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Low-key Jesse Winchester is riveting as singer's poetic gift shines at Golem

REVIEW

Jesse Winchester at the Golem Concert Room for two performances only Saturday night.

By LUCINDA CHODAN
of The Gazette

Maybe the Free Trade Agreement is not going to be a disaster, cultural-ly speaking, after all.

When you consider that our neighbors to the south now have loud-mouth Ottawa-born impressionist Rich Little while Montrealers are blessed with the presence of honey-vowelled Tennessee native Jesse Winchester, the deal doesn't look so bad.

Winchester, who played a rare pair of Montreal concerts Saturday, has lived in this country for more than two decades — since the day Uncle Sam invited the Memphis resident to lay down his guitar and pick up an M-16 in the service of his country.

Twenty years haven't done much to erode that courtly drawl, and they don't appear to have impinged a whit on a distinctly Southern musical consciousness steeped in R & B, soul and country music.

Everything Winchester writes is infused with those elements, and everything he plays and sings is built on a personal metronome that ticks out a lilting, idiosyncratic rhythm.

But what makes Winchester so extraordinary is that those musical attributes are twinned with the sensibility of a poet. Like the God with a "jeweller's eye" in one of Winchester's own songs, the songwriter peers deep into the human soul.

Then, weighing every word, he crafts lyrics about everything from gossip to the human spirit that fall like polished stones from his lips.



Jesse Winchester: Lyrics peer deep into human soul.

In his own soft-spoken, unassuming way, Winchester is as riveting and towering a presence on-stage as anyone on MTV.

So in the early show Saturday, the audience listened stock-still to Winchester classics like *Let the Rough Side Slide* and *Nothing But a Breeze* and, of course, *Brand New Tennessee Waltz* — as well as equally strong new works: a sly look at TV evangelists (the chorus began: "Swing low, big old Continental") and a ballad about what happens to a father's heart as his daughter grows up.

The very best of that new material was a song that parsed the *dénoue-*

ment of a relationship:

*"Don't paint any pictures for me
I see for myself. . .
You don't even care enough
To let me know the score
Girl, I don't think you love me any
more."*

Those devastating words, sketched in Winchester's sweet tenor, were enough to make rueful recognition spring unbidden from the heart to lodge in the throat.

Jesse Winchester's new album, on the Attic label, should be in the stores soon. Truth and beauty should always come so cheap.