

A rare look at Jesse

He's playing at home for first time in 3 years

By JOHN GRIFFIN
Gazette Pop Music Critic

It's a beautiful clear afternoon, the first really warm day since late last summer, but Jesse Winchester is wearing a sweater under his corduroy jacket, and he's still cold.

Twenty years after he traded sunny Memphis and an army draft notice for snowbound Montreal, there's still a lot of the Old South in those Winchester bones.

It's rare getting Winchester out at all, much less into an Old Montreal restaurant for conversation and pots of black coffee. The 43-year-old singer-songwriter hasn't played the city in three calendar years, and he hasn't released an album since "1980 or '81, somewhere in there."

Not that he's particularly reclusive — his sly stock response when asked why he doesn't play here or record more often is, "Nobody asks me" — just that Winchester, who performs at the Golem Concert Room this weekend, has no apparent interest in stardom or the price that stardom exacts.

150 songs

On the face of things, the man who added *Biloxi*, *Yankee Lady*, *The Brand New Tennessee Waltz* and another 150 songs to the catalogue of classic contemporary popular music is content to write music, work on his beloved computer, tour North America with a suitcase and a six-string acoustic guitar, and wait on those royalty cheques.

"They say that the only thing worse than being recognized is not being recognized," Winchester says with secret glee when asked about the flaws of fame. "But money, now that's something else!"

Winchester has had his material covered or coveted by most everyone in Nashville, and some in New York and L.A., too.

Today he learns that one of his songs, *Isn't That So*, has just been included on a new album by popular country-bluegrass duo the O'Kanes. He's as happy about the news as his laconic, sharply barbed and dry-witted personality allows him to be.

"Royalties are enough to form a respectable part of my income," he says in an accent that's as soft



Gazette, John Mahoney

Montreal's Jesse Winchester performs at the Golem Concert Room this weekend.

as the sound of his Shreveport, La., birthplace. "And that's a joy and a delight and a comfort to me on cold evenings. Hallelujah!"

But this man cannot live by royalties alone. Winchester has a new album due on Sugar Hill/Attic Records later this spring, his first since *Talk Memphis* way back whenever.

It's called *Humour Me* ("the 'u' is out of deference to my Canadian roots"), it was recorded this winter in Nashville, and it's full of the loose-limbed music some have called soul, folk, country or rockabilly, but most just call Jesse Winchester songs.

And there is the touring. Winchester works steadily, playing

coffee houses and small clubs from Santa Monica to St. John's, shoring up his substantial reputation as a songwriter's songwriter and subtly charismatic performer. That reputation precedes his visits to the Golem this weekend — tomorrow's show is sold out and there's standing room only for Sunday.

Playing solo

And this from a man who is only half-joking when he says having to travel with a guitar is a hindrance to simplicity.

"I couldn't take working with a band," says Winchester of the years he worked in a rock 'n' roll format. "It always got complicat-

ed and drove me insane.

"The idea of a band always sounds good, but the reality is pure tedium. The effect on the audience is more flash and less real substance in my experience. I've done it both ways, gone back and forth all my life, and in every case playing solo as been more satisfying. It's closer to what I want to get across.

"I'm happy doing things just the way I am. The level I'm doing it at is satisfying to me. The only change I would make would be to quit entirely if I got really fed up with touring.

"But then I would feel the guilt, that I was not doing what I was put here to do."