



Winchester's two shows will benefit the Montreal Food Bank.

SLOW BURN

After simmering for years, Jesse Winchester turns up the heat.

BY MAXINE RUVINSKY

For those given to the dark, smouldering type, a bottle of wine with singer-songwriter Jesse Winchester is an invitation to fall.

The Memphis, Tennessee native had just returned to this city he calls home from a month-long American tour to promote his new album *Humour Me*, a stunning comeback following an eight-year absence from the recording scene.

"I've been working hard the last three months...I usually go out for about a week at a time [on tour]," says Winchester, who admits he finds touring tedious, and record production distasteful.

But not so songwriting. "It's the

best there is," he says. "I'd never give it up." Nor live performances. "Performing for people is relatively easy. 'Cause they give back."

Still, the travelling wears hard on Winchester, who calls himself a homebody. Casting a philosophical eye on the dilemma, he adds, "My work forces me to travel—I guess that's the Lord's way of educating me."

It was his pacifist conscience that first led Winchester, who grew up in Memphis in the '50s, to Canada in 1967 as a draft-exile. He quickly gained recognition for his early songs such as *Yankee Lady* and *Brand New Tennessee Waltz*, which remain concert favourites.

And he was smitten with Montreal, his home here for the last 20 years. "I love Montreal," he says. "It has a soul."

But success never came easily to Winchester, whose still-distinct Southern drawl and poet's vision belie a sharp tongue and eyes that can darken in a moment.

After his debut album in 1970—produced with help from Robbie Robertson—Winchester made seven albums on the Bearsville label, culminating with *Memphis Talk* in 1981. But he grew increasingly disenchanted with the recording process, and despite his respect for the legendary Albert Grossman (who also managed Dylan, The Band, and Janis Joplin) avoided it for eight years.

"My records weren't making any money, so we [he and Grossman] both sort of lost interest. Albert died about three or four years ago [in 1986], and that set me free in a way, in a lot of ways. When he died, it changed my life...like a bird moulting. Because I was without business relationships at all."

Whether forced or set free, Winchester's return with *Humour Me* was roundly welcome. The album's 10 songs, many already favourites with concert audiences, brought him rave reviews from critics, who sported epithets like "riveting" and "towering." One critic wrote "This album reminds us that 15 years ago Winchester had already achieved greatness."

The songs, in distinctly southern country-folk style, suffused with rhythm'n'blues, are still soulful and intensely personal. Winchester's rich tenor is as irresistible now as it was 20 years ago, when he first mesmerized flower children at the city's Yellow Door coffeehouse.

Music should make you feel something, he says. "When you're a country-music fan, you laugh and cry every day. If a piece of music doesn't make you laugh or cry, there's something wrong with it. Take it back to the store."

For his most avid fans—refugees from the '60s—the album is more than a personal best for Winchester. It is the vindication of an era. Said one such fan, "If this album doesn't make Jesse Winchester a superstar, there's something wrong with the business."

Jesse Winchester performs two shows at Pollack Hall Sept 11