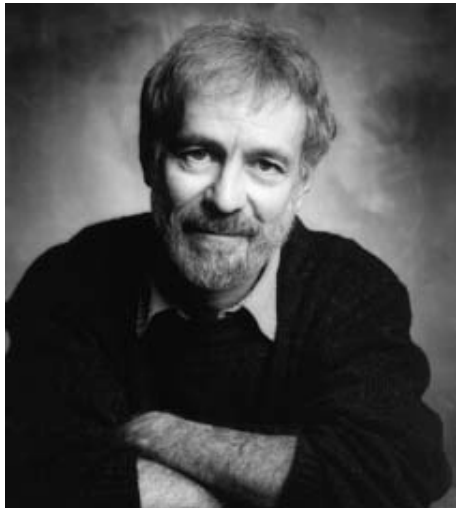


Winchester back on stage, and worth the wait

Jesse Winchester in concert with Loudon Wainwright III Le Spectrum de Montreal, January 15, 2000



Equipped with only an acoustic guitar, Jesse Winchester looked like someone pulling up a chair in your living room and making himself at home. In fact he was at home; since 1967, Montrealers have claimed Winchester as their own, and surely he felt the embrace from the audience that night.

Opening the set with "Club Manhattan" from his latest CD Gentleman Of Leisure - almost whispering as he went along - Jesse was more laid back than he's been in past performances. The lack of touring (his first in 9 years) and the fact that he's 55 may have eased his appearance, but there's still a certain mystique about him that keeps you glued to every song.

He played some of his classics such as "Brand New Tennessee Waltz", "My Songbird" and "Talk Memphis". Whether on a slow comforting ballad or a sobering gospel tune, Winchester sings and plays his guitar with such soul and grace - a master at the art of playing solo.

There were many crowd pleasing moments, such as when Winchester asked for audience participation on the Gospel number "Let's Make A Baby King", and without hesitation the Spectrum was filled with a responsive choir. As well, the "Rhumba" man did not let his age or long absence from touring stop him from doing his now trademarked shuffle dance. He'd sing a few verses to a song then he'd "let the rough side drag."

Jesse mentioned that the last song of his set "I Wave Bye Bye" reminded him especially of Montreal. It could only prove that his ties are tightly rooted to Quebec soil. Winchester was as coolly captivating on the last tune as he was on his first - a gentleman of leisure.

Opening for Jesse Winchester was Loudon Wainwright III. Appropriately Loudon opened his set with a song called "One Man Guy". A story about solitude, sleeping single, eating alone and loving it. As with most of Wainwright's songs, the lyrics come with a comical twist. He writes and performs his tunes like a stand up

comedian. Writing about everyday adventures and cleverly telling tales that are usually thought of, but never spoken.

Wainwright played a mixture of songs from his past repertoire as well as from his latest CD Social Studies. But as humorous as he can be with his stage antics, Loudon has a sentimental side to him as well, playing slow, heart-felt ballads.

A few surprise guests showed up, too. The first was Chaim Tannenbaum, who sang harmony and played the banjo. Later on Loudon invited his daughter Martha Wainwright out to sing a duet. Hers is an amazing voice that blended naturally with her dad. Much to the audience's delight, Kate & Anna McGarrigle were invited on stage with Chaim and Martha to sing the Wainwright composition "Schooldays" from Kate & Anna's latest CD "The McGarrigle Hour." It was in all a memorable performance.

Before the concert I had a chance to interview Jesse by phone from his home in the Townships.

Why has it had been 9 years since your last tour?

"I just got very tired of it, burnt out and I took stock and realized that what was really earning my living was song writing for other people. So I decided to quit the touring and concentrate on writing songs"

Now that you're touring again do you perform solo or with other musicians?

" I've played with a succession of bands over my life. I guess in the last twenty years I've played solo".

Do you find it easier playing solo?

"Much easier, I'm a lot freer. What I do really doesn't depend so much on how many notes are getting played. And certainly it was a relief to have that constant snare drum stopped."

Your new CD Gentleman of Leisure was produced by Jerry Douglas, how was your experience with him as producer?

"I had the time of my life. He just took away all the little decisions that just drive you nuts and he's a real leader, on top of being a sublime musician. I just enjoyed myself thoroughly."

Who's idea was it to choose the musicians on your new CD?

"Jerry was responsible for all the musicians including Steve Cropper. One of the tunes mentions his name and Jerry suggested getting him to play. We had so much fun I couldn't believe that I was really there."

Was the first track on your CD "Club Manhattan" a place that you frequented?

"Yes it was. It was called the Manhattan Club but that doesn't really scan very well, so I reversed the name. It was in Memphis were I grew up." Was it a blues club? " It was more R&B, Willie Mitchell was the house band."

Who were your musical influences?

"I loved Sam Cooke and doo-wop music a lot, old R&B, Ruth Brown, The Clovers back from the early fifties. I loved Lefty Frizzell, Don Gibson. Just pretty much what everyone was listening to."

On your latest CD you are surrounded by bluegrass musicians, do you have any bluegrass influences?

"Not until the last few years. In Memphis most of the music I was involved in was R&B and all that Country and Bluegrass stuff was happening at the other end of the State and I just didn't pay a lot of attention to it. I was so involved in black music like Booker T & the MG's because there were two white guys and two black guys working together and making funky music and that was certainly ideal for me. Now I'm a complete bluegrass fan. I think that they are the best musicians in Nashville. It's like the Jazz of country music."

What's in the future for Jesse Winchester?

"I'm currently writing songs for another album. I had so much fun doing this one, I'm anxious to do another one."

What about touring?

"I'm enjoying that too, oddly enough. I'm really just having a renaissance here personally. I don't know why but I've enjoyed myself thoroughly."

- ***Karl Dee*** writes on music and such for montreal.com

Photo courtesy Sugar Hill Records

Karl Dee's review of Jesse Winchester's latest CD below

Jesse Winchester - Gentleman Of Leisure

1999 Sugar Hill



Louisiana born, Tennessee bred Jesse Winchester has had a long history in Quebec. Born (in 1944) in Shreveport and raised in Memphis, Winchester came to Montreal in 1967 to avoid the Vietnam draft. Up until 1973 he was banned from playing in the U.S. - fortunately for his followers here he could be seen and heard all over Canada. During those days he played at Montreal landmarks like The Golem coffee house, Le Mustache, and the Hotel Nelson to name a few. Even though then-president Jimmy Carter eventually granted amnesty to draft dodgers, Jesse opted to remain here and became a Canadian citizen, making Quebec his home.

In 1970 he released his first album, the self-titled Jesse Winchester, which The Band's Robbie Robertson produced and, with Levon Helm, played on. Songs like Brand New Tennessee Waltz and Yankee Lady gave Winchester instant recognition.

He followed in 1972 with Third Down, 110 To Go, and continued to impress his fans throughout the '70s with albums like Learn To Love It, Let The Rough Side Drag, Nothing But A Breeze, and 1978's A Touch On The Rainy Side.

In 1981 the album Talk Memphis gave Jesse his biggest hit to date with Say What. By this point in his career his songs were being noticed and recorded by a wide variety of artists such as Emmylou Harris (Defying Gravity), Michael Martin Murphey (I'm Gonna Miss You Girl), Nicolette Larson (Rhumba Girl), Jerry Jeff Walker (Mississippi You're On My Mind), Joan Baez (The Brand New Tennessee Waltz), and The Weather Girls (Well-A-Wiggy). In 1988 he went to Nashville to record Humour Me, but not long after the album came out Winchester, reaching burn out, decided to refrain from touring and recording.

In 1999, owing Sugar Hill Records one more record, Jesse gathered up 10 years of song writing and went to Nashville once again, making the record Gentleman Of Leisure. This time around he had Jerry Douglas producing, and the collaboration of Jesse's Memphis soul and Jerry's Nashville session experience fit like a glove.

Sweet Little Shoe is a signature Winchester song. It has plenty of R&B feel to it with a pinch of gospel. It's a lively tune about Jesse praising his dancing partner: "You're a swell shing-a-linger/ you can rock and sock and birdland too/ well you look just like your mama/ but you sure swing a sweet little shoe."

There are many highlights: No Pride At All, with Jesse's satin voice and the masterful guitar work of Bryan Sutton, is one of the best tunes on the CD. Wandering My Way Home, a gospel song with help from the Fairfield Four, is about

stumbling down the wrong path, but eventually finding salvation.

Just Cause I'm In Love With You, with Jerry Douglas playing lap steel, and Sweet Loving Daddy, with Douglas again on dobro, both have a country sound to them. Being one of Nashville's hottest session players, Douglas adds his experience to these songs, and they're a pleasure to listen to.

Contributions from the likes of Steve Cropper (of Booker T & the MG's) and session players Mike Henderson and Bryan Sutton on guitar; and John Cowan (of ex-NewGrass Revival), the Fairfield Four, and Vince Gill on background vocals have all helped turn Gentleman Of Leisure into a well crafted addition for Winchester enthusiasts.

- *Karl Dee* writes on music and such for montreal.com