

Jesse Winchester Still Casts A Powerful Spell

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By Lynn Van Matre, Pop music critic.

It has been 15 years since Jesse Winchester's debut album established him as a singer-songwriter of note, a composer whose finely crafted, often haunting songs frequently reflected his desire to live--as one of Winchester's songs puts it--with his feet in Dixie and his head in the cool, blue North. Critically acclaimed from the beginning, Winchester never really caught on commercially.

Initially, part of the problem was that as a Tennessee-born draft resister who ended up in Canada during the Vietnam War, Winchester was unable to return to the U.S. to tour. By the time amnesty was declared in the latter half of the 1970s, Winchester's engaging brand of low-key folk, country and blues was pretty much passe on the pop scene

Still, he continues to attract devoted audiences, like the crowd that turned out for Winchester's two shows Wednesday at Orphans in the bar/club's pleasant listening room, and it's easy to see why. With his gentle sense of humor, warm voice and wryly unassuming manner, Winchester is no showman in the traditional sense of the word, but he nevertheless casts a subtle and highly effective spell.

Though in the past he has toured with a band, these days the singer-guitarist is strictly a solo acoustic act, and his songs are all the more affecting for it. "Yankee Lady" and "Brand New Tennessee Waltz," two of his early ballads that conjure up feelings of both romance and resignation, constitute some of his finest work and were predictably well-received Wednesday night. But Winchester is equally at home with talking blues, country and an occasional bit of satire, which was showcased marvelously in the song "Extreme Unction." The singer cheerfully dedicated the song to Jimmy Swaggart, whose "impeccable bloodlines" (Swaggart is related to both Jerry Lee Lewis and Mickey Gilley) have made him Winchester's favorite TV evangelist. It's doubtful, however, that Swaggart would be particularly flattered by the honor: The chorus goes, "Swing low, big old Continental, comin' for to carry me home."

Winchester's enjoyable opening set also included "Let the Rough Side Drag," the rather dated-sounding dope song "Twigs and Seeds," "Mississippi You're on My Mind" and "Talk Memphis," a catchy country-pop paean to that city and its southern-style dialect.