

# Jesse Winchester brings new tour to Egg on Saturday

Jesse Winchester hasn't been exactly silent in the 11 years since his last album and tour. But we've heard his songs only in the voices of other singers, including Reba McEntire, Wynonna Judd, Joan Baez and the Everly Brothers.

With his new "Gentleman of Leisure" album and the tour that brings him to the Egg on Saturday, Winchester begins a comeback to stage and studio, from obscurity and bitterness.

"I just got completely fed up with it," he said from his home east of Montreal, but in the easy drawl of his Memphis childhood. "I was repeating myself and not having any fun. The recording business was frustrating: I made record after record that I liked, and they went thud."

He decided: "To heck with driving myself crazy. I'm going to stay home and write songs for other people."

Winchester said: "How somebody else does one of my songs is often very different from any expectation of mine." However, "A big part of the fun is having people you love do your tunes. So it doesn't matter what they do with them."

What Winchester himself did

## JUKEBOX

By MICHAEL HOCHANADEL

with his songs, crooning them in a soulful, bluesy, breathy tone, like a lazy stroll on a sunny day, made him a premier singer-songwriter of the 1970s.

Winchester took piano lessons from second grade through high school, playing in rock bands and a cocktail trio and shifting to ukulele. "I started out in bands with that, then progressed, if that's the word, to guitar from there."

He said: "I have imitated so many people it's hard to point to any one single person: I stole from Frank Sinatra, George Jones, Bobby Bland, Smokey Robinson — just name somebody and I stole from them."

Among songwriters he most admires are the honky-tonk poets, his fellow southerners Felice and Boudleux Bryant who



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wrote many Everly Brothers hits, Roy Orbison, Otis Blackwell, who wrote many Elvis Presley hits, Harland Howard and Hoagy Carmichael.

"If I wanted to be somebody, it was Steve Cropper — he was a white guy playing and writing R&B and making great records," Winchester said.

Winchester got to make records only after apprenticing in bars — "That's what everybody does," he said.

After being stranded in remote Sept Illes in northern Quebec — "where the road ends," he recalled, when a promoter stole his band's money, Winchester went to Montreal to play solo in restaurants and coffeehouses. Hippie audiences there expected him to write his own songs — "a new idea for me," he said, explaining that he didn't start writing songs until he was 23 or 24.

Winchester specialized in homesick songs of the south and in love songs, happy and sad. Asked about the irony that the

price of writing happy love songs seems to be problems in love, he replied: "I'm witness to that in that I've had big problems in love."

Sadness lurks inside most of Winchester's songs. "I've written some songs that have descriptions of places that have memories of my very young childhood," he explained. "I have to go that far back to find feelings of unalloyed happiness. Every other memory is badly tainted: You get these lumps along the road where you go 'Ouch.'"

His wry songs and sincere, easy-going performances won the admiration of Robbie Robertson of The Band who produced Winchester's 1970 self-named debut.

Fewer than a dozen other albums have followed in the more than 30 years since. "I had some lean times when I was younger," he acknowledged, "but I've always managed to keep going. I always managed to feed the young 'uns."



On Saturday night, Jesse Winchester, left, will perform at The Egg and Natalie Merchant will play the Palace.



Winchester said: "There's a big difference between playing for an audience and making a record. You can't have ponderous thoughts throughout the show — you can't do that all night." He added: "You have to give them a break, show them a little mercy," laughing at himself.

Asked about his ambitions for his new music and new album, Winchester explained: "I don't really think like that. Not that I'm not ambitious, but I just want to keep doing it." He said: "I'm enjoying it; I'm happy to say that I feel better than I ever have in my life. I don't know why that is."

Jesse Winchester performs Saturday at The Egg, singing solo. Kieran Kane, formerly of the underrated O'Kanes, opens the 8 p.m. show, which will take place in the cozy Swyer Theater at the Egg. Tickets are \$22, available at the box office, 473-1845, and through TicketMaster, 476-1000.

### Merchant beats odds

Michael McDonald left the Doobie Brothers, Roger Waters left Pink Floyd, then both bands thrived while McDonald and Waters, their main creative forces, couldn't sell records or tickets. But when Natalie Merchant left 10,000 Maniacs, her former band struggled while she has made four strong albums and toured with Bob Dylan, opening for him in 1999 at the RPI Fieldhouse.

She beats the odds through persona, persistence and talent. She says the inspiration for her new album "Motherland" came from former tourmates Billy

Bragg and Wilco, playing the populist folk of Woody Guthrie.

Merchant plays the Palace in Albany at 8 p.m. Saturday. Tickets are \$40 and \$32.50, available at the box office, 465-3334, and through TicketMaster, 476-1000.

### Flatlander Gilmore

Texas troubadour Jimmie Dale Gilmore sings solo tonight at Caffe Lena, after a Top 10 of the Year show here last summer with the Flatlanders, the reunited and hugely influential Lubbock country rock band that also stars Joe Ely and Butch Hancock. (Watch for a new Flatlanders album this summer, their first since 1972.)

Gilmore's high-lonesome singing sounds great with band or without, and he loves playing Lena's, mindful of its history and how well his music fits.

Gilmore plays at 7 and 9:30 tonight. Tickets are \$20, phone 583-0022 for reservations.

### Poucette-Dart in town

Jon Poucette-Dart scored many hits with the band that bears his imposing name and wrote many more on his own in Nashville and at his Woodstock home studio.

Poucette-Dart rarely performs onstage these days. So his Van Dyck show Saturday, a solo performance, is a treat for his fans. His new CD "Sample This" shows he hasn't lost his songwriting touch, and it has a nice, sparse, homespun sound.

Tickets are \$15, phone 381-1111 for reservations.

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