

A poet with a repeating musical talent

DESPITE his Old Testament first name, Jesse Winchester, the laid-back singer/songwriter from Mississippi, remains a prophet unhonoured in the land of mainstream country music and unknown to the record buying public in Scotland.

His art is very distinctively not mainstream country at all. Winchester is a poet working with the flair for structure and verbal adroitness of a jazz standard lyricist or show tune composer but never pushing the bitter-sweet conventions of the country love song too far.

His tunes evoke the best of what's gone before, rooting themselves in the accessibility of the country and black music that Winchester steeped himself in as a boy. But they modulate sophisticatedly beyond "mere country and western."

Nor is the man who dodged the

By **DONNY O'ROURKE**

draft in the early 'seventies by moving to Montreal just a composer — his smokey tenor voice soars well above average and the guitar playing is idiosyncratically excellent (he uses a classical guitar whose full sweet tone is far removed from the familiar Nashville twang).

After long neglect, Winchester has just embarked on his first British tour and I headed down to the Half Moon in Putney to see how the years had treated him and how the on-stage performer compared with the half dozen albums I had tracked down in second-hand shops both here and in America.

The Half Moon nestles on the

Thames, a smoky, sweaty, cavernous rock venue of the old style.

No one was disappointed. Winchester turned in an exemplary, charismatic 90 minutes set, spiffing it on the witty numbers like a mellower version of Loudon Wainwright (his *Twigs and Seeds* "confession" about dope smoking with evidence of superb comedy acting). We got to hear fine versions of the aforementioned, *Yankee Lady* and other classic Winchester songs.

"If I had achieved big success as a young man, I might have stopped working at it," Jesse Winchester said to me after what was a marvellous show.

"I once cherished dreams of fame and riches. I'd still like to be a rich man — but I hadn't the personality to be really successful." Personality is precisely what the man does have with his honeyed Southern boy courtesy,

serene charm, Martini-dry wit and those sudden jolts into almost manic musical activity. A female member of the audience commented on Winchester's facial resemblance to screen ikon, Clint Eastwood. I am not so sure. He's certainly a good-looking performer.

Thankfully, his career seems to be looking good, too. "I've just sold some new songs to Waylon Jennings and I've written a song which will be Lynn Anderson's next single. I'm hoping to have an album out in the early spring of next year." It should be well worth hearing.

Although most of Winchester's songs at the Half Moon were familiar to me, the new numbers showed no dropping off in quality.

Jesse Winchester's home and family is in Montreal; his passport proclaims him to be a Canadian.

Reflecting on Jimmy Carter's amnesty for those who preferred exile to military service in Asia, Winchester said: "I never would have believed that we'd be allowed to go home. The deal was OK, you went to Canada but you never came back. I settled my mind to that. Now I don't want to go back."

As his song *Nothing but a Breeze* affirms "I want to live with my feet in Dixie and my head in the cool blue north." But Winchester seems content, ready to push for the recognition his artistry is due, "I'd love to come over here every year and work — the people here are really into the words of songs, really good with acoustic music."

Jesse Winchester is a songwriter and performer with some great songs in his magazine — popular music with soul and poetry.

Jesse Winchester appears at Edinburgh's Pleasance Bar tomorrow.