

THE CHANGING FACE OF JESSE W.

Pix: CHALKIE DAVIS



"Now watch carefully, I'm only gonna do it once..."

"I dangle my right hand on my guitar cutaway..."

"Then I put it behind my back..."

"Next... Hey, you paying attention at the back?"

"Now look, I'm only gonna do this once..."

Jesse Winchester

NEW VICTORIA

JESSE WINCHESTER certainly didn't have things easy for his British concert debut last week. For a start the combination of heatwave and *Bonnie And Clyde* on TV must have been responsible for the significant number of empty seats, and then there was the PA which maintained a solid hum of static throughout his ninety minutes plus set.

The biggest problem of all Winchester had brought with him from Montreal: his three piece band, musicians who may well be the pride of their home city but could only be something of a letdown after the superb and sympathetic

accompaniment Jesse has always found for his studio work. Their youth and enthusiasm tended to get the better of them, and in many cases denied the singer the frictionless motion that his songs call for, as well as simply playing too loud for long periods.

Still Jesse Winchester, for all his apparent nervousness during the opener, "Payday", found his feet with an effortless version of "Bowling Green" after which he forsook his Gibson for electric piano and positively breezed his way through a brace of songs, with old favourites tempered by the new.

The new compositions were just as impressive as the older: "Midnight Bus" and "Defying Gravity", "Let the Rough Side Drag" the title

track from the new album, and "Everybody Knows Me" (which he introduced as 'a saga of high school life') had a more optimistic and witty aura than much of his previous work and certainly didn't suffer for it.

The band left Jesse to it after a while and he proceeded to curl the toes of the audience with just an acoustic on songs like "Do It" and "Mississippi, You're On My Mind" and most effective of all, a completely guileless and enchanting reading of Tony Orlando's "Candida".

He just sat there and sang it straight with no tricks except the sort that became integrated so long ago that they're as much part of his art as his songwriting, like hitting the first two lines of a number with perfect enunciation or having

back for a bar or two in order to vary the repetition of a chorus. He's not short of showmanship either, slipping in a reference to Idi Amin in the last verse of "Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt" and gyrating like Chuck Berry with back trouble during the rockers.

But most of the time he just stood still at the mike, reeling out songs that sound more like standards every time you hear them. He's a romantic but also enough of a person to write songs that speak directly to people, about their need for each other and their need to be independent, songs inspired constantly by questions of interpersonal status and not the usual vacuous polemic that passes for communication.

David Henworth