

Locker-room acoustics spoil excellent Winchester show

By Bill Provick

Canada's favorite adopted son, Jesse Winchester, returned to town Thursday night and delivered a performance that ranged from great to merely fair — depending on where one sat.

The auditorium of Ottawa Technical High School has all the acoustical charm of a locker room. More than ever, even the best performers are at the mercy of the sound man whose job it is to circumvent the hall's vagaries and deliver a decent sound to as many seats as possible.

Frequently stuffy and uncomfortable with seats that can cramp one's legs in less than 10 minutes, the auditorium poses serious acoustical problems. Downstairs, the sound often gets trapped at the back of the hall, bouncing down off the low ceiling supporting the balcony. Upstairs, the balcony offers more breathing room and is often acoustically better — if the soundman happens to remember there are people up there.

Faced with a near-capacity crowd Thursday night and with the best seats — the first dozen rows downstairs — already occupied, we opted for the balcony as the next-best bet. Unfortunately it wasn't.

A friend sitting downstairs next to the soundboard claimed the sound was terrific. Not so upstairs. The bass notes boomed and rumbled while the high notes proved terribly elusive except under strained concentration — which is no way to enjoy a concert.

In addition, the mix seemed the exact reverse of what it should have been. The percussion dominated everything, followed closely by the lead guitar and bass with the all-important vocals receiving the least amplification. Given Winchester's normal mellow style it wouldn't have been so bad had this been a standard Winchester concert. But lacking a couple of regular band members — in particular the soothing textures of Ron Dann's pedal steel guitar — Winchester opted for a hard, aggressive delivery that played right into the hands of the soundman's miscalculations.

Even in his gentler tunes — *Mississippi You're On My Mind*, *Nothing But A Breeze* and *Bowling Green* — the drums proved frustratingly intrusive.

Aggressive pose

Normally shy and slightly reclusive, even on stage, Winchester struck a strong, aggressive pose that was refreshing in its assertiveness and carried him nicely through a marvelously-paced performance, but suffered greatly in the listener being forced to mentally re-adjust the sound priorities. Underneath the technical difficulties, it was a fine performance, but the constant censoring of unwarranted emphasis on the rhythm section made it too much work and not enough fun for the listener.

The crowd heartily applauded each number and Winchester drew a popular request for an encore



Jesse Winchester
Came on aggressive

responding with a sensitive treatment of *Brand New Tennessee Waltz* and a spirited rendition of *Jambalaya* — but the could-have-been-so-much-better feeling put a noticeable damper on the evening.

Local "legend" David Wiffen opened the show with a standard Wiffen set — neither better nor worse than what he's been delivering for a number of years now. The heard-it-all-before handicap makes Wiffen ho-hum for anyone other than his staunchest supporters.