

*Rolling Stone Magazine (RS228)
December 16, 1976*

Performance: Winchester sings to his homeland

*Jesse Winchester
Studio Six
Montreal Quebec
October 13th, 1976*

By John Swenson

The atmosphere at the small Montreal studio was so much like a living room's that it was hard to believe it was anything more than a group of friends having a party. But Jesse Winchester, an American songwriter whose status as a draft-resisting expatriate has kept him from performing live in his own country, was presenting himself for the first time over the American airwaves.

Backed by a Canadian group, Winchester sang a catalog of his best work with an understated delivery that emphasized the rich emotional impact of songs like "Yankee Lady," "Bowling Green," and "Mississippi You're On My Mind." Brewer and Shipley's recording of "Yankee Lady" misses so much of the depth of Winchester's live rendition that it might as well be another song. The tremendous wistfulness of "Bowling Green"'s search for the American Dream sentiment of Stephen Foster is ironically poignant. In contrast, "Mississippi" is Winchester's realistic lament for his lost homeland.

The eerie "Black Dog," sung in undertones that endow the carnivorous animal's killer instinct with almost supernatural horror, indicates that Winchester's abhorrence of war comes from considerable thought about morbidity. Outside of Winchester's moral context, the song would be absurd, but his rigorous stance is much too compassionate to be baldly Calvinist. The realization of human insignificance in "Defying Gravity" and the openhanded celebration of the poor in "Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt," round out Winchester's world view, as the carefully weighed observations of a profoundly religious man, perhaps a little too humble for his own good.

Winchester's humility could well be a reaction to his fans' tendency to canonize him. When the concert was over, he seemed uncomfortable with the enthusiastic response, as if the recognition somehow spoiled the desired ambiance. He's going to have to get used to the feeling, though, because he's liable to experience a lot more of it.

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