

Jesse Winchester at THE NEW PENELOPE

"What ~~not~~^{does} not destroy me must
surely make me stronger...
but I think I'd rather shoot myself
than be ~~this~~^{bores} much longer...

Sometimes my composure is a shoddy
lived-in lie...

And I think I'll leave that scene behind..."

The anguish of spiritual growth-- an old-fashioned phrase but perhaps one which best expresses the principal concern of Jesse Winchester. Few folksingers have access to as rich a source of inspiration.

Yet to suggest a unity of concern is not to suggest a limited style, for this singer has a seemingly inexhaustible range of style. The successful juxtaposition of a deeply moving spiritual called One of These Days with a hard-lined blues rendition celebrating a woman's love testifies not to a dexterity out of virtuosity but to a more profound sense of man's paradoxical nature.

Every song which he sings grows out of his own inner experience of intensity. And the integrity of human emotion reflected both in his singing and in the lyrics is eloquent testament to his greatness as a performing artist. Nowhere have I heard a singer who brought more presence of hard-earned life to his songs.

The inspiration for much of his work is clearly drawn from the poetry of the Bible as well as the gospel tradition so well known in the town of Memphis, Tennessee. The great power and moving force in his style is an evocation of the prophetic inheritance of the Deep South and its religious traditions.

Often he will borrow a song well-heelled in the pop tradition, like those of Elvis Presley, and not only satirize it but take it far beyond the level of farce towards the seriousness it originally possessed. Often, too, the songs border on blasphemy, like one called, "Jesus Was a Teenager Too," which strays near sacrilege with, "He bopped on down to pick up Mary Magdalene," and then veers away with, "He hung out in Nazareth with the devil for forty days...but he won 'cause he prayed."

To simply repeat the lyrics--even in full--would hardly do justice to the quality of his singing. It is folksinging in the best tradition, a kind of performance which is well-complimented by an audience in attendance.

And although Jesse Winchester is a name which few people know at present, there will come a time when a man will be hard-pressed to find a seat when Jesse begins to sing. Perhaps this is a fitting comment on a singer whose own style owes so much to the tradition of biblical prophecy.

J. Strickland
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