

Jesse Winchester at the Cellar Door

By Richard Harrington

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It was no mistake that Jesse Winchester chose a nylon string acoustic guitar as his only accompaniment in last night's opening of a two-day, sold-out engagement at the Cellar Door. The muted tones and the deep sonority of the bass string provided the perfect setting for Winchester's classic southern grace and Proustian lyric-awareness.

Many of Winchester's songs -- he sang 20 of them in his opening set -- situate the singer in the midst of very real conflicts between traditional values and the forces of change; between inner and outer emotional barriers. Winchester finds himself balanced on the dividing line between conscience and desire, confused by the ambiguity of real and imagined history.

In his best songs -- "Mississippi, You're on My Mind," "My Songbird," "Defying Gravity," "You Remember Me" -- Winchester evokes a particular pathos that strikes at familiar memories with the quietude of a breeze from a hand-held fan. It is a reflection of a southern heritage solidified in his celebrated exile in Canada.

There is also plenty of humor in Winchester's show. He may be a melancholy romantic but he also knows how to laugh, at himself and his circle of friends. All the material is delivered in a hushed baritone so smooth it provides its own southern comfort. The man is a gem.