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All's forgiven – even the cold – as Winchester comes back

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The Gazette

The temperature was stuck in the minus-20s, cold enough to keep most sensible people home and close to the fire last night. Those willing to brave the temperature found a dose of southern sunshine at the Spectrum, where Jesse Winchester made his long-awaited return to a Montreal stage.

It's been at least a decade since the Memphis native and current Eastern Townships resident performed locally, and Winchester, ever the gentleman, opened with an apology for having stayed away so long.

"I sho' have missed you," he told the audience, with a smile.

Any grudges, if any were held, were forgiven within moments.

Winchester, like his audience a little older and a little grayer, held the crowd transfixed with a mixed bag of old favourites and tunes from his new album, *Gentleman of Leisure*. He opened with that album's first track, *Club Manhattan*. On disc, the song has R&B swagger, but stripped to the essentials of Winchester's voice and six-string acoustic guitar, it

was reborn as a greasy blues. Nostalgists didn't have to wait long for their first fix, as Winchester followed up with *The Brand New Tennessee Waltz*, the sweet old melody sounding as fresh as it did when first recorded nearly 30 years ago.

Last night's show might have gone down as the quietest in Montreal concert history. Winchester, seated before a microphone, barely raised his voice above a whisper throughout the night. He didn't need to shout to convey the open-hearted sentiment that figures in so many of his songs. He makes a broken heart seem the sweetest thing in creation.

IN HIS SPELL

By the time he got to *Yankee Lady*, the audience was absolutely in his spell, murmuring rather than singing the chorus. Many in the crowd gladly would have paid full admission just for that one song.

Too soon, the set was over, but not before an encore or two. Winchester got a big laugh when he sang "One of these days I'm going to take a vacation."

With that, he sent his fans off, gentled and smiling, into the cold, cold night.

If Winchester's set was marked by a wistful romance, opening act Loudon Wainwright III earned his bread and butter with tunes that alternated between the wittily topical and the wryly personal. His twin fortes, he admitted, are "sh-ty love relationships" and "death and decay numbers." He served up both, in spades, with a small diversion into what he called his Dad songs.

"Being a Dad isn't so bad, except you have to feel," he said with a grin.

The wisenheimer act might have grown thin had Wainwright not called on some of his friends and family for musical support.

McGarrigle sideman Chaim Tannenbaum provided vocals and banjo. (Would somebody please book this guy for a solo gig? He's Montreal's great undiscovered folk treasure.)

Daughter Martha Wainwright, self-possessed and in great voice, dueted on a couple of tunes. Wainwright's ex-wife, Kate McGarrigle, and her sister Anna, joined the others for *School Days*, the lead track on their most recent album.

The only voice missing was Rufus Wainwright, apparently busy in Los Angeles. Maybe next time.