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## ***Performance: A refreshing five hours in the Berkshires***

*Emmylou Harris*

*Randy Newman*

*Jesse Winchester*

*Tanglewood*

*Lenox, Massachusetts*

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By Peter Herbst

Tanglewood is probably America's most prestigious and well-known outdoor classical venue. And, not surprisingly, the popular music presented there throughout the summer (when the Boston Symphony is not using the stage) is well-mannered. Such performances as James Taylor, Gordon Lightfoot and Linda Ronstadt are the norm; presumably – no surely – ZZ Top would bring the hallowed Tanglewood shed (the edifice under which the high-rollers sit) down around itself.

Tanglewood, in the middle of the Berkshire mountain range, is at the vortex of a highly cultural region; it has New York City below, Boston to the east and Woodstock to the west. Most of 10,000 or so who came to watch Emmylou Harris, Randy Newman, Jesse Winchester and Boston favorites, the Pousette-Dart Band looked as if they had just left either their backpacks or their Psych 101 texts behind. And, of course, a good deal of them had that oddly dazed expression that New Yorkers get when they suddenly inhale a healthy dose of *real* air.

Most striking about the concert (which lasted about five hours) was the audience's tremendous passion for Jesse Winchester. Jesse was in pure and fine voice, and both he and his Canadian band were far more relaxed and rehearsed than they had been during the initial leg of their first U.S. tour. Winchester was in fact, so good that he held Tanglewood's audience rapt during such slow ballads as "Defying Gravity" and "Bowling Green." And the Berkshire enthusiasm for country-flavored rock (local bands seem to think Pure Prairie League ranks right up there with the Stones) gave rise to minute-long ovations for "Let The Rough Side Drag" and "Stems And Seeds."

But "Yankee Lady" provoked the greatest demonstration of all. One of Massachusetts FM radio's classics, the song still seems to hold a great reservoir of emotion for those who saw Winchester's self-exile in Montreal as their generation's clearest symbol. At the song's end, the audience stood for nearly five minutes and applauded: for his flight to Canada, his return, and the fact that he was even more affecting in person than on record.

Randy Newman provoked no such emotion. In fact, his dark irony would never permit that kind of audience affection. But he was definitely among friends, Newman has been doing essentially the same show for five years; there's his sailor-song lead into "Sail Away," his facetious admiration for his slow-fingered non-solos on piano – all the old jokes. But it's still pretty hard not to laugh as Newman's carefully crafted Mad magazine version of Tin Pan Alley and movie-score sonorities.

What clearly demonstrated the audience's understanding of Newman's all-American weirdness was the loud appreciation of the two sickest songs he performed. One was "Wedding In Cherokee County," the song from *Good Old Boys* that introduces William Faulkner to Miss America and then stands both of them on their heads. The other was a new song that may well get Newman into more trouble than "Rednecks" did. Set to a jaunty, jingle-like tune, "Short People" states simply that "short people got no reason to live" and then goes to lay the troubles of the world at the doorstep of the small. Randy Newman is not a well man, and the audience loved him.

Emmylou Harris, the headliner and presumably the top draw among the acts, came on like a ball of wax. Her first numbers, "San Antone Rose," "Drinking Single, Seeing Double," "Making Believe" and "One Of These Days," all hewed to the same sing-song pace and exhausted Harris' well-heeled, plaintive tone. But the show began to heart up with the excellent new song by Harris and Rodney Crowell, "Even Cowgirls Sing the Blues." Crowell, Emmylou's rhythm guitarist, songwriting collaborator and a superb singer, then did a hard-as-nails version of the rockabilly "Elvira," and Harris followed with a slew of hot-blooded performances.

During the "Tonight The Bottle Let Me Down," "C'est La Vie" and "Queen of The Silver Dollar," Emmylou's voice began to loosen up and even break, giving her singing a much needed punch, and her animation whipped the band and the audience into action. By her encored, an achingly sweet version of "Boulder To Birmingham" and a tough, precise "Ooh Las Vegas," Emmylou Harris had thoroughly rescued herself from a painfully slow start. And she offered a fitting end to one of those rare concerts that managed to justify its length.

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