

The Understated Style of Jesse Winchester

By Larry Rohter

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They were lined up around the block Monday night at The Cellar Door, waiting for Jesse Winchester's first-ever Washington appearance. Winchester didn't disappoint them, either: He did enough of his old songs to keep the crowd happy and enough new songs and non-originals to keep himself happy.

All told, Winchester and his Midnight Bus Band, a four-piece bar band which adhered faithfully to the low-key tone their leader set, performed 19 songs. Their hour-long performance included subdued versions of Winchester's two best-known tunes, "Yankee Lady," and "Brand New Tennessee Waltz," and more rocking renditions of Hank Williams' "Jambalaya" and the Gospel hymn "Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt" - updated to include a reference to Jimmy Carter.

Though Winchester is famed for thoughtful, slightly melancholy ballads, perhaps exemplified best Monday night by "Black Dog" and "Mississippi, You're on my Mind," he has arranged for his sets to have their share of jovial moments. The countryish "Let the Rough Side Drag" gave Winchester a chance to play honky-tonk piano, and on "Rhumba Man" he even got a chance to dance.

Still, it is the power of his lyrics and the conviction in his voice when he sings that is the most impressive part of his music. The imagery used in a song like "Biloxi" or the brand new "Nothin' but a Breeze" is so vivid as to be palpable, and Winchester's generally understated stage style only emphasizes that.