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by John Rockwell

JESSE WINCHESTER, who will make his New York debut at the Bottom Line on Wednesday, is one of the once fascinating casualties of this country's political turmoil of the Last decade. Mr. Winchester made his first album in 1970 - produced by Robbie Robertson of the Band - and his new "Nothing but a Breeze" is his fifth. But even though all four of his previous records were critics' favorites and his songs were recorded by Joan Baez, Jimmy Buffett the Everly Brothers and Jonathan Edwards, Mr. Winchester has remained largely unknown by the record-buying public.

The probable reason is he hasn't toured in this country and he hasn't had much air play, outside of a few FM stations. And the reason for that is simple: In 1967 Mr. Winchester moved to Canada to avoid the draft, and he hadn't been able to come home until President Carter's pardon of Vietnam draft evaders this year.

Every man's reason for taking such a step is different. From all reports, Mr. Winchester's was a choice carefully considered and bravely taken reflecting political conviction and moral courage, rather than fear of combat. Certainly, the drama of his move takes on a special urgency when set against his family background. Born in 1944 at an Air Force base in Louisiana, Mr. Winchester is a member of one of the founding families of Memphis where he was raised. His great-great-great-great-great grandfather was the man who convinced Davy Crockett to get into national politics. Mr. Winchester's father, who died when the son was 18, was an Air Force captain.

After the pardon. Mr. Winchester's first trip to this country was March 11, when he came home to Memphis. "It was very emotional, but I didn't remember the city as I had thought I would," the singer said the other day from Woodstock, N.Y., where he was rehearsing his tour band. "I'd forgotten the simplest street directions, things I'd known all my life."

Mr. Winchester speaks in a slow, steady voice, his speech still colored by a Southern accent. He became a Canadian citizen four years ago, referring now to the United States as "your country," and lives in Montreal with his Canadian wife and their two children.

"You get a new perspective," he said. "I didn't know what citizenship was. Now I'm a Canadian, but with Southern tastes. I love that spicy food. But I'm not an American either - I just realized that for the first time, but it doesn't bother me. I think it kind of makes me a citizen of the world."

Many of Mr. Winchester's songs deal with tender memories of his childhood, but he doesn't dwell on the suggestion that they imply a specially acute longing for the South. "I think everybody's cut off from his childhood," he says. "Maybe me more than the others."

His new album is produced by Brian Ahern, and includes lovely back-up singing by two of Mr. Ahern's other charges, Emmylou Harris and Anne Murray.

"I'm trying to make my music as clear and uncluttered with metaphors or poetry or things like that as possible. I'm trying to make it very plain. I want it to mean exactly what it says. I don't want you to wonder what it means." The musical idioms are grounded firmly in the Southern folk styles he grew up with, and even the ventures into French-Canadian have a down-home flavor: "I try to do them in Southern way," is how he puts it.

Mr. Winchester's tour got under way a week ago yesterday in Burlington, Vt., and will continue most of the summer. He recognizes that there are some who resent his return and that of any draft evader, but he hopes that resentment won't lead to trouble. "I know that there are people who feel that way," he says slowly. "I hope there won't be any problems. I don't expect it. I've always gone out of my way to respect other people's point of view, and to make friends with people I don't agree with."