

ROCK

Winchester's New Album Shuns Politics

By Bruce Meyer

United Press International

Jesse Winchester came home recently, except it wasn't home any more. He was glad to be back, but the whole thing seemed to mean more to the media and the record company than it did to him.

Louisiana-born, Memphis-raised, Winchester is now a Canadian citizen, a step he -- like many of the other 10,000 draft resisters who fled northward in the late 1960s -- took years ago and has no intention of changing now.

Over the past seven years, Winchester's strong, gentle voice and easy blend of country, folk and rock has made him a favorite among music critics throughout the U.S. But his inability to tour the lucrative American market left most of his albums languishing unnoticed on the record store shelves.

So President Carter's pardon of Vietnam draft resisters may at last give Jesse Winchester a chance to make a mark on his nation of birth.

Like many of his fellow draft exiles, Winchester, 32, is not overtly a "political" person. He clearly feels his actions are worth more than his words as simple political protest. Yet, inevitably, his audience places on him the burden of a traditional protest singer.

"It's not really so much a burden to have to carry," he says. "It's more of an incentive -- to play a little better, sing a little better, write a little better."

He bristles -- just a little -- when pushed about the expectations of an audience from a musician who has taken so drastic a step as exile to oppose the war.

"I don't know what people expect of me," he says. "I know what they get. They get me -- my

thoughts, my feelings. And "What I'm interested in, and what I'm working on, includes politics. But politics is smaller than what I'm doing. The proper, just, political action would be implied by proper moral action, the proper altruistic attitude. Art is higher than politics -- and only in that sense am I political."

After 10 years in Canada, Winchester recently completed his first tour of the United States, an exhausting experience that will be but the first of several intensive introductions to the U.S. record-buying public. Did he notice any significant differences since he left?

"I can't really say whether things are better, or worse, or what," he says with a small scowl. "It's hard to define it, but it would have to do with, well, that Quaker cereal -- the natural cereal -- that kind of thing, where the economy, which has been painted as so manipulative, is really sensitive to some things.

"It does seem that the country has gone through a revolution, there has been some change. And that cereal thing is a very trivial thing, but it suggests something larger, I think. Peo-

ple's attitudes seem to have changed quite a bit since 10 years ago."

It should come as no surprise, then, that there is nothing in the way of radical rhetoric to be found on Winchester's newest and fifth album, "Nothing But A Breeze" (Bearsville).

The music is rockabilly-influenced and the lyrics are concerned more with traditional, down-home American values than with war and racism and the world's other "big" ailments.

But just by being who he is, Jesse Winchester manages to speak to all of us about all of that.

His art really is bigger than politics. And his music is worth listening to.