

**SINGER JESSE WINCHESTER WILL  
SOON BE SEEN AS WELL AS HEARD:  
A DRAFT EVADER COMES HOME**



After self-exile in Canada for draft evasion, Winchester came home again with son James. Grandma (left) saw them off back to Montreal.

By Kent Demaret

His father was an Air Force captain, a veteran of bloody Pacific campaigns in World War II. His grandfather was a fervently patriotic Southern lawyer who quoted Cicero and preached the honor of family name and country. Indeed, Jesse Winchester's roots reached back to the first mayor of Memphis and to Confederate General-in-Chief Robert E. Lee. But in 1967, at the height of bitter Vietnam draft resistance, Winchester, then 22, agonizingly uprooted himself from his home in the Volunteer State and self-exiled himself to Montreal, where he became a Canadian citizen. He did so with Southern courage (he would likely have been exempted as a teacher or been declared 4-F) and quiet dignity. "A person ought to do what he believes is right," he says, "and shut up."

In the decade since, Winchester fell into the coffeehouse circuit of Montreal, played folk concerts across Canada and recorded four LPs that were released back home. But he discovered that to "ship" an LP in the U.S. without being permitted to promote it in a nationwide tour is like sending a letter without postage. Despite awed reviews, his art too was in a sense exiled from pop charts.

Now all that is changed. With President Carter's pardon of draft evaders, Winchester, 32, can come home again—as he did last month for the first time to visit his mother in Memphis. More important to his career, his fifth glowingly matured progressive country LP, *Nothing But a Breeze*, is due for release late this month. Now that he can and will tour his homeland for the first time, it should reach deserved commercial recognition.



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As for pardon, Winchester says, "I'm very grateful, but I don't feel it's due me, like a lot of draft dodgers. It's an act of mercy on the part of Carter." (Jesse sent the President a note of thanks and hopes to meet him.) But for now, he and his Canadian wife, Leslie, will live in Montreal. "I'm committed to make my original move into a positive, not a negative act," he explains. "I swore allegiance to the Queen and gave up my rights as an American when I left."

Winchester is neither righteous nor bitter about the circumstances leading to self-exile. "The war was like a tornado coming through our lives. I don't blame the American culture for it. People who fought and got themselves shot up for the war believed they were right, and so did I. To me," he sums up, "it's more important how people live with the decisions they make."

As for his impressions of home, Jesse reports, "I had forgotten what a beautiful town Memphis is. It felt real good." It was there that Winchester took up piano. While getting a B.A. in German from Williams College, he taught himself flute and guitar. Once in Montreal, he answered an ad for a rhythm guitarist in a rock band called the Astronauts, but left when their gold leotards and football helmets became too much. He then formed—and fired—several country-folk bands as well as soloing onstage. The Band's Robbie Robertson (of Dylan fame) happened to catch Jesse, and shortly after produced and played for his first LP, with Winchester's best-known song, Yankee Lady.

Leslie, 26, and Jesse occupy the bottom flat of a two-story home in Montreal with their kids, James, 5, and Alice, 2. A basement "studio" lures him into composing and playing. Though he is more hopeful about his recording career now, he isn't resentful of his earlier score: "critical praise and 25 cents." There are no strident polemics on the new LP, but one verse from the title cut reflects the wrench of Jesse's new freedom: "*I want to live with my feet in Dixie/ And my head in the cool blue North.*"

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Photographs by Shelly Katz/Black Star

Jesse's wife, Leslie, was just another admiring folkie till she talked her way into meeting him at an insane asylum gig.

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