

General Pardon Lets Jesse Tour

By MARY CABELL

Jesse Winchester, born in the South, self-exiled to Canada during the Vietnam War, has released his fifth record album and is making his first tour of the United States, with his rural Southern, soft rock songs. He is able to do that because of President Carter's pardon of draft evaders.

The first four albums, on Bearsville — as is the new one, "Nothing but a Breeze" — didn't sell well and Winchester thinks it's because he didn't tour to promote them. He smiles: "We'll soon find out."

He and his band have worked hard and he's confident of the music they're presenting on the tour. After three days of a four-day tour in New York, the third city on his April 29-June 26 tour, he is becoming nervous from journalists' questions about his politics and Canadian citizenship. "I'm afraid my nerves are going to get frayed, is all. You always want to say the right thing and try and have people like you."

Still, in a gentle Southern accent, Winchester explains again. He left Memphis in December 1966, 10 days after his draft notice came. He had attended Williams College in northern Massachusetts, majoring in German, and had spent a year in Europe. He knew he could live outside the South.

As for the war, "I just didn't want anything to do with it. I suppose I could have wangled some deferment, but the war



JESSE WINCHESTER

seemed so poisoned at the source to me at the time. I said, 'I don't want to talk about it with you; I'll just go someplace else.' I felt I could keep myself whole by doing that."

His mother agreed with his decision. "My grandfather was particularly hard hit by it. He was disappointed in me."

His father had been an Air Force captain in World War II, had farmed in Mississippi until Winchester was 12, when he had a heart attack. He died when Winchester was 18. "After the Second World War he hated war," Winchester explains.

Winchester went to Montreal because he wanted a combination North American-European atmosphere.

Had circumstances been different and Winchester stayed in the United States, he

thinks he might now be a teacher or reporter. He worked for a newspaper in Collierville, Tenn., one summer and liked it.

Winchester tried in Canada to get a job teaching German, failed and took a job playing rhythm guitar in a band that played French popular music in hotel lounges. "They had a real good French soul singer of the Charles Aznavour type. I enjoyed working with him."

He started learning French and writing songs. After eight months, he went out on his own, building a following in and around Montreal. He also got married and he and his Acadian wife, Leslie, have a son, James, 5, and daughter, Alice Evangeline, 2. They live in Montreal and he'd like for the present tour to bring in enough money so they could buy a house outside Montreal, in a rural atmosphere he remembers fondly from his own childhood. After six years in Canada, he also became a Canadian citizen.

There wasn't an "American ghetto," Winchester says. "The type of Americans that went up there in the first place weren't the type that joined groups, really. There was one group, but they were very political, and their goals were not the same as mine in general. I wasn't against amnesty for us but I was against asking for amnesty."

Looking at it all now, Winchester says, "The deal was when I came up to Canada I would never be allowed to return to the United States and I was ready

to live by that. There were people who got killed or had legs or arms shot off. Everyone lost something. Your principals have to be paid for one way or another. I was ready to pay the price. If someone is going to wipe that away, I regard it as generosity on their part. Whether it is justice or not, only God in Heaven can know."

Robbie Robertson of the Band started Winchester on his recording career, getting him a contract with Bearsville and producing his first LP, "Jesse Winchester," in 1970. That contained the songs "Yankee Lady," later recorded by Tim Hardin, and "Brand New Tennessee Waltz," recorded by Joan Baez. Robertson was introduced to Winchester by a mutual friend "in the basement of a church where I was making a demonstration tape."

So far his songs, through written in Canada, have been in a folksy Southern idiom. "You write in your mind. My tastes are still Southern; I like spicy foods, country music and Southern accents. I don't think that makes me any less Canadian."

"I'm starting to write about Canada now. I don't know why it has taken me so long; maybe it just takes time to build up an emotional relationship with a country or a place or a person to the point your feel you have something to say about it. I love Montreal; it's a beautiful place. I imagine I'll be writing about that."