

# Troubled folkie to dreamy pin-up and superstar singer-songwriter: a daunting transition fraught by heroin and hospitalisation. But through the chaos, sanity and survival somehow took shape. “I never even had a Plan A,” shrugs James Taylor.

Interview by COLIN IRWIN • Portrait by NORMAN SEEFF

**U**NNERVINGLY TALL AND SLIM AS A RAKE, James Taylor is like an eccentric professor trying to make sense of the spectacular dramas of his life and the bizarre quirks of musical fate that have brought him to this point. Nothing should surprise him any more, but inevitably it does.

Peering out of his London hotel window, he surveys Hyde Park and reflects on the miracle that brought him here from New York in under five hours, a record for a sub-sonic commercial flight. “There was this huge wind behind the plane the whole way... it was surreal.” He shakes his head and smiles with disarming warmth. Just another unfathomable event in a mad world that he barely tries to understand any more. A lifelong liberal, it looks at one point as if he’s about to curl up in a ball and sob as he reflects on the political situation in America. “And I felt so good about Obama...” he says.

His musical career has been a conundrum, too, a giddy mixture of huge success, commercial troughs, unexpected twists and personal despair. He planned none of it. The son of a brilliant doctor who had his own demons, he grew up with four siblings in North Carolina, but refers to his mother’s insistence on frequent holidays in the artistic climes of Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts, as the catalyst for his subsequent adventures in folk, blues, rock and many points beyond. That and the show tunes and standards beloved of his parents, which he first learned to play on guitar – roots to which he pays

homage on his most recent album, *American Standard*, putting his own distinctive stamp on classics including Moon River and My Blue Heaven. They are, he says, “the songs I cut my teeth on, part of the family record collection. The music that informed our generation. They are more sophisticated than songs these days. I think they represent the high point of American popular song.”

Many would argue that the singer-songwriter school of the early ’70s represents another. Taylor was one of its biggest stars – with a gift for stark and powerful melody and a deceptively languid style. Deceptive, because what seemed to come easily was dragged from a hinterland of addiction and institutionalisation, with unimagined success and romantic misadventures with Joni Mitchell and Carly Simon adding to the discombobulation. Subsequent induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (in 2020), White House recognition by Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, and record sales of over 100 million attest to the enduring qualities of his songs, but also an instinct for survival against the odds.

At 72, he insists he saw none of it coming. “I never had a Plan B,” he says. “In fact I never even had a Plan A...”

**So you grew up on show tunes, the music you played on *American Standard*?**

Yes. Mum and dad had a lot of show tunes as well as records by people like Nina Simone. Folk music, too – The Weavers, Pete Seeger. And blues. My father listened to Leadbelly a lot. This was a time when you really listened to music and read all the linernotes. ➤

WE’RE NOT WORTHY

**Bonnie Raitt really rates trilling James Taylor.**



“As someone rooted in the folk tradition, Joan Baez got me playing guitar. But James Taylor was a whole new style – so evocative, with a certain trill on the D chord or the G that’s totally his own. And the voice, songs and lyrics! He’s very eloquent and cuts deep. Very personal but he touches all of us.”

◀ **What was your relationship like with your father?**

He was a doctor. Very driven. He had a lot of personal power but got into trouble with alcohol eventually, though he was essentially self-medicating. His mother died giving birth to him and his grandfather, who was a family doctor, assisted in the birth and also died a couple of months later. He met my mother in Boston, where he had been a star at Harvard and moved the family down to North Carolina, which was a culture shock for my mother. He built a medical school there. And he volunteered to go to the South Pole and build the scientific base at McMurdo Sound, and he was gone for two years.

**What triggered you into making music?**

Different things at different times. We listened to a lot of Harry Belafonte. Nina Simone. When I started playing I wanted to emulate Tom Rush... and then Ry Cooder, Eric Von Schmidt and Dave Van Ronk. And Dylan. But the most important artist over time was Ray Charles. I also had an older brother, Alex, who took root in the South and brought soul music into our house.

**What was the first song you wrote?**

I was 14, and I wrote a little tune called Roll River Roll. Just a simple folksy number with simple guitar chords.

**How did the folk connection begin?**

We had a summer place we always went to on Martha's Vineyard island. A relative backwater. Our mother would drag us up the coast in the family station wagon to this exciting community of academics and lefties from Boston, Chicago and New York. It had a great musical culture while the folk music thing was happening.

**Were you part of that Greenwich folk scene?**

No, I was too young, but I was old enough to notice. My scene was Club 47 in Harvard Square. That's where Dylan played in Boston,

and Joan Baez played, and Eric Andersen played. That's where Kweskin's Jug Band played. They were revolutionary and seminal. Maria Muldaur, Geoff Muldaur, Jim Kweskin, Bruno Wolf, Fritz Richmond. I think Bill Keith might have played banjo in that band. There was a club there called The Mooncusser, which had an open mike night, and when I was 14 or 15 I'd venture on stage and embarrass myself.

**And that's where you formed Jamie & Kootch with Danny Kortchmar?**

I met him on Martha's Vineyard and he said, "Come away from this folk music, and let's play the blues." I was in a group with my brother first, and then Kootch and I played together in New York City, and in that band was a guy named Joel O'Brien - Bishop O'Brien, who was almost a musicologist. He introduced me to Latin music and heroin.

**Was the band any good?**

It had a certain raw energy. I wrote this song Steamroller, which takes the piss out of it a bit because we loved the blues, but we were white kids from the suburbs. Martin Mull had a song: "Woke up this morning both my cars were gone/I felt so lowdown and nasty I threw my drink across the lawn."

**Did you meet Dylan?**

I've only met him once, when we did a benefit together at the Apollo. The Apollo was another important moment for me. Myself and Kootch went to New York to help someone move and Kootch said, "Let's go to the Apollo, there's a matinee." It was amazing. Lee Dorsey was on, Charlie And Inez Foxx played Mockingbird, Billy Stewart played Sitting In The Park, Carla Thomas was there... all these legendary acts playing a Sunday matinee. We were the only white kids there. And they showed a movie with a wagon train being attacked by Indians and every time an Indian stuck an arrow in the chest of one of the

guys on the wagon train, the whole place applauded like crazy.

**Who did you aspire to be back then?**

During the folk phase I thought I'd be Tom Rush. During the phase in Greenwich Village I thought that it would be Lovin' Spoonful or Buffalo Springfield. In the beginning I didn't have any time for The Beatles, but as they continued to amaze us, I became a heavy Beatles fan and that's what I aspired to after a while.

**And you went on to work with The Beatles when you came to London...**

I didn't know that would happen. I wouldn't have dared dream I'd get that chance.

**How did you get the chance?**

I came to London really just to visit. I was gonna make my way across Europe with my guitar, planning to play in the streets or wherever I could play my songs and make my way. Not a very well worked-out plan!

**So what happened?**

Soon after I arrived some people said if I made a demo they'd help me find a record deal. Kootch had previously backed Peter & Gordon so I called Kootch asking if he had a number for Peter Asher, thinking maybe Peter knows who I could talk to. It turned out that Peter had just joined Apple Records and was looking for people to sign, so it was perfect timing. He liked my music and he got me an audition with Paul and George.

**That must have been quite nerve-racking!**

It was terrible. I still get very nervous when a tour is beginning. So yeah, I was nervous, but I could see that this was my opening if I was going to get one. I knew how important it was.

**What did you play for them?**

Something In The Way She Moves. It was my best song.

**A LIFE IN PICTURES**

**Taylor's times: James in the frame.**

**1** Don't let me be lonely tonight: the young Taylor, aged 15, on-stage in Russia.

**2** Rainy Day Man: James in 1968, reclining for the cover of his debut album.

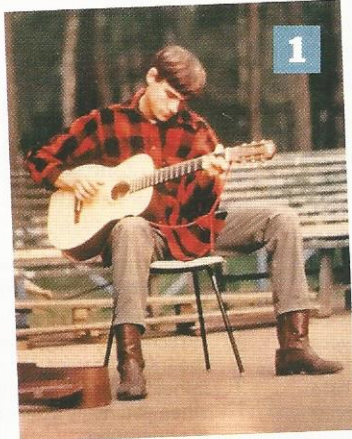
**3** Lo and behold! Taylor at a BBC TV studio, London, October 20, 1970.

**4** James with John Lennon, Yoko Ono and first wife Carly Simon arriving at a New York first night, 1977.

**5** Country road: as The Driver in 1971 movie Two-Lane Blacktop with co-stars Laurie Bird (The Girl) and Beach Boy Dennis Wilson (The Mechanic).

**6** With his '70s band (from left) JT, Danny Kortchmar (guitar), Russ Kunkel (drums), Leland Sklar (bass).

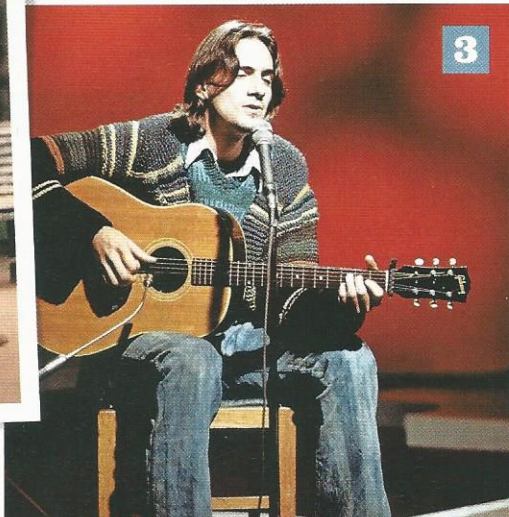
**7** Taylor and Joni Mitchell prepare to sing backing vocals on Carole King's Will You Love Me Tomorrow for her Tapestry LP, 1971.



**1**



**2**



**3**



**4**



**5**

Courtesy of the Taylor Family Archives; Courtesy of US State Department, Getty (8)

**They were obviously impressed.**

I don't know how impressed they were, but they'd asked Peter to go out and find people to sign to the label, and they said, "Sure, go ahead, sign him."

**Did you socialise with them?**

Here and there. Mostly in the context of Apple Records, in the offices, that concert on the roof, the opening of Yellow Submarine. I recorded in the same studio they were using at Trident Sound, which was the only studio in the country with an 8-track machine and so they block-booked it. When they left for the day, Peter and I would get started. So I was present for a lot of their playbacks of *The White Album*. Paul played on Carolina In My Mind and so I did see a fair amount of them. I sat in on a few of their sessions in the control room, stuff like that.

**How do you look back on your first album?**

It seems like it was a work in progress. Both Peter and I were learning how to make records. I cringe thinking about it. It took me a long time to learn how to record.

**But you were on The Beatles' label, you must have thought you had it made?**

Two years previous to that I'd spent 10 months in a psychiatric hospital, which was how I broke free. I had a sort of stormy adolescence, and I didn't have any sense of there being any future whatsoever.

**You had no expectations?**

I had no expectation of anything beyond a week ahead. I didn't think of career or money. I was living in the moment. My only plan was to play in the streets and maybe some cafés or coffee houses and nightclubs if I could get good enough and somehow sell a record. It

was such a counterculture then, the whole idea of success seemed bourgeois, a bad idea.

**What triggered your mental health problems?**

There's a family predisposition to mental health issues, depression specifically. Also there's a family predisposition to addiction. It's definitely the family business, but what made mine seemingly so intense? I don't know.

**"It's not the sort of thing that the most popular guy in High School does – go off with a guitar somewhere."**

**Was being sent to boarding school a factor?**

Yes. I missed my family and I missed my home. I felt that particular school was preparing people for a life that nobody was going to live any more – an upper class that didn't exist in America, had never really existed in America and certainly didn't exist any more in 1966. I felt like a stranger in a strange land. My family also came apart. My folks divorced, my father's drinking finally got out of control, my brother Alex also had a crisis, mostly to do with addiction, which eventually also killed him. So a lot of overwhelming things happened.

**How do you combat it?**

I self-medicated with opiates for about 20

years. Of course, eventually, that stops working. It did work really well for me, so did my father's drinking for him. That's one of the first warning signs. If you can find a substance that really works for you, then watch out.

**Yet you were becoming so successful...**

Yes, but I never trusted what it meant to be successful, and I was right not to trust it. It's a red herring. You still have to learn how to live. The intersection of art and business has always been a bad fit. It's a bad fit for the businessman and a bad fit for the artist.

**Were there benefits from the mental institute – was it Belmont?**

McLean Hospital, Belmont. The main benefit was that I became free. When I left I'd spent all the money my parents had saved for me to go to college – those private psychiatric hospitals are expensive. But I played a lot of guitar, I learned to shoot pool and I started writing songs. But the main thing was that I got my freedom.

**Did you write Fire And Rain then?**

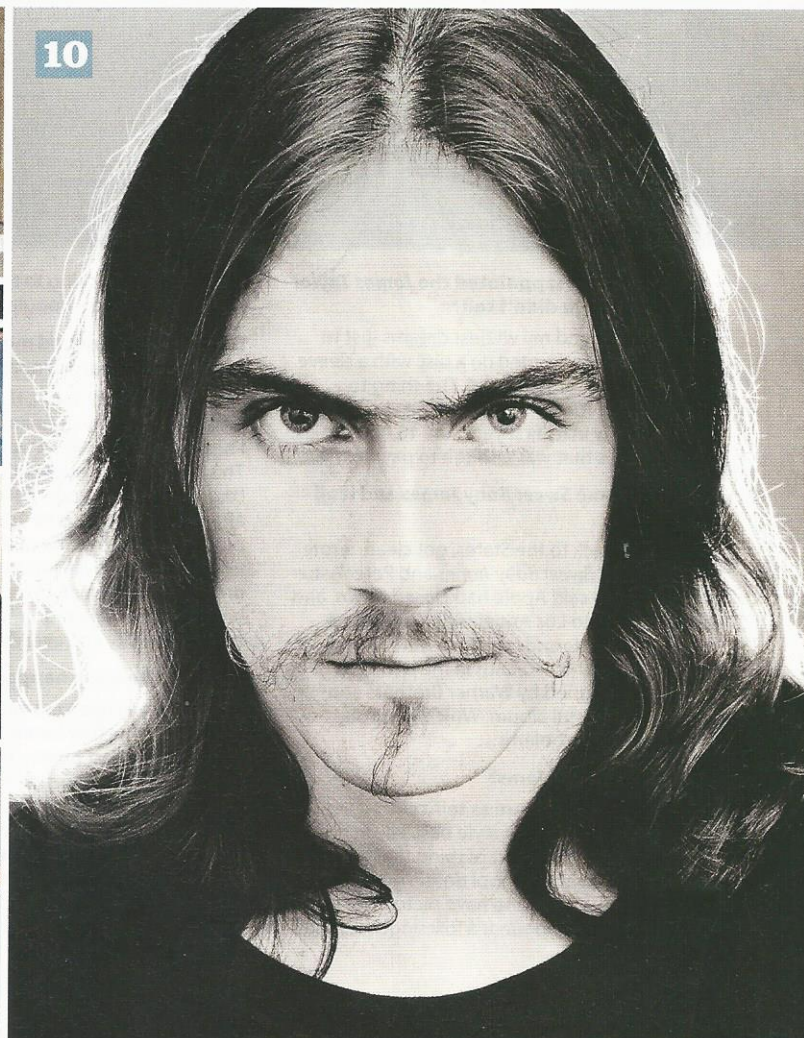
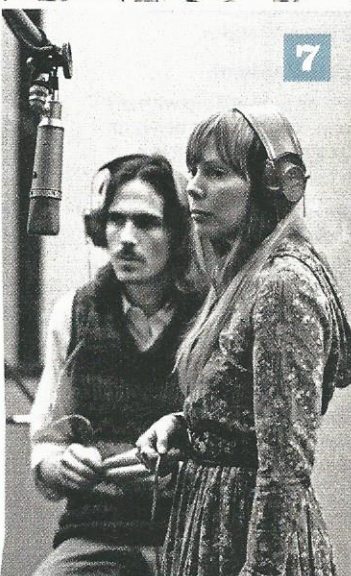
No, I wrote Fire And Rain the second time I was institutionalised. When I came back from London I had a heroin habit and I went to an institution to clean up. I was there for five months, in a place called Austen Riggs. They weren't supposed to do detoxes, so I was admitted as a psychiatric patient. I was there to get clean. That's where I wrote the songs on *Sweet Baby James*, including Fire And Rain.

**And that song was based on a friend of yours dying?**

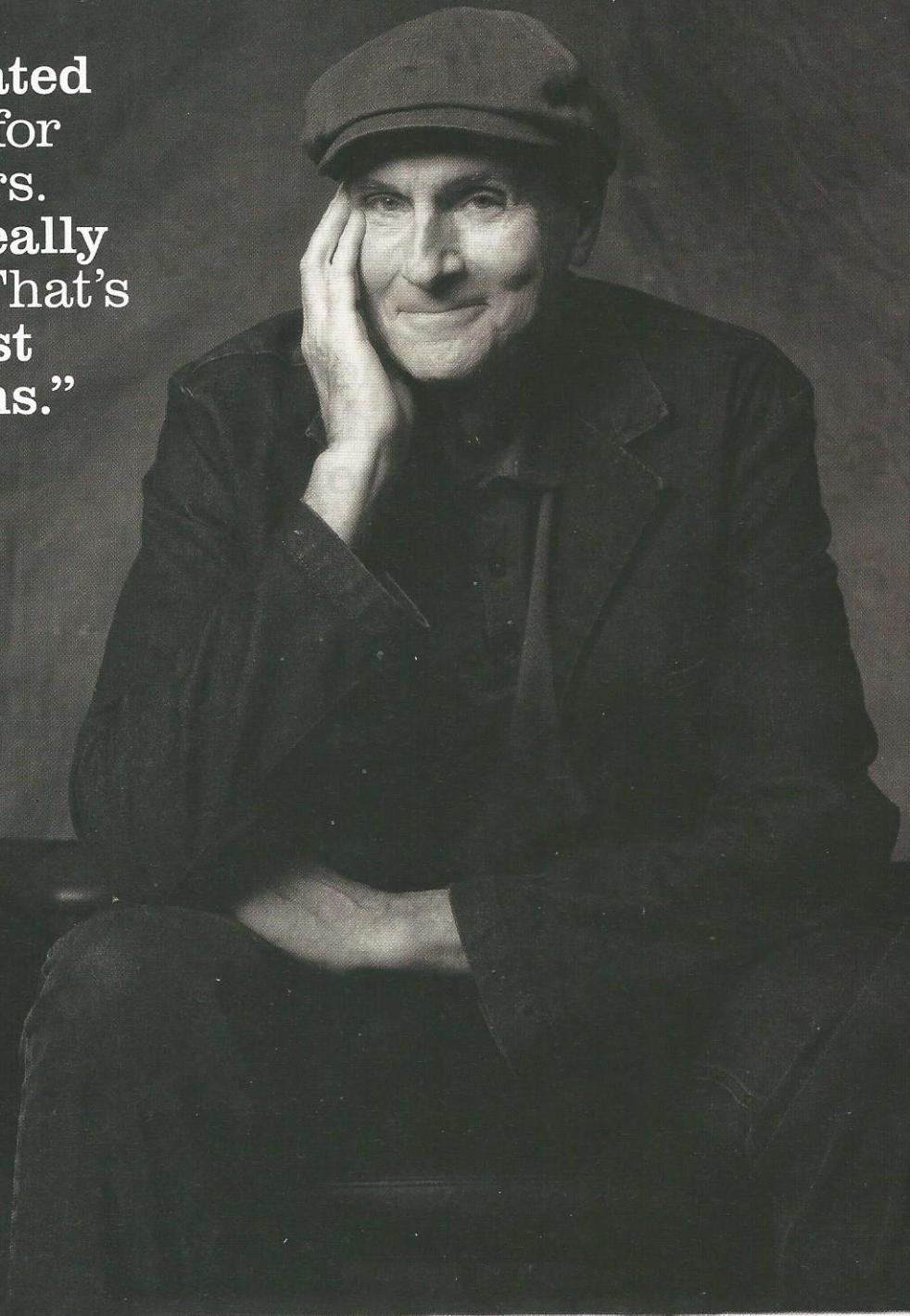
Yes, while I had been recording the Apple album, friends had learned of a friend from the New York days who'd been committed by her family and had thrown herself in front of a subway train.



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**“I self-medicated with opiates for about 20 years. It did work really well for me. That’s one of the first warning signs.”**



**◀ Were you disappointed the *James Taylor* album on Apple didn’t sell?**

No, it was beyond my wildest dreams just to have my music recorded on a disc with a sleeve. I don’t know how well it did. The thing to remember is, for instance, *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* initially in its first year sold 10,000 copies. In those days that was enough to pay for itself.

**But then came *Sweet Baby James* and it all took off...**

Yes, I went back to the States, got clean, wrote the songs on *Sweet Baby James* and Peter Asher called up and said Apple had closed down, and he was going to Los Angeles and proposed he’d manage me and look for a new record label. The fact he had faith in me is probably why we got signed by Warner Brothers and made a successful album. Which presents another set of problems...

**What sort of problems?**

You know, when you are as self-centred as I am... I’d developed my style basically in isolation. It’s not the sort of thing that the most popular guy in high school does – go off with a guitar, get obsessed and have pictures of himself as a troubadour or a folk singer. It makes

it even more shocking to take it to market and turn yourself into a popular product.

**Didn’t you have a bad motorcycle crash on Martha’s Vineyard around that time?**

Well, it was bad enough. I broke my left wrist, my right hand, my right ankle and my left foot. I broke all extremities. I was laid up for a while. This was 1969. A couple of weeks previous to it I’d played the Newport Folk Festival. I was actually on-stage when Neil Armstrong stepped onto the surface of the moon! George Wein, who ran the festival, interrupted my set in order to say, “Human beings have just stepped on the moon.” The moon was hanging right up there in the sky and everybody looked up.

**How did the crash happen?**

I was riding a stolen motorcycle that some friends of mine had found in the woods. I was just taking a blast on it in these fire trails that were in the state forest. It had no brakes to speak of and I didn’t realise the throttle stuck open. I came up over the top of a hill and in front of me was a stand of trees. I just rode into the trees. When I came to, I was pretty broke up. So I was out of commission for Woodstock. I was in plaster casts and basically,

as soon as I came out of the casts we cut *Sweet Baby James*.

**So you didn’t really enjoy the trappings of fame and presumably the riches that came with it?**

It wasn’t riches. I did build myself a house, but I had to borrow the money to do it. I was making a modest amount performing, but it was a while before it felt like real money.

**How did you react to stardom?**

Being on a billboard on Sunset Strip with my picture on was an eye-opener. And being on the cover of Time magazine. That got my family’s attention.

**Were you proud to see yourself up there on a billboard?**

I looked at it with a wry sense of humour. I felt like I was riding a bull.

**There must have been pressure to maintain that level of success...**

No commercial presentation of myself by a record company had any chance of being satisfactory or accurate and I just didn’t trust it. I had relationships with people, and I also had

really great song and I ran to get my guitar to play it. We went into the studio a couple of weeks later and recorded a couple of songs that day – I think Kootch's song Machine Gun Kelly and maybe Riding On A Railroad or something like that. And we had two hours of studio time left. We've recorded a lot of things because there was spare studio time – How Sweet It Is, Handyman, Up On The Roof. And that's what this was. I knew the song and I taught it to Kootch and we took a run at it and Joni Mitchell sang the harmonies with me.

**What was Carole's reaction?**

When we cut it I said, "Oh, Jesus I haven't asked Carole, this is terrible – I'll go talk to her about it." Carole was going into the studio to make *Tapestry*. If someone had come to me and said – "That Fire And Rain is a nice song, mind if I cut it first?..." It's unthinkable. So it was a great act of generosity from Carole... she knew what she had. But when she heard our version, she liked it too. And she said, "Ah, go ahead, take it. Let it out."

**You've always had a great feel for cover versions...**

The important thing with a cover is to take it some place new. You're not going to do it as good as The Drifters or Marvin Gaye. To copy is madness. You want to do something new with it. Just apply your ear and instrument and voice to it and see what comes out. That's what I've done. Sometimes not successfully. I did a version of Day Tripper by The Beatles that wasn't enough of a change.

**You were married to Carly Simon – how do you look back on that time?**

With some regrets on how unready I was to be a husband and father. I was still an addict, so it was doomed, but that's the way it goes. It's hard in this business to have a stable family life. Fortunately – and I can't take any credit for it – our kids Sally and Ben are really wonderful people.

**And are you on friendly terms with Carly these days?**

If you have kids and get divorced you don't really get to be divorced, but when the kids grow up you finally can. So we don't have much of a relationship.

**Was there a key point in your career you look back most fondly on?**

I did Rock In Rio, in 1985. It was the first show I'd done sober in front of a large audience. It was the first time I'd been to Brazil. And on the very day of the show it was the first free elections in Brazil for 20 years after being under this military junta. There were 300,000 people there – the most I'd ever played to – and to discover they knew my songs and to hear them singing them back to me in perfect time was amazing. It turned me around and put me back on my feet.

**For someone politically involved you haven't done many political songs...**

I've done a couple. McCartney sang on Let It All Fall Down, which was about the Watergate days. And I wrote Slap Leather as Reagan was leaving office.

**Did you always have a belief in your own work?**

I knew what I liked but it's healthy to doubt yourself. You wanna be right-sized if you can, but relative to the kind of narcissism given free rein that most celebrities exhibit. An over-developed sense of entitlement seems to be a requirement of being a celebrity and it's not very appealing.

**You're still doing this – do you still love it? What drives you?**

Well, it's my work – I don't always love it. My main experience has been a community of musicians that I work with, the music and the audience, and that's as real as it gets in a very unreal business. I don't belong to a church, but the music has a spiritual component – as fatuous as that sounds. It is very satisfying to have all that attention. I do like it still.

**So do you ever look back and think, Yeah, I did all right?**

The way I mostly look at it is as a long process of getting better. I wince at the early stages, but I do feel I've written some good songs and I think I've gotten pretty good at performing and recording. But mostly I've just been very very lucky.

*American Standard is out now on Concord Records. James Taylor tours the US with Jackson Browne in May/June 2021.*

**TAYLOR MADE**

Three key albums, picked by Colin Irwin.

**THE STAR MAKER**

**James Taylor**  
Sweet Baby James

★★★★★  
(WARNER BROS, 1970)



Taylor's landmark redemption album – a rare mix of melodic beauty and chastened lyricism. Like, is he waving or drowning? Fire And Rain remains its anguished, still-potent calling card, but his languid whimsy – not least the poignant take on Stephen Foster's Oh Susannah, the desultory title track's forlorn musing of a lost cowboy, and the mischievous blues pastiche Steamroller – creates a melancholic post-'60s view from the asylum.

**THE OLD PALS' ACT**

**James Taylor**  
That's Why I'm Here

★★★★★  
(COLUMBIA, 1985)



"Fortune and fame's such a curious game/Perfect strangers call you by name/ Pay good money to hear Fire And Rain again and again," he sings wryly on the title track. Incorporating enterprising arrangements of Bacharach & David's The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance and Buddy Holly's Everyday, and tilting confidently into country territory, it has a relish which suggests an artist finally at ease with himself, while Don Henley, Joni Mitchell and Graham Nash join the party.

**THE RALLYING CALL**

**James Taylor**  
Before This World

★★★★★  
(CONCORD, 2015)



Perhaps Taylor's most surprising album – and, 45 years after *Sweet Baby James*, his first US Number 1. Long reliant on covers amid an extended dearth of original material, he isolated himself in Rhode Island, wrote his best songs for years, put a little band together with a strong rhythmic identity and came out stomping. Narratives range from the Boston Red Sox to war in Afghanistan, plus Wild Mountain Thyme's dive into folk tradition.

"It is very satisfying to have all that attention. I do still like it". James Taylor, in the latter stages of the long process of getting better.

a relationship with substance abuse, which can muddy the waters. But I had a manager and a champion in Peter Asher, who understood what it was like for me and protected me. I wrote a song to him: Hey Mister, That's Me Up On The Jukebox.

**You had your critics, too. In 1971 Lester Bangs wrote an essay titled James Taylor Marked For Death, suggesting you were the enemy of rock'n'roll. That must have hurt.**

Well I wished it wasn't happening but basically I agreed with him. I could see his point. It could have been much worse. If you've worked hard to build yourself up, there will be energy spent tearing it down too. It can be cruel out there.

**Tell us about Carole King and her song You've Got A Friend.**

Carole and I were playing at the Troubadour in LA and one night she played a new song. She told me some years later that when I wrote Fire And Rain and she heard the line "I've seen lonely times when I could not find a friend," she was moved to write You've Got A Friend.

**Did you record it straight away?**

As soon as I heard it, I knew she'd written a

Norman Seeff