

A BandHouse Gigs Tribute to Jackson Browne

Program Notes by Chuck Sullivan

In 1972, when the world first heard his debut album *Jackson Browne (Saturate Before Using)*, the 8-track tape player was the state of the art in car stereos. “Doctor My Eyes” was a hit: poignant, clever, and catchy. But the song wasn’t forced or trying to be anything. It just flowed in my mind like it was there all along—Browne brought it to the surface.

On this same record, songs explore all manner of love’s trappings: betrayal, conflict, and most of all beauty. The lyrics (often closer to poetry) were where he wore his emotions on his rolled-up sleeve, so that even if you’d been betrayed, there was still beauty in loving, being hurt, and moving on. Listeners learned something in the process that helped them feel not so alone, but instead more like they were on the same path Browne travels on, with suffering and a sense of being lost that can end in awareness and sometimes even hope.

Rumors implied that he hailed from Europe because he was born in Germany, but he was a California boy down to the surfer haircut, while also being an unassuming prophet. He was strikingly handsome, yet always seemed to get the short end of the relationship. Somehow that made him even more philosophical.

After high school, Browne joined the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. He left the band after a few months and moved to Greenwich Village, New York, where he became a staff writer for Elektra's publishing company, Nina Music, before he was 18. While in Greenwich Village he backed Tim Buckley and singer Nico of the Velvet Underground. In 1968, Browne moved to Los Angeles where he became part of the Laurel Canyon music movement, collaborating with other musicians like The Eagles, Linda Ronstadt, JD Souther, Lowell George, Bonnie Raitt, and Warren Zevon. The Laurel Canyon sound was more in tune with his style.

His songs could make fans feel like everything they did had a purpose—even if they couldn’t see through the fog. That is a brilliant talent. He began honing these songwriting skills with his plaintive song *These Days* when he was 16!

Whatever the appeal, it was not by accident. Adept at guitar and piano, Browne worked on his craft, playing early versions to his peers for feedback, sometimes taking years to finish a song. He revisited every lyric, every note, until it conveyed emotion with music. Browne is quoted as saying his goal was to write something that he would want to read.

At times he could take himself too seriously. I mean, what was he crying about?! He was a stud artist. To point this out to me, a friend made a tape of “Fountain of Sorrow” and at the chorus he had annoyingly scraped the record player needle back and forth, making this horrible screeching sound. My friend thought it was funny; I eventually did too.

But Browne was always one step ahead of the critics. He told himself to take it easy and don't stress out just because seven women are on your mind. Or he'd introduce his lust as his redneck friend, positing he may not have the answer, but he believes he has a plan. Some claim women love his music because he knew more about love than they did. It also might have just been his hair.

Browne was smart enough to join forces with the amazing guitarist David Lindley, whose eclectic stylings on the lap steel gave his songs an edgy wail to satisfy those who mainly listened to the music (but not the lyrics) and a sense of humor for the cynical romantics. Almost all his songs have lush harmonies to push the theme forward. Some were two part and some had an entire soaring chorus that helped catapult Rosemary Butler to stardom. His bands showcased the greatest session players of the day, including the solid rhythm section of Russ Kunkel (drums) and Lee Sklar (bass), making his live performances every bit as powerful as his recordings. And Browne paid particular attention to getting a great drum sound once he realized its importance.

While this rising star sang about the current challenges he had with women, he could also put himself 10 years into the future, allowing him not only to observe the absurdities and inconsistencies of life, but also reflect on them, feeling compassion while sensing the pain he saw when looking into his friend's eyes.

As poetic as his lyrics are, it was his nuanced melodies that inspired others to consider them carefully. He used the same six magic chords as other singer songwriters of the time (though his inversions and embellishments were not so simple), but what gave the words meaning was his voice: surprisingly high at times but mostly in a comfortable contemplative tenor range. His vocal tonality and idiosyncrasies captured the weariness of a man dealing with life, tragedy, and lost love.

Browne had a son in 1973 and married in 1975. Tragically, his wife died by suicide in 1976 when he was 28, the same year he released *The Pretender*. He remarried in 1981, had a second son, and divorced in 1983. Over all the years he was single it was a rare sighting that didn't include a beautiful, barefoot blonde at his side. He drew his stories from his life.

His career took off with each album giving us new perspectives into the mystery of romance and desire. Along the way, Browne made 20 studio albums and sold 30 million records. His songs were featured in movies from *Taxi Driver* ("Late for the Sky") to *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* ("Somebody's Baby") to *Forest Gump* ("Running on Empty")—illustrating his wide appeal.

Starting in the '80s, he eventually wanted to use his voice to bring awareness to travesties in the world. He had a lot to say, pleading with people to examine and acknowledge that there were lives in the balance. As an activist, his causes include Amnesty International, Central American US policies, Children's Defense Fund, Vote for Change, safe energy, and Farm Aid; he included these themes in his songs.

Browne's contributions to environmental protection show his passion for making the world a better place which is a career in itself. Although his song *Rock Me on the Water* pleads for people to come together for the common good, he also at times threatened to leave this world behind and get down to the sea somehow. Sometimes he was able to merge relationship and social issues into one song like *The Pretender*.

Many fans preferred the folk/pop/rock/gospel genre that focused on relationships. They needed that California star to explain their pain and assure them they were not fools if they dared to love someone while overlooking their tragic flaws (and their own) until they got hurt...again.

In 2004, he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame by Bruce Springsteen. Browne gave Springsteen one of his first breaks, inviting him to sit in at the Bitter End in NYC. These two songwriters are so different but they both touch the human spirit, it's just that Browne had a gentler style and as the Boss says, he was a "bonified rock and roll sex star." Browne was 57 at the time of his induction.

Along with his fans, Browne has grown. He lives off the grid with his partner in a sustainable lifestyle. His current relationship woes are not as much about lost romance or instant infatuation. You don't need to confront Browne with his failures, he has not forgotten them, and we haven't forgotten ours either. That is the bond Browne forged with his fans over the years and we are all better off for having lived a life of his songs—especially tunes about walking slow and appreciating the scars of survival we carry. After all, we earned them along with Browne, and thankfully he is still here to help us survive the rest of the journey.

Jackson Browne album titles mirror his life:

- *Jackson Browne* (1972)
- *For Everyman* (1973)
- *Late for the Sky* (1974)
- *The Pretender* (1976)
- *Running on Empty* (1977)
- *Hold Out* (1980)
- *Lawyers in Love* (1983)
- *Lives in the Balance* (1986)
- *World in Motion* (1989)
- *I'm Alive* (1993)
- *Looking East* (1996)
- *The Best of Jackson Browne: The Next Voice You Hear* (1997)
- *The Naked Ride Home* (2002)
- *The Very Best of Jackson Browne* (2004)
- *Solo Acoustic, Vol. 1* (2005)
- *Solo Acoustic, Vol. 2* (2008)
- *Time the Conqueror* (2008)
- *Love Is Strange: En Vivo Con Tino* (2010)
- *Standing in the Breach* (2014)
- *Downhill from Everywhere* (2021)