

P E R F O R M E R S

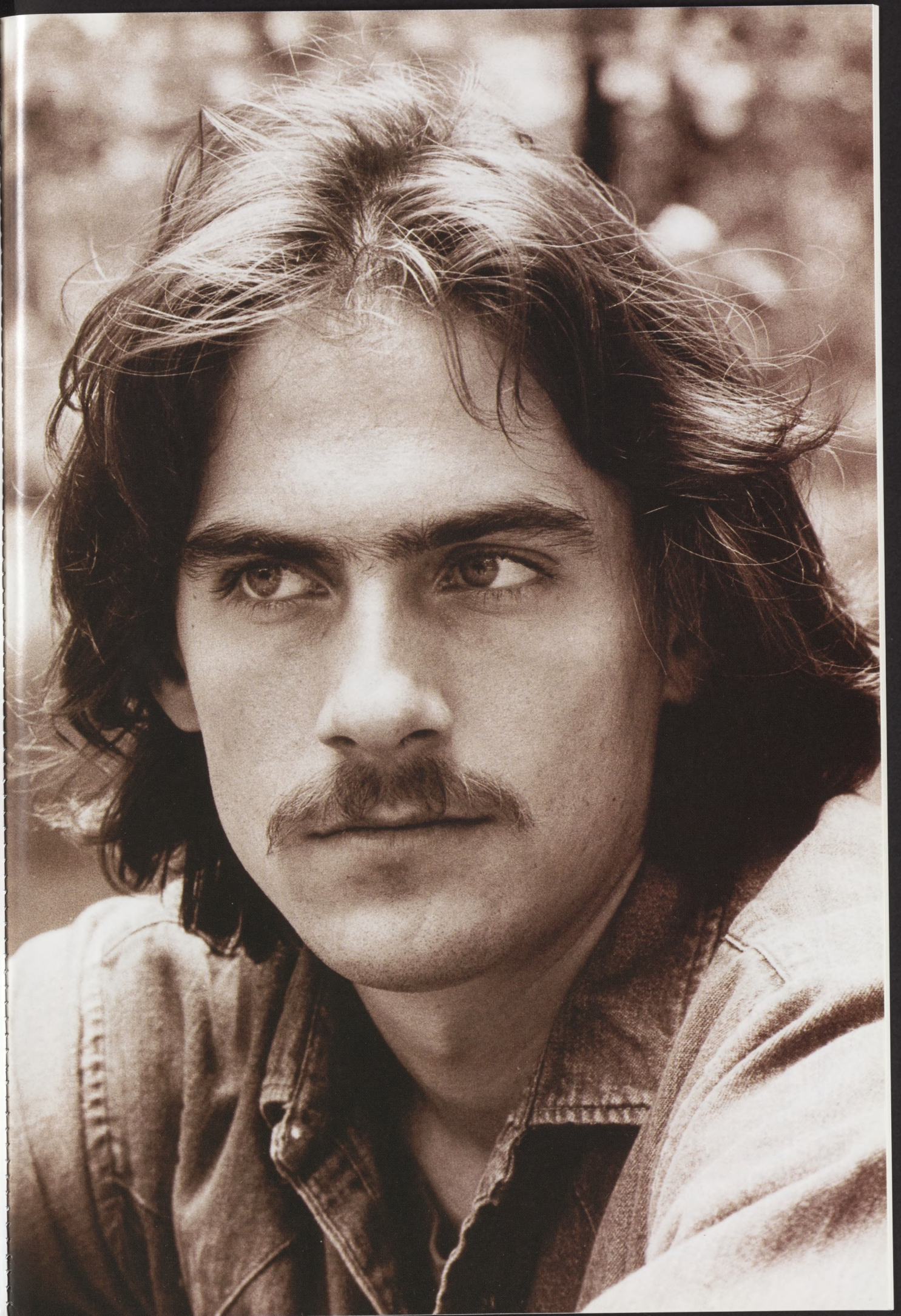
# JAMES TAYLOR

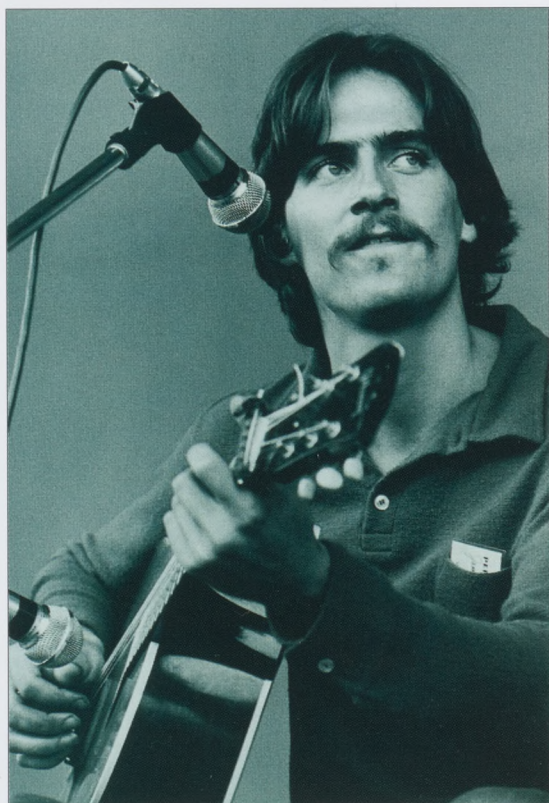
BY PARKE PUTERBAUGH



"I SEEM TO WRITE A LOT ABOUT GOING FROM darkness to light," James Taylor has observed of his songs, whose illuminations have provided insight, solace and pleasure to millions for more than three decades. He's often been called a singer/songwriter, but that term – applied in the early Seventies to describe Taylor and others who professed a more folkish, introspective retort to the rock & roll tumult of the Sixties – fails to recognize that he's also incorporated all kinds of blues, Brill Building pop, Motown soul and country influences into one of the more unmistakable musical signatures of the rock era. His is a subtle, seductive magic, owing to the sturdy craftsmanship of his songs, the casual, amber warmth and Appalachian nasality of his voice and the utterly unique way he fingerpicks the acoustic guitar.

With his second album, *Sweet Baby James*, he reached a large following early in his career that has stayed with him. Their loyalty owes as much to the consistent high quality of his work as it does to nostalgia for a favored set of tunes from their now-distant youth. Like the gangly Taylor himself, his career has legs. Indeed, his achievements make for an impressive tally of awards and statistics: He's sold thirty million albums to date, and his recorded output extends like a string of platinum-certified stepping-stones from *Sweet Baby James* (1970) to *Hourglass* (1997). Somewhat ironically, given that his rangy intellect and retiring personality make him an unlikely pop star, Taylor has charted more than a dozen Top Forty hits, including "Fire and Rain,"





written during and about a depressive period in his life. He won Grammys in 1971 (for "You've Got a Friend"), 1977 ("Handy Man") and 1998 (*Hourglass*, which took Best Pop Album honors). His concerts – from whose breathtaking precision one can infer a deeply committed soulfulness – fill arenas and amphitheaters with boomer faithful and their progeny.

Statistics, however, go only so far in explaining how a depressed young man who'd spent time in mental hospitals and grappled with heroin addiction became one of the most popular musical figures of the Seventies while quietly airing his demons in public. By focusing on his inner feelings, Taylor unwittingly struck a nerve in a country where self-reflection and sensitivity were gradually becoming acceptable and even desirable qualities in men as gender stereotypes began dissolving. With his affecting songs and unassailable talent, Taylor came along at the right time to pose the questions and express the fears and doubts that haunted a generation in the aftermath of the Sixties. What's interesting is that as he's moved through the various stages in his career – from introverted folk-pop confessionals to extroverted pop-soul celebrations to middle-aged meditations on imponderables like love, survival and the meaning of life – his audience has grown right along with him, year by year, chapter by chapter.

Taylor was born in Boston on March 12, 1948, and grew up in the university town of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where his father

served as dean of the medical school. The family summered on Martha's Vineyard, an island sanctuary off the coast of Cape Cod that's been Taylor's primary home in adulthood. There, he met Danny "Kootch" Kortchmar, a pal with whom he played guitar, wrote songs and eventually formed a knockabout blues-folk band called the Flying Machine. They played around New York City in 1966–67 and recorded some songs (later released as *James Taylor and the Original Flying Machine*, 1967). Among them was "Knocking 'Round the Zoo," a black-humored number written in and about internment in a Boston-area mental hospital to which Taylor voluntarily committed himself at seventeen. That bleak setting was where he developed the outlet of songwriting, affirming his later observation that "often you can express things in songs where other modes of communication are hopeless." Taylor would continue to look to and through his muse for answers while battling depression and substance abuse for some years.

When the Flying Machine crashed due to mounting drug and management problems, Taylor headed to London, where he made a demo recording that impressed Apple A&R chief Peter Asher, formerly of Peter and Gordon. Taylor became the first non-Beatle to sign with Apple, and *James Taylor* – his orchestrated, Asher-produced debut album from 1968 – included the Wolfean anthem of longing for his boyhood and home state, "Carolina in My Mind."

With Apple in disarray, Taylor cleared the decks in 1969, recording *Sweet Baby James* in a new location (Los Angeles) for a new label (Warner Bros.) with the similarly relocated Asher, who became his longtime manager and producer. (Taylor stayed with the label for six years and six original albums, plus his best-selling *Greatest Hits*.) *Sweet Baby James* contains some of his most enduring material, including the title track, a Western-themed lullaby; "Country Road," whose back-to-nature message struck a chord; and "Fire and Rain," a meditation on Taylor's addiction and a friend's suicide that he called "a hard-time song, a blues without having the blues form." *Sweet Baby James* was notable for its beguiling songcraft, subtle commingling of folk, blues, country and rock accents and low-key, expert musicianship from Taylor,

LEFT: TAYLOR PERFORMING AT THE NEWPORT FOLK FESTIVAL, SUMMER 1969



Carole King, Danny Kortchmar, Eagle-to-be Randy Meisner and others. Released in February 1970, it sold a million copies before year's end.

Suddenly Taylor found himself the poster boy for the singer/songwriter movement, with Joni Mitchell, Jackson Browne, Carole King (whom Taylor encouraged to pursue a solo career) and Crosby, Stills and Nash among his fellow travelers. With their ruminative lyrics and often acoustic-based music, they took a decidedly more personal and intimate approach than their rock & roll forebears.

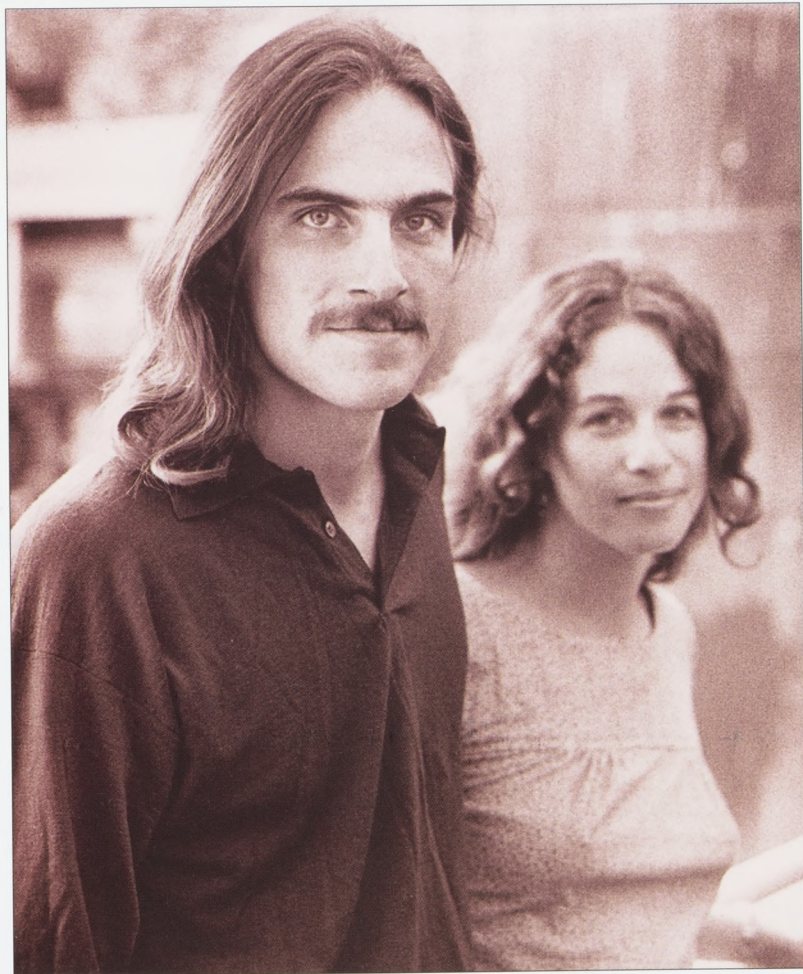
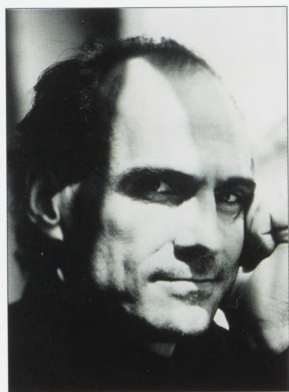
RIGHT: JAMES  
TAYLOR, '91;  
BOTTOM: TAYLOR  
AND CAROLE  
KING, CA. 1971

By the release of 1971's *Mud Slide Slim and the Blue Horizon*, James Taylor mania was in full swing. He appeared on the covers of *Time* and *Rolling Stone*, with the latter proclaiming the Taylor clan – including siblings Livingston, Alex and Kate, all of whom had landed recording contracts – “The First Family of the New Rock.” Selling platinum a month after its release, *Mud Slide Slim* nested at Number Two on *Billboard*'s album chart for four weeks. Taylor's version of the Carole King–penned “You've Got a Friend” became his first (and, to date, only) Number One single.

Taylor remained a prolific recording artist throughout the Seventies, releasing a bevy of albums – including *One Man Dog* (1972), *Walking Man* (1974), *Gorilla* (1975) and *In the Pocket* (1976) – and a string of increasingly breezy, upbeat singles. These included the bubbly originals “Mexico” and

“Shower the People” and remakes of soul chestnuts like “How Sweet It Is (to Be Loved by You)” and “Mockingbird” (a duet with then-wife Carly Simon). His reign as a pop icon culminated in the December 1976 release of *Greatest Hits*, which has sold more than eleven million copies.

In 1977 Taylor moved to Columbia Records, where he debuted strongly with *JT*, which yielded the hits “Handy Man” and “Your Smiling Face.” At this juncture, he was in peak form as a folk-pop stylist whose songcraft cut more deeply than its even-tempered surface suggested. Subsequent albums such as *Flag* (1979) and *Dad Loves His Work* (1981) found him turning more toward characters and issues outside himself. Commenting on this shift in a 1981 interview, Taylor said, “For a long time, all of the album titles were names for myself. A large amount of the stuff I was doing was self-definition, exercises in trying different aspects of myself on for size.” As he's grown more comfortable inside his own skin, Taylor's work has intensified in depth, and though the arrival of new releases has slowed, many consider his later albums – notably *New Moon Shine* (1991) and *Hourglass* (1997) – to be among his finest. And so, over the course of his stellar career, he has progressed from the melancholy despair sketched in “Fire and Rain” to the philosophical triumph of “Secret O' Life,” in which Taylor avers, “The secret of life is enjoying the passage of time.”



The ongoing process of healing and groping toward the light are much in evidence on *Hourglass*, Taylor's latest and arguably most fully realized work. Written at a time when he was wracked with successive losses – including the deaths of his father, Isaac, brother Alex and bandleader–best friend Don Grolnick, and the dissolution of his second marriage – *Hourglass* makes a case for cheer, for gratitude, for perseverance and maybe even, between the lines, for a higher power. Moreover, like Bob Dylan's *Time Out of Mind*, Taylor's *Hourglass* establishes that our more seasoned artists are still capable of revelation. That is to say, more than thirty years into a remarkable career, James Taylor may not yet have peaked. Moral of the story: Pacing yourself in such a way that you get better as you get older may be one of the most valuable secrets o' life. Even in rock & roll.