

James Taylor: Making Music and Memories

By John Fries

If you went to high school during the 1970's, as I did, you'll recall a lot of really great music -- on the radio, in the school cafeteria at lunchtime, and on the eight track tapes you punched into your car dashboards at night while driving around.

While the musical landscape offered something for everyone, much of it seemed to fall into two distinct categories: straight-ahead rock and top 40 pop. Here in Pittsburgh, we were either tuned to Trevor Ley playing Led Zeppelin or Pink Floyd on 'DVE or listening to the "New Sound of 13Q," which played a wide and eclectic mix of whatever was in the top 40 at the time.

The top hits of the day were listed each week in the pocket-sized "hit parades" KQV and 13Q published and provided for free in local record stores. The list could include any combination of rock, power pop, country, rhythm and blues, vocalists, the occasional novelty record, and that 70's radio staple known as the singer-songwriter.

Remember them? The mellow music makers who played guitar or piano, wrote meaningful, introspective lyrics, and served up gentle melodies? The singer-songwriter sections of our 45 collections included titles by such artists as Jackson Browne, Neil Young, Carole King, Joni Mitchell, John Denver, Paul Simon and a West Coast band of country rock upstarts called the Eagles.

Although they were - and are -- all great artists, James Taylor became the undisputed king of the genre. With his acoustic six-string and relaxed manner, James wrote it and sang it, and we appreciated it. There was just something special about his words and melodies and how he conveyed them. When he sang "Fire and Rain," "Carolina in My Mind," or Carole King's masterpiece "You've Got a Friend," it felt like he was singing to us. He also inspired an entire generation of aspiring acoustic guitarists to spend countless hours trying to emulate his elegant fingerpicking style.

Great music is timeless. In the case of James Taylor's music, it can even transcend the boundaries of radio formatting. Former 'DVE personality Ley -- a close friend of mine for many years-- told me something interesting while I was writing this article. His former station, which was known in the 70's for album-oriented rock, began at one point to tape concerts and play live tracks on the air. He recalls at that time playing clips from a Pittsburgh-area James Taylor concert recorded by WDVE.

James Taylor Today

Last month, James Taylor made his perennial summertime stop at the Post-Gazette Pavilion with band in tow and an important message from the Keep the Beat campaign (see sidebar). He played the familiar favorites as well as some newer material, and many in the crowd couldn't help but smile at some of the memories he undoubtedly brought back or, perhaps, was playing a role in creating.

Taylor is no longer the young guy with long, floppy hair who burst onto the national scene in 1970 with the landmark album *Sweet Baby James*. Today's Taylor is a sixty-something musical elder statesman whose intelligent eyes are framed by glasses, and who looks like he could be your next-door neighbor or the man standing in line behind you at Starbucks. Tall, thin, refined, and as soulful as ever, he's a music industry legend whose best-selling albums include a 1976 greatest hits collection that has achieved diamond certification for sales of more than ten million copies.

James Taylor is a familiar, comfortable and even soothing presence to people of a certain age, which is why we continue to go to his concerts and buy his CDs. Just by being himself, he connects with his core audience of baby boomers. He even addressed that connection in the title track of his 1985 album *That's Why I'm Here*, when he sang about the people who bring their blanket and buckets of beer to his concerts every summer.

But he's more than just a guy with a guitar and a way with words. In an ever-changing world, he's been solid and reliable for 35 years. That's not to say that he hasn't changed. While his voice and music still sound like it did three decades ago, he's evolved as a performer. On his CDs, for example, he throws in the occasional pop musical standard, rendering them as well as any seasoned cabaret performer. And, in recent years, he's appeared with symphony orchestras, including our own Pittsburgh Symphony Pops. At that concert, just a few years ago, he gave a performance that was enthusiastically embraced by at least three generations that were in the house - Heinz Hall, in this case.

How it All Started

Taylor grew up in North Carolina, where his father served as dean of the medical school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He started playing guitar in 1960, and in 1963, began attending prep school. During the summer, while vacationing with his family on Martha's Vineyard, he met fellow guitarist Danny Kortchmar and formed a folk duo. At age 16, Taylor dropped out of school and formed a band with his brother Alex. Eventually, struggling with depression, he checked into a Massachusetts hospital and, during his stay, earned his high school diploma.

In 1966, Taylor, now living in New York, connected again with Kortchmar, formed a band called the Flying Machine (referenced in "Fire and Rain"), and released one single on Rainy Day Records, named after his song "Rainy Day Man." By the next year, the band had dissolved.

In 1968, Taylor moved to London and submitted a demo tape to Peter Asher, formerly half of the Peter and Gordon pop duo, then working for the Beatles' Apple Records. Taylor was signed, but his solo debut album - the only record he released on Apple - didn't find an audience, even though it was released on both sides of the Atlantic.

It wasn't until 1970, while Taylor was living in California, that his second solo effort, Sweet Baby James, was released and his career began to take off. Since then, Taylor's career has been on a 35-year upswing, with many milestones along the way.

During the early 70's, he co-starred in a film, Two-Lane Blacktop, with Dennis Wilson of the Beach Boys. He also married and divorced singer Carly Simon, released numerous albums that were popular and critical successes, and recorded with other artists, including Paul Simon, Jimmy Buffett and J.D. Souther. He also contributed songs to the Broadway musical production of Studs Terkel's Working, and, in 2000, was inducted into both the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and the Songwriter's Hall of Fame.

While Taylor has written and recorded his share of pop standards, he also continues to release new music, much to the delight of his fans. He's also released a few videos, both those taped in concert (most recently 2002's Pull Over) and 1992's Squibnocket, which shows Taylor and his band playing, singing and enjoying each other's company at a barn in Martha's Vineyard.

Taylor's legacy extends beyond his musical accomplishments to a new generation of singer-songwriters, and not just the countless ones he's inspired through his recordings and concerts. His children with Carly Simon, Ben Taylor and Sally Taylor, are now singers, musicians and recording artists as well.

James Taylor Keeping the Beat This Summer

James Taylor's summer 2005 concerts are more than places for his fans to gather and listen to great music. They're also places to learn about cardiac arrest, and what to do if someone experiences one.

Taylor has teamed with Medtronic, Inc. to present the Keep the Beat concert series in 33 cities this summer. The purpose of the campaign is to educate communities about sudden cardiac arrest and early defibrillation, and to raise funds to place life-saving automated external defibrillators (AEDs) in schools across the country.

Funds raised support Neighborhood Heart Watch, a non-profit organization whose mission is to place AEDs, supported by trained volunteers, in every neighborhood. Schools can apply for a grant to receive a free AED, along with training in how to use it and direction in implementing a program. Medtronic is also hosting an informational booth at each James Taylor concert.

Mary Newman, executive director of the National Center for Early Defibrillation at the University of Pittsburgh, says the program is a great idea.

"We commend the organizers of the Keep the Beat Campaign for their efforts to promote safer schools through school-site CPR-AED programs. As a national nonprofit organization dedicated to saving lives that would otherwise be lost to sudden cardiac arrest, we can attest to the lifesaving value of placing defibrillators in schools, not only for the safety of students, but also parents, teachers, coaches and other adults who are present at schools and school events."

For more information or to make a donation to the Keep the Beat campaign, please visit www.keepthebeat.org or www.jamestaylor.com.