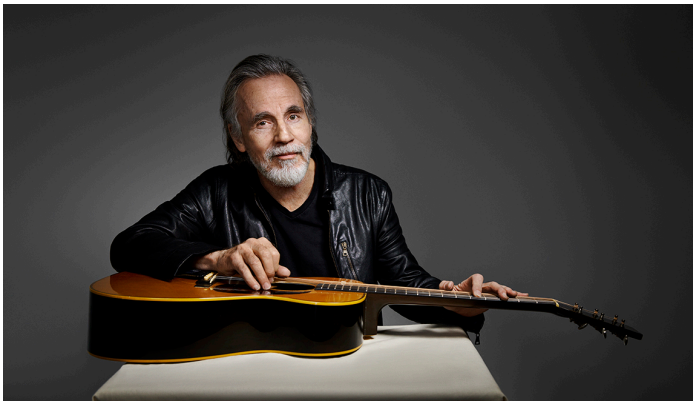
# The following interview with JACKSON BROWNE was conducted by the Library of Congress on March 24, 2021



***This interview was conducted by Neely Tucker of the Library of Congress***

**Neely Tucker: You were a wonderkind, sir. There's a famous David Crosby quote, from about 1970, "I think Jackson Browne is probably one of the ten best songwriters around. He's from Orange County, and he's a stunner." Just for a second, before we get into the album, tell us a little bit about your teenage years.**

Jackson Browne: Well, I started making music in Orange County but it was the folk music boom. I started singing, everybody sang and played guitar. Everybody was, you know, every kid I knew could play "Peter Gunn" on the guitar and you'd pass a guitar around and people would play this [vocalizing] and we played surf music everywhere. There was a lot of great music on the radio, but what really caught my interest was folk music. The first record I ever bought was a Joan Baez record and she's singing these ancient songs, these songs that were from old England…. She was just beautiful.

She looked like the girls that I knew in Highland Park before we moved, the Mexican girls that I was so drawn to, and enamored of, but she was this incredibly new thing. And so, I sang folk songs. My sister sang folks and my dad was a piano player who played jazz like Dixieland jazz and he always had a band. Sometimes when it was an afternoon thing, we'd go with him. He belonged to a thing called the Hot Club, the Hot Jazz Club. And where he'd go, he'd sign up. And then he would be put into a band and they would just play these standards and they would just jam and it was really wild and I was exposed to the fact that music was a language, there was a repertoire that people knew…

But, also, Orange County was a little bit of a holding tank for me because I grew up in Highland Park and had the run of the neighborhood. And when my parents decided to move it was because it was becoming kind of rough, there were a lot of gangs. I mean, I grew up knowing the names of every gang from miles around….

When I moved to Orange County, we lived in a tract home and we lived in a very white neighborhood. Before all my friends were Mexican. I was really a sort of a displaced person when I was 12 or 13, [but] eventually I made really good friends, really close friends…

Anyway, somehow right around then I encountered folk music which was again a very... it was a world full of historical songs that really reflected the lives of people who were immigrants, many of them slaves, and there was just this whole deep history and deep culture of folk music that I was drawn into and then, of course, there was also a bunch of these scruffy young people that played it. It was old, old men and women and young people journeying through life, and I was really drawn to Bob Dylan's first record and Joan Baez's first records.

**NT: And, at your high school, you were somewhat,… You didn't quite fit in at the high school and you were something of an outlier there, were you not?**

JB: Yeah,…no. I fit in, but I didn't. You know, I didn't feel that I did but I think everybody was going through the same thing: Is this what's it's supposed to be all about? I mean, like I was in high school where the big controversy every year was naming the corridors or something. There are these artificial civic responsibilities that were put on people but, meanwhile, the Civil Rights Movement was happening. This free speech movement was happening in Berkeley. There was a lot of really tumultuous stuff happening in the world and I felt that it somehow didn't penetrate high school. We were in this white, artificial environment.[…]

**NT: Let's talk about the making of "Late for the Sky," your third album.**

JB: When I was making "Late for the Sky," I lived in the house that I'd grown up in and it was that place where every hallway and every view was really carefully thought out, you know, a beautiful picture. There was, like if I looked through the glass window of the kitchen door down the hall, it's like an outdoor hall, a covered walkway that would have the patio on one side and the walls of the chapel on the other end. At the end of that, there was like a window and then, through that window, there was another tiny stained-glass window, maybe about ten by ten inches of a [picture of a] sailing ship…

And my second album was released just as we moved into that house, but we were living there for about a year or year and a half maybe. And I was getting ready to make my third album ["Late for the Sky"] and I wanted this piano player who had played in my band. In fact, it was my touring band and I asked this great piano player named Jai Winding. And his father was also a jazz musician, Kai, a famous guy, you know, and Jai was really classically trained but he was a great improviser and he worked really well in this band [and] I wanted him to play on the record and it wounded up being a great band because it was the band that we had had on the road.

So it had David Lindley playing lap steel or electric guitar… And if he played [that], I might play acoustic guitar, and he would play lap steel, or I might play piano. And if I played piano, Jai would play organ, which was this particular thing and it's a particular sound in "Late for the Sky," it is this sort of my simple whole note piano parts, my very simple parts with this beautiful organ attached to it.

On the other hand, if I played guitar and Jai would play piano,… he was a really wonderful and adept piano player, a great inventive piano player playing. So the album had two kinds of piano and it had organ on some songs. They had lap steel on some songs, they had fiddling sometimes. It was, I think, a very interesting palette.

The bass player was a good friend of mine. Doug Heyward, who was also the harmony singer. And when we made the harmony parts, I brought in the friends of mine. Don Henley and Glenn Frey, Dan Fogelberg, and J.D. Souther on some songs. But also, on some songs, there was Doug Heywood's very earnest high tenor added to my voice. When we sang together, it was, it was a thing, you know? It was just a moment in time.

**NT: When you sat down to make the album were you looking for ten good songs or did**

**you have a particular theme in mind that you wanted this work to follow?**

JB: Well, I don't write a lot of songs. So I need every song I write. I don't write songs and then not record them. But I start a lot of songs that I don't finish. But if I finish them, if I take the trouble to-- if I really get through it and it becomes a song, then I need that song. So I think I had a few other songs.

The reason there are only eight songs on "Late for the Sky" is that they're long songs. And even, at that, even putting only eight songs on there, the sides were long. The sides were longer than they're supposed to be, I mean [according to] engineering. My engineers would say, "You know, this is really a long side. This is 21 minutes long or 22 minutes long. Ideally, you wanted to be 18 minutes long."

If you had a 15-minute song, that would really jump off the record, that would punch. That would be so loud. And the reason it was important is because the carryover from the jukebox days where if they're too much record too much music on the side, it wouldn't be loud. It would have to be soft and you wouldn't be competitive on a jukebox.

I remember turning the record in and I'm saying, "There's only eight songs here."

All these songs were really long and you wanted at least one short song, because you wanted to get it on the radio. There were no singles on "Late for the Sky."

**NT: Did those songs come to you in a particular pattern? Do you remember which one you wrote first, which came last?**

JB: I don't remember what came first or last, but I knew exactly where they went in the order and almost every time I would do this: you can't have this song after that song [because] either it was in the same key or the tempo was too similar or it made the song following it sound dreadfully slow.

I mean, there's an art to sequencing and in my early recordings, and even for albums after that, I was always thinking that I knew where a song went in terms of what I was saying. Van Dyke Parks had made a record called "Song Cycle" and it came out right about the same time that "Sgt. Pepper" was made and there was a lot of talk about song cycles and about albums being made *as albums.* And I was,… I was into that.

But, at the same time, I should say that I really believe that songs have to stand on their own. I wasn't trying to make anything that you needed to know a story about but I did think that people were going to listen from the beginning to the end, listen to the first side, turn it over and do the second side. Eventually, though, I was working with a great friend of mine, Scott Thurston, who produced one of my records and he said, "Hey, I hate to tell you but no one's going to listen to this whole record."

I'm going, what do you mean? He said, "You're always putting your best song last…but where I come from, nobody gets to the end, nobody sits down to listen, you're not like in a library." But in my world, they did. In my world, we looked at the cover and you like, stared out the window, and you listened, [but] eventually, I sort of adopted his view and I think that it's really, it was the emergent view certainly, if it wasn't already the view, and what people did, what people eventually did--just listen to songs. They might not listen to a whole record at all. Especially now.

**NT: When you were writing these songs was there a particular mood that you wanted the whole album to convey?**

JB: I wasn't conscious of that too much, but the fact that I wrote them all and at this piano, I wrote them all in this chapel with a piano and you know and [with] my baby boy crawling around on the floor and being in the house where I had been a baby crawling around…

And there was that idea in my mind that I was in repeating, you know, repeating a cycle. That my father had been a child in that house-- My father was a child when the house was built. So I had that idea of the recurring, the generational, repeating generations…

**NT: So you had all the songs written for "Late for the Sky" when you all went into the studio, these eight songs--**

JB: Yeah. I had these eight songs written and these were the guys I was going to play it with and we explored the arrangements. We had played them a little bit. I remember going into David Geffen's office and saying I need ten thousand dollars and he was like, "Why do you need $10,000?" I said, "I need it to rehearse my band." I needed to pay them to rehearse and he had been working with bands that were self-contained bands and he was used to giving you an advance if you needed it but I didn't really need it. I could gig. I had income but I needed to pay these players for playing, you know for coming, driving all the way to Highland Park and you know multiple times and getting together and learning these songs.

Not that we rehearsed them in the form that they are on the record. I don't think that really happened. I think that we just-- when I say we learned the songs, I mean, they learned the changes and we had a lot of the exploration, a lot to do with one instrument: Will David play? What's he going to play? Is it a good song for violin or is it a good song for slide, you know? Is it good for electric guitar?

**NT: There's a song or two I want to ask you about… There's a book written about Nazi, Germany in the '20s called "Before the Deluge." And I think that that had crossed your reading list at some point. Can you talk a little bit about how that song came together?**

JB: Yeah, that book was recommended to me by Linda Ronstadt. Linda Ronstadt turns out to be one of my more literate friends. And in those days, we toured together. She suggested this book about the firebombing of Dresden called "Before the Deluge" and it was a book by Otto Frederich. It's an interesting book and I was kind of bookish, you know, I like to read and it's funny because I have a memory that allows me to select or remember where I was when I read something and I was living in Echo Park and so then that inspired the song "Before the Deluge." But the real inspiration for "Before the Deluge" is a book by Dr. Paul Ehrlich called "Eco-Catastrophe." It was a popular book in the same period like the late '60s, early '70s, that describes a world catastrophe, that is of compounding catastrophes, one of which is pandemic, but also militarism and the spectre of nuclear war.

And that book, it just posed a kind of apocalyptic outcome to the very things we're dealing with now and that we were dealing with then and have been dealing with all through the '70s, the '80s, and the '90s, which is the unsustainability of our structures.

**NT: Let me ask you about "Late for the Sky," the song, first. Can you tell me where that phrase, "Late for the Sky," came to you and how the rest of the song sort of worked its way around that because that's the title track of the album?**

JB: It's actually something I said; "late for the sky" was something that came out of my mouth. I was saying goodbye to somebody that I spent the night with. And I had to fly. I had to go to the airport. And in that moment of saying goodbye, it was really beautiful and she was really

beautiful and it's wild how much you remember about people that you've known for such short periods of time, you know?

I was saying goodbye to this somebody I found really beautiful and I said--but I didn't think of it and didn't say it in a dramatic way--I said, "God, I really have to go. I'm late. I'm late for the-I'm late for the sky," instead of saying "I'm late for my flight," or "I'm late for the airport." I said, "I'm late for the sky" and I remembered it.

So I'm writing the song sometime later. I'm in a relationship. I've got a child. I'm trying to write this song and I, you know, I'm writing the parts of the end before I'm writing the beginning, I'm just trying to write.

I remember my wife said, "What is this? What is this about? What do you mean 'late for the sky'?" And I said, well, you know, it's the last thing I say in this song. Because she didn't hear how it happen and it didn't necessarily make sense. She said, "Well, okay, if it's going to mean something when you say it." She said something like, "It better be good."

I mean, it's interesting to me. That I could be in that house writing a song, "Late for the Sky," and it's about somebody that I broke up, that I had a breakup with, that I had a deep relationship with, that I was no longer with and still healing from and still getting over. So, you're with somebody new, but you're writing about somebody in the past and that has happened to me over and over again. And it happened with her. I was with her, my wife, when I was writing "For a Dancer." But that song wasn't about her, but it became about her because she died.

"For a Dancer" is about this really great friend of mine named Scott Runyon, who was a renaissance man. He was a dancer on the Sunset Strip when they shut down the boulevard and no one could dance in the clubs. The club owners got permission that they could have people dancing on the stage, but no one else was allowed to dance. They were trying to shut down the hippies. You know, hippie throngs that were coming in from the suburbs and they didn't want them to be able to dance. But anyway, they hired my friend Scott to dance because he was an amazing dancer and he was also a tailor and he was a sculptor and he was a photographer and he died. I have a whole box of his photographs that I eventually came into possession of. I may be one of the last people who knew him that is still alive. So I've got his photographs and so I was writing a song for him.

But, later, after my wife died, the song just sort of became about her because we were living together. All the imagery and all the memories of writing the song have migrated and have sort of become mixed together with my memories of living with her.

**NT: Let me ask you one last thing. And that's about the year 1974, the atmosphere in which you wrote the album…**

JB: Well, it felt that California didn't really represent the rest of the country. I mean that it was really kind of on the forefront of some changes. There was something magical about California. Maybe I had that feeling because the first time I ever went east, everybody kept asking me, "What's it like in California?" And I thought, I mean, I don't, you know, it's not something I had wondered about because I was from California. I didn't know how to answer that. I do know I showed up in New York wearing like these really light clothes and penny loafers. There was snow on the ground and I was wearing these like penny loafers!

But, you know, I do think now that what was going on in California was going on everywhere but there was this extra allure to California probably because of Ashbury, but even in Orange County, which was repressive and conservative politically. Hippies were more hardcore in Orange County than they were in LA and certainly more than they were in New York.

And in New York, if you stopped to ask somebody for directions, like a crowd would gather around and they'd start arguing about which train to take. At least it seemed that way to me.

I argue with people about the significance of Laurel Canyon, you know. It just happened, you know, but it did happen and people argue about what it was that happened. I think that what happened in California happened in Ohio and Texas. And in Georgia, you know, especially [it] happened in the South, the hierarchy of things broke down. But what happened in LA, for instance, was I think that there was a hierarchy in the recording business that completely dissolved in the houses of Laurel Canyon where record executives, DJs, and musicians all sat around smoking pot together and that was very different than what happened in the offices of record companies in New York.

Most of all, what was happening everywhere was resistance to the war and insistence on civil rights, that we [had to] live up to our stated ideals of this country.