

Jackson Browne

By Parke Puterbaugh

JACKSON BROWNE IS AMONG THE VANGUARD singer/songwriters of the rock & roll era. Over the course of three decades as a recording artist, he's established himself as both a cerebral, introspective songwriter and a politically attuned voice of conscience. His career has unfolded as a series of chapters reflecting personal evolution and changing priorities. In broad outline, he emerged as a soul-baring folksinger whose songs dealt with the riddles of romance and existence. During his middle period, he became a more outgoing and extroverted rocker. Later work grew more topical in nature as Browne sang of political and social realities within and beyond our borders, all the while drawing on a varied musical palette.

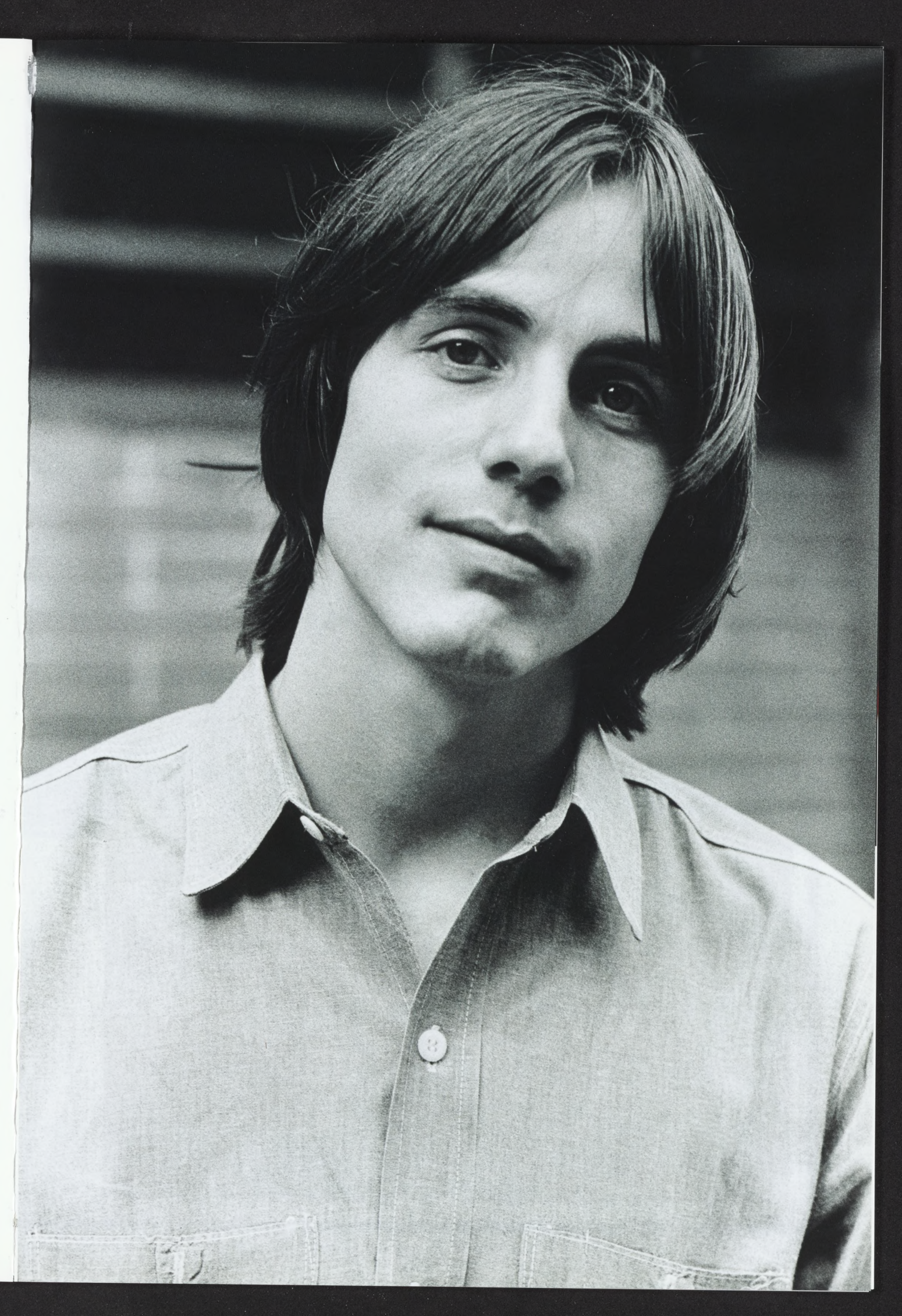
A Southern Californian for most of his life, Browne surfaced in the early seventies as part of a loose-knit collective of rock-minded folkies (and vice versa) that included the Eagles; Crosby, Stills and Nash; Neil Young; J.D. Souther; Warren Zevon; Bonnie Raitt; Lowell George; and others. They'd write songs together, produce or appear on one another's records and share stages on tour or at benefits. As a result, they were linked in the public mind as architects of a musical movement. Browne, though deeply engaged with other musicians, stood apart by virtue of his uniquely poetic and somewhat solipsistic stance. He was only twenty-three when his self-titled first album, known popularly as *Saturate Before Using*, was released. It was one of the most auspicious debuts in rock history. Yet



Browne had already been making waves in certain quarters as a singer/songwriter for seven years.

Clyde Jackson Browne was born on October 9, 1948, in Heidelberg, Germany, where his father worked as an army journalist. Returning to the States, the family moved to Los Angeles when Browne was three and relocated to suburban Orange County when he was twelve. As a well-situated child of the sixties, Browne observed and partook of the sun-drenched, sensual lifestyle that made California seem so golden – and also, at times, lost and adrift – thus shaping his wistful, inquisitive songwriting from an early age. He fell in with an estimable crowd of folk-oriented songwriters that included Tim Buckley, Steve Noonan and Greg Copeland. Headquarters for their scene was the Paradox, a coffeehouse in Orange. In 1967, Browne ventured to New York, where he found himself on the periphery of Andy Warhol's offbeat scene, including backing up Velvet Underground chanteuse Nico. A publishing deal with Elektra Records led to the recording of thirty demos. Browne was also, at age seventeen, briefly a member of the newly formed Nitty Gritty Dirt Band.

All the while, other performers began getting wind of his songs. As a teenage songwriter, Browne seemed far wiser than his years on such early gems as "These Days" and "Shadow Dream Song." Both were written when he was a senior in high school and would be recorded by the likes of Tom Rush, Nico and Gregg Allman. Browne was signed to David Geffen's Asylum label in 1971. In fact, Geffen's desire to show Browne's talent to the world





He is required listening for sensitive souls

was the main reason Asylum – home to the Eagles, Joni Mitchell, Tom Waits and even, for a spell, the Byrds and Bob Dylan – was launched in the first place.

Browne's first three albums – *Saturate Before Using* (1972), *For Everyman* (1973) and *Late for the Sky* (1974) – are of a piece, representing his singer/songwriter period at its apex. From the outset, Browne arrayed words and music with meticulous care and craftsmanship. He wasn't exactly a folk purist, and songs like "Doctor My Eyes" rocked out in their own unbridled way, but his early lyrics evinced a more genteel and erudite approach than the pop-music norm. It is unsurprising that Browne has cited Leonard Cohen, with whom he crossed paths during his New York fling, as an early influence.

Saturate Before Using was rife with thoughtful, lilting classics – including "Rock Me on the Water" and "Jamaica Say You Will" – that touched a nerve in listeners who were either

With longtime friend the late Warren Zevon

coming of age or trying to recover their emotional equilibrium in the wake of the sixties' fitful demise.

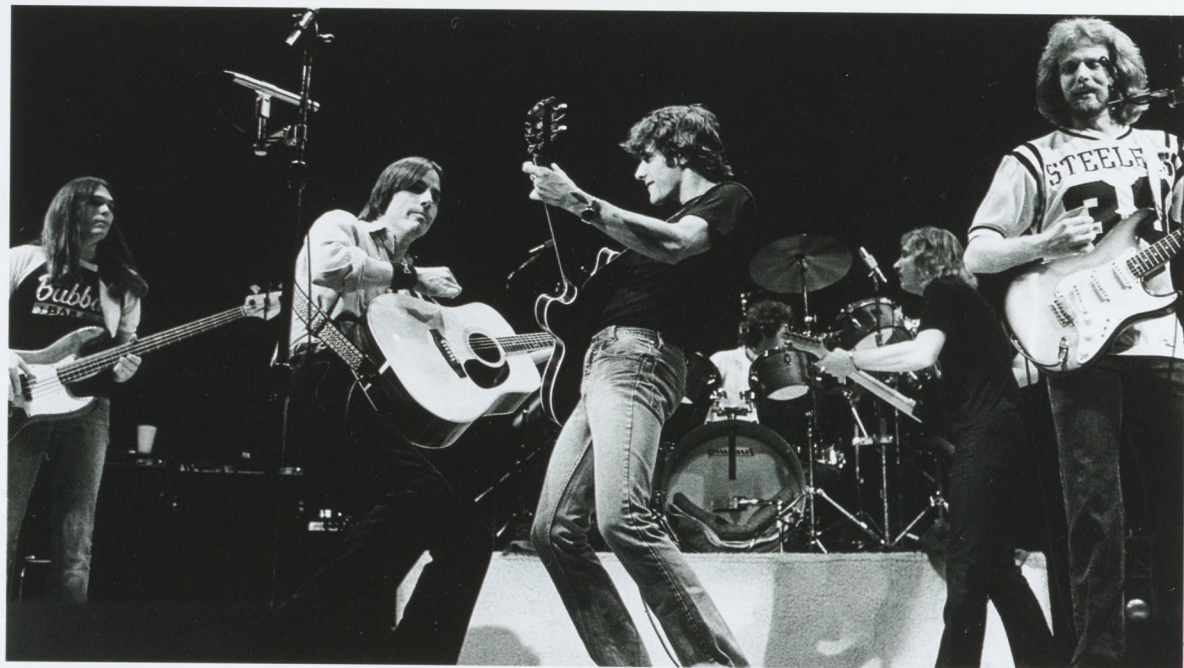
Along with James Taylor's *Sweet Baby James* and Joni Mitchell's *Blue*, *Saturate Before Using* was the seventies' quintessential singer/songwriter album – required listening for sensitive souls wrestling with feelings of doubt and yearning while reluctantly embracing adulthood. In a 1974 *Rolling Stone* profile, Cameron Crowe sagely noted Browne's penchant for writing "song[s] of retrospection, of the man looking back at the child." Indeed, Browne's oeuvre has included numerous requiems: "Song for Adam," "For a Dancer," "Sleep's Dark and Silent Gate," "Of Missing Persons," "For a Rocker."

The followup, *For Everyman*, refined his burnished folk-rock approach and added more classics to the canon, including "I Thought I Was a Child" and the philosophical title track. It also included Browne's versions of "These Days" and "Take It Easy," the Eagles hit he'd cowritten with Glenn Frey. Many regard *Late for the Sky*, Browne's third album, as his masterpiece, and it's certainly his deepest and most allegorical work. Even in a career studded with ambitious statements, *Late for the Sky* boasts an exceptional number of big songs: "Late for the Sky," "Fountain of Sorrow," "For a Dancer," "The Late Show" and the antinuclear, apocalyptic "Before the Deluge."

Two years passed before the release of *The Pretender* (1976), a cathartic album that sounded like a personal exorcism – albeit one that carried Browne to a new plateau of popularity. There were songs of painful, unflinching autobiography, including "Your Bright Baby Blues" and "Here Come Those Tears Again." Album-oriented radio adopted the title track, a statement for the ages about the collision between soul and commerce in a society where bruised idealists found themselves "caught between the longing for love and the struggle for the legal tender." This anthem of discontent, issued during America's bicentennial year, astutely prophesied what lay ahead in the Reagan-led eighties and the stock market run-up of the nineties, when the nation erred grievously on the side of the legal tender.

Browne's next album was the brilliantly conceived *Running on Empty* (1978), which wasn't a standard live album but an audio-verité tour docu-

Jamming with his L.A. buddies the Eagles on 'The Long Run' tour, 1980





mentary consisting of concert performances and music made backstage and in hotel rooms. By now Browne had a fine-tuned band led by his versatile longtime accompanist, the great David Lindley, and their high-spirited renditions of the title track and Maurice Williams and the Zodiacs' "Stay" made this album a multi-platinum phenomenon. To date, it has sold more than seven million copies, and its key songs remain staples of classic-rock radio. Certainly, Browne was among the subtlest musicians ever to crack that pantheon. Browne's profile was further raised when, in 1979, he and Bonnie Raitt organized a series of benefit concerts for MUSE (Musicians United for Safe Energy) at Madison Square Garden. Browne's run at the top continued with *Hold Out* (1980), his first Number One album. In 1982, he contributed a cut to the *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* soundtrack; released as a single, "Somebody's Baby" hit Number Seven.

Subsequent albums in the eighties—*Lawyers in Love* (1983), *Lives in the Balance* (1986) and *World in Motion* (1989)—were

increasingly politicized, as Browne felt compelled to call attention to geopolitical imbalances and injustices. To those who fretted about his shift in subject matter from the personal to the political, he countered that "nothing is more personal than your political beliefs." Besides, he returned to home base with a masterwork, *I'm Alive* (1993), whose artfully introspective tone harked back to his beginnings. *Looking East* (1996) took a more varied approach, mingling leftist politics, world music, love songs and paeans to his hometown.



The twenty-fifth anniversary of Browne's debut album was marked by the release of *The Next Voice You Hear: The Best of Jackson Browne* (1997). The new millennium found him undertaking solo acoustic tours that returned him to intimate settings. In 2002, *The Naked*

Ride Home tied the various strands of his career into a coherent whole and showed him to be a still-formidable and gifted songwriter. And fittingly, we now welcome him to join his peers in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

21st-century
troubadour

"He's a very funky guy"

Bonnie Raitt on the many talents of her friend of thirty-plus years

I first met Jackson at a gig we did together at the University of Syracuse at a little coffeehouse called the Jabberwocky around 1970. We became fast friends. When I heard his songs, I fell in love with his music and his unique lyrical sense. He was singing about love and longing and what it was like to be our age in a way that just moved me. I can't separate Jackson as a person from his voice, the way he plays guitar and piano from his songs. It's the whole person that I've been connected to since we met. To this day, he's an expression of what I'm going through and what our generation is going through. We grew up together and became like sister and brother.

I moved back to L.A. from Cambridge in '73 to make my third record with Lowell George and some of Little Feat. By then, Jackson and I had become part of this very fertile L.A. scene. He, of course, was connected with the Eagles, Joni, J.D. Souther and Linda Ronstadt—that whole Elektra/Asylum crowd. I hadn't yet had a hit, but *Streetchlights* was just out, and Jackson asked me to open for him on his national tour in '74. For a sensitive singer/songwriter, he's a very funky guy—and gets the joke. We sang "Function

at the Junction," this great old Shorty Long hit, as our encore, played a lot of cards and listened to Richard Pryor's album on the tour bus. We had both our bands on one bus for fifty cities, which was pretty challenging. Thirteen guys and me—could be the most fun I ever had.

I hear a lot of influences in Jackson's music—ones that resonate for me, especially as we were both raised in L.A., surrounded by surf and Mexican music and loving the same folk, blues, R&B and rock & roll we got turned on to as teenagers. I hear all of that in his songs—from Staple Singers gospel to mariachi music, from the coolest Motown and soul grooves to the most beautiful Appalachian-like melodies he sings with his piano and guitar. He's all those influences but so uniquely himself, a true American original who's influenced whole generations of singer/songwriters, including me. I love singing his songs and have cut a bunch over the years, starting with "Under the Falling Sky" on my second album *Give It Up*, in '72, followed by "I Thought I Was a Child," "My Opening Farewell" and "Sleep's Dark and Silent Gate." He's sung on my albums, I've sung on his, and we've probably done more benefits

together than either one of us could count.

Jackson and I started doing benefits together around the late seventies, most significantly the No Nukes concerts at Madison Square Garden in 1979, out of which came Musicians United for Safe Energy. We hooked up with some like-minded musician/activists and have gone on to do scores of concerts for a wide range of causes—from protecting Native lands to stopping oil drilling off the California coast to opposing the U.S. wars in Central America—and a host of other peace and justice issues we still work on.

Political music can be a very dodgy affair—pedantic, wussy and mostly tiresome. But Jackson's great sense of language, empathy as a storyteller and keen intelligence allow him to articulate the issues with such eloquence that his music cuts right to the heart of the matter. He illuminates and inspires, as he did on *Lives in the Balance*, *World in Motion* and other albums throughout his career. He's taken time out from what could have been a far more fabulous rock-star life to produce other artists who need some help, working with artists from Nicaragua and El Salvador and shepherding Native

American poet/activist John Trudell's musical career. He walks the talk—building a house in the country off the grid years ago, running it on solar and converting his car to propane way before anyone thought it was cool.

Jackson's also deeply committed to being a dad and being there for his family. He's serious about his politics and his relationships, yet he's an absolute sensualist. He loves being in love; he loves romance; he loves good food and wine. He lives fully. Like all of us, he's put his responsible side more to the fore as he's gotten older, yet he still keeps his surfer/street connection. He surfs almost every day. He's made a conscious choice to live the way he does, and I think it's exemplary how he treats his musicians, finds time to honor the different causes and the things that are important to him—and still manages to come up with album after album that shows such real growth.

I treasure the gift our friendship has been. I can't imagine going through life without him. Jackson's shown me that you can dig deep—when you're at that ledge where you think there's nothing left to say, that all the best songs have been written, he knows that if you just go deeper, you'll get to something even more true. He stays open-eyed, always curious and always vulnerable. That's what I love about him. Like a beautiful prism, he reflects that light on himself and then shines it out so the rest of us can see something we couldn't find before. That's what great artists do. □



Left: Protestors: (from left) Kris Kristofferson, Browne, Raitt. Right: Browne, walking the walk and talking the talk.

