

History of Rock
Chapter 14
Singer/Songwriters

During the 60's, singers and groups had made political and social statements with their music. These statements were about civil rights, war, peace, love, as well as other issues that were important to individual groups. It is not surprising, then, that audiences expected statements to be made by singers of the 70's. By then, however, involvement in Vietnam was decreasing and some progress was being made with civil rights issues. Further, the drug-related deaths of Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and Jim Morrison at the end of the 60's and early 70's, in addition to the murder at Altamont, CA during a Rolling Stones concert took the glamour away from the psychedelic movement. Heavy metal and hard rock styles did develop through the decade, but many people preferred intimate songs accompanied by acoustic guitar, piano, or a small backup group.

The singer/songwriter spoken of here is the person who writes their own songs and sing them themselves. They may also write for other performers, but it is their singing under their own name that is important. Elton John could be considered a singer/songwriter except that he has not written his own lyrics. Consequently, the personal connection between him and his audience does not really exist even though he has written the music for many wonderful songs.

James Taylor was born in Boston, Massachusetts but moved to New York City to play in folk coffeehouses. He spent some time in London, producing one unsuccessful album. After that album, he moved to Los Angeles where his album, *Sweet Baby James*, was produced. Many of the songs on that album were written by Taylor while he was "institutionalized" to recover from heroine addiction. *Fire and Rain* described Taylor's feelings about lost relationships. The piece also serves as an example of his sensitive, almost confessional style.

***Listen to James Taylor---Fire and Rain* (1:1)**

From 1972-1981, Taylor was married to Carly Simon. Her father, who was co-owner of the Simon and Schuster Publishing Company, was a classical pianist. Simon's older sister was an opera singer. Carly Simon played both the piano and guitar, recording some songs with piano accompaniment and others with guitar. The expression of her personal feelings and experiences were important and her song, *You're So Vain* (1971), was her attack on a conceited star she dated. Mick Jagger sang backup vocals on the recording.

***Listen to Carly Simon---You're So Vain* (1:3)**

After marrying Taylor, the two continued with their solo careers. For the most part, because of her stage fright, Simon did not perform in concert. In the 80's, Simon wrote and recorded several songs for movie tracks, including *Coming Around Again* from *Heartburn* and *Let the River Run* from *Working Girl*. She has also written children's books and has said she might write a novel.

Listen to Carly Simon with James Taylor---Mockingbird (1:4)

George Ivan Morrison was born in 1945 and spent his tten years in Belfast, Ireland. He played the guitar, Harmonica, and saxophone and played with a R&B band during the 60's. Morrison left Them in 1966 and moved to Boston where he began a solo career as a singer/songwriter. His lyrics often dealt with relationships and events the listener would assume to be taken from Morrison's own life experiences. *Brown Eyed Girl* (1967) was a song to a girl who left him alone and lonely. Through the song he sings about the good times of their relationship in an effort to get her to come back to him. In some recordings, Morrison played an acoustic guitar. In other recordings, he hired jazz musicians to accompany him. In his highest charting single, *Domino* (1970), a jazz horn section was included.

Listen to Van Morrison---Brown-Eyed Girl (1:5)

Van Morrison's greatest commercial successes came in the early 70's. Even though he suffered from stage fright, he continued to perform and record long after his success had waned. Since that time, he has recorded blues, as well as traditional Celtic folk music.

Joni Mitchell (a.k.a. Roberta Joan Anderson) came from a strong folk background. She performed with her husband, Chuck Mitchell before divorcing him and establishing a solo career. She was raised in Canada and developed a distinctive rural-folk syle. She learned to play the piano, but usually accompanied herself with an acoustic guitar or a mountain dulcimer. Some of her songs became hits for other groups. She was also an artist and many of her own albums, as well as those of some of her friends, included her paintings on the cover.

Mitchell's earliest album sold slowly. In the mid-late 60's there were already many well-established folk singers. By the 70's, the audience was ready for Mitchell's style and her hit, *Big Yellow Taxi* (1970) gave her the start she needed. *Help Me* (1974) was her biggest commercial hit.

Listen to Joni Mitchell---Help Me (1:6)

In later recordings, Mitchell experimented with unusual instruments---stick-beaten drums. She also worked with LA Express and included jazz styles in her work. She returned to a pop style in the 80's. She did very little performing in the 80's and 90's, but continued to write and record. In addition, she continued her work as an artist and her paintings and photographs have been displayed in galleries around the world.

Carole King (a.k.a. Carole Klein) first wrote in the Brill Building (pop music in New York City). She divorced her writing partner/husband, Gerry Goffin, and moved to LA in the mid-60's. She finished that decade writing for herself and for others, including Blood, Sweat, and Tears. She gave her song, *You've Got a Friend* to James Taylor and put it on her own album, as well. That album, *Tapestry*, not only earned her a Grammy

award for Album of the Year, it also sold well enough that it charted in the top 40 for 68 weeks, making it one of the best-selling albums of all time.

Listen to Carole King---You've Got a Friend (1:7)

Like many other singers at that time, King also made recordings that included jazz. King also starred in the Broadway musical, *Blood Brothers* in 1994.

Jackson Browne was borne in Heidelberg, West Germany, but grew up outside Las Angeles. He was primarily a keyboardist, but also played the guitar with the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. He left them and moved to New York where he played his folk-style songs in coffeehouses there. Browne's songs were recorded by other performers before he moved back to California and recorded *Doctor My Eyes* (1972).

Listen to Jackson Browne---Doctor My Eyes (1:8)

Browne captured the hearts of his fans with his song, *Here Come Those Tears Again* (1977), written as he was trying to accept his wife's suicide.

Listen to Jackson Browne---Here Come Those Tears Again (1:9)

Many of his other albums and songs carried strong political and social messages, paralleling Bob Dylan's antiwar stand of the early 60's.

Billy Joel was a singer and songwriter of the 70's, whose career lasted into the 80's and 90's. He established his solo career after playing keyboards in several bands in the 60's. Much of Billy Joel's work is very po-oriented. But, at other times, he makes more serious statements about war, and at other times, about the problems of unemployment.

Listen to Billy Joel---Allentown (1:14)

In his song, *We Didn't Start the Fire* (1989), Billy Joel goes through memories of events and people that influenced his generation. With the title, he reminds the listener that we are all born into a world that we cannot control.

Listen to Billy Joel---We Didn't Start the Fire (1:12)

Bruce Springsteen experimented with many different styles as a youth and this led to the music he wrote and performed as a star. From his experimentation, he developd an energetic, tradition-based rock and roll style that spoke to the American working class oin its own level.

Springsteen was signed to Columbia Records in 1972 by John Hammond, Sr., who had discovered Bob Dylan a decade earlier. His earliest album featured music similar to Bob Dylan and other folk-style singer/writers. His next effort was more rock oriented and drew more fans than had his earliest album. Springsteen found the national spotlight in

1975 with *Born to Run*, recorded using the Phil Spector-influenced wall of sound production.

In some of Springsteen's work, a sense of hopelessness is conveyed in the lyrics. In the title song for his album, *Born in the U.S.A.* (1984), Springsteen attacked the lack of support given Vietnam veterans. Many people did not bother to listen to what Springsteen was really saying in the song. It was from the point of view of a Vietnam veteran who has returned to the U.S. and was turned down for a job, receiving no assistance from the VA, and ended up in prison.

Listen to Bruce Springsteen---Born in the U.S.A. (1:16)

Springsteen won an Academy award and four Grammys for the song *Streets of Philadelphia* (1994).

Listen to Bruce Springsteen---Streets of Philadelphia (1:17)

Springsteen's energy on stage put him in real competition with James Brown for the title of *Hardest Working Man in Show Business*.

Through the work of Springsteen and others, the styles changed from soft singer/songwriter to a more amplified sound with a strong rock beat in the 80's. This was well-displayed by John Cougar Mellencamp. Early in his career Mellencamp allowed his producers to control his sound and image. His first manager billed him as Johnny Cougar and marketed him as a tough teen from the Midwest. Eventually, Mellencamp, who wanted to express honesty switched managers and began to use his real name along with the stage name.

Some of Mellencamp's albums included synthesizers and overdubbed tracks. He decided he was tired of synthesizers and recordings that were difficult to reproduce on stage and vowed to do away with those techniques in the future. The producer of *American Fool* (1982) wanted to overdub a horn section like that used in many of the Memphis soul recordings of the 60's. Mellencamp had cut his band down to the basic instrumentation of two guitars, drums, and bass and wanted the album to be cut using only that band with no overdubbing. After much resistance, he got his way. The hit single, *Hurt So Good*, came from the album.

Listen to John Cougar Mellencamp---Hurt So Good (2:2)

Later albums expressed concerns about universal issues, as well as those relating to his personal life. In 1991, he acted in and directed a movie, *Falling From Grace*.

The rock audience was introduced to Tracy Chapman in 1988. She had a strong, deep, almost velvety voice and sang with the personal commitment and compassion of the singer/songwriters of the 70's while matching the ability to communicate like the social protestors of the 60's. She used an acoustic guitar which gave her the flavor of folk

music. But, the thickness of her background placed her in the 80's. Because her 2nd and 3rd albums weren't as commercially successful as her first, some began to say she was a *flash in the pan*. With her 1995 album, *New Beginning*, her career was revived. *Give Me One Reason* comes from that album. It was the only song in blues style on that album.

Listen to Tracy Chapman---Give Me One Reason (2:3)

Themes of Chapman's music were her life and concerns about world problems. Optimism, the beauty of nature, and faith in humanity were central themes of several of her songs. Her voice, song themes, and acoustic guitar kept a clear connection with folk traditions, but her background production sound brought the music into the 90's.