“Late for the Sky”--Jackson Browne (1974)

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Essay by Dave Thompson (guest post)*

“I certainly don’t cultivate disappointment in order to write although that is something that occurred to me briefly maybe five or six years ago,...that perhaps things did go wrong intentionally in order to have something to write about.... At some point it occurs to you that it might be easier to write a forlorn love song than to write something positive but it has to be such a strong balance all the time. I can’t write songs that are mindlessly happy. I’m just not like that although there are a million things that I love. It’s not in me to do that.”

--Jackson Browne, 1976

Forget about being “late for the sky,” Jackson Browne was almost late for his own career. By the time the Heidelberg, Germany-born Army kid released his third album, “Late for the Sky,” in September, 1974, just two years had elapsed since his debut. But eight had passed since Elektra Records first set ears on the prolific, prodigious teenager, and almost as long had passed since he got his first big break as a performer, gigging around New York with Andy Warhol/Velvet Underground legend Nico.

With Browne under contract as an in-house songwriter at Elektra Records, that label’s artists naturally had first refusal on his output. Tom Rush and Steve Noonan both recorded Browne compositions, as did Nico and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band (with whom he played briefly while living in California). But not Browne himself. Demos aside, it would be 1971 before Browne signed with manager David Geffen’s Asylum label and began work on his first LP.

The stockpile of songs at Browne’s disposal was astonishing. Material spread across his first two LPs (“Jackson Browne” and “For Everyman”) dated back at least to a demo session in April 1970, including “Jamaica Say You Will,” “Song for Adam,” and “Doctor My Eyes” (destined to become a major hit for the Jackson 5), while “These Days” was first heard aboard Nico’s “Chelsea Girl” debut in 1967.

The material he was accumulating for his third album, however, eclipsed all of this. His biggest selling release yet, and highest charting as well (it peaked at #14 on the “Billboard” chart), it also
introduced the now 26 year-old to an audience far beyond the million or so souls who had picked up his earlier records. And this despite being recorded for half the cost of its $100,000 predecessor.

The album’s a short offering, four songs a side that pass by in less than 40 minutes. And, on paper, none would particularly rank among what are now his best-known numbers—no “Doctor My Eyes,” no “Here Come Those Tears Again,” no “Stay.” In fact, the two singles taken from “Late for the Sky”—“Walking Slow” and “Fountain of Sorrow”—were the only Browne singles to completely miss the chart until 1984!

But the title track wove its magic through Martin Scorsese’s “Taxi Driver,” and FM radio devoured the disc, track after track, night after night: “Farther On,” “The Late Show,” “The Road and the Sky,” “For a Dancer” and the epic “Before the Deluge,” an apocalyptic vision of the death of the hippy sixties idealism in which his own earliest songs had been penned:

“in the end they traded their tired wings / For the resignation that living brings / And exchanged love's bright and fragile glow / For the glitter and the rouge....”

Browne prepared for the recording by stepping back onto a live stage for the first time in over a year, with a week of shows at the newly opened Roxy, in Hollywood, in late 1973. His live band would accompany him, too, into the three studios in which “Late for the Sky” was recorded—guitarist David Lindley, bassist Doug Haywood, drummer Larry Zack and keyboard player Jay Winding taking their places among the clutch of guests (Dan Fogelberg, Terry Reid, Don Henley, JD Souther) who also contributed to the proceedings. Six weeks later, they were finished. By comparison, “For Everyman” took nine months.

Perhaps that is what brought such a deeply organic feel to the album as a whole. The musicians knew the material intimately; there was no need to embellish or exaggerate its qualities, while Browne himself seems to take a back seat alongside them, even as his words and music are front and center.

A voice that feels as laconic as it is yearning, and lived in far beyond its owner’s years, does not so much sing the songs as haunt them, conjuring a landscape of such dark beauty that the late night airings it received from American radio could almost have been its natural habitat.

Reviewing “Late for the Sky” in January 1975, “Creem” magazine described Browne as “the Joni Mitchell for teenage boys,” his music pitched towards “the suburban adolescent experience: romance in the shopping centers, vulnerability behind the bowling alley.” But his best lyrics—and “Late for the Sky” is littered with the things—step far beyond that, delineating the modern world (and, in particular modern California) in far weightier terms. Again, from “Creem,” “Jackson's vision is a lot closer to a Dust Bowl preacher's vision of California as heaven and hell than we might have expected.”

Browne himself did not disagree. Interviewed 12 years later by “Q” magazine, he remained wary when asked about the state of the world. “The end is nigh? Well, you’ve got these stockpiles of nuclear waste that have got to sit around for 280,000 years. A Dixie cup of it could
kill the planet. We can’t go back to the land…. We’ve got to become a species that cares, or perish. It’s as simple as that.”

The success of “Late for the Sky” could have pushed Browne even further out into the mid-seventies musical mainstream; could have seen him grasp the mantel of California’s latest superstar, up there with the Eagles, Linda Ronstadt and all. Instead, he retreated, vanishing again from the live scene and the music press and almost two years passed before his next LP, 1976’s “The Pretender.” Two years during which “Late for the Sky” continued to work its majestic magic, and impressing even Browne’s most determined critic --himself.

Normally, he told “Melody Maker” in 1976, “you go around for a year imagining the whole album was [a certain] way,” only to discover later that it isn’t. “[But] I listened to [“Late For The Sky”] around the time I was finishing [“The Pretender”] and I liked it.”

It was, he said, “a surprise.”

Dave Thompson is the author of over 100 rock and pop books, including co-writes with Motown legends Eddie and Brian Holland, New York rockers Sylvain Sylvain and Walter Lure, Judy Dyble (Fairport Convention) and Rozz Williams (Christian Death). His writing has also appeared in “Rolling Stone,” “Alternative Press,” “Goldmine,” and “Record Collector,” among other publications.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.