

BY MELINDA NEWMAN

## (James Taylor)

For more than 35 years, James Taylor has been making music that touches people to their core. With modern-day standards like “Fire and Rain,” “Carolina in My Mind” and “Shower the People,” Taylor has sold more than 35 million albums in the United States alone.

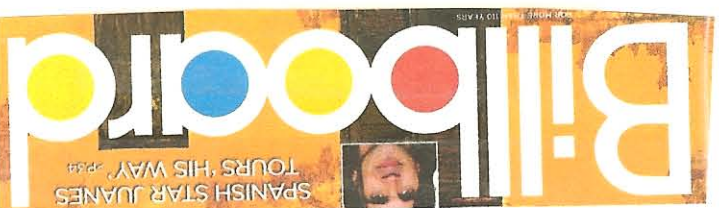
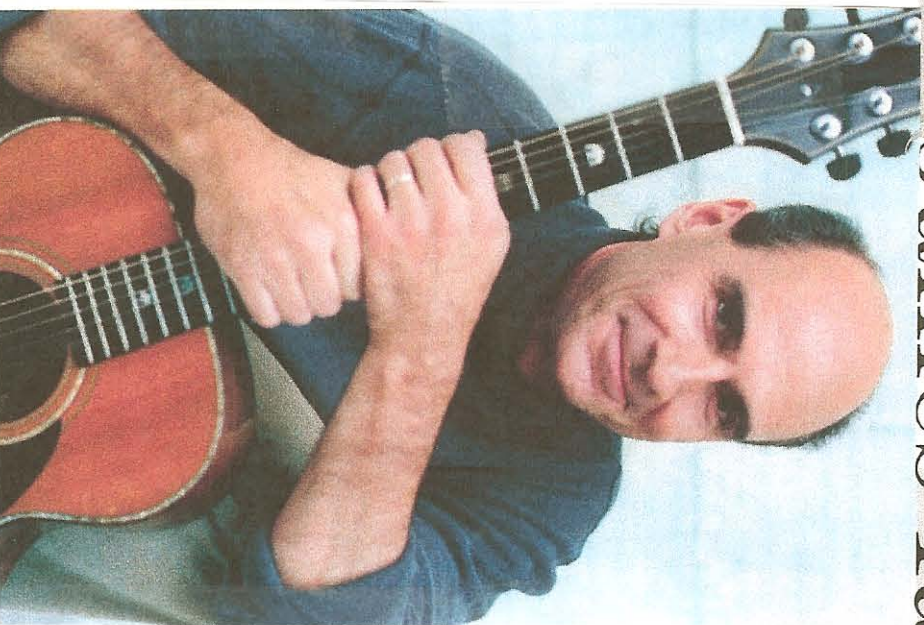
The singer/songwriter also gives generously of his time and wallet to support numerous causes, which include the Rainforest Foundation, the National Resources Defense Council, the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation and Vote for Change.

On Feb. 6, Taylor—who was the Billboard Century Award honoree in 1998—will be recognized for his considerable musical and philanthropic contributions as the 2006 MusiCares Person of the Year. Among the artists saluting him at the Los Angeles event, produced by the Recording Academy, will be Bruce Springsteen, Jackson Browne, Dixie Chicks, Taj Mahal, Paul Simon, Alison Krauss and fellow Century Award recipient Randy Newman.

Taylor admits that after years of seeing his contemporaries receive honors, he is a bit undone at the prospect of all the attention. “I’ll probably be in some kind of a state [at MusiCares]. I’m thinking of taking a bullhorn to the show and yelling at people onstage.”

One result of the honor? Taylor jokes that he will no longer be able to fuss that he has not gotten his due. “I can’t complain about anything,” he says. “It’s been such an important part of my life, complaining; I don’t know what I’ll do with the spare time.”

Undoubtedly, he will work on what he does best: a new tour and a new album. A few years ago, Taylor left Sony Music after more than two decades. He talked to Billboard about his future plans while on vacation on the East Coast.



**Q:** You just finished another great year of touring. How do you keep it fresh after so many years?

**A:** You learn how to pace yourself after a while and not to take on too much work. You sort of strike a delicate balance between being in good shape and fit and up for the show with your chops up, and going too far and getting tired of it and tired of the material and stuff. And it's really amazing how every night the presence of an enthusiastic audience and being onstage with great players just wakes you up and brings that out of you.

That's the best thing about it. It's almost like there's another force operating that continues to be a real factor.

**Q:** You are working on a special concept for the next tour. What can you tell us about it?

**A:** I'm going to go out and essentially do solo work. Larry Goldings is going to play keyboards with me, at least to start with. We're going to play small-ish theaters, houses of around 3,000, I think, performing arts centers and stuff. We'll do that

in the first half of March, the first of April, the first half of May, and beyond that we'll see.

It's been a number of years since I worked solo. That's all I used to do, and that's how I started out. So it's nice to get back to that every once in a while.

**Q:** Are you going to play new material?

**A:** I've got four or five things started and near completion. Maybe I'll have something ready by March, but I wouldn't want to promise it.

**Q:** In 2004, you successfully put out a Christmas album through Hallmark. What did you learn from that experience?

**A:** I finished up my commitment to Sony [in 2002 with "October Road"], and it's a very changing, shifting kind of landscape in the record business these days, and I figured we'd keep our options open. [Taylor's manager] Gary [Borman] got this offer in from Hallmark, and I figured, "Sure, let's give it a try." It was an interesting experiment to work

outside of the record company model, and it's definitely a way to go.

I think it was a positive experience. I had a certain amount of trepidation going into it, not knowing what it was going to be like, but the Hallmark people were clearly on their game and knew what they wanted with just a surprising level of organization. They kept us on track for a whole year ahead of time with deadlines for this and deadlines for that. It was very interesting to see how tight their business model was. It was great.

**Q:** What are your thoughts on a new label home?

**A:** I don't know. I'm assuming it's probably a good idea to find somebody to partner up with, but my feeling is that it's best to do it on a project-by-project basis at this point.

I was with Sony for, oh, close to 20 years, I guess, maybe longer. The thing about it is you can find yourself in a situation where you sign with one company and then five years later, you've delivered two of your five albums and you don't know anybody there. People [say], "I want a key man clause," but no one's going to accept that, it never works out that way.

So I think with the other way, when you make an album and get a certain of the way through the album on your own with your own money and your own production, you can then let a company take a look at it and go, "We like this, we know what we can do with this" or "We want to pass on this."

When it's your fourth album [on a contract] and you signed with a whole different crew, you just sort of deliver it out of thin air, they may take a look at it and say, "We don't know what to do with this thing" or "This isn't what we expected," so this is a much easier and straightforward and honest way to go at it.

Also, we're in state now where you can really get started at home and get into the project without needing a big company to bankroll you, so it's

probably a good idea to do that, and that's how I anticipate we'll work on it, on a project-by-project basis.

**Q:** One cause of the upheaval in the industry is the digital and mobile landscape. Do you pay attention to that and ponder how many ringtones of "Shower the People" you can sell?

**A:** I have kind of a narrow focus on it. I'm not much of a businessman, I really depend on other people I work with to think about those things. I think it distracts me from what my job [is], which is to write, perform and record songs.

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**Q:** MusiCares has expanded its mission in the last few years with initiatives like the Emergency Financial Assistance Plan and by providing relief to musicians in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Have you had the opportunity to become familiar with the organization?

**A:** I've had a chance to talk to a few people about it. I think it's a great opportunity for musicians and people in the business to directly help and do something positive for fellow musicians.

**Q:** How involved have you been in picking the artists for your tribute?

**A:** My management [Borman and Barbara Rose] has been much more active. I asked that my band be the house band because they know the material, so that seemed the easiest way to go about it, but aside from that, I've kept myself out of the loop, so there's an element of surprise to it.



Photo: Dauney Clench