

Jackson Browne still asking questions on *Downhill from Everywhere*

Kevin Reed
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Singer-songwriter and rock musician Jackson Browne released his fifteenth studio album *Downhill from Everywhere* on July 23.

Over the past five decades, Browne has carved out an identity as a craftsman of songs that alternate between introspective and political lyrics combined with attractive melodies and driving rock rhythms. While he has to some extent specialized in acoustic ballads, Browne's most popular songs have always exhibited powerful and energetic hooks on which he hangs his musical hat.

In the songs on the new album—all of them written before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic—the 72-year-old Browne continues along these lines. For listeners who know his back catalog, *Downhill from Everywhere* moves around in familiar territory; for those new to Jackson Browne, there is more than enough accessible music and straightforward language here to gather and hold the interest of listeners.

It has been seven years since Browne's last record and, as he has explained previously, he prefers to take his time to write and record new material. When asked about putting out an album of pre-pandemic music, Browne told GRAMMY.com, "It always takes me several years to make a record because it takes me that long to write songs that I like. I don't write a lot of songs. I start a lot of songs, but I don't finish a lot of songs. So, that's just my process. But it is weird to finish something and have to wait." The album was originally scheduled for release last fall but was postponed by the pandemic.

The singer also tested positive for COVID-19 in March 2020 and was one of the first artists to speak publicly about it. At the time, Browne told *Rolling Stone*, "So many people that have it aren't going to be tested. They don't have symptoms, but they might have it and might be able to pass it on. That's what younger readers need to understand: They need to take part in the global response to stop the spread. That means not going anywhere, not getting into contact with anybody, not seeing anybody."

The new record begins with the track, "Still Looking for Something," where Browne evokes themes from his earlier

and most popular albums and—like many from his generation—peers into the not-too-distant future of a career coming to an end:

*And I'm still looking for something
Way out over my due date, baby, I'm
Still looking for something in the night
I know I'm headed for somewhere
We all dream about somewhere, baby
We all want to go where life is bright
You don't want to end up nowhere, but you might*

Browne wants his audience to know that he has not given up and has something more to say and show that he still has a socially critical eye:

*Gonna keep my options open, even though I'm hoping
For something I can hold up to the light
Don't know that I'll find it, or the soulful smile behind it
If all I find is freedom, it's alright*

Browne is identified with a trend of California-based popular music, associated with the Laurel Canyon neighborhood of Los Angeles, that includes Joni Mitchell, Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, the Mamas and the Papas, Carole King and members of the Eagles such as Don Henley and Glenn Frey. They were for a time a close-knit group that shared songs and performed together, often incorporating Latin, country, folk and bluegrass themes into their music.

These influences are present on Browne's *Downhill from Everywhere* with a distinctively Caribbean rhythm on "Love is Love" and Latin beats on "The Dreamer." The former track is about the difficulties of life in Haiti and also appears on a compilation called *Let the Rhythm Lead: Haiti Song Summit* put out by Artists for Peace and Justice. On the latter track—about an immigrant girl crossing the border into US to reunite with her father, as he has done many times before—Browne sings in Spanish:

*¿A dónde van los sueños (Where do the dreams go?)
Nacidos de la fe y la ilusión (Born of faith and illusion)
Donde no hay camino ni huella (Where there's no road and no footprints)
Solo deseos que susurran al corazón? (Only desires that*

whisper to the heart)

Discussing with GRAMMY.com his desire to continue writing and performing songs with socially conscious messages, Browne said, “I’ve always wanted music to be engaging without even having listened to the lyrics. I felt like the lyrics were there for anyone who wants them. I always want to make sure you aren’t paying for the substance or the content by having the music be in second place.”

Browne has achieved his goal once again on the 10-track album with the considerable collaboration of a group of musicians that include Greg Leisz on slide guitar, Val McCallum on electric guitar and vocals and the excellent work of Leslie Mendelson who shares lead vocals with Browne on “A Human Touch.”

While it is true that the quality of the musical element of his song writing has kept audiences coming back for Jackson Browne, it is also the case that his lyrical gifts have kept listeners eager to hear what it is he wants to say. For many, it is this combination that makes him different.

The title track “Downhill from Everywhere”—released as a single just before Earth Day 2021 (April 22)—is a case in point. The track starts off with a rock drum beat with punctuated electric guitars as Browne starts listing off what appears to be a random list of things:

Downhill from the prison
Downhill from the mall
Downhill from the factory farm and the hospital
Downhill from the border wall

But the list of things going downhill turns out to be about the transmission of plastic pollution from “everywhere” to the ocean as Browne asks the question, “Do you think of the ocean as yours?”

Browne asks more questions on the album, for example on “Until Justice is Realm,” where he sings in the chorus, “What is democracy? What is the deal? What will it look like? How would it feel?”

Perhaps more than any other rock musician to achieve mass popularity from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, Browne—who was a songwriting prodigy at Elektra Records before he was eighteen—has tried to criticize the disillusionment that followed the dissipation of the protest and “counter-culture” youth movement of that time. That the criticism was not sufficiently vehement or angry has something to do with the 1960s-70s music scene of which he was a part. These musicians were sensitive, intelligent, sophisticated; they were also somewhat self-indulgent, insulated and distant from the problems of wide layers of the population. They objected to the onset of Reaganism, but their protests were muted.

In any case, the “settling in” that occurred from the

mid-‘70s onward is treated in Browne’s 1976 title track from the album *The Pretender*, where he sings, “I’m going to rent myself a house in the shade of the freeway, I’m going to pack my lunch in the morning and go to work each day.”

Over the decades, Jackson Browne has opposed US militarism and the wars of the past twenty years—and written about it in his songs—and been involved in raising money for numerous charities. He has largely operated within the orbit of the Democratic Party, including support for the 2004 election campaign of John Kerry, along with other left-liberal artists such as Bruce Springsteen, Don Henley and Bonnie Raitt, and the abortive campaign by John Edwards for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008. Browne has made the occasional foray as well in the direction of Ralph Nader and the Greens.

Also in 2008, Browne sued the Republican Party and the campaign of the presidential candidate John McCain for using his song “Running on Empty” without permission. In the 2012 election, Browne stated he planned to vote for Obama but was not enthusiastic about it. He told *Politico*, “honestly Obama once again has joined the ranks of the lesser of two evils. The great parade of people that the progressives get to vote for who are the lesser of two evils and who don’t really represent what I believe in any overwhelming balance.”

Browne went on about Obama, “He’s just as beholden to the people who put him in office as any of the Republicans would be. But what’s a mystery to me is how he installed pretty much the exact same infrastructure in his administration that deals with finances as the administration that we thought we voted out. That’s really a shocker.”

The singer refused to endorse Democrat Hillary Clinton for president in 2016 and his name is not among the list of celebrities who supported Joe Biden in 2020.

In an interview that year with the *Independent*, Browne commented, “This is the worry I have about democracy ... It can be gamed by private interests, whether they be robber barons in the 1800s or the fossil fuel industry today. They get us to drag our feet so they can keep making their corporate fortunes.”

He remains an interesting figure.



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