

“A Different Kind of Poverty”:  
Folk Rock and Therapeutic Counterculture

by

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**INTRODUCTION**  
**FOLK PROTEST TO THERAPEUTIC FOLK ROCK**

Stephen Stills croons the first verse of his poignant “4+20,” while fingerpicking his acoustic guitar in open tuning:

Four and twenty years ago, I come into this life,  
 The son of a woman and a man who lived in strife.  
 He was tired of being poor and he wasn't into selling door to door  
 And he worked like the devil to be more.

This folk-blues classic, debuted on Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young’s *Dejà Vu* in 1970, unfolds lyrically in a way that exhibits the evolution from folk protest to folk rock in twentieth-century America. The opening lines offer a socioeconomic critique reminiscent of 1930s and 40s Depression-era folk. “Selling door to door” evokes the alienation and soul-deadening repetition of working-class toil. The verse ends with the narrator’s father “work[ing] like the devil to be more,” suggesting that, even though he must go through hell, he is actively attempting to improve his socioeconomic circumstances.

Stills’ second verse, however, transitions into a folk rock narrative that is typical of the late-60s and 70s. It preoccupies listeners with “a different kind of poverty,” centered on personal and inner conflict:

A different kind of poverty now upsets me so.  
 Night after sleepless night,  
 I walk the floor and I want to know, why am I so alone?  
 Where is my woman can I bring her home?  
 Have I driven her away? Is she gone?

Here the speaker is asking himself personal questions about his lover and his loneliness, trying to fathom who he is as an individual rather than critique his positioning in society. Looking inward and feeling preoccupied with romance and

inner pain leads him to a sense of alienation. This alienating interiority takes the place of alienated labor as the problem on which listeners could focus. Finally, the third verse descends into drug-induced self-destruction rather than considering anything like social change:

Morning comes to sunrise and I'm driven to my bed.  
 I see that it is empty and there's devils in my head.  
 I embrace the many-colored beast.  
 I grow weary of the torment; can there be no peace?  
 And I find myself just wishing that my life would simply cease.

The problem is no longer “working like a devil”; instead the concern is “devils in [his] head.” His politics have moved from the external world of labor inequality to the internal world of the self and the mind. He “embraces the many-colored beast,” an allusion to hallucinogenic drugs, which help him to escape temporarily rather than take action. And ultimately, rather than actively “working” for change, he wants his life to “simply cease.”

In this project, I argue that increasingly popular therapeutic folk rock singer-songwriters in the late-60s and 70s helped to produce and sell an inner self that middle-class Americans could experience as individualized, deep, and psychologically “impoverished,”\* thus absorbing listeners with problems seemingly within the self more than with conventionally defined political and social problems. Here in the introduction, I set up my close reading of the lyrics of singer-songwriters, James Taylor, Joni Mitchell, and Jackson Browne, with a history of the development of folk rock as well as with a cultural history of the rise of therapeutic counterculture in the late-60s and 70s.

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\* I will use the terms “impoverish” and “poverty” throughout this study in order to refer back to Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young’s notion of “a different kind of poverty.”

### **Early Folk Protest to New Left Folk**

In *Sound Effects* (1981), celebrated sociomusicologist Simon Frith offers a compelling history of folk music in twentieth-century America. He asserts that the “Old Left” Communist party was in part responsible for revitalizing and politicizing American folksongs.<sup>1</sup> Frith explains that in the 1930s the party’s cultured thinkers like Pete Seeger, a Harvard student and renowned folksinger, began dressing down and singing traditional ballads as rural “folk” Americans. Using careful enunciation and thoughtful lyrics, they intended to communicate the systemically unequal experiences—economic poverty—of the working class to educated urban audiences.<sup>2</sup> Bridging the gap between spectators and performer was of the utmost importance to the Old Left.<sup>3</sup> Seeger was particularly well known for his emphasis on audience participation; his mission was to, in his words, “Put songs on people’s lips instead of just in their ears.”<sup>4</sup> True folk musicians, Frith explains, “were expected to operate anonymously, impersonally, as a sort of musical instrument—played *by* their audiences.”<sup>5</sup>

By the end of the 1940s the rise of McCarthyism led to a rapid decline in popular radicalism, and folk music performances became rare occasions; the politicized folk tradition continued only on college campuses.<sup>6</sup> But as students became more politically active in the 60s, the folk music scene regained its larger following.<sup>7</sup> Frith reports that the groundbreaking events of the civil rights movement brought various folksingers together at rallies, coffee shops and music festivals.<sup>8</sup>

Many of these early-60s New Left folksingers learned guitar by playing the songs of the Old Left folkies, and like their predecessors, they valued the simple, sincere performance of meaningful, politically engaged lyrics.<sup>9</sup> But there was a

marked difference in the tone and style of the two groups. While many of the artists of the 30s were bound by a particular cause—for instance the socialist mission for economic equality—the artists of the early-60s, or at least most of them, articulated the views of a more diverse liberal population that prized individual difference. “New left activists loved to hear that in the old left, as the folksinger Malvina Reynolds told them, ‘there was an inhuman quality about radicals’ that the new left had to overcome,”<sup>10</sup> historian Doug Rossinow writes. He notes that Reynolds went on to say that these New Left activists wanted “to change the way we are, as individuals.”<sup>11</sup> The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963 exemplifies the individualizing spirit of the New Left. 200,000 Americans came together, Bob Dylan and Joan Baez sang protest folksongs, and Martin Luther King Jr. gave his legendary “I Have a Dream” speech.<sup>12</sup> This event had a much wider appeal than radically socialist Old Left rallies did because it celebrated individuality in politics and strove to represent a liberal trans-class plea for racial equality. Historian Bruce Schulman contends that in the 60s, “Most Americans accepted the activist state, with its commitments to the protections of individual rights, the promotion of economic prosperity, and the establishment of some rudimentary form of political equality and social justice for all Americans.”<sup>13</sup>

New-Left folksingers may have brought people together in civil rights and anti-war rallies, but some maintain that they should not get credit for political achievements. In his 1965 tune, “The Folk Song Army” from *That Was the Year That Was*, Tom Lehrer satirizes the “radical” early-60s folkies and suggests that they were just boosting their own egos:

We are the folk song army.

Everyone of us cares.  
 We all hate poverty, war, and injustice,  
 Unlike the rest of you squares.

By the mid-60s, folk music was losing ground as serious protest music, and for many listeners and critics, the mark of a good folk artist became uniqueness and intellectual complexity rather than the ability to organize people around a political party or action.<sup>14</sup> Frith cites Bob Dylan as the prime example of this iconoclastic folk artist.<sup>15</sup> The sociomusicologist observes that these mid-60s artists wanted to represent their own individual perspective on political issues, and they wanted to express themselves, albeit within conventions, rather than represent their audiences.<sup>16</sup> The folksingers continued to be known for performing honesty, but instead of being honest and loyal to their audiences and to a particular political agenda like the Old Left folkies, they were seemingly being honest about themselves and sometimes their personal political opinions.<sup>17</sup>

### **New Left Folk to Therapeutic Folk Rock**

As folk music became more popular in the middle of the 60s, a number of folksingers and groups began adding elements of mainstream rock and pop music to their performances.<sup>18</sup> Here too the most notable example is Dylan, who replaced his acoustic guitar with an electric one at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival.<sup>19</sup> “As folk became folk-rock,” Frith notes, “its political position became increasingly, inevitably, compromised.”<sup>20</sup> The arrival of the Beatles in New York in 1964<sup>21</sup> made a huge splash in the American music scene and that too inevitably intensified the influence of rock on folk music.

By the tumultuous late-60s, new dimensions of the transition from folk to folk rock appeared. The final years of the decade were marked by violent warfare, sexual revolution, student protests, and the rise of youth culture. This shift in politics and culture was particularly obvious in 1968. Bruce Schulman calls 1968 “a revolutionary moment,” and adds that during this year, “Prime Minister [of France] Georges Pompidou warned that ‘our civilization is being questioned— not the government, not the institutions... but the materialistic and soulless modern society.’”<sup>22</sup> 1968 was also an especially brutal year in American history. North Vietnam launched the Tet Offensive against South Vietnam and the United States, which increased Americans’ dissatisfaction with the war.<sup>23</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on April 4<sup>th</sup> and Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated on June 5<sup>th</sup>.<sup>24</sup> When the Apollo 8 mission succeeded in orbiting the moon and the astronauts made it back to Earth, they received a telegram that read, “You Saved 1968.”<sup>25</sup>

This period of incredible violence and political turmoil was also distinguished by protest, particularly on college campuses.<sup>26</sup> And folk music still played a role in college protest culture; folk rock super group Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young recorded “Ohio,” one of their most famous songs, about the shooting of student protestors at Kent State in 1970.<sup>27</sup> Political songs had by no means disappeared; however, the overwhelming number of tragic political events left some of the New Left and the liberal folk artists feeling hopeless. Folksinger Dave Van Ronk complains cynically, “The whole raison d’etre of the New Left had been exposed as a lot of hot air; that was demoralizing.”<sup>28</sup> Robert Lankford elaborates on this sense of futility: “The shifting political scene had left many wondering if singing songs would ever bring

racial equality or end war or even keep the streets clean.”<sup>29</sup> Systemic social change seemed to be up against daunting odds.

Many cultural historians argue that during this period there was a rise in “therapeutic culture.”<sup>30</sup> In his well-known *New York* magazine essay, “The ‘Me’ Decade and the Third Great Awakening” (1976), Tom Wolfe brings up the popular generalization that late-60s political upheaval “left the electorate shell-shocked and disillusioned and that in their despair the citizens were groping no longer for specific remedies but for sheer faith, something, anything (even holy rolling), to believe in.”<sup>31</sup> This desperate search for “sheer faith” led to a desire to narrow one’s preoccupations to problems of the inner self, self-expression, and romance—concerns in which one could immerse oneself.<sup>32</sup> And in turn, a new brand of folk rock was beginning to make these psychologized preoccupations *sound* good.

James Taylor, Joni Mitchell, Jackson Browne, and many other increasingly therapeutic singer-songwriters, began to focus their folk rock lyrics more on the creative exploration of the inner self and inner poverty—emotional pain, often understood as a reaction to ostensibly standardized society or a symptom of perceived personal depth and complexity—than on conventionally defined political perspectives. Taylor and Mitchell both released their first records in 1968. Browne first got his lyrics published in *Time* magazine the year before.<sup>33</sup> And all three artists had lucrative careers and became icons of popular culture. In addition to selling albums, they each had a share of radio hits: Taylor’s “You’ve Got a Friend” was number three on the charts on July 31, 1971,<sup>34</sup> Mitchell’s “Help Me” was number seven on June 8, 1974,<sup>35</sup> and Browne’s “Doctor My Eyes” was number eight on May 6, 1972.<sup>36</sup>

Some of Taylor, Mitchell, and Browne’s lyrics were still political, and various folk artists like Richie Havens, Buffy Sainte Marie, and Joan Baez, continued their careers into the 70s and beyond, maintaining an emphasis on conventional external problems and economic poverty in lyrics, only in somewhat more individualized terms than their earlier folksinger mentors.<sup>†</sup> As mentioned, the late-60s and 70s were undoubtedly still a period of political activism in the form of college-campus protests, environmentalism,<sup>37</sup> the gay-rights movement marked by the Stonewall Riot in 1969,<sup>38</sup> and many other social programs. But the new soft-spoken, inward-looking songwriters started to play a more prominent role in a folk scene that was becoming mass-commercialized as folk rock.

### **The Appeal of Therapeutic “Suffering”**

Historian David Browne describes how Taylor in particular epitomizes the way that therapeutic culture arose from the ferment of the 60s. “In 1970, a country still reeling from Vietnam, the Kennedy and King assassinations and the Manson murders was ready for something calm and introspective. Into that void appeared James Taylor’s second album, *Sweet Baby James*, one of the landmarks of the

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<sup>†</sup> In *A Nation of Outsiders* (2010) Grace Elizabeth Hale argues that these more traditional folksong revivalists and those of the early-60s (as well as Bob Dylan) were also making people feel like romanticized, emotional rebels. She contends, “Somehow the emotion of the [folk] songs...the wailing lament of the black man, forced to travel for work, at finding ‘another mule in his doggone stall’— gave the new fans access to their own feelings.” Grace Elizabeth Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 98.

Perhaps she is right, but those artists’ lyrics did not explicitly sell the emotional complexity and preoccupation with interiority that the lyrics of Taylor, Mitchell, and Browne did. Dylan comes the closest to selling interiority, but his more opaque lyrics, as well as his public image as iconoclast, made his version of interiority harder to consume.

burgeoning singer-songwriter movement.”<sup>39</sup> The word “calm” doesn’t exactly capture it, though. Taylor’s lyrics, overlaying his melodious and often-sweet hallmark fingerpicking, are often tortured and complex.

Though therapeutic music sounds like it would only include soothing, feel-good tunes and lyrics, we will see how the work of Taylor, Mitchell and Browne was therapeutic in large part *because* of its focus on painful, deep emotions like interior poverty. Americans, smitten by angst-ridden countercultures, gravitated to their creatively angst-ridden records. “For the modern consciousness,” Susan Sontag writes, “the artist is the exemplary sufferer. And among artists, the writer, the man of words, is the person to whom we look to be able to best express his suffering.”<sup>40</sup>

In post-industrial America, both literature and lyrics that “express suffering” can be read as cultural products of “soft capitalism,” a term used by Joel Pfister in his book *Surveyors of Customs* (2015).<sup>41</sup> While hard capitalism describes an economic system that relies on material production, soft capitalism refers to a cultural system that shapes what Karl Marx called “spiritual production.”<sup>42</sup> Through folk rock and other industries, soft capitalism provides incentives such as a sense of self, expressions of suffering, a secular soul, and romance.<sup>43</sup> These commercial products often thought of as remedies for commercialism, make citizens and laborers feel deep or hip, so that they will return to the workplace and continue to sustain hard capitalism.<sup>44</sup> Sontag’s writers, extended here to songwriters, provide a compensatory model of suffering that allows readers to feel complex and not wholly defined by their standardized work or social status.<sup>45</sup> Frith touches on how soft capitalism works with regard to music about suffering: “Emotional music has become the image of the mother who says, ‘Come

and weep, my child.’ It is catharsis for the masses, but catharsis which keeps them all the more firmly in line.”<sup>46</sup>

In addition to expressing internal suffering, writers offer aesthetic respites from interior distress. Sontag explains how Cesare Pavese, a twentieth-century Italian author, writes diaries that include “reflections on how to use, how to act on, his suffering.”<sup>47</sup> We will see in Chapters 1 and 2 that the folk rock singer-songwriters present similar “reflections” in their lyrics. Their emphasis on individualism, self-expression, and romantic love both dwells on and sublimates suffering as psychological capital.

Expressing ostensibly personal poverty becomes not only therapeutic but also hip, deep, and *rebellious* in the countercultural folk rock music scene. The folksingers of the earlier generation wanted to make listeners uncomfortable by implicating them in social critiques, while the folk rockers were sympathizing with discomfort, and paradoxically, by doing so, selling temporary relief. These singer-songwriters may have been giving themselves a kind of therapy, too. They were all fairly troubled individuals, with turbulent, intertwined love lives, drug addictions, and frustrated relationships with their own success. “A lot of the early stuff that I wrote was supposed to sort of soothe me,” Taylor confessed recently. “It was sort of like musical heroin, musical palliative... therapeutic.”<sup>48</sup> Browne too explains his songwriting method in documentary, *Jackson Browne: Going Home* (1994), as therapeutic: “The process of writing a song is really the process of confronting something really very internal, very deep inside of me that I need to deal with.”<sup>49</sup>

## Therapeutic Counterculture Incorporated

Wolfe explains that the push to analyze oneself—performing self-exploration—became economically accessible to the middle class by the 1960s. He attributes this economic shift to the thirty-year boom in the American economy due to World War II spending: “It has pumped money into every class level of the population on a scale without parallel in any country in history.”<sup>50</sup> This postwar boom is somewhat comparable, though, to the early 1920s boom after World War I, described by the critic Malcolm Cowley in 1934:

After the war... our industries had grown enormously to satisfy a demand that suddenly ceased. To keep the factory wheels turning, a new domestic market had to be created. There must be a new ethic that encouraged people to buy, a *consumption* ethic... *self-expression* and *paganism* encouraged a demand for all sorts of products.<sup>51</sup>

The post WWI economic boom stimulated “a *consumption* ethic,” which in turn led to a “*self-expression*” or therapeutic and countercultural ethic. And in the continued post World War II boom during the late-60s and 70s, American pop music mass-commercialized that ethic by making it appear stylish and defiant. At this point, the music industry’s profitable war was against conformity and repression. “I... must strip away all the shams and excess baggage of society and my upbringing in order to find the Real Me,” Wolfe quips, sarcastically. “He who has dug himself out from under the junk heap of civilization can discover it.”<sup>52</sup>

Wolfe’s description of therapeutic self-expression can be broken into two parts. First, there is the perceived exploration of the deep self, the search for the “Real Me.” Second, there is the ostensible distancing of oneself from standardized American consumerism, the “excess baggage of society” and “junk heap of civilization.” The Oxford English Dictionary defines consumerism as a focus on acquiring material

products. And as Wolfe points out, many Americans were rejecting this emphasis on obtaining goods. “The mass society refrain [in the 60s] was familiar to millions,” Thomas Frank observes, “The failings of capitalism were...materialism, wastefulness, and soul-deadening conformity.”<sup>53</sup> This frustration with “soul-deadening” consumerism, though, led to soul-reviving and soul-searching consumerism.<sup>54</sup> Masses of American workers and consumers, who considered themselves countercultural, began to buy therapeutic, soulful self-expression, often in the hip form of folk rock records, as an antidote to corporate capitalism and standardization of work and daily life.<sup>55</sup>

“All or nearly all initiatives and contributions,” cultural theorist Raymond Williams posits, “even when they take on manifestly alternative or oppositional forms, are in practice tied to the hegemonic.” He argues that many “oppositional initiatives and contributions, which are made within or against a specific hegemony,” like the singer-songwriters countercultural lyrics “within” or “against” consumerist society, can establish “certain limits” to those “initiatives” or “can succeed in neutralizing, changing or actually incorporating them.”<sup>56</sup> In Williams’ terms, many of Mitchell, Taylor, and Browne’s “alternative” or seemingly rebellious sentiments were “incorporated” into mainstream society as mass-commercial music. More generally, mass counterculture, at least in part, became an ostensibly counterhegemonic manifestation of American hegemony.<sup>57</sup>

### **Folk Rock Self-Expression Takes on Political Weight**

For less politically organized and less hopeful late-60s and 70s countercultural liberals, the New Left turn toward individuality and the personal in politics

transformed into a focus on interiority-as-political. This shift can be seen not only in folk rock music but also in the late 1960s and 70s sexual revolution and feminist movement. Writing about women's liberation, Lawrence Lader contends, "It was a movement that came from inner needs and inner pain."<sup>58</sup> Though the rise of interiority politics was instrumental for the gender equality fight, it was also linked to the rise of therapeutic culture and the evasion of external political issues. Wolfe's assertions about the self-involved nature of interiority politics, while often reductive and misogynistic, are helpful in understanding the cultural shift. The author mentions the ad slogan, "If I've only one life, let me live it as a blonde!" and comments that the creator "had summed up what might be described as the secular side of the Me Decade."<sup>59</sup> In Wolfe's "Me Decade" each individual prioritizes his or her "only one life" above all else. The individual expects to be able to live that "one life" however he or she pleases and without social or political restrictions. He asserts, "This formula accounts for much of the popularity of the women's-liberation or feminist movement."<sup>60</sup> Finally he argues that the feminist movement is part of a transition to politics that center around "Me":

The great unexpected dividend of the feminist movement has been to elevate an ordinary status—woman, housewife—to the level of drama. One's very existence as *a woman*—as *Me*—becomes something all the world analyzes, agonizes over, draws cosmic conclusions from, or, in any event, takes seriously.<sup>61</sup>

Thinking about the psychological "Me," about the role of "Me" in society, and about "Me" struggling against society, according to Lader, was in itself imagined as *political*.

We shall see that the "different kind of poverty" lyrics of Taylor, Mitchell, and Browne made versions of this cultural and ideological tendency seem hip. Browne explains, "It's a challenge to talk to people about specific political things, because like

Little Steven says, ‘What’s more personal than your political beliefs?’”<sup>62</sup> Politics had become part of personal identity just as the expression of the inner self had become politicized. A critic’s description of a 2006 Taylor concert also characterizes the way that the songwriter and his fellow folk rockers are often associated with politics. “At 58, Mr. Taylor still fits the image of a civic-minded patrician farmer who attends town meetings to speak his mind,” *The New York Times*’ Stephen Holden reports. “He has only to arch an eyebrow and direct an eagle-eyed glare of disapproval at an opponent to register his righteous skepticism.”<sup>63</sup> Taylor rarely states his political beliefs in his lyrics; all he needs to do is “fit the image” of the countercultural liberal. The audience will project the rest onto him. Rock fans, more generally, often imbue political meaning into their favorite songs, even if there is no explicit political message in the lyrics. “It was precisely because [rock] so innocently accepted its place within the liberal consensus that it was easily embroiled in and articulated to political struggles,” Lawrence Grossberg maintains.<sup>64</sup>

Christopher Lasch writes that in the 70s the “therapeutic outlook threaten[ed] to displace politics.”<sup>65</sup> Jackson Lears concurs: “The therapeutic outlook has further undermined personal moral responsibility and promoted an ethic of self-fulfillment.”<sup>66</sup> The therapeutic singer-songwriters, we will see, do not completely “displace politics.” Instead, they connect the therapeutic to counterculture, making it seem intrinsically associated with left-leaning politics without very often making politics explicit. Americans could listen to folk rock lyrics about the self, rather than about overt politics, and if they wanted to they could believe they were enacting a rebellious political style. Absorptions with the inner self and self-expressive individuality became an implicit marker of, not just a substitute for, politics.

In 1976 Eli Zaretsky explained that the highly valued sphere of personal life in modern times makes individual expression appear meaningful and “revolutionary.”<sup>67</sup> “Reflecting the ‘separation’ of personal life from production,” he writes, “a new idea has emerged on a mass scale: that of human relations, and human beings, as an end in themselves.”<sup>68</sup> Taylor, Mitchell and Browne reinforce the notion of “human beings, as [a political] end in themselves” by using the historically political folksong form to foreground interiority and cultural rebellion, as well as by selling the idea that the experience of emotional poverty signifies subjective complexity and depth. Grace Elizabeth Hale poignantly suggests that though many countercultural “rebels” equated cultural rebellion with political rebellion, in reality “political and cultural agency have proved to be not so clearly or easily linked.”<sup>69</sup> For the singer-songwriters and their many middle- and upper-class listeners, the never-ending road trip in search of a culturally rebellious, seemingly political “self-fulfillment” preoccupies perpetually unfulfilled, spiritually impoverished individuals. It may keep them from realizing that they are reproducing a consumerist society that may be oppressing them as well as others.

### **Ideological Genealogies**

A cultural historian could trace the genealogy of the therapeutic culture that helped shape the needs and genres brought to folk rock singer-songwriters. This history is not the focus of my study. But it is important to note that therapeutic culture and its literary expressions have roots that go at least as far back as the emergence of the industrial era. Critics such as Raymond Williams understand romantic literature as a self-expressive response to the initial rise of industrialization and secularization in

the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>70</sup> Romanticism's soft capitalist promise of an inner self that was separate from work helped to reproduce hard capitalism's workers and compliant citizens.<sup>71</sup> Lears analyzes the linkages between therapeutic culture and consumer culture in the late-19<sup>th</sup> century and early-20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>72</sup> He explains that frustration with post-industrial proletarianization and consumer culture sparked therapeutic culture as a reaction, and, as a development of soft capitalism, therapeutic culture often lubricated the public's acceptance of proletarianization and consumerism.<sup>73</sup>

In *Exiles Return* (1934) Cowley marks the 1910s and 1920s as the meeting of therapeutic culture and modern bohemian counterculture in New York City's Greenwich Village.<sup>‡</sup> This convergence of curative self-expression and hip rebellion has literary roots in mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century American romanticism with writers like Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman.<sup>74</sup> Cowley explains that during the post-World War I boom—before the Great Depression and the rise of bohemians-turned-folkies performing socialist tunes—bohemia had already established itself as a “doctrine” in Greenwich Village.<sup>75</sup> He describes the bohemians' core values, which bear striking similarities to the tenets of the late-60s and 70s therapeutic counterculture: “The idea of salvation by the child... slowly crushed and destroyed by a standardized society... the idea of self-expression...the idea of living for the moment... the idea of psychological adjustment... the idea of changing place.”<sup>76</sup> Beginning in the 1910s and 1920s, this self-expressive counterculture was becoming mainstream. “American business and the whole of middle-class America,” Cowley

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<sup>‡</sup> According to Cowley, bohemia originated in the 1830s in France after the Napoleonic Wars and industrial growth.

generalizes, “had been going Greenwich Village”<sup>77</sup> We will see how the folk rock singer-songwriters, many of whom served their apprenticeship in Vietnam-era Greenwich Village,<sup>78</sup> were helping make countercultural ideas consumable and conventional.

The folk rock ethic of hip self-expression also has ideological origins in the African-American blues music tradition,<sup>79</sup> which developed towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century.<sup>80</sup> Amiri Baraka describes blues as “private and personal” and writes that it “was a music that arose from the needs of a group.”<sup>81</sup> Hale ties this understanding of blues to mid-twentieth-century culture and argues that white-middle-class Americans in the 50s and 60s romanticized the marginalization of African-Americans and expressive blues music as a reaction to oppression. She links this white middle-class idealization of black outsider culture to middle-class rebellious tendencies including the interest in subversive protest folk and dissident cultural figures like Dylan.<sup>82</sup> Bruce Pollock refers to the mid-1960s music of the likes of Paul Simon, another poetic, thoughtful singer-songwriter, as “the suburban midcentury white young America blues,”<sup>83</sup> but I would alter that term for Taylor, Mitchell and Browne to “the late-60s and 70s white young middle-class interiority blues.” Indeed, one of Mitchell’s most celebrated albums is called *Blue* (1971), and Taylor is known for performing—and parodying—the white blues. In “The Blues is Just a Bad Dream” (*James Taylor* 1968), Taylor reveals the distinctive feature of middle-class interiority blues: “it lives upside your head.” Unlike African-American blues that often responded to systemic racism and inequality, the therapeutic songwriters’ blues tended to reify inner pain.

The ideological roots of Taylor, Mitchell and Browne's therapeutic counterculture can also be found in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century literature. In the 50s and 60s, confessional poetry, associated with poets such as Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, and Anne Sexton, was marked by its conspicuous self-expression and psychological self-analysis.<sup>84</sup> The Beat poets and writers too were individualistic and anti-conformist in this period.<sup>85</sup> During the height of therapeutic culture in the late-60s and 70s, we shall see how Taylor, Mitchell and Browne successfully made these personal and psychological themes staples of the folk rock industry. Even when Plath was writing she understood that writing about her interiority was marketable.<sup>86</sup> In her 1962 poem "Lady Lazarus" she recognizes, "There is a charge/ For the Eyeing of my scars, there is a charge/ For the hearing of my heart."<sup>87</sup>

### **Lyrical Lens as Cultural Lens**

One could focus on the musicology of Mitchell, Taylor, and Browne. Some scholars believe that lyrics should be considered only when the music is analyzed. Songwriting scholar Pat Pattison contends, "Poetry is made for the eye. Lyrics are made for the ear."<sup>88</sup> Yet others believe that lyrics merit publication and should be taken seriously as cultural resources and symptoms. Robert Pattison sees rock 'n' roll as a more vulgar form of romantic poetry,<sup>89</sup> and Charlotte Pence compares country lyrics to Shakespearean sonnets.<sup>90</sup> Some are undecided, as is cultural critic Robert Christgau in "Rock Lyrics are Poetry (Maybe)" (1972.)<sup>91</sup> Many music critics who reviewed the early albums of Taylor, Mitchell and Browne, including the *Rolling Stone* critics, take a literary criticism approach to lyrics. I too consider lyrics through both a literary and cultural lens.

The analysis of Taylor, Mitchell, and Browne's work, in particular, can productively be focused on lyrics, due to the attention that the artists themselves paid to the words in their songs. Christgau asserts that Mitchell has been writing textbook lyrics-as-poetry ever since 'Both Sides Now.'<sup>92</sup> A *New York Times* review of a Taylor concert notes, "As for his fancifully poetic, often enigmatic lyrics, there is usually much more than meets the ear, and sometimes you can come away with multiple meanings."<sup>93</sup> Browne has been classified as "a song poet."<sup>94</sup>

Rather than delve deep into the technical linkage between lyrics and poetry, though, my primary aim is to explore the ways in which Taylor's, Mitchell's, and Browne's folk rock evoke "a different kind of poverty" from their folk predecessors due to a class shift and a cultural shift. Their folk forefathers often represented the working-class in Depression-era America, so they sang folksongs about economic poverty and alienated labor. The late-60s and 70s singer-songwriters flourished during the post-war boom, and their folk rock represented middle- and upper-class, college-educated, consumerist, and therapeutic culture. They never forgot the folk music tradition of protesting poverty, but more often they complained of the spiritual poverty produced by standardized society or by their psychological complexity. The artists and their audience wanted to get away from the conventions and pressures of middle- and upper-class society,<sup>95</sup> not conspicuously from oppressive working conditions. Indeed, Cowley writes, "True bohemia may exist at millionaires' tables."<sup>96</sup> Mitchell alone was a millionaire by the age of 27.<sup>97</sup>

Chapter 1 investigates lyrics by Taylor, Mitchell, and Browne that present middle-class poverty as personal suffering that results from consumerist mainstream society. The songwriters use images of the road and nature to conjure a consumer-

friendly individualism that ostensibly opposes consumerism. They mostly romanticize isolating oneself to look inward, but we will find that at times they also question soft capitalism's therapeutic individualism. Chapter 2 unpacks their lyrics in which personal poverty also signifies interior depth and complexity. The artists evoke this depth as compensation for standardized society through references to music and romantic love. Here too we will see that the singer-songwriters can be read not only as victims but also as critics of the addictive nature of music and love. To these three folk rockers, the road, nature, music and love are beautiful and disappointing, aesthetic subjects and commercial products.

Before proceeding to Chapter 1, I want to clarify that though I am reading Taylor, Mitchell, and Browne as complicit in and critical of therapeutic and consumer culture, I love their work and do not read it only in political terms. Grace Elizabeth Hale writes that "the romance of the outsider," which can be compared to the idealization of the rebellious interior self, is "neither completely separate from nor completely a tool of the U.S. political economy. Its power derives from precisely this slipperiness, the fact that it can be simultaneously both inside and outside."<sup>98</sup> The ideological work of therapeutic folk rock merits critical and historical analysis. Yet I derive great nonpolitical joy from listening to the singer-songwriters' lyrically and musically artful songs. The "slipperiness" of these lyrics makes them rich cultural texts, rife with contradictory meanings, and that is why I investigate them here.

**CHAPTER 1**  
**SELLING ANTI-CONSUMERIST INDIVIDUALISM:**  
**NATURE AND THE OPEN ROAD**

As singer-songwriters, Mitchell, Taylor, and Browne are known for standing alone on stage, an instrument or two as their only companions. Much of their album artwork features romanticized images of the loner. In the painting on Mitchell's *Clouds* (1969), the artist stands alone on a beach, holding a bright red flower to her lips.<sup>99</sup> On the cover of Browne's *The Pretender* (1976), the folk rocker walks apart from the crowd on a city street.<sup>100</sup> Intriguingly, their lyrics also disseminate an overt idealization of the isolated individual. The singer-songwriters often use the literary conventions of the open road and the natural world as settings where one can express a unique self. And they frequently complement this romanticized picture of individualism with a critique of spiritually impoverishing, conformity-inducing consumerism. The therapeutic ideologies of individualism and anti-consumerism go hand in hand, and Americans "buy" them in order to feel countercultural and self-expressive.

Promotion of individualism and criticism of consumerism was popular and marketable during the transition from the 60s to 70s. "Mass-produced entertainment resonated with longings for liberation from the tyranny of the crowd," Lears writes of 1960s culture, "the heroic loner, from Gary Cooper to James Dean, was packaged for popular consumption, contained within a framework of conventional morality."<sup>101</sup> Schulman concurs, "The films, music, and literature of the era pitted a self-styled outlaw band of rebels against the massive global conglomerates that were coming to dominate the culture industries."<sup>102</sup> But the "massive global conglomerates" often promoted the "outlaw band of rebels" image because it was extremely marketable.

American hipness and the rejection of conformity have literary roots in Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman, among others, and in the mid- to late-twentieth-century this idealization of the hip and rebellious caught up with popular, marketable music.<sup>103</sup> Products in general began to be marketed as different, unique and individualizing; “Consumerism is no longer about conformity but about difference,” Thomas Frank contends. “It counsels... vigilant and updated individualism.”<sup>104</sup> He terms this phenomenon “hip consumerism,”<sup>105</sup> which can be seen as a facet of soft capitalism. In the 60s and 70s, when everyone was aspiring to be different and buying products to exhibit difference, being individualistic may ultimately have been one way of conforming. Lears also explains that therapeutic individualism and the desire to express oneself were “well attuned to the consumer ethos of twentieth-century capitalism.”<sup>106</sup> “Developed capitalism has mass-produced specific forms of... individuality,” Zaretsky points out in the 70s, “which simultaneously reinforce and threaten capitalist hegemony.”<sup>107</sup> For the most part, this “mass-produced individuality” fortifies “capitalist hegemony” because Americans consume in order to become different and thus cool.

Taylor, Mitchell, and Browne’s lyrics about nature and the road were not only popular due to the prominence of this rebellious consumerism in the 60s and 70s. Their personal anti-consumerist lyrics were also successful because they, at least by association, seemed vaguely anti-capitalist, and thus political. Left-leaning individuals could listen to their lyrics and feel that they were rebelling emotionally and culturally, perhaps even taking a political stand, by criticizing conventional consumerism and thinking about themselves and their countercultural escapes. But there is another side to the story too. If one listens closely to the lyrics of Mitchell, Taylor, and in particular

Browne, one will notice that these artists are sometimes self-critical about such conceptions of individualism.

### **“I Wish I Had a River”**

On the album cover of *For the Roses* (1972), Mitchell stands on a rugged rock in the ocean, completely nude, baring her body and soul.<sup>108</sup> She and Taylor in particular develop characters in their lyrics that suffer interior poverty, in part due to the standardization of urban industrialism and consumerism. These figures reject conventional society and embrace the natural, ostensibly authentic world.<sup>109</sup> The singer-songwriters’ Depression-era folk predecessors idealized nature, too. “The early days of the American folk ‘revival’ were bound up with rural romanticism,” writes Simon Frith, “with a search for values and ways which could be opposed to urban corruption, to commerce, to mass music.”<sup>110</sup> The Old Left protest folkies used this “rural romanticism” to motivate the working class and Communist party to come together as a unified politically active community, supporting the labor movement,<sup>111</sup> while the therapeutic folk rockers often investigate the way that a rural setting enhances the individual spirit.

Taylor creates a vivid picture of the pastoral individual dream in one of his most popular songs, “Sweet Baby James,” from his 1970 album of the same name.

There is a young cowboy; he lives on the range  
 His horse and his cattle are his only companions.  
 He works in the saddle and he sleeps in the canyons,  
 Waiting for summer, his pastures to change.  
 And as the moon rises he sits by his fire,  
 Thinking about women and glasses of beer.

This conventional story of the lone cowboy is told in lullaby form, and the chorus, “rock-a-bye sweet baby James,” suggests that Taylor may be singing this cradlesong to himself. A lullaby is a calming tune, often used to relax and quiet infants—to put them to sleep. Evidently this narrative of the solitary individual in a pastoral setting is meant to pacify. It depicts a therapeutic escape that is dreamlike enough to put an infant to bed, and perhaps put the listener’s preoccupations with the external world to sleep.

While Taylor does not use any highfalutin literary language in this song, the simplicity of his picture of life as a cowboy brings beauty and poetry to the individualist pastoral ideal. A 1970 *Rolling Stone* review agrees, “Taylor’s persistent lonely prairie... visions... work their way up to the intensity of a haiku or the complexity of a parable.”<sup>112</sup> The singer-songwriter employs straightforward American images such as the “range,” “canyons,” “moon,” “fire,” and “beer,” which conjure up a version of unregulated individuality that seems easy, natural, and cool. Even though he is a cowboy, he doesn’t seem to do any grueling, alienating work. The lone cowboy even gets to “think about women” without the hindrance of real domestic obligations.

One can appreciate the way in which Taylor romanticizes and interiorizes the notion of the individual in the pastoral landscape when one looks at how the folksingers of the early to mid-twentieth-century represented this subject. In the 30s and 40s Woody Guthrie, a political folksinger who had to beg for food when he was growing up in Oklahoma,<sup>113</sup> often sang of rural life in terms of working-class labor. In “Miner’s Song” (composition date unknown) he assumes the role of a miner. Instead of describing how he could find his true self in the open landscape, he describes the backbreaking realities of mining: “I dig my life away.” While Taylor’s camping-out

cowboy romantically “sleeps in the canyon” and “sits by the fire,” seemingly expressing his authentic self, Guthrie’s miner “digs his life away,” oppressed by systemic socio-economic inequality.

Taylor advertises another vision of pastoral individualism as an escape from “soul-deadening” society in “Mud Slide Slim” from *Mud Slide Slim and The Blue Horizon* (1971.)

I'm gonna cash in my hand and pick up on a piece of land  
 And build myself a cabin back in the woods.  
 Lord, it's there I'm gonna stay until there comes a day  
 When this old world starts to changing for the good.

He produces an alluring and commodified fantasy of simply “picking up on a piece of land.” The image of “a cabin back in the woods,” that the speaker will build himself, would presumably remind Taylor’s average middle-class college-educated listener of Thoreau and the transcendental individualist tradition of the nineteenth-century. This reference to time-tested individualism gives Taylor’s brand of pastoral escapism an air of legitimacy and beneficence.

In addition, Taylor makes obvious that this pastoral idea is an escape from the problems of the world. “Lord, it's there I'm gonna stay until there comes a day/ When this old world starts to changing for the good.” Rather than activating his listeners to help the world to “change for the good,” Taylor promotes the decision to find a therapeutic escape from the world until it somehow magically “changes for the good” on its own. A *Rolling Stone* critic comments, “James, Yankee that he is, takes the classic American way out.”<sup>114</sup>

Mitchell also writes lyrics that foster the dream of the individual thriving in a pastoral setting. Early in her career, she sings of nature in a hyper idealistic manner.

In her first album, *Song to a Seagull* (1968), that *Rolling Stone* dubbed “good for the soul,”<sup>115</sup> Mitchell sings of a one-dimensional free spirit in “Michael from Mountains.” In “Sistowbell Lane” she earnestly describes a small town in all of its individualizing glory. She paints a picture of the simple pleasures of life in the country (“Eating muffin buns and berries/ By the steamy kitchen window”), explains that an artist can express his or herself in the country (“A poet can sing”), and suggests that the feeling of liberation in the country will always be preferable to the standardized city (“Go to the city, you’ll come back again/ To wade through the grain/ You always do”). In a Joni Mitchell-inspired essay, Clifford Chase describes an experience he had when “Sistowbell Lane” first came out. He dreamt that he was listening to the song while lying alone in the grass and looking up at the clouds, a classic image of rustic individualism. The anecdote ends, “When I woke, I wanted life always to be like that.”<sup>116</sup> Clearly, listeners had a desire to imitate Mitchell’s rural aesthetic.

Not only does Mitchell suggest that an individual can flourish in nature, she also describes conventional consumerism and wealth as forces that restrict and personally impoverish the individual self. The title of her third album, *Ladies of the Canyon* (1970), refers to Laurel Canyon where she and many other folk rock “hippies” lived in the 60s and 70s. Sean Nelson calls this album “a wistful piece of hippie utopianism,”<sup>117</sup> and it overtly dichotomizes the pastoral self and conventional capitalism. The renowned anthem “Woodstock”—about the legendary countercultural music festival set on a farm in 1969—was released by Mitchell in 1970 and covered by Crosby Stills and Nash on *Déjà Vu* in the same year; she sings,

I’m going to camp out on the land  
I’m gonna try and get my soul free

...

I have come here to lose the smog  
And I feel to be a cog in something turning

Much like Taylor's leisure cowboy in "Sweet Baby James," Mitchell's hippie character is temporarily "camping out on the land" instead of laboring on it like the figures in 30s and 40s protest folk. And Mitchell aligns a brief escape into nature with the liberation of her "soul." The notion of the spiritual, often secular, soul can be found throughout African-American slave spirituals, blues and soul music,<sup>118</sup> as well as much Western literature during and after the rise of industrialization.<sup>119</sup> Mitchell limits the soul to the self-expression of the individual in nature, which hearkens back to the way that certain romantic poets portrayed the soul. John Keats's depiction of the soul, for example, is tantamount to individualism.<sup>120</sup> The "secular soul" of the post-industrial era is no longer afraid of God's judgment; instead, it is terrified of being homogenized by society.<sup>121</sup> Paradoxically, the idea of the secular soul that is fearful of what Thomas Frank calls "soul-deadening" mass-production is in fact mass-produced and highly marketable in twentieth-century corporate and consumer capitalism.<sup>122</sup> Mitchell participates in the ostensible rebellion against urban capitalism and "soul-deadening" consumerism. For her, "camping out on the land," or expressing herself in nature, is the only practice that can "free" her "soul" from the "smog" of consumerism. She makes her listeners feel like they can escape becoming consumerist "cogs," but in doing so she reinforces soul-searching consumerism and individualized class identity, thus redesigning their cog status.

In “Rainy Night House,” another song on *Ladies of the Canyon*, she once again sells the inward-looking pastoral individual as distinctly subversive and anti-consumerist.

So you packed up your tent and went  
 To live out in the Arizona sand  
 You are a refugee  
 From a wealthy family  
 You gave up all the golden factories  
 To see, who in the world you might be

She uses the second person, suggesting that she is speaking directly to her listener, perhaps even instructing her listener. In order for “you” to find out “who[m] in the world you might be” or fully express yourself, you must “live out in the Arizona sand,” or in some isolated, imagined rural setting. She describes “you” as a “refugee from a wealthy family;” earlier folksingers would have provided a critique of literal refugees and migrants, but Mitchell allows her listeners to feel like emotional refugees and countercultural rebels.

Depression-era folkies also would have denounced the alienating nature of “factory” work, while Mitchell describes factories as “golden,” through the lens of the upper-middle-class person who can afford that gold. To her and her listeners factories do not represent excruciating labor conditions; they signify a lack of individuality. In this song, consumerism and the institutions that foster it, like “golden factories,” keep an individual from becoming an authentic self.

Many of Mitchell’s pastoral figures, isolated from society, assume that they can be associated with an anti-capitalist identity. In search of an antidote to conventionally understood capitalism, some of these figures participate in what Thomas Frank terms “hip consumerism.” In the song “Ladies of the Canyon”

Mitchell specifically describes hippies in California who seem to be rejecting typical American consumerism. They ostensibly discard class and gender expectations, not wanting to live in the suburbs with businessmen husbands and perform typical middle-class duties; instead, they are creative, liberated, rebellious, and pastoral women. Their revolt, though, is still within a class and gender framework. Rather than truly separating from society they just reproduce a hip, pastoral form of the same class identity.<sup>123</sup>

Again, Guthrie was more skeptical of these bohemian escapes. In “Do Re Mi” (1940) he sings, “California is a garden of Eden, a paradise to live in or see/ But believe it or not, you won't find it so hot/ If you ain't got the do re mi.” He recognizes that California, a mostly pastoral landscape in the 30s and 40s, may have been romanticized as a “garden of Eden” or “paradise.” But he predicts that an economically impoverished migrant won’t be able to appreciate it—“won’t find it so hot”—or even survive there without money, the “do[ugh] re mi.” Though running off to nature seems like a rejection of consumerism and a distancing from economic pressure, social class follows, and defines, countercultural “escapists.”

In “River” (*Blue* 1971) Mitchell describes another character that wants to escape from traditional American capitalism to a pastoral identity reliant on socioeconomic class. The narrator, who wants to “stand apart from society,” begins the song by discussing “conventional” American consumerism, which is particularly visible at Christmas time. Before any lyrics, she includes a minor key instrumental version of the classic Christmas song, “Jingle Bells,” as a quick jab at the commercialization of music.<sup>124</sup> Then she begins, “It’s coming on Christmas/ They’re

cutting down trees/ They're putting up reindeer.” Later she expresses her desire to extricate herself from this society:

I'm going to make a lot of money  
 Then I'm going to quit this crazy scene  
 Oh I wish I had a river  
 I could skate away on

She must “make a lot of money”—rise through the class structure—in order to “quit this crazy scene,” or separate herself from society. Mitchell discards the typical expectations of her social class, only to create a new version of that class, predicated on the accumulation of wealth. Of course, the “river” has not always been used as an image that represents middle- and upper-class pastoral freedom and individualism. “Ol Man River” (1927), a folksong written by Oscar Hammerstein II and made famous by the great African-American singer Paul Robeson,<sup>125</sup> portrays the river as a site of grueling work for black laborers in the South—“You and me we sweat and strain...Colored folks work while the white folks play”—rather than as a therapeutic escape for restless, psychologically impoverished bourgeois individuals. Robeson uses the image of the river to provide a critique of systemic racism and exploitation of labor, while Mitchell uses it to imagine who she is and what she could be. Her status as an upper-middle-class white woman limits her idea of poverty here to boredom and angst.

### **Soft Critique and Self-Critique: The Pastoral**

Mitchell and Taylor sell therapeutic individualism and anti-consumerism as subjective potency in their lyrics about nature, and they see conventional society as producing interior poverty in individuals. But Mitchell and Browne (and less often

Taylor) sometimes critique, albeit narrowly or “softly,” the political and social implications of a therapeutic culture that idealizes the pastoral. They momentarily recognize that consumerism is not only harmful to their self-expression, but also socially and environmentally destructive. Browne in particular puts aside individual expression in the countryside in favor of a more ethical perspective on nature, a community-oriented vision of nature, and a “soft” or limited motivation to actively protect the environment from rampant consumerism and industrialization.

In “Big Yellow Taxi” from *Ladies of the Canyon*, Mitchell famously writes,

They paved paradise  
 And put up a parking lot  
 With a pink hotel, a boutique  
 And a swinging hot spot.  
 Don't it always seem to go  
 That you don't know what you've got  
 Till it's gone.

In “Sistowbell Lane,” “River,” and “Ladies of the Canyon” Mitchell romanticizes the pastoral and rails against consumerist society for impoverishing her natural individuality and expressivity. But here she is critical of consumerism-motivated destruction of the environment and commodification of natural “paradise.” As Schulman points out, not only does she blame mainstream America for this problem, but she also blames the consumerist tendencies of countercultural rebels in her lyrics; they are destroying nature in order to put up a hip “pink hotel, a boutique, and a swingin’ hot spot.”<sup>126</sup> This argument is not as aggressive and political as it could be, though, because by the end of the song she analogizes destroying nature with a romantic break-up—“And a big yellow taxi/ Come and took away my old man/ Don't it always seem to go/ That you don't know what you've got/ Till it's gone/

They paved paradise/ And put up a parking lot.” She uses the same pattern as Stills does in “4+20”: a social critique of environmental depletion, “don’t know what you’ve got/ till it’s gone,” turns into a personal, romantic reflection. In addition, this mildly political tune is undermined by her light-hearted tone and giggling. Mitchell repeats this pattern in “California” (*Blue*). She begins the song with a political reference to the U.S. and Vietnam peace talks in Paris: “Sitting in a park in Paris, France/ Reading in the news and it sure looks bad/ They won’t give peace a chance.” But she quickly shifts into her personal longing for the naturally beautiful and therapeutic California.

Though I have already read “Woodstock” as complicit in selling individualized, pastoralized, anti-consumerist consumption, this song can also be read as self-reflexive. When Mitchell writes, “I have come here to lose the smog/ And I feel to be a cog in something turning,” she could mean that the romanticization of Woodstock and folk rock music make her “feel to be a cog” in soft capitalism’s therapeutic counterculture. “Something turning” could refer to the pastoral therapeutic records that she sells “turning” on turntables. Likewise in “The Circle Game,” she sings, “And go round and round and round/ in the circle game.” There too she may be self-reflexively alluding to her records going “round” and participating in the “circle game” of reproducing class identity and its preoccupations.

From the beginning of his career, Browne, more so than Taylor and Mitchell, exhibited a grounded understanding of consumerism’s threat to the environment rather than to self-expressive individuality in nature. He plays with the images of nature in his lyrics and pits them against urban industrial society, but he does not recycle the convention of treating nature solely as a place where one can turn inward.

Rather, he seems to see the natural world as a site of community and appreciation for the environment. “Our Lady of the Well” from *For Everyman* (1973) exemplifies

Browne’s perspective on the pastoral world.

But it's a long way that I have come  
 Across the sand to find this peace among your people in the sun  
 Where the families work the land as they have always done  
 Oh it's so far the other way my country's gone

Across my home has grown the shadow  
 Of a cruel and senseless hand

This “cruel and senseless hand” may well be a reference to economist Adam Smith’s “invisible hand.” Smith uses this metaphor as an argument for capitalism; his “hand” signifies the way in which pursuing individual economic success can produce social good.<sup>127</sup> While capitalists believed the invisible hand to benefit society, Browne sees this individual interest and capitalism as “cruel and senseless” and casting a “shadow” over a more environmentally conscious, less consumerist America, “where the families work the land” and there is “peace among your people in the sun.” While this vision of the land is still hyper-romanticized, it is more community-based than individualized. Browne is not looking for himself in this agrarian setting, he is looking for the small communities, the “families” that nurture their land. He strives for social good through collective identity rather than through individual expression.

Browne also recognizes the senselessness of running off to nature and leaving your community behind. In “For Everyman” he writes,

Everybody I talk to is ready to leave....

Make it on your own if you think you can  
 Somewhere later on you'll have to take a stand  
 Then you're going to need a hand

The speaker notices that “everybody... is ready to leave,” to escape from standardized society into some idealized, perhaps pastoral world. But he thinks about the consequences of leaving. He knows that when socio-economic circumstances get tough and “you” actually need to “take a [political] stand... you’re going to need a hand,” and not the “cruel and senseless” one he referred to in “Our Lady of the Well.” Here he again encourages community as a means of social change and illustrates that being a “heroic loner” won’t always seem so romantic. Historian Dave Thompson recalls that in 1999, *Rolling Stone* examined this song again and realized it “was a response to the escapist vision of Crosby, Stills and Nash’s ‘Wooden Ships,’” which, “imagined a kind of hipster [likely drug-induced] exodus by sea from a straight world teetering on the edge of apocalypse.”<sup>128</sup> Mitchell’s “River” and Taylor’s “Mud Slide Slim” also have an “escapist vision” and describe a “hipster exodus” into the pastoral world, but as Thompson observes, “Browne wasn’t giving up so easily.”<sup>129</sup>

In later albums Browne continues to underscore the importance of community and oppose America’s consumerist tendencies from which the natural world only provides temporary escape for the middle- and upper-class. He almost never veers into the Mitchell and Taylor territory of treating the environment as a place for the individual to sit among the wildflowers and think about himself. Mitchell’s and Taylor’s countercultural outlook on the other hand was becoming mainstream and standardized, so it may have helped to funnel Americans back into the consumerist society that they thought they were rejecting. Educated, middle-class folk rock listeners were often able to dwell on and escape their subjectively politicized interior poverty, rather than focus on systemic economic and social injustice.

### **“Show Me the Yellow Line”**

For Taylor, Mitchell, and Browne, another key image that represents the therapeutic quest for anti-consumerist individuality is the “open” road. In the earlier folk revival, singers would discuss the road as a means of freedom, but only as a possible avenue away from economic and social oppression, not as an opportunity for liberating self-expression. In “Blowin’ Down This Road” (composition date unknown) Guthrie sang about going down the road in order to find “a job at honest pay” and in order to provide the children with “three square meals a day.” He is referring to the many migrants during the depression-era who moved to the “Dust Bowl” to attempt to survive in an unjust economic system.

On the other hand Taylor, Mitchell, and Browne figure highways, freeways, or even country paths as sites of escape from society and into oneself. Their roads physically remove one from social pressures—romantic, domestic, professional, or otherwise—that constrain self-expression and impoverish individuality. The openness, forward-movement, isolation, and dynamism of the road allow an individual to seem to become a more “authentic” self. Their performance of an authentic on-the-road self, though, reproduces more workers than rebels.

Taylor’s songs most extremely romanticize the road, including his most famous, “Sweet Baby James,” which describes the open-endedness of the highway: “Ten miles behind me, and ten thousand more to go.” His “Country Road,” also from the album *Sweet Baby James* contemplates: “I guess my feet know where they want me to go, walking on a country road.” And his, “Nothing Like a Hundred Miles,” from *In the Pocket* (1976), rhapsodizes, “there’s nothing like a hundred miles, show me the yellow line.” “Let Me Ride,” from Taylor’s third album *Mud Slide Slim*

and *The Blue Horizon*, pits the individualizing road against social stasis: “Don't deny the highway in my soul. / Jump and sing that silver thing that I feel inside, / Hallelujah, let that big wheel roll.” Taylor seems to suggest that consumerist American society has “denied” him self-expressive freedom in the past, and now he is working to regain agency and individualism. But he shrinks American agency from a collective political force down to the individual alone on the road, so he preoccupies listeners with uncovering their “selves” rather than encouraging them to change society.

Later he exclaims, “Break these bonds that hold my soul,” again addressing and referring to social pressures, “bonds” that keep him from expressing his “soul” or inner self. Though there were various political and social problems to focus on in this period, including the Vietnam War that continued until 1975 and the Watergate scandal that first began in 1972, Taylor’s folk rock songs convince his listeners that the “interior-as-political” problem to focus on was the fight to express the self in a society of conforming consumers. And the road is a utopian setting where his soul can be unchained. Like Mitchell in “Woodstock,” Taylor is employing the well-worn trope of the secular soul as working in opposition to the “soul-deadening conformity” or “cogs” of a confining capitalism. This critique of capitalism, though, in the terms of Thomas Frank and Raymond Williams, is “incorporated” into capitalist strategies. Many products, including folk rock music, are sold and perpetuate capitalism, precisely because they are advertised as anti-conformist.

Taylor again represents the freedom to drift on the road in “Wandering” from *Gorilla*, an album that came out in 1975, the year the Vietnam War was finally coming to a close. Here he associates his individualism with working-class struggle: “My daddy was an engineer, my brother drives a hack,/ My sister takes in laundry

while the baby balls the jack,/ And it don't look like I'll ever stop my wandering.”

This tune has the ring of a car advertisement, convincing consumers that if they don't “ever stop” “wandering,” in their new car, they won't feel tied down to a standardized society. Taylor's “wandering” stands in place of a working-class job like “driving a hack.” Therapeutic individualism is evidently overshadowing socio-political critique here. While earlier protest folksingers would have described the hardships endured in working those mind-numbing jobs, Taylor quickly moves on from the working-class struggle, centering the song instead on the struggle of finding oneself, which he evokes through this image of “wandering” down the road. “Wandering” is an individualized form of resistance to society, with literary roots in nineteenth-century transcendentalism, and in particular Thoreau's “Walking” (1862),<sup>130</sup> making the search for one's “self” seem like a metonym for political action.

Mitchell, too, plays with the symbol of the road as individual escape from middle- and upper-class society. *Rolling Stone* writes that for Mitchell “the highway is a place where the obligations of power and wealth, or merely the confines of civilization, can be momentarily forgotten.”<sup>131</sup> But from the beginning of her career she paints a complex picture of the contradictions that complicate the symbol of the road. Even in her songs that romanticize the road, she seems aware that this idealization may be an illusion. In “Urge for Going” (1968) she sings, “I get the urge for going, but I never seem to go,” suggesting that the idea of escaping onto the open road is more about the desire and the fantasy than the real action. At the beginning of the last verse of “All I Want” from *Blue*, she confesses, “I am on a lonely road and I am traveling/ Looking for the key to set me free.” She describes an individualistic experience on the road by using “I,” the singular first person, but admits that being

alone on the road can be “lonely” rather than simply freeing for the soul or an effective self-expression. “Looking for the key to set me free” sounds like a phrase Tom Wolfe would have used to satirically imitate young countercultural participants of the “Me Decade”; Mitchell is framing the road as a site of individual, not collective, freedom. Perhaps this “key” also could be referring to a musical key, and that music, like the road, can bring a feeling of temporary liberation from consumerist society. But the fact that Mitchell ends the song still in a desperate state of “looking” reveals that she may not believe she will ever truly find such escape. She is selling this convention of discovering individualized freedom on the road, even though she may know that this vision will only help ease her listeners into going back to the lives and work they wish to escape.

Browne employs the road as a metonym for individualized freedom in many of his songs as well, but he also realizes that, as appealing as life on the road may look to some, it is not a systemic solution for discontent. He is more wary of privatized solutions and more interested in collective ones. In “The Road and The Sky” from *Late for the Sky* (1974) he idealizes the road but understands that it only creates a transient illusion, or a fix of freedom.

I'm just rolling away from yesterday  
 Behind the wheel of a stolen Chevrolet  
 I'm going to get a little higher  
 And see if I can hot-wire reality

Here Browne sees the road as an escape from his past, “from yesterday.” His “stolen Chevrolet” adds an element of drama and impracticality to this vision of the road. The outlaw image of stealing the car rather than paying for it seems anti-consumerist, but it also makes the car seem cool and desirable. Also implicit in the

idea of one stealing a car is that one will eventually be caught, and forced to return to standardized society. So Browne's stolen car represents the stolen, transient moments of psychic relief from society that Browne and his fellow singer-songwriters provide to their listeners.

Next Browne writes that on the road he is going to get "higher," hinting that he will be in an altered, drug-induced state on the road. If he sees the road as a place of escape where he can "roll away," he knows that it is a "hot-wired reality," not a genuine separation from society. He is not providing a critique of the road, but by implication, he is questioning the convention of the road as an individualizing escape. Ultimately multiple readings of his lyrics are possible: does one come away from this song ready to rev up one's engines, buying into a rebellious, individualizing version of consumerism, or with an understanding of the social contradictions that complicate seeing driving as a sufficiently authentic expression of the self?

### **Soft Critique and Self-Critique: The Road**

Though it seems that Taylor, Mitchell and Browne are contributing to therapeutic culture by selling the false and profitable image of the road as dream-like and separate from society's problems, it is not that simple. They all figure the road not only as an escape from society-induced interior poverty, but also as an arduous workplace that helps feed the production of consumers and consumption. As popular singer-songwriters, they must tour on the road in order to sustain careers of selling interiority and individualism through folk rock music. In fact, Dave Thompson reports that during Taylor's twenty-seven-date American tour in 1971, Taylor became so worn out and frustrated with the "mind-numbing repetition" and big

audiences that he went back to drugs after a period of being sober.<sup>132</sup> In Martin Scorsese's documentary *The Last Waltz* (1978) members of The Band, a folk rock group that got their start in the early-60s, perform their final concert because they are no longer willing to spend their lives working on the road.<sup>133</sup>

Many of Mitchell's lyrics illustrate how the road can be imprisoning rather than freeing. She "softly" critiques the image of the road in "Coyote" and "Refuge of the Roads" from *Hejira* (1976.) The Oxford English Dictionary defines *hejira* as "any exodus or departure," and this album reflects on its theme of escape. In "Coyote," Mitchell repeats again and again, "You just picked up a hitcher/ A prisoner of the white lines on the freeway." She is clearly speaking to a driver that picks her up, but she also seems to be speaking to her listeners because she uses the second person, "you." Mitchell tells her consumers that they have "picked her up" – or bought her album, perhaps for some therapeutic feeling of individualized freedom. And then she admits that the therapeutic escape her listeners have picked up is contradictory. The speaker, who throughout *Blue* builds a reputation as a free, unique traveler (much like Mitchell's reputation, and *Blue* is considered autobiographical), is actually a "prisoner of the white lines on the freeway." The romanticization of the road as a "freeway" has "imprisoned" her in its restrictive "white lines." Her road is an alluring option, but Mitchell confesses that it does not give her the freedom of self-expression it seems to promise. Either as a tiring workplace or a pointless pseudo-escape, the road produces the same problems as society. Mitchell takes to the road to sell privatized escape, individuality, and the discovery of the secular soul, and such work is both exhausting and extremely profitable.

In “Refuge of the Roads,” Mitchell admits, “You couldn't see these cold water restrooms/ Or this baggage overload/ Westbound and rolling taking refuge in the roads.” From a safe distance, the road is a tempting “refuge” from society, but what “you”—the romantic listener—“couldn't see” was the negative implications, the “baggage overload.” This “overload” could refer to a truck loaded with too many products, exhibiting consumerist American society sustained by the road. It could also represent the exhausting amount of weight that a musician carries around on the road while going on tour. Or finally it could refer to the emotional “baggage” that does not disappear when one conventionally tries to take “refuge in the roads.” Mitchell often promotes an image of the road as a countercultural setting where the individual can be baggage-free, but here she admits that the road does not necessarily provide subjective freedom.

Taylor characterizes the road as a workplace too, but in a more melancholic than critical manner. In “Highway Song” (*Mud Slide Slim and The Blue Horizon*) he describes a life on the road and sings in a disenchanted tone, “Here I am again, Holiday Inn, same old four walls again.” Although an individual may hope that by going out on the road he or she will feel liberated and separate from society, ultimately the road is not so romantic. Though he is at a “Holiday Inn,” he is not actually taking a “holiday”; he is most likely on tour. The image of the chain hotel brings to mind a sterile, standardized, fluorescent-lit product of the soulless society that Taylor’s lyrics often refer to and that he often expects the road to remedy. A roadside “Holiday Inn” is unsexy and unromantic, so maybe the road is too.

Browne gets at the heart of the problem of the road as an escape. He registers a disappointment with the road as freeing and individualizing in songs such as “Your

Bright Baby Blues”: “Cause I’ve been up and down this highway/ Far as my eyes can see/ No matter how fast I run/ I can never seem to get away from me.” He sees that the road just makes us look deeper into ourselves rather than giving us perspective on a larger world. Browne’s “Running on Empty,” the title song from his 1977 album, frames the road as an exhausting, life-draining setting. On that album, “The Road” describes the monotony of the road as a workplace, of driving without drive: “You’ve got it down/it’s just another town along the road.” The penultimate song on the album, “The Load-Out,” deals more explicitly with the road as workplace. His “roadies” know working-class labor.

Now the seats are all empty  
 Let the roadies take the stage  
 Pack it up and tear it down  
 They're the first to come and last to leave  
 Working for that minimum wage

The mention of tireless work like “pack it up and tear it down” and the reference to “minimum wage” are reminiscent of the early folksongs about unfair wages and labor unions. In “Talking Union” (1941) Pete Seeger sings, “Now if you want higher wages let me tell you what to do,” and he goes on to advise workers to build “unions.”

Browne’s song, in contrast, does not discuss creating unions for the roadies; instead he paints working-class in the music industry as poetic and almost enticing. He broaches inequality and softly critiques it, which allows his listeners to feel associated with a liberal political stance. But he is not advising any direct political action to combat it, as did Seeger.

While the road and the pastoral landscape are both figured as therapeutic individualistic escapes from consumer society, they are portrayed also as disappointing respites with contradictions at their cores. Nathanael West’s 1933

novella, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, eloquently examines the way that each potential escape from an unsatisfying capitalist society is ultimately illusory. The cynical character, Shrike, describes how nature, which he refers to as “the soil,” could be a possible escape:

You are fed up with the city and its teeming millions... the ways and means of men, as getting and spending, you lay waste your inner world, are too much with you... as you turn up the rick black soil, the wind carries the smell of pine and dung across the fields and the rhythm of an old, old work enters your soul (33.)<sup>134</sup>

First, Shrike illustrates the way that hopeful romantics see urban consumerist society as full of “teeming millions” who all blend together in endless and soulless “getting and spending.” Such a society doesn’t value each individual’s “inner world.” The next few lines clearly satirize the idealized notion of the countryside as a setting that would nourish one’s inner world. The juxtaposition of the scent of “pine” with that of “dung” humorously illustrates this false understanding of the pastoral as escape. He even pokes fun at the idea that the “old work,” such as the cowboy’s “work” in “Sweet Baby James,” will “enter your soul.” A reader can easily see that Shrike is mocking the countryside as a viable separation from consumerist society. West was writing in the 30s, and he was extremely aware of the hollow, pop-depth nature of bohemian values. The folk rockers of the 60s often endorse these pastoral principles, but once in a while Taylor, Mitchell, and Browne take on a slight air of Shrike-like cynicism.

Their critiques of the therapeutic, though, may have slipped past fans during the “Me Decade.” Most of their middle- and upper-class educated listeners could still feel like Sontag’s “exemplary sufferer”; they could tell themselves that they were victims of cultural and personal poverty that seemed separate from social class and like a political argument against conformity. Images of the pastoral and the road offer

escapes to and reinforce privatized alienation. And the concept of personal alienation possibly could have served as an oblique metonym for the war and social and economic injustice. The countercultural aesthetic, though, did not subvert capitalist society because it was, in Raymond Williams' terms, "incorporated" into that society, becoming hegemonic and reproducing class identity.

**CHAPTER 2**  
**ADDICTIONS TO COMPENSATORY DEPTH:**  
**MUSIC AND ROMANTIC LOVE**

We have explored the lyrics of Mitchell, Taylor, and Browne that provide—and critique—therapeutic escapes on the road and in nature. They frame these respites as expressions of individuality and anti-consumerism. All three are also known for their love songs. For them, and the more general therapeutic culture of the late-60s and 70s, romantic love is an opportunity for one to express depth and reveal one’s emotional needs and dependencies—“a different kind of poverty.” In the first chapter, I read personal discontent with consumerist society as personal poverty, but here a romantic kind of poverty also signifies deep feelings, perceived as internal and complex, that paradoxically can serve as *psychological capital* and reinforce class identity. One avenue of the “rebellious” middle-class quest for what Wolfe calls the “Real Me” was to absorb oneself with one’s embittered heart or intense infatuation.

These singer-songwriters’ ruminations about love parallel their meditations on music. Mitchell describes a lover as “the warmest chord I ever heard” in “My Old Man” from *Blue*. The folk rock music industry, in fact, can sometimes be seen as a romantic love industry because so much of popular folk rock music sells notions of love as romanticized. Romance and music about romance are described as addictive drugs, simultaneously providing one with an escape from a deep and psychologically tormented self, as well as a compensatory sense of self that is emotionally complex and thus meaningful. In “Looking Into You” from *Jackson Browne* (1972), the artist writes,

Well I looked into the sky for my anthem  
 And the words and the music came through  
 But words and music can never touch the beauty that I've seen  
 Looking into you - and that's true

The singer was looking for his own personal “anthem,” a song to capture his identity, because he expects music and lyrics to provide a sense of personal meaning. But he then decides that romantic love, or the idealized lover “you,” can perhaps provide even more “truth,” and personal “beauty” to his life. Romance can allow someone else to “look into you,” and see the “real you” underneath all social pretenses; this notion instills a sense of pop-depth and potent interiority in the listener.

Sontag writes that love is just “one more dance of the solitary ego.”<sup>135</sup> She compares love to art, just as Mitchell, Taylor, and Browne compare love to music: “Love, like art, becomes a medium of self-expression.”<sup>136</sup> For the singer-songwriters this “self-expression” can be extended to a narcissistic, addictive preoccupation with discovering one’s interiority. While the three folk rockers are complicit in idealizing romantic love and music in their lyrics, we shall see by the end of the chapter that they are also sometimes reflexive about the ways in which music and love are often delusional, disappointing, and tied to consumerism.

### **“Now Let the Music Keep Our Spirits High”**

Mitchell, Taylor, and Browne tend to write lyrics about themselves, so they inevitably write lyrics about music: the artistry, the emotions, and the industry. Listening to music gives the artists and their fans a compensatory sense of personal complexity and deep interiority, while also providing a drug-like escape from that inner poverty. In my introduction, I quoted Taylor comparing his therapeutic music of the late-60s and 70s to heroin. Some of his lyrics also compare music to drugs in their ability to provide a mental escape from a psychologically impoverished self. In

“Steamroller” from *Sweet Baby James*, Taylor croons, “I’m gonna inject your soul with some sweet rock ’n’ roll and shoot you full of rhythm and blues.” This song parodies white artists who perform the blues<sup>137</sup> (and I would categorize Taylor as one of these artists at times), so the metaphor of music as drug must be read as somewhat satiric and hyperbolic. And Taylor’s exaggerated language is accentuated by his affected voice and instrumentals; “Here Taylor is earthy and lowdown with definitely crude electric guitar behind him,” corroborates a *Rolling Stone* critic.<sup>138</sup> Though Taylor is not using a completely earnest tone in this song, and he knows the dangers and elusiveness of drugs, he still paints music-as-heroin in a sexy, alluring light.

In “Dance” from *One Man Dog* (1972), he alludes again to the therapeutic nature of music, revealing its ability to help one forget inner poverty. He sings, “Listen to the music of the steel guitar, don’t it sound good, hey now,” setting up music as a feel-good commodity. And then in the last verse he continues,

Kick off your shoes and lose your blues. Pick em up, Lord, put em back down  
And around, and around, and around, and around  
If I could lose my mind, if I could throw myself away

The nonchalant rhyming of “kick off your shoes and lose your blues” highlights the way that music can ease you into feeling better. Jackson Lears would see this portrayal of singing and dancing as a use of culture for “muddling through”<sup>139</sup> social, economic, and political discontent. And Taylor seems to celebrate such cultural coping. The next two lines give a darker edge to the image of music and dancing as escape. Taylor repeats “and around,” four times, which brings to mind a record spinning around on a turntable and creates a dizzying and disorienting feeling, reminiscent of Mitchell’s line “And go round and round and round” from “Circle Game” (*Ladies of the Canyon*). This sentiment leads one to feel that music, like a drug, will hypnotize one into a

happy but deluded state. He is suggesting that the music is in control, and the subject lacks agency. The following line underscores this sentiment: “If I could lose my mind, if I could throw myself away.” These airy fragments lack a conclusion, leading one to believe that Taylor might in fact “lose his mind” or “throw himself away” temporarily if he could. To him, music and dance provide a brief escape from one’s perceived impoverished and complex inner self.

Browne’s “Before the Deluge” from *Late for the Sky* also promotes music as a source of personal meaning and coping. First the songwriter criticizes hippies from the 60s—“Some of them were dreamers/ and some of them were fools”—and their desire to change the world. Then he begins the chorus with “Now let the music keep our spirits high.” Browne is calling upon music to help us muddle through. The lyrics do not encourage consumers to imagine themselves as agents of political or social change. A *Rolling Stone* critic calls this chorus “a moving secular prayer for music, shelter and spiritual sustenance.”<sup>140</sup> While the naïve, “foolish” New Left and 60s hippies may have demanded social change and peace, be it through folk music, sit-ins, or marches, Browne gently, passively offers a “secular prayer.” Americans felt the need to “spiritually sustain” their hip-depth, because therapeutic culture valued psychological complexity.

Taylor’s song, “Music,” from *Gorilla* characterizes the acceptance of music as a means of coping rather than a means of social change. It begins,

Things may always stay the way they are,  
 Still my head looks for a change from time to time.  
 I don’t really mean to look that far—turn on the music, strike up the music,  
 Let the music change my mind

Here Taylor admits that he “looks for a change,” a sentiment reminiscent of the movers and shakers of the earlier folk protest music; however, this change is for his “head” and “mind,” not for the community or society at large. He clarifies, “I don’t really mean to look that far,” and then reveals that listening to music will satisfy his desire for a change.” In effect, he helps make a defeatist attitude towards politics hip.

### **“Love Has Brought Me Around”**

Taylor, Mitchell, and Browne, represent romance, much like music, as a psychologized expression of emotion and interior discontent, and also as a privatized antidote to that discontent. Lovers are portrayed as individual, psychologically convoluted souls merging together. Paramours can struggle against the world alone or together, but not as part of a community. Value is placed upon the notion of coping with a romantic partner, which becomes another metonym for a political struggle against economic and social problems. The desire to discover one’s true identity through romantic attraction and heartbreak also becomes associated with the sexual revolution and is deemed “rebellious.” One can feel subversive because of one’s complex dating life rather than because one is attempting to change the world. Romance, as another industry of soft capitalism, helps Americans to believe that their countercultural, complicated love lives make them so deep that capitalism and systemic oppression will not be able to affect or hinder them.

In order to understand the folk rockers’ depictions of romantic love, one must investigate the culture they were participating in. The term “sexual revolution” has been used to describe increasing openness about sex and sexuality in the 60s and 70s. In 1972 British doctor Alex Comfort first published *The Joy of Sex*, an illustrated guide,

and its status as a bestseller seemed to mark a cultural shift.<sup>141</sup> Some critics have argued that the “sexual revolution” is linked to therapeutic culture. Wolfe attributes the focus on romantic love and sex in the late-60s and 70s to the therapeutic desire to think and talk about oneself. “Men and women of all sorts, not merely swingers,” he contends, “are given just now to the most earnest sort of talk about the Sexual Me.”<sup>142</sup>

Lasch also recognizes that romantic love becomes accepted as a passionate expression of one’s “Sexual Me,” instead of as a more rational commitment to another person or to a family.<sup>143</sup> He describes this new perspective on love as a “trivialization” due to the “culture of narcissism,” or therapeutic culture, in 1970s America.<sup>144</sup> Lasch cites a passage by David Barthelme that reflects the way that romantic love had become narcissistic and therapeutic. This episode, from a 1965 short fiction story in *The New Yorker*,<sup>145</sup> foreshadows the way that Taylor, Mitchell, Browne will portray romantic love:

Suddenly she wished she was with some other man and not with Edward... Pia looked at Edward. She looked at his red beard, his immense spectacles. I don’t like him, she thought. That red beard, those immense spectacles...

Pia said to Edward that he was the only person she had ever loved for this long. “How long is it?” Edward asked. It was seven months.<sup>146</sup>

The singer-songwriters themselves were known for their passionate but short-lived romantic relationships. Mitchell and Taylor fell in love in 1970, and then two years later she and Browne dated briefly.<sup>147</sup> They all had countless love affairs that seemed to fuel their writing.

In addition, the folk rock singer-songwriters’ lyrics about love often advance conventional gender expectations that perpetuate therapeutic culture. Zaretsky describes the way that gender roles were affected by capitalism’s therapeutic culture in

the 70s: “Within [the family] a world of vast psychological complexity has developed as the counterpart to the extraordinary degree of rationalization and impersonality achieved by capital in the sphere of commodity production.” Here the “family” can refer to male-female romantic relationships in general. Zaretsky goes on to state, “The internal life of the family is dominated by a search for personal fulfillment for which there seem to be no rules. Much of this search has been at the expense of women.”<sup>148</sup> Romance is functioning as an incentivizing preoccupation, produced by soft capitalism. He also references a 1972 *New York Times* article in which William Masters, a well-regarded researcher of human sexual response,<sup>149</sup> writes, “A man and a woman need each other more now than ever before. People need someone to hold on to. Once they had the clan but now they only have each other.”<sup>150</sup> Romance in this period takes on much more weight than it ever has before. Thus Americans are constantly disappointed with their romantic experiences, perpetuating a perceived feeling of interior poverty. Taylor, Mitchell, and Browne endorse this notion of romance as a primary preoccupation.

Particularly in Taylor’s lyrics, graceful women are expected to offer therapy as well as personal deep meaning to the lives of emotionally impoverished men. Taylor describes a female lover bringing him out of a period of depression in “Love Has Brought Me Around” from *Mud Slide Slim and the Blue Horizon*. One of his most well known songs, “Something In The Way She Moves” from his debut album, *James Taylor* (1968), exemplifies this understanding of gender dynamics and many of the ways in which romantic love is represented as therapeutic. It begins:

Something in the way she moves, or looks my way, or calls my name  
That seems to leave this troubled world behind.  
And if I'm feeling down and blue or troubled by some foolish game,

She always seems to make me change my mind

The ambiguity of “Something in the way she moves, or looks my way” illustrates an ephemeral feminine quality that helps the suffering man escape, “to leave this troubled world behind,” rather than engage with society more purposefully. Taylor suggests that he is the one to be disturbed or spiritually impoverished by “some foolish game,” which might mean social pressure, perhaps related to the music industry. The woman, on the other hand, should not be affected by or involved in the problems of society.

Browne also plays into the understanding of female love as therapeutic and providing compensatory depth. On his album, *Jackson Browne*, he sings of his discontented life, and the woman that makes it all better in “Jamaica Say You Will.”

Jamaica, say you will  
 Help me find a way to fill these lifeless sails  
 And stay until my ships can find the sea

Jamaica was a sweet young one, I loved her true  
 She was a comfort and a mercy through and through  
 Hiding from this world together

First, Browne expects the woman, Jamaica, to provide meaning in his hopeless life; she is the emotional wind that can “fill (his) lifeless sails.” Then he describes her as “a sweet young one,” implying that she is naïve and perhaps doesn’t understand the problems with society. Rather than taking on her idealistic viewpoint and using it for social betterment and activism, he wants her to provide “comfort” and “mercy.” Finally, he not only wants to muddle through, but he also wants to “hide from this world” with his new lover. He is actively distancing himself from society through this romantic relationship. It is not even an “us against the world” mentality; it goes one step further to “us away from the world.”

Mitchell too strives to be the woman who can emotionally support a man in certain songs. Towards the end of “All I Want” from *Blue*, she confesses that she wants to provide therapy to her lover:

I wanna make you feel better,  
 I wanna make you feel free  
 Hmm, Hmm, Hmm, Hmm,  
 Want to make you feel free  
 I want to make you feel free

Mitchell insists on her desire to make her lover “feel free,” repeating this project three times. She even pauses to repeat “Hmm” four times, which could also be read as “him,” in order to extend this sentiment. Mitchell suggests that by loving another individual enough you can perhaps temporarily free that individual from the strains of society. These lyrics could also be read as a message to her listeners; she can “make [them] *feel* free,” temporarily and provide them with relief, but she is not providing encouragement for them to take action to get themselves or others actually free from systemic oppression.

Of course, there are moments where Taylor and Mitchell swap the conventional gender roles and describe a man providing therapy to a woman in distress; for example, in “Brighten Your Night With My Day” from *James Taylor* (1968), he exclaims, “Girl, you can count on me, watch those shadows fade away.” Mitchell describes male lovers who are able to help her, or her narrator, escape from an unsatisfying mental state too. In “My Old Man” from *Blue*, she sings,

We don't need no piece of paper  
 From the city hall  
 Keeping us tied and true  
 My old man  
 Keeping away my blues

But when he's gone

Me and them lonesome blues collide

Mitchell clarifies that this romantic relationship lives outside the constraints of society by writing off marriage with the line, “we don’t need no piece of paper/ from the city hall.” The love between her and her “old man” is portrayed as complex and individualistic, and it does not need validation from social institutions. This desire to separate oneself and one’s lover from society is a direct product of therapeutic culture. Zaretsky writes about the separation of private and public worlds in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century, where therapeutic culture originated.

The objective social world appeared, perceived at first as “machinery” or “industry,” then throughout the nineteenth century as “society” and into the twentieth as “big business,” “city hall”...as the domination of the proletariat by the capitalist class became more difficult to perceive. In opposition to this harsh world that no individual could hope to affect, the modern world of subjectivity was created.<sup>151</sup>

In part, the “domination of the proletariat by the capitalist class became more difficult to perceive” because mass-commercialized culture preoccupied listeners with their often compensatory, “subjective” inner lives. Mitchell is concerned with thinking about her lover rather than with going to “city hall,” which functions as a reference to the increasingly “harsh world that no individual could hope to affect.” Not only is this version of romantic love therapeutic in that it separates the artist and her lover from society, but it is also psychologically curative in that it keeps away the singer’s “blues.” Mitchell describes her emotional poverty as having the weight of a physical force with which she sometimes “collides.” Whether her lover is present or not, thinking about love is her central absorption.

Mitchell, more than Taylor and Browne, delves into the psychological complexity and self-expression that come with relationships. She alludes to Freudian

psychology when she sings, “Willy is my child, he is my father” about a lover in “Willy” from *Ladies of the Canyon*. In addition she relates the notion of the secular soul to romance when she sings, “Love is touching souls” in “A Case of You” from *Blue*. In “All I Want,” also from *Blue*, Mitchell represents love as an expression of a deeply ambivalent self: “Oh I hate you some, I hate you some, I love you some.” This quick shifting from hate to love reveals the psychological complexity of the lovers. Mitchell represents lovers’ inner lives as rich, contradictory, rapidly changing, and fragile—how could a listener deny that thinking about romance should be their primary preoccupation?

### **Soft Critique and Self-Critique: Overburdened Music and Love**

Listening to Taylor, Mitchell, and Browne, one gets the sense that they can find depth in and escape their own interior poverty through music and romantic love. These artists sell romance and folk rock as compelling preoccupations. But they also reflect on the negative repercussions of a culture addicted to compensatory music and love. They issue warnings to their listeners about the potentially problematic nature of having a limited and psychologized understanding of the individual’s position in society.

Taylor reveals his disappointment in his own choice to write lyrics that depict what Sontag refers to as “exemplary suffering.” Various songs on *Mud Slide Slim and The Blue Horizon* illustrate his disillusionment with writing about emotional poverty. In “Hey Mister, That’s Me Up On The Jukebox” he sings, “I done wasted too much time just to sing you this sad song./ I done been this lonesome picker a little too long.” Then in “Places from My Past,” he goes on to admit that by using music to escape

suffering, he is haphazardly alienating himself from his friends and community: “I don’t know, I just seem to sing these songs and say I’m sorry for the friends I used to know.” Though Taylor is being self-reflexive he is still taking the political concept of alienation that earlier folksingers considered and limiting it to a middle-class, psychologized scope.

Taylor more strongly cautions his listeners about the effects of soft capitalism’s therapeutic music in “Lighthouse” from *Gorilla*:

Well if you feel lost and lonely and don't know where to go  
 And you hear this song on the radio,  
 Or even if you're feeling healthy and strong,  
 You might like to sing along.  
 But just because I might be standing here,  
 That don't mean I won't be wrong this time.  
 You could follow me and lose your mind.

He seems to understand that his listeners, whom he directly addresses as “you,” are in need of a therapeutic escape, they are “lost and lonely and don’t know where to go.” Taylor even believes that those “feeling healthy and strong,” may be seduced by the escape as well. He then admonishes his listeners not to be deceived by the image of him as a singer-songwriter, “standing here,” because that façade of authority and depth doesn’t mean that he “won’t be wrong.” The final line, “You could follow me and lose your mind,” seems to alert the listeners that though they may enjoy this folk rock, they should not necessarily “follow” it, because they will “lose” their “minds.” The tone here seems more cautionary than it did in “Dance,” discussed earlier, where he celebrated and romanticized the idea of hiding away and losing one’s impoverished mind through music.

Browne and Mitchell, more so than Taylor, are reflexive about the therapeutic nature of love and music simultaneously. In “Farther On” from *Late for the Sky*,

Browne focuses on the way that ideas of love in music can seduce us, even though we know rationally that these privatized solutions can be evasive and disappointing.

Still I look for the beauty in songs  
 To fill my head and lead me on  
 Though my dreams have come up torn and empty  
 As many times as love has come and gone

He admits that he relies on “songs” to delude him by “filling his head.” They “lead him on,” helping him muddle through life. And then he goes on to confess that he knows that the end result of romanticizing music and love: “torn and empty” dreams. Giving in to therapeutic culture perpetuates a vicious cycle, a “circle game” of unrealistic dreams and political inaction followed by possible disappointment.

Browne similarly illustrates this cycle in “Linda Paloma,” a song from *The Pretender* (1976) that tells the story of a narrator falling in love with a Mexican woman while listening to music.

Now the music that played in your ears  
 Grows a little bit fainter each day  
  
 Love will fill your eyes with the sight  
 Of a world you can't hope to keep  
 Dreaming on after that moment's gone  
 The light in your lover's eyes  
 Disappears with the light of the dawn

Both music and romantic love are temporal, fleeting solutions. Music gets “fainter” and the light of love “disappears.” Browne also describes the way that love can make one delusional. It “fill[s] your eyes with the sight/ Of a world you can’t hope to keep.” Notions of romantic love rarely give one dreams that one can then realize. Popular culture often teaches Americans to look for solutions to discontent in privatized love rather than in public political action. Thus romance becomes overburdened with expectations, and systemic problems remain intact.

Browne once again repeats a similar sentiment in “These Days” from *For Everyman*, but here he seems to be giving up on following his therapeutic instinct.

And I had a lover  
 It's so hard to risk another these days  
 These days-  
 Now if I seem to be afraid  
 To live the life I have made in song  
 Well it's just that I've been losing so long

He doubts the ideological image that he is selling to listeners: “the life” he has “made in song.” Browne does not want to continue to delude himself or others by preoccupying himself and his lyrics with romantic love. He and his listeners are ultimately “losing” because of the utopian weight they place on “lovers.”

Mitchell writes similarly about the way that romanticized love can be disappointing. In “The Last Time I Saw Richard” from *Blue*, she sings about drinking with Richard, a romantic depressive, for the last time. He, like Mitchell and Taylor in many of their less self-reflexive lyrics, is often “romanticizing some pain that’s in his head.” She goes on to describe the dismal way that he uses music about love to escape reality.

You got tombs in your eyes but the songs you punched are dreaming  
 Listen, they sing of love so sweet, love so sweet  
 When you gonna get yourself back on your feet?  
 Oh and love can be so sweet, love so sweet

He has “tombs” in his eyes, which suggests that he has a desire to die, one that he is romanticizing. Instead of trying to improve his situation, he is “punching” songs that make him “dream” into the jukebox. These songs describe love as “so sweet” which Mitchell implies is only a fantasy. Then when she asks him, “When you gonna get yourself back on your feet,” she is articulating to him that by listening to music about love, he is only getting more and more intoxicated, deluded, and deep. It seems she

could be responding to a therapeutic, romantic mindset like the one Taylor depicts one year later in his love song, “Back On The Street Again” (*One Man Dog* 1972). He sings, “All I want to do is dance with you honey...Cause I gotta get back on my feet again.” While Taylor’s song plays into the romantic’s vision of love solving problems and getting one “back on one’s feet,” Mitchell’s recognizes that this understanding of romance is just—as she sings in “The Last Time I Saw Richard”—a “pretty lie” that is perpetuating discontent.

Mitchell adds a complicating twist to her reflexivity by thinking about how when love is disappointing, we often use music as therapy. But she sees that ultimately music is disappointing as well. In “This Flight Tonight” from *Blue* she sings,

I'm drinking sweet champagne  
Got the headphones up high  
Can't numb you out  
Can't drum you out of my mind

In this song, she compares “headphones” to “champagne,” or music to alcohol, in its addictiveness and ability to “numb” one out. She quickly realizes, though, that both of these attempts to escape fail. In a therapeutic culture, love-as-self-fulfillment takes on so much compensatory weight that it is nearly impossible to “numb” or “drum” continual dissatisfaction with romance out of one’s mind.

### **Soft Critique and Self-Critique: “Stoking the Star Maker Machinery”**

“The mid-70s rock ‘n’ roll industry was more lucrative than the movie business (by a factor of \$500 million).”<sup>152</sup> Sean Nelson refers to this fact that comes from Geoffrey Stokes’ *Starmaking Machinery* (1976), a book that derives its name from a Joni Mitchell song and describes the music business in the 70s.<sup>153</sup> Mitchell, Taylor,

and Browne were immersed in this highly commercialized world, and they were paid millions to sell hip and deep ideologies about music and love that helped to lubricate capitalism and to privatize Americans' preoccupations and their sense of what constitutes problems and solutions. Zaretsky generalizes that the “search for personal happiness, love, and fulfillment” in original, nineteenth-century sentimental culture, “was understood as a ‘personal’ matter, having little relation to the capitalist organization of society.”<sup>154</sup> The singer-songwriters actively participated in the music industry and encouraged the “search for...love” as separate from capitalist society. But they sometimes come close to recognizing that this “search” is actually driven by therapeutic industries of soft capitalism—such as the music industry and the romantic love industry. They have lyrical moments of reflexivity, sometimes self-critical reflexivity, where they critique the music industry for mass marketing listening to music and falling in love as primary preoccupations. The “search” for these personal therapeutic ideals propelled American consumerism and contributed to the reproduction of systemic oppression.

Browne explicitly investigates the linkage between popular music and capitalism. In “Downtown” from *Lawyers in Love* (1983)<sup>§</sup> he sings,

It's all music  
 It's all music  
 Downtown  
 It's all music  
 It's all music

I feel alright when I'm downtown  
 My feet are light when I'm downtown  
 I cast my hopes on the human tide

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<sup>§</sup> Though this album was released in 1983, I am categorizing it as a late addition to Browne's therapeutic 1970s work. It is socially conscious but not as overtly political as his 80s albums like *Lives in the Balance* (1986) and *World in Motion* (1988).

I place my bet and let it ride  
I'm open wide when I'm downtown

“Downtown” music is therapeutic. Browne’s “feet are light,” and the singer-songwriter is willing to be optimistic and believe in the goodness of humanity, so he “casts his hopes on the human tide.” He is not taking any political or social action, he is just “letting it ride.” But he complicates and contextualizes this inaction in the last two verses:

Eight blocks south of city hall  
The rats run free and the winos crawl  
Darkness falls on the vast machine  
Where the future stalks the American dream

I feel alright when I'm downtown  
My head feels light when I'm downtown  
It's all in sight when I'm downtown  
I feel alright when I'm downtown

Here he has painted a different, darker version of “downtown.” Browne takes the listener even farther down, to “south of city hall.” He artfully allows this setting to take on various meanings. On one level, economic poverty exists downtown, and for those whose homes may be infested by “rats,” “city hall” can again be seen as a metonym for what Zaretsky refers to as the “harsh world that no individual could hope to affect.” On another level, his description of “south of city hall” may indict the billionaire “rats” and “winos” of Wall Street who corrupt society. Then, if only metonymically, he rightly attributes this “dark” side of downtown to capitalism, “the vast machine.” The final line is chilling: “Where the future stalks the American dream.” Vermin and drunkards, possibly representing the wealthy and powerful classes, dominate the “future.” And the vague force of “city hall” helps to legitimate their top-down control. By writing that the capitalistic future “stalks” or haunts the



album *Sweet Baby James*. The original lyrics go, “I’ve seen fire and I’ve seen rain,” but Taylor parodies that here with “I’ve seen fives and I’ve seen tens.” He is admitting that his singing career inevitably and immediately became about *money*. Finally he writes, “It was a strong hit from the money machine,” implying that succeeding in the capitalist music industry is as harmful and addicting as taking drugs because it makes you feel “on top of the world” leading to a false sense of agency. When Taylor compared music to drugs in “Steamroller,” both seemed sexy and appealing, but here he figures the music industry and drugs as more destructive. He recognizes his own addiction to thriving in capitalist society, and he notes the way that the hip and deep music industry encourages this addiction.

After this verse he goes on to repeat the word “money” twenty times, and follows that with “give me that dough” four times. In Guthrie’s working-class folk tune, “Do Re Mi” (1940), “dough” is represented as necessary but lacking, while in Taylor’s middle- and upper-class folk rock, dough becomes excessive and systemically oppressive. Taylor is satirizing and critiquing the way that the therapeutic music industry soothes Americans’ nerves, motivating consumerism, and perpetuating a monstrously flawed economic and social system.

In the next verse of this song he connects the music industry to the romanticized love industry. “Please, Mr. DJ, won't you play my song./ Maybe my baby will listen on the radio./ Come back home to me. Help me spend my dough.” When he sings to his “baby,” “Help me spend my dough,” he suggests that romantic love produces a desire for consumer goods. A culture of romance in America is a consumer culture, and perhaps “dough” is the true object of love in the idealized romantic story.

Taylor's "Millworker" from his 1979 album *Flag* is an antidote to the kind of love lyrics that he is aware the soft capitalist music industry endorses. In this song, "a daughter took up with a no-good mill working man from Massachusetts" and she too must take a job at the mill. Instead of romanticizing this relationship, Taylor takes on the voice of the mill-working-wife and illustrates the realities of a struggling working-class-woman in capitalist America:

Millwork ain't easy, millwork ain't hard, millwork it ain't nothing but an awful boring job.  
 I'm waiting for a daydream to take me through the morning  
 and put me in my coffee break where I can have a sandwich and remember.  
 Then it's me and my machine for the rest of the morning,  
 for the rest of the afternoon and the rest of my life  
 Now my mind begins to wander to the days back on the farm.  
 ...  
 Yes, but it's my life has been wasted, and I have been the fool  
 to let this manufacturer use my body for a tool.  
 ...  
 So may I work the mills just as long as I am able  
 and never meet the man whose name is on the label.

The millworker "daydreams" and her "mind begins to wander." Taylor previously romanticized "wandering" as a means of *escaping* "conventional" society in "Wandering" on *Gorilla*. Here, though, he self-reflexively critiques the way that "wandering" and "daydreaming" can be represented as means of temporarily coping with an "awful boring job." Taylor uses repetition of "the rest of" to illustrate the hopeless monotony of the job and working-class life: "it's me and my machine for the rest of the morning, the rest of the afternoon and the rest of my life." Neither "wandering" nor moving to the countryside, nor going out on the road, nor falling in love, nor listening to "wandering" music, nor "going to Woodstock" will have an effect on the narrator's position in society. If anything, those "daydreams," which are

encouraged in folk rock singer-songwriters' lyrics, will help workers muddle through and continue to "let manufacturer[s] use [their] bod[ies] for tool[s]."

Browne's "The Pretender," from his 1976 album of the same name, makes an argument similar to that of Taylor's "Millworker." It critiques the endless cycle of unfulfilling work and the way that therapeutic culture, *including* notions of romantic love, perpetuates that cycle:

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  
 And when the evening rolls around  
 I'll go on home and lay my body down  
 And when the morning light comes streaming in  
 I'll get up and do it again  
 Amen  
 Say it again  
 Amen

I want to know what became of the changes  
 We waited for love to bring  
 Were they only the fitful dreams  
 Of some greater awakening  
 I've been aware of the time going by  
 They say in the end it's the wink of an eye  
 And when the morning light comes streaming in  
 You'll get up and do it again  
 Amen

Caught between the longing for love  
 And the struggle for the legal tender  
 Where the sirens sing and the church bells ring  
 And the junk man pounds his fender  
 Where the veterans dream of the fight  
 Fast asleep at the traffic light  
 And the children solemnly wait  
 For the ice cream vendor  
 Out into the cool of the evening  
 Strolls the Pretender  
 He knows that all his hopes and dreams  
 Begin and end there

Ah the laughter of the lovers  
 As they run through the night  
 Leaving nothing for the others  
 But to choose off and fight  
 And tear at the world with all their might  
 While the ships bearing their dreams  
 Sail out of sight

I'm going to find myself a girl  
 Who can show me what laughter means  
 And we'll fill in the missing colors  
 In each other's paint-by-number dreams  
 And then we'll put our dark glasses on  
 And we'll make love until our strength is gone  
 And when the morning light comes streaming in  
 We'll get up and do it again  
 Get it up again

I'm going to be a happy idiot  
 And struggle for the legal tender  
 Where the ads take aim and lay their claim  
 To the heart and the soul of the spender  
 And believe in whatever may lie  
 In those things that money can buy  
 Though true love could have been a contender  
 Are you there?  
 Say a prayer for the Pretender  
 Who started out so young and strong  
 Only to surrender

A 1977 *Rolling Stone* critic writes, “‘The Pretender’ is a breakthrough. Browne has always had traces of cynicism in his writing, but about romance he has remained firm. Love can make a difference, all of his songs say. But ‘The Pretender’ is a song about why even that won't work, in the long run.”<sup>155</sup> Ultimately, the social reproduction of consumerism and of the unsatisfied, oppressed working-class will rule the day. The “pretender” flirts with romanticized notions, but he is ultimately realistic and “knows that all his hopes and dreams/ Begin and end” as a worker and consumer, a “cog” in capitalist society. In the end he decides to “struggle for the legal tender” and be a “spender” because he sees that ostensibly anti-consumerist

conceptions of romantic love and marriage just make consumerism even more necessary and inevitable in American capitalist society. Browne is so in tune with the workings of consumer culture in this song that he even refers specifically to soft capitalism. He knows that the “ads take aim and lay their claim/ To the heart and soul of the spender.” Advertisers rely on reproducing romantic interiority—“hearts” or “souls”—that can be associated with the purchase of products and that can reproduce compliant, consuming citizens.

Mitchell, too, has written reflexively about the music industry that sells preoccupations with romantic love. She often critiques her participation in this industry and describes feeling personally and artistically restricted by it. Mitchell was particularly enlightened about the powerful nature of the music business because, with the help of producer David Geffen, she very quickly transitioned from an unknown folksinger to a folk rock superstar. In one of her more famous songs, “Free Man in Paris” from *Court and Spark* (1974), she explains her own frustrations with the industry and those of Geffen.

I was a free man in Paris  
 I felt unfettered and alive  
 There was nobody calling me up for favors  
 And no one's future to decide  
 You know I'd go back there tomorrow  
 But for the work I've taken on  
 Stoking the star-maker machinery  
 Behind the popular song

I deal in dreamers and telephone screamers  
 Lately I wonder what I do it for  
 If I had my way  
 I'd just walk through those doors  
 And wander down the Champs-Élysées  
 Going café to cabaret  
 Thinking how I'd feel when I find  
 That very good friend of mine

The hostile capitalist music industry is full of “dreamers and telephone screamers” anxiously, even belligerently, calling and asking for favors. Only when Mitchell—or Geffen—is away from the music industry, taking on a male voice, and in the most romanticized city in the world, Paris, can she feel “free.” She self-critically recognizes that she cannot achieve feeling “free” because she has chosen to “take on” the work of “stoking the star-maker machinery/ behind the popular song.” She is aware that she is selling music that sells romantic love, and she sees the dark, greedy, capitalist “machinery” that goes into this “work.” Her reference to “machinery” brings to mind her mention of “cog” in “Woodstock,” and perhaps she is again illustrating her awareness that the music industry produces “cog” “individuals” by selling anti-cog ideology.

Though she is self-critical and questions the industry she participates in, she still seems to believe that she does not have the agency to actively make change: “Lately I wonder what I do it for/ If I had my way/ I’d just walk through those doors.” Mitchell figures her involvement in the therapeutic music business as purposeless and out of her control. She knows there are systemic problems but she takes the blame off herself. In addition, “Free Man in Paris” was a moneymaking hit, so the “free man’s” anti-capitalist sentiment was ultimately “incorporated” into the capitalist structure of the music business.

In “For Free” from *Ladies of the Canyon* Mitchell softly indicts the music industry again. She notes the difference between herself and a man playing the clarinet on the street for free.

Now me I play for fortunes,  
and those velvet curtain calls

I got a black Limousine and two gentlemen  
 escorting me to the halls  
 And I'll play if you have the money,  
 or if you're a friend to me  
 But the one man band,  
 by the quick lunch stand,  
 He was playing real good for free

She uses materialistic imagery—“velvet curtain calls” and “a black limousine”—to heighten the contrast between herself and “the one man band by the quick lunch stand.” The man represents non-commercial music and singing for the sake of community, possibly ideals that originally drew Mitchell to folk music. She thinks about joining him for a song but then chooses not to. This decision is meaningful because it self-critically reveals that once one becomes a wealthy music star, one becomes disconnected from a utopian, community-based vision of music. But she once again does not take action to alter—or remove herself from—the industry that she critiques.

In “For the Roses,” from the 1972 album of the same name, Mitchell again accuses the music industry of problematically commercializing and monetizing art. She depicts a successful musician, like herself, looking back to her early, creative days.

Remember the days when you used to sit  
 And make up your tunes for love  
 And pour your simple sorrow  
 To the soundhole and your knee  
 And now you're seen  
 On giant screens  
 And at parties for the press  
 And for people who have slices of you  
 From the company  
 They toss around your latest golden egg  
 Speculation well who's to know  
 If the next one in the nest  
 Will glitter for them so

She describes her shift from a singer-songwriter who puts meaning in to her work, to

a singer-songwriter who must lay “golden eggs,” or write commercially successful songs. Nelson sees that she is “recognizing and resigning to the hypocrisy” of her career when she sings later in the song that her “teeth sunk in the hand/ That brings me things/ I really can’t give up just yet.”<sup>156</sup> She admits that though she politically and personally opposes the capitalist, consumer-driven music industry, she—like Taylor in “Money Machine”—is addicted to her success within it.

In “Free Man in Paris,” “For Free,” and “For the Roses,” Mitchell has a desire to be “free” from the popular music industry. This continuous wish to be or feel free is a middle-class, privatized, psychologized version of protest folksingers’ and blues singers’ pleas for *freedom* from racist oppression and economic poverty. Mary Ellison describes the history of African-American lyrics about freedom:

That songs of black people have always been about freedom is quite obvious... This search for freedom through song was an overt rejection of exploitation and discrimination at all levels, and the accompanying poverty and powerlessness were continuously condemned as unfair and unacceptable.<sup>157</sup>

Mitchell appropriates this theme of “freedom” as a “rejection of exploitation,” but she feels she is “exploited” emotionally and musically, while African-Americans were and are systemically “exploited... at all levels.” Though she is self-reflexively critiquing a real system of oppression, the music industry, she is still privatizing the idea of poverty.

In addition to expressing her desire to be free of the music business, Mitchell describes the tension between artistry and commercialism in music, and in “The Boho Dance” (*The Hissing of the Summer Lawns*, 1975) she critiques the naïve bohemian approach to the industry:

Down in the cellar in the Boho zone  
I went looking for some sweet inspiration, oh well

Just another hard-time band  
 With Negro affectations  
 I was a hopeful in rooms like this  
 When I was working cheap  
 It's an old romance-the Boho dance  
 It hasn't gone to sleep

As mentioned in the introduction, bohemianism flourished in Greenwich Village in the 1910s and 20s and was defined as a lifestyle taken up by middle- and upper-class people who considered themselves anti-consumerist “artists.” Both late-60s and 70s singer-songwriters and the earlier generation of bohemians, though, often perpetuated consumer culture. Mitchell is poking holes in the ostensibly anti-music-industry “romance” of bohemianism here. She recognizes that Americans see “working cheap” “down in the cellar” as “an old romance,” and she reveals that this romance is in fact *romantic* and not economically viable. To Mitchell, the commercialization of music is a necessary evil. In addition, she critiques the white middle- and upper-class tendency to put on “Negro affectations,” to perform the “blues,” though their preoccupation is self-expression rather than overcoming systemic oppression. Perhaps here she is being self-critical of her own performance of white interiority blues—like in her aforementioned songs about wanting to be free. Ultimately, she is still participating in the capitalist music industry, but at least she is no longer hiding her involvement in consumerism by performing “bohemianism.”

Perhaps the song that delivers the strongest critique of both the music and romantic love industries—while still participating in them— is Mitchell’s “You Turn Me On I’m A Radio” from *For the Roses*. Mitchell wrote this song because Asylum Records wanted her to compose something that would be at the top of the charts and played on the radio.<sup>158</sup> And it was; the single was ranked number 25 on *Billboard*.<sup>159</sup> At

the same time, though, this song intends to satirize the typical, popular love song played on the radio, the type of hit that romanticizes love and encourages a therapeutic culture of consumerism. Mitchell sings directly to the record label, “And I’m sending you out this signal here, I hope you can pick it up loud and clear.” She is “signaling” to them that she is very obviously, even cheekily, producing a hit because they want her to. She finishes the song with,

If your head says forget it  
 But your heart's still smoking  
 Call me at the station  
 The lines are open

The “lines” here could refer to both the phone lines at a radio station as well as the lines of Mitchell’s song. Her fans may read the lines of her songs and rationally understand that believing in music and love is delusional. The listener’s logical “head” might “say forget it” to mass-marketed fantasies of romance. But if the lines of the song are “open” to interpretation, then even when one knows that he or she is being manipulated, notions of romantic love and music can keep their “hearts... smoking” and drive their actions and consumerist behavior. Even if Mitchell, Taylor and Browne are complicit in promoting a preoccupation with a deep, love-obsessed, music-addicted inner self, they are all keenly aware of their participation in the music and romance industry. Popular folk rock music and the romantic love industry sell depth to compensate for standardized hard capitalism. And this addictive soft capitalist depth reproduces class identity and what Taylor calls the “money machine”—consumerism coupled with systemic injustice and inequality.

**AFTERWORD**  
**FOLK ROCK’S “SLIPPERINESS”**

Most avid folk rock listeners know that James Taylor has “seen fire” and “seen rain” (in “Fire and Rain,” ranked number three on the charts in 1970<sup>160</sup>): he has lyrically expressed his interiority. But not as many hear him when he sings that he has “seen fives” and “seen tens” (in “Money Machine”): here he has provocatively criticized his self-expression as a mass-produced commodity. Though it may seem that in the late-60s and 70s Taylor, Mitchell, and Browne were only shaping and selling ideas of anti-consumerist individualism, emotional conflict, and romantic depth as meaningful, as we have seen, in some instances they critique the commodification of those ideas.

Raymond Williams cautions,

It would be wrong to overlook the importance of works and ideas which, while clearly affected by hegemonic limits and pressures, are at least in part significant breaks beyond them, which may again in part be neutralized, reduced, or incorporated, but which in their most active elements nevertheless come through as independent and original.<sup>161</sup>

All three singer-songwriters authored Vietnam War- and Watergate-era songs that contained “significant breaks beyond” “hegemonic limits.” They creatively questioned their therapeutic, self-involved perspectives on the natural world, the road, romantic love, and the music industry, pushing against their preferred and profitable preoccupation—interior poverty— and in effect partly illuminating how aspects of soft capitalism work. Browne had an especially acute awareness of the ideological tendencies of therapeutic folk rock and a strong understanding of systemic economic and political oppression. For him, simply critiquing his complicity in mass-marketed therapeutic culture was not enough. His keen perception was evident in both his

lyrics, in songs such as “Downtown” and “The Pretender,” as well as in his political advocacy—he has planned and performed at a wealth of benefit concerts for anti-nuclear and human rights causes, and he founded MUSE (Musicians United for Safe Energy) in 1979.<sup>162</sup> He also became increasingly and conspicuously political during the conservative Reagan presidency in the 80s.<sup>163</sup> In the documentary *Jackson Browne* he expresses his more explicitly political, uncapitalist perspective: “The realization that there were people out there that were not aspiring to great wealth but were aspiring to create a world that was more inhabitable in every way, it was coming into contact with those people that probably had the biggest effect on me.”<sup>164</sup>

In this respect Browne is the political hero of my folk rock story, even if his lyrics are never as hard-nosed as those of Guthrie and Seeger. Nonetheless, my liberal arts college peers and I prefer the less political, more therapeutic songs of Mitchell, Taylor, and Browne. We grew up listening to them in car rides with nostalgic parents, and the soft folk rock struck an aesthetic chord—perhaps also an ideological chord—with us. I love them because I too am entrenched in a professional-managerial-class therapeutic culture that highly values self-expression and thrives on compensatory depth. When Mitchell’s *Blue* pours into my ears through headphones, her complex self-expression almost feels as if it is coming out of me. In addition, I feel slightly countercultural in choosing antimodern music from the late-60s and 70s over the newest Top 40 songs.

As I mentioned in my introduction, I also find that the music and exquisitely crafted lyrics of Taylor, Mitchell, and Browne provide me with immense joy. And this delight persists even though I am aware that the artists are complicit in—as well as sometimes critical of— political and ideological problems. Their “different kind of

poverty” lyrics are constantly in limbo; to use Hale’s term, they are “slippery.” They can be read as “a tool of the U.S. political economy,”<sup>165</sup> as a sometimes self-aware instrument of soft capitalism. But many of their songs serve another purpose: they give me pleasure that is not politicized, though perhaps that pleasure can have its own political effects. The rush I feel in listening to this folk rock could be understood as a therapeutic coping mechanism, but maybe that cultural coping is a necessary respite from thinking about my relationship to structures of power.<sup>166</sup> Perhaps that distancing can rejuvenate me and inspire me to try to, like Browne in particular, “create a world that [is] more inhabitable in every way.” If these artists could *only* be understood as overtly political tools, would they have the power to engage and affect me? I think not, considering my own and my generation’s relative lack of interest in the *only* political work of Old Left folksingers. So I will continue listen to my favorite folk rock, to turn the “headphones up high,” but I will not “numb out” systemic injustice and poverty. Instead I hope to let this artful music give me the pleasure that will sustain me in fighting for social change, fighting for a world where more people can spend more time listening to music and less time thinking about the powers that oppress them because those powers will no longer exist.

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- <sup>1</sup> Simon Frith, *Sound Effects* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 28.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> Pete Seeger, et al., *Pete Seeger: In His Own Words* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2012), xiii.
- <sup>5</sup> Frith, *Sound Effects*, 31.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 248.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>12</sup> History.com Staff, "March on Washington," *History.com*, 2009, 07 Mar. 2016 <<http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/march-on-washington>>.
- <sup>13</sup> Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 5.
- <sup>14</sup> Frith, *Sound Effects*, 30.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 31
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-32
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.
- <sup>19</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 128.
- <sup>20</sup> Frith, *Sound Effects*, 31.
- <sup>21</sup> History.com Staff, "February 07, 1964: Beatles Arrive in New York," *History.com*, 2009, 06 Mar. 2016 <<http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/beatles-arrive-in-new-york>>.
- <sup>22</sup> Schulman, *The Seventies*, 1.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-4.
- <sup>25</sup> "The Event That Saved 1968," *PBS*, 22 Nov. 2015 <[http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/moon/peoplevents/e\\_1968.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/moon/peoplevents/e_1968.html)>.
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