

# Running on empathy

**IN PERSON** / Although it's been more than a decade since his last hit song, Jackson Browne is still in demand as a performer at benefit concerts. But has his political activism damaged his commercial appeal?

BY CHRISTOPHER GULY  
Special to The Globe and Mail  
Ottawa

**I**T took the signing of a treaty banning the use of land mines to bring Jackson Browne to Ottawa for the first time.

The 49-year-old singer-songwriter performed at a benefit concert last week for Mines Action Canada and its U.S. counterpart, Operation Landmine, and while the Ottawa Congress Centre venue was a new experience for him, doing a charity benefit was not.

Browne, best-known for the hit album *Running on Empty* and as one of the pioneers of the laid-back folk-rock sound that came out of California in the seventies, has participated over the past decade in benefits for a seemingly endless list of charities. The night before his Ottawa debut at the international conference where more than 100 countries signed an antimine agreement, Browne was on stage in Washington, raising money for an inner-city project working with teen-agers stricken with AIDS.

He says he doesn't keep a count of the number of these fund raisers he does each year. "I'm more comfortable talking about the need for such things than I am talking about many of these things I do," he said.

If prompted, Browne could probably go on railing against land mines — only the latest injustice to which he's called attention with his pop-music profile.

Browne was one of the founding members of Musicians United For Safe Energy, which organized the legendary No Nukes concert at Madison Square Garden in 1979. The concert has recently been rereleased as a two-CD set, featuring such artists as Bruce Springsteen, Carly Simon, Bonnie Raitt and James Taylor.

Although he's not as commercially successful as he was nearly two decades ago when he released a series of critically praised albums, including *The Pretender* and the multimillion-selling *Running on Empty*, Browne is still in demand by grassroots organizations who need help raising money for native U.S. high-school scholarships or preserving the forests.

However, there seem to be a few constants in Browne's life. While the black turtle-neck, blue jeans and wire-rimmed glasses give him a more nineties yuppie air, Browne is still



**Jackson Browne:** 'If you're a human and a member of a democracy, you should participate in the process.'

boyishly handsome with his southern California looks and a compact five-foot-nine college wrestler's build.

Indeed, conversation with him is like a wrestling match: Browne gets combative if he needs to make a point. For instance, he insists on calling his charity work "aiding public initiatives to create social change." Don't call them causes. "That's a shorthand way of not discussing what those issues are," said Browne. "The word 'causes' is too generic a term. . . . For me, it all comes under the heading of human rights."

Whatever they're called, Browne's passion for them has at times come close to eclipsing his musical career. Indeed, his albums in the eighties, such as *Lawyers in Love* and *Lives in the Balance*, added a more strident political edge to his songwriting, criticizing, among other issues, U.S. interference in Central America. Each also showed a decline in sales, and a concert appearance in Toronto this summer at a large outdoor amphitheatre was attended by only 1,500.

Browne, however, bristles at the suggestion his career has suffered because of his activism. "[It] may be true in some general way," he con-

ceded. "But one of the byproducts may be that people feel guilty of not knowing the [U.S.] foreign policy on Central America, so I may be succeeding at some level if I'm making people aware of it for only a moment. . . . If you're a human and a member of a democracy, you should participate in the process."

Browne credits his father Clyde Jack, a jazz pianist who taught high-school English, and his mother, Bea (Dahl), who was also a high-school English teacher, with instilling in him principles and ideals.

Growing up in Los Angeles, he remembers both were involved in protests against U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.

Browne's mood lightens when the conversation turns to his music. In September, he released a greatest-hits album that features 15 tracks. He said that two of the songs, *In The Shape Of A Heart*, released a decade ago, and *Fountain of Sorrow* from 1974, are "more meaningful" to him today than we they were when he wrote them.

"I think a whole lot of them are really good," Browne added. "My songs have a way of aging and becoming

more developed, like wine. My way of singing and feeling those songs has also matured." While he has not seen Top 10 hits since the likes of *Doctor My Eyes* in 1972 and *Somebody's Baby* in 1982, he doesn't seem terribly bothered by it either. "I don't think an artist's work can really be gauged in terms of commercial success."

But the past has also come back to haunt Browne in a less pleasant way. Two decades ago, Browne had a relationship with Canadian songwriter **Joni Mitchell**. In September, a reporter with the Dallas Morning News sought Browne's opinion on the lyrics of Mitchell's song, *Not to Blame*, from her 1994 Grammy-winning album, *Turbulent Indigo*.

In the song, Mitchell sings, "They said you beat the girl/ You loved the most/ Your charitable acts/ Seemed out of place/ With the beauty/ With your fist marks on her face." Though she never acknowledged it, the U.S. tabloids guessed Mitchell was referring to Browne's ex-girlfriend, actress Daryl Hannah, who accused him of beating her in 1992.

*Not to Blame* ends with lyrics that could be taken as referring to Browne's wife Phyllis Major, who committed suicide in 1976.

When asked about Mitchell and the song now, Browne appears visibly upset and looks away, as if to control his anger. "She didn't know my life; she doesn't know what she's talking about," he said. "She's a very unhappy person and the song is beneath her."

Then Browne says he's not interested in discussing Mitchell any more. He prefers to talk about his future plans (more song writing) and ponder his career, which dates from his teen-aged years when he performed in an early version of the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band.

"I grew up in the era of the Vietnam War . . . where you were in charge of your own consciousness. That's the crucible of my upbringing."

Right now, I think we're in the same revolution. In the course of time, it's a heartbeat from the sixties. You find the same people working in the same kind of areas: those who opposed the Vietnam War oppose mining harbours and farms in Central America."