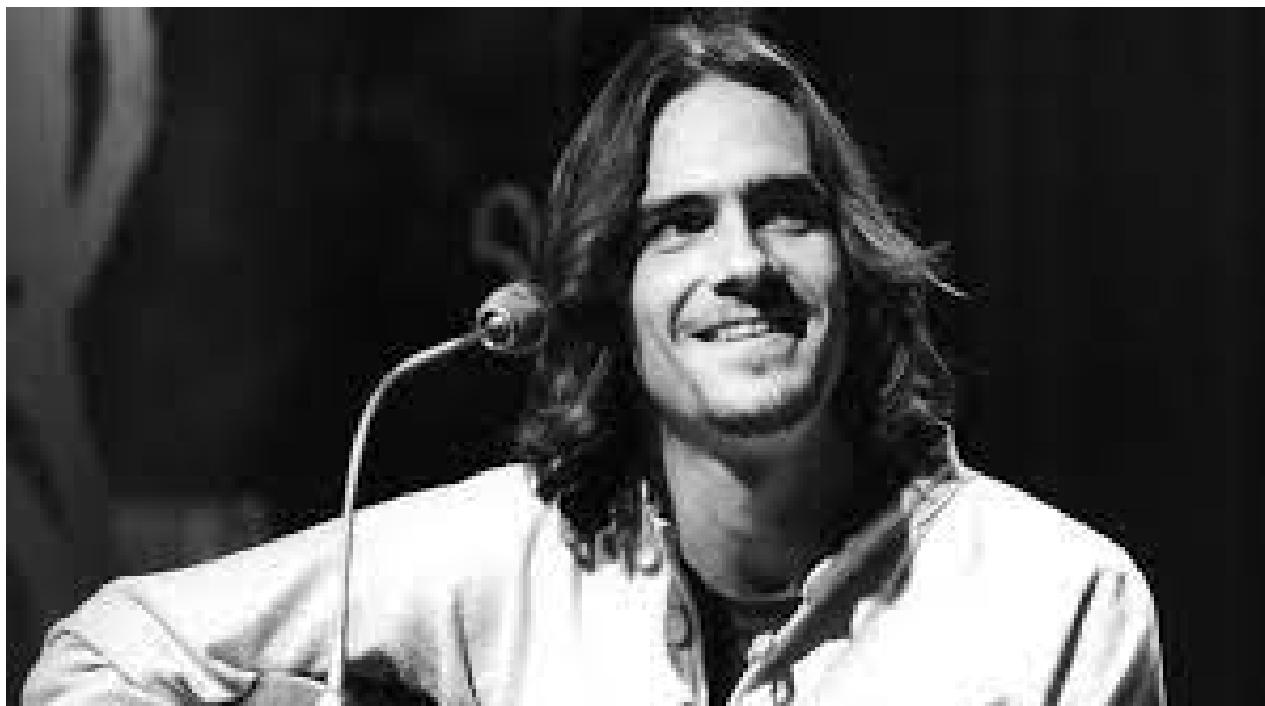


Fire and Rain – the story behind the classic song...

Written by Andy Owen



To many of us of a certain age, the song '*Fire and Rain*' by James Taylor, has been a constant soundtrack in our lives.

It's *always* been there.

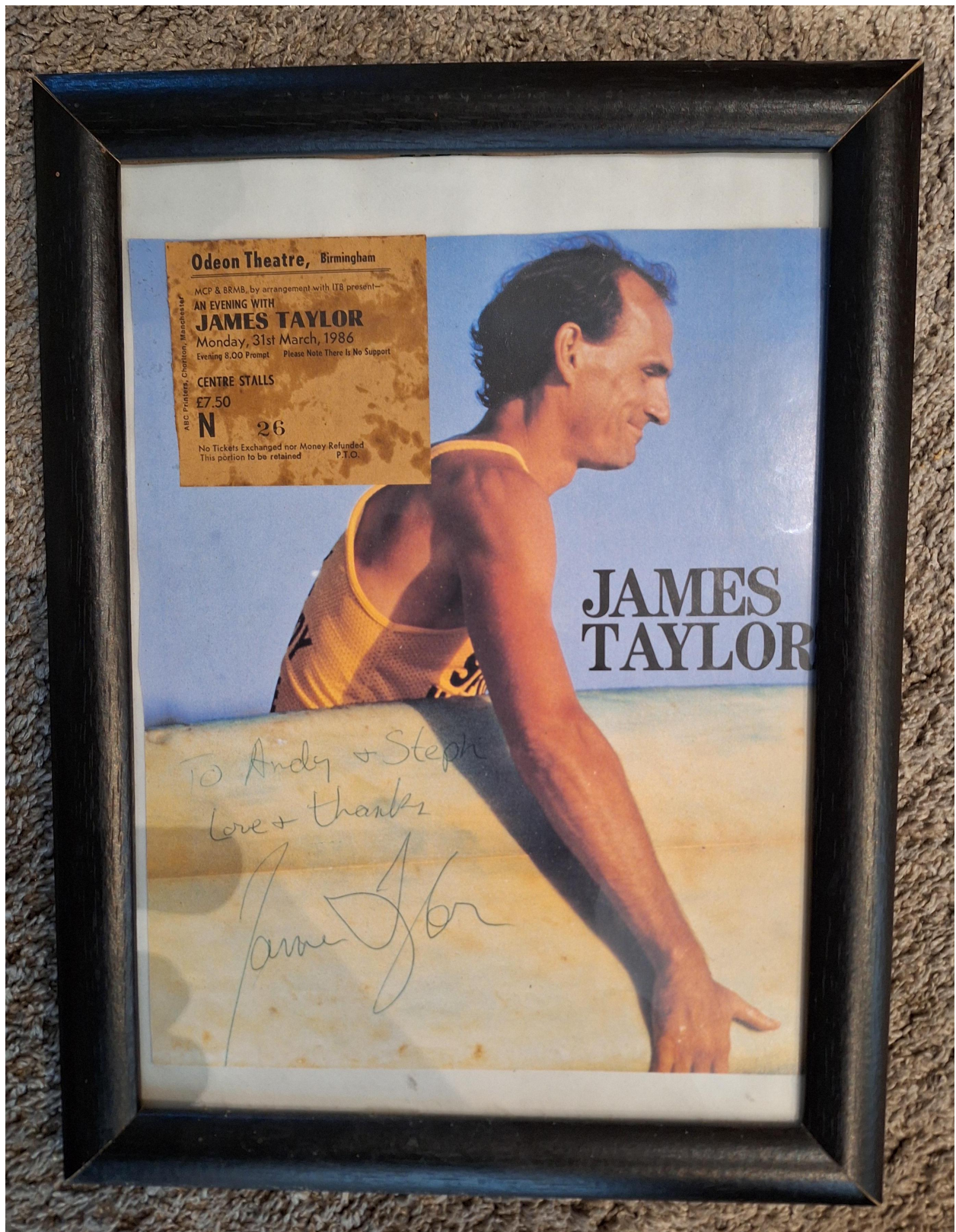
Always will be, I have no doubt.

As will James.

An inspirational man and a true legend.

I have seen him numerous times in concert and my wife and I had the pleasure of meeting him in Birmingham in 1986. He was warm and charming - and everything you hoped he would be.

A programme he signed on that evening, now in a frame, sits proudly on our wall at home.



(I was working for RCA Records at that time and met many so-called 'stars', that were on our label, and many of them were not as I had hoped and were a big disappointment. A few notable exceptions included: David Bowie, Daryl Hall & John Oates, Gerard Kenny and Cleo Laine.)

'Fire and Rain' is one of the truly great songs of our time. So, I thought it would be nice to share the story behind those words we all know so well - and have all sung so many, many times.

The song is about certain high and low points of James's life.

It was written in three parts, over a period of close to two years.

He started the song in London in 1968. He was 20 years old.

He worked on the second part of the song in a Manhattan Hospital - and the third and final part while in drug rehab at The Austin Riggs Centre in Massachusetts.

Before I get to the words of the song - and the story and meaning behind them - it's important to look first at James and his life, prior to, during and after the song was conceived.

James had been in a New York band The Flying Machine, with guitarist Danny Kortchmar.



The Flying Machine

It was at this time, that James began using heroin and this developed into a serious heroin addiction.

James commented on this period in a later interview: *"I just fell into it, since it was as easy to get high in the Village as to get a drink"*.

Very soon, he was struggling badly and in a tough place.

During a call home, his father recognised his son needed help – and quickly.

So, Isaac Taylor flew to New York and staged a rescue, renting a car and driving all through the night back to North Carolina with James and his possessions.

We'll never know, of course, but it may well be, that his dad's prompt and unselfish actions saved James's life.

James spent six months getting treatment and making a tentative recovery. He also required a throat operation to fix vocal cords damaged from singing too harshly.

In late 1967, funded by a small family inheritance, he moved to London, living in various areas – Notting Hill, Belgravia and Chelsea.

James told Guitar World the story, many years later:

"I arrived with my guitar, some songs and no plan at all, beyond trying to get some work in clubs and travel around Europe and see what I could see.

I'd met some friends who were very encouraging about my music and got me into a little demo studio I found in the phone book."

"Danny knew Peter Asher, who had a new gig signing acts to Apple and I asked if he thought Peter might be interested in my stuff. And it turned out that it was just the right time.



James & Peter in 1970

Peter and his wife really heard something in my music. And he took me to Apple, where I played some songs on an acoustic guitar for George and Paul.

And they said to Peter, you know, if you want to record this guy, sign him to the label. It was that simple. But it was just otherworldly, because I was a huge Beatles fan. And they were at the very height of their powers. They just kept going, kept growing. So, to be in London, the first person signed to their label in 1968, was really like catching the big wave.

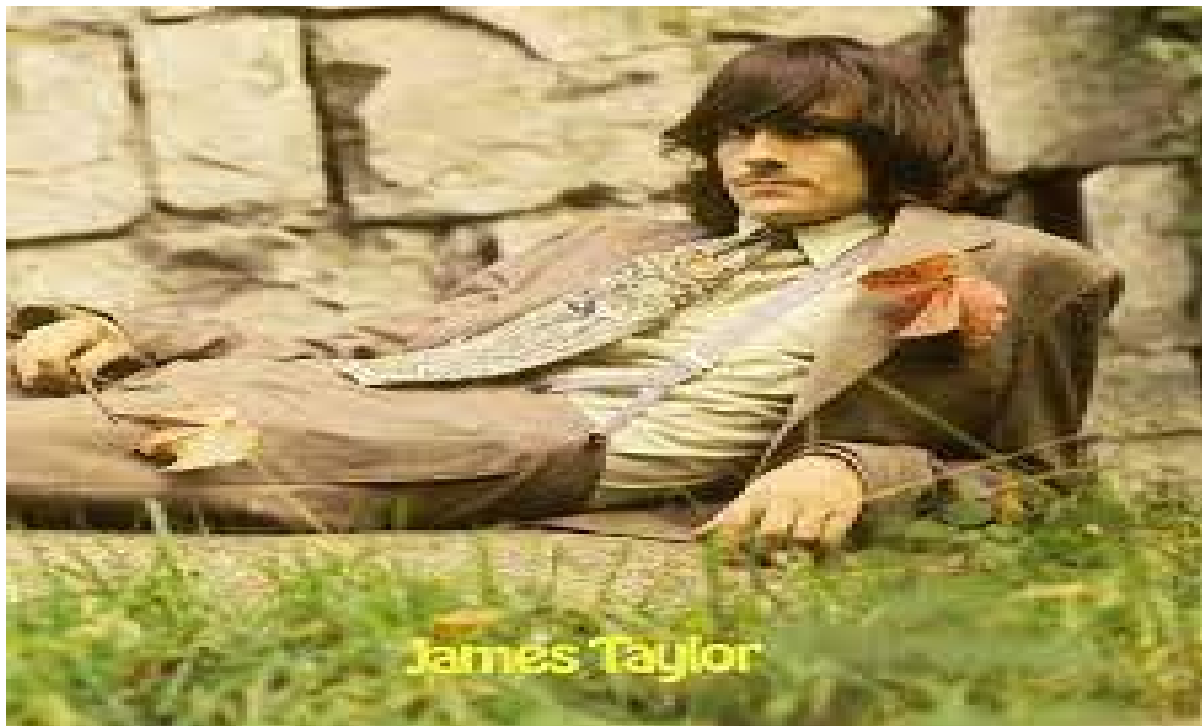
It was unbelievable."

It must have been. Just *imagine...*

Both Paul and George went on to play on James's self-titled first LP, which was recorded at Trident Studios in London - the same studio where, at the time, The Beatles were recording a significant part of *The White Album*.



"We intersected in the studio a lot," says Taylor. "They were leaving as I was coming in. I often came in early and would sit in the control room and listen to them recording – and hear playbacks of what they had just cut."



This first album didn't include '*Fire and Rain*', as it was only part written at that time, but the song was to feature on his second album.

However, this first album contained some soon-to-become Taylor classics, like '*Carolina in My Mind*' and '*Something in The Way She Moves*'. The latter song, was one of the songs James sang in the audition for George and Paul – and it had an immediate impact on both of them.

But, despite enjoying the Beatles influence and involvement, it sold poorly, even though it got excellent reviews and received glowing praise from within the industry.

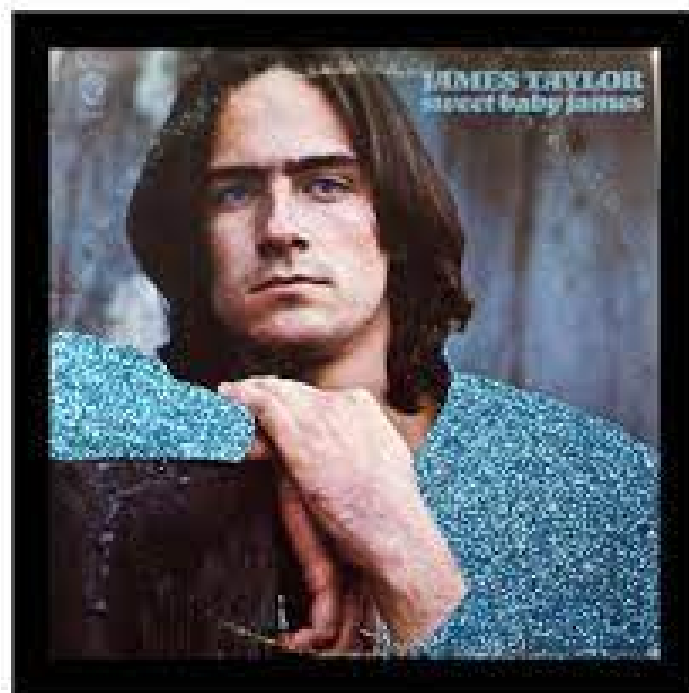
Looking back on it, most people now accept that it failed for two main reasons. Whilst in London, James had fallen back into using heroin and methedrine and became hospitalised, so he was unable to promote the album – and, of course, there were serious problems at Apple as the label fell apart.

James returned to New York and was hospitalised again, and then finally committed himself to the Austen Riggs Centre in Stockbridge, Massachusetts for the coming winter.

During that time, James was dropped from Apple.

But he had not been forgotten. Warner Brothers Records in America had been watching him and were aware of his potential, so they snapped him up.

It was with them, that he released his second album, **Sweet Baby James**.



The album was produced by Peter Asher, who later was to become his manager. It was recorded at Sunset Sound, Los Angeles, California in nine days – and it cost only \$7,600 out of a budget of \$20,000.



The musicians that rehearsed the album with James, were Danny Kortchmar (guitar), Russ Kunkel (drums) and Carole King (piano).

Another session guy called Bobby West was also used and he played a bowed upright bass on '*Fire and Rain*', at James's request.

Of course, Kootch and Russ became part of James's band on tour and played on many later albums in the coming years.

They were also used by other artists in the studio, notably Jackson Browne, Linda Ronstadt and Carole King herself, after she had established herself as a solo artist.



James & Carole King

At this time, James was still extremely vulnerable and was staying in Asher's home or sleeping on a couch at Kootch's house.

Warners released the title track as the first single, but it failed to do anything and even failed to chart.

James was on the road promoting the album, when the label decided to release '*Fire and Rain*' as the second single.

It was released in August of 1970, six months after the release of the Sweet Baby James album. The song hit number three on the Billboard Hot 100 and number two in Canada.

It instantly catapulted James into the big league, finally bringing him the popularity and success that his friends and supporters had envisioned from his talents.

He went to live in Laurel Canyon which became a hot bed of inspiration and excellence and arguably the centre of the rock music world for a number of years.



It was a haven for young, politically aware and creative musicians and artists - and it spawned a new generation of singer-songwriters.

They all showcased their talents nightly at The Troubadour nightclub down on 'The Strip', with most of their work being inspired by the roots of American music – blues, country, bluegrass and folk.



James later commented on his time in the Canyon:

"It really was a perfect moment, that Laurel Canyon period.

Carole lived up there, Joni and I lived in her house there for the better part of a year.

The record companies were relatively benign and there were people in them who cared about the music and the artists – it hadn't become a corporate monolith yet.

There was a sense of there being a community: myself, Jackson Browne, Joni Mitchell, Carole King, David Crosby, Stephen Stills and Graham Nash. David Geffen was in the mix a lot.

Linda Ronstadt, Peter Asher, Harry Nilsson. You know, it was pretty much what they say. Things really worked well."

There was an incredible sense of community that built up between the musicians living and working in the Canyon at that time – with a steady stream of artists arriving every day and settling into the rural hippie enclaves of Laurel Canyon, Silverlake, and Topanga.

What's more, all the big labels were there - Capitol, Warner Brothers, A&M and several major East Coast labels - Elektra, Motown, and Aldon Music soon saw what was happening - and quickly moved in.



James & Joni in The Canyon

In 2012, Joni Mitchell explained the atmosphere of Los Angeles in the late sixties, saying:

"Like Paris was to the Impressionists and the post-Impressionists, L.A. was the hotbed of all musical activity. The greatest musicians in the world either lived there or passed through there regularly. I think that a lot of beautiful music came from it, and a lot of beautiful times came through that mutual understanding."

OK, that's the background. Now, as promised, here is the story behind the words of *'Fire and Rain'*. Here is the first verse...

Just yesterday morning they let me know you were gone.

Suzanne, the plans they made, put an end to you

I walked out this morning and I wrote down this song.

I just can't remember who to send it to.

This first verse is about James's close childhood friend – a lady called Suzanne Schnerr - who committed suicide while Taylor was recording his first album in London.

James explained: *"It concerned a girl called Suzanne I knew, who they put into an isolation cell and she couldn't take it and committed suicide.*

I always felt rather bad about the line, 'The plans they made put an end to you,' because 'they' only meant 'ye gods,' or basically 'the Fates.' I never knew her folks but I always wondered whether her folks would hear that and wonder whether it was about them."

It was said that Suzanne wanted to see James and they didn't let her, before she killed herself.

It was 6 months before he found out about her death, as no one wanted to distract him from what was to be his 'big break'.

This second verse refers to James's struggles with heroin and methedrine addiction and his bouts of severe depression.

Won't you look down upon me Jesus, you've gotta help me make a stand.

You've just got to see me through another day.

My body's aching and my time is at hand.

And I won't make it any other way.

James explains:

"The second verse is about my arrival in this country with a monkey on my back, and there Jesus is an expression of my desperation in trying to get through the time when my body was aching and the time was at hand when I had to do it."

The third and final verse which was written in the US, during his difficult recuperation in Austin Riggs which lasted about five months.

It is about James trying to come to terms with his almost overnight fame and fortune. 'flying machines' refers to his band The Flying Machine, whose breakup years earlier, had cut him deeply.

Been walking my mind to an easy time, my back turned towards the sun.

Lord knows when the cold wind blows, it'll turn your head around.

Well, there's hours of time on the telephone line, to talk about things to come

Sweet dreams and flying machines in pieces on the ground.

The chorus, which is imprinted in all our brains - combines the feelings and sentiments of all three verses.

I've seen fire and I've seen rain.

I've seen sunny days that I thought would never end.

I've seen lonely times when I could not find a friend.

But I always thought that I'd see you again.

The last line, of course, is talking about Suzanne.

'Fire and Rain' is almost certainly James's most popular song. 'You've Got a Friend' runs it close for many, but, of course, James didn't write that, Carole King did.

'Fire and Rain' was the song that took Taylor from little-known troubadour to be the star of the '70s singer-songwriter movement.

James has said many times that he was so surprised that such a deeply personal song would have such an appeal to people.

In fact, he mentions it in a later song – 'That's Why I'm Here' – which became one of James's most popular and requested songs and he nearly always plays it on tour:

'Fortune and fame's such a curious game.

Perfect strangers can call you by name.

Pay good money to hear Fire and Rain, again and again and again.

Some are like summer coming back every year, got your baby, got your blanket, got your bucket of beer.

I break into a grin from ear to ear and suddenly it's perfectly clear.

That's why I'm here'.

'Fire and Rain' is a rock classic. It has since been covered by hundreds of different artists, including some of the most famous musicians of our time.

James was invited to play it for President Barack Obama and his wife and his second inauguration.



The last words I leave to James.

First, about the audition for George and Paul and being signed by Apple....

"I felt like I was in the big leagues," He remembers.

"Fifty years later, I can't get over what the Beatles did for me. Their approval validated my music and introduced me to the world I've lived in ever since. The Beatles opened the door and invited me through. It was the dividing line in my life."

And, finally, his own thoughts on *'Fire and Rain'*...

Despite the sad nature of the song, James describes the experience of writing it as 'a great relief'.

"That song relieved a lot of tension. There were things that I needed to get rid of - or at least get out of me, either by telling somebody else or by just putting them out in a form in front of me so that I could say, 'There they are'."

We are all glad you did, James.

Thank you, my friend.

For everything...