

RANDYMEINERRETROSPECTIVE.COM

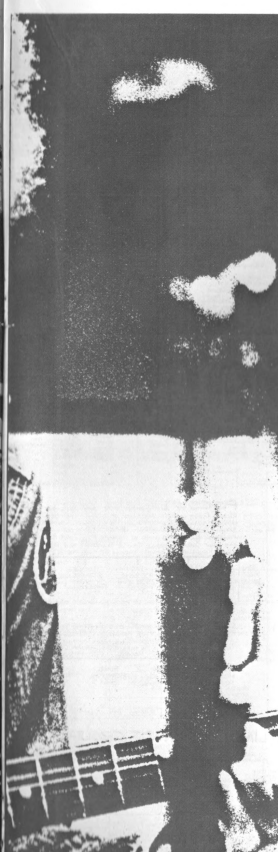
m

illions of people, driving millions of cars, combined with temperature inversion, provides Los Angeles with a near perfect environment for the production and containment of smog. (That's what it says on the sleeve of the last Tim Buckley album anyway). You've got smog, a terrifying population growth (over 6 million in the county area at the last count, as compared to 170,298 at the turn of the century), roads and buildings packed into nearly every square inch of

terrain, the constant fear of an earthquake opening up the San Andreas fault, and Kim Fowley. . . . but still LA seems to act as a huge magnet, attracting musicians to what is, after all, the hub of the recording industry - but, though the Eagles' jigsaw was completed in Los Angeles, the story begins in places as remote as San Diego, Florida, Nebraska, Colorado, Detroit and Texas.

Bernie Leadon (that's

him up there - he gets a bigger picture than the others, because he did most of the talking), arrived in San Diego in 1957, and subsequently became interested in bluegrass music. Interest in which was kept going by a core of enthusiasts who used to hang out at the Blue Guitar, around which most of the local activity used to revolve. The Blue Guitar, owned by Larry Murray and Gary Carr (see the chart), was typical of a number of West Coast instrument shops



in the late 50s/early 60s in that it not only sold stringed instruments, and acted as a meeting place for local folkies, but the owners also repaired instruments, gave lessons, and actually manufactured custom banjos, guitars and dulcimers. "It started out really funky, a focal point for anybody who was at all interested in folk or bluegrass; you had the two camps - folkies on one side, and bluegrassers, the best of whom played in the Scotsville Squirrel

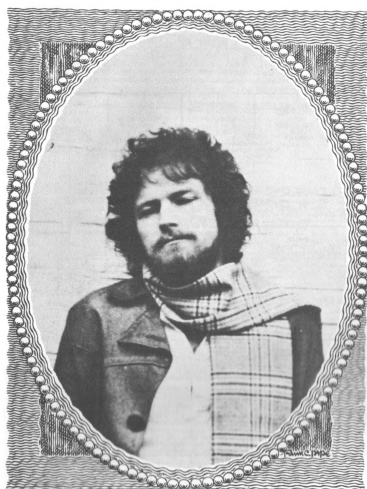
Barkers, on the other. . . . and then you had flamenco freaks and classical nuts too. So the Blue Guitar, for the whole of that folkie period, was a really interesting place." "I was still very young, and I'd been into commercial folk, playing in a few little school groups, but when I met all these guys and started hanging around with them, I realised how much stronger the roots of the traditional folk music were than the commercial stuff, which at

COMING INTO LOS ANGELES: THE STORY OF THE EAGLES

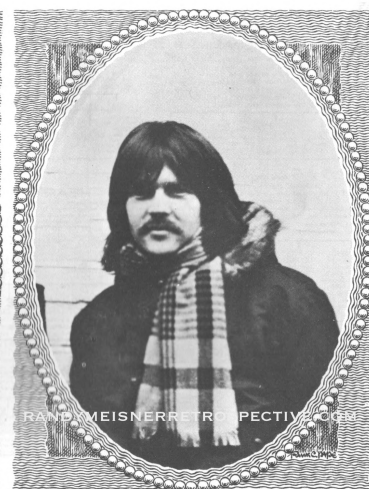
this time, around 1961, was in its heyday on the West Coast. . . . As a result, I got into bluegrass banjo, listening to and learning from Kenny (Wertz). At the weekends, the shop used to hold concerts where the Squirrel Barkers would play, besides which they would do evening gigs all round the city, and play bluegrass festivals up in LA, and so there was a really good little scene happening there."

In 1962, Kenny left for

a while and Bernie stepped into the breach, playing banjo through the last days of the group until it broke up later that year when Larry Murray and Chris Hillman decided to head north to LA. Chris joined the Hillmen, with the Gosdin Brothers and Don Parnley (see Byrds Chapter 1 in ZZ 27), and Larry wound up in a short-lived Randy Sparks invention called the Green Grass Group (created to ride the coattails of his previous success, the New Christy Minstrels),



DON



RANDY

which also included Chris Hillman in its ranks, around Spring 1964. Bernie also went up to LA about that time, and hung around with them for a month or so, "but I was only 17 at the time and decided to go to Florida with my father, who had got a position teaching at a university there. So I went off to Florida and stayed there until 1967, when I felt the urge to get back out to California, and I packed all my stuff into a Volkswagen and drove the 3000 miles all by myself!"

In LA, he joined Larry's country group, Hearts & Flowers, who played all the folkie haunts in Southern California; the Ash Grove, the Troubadour, McCabe's, the Ice House and so on... but the days of the group were numbered and enthusiasm for continuing in that particular combination was on the wane.

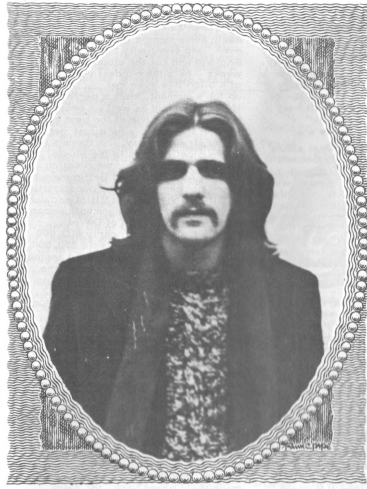
Coincidental with the eventual demise of Hearts & Flowers, Bernie happened to cross paths with Douglas Dillard, banjo wizard and bluegrass fanatic extraordinaire, who was at a bit of a loose end. He'd left the Dillards earlier that year (1968) after six years on the road with them, because he wasn't happy with the way that contemporary music and humour were superseding bluegrass as their staple, and he'd done a few gigs with the Byrds - but he was on the look out for a new group. "Hearts & Flowers pooped out and so I moved in with Doug and we just played and played for weeks on end... and Gene Clark was dropping by and playing along too. Finally Gene, who had signed a solo contract with A&M Records, had the idea of roping Doug in too and they became a group... Dillard & Clark. Not long after that, we recorded the album, 'The Fantastic Expedition'".

Though the album was recorded in a very light acoustic drummerless style, they decided to recall Michael Clarke from Hawaii, where he'd been lying around since leaving the Byrds at the end of 1967, and electrify into a C&W/folk/rock band. This they did, for a short time - until Michael left to join the Burritos, whereupon they reverted to acoustic music and played a gig schedule very similar to that of Hearts & Flowers - the Ash Grove/Troubadour circuit. In fact (in true Arthur Lee tradition), they never played outside of LA, and thus never achieved any kind of national reputation. So, they plodded along in this rather unsatisfactory manner until, among other things, the arrival of Donna Washburn (and the implication that Bernie could not sing) precipitated his decision to leave. "We had a 3 part harmony vocal thing, but when Donna came in she took over my part, leaving me with nothing to sing and nothing to play except just rhythm guitar. On the album, I'd played guitar, some banjo, I'd sung a lot, and I'd had a hand in writing more than half the songs; then, when Michael came along, Doug electrified his banjo, David Jackson switched from upright bass to Fender bass, I swapped my Martin for a Gibson electric, and we started doing more country & western stuff, which is when I started getting into lead guitar. When we went back to 'ethnic bluegrass' and acoustic music I just couldn't get any satisfaction from what little I was doing, so I left Doug and joined Linda Ronstadt, picking up where I'd left off on the electric lead/rhythm trip!"

Jeff Hanna (see Zigzag 28) had left Linda's group to reform The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, so Bernie filled the vacancy, picking guitar behind Miss Ronstadt for a couple of national tours until, returning to LA once more, he was invited to join the Flying Burrito

Brothers. The history of the Flying Burrito Brothers is very weird and very complicated; even in late '67, there was a loose group of musicians living in Topanga Canyon and calling themselves the FBB. In a motley collection including Ed Freeman (then a folksinger/Barry and the Remains roadie/member of a group called the Joyful Noise, and now Don McLean's producer), Bruce Langhorne (famous for his playing behind Dylan, Fred Neil etc) and Pete Childs (ditto, and also in the Joyful Noise), were Ian Dunlop and someone called Mickey (both of whom had already been in and out of the International Submarine Band by then) and Barry Tashlan and Billy Briggs (both remnants from the Boston group, Barry and the Remains, who toured America as a support band with the Beatles and may have stayed in LA at the end of it). It was the last four who were masquerading as the Flying Burrito Brothers, though the group never recorded and seemed to disappear without a trace. (You can read more about this prototype Flying Burrito Brothers in the sleeve-note to 'The Last of the Red Hot Burritos').

A year later the name was resurrected by Gram Parsons and Chris Hillman, both of whom had left the Byrds in a state of intense dissatisfaction (see appropriate forthcoming chapter), and a year later, Bernie Leaton rolled up in an effort to inject a little stability and enthusiasm into the group, which was staggering about (according to various interviews with Sneezy Pete, Gram Parsons and Chris Hillman) in a state of apathy, undisciplined juvenility and squabbling tension. Bernie arrived in time to contribute his playing, singing and writing to



GLENN

'Burrito Deluxe' and later to the third album 'The Flying Burrito Brothers', but after one and a half years of plugging away without the band increasing in stature or maturity he decided to quit them too. "I was just fed up, I suppose... I felt that by staying, I was restricting my abilities - I wanted to try and broaden my techniques to a greater degree than my role in the Burritos allowed."

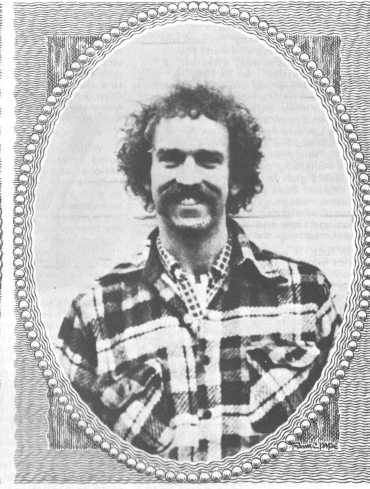
The Burritos hadn't taken off as they'd planned when they'd formed at the end of 1968... all the fancy dressing up and publicity was to no avail, and as the months went by, the initial excitement and optimism gradually dimmed until, as Stephen Stills said, "they couldn't draw flies, let alone a big crowd." Its reputation as a vehicle for creativity and musicianship had really begun to wind down and in the seven months between April and October 1968, Sneezy Pete, Bernie Leaton, Chris Hillman, Al Perkins and Michael Clarke all left the band in search of greener grass. "Sometimes we'd do awful shows; it used to get real embarrassing... we just couldn't be counted on to do a bang-up gig!"

Whilst in the Burritos, Bernie (together with Chris Hillman, and Sneezy Pete), played on an album called 'Barry McGuire and the Doctors', after bumping into McGuire (and Doctor) Eric Burdon at A&M studios. This album was recorded in 1970, though Barry McGuire's vocal abilities don't seem to have improved since his 'I've got a feeling' days five years earlier, but the music, particularly on a track called 'Too much city', is exceptional. (This album is now deleted, but there are loads of copies in the current Woolworth's sale, so rush out and buy one - can't be bad at 72p). "Barry

was a real hippie - really believed all the hippy thing... made a great deal of money and gave it all away. He used to live in a psychically painted VW bus, and just drive around barefoot and tanned, full of 'I love you', you know? He's a really fine dude though - crazy but beautiful. Those sessions were so loose... it took hours to get the tracks down because no-one could remember the arrangements, but it all came out OK." Too right - great stuff.

Anyway, back to the main story; Bernie threw the towel in in July 1971, left the Burritos and looked around to see what was going on of interest... and he happened to wander down to Disneyland to see his old employer, Linda Ronstadt, who was doing a week of gigs there. He was invited to pick along with her band, which included Glen Frey on guitar and Don Henley on drums, and so he did. During that same week, but on a different night, Randy Meisner also came looting along and, at Linda's invitation, played along on bass.

Randy Meisner's family lived in Nebraska and it was there that he first joined a group, the Dynamics, in 1962 at the age of 15. He stayed with them for a while, but realising it was a bit of a blind alley, moved to Colorado and joined a group called the Poor. Randy: "We did as many local gigs as we could for a few years, but then decided to move to Los Angeles and become a super original folk-rock group. Charlie Greene & Brian Stone (who also had Sonny & Cher and the Buffalo Springfield) did some recordings with us but they didn't come to anything and we ended up the same way we'd arrived - with nothing. I think maybe we tried to be too original and it just didn't quite work out - we didn't



BERNIE

hit them hard enough... and so, with prospects looking pretty bleak for the Poor, I left to join Poco after Miles Thomas, our roadie, who knew Richie Furay, had suggested me as a possible bass player for his (Richie's) new group. I stayed with Poco for almost a year before I decided to leave them too."

"There were various reasons for my leaving, but I finally quit over the final mix of the album; I wanted to be present to make my suggestions, but Richie and Jim (Messina) said they were going to do it and that we'd have to wait and listen to it later... so, rather too hastily, I suppose, I quit because I thought that if we were a group we should all have a hand in it. Looking back, I'm more pleased with the way the album ('Pickin' up the pieces') came out, but at the time, I wanted a stronger drum/bass sound... I wasn't very experienced, so maybe Jim was doing the right thing in keeping me out and going for an overall sound!"

"Having left Poco, I was ready to give up, but then Rick Nelson called and asked me to join his band, so I went with him; he'd seen Poco playing at the Troubadour and that had given him the idea of getting a new group together... held got real buzzed by hearing us play that kind of music like that. I played on 'Rick Nelson in Concert', came over to Europe to do a military tour, and then when we got back, I quit, because I didn't feel that I was getting any opportunity to express myself; it wasn't anyone's fault, because it obviously had to be Rick Nelson and his group rather than just being a group with all the members having equal status... I mean, I Rick always consulted us and we all made suggestions, but even so, I wasn't really happy with

the music, so I left and returned to Nebraska for eight months."

Working in a tractor factory was even less appealing and made Randy realise that music was, after all, a better proposition - so he returned to Rick Nelson's group after his second replacement had fallen by the wayside.

"Allen Kemp called me and told me the job was open again and so I went back to LA and rejoined Rick for another six months or so before John Boylan, who produced both Rick and Linda Ronstadt, got me to fill in on one of Linda's gigs in San Francisco which her regular bass player couldn't make for some reason.... so I did that for a couple of nights, and that's where Glenn and I met and discovered that we got on pretty well playing together".

In fact, it was John Boylan, once half of the Appletree Theatre and also producer of the Dillards as well as Linda and Rick, who had the initial idea for the Eagles. Bernie: "He is also Linda's manager and has helped to put her bands together over the last few years - so we all knew him from the times we played on her records or in her groups. He always liked all of us as individuals and apparently he sat down one day, figured out our capabilities, and came to the conclusion that, on paper, it would be hard to put together a better band. Of course, that was 'on paper', which doesn't really mean a thing, because, like I said, no good how the components of a band may be as individual musicians, it's no use them playing together and expecting good results unless there are no personality hang-ups. Anyway, at his suggestion, or rather, his insistence, we got together not long after that Disneyland gig and it just seemed to come together from there..... we wrote and played and sang and had a good time and everything was great".

Glenn Frey, who I didn't get a chance to talk to, had arrived in LA from Detroit and formed a folkie sort of duo with John David Souther some five years ago but, commercially it was a disaster and it withered away after recording an album on Amos, a Los Angeles label owned by ex-rock and roller Jimmy Bowen. Glenn, however, had wound up contracted to David Geffin's management company and suggested that the Eagles present themselves and their ideas to Geffin, who was in the throes of launching his own record company, established on the proceeds of his working with Laura Nyro and CSN&Y.

This they did, and though there was nothing of any staggering magnitude in their music so far, it was evident that the fruits of the union would flower if given the chance - they were, after all, experienced musicians with solid knowledge and interesting ideas and not just a bunch of punks off the street.... so he signed them up and packed them off to play a month of gigs at the Gallery in Aspen Colorado (no doubt the American equivalent of 'getting it together in a country cottage, man!')

Randy: "The Gallery was a small (held maybe 500, packed in solid) dance bar, where everybody just danced and drank until they fell down.... it was fantastic.... everybody had a great time. We did four sets a night for a month, playing as many originals as we'd written - to work them up ready for the album - and filled out with just about every other song we knew

.... loads of Chuck Berry, some Neil Young songs and all sorts of other things from the other groups we'd played in. It tightened the group up pretty well; we learned how to play with each other, and then we went on to a club in Boulder, which is where Glyn Johns came to see us.... it was exam week, so the place wasn't very full, but Glyn liked us anyway".

Within weeks of their first album being released, the Eagles became national stars, thereby justifying Geffin's faith in their abilities as well as giving him a speedy return on his investment, and although their immediate success was partly attributable to the charismatic aspect of the Geffin/Asylum/Jackson Browne/right place-right time elements, the performance and concept of the music was obviously by far and away the most important clincher.

Harking back, momentarily to the Burritos, I really love some of the tracks they recorded, and I'm sure the musicianship was no less excellent than that of the Eagles.... so where did the difference lie?

Bernie: "In the Burritos, everyone had just as much talent, but it was difficult to make the best possible use of it with that combination of people. Suppose you and I are in a group; say I'm trying to play a certain style.... the more you want me to play that way and do it well, the more I'll try and be inspired, if you like. But if you discourage me, or even show a bit of doubt or hesitation - then I'll close up and it won't happen. The relationship is that delicate; either everyone is totally in accord, or else nobody plays anywhere near 100% of their potential. Sneaky is an incredible steel player, Chris Hillman is just amazing on bass, but their performances could and would have been so much better if there hadn't been the personality conflicts and differences of ideas in the band.... I mean, I didn't do as well as I could have, either."

"None of us in the Eagles have ever been in the limelight, but we're strong well-rounded backing musicians and our ideas run parallel rather than crossing each other. Glenn and I have both had a lot of experience on rhythm guitar, and I think that's maybe the key to our being able to switch lead/rhythm roles.... neither of us felt that we were the lead guitarist - it's a different attitude altogether. This band is the greatest challenge I've ever faced, musically, but at the same time, it's the first band I've been in where there are no downers; the management's an upper, the music's an upper, the producer's an upper, the road crew's an upper.... there is no trace of depression floating around."

Why, I wondered, did they come all the way to London to record.... why not do it in LA?

"We wanted a producer who could handle the folkie stuff and the rock n' roll, and we wanted the best person we could find.... so names like Glyn Johns, Tom Dowd, Bill Halverson, Ted Templeman - people who'd had a history of producing the same range of music as we were into - names like that came to mind.... and Glyn was the first choice. I wasn't familiar with some of the stuff he'd done, like the Steve Miller things, but the other guys were, and were very up on it, so

he came over to see us, but thought we weren't ready then.... so we met again some months later, talked it over, and eventually came over to England and cut the album in three weeks - he's the hardest working son of a bitch I've ever met.... never lets up for a moment. He's a perfectionist, if you like, and as well as being a producer, he's one of the best engineers in the world - he'd just get the sound straight away.... there's no communication gaps in the studio.... same as there's no communication gaps at Asylum; David Geffin runs the record company, with the consultation of Elliot Roberts, and Elliot and John Hartman run the management company with the consultation of David".

"The album sold nearly 400,000 copies, 'Take it Easy' sold 650,000 singles, 'Witchy Woman' sold another 650,000, and a third single off the same album, 'Peaceful easy feeling', is in the charts now - number 22 with a bullet - so things are looking good."

"You see, when David Geffin signed us, he didn't have any similar bands; he had Jo Jo Gunne, who were an out and out rock band, but we were the only folkie rock band - so he was willing to go out on a limb for us and concentrate his efforts.... he saw the potential and gave us living expenses until such time as the band could support itself - and we're in the black already, of course. In the case of Dillard and Clark, we made the first album for around twenty thousand dollars, but though the record company made their bread back, the sales weren't high enough to bring the group any money. So we had to support ourselves entirely on gigs, which weren't too wonderful."

Don Henley has also experienced some ups and downs over the past ten years - first in a dixieland jazz band, then in a group called Felicity which evolved into another group called Shiloh around 1970 - throughout which time he was lead vocalist as well as drummer.

For years, they were content to chug around Texas doing local gigs, until, concluding that going to LA was the only way to get beyond local group status, they moved to the coast in May 1970 and recorded an album for the (very same) Amos label - with fellow Texan Kenny Rogers producing. "It didn't sell, but then, it wasn't that good.... the songs weren't any good, the production was terrible - in fact, we knew before we made it that it would turn out awful. After that, we just bumbled along, managed by Kenny Rogers' wife, who'd never managed anyone before, and our spirits just got lower and lower - until Al Perkins left to take up an offer to join the Burritos, and the band split up. No one was particularly sad to see this happen; the record hadn't sold, the band wasn't doing anything and we were all flat broke."

Blimey, I've run out of space - that's what comes of taking up too much room with photographs. Never mind, you can sort things out from the family tree I hope, and I'll have to leave all the other stuff (like the geography/musicians' colony of LA, and all about the songs on the first album) for another time.... I haven't even left any room to tell you how great their new album is. (Nothing else to do but sack myself for incompetence). Pete