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EAGLES: A RARE INTERVIEW WITH THE HIGH SCHOOL DESPERADOES

by Linda Cain



After earning two gold and two platinum albums, composing an uninterrupted string of hit singles long enough to comprise a greatest hits album in only four years, making numerous television appearances, acting as back-up band to the Rolling Stones and completing a world concert tour, it is safe to say the Eagles have reached a pinnacle in the rock industry. Named the "Best Band" of 1975 over the Stones and Zeppelin by the judges of Don Kirschner's Rock Music Awards, The Eagles also won the Best Song award for "Best of My Love" last summer while their fourth album, *One Of These*

Nights, topped the charts for most of the year. They are the yardstick against which critics measure country-rock, so "big" their manager refuses to allow the media to interview them.

Yet, a little over a year ago, the Eagles were giving a command performance in a stifling, smelly high school gymnasium. They tuned up in a weight lifting room filled with the odor of dirty jocks, sneakers and the awesome humidity from the swimming pool below. Glenn Frey lingered in the girl's locker room, waiting for his turn to use the only available toilets in the gym. "Any girls in there?" he asked. "Only me, but come on in. Just don't use the third one, I'm in it." He entered two stalls down, carrying on a conversation as he prepared to go on stage (which was not even a platform, just an area fenced off from the rest of the gym). "I never thought I'd be talking to an Eagle while going to the john." The things one has to go through to get interviews these days.

Just before *One Of These Nights* was released, in the spring of 1975, the Eagles were raffled off in a WCFL radio contest as the prize for the Chicago area high school with the most school spirit. A school in the sticks, McHenry High, eventually won a free concert from the Eagles and Dan Fogelberg when the students were able to fit the station's call letters, written 5,000 times, onto a miniscule piece of paper. In exchange for the gig, the Eagles received prime time promotion as the nation's number one disc jockey interviewed them on his show and premiered their most recent album just before the show. During the concert, the winners seemed more enthusiastic over the contest's sponsor than the prize. Superjock Larry Lujack caused a near riot in the bleachers when he tossed records to the grappling crowd after Fogelberg's set. But the Eagles managed to win over the new audience. The entire house, audience and roadies alike, were up and dancing despite the overwhelming heat as the Eagles performed several encores.

Playing high school gyms is nothing new to drummer Don Henley, bassist Randy Meisner, guitarists Glenn Frey, Joe Walsh (recent addition) Bernie Leadon (gone) and Don Felder. Individually, they struggled as impoverished musicians playing with a wide variety of bands until they found success as Eagles. "Since I was 14, I played in high schools," commented Meisner.

Four distinctive individuals with diverse musical and social backgrounds, the Eagles—like the Beatles—have had their personalities pegged by the media. The group's intellectual is Don Henley, 29, who grew up as the only hippie in Linden, Texas. The bushy haired drummer attended college for four years before leaving to seek his fortune in L.A., on the advice of a counter-culture English professor. Now that his dream has come true, Henley wants to make certain that it won't fall apart because of bad management or financial hassles. Both he and Frey keep abreast of the music industry by reading all of the trade papers. The change in management from Geffen to Azoff, which has played a large part in the group's recent success, was a decision made mostly by the two.

Behind 27 year old Glenn Frey's "playboy/rowdy" image lurks the soul of a literate artist. He also attended college before taking off to the West Coast to further his musical career. While he enjoyed some success with the Bob Seger System in his home town of Detroit, singing back up on the group's one hit "Ramblin' Gamblin' Man", the lure of California's music, drugs, and sex was strong. He became close friends with John David Souther and they formed a duet called Longbranch Pennywhistle. Moving into "a real pit" with Jackson Browne in Echo Park, the duet recorded one obscure album on Amos Records — a lot of the inspiration provided by their talented roommate.

Frey and Henley met at the Troubadour where, like most founding L.A. musicians, they hoped to be discovered. Instead, they discovered each other out of desperation. Henley was also recording on Amos Records as the lead singer and drummer for Shiloh. Al Perkins quit Shiloh to join the Flying Burrito Brothers (and later Mannassas) leaving Henley up in the air. At this point, Frey had finally got David Geffen to listen to his material.

The perceptive manager for Joni Mitchell and CSN&Y liked his work and suggested he join a band before recording. Linda Ronstadt hired him for her back-up band, and, two days before they were scheduled to record, the group was still looking for a drummer. The Troubadour encounter solved both their problems and Henley/Frey have been a team ever since. Most of the Eagles' hit songs are a unit of their collaborations. While they often help polish and rewrite Eagles lyrics, Henley and Frey credit the others as the musical experts.

It is Randy Meisner who lays down the driving, sensuous beat for the group with his funk-melodic playing while adding high-end harmonies with his unique voice. Elvis Presley was his first musical influence and he is the only one in the group who digs the Motown sound, pure "funk" rock and "trashy music."

He spends much of his spare time experimenting in the studio or entertaining friends with new albums he's discovered.

When asked if he acts as the "father image" for this somewhat rowdy band, he half-admitted, "No, not quite. Well, yes in a way." The eldest and most settled member of the group at 30, he has been married for 12 years and has three children. He and his family still live in the small Nebraska town where he grew up. He enjoys living in the isolated, but "friendly, typical American, old-fashioned type, small town."

Like the "Doolin Dalton" boy who "left that peaceful life behind," Meisner started his musical career by leaving Nebraska and heading for Denver at age 20. Winning a "battle of the bands" contest and joining a group called the Soul Survivors provided his first big break. The Denver group (not to be confused with the Soul Survivors who did "Expressway to Your Heart") had a local hit song called "I Can't Stand to be in Love with You."

"We more or less cleaned up in Denver because they were real hot when I joined them. So we hit all the stops and pretty much managed ourselves. We made a bunch of money and then split for L.A." Once in California, the group called itself the Poor, an all too appropriate name. "There was one guy and his wife and four others living in a one bedroom apartment in east L.A. We slept on the floor." The Poor's road manager, a friend who came out from Denver, also took on the Buffalo Springfield, the Daily Flash and Sonny and Cher. "But we were like the ones at the bottom of the totem pole. We never really got anywhere."

The road manager then helped get Poco together by bringing out a steel player and drummer from Denver. "Rusty (Young) and George (Grantham) came out to join. And then he thought of me and broke up our group, which had been together for three years and knew absolutely nothing. I mean, we practiced, had original songs and everything but at the time they just weren't what people wanted to hear. They were good songs, meaningful songs. You know, like a lot of the songs that we (Eagles) do."

Meisner's career as an original member of Poco began successfully at the infamous Troubadour. "We started out, practiced for three months and got all the material together. Jimmy (Messina) and Richie (Furay) had put it together. We went to the Troubadour for a "hoot night" and got really great reviews and everything was happening for us and we were really hot. We played there for about a week as an opening act."

Rick Nelson, who was planning a comeback, went to see Poco perform several times. When he found out that Meisner had quit the group because of fights in the studio, Nelson invited him to join his Stone Canyon Band. Meisner played on several albums with the group but left before they hit the charts with "Garden Party." The band was playing in Palo Alto when Meisner met up with the rest of the Eagles. "We played Chuck's Cellar, that's the place where the group (Eagles) was formed. It's like a steakhouse and in the bottom there's a little barn. That's where Linda was playing, and that's where I met Glenn and Don. I rehearsed with them for a couple of days." The combination was a magic one and Linda Ronstadt's band soon became the Eagles.

Bernie Leadon, 29, had a head start in his career, being a native Californian. Like Meisner, he was a member of one of the first rock groups to pick up on the country sound of banjo and pedal steel—the Flying Burrito Brothers. Ex-Byrd Gram Parsons was to become a powerful influence in the direction of that music and in the lives of musicians like Leadon, Emmylou Harris, Chris Hillman, Richie Furay and others, even after his untimely death. "My Man" is Leadon's sensitive elegy to Parsons. The country sound of the Eagles was largely derived from Leadon's foot-stompin' banjo, mellow mandolin playing and a soft melodic voice which matches his tender songs. Leadon was the purist, dedicated to creating meaningful and progressive music while rejecting commercialism and the star trip of riding in limos and staying in luxury hotels.

Leaddon quit and rejoined the Eagles twice before recently deciding to end his role as a touring member of the group, staying on only to work in the studio. Joe Walsh, also managed by Azoff, has replaced him on the road.

Compromise makes for commercial success, but the egos and artistic temperaments of five individuals often clash as a result. Much in-fighting has gone on during the recording of every one of their albums. This was the case when the fifth Eagle, Don Felder, 28, joined the group toward the completion of *On The Border*. The album was started in London under the direction of studio wizard Glyn Johns, who guided the Eagles through their finest effort, *Desperado*. So much fighting went on over making each song perfect, they never finished the record there. They ended up back in L.A. with producer Bill Szymczyk. When Felder, a studio musician, joined them he feared entering a group already on the verge of breaking up.

Originally from Florida, Felder dislikes the L.A. scene and prefers to live quietly along California's coastal canyons with his wife and young son. On the road, Felder fits right in with the group like he's always been one of the boys; either clowning with Henley and Frey or jamming with Meisner.

It becomes apparent upon observing the group backstage that each one has his own distinctive tastes, talents and interests. Leadon spends most of his time before a show checking his drums, the lighting and sound equipment and talking business with manager Irving Azoff.

The 27-year-old former Chicagoan took over managing the Eagles after Geffen became a record company president and left charge of the group to his partners, Elliot Roberts and John Hartman. They never received the promotion and attention of bigger stars on the label like Joni Mitchell and CSN&Y until Azoff took over. By promoting their albums and getting massive airplay, signing them for Kirschner's Rock Concert and bargaining for better recording and concert contracts, Azoff was largely responsible for the Eagles' awesome success. In addition, he formed Front-Line Management, taking on close friends Dan Fogelberg and Joe Walsh, recently signing Boz Scaggs, and forming a new record label called Full Moon. But managing the Eagles is his top priority and he claims to be a good friend to each of them. "He looks out for our personal interests," Meisner said of his miracle-working manager. Despite his reputation for hard-nosed business tactics, the diminutive young man with the owl-rimmed glasses and pudding bowl haircut is easy-going and friendly when not on the line for his boys. When I introduced myself as a freelance writer backstage, he told me, "Go on, ask them anything. Anything at all. They don't bite." (that was before his no-interview policy).

Upon hearing this, Frey developed a gleam in his eyes and began to loudly gnash his teeth. When not doing clever humor like this or occupying himself with a beer in one hand and a short, shapely blonde in the other, Frey is usually basking in the limelight of the fans. Peeking from behind the stage curtain at the Aerie Crown Theater in Chicago, Frey spotted the first row of teenage boys in cowboy hats cheering, stomping, hooting and nearly climbing onto the stage. "Hey, guys! Look at this," he called to the others. "Those guys are crazy!" he added, loving every minute of it. After the show, the very same fans made it backstage past the watchdog security to tell their idols, "We drove 500 miles, all the way from Indiana, to see your show and you were great." Thoroughly pleased, Frey mugged for the instamatics, signed autographs and urged his buddies to do the same. He fits almost perfectly into the teenage idol role he has created for himself. Meisner, like George Harrison in early Beatle days, has been labeled the "quiet one". He admits to shying away from fans, photos and interviews and prefers to stay out of the spotlight. When on stage, he leaves the posturing and audience rapport to Frey. Oddly enough, Meisner was the easiest to talk to, as the others were constantly involved in backstage games. While discussing certain subjects of concern — ecology,



government and the music business—it became clear that Meisner and his four partners have a lot in common despite their differences. They seldom hang out together when not working, but shared beliefs and philosophies have served as a unifying force for their diverse energies and musical talents.

They look to groups like the Beatles and CSN&Y as examples of how personal conflicts and egos can destroy creative unity, and they try to avoid the same mistakes. Referring to the film *Let It Be*, Meisner commented on one common cause for discord among musicians in a band. "When you love someone and the guys in the band don't like her, or she can't stand them, it's hard on you. It's painful."

The Eagles share an interest in sports, especially Frey who is given to wearing Chicago Blackhawks jerseys on stage, and they display a great deal of good old American group effort and "team spirit" when playing together. Upon ending their final song, Frey dashed off stage, shouting, "I gotta piss!" He soon returned to join the rest of the group around a table of cold beer, taking a quick break before the encore. Like a football team, they formed a huddle, as Frey put his arms about his partners and planned the next play. "O.k., let's hit 'em with 'Chug All Night' and 'Tequila Sunrise.' What the hell, we'll do 'Peaceful Easy Feeling' too," coached Frey, as they bounded back to the turf.

High flying followers of Carlos Castaneda and the teachings of Don Juan, the Eagles have received inspiration for some of their songs while tripping on peyote and chugging raw tequila in the Mojave Desert at night. The group got its name from the all-powerful spirit of the American Indian pantheology, the highest form that a sorcerer can achieve. While some "brujos" could take on the form of a raven or coyote, "a master sorcerer was an eagle," according to Carlos Castaneda in *A Separate Reality*. Outlaws, cowboys, the desert, Indian medicine men, witches and peyote are the images which are conjured up in their first two albums, *Eagles* and *Desperado*. Such symbolism in their songs, combined with themes of mysticism, rebellion, breaking the law, paranoia, wanderlust, loneliness, and self-destruction served to make their music and philosophy a smash hit with the current generation.

But rumor has it that Detroit-born Glenn Frey liked the name for the group because the

Eagles sounded like a tough street gang out of *West Side Story*. The sound of the Eagles reaches beyond the past decade and into the biting rock and roll of the 50s. When Frey dons his reflector shades to sing the ballad "James Dean" you know exactly what sort of teenage idol fantasies he dreamed as a young punk growing up in the motor city.

As they sometimes express the sentiments of the 60's counter-culture, they have also managed to capture the apolitical 70's generation as part of their audience. Their largest commercial success, *One of These Nights*, is an album which displays the full range of their talents geared to a mass audience. They have not, however, gained that popularity by reducing their music to the lowest common denominator. It took months in the studio and \$160,000 in production costs before they were satisfied with *One of These Nights*.

Yet the Eagles remain unsure in spite of their success. Not content to sit back and enjoy the ride, they tend to worry about maintaining artistic quality. "What can you do when your dreams come true. And it's not quite like you planned." ("After the Thrill is Gone") expresses these doubts and fears. Topping yourself is a tough act to follow. In the process of gaining a mass audience, they have disappointed their original fans—especially the critics, and have been soundly criticized for selling out.

Regardless, *One of These Nights* displays several levels of meaning, in addition to the catchy, "pop" tunes. The inner conflicts and outward appearances of success is the central theme behind the album. Like the confusingly symbolic covers of the Beatles' records, the physical appearance of *One of These Nights* is in keeping with this conflicting thematic approach. Surrounded by an eerie glow on the back of the jacket stand the five sullen-faced and tough, yet innocent looking, Eagles clad in black with pink roses in their lapels. There is even a message imprinted on the vinyl itself. "Don't worry," it reads on side one, just outside the record label. The sentence is completed on side two: "Nothing will be o.k.!"

A cynical summary of their attitude? Perhaps. Whatever message the Eagles are attempting to convey through their creative efforts is still a mystery; leaving their audience suspended "between the dark and the light", hoping for more signs of genius like those displayed on *Desperado*, yet fearing abandonment for commercial success and mediocrity. □