

Are Glenn and The Eagles high flyin' dealers or just macho chumps?

# EAGLES: Fly Me, I'm Vacuous

by John Milward

The sun has spread a fluorescent haze over the highway's monoxide cloud-drifts. We're three hours on the road and four hours from Manhattan, and my fingers are already calloused from punching the AM radio buttons, striking them with a fury usually reserved for lonely candy machines that gobble change at deserted subway stops. Whenever a good tune is found, the station is allotted its own punch-button, but as New London fades into New Haven, and as various top-forty stations fade in and fade out, it's continually brought home that it's all the same — a dozen tunes played until the grooves finally wear down our patience and leave us slamming the buttons from Elton to Paul to Olivia. Recogniza-

bility is the key, I realize, as I muse over the rationale for such boring radio: the limited attention-span audience wants to hear something they know and can hum along with. So give 'em anything, just so long as they don't punch the button before the song fades into hyped-up pimple commercials. And the capitalist in me accepts the rationale with all the demographics which make the radio audience look like so many stupid Big Macs, and I'm left in a puzzle as to who is to blame for this sad state of pop music. Is it those pig station owners or the people in the next car who accept this pabulumization of their culture?

An errant turn leaves us stuck and sweating in the sprawling flats of Queens, our throats parched for a beer

and our ears hungry for a dish of Springsteen. Dan Ingram, WABC afternoon drive-time jock since I was a kid, is carrying on with 50,000-watt professionalism and the slickness of the next Elton John single, and I keep rapping the buttons. And then, snarling with a hard rock fervor equalled only by New York's 90-degree swelter, the Eagles rise out of the dashboard:

One of these nights.

One of these crazy old nights

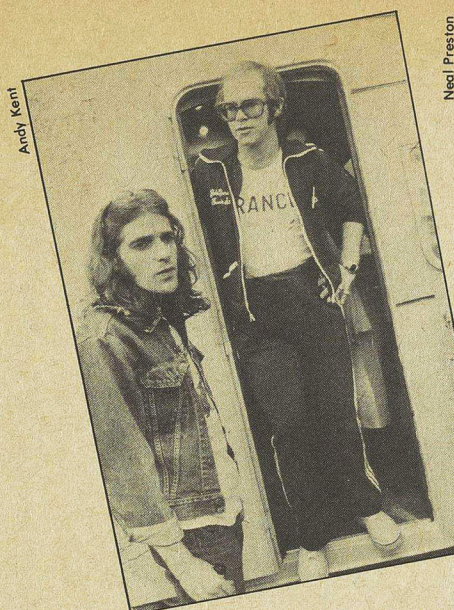
We're gonna find out pretty mama,  
What turns on the light . . .

The Eagles have bound me into a critical quandary: I admire and enjoy their music and also detest them as representatives of the transient vacuum of pop culture. They are my favorite country-rock band because they know how to rock with a vengeance and they have a brilliant producer in Bill Szymczyk, who can fit the audio dynamics of heavy metal into the band's sweet harmonic framework. The radio is never punched when an Eagle single is on the air and I've gotten numerous pleasures out of their records at home, but I'm still left feeling empty and vaguely conned each time the tonearm rejects. I may sing along with "Take it Easy," but it never feels as good as it should.

A Boston writer recently dismissed the Eagles as mere journalists of the California scene, contrasting them with Joni Mitchell and Jackson Browne, the true explorers of the culture, who paint the landscape but also let the scenery reflect off their own individual consciousness. I agree, but what is more dis-

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creem



Is there a sexism clause in the law  
West of the Pecos?



turbing about the Eagles is that by denying a personal stake in their painting and opting for smooth noncommittal commerciality, they become embodiments of the vacuous and rootless culture of which they sing. Eagles songs abound with images of faithless women and the men who create their faithlessness. This relationship is never acknowledged though, for Eagle men are "looking for a lover who won't blow my cover" and never seem to realize that their selfish macho stance robs both them and their "chuggin'" women of their humanity.

The Eagles' sexual duplicity has shown through over their four albums, but it is most striking in comparing their first hit, "Take It Easy," to a disturbingly pretty tune off *One Of These Nights*, "Lyn' Eyes." In "Take It Easy," — ironically co-written by Browne whose three albums sufficiently undermine the song's sentiments — the singer implores us to "lighten up while you still can, don't even try to understand, just find a place to make your stand and take it easy." This rubbish is made palatable because it is sung with a whipping-breeze harmony, but the reality still rests in the protagonist, who is fleeing for his freedom from no less than seven women and still asks his next conquest if her "sweet love is gonna save me." Probably not, for in "Lyn' Eyes" we catch a different view of the Eagles' sexism. Here we have our masculine pioneer narrating the faithlessness of a woman who married an older man for his wealth, though his loving hands were as "cold as ice." The woman is

hungry and searching, like the masculine and heroic Eagle, but she is also pictured as desperate and pitiful. But is she guilty? No, for I choose to blame the singer — an ex-lover of the woman, who, I suspect, blew his cover and cried all night while he was singing his victory song for, as in the song of the same name, he was "Already Gone." It's not surprising that the Eagles' most moving love song, "The Best of My Love," is sung from an alienated soul. "You know we always had each other baby, I guess that wasn't enough. But here in my heart I give you the best of my love."

Sexism, of course, permeates rock and roll, but what bothers me about the Eagles is that they are the best proponents of the West Coast folk-rock sound which, at its inception, seemed determined to incept both the chains that bounded our social relationships and the limitations that stifled folk music. The Eagles sound is rooted in the harmonic-country terrain of the Byrds' Gram Parsons period, but where the Byrds seemed at one with the counter-culture from which they rose, the Eagles fly above their culture in a sleek and controlled glide. Denying the hopes from which their style was nurtured, their appeal rests on the slick and sweet and their songs rarely venture into the murky realm of responsibility and the give-and-take of emotions.

The Eagles' success — sanctified by their winning the best rock band prize on the recent Rock Awards TV show, a concept which itself takes the counter-culture concept away from rock and roll by creating its own star-struck TV spec-

tacle — lays in their broad and amorphous constituency. I sat with 20,000 in Chicago and saw the Eagles execute a solidly professional set of high-energy rocking country and, though I enjoyed and appreciated their craftsmanship, their spiritual lackings left me feeling alienated from their show. Unable to find the sustenance that would throw my body and soul into that final orgasmic commitment to rock and roll — the quest for that enlivening flash being the narcotic of my rock infatuation — I pull back. Unable to participate, I see the Eagles as a commercially based sham and am infuriated because I know I'll be playing "One of These Nights" full-blast on the stereo come morning.

The Eagles have sold out the morality of their culture's vision and glossed over the loss with the richness of sixteen tracks. *Time* magazine can now write of their chart success and picture their philosophy as the culmination of a peyote-and-tequila laced Castaneda search for the band's power spot. But that spot rings with a reactionary tone, for their enlightenment is subservient to the capturing of chart bullets. Fearing the regressions that the Eagles represent in me and my culture, I'm wary when they tell me to take it easy. Complacency is the easiest and most dangerous drug on which you can depend, and it is the disease that rock is meant to destroy.

Me and a couple of cohorts — both friends and Eagle fans, a situation which adds to my perplexity — sat on our car that night while the parking lot

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emptied out into the southwest suburbs, and it was somehow an appropriate ending to a show featuring the ultimate rocker symbols of the transient nature of California (and by that, America) and of our culture and lives. As long lines snaked out towards Halsted, I kept humming the brilliant Tom Waits song, "Old 55," which the Eagles had performed just an hour earlier. I wasn't singing their version though — it is much too pretty to convey the desperate and yet inspiring car ride of which Waits wrote — but rather the original as recorded on his first album. Waits too is embarking on a restless retreat, but his strikes from his heart: "As I pull away slowly, feeling so holy, god knows I'm feeling alive/ And now the

sun is coming up, I'm riding with lady luck/ Freeways, cars and trucks./ Stars beginning to fade, as I join the parade." And more importantly, Waits' journey strikes my soul: "just a wishin' I'd stayed a little longer, lord let me tell you the feelin's getting stronger."

Waits conveys both the pathos and possibilities of those lonely drives in rattling jalopies. His voice makes me feel a loss for not having looked around me in that traffic snarl in Queens and simply dug the carousel of souls bustling down the boulevard. Instead — hot and surly, two cans of Bud rolling under my co-pilot's bucket seat, I stabbed at the radio buttons until I heard the hypnotic chords of the Eagles' latest. Cranking up the volume, I gunned the gas to clear the traffic and hit some open road, the sound of my own wheels driving me absolutely crazy. [Reprinted from the Chicago Reader with permission.]