

THE EAGLES - Glen Frey Interview, December 1976

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by Chris Charlesworth
for Melody Maker *Part 1 of interview*

What's it like, I asked, being an Eagle? Glenn Frey, a perpetual talker, paused to consider the question and the silence lasted almost a minute.

"Oh well... it's not unlike anything I've done all my life. It's not unlike being in any other band, but the world around me seems to change its perspective on me as much as I change my perspective on it. So what it is really... it's a pain in the ass."

Frey and Don Henley collapsed into laughter.

"What he means by that," said Henley, attempting to introduce an element of seriousness into an interview that had already lasted well over an hour, "is that especially over the past year we have felt a tremendous amount of pressure. It's almost harder once you get to the top of the mountain than it is climbing it. It's hard to stay up there and maintain it.

"I admire the Stones, no matter what I think about their music, because they've stuck there. I admire Paul Simon and the Who simply because they've stuck around and not burned themselves out. It's hard because you lose a lot of friends along the way."

"Being an Eagle can be a handicap," said Frey, "but only because of what other people tend to think. Your life is not your own any more but that's a concession I'm willing to make."

"But we asked for it," added Henley.

The Beverly Hills Hotel sits elegantly at the junction of Sunset Boulevard and Beverly Drive, its pink rococo walls almost camouflaged by the pale green palm trees that have been planted in endless rows along the grassy sidewalks of this most sumptuous Los Angeles suburb.

Stories concerning the hotel are legendary, principally because it has, over the years, housed rich and famous guests whose behaviour has made Hollywood synonymous with decadence. Nonetheless it is a discreet establishment: if the bellhops know anything they keep their lips sealed and conversations in the Polo Room Bar are deflected by the walls that surround the choice booths.

The hotel itself is probably not the one directly referred to by the Eagles in the title track of their new album *Hotel California*, though the ambience of the establishment is neatly reflected in the song's lyrics. Either way it was the location chosen by Glenn Frey and Don Henley for one of their rare interviews last week.

Frey and Henley, the two main vocalists in the group, are the perennial spokesmen for the band, whose music has consistently reflected the sound of California in the Seventies as much as the Beach Boys represented the Golden State in the Sixties. The other longest serving member of the band, Nebraskan bass player Randy Meisner, whose soaring falsetto graces such tracks as 'Take It To The Limit' is a shy, retiring man who rushes home to his wife and three children, whenever the group have a free moment.

Which isn't very often these days. Throughout 1976 the Eagles have toured the US almost constantly, through consolidating their position as one of the top few (regularly working) bands in the country. Their year began on a shaky note with Bernie Leadon's departure and the simultaneous arrival of Joe Walsh, a partnership that seemed, on paper, to be a curious mixture of rock and harmony. It's worked, though, and the Eagles are now bigger than ever. Their *Greatest Hits* album has notched up sales in the region of five million copies and, at the same time, introduced the band to a whole new audience. Joe Walsh, who doubtless had a following of his own, has probably done the same thing.

Work on *Hotel California* began in March and ended in October. The sessions were crammed into spare days when the band wasn't playing live and, like all their albums, it reflects the cautious approach that they have towards all their albums. It seems, at times, as if all the individual words and notes, all the intricate little harmonies and all the little background guitar chops, are carefully considered before insertion. Sometimes the results are almost too good to be true, but usually they produce the best floating harmonies, effortlessly easy-going music, since the Everly Brothers.

"We knew for two years that Bernie wasn't happy with the road," said Henley. "He'd been doing it longer than the rest of us. He'd been in the Burrito Brothers, remember, and his road map started five or six years before we began travelling at all.

"Besides, Joe was getting tired of being the leader of a group and feeling that he just wanted to be in a group for a change. He was to be a participant rather than a chief who hired and fired people. Writing all the songs gets to be a big burden on any solo artist."

"There was never any question of trying anybody else," said Frey. "We never made any other calls because there really wasn't anybody else who could join our band, and we wanted to keep it a five-piece group instead of going back down to four again. We like the advantages of a five-piece band. When we got Felder it allowed me to just play rhythm guitar and still there were two guitar players, so we could have two lead guitars playing with each other, yet there is still a rhythm instrument playing with the bass and drums."

According to Henley, Walsh fitted into the band much easier than doubters suggested. "Most of the media suggested he wouldn't fit because we were a mellower band than anything he'd done before, but I read every review of our last tour and they all said how he didn't clutter or get in the way of our music and how well we played his music. On stage we did 'Rocky Mountain Way' and 'Funk 49' and 'Turn To Stone'. He's capable of playing the stuff we do and we're capable of playing his music.

"Sure he introduced some harder guitar playing even though he didn't put it on this album in the way of songwriting, but I think he and Felder played some killer guitar for us all. To me it's like Duane Allman and Eric Clapton together."

Frey agreed. "Those boys (Felder and Walsh) really get on well together which didn't happen with Bernie and Felder."

"Bernie had bluegrass roots," continued Henley. "He'd never really messed with rock and roll guitar, and he never really understood how to get that dirty rock and roll sound. He was just not schooled or programmed in that area. We also knew that Joe was so controlled that he could play the ballads with no problem at all and a lot of people doubted that. Also Felder can play the banjo and a mean mandolin so we didn't lose anything in that area when Bernie left."

The Eagles' last concert with Leadon was in the fall of 1975 in front of 55,000 fans at Anaheim Stadium in California. Ten days later the remaining four Eagles were rehearsing with Walsh for a tour of Australia and New Zealand and Japan. "We didn't want any rumours to get around that Bernie had left and that was it for the Eagles," said Frey. "We wanted it out quickly that Bernie had been replaced by Joe and the group were on their way to New Zealand. Even so there were rumours that Joe wasn't staying with us and that the group was going to split up. "Joe's contract with ABC had expired and Irving Azoff was shopping around the labels to get him another solo deal. First there was talk of Columbia, then staying with ABC and he finally wound up with Asylum, but because he was shopping for a solo deal people construed it as meaning that he couldn't have been interested in recording with the Eagles and that this was a short term thing. All that was bullshit."

"The band is his first priority," said Henley. "I don't think he cares if he ever makes another solo album." According to Frey, American audiences were quick to accept the new-look Eagles. "I received one letter from someone who wanted the old Eagles," he said. "He wanted those mellow Eagles."

"And that," said Henley, "was before he'd even heard the show with Joe in it. It said something like... how can you let Joe Walsh fuck up

The new album is based loosely around a concept in that the State of California represents a hotel whose guests have somehow reached the end of the day; somewhat vaguely it's supposed to chronicle the decaying morals of the seventies. Frey and Henley don't enjoy explaining the meaning which is far less obvious than the western concept of *Desperado*, their second album.

Musically it features more extremes: the lush cuts are as mellow as the Eagles have ever been, even to the point where one track is reprised as an instrumental with only a string section playing, while the up-tempo material bounces along with a harshness that must have come from Joe Walsh. Surprisingly Walsh's only composer credit is a slow song he wrote some time ago with Joe Vitale, one time, drummer in Walsh's defunct Barnstorm band.

"A lot of the music on this album came very easy to us," said Frey, sipping coffee in a bungalow at the Beverly Hills Hotel last week. "We worked up three of the songs for the October tour that we played and found them easy to do on stage. We have been playing the title track, 'Wasted Time' and 'New Kid In Town' but it's difficult to do new tunes on stage. If the people haven't heard them on the radio then they just don't pay that much attention. There has to be a repetition factor for some reason. When we start touring again in March the album will have been out two months or so and by that time we'll be playing it all or most of it."

Although it's been almost a year and a half since the group's last studio album, *One Of These Nights*, they didn't have the usual wealth of spare material that most bands accumulate. "We hardly ever do," said Henley. "We can usually tell when we start a song that if we get past an eighth of the way into finishing it, it'll be worth doing. If we don't get that far then we know it won't be worth finishing."

"The ones that get finished wind up on the record. I know some people write a lot of tunes, pick the best and throw the rest away but with us they never reach that far. We do save ideas though, especially ballads. We also try to balance an album because we believe it's a work of art and it should have contrast and continuity at the same time."

"The rock and roll on this album came from Felder," said Frey, who always refers to the band's second guitarist by his surname as if to differentiate between him and Henley. "Strangely enough Joe wrote a ballad, but me and Joe and Don here collaborated on one track together. I think Joe was saving his song because he knew something like his joining the Eagles was coming up."

The circumstances surrounding Walsh's entry into the group seemed to be almost too convenient to be true. Walsh, as a solo artist, was and is managed by Irving Azoff, who has run the Eagles since he quit as an employee of the Geffin-Roberts management team who handled the affairs of Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young at one time. When Bernie Leadon quit the group, Walsh was between bands so his baptism as an Eagle was a natural business move even if some sceptics doubted his musical adaptability.

"We actually knew some time before he joined," said Frey. "Even while Bernie was still in the band we had a feeling that he might be a part of us before long. We had an indication a year and a half before Bernie left that he was planning to leave - or at least he wasn't going to stay with us for the duration. The duration as we saw it was a much longer period of time than he wanted it to be."

"We had talked to Joe as early as the beginning of 1975 and his attitude was that... 'If it ever happens give me a call.' He'd spent a lot of time in his solo ballpark, but he also knew what it was like to be in a band. So we more or less knew which way things were going to go and it was more or less a matter of time. Even as far back as the last time we were in England, which was that Elton John concert, we knew something was going to happen although we didn't want to talk about it."

your harmonies, but that was before they'd even given us a chance. I don't know whether we ever wrote him back or not but we don't need those kind of people anyway.

"Joe's own songs proved to be showstoppers in the set and that was a great change for me. In fact they saved me because we've been playing 'Witchy Woman' and that stuff since 1972, and to do new songs was like a shot in the arm for us. We can play that kind of material and always have been able to."

"We were kind of reticent to play that music unless we could make it sound great," said Frey. "We didn't want to make a limp-wristed attempt because we didn't have the right kind of guitar players before. We've been working on getting the right guitar line-up for the last three years and now we feel we've got it."

"We're not about to change direction, though," said Henley. "We'll be keeping the best of the old style and not abandoning country rock or whatever you like to call it. We just want to stretch things out a little bit. On this album we get into r and b a little bit, which was something that we began on *On The Border* and developed further on *One Of These Nights*."

"But on the tour there was a whole load of kids who were yelling for Joe and I think there was probably a whole load of them who'd never heard his material either. It was like new songs for them."

Leadon, meanwhile, has had an easy year, though he does have plans to record a solo album in the New Year. Glyn Johns, who produced the first two Eagles' albums, will be producing the record in a studio that Leadon has built in his home. "We always knew that he wouldn't just retire completely," said Henley. "He just wanted to do things at his own pace while we were caught up in a momentum and had to take it to the limit, if you'll pardon the expression."