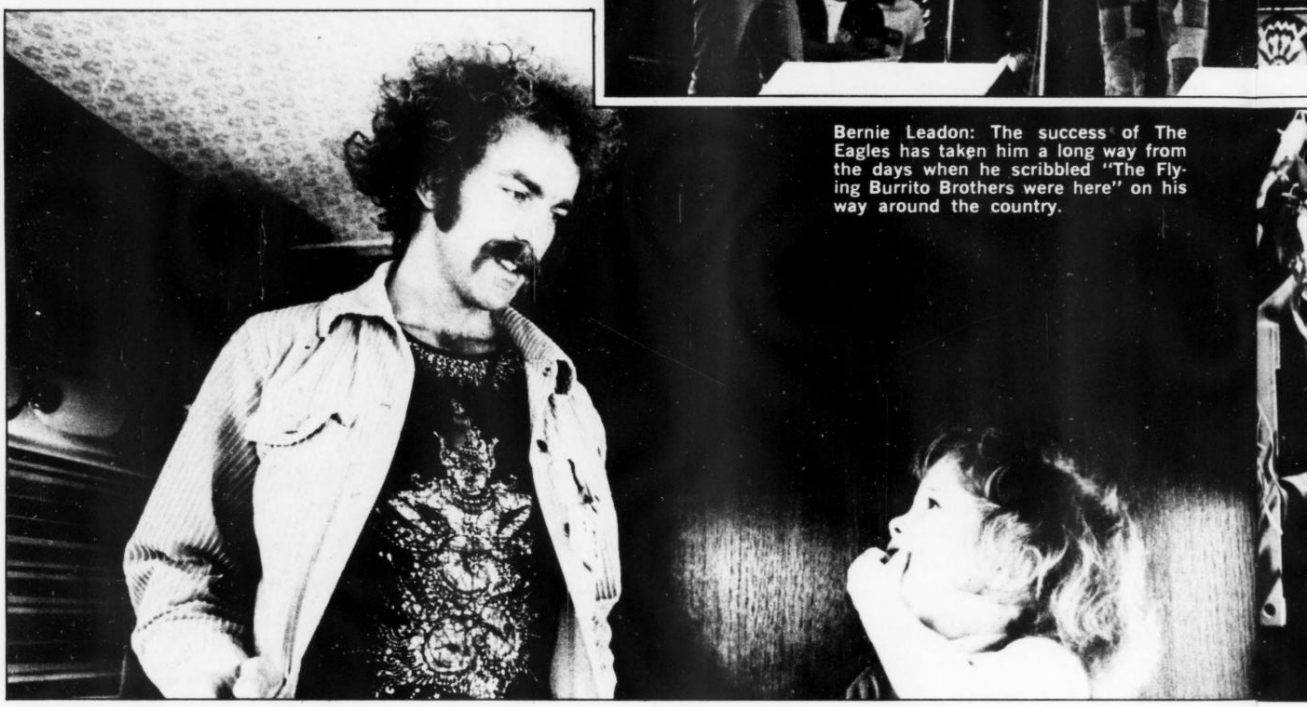
'On The Border' — The Eagles Kick Up A Sundance



Bernie Leadon: The success of The Eagles has taken him a long way from the days when he scribbled "The Flying Burrito Brothers were here" on his way around the country.

The air hung heavy with humidity and the sky was as grey as the cobblestone city of London itself on a soggy, foggy British morn last October. From their tiny makeshift nests in Kensington and Chelsea, the four Eagles—Glenn Frey, Don Henley, Randy Meisner and Bernie Leadon—sleepily dragged themselves through the twisting London streets to Olympic Studios, where dashing producer Glyn Johns was waiting impatiently for them to get on with work on their third album. Glyn had produced their first two LP's, and his production work was still as flawless as ever. But the Eagles knew that that day would be the last time they'd ever work with him.

It was a day like almost any other day since they'd arrived in England earlier that month to commence production on that third LP. Yet after weeks of grueling ten-hour shifts shut-up in the studio for non-stop recording, the Eagles homesickness for the warmth and freedom of the Arizona desertland and the much-missed Southern California sunshine was becoming unbearable. They were all-too-aware that their closed-in environment was taking its toll on their music. When everyone had arrived, they asked Glyn for a private meeting.

Nobody except Glyn and the Eagles knows exactly what was said at that secret session, except that when it was over, the Eagles were looking for a new producer. The unfinished recording of their third album was postponed until after an eight-week tour of England and the States. That would be time enough to get over their traumatic British experience and recharge their creative energy for another bout in the studio—whether with or without Glyn Johns.

"What our music needed was a good kick in the ass," the refreshingly handsome Eagles' guitarist Glenn Frey later admitted. The Eagles looked high and low for that kick, which they feel they've finally found in their new producer, Bill Szymczyck, and with the addition of a fifth Eagle, Don Felder. If they're right, their latest album, *On The Border* (on Asylum Records), should send them flying high to a perch right on top of the charts.

3 Hits to start: The fledgling Eagles first soared onto the scene in the spring of 1972 with a stunning premiere LP that swooped up a gold record and over a quarter-million cash register bells tingling. The LP gave birth to three hit singles, "Take It Easy," "Witchy Woman," and "Peaceful Easy Feelin'." The band had been together a scant six months, but each member joined well recommended. Glenn Frey (guitar-piano-vocals) had founded the Longbranch Pennywhistle group with John David Souther. Curly-topped Bernie Leadon (guitar-banjo-vocals) had played with Dillard & Clark and The Flying Burrito Brothers. Impish-looking Randy Meisner had been the bassist with Poco and Rick Nelson's Stone Canyon Band. And Don Henley

After the poor sales of their thoughtful 'Desperado' album, the outlaw band from the West began to feel like genuine outcasts from the popularity charts. Now, with their third album, The Eagles are rocking harder.

by Ellen Mandell

Glenn Frey: He wrote "James Dean" with Jackson Browne and J.D. Souther on the same night they came up with "Doolin' Dalton."

(drums) had recorded with the Texas-based band, Shiloh. Shortly after their breathtaking entry, and in light of their impressive individual histories, at least one reporter commented, "There was just no doubt about it: the Eagles were gonna be first class."

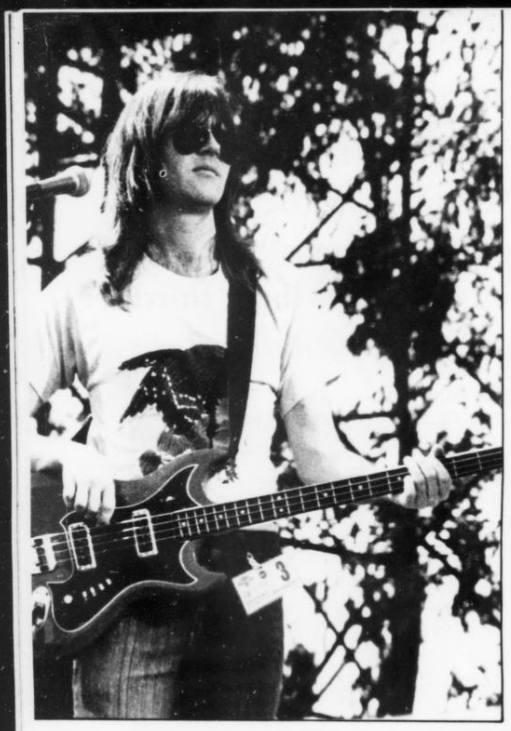
On *Desperado,* their follow-up and perhaps most ambitious effort to date, the Eagles experimented with a concept, trying to draw an analogy between the outlaws of the old west and modern-day rock heros. But *Desperado* sold 50,000 copies less than their dazzling debut LP, and with both singles released from it, "Tequila Sunrise" and "Outlaw Man," the Eagles laid an egg. Catching late suppers every night at Tana's restaurant in Los Angeles during a painfully long, gigless stretch, the Eagles privately wondered if their highly praised debut had been a false first flight.

On the Border appropriately describes where this third album exists in relation to the other two. Its lively spirit intermingles the easy-flowing good-time rock of the first album with the meaningful, thought-out lyrics of the second. On another level, *On The Border* explores the thin line between relative concepts like love and hate, fantasy and reality, sanity and insanity, and life and death.

Bill Szymczyck, who the Eagles nicknamed "Coach," was handpicked to produce *On The Border* simply because they felt he could put across their sun-loving, fast-moving lifestyle on record. But locating Bill, who is perhaps the foremost rock technician in LA, was not as easy as they thought it would be. They called all their contacts, sifted through countless address books and racked their own and other's memory cells, but Szymczyck was nowhere to be found. Finally, on a tip from their manager and spy-supreme, Irv Azoff, they got the word he was at the illustrious Record Plant, producing a single for Jo Jo Gunne. They cornered him during a lunch break at Chuck's Steak House, the popular rock-star haunt next door, and explained their hapless situation. Two days later, they all met again—this time *inside* the Record Plant to begin working on *On The Border.*

Football goal: Then came the disheartening realization that only two tracks from the London sessions—Don Henley's sexy "You Never Cry Like A Lover," and his romantic ballad, "The Best Of My Love"—could be salvaged. Everything else had to be recut from scratch. Bill took his place at the control board.

"Working with Bill was like we were the Miami Dolphins and he was Don Schuyler," quipped the strikingly suntanned Glenn Frey during an interview at his New York hotel suite on posh Park Avenue. "His job as far as producer went was not so much to arrange the music or analyze the songs as much as just to keep us up, keep us loose, make sure things didn't get too intense, but that they got intense enough."



Randy Meisner: Many critics think his "Is It True?" is the most beautiful song on the new album.

Laughing, he recalled the night they recorded the cut "On the Border." It was already past midnight, and after three or four takes, they knew they were sounding really close to how they wanted to sound. Suddenly Bill shut the massive tape recorder and smiled through the glass partition surrounding the engineers booth. "Hey, it sounds great," he said. "Let's just cool it for a few minutes. There's no sense in playing this until you're sick of it." He then proceeded to mix Tanqueray and tonic's for all, at which point the Eagles decided to get "seriously drunk" for the crucial take.

Nestling into an overstuffed armchair, Glenn explained, "We decided to get completely liberated on gin and tonics in order to do that little Temptations bit in the break. We had to be totally uninhibited where we didn't feel like we were going to sing the blues or anything, but like we were white, stoned punks, drunk out of our minds. We were just gonna go out there and have a good time!"

Coach Bill also kept the good booze flowing for the recording of "James Dean," a tune written a couple of years ago by Glenn with two other members of the Asylum Records family, Jackson Browne and John David Souther. (Said Glenn with his tongue planted firmly in his cheek, "Some of us are from different asylums but we're all from the same family.") At the time, Glenn and Jackson and John David were struggling young musicians sharing a slum apartment in a rundown section of LA known as Echo Park. Hungry, sweaty, and probably a bit delirious from the summer heat and warm wine, they were passing the time one night rapping about famous outlaws—Dillinger, the Dalton brothers, and the on- and off-stage roles of the notorious James Dean. By the time the sun came up, the basic riffs for the haunting ballad, "Doolin' Daltons" (included on *Desperado*), and the frenetic "James Dean" had been written.

Gram eulogy: Two of the tunes on *On The Border* were written in honor of the late Gram Parsons, who'd been a close friend of all the Eagles. Bernie Leadon, who'd played with Gram in the Flying Burrito Brothers, immortalizes him in a touching tribute entitled "My Man":

I once knew a man, a very talented guy.
He'd sing for the people and the people would cry.
We knew that his song came from deep down inside.
You could hear it in his voice
And see it in his eyes . . .
He's gone far beyond the pain,
And we who must remain
Go on living just the same.

Glenn wrote "Good Day In Hell" for Gram several months before his sudden and mysterious death. The song features some downright nasty slide work by guitarist Don Felder, who ultimately was asked to join the Eagles. Originally, Glenn had wanted Joe Walsh to play the part, impressed by his searing slide on "Rocky Mountain Way." But Joe happened to be out of town at the time, so they called Don, who had played with David Blue and had once been in a band with Bernie in Florida. Playing the part with ease, Don was invited to cut "Already Gone." On "Already Gone," he more than shook a few Eagle feathers, getting into a fiery guitar dual with Glenn. After hours, he displayed his expertise on mandolin, adding a nice touch to Eagles' standards like "Peaceful Easy Feelin' " and "Tequila Sunrise."

Pulling back his sun-streaked golden mane of hair Glenn confessed, "There were only four Eagles and I could never foresee that framework actually changing. But I saw no one who could fit in as completely as Don does. He's definitely the fifth Eagle. No doubt about it."

Jammed birds: Last March, the Eagles were given the chance to make their television debut as a five-man band before a live audience of 300,000 on the ABC-televised California Jam. The night before the jam they played in Phoenix. As soon as their gig was over, they raced to the airport and hopped the last flight to LA. There they crammed into a rented station wagon and sped along the freeway to the Holiday Inn in Ontario, the site of the jam. Animated conversation about their set and changes in some of their arrangements ran non-stop throughout the anxiety-filled two-hour trip. But the fact that Don Felder's wife, Susan, was due to give birth any day didn't come up until they reached the hotel.

No sooner was their car unloaded than Don was paged at the hotel. Susan was having pains 10 to 15 minutes apart. And since he was part of a program in which the husband participates in the delivery, he'd *have* to be there. Just in case Susan delivered before 8 A.M., a helicopter would be waiting for Don at Santa Monica airport to speed him back to the gig!

The band had discussed the possibility of something like this occurring. But on the day of the California Jam? With 300,000 fans anxious to meet Don Felder? And after they'd worked so hard towards that moment? The remaining Eagles walked stunned into the Holiday Inn coffee shop, unable to rationalize what had just happened. It was almost 4 A.M. and only one other scraggly soul sat at the counter, obviously part of another band there for the jam. When he suddenly swung around, the Eagles could hardly believe their eyes: It was Jackson! Instantly they were working out arrangements that would include him in "Outlaw Man," "Midnight Flyer" and "Peaceful Easy Feelin'." The Eagles went on as a five piece band after all.

They hit the stage at high noon, and ripped through one of the most exciting sets of the day. Garnishing their stage were a 10 foot high medicine wheel, a gift of the Redwing Indians, to keep the good spirits near; a drawing of an Eagle in flight, the art used for the *On The Border* album cover, drawn by American Indian artist Betian Yaaz; and a floor covering of warm earth brown. Their show is very influenced by what they term "peyote consciousness," and Glenn claimed that their reason for touring is "To bring a chunk of the desert to you."

Once onstage and lost in a mesa of their music, the Eagles memories of the dinginess of London and the horror of seeing *Desperado* fall by the wayside became just bitter nightmares fading across to the other side of the border. Their decision to change producers and add a fifth member had put them back on the galloping track. And in front of 300,000 sun-drenched fans, the Eagles seemed to have found their place in the sky at last.

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