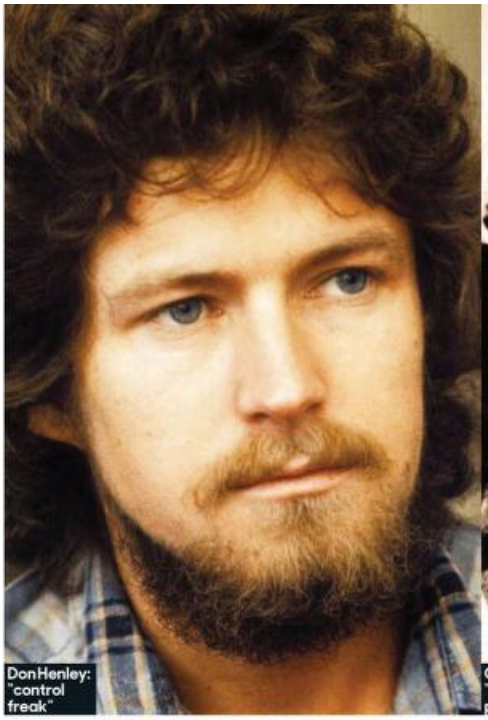
TAKE IT EASY

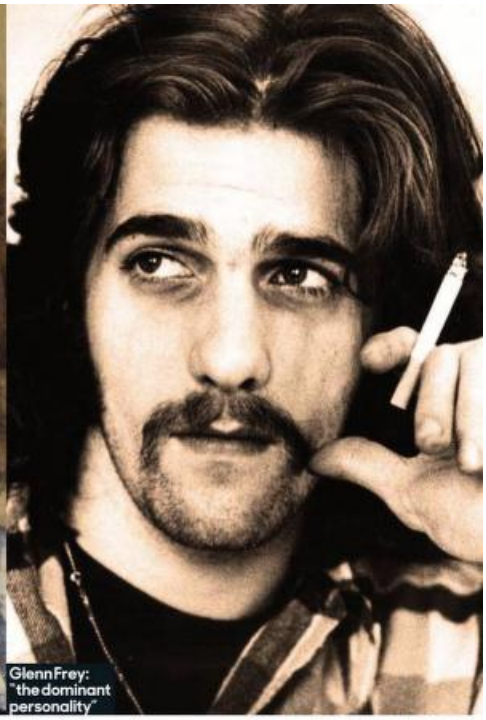
Fifty years ago, in the frozen depths of a British winter, the EAGLES recorded their debut album, in doing so defining their signature blend of laid-back country rock. But what took this ambitious group of self-confessed "control freaks" from the sun-baked climes of California to a cavernous and draughty studio in Barnes, in pursuit of success? "The shop ladies would call you 'dearie'," learns Nick Hasted.

Photo by HENRY DILTZ

"We are sons of the desert": the Eagles at Joshua Tree, California, in 1972

FEBRUARY 1972. For these four Americans more used to the temperate Californian climate, London in the depths of winter was not the most propitious place to be. But the intense cold was not the only thing the Eagles had to contend with while they recorded their debut album at Olympic Studios. As guitarist Bernie Leadon recalls, "We're really close to getting this one cut – 'Just one more, come on guys!' We get it, the final note is struck, and right as that ring-out decayed into nothing, the power went off. The machines all stopped. We went into the control room, because the talkback had cut out. Our producer Glyn Johns said, 'Well, we'll just have to listen to it tomorrow...' It was a blackout, due to the strikes." Viewed from a distance of 50 years, the irony of the situation is not lost on Leadon. Here they were, recording laid-back, sun-baked country-rock while crisp layers of frost lay thick on the ground outside the studio and Britain was in the grip of a miners' strike, causing electricity shortages and power cuts. The album they recorded – including "Take It Easy", "Witchy Woman" and "Peaceful Easy Feeling" – helped define Southern California's sound during the early '70s – yet the temperature in their rented Maida Vale digs rarely rose above zero. Hell might not have frozen over, but the pipes almost certainly did. "It was a huge culture shock," recalls Don Henley. "Trying to find Mexican food in London... and the burgers were horrible!"


Don Henley: "control freak"


Glenn Frey: "the dominant personality"

At this point, Leadon and his compadres Glenn Frey, Don Henley and Randy Meisner had only been together six months. Many bands in a similar predicament would perhaps have called it a day. But the Eagles were already well advanced with their masterplan – which had led them to chilly London in the first place, specifically to work with Johns, whose track record – The Beatles, Led Zeppelin, The Who – was unimpeachable. "We weren't perfectionists," Henley argues. "We did strive for excellence, and that's two different things. We just tried to make that Eagles record good. I just want to do the best I can do."

The four men had been in acclaimed but commercially unsuccessful bands before. This time, they left nothing to chance. As Leadon confirms, "We asked ourselves, 'What was our MO? What are we doing here?' We wanted it all. Why not? We wanted artistic success, the approval of our peers, commercial success and to be well paid. We had what we called the LCD Show – Lowest Common Denominator. We rehearsed so that if two guys have flu and two of the others aren't speaking, most of the audience wouldn't know. I came to look at bands as entrepreneurial, young businesses. Consistency and discipline is a lot of how we succeeded."

Consistency? Discipline? These qualities stood the Eagles in great stead – then, as now. Fifty years on, the Eagles will play a run of UK and European shows, including Hyde Park this summer. Only Henley now remains from the original lineup. But in the winter of 1972, for all their uncommon planning and professionalism, the four original Eagles were a happy and united group, with a delicate balance of talent. "They were all equally important," acknowledges Glyn Johns. "Henley's strongest contribution was his voice. The same with Frey. Bernie Leadon was great on banjo and guitar, and Randy Meisner was a fine bass player, with a voice of extraordinary range. What I was dealing with was those four people. Without any one of them, it wouldn't have been the same."

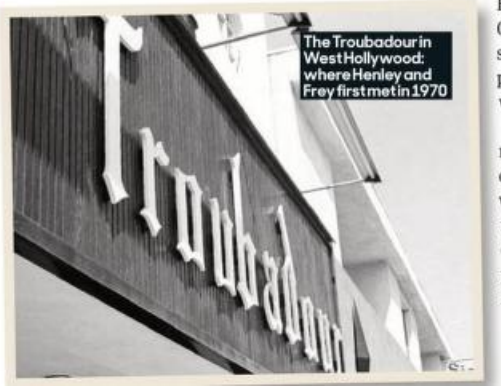
> **"I CAME TO LOOK AT BANDS AS YOUNG BUSINESSES"**
> BERNIE LEADON

COUNTRY rock was well established by the time all four future Eagles had fetched up in Los Angeles. "Even in our small town in Texas," Henley explains, "we'd read about The Flying Burrito Brothers and The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band and Poco and bought their albums." As with many of the bands who helped pioneer the LA country sound, the Eagles were mostly migrants. "I was born in Texas, Glenn Frey is from Michigan, Randy Meisner was from Nebraska – only Bernie Leadon grew up in California," says Henley. "So yeah, it was an amalgam of America. And Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young are from even further afield, though Crosby is Californian, I think. So it was an imported sound."

Henley arrived in town in June 1970 while still a member of Shiloh. Randy Meisner was in Poco, while Leadon had been in foundational country-rock bands Dillard & Clark and The Flying Burrito Brothers. Frey, meanwhile, had moved to Los Angeles in 1969, where he'd formed country-rock duo Longbranch Pennywhistle, with aspiring Texan songwriter JD Souther. The pair wound up living in the same grungy Echo Park apartment complex as Jackson Browne. "We were penniless, living in these rat houses," says Browne. "We were each other's peer group." When David Geffen formed Asylum Records to release Browne's debut, Browne loyally pushed Frey forward for his consideration. Geffen's response? "You need a band."

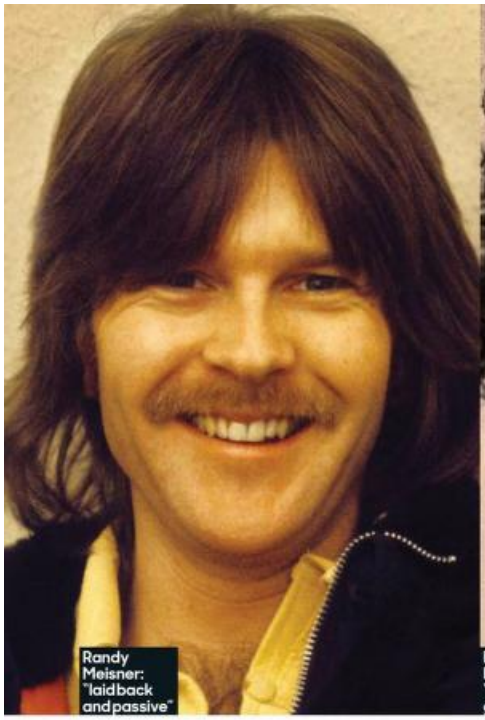
"In 1971, the folk club circuit still existed," Leadon explains, "That was where people like us gathered, and that was the world we came out of. We'd all studied vocals, harmonies and older folk songs and melodies, as well as rock'n'roll and R&B." Their unofficial base became the bar at Doug Weston's Troubadour on Santa Monica Boulevard, West Hollywood. "Ronstadt, Crosby and Chris Hillman were always there," says photographer Henry Diltz. "Amongst the people who arrived in LA and hung out there were Glenn Frey, JD Souther and Don Henley."

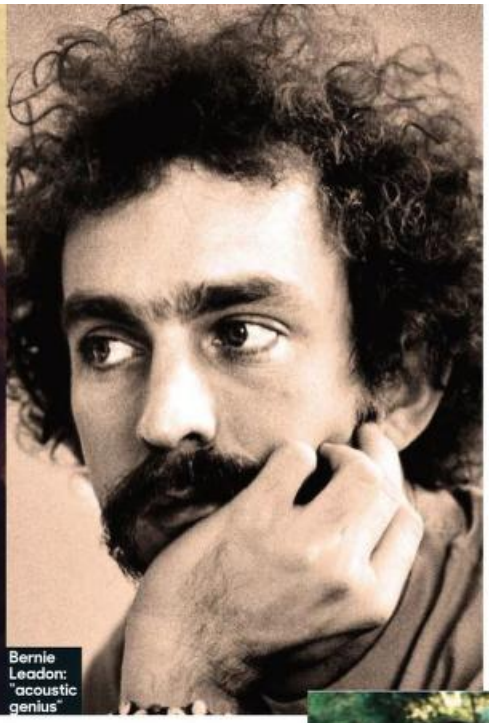
By summer '71 Henley was spending most nights at the Troubadour, "getting ready to call it quits". He met Frey, who told him he wanted to put a band together. Going on the road with Ronstadt's band, they made their own plans at night. Meisner joined after playing with Ronstadt one weekend at Disneyland. Her manager-producer, John



The Troubadour in West Hollywood: where Henley and Frey first met in 1970

GUSBERT HANEKROOT/REDFERNS; MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

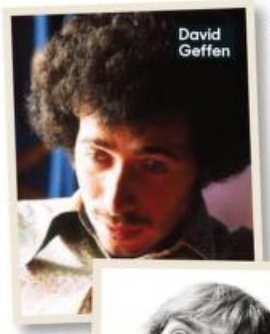

Randy Meisner: "laidback and passive"

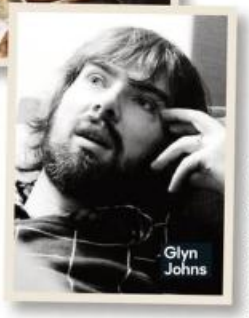

Bernie Leadon: "acoustic genius"

Boylan, paid for a rehearsal studio where they auditioned Leadon. "We just played songs and went, 'Yeah, I think so,'" Leadon says. "Then we got a funky, cheap rehearsal place near the Hollywood Bowl and started woodshedding.

"Meisner was the most laidback and passive. Henley and Frey were both control freaks! Frey was the dominant personality – he was go-go-go. I was somewhere in between. I was very driven. I'd left Hollywood partying behind to go back to the beach lifestyle, living near Malibu and the mountains."

"They called it 'the Eagles' because they always had that desert music," Diltz believes. "Glenn Frey especially would say, 'We are sons of the desert!' Frey was from Detroit, but he came out seeking that Southwestern, desert experience – sunshine and California and the whole mystique of the music business here."


David Geffen


Glyn Johns

Boylan suggested they try Geffen, whose Sunset Strip management office with Elliot Roberts was as starry and hip as the Troubadour. "They handled Crosby, Stills & Nash, Neil Young, Joni Mitchell – everybody, really," Diltz recalls. "Graham Nash would always have his hand outstretched, holding out a joint."

Geffen liked what he heard. "We only had three or four songs," Leadon remembers. "But he said, 'OK, let's do this.' We were Asylum's first band, with David as manager." In a saga where laid-back hippie art and sharp business sense combined more nakedly than usual, it was the Eagles' biggest break. "Geffen was a rocket ship going to the moon," Leadon says admiringly. "He was ready to launch, had all the skills. He said, 'Don't make trouble, and hold on!'"

The wildly ambitious group next set their sights on a producer. "John Boylan wanted to do it," Leadon says. "But Frey wanted someone top-tier."

"I was at the Troubadour with Mick Jagger watching Billy Preston," remembers Johns. "Glenn Frey came up and introduced himself to me at the bar. He looked like he'd been sleeping rough for a couple of years. He said he had a band that he was very keen to have me produce."

Geffen sent the Eagles far away from LA's spotlight to Colorado ski resorts to effectively rehearse in public – playing The Gallery in Aspen, then Tulagi in Boulder. "We were doing covers and a few songs Glenn had written," says Henley. "But they didn't care – they were so drunk and so high, they'd dance to anything!" Meisner remembers playing "Witchy Woman" and an early, R&B version of "Take It Easy". "We played four sets a night, and become a band," Leadon says. Geffen's office flew Johns up in December. "It was very badly attended and the sound was terrible," Johns says bluntly. "Henley and Randy were caught between Glenn Frey on one side, who thought he was a rock'n'roll guitar-player, and the acoustic genius of Bernie Leadon, who had far more of a country feel. The material wasn't that impressive. It was a mess."

"We came back to LA and tried to write some songs," Henley remembers. Geffen, meanwhile, didn't give up. "He phoned me and said I'd made a huge mistake," says Johns. The producer suggested the Eagles play for him again in a rehearsal room. "When they ran their set, I didn't feel that differently about it." Not, that is, until the band huddled around an acoustic guitar to sing Meisner's "Take The Devil". "It completely blew me away. Once I copped their four-part harmony mix, it opened my eyes to the possibilities."

They rehearsed further with Johns. Then the Eagles flew to London.

Ronstadt: "Not playing made her a catalyst"

THE RONSTADT FACTOR

Singer needs band: finds all that and more

"THERE'S a Linda Ronstadt connection to everything," Bernie Leadon believes. "I worked in her band the Corvettes in '69. Then later Henley and Frey got hired by her, briefly Randy Meisner too. She'd been having significant hits since '67, but because she wasn't a writer or musician, she sought out both diligently. If you said you were a songwriter, she'd give you an acoustic guitar, put you in a corner and say, 'Play me your best song.' I saw her do it."

"She loved all the boys in the band and she loved being part of a band," adds Henry Diltz. "She got those future Eagles to back her up because she needed them. Not playing anything made her a catalyst. And she was the most wonderful singer. Don Henley sang 'Desperado' beautifully with that flinty voice. But Linda Ronstadt's full-throated voice sang it better."

"I THINK they wanted to get us away from the drugs and the women," laughs Henley. "None of us had ever been out of the country before, except for Bernie, who'd been on the road with the Burritos." Nevertheless, the Eagles made the 6,000-mile trip across the Atlantic to record their debut at Olympic Studios in Barnes. They brought some of their LA traits with them – presumably as creature comforts. Meisner recalled sneaking round the back of the studio for a joint or a shot of tequila. "I didn't know anything about their partying habits back home – that wasn't in my brief," says Johns. "If they did take anything, I didn't notice. Because I wasn't having any of that going on. I'd had it for years when I couldn't control it, as an engineer. I had waited months of my life while the Stones got their shit together. I wasn't going to take it any more. That's one of the reasons why the Eagles' stopped working with me later."

Leadon, whose Anglophile, cribbage-playing uncle had served alongside the British Army in World War I, has fond memories of a Burritos show at the Lyceum Ballroom in 1970. Still, their cramped Maida Vale digs left something to be desired. "The bedroom that I had ➤

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES; GIJSBERT HANEKROOT/REDFERNS

didn't have a bed in it. It had a pallet on the floor. I can't believe I actually slept in that apartment... but let's say I did."

In contrast to LA, London seemed like a step back in time. "Some things were delightful. Barnes was still a bit of a village, with a greengrocer, butchers, and another store that just had candles," Leadon laughs. "You had to walk into six small shops to make a meal, the ladies in them would call you dearie, you'd pay 'em and they'd say, 'Ta.' All that was just lovely. Were we cooking for each other? No. We ate out exclusively. We didn't have a kitchen anyway. We didn't go socialising much, either – just the pub and a couple of clubs. We saw Muddy Waters at the Speakeasy and the Stones were there."

> "I NEVER LIKED FREY AND I DON'T THINK HE LIKED ME"
> GLYN JOHNS

The English winter was felt most bitterly at Olympic. "The studios then were large because they had been designed for orchestras," Leadon explains. "Glyn would tailor the room by having the band set up as if on stage in the middle, then he'd put screens around us to make the sound less cavernous. But these studios were hard to heat, it was cold. It just seemed damp. The assistant kids in the control room were called teaboys. We were like – 'Boy, more tea!' If we had any time off, Henley and I would go to a club in Kensington High Street that had a sauna, to keep warm. That could carry us for a couple of hours.

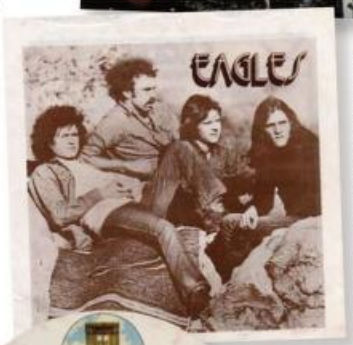
"It was hard because we were just cold," Leadon continues. "But Glyn had the leadership ability to get us to focus. 'Try it this way. Great, you got it – let's put the vocals on!' It was bit of a shock to us because we did the whole thing in three weeks, working five days a week. We weren't staying in a place we wanted to hang out. So we just worked!" Johns has little sympathy for the band's frost-bitten travails: "They weren't there for the weather – they were there to make a record!"

Leadon is keen to highlight the contributions Johns made to the fledgling Eagles sound. "We all knew how to arrange and we already had the basic sound because of the time we spent in Aspen, rehearsing regularly and working on songs. But I would never have focused on the vocals. Glyn had more experience than us, he knew that you had to have a unique sound. He had already decided that the vocal thing would be the centrepiece."

"I built it around harmonies," agrees Johns. "I tried to make the best of each of their abilities. On 'Take It Easy', there's double-time banjo, which is pretty odd. That was my idea. It makes a big difference and it's pretty difficult to play. But Bernie did it in one take. I remember being excited by what we were doing. I thought they were too."

With a shortage of material, Leadon reached back to a co-write with Guy Clark – "Train Leaves Here This Morning" from 1968's *The Fantastic Expedition Of Dillard And Clark*.

"The main difference from Dillard & Clark is Glenn's electric guitar solo," Leadon explains. "But the Eagles rendition is very country, folky and stripped down. There's electric lead, electric bass and drums, but they're lightly played. It's singer-songwriter-type, stripped-down production and vocal-oriented."



This was just how Johns liked it. But Frey, who had wanted the producer so badly, still itched to rock out. Johns was having none of it. "I'd worked with some pretty innovative characters in that area," he says. "I didn't feel that Glenn Frey could compete!" Leadon argues that the conflict between the band's country and rock camps is exaggerated. "Frey was very capable of playing tasteful music in a more folk vein – Longbranch Pennywhistle were acoustic singer-songwriters. I'd been in a Top 40 rock covers band. There was creative tension – but Eagles songs achieved a synthesis. We couldn't have carried on if we hadn't."

The conflict with Frey also raised the question of just whose band the Eagles was – which continued to chafe until years later, when Leadon and Meisner left. "They started out as equals, influencing each other," Johns believes. "That changed when Henley and Frey started writing more. Was this album more democratic? Yes, it was. But Frey and I didn't ever get on, really. I didn't like him. And I don't think he liked me."

Eagles included just one Henley song, his Leadon co-write "Witchy Woman", rounded out by collaborations with their peers, including Jackson Browne and Frey's majestically languid calling card "Take It Easy" and Jack Tempchin's "Peaceful Easy Feeling". Browne's "Nightingale", discarded in London, was re-recorded back in LA on Geffen's insistence, to give Henley a second lead.

"When we went back home, Randy freaks out and calls a band meeting," Leadon laughs. "He wants to trash-can the whole thing and start over. He thinks it's not good, he's paranoid, he's afraid. Glyn had to fly out and calm us down." Such last-minute panics aside, the Eagles' first album was finished.

"Boy, more tea!": Frey and Leadon in London, 1973

GLISBERT HANEKROOT/REDFERNS

Peyote campfire: (l–r) Henley, Leadon, Frey and Meisner prepare for the *Eagles* cover shoot, 1972

THE band left the Troubador shortly after it shut at 2am, reaching the Joshua Tree National Park three hours later. Accompanied by Henry Diltz, they intended to photograph the sleeve for *Eagles* as the sun rose. "We took a guide who knew the desert," says Diltz. "We went to a secret mountain top, where certain Hollywood actors would take psychedelics. You don't drive in like a tourist; you go in the back way, on dirt roads, opening fences on private property. We started sucking peyote buttons before we got there – plenty of God's herb – and ice-cold beer. By the time we climbed to the top, dawn was breaking.

"There was a natural rock semicircle where we built a fire," Diltz continues. "We weren't fucked-up high, but high in a very pleasant, funny way. We'd smoke a little grass, they got their instruments out. Bernie was playing his banjo, with his shirt off. Glenn had to use the commode behind some rocks. He looked up and said, 'Eagle! Eagle!' He rushed out pulling his pants up, pointing up at the air. Don remembers it was really a hawk. Gary [*Burden, designer*] thought it was a crow. But it was a lovely omen. We spent quite a number of hours around the campfire. It was a bonding experience for all of us. Except I remember Randy didn't eat the peyote. He stood to one side with a smile on his face, not quite as engaged in the hilarity. We all mellowed out around the campfire 'til we came down a bit and then we drove back. I never went back to that spot. I couldn't even find it."

Diltz' photographs reveal a fully connected band, comfortable in each other's company. Looked at now, it could be seen as a rare moment of peace before the harsher realities of the band's coming success set in. "Being the first band on Asylum meant we got special attention in radio promotion," Leadon says. "David Geffen paid for his own radio guy to go on the road with Atlantic's guy. David's was younger, hipper and his only job is to promote the one record Asylum had out. So we got played on a lot of radio stations and that's why 'Take It Easy' was a hit. I was hanging out down on Topanga Beach, and people there were like, 'Wow. You're in *that* band?' Because suddenly it was being played all the time. By the middle of summer 'Witchy Woman' was on the chart, and by summer's end so was 'Peaceful Easy Feeling'."

"Take It Easy" was the real hit – reaching No 12 in the States, while the album, released on June 1, 1972, reached No 22. Leadon considers what was special about the album: "There'd already been country-rock bands, like Poco. But they didn't have the success the Eagles did. I would say our vocal stamp, that particular blend, was better than most. But the biggest reason the Eagles were successful was the fact that Geffen was promoting it."

"As the Eagles we did have success right off the bat," reflects Henley. "I learned a lot from Geffen, about the realities of the business. And at the end of the day, he did give us a contract, which I appreciate, the fact that he signed us to the label and got us into the spotlight."

Having planned their ascent so meticulously, how did the Eagles take to instant success?

"Well, anyone can have a plan," Leadon argues. "We knew it was possible, because we had we sought out the top-tier talent in each category. But whose plans come to fruition? Whose plans succeed beyond your wildest dreams, even? I look back on the Eagles as a huge blessing."

The Eagles tour the UK in June 2022

"HE WAS AN ARCHITECT"

How Gary Burden built *Eagles'* sleeve

"GARY Burden was an architect," Henry Diltz says, recalling the pioneering work done by Burden, the designer of some of the '70s most iconic album covers. "He was fixing Mama Cass's house, and she told him, 'If you can make a blueprint, you can make an album sleeve.'" His work on the Eagles' debut certainly boasts architectural ambition. "Gary had the idea he would print this thing 24 x 24 inches," Diltz explains, "like four album covers in a square, opening like a poster. When I was high on peyote he told me, 'Just get on your hands and knees and photograph the desert floor,' for the inner sleeve. The album was supposed to wrap around it, with a picture on the bottom of the Eagles around the campfire, and then right at the very pinnacle in blue sky was an eagle flying. It would have been very beautiful. But David Geffen thought, 'That's too far out,' and told the printers, 'Just glue it shut.' Which was really stupid, because now the inner spread is upside-down! Geffen made similar last-minute changes on *Desperado* and *On The Border*. So he saved three cents an album! His business sense and Gary's design sense kept butting heads."

HENRY DILTZ