# 1976

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**The Eagles on stage in 1976, following the departure of Bernie Leadon, one of the four founders of the group**

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# "Something has been corrupted"

**As mellow as they appear to be, the EAGLES have a new album which explores a more satirical side. "We have a love-hate relationship with California," says Glenn Frey. "Like anything you love, you're capable of hating it, too."**

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## — MELODY MAKER DECEMBER 11 —

**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 Angelean 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 '70s as much as The Beach Boys represented the Golden State in the '60s.

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, finally 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 the band 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.

**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 '70s. 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 lusher 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 uptempo 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, onetime 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.

> "Joe's own songs proved to be showstoppers in the set"

"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'n'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 Geffen-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 compatibility.

"We actually knew him 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

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The *Hotel California* Eagles lineup: (l–r) Don Felder, Don Henley, Joe Walsh, Glenn Frey and Randy Meisner

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."

"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'n'roll guitar, and he never really understood how to get that dirty rock'n'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 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 lineup 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. »

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Joe Walsh in 1976: the road ahead will involve both a *Rocky Mountain Way* and *Life In The Fast Lane*

On this album we get into R&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."

Neither Frey nor Henley expected their Greatest Hits album to do as well as it did. "I never expected it to do five million," said Frey with genuine disbelief. "The numbers this year are staggering, and I try not to look at them any more. It's a different kind of person that buys Greatest Hits albums… people who buy them for gifts for children and not the kind who buy regular albums. I think you reach more people with them… you reach the over-25s and the under-15s a lot."

Henley seemed vaguely embarrassed by the success of the record. "Let us say that we aren't really advocates of Greatest Hits albums," he said. "They are more or less a ploy by the record company to get free sales. They don't have to spend any money to make them and they get a lot of money back. We got a couple of hate letters after the Greatest Hits album came out that said we were selling out… they said that us and Steve Miller were the last bands who were holding off selling out this way.

"But we didn't have anything to do with it. The record company put it out and we couldn't stop them. We had a say in picking the tracks, sequencing them and doing the graphics."

"I must say," said Frey, "that an eagle's skull which appeared on the sleeve is not very good karma in terms of the American Indian. By putting this shiny eagle's skull on the album we felt like we knew where the Greatest Hits thing was at."

"That was what we looked like after writing all those songs," quipped Henley. "But another reason why I didn't feel bad about putting a Greatest Hits album out was that it definitely marked the end of a phase for us. It marked the end of five years, and this new album opens up a whole new era for us. Ever since 'Best Of My Love' kicked off a whole big thing for us, moving us from the top 90 per cent of bands in America to the top 10 per cent, we've been running and I never had time to stop and think about how well the Greatest Hits record did. We just wanted to stay busy."

A pattern, coincidence perhaps, seems to be emerging with the release of *Hotel California*. The Eagles' first album contained three hit singles – "Take It Easy", "Witchy Woman" and "Peaceful Easy Feeling" – and was followed by a concept album, *Desperado*; the *One Of These Nights* album contained three hit singles – the title track, "Lyin' Eyes" and "Take It To The Limit" – and is followed by their second concept approach.

"Like *Desperado* it didn't necessarily start out to be a concept album but it became one after all," said Henley. "It's a more urbane version of *Desperado* inasmuch as the symbolism isn't set in the past but is here and now."

"We had all those hit singles off *One Of These Nights* and that gives you more room to breathe and make an album more like the kind of album we really want to make," said Frey. "We took some artistic liberties with the new record which we hadn't taken before, and part of it was because we felt a slight ease of pressure because the last album had done so damn well."

"Hit singles are no crime," said Henley. "Some people view them to be something that can't be good artistically, and that's total nonsense as far as I'm concerned. Paul Simon has hit singles, Bob Dylan has hit singles, Neil Young has hit singles, and The Beatles had lots of hit singles.

"The way the record business is structured these days… if you don't have singles you can forget it. You can work for 10 years making eclectic and artistic underground albums and maybe you'll get the recognition you deserve when you're half-dead.

"But even the FM stations here are playing singles just to stay in business. Admittedly there's a lot of fucking rubbish in the singles charts. I won't mention any names, though we all know who they are, so I think

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AM needs a shot in the arm and I am glad that we can contribute something that I consider quality music to the AM airwaves. God knows… it needs something.

"There'll be some singles off the new album, but they'll be long songs. None of the tracks is much under five minutes long, but we're going to release a double-sided single of 'New Kid In Town' and 'Victim Of Love'."

A **HAMMOND ORGAN MAKES** its first appearance on an Eagles album in *Hotel California*, and Walsh was also brought in on various synthesizers, a talent which came as a bonus surprise to the rest of the band. Extra keyboard instruments are now accompanying the Eagles on the road.

"We have to beef up the act to stay in there," said Henley. "We don't want to beef it up with flash and meaningless theatrics like funny clothes and flashlights, or smokebombs or any crap like that. The group has to keep growing musically on stage, even though we do have to keep playing old material.

"When Joe arrived, the older songs began sounding different. I think we were tighter and less cluttered on stage. I can still sing 'Witchy Woman' as inspired as the first time I ever sang it, because people want to hear it, and that's enough for me. Sure I can get tired of it after I've been out on the road for three weeks, but each night seems to bring out a little more inspiration in any particular song."

"For me this summer it was Joe's stuff that excited me," said Frey. "It was good to know that after three more Eagles songs we were going to do one of Joe's. And, of course, the new stuff is always more interesting. It was good to see if we could pull off 'Hotel California' and 'Wasted Time', to see if we could make them happen and make the audience dig new tunes.

"I guess 'Take It To The Limit' as well. Randy [Meisner] gets a standing ovation whenever he hits the high notes, and sometimes the applause goes on for two or three minutes.

"In the last year and a half Randy has really found himself as a vocalist. 'Take It To The Limit' and 'Too Many Hands' were sung with so much brilliance on the record that he is a changed singer in the solo vocalist category. In the group he's always been phenomenal," said Frey.

"Randy has always been the ribbon on our package. He provides all the bottom and the top, but we have to find the right song for his high voice and that usually means it must be in the ballad category. He delivers on such high intensity too… he even sounds a little like Gene Pitney."

"He's kind of a quiet, shy guy with a family, and he's also been doing it longer than we have," said Henley. "He was in a band called The Poor out here in 1968 and then in Poco, and he doesn't care about interviews and so forth. As far as he's concerned he'll just let Glenn and me shoot off our mouths and make fools of ourselves. He does his job and goes home to Nebraska when it's done."

"We've come to learn that we are different people," said Frey. "We learned through the experience of this group that you can't try to change people to the way you want them to be. Randy is a very dedicated musician and when he goes home gets to work on new ideas for the next album in a little studio he has built. Felder lives here in Malibu and he stays there in his own studio recording like a madman.

"These things are going on all the time in this group. We have been together almost non-stop for the past 11 months."

"And that's much too much togetherness," said Henley. "When we do get away we like to get away properly. We all have ladies and other friends, and this year we've neglected our relationships with other musicians like Jackson Browne, JD Souther, Linda Ronstadt and other people we would like to hang out with and write songs with a little more. In the next two or three months we'd like to reopen all those doors and think about our next album.

"John David had a great deal to do with *Hotel California*, and had Jackson Browne not been in the studio making *The Pretender*, I'm sure that he would have been involved as well. JD helped us do 'New Kid In Town' and he helped us finish 'Victim Of Love', too."

"Bill Szymczyk [the band's producer] was also very instrumental in helping us with the musical side of this album," said Frey. "He's always influenced us in the R&B direction and in the rock'n'roll side. I think that the recording technique that we developed and perfected by the time we got to *One Of These Nights* reached a conceptual peak here."

Although it appears that, as almost always, the band are writing about the State of California, Henley insists that it is just a microcosm for the rest of the country. "It's the Bicentennial Year, and this is our Bicentennial statement," he said.

"It's kind of about the demise of the '60s and the decadence and escapism we are experiencing in the '70s. It's also about the kind of limbo we're experiencing in the music business while we're waiting for the next big surge of inspiration, like The Beatles or whatever.

"It's an attempt to shake people out of the apathy they are going through, and also a comment on the destruction of the air and the planet and the ecology. I thank California represents all that because it is the vanguard of America, the farthest place you can go."

"We've often been criticised by people on the East Coast for marketing the Southern California lifestyle… the beautiful girls, the houses in the hills, the footloose people and all that kind of thing, but I think people have spoken too soon on that. We think that this album represents the whole world, not just California, as something elegant which has been corrupted," said Frey.

"This used to be a beautiful place and it still is fairly attractive, but America used to be too before we came over here and fucked it up," said Henley. "We have a love-hate relationship with California. Like anything you love, you're capable of hating it, too. On this album we're simply holding California up as an example.

"I wouldn't live anywhere else, though. I wouldn't run away, I'd rather stand here and fight. The song 'Hollywood Waltz' was about people who came here and corrupted it, then moved on somewhere else, but we're not doing that.

"This place has given us all we've got because we became successful here and we're proud of it, but people from the East Coast have really nailed us to the wall for something that they think we represent. I think it's really a personal vendetta rather than a criticism of the music."

> "On this album we're simply holding California up as an example"

Current plans are for the Eagles to play two dates in December – shows they had to cancel earlier this year because of recording commitments – and then take three months off before a European tour in April. "There needs to be a period of input after all the output," said Henley.

"Then we're going to Europe to play various countries we haven't played before," said Frey. "We've never played in Germany and never played in France, so that needs to be done. We're also planning to play in Scotland this time around. The only time we ever did that before was with Neil Young. The last time we went to London was really the only time I could enjoy it properly."

"We work so much because it's therapeutic," he added. "Sometimes it's easier to be the underdog. We have to keep changing our goals so much now. What we have to look for, what I'm doing to keep me going, is to try and get better each time. I try to make my singing a little better, and my music a little better. At this point it's either grow or stagnate, and we won't do that." *Chris Charlesworth* •

Where Eagles dare...

The Eagles, whose 'Greatest