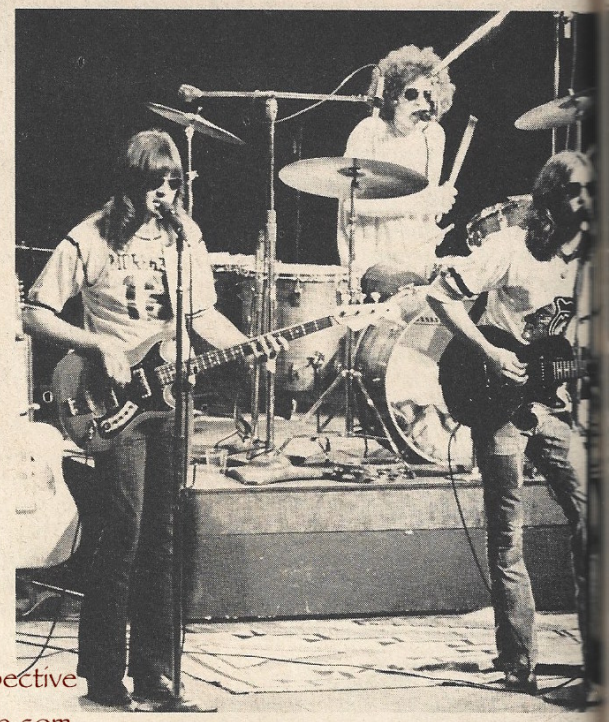


The Eagles Have Stopped Takin' It Easy

by David Rensin

Randy Meisner: A Retrospective
randymeisnerretrospective.com

With a new lead guitarist, a new producer, a hit and a series of almosts, the Eagles step out on the border . . .

Flying around his Howard Johnson's hotel room, Eagle Glenn Frey flashes an embarrassed grin and tries to remember if he took his vitamins. Finding them on the dreasser, he gulps an assorted handful, sloshes them down with water and flops on the bed with a frown.

"You might say I'm afraid to wake up one morning and find I'm not happening anymore," he says with a lazy, L.A.-via-Detroit drawl. "It makes me think of the whole desperate attitude again. I've always felt there's nowhere to go but down once you've reached the top, so I want to take just the right amount of time getting there."

He jumps off the bed, opens a bag and tries to find a phone number.

"I mean, shit, here I am on the road in L.A., my home! All my furniture's in storage, I'm on the streets and . . . yeah, I'm real aware of that. I want to stay sharp as long as I can. Christ knows Joni Mitchell has been an inspiration. It can be done. You *can* go further. You don't have to fizzle out at 27."

Frey, 25, pulls the drapes to get a breath of smoggy/fresh air and watches the freeway traffic.

"You always want things to come faster, but they never do," he sighs. "Actually, they seem to be going fast enough now."

Frey is tired and he knows it. Looking decidedly thinner, his already hollow facial features more sharply defined than ever, he mirrors the pressure borne by the Eagles since September when they began three months of unsuccessful recording in London with Glyn Johns (producer of their first two albums) before switching to Bill Szymczyk (Joe Walsh, J. Geils, Edgar Winter, Michael Stanley) and the L.A. Record Plant for another try, this time successful.

During the L.A. sessions, the band left manager Elliot Roberts (the old Geffen/Roberts Co., now Lookout Management) for fireballing industry upstart Irving Azoff. Then they added a fifth Eagle as *On The Border* neared completion.

Now with a week already under their belts, the Eagles (Frey, vocals-guitar-piano; Bernie Leadon, banjo-guitar-vocals; Randy Meisner, bass-vocals; Don Henley, drums-vocals; and new addition Don Felder, guitar-mandolin) have two-and-a-half months of touring ahead to promote the new album.

Neither Frey nor the band have had a chance to relax, but that's the way they want it—a marked change from the sporadic touring that followed the release of their first two albums. Now the Eagles are taking their music to the people and Frey is sitting in a San Fernando Valley hotel room explaining the various changes, the biggest of which was leaving producer Glyn Johns.

"I just think it was time for a change," says Frey carefully, adding he didn't want to say "anything derogatory about Glyn. We're still friends."

Although he cited the "need to do something more challenging," he maintained there was no dissatisfaction with either of Johns' two efforts—at least for him.

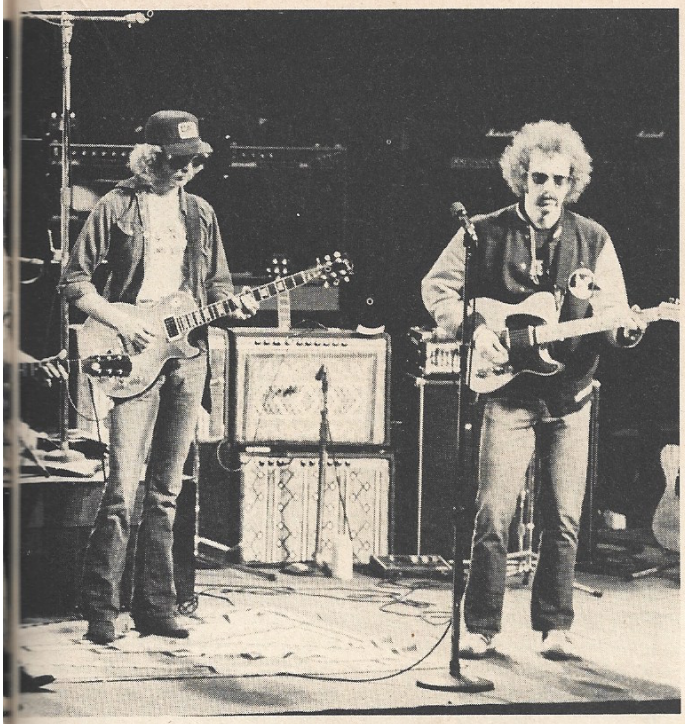
"There were no flies on either album," he laughed. "Bill and Glyn are similar to each other in their own elements, but Szymczyk is a premier *American* rock and roll producer/engineer."

And, as drummer Henley added two weeks later, relaxing in the afternoon sun before a concert at the University of California in Santa Barbara, "We just wanted to sound American instead of English."

The reasons, however, run deeper, with noticeable frustration on both sides.

According to Henley, "Glyn thought we were a nice, country-rock, semi-acoustic band, and every time we wanted to rock and roll, he could name a thousand British bands that could do it better."

He also described the basic differences in sound between the two producers.



"There's a lot less echo with Bill, for one thing. There's more of a raw and funky presence. Glyn had a stamp he put on his records which is a deep echo that is really smooth like ice cream." There are however, two Johns tracks intact on the album, "Best Of My Love" and "You Never Cry Like A Lover," both written by Henley ("He did a good job on those, they needed that sound") and singer/songwriter friend John David Souther, who ascribes the change to "the Eagles' desire to get more of a live, thin sound on the albums."

Randy Meisner, the band's soft-spoken bassist, felt the recording locale had a profound effect on their failure to

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complete *On The Border* in England.

"You can't settle things out inside you when you're staying together," he asserted. "You need to be alone in your own home."

"We couldn't think over there," Henley concurred. "We couldn't create. We were too busy trying to find a good restaurant." This, in spite of the fact that the first two albums were done there—successfully.

"We had more freedom in the studio with Bill," said Frey.

Glyn Johns, talking in Los Angeles just two days after the Eagles left him, reacted this way.

"The six weeks in the studio were a disaster area, but I will sit here and tell you that it had nothing at all to do with me. I certainly got frustrated on some occasions, and pissed because they wouldn't grab the situation by the balls and get on with it. I don't believe in kid-gloving artists."

Johns, a brilliant, hard-working producer, claimed he was ready to give the band more of a say in the studio, but admitted they weren't comfortable in England, "physically or mentally. There were a lot of hang-ups, individually and with each other. But what it boils down to is they weren't ready to make another record."

But the passage of time has eased the pain of separation, and Frey is most complimentary toward Johns.

"We learned tons and tons from Glyn. How to cut through a lot of bullshit in arranging songs and how to shape them up real fast in the studio. He helped us take professional attitudes and mold them into professional recording artistry. He also taught me a lot about myself."

The acquisition of Don Felder on lead guitar has also been a major breakthrough—both in recording and performing. He makes the Eagles a five-piece country band by playing mandolin, allows Leadon to take up instruments heretofore confined to studio overdubs and, by playing occasional rhythm guitar, lets Frey pound the keyboards.

"I've been a Don Felder fan for about a year-and-a-half," say Frey, brimming with excitement. "Ever since I heard him playing in a dressing room in Boston one night. I saw him at a concert in L.A. and asked if he'd come down and put some slide on 'Good Day In Hell,' but with every take he just blew us all away. If he isn't Duane Allman reincarnate, I don't know who the fuck is." Felder was backing David Blue at the time, but after a short conference, the band asked him to join and his presence prompted Meisner to reflect wistfully, "I feel better than ever since he's joined. It's much fuller onstage now."

Back in L.A., Frey offered some personal observations on his co-members.

"I love to say this," he nodded, cracking a smile. "Bernie and Felder are proud guitar players and to me, and I don't mean to make their work comparative, but respectively, they're carrying on the work of Clarence White and Duane Allman.

"Don Henley is like a rock, besides the fact that he's the best singer I've ever worked with.

"Randy is the perfect ribbon for the package. He adds all the top and all the bottom, singing like a lark and giving that growly, Nebraska, r&b-oriented bass feel to the country stuff."

"Glenn's role is Detroit gutter," joked Meisner in return.

"He adds the grease," said Henley. "He's all action and he moves more than any of us trying to get people off. [Maybe that's why he's called the 'Teen King.'] Glenn's got a real positive ego and he's not afraid to do things even though sometimes he does them wrong. He pulls us all through because he's the catalyst."

The Eagles might have liked fame and fortune a bit sooner, but with *On The Border* being a tight mixture of country, ballads and the much-desired rock and roll, and with its promising performance in the marketplace, the rewards should come soon enough. They've already purged themselves of disenchantment with the business and controls on artistic freedom in the *Desperado* album, written during their "pain period" in the guise of a bunch of cowboy songs. Now that they're being thrust into the spotlight, concern for image becomes an important factor.

"We don't go in for glitter or glam rock," said Henley. "We don't wear gorilla suits or aqualungs. Ultimately the music survives and that's what we're most interested in. It will establish the image for you without even working at it."

But still, they're definitely working at it.