

“Their Greatest Hits (1971-1975)”—The Eagles (1976)

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Essay by Marc Eliot (guest post)*



The Eagles

In 1971, the arrival of The Eagles signaled a major shift in popular musical tastes in America. If Woodstock was the funeral for both the music and the culture of a decade of drugged out, hippie, free love and cultish idealism, the Seventies was the decade of blatant decadence, political cynicism, sexual distrust, and rampant narcissism. No band represented both the rejection of the Sixties and the celebration of the Seventies more than its crown princes, the Eagles. Songs like “Lyn’ Eyes,” “Witchy Woman,” “One of These Nights,” and “Already Gone,” filled with spirited playing, close harmonies and an overlay of the Eagles’ war between the sexes, comprise four of the ten selections included in the initial compilation of Eagles’ hit songs from their first four albums, “Their Greatest Hits (1971-1975).”

Ironically, although the Eagles’ laid-back sound was bright and natural as Southern California sunshine, none of the original four members were Golden State natives (Don Henley, vocalist, lyricist, drummer, was from Texas, bred on bluegrass and country music; Glenn Frey, vocalist, lyricist, rhythm guitar, pianist, came from the streets of Detroit, influenced by the music of Motown and mentored by Bob Seger; Randy Meisner, on bass, was a veteran bar band night sider out of Nebraska; Bernie Leadon, guitar, mandolin, banjo, was a Minnesotan who loved and loved to play classic country). Each migrated separately to Los Angeles, like lemmings, to The Troubadour, the musical and cultural ground zero club on Santa Monica Boulevard, owned and operated by Doug Weston, who favored putting on his stage country-rock bands and female vocalists. The nightly music and mayhem of The Troubadour signaled the beginning of the resurgence of, and eventually domination of, West Coast American rock and roll, after a decade-long “British Invasion” had for the most part dominated the airwaves, and the record charts, for most of the stateside Sixties.

Poco, Crosby, Stills, Nash and sometimes Young, Rick Nelson’s Stone Canyon Band, Joni Mitchell, Linda Ronstadt and the occasional British import like Elton John, all became part of the regular Troubadour rotation, along with the individual members of the not-yet formed Eagles, all of whom were on the musical make. Originally put together by manager John Boylan to back up his client Linda Ronstadt for a concert at Disneyland, Don Henley (of Shiloh), Randy Meisner (previously with Poco), Glenn Frey (of Longbranch Pennywhistle), and Bernie Leadon

(of the Flying Burrito Brothers) decided to form their own band. They were signed by David Geffen's independent label Asylum, and made their debut in 1972, with the eponymous "Eagles," produced, at Geffen's urging, by Glyn Johns, a native Brit whose resume included The Beatles, The Who, Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones, and who was fascinated by American country music.

Three top-40 hits came from "Eagles" which was filled with songs that were a little bit country, a little bit rock and roll; youthful, fresh and airy songs about fast cars (convertibles, natch); and girls (chasing and being chased by) including "Take it Easy," written by Frey and Jackson Browne; "Witchy Woman," written by Bernie Leadon and Don Henley, and "Peaceful Easy Feeling," written by Jack Temchin, a friend of the band. All three songs are included in "Their Greatest Hits 1971-1975." "Take it Easy" and "Peaceful Easy Feeling," especially, updated and refined the sound of L.A.'s most iconic 60s band, The Beach Boys.

The Eagles' second album, 1973's "Desperado," was darker and more cynical, and enjoyed less popular appeal. Its thematically linked songs were aimed, in part, at David Geffen, who had sold his label and its catalogue to Warner-Elektra (Warner-Elektra-Asylum), a move the band considered a corporate sell-out, hence the album's "outlaw" motif. "Desperado," with Don Henley on vocal lead, was not released as a single, but, when covered by Linda Ronstadt, became a top 40 hit. Two other songs from the album, "Outlaw Man" and "Tequila Sunrise," both released as singles, appear on "Their Greatest Hits."

The Eagles' third album, 1974's "On the Border," which may be taken, at one level, as a description of the band's growing internal struggles between Leadon's desire for the Eagles to play more traditional country and Frey and Henley's desire to become harder rockers. It also marked the end of the band's association with Johns, who began the album but parted ways over these unresolved musical conflicts. Johns' split with the Eagles was followed by the eventual departure of Bernie Leadon (Leadon stayed for one more album). Bill Szymczyk took over production of "On the Border," he's previous credits included hard-rocking albums by The James Gang, and he brought in Don Felder to give the band a heftier, harder rock sound. Felder, a solid rock guitarist who had floated through the L.A. scene, appears on two tracks of "On the Border": "Good Day in Hell" and "Already Gone." Of the ten songs on the album, only Johns' "You Never Cry Like a Lover" and "Best of My Love" made the final cut. Ironically, "Best of My Love" became the band's first #1 hit. "Already Gone" and "Best of My Love" both appear on "Their Greatest Hits."

The Eagles' fourth album, 1975's "One of These Nights," showed off the band's newly embellished rock chops, encouraged by Szymczyk's production and Don Felder's ringing-a-bell guitar licks that resulted in his being asked to become a full member of the band. "One of These Nights" was the band's first #1 album, and yielded three hit singles, "One of These Nights," a Henley-Frey composition, "Lyn' Eyes," Henley-Frey, and "Take it to The Limit," Henley-Frey and Randy Meisner. Meisner's keening vocals helped make the song one of the band's signatures, and was its mandatory encore at live concerts. "Lyn' Eyes," "One of These Nights," and "Take it to the Limit," are all included in "Their Greatest Hits."

The next album the band released was “Their Greatest Hits (1971-1975),” despite the fact that several members of the band were not in favor of releasing a compilation package, feeling it was too soon, because compilation albums usually signaled the end of the line for a hit singles band like the Eagles. Moreover, Henley was annoyed because he felt the inclusion of “Desperado,” and “Tequila Sunrise” made no sense taken out of the context of the theme-oriented “Desperado” album. There was also a feeling among the band members that Geffen was trying to cash in on the band, releasing an album without having to pay up any production costs. Geffen may have also been partly motivated by the difficulties the band was having finalizing the recording of their next album that held up its release.

In its first week, “Their Greatest Hits (1971-1975),” which came out February 17, 1976, debuted at number four on Billboard’s top 200 album list, and rose to number one the following week, where it stayed for the next five. It has been certified platinum (one million units) 29 times, to date, and counting, and was, for a time, ranked the top-selling album of all time. Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” took over that position after the performer’s death, and the two albums have continued to vie for the top spot.

“Their Greatest Hits (1971-1975)” was not, as some band members had feared, the end of the band’s heady run. A year later, with the addition of Joe Walsh on guitar and vocals, “Hotel California” was finally released and became their ultimate achievement and their signature album. It stands as the definitive chronicle of the band’s self-destruction via excess, paranoia and distrust, and is considered by many to be the ultimate ‘70s album, surpassed in stature only by Bruce Springsteen’s 1975 “Born to Run.”

The Eagles would make one more studio album in the seventies, 1979’s “The Long Run,” after which they disbanded for 14 years, before reuniting as, essentially, a cover band of their own music.

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