Pop Talk: Eagles' 'Eden' well worth the long wait

by George_Varga

LOS ANGELES - The Eagles had just finished the second selection of their concert recently at the newly opened Nokia Theater, where they were wrapping up a six-show series, when a smiling Glenn Frey addressed the sold-out audience of 7,000.

WORTH THE WAIT - The Eagles' first new studio album in 28 years only costs $11.88 for a two-CD set ($10.88 if you download it). But you can't get it in any record stores. CNS Photo courtesy of Andrew MacPherson. "Thanks for coming," said the singer-guitarist. "We have new songs. Ha ha!"

Frey's giddiness was perfectly understandable. After all, it's been 28 years since The Eagles released "The Long Run," which, until recently remained the band's newest studio album. But all that has changed with "Long Road Out of Eden," a two-CD outing that will at last enable this legendary group to explore its present and possible future, not just endlessly revisit its very lucrative musical past.

This point was quickly emphasized at the Los Angeles concert, which began with four songs from the new album: the midtempo country-rocker "How Long"; the wry, R&B-flavored "Busy Being Fabulous"; the sleek Timothy B. Schmit ballad "I Don't Want to Hear Any More"; and the honky-tonk-tinged "Guilty of the Crime."

But "new" is a relative term for an album that was nearly six years (and many disagreements) in the making. And what will likely delight longtime fans - while probably fueling the ire of the band's critics - is how instantly familiar much of "Eden" sounds.

Rather than add hip-hop beats, car-shaking bass lines or any flavor-of-the-month production touches, The Eagles play to their strengths. It's a sound move, since the band's "Greatest Hits" collection from 1976 is still the best-selling album of all time (more than 40 millions copies sold worldwide), while its concert tours since reuniting in 1994 consistently rank among the most profitable in or out of rock.

Accordingly, the J.D. Souther-penned "How Long" sounds like a close relative of "Take It Easy" and "Already Gone," while "Fast Company" evokes a slower, more soulful "Life in the Fast Lane." But other songs find the band very much in the moment, without abandoning their tried and true roots.

It's a challenging balancing act, as singer-drummer Don Henley acknowledged in a 2003 interview.

"My greatest concern is the songwriting process, because we're competing with our own legacy," Henley said at the time.

"The trick is to try to be ourselves and make a record that is current. We don't want to trend-hop. We don't want to try to latch onto the latest fad. We want to be The Eagles and we want to bring, to retain, all the qualities of our music that people love. (It's) a very fine line we have to walk, between sounding like who we are and making a modern record that shows some growth."

"Eden" doesn't measure up to this lofty standard on all 20 of its songs, which helps explain why Henley was strongly in favor of making it a one-disc outing (he was outvoted by his bandmates). Even so, it succeeds often enough to suggest it was mostly worth the long years of effort.

The musical grandeur and lyrical sweep of "Hotel California" is recalled on "Eden's" deeply moving title track. A 10-minute-plus opus, it takes an alternately sad and withering look at the war in Iraq, as well as the cost in human lives and to the soul of both nations.

The album opens with the stunning "No More Walks in the Woods," a nearly a cappella lament about our increasingly fragile environment. It closes with the equally stirring "It's Your World Now," a mariachi-flavored ballad (co-written by Frey and Jack Tempchin) on which the older and wiser Eagles hand the torch to a young new generation. The song's concluding line - The curtain falls / I take my bow - is more than a theatrical allusion, given that Henley has strongly hinted that this will be The Eagles' final album.

Tempchin also co-wrote the brooding "Somebody," which features some razor-sharp slide guitar work by Joe Walsh. Walsh, The Eagles' hardest-rocking (and most self-effacing) member, contributes just one song, "Staying at Home." It finds him slyly lampooning his now mild, no-longer-wild lifestyle (sample verse: Lately I've been stayin' at home / Workin' the crosswords / Turn off the phone / And I dream I'm on vacation / 'Cause I like the way that sounds.)

Happily, no one is slacking on "Eden," which also features strong contributions from keyboardist/trombonist Michael Thompson and saxophonist/violinist Al Garth.

It's not a flawless album, to be sure, and an air of compromise can be detected on several tracks. But its strengths easily outweigh its shortcomings, so much so that one hopes "Long Road Out of Eden" won't mark the end of the road for The Eagles.

REVIEW

The Eagles

"Long Road Out of Eden"

(available only at Wal-Mart stores and online at www.eaglesband.com)

3 1/2 stars.

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