

Earnest Don Henley gets serious

By Greg Kot

TRIBUNE ROCK CRITIC

I hate to tell you this, but I'm very, very happy."

Don Henley hissed those words at the outset of a new song, "Everything Is Different Now," even though he cracked very few smiles Saturday at the New Arie Crown Theater.

Henley always had the reputation as the earnest, cynical one in the Eagles' hit factory, playing a caustic poor-man's Lennon to Glen Frey's jocular McCartney. If comparing the Eagles to the Beatles sounds like a stretch, consider that the California country-rockers defined the '70s in much the same way as the Fab Four did the '60s. With a series of indelible songs, the Eagles captured their era's self-centered party spirit and how it eroded into cocaine-fueled decadence better than almost any other band.

The 52-year-old Henley has tried to play a similar role as a solo performer, chronicling his generation's foibles and triumphs with withering directness on four solo albums spread over 18 years.

As a social commentator he remains as cranky as ever, his diatribes against the "captains of industry and their tools on the hill" and "the barons in the balcony" ringing a bit hollow, given that Henley became a veritable poster child for rock greed when the Eagles broke the \$100 ticket barrier during their '90s reunion (top tickets for this show were \$86).

When Henley turned the focus inward, he was far more persuasive. Blessed with a dry, husky baritone that he pushes toward a falsetto cry,

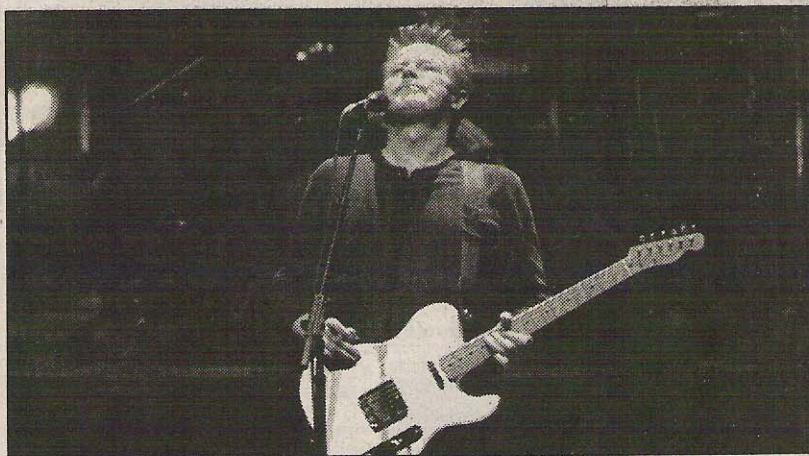


Photo for the Tribune by Kevin Tanaka

Don Henley, who performed at the New Arie Crown Theater on Saturday, proved he's a consummate pop craftsman.

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he was a still-potent blue-eyed soul balladeer on such tunes as the Eagles' "Wasted Time" and his own elegantly world-weary "The End of the Innocence."

With the exception of one unfortunate Michael Bolton-esque moment during the Eagles' "Desperado," when he held a single note for no apparent reason other than to milk some applause, he was a consummate pop craftsman.

For a drummer (the role he played in the Eagles), Henley doesn't experiment much with rhythm, and he broke out of his deliberate, mid-tempo grooves only a few times: a reworked "Hotel California," which slapped mariachi trombones on top of a reggae pulse, and another Eagles tune, the R&B-

flavored "The Long Run," which without apology borrows its melody from Otis Clay's 1972 soul hit "Trying to Live My Life Without You."

Henley compensated with textural details, employing a gospel choir, a string quartet, a handful of Celtic musicians and a horn section. "Sunset Grill" and "Boys of Summer" captured the sun-glazed exhaustion of early '80s California, "The Heart of the Matter" ached for "forgiveness" but drew poignancy from the prospect that none would be forthcoming, and "For My Wedding" and "Everything is Different Now" greeted the new century with cautious optimism.

No, Henley didn't sound "very, very happy." If this evening was about anything, it was about an artist who takes his work—and himself—very, very seriously.