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A Conversation with Walter Egan

Mike Ragogna: "Magnet And Steel," after all these years, is one of those songs that really stuck with me...with a lot of people. Cool pop classic. How the heck did you create this thing? Was it voodoo? A pact with the devil?

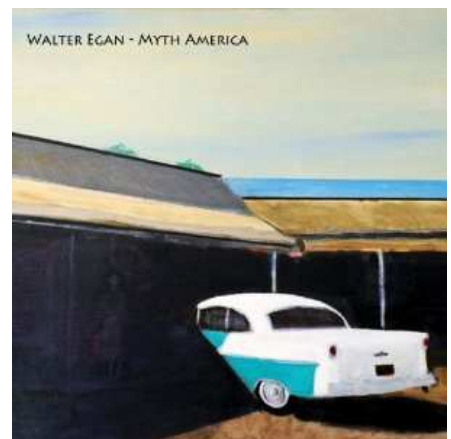
Walter Egan: I'll tell you, if I could figure that part out I would not just have the one hit.

MR: And it's such a classic, it's not just having a hit, it's one that stuck.

WE: I'm a lucky guy, that's all I can say. I was really lucky to be able to fall in there with Lindsey [Buckingham] and Stevie [Nicks] just from happenstance and catch them as they were ascending with Fleetwood Mac yet wanting to keep their identities outside of the band. That's kind of how that happened, I had been doing some demos out there in the now world-famous Sound City, and when I did this hoot night at The Troubadour in February of '76 with a band that I had from Claremont, California. We played seven songs, six of which were mine. I always thought everybody else sang better than me, so I only sang one. At the end of that I was offered a deal instead of the band. It was a very strange moment for me, because that's why I went to California, to get a deal, but I always thought it would be within a different context. Then it was like, "Oh, you want me to sing these, too?" I was taken by surprise by that, I must say. So when we were looking for producers the engineer who had done the demos for us suggested Buckingham Nicks. I was like, "I have no idea who that is! Is that like Don Nix? Is this southern rock?" and he said, "No, listen to this record." So I checked it out, and aside from the orchestral production that Keith Olsen had done on Buckingham Nicks I thought it was an amazing record. I instantly fell in love with Stevie and her voice and all of that. We just happened to be doing stuff at that studio, the magic of Sound City once again. Then I got to meet them as they were in the beginning of *Rumors*. When I met Lindsey, it was as if we had grown up together on separate coasts, we had the same touch stones of The Beach Boys and The Kingston Trio and strange things like that, and my middle name being Lindsay. His band that he had with Stevie was Fritz and my band was called Sageworth on the East coast and I had a female singer named Annie McLoone who showed up on a lot of my records later on and toured with me. Stevie and Annie's birthday fall within a week of one another. All these strange coincidences, it's like when things are meant to be it seems like there are cosmic occurrences to bring them together. I was just really lucky to be able to work with those guys. Stevie, of course, has become such an icon now, even the younger generation know her because of *American Horror Story*.

MR: It's weird to think of how kids now grew up with their parents playing Stevie Nicks or Fleetwood Mac in the house the way our folks played Sinatra.

WE: The young people are picking up on some of the stuff I did a while back. It's kind of neat.



MR: Come to think of it, "Magnet And Steel" might as well be "Strangers In The Night" since it's such a classic!

WE: [laughs] Except everybody knows Frank Sinatra did that. "Magnet And Steel" has endured, but people still don't really know who did it in many cases, which is kind of a funny thing for me. I think I'm the ultimate cult artist because of that.

MR: Well, you also have "Hot Summer Nights" and "Fool Moon Fire" and other hits.

WE: I appreciate that you know that. "Fool Moon Fire" was actually my last charted single. When I did that record for Backstreet Records, Tom Petty's label distributed by MCA. It came out in '83 and it's about figuratively turning into a werewolf and going nuts at night. For the video I suggested, "Why don't I turn into a werewolf and we do this whole thing?" I don't know if you've ever seen that video of "Fool Moon Fire" but I bring my girlfriend to the movie and at the movie we're watching *The Werewolf with Lon Chaney Jr.* and all of a sudden I turn into a werewolf. I run amok, I run outside and grab a guitar from a guy busking out on the street. It's a funny video because eight months later, Michael Jackson came out with *Thriller*. I think somebody must've seen my video. Otherwise, it's just one of those ideas that's in the ether that people are grabbing. But one thing, "Fool Moon Fire" did crack the top forty and it did have the word "lycanthropy" in it, which is the official term for werewolfism. So I feel at least I educated a few people.

MR: That's probably the first time that's ever been in a song.

WE: I think the first and only, certainly the only to crack the top forty. When I grew up in New York there was a guy named John Zacherle who did the horror movie show and then he was a DJ on WPLJ when my first couple of albums came out, so I got to meet him. I had wanted to be Zacherle for Halloween when I was thirteen or something and my mother called the station and said something like "Where I can get a wig like Zacherle?" and actually Zacherle was on the phone and was like, "Madam, that is my own hair." So meeting him was a nice little thing.

MR: Do you also remember "Chiller"?

WE: Oh yeah, [creepy voice] "Chiiiiillerrrrrrr."

MR: [laughs] Let's get into *Myth America*. How did you approach this album differently from others? It seems like it takes a hint or two from the seventies.

WE: Well some of that is unconscious at this point, I think I lived through that decade quite vitally, the seventies was my breakout decade. This record is a product of getting a sixteen track recorder that I could use at home and then I invited my drummer who lives down the block from me to come over and we recorded it, just the two of us. We did the basic tracks with him playing the drums and then I overdubbed just about everything else on there. I work cheap. Last summer I did a house concert up in Berkeley and also in LA and the promoter, Mike Somavilla, who I knew when I was living in DC said, "I get record deals for people, do you have anything that hasn't been released?" and I said, "Well, as a matter of fact, I do, I've got about forty new songs that I haven't unveiled on the world yet." He said, "Let me hear them!" He really like them and he played them for this guy Dean Sciarra. You know Dean, obviously, he's the one who set us up here. Dean liked it, and that's kind of the genesis of the album. The title, *Myth America*, I'd had that title for a number of years now. I love to play with words, my last album was called *Raw Elegant* which is an anagram of Walter Egan. Before that, I had one called *Apocalypso Now* and before that, *Walternative*. So I've always played with words as much as possible. I always thought that *Myth America* was a funny title and yet somehow seemingly profound at the same time.

MR: Let's get down to that. There seems to be a little thread running throughout the situations on this album, it's almost like "myth"-busting in some respects.

WE: That's how I rationalized it myself. Originally, Dean wanted to call it *Cool Crazy*, which is the second track on the record. I thought that would be a cool title, I thought that would be a cool title, I was willing to go along with it. He basically chose seventeen out of the forty songs I gave him and we went back and forth about the seventeen and eventually cut it to fourteen and then eventually cut it to thirteen. So the choices were not so much, "Well is this the most mythic song we can think of here?" it's just the ones that he liked the most and the ones that I lobbied for and thought should be on there, too. It was that kind of a collaboration as far as the setting of it and all of that, but you know, as a songwriter you reflect what's going on in the world and what's your feeling about it. I grew up as a catholic, so "Faith Crashing Down" is very much a diatribe against what's going on the catholic church these days, and "Dying For Love." I would've made the first

couple of songs a little less profound or meaningful or pointed. I wanted to open it with the last song on the record, "Yeah," which I think is not too heavy to start with, it's kind of catchy to bring you in there. Dean thought that because of the way people find music now online and tend to go with the first couple of songs that are on the list, he thought that "Faith Crashing Down" was a very strong song. "Stop Being You" was a song that I wrote after watching Mitt Romney try to be everything to everybody as a politician. As a songwriter you get these sparks of inspiration and with any luck it translates into a more universal theme.

MR: Well that hooked right in to *Myth America*, huh? If ever there was a myth being perpetrated, it was in the body and form of Mitt Romney.

WE: Yeah, he just had no shame at all about pandering. Of course, most politicians don't. I went to Georgetown University, I graduated with a Fine Arts major in 1970. I did metal sculpture there. But while I was there the freshman year in my dorm one of the junior hall monitors was Bill Clinton. Pretty strange. I never really hung out with him, I was kind of on the lunatic fringe of the people that went to Georgetown whereas he was what people who go to Georgetown call a Hoya. Hoya Saxa is the phrase, the motto of the school and a lot of people have a lot of confusion over what that means, we were taught that it's latin and greek, saxa being "rock," hoya being the exclamation "What!" So it really says, "What rocks," and it could be a question, "What rocks?" or it could be, "Hey, what rocks!" Apparently the story among people who go to the school is that John Carroll, founder of the university in 1789 was sailing up the Potomac and there was this rocky bluff and apparently his exclamation was "What rocks!" So the team is called The Hoyas, and nobody knows what that means. It's like The Pokeys at Virginia Tech. It's one of those words.

MR: So you went to catholic school.

WE: I went to Loyola Jesuit High School, where I was in a band called The Malibooz which migrated en masse to Georgetown University. The guy who was the leader of The Malibooz, a guy named John Zambetti, went into pre-med and relinquished his guitar duties to me and then we changed the name of the band from The Malibooz to Sageworth & Drums to be a western folk rock kind of thing. We were totally into The Birds at that point and Buffalo Springfield. When Annie McLoone joined the band, it became like a Jefferson Airplane/Buffalo Springfield kind of band. But we started doing original material fairly early on. I got a guitar when I was fifteen and didn't want to take lessons. For some reason, I thought I could teach myself how to do it. Of course this was after going to buy the guitar and thinking, "Well, I should probably get a four string guitar because you really only have four fingers to use on the neck" and another guy said, "No, no, you can make it," so I wound up getting a six string. So the summer of my fifteenth birthday I basically taught myself to play from a Kingston Trio songbook. We evolved through that period while Georgetown and DC in general seemed like it was trying somewhat consciously to be an east coast San Francisco, because San Francisco was kind of the capital of cool music at that point, as well as LA, but, "oh, plastic LA," and San Francisco was organic and cool and hippie and everything. There were bands that sort of mimicked The Grateful Dead, but the other elbows we were rubbing in those days was a guy called Bill Danoff, who went off to have a band called Fat City and then another band called the Starland Vocal Band. He's responsible for "Afternoon Delight" and "Take Me Home Country Road" and a slew of other great songs.

MR: "Boulder To Birmingham" too, I think.

WE: Yeah! He and Emmylou Harris wrote that one together. Emmylou was playing that same circuit. She didn't go to Georgetown but she was playing in the same circuit down there and was a good friend of ours. In fact, I don't know how much you're into the Graham Parsons stuff...

MR: When I was at Universal, I compiled like three collections by them. Loved those first three albums.

WE: The first three albums are where The Flying Burrito Brothers begin and end for me. But when The Byrds came out with Sweetheart Of The Rodeo it just blew our minds because the most radical thing any hippie or anyone from our time had heard. Buffalo Springfield had a bit of country rock in it, but there was no real blend of hippies doing serious country music until Sweetheart Of The Rodeo. It was just out of left field. You look at the record and you think, "Who is Gram Parsons?" I was on the radio at Georgetown, so I always liked to turn people on to new music and new things and keep ahead of the curve. So everybody that had any contact with the music scene in LA and came to town, I would talk to them

and say, "Who's this Gram Parsons guy? What's with him?" I found out as much as I could about him and then of course when The Flying Burrito Brothers came along I knew very much who he was and really *The Palace Of Sin* was one of those lifechanging records for me. That one and *Sweetheart Of The Rodeo* as far as leading me in that country rock direction. When the Burritos with Rick Roberts were doing *Cellar Door*, that's when depending on who you talk to either Rick or Chris Hillman came in and saw Emmylou play and approached her about singing with his friend. She had no idea who Gram Parsons was. In fact, at that time she wasn't doing country at all, she was doing kind of Judy Collins and Burt Bacharach songs. She had the long velvet dress and an amazing presence, but she didn't know who Gram was. So I said, "I can show you who Graham is!" I took her home and played those records for her and I was like, "Okay." Then when Graham came to town, I think it was the next day, he met Emmylou, I was there, it was the first time I met him, and they needed a place to sing together the next day and I offered my kitchen. So the first time they ever sang together was in my kitchen and I was the only audience they had at that point. They sang "That's All It Took" and "Sweet Dreams." I was trying to learn more about country and country rock so I said, "Oh Gram, what should I do? How can I get into it?" he said, "Listen to Merle Haggard, George Jones, Harlan Howard and Charley Pride.

MR: That's a nice crowd! And now you're in Nashville, you've almost come full circle.

WE: Yeah, that was part of my conscious reason for coming here. In fact I wound up doing the last Burritos album, which came out two years ago on the SPV label, it was called *Sound As Ever*. I think I was the last person in the world to join The Burritos, they sort of became the Menudo of country rock. Everybody's been there, every year there's a different lineup, and it just seemed to drift so far away from that cosmic cowboy thing. I think Gram's great gift was first his vulnerability in his singing, he had very soulful singing, but it wasn't classically great, certainly even in country, and the lyrics which had this semi-psychedelic input to it, "These lines mean a lot more than they're saying!" "Thousand Dollar Wedding" is one of my favorite songs of all time. When I first met him he was wearing his nudie jacket and the charisma was just beaming off of him. In a lot of ways Gram was the last idol I had in the music business. I got to know him a little bit as a sober person and he was a sweetheart of a guy, very much a sweetheart when he was sober. He was very charismatic, he really was. In fact, the Nudie thing has carried on by a guy named Manuel here in Nashville. Manuel just had his eighty first birthday party the other night and I went to that. He's a character, boy.

MR: He's going to need somebody to pass the Nudie torch to, so maybe you have an opportunity here.

WE: [laughs] I'm not even good at mending my own pants. But Manuel is inspirational because he has a lot of vitality for such an age.

MR: What advice do you have for new artists?

WE: Well, "artist" is a broad term, I suppose. In anything creative, you've got to have a pretty tough skin first of all, to be able to continue to hold that flame of your intense desire to create and shield it from all the people who don't appreciate you. I think perseverance is a big part of it. Really loving what you do has a lot to do with it, too. Then it's just getting the most pleasure. In every step of the way as a songwriter, when I'm writing a song it's a great feeling, to feel like you're grabbing something and going with it, and then when that song is finished usually it's another great moment and then of course you record it and it sounds pretty good and somebody else says, "Oh, that's pretty good," that's a great moment, too. There's all these levels of getting your satisfaction out of what you're doing. This is kind of obvious, I suppose, but you've got to love what you're doing. You have to really feel it. I've lived what I consider to be as much of a creative life as possible. When I was in high school I was captain of the baseball team and also the editor of the literary magazine and that continued on until college to a certain degree except I let my baseball career go. But my parents were both in advertising, I grew up in sort of the *Mad Men* world. My mother was the copy director, my stepfather was the art director and they would often drink lots of martinis, but they encouraged my creativity and supported it. As an only child I suppose I got a lot more than others do as far as parental support. So through the years I try everything I can. In college I did metal sculpture and painting and print making and continued to write songs. I've never stopped writing songs, I started when I was sixteen and never stopped. My ex-wife is always like, "how come you don't need therapy?" I think my therapy is my

creativity. I think you're able to process and deal with at least some of what goes on in your life by objectifying it and making it into either a song or a book or a story. I've started writing screenplays over the last ten years or so.

MR: Any placements?

WE: I've got a guy running with one on the west coast now. He feels like it could turn into a miniseries on Syfy.

MR: Wait a minute! Are you a science fiction fan?

WE: I am and I'm not. I was a classic Sci-fi fan, Silverberg and Heinlein and Asimov and those people, but I didn't continue that so much, I moved away from that. But I guess four years ago I was contacted by an author named Jeffrey Thomas, who has a series of books called Punktown, which are kind of sci-fi horror. If you don't know about them, you should check them out, he's really an excellent writer, he's got a new book coming out, too. But he contacted me about using lyrics from my song "Tunnel Of Love" in one of his stories, and I said, "Yeah, of course." Then he came back and said, "Would you like to be a character in the story?" and I said, "Yeah, go for it!" So he wrote this story where the singing duo covering my song "Tunnel Of Love" are interdimensional superstars, one of them looks kind of like a lanky cowboy and the other is a dwarfish kind of marionette creature that floats and has a really bad temper. Anyway, I go to the video shoot for this cover of their song and I get into a big argument with the marionette and he says, "Well f**k you, Egan! We'll just get Bruce Springsteen's 'Tunnel Of Love!'" It's hilarious, because I always thought it was funny that Springsteen wrote a "Tunnel Of Love" after me. From there I went on to read all of his other stuff and I really liked it, I liked a lot of his characters and his imagination. It's a future that's not too far away, it concerns this Earth-like planet named Oasis, with a big city there called Paxton, which is bastardized into Punktown and all these crazy things happen there. You should check it out, it's really cool. Anyway, from reading all those it occurred to me that this one called "Health Agent" would be a great screenplay. And I had written three screenplays based around my own adventures in life, one in high school, one in college and one imagining myself as the rock idol turned idle rocker trying to reinvigorate his career by faking his own death and having a bunch of stuff in the can to release. That was sort of the loose plotline of that one. So it's different for me to do an adaptation, because most scripts have to be a hundred pages long these days. Mine turned out to be so true to the book that it came out to be a hundred and sixty pages, so I thought I'd have to split it. But I showed it to a friend of mine who's an agent out in California and he said, "this is really cool as it, let's see if we can do a Syfy miniseries." I think it has a lot of potential because it does have the franchise thing going for it if people start getting into Punktown, he's got a whole bunch of stories and novels written.

MR: Good luck with that, Walter.

WE: Thanks. But like I said, I try everything I can think of. My other recent thing is a painting exhibit I just had up in Georgetown of the martyrs of rock 'n' roll. I wrote a song called "RNRIP" and it's kind of a tongue in cheek sendup of the demise of the great dead rock 'n' rollers. Then I started doing pieces around it, I started doing little pieces of sculpture, paintings and prints, and then another Gram Parsons connection, this artist named Bill Adair discovered his birth date was the exact same as Gram Parsons', so I became the Gram Parsons expert in his world and he came to Nashville and we talked. He's been doing these gilded doors, which of course refers to the "Sin City" line "On the thirty first floor the gold plated door." We did a joint show between his doors and my paintings. He as a framer took it upon himself to make custom frames for each of these paintings. They're really quite exquisite. We're trying to get it put in the Rock 'N' Roll Hall Of Fame.

MR: Cool. Life is good.

WE: It certainly is when you're doing what you want to do. That goes back to the advice for young artists. Do what you love to do and people will pick up on that. And of course work at it. You have to believe in yourself and work at it.

Transcribed By Galen Hawthorne

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