

Fred J. Eaglesmith – All The Way to Forty, And Fred's "Drive-In Movie"

Part 1 – The Hardscrabble Sharecroppin' Years [1957 to 1990]

Although it doesn't enjoy as high a profile, roots musicians based North of the 49th parallel have consistently produced worthwhile music and recordings. This excursion mostly focuses on that segment of South Ontario that is located between the Southern edge of Lake Ontario and the Northern shores of Lake Erie. As we'll soon discover, Fred J. Eaglesmith has spent most of his life domiciled in that area. Here's Fred to pencil in a few early details.....

"I was born in Hamilton, Ontario during 1957. My folks were chicken farmers and lived in the country. I have eight brothers and sisters. I'm the sixth. At the age of eight, I was getting up at five in the morning and throwing hay down for the cows, before going to school. When we came home we worked again. The bus took an hour and a half to get to school from where we lived. They were horrendously long days. And my parents very religious. Mix that with hard work and you've got a tired kid."

In his tenth year, Fred saw Elvis Presley on a television show. *"I thought, "Everybody loves him, going around singing. That's all he has to do. I can do that. I have the resources." I started singing and writing songs. They were goofy little kid songs. I also listened to country music. At night we could pick up Station WWOL out of Wheeling, West Virginia. I listened to Hank Snow, Wilf Carter - the Canadian guys. Then there was Hank Williams. Conway Twitty. Dolly Parton. Subsequently, I followed harmony groups like The Turtles. And those real romantic guys like Gary Puckett. Real sweet teenage stuff."*

Although Fred's family owned a piano, only his sisters played it. Eaglesmith recalled that if his parents and siblings went anywhere, it was [mostly] to church. As for encouraging Fred's nascent musical abilities and longer-term aspirations, his mother and father only approved of music with a religious theme or purpose. It wasn't however, a case of total and utter despair. *"My father bought me a \$10 guitar when I was twelve, but I couldn't figure out how to play it."* Without the benefit of formal lessons, Fred persevered with a couple of music books. *"When I saw John Prine on "The David Frost Show" it changed my life. I was fourteen years old. I went "OK, I can be this sardonic and sarcastic. This is how I really feel. I don't feel all that sugar and sweet stuff." That's when I started writing more seriously, but I didn't produce anything worthwhile for a long time."*

As for his chores on the family farm as the years passed it became a matter of barely surviving, *"We originally owned two hundred acres. By the time it was over and done with, twelve acres were left. We progressively sold off pieces of the property to keep going. In 1968 my father gave up, and went to town and started selling real estate. Basically the farm was left to us, my brother and I. I was eleven and he was ten. We were farming like men at this point. One summer, we brought in thousands of bales of hay. Other kids we knew were having parties, but we couldn't go to any of them. We got up in the morning and worked. That was our life."* As one teenage year merged into the next, Fred began to question his parent's lifestyle. *"The school was attached to the church I was raised in. Christian Reformed. I began rejecting what they taught me. Started rebelling. When I was fifteen, I hitchhiked to Vancouver for the first time. That's when I became a competent musician. I played every night in a Youth Hostel, right across Canada. I left in June and came back in October. I went a couple of times. One time, it was winter. I was trying to figure out my childhood, while also being exposed to the world. It was the end of the hippy era. On the road I was encouraged by all the people I met. Musically, my parents had always discouraged me. They didn't understand art or being in the entertainment business. They thought my music was a thing of the devil."*

When Eaglesmith turned seventeen he began performing locally in coffeehouses and at open mikes. A few years later, while on the road, he recalled *"I found this book in a Youth Hostel about going back to the land. Having read it, it dawned on me that I had come from a good foundation. I possessed all this information about farming that nobody my age knew. How to plant buckwheat, when to bring it off, and when to plough. When the wheat is ready. The book was called "Cloudburst." It was a hippy, back to the land type of book."*

Returning to his South Ontario home, Fred made friends with some he endearingly called "road freaks" who were making an effort to homestead at the nearby Sweetwater Farm. Since they were musicians they

tended to and play all day long. *"Around the age of twenty, I finally left our farm. A few years later, I signed with Boot Records. It was a national Canadian label. Stompin' Tom Connors had a hand in that label - he's a legendary Canadian East Coast guy. Real patriotic. I didn't really understand how the music business worked, and they didn't put my album out for a year after it was recorded. They sat on it and I got very discouraged. To support my music career, I went into the flower business."*

Eventually released in 1980, **"Fred J. Eaglesmith,"** was recorded at Grant Avenue Studios in Toronto and featured ten of Fred's compositions. *"I had a lot of songs by that point. For about five years, I had been writing what I considered were adequate songs."* The album was produced by recording artist David Essig. *"I met David when there was still a good Canadian music scene. David Essig, Willie P. Bennett and David Wiffen were all making records. I liked the ones David made with Willie. I was at a festival and asked David 'Would you be interested in producing my record.' He said 'Yeah, I think I can do it for \$4,000.00 total.' I got a high-pressure water-blasting job in order to finance the sessions. It was dangerous work, but it paid \$20.00 an hour."* For a long time Eaglesmith's debut recording, a 12" vinyl release, was out of print, but a handful of years back Fred began selling a CD version of the recording at his shows, and it's still currently available via his web site. On this folk styled album Fred sounded remarkably like his musical influences - John Prine in particular. The recording contained the original recording of Fred's "Do You Love Me Now?" which he revisited on his 2003 'back to acoustic' studio album **"Balin."** Fred's road band at that time consisted of Ralph Schipper [bass], whom he had befriended in High School at the age of fourteen, with David Essig on mandolin. They rarely performed in public and mostly in local venues.

Between the release of his first and second albums, Eaglesmith continued to tend his fields of flowers. *"Canada never understood my music during those years. I had these country, sort of hillbilly, roots. I was not encouraged in Canada. The other thing was, I came on the scene at the end of an era."* **"The Boy That Just Went Wrong"** was released on New Woodshed Records during 1983. Fred claimed, *"It was a pretty odd record for the time. A bluegrass style record all about death. Shotgun, where we cut it, was a dumb little studio right by the side of the highway. They had to fill the basement with sand, so the studio wouldn't shake as traffic passed. The studio was cheap, so we made the record there."*

When I first interview Eaglesmith in December 1996 he told me that he considered **"The Boy That Just Went Wrong"** to be the equivalent of a movie soundtrack. The recording was dedicated to his younger brother, who was *"somewhere in Alberta."* *"Ivan had to hide from the law for three or four years."* As for polishing his skills as a composer *"I wrote sort of nonchalantly. They were horrible songs about people dying or getting killed. I was listening to bluegrass music at the time. The Stanley Bothers. Bill Monroe. Whoever I could get my hands on. That was affecting how and what I wrote. Subconsciously, I eventually concluded that I was writing about my childhood. There were some very horrible things that I saw as a child. My parents hated that album."* As for those dark, dark song "Bottom Dollar," for me, remains one of Eaglesmith's most hauntingly beautiful compositions. It also featured fan favourite "Flowers In The Dell" which Fred revisited on **"Live: Ralph's Last Show"** [2001] – a 2CD live recording, recorded in Santa Cruz, California, that commemorated the departure of long time sideman Ralph Schipper.

You may recall that Willie P. Bennett was mentioned a couple of paragraphs ago. *"David, Ralph Schipper and I were playing the Owen Sound Folk Festival. Willie was there and asked 'Do you want a harp player during your set ?' I thought 'Why not.' He came on and it was really good. Willie and David Essig had a reputation. They were sort of like the Willie and Waylon of Canada. That summer David went to Djakarta and when he came back, things had changed between all of us. David left the band and Willie stayed."* Before he left, Essig produced Fred's third album although the sessions at Grant Avenue Studios were constantly dogged by problems. *"I had been making and releasing records for peanuts. That record cost a fortune to complete."*

Released in 1987, Eaglesmith's **"Indiana Road"** lyrics possessed a visibly harder, political edge. Fred was obviously becoming more adept at capturing his feelings and stringing clever lines into biting verses, *"I was angry about what was happening in Canada with farming. I was mad about my childhood, and the land that had been stripped from our family. I could have had this beautiful two hundred acre farm. I put that record out, and nothing happened again. Nothing."* Three years later, at the dawn of the nineteen-nineties the market for flowers collapsed. Concurrent with this untimely financial setback, Fred recalled *"I suddenly started getting calls from people saying, 'We want you to play. We'll give you \$1,000.00 a night.'" **"Indiana***

Road" had, in a real quiet way, become a cult recording. It was amazing to me. The truth is, that is the record that really launched me. We started calling ourselves Fred Eaglesmith and the Flying Squirrels around that time."

to be continued.

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 1/97 & 02/07.

[1800 words].

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Fred J. Eaglesmith – All The Way to Forty, And Fred's "Drive-In Movie"

Part 2 – The Things Is Changin' Years [1990 to 1997]

Last week in Part 1, I traced Fred Eaglesmith's early years on a South Ontario farm, how his love for country music developed and how he eventually achieved his aim of becoming a performing and recording musician.....

During 1990 some kids set fire to a tyre dump in the Ontario town of Hagersville. Commissioned by CBC, Fred penned the amusing "Wooden Wheels In Hagersville." *"People liked the song, so we put it out as a single. While the fire was raging, they predicted that it would burn for three years. It only took twenty-three days to put out. There were black clouds of smoke everywhere. It was an amazingly big thing in Canada. Hagersville lies between Hamilton and Port Dover. We can't lay that song to rest. It's still real popular here. No one would play it on the radio however. That's Canada. If it had been a major label single, they probably would have played it."*

Two years on – although recorded in November 1991 - and housed in a specially made wooden box, Eaglesmith issued a double cassette, nineteen-track album titled **"There Ain't No Easy Road,"** and the set was completed by a forty-page photocopied booklet of lyrics, photographs and testimonials. *"I was still trying to look like I belonged on a major record label. We booked this small hall, stood around a couple of mikes and recorded the songs live - just to see how it sounded. I had wanted to make this wooden box for years. I thought making my own packaging was as honest as I could be. A lot of this had to do with that Luddite sort of Appalachian attitude my father had passed on to me. I made the first five hundred boxes. It got to be too much and later someone else made them. Around the time my flower business failed, this guy came in and said, "I can't believe you're doing this. Why aren't you being a musician." He was a graphic artist and had a little studio in Port Dover. He knew how to get the theatre in the town for free, and the making of **"There Ain't No Easy Road"** developed from there."* The liner notes for the album described the recording process as *"no mixing, no over-dubs... just two mics and a volume control."* Of course Fred hadn't really reinvented 'the wheel' as far as recording was concerned.....circa 1988 Fred's fellow countrymen, The Cowboy Junkies, recorded their sophomore album **"Trinity Sessions"** in a Toronto's Church of the Holy Trinity in one day, reputedly using one microphone.

Scott Merritt who played on **"The Boy That Just Went Wrong"** sessions, reappears on this album. *"We met when we were about eighteen and working the coffeehouses. He later signed with I.R.S., but they didn't know what to make of him. We all worked with Daniel Lanois at Grant Avenue although Scott worked with Daniel a lot more than I did."* When Fred tried to submit the box set for a Juno Award [Ed. Note. The Canadian equivalent of a Grammy] in the "Most Innovative Record Album Cover" category, the organisers refused to even consider nominating it. As someone once noted, in terms of concept and execution, **"There Ain't No Easy Road"** has to be one of the coolest boxed sets ever released – so what were those guys thinking?

Another Fred Eaglesmith personal favourite, "Highheels In The Rain," appears on this set. *"It's a fictional song. She didn't become a prostitute, but her husband just sat there and couldn't believe what his ex-wife was doing. She would walk past him with a guy on her arm, and not even acknowledge him."* On a personal level, Eaglesmith clearly recalled this period *"I was realising that there ain't no easy road for anyone. Just because I'd had a hard life, there were lots of other people who had had a hard life."*

Never short of ideas, the CD liner to Fred's 1993 Scott Merritt produced album **"Things Is Changin'"** was printed on brown wrapping paper. When asked about the booklet, Fred commented *"Well, it's Fred Eaglesmith with no money. Still no money, but still making records."* The set was recorded at Scott Merritt's home studio, The Cottage, in Brantford, Ontario. *"I had a real awakening during this period. A mid-life crisis if you will. I did a lot of soul searching and re-evaluating my whole existence. I started to get my life together, as far as what had happened to me as a child. In addition, my writing became introspective. **"Things Is Changin'"** was really "Things is changin' for me". "*

My recall is that **"Things Is Changin'"** is the album that introduced me to Eaglesmith's music. This twelve song collection included titles such as album opener "Sharecroppin'," "Rough Edges" and "White Ash & Black Ash" and on first hearing Eaglesmith struck me, in word and melody, as being a modern day Woody Guthrie. Elsewhere on the disc, "Harold Wilson" farms his land with only a *"pick and a shovel"* until, that is, the bank repossesses his land. There's a feeling of helpless desperation in the lives of the characters that pass through Eaglesmith's lyrics [akin to that prevalent in the Southern *Dustbowl* States during the early nineteen-thirties]. In the closing decades of last century the small time farmer became the victim of farming conglomerates across North America.

In early 1996, Eaglesmith penned the liner notes to Lynn Miles' *totally bewitching* Philo album, **"Slightly Haunted."** *"I met Lynn after I played a concert. She came up and said "Hey, I'm a big fan of yours." She talked to me a lot and introduced me to the concept of a publishing deal. That's when things changed for me. I went down to Nashville and got a publishing deal. That was in 1993. I met Brownlee Ferguson, and he became my best friend. He said, "Look I can't do anything with you as a commercial artist, but as an art collector, I want to have this stuff." He started paying me every month. That changed my life for the better. I've had holds on my songs already, with The Highwaymen and Chris LeDoux."*

On their way to Nashville, Fred and the band played the La Casa Concert Series in Birmingham, Michigan. Dave Brogan who runs the concert series recorded Fred's set and during 1994 released the recording on a CD titled **"From The Paradise Motel."** *"Barbed Wire Records was his company, and he had these pie in the sky ideals about what was going to happen. **"From The Paradise Motel"** was pretty much his deal. I have this life where I'm not meant to be a star, and I'm really meant to be barely successful. I think that is what has helped me keep my edge all these years."*

Eaglesmith's next studio latest album, **"Drive-In Movie,"** issued by the Nashville based Vertical label was constructed around the use of electric instrumentation. During our December 1996 interview I asked Fred if the move away from his career long string band foundation had been deliberate. *"No it wasn't. All my life people have been saying to me, "I hear two sides to you. I hear this folkie acoustic guy, but I also hear this electric guy. This Rolling Stone sort of thing with you. What is that ?" I didn't really know how to explore it, because I'd always played an acoustic guitar. I also didn't want to make another, same old Fred Eaglesmith record. Another album of songs about farming didn't make sense. I did ten years of work there, on that one subject. People were starting to expect certain things from me. They wanted me to become a caricature of myself. The musical universe for this record is located more in the United States, than it is in Canada. Somewhere between Nashville and Memphis. I've been compared to Bruce Springsteen on this record. To John Cougar Mellencamp. Steve Earle as well. What this album was about, was moving. All of a sudden, I was going on the road. I was out of town. I was flying all over the place. I was having a life. What you hear on **"Drive-In Movie"** is a much happier guy."*

"Drive-In Movie" was recorded at The Cottage in Brantford, Ontario, Canada and was another Scott Merritt production. Lynn Miles supplied backing vocals, and the disc featured eleven Eaglesmith originals. On the recording Eaglesmith treads the save verdant musical valley as Jimmy LaFave, fellow countryman Wyckham Porteous, Greg Trooper, Tom Russell et al. We're talking about a marriage of roots rock songs and ballads with an intelligent backbone. Subjectively "49 Tons" could have been an out-take from Springsteen's classic 1982 outing **"Nebraska."** Elsewhere there are tales of overgrown gas stations, racin' on the drag, lost love and empty soda machines. Fred's **"Drive-In Movie"** was without doubt, a blockbuster as far as main features go. Most musicians will tell you that winning an award is really no great shakes in the long term, and is soon forgotten like yesterday's news. Fred's musical career took a turn for the better however, when his **"Drive-In Movie"** picked up the 1997 Juno Award for Best Roots and

Traditional Solo Album.

All of a sudden the future seemed bright and full of promise, but that's a whole other Fred Eaglesmith story for some other day.....

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 1/97 & 02/07.

[1560 words].