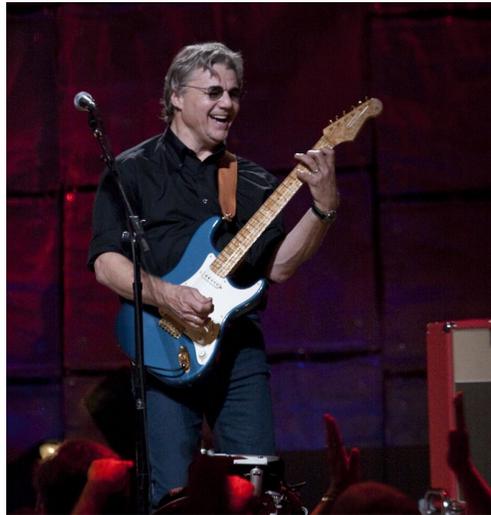


**This interview with
STEVE MILLER was conducted by
Stacie Seifrit-Griffin from the Library of Congress on
March 21, 2025**



Stacie Seifrit-Griffin: For the Recording Registry, the Librarian can only choose 25 sound recordings a year. So when you think about the number of albums, singles, radio shows, podcasts, and noises to be chosen as one of the 25, it's pretty amazing being a part of the National Recording Registry. What do you feel in your heart about being honored by the Library of Congress?

Steve Miller: Well, I have a lot to be thankful for. And this this is really an unexpected honor. I had no idea. And, just to think, that a piece of work that I've done has been selected for this collection is just something I never thought of.

SSG: So, in this case, it's the album "Fly Like an Eagle" that is being honored. And so I want to talk to you a little bit about the making of this album, specifically the song "Fly Like an Eagle." Was this in your head for a long time because this was your ninth studio album?

SM: Correct. Yeah. It was slowly working toward being able to make it. I had to be sort of free of commercial restraints, and I had to have control over my artistic work. I had to be able to do whatever I wanted to do. And, after making nine albums, I had pretty much negotiated all of those things. And so I was able to combine all the ideas that I've had over the years into an album that combined blues and jazz and electronic music. It had, electronic segues. [But] I was really free of all commercial constraints....

I just had a huge hit with “The Joker,” which was a hit single all over the world, and that was a really big deal and that enabled me to be able to kind of go, “Well, I’m going to work on what I want to work at....”

It took about 18 months. I basically isolated myself. I lived alone in a house up on top of a hillside in Novato, California, in the woods, and I stayed out there for 18 months, and I had a tape recorder, and I wrote songs, recorded ideas, put bits and parts together.

Finally, when I was ready to record, I called my musicians and we went into the studio for 11 days and cut all the songs. And then I went back to my studio out in the country by myself and then sang all the parts and did the solo pieces and everything. I was able to just work on it until I was satisfied that it was finished.

So, I liked it. I thought it was good. And it was a great, yeah,... it was a great opportunity to be able to work on a record that way. Like I said, not to have to deal with commercial restraints where you had people in the advertising department going, “You boys need to move more when you play” and that kind of stuff. So it was great.

As for “Fly Like an Eagle,” it’s hilarious. You know, it’s amazing how far this song has gone. And now the group Playing for Change has just made a remarkable video of musicians from all over the world playing on the song. And, for me, it’s finally reached its potential. And then you guys coming in and recognizing the song, at the same time, I mean, it’s the song has reached its potential, which is very rare, it’s hard for things to do that.

SSG: The song “Fly Like an Eagle” has so many layers. I wondered was there improv in the studio? I mean with adding these different sounds. I’ve read or I’ve heard an interview where you talked about dubbing the tape and finding the “boop boop.”

SM: The very first album I made was “Children of the Future” and I argued with my engineer, Glyn Johns, all day and all night, the entire sessions, about wanting to use electronic pieces and parts. And it wasn’t that he wasn’t a great engineer, he just wasn’t interested in that kind of music.

So when I finally got to the point where I was able to get my own synthesizer and an Echoplex, which is a really cool tape echo repeat device, I started making segues and that became very spontaneous because you don’t know what’s going to happen. Sometimes you turn something on, you turn that up and you go, “Well, that sounds terrible.” Or, no, it sounds pretty cool. Let’s use that. So when we were mixing the record, doing the final mixes, two things happened. One, I said, “You know, on the song ‘Fly Like an Eagle,’” I said, “I want to play some lines with my synth and my Echoplex. I just want to try a stereo track on top of the whole track.”

And, you know, it’s like 11:55 at night. You know, we’ve got to finish at midnight. And so I put that on and I did all those little arpeggios and all those things and really liked doing that sound. And then, when we mixed it, we had to get some tape to put in between “Fly Like an Eagle” and then the next song just for the transition.

And the tape we used had been demagnetized, which is how you bulk erased a tape. You put a big magnet on the tape and we had that tape and we put it up and it turned out that the magnet hadn't erased everything. There was still a little beep, beep, beep. And of course, it sounded like Sputnik. I mean, it was like that first satellite in space. The sound, and it just-- There it was. And, you know, Jim Gaines, a great engineer, and I, we did all the mixing and put it all together. And we looked at each other and just went, "Where did that come from?" That's amazing.

So it's just a little thing, but it really was great; you know, a punctuation mark for the whole project.

SSG: That's so great. One of the things, you know—and we'll talk about this a little bit later—but Les Paul. I mean, the household you grew up in could have been its own movie with all of these people coming in and out. But, of course, Les Paul, being one of the most significant. I heard somewhere where Les Paul had said to you that you really, when writing a song, you have to grab them in the first four seconds.

SM: First of all, you know, growing up with Les Paul as my godfather, I had no idea he was special. He was just my godfather. I knew he was special because he played great guitar and I went to all his shows. If he was playing in a nightclub down the street from our house, my dad would go down and record him every night. So that's where I first went, "Gee, that looks like fun. That's what I wanted to do. Play the guitar and sing."

[Les Paul] taught me so much, so much about making records. He invented so many things. But, you know, to be able to build a career, you had to become popular on the radio. You had to build an audience, and so you had to be on the radio. And that was FM radio. And FM radio, the songs, if they were longer than two minutes and 30 second, they'd cut the song and they wouldn't play it. It was such a commercial constraint. So it was like a game, a puzzle. It's like, how can I take this idea, have the takes and just edit it until it's two minutes and 30 seconds?

And in those two minutes and 30 seconds, the very first four seconds, five seconds, when the DJ goes, "Here it is" and he puts it up there and you hear those first four seconds, people are really quick. And of course nowadays kids hardly listen to anything that's longer than four seconds. So it's all edited, you know, they know right away if they like it or not.

So that was part of the deal and Les made, I think, he had 25 top ten singles. So I was really aware of how important that was with "The Joker." I mean, we were trying to make singles from the beginning. I think "The Joker" was on the seventh album or the eighth album, I can't remember exactly. And that was our first single. You know, where we really had a "Hey, it's number one!" What can you say? You know, that was, that was a really powerful moment. And then when I started working on this album, FM radio was becoming much more popular. AM radio was still very popular and at the peak of the release of "Fly Like an Eagle" was when AM and FM radio were both wide open.

So it was a perfect time to be there, and I knew exactly what I needed to do to make FM radio sound great because they'd play the whole side. They played, I mean, they played 20 minutes. And so that's kind of what I was looking at but still keeping, you know, AM radio in mind. "Fly

like an Eagle” is a little bit long. It was questionable whether they would play it or not, but they kind of had to play it. And it got played on FM radio. They played the whole album for the first six weeks. They just put it on and leave it on, which was what I was trying to accomplish. And it worked.

And, what was really remarkable, you know, I learned all the recording techniques and the mixing techniques and the overdub techniques and all of that stuff, I learned from Les Paul and Mary Ford. I knew Mary sang harmonies with herself. I knew all about that from, really early on. And all that was at five years old, you know. Like, holy cow, what a charmed life I've lived. I can't believe the people I've met. You know, it's been remarkable.

SSG: So when you recorded “Fly Like an Eagle,” it was brought to my attention that you also did your album “Book of Dreams” at the same time. Did you record it in the same sessions? How did you choose which songs would go on “Fly Like an Eagle” and which on “Book of Dreams”?

SM: It's very difficult. And, I'll tell you why, first of all, in 1969, which was like five, six years earlier, I had been in the studio with the Beatles and had been stunned to find out that they had like 40 hits in the can. They had so many great songs already recorded. They were so far ahead of everyone that whenever they wanted to release something, they just were almost sure. And you know, over in the States, it would be like, “Well, the boys are in the studio and they're working hard. They're trying to make another record.” So I learned from the Beatles that, like, it was much smarter to really get a lot done and get ahead of it, you know.

So I was writing... I think we recorded 25 songs in 11 days when we went into the studio....

And now, in today's world, they'd say, “That'll cost \$2 billion and take eight and a half years.”

You know, it's just there was then always that feeling like, why can't we do this a lot faster? And so we cut everything, the basic rhythm tracks without the vocals and stuff. In 11 days. Then I took them home and put them on my tape recorder in my living room, and I sang everything at my house and worked on all the lyrics.

And so I finished. I had 25 songs, and the first impulse is to take, you know, 12 singles and put them on one record. And I did that. I put them all together, and it was too much chocolate cake, you know, it was like 12 pieces of chocolate cake. I mean, one's good, maybe two, but not....

And so I started going, “Well, maybe I can space these things out and make them sound more interesting.” And so then I started moving things around, and that's when I was able to bring in the segues and all the different things between the songs. And it was really clear after a long time of doing this that it just kept getting better every time we spaced things out and changed the running order.

Now, in those days, this was, before the digital age, to change the order on a record, you had to have: let's take side one, six songs. Each song had to be put on its own individual, separate reel. One separate reel for song two. So you had to take everything apart. This is to change the

running order on one side. Then you had to select the running order. You wanted to tape them all together. Assemble them. Then put all six songs back together with splicing tape and everything and rewrite it and go, "No, that's not it. I thought it would be better. Let's change it." And to do that, you had to have a lot of time.

It was so hard to cut the tape. But I didn't need an engineer to do that for me. You know, I could do the basic engineering of recording my voice and stuff like that. But, afterwards, when the digital age arrived, I bought a one gig hard drive for \$14,000 so I could take six songs and then cut, paste, cut, paste.

But it was like a miracle to be able to do that. I look back at that and I go, Oh my God, that hard drive weighed 9 pounds. It was this big. It was one gig. But it did it and that's why I bought it. So I could do that. And I wouldn't have to cut all the reels apart.

SSG: But also one of the interesting things I like about this album, as you pointed out, between the songs is you created transitions between the songs. It's really ingenious.

SM: It's almost like, well, it is a musical journey. And a lot of times when I would go into a studio, I'd see that space between the great big, huge studio speakers; it's a giant horizon, an audio horizon. And to me, it always made me want to write an epic story.

So that's just the way I look at it, you know, it's like an album should be a journey. When I was a kid, I used to listen to "Bozo Goes to the Circus" kind of records and stuff like that. My parents had lots of jazz records and blues records and things.

My parents were real huge, really hip music fans [and] had great music around the house all the time. But I always liked those records where it was a story that lasted for several records, you know, and you had to put the next album on. And I loved that and I wanted to do my records like that.

SSG: That's the next thing I wanted to ask you. Again, you know, being five years old, witnessing all this, was it your dream to do this, was it inevitable that you were going to follow this path? What was your dream? What was Little Steve Miller's dream?

SM: I want to be a cowboy and I wanted to change my name to Jim. That's one of the first things I'd tell my mom that I wanted. She later named my brother, my younger brother, Jim. And I was into Roy Rogers.

But, when I saw Les, I had a guitar. I'd gotten a guitar when I was four and a half. My uncle Dale played guitar. And on my mother's side of the family, they were all musical.

And I had an Uncle Paul who played hot jazz violin in the Paul Whiteman Orchestra. He was in his late 20s. I think he was out in Hollywood working. It was pretty cool. And I had another uncle, KB, who played really great banjo and was very musical. My grandmother played piano, my mom played piano, and my mom and her sisters all sang harmony.

And my cousin, Carol, who lived with us because we all lived in the same house. This was during World War II, and after in 1948, '49. And we listened, we all listened.

And so I was very musical. And then Les Paul came to town and he got a job at a nightclub just down the street from our house. We lived in the middle of the city and in a row house and my dad went down there and said, "Hey, you know, I have a tape recorder. Would you mind?"

Could I come and record? So my dad, for whatever reason, had bought a Magnecorder [recorder]. This was like 1949. I think it was one of the first tape recorders in the United States. It was a total professional tape recorder he had.

I watched Les Paul and Mary Ford rehearsing their act to go to New York to do their radio show. And he was so funny. And all the guitarists in the Midwest came to Milwaukee to see him play live. You'd go there and Charles Mingus would be in the audience. Tal Farlow, he'd be in the audience. Red Norvo would be there. All these jazz characters were there and they jammed. They jammed. Every night he'd call people up and jam.

So I was just captured, and then we moved to Texas when I was six, and that changed everything. All of a sudden there was the big jamboree on the radio and local television. There was a blues radio and a black-blues radio station in town. There was Tex-Mex music everywhere.

It was amazing. And I couldn't believe it. There was a music store in downtown Dallas that had Fender instruments. It was one of the very first Fender stores in the entire country. I could go down and look at Fender amps and Stratocaster guitars and all this stuff, and I met T-Bone [Walker] when I was nine years old, and he really taught me everything I know about melody.

And once I met T-Bone, I just started doing melodies. I didn't worry about chords and everything; I was just making up melodies. And I still use that when I write. And he was so inspirational and so kind. He taught me how to play the guitar behind my head, taught me how to play the guitar and do the splits.

And, at the same time, he happened to be the bridge between blues and jazz. B.B. King, Freddie King, Albert King, Albert Collins, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck: they all listened to him and they all were inspired by his records to become musicians.

He inspired this huge line of musicians, as did Les and all those people that I just mentioned and I listen to those guys a lot. When T-Bone was at the house, he showed me how to do this, you know, and like I said, I had no idea, I was just a nine year old kid.

I started my first band when I was 12, because I ran into a kid who had been taking drum lessons for five years since he was five years old. He was a totally professional drummer as a little man. I had a drummer who could play shuffle and could do parrot fiddles and could do all that stuff. And Boz Scaggs was in that band. It was a really good band. And we went to work.

I was making about 300 bucks a night when I was 12 and telling my mom, "You don't understand. I have a gig on Friday night!" We, like, sent out a letter to all opportunities, all the

sororities at SMU. There weren't any rock and roll bands in 1956. They were all dance orchestras and set up.

So I said, "We've got a rock and roll band and we're only going to accept bookings for the next three weeks, because we don't have time to do this very long." And we had the whole semester booked in three weeks. My mom would make me knock off the phone work at 10:00 at night. I was 12, I had to go to bed. I wanted to be our manager. I wanted to be our agent. I wanted to produce our records. I wanted to write the songs. And, you know, I took off and we worked every Friday and Saturday night from 1956 till last weekend. It's been like that.

SSG: That might be one of my favorite stories ever! As Steve Miller and the Steve Miller Band, started to really take off, what did these mentors from your life ever say to you once you started to really take off?

SM: Well, they were all very proud of me, of course. Everybody was very reassuring but, you know, at a certain point when you're doing this, you end up out on your own....

SSG: The song "Fly Like an Eagle" has had several incarnations. For the song, my understanding is you recorded it several times and had different lyrics...

SM: The song was developed over a three-year period, and, at the time in 1972, '73, '74 like that, we weren't playing really big places. We were playing kind of old dancehalls and old theaters. And the "light show" was usually a mirror ball, because that's what they had in the dancehalls, from the 40s. Our shows, we would, you know, if you came to see our show, it might be three hours long, it might go from 8 to 1:00 in the morning.

I mean, it was different than it is now. And, you know, we jammed and we did long sets, and so we jammed "Fly Like an Eagle" a lot and I'd try different lyrics, try different grooves, try different guitar parts. At one period it was a song about Indians on the reservation. And then it changed. It got more urban and I just kept working on it. When it came time to actually record it, I did something that was very unusual. I had used three different bands, three different sessions, to record it. I recorded it, and the reason it was unusual is because it cost so much to go into the studio in those days. I mean, you'd be spending thousands of bucks.

So I got the first recording and I just went, "Man, this just doesn't have any life and [then] I'd recorded it again. I still feel that way. And then, I recorded it one more time in a different studio, an old studio in the city where Sly [Stone] had recorded some of his stuff and just a good old sounding room, and we got a really good sound.

So I started working on it, and then I worked on it forever. I had that multi-track tape at my house, singing the "doo doo dos" and getting all those parts just right, I just got so tired of doing that, that I stopped working.... When it was time to go in, I said, "Man, I have to go in and I have to finish all that stuff."

So I finished all the background vocals and all of that business, and, like I said, we finished mixing it. We were just assembling the final master tape and I said, "You know, I want to just

run this synth over on top of that.” And that did it; it kind of put the mirror ball back into the song.

It finally fell into place. And then we got the mystical “beep beep” at the end. And we were done with this one. And, yeah, it was, it was really, really good.

I thought this was exactly what I needed to make. And so that all felt good. So I was on my own, and I was doing what I wanted to do, and I wasn't talking to a producer who was going, “No, no, no, no, no, we don't want we want more echo on this or this!”

This was finally a time when I could get it where I wanted it without anybody arguing with me. It took a long time, too. You know, I saw Lady Gaga the other day. She said it took her 20 years to become the boss. Took me nine albums.