

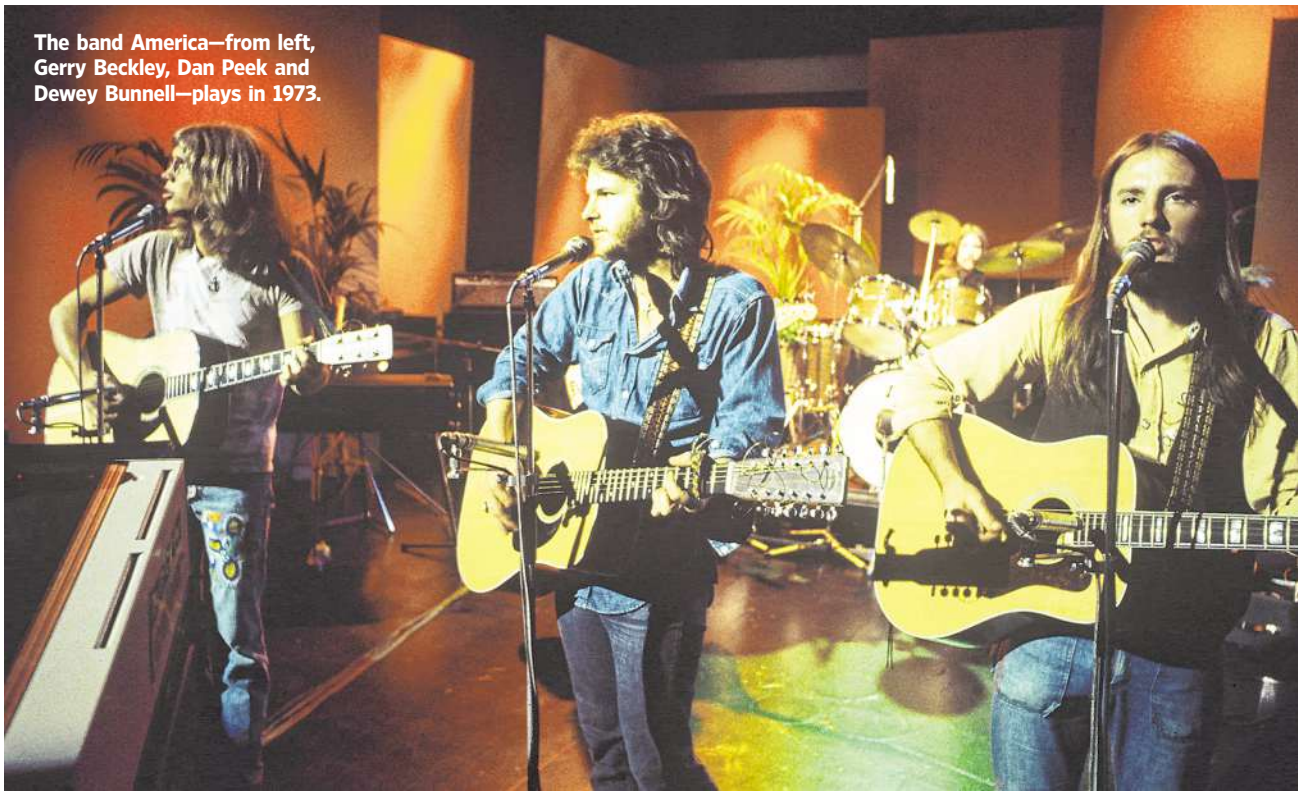
LIFE & ARTS

ANATOMY OF A SONG | By Marc Myers

A Journey to ‘A Horse With No Name’

IN JANUARY 1972, the folk-rock band America released “A Horse With No Name,” a loping ballad that many people mistakenly attributed to Neil Young. The mellow introspective song, by lead singer and guitarist Dewey Bunnell, reached No. 1 on Billboard’s pop chart, and sent the band’s eponymous album to No. 1 as well—pushing Mr. Young’s “Heart of Gold” single and “Harvest” album out of the top spots. Recently, Mr. Bunnell and vocalist-guitarist Gerry Beckley talked about the song’s evolution. The band currently is on tour in the U.S. Edited from interviews.

Dewey Bunnell: In 1967, I was an American living with my family in England. My father was in the U.S. Air Force and stationed at an RAF base northwest of London. I was 15 at the time and friends with Gerry Beckley and Dan Peek, whose fathers were stationed there, too. The three of us formed a Top-40 band called the Daze. After graduation, we went our separate ways for about a year. When we reunited in early 1970, we formed an acoustic folk-rock band. We spent a lot of time in the base’s cafeteria listening to the jukebox. That’s when we decided to call our new trio America. The trend by bands then—including Chicago, Yes, Traffic and Genesis—was to use broad, generic names. In the spring of 1970, my parents relocated to Yorkshire. I stayed in London and shared a room with John Alcazar, an old classmate, at his parents’ home. One afternoon, when everyone was out, I was on my bed with my cheap Hawk guitar. I had just begun experimenting with alternate tunings. With the Hawk on my lap, I found a chord progression that I liked. The song’s melody started to come. Playing on the bed, I was homesick for the U.S. I wanted to be part of the evolving folk-rock scene there and I wished for warmer, drier weather. I also



The band America—from left, Gerry Beckley, Dan Peek and Dewey Bunnell—plays in 1973.

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thought about my parents up in Yorkshire and felt alone. As I strummed, I thought back to a drive my family had taken through the American Southwest. I began to visualize the sights and sounds of the desert. I realized I needed a good opening to set up the narrative: “On the first part of the journey / I was looking at all the life / There were plants and birds and rocks and things / There was sand and hills and rings.” As I wrote, I asked myself, “How did I wind up in the desert?” Ah, right, they ride horses out there. I asked myself if the horse should have a name. The horse was merely a vehicle to get me into the desert, so I made it “a horse with no name.” Being out of the rain was metaphoric. It was super rainy and dreary in England. The rain represented the uncertainty of where my life was going. Being out in the des-

ert on a horse in a hot, dry climate was metaphoric for being independent and in control of my life. I wrote the song’s lyrics on a scrap of paper. When I finished, I called the song “Under the Cities.” I liked the phrase I had used: “Under the cities lies a heart made of ground / But the humans will give no love.” Later, as we played the song at our pub gigs, the title changed to the “Desert Song.” It was easier to refer to on stage. **Gerry Beckley:** I really liked Dewey’s song. It had this surreal, cryptic lyric that you could get your teeth into. We arranged the song so it had our own vocal-harmony sound. When it came to the chorus, we added “Lah lah, la-la la-lahhh.” It was a breather and let listeners sing along. Typically, Dewey sang the low harmony, I sang the middle fifth

and Dan sang the note above, which might have been a minor 7th or 9th. **Mr. Bunnell:** Gerry had his foot in the door at a London demo recording studio. We played our songs for one of the guys there. He passed us along to Dave Howson, who managed a club in Covent Garden. Dave got us pub gigs. Next, we were passed on to Jeff Dexter, an influential DJ at the Roundhouse, a popular venue in Camden Town. Eventually, we were signed to Warner Bros./Kinney Records in London and toured in England and the Netherlands. In 1971, we began to record our first album, “America,” at London’s Trident Studios. It was co-produced by Jeff and Ian Samwell. Initially, I left “Desert Song” off the album because I thought it might be perceived as a novelty tune. When we finished recording, Ian said Warner Bros. wanted more songs so we’d have other potential

Mr. Beckley: Kim Hawthorth played drums and Ray Cooper came in after to overdub the bongos. The bongos added a clippity-clop feel of the horse. I overdubbed my 12-string guitar solo. It was a strummy solo that first ascends the scale. Ian suggested I follow with a descending arpeggiated triplet thing, so that’s what I did. **Mr. Bunnell:** When we finished, Ian loved the song but hated my title. He insisted we change it to “A Horse With No Name,” since “Desert Song” was the title of an operetta. I agreed. No doubt, when I recorded my vocal, I was infused with Neil Young and his music. I loved “The Loner,” from Neil’s first solo album in 1969. I was immersed in his first and second albums while writing “Horse,” and they affected my vocal trajectory. When our song was released, many people thought it was Neil. In his memoir, “Waging Heavy Peace,” Young writes that when his father first heard the song, even he assumed it was Neil’s. Today, my wife, Penny, and I live in Southern California and Northern Wisconsin. In California, we recently adopted a wild mustang. My wife and our daughter, Destry, call her “No-nom-ee.” It’s “no name” pushed together.