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Behind the Song: “Sister Golden Hair” by America

[Paul Zollo](#)

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America’s Gerry Beckley on the origins of this classic song, and on making the record with the legendary Beatles team of George Martin and Geoff Emerick

Because of the Coronavirus and social restrictions here in L.A. and elsewhere at this moment, all new interviews we’re conducting for *American Songwriter* are being done over the phone. We spoke to Gerry Beckley, who along with Dewey Bunell, separately wrote songs for their band America. Dewey wrote their first #1 hit, the cryptic classic “Horse With No Name” (the origins of which Dewey discusses with us in an upcoming piece).

And Gerry wrote their second #1 hit, “Sister Golden Hair,” the main subject of our conversation on this day.

Gerry spoke to us from his home in Venice – the California one – near the beach, on the dark morning of March 25, 2020. It was dark both physically and emotionally, because of this crisis, which has been exponentially expanding in many directions every day. The awful news had just come in the night before that Jackson Browne (an old friend of Gerry’s and one who figures into this story), had tested positive for the virus. What was already terrible and frightening had gotten worse, and now was way too close to home.

So before getting to a discussion of the song and other musical topics, we spoke about Jackson, and also about how Gerry and his family had been coping with the crisis. He told us that his family – wife and children – are all safe and healthy. But that, unfortunately, his wife and him were presently enduring this crisis in opposite corners of the globe.

“We split our time between two homes,” he said. “We have our home in Sydney, Australia and our home in Venice here. And, unfortunately, we were split in two different countries when this started. [My wife] is in Sydney and I’m here. So it just made sense

to both of us to hunker down where we are. But we're fine. Our kids are here, and they are good. And, since we spend quite a few weeks apart anyway because of our situation, for us this is not that unusual to be apart. But it has been difficult in these trying times."

Asked about the concept of "social-distancing" which we're all instructed to adopt, he said, "I don't mean to make light of this, but I've been pretty severely anti-social most of my life... I've always been a little bit uncomfortable about being in crowds. I'm quite content alone. I'm a reader, and a lot of my pursuits are solitary, like photography. So it's been a slightly better fit for me than for others, I think, because it's the kind of thing I do on a regular basis anyway."

"But, of course, we're all testing our abilities. How much of this can we take? I guess we will find that out."

Although the purpose of this interview was ostensibly to delve into the origins of his song "Sister Golden Hair," Gerry generously indulged our queries about other songs he's written, as well as those his partner Dewey Bunell wrote for the band, especially "Horse With No Name," as well as his thoughts on songs and songwriting, all of which we will bring you in the near future.

But first we focused on "Sister Golden Hair," which he wrote alone, influenced by both Jackson Browne and George Harrison, as he explains.

It's an upbeat song with unexpected strands of darkness woven into the lyric, which he said is a dynamic that emerges in many of his songs. "Sister," despite its upbeat feel, start with depression, and ends each chorus with the unapologetic candor of, "I tried to fake it, I don't mind sayin', I just can't make it."

Though he had the song sitting around for a long time, he didn't record it until America's fifth album, *Hearts*, the second of seven to be produced by legendary Beatles producer George Martin, and engineered by co-legend, The Beatles engineer Geoff Emerick. Gerry relates the story of their meeting, and the dream-come-true process of working with these two greats, who he'd admired for years, on his own songs.

"Sister Golden Hair" quickly ascended to number one on the Billboard charts in the Spring of 1975, when it was released. It was the second America song ever to do so, following "Horse With No Name," in 1972, which was written by Dewey Bunell. In this account, Beckley shares his memories of how the song was born, as well as how it was produced by George and Geoff, a process which went way faster than anyone expected.

Here, in his own words, is the story behind the song, and record, of America's "Sister Golden Hair."

GERRY BECKLEY:

I had that song ("Sister Golden Hair") for a while. I remember I wrote it and I demoed it before the *Holiday* album. But I'd already had songs I'd written selected for *Holiday*, and I was very happy with those songs.

So I thought, "I'm good," and I still had "Sister Golden Hair," which sat around for a year and a half or so. That's an example of what really happened. It's not like the minute you write something new you say, "Oh my God, I think I *got* one!" You know?

The song was inspired by Jackson [Browne]. We had toured with Jackson. And I always loved his songs for so many reasons. But a big one is that there's always such a wonderful conversational tone that he structures. His lyrics often feel like somebody's telling you a story; they're talking directly to *you*.



Gerry Beckley at Home, 2008. Photo by Paul Zollo/American Songwriter.

And I thought that's just a really great thing to do in a song as opposed to most songs I heard that were not that at all. That lyrical tone was something I think I got from him.

The other thing with that tune is that there's obviously a clear "My Sweet Lord"[by George Harrison] sound in it. It all starts with that twelve-string acoustic guitar, followed by slide guitar, which was taken directly from "My Sweet Lord." Not the chords or anything, but just the combination of sounds.

And then the other is that I've always had this kind of light and dark element in my songs. I'm not saying it's intentional, but it's in many of my songs. There's this thing that sounds upbeat, but there are some darker shadow stories in it.

"Sister" is a great example of that: "Tried to make it Sunday, but I got so damn depressed." You know? "Set my sights on Monday."

I was doing a songwriting class once, and the professor pointed out to the class how unusual this opening was. He said, "You've got to understand, that's not the kind of thing that you would normally write and then think, 'Let's open a song with this.'"

But I think it's an upbeat tune. The chorus has, "Meet me in the middle, meet me in the air." It's hard to do better than that, as far as a singalong goes.

But yeah, "Set my sights on Monday, got myself undressed," there's no resolution to that. It's like, "Okay, let's try again."

I pretty well sketched it as it was going. There's an early demo that there's a word or two that's tweaked. But in general, the demo that I have, which I think is on one of our rarities albums now sounds, that was a lot like the master. It's me playing the 12-string, and I did the slide. I played the slide on the record, too. I had a lovely lap steel that David Lindley had picked out. And I I'm just no good at playing slide like the Duane Allman and [Eric] Clapton. But I can do okay on a lap steel. So that's me on both. I played acoustic guitar, and then went back and overdubbed the lap steel.

It's an up-tempo tune. And I was kind of a ballad guy, but I've written a lot of all different tempos.

I remember once we were touring with Brian Wilson, and he sat in the wings and actually watched the whole show. "Sister" was at the end of the show, and I knew he's always been a fan of the song.

So afterwards I ran back to him, "What'd you think, Brian? What'd you think?"

And he goes, "You rushed it." [*Laughter*]

There was no actual Sister Gold Hair. You mix up all the different anecdotes of your life and you put it together and hopefully they make a good soup.

It did come pretty quick. I don't want to speak for others, but there is some conventional wisdom that says sometimes the ones that come the quickest are the most pure, and I have found that to be true. Some came so quick I couldn't scribble it down fast enough, you know? I've had that. On the other hand, I've had some that I've worked 20 years on. This came fast.

George Martin produced it, and Geoff Emerick engineered. But the arrangement was

mine. And we liked the idea of holding off the drums at first. When producing a song, every instrument doesn't have to come in on the downbeat. There's such a common production language that says if you hold the bass off until the second verse, it just adds another layer. In "Sister Golden Hair," we have that famous drum fill where the drums enter on the second verse after I sing "I do believe there's times when a woman sure can be a friend of mine..." When we do that live, the whole audience air drums that. It's because it's just part of the build of that tune. So I think we did it right with that one.

We had [produced] the first three albums ourselves. We co-produced the first one and then we did the second and third ourselves and the third one didn't sell.

We were writing all the songs, and also touring, and so to produce our own records was just too much; there wasn't time. I remember thinking that we might have to turn over the producing chore. We're certainly not going to switch to outside writers. We're going to be singing all this. We're going to be out touring. So I felt if we could find the right guy who we could turn it over to, then those wheels could keep spinning.

So we made a short list. And the name George Martin was at the top of the list. And we never got past the number one guy on the list.

We were such *huge* fans of The Beatles and George, and we knew every second of every single song they did. But we had *no* idea if he would consider working with us. It's not like we were an unknown entity. We had a Grammy, we had two multi platinum albums, a whole series of hits. So for him to be approached by us was not crazy. Bu

He happened to be in L.A. for the premiere of [the film] *Live and Let Die*, which he worked on with Paul McCartney.

We had a meeting with him. It couldn't have gone better.

The first thing he said was, "Oh, I'd *love* to do this. All I ask is that can you come to London. I've built a wonderful facility. I'm no longer at EMI but I've built Air Studios, Oxford Circus.

Our previous album had taken three months or so to do. It was pretty drawn out. And he said, "I can't be gone that long." By that time I had bought a 15th century cottage, as you do, in Sussex. And Dewey and I were half-English anyway, and our families still live there.

So we said, "Sure, of course we'd love to come there."

So we went over. We were so concerned with making sure we were together for this monumental course correction that he said to us, "I've held two months in the studio." He said, "I'm not saying we need to be done by then but let's just see how we go. But I've got two months."

Because it was George Martin producing, we were very concerned with rehearsing and making sure we knew what we were doing before we went in with him, so that when we started, we would be ready. So we went to my cottage with a small setup and practiced for a week or so, so that we knew what the tunes were. We already had worked out the harmonies, the arrangements. We didn't have to invent all this in the studio.

Within the first day we had three or four tracks. We were a third of the way through the backings. Because we rehearsed it and we knew all the songs and arrangements well. George wasn't used to this.

I remember him talking to Geoff and saying, "What's going *on*? It seems to be working. *Next!*"

We were done in fourteen days. Finished the *entire* album, and mixing.

At the end of it, George said, "Well lads, gentlemen, I'm sorry, but this can't possibly be a success. *Nothing* that easy could ever be." [*Laughter*]

And it was a *lovely* credit to all of us, because we had worked hard to get there.

Working with George and Geoff was great. They were so respectful of what we were doing, and our sound. They didn't try to change it, but enabled us to capture that. Yet they brought their own ideas, too. At once point George sat at the piano with me and we played together.

It was a great collaboration. It started a string of seven consecutive albums we did together.

"Sister Golden Hair"

By GERRY BECKLEY

Lyrics:

Well I tried to make it Sunday, but I got so damn depressed
That I set my sights on Monday and I got myself undressed
I ain't ready for the altar but I do agree there's times
When a woman sure can be a friend of mine

Well, I keep on thinkin' 'bout you, sister golden hair surprise
And I just can't live without you, can't you see it in my eyes?
I been one poor correspondent, and I been too, too hard to find
But it doesn't mean you ain't been on my mind

*Will you meet me in the middle, will you meet me in the air?
Will you love me just a little, just enough to show you care?
Well I tried to fake it, I don't mind sayin', I just can't make it*

Well, I keep on thinkin' 'bout you, sister golden hair surprise
And I just can't live without you, can't you see it in my eyes?
Now I been one poor correspondent, and I been too, too hard to find
But it doesn't mean you ain't been on my mind

*Will you meet me in the middle, will you meet me in the air?
Will you love me just a little, just enough to show you care?
Well I tried to fake it, I don't mind sayin', I just can't make it.*



America, "Sister Golden Hair."

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