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Behind the Song: “Ventura Highway” by Dewey Bunnell

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In his own words, from a recent interview during lockdown time

“Ventura Highway” was written by Dewey Bunnell of America in 1972, from their second album, *Homecoming*, which they produced themselves. A classic California anthem, it’s one of the great L.A. songs. How many of us thought of it the very first time we started driving on the 101 and realized it was called Ventura?

Ventura.

As Dewey explains herein, it was the word itself that triggered the song. Its evocation of adventure matched how he felt as a kid in Omaha told the family was moving to California. California! To kids from the Midwest, especially during those long frozen winters, the idea of going to sunny California seemed as exotic and unlikely as going to Tahiti. He saw it all on a sign by the sea when he first arrived with that word on it.

Ventura.

It’s also been the subject of some confusion, as people assume it is about the Ventura Freeway, also known as the 101. Which isn’t exactly right. But pretty close.

“Now, we’re really getting *deep* into this,” he said with a slight laugh, in regard to the endless barrage of questions about this and other enigmatic facets of this song. But he’s the guy, after all, who wrote “Horse With No Name,” after all ([discussed here](#)), and also “Tin Man.” So he’s one of the kings of enigmatic songs, the kind which people have been obsessing over forever – especially those who might have listened back in the day while enjoying some of “God’s herb,” (to quote our friend Henry Diltz).

Like that famous horse nobody named, this one has Joe, leading to the inevitable question, *What’s with that guy?* Not to mention those alligator lizards up in the air, and of course, the first appearance of purple rain in a song, written when Prince was all of 14. Did Prince discover purple rain in “Ventura Highway”? (Where else?)

We’ve been wondering about this stuff for year. Dewey’s used to it, of course, and

patiently answered all our questions. Afterwards, we spoke about another enigmatic Dewey classic, "Tin Man." We'll bring you that next week.

But first, from our recent talk this May of 2020, here's the great Dewey Bunnell with the story behind "Ventura Highway."

DEWEY BUNNELL: I wrote "Ventura Highway" in England during that first rush of songwriting. The song was sketched out pretty much. I had the chord structure and some of the lyrics. We were in the studio at Trident Studios recording the first album. We'd already decided on the songs we wanted to record for the first album, so it was just shelved.



Dewey Bunnell & Gerry Beckley. Photo by Henry Diltz.

It wasn't until we got the first album took off, we had done a six-week club tour, and then we came back to England. But we had a taste of the U.S. again, and we had been pitched by Geffen Roberts as management. So we decided to move to L.A. Gerry and Dan, I know, they didn't even hardly unpack, and they flew back to California.

We regrouped in California and started looking at making our second album. "Ventura Highway" was part of what I had to bring to the table. We were all writing songs; in those days, it was practically second nature. Wake up in the morning and start on a song or finish a song, or talk about songs, because that was what we did.

Same as with "Horse with No Name," all my imagery was based on my history, my life, my past experiences in the U.S. We lived about a year and a half in California, when my dad was stationed at Vandenburg Air Force Base, which is in Lompoc, in the middle of the state there.

We drove down the coast quite a bit, south to L.A. My family had a friend down there that we'd visit, and we'd go to Disneyland or do things.

We took that coast road. Call it what you want, Highway One, Highway 101, Pacific Coast Highway.

I dubbed it Ventura Highway. Because I've seen that name in my mind's eye. *Ventura*. It was on the freeway signs.

There was some confusion about if I was writing about the Ventura Freeway. That was my own misinformed self. I called it a highway, I never really differentiated much between highways and freeways and interstates, I just called it a highway.

Now, when we talk about the Ventura *Freeway*, it's the 101. It was just trying to paint that picture of that place, that environment, that vibe on the West Coast.

We stopped there. We got a flat tire and my dad had pulled the car off right there at the coast. We were looking at the ocean and the waves and stuff while he changed that tire. I spent a lot of time staring at the ocean and up at that freeway sign that said Ventura. That image just somehow stuck with me, and that's what I pulled out as a lyric option for that song.

I did want to capture that whole California vibe which we're all so familiar with and what the Beach Boys brought to the world. The whole sun and surf and the free wind blowing through your hair and that whole idealistic California vibe. It was 1963, 1964 when my family was living there, so I had experienced it. It was the real heyday of the surf scene. I was about 12, in seventh grade or whatever, but I did try my hand at surfing. That's where I got my nickname, Dewey. My real name's Lee.

Needless to say, in England, where we were living, it was pretty gray and dismal. So I wanted to reimagine that California thing.

We lived in Omaha, and my dad got stationed out in California. When we started packing up to move there, it was a *big* thing. The Bunnell family is going all the way to *California!* To *Disneyland!* It was a *magical* place in those days to the uninitiated, and certainly to younger kids.

This lyric is about going out there to the West Coast. The stage was set for me and another guy named Joe, chewing on a piece of grass walking down the road somewhere, which would have been Omaha. Wanting to say "Hey, we're going out to the *coast* now!"

In Omaha, most all of my friends had never *seen* an ocean, never been very much farther. *All* of America, back then, didn't have this access to instant travel, really hardly flew that much, or had destinations to go to beyond the boundaries of their own communities.



Dewey Bunnell, Dan Peek and Gerry Beckley of America. Photo by Henry Diltz.

"Chewing on a piece of grass" came from the Omaha cornfields. My brother and I used to spend a lot of time in the cornfields. That imagery of a guy walking down a dusty road with a piece of hay in his mouth, it's a solitary experience. Like "Horse with No Name." It's something I did myself, alone.

Of course, Joe decides not to go in the lyric. He says no. He doesn't have that drive to get out of this place, maybe a small town in Nebraska, like where we lived.

"Come on, Joe, you can always change your name." You could change your whole *life*. You can be someone else; you can go out to the coast.

I thought of Joe as an older guy. It's a stylized relationship between this younger guy, who had all this energy, bursting at the seams to get out of there and go to the coast, and this older, more established guy who is debating whether he should go or not, and decides at the end of the day that now a bird in the hand is better than two in the bush. He's not going to go chance it.

I wrote it quickly. But all my songs came relatively quickly in those days because I always finished them. In those days I was always determined to finish the thing. I'd have it complete in my mind and I just couldn't leave it alone until I'd finished it. Nowadays, and in subsequent years, I'd start a song, and never followed it through, so I had a lot of half-finished songs.

The guitar lick came from Gerry. We were in Los Angeles, staying at the Sunset Marquis, working on songs for the next album. We were working on the arrangement of it sitting around with our three acoustic guitars, and Gerry came up with the famous lick. He came up with the opening single note line, and then Dan played the harmony part. We would arrange everything that way. The three of us sitting around a table, three voices and three guitars. We were mirror images of each other. Of course we had our

different styles, our different voices, our different ideas of what lyrical imagery we wanted to project. It was a great chemistry.

I've always thought of Gerry as our musical director. I'm not good at heading up rehearsals, talking to the other players, "Hey, this is the part you should do."

Gerry's *great* at that. He always was, in the high school band and everything else.

The harmony parts we sang were often instinctual, but being that Gerry was a piano player, he could quickly pick out the thirds and the fifths and the parts that would sound best. We came to know that Dan's was always the high part, I was usually the third, and sometimes we'd interchange those parts.

There's that line "getting hit by purple rain." People always ask me if Prince took that from me. I have no knowledge of him taking it from me, but it's possible. I had written it before Prince broke. So who knows? I never met Prince unfortunately. But I'd like to think I inspired him.

In the song, getting hit by a purple rain is the excuse that the old man gives for not going on the adventure. To me it meant something happened to this guy that wasn't good; possibly this guy had a psychedelic experience and didn't want to go. It was some revelation that told him to stay there.

It could be depression, the purple rain. Instead of having a blue feeling, it's a purple feeling.

The "free wind blowing through your hair" is referencing the freedom we felt here. I always thought of that as motorcyclist, like *Easy Rider*. The free winds blowing through your hair, before the helmet laws. Get a chopper.

The lines "Ventura Highway in the sunshine/ the days are longer, the nights are stronger than moonshine," were some of my favorite lines, because it fit together like a great puzzle, rhyming wise.

"And the nights are stronger than moonshine." Moonshine is a brew. Stronger than that, the great California nights. Strong stuff was happening. It was action, it was life, it was a life-style.

The "alligator lizards in the air" came from another actual memory of living in California. My brother and I used to catch lizards and snakes all the time. There is an actual animal here called an alligator lizard. But this was also referring to a cloud formation, a shape. A long cloud that reminded me of an alligator lizard.

It was always titled "Ventura Highway." That was one thing that I yanked out of nowhere: *Ventura*. I like that word. It evokes a great adventure. This exodus from the old land to the new.

[For Dewey on the story behind "Horse With No Name."](#)



“Ventura Highway”
By Dewey Bunnell

Chewing on a piece of grass
Walking down the road
Tell me, how long you gonna stay here Joe?
Some people say this town don't look
Good in snow
You don't care, I know
Ventura Highway in the sunshine
Where the days are longer
The nights are stronger
Than moonshine
You're gonna go I know
'Cause the free wind is blowin' through
Your hair
And the days surround your daylight
There
Seasons crying no despair
Alligator lizards in the air

Wishin' on a falling star
Watchin' for the early train
Sorry boy, but I've been hit by
Purple rain
Aw, come on Joe, you can always
Change your name
Thanks a lot son, just the same
Ventura Highway
In the sunshine
Where the days are longer
The nights are stronger
Than moonshine
You're gonna go I know
'Cause the free wind is blowin' through
Your hair
And the days surround you daylight
There
Seasons crying no despair
Alligator lizards in the air