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Dewey Bunnell of America Talks 50 Years of Exceptional Harmonies (INTERVIEW)

By Douglas Hall December 6, 2021



A perfect match was found between the intimate setting of The Cabot theater, in Beverly, MA., and the distinctive mellow sound of the folk-rock band, **America**, on their 50th Anniversary tour. This newly renovated 850 seat theater, from the 1920's art-deco period, offered an acoustically exceptional and cozy setting for these ballad troubadours. The two remaining band members **Dewey Bunnell and Gerry Beckley** on acoustic guitars and vocal harmony accompaniment reminded the audience of the staying power of a well-crafted song. America was almost always on the radio air-waves during the '70s with hits including "Horse With No Name", "Ventura Highway", "Tin Man" and "I Need You".

The Cabot theater was mostly full for this reunion tour performance and the band clearly prided themselves in staying true to the sound of these original folk-rock songs. The age group was older and represented 1970's listenership, but a few younger faces were also swaying to the melodic and uplifting nature of these well-strummed and beautifully harmonized gems. Clearly, both Bunnell and Beckley were not only "in the moment" but truly enjoying the moment.

Bunnell, who wrote a slew of their most popular songs, including the top-charting first hit, "Horse With No Name" in 1971, shared thoughts with *Glide* about a 50-year career on stage and his personal history with the band, in an interview before The Cabot theater performance Sunday, November 28.

Going back to an earlier time in your life – when you met your future bandmates in high school over in England – what was the chemistry that brought you together as a band?

As you can imagine us, being American teenagers thrust into a whole new cultural change, and in my case, it was an extension of my family because my father was American and my mother was British. We (Dewey Bunnell and bandmates Gerry Beckley and Dan Peek) were over in England because our families' fathers were in the US Air Force stationed in London. We were then in an American school for US citizens and military kids – literally a melting pot of us from around the U.S.

We all bonded in a very unique way, as none of us had normal support groups like we would have had in the US. So certainly, if there's anything that one finds in common with each other, you really grab on to it. We were guitar strummers and very excited to meet each other, find out which songs each guy knew, and so forth. Basically, Gerry (Beckley) had a band called the Corporation and I was kind of an interloper, listening and introducing myself to them. So, anyways, one thing led to another. The long and the short of it was when we all began writing our own songs and music, that really changed the formula, and that was a bit later when we graduated in 1969.

After 69', now unencumbered by school, we realized we all had a little stash of songs we'd written, and we sat down to arrange those songs and the vocal and guitar parts. This is really when we felt like, "Hey – we might have something here."



<https://youtu.be/fSPvr5sSNas>

As three musicians, what was the process of collaboration musically that led to original songwriting?

We had all played together in that one band called the Daze, a cover band playing Friday nights at the teen club. We took it a bit further, as we were actually arranging cover songs in our own way. Ever since we heard the Vanilla Fudge do “River Deep, Mountain High” in a heavy way, showing you could interpret songs differently. And that was the spark of going into writing our own stuff. We put our own touch on those cover songs and it grew from that place.

With the musicians of the 60’s being such a historic driving force, and your first America album releasing in 71’ – What influences did you take away from that period of songwriting?

We were absolute sponges to everything music-wise that was coming out. That was our lives during that period, in that sense. We were really immersed in music, and we listened to everything too. We also had access to the British music scene which was unique at that time and that very fertile time. We could actually see live shows and of course saw a lot of great performances during that time (specific references to Cream, The Who, The Jimi Hendrix Experience, Rod Stewart and the Faces, Pink Floyd). But my songwriting started then. And I’m really an un-trained musician in the sense that I didn’t learn by instruction. And the timing of being in southern California, where my father was stationed in 1962, and the “surf” scene was happening, and I was first starting to pluck away on the guitar that a friend loaned me. I was trying to figure out melodies on “surfing” music and absorbed myself in self-teaching and learned some chords but never became proficient at that. I was instead constantly listening to the Beach Boys, The Deltones, The Safaris, The Ventures, and mostly instrumental music. And then suddenly there are vocals involved. The Beatles came out and these songs were just blowing up everywhere, and the British invasion comes and it was a stepping stone on to the next and the next. And just learning more and more about the guitar, taking more lessons, and playing with some kids in the 8th grade. Then off to Biloxi, Mississippi, and being exposed to a southern rock group sound.

As the nomadic kid, I really had to become a chameleon – as we all did (bandmates). Just step in and “when in Rome” be a fly on the wall – learn a little here, a little there. And the three of us all went through that experience – and that’s what we brought to the table – when we sat down and started writing music. And of course, we had similar musical interests.

Dan (Dan Peek) was a much better rock and roll guitar player, soloist, and so on – and Gerry (Gerry Beckley) was really well-rounded and at that point was playing bass guitar and a schooled pianist and had some music theory in his head. So, Gerry is really the musical director and I take direction in the sense that when we’re working out vocal harmonies, it’s like ‘gimme a part – I’ll sing it’ and then I’ll throw in my own flourishes.

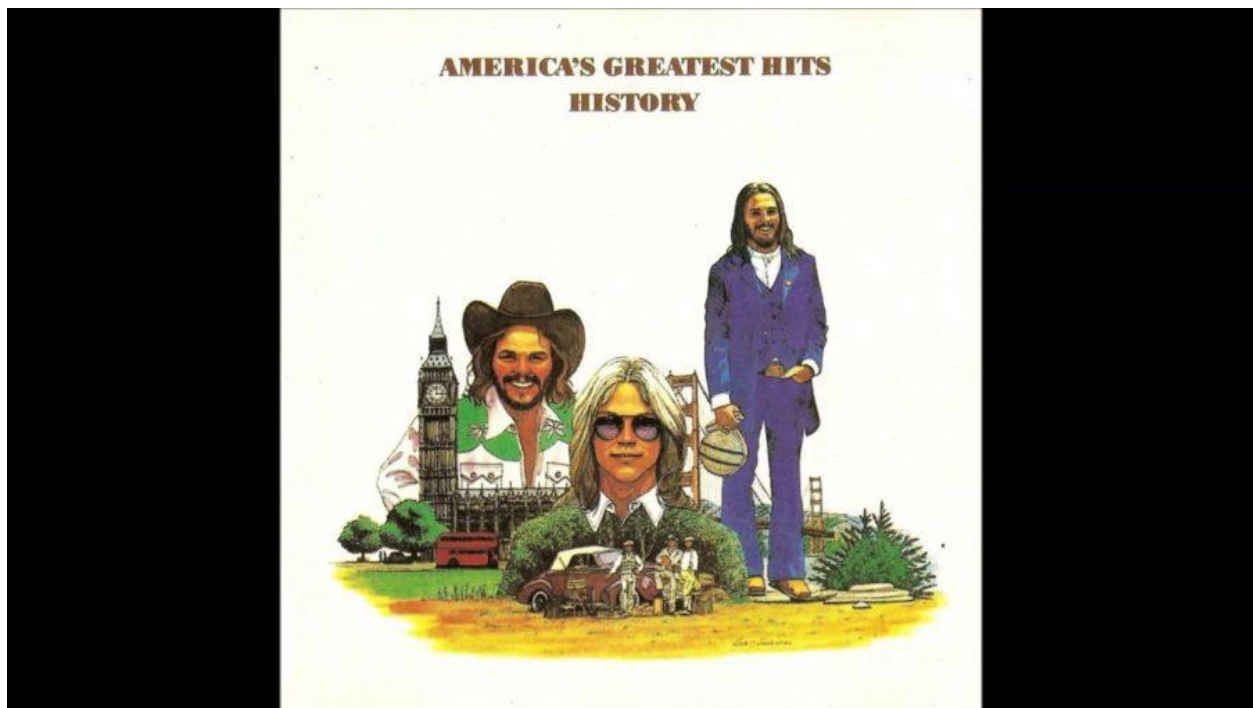
The songwriting we really did separately at that point, and during our career, we’ve really prided ourselves in bringing our own song to the table. The arrangements were a collaboration. But primarily it was really – my songs, Gerry’s songs, and Dan’s songs.

Listening to America or Crosby, Stills and Nash, there is such a distinctive rich folk sound coming from several acoustic guitars playing at once with vocal harmonies – were you seeking that specific sound or did it find you?

Well, we were certainly heavily influenced by CSNY at that moment, as we were listening in real-time as their first and second albums came out. But we were also listening to Buffalo Springfield mixed-in and the Byrds. But, like you say, one of the elements is, we were drawn to the acoustic guitars – but we weren't "folkies" like the Kingston Trio. Really, I was a latecomer to Bob Dylan in that sense, and the Beatles and the Beach Boys were much more in the forefront of my listening than really sitting down with a Bob Dylan album, you know.

But we always loved the incorporation of the acoustic guitars with a lead electric guitar element to it. So we definitely weren't part of the "purest" folk scene, that wouldn't even accept an electric guitar, as was the case with Bob Dylan going electric in the early '60s where – they really were separate "camps". But I think that era – 67', 68', 69' – with CSNY, and come to think of it, even Jimmy Page with Led Zeppelin and that acoustic guitar and his fantastic electric guitar sound woven in there – that was great. We were drawn to any number of bands during that period, but we incorporated both – electric and acoustic sound.

That first Crosby, Stills, and Nash album was really fantastic and said everything about what we would have loved to emulate, so we certainly take that critique that we were CSN-like. It goes without saying that we were carrying on the most immediate tradition that was in front of us -as all bands do. And we do also tout the Everly Brothers and their vocal harmonies.



Along that same conversation, can you talk about the “America” vocal harmony sound?

The vocal harmonies are this magical thing that happens when three voices blend – some don’t blend together as well as others. But sometimes you get this magical blend which was certainly the case with Stephen Stills, Graham Nash, and David Crosby. That fantastic blend with Graham’s voice on top. And we had a good blend and I think that was certainly the case and we were fortunate to have that. But you put three different voices together, singing their parts, and the sum is greater than the parts. It’s a new sound that comes out and we loved that.

How did your nomadic lifestyle as a perpetually traveling Air Force family, impact the feel and mood of your songwriting?

Yes- It certainly did, including those first songs that I wrote including “Horse with No Name” and “Ventura Highway”. They were basically looking back to experiences I had in the US, as all of us (bandmates) certainly were affected by one form of homesickness or another while living abroad. That was a way to reach back and reminisce. I’ve always really been interested in nature, the outdoors, wildlife – you know – different terrains, bodies of water, oceans, rivers, and lakes – “plants and birds and rocks and things” if you will. That and the art world, has always been at the forefront.

I was always trying to express myself musically, that way. I also have always said, you’ve got three minutes in a song. I don’t know how that came about or established that there was a time frame. Of course, there are much longer songs and whole sides of albums, but that’s really not the norm. You’ve got three minutes to write a song and grab someone’s attention, and express some view and come up with a nice melody. Also, you’re moved at the moment, you know – your personality – and what’s going on in all of our lives. That’s why you wake up some morning and you feel great, and other days – you don’t.

There’s some type of chemistry going on in your head and your psyche and if you sit down with the guitar on one of those given days, you’re kind of directed into an emotional, visual moment that you want to express.

In terms of your America’s 50th Anniversary tour, as you look out into your audience, and see another generation of listeners, that must be very satisfying?

We’ve always loved the live show, as it’s the one thing that you’re doing in real-time. I love recording and we’ve done it a lot -especially during those concentrations of years in the 70’s – but with the live show, you’re really connecting, living, and breathing the songs. So many people say to me, “How do you go out there and sing ‘Horse with No Name’ every night, or ‘Tin Man’ or whatever. And I never do wary of it. I do like getting up there. Some people liken it to re-painting the “Mona Lisa” every night.

Also, I think, you deliver whatever you’re known for. That’s what people want on a reunion tour. We’ve already tested the waters after 50 years. You go out there play a couple of songs you don’t know or God-forbid they’re original songs, and you’re previewing them on a live show- people lose interest. I think the motivation is to hear the material we are most known for, especially if you’ve been around as long as we have – listeners come and re-live that part of their lives. Getting away from the daily grind of life – that’s what we hope we are providing.



<https://youtu.be/QUby4mtGVlw>

What's the formation of the band like on stage?

We're just a five-piece up there on stage and we're all playing our instruments and we're re-creating those songs. There's some stretching on some songs but we actually pride ourselves in trying to re-create the recordings as much as possible because that's what people like. Needless to say, after Covid took 18 months away from us – it was great to get back together again. Above and beyond just making a living, it's been a great return.

Who are you listening to today?

Not the younger, younger stuff – I'm just braindead as I watched American Music Awards last night. It's not from lack of interest as I'm naturally curious, and as an art lover, I can respond to performance art or any form of artistic expression. I'm just getting old I guess as I constantly turn around and look back.

I like the ensemble band style. Wilco and Tom Petty we followed and always felt that Petty and the Heartbreakers had that connection and feel. The Eagles had that as well, but everything ages, and losing Glen Frey was a real shock as he was a close friend. We actually came up with those guys and with Jackson Browne, J.D. Souther, and the like. In the 70's we were all in the same office with David Geffen, who managed us after the first album which broke our way and we moved back to California under Geffen's record label. Joni Mitchell was there too – and my gosh being able to be around Joni Mitchell and her craftsmanship. And CSN was in there and Neil Young was in there as well.

That time was unbelievable – we took our band to another level. Tried anyway – hopefully. And then working with legendary record producer George Martin for seven

consecutive albums and the whole Beatles thing, that we were rubbing shoulders with part of the history we'd been listening to. We've had a great career.