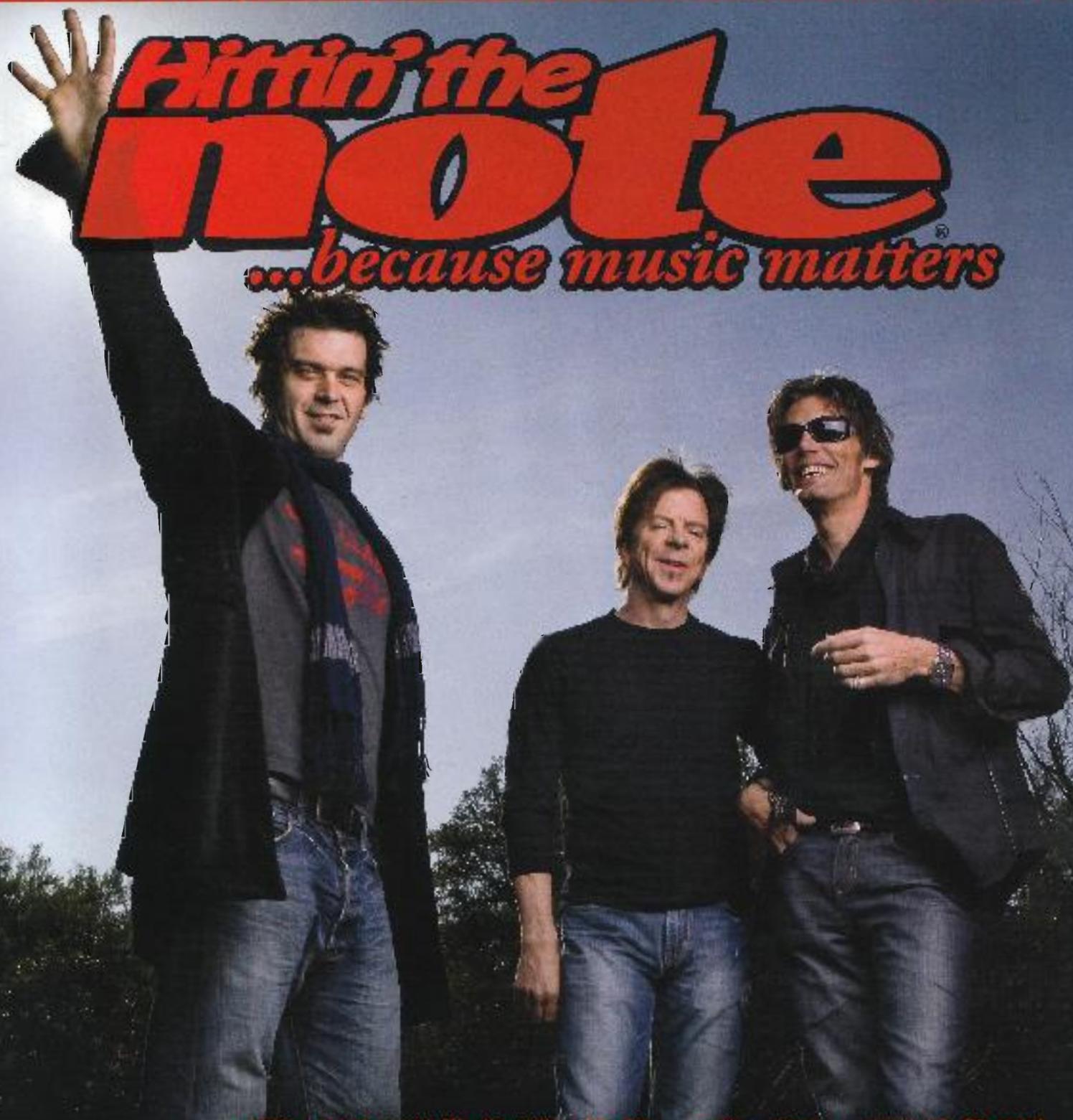


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RETURN OF THE ABC ANGELS

Issue 64 - U.S. \$6.00
2010 \$8.00 CAN



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All my Life:



Singer/songwriter Gerry Beckley helped to form America 40 years ago, and after four decades, he and partner Dewey Bunnell continue to play over 100 shows a year to an ever-increasing fan base. The release of the album *Here and Now* in 2007 helped to spark a resurgence of interest in America's music, and as Gerry tells us, he and Dewey have no intention of stopping the show any time soon.

Gerry Beckley of America

by John Lynskey

Photos by Kelley Lynskey



Hittin' the Note: Growing up, what were your earliest musical influences? I know you started playing at a fairly young age.

Gerry Beckley: I started piano when I was three, and that was classical piano lessons. That was because my house was always full of music; my mom always played classical records, and I always like to HittinTheNote.com

mention that, because that was an influence right from the start. Her taste was the Romantic period, the Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff and all that stuff. I know all that stuff pretty well, but what Dewey and I usually jump to and list as major influences were the Beatles and Beach Boys, which was when we were in junior high. That was my basic inspiration.

How did you, Dewey and Dan Peek come to hook up together in England?

Our dads were all in the U.S. Air Force, and you spend all your life moving around; it's usually two or three years for each stop. It just happened that we all were stationed at a base outside of London at the same time. I met Dewey in '67, and we had both our junior and senior years of high school together. Dan came for our senior year of high school, and we all graduated together in 1969. We played together in high school, and the three of us formed America in 1970.

America experienced a great deal of success early on, with the

albums *America*, *Homecoming* and *Hat Trick*, and took home the Grammy for "Best New Artist" in 1972. What do you think it was that allowed you guys to break away from the Crosby, Stills and Nash comparisons and establish your own sound and style?

The first album was overseen by a great guy named Ian Samwell, and we co-produced it. It was done in a way to capture what we were doing live at the time, which was three guys sitting on stools – very much like Crosby, Stills and Nash, who we were really big fans of and were very influenced by. The whole album was done very quickly, and although there were real drums and other features – David Lindley played a lot of fantastic extra instruments,



Ray Cooper added some percussion, and there was some grand piano, but these things were downplayed as elements. The focus of the first album was on these acoustic guitars and harmonies. Once we got beyond that, we knew as early as *Homecoming* – and certainly by *Hat Trick* – that we wanted to expand the base of our sound. I love that sound; I love acoustic instruments, and I think there is really something to be said for that sound. But as I said, our influences were far deeper than that, and we really wanted to start involving other ingredients. I think we were well on our way to that before we got to the George Martin years, which really didn't start until the fourth album.

Speaking of George Martin – in 1974, you guys recorded *Holiday* with George, which was the first of seven records America did with him. The “H” albums era (*Holiday*, *Hearts*, *History*, *Hideaway*, *Harbor*) was incredibly important to the group. What did you guys take away from working with George?

We learned immeasurable amounts, but I think the first thing we learned was focus. We took ages to do *Hat Trick*, due in part to the fact that we produced it ourselves. We were three young guys, and to keep us all satisfied was very difficult. *Hat Trick* is a wonderful album, but it was quite trying getting through it, so that is why we went back to working with a producer.

We were very fortunate to be able to work with George Martin. The story is we just called him up and asked if he would be interested in working with us. He was aware of who we were because of our success, and he agreed. We started off with an approach of “Let's do one record and see how it goes”; we had no idea we would be entering into a seven-album run with George.

He booked two months at AIR Studios in London, but we actually recorded *Holiday* in just 14 days. It really was a great experience for all of us, and quite a surprise to George. I always like to mention Geoff Emerick, who was our engineer during that time period; Geoff was the engineer on *Sgt. Pepper's* and *Abbey Road*, and remains a good friend to this day.

First of all, to do it in 14 days meant we were very well prepared; there wasn't some guy cracking a whip over us. We were ready to go, and everything just fell into place. George's comment at the end was “This can't possibly be a success; nothing that easy could ever be.” We had a great time, and the focus was the main thing. George kept us moving from one thing to the next; there was no messing around. It got us back on track, basically.

Dan Peek left the group after the *Harbor* album, which obviously was a major shift for you guys. Was there any serious thought by you and Dewey to replace Dan, or did you two know pretty quickly that you wanted to go on as a duo?

There really was never any thought about replacing Dan; we knew that there would be a hole certainly in many ways, especially in the three-part harmony sound. You can always have somebody sing those parts, but there was no way to have somebody become the third facet of your life to that extent; this was a guy we went to high school with and all that stuff. A good friend of ours, Timothy B. Schmit, who was with Poco, was someone we had spent most of the '70s touring with. Half the time Timothy was on our plane – we had a big private plane, and he'd mooch a ride. Here was a guy who was high-harmony singer, and if anything, we could have

said, “Hey Timothy – what do you think?” To be honest, shortly after that, the Eagles did something quite similar, when Timothy replaced Randy Meisner as their bass player. I don't want to imply that it was ever discussed; we never even considered it. Dewey and I just felt that it was best to carry on; there was certainly a long line of names and people who wanted to step in there, and it really wasn't a case of “Man, let's get the guy with the greatest chops” – it wasn't like that. We just moved on.

When people talk about songwriting in America, the basic notion is that you write the ballads and Dewey's songs are heavy on the visual imagery. Is that a fair assessment?

Dewey writes the outdoor songs, and I write the indoor songs! I mean, I wrote “Sister Golden Hair,” which is an up-tempo song, so it is not quite as simple as I write the ballads, but I did write a lot of ballads. Dewey likes to say that if it has two chords, he wrote it, and if it's got a million chords, then I wrote it.

How would you describe your creative relationship with Dewey?

I view it as a marriage – we jokingly say that it's our *other* marriage, and it has very many of the same ingredients. There is an immense amount of give and take, even though it's now two instead of three, but it's been two for 33 years now, so it's been a duo for a very long time. It's still a democracy, but how do you have a democracy when there is only two votes? What we do is defer to whoever is more passionate about a particular issue and that has worked very well for us.

Underneath all of that is the fact that it is both our livelihoods – we support not only our own families, but also people who have been with us for going on 40 years. Willie Leacox, our drummer, has been with us 38 of our 40 years, so these bonds go very deep.

In 2007, America came full circle with the release of *Here and Now*. That album exposed the group to a whole new generation of fans, but it really appealed to your hardcore audience as well. It was new music, but old America at the same time. The impact of *Here and Now* was phenomenal for you guys.

Yeah, it was a pretty big trick, and I have to give all the credit to Adam Schlesinger and James Iha, who produced *Here and Now*. I struck up a relationship with Adam for a couple of years leading up to the record, and we're huge fans of Adam's band Fountains of Wayne, and we went back and forth for a while, sending songs to each other. One thing slowly led to another, and I went to his studio in Manhattan by myself, and cut a few things. Adam worked James Iha into the equation very early; they're partners. I'm always working, trying a variety of different things, and I don't always bring Dewey onboard, because sometimes things work out, and sometimes they don't. This was really taking some great shape, and because Dewey was a big fan of Fountains of Wayne, it already had some real foundation. Right away, Sony heard about it; they wanted to get involved with it, and then it became very real very quick, after two years of back and forth. All of sudden we had a major label, so Dewey and I started to try and figure out how we were going to do the album, because there were still 100 or so shows on the calendar and we didn't want to get rid of them. So it

really turned into Dewey and I going to New York Monday through Thursday, and then getting on plane and doing Friday-Saturday-Sunday out on the road, and then going back to New York.

It worked out really well; those guys are so genre savvy, and so honest about their interests; it wasn't just somebody trying to do America. It was a lot of fun, and I think it showed. Once the word got out, some real incredible talent began to show up, and that became this additional challenge; how do you involve someone like Ryan Adams and really give them their due without it turning into "Here's us and so and so, and now here's us and someone else." That wasn't what we were after; James always said that he wanted a timeless quality to this record, the kind of thing that when the needle drops, you can't tell what decade it is – you just know it's America.

The only thing about it is that it was such a great experience, I don't want to mess with it. It was so good and so much fun that part of me wants to do it again, but on the other hand, you can never repeat that kind of thing.

Your solo career; you've made some really great albums that people may not be as aware of as they should. *Van Go Gan*, *Horizontal Fall* and *Like a Brother* with Carl Wilson and Robert Lamm are all tremendous. Can you talk about your solo career a little bit?

Well, when you do over a 100 shows with your main band, the simple equation is to double that; 100 shows is about 200 days out of your life. You have a wife and kids, and all these things need to get fit into the year. Fortunately, I have a studio here at the house, and I do a lot of work there. These other projects have to fit in and around life, so it can take a while to make them. *Horizontal Fall* took about eight years to do, and the great thing for me is that I'm not in any hurry to do these things; I do them if and when I can. Also, I'm very, very proud of them; I love to do them, and in this case, the democracy is not a part of it; I only have to please myself. There is nothing wrong with having a really great working relationship with Dewey; I love that, and I really honor that. When I do something on my own, there is nobody I can rest that on other than me.

This year I had an interesting project which really came out well. I produced an album for a guy named Jeff Larson; Jeff is a great independent singer/songwriter, who's of the same genre. He has done very well on his own, and certainly doesn't need my help. He has done a series of CDs, and they have done well. He's often done a song of mine, or I have sung some harmony on his albums, and we just started batting some things around. I said, "Rather than doing just one song here, or me helping you with a bridge or something, why don't you start going through the material, and why don't we put two aside, and then another two, and then you'll end up with something that's a little bit more unique." I was thinking of a *Nilsson Sings Newman* kind of project, where he would then have an album of material, and I have a lot of material. I didn't want to steer him towards stuff; I wanted him to be able to pick, and Jeff has very good ears. Well, it all happened a lot quicker than I thought, so within the year, we had an album called *Heart of the Valley*, which has done quite well, and it continues to get great reviews. I produced it, I wrote most of it, and I played a lot of the instruments – I'm very pleased how it turned out.

You've written so many songs and had so many wonderful hits,

but do you think there might be some songs that have slipped through the cracks and maybe don't get the recognition that they should?

You know, it's almost the opposite. To tell you the truth, we've been doing something that we very rarely do; we've been rehearsing because we want to mix the show up a little bit for our 40th anniversary. Dewey and I went back through all our albums and made a short list. We came up with some songs, started to work on them and we were like, "Naw, naw – that's crap. We can't do that one!" Then we realized the reason that the show had shifted through the years into the show that it has become is that those are the best songs. Certainly the fans might not agree completely, but the reason you pick the two or three songs from each record is that those are the ones that work, and it's very rare that you find what you're asking me about.

Now, I've been asked, "Why don't you do this one" or "Why don't you play that one?" Very often, it's a slow song, or it's a quiet song, and when you've only got about 90 minutes a night, it is very hard to slow it down or quiet it down too much. For us, we have a lot of songs that are ballads, so when the show already has "Daisy Jane" and "I Need You" and has its slow moments in it, it's difficult for us to then incorporate any extra slow tunes without bogging the show down too much. We don't want to make the show too slow for too long, so that's why.

We were really honored many years ago to do all the music for *The Last Unicorn*, which was written by Jimmy Webb. The title track is a fantastic ballad, and it was a #1 song in Germany. When we play in Germany, that song is the encore, but when we play in the States, that song is really only brought out for more of the performing arts theatre shows. "Man's Road," one of the other songs on that album, is another incredible ballad, and I would love to do that one, but for us to do both of them – to do eight minutes of Jimmy Webb's beautiful slow stuff – in a 90-minute set would be very tough. It's unfortunate, because that would be eight of the best minutes of the show.

America puts on a great show. It's a lot of fun to see America in concert.

It is a pleasurable thing to know that you really exceeded people's expectations, and I take a lot of pride in that. Thanks to classic radio, people know the music, and these songs have remained on people's minds and in their hearts for many, many years. That's a gift that we couldn't be more grateful for. Off the top of their heads they think of "Horse with No Name," "Ventura Highway," "Sister Golden Hair" and a few more, so it's not until they come and sit down that you see them nudging each other, and collectively a few thousand people are saying, "Oh, I forgot about that one." When you can pull that off for 90 minutes or so, I think that's really something, and that's what we get to do with our show.

You've been doing this for a very long time. What still motivates and challenges you?

I still write constantly, and I'll tell you, that's a double-edged sword. There's nothing better than feeling good about something that you've written, but that is a rare feeling. Long ago, I got over that hurdle of no longer being 20 years old, or 30, and I can't write ev-

everything about, to quote Brian Wilson, "I'm bugged about my old man." You have to slowly adjust, and start to use all the different parts of your life and different events in your songwriting. So I'm over that hurdle, but it's still a challenge to make a good three or four minutes of music.

It's impossible to say what's going to happen tomorrow, but in general, what do you think lies ahead? After 40 years of America, how do you view the future?

I can tell you that I feel pretty good, and that Dewey feels pretty good. One of the things that we had in our favor right at the start was that we were really young. We were 17 and 18, so we had about

a decade's grace on most people. After 40 years, I'm 57, and I have a lot of friends who are doing this who are 67, so we feel that we've got a good 10 years that we can still do this – and we're trying to do this as well or better than we ever have. That is a challenge, but the band is in as good a shape as it's ever been, and the show has a lot more video in it now. One of the great things about an America show is that it's like a garage band up there, with all kinds of chords coming out of the guitars. So we're proud of all of that; I can tell you that those 10 years are going to fly by like two or three; every year goes by a lot quicker, but we're still going to be playing.

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