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## America rides into Huntington on its 50th anniversary tour

By DAVE LAVENDER For The Herald-Dispatch  
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The band America has planned a return to Huntington after canceling its March 2020 performance due to COVID-19.  
Submitted photo

HUNTINGTON — You can count on one hand the number of rock bands forged by high school friends still making a living in music decades later.

Iconic rock acts such as: U2, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Green Day, Boyz II Men, and Radiohead are some of the few and the proud. One of the longest running units is America. +


America was formed up in 1970 by Dewey Bunnell, Gerry Beckley and the late Dan Peek — three high school buddies and sons of U.S. Air Force soldiers stationed in London, England. America struck gold out of the gates. Its first song released, “Horse With No Name,” shot to No. 1 and is still the band’s biggest hit. Crowned the Best New Artist at the 1972 Grammys, America has been riding around the globe on a string of hits ever since.

Equally influenced by The Beatles and The Beach Boys, America, known for their melodic, cinematic songs and distinct harmonies, has recorded more than 20 albums, with six going gold and platinum, and has notched 47 singles including such sing-along FM radio staples as “Sister Golden Hair,” “I Need You,” “Ventura Highway,” “Don’t Cross the River,” “Tin Man,” “Lonely People” and “You Can Do Magic.”

As part of the 85th Marshall Artists Series season, Mountain Health Network Presents America in concert at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 1 at the historic Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center. Tickets are \$76, \$87, \$98 and \$109. To purchase tickets call the Marshall Artist Series at 304-696-6656, order tickets online at [ticketmaster.com](https://www.ticketmaster.com), or visit the box office location in the Joan C. Edwards playhouse on Marshall University’s campus anytime noon to 4 p.m., Monday through Friday.

## Back on the road

Speaking by phone, America founder, Dewey Bunnell, whose teenage-written hit “Horse With No Name” put the British-birthered band of Yankees on the map, said the band is ecstatic to be back out on the road on its 50th anniversary tour after it got derailed the COVID-19 in 2020.

“This show was supposed to be the kick off for the 50th anniversary tour before the whole COVID crisis shut us down so it feels good to finally be able to get back and bring this thing full circle,” Bunnell said of the 17-month touring hiatus, which was the longest of the band’s half-century career. 

“We started the band in 1970 right out of high school and have worked ever since. We were a trio in the beginning. Our third member (Dan Peek) left in the late ‘70s and sadly passed away in 2011. In that entire 50-plus years we have never been off the road and have never taken a lot of breaks. This was different, scheduling was impossible, and it was a real ordeal as it has been for everyone in the world not being able to work. But you make the most of your time.”

While Bunnell said everyone enjoyed the unexpected time with their families, the band was more than ready to get back together to connect with each other, the music and the fans.

“We never look the gift horse in the mouth,” Bunnell said. “We always have a lot of gratitude for what has happened in our lives and careers. I had no ambition to be some big music success. Things clicked for us in a way that has been wonderful. We have had our share of ups and downs and personal strife, but Gerry and I focus on this is as what we do. We don’t have another profession. It’s still exciting. It is still fulfilling, and we still have something to offer. We don’t live in each other’s pockets. We have wives and grandkids and when we come together to do this it was such a great reunion to start this up was fantastic. What about this wouldn’t we be excited about?”

America began rehearsing in July, resumed the tour on Aug. 13, and is now on a run of shows from Nov. 18 up through their final 2021 date, Dec. 10 at the storied Town Hall in New York City.

“We’ve got 40-plus shows under our belt so we’re a real well-oiled machine and ready to go,” Bunnell said.

Known as a die-hard road band and racking up 100 or more dates a year for decades, America has gotten choosier with touring as its members have aged, Bunnell said.



“I remember one year we were booked in Anchorage, Alaska, in January,” Bunnell said, laughing. “You remember the commercial, ‘Geez, Mikey will eat anything.’ Well, we were the band that would go places. Our band is very compact and for an international band we tread very light, eight guys and we can get in and out. We play any number of indoors and outdoors venues, casinos and theater and you name it. It’s great. We are really enjoying it and the people are coming out and we are grateful for that. We didn’t know what to expect and if crowds would come out, especially for our demographic. We are old guys, but we are taking care of ourselves and doing one show, one day at a time. We know that if anyone of our band tests positive for COVID, it shuts it down for 10 days.”

## Playing to new generations

While the majority of their crowd may be the original LP-buying, bell-bottom jeans-wearing crew, Bunnell said they also get a lot of multi-generational fans and families coming out to vibe on their timeless music, whether or not the person in the crowd found the band through the 2007 album, “Here and Now” with such guests as My Morning Jacket, Ben Keller and Ryan Adams, or rocked out to “Horse With No Name,” featured on the 2004 hit video game, “Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas,” or discovered the band when they heard “Ventura Highway” in the 2006 Warner Brothers film, “We Are Marshall.”

They are excited to share their music with students at Marshall and to be a part of the storied Marshall Artists Series’ 85th anniversary, Bunnell said.

“It’s an honor to know that performers like Marcel Marceau and artists we love like Tony Bennett have played the Artist Series,” Bunnell said. “They’ve had a great eclectic bunch of bookings. We feel fortunate to maintain this generational timeline where our fans are bringing their kids and grandkids. For things like ‘Grand Theft Auto’ or a movie or TV show that’s a bonus and a real compliment.

“We tend to set the mood in a period piece about the 1970s. We were very honored that ‘Ventura Highway’ was featured in ‘We Are Marshall,’ and when we had to cancel that March show we were as upset as the audience, so we are glad it has come full circle. The Marshall plane crash was a tragedy that is incomprehensible and to have our music in a film that is so poignant is really nice.”

## In the beginning

Bunnell said this 50-year celebration, which includes “America 50: The Half Century Box Set,” has caused he and his lifelong musical partner Gerry Beckley to take a moment to really appreciate their incredible creative life together.



America's genesis was a deep love of songwriting and vocal harmonies fueled by growing up in the late 1960s during a rock and roll revolution happening on both sides of the pond.

"Only looking back do you get a good perspective of your life, and it was just an amazing thing as these American teens living in London at the end of the 1960s," Bunnell said. "My parents moved us over in 1966 and it was a golden time for British musicians and getting to see it from the British perspective. The music scene in England was blowing up and we were sponges (who would) go see live music all the time ... We were influenced immensely by The Beach Boys and The Beatles, primarily for the songwriting and the vocal harmony aspects, which intrigued us. That concept that the sum is greater than the parts ... Every voice is unique, like fingerprints, so if you can find two or three voices that blend together it is a magical thing."

Armed with three songwriters, America had the ability to create songs that may have come from different places and people, but worked well together for the band.

"I think I attempted to be a real — what you called a cinematic — songwriter from the beginning, telling a story that you could visualize," Bunnell said. "You have 3 or 3 1/2 minutes to express something, and I always approached songwriting that way and that has been a good complement. Gerry writes the more internal, love songs and ballads and I write these visual, outdoorsy songs. I've always been an outdoors guy as we were moving around on these Air Force bases. The one thing my brother and I always had going was trekking around in the desert and going fishing and so that arises in a lot more of my songs."

## Riding on as a duo

Although Dan Peek would depart in 1977 to become a Christian rock artist, Gerry Beckley and Dewey Bunnell have motored on as a duo and in the 1980s chalked up a smattering of charting hits including their 1982 smash single, "You Can Do Magic." It would be the last of their run of 11 Top 40 singles in the U.S. during the 1970s and 1980s.

While they have still scored a number of Top 40 hits abroad in the years since, America has stayed on the road and has been, in recent years, getting accolades for its enduring legacy. The band was inducted into the Vocal Music Hall of Fame in 2006 and got a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 2012.



As anniversaries have been notched, Bunnell said they have taken the time at each juncture to celebrate the occasion with eight thoughtful curated and extensive compilations since 2000, including a 40 Years box set and one celebrating their string of hit records for Warner Brothers. Bunnell said for the 50th Anniversary box sets, they have been blessed to have one of their colleagues, Jeff Larson, go back through the Warner Brothers vault and dig out some incredible nuggets from past recordings, including a to-be-released recording with the late George Martin conducting and performing.

“Jeff is a great musician and really took it upon himself to do some archive raking,” Bunnell said. “We gave him the reins and Warner Brothers opened the vault up for all the masters. He was a real bird dog about this, and he sniffed out every track and outtakes and like there would be six vocal tracks and he would pick out something different and a lot of gems for the listeners who are really into it. He found a lot at the Poison Oak sessions which is the only time I had a home studio up in Northern California and we had a bunch of songs that I had completely forgotten about ... I was personally really excited to hear and hopefully some of the listeners will be interested too. Right now, we just finished up a live performance at the Hollywood Bowl in 1975 with George Martin as the opening act, playing some of his arrangements of songs from the Beatles era. I hope that gets to be included.

“So hopefully that is coming out, and there will be songs that people have never heard because they have never been available.”

## Welcome to the discussion.

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