



Nitty Gritty Dirt Band – Did The Circle Remain Unbroken For A Third Time?

The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band made its performing debut at The Paradox in Orange, California on the day I turned twenty. Allowing for the variance between Greenwich Mean Time and Pacific Time, by the time the band took the stage, I was probably sleeping peacefully in student accommodation in Glasgow. Years later, in my birthplace in Northern Scotland, I was visiting family and was introduced to the band's recordings by a former schoolmate. *Some days you eat bear, and some days the bear eats you.* The day my ears crossed paths with the Dirt Band was a good day.....

The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band's seventh recording was a triple [vinyl] disc set issued in 1972 by United Artists Records titled **"Will The Circle Be Unbroken."** By that stage the band had settled into its fourth line-up and consisted of Jeff Hanna [guitar/vocals/drums], Jimmie Fadden [guitar/harmonica/vocals], Les Thompson [bass/guitar/vocals/mandolin], John McEuen [guitar/fiddle/banjo/mandolin/accordion/vocals] and *new boy* Jimmy Ibbotson [guitar/keyboards/drums/accordion/vocals] who had joined them a couple of years earlier.

Back in the summer of 1966, prior to signing a recording contract with Liberty Records, Jackson Browne had been a band member. At that stage the six Dirt Band members used to hang out at McCabe's Guitar Shop in Santa Monica, where Hanna taught guitar. Browne was replaced by McEuen prior to the group signing a recording deal with Liberty Records, and John remained a band member until 1987. John's older brother, William E., took over management of the band around this time. Essentially an acoustic jug band at the outset, by 1968 Bruce Kunkel counselled the others to start using electric instruments, but they resisted, so he departed after the band's unsuccessful second album, **"Ricochet,"** was released. He was replaced by multi-instrumentalist Chris Darrow [ex Kaleidoscope], who stayed for two albums, appeared with the group in the Lee Marvin/Clint Eastwood movie **"Paint Your Wagon"** [1969], following which the Dirt Band split up for a short time. Darrow and Hanna formed The Corvettes, who became Linda Ronstadt's band. Darrow issued a number of solo recordings during the seventies, but by the beginning of that decade the Dirt Band had reformed with Hanna back in the fold. Darrow's replacement in the band was Jimmy Ibbotson.

In 1970 the Dirt Band moved their base to Colorado, and while they had enjoyed Top 40 success with "Buy For Me The Rain" [#], a cut from their 1967 self-titled, debut album, the Dirt Band *struck out* as far as further chart hits were concerned until 1970, when Jerry Jeff Walker's "Mr. Bojangles" [+] gave them a # 9 Pop Single. Their follow up album **"All The Good Times"** [1971], complete with rustic Rorschach inspired artwork, hinted at the quantum leap that the band was about to make. The opening song on Side 1 – remember these were the golden days of what we once lovingly referred to as *vinyl* – the Hanna/Ibbotson collaboration "Sixteen Tracks" included an *audience-taped* instrumental segment featuring Randy Scruggs, Norman Blake and Ellis Padgett. According to John McEuen's liner notes for the 30th anniversary reissue of **"Circle, Vol. 1"** when the Dirt Band made their Nashville concert debut in 1970, Earl Scruggs along with his wife and three sons were in the audience. As McEuen puts it, Scruggs Sr. was there to *"See the boy who played "Randy Lynn Rag" the way I intended to."* The following year Earl and his sons played Tulagi's, a Boulder club, and later that night when McEuen nervously posed the question *"Would you ever record a song with the Dirt Band ?"* it elicited an enthusiastic *"I'd be proud to."* As they say, *mighty oaks from tiny acorns grow*, and in the ensuing months Doc Watson, Merle Travis and Roy Acuff indicated their commitment to the *recording project*. For those times, the *project* plan was somewhat off the wall. Who in their right mind would even contemplate recording an album of vintage roots material, let alone as a studio collaboration by numerous mature [in age] country/folk musicians and a quintet of twenty something year old hippies. It had never been done before, but on the strength of

"Mr. Bojangles" success United Artists, according to McEuen's liner notes, agreed to the project by setting a *handsome* \$22,000 budget.

On 6th August 1971 the five "*longhaired West Coast boys*" – a quote attributed to the late Roy Acuff, convened in Nashville where the "**Circle Vol. 1**" sessions were recorded at Woodland Sound Studios. The legend goes that, the songs were recorded direct to two tracks. Seven days later the sessions were complete. When released as a single in late 1971 the Roy Acuff/Dirt Band duet on Hank Sr.'s "I Saw the Light" hit the Country chart scoring a # 56, and the following year the triple album went on to score two Grammy nominations. The thirty-eight track recording, which included casual [and sometimes humorous] comments by musicians before and after many of the cuts, lasted some two hours ten minutes, featured the input of around thirty musicians, and went on to achieve platinum sales for United Artists. The 30th anniversary reissue of "**Will The Circle be Unbroken**," a 2CD set was enhanced by four new tracks – two instrumentals and two spoken tracks – and was released on March 26th 2002 by Capitol Records.

In a musical climate that saw the unlikely and somewhat gargantuan chart success of the movie soundtrack album "**Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?**" [2000], it was obvious that apart from it being the 30th anniversary of "**Circle Vol. 1**," currently there were sound commercial reasons to reissue the recording. In fact the band had revisited the concept in 1989 with the single disc set "**Will The Circle Be Unbroken Vol. 2**" released on May 1st that year by Universal Records. Keeping pace with the times, there was even a video release – **Making Of "Will The Circle Be Unbroken Vol. 2."** By then down to a quartet following McEuen's departure [and Thompson's 15 years earlier], the Dirt Band included Bob Carpenter who had joined in the late seventies. The recording gained the 1989 Country Music Association Award for "Album of the Year" and the band was nominated for five Grammys and scored successes in the categories of Best Country Vocal Group/Duo of the Year, Best Bluegrass Recording - "Valley Road" with Bruce Hornsby, and Best Country Instrumental - "Amazing Grace" with Randy Scruggs. Where the first collection had been a William E. McEuen production [younger brother John produced the 30th anniversary reissue], Randy Scruggs and the Dirt Band produced "**Circle Vol. 2**" at Scruggs Sound Studio in Nashville. All I'd add at this juncture is that "**Circle Vol. 2**" lasted a tad over seventy-two minutes, featured twenty songs that were far from vintage in terms of their age [~], while the liner credited the input of nearly sixty musicians. Around two-dozen of the foregoing musicians only appeared as backing vocalists on the album title song.

The twenty-nine song, one hour forty-five minute, 2CD set "**Will The Circle Be Unbroken Vol. 3**," produced by the same team and recorded at the same location as "**Circle Vol. 2**," was released by Capitol Records on October 1st last year. It has been nominated for two Grammys - Best Country Performance By A Duo Or Group With Vocal for "Roll The Stone Away" and Best Country Collaboration With Vocals [featuring Taj Mahal, Alison Krauss and Doc Watson] for "Will The Circle Be Unbroken (Glory, Glory)." Part of the charm of "**Circle Vol. 1**" had been the challenge of *old world* meets *new*. That the sessions would produce awesome renderings of vintage country/bluegrass songs and tunes had been far from being a foregone conclusion. "**Circle Vol. 2**" was a far more contemporary, and, frankly, commercially driven affair. Circa the early twenty-first century, those twenty something year old hippies are now much longer in the tooth and, thankfully, they have attempted to revisit the original concept with "**Circle Vol. 3**." It's not a total success, but I applaud their effort. Of course a number of pickers and vocalists, Mother Maybelle Carter, Roy Acuff, Merle Travis, the Huskey's Sr. and Jr. and others, are sadly no longer with us. That said, a small band have succeeded in appearing on all three recordings.

In addition to Messrs. Hanna, Fadden, [the newly returned] McEuen and Ibbotson of the Dirt Band, Jimmy Martin, Randy and Earl Scruggs, and Vassar Clements reprise their appearances on "**Circle Vol. 1**" and "**Circle Vol. 2**," while Doc Watson returns having appeared on the first collection. One pleasing aspect in terms of *passing the torch on* is that following in the footsteps of *those who have gone before*, the "**Circle Vol. 3**" recording features a new *younger generation* of players. In terms of "*sons of*" there's Jaime Hanna, Jonathan McEuen and Ray Martin, while Doc Watson's grandson Richard also contributes. Sadly, no youngsters have come forward from the Carter/Cash axis. As for *those who have gone*, Doc Watson dedicates "I Am a Pilgrim" to Merle Travis, while Mother Maybelle and Sarah Carter are recalled by Johnny Cash in "Tears In The Holston River." In terms of acknowledged bluegrass musicians, the *first timers* include Del McCoury and his sons, Robbie and Ronnie, the Nashville Bluegrass Band, Sam Bush, Rodney Dillard, Tony Rice, Jerry Douglas, Glen Duncan and Alison Krauss, plus "**Vol. 2**" vet Ricky Skaggs. As for the country contingent, there's Willie Nelson, Dwight Yoakam,

Vince Gill, Iris Dement and songwriter Matraca Berg [Mrs. Jeff Hanna], plus **"Circle Vol. 2"** vets Emmylou Harris, Johnny Cash and June Carter Cash [Maybelle Carter's daughter]. Widening the roots genres embraced to include the blues, Taj Mahal's contribution is quite significant, while *rocker* Tom Petty's is somewhat superfluous.

As for those contemporary songs, given the choice, honourable mention is certainly deserved by Iris Dement's parental tribute "Mama's Opry" [originally on her **"Infamous Angel"** album], and even though his voice sounds ravaged by time Big John delivers a heartbreaking take of "Tears In The Holston River." As for those vintage tunes, there's a quartet of trad. arr. numbers, plus two A. P. Carter originals, as well as "Hold Whatcha Got" from the irrepressible Jimmy Martin, and the Watson classic "I Am A Pilgrim." On the negative side, while attempting to sound traditional there's at least ten *way to contemporary* compositions, although Krauss' reading of McDill/Reynolds "Catfish John" is quite winsome. Lurking in the grooves after the final listed cut - Randy Scrugg's performs "Farther Along" on Mother Maybelle's L-5 Gibson guitar [*] - there's a short rendition of Robbie Robertson's "The Weight."

By the time you read this piece, the 2002 Grammy Award ceremony will still be a week away. It's amazing to consider that **"Circle Vol. 1"** was a recording which ploughed *totally fallow ground*, yet it was only rewarded with nominations. I'll let you figure out my thoughts on the **"Vol. 2"** result. Now I'm not suggesting that in the light of **"Oh Brother," "Circle Vol. 3"** should be a winner merely for old times sake, but I do feel that it is about time that the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band's contribution to American[a] music – contemporary, as well as vintage – was openly acknowledged. Accompanied by *prime Circle movers* Earl and Randy Scruggs, on 10th December last year the band donated **"Circle Vol. 3"** memorabilia to the archives at the Country Music Hall of Fame Museum. Past and present **"Circle"** contributors Roy Acuff [1962], Merle Travis [1977], Earl Scruggs [1985] and Willie Nelson [1993] are already members. The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band has yet to be honoured, either by the latter organisation, or the Cleveland based Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Considering their *multi-genre, unbroken* thirty-five year contribution to music, that's an omission that should be remedied forthwith.

Note.

[#] – Penned by Jackson Browne's teenage pals and contemporaries, Steve Noonan and Greg Copeland. Noonan issued a self-titled album on Elektra circa 1968, while Copeland surfaced on CBS/Geffen Records with the Browne produced collection **"Revenge Will Come"** in 1982.

[+] – Taken from the Dirt Band album **"Uncle Charlie & His Dog Teddy"** which Capitol are about to reissue c/w two previously unreleased tracks.

[~] – Compared with the contents of **"Circle Vol. 1,"** there was a unique facet to **"Circle Vol. 2."** It featured three traditional tunes. Although the remaining material sounded traditional, much of it had been written in recent years. **"Circle Vol. 3"** also featured trad. arr. material.

[*] – Randy has closed all three collections with a solo instrumental on guitar, and yes, I'll concede that "Both Sides Now" on **"Circle Vol. 1"** was a contemporary composition, but then was the only one.

Arthur Wood

Kerrville Kronikle 02/03 [1950 words].