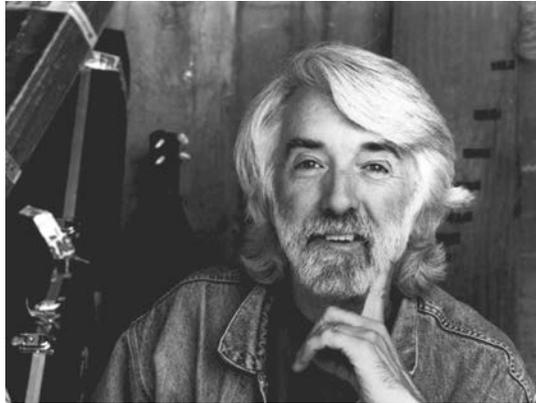


**This interview with
JOHN MCEUEN
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on June 7, 2017**



John McEuen

Library of Congress: Thank you for the advance pages from your autobiography that you sent, specifically those pages related to the making of “Will the Circle Be Unbroken.” I was struck by many things. One of them, there seemed to be a divide at the time, between how you as a group were perceived—as long-haired hippies—and the Nashville establishment. Did you feel that?

John McEuen: Well,...you know, Earl Scruggs, in 1969, appeared at a DC peace rally. Skeeter Davis had spoken out against the Vietnam War; it upset some people in country music. Various other country musicians were not all pro-Vietnam. Musicians were Republican and Democrat. But there was a chasm in the country that affected everyone. It was a time of mass confusion. Sort of like now! *[Laughs.]*

But, it was noted by all that when we came together to record, politics did not enter the studio. Everyone was there for the music and the event of three generations making it. It was magic.

I’m reminded of something that Mark Twain once said: “Politicians and diapers--you have the change them often and always for the same reason.” It still applies....

But “politics” are something different than “people.” And when you play an instrument, you don’t think, “This is only for a certain group of people.”

The music on “Circle” was a reflection of hearkening back to different times and paying homage to what had come before. It didn’t matter if it was about some wreck on a highway or a story about two horses. It was the music of America; that’s what folk music was at the time, music that gave you a place to feel at home, whether it was about a flood, a death, a fire, or a wreck on the highway. It was also music that motivates, music from the heart of America that got set in motion sometime back in the 1800s.

When we made [“Will the Circle...”], it was only a few years after Robert Kennedy had been assassinated. The Dirt Band played that same Ambassador Hotel ballroom the night after he was killed! It was for a prom and we were told, “Don’t cross that yellow tape.” Gives you an idea of what was going on in the country at that time. Churches were burning. People were being shot.

The President was lying—oh, wait! *[Laughs.]* And the music was a respite from that, the music reflected life more than just the news....

LOC: How did you know that when you started the “Circle” album, it was the “right” time to do it?

JM: Sometimes after our concerts someone would say, “I never heard the banjo played like that!” and I’d say, “You’ve never heard Earl Scruggs?”

Nobody knew of him. Nobody knew who Merle Travis, Maybelle Carter, Doc Watson, etc., were. Most did not know about bluegrass nor where it came from.

Nashville had brushed aside the music of the predecessors with whom we were recording. One of my favorite things from that time was when it was reported that the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band was coming to Nashville, to the heart of country music, and the “Nashville Tennessean” [newspaper] wondered “Why?” When we [NGDB] got to Tennessee to make the album, the “Tennessean” said, “Why the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band is recording with a bunch of old dinosaurs we don’t understand.”

We had just come off of the “Uncle Charlie” album and had had three pop hits in a row, with one of them—“Mr. Bojangles”—being on the charts for 36 weeks.

At the time, with that success in the pop charts, it meant if you [were going] to Nashville. Some people there were fascinated by it. They said the same about Dylan—“Why is he going there?”

It was like there was some sort of fence somewhere near Memphis that blocked the west coast from Nashville and another fence that blocked the east coast from Nashville.

But, to us, Nashville was to be the new home base. That was where you wanted to make it, if you wanted to make it with bluegrass or country music. (Of course, what they were trying to make, who knows?!)

It’s like when you, or anyone, decides what you want to do and you do it. For me, it was to go to Nashville. I was excited to get out there.

I discovered music through the conduit of the Grand Ole Opry. It gave us exposure to music through all the records of the artists who played there. I had made my way to the Opry two years before the NGDB formed, and on that hot August night, I looked into the open back windows facing the stage...and saw all those people I had been listening to! Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs introduced Mother Maybelle Carter to come out and play “The Wildwood Flower” with them.

Years later I asked Earl [Scruggs], “Why did you guys make that album ‘Songs of the Famous Carter Family’?” It was not bluegrass, but bluegrass instruments doing Carter Family songs.

And he told me, “At the time, no one was paying any attention to Mother Maybelle anymore. In the late 1950s, she couldn’t even get a job in music! She was working as a nurse. I thought, we’ve got to do something to get her out of there and back in music.”

Maybelle’s guitar style was a major influence on Scrugg’s banjo playing, and on other players, so I think he felt he had to return the favor to her, return the inspiration. And returning and honoring that inspiration, that’s what the “Circle” album meant to me....

When we started the band we didn’t really know much about Roy Acuff, though I knew some of his songs. Now, for Merle Travis, I was an idolater; and for Scruggs and other players.

[Once we started recording,] I asked Earl, “Did you find some fiddle players?”

Earl said, “I found one man. Vassar Clements”

I didn’t know Vassar Clements.

I asked, “Can he do it all?”

Earl said, “He’ll do.”

That’s what Earl said, simply, “He’ll do.” And that’s how we got Vassar, who set a new benchmark for fiddle playing that stands to this day.

Earl took my brother and me backstage at The Grand Ole Opry the Saturday we got in town for rehearsals, the week before the sessions, to meet Junior Huskey. We were elevated to that league!

So many people tell me now about having the “Circle” album in their life and how it affected them greatly. They say, “I’ve been listening to you since I came back from Vietnam” or “Since I was 18 years old, and quit playing rock and roll.” or “When I got divorced—do you know how hard it is to divide a three-record set?” I’ve heard that at least three times....

The album gave us a great feeling of accomplishment that we had spread the music that had influenced us all greatly to a much wider audience. To be told by Merle Watson, “Daddy’s career really took off after the album,” or Vassar Clements saying “I’m not a side man anymore,” or to have the pleasure of giving Maybelle her first gold record, made me feel like we accomplished what we set out to do.

And, all these years later, we’ve become what we were emulating (to some people).

LOC: Were you surprised by the commercial success of the album when it was released?

JM: The other guys in the group didn’t think it would be that successful, but we all had a great time making it. They didn’t know about Jimmy Martin and learned quick. My brother Bill (who was producer/mixer, designed the cover and package) and I thought it was going to be *successful* artistically and with media, but we didn’t know it would have the impact it has had and be multi-platinum.

It took a long time to sell as they could only press 25,000 units at a time because it was such a complicated, multi-color package. It took a couple of weeks to manufacture a shipment and then, by the time they got them in the stores, they’d already been sold! Then they’d make another 25,000 that would take a month, and they’d be gone in a week. That’s why it never really charted like it deserved. It would sell 25,000 for a week and then drop off the sales charts, then a month later, it would sell another 25,000.

That went on for, like, eight months and they thought, “This isn’t stopping!” Then they started doing 50,000 at a time—and they’d sell those in a month! It took three years to make the gold level of 500,000 units.

It should have won a Grammy but it didn’t get nominated due to some of those reasons. “I Saw the Light” was nominated as a single and we were thrilled we had put Acuff back on the radio and the “Billboard” charts. So, there you go, Nashville! “Dinosaurs,” huh?

It certainly was a record, in the sense that it was a record of an event. My brother Bill made sure to capture all the talk between the musicians with a tape that was running just for that purpose

during the entire sessions. Hearing these iconic people talk between and before songs let you know them as people, especially when Doc Watson and Merle Travis meet for the first time.

LOC: I was stunned to read that you made the entire album in six days. Is that true?

JM: Yes, six days. With Acuff, he was always, “Now, boys, get it right the first time.” And he was right: every time you do it over, you get on a sliding scale going down. Maybelle, Doc, and Acuff were first takes. Jimmy Martin we did a couple of versions on some songs. That’s all the time that Earl and Travis needed.

We had figured we’d have eight-hour days in the studio. Merle Travis came in to record and it took him about an hour and a half, start to finish. We listened for the next few hours. As it was done two-track--straight to the master--the sound is incredible.

Then we got to “You are My Flower” and it was another first take with Earl on guitar. Jeff and Gary (Earl’s oldest son) sang great on that song. With the instrumental side, most were first takes, except for “Flint Hill Special,” a Scruggs banjo masterpiece. Earl played it fine the first time but we ended up doing it seven times because the band just wasn’t tight enough.

So Earl had to keep doing it—*so good and perfect* over and over. I was in the control room drooling on the floor with that one. He nailed it every time. It was all quite a head trip for me—to be the first banjo player to record with Scruggs, and it was something I didn’t take lightly.

Or to be in the studio with Maybelle Carter and have her ask, “If you don’t mind, I’d like to play ‘Wildwood Flower’ in the key of F.’ We wanted to say, ‘If we don’t mind!?’ Are you kidding? We’ll do whatever you say!”

I was very fortunate. When as a teenager, standing outside at the back of the Opry that first night there, looking at that stage, I thought, “I’m going to record with them one day,” but I also thought, “Not much chance unless I have a band!”

LOC: You mentioned that for the album you did all the making of hotel arrangements for the musicians and the scheduling. How did that fall to you?

JM: Well, I was the road manager for the group during our first 10 years, the early, very primitive years. The band started in August of 1966. One of the guys was 16, one was 17, I was 20. Then, the following February, when we had our first hit (“Buy for Me the Rain”), I was 21 and, at that time, the only one old enough to rent a car—but, even then I had to have a special “one trip travel order” from a travel agent that said you were okay to drive a rental car even if you were under 25!

We soon started going around the country. As road manager, I was also the one booking hotels, dealing with promoters, doing interviews. I really liked it. Some of the other guys didn’t like doing interviews, but I liked all of it. They’d always say [about interviews], “I’m too tired” or they had nothing to say. Or they’d tell the interviewer, “I’m just trying to raise enough money to fix my truck.” That was funny, at first, but I wanted to tell the truth—“I want our music to reach people.”

So, from those early years as road manager, that led to handling session contracts and keeping track of stuff. Scheduling rehearsals, transportation, etc.

LOC: Did what happened in those “Circle” sessions change how you approached music, recording or performing?

JM: Yes, especially the “first take” approach.

I mean, one take?! Why not? In 1949, Flatt and Scruggs did “Foggy Mountain Breakdown” in one take. And many other people do that regardless of their job; they know what they’re doing. When you get on an airplane, the pilot doesn’t sit down and say, “Now, where am I going today?”

For the “Uncle Charlie and His Dog Teddy” (the predecessor to “Circle”) Dirt Band album, we’d rehearsed for months and did the album fairly quick, but with that success we later spent six months or more making subsequent records. I never liked that. I remember one band guy coming in and saying, “I’m going to LA tomorrow, then I’ll come back next week on Wednesday to replace some of the bass and then the next day re-do the vocal!”

I thought then, “Well, do it right the first time!”

When I did my “String Wizards” record—and I think it’s my best album of bluegrass—eight of the 12 songs were first takes. I rehearsed the other players (not Dirt Band guys) for six days and then recorded it. There was some overdubbing later on some cuts.

My new album, “Made in Brooklyn,” was made in that fashion, too. We did 14 songs in two days. John Carter Cash is on it, Steve Martin, John Cowan, David Amram, David Bromberg, other great players. We did the recording with one special binaural microphone, all us gathered around it. Then when you play it back, it sounds like surround sound!

All the musicians on it knew this game. They grew up with the “Circle” album. Of course, I feel like I grew up with the “Circle” album too. In fact, a couple of times, I’ve had to go back to it and relearn some of my solos from it.

So [for “Brooklyn”], doing first takes, two takes if we have to overcut something. I had not felt that much energy [in the studio] since making the “Circle” album.

LOC: Do you have a favorite cut from the “Will the Circle Be Unbroken” album?

JM: Doc Watson singing “Tennessee Stud” is one of them. With the headphones on, when it was being recorded, I just shut my eyes and thought “This sounds like a GOOD old record!” I was just astonished that I was part of it. I thought, “This sounds like something I would buy!”

“You Are My Flower” is another. I just think that that’s really cool. It also sounds like an old record.

“Soldier’s Joy.” In my early learning years I wanted to record that with Earl—before I met him. We rehearsed it and recorded it in one take. Then I said, “That was good, but you want to do it again?”

He said, “I don’t reckon why.”

“Well, Earl, I just wanted to play with you again!” I think it is a stand-out to this day.

One of the reasons that the “Circle” album came off as well as it did was because Nitty Gritty Dirt Band was a hard-working group. We had about six weeks to plan the album and learn about 25 songs, before we got into the studio. We were also on the road doing 21 dates. We’d be on the bus and we’d find out Acuff wanted to do “Wreck on the Highway”—so Jeff and Jim would figure out the harmony. Oh, we want to do that song?—Get started on the arrangement! It worked like that.

We were driving around the country, slowly gravitating towards Nashville doing the concerts, and, when we finally got there, everybody was ready. In many ways, the guest artists welcomed us as equals. We were strutting in high cotton. What really helped take some of the pressure off of us was finding out these iconic guest artists were all fans of each other--and had wanted to record together--but never had.