

# “Will the Circle Be Unbroken”--The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band (1972)

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Essay by Pete Finney (guest post)\*



*Original album*



*The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band*

The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band’s album, “Will the Circle Be Unbroken,” was by any standard a unique undertaking, simultaneously a commercial release in the popular music marketplace and a consciously historical project. Recorded in Nashville in 1971, the three-disc album features the band performing with a cross-section of important figures from the earlier days of country music, and it introduced these performers to a whole new audience. This profoundly influenced perceptions of this important stream of American roots music in ways that reverberate to this day.

The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band had grown out of the fertile Southern-California roots music scene of the early 1960s and began making records rooted in folk and jug-band styles in 1966. In 1970, they broke through commercially with the country-rock flavored album “Uncle Charlie and His Dog Teddy,” which featured their version of Jerry Jeff Walker’s “Mr. Bojangles,” a top-10 hit for them that year.

The success of that album gave the band the freedom to do a very special project they long had had in mind. So in the summer of 1971, the band--Jimmie Fadden, Jeff Hanna, Jim Ibbotson, John McEuen, and Les Thompson--came to Nashville. With a modest budget and little record company enthusiasm, the group recorded “Circle,” as the album has come to be known within the band.

They had first enlisted the help of McEuen’s banjo hero Earl Scruggs, and used that credibility to recruit Doc Watson, Merle Travis, “Mother” Maybelle Carter, Roy Acuff, and Jimmy Martin to join them in the recording. The album was a pure labor-of-love for the band, and a chance to play with many of the people that had most influenced them.

Though certainly unique, the album did not develop in a vacuum. In a period where tensions between the youth-oriented Sixties counterculture and mainstream America were at a height, because of its legendary musicians Nashville became a Mecca for many rock and folk artists that would not usually be associated with what was perceived as a

conservative Southern city. After Bob Dylan started recording a series of albums there in 1966, a steady stream of diverse people came to record with the town's storied studio musicians. As famed studio multi-instrumentalist Charlie McCoy put it, "After Bob Dylan, the floodgates opened."

Rock acts like the Byrds, Linda Ronstadt, Neil Young and the Steve Miller Band came to town, and folk veterans Joan Baez, Peter Paul and Mary, Pete Seeger, Ramblin' Jack Elliot and Ian & Sylvia also recorded there in the late '60s. Canadian songwriters Leonard Cohen and Gordon Lightfoot made important albums in the city during this period, and former Beatles George Harrison and Ringo Starr sought out Nashville musicians for their solo projects.

Many of these artists were contemporaries of the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, and others had been early musical inspirations, but none made the pilgrimage to Nashville with more focus or sense of purpose than they did. Rather than combining current country flavors with their own music, they consciously set out to survey several decades of earlier styles, enlisting some of the most important figures from country music, going back to the 1930s. As Jeff Hanna told Frye Gaillard for his 1978 book "Watermelon Wine," "Those of us in the band just wanted to give the older musicians credit for what they've done. We thought the younger generation of fans owed it to themselves, if nothing else, to get into the older forms of the music."

The combined histories of the guest performers they invited to join them was staggering, and a brief survey can only hint at what an historically important gathering this was.

"Mother" Maybelle Carter had been there from the beginning of the country music recording industry as a member of the Carter Family, with her sister Sara, and Sara's husband, A.P. Carter. They first recorded as part of the famed Bristol Sessions in 1927 and were extremely popular on radio and records throughout the 1930s. Their music was a huge influence on the folk revival of the '60s, and there are echoes of Maybelle's unique guitar style throughout country music well into the present. Not long before the "Circle" recordings, she had been featured weekly on her son-in-law Johnny Cash's ABC television show, leading her three daughters as "The Carter Family."

Roy Acuff was a largely unknown name to a younger audience, but he had been perhaps the biggest country-music star of the late '30s and early '40s. Hank Williams himself said of Acuff: "He's the biggest singer this music ever knew.... For drawing power in the South it was Roy Acuff and then God!" In 1971, he was still a major figure on the Grand Ole Opry, but had not been a part of the country mainstream for many years. Acuff was talked into doing the album by his manager, in spite of Acuff's public dislike for the counterculture the band represented. "There's no reason any group with the hippie dress--long hair, beards, dirty clothes--couldn't sing on the Opry," Acuff told "Look" magazine in July of 1971, "But it wouldn't be accepted as if you or I should walk on as we are in our good American way of life. The music is down to earth, for the home--not to get all hepped up and smoke a lot of marijuana and go wild about." Acuff

was converted by the band's musical abilities and clear love for the music, and left the sessions singing their praises.

Another guest was Merle Travis, an extremely influential guitar player with his "thumb-style" playing that is called Travis-picking to this day. Travis had been a successful Los Angeles based country-recording star in the late '40s, and being asked to do a "folk album" quickly wrote two songs that reflected his Kentucky coal-country upbringing. "Sixteen Tons" and "Dark as a Dungeon," became instant classics, and were performed by so many different people that they were often mistaken for traditional folk songs. Travis did a rendition of "Dark as a Dungeon" on the "Circle" album, along with several other signature pieces.

Jimmy Martin was one of the most respected singers, and most colorful characters, in bluegrass music, and brought a few of his signature songs to the project. Martin was a veteran of bluegrass patriarch Bill Monroe's band, but Monroe himself declined to be a part of the project, reportedly due to his own dislike and distrust of young, longhaired musicians.

Guitar virtuoso Doc Watson was a long-time hero to the band, and while he was not himself a country star of earlier eras, he brought early country music styles into the folk revival with stunning ability, and was a universally loved and respected performer.

Of all the guests, it was banjo pioneer and virtuoso Earl Scruggs that was perhaps most central to the music on the album, just as he was a central part of bringing everyone together. He had been there at the birth of classic bluegrass music as a member of Bill Monroe's celebrated band in the mid-forties, and after he and Lester Flatt left to form Flatt and Scruggs they became perhaps the best known exponents of the music. On his own he had recently formed the "Earl Scruggs Revue" with his sons Gary and Randy, consciously broadening his music beyond bluegrass and reaching out to a wider, and younger, audience.

Gary and Randy Scruggs also played on the album, and the cast was rounded out with Vassar Clements on fiddle, and Norman Blake and Pete "Oswald" Kirby, both on Dobro. Nashville session stalwart Junior Huskey held the music together on the upright bass; he plays on almost every track. The band's manager, William E. McEuen, was also central to the making of the album; he is credited with "Production, Direction, and Concept."

Although the album celebrated styles of country music whose height of popularity had long past, the album was still an enormous success. The counter-culture world had to a small extent embraced bluegrass and older country music styles before this; the success of "Circle" catapulted some of the featured artists into revived careers and likely helped spur on the growth of bluegrass festivals and record sales for all kinds of rural "roots" music.

While none of the celebrated country-oriented albums by people like Bob Dylan or the Byrds had made any dent at all in the country music world, "Circle" went to number

four on the Billboard country music album charts. It truly did bridge cultural gaps; in a low-key but unmistakable way, it drove home the idea of a musical connection between generations at every turn, crystallizing an idea that had been implicit in so many rock/Nashville collaborations but mostly left unexpressed. It was summed up by the subtitle in bold print on the cover: “Music Forms a New Circle.”

As Jeff Hanna told John Einarson (author of “Desperados”): “We got letters like, ‘My father and I never understood each other for thirty years. I bought the “Circle” album because of you guys and I brought him in to listen to it and he was dazzled. From that day forward we’ve been the best of buddies.’ I think it broke down some barriers.”

*Pete Finney is a veteran Nashville musician, playing pedal-steel guitar and other stringed instruments. He has worked in many styles with many people, ranging from Patty Loveless, Vince Gill and the Dixie Chicks to Doug Sahm and Beck. As a passionate historian of American roots-music, he is currently working with the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum on a forthcoming exhibit that will examine folk and rock recording in late 60’s Nashville.*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.