

They're not Texans, but their biggest hit is

Nitty Gritty Dirt Band member discusses enduring hits, musical legends

By Lance Martin

Special for the Kenneth Threadgill Concert Series

Despite originating in California, the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, which plays Greenville's Kenneth Threadgill Concert Series on Feb. 27, could just as well have been one of the prototypes of the Texas country band.

Singer and multi-instrumentalist Jeff Hanna, one of the band's co-founders, recently discussed the Dirt Band's history, including two of its most acclaimed works – the 1970 album, *Uncle Charlie and His Dog Teddy*, and 1972's *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*.

The band, which today includes Hanna, John McEuen, Jimmie Fadden and Bob Carpenter, was founded in 1966 and was known for blending both popular rock and traditional country sounds, just as many Texas acts today cross genres easily.

Hanna is familiar with Threadgill and his legacy as a father of the Texas music scene, but said he never had the chance to meet him. He said the band has spent a lot of time touring Texas and was often considered a 'southern' rock band – "maybe because of all the time we spent there."

"We were getting to know guys like Guy Clark and Jerry Jeff," Hanna said, "and I remember when Bob Livingston from the Lost Gonzo Band introduced me to Willie. He said, 'Man you've got to check this guy out,' and I was like, 'Who is he?'"

"We met Mickey Raphael, who's played harp for Willie forever. He was playing with B.W. Stevenson when we met him. We certainly have a lot of Texas pals and some of our favorite music's been created in that state."

Uncle Charlie

A Texas singer-songwriter's work played a role in the success of *Uncle Charlie and His Dog Teddy*, which is considered the band's breakthrough effort, yielding three hits.

Uncle Charlie, Hanna said, was a fun record to make and "the first album we made we were really proud of – it was our fourth record – but up until 1969, early '70, we didn't have much control in the studio. It's also when we made the transition from jug band to playing what we call country-rock."

That album included the work of high-school senior from California named Kenny Loggins ("He hadn't really recorded on his own yet," Hanna said. "We put out his song *House on Pooh Corner* before Loggins-Messina." *Uncle Charlie* also had a pair of songs from former Monkee and native Texan Michael

Nesmith (*Some of Shelly's Blues* and *Propinquity*). Nesmith eventually formed the First National Band with two of Hanna's former band mates in a side project called The Corvettes.

Yet, it was a song from Texas singer-songwriter Jerry Jeff Walker that became *Uncle Charlie*'s most enduring hit.

The band had been practicing in a jukebox warehouse that belonged to the father of then-bass player Les Thompson when Hanna mentioned a song he heard on the radio the previous night.

"I explained what it was about," Hanna said, "and Jimmy (Ibbotson, former band member) said, 'I think I know that song. So we fish this 45 out of the trunk of his car – it's got no sleeve on it – all scratched to heck. And we didn't have a record player.'"

The band remembered the jukeboxes surrounding them and found one that had been broken that they coaxed into service and was barely audible.

"We're putting our ears down - it emitted this little sound," Hanna said. "There were a couple lines that we actually got wrong because we couldn't hear them correctly. But Jerry Jeff, bless his heart, was grateful for the hit and we were *really* grateful."

That version of *Mr. Bojangles* was inducted this month into the Grammy Hall of Fame, which honors "recordings of lasting qualitative or historical significance."

While not the first Grammy honor for the Dirt Band, it had a special significance. "We had won before with *Circle*, (but) that's such a group effort – a community project," Hanna said. "We're super proud of that, but this is the first one that is just kind of us. To be associated that closely with an American standard like *Mr. Bojangles* is pretty cool."

Another Grammy connection

Mr. Bojangles wasn't the only Grammy affiliation this year for Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. John McEuen, another member of the band since 1966, accepted a Grammy on behalf of comedian/actor/author Steve Martin. The album, *The Crow: New Songs for the Five-String Banjo*, featured Martin on the banjo and was produced by McEuen, winning a Grammy for Best Bluegrass Album.

Martin's association with McEuen started when he was in high school. He and McEuen worked in the same magic shop in Disneyland as teenagers.

"John taught Steve to play the banjo and Steve taught John to do magic tricks," Hanna said.

Martin even opened for the Dirt Band in his early days of stand-up, though Hanna describes him having "a hard time because he couldn't do what he does in front of an arena of screaming rock fans – it required a more intimate setting to develop what he wanted to do. It was a real skin-thickening experience."

Later, after Martin had gained fame as a comedian, the band, billed as The Toot Uncommons, played on a '70s song, *King Tut*, that Martin wrote and performed about the famous mummy's visit to the U.S.

Hanna said Martin first debuted the song at a Dirt Band show at Los Angeles' Dorothy Chandler Pavilion.

"Steve came back stage – he was already a big star at this time – and had this thing he kind of scribbled on a napkin," Hanna said. "He said, 'I have this song,' and he showed it to us and said, 'it kinda goes like this and it kinda goes like this ...' We brought him out and we muddled through the tune but people went crazy for it. "

The song was recorded as a demo a couple weeks later in the Aspen, Colo., studio of John's brother, Bill, who also managed the band.

"(Steve) was singing live," Hanna said, "I'm sitting there playing guitar and Steve's about three feet away, doing the full Steve Martin moves, that kind of wild and crazy dance he did, and I had a hard time keeping it together through the changes."

The demo went to Warner Bros. and, much to the band's surprise, was considered "perfect" and put out as a record.

"The only gold 45 record I have hanging on my wall is my *King Tut* gold record," Hanna said. "I'm proud of that one."

And while the Dirt Band's role on *King Tut* was fairly obscure, an earlier collaboration cemented the group's status as a musical powerhouse.

The Circle

The band had toured "pretty much every college in America" when *Mr. Bojangles* was on the charts, Hanna said, and a stop at Nashville's Vanderbilt University began the chain of events that resulted in *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*.

Earl Scruggs, who with Lester Flatt formed the bluegrass duo Flatt & Scruggs, attended the Vanderbilt show with his family, Hanna said.

"We had not ever met them but were huge fans of Flatt and Scruggs," he said. "Earl's sons – Randy, Gary and Steve – were all fans of our band so we got to meet Earl and immediately started talking about playing together, either us playing on one of his records or him returning the favor and playing on a Dirt Band record. That idea was the seed that became *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*.

"John's brother, Bill, asked us what we thought about taking that idea and expanding it and making a record with all our heroes: folks like Doc Watson, Roy Acuff, Mother Maybell Carter and Jimmy Martin, Merle Travis. With Earl as our calling card – he agreed – John asked Doc Watson and we were off and running. Of course when we asked Doc Watson it was 'Hey, we're going to make this record with Earl Scruggs, would you like to join us?' We had a great hook."

Hanna said that Scruggs and his wife, Louise, opened a lot of doors for them with the revered country stars they had long admired.

“Here we were,” he said, “a bunch of hippies from Southern California and, in the early ‘70s, we were like from another planet for country music.”

Hanna said the record was cut in Nashville in about a week, all live.

“It went by so quickly, it was like a blur for us,” he said. “It was amazing, really. We knew we were doing something significant but we didn’t know if it was that significant. Mostly, it was just a real honor and a blast for us. We thought, ‘if nobody ever hears this record, I want a copy because it proves we got to make a record with these guys.’”

Amazing artists

Hanna, who describes himself as a fan of music who still goes to a lot of concerts and buys the records, was almost at a loss when asked who might still be out there whom he’d like to record or perform with. Realize that Hanna and the Dirt Band have played with a Who’s Who of 20th century musicians, including shows with Jack Benny and The Doors in the same week, as well as going from a bluegrass festival one night to opening for Aerosmith the next.

Hanna paused and said, “I would love to go in the studio with Bruce Springsteen... but there are so many artists who are amazing. I know 20 minutes after this I’m going to think of someone else, but we’ve been so fortunate to record with everyone from Johnny Cash to John Hiatt to Kris Kristofferson – it’s been incredible.”

And despite all the legends the band has performed with, Hanna sees great talent in today’s music scene. He gave an example.

“There’s a bluegrass artists I love name Sarah Jarosz and it’s been in my CD player for the past week,” Hanna said. “There are so many amazing, talented bluegrass kids coming up. Music is always evolving – it’s a great thing. Probably as much great music today as there’s ever been.”

About the Kenneth Threadgill Concert Series

More information on the Kenneth Threadgill Concert Series and Friends of Main Street can be found at www.greenville-texas.com.

Tickets for the Feb. 27 concert are on sale now at Cavender’s in Greenville. Tickets are also available online at www.frontgatetickets.com or by calling (888) 512-SHOW. A limited number of seats are available in the reserved section.