

A Horse With No Name

by America

The early '70s anthem of Californian hippiedom – all the way from Staines, Surrey. “A Satanic drug song? All I’d had was a cup of tea...”

THE KEY PLAYERS



DEWEY BUNNELL
Writer, vocals, guitar



GERRY BECKLEY
Vocals, guitar



DAN PEEK
Vocals, bass



KIM HAWORTH
Drums



MARTIN WYATT
Head of A&R, Warner Bros

IT'S MORE THAN a little ironic that 1972's "A Horse With No Name", perhaps the quintessential hymn to California hippiedom, was written in an empty house in Staines. That it was recorded in London by the Anglophile sons of US servicemen only added to the paradox. Even the band's name, America, was inspired by the jukebox in a greasy caff in West Ruislip. For Dewey Bunnell, Gerry Beckley and Dan Peek, the canyons of the American West might as well have been on Mars.

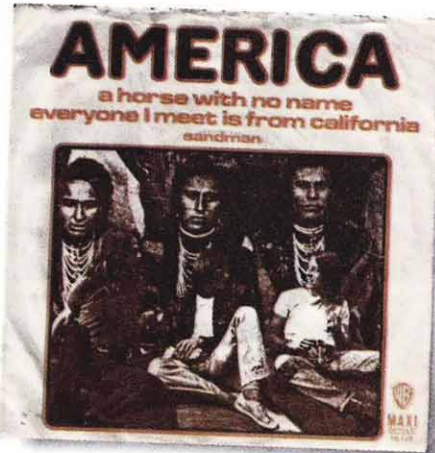
Yet the song, with its dreamy clomp, vast spaces and mirage-like lyrics, captured the laissez-faire spirit of the early '70s counterculture. It was a desert travelogue that echoed the yellow haze of Neil Young's "After The Gold Rush", with a similar ecological bent. "Environmentalism was a hot topic of the day, the idea of saving the planet," says Bunnell, its writer. "There was a lot of change going on. The Vietnam War had been raging and if you're at all sensitive to the environment, you see so much destruction."

"A Horse With No Name" was also a major hit, establishing America as the clean-cut alternative to Crosby, Stills & Nash. The song went Top 3 in the UK and also spent three weeks at the top of the US chart. Yet it wasn't all vanilla skies. Radio stations in the American Midwest banned the song for supposed drug references, while hardcore Neil Young disciples, deeply offended by "Heart Of Gold" being ousted from the top spot by these upstarts, began the backlash. Young's manager Elliot Roberts even signed them up, taking the band out to meet Neil at his Broken Arrow ranch. Young, apparently unimpressed by "this copy band", was hiding out at a friend's house.

So just who did these freshmen think they were? And was it really a covert drugs song?

ROB HUGHES

DEWEY BUNNELL: I remember writing "A Horse With No Name" literally in a day. I was living with a friend's family in Staines at the time. He'd gone off to work and I was sitting in his room with my guitar, all alone in the house. We were completely immersed in the Neil Young/Joni Mitchell/Crosby Stills & Nash thing. We loved all those song structures and vocal arrangements. I was tinkering with a new tuning and wrote the song in one fell swoop. It was purely based on a really deep fondness for the desert and wilderness areas in



general. I'd spent a lot of time in the desert and it just kinda poured out. My dad was stationed in six or seven different cities in my youth, and my uncle was stationed in New Mexico, so we'd go off on these drives through the iconic American landscape in our station wagon. I still have a burning image of all that.

GERRY BECKLEY: Dewey was just an 18-year-old kid at the time and writing what he felt. I know he felt there was an ecological slant to it, but when pressed beyond that there's the fact he grew up in some of those bases in the desert, like Vandenberg in California.

DEWEY BUNNELL: We would convene at [Warner Bros producer/talent scout] Ian Samwell's flat. That's when we'd showcase any new songs we were starting. I'd just written it and it was so easy to play, just me and the guitar. The guys all sat around listening. Ian said, "Ooh, that's a good one!"

MARTIN WYATT: They came in and played me the beginnings of "A Horse With No Name", which was called "Desert Song" at that point. It was a rough treatment but I told them I loved it and could they go back in and finish it.

GERRY BECKLEY: We thought Dewey's quirky desert song was pretty good. Ian Samwell told us: "You can't call it that. There's an opera with the same title." So he renamed it "A Horse With No Name".

KIM HAWORTH: At Morgan Studios I remember setting up the drums against the wall, with Dewey, Gerry and Dan around me in a semi-circle, all looking at each other. I'd already played on the demos so that song was very familiar. I don't think Ian Samwell really wanted me in the band. He wanted Dave Mattacks from Fairport Convention, but I was the drummer the band brought along. He had to grit his teeth and bear with it. That was the vibe I felt: 'OK, you play this but I'll get you out as soon as we're finished'. And that's what happened! I basically did "A Horse With No Name" and that was it.

DAN PEEK: At the time Ian seemed like an abrasive and cold figure when it came to dealing with us. In hindsight, having produced other artists I can understand his no-nonsense businesslike manner in trying to keep a band on track and under budget. In our own defence I will say that we were so well-rehearsed, that was not really an issue.

MARTIN WYATT: When they came back, it sounded fabulous. So we then made a decision, which

CONTINUES OVER ►



|||||

**"Success came awfully early
for us, and that's a very
delicate time for a band..."**

THE MAKING OF...

America, live on the BBC, April 30, 1972: (l-r) Gerry Beckley, Dan Peek, David Dickey (back), Dewey Bunnell and Kim Haworth (on drums)

we wouldn't normally do, which was to withdraw that first album and put "A Horse With No Name" on it. Then we started getting airplay in the UK and it suddenly took off in the States, too. [Warners US head] Joe Smith then dug out the contract and screamed at me: "Why haven't you signed them to a longer deal?" The success of the first album was frightening. I think it sold 11 million copies in the US, which was just ridiculous for a first album.

GERRY BECKLEY: We were just kids. And there was a certain naivety about us. We released one record and it went straight to the top of the charts. We just thought that's how everything worked. In the States, both the first album and "A Horse With No Name" went to No 1. That hadn't even happened with The Beatles.

DEWEY BUNNELL: It was a very hard act to follow. We were suddenly moved from club dates to playing huge venues. I mean, our live show was very elementary. Success came awfully early and that's a very delicate time for a new artist.

DAN PEEK: The Neil Young comparisons created a whole other level of curiosity. We actually heard the song announced by a DJ on a major radio station in Philadelphia saying, "That's 'A Horse With No Name', Neil Young's new single."

GERRY BECKLEY: The biggest backlash was that it sounded like Neil Young. We were big Neil fans, but there was this bizarre aspect where he was top of the charts [in the US] with "Heart Of Gold". It was his first No 1, at last. He had it for one week, then he got knocked off by us. My God! Already we felt bad. Apparently Neil's dad called him and said: "Hey, I heard your new song. It sounds great." I hear Neil was really upset.

DAN PEEK: The song was controversial. Though there's no heroin connection to it, I've read America fan letters extolling the virtues of a heroin high in conjunction with listening to the song. I've heard preachers who came out against the song as being Satanic and a drug anthem. The supreme irony is that we had a mutual agreement in the band that heroin use was grounds for ejection. Heroin is the world's most boring drug. If you like puking I guess you could say it's a recreational drug. Personally, puking and nausea don't hold a lot of fascination for me.

KIM HAWORTH: The imagery in the song was typical of the time. It was very psychedelic, dope and more acid than more dope. Lyrically it's just about looking at yourself,

describing images of your journey through life. That's the way I saw it. And of course, at that time, we were smoking lots of stuff and taking acid. So that had an influence, too.

MARTIN WYATT: A lot of people, especially in the US, were convinced the band were on some trip. Some people read things into the song that were supposedly drug-related. I have to say I never saw anything with any of America that suggested a drug relationship with any of them. They were so into their music.

GERRY BECKLEY: I know it had nothing to do with drugs. My favourite analogy is a Randy Newman quote, when he called "A Horse With No Name" a song about a guy "who thinks he's taken acid".

DAN PEEK: Gee Randy, I don't know quite how to take that. Was "Short People" about a guy who thought he was short? I might be able to see his point if he wasn't wearing a hat.

DEWEY BUNNELL: I never overtly used any drug references, but I suppose there's a certain aspect of the dreamy quality of the lifestyle of the hippy scene that was woven into the dialogue of the day. But certainly nothing like 'this is the story of the day I took 10 hits of LSD and walked through the desert'. Absolutely not. And the other drug reference, that horse was the street name for heroin and I was a big heroin addict, was totally false. I mean, when I wrote it, it was mid-morning and all I'd had was a cup of tea.

GERRY BECKLEY: I would say drug use in the band was no more than recreational until Dan's departure. Then we had some real issues with that. But he had to go because it just wasn't good for his health [Peek left the band in 1977, after which he became a born-again Christian].

DAN PEEK: Unfortunately I did use drugs: hash, marijuana, cocaine, quaaludes, alcohol and tobacco. There was a certain amount of naivety as regards drug use in the '60s and '70s. In retrospect I sincerely wish I had been a teetotaler. I now regard caffeine as the gateway drug.

DEWEY BUNNELL: "A Horse With No Name" stands by itself because of its popularity. It's not a terribly complex song. I've worked a lot harder on a lot of other songs I've written. But you really can't second guess the time and the era and the effect of youth. For a very very simple song, it really went a long way. The song is part of who I am. Regardless of any other things we do, it'll always be a case of 'Oh, you're the one with that horse thing.' ☺

FACTFILE

Written by Dewey Bunnell

Performers: Dewey Bunnell (lead vocal, guitar); Gerry Beckley (vocals, 12-string guitar); Dan Peek (vocals, bass); Kim Haworth (drums); Ray Cooper (percussion)

Produced by Ian Samwell
Recorded at: Morgan Studios, London
Released as a single: December 1971
Highest UK chart position: 3

TIMELINE

Summer 1971 The band ready a debut LP but are told to cut something new as a single. "Desert Song" is demo'd at farmhouse studio of Arthur Brown in Puddletown, Dorset. They rename it "A Horse With No Name"

September 1971 The band play on first ever *Old Grey Whistle Test*

December 1971 Released as a single, entering the charts at No 49. America appear on *TOTP*, December 23

January 1972 It peaks at No 3 in the UK, with their debut LP reissued to include the new song. Two months later "A Horse..." tops US chart.