

John McEuen talks the nitty gritty

By JEFFERSON
GEIGER

Courier staff writer

ALAMOSA — “No, there hasn’t been a will made for the band,” said John McEuen of the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. “When you reach a certain age in life you say ‘I guess this will be over sometime so I’ll draft up a will,’ but so far that hasn’t happened with The Dirt Band.”

For 50 years, The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band of Long Beach, California has been touring the world and there’s no sign of stopping. This weekend marks the third year in a row that they’ll be playing at the Rio Grande Scenic Railroad’s Mountain Rails Live concert series.

“The train ride is a very unusual, wonderful thing to do. It’s like going on a cruise,” said McEuen. “It puts the band in front of the people in a unique situation at the top of a mountain. We’re looking forward to doing a show that goes back to more of our historical songs. It’s neat when you pull an old song out of a hat and it goes over like a great hit.”

McEuen first fell in love with bluegrass at the age of 17 when he saw The Dillards perform at Paradox in Orange County, California. “They were fantastic and swept me away.” McEuen then picked up a banjo, quit working at Disneyland’s Magic Shop and has been performing ever since. “What really drove me to the banjo was the fact that it made people happy.”

In 1966 the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band coalesced out of informal jam sessions at McGabe’s Guitar Shop in Long Beach, where McEuen happened to be teaching banjo. Though he wasn’t a member from the very beginning, McEuen joined the band when Jackson Browne left after five shows to pursue his solo career. “Fifty years later, it seems like just five.” McEuen’s first show with Nitty Gritty Dirt Band was at Paradox, the same venue he saw The Dillards.

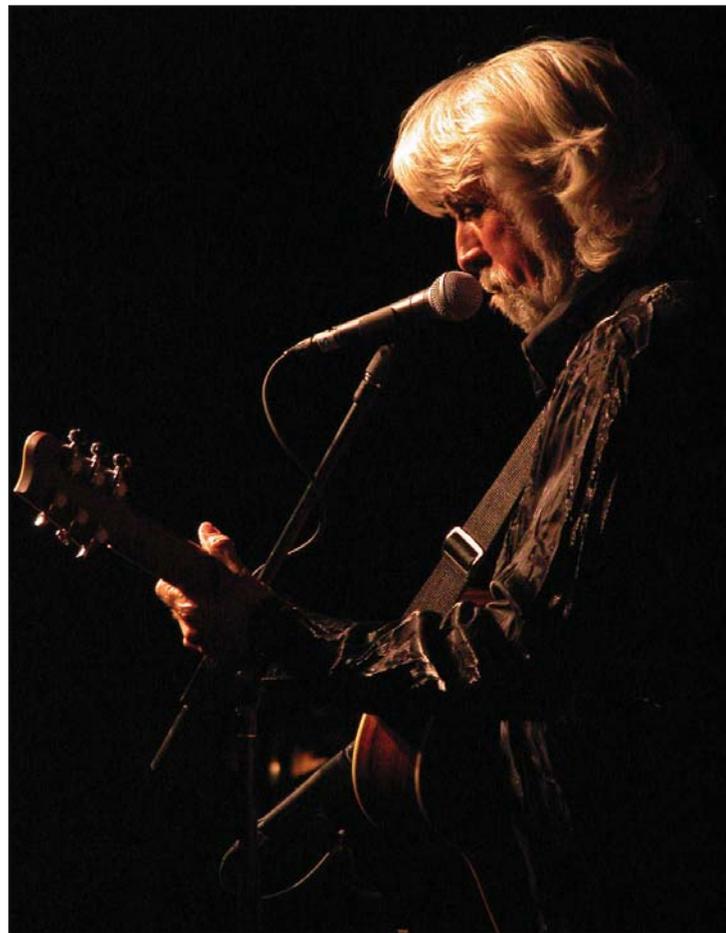
“We had no idea that it would work. Our first review in *Billboard* said ‘This’ll never be on record.’ Seven months later we had a record

on the radio.”

The band would go on to make hit songs like “Mr. Bojangles,” “Fishin’ in the Dark,” “Stand a Little Rain,” and win multiple Grammys and County Music Awards. In 1977 the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band became the first American group to tour the Soviet Union with 28 sold out shows. Last January they were inducted in the Colorado Music Hall of Fame.

But if there’s one thing the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band will be known for, it’s the platinum selling “Will the Circle be Unbroken” album released in 1972. The historical 34 tracks, recorded over three records, were unlike anything else produced at the time and would go on to spawn two follow-up albums.

One of the defining aspects of the album is the guest artists like Earl Scruggs, Merle Travis, Maybelle Carter, Jimmy Martin and others. On how he got to work with them, McEuen said, “Jeff [Hanna] and I went to see [Scruggs] performing with his sons and



Courtesy photo

John McEuen

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I asked Earl if he would like to record with the Dirt Band. He said he'd be proud to. A week later we saw Doc Watson so I said, 'would you like to record with the Dirt Band and Earl Scruggs?' He said it sounded like a good idea." From there the collaboration snowballed.

Seven weeks after that first 'yes' from Earl, they were all in the recording studio in Nashville and six days later the record was complete. Rather than simply fly to the studio, the band performed 21 concerts on the way there and as soon as they finished they went back on tour.

The album features covers of hymnals and other classic folk songs. McEuen said the band chose those tunes because they "wanted to spotlight the people that influenced [them] greatly and give them to [their] audience." The collaborators also had a say in what tracks got recorded.

"You're in the studio with people you always wanted to meet or play with," said McEuen, "so when Maybelle

Carter says 'Well we could do 'Keep on the Sunny Side,' you say 'Okay.'"

The album has been inducted into the Library of Congress's National Recording Registry and the Grammy Hall of Fame.

After "Will the Circle be Unbroken," the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band found international success. Once at a musical festival in Zurich, they were opening for Johnny Cash at the end of the night. Much to McEuen's confusion, every band that played earlier came to the stage to watch. County singer Johnny Russell told them that the crowd has been unresponsive so they all wanted to see if the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band could change that.

"By the end of the night 50,000 people were on their feet," McEuen said. "It was probably one of the best examples of the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band pulling a rabbit out of the hat."

In 1986, while he was in midst of getting his divorce, McEuen amicably departed the band. "The band didn't

want to do my instrumental music anymore," McEuen said, "because they wanted to make music that will go on the radio. I needed to make my own albums and run my own work schedule

away from the band McEuen scored multiple films and produced six albums.

When the train ride is over, people will have the opportunity to listen to McEuen's solo work at Wildwood Sounds in Del Norte. His third time at the venue, McEuen said that the intimate setting "is like going back in time." At least one song from his forthcoming album "Made in Brooklyn" will be played at the concert.

His first album the 17 years, "Made in Brooklyn" is in a sense

McEuen's own take on "Will the Circle be Unbroken." McEuen said, "The album takes advantage of 50 years of experience on the road with musicians I've worked with and brings us together to make something that hasn't been recorded before."

The album will be released on September 30 and features artists such as David

Bromberg, Steve Martin, John Carter Cash and Andy Goessling.

"I'm trying to create a new piece of history that's hard to define."

"Made in Brooklyn" is not the first time McEuen and Steve Martin have worked together. In fact, the two have been friends since high school. According to McEuen, Martin says that McEuen taught him the banjo. "But I was just about a week ahead of him," McEuen said.

The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band also worked with Martin before on his "King Tut" record. Martin saw the band in Los Angeles and went backstage with an idea for the song. "We workshopped it in the dressing room and did a loose version of it that night in front of 2,000 people," said McEuen. "It blew the room away."

The next week they recorded it in Aspen and shortly thereafter Martin performed the song-based skit on "Saturday Night Live."

Performing in a band that's been around for half a century is not without its challenges. McEuen said that you have "to be as good as you'll ever be each time

you go on stage. There's no excuse not to. I try to play 'Mr. Bojangles' better every night than I ever played it and when Jeff sings it he sounds better every day."

McEuen said it's been a dream to be with the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. "I'm really thankful for the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band for taking all of us to situations that we couldn't have predicted and maybe only hoped for."

Playing with The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band
When: July 2 and 3
Where: Fir Summit Amphitheater on La Veta Pass
Tickets: www.coloradotrain.com/ride

Playing solo
When Saturday July 2 at 8 p.m.
Where: Wildwood Sounds 850 Grand Avenue, Del Norte
Tickets: www.wildwoodsounds.com

so I could raise my kids. A change needed to be made."

After 15 years, the 30 anniversary of "Will the Circle be Unbroken" was approaching so McEuen rejoined the band to produce the remaster. Then they recorded "Will the Circle be Unbroken, Volume III" in 2001 and he's been with them ever since. In that time



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