

The Wedgwood Trio



The Wedgwood Trio, gifted American folk singers from the South with their stringed instruments, experienced decidedly mixed reactions within the Seventh-day Adventist church when they began performing in the 1960s. For a church accustomed to congregational hymn singing and other traditional types of formal sacred music, the sound in the church sanctuary of a male trio singing mountain-style folk music accompanied on guitar, string bass, and banjo was jarring. While their music was viewed with alarm by many in the church, the youth, familiar with long-haired, poorly dressed performers doing rock music focused on the baser aspects of life and folk singers singing angry protest songs, embraced the well-dressed trio with its contemporary sound and wholesome music. From the perspective of nearly a half-century later, The Wedgwood Trio, with its upbeat sound and mix of folk music, creative arrangements of traditional Christian music, and original music, helped create a greater openness for newer forms of worship music in the Adventist church while providing an attractive alternative for a generation that otherwise might have left the church.

The Wedgwood Trio had its start when three young American students studying at Newbold College in England during the 1964-65 school year joined forces to sing folk music and play their instruments as a trio. While they all had Southern roots and were acquainted with one another, they had not previously performed together. All three had come from musical families and had inherited a generous amount of musical talent along with good singing voices.¹

Bob Summerour, an accomplished guitar and banjo player, had a paternal grandmother who had been one of

the first diploma graduates in music from Southern Training School, later Southern Missionary College and now Southern Adventist University. She returned to serve as its first teacher with a music degree she had earned at Washington Missionary College, now Columbia Union College.²

His father was a physician and a cellist and singer who loved classical music. Bob learned to play trumpet while young and made his initial foray into playing folk music with a banjo he purchased in a pawnshop near Mount Vernon Academy, where he was a student. He practiced incessantly and by the time he graduated had become an accomplished performer on the instrument and was playing in a folk trio called The Sons of Thunder.

Jerry Hoyle, singer and string bass player, had learned to play the instrument at a youth camp where he and Summerour sang and introduced music they had arranged to the campers at evening campfires. Although fascinated with bluegrass music from his earliest years, he was trained in more traditional music on piano and trumpet.

A shy child with a good singing voice, Jerry was a reluctant though popular soloist while very young. His experience as a scuba diver had led to an invitation to teach that skill at the youth camp where he met and worked with Summerour during their academy years, assisting camp director Bill Dopp. As Hoyle's voice matured, he was encouraged to use it in the ministry, and following



graduation from Mount Pisgah Academy in 1962, he enrolled as a theology major at SMC.

Don Vollmer, a gifted singer who would learn guitar after the trio was formed, had also come from a musical family where his father, a noted physician, and his mother were excellent musicians, who made music an important activity in their home. His voice was an inherited talent shared by others in his larger family, including an aunt, Dorothy Evans Ackerman, a well-known Adventist singer in the South and a voice teacher at SAU for over a quarter of a century.³

He was a classmate of Hoyle at Mount Pisgah Academy and was only a casual acquaintance with Summerour, having met him during visits to the youth camp. When Vollmer enrolled at Atlantic Union College following graduation from MPA in 1962, he and Hoyle kept in touch.

When Summerour and Hoyle sailed for England in 1964 for a year of study at Newbold College, they planned on continuing their musical collaboration as a duo, with Hoyle playing string bass and harmonica.⁴ Vollmer had learned about the trip from Hoyle and decided at the last minute to join them and other friends he knew, secretly gaining acceptance as a student, and traveling to the school. A week after classes started, he casually walked into the cafeteria one afternoon during mealtime, surprising all of his friends who greeted him enthusiastically.

The three men started to sing American folk music and arrangements of spirituals and other religious music to the delight of both students and faculty at the college. It was at this time that Vollmer, wanting to do more

than just sing, took a crash course in playing the guitar from Summerour, who, in addition to playing the banjo, was also a skilled guitarist.

By the end of the first semester, they had started to play off-campus, known as the Shady Grove Singers, taken from the name of their opening song at concerts. They began playing at the New Gallery Center, an Adventist evangelistic venue in London, on a regular basis. One of the goals of the center was to present religion in a variety of settings that would attract non-Adventists, a strategy facilitated by the trio with its folk music.

One of the programs presented by the center, a variety show called "The Best Saturday Night in Town," became a showplace where the trio, which would engage in humorous repartee and Southern style kidding between numbers, became a highlight. When the semester and their stay in England ended, they were given the "New Gallery Personality Award," an acknowledgement of the pivotal role they had played in the center's programs.

Before the end of the end of the semester they traveled to France where they worked with Gisela Willy, a visiting professor at Newbold, and her French-singing choir, to record music for use by the French Educational Ministry and the French Voice of Prophecy broadcast. They recorded some Appalachian folk music and also accompanied the choir with their instruments on some of its numbers.

The return to the U.S. would mean an end to the trio unless Vollmer decided to transfer to SMC from AUC. Following a summer of extensive travel throughout Europe, all three enrolled at SMC.

At this time they changed their name to The Wedgwood Trio when it was discovered that another group in the South was using their first name. Having just come from England, they decided the name had a classy ring to it and would suggest high quality folk music.⁵

Word of their success in England preceded them to the SMC campus and when they played at the first college program of the year, a hootenanny, they were a hit with the students. Although many of the older generation were initially unsure about them and their music, Vollmer's aunt, Dorothy Ackerman, and Marvin Robertson, chair of the music department, along with Jack Castle, academic dean, encouraged and supported them.

By the beginning of the second semester, they were frequently playing off campus at numerous church functions and at events in other Adventist schools, including Andrews University and AUC. When Hoyle graduated at the end of the year, he took a job at a school in nearby Chattanooga so that the trio could continue.

During the school year they had worked with Jim Hannum, a teacher at SMC, to record and produce their first record, *My Lord, What a Morning*. Hannum, who had considerable expertise in recording, worked tirelessly with them for weeks and late into the night, serving as both their sound engineer and producer in a makeshift studio with three microphones.

When the next school year started, the trio resumed singing, and began selling their record at concerts. The sales of the record and playing of it on religious music radio stations led to increased popularity and more requests to perform.

In November 1966, H.M.S. Richards, Jr., while visiting on campus heard them perform and approached them about singing at evangelistic meetings he was holding in Texas on behalf of the Voice of Prophecy. Richards had a special interest in trying to connect with the young people of the church and saw the trio, with its music and informal comments between numbers as a way to reach that group.

Their success in Texas led to another invitation from Richards to work with him at a second VOP evangelistic series in Hinsdale, Illinois, in the second semester. Richards noted their effectiveness in reaching young people and asked them to join with him and Del Delker that summer during their tours to camp meetings on behalf of the VOP.

By the end of August 1967, travel with the VOP, combined with other appointments, totaled eighty thousand miles. It had been an exhausting, yet exhilarating eight months.

When summer ended, The Wedgwood Trio was nationally known in Adventist circles and hugely popular with young people. The reception accorded the group by older Adventists, however, was somewhat mixed. Conservative church members and ministers were convinced the trio constituted an endorsement for current popular music that would lead the youth away from, not into, the church. The reaction was visceral, surfacing

more than any other time during their travels with Richards and Delker that summer. After one introductory performance in an evening meeting at a Mid-western camp meeting, Richards was angrily confronted by the conference official in charge of music for the meetings. At the end of a discussion that continued into the early morning hours, Richards was told the trio would not be allowed to perform



The Wedgwood Trio performing in 1967

at the youth meetings the next day.

This action, the most extreme that summer, was a blow to the trio as well as Delker and Richards. All during those travels they had to deal with objections over the music, the group's attire (matching double-breasted blue blazers with ties and gray slacks), Vollmer's naturally blond hair (thought to be bleached), and the "girls" who accompanied them (Hoyle's wife and Richards' wife and daughter).

In spite of the criticisms, both Richards and Delker later talked about how they had personally enjoyed working with the trio and the positive impact it had had on the young people that summer during their travels in thirteen states and two provinces in Canada.

The success of the trio's first record had led to the release of another, *Come, Follow Me*, recorded by Chapel Records in the spring of 1967, during their final semester at SMC. A third record was recorded with Del Delker in the VOP recording studio during that summer. Their records, which were selling well, led to their acceptance into mainstream Adventist music and bookings for

performances now had to be done six to nine months in advance. They were performing in sellout concerts to enthusiastic and appreciative audiences in large and well-known venues such as the Pasadena Civic Auditorium in California.

At the end of the summer, they returned to England for two weeks, where they

assisted in street evangelism in London during the day and performed in the New Gallery Center in the evenings.

That fall, the trio, now based in California, continued its busy schedule. The VOP and Bill Dopp, who was working with Adventist youth in Southern California, helped find jobs for Vollmer and Hoyle so that they could be in the area while Summerour pursued his medical studies at Loma Linda University.

Because of their work and studies, they limited performances to the weekends. Secular Saturday evening concerts were sellouts, large numbers of records were being sold at these events and in Adventist bookstores and income from concert fees and royalties was substantial.



By the summer of 1969, however, a decline in the size of audiences and a drop in record sales was noticeable. In mainstream music, edgier sounds in rock music and more sophisticated folk music were emerging as the new rage with young audiences.

With the approach of a new decade, Hoyle and Summerour felt the trio should experiment with and incorporate some of these newer trends into their performances. They believed this would revive waning interest in their group and broaden their appeal to young people both in and outside the church, creating expanded opportunities for evangelism.

They proposed including more rhythmic activity by adding percussion instruments, using electric keyboards and amplified string instruments, and singing songs with more thought-provoking lyrics about challenging issues developing in the church and society. Vollmer, however, became increasingly uneasy as these changes began to be implemented.

For him, the new approach was a departure from what they had wanted to do as a group when they had started five years earlier. The newer music conveyed a message of anger and rebellion that stood in sharp contrast with the music of hope and affirmation they had been singing.

He was troubled over what he felt would be a compromise of his principles if he continued with the group and, after discussing his concerns with the other two, withdrew. It was a troubling development for all of the

trio, the end of an experience that had created extremely close personal bonds and many satisfying memories.

Vollmer left the group three weeks before a major concert scheduled at La Sierra College, later University. A cancellation of the contract wasn't possible and since time was of the essence, the two men invited Gary Evans, a senior at Glendale Academy and an accomplished guitarist, to audition.

Although Evans' life experience of growing up in California and his age differed from that of the other two men, musical aspects meshed surprisingly well from the start.



*A 1970 Wedgwood publicity photograph
John Waller, Jerry Hoyle, Gary Evans, Bob Summerour*

Evans now became part of a new group called Wedgwood, one that began forging a new identity, a more contemporary sound.

Electric string instruments were added and Hoyle's acoustic string bass was replaced with an electric one. Electric keyboards were added, played by John Waller, a medical student who had attended MPA with Hoyle and Vollmer and been at SMC when the trio was there. When the transformed group played the concert at LSC previously

scheduled for the older trio, some in the audience did not like the changes and began leaving during the program.

Percussionists and other studio musicians joined the group for recording sessions. The first album released by Chapel Records under the Wedgwood name, *Country Church*, with its soft rock feel, drew decidedly mixed reviews.

In February 1970, five months after Evans and Waller joined the group, Wedgwood gave a Saturday night concert at Walla Walla College, later University, introducing their new sound, music, and appearance to that campus. The new look captured in a

publicity photo used to announce that concert featured various members with long hair, a beard, and moustaches, attired in modish clothes including paisley shirts, scarves, and leather jackets.

Although their concert created some controversy on that campus, it was a concert given at Pacific Union College a month later that became a turning point for them. At the time of the concert, the students responded as they had at WWC, with increasing

enthusiasm as the program progressed, and then gave them a rousing ovation at the end, a response the group viewed as an affirmation of what they were doing.

Shortly after their return home from PUC, however, they received a letter from F.O. Rittenhouse, president of the college. In it, he revealed that although the music department had unanimously urged a cancellation of the scheduled performance prior to their coming, the school had not done so, feeling it should honor its



agreement with them. Rittenhouse concluded his letter by stating the action of the school: that in light of its performance and standards, the group would not be invited back for another appearance on campus. Additionally, he noted that a copy of his letter was being sent to all of the other Adventist colleges and universities.

A few weeks later, they performed at Andrews University, where again the students greeted their performance with great enthusiasm. Older members of the church and school faculty and administrators, however, reacted angrily, deeply concerned over the influence Wedgwood was having on the younger generation. Rittenhouse's letter, distorted news about the group, and false rumors about supposed drug use resulted in fewer and fewer invitations for concerts.

Wedgwood felt it was speaking to cultural issues with thought-provoking lyrics and finely crafted music suitable for Adventist youth in the 1970s, an era characterized by rebellion against authority and the status quo. Increasing numbers of Adventists began, however, to see them as facilitating turmoil within the church's youth.

Apparently, the greatest concern about the group, other than its appearance, was the more contemporary rhythms and lyrics of their music. From an arranger's viewpoint, the quality of scoring and creative orchestrations using numerous instruments, such as recorder, electrified harpsichord, dobro, and other exotic instruments, was remarkable.

They began working on an album titled *Dove* that would present their best work. For a year, they rewrote and rescored some of the songs and

had multiple recording sessions, redoing numerous tracks in their quest for perfection.

In the midst of that year, they were invited to present a concert at the Loma Linda University Church in September 1972. They decided that the concert would be recorded and released as a live-concert album. A small orchestra was formed and orchestrations for a dozen of their numbers were prepared to complement other numbers that they would accompany with their usual string, keyboard, and percussion instruments.

The church was packed with an audience that had come with high expectations. From the start of the concert, the performers could sense the growing excitement in the crowd and responded with one of the best performances of their lives. A third of the way through the concert, the audience began applauding at the end of numbers, an unheard of reaction in Adventist church sanctuaries at that time.

The euphoria following the obvious success of the program vanished a few days later when the Loma Linda city newspaper panned the concert in a review headlined "Wedgwood: Shall We Dance?" When the album of that concert was released a few weeks later, the university church requested that its name not be mentioned in the liner of the jacket. Yet another blow followed when release of the *Dove* album was recalled from Adventist bookstores a month later.

In the earliest days of the formation of Wedgwood there had been talk of it becoming a full-time entity and possibly breaking into mainstream music outside the church. The realities of what it would take to pursue that course and now the loss of support from within the church that had been its base ended that

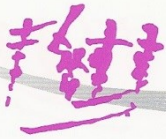
possibility. They now made moves to begin their post-Wedgwood lives.

Summerour did a residency in psychiatry at Loma Linda University and set up practice in nearby Riverside. Disillusioned by the university concert and what had happened to the *Dove* recording, a project he led out in, he put his guitar and banjo in a closet, rarely touching them and then only to try out a tune and lyric that had come to mind.

Hoyle, who had been teaching at Loma Linda Academy, went through a traumatic divorce about the time of the group's ending. He briefly worked as a medical social worker and then enrolled in a doctoral program in clinical psychology. After completing a Ph.D. in that area, he did a post-doctoral internship in the LLU department of psychiatry and eventually became a faculty member there, a position he still holds.

After leaving the trio in 1969, Vollmer continued to teach Bible. He completed an M.Div. in the seminary at Andrews University and then taught at Greater Miami Academy in Florida. In 1982, after serving as a pastor in North Carolina, he accepted an invitation to work as a pastor/evangelist in Galway, Ireland. Working in this enchanting part of that country proved to be a wonderful experience for him and his family. In 1987, they returned to San Diego, California, where he was senior pastor in the El Cajon church.

In 1990, twenty-one years after the original trio had disbanded, Hoyle called Vollmer with a suggestion that they get together with Summerour and play for the fun of it. Although Vollmer was hesitant, they and their families met at Hoyle's home where, following a meal together, they tuned their instruments and began to sing. It



was an emotional reunion that started with *Down in the Valley* and ended with *Shall We gather at the River*, the song they had used as the ending number at every concert they had given as the Wedgwood Trio. Inspired by that informal reunion, they agreed that they would perform together again as the Wedgwood Trio, if invited to do so in the future.

Two years passed before they received an invitation to play at a reunion concert for a convention of baby boomers in Long Beach, California. After accepting the invitation, Vollmer began to worry that the other two might want to do some of the newer music that Wedgwood had done. His fear was allayed early on, though, when Summerour suggested they do only the “old music” associated with the trio.

As a warm-up for the convention appearance, they performed in Vollmer’s church two weeks before the concert. The positive reaction at the church proved to be a prelude to that afforded them at the convention, which ended in a standing ovation. It was a resounding affirmation of the role they had played in the lives of their audience in another age, when both the trio and those in attendance had been younger.

The reuniting of the three men also meant more than just making music. The comments and humorous interaction between numbers, which had

ended when the trio had disbanded, now resumed. Summerour recently observed:

Our music was one thing, but our stage style was what really made our group successful. We were able to put people at ease with religious issues. Don was really good at this type of interaction. We had this rhythm where I played the rebellious one, he was the innocent, and Jerry was the peacemaker. These usually secular exchanges, when combined with the music, enabled us to connect with our audiences and enhance our spiritual message.

Still unsure about whether to continue and, if so, at what level, they accepted an invitation to perform during alumni weekend at Southern Adventist University, their alma mater. Because of the enthusiastic reception the trio received at this appearance, they made personal and financial commitments to continue as a trio.



Numerous requests for concerts began coming in and by 1995, three years after that first reunion concert, they were giving up to 25 performances a year, many

ending in standing ovations. They bought back the rights to their earlier records and, in February 1993 released a CD with recordings done from 1964 to 1969. The success of that collection led to a second CD featuring music done from 1970 to 1973. They have since recorded additional CDs, with sales of the collections and new releases totaling over 50,000 copies.

After the concerts, countless persons from all age groups have surrounded the group, asking for autographs and telling them about the important role their music has played in their lives and spiritual journey. Although they received apologies from persons who had criticized the group years earlier, occasionally some older church leaders and members let them know they have not changed their minds, despite the sweeping changes that have happened in church music in the last forty years.

In 1995, Wedgwood traveled to Australia, where they sang in camp meetings and at Avondale College to enthusiastic audiences. Two of their more meaningful concerts abroad, however, were performed for alumni weekend at Newbold College in England in the summer of 1995. They took their families along and

shared with them nostalgic visits to sites that had had meaning to them as young men in their early twenties. Both sacred and secular programs that weekend were highly successful.

A week before going to Newbold, they performed at the General Conference Session in Utrecht in the Netherlands. While three decades earlier they had been viewed with alarm by many in the Adventist church, they were now featured at the largest church gathering in history and greeted with applause, no less, after their numbers.

Two years later, in March 1997, the General Conference invited the trio to give a concert at GC headquarters. They played for an appreciative and applauding SRO audience that included the GC president. When they performed the following month at Leoni Meadows campground in Northern California, PUC president Malcolm Maxwell publicly invited them to return to the campus, reversing the stance taken by the college president nearly thirty years earlier.⁶

Beginning in 1995 and continuing for the next seven years, Dick Walker, a fiddler, joined them for some of their concerts. During those years, he played with them in concerts in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the U.S. He later wrote about that experience and the realities of life on the road:

During our concerts, Bob was the leader. It got to the point where he and I could read each other with eye contact and make adjustments as we were performing, a form of communication I really enjoyed. All of us had a good way of pulling together to make things work.

Live music is fraught with endless possibilities for disaster. Strings break, sound systems squawk or don't work at all, words to songs are forgotten at crucial moments, and the fiddle player forgets to make his entrance, just standing there with a goofy look on his face.

All these things can and did happen. And in the midst of them, Jerry was unflappable and kept on as if nothing had happened, even when he pulled one wrong harmonica after another out of his pocket. In the years I have known him I don't remember Jerry complaining about anything. He just kept writing wonderful songs and making his music.

I first heard Don sing the hymn Softly and Tenderly during one of my first concerts with them. To watch and hear him sing that hymn was for me a moment of great insight into the love of God, a moment I carry with me to this day.⁷



The trio with Dick Walker following a recording session in Nashville for their last CD, Mountain Christmas

The openness to new music that now exists in the Adventist church contrasts sharply with attitudes of the 1960s and 1970s. In the four decades since the trio started, changes in music have occurred at warp speed. What was considered radical then now seems bland and dated to the ears of many of today's youth

In an article by Reger Smith in the *Adventist Review* in 2005, Del Delker spoke about her work with the trio in the 1960s: "I was about as popular as a skunk at a picnic. They wouldn't let us sing at the adult camp meeting tent, only with the youth. Now, of course, when I join with the Wedgwood on their reunion tours, they won't let us sing with the youth . . . too old-fashioned."⁸

The passage of years and the changes around them in society and the church as well as those that have occurred in each member's life have forged friendships and a bond that will be with them for the rest of this life and into the next. Like the Voice of Prophecy broadcast and Faith for Today telecast, which pioneered new ways in which to do evangelism for those outside the church, the Wedgwood Trio was the first to show a way to reach and keep young people and members with differing tastes in the church.

Dan Shultz

¹ This article is based in part on interviews conducted by Marilyn Thomsen with members of the Wedgwood Trio, which were then edited and placed in context by her in *Wedgwood: Their music, their journey*, Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1996.

² From her biography at www.iamonline.com

³ From her biography at www.iamonline.com

⁴ Roy Scarr had been guest teaching at SMC during the previous year and invited them to come to Newbold and sing their music, offering to provide a string bass for their use. They sang in his choir and he featured the trio on choir tours.

⁵ There is a difference in recollection about the name change. Vollmer recalls it as stated here. Hoyle recalls it as happening when they realized the name they had chosen was puzzling to the English, who questioned the use of "shady" in the name for a group of clean-cut young men singing Christian music.

⁶ William G. Johnson, "The Sound of Wedgwood," *Adventist Review*, 17 July 1997, 13.

⁷ Dick Walker, "Dick's Forum - No.13," www.dickwalkermusic.com/forum13.html

⁸ Reger Smith, Jr., "In All Directions, A brief survey of Adventist musicians today," *Adventist Review*, May 2005, 32,33.

Conversations/Interviews/emails: Don Vollmer, 17, 23 March 2009; Bob Summerour, 19,22 March 2009; Jerry Hoyle, March 2009.

BIOGRAPHIES FOR JERRY HOYLE, BOB SUMMEROUR, DON VOLLMER, GARY EVANS, JOHN WALLER, AND DICK WALKER ARE PROVIDED AT WWW.IAMONLINE.COM