

# Wedgwood Trio

## DAN SHULTZ

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The Wedgwood Trio, American folk singers from the South, helped create a greater openness for newer forms of worship music in the Adventist church during the 1960s and 1970s.

The group started when three young American students, Bob Summerour, Jerry Hoyle, and Don Vollmer, 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.<sup>1</sup>



Wedgwood Trio, left to right: Jerry Hoyle, Don Vollmer, Bob Summerour

From La Sierra University blog, <https://blog.lasierra.edu/good-harmony-the-wedgwood-trio/>

## Individual Backgrounds

Bob Summerour, an accomplished guitar and banjo player, was a grandson of Gradye Brooke Summerour, one of the first diploma graduates in music from Southern Training School, later Southern Missionary College (SMC) and now Southern Adventist University (SAU).<sup>2</sup> His father was a physician, a cellist and a 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 at a pawnshop near Mount Vernon Academy, where he was a student. He practiced attentively, 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, a singer and string bass player, had learned to play the instrument at the Georgia-Cumberland Conference youth camp (then called Camp Gumby-Gay), where he and Summerour worked during their academy years, assisting camp director Pastor W.E. (Bill) Dopp. The two sang and introduced music they had arranged to campers at evening campfires. Although fascinated with bluegrass music from his earliest years, Hoyle 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. As his voice matured, he was encouraged to use it in the ministry. Following graduation from Mount Pisgah Academy in 1962, he enrolled as a theology major at SMC.

Don Vollmer's 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 Pastor Bill Dopp. Don Vollmer was also a gifted singer, who would learn guitar after the trio was formed, whose voice was an inherited talent shared by others in his extended 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 (AUC) following graduation from Mount Pisgah Academy (MPA) in 1962, he and Hoyle kept in touch.

## The Shady Grove Singers

When Summerour and Hoyle sailed for England in 1964 for a year of study at Newbold College, they planned to continue their musical collaboration as a duo.<sup>4</sup> Vollmer had learned about the trip from Hoyle and decided at the last minute to join them. 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. 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 started to play off-campus, under the name 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. As part of its effort to reach the public in a variety of ways, the center presented a variety show called "The Best Saturday Night in Town" that became a showplace for the trio. Their 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.

The trio also traveled to France, where they worked with Gisela Willi, 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 accompanied the choir with their instruments on some of its numbers.<sup>5</sup>

## The Wedgwood Trio

Following a summer of extensive travel throughout Europe, all three enrolled at SMC. Vollmer's decision to transfer from AUC enabled the trio to remain together at the Tennessee school. When they discovered that another group in the South was using their first name, they decided to call themselves the Wedgwood Trio. Having just come from England, they thought the name had a classy ring to it and would suggest high quality folk music.<sup>6</sup>

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 John Cassell, 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 album, *When the Spirit Says Sing*. Hannum, who had considerable expertise in recording, worked tirelessly with them for weeks, often late into the night, serving as both their sound engineer and producer in a makeshift studio with three microphones. The custom album, which included both secular and sacred music, was pressed in Nashville. Sales of the record and frequent airtime 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 was seeking ways to connect with the young people of the church, and saw the trio as an effective means of doing so. Their success in Texas led to another invitation from Richards to work with him at a second VOP evangelistic series in Hinsdale, Illinois, and then join with him and Del Delker<sup>7</sup> 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.

The Wedgwood Trio was nationally known in Seventh-day Adventist circles and hugely popular with young people. The response from older members, however, was somewhat mixed. Some 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 the trio's travels with Richards and Delker to camp meetings. After one introductory performance in an evening meeting at a Midwestern camp meeting, Richards was confronted by the official in charge of music and told, after a discussion that continued into the early morning hours, that the trio would not be allowed to perform at the youth meetings the next day.

This action was the most extreme, but all through their travels that summer Richards faced 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). Despite the criticisms, both Richards and Delker later recalled 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*, by Chapel Records in the spring of 1967, during their final semester at SMC. A third album 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 made 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. With the assistance of the VOP and Bill Dopp, who was by then leading youth work in the Southeastern California Conference, Vollmer and Hoyle found jobs so that they could be in the area while Summerour pursued his medical studies at Loma Linda University (LLU).

Because of their work and studies, they limited performances to the weekends. Secular concerts on Saturday evenings were sellouts, and the concert fees along with strong record sales at these events and in Adventist bookstores initially yielded substantial income. By the summer of 1969, however, a decline in the size of audiences and a decrease in record sales were noticeable.

## Wedgwood

In mainstream music, edgier sounds in rock music and more sophisticated folk music were gaining popularity. 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 with these changes. For him, the new approach was a departure from what the group had set out to do five years earlier. He finally became convinced that to continue would be a compromise of his principles, and so reluctantly withdrew. It was a troubling development for 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 (LSC), 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. 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 (WWC), 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 (PUC) 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 Floyd O. Rittenhouse, president of the college, revealing that the music department had unanimously urged a cancellation of the scheduled performance. The school had not done so, said Rittenhouse, feeling it should honor its agreement with them. However, he informed them of PUC's decision that the group, because of its performance and standards, would not be invited back for another appearance on campus. Additionally, he noted that a copy of his letter was being sent to all 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 university 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 enabling 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 middle of that year, they were invited to present a concert at the Loma Linda University Church in September 1972. They decided that the concert should 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 its 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. The team now made moves to begin their post-Wedgwood lives.

## Post-Wedgwood

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 clinical 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.

## Re-union

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.

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<sup>8</sup>

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 recent 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 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 many in the Adventist church had viewed them with alarm, 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.<sup>9</sup>

Beginning in 1996 Dick Walker, a fiddler, has joined them for some of their concerts. During those years, he has played with them in concerts in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the U.S.

## Contribution

The openness to new music that now exists in the Adventist church contrasts sharply with attitudes of the 1960s and 1970s. In the 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.

"I was about as popular as a skunk at a picnic," Del Delker commented in 2005 in recalling her work with the trio in the 1960s. "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."<sup>10</sup>

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 pioneered a new era of reaching and nurturing people in the church, young people in particular, of varying musical tastes.

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### NOTES

1. This narrative is based on interviews by the author with Don Vollmer, March 17, 23, 2009; Bob Summerour, March 19, 22, 2009; and Jerry Hoyle, March 2009; and the trio members' autobiographical reflections, introduced and edited by Marilyn Thomsen in *Wedgwood: their music, their journey* (Boise: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1996).
2. See biography for Gradye Brooke Summerour.
3. See biography for Dorothy Evans Ackerman.
4. See biography for Roy Scarr. He was an exchange teacher at SMC when he heard them play and invited them to come to Newbold College.
5. See biography for Gisela Willi-Winandy.
6. 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.

7. See biography for Del Delker.
  8. Bob Summerour, email message to author, March 22, 2009.
  9. William G. Johnsson, "The Sound of Wedgwood," *Adventist Review*, July 17, 1997, 13.
  10. Reger Smith, Jr., "In All Directions, A brief survey of Adventist musicians today," *Adventist Review*, May 2005, 32, 33.
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