

Sundate

Old rock and rollers don't die, they just make comebacks. And that's what Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young (remember 'em?) have done. Then there's a team-up of equally ancient, supposedly anonymous all-stars called The Traveling Wilburys. **John Rockwell** checks out their albums.



□ David Crosby, Stephen Stills, Graham Nash...



□ ...and Neil Young.

GEEZERS AT PLAY



□ The Traveling Wilburys... (clockwise from top left) Jeff Lynne, Bob Dylan, Tom Petty, George Harrison and Roy Orbison.

THE two records under consideration here might be lumped together under the title *Geezers At Play*, except that one (the far better one) sounds like playful geezers and the other like geezers hard at work to recapture something long lost.

In other words, the first studio album in 18 years by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, *American Dream*, and a set by a newly assembled, loose confederation of five equally ancient, supposedly anonymous all-stars called The Traveling Wilburys are both examples of veteran rock stars uniting or reuniting.

But while *American Dream* is not the embarrassment that the group's detractors gleefully anticipated, it's nowhere near as good as the Wilburys effort. Which, in turn, suggests that relaxed spontaneity is a better source of high-spirited vernacular music than guarded reconciliation, especially if the reconciliation is tinged with commercial calculation.

The 1960s saw the advent of the so-called supergroup, of which first Crosby, Stills and Nash and then, with the addition of Neil Young, this foursome was a prime example.

The original Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young records were fascinating if, to this taste, a little slick and chilly. They were characterized above all by the closeness and asymmetrical originality of their part-singing, like a set of giddy, psychedelized madrigals.

The individual personalities of David Crosby, Stephen Stills, Graham Nash and Young could still be heard. But there was a genuine group sensibility that transcended individual attributes.

Unfortunately, that togetherness, always charged with internal competitiveness and contradictions, soon foundered. The members went their own ways to eccentric stardom, in Young's case; to genteel neglect for Stills and Nash; to a ghoulish public bout with drugs for Crosby (whose autobiography has just come out).

American Dream reaches its finest moments in the songs by Young, Stills or the two of them together. This is not Young's best work; nothing from the 1980s has been and he's in particularly adenoidal voice.

But there's ample personality, and at least he's back to writing narrative songs in a folk-rock idiom. Stills sounds effectively hard-rocking, and the two men's instrumental work is solid and sure.

Nash's contributions tend toward homiletic exhortations in favor of 1. Love. 2. Peace and 3. A clean environment.

Crosby's, though he's singing well enough, consist of a denunciation of American militarism and a predictable confessional number that begins, "I have wasted 10 years in a blindfold."

What's missing, beyond the failings of any individual contribution, is a sense of shared purpose or even identity.

The songs consist of solos with fairly simple backing harmonies. And while it is foolish to speculate from the outside as to any artist's or group of artists' motives, this record does not sound as if it were impelled by a burning artistic vision.

Neither does the Traveling Wilburys, but it may have been impelled by something just as good a truly jolly good time. There is an element of coyness in this album's presentation that extends to the group biography.

But that kind of game-playing is typical of Bob Dylan, a leading Wilbury: his Rolling Thunder revue of the mid-70s, another all-star assemblage (though focused firmly on himself), was the source of his best music since his heyday, prior to this album.

His cohorts in the Wilburys are George Harrison, Tom Petty, Roy Orbison and Jeff Lynne of the Electric Light Orchestra.

Their anonymity is just pretense, since they allow their photo to appear on the jacket and their voices are recognizable. Some have suggested that record-company conflicts were a reason for the ruse.

But the various companies are still credited, and the most likely explanation is sheer self-amusement. Should they tour, as has been rumored, any lingering fog of secrecy would evaporate completely. (The best explanation of the name Wilbury, by the way, is that it is boys-club slang for a musical or recording mistake.)

The five seem to have come together for this project with refreshing serendipity, and the recording sessions reportedly took only a couple of weeks.

The result is not an immemorial art-rock statement. But in its buoyant good spirits, clever songwriting and impassioned singing and playing, it's as good-spirited an album as you're likely to hear this year.

Much of the songwriting on the album was apparently communal, but copyright credits reveal the primary responsibility for each song. Harrison and Dylan each provide three numbers; the one by Harrison most overtly reminiscent of the Beatles being the cheerful *Heading for the Light*.

Dylan's three are all strong: *Congratulations* is full of upbeat romantic scorn, *Dirty World* can be heard as a good-humored Prince parody and *Tuceter and the Monkey Man*, with its references to New Jersey and driving down highways and other Springsteen signposts, may well be a gentle send-up of the Boss.

Petty and Lynne provided the remaining four songs, two each. But the point is that everything fits comfortably together, instrumentally and vocally. Orbison takes the lead on one of the Lynne songs in his characteristically throaty, operatic manner.

But to this taste, the best vocal work comes from Dylan and Petty, and from Lynne in a rockabilly song called *Rattled*.

In almost every song, however, someone other than the lead makes a significant solo contribution, and a couple are true ensemble numbers, with solos handed around and more inventive harmony singing than the latter-day incarnation of Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young can muster.

In other words, this entire venture is a charmer. On the album spine are the words *Volume One*. That makes one look forward eagerly to a sequel as long as the Wilburys can sustain the spirit of happy informality that prevails here. — NYT.

REVEALED!

The secret origin of the Wilburys

THE wacky sleeve notes on the album recount the Wilburys' history: "The original Wilburys were a stationary people who, realising that their civilisation could not stand still forever, began to go for short walks..."

The Wilburys' real history is not quite as bizarre as that in the sleeve notes, but they do seem to have come together almost by accident.

It all started a couple of years back when Harrison decided he was bored working by himself and needed a co-producer. He had never met Jeff Lynne but had always loved Lynne's productions with ELO because the band "was in some ways reminiscent of the good bits of *I Am The Walrus*".

The pair got together, "drank red wine for a year and a half", and then produced Harrison's *Cloud Nine* album.

Early this year, Harrison called on his services again when he was asked to fill up the space on the B-side of the 12-inch version of *This Is Love*. Harrison thought he would knock off a quick song and asked Lynne, who was having dinner with Orbison, to come along.

They didn't have a studio, so decided to ring up Dylan "who's got a tiny tape machine in his garage". Harrison needed to pick up his guitar, which he had left at Tom Petty's house, and he asked if he could come along too.

The next day, all five were assembled at Dylan's where Harrison and Lynne sat on

the lawn working out a melody. Dylan was asked to help; Harrison said: "Give us some lyrics, you famous lyricist."

Not unnaturally, Dylan asked what the subject matter was supposed to be. "I looked behind the garage door and there was a cardboard box with 'Handle With Care' on it. So I said that, and Bob said: 'That's good'."

The Traveling Wilburys' first single, *Handle With Care*, was written and recorded within the next few hours.

"I thought of the first line, then everyone was writing words, with Dylan saying some hysterical things. Then we thought, 'if Roy Orbison's coming along, we might as well have a lonely bit for him'. So we wrote that, then just sang it. The next day we added electric guitar and bass, and mixed it. It was instant."

The record company ruled the song was too good to be tucked away as an obscure B-side, so didn't put it out.

Harrison decided it should be expanded into an album, and nine songs were written and recorded in just 10 days ("because Dylan had to go off on tour"), with the final overdubs and mixing taking just five more weeks, a speed almost unknown in superstar circles on the West Coast.

The team would "assemble after breakfast, at about one in the afternoon, and just sit around with acoustic guitars. Then someone would have a title or a chord pattern, and we'd let it roll."

The result is not just a gloriously entertaining (and no doubt very commercial) pop record, for it seems that some of the participants rediscovered the lost joys of making music in the process.

Harrison said Dylan certainly seemed affected. "I think this inspired him...People close to him say that since the Wilburys, he's started writing really good songs again."

For Harrison, the experience was a welcome return to basics, "because the Wilburys remind you of good old Carl Perkins tunes or Bob Dylan tunes. It's like a pastiche, a montage of all the good bits you remember."

He enthused at length on the drum sound on the record, how Jim Keltner, who joined them, had used brushes or how he'd started drumming on a wire grill inside a fridge.

This, for him, was a way of hitting back at all he hates in '80s pop, "which over the last 10 years has got so computerised and so monotonous. I'm amazed that people don't realise that they've heard the same drum sample on the last 59,000 records."

"People have got so far from the human element with their computers. Even Michael Jackson — I can't make head nor tail of it. It sounds like an IBM computer whirling around while he jerks his neck back and forward. It makes no sense to me whatsoever. I don't think high technology is a good thing. It's a load of crap." — Guardian.