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## ENTERTAINMENT: LOCAL DUO COMES 'FULL CIRCLE' WITH NEW CD

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Walt and Amy Fletcher of Panama City Beach took a fork in the road a couple of years ago — as they are prone to do — and ended up in Nashville, Tenn., hip-deep in family history and the kindness of strangers. The side-trip produced contacts and influences that took the duo — better known in these parts as "Gilligan Loves MaryAnn" — back to their family and musical roots. It resulted in a new CD of original material, *Full Circle* (Uncle Am Records, available at [www.cdbaby.com](http://www.cdbaby.com), [www.gilliganlovesmaryann.com](http://www.gilliganlovesmaryann.com) and [www.sterlingfletcher.com](http://www.sterlingfletcher.com)), under the band name Sterling Fletcher.

"Nashville was inspiring," Amy said. "When you're surrounded by incredible talent, it makes you want to practice more and be the best you can be."

The best shines through on *Full Circle*, from the twangy hillbilly of *The Only Pearl* to the simple melody of *Purity*, to the melancholy bassline of *To Be*. The sound is rich and full, but not overly produced — and the presentation is professional without coming off as pre-packaged. To avoid that digitally purified sound so many modern artists are foisting on the public, Sterling Fletcher used analog equipment in the recording process. Producer Anthony Crawford, who toured with Steve Winwood, Neil Young and others over the years, suggested the more earthy approach.

"He brought us down to earth and made us slow some of the songs down," Walt said. "He helped us 'get into the pocket,' as he would say."

The duo will play the annual "City Stages" event in Birmingham, Ala., on Saturday, sharing the Blockbuster stage with Steve Earle, Gillian Welch, Buddy & Julie Miller and Dwight Yoakam. Playing their own music for large audiences is a different experience from playing cover tunes for coffeehouses. "If you can just get people to stop and listen, you're got half of it," Walt said. They call their sound "Y'all-ternative." It's a little bit retro-country, a little bit rock 'n' roll. It's got gospel elements and bluegrass roots. It's got surf and soul. It's what might result if Chris Isaak and Aimee Mann produced a duet between Tom Petty and Loretta Lynn.

"I don't know if it'll go over in the bars," Walt said. But whatever it's called, it gets a positive reaction. Walt plays a glittering guitar — a physical sign of the "Sterling" portion of the band, as Amy's voice is its more

ethereal signature. He often dreams of melodies, then gets up in the middle of the night and hums or sings them into a boombox recorder. The two work together on lyrics after that. "Sometimes, I have a little phrase in my head for a while, trying to figure out what to do with it," Amy said. "'The Other Side of Water' was like that, and 'You reap what you sow and you sew what you rip.'" Walt grew up singing hymns and folk songs. He eventually drifted to the Gulf Coast from his Alabama home, where he met — and was captivated by the voice of — Amy Graham.

"I had never written my own song before, and I couldn't find anybody to listen to it," Walt said. Amy listened. Then Amy sang. They began touring the college circuit as Gilligan Loves MaryAnn, performing covers of everything from Bob Dylan to 10,000 Maniacs. Meanwhile, they worked on original compositions and made contacts and friendships throughout the industry. In 1998 and again this year, they won the "Best Band" award from the national Association for the Promotion of Campus Activities. "That was exciting because the students vote on that," Amy said. "It's not just picked out of a hat or something." On road trips, they often stopped in little towns to research their family history. Searching through graveyards, churches and old books in the east Tennessee hill country they discovered deep roots of preachers and musi-

cians. One preacher, Walt's great-grandfather George R. Stuart, led revivals in Nashville in the 1890s. He and Sam P. Jones converted Capt. Thomas Ryman, who established the Union Gospel Tabernacle where the men could preach to thousands. Later renamed the Ryman Auditorium, the building became home to The Grand Ole Opry.

On their recent visit, Amy stood in a back corner of the Opry and sang in a tentative voice — just a few words — and was amazed at how the sound carried and came back to her, amplified. "The Nashville thing was a big surprise," Amy said. "Before I die, I really want to play at the Ryman, to do anything at the Ryman. Soundwise, it's incredible. It has the best acoustics in the world."

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