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New Riders perform in Carbondale

Riding high on the words of Robert Hunter

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Country-rock band the New Riders of the Purple Sage, with founding singer-guitarist David Nelson, far right, has released the album "17 Pine Street" and performs Tuesday at PAC3 in Carbondale.
Contributed photo

CARBONDALE — When the New Riders of the Purple Sage perform Tuesday at 8 p.m. at the PAC3 in Carbondale, much talk will center around who is not present in the band's lineup — especially the late John "Marmaduke" Dawson, who served as frontman of the group from its founding in 1969 till 2005 and who died in 2009. But the New Riders are probably more accustomed to this than most aging rock groups; it has been like this from the very beginning. The New Riders began their trip with Jerry Garcia on pedal steel, Phil Lesh on bass and Mickey Hart on drums — a lineup that was bound to be short-lived, as that trio had other business to tend to, namely their membership in the Grateful Dead. The band has cycled through a couple dozen members since, and only singer-guitarist David Nelson, a founding member, and pedal steel player Buddy Cage, who joined up in 1971, remain from the early years.

But some of the focus should be on one of the newest of the New Riders. Robert Hunter, Garcia's writing partner in the Dead, has become the primary lyricist for the New Riders of the Purple Sage, contributing the words to most of the songs for the 2009 album "Where I Come From" and co-writing seven tunes on the band's latest, "17 Pine Avenue," released in March.

Whether having one of rock's top poets in their circle is what inspired the New Riders to continue making new albums is tough to say. But what is evident on "17 Pine Avenue" is that the band is inspired, sounding as good as a 43-year-old group could hope. The New Riders — who now include drummer Johnny Markowski, bassist Ronnie Penque and guitarist Michael Falzarano, who put in some years with Hot Tuna — are still grounded in the cosmic country they played four decades ago. But when Nelson sings Hunter's words in songs such as "Suite at the Mission" — "Got a suite at the mission / It's much cleaner than hell / Got a suite at the mission and I'm here to tell" — they sound not so much like a relic but a group that has been through it all and emerged with some wisdom to spread. Cage's pedal steel remains a bedrock of the cosmic country sound on the chugging "Message in a Bottle."

Impressively, the New Riders are not the only ones benefiting from Hunter's contributions. Both Grateful Dead drummers called on Hunter for their recent albums. In 7 Walkers, a group anchored by drummer Bill Kreutzmann, Hunter experimented successfully with New Orleans-inspired tunes. For the Mickey Hart Band, Hunter offered up words connected to the theme of the Big Bang.

Singer-songwriter Jim Lauderdale had Hunter on board for the entirety of the 2010 album "Patchwork River." Hunter also has co-written recently with Los Lobos and Bruce Hornsby.

And a guy who has been known as a pretty fair wordsmith himself has found occasion to reach out to Hunter. Bob Dylan's 2009 album "Together Through Life" featured Hunter as a co-writer on all but one of the tracks.

stewart@aspentimes.com

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