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New Riders renaissance continues

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In 1962, Jerry Garcia, Robert Hunter and David Nelson started a bluegrass band called The Wildwood Boys. They were each making \$6 a gig. Little did they know that in a few years they would be reinventing the music and performing in two of the biggest psychedelic rock bands in history.



NEW RIDERS OF THE PURPLE
SAGE

One of those bands -- the New Riders of the Purple Sage -- is still gigging. In fact, they'll perform their brand of country rock Saturday at the Rock, Ribs & Ridges festival in Vernon. The other was The Grateful Dead. Enough said.

While technically the New Riders may have outlived The Dead, Nelson acknowledges Garcia, the late Grateful Dead frontman, is the main reason The New Riders ever existed in the first place and the influence behind the kind of music they play and how they play it.

"Jerry Garcia wanted to learn to play the pedal steel. He just wanted to be a sideman, if you can imagine that. And it just grew from there," explained Nelson, vocalist and guitarist of both the original and current New Riders.

That was in 1969, when The Grateful Dead were hitting their stride with their bluegrass-influenced, all-night rock jams. Dead members Garcia, bassist Phil Lesh and drummer Mickey Hart joined forces with Nelson and guitarist-vocalist John Dawson, who had just returned from England with a bunch of new songs he wanted to try out, to form a Grateful Dead warmup act. Hunter also had a brief stint on bass in the beginning.

"It was the easiest thing to do. Bring two extra guys on a Grateful Dead tour and you've got another whole band," Nelson said, in a telephone interview from his northern California home.

The rest, as they say, is history. But in the case of the New Riders of the Purple Sage, that history is still being written. Of course, the original NRPS lineup couldn't be sustained for long because of the increasing demands facing The Grateful Dead members. NRPS signed a recording contract in 1971 with Columbia, by which time Dave Torbert had replaced Lesh, and Spencer Dryden, formerly of Jefferson Airplane, became the group's permanent drummer. Garcia remained both a member of The Dead and the New Riders until he found himself overcommitted, and Buddy Cage, previously with Ian and Sylvia's Great Speckled Bird, replaced him. During this period, NRPS recorded four records and put out perhaps their best known singles, "Panama Red," "Glendale Train," "Portland Woman," "Henry" and "Dirty Business."

NRPS lasted from 1969 to 1997 in various incarnations, enjoying their biggest commercial success in the '70s. But in 2005, "a reunion turned out to be a renaissance," said Nelson. The group has enjoyed an unprecedented resurgence in recent years that even Nelson can't explain.

"I have no idea. I've wondered about it a lot. I just count my lucky stars," Nelson said. "There's something about the New Riders that appeals to a lot of different people of all ages. I think our music connects."

The band did suffer setbacks in 2005 when Dryden died and in 2009 when Dawson died. Before Dawson passed, he urged Nelson and the others to carry on, excited to know his music was being heard live again by a new generation of fans. That same year, the band released their first studio album in 20 years, titled "Where I Come From."

In 2006, Nelson returned to his roots and made history at the same time. Bluegrass legend Jesse McReynolds invited him to sing "Ripple" at the Grand Ol' Opry, the first time a Grateful Dead song had ever been performed at the Opry. He still performs the song with NRPS. Nelson also will be forever linked to The Dead, having played guitar on their pivotal albums, "Workingman's Dead," "Aoxomoxoa" and "American Beauty."

The current NRPS grouping — Nelson, Buddy Cage on pedal steel guitar, guitarist-vocalist and Hot Tuna veteran Michael Falzarano, drummer Johnny Markowski and bassist Ronnie Penque — turn down more bookings than they can accept and sell out most of their shows. They've also continued to record, an aspect of the business that Nelson enjoys more now than he did in the '70s, even though NRPS undoubtedly sold more records then than now. Studio recordings are now much more like live concerts, he says.

"In the early days the whole music community was different. We were recording songs with the intention of getting them on the air. It was a more commercial sound. Now it's more freewheeling. Now we can stretch out on a song. It's much more creative and spontaneous," Nelson said.

A good example is NRPS's brand new album, their 27th, called "17 Pine Avenue" (Woodstock Records). Nelson and Robert Hunter, the longtime songwriting partner of Jerry Garcia, wrote eight of the 12 songs on the album. "It's getting great reviews. I think it's really good. There's all different kinds of songs on it ... a cajun stomp ... a blues shuffle ... a couple of upbeat rock songs..." Nelson said. In other words, jamming, psychedelic Americana, something NRPS learned from the best — Garcia and The Grateful Dead.

The third annual Rock, Ribs & Ridges festival features two days of southern rock and southern cooking. Saturday's other headliner is Dickey Betts & Great Southern. Betts, No. 58 on Rolling Stone's original Greatest Guitarists of All Time list, was a founding member of the Allman Brothers Band, responsible with Duane Allman for introducing twin guitar harmony to rock. He is known for such classic songs as "Ramblin' Man," "Blue Sky," "In Memory of Elizabeth Reed" and "Jessica."

Sunday's lineup features Artimus Pyle, Molly Hatchet and the Georgia Satellites. Pyle was the drummer for the iconic southern rock band Lynyrd Skynyrd. He survived the devastating airplane crash in 1977 that killed three members of the band. Pyle's distinctive double bass drumming helped define the legendary Skynyrd sound, which includes the classic hits "Sweet Home Alabama" and "Freebird." Betts and Pyle are both in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

"We're thrilled to have Artimus Pyle bring that mix of American rock and southern blues to Rock, Ribs and Ridges," said festival Executive Producer Howard Freeman, of Promo 1. "The impact of Lynyrd Skynyrd is still felt today. You didn't have to grow up in the '70s to enjoy their timeless music."

While the bands are filling the air with music, local rib chefs will be filling the air with meaty aromas. Competitive ribbers include 2010 champions Three Men and a Baby Back from Bergen County, 2011 champions Double S Diner from Sussex and newcomer Chumley's BBQ & Catering Company from Florida, N.Y., who will serve food all weekend and compete for thousands in prize money and the titles of Best Ribs and Best Sauce.



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