



Bluegrass Legend Puts out Album of Grateful Dead Music

By Randall Mikkelsen

Reuters

BOSTON

Before there was psychedelic rock and the Grateful Dead, Jerry Garcia played bluegrass.

Now, a legendary mandolin player whose music inspired Garcia and his Black Mountain Boys bluegrass band in the early 1960s has released a CD revealing the deep country roots of the Grateful Dead's music.

The new recording by Jesse McReynolds and Friends was released this month on Woodstock Records and is titled "Songs of the Grateful Dead." McReynolds recently performed songs from the CD at Nashville's Grand Ole Opry -- country music's home -- where he earned a standing ovation.

"I'm always looking for new ideas," said McReynolds, who rocked the traditionalist bluegrass world in 1965 with an album of Chuck Berry covers and has also recorded with The Doors.

"I didn't want this to sound like straight bluegrass," he told Reuters. "I wanted it to be more of my own sound, pretty much -- bluegrass and the Grateful Dead sound."

McReynolds, 81, made his name playing and singing with his brother in a country act called Jim & Jesse. The pair started in 1947, and Jesse developed a style of "cross-picking" that became much emulated. Jim McReynolds died in 2002.

"Songs of the Grateful Dead" was conceived and steered by Sandy Rothman, who played with Garcia in the Black Mountain Boys and shared the Grateful Dead guitarist's admiration for Jim & Jesse. Other former Black Mountain Boys on the record include guitarist David Nelson, who co-founded New Riders of the Purple Sage with Garcia, and longtime Grateful Dead lyricist Robert Hunter, who contributed lyrics to a new song on the album.

"It's just something I wanted to do as a tribute to Jerry and Robert Hunter," said McReynolds.

Before he became a rock legend as the Grateful Dead's co-founder and guitarist, Garcia played banjo, and among his early heroes was Allen Shelton, who played for Jim & Jesse.

Garcia and Rothman took a musical tour of the southern United States in early 1960s, attending Jim & Jesse concerts along the way. They snagged the pair's autographs and propped up a tape recorder in front of a motel TV to capture a live performance of Jim & Jesse at the Grand Ole Opry. That tape still survives, according to Rothman.

Garcia never abandoned bluegrass or the banjo, and his 1975 bluegrass album "Old and In the Way" was a

critical and commercial success.

MCREYNOLDS CONJURES UP THE DEAD

McReynolds said he did not want "Songs of the Grateful Dead" to be pure bluegrass. Instead, he sought to stay close to Grateful Dead arrangements and insert his mandolin where Garcia's lead would have gone.

He also sang most of the vocals on the CD. With Jim & Jesse, he sang lead to Jim's distinctive tenor harmonies, but said his solo vocals gained little recognition after Jim died.

"This is the first thing I've done solo that's really been accepted like it has," he said. "I think it's one of the best vocal things I've ever done."

Nelson said McReynolds gave "a whole new take" on the Grateful Dead's music. "You get to hear the core, the melody. He has a totally pure approach to the songs."

Some songs McReynolds chose for the CD have obvious country roots, such as the opening "Black Muddy River." Others are more of a surprise, like mystical tune "The Wheel" or the reggae-influenced "Fire on the Mountain."

"I really wasn't trying to hear what would go bluegrass and what wouldn't," McReynolds said. "I never close my mind to listening to any type of music."

Aside from the romantic ballad with Hunter's lyrics, "Day by Day", the record's only song not written by the Grateful Dead is "Deep Elem Blues," which had a long run in the band's repertoire. McReynolds makes it a foot-stomper with Rothman on banjo and Grand Ole Opry veteran Buck White ripping out a lively piano solo.

McReynolds said "Deep Elem" evoked boyhood days listening to his uncles play in rural Virginia. "It was pretty far back in the hills, and music was a pretty big part of our entertainment for the weekend," he said.

"Ripple," a Grateful Dead classic on the album, was part of the Grand Ole' Opry performance when Nelson joined McReynolds' band at the country music citadel.

"It was just fantastic," Nelson said. "I don't know if it was the first time for a Grateful Dead song to be sung on the Opry, but it could be."

McReynolds said the Opry can be a hard venue to play because of its ever-changing audience of tourists. Yet he got a standing ovation. "It's unusual you do anything it would go over that well," he said. "Evidently there must be a lot of country fans now that like the Grateful Dead music."

(Editing by Bob Tourtellotte)

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