



A Bluegrass Treasure: An interview with Jesse McReynolds

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This post is a contribution from [Mike Reed](#), one of our 2010 IBMA correspondents. Photo for this post courtesy of [Ted Lehmann](#).



[Jesse McReynolds](#)' CD release [Songs of the Grateful Dead](#) probably surprised a lot of his fans, not to mention unsuspecting Grateful Dead and Jerry Garcia fans. I asked him how this project came about and why he decided it was the right move at this time in his career.

Jesse said that he has always been open minded when it comes to the kinds of music he listens to and the types of music he's recorded over the years. "I try to do something a little bit different now and then." He reminded me "a few years ago we did a tribute to Chuck Berry and also recorded with the Doors back in the 60s and rock and roll."

He explained that he learned from Sandy Rothman, Jerry's traveling companion in the 60s, that he and Jerry drove east from California to follow the Bluegrass festival circuit. Sandy told him that they drove all the way to Alabama just to get a hotel room so they could audiotape the Jim & Jesse TV show. "I found out that Jerry was really a Bluegrass fan. I think he wanted to be a Blue Grass Boy with Bill Monroe. This was before the Grateful Dead started."

Jesse figures he must have unknowingly crossed paths with Jerry during this time. "I'm sure I came face to face with Jerry back then a few times because Sandy said they were just kind of fans, come around, buy song books, a little shy to come up and introduce themselves and get autographs."

It seems that Jesse's wife was the real inspiration for the project. "My wife had all the Grateful Dead CDs and everything they ever done. She's a devoted Deadhead, that's what they call them."

He was asked if he would be interested in doing a tribute to Jerry Garcia and Robert Hunter (the lyricist for most of the Grateful Dead songs). Up until then he had heard the songs, but not really paid much attention to them. After the proposal, he started to listen with the project in mind.

One of the first songs he considered was *Black Muddy River*. Then he got to *Ripple* and *Deep Elem Blues* and thought these were songs that could fit his instrumental and vocal style. "We just went in and picked out songs, our favorites, [that] I could do without plumb going into another field."

He then enlisted David Nelson, a friend of Jerry's, to work on the project with him, as well as others familiar with his music.

"We worked on this project, was in the making about five years, so it's nothing we just ran in and done. I said if we are going to do this I want to do it where the Grateful Dead people would accept it. So we arranged it in a way where some of it could be acoustic and some of the regular sounds of the Grateful Dead...I just finally picked out 12 songs that I figured would fit my voice a little bit."

The final song on the CD is not a Jerry Garcia track, but a McReynolds/Hunter composition. I asked him how that came about.

"I got acquainted with Robert by telephone and introduced myself to him and he said I'm well aware of who you are and how you play, you were a big influence on us with your mandolin style. He was familiar with me and said that he had some songs that would I be interested in working with him on."

So far the positive response to the recording has been more than he expected. "I'm just really venturing into a new area, a new audience here that I didn't know even existed for anything that I would do, and surprisingly this has taken off."

Jesse has had the opportunity to play some of these songs at the Grand Old Opry. I asked him how they have been received. He laughed and said...

"It went over great. Only thing, at the Grand Old Opry they don't think I'm serious. I'll walk out and say here is a tribute to the Grateful Dead and you have this silence and then you hear this laugh. They think I'm telling a joke. So after a while I go out and do *Black Muddy River* or *Deep Elem Blues*. Then afterwards I got a standing ovation a couple of times from just doing these songs which is hard to do at the Grand Old Opry."

He has already incorporated some of these songs into his bluegrass festival program and they have been received very well.

When I asked him about his next project, he joked that he's told people "I'm not sure, it's going to be Michael Jackson or Elvis Presley. That's my joke. I'm not closed minded to any kind of music, it listen to all of it."

I asked him if hearing Sandy Rothman talking about the influence that Jim & Jesse had on them in the 60s brings back any memories for him of that time.

"We were busy. We were doing like 4 or 5 television shows a week, different TV stations – Pensacola, Dothan, Albany, Savannah and we were doing the Grand Old Opry at that time as special guests so we were really busy on the road at that time. That was one of the best bands we had, I guess, because the main thing was we played together every day. We were doing radio shows and then the TV shows, every day we were playing somewhere. Yes, that was the highlight of our career when we were trying to get things going."

I mentioned that Jesse McReynolds was a hero and role model for a lot of musicians, especially mandolin players. His response and humility set me back a bit.

“It’s amazing the people I’ve met here at the IBMA that come up and say they admire my playing. I feel like I’m lost in the shuffle sometimes. There’s people come up and say stuff like this, how I influenced them, so that’s a big uplift.”

Jesse McReynolds is one of our true treasures of bluegrass music and music in general. While many younger musicians are afraid to drift too far from the established center, here is a Bluegrass first generation player who is not afraid to seek out new challenges, test the presumed boundaries, and reach out to new audiences. We can’t take true innovators like him for granted.

“Here I am 81 still going like I’m 30 or 40, so I continue.”