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Review: Jesse McReynolds & Friends, *Songs of the Grateful Dead—a Tribute to Jerry Garcia and Robert Hunter*

In [CD Reviews](#), [Reviews](#) on November 10, 2010 at 8:00 am

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Jesse McReynolds & Friends

Songs of the Grateful Dead—a Tribute to Jerry Garcia and Robert Hunter

[Woodstock Records (2010).]

As the traditional bluegrass and jam band circuits have coalesced over the last few years, some intriguing hybrids have emerged. Jim and Jesse were among the bluegrass acts most revered by Jerry Garcia and picking pal Sandy Rothman during Garcia's pre-Grateful Dead banjo years, and Rothman, along with guitarists David Nelson (New Riders) and Stu Allen (Jerry Garcia Band) had the chance to support McReynolds on this set of classic Dead songs penned by Garcia and writing partner Robert Hunter.

Octagenarian McReynolds might seem like an unlikely choice to do an album of Dead songs, but his connections to the rock community go back to a 1969 session for the Doors' *Soft Parade* album, and his wife Joy's affinity for Garcia's music led to this collaboration. On this album, McReynolds not only sings what might be termed 'bluegrassy' Dead songs like "Black Muddy River" and "Ripple," but fully electric performances of more rock based pieces like "Fire on the Mountain" and "Franklin's Tower" featuring various combinations of Nelson, Allen, and steel guitarist Tommy White.

Such musical liberties may shock long time Jim and Jesse fans expecting straight bluegrass, but McReynolds gets right in there, weaving the perfect path through the guitars on his mandolin. Garcia often bemoaned his own vocal limitations, and he would doubtless be thrilled to hear McReynolds' magnificently craggy voice take on his songs. McReynolds is also not afraid to put his own stamp on the songs, as evidenced by the way he changes the phrasing and timing of the ballad "Stella Blue." Although the Dead covers are fine, the disc's high point is arguably the closing track, "Day By Day," penned by McReynolds and Hunter and augmented with rich harmonies from McReynolds clan

members Garrett and Audrey. Although there have been plenty of lukewarm ‘tribute’ albums of GD songs produced in recent years, this one is the real deal, and well worth seeking out.

[\[Here's a good place to get this one.\]](#)

—Michael Parrish (San Jose, CA)

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