

Erie Times-News

Jesse McReynolds & Friends, "Songs of the Grateful Dead" ***

There's an Opry gloss on "Songs of the Grateful Dead," the new set of covers by first-tier picker Jesse McReynolds. But it's the spots where the band wanders -- the curlicue mandolin licks that wind down "Ripple," the scuffed-boots shuffle out of "Bird Song," where the bass line totters like a drunk on the porch step -- that truly honor the Garcia-Hunter catalog.

McReynolds proves a good fit. His high-plains holler gives a been-there legitimacy to "Loser" and "Standing on the Moon." His cross-picked mandolin flits across the chorus of "Franklin's Tower," trading off with David Nelson's guitar.

Having Nelson helps. The New Riders frontman played with Jerry Garcia. He has written with Robert Hunter, who drops a new song here.

The drifter imagery in Hunter's lyrics suits McReynolds, who has been singing on tape since 1952. And the bluegrass treatment isn't exactly a reach on these songs: Though he comes from a different tradition - hats, matched suits and the Saturday-night "Suwanee River Jamboree" -- McReynolds and his crisp picking clearly influenced Garcia, who once got an autograph on his Jim & Jesse songbook.

These songs, recorded more than 40 years later, make clear that the feeling was mutual.

-- Robb Frederick