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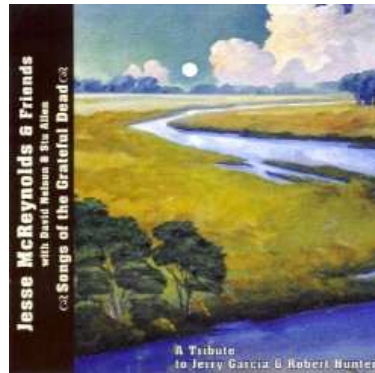
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Jesse McReynolds & Friends - *Songs of the Grateful Dead*

CD Review by: [Jud Conway](#) | Posted: 10/5/2010 10:01:29 AM

Innovative mandolinist/vocalist Jesse McReynolds is probably best-known for his fifty-five year stint as half of legendary bluegrass duo Jim & Jesse, along with his late brother Jim McReynolds. In addition, he also holds the distinction of being a Grammy-decorated forty-five-year veteran of the Grand Ole Opry. In 2006, Jesse teamed up with David Nelson (New Riders of the Purple Sage), Stu Allen (The Jerry Garcia Acoustic Band), and a host of Nashville session players to create a unique and refreshing tribute to the music and lyrics of Jerry Garcia and longtime Grateful Dead lyricist Robert Hunter. The resultant product of those sessions, *Songs of the Grateful Dead*, is due out October 5, 2010, on Woodstock Records.



A valid question that fans of both Jim & Jesse and the Dead might ask is... Why and how did this intriguing project come to fruition? Veteran multi-instrumentalist Sandy Rothman, who has played with iconic figures like Bill Monroe and Clarence White, and whose banjo work is featured on McReynolds' version of "Deep Elem Blues," may have the definitive answer. He cites Allen Shelton, sixties-era banjoist for Jim & Jesse's backing band, the Virginia Boys, as one of Jerry's earliest musical heroes. Rothman's opinions come highly regarded, as he served with Garcia in a short-lived bluegrass outfit called the Black Mountain Boys, just prior to the formation of the Grateful Dead. His contention that Jim & Jesse and the Virginia Boys were a major influence on the young Jerry Garcia provides valuable insight into McReynolds' surprising, but as it turns out serendipitous decision to record an album of Grateful Dead covers.

Songs of the Grateful Dead includes McReynolds' reading of twelve Garcia/Hunter classics, as well as a fantastic new original number, "Day By Day," co-written by Jesse & Robert Hunter. Although much of the album falls outside of conventional notions of traditional bluegrass; the instrumentation and execution are looser and more "root-based" than bona fide bluegrass, McReynolds' arrangements deftly get to the heart of each song. McReynolds' adventurous musical spirit permeates vintage Garcia/Hunter compositions like "Stella Blue," "Fire on the Mountain," "Ripple," "Deal," and "Birdsong." Although he is now in his eighties, McReynolds' vocals are noticeably strong throughout the entirety of *Songs of the Grateful Dead*, blending beautifully with the subtle harmonies of David Nelson. The real treasures on this stunningly-original collection of covers lie in McReynolds' readings of deep cuts like the opener, "Black Muddy River," "Loser," and "Standing on the Moon."

While many accomplished artists, both young and old alike, will continue to interpret the songs of the Grateful Dead, it is a rare talent like Jesse McReynolds who has succeeded in adding a wholly-unique fingerprint to the growing Dead-related canon, and it is a rare album like *Songs of the Grateful Dead* that delivers the goods.

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