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Mandolinist Jesse McReynolds pays tribute to late fan Jerry Garcia

Mandolinist McReynolds pays tribute to Grateful Dead's Garcia

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There is a tale that Sandy Rothman, traveling companion of the late Jerry Garcia during his pre- Grateful Dead days, has been telling a lot of late.

It places the two friends in the front seat of a Corvair with Garcia behind the wheel. They are journeying, as the story goes, "somewhere down South" during the spring of 1964. Then a sound comes on the radio. It's bluegrass music, for sure.

"Friday night ... Jim and Jesse must be on the Opry," Rothman said.

"Can you tune that in any better?" Garcia replied.

Rothman offers the story in the liner notes to *Songs of the Grateful Dead*, the new tribute album to the music that Garcia wrote during the Dead's heyday with lyricist Robert Hunter. But it's not Rothman's album. He was one of the catalysts in getting it made, but the record is the work of Jesse McReynolds. He is the surviving, mandolin-playing half of Jim and Jesse, the acclaimed bluegrass duo that practiced and pioneered string music for 55 years before elder brother Jim McReynolds' death from cancer in 2002.

Jesse McReynolds, 81, used the album to solidify the links between two seemingly opposite musical greats who never met. Garcia, a versed banjoist and fanatical bluegrass supporter who played the music in side bands throughout the Grateful Dead's reign, was an avowed Jim and Jesse fan. McReynolds, in turn, had an appreciation for Garcia's music that seemed to intensify in recent years. Among the devoted Dead fans who surround him, in fact, is his wife, Jay.

"I came to find out Jerry was a big fan of ours," said McReynolds, who will perform selections from *Songs of the Grateful Dead* along with music from throughout his 63-year career for *WoodSongs Old-Time Radio Hour* on Monday. "He watched our TV shows, went to a lot of our festivals and listened to us on the Grand Ole Opry on the radio.

"My wife, she's a Deadhead herself. She got me listening to a lot of the Grateful Dead's music while we were traveling. So she and Sandy suggested doing the album. There have been a lot of tributes to the Grateful Dead as a band. But I just wanted to do something for Jerry and Robert, as they were the people that wrote so many of their songs."

McReynolds teamed with two cross-generational Garcia guitar disciples: David Nelson, a cornerstone member of New Riders of the Purple Sage, the countrified band that Garcia co-founded in the early '70s, and Stu Allen, a member of the surviving offshoot of the Jerry Garcia Band (Garcia's longest-running side project during the Dead years), now known simply as JGB.

"We tried to pick a way to do this music where it would be accepted by anybody," McReynolds said. "I didn't want to offend anyone on either side — the bluegrass fans or the Deadheads.

"So I didn't change the concept of what Jerry and Robert had in mind. Robert, he had some great lyrics. And, of course, Jerry had these incredible melodies to put to them. So I just did the best I could to get into the song without changing it into straight bluegrass. I wanted the Grateful Dead fans to be able to say, 'Well, that sounds familiar.'"

In many ways, *Songs of the Grateful Dead* sounds familiar simply because there was such a strong grass-roots flavor to some of the Dead's material — especially songs like *Ripple* and *Black Muddy River* — that McReynolds' album winds up with more of an Americana accent than a strictly bluegrass feel. After all, drums and electric guitar color much of the music.

But there are some fun surprises, too. *Alabama Getaway*, for example, winds up sounding less like the Dead and more like vintage George Jones. The killer, though, is *Standing on the Moon*. Pulled from the Dead's final studio album, 1989's *Built to Last*, it stands as one of the most emotive but underappreciated songs in the Garcia/Hunter catalogue. Fittingly, McReynolds' vocals on the tune are as strong as oak, with a clean country tenor that sounds majestic but unassuming.

"That's one of my favorite songs on there," McReynolds said. "That and *Black Muddy River*. They're both such great songs."

Songs of the Grateful Dead concludes, somewhat ironically, with something that isn't a Dead song — a newly written collaboration between McReynolds and Hunter called *Day By Day*.

"Robert had some lyrics he wanted to send me, to see if I wanted to put some music to them," McReynolds said. "This was the first time I ever did anything like that. I kept e-mailing him, saying, 'I want to send you the music I have so far.' He said, 'I'd rather you wait until you get finished.' So he didn't hear what we done on *Day By Day* until the record was ready to come out. He was very pleased with it, though.

"I tell you, it's just a great thing to be a part of this music. I get e-mails every day with reviews of the album. It's amazing how much people seem to enjoy it. All these years, and I have never received the kinds of compliments I'm getting now."

Read Walter Tunis' blog, *The Musical Box*, at LexGo.com.

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