

From [Mandolin Cafe](#)

#### Interviews

The Jesse McReynolds Interview

By Mandolin Cafe

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Colorful characters dot the landscape of bluegrass and country music history like bright red painted barns in a grey and white winter landscape, and the pioneering days from the 1920s to the 1960s are especially rich. But coupled with a wealth of color, we hope the great patriarchs of our family also set personal examples that will be emulated by our own children.

Jesse McReynolds has always inspired me with both color and character.

The color comes in shades well beyond the blue in bluegrass. He's a renowned master with a childlike curiosity let loose on the town square on Saturday morning venturing into every musical candy store promising different sounds. He's shared his tastes for old-time, blues, rock, country, jazz, pop, Latin and, of course, bluegrass, to name just some of his flavors.

Jesse decided from the outset of his musical journeys in the 1940s that a trademark style was critical to setting his sound apart from the growing field of mandolin players. His unique crosspicking and split-string techniques have proven so distinctive and intricately detailed that few have even come close to copying. And with his late brother Jim, he would help refine harmony singing to a high and polished art in a brother duo that lasted longer than any other in country music history.

The accolades are well documented and rightly attest that he is a musician's musician. And every one he's received, if it speaks only to those credits, is an understatement.

On the side of character, Jesse McReynolds is also a gentleman's gentleman. Generous and warm hearted, he's forever willing to share with others and delighted in the daily efforts toward continual improvement - even in his 80s. He's a consummate professional, an accessible mentor in life as well as music and possessed with soft-spoken poise that I believe can only be grounded in self-confidence deserved.

If students of any form of art want to study the combination of character and grace with just the right highlights of color and flash, the list of genuine masters has to include Jesse McReynolds. Maybe the most inspiring news for us students is that he's still innovating, and the type of person anxious to both teach and learn at the same time.

— Dan Hays

[International Bluegrass Music Association](#)

## Jesse McReynolds

**Question from F5Loar:** Jesse, over the years you have used many different mandolins, many of them Gibsons. Can you tell me about the mid 50s F5 you used during your Epic recordings? What year was it made? It sounded really great. Did you do any work to it? Did you buy it new? In the late 60s, you had a blond top F5 style with just "Gibson" and a little long diamond shape in the headstock. What kind of Gibson was that? In the early 70s you had a converted 20s F4 to F5 style. Can you tell us who did the conversion? Do you still have these 3 Gibson mandolins?

And I wanted to say that if you lined up you and say the top 5 cross-picking mandolin players it would be so easy to pick you out of a line-up. Your style is that unique and different and I don't know of anyone that has come close to doing your style. It's a real joy to continue to hear the McReynolds style bluegrass live on the Opry 46 years later which is how long I've been hearing you on the Opry. Thanks for keeping it alive for new generations!

**Jesse McReynolds:** First, I just want to say how much I appreciate The Mandolin Cafe for sending me this online interview and my wife for typing it all up to send back to you. And I thank you all for coming up with so many good questions. So let's get to it:

To F5Loar: The mandolin I used in the mid 50s was an F5 model. I bought it new in Live Oak, FL, in 1956 or '57. I used it on our first recordings for Columbia and Epic Records.

The blond top F5 was made about the same year. The top was thinned down a bit, hoping to get a better sound. But it was later returned to its original color. As I recall, Randy Wood did the work on it.

The converted F4 was done by Robbie Robertson in Columbus Ohio in 1964. I still have the last two mandolins. Out of the top 5 people that play my style, I would say my grandson, Luke McKnight, would be the top one I would pick and Luke Shamblyn also does a great job.

**Question from hank:** Your Songs of the Grateful Dead are real jewels for new and old audiences. What an interesting mix of so many talented artists. Can you tell us how this project came about?

**Jesse McReynolds:** Hank, thanks for the nice compliment on it. The Grateful Dead project came about when I learned that Jerry Garcia was a fan of bluegrass and Jim & Jesse. And my wife Joy is a Deadhead. I'll have to say that it is the most interesting and successful project that I have ever done. And I have met and worked with a lot of wonderful new friends and fans since this CD came out.

## Jesse McReynolds - Songs Of The Grateful Dead

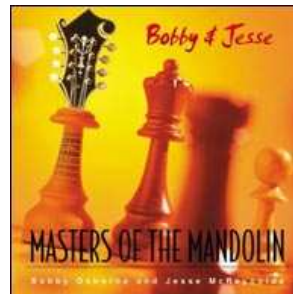
Purchase: [from the artist](#), [from Elderly](#), [from amazon.com](#).



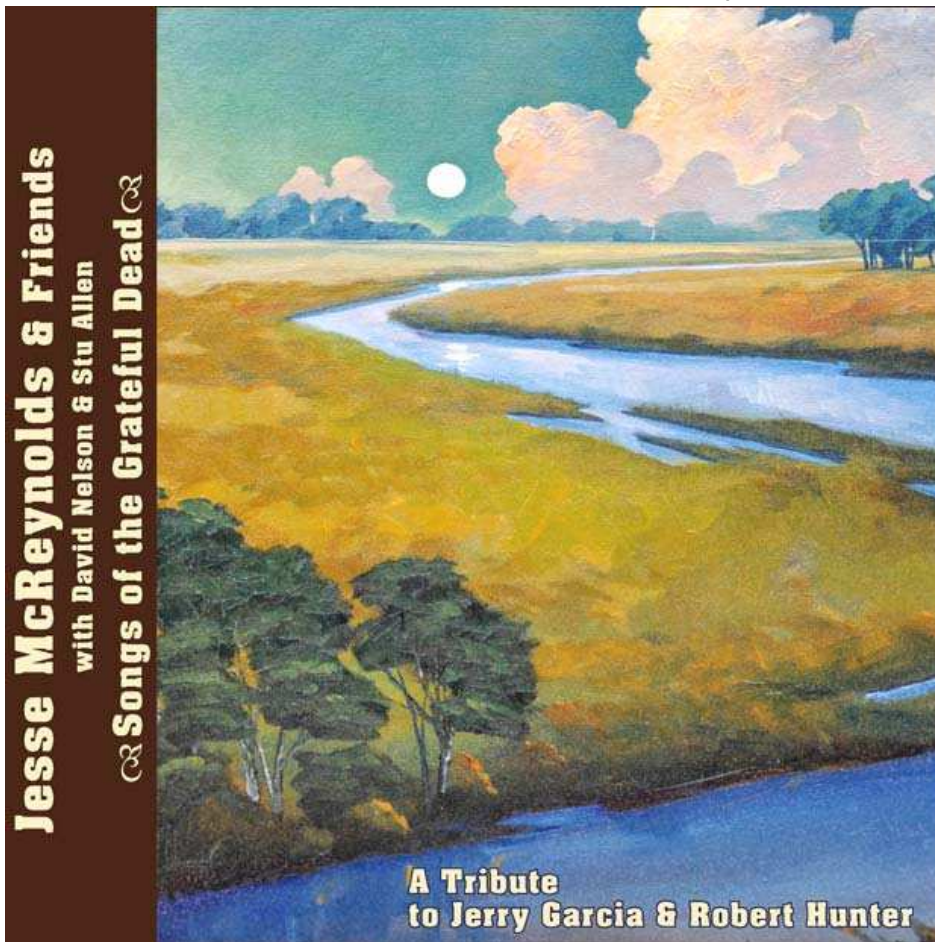
Jesse McReynolds - Photo credit: jimandjesse.com



Bending The Rules - 2004. Click to purchase from artist.



Masters of the Mandolin - Bobby Osborne and Jesse McReynolds from 2001. Click to purchase.



**Question from jramsey:** Thank you for participating in an interview, what an honor for this community to learn from a first-generation living legend.

I've seen you live a few times in the past couple years, listened to all your recordings, and I must say that you sound as good as ever. What's your secret to longevity in terms of speed, dexterity, and hand health, especially with physically demanding techniques like split-string and crosspicking?

Regarding split-string technique: I know that you use your pinky nail with a notch filed to grab the split, and this is how you're able to slide the shapes around. I've heard that you use press-on nails if your nail breaks. If so, how does this work for you, and would you recommend it to someone with brittle nails trying to copy the style?

Judging from the demand around here for the out-of-print book you did with Statman, it seems that more and more people really want to dig in and learn about your style. Any plans for new teaching material... another Homespun tape, or maybe a book of transcriptions?

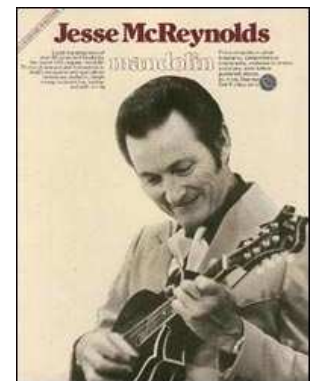
Thanks again for taking the time to do this. You're at the top of my hero list and I look forward to many more years of great music and innovative, creative mandolin playing. Take care.

**Jesse McReynolds:** jramsey: Thanks for your compliments. The only thing I can say about my longevity is I try to keep playing and practicing as much as I can and trying to come up with something new every day. As for the split-string style, I only use press-on nails when my regular nails wear out, which they will do if you play a lot.

As for new teaching material, I did one DVD for Homespun tapes. Hopefully they might want me to do another one sometime. I don't think the first one sold very well. We went right to the advanced technique. Maybe I need to put out a beginners introduction to crosspicking before getting right into it.

Crosspicking is a very difficult thing to do, especially if you try to do it on faster songs. As I get older, I have to work harder to keep the speed up on some of the songs. I'd say practice is the most important thing to do.

## Jim & Jesse's First Grand Ole Opry Appearance, 1963



Bluegrass Masters: Jesse McReynolds Mandolin, by Andy Statman. Now out of print, but used (and very expensive) copies are usually available on [amazon.com](http://amazon.com). Click to view availability.



L-R: Jimmy Buchanan (fiddle), Allen Shelton (banjo), Jesse, Jim, and David Southerland (bass). Photo credit: jimandjesse.com

**Question from Russ Jordan:** Jesse, I believe George Shuffler played bass with Jim & Jesse for a while, before he was known for crosspicking on guitar. Was George working on crosspicking when he was with you?

**Jesse McReynolds:** Hi, Russ. George Shuffler worked with me for a few months around 1951 or '52 and we jammed a lot with mandolin and guitar. After that, he started cross-picking on the guitar. All this took place at a rooming house in Ashville, NC where the whole band shared one big room.



Jesse on WSFA-TV in Montgomery, Alabama, circa 1962. Photo credit: jimandjesse.com

**Question from jhduncan:** What business practices have you had to undertake to stay in the music business during a long career which has seen format changes (vinyl, tapes, CD's, MP3's) trends (rock and roll), and the loss of your beloved brother and musical partner?

I grew up hearing *Hard Hearted* amongst my dad's records and cherish those memories; I also really love hearing Jimmy Campbell's fiddling with your band on videos from the Jerusalem Ridge, Peaceful Valley Bluegrass festivals on YouTube.

Thank you for all your hard work in diversifying bluegrass music!

### **Jim & Jesse - *Hard Hearted***

Other musicians in this video: Keith McReynolds (bass), Joe Meadows (fiddle), and Tim Ellis (banjo).

**Jesse McReynolds:** Dear jhduncan, I started in the music business in 1947, and back then the music spoke for itself. That was before managers and big agents and corporations came into the picture. It has changed a lot since then. Now, without agents and managers, and a lot of promotion, it's hard to survive in the music world. Business and management play a big part in music nowadays. As for me, I keep looking for new ideas and hoping that I'll find something that music fans will accept and enjoy.

As for the loss of my brother Jim, after working together for 55 years, it was a great loss, not only as a brother, but a business partner. Jim handled most of the bookings and contracts, etc., and I handled the music part, and now I'm responsible for all of it.

**Question from swampstomper:** I went to a workshop with you at Andy Alexander's "Picking in the Pasture" in Lodi, New York two years ago, and I remember you commenting that you hated some of the material you had to cut for Epic. I think you specifically mentioned *Diesel On My Tail* and the Chuck Berry material. Is my memory correct? If so, was it the material or the way you had to present it that bothered you? Obviously you are broad-minded as a musician (*El Cumbanchero*, Robert Hunter songs). Related to this, my all-time favorite project of Jim & Jesse was the *Saluting the Louvin Brothers*, also on Epic. I wore out two 8-track tapes of that! How did that project come about? I know you and Charlie Louvin served together in Korea and sang together, but how did you convince Epic to let you do that project?

In the interview you did at the beginning of the Oak Publications book (by Andy Statman) you mention your early mandolin influences: Mack Maghar (early Opry mandolinist), Paul Buskirk (Jethro-style pop, lived around Knoxville when you were growing up), Ernest Ferguson, Red Rector and of course Jethro. What specific ideas did you get from Jethro's playing that we can hear in some of your songs?

### Jesse McReynolds - *Okechobee Wind*

Jesse displays his cross-picking and split string techniques on his composition *Okechobee Wind*.



Jesse McReynolds and the Virginia Boys and Amanda, 2009. [Click to purchase.](#)

**Jesse McReynolds:** Swampstomer, I have had to record a few songs that I didn't like. *Diesel On My Tail* didn't impress me very much but it turned out to be one of the biggest songs that we ever recorded as Jim & Jesse. So sometimes, the record producers are right.

The Chuck Berry project was an interesting thing. I had no problem doing that. I enjoy doing different things like that. Yes, I am broadminded when it comes to music. Glen Sutton was a producer for Epic Records, and was the one we did the Louvin Brothers tribute with.

I was influenced by most of the mandolin players that you mention. They all played different styles. Jethro and Buskirk played more swing and jazz than the others did. So I learned a little from all of them before I started my own style.

After the death of Ira Louvin, Charlie asked me if we would consider doing a tribute album of the Louvin Brothers. We presented the idea to Glen Sutton, producer for Epic Records, and he thought it would be a good project. It's one of my favorite albums we did for Epic Records.

### Jim & Jesse early publicity photo



**Question from Kevin Briggs:** Hey, Jesse! Thanks for everything you've done throughout your working life. You are royalty around these parts.

I am wondering what your thoughts are regarding mandolins. Specifically, how have the different mandolins you've owned impacted your playing? I'm not concerned with brands that you prefer or don't prefer, just with your general experience regarding how one mandolin can contribute to or take away from your playing. If you think it's more about the player and not the instrument, tell me about that too.

Thanks again, and thanks for everything.

**Jesse McReynolds:** Kevin, I never was interested in the brand name of an instrument. I just look for how it sounds and how it plays. If I had to pick one name that fits my style of playing, it would probably be the Stiver that I've been using since 1978.

### Jim & Jesse, early 70s



An [interview with Wayne Helfrich](#) and his remarkable collection of historic bluegrass photos he took starting in the 1960s appeared on this site last year. Wayne agreed to share one of his best Jim & Jesse photos. His comments: *"I have only bits and pieces of memories of Jim & Jesse from the festivals I attended. I believe this photo is from the early 1970s. I did spend some time at a campsite once listening to Jesse playing and showing his cross picking style to some campers, he seemed to be very cordial and giving of his knowledge on the instrument. I always enjoyed their music and the cohesiveness of their band. They were not afraid to stretch the boundaries of Bluegrass by doing everything from Dylan to Chuck Berry!"*

**Question from D C Blood:** How did you come up with the idea of imitating the banjo roll on the mandolin, and how long did you have to fool around with it until you were satisfied with it?

**Jesse McReynolds:** DC Blood, As for where I got the idea for crosspicking, after hearing Earl Scruggs' style, I was working with Hoke Jenkins in 1949 and he played the banjo with a backward roll. So I started doing it that way.

**Question from Calusa:** Jesse, thank you for all the great music over the decades. There will never be another duo like Jim & Jesse McReynolds. Truly one-of-a-kind. My question has to do with your guitar. For example on your song, *My Time is Running Out*. Those lyrics connect with many people including myself, and the lead you play on your D-28 is superb! What year is that D-28, and do you still have it? Thank you, sir. And God Bless!

**Jesse McReynolds:** The guitar I used on *My Time Is Running Out* was one of my brother Jim's guitars. I'm not sure what year it was. His daughter still has all of his guitars.

Thank you for your compliment on the song.

**Question from mandolinlee:** Jesse, heard you and Jim at Hillbrook Recreation and other places around Northwest Ohio in the 1970s and early 1980s. My question is, how long have you been on the road and on average how many dates do you play in a year? You are one of my favorite mandolin players!

**Jesse McReynolds:** Dear mandolinlee, I have been on the road since 1947. So this year will mark 64 years, I guess. And I still travel about 50 or 60 days a year now. This year is shaping up to be a good one, so I might get to a few more places. I'm blessed. I've had a great run of it.

Thanks for all your questions and comments and I hope you all stay enthused about music. It's a great thing. Maybe it's what has kept me young at heart! And I wish Scott and the Mandolin Cafe much continued success. I am proud to be part of it. ~ Jesse

## Gear Facts

**Mandolin you currently play:** Stiver

**String preferences:** D'Adarrio and Gibson med. gauge

**Instrument cases:** square Gibson case

**Picks:** medium gauge

**Microphone preferences, studio and live:** I usually work with the sound engineer on what type of microphone is best for each instrument and vocals.



Jesse McReynolds with Jim McReynolds. Photo credit: from a collection of photographs from Roland White's Facebook page.

### Additional information:

- [Jim & Jesse McReynolds web site](#)
- [Jesse McReynolds' Opry Web Page](#)
- [A select Jim & Jesse discography from CMT.com](#)

### ***Superior Sounds of Bluegrass***

From Old Dominion Records, released in 1974 and still available as MP3 downloads from various sites, Jim & Jesse's *Superior Sounds of Bluegrass*.



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