

The Musical Box

friend of the dead

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jesse mcreynolds. photo by j&j music.

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 seats 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 & 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 Garcia penned during the Dead’s heyday with lyricist Robert Hunter. But it’s not Rothman’s album. While he was one of the catalysts in getting it made, the record is the work of Jesse McReynolds. He is the surviving, mandolin-playing half of Jim & 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 that never met. Garcia, a versed banjoist and fanatical bluegrass supporter that played the music in side bands throughout the Grateful Dead’s reign, was an avowed Jim & Jesse fan. McReynolds, in turn, had an appreciation for Garcia’s music that seemed to intensify in recent years. Among the devoted Dead fans that 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 on Monday for the WoodSongs

Old-Time Radio Hour. “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 Dead Head 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 something for Jerry and Robert as they were the people that wrote so many of their songs.”

With that, McReynolds teamed with two cross-generational Garcia guitar disciples - David Nelson, a cornerstone member of the New Riders of the Purple Sage, the country-fied band Garcia co-founded in the early 70s, and Stu Allen, a member of the ongoing 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. I didn’t want to offend anyone on either side - the bluegrass fans or the Dead Heads.

“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 very familiar simply because there was such a strong grassroots 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 very 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’ vocal performance on the tune is as strong as oak with a clean country tenor that sounds majestic but unassuming.

“That’s one of my favorite songs on there,” McReynolds confessed. “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 at all - but 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. This was the first time I ever did anything like that. I kept emailing 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 had 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 emails 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.”

Jesse McReynolds performs at 7 p.m. Nov. 22 at Kentucky Theatre, 214 East Main for the WoodSongs Old-Time Radio Hour. The taping will also feature blues guitarist Lucky Peterson. Tickets are \$10. Call (859) 252-8888.

