

Grateful Dead tribute from bluegrass star McReynolds

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BACK IN 1964, just before the formation of the Grateful Dead, Jerry Garcia took a road trip through the South to see some of his favorite bluegrass acts.

High on his list was Jim & Jesse, the two McReynolds brothers inducted into the Grand Ole Opry earlier that year. He was able to catch the legendary bluegrass duo during his pilgrimage and, according to longtime Dead historian Dennis McNally, Garcia cherished the experience.

Funny how things come around.

Completing the circle, Jesse McReynolds, an 81-year-old vocalist-mandolinist, has released "Songs of the Grateful Dead," a tribute to Garcia and his songwriting partner, Robert Hunter. He'll showcase the 13-song offering, which features such Dead classics as "Ripple," "Bird Song" and "Stella Blue," when he headlines the "The Wheel -- A Musical Celebration of Jerry Garcia" on Saturday at the Fillmore in San Francisco.

McReynolds, inducted into the International Bluegrass Hall of Fame in 1993 and now in his 45th year of performing at the Opry, might seem an unlikely person to deliver a Dead tribute record. Yet, he says he's long admired the way Garcia and company went about making music.

"They weren't doing it because they were trying to get a big hit," he says by phone from his home in Nashville. "They were just doing the type of music they loved to do. It's just good to know people are doing that. I've been doing (music) for a little

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more than 60 years, and I do it because I love the music."

The new CD is officially credited to Jesse McReynolds and "Friends," two of whom are absolute ringers when it comes to interpreting the Dead's songbook. The pals are guitarist David Nelson, a longtime Garcia cohort best known as an original member of the New Riders of the Purple Sage, and vocalist-guitarist Stu Allen, who has performed in several Dead tribute acts and band-related projects. Still, McReynolds' voice truly sells this album.

"If Jerry had managed to live to 80 and been from the South, he'd sound like Jesse McReynolds," McNally says. "It's one of the great American voices singing great American songs."

It's not, however, a bluegrass album. McReynolds definitely strayed from his comfort zone by recording an album that wouldn't sound out of place if played as the meat (or, more appropriately, the tofu patty) in a Grateful Dead studio album sandwich.

"It's a different type of music than I've done throughout the years," McReynolds says. "I didn't want to do it bluegrass. A few bluegrass groups have done Grateful Dead things. I wanted to do this more in a way that would be recognized as the Grateful Dead-style music. I did it pretty much in the middle of the road between bluegrass and rock 'n' roll.

"This is something I got into because I thought it was interesting and I wasn't sure how people would accept it. I was surprised that the Grateful Dead fans have accepted it as well as they have. I'd say that the response has been 99 percent positive."

Look for that approval rate to rocket even higher when McReynolds performs at the Fillmore, 1805 Geary Blvd., San Francisco. The Peter Rowan Bluegrass Band, David Nelson & Friends and other special guests are also on the bill. The show is a benefit for the Rex Foundation, the Grateful Dead's charitable arm that benefits several worthy organizations. Showtime is 8 p.m. Tickets are \$45-\$510. Call 415-561-3135 or visit www.rexfoundation.org or www.livenation.com.

YOUNG AT HEART: Neil Young never sleeps. Or, at least, if he does, it's probably only for short catnaps.

Having just led a reunited Buffalo Springfield at the Bridge School Benefit, the 65-year-old Woodside resident will headline the Concert for UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital on Wednesday at the Nob Hill Masonic Auditorium in San Francisco.

It's a worthy cause and, of course, Young is a phenomenal talent. Yet even the most devoted philanthropist/fan might pause at the ticket prices, which range from \$250 to \$5,000. (Now might be a good to try the mantra, "It's for the children, it's for the children "... .")

Those who decide they can spare the loot to attend this benefit -- underwritten by Salesforce.com Foundation, an international philanthropy outfit -- would be wise to arrive on time. Opening the show is Northern California's Joanna Newsom, an acclaimed indie-folk artist who wowed critics with 2006's "Ys."

Showtime is 8:15 p.m. The Masonic is at 1111 California St. For more information, visit www.theconcertforucsfbch.com.