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ALBUM REVIEW: An homage to Garcia's greatness



by Michael Lello
Weekender Editor

There is a gentle country soul at the core of the snarling, multi-tentacled psychedelic beast that is the music of the Grateful Dead. Jerry Garcia was a country and bluegrass nut, and that dusty spirit infuses much of the Dead's music. Jesse McReynolds & Friends, with David Nelson and Stu Allen, have made the country side of the Dead their focus on "Songs of the Grateful Dead," not the first tribute to the music of the Dead but one of the best.

McReynolds, a 45-year Grand Ole Opry veteran who played in the duo Jim and Jesse with his brother who has since passed on, chose some songs Deadheads would expect for this treatment, like "Ripple" and "Deep Elem Blues." But what McReynolds has done with less obvious selections like "The Wheel," "Bird Song" and "Franklin's Tower" is remarkable. Garcia's original song structures did not need to be changed to fit McReynolds' format, even on a funky song like "Franklin's" or the weepy '90s ballad "Standing on the Moon." The record also includes "Day By Day," a new song penned by McReynolds and Dead lyricist Robert Hunter

McReynolds, who sings lead on most of the tunes, has an inviting, midrange voice that serves well the sentiments of Garcia and Hunter. His mandolin, too, is prominent throughout the album, as is acoustic guitar, and Allen and Nelson's electric guitar add spice and muscle.

It's a beautiful, clear-minded approach, one that would certainly draw that famous grin and giggle from Garcia himself.

Rating: W W W W 1/2



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