

Black Muddy River Revisited

Bluegrass legend Jesse McReynolds, 81, covers a little more ground with his Garcia/Hunter tribute album

By Mary Eisenhart

(December 1, 2010) Mandolinist Jesse McReynolds and his late brother Jim were already stars of the bluegrass world in 1964 when young Jerry Garcia and his pal Sandy Rothman took to following them around with a tape recorder and once got their autographs, though they were too shy to introduce themselves to their heroes.



Jesse McReynolds headlines the Fillmore December 4, benefiting Rex. Photo: Courtesy J & J Music

So McReynolds never met the co-author of the songs he performs--with David Nelson, Stu Allen and other guests--on *Songs of the Grateful Dead: a Tribute to Jerry Garcia & Robert Hunter*. But, in addition to the 12 cover tunes, the album includes "Day by Day," a sweet ballad he co-wrote with Robert Hunter.

Honored as a Legend at the [Grand Ole Opry](#), McReynolds represents the finest in traditional bluegrass--see [this video](#) of him performing "Ashes of Love" with his grandchildren. But he's never been averse to trying something new. After all, he did do an album of Chuck Berry tunes.

"I've never closed my mind to any type of music. I listen to everything. I surprise people sometimes when I have hard rock going," he chuckles. "I listen to bluegrass music all the time, but I listen to other types of music to get ideas, to maybe arrange it and do it in their way."

McReynolds and his band will be headlining this Saturday's Rex Benefit, [The Wheel, A Musical Tribute to Jerry Garcia](#). Also on hand will be Nelson, plus Peter Rowan, whose friendship with McReynolds goes back to the days when a teenage Rowan toured with Bill Monroe's band. In anticipation of the evening, we talked with him about the CD, colliding musical worlds, and an Opry Legend's thoughts on taking the stage at the Fillmore Auditorium.

Rex Foundation: OK, it's not so common for bluegrass legends to do tributes to Grateful Dead music. How did this project come about?

Jesse McReynolds: My wife, Joy, had all their music; when we first got married we'd travel together all the time, and that was her music in the car. She'd be saying, just listen to Jerry Garcia and the way he plays that guitar...

The first thing I heard was "Black Muddy River," and I said, now there's a song I think I could do! (laughs) I wouldn't want to do a song that I couldn't execute where it would be recognizable, but "Black Muddy River" was more of a simple, good ballad song.

Rex: It seems like such a great fit--how are your audiences reacting?

McReynolds: I did a bluegrass show the other night in Kentucky and closed the show with "Black Muddy River." I usually close with a fast instrumental, but I talked about the album and did the "Black Muddy River," and I got a standing ovation. It was amazing! People came up to me at the concession stand afterwards and said "That's the most beautiful song I've ever heard, where did you get it?" And these were bluegrass fans from eastern Kentucky.

I've done it a couple times at Bean Blossom, Indiana, which is a big festival--the diehard bluegrass fans really came out for it and responded great. Now next year I've got the festival booked and the promoter wants to do my show around the Grateful Dead project!

Rex: What is it about this music that bluegrass audiences respond to?

McReynolds: It's different. The bluegrass music scene has gotten into a situation where we've got a little joke that there's so many bluegrass bands that we have to wear badges to keep from booking each other. Great players, but they sort of got into a situation where all the bands pretty much sound alike; you can't tell one from another unless you're sitting there watching them on the stage.

So I come in doing this, bringing a whole new type of music to the bluegrass field, and it's amazing how they've accepted it. I think that after so many years, people just look for something new a little bit.

Hopefully I have come with something here that nobody has done--I think some bluegrass bands have done the Grateful Dead's music, but just acoustic bluegrass style, and didn't get the feel like the original material was meant to be. I tried to do it so it would be recognized as Jerry Garcia's version of the Grateful Dead's music, and so far I'm just surprised and overwhelmed at the response I'm getting to it.

Nashville hasn't caught onto it yet though, and I live in Nashville! But I was just talking to a reporter from the local paper who said he'd change that... So maybe it'll break here one day! (laughs) Some of the things they do at the Opry these days are louder than anything the Grateful Dead ever done.



Jesse and Jim McReynolds with Bill Monroe. Photo: Courtesy J & J Music

On the Opry, they feature me in this category called "Legend." They say "We have a variety of music on the Opry, and here's a man who can play bluegrass the way it should be sounding, and I'm sure you're going to enjoy him doing some bluegrass." And then I walk out and do the "Black Muddy River"! (laughs)

That's what surprises 'em sometimes. I say I've got this new CD, a tribute to Jerry Garcia and the music of the Grateful Dead. People get quiet for a few seconds and they look at each other and say, is he kidding? (laughs) But once I play it they really do accept it well.

David Nelson came to help me with the project; I brought him along to the Opry, and we did "Ripple." That was probably the first time a Grateful Dead song had been done on the Opry, especially with one of the creators of that music. Stu Allen came in another time, and I think we did "Black Muddy River" with him. It's one of my favorite songs on the whole project.

I've never closed my mind to any type of music. I listen to everything. I surprise people sometimes when I have hard rock going. (laughs) I listen to bluegrass music all the time, but I listen to other types of music to get ideas, to maybe arrange it and do it in their way.

Rex: Well, the Grateful Dead tended to listen to everything too.

McReynolds: We listen to the Grateful Dead XM channel all the time here, and it's amazing--I hear things that, well, I didn't know they did that, some of the old country things like "Goin' Down the Road Feelin' Bad."

And they did a lot of bluegrass tunes on *Old and in the Way*. I remember when they did that album, David Grisman contacted us about coming out and being a part of it, but at the time we were too busy, working 200 days a year back here, and we just didn't have time to go out and be a part of it. I wish we had been a part of it.

We missed out on a few things--my brother was asked to be in "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" They wanted him to be the Ku Klux Klansman that they rode out of town. He said, I don't think I want to be that part. (laughs)

When I got into this project I had no idea what I was going to do with it, but I wanted to do it, because it's something I like to do. I pitched it to the record labels here in Nashville and they didn't even want to hear it. In fact they would say, send us a copy and we'll listen to it, and I'd take a copy to the office and they'd say, just leave it with the secretary. And I'd call back and get "Well, he listened to it, but we don't think it would fit with our programming."

So I got turned down a lot, but it didn't discourage me--if I had to put it out on my own label I'd do it. But through David Nelson I got with Professor Louie at Woodstock Records, and they liked the project. That was the main thing, I think, that you have to do if you're successful with a project--everybody you work with, if they're not sold on the project they're not going to push it. And so far I've been lucky enough to get people who like the project well enough to work with me.

Rex: A lot of those folks will be onstage with you at the Fillmore for the Rex benefit.

McReynolds: I'm not sure how many of them are going to be there, but I'm hoping to see them all when I get there, and I'm sure there'll be a lot of other folks I have known throughout the years. Peter Rowan will be there of course, and Peter was in Nashville about a month ago. I've known him ever since he's been in the business anyway!

When Dennis McNally sent me an email and asked if I'd be interested in coming out, I said sure, I'd be honored to be a part of this. It's a historic place, and I guess it's one of the biggest things that could happen to anybody, to be where so many people have been--and get to meet a lot of them too. I've talked to a lot of my bluegrass friends who live in the area and some of them will be there too. I'm getting emails every day from people from places like Arizona saying they're going to try to be there.

Rex: How have Grateful Dead audiences been reacting?

McReynolds: I did play in Nashville a couple weeks ago with the Dark Star Orchestra--they were playing at the Cannery Ballroom. I went down and did three songs from the project.

I went and rehearsed with them before the concert, and I said, it's great to get up here in front of a band that really knows this music! (laughs) I have to plug my mandolin in so I can stand in with the rest of it. They had a great crowd.

It was a great experience to do that and get the response I got. And it wasn't a sit-down, listening crowd--they had no seats in the place and everyone was standing there doing their thing. And I thought, how am I going to go out there and do "Black Muddy River" and "Standing on the Moon" when these people are dancing and everything? (laughs) But it got pretty quiet when I went out there, and it went over as great as if they had known me all their lives!

I played the Philadelphia Folk Festival a couple months ago; I wasn't really planning to be on the bill, but somebody couldn't make it so they called me. When I mentioned the Grateful Dead project the audience started applauding, so I did a couple of songs from it, and it was a Grateful Dead crowd, it looked like! (laughs)

When I got through I went to the concession stand where they were selling records; I think the record company had sent probably 100 copies and they were all gone! (laughs) People were standing a long ways wanting autographs, and I said, this is very unusual! (laughs)

Rex: You're a rock star!

McReynolds: (laughs) Well, it's got me enthused enough that when people say, when you gonna retire, I say, I don't think about that. I got a lot of things I want to do yet.

Rex: What does your wife think of all this?

McReynolds: Oh, she's on Cloud Nine. She's enjoying it more than I am, I think sometimes. (laughs)

Rex: Hey, maybe it'll go platinum! That'll show Nashville!

McReynolds: Well, that would be nice. I've been in the business 60-some years and it would be nice to have something like that! (laughs) I could tell people it took me that long to finally find the audience that would accept me.

