

# Hart Valley Drifters

A Grateful Dead collector unearths a time capsule containing Jerry Garcia's earliest studio session. BY DEAN BUDNICK

**"MY NAME'S JERRY GARCIA.** I play banjo on the old-timey songs and guitar on the bluegrass songs and do a lot of lead singing too, which I'm not proud of..."

So begins the famed musician's light, affable introduction to his first-ever studio recording, which took place at Stanford University's KZSU radio station Studio A during the late fall of 1962. (The date itself remains unknown, although it was likely November or December.) The 20-year-old Garcia appeared with the Hart Valley Drifters, a group that also featured two friends who would remain in his musical ambit for years to come: Robert Hunter (bass) and David Nelson (guitar), along with Ken Frankel (fiddle and banjo) and Norm Van Maastricht (dobro). Their performance has just been released on Round Records/ATO Records as *Folk Time*, after the name of the show on which they appeared.

In Hunter's own comments from that day, he explains that the group had previously dubbed itself the Thunder Mountain Tub Thumpers. Looking back on that era, Frankel now adds, "Every time we played, we had a different name. One time, we were riding around playing bluegrass on the back of a flatbed truck with a sound system for this guy running for sheriff of Monterey County [Hugh Bagley]. I think we changed our band name six times during that ride. It wasn't me doing it; it was Jerry and Bob. I don't think we had a specific name that lasted more than a month." As their shifting sobriquets suggest, the players never took themselves too seriously, although they did share a reverence for the music they were arranging and performing.

Frankel was a college student when he first met Garcia at Lundberg's Fretted Instruments in Berkeley. There,

he discovered Jerry making tapes of acoustic music that had long fallen out of print. Frankel was thrilled to find someone who shared a similar interest. He remembers, "I grew up listening to pop music and rock-and-roll when it first came out. But the first time I ever heard that old-time music, I absolutely fell in love with it. Old-time music is the music that came before bluegrass, when they were first able to make records, and they made records from the southern mountain region of the Appalachians. In the 1920s, this was the traditional music that was played in the South and recorded for the first-ever records. Jerry was listening to some tapes there of these records that were 40 years old. People would create tapes. I told him that this was the same kind of music I played, and we just started playing together after that."

The two began performing in mostly informal settings, just for the pleasure of it all, with Garcia's pal Hunter typically participating, while various other aficionados of varying skill sets occasionally joined in as well.

Beyond their flatbed set for the aforementioned would-be Sheriff Bagley—the perennial candidate was not victorious in 1962 and would make subsequent unsuccessful runs for mayor, governor and eventually president—the group did sporadically appear in more formal environments. For many years, their only fully documented show was at the College of San Mateo Folk Festival on November 10, 1962, where their setlist included traditionals such as "Roving Gambler" (which opens *Folk Time*), "Pig in a Pen" and "Nine Pound Hammer."

A half-century later, intrepid Grateful Dead tape collector Brian Miksis discovered something of an archival holy grail. Miksis had long been

searching for recordings of Garcia's early days, and this pursuit eventually led him to a

former Stanford student named Ted Claire (who would go on to play rhythm guitar in Hunter's short-lived mid-'70s group, Roadhog). Claire explained that he had recorded live acoustic music in the early '60s for his KZSU radio shows, *Folk Time* and *Flinthill Special*, and that he had held onto a tape that might be of interest to Miksis. Claire briefly walked off and then returned with a reel that had been languishing in his closet for decades.

Frankel acknowledges that upon learning of this recording, "My first reaction was: 'I don't remember making a tape like that.' Then I listened to it, and I recognized my talking in the introduction. [I'm Ken Frankel. I play fiddle on the old-timey songs and banjo on the new-timey songs, formerly bluegrass...] I knew I played with Jerry a lot and I recognized my banjo playing and my guitar playing. It's the kind of music I played with Jerry and the same songs. David Nelson recently showed me some pictures from the session, which was pretty funny."

*Folk Time* provides a glimpse into the music that animated these five players, all of whom were between the ages of 19 and 22. It includes a pair of songs written by Earl Scruggs ("Ground Speed," "Flint Hill Special"), a couple of tunes by the Stanley Brothers ("Climch Mountain Backstep," "Think of What You've Done"), the aforementioned traditionals, and the 16-song set closes out with a version of "Sitting on Top of the World," which would later find its way into the Grateful Dead repertoire. There were no originals (although Garcia and Hunter reportedly



wrote at least one during this era, titled "Black Cat") because their intent was not to showcase new music. Instead, they wished to embrace and honor tradition at this moment during the incipient folk-music revival.

As for Garcia's self-effacing assessment of his vocals during the intro to *Folk Time*, Frankel muses, "I never thought Jerry was that great of a singer. But the main thing that struck me in listening back is that he really is. He just has such an unusual voice, it's not like the singing that you hear when you think of a standard bluegrass singer—you think of them a certain way, with very strong, clear voices. However, I listen to Jerry on the CD and think, 'This is really moving.' He has a tremendous amount of soul in his own style. He doesn't sound like anybody else; he sounds like him. When you listen to these songs, you feel: 'Wow, he's really emotive. He's really *him* doing the songs.' That's a big deal—to be yourself, to not sound like everyone else who does them."

Although the Hart Valley Drifters proved to be as fleeting as their ephemeral band name, fixating on their brief existence misses the point. In listening to *Folk Time*, one comes to appreciate the spirited, rollicking energy that these neophytes brought to bear while arranging and interpreting the sounds that captivated them. As Frankel affirms, "When we were playing, we weren't trying to become famous. We were playing the kind of music that wasn't going to hit it big. We just loved playing that music. It was the most important thing in our lives." **E**