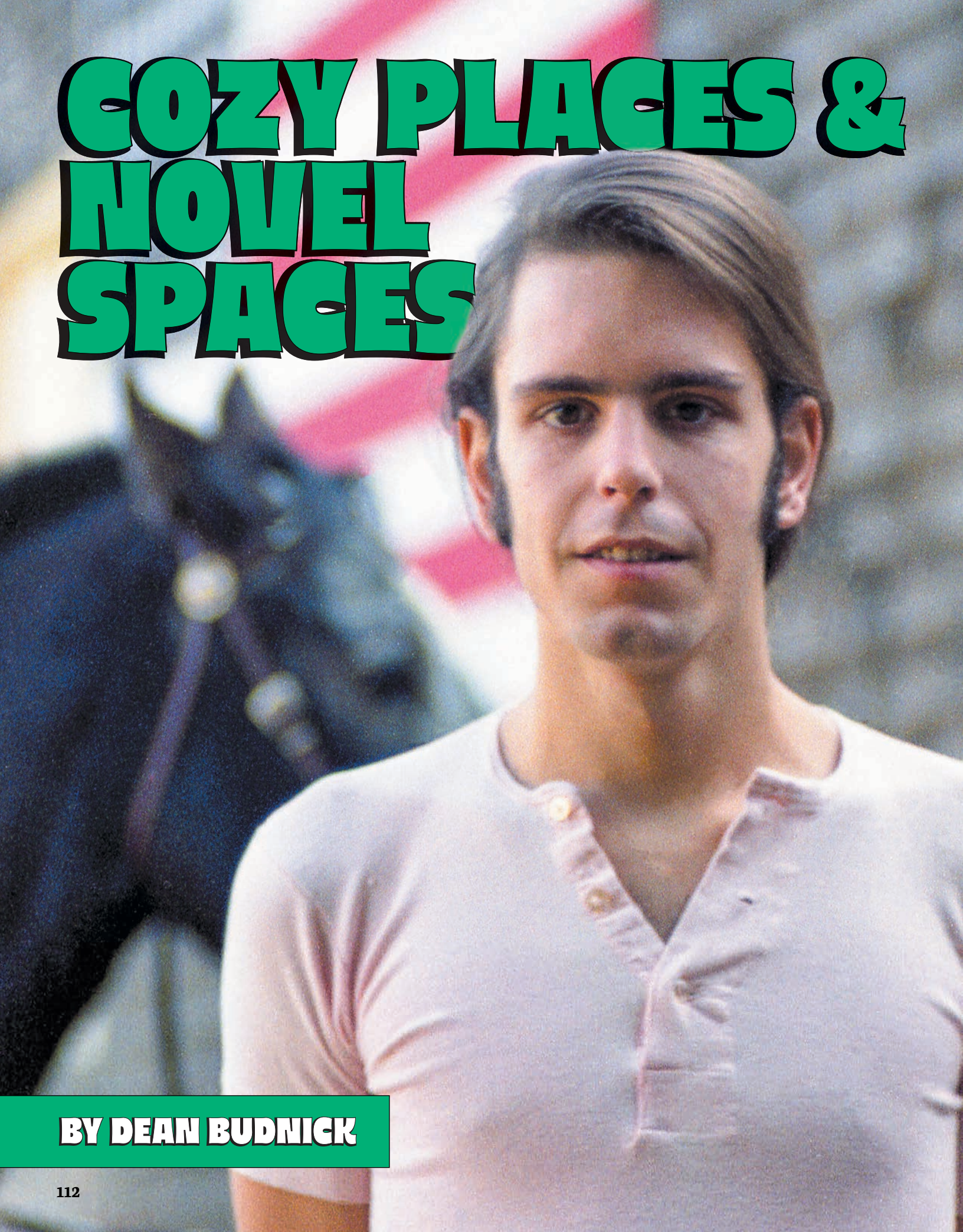
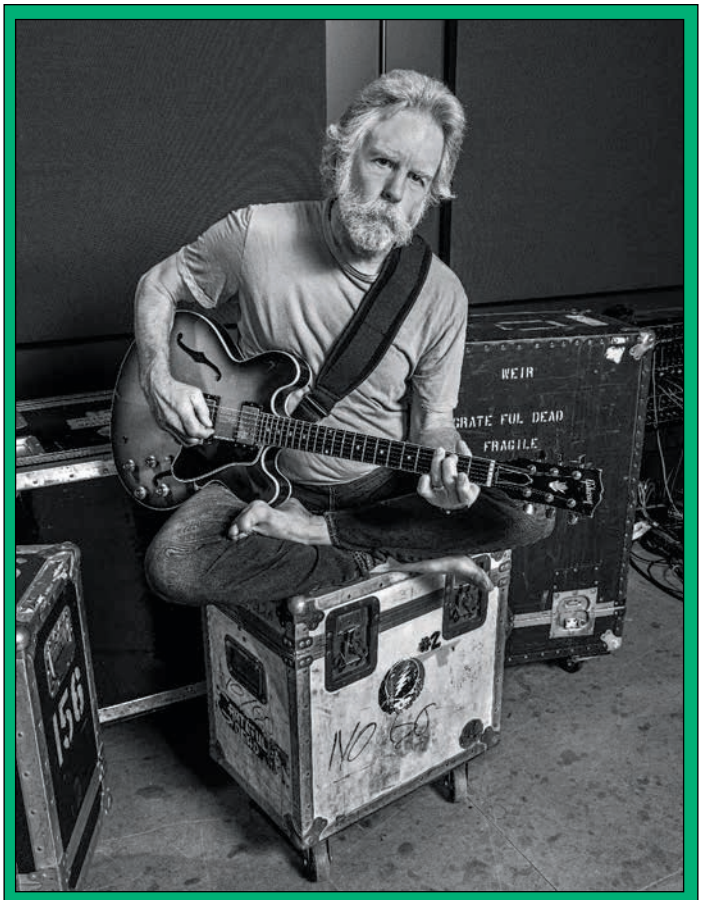
COZY PLACES & NOVEL SPACES



BY DEAN BUDNICK



TRI Studios, San Rafael, CA July 11, 2015.

Bob Weir remains active and engaged, well over five decades since he first took the stage with The Warlocks. On September 30, he released *Blue Mountain*, his first studio album to focus on original compositions since RatDog's 2000 record *Evening Moods*. Weir hit the road with this material last month, joined by *Blue Mountain* producer Josh Kaufman and many of the musicians who appear on the record, including Steve Kimock, Jon Shaw, and The National's Bryan and Scott Devendorf. In the following conversation from 2016, he looks back on those events, as well as his recent collaborations with Phish, Joe Russo's Almost Dead and the musicians who will join him at Los Muertos con Queso in January. Weir also shares some thoughts on the future of Dead & Company.

In hearing you speak about *Blue Mountain*, one thing that has struck me, is the way that cowboys influenced your musical approach—not through their own music but through the improvisational nature of their lifestyle.

There's that frame of mind cowboys are famous for that "This will get done no matter how that has to happen." I think that does bleed over into my music a bit. No matter how unlikely or challenging something is apt to be, you have to do it, you have to rise to the occasion.

In recording this collection of songs, did you have any underlying goals?

I don't really have much in the way of goals generally speaking when I write, I just invite a notion to a character to step through and express him or herself and I'm just there with a pen. That goes for the music as well. It gets to the point where I'm willing to camp out and tell those stories, and so those kind of characters came through. It's a place that I remembered, a cozy place where I set up camp and then entertained the quotes that came through.

Was this something that had been sitting in your head for 50 years or did relatively recent events lead you down the path?

It's both. I had been entertaining notions of doing something like that although for a long time I had no idea how I was going to go about it. Then when Josh Kaufman and his coterie propositioned me with a notion of doing an album and they wanted to do cowboy tunes, it occurred to me, "Well OK let's go there, let's look at that" and this is what emerged.

It sounds like the material from Josh Ritter came to you in varied forms, in terms of their completion. With a song like "Whatever Happened to Rose," for instance, can you share insight into what was presented to you and how you worked with it?

"Whatever Happened to Rose" came pretty intact. I think it was relatively complete in regards to the lyrics and the music was kind of formed as well. I would sit with the character for a little bit and see what the character had to say—that's a matter of packing it under your pillow for a little bit and seeing, then breaking it out and playing it to see where the music wants to go and what line here or there needs fluffing up a bit.

The character doesn't generally arrive fully formed. Generally speaking a character will knock on the door and won't reveal itself in full detail until you start picking the song around it, until you sit down with a guitar and start working with it. That's what happened in both these cases. In "Whatever Happened to Rose" as I got to know the character a little bit better, some of the lines changed, some of the music changed and all that kind of stuff.

As you went out and toured with this material, did any of these songs reveal themselves to you in new ways in the live setting?

Yes, there were a few of them. "Only A River" took on a new aspect when we started playing it live. I can't really describe it very well but it showed itself in a new light once I started playing it—a few of them did. "Gallop on the Run," to my surprise, became something of a lovesick ballad, a heartbroken lovesick ballad that I wasn't expecting. Those two got different on the road. Then musically some of them also expanded as well.

Do you anticipate that you'll do additional shows with the live unit that you toured with in October? Or that perhaps you'll head into the studio with those particular players?

It was fun and we were just starting to get good toward the end of tour, predictably enough. We were having too much fun to just


Bobby with John Perry Barlow, Marin County, CA Fall 1972.

Left: Photo: Mickey Hart's Ranch, Novato, CA, 1969.

walk away from it, so we'll get back to that in a little bit. We'll have some live shows coming up early-ish next year.

Did going out with those players lead you down the path to writing more songs in that vein?

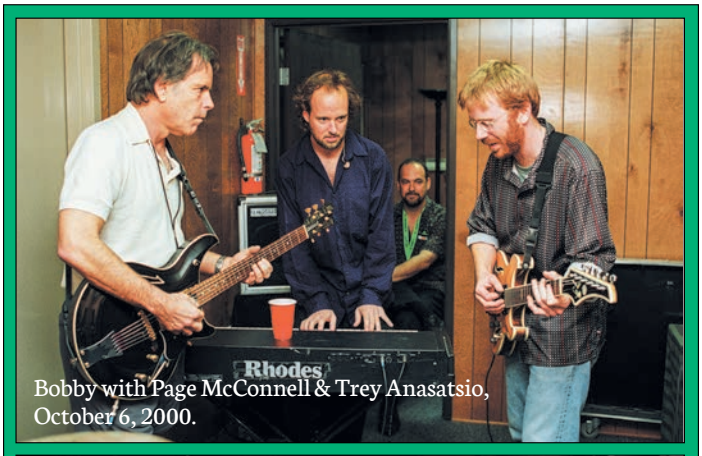
I've been kicking stuff around since I got back but I don't know exactly where it's going yet.

The cattle ranch that inspired much of the material on *Blue Mountain* was owned by the family of John Perry Barlow [who would go on to become Weir's songwriting collaborator and later co-founded the Electronic Frontier Foundation]. Last month you performed a benefit for him at Sweetwater [to help defray medical costs from a series of recent ailments].

It was a great show. Unfortunately, we couldn't do all that many of the tunes that I wrote with him because they tend to be real complicated and require a fair bit of study and rehearsal and all that kind of stuff. My hope, which proved to be kind of unreasonable, was that we could do an evening of Barlow's tunes but then I backed off. I looked at the tunes and that's a matter of breaking out charts and a few days in rehearsal to get that to happen and none of the folks who were coming to play had that to give, so we did the best we could. There were a number of Barlow tunes and fortunately the guys from Dark Star knew some of the complicated ones, so we got quite a few Barlow tunes in there which was good.

What was his reaction to the evening?

Well, of course he wishes he could've been there but that would've been a bad idea. He needs to rest, he needs to recuperate. He's on the upswing but he's got a long row to hoe.



Bobby with Page McConnell & Trey Anasatsio, October 6, 2000.


Fare Thee Well, August 26, 2017.

I just saw a picture of you rehearsing for the Los Muertos con Queso event at the end of January. Can you talk a little bit about what that process was like? I think some people might be surprised that it's over two months out and you're already working on it.

We thought we'd get a jump on it. Tommy Hamilton was in town here and he's part of the band. Dave Schools lives a bit north of here but not far and Jeff [Chimenti] is in the San Francisco area so we're all fairly local, and with Tommy in town we took it as an opportunity to get in some rehearsal. We got a couple days in and had a lot of fun.

Did you have an idea of what you wanted it to be going into that?

We know a bit about what folks are going to want to hear but we don't know until we all get together and start kicking stuff around what the band is going to be really good at. We know that folks are going to want to hear some chestnuts, so we worked up a bunch of chestnuts. We did a lot of choral vocal rehearsals, so that we have a good vocal blend and everybody knows the parts—the vocal parts are fairly complicated in many cases. We figured we ought to get a jump on that so we have plenty of that to offer and then as far as straight-up playing is concerned, we'll just see where that takes us. Everybody's a good player.

You also recently sat in with Joe Russo's Almost Dead. People would be interested to hear your reflections on how they interpret that body of material.

They offer a younger and more zestful approach than us old guard guys do. It was fun working with them. I didn't work with the full electric ensemble. We were all on acoustic guitars and upright bass so it was a different approach to the music then they generally offer. But it worked well. It was a lot of fun.

Let's jump to Dead & Company. It sounds like there might be plans to tour some more and also to record. What can you say about that?

We're looking at all of the above. I'm more interested in recording I think than some of the guys—I just think it'd be fun to get into the studio with that outfit. [*Laughs.*] But nobody buys records anymore so we'd have to view it kind of as a hobby. That said, I'd love to do that. We're also looking at some dates in the not too distant future.

I remember interviewing you after *Evening Moods* came out and back then you mentioned the challenges of recording and releasing an album. Has your recent experience with *Blue Mountain* animated you to go back into the studio?

I just enjoy the process. It's like the difference between dashing off watercolors and doing a layered oil painting. It's a different medium and I enjoy working it just for the fun of doing it. Getting stuff right but not too right.

Last month you performed with Phish in Nashville. In addition to some of your own songs, you sang one of their tunes ["Miss You"]. How did that come about?

It was actually suggested to me that we might want to do the tune. After I listened to it, I figured, "Well, this might be fun to sing." So I proposed that to Trey. He liked the idea so we went ahead and did that. It was a matter of being in the same town that they were in for an evening when I was off and they were playing, so I was there with bells on.

It had been a while since you'd appeared with Phish. I'm curious if you noticed any changes in their sound?



I didn't hear a huge change. I heard definition and refinement and stuff like that to their approach. Their basic overall sound was the same as it was 10 years ago when I sat in with them. The Grateful Dead didn't change much in its overall thrust over the decades. We got bigger and more developed and all that kind of stuff and that's what they're doing.

Trey has spoken about everything that he took away from the Fare Thee Well experience, some of which he hopes to apply to Phish. I'm curious if he said anything to you about any of that after the Nashville show?

I'm sure he did. I'm not entirely sure that I heard it that way. [*Laughs.*] We just had fun playing together. He's a great player.

Do you anticipate that down the road, the two of you might do something again together?

I'd be surprised if that doesn't happen. But we both have to have a little time on our hands and both of us are hellaciously busy right now.

Final question: There are a number of people out there who are anxious about the looming Trump presidency. What do you say to those folks?

We absolutely have no choice other than to accept this as a challenge and to rise to it. We've got to play the ball as it lies. I'm actually kind of fired up about it.

I'd say that people who might be inclined to sleep through stuff or be uncompromising in their approach to politics, might have some thinking to do because we're in new territory now as far as I can see.

Every day things progress, every day things roll on. We're down the road now. I don't expect it's ever going to be comfortable or cozy with regard to politics. I don't think that happens. So it's just a matter of how much of it you can indulge and endure and how much you're willing to participate. Everyone has to sort that out individually and then offer what they have.

Going back to the 2000 election, if every Deadhead in the state of Florida had voted, it'd be a very different world today. There are enumerable parallels with other folks with regard to this election as well.

The way this government is set up if you want to be an absolutist you're always going to be on the outside. If you want to be reasonable and you work with people you might get some progress made. It's a personal choice that one has to make and I prefer to be involved. I have kids, I want to try to make things happen, I want to try to shape things.

I'm not going to insist on having everything my way exactly or I'm going to take my ball and go home. We live in a democracy and it requires our participation, otherwise the folks who want it the most, and oftentimes those are the greediest among us, will be glad to step in and take it.



Blue Mountain album cover outtake, July 11, 2016.

ONE MORE RIVER TO CROSS

Blue Mountain, the cowboy-inspired set of campfire tunes that turned out to be Bob Weir's last LP before his passing, began its life in the most unexpected of places—an urban enclave in Brooklyn, N.Y.

BY MIKE GREENHAUS

In 2012, the members of The National—a seminal New York-via-Ohio indie-rock outfit that had then-recently ascended to large theaters and marquee festival spots, thanks to a series of critically acclaimed albums—were tasked with putting together a livestreamed concert at Weir's TRI Studios benefiting the nonprofit voter registration organization HeadCount. A comment Weir made about the importance of Deadheads getting to the polls inspired the organization's original mission and the event, The Bridge Session, was intended to reach across the aisle, bringing together the Dead's Bay Area scene and the burgeoning New York hipster community.


Bobby with Josh Kauffman, Red Rocks, August 4, 2017.

Three of The National's founding members—guitarist/songwriter Aaron Dessner, bassist Scott Devendorf and drummer Bryan Devendorf—participated in the charity show, and they rounded out the one-off live ensemble with musicians of their touring band and a mix of fellow undercover Deadheads from their community, including multi-instrumentalist Josh Kaufman. Best known at the time for his work with the psych group Yellowbirds, Kaufman had been friends with The National since their earliest days—he famously provided Dessner with a guitar he used to make their breakout 2005 album *Alligator*—and assumed the role of musical director for the event. The ad hoc combo rehearsed in Kaufman's cavernous Brooklyn studio and then brought the party to Marin County to weave Weir into the fold, settling on a mix of Grateful Dead classics, National songs and politically coded covers, like Cass McCombs' "Love Thine Enemy."

From the moment he arrived at TRI, Kaufman, a decorated Deadhead, was struck by Weir's singular approach.

"In rehearsals, Weir kept on talking about this feel that he was looking for. He wanted what he kept calling a cowboy swagger," Kaufman says, noting Weir's teenage days living on his future writing partner John Perry Barlow's family ranch in Wyoming. "He would demonstrate with his right hand on the guitar. The rhythm was a little bit of a swing and a little bit of a straight. He used to say that rock-and-roll meant that you had a swing feel and a straight feel and you were rocking and rolling between the two. This cowboy swagger had that thing—it wasn't quite straight rockabilly, and it wasn't a country-swing thing either. It was this folksier, rolling, tumbling thing that he would do. It helped him inhabit these characters when he'd sing and think about them."

The Bridge Session was a huge success, raising funds to help sustain HeadCount and introducing Weir's songbook to a new generation of fans who had not yet been fully awakened to the importance of the Dead's musical ethos and overall approach. A few months later, Kaufman returned to TRI to take part in another summit, Move Me Brightly, and felt that natural kinship with the Grateful Dead co-founder once again.

"I came home to Brooklyn and kept thinking about how much fun it was to be around him. I just wanted to hang out with him. I felt this camaraderie, and I kept thinking about these cowboy songs," he says. "So I called Matt Busch [Weir's manager at the time], and I explained this idea I had. And he said, 'You should tell Bobby this; he doesn't wanna hear it from me. He wants to hear it from you.'"

Soon after, Kaufman received a call from a number with no ID and was greeted with two familiar words: "Weir here."

"Then, basically, he just started singing these old songs that he learned at Barlow's farm over the phone: 'Blue Mountain/ You're azure deep,'" Kaufman says. "He'd say, 'I don't remember the verses, but we can always make up our own verses.'"

"Over the years, if a cowboy song came up and caught my ear for one reason or another, I might do it with the Grateful Dead simply because it seemed like a natural thing, whereas other folks wouldn't have thought it was cool to do a song like 'El Paso,'" Weir told *Relix* in 2016. "It has a little bit of an enigma to me, and I felt that I could breathe a little life into that stuff."

At the time of his first conversation with Kaufman in 2013, Weir had not released an album under his own name since 1978's *Heaven Help the Fool*, though he had hunkered down in the studio with the Dead and side-projects like RatDog and Bobby & The Midnites in the intervening years. Yet, Kaufman was interested in looking back even further than all that, envisioning the project as a spiritual sequel to Weir's 1972 solo debut, *Ace*, which was essentially a Dead album in all but name.

"*Ace* became absorbed by the Dead. The Dead was the band on that record, with the exception of [bassist Dave] Torbert on the first track. And the Dead played those songs on *Europe '72*," Kaufman says. "He didn't tour on that record. Who knows? Maybe Bobby never felt fully comfortable with the idea of a Bob Weir solo career."

Kaufman pitched Weir on his plan to use those country-western-inspired campfire tunes as the basis for a studio effort, building on their traditional words and timeless motifs with new music and fresh lyrics that brought the material into a different realm. He also recruited his friend Josh Ritter, an Idaho-bred singer-songwriter whose original Americana music felt akin to the Dead's rustic, folksier side. Perhaps most important, Ritter's upbringing in the Mountain West had long colored his pastoral imagery in a Barlow-like way.

"He was our Hunter," Kaufman says, a whiff of sorrow in his voice. "With his words, we were able to take these songs and really turn them into Bob Weir songs."

Ritter was in an airport when Kaufman initially reached out about bringing him into the fold, and he immediately jumped at the prospect.

"I was excited to hear his voice deliver something that I could never deliver—in my time, in my place and in my voice—this older man who had seen so much," Ritter says. "He could tell the story the way I could hear it being told by the narrator in the songs."


Bobby with Josh Kauffman & The National, TRI Studios, March 24, 2012.

As soon as they got going, he figured out his unique role in the process.

"I wasn't a person who had really written with anybody—I tend to sew my clothes alone," Ritter says. "But I jumped at working with Bob out of a combination of naivete, excitement, ambition and the joy of writing songs for Bob's voice. I saw him in my mind as I was writing those songs. He was a combination of ranch hand and movie star."

By the time he started working with Weir on *Blue Mountain*, Kaufman had already been on a long, circuitous journey with the Dead. The Long Island native first went down the rabbit hole after hearing *American Beauty* when he was a teenager, and the ensemble's sound and approach had an indelible impact on the way he perceived music from that moment forward. He caught a few Northeast shows in the 1990s and covered their material in some of his early bands, but his work naturally took a stylistic left turn after college, and he started making his own song-driven music at the height of the New York indie-rock boom. Then, he received a call somewhat out of the blue from Bryan—who he had become close with through intimate gigs at New York venues like The Living Room and The Knitting Factory—asking him to join The Bridge Session.

"He was like, 'You're a Deadhead, right?' And I was like, 'Yeah, totally,' and he explained the offer," Kaufman says. "When we got out to [California], we all piled into a van and got In-N-Out Burger on the way to TRI, like we were on a camping trip. When we got to TRI, Bob was standing in the live room conducting these reverb experiments. He didn't even say hello, he just started demoing this stuff for us and I was like, 'I already love this man.'"

"It's very lucid when you're working with him. He's incredibly focused. We rehearsed for 12 hours, and he would be the one driving that," Dessner says. "We wanted to use *Europe '72* as this point of view—noodle around Bob Weir in this crisp, elastic way to have it be a conversation. We didn't want to just solo around Bob Weir because so much of what's done with that music is more about the solo and less about trying to celebrate the songs and trying to get into that elastic conversation that the Dead had at their best."

Even as he aged into his community's elder statesman and gray-bearded torchbearer, Weir never fully shook the kid-brother tag he'd been branded with since meeting Garcia at the tender age of 16. And Kaufman believes that's a major reason why he enjoyed working with players from different generations so much.



Bobby with The National, TRI Studios, March 24, 2012.

"He felt seen by some younger people who were really interested in what he had done and also what he was still able to do at that time. He felt vital," Kaufman says. "We didn't know all of his stories or all of his jokes, so he was able to really hold court. And we were really collaborating on this thing, so there was less of that mercenary quality that you have with some sessions."

Armed with a few song ideas, Kaufman went out to Mill Valley to test the waters with Weir in 2014, beginning a fertile creative period that produced a full album of new material during the next two years. Ritter's lyrics fit seamlessly into the cowboy-song canon and Kaufman and Weir started crafting music that musician Craig Finn described as having a "days-gone-by feeling." During their preproduction and writing hangs, Weir and Kaufman got to know each other on a personal level, too.

"It was just us schlepping the guitars ourselves, cooking breakfast together, going out to dinner together, me riding in his Tesla through the switchback between Stinson and Marin," Kaufman says. "Sometimes we were chatting it up about the record, sometimes he'd go on about nautical knots. He had a vast array of things that he could talk about, and he could go so deep and be so funny about them, too. He had such an unusual early childhood and a really strong constitution. It was different than the rock-God Bob you'd see in the stadium photos with the short shorts doing this hair flip and the big-rock kicks."

They crafted the material in the midst of a particularly impactful multiyear stretch during which Weir was wrapping up Furthur, still working with RatDog and putting together Dead & Company. It also overlapped with the 2015 Fare Thee Well celebration, which reignited the Dead's popularity globally.

"He must have really wanted to do [*Blue Mountain*] because there were so many other things that were calling him from the Grateful Dead world," Kaufman says. "And *Blue Mountain* wasn't really in that world, although there are ghosts of all of those things in there. When I hear a song like 'Ramble on Rose,' I often think, 'Whatever happened to Rose?' I feel like this is the addendum to that. There's a lot happening in these songs that harkens back to those Grateful Dead characters."

The first tune Ritter sent over was "Only a River," a 20-year-old number he originally wrote in the stairwell of his college dorm and attempted to record several times without any luck. In Kaufman and Weir's hands, the cut was finally finished, and it turned out to be one of *Blue Mountain*'s signature moments as well as a compass for the rest of their work together.

"That one was fully formed," Ritter says. "And as I started to realize how Bob worked, I started sending over new ideas."

However, there were some learning curves, too. "The first time I heard Bob come back with a song from something I'd sent him, I thought there must be a mistake. I was like, 'This is not how I wrote it,'" Ritter admits. "And then I realized that Bob was doing this thing that's in the Grateful Dead tradition—shaping these lyrics into a world. I began to really appreciate the value of the experience that I was being offered."

After initially testing the waters, Weir and Kaufman started scheduling recording sessions between their other commitments in both the Bay Area and Upstate New York. When they were in California, they called upon longtime Weir associates like guitarist Steve Kimock, drummer Jay Lane, bassist Robin Sylvester and folk troubadour Ramblin' Jack Elliott. And they leaned on Kaufman's stable of collaborators on the East Coast—the Devendorfs, Dessner, guitarist Sam Cohen, drummer Ray Rizzo, percussionist Conrad Doucette and The Bandana Splits, which is the vocal group



Bobby with The National, TRI Studios, March 24, 2012.

"BOBBY LIVED INSIDE HIS CREATIVITY ALL THE TIME—THERE WAS NO OFF SWITCH—BUT HE WAS ALSO AN AMAZING LISTENER, WHICH ISN'T ALWAYS THE CASE WITH VERY FAMOUS PEOPLE."

of Lauren Balthrop, Dawn Landes and Kaufman's wife and artist partner, Annie Nero. One musician who hugged both of those worlds was drummer Joe Russo, who played with Weir in Furthur but had also been on a creative hot streak with Kaufman and Finn. Mixer D. James Goodwin, who regularly works with Kaufman, and longtime Weir roadie A.J. Santella played key roles in process as well.

"He'd shine the bat signal, and these guys would show up," Kaufman says of Weir's core crew. "They have such an interesting language with Bob, and they gave him what they knew that he loved. It was such a deep hang to be dropped into the middle of that. Robin had all these amazing stories about working at Abbey Road and I could tell Bob really liked his playing. There was a drum tone where he had Jay stuff the inside of all the drums with cotton balls."

While Ritter, like Hunter and Barlow before him, did not perform on the tracks, he felt an intimate connection to the process. "We'd talk about different parts of the songs, and he'd take that to heart and he was very open—there was this beautiful, craggy soul that we wanted to come out," he says. "Kaufman was worried that he might not capture that, but I certainly had faith in him."

The sessions felt free. They cut "Only a River" live on the floor and the catchy "Lay My Lily Down" is a powerful, swampy, dark blues offering. The harmonica-laced "Gonesville" signifies that "folksier, rolling, tumbling feeling" that Kaufman was originally drawn to, while the weathered and wise character Weir inhabits on the album closer, "One More River to Cross," is a fitting studio swan song for a musician who spent his life on the road.

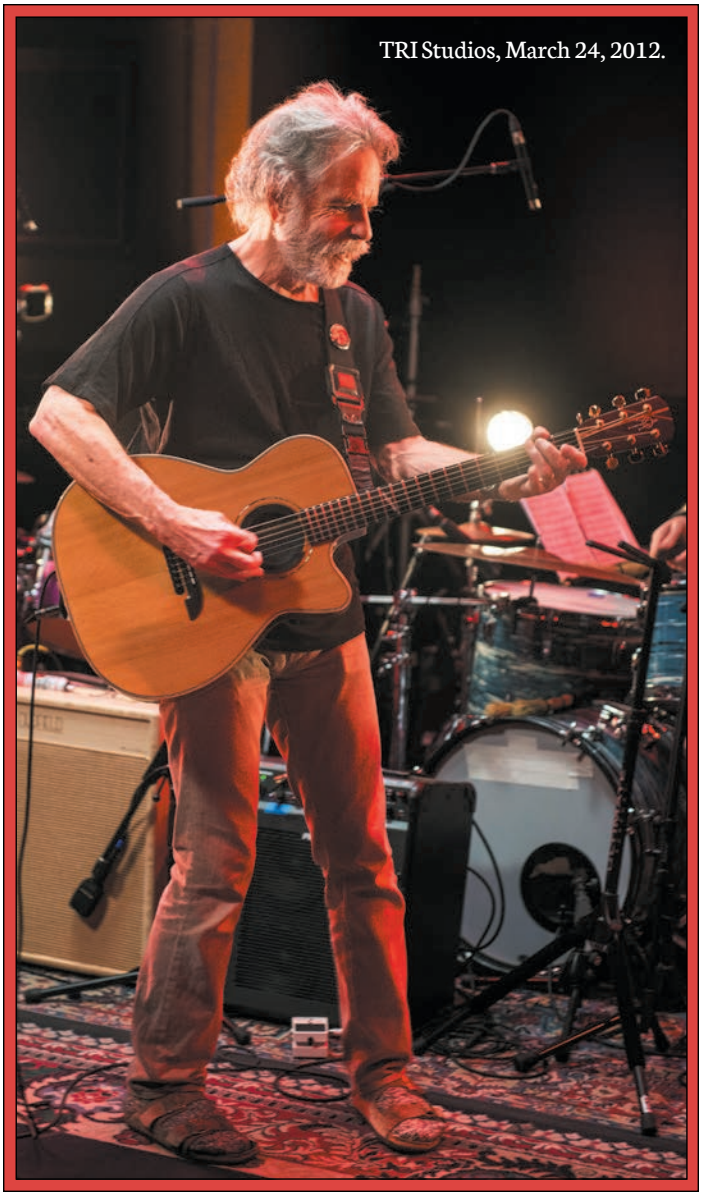
"Bob has such a unique harmonic, rhythmic language," Kaufman says. "We would throw these ideas back and forth and he would have very strong feelings about how and when chords should change and how they should narrate what's going on. Sometimes he would want to change how a word was sung, or he would insert something from his experiences or his imagination into a song. Other times, he would tell me he wanted to change something, but he wasn't sure what and we would write together. 'I'm going back to San Angelo' in 'Only a River' was Bob's idea. And the cowboy part of 'Ki-Yi Bossie,' with the yodeling by Ramblin' Jack, is almost all Bob—stuff that he had in his dream journals. He would write all sorts of stuff on his iPad, and he'd pull out all these lyrics. 'Ki-Yi Bossie,' which A.J. worked on as well, was a deeply personal song for Bob. It's a great song—it's really earnest, imaginative and a little weird."

Kaufman, who has since gone on to work with Mary Chapin Carpenter, Guster, The Hold Steady, The War on Drugs and Taylor Swift in different capacities and earn accolades as one-third of the indie-folk outfit Bonny Light Horseman, believes *Blue Mountain* helped him establish his footing in the studio. "I was younger," he says. "I hadn't produced a lot of records at that point. Getting

involved in this record was so over my head, honestly. It was sink or swim."

Ritter also felt the pressure, adding that he tried to channel the spirit of the Dead's storied repertoire. "With a song like 'Dire Wolf,' I picture a raggedy, down-and-out, gold-mining camp somewhere on the edge of a blizzard. There's this beast coming in and that's an American folk story. It's available to you, but you can also listen to the song and be like, 'That's a damn good song delivered in the midst of a bunch of songs that are all in service of creating that particular world.' And it was fun because I knew I wasn't working on a *song* with Bob. I was working on a record with him and that record was gonna be like being in Wyoming, sitting by a campfire, hearing the last of the cowboys. It was wistful, ornery and so fun."

"For me, a song gets written however it gets written," Weir said in 2016. "Sometimes a shard of melody presents itself and I go around looking for a lyric to couple with that. Sometimes a lyric will come, and I'll put a melody to it or a musical texture to it. Sometimes they both arrive at the same time and sometimes something else happens. There's no way to tell where a song comes from. They hide behind bushes—they jump out at you from rocks up above your head. They land on you, however they're gonna come. It's like cosmic waves—I have a feeling we're being barraged by them all the time, and it's just a matter of whether or not you're open, at a given moment, to hearing that because, when a song comes to you, it's coming from the place you go when you're dreaming or where you are when you're dreaming. I'm not sure you go there—or that you just forget you're there when you're awake."


TRI Studios, March 24, 2012.

After *Blue Mountain* was released in 2016, Weir hit the road for a support tour, showcasing the album's music and a range of his classics. Dubbed the Campfire Band, the ensemble also featured Kaufman, Kimock, the Devendorfs, bassist/Rhodes player Jon Shaw and, on select dates, Dessner. A mix of friends and associates popped up in different markets as well, and, at Port Chester, N.Y.'s Capitol Theatre, the musicians even donned blue hats in one highly visual moment. Weir continued to perform the material with his myriad projects for years to come, and Aaron and his brother, National guitarist Bryce Dessner, concurrently released their massive *Day of the Dead* tribute, which featured Weir on a pair of live tracks and firmly brought the Dead into the indie-rock conversation.

"What a spirit," Scott says emphatically of his time with Weir. "We were all very lucky to work with Bob—playing at TRI for The Bridge Session, making *Blue Mountain* together and touring as his Campfire Band are cherished memories for us all. An incredibly deep and sensitive person on every level—wise and funny as hell. Fare thee well now, Chief!"

"There's been, at every stage [of our growth], that love for what they accomplished as a band," Aaron adds. "The music and the songs have only deepened. It may not be the coolest thing in the world for the heart of the music world that we are more associated with, but the great thing is to discover how profoundly important this music has been to so many of our peers and to so many people that we look up to. When we went out and had our first interaction with Bob personally, it was really great to meet all these roadies and people around him and realize that, all of a sudden, there was a closeness that had formed. And he then came out with The National."

Soon after *Blue Mountain* dropped, Weir also joined Ritter on his solo album, 2017's *Gathering*, and sat in with his band. In another surreal moment, "Only a River" received the approval of Bob Dylan—who is not known for covering current music—when he ran through the tune live in 2023, during a period of time when he was regularly paying tribute to the Dead in concert. Ritter was caught off guard, to say the least.

"We couldn't hear a recording yet, so Josh and I thought it must have been another song called 'Only a River,'" he says, highlighting the material's timeless quality. "[Weir] was such a sweet man. Backstage, he got to meet my kids. He called them bus monkeys, so we've called them bus monkeys ever since."

Shortly before Weir's death, Ritter admits that he floated the idea of working on a sequel by Kaufman, but that experience never came to pass. Yet, Ritter, who was hesitant to play the *Blue Mountain* cuts live during the past decade, considering them to be Weir songs, has started to revisit the tunes since the musician's passing.

"Annie and I just put on *Blue Mountain*, and it's a beautiful album. I hadn't listened to it in a while, and I am glad I still felt that way," Kaufman says. "Bobby lived inside his creativity all the time—there was no off switch—but he was also an amazing listener, which isn't always the case with very famous people. That was a big part of his personality. His word meant something."