

Bluegrass and jams: The Travelin' McCourys play TACAW

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When Ronnie McCoury was 13, he picked up a mandolin. Six months later, he was playing with his father's band, the Del McCoury Band.

"It was kind of a sink-or-swim type of situation," McCoury said with a chuckle.

Growing up surrounded by his father's music, McCoury and his brother, Rob, were immersed in the bluegrass world from a young age. In his late teen years, Del taught Ronnie to sing, shaping the traditional bluegrass voice that he still has.

"I guess I just can't help it," he said.

The McCoury brothers now have their own band, though they still perform with their father's band, too.

The band plays a mix of bluegrass with some elements of jam music.

"I would consider it to be a foot in both worlds," McCoury said.

He appreciates the freedom to escape the traditional structure of bluegrass music; the songs are usually short (three to four minutes) with two choruses and a solo.

"What we could do a little differently is stretch out our solos and improvise more," McCoury



Travelin' McCourys
Courtesy Travelin' McCourys

said. "That's kind of what the Travelin' McCourys are getting more into."

The Travelin' McCourys' emphasis on solos gives all of the band members an opportunity to shine.

"It's all with your ears," he said. "That kind of music is all listening to other players and seeing what's going on, trying to make something work with that. ... Improvising is a big, big plus for what we do, and so I think that's kind of what's happening there. You just gotta listen — big ears."

The Travelin' McCourys will perform at The Arts Campus at Willits in Basalt on Friday as part

of their "Grateful Ball" tour. They will play one set of their own original music, as well as a set of music by the Grateful Dead.

David Grisman, one of McCoury's self-described heroes, formed a bluegrass band with Jerry Garcia in 1973 called Old & In The Way. Garcia also played in a folk and bluegrass band with Grateful Dead lyricist Robert Hunter in the early 1960s before founding the Grateful Dead. Drawn at first to Garcia's bluegrass music, McCoury started exploring more of his discography, eventually arriving at music from Garcia's Grateful Dead era.

"It started out as just a fun

thing to do on the side because we enjoy that music and the songs," McCoury said. "I could relate that way because I was a bluegrass musician."

Eventually, the Travelin' McCourys began playing music from the Grateful Dead as an extra set of music. Though the Grateful Dead's music can hardly be considered bluegrass, the tunes take on a new sound when played by the bluegrass instruments of the Travelin' McCourys.

"People really like it because there's a lot of their fans that just love their songs like I do," McCoury said. "They're curious to see what it sounds like when we do it."

Though McCoury's father is his biggest influence, he also draws inspiration from a variety of bluegrass, country and rock musicians: Bill Monroe, David Grisman, Merle Haggard and Led Zeppelin, to name a few.

McCoury, who lives in Nashville, has recorded and played with several of his musical influences including, most recently, Little Feat. Stylistic influences inevitably

seep from McCoury's guest performances into the music he plays with his own band.

"With your ears you're listening, and next thing you know you're playing something and saying 'Well, where did that come from?'" he said. "Maybe that came from that band I played with."