

## Back from the Dead

Contributed by Dan England  
Wednesday, 19 September 2007

Vocalist, who had success singing backup with legendary jam band, strikes out with new group Donna Jean and the Tricksters

Donna Jean would listen to Grateful Dead records, and instead of having a strong desire to name an ice cream after them, she would just shake her head.

She didn't get what all the fuss was about.

"I didn't even know what jamming was," Jean said in a phone interview. "I thought they must be really good-looking. So I got an album and said, 'No, that's not it.' And then she saw them live.

"They were absolutely on, and my little pea brain was blown," she said. "I couldn't go to sleep, and I said to myself that when I sang again, it was going to be with that band."

That's probably what the Dead's legion of hyper-obsessed fans said, too, especially in the later days, when people devoted their lives to them (and Ben & Jerry's did indeed name an ice cream after Jerry Garcia, guitarist for the Dead). But this was 1971, and Jean, it turns out, had the pipes to back up her wish. When she introduced her husband, Keith Godchaux, to Garcia and ensured he would be the band's next piano player, she was already a successful studio backup singer, recording R&B songs and appearing on such hits as "When a Man Loves a Woman" for Percy Sledge and Elvis tracks for studios in Muscle Shoals, Ala., where she lives today. She let her husband have his time with the band and then joined them as a backup singer a few months later.

Now she's leading her own band, Donna Jean and the Tricksters, a band with heavy Grateful Dead influences that will play Thursday, Sept. 27 at Hodi's Half Note, 167 N. College Ave. in Fort Collins.

Her husband auditioned for the band during a canceled rehearsal when he and Garcia jammed together. Even to this day, Jean calls it magic. There were many good years until they left the band in 1979. A year later, her husband died in a car crash.

Jean, unlike many of the Dead's devoted fans, didn't have to follow the band everywhere. The Dead seemed to follow her. That's how she got together with the Tricksters. She was a part of a celebration for the 10th anniversary of Garcia's death. The Tricksters asked her to sit in on a couple of songs, and though she didn't connect with them right away, she eventually realized the band, with its six lead singers all heavily influenced by the Grateful Dead, would be a perfect fit for her.

"It was a ready-made band," Jean said. "It's a lot of work to put a band together, and they were all really good. It's heaven for me to have all that vocal strength."

The band also has that backbeat, the R&B staple that kickstarted her career back in Alabama. She was especially impressed with the fact that the band had its own sound, just like Jean had hers. The band recorded its first album and will release it at the end of January.

"They had grown up with the Grateful Dead, and they had embraced that but then moved on to do their own music," Jean said. "We're really digging it, and we hope to keep it going as long as we can."

— — — TO GO

- Donna Jean and the Tricksters

- 9 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 27

- Hodi's Half Note, 167 N. College Ave., Fort Collins.

- Tickets are \$10 for 21 and older, \$12 for 18 and older in advance at

- [brownpapertickets.com](http://brownpapertickets.com), by calling 800.838.3006, or go to ABCDs, 157 N. College Ave. Tickets are \$12 for 21 and over an \$15 18 and older day of show.