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One Concert, Multiple Bands and a New Life for a Dead Classic

The American Beauty Project Winter Garden

Even in their absence, the Grateful Dead can pack a hall. On Saturday night, the World Financial Center's Winter Garden was filled to capacity for the first night of the American

**JON
PARELES**
MUSIC
REVIEW

Beauty Project: various groups performing all the songs on "Workingman's Dead." (Sunday's concert covered "American Beauty," the other album the Dead released in 1970.)

None of the Dead were on the bill; the aura was enough.

"Workingman's Dead" and "American Beauty" were the kind of music few had expected from the San Francisco band devoted to sprawling psychedelic jams. They were carefully rehearsed collections of concise songs, rootsy and pensive, somberly reconsidering the late 1960s. "Workingman's Dead" was the bleaker of the two: a collection of songs about jobs, duty and death, topics that weren't a big part of the hippie agenda.

The concert lineup, produced by David Spelman (who also played guitar in an instrumental duo between songs), mirrored the eclecticism of the Dead and generally recast the songs.

Catherine Russell, a longtime backup singer, was the concert's discovery. With the Holmes Brothers, she turned "High Time" into wistful, sultry rhythm and blues. She sang "New Speedway Boogie" over a jazzy bass vamp and Larry Campbell's mandolin, in a skeletal ar-



Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

Catherine Russell, backed by Larry Campbell, left, and Lee Hudson, sang Grateful Dead songs as part of the American Beauty Project.

range that only heightened the song's philosophical reflections. And she merged her voice precisely with Jim Lauderdale's classic country twang when he sang the deathbed testimony of "Black Peter" in a string-band arrangement.

In the concert's biggest stylistic stretch, the Klezmatics jovially relocated the bluegrass oompah of "Cumberland Blues" to somewhere in Eastern Europe, where it could take on a hora interlude. Another klezmer musician, the clarinetist Andy Statman, played an instrumental interlude backed by the twangy drone of a Brazilian berimbau. There was no discernible Dead content, but plenty of sinuous melody in a long, modal, Greek-flavored improvisation allegedly based on "Uncle John's Band." The banjo virtuoso Tony Trischka turned up with a Jerry Garcia rarity: a minor-key banjo tune, "Jerry's Breakdown," from 1964.

Mr. Campbell on guitar and Rob

Barraco on vocals (who have been in the band led by the Dead's bassist, Phil Lesh) carried "Dire Wolf" back toward ragtime picking. Ollabelle, less successfully, tried "Uncle John's Band" with the lilt of "Sugar Magnolia." And Tim O'Reagan shifted "Easy Wind" from blues to brooding ballad. The concert's full-ensemble encore was also death-haunted: Bob Dylan's "Knockin' on Heaven's Door," with a ghostly falsetto by Popsy Dixon of the Holmes Brothers.

One band was happy to emulate the Dead: Railroad Earth, a jam band with the lineup of a traditional bluegrass band plus a drummer. It started "Casey Jones" with a folk version of the song about the dying railroad engineer, then switched to the Dead song, using its rhythm and instrumental hooks (though they were played on mandolin and fiddle with banjo counterpoint). As soon as the song turned familiar, Dead fans in the crowd were up and dancing.