

## Masters of Bluegrass #15.5 1970s Supergroups

“Muleskinner” and “Old and the Way” were two bluegrass super groups consisting of some of the best young acoustic players of the time. “Muleskinner” was formed from L. A. based rock/bluegrass musicians to open a 1993 television show to feature Bill Monroe. When Monroe’s tour bus broke down on the way to the performance, “Muleskinner” was asked to present the entire program. The band included Clarence White on guitar who had performed with his brother Roland in the Kentucky Colonels before beginning to play electric guitar which led him to a stint with the rock group “The Byrds.” The lead singer/guitarist was Peter Rowan who had worked with Bill Monroe and the rock groups “Earth Opera” and “Seatrain.” Fiddler Richard Greene had played with Monroe and “Seatrain” as well. Banjo player Bill Keith had played with Monroe also and with “Jim Kweskin and the Jug Band.” David Grisman played mandolin. He had worked with bluegrass singer Red Allen before joining the rock group “Earth Opera.”

The group’s music ranged from older bluegrass standards from the Colonels repertoire to originals from Rowan and Grisman. Keith also showcased his melodic banjo style with “Blackberry Blossom.” Greene closed the show with “Orange Blossom Special.”

Recording executives from Warner Brothers saw the program and offered the group a recording contract. “Muleskinner” was released in 1974 after the death of White. It featured an eclectic blend of electrified bluegrass. Many of the tunes were repeated from the television broadcast. The fact that the group never played live likely affected their influence. The album was received coolly by older bluegrass fans, (if at all) but for legions of younger fans of the music it was bluegrass they could relate to.

The same could be said of the live 1973 release “Old and in the Way.” This group included Grisman and Rowan from the “Muleskinner” group. Fiddler Vassar Clements who had performed with Monroe and other bluegrass luminaries was present. The “star” of this group was banjo player Jerry Garcia. Garcia had established his name and draw as lead guitarist for the rock group “The Grateful Dead.” “Deadheads” (fans of the group) would flock to see any band that featured members of their favorite band and so, “Old and in the Way” was popular among this crowd. Several of the “Muleskinner” tunes were repeated here. This group only appeared on the West coast.

### Supergroup Legacy

While the impact at the time of their release was sizable, it seems these events have gained stature as the years have passed. A DVD of the Muleskinner show was released in the 1990s and a CD release of both the TV audio and the studio recording are now available. The death of Clarence White shortly after these recordings were made added to their mystique. The “Old and in the Way” project has seen similar increased interest. A reunion album called “Old and in the Gray” was released in 2002.