

## **A Conversation with Jerry Miller of Moby Grape** **by Frank Goodman (6/2007, Puremusic.com)**

It's a strange twist of history that the tightest group in the Bay Area scene around the explosive era of 1966-7 became the most forgotten, because they didn't stay around that long: Moby Grape. Most agree that the promotion of the group was way over the top and ineffective (releasing five singles at once) considering the countercultural timbre of the time, and that strongest debut in the psychedelic era by far was tragically bobbled. They unfortunately didn't cut another disc that lived up to the first, and broke up a few years down the road.

Guitarist Jerry Miller did not come out of the folk tradition, unlike key members of the Jefferson Airplane, The Grateful Dead, and Quicksilver Messenger Service. He did, though, have strong Country roots and influences, like out-of-towners The Byrds and Buffalo Springfield. In fact, somebody said (I thought it was Jerry, but he didn't confirm that) that Moby Grape was "The Byrds with The Blues."

Skip Spence (often lumped in somewhat with Syd Barrett and Peter Greene because of his mental anomalies and difficulties) *did* come out of the folk movement. He'd drifted to the bay area after the military. He played drums on the Jefferson Airplane debut (*Jefferson Airplane Takes Off*) and then in the Grape he stepped out as a front man and rhythm guitarist, and the author of "Omaha" ("Listen My Friends") their biggest song ever. As Jerry points out in our interview, Skip also co-wrote the great single released on the Airplane's classic *Surrealistic Pillow* album, "You're My Best Friend." Spence got hospitalized for six months after taking a fire axe to Peter Lewis' door on a speed run; upon his release, he got a small advance from Columbia, bought a motorcycle and went right into a Nashville studio to cut his 1969 solo record, *Oar*, a commercial flop but a cult classic. It was recut as a tribute record with Robert Plant, Beck, Tom Waits and many other luminaries in 1999 called *More Oar*. Spence died before its release, in the same year.

All the members of Moby Grape were great songwriters and singers. Peter Lewis played second guitar (he is the son of actress Loretta Young), Bob Mosely the bass, and Don Stevenson was on drums. There have been a number of reunions over the years, with various lineups. Current attempts feature all surviving members, which makes the new Columbia/Legacy compilation, *Listen My Friends!*, all the more poignant. This is truly rock and roll history: a key group and a benchmark release from the San Francisco Sound that changed music and the country, nay, the world, forever. Check out the clips on the Listen page, and enjoy this conversation with one of the great West Coast guitar players, Jerry Miller. He's still playing in his native WA state, and he's still got it.

**Puremusic:** I was very tickled, as a massive Grape fan, to hear that Legacy is issuing a brand new Best Of, *Listen My Friends!: the Best of Moby Grape*.

**Jerry Miller:** How about that, right?

**PM:** One of the greatest San Francisco bands ever, not just in psychedelic, period.

**JM:** Well, thank you. That's nice to hear, Frank.

**PM:** When I think about those days, "Omaha" is still, to me, one of the most urgent, exciting songs of that whole psychedelic period.

**JM:** Yeah.

**PM:** I mean, don't you agree, there's something about that groove and about that sound?

**JM:** Yeah. I do. I did a lecture kind of thing at San Francisco State. And David Suzuki, the professor there, he played, for example, some really lightweight stuff from L.A., and he said, "Then it changed," and he put on "Omaha."

**PM:** Wow.

**JM:** And that was really cool, because it had a little bit of hair on it.

**PM:** And then on the other hand, "8:05" is one of the greatest ballads of the '60s.

**JM:** It was a pretty one, wasn't it?

**PM:** I mean, I think of it really in the same breath as "Today," from [The Jefferson Airplane's] *Surrealistic Pillow*. You remember that song.

**JM:** Oh, you bet I do. Yeah, because Skippy had the song "My Best Friend" on that one, *Surrealistic Pillow*. [Skip Spence, that is.]

**PM:** Oh, right, that's Skip's tune! Oh, that was a great song, too. I forgot that was Skip's tune.

**JM:** You betcha.

**PM:** I read somewhere that the Grape were the Byrds with the blues. Was that your definition?

**JM:** Yeah, I guess you could say that. But the Byrds were the first band that I heard that made me say, "Hey, I could play with other guitar players."

**PM:** Right.

**JM:** Before that I didn't have anything to do with another guitar player.

**PM:** Really? Because you were more of a jazz guy or a blues guy?

**JM:** I was playing mostly organ trios. I just love that, and I still do.

**PM:** Oh, yeah, to get a great B3 player behind an L5, oh, my God.

**JM:** Oh, yeah. Yeah, and kick back and be cool, it's really fun.

**PM:** [laughs] And the Grape were a much more explosive band than, say, the Airplane or The Dead, wouldn't you agree?

**JM:** I would, yeah.

**PM:** They were both much more laid back outfits in comparison.

**JM:** They both played very nice, beautiful music.

**PM:** And the Grape had that essential difference in their personality than any of the other Bay Area bands of that time, don't you think?

**JM:** Yeah, we had kind of a mish-mash there, for sure, but yeah, we were all pretty strong.

**PM:** And you being, in my mind, a quintessential L-5 player distinguished you from the pack in temperament and sound.

**JM:** Well, thanks. I did have a desire to learn how to play the thing.

[laughter]

**PM:** Garcia and some of the other great Bay Area guitar players came from the folk movement. Did you come up that way?

**JM:** Not at all.

**PM:** You came from a different angle, didn't you?

**JM:** Right, I didn't come up from that at all. My initial kick-off, I think, was Link Wray's "Rumble," and that sort of thing. I'd play that at two o'clock in the morning, and my grandma would get out of bed and come out there and say, "That's a sweet little piece." She really liked that.

[laughter]

**PM:** [laughs] So where were you growing up? What town were you growing up in?

**JM:** I grew up right here where I am now, just a few blocks away, in Tacoma.

**PM:** What's that like being back in your hometown? That's got to feel interesting.

**JM:** Oh, it's pretty cool. I got the beach here. I got a bird dog, and a wee little house. It's pretty cool.

**PM:** And is it just you and the lady or--

**JM:** Yeah.

**PM:** Beautiful.

**JM:** I got somebody to argue with.

[laughter]

**PM:** And what's today all about? Are you playing many gigs? Are you writing many songs?

**JM:** I am writing songs. I recently wrote a really good one called "You Did What You Said You Wouldn't Do." And that's a good one. And I wrote one just before that called "I Don't Love You Right." I was just making up a melody when you called. I probably stole it somewhere.

[laughter]

**PM:** Who are you playing with these days? Who are your running partners?

**JM:** I'm playing with a drummer named Tom Murphy, and a bass player named Kim Workman, a little trio up here. Tom Murphy plays real good second line, New Orleans.

**PM:** Right.

**JM:** And the bass player, he's everywhere. He's got the whole thing down. Electric, standup, the works. Sometimes we do just a duo with the standup. That's for the society parties.

**PM:** Wow. Is anybody shooting any video of this stuff, or what?

**JM:** No, not yet. But I should do that, my little white-haired self. Put on the suit and go down there for the parties.

**PM:** Really? You can do that gig? Go down there and do the Society Hill thing.

**JM:** Oh, yeah. Yeah, I do "Misty" and--

**PM:** Yeah, because I remember you knew all the jazz standards and all that stuff.

**JM:** Yeah, I love to play those. I still have my old Bassman [Fender amplifier] that I bought brand new in 1959.

**PM:** Really? I worked with Mesa/Boogie a long time, certainly that Boogie circuit [not to mention the Marshall] came right off the Bassman.

**JM:** Yes, it did. I remember Randy [Smith, the maverick founder] up there.

**PM:** Yeah. I worked with Randy for many, many years.

**JM:** Well, then you knew Haggerty, too then? [The iconic guitarist of the Bay Area greats The Sons of Champlin.]

**PM:** Sure. I know Terry Haggerty very well.

**JM:** Me and Haggerty play, man, it's really fun.

**PM:** So do you know Steve Kimock, too?

**JM:** Of course.

[We digressed briefly here about The Goodman Brothers and Steve Kimock, as we'd played a gig or two with the Grape in our early days in SF, in the '70s.]

**PM:** Aside from Skip's sad passing just before the millennium, can you tell me what the other guys of the original band are doing? Where is everybody?

**JM:** Well, Bob Mosely is down in Santa Cruz. He's got a nice place. He's got a nice wife named Connie.

**PM:** He plays a lot, still, right?

**JM:** Oh, yeah, he plays. We're Moby Grape'n. We're doing that Monterey Pop Festival.

**PM:** Oh, yeah. I saw that there was going to be a gig in Petaluma, CA, is that going to happen, at McNairs?

**JM:** Yeah, I hope so. I mean, The Grape, at times seems a bit squirrelly. [laughs]

**PM:** So what's Peter Lewis doing?

**JM:** Well, there you go.

[laughter]

**PM:** That's the \$48,000 question.

**JM:** Yeah. Pete is doing quite well. He's down in Solvang. He's writing, he's got his music going.

**PM:** Is that a California town?

**JM:** Yes, it is. I think it's in the Santa Ynez Mountains, just up from Santa Barbara.

**PM:** So he's playing music, too.

**JM:** Oh, yeah. Well, we've been rehearsing.

**PM:** Oh, that's great.

**JM:** At Mosley's house, right near Santa Cruz.

**PM:** And is Don Stevenson playing? Or who's playing drums?

**JM:** I just talked to Don. Don is playing.

**PM:** Beautiful.

**JM:** Yeah, he's also doing his business, it's this time-share kind of thing. So he's been down in Mexico for a while.

**PM:** Do you know where he lives down in Mexico?

**JM:** Well, he's back now. He was down in Zihuatanejo , or somewhere.

**PM:** Oh, Zihuatanejo, that's a nice town.

**JM:** Oh, yeah, he travels. He spent the nasty winter down there, that sun of a gun.

**PM:** Oh, that's a hell of a nice town. You ever see the movie *Shawshank Redemption*?

**JM:** Oh, yeah.

**PM:** Well, that's where they end up in the end, Zihuatanejo.

**JM:** Oh, boy.

**PM:** That kind of made that town famous.

**JM:** That is nice.

**PM:** Have you seen the cool Moby Grape videos on Youtube? There are a lot of good ones.

**JM:** No, I haven't. I'll have to do that.

**PM:** I saw one of a Michael Douglas show--

**JM:** Yeah, I got a copy of that show.

**PM:** --where he introduces you as the Moby Grapes. That was hilarious.

**JM:** Yeah, that's funny. It's great.

**PM:** And Skip is really funny in that clip, he's such a ham.

**JM:** Yeah, what else is funny, too, is after we were done playing, Mike Douglas came over and he says, "Why you got to play so f\*\*\*\*\*n' loud?"

[laughter]

**JM:** And that was nothing compared to what we could have done, Mike.

[laughter]

**JM:** Yeah, man. So Don is up in Canada now.

**PM:** Oh, really?

**JM:** Yeah, he lives up in Vancouver.

**PM:** Oh, yeah, what a place.

**JM:** Yeah, he has been living up in Whistler.

**PM:** Is that a Canadian town?

**JM:** Yeah, it's a beautiful ski area. People come from all over the world there.

**PM:** Back then, or in the years that followed, were you very friendly with other members of the San Francisco psychedelic band scene, the Airplane or The Dead, or any of those? Was there much co-mingling back then?

**JM:** Just Jerry, yeah, pretty much.

**PM:** He was a pretty friendly guy.

**JM:** Yeah, he was really friendly. I think that was one of the big charms of the Grateful Dead, was Jerry Garcia's amiability.

**PM:** Yeah, and such a musical soul. He really liked to jam and liked to play and liked to hang out.

**JM:** Yes, he did. He was a really good guy. He was basically responsible for us staying in California.

**PM:** How so?

**JM:** Well, we went down to a place called Hunters Inn in Santa Maria, and it was '64 or '65--probably '65. And we finished a gig down there, and we didn't have anything left to do, so we were headed back up to Washington. And we had an old Corvair and a trailer. And we stopped at this place just out of nowhere in Belmont called Inn Room, and the Warlocks were playing.

**PM:** Wow!

**JM:** And we just stopped in to have something to eat, and we heard this band playing. And we went in there. And I started talking to Garcia. We said, "We're headed on our way home." And he said, "No, you're not."

[laughter]

**PM:** "No you're not"!

**JM:** So I think I got home in '95.

[laughter]

**JM:** So, yeah, we stayed at this beautiful Victorian, all of us lived there, on Ralston Street in Belmont with these bartenders. And we'd go up to the Inn Ranch and jam. Had a lot of cool people around. There was Neal Cassady.

**PM:** Wow.

**JM:** We got to meet everybody. We still hadn't gotten the bar scene out of our craw yet, so we were doing the Dragon-a-Go-Go. Then we got wind of what was going on at the Avalon and Longshoreman's and the Fillmore. And we said, "Okay, well, that's enough of that." So we just partied for a little while and the organ player went home up to Seattle. And we kept the sax player with us for a while, and we started doing a few more clubs. But slowly but surely we got--me and Don, who were in the Frantics, got Mosley. We heard him play, and he was playing with Joel Scott Hill. And we got him, then he took off for a while and met Peter. And he came back up and we all met Skip, and kaboom!



**PM:** Wow.

**JM:** Yeah. It was Garcia's fault.

**PM:** All his fault. That's amazing.

**JM:** Yeah.

**PM:** Have you ever considered, or have you ever started writing a book about this colorful life you've led?

**JM:** Yes, I have. As a matter of fact, I like to turn on my little recorder and just sit there and tell stories. I think it would go over pretty good. As long as I don't tell the whole truth.

**PM:** Yeah. Some version thereof.

**JM:** I have to keep it down a little bit for the Santa Cruz days.

**PM:** Yeah, because I mean, you're a survivor, not only of the band's crazy years, but many of the later years were equally wild, since I was on the West Coast in the '80s when everybody was going nuts.

**JM:** Oh, the '70s were even nuttier. But it was a lot more fun than now. I mean, what can you do. Now they have your name and address, man, and they look up your name and address all the time. We even have, believe it or not, the lawn police here.

**PM:** The lawn police?

**JM:** Absolutely. Oh, they tell you you got to keep your lawn under seven inches--

**PM:** --and you can't have any pink flamingoes on your lawn and stuff.

**JM:** And see if you're up at night.

**PM:** And see if you're up at night?

**JM:** Yeah, anything suspicious.

**PM:** Oh, man, that sounds way worse than it is here. I mean, here they try to tell you what color to paint your house, but they don't give a damn if you're up at night.

**JM:** Yeah, well, I may be a little suspicious, because I am up half the night.

**PM:** Yeah, right, of course.

**JM:** But if they're going to be over looking at your lawn and stuff, what's next.

**PM:** Yeah, looking in your window.

**JM:** Yeah. And if your car is up to date.

**PM:** Wow. The people in my neighborhood flipped out because of this kind of stuff, and they all started putting pink flamingoes on their lawn, like sometimes up to 20 or 30 of them.

**JM:** You know what? That's a good idea. You just opened the door to something.

**PM:** [laughs] It looks really funny when you ride by.

**JM:** Yeah. Well, doggone it, that's what I'm going to do. And I'm going to tell my friends, too.

**PM:** So tell me, are you what you'd call a spiritual dude at all?

**JM:** My faith will lead me through.

**PM:** Wow. In any special way?

**JM:** Well, it's the church of the woods and water.

**PM:** Right, it's natural things.

**JM:** It's my own honor, you know, truth, justice, and what used to be the American way.

[laughter]

**PM:** Right, my American way. How about reading, Jerry? Do you make time to read? Is that part of your routine?

**JM:** I read for information. I read the New York Times every night. I also read books like *Custer*. Reading about him hating wigs. I usually have some kind of a book going. My lady Jo's a big reader. Our place is full of books.

**PM:** What are you listening to these days?

**JM:** Oh, let's see. What have I got? Yesterday I was listening to Jim Post. Are you hip to him?

**PM:** I don't think so.

**JM:** He's real good. He's been writing songs forever.

**PM:** Is he the television writer?

**JM:** No, that's Mike Post. But Jim Post is doing this thing on Mark Twain, because he looks just like him. Here's let's see, it's called *The Laughing River*.

**PM:** Oh, yeah, we're going to link to him in the interview, for sure.

**JM:** Yeah. That would be really cool. And I want to play some guitar with him, because he comes up from the folk thing. And he knew Jerry, I'm sure.

**PM:** Right.

**JM:** Yeah, I knew all those guys, Dave Nelson and Marmaduke, John Dawson. [New Riders of the Purple Sage]

**PM:** How would you describe your lifestyle today, Jerry? What's it like where you are today in your life? You running hard, or chillin'?

**JM:** No, I'm not at all. I ride my bike a lot. I ride my bike, try to keep my car running, try to get the rent paid, hoping I can get out of here, do a little traveling.

[laughter]

**PM:** Well, I'm going to try to get out to the West Coast, man, and catch one of these shows of yours.

**JM:** Well, if you do, you got to give me a jingle, Frank.

**PM:** I will. And I'll let you know when we put this interview up. Good talking with you, brother man. Thanks, and I'll see you out on the West Coast before long.

**JM:** You're welcome, Frank. I enjoyed that. Take care.