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“The Secret of This Tie That Binds”:  
Discoursing the Grateful Dead

NICHOLAS G. MERIWETHER

One afternoon in November 1965, Jerry Garcia opened a dictionary and let his finger trace down a page until it settled on an entry. As every fan of the Grateful Dead knows, that act of bibliomancy launched one of the most celebrated band names in popular music. When Garcia recounted the story over the years, he often observed that it felt like the name chose them, a typically modest way of privileging serendipity over his own agency. But he was also acknowledging how even small acts could become cornerstones of large enterprises, and that from humble beginnings could spring powerful movements.

That is also true of the scholarship on the Grateful Dead phenomenon, which this inaugural volume of *Grateful Dead Studies* celebrates. Over more than four decades, the scholarly work on the Grateful Dead has grown into a respectable bibliography. *Grateful Dead Studies* builds on that work, offering scholars and readers an opportunity to extend the conversation on the Grateful Dead and their associated contexts with a dedicated forum. As a peer-reviewed scholarly journal, *Grateful Dead Studies* is intended for academic readers, but its interdisciplinary scope should make it accessible to non-specialists. The Features and

Last Words sections in particular address a wider audience, presenting primary materials illuminating the Grateful Dead phenomenon that should appeal to all readers interested in the band and its work.

Earlier versions of the essays here were first given as papers at the the Grateful Dead Scholars Caucus, the nickname of the Grateful Dead area of the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association conference. Over the past sixteen years Caucus meetings have emerged as the incubator for a diverse academic discourse community whose work has defined Dead studies. The essays here illustrate one of the major characteristics of Caucus meetings, which is how themes linking the presentations emerge in surprising yet compelling ways. That intriguing tapestry of interconnections represents the intellectual, conversational counterpart to what the Dead courted in performance: a recognition and celebration of the fact that serendipity and synchronicity abound, if viewed with the right eyes.

Although the articles and reviews here were selected independently, they, too, demonstrate that serendipitous and evocative interlinking. Michael Kaler's "How the Grateful Dead Learned to Jam" focuses on the band's formative years in San Francisco from 1966 to 1967, detailing how the Dead learned to open up song structures and improvise collectively, a hallmark of their concert prowess that band members address in the two interviews in the Features section. James A. Tuedio's essay provides the philosophical counterpart to Kaler's musicological exegesis, describing how the band's signature improvisational ethos can be viewed from a variety of critical contexts. Stanley J. Spector's essay extends Tuedio's approach, reframing the terms in which the band's art can be viewed to encompass the broad sweep of western philosophy, beginning with Plato. The last essay, "Sunshine Daydreams and Haight Street Nightmares: Deadhead Memoirs and Postmodern Autobiography," examines the theoretical perspectives that allow scholars to view memoirs as documents of how fans construct the meaning of the Deadhead experience. Together, these essays can be seen as tracing the arc of the band's work from origination, both historically and on stage, out into the audience and ultimately into culture.

As Kaler's essay shows, the Dead's jamming prowess was rooted in their mastery of formal structures, a thoughtful, painstaking process by

a group of disciplined artists who held a common vision of what musical performance and experience could be for both performers and audience members. A similar sense of commitment to the discourse of Grateful Dead studies animates the scholars who contributed to this volume; their work here shows how that discourse not only is a way of understanding that originary vision, but also represents an organic extension of it.

That quality is especially marked in the reviews in this volume. The critiques of recent additions to band's back catalog by David Malvinni and Mike Dolgushkin provide views of more than just the ways that legacy has been presented by various commercial releases. Dolgushkin's thorough analysis of one period in the band's career, the seminal year of 1989, surveys the audio and video releases documenting that fertile period, while Malvinni reviews the Road Trips series and how it relates to the band's earlier archival release series in presenting the band's recorded legacy. Michael Parrish's review recasts that legacy in more active terms with his analysis of *Furthur*, the band formed by Bob Weir and Phil Lesh, centered around their concert on December 30, 2010.

A central aspect of the Dead's music has always been its tendency to resist the traditional demarcations of genre (a theme in the essay "Sunshine Daydreams and Haight Street Nightmares"); that stubborn refusal to be limited by the taxonomies imposed by others extends throughout the Dead phenomenon. The two books reviewed here both make that point. Horace Fairlamb's review of Gary McKinney and Robert Weiner's *The Storyteller Speaks: Rare and Different Fictions of the Grateful Dead* provides a thoughtful reading of the ways the various essays, stories, and other pieces in the book contribute to the steadily growing literature on the Deadhead experience, and his discussion of Robert Hunter's delightfully elliptical contribution points out the degree to which the lines blurring the distinction between band and fan extend far beyond the concert hall. Dennis Rothermel's thoughtful reading of Tuedio and Spector's coedited volume, *The Grateful Dead in Concert: Essays on Live Improvisation*, shows how the essays in the book, which collectively define the scope of Dead studies today, still point to intellectual riches far beyond those they delineate.

That scope continues to widen, a testament to the vibrancy and increasing sophistication of the scholarly conversation on the Grateful Dead, but it is also driven by the broad constituency interested in understanding the larger cultural phenomenon crystallized by the band. In keeping with the band's example, the discourse welcomes contributions from independent scholars and other thinkers working outside of the academy, both as presenters and perhaps even more importantly (and certainly more rare), as audience members at our conference meetings, and readers of our work.

That democratic mandate informs the Features and Last Words sections, whose entries all originated outside of the academy. That status is appealing for other reasons as well, however, for just as the Dead made it a point to steep themselves in tradition, looking to history for compass bearings even as they plunged into uncharted waters, scholars studying the Dead have had to struggle to ferret out interviews, letters, and other sources scattered in the popular press to support their research. This volume of *Grateful Dead Studies* presents three unpublished primary works as Features, all of which help to illuminate the band's early work and approach.

In many ways, 1967 was a watershed year for the Dead: they recorded their first album, performed at the Great Human Be-in and at the Monterey Pop Festival, and earned a reputation as the house band for the Haight-Ashbury by playing free shows in Golden Gate Park. Two interviews with Jerry Garcia, with interjections from Bob Weir and Phil Lesh, provide a contemporary view of that time, one recorded in April 1967, the other in September, only a month before their house was raided by the police, which precipitated their departure from the Haight.

Their interlocutors were no less interesting. Ralph J. Gleason was the nationally syndicated music critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, a pioneering jazz critic whose early championing of the emerging San Francisco rock scene played a vital role in its success. Gleason's interview is paired with a much longer one by California State University–Sacramento history professor Frank Kofsky, also a jazz critic and journalist; his lengthy interview was intended for publication but never appeared.

Capping these two interviews is a remarkable oral letter from Gleason to Kofsky about the broader San Francisco music scene, reflecting on the historical parallels to the growth of jazz and its relationships with the music industry and youth culture in the sixties. All three pieces capture the zeitgeist of the Haight-Ashbury in the 1960s in a revealing set of intersections between the interviewers, their narrators, and the topics they address.

Those intersections also inform band lyricist Robert Hunter's moving poem, "An Anthem for The Bear," the Last Words for this volume. Bear was the nickname of Owsley Stanley, a luminous figure in the band's history who passed away as this journal was in development. A friend and supporter whose work helped the Dead in many ways, especially in their early years, Stanley cast a long shadow whose contours and shades will challenge scholars for years to come. Hunter's elegy to his fallen friend captures Stanley's iconic stature and forceful personality in a tribute that also demonstrates the author's gentle humanism and formidable poetics. We thank him for allowing us to print his poem here, and we thank Greg Anton for his help in that process.

In addition to the tradition of scholarship, collaboration, and community that informs the contributions here, this volume owes many other debts. The members of the Editorial Board provided more than just careful readings of the essays, they also supported and helped to refine the broader vision of the journal. We thank Don Defenderfer for his photograph of the band in concert for the front cover and Robbi Cohn for her 1990 photograph of the band on stage for the back cover. Ed Perlstein kindly allowed us to reproduce his photograph of Owsley Stanley. The hard work and creativity by all of these contributors defines the ambition, scope, and depth of the developing discourse of Grateful Dead studies, just as their cooperation exemplifies the finest of Deadhead ideals.

That link is one of many connections tying the pieces in this volume back to the Deadhead experience, complicating and enriching the scholarly exegesis in ways that can usefully challenge our understanding of academic discourse. The community of scholars assaying the Grateful Dead phenomenon do not always agree with each other, but they all respect the

collective commitment to discover its meaning—and perhaps that is “the secret of this tie that binds,” as Robert M. Petersen’s lyrics for the Dead’s “New Potato Caboose” suggest. That tie, or perhaps the secret of it, may be what unites this most disparate range of disciplines and scholars—even if that unity can appear elusive, a kaleidoscope still shifting, still evolving, still challenging us to view that slippery totality of a collective discourse that is indeed “all a seer can own,” as the song observed.

Sometimes that perspective can be clouded—after all, Garcia had no idea that the name he found that fall afternoon in Palo Alto would resonate so well, and so deeply, for so many. That unlikely evolution describes the course of this journal, which traces its origins to a small-run volume dubbed *Dead Studies* produced to commemorate the 2011 meeting of the Grateful Dead Scholars Caucus. That preliminary effort included the conference program and some additional material along with early versions of the essays here. This volume makes the essays and reviews first printed there available in a textually definitive form, along with new material.

In addition to the loss of Owsley Stanley, one other absence haunts this volume: Phil Heldrich, longtime officer of the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association. Just as Stanley’s pioneering role in the band’s early career helped to define the musical and cultural legacy of the Grateful Dead, Heldrich’s support of the Grateful Dead area was instrumental in nurturing the scholarly study of that legacy. This volume is dedicated to their memories, a gesture in keeping with the folk motif described by that unlikely and evocative dictionary entry Jerry Garcia stumbled on in November 1965.