GRATEFUL DEAD STUDIES

Volume 1 2013/2014

ISSN 2572-7818 (Online) ISSN 2572-7702 (Print)

Meriwether, Nicholas G.

Features: “In Our Expanding Consciousness”: The Grateful Dead in 1967

CITATION INFORMATION

Nicholas G. Meriwether

“In Our Expanding Consciousness”: The Grateful Dead in 1967

Grateful Dead Studies

Volume 1 (2013/2014)

Pages: 86–91

URL: http://gratefuldeadstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/GDSv1_FeaturesIntro.pdf

"In Our Expanding Consciousness": The Grateful Dead in 1967

Early in 1967, Jerry Garcia sat down for an interview with Ralph J. Gleason, the dean of American jazz critics and a staunch defender of the burgeoning rock scene in San Francisco. Part of their wide-ranging conversation addressed the problem of musical dynamics in performance: the challenges of amplification and associated issues with electric instruments as well as the kinds of halls and venues that welcomed rock music, all problems the Dead had wrestled with since their earliest gigs. But within Garcia's thoughtful remarks was one surprising aside: he dated his insights precisely, to the night that the Dead attended their first Family Dog dance.

Held October 23, 1965, the dance featured the Lovin' Spoonful and passed into Dead lore as the event where the band, high on LSD, realized that the Dog's approach to concerts represented the future—their future. "We began to see that vision of a truly fantastic thing," Garcia told Charles Reich, years later. "It became clear to us that working in bars was not going to be right for us to be able to expand into this new idea" (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner 1972, 45). And the Dead were primed for this kind of scene—which Lesh made plain that night when he famously accosted Luria Castell, one of the promoters, and exclaimed, "Lady, what

this little séance needs is us" (McNally 2002, 96). It is a tale widely told, one of the creation stories of the Haight-Ashbury, but the Dead's epiphany also had a strictly musical dimension. The problem was amplification: "from the back of the hall you couldn't hear anything," Garcia explained to Gleason:

> You could hear maybe the harmonica. As you moved around you could hear a little of something, a little of something else but you could never hear the whole band, unless you were right in front of it and in that case you couldn't hear the vocal. So in our expanding consciousness, we thought, the thing to do, obviously, when you play in a big hall, is to make it so that you can hear everything everywhere. How do we go about this, we thought? (Gleason 1969, 317)

It was more than just an engineering problem; it was also philosophical. The folk scene had detested electric instruments, distaining them as inferior, unmusical, and even ideologically suspect, smacking of the depradations of industrial capitalism that were the enemy of the Old Left, which had embraced folk songs as protest music. Hippies disagreed. The musicians of the Haight relied on electricity for their art. Moreover, Garcia and his peers found electric instruments liberating, viewing them as fundamentally democratic, part of an attitude that embraced technology and believed it to be a tool that could be used well.

That idea was far from an acid-addled notion. When Garcia waxed eloquent on the technological challenges of the Dead's music, he didn't quote Herbert Marcuse—or even Marshal McLuhan—but ideas from both critics were part of the larger discourse of the Haight-Ashbury, and often cropped up in neighborhood conversations. Those ideas went to the heart of the Dead's project, too. In 1964, McLuhan's *Understanding Media* presented a wide-ranging critique of modern mass media and their cultural implications, writing that "Our new electric technology that extends our senses and nerves in a global embrace has large implications for the future of language" (1964, 80). Hippies did not subscribe to McLuhan's cheerful prediction that the advent of widespread computer use would lead to "a Pentecostal condition of universal understanding and unity," but his idea that this would lessen the isolation of individual languages in favor

of "a general cosmic consciousness" (1964, 80) had perfect resonance for psychedelic consciousness. Hippies also instinctively appreciated his broader point, that the nature of media powerfully shaped the information they conveyed (Gerzon 1969, 42–45). Hippies tended to see a continuum between the technologies that defined media and those that made their music possible, a continuum that psychedelics laid bare. When the Dead had their epiphany at the Family Dog dance, that insight invoked McLuhan's belief that "Electricity points the way to an extension of the process of consciousness itself" (1964, 80).

McLuhan's theories were not all rosy, but other critics raised more explicitly dystopian views of the rise of the media state. The same year that McLuhan's book appeared, philosopher Herbert Marcuse published a much more strident and pessimistic prediction. In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse argued that media shaped society in ways more pernicious than emancipatory, and indeed, were tools used to repress individuality and dissent, not promote freedom. Most striking, however, was his contention that modern capitalist democracies were as subtly repressive as their overtly totalitarian counterparts, dominated by mechanisms that acted in ways that limited choice, suppressed opposition, and thwarted dissent. Beneath the guise of democracy and liberty, these societies actually precluded change and opposition, absorbing dissent and rendering challenges impotent. When Marcuse expanded his critique to the war in Vietnam, his book earned a much wider readership, especially among young people; budding rock journalist Jon Landau called him "a powerful symbol and enunciator of what many were beginning to think and feel" (Landau 1972, 192).

Hippies shared Marcuse's skepticism but not his pessimism, a stance that counterculture theorist and historian Theodore Roszak (1986) would later criticize as the Achilles' heel of the counterculture and that less sympathetic observers viewed as irreconcilable hypocrisy. The Haight would come to see the media in far darker terms, as the Diggers' "Death of Hippie" ceremony held in October 1967 would demonstrate: their wake for the Summer of Love featured a mock funeral, replete with a coffin, for "Hippie, devoted son of Mass Media." Yet for the Dead and their Haight-Ashbury peers, the larger challenge was to see if these

technologies could be harnessed and used for positive ends. The advance of science and technology was inevitable and inescapable; even more, it was neutral. After all, Nazi technology informed advances in magnetic recording and public address systems that were at the heart of rock music; if good could be wrested from even that evil, then surely mass media and the technologies that informed them could serve positive ends—or so the thinking went.

That was the bigger point that Garcia was making in his conversation with Gleason: the goal was to be heard—and that entailed media. If the immediate problem was that volume did not translate into clarity, the bigger point was that positive goal, to communicate: he wanted to be heard, to be understood—and that happened in many ways, both in interviews and onstage. That commitment was why Garcia was already an accomplished musician as well as such a good interview subject. His job was communication, and that work was deeply informed and shaped by modern technology, beginning with electricity. And all of it was filtered through the lens of media.

Media presence and pressure was a major force in the Haight in 1967, when the three interviews here took place. They offer a rare glimpse into the band and the Haight in its heyday, framing the Dead's project in the neighborhood they would always be associated with and showcasing the already mature approach to their work the Dead had developed. For young musicians to engage thoughtfully and eloquently with two much older—and from a hippie perspective, mainstream—critics speaks to their seriousness and sophistication, even while they were still ensconced in the Haight.

Their interlocutors were not unsympathetic. Gleason was well known as a supporter of the city's rock music, a role that came to him naturally: like Kofsky, he was accustomed to defending musicians and music ignored or denigrated by highbrow critics. Both men had forged their aesthetics championing jazz and blues from their detractors, and Kofsky had carried that battle into the academy (1970). A professor of history at California State University–Sacramento, Kofsky was also an active music journalist, contributing frequently to *Jazz and Pop* magazine. Those experiences informed the way the two critics approached the psychedelic

rock being incubated in the Haight, and the questions they asked the Dead.

By 1967, the Dead had already experienced the full range of media treatments, from puff pieces to hatchet jobs. Yet even when hostile journalists sat down to talk to the band, they could be surprised at how thoughtful, eloquent, and erudite band members were, particularly Garcia. Even a casual interview could demonstrate his media savvy, a sophistication about journalism and interviewing that would serve him well throughout his career. That intelligence, along with his trademark wit and boundless good humor, shine in the interviews here.

Those discussions bookended the Summer of Love, a media-saturated spectacle that indelibly marked the band as exemplars of the Haight-Ashbury, the hippie scene, and the burgeoning counterculture that had already captivated the nation's attention. Taped in April and September, the recordings of these encounters offer snapshots of how the band viewed their own increasing visibility and celebrity, particularly in the wake of events such as the Great Human Be-In, held in January 1967, and the Monterey Pop Festival held in June.

The first interview was conducted by Gleason. Recorded at a local television studio, the brief session nonetheless captures why one of America's foremost jazz critics found the band so interesting. Gleason was sufficiently impressed with Garcia that he devoted an entire chapter-length interview to him in his seminal early account of the San Francisco scene, *The Jefferson Airplane and the San Francisco Sound* (1969). The second interview was conducted by Kofsky at the band's house in San Francisco, only a few weeks before it was raided by the San Francisco police, the event that finally pushed the band out of the Haight. Kofsky admired the Dead, praising them for their innovative use of electronics and singling them out for their "casual friendliness," which allowed them to be "more intimate with their audiences" than most jazz bands (1967, 35).

Although the recording of Gleason's interview is available online, it has never been transcribed and published. The Kofsky interview was intended for publication but never appeared. Those texts are followed by a remarkable oral letter dictated by Gleason in response to a letter from Kofsky, establishing a broader context for the preceding interviews and

placing the Dead's work in the continuum of American artistic expression that Gleason considered their milieu. As one jazz historian and critic's response to another, Gleason's thoughtful and impassioned defense of the Haight and its music is a manifesto of the power and significance of the scene that nurtured the Dead and that they in turn did so much to define.

That future was only a fantasy when the Dead walked into the Longshoremen's Hall that night in October 1965, but it was one that they could all glimpse. When Garcia described the Dead's "expanding consciousness" to Gleason, it was both a revelation and a goal, one that they would pursue for the rest of their career. It went to the core of the band's project, a grail that beckoned to them not only in their music, but in all of the work that entailed, from business practices to interviews. No wonder critics like Gleason and Kofsky found the Dead and their scene so compelling.

N.G.M.

Works Cited

Garcia, Jerry, Charles Reich, and Jann Wenner. 1972. *Garcia: A Signpost to New Space*. San Francisco: Straight Arrow.

Gerzon, Mark. 1969. *The Whole World is Watching: A Young Man Looks at Youth's Dissent*. New York: Viking.

Gleason, Ralph J. 1969. *The Jefferson Airplane and the San Francisco Sound.* New York: Ballantine.

Kofsky, Frank. 1967. "The Scene." *Jazz and Pop* 6 (September 1967): 35–36.

———. 1970. *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*. New York: Pathfinder Press.

Landau, Jon. 1972. *It's Too Late To Stop Now: A Rock and Roll Journal*. San Francisco: Straight Arrow.

Marcuse, Herbert. 1991. *One-Dimensional Man.* 2nd ed., Boston: Beacon Press.

McLuhan, Marshall. 1964. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

McNally, Dennis. 2002. *A Long Strange Trip: The Inside History of the Grateful Dead*. New York: Broadway Books.

Roszak, Theodore. 1986. *From Satori to Silicon Valley*. San Francisco: Don't Call It Frisco Press.