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“To Let It Go as Far as It’ll Go”: Jerry Garcia, Phil Lesh, and Bob Weir on Roots, Improvisation, and the Music of the Dead

RALPH J. GLEASON

In the last year and a half [1966–1967], San Francisco has literally exploded with music. The rock bands are some of the most interesting bands in the country, and one of the most exciting and interesting bands in San Francisco these days is the Grateful Dead. We’re talking to the Grateful Dead, particularly to Jerry Garcia, the lead guitarist. Jerry, what kind of music does the Grateful Dead play?

Jerry Garcia: Loud music; dance music—for dances, at dances. [*Laughs.*]

Ralph J. Gleason: Where does it come from? Do you write all your songs?

JG: No. We write some of it.

Phil Lesh: We steal it from a lot of places.

JG: Yeah, we steal it from a lot of places.

PL: As many as we can find, as a matter of fact.

JG: We’re clever thieves, stealing from a lot of places and rearranging.

PL: Sort of like the Baroque era.

RG: Do you have any particular bank vaults of music that you raid periodically?

JG: Old blues; new blues.

Bob Weir: Jug band.

JG: Jug band music. We've been getting into stealing classical licks. And jazz—anything; anything that we can hear.

RG: You don't sound like other bands. Why is this?

JG: Well, because we're not other bands. [*Laughs.*] We're the Grateful Dead and we've been together long enough to where we are used to each other enough to be able to play together.

RG: Even when you take old tunes, or tunes that have old influences in them, you still don't sound like the originals.

JG: No, 'cause that's not who we are. We're not trying to recreate anything.

RG: Ah. Do you change them around?

JG: Oh, freely, freely. Like I say, any one song can have lots of stuff in it from lots of different sources. But it always comes out nothing like the original—and also nothing like anything else.

RG: Do you work at things electronically for different sounds and devices?

JG: We're getting into it more than we have been. We've been mostly just working on getting better at our instruments, and the electronic stuff is stuff that you discover playing at the enormous volumes that you play at in the big auditoriums. And pretty soon your guitar is feeding back and there's this insane sound coming out of it, you know? And you find that, by fiddling around the right way, you can control it, to a certain extent. And that becomes part of the way you play.

RG: You use this in the way you play?

JG: Oh, sure, yeah. You can't not. If you ignore it, it just gets louder and louder. [*Laughs.*]

PL: It takes over the entire thing.

RG: Do you write out arrangements that you're going to do?

JG: Sometimes we do and sometimes we don't.

PL: Only if the record company insists.

JG: Right, if the record company insists. [*Laughter.*]

RG: Do you do them the same way, time after time, when you play them?

JG: I don't think so. There are some that are more or less the same most of the time.

PL: In general, contrary, you might say.

JG: Right. But the events inside them aren't always the same. And the thing that we really like is when something new suddenly happens and we're suddenly playing differently than we used to. It's this sort of—evolutionary stuff goes on.

RG: What sort of thing can tick that off in the course of playing a tune?

JG: Playing it long enough.

BW: Good vibes.

JG: Playing it long enough. And yeah, a good situation, you know, a lot of feedback from the audience and dancing and—.

BW: Carrying on.

JG: Playing in the big auditoriums is conducive to that.

RG: Will things that you've done yourself in music suggest themselves to you at various points in playing the tune, in individual performance? Are you a serial composer? Will you come up with some—.

JG: Yeah, that's kind of what happens. It's just, all of a sudden, another possibility reveals itself to our wondering eyes and ears.

PL: Or somebody will play something and it suggests another place to go.

RG: Change the whole tune?

PL: Right.

JG: We like to let it go as far as it'll go.

RG: What song are you going to play for us?

JG: A song called “Cream Puff War.”

RG: Did you write this?

JG: Yeah. I wrote this particular song. [*Laughs.*] It’s the only song I’ve ever written completely, all the way. It’s my song.

RG: And it steals from all those places?

JG: Oh yeah, yeah. Well, I mean, just the actual song—meaning the melody and the words. But the rest of it is—.

PL: To the extent that all of us, in our own playing, steal from everywhere.

JG: Right.

RG: Let’s hear it.

NOTE

This transcription has been lightly edited for clarity.

SOURCE

Grateful Dead. 1967. Interviewed by Ralph J. Gleason, KPIX Studios, April 8, 1967. *Internet Archive*, <https://archive.org/details/gd67-04-08.tv.hanno.12623.sbeok.shnf>.

RALPH J. GLEASON (1917–1975) was a nationally known music journalist and critic whose column for the *San Francisco Chronicle* was widely syndicated. A cofounder of *Rolling Stone*, he was an early champion of the rock music that developed in San Francisco in the mid-1960s, covering it in his column and later in his book, *The Jefferson Airplane and the San Francisco Sound* (Ballantine, 1969).