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REVIEWS

Grateful Dead. *Road Trips*, Vols. 1–4. Rhino, 2008–2011. 14 releases, 40 CDs, with liner note booklets.

DAVID MALVINNI

With the phasing out of the popular *Dick's Picks* series, Grateful Dead soundboard recordings are currently being released as part of the *Road Trips* series at a pace of four per year. Unlike the thirty-six release series *Dick's Picks* (1993–2005), each annual volume of *Road Trips* consists of four separate multidisc releases; this review covers the first fourteen releases. As was the case with *Dick's Picks*, the *Road Trips* series is the primary official delivery option for soundboards from the Dead's legendary Vault, their vast archive of recordings now housed in Burbank in a climate-controlled facility. David Lemieux, the Grateful Dead's official audio/video archivist and legacy manager, and writer Blair Jackson produce the compilations. The compilations are remastered in HDCD by Jeffrey Norman, who has done an excellent job in handling the mixes (more on his work below).

In terms of marketing a commercial product to Deadheads, the *Road Trips* philosophy is a solid one. Each release presents a contextual snapshot of the Grateful Dead at a particular moment in their evolution as a touring entity, supported with a historical essay and photographs in the booklet. The idea seems to have grown organically out of the "Taper's Section" on Dead.net, where Lemieux picks a group of songs and places them within their touring context.

If *Dick's Picks* tended to focus on a particular show, *Road Trips* tries to highlight the significance of the show within a particular tour or run, often by combining songs from shows on the same disc. And because there are no "rules" governing this series—Jackson states that *Road Trips* is "not limited to full-show releases, or even two-track tapes" (2011)—anything is possible for release, so Deadheads should expect surprises.

Responding to early criticism that *Road Trips* was only a “compilation” series, Grateful Dead Productions began to offer complete shows, starting with Volume 2. As of this writing, six of the releases—nearly half of the fourteen—contain complete shows: *Carousel 2/14/68* (Vol. 2, No. 2); *12/28/1979 Oakland* (Vol. 3, No. 1); *Austin 11/15/71* (Vol. 3, No. 2); *Fillmore East 5/15/70* (Vol. 3, No. 3); *Big Rock Pow Wow '69* (Vol. 4, No. 1); and *April Fools' '88* (Vol. 4, No. 2). Given that Volume 1 did not contain any complete shows, and that five of the last six releases are complete shows, *Road Trips* appears to have embraced the whole-show approach that *Dick's Picks* adopted shortly after it commenced.

This was a wise decision. A glance at the message board conversations about *Road Trips* on Dead.net shows that as far back as 2007, fans wanted complete shows. One pseudonymous writer commented:

Having the entire show does feel right and as you listen to it, you can feel part of what the Dead were like that night, and what the audience at that time might have felt. This is not a concept that the uninitiated nor any marketing person might know about. As a taper and trader from way back (70's), I can tell you that a 'compilation' would be one of the last offerings that I would be interested in. (Oroboros 2008)

If Oroboros's main point is correct—a compilation holds less value for a Deadhead than a complete show—there are, nonetheless, precedents for the compilation approach within the Dead's own discography. For example, the band's eponymous live album (nicknamed *Skull and Roses*) and *Europe '72* are two well-known collections of tour highlights, not to mention *Live/Dead*. And Steve Silberman remarked in a post that archivist Dick Latvala was fond of making tape compilations for friends. Silberman goes on to point out that for Lemieux, the compilations represent “dream sets,” and that the highlights chosen will “peel the paint off your walls” (2008).

But do we need an imaginary Grateful Dead, a Grateful Dead of our “dreams”—even one that “peels the paint off” our walls? What is wrong with the ebb and flow of the actual Dead show, where surely there are garden-variety renderings of songs as the band warmed to a venue or an audience? After all, the garden-variety stuff is what makes the stand-

outs all the more amazing; further, it is stunning (to this writer, at least) how consistent the Dead actually were, night after night. Earlier compilations like *Skull and Roses* or even *Reckoning* existed at a time when the record industry thought in terms of albums, when a complete show would have been technologically impractical to produce on vinyl, and difficult or nearly impossible to sell to non-Deadheads. Plus, the band was still actively touring at the time, so compilations made sense—they helped to generate new fans. But in our contemporary digital age, where shows are easily available on Internet Archive (more on this below) and on blog sites, the idea of producing a compilation for an experience of the Grateful Dead seems at best *recherché*, if not simply antiquated and misguided. Like “Oroboros” and many other fans, I applaud the decision to release complete shows; it is worth reminding ourselves of the rationale for this, as well as show some of the obfuscation that can result from the compilation concept.

The volume/number approach, however, is unnecessary, and here the simpler, sequential numbering system of *Dick’s Picks* is more elegant. For example, it would be easier to refer to *Road Trips* 8 rather than the cumbersome Vol. 2, No. 4. It is much easier to remember and to refer to a single number, and I have not been able to discern any unity in the four numbers that make up a volume. Further, when we consider that most folks are probably importing the CDs into iTunes or some other media player, and not actually playing the CDs in a dedicated stand-alone machine, the numbering system gets in the way of ordering your collection. My iTunes library containing thirteen *Road Trips* is a mess, and they are not in order; most of the discs import as separate discs, with varying titles for the compilation discs, while some (e.g., Vol. 2, No. 4) collect under just one show. Obviously the latter would be preferable, as happens when you download a *Dick’s Pick* from iTunes. Finally, when you import a song into iTunes, the song’s date does not show up in the title, creating further confusion because of the compilation issue. This forces you to rely on the booklet to know what you are listening to (unless you are enterprising enough to enter in the information manually, which is difficult for busy professionals).

This brings up the whole download issue. Why are *Road Trips* still

unavailable for downloading, either from Dead.net or the iTunes store or Amazon? Perhaps there are legal reasons or behind-the-scenes issues, but *Dick's Picks* are readily available on iTunes. Discs from two of the *Road Trips* packages I have did not download at all, though they do play in my Samsung Blu-ray machine; perhaps technology is at fault, but in that case I would rather be given the choice of downloading directly from a server.

The CD delivery method may have something to do with the HDCD format touted on the discs. HDCD, short for "High Definition Compatible Digital," is a standard introduced in 1995 and now owned by Microsoft Corporation. Unlike standard CDs with 16-bit encoding, HDCD CDs feature 20-bit encoding to enhance highs and expand lows. The CDs sound excellent on a Blu-ray player, though I cannot comment on what they would sound like in their full sonic glory with a machine that has a dedicated HDCD encoder built in. It seems that this technology is rare and hard to find; calls to retailers indicated that fewer and fewer machines with HDCD capabilities are being manufactured. Consumers may be baffled by the decision to still produce compact disc releases in what seems to be an increasingly rare encoding format.

The essay booklets and tri-fold packaging are well done, with gorgeous cover art by Scott McDougall, first-rate design by Steve Vance, and good period photographs. Each booklet cites who recorded the given concert, though more information on the source tapes and their condition would be welcome, in order to know how much was done in their remastering. The whole issue of remastering and mixing is complicated, in part because it really changes our relationship to the original. And a soundboard is a strange thing, in that we are hearing a sound engineer's "ideal mix" which of course does not match what the audience (or the band, for that matter) heard. However, comparing the landmark Carousel show (Vol. 2, No. 2) with the soundboard recording in my collection, I was pleased to hear the improvements in sound quality, and it was nice to know at least partially why: Jackson states that Vol. 2, No. 2 uses, for the first time, all eight tracks, and Norman has done an outstanding job with the mix.

Along with this are informative essays that put the music in context, sometimes with the author's personal recollections of the actual concert.

In consistency and quality, this is an overall improvement over the *Dick's Picks* series, many of which did not include program booklets. For the liner notes to *Big Rock Pow Wow '69* (Vol. 4, No. 1), Jackson's excellent essay is supplemented with a few paragraphs from one-time Dead keyboardist Tom "TC" Constanten, who relates the spiritual inspiration and guidance that the 1960s counterculture received from Native Americans. Constanten also mentions meeting Timothy Leary, an introduction made by McKernan, when Leary was in Florida as a gubernatorial candidate for California (!).

Jackson is the main commentator for the booklets, credited with nine essays in the first fourteen releases (Vol. 1, Nos. 1, 3, 4; Vol. 2, Nos. 2, 4; Vol. 3, No. 2, 3, 4; Vol. 4, No. 1). Other essayists include former *Wired* journalist and well-known Deadhead writer Steve Silberman (Vol. 1, No. 2 and Vol. 3, No. 1), band biographer and publicist Dennis McNally (Vol. 2, No. 3), and Dan Levy (Vol. 2, No. 1). Silberman's essays are perhaps the most entertaining, salted with his trademark insights and pithy observations; most fans can relate when he describes, for example, "the unspoken promise that any song, in any venue on any night of the week, could turn out to be the most powerful performance you'd ever heard, even if you had dozens of tapes stashed away at home" (2008, 4). Silberman captures the truth that for so many Deadheads, there was an urgency to attend as many shows as possible, in order to witness one of these stellar performances. His idea of "promise" conveys something about the improvisatory nature of the music—an implicit guarantee from the band that they were not going to be satisfied with prior performances, that they would not rest on their laurels, as it were. The promise of the Dead was their probing, restless explorations of fixed material (the song and the existence of the prior tapes) that made us all want to keep coming back for more. This is the "thrill of discovery," as Silberman puts it, when the Dead gave to the audience "savage beauty to be revealed in a lightning strike of inspiration" (2008, 4).

This brings us full circle, back to the "compilation" issue: namely, the producers are directing our ears and gaze toward great moments of listening, or highlights, at the expense of perhaps interesting material and song relationships that led up to these peak, breakthrough moments

characterized by what fans call the X factor. This is perfectly fine for the casual Deadhead (if there is such a thing), but as a Deadhead actually interested in understanding the evolution of the “thirty-year arc” (as Silberman puts it), the philosophy behind *Road Trips* can be frustrating. In their construction of “dream sets,” the producers have complicated our relationship to the Dead, which is already complicated enough. A few of the most confusing examples merit mention.

The trouble starts with the choice of material and song groupings on the very first *Road Trips* release, *Fall '79*, a criticism that can be repeated for many of the other compilations in the series. As many fans noted in the message boards on Dead.net, the exclusion of the Cape Cod shows seems disappointing; however, absent any stated reasons for this, it may be that the producers are planning a future release dedicated to this material. Yet even if that were the case, then why produce a tour highlight release that excludes essential material?

This raises a larger question. How are we to make sense of these imaginary sets? Disc 1 begins with “Alabama Getaway” > “Promised Land” from Crisler Arena, November 10, 1979, which is actually the opener of the second set. This is followed by selections from the first set of the November 6 show at the Spectrum; the rest of the disc features the remainder of the second set following “Drums” > “Space” from November 9 in Buffalo. What is confusing is that some of the songs actually go together, such as “Alabama Getaway” > “Promised Land,” or “Wharf Rat” > “I Need A Miracle” > “Bertha” > “Good Lovin’.” But if you had this disc in your CD player or in iTunes, how would you know which songs actually appeared in sequence, or at which point the “imaginary set list” begins? In short, you have to refer constantly to the booklet to understand what you are hearing. Note that “I Need A Miracle” > “Bertha” > “Good Lovin’” formed a regular suite at the time, played thirty-one times between October 21, 1978, and March 14, 1981; this particular performance is only average. The “Dancing in the Street” > “Franklin’s Tower” pairing is interesting, having been trotted out three times on this tour; this helps to give further meaning to the only other one, from April 6, 1987, which is also the band’s final performance of “Dancing in the Street.”

The Yale Bowl disc from July 31, 1971, on Vol. 1, No. 3 rightfully contains the amazing “Dark Star” of that show, but is unfortunately missing the “Mr. Charlie” and “Sugaree” premieres, an omission underscored by their mention in Jackson’s notes. A quick listen to the “Mr. Charlie” of the audience tape on Internet Archive reveals that the groove and Garcia’s signature guitar riff are different from the mature version of this McKernan classic. The Dead’s ensemble then was fascinating indeed; the period of spring, summer, and part of fall 1971 is only the second time in the band’s history that they played as a quintet, as noted by Jackson. (Garcia called this version of the Dead in an interview with *Rolling Stone* a “shoot-’em-up saloon band”; more on this below). We also learn from Jackson about the historical importance of this show in terms of audience dynamics—it was the most people he had ever seen at a Dead show.

The Yale Bowl’s “Dark Star” contains only the first verse, and has a spirited if slightly out-of-tune “Feelin’ Groovy Jam” within it. The set list of the disc, features the era’s typical “Not Fade Away” > “Goin’ Down the Road Feeling Bad” > “Not Fade Away”; omitted from this is the demarcation of the “Darkness Jam” that serves as a postlude at the end of the “Goin’ Down the Road Feeling Bad,” starting a little after eight minutes in—a jam cited in the tenth edition of *DeadBase* (Scott, Dolgushkin, and Nixon 1996, 19). This is especially troubling, given that the “Darkness Jam” was only played perhaps five times (the four in *Deadbase* plus the one from June 6, 1970, cited below), and that this is the final one (note that the last two of them were played at the end of “Goin’ Down the Road Feeling Bad” > “Not Fade Away”). In the “Taper’s Section” for June 1–9, 2009, the set list from June 6, 1970, at the Fillmore West also does not cite the “Darkness Jam” pointed out in the post by “Cream Puff” (2009). Like “Dark Star,” the “Darkness Jam” is based on two chords, in this case E (the key of “Goin’ Down the Road Feeling Bad” and “Not Fade Away”) and D major; it is related to “Dark Star” in its further exploration of the Mixolydian mode (D natural represents the Mixolydian seventh of E major). The jam is based on the song “Darkness, Darkness”; its most well-known version was sung by the Youngbloods.

The second disc of *Summer of ’71* (Vol. 1, No. 3) is culled from one of the so-called “houseboat” tapes discovered in 2005. These were

1971 tapes of concerts that Garcia had given to Keith Godchaux to learn the band's recent material. Godchaux left the tapes on his parents' boat in Alameda, across the bay from San Francisco. The rediscovery of the tapes was commemorated with the release of *Dick's Picks 35*, which contains most of August 24, 1971 (originally thought to be August 23, 1971) along with the complete San Diego show from August 7, 1971. Now with the release of *Summer of '71*, we finally have some of August 23, 1971 (originally listed in *DeadBase X* as August 24, 1971). Because Disc 2 does not match the *DeadBase* set list, I wish that Jackson had published the definitive set lists for August 23 and 24 in the booklet. I have spent much time trying to figure out what was going with some of the songs that do not appear in *DeadBase*, only to find Dead.net's own definitive set list for the August 23, 1971, show does not match either, but in a posting, apparently Jackson has the correct set list, confirmed by Rick Stenquist who taped the show. Note that Dead.net's incorrect set list for August 23, 1971, has missing songs and the inclusion of "Empty Pages," which *Dick's Picks 35* attributes to August 24. With access to the source material, and after an official CD release, I wish the archivists would clear up the muddle surrounding such an important thing as accurate set lists. And once again, by having the songs out of order on Disc 2 of Vol. 1, No. 3, it frustrates those who want to know where we are in what is an amazing show—one that probably deserves a full release of its own.

Issues like this raise many questions and confound efforts to understand *Road Trips* as a series. The *Road Trips* releases fall somewhere between an "entertaining" experience of the Grateful Dead, with wonderful song examples, and a rigorous academic effort to document the band's performing history. The informal but informative nature of the writing in the project works well, but more careful treatment of the material seems warranted, especially the integrity of the set lists and the sources for quotations. For example, the Garcia comment that the Dead were a "regular shoot-'em-up saloon band" cited by Jackson in his *Summer of '71* liner note essay is from a *Rolling Stone* interview in 1971, later published in *Garcia: A Signpost to New Space* ([1972] 2003, 71). It is unfortunate that we must track down this information, which easily could have been cited,

especially for such a significant description of the band's musical direction at a critical juncture in their career.

If *Road Trips* is going to continue to feature compilations, one possible compromise might be to make each individual CD within a package present material from only one show, and in the correct set list order. *From Egypt with Love* (Vol. 1, No. 4) does exactly this: Disc 1 presents the highlights of the October 21, 1978, Winterland show, and Disc 2 continues with the highlights of the October 22, 1978, performance. *MSG September '90* (Vol. 2, No. 1) has, admirably, most of the second set of September 20, 1990, in order, but still omits material and adds material from September 19 at the end of Disc 1; Disc 2 contains another "encore" with "Knockin' on Heaven's Door" from September 18 (the apparent reason is that "Knockin'" from two nights before marked the twentieth anniversary of Hendrix's death). Levy remarks that the "Love Light" encore that night "turned standers into twirlers" (12).

Wall of Sound (Vol. 2, No. 3) also presents the material out of order, for no apparent reason. On Disc 1, had they placed "U.S. Blues" after "I Know You Rider," it would be in correct order—there are no issues of fitting material onto a CD to justify doing this. Unfortunately, McNally's very helpful essay about the origins of the Wall of Sound and the Dead's 1980s sound system by John Meyer does not, however, deal at all with these two amazing shows from June 1974. *Cal Expo '93* (Vol. 2, No. 4) represents most of the material from May 26, 1993; the next release, *12-28-1979 Oakland* (Vol. 3, No. 1) takes us back to where *Road Trips* started, fall 1979. The next two releases present more early seventies music with shows performed in Austin on November 15, 1971, and at the Fillmore East on May 15, 1970. With these three Volume 3 releases, we are now eleven releases in to *Road Trips*, and still no 1980s shows (and only two Brent shows, Vol. 1, No. 1 and Vol. 3, No. 1). That is finally addressed in the last release of Volume 3, with the May 6 and 7, 1980, shows at Penn State and Cornell. Finally, with Vol. 4, No. 1, *Big Rock Pow Wow '69*, we have a major addition to the magical year of 1969 that will be talked about for years to come.

Before addressing some specific jams, it must be noted that one negative side effect of the *Road Trips* series is the Grateful Dead's official

policy of removing soundboard recordings from Internet Archive once they have been released. Take, for example, the Iowa State Fairgrounds show from June 16, 1974, where seven of the tracks comprise the first disc of *Wall of Sound* (although six more cuts were released on the bonus disc, now unavailable; one hopes that this and the other bonus discs will be made available for download). The streaming soundboard for that show has been removed from Internet Archive, and if one does not already possess it, I am not sure how one would procure a copy of the soundboard legally, or whether it is even possible. During the *Dick's Picks* era, the Dead made it part of their policy that once a soundboard was released commercially, all trading of that soundboard should cease, even if the soundboard circulated prior to the commercial release. If this policy continues, the problem will only start compounding as more compilation CDs are released, thereby removing more material out of circulation. And this is even worse if the newly released CD, like the Iowa show, does not contain the entire set list, as is the case with so many *Road Trips*, in effect making the material not included impossible to procure legally.

This is frustrating and short-sighted, and perhaps the golden age of soundboards on Internet Archive may be at an end, if this policy remains in effect. Internet Archive is an incredible resource for anybody wishing to understand or to write on the Dead, as it is so easy to navigate quickly through an entire show; with the *Road Trips* official releases, it is much more time consuming to do the same work.

It would be impossible to discuss all of the songs in a review, especially given the uniformly high quality of the tracks. There are a few jams worth highlighting, however, listed in order of their release on *Road Trips*:

- The interplay between Garcia, Weir (using some kind of extreme wah-wah effect) and Mydland during the outro solos of “Shakedown Street” on *Fall '79* (Vol. 1, No. 1);
- The tasteful improvisational episode in F Lydian after “Lady with a Fan” on *Fall '79* (Vol. 1, No. 1), leading into a very laid-back transition to “At a Siding”;
- Garcia’s blistering solo in “Let it Grow” on *October '77* (Vol. 1, No. 2), in an up-tempo, disco version with power chords (around 6:30) bordering on seventies hard rock at times;

- The piano-solo driven jam starting at around 7:00 that organically builds into a lyrically crescendoing Garcia solo in a seventeen-minute “Sugaree” on *October '77* (Vol. 1, No. 2)—it is jaw-dropping what they do with only two chords;
- The mind-blowing sequence on *Summer '71* (Vol. 1, No. 3), “The Other One” > “Me and My Uncle > “The Other One” > “Cryptical Envelopment,” is primal five-man Dead from 1971; the second “Other One” is particularly psychedelic and beautiful, especially as they transition into the main theme and to verse two, Lesh’s bass prominently featured in the mix. When Garcia’s voice breaks through at the line, “When the day had ended,” it is a truly cathartic moment;
- The outro jam and transition between “Got my Mojo Working” > “The Other One” on *From Egypt With Love* (Vol. 1, No. 4), with Lee Oskar on harmonica, Weir on slide, and Garcia with his cutting rhythmic precision, both in leads and as accompaniment; the band also crafts an interesting peak jam at the end of “The Other One,” a neat little chromatic lick that begins with Keith and is picked up by Garcia and Weir, leading to a final triumphant hard rock version (with power chords—again, this is the late seventies after all) of the main theme. I would be remiss if I neglected to mention how sweet the “Stella Blue” (definitely one of the best) sounds after this—again, another argument for complete shows;
- The drums and following bass solo to the majestic and Nile-influenced version of “Not Fade Away” on *From Egypt With Love* (Vol. 1, No. 4). It needs to be said that this relaxed, twenty-one-minute long jam (with John Cipollina on guitar) contains the “Caution” jam (around 16:00) and final “Mojo Jam” (19:20), not cited in the CD booklet. It should also be noted how well the band jammed in E, going back to their “Alligator” (the outro) and “Other One” days and continuing with “Not Fade Away”;
- The entire *Carousel 2-14-68* release (Vol. 2, No. 2). As Jackson aptly notes, this is the birth of the “mature Grateful Dead sound”; what more needs to be said? The ecstatic peak of “Mountain Jam” at the end of “Alligator,” with a sweet resolution, is hard to beat (despite the patch);

- The episode that begins at 24:19 in the interplanetary jam in “Playing in the Band” on *Wall of Sound* (Vol. 2, No. 3) performed on June 16, 1974—the entire song clocks in at well over twenty-eight minutes;
- Garcia’s groove at 10:50 in “Eyes of the World” on *Wall of Sound* (Vol. 2, No. 3) performed on June 18, 1974; “Eyes” from 1974 are masterpieces, especially with the outro chord jazz-style changes (dropped in later years) and the “Slipknot!” jazzy riff in an odd time count (6+7). The tone of Garcia’s guitar in 1974 was crystal clear, perhaps one of the greatest electric guitar sounds of all time;
- Garcia’s playing is in top form at the ostinato lick he hammers on at 11:47 in “Playing in the Band” on *12-28-1979 Oakland* (Vol. 3, No. 1); the delay in Weir’s guitar adds a marvelous effect to this jam, as do Mydland’s synthesizer effects; earlier, Silberman notes an “All Along the Watchtower” jam, and the end of this incredible jam finds us in deep space;
- The “Dark Star” sandwich around “El Paso” on *Austin 11-15-71* (Vol. 3, No. 2); at little before 5:00 into the second “Dark Star,” Garcia plays the same riff that he used to transition from “Saint Stephen” into “The Eleven” on *Live/Dead*;
- The twin performances of “Turn On Your Love Light” from *Big Rock Pow Wow ’69* (Vol. 4, No. 1); it seems unprecedented and unique for them to have ended with “Love Light” on Friday night and open with it the next night, at the same venue. The suite “Dark Star” > “Saint Stephen” > “The Eleven” > “Love Light” from the first night presents the Dead at their finest in one of their greatest years.

Overall, the *Road Trips* series marks a significant departure from *Dick’s Picks*, and those releases featuring tour highlights or compilations have not been well received. However, as *Road Trips* has moved toward complete shows, fan reaction has been positive. And there is much to commend: the packaging is generally first-rate, the recording quality is stellar, and I have yet to find a disappointing sounding track or poorly played song on any release. The producers certainly know their Grateful Dead recorded history, and cavils aside, they should be commended for

working hard to release thoughtfully chosen, critically significant material from what is perhaps the largest archive of recorded music by a single band in the world.

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