

Bach, Debra Schmidt, and Nina Nazionale

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## The Grateful Dead at the New-York Historical Society

DEBRA SCHMIDT BACH AND NINA NAZIONALE

As curators of the exhibition *The Grateful Dead: Now Playing at the New-York Historical Society*, we were asked frequently, “Why is the New-York Historical Society doing an exhibition about the Grateful Dead?” Historical Society President and Chief Executive Officer Louise Mirrer explained in a *Huffington Post* blog:

*The Grateful Dead: Now Playing At the New-York Historical Society* is a genuine contribution to the understanding of American history. It uses ... rare and fascinating materials from the Archive to explore not just the life but the times of the Grateful Dead, giving a vivid picture of the band’s tremendous, lasting influence on how popular music is performed, recorded, heard, marketed and shared, while also reflecting on the tremendous changes in American society, culture and politics that shaped and influenced the band. (Mirrer 2010)

For a cultural institution that examines American history through the lens of New York, an exhibition about the Grateful Dead made perfect sense.

Not only are the Dead a great American band rooted in American musical traditions, they also played over 230 dates in metropolitan New York City. According to band historian Dennis McNally, New York City was “the Dead’s home away from home,” despite being “an antipodal mirror for this bunch of San Franciscans” (2002, 461). In fact, the band’s relationship with the city began in 1967 with a free concert in Tompkins Square Park during the week of their first official appearances at the legendary Café Au Go Go. On that same trip, they also played a free concert at the Central Park Bandshell and traveled fifty miles east of Manhattan to play in the gymnasium of the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Subsequent New York City performances included a surprise appearance at Columbia University during the student strike of May 1968 and shows at celebrated venues like the Fillmore East, Radio City Music Hall, and Madison Square Garden.

The Grateful Dead exhibition underscored the fact that the New-York Historical Society’s collections, programs, and exhibitions encompass even recent events and phenomena and represent all aspects of New York and American history. Additionally, the exhibition’s two curators—the authors of this essay—came to the project with unique but complementary sensibilities gained through years working in the institution’s two main divisions, the museum and the library. Debra Schmidt Bach spends her days studying rare and prosaic objects that include early New York silver, fine mahogany furniture, decorative porcelain, utilitarian stoneware, and unique historical relics. Nina Nazionale is surrounded by works on paper: manuscripts, books, newspapers, maps, photographs, architectural plans, and broadsides from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries. Despite different backgrounds and training, we use a similar intellectual approach to the study and analysis of paper-based materials and three-dimensional artifacts, interpreting objects as documents and documents as objects.

The Grateful Dead Archive’s original artwork, marketing materials, correspondence, contracts, ephemera, and hand-written work plans provided glimpses into the band’s inner workings from the inside out. In view of that, we presented each document or three-dimensional object as artifacts, evidence of the time and place where they were made or used.

While there was evidence of the seismic social, political, and cultural changes that occurred in the United States between 1965 and 1995—the span of the Dead’s career—throughout our selections from the Grateful Dead Archive, we chose to anchor the exhibition in themes that the Archive suggested to us as we looked through its treasures.

After our visit to the Archive, four exhibition sections emerged: “Beginnings,” “Artistry,” “Business,” and “Community.” The exhibition opened with a brief examination of the band’s early years in the Bay Area and their first trips to New York, “Beginnings” (fig. 1). This section led naturally into the second, “Artistry,” which highlighted the band’s musical artistry and the phenomenal creativity of the many visual artists who collaborated with them. “Business” presented the band’s administrative inner-workings and hard-learned business lessons, which included many internal documents never before seen by the public. The fourth and final section, “Community,” explored the extraordinary following that the band fostered, symbolized (and partly catalyzed) by the message included on the jacket of their eponymous 1971 live album: “Dead Freaks Unite. Who are you? Where are you? How are you? Send us your name and address and we’ll keep you informed.”

### **Redwoods and Artichoke Fields**

The curatorial process was set in motion when we traveled to the University of California–Santa Cruz in early September 2009. Guided by the extensive library of work on the band, and with only a modest exhibition budget, we were only able to spend a few days examining the materials at McHenry Library and at a warehouse located off campus. With the exhibition slated to open in only six months, we worked efficiently, opening file cabinets and boxes, looking through folders and binders of show files, stacks of decorated envelopes and audience survey responses, and thousands of backstage passes. It was exhilarating to be surrounded by so much Deadiana, but also a bit overwhelming. The more we saw, the more we wanted to see—and we were acutely aware of how little time we had in Santa Cruz. With measuring tapes and digital cameras, we worked as quickly as possible, examining items as closely as museum practices and best-handling standards permit. For scholars of the Dead, the extent of



Figure 1. "Beginnings," the first section of the Gallery. Photograph by Laura Mozes, 2012.



Figure 2. Grateful Dead Ticketing Hotline case and headphones. Photograph by Laura Mozes, 2012.

their collection might not surprise, but for us, every day found us repeatedly looking at each other in amazement as we described a new find. “Who knew?” became our mantra, called out with increasing frequency and enthusiasm. There were many specific discoveries that wowed us, including a signed document between the Grateful Dead and Warner Bros. that extended the terms of their initial 1966 contract through 1969; hand-drawn sketches for the Wall of Sound; itineraries for tours; road notes and rooming lists; hundreds of hand-decorated envelopes; and even the scripts that Eileen Law, the Dead’s de facto records manager and in-house archivist, used when recording messages for the band’s hotline.

After spending a full day at the library we ventured to a warehouse near the railroad tracks and fields of artichokes to examine oversized and three-dimensional materials: posters, records (including test pressings and platinum, silver, and gold awards); travel cases for instruments and sound equipment; licensed and bootleg merchandise; souvenirs and merchandise prototypes (T-shirts, baseball caps, playing cards, dolls, and even a yarmulke); boxes of cassette tapes from the hotline; and dozens of examples of fan art. A few of our particular favorites were the four cloth character dolls depicting Jerry Garcia, Ron “Pigpen” McKernan, Bob Weir, and Mickey Hart, submitted to the band with a production plan created by a fan hoping to market them; a paper doll Grateful Dead crèche; handmade jigsaw puzzles; and illustrations by Japanese artist Miki Saito.

As we continued our artifact research, we began to formulate possible exhibition themes and subthemes. When we saw the cassette player and boxes of tapes used for the hotline the day after we had seen the hotline scripts, we knew we wanted to display all three. We were doubly pleased when, with UCSC’s help in transferring the audio recordings from magnetic to digital format, we created what we hoped would be a Proustian moment: headsets for visitors to listen to hotline messages recorded between 1983 and 1995 (fig. 2).

Among the most dramatic artifacts at the warehouse were several life-sized band member marionettes used in the 1987 “Touch of Grey” video. We got a glimpse of part of one or two of them but, because they were in boxes on a very high shelf, and the extra-strong man who had been identified to retrieve them was out sick, we left the warehouse know-

ing only that we wanted them in the exhibition—assuming they were strong enough to travel and then display upright. All in all, it was an eye-opening visit, marked by the kind of serendipity that the Dead had courted so ardently in their music. Fittingly, our trip ended on just such a note: as we waited on the tarmac to fly back to New York, Nazionale heard the pilot say “I’m Casey Jones and today I’ll be flying this plane.”

### **How Many Envelopes?**

Back in New York, we sorted our notes and photographs, compiling a preliminary checklist of over 300 exhibition items. This was another first for both of us—curating an exhibition with *all* of the content located 3,000 miles away. An additional complication was that only a very small percentage of the Grateful Dead Archive had been processed (or even examined) since the band donated it to the University the year before, in 2008; this meant that there was little to no metadata for the items we wanted to display. We had to do our own research. Thankfully, exhibitions are a group venture. We were surrounded by knowledgeable, creative people, and would soon be introduced to many more.

Because so much of the material was flat, two-dimensional, and made of paper, the exhibition had to develop a unique mode of displaying these items. We did not want visitors to be greeted by a static gallery cluttered with display cases crowded with papers and posters. Furthermore, framing individual pieces seemed contrary to the spirit and ephemeral nature of the collection. These were just some of the challenges faced by the exhibition design team, headed by Brianne Muscente, a Historical Society exhibition designer, and exhibitions and loans conservator Heidi Nakashima. Muscente soon had elevations to show us: the displays would be large, protected wall cases, for the most part, created by vertical panels covered with clear acrylic, and supported by a structure of jointed aluminum piping known as Speed-Rail. Nakashima was understandably concerned about the effect gravity would have on the paper objects from the Archive. Her solution was a special mount she created that could be used within the vertical display cases. “To safely display the artifacts vertically, we custom-made an acrylic mount for every item,” she explained afterwards. “To make the display method as

unobtrusive as possible, we used only transparent materials like Mylar and polyethylene to secure them.”

After our trip to Santa Cruz, we were able to contact several important people in the extended Grateful Dead family, including former Grateful Dead Productions staff, Gary Lambert, cohost of the syndicated “Grateful Dead Hour” radio show, and longtime band photographer Herb Greene. These connections were cemented by the appearance of Phil Lesh and Bob Weir, who performed with the Grateful Dead tribute band, Wigjam, in celebration of the upcoming exhibition.<sup>1</sup> The sight of Lesh and Weir playing in the library’s 1908 Neoclassical-style reading room was surreal—in the best possible way. As a teaser, UCSC shipped us a select group of items from the Archive that we installed in display cases for the event. New York even honored us for our efforts, underscoring the significance of the band and the upcoming exhibition by lighting the Empire State Building in tie-dye colors.

### Filling in Gaps

As we continued our research and moved toward a final exhibition checklist we realized we needed at least a few items that were not small and flat. In addition to the marionettes we wanted additional pieces, especially realia, to give the exhibition greater depth. Based on photographs sent to us from Santa Cruz, we decided to include a gloriously colorful stage backdrop based on Gary Guitierrez’s illustration of Uncle Sam (fig. 2). We also set up a video loop of Robert Nelson’s 1968 experimental film featuring the Grateful Dead, and screened segments of the 1977 *Grateful Dead Movie*. Many people in the extended Dead community—including band members—offered their help, and we were able to arrange the loan of Jerry Garcia’s guitar, Rosebud, Bob Weir’s Ace guitar (courtesy of the musician), two congas and a gong (courtesy of Mickey Hart), and an ornate wooden chair that once resided in the Grateful Dead boardroom. Finally, a private collector loaned us a harmonica that belonged to Ron “Pigpen” McKernan. To block out dust, an airtight glass booth became home to the marionettes, all the instruments, the chair, and—a last minute addition—a United States flag shipped to us by Garcia’s daughter Annabelle. It was the same flag seen in Herb Greene’s famous 1967 pho-

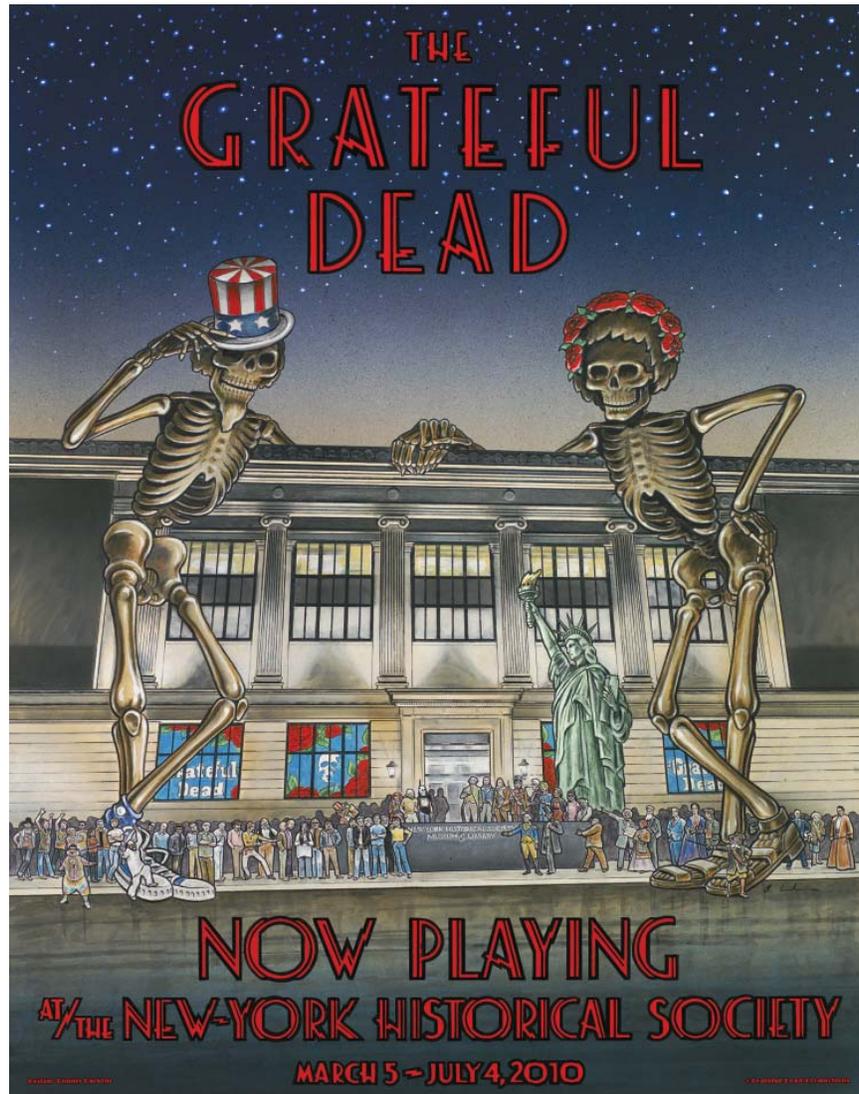
tograph, *Jerry in Front of American Flag Playing Banjo*, which was to be displayed on the wall next to the oversized case.

The community also provided us with endless amounts of vital information that we could not get anywhere else. This proved to be especially important in working with an archive that had not yet been processed, which otherwise would have made dating ephemera or internal documents for explanatory labels extremely challenging. Some of these connections produced wonderful insights: a call to Owsley Stanley, then quite ill, helped identify pen-and-ink sketches of the Wall of Sound (Bear attributed them to longtime band staffer Bob Matthews). Others went to even greater lengths. Photographer Amalie Rothschild took an active interest in our efforts: since the prints in the archive were, in her view, not worthy of display, she produced new prints especially for the exhibition, donating them to Historical Society's library. An enlargement of her January 1970 photograph of the exterior of the Fillmore East welcomed visitors at the start of the exhibition. Another visual artist connected to the Grateful Dead for many years, Dennis Larkins, created a poster for the exhibition based on the posters he designed for the famous 1980 concerts at the Warfield Theatre and Radio City Music Hall (fig. 3).

### **Ersatz Historians and Archivists**

Beyond our direct links to the extended Dead family, we got feedback and input from many fans. As much as the Deadhead community was a daunting audience to contemplate, they turned out to be an invaluable resource and were beyond generous with their knowledge and time. Fan-based websites such as [Deadlists.com](http://Deadlists.com) and [Deaddisc.com](http://Deaddisc.com), not to mention the Internet Archive and the band's official site [Dead.net](http://Dead.net), provided countless facts that we needed to create the exhibition. These sites showed that Grateful Dead fans often have extensive, detailed memories about concerts and the band's history, as well as personal collections, some vast and encyclopedic, others more idiosyncratic. In a real sense, Grateful Dead fans are ersatz historians and amateur archivists of the highest order.

Another welcome boon was the addition to our team of a young researcher and recent college graduate, Jackie Burns, a self-described



**Figure 3.** Dennis Larkins, *The Grateful Dead: Now Playing at the New-York Historical Society*, 2010. Exhibition poster, courtesy of the artist.

Deadhead who is among the most recent generation of fans. Burns's deep knowledge of the band's music and history played a key role as we assembled facts and dates and helped us track down obscure information about the band's music, documents, and objects. He even took on the task of creating the audio loop that played in the gallery. Visitors were thrilled with the selections, which we were fortunate to be able to license from Grateful Dead Productions, Rhino Records, and Ice Nine Productions.

### **A First-Class Ticket**

Two months prior to the exhibition opening, travel arrangements for all artifacts and documents were finally in place. While the bulk of the material slated for the exhibition was to come from Santa Cruz, shipments were also coming from Ohio, northern California, Oregon, and even Italy. Some objects also required special attention to ensure safe transport. Rosebud, one of three guitars made for Jerry Garcia by master luthier Doug Irwin, was on long-term loan at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland; to travel, it required a first class round-trip airplane seat. The marionettes needed individual custom-made crates: each one traveled in its own wooden sarcophagus built by a local California art shipping company, working in tandem with a second firm responsible for transporting them to New York. Those logistics created another complicating factor: whether the objects would arrive in New York with enough time for needed conservation treatments. Fortunately, Alan Balicki, the Historical Society's Chief Library Conservator, and Mike Smith, a staff exhibition technician experienced with natural history collections (including skeletons), were able to stabilize the marionettes' understructures and reinforce their heads and torsos.

So much happened so quickly in the months since we had visited Santa Cruz that it was a relief when the exhibition opened on March 5, 2010. It was also a little daunting because we envisioned fans finding all kinds of errors in our labels. Although visitors did correct a few facts, the bigger lesson was how accepting and generous the Deadhead community is. Being in the gallery while visitors of all ages enjoyed the exhibition was a real thrill. It felt like a natural extension of the Grateful Dead experience, a place where both long-term fans and those just beginning

to understand the Grateful Dead could feel at home and absorb the spirit of the band. Our team had created a very friendly, visually appealing environment, serenaded by outstanding Dead performances throughout the space.

Many visitors found out about the exhibition through the various Dead websites, social networking, and word of mouth, but a critical mass learned about the exhibition through the extensive media coverage it generated. We were interviewed by print journalists, local and national television reporters, and international radio correspondents. A local TV news anchor even declared his identity as a lifelong Deadhead while interviewing Nazionale. We also participated on a panel entitled “Living with the Dead” at the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives conference. Moderated by Todd Harvey (2010), curator of the Alan Lomax Collection at the Library of Congress and a confirmed Grateful Dead fan, the session began with Harvey displaying a cassette tape of his favorite concert, a show at Stanford University on February 9, 1973. In addition, Gary Lambert (2010) moderated a panel discussion sponsored by the Historical Society featuring author Carol Brightman, disc jockey Pete Fornatale, and Lenny Kaye, guitarist for the Patti Smith Group. A highlight of this public program was Kaye’s vivid recollections of early Dead concerts in New York City, describing how the band’s music influenced his own work.

More exciting than all the media coverage and special programs was seeing visitors in the gallery and reading their comments. Visitors of all ages attended, often in family groups that included three generations. Many had fun looking for the envelopes that they had decorated, or seeing if the survey they filled out in 1980 was one of the ones displayed. The deep connection between the Dead and their fans was obvious. The final section of the exhibition, “Community,” expanded to include the visitors. The feedback we received from visitors of all ages underlined the generosity, passion, and attention to detail of Grateful Dead fans. Based on that response and the attendance in the first few months, the exhibition was extended through Labor Day, rather than ending on July 4, as first planned.

At the end of the exhibition, what we found most special was the spirit of the Grateful Dead community (fig. 4). Visitors were entranced,

and the comments they left conveyed that eloquently. “Thank you for a wonderful walk down memory lane. I was especially stoked to see the equipment used on the old GD ticket hotline and to have a chance to hear an old mail order announcement,” one wrote. Another noted, “If you told me in 1972 that I would be viewing a ‘Dead’ exhibit at any historical society I would have thought you to be MAD!! Brought back great memories which I enjoyed sharing with my children. Viva la Dead!!” One “Deadhead since ’72, 400+ shows, etc. etc.,” called the exhibition “fantastic. Brought back many memories—old ’70s fan mailings I still have; hearing Eileen’s voice again on the phone, old t’s and posters, etc. ... brought tears to my eyes ...” Some visitors raised interesting questions: “The fan memorabilia is priceless. Can you imagine kids today adorning envelopes with artwork to get the attention of the ticket office?” Another puckishly asked, “Where is the dance floor?” And many were thoughtful, even poignant: “The exhibit was really fun. It does feel weird to see your life as history ... I wonder what legacy this generation’s music will leave?”

That sense of history was a guiding principle of the exhibition, and for many visitors, it left a profound impression. “Although I have read numerous books about the Dead, I felt like the exhibit ... pulled together the influence of the visual creativity that the Dead inspired. In every aspect of their work from tickets, posters, backstage passes, t shirts, etc, the Dead inspires and explodes with creativity. I felt this strongly in this show ...” One fan provided the best summation of the experience for us as well. “Thanks so much for putting together this very extensive and entertaining collection of rare artifacts from a band whose history is indelibly forged into the history of this country. It’s fantastic to revel in the great times of years long since past and share new memories for generations to come. The Grateful Dead is a truly great symbol of all the best aspects of the USA.” We couldn’t agree more.



**Figure 4.** Leaving the Exhibition. Design by Kira Hwang, New-York Historical Society, 2012.

#### NOTE

1. Photographs from the event can be seen at Wigjam's site, [www.wigjam.com](http://www.wigjam.com). Many cell phone videos are also available on YouTube.

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NINA NAZIONALE is Director of Library Operations at the New-York Historical Society and has worked at the Society since 1999. She has curated exhibitions at the Society and published numerous articles, chapters, and podcasts. She earned an MLS from Queens College, City University of New York, and a BA in Art History from Swarthmore College.