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The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and  
the Rhetoric of the Grateful Dead: An  
Interview with Howard Kramer

SUSAN BALTER-REITZ

On April 12, 2012, the exhibition *The Grateful Dead: The Long, Strange Trip* opened at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland, Ohio. Curated by Howard Kramer, the Museum's Curatorial Director, the exhibition was more than two years in the making, assembling hundreds of artifacts from band members, collectors, and the band's own archive. This interview focuses on the curatorial goals and challenges in mounting the exhibition with an eye toward ferreting out the larger rhetorical issues engendered by museal display of the Grateful Dead phenomenon. This transcript represents an edited version of the original interview conducted on November 28, 2012.

*Susan Balter-Reitz:* What was your experience with the Grateful Dead before you embarked on this exhibition?

*Howard Kramer:* I was fortunate enough to see them twice. The first time was at the Masonic Auditorium in Detroit on January 21, 1979. That was

an uncomfortable show: it was a cold night in January and it was very hot in the venue. The second time was at the Spectrum in Philadelphia in 1990 or '91. I went because a buddy of mine, the programmer for a radio station, had tickets, and I think we sat in the press box. And I was shocked how much I knew: I think, of everything they played that night, I didn't know two songs. I even knew when they went into "Space."

I certainly have an appreciation for them. I have a deeper appreciation for them as songwriters—that was my first appreciation; I've become more appreciative of them as a band, as a working band. I like where they come from. I don't necessarily love the result, but their roots are the very same thing that I love, so when I hear certain things in their music I enjoy those. But as songwriters, as composers, that's where I really found a deep level of admiration for them.

SBR: What prompted the exhibition at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame?

HK: We always look for exhibitions that we think are going to be, in no particular order: appealing; have enough material to make an exhibition; are subjects that merit a large-scale exhibition; and have cooperative subjects. We started talking to the Dead around 1996.

SBR: They were inducted in 1994?

HK: They were inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1994; the Museum opened in '95. Garcia died three weeks before the museum opened, so the first approach to the band was when we were getting the museum together and we wanted to get some artifacts documenting the San Francisco era. Journalist Ben Fong-Torres curated that portion, just before the museum opened. Robert Hunter came through with a number of things; the band did not.

When we did the exhibition *I Want to Take You Higher: The Psychedelic Era 1965–1969*, which opened in 1997, we approached the Dead about doing something. They said, "We're happy to be part of a show about a larger subject; we don't want to be the subject of it." And that was fine. They were in the part of the exhibition that really focused on the Fillmore: there was a video reproduction of a light show that Candace Brightman and some of the other light show artists from San Francisco

created. And we had Pigpen's Hammond B-3, and a drum set, I think, from Mickey Hart, and guitars from Jerry Garcia and Bob Weir. Then in 2000 I got a call from Pigpen's sister, saying that her brother would have wanted his stuff here.

So we now had a little core collection. Around the same time, the Grateful Dead approached us. They had five of Jerry's guitars that were sitting in storage. Did we want to exhibit them? We said, "Yes, absolutely." In fact, there were six guitars; Wolf was not part of the offer. Not too long after that is when the dispute over the ownership of the guitars Doug Irwin had made for Garcia happened. The band did not prevail in the lawsuit and the guitars were sold, so those are now in private hands. But the other four remained with us, and still do. The band imposed one condition: that the guitars be in a place where the public didn't have to pay to see them. So we created cases out in the lobby, where every visitor can see them.

SBR: Are those the ones that are upstairs now?

HK: Yes. Four of the five Jerry guitars on display are the ones that have been here for a while.

So, periodically, I kept in touch with the Dead organization. The Grateful Dead were essentially my clients. Each of the Museum's senior staff handles different artists; that's how you establish relationships. I've been here since 1996, and there had been many changes in the Dead organization, not the least of which was shutting down the office in 2005. Then they made the donation to UC Santa Cruz. Part of the terms of the band's gift was that UCSC had to work with us. Then in 2010, the Dead organization went through another transition, and now I was directed to David Lemieux. He and I had never met, so it was a cold call, but when you're calling from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, generally people pay attention.

So Dave and I started talking about an exhibition, and he liked the idea. He is essentially the conduit for all things creative related to the band and brought it to them. And they said yes, telling me to work with Santa Cruz primarily, but work with them a bit as well. So that's how it started.

But once you get *a* green light doesn't mean you get *the* green light. I still had to go to UC Santa Cruz and talk to them about it. And I did not know Nicholas Meriwether, so I basically made a trip out to the West Coast to build a foundation for relationships, to build trust. Granted, the Museum is established and we do well, but you have to establish trust. They needed to know I was a worthwhile person to work with.

I hit it off well with David and Nicholas, in part because I never pretended to be anything I'm not. I came to this job from the music business, and one thing you learn is that if you try to fool people, you will be revealed in short order. So if I don't know something, I admit it. And eventually, everybody was on board.

Then there was the Archive. Archives, generally speaking, are not lending institutions, but with Nick in my corner, I had no difficulties. However, the collection was voluminous. Much of the material was really not traditional archival material. They have a tremendous amount of two-dimensional material but they have a lot of artifacts and realia as well.

So I ended up with a lot to work with: I had Dave for the band and I had Nick for the collection. And there were a couple of other collectors who I knew.

SBR: And you had the material that you already owned.

HK: Some material was here, but we have virtually nothing of our own. I would venture to say that more than ninety percent of what's on display here is not owned by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, nor was it on loan to us prior to this exhibition. It all had to come here.

The other factor was the band's participation. It's one thing to have the band's blessing, it's another thing to have the musicians' involvement. Since the band is no longer a working band, nor is there the kind of organization they once had, I had to go to the individuals, because that's where everything was.

The first person I met with was Bill Kreutzmann, because his band 7 Walkers happened to come to Cleveland around the time the Dead had given the green light for the exhibition. He couldn't help much because he didn't keep much. That was unusual: most drummers, because they

have the most equipment, need the most space; as a result, they tend to keep stuff. Mickey Hart is one of those guys: Mickey's got everything, a great collection going back forty or fifty years—things he played with the Dead, with every other musician he's worked with, and things he's just picked up along the way.

SBR: He's a collector in general, right?

HK: Exactly, Mickey is a collector, in addition to being an archivist of his own career. Billy is the opposite of that. I had met Bobby a number of times over the years, and I had become very friendly with Dennis McNally. And even though he was not directly involved, Dennis had a real spiritual involvement with the exhibition because he has always been a great friend. He was a great sounding board for me.

So everybody got on board, with the exception of Phil Lesh, who did not loan us anything of his. However, he arranged for the loan of a Modulus bass of his that had gone to the son of one of his friends. He called the young man and asked if he would loan the bass to the exhibition and the answer was yes, so that's how we got everybody represented.

I made it clear that band participation and representation were key. Otherwise the exhibition lacks legitimacy. The Grateful Dead needed to have an actual, physical presence in the exhibition; that was their imprimatur. Once all of those elements came together—and they did, over time—it worked.

SBR: That leads into what I wanted to ask you next, because from a rhetorical point of view, you are creating a narrative that you want your audience to understand. Who do you think the audience was for the exhibition, and for the museum in general?

HK: All exhibitions are stories; an exhibition is a form of storytelling. Our audience is very broad. Everybody walks in here with a different definition of rock and roll. Some people ask, "Why would you have Metallica in here? They're not rock and roll." Or they say, "Why would you have Madonna in here, she's not rock and roll."

SBR: Do you have a definition of rock and roll? Does the Museum?

HK: My definition of rock and roll is very narrow and rooted in when it began. I believe that rock and roll is black music played by white people in the style of black musicians. There is a profound difference between how white people play music and how black people play music. Paul Whiteman may have called himself the King of Jazz, but he was never the king of jazz; it was a marketing term. He was never Louis Armstrong; he was never Sidney Bechet.

That's my definition of rock and roll, but we, as an institution, take a much broader view. It includes, for our purposes, all the roots of rock and roll: gospel, rhythm and blues, folk, country, bluegrass, blues, ragtime; the American song form, going back to Stephen Foster, even minstrel singing, because that was also part of the American popular song form. Jazz as well, because there's a point where jazz divided.

Visitors come here secure in their own knowledge. They believe that they know a lot about rock and roll—that's something we've found, universally, in surveys we've done, in market research—but everybody's definition is different. What we try to do is address false memory or false nostalgia—I'm using this as a term that Chuck Berry gave—and actually teach people something that they didn't know. We provide a little bit more information about something, enlightening them about a connection they were unaware of, help them see how all the pieces fit together. Hip-hop does not exist in a vacuum; hip-hop has an actual history that is directly related to rock and roll and rhythm and blues. Disco is not bad; dancing is not bad. That's how you have to approach it.

As far as the audience for the exhibition, we don't do separate admissions so I can't gauge it by numbers. One thing we've discovered with the Grateful Dead exhibition, more than any other exhibition we've ever done, is that patrons either are interested or don't care at all. The shocking thing we found is that extreme: "Grateful Dead? Oh yeah, cool," or, "Grateful Dead? Eh, I don't want to see that."

SBR: When I was there I heard a patron say "eh" and leave. I thought, "Whoa, you don't usually hear that in a museum."

HK: It's partly a function of the material. For most patrons, if we go to a major art museum and there's an exhibition on twentieth-century

sculpture, we may know a little bit about the subject, we may even have a favorite, but unless we're experts, we won't be completely versed in it. Rock and roll is different. Rock and roll is the only art form that is completely universal. Everybody has some passionate connection, in some way, to the music.

SBR: Do you have any theories about why people are either interested or disinterested in the Dead?

HK: I think there is a social aspect of the Grateful Dead that people either subscribe to or don't. I think that the image of the Grateful Dead—and in the West, people are obsessed with image—colors peoples' perception of the band. I'll admit it colored my perception when I was younger; I wasn't particularly interested. But when I got to understand their music, I began to understand its richness and depth: "Oh yeah, they do Jimmy Reed and Chuck Berry, I love Jimmy Reed and Chuck Berry. Oh, they do the Stanley Brothers, I like the Stanley Brothers. I'd like to listen to some more bluegrass—oh, Jerry plays some of that with David Grisman; wow, that's really cool. Oh, that's an awesome version of 'Wild Horses'; I love the Rolling Stones." You start seeing the connections, and if you can peel away the visual image, you get to see what they really are.

There are also a number of people who trust us, who walk in with open minds and are willing to say, "Well, if the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame did this, let's see what they're doing." Which is what I hope for.

SBR: When you sat down with all your materials to put this together, who was your audience? Who were you creating the exhibition for?

HK: I thought there would be people who knew nothing about the Grateful Dead and people who knew everything about the Grateful Dead. And I had to get it right for both of them. As a curator, you have to have a balance. You have to make sure that when you are constructing the text that it informs without being patronizing, and it doesn't go over people's heads. It has to have enough common reference points for non-fans to be able to understand.

In the discussion of touring, for instance, that brings in Alembic and Modulus, small companies the band patronized and helped to build.

A patron can see, “Oh wow, these guys believed in shopping local.” Yes, they also played Fenders and Gibsons, but an Alembic was a custom instrument made in nearby Santa Rosa. So part of my challenge was to get these little things in there without it turning into a discussion of the circuitry of a guitar. Most visitors don’t care about that—and that level of detail doesn’t serve the story.

SBR: It sounds like you don’t have the luxury of targeting an audience.

HK: It’s a challenge but not a problem, simply because it’s a universal issue with any museum. We did an exhibition about the Beatles and found that there’s still information about the Beatles that you can present that even expert fans did not know—and not trivia, either. In the end, it’s all about the story.

SBR: What was the narrative structure for the exhibition?

HK: The idea for the narrative structure of the exhibition came from Roger McNamee. Roger is an accomplished musician himself and a very successful venture capitalist. He’s an important member of our board of directors and he’s also a Grateful Dead fan and collector—he owns the artwork for *Live/Dead*, for example.

SBR: Did he loan that artwork?

HK: Yes. I finally met him when I made my first reconnaissance trip to California. I went to his house and saw his collection, which is most impressive, and he sat me down and made it very clear that the Grateful Dead are not the sum total of the events in their career. The Grateful Dead are about things. Things went on around the Grateful Dead because the Grateful Dead concentrated on one thing, and that’s the music.

Roger helped me understand that the exhibition ultimately had to deal with the music. Everything else is secondary to the band onstage or on record. That led to a vision of the exhibition as a set of concentric circles: at the center you have the band. Who are they? What did they make? They made records and they wrote songs. And outside of that were the people who influenced them, like Neal Cassady and Ken Kesey, and the people they influenced, like Bill Graham, who also influenced them.

And then beyond that, they were a performing band, so there's touring, and the whole method of touring that they developed, which was very seasonal. Like baseball season and basketball season, you knew when it was coming: East Coast, West Coast; summer and fall; New Year's, Chinese New Year's; you knew what to expect. Dead tours developed into a very dependable thing, which also helped to propagate the lifestyle. Which then led to fans and tapers, another circle. The taper is a Grateful Dead phenomenon: it wasn't unique to them, but the Dead scene refined taping and made it an integral part.

SBR: I think it become more visible in part because there were earlier tapers. Garcia was a taper.

HK: Yes, and it was not about the cloak-and-dagger part of taping the shows; I think it was an incredible contribution tapers made to the music and to the audience in general.

Since we are an artifact-based historical museum, we included gear. People want to see the real thing. So the sixth floor had stage artifacts and items. Another aspect is that the Grateful Dead have more visuals associated with them than any other group that I can possibly imagine. It was important to me not to just have another FD-26, the famous Skull and Roses poster, on display; everybody has seen that. It's valuable and significant, no question: an original first printing can fetch more than \$20,000 and it's a beautiful poster, now a classic piece of Americana. But everybody knows it.

So my goal, one that I developed over many visits with collectors years before this exhibition was even a possibility, was to display original artwork. Roger had some; others came to me more circuitously. A few were just serendipitous. I worked on an exhibition on the psychedelic era that opened in Hungary about a year ago, and one of the guys who was involved owned tons of original artwork by Wes Wilson, Stanley Mouse, Alton Kelley, and Victor Moscoso. He had three Wes Wilson works from 1966, and those are the ones that we displayed upstairs, because it's one thing to see a print, but its entirely different to see the work that led to it. When you see the actual original painting for the cover of an album that's been sitting on your shelf since 1974, that's far more meaningful. When

Gary Grimshaw, the poster artist from Detroit, visited, he said seeing Rick Griffin's painting of *Without a Net* was a very powerful experience for him because he knew Rick. This is one of the last works Griffin did—he died less than a year later. It was very important to Gary to see the real thing.

Exhibitions in the context of this type of museum, an artifact-based historical museum, must display real items. A cast of a dinosaur bone is fine for a natural history museum, so people can get an idea of the scale of the femur of a Tyrannosaurus Rex, but we can't just have an exemplar: "Oh, this is just like the guitar that Bob Weir played." No, this *is* the guitar that Weir played.

SBR: Obviously, some visitors are going to be disappointed about things that aren't here. What constraints did you have? What limited your ability to tell the story?

HK: There was only one limitation imposed by the band, and that was that any audio we used be legitimately released, which I thought was completely reasonable. The doctrine of fair use gives an organization a lot of leeway, but why annoy a subject? People are being generous; don't bite the hand that feeds you.

SBR: What other constraints did you face?

HK: Time. I wish I had been able to do more with the fans. I had an idea, late in the planning, for a user-generated display of photographs taken at Grateful Dead shows—fans and friends in the parking lot, at the show—in an endless loop. I wanted fans to send in images and then see them on a screen in the exhibition. There wasn't time for that, which was disappointing.

SBR: What about the space? Obviously it limits the number of artifacts and shapes how you display them.

HK: The space is the space. I don't even think about that. It's roughly 5,000 square feet, but that's good for what we're doing. It's a pretty artifact-rich exhibition. The problem with that space is that it's idiosyncratic.

We don't have a black box—four walls that we can move and rearrange. It has its shape, so I deal with it.

SBR: How about material? Were there things you didn't get that you wanted? Did you have free rein with the Archive?

HK: With the Archive, yes; both what the Grateful Dead had and what Santa Cruz had. There were no points where they said, "This is off limits."

SBR: So when you decided on the concentric circles narrative, did you know what artifacts you were looking for?

HK: In some sections I did; in some sections it was more a question of, where does this best fit? It all depends on what you are doing. There are records, songs, and a tremendous collection of lyric manuscripts. Rhino has all of the original master tape boxes and they shared them. When I opened up a box for *Aoxomoxoa*, there were Jerry's original notes.

Some of it was fortuitous; you never know what you are going to find. But the process has a tendency to really work itself out in the most organic and spiritual way. I've seen that with other exhibitions, too. For the Who's *Tommy* exhibition, it was the first time we did a subject that was that narrow. It basically covered twenty months of the Who's career and that's it. But the amount of material that we found was mind-boggling, so we said, "Well, we'll make all this stuff fit, somehow"—and it did.

SBR: Did you get a chance to go to the New-York Historical Society exhibition?

HK: Yes, I did.

SBR: Did you have any ideas about how your exhibit would intersect with that?

HK: I knew there was going to be some common artifacts, and in fact, we shipped the "Touch of Grey" skeletons out here, only to discover they were too difficult to deal with. We didn't exhibit them. We're not going to jeopardize an artifact.

The New York exhibition was a third of the size of ours and it was not nearly as ornate, for lack of a better term; theirs was a different type of

exhibition. I wasn't worried. I knew that there was going to be very little crossover with what they did and what we were doing.

SBR: I didn't see too much overlap, but there are some similar themes.

HK: There are some universals; some obvious items, like the answering machine for the hotline, but we presented it differently. We had a listening station with the red phones.

SBR: When you create a themed exhibition like this one, do you have a template?

HK: In terms of the visual design, because we have such an idiosyncratic space, we make a point of trying to make the space look and feel different every time. For the John Lennon exhibition, for example, we used a very simple, harmonious color scheme throughout. The Clash had a different design scheme, presenting the band based upon its achievements. Each record was its own chapter, with each related to a different geographic area. The first three records were recorded in London, the third in New York and then in Kingston. So we had all of these different vibes and colors that could be incorporated, and we told the story that way, which was also chronological.

With the Grateful Dead, there were so many visuals associated with the band, so many icons: roses, skulls, lightning bolts, dancing bears. It could have been a damned gift shop, and we didn't want to do that. John Sliboda, who designed the exhibit, had a lot of conversations with me, and ultimately it came down to the band's status as an American band, born of American elements, that created a kind of society around them. John took that idea and—because they're a California band with Western themes, an American group with this traveling sideshow vibe—his design provided a touch of a Western circus feel.

That's why the colors are muted. That's why there's a slight sepia tone to it. There are no bright colors, just a very subtle hint of tie-dye in the background. We didn't do tie-dye throughout. We wanted visitors to go through and think, "that looks like a sideshow tent," just from the colors and the materials that John picked out. That's how you make the space different.

The other thing about the Grateful Dead that shaped the design came from Roger's initial discussions with me. This exhibition is not about achievements on a timeline; it's about the story, the zeitgeist, the gestalt of the Grateful Dead. There have been a lot of conversations here recently about how we need to tell the stories differently. How do we try different things? I think some people don't have enough of an affinity for the band to take the time to look at the mechanics of the exhibition. There are ways that you can eliminate the subject and still see what the skeleton is, pardon the pun. Some get it; some don't.

SBR: The themes of the narratives of the exhibition are in the skull. Why did you choose that icon?

HK: John just saw that as a simple mechanism. Highly recognizable, and flexible enough to be made into a text panel. When you are putting the text up, you have to give people a simple place to work from.

SBR: There is a lot of research in museum studies on how people interact with the textual elements, especially in art museums and artifact-based museums.

HK: I'm very good friends with the people who run the theater museum at the Victoria and Albert in London. This is England, it's a high-level museum, and yet they will not display a text panel over 200 words, maybe 225. I was surprised; I thought British museumgoers were more inclined to read.

SBR: I think they get tired and overwhelmed.

HK: Yet I also think, in this museum, we'll get people who will read everything. They're willing to immerse themselves in it. The scholars who come to the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association conferences want to read exhibition text. They're also the ones who will call me out on mistakes. The big one I made was the song that the Dead performed the most was not "Truckin'," it was "Me and My Uncle." But their original composition that they performed the most was "Truckin".

SBR: Any last thoughts?

HK: One of the problems we face as an institution is that people look at us as pop, as entertainment in a light sense. We have very rarely—twice, maybe three times in the course of our existence—had our exhibitions subjected to what I consider to be real critical rigor. The *Women in Rock* exhibition was one; there's a really great piece written about it in the *Wall Street Journal*. The Lennon exhibition got a couple of good write-ups, as did *The Psychedelic Era*. But generally speaking, it's some pop music critic in the local paper who covers us. That's more like generating PR.

I would love to see more critical rigor. Two weeks ago I was in Paris for a conference on music museums, and I was the token American. The first half of the conference was theoretical and academic, the other half was practical. They had me and representatives from the Victoria and Albert, two museums in France, a new one in Denmark, and a new one in Norway, all talking as practitioners. The one thing we all talked about was the need for more critical rigor. By definition, that will elevate what we do. We will have to do better jobs. And the public, after reading these critiques, will realize there's something more here.

Rock and roll is important because it resonates; that's why it is culturally the most important art form. It has covered so many decades and affected so many hundreds of millions of peoples' lives, throughout the world, whether it's James Brown influencing the people in East Africa, or Fats Domino in Jamaica, or Bill Hayley in Germany. This is the most incredible art form in the world. And as the lone American there, after listening to people speaking for five or six hours, the first thing I said was, "I'm amazed and deeply touched how this American outsider music"—and it *is* outsider music—"became such a rallying cry for you all." That's what defines great art.

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SUSAN BALTER-REITZ is Associate Professor of Communication and Theatre at Montana State University–Billings. Her research interests include argumentation theory, free speech, audience studies, and visual rhetoric. She has presented on the Grateful Dead to a variety of conferences and institutions, and is a frequent presenter at the Grateful Dead Scholars Caucus, where she serves on the Program Committee.

HOWARD KRAMER served as Curatorial Director of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum (1996–2014) where he was lead curator of exhibitions on the Rolling Stones, Hank Williams, Motown Records, the Clash, and the Who's *Tommy*. He is the author of *The Rolling Stones: 50 Years of Rock* (Krause, 2011) and contributed to *The Cambridge Companion to the Beatles* (2009) and *Bruce Springsteen: Cultural Studies and the Runaway American Dream* (Ashgate, 2012). Now a curatorial consultant, his clients include Heritage Auction Galleries, Elvis Presley Enterprises, and Third Man Records.