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REVIEWS

Grateful Dead. *Europe '72: The Complete Recordings*. Rhino GRA2 6023, 2011. 73 CD box set with 100-page book, booklet, and ephemera. \$450.00.

MIKE DOLGUSHKIN

For years, Deadheads in various online forums had suggested, half-jokingly, that the band release the fabled 1972 Europe tour in its entirety. Of course, that would never happen. No band, not even the Grateful Dead, had ever done such a thing. The logistics of putting together a project of that scale would be, to say the least, daunting, and the probable retail price of such a release would surely not net enough sales to make it worthwhile. Conventional wisdom would rightfully serve to nip such an ambitious undertaking right in the proverbial bud. We loyal Dead fans would have to content ourselves with the circulating tapes of the tour, most of which were quite good, and the occasional single show or compilation that Rhino might release.

Leave it to the Grateful Dead to ignore conventional wisdom. In January 2011, after a few vague teasers, Rhino announced that plans were in the works to release the complete Europe tour at \$450.00 a pop, provided that enough people pre-ordered to make the project feasible. After much frantic plundering of bank accounts, taking of second jobs, and convincing of spouses, *Europe '72: The Complete Recordings* sold out in a matter of days. This occurred before production had even begun, meaning that no one was sure what they would exactly get. In late August, when the full set with all the trimmings began to ship, those fortunate enough to have ordered it held in their hands an amazing chronicle of one of the Grateful Dead's peak periods in their performing history. Less obvious are the ways in which the release itself contributed to the band's ongoing history as a sociological phenomenon.

That the April–May 1972 Europe tour is one of the Grateful Dead's very best, perhaps the best, is without question. *The Complete Recordings*,

in its deluxe steamer trunk edition, does a masterful job of putting this period into context with a full-color book featuring gorgeous photos and essays by Blair Jackson, Henry Kaiser, Sam Cutler, and others, a reproduction of the book available at the tour-closing London Lyceum shows, and liner notes for every show.¹ In a nutshell, this tour represented the culmination of the rebuilding process that had begun after drummer Mickey Hart left the band in February 1971. The Dead carried on for a few months in their original five-piece configuration, somewhat at a loss at which direction to take, but playing some very fine shows in the process. After August, resident bluesman Ron “Pigpen” McKernan became seriously ill, and a replacement keyboard player, Keith Godchaux, seemingly appeared out of nowhere. It is significant that Phil Lesh, in his autobiography, stated that he felt Godchaux filled the hole that Hart left (2005, 199). As the band’s sound changed with the subtraction of a drummer, so, too, did it morph with the addition of a keyboard player. Godchaux was already adept at several musical styles and reportedly could master quickly those he was not familiar with. Most significantly, he could improvise at will, employing a jazz sensibility that helped propel the Grateful Dead’s jams into increasingly uncharted territory over the next three years.

Further fueling this new improvisational style was remaining drummer Bill Kreutzmann. By April 1972 he had settled back comfortably into the role of sole percussionist. Lesh later remarked that Kreutzmann “played like a young god” (Jackson 1999, 230) on this tour and indeed, he performed with a fluidity that adapted to any situation, ready with the proper accent when needed and capable of kicking the music in new directions. Kreutzmann’s drumming was a major factor during the Grateful Dead’s turn-on-a-dime period in which the band could seemingly shift gears at the drop of a hat.

Of course, another factor contributing to the nature of the Dead’s jams at this time was Garcia’s guitar, the fabled “Nash Strat” (Jackson 2006, 110). During the shorter, discrete songs he relied on a country twang for the most part, a holdover from the *Workingman’s Dead* and *American Beauty* period. On the jams, however, Garcia ventured into a decidedly “liquid” mode, a perfect fit for the loose, often scary improvisations characteristic of the band’s sound in 1972. In fact, the wah-wah-propelled

crescendo known by some fans as “The Tiger” reached its full fruition during the Europe tour. This was truly a musical realm that no other band had assayed.

And complementing Garcia perfectly were guitarist Bob Weir and bassist Phil Lesh. As David Crosby commented to Steve Silberman, who wrote the liner notes for the May 3, 1972, Paris show:

Weir was another lead player, not the rhythm player you would expect. Along with Phil’s completely unorthodox bass melody, that’s what enabled the band to play three running melodies simultaneously. It was a completely new way for an electric band to play, and no other group has done it successfully. (2011, 2–3)

This amazing counterpoint between the three players is much in evidence on these recordings—but simultaneously, Weir and Lesh also joined with Kreutzmann to form a swinging rhythm section throughout these shows. No mean feat, that.

With the addition of Keith Godchaux’s wife Donna Jean on occasional vocals, and the return of Pigpen the previous December, this was the band that departed for Europe on April Fool’s Day 1972. The book included with the deluxe set gathers together all of the wonderful and oft-told stories that sprang from the tour. And now we can listen to the entire accompanying musical journey in almost complete form, in chronological order if we want. What may surprise Dead fans who did not see the band until later years is that anywhere from half to three-quarters of the tunes played at one show would be repeated at the next, and the nightly main jam basically alternated between “Truckin’” into “The Other One,” and “Dark Star” into (usually) “Sugar Magnolia.” This was a function of the band playing longer shows, but drawing on a smaller repertoire than in their post-1975 period. (If you listen to the tour in chronological order, you will notice that different tunes do begin to appear toward the end.) This seeming repetitiveness does not, however, detract from the quality of the performances. There is literally not a bad show in this entire run. Some are better than others, but only by a matter of degree.

The repertoire during the 1972 Europe tour mainly consisted of newer material. Some of the old chestnuts like “The Other One” and

“Morning Dew” are present, along with the surviving *Workingman’s Dead* and *American Beauty* numbers, but the majority of what was played in Europe consists of tunes that likely would have been on what Robert Hunter once called the “kicker follow-up” to *American Beauty* (Jackson 1992, 226). Songs like “Bertha,” “Jack Straw,” “Playing in the Band,” and “Tennessee Jed” were instead dribbled out over a series of live and solo releases. And, of course, the Dead typically played new material a lot when first introduced.

Highlights and surprises abound throughout this set. The jams from Rotterdam, the second night in Wembley, and the closing night at the Lyceum have long been held in high regard, but some others, notably those from the second Copenhagen and the second Lyceum shows, reveal themselves to be just as strong. It is fascinating to hear “Playing in the Band” quite suddenly double in length during the last two shows of the tour. And Pigpen, not usually regarded as a strong presence on this tour since he embarked upon it against doctor’s orders, comes roaring out of the gate, providing a number of hot renditions, all with inventive raps, of “Good Lovin’” and “Caution,” along with his zippy “Chinatown Shuffle” and moody “The Stranger.” Not only that, his organ playing is very much in evidence throughout these recordings, contradicting the notion that he was instrumentally absent. However, it is Garcia playing organ during the verses on the tour’s last four renditions of “Good Lovin’,” the final two of which also lack a mid-jam Pigpen rap. Why, we do not know.

Before this release, I often felt “inside the music” while listening to the best circulating tapes of this tour, a quality now present on all of these recordings. Besides the fact that the Plangent Processes were used during production to remove the anomalies present on the original tapes, the shows are mixed in such a way that each instrument and vocal can be heard clearly, but still blend enough to provide the music with drive, punch, and presence. Not that each show sounds the same: the different acoustic properties of the venues are noticeable even on these sixteen-track tapes. But this release reveals another aspect of the recordings—namely, the tunes selected and overdubbed for the original *Europe ’72* album issued five and a half months after the tour. This overdubbing was done onto the master recordings so that no loss in sonic quality would

occur, resulting in original vocal tracks being permanently erased. While two-track masters were also recorded during the tour and were reportedly used in production of this set (specifically to patch gaps in the master sixteen-track recordings), the overdubbed songs appear for the most part in their altered form. While this means that parts of this new release are not presented as originally played, they nonetheless tell the story of an important facet of the recorded history of the 1972 Europe tour.²

The deluxe steamer trunk edition indeed documents that fabled tour as it never has been, with a compelling combination of music, stories, and photographs. But the release of this monumental project also sheds much light on the Grateful Dead scene of 2011. First, Rhino's release of an entire tour indicates that, at this point, anything is possible. Fans are already clamoring for Spring 1977 in its entirety, as well as Fall 1972 and other fabled tours and eras. Second, Rhino has proven itself extremely adaptable to public demand. Initially, the label's response to provide for those fans unable or unwilling to buy the full set was to release a second *Europe '72* compilation containing no tunes included on the original LP, which proved problematic in selecting jam material since "Truckin'," "Morning Dew," and "Sugar Magnolia" were already represented.³ Then, after the boxed set sold out, a "music-only" edition without the extras was offered at the same price, still a bargain considering how much one would be paying for each show. Numerous fans ordered this, some of whom actually received the full boxed set after others who ordered extra copies decided not to pay for them. A few months later, again bowing to public demand, Rhino began to offer each show individually, taking care of those not interested in the entire tour but willing to pick up specific shows.

Unfortunately, the logistics involved in shipping a project of this magnitude often appeared beyond Rhino's grasp. By the end of September, the Dead.net discussion about this release had received numerous reports of sets not arriving or being sent to the wrong place, particularly from overseas customers. Others complained about the futility of trying to change payment methods or addresses after orders were initially placed (fortunately, staffer Mary Eisenhart proved a great go-between and problem solver). Many fans were not happy with the packaging, particularly the cardboard sleeves which are actually not unique to this release. Here

I must agree with the common sentiment that Rhino needs to go back to jewel cases for better protection of the discs. (To their credit, Rhino has taken that criticism to heart and announced the use of digipaks with trays for the upcoming *Dave's Picks* series.) In my own experience, even when I used the recommended pinching-in-the-middle-of-the-edge method to remove the discs, they still sometimes emerged bearing slight scratches and, more often, covered with a thin layer of dust (this is true of the *Road Trips* releases as well). Defective or damaged discs have been reported; my own experience with *Europe '72: The Complete Recordings* has been trouble-free, although it was amusing to get Rhino's email that the box had shipped about a week after it arrived.

Other complaints take the meaning of the term "picky Deadhead" to a new level, especially those concerning the extras expected in the full boxed set. While frustration about not receiving the personalized and numbered sticker promised upon ordering is understandable, a few folks wrote to Dead.net wondering where were the big map, ticket reproductions, news clippings, and the rest, since all that came in the box besides the discs and books was a sticker. The original announcement, though, made it fairly clear that the final form of the deluxe set had not yet been determined. Other gripes had to do with the sound quality of the music, with some fans claiming that the version of the April 24 Dusseldorf show did not sound as good as the one released as *Rockin' the Rhine*, and that the Wembley shows did not hold a candle sonically to the same material released on *Steppin' Out*. Others disagreed; clearly, tastes differ.

Contrary to what the title implies, the recordings included in *Europe '72: The Complete Recordings* are not technically complete. About half of "Big Boss Man" and all of "Casey Jones" are missing from the first night's first set; completists have to rely on the audience recording of that show, poor as it is. Likewise, the liner notes to the April 21 Bremen show mention the soundcheck tunes but the discs do not include them, and the absence of Rotterdam's encore is not explained.

Cavils aside, however, the positive aspects of *Europe '72: The Complete Recordings* greatly outweigh the negative. I purchased the deluxe set and found it well worth the price. The music the Grateful Dead played in Europe during the spring of 1972 was nothing short of amazing;

the books and liner notes included with the set complete the story. And the online commentary about the release, even the negative, reveal the amazing passion people still have for a band that has not existed in sixteen years. Grateful Dead Productions and Rhino deserve enormous credit for pulling off this feat—a release that honors the scale and significance of the music it preserves and now makes accessible, for the first time, to the public, and for posterity.

NOTES

1. Among the liner notes for the individual shows are several written by attendees, which provide a different viewpoint from those of the usual historians, and one written by the man who recorded the audience tape of the May 24 Lyceum show, which for many years served as the only circulating recording.
2. While “Truckin’” from the May 26 Lyceum show is the same as that released on *Europe '72*, the version on the previously circulating recording of this show does not contain the overdubs.
3. This problem was solved by using the “Dark Star” > “Other One” sequence from Bickershaw as the basis for the jam on this compilation.

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