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## Editor's Column: Icons and Iconoclasts

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## EDITOR'S COLUMN

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### Icons and Iconoclasts

NICHOLAS G. MERIWETHER

In 1993, a reporter asked Jerry Garcia what he thought about the Grateful Dead's increasing critical approval. "Well, it's a little like bad architecture—or an old whore," he chuckled. "If you stick around long enough, everyone gets respect, eventually" (Jenkins 1993, E1). Garcia's self-deprecating humor got an appreciative laugh from his interviewer, a Bay Area journalist who appreciated the Dead's achievement and knew their work ethic. But the reluctant band leader's remarks also pointed to the tangled and turbulent acculturation that attends artists who challenge mainstream mores, a process that finally adapts culture, forcing it to absorb or at least accept those singular voices, turning the iconoclasts of a generation into icons of an era.

Critical commentary often charts that process, and this volume of *Grateful Dead Studies* explores several strands of that ongoing cultural discussion. Four essays document the band's influence and significance in a range of contexts, from history to law to media studies; the range of theoretical perspectives and disciplines shows how the questions the Grateful Dead raise and the themes in their history can bridge and link even often quite disparate approaches. Along with the reviews, which contribute perspectives from business theory, journalism, philosophy, and musicology, these essays all demonstrate the Dead's ability to invoke

and illuminate even well-entrenched issues in these fields, with often surprising yet compelling results. That resonance and topicality can be seen in the recordings and books reviewed here as well, which also mark the steady transition of this former countercultural phenomenon into the mainstream of American history and culture.

Icons can be seen as a culmination of that process, but they embody a complexity that resists easy distillation; what they represent and how they do so is always more contested than any fan may wish, or any critic allows. Since the 1960s, admirers hailed the Dead as icons of a range of ideas and causes, usually projections of their own agendas, just as detractors cast the Dead as iconoclasts, counterculturalists whose primary goal was destructive. Both views ignored the reality their distorted depiction obscured, but both views raise the questions, how did the band become an icon? And what does that status mean today?

Religious scholars and art historians differ on the lineage and antiquity of iconic practice, but agree on the importance of icons in religious devotion by the third century CE. In the middle ages, icons were more than just objects of veneration: in Peter Brown's words, "The icon was a hole in the dyke separating the visible world from the divine, and through this hole there oozed precious dribbles from the great sea of God's mercy" (1982, 260–61). That view—and that use—faded with time, as icons "rose to prominence as so many visions frozen in encaustic and mosaic" (1982, 183). Yet the meaning of those visions remained fluid, signifying different things to different eyes, with the only point of agreement their power.

That remains true today. As Daniel T. Rodgers observed, "Modern secular icons, like their spiritual originals, connect those within their aura with fields of power" (2015, 156). Rodgers skillfully draws on Brown's analysis of medieval icons—a use that this introduction borrows—but he goes on to note that even icons of nationalism convey multiple meanings. That ambiguity challenges viewers and critics alike; as Rodgers asks, "what if, when you bring an icon into close embrace, not one god springs forth but a whole clutch of them?" (2015, 156) His question points to the ways that all icons, including modern secular ones, can evoke those older spiritual functions, serving as a door, a device that opens to let some deeper truth shine through the veil of the mundane—even acting as a

signpost, in other words, pointing to new space, to use the famous phrase from Charles Reich's interview with Jerry Garcia (1972, 127).

Yet the context of that remark also reveals how the Dead's attitude could be misconstrued as iconoclastic: the way they courted chaos, reveling in its transformational potential, could be misread as destructive. One journalist in the Haight described Garcia as having "taken [his] mind apart with drugs" and sniffed, "He and the Dead have been ridden by critics as musical illiterates and drug addicts leading flower children down the path of sin" (Wolfe 1968, 38). Dismissing their music and lyrics, this journalist thought that "the other way they delineate the hippie style is to blast is to blast everything at top volume with amplifiers that so that all other sounds of the world are drowned out," all part of a concerted effort "to challenge the old order's moral structure in a loud, aggressive, blunt manner" (Wolfe 1968, 37).

Yet Garcia made clear the band's fundamentally positive intent in his interview with Reich:

Formlessness and chaos lead to new forms. And new order. Closer to, probably, what the real order is. When you break down the old orders, and the old forms and leave them broken and shattered, you suddenly find yourself a new space with new form and new order which are more like the way it is. (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner 1972, 128)

Breaking through a barrier in order to reach the truth could be seen as iconoclastic, but what Garcia described could also be seen as the older, medieval function of an icon: to let in the light from the other side, a revelation here not of the infinite grace of God's love and mercy, but of a mystery nonetheless as vast and absolute as "the real order" that Garcia sought. It is a view connected to the idea of epiphany, the manifestation of the divine in the mundane and secular made famous by James Joyce, one of the Dead's literary influences, as Eric Levy (2015) has explored. That same sense of shared discovery, of shared insight, came to define the Dead's project: creating music, especially in concert, that did serve as a conduit for the ineffable. Over time, the band—the musicians who courted that muse and shared that inspiration with audiences—would come to be seen as avatars, and finally as icons. And, in that sense, the Dead were

indeed acting as icons, in that older sense of serving as both portal and vessel, courting the enduring mystery of consciousness and connection that inspiration invokes.

The word icon derives from the Greek εἰκών (*eikōn*), “image” or “resemblance,” a term that immediately invokes the concept of representation. If the representations that icons convey are varied, subjective, and contentious, that complexity also defines how the theme of representation winds through the essays here. Peter Richardson’s “‘Let Fate Decide the Rest’: The Grateful Dead, Quietism, and the Politics of Utopia” explores the Dead’s project through the lens of the politics of the countercultural milieu of the Haight-Ashbury in the 1960s, showing how the band’s goals of ecstasy, mobility, and community forged a compelling model and an enduring legacy. Richardson explains how the ideals animating the band’s project eluded or confounded contemporary commentators and have continued to confuse the band’s reception since then; Jay Williams provides an example of how that misperception played out in his “Jerry Alfred Garcia Hitchcock,” analyzing how director Richard Lester’s film *Petulia* cast the band in a negative light that celluloid cemented. That representation embodies the often paradoxical role the counterculture played in the mainstream media at the time and after.

Paradox describes the tangled role of copyright in the Dead’s history, as Susan Balter-Reitz discusses in “‘We Can Share What We Got of Yours’: Reflections on the Copyright Paradox in the Grateful Dead Community.” The complicated stance of the band toward their music and recordings, simultaneously trying to permit fan taping while protecting their work and navigating a legal environment not designed to allow that kind of flexibility, goes to the heart of intellectual property and the larger legal labyrinth that the Dead had to navigate. That labyrinth also defines the challenges artists confront with how they are represented, which is the subject of Jordan McClain’s essay. One measure of an artist’s significance is the influence she has on other artists, and McClain explores how *Rolling Stone* framed its coverage of Phish in terms of the Grateful Dead, highlighting the implications of that representation for both the bands and their critics.

*Rolling Stone* began in 1967, the year the Dead recorded their debut album for Warner Bros., which is the subject of the Features section. Jesse Jarnow's "The Grateful Dead Meet the World" explores the broader context informing the recording by focusing on the Dead's little-known first foray into Canada in the summer of 1966, which set the stage for what they did in the studio the following January. Roberto Rabanne's photographs provide an intimate view of those sessions, a perspective that he knew would be important when he made the decision to hitchhike down from San Francisco to help capture what was unfolding in Burbank.

By that time, the Dead's identity was already firmly entwined with the Haight, and the contradictions and confusion of that association were already complicating their work—and lives. That would persist long after they had left the Haight, forever coloring how they were viewed in the music industry. More than twelve years later, Garcia still found it "really difficult to extrapolate from the Grateful Dead to the music business or the music scene—we're really not quite in that whole world as its presently constructed" (Gans 2002, 51). While that independence hampered them from a conventional business perspective, it also provided a powerful foundation for their unique artistic vision, which ultimately translated into enormous commercial success. The reviews here all address aspects of that complex history.

The foundation of the band's work was always the music, especially in performance, and two reviews examine recent archival releases that add to our understanding of that effort. *DeadBase* coauthor Mike Dolgushkin's penetrating assessment of the band's historic 1972 European tour explains why the mammoth box set documenting the complete tour earned critical acclaim as well as eye-opening commercial success. The work ethic and artistic creativity that defined that tour continues today, as philosopher Stanley J. Spector's thoughtful review of Furthur's two-night stand at Shoreline Amphitheatre in June 2011 explores. Concert prowess was always the most visible aspect of their business acumen, which the final two reviews assess. Business journalist Glenn Rifkin, whose 2010 article first described the relevance of the Dead's formidable example for managers, examines Barry Barnes' acclaimed analysis of the band's business history, *Everything I Know About Business I Learned From the Grateful*

*Dead*. Barnes extends that analysis in his review of Brian Halligan and David Meerman Scott's book-length introduction to the band's advertising and outreach acumen, *Marketing Lessons from the Grateful Dead*.

The foundation of the band's business philosophy was the respect they gave their work and accorded fans. The Dead profoundly understood that their approach to performance relied on and explicitly included their audience, blurring the boundaries that defined music making in ways that still challenge commentators, frustrate critics, and inspire colleagues. This volume's Last Words embrace that inclusive ethos with an unpublished poem by occasional band lyricist Robert M. Petersen. Written in 1964, shortly before Petersen began his collaboration with Phil Lesh, "Noyo River" sketches several themes and images that would inform the handful of lyrics that he penned for the band. As someone who straddled the divide between insider and witness, lyricist and poet, Petersen represented a kind of icon in his own right, though one so specific to the Dead's milieu that few beyond that circle know him.

In many ways, though, that fits with the broader arc of the band and scene Petersen chronicled, both directly and elliptically, in his writing. From their earliest days, the Dead understood and even played off of the profound tension between what they sought as musicians and artists and how they were portrayed by the media, despite their patience with interviewers. Watching a bemused Garcia banter with Hugh Hefner during the Dead's appearance on *Playboy After Dark* in 1969 offers a glimpse of that tension, as well as a testament to the band's forbearance in the face of that kind of misunderstanding (although dosing the coffeepot on the set represented a decidedly Dead-like move to level the playing field).<sup>1</sup>

That was almost a quarter-century before Garcia sat down to talk to *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter Chris Jenkins. The setting could not have been more different from the Hollywood façade of the *Playboy* set, and it was a sign of the respect that prompted Jenkins' question: Candlestick Park, where Garcia was about to sing "The Star-Spangled Banner" with bandmates Bob Weir and Vince Welnick to open a San Francisco Giants game. They gave a fine performance, too, with an arrangement that played to their well-honed harmony, bringing the crowd to their feet in an ovation that was moving, genuine, and powerful. That

response underscored the incongruity and the irony of the event, making it clear that the Grateful Dead were more than just hometown heroes but musicians worthy of such a moment, in all its symbolism: despite all of the media hype and misinformation, despite the ongoing culture wars over the meaning of the 1960s and the band's countercultural legacy, the Grateful Dead had somehow emerged as authentic American icons, and to far more than just their fans. Musician Branford Marsalis, after sitting in with the band at a 1990 concert, called the Dead "American music icons" (Pooley 1990, 24); a year later, poet Richard Tillinghast wrote that the band had become "an American cultural icon, even for those who don't listen, or no longer listen, to rock music" (1991, 188). And when Garcia died four years after that, critic Jon Pareles eulogized him as an "Icon of 60's Spirit" (1995, A1).

All three characterizations were accurate, yet the ways these descriptions used the idea of an icon were very different. That range gets at the thicket of engagements represented by the Dead's achievement and the band's place in history. The invitation to open a San Francisco Giants game crystallizes that messy complexity: singing the national anthem for the national pastime—the symbolism could scarcely be richer, made more so by a performance that was respectful, polished, and sincere. Yet it was also appropriate—and that goes to the heart of the Dead's identity as Americans and their vision of America, which were as fraught and complicated as those of the nation. The Dead understood that, too, which explains Garcia's withering response when a reporter wondered if people could like both the Dead and the Republican Party: "Yeah. We're American, too. What we do is as American as lynch mobs. America has always been a complex place" (Goodman 1989, 68).

It was more than a glib response. Garcia's comment reflected a deep awareness of the country's contradictions and paradoxes: forming a republic through revolution, devoted to liberty but built on slavery, and one that welcomed immigrants while killing indigenous people and taking their land. The foundation of the country fused iconoclasm with icon; it would be up to every generation that followed to weave their own understanding of what that inheritance meant and find a way to navigate the web of obligations it entailed.



That challenge was on full display in the 1960s, perhaps especially in the Haight-Ashbury, and it framed the Dead's exploration of identity and citizenship. How that identity evolved is one of the themes that winds throughout the discourse of Grateful Dead studies, a conversation that has gone on since their earliest days, and that they themselves were part of, from the moment that Garcia found their name in a dictionary to the myriad ways in which they sought inspiration in American roots music and the rhythms and musical idioms of India, Africa, and Europe. This volume of *Grateful Dead Studies* marks another chapter in that ongoing conversation.

Earlier versions of the essays and reviews here first appeared in the second issue of the short-run preliminary publication *Dead Studies*. This volume updates the scholarly content of that ephemeral effort in a textually definitive form with different features and new introductory and reference material. Our thanks to the community of scholars, writers, photographers, and supporters whose hard work and generosity made this publication possible—and most especially to the members of the Editorial Board and the Grateful Dead Studies Association, whose commitment and enthusiasm remind us why that effort is so important. Their faith and support were critical during the time it took to complete this volume. While the duration of that process was challenging, it was also a reminder of the work that all young discourses must shoulder—and, perhaps, the time required for the acceptance, even respect, that Garcia mused about that afternoon at Candlestick Park in 1993.

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## NOTES

1. Footage of the show can be seen on *Internet Archive* (*Playboy After Dark* 1969); Dennis McNally discusses the dosed coffee pot in his authorized history of the band (2002, 286), an account that Bill Kreutzmann confirms in his memoir (2015, 108–09).

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