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FEATURES

“Some Intangible Something”: Recording the Dawn of the Grateful Dead

On the morning of January 14, 1967, thousands of hippies, young people, and curious San Franciscans began walking into Golden Gate Park for an event billed as the Great Human Be-In. The day-long affair featured Beat poets and counterculture luminaries along with the major San Francisco rock bands in what was seen at the time, and hailed afterward, as a seminal event of the era. In time the Be-In would be seen as a watershed, the final flowering of the Haight just before a mass-media onslaught and population explosion overwhelmed the neighborhood. For the Dead, who played a fine set that afternoon, the Be-In represented a personal send-off: a few days later, they left for Los Angeles to record their debut album.

It was an event long in the making: the band had vacillated for months before signing the contract with Warner Bros., dubious of financial entanglements and unsure of how to navigate legal labyrinths. But the Dead also wanted to establish themselves as musicians, and that meant embracing record industry and trying to translate their sound from the stage to the studio. Fresh from the triumph of the Be-In, where an

estimated 25,000 people had thronged the Park in a peaceful, joyous if somewhat amorphous celebration, the appeal of finally capturing their music on vinyl must have been intoxicating.

It was also nerve-wracking. “Being in a recording situation is really a lot different than playing,” Garcia said shortly afterwards (Gleason 1969, 306). He spoke from experience. The band’s first two encounters with the studio had not gone well: in the fall of 1965 they had recorded a demo for Tom Donahue and Bobby Mitchell’s Autumn Records, resulting in a six-song tape that left everyone unimpressed and the band unsigned. Six months later they had begun work at Gene Etribou’s fancifully named Buena Vista Studios, really little more than a couple of rooms in Etribou’s large Haight-Ashbury Victorian a few blocks away from the band’s headquarters. Etribou had at least released a single from the sessions, though that hadn’t pleased the band either. (It didn’t help that Etribou named his fledgling label Scorpio, already in use by a far more visible and well-established label.)

And LA carried with it all of the baggage that Hollywood and history freighted it with, some of it personal. The Dead had spent a couple of months there in the spring of 1966, playing a few Acid Tests and testing the waters; they left without a record contract and a bad taste in their mouths, finding the city soulless and competitive in ways that felt alien to their burgeoning psychedelic consciousness. Those lessons still echoed years later, when Garcia discussed the pressures that could squelch art with Charles Reich, calling them “business world realities” that in his mind were nothing more than a “Show-Biz trip. That wrecked it” (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner 1972, 68).

So when the band settled into RCA Studio A in Burbank, the pressure was intense. Jesse Jarnow’s essay frames the period of those sessions in the larger context of the band’s work at the time, from their first foray across the border the previous summer to their increasingly sophisticated approach to their craft, as the sessions documented. The sessions were big news: everyone in the Haight was talking about how the Dead were finally going to record an album, and when Garcia’s friend Roberto Rabanne got the word, he hitchhiked down to Burbank to make his own record. His photographs provide a vivid and evocative window into his-

tory in the making, showing the determination of five young musicians, hard at work, trying to condense their already sprawling sound into the unforgiving confines of magnetic tape and polyvinyl chloride. The images Rabanne captured show all of the youth and vitality of the Dead, especially their concentration and care, on the cusp of a debut whose import they could only guess, but were bent on conveying.

Almost a half century later, Rabanne's pictures and Jarnow's words provide a backdrop for the music the band recorded that January, honoring a debut that still stands as a bellwether of the Haight-Ashbury as it emerged on the international stage. The band always dismissed their debut release as rushed and inaccurate, but it also mapped out the challenge they embraced: to make the business world accommodate their art. When Reich commented, "But you can have a commercial trip if the substance ...", Garcia replied, "Right, if you have the substance together, since that's the only thing there really is, in music or in anything else. It's the fact that it ... has some intangible something which you can't pin down" (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner 1972, 68).

And in those few days in January 1967, the Dead did pin down some of that "intangible something." Though they quickly moved beyond much of what they recorded then, the album they created is still a snapshot of a band steeped in the ethos of the time and the comforting bohemian environs of the neighborhood they loved. Nearly a half century later, the Dead's debut remains a signal example of what would come to be called the San Francisco sound.

N.G.M.

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