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From "Dark Star" to Cherry Garcia: Four Subframes in *Rolling Stone* that Link Phish to the Grateful Dead

Jordan McClain

Like a frame around a partially assembled jigsaw puzzle, cumulative media coverage can establish a cohesive image of a subject. Parts of the whole may be obscured by the frame, but these boundaries function to define and bring into focus what the audience is exposed to, even if some pieces fit and some do not. Applying this idea to coverage of the band Phish raises many questions about the pieces, the whole, and the frame. Despite debatable similarities and many differences between Phish and the Grateful Dead—formed in Vermont in 1983 and California in 1965, respectively—much media coverage has nonetheless drawn unsolicited parallels that link the two bands through various logics, often portraying Phish as a new or next incarnation of the Grateful Dead. While the two bands are objectively related in some ways, media coverage often overreaches to connect the groups. This tendency, through creative portrayals and the exclusion of other parts of the Phish story, consequently exaggerates the Phish-Grateful Dead link and distorts Phish's characterization.

For example, prior research has shown that *Rolling Stone* album reviews relate Phish to the Grateful Dead far more than to any other act, while Phish's other diverse musical influences are dramatically under-

represented (McClain 2011a). *The New Rolling Stone Album Guide* entry on Phish defined the band in a way that is typical of how media coverage tends to portray Phish vis-à-vis the Grateful Dead:

> Comparisons to the mother of all jam bands, the Grateful Dead, are unavoidable, and in some cases warranted. Like the Dead, Phish had a pronounced fondness for the rustic and drew from a seemingly bottomless well of cover tunes. Like the Dead, Phish was helmed by a guitarist [Trey Anastasio] with a casual, conversational lead style who enjoys playing lots of notes. And like the Dead, Phish lacked a singer who's any more than competent. But in its frequent bursts of prog-style musical complexity as well as its taste for goofy humor (this is a band, after all, that incorporated trampolines, vacuum cleaners, and a giant hot dog into its concerts), Phish shows that it was very much its own entity. (Randall 2004, 635)

Many scholars and journalists have discussed why Phish are important enough to deserve serious analysis, signaling why it is also important to interrogate coverage of the band.[1] In *Rolling Stone* alone, Phish have been described as "the ultimate college band" (Puterbaugh 1997, 45), "the world's biggest jam band" (Scaggs 2006, 44), and finally, "given their sense of community, their ambition and their challenging, generous performances," they have been credited as "the most important band of the Nineties" (Hendrickson 1998, 22). Jam band scholar Dean Budnick summarized Phish's significance by noting that "Phish has become an estimable influence to a broad swath of its peers and many others peering up at the most celebrated of jambands" (2003, 166). *Billboard* detailed Phish's career as "one of the most remarkable chapters in the history of the concert business," with the band having "built a loyal following of fans—known as Phish-heads—that was arguably rivaled in their passion only by the Grateful Dead's legendary Deadheads" (Waddell 2004).

This essay examines how Phish are characterized and consequently framed in media accounts through these kinds of associations with the Grateful Dead. In addition to documenting the range of perspectives provided by specific media coverage, my purpose here is to explore and assess four issues: how the media make sense of Phish's unconventional nature through Grateful Dead references; how the Grateful Dead are

commonly used as a reference point for understanding Phish; how certain media coverage depicts the two bands as related; and how media framing of Phish cumulatively structures this link as logical. In so doing, this study helps fill a gap in framing research, which tends to focus on politically oriented media coverage. This essay considers framing research through a textual analysis of *Rolling Stone*'s Phish coverage that links the band to the Grateful Dead.

Before examining Phish's media characterization vis-à-vis the Grateful Dead, it is important to consider why research on framing is an effective path to understanding that media characterization. Numerous scholars have presented explanations related to frames and framing, which often include references to Erving Goffman's work (1974).[2] Goffman figured that frames are "schemata of interpretation" that "vary in degree of organization" and provide "a lore of understanding, an approach, [or] a perspective" in the process of allowing the frame user "to locate, perceive, identify, and label" any number of occurrences in order to find meaning and guide action (1974, 21). For Goffman, framing was a concept that explained how individuals make sense of their social world. More recently, Reese defined frames as "*organizing principles* that are socially *shared* and *persistent* over time, that work *symbolically* to meaningfully *structure* the social world" (2003, 11, emphases his). Frames "impose a pattern on the social world" constituted via symbolic devices such as media texts (2003, 17). A dominant frame may gain coherence over time, just as a pattern persists, to ultimately form its structure. Such a pattern normalizes a viewpoint by making what is framed seem logical, as in the case of Phish-Grateful Dead connections often suggested by media (Reese 2003, 19).

The frame metaphor may be envisioned in several ways. It can be likened to a camera angle or perspective that styles a visual message (McCombs and Ghanem 2003, 71); to a frame around a picture, selecting and excluding certain parts (Tankard 2003, 98–99); or to a building frame that is the "organizing structure used to construct a house" (Tankard 2003, 99). In mass communication studies, these metaphors all point to the idea that media framing structures how issues and stories—whether coverage

of political rallies or rock bands—are presented to audiences. This raises important questions about how Phish have been characterized and consequently framed in relation to the Grateful Dead.

Throughout their career, Phish have been featured fairly often—not exactly regularly, but nevertheless substantially—in *Rolling Stone* magazine. Studying the band's characterization by individual article and cumulatively reveals a great deal about the media framing of the band.As previous research has shown, one dominant frame in all *Rolling Stone* coverage of Phish is the frequent characterization of the band in relation to the Grateful Dead (McClain 2011a; McClain 2011b). This study furthers that analysis by tracing how, through that particular primary frame, Phish are characterized as connected to the Grateful Dead, moving beyond simple confirmation of that connection toward better comprehension of the connection's makeup.The key research question is, in *Rolling Stone* coverage of Phish, how is the band characterized in relation to the Grateful Dead?

To investigate this question, a textual analysis was performed on *Rolling Stone*'s Phish coverage that links the band to the Grateful Dead. *Rolling Stone* was chosen for three reasons: its status as a venerable chronicle of rock music and popular culture, its effective illustration of mainstream coverage of Phish, and its long and meaningful (if varied) history of Grateful Dead coverage. The data were obtained using *Rolling Stone, the Complete Archive Online*, a digital library of the magazine's back issues, which made possible a keyword search for "Phish." The eighteen years of *Rolling Stone* coverage began with the first report of Phish in the May 29, 1992, issue and ended with the May 27, 2010 issue. Of the 367 search results, 72 instances labeled "Display Ads" were examined but ultimately excluded from analysis to focus on journalistic coverage of Phish. Since the *Complete Archive Online* search did not consider copy from magazine covers, all covers from the issues listed in the search results were manually inspected for the word "Phish," adding 10 items to the data. In total, this study analyzed 305 items, which ranged from magazine covers to articles to letters to the editor.

The results were chronologically sorted, printed, and annotated for themes and patterns characterizing Phish in relation to the Grateful Dead, which were logged in a Microsoft Word document. This characterization

was defined by decipherable references—implicit or explicit—to the latter band that relate, connect, and/or link them to the former. These quotations were analyzed, cataloged, and sorted into carefully defined subframes, using definitions—especially Reese's, cited above—established by prior framing research. With this information aggregated, the original search was repeated in the *Complete Archive Online*, the results were reread, and the newly identified patterns were referenced to verify findings within this final full review of coverage.

Linking Phish to the Grateful Dead

Detailed analysis of *Rolling Stone*'s coverage revealed various subframes linking the band to the Grateful Dead. This study identified four specific subframes through an inductive approach. Here, "subframe" means recurring content that forms a subset of a particular frame—in this case, the established frame of covering Phish in relation to the Grateful Dead—such that the subframe's content may be interpreted as a secondary level to the primary frame. My analysis found that the two bands are typically linked via four subframes: musical, historical, sociocultural, and organizational. These subframes make the link between the bands seem logical.

The musical subframe was defined by content relating Phish's music to the Grateful Dead's. This subframe was identified by comments about the sound or style of the music. The historical subframe, defined by content relating the historical chronicling of Phish's career to the Grateful Dead's, was identified by discussion of specific times/timelines or succession-status labels (e.g., "new Grateful Dead," "heir to the Grateful Dead," etc.). The sociocultural subframe, which addresses the bands' audiences, was defined by content relating social and cultural factors associating Phish with the Grateful Dead. This subframe was mainly typified by comments about audience characteristics and customs, such as following the band on tour, concert taping, drug use, or attire and appearance. The organizational subframe addresses only the band, and was defined by content relating the Phish organization's operations to the Grateful Dead. Classification by this subframe was by comments about regular touring,

grassroots promotion, band commerce, or business strategies (ranging from canny ideas to rock and roll pitfalls).

Four Grateful Dead Subframes

Using these definitions and guidelines, this study found four Grateful Dead-related subframes. As demonstrated below, a quotation may sometimes span multiple subframes, but its primary evidentiary value will fit one subframe in particular. In other words, this taxonomy does not imply distinct categorization, only useful representation of a certain pattern.

The musical subframe connected Phish to the Grateful Dead through comments about the sound or style of the music. Comments from this subframe ranged in focus but always related one band's music to the other's. This is perhaps the least surprising subframe and manifestation of a Phish-Grateful Dead link since the examined content is from a musically oriented magazine and addresses a musical group. Regardless, the manifestations are no less inspired.

One review briefly considered similarities and differences between the two bands, commenting about Phish: "Apart from the venerable Grateful Dead, no arena band soars so freely about the astral blues-rock plane … Then the band [Phish] slid into an a cappella Hebrew folk song—Jerry Garcia can't do *that*" (Robicheau 1995, 35). Similarly, a reviewer stated of Trey Anastasio that "Jerry Garcia wasn't around, so the Phish head roped in Carlos Santana, the next-best local guitar deity, when he brought his band to San Francisco last year" (Dana 2004, 103). Reviewing Phish's December 31, 1995, concert, one writer commented that the songs bore "the unmistakable imprint of the Dead's free-fall jam aesthetic" (Fricke 1999, 102). Taken together, examples of this subframe indicate how the coverage forms a basic musical connection between the two bands. The connection does not stop there, however, but is also expanded by arguments for other linkages.

The historical subframe revealed a number of interesting comments in *Rolling Stone*'s chronicle of Phish's career. Particularly noteworthy is the recurring emphasis on relating Phish to the Grateful Dead through dis-

cussions of time, timelines, chains of events, or catchy labels. For example, a 2008 obituary for Merl Saunders, an early Jerry Garcia collaborator, laid out a biographical timeline and capsule history that connected the two groups: "By the early Seventies, Saunders and Garcia began touring and recording together as the Saunders-Garcia Band," and "by the 1990s, Saunders was an elder statesman in the jam-band community, sitting in with Phish and Widespread Panic until a stroke robbed him of his voice and the use of one side of his body in 2002" (Greene 2008, 32).

Other articles illustrate the use of historically focused catchy labels, such as calling Phish as "the Dead of the Nineties" (Bozza 1999, 26). Elaborating on this historical perspective, one letter from the editor—adjacent to a surreal illustration of Trey Anastasio sporting an arguably exaggerated Jerry Garcia-like bushy beard and sunglasses—prefaced a feature article on Phish by noting:

> When longtime contributor Parke Puterbaugh first hooked up with Phish, in the spring of '94, the band was primed to be the heir apparent to the Grateful Dead. Little did Phish know how soon that chance would come. Fifteen months into Puterbaugh's reporting of the story in this issue, Jerry Garcia died, ending the Dead's 30-year reign as the daddy of all jam bands. For Phish, it was either sink or swim. (Kemp 1997, 11)

And a letter to the editor—accompanied by a *Rolling Stone* cartoon of a road marked first with a street sign reading "Dead End," then a "Phish" sign beyond with an arrow pointing further down the same path—touched on the historical link using words such as "continuing" and "gone," later addressing that same article:

> Parke Puterbaugh's piece was a gift to Phish's always growing family of fans ["Phresh Phish," RS 754]. As much as we miss the Grateful Dead, it should be acknowledged that Phish are continuing in much the same vein, all the while tracing the wonderful web of human fraternity spun by the Dead. They may be gone, but we are not alone: We have Phish. (Lipton 1997, 14)

Another article reported the timeline of Phish's career this way:

> But with the death of the Grateful Dead's Jerry Garcia on August 9th, 1995, and the de facto end of that band, Phish became, by

> popular consensus, the primary guardians of the vagabond idealism of the Deadhead life. With responsibility came reward: A year after Garcia's passing, Phish played to a two-day audience of more than 135,000 at the Clifford Ball in Plattsburgh, New York, and made waves at commercial radio for the first time with their seventh album, *Billy Breathes*. (Fricke 1999, 62)

This quotation is clearly situated in the historical subframe, while also straddling the sociocultural subframe through its consideration of "the Deadhead life." This kind of overlap was also present in an article from the memorial issue for Jerry Garcia, who appeared on a September 1995 cover. The article noted that the Dead "inspired several generations of bands—from '60s peers like the Allman Brothers Band to successful youngsters like Phish—who absorbed and recycled that family vibe, not just the musical notes" (Fricke 1995, 73), explicitly defining a connection beyond music but also extending to a historical and sociocultural nature. Overlapping quotations such as this illustrate the multilayered connection that the coverage builds between the bands, one that extends beyond simple musical similarity.

The sociocultural subframe related Phish to the Grateful Dead through social and cultural factors focused on the audience. Many articles featured comments that emphasized this pattern. For instance, "Phish's audience includes many Grateful Dead types," observed the earliest coverage of Phish (Giles 1992, 17). Numerous passages fitting this subframe focus on the Phish "scene." After Garcia's death, an article called "Life After Garcia" predicted that "Some people will find other bands to follow. Phish, for example, may find themselves heirs to a certain more or less unwelcome element from the Grateful Dead parking-lot scene" (Gilmore 1995/1996, 86). Likewise, an article about Phish's 1998 Lemonwheel festival observed, "But while other music scenes, such as rave, goth, and the Grateful Dead, have an undercurrent of seediness or evil, here a sense of purity and community prevails" (Hendrickson 1998, 21). One remark in a letter to the editor captured both the musical and the sociocultural link:

> Although Matt Hendrickson included a reference to the Grateful Dead, it was used with great candor and respect. I've read countless articles about Phish in which the author finds it essential to

> compare Phish with the Dead. Phish have worked very hard for the past fifteen years to push the limits and excel in their music. I think I speak for a number of Phish fans when I say that Phish don't deserve to be reduced to a band that merely offers a scene for lost tourheads. (Savitske 1998, 26)

In another pointed example of content connecting Phish and the Grateful Dead socioculturally, a 2010 article about the band Vampire Weekend described the group's drummer as "a Phish fanatic" who, paragraphs later, is also reported as "[renting] the same room he lived in before getting signed, a laundry-strewn, seven-by-seven-foot shoe box with a framed copy of the Grateful Dead's *Workingman's Dead* on the wall" (Eells 2010, 50).

A passage from Parke Puterbaugh's 1997 article illustrates how readily some coverage fits into multiple subframes, including the sociocultural:

> From Day 1, Phish have deliberately plotted their fate, evolving at a steady and uncompromising pace. Lately, however, the band's career is all but out of the members' hands as their audience multiplies, lured to the Phish camp by the bait of a musical and social environment that—since the death of Jerry Garcia and the demise of the Grateful Dead—can be found nowhere else. At a Phish show, you're likely to see first-generation Phish-heads alongside musk-drenched, dreadlocked, tie-died [sic] Deadhead émigrés, plus a growing army of neophytes that has latched onto Phish as the next big thing. (1997, 44)

Here, Puterbaugh introduces the Phish-Grateful Dead connection through the historical subframe, then also explicitly links them through the sociocultural and musical subframes. Moreover, the same article featured a photograph of Phish, captioned, "Come see Uncle John's band," referencing a well-known Grateful Dead song (Puterbaugh 1997, 45). The overlapping subframes strengthen the logic of a Phish-Grateful Dead connection constructed by the coverage.

The band-focused organizational subframe related Phish to the Grateful Dead through discussion of organizational operations. Reflecting on the process that led to Phish's 2000 hiatus, an article containing an

uncommon opinion by a Phish band member on the Phish-Grateful Dead link stated:

> The only thing they knew about their future was that they didn't want to turn into the Grateful Dead. "They were obviously these big role models for us," says Anastasio, "and I was never going to end up in that situation, where I felt like a tour was happening because I needed money to support all these people." (Dana 2001, 33)

A 2003 article similarly reiterated, upon the band's reunion, "'A part of what killed Jerry Garcia,' [Phish keyboardist] McConnell says, 'was the bigness of what the Dead became. He couldn't stop touring. It's the antithesis of what I want to happen'" (Fricke 2003, 46). Both examples made the comparison between successful independent operations and the accompanying financial pressure on both acts to constantly tour.

Rolling Stone's 1996 "Rock & Roll Yearbook" coverage of Phish's summer festival sarcastically quipped, "Phish rolled into Plattsburgh, N.Y., bringing all their buds—not to mention more than 70,000 fans—for two days of Dead-like jamming known as Clifford Ball. More Cherry Garcia than 'Dark Star,' the shows took place on a decommissioned Air Force base" (Dunn et al. 1996/1997, 74). The passage playfully defines Phish by analogy to a licensed Grateful Dead-affiliated product, the Ben and Jerry's ice cream flavor Cherry Garcia, rather than the beloved and respected Dead tune.

A number of other quotations fit the organizational subframe while overlapping others. For instance, one article explored the role the Web played in Phish's career and grassroots success, defining this historically, socioculturally, and organizationally via the Grateful Dead and their audience:

> The Phish online community was born in 1991. Fans of the Grateful Dead were becoming aware of the Vermont foursome and began monitoring Phish on the Dead's newsgroup, rec. music.gdead … Word continued to spread, and in March 1992 rec.music.phish became only the fourth newsgroup dedicated to a rock band, behind the Dead, Bob Dylan and the Beatles. (Hendrickson 1998, 4)

Similarly, another article stated, "Then success got in the way. With the death in August 1995 of Grateful Dead guitarist Jerry Garcia, Phish—already packing arenas on their own—became the box-office heirs of a huge concert audience stranded by the end of the Dead" (Fricke 2003, 42). This remark also fits the historical, sociocultural, and organizational subframes, as it connects the bands through a timeline, an audience, and the box office. Clearly, by constructing a cumulatively extensive and multifaceted bond that sustains a Phish-Grateful Dead analogy, *Rolling Stone*'s coverage bolsters the logic of a link between the two bands.

Constructing a Logical Link

Examining how media characterize Phish via Grateful Dead associations is revealing, as this study shows. Textual analysis discovered that *Rolling Stone* coverage constructs this relationship through four subframes—musical, historical, sociocultural, and organizational—which, though not specific to Phish-Grateful Dead media links, are broad enough to be useful in future framing research. Ample evidence for each subframe illustrates the various ways a connection between the bands has been established. Framing research suggests that such persistent media characterization combines to structure the Phish-Grateful Dead link as a logical connection.

One way media accounts have been able to make sense of Phish's unconventional and exceptional features is through Grateful Dead references, comparisons, analogies, and parallels. For scholars of the Dead, this study illustrates how the Grateful Dead have become a powerful musical and cultural reference point, especially in a way that transcends those contexts to become a potent journalistic shorthand. Given their long history and widespread fame, the Grateful Dead can be a useful device for making the unfamiliar understandable in Phish coverage, even utilized as a tool to quickly and efficiently convey Phish's essential qualities. Some of these references are profound; others are conspicuously facile. Either way, the persistent Phish-Grateful Dead link—an aspect of Phish's story that has received much more attention than other parts—makes one wonder about the elements of Phish's story that have been de-emphasized or disregarded as a consequence of such media framing.

It is important to note this study's limitations. Framing analysis, while well accepted, is not without its critics. It could be suggested that this study could have contributed to the same link that it sought to investigate by focusing on Phish-Grateful Dead links and not fully exploring Phish coverage absent those Dead references. However, since prior research (McClain 2011b) has investigated how Phish are characterized in all *Rolling Stone* coverage—which, naturally, does not always include Grateful Dead references—this study's focus is productively narrowed to *Rolling Stone*'s characterization of Phish in relation to the Grateful Dead. Restricting the scope in this manner yielded a deeper, more comprehensive examination of the evidence—and the findings are better explained through framing than they might be otherwise. Indeed, the subjective nature of this kind of textual analysis was mitigated through careful procedures and thorough rechecking of results to strengthen reliability.

Moreover, I would argue that my "cultural expertise," as Hertog and McLeod put it (2003, 152), aided instead of hindered interpretation of the coverage. Explaining the value of qualitative textual analysis for the study of framing, Hertog and McLeod asserted that "researchers must apply their cultural expertise to induce the meaning of texts" (2003, 152). My combined experiences as mass communication theorist, longtime reader of *Rolling Stone, Relix,* and *Spin* magazines, avid follower of Phish media coverage, and devotee of both Phish and the Grateful Dead facilitated my systematic and methodical analysis of the data.

Another possible limitation is the 1992–2010 range of coverage found in *Rolling Stone, the Complete Archive Online*. However, this range does not exclude an excessive portion of Phish's national media recognition, as the band's first national music press coverage is attributed to *Relix* in 1989 (Greenhaus 2009; Puterbaugh 1997). Still, conclusions of this study are best applied to the 1992–2010 boundaries. Similarly, the sole focus on *Rolling Stone* content is a limitation. However, the framing patterns found in this study are prevalent in other publications (McClain 2011b), so it is reasonable to restrict this study's scope to the 305 items from *Rolling Stone.* Moreover, a defined sample of coverage from an important source like *Rolling Stone* is an ideal starting point in the examination of Phish-Grateful Dead media links.

The utility of framing analysis in musical/cultural studies seems clear, but there is a wealth of work that can be undertaken to strengthen our appreciation and understanding of how to best apply framing analysis in these contexts. This study suggests several profitable areas for future research. It would be interesting to analyze Phish-Grateful Dead links in coverage from sources beyond *Rolling Stone*, such as *Relix* or *Spin*. Comparison between these sources could corroborate this study's conclusions and qualify them in interesting ways, as well as extending the time range of the coverage. Research could also investigate Grateful Dead references beyond Phish to include other contemporary jam bands such as the Disco Biscuits or Umphrey's McGee. This could reveal more about the power of the Grateful Dead as a cultural touchstone. Considering what other frames besides the Phish-Grateful Dead link are common in mass media coverage of Phish would augment our understanding of how media make sense of Phish and their use the Grateful Dead as a tool in this process. Finally, future research from diverse perspectives should continue scholarly analysis of Phish as its own significant phenomenon and as a related context of the Grateful Dead. The productive interdisciplinary synergy of Grateful Dead studies is an unmistakably fitting blueprint for such work.

Notes

1. See Blau (2007); Budnick (1996); Cohen (2011); Gehr and Phish (1998); McClain (2011a); McClain (2011b); Puterbaugh (1997); The Mockingbird Foundation (2004); and Yeager (2011).

2. See, for example, Pan and Kosicki (2003); other seminal studies related to framing include D'Angelo (2002); Entman (1993); Gamson and Modigliani (1989); Gitlin (1980); and Tuchman (1978).

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