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Grateful Dead. *Downhill from Here*. Monterey Video 319832, 1997. DVD. *Out of print*.

Grateful Dead. *Nightfall of Diamonds*. Arista GDCD 4081, 2001. 2 CD set with 8-page booklet. \$22.98.

Grateful Dead. *Truckin' Up to Buffalo*. Monterey Video 319952, 2005. DVD. *Out of print*.

Grateful Dead. *Truckin' Up to Buffalo*. Rhino R2 73139, 2005. 2 CD set with 12-page booklet. \$24.00.

Grateful Dead. *Crimson White and Indigo*. Rhino GRA2 6015, 2010. 3 CD set with DVD and 16-page booklet. \$39.98.

Grateful Dead. *Formerly the Warlocks*. Rhino R2 525760, 2010. 6 CD box set with booklet and facsimile ephemera. \$69.98.

MIKE DOLGUSHKIN

Ask a serious Grateful Dead fan about the most over-represented period in the band's archival releases and he or she might think immediately of September 1972, responsible for three *Dick's Picks* releases. But July 1989 has the distinction of giving us that same number of videos—two with accompanying audio sets. And three shows in two releases come from October of the same year. The fact that two of these sets (one from each month) were issued in 2010 warrants a further look at all of them, along with a close examination of this period's importance in the Grateful Dead's musical development.

It is a fascinating time in the band's history. The introduction of MIDI to the band's sonic arsenal inspired its members to once again explore and take chances like they had many years before, and in the process dust off a few old chestnuts that had not been heard in a while. But while the Dead had entered a golden age musically (believed by many fans to be their last), their enormous ongoing popularity since the July 6, 1987, release of *In the Dark* threatened to crush the entire Grateful Dead scene under the weight of too many people, a significant number of whom traveled to the shows solely to party outside the venues. Viewed

as interlopers by Deadheads, these scene-wreckers were only peripherally interested in the music (if at all), and their boorish behavior was generally noxious and often destructive.

But when did this musical transition take place? Can it be pinpointed exactly? Eric Wybenga offers an interesting theory. He begins by stating that, through the late 1980s, Deadhead opinion on current shows “seem[ed] perilously close to self-delusion and denial” (1997, 234). In other words, despite many fine performances, were the Dead’s best days really behind them? Were the fans telling themselves that the band “seemed to be getting better in order to avoid unbearable conclusions,” as Wybenga asks, “Or was confirmation of our hopes and banishment of our fears just around the corner?” It turned out to be the latter, and he goes on to say,

In retrospect it seemed the Deer Creek Close Encounters (7/15/89) was the catalyst, the mother ship beaming the instructions for Dark Star, Death Don’t Have No Mercy, Attics, We Bid You Goodnight—those glistening, almost illusory pieces of primal Dead—back into Jerry, Phil, Bobby, et al.’s frontal lobes. The results were felt immediately: The very next show, at Alpine [during which Jerry toyed with “Close Encounters” again], the Boys closed with We Bid You Goodnight. (1997, 234)

Others, including me, saw the process as more gradual. This view can be traced back to the first Grateful Dead shows after Garcia recovered from his coma. The December 1986 “comeback” run at Oakland Coliseum was more solid than one might have expected, but then the very first show of the New Year’s run at the Kaiser opened with “Playing in the Band.” That, and the fact that the band weaved the song in and out through the rest of the show, portended great things for the future. In view of this, 1987 was a disappointment. Yes, the year contained numerous hot shows but they tended toward tight performances of individual tunes without much real jamming (which could be why advocates of 1977 tend to like this year as well).¹ The pre-coma period up to the spring of 1986 often featured lengthy renditions of “Playing in the Band,” but a year later that tune and most others seemed to have been truncated. Because of this I no longer went to as many Dead shows, a trend that continued until early

1988 when I started going regularly again. The February run at the Kaiser was a hit-or-miss affair (and I recall telling those around me of my desire to hear a lengthy “Playing in the Band”), but the Dead played the Kaiser again in March, and it all quite suddenly blew wide open. The first night’s second set began with an exceptional “Scarlet Begonias” into “Fire on the Mountain” followed by a “Playing in the Band” that was more exploratory (and just plain weird) than anything heard from them in years. At this same show—significantly—Lesh joined Garcia and Weir during “Space” for the first time in ages.

Most subsequent shows did not match the level of March 16, 1988, but over the next year the Grateful Dead threw out occasional goodies that hinted at a forthcoming major breakthrough. The second set on July 29 at Laguna Seca showcased a “Playing in the Band” containing three intense “power rushes,” or musical bursts. An odd little jam led into “Estimated Prophet” at the October 2 Shoreline show. Lesh played interesting tricks with the time signature during “Playing in the Band” at the February 5, 1989, Kaiser performance, and the following show’s first set began with “Not Fade Away” and ended with “Tennessee Jed”—unusual, to say the least.

The Dead’s next major sonic development was unveiled in Bloomington, Minnesota, on April 17 during “Space,” when Garcia used a MIDI synthesizer guitar for the first time. The rest of the band, through the expertise of crew member Bob Bralove, had been employing MIDI for almost a year (to especially good effect during “Drums”), but had to wait until their lead guitarist found a stable enough digital setup for this new technology to radically change their overall sound. Even so, Garcia only used MIDI during “Space” at first, using an outboard device strapped to a black Stratocaster (and later to his Doug Irwin “Wolf” guitar) before switching back to the Irwin “Tiger” for the balance of the show (Toluzzi 1989; Rogers 1989; Jackson 2006, 235–38, 241–44).

And this is where matters stood in July 1989, the month documented by three Grateful Dead video releases. Issued in 1997, *Downhill from Here* gathered selections from the July 17 and 19 Alpine Valley Music Theatre shows. In 2005, *Truckin’ Up to Buffalo* showcased the complete July 4 Rich Stadium performance, and in 2010, *Crimson White and Indigo*

presented the very next show, July 7 in Philadelphia, in its entirety. Taken together, they provide an intimate visual look at what the Grateful Dead were up to that month. We see the band performing a good selection (although by no means a comprehensive one) of tunes from their regular repertoire, with few repeats. Notable among these are the new songs that had been gradually introduced into the rotation over the previous year, most of which appeared on the forthcoming (and, as it turned out, final) Grateful Dead studio album *Built to Last*. The title track appears twice, as does “Standing on the Moon.” And the presence of two Brent Mydland songs, “I Will Take You Home” and “Blow Away,” attests to their prominence among the new arrivals (although “Just a Little Light” could have been included as well). The Alpine Valley release includes the revival, “We Bid You Goodnight,” as well as the snippet of the *Close Encounters* theme from earlier in the show.

Repertoire aside, what is most striking about these videos is how they show the band members interacting with each other during a time they were playing well and were generally healthy. Garcia in particular seems animated and enthusiastic (watch him bark out the lyrics during “U.S. Blues”), underscoring the complete recovery he had made from his diabetes-induced coma and drug addiction. His special bond with Mydland is especially prominent in their call-and-response during “Not Fade Away” from the July 4 show. In addition, a major plus of both *Downhill from Here* and *Crimson White and Indigo* is their lack of psychedelic visual effects during “Drums” and “Space,” enabling us to actually *see* what the band is doing.

During August 1989 the Dead played two California runs (both of which included “We Bid You Goodnight,” but featured no further break-outs) before taking a break until the end of September, during which they finished work on *Built to Last*. This also gave the band and its management a chance to think about their crowd control problems, which had grown exponentially since *In the Dark*’s release two years previously. Numerous incidents occurred all through the spring tour, but particularly in Pittsburgh and at Irvine Meadows, where the situation approached riot conditions. A major catalyst for this was the vending and camping outside of each venue, which before the Grateful Dead’s hit record was low-key

and manageable. Now that the popularity of the band had reached stratospheric proportions, the shows were drawing people without tickets who were only interested in the outdoor party scene, and others who thought they could scam tickets for free. Some of the ticketless, unfortunately, tried to crash the gates, which provoked a predictable response from law enforcement. This was not entirely the fault of the young newbies; a good amount of this police action was heavy-handed and unnecessary. On the other hand, suggestions that fans not come to the venue if they didn't have tickets fell on deaf ears; youth and limited experience with what appeared to be an "anything goes" scene made them incapable of understanding why they couldn't do whatever they pleased, and many of them seemed to lack the capacity to grasp the consequences of their actions. Before 1987, newcomers often stumbled around on their own until older Deadheads showed them the ropes. Since that year, the scene had gotten too big for new fans to be absorbed in this manner (Jackson 1989, 7–8; Weisman 1990, 128–29).

Because of the crowd problems, 1989 was the last year the Grateful Dead played at Irvine Meadows Amphitheatre, along with the Henry J. Kaiser Convention Center in Oakland, the Greek Theatre at UC Berkeley and the Frost Amphitheatre at Stanford University, all Deadhead favorites. Clearly, the Dead had to do something, and their response for the fall 1989 tour was an outright ban on camping and vending outside shows, and instructing fans not to show up without tickets. But they also had something else up their sleeves: "stealth" performances. The tour was to begin with two shows at Hampton Coliseum in Virginia billed as Formerly the Warlocks, announced about a week ahead of time with tickets sold only to locals at nearby outlets. This tactic was intended to keep most of the ticketless tourheads away.

And it worked: this was indeed a big secret. At the late September Shoreline shows, a colleague heard from a Grateful Dead staff member in a very hushed manner that the Dead would be performing at Hampton on October 8 and 9 and there might be some unusual material played. We had heard the "Death Don't Have No Mercy" breakout the night before, and "And We Bid You Goodnight" twice, so we weren't sure what the big deal was. The Shoreline shows were notable in that Garcia, having gotten

“Wolf” rewired, was now using MIDI for the entire show, although we didn’t hear much of it since his gear wasn’t working most of the time. We would have to wait to hear the full effect of his use of MIDI on the band’s sound.

In the meantime, the former Warlocks played at Hampton. The night of October 8, I got a phone call from a colleague who reported that the Dead had revived “Help on the Way.” This was great news, but not earth-shattering. The following night, my colleague called again, this time before the show was over. The Dead had brought back “Dark Star,” its first performance in over five years. And unlike its previous post-hiatus appearances, they *really* played it, during the flow of the jam and not as an encore or afterthought. Some time later my colleague called back. Not only had they played “Death Don’t Have No Mercy” later in the set, but they had also resurrected “Attics of My Life” for the encore, its first appearance in almost seventeen years!

That the Grateful Dead had taken things up a notch—or two or ten—was undeniable. And now we can hear both Hampton shows complete in crystal clarity via Rhino’s 2010 box set, which the Grateful Dead website calls *Formerly the Warlocks*. Yes, excellent audience and sound-board tapes of these shows have circulated for years, but never in this quality. What is striking about these recordings is how spotty the Dead were, with moments in which they sound absolutely lost along with music so fantastic one can scarcely believe it. Peaks and troughs aside, Hampton was clearly the big turning point, the beginning of a new era. Garcia used his MIDI sparingly during the first show but let loose completely on “Dark Star,” showing us exactly *why* the band had brought these old songs back, and how things would be in the future. He seemingly had a limitless sound palette at his disposal, switching from flute to saxophone to bassoon to straight guitar. In 1978 Garcia said that, “There are times when I wish I were a combination of a French horn and an oboe. Anything that will give me more possibilities, I’m a nut for” (Sievert 1978, 114). In 1989 it seemed he had finally achieved this goal.

A good companion to the Warlocks set is *Nightfall of Diamonds*, the complete October 16, 1989, show at the Meadowlands Arena released in 2001. This includes many of the same songs performed at the Hampton

shows but, opening night jitters long banished, played with more authority. I had an audience recording of this one within a week, and marveled at the new, exciting directions the Grateful Dead was going in. “Dark Star” was truly deep and exploratory, and the way the band wound the revivals around more recent material was masterful. I looked forward to seeing the Grateful Dead again on my home turf.

So was it really “downhill from here?” Not immediately. The Grateful Dead’s musical roll continued for about another two years. The band’s MIDI explorations resulted in much exploratory jamming, and the influence of guests such as saxophonist Branford Marsalis pushed the envelope further. Even the July 1990 death of Brent Mydland and his replacement by Bruce Hornsby and ex-Tube Vince Welnick did not break the momentum, at least not right away. The ennui that descended during 1992 might be seen as a delayed reaction to Mydland’s death. And Garcia began using hard drugs again, perhaps a reaction to losing a key band member. Regardless, the rot had truly set in and the Dead never recovered from it, although flashes of brilliance still appeared up to and including in their final concert.

Unfortunately, the Grateful Dead were never able to solve their crowd control problem. More and more ticketless, clueless partiers showed up at the concerts, and more and more venues became off-limits to the band, to the point where they could only play in huge arenas, “sheds,” and stadiums. This situation hit a ghastly peak during the band’s last tour, during which a major fence-crashing at Deer Creek caused the band to cancel a show, the first time fan behavior had precipitated such a response. This and other catastrophes were well covered by the news media, adding to a palpable sense of impending doom. It seemed as if this was the carefully scripted final chapter to a great drama, especially since the “Tour from Hell,” as fans called it, was followed by the death of Jerry Garcia only a few weeks later.

So how do these five releases reflect the context of the music they present? *Downhill from Here*, *Truckin’ Up to Buffalo*, and *Nightfall of Diamonds* contain absolutely nothing in the way of liner notes, except for the CD version of the Buffalo show which includes a booklet with a brief show description by Blair Jackson. *Crimson White and Indigo*

features notes by Steve Silberman that provide an excellent overview of the Grateful Dead world since Garcia's illness. The Warlocks release, packaged in a deluxe "cigar box"-style set, comes complete with a skull-and-roses button, replica tickets, a facsimile of a newspaper article, and a notice from the band to the fans telling them to behave. In his liner notes, Blair Jackson takes a different tack than Silberman and describes digging out his old audience cassettes of the Hampton shows and listening to them for the first time in many years, something that anyone who was a Grateful Dead fan before the advent of digital sound technology can relate to. He uses this to set up the context of the shows, and to describe what they might have been like for a fan in the audience.

Perhaps this is the best way to enjoy these releases, imagining that you were a Deadhead in 1989 and these were shows you saw. No, you didn't hear everything the band was doing, but they played well and you enjoyed it immensely. And maybe that is what these sets illustrate best. Years such as 1969, 1972, and 1977 have been rightfully exalted in the Grateful Dead's canon of music, but even as late as 1989, they could still be the best band on the planet.

NOTE

1. For more on the Deadhead veneration of 1977, see Dolgushkin 2009.

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