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ESSAYS

How the Grateful Dead Learned to Jam

MICHAEL KALER

This essay explores the Grateful Dead's transformation from an essentially conventional folk/blues/rock band into exponents of a unique, new, improvisational way of playing rock music. This analysis unfolds both synchronically and diachronically—that is, both within and without reference to their broader musical development over time. The band's performance practice for the period discussed here can be broadly fitted into a conceptual model I call the Paradigm, synchronically detailed below. Developed in the first half of 1966, the Paradigm reached its full expression in the latter half of 1966 and into 1967, when it was partially superseded by the band's artistic and professional development, although it never disappeared completely.

The Paradigm represents a way of understanding the Grateful Dead's early solution to the problem of developing a means through which live rock music could be transformed into a flexible, improvisational art form. Interviews with band members and insider accounts suggest that the impetus to create and develop the band's improvisational approach to rock music derives from what can only be described as the revelation of a

new mode of consciousness for the band. My argument is that the Grateful Dead's early career can only be understood fully when it is seen at least in part as the attempt to recreate and represent their experiences of this new mode of consciousness, and it is in that conceptual environment that the Paradigm's usefulness becomes apparent.

Overall, the Grateful Dead's approach to improvisation can be described as the group's spontaneous creation and manipulation of, and progression between, musical structures. Only extremely rarely do they approach "free" or unstructured improvisation; there is almost always a pulse in their music, usually a rhythm, and the tonal center is rarely in question. What we find in the Grateful Dead's music is not the rejection of structure, but rather the freedom to work with structure, moving from form to form, either directly or with periods of liminal formlessness in between. This motion through forms is not soloistic or individualistic, but rather is guided and cued by the spontaneous interplay between band members and their commitment to group solidarity. The Grateful Dead do not abandon structure—or rather, they do so only very briefly, and not at all in the period under discussion. Instead, they take an outsider's view of structure, seeing it as impermanent, thus allowing themselves the freedom to move around within it. At any given moment the group will be more or less invested in a given form, but not identified with it. While playing with a form, they also play around with it; throughout, they retain their collective autonomy.

According to interviews, the Grateful Dead's approach was influenced by jazz, particularly the more open, modal jazz of the late 1950s and early 1960s, rather than the "energy music" free jazz that was developing contemporaneously with them. However, the Grateful Dead's concept was significantly different from that of most jazz groups, especially in terms of the status of the interrelationships between the musicians—that is, whether those interrelationships are seen as a means or as an end. Jazz improvisation has frequently been likened to a conversation, a discussion between separate voices individually responding to and commenting on their situation, as Ingrid Monson (1997) describes. Although the conversational element is certainly present in the Grateful Dead's playing, here

it is the means to the end, rather than the end itself. The Grateful Dead functioned very much as a group: one whose musical directions arose from the interaction of its component members, to be sure, but the focus throughout was on the organization as a single thing composed of several independent but aligned voices, unified if at times only raggedly so, as they sang in “Truckin’”: “Together—more or less in line.”

It might seem logical here to draw a comparison with a funk band. There, too, the soloist is not ignored and accorded the foreground, but the emphasis remains on the group as a cohesive unit whose goal is to facilitate dancing. However, funk music is often static in a way that the Grateful Dead never were, and is also precisely and polyrhythmically organized, whereas the Grateful Dead’s *modus operandi* allowed for, and even necessitated, a great deal of creative disorganization. A better comparison might be to an African dance band, such as a Nigerian juju or highlife band: Here we find the same focus on the group as an aggregation of individuals with the soloist as an element within that group; the same extended songs; the same openness to changing parts and lines to suit new developments in the music or its surrounding context; and the same willingness to accept and even revel in a certain degree of looseness or openness.¹

While there certainly are musical precedents for the Grateful Dead’s approach to music, non-musical influences also play a role. During this period, the band members were on what can be understood at least in part as a religious or spiritual quest. Their goal, at least from the point of view of bassist Phil Lesh, was to create a group consciousness that would enhance or fulfill rather than suppress the individuality of the various band members, and that would be able to create in spontaneous yet unified ways, with its members intuitively in sync. As Lesh puts it, they were seeking “to learn, above all, how to play together, to entrain, to become, as we described it then, ‘fingers on a hand’”:

The unique organicity of our playing reflects the fact that each of us consciously personalized his playing: to fit with what the others were playing, and to fit with who each man was as an individual, allowing us to meld our consciousnesses together in the unity of a group mind. (2005, 56)

This sort of perception of experiences of group consciousness could be attributed to the band's use of LSD (with the exception of McKernan) and their willingness to be influenced by experiences and insights received while tripping; their participation in the Acid Tests also fueled their insights, as Tom Wolfe's (1968) seminal book recounts. But the band's drive to create this group consciousness could also be framed in terms of contemporary American popular culture, specifically science fiction. Lesh recalled that "for us, the philosophical basis of this concept was articulated" in Theodore Sturgeon's science fiction novel *More Than Human* (1952), and in his autobiography Lesh uses Sturgeon's neologism "blesh" (a combination of "blend" and "mesh") to describe the state (2005, 56). Related descriptions of small but advanced groups being linked mentally can be found in other classic works of science fiction at the time, including Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) and "Lost Legacy" ([1953], 2012), Olaf Stapledon's *Odd John* (1965), Frederick Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth's *Wolfbane* (1959), and Henry Kuttner's *Mutant* (1953), among others. For any reader of science fiction in the early 1960s, this theme would have been difficult to avoid, especially after having been sensitized to it through shared psychedelic experience.

The flexible group consciousness that was the Grateful Dead's *raison d'être* manifested itself in several interesting ways. First of all, it is noteworthy that traditional instrumental roles were rarely challenged in the Grateful Dead. It was rare indeed, especially in the early days, for Weir or Lesh to play a solo, for instance (although beginning in mid-1966, Lesh was almost always a lead voice). Conversely, Garcia's guitar was almost always the lead instrument, playing lines and only very rarely chords. Yet, although Garcia was the lead voice, he was not always the leader. Rather, the impetus to move the band into new musical spaces could and did come from any of the members: any of them could become the momentary center of musical attention—the group's leader—with the others adapting their parts accordingly.² In other words, the Dead largely retained the fundamental, traditional division of roles within the group; what changed is where the emphasis was placed at any given point, the source of that moment's guiding inspiration. They firmly maintained a

vision of the band as being a whole with each musician playing a given, predetermined role within that whole, based on instrument.

Practically speaking, this choice lessened the “shock of the new” for the band’s audience, enabling the band to continue to function as the dance ensemble that they were at heart—at least in performance. On a more abstract level, this brings to mind both Sturgeon’s group mind in *More Than Human*, whose members have interlocking but separate and defined roles, and also the Christian tradition of seeing the community of believers as one body with each of the parts having its separate role, a tradition that stretches back to the ecstatic Christian community addressed in Paul’s Corinthian correspondence (1 Cor. 12:4–31). The members of the Grateful Dead may not have been familiar with early Christian traditions, though Garcia and Hunter discussed their early church experiences, but the band could well have absorbed this from Sturgeon, whose familiarity with both can be seen in many of his short stories and novels, particularly his last, *Godbody* (1986).³

As the traditional instrumental roles are more or less unchallenged, so, too, do song forms retain their integrity. Some aspects of these forms are treated as being mutable, in the sense that there might be a variable amount of time spent grooving before a song starts, or instrumental breaks might extend for an extra few bars from time to time. But by and large, songs during this period are played the same way every time, with the improvisational section occupying a precise and unchanging slot (save for its length) in the tune. The essential structure of the songs, like the traditional roles of the players, is respected, if elastic.

And as with the song, so with the playing. The Grateful Dead’s music almost always has, if not a groove, then at least a strong pulse; although energetic, it is rarely chaotic; although the band frequently abandons specific chord changes, their music usually has a clear tonal center; and extremes of dissonance are generally avoided, at most being treated as special effects. At its heart, the Dead’s music remains traditional and easily comprehensible in ways that do not apply, for instance, to the music of contemporaries such as Albert Ayler, Cecil Taylor, or AMM. In other words, the music that the band produces is experimental in a distinctly

modernist way: it plays *through* forms, more than playing *within* forms. The Grateful Dead's real innovation, their distinctive approach, lies in their determination to show the potentialities that lie hidden within the structures and codes that make up normal lived experience. What the Grateful Dead do is not so much to change these codes and structures—the song remains a song, the band remains a band—but rather to crack them open and show the freedom that lies at their heart.

In *The Deadhead's Taping Compendium*, Nicholas Meriwether writes that “from their first definite if inchoate stirrings in 1966 through their last shows, there was usually an element in the Dead's jams that approached what they began to do more formally beginning in 1967 ... a free-form group improvisation without much of anything at all in the way of arrangement, melody or key” (1998, 90). As Meriwether points out, this element took time to develop (which is understandable, given its novelty), but it also required a mechanism by which—or a conceptual playing context within which—it could be nurtured. This context, which for the sake of simplicity I call the Paradigm, can be discerned through an analysis of the band's earliest improvisational forays.

As the conceptual model that underlies the band's first explorations into improvisation, the Paradigm can be summarized as follows:

- Extended improvised sections *may* occur in some songs (such as “You Don't Have to Ask”); invariably *do* occur in other songs (such as “Viola Lee Blues”); and do *not* occur in yet other songs (such as “Cold Rain and Snow”);
- When found, these extended improvisational sections occur at the end of the song, after the form has been played through, although shorter, more restricted improvisational sections may occur at the very start of the song or between verses;
- The extended improvisational sections emerge from the main groove of the song and return to it when they are finished;
- The improvisational sections are made up of a variable number of smaller sections, each lasting 15–60 seconds;
- Movement between these sections will be initiated by band members making musical statements that are either joined in on by other band members, or used by them in constructing new musical contexts;

- Any member can make such statements;
- Although traditional instrumental roles are not challenged, any of the band members can opt to move into the foreground; thus leadership, both in terms of direction between contexts and within a given context, is potentially available to any member;
- Jamming sections tend to conclude with a climax, a high point (if not necessarily the highest point) in terms of dynamics, volume, and/or frenzy;
- Following this climax, the band will frequently either reintroduce the main groove of the song, with or without a sung coda, or play the song's characteristic riff.

In the period discussed here, extended improvisational activity takes place in a number of songs, the most notable of which are listed in table 1.

Of the various styles of songs in the Grateful Dead's repertoire, the least represented in this list are the driving rock or folk-rock tunes such as "Goin' Down the Road Feeling Bad" (which only later became an extended vehicle), "Cold Rain and Snow," or "You Don't Have to Ask," with "Cream Puff War" being an exception to this general rule.

Table 1. Improvisational Activity

Song	Improvisational Activity
"Alligator"	always
"Caution (Do Not Stop on Tracks)"	always
"Cream Puff War"	sometimes
"Dancing in the Street"	always
"Death Don't Have No Mercy"	sometimes
"Good Morning Little Schoolgirl"	sometimes
"In the Midnight Hour"	always
"Morning Dew"	sometimes
"New Potato Caboose"	always
"The Other One"	always
"The Same Thing"	sometimes
"Turn on Your Love Light"	always
"Viola Lee Blues"	sometimes

The improvisation found in the McKernan-sung R&B or blues rave-ups with extended vocal exhortations (especially “In the Midnight Hour,” “Good Morning Little Schoolgirl,” and “Turn on Your Love Light”) is structured differently from that found in the other material, and will not be discussed here. My goal is to trace the Grateful Dead’s initial steps into fairly open improvisation, in which potentially all aspects of a song, including its rhythm and harmony, could be spontaneously renegotiated. The approach to jamming that the band adopted for the material led by McKernan, by contrast, is less open (albeit frequently more danceable), especially in terms of the groove and the harmony, which do not vary. Thus even in the band’s early period there are two streams of improvisational practice at work; this essay explores one of those streams.

In the period discussed here, improvisation takes place in up to three sections in a song: in the introduction, in which case it is relatively restrained; in brief instrumental statements between verses, again with restrained improvisation; and in full-on jamming sections that take place at the end of the song, after the verses have been sung—at a point where one could imagine the song going into a fadeout, were it a 45 rpm single. For example, a typical performance of “Viola Lee Blues” in this period would begin with the main groove, with some elaboration, perhaps in the form of a straight-ahead guitar solo, followed by the first verse. Between the first and second verse there would be more elaboration, again most likely in the form of a guitar solo, with the band waxing somewhat more expansive; following this would come the third verse, and after this the jamming would begin in earnest.

At this stage in their career, the Grateful Dead did not jam from one song into the next—or at least, extant recordings do not show this. Nor did they develop songs out of amorphous beginnings: rather, songs started definitely, following the clear finish of preceding songs, and they began with the form, or if not the form then at least with a statement of the main groove. This statement, if present, might be extended, but rarely for very long, and what jamming took place stays fairly close to the original groove.

As an example, consider the version of “Cream Puff War” performed October 7, 1966. The instrumental section begins (2:05) with

Garcia soloing over the song's main groove and a two-chord vamp. After four times through the progression, the band moves to slightly different territory, cued by Lesh's choice to extend the main chord of the progression slightly (2:28), to which Garcia responds by going up the neck into a higher, modal solo. They play the progression another four times through, as Lesh increases both his level of activity and the intensity of his playing. This rise in dynamics cues Kreutzmann to deliver some propulsive hits (3:16) as Lesh continues his driving bass line.

At several points in the jam (e.g., at 3:36) it sounds as if Garcia and Lesh are thinking in terms of a one-chord structure, dropping the second chord of the vamp, but McKernan's monotonous riffing on the organ prevents this change. Weir shows his willingness to suspend the chord progression (for example, from 4:16–4:19), and introduces a very effective high chord at 4:39, incorporating drone strings that move the jam into a more ambiguous, open context before it returns to the vamp and the groove at 4:51. This in turn leads into the cue for the end of the song at 5:25, indicating that this open section—the high point of chaos and uncertainty in the improvisation—has been taken by the band to be the climax of the song.

This piece clearly demonstrates the movement from the song proper into the jamming section, and also shows how changes in harmonic motion can be used as markers. It is significant that the Grateful Dead's trajectory here is toward simplicity and/or ambiguity. Although the main groove involves a two-chord vamp, as in some other songs, there is a tendency here to break away from that vamp in favor of harmonic stasis (as in the case of Garcia's and Lesh's tendencies to extend the first chord in the vamp) or, more subtly, in favor of creating a harmonically ambiguous area, essentially conceiving of the general tonal environment of the jam as a mode rather than a chord.

This tendency can be seen quite clearly in the band's treatment of blues and blues-related tunes, in which turnarounds and standard I–IV–I–V–I progressions are used during the verses and then often drop out of the improvisational sections. One striking example of this is their treatment of “Death Don't Have No Mercy” on March 19, 1966, in which the band chooses to understate the chord changes from 2:34–2:50 in order

to keep the open drone on I going, or from 3:34–3:47, when they pedal on the I following a turnaround, rather than immediately move into the form. Likewise, the blues song “The Same Thing” is already quite droning, with no move to the IV and only a final V–I turnaround, but even this harmonic motion tends to be dropped as the band improvises, as can be heard in their September 16, 1966, performance.

As noted above, the jamming section will begin at the end of the form, at the point where a contemporary pop recording might go into a fadeout. The Grateful Dead do not introduce these sections abruptly; there is no jarring discontinuity or sudden change in basic musical parameters. Rather, they begin by simply continuing the main groove of the song, playing in a controlled, precise fashion, usually gradually bringing the dynamics up, and almost always with an introductory guitar statement by Garcia. They ease the listeners into the jam, keeping the dancers dancing and establishing a point of reference for later explorations. An example of this would be the May 19, 1966, version of “Cream Puff War.” As they vamp over the main riff, Kreutzmann begins smoothing out the song’s accents into a straight beat at 2:20. As he is doing this, Garcia loops a lead figure above him as a holding pattern, providing stability while this rhythmic change is being worked out. After ten seconds of this, Kreutzmann starts incorporating the accents of Garcia’s phrase into his playing; by 2:41, it is clear that the band has moved into the jamming section proper, and Garcia takes off on a solo.

What goes on while the band is jamming? It is not a question of riffing, of the rhythm section playing ostinatos while one member solos. Nor is it a question of the band settling into a groove and riding it. Rather, the Grateful Dead’s practice in the midst of jamming can be likened to that of a jazz rhythm section. The parameters (tonal, rhythmic, melodic, etc.) of the piece are understood, the feel is broadly expressed, but within that context the players are free to play as they see fit, continually adjusting their lines and phrasing to express their take on what is happening at any given moment or to respond to what the other players are doing—and also, potentially, to aspects of the song’s harmony or rhythm.

The major difference is that most of the time, a jazz rhythm section is carrying out all of this activity against the backdrop of a more or less defined song structure, ranging in specificity from the rigidity of a standard to the openness of a modal jazz piece. When the Grateful Dead are jamming, the texture against which they are working at any given moment tends to be understood as a certain tonality, a certain dynamic level, and a certain rhythmic feel—keeping in mind that the band’s tendency is to break down chord changes, thus more strongly emphasizing the bare, unadorned tonal centers of the songs. This undulating, loosely unified space, filled by the different voices of the various band members making their own idiosyncratic contributions moment to moment, I call the Soup. This term, along with “markers” and “pointers,” is used here for the sake of vividness and concision, and to allow us to see different musical statements from a functional point of view; they are heuristic tools, not formal terms. When the band goes from “playing the song” to “just playing,” they are in the Soup.

The version of “Dancing in the Street” performed on March 18, 1967, features a particularly elegant and illustrative entry into the improvisational section, moving from the song to the Soup. The jamming starts (2:05) as a guitar solo played over the main groove, and the song continues in this vein for twenty seconds. At 2:25, Kreutzmann interjects a series of small drum fills that function as pointers, indicating that the texture is changing. Lesh responds to this at 2:30 with a few extra notes before returning to the main groove, but playing it more aggressively. By 2:40 there is a definite feeling of anticipation, of the jam being in motion. Garcia finishes one statement and leaves a little bit of space; Weir immediately increases his volume and Kreutzmann also gets more active, driving the rhythm. Garcia then launches into another statement, playing more aggressively, picking up on Kreutzmann’s increased energy. By 3:02 Weir joins in by playing open, ringing chords rather than clipped ones, and Lesh is beginning to roam more freely. Having moved through this gradual increase of dynamics, they coast on this level for thirty seconds or so until Garcia signals the move into a new context.

In this brief segment, we can hear the musical “ball” being passed from player to player, highlighting the incremental intensification of the

collective music through players responding to each other's markers, and in this way moving from the main groove of the song into uncharted territory. The art of making the Soup lies in creating a musical space that is well enough defined to give the band something to play off of, and the dancers something to dance to, and yet not so precisely defined that it inhibits spontaneous action and reactions. It is the combination of having boundaries *and* the open space that they surround and protect.

The jamming sections are always full of motion, and this is particularly noticeable in terms of the rhythm section's playing. The Grateful Dead do not work in terms of a lead guitarist soloing over a static backing band. Rather, the overall group feel is created through continuous and independent though united movement in all the voices—although McKernan is the member most likely to simply riff through jams. In addition to this continual motion of the individual band members, there are several characteristics of the group's playing that keep the jamming sections mobile and interesting.

First, especially as the jams lengthen, there is an ongoing alternation between periods of expansion and contraction, particularly in terms of dynamics or rhythm. The band is continually moving to a high point of intensity, of rhythmic drive, of volume, and generally, of excitement—briefly sustaining it, and then dropping back to a lower point. The rare exceptions to this principle (such as the extended, droning three-note riff in “Viola Lee Blues”) are effective precisely because they are exceptions.

In addition to this rise-and-fall motion, there is also ongoing motion that shifts the contexts of the jam. Broadly speaking, the band stays in any given “feel” for not less than fifteen seconds, and not more than a minute. At regular intervals, some aspect of the feel will change, whether that means someone introducing a new harmonic texture into the jam or dissolving harmonic progressions (often Weir's approach); tightening up or loosening the rhythm (typical of Kreutzmann); significant shifts in register or attack (Lesh); or looping riffs and using them as jumping-off points (Garcia).

Consider, for example, the version of “The Same Thing” performed on November 29, 1966. The improvisational section of this performance is carefully and subtly developed, offering a particularly clear model

of the band's process. The improvisational section begins at 4:50, with Garcia soloing over a more or less static backdrop. By 5:15 the intensity of the band has definitely begun to increase, cued by Lesh. Garcia teasingly introduces a brief figure at 5:40, joined by Lesh, creating a momentary respite from the main groove of the song. But he quickly drops the figure, only to bring it back again at 6:05, where it is looped and used as a marker to cue a leisurely intensification that smoothly turns into a double-time acceleration at 6:56. By 7:30 they have settled into a boogie, with Garcia playing low and the whole band producing a very dense rhythmic structure, which Garcia eventually breaks out of at 8:04, and then goes back into at 8:24, quickly breaking out yet again to start another statement. At 8:51, the most interesting part of the jam appears. Garcia begins looping a triplet riff, holding it for close to thirty seconds as the rest of the band assimilates this new context: Lesh by droning, Weir by playing static, dreamy chords, McKernan by introducing a very effective high organ voicing. Overall, the effect is of something opening up, like a flower unfolding its petals; it is a lovely, evocative moment. And just as the moment threatens to become dissonant (with the dissonance led by Weir), Garcia breaks loose to continue his solo.

Here we can see the regularity of the movement between sections, with significant changes in context taking place roughly every thirty seconds—enough time for listeners or dancers to get the feel of a new context, but not enough time for them to grow bored. Although many of the changes are cued by Garcia, the piece does not come off as a guitar showcase, but rather as a collective movement through different environments. Garcia is the acknowledged leader, by virtue of his sensitivity to possibilities and his willingness to point the way to new adventures; this is more of a “first among equals” situation rather than the more dictatorial leadership usually assumed by a lead guitarist.

Changes in feel are usually signalled and initiated by one member briefly rising to the fore and making a musical statement, leading the other band members to echo or respond to it. These rise-with-a-statement moments I refer to as *markers*, and generally they perform one of two functions. Sometimes they work as statements that lead the way to momentary interludes that create focus by playing a riff or tightening up

the rhythm, as we find, for example, in the version of “Dancing in the Street” played on September 3, 1967. From about 5:15 to around 6:38, the band is jamming in an open, free-floating conversational context that extant recordings suggest is unprecedented at this point in their career. At 6:38, however, things solidify: Lesh introduces a riff in 7/4 that sounds as though it might be the ancestor of the Dm section in “Uncle John’s Band,” and it is quickly picked up by Garcia. This marker serves as a grounding, in that it momentarily anchors the jam, briefly bringing them down to earth before they return to floating territory.

At other times, markers work as statements that inspire the band to change the feel of the music, whether to a great or small extent; in these cases, I refer to them as pointers. An example of a pointer would be Lesh’s bass run at 2:43–2:45 in the version of “Dancing in the Street” performed on September 3, 1967, which suggests a move into the “spacey” atmosphere that prevails in this section of the jam. Pointers may lead the way into new territory, or they may simply signal that someone thinks that the given feel has gone on long enough and is suggesting that things change, without necessarily taking a stand on how they should change, as is the case with Garcia’s looped triplet riff in the performance of “The Same Thing” above.

Pointers lead to new musical territory, while groundings provide a momentary contrast to the more free-floating textures characteristic of the Soup. Some markers are clearly intended to belong to a specific category when played, but often their ultimate function will be determined retrospectively, depending on the reception that the marker receives from the rest of the band. An example of this can be found in the version of “Alligator” performed on May 5, 1967. The jam begins at 3:20; by 4:00, Garcia has finished his introductory statement and Lesh has descended to an ominous low note. Garcia takes these markers as pointers, ushering in a somewhat new texture by playing lower and more quietly; Lesh, on the other hand, seems to take them as groundings, momentary respites before he returns to the fray, this time accompanied by McKernan. Overall, markers can be played by any band member (with McKernan using them least), usually in ways that reflect his traditional instrumental role—e.g.,

Weir will usually play markers that involve harmonic changes or chordal riffs, whereas Garcia's markers involve melodic lines or single-note riffs.

Jam sections end with a climax, built by the group as a whole, although its onset is frequently cued by Garcia. This climax will be at a high point in terms of the intensity and volume of the playing, but not necessarily the highest point in the jam. Rather, the climax is distinguished by the fact that it presents the most dissonant and/or chaotic playing in the song, the point where things come the closest to sounding out of control. While some climaxes may arise from spontaneous excitement, it is clear from other cases that this is a deliberate strategy—and an effective one, providing a moment of tension that is simultaneously a moment of destructive liberation, as the forms that the band has been manipulating momentarily dissolve and the listener is brought face to face with the raw sound that underlies all form.

It is typical of the Grateful Dead's aesthetic as a dance band, no matter how experimental, that such moments are nonetheless controlled, in two ways. First, the climaxes themselves are not as noisy, extended, or dissonant as they might have been, especially in the band's early period—they are mild compared with, for example, contemporary music made by the Velvet Underground or La Monte Young. In the Dead's hands, chaos is *represented*, but not *enacted*. One can easily imagine these climaxes driving dancers into a frenzy, but they are not so disruptive as to make the dancers actually stop dancing, at least in this period. One noteworthy exception to this is the climax to "Viola Lee Blues" performed at Toronto's O'Keefe Centre on August 4, 1967, when the music turns into a howling mass of electronic sound, a harbinger of what is to come in the next phase of the band's development. Secondly, the climaxes are followed by a return to the main groove of the song. This return to the groove initiates a settling-down period that is formally similar to the introduction to the jam in reverse—the groove is played, the musicians calm down, and often Garcia will take a solo before the song ends, sometimes with a sung coda that symbolizes a return to the song's form after the jamming section, as they do in "Dancing in the Street" or "Viola Lee Blues."

Thus the chaotic part of the jam, and indeed the jam as a whole, is encapsulated within the song, in an elegant chiasmic structure. We are

never in doubt (at this point, anyway) as to what song the band is playing, but it is made clear that the structured, formal face of the song is only part of its identity, only its public face, so to speak. The Grateful Dead's practice unveils the private face as well, the part of the song that opens out into infinity, and that is (theoretically at least) always potentially present.

The Paradigm was not the Grateful Dead's ultimate solution to the challenge of improvisation within a rock idiom. There are at least three other models that they employed as their career progressed, including the aggressive "acid rock" approach that developed out of the Paradigm and came to its height in 1968–69; the extremely flexible, layered, and nuanced approach that peaked in 1973–74; and the formalized and structured approach that solidified by the end of the 1970s, in which they continued working for the rest of their career.

The Paradigm should be seen as but one step on a longer journey, and the time frame discussed here allows us to see the Paradigm as it was being developed, at its peak, and then as it was in the process of being superseded by the next phase of the Grateful Dead's improvisational journey. We will look at these aspects in greater detail below; here, I will summarize three especially significant alterations to the Paradigm that took place in 1967 and that eventually led to a new approach to improvisation. These changes occurred at the set list level, at the song level, and within the Soup. Fundamentally, these alterations have to do with the relation between parts and whole on different levels, and with a tendency to privilege the latter over the former—to see smaller forms as constituents of larger forms.

At the set list level, the band moved toward deemphasizing the autonomy of the individual piece. Whereas in the Paradigm, pieces have definite beginnings and definite endings, in the next phase of the Grateful Dead's journey there was a tendency to make starts and/or endings of many (though not all) songs amorphous, and frequently connected by jamming. The effect is to reimagine the set, so that it becomes perceived as the basic context, with its constituent songs being the pieces that comprise it—just as the Grateful Dead is seen as the basic unit, with the band members as the parts of that essential unity.

At the level of individual songs, the old placement of improvisational parts in the “fadeout” section, following a period of grooving on the main riff of the song, is challenged compositionally as the band begins writing sections that function as launching pads for improvisation, or what I call “trapdoors.” The placement of the jamming section in “Alligator”—at the end of the song, but within the song’s form rather than in fadeout position over the main groove—is a clear step along this road, as is the placement of the jamming section in “New Potato Caboose.” This development allows for greater variety in terms of the placement and basic premises of improvisational activity, and it also has an effect on the perceived interaction of the composed and improvised sections of songs. The Paradigm model presents composed and improvised sections as linked in their contexts of origin—that is, both develop out of the same basic groove and tonal area. They are linked by the fact that they come from the same place, and return to it.

On the other hand, the increasing use of compositional placement of improvisational sections unites composed and improvised sections in a different way. Although they may be different in groove or tonality, they are seen as constituent parts of the larger whole they comprise. Perhaps the clearest model would be the improvisational section of “Uncle John’s Band,” a song composed a little later than the period under discussion but sections of which appeared in jams long before the song itself was unveiled. The jamming section for this song is in a different key than the composed section (D minor versus G major), has a different time signature (7/4 versus 4/4), has a different groove, and ends with a bridging chord accompanied by a suspension of the rhythm to enable the players to return to the feel of the composed section of the song. In all of these instances, the improvisational sections are joined with the composed section; they are not radically discontinuous. But, as was the case with the songs in relation to the set as a whole, here we see within the songs a move toward deemphasizing the autonomy of the sections in favor of seeing them in terms of, and fitting them into, a larger whole.

Finally, within the improvisational sections, we can also hear distinct advances—the consistency of the Soup changes, to extend the metaphor. The tendency in the earlier material was for the Soup to be made

up of more or less identifiable and distinct sections, with motion between them cued by markers while the band played in a relatively restrained manner, often one that was expressive of the dominant idiom of the given section. By mid-1967, however, the band was playing much more aggressively and exuberantly, particularly Lesh, and extant recordings show them playing at full tilt, all the time. The effect that this has on the listener is mixed. At any given moment the playing will tend to be more exciting and impressive than before, but it is also true that the long jams can simply be exhausting, lacking in respite or change of atmosphere. The effect is to turn the jams into more homogeneous affairs, again reducing the separations between sections in favor of emphasizing the unity of the whole in which they are contained.

The Grateful Dead's improvisational practice is not well served by the standard analyses of improvisation, for several reasons. First of all, their understanding of improvisation as a group practice, with the group as a structured whole (i.e., with the different instrumental roles maintained) that moves spontaneously through contexts, differs significantly from jazz, where the individual player rather than the group is the focus of attention, and the form is usually understood as being broadly established for any given piece. Likewise, the Dead's approach also differs from "art" music, where the individual composer and his or her intentions for the piece tend to be the focus of attention. And, of course, the Dead's understanding of improvisation as a literal manifestation of a group mind is unusual, particularly when coupled with their transformation of improvisation from an end to a means by which a religious or spiritual end is achieved and expressed. Perhaps the closest parallel would be found in the work of Sun Ra, although the comparison is not quite apt, given his insistence on the importance of maintaining autocratic control during performance.

All of this raises two questions that need to be answered in future research: What does it mean on a theological or religious level to position oneself as a group outside of form, developing techniques that enable the group to move through forms while always being open to transcendence? And how do these techniques show the influence of the band's religious/theological/spiritual stance? Finally, we must keep in mind that the

Grateful Dead stand at the head of a tradition. Improvisation is, of course, universal—one cannot avoid improvising, in some sense, whenever one plays—but the Grateful Dead belong to the first generation of rock bands to bring to consciousness and develop what had up to then been an underground, hidden tradition of rock improvisation. Thus the typical kinds of analyses of jazz improvisational practice that rely on the existence of an acknowledged tradition of jazz improvisation are not appropriate to the Grateful Dead's contemporary situation. There was no such tradition then, nor can we use these methods as models for retrospective assessments of the rock improvising tradition, as it has not developed in anything like the same way that the jazz tradition has developed.⁴

Robert Freeman (2000) offers a useful model for approaching the practice of an improvising rock band. His article is a summary of his research on the Other People, a jam band formed directly and consciously in the lineage of the Grateful Dead whose goal was to induce a state of intense interaction and unity among the musicians. Freeman provides a taxonomy for assessing improvisation in a rock idiom. He discusses songs as models, including the relative density/openness of required material for any given piece; the moods that the piece evokes; and typical approaches in playing a given piece, addressing musical role conventions (the conventional function of each of the instrumentalists, both in terms of general conventions and those specific to the Grateful Dead). How players work within and around those conventions, how they affect the band's improvisational practice, and how they help to structure it, all inform his analysis of how the musicians *accomplish* structure (the cues and keys that provide structure to otherwise less structured sections), *push* structure (the way that the band negotiates in open sections and in passage points between songs, where things are theoretically up for grabs), and their use of transitional strategies that communicate or disrupt emergent structure.

Finally, Freeman takes apart the improvisational passages with a typology of their musical elements—melody, counterpoint, rhythm, symbolic interaction (cues)—with the manipulation or interaction of these elements creating tendencies that come together into institutionalized approaches or structures. These structures then must themselves be contested in order to maintain improvisational freedom. This analysis is both

perceptive and compelling, and its application goes far beyond the Other People. Indeed, Freeman's conclusion could apply equally to the Grateful Dead when he notes:

Creativity is not simply a product of the initiative or abilities of individuals. Rather, it may be a systemic outgrowth of organizational forms that institutionalize playful and deconstructive processes rather than enforce rigid hierarchies. Such social forms reshape themselves in response to both external inputs and the creative solutions and contributions of individual elements. By allowing lower-level elements to self-referentially reprogram upper-level processes, flexible social forms open their very structures up to adaptation ... The lesson is to build porous forms with room for individual contributions rather than rigid structures to ward off chaos. (2000, 103)

This essay corroborates and extends Freeman's conclusion by outlining the "porous form" that the Grateful Dead constructed early in their career, and tracing some of the ways that it was "reprogrammed" as time went on. Although the way that the Dead developed their signature approach to improvisation evokes and deeply reflects the complex cultural ferment of their times, there are far broader lessons in the Dead's work for scholars studying improvisation. By providing a close listening to concert highlights from the band's formative era, this essay expands Freeman's assessment to indicate some of the potential and rewards of the practice of improvisation within popular music generally. As shown here, that practice is one that the Dead did much to define.

NOTES

1. An informal review of the African dance music of the 1960s and 1970s suggests this. More recent recorded music tends to be tighter, but even the superstar bands (such as those led by Thomas Mapfumo or Sunny Ade) are much more open live.
2. This is theoretically true; in practice, McKernan very rarely took the lead in improvisational developments.
3. Lesh has invoked traditional Christian sacramental terminology to describe the effect of the Grateful Dead's music, referring to improvising as "praying" and

saying that their approach to musical transcendence is to play and then “hope” that “the dove descends” (Brightman 1999, 8), remarks echoed in his memoir (2005, 68–76). There he strikes an explicitly messianic note, saying that “it felt as if we were an integral part of some cosmic plan to help transform human consciousness” (2005, 333). And, of course, many have theorized about the relationship between drug-induced transcendent experience and religious experience. The idea that one could have experiences under the influence of LSD that would be similar to, or comparable to, non-drug-induced religious experiences, such as those recounted in the New Testament, considerably predates the hippie scene, and would have been prevalent in the Grateful Dead’s environment. Contemporary promoters of that idea included such well-known figures as Alan Watts and Aldous Huxley.

4. See, for example, Paul Berliner (1994), or even more specifically Hal Crook’s instructional volume *Ready, Aim, Improvise*, where he notes: “When even a capable instrumentalist who is not proficient in traditional jazz vocabulary attempts to improvise in a jazz context, the content and execution of the music sounds foreign, remote, inappropriate, and, in a sense, too original. This is a very different sounding player than the studied, experienced and highly skilled avant-garde jazz artist, whose improvising may still repel some non-discerning ears, but who is, nevertheless, permeated with tradition” (1999, 58).

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