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Furthur. Bill Graham Civic Auditorium, San Francisco, CA, December 30, 2010.

Furthur. *Bill Graham Civic Auditorium, San Francisco, CA, December 30, 2010*. 3 CD set (FLAC download). \$25.00.

Furthur. *Bill Graham Civic Auditorium, San Francisco, CA, December 30, 2010*. Audience recording by Russ Cansler. *Internet Archive*, <https://archive.org/details/furthur2010-12-30.pzm.russjcan.111398.flac16>.

MICHAEL PARRISH

Ever since Garcia's death in 1995, his bandmates have continued to explore the Grateful Dead catalog, performing singly and in various aggregations under several names. The variety and range of these efforts makes for an interesting tapestry, made even more complex with Bob Weir's and Phil Lesh's joint effort Furthur, now entering its second very successful year. The occasion of their two-night engagement for New Year's 2010 gave me an opportunity to hear and reflect on the tangled history of this post-Garcia band as reified in the recordings of that event, both the official soundboard and a representative audience recording.

When Jerry Garcia's health started to decline in the mid-1980s, it was clear that he might join the heavenly band at any time. However, when that time finally came in August 1995, the surviving members of the Grateful Dead found themselves without a backup plan. When key members like Ron "Pigpen" McKernan and Keith Godchaux passed away, the band had carried on with replacements, but given that Garcia was arguably the Dead's central creative axis and served as somewhat of a buffer between some of the other volatile personalities in the group, this was a more fundamental crisis, both existential and actual.

Initially, a round of concerts scheduled at the Shoreline Amphitheater was cancelled, followed by the formal announcement in December that the name would be retired. Drummer Bill Kreutzmann moved to Hawaii, making any spontaneous reunions of the surviving members much less likely. Several band members carried on performing: Bob Weir with

RatDog, Mickey Hart with a variety of ensembles including Planet Drum and Mystery Box, and Deadheads' summer tour needs were satisfied by the daylong Furthur Festivals that featured RatDog, Hart's ensemble *du jour*, and a changing roster of simpatico acts including Hot Tuna, Bruce Hornsby, Los Lobos, and the Black Crowes. For two years following Garcia's death, Lesh and Kreutzmann were essentially retired, although he and Weir guested at a Bruce Hornsby gig at the Fillmore in March 1996, and Lesh sat in with his bandmates' groups at the 1996 Furthur Festival. In late 1997 and early 1998, Lesh apparently got the itch to play again, first through several local gigs with Broken Angels and later with guest spots with Crosby and Nash, David Murray (also with Weir) and again with Hornsby. This led to the first incarnation of Phil Lesh and Friends, which debuted in February 1998 at the Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco.

For the 1998 Furthur Festival, the Weir, Lesh, and Hart toured together in a group dubbed the Other Ones, rounded out by drummer John Molo, Hornsby, saxophone player Dave Ellis, and two additional guitarists, Mark Karan and Steve Kimock. For the tour, the Other Ones dug deep into the Dead's repertoire, dusting off long-shelved chestnuts like "Saint Stephen" and "Mountains of the Moon." Although quite popular with fans, the group suffered from cluttered arrangements, and neither Kimock nor Karan really stepped out, which meant that an authoritative lead guitar presence was missing. In fact, in many shows, Ellis's sax was closer to a lead voice than either Karan's or Kimock's guitars.

The 1999 Furthur Festival was cancelled but returned the following summer, with the Other Ones headlining and sporting another lineup. Lesh was out but Kreutzmann was back, with Alphonso Johnson on bass. This might have been the least artistically satisfying of the post-Dead configurations, but it was great to see and hear Kreutzmann and Hart working off one another again. In 2002, the "core four" finally reunited for a tour, starting with a two-day event billed as a "Grateful Dead Family Reunion" at Alpine Valley that featured all four members with their respective bands as well as an Other Ones performance each night. At this point, Ellis, Hornsby, Kimock, and Karan were all out, replaced by a single lead guitarist, Jimmy Herring, and supplemented by two keyboardists, Jeff

Chimenti from RatDog and Rob Barraco from the relatively stable quintet version of Phil Lesh and Friends. For the latter part of the fall tour, Susan Tedeschi joined, providing additional vocals.

The next year, to great fanfare (and bemusement), the group reverted to a new/old name, no longer Grateful but touring instead as just “The Dead.” Tedeschi was replaced by Joan Osborne, who, along with Barraco, shared a lot of the vocal duties with Weir, Lesh, and sometimes even Hart. The group was retooled again for 2004, with Osborne and Baracco out and Warren Haynes brought in from Phil Lesh and Friends to add guitar and a significant portion of the lead vocals. During the Herring and Haynes eras, lead guitar was abundant, but their Southern-tinged, seat-of-the-pants instrumental duels made this iteration, much like the Phil Lesh Quintet, sound, to no one’s surprise, like a genetic hybrid between the Dead and the latter-day Allman Brothers.

Following another very public parting of the ways, the band members did not work together in a formal context for another four years. The occasion of the 2008 presidential campaign found the 2004 band, minus Herring, doing a couple of benefits for Barack Obama followed by a very successful summer tour. As good as Haynes is as a musician and vocalist, his being called on to essentially fill the Garcia role did not sit well with many fans. The Dead disbanded again after the summer tour, but Weir and Lesh performed together on a few occasions that fall, including a pair of New Year’s concerts that included them performing together in between sets by their respective bands.

During this Byzantine period of comings and goings, the former Grateful Dead members, collectively and individually, explored and dissected virtually the entire Dead canon. However, they resisted trying to really *sound* like the Dead. Even when Kimock—who can do a fine job of emulating Garcia’s sound when called to do so—was in the Other Ones, his playing was seemingly reined in, and often focused on playing slide and lap steel rather than lead guitar. Thus it came as a shock to the Grateful Dead world when, hard on the heels of the heavily publicized tour by The Dead, in late summer of 2009, a new band, dubbed Furthur, was launched, with Dark Star Orchestra’s John Kadlecik providing lead guitar and vocals.

Kadlecik had been playing the Garcia role in Dead-inflected bands for some time, first in Chicago-area groups Hairball Willy and Uncle John's Band and then as part of a regular Dead-themed Tuesday night gig at Lincoln Avenue tavern Martyr's. Starting out as somewhat of a lark, this assemblage of Dead-influenced musicians, dubbed Dark Star Orchestra (with tongue firmly in cheek), started out with the conceit of recreating a complete Grateful Dead show each evening. The musicians put a lot of care into this effort, and the group steadily built a following, eventually becoming a marketable touring entity that played many of the venues the Dead performed in their pre-stadium days.

Dark Star Orchestra takes their charge very seriously, varying personnel and equipment to best emulate the Dead from a particular era, and years of touring with the group gave Kadlecik an unparalleled opportunity to study at the figurative "University of Jerry." That said, he could neither play the required role in Dark Star Orchestra nor be able to function so effectively in Furthur if he were not a tremendously gifted musician in his own right. There is a lot more to absorbing Garcia's style than memorizing charts. Nonetheless, the decision to recruit a "fake Jerry" from what is—unashamedly—a Grateful Dead cover band came as a shock to many, myself included. It seemed like a decision to move the legacy of the Dead into the territory of groups like the current Beach Boys, touring endlessly and playing mainly hits recorded decades previously (not that the Dead had too many hits, but that's another discussion).

The other significant changes in personnel occurred in the percussion section. Once again, the "core four" remained apart, with Lesh and Weir recruiting two different percussionists, Jay Lane from RatDog and Joe Russo, a new face to the Grateful Dead world. Russo had previously worked mostly in a duet format with jazz pianist Marco Benvenuto, but he had also served as somewhat of a first-call drummer for the jam band community. With Russo solidly behind the trap set and Lane, usually standing up, playing a variety of percussion instruments and providing backing vocals, their selection seemed a conscious effort to replicate the type of percussion chemistry that Kreutzmann and Hart provided in the Dead.

To some observers, the overall conceit for Furthur seemed to be a conscious effort to recreate the sound of the Grateful Dead in its prime, using younger players to work with the team of Lesh and Weir. In all of the previous post-Grateful Dead ensembles, the notion had seemed to be to work with the Dead repertoire without really trying to *sound* like the Dead—instead, to chart some new musical territory. This made for some interesting music, but consistently begged the question of how essential Garcia's very singular sound and presence had been to the mystique of the Grateful Dead.

The decision to launch Furthur could be explained either from an artistic or a commercial perspective, and the truth is probably somewhere in between. Artistically, the new lineup provides a context for Weir and Lesh to work together in a manner as close as possible to the one in which they had experienced what was arguably their greatest group creative chemistry, but without some of the personal friction and practical issues (notably Garcia's health) that characterized the Grateful Dead in their final decade. And many fans delighted in the new name, steeped in the Dead demimonde and harking back to the band's origins in the Acid Tests. Christening the new effort with its own name also suggested a serious commitment. This would not be a solo conceit, but a band.

A more cynical view is that they realized that a group that sounds more like the Grateful Dead at the peak of their popularity would sell more tickets than either RatDog or Phil Lesh and Friends, and indeed this has been the case. It is clear from audience reactions I have seen that, name notwithstanding, most fans at shows consider Furthur to *be* the Grateful Dead. Standing in line for the show reviewed here, I probably heard a dozen different conversations that talked about being at a Grateful Dead show rather than a Furthur performance.

I did not attend the inaugural Furthur shows at the Fox in September 2009, mainly because I was dubious about the whole concept and wondered whether the new lineup would jell successfully. Indeed, reports I heard from the shows were mixed, and centered principally on Kadlecik's role. It certainly must have been daunting for the guitarist to be expected to fill those big sneakers, in some ways at least, and his playing was ten-

tative the first night, but grew in confidence over the weekend, further honed during a short December tour on the East Coast.

In December and January, bookending the first Furthur New Year's run, the band did a remarkable series of public dress rehearsals at small halls in Mill Valley. In addition to expanding the group's repertoire, these shows served to break in the first adjustment to the band's lineup, adding two backup singers that served to enrich the occasionally strained vocal ranges of the three fretted instrumentalists. Zoe Ellis, sister of former RatDog/Other Ones sax player Dave Ellis, had worked with Lesh in one of the many incarnations of Phil Lesh and Friends; Sunshine Garcia Becker (no relation to Jerry) had primarily worked previously in Bay Area a capella group Sovoso.

My first chance to see the group live came in the penultimate of these rehearsals, held at the incredibly intimate Mill Valley Masonic Hall on January 11, 2010. These were incredibly tough tickets, but I managed to get in through one of the random windows when the internet box office was open. As befits a rehearsal, the mood was casual. The band drifted in about a half hour after the scheduled start time, but played with all the energy and concentration one might expect in a regular concert setting. The selection of tunes was not all I might have hoped for, starting with a very rough take of "El Paso." But there were some nice surprises, notably the first run through of "Caution" (actually played through twice without stopping) with Weir in full raging bluesman mode, and a set-closing "Help On the Way" > "Slipknot!" > "Cassidy," with "Franklin's Tower" as an encore.

Obviously, this was a relaxed, supportive environment for the group, but what I found especially impressive was the camaraderie on stage. In particular, Lesh seemed thrilled by Kadlecik's playing, flashing his trademark grins toward the guitarist throughout the evening. That evening also made me a Kadlecik believer. I had seen Dark Star Orchestra once in Chicago early in their career and was not that impressed. They certainly had a handle on the Dead's repertoire but seemed to come up short in the sections of the show that required improvisation. Also, at that point Kadlecik seemed bent on trying to copy Garcia vocally as much as possible, which moved things dangerously close to the ethos of a cover

band one might find in a neighborhood sports bar. Clearly his years on the road have allowed the guitarist to refine his chops, and he has found his own voice—literally—when singing. There is no mistaking the similarities between his voice and Garcia's, but he has dropped most of the affectations and now sounds more like himself than like someone trying to imitate Garcia.

In Furthur, Kadlecik is clearly tasked with working around one of the most distinctive “rhythm sections” in rock, while churning out Garcia-inspired leads, much as a banjo player provides a steady cascade of notes in a bluegrass band. Very rarely is he called on—or given the space—to really direct the music, the way Garcia did in the Dead. It's a subtle but very significant difference, and it seems clear from the onstage body language that this has been clearly delineated. On more than one occasion at both the Marin show and at Lesh's birthday bash, Kadlecik would slip out of a solo space at a cue from Weir.

The emotional and musical rapport between Lesh and Weir was impressive. The two have obviously had their differences in the past, but they seemed to be thoroughly enjoying one another's company on stage. Weir did stumble lyrically on occasion, but that is hardly a new development. If you take Garcia out of the mix, the most distinctive aspect of the Grateful Dead's instrumental sound was the interplay between Lesh and Weir, who both pushed their craft far beyond the traditional roles occupied by those instruments in a typical rock band. Lesh, like his colleague Jack Casady, approaches the bass much more as a lead instrument than merely as a part of the rhythm section, holding down the bottom end and keeping time. Weir, trying to thread his way through Garcia's dancing leads and Lesh's aggressive melodic extrapolations, was forced by circumstance to similarly reinvent the “rhythm” guitar, employing arpeggiations, jazz chords, and often his own lead lines to stake out his own harmonic territory.

My next live encounter with Furthur was at the Bill Graham Civic Auditorium for a concert billed as “Phil Lesh's Seventieth Birthday Bash,” on March 12. This was less a Furthur show than a celebration for Lesh, with Phil Lesh and Friends alumni Jackie Greene and Chris Robinson taking lead vocal duties for much of the night. This concert

also marked the end of the first lineup of Furthur, with Jay Lane and Zoe Becker leaving the group after this show, Lane choosing to tour with his old band Primus and Ellis retiring because of an imminent pregnancy. This lineup continued with Russo as sole drummer/percussionist and with Box Set vocalist Jeff Pehrson brought in to replace Ellis. Kadlecik played largely a support role that night, stepping up to sing just one song, “Lazy River Road,” and even surrendering many of the guitar leads to Greene. With the guests prominently featured during almost the entire show, it was difficult to evaluate how this fit into Furthur’s progress, despite the evening’s three sets of music.

Following Lesh’s birthday, the band kept a relatively low profile in the Bay Area, doing a few more stealth shows at the Palms in San Rafael and playing a chilly evening set in Golden Gate Park as part of the mammoth Outside Lands festival. Elsewhere, Furthur toured aggressively, most frequently on the East Coast, returning to the Bill Graham Civic for the year-end shows with an impressive eighty-one gigs under their belts for the year. They had also clearly re-established their roles as hometown heroes. While RatDog and Phil Lesh and Friends could comfortably fill the Warfield or the Fox, both of the year-end Furthur shows were sold out well in advance, with tickets hard to come by on the street.

The December 30 concert was a fine show. The band ran through most of the first set as a medley, starting with a long “Shakedown Street,” sung by Kadlecik. Several changes in the band were apparent. First, Russo seemed to be holding back, both in tempo and in energy. At an earlier concert, I had been impressed with his ability to seamlessly keep the beat while adding interesting embellishments, regardless of the directions his partners might take. Whether this change was due to directions from other band members or the absence of Lane, it definitely toned down the band’s energy, particularly during the first set.

Secondly, a great deal of material seemed to have been rearranged to more fully feature the choral effect that can be achieved by the combined voices of Pehrson, Becker, Chimenti, and sometimes—as in the two show closers, “And We Bid You Goodnight” and “Attics of My Life”—the three guitarists as well. On such vocal-heavy tunes, the effect is mesmerizing, but in other places (such as the “Shake it down, shake it down, shake it

down, down” rejoinder in “Shakedown Street” and the call-and-response conceit thrown into the chorus of “Love Light”), the attempt to work in the additional vocalists sounded misguided and kitschy. The additional vocals certainly enhance the well-worn pipes of Weir and Lesh, but a less-is-more approach to the vocal arrangements seems wise.

In sharp contrast to Lesh’s birthday show, Kadlecik sang lead on a majority of the songs. Instrumentally, however, the guitarist is still clearly tasked with working around Lesh and Weir while churning out Garcia-inspired leads. To my ears, one of the best things about the emergence of Furthur was the return of Bob Weir’s ringing, bell-like guitar tones that were such a distinctive feature of the band’s sonic arsenal from the beginning through the mid-1980s. Later in that decade, he began favoring a much harsher, metallic clanging sound that he favored in RatDog and most of the post-Grateful Dead ensembles. Regrettably, those grating tones were back in force for December 30 show, making “Shakedown Street” sound like chipmunks were loose on stage and later breaking the hypnotic vibe of “Fire On the Mountain.” To be fair, he did moderate his tone in places, but like many, I long for him to return to a more melodic tonal range.

In the Grateful Dead, the level of energy was most often directly related to Lesh’s level of engagement. Every time I have seen Furthur, he seemed to be having a ball, and his playing is arguably as aggressive and creative as it has ever been. Lesh is in remarkably good shape for a septuagenarian, especially one with a liver transplant. Jeff Chimenti is the only musician outside of the “core four” who has been a member of all of the post-Other Ones Weir-Lesh aggregations, and it seems clear why he has been such a durable addition. With a Hammond B-3 organ, a grand piano, and a bank of electric keyboards, Chimenti moves easily among the Dead’s eras, spanning the sixties to the nineties as required. His presence is always apparent but not overstated, playing moody electric piano on “Estimated Prophet,” elegant piano chords on “Crazy Fingers,” and beefy McKernan-era organ on “Love Light.”

Another successful aspect of Furthur is their incorporation of new material. On December 30, this included Lesh’s driving, melodically complex “Welcome to the Dance” as well as Weir’s impressionistic “Seven

Hills of Gold.” Kadlecik has taken on a variety of interesting covers, including several of Ryan Adams’ songs. The second set opened with him singing a very nice arrangement of George Harrison’s neglected chestnut “Any Road,” to which the band gave a nice “Touch of Grey” vibe.

The second set continued to build in energy thanks to a rare, complete version of “Playing in the Band,” with the body and reprise of the song bridged by a bright melodic jam in which Chimenti laid down a soothing bed of piano chords while Lesh and Kadlecik made subtle melodic thrusts. After roaring back into the reprise, the group plowed into a crisp, choppy “China Cat Sunflower” that meandered into another pretty jam before evaporating to make way for a rousing, 1968-style “Saint Stephen” that built into another monster jam, following the “One man gathers what another man spills” line before literally spilling into a fairly stock reading of “Scarlet Begonias” and “Fire on the Mountain.” After a pause, the band assumed a slow, moody pace for Weir’s reading of “Death Don’t Have No Mercy.” They stayed in a 1969–70 mode for the rest of the show, with an uptempo pairing of “The Eleven” and “Goin’ Down the Road Feeling Bad” followed by the choral extravaganza of “And We Bid You Goodnight” with “Attics of My Life” as the encore.

With another lengthy tour announced, Furthur seems positioned to continue for the foreseeable future. With this band, Lesh and Weir have come the closest to recapturing the audience—and gate receipts—that they had with the Dead. They aren’t playing stadiums in the summer (nor do they necessarily want to), but they are selling out medium to large halls. Amazingly, both musicians have been playing some of the tunes in their repertoire for forty-five years or better, so it seems likely that they can do so for another few years, as long as their health holds up.

The injection of new material is noteworthy, as the various Grateful Dead-related bands have pretty much restored the entire Dead canon in one incarnation or another and, in fact, Furthur has been rotating the bulk of that body of work within their regular touring repertoire. One big factor in keeping things fresh is that, much as in Phil Lesh and Friends, the order of tunes and even their placement in the set list seems up for grabs. Song order is determined in advance of the show, as evidenced by photos of printed set lists that often show up in chat rooms even before the

show is played. What this means, though, is that the group is thinking—in advance—of how the segues might unfold. On December 30, almost all of the segues were remarkably smooth, in sharp contrast to the disjointed transitions that sometimes occurred at Dead shows, particularly in their later years.

My ability to assess the concert *ex post facto* was made possible by two different recordings, one taped by an audience member and the other released officially by the band, available in either download or CD format at www.furthur.net. The audience tape, made in front of the board with PZM (pressure zone) microphones, captures the ambiance of the cavernous Civic, but is also marred by significant audience chatter and the effects of what was a somewhat muddy room mix. The soundboard, by contrast, is crisp and clearer, but potential downloaders should keep in mind that this was mixed on the fly and consequently not on a par sonically with the superb mixdowns from multi-track tapes that one gets from Grateful Dead releases. The official live download appears to be a matrix mix, because some audience sound is present, particularly in the quieter parts.

For fans, what may matter most is that Lesh and Weir clearly are enjoying playing together and have come up with a supportive, creative group of colleagues with which to tour—and that’s a good thing, for both the musicians and their doggedly loyal audience. While Furthur is not a full-blown continuation of the Grateful Dead, it sounds like a genuine attempt to pick up and carry that torch, and for all the right reasons, musically. Fifteen years after Garcia’s death, Lesh and Weir may have emerged with a worthy successor to “the band beyond description.”

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