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## Review: Jim Tuedio and Stan Spector, *The Grateful Dead in Concert: Essays in Live Improvisation*

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DENNIS ROTHERMEL

Stanley Krippner suggests that Grateful Dead scholarship is not just interdisciplinary but transdisciplinary; that is, what has emerged in the study of the Grateful Dead comprises not just a collection of diverse disciplinary approaches to the band and its culture, but interlinking efforts that in each case represent how a scholar stretches beyond the recognized boundaries and established methodology of any single field of study. That is an outcome that emulates the ease with which the multivoiced improvisations of the Grateful Dead's music abandon the domination of singularly centered vantage points. Like the band's music, it is a blend, though not so much of distinct voices but rather a collective of voices, each of which is already inclusive of the whole mixture, and thus attuned to "the song itself" (14).

Editors Jim Tuedio and Stan Spector have organized the book into three "sets," loosely modeled after the way the band structured performances. As has been the enduring special magic of the band and its performances, they emphasize—borrowing the phrase from Robert Hunter—that there is an "absent center" (9) to the collection, which is exactly how the music of the Grateful Dead flourished in improvisation. Tuedio and Spector have thus appropriately avoided forcing any singular organizing thesis, theme, issue, or argument upon the collection. The organization of each set borrows from the composition of a concert performance, opening with "a tuning observation, followed by a loose 'collective' of focused, reflective essays" (8).

The "First Set" of chapters, "influenced by musicology and ethnomusicology" (7), focuses on the music, upon how Grateful Dead improvisation served as "vehicles for the collective exploration of musical and cultural ideas" (8). Cristin Amigo elucidates the emergence of the Dead's creative practice of improvisation in both its musical and cultural form as

an inventive experience of exploration: “to intuitively grasp what is essential in an artistic or social situation” (19). White American culture overtly obstructed exactly this sort of experience in either music or culture, in contrast—and aversion—to African American music and culture in particular. But the Dead’s creation is a correlate and not a copy, influenced but not derivative. Graeme M. Boone elucidates a notion of the mandala, first in reference to its context in Tibetan Buddhism as both “cosmological and liturgical” in import (26), but also with significance in music, and in the forms of paintings and sand mandalas. Boone uses known connections with American transcendentalism, Beat poetry, the writings of Gustav Jung, as well as explicit mentions in Jerry Garcia interviews to tease out a notion of the mandala as “uniquely appropriate in relation to the Dead’s early music, not least because of its very quality of ‘guided opening’” (35). Brent Wood elucidates how Phil Lesh’s background in musical performance and composition in the European symphonic tradition is at least partly the basis for the bassist’s disinclination to replicate the essentially purely rhythmic function of the bass line in popular music. That Lesh’s contribution to the improvisational mix of the band’s music is melodic in its own right contributes mightily to how the music inspires imaginative dance, and thus also to the unique nature of the experience of a Dead concert, even for those “who weren’t under the influence of any substances at all” (53).

Shaugn O’Donnell likewise finds importance in Lesh’s musical influences, particularly the iconoclastic American composer, Charles Ives. The combination without dilution of “blues, banjo, [and] mandolin techniques” in Garcia’s solos also shows sympathy with open invocation of varieties of the American musical idioms that likewise occupied Ives. The Dead’s loosely structured transitions in improvisation, in which melodies and tunes overlay in a nearly chaotic but in fact controlled harmonic and rhythmic dissonance, likewise echoes Ives’ complex symphonic compositions. Taking a cue from Martin Heidegger’s notion of the “saving power” emanating from the either/or challenge that technology poses to the sedentary acquiesce to the standing reserve of aggregate social and material exigencies, David Malvinni explores how the Dead expanded blues tradi-

tions into mystical, psychedelic realizations of the *Ereignis*, “a gift where there is an Opening” (73).

In a further expansion of the exposition of Dead music as mandala, Boone also explicates a detailed analysis of the variants in the segments of sixty-three recordings of the Dead’s performance of “Dark Star” over a period of eighteen months in 1967–69. This analysis serves as the basis for composing a “Dark Star” mandala, with locations for the tonal center, verses, chord cycles, instrumental tags, tonal anchors, climaxes and post-climaxes, modal shifts, arpeggio riffs, growling, and feedback. Any one performance wanders variously in the mandala. Later performances during this period expand the mandala more complexly—and significantly—to include a location at the apex for the “movement toward ‘instability’” or “space.” Revell Carr explores how Dead lyrics—Robert Hunter’s especially but also John Perry Barlow’s and Bobby Petersen’s—are “loaded with meaningful metaphor and allusion” (107). Dead song lyrics evoke the use of pithy aphorisms by Socrates, Confucius, Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin, Benjamin Franklin, and Ralph Waldo Emerson to articulate thoughts that lift meaning from one context into another, and onto open-ended, multiple planes. The lyrics do not often reduce to a single narrative, and thus encourage finding expanding points of meaning, but ultimately and quintessentially include the endeavor of singing as the primary locale of meaning. Erin McCoy places *Workingman’s Dead* into the historical context of American politics and counterculture, yet finding it timeless, “dignified because it doesn’t attempt to hang on to the psychedelic illusions of the ’60s” (125).

The “Second Set” of chapters clusters investigations informed by recent Continental philosophy and probe “the experience of fusion improvisation” (7–8). Alan Trist describes the well-noted presence of the Dead concert audience and the “collective energy consciousness in the mix” that the audience contributed to the music itself. Trist names this a *hamarchy*, meaning how a political community can enjoy “ruling together” (129–30). Coeditor Tuedio draws from the discussion of musical refrain and innovation in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* to come to terms with the fragile balance between sta-

bility and chaos evident in Grateful Dead improvisations, which traverse “musical space like Deleuzian lines of flight, nomadic assemblages, creative articulations shaping the production and reception of musical multiplicities” (134). For Tuedio, immersion in Grateful Dead improvisational “jams and poignant spatial interludes delivers us to a space of *affectional immediacy* in which our life can recuperate from the practices of normalization and exclusion that otherwise serve to constrain our attunement to possibilities for living *beyond* our contingently prescribed boundaries of self-containment” (149).

Jason Kemp Winfree examines the model of listening that characterizes both Dead improvisation and also what it elicits from its audience. For Heidegger, listening attentively is how the openness of existence becomes revealed to us. Listening attentively is evident in the Grateful Dead’s music first as a listening to the musical traditions that the band appropriates and transforms. It is also the very careful listening of the musicians to each other in performance, and especially in the improvisational segments and “Space.” It is, again, to the listening that the music, in its complexity and yet clarity, draws its listeners to hear attentively, and with that—reading with Hans Georg Gadamer’s elucidation of hermeneutics—to “give it the space required for its manifestation, the world itself comes into being, meaning is disclosed, truth happens” (157).

Elizabeth Carroll draws from Plato’s discussion of *pharmakon* to elucidate how the presence of drugs “held multiple and often contradictory meanings” for a Dead concert, evoking the oppositions that Jacques Derrida identifies in the Plato’s discussion of *pharmakon*: “remedy/poison, good/evil, inside/outside, true/false” (165–66). The tension particularly in the first of these coextensive oppositions finds its clearest expression in Bob Weir’s “Victim or the Crime,” with its references to heroin addiction and codependency, even as Jerry Garcia struggled with that addiction. In an earlier context, Garcia proclaimed the band a remedy to American political disenfranchisement, suggesting that the government should provide a stipend for the band, which inadvertently echoes what Socrates said should be his punishment when informed of his conviction by the Athenian court on charges of impiety and corrupting the young.

And thus the Grateful Dead would be the *pharmakon* that the nation desperately needs (176).

Coeditor Spector pursues how “the thoughtful lyricism” of Dead songs resonates with Nietzsche’s thoughts “on the art of living a healthy life within the wider context of his general critique of Western culture and philosophy” (180). The lyrics and music of “Dark Star” resurrect “the precise tensional balance between Apollonian and Dionysian tendencies operative in Greek tragedy,” particularly with the elusively poignant line “reason tatters” (184). Steven Gimbel iterates the reluctant but steady, even didactic, presence in Dead songs of a moral outlook. The casual familiarity of the band in performance is evident in the absence of any shred of showmanship on stage. But that ease in presence connects with lyrics that nevertheless deliver a message, though couched in assiduous anti-authoritarianism. The moral messages Dead lyrics evoke, however emphatically, portend ways of behaving and judging that are accordingly “all vague, ambiguous, or so open-ended as to require significant work to make them applicable to real life contexts” (194).

Nicholas Meriwether ponders how Stuart Hampshire’s crowning philosophical effort, *Innocence and Experience*, engenders an understanding of how “a personal grounding” is evident in the Grateful Dead as well. In both, what is central to how to live life is how “consciously [to] seek out and learn the highest standards for the activities in which you are engaged, and then measure up to them; and you do so with a fiercely independent, personal motivation” (207).

The “Third Set” of essays draws upon “postmodern research methods in sociology, cultural anthropology and communication theory” and explores the multifaceted communities that the music has fostered, primarily in concert but also in the proliferation of the concert performances virtually in recordings and broadcasts (7–8). Mary Goodenough describes Dead improvisation within the culture that surrounds the concert experience, in which “Deadheads are adept at making do and even thriving with whatever resources are available.” Goodenough connects this practical improvising with Grateful Dead scholarship, in which “each discipline brings its own methodology to the inquiry” and yet where “there is still

an openness and ambiguity concerning where this inquiry is headed” (211–12).

Eric Silverman explicates how Grateful Dead concerts were sublime experiences, which is to say, with a strong element of the terrifying. Testimonies abound of rapture, mysticism, and transcendence for those who experienced the concerts deeply. But with the fall into the throes of the experience of the music comes the shattering of conventions of music, behavior, and thought. Beyond what Jean-Francois Lyotard identified as the postmodernist sublime, “the most frightening hallucinogenic experiences at Dead concerts” occurred during the “eerie, sonic renditions of uncontained or unrepresentational immensity that refused to abide by singular or simple standards of musical etiquette”—that is, the improvised interludes known as “Space” (221).

Jay Williams explores the counterculture use of the American flag, often with graphic embellishment, during a time when proud display of the flag was the emblematic and confrontational signature of staunch right-wing political orientation claiming true patriotism as its own purview, and especially in regard to the national political division regarding the war in Vietnam. Signifying a theme in both Dead accoutrements and music that testifies to the band’s roots in the long history of San Francisco bohemianism, as well as their progression out of that tradition, the Dead, too, appropriated the flag as their own to transform:

Like a standard blues song that provides a basic structure, the stars and stripes gave the Grateful Dead a form to begin from in order to create a new nationalism. They grabbed the American flag away from straight culture, tore it to shreds, and used the shreds to make clothes and blankets. They used it in their emblems. They incorporated it into their music. (245)

Gary Burnett explores the migration of Deadhead communities from the perennial concert-going travels into the virtual communities of online interest and discussion groups, blogs, as well as concert recording collections and regular radio shows dedicated to concert recordings. In accordance with how Paul Ricoeur delineates virtual communities, the enduring virtual community of Deadhead culture maintains coherence,

common reference, intentional continuation of the culture, and invention of new avenues for celebrating it.

Barry Barnes finds salient lessons in the improvisation evident in both the Dead's music and their business of being a rock and roll band. Very much in the tradition of W. Edwards Deming, a set of seven requirements for strategic improvisation outline an applicable means for effective organizational practice, as codified by Frank Barrett, a management consultant and musician. All of these requirements are exemplified in the evolution of the band's music and organizational practice. Natalie Dollar examines the evolution of modes of communication among Deadheads as one of cultural improvisation, from the early proliferation of flyers at concerts, published fan magazines, and, more recently, FM and satellite radio shows devoted to the broadcast of Grateful Dead concert recordings. As this landscape of Deadhead culture persists, "it becomes more and more complex and sophisticated, and increasingly accessible to Deadheads, Grateful Dead fans, and curious participants" (292).

Amanda Diederich-Hirsh finds that the thirty-year history of the band "took on characteristics of the ritual process as it revolved through the three states of *communitas* in a perpetual evolution of contained chaos," and exemplified this process as delineated in contemporary theoretical work by Victor Turner (294). The three phases of "separation, liminality, and reincorporation" inhere in the typical Grateful Dead concert, as what happens "before, during, and after" the concert respectively. Rebecca Adams relates the theoretical and practical challenges encountered in organizing student assistants in the conduct of research about Deadhead communities, with data gathered during travels to Dead concerts, in the very manner of Deadheads. As she explains, "Deadheads acknowledge that reality is a mental construct or at least is elusive. They were thus particularly receptive to the notion that accounts of reality are incomplete and thus fictitious." That shared skepticism meshed perfectly with the investigative approach, "because knowing we had similar views helped me build rapport with Deadheads" (317).

The volume's concluding "Encore" and "Greensleaves" provide "a reminder of the fragility of human existence" and then "calm solace"

in the return to the world where the improvisation doesn't prevail (8). Deadheads take their experience of the music's elevating improvisation into how to engage life, having learned from that experience that improvisation at its best builds upon practice—that already hearing how the other voices will sound resonates in one's own evocation of a unique constituent of that collective creation (11–14). Christian Crumlish relates an evening event lubricated with “liquid refreshment” in Hawaii that resurrected the band's songs as if it weren't really true that Garcia had been gone for years. “We can conjure him back,” he writes wistfully (328). David Gans explains that Garcia “had a million dependents” (329), and perhaps also a thousand attributes, with a full mixture of divine blessings and earthly failings. “No one who knew anything could have been terribly surprised by Jerry Garcia's death in August of 1995” (331). Jean Millay tells of how the Dead visited her house in Venice Beach, long before they gained fame. LSD was shared by all, and no sooner than it had been shared, a troubled young man intruded—a friend of the band, a marine who had just returned from Vietnam. He was taken over by a fit of screaming and running, which Millay deciphered as reliving “many deaths and rebirths.” He asked for help and Millay promised him trust:

I felt locked into position with my left hand in the air receiving light and my right hand pressing on the solar plexus of the man lying on the floor. For the first time in my life, I felt that I was channeling energy directly to him, and that he was comforted because he was actually receiving it. (342)

One can imagine this collected text of thoughtful and often delightful essays as itself a mandala of the Grateful Dead experience, a performance of thoughts about Grateful Dead performances—or maybe just part of that same mandala that is the Dead. Indeed, with an “absent center,” the text encourages starting anywhere in its circle, following a trace thought, any one among dozens in any of the essays that connects with another, and so on. The traversals are open-ended and endless. They all pass through “Space” at one point or another, as well as the song, the dance, the guided opening—light, life, and death. It is a phenomenal tribute to the Dead that such marvelous spinning of detail in thought and insights still doesn't suggest that the subject matter is hardly more than touched upon.

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