GRATEFUL DEAD STUDIES

Volume 4 2019/2020

ISSN 2572-7818 (Online) ISSN 2572-7702 (Print)

Meriwether, Nicholas G.

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CITATION INFORMATION

Nicholas G. Meriwether

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Grateful Dead Studies

Volume 4 (2019/2020)

Pages: 6–15

URL: http://gratefuldeadstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/GDSv4_EdColumn.pdf

EDITOR'S COLUMN

"The Time of Returning": Rebirth, Renewal, and Reinvention in the Grateful Dead

NICHOLAS G. MERIWETHER

In the fall of 1971, Jerry Garcia went into the studio to do something he had never done before: remix an album. It was a challenge he relished, a project whose appeal was not just personal but also represented a kind of reclamation, both artistic and historical. The album was *Aoxomoxoa*, the third entry in the band's catalog. Released in June 1969, *Aoxomoxoa* was also the most difficult to record, requiring nearly seven months of work and racking up more than $180,000 in studio costs (more than $1.2M in 2018). Those dubious superlatives matched a deeper set of problems, for *Aoxomoxoa* also marked the most difficult time in the band's history, just after they had left the Haight and were undergoing a full-blown identity crisis. Indeed, during those months the Dead almost fractured, and for a time considered disbanding altogether.

But Garcia harbored a real fondness for the album, feeling that they had recorded it well but "lost it in the mix" (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner 1972, 93). And although he and the band had covered a lot of history since they had completed the album, something about it still felt unfinished—even, or perhaps especially, in the cold light of a new decade. For Garcia,

the task of remixing it was more than just his newfound prowess in the studio, cemented by the success of *Workingman's Dead* and *American Beauty*, both completed in 1970. Nor was it just his celebrated perfectionism, the same drive that had already made him one of the most respected guitarists in rock. Rather, it was an expression of something more fundamental about the Dead, which Garcia always described as "a process rather than an event" (Goodman 1989, 74). That process was endlessly regenerative: unpredictable, sometimes daunting, but always compelling, always surprising, and always new.

Even in 1971, that sense of renewal was already a defining quality of the Grateful Dead. Critics and fans marveled at the band's capacity for reinvention. In an industry defined by the pursuit of stasis and stability, where bands viewed performances as static stage shows with set lists that never changed from show to show, and often never varied from year to year, the Dead stood apart. That restlessness defined their career: change was not casual, but courted, constant, and often dramatic. That commitment created a dynamism that Garcia called "fascinating in the sense of the progression," especially "the year-to-year changes" they all could see (Weitzman [1974] 1995, 123). His bandmates felt the same way: "there is a spirit here of, 'We gotta keep things fresh'," Weir explained a few years later (Fong-Torres 1980, 10). Critics agreed. That same year, longtime San Francisco journalist Ben Fong-Torres wrote how the band's wide-ranging efforts represented "lots of new beginnings" (1980, 19). Those continued: seven years later, veteran critic Mikal Gilmore called *In the Dark* as "a rousing and often moving work about aging, decline, rebirth and recommitment," which heralded "a new beginning" for the band, in Garcia's view (Gilmore [1987] 1995, 160).

Yet, when critics marveled at the Dead's commitment to reinvention, what they often failed to appreciate was the deeper way that was inherent, an integral function of their project. Improvising anew at every performance was not simply an ambition, it was a fundamental expression of their approach to their art: the belief that music was communication, something that was necessarily created anew with each performance. Nor was that a conceit: it was part of a much deeper awareness of the role that

music and the arts played in human history, in the great questions of life and broad rhythms of culture that the arts always entail.

That process looks to the past even as it does the future. Ezra Pound's famous directive to artists to "make it new" encapsulates that complex sense of renewal, of looking to history while resisting its strictures. Garcia's famous comment to Charles Reich got at that idea:

> Formlessness and chaos lead to new forms. And new order. Closer to, probably, what the real order is. When you break down the old orders and the old forms and leave them broken and shattered, you suddenly find yourself a new space with new form and new order which are more like the way it is. (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner 1972, 128)

That complex sense of honoring the past without being bound by it describes the scholarship on the Grateful Dead phenomenon as well. While the essays and reviews in this volume of *Grateful Dead Studies* build on more than five decades of work on the band and its contexts, each provides new insights into the band's music, impact, and significance.

As a reflection of the interdisciplinary nature of the discourse, the essays here reflect a wide range of fields and perspectives, from the humanities to the social sciences, from theory to praxis. Together they extend the scholarly conversation about the Dead in several directions. Musicologist Melvin Backstrom's "'Spring from Night into the Sun': Metaphors of Dark and Light in the Music of the Grateful Dead" traces two principal themes that inform the Dead's music, showing how they evolved over time and extended into both the band's music and lyrics, uniting their corpus in a number of compelling ways. Listeners have always admired the degree to which Garcia and Hunter could craft compositions that tied poetry to music, with the same ideas or motifs explored and unified across the boundaries of art forms; Backstrom provides a telling example of that deep connection, demonstrating how exposition of the band's work requires a similar flexibility with disciplinary boundaries. His broader approach, as well as the themes he illuminates, connect to the other essays here as well.

Musicologist Mike Daley complements Backstrom's survey with a close reading of a segment of one performance of "Space." Of all of the

band's songs, "Space" is the most difficult to pin down; indeed, it challenges even the idea of a song, forgoing any fixed structure and unfolding uniquely with every performance. Daley's careful reading makes clear that, however improvisatory, "Space" nonetheless had an internal logic and structure that cohered and made sense, both to the musicians and to their listeners. As an ever-evolving piece, "Space" was, for many listeners, the aural legacy of the Acid Test, an expression of the aleatory aesthetic the band developed at those events. In a 1989 interview, Garcia likened them to "the study of chaos. It may be that you have to destroy forms or ignore them in order to see other levels of organization. For me, that's what the Acid Test was, that's what it was a metaphor for. If you go into a situation with nothing planned, sometimes wonderful stuff happens" (Goodman 1989, 68). That was the essence of "Space," and as Daley shows, wonderful stuff could indeed happen, as they did during the brief but remarkable section he analyzes.

How the Dead imbued their musi with so much meaning is one of the questions literary scholar Christopher Coffman explores in his "'All That's Still Unsung': Agamben's Potentiality and the Grateful Dead." Drawing on the work of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, Coffman posits that the Dead's approach to their craft embodies the idea of the potential, a concept that several scholars have addressed using various disciplinary and theoretical lenses. Agamben's work offers a different perspective on that idea, suggesting a way of approaching the many layers of communication embodied in and implied by the Dead's signature approach to improvisation in the larger terms of his concept of potentiality, rooted in his reading of Plato. The ways in which the Dead approached tradition and explored the past have interesting resonances in Agamben's thought, and Coffman shows how the Dead's achievement can be framed by their pursuit of what was hidden, forgotten, or suppressed and how they enacted it, making it real.

That idea of rendering the possible into the actual also plays a role in philosopher Kurt Torell's essay. In "Makin' the Seen: Synesthesia, the Grateful Dead, and the Total Work of Art," Torell connects the idea of the *Gesamkunstwerk*, the total work of art, to the Dead's project through the concept of synesthesia. Typically taken to mean the transposition of one

sense to another, synesthesia is a more complex and contested phenomenon that finds particular expression in the Dead's music. In peak performances, the band's music not only invokes but requires this phenomenon to explain fully its power and impact, as Torell argues.

Those peaks were also defined by troughs, but even those can be revealing. Psychologist Mark Mattson's "Some Structural and Expressive Variations in Performances of Six Grateful Dead Songs" presents the results of his study of the band's vocal performances, using errors and variants to elucidate how the band's celebrated approach to improvisation played out lyrically. The study of memory informs Mattson's methodology, and the insights that context provides help to frame the challenges posed by the band's massive songbook and commitment to improvisation.

That achievement crossed borders with remarkable facility, as Bethe and Robert Schoenfeld's "The Grateful Dead Subculture in Israeli Society: A Preliminary Study" explores. The band's fame spread internationally in the 1960s, recruiting fans all over Europe and as far away as Japan. By the late 1970s, there were even Deadheads in the Middle East—not just in Egypt, where the band played in September 1978, but especially in Israel. One kibbutz member wrote the band in 1979, "PLEASE! Come to Israel. There are SO many people here waiting for you, you can't imagine" (Anonymous 1979). This study addresses the complex ways in which the band's music and example translate to very different cultures, far removed from the Dead's Northern California origins or their larger American context. Scholars continue to pay increasing attention to the transnational nature of American culture, and the Dead phenomenon offers a fascinating case study in the complex ways that music refracts and reflects themes, ideas, and motifs that span diverse cultures and locales, as the Israeli Deadhead experience demonstrates.

The ways that the band's music and example spanned vast geographies is a central theme in the history of the Dead, and it defines the evolution of the Dead phenomenon within the United States, as it progressed from the countercultural margins of the Haight-Ashbury to the mainstream of American culture. That continues today, with the steadily increasing number of gallery shows and museum exhibitions devoted to the Dead phenomenon providing an interesting barometer of that process.

Museum display has long represented a kind of cultural recognition, conferring status and signifying acceptance. This volume's Features section presents four essays describing how different institutions mounted exhibitions devoted to the Dead. All of those exhibitions took different approaches to the band's history, framing it to fit their institutional contexts and the audiences they serve, but beyond the evidentiary richness of the subject and the multiple perspectives that plenitude supports, there are a number of lessons and insights that emerge from even disparate venues and very different efforts. Exhibitions can be powerful reminders that the band's project took shape far outside of the confines of the academy, and the issues raised by translating the Dead into a museal context offer useful insights for scholars as well. Beyond the curatorial challenge of conveying the complex and sprawling history of the Dead artifactually lies the larger work of situating the band's project as public history, a challenge the band's own work invoked. Exhibitions can serve as a forum for exploring that question on multiple levels, giving full sway to the dazzling array of media, artifacts, and evidence that define the Grateful Dead phenomenon, and whose creation was central to the band's work and impact.

Exhibitions help us understand not only how the Grateful Dead phenomenon has endured but also the way it has diffused into culture. Criticism both reflects and shapes that process, and the reviews in this volume address several recent works that reflect those processes. That began in the band's early days, as Peter Richardson's review of two memoirs explains. Rosie McGee (then Florence Nathan) and Rhoney Gissen Stanley were intimately involved with the band in their Haight-Ashbury heyday, and their memoirs illuminate that era and the band's role in it, providing valuable perspectives that contribute to our understanding of a host of issues that go to the heart of questions central to the scholarship on the 1960s as well as to Dead studies. While the band played a central role in the broader social and cultural life of the Haight, their focus was on their music. Musicologist Brian Felix assesses David Malvinni's study of the band's pioneering approach to improvisation, a groundbreaking book that is also the first scholarly monograph on the Dead's music.

The wealth of recordings of that music continues to grow every year, as Rhino Records and Grateful Dead Productions continue their award-

winning project to restore and release historic performances by the band. Expertly curated by the band's longtime Vault Archivist David Lemieux, those recordings continue to command strong interest from listeners and scholars, as the reviews here show. Drummer, scholar, and musicologist Peter Lavezzoli provides a detailed review of the eighteenth release in the Dave's Picks series, featuring the band's performance on July 17, 1976, at the Orpheum Theatre in San Francisco. The recording showcases the Dead at a pivotal time, just after their hiatus from touring, and offers a fascinating glimpse of what their time away from the road had done for their music. The snapshot of a single show complements broader surveys provided by two recent box sets. Michael Parrish's thoughtful assessment of *July 1978: The Complete Recordings* examines an eventful though unusually brief tour in the band's history, a one-week excursion that took the Dead from Kansas City to Colorado shortly before they made their celebrated foray to Egypt. That tour helped to define only one year in the Dead's three-decade career, which is the challenge assayed by the mammoth box set *Thirty Trips Around the Sun*. *DeadBase* coauthor Mike Dolgushkin provides a detailed survey of the challenges and achievements of the release, which ranks as one of the most ambitious in popular music as well as a monumental contribution to the band's recorded legacy.

Despite their resolute originality, the Dead made it a point to acknowledge their sources and influences, and that imbued their work with a kind of hybrid quality that blended art and commentary, participation and criticism. That is true of the study of the band's work as well, and it explains our Last Words section, which features primary works that cast light on or connect to Grateful Dead studies. This volume reprints a poem whose first publication marked one of the earliest U.S. appearances of the phrase "the grateful dead." Written by Paul Mariett, a promising poet whose career was tragically cut short, the poem shows how the phrase invokes a number of the themes and resonances that would later inform the Dead's lyrics, especially those by Robert Hunter. Years later, Hunter mused, "The evocative power of that strange, not at all comical name is considerable, for grace and ill. I know that my own input into the scene, my words, were heavily conditioned by that powerful name. It called down sheaves of spirits on us all" (2005, xiv). Those spirits are the

subject of Mariett's poem, which can be seen as one of the tributaries of the dictionary entry that gave the band its name.

In 1981, Garcia commented that the band was still exploring new territory, "heading toward places it's never been." Some of those were new destinations, but some represented unfinished business: "we've had so many instances of suggesting these spaces that are more wonderful in the suggestion than in the realization," Garcia observed, "and we haven't gotten around to the realization of certain ideas that we've instituted" (Gans 2002, 46). It was an eloquent expression of a central tenet of the Dead's artistic philosophy, the same attitude that had led him to remix *Aoxomoxoa* a decade before. Although *Aoxomoxoa* was not the only album that the band revisited—Lesh remixed the band's sophomore release *Anthem of Sun* in 1971 as well—those would be the only releases to receive that treatment, and in some ways, the remixes were exceptions to the band's general practice. When concerts were finished, the Dead moved on, feeling that the recordings belonged to history—and to the fans who wanted to trade and listen to them, as Garcia famously said. Yet the larger point is the nature of the band's commitment to their art: they looked forward, not back; the goal was to make it new, on stage, every night, never polishing a fixed set or even a definitive song rendition, but always improvising, always probing and pushing and exploring, trying to ferret out the mysteries and magic lurking at the heart of a phrase or melody.

That injunction is one that the band's followers took to heart, and it extends to the scholarly community devoted to studying the Dead and their achievement. This volume of *Grateful Dead Studies* reflects that commitment, along with the often circuitous path the band took to its fulfillment. For years, scholars have sought a more prominent, permanent, and professional forum for scholarly work on the band and surrounding phenomenon. The short-lived, small-run periodical *Dead Studies* was an experiment to see if such a publication was feasible, and its three issues demonstrated the viability of the project, despite that publication's eventually insurmountable infrastructural obstacles. After the final issue of *Dead Studies*, an informal working group proposed a plan to revise and

update much of the journal's content, refining its editorial approach and streamlining and replacing its features to better reflect its interdisciplinary focus and audience. This volume represents the official relaunch of the revamped journal, rechristened *Grateful Dead Studies*, and made available online at no cost as well in a reasonably priced print format. In 2019, revised versions of much of the content in the three volumes of *Dead Studies* will be published with new features and expanded content, comprising the first three volumes of *Grateful Dead Studies*.

The new journal reflects the continued interest in the scholarship on the Grateful Dead phenomenon as well as the continued relevance of the work first presented by *Dead Studies*. In many ways, that evolution reflects the band's own example. Commenting on their early work, Garcia noted that "just the ideas themselves have so much power that they continue to be legendary in spite of the fact that we haven't performed them for a long time … That's the thing about the Grateful Dead: there's this amazing richness of stuff" (Gans 2002, 46). No wonder reinvention and renewal were such wellsprings of the Dead's art. Garcia's comment also speaks to the reasons why the scholarship on the Dead continues to deepen, even if that process is as unpredictable and complex as the one that gave birth to the band's music. And his remark also gets at why there remains so much for scholars to explore, despite a half-century of work on the band and its impact. That connection is more than just parallelism, for the scholarly discourse continues to grow and evolve along with the band's own musical discourse, propelled today by the surviving members of the Dead along with hundreds of musicians and thousands of listeners all over the world. The links between the band's legacy as a living, growing phenomenon and the scholarly conversation about it represent another fascinating, complicating aspect of the ways that the Grateful Dead have left their mark on history and culture.

In many ways, the man now missing from that conversation predicted it. "I keep saying it's like we're just getting started," Garcia said in 1981. "There's so much that we haven't even done … " (Gans 2002, 40). There still is. As the conversation propelled by his bandmates continues, so, too, does the scholarly discourse about it—as this volume of *Grateful Dead Studies* shows.

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