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David Malvinni. *Grateful Dead and the Art of Rock Improvisation.* Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013. Hardcover, xvii + 276 pp. ISBN 9780810882553. $53.00.

Brian Felix

No single feature of the Grateful Dead's musical lexicon more defines its sound than improvisation, yet no aspect is more elusive. In *Grateful Dead and the Art of Rock Improvisation*, musicologist David Malvinni takes on the ambitious task of detailing the evolving role of improvisation in the Grateful Dead's music over the span of the group's thirty-year career. The book is chock-full of musicological, analytical and philosophical detail, and is the first academic monograph on the band's music. In the preface, Malvinni presents the argument for the necessity of the book: despite the Dead's "clear musical sophistication ... little work has been done on the musicological elements in their oeuvre. This book seeks to fill that gap by focusing on songs and the improvisational practice central to the Grateful Dead experience" (x).

At the outset, Malvinni is forthright about the fact that he is writing the book as a Deadhead and that certain tenets are central to his work: live improvisation is the "aesthetic core of the Grateful Dead experience," and the "early period" (up until the hiatus that began in 1974) contains the group's "finest improvisations" because "this was the period of greatest risk taking" (xvi). Furthermore, a Grateful Dead concert was "at the forefront of a new era of the rock concert, where the point was not to put a face to a song or see a song faithfully played live as on the record; rather, the concert itself was a transformational journey" (6).

Central to Malvinni's argument is his concept of "Deadness," a style of musical performance that is "rehearsed, learned, and studied and, at the same time, open to free play, improvisation, and the unknown in the paradoxical attempt to reach the unreachable" (13). Furthermore, "the stylistic tendency of Deadness is to present the essence of a given song while providing a living space for a new Event to occur" (13). Deadness can be understood

both as a "basic style of the band's music" and as a "unique performative moment that is by definition unrepeatable" (13). Malvinni breaks Deadness down into four subcategories: Ensemble ("interconnectedness"), X factor (attempting to reach the "transcendental"), Synchronicity ("group mind" and "telepathy") and Risk Taking ("willingness to venture outside of one's comfort zone"). Unsaid, yet implied, is the notion that the Grateful Dead pioneered this phenomenon; Malvinni states that the Dead differs from other improvisational rock bands of their time (e.g., Pink Floyd, Cream) because of the group's willingness to improvise for "increasingly longer time spans" (27).[1]

After laying out this framework for what makes the Grateful Dead's improvisations distinctive, Malvinni embarks on his primary mission and his greatest accomplishment in the book: leading the reader though myriad Grateful Dead improvisations and delineating the noteworthy musical attributes of each. The first example he cites is a version of "Hard To Handle" from August 16, 1971, released on the 1997 compilation *Fallout From The Phil Zone*. To Malvinni, there is a distinct time frame during the improvised section of this tune that is a quintessential representation of Deadness.

While Deadness, even with all the explanation, remains a somewhat elusive concept, Malvinni's subsequent analyses are more tangible, in a musical sense.[2] He uses "In the Midnight Hour," "Viola Lee Blues," "Turn On Your Love Light," "Alligator" and "Good Lovin'" as examples of the Dead's early "psychedelic blues orientation" that can be linked to the "rave up" style of the era's blues revival groups. "That's It For the Other One" is cited as an example of the group's maturing psychedelic long-form jamming style and a precursor to "Dark Star," which in Malvinni's eyes is the Dead's most important improvisatory vehicle because it "gets at the essence of what the Grateful Dead experience is supposed to be, namely, the transformation of the mundane, the commonplace, into a higher (literally and figuratively) consciousness."[3]

The inception of "Dark Star" represents a turning point in the improvisatory practice of the Grateful Dead because, rather than to "try to impress with over-the-top rhythmic display or virtuosity," the song instead creates a space for "cosmic reflection" and the evocation of

"deeply expressive moments through jamming" (79). Over the course of the two chapters devoted to the song, Malvinni thoroughly delineates the musical and philosophical underpinnings of "Dark Star," connecting its development to the band's interest in John Coltrane, Charles Ives, Indian raga, and modal jazz and his own interest in philosophers Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida. He provides a useful listening guide to the "Rheinhalle Dark Star" from April 24, 1972, in which he walks the reader through the pertinent musical details to the first twenty-five minutes of this forty-minute version.[4] This scrutiny of "Dark Star," along with the rest of the detail presented within these chapters, serves to support the notion that "the multiyear performance history of 'Dark Star' is singular in the history of popular rock music," and that through it the band "created a musical language or really a praxis as it relates to improvisation that defies categorization in and assimilation into other popular improvisational styles, such as blues, jazz, bluegrass, and acid rock" (99).

From "Dark Star," Malvinni moves to "Thematic Signposts and Arrivals in the Grateful Dead's Jazz-Rock Jamming" (137), a topic most easily explored with named jams such as the "Mind Left Body Jam," "Feelin' Groovy Jam," and "Tighten Up Jam." This chapter (an earlier version of which was published in Volume 3 of *Grateful Dead Studies*) delineates the musical contents within these "arrival jams," which feature recurring themes and chord progressions but are not considered distinct "songs" *per se*. Malvinni makes a point of including a footnote that captures the essence of an email from journalist David Gans, who has "objected strongly" to perpetuating the use of these titles for the jams, as the band members have never corroborated them.[5] Historical accuracy of the names aside, these analyses are useful to listeners looking to unlock the mystery of Grateful Dead improvisations; anyone who has picked up a *Dick's Picks* or cassette tape with "Mind Left Body Jam" included in the set list will be happy that an explanation of these labels now exists**.** Included in this same chapter (most likely out of chronological considerations and because of the "jazz-rock" theme) are analyses of "Playing in the Band" and "Eyes of the World," the latter featuring a useful explanation of that tune's "outro jam" in 7/8.

At this point in the narrative, Malvinni moves into analyses of Grateful Dead jamming paradigms within the group's more traditional song forms. Crucial to this section is the distinction he draws between two types of jamming: in a "Type 1" jam, there is a solo over one or two chords with no set amount of measures limiting the improvisation; a "Type 2" jam is over the chord changes for a verse or verse-chorus, most akin to a traditional solo in jazz, blues, or rock.[6] While neither of these improvisational styles is revolutionary, Malvinni makes the point that the Dead were "the first, to our knowledge, to employ both of them within the same song, consistently, and over a wide range of repertoire" (169). "Uncle John's Band" and "Shakedown Street" are given as examples of songs that contain both types of jamming.[7]

As he approaches the chronological end of both the book and the Dead's career, Malvinni makes clear that the best years of the band's improvising were long gone. After 1975, "the Grateful Dead gradually started to give up long jams inside of songs, in favor of jams that were polished and 'professional'—competent, less meandering, and in keeping with the shorter, rock-and-roll-as-direct-music spirit of the post psychedelic era" (181). That said, there were a few improvisatory gems in the post-1975 era, most notably "Terrapin Station." The live performances of this song feature a technique that Malvinni terms "improvisatoriness," which can be best described as giving the "impression of improvisation" when the parameters of the jam are already preplanned. This kind of improvisation was representative of the overall trajectory as the band moved into its later years, characterized by decreased adventurousness and increased predictability in the improvised sections. However, Malvinni does note that the spirit of their earlier jamming (in the spirit of "Dark Star") persisted, to a certain extent, in the "Space" segments of latter-era second sets.

Malvinni has a deep knowledge of and appreciation for the Dead's music, which is made clear by impressive cross-connections that he makes between songs and jamming styles from different eras. At times, though, the reader is left wishing that Malvinni had put the same effort into presentation and proofreading that he did into theorizing. From the misspelling of Neal Cassady's name as "Neil" (2) throughout the book,

the work is plagued by typographical errors.[8] Some readers may be turned off by frequent digressions into continental philosophy, where Malvinni connects the Dead's improvisatory style to the work of Gilles Deleuze, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and others. It is possible that these passages were intended as a framework for the understanding of the Dead's improvisations, but often they distract from the primary narrative at hand. In short, the book suffers from a lack of editorial direction.

At its best, *Grateful Dead and the Art of Rock Improvisation* leads the reader through gems of Grateful Dead improvisation, clearly explaining and delineating the important musical factors along the way; at its worst, it reads like a good first draft. The end result is a somewhat uneven presentation of often engaging and worthwhile research—a useful albeit rough roadmap for those looking to learn more about the Dead's hallmark improvisatory style.

Notes

1. Based on the summary of Deadness presented in this review, one could make the argument that jazz musicians had been involved in the same practice for decades before the inception of the Grateful Dead. The details of Malvinni's definition are so Dead-specific, though, that it would be hard to argue that any other group of musicians has ever participated in Deadness.

2. A typical explanation of a song and its improvisational section will contain basic musical analysis, usually including chord progressions and, at times, notated musical figures.

3. In focusing on "Dark Star," Malvinni is following the work of Graeme Boone—see, for example, his "Dark Star Mandala," in *The Grateful Dead In Concert: Essays On Live Improvisation*, edited by Jim Tuedio and Stan Spector, 85–106 (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010). Malvinni includes extensive commentary on Boone's work (81–83).

4. This recording of "Dark Star" can be found on *Rockin' the Rhein With the Grateful Dead* (2004) and on *Europe '72: The Complete Recordings* (2011).

5. Tapers are generally considered the source for the jam titles in question.

6. It should be noted that the definitions for Type 1 and Type 2 jams flips between Chapters Six and Seven; I have included here the explanation provided in table 7.1 (202). The earlier, "flipped" example is on p. 169.

7. It should be mentioned here that two-jam tunes of this variety are present in the jazz literature: Cedar Walton's "Bolivia" and Dave Brubeck's "In Your Own Sweet Way" are compositions that are often given this treatment in a live setting. It is also fairly common in jazz performance practice to have a structured solo over the tune proper and a modal vamp at the end of the tune.

8. There are several factual and/or presentation-related errors, e.g., information in the text contradicts the corresponding table 6.1 (185); in Chapter 5, tables 5.1 and 5.2 are switched; *Dick's Picks 14* is mislabeled *Dick's Picks 12* (150), and the "Hard Day's Night" chord is misnamed the "Help" chord (53).

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