

GRATEFUL DEAD STUDIES

Volume 4

2019/2020

ISSN 2572-7818 (Online)

ISSN 2572-7702 (Print)

Lavezzoli, Peter

Review: Grateful Dead, *Dave's Picks 18*

CITATION INFORMATION

Peter Lavezzoli

Grateful Dead, *Dave's Picks 18*

Grateful Dead Studies

Volume 4 (2019/2020)

Pages: 255–261

URL: http://gratefuldeadstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/GDSv4_Lavezzoli.pdf

LICENSE

Download of this Grateful Dead Studies Licensed Content (hereafter Content) constitutes acceptance of the following terms and conditions: Provided they abide by the restrictions below, users may search, view, reproduce, display, download, print, perform, and distribute Content for the following Permitted Uses: research activities; classroom or organizational instruction and related classroom or organizational activities; student assignments; as part of a scholarly, cultural, educational or organizational presentation or workshop, if such use conforms to the customary and usual practice in the field; authors or other Content creators may at their discretion incorporate their Content into unrestricted databases or websites with prior written permission from Grateful Dead Studies.

The portions of Content that have been downloaded or printed out by a User may continue to be used in compliance with these Terms and Conditions even if such license should later terminate or expire.

Users may not: use or authorize the use of the Grateful Dead Studies Licensed Content for commercial purposes or gains, including charging a fee-for-service; undertake any activity such as the use of computer programs that automatically download or export Content, commonly known as web robots, spiders, crawlers, wanderers or accelerators that may interfere with, disrupt or otherwise burden the Grateful Dead Studies server(s) or any third-party server(s) being used or accessed in connection with Grateful Dead Studies; or undertake coordinated or systematic activity between or among two or more individuals and/or entities that, in the aggregate, constitutes downloading and/or distributing a significant portion of the Content; or make any use, display, performance, reproduction, or distribution that exceeds or violates these Terms and Conditions of Use.

Additionally, users may not: modify, obscure, or remove any copyright notice or other attribution included in the Content; incorporate Content into an unrestricted database or website; systematically print out or download Content to stock or replace print holdings; download or print, or attempt to download or print, an entire issue; reproduce or distribute Content in bulk, such as the inclusion of Content in course packs, electronic reserves, repositories, or organizational intranets.

Grateful Dead Studies encourages the use of links to facilitate access to the Content.

Grateful Dead. *Orpheum Theatre, San Francisco, CA, July 17, 1976*. Dave's Picks 18. Rhino R2 552288, 2016. 3 CD set with 12-page booklet. \$29.98.

PETER LAVEZZOLI

In June 1976, the Grateful Dead returned to touring after an almost twenty-month hiatus from the road. The rest of the year saw the band struggling to regain their footing, in many ways. One of the common critiques of 1976 shows is that the band played at a lethargic pace and that the set lists were often overwrought, with too many arbitrary segues. There is some truth to that: although many of the set lists that year are a Deadhead's dream come true, in terms of unusual groupings and sequences, in many cases the plodding tempo is enough to dull even the mellowest Deadhead's enthusiasm.

But forty years after the fact, Dave's Picks 18 presents a sterling exception to that complaint: the complete recording of the band's concert on July 17, 1976, at the Orpheum Theatre in San Francisco, as well as bonus material from July 16. Not only is this release a godsend for those who are fond of the post-hiatus Godchaux era, it makes available a first-rate concert that showcases many of the ineffable qualities of the Dead's music at its best. A longtime favorite among collectors, and particularly of late Vault archivist Dick Latvala, the recording of the July 17 show makes a powerful and historic addition to the band's steadily growing live discography.

The penultimate show of a six-night stand at the historic Orpheum, July 17 was also the penultimate appearance of Garcia's first Travis Bean guitar, the TB-1000A. At first glance, the set list that night appears to be relatively uneventful, with a first set of nine songs played without segues and a second set with only one identifiable "jam segment" of "The Other One" > "Eyes of the World" > "The Other One," followed by a succession of songs normally played as set closers: "Goin' Down the Road Feeling Bad," "One More Saturday Night," and two separate encores of "U.S. Blues" and "Not Fade Away." This is in marked contrast to the

next night's show on July 18, where the second set featured a marathon segment consisting of "Let It Grow" > Jam > "Wharf Rat" > Jam > "The Other One" > "Saint Stephen" > "Not Fade Away" > "Saint Stephen" > "The Wheel" > "The Other One" > "Stella Blue." But the potential power of these segues dissipates, with the band sounding unfocused despite a herculean effort to execute the twists and turns of the set. The July 17 show is the opposite: the band spends more time *playing*, exploring where they are, in larger improvisational segments. Interestingly, this also seems to prevent the band from slipping into the lethargy that is too often associated with 1976. Indeed, on July 17 the band played with razor-sharp tautness. Communication was almost instantaneous, with ideas suggested by one player immediately addressed by the group. And the band played with extreme dynamics, from thunder to whisper quiet, even letting silence enter the conversation.

The show merits detailed discussion. The band began in typical fashion with Chuck Berry's "Promised Land," a standard opener for the Dead in the 1970s. However, this first set has the distinction of being bookended by Berry, with "Johnny B. Goode" as an unusual first set closer (it was almost always an encore). From the opening bars, it is immediately evident that the band is already limber. Lesh's bass has an especially resonant solidity. Kreutzmann and Hart are playing with taste and restraint. In this recording, Weir's rhythm guitar is somewhat obscured in the mix, with only occasional clarity and presence. The same can be said of Godchaux's piano for almost half of the recording, though he does have a larger footprint in the mix than Weir. Donna Godchaux only sang harmony on two songs of the first set, "Mississippi Half-Step" and "Deal," and is inexplicably absent during the second set. The mix also presents Garcia's guitar panned hard left and Lesh's bass hard right, with the two drummers likewise separated, Kreutzmann at left, Hart right.

Garcia's tone is noteworthy. This show was almost the end of his time with the TB-1000A, used throughout 1975 and through July 18, 1976; after that he switched to a different Travis Bean, the TB-500, which featured a much brighter sound on the top end. The TB-1000A had a warmer and more rounded top end, combined with a midrange and low end that I would describe as "syrupy," but in the best possible way: a

genuinely sweet, thick sound that has enormous ear appeal. Garcia sounds audibly enthused and plays with verve and gusto, even on first set material, beginning with “Mississippi Half-Step.” The outgoing jam of that song is where the band establishes its blueprint of bringing the dynamics down to *pianissimo* (near silence) at times, with both drummers barely scuffing their drums and cymbals, and the bass and guitars playing at the edge of audibility.

“Mama Tried” is distinguished by almost continuous Garcia solos behind Weir’s vocals. “Deal” unfolds at a relaxed pace, marking Donna Godchaux’s final appearance for the evening. “Minglewood Blues” features a restrained tempo, but once again, Garcia sparkles. “Peggy-O” is one of the band’s finest renditions of that song, with Lesh playing a reggae-like loping figure over restrained drumming while Garcia delivers one of his typically masterful solos, first reiterating the vocal melody before developing it with remarkable variations. The “Sugaree” is especially noteworthy. Here the song demonstrates astonishing growth from its pre-hiatus arrangement. In 1971–74, versions were devoid of extended soloing between verses. But in November 1975, Garcia began using “Sugaree” as vehicle for jamming, using Garcia Band concerts to experiment with the song, soloing over the repeated chord pattern of B and E. Although the July 17 show has several short songs, it has the kind of balance and proportion that define the best of the Dead’s shows, and this “Sugaree” is one of the first by the Dead to benefit from this longer treatment. Garcia’s final solo, after the third verse, is particularly incisive. After a gradual build of tension, Garcia unleashes a screeching run of high notes that sound like he’s wagging a defiant finger at the sky. And just when it seems he might be finished, he keeps going. It stands as one of the most striking renditions of “Sugaree” from any era.

The second set opens with an understated “Samson and Delilah,” played with softer dynamics than what would become customary by 1977. Here it can be seen as a warm-up for the music that is to follow. “Comes a Time” takes a moment to settle as the band struggles to find a tempo and Garcia slows his pace, but by the end of the opening chorus, the pulse is set. A passionate reading of the final verse and chorus leads to the instrumental alchemy that truly defines this performance as one the band’s best.

The outgoing jam of “Comes a Time” traditionally alternates between F sharp minor and G major. But Lesh moves the music in a different direction when he makes the simple adjustment of playing D under the F sharp chord—now producing a D major 7 chord—and playing A under the G major, producing an A9 with a suspended 4th. This shift opens up an entirely new realm of feeling and color, giving this jam a jazz-inflected openness that is both pastoral and otherworldly, aided once again by the softness of the drumming, with Kreutzmann and Hart primarily providing delicate cymbal accompaniment.

The jam then takes a few more unexpected and remarkable turns when Weir shifts the second chord from A9 to A minor 7, under which Lesh changes from A to C, making a new chord of C major 7 (the same notes as A minor 7, as the two are relative). But Lesh quickly returns to playing D and A, only by this time the guitars and piano have now all changed their second chord to A minor 7, and this is the pattern where the band settles: D major 7 to A minor 7. Then an unforeseen rhythmic twist emerges: While playing in 12/8, Lesh and Hart simultaneously drop a beat and assert a new eleven-beat cycle which is quickly picked up by the rest of the band, suddenly steering the jam into 11/8. The rhythm pattern is identical to “The Eleven,” basically played as 12/8 without the final beat, and this is likely the first instance where the Dead played in 11/8 since their final (known) version of “The Eleven” on April 24, 1970. They settle on this pattern, again with the dynamics ebbing and flowing from whisper-quiet to moderately loud to quiet again. This is one of those extraordinary segments, really a “slab” of music, which can only take shape when the musicians are in no hurry to move from one song into the next.

Eventually, Garcia signals an exit by playing the “Other One” riff, and the band quickly falls in line, but rather than making an immediate shift into the song proper, the band fades out to a brief Kreutzmann and Hart drum interlude. Then Lesh thunders his trademark rolling bass intro, and the band launches into what is perhaps the most exploratory and spacious “The Other One” in the Dead’s entire post-hiatus era. Immediately after Weir sings the first verse and chorus, the rhythmic and harmonic foundation dissolves, and the band enters a free-floating atonal space. The drummers essentially disappear, apart from a few random cymbal

swells. Silence enters and becomes an active participant in the music. This is reminiscent of how “The Other One” sounded on the Europe ’72 tour. Garcia turns to his wah-wah pedal for a screeching wail of notes that propels the band into an energy surge that is often referred to as a “Tiger meltdown,” or as Vault Archivist Dick Latvala christened it, a “brain-fry.”

After the chaos subsides, Godchaux switches to electric piano, with the drummers limning a bright swing tempo. Garcia has moved back into his clean tone, Weir begins playing in E major, and soon the band has seamlessly drifted into a lilting “Eyes of the World.” Here again, the drummers emphasize the cymbals, rather than the heavier attack that soon became the norm on this song. This “Eyes” finds Garcia in high spirits. After the final chorus, another “slab” begins: a shift by Garcia to E minor, where the band now settles for over seven minutes, with a jam again as long as the song itself. Only when this E minor segment has reached full saturation, again *pianissimo*, does Garcia then make the simple and satisfying choice of reprising “The Other One” for the second verse (after he briefly teases “Goin’ Down the Road Feeling Bad”).

After “The Other One,” Garcia returns to “Goin’ Down the Road.” This version is played by the drummers at half-time, giving an unusual lope to the rhythm and opening up space for Garcia to deploy different phrasings. As was often the case, the “And We Bid You Goodnight” theme at the end of the song gives way to “One More Saturday Night,” which closes the set. As was common for the Dead, these last songs return the band to Earth after their improvisational voyages into outer and inner space. In the first encore, “U.S. Blues,” Garcia takes two solos, a rarity that provides yet another indication that this is a special night. If one listens closely to the backing vocals in the choruses, one will faintly discern Lesh singing the high harmony, as he had done in earlier years. With Donna Godchaux absent for the second set, he must have felt the need to assist.

Well-known taper Rob Bertrando was in the audience that night, and he felt that the second encore was completely unexpected. After “U.S. Blues,” the band left the stage and the house lights were turned on for several minutes. As the audience was filing out of the Orpheum, suddenly the house lights were turned back off and the band appeared onstage—a

shock to everyone. Bertrando remembers that he and his friends who had been taping the show from the balcony had already packed up all of their gear and were heading for the exit. When the band returned, they sprinted back to their seats to frantically begin setting up again. Fortunately, the band took their time tuning once they were onstage.

Lesh appeared to be in an ornery mood, although musically his playing certainly does not reflect that. According to Bertrando, Lesh had spent most of the evening playing with his back to the audience, facing the drummers. And now, as the musicians were returning for their second encore, he approached a microphone and can be heard off-mike grumbling, “Hey, turn this fucking mike on.” He may have been less than thrilled for the second encore, because as the crowd is whistling and hollering while Garcia takes his time tuning, he commented, “Half our crew went home already. Anyway, if you all shut up, we can tune.” Weir defuses the tension by commenting, “Mister Nice Guy,” to a small chorus of laughter. Finally the drummers launch into the Bo Diddley groove of “Not Fade Away,” a not-uncommon encore in 1976. After the second verse and chorus, the band launches into a very generous jam segment, turning in a respectable fourteen-minute rendition. As a finishing touch, in a show where the dynamics have been unusually sensitive, this rendition expands into open territory, with the drummers bringing the volume down to silence before surging back up into the final crest of the jam that steers into the closing verse. It makes a perfect close to what is without question one of the most musically satisfying performances of the Grateful Dead’s career.

This show not only stands as one of Garcia’s finest performances, it is also one of the most compelling examples of collective improvisation at the highest level of dynamic interplay. For many Deadheads, this show easily ranks within the band’s top ten performances. Its release marks a milestone in David Lemieux’s and Rhino’s work to make the band’s live catalog available, beautifully remastered and nicely presented, with excellent photography and packaging. Like the best of the band’s shows, this one rewards repeated listening: always refreshing, always soulful, and at times simply hypnotic, it is a powerful statement of the beauty, mystery, and magic of the Grateful Dead.

PETER LAVEZZOLI is the author of *The King of All, Sir Duke* (Continuum, 2001), which explores the legacy of Duke Ellington in modern jazz, rock, and R&B, and *The Dawn of Indian Music in the West* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2007), which won the Association of Recorded Sound Collections award in 2007 for Best Historical Research. A professional musician, he is the drummer for Melvin Seals and the JGB Band and has performed with Bob Weir and Phil Lesh.