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The Grateful Dead Meet the World

JESSE JARNOW

“I want to say what an honor it is for Warner Brothers Records to be able to introduce the Grateful Dead and its music to the world,” record company president Joe Smith announced to a San Francisco crowd on the occasion of the March 1967 release party for the shiny new self-titled Grateful Dead LP. Jerry Garcia stood and took the microphone. “I want to say what an honor it is for the Grateful Dead to introduce Warner Brothers Records to the world” (McNally 2002, 188). It was a good line, to be sure, but there remained a lot of the world left for both the Grateful Dead and Warner Bros. to meet.

The Grateful Dead may have passed the Acid Test with flying colors and possessed any number of other winning traits, but there was also the practical real-life matter of how to get the word out about their music. It’s one variety of achievement to start a band, build a repertoire, and achieve a musical proficiency; it’s another order of magnitude entirely to do so in a way that actually reaches listening ears, and still does so a half-century later. Even the Grateful Dead had to start somewhere.

There's the barest smattering of applause when the Grateful Dead take the stage for the first of their sets at the three-night Vancouver Trips Festival in late July 1966. "Our fame has preceded us!" bassist Phil Lesh notes. Step number one in getting the word out: hit the road.

While there may not have been a frothing mass of Dead freaks awaiting the band on their first professional trip outside of California, it's clear the band's fame *had* preceded them, or they wouldn't have been summoned to Vancouver at all. But on this night they are the first band of at least four, and the musicians will remember the height of the stage and the cavernous feel of the room, a theater nestled in the gardens of the Pacific National Exposition. Equally as inaudible as the audience is the Vancouver Trips Festival's main attraction, a massive light show that the organizers had spent the previous week constructing in the auditorium, consisting of some 52 projectors and 25,000 square feet worth of screen.

A culmination for a long-brewing local avant-garde scene and a showcase for numerous Vancouver filmmakers and artists, the Trips Festival had borrowed the template and name from the event organized six months earlier in San Francisco by junior Merry Prankster Stewart Brand and members of the San Francisco Tape Music Center. In Vancouver, the Captain Consciousness collective, including local filmmaker and plugged-in tech-head Sam Perry, had previously imported the Jefferson Airplane (making the Airplane miss the original Trips Festival). Now they had their sights on something much bigger, brighter, and louder, and invited another gaggle of San Franciscan sound-makers to participate. Along with Janis Joplin and Big Brother and the Holding Company (who allegedly had to hitchhike the last 140 miles from Seattle with their gear), poet Michael McClure, and the Dead, the handbill for the event promised "The Acid Test." Another first for the Dead: being called in to summon the mojo from the anarchistic parties they'd wrought with the Merry Pranksters.¹

The band had been out of town before for just that purpose, only barely, playing an all-are-one/one-are-all guerrilla-style Acid Test in Oregon in January before decamping with the Pranksters for a season in Los Angeles. In LA, the band played Prankster soirees and staged their own gigs to varying degrees of success, all featuring the earliest draft of

their legendary sound system. Once the home stereo of LSD chemist and Grateful Dead patron/soundman Owsley Stanley, the unwieldy assemblage of Altec Lansing Voice of the Theater speakers had been expanded and retooled for service in the name of rock and roll.

As with many elements of their career, the Dead would serve as somewhat unwilling pioneers. And while Stanley's first system took hours to set up and was terribly inefficient in other ways, the soundman also had the foresight to attach a reel-to-reel to the contraption, capturing the earliest live documentation of the Grateful Dead, including these recordings of the Vancouver Trips Festival. Nearly everything about the Grateful Dead was new in 1966, from the songs they were playing to the equipment they were using, and not all of it worked to the band's liking. While only a small number of recordings of the band's first two years in existence, each reveals corners of the Grateful Dead repertoire not captured anywhere else, corners containing songs and approaches that were embraced enthusiastically, rehearsed obsessively, and often soon thrown out entirely. The band would spend a lifetime getting it "just exactly perfect," leaving a trail of Grateful Deads behind that only existed for a fleeting moment or two.

Living communally for the summer at Olompali, a sprawling estate in Marin County north of San Francisco, the Dead boarded the train headed north from Oakland.² Though they would return with cold memories of the Festival, which proved to be more a light show than proper psychedelic chaos, the tapes they brought back reveal a band bursting with ideas and young creative confidence.³ "Going through changes" became a wellness-oriented sixties buzz-phrase, and the Dead adopted this as an artistic strategy that resulted in a kind of ongoing musical ecology, with each subsequent soil layer revealing a different world.

Their first international gig opened with "Standing On the Corner," a group-composed original that owes more than a little to their collective hero Bob Dylan, and like other early efforts, it retains a certain psychedelic charm. "Things don't seem to be the way they used to seem to be," Jerry Garcia sings, an apt description of the Grateful Dead's musical direction in *any* year of the career that stretched ahead of them. While only two original songs would make it to their debut album for Warner

Bros. the following year, with two further tunes tracked and discarded, the band likewise left another early body of work behind.

Like two other originals performed in Vancouver, “Standing On the Corner” here makes its last appearance on a surviving Dead recording, audio documentation of this particular alternate-universe incarnation of the Grateful Dead, the Dylan-obsessed quintet that no longer quite existed by the time they made it into the studio for real. (Dylanologists might note that this performance of “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue” occurred on the same day as Dylan’s fabled motorcycle accident in Woodstock.) Sometimes sounding similar to other Farfisa-driven garage acts parading up and down the charts, the Dead were still working on musical ways to express that greater sense of purpose and freedom they had discovered at the Acid Tests, a sensibility that was beginning to pour out in Dylan-channeling lyrics, complicated changes, and the first hints of jams to come. It is a creative moment as singular and vital as any other in their career.

Introduced in Vancouver by Bob Weir as “No Left Turn Unstoned,” “Cardboard Cowboy” was the only Grateful Dead song until 1994 with music and lyrics solely by Phil Lesh. A torrent of imagistic lyrics over a riot of chords, the song was also sometimes known within the band as “The Monster” for its knotted structure. “You Don’t Have To Ask,” meanwhile, features three verses, each with a different arrangement of call-and-response vocals, plus multiple key changes (including one that occurs mid-solo). The Grateful Dead’s idea of an orchestrated pop mini-epic, a full half-year ahead of Brian Wilson’s “Good Vibrations,” it was as exhilarating to listen to as it was difficult to play, and the Dead play it well. Despite being considered for their never-released first single during their Los Angeles sojourn (as announced to the *Los Angeles Free Press* by Rock Scully), the song also known as “Otis On A Shakedown Cruise” disappears from the tape canon after Vancouver as well.⁴

But what is perhaps the most thrilling experience, besides uncovering the forgotten past, is hearing the sound of the band’s future click into place in Vancouver. After a year of trial and error with their repertoire since their debut as the Warlocks in spring 1965, the Vancouver sets now include songs that will make it onto the first album (“Cream Puff War,”

“Viola Lee Blues,” “Cold Rain and Snow”), arrangements that will stay in the band’s songbook virtually unchanged for the next half-decade (“Big Boss Man,” “Sitting On Top of the World,” “Next Time You See Me”), and numbers that will keep altering themselves for years to come, including the proposed A-side to the band’s imaginary seven-inch from that spring, “I Know You Rider,” still three years away from achieving its semipermanent *Europe* ’72 form.

Perhaps feeling nervous in front of a new audience, the band’s singular bounce is still fully on display, providing early glimpses of the extended musical conversations for which they’d become known. On “Cream Puff War,” which stretches to a robust seven-and-a-half minutes and is still looking for the modal doorway it would find later in the fall, Garcia and drummer Bill Kreutzmann lock together, with Garcia’s solo transforming into a jam. On “Viola Lee Blues” (featuring a descending intro seemingly abandoned after this performance) the band soar into a double-time excursion, a reliably ecstasy-inducing party trick that would become the big finale to their album and many sets to come.

One lesson the Grateful Dead learned in Vancouver was that Owsley Stanley’s ideas about live concert amplification were not yet road worthy. Back in Los Angeles earlier that spring, Stanley had seen sound pouring forth from the Altecs, a vision that would fuel his design of the Wall of Sound a few years later. But after a painful five-hour load-out at the end of the Vancouver Trips Festival, it was time for Stanley to tear down his first Wall. When they got back to California, Owsley bought the band less experimental equipment, and the band’s first two-man sound crew disappeared into the alchemical mists for the time being, off to establish a new lab to manufacture still-legal LSD. The rest of their trip had been more productive.

A group of young promoters called The Afterthought had attended the Trips Festival too, and their presence helped provide the Grateful Dead with perhaps their most valuable takeaway from Vancouver. Approaching Jerry Garcia, the upstarts invited the Dead to stick around until the next weekend for another show (and a \$500 paycheck) at The Afterthought’s next gig at Pender Auditorium. The Dead made their mark, practicing at the home of one of the United Empire Loyalists, a teenage combo

employed to open for them at the Pender. With the parents conveniently out of the picture, the Dead cleaned out the fridge and apparently instigated a legendary house party that was not soon forgotten in the local lore.

It was also during this week in Vancouver, too, that they added a major new trick to their repertoire, doing something that they had never tried but would soon become famous for: performing for free in a local park. Drumming up good vibrations, goodwill, and real business for their impending not-free show at the Pender, it was a move they would repeat again and again in the years to come, especially after relocating to the Haight-Ashbury in September. When they played their next real shows outside of California, making their East Coast debut in Manhattan's East Village in June 1967, they not only made sure to play the free show in the park first, they even went there straight from the airport.

The impending future can be felt in the first rush of "The Golden Road (To Unlimited Devotion)," the lead-off track of the Grateful Dead's debut album and the heady sound of the Grateful Dead meeting the world. The final song to be recorded, it was also the last to be written, bashed out to order when Warner Bros. requested a single. And where the rest of *Grateful Dead* had been recorded live to tape at RCA's Studio A in Los Angeles in January and February, "The Golden Road" was taped at Coast Recorders in San Francisco after they had returned home. It is also the sound of the Dead learning to use the studio as an instrument in its own right, adding a subtle wash of overdubs and chaos to the fringes of their sparkling new sunshine pop anthem.

"A recording rather than a transcription" is how Phil Lesh described "The Golden Road" to radio host Tom Donahue on the album's release in 1967. A group composition credited to "McGannahan Skjellyfetti," a name borrowed by Pigpen from poet Kenneth Patchen, "The Golden Road" is also unlike almost anything else in the band's vast songbook; it would be the last of the Farfisa stompers, written just as the Summer of Love and the psychedelic age were *really* starting to kick in.

"It comes out sounding more like the way we sound live, just because of the enormous amount of confusion involved," remarked

Jerry Garcia, whose additional acoustic guitar can be heard in the swirl (Donahue 1967). This approach would consume the band's next two studio efforts, but they were not quite there yet. *The Grateful Dead* is the Grateful Dead as they existed, a slice of their fast-changing live repertoire circa 1967. Nothing would ever be the same, but then nothing had ever been the same with the Dead from the time of their second show onward.

For most bands, recording and releasing music constitutes a basic vital step in getting the word out. The Grateful Dead had tried to do just that at least three or four times before they succeeded, with those efforts yielding only a locally released seven-inch sold at the Psychedelic Shop in the Haight-Ashbury and virtually nowhere else. Soon, though, their live reputation piqued the interest of Warner Bros. In the interim, the band continued to evolve, adding new songs and discarding old ones. Of the dozen songs they'd recorded in proper studios in 1965 and 1966, only one remained in their current repertoire in early 1967.

Making studio recordings remained an active concern of the Grateful Dead in the decade to come, especially after their friends in Jefferson Airplane scored two Top 10 singles off *Surrealistic Pillow*, released in the same week the Dead headed to Los Angeles to record at the end of January 1967. Garcia had joined the Airplane in Hollywood for the sessions, playing on five songs on the album and helping to arrange others, and it was *Surrealistic Pillow* (and Rolling Stones) engineer Dave Hassinger in the producer's chair for the Dead.

Recorded in four days and mixed on the fifth, *The Grateful Dead's* live-in-the-studio approach was perfectly timed to capture the band's musical starting points just as they were receding into the rearview mirror. A careful curation of the band's early repertoire mixed with a few new favorites, the album captured faithful reproductions of electrified jug band stomps ("Beat It On Down the Line," "Sitting On Top of the World"), Chicago blues with face-eating harmonica ("Good Morning Little School Girl"), crazed modal improv ("Viola Lee Blues"), Dylanesque put-downs ("Cream Puff War"), and apocalyptic folk ("Morning Dew"). With all of the band other than Pigpen and Weir eating Ritalin or Dexamyl (accounts vary) during the sessions, the musicians would later dismiss the playing

as rushed (and the amps not turned up loud enough), but the energy and talent of the young musicians is also palpable, especially Garcia as he blazes through solo after solo.

While the band is only credited with two original songs on the album—"The Golden Road" and "Cream Puff War"—the credits disguise the amount of invention on display. "Viola Lee Blues" might originate with a 1922 recording by Gus Cannon's Jug Stompers, but the rhythm, chords, arrangement, three-part vocals, multiple jam segments, and pretty much everything except the words (especially the jam) come via the Grateful Dead. In comparing Obray Ramsay's haunting version of "Cold Rain and Snow" from 1961 to the Dead's spiraling, strident reading, only the ghost is the same. And although they were pulling from the Rolling Stones for much of their electric inspiration, Garcia and Lesh's ebullient backup vocals on "Beat It On Down the Line" and unceasing bop of "Sitting On Top of the World" owe just as much to their electrified jug-head heroes in The Lovin' Spoonful, whose first LPs share more than a little DNA with the early Dead. (The Dead's Lesh-sung cover of the Spoonful's "Do You Believe In Magic" has not survived on any currently known recordings.)

Even "Morning Dew," the most recently composed song on the album aside from the band's own, contains the Dead's fingerprints. Written by Bonnie Dobson in the early 1960s and first recorded on her *Live At Folk City* in 1962, the song about nuclear fallout had been covered on numerous occasions already by the time Jerry Garcia took it up, including a recording by Fred Neil. None, however, performed it quite like Garcia did, rearranging the phrasing slightly and adding a new climactic lyric of existential realization: "I guess it doesn't matter, anyway." It is very probable that the guitarist wrote the line himself.⁵

Along with "Cold Rain and Snow," "Beat It On Down the Line," and "New, New Minglewood Blues," "Morning Dew" would remain a part of the band's sets into the 1990s; all went through their own changes, just like the band. And if the album-opening "The Golden Road" was the sound of the future (and just as quickly the sound of the past), the album-closing "Viola Lee Blues" jam was the sound of the ever-present now. The word was out, and would be out even more when the Dead jumped into

the major media spotlight and onto the road for real in the next months and years. But, more importantly, the world could now go into a record store, look under G, and introduce themselves to the Grateful Dead whenever they wanted.

NOTES

A version of this essay is slated to be published as the liner notes for the Grateful Dead, *Grateful Dead: 50th Anniversary Deluxe Edition* (Rhino R5 557478, in press).

1. By the standards of both the musicians (see note 4) and organizers, the Vancouver Trips Festival was a failure, marking a transition from the city's slightly older avant-garde (represented by promoter Sam Perry and his film-making associates) to a younger more rock and roll hungry crowd, such as The Afterthought. In that way, the Vancouver Trips Festival mirrored its American predecessor which, according to co-organizer Stewart Brand, was "the beginning of the Grateful Dead and the end of everybody else" (Bernstein 2008, 243–44). In Vancouver, it was perhaps even more literally and tragically true. The failure of the Vancouver Trips Festival seemingly sent organizer Sam Perry into a spiral of drug abuse and mental instability, leading to his institutionalization, shock treatment, and suicide later that fall.
2. Phil Lesh remembers an incident on the train when, taking a smoke break between cars, he and drummer Bill Kreutzmann grew "entranced by the rhythm of the wheels clickety-clacking over the welds in the rails" and simultaneously declared, "We can *play* this!" (Lesh 2005, 91). Lesh writes that this revelation inspired the composition of the Dead song "Caution." The only problem(s) with this memory, though, are first, that "Caution" was at least nine months old by that point, having been recorded by the Dead at their first studio session, booked as the Emergency Crew in November 1965 and, second, the groove of "Caution" was almost entirely borrowed from "Mystic Eyes," a popular R&B single by Van Morrison's Irish combo. This does not mean the story didn't happen, but it requires some work to determine what occurred. Did Lesh and Kreutzmann lock into this groove the *next* time they played "Caution"? Was there an earlier train incident?
3. In fact, the band were pretty down on the whole affair, remembering it was a "stiff" event. "It wasn't really much fun to play," Garcia told *Mojo Navigator R&R News*, a recently launched weekly mimeographed zine dedicated to the local music scene, in one of the band's earliest in-print interviews. "The Trips Festival wasn't really a Trips Festival," Garcia told editor Greg Shaw, and Garcia knew

from Trips Festivals. “It was just a light show ... a very complex light show, but in terms of what it did with the music it was pretty meaningless also” (1966, 1). In his memoir, Phil Lesh called the Vancouver Trips Festival, “one of the worst performances I can remember” (2005, 91), yet the tapes don’t bear that out. The music is crisp and professional, a young band bringing their music to an almost wholly unknown audience for one of the first times. But I do wonder if Lesh isn’t remembering a vaguer sensation, the beginning of a collective dissatisfaction with the band’s repertoire. The tape record is scant for the band’s first few years, so it’s especially hard to track the debuts and retirements of songs, but many songs don’t appear again after Vancouver, though that could also be, in part, because Owsley Stanley, who recorded the show, would temporarily part ways with the band following Vancouver. Blurry memories can open up historical wormholes.

4. There’s been some dispute about the mysterious “Otis On A Shakedown Cruise,” an early song referred to in multiple places, including the earliest full-band interview, from the *LA Free Press* (White 1966, 12). Though it would seem to have never been recorded, an eagle-eared listener noticed a just-off-mic bandmember voice on the May 19, 1966, Avalon Ballroom recording confirming that the band are about to play “Otis” only seconds before launching into the less-figuratively-titled “You Don’t Have To Ask,” all but verifying it as the same song.

5. According to Dennis McNally, the Dead learned the song on one of Fred Neil’s two recordings of “Morning Dew” (2002, 539). Neither these nor the other pre-Dead versions seem to contain the line “I guess it doesn’t matter anyway.” Unless Garcia heard someone perform it live this way (and it likely was not Tim Rose, with whom the Dead shared a Fillmore bill in December 1966), it seems it’s an original lyric by Garcia; and not only an original lyric, but arguably the *central* lyric of the Dead’s version, the climactic line Garcia leans into at the song’s end, summing up the song’s existential live-in-the-now message, which in turn might be connected to the Dead and Garcia’s own philosophies, as espoused in interviews through the years.

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