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Not Saying Goodbye to the Grateful Dead

WAI CHEE DIMOCK

When the “Fare Thee Well” shows were first announced, back in January 2015, I thought it’d be nice to go on Friday, July 3. Sunday, or even Saturday, would be too much, downright risky, in my opinion. But two more to go would be a good safety net. The band could bomb the first night or they could be great, either way it would be fine. It would almost be like listening to the shows online, with the same luxury of infinite repetition—except that, in this case, there really wouldn’t be any more.

I got in touch with Alan Trist, my sole Grateful Dead contact, and he in turn got in touch with his colleague, Nicholas G. Meriwether, Grateful Dead Archivist at UC Santa Cruz. We quickly agreed on the July 3 date and (living up to the cliché about Deadheads) never saw what was coming. But ticket requests—many of them decorated by hand, as in the old days—would start pouring into the Stinson Beach P.O. box right away, 60,000 the first week. By mid-February 400,000 had arrived. Soldier Field has an estimated capacity of 61,500. Online tickets, meanwhile, were sold out within minutes and reappeared later on secondary markets at exorbitant prices. By early March, tickets were going for as high as \$8,660 for

a front-row seat. The average price for a seat was more than \$2,000, and three-day passes were selling for an average of more than \$4,000. In mid-March, a three-night package for \$116,000 showed up on StubHub.

The odd thing was, it all sort of worked out in the end. Two additional shows were announced in April, at Santa Clara the weekend before Chicago. Eventually tickets came down to between \$400 and \$11,000. For the three of us, things looked bleak in February, but then Alan got word from Trixie Garcia that we were on the Garcia family ticket buying list. Another anxious wait followed. Finally, in mid-April we got a ticket request form; it was approved by the end of the month. The ticket was its face value, \$199.50; with processing and UPS delivery, it came to \$233.00.

I first met Alan in 2009, when I wrote to Ice Nine, the Grateful Dead's publishing company, asking for permission to use "Blues for Allah" in my American literature anthology. The song is an anomaly in the Dead repertory. It was written after the assassination of King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, an enlightened ruler and Grateful Dead fan, and performed only five times, all in 1975. The studio album came out that September. After that the song disappeared completely, never to resurface. The music itself wasn't my favorite: it seemed too ponderous, declamatory; but the lyrics—"The flower of Islam / The fruit of Abraham /... What fatal flowers of / darkness spring from / seeds of light"—seemed unique in American literature. The Dead were songwriters, after all, as well as musicians; Garcia and lyricist Robert Hunter were inducted in June 2015 into the Songwriters Hall of Fame, joining Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Sondheim, and George and Ira Gershwin. The anthology could be one place where the lyrics would be heard again. But would I be able to afford the permissions?

The reply came by return mail, in a pale blue envelope with the Ice Nine logo looking like a Celtic version of the I-Ching symbol. (Ice Nine is a lethal polymorph of water in *Cat's Cradle*; Robert Hunter was a Kurt Vonnegut fan.) Signed by Alan Trist, the letter gave me permission "to quote from 'Blues for Allah,' in all print and electronic editions, throughout the world in perpetuity." There was no charge.

At the time, Alan was manager and all-purpose administrative staff at Nine Ice. His job effectively came to an end when Universal Music took

over the Grateful Dead catalog in September 2014. But as Alan says, “You can never retire from the Grateful Dead,” so he’s continued to work with Trixie Garcia, Jerry’s daughter, and with Nicholas Meriwether.

Alan and Nicholas have a weird connection: Pembroke College, Cambridge University, separated by twenty years. Alan is a Brit whose transplanting began in 1960, when he spent a year hanging out with Garcia, Hunter, and Lesh in Palo Alto while his father was at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford. He went back to England for college, but his fate was sealed when the Grateful Dead offered him a job on their first trip to the UK, to Newcastle-under-Lyme, in May 1970. Nicholas is a multi-generation South Carolinian who spent two years at Cambridge studying antebellum Southern literature. The two spoke in one voice about the distinguished alums of Pembroke College (John Donne, among others). They also spoke in one voice about their many projects, including a Grateful Dead conference (“26 disciplines and fields represented”) and an academic book series devoted to the Grateful Dead, forthcoming from Duke University Press. But the two also disagreed—about Santa Clara, for instance. Just how good was the jamming on Saturday?

It all depends on what you mean by “jamming.” I realized when the July 3 show opened with “Box of Rain” and quickly hit full stride, with something like a reinterpretation of that term. “Box of Rain” was the last song played by the band, the final encore on their July 9, 1995 show at Soldier Field, a month before Jerry Garcia died in his sleep. It was the first song on *American Beauty* (1970), and the first with Phil Lesh as the lead vocalist. Robert Hunter commented, “Phil Lesh wanted a song to sing to his dying father and had composed a piece complete with every vocal nuance but the words.” I’d always found the song deeply moving but too minimally conceived, with not enough instrumental support for the vocals. Here, the level of instrumentalization (with Trey Anastasio as the new lead guitar, and Bruce Hornsby and Jeff Chimenti on keyboards) was now spectacular. This new, 2015 version of “Box of Rain” was robust, vigorous, and joyous, turning the elusiveness of the lyrics (“Just a box of rain / wind and water / believe it if you need it / if you don’t just pass it on”) into the strumming and rolling of a sizzling rhythm.

Songs that benefit from such rhythmic energy shone throughout: “Jack Straw,” “The Wheel,” “The Music Never Stopped,” “Playing in the Band.” Even “Bertha” had a new texture, a new up-tempo flair. What brought down the house, though, was “Help on the Way” > “Slipknot!” > “Franklin’s Tower,” wrapping up the second set. True to form, the band initially stumbled on this one with Trey Anastasio’s miscue, but recovered with grace and agility. The three songs were first performed as a triptych on *Blues for Allah*, where Garcia’s still supple vocals and the complex harmony and time signatures gave it a ruefulness that was almost structural (“if you plant ice you’re gonna harvest wind”). Now, in 2015, the emphasis shifted to the chorus of voices chanting in unison, “Roll away the dew, roll away the dew, roll away the dew, roll away the dew,” a refrain that was also a benediction. As the sure-footed drumming of Bill Kreutzmann and Mickey Hart anchored the jamming from the keyboards and the guitars, a ripple of excitement spread through the entire stadium, the thrill of a job well done.

Still, something was lost in this new kind of jamming, this new reliance on rhythm as the unifying vehicle. I missed the old “Cassidy,” written for Bob Weir by lyricist John Perry Barlow as he and Alan Trist drove through a blizzard to go see his dying father in Salt Lake City. The song was a tribute to two Cassidys: Neal Cassady, recently dead, and Cassidy Law, daughter of Grateful Dead staffer Eileen Law, just born. I missed what it used to be: a song pulled in two directions, departure yoked with arrival, leave-taking doubling as a form of lingering. And I missed the old “Crazy Fingers,” also from *Blues for Allah*, evanescent and tonally indeterminate, just as I missed the way the melodic lines used to splinter and wrap around one another before they were reconstituted, allowing the band to segue seamlessly from “Scarlet Begonias” into “Fire on the Mountain” (called “Scarlet > Fire” for that reason).

Phil Lesh once said that the twining of his bass lines around the guitar licks of Jerry Garcia was like “a sandworm in heat.” For that kind of twining, and for related nudging and nesting, I would need to go back in time, to the other 2,318 shows performed by the band. As a milestone, 2015 is about as satisfying a resting place as one can hope for, but it is not a

closure for three decades of Grateful Dead music. That music is still live, not concluded. It has not bid us farewell.

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