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## EDITOR'S COLUMN

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### Mystery, Mystique, and Grateful Dead Studies

NICHOLAS G. MERIWETHER

In a 1983 interview, Jerry Garcia, Phil Lesh, and Steve Parish mused about the challenges of analyzing the Grateful Dead's unique gestalt. Parish finally likened it to a *Twilight Zone* episode where a magic jar is unsealed, only to reveal a few mundane objects: "There are certain things that if you take them apart, it's not as mystical," he concluded, with Garcia laughingly adding, "This human! I took him apart, and he's not even alive anymore ..." (Gans 2002, 248). It is a casual but revealing exchange on several levels, and it also connects to the work of Grateful Dead studies. On its face, it could be taken as a rebuff of the academic effort to explain and understand, the fear that analysis could destroy the spirit of mystery that lay at the heart of the Grateful Dead phenomenon, killing it as surely as dismemberment. Yet that ignores the larger point, which was the topic of the conversation: the elusive, mysterious core of the band's work and its reception, with all three participants making a thoughtful effort to pin it down with words, at least partially.

That paradox lies at the heart of the academic discourse of Dead studies. Although it comprises decades of work on the band, their music, and the larger contexts of both, the scholarship is still in its formative,

inchoate stage of development, evidenced by its struggles to balance the twin goals of appreciation and criticism. The essays, reviews, and features collected here address both goals, their authors spanning the gamut from band member to next-generation *aficionado*, from scholar to enthusiast, with an equivalent range of efforts and perspectives, from primary to secondary, and insider to outsider. That range is something the band prized and consciously encouraged, which Garcia recognized as a defining aspect of their performances: as Dennis McNally noted, Garcia thought of the Dead, and Dead shows, as “a postmodern construct of music, biographical experience, and technology—a hundred things that fused into a viable subculture” (McNally 2012, 16).

Readers will find that diversity reflected throughout this volume. The six essays add perspectives from art history, legal studies, literary criticism, musicology, psychology, and sound studies, all offering new insights into the Dead and their world as well as how those connect to broader academic domains. A hallmark of the band’s project was the ways that it engaged with the cultural and historical issues around them, as law professor Joseph A. Tomain’s essay “‘The Virus of Liberty’: John Perry Barlow, Internet Law, and Grateful Dead Studies” makes clear. Barlow’s contributions to the band’s lyrics are well known, but his protean thought connects the Dead’s project to a number of larger issues their work touched on or directly addressed, as Tomain explores.

The core of that work was their music, and it was the central site for the band’s efforts to understand and build their connection to the world around them. That was also why the music was both subjective and contested, as musicologist Brian Felix explores in “Tempo, Diet Pills, and Mythology on *The Grateful Dead*.” Tackling a persistent canard in the band’s history, Felix explains how the band’s debut album came to be incorrectly perceived as overly and uncharacteristically “speedy,” and what that misperception means, both for our understanding of the band’s history and their project. Part of that project was the visual art that the Dead inspired. Art historian Scott B. Montgomery examines one of the early artists to illustrate the Dead’s concert appearances in his “Lee Conklin’s Grateful Dead: Icons and Iconography in the Development of the Psychedelic Poster.” Conklin was one of many artists to be attracted to the

Dead's rich iconic potential, and his struggle to capture that ethos within the constraints of his commissions offers revealing insights into the challenges artists faced in depicting the band's music, and illustrating its place in music, culture, and history.

Challenge often elicited the best from fans as well as artists, and Deadheads are known for their grace under pressure, as psychologist Adam D. Brown discusses in "'We Will Get by, We Will Survive': Deadhead Resilience During the COVID-19 Pandemic." Linking the band's example and lyric message to fan interpretation, Brown also provides a case study of how listeners used their experience of the phenomenon to provide effective coping mechanisms, a view that usefully interrogates the still largely negative mainstream depiction of Deadheads.

The core of that achievement is the band's work, both lyrically and musically, as the last two essays demonstrate. Literary scholar Rick Wallach's "Disturbing the Dead: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Lizzie Siddal, and 'It Must have been the Roses'" traces allusions and connections between Hunter's lyrics for the song and larger unexplored literary antecedents and historical contexts, showing how Hunter's words anchor and deepen the Dead's music even more broadly than scholars have recognized.

Hunter was only one of several band members who had a scholarly inclination. Mickey Hart sought out scholars in his work on percussion and drumming, eventually tapping a team of experts to help him in his research. Literary scholar Teddy Hamstra explores the results of those efforts in his "Joseph Campbell, Multimedia Ritual, and the Sounded Caves of Mickey Hart's *Drumming at the Edge of Magic*." Hart's work is an important part of Grateful Dead studies that has yet to receive sustained attention, and Hamstra's essay marks a welcome effort to address that lacuna.

Hart's approach to his work is both scholarly and experiential, and that describes this volume's special section. Seven years after the fifty-year anniversary series of concerts called Fare Thee Well, the shows continue to cast a long shadow. That began at the time, with an extensive journalistic footprint that is explored by media scholar Jordan M. McClain in "Reflecting on Fare Thee Well: An Interdisciplinary Perspective," which also features perspectives on the event from religious studies professor

Ariella Werden-Greenfield and psychologist Isaac Kandall Slone. Their multipronged analysis also reveals how the complexity of the concerts made for a fitting celebration of the band's history, demonstrating why the Dead elicited and warrant so many approaches to explain their significance. Literary scholar Wai Chee Dimock's "Not Saying Goodbye to the Grateful Dead" offers a thoughtful meditation on the shows from the standpoint of a scholar whose work offered a groundbreaking acknowledgment of the band's cultural achievement (Meriwether 2012, 38). One of her show-going companions was Alan Trist, longtime manager of the band's publishing company Ice Nine, who saw the larger significance of the shows from the perspective of a longtime band staffer. His "The Bowels of the Stadium: Fare Thee Well in Santa Clara" captures how the concerts looked to someone who first met Garcia and Hunter before the Dead came together, only fifteen miles away from Levi Stadium, where they were all forging the bonds and ideas that would inform their work together for more than three decades, and beyond. Fans appreciated and emulated their example, and two contributions provide the view from the stands, both by participants in the scholarly discourse as well. Filmmaker and musician Steve Hurlburt's poetic "It Didn't Matter" is an eloquent tribute to how Deadheads made themselves, and in so doing made themselves part of the band's project. Poet Robert Cooperman's "The Last Dead Show" completes the section with an elegy to the band and scene, mediated by the strange, comforting remove of the televised broadcast of the last show.

Reviews of seven works outline the range of recent contributions to the larger Grateful Dead phenomenon, from books to music to film. Association cofounder and current President G. Ganter examines literary scholar Brent Wood's *The Tragic Odes of Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead*, a scholarly work that also reflects its author's acumen as a poet. Two other texts reviewed here also get at the complex ways that the Dead participated in the literature they inspired. English professor Daniel Pinti considers the graphic novel *Grateful Dead Origins* as serial art as well as band history, and literary scholar Matthew C. Armstrong provides a thoughtful assessment of the new edition of Jerilyn Brandelius's *Grateful Dead Family Album*.

Supported by the band when it first appeared, Brandelius's book also reflects how the Dead have actively shaped their legacy, especially through their archival recording releases. Three reviews of recent additions to their discography explore aspects of that legacy. Library and information science scholar Joseph A. Salem Jr. takes a thoughtful look at the Dead's continuing contribution to the vinyl resurgence with *The Story of the Grateful Dead*, and Jason Robert Gallagher, a St. Louis native and scholar-poet, provides a close reading of the band's recent box set *Listen to the River: St. Louis '71 '72 '73*.

Garcia's solo work was always an important complement to his primary work with the Dead, and political scientist and pioneering Garcia scholar Joseph Jupille examines the Jerry Garcia Band's November 15, 1991, concert at Madison Square Garden, released as Volume 16 of the *GarciaLive* series.

The Garcia Band's work helped to define the larger context of the Dead phenomenon, with fans often calling JGB concerts noteworthy for their spiritual feel. Director Lonnie Frazier's documentary *Box of Rain* explores how the Dead scene embodied that, offering fans a site for psychological healing, as film scholar and documentary director Dave Jannetta discusses in his review. That scene demonstrated surprising continuities despite equally powerful changes over time, as the two Features explore. Peter Connors, who also provided essential interview footage in *Box of Rain* offers an impressionistic snapshot of the 2012 Gathering of the Vibes festival, one of the sites where the spirit of the Dead scene flourished after Garcia's death. Grateful Dead keyboardist Tom Constanten's thoughtful, wide-ranging interview with scholars Davis Schneiderman and Richard Pettengill and their students offers his own insights into the development of that spirit, which the band always said they channeled, not created.

The band's name was itself an expression of that, as shown by the poem that serves as this volume's Last Words. Long attributed to John Lydgate, "The Grateful Dead" marks one of the earliest appearances of the folk motif in English, and represents an early effort to reframe it in Christian theological terms. It shows the depth and longevity of the cultural and intellectual currents surrounding the name, which makes a fitting close to a volume of work that is itself a contribution to those currents.

In a review of *Unbroken Chain: The Grateful Dead in Music, Culture, and Memory*, the first academic conference devoted to the Dead, one reporter mused that “the mystique of scholarship and academia at large came into question: some phenomena don’t fit neatly into a category” (Collette 2007). Neither do some discourses. For Dead studies, that is in part a reflection of the complex and messy way that the fan culture surrounding the band elicited reflection and thought; though not scholarly, the work of fans to articulate their experience in terms familiar to scholars, and even frame their insights in academic terms, is a fascinating element of the Grateful Dead phenomenon that also represents a theme in the larger scholarly discourse. That can be challenging, even problematic, if viewed in strictly academic terms, but, of course, such efforts are not written for that audience, nor are they intended to be read according to those terms. Yet viewed correctly, that aspect of the discourse enriches the discussion and enlarges the audience for the academic work of the field.

That range and democratic inclusiveness requires scholars to apply their disciplinary lenses carefully, a challenge familiar to academics that study artists who explicitly embraced mystery and framed their work in those terms. In their 1983 interview, Garcia, Lesh, and Parish suggest as much: while Parish’s analogy may be a warning against trying to dissect the mystery and mystique, their larger conversation is as much about how to talk about the Grateful Dead as it is about the Dead—and that goes to the heart of the scholarly work on the band.

It is a theme that winds throughout the literature. In the book that accompanies his BBC Channel 4 series on improvisation, Derek Bailey includes a segment of his wide-ranging interview with Garcia that does not appear in the television episode, published in the first volume of the Association’s *Proceedings* (Bailey 2021). Discussing the band’s approach to improvisation, Garcia comments, “What’s interesting to me is the accidental, the chaotic. You know, the stuff that you can’t control or you can’t predict.” Bailey responds, “There’s another side to that isn’t there, which it seems to me you’re interested in. Magic,” prompting Garcia to comment:

This is part of the tradition of music, where music comes from. A magic of one sort or another. For us, for the Grateful Dead, that

has been a part of what's kept us going all this time. It's sort of stumbling into this area where there's a lot of energy and a lot of something happening and not a lot of control. So that the sense of individual control disappears and you are working at another level entirely. Sometimes this feels to me as though you don't have to really think about what's happening. Things just flow. It's kind of hard to report on but it's a real thing ... we pretty much understand intuitively but we don't have the language to talk about it. (Bailey 1993, 42)

For scholars of the Grateful Dead, his words could also be describing the academic discourse about the Dead phenomenon.

The world of academe can still find uncomfortable ideas and phenomena that suggest the ineffable, but we now study and discuss grimoires, even if we do not believe in the efficacy of the spells they detail. Garcia also expressed his own distrust of phenomena he could not explain, but he acknowledged their existence.<sup>1</sup> This volume represents another installment in the effort to talk about the very real but still elusive magic that so entranced Garcia and his bandmates, and that they courted so effectively.

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#### NOTE

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1. For a good discussion of this, see Gans (2002, 208–215).

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