GRATEFUL DEAD STUDIES

Volume 5 2021/2022

ISSN 2572-7818 (Online) ISSN 2572-7702 (Print)

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CITATION INFORMATION

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Grateful Dead Studies

Volume 5 (2021/2022)

Pages: 145–153

URL: https://gratefuldeadstudies.org/GDSv5_FareTheeWellIntro.pdf

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On the opening night of *Fare Thee Well*, deep in the heart of the second set, Phil Lesh stepped up to a microphone at the side of the stage and began speaking. Mickey Hart and Bill Kreutzmann were in full flight, creating the distinctive drums and percussion soundscape that for many fans served as an anchor for the second set of Grateful Dead shows for much of the band's thirty-year career. Improvisation was the hallmark of those segments, but Lesh's spoken-word accompaniment was a first—and it was remarkable.

Sharp-eared listeners quickly recognized the words to "What's Become of the Baby," a song on *Aoxomoxoa* that had never been performed in concert.[1] Originally conceived by Hunter as a folk-inflected ballad, the song morphed into something very different on the album, Garcia's arrangement and production turning it into an avant-garde piece that owed more to John Cage than John Lomax. While the track eluded most critics, *aficionados* viewed its haunting lyrics and compositional complexity as a seminal statement of the Dead's musical range and ambition.

Those qualities, along with its obscurity, made "What's Become of the Baby" almost as much of a grail as "Unbroken Chain," a song released in 1974 but not played in concert until 1995. The performance of

this chestnut on June 27 was proof that there was still ore, even gems, to mine in the Dead's storied repertoire, just as the five concerts comprising Fare Thee Well demonstrated the depth and vitality of that body of work.

Yet the significance of the song's appearance went beyond the decision to include it, and even more than the new and effective arrangement the band gave it, itself proof that the surviving members could still make ground-breaking and powerful music together as they revisited their history. "What's Become of the Baby" also serves as a useful way of getting at a number of the defining issues of Fare Thee Well, not only why the event remains a fascinating if challenging achievement in the history of the Grateful Dead phenomenon, but also why it offers a fertile subject for analysis. This section outlines a range of reflections, providing a view of the event from the standpoint of scholars and fans as well as critics and insiders. The accounts range from contemporaneous to recent, appreciative to critical, artistic to academic; together, they demonstrate the wide-ranging and ecumenical nature of the discussion the event inspired, painting an impressionistic collage of how the sprawling, five-night run of concerts managed to effectively channel the spirit of the multifaceted experience of the Grateful Dead phenomenon.

More than seven years later, Fare Thee Well still provokes debate—and resists assessment. Although the concerts generated more media coverage than any other Grateful Dead concert event[2], that did not clarify the circumstances surrounding its genesis and development, with conflicting accounts at the time and after. Trying to make sense of the record frustrated seasoned journalists at the time and has rebuffed commentators since. Readers learned more of the organizational and other challenges from later books by Joel Selvin (2018) and promoter Peter Shapiro (2022), but those accounts treat Fare Thee Well as part of larger stories. Selvin's account views the event as the culmination of the post-Garcia era of the Dead phenomenon, which comprises the book's scope. The concerts are the defining event in Shapiro's memoir, treated as the pinnacle of his already extensive career as a promoter to date as well as a genuine personal achievement. Yet both books wrestle with the contexts of the shows, chiefly the surviving bandmembers' history since the death

of Jerry Garcia in 1995. Shapiro is diplomatic, as befits a promoter who continues to work with the surviving band members, but he also acknowledges that the effort to secure their participation "wasn't easy" (Shapiro 2015); even longtime band friend Bill Walton alluded to "all the underlying implications" of the concerts in his appreciation of the shows (Walton 2015, [12]). That interpersonal dimension dominates Selvin's account, often obscuring the history and music that continues to knit the band members together (Meriwether 2019a). Those tensions challenged fans as well, who often viewed the band as not just a musical group but something of a model for community, an expression of a nebulous but nonetheless very real alternative to typical fan cultures and music industry norms.

The challenges and complexities of Fare Thee Well make clear the utility of a scholarly approach to the event, as Isaac Slone, Jordan McClain and Ariella Werden-Greenfield's essay demonstrates. Their thoughtful explication shows how media framing, religious studies, and psychology can work together to reveal the rich interplay between artists, audience, and history that informed this large-scale cultural event. All three use the role of lead guitarist Trey Anastasio to especially good effect, confirming why he was not only a wise choice musically but also diplomatically: as Shapiro put it, Anastasio was the only guitarist with "the ability to navigate the internal politics of the band members" (2022, 217). His involvement overshadowed the participation of longtime sideman Jeff Chimenti and former occasional Dead keyboardist Bruce Hornsby, but the complexity of the personnel for a band assembled solely for these shows was a practical and musical issue with far-reaching ramifications.

However compelling, academic analysis can lose sight of the intensely personal, subjective, and emotional experience that defines this kind of event, and informs reactions afterward. Justin Kreutzmann, the filmmaker who directed the video shoot of the Chicago concerts, saw the first signs of that in Trixie Garcia's video announcement for the concerts. Invoking her father's faith in the power of music and performance, Garcia's heartfelt plea "set the tone for the whole Fare Thee Well project" in his view (Kreutzmann 2015). The contributions by Wai Chee Dimock and Alan Trist sketch how that emotion played out to thoughtful observers from both a critic's and an insider's view, respectively, with poetic assess-

ments by Steven Hurburt and Robert Cooperman providing the Deadhead perspective.

Each of the contributions acknowledge the larger psychological landscape of the concerts, and that suggests a way of reframing the event that also addresses the lingering trauma the band's dissolution created for committed fans. Grateful Dead concerts always straddled a divide between the event as a unique occurrence and the concert as a chapter in a longer narrative. The Dead's indefatigable commitment to touring made the long view natural. Yet, for dozens if not hundreds of concerts, the show was a singular event, whether that was a cultural celebration such as Mardi Gras or New Year's Eve or a one-off performance at a venue or in a locale the Dead never played again. The band's embrace of improvisation and, for most of their career, the lack of repetition in their set lists, highlighted that singular quality. Fare Thee Well necessarily eschewed some of those characteristics: the set list was planned; the improvisations were more constrained. But just as Dead concerts balanced their episodic and singular qualities, Fare Thee Well had to navigate the tension between the centripetal pull of the band's long history with the centrifugal forces of the surviving members' post-1995 work and relationships. That emphasized the planned, ritual aspects that a fifty-year anniversary necessarily invokes, but it also spoke to the work and history that such milestones connote.

Those things also inform communities, which was another central aspect of both the event and the phenomenon it celebrated. That effort had never been easy: the Haight had seen its sheltered, halcyon early days shattered by media distortion and immigration; the Dead scene experienced a similar set of pressures following 1987's "Touch of Grey." Yet, in both instances, the Dead regrouped and persevered. From their earliest days, resilience was not just a quality the band prized but a trait they cultivated, one that fans recognized.

Robert Hunter commented appreciatively on Deadhead efforts to address the problems in the scene that followed "Touch of Grey." He hoped that "when there is no more Grateful Dead … there is a community formed that needn't wither simply because they don't have the band anymore":

> Because it will come, that time. And if there can be a strong, liberty-loving community at that point, which has evolved its own ethics, I think that community can hold together. (Gans 2002, 285)

Fare Thee Well underscored the prescience of Hunter's remark, on many levels. The concerts suggested that the larger fan community had indeed survived in some form, even if the originary, core community of the band and their organization had fragmented.

That process had unfolded slowly. Four years after the surviving bandmembers had retired the name, Rachel Wilgoren wrote that "While the Grateful Dead may no longer exist as a band, the Grateful Dead community has managed to adapt and survive" (1999, 200). The band saw that as well. Shortly after Garcia's death, Mickey Hart mused, "The audience is the Grateful Dead now" (Selvin 1996, 176). But Fare Thee Well succeeded in large part due to the surviving members' shared history, the enduring memories that thousands of hours of playing together had forged; when the music started, everyone was swept up in the moment. As Fare Thee Well keyboardist Bruce Hornsby noted, "When they get together to play, when the music is happening, all that other stuff is rendered so unimportant. Getting those chills onstage—that's something you always covet" (Selvin 2002, 186).

Courting that feeling was not only a goal of the concerts but a core of the larger phenomenon they commemorated: in a real way, it defined both the music and the community that prized it, and whose participation the band considered essential for its creation in concert. The band recognized that: as Lesh wrote in his memoir, "The psychic connection and sense of community shared by the band and the audience is the key to our music and to the Grateful Dead 'experience'" (2005, 281).

Lesh's memoir was published in 2005, the midpoint of the two decades separating Garcia's death and Fare Thee Well. Relations between the surviving bandmembers had grown increasingly fractious during that period, especially in the last few years, notwithstanding a few performances together and one well-received tour in 2009. Addressing that history became part of the rationale for the fiftieth reunion: One of Shapiro's arguments for why Lesh should participate was "to let everyone know

that this would be his final musical statement with Bobby, Mickey, and Billy" (Shapiro 2022, 228). Although Weir and Lesh have played together since then, and Dead and Company includes Hart, Kreutzmann, and Weir, Shapiro's argument has held true: Fare Thee Well marked the last time the four surviving members performed together, despite Weir's belief that they still have "some unfinished business" (Doyle 2015). Eight years later, Fare Thee Well stands as a complicated post script to the Grateful Dead phenomenon, one whose apparent finality raises as many questions as it answers.

Ambiguity and fluidity were qualities the Dead prized, and they help to make Fare Thee Well a fascinating lens for viewing the band's project. "What's Become of the Baby" was an expression of that complexity. It was not lost on thoughtful observers that the song's arrangement relied on Hart and Kreutzmann, whose frayed relationships with Lesh were the central stumbling block to convening the shows. That, too, made the point that the Dead's legacy was a group effort, which was a lesson from the era of the song's creation as well. The recording of *Aoxomoxoa* came at a pivotal time in the band's history, when the Dead almost fractured irrevocably; lyrically, the album can be read as a kind of allegory of the demise of the Haight, with "What's Become of the Baby" asking what it all meant (Meriwether 2019b).

At Fare Thee Well, that question took on a different cast. Reflecting on "Cassidy," John Perry Barlow argued that "Grateful Dead songs … grow and metamorphose over time":

> Their music changes a little every time they're played. The words, avidly interpreted and reinterpreted by generations of Deadheads, become accretions of meaning and cultural flavor rather than static assertions of intent. (Barlow 1994)

At Fare Thee Well, "What's Become of the Baby" embraced a new context, and spoke to a different legacy. Hunter's chorus—"What's become of the baby / This cold December morning?"—now referenced the Dead, asking what their music, their work, meant.

In *A Long Strange Trip*, band biographer Dennis McNally concludes that the Dead's "ultimate legacy is their audience and their music

itself" (2002, 618). Fare Thee Well added something else to that legacy: the Dead's example, a model of what the larger project of a band could be and might accomplish. Writing about his time in the Haight and the broader milieu that surrounded it, novelist Robert Stone wrote after Garcia's death:

> The art and the thought and the spirit of the liberation of the '60s flourished in their way. But of that holistic magic vision of the garden set free, the music of Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead is the purest sing remnant. It was supposed to be an accompaniment to the New Beginning. In fact, it was the thing itself, all that remains with us. (Stone 1999, 281)

At Fare Thee Well, the performance of "What's Become of the Baby" served as a potent reminder of that primal link between the genesis of the band's project in the Haight and the era of the 1960s, confirming Stone's tribute to the Dead as the most enduring and compelling legacy of that bright, brief bohemia.

No one would cite "What's Become of the Baby" as one of the Dead's greatest songs, but its appearance in concert, and at this event, was nonetheless historic. For some fans it was the peak of the shows, a definitive if ambiguous statement bound up in the surrealistic swirl of images and allusions of the lyrics, ending with the haunting final couplet, "Shackled by chains of illusion / Delusions of living and dead" (Trist and Dodd 2005, 91). In the context of Fare Thee Well, those lines could be taken as a veiled, bittersweet commentary on the Dead's legacy and the freight that it carries, but on a larger level, the words describe the space for exploration that the Dead sought to provide for so many, something that the scale and box office success of Fare Thee Well affirmed.

That ambiguity reflected the title of the event itself. Fare Thee Well alluded to lines in two songs, "Brokedown Palace" and "Cassidy," both of which describe the process of bidding good-bye to the past and moving on to a new beginning, whether that is a new life or the afterlife. Both songs are about transition: the vision of death as a reward for a life well lived, the peaceful resting place at the end of life's journey expressed in

"Brokedown Palace," and the cyclical nature of that journey in "Cassidy," and the way the lessons and obligations of the journey, its insights and ideals, pass from generation to generation.

Those are themes that the veiled Christian imagery in "What's Become of the Baby" invokes as well. Anniversaries are a time-honored way to honor those moments of transition. And that was Fare Thee Well.

N.G.M.

Notes

Special thanks to Mark Pinkus for his assistance.

1. The album recording of the song was played at a concert at the Electric Factory in Philadelphia on April 26, 1969, while the band performed "Feedback," leading to years of confusion when the tape began to circulate (Scott, Dolgushkin, Nixon 1999, 10).

2. The subtitle of the event, "Celebrating Fifty Years of the Grateful Dead," was designed to make it clear that it was a reunion, as Shapiro notes: "We never identified the seven performers collectively as the Grateful Dead, but we designed the art to feature the words Grateful Dead in a way that provided a sense of what was to come" (2022, 229). Woodstock has generated more journalism and other writing, but the bulk of that followed the concerts; the Dead were also only one of many performers at the event.

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