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Tempo, Diet Pills, and Mythology on *The Grateful Dead*

BRIAN FELIX

Released on March 17, 1967, *The Grateful Dead* is the band's first album. As the Dead's major-label debut, it is undeniably important, yet it is typically denigrated by both the band and commentators. The album *is* something of an anomaly in the Grateful Dead's catalog of thirteen studio recordings: the tunes are mostly cover songs, whereas most of the band's other studio releases primarily consist of original material, and it is also the only Grateful Dead studio album to feature the original quintet configuration of the group. Those are not why band members dismiss the album. Rather, their critiques disparage the release for failing to capture the excitement and dynamics of a Grateful Dead live performance in general, and specifically for its abnormally—and atypically—speedy performances. Carolyn “MG” Garcia, who was with the band in the studio, explained that “They were taking my diet pills at the time, and that’s why there are accelerated tempos on that album” (Troy 1991, 83). Her impression—and explanation—are widely echoed by band members and others.

Yet a careful analysis reveals that the renditions on *The Grateful Dead* are not in fact substantially quicker in tempo than other represen-

tative live recordings from 1966 and 1967. Frequently performed tunes on the album, including “Cold Rain and Snow,” “Good Morning Little School Girl,” and “Cream Puff War,” are all performed at normal tempi for the time, and the version of “Viola Lee Blues” is the slowest version of the available recordings from that period. The discrepancy between what band members say of tempi on *The Grateful Dead* and the actual tempi on the recording invites a fresh examination of the importance of the album, and the studio albums more generally, in the Grateful Dead’s body of work. That difference also reveals the process of myth-making and the role of media in the Grateful Dead, topics increasingly important to scholars and subjects long recognized as central to Grateful Dead studies.¹

Background

In late January 1967, the Dead traveled to RCA Studio A in Hollywood to record their first LP. The lineup consisted of Jerry Garcia on guitar and vocals, Bob Weir on guitar and vocals, Ron “Pigpen” McKernan on keyboards, harmonica, and vocals, Phil Lesh on bass and vocals, and Bill Kreutzmann on drums. The session was produced by David Hassinger, who had engineered Jefferson Airplane’s *Surrealistic Pillow* and the Rolling Stones’ “Satisfaction,” among other popular records of the day. Although the Grateful Dead had been in a recording studio before, those were primitive and amateurish by comparison: this was, as Phil Lesh put it, a “high pressure scene” in a room that was “about the size of the Vehicle Assembly Building at Cape Canaveral” (Lesh 2005, 99).

Although the Dead worked within the parameters set by Warner Bros. for the sessions—the label approved the choice of producer and set the schedule—they, and their extended family, still managed to make their mark. Rosie McGee, Lesh’s partner at the time, recalled:

Although I imagine wives and girlfriends were frequently present during recording sessions for other bands, I doubt the studio was all that ready for the long-haired, pot-smoking, make-yourself-totally-at-home gang that was the Grateful Dead family at that point in history. We stood in striking contrast to the buttoned-down record company folks who came by to observe the

sessions, and who didn't stay all that long, mumbling excuses as they left. (Jackson and Gans 2015, 68)

For the band, however, it was all work: they were professional and worked well with Hassinger, who told journalist Blair Jackson that he had “made two or three trips up to the Bay Area and seen them at the Fillmore” and “thought they were dynamite.” His goal was “to capture as much of the energy as I could” (Jackson and McMahon 1985, 32).

The session went quickly, with the tracks recorded and mixed in less than a week. The selections were staples of their concert repertoire, featuring their own arrangements of folk, blues, and jug band tunes, including Jessie Fuller's “Beat It On Down the Line,” Sonny Boy Williamson's “Good Morning Little School Girl,” the traditional “Cold Rain and Snow,” Walter Vinson and Lonnie Chatmon's “Sitting on Top of the World,”² and two compositions by Noah Lewis: “New, New Minglewood Blues” and “Viola Lee Blues.” They also included “Morning Dew,” a recent folk tune about nuclear holocaust by Bonnie Dobson made famous by Tim Rose (who later claimed credit as cowriter), which was a more recent addition to their repertoire. The lone original song they recorded at RCA was Garcia's energetic rocker, “Cream Puff War.”

While most of the tracks are less than three minutes in length (in keeping with pop conventions of the time), the long-playing record format meant that they had a comfortable thirty-plus minutes per side, letting them stretch out “Morning Dew” to five minutes, “Good Morning Little Schoolgirl” to six and a half minutes, and a full ten minutes for “Viola Lee Blues.” In his memoir, Lesh called the version of “Viola Lee Blues” they released “the only track on the record that sounds at all like we did at the time,” noting that “The recording *almost* captures in ten minutes what used to take thirty or more—especially the last big craze-out buildup to the verse recap” (Lesh 2005, 99).

If so, it failed to impress the Warner Bros. executives. When they heard the recordings from the sessions, they asked the band to write something that could be used as a single. The Dead responded by quickly crafting “Golden Road (To Unlimited Devotion),” an homage to the current Haight-Ashbury scene that they recorded at Coast Recorders in San Francisco. Interestingly, though a far less technologically advanced stu-

dio, it produced a recording superior to those recorded at RCA (McNally 2002, 182). The band credited the song to “McGannahan Skjellyfetti,” which was “Pigpen’s whimsical moniker for the five of us writing together,” Lesh explained (2005, 99). Overall, the album consists of nine total tracks, with two original tunes and seven covers.

The album enjoyed modest success when it was released: it debuted on the Billboard 200 chart on May 6, 1967, and rose to a peak of 73, spending a total of twenty-eight weeks on the chart (Whitburn 2010, 322). The single, “Golden Road (To Unlimited Devotion)” b/w “Cream Puff War,” did not chart on the Billboard 100, suggesting that it failed to garner widespread radio play (Whitburn 2011, 372). This is particularly noteworthy when compared to Jefferson Airplane’s *Surrealistic Pillow*, which debuted on the Billboard 200 chart on March 25, 1967, and peaked at 3, spending a total of fifty-six weeks on the chart (Whitburn 2010, 393). Two singles from that album, “Somebody To Love” and “White Rabbit,” enjoyed substantial radio success, reaching 5 and 8 on the Billboard 100 chart, respectively (Whitburn 2011, 452).

The band’s initial opinion of their first album appears to have been relatively positive, but the glow did not last. Between the recording of the album and its release, Garcia gave an interview in which he referred to the record as “honest. It sounds just like us. It even has mistakes on it. But it also has a certain amount of excitement on it. It sounds like we felt good when we were making it. It sounds like one of our good sets” (Groenke and Cramer 1985, 27). By April, he was far less enthusiastic. When Garcia and Lesh were interviewed on KMPX–FM in San Francisco by Tom Donahue, he asked if they wanted to play anything from their new album, and they both responded with a simultaneous “No.” Donahue persisted, asking, “How do you feel about the album yourselves, personally?” Garcia and Lesh were unequivocal:

Lesh: I feel like it’s a turd.

Donahue: Not where you want it to be.

Lesh: Well, no, it’s where we were at the time.

Garcia: Yeah, right, it’s something we did, it’s all over with, and it’s—

Lesh: The next one certainly won’t be anything like that one.

Garcia: No. Uh-uh.

Lesh: In any way. (Garcia and Lesh 1967)

They went on to have a substantive conversation with Donahue about the recording process, discussing their desire to move beyond trying to recreate their live sound in the studio, which was an approach they associated with their first album. Among other things, they expressed interest in the craft of studio production, which they would explore on their sophomore release, *Anthem of the Sun* (1968), and creating a professionally recorded live album, which they would achieve on *Live/Dead* (1969). The larger point is that by April 1967, roughly a month after the release of *The Grateful Dead*, both Garcia and Lesh were already dismissive of it—but they did not mention the tempi.

Four years later, Garcia participated in his famous interview with Charles Reich and Jann Wenner for *Rolling Stone*, published in the January 20 and February 3, 1972, issues and later expanded into book form (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner 1972). It is in this interview that the revisionist narrative involving tempi and diet pills emerges. When Reich asked, “How has your music changed from one record to another?” Garcia responded:

The first one was called *The Grateful Dead*. At that time we had no real record consciousness. We were just going to go down to L.A. and make a record. We were completely naïve about it ... so we went down there and, what was it we had? Dexamyl? Some sort of diet-watcher’s speed, and pot and stuff like that. So in three nights we played some hyperactive music. That’s what’s embarrassing about that record now: the tempo was way too fast. We were all so speedy at the time. It has its sort of crude energy, but obviously it’s difficult for me to listen to it; I can’t enjoy it really. I just plain cannot enjoy it just because even as soon as we’d finish it there were things that we could hear ...

To which Carolyn “MG” Garcia added, “Man, it’s so fast, it’s just blinding!” (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner 1972, 38).

The Tempi

Tempo is a specific musical term that refers to the speed of a piece of music. It does not refer to feel, groove, vibe, dynamics, or anything

else that might make a piece of music *seem* faster or slower. Tempo is measured in beats per minute (BPM), which can be determined by matching a metronome to the musical piece in question. It should be noted that the vast majority of live performances contain subtle variations in tempo throughout, but the variation is typically narrow enough that a particular BPM, or relatively narrow range of BPM, can be pinpointed as the actual tempo of the track. One notable way to avoid fluctuations in tempo is to use a “click track,” which is delivered to all of the musicians through headphones and helps to keep the performance at a perfectly steady tempo. The use of a click track is most common in studio recording, but it is also sometimes used in live performance. The Grateful Dead did not use a click track in live performance, though they did use something akin to a click track when recording their final studio album *Built to Last* (1989).

To determine if the recordings on *The Grateful Dead* are indeed faster than those performed at the time, the BPM of the album versions can be compared with representative live recordings of the same tunes during the same time period (1966–1967). Determining the BPM of songs on live recordings from this period can be tricky, as the tape speed is not always reliable, which can affect the perceived BPM. For this study, I chose only live versions that seemed to be sonically accurate recordings of the live performance, based on pitch, vocal timbre, and so forth. In order to make these comparisons, I selected four tunes that had at least three reliable live versions from this time period: “Viola Lee Blues,” “Cream Puff War,” “Good Morning Little School Girl,” and “Cold Rain and Snow.” As seen in table 1, when compared with representative live recordings from 1966 and 1967, the renditions on *The Grateful Dead* are, in fact, *not* substantially quicker in tempo than comparable performances.

“Viola Lee Blues” was one of the first Grateful Dead tunes to feature an extended open-improvised section. By far the longest track on *The Grateful Dead*, the song was the touchstone “big jam” in the band’s live sets at the time. It was originally a jug band tune, written by Noah Lewis and recorded by Cannon’s Jug Stompers on September 20, 1928. There are seven reliable live recordings of “Viola Lee Blues” during this period, the most of any of the tunes analyzed here, and likely reflective of its frequency of performance.³ The dates range from July 3, 1966, at the

Table 1. Tempi on *The Grateful Dead* vs. Live Performances

Date	BPM	Source/Location
"Viola Lee Blues"		
07/03/1966	122	San Francisco, CA
07/16/1966	110	San Francisco, CA
07/30/1966	105	Vancouver, BC
11/29/1966	113	San Francisco, CA
01/14/1967	109	San Francisco, CA
01/1967	103	<i>The Grateful Dead</i>
03/18/1967	114	San Francisco, CA
06/18/1967	107	Monterey, CA
Average	110.375	
"Cream Puff War"		
07/03/1966	162	San Francisco, CA
07/16/1966	159	San Francisco, CA
10/7/1966	157	San Francisco, CA
01/1967	163	<i>The Grateful Dead</i>
03/18/1967	163	San Francisco, CA
Average	160.8	
"Good Morning Little School Girl"		
07/16/1966	138	San Francisco, CA
07/29/1966	129	Vancouver, BC
11/29/1966	127	San Francisco, CA
01/1967	128	<i>The Grateful Dead</i>
11/10/1967	127	Los Angeles, CA
Average	129.8	
"Cold Rain and Snow"		
06/1966	169	Buena Vista Studios, San Francisco, CA
07/03/1966	166	San Francisco, CA
07/16/1966	175	San Francisco, CA
01/1967	168	<i>The Grateful Dead</i>
06/18/1967	164	San Francisco, CA
10/22/1967	172	San Francisco, CA
Average	169	

Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco to June 18, 1967, at the Monterey Pop Festival. The former has a BPM of 121; the latter, a BPM of 107. The album version, recorded in late January of 1967, has a BPM of 103—the slowest rendition at the time, as noted above. Compared to the average of 110.375 BPM, the album version is slower by a substantial 7.375 BPM—a distinct, audible difference.

It is important to note that, to maintain consistency of the measurements, I checked the tempo of each of the versions of the four tunes at the beginning of the first sung verse. This is particularly important when it comes to the band's version of "Viola Lee Blues," which featured an *intentional* change in tempo (speeding up, then slowing back down) later in the tune.

The next song in the study, "Cream Puff War," is significant in the band's early repertoire for a number of reasons. It is a useful and revealing example of the band's early compositional style; it was performed regularly in a live setting; it features one of their early attempts at embedding open-improvised sections within a composition; and the band considered it worthy of inclusion as one of the two original compositions on their debut album. Interestingly, it is the only composition in the Grateful Dead's oeuvre written entirely by Garcia, a mostly a straight-ahead rock and roll tune that nonetheless offers a glimpse of the band's ambition, its shifting grooves and time signatures providing an early indication of their signature rhythmic adventurousness.

In addition to the album version, four reliable examples of "Cream Puff War" are available. The earliest version, from July 3, 1966, at the Fillmore Auditorium, clocks in at 162 BPM; the last, performed March 18, 1967, at Winterland Ballroom in San Francisco, is 163 BPM. Interestingly, the album version is the same tempo as the March 18 version and thus can be said to reflect how the band was performing the tune in this era. Although the album version is slightly above the average tempo of the other versions here (160.8 BPM), the difference is relatively small (2.2 BPM), suggesting that "Cream Puff War" on *The Grateful Dead* was performed at a relatively normal tempo for the period.

"Cold Rain And Snow" is a traditional American folk song that the Dead arranged. It reflects the folk roots of several band members and their

penchant for interpreting folk and jug band repertoire with a rock and roll feel. Interestingly, it is one of the only tunes in the Grateful Dead's 1966 repertoire that remained in their song rotation, more or less, for the duration of their career. Performed a total of 216 times, the first documented performance of "Cold Rain and Snow" was at the Danish Center in Los Angeles on March 12, 1966, with the final one at Giants Stadium on June 19, 1995.⁴

The earliest version examined here was, interestingly, from a June 1966 studio session, recorded at a neighbor's home studio (Meriwether 1998, 111). Intended as a demo designed to attract major label interest, this version clocks in at 169 BPM. Though the circumstances of the recording likely make it a live-in-the-studio version—overdubs were unlikely—the earliest publicly performed version examined here comes from the Fillmore Auditorium performance on July 3, 1966, the same source of the earliest "Viola Lee Blues" and "Cream Puff War." It features a BPM of 165. The latest version, performed at Winterland on October 22, 1967, was the fastest, clocking in at 172 BPM. The average of these versions is 169 BPM, putting the album version at 168 BPM in the middle—once again, a relatively normal tempo for the period.

Like "Viola Lee Blues," "Good Morning Little School Girl" was a Grateful Dead concert staple during this period and featured extended improvisational sections. This tune, though, was led by McKernan, and shows why many fans viewed the early Grateful Dead as "Pigpen and the boys" (Gans 1991, 256). Although "Good Morning Little School Girl" was first recorded by Sonny Boy Williamson in 1937, Junior Wells' 1965 arrangement appears to have been more influential on the Grateful Dead (Kaler 2013, 3). In terms of the tempi, the first version examined here, from the Fillmore Auditorium on July 16, 1966, is the fastest, at 138 BPM. The other versions are all relatively consistent, hovering between 127 and 129 BPM, with the album version falling squarely in the middle at 128 BPM.

Overall, the tempi of these four frequently performed tunes on *The Grateful Dead* are relatively normal for this time period, based on the reliable recordings available today. The album versions of "Cold Rain and Snow" and "Good Morning Little School Girl" are very close to average

if not slightly below average. “Cream Puff War” is a bit above average but consistent with other versions from the period, while “Viola Lee Blues” is the slowest. It can thus be said that, at the studio sessions for *The Grateful Dead*, these four tunes were performed at relatively normal tempi for the period, and decidedly *not* substantially fast or rushed.

The Diet Pills

The relatively normal tempi of these four tunes on *The Grateful Dead* challenge the retrospective reflections from band members and other commentators alleging that the tempi are too fast, and due to the diet pills. As noted above, there were three noteworthy commentaries provided by band members during their career: the first positive take by Garcia in February–March 1967 (“It sounds like one of our good sets”), the first evidence of negativity from Garcia and Lesh in April 1967 (“I feel like it’s a turd”), and then a more fully fleshed out negative assessment from Garcia in 1971 that included the burgeoning narrative involving tempi and diet pills. Most of the other commentary regarding *The Grateful Dead* appears in memoirs written decades after the original events. Interestingly, *all* of those accounts reflect Garcia’s sentiments from his 1971 interview involving tempi, diet pills, or both.

In his memoir *Searching for the Sound* (2005), Lesh opined that the sound of the resulting album was a function of the recording process. Interestingly, he does not mention the diet pills, but does call the speed of the performances problematic: “None of us had any experience with performing for recording, so we tended to accept the judgment of the production team, although the whole process felt a bit rushed. In fact, the resultant album sounds rushed, even hyper: sound and fury buried in a cavern” (Lesh 2005, 99). In his memoir, *Deal: My Three Decades of Drumming, Dreams, and Drugs with the Grateful Dead* (2015), Kreutzmann remembered:

Playing music on speed sounds like you’re playing music on speed. It was our first experience with recording for the big league, and we all wanted the album to be popular. We wanted it to work. We even had a big-shot producer—Dave Hassinger, who came to us straight from mixing the Rolling Stones.

Hassinger told us the record was great. It wasn't. (Kreutzmann and Eisen 2015, 69)

Rosie McGee, who was an important part of the Grateful Dead organization during this period and was present for these sessions, corroborated the circumstances in her memoir:

The album was recorded at breakneck speed in four days, largely because we were all taking Ritalin, a drug that later gained notoriety when given to hyperactive children to calm them down. It apparently has the opposite effect on adults, and when combined with the hash we were smoking at the time, had us bouncing off the walls of the studio for ten hours at a time. (McGee 2013, 92)

Although there seems to be a discrepancy over precisely which speed-like drug was being taken at the time, the participants universally agree that it caused the band to perform in an uncharacteristically hyperactive manner, producing performances that were excessively speedy and unrepresentative. The sole exception is biographer Dennis McNally, who notes that their use of diet pills could produce both “speeded-up—and sometimes slowed-down—versions of their material” (McNally 2002, 181). But first-hand accounts are all consistent, claiming the results were only speeded up, and those have shaped how the album has been discussed in almost all histories and biographies of the band. While there are variations in the telling, every first-person account except for Lesh's attributes the tempo to diet pills. Not surprisingly, critical commentary echoes the band's dismissal, finding the speed of the renditions on the album “fast” (Jackson 2000, 122; cf. McNally 2002, 181). Nicholas Meriwether notes the very brief time for recording and mixing and concurs with Lesh's opinion that the album “sounded rushed” (2015, 22).

Later Tempi, Later Opinions

One possible explanation for this discrepancy is that most of the critical commentary related to *The Grateful Dead* comes later in the band's career (or after), which may have led to retroactive evaluations of *The Grateful Dead* relative to tempi that the band utilized on representative tunes. In this sense, the recordings could indeed be heard as “too fast” compared to later versions, but not in relation to how they were performed

at the time. Over the course of their thirty-year career, the Dead performed many tunes that they deliberately played at different tempi in different eras. In general, the tempo at which a tune was performed can be an indication of the interpretive mode the band intended, and this deserves further study. In the case of *The Grateful Dead*, the album is relatively evenly split between tunes that were performed over multiple eras and those that were dropped quickly after the album was released. Interestingly, the two original compositions, “The Golden Road (To Unlimited Devotion)” and “Cream Puff War” vanished from the band’s repertoire almost immediately after the album’s release.

Four of the cover tunes—“Beat It On Down the Line” (326 performances), “Cold Rain and Snow” (216 performances), “Morning Dew” (260 performances), and “New, New Minglewood Blues” (434 performances)—were performed over the course of the band’s career and can provide useful insights into tempo trends over time. “Cold Rain and Snow” is a good example, as it had a performance history before *The Grateful Dead*, appeared on the album, and was performed somewhat steadily (with a few breaks) until the end of their career.

As table 2 shows, an obvious “slowing down” of the tune is evident in the tempo measurements up through the end of the 1970s. This table, which shows one version per year from 1967 through 1979 (there were no performances in 1968 or 1975), demonstrates the quick early tempi (168 BPM on *The Grateful Dead*, 174 BPM on May 31, 1969), followed by a deliberate and substantial slowing later in 1969 (132 BPM on October 26, 1969) and then continued performances at even *slower* tempi up through the end of the 1970s. This trend of slowing down the tunes that appeared on *The Grateful Dead* is consistent in versions of the other cover tunes on this album as well over this same span of time.⁵ Given this apparent preference for slower versions of these tunes over time, it is not surprising that band members would consider the versions on *The Grateful Dead* to be “too fast,” even if they were relatively normal for 1966–1967.

Regardless of tempi, the band members clearly did not like the album in hindsight. With the exception of Garcia’s 1967 interview (“it sounds like one of our good sets”), all of the commentary is disparaging. Aside from tempi, there are several reasons that could explain that dis-

Table 2. Representative Tempi of “Cold Rain and Snow,” 1967–1979

Date	BPM	Source/Location
01/1967	168	<i>The Grateful Dead</i>
05/31/1969	174	Eugene, OR
10/26/1969	132	San Francisco, CA
04/15/1970	116	San Francisco, CA
02/21/1971	115	Port Chester, NY
04/17/1972	119	Copenhagen, Denmark
02/12/1973	110	Boston, MA
10/20/1974	124	San Francisco, CA
09/28/1976	128	Syracuse, NY
12/27/1977	128	San Francisco, CA
07/07/1978	125	Morrison, CO
12/26/1979	123	Oakland, CA

like. Over the course of their career, the Grateful Dead became known for the quality of their original compositions, and *all* of their subsequent studio releases featured a majority of original material. That *The Grateful Dead* only contained two original tunes, both of which were quickly retired, may have played a role in their later dismissal of the album. On the production side, *The Grateful Dead* was recorded almost entirely in a four-day marathon in Los Angeles, and they felt that they bowed to pressure from Hassinger and Warner Bros. to sound a certain way, as Lesh and Kreutzmann noted in their memoirs. As a group, the Grateful Dead did not like to be “handled,” and the notion that they succumbed to the influence of a producer goes decidedly against the band’s avowed anti-authoritarianism.

Their second album, *Anthem of the Sun* (1968) also plays a role in the narrative that has been constructed to explain their early history. That album consists of all original material and is a fiercely experimental sonic collage featuring a combination of studio and live recordings. Lesh is a particular fan of this album, noting that “I’ve always felt that as an artistic statement *Anthem of the Sun* was our most innovative and far-reaching achievement on record: as a metaphor for the manifestations in our live

performances, as a temporal collage, as a summation of our musical direction to date” (Lesh 2005, 130). These positive opinions about *Anthem* reflect the importance of experimentalism as one of the primary commitments of the early Grateful Dead. The relatively non-experimental early dance band sound on *The Grateful Dead* is quickly dismissed so that the narrative can move on to the experimental early Grateful Dead featured on *Anthem*. This is why Lesh spends only a page discussing *The Grateful Dead* but devotes nearly six full pages to *Anthem of the Sun* (Lesh 2005, 98–99; 125–130).

(Mis)Memory and the Social Contagion Effect

The band’s experience of *The Grateful Dead* was spread over several events spanning years, making the process of memory related to that album even more complex. First, the members of the Grateful Dead had the experience of performing these songs, which they had been playing frequently, in RCA studio A in early 1967. As such, they may have memories based on what it *felt* like in the recording studio. After the recording, they all would have listened to the recording, perhaps repeatedly. As such, they may have certain memories associated with listening to the playback. After the album’s release, they likely listened to the album again, played it for friends, or heard it on the radio. As such, they may have certain memories associated with hearing the record again. Later on, they began to reflect on the album, documenting some of those impressions in interviews. They likely read or revisited those interviews later, compounding or perhaps qualifying those impressions. And they may have certain memories associated with their reflections, or other members’ reflections. This all forms a complex web of events associated with remembering *The Grateful Dead* and provides an important possible explanation for the tempo and diet pills story.

Particularly relevant here is the nature of memory transmission in small groups, most notably the social contagion effect. Memory is understood as “a process of reconstruction rather than verbatim recollection,” which is why “individuals routinely exhibit forgetting and distortions” (Maswood and Rajaram 2019, 688). And, although there are several possible contributing factors to memory distortion, one possibility

is the “social transmission of information.” The social contagion effect describes a chain of events where “false information introduced later can make a memory erroneous” particularly as related to a group of individuals (Maswood and Rajaram 2019, 688; 690). Of particular relevance to the chain of events surrounding *The Grateful Dead* is that “social and interpersonal factors do influence social contagion,” and that “source credibility plays a role” (Maswood and Rajaram 2019, 692). Furthermore, people tend to rely on information from “partners with whom they have a prior relationship” and that “individuals are more likely to incorporate information received from those perceived to have more power in certain relationship dynamics ... those who speak first, and those asserting more confidence” (Maswood and Rajaram 2019, 692).

Although most conversations between band members regarding *The Grateful Dead* were not documented, we do have evidence of the sequence of remembering (or memory construction) through interviews and memoirs. The first negative comment on record about *The Grateful Dead* was Lesh’s dismissive remark in the KMPX interview. At his side was Garcia, agreeing. At that point in their career, and perhaps throughout, Garcia and Lesh were regarded as the dominant musical voices within the Grateful Dead dynamic. Considering the social contagion effect, it is *not* surprising that other band members (and commentators) adopted their critique. This initial negative interview about the album reflects the three aspects of the social contagion effect discussed here: individuals are more likely to incorporate information from those with more perceived “power” in the relationship dynamic, those who speak first, and those who “assert more confidence.” These factors are also relevant to Garcia’s 1971 interview, which was the first time on record that the tempi, diet pills, and *The Grateful Dead* were connected. Although Garcia eschewed the title, he was the band’s de facto leader, and his commentary carried particular weight. When considering the social contagion effect, it is not surprising that Garcia’s 1971 account, combined with Lesh’s initial outright dismissal of the album, became the generally accepted memory involving the tempi on *The Grateful Dead*.

Oral historians have noted this “tendency toward conformity with acceptable norms” in interviews among a particular social group, and

that the stories can “assume the character of old myths” (Hoffman and Hoffman 2006, 293). In this case, the socially constructed myth involving tempo and diet pills has allowed the band, over time, to dismiss *The Grateful Dead* as not important (or “too fast”), in order to move on to other, preferred topics, such as their subsequent album, *Anthem of the Sun*, or live performances.

Conclusion

What the record shows unequivocally is that in hindsight, the band was unhappy with *The Grateful Dead*. In addition to the reasons band members have given, we can speculate that negative opinions relate to the fact that only two out of nine tracks are original compositions, it does not represent the experimentalism that they prized, and it was the original, single-drummer configuration that they rapidly outgrew. And, as their own critiques made plain, the tempi are indeed faster than later renditions of the same tunes. Most of all, they progressed and matured rapidly as a band, and *The Grateful Dead* may have been a reminder of what they felt was juvenilia. But the critical commonplace used to justify that dismissal—that performance tempi on the album were too fast because they were taking speed-like diet pills during the sessions—is not borne out by the facts. Based on the four tunes examined here, the actual tempi on *The Grateful Dead* are not faster than those on representative recordings from the same era.

The diet pills story is derived from publicly mediated discourse that accumulated over time. It became part of band mythology because it was a rhetorically productive narrative that efficiently shifted aesthetic focus away from early work that quickly fell out of favor. However accurate—they were taking speed; the songs may sound fast to certain ears—this reductive distillation oversimplifies and distorts the achievement of *The Grateful Dead* and the Grateful Dead’s studio albums in general. More broadly, this story underscores the distorting process of public relations that the media force on popular musicians and bands—perhaps especially those with large followings.

What emerges in that complex process, and often passed off as historical truth, is rather an agreed-upon story about what happened that

may only have a loose connection to actual events. The Dead are not alone in this: as Paul McCartney explained, sometime in the 1960s the Beatles agreed on a “version of the facts” that would eventually become the official, authorized account of their band biography. That meant only “about 65 percent” of Hunter Davies’ official biography of the band, written in 1967, was accurate, in McCartney’s estimation. Yet by the early 2000s, Beatles biographer Bob Spitz notes, “all of it has been told and retold so many times that even McCartney is no longer certain where the truth begins and ends” (Spitz 2005, 861).

For the Grateful Dead, the diet pills critique marks the first instance in a lineage of intense public self-criticism, where the band tended to dismiss the value of their studio records, wholesale, out of preference and respect for the live performance experience. As Garcia commented in 1981:

When we went with Arista, we went with a spirit of cooperation, thinking, well, we’ve tried things our way; we’ve had our own record company, we’ve produced ourselves—we’ve done it a lot, in fact—and it’d be interesting to try somebody else’s approach totally, and see where it takes us, because of the fact that our records—as records—have always been neither here nor there. They haven’t been relevant. (Gans 2002, 44)

For scholars, this dismissal of their entire studio output to that point is critically problematic, as it suggests that students of the Grateful Dead’s music should not pay close attention to the band’s albums. Furthermore, it calls into the question the potentially misleading nature of musicians’ opinions of their own work. Musicians have the right to self-criticism, but scholars have the obligation to form their own critical estimations. And historians need to parse an artist’s opinions carefully, and not dismiss a particular song, album, or performance simply because of disparaging comments by the artist.

For scholars, the Grateful Dead’s recorded studio output is central to any understanding of the band: their albums are valuable historical documents that reflect the musical decisions made by the band at the time. That is true more generally as well: as Theodore Gracyk (1996) has argued, the actual recorded sounds on rock albums have an ontological

thickness that is not present in other genres. As he observes, the album is *the* object of import in rock music. The Dead complicate that claim: in considering their canon, the vast trove of live recordings is undeniably the primary document of their work, and carries more weight, both critically and historically.

However, as Gracyk makes clear, it is of critical importance to consider studio recordings as central, vital works when dealing with rock music. And regardless of band member opinions, *The Grateful Dead* is especially important as their first album, and it is, in fact, sonically representative of their performance practice during 1966–1967. When we strip away the layers of mismemory and dismissal, we are reminded that *The Grateful Dead* was an important, powerful marker for the band: as a professionally distributed record on a major label, it helped to establish the Grateful Dead's reputation, especially as they sought to expand their audience and forge an identity as a professional, viable, working band.

NOTES

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1. Scholars have recognized the centrality of the role of media in the history of the Dead; see, for example, Meriwether (2012).
2. The authorship of “Sittin’ on Top of the World” is a point of contention. Vinson and Chatmon of the Mississippi Sheiks are sometimes credited as Walter Jacobs and Lonnie Carter. Other scholars credit Tampa Red as the composer of the melody (cf. Ginell 1994, 294; Komara 2006, 470).
3. Set lists from this period are not always reliable and frequently nonexistent (Scott, Nixon, and Dolgushkin 1999, xiii), so researchers need to rely on the surviving recordings (and corresponding set lists) to draw conclusions regarding song rotation, frequency of performance, and other details.
4. The only other tune in the Grateful Dead's repertoire to have a similar length of performance history is “I Know You Rider,” with 550 documented performances

from March 12, 1966, through July 8, 1995 (Scott, Nixon, and Dolgushkin 1999, 127).

5. Not all tunes slowed down towards the end of the 1970s. In fact, concert recordings reveal that some were sped up, but this study is limited to the tunes on *The Grateful Dead*.

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