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St. Louis '71 '72 '73

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Grateful Dead. *Listen to the River: St. Louis '71 '72 '73*. Rhino R2 645687, 2021. 20 CD box set with 84-page liner note booklet and memorabilia. \$174.98.

JASON ROBERT GALLAGHER

Late 1971 was a turning point in the Grateful Dead's career, marking the beginning of a micro-era that ran for about nine months. With the addition of Keith Godchaux in mid-October and the return of Ron "Pigpen" McKernan at the beginning of December 1971, the band appeared to be entering into a new phase, bolstered by the success of their two 1970 albums, *Workingman's Dead* and *American Beauty*. Starting with the Boston Music Hall concert on December 1, the six-man Dead, now with two keyboardists, began to prepare for their upcoming European tour, scheduled to start in April. Conventional wisdom is that this period features some of the Dead's best music, prompted in part by the release of Bob Weir's *Ace* and Jerry Garcia's *Garcia*, with songs from these projects comprising the bulk of the band's concert repertoire.

Listen to the River: St. Louis '71 '72 '73 confirms that wisdom with an interesting and revealing box set that adds to our knowledge of that late 1971 period and the next two years, all drawn from shows in St. Louis. The release continues the recent trend of location-based archival releases, beginning with the 2018 box set *Pacific Northwest '73-'74: The Complete Recordings*, and *Giants Stadium 1987, 1989, 1991*, released in 2019. Earlier box sets focused on seminal tours such as Spring 1990, Europe '72, and May 1977, but focusing on a single location offers a different way of looking at how the Dead's music changed to fit the environment.

The music in this release spans three different formats. The first was *Light into Ashes: Fox Theatre, St. Louis, Missouri 10-18-72*. A vinyl-only release, it includes the first half of the second set of the show, consisting of "Playing in the Band" > "Drums" > "Dark Star" > "Morning Dew" > "Playing in the Band." (The complete concert is included in the box

set.) Released at the same time as the box set was a vinyl release of the December 10, 1971, concert at the Fox Theatre, which is the only content from the release currently available via streaming services. The box set features seven complete concerts: December 9 and 10, 1971; October 17, 18, and 19, 1972; and October 29 and 30, 1973. The set includes an eighty-four page hardbound booklet, with essays by Sam Cutler, the Dead's tour manager at the time, and historian Nicholas G. Meriwether. Two keepsakes complete the package: a patch with a version of the St. Louis flag that replaces its traditional *fleur-de-lis* with the Dead's lightning bolt insignia and a brown bandana, the same color of the "Big River" itself, with a rose and skeleton pattern. The bandana makes a nice nod to the context: this is the period when the band was most likely to perform "Me and Bobby McGee"—made famous by their good friend, Janis Joplin—in which the narrator describes pulling out a harmonica and a "dirty, red bandana." The bandana also references the hitchhiking story in the St. Louis-centric "Black-Throated Wind," since hitchhiking traditionally includes bindles and bandanas.

The design of the box cleverly alludes to a number of other songs played during this period, such as cowboy skeletons, likely representing Weir's cowboy songs, "Me and My Uncle," "El Paso," etc. The Fox Theatre also plays an important part in design of the box, with its famed "Hindoo [*sic*] Mosque" aesthetic by architect C. Howard Crane and interior designer Eve Leo Fox providing elements and motifs such as elephants and antelope in a mandala-like pattern. Those also figure prominently in the design of the breakout LP from the set. And there is a bumper sticker telling tailgaters that "[You] Listened to the River," after hearing the December 10 concert on St. Louis station KADI.

While there are several extraordinary aspects of the box, the recording from December 9 begins with one of the more noteworthy. The Grateful Dead were never known for their stage banter, and over time, they became less and less likely to engage with the audience. The exception to that trend occurred between the first two runs in this release, during the spring 1972 tour of Europe. All the "greatest hits" of Dead stage banter can be found there: "step back," Weir and Lesh asking each other if the audience thinks that their voices are husky, and, of course,

the notorious “Yellow Dog Tale.” It should come as no surprise that the band is also rehearsing their stage banter during the run-up of shows that preceded that tour.

That explains the revealing banter at the beginning of the December 9, 1971, show, which provides something of a thesis statement for the box by explaining the “special relationship” that the Dead had with the Gateway City. After a crew member asks Keith Godchaux to check his pick-up, Weir welcomes the audience to St. Louis. After some badinage, Lesh tells the audience to be respectful to the Fox, since it’s the only venue that the band likes in St. Louis. “If we can’t come back to this theater,” Lesh admonishes, “we can’t come back to this town, which means you’ll have to go to Kiel Auditorium and listen to Grand Funk Railroad,” prompting laughter and applause. Ironically, after the release of *Wake of the Flood* just two years later, the Dead’s burgeoning popularity forced them out of the more intimate Fox and into the 9,300-seat Kiel Auditorium.

Musically, the box adds to our understanding of the Dead’s history in several ways. The December 9, 1971, show lacks the power of the previous show at Madison Square Garden’s Felt Forum but it does have some high points. The two-keyboard sound of this era is always intriguing, and Garcia does interesting things out of the gate on “Truckin’,” although that does not rise to the level of his performance at the Felt Forum. Lesh is the star of this “Brown-Eyed Women,” though the mix also lets us finally hear McKernan on a song that most extant recordings do not.

December 10 is probably the most famous show from this run. To St. Louis fans, the concert holds particular appeal in part for McKernan’s version of Chuck Berry’s Christmas classic, “Run, Rudolph, Run,” which the Dead played throughout the month to celebrate the holidays. A favorite of generations of St. Louis Deadheads, the show was recreated in its entirety by St. Louis area Grateful Dead cover band Alligator Wine to celebrate the return of live music in May 2021, even before the announcement of this release.

The set takes its name from a line in “Brokedown Palace.” Though not explicitly about St. Louis, the song discusses the return of a prodigal son to a river city where he can find the rest denied him in the wider

world. The lyrics evoke a fitting tribute to a city that had a lasting impact on the band—indeed, the Dead’s music could be described as the answer to the question, “what if Chuck Berry and Miles Davis decided to have a rock and roll band that was equal parts both?” Both of these St. Louis artists had a tremendous influence on the band. In fact, a song either covered by Berry or written by him was included on the set list of every concert on the set. And the addition of Godchaux’s jazz-influenced piano gave the band a more Davis-like sensibility by the time they played the Halloween run in 1973.

One of the strengths of the release is the way it reveals the crucible formed by these two styles of playing, which would take final form in the beloved spring 1977 period. While the two concerts with McKernan show a hint of his magnetic showmanship, the concert that really stands out is October 17, 1972, especially the extended section showcased on *Light into Ashes*. Without McKernan, Keith Godchaux is free to challenge the band in his own quiet way. The piano flourishes he provides during the transition between the first “Playing in the Band” and “Drums” are inverted and atonal but fit with the adventurous soundscapes the band would explore later during his tenure, especially in “Playing in the Band,” “Eyes of the World,” and “Slipknot!”> “Franklin’s Tower.”

Overall, the box is a testament to the credo that when the Dead were good, they were very good indeed. Unfortunately, the quality of the sound highlights the occasional technical defects of the sources. The “Black-Throated Wind” on October 19, 1972, for example, has significant hiss in the right channel and dropped vocals after a switch from the left channel to the right. Those deficiencies mar what would otherwise be a fine release. As the band’s Vault continues to disgorge treasures, that kind of variability is to be expected: fans have a slew of great releases from all three years represented in this release already, and many of those offer a better introduction to the Dead than *Listen to the River*. St. Louis fans will rejoice at this box and completists will be delighted, but the material released on vinyl represents the “gold” of these runs and are a good way to introduce non-Deadheads to the mastery the Dead could muster fifty years ago.

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