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REVIEWS

Brent Wood. *The Tragic Odes of Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead: Mystery Dances in the Magic Theater*. New York: Routledge, 2020. Paperback, xi + 226 pp. ISBN 9781032237367. \$47.00.

GRANVILLE GANTER

Brent Wood's *The Tragic Odes of Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead: Mystery Dances in the Magic Theater* is one of the richest studies of Grateful Dead music yet published. Wood, who has presented several portions of this project at the Grateful Dead area of the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association over several years, focuses on the importance of a specific genre of song lyrics to appreciate the larger significance of the music itself: tragic ballads and odes. His explications of the tragic elements of Garcia/Hunter collaborations and other ballads that Garcia made his own—from “Morning Dew” to “Days Between”—will become required reading for future generations of scholars and fans alike.

In song after song, Wood explores previously unexamined origins of Dead lyrics in American cultural history, English folk traditions, and classical myth. And, as importantly, the depth of these literary interpretations is enhanced by Wood's skills as a musician and he frequently combines his interpretation of the lyrics with musical history and guitar technique. He traces how songs in Dead catalog were rearranged over the years, and connects these changes to the transforming attitudes of Garcia and the band. As someone who thought I knew most of the important turning points in Dead musical history, I was consistently surprised and excited by Wood's claims, which have me hearing many Dead songs in completely new ways.

Beyond its nuanced and historical readings of song and music, the overarching framework of Wood's book is a scholarly engagement with Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*. Nietzsche argued that the best Greek tragedy emanated from a Sophoclean balance

of Dionysian ecstasy and human reason, a tension between Dionysian and Apollonian impulses, and Nietzsche believed that the modern face of this ancient art form was best expressed through music rather than theater. Applying this insight to the Grateful Dead, Wood shows that the Garcia/Hunter tragic ballads and odes derive their richness from a delicate balance of the Dionysian dance energy of the concerts coupled with an awareness of human frailty and limitation. Wood's text is framed by close readings of Garcia's childhood losses toward the beginning of his life (such as his father's drowning and his close friend Paul Speegle's death in a car crash), the untimely passing of Janis Joplin and Pigpen, and Garcia's addictions toward the end of his life. These tragic experiences often find expression *within* the transformative dance music for which Garcia and the band have been celebrated. As Wood acknowledges, discourse about the importance of collective Dionysian enthusiasm has become a significant keyword of research on the Dead, an insight made most famously by the comparative myth scholar, Joseph Campbell, at the 1986 conference he participated in with two members of the Dead, "From Ritual to Rapture: From Dionysus to the Grateful Dead." But Wood's unique contribution to our understanding of the importance of Dionysian experience in the Dead's project is to connect that experience always to a larger interaction with tragedy and inspiration. For Wood, the power of the Dead's music is its embrace of *both* of these poles of the human condition.

The second half of Wood's title, *Mystery Dances in the Magic Theater*, refers to The Magic Theater of psychic dissolution and reconstitution in Herman Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, a text written in 1927 but popular in the psychedelic generation of the 1960s. After attending the Magic Theater and a jazz saxophone performance, Hesse's alienated and hyper-intellectual narrator, Harry Haller, experiences a Dionysian "merging of the personality in the mass, the mystic union of joy" (16). Wood teases out the connections between Nietzsche's post-Romanticism and Hesse's novel, suggesting that the theatrical elements of Dead concerts return us to this transformative type of music where the ego dies and is reborn, a process which is both tragic and ecstatic.

The strong foundations of Wood's argument are evident in the first two body chapters of the book. His opening analysis discusses Garcia

playing “Morning Dew” at Berkeley’s outdoor Greek Theatre in June of 1985. Wood gives a fascinating historical background of the Theatre, which was built with great fanfare in the early 1900s. Modeled on the dramatic amphitheater of Epidaurus on the Peloponnesus, the Theatre’s sponsors sought to establish a cultural venue that would bring classical Greece to Berkeley. Having fallen into disuse by the 1950s and ’60s, the venue was revived by the Dead throughout the 1980s as one of its signature West Coast locales (despite how chilly it could get at night as the fog rolled in!). Wood’s interpretation of the Cold War apocalypticism of Bonnie Dobson’s song “Morning Dew,” and the Dead’s unique appropriation of it in the context of their twentieth anniversary revels, is a thoroughly unique and dynamic interpretation that speaks to the way the song changed over the years.

Similarly, in the next chapter, which studies “Death Don’t Have No Mercy,” “He Was a Friend of Mine,” “Birdsong,” “Brokedown Palace,” and “He’s Gone,” Wood discusses how each of these songs changed meaning for the band over the years. One of the great strengths of this book is Wood’s attention to historical context—such as how “Birdsong” evolved over time, both in its arrangement and its meaning, finally coming to refer to Garcia at the Fare Thee Well shows of 2015.

Some of the most informative and enjoyable portions of the book are in the next two chapters: chapter three, on “Dark Star” and Dionysus, and chapter four, which situates the Dead’s appropriation of tragic folk tales in the context of the eclecticism of New Orleans jazz. Both chapters emphasize the importance of movement for talking about Grateful Dead music. Wood argues that “‘Dark Star’ exemplifies the ritual dissolution and re-emergence characteristic of Grateful Dead concert experiences” (71), drawing on Graeme Boone’s examinations of ambiguity and mandala in the song. In the next chapter, Wood reads Garcia/Hunter collaborations on tragic ballads such as “Fennario” (“Peggy-O,”) “Dire Wolf,” “Stagger Lee” and “Casey Jones” for both their literary sources and as well as their development in the band’s sense of itself. Wood convincingly puts the Dead’s selective appropriation of this tragic ballad tradition in the context of their homage to a syncretic and danceable New Orleans sound—once again, Dionysus and death. His multileveled analysis of the

carnival parade in “Reuben and Cherise,” a song played only four times by the Dead but a standard of Garcia’s solo repertoire, is a brilliant illustration of the way the song successfully fuses many mythic, celebratory, and tragic elements. I’ve always liked “Reuben and Cherise” as a love song, but Wood’s interpretation has me hearing motifs of death and rebirth that I had never noticed. Both the “Dark Star” and New Orleans chapters vividly illustrate Wood’s argument that part of the Dead’s unique musical sensibility comes from the tension between joy and loss.

More central chapters of the book discuss songs such as “Uncle John’s Band,” “Black Peter,” “Fire on the Mountain,” “Comes a Time,” “Black Muddy River,” and “Standing on the Moon.” Wood really shines on the development of these songs in the late 1970s and 1980s, a period of relative scholarly neglect. For many, the worst periods of Garcia’s heroin and cocaine use (from say, 1978 through 1985, and after 1993), have colored the years with such a negative cast that it is sometimes difficult to talk about how good the band was, notwithstanding. Wood shows how many of these tragic songs seemed to have experienced an attitude change—fans began to think about Garcia as Black Peter, and Wood persuasively argues that Garcia himself identified with many of the down-and-out characters he formerly sang about as a troubadour.

Another important contribution of Wood’s book is his chapter on the relationship of Bob Dylan to Garcia. Wood shows that Garcia’s relationship to Dylan’s music began early with “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue” and continued through the end of the 1995 tour, such as his heartfelt renditions of “Visions of Johanna.” The band helped get Dylan out of a funk in the mid ’80s, supporting him with patience and generosity; it seemed that Garcia also found catharsis and refuge in Dylan’s lyrics toward the end of his own life. Although most fans probably recall Bob Weir’s flashy vocals during “Desolation Row,” “Queen Jane,” “Memphis Blues,” and “When I Paint my Masterpiece” as the most notable illustrations of the Dead/Dylan collaboration of the later ’80s, Wood shows how Garcia adopted tunes like “She Belongs to Me” and “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door” with exceptional power and gravitas, allowing himself to process his own struggles through Dylan’s songs.

The penultimate chapter discusses the end-of-career songs “So Many Roads” and “Days Between” in the context of “Mason’s Children.” It is Wood’s clever epitaph to Garcia’s legacy among Deadheads, as a leader gone but whose spirit still thrives. As he does throughout the book, Wood examines numerous intertextual resonances of “So Many Roads” with American musical history in an extended close reading of the song, paying attention to its musical composition as well as its significance for the band’s story. He also explicates the haunting significance of “Days Between,” a song with retrospective significance for Hunter, Garcia, and the entire Grateful Dead project.

In his final chapter of his astonishingly rewarding book, Wood returns to Nietzsche and the classical *sublime* of the eighteenth century. As Romantics understood it, the sublime is an experience of nature’s awesome power coupled with an acknowledgement of humankind’s insignificance. Like looking at the daunting expanse of a starry night, the threatening pinnacle of Mont Blanc, or the mind-bending windup of a good “Viola Lee Blues,” the sublime is fundamentally an experience of humility where the ego is destroyed and reconstituted. Wood appropriately coins the term the “psychedelic sublime” to talk about the achievement of Grateful Dead music, an invocation that Wood intends to convey fear, mortality, and bliss all at the same time.

In the larger context of Dead studies, Wood’s book unapologetically focuses on the lyrics and songs that have deeply shaped the Dead’s identity. In some ways, this conceptual approach is a contrast to studies like David Malvinni’s *Grateful Dead and the Art of Rock Improvisation* (2013) or Ulf Olsson’s *Listening for the Secret: The Grateful Dead and the Politics of Improvisation* (2017), both of which focus on the processes of jamming and improvisation rather than the lyrics. It is also quite different from a growing wealth of auto/biographies and books that recall living with the Dead or life on tour.¹ Another significant contrast is the centrality of the classical idea of the tragic in Wood’s book. For example, Sean Zwagerman recently argued that a sense of comedy needs to be better acknowledged in Dead studies, and he specifically indicts both Blair Jackson and Wood for an overly pious approach to the blunders and mistakes that characterized much Grateful Dead history, including Garcia’s

occasional comments about just living for fun and getting high.² But this criticism of Wood seems particularly uncharitable, because Wood's approach clearly embraces the unkempt craziness of Dionysian celebration as well—in fact, comic stories about Dead excess and disaster are the norm. Far from being sanctimonious, Wood has developed a rich and unique interpretation of incorporating the role of the tragic in *interplay* with the weird and goofy aspects of the music, and that is a very sophisticated approach indeed.

NOTES

1. In addition to bandmember autobiographies and biographies about Garcia, such first-person accounts and memoirs of Dead culture include Linda Kelly, *Deadheads: Stories from Fellow Artists, Friends, and Followers of the Grateful Dead* (1995, 2015); Carol Brightman, *Sweet Chaos: The Grateful Dead's American Adventure* (1998); Rock Scully, *Living with the Dead: Twenty Years on the Bus with Garcia and the Grateful Dead* (1996); Steve Parish, *Home Before Daylight: My Life on the Road with the Grateful Dead* (2003); Peter Conners, *Growing Up Dead: The Hallucinated Confessions of a Teenage Deadhead* (2009); Rhoney Gissen Stanley, *Owsley and Me: My LSD Family* (2012); Rosie McGee, *Dancing with the Dead: A Photographic Memoir* (2013); Jim Daley, *Deadheads Remember Englishtown '77: The Largest Gathering in New Jersey History* (2020).

2. Zwagerman, Sean. 2020. "Comedy Is What We're Really About: The Grateful Dead in a Comic Frame," *Americana* 19 (2). https://www.american-popularculture.com/journal/articles/fall_2020/zwagerman.htm. One could fault Zwagerman for mistaking the difference between a piteous lament for blighted potential and classical tragedy, the latter of which is Wood's context. Garcia's anti-establishment comments in 1972 about the importance of "getting high" can be found in his interview with Charles Reich and Jann Wenner in *Garcia: A Signpost to a New Space* (reprint, Cambridge, MA: Da Capo/Perseus, 1972), 100. On fun, see Blair Jackson, *Garcia: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 72; 123.

GRANVILLE GANTER is Associate Professor of English at St. John's University in Queens, NY. He presented a paper at the first Grateful Dead Scholars Caucus in 1999, published as "Tuning In Together: Daniel Webster, Alfred Schutz, and the Grateful Dead," and he is President-Elect of the Grateful Dead Studies Association. He otherwise writes on the oratory of under-represented speakers in early nineteenth-century America.