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Jerry Garcia Band. *Garcia Live volume 16: Madison Square Garden, November 15th, 1991*. Round Records JGFRR1037, 2021. 3 CD set with 8-page booklet. \$21.99.

JOSEPH JUPILLE

Volume 16 of the *GarciaLive* series, the visually appealing packaging tells us, “presents the world’s most recorded musician in the world’s most famous arena.” The performance by the Jerry Garcia Band, commonly called the JGB, at Madison Square Garden on November 15, 1991, represents the acme of Garcia’s solo career, the culmination of a nearly quarter-century name-claiming journey by which he established his identity as an individual American musician, Jerry-Garcia-full-stop, beyond and distinct from his wider fame as Jerry-Garcia-of-the-Grateful-Dead. Those expecting the Dead’s jammy alchemizing of independent voices may be disappointed, but those who know to expect focused support for Garcia’s jukebox favorites will appreciate this installment of the *GarciaLive* series as a historically important, well-recorded collection of great tunes, well played.

Jerry Garcia never planned a solo career; it just sort of happened as he sought more and different avenues for expression than the Dead allowed. Inchoate jams at the Carousel Ballroom became *tempo études* (“Mickey and the Hartbeats”) at the Matrix, which became regular but musically formless Monday night jams with Howard Wales, which morphed into ongoing and more musically grounded gigs with Merl Saunders. Even after four years, the amorphous aggregation resisted naming itself, going by “The Group” in the Bay Area, or just listing members’ names, before coalescing into “Legion of Mary” for its last eight months. The meantime saw numerous aggregations under other (and others’) names, playing diverse musics, cutting some records, running some drive-by tours, and banking an increasingly sizeable pile of accomplishments, including the country New Riders of the Purple Sage, the space-jazz *Hooteroll?* project with Wales, and the incandescent bluegrass all-stars Old and In The

Way. Otherwise off-nights found Garcia making a singular solo record, engaging protean Dawg Music (David Grisman's Great American Music/ String Band), renewing bluegrass ties with the Good Old Boys, vibrating electrons with Ned Lagin, and making time for a vast array of sessions, sit-ins, dalliances, and one- and few-offs.

But the Jerry Garcia Band (1975–1995) bore his name, and it played the music its eponym liked, the way he wanted to play it. Over the years the JGB, always featuring Garcia's friend bassist John Kahn but with an evolving array of other musicians, grooved to soul, R&B, Motown, contemporary gospel, reggae, and other Black idioms that fit the band's changing personnel, especially after the arrival of church organist Melvin Seals in 1981 and his handpicked backing vocalists starting the next year. A second tranche of cover tunes drew from the contemporary White Anglosphere, both the British Isles and North American settler colonies, heavy on the Americana. Garcia-Hunter originals, some shared with the Dead and others exclusive to the JGB, rounded out the repertoire.

The six players integrate seamlessly. This is *the* canonical Jerry Garcia Band, a lineup that lasted 1984–1993, the core three plus steady David Kemper on drums and harmony vocals by Jackie LaBranch and Gloria Jones, Oakland church singers with day jobs who took to calling themselves the Jerryettes. *GarciaLive* 16 captures the band making pure JGB musical magic, at once vibing and unhurried, comfortable as the band's beds at the St. Moritz, yet with a clean snap and sizzle—after all, everyone is there to support and complement the main attraction. Garcia said consistently over the years that his solo band was designed for consonance, as distinct from the Dead's dissonant *gestalt* (e.g., Weitzman 1976); listeners should correspondingly judge JGB music less for the complex layering of voices and more for the groove. By that standard, this is a classic JGB show that would provide any neophyte with a solid introduction to what this side of Garcia was all about.

It's no surprise to hear "How Sweet It Is (To Be Loved By You)" kick things off. First done by Marvin Gaye for Tamla in 1964, Garcia sang it as a serenade to the faithful. Seals misses his first cue, and the leader supports him until he gleefully fills the hall with that swirly B-3 sound. Jimmy Cliff's "Struggling Man" takes the second spot, showcasing

Garcia's commitment to the individual note, each with its own personality and spirit, set off against the island beat. Van Morrison's "He Ain't Give You None" lets Kahn dig deep before turning it over to Garcia, who takes his only real chance of the night to belt some blues. The Jerrypes shine on these last two numbers, from the oblique key of the reggae to the straighter blues harmonies here. The only Dylan of the night, "Simple Twist of Fate," mourns more quietly, with the line "the waterfront docks where the sailors all come in" speaking to the pain and loss of Garcia's childhood, evoking his family history, when his mom took over the family maritime bar after his father drowned.

"Lay Down Sally" entered the repertoire in late 1990, as Garcia seemed to find more emotional energy for the JGB than for the Dead following Brent Mydland's death. But there is nothing mournful about this number. Garcia takes advantage of the band's groove to put together some highly original note combinations and offers some of the pitch-bending that he developed as he lost his younger gunslinger's picking power. Always a fan of great songwriting, Garcia had been doing The Band's "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down" for over twenty years, and tonight he brought out all of narrator Virgil Cane's wizened perspective. Moving from Lost Cause myth to eternal salvation, the Sensational Nightingales' "My Sisters and Brothers" exemplifies the JGB's churchy spirit. It might have been a Friday night in New York City, but for four-and-change minutes Garcia and his band take the assembled on a lovely Sunday stroll to a more venerable garden. Garcia's pastoral wisdom works well here, as does his banjoistic picking, but the rest of the choir really stands in the light, Seals' celestial organ wrapping around the ladies' earthier tones. As it often did, "Sisters and Brothers" drops naturally into the set-closer, turning the clock back to a sinful Saturday's "Deal," neither the spare shuffle of its birth nor the grungy metallic fire-breather of Garcia's down-and-dirty period, but the crystal-loud anthem of a grown man halfway through perhaps the biggest gig of his solo career. Kemper, especially, shines in relentlessly driving the band into a well-earned break.

The second set is even stronger, clocking in at eighty minutes (encore included) of eclectic covers, deftly mixing tempos, idioms and emotional colorings into classic JGB. Smokey Robinson's "The Way

You Do the Things You Do,” a nice little paean to a lover, had grooved well almost since the start of the JGB. But it found new life and took on new depth after the second half of 1990. Here, after synthesizing some bells, Seals takes it minor, Garcia joins him, and we spend a surprising few minutes in a Motor City Mars Explorer before reentering the groove. Canadian Bruce Cockburn’s aspirational “Waiting For A Miracle,” which Gloria Jones had heard on the radio and brought to the band in 1988, follows. This version feels fresh as the day it was born, reminding us all to “stand up tall / pretend you’re strong / in the hope that you can be.” The geographically-appropriate “Shining Star” (originally done by the Manhattans) inspires with a smile, deftly exploiting the range between softer verse to more punctuated, assertive chorus. Garcia makes plucky use of the room’s reverb to forge an ongoing exchange between band and crowd; check out the impossibly high glassine notes at the seven-minute mark coming back to the band in spades. As they let the vocals echo out, Jones hoots appreciatively.

Norton Buffalo’s “Ain’t No Bread In the Breadbox” made its JGB debut during this \$3.9 million-grossing fall tour, so “we ain’t got no dough” was never less true for the JGB. But the meaning is in the feeling, and this tune was the most joyful late-era addition to the band’s repertoire, upbeat, insouciant, full of spirit and infectiously danceable. We hear the band’s deft sync late, as Kemper falls out for a beat but catches up, only for Garcia to throw him a curve by singing the refrain again—which the drummer adjusts to, perfectly, on the fly. It is a classic JGB moment: a few lyrical wobbles and a lovely recovery, almost winking to the audience, “Now, that was fun!”

The classic JGB’s only big jam vehicle, “Don’t Let Go,” reverses “Breadbox’s” priorities, seeking out the loose and dark. This version is superb, its strong head giving way to a hot modal burn which enters a deep, vaguely scary, soft and slow exploratory space until about nine minutes in. When it returned from a hiatus in early 1988, the jamming ended here. Almost four years later it stretches further, driving through some fast-splashy Kemper-driven runs, making room for Kahn to rumble, and staying out for five more minutes before the Bo Diddley-ish beat signals

the return. This is a Goldilocks version: not too long, not too short, good and weird.

It's worth reflecting on how "Breadbox" pairs with the set-closer, "Bright Side of the Road." Like "Breadbox," this Van Morrison tune is peppy and upbeat; also like "Breadbox," it had debuted in fall 1991. But unlike "Breadbox," it would leave the repertoire after this tour. One of the things that made "Bright Side" sound so fresh—vocals very high in Garcia's singing register—might also have made it unsustainable. It also tilled some of the same emotional terrain as "Breadbox," so to have both on any given night may have felt redundant. Yet it also may have felt uncomfortably autobiographical, as if the song spoke too directly to the growing wedge between how Garcia avowedly felt about his two main bands in this period: one, the "dark end of the street," and the other, the "bright side of the road" (Morse 1991). Whatever the case, like Robbie Robertson's devastating "Twilight" and a few other late-era JGB break-outs, it was great while it lasted. Three of the five live versions have been officially released, and all are worth hearing.

Slowing things way down, "That Lucky Old Sun" took Garcia to Tin Pan Alley, the beating heart of America's pre-World War II twentieth-century popular music business, located just half a mile from the Garden. A hit for Frankie Lane in 1949, Garcia adapted it from Ray Charles's arrangement and made it a second set ballad after recovering from his 1986 coma. So it has *that* resonance, which only resonated more the older Jerry got. This night in New York he crafted it masterfully, letting it breathe, tipping a million notes not to play, voicing it all with weary authenticity.

The night's encore, "What A Wonderful World," of newer vintage as an original (written in 1967) and in the JGB (only played this tour), lands with grace. Now considered a standard based on Louis Armstrong's classic rendering, it joins "Lucky Old Sun" in finding an older Garcia lovingly and tenderly honoring his patrimony. Fittingly, this is also the night that Garcia had a backstage visit with roadie Steve Parish's great-uncle Mitchell Parish, legendary songwriter of "Stardust" and countless other American popular songs. "He and Jerry started raving about the old

songs,” band publicist and biographer Dennis McNally remembered, “and Jerry matched him tune for tune ... The room was so packed that the Vice President of Arista, in a \$2,000 suit, was sitting on the floor, but it was quiet, and everybody just listened to this amazing conversation” (McNally 2005, 102). That same feeling of deep knowledge, respect, even reverence permeates these last two slow tunes on this recording.

Madison Square Garden stands as the centroid of the polygon formed by the Academy of Music/Palladium and The Bottom Line in Greenwich Village, the Beacon Theatre on Broadway, the Roseland Dance Palace on West 52nd, Avery Fisher Hall at the Lincoln Center, the Ritz on Central Park South, and the Lunt-Fontanne in the theater district, all places Garcia had played before hitting the Garden proper (not in its Felt Forum configuration) here on November 15, 1991. A lot of American music, in its intersectional glories especially of race and class, was born and has lived in that space, and every immigrant jazz player (such as Garcia’s father) and natural-born citizen to ever pick up an instrument probably dreamed of playing it. So, yes, “Jerry Garcia” on the Garden marquee represents something of a *ne plus ultra*, an achievement of status akin to the West African Mandeau concept of *tògòtigi*, the musician’s proprietorship of an established name within the broader tradition (Skinner 2004, 157).

Dean Budnick’s smart and well-written liner notes tee up many of the themes raised here—the glitzy big-time of the Garden and New York City, the band’s wide-ranging repertoire, the visit with Mitchell Parish and what it symbolizes in terms of Garcia’s connection to the American musical firmament. Besides offering great music, then, the whole *GarciaLive* 16 package succeeds in pulling back the curtain on a larger understanding of Jerry Garcia as a solo artist, framing him as a musician of intelligence, depth, and range. Everyone involved in this success should be commended. For those who haven’t kept up with the *GarciaLive* series, or who have dismissed the JGB as a mere side trip, this release offers compelling proof of why Garcia’s non-Dead work, even or perhaps especially here, late in his career, commands serious interest from listeners and scholars alike.

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