

Pinti, Daniel

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Chris Miskiewicz and Noah Van Sciver. *Grateful Dead Origins*. New York, NY: Z2 Comics, 2020. Softcover, 152pp. ISBN 9781940878300. \$19.99.

DANIEL PINTI

The historiography of the Grateful Dead has taken many forms, including Dennis McNally's classic, chronological *A Long Strange Trip: The Inside History of the Grateful Dead*, Peter Richardson's thematically-organized *No Simple Highway: A Cultural History of the Grateful Dead*, and Blair Jackson and David Gans' polyvocal *This Is All A Dream We Dreamed: An Oral History of the Grateful Dead*. Uniquely to this point, *Grateful Dead Origins* casts the history of the band in the form of comics. In doing so, the book merits both attention and appreciation, even as it stands as something of a missed opportunity.

Writer Chris Miskiewicz and artist Noah Van Sciver (along with colorist Aladdin Collar and the editorial assistance of David Lemieux, who contributes an enthusiastic foreword to the book) limit their account to the Dead's formation and early years. The book begins with Phil Lesh first seeing the Warlocks at Magoo's Pizza Parlor on May 27, 1965, and concludes with the Dead's performance at Woodstock. Earlier moments, such as Bob Weir and Jerry Garcia meeting at Dana Morgan's Music Shop, are incorporated through occasional flashbacks. We read many of the pivotal events of that formative time, such as the chance discovery of what would be the band's name in a Funk and Wagnalls dictionary, the Trips Festival, the visit to the Watts Towers, and the first meeting of Bill Kreutzmann and Mickey Hart, all in an episodic narrative that rather resembles the discrete but still connected individual panels that convey the story itself. In all of this, the creators offer a version of the band's beginnings that covers ground familiar to Dead scholars and fans, and, in terms of narrative details, does so accurately.

That said, the narrative, however accurate, is sometimes clumsy as comics. Most noticeably, there's the simple fact that the drawings do not really resemble the band members. They are consistently drawn and clearly

differentiated—Jerry Garcia has black hair, Pigpen has a moustache—but outside the context of the narrative none would be recognizable. Nothing close to photographic realism is required for good comics, of course, but for documentary comics of this sort, a lack of verisimilitude is rarely a strength. Comics inherently advertise their own artificiality, but the book fails to turn that necessity into a virtue in the way outstanding nonfiction comics do.

If pictorial images largely disappoint in *Grateful Dead Origins*, verbal text often does as well. For instance, the flashbacks mentioned above often begin as dialogue between characters in the narrative present that modulates to visual depictions of previous events with a character providing a kind of “voiceover”; this functions in the way that comics scholar Thierry Groensteen refers to as a *recitant*, working in tandem with a *monstrator*, the textual function “showing” the story. This narration sometimes reads not as natural conversation, but either as first-person narrative recounted at a much later date to someone all-but-unfamiliar with the band (as one might read in an interview), or, worse, as third-person narration about the band (as in conventional history writing) recast in the first-person and put into the mouth of a Grateful Dead bandmember. So, when Jerry Garcia is depicted as telling Phil Lesh that Bob Weir was “a total loner, bored with school, who began to immerse himself in music as a kind of coping mechanism,” or Bob Weir is told later that, “As you know, Neal [Cassady] connected with Jack Kerouac and ended up becoming the inspiration for his character ‘Dean Moriarty’ in the generation-defining book *On the Road*,” the reader encounters what feels like accurate enough exposition but not dramatically true dialogue.

As for the book’s production values, publisher Z2 Comics has produced a respectable edition. Colors are vibrant—a matter of real importance for a story about psychedelic experiences and a band notable for its own vivid iconography—and Van Sciver’s lines are always clear. The paper stock is fairly heavy, and this reviewer’s softcover copy has held up well through multiple readings. It is worth noting that the book includes a UPC symbol that, when scanned, allows one to download thirteen tracks of music curated by David Lemieux, including early studio demos and several live performances. Shortly following this

edition's publication, a "Deluxe" limited edition appeared, totaling 6,800 hardcover copies which included a vinyl LP with tracks from the Dead's performance at the Fillmore West on August 21, 1968.

*Grateful Dead Origins* does have its high points when the comics medium is used to fuller and more compelling effect. The drawn reproduction of well-known filmic documents, such as the 1967 CBS news documentary "The Hippie Temptation," wherein Garcia discusses the band's outlook on life ("What we're thinking about is a peaceful planet," etc.), becomes almost a metacommentary on the comparatively cartoony nature of the straight world's representation of the counterculture. Van Sciver employs creative page layouts to good effect in scenes portraying musical performance or audience reactions. And the capability of comics to depict multiple spatial or temporal moments simultaneously on one page can be powerful, as when we read Weir composing the second verse of "The Other One" on an acoustic guitar on a page that includes panels showing Weir's handwritten lyrics, a wind blowing out a candle in his room, and Cassady lying dead next to Mexican train tracks as the "cowboy Neal at the wheel" line is being sung above him.

The frustration is that such high points are too few and too conventional given the level of creativity and daring found in the work of other nonfiction comics artists. It is no fairer to criticize a comics creator for not being a Joe Sacco or Alison Bechdel than it is to criticize a guitar player for not being Jerry Garcia, but *Grateful Dead Origins* necessarily evokes deeper comparisons with its topic, and by that measure, it reads as rather too safe for its subject matter. Miskiewicz and Van Sciver do offer a new reading of the Grateful Dead's early years, not by revealing previously unknown details but by narrating them in a form that is the antithesis of the kind of visual art epitomized by the Watts Towers and famously rejected by Jerry Garcia: not static but dynamic, not solitary but collaborative, not monumental but fun. Comics, as David Lemieux rightly puts it in his introduction to the book, can be "every bit as vibrant and alive as a concert video or live concert CD." For those unfamiliar with the oft-told tale of the band's formative years, this book may serve as a novel introduction, but more experienced and thoughtful readers of both the band's history and comics as an art form will wish *Grateful Dead Origins*

served as a more accomplished, or at least a more audacious, example of what comics can offer this seminal American story.

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DANIEL PINTI is Professor of English at Niagara University, where he teaches courses in Comics Studies, Literature of the American West, Literature and Film, and the Bible and Literature. He has published on a range of topics, from medieval mystics to contemporary superhero comics, and he is working on a study of Robert Hunter's lyrics in the context of Western American literature.