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## Review: Grateful Dead, *The Story of the Grateful Dead*

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Grateful Dead. *The Story of the Grateful Dead*. Warner Records R1 631404 /Vinyl Me Please VMP A 006, 2020. 14 LP box set with 29-page liner note booklet. \$449.

JOSEPH A. SALEM JR.

The resurgence of vinyl record sales has sparked a demand for supplemental experiences and enhanced services as well. One of those services is the “record club” approach to building a collection, a revival of the buying club model that for decades provided discounted access to popular music on vinyl and later compact disc. The new incarnation of the record club offers the opportunity for music collectors to build a collection, but the emphasis is less on discounts and more on curated content and exclusivity.

*Vinyl Me Please* is a good example of this modern model, offering carefully selected releases of vinyl records each month to subscribers and exclusive pressings of additional titles. Those exclusive pressings range from titles that are only available through *Vinyl Me Please* to unusual colored pressings of titles available elsewhere. Both their service and experience model appeal to the completist collector who wishes to acquire every variant of an artist or title as well as to listeners who simply wish to take advantage of the curatorial work the service provides.

In addition to the monthly offerings, *Vinyl Me Please* has started an occasional series of anthologies. Their 2020 release, *The Story of the Grateful Dead*, should appeal to both the uninitiated record collector who wishes to get a good introduction to the Grateful Dead and to Deadheads who collect or wish to listen to the band on vinyl. As the sixth in the series, the *Story of the Grateful Dead* is notable as the first to focus on one artist. The first five anthologies in this series highlighted the output of specific record labels or subgenres of specific eras of music. Giving Grateful Dead music the same treatment is not surprising given the vast expanse of the songbook and the impact of the band on several genres. This anthology treatment in some ways anticipated the two-part explora-

tion of the Grateful Dead as a genre, dubbed “Playing Dead” in the band’s official podcast *Good Ol’ Grateful Deadcast*.

*The Story of the Grateful Dead*, like other *Vinyl Me Please* anthologies, attempts to meet the dual audience of general record collectors and committed fans of the music by creating an experience that complements the music. In addition to good pressings of eight representative records (four live and four studio), buyers receive access to a podcast series that divides the set into four episodes, covering two records in each. By their own admission, hosts Amileah Sutliff and Andrew Winistorfer, the editorial assistant and senior editor of *Vinyl Me Please*, respectively, were not very familiar with the Grateful Dead going into the experience, but that vantage offers the same growth opportunity to similarly positioned new listeners. The set also includes a glossy, twenty-nine-page book with liner note essays for each record in the set along with a live session associated with each episode.

The core of the set is the eight albums, fourteen LPs intended to represent the career of the Grateful Dead, alternating between studio and live releases. Episode one presents *Workingman’s Dead* and *American Beauty*; Episode two, *Live/Dead* and *Skull and Roses*; Episode three, *Wake of the Flood* and *Terrapin Station*; Episode four, *Reckoning* and *Without a Net*. Each album is pressed on colored vinyl and offers superb sound quality, especially when compared with earlier pressings and even audiophile rereleases; the choice of colored vinyl is more cosmetic, but likely will appeal to the completist and to those who appreciate the novelty of the format. Audiophiles looking to complete their collections by purchasing this set may have preferred black vinyl pressings, but they will appreciate the fidelity of the pressings. Each album that was originally mastered on analog tapes was remastered and pressed through a completely analog process. The only exception is *Without a Net*, which was originally mastered digitally.

The records offer very good reproductions of the original artwork. There are some noticeable differences, evident in the finish and colors though less in the actual art. For example, each of these jackets and covers has the same semi-matte finish. This presents well as a set, but differs from the originals, which varied in their texture and finish.

The albums in the set are thoughtfully chosen. One could quibble over the inclusion of one release over another; however, each is put into its context nicely by the podcast and booklet, especially the essays that are provided. For the avid collector, the inclusion of a fine pressing of *Without a Net* is the standout. The sound of this is comparable to the original 1990 pressing and the artwork is nicely recreated. This title in particular is difficult to find on vinyl as it did not receive wide distribution in that format; indeed, for over twenty years it had the distinction of being the last live album to be released simultaneously on vinyl and digital format. It does raise the question of, why bother with vinyl for a release that was mastered digitally. The sequencing makes that clear: “Bird Song” was moved to the last side to meet the limits that vinyl imposes. As a result, the album does not flow as well as the digital version, which better represented the set lists of the 1989/1990 tours. Without the benefits of a fully analog process, the rationale for a vinyl version in this case has more to do with the aesthetics of the format and less to do with the sound.

Both the podcasts and book enhance the listening experience of the set. Although the hosts approach the project as novices, they demonstrate a deep interest in learning throughout the podcasts. Their questions reflect their lack of experience, but the fact that they are less on the inside of the conversation on the Grateful Dead, their music, and their culture does not hurt their work as hosts. The star here is David Lemieux, Grateful Dead Archivist and Legacy Manager, who appears in each episode. His expertise and easy conversational style is welcome, though less self-consciousness and more focus on the music and the guests would have served the hosts well. In addition to good episodes on the albums in the set, bonus episodes are offered on topics including the noteworthy nugs. net platform and the art of tie-dying, ancillary at best and trafficking in a Dead cliché at worst.

The booklet, however, suffers from no such deficiencies. The contemporary artists who penned liner note essays range from MC Taylor of Hiss Golden Messenger to Hunter Brown of STS9. Of particular note is Margo Price’s essay on *Wake of the Flood*, a moving tribute that makes clear her love for this music. Good photos and artwork complement the

essays, and while not especially unique or remarkable, all are presented well.

In the episode one podcast, the hosts ask Buzz Poole, author of the Bloomsbury Academic book on *Workingman's Dead* (2016), why he chose that album and not another—the implied comparison being *American Beauty*, the second album in the episode. Poole comments that *Workingman's* tells a story, whereas *American Beauty* is a collection of songs. Scholars and critics may disagree, but Poole's argument does get at the heart of this set. The question for this set, and the experience it provides, is whether it tells a story or is simply a collection of records. On their own and without context, the albums in this set do tell a story, but one that requires real expertise and substantial effort to discern. With the context provided in the podcasts, liner notes, and the live sessions, that story comes into focus. This set represents that story well and faithfully, offering a useful and noteworthy contribution to the ongoing project of the discography of the Grateful Dead.

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