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An Interview with Tom Constanten

Davis Schneiderman and
Richard Pettengill

In the spring semester of 2017, we co-taught a new course in the Lake Forest College American Studies program, "The Grateful Dead and American Culture." The course description concluded with the question, "Why do the Dead survive?" We had a strong response, with students whose interest in the band ranged from confirmed Dead fans, those with a casual interest, and those who were newcomers. In addition to our reading, we brought in local bands to campus to play free concerts, and our culminating event was an appearance by Tom "TC" Constanten, who played keyboards with the Dead from 1968–1970. He visited class to answer questions and then played with Chicago band Terrapin Flyer that evening.

This transcript is an edited account of that wide-ranging conversation. Our students provided many of the questions through a shared brainstorming session, and they are represented by name in the interview. References to Constanten's memoir, *Between Rock and Hard Places* (1992) have been added to facilitate further reading.

Early Musical Development

Pettengill: Could you think back to some of your earliest memories of music as a child? The things that you heard, things that resonated for you, that are lasting memories that led to you becoming excited about and interested in pursuing music? (Constanten 1992, 19–22, 28; all further references are by page number in brackets in the text.)

TC: Well, actually, if you really went back to the 1940s, we used to listen to the Metropolitan Opera broadcast. Of course, this was 65 years ago, and a totally different range of stars and performers. Arturo Toscanini was the conductor of the New York Philharmonic. Their level of achievement was so lofty and so high, both of those. I didn't know any better; I just felt like "I'd like to do that, too." If I'd had any idea as to how much work was involved, it would have scared me away. But I didn't, so I was like the bumblebee that doesn't have enough wing span to be able to fly and went and did it anyway.

Christian Koules: What got you interested in music? At an early age, what was your first interaction?

TC: I was already deep in the deep end of the pool. I was born in the New York City area. When I was 10, we moved to Las Vegas; that's where I got this accent … There were a lot of European trained musicians; many of them were from Europe. They had performed with major symphony orchestras there. I made my debut playing a piece for piano in an orchestra with the Las Vegas Pops orchestra in 1961, conducted by Antonio Morelli (20–23), who was the guy who conducted the showroom at the Sands Hotel. When Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin came to town, he was the bandleader.

In the 1950s and '60s, Vegas was a lot more of a small town. Everybody knew everybody else. I knew a lot of musicians back then. I mainly hung out with musicians, and, I suppose, dealers, especially 21 craps dealers. I had this statistical probability theory view of the world as a result. It also immunized me to gambling. I figured that the good folks who come and put their money on those green felt tables were putting food on my table, and I wanted to stay on the right side of that. I do not disapprove of it; in fact, I know how most of the games work, and I know

how to hack a couple of them. [But] I don't do that. I channel those efforts into tweaking the musical beats and I was just surrounded by music and musicians from a very young age. It's not anything that I thought I would gravitate toward.

Actually, I went to the University of California at Berkeley (23, 37) as a science major. You might remember (that's a joke) 1957, when Sputnik went up. The nation got into this science craze and all us kids were supposed to go to school and learn science and compete with those Soviets. I lasted a semester. I met Phil Lesh (25, 53) and Jerry Garcia (71) when they were rather young also. Phil was 21, Jerry was 19, and I was 17. And, as we like to say in other contexts, one thing led to another. And there I jolly well was, as Lord Buckley put it.

Clayton Dreier: You talked about the scene in Las Vegas in terms of music. How would you compare that scene to how things are nowadays? Would you say it has grown, deteriorated, or just changed in general, in terms of the community of musicians in Las Vegas? (7,14)

TC: Everything is in such a wild state of flux. We hear occasionally that "history repeats itself." I am not so sure about that. Things come up in new and wildly different contexts. Things now are so incredibly different. We didn't have the internet back then. It's amazing that we were able to research and find out as many things as we did … I was very lucky in that I could go to the source: I could talk to someone who performed music in Europe, or at the Sands Hotel, [with] someone who performed with Charlie Parker, or any number of jazz musicians (26–27).

Rock and roll (70) was only starting to come up, I would say, around '53 or '54, which is when it started to emerge as its own phenomenon. Of course, speaking of a phenomenon, Elvis Presley hit the scene in 1956. Most of all, I remember how my teachers all *hated* him. You have to remember, this was music that was disapproved of by our elders, as was the music we were doing in the later 1960s with the rock and roll scene in San Francisco and also, to a degree, the avant-garde music—Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez, John Cage, (24, 64, 97–98) Olivier Messiaen (pardon my French); it was really thinking outside of the box before anyone called it that, so that was the nature of my attraction to that. Luciano Berio (25–26, 40–52) came to Mills College in 1962 and taught a course,

and Phil and I signed up for it. I showed him some of my work and he was impressed enough to arrange for scholarships for me to study with him in Europe, which I went and did. Two years in Darmstadt with Stockhausen, Boulez, and Henri Pousseur, a few months in Brussels with electronic (100,101) music, and almost a year in Italy, which was definitely an education in itself. It made me very picky about pizza.

Schneiderman: Go back a little bit more. What was your family life like growing up? Were your parents interested in interesting types of music? What music came in at a young age?

TC: This is very interesting. The family I was born into was an immigrant family from Norway. I lived with my mother and grandparents in New Jersey. This is going to start to get surreal; buckle your seat belts. I got quite used to that, I was very cozy with it. My mother was a violinist. These folks were naturally very old country. Then, something incredibly traumatic occurred. I thought it was really more than I could deal with, although in retrospect, it was one of the blessings of my life. That event was kindergarten. It necessitated my learning another language, namely English. That sort of twisted my mind. When you learn a second language at the age of five, you have this "Well, why not?" attitude. It doesn't seem like such an obstacle; you see people doing it, so you say "I will do that" [*speaks in Norwegian*].

So the attitude of going out and getting it, going to the source, going to the person who knows about it, was ingrained there from very early on in all kinds of applications, in music as well. There was an old violinist I knew in the area named Misha. He was about seventy years old in the 1940s and he had played in orchestras in Berlin conducted by Arthur Nikisch, who conducted Wagner premieres.

So it felt like I had a great and long view. Now we have the internet, which is a wonderfully marvelous thing to play with. Anything you think of, you can look it up right away. It's great for settling bar bets and things like that. But back then, we mainly had our initiative and libraries, and there were some amazing libraries available. I remember the library at the Juilliard School of Music. Anything I could think of in music, I found there. University of California at Berkeley, Morrison Hall, had a wonderful library as well. They had recordings and listening booths. You

could satisfy your curiosity by finding out what these things sounded like. Also, there were radio stations (117–118), KJazz, KSOL, KDIA, Lucky 13 in San Francisco playing R&B and jazz. Pigpen's father was a blues deejay who went by the name of Cool Breeze. His actual name was Phil McKernan; he had an encyclopedic knowledge. It was more organic, but it was the same process. You have the questions, you ask them, and you find them out, except at this time it was some Obi Wan Kenobi-with-a cello sort of event.

Alexandra Vela: What was the first tune or tunes that you learned to play? Were you influenced by any old recordings?

TC: Oh yes, and I still am. I started playing when I was around ten, but I didn't appear publicly until I was seventeen. Right away, I was getting into (which I thought was edgy at the time) sonatas by Mozart, Beethoven; I would venture as far as Brahms. I would consult every edition I could find of them. It's like when I studied languages, I didn't trust any of the books, so I consulted all of them. I have that attitude with news media nowadays: Is that story really true? What is that other source saying? A friend of mine listened to *War of the Worlds* in 1938 or '39, and this caused such a panic. People thought it was really happening. But my friend said, "If it's really happening, it will be on all the stations." He looked on the next station and it wasn't there, so he thought, "A-ha, this is just a show."

I was that way with music. I would listen to an Ignacy Jan Paderewski recording, or a Manuel Rosenthal, or a Vladimir de Pachmann to see what their take on it was. In those instances, you had to not only learn the written tradition, but you could talk to someone who knew the music of Brahms and also knew Brahms. His research answer wasn't because of a footnote of a volume he found in the Bodleian Library, it was because Brahms told him; that's how it was supposed to be.

And so there was a blending of the oral tradition with the tradition of recordings. Starting around 1890, we had recordings; in fact, there is a recording of Brahms playing. I was ravenously hungry to consult all of them. I wanted to put in as many pieces of the puzzles that I could find because that way you get a clearer picture. You can tell sometimes when someone only has one source or is getting their ideas from one area. My friends in the Netherlands say that they can tell, when the Americans

come over, what textbook they used to learn Dutch because there are certain tropisms or directions they go toward. Those tend to smooth out when you consult multiple sources. Did I evade your question sufficiently well?

On the Contemporary Avant-Garde

Paul Dunham: Going back to Berkeley, I understand you were rooming with Phil Lesh. What was it like having Phil Lesh as a roommate?

TC: In some ways we are very much alike and in some ways we are very different. Our birthdays are four days apart. Age-wise, we are four years apart, but our tastes in music are very similar. Have you ever met someone who turns you on to all kinds of music? Well, this was not Phil. We already knew the kinds; we already liked them. There might have been a couple things around the edges. At the time, Phil was a volunteer at KPFA, the radio station, and from them he got a lot of interesting tapes from festivals in Europe. Not only musical tapes, but in 1961 and '62, which is when we were there, Timothy Leary was giving lectures at KPFA, before *Time* magazine discovered him.

There were a lot of interesting, very edgy things going on and we were both into them. Anything new and exciting that would come up, we would go to the other one right away and say, "Here it is." There are certain personality differences, but we all have personality differences. I have always gotten along with Phil quite well. Occasionally, he would do something to tick me off, but I was never able to stay mad at him for very long.

Pettengill: Did you already know the music of Berio when you heard he was teaching a course at Mills College, and you guys decided "let's do that?"

TC: Before that, there were articles in art magazines in the 1950s and they had some musical examples. I said, "This looks interesting." I tried it out at the piano and it was these crystalline, fascinating, jagged sounds on the other side of dissonance, and my immediate response was "That's for me." A lot of people have the response of, "Get me out of here! This isn't music at all." I have been used to hearing that for quite a while. The kinds of music I do that get that response vary, but the response is the same.

I had heard of that in the 1950s. Columbia was putting out some avant-garde recordings, like Robert Craft doing the complete Anton Webern. There was an amazing recording with Stockhausen and Boulez on the flip side—records used to have two sides. It was eminently fascinating. I read an interview with Igor Stravinsky and he was talking about how he was so fascinated with the newer kinds of music as well. Here was a guy who was already in his seventies by then, who had studied composition with Rimsky-Korsakov, who was definitely on the other side already.

Nathali Ibarra: I had a question from the beginning of our conversation. We were talking about how Sputnik prompted this whole push for science education. We talked in class about how you'd studied astronomy (11–14, 33). Did that in any way affect the way you saw music? Did it inspire anything new?

TC: It's all pieces of the puzzle. In the late 1960s, in the San Francisco scene, the Haight-Ashbury, we knew that these were the good old days. This wild and crazy cosmic door had opened and we had wandered in, or out; we couldn't even tell. Everything was so new. All the creative arts, the graphic arts, posters, the music, cuisine even—*nouvelle cuisine* was starting to move in. It was all so exciting, but nobody knew what they were doing. I say that with reverence and admiration because there was no precedent. There was no one who had done this before who could tell you how you do it. A lot of the protocols and methods that you see in stadium concerts now, they were put there as a result of the mistakes we made while learning how to do it.

That is true in how the music venues were organized; it's also true in how music is put together. The downside of that is that there are a lot of people who will tell you how to do it; there is a way to do it. That, if anything, was a tyranny we rebelled against. The record company would tell us, "We want a three-minute hit single." And we would tell them, "Oh yeah? Forget that!" We used a different word starting with F. Now we are getting to the next level of stratification. I am looking forward to some of you who will come up with rebellious ways to break that mold. I am waiting with a smile.

Pettengill: I am curious to know about that period of your life after you had met Phil and you had done that course at Mills College. At a certain

point, you decided to enlist in the Air Force (57–60, 67–68) and then you did long-distance musical communication with some musicians recording in LA.

TC: I went to LA to record with them. The long distance was the drive from Las Vegas, which was where I was stationed. You could say I decided to enlist; I had received a draft notice. It was a "Notice to Report for Induction into the Army." I have since heard a recording C-SPAN played of the conversations of President Johnson with Robert McNamara, his Secretary of Defense. There's a January 1965 recording of LBJ saying that he didn't think the Vietnam War could be won. He and McNamara were hashing that out and I took that quite personally because in March 1965, sixty days later, I got a draft notice. It's like saying, "Son, here's a job that I don't think can be done; you might get killed, but I want you to go do it." So I figured I would rather program a computer for the Air Force, which is what I did, than potentially malfunctioning an M16 for the army in Southeast Asia. I spent my entire hitch stateside at Nellis Air Force Base, which is right outside Las Vegas, so I lived at home.

Surrealism is my life; it really was surreal. At the same time, I was going to San Francisco and LA to go record with the Grateful Dead. (60) There were no legal problems with this prior to 1967, but as of 1965—maybe someone can disprove this; I know there are some people who will disapprove of this—to my knowledge, I was the first one to import LSD to Las Vegas. The Halloween party at the Sahara Hotel was never the same. Of course, the musicians along the strip, especially the jazz and rock musicians were already on the hip side of the street, and things got very interesting.

Pettengill: What I meant by long-distance musical communication is that while you were out in Vegas, there was some kind of communication happening between you and the band as to what you would be recording, and sharing ideas about it.

TC: Oh yes, they sent me tapes to listen to of their rushes, from the tracks they'd already put down. They would be quite specific and explicit as to what they wanted to be added where, sometimes very detailed in ways that would not be later. Later, when touring with the band, (73) it was more, "Hey, go for it and do what you want to do." Whereas before, Phil

was something of a control freak. It was more of a "You do this now" sort of an organization. Of course, he and I have changed a bit since then.

On Popular Culture

Charles Koules: You mentioned Elvis Presley. Do you remember "The Day the Music Died"? [February 3, 1959, when Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and J. P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson died in a plane crash.]

TC: I remember Elvis's appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. He seemed like this country kid who was overwhelmed by the attention he was getting. After he sang, he was looking out at the audience and he was covering his eyes because of the bright lights. He could not believe the phenomenon he'd unleashed. He was definitely the right person at the right time to bring that particular message. He solidified and galvanized the rock and roll medium and gave it a "knight in shining silver lamé armor" to carry the message. What other performer has inspired so many imitators? There are people who make a living imitating Elvis Presley.

This is quite an amazing thing. You can probably think of other examples, like tribute bands nowadays also. There are preachers who pretend they are Martin Luther King Jr. Elvis was quite the music phenomenon. But you asked about "The Day the Music Died"—Buddy Holly, The Big Bopper, Richie Valens, Mr. Valenzuela, who changed his name; he was a kid from LA. It was definitely an enormous loss, but the rock scene was in its early stages of gathering momentum and if anything, it gave something to keep on fighting for. It was a loss; inspiring is not the word, but it motivated people to pick up the flag and carry on.

Charlotte Eaton: You touched on Elvis Presley and how when you saw him, he looked like he didn't how to handle fame. We read a lot about the '95 tour of the Grateful Dead and Jerry Garcia's death. I think you can draw some parallels between Garcia's death and Presley's death. I wanted to know if you could talk on your own experiences of being in part of a band that is so well known, as well as the experiences of those you saw around you.

TC: Well, the first thing I would say is that nobody understands fame. Least of all those who seem to have it. It can be very fleeting and in Jerry's case, it was a burden. He was too famous for his own good. He

couldn't go out in public; he would be hiding backstage in his dressing room because people would be hanging on his every word. It could be a casual question or thought that he'd have and people would take it very seriously. It became a very great burden for him. There are occasional funny stories about how one day he was out riding his motorcycle and how he was riding next to a school bus. The kids in the school bus would point and laugh, saying, "Look at the old guy on the motorcycle." Little did they know who it was.

My friend Peter Coyote, who taught me something about name dropping, said that he has a comfortable level of fame. Too much can be a nuisance or a burden even. Myself, I get spotted in public about once, on average, every week in a half. I don't have a problem with that. It's comfortable. Sure, there are worse things to be famous for: [*imitating*] "Here's the guy that embezzled …" Sure, there is a comfortable level of fame that way. It is an ill-understood phantasm. It fascinates all of us; it is incredibly fascinating.

There is a tip-of-the-iceberg phenomenon where you see someone on stage and everyone wants to be that person. Everyone says, "Wow, aren't they having a great and wonderful time?" A lot of times, you don't know what they had to do to get there. This is true for performance artists, professional athletes; any baseball player out in the field has played hundreds of games in the minor leagues to be there at all. Sometimes you will see something in a TV variety show about a person who has worked their entire life for about 2.5 minutes of performance, and they get judged for that. It's fair and it isn't. I think in the best of times, with our wholehearted good intentions, we can see but the tiniest slivers of each other's lives. Now here I am, spending an hour with you. How many hours are there in your whole life? This is an infinitesimal little sliver. It keeps me from being very judgmental because whenever I was, I was usually wrong. It keeps me from taking other people's being judgmental with a grain of salt because I know that subject changes also.

On Music Technology and the Military

Schneiderman: You not only programmed computers, but you made music with a military computer or machine. I wonder if you could talk a

little more about that. I picture you cooking up all of these kinds of kooky electronic sounds that later find their way onto Grateful Dead records.

TC: It was actually a compositional algorithm. I worked with Lejaren Hiller, who was at the time the foremost expert on computer-assisted composition. I also toured Bell Laboratories, where they were working on computer sound synthesis and generation, with Hal Alles; they were inventing devices and machines that would ultimately become the Yamaha DX7, the current crop of digital synthesizers that we now have. They were solving those problems. That was also another exciting realm to go into.

I worked with Dr. Hiller and some of his later more advanced computer compositions. Once we worked with a thing called a vocoder. Let me explain what this is. This one had a rack of twenty-one bandpass filters, a third of an octave—I don't want to get too technical too fast—and another rack, twenty-one voltage control amplifiers. To put it simply, it would take one sound and only have the amplitude of it. Instead of hearing my voice come through, you would just hear [*mumbling noises*] and then that could be superimposed on another sound. We had one example where we had a Renaissance choral piece and we superimposed Bob Dylan's "John Wesley Harding" onto it. You could hear his words plain as day, except the chords underneath were [Giovanni Pierluigi da] Palestrina. You can take any two musical ideas, meld them, put them together.

There were other ways: using white noise as a statistical source to cross-fade two different sounds. There was a sound called the Risset tone, also the Shepherd's tone; we called it the Risset tone after Jean Claude Risset. It is a sound that moves up an octave to become exactly the same sound. When you play it on for a while, it's a *glissando* going up and up, and never stops going up. The way this is achieved is as if you had imagined the band of frequency, low to high; you would have an amplitude control.

So a sound would come in silence, get louder and louder, midrange, and get softer and softer. Underneath that, we would feed octaves to come through. In effect, later you would have the same sound again. It's just like a motorcycle, it just won't quit. And there were all these intersections of mathematics and music that Johann Bernoulli brought in. Again, another fascinating jungle to explore.

Nicholas Podesta: I have a question related to the military. What did you learn about yourself from going to the military and then going to tour with the band? How did that affect you?

TC: Culture shock is my life. The main thing I learned about the military was that I was glad to be out. I was honorably discharged as a Sergeant. Of course, an experience like that cleans out your attic to a great degree. I am glad for that. There wasn't much I could apply, especially in the rock and roll universe. It was a very different thing. In fact, in the rock and roll universe, there are a lot of other business principles in my work and in other lines of work, but they won't work with music. It's a very different ball game, which makes me stand more in admiration with those who are doing well because they are not applying the same rules as a Horatio Alger or a motivational speaker. In fact, a lot of them are doing things they would exactly say are considered wrong.

On the Music Business

Schneiderman: Tom, we just read Barry Barnes' *Everything I Learned About Business I Learned From the Grateful Dead*. It was counterintuitive business lessons. The band stumbled upon a kind of gift economy of giving away content, they in-sourced instead of out-sourced, they tried to rebel against traditional record company ways of doing things. The book argues that all of this was almost by accident. Through that strategic improvisation, something interesting emerged and there is a legacy to that.

TC: A lot of the Silicon Valley startups had the same sort of genesis as the Grateful Dead. A lot of them had the same sort of rapid success that a lot of rock and roll bands had. I am thinking of Steve Jobs, for instance, thinking outside the box, not doing it the same old way. There's a reason why Apple passed IBM because IBM was the old-school, "Do it the way you are supposed to do it", gray jacket, necktie. They weren't even Jerry Garcia neckties. I've wondered about Jerry Garcia neckties; that's kind of like Rush Limbaugh rolling papers.

Christian Koules: Out of all of the members of the band, who was your favorite to work with and who was your least favorite?

TC: Oh dear, you are going to get me into trouble, aren't you? I would

have to say I was closest to Pigpen. (72) We lived together in Novato. We were roommates on tour. Nowadays, arena band members have their own rooms, but we were economizing by doubling up. We would hang out a lot; we had our own little in-jokes. This is what happens when bands go on tour. You will have a running gag for the tour. You would only have to say the punch line and everyone would know what you are talking about.

There was a band I toured with in the 1990s called Dead Ringers: David Nelson and Barry Sless; we did Grateful Dead material. We got into this thing when we would be driving to the next venue in the next town and one person in one car would say, "Safe ride," and someone else in the other car would say, "Fried." That would become our running gag.

That's the kind of thing where you just know what each other means, especially because when you are on tour, the band and your music are the only thing that stays the same. Everything else changes. The TV anchor at the 11 o'clock news. The kinds of beer available. The names of the supermarkets. All of that changes. The music and your friends, they stay the same. Your focus on the world sort of shifts, in a way—usually in a pleasant way. I have been on a couple tours from hell; you have to remember that "This is just a bad dream. I will be home Saturday."

In 2005, I started touring with Jefferson Starship. I was on the phone with someone from the Grateful Dead business office. I made the move from one dysfunctional family to another. It was slightly less dysfunctional and they said, "Slightly less?" I said, "You know, it's a close call."

Every one of the groups has something like a family situation. Every family has roles: there's the domineering, impossible-to-please grumpy one; there's the eccentric uncle. In rock and roll, you have a greater portion of weirdos. But mostly they are pleasant kinds of weirdos. If they are an unpleasant kind of weirdo, they don't get invited back to tour with the band again; these things have a way of correcting themselves over time.

Pettengill: Let's go back to the albums that you participated in while you were in the Air Force and then became a touring member of the band. When I think of the parts I recognize as yours from both *Anthem of the Sun* (71) and *Aoxomoxoa,* some of them (for example, the harpsichord introduction of "Mountains of the Moon") seem very classical and precise in nature. They seem written out and not improvisational.

TC: They were not at all improvisational. In fact, that recording session had a harpsichord in the studio that could not be tuned up to concert pitch. The major invention in keyboard technology was the Steinway cast iron harp. Before then, instead of being made of iron, pianos were all made of wood. As you tighten up the strings, it increases the tension on it and it would pull them apart. Franz Liszt broke pianos by playing them that hard. Of course, harpsichords were entirely [made] of wood also. You could only tune them so sharp. Baroque tuning is commonly a whole tone or a semitone flat lower. Handel's tuning—his A—was 416. This studio harpsichord wouldn't tune up, so we tuned it a whole tone flat and I played the piece in a different key. So here we were starting to record and Bob was saying, "Give me an E" and I said, "You mean you want an F sharp?"

The tuning was exceptionally interesting as well; there was a little bit of stiffness. It also was the only tune on the album that we all recorded at the same time. *Aoxomoxoa* was the first album using sixteen tracks, and so we got very objectified. First, we did the rhythm section; the drums, the bass, and vocals were added later. Now, this made it complicated if the drums or bass dropped a beat early on; it was hard to repair. Again, we learned from doing that, because no one had done it before. Nowadays it's boring; they know what they're doing.

Pettengill: In that period, it seems as though your playing was not so much in the improvisational nature as the rest of the band?

TC: I was just getting my feet wet with the band, touring with them as well. Performing live is very different than recording with them in the studio. When you are recording with the studio, there is never any problem hearing yourself or hearing the mix. You are certain with the timing; you can punch in and drop in a note on a dime. Whereas when it's live, you are out there in the deep blue sea where anything can happen. Sometimes you can hear yourself, sometimes you can't. I've had performances that I credited to my teacher Marcel Marceau, or where I announced that the piano was provided by Mattel. Victor Borge used to say, "The Steinway Company wanted me to announce that this is a Baldwin piano." It sharpens up your sense of sarcasm to a very high degree.

On Pigpen and Bob Bralove

Schneiderman: Tom, did you live with Pigpen in part because you both were *not* doing hallucinogenic drugs at the time? (62, 79) Was it that you guys were sort of on a different trip?

TC: Believe it or not, I had gotten into Scientology. I would not take any drug, not even an aspirin for a headache. Pigpen's drug of choice moved from Southern Comfort to Bourbon Deluxe, which was in keeping with the blues tradition. My attitude towards hallucinogenics was not that I disapproved of them, but that I'd been there and done that, and I was trying a different path for a while. I definitely respect them.

In the 1990s, I started doing shows with Bob Bralove, twin pianos, totally improvised. Bob had found, at the Grateful Dead studio, a bottle of mescaline that Ken Kesey had left there. We tasted a little bit of it, we improvised a little, and said, "Hey, let's put this on the stage and see what happens." First we were amazed that we got away with it. Then we were amazed that the wilder we got, the better they liked it. Our methodology was, "No charts, no chord symbols, no set lists, just dive into the pool and make it all up." We found things. We have three or four CDs out.

Bob arranged a thing where through the MIDI keyboard we could play the light show; every key was keyed to an image. We would have a sound palette that sounded like an organ, piano, clarinets, or elephants farting, and there was a visual palette with colors and processes. There would be a 2D tunnel or a 3D tunnel, which was like going through a water slide. We both, together, would play that. We did a couple of shows backed by a symphony orchestra playing charts that we had created through MIDI by improvising. We were definitely in the Brownian movement world of creativity.

Schneiderman: Are you still playing with Bralove?

TC: Yes. We just played last year at the Festival of New American Music in Sacramento. In fact, Stephen Blumberg, the composer, wrote a piece for us. It consisted of one big page of musical elements, like Terry Reilly's "In C," where you start at this one and then repeat it a bunch of times; he doesn't tell you how many. After a while, you move on to the next one and you deliberately move out of phase so the music starts interact-

ing and crossing. We gave three performances of it. One performance, it just turned out that we would be at the same moment in the middle of the piece. Blumberg said, "Could you avoid doing that? Try to get away from each other." So, in the final performance, I was going at the same time Bob was going and I was doing just what he told me not to do. So I am trying to get out of step and Bob is trying to get out of step in the same way, and so you see this hippopotamus limping *in step*—a couple of them.

At Mills College, in '62, when Berio was here, we gave a performance of John Cage's "Winter Music" with fourteen pianos, including pianos up in the practice rooms, and there were two on stage. Phil and I were up in the practice rooms. At one point, we decided that we would interpret this thing in the score as an enormous explosion. So, I made my explosion and I said, "Well that was really intense. I will have to check out with Phil what happened." I walked out of the hall and what do I see: Phil walking towards me. He thought of doing the same thing at the same time. So that's why it was so amazing. That's why we each thought of doing it, because the sound was amplified by the other doing the same thing and something quite similar. The serendipity of things that can happen!

Schneiderman: When you speak about similarity, I think about how your style of playing was quite different than Pigpen's. You were both operating at the same time. How did you either complement or contradict each other? How did your musical relationship work?

TC: It is counterintuitive, but we got along wonderfully well. Mountain Girl said that Pigpen plays black man's music while I played white man's music. That's an oversimplification, but there is some validity, some truth to it. My musical background was completely European classical; even European classical avant-garde. Pigpen and I got along famously on stage and off in every way you could imagine. I don't know why, but I will take it.

Pettengill: I was interested to hear your comments about working with Dose Hermanos and Bob Bralove and being entirely improvisational. It sounds as though your own sensibility evolved over the years toward an entirely improvisational mindset.

TC: Also, remember that the music of John Cage and that part of the avant-garde—that part of the forest—was definitely 100% improvisational. He opened the doors and windows of the cathedral and let whatever fly in, fly in. And somehow for him, the magic worked like gangbusters.

On *Live/Dead*

Schneiderman: Richard and I don't always like the same parts of the Dead, but one of the places we really align is *Live/Dead*, which is our favorite album. Could you talk a little bit about the recording of that, or the tour, or any of the things that went into it?

TC: Van Morrison once said that music is spiritual; the business of music is not. We were talking about *Aoxomoxoa*, sixteen tracks, a very complicated project. Well, we were about three-quarters of the way through with it when Warner Bros. records had invested $100,000 in it thus far. Now in 1970, $100,000 was a bit more than what it means today. They were getting antsy to see a product. Somebody in the band said, "Hey, let's record all of our shows live, give them a double album for the same amount of money"—made it seem like a better deal.

We started recording, also sixteen-track, every show we did. We had a weekend run at the Carousel Ballroom, later called the Fillmore West. Every show we recorded we listened to afterwards, and someone always objected to something. Usually, it was because someone was unhappy about their own performance. It could have been a problem of balance, it could have been a problem of one of the tracks being distorted. There was always some fly in the whipped cream that ruined the effect.

Until finally we had this one show: it was from that weekend run at the Carousel Ballroom, and we listened to it and there was silence. Nobody was complaining. Nobody said they didn't like it. We all stood up at the same time and said, "That's it! Let's send that one."

After that, we started playing wonderfully well when the pressure was off. The *Live/Dead* sequence came from that choice by default. Another show from that same weekend was released later; the material is almost the same. I can't hear what anybody objected to in it. I don't know what was wrong about that show that was so right about the other one. In

fact, all the shows were different and I could easily see that show could have been the one that was picked.

I should say something here at this point: albums, especially in the age of vinyl LPs, had come to this iconic status, that it was engraved in stone that this was the way it had to be. As far as the musicians who were creating it, it wasn't so much a tablet with the Ten Commandments written on it as it was stein of beer you just served.

As a counterexample, I would mention the Cirque de Soleil arrangements of Beatles music. They would have the same material on *The White Album*, on *Revolver*, on *Abbey Road*, except it was all mixed up in different ways. This was the way the Beatles actually saw the music. The view toward albums was that musicians had a much more flexible and plastic view—if I can say that about vinyl—than the public did.

On Early Set Lists

Schneiderman: I have the sense that the repertoire was not as large then, so the song choices were more limited; the exploration would be in viewing the same eight to twelve songs, but really stretching out within them. Whereas later on, there was a bigger pool to choose from.

TC: Not only was there a limited number of songs, but we would do sequences that were consistent: the "Dark Star" > "Saint Stephen" > "Lovelight" sequence, the "Alligator" > "Caution" sequence. Starting out with "Mountains of the Moon" and going into "Dark Star," as it happens on *Live/Dead*, hardly ever happened any other time; that was definitely a rarity. Also, playing the "Mountains of the Moon" keyboard part on the organ felt really strange to me. It wasn't so much, "This will be iconic," it was more like, "Here it is, I will give it a try." If you have 5,000 people at a concert, you have 5,000 different concerts. Everyone has their own different experience of it.

Schneiderman: Could you talk about how the band would select what song to do next? At this point, did you know what the set list was because the repertoire was small?

TC: We didn't do set lists, it was more based on what we wanted to do at the moment. Usually Jerry, Phil, and Weir would get together; there were

a couple of rules of thumb. There wouldn't be two Bobby songs in a row. Other than that, there were scarcely any rules at all.

Schneiderman: How would the call be made on stage at that time? How would the message get to you?

TC: As always, I would listen and play on that. There have been times when I got the tune wrong and it was a different tune than I thought it was. I adapt to what is happening. Once in the '90s I was sitting in with a band called Foxtrot Zulu and I realized I did not recognize a single tune the entire set, but I heard the recording and my gosh, you'd really think I knew what I was doing.

On Authenticity

Schneiderman: One of the biggest themes of this course has been authenticity (135–137, 143–148). We talked about how for us, *Live/Dead* was the "definitive" version of these songs, although, as you point out, that was not the way the musicians thought of it at all. How do you balance the expectations that pay tribute to the original music and what I imagine you want to be new and interesting and not note-for-note reproductions? A couple weeks ago, Richard and the band he plays with, Great Moments in Vinyl, came here and did the entire Barton Hall concert. It was amazing, but it was not a note-for-note reproduction. It was a song-by-song reproduction that went in a thousand different directions with some key moments replicated, like the descending unison progression during the "Dancing in the Streets" jam. Could you talk about the experience of playing the music you grew up with and the music you helped originate and to what extent those things meet audience expectations?

TC: Actually, playing with this band [Terrapin Flyer] is very much like playing with the guys in 1969. It's similar because of the freedom to the approach to the music. There are tribute bands that approach the music like Grateful Dead Pro Musica. They play it incredibly accurately. They study the music intensely; they try to get it exactly right. Whereas some of the Grateful Dead songs that I remember learning at rehearsal, the chords were written by Phil Lesh on legal pads. That is what we had to go by. Otherwise, it was, "Make this up and do what you can." It turns out that

most of the things we made up are now available on sheet music. It's a generational thing. It is not necessarily unique to the Grateful Dead. Like the jazz players from fifty or sixty years ago, when they were probably pushing the post-Charlie Parker line on up to Coltrane and Cecil Taylor.

Nowadays, jazz players get graduate degrees in what they do, whereas back in my day the pianist Denny Zeitlin had a graduate degree in Psychology. As far as the music was concerned, our approach was very different. The Terrapin Flyer approach is a little closer to our original one, which I think is more in keeping with the spirit of the music. I am reminded of a John Cage story when he went to hear [J.] Krishnamurti give a lecture. During the lecture, Krishnamurti said, "When you are at one of my lectures, you should give me your full attention. You cannot do this when you are taking notes." The person sitting next to Mr. Cage was taking notes. He nudged her and said, "Did you hear what he said? He said he didn't want you taking notes." She said, "Yes, I know, I have it written it down right here."

The approach to the music reminds me of that of some of the newer bands. They are trying to simulate improvisation. Now I understand why they do that. It's the same reason why a classical musician likes sheet music. It's a security blanket. It gives you the security of knowing like you know what you are supposed to be doing. Even within that, there is a wide latitude. However, at the other end of the spectrum, with Bob Bralove, we learned we can jump into the ocean and survive. And it's not only interesting but possibly better, we think.

On "Dark Star"

Pettengill: We have been talking about spiritual transformation through hearing this music. When I first saw the Dead at Woodstock it was a galvanizing experience, but I don't really know what I saw. I heard "Dark Star" that night for the first time and I think it went right over my head. Little did I know at the time that that was among the most important aesthetic experiences of my life. When I got hold of the album *Live/Dead* that fall, I began to listen to it obsessively. I want to ask Tom if he could talk a little more about "Dark Star," which is widely considered to be the launching pad for the band's collective improvisation. Of course, there are

elements of the song that are not improvised. There are recurring themes even in the improvised portion of it. It seems to vacillate between themes that recur from performance to performance, and others that seem entirely improvised.

TC: In some ways, "Dark Star" might be the ultimate jam band piece, even more than, say, "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida" or some other tunes like that. It is so easy to fly and make it work. It gives you so much for such little effort. It will really reward you. Anything you think of throwing in the pot will come back to you in splendiferous ways.

I will give you a counterexample: In the '80s, I played in a band with Henry Kaiser and we did a song by The Band called "King Harvest." It was a very nice song, except it would rot your brain because you are thinking at every turn, "Oh, here's a time signature change coming here; here's a tempo change coming up." You don't even get to listen to the song because you are so busy hitting your marks.

"Dark Star" is the opposite of that. You can listen to it and enjoy it even while you're playing it. In fact, it's probably counterproductive to think much about what you are doing. You have to go very much with the flow. In fact, it is a piece that you don't so much begin to play as you enter and see where it takes you. You never know where it's going to take you.

I would recommend any Fillmore East "Dark Star" that we did. There is something about the New York audience; they were objective, they were picky, but if they decided they liked you, that's a very good welcome to enjoy. We played off that energy. We rode it for all it was worth. We would play off each other's energies.

Sometimes we would get into these clairvoyant or telepathic sort of things. I remember once at the Fillmore East, I was looking into Phil's eyes and we were playing the same pattern, like reading a classical symphony, except we were totally making it up. It just matched and meshed so perfectly. Stuff like that would happen with a "Dark Star." I think the material is simple enough and so molecular in its simplicity that it invites and provokes events like that to happen.

NOTE

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