GRATEFUL DEAD STUDIES

Volume 5 2021/2022

ISSN 2572-7818 (Online) ISSN 2572-7702 (Print)

Slone, Isaac Kandall, Ariella Werden-Greenfield, and Jordan M. McClain

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CITATION INFORMATION

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Grateful Dead Studies

Volume 5 (2021/2022)

Pages: 154–169

URL: https://gratefuldeadstudies.org/GDSv5_SloneEtAl.pdf

Reflecting on Fare Thee Well: An Interdisciplinary Perspective

Isaac Kandall Slone, Ariella Werden-Greenfield, and Jordan M. McClain

The summer of 2015 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the inception of the Grateful Dead. To honor the band's storied legacy, surviving members Bob Weir (guitar/vocals), Phil Lesh (bass/vocals), Bill Kreutzmann (drums/percussion), and Mickey Hart (drums/percussion) performed a series of five concerts entitled *Fare Thee Well: Celebrating 50 Years of the Grateful Dead*: June 27 and 28 at Levi Stadium in Santa Clara, California, and July 3, 4, and 5 at Soldier Field in Chicago. Joining the surviving members, nicknamed the "Core Four," were Phish's Trey Anastasio (guitar/vocals), Bruce Hornsby (piano/vocals), and Jeff Chimenti (keyboards/vocals). The concerts not only celebrated the band's fiftieth anniversary but marked an ending as well, with the shows publicized as the surviving members' final performances together, underscoring the significance of the widely anticipated events.

Beyond the overwhelming demand for tickets and the compelling publicity the concerts generated, the five shows offer much to reflect on. This essay distills three different disciplinary approaches to Fare Thee

Well, derived from a conference roundtable discussion (McClain, Slone, and Werden-Greenfield 2021).[1] All three approaches recognize that multiple functions and meanings are associated with the live show experience. Additionally, the contributors center their inquiries around Anastasio's participation in the experiment, an element that all three view as a defining aspect of the concerts. Each contributor considers Anastasio's involvement and contextualizes it within the history and evolution of the Grateful Dead's project and legacy. That, in turn, informs the authors' consideration of Fare Thee Well's implications for the Grateful Dead and Phish communities, acknowledging important connections between the two bands and their fan bases and pointing to areas for future research.

Mourning at Fare Thee Well

For many fans, Fare Thee Well served as a means of closure, addressing the lingering trauma caused by the abrupt cessation of Grateful Dead concerts following Jerry Garcia's death on August 9, 1995, a month after the Grateful Dead played their final show. After canceling their scheduled fall tour, the surviving band members went their separate ways and announced the official disbandment of the Grateful Dead four months later. Like any bereavement, Deadheads experienced significant emotional pain from the loss of their beloved band. Many saw and even still see their connection to the band as a fundamental part of their identities. While sociologists have explored the loss that Deadheads experienced after Garcia's death (e.g., Dollar 2013), psychoanalytic theory is uniquely equipped to investigate this pain and the ways that Fare Thee Well offered opportunities for fans to correctively celebrate a close to their Grateful Dead experience.

In "Mourning and Melancholia," Sigmund Freud described the emotional processes that loss can produce. These processes take place after the loss of a loved person or in reaction to the loss of "some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" ([1917] 1975, 243). In Freud's theory, mourning refers to a conscious and active process of working through grief. While some can work through loss by mourning, others struggle in the prolonged and more symptomatic state of melancholia. Those experiencing melancholia

process loss in unconscious ways that lead to feelings of entrapment. In the context of Fare Thee Well, the consideration of mourning and melancholia can be expanded to encompass what takes place personally and culturally around the loss of Garcia and the Grateful Dead.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the death of Jerry Garcia and the disbanding of the Grateful Dead represent both the loss of a loved person and the abstraction and dissolution of the ideals the band stood for and fostered. In the late 1980s, the Dead achieved a new level of popularity, attracting record-breaking audiences. Although the band's appeal had been steadily building since the start of the decade, it increased exponentially with the success of their 1987 single "Touch of Grey," which gave the Dead their first Top 10 hit. Looking back on that time, Garcia biographer Blair Jackson reflected that "from the center of the swirl in 1987 the future looked bright indeed. We weren't just surviving; we were thriving" (2012). The lives of many fans revolved around Garcia and the Grateful Dead's performance schedules, with tours providing a pastime for many, a livelihood for some, and a place of community for all.

In addition to those employed by the band, many fans vended goods in the parking lots of shows, often traveling for some or all of a tour. The band's retirement represented a major blow to this ecosystem, forcing those who had been immersed in the movement to confront this loss individually. That process had begun even before 1995, as Garcia's health began to visibly deteriorate and the scene outside of venues became increasingly fraught and problem-plagued. By 1995, hope that the music and countercultural ethos of the Grateful Dead would continue to reach new highs collapsed, with the final tour dubbed "the Tour from Hell" by both insiders and longtime fans. It colored the memory of the band's last years for many fans, causing them to see the Grateful Dead's ending as tragic, destabilizing, and incomplete.

Fare Thee Well succeeded in engaging its audience in the work of mourning. The official video from the final concert on July 5 opens with a montage from outside the show. Fans clad in festive band merchandise and tie-dye apparel smile at the camera and offer their reflections on the concerts. A young woman explains, "It's definitely really emotional, you know?" (Kreutzmann 2015). The man sitting next to her adds, "They've

given us so much to listen to already, and they're saying goodbye to us." This couple looks too young to have seen Jerry Garcia, yet they express a deep connection to the music and an awareness of an impending goodbye. Another young man adds, "I think that when that last note happens, it's just going to be like, 'woah'." In the framework of mourning, his "woah" could be an expression of detachment from the loved object, which is at once a release and a moment of new possibility. Here, a new generation assists in the work of mourning, recognizing the band's legacy and their chance to be a part of an event signified as a conclusion. This new generation identifies the gravitas of this ending, reaffirming the act of grieving as an appropriate response.

Garcia's absence caused fans to pay close attention to guitarists who attempt to emulate his style and sound, especially those who occupy his role in Grateful Dead-related projects. The selection of Trey Anastasio as the lead guitar player for Fare Thee Well succeeded stylistically, but more importantly, it facilitated the work of mourning because of his distinctive, individual approach to that role. Asked who would sing Garcia's songs, Anastasio replied,

> I don't think anybody can be Jerry's voice ... But my take on it is that everybody sings—the audience too. They'll sing. We'll sing ... People have such lifelong relationships to these songs. When I say I'm providing a service—it's to the songs, the memories, the community. (Fricke 2015)

Anastasio's thoughtful remarks demonstrated his awareness of the role he had been tapped to fill and revealed his conscious belief that Garcia's loss should be grieved as an absence, rather than replaced or compensated for by attempting to replicate Garcia's style.

In melancholia, "the lost object's shadow remains upon the ego ... Melancholic identification means that the ego treats itself as if it was the object" (Frick 2011, 662). Many of the musicians who have stepped into the lead guitar role in Grateful Dead music have approached the challenge as one of emulating Garcia. John Kadlecik, who played guitar in Furthur (one of Weir and Lesh's post-Dead projects) and Dark Star Orchestra, one of the best-known Dead tribute bands, developed a style that mimicked Garcia's, causing critics to label him "faux Jerry." Anastasio could have

viewed his role in these concerts in the same vein; instead, he honored the songs, memories, and community by offering his own interpretation, a gesture of respect and homage that also suggested an engagement with a living, ongoing tradition. His approach provided the synthetic function of interpreting the music authentically, allowing for new meaning to emerge, rather than attempting to replicate Garcia's playing and voice in a static, melancholic way. This approach enables healing, offering the promise of something new that is nonetheless an integral part of that lineage.

As farewell shows, Fare Thee Well attempted to distance the concerts from the idea of the return of the Grateful Dead as they had been. Drawing on Vamık Volkan's work on applying psychoanalytic theory to societal mourning, Eckhard Frick describes the process of grieving as complete when the bereaved make "the mental representation of the lost person or thing 'futureless'" (Frick 2011, 662). Fare Thee Well helped evoke this sense of futurelessness. The montage segment of the concert film ends with someone who attended the final Grateful Dead show in 1995: "I was here in '95 ... but this is different because, you know, you know it's the end" (Kreutzmann 2015). The video fades out on the man in tears.

Jon Pareles of the *New York Times* picked up on this sentiment, reworking the lyrics of Fare Thee Well's closing song, "Attics of my Life," by turning the lines "I have spent my life / Seeking all that's still unsung" into the headline, "No Song Left Unsung, Grateful Dead Plays Its Last" (2015). Like the fan in the video, Pareles acknowledges the burial of the mental representation of the Grateful Dead as an endlessly touring ideal, continuously in pursuit of that which has been left unsung. As with other instances of mourning, detachment from a loved object opens new possibilities. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Fare Thee Well represents a fertile site for a kind of large-scale analysis of resiliency in the face of loss, and the healing potential—and psychological utility—of such events as windows into fan identity.

Religious Language and Fare Thee Well

Fare Thee Well afforded the Grateful Dead community a reprieve from the painful cessation caused by Garcia's untimely passing. Indeed,

Trey Anastasio facilitated that mourning and healing process as an interpretive surrogate for the revered musical icon. Anastasio's participation, too, provided an entree for Phish fans, welcoming them as participants in the Grateful Dead phenomenon. In descriptions of that phenomenon (and of Phish), journalists and academics have described fans' devotion and fervor as "religious," as do some fans (e.g., Kaler 2011; Gertner 1999). Driving that fervor is a commitment to music, to the communities built around it, and to the bands and musicians themselves. Fare Thee Well offers an opportunity to examine fan use of religious language to describe beloved musicians, the community of concertgoers they inspire, and the live concert experience.

In online chat boards and social media groups, Dead and Phish fans frequently describe band members, and, in particular, Garcia and Anastasio, as divinely inspired and facilitators whose musical contribution and stewardship serve as access points for religious experience as self-determined by concertgoers. Within that schema, musicians act as guides towards a concert-going congregation's elation and consequent transformation. While the musicians could eschew this role, members of the Dead (and Phish) seem to accept it and sometimes even embrace it. For example, Lesh has observed that he and his bandmates perform the role of "shamans helping to channel the transcendent into our mundane lives and those of our listeners" (2007, 79). In this scenario, fans assume the role of devotees and scribes who, during concerts, offer service by jotting down set lists in their notebooks as their musician-guides reveal them, or detail the show experience in conversational or journalistic reflections. The conception of players as religious stewards and the subsequent understanding of the concert experience as religious and/or spiritual extends beyond the stage to those fans who find something in the music and live concert experience that they identify as religious.[2]

In 1971, Garcia commented that "The Grateful Dead plays at religious services essentially. We play at the religious services of the new age" (Stuckey 1971, 39). His point was not only that music is central to spiritual experience, but that concerts also manifest those experiences for attendees. Rupert Till seemingly agrees with Garcia when he suggests that dedicated fan cultures, which he calls "popular music based new

religious movements" answer the needs of younger generations searching for something left unfulfilled by organized religion (2010, 169). This perspective on fan culture and band loyalty certainly resonates for some Phish and Grateful Dead listeners, while other fans find that the concert experience strengthens their connections to those "traditional religious cultures" that Till deems irrelevant. Live concerts become, for some fans, intrinsic to their identity as religious actors, either as an extension of a rooted religious tradition or as a wholly separate site of discovery and religiosity. Favorite musicians play a role in both forms of religious experience and expression.

Discussing Phish, Rabbi Yehoshua "Shu" Eliovson, founder of PHIShalom and Jam Shalom shares:

> Trey is my *Rebbe*. As far back as I can remember, there are times when Trey is in a jam and I truly know the next bar before he gets there because I am learning a Torah with him that is so deeply connected to my own soul that it is like being in love. (Eliovson 2021)

Fans of the Grateful Dead, too, have long identified Garcia as a holy vessel, some even going so far as to claim membership in a "Church of Jerry," a phrase found often in online forums. One unnamed enthusiast affirms that "Jerry Garcia's guitar is a channel for God's voice," and a popular image of Garcia emblazoned on patches and shirts shows him in a Christlike pose draped in robes (Lattin 1992). For some fans, members of the Grateful Dead and Phish serve as spiritual teachers and conduits for divine energy, while others playfully imbue their musical heroes with divine attributes to express adoration. But what happens when these artists play in alternate lineups? Specifically, did the substitution of Phish frontman Anastasio for Garcia in Fare Thee Well interrupt the transformative potential of the concert experience?

Though attendees at Fare Thee Well had to negotiate a change in the roster, many still described their experiences using religious language, a choice that indicates the weight that fans assigned to the event. An examination of online chat boards and social media conversations shows that fans believed that the unique assemblage of musicians merited description in religious language. Phish fan Alex Bleeker explained:

> To me, having come up firmly in the "Phish generation," Anastasio's participation was particularly powerful ... I shed tears during "Attics Of My Life," as did many, if not most, of the fans around me ... I have never had any affinity for any kind of organized religion, and felt conflicted as I wondered, "Do I belong to some kind of church? Is this our most sacred hymn?" (Bleeker 2015)

Anastasio's involvement in Fare Thee Well enabled a younger generation of listeners who might not have attended a Grateful Dead show to feel like insiders. To them, the event offered a taste of the Grateful Dead's famously mind-altering and joy-infused tour experience, made possible by Anastasio's participation.

Of course, not only Phish fans wrote about these shows in religious terms. David Bryan, a theologian who plays in a Dead cover band, remarked:

> Our progeny will be watching recordings of these concerts for generations to come ... History will continue to unfold, and so will the religious nature of this community ... Jehovah's favorite choir indeed. IF this is ... the early stages of a new religious movement, then these concerts might be somewhat comparable to the christian story of pentecost: a day on which a "tongue of fire" rested on each of the people in attendance ... there was definitely something wholly other in attendance for these concerts. (Bryan 2015)

Bryan referenced the lyrics of "The Music Never Stopped," quoting the lines, "They're a band beyond description / Like Jehovah's favorite choir / People joining hand in hand / While the music played the band/ Lord, They're setting us on fire," before describing how the events were imbued with a sacred energy of something "wholly other in attendance." Though he does not articulate what that something is, he reconciles that element of his experience using religious language and points to the assemblage of musicians as divinely elect. He, too, references "the religious nature" of a "community" formed out of the musical and cultural experiment that was Fare Thee Well. Though the gathering of attendees dispersed after the final chords had been played, that sense of community built around shared musical interests and emphasized by the potentially transforma-

tional nature of the live music experience offers something meaningful and lasting.

Fare Thee Well presented a special opportunity for fan communities to gather together with their revered musicians. Attendees described their show experience and their favorite musicians using religiously charged terminology. Their employment of this linguistic code offers insights into American religion and popular music while posing a unique set of questions for scholars working in religious studies. Within the Grateful Dead and Phish communities, many fans envision rock stars as deities and conduits for divine interaction, a depiction that challenges conceptions of a divide between sacred and profane. This practice indicates the potency of the live concert experience as a transformative event with foundational meaning for fans' identities. While fans may use religious language superficially to indicate deep commitment to a band, such usage muddles the line between the realism of the mundane and the holy, a division further challenged by those fans who carefully employ linguistic choices that reflect their metamorphic and sacred concert experiences. Fan responses to Fare Thee Well demonstrate the potentially rich relationships between religiosity, the live concert experience, and musicians, suggesting that concerts freighted with these associations and history are especially fertile sites for scholarly research. And for both Phish studies and Grateful Dead studies, Fare Thee Well offers a useful way to connect and refract their interdisciplinary discourses with larger these academic conversations.

Media Framing of Fare Thee Well

Communication theory and media studies offer ways of assessing portrayals and narratives in music journalism, music criticism, and music writing. Research on media framing examines how patterns in media coverage normalize certain viewpoints and make them appear logical (Reese 2001). This methodology has already made contributions to Phish studies and Grateful Dead studies, showing how media coverage of Phish connects the band to the Grateful Dead and rationalizes that connection, as well as how prevalent the connection is and what key audiences make of it (McClain 2016; 2018). Fare Thee Well presents an interesting and rare opportunity to study that Phish/Grateful Dead link in a specific col-

lection of coverage that touches on both bands and does so with a clear (and novel) premise: Trey Anastasio's inclusion in a band that featured the surviving members of the Grateful Dead. Studying the narratives, patterns, and themes that comprise Fare Thee Well coverage not only allows us to consider the connections between the Grateful Dead and Phish but also enables us to clarify the broader contexts of this significant cultural moment.

Coverage of Fare Thee Well was concentrated between the announcement of the event in early January 2015 and the end of July 2015, shortly after the shows concluded. The review of this coverage discussed here included key publications with a wide readership and credible ties to relevant music culture and Fare Thee Well audiences, such as the *New York Times, Rolling Stone, Relix, San Francisco Chronicle, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune, Spin, NPR, Pitchfork,* and others. An exploratory examination of this coverage raises three major questions: How did media coverage portray Fare Thee Well as a significant event; how did media coverage of Fare Thee Well portray Anastasio's role in this Grateful Dead-centered event; and what did media coverage of Fare Thee Well indicate about music culture, situating the event in a broader context? This summary focuses on evidence from the extensive *New York Times* coverage, highlighting representative patterns found across various publications.

Coverage leading up to Fare thee Well established the importance and historicity of the event, attesting to fans' belief that the concerts held significant meaning beyond the music. The coverage took on the work of extracting meaning, defining terms and ideas and explaining the historical significance for readers. This was indicated across coverage via two features, from the winter announcement to the summer shows: extensive attention and sustained, frequent coverage that could be thought of as a temporary or micro Fare Thee Well beat. Read as a whole, Fare Thee Well coverage tells the story of a concert event about much more than music—it is the story of big business, fandom, and cultural phenomena.

Articles touching on the big business of Fare Thee Well focused on the exceptionally strong demand for tickets, anti-commerce sentiment toward high ticket prices, and—in contrast—fans gladly paying

for expensive tickets and trips. A description of one longtime fan and his friends noted, "instead of driving in an old car, or driving at all, the group will be flying in an eight-seat private jet, at a rate of about $4,000 an hour. Their ticket packages cost almost as much" (Rosman 2015). Media coverage emphasized and fixated on fandom, often treating enthusiastic fan travel, ticket purchase rituals, taper practices, and the spectacle of the Grateful Dead community (often reduced to hippie tropes about tie-dye and drugs) as symbolic of unusual behavior. This narrative reinforces the misguided public perception of such devoted practices as nonsense.

Coverage of Anastasio tended toward the simplistic, defining the complicated dynamics involved in Anastasio playing lead guitar for the group in terms of the label of Phish-as-the-new-Grateful Dead or its variants (e.g., Phish is the next Grateful Dead, heir to the Grateful Dead, etc.). Coverage distilled Anastasio's role to a serious task, an important task, or a reverent task. The challenge of that task was attributed to Garcia's outsized role in the Dead, the technical difficulty of the Dead's songs, and the hypercritical nature of Deadheads, who were characterized as especially "tough to please." For example, one *New York Times* piece observed, "Garcia's replacement in the reconstituted lineup was Trey Anastasio of Phish, who carried off his fraught assignment with grace and head-bobbing enthusiasm" (Pareles 2015). Beyond the role, coverage treated Anastasio as "the ringer" whose skills were a match for the enormous challenge, one deemed too great for most but noting that if anyone could succeed, it would be him.

Elsewhere, coverage treated Anastasio as a parenthetical aside, essentially a footnote in the legend of the Grateful Dead or a passing mention within a story about the Core Four. This treatment showed a minor emphasis on the Grateful Dead/Phish link, a prominent theme in typical coverage of Phish throughout their career. In other words, Phish coverage warrants clever references to the Grateful Dead to provide a shortcut for explaining Phish (i.e., simplifying something complex via a familiar icon), but not the obverse, as coverage of Fare Thee Well demonstrated.

More broadly, coverage of Fare Thee Well situated the event in a broader context of music culture, telling readers about the world beyond the 2015 celebration. These descriptions included perspectives on fan

practices (overlapping the kind of hippie tropes mentioned above), the jam band scene (positioning the Grateful Dead atop a hierarchy of all other members), and American history. On the latter point, coverage illustrated the historical importance of the Grateful Dead's music (characterized as "anthems"), the singular commitment of the fan culture over decades (through common profiles of longtime fans and fan groups), and the place of both band and fan communities in American culture (expressed as a recurring emphasis on the July 4 show as emblematic of American identity and celebration). That was especially clear in the article, "On July 4, The Grateful Dead Show Pride in Being an American Band," in which *New York Times* music critic Jon Pareles wrote:

> Its career and song catalog … offer plenty of thoughts about an America of freedom, possibility, diversity and communal purpose … Saturday night's first set and much of the second were openly thematic: songs full of American locales, archetypal characters … and thoughts on American identity. (Pareles 2015)

Another critic, summing up the meaning of the connection between the band, fans, and America, explained, "the Dead became avatars, along with their fanatic Deadhead followers, for the '60s psychedelic hippie scene from California to Woodstock" (Coscarelli 2015).

These examples reveal the influential role that patterns in media coverage played in constructing the story of Fare Thee Well. Such patterns establish a dominant narrative about the importance and meaning of this ostensibly final chapter in the Grateful Dead's performing history, as well as the possible denouement of the lengthy comparison between Phish and the band. The repetition of concepts used to characterize Fare Thee Well built on and underscored conventional depictions of the band, audience members, the "jam band hierarchy," and the Grateful Dead/Phish relationship, among many ideas that shape the public's understanding of these phenomena. Such framing shapes how people think about the band's legitimacy and fame, the fans' reputation and credibility, the culture's components and order, and more. Understanding how these patterns work not only helps us better interpret media coverage of these topics but also offers insights into media portrayal of similar events, especially how

repeated elements that comprise media narratives mold expectations and understandings of the consequences of those events.

Conclusion

Like Woodstock, the Harlem Cultural Festival, Lilith Fair, and Lollapalooza, Fare Thee Well is a rich research site for scholars from a range of disciplinary perspectives including media studies, psychoanalysis, and religious studies. In addition to providing abundant material for academic research, Fare Thee Well offered solace, community, and affirmation for many attendees. Seven years later, the concerts continue to engender strongly positive commentary from audience members, many of whom derive life-altering meaning from their experience.

The Grateful Dead's status as an iconic American band and as the progenitor of today's jam band scene factors significantly in that meaning-making, as did the finality of the shows. Beyond their impact on fans, the concerts also affirmed the cultural significance of the Grateful Dead, especially the band's enduring appeal, even long after the death of Jerry Garcia.

Yet the importance of Fare Thee Well went beyond those effects. The concerts catalyzed a multi-generational surge in fan interest in the Grateful Dead's work, contributing to the later box-office success of Dead and Company as well as increasing the audience for a host of cover bands, tribute acts, and the jam band scene. The event also helped to make the Dead and the larger jam band genre more acceptable in indie rock circles. More broadly, the concerts earned Phish greater mainstream respect, bridging the gap between Phish fans and Deadheads and securing a firm place for Phish in the Dead's biography.

The work outlined here points to the continuing significance of Fare Thee Well and suggests several additional areas for investigation and analysis, especially the connections between the Grateful Dead and Phish, and how those in turn lead to a host of associated questions and contexts. After all, Grateful Dead history is a part of American history. Fare Thee Well tapped that powerful, complex inductivity with a unique episode, rich in significance and rife with meaning, in the nation's cultural and musical landscape.

Notes

1. All three presenters revised and expanded their remarks for this publication. Ariella Werden-Greenfield and Jordan McClain thank Isaac Slone for spearheading the revisions process.

2. How fans define a "religious" element varies widely, as scholars have explored (cf. Sylvan 2002); this is one of several issues Fare Thee Well highlighted that merit further scholarly attention.

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ISAAC KANDALL SLONE is a candidate at the Psychoanalytic Training Institute of the Contemporary Freudian Society. He received his BA and MA from New York University Gallatin School of Individualized Study, where he studied the relationship between psychoanalysis, music, and literature. He is the development manager for ROOM: A Sketchbook for Analytic Action and writes on modernist literature, the Grateful Dead, and Phish.

ARIELLA WERDEN-GREENFIELD is Associate Director of Temple University's Feinstein Center for American Jewish History. Her work interrogates the intersections of religion, popular music, and identity-making, and she is the coeditor of *Phish and Jews: This is Your Song Too* (Pennsylvania State University Press, forthcoming). Her writing has appeared in *Religion in Philadelphia: A Reader* (2016), *Savoring Gotham: A Food Lover's Companion to New York City* (2015), *Religion*, and the *Journal of Contemporary Thought*.

JORDAN M. MCCLAIN earned his PhD at Temple University in Mass Media and Communication. He served as President of the Mid-Atlantic Popular and American Culture Association (MAPACA) and his writing has appeared in *Popular Music and Society, Journal of Popular Culture, Grateful Dead Studies*, and elsewhere. He maintains an active scholarly career while working in industry.