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Life Beyond the Dead: Leadership, Branding, and the Business Legacy of the Post-Garcia Grateful Dead

Barry Barnes

The Grateful Dead were a remarkably durable institution in rock music, the American music industry, and surprisingly, business in general. Although the band retired the name in 1995 after the death of Jerry Garcia, the remaining members have continued to perform since then, and the business they established has continued, despite substantial changes, increasing the Dead's market reach and audience. For readers familiar with that work, which has been accompanied by a surfeit of media coverage that has tended to obscure more than it illuminated, focusing on the business offers a useful lens for assessing the era. This essay uses that approach as the culmination of a thirty-eight-year study of the Grateful Dead's business organization and its relationship with the band's fans, the Deadheads. The study has led to several publications, themselves part of a larger interest in the Dead's business practices.[1] In 2011, *Everything I Know About Business I Learned From the Grateful Dead* identified the key elements of the band's business philosophy, condensing it into ten guidelines, or lessons, for business theorists and managers

(Barnes 2011). These lessons described the Grateful Dead's very unusual approach to business strategy, leadership, organizational values, branding, and customer service, as well as how these lessons led to the band's unique and very successful thirty-year performing career (see Appendix).

As the band's sixtieth anniversary approaches, what is clear is that thirty years after Garcia's death, the Dead's business and legacy continues to attract significant interest. That has defied convention as well as most predictions: as recently as 2015, the five Fare Thee Well concerts were touted as the end of the Grateful Dead (Selvin 2018). History has proven that wrong; indeed, the continuing interest suggests that the Grateful Dead's legacy is much more likely extend far into the future, even without the band and without the legion of first-generation Deadheads. This article explores the reasons for that by examining the Dead's history with an eye toward how that contributes to the larger literature on the band's business.

The Garcia Era, 1965–1995

Although historians often divide the band's career into various eras, for the purposes of this study, there are three major periods: the Grateful Dead, 1965–1995; the post-Garcia Grateful Dead, 1995–2015; and the current era, following the 2015 Fare Thee Well concerts. Surveying what each period suggests about the band's business offers a number of insights into the Dead's remarkable endurance as well as a glimpse of what the future of the phenomenon may be.

Assessing the Dead's thirty-year career reveals a work ethic and a commitment that allowed them to weather often daunting setbacks and difficulties. By 1995, they were heralded as one of the most successful touring bands. That reflected an unusual and exceptional business model: by focusing on concerts rather than record albums, they ignored what the industry considered the "bottom line," the typical metric for bands then and today. Another distinctive aspect of that model was their approach to management, which was self-governing and relied on consensus: all decisions were made by all of the band members. The Dead structured their corporation so that the band members were the board of directors; as David Parker, their business manager for much of the 1970s, explained:

> Their whole philosophy was that the musicians should be in control of their music and of what they do. They should be the

> ones to decide how much they are going to charge, what kind of places they're going to play, as well as [what they do] in the recording studio. (Parker 2000)

That unusual structure and philosophy remains anomalous, perhaps a reflection of their 1960s origins in its anti-corporate and antiauthoritarian characteristics.[2]

This shared leadership approach could be seen as an extension of their musical philosophy, where all band members contributed and leadership depended on what the music required. This democratic view of leadership was something that Garcia cultivated, despite his unspoken role as de facto leader; as one reporter noted in 1973, "everyone senses his special spiritual authority in the band, his permissive guru-figure status. At the same time, he never puts himself in front of the band" (Perry 1973, 49).

The emphasis on consensus was part of what traditional corporate culture would see as a loose management style that was long on flexibility and short on structure. Using that rubric, the Dead were horizontally managed with shared leadership and decentralized decision-making. This resulted in loyal, motivated employees who tended to be friends, a personal identification that made insiders call the organization the "Grateful Dead Family." That structure—and the relationships it derived from—also meant they avoided outsourcing decision-making, especially when that concerned the music.

Jerry Garcia reflected on the band's business philosophy in a preface to a 1981 internal study of the Dead's business organization. Titled "A Balanced Objective," the report was written by longtime band staffer Alan Trist, a Cambridge-educated social scientist who had worked for a UK-based organizational analysis firm before going to work for the Dead in 1970. Garcia used the preface as an opportunity to express some of what he had learned and seen in the band's first fifteen years:

> This report shows how we really work. We do business the way artists do business. The reason there is a Grateful Dead Productions is because the State of California requires that we identify ourselves as a business. We have to fulfill the standard formalities of operating as a business. Grateful Dead Productions, Inc. is a legal fiction, not a working reality. It

> doesn't represent our real work. Just because we have an office doesn't mean we have to feel we have to be office workers, nor identify ourselves as a Corporation because we have a corporation. (Trist 1981, 3)

Though brief, the preface demonstrates Garcia's extraordinary intuitive understanding of business as it applied to a band, even if the Dead's approach contravened traditional corporate structure, and in particular its hierarchical, "top down" decision-making apparatus, which Dougald O'Reilly explores in this volume. The Dead's idiosyncratic notions about self-governance often led to disputes with their first record company, Warner Bros. Records, who had signed them to a contract in 1966. That friction ultimately prompted the Dead to form their own record company in 1972, when their contract expired, offering them complete autonomy to exercise even greater control over their work.

That independence was an expression of the band's values, which they had expressed in their work from the outset. They balanced the need to survive with the artistic imperative to create, and that in turn meant balancing the drudgery of work with the pleasure of performance—with fun, as Garcia often said. A defining expression of that belief was their commitment to playing for free and for worthy causes. That began in 1966, when the Dead performed in Golden Gate Park for impromptu concerts and benefits, an expression of a socially conscious business model that also focused on 'doing good.' Remarkably, the Dead never abandoned that ideal. Jan Simmons, who worked for Grateful Dead Productions starting in 1990 and was a Deadhead long before she went to work for them, noted that "There are a lot of Sixties values here. Peace, love and understanding kind of values, certainly, and music. The business still sticks to those early values when it comes to licensing the Dead name" (Simmons 1998).

While business theory can overlook these aspects of the Dead's organizational values, they were integral, and reflected more than an ideological adherence to so-called countercultural or hippie ideals. Supporting charitable and community-oriented efforts reflected the Dead's broader goal of raising consciousness, not only their own but those of their coworkers and perhaps especially their fans. As Garcia explained in his famed 1972 interview with Yale law professor Charles Reich,

> I think basically the Grateful Dead is not for cranking out rock and roll, it's not for going out and doing concerts or any of that stuff. I think it's to get high … To get really high is to forget yourself. And to forget yourself is to see everything else. And to see everything else is to become an understanding molecule in evolution, a conscious tool of the universe. And I think every human being should be a conscious tool of the universe. (Garcia, Reich and Wenner 2003, 100)

Mickey Hart has often called the Dead's unique approach "transportation music." In 1991, he elaborated on this, saying, "The transformative power of the Grateful Dead is really the essence of it. It's what it can do to your consciousness. We're more into 'transportation' than we are into music per se" (Henry 1991).

Hart's remarks go to the heart of what made the Dead unique, but that began with their music. The band's repertoire was also atypical. An amalgam of rock and roll, blues, country, folk, classical, jazz, bluegrass, and more, it offered a range and variety that could maintain both their own interest as well as their audience's. Their lyrics, chiefly by Robert Hunter and John Perry Barlow, drew inspiration from folk tales and traditional songs as well as a range of literary sources, rewarding repeated listening.

Most of all, the Dead approached their music as an improvisational form, a novel and distinctive approach in rock and roll, and rare when they started in the mid-1960s. With improvisational music, shared leadership was absolutely necessary (Barrett 1998); the flexibility this required, and produced, was a quality the Dead prized and sought to foster in their organizational structure. In other words, their music demanded a business strategy and structure that was continually adapting to internal and external changes. Thus, they would strategically improvise their business organization to facilitate their music.

With their focus on playing live music to an audience rather than making records, they played a *lot* of concerts. In 1966 alone, they played more than 100 known concerts, although the actual number is likely greater (Scott, Dolgushkin, and Nixon 1999, ix, xiii, 1–3). Over the course of their thirty-year history, the Dead played more than 2,300 concerts around the United States as well as Europe and Egypt. Even with this traditional

music industry practice, however, they did it their way, ignoring the usual strategies such as using tours to promote albums. They only took one significant break from touring, from late 1974 through mid-1976; otherwise, they played an average of about eighty shows a year, a remarkable statistic.

One of the most important aspects of the Dead was their emphasis on engaging fans (Barnes 1999). That focus seems obvious today, given the centrality of the role of the internet, cell phones, social media, and the ways those have sharpened business emphasis on customer service. But during the Dead's career, none of that technology was available, so the band pioneered the use of direct mail to reach out to fans. Launched with a prominent announcement in their eponymous 1971 live album, the mailing list gave those who signed up—at no cost—regular updates with newsletters, providing information about concerts, tours, and even samplers of forthcoming releases. They also provided a hotline—one on each coast—for fans to learn the most up-to-date information about concerts. And in 1984 the Dead created Grateful Dead Ticket Sales (GDTS), a stand-alone mail-order ticket service, giving Deadheads the chance to buy tickets far ahead of time for any concert, regardless of location. It was an unprecedented and immediately successful innovation, one that ensured democratic access to concert tickets and undercutting scalpers. Given the ongoing controversies and escalating ticket surcharges associated with Ticketmaster, that practice seems especially conscientious—and far-sighted.

Another way the Dead engaged their fans was by developing and implementing the finest sound system that had ever been heard. As early as 1966, they chafed at the limitations of extant PA technology and began to cultivate experts to help refine and improve their instruments and equipment. This culminated in their "Wall of Sound" system, a legendary PA debuted in 1974 that still attracts technical analysis and industry attention. Literally monumental in size and power, the Wall represented the band's dedication to the pursuit of engineering excellence and innovation, regardless of cost. It was also an expression of their focus on their listeners, as Alan Trist explained: "They had an ethic about the person in the back seat, the far back, has got to hear as well as the person in the

front, otherwise why are we charging him [the same] ticket price" (Trist 2010). The Wall of Sound delivered 24,000 watts of undistorted power via 641 speakers powered by 48 McIntosh amplifiers, through 11 separate channels, one for each instrument and vocalist. It was enormously expensive to develop, transport, and assemble. The costs, from maintenance to transport to crew, overwhelmed the organization and drained the band's finances, prompting them to take an unprecedented eighteen-month break from touring in late 1974. Yet its lessons endured, and indeed, it took years before the concert sound industry could even approach its power and fidelity (Healy 1991).

The Dead embraced two additional practices that endeared them to fans, both directly related to their focus on performance and rooted in their anti-corporate stance. First, they ultimately allowed their fans to record their concerts. Though this policy evolved over time from initial hostility to ambivalence to reluctant accommodation (Getz and Dwork 1998), it was a concession that was critical to Deadheads because no two performances were ever the same, and they typically lasted several hours, much longer than a vinyl record or other performers' concerts. That made tapes distinctive, something special to share. While this practice flew in the face of record industry practice, which held that any unofficial recordings undercut record sales, the Dead came to see tapes as a fan-based effort to expand their audience, bringing additional revenue through greater ticket sales and merchandise sales. The alternative—to police fans and interfere with what was in fact a sincere effort to document the uniqueness and power of a concert—was also antithetical to the band's antiauthoritarian ethos. Moreover, as veterans of the folk scene, both Garcia and Weir were familiar with the practice of amateur taping, and along with Hart's increasingly professional efforts at field recording, inclined the band to see the practice favorably.

In the 1980s, the advent of inexpensive, increasingly high-quality portable cassette recorders resulted in the dramatic expansion of the number of tapers, creating friction between tapers and other concertgoers as well as interfering with the band's crew. In 1984, the band created an Official Tapers Section (OTS) behind the soundboard; tapers had to purchase a special ticket stipulating that any recording was for "home

use only" and prohibiting videotape. Although Deadheads frowned on commercial bootlegs on general principles, sanctioning amateur taping ended up drastically curtailing the market for commercially produced ROIOs ("Recordings Of Illegitimate Origin"), or bootlegs. Moreover, the creation of the OTS cemented fan loyalty and became a badge of distinction for the Deadhead scene, proof that the Dead's connection with their fans was rooted in shared beliefs and practices that proudly departed from mainstream norms.

That countercultural sensibility even extended to toleration of fans' use of band trademarks in the 1970s and early 1980s. The Dead commissioned or adapted several different images as logos over the years, including the Steal Your Face, Dancing Bears, Dancing Skeletons, and several others. Enterprising fans made t-shirts, posters, printed tape covers (known as J-cards) and other items featuring these insignias or variants to sell in venue parking lots to help pay for tickets or even support them on tour. As the parking lot scene, dubbed Shakedown Street, grew larger, the band began to crack down on the use of their trademarks in order to protect their intellectual property. Yet even then, the band sought to soften the impact of the legal necessity that compelled them to act, offering generous licensing terms to artisans and entrepreneurs who wanted to vend merchandise bearing Dead logos at shows and beyond.

It was a stance that reflected the band's attitude toward community, which the Dead modeled. The Dead's frequent benefit concerts were perhaps the most visible expression of that commitment, a statement of their organizational belief in "doing good" and giving back to the community. They defined "community" broadly: over the years they played benefits for nonprofit entities as varied as the San Francisco Mime Troupe, the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, SEVA, the Lithuanian Olympic Basketball team, and the Rainforest Action Network. In 1983, they formed their own charitable arm, the Rex Foundation, to ensure that the proceeds of their philanthropy could be efficiently and ethically handled, in accordance with their values.

At that time, no other band and very few businesses were as creative in how they engaged with their customers. In addition to burnishing the Dead's reputation, those practices helped their popularity grow every

year, despite their relative lack of radio airplay, still the dominant form of exposure for popular music then. The band did not have a Top 10 hit until 1987, when "Touch of Grey" introduced the band to a new cohort of listeners, fueled by a music video on MTV. Although longtime fans mourned the band's newfound accessibility, in fact the song's danceable, catchy music both reflected the Dead's deep roots as a dance band as well as their welcoming stance. Newcomers might marvel at the fact that Dead shows were dance marathons, but that was part of the inclusive spirit of the scene.

As the Dead's popularity continued to increase, so did their concert revenue, despite their refusal to maximize ticket prices. This was a direct nod to their fans to ensure that shows remained affordable (McQuaid 1998). From 1989 through 1995, the Dead were one of the top five concert attractions in the country; in 1991 and 1993, they were number one. As Garcia explained in 1991, "We never could sell records; we still don't really. We sell tickets. That's what everybody knows we do. We sell tickets" (Henry 1991). Their ticket revenue in 1994 for eighty-five shows was $52.5M, and even in 1995, when the fall and winter tours were cancelled after Garcia's death, they still notched $33.5M in revenue (*Pollstar* 1994; *Pollstar* 1995).

Garcia's modesty notwithstanding, the Grateful Dead did sell records. From 1967 to 1995 they released thirteen studio albums and nine live albums with total sales of $35M. In 1993, the band also began releasing archival recordings, sold primarily via mail order although some were distributed through music stores. The advent of compact discs opened up the band's back catalog to new listeners as well, adding to the Dead's steady selling power. Although the industry continues to chase the newest and largest-grossing hits, the Dead's endurance and steady sales made them a valuable property for their record labels, first Warner Bros. Records and then Arista.

Their quiet success is a hallmark of why the Dead in this period offer a revealing case study for business theorists. Their unique approach to business strategy, leadership, organizational values, branding, and customer service allowed them to conduct their work on their own terms and according to their own beliefs, yet still succeed according to conven-

tional business metrics. That success, and the lessons it reflected, created a foundation for the next era, when the band faced a series of challenges prompted by the death of Jerry Garcia.

The Post-Garcia Era, 1995–2015

Following Garcia's death in August 1995, the four surviving band members—Bob Weir, Phil Lesh, Bill Kreutzmann, and Mickey Hart, dubbed the "Core Four"—struggled with the shape of the band and its business. Grateful Dead Productions (GDP) and Grateful Dead Merchandise (GDM) conducted the work of the band, employing about 100 longtime employees who tended to be friends and family members. Three issues defined this period of the band's business: succession planning, intraband friction, and long-term organizational goals.

In many small organizations and family-owned businesses, succession planning is often neglected (Motwani et al. 2006); as a result, many fail to survive. That is true for bands as well: although some bands have been able to persevere for a time despite the loss of leaders, many do not. The Glenn Miller Orchestra continued for a few years after Miller's death in 1940, as have other jazz orchestras, but in rock music that remains rare. The Rolling Stones have continued for decades after losing founding member Brian Jones in 1969, but Keith Richards and Mick Jagger had already moved into leadership positions by then. Likewise, the Who have managed to continue with only two founding members, but they are the central figures.

With the Grateful Dead, Garcia was truly the glue that kept the band together for thirty years. And he was the band member who modeled shared leadership and cultivated the foundation of their customer-oriented business philosophy. He was extremely charismatic, a "transformational leader" whose natural leadership qualities led the band and inspired everyone in the organization to perform at their highest level, even beyond what they themselves thought they could do—traits that business scholars have identified as critical (Bass and Avolio 1990). Garcia was essential, but that also made the idea of a successor difficult to imagine. When he died, despite the warnings heralded by his health crises in 1986 and 1992, there was no plan for the future of the band without Garcia.

In December 1995, the surviving members agreed to retire the Grateful Dead name. The decision to no longer use the famed name for any future musical efforts was counterproductive from a business perspective—it was not just a shared musical identity but their brand—but it made sense artistically. After all, when they realized they had to change their name from the Warlocks in 1965, it was Garcia who randomly picked "grateful dead" from a dictionary. Retiring the name not only acknowledged his centrality but also his agency, and it made a powerful public tribute to the fallen leader.

What happened to the band's unique approach to business in 1995 reflected that loss. As part of Garcia's transformational leadership approach, he and the other band members also embraced a shared leadership style that empowered all employees to have a voice in decision-making (Barnes et al., 2012). Monthly meetings were held where decisions needed consensus to be accepted and enacted. As Dennis McNally explained, "Although seniority often resolves conflicts, building a consensus is usually deciding political factor … The most negative vote carries" (2002, 56). David Parker saw this as "an egalitarian sort of organization" while Alan Trist even thought of the Dead's business organization as a "cooperative," where the employees were all friends and worked hard to maintain harmony and unity (Trist 2010). Without Garcia, the surviving members struggled to achieve that unity, and harmony became an increasingly rare commodity in the organization.

The stakes were enormous. Could they continue as a band? If not, how would they sustain the organization? At first, the Core Four agreed to continue playing together, but by December, drummer Bill Kreutzmann declared that he did not want to perform without Garcia, effectively shelving the band. That in turn ended the primary source of income for the Dead's business, much of which was devoted to maintaining the touring operation. Although sales of records and other merchandise was especially brisk shortly after Garcia died, those sales slowed quickly. In late 1996, the band confronted the inevitable and downsized the organization, laying off most of the staff. This is painful for any business, especially one with low turnover, but for the Dead, this ended a workplace where employees were treated as "Grateful Dead family." It not only brought the original

organization to an end, it also marked the loss of the original values and business approach that had been in place for thirty years.

The loss of those values could be seen in the fragmentation of the Core Four's musical efforts as well. Phil Lesh formed Phil & Friends and toured extensively with a roster of other musicians. His emphasis was on long improvisations with a repertoire primarily of Grateful Dead music. Bob Weir continued with his band, RatDog, varying its lineup but continuing his well-established solo repertoire. His emphasis seemed to be recreating the Grateful Dead concert experience. Drummer Bill Kreutzmann played less frequently, forming several bands, including the Trichromes, Billy and the Kids, and finally the Bill Kreutzmann Trio, or BK3. Mickey Hart continued his long-standing practice of leading percussion-based ensembles, augmenting his work to include a wider range of instruments and including singers and Dead songs. Kreutzmann and Hart also toured as the Rhythm Devils.

Members of the Core Four reunited for concerts and tours as well, in lineups that ranged from two to all four members, as The Other Ones (1996, 1988, 2002), The Dead (2003–2004, 2008, 2009), and Furthur (2009–2014). Each of these attracted sizeable audiences, and though none achieved the box office clout of the Grateful Dead, they confirmed the ongoing interest in the Dead's music, and they ensured the survival and evolution of the repertoire.

The structure surrounding that musical core proved less durable. When Garcia died in 1995, the band managed their work through two separate business entities: Grateful Dead Productions (GDP) and Grateful Dead Merchandising (GDM). GDP was responsible for the concert side of the band's business, including licensing; GDM was responsible for merchandise. After Garcia's death, the band merged the two entities under the umbrella of GDP to manage all aspects of the band's legacy as well as surviving members' work, from touring to merchandising to intellectual property.

The Dead's legacy was an active part of GDP's mandate. Their archive included the master recordings of the studio work they owned as well as concert recordings of a substantial percentage of their 2,300 known concert performances. Since the inception of their archival record-

ings releases in the 1990s, those releases have been a reliable income stream; they continue to this day, spanning several series, including *From the Vault*, *Dick's Picks*, *Road Trips*, and *Dave's Picks*. Intellectual property included music books, logos, and licensing rights for their name and other brands, such as Dead Heads.

GDP did arrange the tours of the various bands of the surviving members, but they were unable to leverage this successfully. As a result GDP's operations shrank to merchandise and licensing, although they did try to expand their services, handling merchandising for musicians such as Bonnie Raitt and Alanis Morrisette (McQuaid 1998). Yet frayed relations between the remaining members continued to pose challenges for the business, and in 2006, they voted to enter a licensing agreement with Rhino Entertainment—in a nice turn of history, Rhino was now a division of Warner Bros., the Dead's first record company. The agreement hinged on the band's trust in Mark Pinkus, a dyed-in-the-wool Deadhead and Vice President of Rhino, who proved to be an extremely able executive and creative steward. The ten-year contract provided a significant annual royalty guarantee to the surviving members and gave Rhino sole responsibility for all Grateful Dead recordings, marketing, and licensing, including administering the official website, *Dead.net* (Budnick 2017).

After tape vault archivist Dick Latvala died in 1999, David Lemieux stepped into the role, overseeing the band's archival release program. His efforts included the continuation of the *Vault* and *Dick's Picks* series as well as the *Download Series* (fifteen releases from 2005 and 2008), the *Road Trips* series (seventeen releases between 2007 and 2011), and several box sets. Although some of the *Road Trips* volumes had fared poorly, most of these archival releases sold well, often as many as 25,000 copies. Despite widely available audience and soundboard recordings of many of these concerts, Rhino's work attracted loyal customers with state-of-the-art restorations of the master recordings, professional art, and extensive liner notes (Barnes 2023). In 2023, one of Rhino's Grateful Dead box sets won a Grammy for Special Limited Edition Package. For the industry, the more important metric was Rhino's marketing prowess—and the Dead's continuing appeal: the 2011 box set *Europe '72: The Complete Recordings* featured all twenty-two concerts from the tour, seventy-three

CDs in a miniature steamer trunk with a liner note book with the unusually high pricetag of $450. All 7,200 copies sold out in a week, prompting the release of a CD-only version that also sold well.

Rhino's successful administration removed the final reason for GDP as an ongoing business entity, so that same year, the remaining band members voted to dissolve the corporation. Although the band members entrusted David Lemieux with the responsibility for ensuring that their work is presented appropriately and well, this dissolution essentially ended the band's day-to-day involvement in decisions about the Grateful Dead's continuing business interests and legacy. For the band members, this allowed them the freedom to focus on their music and performing careers, which fans welcomed. Yet it formally brought to a close the last vestiges of the Garcia-era organizational ethos of self-management and the cottage industry that had defined the Grateful Dead.

Fare Thee Well: 2015 and After

Four years after GDP was shuttered, the Core Four announced a series of concerts to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Grateful Dead. Dubbed Fare Thee Well, the concerts were announced as the last time the Core Four would perform together. That proved to be true, but they also marked a new phase of the Dead's business history.

The response for tickets by Deadheads for the three Fare Thee Well concerts shocked the promoter, Peter Shapiro, and the band. The demand for tickets was far beyond their wildest expectations (Shapiro with Budnick 2022, 229–234). In a gesture that harked back to the band's original mail-order outreach to fans, a block of tickets was allocated to Grateful Dead Ticket Sales-Too, allowing knowledgeable fans a chance to purchase tickets before they were made available via other outlets. In all, more orders were received than the capacity of the venue, a remarkable statistic. The demand prompted two additional concerts to be added at Levi Stadium in Santa Clara, California, the weekend before the three concerts at Soldier Field in Chicago, July 2–4. The unexpected, and unrecognized, demand for those concerts offers a number of insights into the Dead's music, their brand, and their business model and values.

The five Fare Thee Well concerts set a number of new industry

records. Total ticket sales for the shows was 362,000, grossing $52.5M, a number that matched what the Dead had made in 1994 with eighty-four concerts. The shows were the fastest ticket sales that Ticketmaster had ever handled and the concerts set an attendance record for Soldier Field. The concerts were video streamed live to more than 400,000 subscribers, and fans bought $8M in merchandise.

Downtown Chicago rolled out the red carpet for fans, and nearly every business had some Dead imagery in the window; one pizza shop licensed a Steal Your Face for its boxes (and hosted a party for Rhino before the run). The city was alive with fans and the communal, tribal Deadhead vibe suffused the streets and parks before, during and after each concert. The ubiquity of the Dead and the warmth of the city's welcome showed that the Grateful Dead had now become a comfortable part of American culture—a far cry from their reputation as disreputable, drug-addled hippie holdovers that had dogged them for their career. Now Deadheads were visible and respectable, treated as valued concertgoers who significantly boosted Chicago's economy by selling out most of the hotels, restaurants, and car rental agencies that weekend.

What that suggests is a factor that the surviving partners in GDP overlooked or underestimated in 2011 when they dissolved GDP: not just the passion and continuing interest of their audience, but the economic clout and now mainstream status of that audience. What Fare Thee Well proved was that these fans would still travel across the country, but now they would pay often premium prices to see the members of the Grateful Dead, backing that commitment with resources that were not just significant but record-breaking. Moreover, that passion spanned generations: younger fans were a key demographic for the shows, continuing the Dead's long tradition of appealing to a multigenerational audience. In short, the community of fans the Dead had built continued to thrive, in ways that startled both insiders and commentators.

One group was not surprised. Musicians who played the Dead's music were intimately familiar with the power and appeal the music had for audiences all over the US (and indeed, in countries as diverse as Japan, Germany, England, and Israel). Several Dead cover bands held performances before and after the Fare Thee Well shows in Chicago, affirming

that the interest in all things Dead extended beyond simply the Core Four. While many iconic bands, from the Beatles to Led Zeppelin to Pink Floyd, have spawned tribute acts, the nature and extent of the Dead cover band phenomenon is significant, since these bands do not recreate note-for-note copies of the Dead; instead, they channel the improvisatory spirit of the music and make it their own. That creative engagement gets at the uniqueness of the continuing interest in the Dead's music.

For Deadheads, live music has always been the heart of the Dead experience. That was the band's philosophy and fans understood their role in the performance, taking seriously their participation as active listeners, dancers, and cocreators. In the years following Garcia's death, the Dead community's focus on live performance fueled continuing interest in the surviving members' work as well as the burgeoning cover band scene.

All four surviving band members continued to perform, and Phil Lesh and Bob Weir performed together, though efforts to reunite the Core Four failed. Phil Lesh was the most accessible, performing often at his Terrapin Crossroads, a restaurant with several performance spaces in San Rafael, California, from 2011 till 2021. He played frequent performances there with his Terrapin Family Band, with his son Grahame and other musicians, as well as well-received stands at the Capitol Theatre in New Jersey.

Only two months after the 2015 Fare Thee Well concerts, the other three surviving band members performed their first show as Dead & Company, which became the most enduring and popular post-Garcia effort. With John Mayer and seasoned Dead musicians Oteil Burbridge and Jeff Chimenti, Dead & Company played a rapturously received Halloween concert at Madison Square Garden, launching a full tour. The most successful post-Dead aggregation, Dead & Company toured regularly from 2015 through 2023, playing 235 concerts to audiences on the scale of the Grateful Dead. Their final tour of forty-seven shows attracted 840,000 fans with ticket sales of nearly $115M. By comparison, the Dead's last tour in 1995 constituted forty-five shows earning ticket revenue of $33.5M, or $70M today (Kaufman 2023).

Although Dead & Company have continued to perform, their decision to no longer tour attracted widespread media attention and sparked

renewed consumer interest in all things Grateful Dead. *The New York Times* reported that in August 2022, the Grateful Dead had its biggest week of record sales in thirty-five years, along with a dramatic spike in streaming (Tracy 2023). Dead & Company's longevity also initiated a new generation of young fans in the Deadhead experience, expanding the band's demographic yet again.

Those younger fans also supported a widening array of Dead cover bands around the country. Although Dead cover bands formed beginning in the early 1970s, the phenomenon exploded after Garcia's death and has continued to grow since then. In 2018, it was estimated that more than 300 Dead cover bands performed in venues ranging from bars to music festivals. Some of these bands, such as Dark Star Orchestra, have cultivated national audiences, even playing venues that hosted the Dead. Today, they have performed more than 3,000 shows and continue to tour successfully. Other high-profile Dead-oriented bands include alumni of Dead-related efforts: Joe Russo's Almost Dead (JRAD) built on Russo's time in Furthur and began touring in 2013. Their improvisatory acumen has earned critical acclaim and attracted a significant audience.

The success of this array of musicians highlights the continuing demand for live Grateful Dead music and its widespread appeal. Remarkably, that interest has resulted in the proliferation of choices for Deadheads, far more than when the Grateful Dead were touring. That extends to other media: a multitude of podcasts and radio programs focus on Grateful Dead music. The *Grateful Dead Hour*, which began in 1984, remains in syndication today, and more than twenty radio stations offer locally produced Dead-oriented shows; SiriusXM features an all-Dead channel. The thriving listener base that supports Grateful Dead music in every medium and format suggests several insights into how that music, and the business that supports it, will endure.

The Future and Legacy of the Grateful Dead

While this essay focuses on the business of the Grateful Dead, it is clear that today there really is no more Grateful Dead business entity per se. Although Rhino's adept and capable administration of the Grateful Dead's music and licensing constitutes an organic extension of GDP's

work, they are an independent company with a much larger ambit. From a business standpoint, Rhino ably stewards the Dead's brand and shepherds their archival musical legacy, yet that underscores the fact that these tasks were once the exclusive purview of GDP and GDM. The Dead's business model had always focused on "insourcing," keeping decision making to themselves. That reality shapes any discussion of the future.

The health, age, and relationships between the surviving band members plays a decisive role in that discussion. At 83, Lesh is the oldest; he maintains an extensive performing schedule, as does Bob Weir, 75 years old, who continues to tour with the Wolf Brothers and continues to expand his efforts, most recently with orchestral performances with symphonies around the country. Bill Kreutzmann is 76 years old and continues to play with Billy and the Kids; he ended his participation in Dead & Company in 2023, although Mickey Hart, 79, continues to perform with the band as well as pursuing a variety of other musical projects. In each of these bands there is a younger generation of musicians who have now been mentored in the Grateful Dead's improvisational music by the members of the Core Four. As a result, a new generation of skilled musicians has developed a insightful appreciation for the Dead's music and a deep understanding of the band's distinctive style of collective improvisation. This will likely create even more bands with very deep Grateful Dead roots into the future.

The changes in the surviving band members mirror larger shifts in how the business of music is conducted. As musicians navigate the rapidly evolving economics and business landscape of the music industry, they may find reassurance in the ways that the Grateful Dead assessed and addressed similar challenges. In 1992, Jerry Garcia observed that:

> The music business is basically economics: it's basically the thing of, when you make a record, you want players that don't make mistakes, you don't necessarily want players to take chances. You want players that don't make mistakes because economically that means less time in the studio. You get what you want on the record and it's safe and it's perfect, and that's been the thrust of music production in popular music, which has sort of co-opted rock and roll. Our audience, I think, illustrates that there's a lot of people who really want a musical experience rather than to be performed at. (Bailey 2021)

Garcia's insights are as relevant today as they were more than thirty years ago. Musicians focused on popularity and hits will find the music industry oriented around those goals; musicians who wish to reach an audience that "wants a real musical experience and not to be performed *at*" will likely find themselves at odds with the music industry and frustrated by its strictures.

Yet, as the Dead cover band phenomenon shows, there are a variety of mechanisms for entrepreneurial musicians to build an audience outside of conventional music industry processes. Home recording studios, websites, social media and music streaming platforms offer direct-to-consumer tools to share and sell music, merchandise, and even attract patrons. Together these are not at all unlike the Grateful Dead's business model of self-management and fan engagement. As one musician put it, "the Grateful Dead created a sustainable business model" for bands that are more improvisational and focused on playing to live audiences.[3] As the Dead showed, it is possible to be artists and rebuff the pressure to conform to industry norms and expectations—and still succeed. That attitude continues to drive many serious musicians today.

It also continues to attract listeners. Any consideration of the Dead's legacy and the future of their music has to take into account the ongoing Deadhead phenomenon. First-generation Deadheads, those who actually saw the Dead perform, were an extremely unusual and communal group. Intentionally nurtured by the band and its organization, these fans' engagement was rooted in the shared history of the 1960s and the counterculture, but it endured because of the understanding that they were as essential part of the concert experience, an active participation that fostered a subcultural identity. By 1995, estimates suggested there were one million Deadheads worldwide. That number has only grown.

In *The Grateful Dead Movie* (1977), a fan declares, "There is nothing like a Grateful Dead concert. Never was, never will be." While the continuing work of the surviving band members has ensured that a direct connection to the original band has continued, that raises the question of what their music will look like once all of the surviving members have ceased performing. Will the audience continue? Will it thrive and attract new generations, or will it dwindle and atrophy? To help answer these

questions, a small convenience sample was used with mostly young men who had no opportunity to see a live Grateful Dead performance. There were eighteen men with ages 20 to 57 and an average age of 36. Four were Gen X; nine were Gen Y Millennials; and five were Gen Z, the youngest group in the population. There were some clear patterns in all of their responses. First, they all enjoyed Grateful Dead music, ranking it among their top ten bands. Several respondents also expressed an interest in the rich and deep history of the Dead, wanting to "follow it down the rabbit hole," as one put it. All had very broad tastes, appreciating many musical genres; most had seen or listened to several of Dead-affiliated bands. Most had been introduced to the Dead's music by family members or by friends in high school or college. All but two considered themselves Deadheads. In describing their interest for the Dead's music, the common terms they used included "passion," "in a class by itself," "never the same," and they singled out the band's songwriting and range of genres, calling the music a portal to other music. They also admired the sense of community that the music accompanies.

Although this was a brief study and a small sample, the insights it provided suggest that the music and history can continue to catalyze deep interest, especially when fueled by live performances. Responses were also typical of how first-generation Deadheads were introduced to the band's music, as was the age range of respondents. Listening habits are very different, however, a reflection of the changes in technology. For new fans, streaming music and listening via cellphones is most common, and their purchases of recordings is more limited; an exception was vinyl LPs, which command strong interest.

The resurgence of vinyl as a music format is part of larger trends in the marketplace that exceed the bounds of this article, but it does point to the degree to which the Deadhead phenomenon has become a part of mainstream culture. This can be seen in the steady increase in interest in Grateful Dead-related merchandise by the general public. In 2018 and 2019, several high-end fashion clothiers released Grateful Dead-themed apparel, and tie-dye has become part of fashionable street wear. The proliferation of interest in band logos and insignias is part of this trend, made possible by Rhino's work to promote the Dead brand. Although that

departs markedly from the band's practice, when they tightly controlled their trademarks and rebuffed mainstream efforts to adopt their imagery, Rhino's obligation to fulfill annual royalty guarantees to the surviving members necessitates a larger stable of vendors, and that accompanies and helps to foster larger cultural interest in the band's music and legacy.

Perhaps the most unexpected aspect of that interest is scholarship. Although academic scrutiny of the band began in the 1960s as part of social scientists' study of the counterculture, scholars began to examine the Grateful Dead with greater urgency and visibility after the death of Garcia (Meriwether 2012). In 1996, the first conference sessions devoted to the Dead were held at Southwest/Texas Popular Culture Association; in 1998 the conference formed an area devoted to Dead studies, which has hosted papers and sessions every year since then. In 2019, scholars who had presented at the area voted to form the Grateful Dead Studies Association (GDSA), which has expanded the work on the band and its reception and led to its greater acceptance as an academic subject, evidenced by the Duke University Press series Studies in the Grateful Dead, which the GDSA sponsors. Remarkable for its rigor and interdisciplinarity, the field of Dead studies intersects with the broadening interest in the Dead and serves as an expert forum for those who wish to deepen their understanding. The work of the GDSA has also facilitated a growing number of undergraduate and extension classes on the band as well as a few graduate courses.

Pedagogy was part of the Grateful Dead since their inception (Meriwether 2012). Yet the Dead's easy translation to the classroom suggests that the phenomenon will only gain in sophistication and reach. Just as the history of jazz shows that popular music can easily move from clubs to conservatories, scholars have shown that the Dead's music calls for and rewards high-level critical attention. Business theorists have played a role in that work, which returns to the question that prompted this essay: what has changed in our understanding of the band's business history since the 2011 publication of the business lessons modeled by the Dead?

In broad form, despite the enormous changes affecting the surviving band members and the larger contexts of their work, the reasoning that led to the formulation of those lessons remains applicable today. Moreover,

the enduring principles that defined that history have been underscored and affirmed, not obviated or contradicted, in the intervening years. In large part that is due to the fact that the Grateful Dead were a band before they were a business; for the duration of their career, they were a cooperative organized around artistic, not economic, goals. Events since then have only confirmed that view.

Although the outsourcing of the band's business represents a marked departure from how they conducted business, there was a precedent for that. Early on, the Dead sought expert outside help, eventually supporting closely allied business such as Fly By Night Travel for their touring, Kumquat Mae for merchandise, and Alembic for their instruments and equipment. Those were not run by the band, yet they provided essential services; in that sense, the surviving members' decision to entrust their legacy to Rhino can be seen as an extension of that practice. It is significant that the band predicated their decision on Rhino's understanding of their work: Mark Pinkus's deep knowledge of, and appreciation for, the Dead made that possible. And Rhino's success, and the band's renewal of their contract with them, also echoes the band's own philosophy of requiring, and rewarding, employees who could constantly innovate and take risks to keep the Dead moving forward.

Rhino's achievement is especially notable given the seismic changes in the music industry and in business more generally. Scholars have identified at least three major issues that have changed for all businesses since the publication of the business lessons of the Dead: the need to rapidly adjust to shifting internal and external environments; to quickly and effectively adopt and apply new technology; and to recognize and respond to the changing demographics of customers and employees. When the business lessons of the Dead were published it was understood that they applied more readily in smaller, entrepreneurial organizations and businesses—organizations like the Dead. This is still true today. Similarly, the industry that appears most likely to be an easy adopter of the lessons is music. Given the changes in the music industry and how technology has made it easier for new bands to survive and attract fans, nearly all of the lessons should be relatively easy to apply, depending on the personalities and values of the individuals. Larger businesses and organizations are

typically older and have a more rigid top-down structure, leadership, and decision-making apparatus, making it more difficult to apply many of the lessons. Lesson 8, Transformational Leadership, is always the most challenging to apply because such leaders are *very* rare, and that quality cannot be easily taught.

However, new businesses started by and/or appealing to Millennials and Gen Z employees and customers will likely find most if not all the lessons relevant and useful, for several reasons. These are the generations that represent the future of both customers and businesses as they become the largest segments of the population. Research shows Millennials (born between 1981 and 1998) want to make a difference in the world, have strong values, and are determined to live by them. They are willing to change employers or, as customers, buy products from other sources if they don't see socially responsible practices. They thrive on social media. Those in Gen Z (born between 1997 and 2015) are considered the digital generation, having been exposed to screen devices since they were born. Like Millennials, they wish to make a difference in the world, and care strongly about the collective good. They believe in dialogue and accept differences of opinion as part of effective communication (Greenwood 2008). These two generational groups exhibit strong connections between their behavioral characteristics and every lesson (see Appendix).

Conclusion

The continued success of the Grateful Dead may defy conventional music industry norms, but as this essay shows, that enduring appeal is rooted in the band's thirty-year effort to live their values, engage their fans, and cultivate a like-minded community based on those values. Remarkably, that vision has produced a legacy that has extended a decade beyond the Fare Thee Well concerts, with no signs of fading. In particular, Dead & Company's ability to renew, reinvent, and expand the Grateful Dead's repertoire also showed that the band's improvisational ethos can continue to appeal to a wide audience. In 2023, shortly before Dead & Company finished their last tour, Mickey Hart commented:

> There's a need in the community for this kind of music; and fans really want that Grateful Dead experience. That's "home" for

> them. Without it they're not as fulfilled in life. They really feel it's transcendent for them, and they keep coming. You can feel the energy. And it's really serious, on another level of what we really try to do to people: to raise their consciousness, and that's what it's all about ... It improves the human condition. (Gans and Lambert 2023)

Rhino's ambitious archival project continues to deepen listeners' understanding of the Dead's legacy with several new vault releases every year as well, a project that shows no signs of slowing. Fans hungry for live performances can hear surviving members as well as a host of cover bands, some of whom can boast careers that rival the Dead's in longevity, with more joining the ranks every year. As John Mayer put it, Garcia "set up camp, and then he left. But you can still go there. And I think that speaks to how incredible the music is. You can still visit. It just takes people … This is never going to be over for me as long as I live" (Rose 2017).

The continuing appeal of the music informs the marketplace clout of the Grateful Dead brand. Bolstered by Rhino's shrewd marketing efforts, that enduring interest helped make 2022 a record year for the Dead's music sales, a remarkable feat for any band. Yet the widening demographic reach of the band's music, message, and model point may offer the most compelling reason for business theorists and managers to study the Grateful Dead. That is part of the larger relevance of the band's model for other businesses and industries, which is perhaps even more true today than it was when the ten lessons were published in 2011. While those lessons remain timely, we can hope to see additions and refinements as the story of the Dead's legacy continues to unfold.

Band manager Jon McIntire remembers Garcia once telling him, "I'd really like to see what can be created from joy" (Greenfield 1996, 342). Perhaps the most important lesson the Dead's career and ongoing legacy illustrate is how tenacious and powerful that idea is. Indeed, the ongoing vitality of the Dead phenomenon presents a remarkable, longitudinal case study in what joy can create. Though Garcia did not live to see what it would become, the business philosophy he helped establish for the Grateful Dead shows that joy can indeed be the foundational goal not only for art, but for the business that facilitates it.

Appendix: The Ten Lessons

All lessons are from Barnes (2011). Page numbers where each lesson is first listed are in parentheses.

1. Strategic improvisation—the ability to plan, act, and make adjustments in real time—is the key to running a great organization (11).

2. Embrace strong corporate values and socially conscious business practices because it's the right thing to do—and because it's more profitable (33).

3. Be kind to your customers—by offering high-quality products and services and being responsive to their concerns—and they'll be kind to you by becoming lifelong customers (51).

4. In creative businesses, familiarity—rather than scarcity—creates value. Share your intellectual property, because the more people who know about your work, the more ways there will be to make money (69).

5. Harness the power of consumer tribes to collaborate with your customers, improve performance, and boost profits (90).

6. Insourcing—bringing as many business functions as possible in-house—increases creative control, keeps customers happier, and boosts profitability (110).

7. Innovate constantly, despite risks of failure and financial loss, in order to keep your business ahead of the curve (129).

8. Transformational leaders create cohesiveness in an organization and inspire others to achieve greatness (149).

9. Sharing leadership through horizontal organizational structures leads to better decision-making and more loyal employees (164).

10. Provide your customers with authentic experiences that improve their lives (187).

Notes

1. See, for example, Barnes 1999; 2011; 2012. For a survey of that larger interest, see Barnes 2015/16 and Rifkin 2015/16.

2. David Farber, a scholar of both the 1960s and American business history, has explored the Dead's efforts to express their values and countercultural ethos in their business practices and philosophy; see Farber 2017.

3. Matthew Armstrong, a scholar who went on to lead a Dead-influenced band called Viva La Muerta, made this comment in 2012, echoed by Peter Conners, who identifies three primary traits that define jam bands, all of which derive from the Dead's model (2013, x–xi).

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