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## Reconstructing the Warlocks: The Top 40 Roots of the Early Grateful Dead

MIKE DOLGUSHKIN

Before the Grateful Dead, there were the Warlocks. As listeners familiar with the band well know, the group formed when Ron McKernan urged Jerry Garcia to form an electric blues band. With Bob Weir, Bill Kreutzmann, and Dana Morgan, Jr., the group began rehearsing early in 1965 and had their debut that spring. They quickly morphed into a rock and roll band, however—as Garcia later remarked, once they “went electric” they automatically gravitated toward rock and roll, not only because it was “fun to play” but also—crucially—because there was the possibility of paying gigs (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner 1972, 37). After a few months, Garcia’s friend Phil Lesh replaced Morgan was replaced on bass and the die was cast. The young band honed its chops and paid its dues by playing bars on the San Francisco Peninsula for most of the remainder of the year.

By any objective view then, this first year was, by definition, formative. Yet official accounts gloss over 1965, focusing instead on 1966, when both the documentary record and extant recordings begin to provide a more complete sketch of the band’s history. For scholars, the most prominent gap in this period is also the most critical for our understanding

of the band: what did they actually play? Only one recording survives. Cut in November 1965, on the cusp of the band changing its name, this six-song demo is the only known recording of the not-yet-Grateful Dead (Scott, Dolgushkin, and Nixon 1999, 1). Band members and those fortunate enough to have seen performances that year have talked about what the Warlocks played, but fading memories and scattered fragments in the documentary record are all that scholars have to reconstruct this foundational era of the Grateful Dead. For most bands, this would scarcely matter: the apprentice or journeyman efforts of musicians who were, as they all admitted, still learning to play their instruments would interest only completists or obsessive fans. The Warlocks, however, were different: not only did they return to these roots in later years, band members all cite this period as critical. As Kreutzmann later said, “we were making it up as we went along,” but nonetheless, this was when “we got our first chops as a band, in front of an audience” (Kreutzmann 2015, 30, 34).

That makes the lack of information about this early repertoire all the more intriguing. As scholars delve more deeply into how the band became the mature Grateful Dead, the era in which they were the Warlocks represents a vital foundation for the Dead’s project, one that merits more attention. This essay builds on the preliminary (and speculative) list compiled for *DeadBase* (1999, 565), offering a deeper look at the Warlocks’ repertoire as one of the few archival exercises that can be undertaken in the absence of a more extensive recorded legacy.

For those who never heard the Warlocks, the first inkling of the band’s repertoire were Garcia’s comments in his 1972 *Rolling Stone* interview with Charles Reich and Jann Wenner. There he mentioned stealing from the Kinks and playing American blues recently made popular by the Rolling Stones, including “King Bee,” “Little Red Rooster,” and “Walkin’ the Dog,” along with the Chuck Berry songs “Promised Land” and “Johnny B. Goode.” Garcia also cited material adapted from their jug band days, including “Stealin’” and “Don’t Ease Me In,” as well as a couple of Dylan tunes: “It’s All Over Now Baby Blue” and “She Belongs to Me” (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner 1972, 38). Indeed, the Warlocks were remembered by some as being highly influenced by the Stones (Levy 2008). Garcia noted that the Warlocks were known for this among

the other bands on the Peninsula circuit. Early critics and fans saw the Warlocks as primarily McKernan's band. Regardless, McKernan's influence on the band's repertoire is borne out by archival recordings, band member testimony, and even archival evidence, albeit fragmentary. The most interesting of these fragments is a list of songs found among his possessions that surfaced after his death (fig. 1).

While at first thought to be a Warlocks set list, the tunes listed do not reflect known aspects of the band's repertoire, but they do display McKernan's affinity for blues and soul, along with some Beatles covers, and even, surprisingly, "Ghost Riders in the Sky." Contemporary and other accounts suggest that this is most likely a list of songs McKernan may have wanted the band to perform or thought they could work up, perhaps even before they had played any gigs (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner 1972, 38; Kreutzmann and Eisen 2015, 16–26). While we know that the Warlocks and later the Dead did in fact play some of these tunes, we have no idea about the rest.

Given the relative lack of information on McKernan that survives, this song list provides useful insights. For the other members, we have far more information. Garcia noted that he listened to Freddie King when he took up electric guitar again, and while one can definitely hear King's influence in Garcia's playing, we have little evidence that the band played any of those tunes except for the occasional later appearance of "Hideaway." Garcia also mentioned that Weir had sung "She Belongs to Me," and Kreutzmann had played drums in rock and roll bands previously (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner 1972, 38).

What emerges from these comments is a fairly good description of what band members remembered of the Warlocks. They played a combination of blues, soul, jug band, folk, and what was by then "classic" rock and roll. What tends to be overlooked or downplayed in these accounts is music that was popular at the time. The Warlocks were a bar band; that meant their patrons expected the band to play what they knew, which was current hit records that were the staple fodder of local radio. In 1965, this meant AM Top 40 radio, since rock and roll on the FM band did not exist yet—that would emerge in just a few years, when Tom "Big Daddy" Donahue would become a legendary Bay Area deejay as FM radio

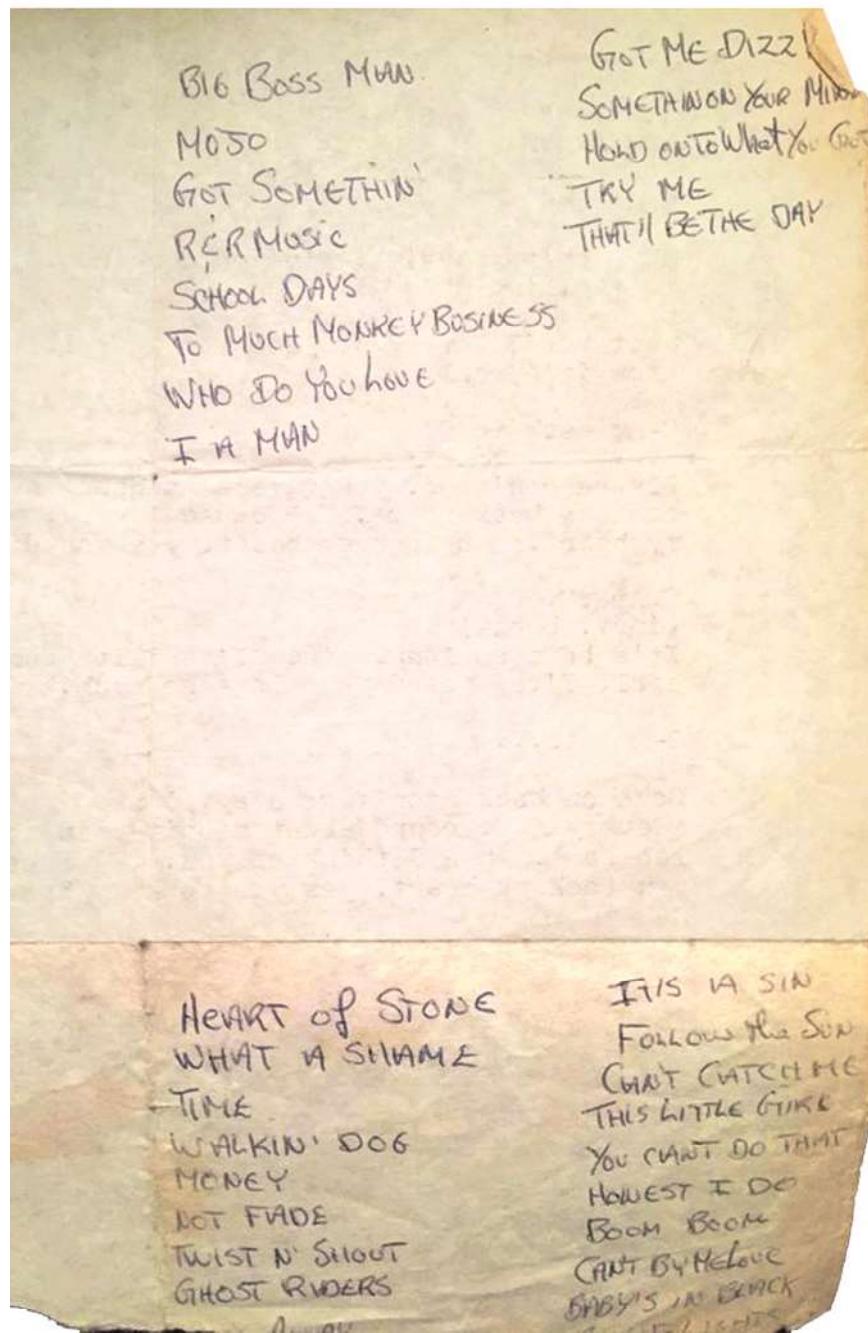


Figure 1. Ron McKernan, "Early Song List," ca. 1965. Courtesy Jim and Danny Sullivan.

exploded into prominence. Dubbed “The Father of Underground Radio,” Donahue also played a crucial role in this era of the Dead as the co-owner of Autumn Records, who recorded the Warlocks’ demo in November 1965 (McDonough 1985, 95). A look at the San Francisco Bay Area weekly radio surveys of the period sheds some light on this overlooked aspect of the Grateful Dead’s musical development.

This essay relies on surveys from Bay Area radio stations KYA, KEWB, and KLIV. These Top 40 stations catered primarily to a preteen and teenage audience, playing the songs that were popular in the area for that particular week. This made for eclectic playlists. Although not comprehensive, these surveys are revealing, not only for how the Bay Area’s radio fare fit into the larger national currents in the record-buying public, but for the changing tastes of American youth on the cusp of the psychedelic Sixties.

These surveys provide a good measure of how the Warlocks’ repertoire fit into those larger trends. A good starting point is one of their Chuck Berry tunes, “Promised Land,” which was not a current hit when the Warlocks formed but a recent one that got airplay in the San Francisco Bay Area in November and December 1964. According to Ruth Pahkala, Lesh’s girlfriend at the time he joined the band, Garcia originally sang this, after which it was handed over to McKernan, and finally to Weir (Pahkala 1980/84). A spring 1966 recording of “Promised Land” features Garcia on vocals, so it is difficult to tell exactly when and how these transfers of vocal duties occurred. Sung by Weir, “Promised Land” became a staple of the Grateful Dead’s repertoire from 1971 onwards.

Among the Rolling Stones songs which the Warlocks covered were three 1965 hits: “The Last Time,” which was getting airplay from March into May; “Satisfaction,” played from May through August, and “Get Off of My Cloud,” in the rotation from October through December. “Satisfaction” reappeared sporadically in Dead concerts beginning in 1980, and “The Last Time” returned more regularly, starting ten years later. “Get Off of My Cloud” did not last, but it did inspire them to add their own flourish, changing the chorus.

It is interesting to note that these tunes are linked to certain months. During most of the 1960s, more songs were hitting the charts than before

or since, meaning that there was a higher turnover. Hit records rarely lasted more than twelve weeks on local surveys, most considerably less than that. They could therefore be associated with very specific periods, and that is how the Warlocks heard them on the radio. They were truly current hits, unlike in recent years, when a popular song can remain on the *Billboard* Hot 100 for a year or longer.

“Good Lovin’” was another song the Warlocks likely picked up in 1965. Originally done by soul singer Limmie Frank Snell, Jr., recording under the stage name of Lemme B. Good, the song was recorded by the Olympics and received airplay on Oakland’s KEWB during April 1965. Given how attuned McKernan was to blues and R&B, it seems likely that he would have taken notice, as would the other members of the band. The earliest extant recordings of the Dead’s take on the song date from early 1966; before their May 19, 1966, performance, Garcia calls it a “new version,” implying that there was an earlier one. The Dead famously revived “Good Lovin’” in 1969 and it remained in the repertoire, with a succession of lead singers, all the way to the end of the band.

The Warlocks also covered Van Morrison’s “Gloria.” His version with the band Them was a radio hit in the Bay Area during April, May, June, and July, unlike the rest of the United States which had to wait for the cover by the Shadows of Knight a year later. The Warlocks would have heard the versions of these tunes that were aired locally, which were not necessarily the ones that caught on nationally. This applies to “Louie Louie,” a tune that Weir recalled them playing, though he had never been able to remember the words, as he commented during one performance (Grateful Dead 1971). The Kingsmen had a huge national hit with their version of the Richard Berry song late in 1963, but Paul Revere and the Raiders’ rendition got the airplay and sales over most of the West Coast. San Francisco’s KYA briefly played the Kingsmen’s recording in May 1965, which reached Number 15 for the week ending May 28 (fig. 2), after which the Raiders’ version supplanted it, becoming a major local hit for the second time.

This is the recording that the Warlocks would have heard. Interestingly, both “Gloria” and “Louie Louie” remained in the band’s repertoire well past the Warlocks era, although apparently more infre-

**KYA** **RADIO**  
**1260**

**OFFICIAL TOP THIRTY**

**FOR WEEK ENDING MAY 28, 1965**

This Week	Last Week	Title	Artist
1	( 1)	WOOLY BULLY	Sam the Sham & Pharaohs
2	( 7)	MR. TAMBOURINE MAN	Byrds
3	( 5)	GLORIA	Them
4a	( 2)	TICKET TO RIDE	Beatles
4b	( 2)	YES IT IS	Beatles
5	( 9)	CRYING IN THE CHAPEL	Elvis Presley
6	( 4)	MRS. BROWN YOU'VE GOT A LOVELY DAUGHTER	
7	(24)	I CAN'T HELP MYSELF	Herman's Hermits
8	( 8)	CAST YOUR FATE TO THE WIND	Four Tops
9	( 3)	LAND OF A THOUSAND DANCES	Sounds Orchestral
10	( 6)	HELP ME RHONDA	Round Robin
11	(11)	BACK IN MY ARMS AGAIN	Beach Boys
12	(14)	OOO BABY BABY	Supremes
13	(22)	HUSH, HUSH, SWEET CHARLOTTE	Miracles
14	(12)	JUST ONCE IN MY LIFE	Patti Page
15	(30)	LOUIE LOUIE	Righteous Brothers
16	(10)	THE LAST TIME	Kingsmen
17	(--)	YOU TURN ME ON	Rolling Stones
18	(27)	FOR YOUR LOVE	Ian Whitcomb
19	(15)	CATCH THE WIND	Yardbirds
20	(20)	DO THE FREDDIE	Donovan
21	(23)	CONCRETE AND CLAY	Freddie & the Dreamers
22	(28)	A WALK IN THE BLACK FOREST	Unit Four Plus Two
23	(26)	ENGINE ENGINE #9	Horst Jankowski
24	(--)	BRING IT ON HOME TO ME	Roger Miller
25	(29)	HERE COMES THE NIGHT	Animals
26	(--)	YOU CAN HAVE HER	Them
27	(--)	BEFORE AND AFTER	Righteous Brothers
28	(--)	THE ENTERTAINER	Chad & Jeremy
29	(--)	THIS LITTLE BIRD	Tony Clarke
30	(--)	I'LL BE WITH YOU IN APPLE BLOSSOM TIME	Marianne Faithfull
			Wayne Newton

**SMITHS**

Oakland Hayward Berkeley Richmond  
Walnut Creek Woodside Sacramento  
Concord Corte Madera San Jose Vallejo  
Fremont Santa Rosa Southland

**GENE NELSON**  
6:00-10:00 AM

**JIM WASHBURN**  
10:00 AM-2:00 PM

**BOB MITCHELL**  
2:00-6:00 PM

**TOM DONAHUE**  
6:00-10:00 PM

**TOMMY SAUNDERS**  
10:00 PM-1:00 AM

**RUSS SYRACUSE**  
1:00 AM-6:00 AM

**BILL KEFFURY**  
6:00 AM-NOON SUNDAY

Figure 2. "KYA Radio 1260 Official Top Thirty," May 28, 1965. Courtesy Mike Dolgushkin.

quently; both would be revived by the Dead in later years, though they would remain rarities. Future Grateful Dead keyboardist Tom Constanten remembers seeing the Warlocks perform Sam the Sham's "Wooly Bully" at Magoo's Pizza Parlor (Greenfield 1996, 63), which was topping the Bay Area charts at the time. Ruth Pahkala recalled that she wrote out the words to Dylan's "Like A Rolling Stone" because Lesh wanted to sing it (Pahkala 1980/84). He also tackled the Lovin' Spoonful's "Do You Believe in Magic." This took place in late summer 1965, revealing that the Warlocks were still picking up new Top 40 covers.

In September the band worked up Wilson Pickett's "In the Midnight Hour," which became a Pigpen showcase. It was a prototype of the extended rapping he would do on tunes such as "Turn On Your Love Light," and remained a staple of the Dead's repertoire for years to come. In late September, San Jose's KLIV briefly charted Peter, Paul, and Mary's version of Gordon Lightfoot's "Early Morning Rain," which came in at Number 30 for the week ending October 2 (Fig. 3). While it is true that Tom Donahue required the bands auditioning for Autumn Records to play the tune, the appearance of the song on Bay Area radio that fall suggests that the Warlocks might well have worked it up for live performance earlier than their November 3 Autumn Records session.

In late October, well into the Warlock's residency at the In Room in Belmont, two new Top 40 songs entered the band's repertoire, both significant. Junior Walker's "Cleo's Back" Garcia later cited as a major influence on the band's developing style, noting that they studied it and may have even played it live (McNally 2002, 92). An instrumental played at the Dead's March 25, 1966, performance at Trouper's Hall in Los Angeles bears a strong resemblance to "Cleo's Back," and may have been either their own take on it, or perhaps the closest they could get to Walker's distinctive rendition. The other song was a new one by Them called "Mystic Eyes," which the band heard while driving around the Peninsula one afternoon. That night, they warmed up with it at the In Room.

The band's lengthy engagement at the club gave the Warlocks an opportunity to explore, learning to improvise and stretch out songs, not just to learn how to play together but also to avoid repeating songs from their still limited repertoire. Sometimes that meant doing one tune for an

**KLIV**

**SOUND SURVEY**  
 Dial 1590 on your AM Radio  
 292-1590 on your telephone  
 San Jose, California

This Week	WEEK ENDING SATURDAY, OCT. 2, 1965	Last Week
1. YESTERDAY	—The Beatles (Capitol)	( 1 )
2. LOVERS' CONCERTO	—The Toys (Dyna Voice)	( 5 )
3. TREAT HER RIGHT	—Roy Head (Back Beat)	( 2 )
4. MOHAIR SAM	—Charlie Rich (Smash)	( 4 )
5. EVERYONE'S GONE TO THE MOON	—Jonathon King (Parrot)	( 8 )
6. KEEP ON DANCING	—The Gentrys (MGM)	( 3 )
7. THERE, BUT FOR FORTUNE	—Joan Baez (Vanguard)	(11)
8. EVE OF DESTRUCTION	—Barry McGuire (Dunhill)	( 6 )
9. I STILL LOVE YOU	—The Vejtables (Autumn)	(15)
10. LIAR, LIAR	—The Castaways (Soma)	( 7 )
11. ROSES AND RAINBOWS	—Danny Hutton (HBR)	(23)
12. HELP	—The Beatles (Capitol)	( 9 )
13. STEPPIN' OUT	—Paul Revere & Raiders (Columbia)	(10)
14. I LIVE FOR THE SUN	—The Sunrays (Tower)	(14)
15. DREAM BABY	—Cher (Imperial)	(25)
16. THE UNIVERSAL SOLDIER	—Glenn Campbell (Capitol)	(26)
17. LAUGH AT ME	—Sonny (Atco)	(12)
18. MY GIRL SLOOPY	—Little Caesar (Mala)	(13)
19. HEART FULL OF SOUL	—The Yardbirds (Epic)	(30)
20. DO YOU BELIEVE IN MAGIC?	—The Lovin' Spoonful (Kama Sutra)	(16)
21. JUST A LITTLE BIT BETTER	—Herman's Hermits (MGM)	(28)
22. CATCH US IF YOU CAN	—Dave Clark Five (Epic)	(19)
23. NOT THE LOVIN' KIND	—Dino, Desi & Billy (Reprise)	(29)
24. AGENT 00-SOUL	—Edwin Starr (Ric Tic)	(17)
25. IF I'VE BEEN DREAMING	—The Tikis (Autumn)	(20)
26. YOU'RE THE ONE	—The Vogues (Blue Star)	( K )
27. YOU'VE GOT YOUR TROUBLES	—The Fortunes (Press)	(18)
28. DANCE WITH ME	—The Mojo Men (Autumn)	( K )
29. WITH THESE HANDS	—Tom Jones (Parrot)	(21)
30. EARLY MORNING RAIN	—Peter, Paul & Mary (Warner Bros.)	( K )

K—K-LIV Klimber last week

**Figure 3.** "KLIV Sound Survey," October 2, 1965. Courtesy Mike Dolgushkin.

entire set, although the band justified that on artistic grounds. As Weir put it, “we weren’t done playing but the tune was over” (McNally 2002, 90).

More importantly, the Warlocks did not do “Mystic Eyes” with Van Morrison’s lyrics. Instead, McKernan contributed new ones, which produced their first original to have real staying power, “Caution (Do Not Stop on the Tracks).” That month an outfit known as the Family Dog began presenting dances at Longshoreman’s Hall in San Francisco, and when two of its members auditioned the Warlocks at the In Room, they passed on the band because of their reliance on cover songs (McNally 2002, 96). Within a month, the Warlocks wrote at least four original tunes, which comprised the bulk of their Autumn Records audition in November.

By that time they were no longer the Warlocks. Adopting the temporary monicker The Emergency Crew for the audition, they changed it to the Grateful Dead shortly after and quickly settled into their role as part of the Acid Tests, writer Ken Kesey and friends’ free-form multimedia happenings featuring then-legal LSD. This was the format where the Dead’s already honed improvisational acumen reached new heights.

The Acid Test era lasted only a few months, primarily December 1965 through April 1966, with a couple more held that fall. For the Dead, the end of the Acid Test era marked the end of the early developmental phase of the band, and the start of far better documentation, both by journalists and via concert recordings. Obviously, there is much that we do not know of this first year, but this study points to some tantalizing possibilities. We have a fairly good grasp of the Rolling Stones songs played by the Warlocks, but that suggests that they might have played others that received AM radio play that year, such as “Surprise Surprise,” “What A Shame,” “Spider and the Fly,” or “Heart of Stone,” some of which were on McKernan’s song list.

Which Kinks songs did they do? “Tired of Waiting For You” and “Set Me Free” were 1965 hits, along with the more obscure “Everybody is Gonna Be Happy.” The Warlocks performed “Wooly Bully”; did they also play “Ju Ju Hand,” the follow-up? In 1965, Paul Revere and the Raiders were still hard-edged enough that the Warlocks might have tackled “Sometimes” or “Steppin’ Out.” While suburban garage bands at the time were influenced by the Stones, the Who and the Yardbirds were even

more influential. “Can’t Explain” received some Bay Area AM airplay, but while “For Your Love” and “Heart Full of Soul” were major hits they are conspicuously absent from band member accounts, nor are they mentioned by friends or casual listeners. Also, while Garcia named the Stones, the Kinks, and especially the Beatles as inspirations for the Warlocks—or at least as models—their early aesthetic was steeped in folk-era ideas of authenticity; it is unlikely they would have found anything worthwhile in the more pop side of the British Invasion, such as the Searchers or Peter and Gordon.

Another gap in the early Warlocks’ contemporaneity is Motown. Though Garcia showed an affinity for Motown in later years, there is no evidence that the Warlocks were inclined in that direction, though there are several rhythm and blues tunes that got Top 40 airplay in the Bay Area in 1965 that would have been logical fits for the band: “Got To Get You Off My Mind” by Solomon Burke, “Ride Your Pony” by Lee Dorsey, and “First I Look At the Purse” by the Contours. James Brown also had a few hits that year. In a later interview, Garcia mentioned that he listened to rhythm and blues stations in his early adolescence, a practice that taught him and many of his contemporaries that there was far more to American popular music than what their parents listened to (McNally 2015, 67–68). An interesting exception was McKernan, whose father was a well-known rhythm and blues disk jockey and had an extensive library of blues, R&B, and African American vernacular music. It is possible, even probable, that the other members of the Warlocks also listened to Bay Area soul stations, but what we know of their repertoire suggests a much stronger focus on current Top 40 hits, even the soul tunes.

That, in itself, is telling: the prominence of Top 40 songs in the band’s early repertoire is a reminder of the pressures, challenges, and opportunities that the fledgling Grateful Dead faced as they sought to establish themselves as a working band. What regional radio station playlists confirm is that the band members were very much attuned to what was being played on the radio at the time. Contrary to their later identity as being aloof from the musical fashions of the times, the proto-Grateful Dead were keenly sensitive to what was popular: for the Warlocks, the

Top 40 was a distinct and prominent influence, and arguably more significant at the time than the influences their later repertoire emphasized.

The winnowing influence exercised by the ravages of time and the vagaries of memory means that much of what the Warlocks played will likely remain speculative, but the period in which the proto-Grateful Dead were a Top 40 bar band deserves more attention from scholars who wish to better understand the roots of the band. While more work remains to be done, this preliminary study shows that the Warlocks were very much a part of the broader development of the teen/garage band movement, which reframes how we see the early development of the Grateful Dead. Most of all, this reappraisal helps us understand how and why this early phase of the Grateful Dead's development continued to be a significant factor in their music, and performing repertoire, for the rest of their career.

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#### NOTE

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