GRATEFUL DEAD STUDIES

Volume 6 2023/2024

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

Meriwether, Nicholas G.

Editor's Column: The Sound of Fragile Thunder

CITATION INFORMATION

Nicholas G. Meriwether

Editor's Column: The Sound of Fragile Thunder

Grateful Dead Studies

Volume 6 (2023/2024)

Pages: 6–12

URL: https://gratefuldeadstudies.org/GDSv6_EdColumn.pdf

LICENSE

Download of this Grateful Dead Studies Licensed Content (hereafter Content) constitutes acceptance of the following terms and conditions: Provided they abide by the restrictions below, users may search, view, reproduce, display, download, print, perform, and distribute Content for the following Permitted Uses: research activities; classroom or organizational instruction and related classroom or organizational activities; student assignments; as part of a scholarly, cultural, educational or organizational presentation or workshop, if such use conforms to the customary and usual practice in the field; authors or other Content creators may at their discretion incorporate their Content into unrestricted databases or websites with prior written permission from Grateful Dead Studies.

The portions of Content that have been downloaded or printed out by a User may continue to be used in compliance with these Terms and Conditions even if such license should later terminate or expire.

Users may not: use or authorize the use of the Grateful Dead Studies Licensed Content for commercial purposes or gains, including charging a fee-for-service; undertake any activity such as the use of computer programs that automatically download or export Content, commonly known as web robots, spiders, crawlers, wanderers or accelerators that may interfere with, disrupt or otherwise burden the Grateful Dead Studies server(s) or any third-party server(s) being used or accessed in connection with Grateful Dead Studies; or undertake coordinated or systematic activity between or among two or more individuals and/or entities that, in the aggregate, constitutes downloading and/or distributing a significant portion of the Content; or make any use, display, performance, reproduction, or distribution that exceeds or violates these Terms and Conditions of Use.

Additionally, users may not: modify, obscure, or remove any copyright notice or other attribution included in the Content; incorporate Content into an unrestricted database or website; systematically print out or download Content to stock or replace print holdings; download or print, or attempt to download or print, an entire issue; reproduce or distribute Content in bulk, such as the inclusion of Content in course packs, electronic reserves, repositories, or organizational intranets.

Grateful Dead Studies encourages the use of links to facilitate access to the Content.

EDITOR'S COLUMN

The Sound of Fragile Thunder

Nicholas G. Meriwether

In spring 1975, when the Grateful Dead were deep into the recording of what would become *Blues For Allah*, Jerry Garcia happened to see Robert Hunter's notebook. A page caught his eye, one with "a collection of haiku-style verses" that Hunter had jotted (Hunter 1993, 45). Part writer's exercise and part creative compost, Hunter viewed them as unconnected images, fragments that might grow into lines or lyrics. Garcia saw a unity that escaped their author: "Hey, this might fit together as a song," Hunter recalled him saying—and that was the genesis of "Crazy Fingers" (Jackson 1992, 229).

Garcia's discovery is fascinating for several reasons, and it gets at the theme of this volume. The Dead had begun taping their performances in 1966, at the urging of Owsley "Bear" Stanley, partly to critique their performances but also to mine their jams for possible songs. When Garcia spotted the inchoate lyrics of "Crazy Fingers," he was applying that same practice to words. This volume represents that idea writ large, a collective scholarly effort to recognize a kind of hidden, underlying unity across different aspects of the band's work, from their songwriting to their business practices.

One result of Stanley's policy was the start of what would grow into a remarkable archive of recordings documenting the band's performing

history. The extent of that has highlighted what it does not have, especially of the band's first two years. In 1971, Garcia summarized their early repertoire as "James Brown stuff, popular tunes, and top-40" (Stuckey 1971, 25), but the rationale for those choices has never been scrutinized. Mike Dolgushkin's essay traces how those songs tracked with regional radio charts at the time, offering insights into the degree to which the young band was more sensitive to, and enamored of, contemporary tastes than their later history suggested. Commentators have tended to highlight the early signs of the Dead's independence, but Dolgushkin's analysis documents a hidden aspect of their origins that usefully complicates our understanding of their development.

Radio charts are part of a defining albeit complicated context for the Dead's project, which is the larger ways that it fits into business. As Garcia commented in 1983, "It's not as though we're a business trying to be a loose business, what we really are is like artists trying to survive in that half-world of entertainment, which is much more conscious of its entertainment self than it is of its artist self" (Gans 2002, 224). The essays by Dougald O'Reilly and Barry Barnes examine the band's approach to business, exploring how the band navigated the tension that Garcia identified during the heyday of the Dead's career and after. Dennis McNally noted that "The Grateful Dead scene was a horizontal, not vertical, hierarchy, with the band at the center" (2002, 214). O'Reilly explores how the Dead structured their organization, showing how it fits into the scholarship on heterarchy and focusing on how Garcia's leadership offers a revealing example of, and lens for, exploring that consonance.

Garcia's leadership has been a focus of Barry Barnes's work as a business scholar, and he brings his multi decade study of the Dead's business practices to the present with his essay. Dead studies remains focused on the band's career, omitting or deprecating the years following Garcia's death in 1995; Barnes's analysis offers a comprehensive view, using business theory to trace larger themes and issues that other disciplinary perspectives can miss. In 2011, band lyricist John Perry Barlow reflected that "Our emphasis on decision by consensus that had to include just about *everybody* seemed like a clumsy tool at the time but, in the process, we were doing a lot of the early work in designing the 'flat' organizations

that have become far more common in recent years" (Barlow 2011, xxix). Both O'Reilly and Barnes trace how that far-reaching policy shaped the Dead's business model, highlighting a core of the band's endurance and the continuing relevance of their project.

For some observers, the Dead's willful refusal to follow industry norms makes the band's appreciation by business theorists and managers surprising, but independence is an ideal with deep roots in their art. The improvisatory nature of the Dead's performances represents the clearest expression of that belief, but it extends to their lyrics as well. Two essays explore that aspect of the band's music by focusing on the ways that their lyrics usefully raise long-standing issues in literary and textual studies. B. Steve Csaki explains how the band's work fits into and embraces the discourse over authorial intent and critical exegesis, highlighting how the song "He's Gone" frames the band's determination to create open-ended songs that encouraged and rewarded listener engagement. Likewise, the tangled history of the lyrics to "New Potato Caboose" provides a revealing example of how the process of writing, recording, performing, and copyrighting song lyrics was not only collaborative but creative, invoking issues in textual scholarship that help frame the Dead's music.

The success of the band's approach to composition relied on cooperation, and Garcia was fascinated by how that could also inform filmmaking. Although scholars have begun to pay more attention to Garcia's work as a visual artist, his work in film has received scant attention. Dennis Rothermel explains how Garcia's lifelong interest in the medium fueled the project to bring Kurt Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan* to the screen. Though never fulfilled, the effort offers vital insights into Garcia's work that illuminate critical dimensions of his larger achievement.

Each essay also illuminates the role of misunderstanding in the Dead's career, a central issue that informed their media footprint and complicated their reception. That extends to the band's own engagement with their work, not just textually and commercially but more generally. Perhaps the most striking example of that is their oft-discussed expedition to Egypt in September 1978, an ambitious project to stage three concerts at the Great Pyramid complex at Giza. Although much has been written about the shows, the gulf between accounts of the venture and

critical assessments continues to cloud its discussion. The Special Section provides a representative sample of the kinds of documents the events generated, with an eye toward how those highlight the challenges posed by the record. The original concert program along with unpublished transcriptions of band member interviews and first-person reflections from band insiders Alan Trist and Richard Loren, and Don Defenderfer, a fan, outline what the primary documentation of the shows can offer. Michael Parrish revisits the most recent archival recordings of the concerts to provide a new critical assessment of what that tells us about the concerts, and how that interrogates the historical narrative. And occasional band lyricist Peter Monk's poem, published earlier in an unattributed and abridged form, concludes this volume; it represents the way the concerts, as a collective artistic experience, inspired other works of art, including those lost or obscured by time and circumstance. As Dead studies evolves, the Dead phenomenon's increasingly historical status highlights the problems, and the potential, of its disparate and fragmented evidentiary landscape. The Egypt shows offer a revealing and thought-provoking case study of that archival challenge. It is especially appropriate for this final Special Section, which brings this aspect of the journal to an appropriate close. The Texts and Documents section of the Association's companion journal, *Proceedings of the Grateful Dead Studies Association*, will continue to provide a forum for this kind of material , allowing the journal to focus exclusively on essays and reviews.

The reviews in this volume speak to that larger archival theme, addressing works that span a range of media and forms, including concerts, archival releases, critical works, and fan-produced efforts. Assessing the Grateful Dead phenomenon, in all of its facets, has always been a shared endeavor, and that makes for a bibliography that is as capacious as it is uneven. Variability complicates scholarly discourse, but it also forms the kind of challenging record that can elicit novel and creative analyses. Even the most flawed fan effort can offer useful insights, as Scott Carlson's review suggests, just as an uneven concert can still provide an aesthetically fulfilling and thought-provoking experience, as Granville Ganter describes.

In the first verse of "Crazy Fingers," the line, "peals of fragile thunder" captured what both Garcia and Hunter loved in folk music, a *koan*-like image that expressed what Garcia called "the power of the almost-expressed, the resonant" (Jackson 1992, 209). It was a quality that oral transmission over time created: "You only get three or four verses, but they're so rich in weirdness because they're the ones that made enough of an impression that they could last through the telephone game through several generations" (Jackson 1992, 210). The sense of a fragment evoking a deeper, obliterated specificity evokes an earlier comment Garcia made to Yale law professor Charles Reich:

> Formlessness and chaos lead to new forms. And new order. Closer to, probably, what the new order is. When you break down the old orders and the old forms and leave them broken and shattered, you suddenly find yourself a new space with new form and new order which are more like the way it is. More like the flow. (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner 2003, 101)

Often quoted, Garcia's observation has sparked varying interpretations, but it reflects an idea that he may have absorbed from his time as an art student. Artists often deliberately dispense with established forms, and the Surrealists whose influence Garcia credited in his visual art embraced the notion that breaking up older forms was essential for art to move forward.[1] As Melvin Backstrom (2021) has shown, Garcia's argument usefully taps Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's work on the psychology of flow states, although here Garcia was discussing the Acid Tests as a new form of artistic exploration and expression.

His understanding that breaking older forms and pursuing new paths were necessary to the artist's search for hidden truths also connects to the work of Dead studies. As a field, the multidisciplinary study of the Dead still challenges the academy to widen and alter its view of the band's music and impact—to recognize the myriad ways that the Dead repay analysis. That sense of the obvious, hiding in plain sight, yet obscured by time and transmission and "older forms," gets at the heart of that collective scholarly inquiry. The effort to bring that to light can still feel like the work of contemplating a paradox, but it can also be its own reward, like recognizing a friend's writing exercise as the genesis of a song lyric. The

contributions in this volume speak to that, offering a range of ways that show how a peal of thunder can indeed be fragile—and even keep time, if we hear it in the right way.

Note

1. See, for example, Polizzotti (2024). For more on Surrealism and Garcia, see Graham (2005); Meriwether (2025).

Works Cited

Backstrom, Melvin. 2021. "Notes on Jerry Garcia, Improvisation, and *On the Edge*." *Proceedings of the Grateful Dead Studies Association* 1 (2021): 123–134.

Barlow, John Perry. 2011. "Foreword." In *Everything I Know About Business I Learned From the Grateful Dead*, by Barry Barnes, xv–xxx. New York: Hachette.

Gans, David. 2002. *Conversations with the Dead: The Grateful Dead Interview Book*. Rev. ed., Cambridge, MA: Da Capo.

Garcia, Jerry, Charles Reich, and Jann Wenner. 2003. *Garcia: A Signpost to New Space*. Reprint, Cambridge, MA: Da Capo.

Graham, F. Lanier. 2005. "Shamanic Vibrations." In *Jerry Garcia: The Collected Artwork*, edited by April Higashi, 138–139. New York: Thunder's Mouth.

Hunter, Robert. 1993. *A Box of Rain: Lyrics, 1965–1993*. Rev. ed., New York: Penguin Books.

Jackson, Blair. 1992. *Goin' Down the Road: A Grateful Dead Traveling Companion*. New York: Harmony Books.

McNally, Dennis. 2002. *A Long Strange Trip: The Inside History of the Grateful Dead*. New York: Broadway Books.

Meriwether, Nicholas G. 1998. "The Great Pyramid Prank: Egypt, September 14–16, 1978." In *The Deadhead's Taping Compendium: An In-Depth Guide to the Music of the Grateful Dead on Tape*, edited by Michael M. Getz and John R. Dwork, 247–250. Vol. 2, New York: Henry Holt.

———. 2025. "Blue Suns: 'Scarlet Begonias,' Inspiration, and the Grateful Dead." In *Sky Yellow/Sun Blue: The Art of Scarlet Begonias and the Ecstatic Vision of the Grateful Dead*, edited by Steven R. Hurlburt, in press. Atlanta, GA: Sky Yellow/Sun Blue LLC.

Polizzotti, Mark 2024. *Why Surrealism Matters*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Stuckey, Fred. 1971. "Jerry Garcia: 'It's All Music'." *Guitar Player* 5 (3): 24–26, 36–39.