

Ganter, Granville

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Dead & Company. Oracle Park, San Francisco, CA, July 14–16, 2023.

GRANVILLE GANTER

The closing nights of Dead & Company’s summer tour at San Francisco’s Oracle Park—apparently the last tour for the band—were a triumph rather than a requiem. Dead & Company played with energy and enthusiasm, and their chemistry and camaraderie onstage was infectious. Instead of a pious farewell to the past eight years, the group that took the stage at San Francisco’s beautiful bayside venue sounded remarkably confident and playful, leaving the impression that they were not finished playing together quite yet. (As I write, rumors of a reunion at The Sphere in Las Vegas are swirling.) It is difficult to review the end of the tour without referring to the growing sense of prowess, even swagger, that Dead & Company have developed, especially since 2019. Far from just another one of Bob Weir’s ensembles, the band has forged a distinct and distinctive identity as a group. These three concerts showed why.

The shows were a fitting end to the summer tour, which got better and better over the months of June and July. Just as they had on the summer tour, too, the band stuck to its crowd-pleasing songs and delivered dynamic versions of them all. If the tour can be faulted for an unusually short rotation of songs (songs repeating every two or three nights, as opposed to the more traditional five or six), they played those songs hard. Although the sets of the final three nights in San Francisco disappointed those hoping for breakouts, the set lists reflected the band’s successes over the past month and a half. For example, the runs at Chicago, Saratoga, Citi Field, Fenway, Boulder, and San Francisco featured very similar sets. The philosophy of this approach simply seemed to be, “Give the people what they want.” Dead & Company played “Deal” a lot, but to be fair to John Mayer, he’s been shredding that song since 2016 and the San Francisco version on the second night was as bold as any.

Rather than conveying some sort of message over the three nights, the band simply stuck to their A-list material: “China Cat Sunflower” >

“I Know You Rider” and “Scarlet Begonias” > “Fire on the Mountain” on the first night; “Playing in the Band,” “Terrapin Station”, “Uncle John’s Band,” and “Morning Dew” on the second; and “Help on the Way” > “Slipknot!” > “Franklin’s Tower”, “Estimated Prophet” > “Eyes of the World,” and “Truckin” on the third. No surprises, but every version was creative, thoughtful, and sensitive. When one musician played an interesting lick, the rest of the band followed closely, imbuing the texture of every song with a strong sense of interaction and exploration. The audience responded: I was in the dance pit on the left side of the stage when they opened with “Not Fade Away” and it is difficult to express the primal ecstasy that erupted on the floor. The band took its time, savoring every second, and the dancing crowd met them at every note.

A few choices stood out as representative of the best of what they did over the summer tour. In San Francisco, their “fast” version of “They Love Each Other,” hearkening back to the original arrangement of the song in 1973, was pure joy, both for the band as well as the audience. Like “Here Comes Sunshine,” the standard Dead & Company version of “They Love Each Other” was already one of Mayer’s favorite guitar explorations over the past few years, but the band broke out the new “fast” version at Saratoga, and, with the exception of their show at The Gorge, played the faster version through the end of the 2023 tour. This shift marked a significant departure from Weir’s embrace of slow, frequently tedious tempos that characterized the band’s performances for most of Dead & Company’s career. At San Francisco, they played “They Love Each Other” like it was *their* song, and it appeared between “Cassidy” and “Turn On Your Love Light” to close the first set on the second night, a walloping thirty minutes of music. “Cassidy,” which has sometimes been a risky gamble for Dead & Company to get airborne, was truly exceptional, as was the spirited version of “Love Light.”

Another welcome surprise during the second night was a fierce “Hell in a Bucket,” an ’80s Garcia party song that has aged surprisingly well. In a memorable review of the summer show at Charlotte, Théoden Janes noted with pleasure (and perhaps some surprise) that the seventy-five-year-old Weir “did not embarrass himself” when tackling this kind

of young man’s song (Janes 2023)—and at San Francisco, he pulled off a rendition as if it were 1989.

There were several prominent faces of Bob Weir’s remarkable energy evident over the weekend: the rocker who belted out “Good Lovin’” and “Sugar Magnolia” with fire and excitement; the dazzling rhythm guitarist whose fiendishly complex ribbons of sound diced up a “China Cat Sunflower”; and the poignant interpreter of Garcia’s ballads. Weir sang “Days Between” and “Morning Dew” as if the world were coming to an end. These interpretations recalled a November 2022 interview where he explained his view of performance, calling himself a “medium” of the song (Blackstone 2022). As Deepak Sarma has explored, this view connects Weir’s aesthetic to a rich vein of religious studies scholarship; in San Francisco, Weir’s evocation of the dramatic personae of these characters was haunting. And he surprised showgoers with an unusual first-set “Wharf Rat” on the opening night, a choice reminiscent of the sometimes quirky placement of that song in 1973.

No survey of Dead & Company history is complete without a mention of “Cumberland Blues” on the third night. They have done a great job with the song over the years—during the swinging version at Columbus, Ohio, in 2017 I recall thinking, “They’re *really* having fun!” But if I were to put my finger on the moment when the song started to get into deep Grateful Dead territory it would be over the summer in 2019 at The Gorge and at Saratoga. Since 2019, Mayer and Chimenti have had a field day shooting phrases back and forth at each other, beaming as they added to each other’s leads. When Burbridge starts in, shouldering back and forth like a shark plunging forward, it’s just a joyous, polyrhythmic explosion of down-home jamming. Of all the great versions of “Cumberland Blues” they played this summer, the closing version at San Francisco was a pinnacle, and clearly the moment where Dead & Company was taking its victory lap for the tour.

One might be inclined to say that Bill Kreutzmann’s absence is one of the elements that began to change Dead & Company’s sound over the past year. Initially an understudy for an ailing Kreuzmann, Jay Lane’s drumming has been phenomenal: upbeat, muscular, and complex.

Even in his guest appearances over summer 2022, he was an exciting new addition to Dead & Company's sound, seemingly pushing Mickey Hart to explore new directions, too. But one can hear the "new" Dead & Company emerging in 2021 with Kreuzmann's guidance as well: with the "Saint Stephen" at Shoreline in June 2022, Dead & Company began exploring new approaches to the song that would later explode with Lane on the drums at Foxboro later in the summer. As Mayer put it in a summer 2022 interview, Kreuzmann gave an "imitable swing" to Dead & Company, and Lane contributed a more "modern and precise" sound (Gans and Lambert 2022a). A close analysis of song tempos over the past eight years would be revealing, but it would seem that Dead & Company have picked up the pace of their performances, especially in contrast to their early tours. Another noteworthy element in the drumming over the course of the summer was Hart's introduction of a theme to the drum interludes, posting them on Facebook before each concert. Fittingly, the theme of the "Rhythm Devils" set on the opening night of the San Francisco run was "Sounds of the Golden Gate Bridge," a choice that reflected his long-standing fascination with the sonic potential of that landmark (Eisen 2012).

The shows also showcased Burbridge's growing importance to the band's sound, both as a singer and an instrumentalist. Since COVID, Burbridge has been working on an album of Garcia ballads, and one of the highlights of Dead & Company has been his soulful renditions of songs such as "If I Had the World to Give," "Comes a Time," "Fire on the Mountain," and "High Time" (played on the third night at San Francisco), as well as his scat harmonizing to his bass solos during "Eyes of the World." Burbridge has spoken about his fight with back pain over the past several years, and he had a new, lighter weight bass made for the 2022 tour. It was not only half the weight, allowing him to caper about enthusiastically on stage, but the new bass's sound was significantly bolder and fatter, prompting Hart to praise its unusual punch (Gans and Lambert 2022a). Burbridge has also said he enjoyed the faster tempos of the 2022–2023 tours, singling out the speedier version of "They Love Each Other" as especially satisfying to play (Greenhaus 2023).

Much more could be written about these shows, from the extraordinary PA sound to the scene outside, and if this run did indeed mark the last of the band's touring days, critics and scholars will find much more to explore (cf. Meriwether 2023). For experienced listeners, the San Francisco shows continued to build Dead & Company's growing reputation as a band, even though the run was billed as the end of an era. The caliber of the performances seemed to belie that, however, and the end of the tour was so strong—especially the three shows at Boulder, Colorado, two at the The Gorge in Washington State, and the final three at Oracle Park—that Mayer sounded like he was trying to walk back the group's farewell. As the purported instigator for the group's retirement from the road, Mayer's post on Instagram the night of the last show on July 16 was especially significant: "Something magical happened on this tour, and I don't think any of us saw it coming. @deadandcompany is still a band—we just don't know what the next show will be" (Mayer 2023). Those who caught any of these three shows, or really most of this tour, would agree. Given the Grateful Dead's deep roots in San Francisco, it seems especially fitting for these shows to have given Mayer pause to reconsider. One suspects that everyone in the band, but especially Mayer, discovered that they were having the best kind of fun possible. And that is hard for anyone to pass up—or bring to an end.

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GRANVILLE GANTER is Associate Professor of English at St. John's University in Queens, NY. His research focuses on nineteenth-century oratory, and his first essay on the Grateful Dead was presented at the first Grateful Dead area meeting of the Southwest Popular Culture Association in 1998, later published in John Rocco's *Dead Reckoning* (Schirmer, 1999). He is President of the Grateful Dead Studies Association.