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## REVIEWS

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Grateful Dead. *Pacific Northwest '73–'74: The Complete Recordings*. Rhino R2 566110, 2018. 19 CD box set with 65-page liner note booklet. \$189.98.

RICK MONTURE

One of the many exciting things about being a Deadhead in the past few years has been the opportunity to listen to the various fiftieth anniversary album releases, offering a chance to revisit old favorites with fresh ears and new appreciation. Although many fans have now owned multiple versions of these albums in various formats, the new releases and the discussions they have prompted on various podcasts and discussions boards have also given more recent fans a chance to enter the Dead's remarkable musical world. And for older fans, the interest this has kindled has made all of us marvel at the fact that, although this music is now a half century old, it shows no signs of aging. While the *Pacific Northwest '73–'74: The Complete Recordings* box set was released in 2018 and quickly sold out its 15,000-copy run, the shows it commemorates now fall into the fiftieth anniversary category, and warrant another listen—and further consideration—in the historical context of the band's performing career.

That task can be challenging, given the number of archival releases and their scarcity (almost all are one-time releases). This review relies on my long experience as a listener who purchased almost all of the *Dick's Picks* and *Road Trips* releases as they were released, subscribed to the *Dave's Picks* series since its inception, and gladly, albeit begrudgingly, paid the Canadian exchange and shipping for all but one of the box sets. I have been consistently impressed at the thought, care, and effort that Grateful Dead Productions, Rhino, and David Lemieux have put into these releases.

Yet of all of the box sets released over the past decade, the Pacific Northwest is quite likely my favorite. The look and design are exemplary: the box presents itself as a piece of art, making it an eye-catching décor

object and not “just another” collection of Grateful Dead CDs. The small decorative box inside subtly underscores that, representing the secret that the band’s music has long represented for fans as well as making a nod to the countercultural heritage of stash boxes. Like any artwork, the package tells a story; this one evokes the ancient Indigenous presence in, and continued physical and spiritual interaction with, the Pacific Northwest. That offers a compelling cultural and philosophical context for the music it presents. The result is a layered, reflective effect that creates a coming-together of many elements.

First Nations artist Roy Henry Vickers’ work here is exceptional, both powerful and playful, deep and whimsical, all at the same time. As a member of the Tsimshian, Haida, and Heiltsuk nations, who have all lived in British Columbia for over 10,000 years, he knows his subject matter intimately and his artistry, and explanations of it, form a significant presence in the release. The way in which his representations of animals from the sea, land, and air are interspersed across the outside and inside of the bentwood-style box, CD covers, and the CDs themselves cue attentive listeners to the fact that this music was created in a region that has been dominated by the ocean, trees, whales, eagles, bears, and wolves for thousands of years. According to Bob Weir’s quote from the liner notes, the band was also transfixed by the enormity of the land itself as they looked upon it on one of their early Northwest tours: “It was breathtaking to behold, but as we watched, we had a firm realization that we were witnessing something even more beautiful than our eyes could ever take in ... of which we are just a tiny part—awed by the magnificence without beginning, without end ...” Within this timeless place, fifty years ago is but a moment, so the six shows in Portland, Seattle, and Vancouver, happened only yesterday and are made more immediate with not only the advent of digital technology, but with the renewed listening and conversations that are taking place in the here-and-now.

The set consists of six concerts on nineteen CDs, from three cities over a twelve-month span. These took place in the heart of what many consider to be the epicenter of the Dead’s performing career, 1973–74. By then the band had, in many ways, left the 1960s behind and was deeply immersed in the process of redefining what could be done within the

music industry. For the Dead, that meant creating their own record company and expanding the frontiers of sound technology, all while writing and premiering songs that can still be heard today on any given night on stages across the continent and abroad.

Much has already been written about the “Bird Song” from Vancouver ’73, the “Playing in the Band” from Seattle ’74, and the “Truckin’” > “Not Fade Away” > “Goin’ Down the Road Feeling Bad” sequence from Portland ’74, and this release allows us to more closely examine the many other moments that led into, and flowed from, those already well-known performances. Bob Weir’s playing is particularly energetic in all six shows, which show him evolving as not only a singular rhythm guitarist but also as a 1970s rock and roll front man. Garcia was settling into a more mature, wizened role, giving him even more authority as a singer of Hunter’s lyrical narrators. Keith and Donna Jean Godchaux were comfortably ensconced within the lineup and stage sound, Kreutzmann was as at the peak of his prowess as a jazz-influenced rock drummer, and Lesh seemed to revel in the band’s ever-improving sound system, particularly in the ’74 shows.

The Dead were also creating more space for their newer (i.e., post-1972) songs, often in the first set (“They Love Each Other,” “Row Jimmy,” “Ship of Fools,” “Mississippi Half-Step”) and stretching out on a few in the latter half (“Eyes of the World,” “Weather Report Suite/Let It Grow”). Notably, there is only one “Dark Star” (Portland ’73) here, evidence of the Dead perhaps shedding their former reliance on the exploratory opportunities of this platform to test the possibilities of other musical settings. Another lone inclusion is “Peggy-O,” deep in the second set of Portland ’74, but it is one for the ages. “Loose Lucy” and “Money Money” have always jarred for me, and this release did not alter that opinion. Neither song ever struck me as compelling, especially compared to other songs of that era, and the lyrical themes have not aged well, no matter how they are spun. Although “Loose Lucy” made a comeback in the 1990s, “Money Money” was wisely retired after 1974.

Amid the new songs and the old standbys, the Dead’s repertoire of Americana-before-it-was-Americana covers are also well represented here. Marty Robbins, George Jones, Loretta Lynn, Johnny Cash, and,

of course, Chuck Berry all make appearances, a reminder of the band's thoughtful, wide-ranging musicology. For listeners who wondered why the Dead chose to cover these songs with such regularity when they had such an endless number of possibilities, this set makes it clear: the humor, tragedy, metaphor, irony, and self-deprecation in these songs are also themes in the best of Hunter's lyrics. These covers are exemplars in the great American songbook that the Dead admired and respected, an homage that is on full display here. It is interesting to note that the Dead's songs are now celebrated as equally timeless entries in that songbook, inspiring a multitude of musicians who find the same enjoyment, solace, and appreciation that the Dead modelled in their choice of covers.

What ultimately defines the quality of this collection beyond the packaging is the sound restoration. Even the most discriminating of tape aficionados will marvel at what Jeffrey Norman's remastering achieved with these tapes. Soundboard recordings that circulated from this era, while good, often had a distant and one-dimensional sound quality to them. Yet even analog purists who disdain digital—I am one—will admit that the result here more than warrants the price of the set. Nicholas Meriwether's liner notes are the textual equivalent of Norman's audio wizardry, providing a detailed survey of the social and historical context of the concerts. His ability to deftly move from archival materials such as news clippings, fan letters, and band meeting minutes to contemporary events, environmental setting, twenty-first century perspectives and back again offers the right balance of scholarly research, critical analysis, and the larger understanding of just why all this matters today. Little did we know that the band we loved so much back in the twentieth century would follow *us* into the twenty-first, and Meriwether's commentary and analysis help to capture the many reasons how, and why.

The region that the Grateful Dead traveled through for these shows and the land they performed upon a half century ago is vastly and forever different now, a reminder that human presence is greatly affecting that timeless place that Vickers evokes in his artwork, and which Bob Weir commented on so long ago. The devastating wildfires that ravaged British Columbia, Washington state, and Oregon in 2023 serve as stark reminders of the dangers of climate change. While our actions as individuals in our

daily lives are meaningful responses to the threat, being a Grateful Dead fan has always been about cultivating an awareness of our common connection to a much larger and greater collective consciousness and purpose that all of us can contribute to and strengthen. That is precisely the kind of thinking and effort that is needed on a global level to address the climate crisis. As much as the Dead did not overtly advocate a political agenda, they did hope that those who listened to them would see them as modeling good citizenship; they did not preach, but they did urge us to make the right choices, and reminded us that choices determine the future. Ken Kesey, a good Oregon boy, famously observed that “In any given situation there will always be more dumb people than smart people. We ain’t many.” But if we are everywhere, as the Deadhead saying goes, then there is hope.

All of the hype and anticipation, the critiques and accolades, around these reissues and box sets raise the question of why so many fans are still drawn to these concerts. What holds the interest of Deadheads, new and old, with these historical recordings? And why, now almost sixty years after the Dead formed, and nearly thirty years after they formally disbanded, are listeners still eager for still more? Is it nostalgia, deep appreciation, habit, curiosity, or something else? This release does not advance any definitive answers. But it does offer insights. Fifty years ago in Vancouver, Seattle, and Portland the Grateful Dead were also looking back over their career so far, reimagining and appreciating their present, setting their sights on the future. While they would retreat from the road for their “hiatus” just a few months after the 1974 shows here, they would use that time to regroup, returning to delight, confuse, amaze, and affect us for another half century, and counting. There is joy and comfort in that musical story, and like the story that Roy Henry Vickers tells us of the Pacific Northwest landscape, it is a tale worth telling, and re-telling, again and again.

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Professor in the Department of English and Cultural Studies and former Director of the Indigenous Studies Program at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. He is the author of *We Share Our Matters: Two Centuries of Writing and Resistance at Six Nations of the Grand River* (University of Manitoba Press, 2014), a past Fulbright Fellow, and a founding member of the Indigenous Literary Studies Association.