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Mordechai Rubinstein. *Dead Style: A Long Strange Trip into the Magical World of Tie-Dye*. New York: Abrams, 2020. Softbound, 224 pp. ISBN 9781419742910. \$24.99.

ANNABELLE WALSH

In *Dead Style: A Long Strange Trip into the Magical World of Tie-Dye*, Mordechai Rubinstein offers readers a glimpse into contemporary Deadhead dress practices and the recent proliferation of Grateful Dead iconography in mainstream fashion contexts. Rubinstein, a fashion consultant and photojournalist, leverages his expertise in street style photography to document the diverse and idiosyncratic ways in which Deadheads construct and negotiate their identities through clothing. Spanning over 200 pages, *Dead Style* excels as a visual resource; however, Rubinstein's commentary does not adequately address the historical dimensions of Deadhead material culture nor the processes through which the aesthetics and iconography transitioned from their countercultural origins to become mainstream signifiers of style. The book does a fine job of surveying how fans express their Deadhead identity through the fashioned body, but readers interested in a more critical examination of these impulses and expressions will be frustrated.

Dead Style is the culmination of a two-year photography project that began in 2017 when *GQ Style* Editor in Chief Will Welch assigned Rubinstein to document the scene at a Dead & Company concert at Madison Square Garden. From 2017 to 2019, Rubinstein attended fifteen Dead & Company shows across the United States and Mexico, photographing Deadheads with an eye toward capturing their eclectic garb, from patchwork corduroy shorts to ice-dyed t-shirts. In the introduction, Welch cites the fall 2017 tour as a critical turning point in the larger Dead phenomenon, where the spirit of Dead & Company shows—both inside the venues and in the parking lots—began to permeate the broader culture. “Suddenly,” he writes, “being a Deadhead no longer felt like being a Trekker or whatever people who are into model trains call themselves. It

got, like, cool” (7). Deadheads may wince at the comparisons, but Welch’s observation does get at the commercial and ideological rehabilitation of Deadhead identity that had been underway well before the publication of *Dead Style* in 2020.

Indeed, during that time, identifying as a Deadhead not only became “cool” but also increasingly fashionable. Following the commercial success of the Fare Thee Well concert series and subsequent formation of Dead & Company in 2015, several high-end fashion labels—among them Alice & Olivia, James Perse, and Proenza Schouler—released officially licensed Grateful Dead collections. These tactfully adapted the band’s iconography to fit with the brands’ visual identities. The merchandise commanded a premium; an Alice & Olivia ball gown skirt adorned with dancing bears retailed for \$1,298 while a Proenza Schouler chain-strap leather bag emblazoned with the thirteen-point lightning bolt sold for \$2,495. *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *Esquire* reported on the newfound fashionability of Grateful Dead fans, a marked departure from longstanding media discourses that framed Deadheads as dowdily dressed relics of the 1960s counterculture.

Dead Style focuses on the less glamorous homespun roots of Deadhead fashion. The photographs are organized by venue, starting with images from Dead & Company’s 2017 Madison Square Garden run and concluding with more than sixty photos taken at Washington’s Gorge Amphitheatre in 2019. Interspersed throughout the book are photographs of people wearing Grateful Dead attire outside of a live show setting, primarily on the streets of New York City. These subjects vary widely, from self-identifying Deadheads to those who profess no particular allegiance to (or even familiarity with) the band—a testament to the extent to which Grateful Dead iconography has transcended its original context to become a set of open-source symbols that anyone can appropriate or claim as their own, irrespective of any connection to the music.

The book’s visual impact is occasionally marred by the layout design and accompanying captions. Some photographs are framed by colorful borders and icons that include the “Steal Your Face” logo, dancing bears, skeletons, and generic symbols like peace signs; though evocative of the aesthetic associated with the band, the overuse here tends towards

kitsch. (The lack of any acknowledgment that these logos are official band trademarks and copyrighted is also curious.) Rubinstein's captions often read as casual, stream-of-conscious remarks, such as one accompanying a fan at The Gorge wearing a tie-dye shirt and crocheted hemp hat: "I want a bucket hat so bad" (216). Rendered in a disconcerting array of "psychedelic" fonts, these captions offer little meaningful context or insight into the garments. This undermines the potential for *Dead Style* to serve as a more serious exploration of Deadhead fashion and material culture.

Given that Rubinstein did not identify as a Deadhead when he embarked on this two-year project, the surface-level engagement of the book with its subject is understandable. Despite the lengthy gestation of the project, the design and text of *Dead Style* suggest a rushed production. Critics might see this as a push to capitalize on the burgeoning fascination with Deadhead culture, but the book might have been conceived as a purely playful and lighthearted exploration of Deadhead style. Regardless, the intended audience of the book is difficult to determine.

Perhaps the most compelling feature of *Dead Style* is its ability to bridge the contemporary Deadhead scene with the pre-1995 scene through the representation of older fans and their clothing. The book includes several subjects clad in well-worn t-shirts bearing the marks of extensive use: faded colors; frayed edges; holes. Marked by the patina of age and the physical signs of wear, these garments stand in stark contrast to the disposability that characterizes much of contemporary fashion and consumer culture. Many of these, likely acquired at Grateful Dead concerts during the 1980s or 1990s, not only demonstrate the passage of time through their signs of wear but also signify the wearer's sustained engagement with the Deadhead community. Unlike other subcultures, where participation tends to wane with time, many Deadheads who entered the scene in their youth continue to be active participants well past middle age.

The phenomenon of wearing well-worn t-shirts is not confined to older generations of fans. The book makes it a point to depict younger Deadheads engaging with the scene's storied past via vintage garb. One photograph taken on the streets of New York features a young man wearing a "Box of Rain" t-shirt from the early 1990s; another image from a Dead & Company show at Folsom Field in Boulder, Colorado, shows

a young woman in an oversized parody t-shirt from 1997. Absent any explanation, however, readers must speculate whether the t-shirts were passed down from Deadhead parents, discovered in a thrift store, or purposefully sought out on online platforms like eBay, where vintage Grateful Dead t-shirts often sell for hundreds of dollars. However they were acquired, these garments provide younger fans with a tangible link to eras of Grateful Dead history they did not experience firsthand. The intergenerational exchange of such clothing not only preserves the cultural memory of the Grateful Dead but also fosters a sense of continuity and shared identity within the Deadhead community. As the scene continues to evolve and welcome new participants and permutations of the band, these fashion objects offer a direct, tactile connection to the personal histories of their original owners and to the broader history of the Grateful Dead.

Rubinstein's photographs also feature t-shirts crafted by artists and designers who sell their wares in the parking lots of Dead & Company shows, thus sustaining the tradition of vending while simultaneously adapting the iconography and aesthetics to engage contemporary audiences. Several subjects are photographed wearing t-shirts by Online Ceramics, one of the most prominent brands to emerge from the Dead & Company's vending scene. Founded by Alix Ross and Elijah Funk in 2016, Online Ceramics swiftly evolved from a small-scale parking lot operation into a respected clothing brand endorsed by celebrities and featured in the *New York Times* and *The New Yorker*. Ross and Funk's hand-screened t-shirts combine the traditional visual language of the Deadhead scene with new elements that draw from the lo-fi aesthetics of early internet blogs and websites.

Dead Style may serve as a valuable resource for scholars studying the production techniques found in Deadhead material culture. The book features an extensive array of handmade garments, from painted denim jackets to t-shirts with crudely airbrushed dancing bears. It presents both fan-made bootleg t-shirts and officially licensed merchandise side-by-side. Some examples of the latter, such as a screen-printed t-shirt by Ed Donahue from 1993 and a 1995 "Steal Your Feathers" design by Peter Forsythe, illustrate how some Deadhead entrepreneurs who initially sold their wares in the parking lot were eventually commissioned to design

officially licensed merchandise for the band. Although these details are not explicitly stated, the images themselves could serve as catalysts for further research.

Visually, *Dead Style* provides valuable context for understanding how Deadheads continue to perform and articulate their identities through dress. Despite the book's extensive catalog of handmade and commercially produced garments, it lacks any substantive textual commentary on the significance of these fashions, either within the Deadhead community or more generally. This leaves ample room for future work on the role of clothing in Deadhead identity construction, and points to that need. Yet *Dead Style* does offer a tantalizing nod to how the aesthetics of Deadhead garments have evolved over time rather than remaining a static subcultural style, and that makes it a useful if preliminary entry on the topic.

ANNABELLE WALSH teaches in the School of Art and Design History and Theory at Parsons School of Design in New York, where she also received her MA in Fashion Studies in 2023. Her research focuses on the role of fashion within subcultural contexts and considers how fashion and dress inform processes of identity construction and group belonging among fans of the Grateful Dead.