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CITATION INFORMATION

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Great Mysteries: Talking About Egypt with Mickey Hart, Bill Kreutzmann, and Dan Healy

Tony Berardini

This interview was broadcast on November 14, 1978, on WBCN–FM. The transcript has been lightly edited to remove false starts and crutch words.

Tony Baradini: What do you call yourselves, the Baksheesh Rhythm Devils?

Mickey Hart: Right, we're the Rhythm Devils, the Baksheesh Rhythm Devils.

TB: Baksheesh Rhythm Devils. Well, you guys got into that when you were over there in Egypt. Now, the Dead took the whole family to Egypt? When was this?

MH: Right. We packed up all the women and the kiddies, and with Bill Walton and [Ken] Kesey and [Paul] Krassner.

TB: You took Bill Walton with you, too?

MH: He went along with us, yeah. He's a friend of ours … He likes the music.

Bill Kreutzmann: Good inspiration.

MH: He's a good man. And he came with us and we packed everybody up and went to Egypt for three nights. Well, actually, we went for two weeks.

TB: Explain what *baksheesh* means.

MH: *Baksheesh* is the word for a tip or a gratuity.

BK: Kids use that word more than adults.

MH: Kids, yeah. They wanna be tipped, so it was a funny kind of saying. So [Bill] Graham picked it up and he made us t-shirts, "Baksheesh Rhythm Devils." And this [*gestures to shirt*] is "grateful dead" in Arabic.

TB: It is?

MH: That's what that is. It's a little in-joke between Bill Graham and myself.

TB: What made you guys decide to go to Egypt to play a concert?

BK: Why not? [*Inhales theatrically*.]

TB: Okay.

MH: Well, it held a lot of great mysteries for everybody; it was an alchemical thing. We had talked about, years ago, we had always wanted to play the Great Pyramid. We thought that the imagery of the Grateful Dead playing at the Great Pyramid, you couldn't miss. There was something there; we didn't know exactly what it was but it was drawing us there.

BK: And we hadn't done it before.

MH: We hadn't done it before, for sure.

BK: We knew there was some *power* there, some strong power.

MH: It was a great vacation. It was pulling us.

BK: That's right.

MH: We went there and we took all the family; and it was sort of a pay-off for them, the people who have helped us along the way. It was sort of like a treat for all of us. We gave ourselves a real experience.

TB: You knew some musicians before you went there, some Egyptian musicians?

MH: Yeah, Hamza El Din is the musician. He's an oud player—that's a twelve-string instrument—and the tar. I knew him and I recorded an album with him. It's called *Eclipse*; it's out on Pacific Arts Records. He taught me to play the tar. It's a large, tambourine-type of instrument without jingles. And it seemed like a natural for him to come with us to open the show at the Great Pyramids, to play with us, because he was Egyptian—Nubian. And, as you know, the Nubians were the people who were flooded when Nasser built the Aswan Dam in '65 … 250,000 families that were displaced from Lower Egypt. That's a lot of people … they were relocated in another place. Hamza was the person who got out of Nubia to spread their music and the music of Egypt, Upper and Lower, to the rest of the world.

Somehow we met in California, hooked up, and he started teaching me the tar, and I started recording him in multitrack, and one thing led to another. So it was sort of a natural culmination to three years of knowing each other. And he came and played with us. We made a composition that we all played together … He wrote a piece that we all shared in. So it was like Hamza playing the oud, Hamza singing and hand clapping, and then Billy and myself and everybody, one by one, coming out onto the stage as Hamza was playing. Hamza left, and there was the Grateful Dead. And that's how we appeared in Egypt; that's how the show was. And then we went out into our space.

TB: Did you play what people in this country would expect would be Grateful Dead music—the regular songs?

MH: Oh, yeah. Well, we played those songs, but we stretched out. We let the moment take us, wherever it was. We were the Grateful Dead. You couldn't go there and be pretentious or anything. The Grateful Dead's good

enough for me, and I'm sure we'd be good enough for the Egyptians—if we played good. And we did play good. At least one of those nights was special.

TB: Was that recorded at all?

MH: It was, yeah.

TB: Will we ever hear that?

MH: Possibly. There's thoughts of making a live record out of it, but I haven't heard the tapes and we don't know really yet what they sound like.

TB: You brought the tar up tonight to show us, so if you all get close to your radio you can see this instrument.

MH: This tar, I'd say it's about a fifteen-inch diameter, and it's about four inches high, and it's got a single stretched skin over it. It's made of calf. And it's got basic tones of—. [*Plays various tones*]. So this is a basic tune of Nubia. [*Plays a rhythm*.] And the women use it as a strainer to strain grain. They have a little screen on it, and then when they want to make a drum out of it they just put a hide on it and they stretch it. It's a multiple-use—.

And this is the native percussion instrument of Egypt. So we learned how to play these instruments; and we went over there and played their instruments there, so that sort of took them back.

TB: Immediate cultural touch.

MH: Yeah, it was great. That was the link with Hamza: we all set out to play something in twelve beats. That was Hamza.

TB: Were you at all apprehensive? I mean, so here's the whole Grateful Dead family in Egypt, and you're all set up and you're getting ready to walk out on stage for the first gig, and there's how many people in front of you?

MH: Not very many, there was only a couple of thousand.

TB: Nervous?

MH: No, I wasn't nervous. It wasn't nerves. We wanted to do it, we were looking forward to doing it. I wasn't nervous; were you, Billy?

BK: No, I wasn't nervous in the least. Not at all. Never have been.

MH: It wasn't nerves. It was like, "Here we are, we finally made it, and we're playing here, and how is it going to sound? How is it going to be?" It wasn't nerves, it was mostly like, "Gee, we're here and isn't it great? And let's savor it, enjoy it." We were digging it. We really liked it.

BK: Good, positive excitement.

MH: It was exciting.

TB: You played three days or four days?

MH: Three days.

TB: Did the crowd increase day by day?

MH: A bit, but not really. There wasn't really that much room for that many people, except if you wanted to sit out there in the desert.

TB: Where did you play?

MH: It was right in front of the Sphinx. The three pyramids are behind the Sphinx, and in the front of the Sphinx is this granite stage; it's about eighty feet long and about forty feet deep and that's where they hold what they call the Sound and Light, which is a light show that depicts pharaonic times until now. And it tells you what happened to Egypt and about how the pyramids were built and who lives there and why it was devastated.

It's really a horrible situation in a certain way: the Sphinx, the nose was blown off by Napoleon's troops for target practice, and these things, they were really defiled, and all the outsides of them were taken away. There was gold on the top and it was all swept away, and they built mosques with them. They just tore down part of the outside of them, so for that reason it was sort of weird. But it had a great energy there and it was granite and you're playing outside live on granite and it really made it sound good.

BK: And it carried for miles.

MH: Oh yeah. One time I put a song on the PA just for testing it and I went out and listened to it out in the desert, rode my horse out into the desert, about ten miles. And you can hear it: it was quite clear, so there were Bedouins that would come up on their camels and park their camels by the side, off to the side, and then by the third night they were getting into it. The first night, weird; the second night, it was better. Third night they let their camels alone and they got off.

BK: [*Laughs*.]

MH: One fellow there was Omar, Omar the Horseman; he's a friend of mine. I said, "How does it feel? What does this music make you feel like? How does it move you? Does it at all?" And he said, "It makes me feel like that man on TV, the guy who jumps tall buildings and breaks bricks—that's what it makes me feel inside." Because he had never heard electric music, or really a rock and roll band. So he got moved, and a lot of the Egyptians felt like that.

And the youth, we wanted to reach the youth, and that's what we did there. They didn't know about "Truckin'" or "Casey Jones" or any of that stuff, so you had to work, you had to play, you had to make music; you had to really reach them, really do the thing.

BK: That's good for you.

MH: It was great. We found that we could do it. We found the Grateful Dead that night, and they did, too. It was great. I liked it.

TB: What was the political climate like when you were there?

MH: Camp David was going on. So we were right there on that threshold. We were sort of playing a *Mission Impossible* game: the United States didn't really sanction us going over there but they didn't say we couldn't go over there ….

TB: Were there political things involved in getting visas … to get into the country?

MH: No, we just went there. There's no embargo … You can go to Egypt. We just went there as citizens. It wasn't political at all; the United States government wasn't involved in it at all. We went over there strictly as a musical experience. And we tried not to get politics into it, but Camp David was happening at the same time, so there was a precipice there. We were wondering, "Well, if this goes south, you know, we're *out* there." So it was exciting for that. Here was this giant political arm coming down, this big paw, and we were there alone. Bill Graham couldn't scream loud enough to make it—you couldn't move anything there. There's you and there's the desert and there's that big arm, you know?

TB: After you played the concerts you went out into the desert … You went to some villages to play the tar?

MH: What I did was, after the concerts—we were there already a week before we started playing, and there was three days of concerts, so we were there at least ten days. Afterwards I went with Brett Cohen and John Cutler and Jerilyn [Brandelius] to Hamza's village, which is Kawm Umbū, which is the village that was relocated after the flood of '65. So we went to his village which was way out there, I mean *really* out there in the desert. And these people were relocated by the government after the big flood, so it was sort of a weird scene. There were two government houses, small replicas, not so good, of what they had formerly had on the Nile. They were fishermen; now they're farmers way out in the desert.

So it was unusual, but they were tar players—drummers—and they were musicians. I took my Nagra and I went to record them and play with them. And I went with Hamza. So that's what I did. I went down to Kawm Umbū and then I went to Luxor and to Aswan, where the dam is, and then back up to Alexandria on the coast to get some of the Bedouins and the northern desert tribes, the wanderers, and I got them up there and we had a great time.

TB: Were they surprised that an American walked into their village with a tar and started playing?

MH: Oh yeah! It was a great thrill, you know, to actually go over there and share drums with them. Like, the gringo drummer at first when I

walked into the village, and all these black people, and I was the only white person there, you know. And I was Hamza's friend; they treated me really beautiful. They were gentlemen there; there was no jive-ass stuff, no finger-snapping. It was really great. And these people were concerned with living; beautiful people. I thoroughly enjoyed myself.

And they said, "Okay, we accept you as a human being." Then once that was over with, and the formalities, and we laughed and we talked—a little bit; they can barely speak English—and then I broke out the tar. And one by one, the tar players came out of the village. A lot of the people play drums there: they sit in the fields and they play and so forth. So they started to show themselves to me, one by one, so I got to meet some of the finest drummers. Then they saw me play and they saw my—checked my technique, and they checked it out and they smiled and then we all started playing and it was great … almost twenty or thirty tar players.

TB: How long was this whole process, from the time that you walked into the village until the time that you actually got them to come out and start playing with you?

MH: Well, we all sat in this big room for a long time, because Hamza's mother had died a year before and Hamza hadn't been back there in about six years, and they didn't know whether to cry or to laugh when we walked in; it was confused. He says, "Everybody was so happy to see me and happy to see you, but I'm supposed to be in mourning for my mother." So instead of crying they laughed, and it was really a very touching scene.

I didn't know this. It was going down while I was there so we went we sat for a long time and we all looked at each other, everybody gave each other cigarettes—everybody there smokes a lot—and we sat for a while. And it was about then that Hamza went outside to deal with his parents, and it was about an hour or two before I broke out the tar and then we smoked a little hashish and everything loosened up, and then we started to play, one by one.

Then the blind tar maker came out and he scratched the head [of my tar], smelled it, see what it was what kind of head it was, how it felt, because it was made in the United States, and then he asked me to play. And that's how it worked: everybody played for each other. They got to

know me and I got to know them. It was great, it really was; it was one of the high points of my life.

TB: Sounds real interesting because you really couldn't communicate with each other except through the music.

MH: No, we didn't speak the same language at first. And as we knew each other, then they would start to speak a little English. It came out a little bit once they were relaxed; then all of a sudden they wanted to speak with you. Then they weren't embarrassed about their broken English and they'd start speaking. It was a good experience. The Grateful Dead scored in Egypt. We've got a lot of good friends. We really made contact with them.
TB: That's a more basic kind of communication than all the rhetoric that can go down, too. That's the kind of impression that's going to last for a while.

MH: Right. It really was. They were really moved. After a while you felt it, because Grateful Dead didn't mean anything. And after a while you weren't just Hamza's friend.

TB: You were part of the family.

MH: Yeah, you had relationships. I slept there at the village for three days. They have no roofs because it never rains there, so their houses were just like walls, and they have rooms off to the side and in the middle were little courtyards. And it was all sand because it was in the desert and they had a canal which came off of the Nile. The Nile feeds everything there; the Nile is the mother. If you're not near the Nile, you're in trouble.

TB: There's no water. You were going to say something else about what was happening in the villages, I think?

MH: One of the last things that I remember about Egypt was the feeling of the people towards the war. They remembered when it was bad there and the Iran war and they [lit] the canals on fire and it was just horrible. And they don't want war, they really don't. They seem to be a very peaceful people and they're just run by politicians, just like most everybody else. I

really got a great respect for them and they were just really good folks … I really got a good feeling for them and that was the last impression I had. I felt like I really scored there … the Grateful Dead really did a good job there, as far as making friends.

There are a lot of things: there was the energy felt from the pyramids and what it did to our music, and how it made me feel; to see the bigness of the desert and the smallness of you; "surrender to the desert," there was that whole thing. Either the desert eats you—you can't eat the desert, so the desert will eat you if you don't give up to it.

We rode; me and Billy would ride, we'd go out in the middle of the night riding ten, fifteen, thirty miles. We took Bill Graham out there on his first horse ride: "Come on, Uncle Bobo!" And we got him out on a horse and we rode flat-out in the desert, and we said, "Relax, Bill, it's going to be okay," and he got high, he got loose. He's a businessman, you know: run, run, run. But out in the desert, with an Arabian underneath you, it's quite a feeling to run; it feels very free. And you have no fear of falling; they don't trip in the desert. So we rode and rode for hours.

TB: It must be a real humbling experience. I mean, the desert is big.

MH: The desert is *huge*; it's Goliath. It's amazing.

TB: There was something else interesting that I read about: when you were doing the concerts, you ran a microphone into one of the chambers of the Great Pyramid.

MH: That's Dan Healy. And you should talk to Healy about that, he's right out here. You should let Healy talk about it because I'd like to hear what Healy has to say about it.

TB: Tell everybody who Dan Healy is.

MH: Dan Healy is our sound wizard. He's our sound man; he does our PA and makes the records. He's the man that develops the goodies, the stuff. When we want this, he makes it happen. And he's been with us for years. He knows about the Great Pyramid. Dan, why don't you sit down here and explain to him about miking the Great Pyramid?

Dan Healy: Hi. Well, basically the idea was that we went into the King's Chamber and we spent a night after the first sound check—sound rehearsal—over at the Great Pyramid. The Egyptians were kind enough to let us in there after hours, after the normal touring time. And so we—there was Jerry and Bobby and David Freiberg and Mountain Girl and a couple of others of us—went in there and spent about four hours clapping and singing, harmonizing, and things like that. And we discovered the incredible acoustics of the King's Chamber, which, because of the resilience, because of the solidness, of the pyramid, the walls just absolutely don't give at all, so you get this almost indefinite sustain.

MH: It offered a basic frequency response that was advantageous, maybe to some other instrument, like the voice or a guitar. Having the resonance factor of the pyramid, along with your music, besides all the other—.

TB: Making use of the indigenous things you could work with; that's a great idea.

DH: It's sort of a natural. And you could do things: like, inside the King's Chamber was the sarcophagus, which was the coffin made of stone, only it was a rectangular box about six feet long, about three feet wide and about four feet high. It was carved from one piece of granite. And you have to understand that this is at least 4,000 years old. But it wasn't like it was sides and an end and a bottom piece; this is cut out of one piece of granite and it's perfectly smooth and perfectly engineered and the corners are perfectly straight.

And you could lay down inside it and you could hum notes. And when you hummed the resonant notes—every chamber, every room, has a note that reverberates more than other ones—it would come alive. So you can hum a tone or a musical note and as quietly as you could possibly hum it would reverberate so loud that it would hurt your ears. And if you hummed in a regular normal talking voice it would massage your body.

TB: You must have had to whisper in the Chamber.

DH: You could whisper and in the right frequencies it would be blown up like a thousand-fold, in terms of the volume.

MH: It would be like an amplifier, like its own speaker.

DH: And furthermore, it tends to defy the laws of physics, in that there are laws that say that if you have a certain size chamber it'll resonate at certain musical notes, and stuff like that. Not so in the King's Chamber and the sarcophagus. What happened was that it tended to resonate in the temperate scale—it's the western music scale rather than the just scale, which is absolutely even harmonics. It conformed with music rather than physics.

MH: The harmonic structure was clean all the way up. You could really hear the harmonics.

BT: That's great. It sounds like you guys really had a ball.

DH: From my own point of view, being of course the sound mixer, when we're playing live shows I'm always out in the audience, facing the band, and so my view was the stage at the Son et Lumière Theatre.

BT: That's the Sound and Light?

DH: The Sound and Light, right. And above that, up to the right—if you are standing on the stage it would be up over your left shoulder—it was the Sphinx, and then directly above that were the three pyramids.

BT: Nice backdrop.

DH: And there I was—there you are, seeing all of this.

MH: That was the only thing wrong with it, that we couldn't see it.

DH: Well, I had this little mirror out there, but you couldn't see it. [*Laughter*.]

TONY BERARDINI began as a deejay at Boston's WBCN and went on to be general manager. Known for its progressive politics and innovative programming, the station forged a reputation as a countercultural institution in the late 1960s, with nationally known deejays who helped several bands gain prominence.