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The Giza Acid Test: The Grateful Dead at the Great Pyramid

DON DEFENDERFER

Trippers and askers surround me,
People I meet, the effect upon me of my early life ...

—Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*

The start of my Great Pyramid adventure with the Grateful Dead really began a couple of years earlier, in rural Oregon. That was when I first met Ken Kesey: it was June 1976, and Kesey was hosting a party at his farm in Pleasant Hill on the eve of a literary festival he was organizing called *The Poetic Hoohaw*. My brother Kim, a student at the University of Oregon, was part of the organizing committee, so I got invited along since I happened to be up in Eugene. I was eighteen and had just graduated from high school. I had just bought a VW, stuck a Dead sticker on the back of it, and was heading up from San Francisco to the Northwest, headed across Canada and to see what would happen along the way.

The first thing that happened was going out to Kesey's farm for what turned out to be a bucolic evening party full of kids, animals, musicians, poets, people of countercultural notoriety, Pranksters, and assorted could-have-beens and wannabees. Like the best gatherings, everyone there seemed relaxed; new and old friends mingling, the known and unknown mixing, cliques clicking, and Kesey, the obvious charismatic center of it all, visibly and invisibly facilitating the whole thing. Kesey was visible in

that he was darting around like a firefly—here one minute, there the next, joking with kids, dogs and adults alike, seeing to the needs of dignitaries as well as to nobodies like myself. He was invisible in that even when he wasn't present, you felt his luminescence and energy urging you on to have a good time, to explore his farm, to have some food in the house, to explore the swamp or to play horseshoes with his kids.

Besides poets and musicians, Kesey's farm was being grazed and graced by assorted Pranksters and kids of all ages. One of the kids, Kesey's daughter Sunshine, who was probably about eight or ten years old, had a bucket with a snake in it that she was taking out and showing off. I said to her something patronizing like, "Oh, snakes are really scary, aren't they?" And she held up the snake and patted it and said, "Oh no, snakes are nice, come on and hold him." So I held the snake and have remembered to respect snakes ever since. Kesey was a sharer of wisdom, and so were his children.

Of course, Kesey wanted everyone to see The Bus. He urged Kim and me and my friend Jeff to go see it and then he disappeared, back to facilitating the party. The famed psychedelic relic from the 1960s now rested across a damp field on the edge of the woods and a swamp, looking like it was becoming part of the forest, or the forest was becoming part of it. The bus exuded a murky, haunting feeling, vaguely troubling, making me feel like I shouldn't be there. It was not my place to sit where Neal Cassady had sat. We didn't linger and soon came out for air and back to the present.

I didn't talk to many people inside the house, but I do remember someone telling me that the adults at the party were advised "not to smoke joints in front of the kids." I thought this was ironic, since I had just spent the last four years at high school doing exactly the opposite: hiding joints from adults. But this was Kesey's world, the rules were reversed, and life had to be looked at from a different perspective. At some point in the night I found myself talking with Ken in the kitchen, and I wonder to this day if this happened to everyone at the party, that all of a sudden one found oneself in a one-to-one conversation with Kesey, with no idea how it had happened.



Ken Kesey, Bill Kreutzmann, and friends

Don Defenderfer

The next time I saw Ken Kesey was on the top of the Great Pyramid of Cheops in Egypt in September 1978. Kim and I had journeyed there from southern France to see the ruins and, we hoped, to see the Grateful Dead play in front of the pyramids next to the Sphinx. We had heard plausible rumors the concerts were going to happen but we weren't sure, as there had been nothing in print and this was long before the internet. But as soon as we saw Kesey on the Great Pyramid, we knew the rumors were true. Kim and I had climbed up the pyramid in 110-degree heat, having just arrived in Egypt the night before from Athens. I had bolted up to the top of the pyramid with pent-up excitement—we were climbing to the top of the Great Pyramid! I was carrying a green cellophane kite, which had accompanied me all through Greece, seeking unusual places to fly it. This was a family tradition, to fly kites from outrageous places, and what better place to fly a kite than in Egypt, from atop the greatest of all pyramids?

When we got to the top of the pyramid there was Kesey, dressed in white pants and a white t-shirt with a big red, white, and blue (ever

the patriot) Grateful Dead skull on it. He wore a white Bedouin-style bandana hat to keep cool—it was a long way from green, humid Oregon. He was wide-eyed and taking it all in. On top of the pyramid were various Pranksters, related family members in tie-dyed t-shirts, and a couple of Italian tourists. Kesey kind of nodded to us, knowing we were somehow within his orbit of relations, and suddenly I felt we were part of his party again: The Oregon *Hoohaw* had moved to Egypt without missing a beat.

While we were on top, taking in the views of the desert and the other pyramids, some of the Pranksters had the idea of flying a Grateful Dead Steal Your Face flag from the top of an old triangle-masted flagpole that capped the pyramid (and represented, so I heard, the original golden cap of the pyramid). Kim helped Prankster George Walker, letting him stand on his shoulders and then George shimmied up the wooden pole to hang the flag. He tied it on and then slid back down the pole onto Kim's shoulders. Along the way he got a nasty splinter right between his legs—the price that pirates pay to raise a flag of glory (and the price one pays of coming down from great heights). Kesey sat on the edge of the pyramid watching it all happen while also facilitating the filming of the flag raising while I flew my kite.

As usual, Kesey was simultaneous in his actions: all at once he was sitting on the corner of the pyramid mellowed by the heat, contemplating, while at the same time he was directing the filming, joking, telling stories of his previous visit, engineering the event, and reflectively taking it all in. He was seamlessly playing host in foreign terrain to other boundary riders without missing a beat. My kite flew proudly as I let it out to the end of its half mile of string. When it was fully extended, all that one could see was a little green cube floating in the powder blue skies above the desert sands. Magnificent. Had the pyramid ever flown a kite or supported a Grateful Dead flag before? It was the best of times.

On the way down the pyramid I gave the kite to an Egyptian boy who had probably never seen a kite before. It was a wonderful kite, with a Grateful Dead *Wake of the Flood* sticker on one of the cellophane panels, and to this day I imagine the kite leaning against a wall in a mud brick house in the poor section of Giza, perched next to an earthen jar and a sleeping baby.



The Sphinx

Don Defenderfer

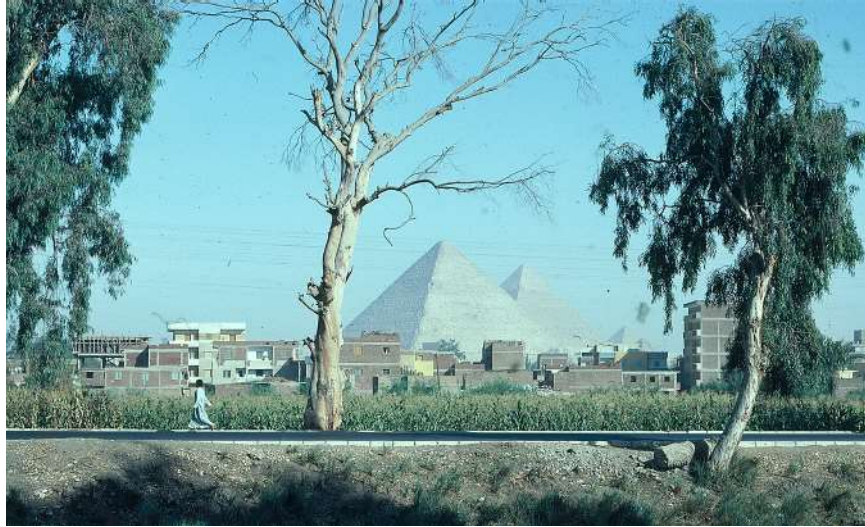
I descended the pyramid with Ken. I was still full of adrenalin from being on the pyramid and accomplishing my kite mission. I started to leap from one big limestone block down to another (as only a twenty-year-old can do) and Kesey said to me, “You ought to be careful, it’s pretty steep coming down.” And so I slowed down to his Oregon pace as I thought to myself, “When someone like Ken Kesey advises caution, one heeds that advice.”

As we descended, Kesey had a little tape recorder he was talking into and I heard him say, “Lawrence of Winterland now descending the Great Pyramid of Cheops.” He recorded other observations, too, but sadly, his words have long since faded from memory. I hope his thoughts linger on some cassette tape, filed back in his archive on his family farm at Pleasant Hill, waiting to be unearthed one day.

When we got to the bottom of the pyramid, we went our separate ways. Later that afternoon Kim and I were playing backgammon in the shade of a café at the front of the Mena House Hotel when Kesey walked by. Recognizing Kim’s *Spit in the Ocean* t-shirt, he stopped and greeted us in his relaxed style. After chatting a bit he said, “Hey, we’ve rented a bus to go out and see some ruins tomorrow, if you want to join us you are welcome. Just be here first thing in the morning to catch the bus.” Go on a bus trip with Ken Kesey in Egypt? You bet your *baksheesh* we’ll be there.

The next morning we were there, right on time. We climbed on board the bus with Kesey’s family, assorted Pranksters, and Dead family members. I recognized a few other inner-circle people like Mountain Girl and Courtenay Pollock, the Dead’s legendary tie-dye artist, but Kim and I really knew no one, so we mingled just a little, mostly observing. Grateful Dead drummer Bill Kreutzmann was friendly: he told me he had seen my kite flying the day before and wondered what it was. We chatted, and he told me about trying to throw a Frisbee across the Grand Canyon. It hadn’t gone far, flying back into his face.

As we headed across the flat Egyptian landscape into the bright warm morning the bus was full of talk and people pointing at the sites: camels, cows filling dry fields, Egyptians lingering along the roadsides, mud brick huts, ruins, goats—a thousand scenes. I sat next to Paul Krassner, the satirist and onetime publisher of *The Realist*. He admired my Bookshop



View of the Pyramids from the Mena House Hotel

Don Defenderfer

Santa Cruz t-shirt and commented, “Some of the Pranksters used to own that bookstore when it was getting started.” More connections.

Kesey strolled up and down the aisle of the bus making sure all was well, pointing at things out the window and telling us about our destination, Saqqara, site of the original step pyramid (a practice run for the Great one) along with underground ruins, getting everyone excited for what was in store. Kesey looked at home on the bus, making things happen, and everyone was enjoying the trip. His wife Faye smiled all day, looking serene and natural, like an Oregon farmer’s wife out on a day trip to pick raspberries.

We spent the day exploring the ruins and Kesey’s crew filmed it all, lugging the old-style video and audio equipment in and out of the heat and the underground. I’m sure the footage would make entertaining viewing today, with Krassner and the other Pranksters constantly playing gags and improvising jokes and little skits about the ancients. What looked like mockery was actually showing their respect, rather than adopting the awestruck reverence of the few normal tourists we saw. It was vaudeville in Saqqara, Prankster-style.

The day was over before we knew it, and as we pulled into the Mena House Hotel Kesey whispered to Kim and me, “If you want to donate

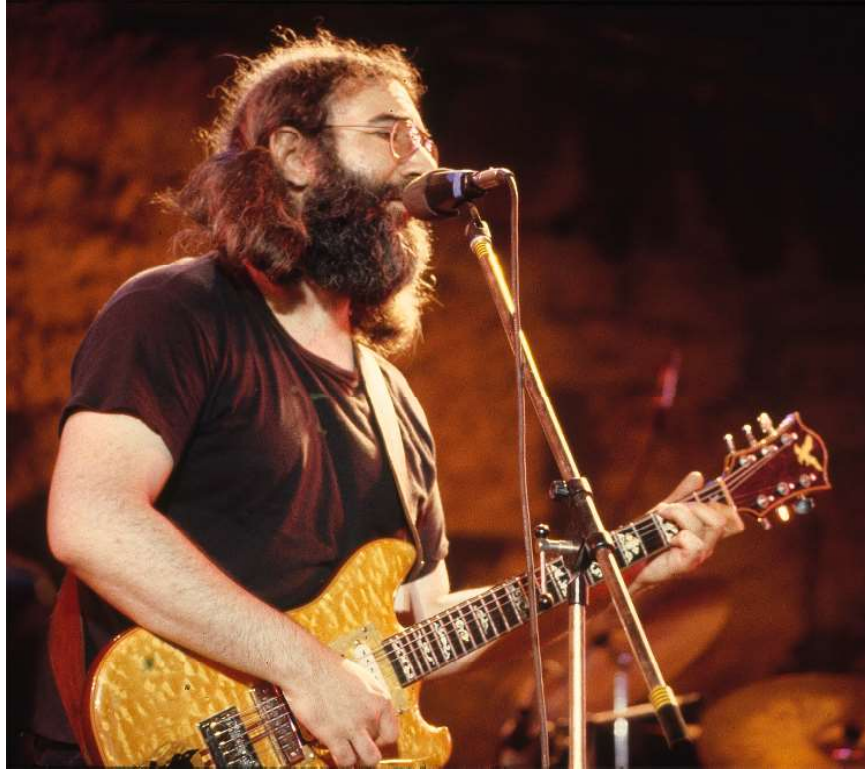
some *baksheesh* to the bus driver and guide for the day, feel free to do so.” A very thoughtful suggestion, so we gave the bus driver (who was really the Egyptian equivalent of Neal Cassady) and our guide Mohammed a few dollars before we climbed off the bus and back into the 115-degree heat. We made a beeline for the refreshing Mena House Hotel pool, as if we were staying there, but before swimming, we thanked Ken for being so kind and gracious, inviting us on the bus trip and letting us spend the day with his family and friends.

Of course, the pull for Kesey and his entourage was the Dead, who were there to rock the cradle of civilization with three outdoor concerts at the foot of the pyramids. Kim and I had been planning a trip to Egypt already, but seeing our favorite band there was going to be fluorescent icing on a monochromatic desert cake. Not long after we arrived in Egypt, we just happened to be milling around at the Mena House Hotel when the band just happened to be checking in.

Seeing an opportunity, I brashly walked up to Bob Weir and said, “Welcome to Egypt, my friend. We have a slight problem with the pyramid, but we are getting our crack equipment crew onto the job and we expect that the pyramid will soon be ‘Just Exactly Perfect.’” He looked at me like I was insane (probably thinking, another lost Deadhead soul) and then he got it, breaking into a grin at the inside joke.

I asked him how the Giants were doing and he said, “Pretty good, I guess,” before turning away to continue checking in. Just as we were leaving the Mena House we ran into Phil Lesh and chatted, telling him that we were headed to Luxor. He suggested we get in touch with a guide he knew and said that we would have a great time in Karnak and the Valley of the Kings. “Thanks, Phil,” we chorused, adding, “we’ll see you at the concerts.”

Leaving the Mena House and walking back towards our more humble hotel, I spotted Mickey Hart standing up in the back of a minivan as it careened through the chaotic traffic on its way to the mania of the Mena House. He had obviously just arrived, eyes looking wide and wild. I could see him pointing and gesticulating at the passing menagerie of veiled women, horses, carts, old buses, donkeys, darting taxis, bicycles, palm trees, soldiers, street vendors, the vast dry desert that surrounded it



Above: Jerry Garcia. Below (L to R): Bob Weir, Donna Jean Godchaux, Jerry Garcia, Bill Kreutzmann, Phil Lesh, Mickey Hart, Keith Godchaux, Son et Lumière Theatre, September 16, 1978. *Don Defenderfer*



all, the pyramids in the background, and a million other things to marvel at. Welcome, traveler.

We took the train trip down to Luxor and of course we met various Deadheads along the way—you could spot them a mile away, wandering awestruck in black skeleton t-shirts through Tutankhamun's tomb and the Temple of Karnak. We made friends with famed Deadhead dentist Bernie Bildman and two of his friends from Alabama, who said they had mortgaged their home in order attend the concerts.

After a few days of tombs, hookahs, and Nile sunsets we came back up to Cairo for the three-night stand. The outdoor venue for the concerts (usually used for a more modest "Sound and Light" show for tourists) was a dream. The band's stage and speaker towers were set up next to the Sphinx, the pyramids looming on the hill behind them. The theater consisted of a small seating area, holding only a few thousand people. The first night's crowd consisted of local Egyptians, a front row of well-dressed dignitaries who were there to see what all the fuss was about, some lucky backpackers, a few bemused tourists, and barely a carload of Deadheads—the band had finally found a place remote enough that only the most intrepid Deadheads could make the journey.

You couldn't imagine a more dramatic setting for a concert, with the Sphinx and pyramids lit up boldly behind the stage and the Grateful Dead flag flying atop the Great Pyramid for all to see. The band were loud and rocking as always, and they seemed especially inspired to be there. The dignitaries seemed a bit taken aback by the music, but everyone else loved it, of course. The Deadheads were ecstatic. It was so audacious of the band to be there—a huge achievement. But in the shadows of such a rich history, the first night's music almost seemed dwarfed by such an epic setting—as if the Grateful Dead had finally met their match.

After the first night's concert Kim and I were talking to a few friends near the side of the stage when Jerry Garcia walked past—he was just out wandering, taking in the scene. We talked about how cool it had been to see the local Egyptians, dressed in their pajama-like *gellabias*, dancing in the dunes that framed the seating area. "Yeah," he agreed, "that was a sight," and asked us how the sound had been. "Great," we said, and he replied, "We're just getting warmed up, man, the music is going to get



Above: Bob Weir, Donna Jean Godchaux, Jerry Garcia. Below: Hamza El Din and the Nubian Youth Choir, Son et Lumière Theatre, September 16, 1978. *Don Defenderfer*



better. See you later,” he finished, and drifted off toward the stage, leaving us awestruck. Wow, did we really just have a chat with Jerry?

In between the concerts we explored the pyramids and tombs. One day we ran into some of the Pranksters and Owsley “Bear” Stanley, the Dead’s original sound man and mind-altering facilitator to a whole generation. We explored the King’s Chamber with them and then, led by Owsley and his tie-dyed gang, we went deep under the Great Pyramid into a secret, non-tourist tunnel and into a hidden chamber where we all huddled in the darkness, lit only by candlelight. Owsley speculated on the age of the pyramids and their construction, and in the darkness we chanted “Omm,” trying to tune into the timeless world of the pharaohs. Kim recorded the chanting onto a small cassette tape (which years later he loaned to Bear) and we all were suitably amazed at the experience.

Later that day we were walking back from the Mena House Hotel when I looked up and there was Garcia, walking down the sidewalk, alone. He was dressed in his usual black t-shirt and jeans. He had no hat, even though the temperature was over 115 degrees; the only concession he made to the heat was tying his hair up into pigtails. He stopped to talk with us and we shook his hand. I said, “Thanks for coming,” and he replied, “No, thank *you* for coming”—leaving us awestruck, once more. He had the same graciousness as Kesey.

The third night’s concert was something special: finally, the occasion, the music, and the incomparable setting all merged into one. It was warm and clear and the crowd was more electric than the first two nights—the locals now knew what to expect and so there was that air of expectancy in the crowd that gives a concert a good vibe even before it starts. The dunes along the side of the theatre were now covered in local Egyptians—no tickets needed in the desert—and when the music got going, the place came alive with whirling dervishes and twirling Deadheads alike. When Hamza El Din and a dozen or so Nubian singers and clappers jammed with the Dead, the locals really got into swaying and swirling and dancing.

Kim and I were right up front, next to the stage, and at a certain point during the concert there was a full lunar eclipse. Kim yelled, “Look at the moon,” and Weir and Garcia looked up, watching the moon disappear as they played ever more intensely. The sight of the moon disappearing



Jerry Garcia, Bob Weir, Donna Jean Godchaux

Don Defenderfer

and then slowly reappearing, all to the swirling rhythms and chiming electricity of the band's music, was unforgettable.

Taking it all in too, on the side of the stage, were the Dead's extended family: the Keseys, Mountain Girl, Bill Walton, Bill Graham and others, all watching and dancing and marveling at the spectacle. The music soared, the full moon lit up the desert, the spotlights played on the pyramids, Egyptians and Deadheads danced alike, and it truly seemed as if world peace was possible; a great, great night. Bill Graham later said it was one of the highlights of his life. Ours, too.

We stayed up all night, courtesy of Owsley's elixir, and at dawn we caught a taxi to the airport with Bill Walton. We helped him with his luggage at the airport—he had a cast on his leg—and we talked about how incredible the concert had been. We felt a deep sense of love for Egypt, the band, Kesey, and everyone we had met. It had all just come together so

perfectly—and like the best of Grateful Dead experiences, it seemed like it was all meant to be. We knew we were lucky to have been there.

We flew to Marseille where we met my mother at the train station for a brief rendezvous before she embarked on her own Egypt trip. We went out to a restaurant where Kim told her about our travels while I promptly fell asleep over my couscous. I'd finally had enough input. Coming down from Egypt took long time, but I still remember the overwhelming feeling of love I felt then. Forty-five years later, that feeling still permeates my memories of that once-in-a-lifetime experience.

After the Egypt trip I went back to UC Santa Cruz and enrolled in a creative writing class taught by Page Stegner, son of Wallace Stegner, Kesey's teacher at Stanford just before he wrote *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. I saw Kesey one last time, on New Year's Eve, 1978, at the closing of Winterland. He and his son Zane were carrying the Thunder Machine into the bowels of Winterland as I was walking by. There was a flash of recognition on his part as I took their photo. We shook hands and then I melted back into the crowd of waiting Deadheads as he and Zane squeezed into the backstage sanctum of Winterland.

DON DEFENDERFER earned a BA from the University of California–Santa Cruz in Environmental Studies and a Masters in Social Ecology from the University of Western Sydney–Hawkesbury. A published poet, he has focused on environmental and educational issues in his career. He emigrated to Australia in 1983 and now lives with his family on Tasmania. He saw his first shows at Santa Barbara and Kezar Stadium in 1973 and has considered himself a Deadhead ever since.