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Meriwether, Nicholas G.

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Nicholas G. Meriwether

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SPECIAL SECTION

Hailing Osiris? The Afterlife of the Grateful Dead's Egypt Adventure

When the Grateful Dead were living in the Haight-Ashbury, a supposed quotation from the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* was often cited as the source for their name: "We now return our souls to the creator and as we stand at the edge of eternal darkness, let our chant fill the void, that others may know: In the land of the night, the Ship of the Sun is drawn by the Grateful Dead."[1] Promoter Chet Helms was fond of reciting the phrase when he introduced the Dead, and although the band and their inner circle never asserted a link between the band's name and that ancient text , other Haight-Ashbury friends were entranced by the idea (Greenfield 1996, 104; Legate 1987, 4). Rick Griffin incorporated part of those lines in his advertisement for the band's debut record (fig. 1), and Stanley Mouse's design for the LP's front cover originally incorporated the last part of the phrase until the band insisted that it be obscured (Jackson 1984, 10).

Within the band's circle, however, no one made that claim. Jon McIntire, who was an active participant in the 710 Ashbury scene, pointedly observed that "Among the Grateful Dead, no one ever talked about the name coming from the Egyptian Book of the Dead" (Greenfield 1996, 104). Yet even after Garcia publicly debunked the story, it persisted.

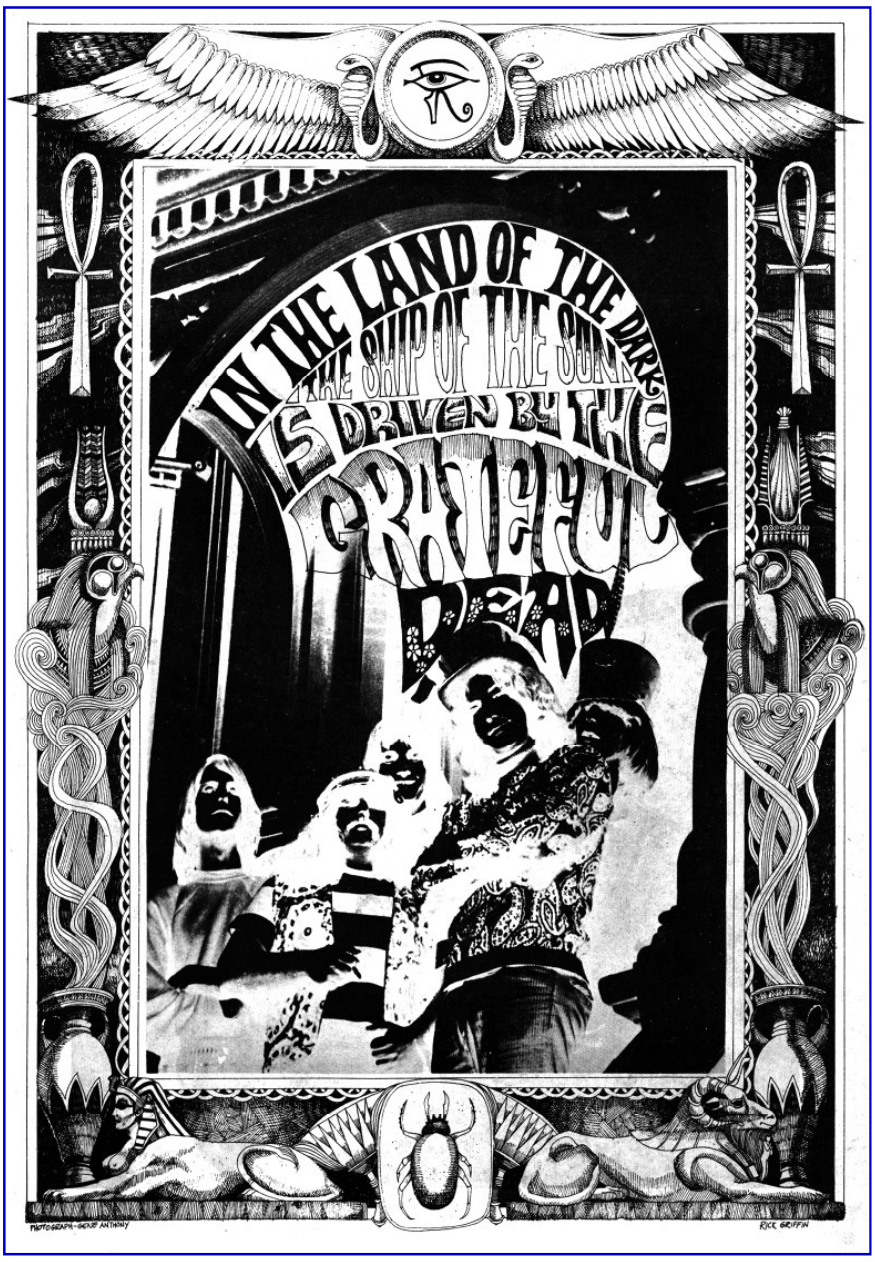


Figure 1. Rick Griffin's advertisement for the Dead's debut album, *San Francisco Oracle*, no. 6 (February 1966): 21.

When the Dead toured Europe in 1974, band staffer Steve Brown visited the Victoria and Albert Museum and made it a point to visit the Egyptian exhibition, a pilgrimage to see the alleged source:

> I stood in front of the *original* hieroglyphic inscriptions of the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*. There they were, those haunting words first heard proclaimed by the high priest of the Temple of Avalon, Chet Helms: "In the land of the dark the ship of the sun is pulled by the Grateful Dead." Seeing the actual inscription allowed me to reach back and touch a reality from thousands of years past. (Brown 1986, 24)

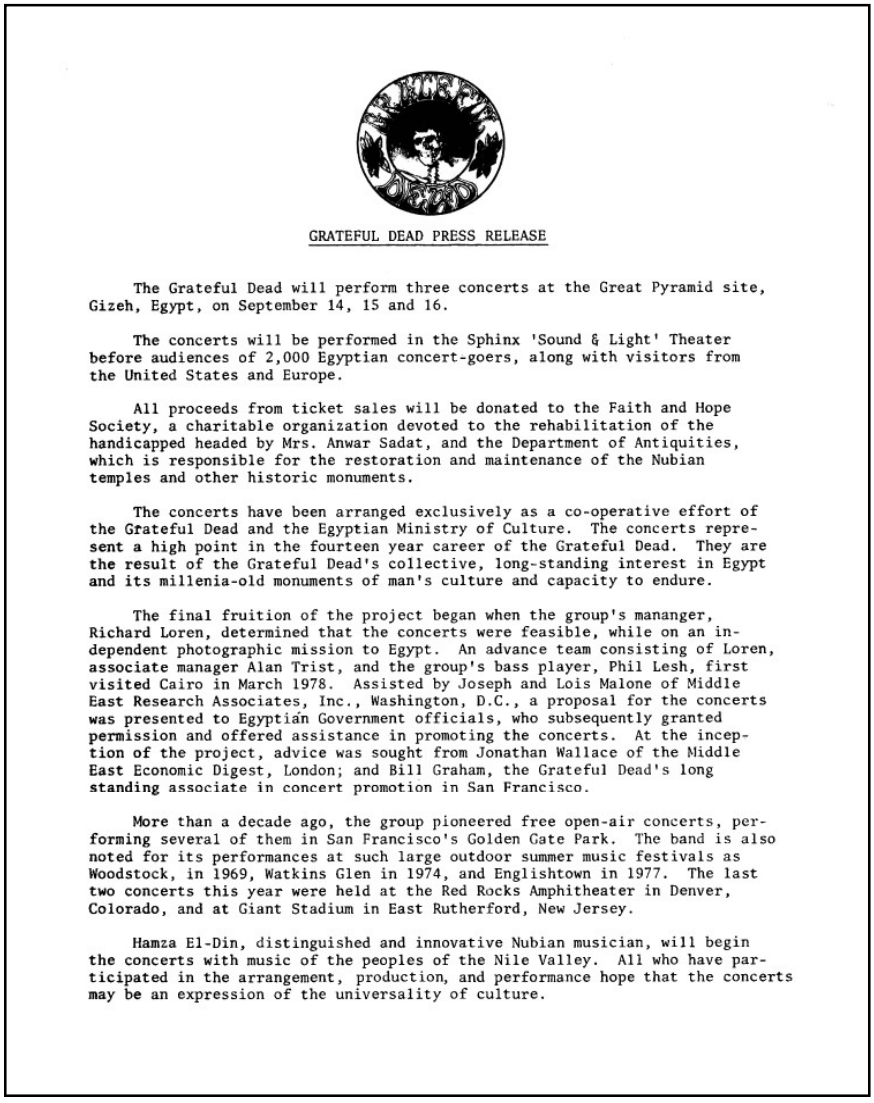
However powerful that reality, those papyri do not contain those lines, nor does the signature phrase that became the band's name appear in any translation of that bibliographically complex work.[2] Yet Brown's visit did evoke the slippery ways that the archival record has complicated the story of the Dead's engagement with Egypt.

What cemented that complex relationship was the Dead's celebrated performances in Giza in 1978. And just as Brown's museum visit didn't dispel the spurious story of the origins of the band's name, the narrative of the Egypt concerts that emerged after the band's return has stubbornly resisted much of the record of the trip, obscuring the nature of the project as well as its place in the Dead's history. This section provides an outline of that complex archival legacy with a representative sample of primary and secondary sources, most unknown and all unpublished in this form.

I.

When the concerts were announced, the band's press release called them "the result of the Grateful Dead's collective, long-standing interest in Egypt and its millennia-old monuments of man's culture and capacity to endure" (fig. 2). For some, that sounded like a veiled reference to the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* myth, but Bob Weir framed the project in more prosaic terms:

> Really, as far as playing Egypt is concerned, there are a number of things that we've all wanted to do. We want to play for new faces in new situations, and that certainly represented a place where you could play to new faces and in a new situation … I



GRATEFUL DEAD PRESS RELEASE

The Grateful Dead will perform three concerts at the Great Pyramid site, Gizeh, Egypt, on September 14, 15 and 16.

The concerts will be performed in the Sphinx 'Sound & Light' Theater before audiences of 2,000 Egyptian concert-goers, along with visitors from the United States and Europe.

All proceeds from ticket sales will be donated to the Faith and Hope Society, a charitable organization devoted to the rehabilitation of the handicapped headed by Mrs. Anwar Sadat, and the Department of Antiquities, which is responsible for the restoration and maintenance of the Nubian temples and other historic monuments.

The concerts have been arranged exclusively as a co-operative effort of the Grateful Dead and the Egyptian Ministry of Culture. The concerts represent a high point in the fourteen year career of the Grateful Dead. They are the result of the Grateful Dead's collective, long-standing interest in Egypt and its millenia-old monuments of man's culture and capacity to endure.

The final fruition of the project began when the group's mananger, Richard Loren, determined that the concerts were feasible, while on an independent photographic mission to Egypt. An advance team consisting of Loren, associate manager Alan Trist, and the group's bass player, Phil Lesh, first visited Cairo in March 1978. Assisted by Joseph and Lois Malone of Middle East Research Associates, Inc., Washington, D.C., a proposal for the concerts was presented to Egyptian Government officials, who subsequently granted permission and offered assistance in promoting the concerts. At the inception of the project, advice was sought from Jonathan Wallace of the Middle East Economic Digest, London; and Bill Graham, the Grateful Dead's long standing associate in concert promotion in San Francisco.

More than a decade ago, the group pioneered free open-air concerts, performing several of them in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. The band is also noted for its performances at such large outdoor summer music festivals as Woodstock, in 1969, Watkins Glen in 1974, and Englishtown in 1977. The last two concerts this year were held at the Red Rocks Amphitheater in Denver, Colorado, and at Giant Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey.

Hamza El-Din, distinguished and innovative Nubian musician, will begin the concerts with music of the peoples of the Nile Valley. All who have participated in the arrangement, production, and performance hope that the concerts may be an expression of the universality of culture.

Figure 2. The press release announcing the concerts, September 2, 1978, by Alan Trist. *Courtesy Rhino Entertainment Co.*

> want to reach as far with our music as we possibly can. (Benson 1979).

Mickey Hart was also circumspect, but acknowledged the larger symbolism of the effort: “This was something that we’d wanted to do for years. Without sounding too mystical, I’d say we felt drawn there” (1978, 28).

Though he never mentioned the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* or the spurious link to the band's name, he was not exaggerating when he noted that an interest in ancient Egypt wound through the Dead's early thinking. Ancient Egypt played a prominent role in the Haight-Ashbury fascination with esoterica, and the Dead shared that larger interest (Meriwether 2020). Still, after years of debunking the faux source of their name, it must have been tiresome to hear it trotted out again when the Egypt trip was announced. Yet that was emblematic of the larger challenge the trip has posed for critics. Much has been written about those concerts, chiefly revolving around the gulf between the scale of the setting and the cost of the enterprise versus the perceived caliber of the performances. Phil Lesh offered a trenchant summary of that view afterwards, noting "the performances weren't that good. The chance of a lifetime and we blew it. You can never push a button and say it's going to come out right" (Kohberger 2009, 24). The decision to shelve the planned live album gave critics an easy way to echo Lesh's dismissal.

Yet that view misses the nature of the effort and distorts its achievement. Although a few commentators have pointed out the complexities of the documentary record, most deprecate the scale and scope of the project by reducing the larger narrative to the concert recordings. That obscures much of the contemporary reporting, beginning with the band members themselves. Shortly after the concerts, Weir called the experience "spectacular," with the Sphinx and the Great Pyramid "lit up, golden, magenta," the bluffs around the plateau "ringed with Bedouins on their horses and camels with their rifles slung over their shoulders, hundreds on either side" (Brown 2009b, 237). Even the cloud of mosquitos that descended on the stage didn't undercut the majesty of the moment: a swarm of bats followed, providing an aerial counterpoint to the dancers in front of the stage and leaving the musicians unscathed. "It had to have been one of the most sublime moments that's ever occurred. I left my body," Weir laughed. "If I had to freeze a moment in time, this [was] it" (Brown 2009, 237). Ten years later, Garcia noted, "I've had about a dozen totally life-altering experiences. They're kind of before-and-afters. There was the me before I went to Egypt, and there's the me since I've been to Egypt" (Vaughan 1987, 80).

Lesh offered a way to reconcile the gulf between the experience and the concert recordings by noting, "The thing about Egypt that made it cool for us, morally, was that we didn't go in there and take any money out of the country" (Kohberger 2009, 24). Even more, the philanthropy was guided by Egyptian interests, which designated the proceeds for antiquities preservation, the disabled, and the construction of a soccer field for locals. It was a statement of support for Egypt's control over their heritage—control that had been denied over centuries of colonial exploitation. The fact that Steve Brown had to visit London in order to see a priceless and essential part of that heritage attested to that history.

If philanthropy suggests a different way of framing the Egypt project, it also highlights the larger evidentiary challenges it raises. The archival turn has brought a broad range of disciplines into the discussion of how we collect and make archives accessible; for scholars, the challenge of the Egypt project is not just its tangled and charged legacy, but how that is complicated by the fragmented archive it left, as the pieces in this section show. The continuing problems of the band's own archive highlight the need for scholars to adopt a more expansive view of the Dead's archival landscape; this section brings that into focus.

II.

One critical aspect of the Egypt expedition that the dominant narrative tends to downplay, or even overlook, is its place in the band's history. The trip may have tapped older interests from the Dead's past, but it was even more of an expression of their recent experience. The project represented a statement about where they were as a band: this was their great project after the hiatus, undertaken because "the band felt the need for something magical," as Mickey Hart put it (1990, 189). His comment could also be taken as a veiled nod to the way the trip offered something of a bonding exercise, not just a celebration of their successful return to touring after the anxiety of the hiatus but also an effort to stanch the steady deterioration of Keith and Donna Godchaux's roles in the band. The expedition also capped months of often frustrating work on what would become *Shakedown Street*, which failed to wrap before they embarked. Although the album may have benefitted from the infusion of energy and

inspiration the trip provided, at the time its unfinished status made Egypt a respite, an interruption rather than a sustained break from the treadmill.

Yet the months of planning and creativity that went into the project would not only underscore core values of the Dead but presage how they would inform and shape the years to come. Initially the band had considered making the concerts free; designating them as benefits allowed the proceeds to make concrete, demonstrable contributions. In many ways, the Egypt shows marked a highlight the band's philanthropy, making the concerts a cross-cultural expression of their values, framed in local terms. That would become a hallmark of the band's mature philanthropy, as the Rex Foundation would show. Asking famed Egyptian musician Hamza El Din to participate in the concerts was a statement as well. El Din's involvement not only acknowledged his role as a renowned Egyptian musical emissary but as a powerful voice for the Nubian people, who still suffered from their displacement by the construction of the Aswan Dam.

That gesture could have been misinterpreted by the Egyptian government, but the fact that the Dead could position it as an integral aspect of a larger cross-cultural effort is significant, marking the project as a defining moment in the band's transition from the counterculture to the mainstream. The level and extent of their outreach and diplomacy speaks to how well their ideals aligned with those of the US State Department, just as the larger aim of the project underscored how much the band's perception as a Haight-Asbury holdout misconstrued the nature of their work (and, some would argue, the Haight as well). In that, the Egyptian expedition can be seen as part of the post-hiatus shift of the band away from the resolutely countercultural stance that defined their first decade to a more tempered approach, rooted in a pragmatism that would come to define their project and facilitate their work with promoters, their record label, and eventually usher them into the White House.

Finances were inextricably bound up in the diplomatic negotiations required to navigate the political terrain of the Middle East at the time, and that maneuvering marks one of the most far-reaching elements of the project. The concerts happened four years after the Dead had undergone an organizational crisis, causing them to retire from active touring, downsize their operation, and seriously consider disbanding. Even industry insiders

who relished the *Schadenfreude* of the band's retirement from the road had to acknowledge the skill that it took to mount the first rock concerts at the Great Pyramid, and at a time in which the region was still seething from decades of war. For the band to undertake that financial commitment, when they were still rebuilding after the crippling expense of *The Grateful Dead Movie*, was extraordinary; the fact that they cancelled the release of the planned live album underscored the nature, and level, of that commitment. Not only was the recording a significant part of the cost of the trip, the loss of the revenue from the album compounded the debt, dragging down their balance sheet. That makes the decision to shelve the album a more revealing choice than band histories have painted: forgoing any commercial aspect underscored the integrity of the band's approach, recasting one of their most significant investments into an unalloyed expression of their values.

Those values helped open doors in Cairo and Washington, as Alan Trist's essay explains. The diplomatic skills the band deployed were matched by the technical acumen they mustered. Transforming the minimal and primitive infrastructure of the Son et Lumière Theatre into a venue capable of supporting the Dead's sound and the recording truck was nothing short of an engineering marvel. Yet that aspect of the project tends to be obscured by the ambitious effort to wire the King's Chamber in the Great Pyramid to serve as a reverberation effect, which failed. That failure colored accounts of the recording as well, despite the gradual proliferation of increasingly good tapes. Only the release of *Rocking the Cradle* finally gainsaid that charge, showing that despite the extreme conditions that challenged every aspect of the sound, enough tape could be salvaged to create a compelling archival release.

Even the charge that they failed in the King's Chamber project fails to acknowledge for the creativity and ambition of the effort. Although Dan Healy would later argue that it "almost worked. And it worked sporadically"—a claim other witnesses dispute—he was correct when he concluded, "I don't think the importance was whether or not it worked, the importance was the fact that we took a shot at it" (Brown 2009c, 133; 134). Failure can be as instructive as success, and Healy's assessment offers a way of reassessing the venture as a whole. In that light, the con-

cert PA represents the most significant aspect of the engineering—and it succeeded, successfully bringing in the Bedouin who gathered to hear the music beyond the perimeter of the theatre.

Their presence was more than incidental; it was emblematic. They represented perhaps the most far-reaching aspect of the expedition as well. Band manager Rock Scully traced the genesis of the idea for the project to the *Blues For Allah* sessions three years earlier, when the band became obsessed with the idea of "*giving voice* to the desert" (1996, 257). Perhaps, but Mickey Hart's project to record Egyptian musicians following the concerts would enact that idea in a powerful and culturally vital way. His tapes, later released as *The Music of Upper and Lower Egypt*, captured the music of those communities, and their relationship with the desert, with state-of-the-art field recordings that are considered vital ethnomusicological documents.

That project was never designed to be a profit-making release, which mirrored the band's goals for the trip as a whole. The shows were never about releasing a live album; they were about creating an event. That motivation was artistic, not financial. Viewed in that way, the concerts represent the essence of the Dead's work, which was always more about music than commerce. That approach not only reflected the band's aesthetic philosophy, it was an expression of their identity, as artists whose vision of art was as a center for community.

This suggests a way to frame the music of the concerts in a broader perspective—one that foregrounds the archival challenge that scholarly reassessment raises. This section brings together a set of sources outlining the range of evidence and perspectives that the Egypt shows created with an eye toward how those point to additional insights. Alan Trist's essay and Richard Loren's interview address the history of the concerts from the planners' perspective; they make clear the magnitude and complexity of the work to bring about the project. Trist's essay expands on his earlier liner notes for *Rocking the Cradle* and adds sources and illustrations; like the concert program and Loren's interview, it points to how earlier published accounts offer glimpses of a larger story.

Band member interviews provide the view from the stage, highlighting the impact and experience of the concerts as something more than

just a performance for the musicians. Untranscribed until now, they indicate how much of the record survives in unrecognized forms or formats. A few fan accounts have been published (cf. D. R. 1985; Genetti 1999); they represent a compelling but under-utilized resource for scholars, as Don Defenderfer's essay shows. His account emphasizes the audience's perspective, highlighting how participants offstage shared in the event. Their stories help to frame the complexity of the concert tapes, which have as contentious a history as the larger story of the shows. Michael Parrish offers a new discussion of the recordings, revisiting them in the light of the most recent versions.

Just as the recordings have provided more insights, so does the key piece of ephemera, the concert program. It has had only brief mentions and no analysis, yet it represents a revealing encapsulation of the band's approach to the project; it has not been republished before, and the Egyptian version of the band biography has never appeared.[3] Finally, Peter Monk's poem, which concludes this volume, illustrates a final way the concerts marked participants, another expression of the inspiration the events provided. It makes a fitting postscript, offering an evocative example of how the concerts challenge the narrative by suggesting that the culmination of its impact is another work of art, perhaps the most powerful, enduring, yet challenging aspect of the project. Together, these pieces show how the dispersed archive of the concerts can reshape the narrative about the Egypt shows, making it a site for a wider scope of critical engagement—a scholarly intervention that restores the primacy of the human reactions to the event, and treats the documentary record as a more variegated, detailed, and layered account than the dominant narrative has allowed.

III.

For many participants, one of the most vivid memories of the event was the sight of the Bedouin, silhouetted atop the hills surrounding the plateau, dancing and swaying to the music. It is an image of cross-cultural connection and communication, and it gets at the way that the Egypt project can broaden our understanding of the Dead phenomenon. To listeners, the Egypt shows challenges the view of Dead shows as merely concerts,

musical performances whose history is solely and strictly defined by a recording, an objective document of the performance. This is a perspective that goes back to the band's early days at the Acid Tests, but the Egypt trip offered that promise at the outset. And that potential was never intended to be reduced solely to audiotape.

That is why Egypt marks perhaps the most striking example of the gulf between the concert experience and the recording in the Dead's career. Band family member Nicki Scully experienced that on a personal level, calling the concerts "maybe the whole reason I was with the Grateful Dead, so that I could go to Egypt to make those initial connections, that I was awakened to what I could be" (Troy 1991, 210). As scholars increasingly widen their focus to embrace the broader contexts of Dead shows, the Egypt concerts offer a compelling example of the artistic experience that made Grateful Dead performance something other than a traditional concert.

There is a postscript to that part of the story. When the band returned, they played a series of concerts at Winterland called "From Egypt With Love." With Hamza El Din as a guest, the concerts presented Stateside fans with a spectacular slide show in a musical setting that shared the experience in the most powerful, primal way. By all accounts, the shows were transcendent, musically: here the Dead were explaining what the experience had meant, conveying the majesty and import of what they had experienced in the most powerful way they knew. Although the slides were discarded, a harbinger of the UCSC Library's broader purge of its slide collection, the music of those shows endures as a powerful expression of what the shows meant for both the band and those lucky enough to be there.

IV.

After Garcia's death, Alton Kelley's commemorative poster revisited the old *Egyptian Book of the Dead* adage, incorporating it into the design and making it the theme of the image (fig. 3). Kelley's vision was a sincere tribute to the band he admired and illustrated throughout his career. By then, everyone knew the phrase was an invention, but Kelley correctly surmised that it had outgrown the story of its discredited origins

Figure 3. Alton Kelley's commemorative poster for the Dead, created after Garcia's death in 1995. *Courtesy Rhino Entertainment Co. and Alton Kelley Estate.*

to become something else, something other. His artwork made that clear, featuring a 1966 set of band member portraits by longtime band friend and early Haight-Ashbury photographer Herbie Greene, who had posed them against a wall of hieroglyphics drawn by his roommate and fellow photographer Bill Brach. Greene's black-and-white photographs played off of the backdrop, imbuing his subjects with some of its exoticism. Like the folklore term that had actually inspired the Dead's name, the association between the Egyptian phrase and the band had also outlived those origins to become something more. What Kelley's homage showed was that even if the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* did not inspire the band's name, it did inspire the band, as the Egyptian translation of the band's biography in the concert program noted, which appears in the following article.

That explains the rationale for this section. However spurious, the story of the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* and its tangled persistence gets at how the narrative that has grown up around the Egypt shows has taken on a life of its own, beyond what history permits. The texts in this section point to the complex ways that event and reception, fact and artifact, not only complicate but resist that received narrative. More than forty years after the concerts, that stubborn dance between the nature and meaning of the expedition is more than just another example of the lingering gulf between history and memory, between the accounts of the trip and the

evidence that has surfaced. After all, that dynamic is familiar scholarly terrain, especially in Egypt: just as archeologists continue to excavate more artifacts from the Valley of the Kings, scholars can hope that more texts and stories will surface, and be preserved and made accessible as part of the larger archival record.

But for Dead studies, the curious afterlife of the Egypt expedition highlights the gulf between the enduring appeal of the project and the critical consensus deprecating its impact. The texts here offer a way of tracing what this archival lacuna suggests, and why it has persisted, just as their novelty points to how much more of that archive remains unexplored. Beyond the romantic allure of mystery and myth that the Dead's Egyptian adventure tapped, what the project demonstrates is far more compelling. However slyly the idea of the concerts may invoke the timeless archeological challenge of Egypt, and the mysteries that implies, what it reminds us is far more concrete. Even well-known accounts can point to hidden stories, ones that not only fill in missing pieces of the larger narrative, but can fundamentally change its course and meaning. The work to excavate and build the archive of the Dead remains.

N.G.M.

Notes

1. Several variants of the alleged quotation have been published; this is from *The Grateful Dead Family Album*. It notes the controversy surrounding the phrase, calling it a "heavily disputed but unresolved question" (Brandelius 1989, 166).

2. Longtime band staffer Willy Legate tried to track down the alleged quotation without success. He noted Helms's assertion but concluded that "Cosmically appropriate LSD fables and recapitulations of all history in the end-time were popular in late-'60s Frisco" (Legate 1987, 4). Legate consulted UC Berkeley scholar William Murnane, author of *The Guide to Egyptian Antiquities* (1983), who suggested that the quote was possibly a paraphrase of the *Book of the Dead*. A close reading of the translation available at the time bears that out (Budge 1967; cf. Meriwether 1999, 248).

3. A partial image of the front cover of the program appears in *Grateful Dead: The Illustrated Trip* (Heyworth-Dunne et al. eds. 2003, 222) and in *Grateful Dead Family Album* , which also reproduces with the Arabic version of the band biography (Brandelius 1989, 168; 167).

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