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Charming Cheops: Richard Loren on Taking the Grateful Dead to Egypt

DAVID GANS

Portions of this interview were broadcast on *The Grateful Dead Hour*, episodes 1044 and 1045, on September 22 and 29, 2008.

Richard Loren: In the late sixties, I was a rock agent in New York, and I represented the Doors, the Jefferson Airplane, and a bunch of other rock bands. During that time, I befriended Marty Balin, the lead singer of the Airplane. That was also when I met Jerry Garcia—David Grisman introduced me to him at the Fillmore East in June of 1970, I think.

When I first moved to California in 1970, I lived with Marty for a little while. We shared an interest in the arcane—suppressed ancient knowledge and all that stuff. Marty is an avid reader and had an astonishing collection of books on Egypt. And it was he who turned me onto the wonders and mysteries that Egypt had to offer. And after being there with him and talking and listening to all his stories, I thought to myself, “Man, I have to visit this place the first chance I get. I just got to get there. That’s it.” And this, of course, is really before my involvement in any of the San Francisco scene at all—I just had moved to San Francisco.

The confluence of events that brought it all together happened a few years later. In 1974, I was working for Jerry as his manager and his non-Grateful Dead groups, like Merl and Jerry, the Jerry Garcia Band, Old and In the Way, and so on. Around January 1974, the band asked me if I would be their booking agent. They had just fired Sam Cutler, and Jerry had known that I had been an agent before I worked for him. He discussed it with the other band members and asked me if I wanted to book the band, and I said, “Sure.”

It was kind of an interesting year. We dismantled the Wall of Sound and Ken Kesey was commissioned by *Rolling Stone* to go to Egypt and write a little piece, which turned out to be the “Search for the Secret Pyramid.” It came out in consecutive issues of *Rolling Stone*, from November 1974 through February 1975.¹ And the Dead had just completed their filming of *The Grateful Dead Movie* in October and then decided to go on hiatus, because they needed some time off, for reasons that are pretty well known.

So I thought, “Hey, this is my opportunity. I’m going to just go to Egypt.” So I went with my wife at the time and Goldie Rush, a friend of ours and a close member of the Dead family. And it was during this, a trip to Luxor in Upper Egypt, that I met Abdul Ati, a boatman, who was later to take the four band members and fifteen or so other family members on a four-day trip on the Nile from Luxor to Aswan.

I was so enamored and overwhelmed that I decided to return the next year. I took another two weeks off in January 1976 and went back. And, after I was there a few days, I was riding a camel around the pyramids and the Sphinx when I suddenly looked over to my left and I saw a stage. It all kind of hit me: a light bulb went off in my head and I thought, “God, you know the Dead should play here.” During this trip, and the previous one, I had come to know the people a bit; as Phil Lesh put it succinctly in his book, he saw a connection between the loose, laid-back style of the Egyptians and the spirit of the Haight, and it was exactly that. The Egyptians and our counterculture shared a nonlinear concept of time—and I knew the band and their friends would get along just fine there. It was also, politically, a propitious time. Anwar Sadat, the president of Egypt, had recently expelled the Russians, who had been Egypt’s

financial and military benefactors, and had begun to ally themselves with the United States and the West. So I thought, here's an opportunity for an authentic cultural exchange, a hands-across-the-water event.

DG: The Dead had just completed *Blues for Allah*. Were they already thinking of going to Egypt when they were doing that?

RL: Actually, there was no connection at all between Egypt and that album.

DG: It was just a musical mode of that piece that caused Hunter to write that lyric?

RL: Yes. Yes, I think that there was a feeling, a connection with Arab culture, or something with Saudi Arabia. I don't really know the story behind it, but it had nothing to do with my trip to Egypt. I had just started working for the band; they had finished *Blues for Allah*. In the bigger sense, maybe there was some connection ... During the 1972 tour, Alan Trist took Jerry and Phil and Mountain Girl to visit Glastonbury and Stonehenge and they talked about the idea: "Oh, we should play some sacred sites. We'd really love it." But I didn't know about that till later on.

When this idea came to me, I immediately called Ati, who I had met in Upper Egypt on my first trip with Goldie. He was just such a great guy. And, as a matter of fact, Goldie and Ati had a romantic interlude that produced a son, Ali, who is my son Gus's best friend. I called Ati and I asked him about this idea that I had. "Could the band really play here? You think there's an opportunity?" He said, "I know some people in Cairo. Let me introduce you to this tour director I know, a friend of mine." So I met with him and he made me feel that this was something that could be achieved.

I couldn't have been more stoked. I was just out of my gourd. I returned home and immediately informed the band of what transpired, and as expected, they were totally jubilant at the possibility of playing at this site. But could we do it? We had a band meeting and we basically decided to embark on a serious feasibility study to determine whether we could, and what it would take to pull it off.

An Egypt committee of three, comprised of Phil Lesh, Alan Trist, and myself, was formed. That's when we got our nickname "The MIDS,"

the Men In Dark Suits, because in order to accomplish our goal, of course, we had to dress the part. So we sheared our locks a bit and bought these dark suits, and off we went to Cairo via Washington, where we met ambassadors of each of the countries, the American ambassador to Egypt and the Egyptian ambassador to America, along with an untold number of bureaucrats and dignitaries before we finally got a signed contract.

When Alan, Phil, and I concluded our business in Cairo, we went to Luxor to visit Ati for a tour of Upper Egypt, the one that I had taken the year before. So he took us for a trip on his felucca sailboat. And he said to us, “You know, after the show, why don’t you come down and spend a few days on the Nile?” Which is exactly what we did. He showed us a boat when we were down there that he aspired to own, so we bought it for him for what amounted to a pittance in American dollars at that time. And that boat took Bobby, Jerry, MG, Keith, Donna, John Kahn, and twenty of us family members down the Nile on a three-day voyage from Luxor to Aswan after the concerts; quite a thing.

When we got back to the States, we had already informed everybody that a contract had been signed for three shows on the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth of September. But when we got back, we really had our work cut out for us. Our travel agent, Randy Sarti, arranged for charter flights and hotels for band and crew, as well as flights for Deadheads from San Francisco and New York. The logistics alone of moving the equipment and fifty people halfway across the world was really no small obstacle, I’ll tell you. Fortunately, we had the experience of moving the monster sound system from city to city during 1974. But the Dead were very, very particular about their sound system, so we didn’t want to move all of our stuff from San Francisco to Cairo.

So I got in touch with the Who’s management and they were generous enough to rent us their PA and recording equipment. In order to get it to the site, at the foot of the pyramids, it was driven from London to Genoa, where it was put on a cargo vessel. It was picked up in Alexandria and driven to the pyramids site, in what I believe were the only three semi-trucks maybe in the Middle East, but for sure in Egypt. There weren’t very many semi-trucks around or very many generators or any of that stuff. So

we had a task just to find generators and trucks to pull this off. When they arrived, we all applauded. We couldn't believe what we were seeing—that the equipment had actually arrived.

DG: Mickey and Phil told me stories of staging a guerrilla attack on Bill Graham's house to get his help.

RL: Yes. My original intention was to get Bill Graham to help. This was before we got the contract signed. I thought it was going to be a monstrous task to really pull this thing off and really needed the help of somebody like Bill, who would really get behind this thing. And Alan Trist and I went and had a meeting with him and proposed the idea, and he said, "You guys are crazy." And then he said, "Well, I don't know; maybe we'll put Santana on the bill." That was a band that he managed at the time, and of course, he was looking after their interest too, but I said, "No, no, no, no, no." There was no money to be made here.

At that point, because Bill had basically said no to Alan and me, that's when Phil and Mickey went to him and said, "We want a new PA, and we want you to take us to Egypt." And Bill thought, "These crazy guys are going to Egypt? No way." So we went to Washington, and when we were involved with these ambassadors and dignitaries and bureaucrats and so on to pull this thing off, he started to get involved, and he started to call people in Washington, and we said, "Whoa! We don't want you involved now. We think we can pull this off on our own."

By then, Alan Trist's friend Jonathan Wallace in London had introduced us to Middle East Associates. They represented American corporations working in the Middle East. They were our liaisons, so once we met them, we knew that we could do it on our own, and we didn't need Bill Graham. So we sent him a telegram, "We appreciate it, but we got the contract signed, lay off."

Then, of course, when the event happened, Bill came to Egypt with Bob Barsotti and his brother, and they threw a big party, and it was great having them there, not as the impresario, but as the party-giver. He rented a big tent and he threw a big breakfast in the desert after the third show and it was just great.

DG: How early did the band get there? How far ahead of the show did people start arriving?

RL: Well, we got there a week or so before, and I think people started to trickle in three or four days before. So everybody got a chance to just walk around and check out the Pyramid and go to Saqqara, and go to the Cairo museum, and just to hang around a bit, because the equipment got there, then we had to set everything up for three days. We had semis to unload and a stage to set up. It was no small feat, because usually when we went from town to town, we'd have the crew of the promoter to help. And here we were, just the Grateful Dead crew, the few of us and a few of them—no IA guys at all.²

So it was no small feat. The theater that I had seen there had a nice stage, with enough for about 2,000 chairs; basic. Half the audience was comprised of Deadheads from the US and Europe, and the rest were basically Egyptian dignitaries that we had given passes and tickets to, and local high school students from Cairo.

DG: Did anybody buy a ticket?

RL: Yes, but they bought them at really, really reduced costs. And we gave whatever money that we got to the Department of Antiquities and to an Egyptian charity that was a favorite of Jehan Sadat, the Faith and Hope Center.³ We donated whatever money we got from the concerts to them.

The concerts were an extraordinary phenomenon. The Sphinx and the Pyramid were lit (fig. 1). The show opened with Hamza El Din, the famous Egyptian oud player who was a friend of Mickey's, and a Nubian group of tar players and singers from Hamza's village; just beautiful, beautiful guys. And as they played, the music segued beautifully into the Dead's music. On the third night, the moon was in full lunar eclipse.

DG: You guys didn't work that out ahead of time?

RL: No. We had no idea. If we had known, we would have scheduled it, or tried to schedule it, but we didn't know until a week before. Talk about synchronicity. And the last show also happened to coincide with the Camp David Peace Accords between Egypt and Israel. Let me tell you, the syn-



Figure 1. The Grateful Dead, Son et Lumière Theatre, September 16, 1978 *Richard Loren*

ergy was extremely powerful. It turned out, in my opinion, to be the most really unique chapter in the Grateful Dead chronicles; a truly cooperative experience.

DG: I remember John Cutler telling me years ago about trying to find enough wire to go rig up the Great Chamber as an echo chamber, and they weren't able to pull it off.

RL: That was the crew doing their thing. There were so many things to deal with when we got there; people asking "Where's my room?" at the Mena House Hotel, people from all over trying to get rooms and just trying to find a place to stay. It was chaos, but it was lovely chaos. The energy there was just phenomenal; Ken Kesey and Bill Walton and Paul Krassner and a bunch of Merry Pranksters; it was insane. That last night was just incredible.

The idea was to make a record out of the shows. We put out a ton of money to do this. And I thought, “Well, we’ll make a record. We’ll do a three-album set. We’ll get our money back.” But, of course, music always comes first with the band, and they weren’t happy with their performances. They refused to release it, and we were left with an enormous debt.

DG: Some of the songs—I’m thinking of “Looks Like Rain” and “Stagger Lee”—were not big improvisation vehicles, but there’s a nice quality to the performances. And at the end of each, it’s almost like they don’t want to let go. Each song has this drawn-out ending, and it just feels special, in a way. It feels extraordinary to me, and I think there’s something that comes through in this music that you just know you’re hearing something that comes from a power spot.

RL: Absolutely. From a special place. And as you said, the music definitely reflected that. “Looks Like Rain” goes on for a long time; Jerry’s guitar playing at the end of that is just incredible.

DG: Yes. He starts out on this high note and everybody else is thinking they’re ending the song and he just plays. He’s like fanning this high note like a mandolin.

RL: Right, right.

DG: And I don’t know whether he was trying to get it to go into another song, or what, but it just—I love it.

RL: Right. So do I. You know, the next note with Jerry is always a mystery. And that’s what makes his playing so unique and beautiful and so free-form; inimitable.

DG: Yeah. I remember reading a story about the hash over there. And it seems to me that everybody was away from their usual milieu, and they’re in this other place. And, you know, if everybody is smoking this incredible hash, that probably had an effect on the music, too.

RL: Well, yeah, but is that that unusual? And there’s those Murine bottles, too, that went around.

DG: Tell me about this movie, *The Vacation Tapes*.

RL: After the contract was signed, I was in the office with Jerry and Keith walks in. He said he had been approached by some documentary filmmakers offering to film the extravaganza we were about to undertake. Jerry thought about it for, like, ten seconds, and he said, “You know, I don’t think we should do that. I think it would mar the experience for the band and the participants to have professional cameramen in our faces throughout the whole time we’re there. We just want to relax and enjoy.”

I said, “Yeah, that’s great.” Then I started to think; I had been to Egypt a couple of times, and I had taken a lot of good photos. And I thought, “Well, gee, maybe I could film this thing.” So I said to Jerry, “Look, would you mind if I just took along a Super 8 and I filmed us?” He said, “Yeah, that’ll be fine.” He immediately gave me his approval.

And I contacted this friend of mine, Teppei Inokuchi, who was actually a cameraman for the Hells Angels movie—a cameraman with some experience—and I said, “Teppy, pick up a couple of Super 8 cameras. You come to Egypt with me. I’ll fly you in there and we’ll just photograph the band, the set-up, and so on.” That’s basically what happened. We shot close to twenty hours’ worth of footage, only fifteen minutes of which appears in *The Vacation Tapes*. We hope to release some more of the footage at a later date, but we’ll see what happens.

In addition to the twenty hours of footage that Teppy and I shot, I decided to collect some footage from other people who had Super 8 cameras there. Bernie Bildman was one of them, and thank goodness, he accompanied Ken Kesey and George Walker climbing up and putting the Grateful Dead flag atop the Great Pyramid. And I got some good footage from a few other people, but largely, it’s mine and Teppy’s footage on the Nile, and so forth. When we returned, I had an idea to try to put something out, but because the band didn’t really like their performances, the idea of actually putting out some kind of film documentary kind of died. It wasn’t of the highest quality; it was really like a home movie, so Jerry said, “Let’s forget about it. Let’s just do a slideshow.” And that was the slideshow, “From Egypt With Love,” that we did in October of ’78 at the Winterland shows.

DG: I went to those shows, and the slideshow was phenomenal, and so was Hamza. He and some local guitar players did that same thing to open the show, and the band filtered onto the stage during it. In an interview a couple years later, Bill remembered that moment: Everybody in Winterland, all the local hippies, did the same thing, getting entrained with that complicated hand clap. It was a knockout. The vibe was amazing at Winterland that week.

RL: Yeah, yeah. It was quite, quite amazing. When Alan and Phil and I had finished our business, got our contracts signed, as a little vacation for ourselves, we went from Cairo to Upper Egypt where this boatman, Abdul Ati, had told us, “Well, after the concerts, just come on down to Egypt, come on down to Luxor, and I’ll take you on my boat.” So Jerry, Mickey, Bobby, Keith and Donna, Ramrod, Alan, myself, Mountain Girl, just a bunch of friends piled on his boat, like twenty-five people, and we all had a little space, like three-by-six [feet] with a cushion. And that’s where we stayed, except when we had to go to the head, for like three days. We ate right there. The food was brought to us, and you’ll see that in *The Vacation Tapes*.

Some of the sights that we saw there were timeless. What we saw was probably not much different than it was 2,000 years ago: the fishermen; the banks of the Nile; it was a timeless place. It was something that was just meant to be, and that’s why I feel it’s the most unique chapter in the history of the Grateful Dead. One of many chapters, of course, but this one was so multicultural. And it just brought a lot of things together.

At that point, an attempt was made for peace in the Middle East, and it was probably the closest we’ve ever come to peace in that area. It was part of that historic confluence of events: that full moon, the Camp David Accords, this great music; the feeling on stage was absolutely amazing. Lots of Dead stages, while they’re playing, it’s electric, but this one was incomparable.

NOTES

This interview was originally conducted in summer 2008. This is the first publication of this edited version of the transcript, which has been approved by the narrator and interviewer.

1. A five-part series, the first article was Ken Kesey, “The Search for the Secret Pyramid,” *Rolling Stone* 174 (November 21, 1974): 56–58.
2. IA is short for IATSE, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, a union for stagehands and associated theater professionals.
3. Wafa Wal Amal Center, a rehabilitation organization outside of Cairo that provides therapy and job training for handicapped Egyptians. The name means “faith and hope” in Arabic.

DAVID GANS is a musician, writer, journalist, record producer, photographer and radio host who also performs songs from the Grateful Dead songbook. He is the author of *Playing in the Band* (St. Martin’s, 1996) and *Conversations with the Dead* (Da Capo, 2002), and coauthor of *This Is All A Dream We Dreamed: An Oral History of the Grateful Dead* (Flatiron, 2015). He hosts the nationally syndicated radio show *The Grateful Dead Hour* and cohosts *Tales from the Golden Road* on SiriusXM.