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“An Old Fantasy of Ours”: Jerry Garcia on Egypt

RAY WHITE

This interview was broadcast on WLIR-FM on January 11, 1979. The segment on Egypt began approximately nineteen minutes into the interview. This transcript has been lightly edited to remove false starts and crutch words.

Ray White: Let's talk about Egypt. Did you have a good time?

Jerry Garcia: Oh yeah, a wonderful time.

RW: Did you have to be in control or could you just be a tourist?

JG: Oh, yeah, Egypt is a great place if you even worry about control, ever, because—.

RW: You can lose it?

JG: Oh, totally.

RW: That's great.

JG: Oh, yeah. People will drag you into scenes—I mean really, physically. You can just be walking down the street and you'll end up in somebody's house eating dinner and meeting with family and drinking tea and smoking hubbly bubbly, the big water pipes. God, it's great; what a place. Great people; really amazing people.

RW: Did you have any hassles there at all?

JG: None. Not at all.

RW: Was it tough to set up the concerts?

JG: No, but we went in there expecting maximum difficulties so we came completely self-contained. We brought a whole lot of equipment from England—the Who's stuff, actually. They have a sound company that has the whole number, so we had a generator truck, 24-track recording truck, PA, and all of our gear.

RW: So you recorded it?

JG: Yeah.

RW: Did you like the tapes? Have you heard them?

JG: They're pretty crazy. We may put some of it out.

RW: What is it with live albums? I know as far as I'm concerned I think live is, you know—. You people can either be a regular band but some nights I see you and you're the best band in the world, maybe the best band that'll ever come down.

JG: We keep hoping we'll get one of those on tape.

RW: And I guess that's why we have so many live albums.

JG: Yeah, I know, but they—.

RW: Do you ever listen to any of the old ones?

JG: Not too often. More often I listen to tapes of our most recent concerts because it's like homework.

RW: Keeps you sharp.

JG: Yeah, right.

RW: So what do you do? Do you have cassettes with you or something?

JG: Yeah, we usually pull tape out of the sound booth and sometimes we have people who are recording really nicely next to multitrack Nagra tapes of the shows, as a matter of routine.

RW: Great. So, Egypt—maybe on vinyl someday?

JG: Maybe. Some choice bits of it, certainly.

RW: What surprised you when you were there?

JG: Everything!

RW: Did it freak you out? Did you come in and out of thinking about—

JG: Of course. It was a really amazing setting. Where we were playing was sort of down and to the right of the right paw of the Sphinx with the three pyramids behind us sort of symmetrically, so from the audience's point of view you could see the band and the band set-up, the Sphinx a little to the right and the pyramids and the horizon right there, right on the plateau there. It was just amazing. And then there was a total eclipse of the moon the third night we played. It was perfect, in short.

RW: Who thought the whole thing up?

JG: It's an old fantasy of ours that we've thought of—"God, wouldn't it be great to play at the Great Pyramid!" "Yeah, the Great Pyramid; too much." So the idea has been around for a long time; we've been fantasizing. But really Richard Loren, who is more less our manager, put it together. He started visiting Egypt about '74 or '75 and he went back a couple of years. He's a photographer and he came back with beautiful pictures, and he said, "This is a great place to go."

And he kept going back there until pretty soon he discovered that there's this outdoor theater that they have right by the Sphinx. You don't

hear about it very much; it's where they have their Son et Lumière show. They light up everything at night there for the tourists. And they have a rap, a pre-recorded rap in three languages. It's pretty lame, actually, but it looks pretty.

RW: Did you freak anybody out so that they won't ever allow that again?

JG: Oh, no, everybody loved it. There's a little village there, the Mena Village, where countless generations of people are hustling tourists and selling camel rides.

RW: Goes way back.

JG: Yeah, way back. And those people were *wonderful*. They completely absorbed our whole scene, in fact. Everybody had a great time there. And they loved the music—the people loved the music.

RW: That's great.

JG: Yeah, it was amazing, God. And the way the stage is—the way this little theater set-up is, there's no real security or anything, there's only little border markers delineating where the theater area was, as opposed to the desert. But beyond that was just desert, and there would be Bedouins out on the desert dancing. God, it really was amazing, it really was amazing.

RW: So no one has stuck apartment buildings or anything there? There's no billboards or anything?

JG: No, it's all little funky Egyptian, Arabic-looking stuff, but old, old stuff, little sandstone houses and things like that. And the people are neat there, real neat. It's a place where people are poor but there isn't any misery. Everybody's very up, enthusiastic, and friendly; neat, real neat.

RW: It must have been pretty wild, because I imagine on the stage there must have been points where you could just space out and dig what was going on.

JG: Yeah. [Laughs.]

RW: That must have been a wild one.

JG: Oh, it was. It was amazing.

RAY WHITE (1959–2021) was a well-known radio journalist and deejay whose long career included rock, jazz, and classical music.