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Sailing the Ship of the Sun: Listening to Egypt, Again

MICHAEL PARRISH

In July 1978, the Grateful Dead played their first shows at Colorado's Red Rocks Amphitheater, the most beautiful outdoor setting they had ever played. Those shows, captured vibrantly in the 2016 Rhino Release *July 1978—the Complete Recordings*, included some of the band's most inspired playing of that or any post-hiatus year (Grateful Dead 2016; Parrish 2020). However, the band had already invested over a year planning to perform at an even more amazing setting, at the foot of the Great Pyramid of Giza. Although much has been written about the larger context of these historic concerts, the principal driving force for the band's interest can be summed up in what Phil Lesh said to Egyptian Ambassador Ashraf Gorfal: "I am interested in how the different places we play affect our music, and I can think of no greater venue than the Great Pyramid."¹

The three shows that the Dead played at the Sound and Light Pavilion have gone down in history as artistic disappointments, fueled by the band's criticisms of their performances and by fan reviews of the recordings. While they may not have fulfilled the band's expectations musically, the Egypt shows remain notable landmark in the band's quest to explore new ways to present their music, and, despite technical and

other problems, they provided noteworthy musical high points. The music comprising these shows was reviewed in detail in the late 1990s, based on the audience recordings publicly available at the time (Meriwether 1999). Since then, the band's official compilation of recordings has been released, along with new and better-quality audience and other soundboard recordings (Grateful Dead 1978a, 1978b, 1978c, 1978d, 1978e, 2008a, 2008b); those make a new assessment timely, and merited. This review offers a first look at these recordings, with an eye toward how they bring to light additional details about the concerts and the band's performances.

Following what is generally considered a post-hiatus high-water mark in 1977, the Dead experienced some significant changes the following year in both their music and show format. They started the year with a California tour that saw Jerry Garcia lose his voice, resulting in two unique shows in San Diego that only featured songs sung by Bob Weir and Donna Jean Godchaux. Following a unique run through the Central Valley with stops in Bakersfield, Fresno, Sacramento, and Stockton, the band wrapped up the tour with a blazing show in Eugene that was one of the year's best, later released as Volume 23 of the Dave's Picks series (Grateful Dead 2017). A brief mid-winter tour of the Midwest followed a week later, including the first run of many at Chicago's Uptown Theatre, after which the band was off the road until the beginning of April. The six-week spring tour wound through the South, Midwest, and Eastern Seaboard, wrapping up back at the Uptown Theatre for a three-show stand marred by the cancellation of the final show, precipitated by Kreutzmann's decision to leave town following an altercation with Keith Godchaux (Kreutzmann and Eisen 2015, 216).

Two things were particularly notable about this spring tour. Starting with the opener in Tampa, the Dead introduced what was to become a mainstay of the second sets for the remainder of their career. Midway through the extended song suite that formed the heart of the set, the two drummers introduced what became known as "Drums" preceded and/or followed by relatively free improvisation from Garcia and some other subset of the band. Formerly the free improvisation segments occurred principally during open-ended tunes such as "Playing in the Band,"

“Dark Star,” and “The Other One,” so formalizing this segment before and/or after “Drums” represented a significant change in format. Initially the “Drums” segment was more of a group effort, with the remaining band members and usually some of the crew and family joining Hart and Kreutzmann onstage playing various percussion instruments. By the end of the spring tour, the percussion segment had been mostly stripped down to just the two drummers, a protocol the Dead followed for the remainder of their career, augmented by occasional guest percussionists.

The other notable change was a visible and audible disengagement by keyboardist Keith Godchaux. His ferociously creative piano work was one of the highlights of the Europe '72 tour, and his jazz chops were a strong influence on the band's 1973–74 excursions. By 1978, however, drug-related problems and mental health issues fueled a growing disenchantment with his role in the band, creating a musical estrangement that undercut the Dead's onstage chemistry. As a result, the 1978 shows, by and large, had far fewer examples of the jaw-dropping ensemble playing so frequently evident during 1977. In Egypt, Godchaux's input was further stymied by an unfamiliar electric piano allegedly beset by tuning issues. That was part of a larger set of logistical issues that dogged the shows, with much of the equipment, including the PA system they borrowed from the Who, arriving just before the shows were scheduled to begin (Trist 2008, 10).

For the Egypt shows, the Dead partnered with noted Nubian oud player and percussionist Hamza El Din, whom Mickey Hart had sought out to learn the tar, an Arabian single-membrane frame drum (Hart 1990). El Din was a logical addition to the event, and he enlisted the Nubian Youth Choir, a troupe of singers, percussionists, and dancers, to accompany him.

On August 11, Garcia and El Din met at the band's Front Street studios to prepare, running through one of El Din's signature compositions, “Ollin Arageed” (Jerrybase). On the day preceding the Sound and Light concerts, a brief rehearsal was held at the site, captured on an audience recording, available at the Internet Archive (Grateful Dead 1978a). The majority of the tape consists of sound checks by El Din playing several solo compositions. The initial track on the tape, however, consists of El

Din and the Dead sound checking “Ollin Arageed”; their collaboration would open each of the three concerts.

At the first show, El Din started out with a solo performance of two songs. The only soundboard tape seems to be El Din’s oud, although his voice can be heard faintly (Grateful Dead 1978b). After switching to tar, he was joined by the Nubian Youth Choir whose hand-clapped accompaniment created the rhythmic cadence of “Ollin Arageed.” About six minutes in, Garcia appears, with the rest of the band gradually joining in as the sinuous tune unfolds. Garcia carries the melody with the vocals starting about five minutes in, the Nubian choir slowly joining in while Lesh contributes a simple loping bass line and Weir adds arpeggiated filigrees. As the tune progresses, Hart and Kreutzmann transition from hand percussion to their drum kits, and Garcia gradually deviates from the “Ollin Arageed” melody into a percussive vamp on E that very gradually mutates into the Bo Diddley beat. As the Nubian musicians dropped out, the Dead took their time exploring the territory before launching dramatically into the first verse of “Not Fade Away.” Once the lyrics were dispensed with, the band spent more time developing instrumental themes in the key of E before bringing things gently to a close with a single ringing chord.

Following that memorably unique opening, the Dead delved into much more familiar first set material starting with “Me and My Uncle,” a narrative that sounds out of place, given the circumstances. A typically bouncy “They Love Each Other” followed, after which Weir opted not to namecheck “Giza” during a lengthy “Minglewood.” An extended “Peggy-O” featured a unique coloration, courtesy of Keith’s electric piano and Garcia’s meandering solo. An atypically mellow “Beat It On Down the Line” followed, with the set concluding reliably with a powerful “Deal,” featuring an over-the-top vocal from Garcia. The soundboard recording lacks the vocals for the entire first set and infrequently in the second; audience recordings confirm the audio issues this night and the next were confined to the soundboard tape feeds and did not affect the sound in the pavilion (Grateful Dead 1978c).

The second set began with an epic “Sugaree,” marred only by Weir’s pedestrian overplayed slide guitar and continued issues with vocal clarity in the soundboard recording. Next up was a particularly revved-

up version of “Samson and Delilah” featuring some snarling lead guitar from Garcia and a fully audible and testifying Bob Weir on vocals. The highlight of the second set is probably the energized version of “Scarlet Begonias” > “Fire On the Mountain,” which was again handicapped on the soundboard by the absence of a lead vocal feed. The final medley continues the high-energy streak, starting with a “Truckin’ that leads into a brief version of “The Other One.” The percussion segment starts with both Kreutzmann and Hart playing hand percussion instruments, building to a trap drum and marimba duet typical of the era. The extended space segment is singularly odd, with unnerving thumps, science fiction sounds, and beastly snorts and grunts as Garcia cheerfully solos throughout. His emotional reading of “Black Peter” is marred by an awkward transition into the pro-forma set closer, “Around and Around.”

A much better, though still flawed, soundboard recording documents the second night (Grateful Dead 1978d). Again opening with Hamza El Din, it features him singing two tunes accompanied by the oud before he started the rhythm of “Ollin Arageed.” Joined by vigorous rhythmic clapping from the members of the Nubian Youth Choir, the recording also features much more vigorous (or perhaps just better amplified) vocal support than the previous night. Garcia slid in at about the six-minute mark, with the rest of the band members joining shortly thereafter. Sixteen minutes in, the Dead deviated from the “Ollin Arageed” melody and rhythm to a languid free-form jam in D before abruptly upshifting into A and then C to launch a raucous “Promised Land.” The rest of the first set unfolded rather unremarkably. A long, slow “Friend of the Devil” followed by a peppy “Mama Tried” led into an extended “Big River.” “Loser” features an elegiac solo from Garcia, with the last two songs of the set, “I Need a Miracle” and the curious set closer “Stagger Lee,” both delivered with gusto.

Though energetic, the “Jack Straw” that opened the second set was a shambles, further marred by PA issues. After some technical adjustments, the band plowed on with an uneven version of “Ship of Fools” where Weir’s slide contribution—often variable during this era—here is more of an asset than a liability. The big medley of the set began with the all-too-familiar 1978 pairing of “Estimated Prophet” and “Eyes of the

World.” “Estimated” was unremarkable, but the leisurely stroll through “Eyes” featured some nice ensemble playing leading into a relatively subdued “Drums” followed by a short but feedback-drenched “Space.” The set ended on a high note with an elegantly played “Terrapin” that suited the historic setting, followed by a final workout, thanks to the always reliable “Sugar Magnolia,” which featured some playful musical banter between Weir and Donna Godchaux.

Expectations were high for the third show, fanned by the anticipation of a full lunar eclipse that was to occur during the performance. What ensued, however, was a relatively stock 1978 show, although longer by about a half hour than most concerts of that era. The band missed the opportunity to roll out a “Dark Star,” choosing instead to focus on well-played material from the soon-to-be-released *Shakedown Street* along with very familiar 1978 fare, including several repeats from the previous two nights. Most of this show can be heard on the 2008 release *Rocking the Cradle*, which also includes some video from this show as well as audio and video from the preceding night (Grateful Dead 2008a). More audio from these two shows is found on the bonus disc that came with the release, and both soundboard and audience versions of the third show can also be found on the Internet Archive (Grateful Dead 2008b).

For this final show, the set featuring Hamza El Din solo and his performance with the Nubian Youth Choir and the Dead on “Ollin Arageed” did not take place until the start of the second set. Instead, the band opened with the always reliable pairing of “Bertha” and “Good Lovin.” On the video of these tunes, the band can be seen in particularly high spirits, especially a bouncing Bob Weir (Grateful Dead, 2006). An atypically up-tempo version of “Candyman” followed, featuring an effects-heavy solo from Garcia. Garcia’s relentless soloing resumed for the delicate rendition of “Looks Like Rain.” On an otherwise pretty “Row Jimmy,” Weir again unleashed his slide, but the tune was saved by melodic input from Garcia and Lesh. “El Paso” was powerfully sung by Weir, and the strong performances continued with “Ramble on Rose” and “Minglewood,” which featured a great piano solo from Godchaux. The set closed reliably with a rollicking “Deal.”

Hamza El Din’s set between Dead sets was slow getting started

because of further PA problems, but he again opened with a couple of songs on the oud before starting “Ollin Arageed” with the Abu Simbel Youth Choir of Cairo. This evening’s collaboration with the Choir and the Dead is captured in the Rhino video and it shows a beatific Mickey Hart in the midst of the Nubian musicians playing his tar, while the remaining members of the Dead wove happily in and out of the choir (Grateful Dead 2008a). As El Din and the choir exited the stage, the Dead transitioned harmoniously into “Fire on the Mountain,” arguably the best Dead tune to date to pair with the cross-cultural collaboration. This was a long, luxurious version of “Fire On the Mountain, nearly twice as long as the one on September 14. As “Fire” slowed into a long instrumental coda, the drummers deftly switched to the ‘shave-and-a-haircut’ rhythm as the Dead transitioned smoothly into the New Orleans classic “Iko Iko.”

Weir followed with the unusual and awkward medley of “I Need a Miracle” and “It’s All Over Now.” Next, Donna Jean Godchaux, a joyful, extroverted presence throughout the shows, got her sole lead vocal of the run with her Gospel-tinged “Sunrise.” Well into the second set, the extended sequence started with a long, slinky version of “Shakedown Street,” in its third live performance. It also featured a long instrumental coda, with Garcia doing some “tiger” style soloing just before the rest of the band left the stage to the drummers. Both “Drums” and “Space” are severely edited in the official release, but generously clock in together at just over seventeen minutes on the unedited tapes. During “Space,” a lot of strange vocal noises are audible. About midway through, the drummers dropped out, someone (Ken Kesey?) chanted “*baksheesh*,” and the music built to a climax of chaotic feedback and dental drill sounds just before dropping right into a supercharged version of “Truckin’,” another repeat from the first night. During the closing chorus, Lesh took his turn at some ragged harmonies, a very rare stand at the microphone for the bassist during this era.

After “Truckin’” built to its big instrumental climax, the band shifted gears with a brief, quiet improvised passage before leading into a poignant “Stella Blue,” with Donna providing some stunning vocal support to Garcia. The show wrapped up back in secure rock and roll territory with unexceptional but serviceable versions of “Around and Around” and

a predictable-but-anticlimactic encore, given the day of the week, of “One More Saturday Night.”

The band reprised their collaboration with Hamza El Din the next month for their “From Egypt With Love” concerts at Winterland, performing “Ollin Arageed” each of the five nights of the run. Hamza El Din also played it with the Dead another seven times between November 1978 and March 1985 (Jerrybase).

Based on the recordings, the Egypt shows were not the musical peak that the band and fans hoped for. Still, the tapes reveal better performances than history has allowed, and each show had some memorable moments, particularly the third night. Given the magnitude of the challenges of the site, and the issues affecting the band, the Dead’s performances merit more attention than critics have given them. And for scholars, the existence of such a complete record represents an archival triumph, one that may continue to offer additional insights and opportunities for reexamination in the future. Ultimately, the success of the shows was measured by the effort to mount them, marking a fascinating chapter in Egyptian-American cultural relations, and provided a once-in-a-lifetime adventure for the Dead and the fortunate few who accompanied them. The videos on the DVD from *Rocking the Cradle* do a fine job of documenting the broader context of what remains the Dead’s grandest excursion (Grateful Dead 2008a, 2008b).

NOTES

Thanks to Jeffrey Norman for reviewing his notes on the Egypt multitrack tapes, and to Nicholas Meriwether for his editorial help and insights from reviewing the Egypt recordings for the *Deadhead’s Taping Compendium*.

1. Trist 2008, 6. For the larger contexts, see McNally 2002, 508–509, and Meriwether 1999.

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