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Beyond Category: The Grateful Dead in Egypt

ALAN TRIST

Returning home from Cairo in the fall of 1978, I was given a note by a fellow concertgoer on the plane:

The Grateful Dead, themselves epitomizing Duke Ellington's definition of the excellent as being "beyond category," have sought access to sources of the imagination which transcend "Western" or "Eastern" categories of history and culture. Their music asserts that we are liberated not enslaved by such an acceptance of total awareness, and their pilgrimage to the Great Pyramids of the Nile, the cradle of revealed culture, is made with the understanding that men and women, many thousands of years ago, also aspired to voyage to the stars in their search for a pure and universal humanity.¹

It struck me at the time as one of the more apt assessments of the experience we had just shared, and his words have stayed with me; forty-five years later, they still bring me back to that time, to those concerts, and to a pilgrimage that we were fortunate to have been able to make.

The story begins during the band's 1972 European tour when I took Carolyn "MG" Garcia, Phil Lesh, and Jerry Garcia on a tour of the ancient

megaliths of southwest England, visiting Silbury Hill, Avebury's megalithic circles, and Wells Cathedral. These intrepid voyagers shared an interest in the patterns of the past and the meanings of the moment; over lunch at the Swan on the market square at Wells the idea occurred to us that the Dead's music could tap, and be enhanced by, profound energies at ancient sites around the world. An idea was born. It was perhaps no accident that at the adjoining white-linen clothed table the very distinguished Bishop of Wells was in conference with the Keeper of the Fabric, who in church building speak is the architect-builder responsible for the upkeep of the cathedral, an edifice built around 1175 to replace an earlier church dating back to 705. It was no doubt built on an older pre-Roman pagan site—thus the moment was connected to an ancient lineage of monument construction going back to megalithic times.

Back in London, we hung out with John Michell, whose books had sparked a generation's interest in arcane perspectives on so-called "Earth mysteries." Although controversial among orthodox archaeologists, the awakening of awareness in the 1960s to the energy patterns discernible at the ancient stones was palpable at the sites, which though hardly measurable in scientific terms, nevertheless led to the establishment of an "alternative archaeology" that continues to investigate subtle energies in megalithic stone monuments and their meaning, as understood and manipulated by their creators.² Jon McIntire codified these notions by suggesting that Warner Bros. Records sponsor what he called an "archaeological mystery tour" of the sacred precincts of antiquity; a grand idea, but definitely outside of their comfort zone.

That same year, 1972, President Anwar Sadat evicted the Soviet military advisers from Egypt. That gesture towards the West had enormous geopolitical significance, given the Cold War, and eventually opened the way for the Giza concerts. Two years later, another parallel track got under way when the first installment of Kesey's five-part series "The Search for the Secret Pyramid" appeared in *Rolling Stone*; that series concluded in early 1975, shortly before the Dead released *Blues for Allah*, which was replete with lyric references to the Middle East conflict. But it took manager Richard Loren's personal pilgrimages to Egypt to secure the actual possibility of playing at the Great Pyramid, memorably detailed

in his 2014 memoir. As Phil recalled, “Richard saw a connection between the loose, laid-back lifestyle of the Egyptians and the spirit of the Haight,” which made the idea of a concert a natural, something that “could be a hands-across-the-water event” (Lesh 2005, 232).

He, too, was curious about how the music might be affected at the power points of ancient sites. Introduced to Egypt’s mysteries by the Jefferson Airplane’s Marty Balin, Richard, a photographer, returned with evidence that an open-air theater adjoined the Sphinx, with the three pyramids of Giza plateau as a backdrop. “A light bulb went off in my head,” Loren told me later: “the band should play here! I went home and presented them with the idea. The band responded with an enthusiastic ‘Let’s do it!’—and the excitement began.” The Dead’s organization had never attempted anything on this scale, and before long, everyone was involved in the planning.

In the fall of 1977, the band appointed an Egypt Committee: Phil, Richard, and me. Planning for a scouting trip to Cairo began. Ironically, the first hurdle was local, since Mickey and Richard had approached Bill Graham to promote the shows. But he had his own ideas, causing the famous “Egypt or Bust” encounter between Mickey and Bill over the right approach; in the end, all parties agreed that traditional concert promotion—and promoters—were not going to work. We would have to bootstrap this gig.

That launched a period of diplomatic firewalking, from which was born the Egypt Committee’s new moniker, the MIDS—the Men In Dark Suits, since accomplishing our goal would require us to dress the part. At this time, Sadat made a bold and unprecedented visit to Israel and addressed the Egyptian people and the Israeli Knesset with words of reconciliation and peace. A glimmer of hope illuminated a troubled world and into its crack of light the MIDS took our dream. By then, an old friend of mine, Jonathan Wallace, had introduced us to Joseph Malone, a former professor at the American University of Beirut who had gone on to found an international consultancy; both Jonathan and Joe had deep understandings of how things worked in the Middle East, and Joe and his wife Lois quickly became indispensable resources, setting up a series of high-level meetings in Washington and Cairo.

Donning our suits, we first went to the US State Department to be vetted as cultural ambassadors. Joe gave a formidable introduction to our mission: “The Grateful Dead are cultural ambassadors, bringing the music of the young people of America in friendship to a troubled region. Cultural exchange is a contribution to understanding and a way to peace between nations.” We made the rounds, including a memorable meeting with Ashraf Ghorbal, the Egyptian ambassador, who naturally wanted to know how we expected to pay for such an adventure and asked, pointedly, “You want to bring tons of equipment and hundreds of people?” When Phil replied that we intended to pay for the trip ourselves and donate the proceeds to an Egyptian charity, our way was cleared. That evening we hosted a party for State Department staffers at a fancy D.C. hotel. It worked—and soon after, they wired associates in Egypt, saying, in effect, “the Grateful Dead are cool—do what you can to help” (see fig. 1).

Cairo is a teeming city of the Old World, where camels, donkeys, antique buses and limousines all vie for space on the thoroughfares. Richard, Phil, and I hustled about its dens and hotel lobbies, trying to keep pace with our hosts. Many meetings and many courtesies finally brought us to the final sanctioning power, Saad Ed-Din, the formidable Egyptian Minister of Culture. He received us at the ministry, locked eyes with Phil and asked, “Why do you want to play, specifically, at the Great Pyramid?” A moment of deep understanding followed. “Over the years we have played to many different people in many different places,” Phil explained. “We have learned that the context makes a difference. As musicians dedicated to live performance, this is a point of great interest to us, and we can think of no more inspiring place to play than the Great Pyramid.”³ The Minister nodded and smiled. The remaining details and logistics took another week, but after this, everything fell into place.

Our telegram home was appropriately exultant (fig. 2), triumphantly announcing “two count them two open air concerts at the Great Pyramid Sphinx Theatre in Lower Egypt confirmed repeat confirmed,” and ending, “Sun rules in Upper Egypt where is alchemy ... Let’s close the circuit, Inshalla.” A hoped-for third concert in Luxor fell through; instead, we added a third night at Giza, as though history required it to fine tune the synchronicities which would then unfold.

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SUBJECT: ROCK CONCERT IN CAIRO

1. ADVANCE TEAM FROM ROCK GROUP THE GRATEFUL DEAD IS ON WAY TO CAIRO TO EXPLORE POSSIBILITIES OF GIVING CONCERT AT PYRAMIDS IN OCTOBER. PROFESSOR JOSEPH MALONE OF NWC IS INVOLVED IN HELPING GROUP MAKE ARRANGEMENTS AND WROTE TO AMBASSADOR EILTS ON MARCH 4 ABOUT GROUP'S PLANS. WE DO NOT HAVE EXACT DATES OF ADVANCE TEAMS ARRIVAL IN CAIRO BUT BELIEVE THEY MAY CALL AT EMBASSY ON ADVICE OF DR. MALONE. GROUP WILL BE TOURING PRIVATELY.

2. GROUP HAS HAD PRELIMINARY MEETING WITH EGYPTIAN EMBASSY OFFICIALS WHO HAVE ALLEGEDLY INFORMED MINISTRY OF CULTURE. ORIGINAL PLAN WAS TO GIVE FREE CONCERT, BUT ON ADVICE OF EGYPTIAN EMBASSY, IT IS NOW PLANNED TO DONATE ALL ADMISSIONS PROCEEDS TO CHARITY. THE CONCERT WILL BE MADE INTO A RECORD ALBUM.

3. THE GRATEFUL DEAD ARE A VERY HIGHLY REGARDED AND PROFESSIONAL ROCK GROUP. WHILE NO SPECIFIC EMBASSY ACTION IS REQUESTED, BELIEVE THEIR ADVANCE TEAM MAY BENEFIT FROM ANY ADVICE YOU CAN GIVE. VANCE

Figure 1. Cable from Secretary of State Cyrus Vance to US Embassy Cairo, March 2, 1978. Courtesy US Department of State.

But that date was still six months away, and before returning from our advancing trip, MIDS hired a car whose driver took us to Upper Egypt at a speed that would have been reckless had it not matched the way energies are funneled through the narrow valley of the Nile, as if squeezed into a coherence that visibly has lasted through the ages. Richard introduced us to his friend Abdul Ati, boatman at Luxor. Sailing across to the Valley of the Kings, resting place of Pharaohs, I had an epiphany of the Four Elements of the ancient world: Banded in my field of view where Water, Fire, Earth, and Air—blue, green, brown, azure—were Fire consisted of the illumined life energies of the Nile's banks. Flame was not in this picture, and this was revelation indeed.

We made two more advance trips to Egypt, first to meet with the Egyptian Department of Antiquities, who managed the *Son et Lumière* Theatre, to discuss logistical and technical aspects of the production; with us was Eddie Washington, a Grateful Dead engineer who scoped out the many challenges that the gig would entail. The second was to meet with the secretary to Madame Sadat. The approval of each was instrumental, and in the final tally, concert proceeds would support both the Department of Antiquities and Waf Wal Amal (Faith and Hope Society), Mme. Sadat's favorite charity.

The cancellation of the European shows originally planned around the concerts also complicated logistics; in the end, Richard persuaded the Who to loan their PA system and recording truck, arranging for their transportation to Cairo from London. This would turn out to be an adventure of its own, with customs clearance delayed by Alexandria's port authority, but the trucks arrived for the concerts in the nick of time.

Meanwhile, Mickey was hot on the cultural ambassadors' trail. He invited Hamza El Din to open the shows. Hamza, Egyptian virtuoso of the oud and Mickey's mentor on the tar, arranged for the Nubian Youth Choir of the Abu Simbel School, a group of singers, dancers, and hand clappers, to join him. A seamless bridge to the Grateful Dead's music was painstakingly worked out in the studio in California. Mickey planned his own post-concert recording odyssey to Hamza's village far south of the Nile cataracts. Things were falling into place.

To help pay for the trip, Richard booked a brief, three-show tour,

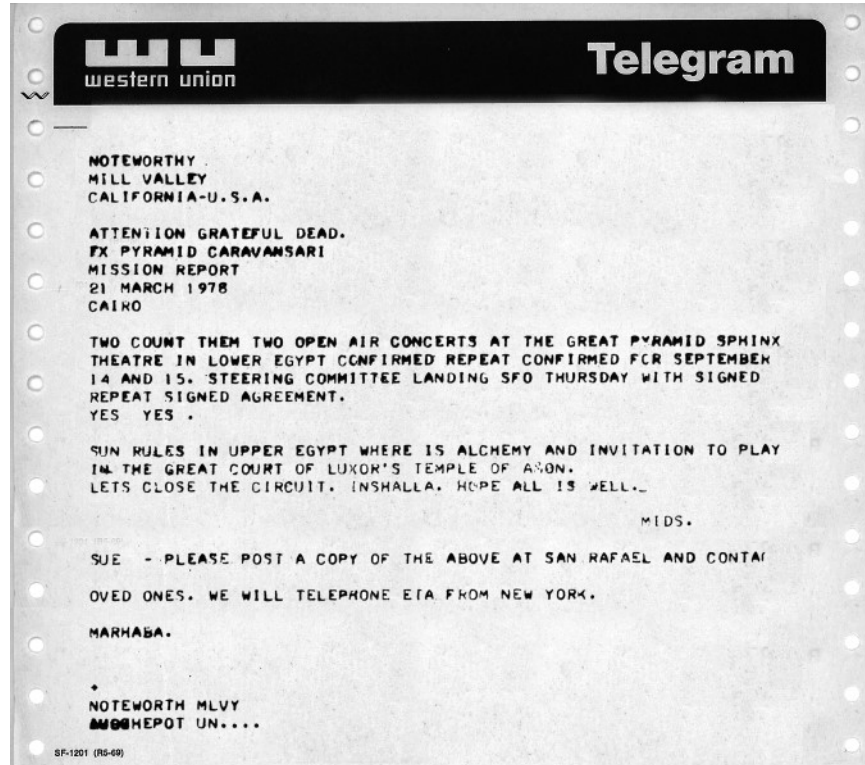


Figure 2. Telegram from the MIDS to the Grateful Dead, March 21, 1978.

two nights at Red Rocks culminating at Giants Stadium in New York, where the band held a press conference to announce the Egypt concerts. Within days a charter flight was on its way to Egypt. Many old associates came along. We had booked all the rooms at the Mena House Hotel, right below the Great Pyramid, which could be seen from some of the rooms (fig. 3). This elegant institution, home base for generations of archeologists, was soon transformed by the Grateful Dead's "extended family" into a colorful parade. At all hours you might find Bill Walton, Paul Krassner, Kesey along with miscellaneous Pranksters, David Freiberg, Bill Graham, the Bear, band members, and assorted Deadheads poolside or in the lobby. It soon became clear that, to a greater extent than any archaeological expedition or tourism influx, the Grateful Dead and crew, their entourage, and audience had taken over the Giza Plateau with a sus-

tained presence that lasted several weeks. The locals, guides, guards, and camel drivers became friends, showing us around at all hours for reasonable *bakseesh*, and eagerly anticipating the concerts for which they had become indispensable local crew.

Our days were filled with camel rides and horseback riding. Impromptu expeditions went to pyramid and temple sites south of Giza; we also sought out local culture at Nile-side restaurants and other gathering places in Cairo and in visits to the local market at Mena Village. Memorable climbs of the Great Pyramid left enduring impressions, as did our explorations of its inner chambers, where Kesey tested its acoustic properties by playing “Home On the Range” on the harmonica. In another classic Prankster action, George Walker shimmied up the flagpole atop the Great Pyramid and hoisted the Grateful Dead’s iconic Steal Your Face flag, where it fluttered for several days. All this activity went on as the technical set up at the Son et Lumière Theatre slowly came together.

For his part, Bill Graham arranged a breakfast for all at a Bedouin tent restaurant several miles south on the uninhabited, non-tourist side of the Giza plateau. We feasted, rode horses, and had a great time. Afterwards, my friend Katie and I walked back across the stony desert to Giza and I had my second epiphany, this one about foolish adventure: halfway back, the sun at midday turned the desert into the proverbial furnace, and the possibility of not making it loomed very real in the mirage of distance.

We made it. But the elements were not so kind to the equipment truck: later that day it got stuck in the sand, which also ensnared the tractor the crew tried to use to free it. Leave it to Egypt to provide an Old World solution: camels were what finally came to the rescue. By the time September 14 dawned, all was ready. That evening, Egyptian dignitaries from Cairo, including Mme. Sadat, occupied the first row. This was a cultural event, long anticipated by the youth of Cairo, who mingled with the Deadheads that had converged on Giza from the US and Europe. Bill Kreutzmann observed that by the third night the locals had picked up their distinctive dance. He also provided one of the more memorable exchanges with the local press: asked by an Egyptian reporter about how it felt to try to drum with one hand in a cast, he wryly observed, “In the land of



Figure 3. The Great Pyramid, seen from the Mena House Hotel.

the limbless a one-handed drummer is king” (Jackson 1999, 300–01). The Bedouin agreed, their silhouettes illuminated by the moonlight, moving in sync on the sand dunes.

The concerts played with time and space, as Egypt itself is timeless. The mass of the Great Pyramid warped local dimensions. The vast, ancient structures, with which the music of the Grateful Dead attempted to come into phase and alignment, hosted us in their enigmatic grandeur. We tried to tap that power, drawing them into the music by using the King’s Chamber deep inside the Great Pyramid as an echo chamber. Dan Healy set up a radio link from a PA tower to the corner of the Great Pyramid, and from there John Cutler ran a cable down the Ascending Passage and through the Grand Gallery to a speaker at one end of the King’s Chamber. A microphone at the other end picked up the sound and sent the feed back

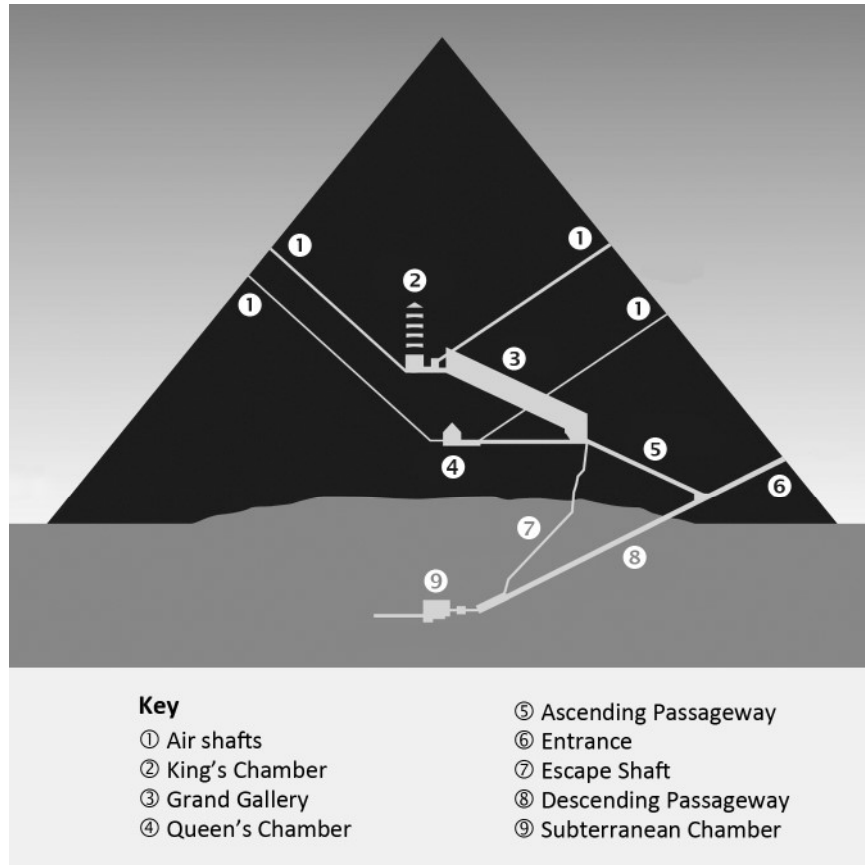


Figure 4. Cross section of the interior of the Great Pyramid, facing west.

to the radio relay and to Healy's mixing console. It took 2,000 feet of cable to accomplish this (see fig. 4).

Throughout the first set on September 16, I hustled back and forth between these locations, facilitating communications. Courtenay Pollock, original Grateful Dead tie-dye artist, channeled the Great Spirit by chanting "om" in the sarcophagus, bringing the acoustic properties of the King's Chamber to life. Despite our best efforts, the connections never worked, and the Great Pyramid remained a silent witness, a participant whose power could be felt without being known. Some attributed the failure to a pharaonic curse; others to cheap wiring bought at the last minute in a Cairo street market. But as I went back and forth from the

stone silence of that inner chamber to the festive panorama of the concert outside, I felt a greater link at work, an enhanced connection between our project, in its totality, and the music of the spheres, the reasons for which are fittingly multiple.

It helped that the full moon was in total eclipse, a cosmic event unforeseen when the MIDS booked the concert dates six months before. But such entrainment was the order of the day, for another event was taking place at the same time. The Camp David peace talks between Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, which had been in secret negotiations mediated by President Jimmy Carter, were even at that moment reaching agreement; on the following day, September 17, the historic Peace Accord between Israel and Egypt was signed. To have found ourselves simultaneously in tune with cosmic and worldly events at the Great Pyramid was an awe-inspiring and humbling experience.

Afterwards, band, family, and friends moved in different directions, one of the most memorable of which was a trip to Upper Egypt. We visited the temples of Luxor and Karnak and sailed the Nile to Aswan for three days on Ati's boat, sleeping on deck like a row of mummies. Richard and his cameraman Teppei Inokuchi filmed this one-of-a-kind vacation for a home movie, along with occasional contributions from me; footage from this was included as a DVD in the official release of the concerts (Grateful Dead 2008). Garcia, skills honed from his heroic work editing *The Grateful Dead Movie*, directed one memorable shot: as I was attempting to film Donna Jean and him on donkeys for a hazardous trek over a rocky trail from the Valley of the Kings to the Temple of Hatshepsut, he redirected my eye to a hawk circling overhead. Horus, Egyptian God and symbol of renewal, accompanied us.

In one final synchronicity, the Tutankhamun Exhibition opened in San Francisco soon after we returned. The organizers honored the Grateful Dead—band, crew, staff and family—with a private showing before opening day, giving us the opportunity to see the contents of a tomb the MIDS had visited six months before in the Valley of the Kings. Still in filming mode, I improvised a rolling shot by pushing Richard, who held the camera, in a wheelchair around the exhibits. To my horror and almost

historic mortification, the wheel clipped the base of a narrow column at the entrance on which was mounted a glass case containing the bust of Nefertiti—which wobbled ominously but did not topple over.

At journey's end, Garcia brought it all home with a comment that fused the message of music-in-place, our guide to meaning in Egypt, with that other fundamental of the Grateful Dead experience, the bond between band and audience:

We would've played here if the audience had been here or not. But the reality of it, as it's unfolded, is that the audience has become as much a part of the show as Egypt, the Pyramids—as the ideal. If you were to think of this whole thing as a piece of concept art, rather than as a performance, they are full participants. (Watts 1978, 32)

It was more than just a typically thoughtful, generous tribute. Garcia placed the entire experience in the heart of what the Grateful Dead always sought, a fusion of music, audience, and setting into a single, unified, authentic experience, the very *rasa* hoped for at that lunch in Wells during the Dead's Europe '72 tour.⁴

The Egypt shows will always beguile; they added up to something more than just the music and memories they left. The Dead were always and foremost an American band, but for three days in 1978, their music crossed borders and cultures in a way that inspired the joining of peoples and not their separation.

NOTES

An earlier version of this essay was published as the liner notes to *Rocking the Cradle* (Trist 2008). This version benefitted from Nicholas Meriwether's editorial work, references and illustrations research.

1. The Deadhead who handed me the note signed it Hamilton Eddy—I didn't know him, nor did he connect with me later. The phrase he quoted was one of Ellington's favorites, often used when he praised the music of others (Hasse 1993, 18–19). John Edward Hasse, Curator of American Music at the Smithsonian, used it as the title of an exhibition he curated on Ellington at the Smithsonian and for his accompanying biography (1993).

2. Michel's works includes books on the megalithic age, ancient metrology and Earth mysteries, and more; see Michel (1969), (1988), and (1989). Fifty years have elapsed since Michel's seminal early work; in that time, our understanding of ancient technologies in relation to Earth energies has increased substantially: see, for example, Heath (2018), Heath (2021), and Dunn (2024).

3. See Lesh (2005, 238). I remember the exchange slightly differently than Phil's account in *Searching for the Sound*. Loren's account also varies slightly (2014, 176), as does the version that Dennis McNally includes in his band history (2002, 508). My recollection is that Phil placed the context of the exchange more on the energetic attraction of the Great Pyramid than the cultural, as his larger discussion in *Searching for the Sound* makes clear.

4. In Indian aesthetics, a *rasa* is a nectar, essence, or taste. It is a concept in Indian arts denoting the aesthetic flavor of any visual, literary, or musical work that evokes an emotion or feeling in the reader or audience but cannot be described. It refers to the emotional essence of a work imbued by its creator and relished by a *sahridaya*, a "sensitive spectator," literally, one who "has heart" and can connect to the work with emotion.

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ALAN TRIST served as longtime manager of the Grateful Dead’s Ice Nine Publishing Company. He cofounded Hulogosi Communications, a Eugene-based publishing house that published his *The Water of Life: A Tale of the Grateful Dead* and his edited *Alleys of the Heart: The Collected Poems of Robert M. Petersen*, among other volumes. His poetry and essays have appeared in a variety of books, journals, and other periodicals.