

All Graceful Instruments

All Graceful Instruments
The Contexts of the Grateful Dead Phenomenon

Edited by

Nicholas G. Meriwether



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To the memory of Jerome John Garcia

“A shelf of books could be written and still only lightly perturb the surface of who the Grateful Dead were, are, and why.”

—Robert Hunter

“The Grateful Dead have been all things to all men.”

—Rob Burt and Patsy North

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At the end of the liner note booklet to the boxed set *The Golden Road* is the line: “The Grateful Dead was never five or six guys on a stage; it was everybody in the room.” The greatest thanks of all go to those five or six guys who made me and everyone else in that room feel welcome: you inspired this collection. “Thank you, for a real good time.”

INTRODUCTION

“ALL GRACEFUL INSTRUMENTS”: THE CONTEXTS OF THE GRATEFUL DEAD PHENOMENON

NICHOLAS MERIWETHER

In the early 1970s, famed anthropologist Victor Turner traveled to Mexico to witness a religious festival and was amazed at what he found. Calling it “patently a social phenomenon of great interest and possible significance,” he wrote: “Here was a great extant popular process ... rich in symbolism and undoubtedly complex in social organization, and yet very largely ignored by the often competing orthodoxies of social science and religion. Why was there this neglect?”¹ His question was not so much answered as obviated, as the academy grew to accept his challenge, but nearly thirty years later, another scholar, reflecting on a very different celebration, echoed his remarks: “If someone said that there was a community of people who got together and took psychedelics in a ritual manner sixty or seventy times a year, there would be busloads of anthropologists flocking to study them, but because it’s happening in Cleveland, no one cares.”²

There are interesting, deeper parallels between the two comments, but sadly, the second remains largely true today.³ Academics might be surprised to know that the second remark refers to Deadheads, the group of fans gathered around the band the Grateful Dead. Perhaps more surprising might be the context in which this observation was made, an academic conference where scholars studying the band and the cultural phenomenon surrounding them had gathered for three meetings already and would continue to do so until today, more than a decade after the first convocation in 1996. But neither remark nor context should surprise, and that is one of the points this collection of essays underscores: that the Grateful Dead phenomenon not only merits serious academic attention, it requires it, on many levels from many disciplines.

Enough scholarship has been done already to suggest this. In addition to the groaning bookshelf of popular publications—a few of which even approach academic standards of rigor—there are two collections of essays, a book-length bibliography, nearly fifty articles, three issues of an occasional scholarly

journal, and a host of theses: five Ph.D. dissertations, twenty-seven masters' theses, and eleven undergraduate theses, many of which have been revised for publication.⁴ Yet Dead studies still suffer from the stigma surrounding their subject, a point made by many of the scholars who have studied the phenomenon.⁵ Some of that stigma can be traced to the lingering cultural wars over the meaning of the sixties and the countercultural milieu from which the band emerged, perhaps more still to the perceived role of drugs in the phenomenon. But those factors should make the topic of even greater interest to the academy, and indeed, the Dead phenomenon is a compelling and fascinating way of getting at the pith of those and several other thorny, academically interesting topics, from longstanding issues in rock music analysis and, more generally, cultural studies and even interdisciplinary studies—if scholars can look beyond the taint of their Haight-Ashbury and Acid Test origins. Historicity and stigma notwithstanding, the Grateful Dead phenomenon cries out for scholarly assessment in a variety of intriguing ways. How it does so is the subject of this introduction; why it has—and has not—is a goal of this collection.

I

In a sense, the genesis of the Grateful Dead is rooted in scholarship: in the fall of 1965, the five members of the band gathered at bass player Phil Lesh's house to try to come up with a new name. As lead guitarist Jerry Garcia recalled a few years later, he pulled out Lesh's dictionary, "opened it up and the first thing I saw was 'The Grateful Dead.' It said that on the page and it was so astonishing. It was a truly weird, a truly weird moment."⁶ Not everyone liked it, but they all recognized its power. Garcia's songwriting partner Robert Hunter would later reflect, "The evocative power of that strange, not at all comical name is considerable, for grace and ill. I know that my own input into the scene, my words, were heavily conditioned by that powerful name. It called sheaves of spirits down on us all. It expressed a deep mystic hope about the nature of eternity."⁷ And they all felt it. They had their new name, and with it an intellectual pedigree that would come to resonate deeply with their approach to composition, performance, their audience, and even commerce.

What Garcia found was this description of an ancient concept, written shortly after the turn of the century: "The belief that no obligation is more binding on man than he pay proper respect to the dead is as old as civilization itself. Indeed, it probably antedates what we ordinarily call civilization, since otherwise it could not well be found so widely distributed over the earth in historical times."⁸ The definition of the entry was:

The motif of a cycle of folk tales which begin with the hero's coming upon a group of people ill-treating or refusing to bury the corpse of a man who had died without paying his debts. He gives his last penny, either to pay the man's debts or to give him a decent burial. Within a few hours he meets with a traveling companion who aids him in some impossible task, gets him a fortune, saves his life, etc. The story ends with the companion's disclosing himself as the man whose corpse the other had befriended.⁹

So it was that the band that would become most strongly identified with the Haight-Ashbury and by extension, the hippie movement, acquired a moniker that was steeped in scholarship, near universal in human culture and history, and still capable—as one Deadhead would put it—of alienating parents.¹⁰ The poles of deep learning, stigma, and older human traditions that would all come to describe the band who embraced that name were rooted in that simple act. They also describe central themes that define the scholarship surrounding the band that would follow.

II

Like the Haight-Ashbury hippies who were the first Dead fans (called “Dead freaks” then; the term “Deadheads” emerged later), Deadheads appreciate serendipity and synchronicity, two poles in their worldview that describe this moment in several interesting ways.¹¹ Garcia's gesture that afternoon embodies both and can be seen as a quintessentially Haight-Ashbury move on a number of levels. Hippies believed in play, and “dictionary” was a playful game (find an obscure entry and see if others could guess which definition was real). But hippies also believed in ferreting out esoteric or hidden knowledge, and the act of turning to a dictionary—especially a good one, like this—was fundamentally a scholarly move. The fact that the first entry Garcia spotted was rooted in scholarship that had traced the definition back to the dawn of civilization makes it redolent of the very kind of obscure knowledge that so intrigued the Haight.

Obscurity was not the goal of turning to the past, however—excellence was. Hippies read Joseph Campbell and the *I Ching*, and they listened to Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Song* and the Indian music of Alla Rakha.¹² Some commentators at the time saw hippies as rejecting their intellectual heritage; a better way of putting it is that the hippies of the Haight were engaged in a search for that heritage on their own terms. As one prominent member of the Haight later put it, “We reacted to false authority, which demeans true authority. True authority is skill, insight, and knowledge.”¹³ That attitude would inform the art produced in the Haight, from the music to the posters.

Much of that sensibility stemmed from the cultural and intellectual ferment of the Bay Area, which had an academic element. With Berkeley across the

Bay, Stanford down the peninsula, and San Francisco State in the city—as well as several smaller institutions scattered throughout the region—the Haight-Ashbury had a distinct academic current running through it. That was especially true of the Dead. Phil Lesh had studied with Luciano Berio; and, although band members were not formal academics, they all considered themselves keen amateur scholars. Several band members had also been music teachers in their folkie days on the peninsula. Garcia's students in particular thought of him as a fine instructor, one of whom remembered his teaching skills as “impressive and innovative”.¹⁴ Band members' participation in the folk revival of the early sixties cemented a scholarly approach to their music, from their attitude toward composition (participate in the tradition, be eclectic in your influences) to performance (make it new every time). Despite their appreciation for the purists of the scene, they were not, at least when it came to technology. One of Garcia's students recalls that, despite the relative rarity of record players, he made sure that his students could listen to the songs they wanted to learn.¹⁵ Weir even carried around a portable tape recorder to record musicians whose skills or repertoire impressed him. Advances in recording and sound technology would later play an important role in the development of the music of the Haight and in the Dead scene especially.

The folk revival gave way to the hippie scene, and as the Haight-Ashbury flowered in the mid-sixties, it became the focus of intense scrutiny, academic and otherwise. Sociologists were the first academics to study the hippies of the Haight, but the art produced received attention as well.¹⁶ Psychologist Stanley Krippner was one of several scientists interested in studying the effects of psychedelics on artists who spent time in the Haight, and his contact with the Dead, which included interviewing band members and attending concerts, would bear fruit in several articles over the years, as well as a friendship that stretched into decades.¹⁷ But the major work on the band, fans, and the broader hippie milieu of the sixties was done by journalists, which is where the problems begin. Some of these efforts were well-intentioned, a few even well-researched. One scholar would later credit the New Journalism by Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson, both of whom wrote pieces that included the Dead, as “carrying on and developing the brilliant style of social research that was begun at the Department of Sociology of the University of Chicago.”¹⁸ But for every thoughtful effort by a Tom Wolfe or Michael Lydon, there were numerous sensationalist scare stories. It was a pattern that would come to characterize the journalism on the band in general: while some journalists have been among the Dead's finest commentators and critics, most have focused on, in Rebecca Adams' words, the “exotic and problematic aspects.”¹⁹ And many have been just plain wrong. But whether good or bad, favorable or unfavorable, journalism on the Dead in the sixties established the two poles that would characterize much of

the writing on the band and phenomenon from then on: they were interesting, both artistically and phenomenologically, and also deeply threatening. These poles would continue to play roles in the scholarship that followed as well.²⁰

The interest appeared even before they changed their name, as James Revell Carr's chapter here notes, when the earliest mention of the band, still known as the Warlocks, praised Garcia's instrumental prowess and compositional abilities.²¹ But the first real flush of media attention—and stigma—came shortly after, with the band's association with novelist Ken Kesey and his multimedia events, dubbed the Acid Tests. Featuring then-legal LSD and the music of the Dead, among other attractions, the Tests achieved national notoriety in a cover story on LSD in *Life* magazine, an LP documenting the same (also the band's first appearance in an LP release, though not musically), and finally immortalized in Tom Wolfe's classic of New Journalism, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*.²² By the time of the Dead's involvement with Kesey, media coverage of LSD had turned negative, and the band's willingness in interviews to credit the drug with some of their musical inspiration—even their very commitment to music—cemented their notoriety.²³ After the heyday of the Tests passed, the band moved to the Haight-Ashbury, and by fall of 1966 were neighborhood fixtures, just in time for the media blitz that would shortly inundate the foggy little cluster of blocks just southeast of Golden Gate Park with seekers and runaways, Scott McKenzie's treachy anthem "San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair)" echoing in their ears.

Over the next year, the Dead would become synonymous with the Haight-Ashbury in the popular imagination, just as the Haight became synonymous with hippiedom and the counterculture in the media. In time, the Dead's appearances at the Monterey Pop Festival and Woodstock, as well as their role in the disastrous concert at Altamont, immortalized in the film *Gimme Shelter*, would help make them among the most well-known icons of the sixties.²⁴

All of this should have made the Dead and their milieu immediate and compelling subjects for academics, and Garcia, along with Kesey and Tom Wolfe, did appear in one of the first books with academic roots to appear on the sixties, Peter Joseph's *Good Times: An Oral History of America in the Nineteen Sixties*.²⁵ It did not portend a flood of such efforts. Thirty years later, Alice Echols, researching a biography of the Dead's fellow Haight-Ashbury icon Janis Joplin, commented that she was "struck by the absence of good histories of the counterculture."²⁶ Some of the reason for that may be the pharmacological challenge of the times. As historian David Farber has written, "To make drug consciousness ... a major force in the youth movement of the 1960s is not something that comes easily to an academic, but those academicians who have written about the 1960s without any attempt to seriously or analytically relate drug consciousness to the events of the 1960s have done so at the cost of

warping and misconstruing much of what went on.”²⁷

Part of this is the lingering, contentious legacy of the period: Nick Bromell calls the counterculture “something that began more than thirty years ago and is still going on, something fundamental and unresolved in American culture. The fusion of rock and psychedelics that [critic] John Cunnick called ‘living to music’ lies at the heart of a ’60s that was experienced by millions.”²⁸ The counterculture of the times that shaped and was shaped by the Dead is, for Bromell, “the river that runs steadily and silently through American life these days, the river that welled out of the American psyche thirty years ago, spilling through the fissure blasted by psychedelic drugs.”²⁹ And to Bromell, the rock songs of the time are the carrier of that suppressed history: “They challenge me to sustain a vision that remembers more of what the ’60s were about than public memory has allowed.”³⁰ Although his soundtrack of the sixties is not by the Dead, he is one of several scholars, including those mentioned here, who have indirectly made a very strong case for academic study of the band and phenomenon. When scholars do integrate the Dead into their work on the sixties, they may find much in novelist Robert Stone’s eulogy for Garcia:

The art and the thought and the spirit of liberation of the ’60s flourished in their way. But of that holistic magic vision of the garden set free, the music of Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead is the purest single remnant. It was supposed to be an accompaniment to the New Beginning. In fact, it was the thing itself, all that remains with us.³¹

III

The first wave of scholarship on the band focused on them as examples of other topics—usually hippiedom—not as subjects in and of themselves. Nor was there much to this first wave. Despite the number of sociologists working in the Haight in the sixties, they produced comparatively few articles and even fewer monographs. Some of that work appeared in highly unlikely places. One graduate student in sociology at UC Santa Barbara published his inquiry into the San Francisco music scene—replete with transcribed quotations from extensive interviews with members of the Dead, among others—with a pornographic book publisher; as a result, *Electric Tibet* remains one of the more obscure and expensive books on the collector’s market for San Franciscaniana.³² Despite its flaws, it still presents a more accurate and thorough look at the San Francisco music scene than Carl Belz’s chapter in his *The Story of Rock*, published by Oxford University Press.³³ Thorny evidentiary problems face academics when they tackle a subject so heavily documented by mass media, and so poorly represented by traditional scholarly sources.³⁴

But as some of the sociological accounts show, when the work was based on research conducted in the Haight, it could be well informed and in some cases, even quite good. One of the most interesting examples of this early work addresses the Dead's commitment to sound technology. From their earliest gigs, they realized that their art relied on successful control of, not only their own instruments, but the sound system as well. As their longtime sound engineer Dan Healy explained later, the goal of the band and their engineers was to "unite the music with the sound reinforcement electronics in a coherent way."³⁵ It became a philosophy of technology that was rooted in their artistic vision: in Healy's words, "The concept was that the sound designed the music and the music designed the sound, from the fingertips of the player to the ears of the audience."³⁶ Lesh recalls their expression for this as simply, "As on the stage, so in the hall."³⁷

This became the driving ideal in their PA design, culminating in their mammoth "Wall of Sound" in the early seventies (the subject of an academic textbook chapter³⁸), but also extending to the innovations they spearheaded in instrument design as well. Garcia and Lesh's instruments attracted the most media attention, but Weir's collaboration with guitar engineers produced a scholarly article that made the point explicitly: "The actual instrument must be defined as the totality of equipment between the musician's hands and the listener's ears."³⁹ The notion that the PA should be an extension of an instrument would evolve into an axiom of sound reinforcement system engineering, and the Dead's pioneering work would be applauded over the years until they received some of the industry's highest accolades in the 1990s, as will be discussed below. But even in the sixties, their innovations were considered noteworthy, beginning with their approach to recording, both live and in the studio.⁴⁰

This also documents the band's creative approach to the business side of their art: the need to develop the technology necessary to allow that art to happen, both in concert and in the studio. And in both cases, it also reflects their commitment to their audience as well, a theme that would resound with increasing force and frequency in later writing on the band and scene. Alan Trist made the point explicitly in a band report in 1981: "In fact, development of live recording capability was an on-going process integral with the development of concert sound and its relation to performance and audience response."⁴¹ To be sure, they were also involved in the music industry itself, and aspects of that also demonstrated their attitude to art, as their contract negotiations with Warner Bros. reveal.⁴² But the point is, their approach to business was cemented in the sixties, and even the early literature reflects that—just as that literature established the poles that would define so much of the writing that would follow, from the ambition and achievement of their art to their attitude toward

technology, their fans, and the music industry.

Fittingly, this first era also marks the genesis of several other themes in the Grateful Dead phenomenon that would make possible later scholarship, from their own policy of taping concerts (to improve as well as recall particularly good moments in jams that might serve as the basis for new songs) to allowing fans to do the same, although that wouldn't become common until the seventies.⁴³ But the reason for that kind of preservation was far more than just to document the band's policy of "make it new," and never repeat themselves: it was the degree to which those relentlessly improvised performances included—even depended on—the audience, a dynamic that was manifest even in the tapes. As early as 1967, critics recognized what both band and fans knew already, calling the obvious bond between them in concert "enviable."⁴⁴ In a few years, journalists would praise it in even more effusive terms, but what is clear from even these early accounts is that this bond is already powerful, spiritual, and capable of producing great art.⁴⁵

It was also already wholly baffling to outsiders. One early book of rock criticism, reflecting on the second set of a show, opined: "On a good night, at this point, the group and the audience become one. That's what happens and it doesn't even make sense on paper. Which is why so many people are religious about the Dead, having been through the experience, while those who haven't refuse to believe."⁴⁶ As one of the earlier statements of that symbiosis, it goes to the heart of the Grateful Dead phenomenon. Lesh later recalled of their early days, "we used to say that every place we played was church and that's what it was like. A pretty far out church but that's how we felt."⁴⁷ And that was not intended as a derogation of church. Rather, it was an acknowledgement of the bond they all felt, and a feeling that would attract fans for another quarter of a century. It would also continue to puzzle non-fans—as David Gans put it, "Outside the community of people who love this music, being a Deadhead is like being in love with the ugliest girl in the world."⁴⁸ Stigma notwithstanding, it would attract a steady stream of curious scholars from a growing range of fields to explore and explain it.

Thus the work by the band and on the band in these first few years sets the stage for the development of the rest of the work that would appear about the Grateful Dead phenomenon, which would continue to acknowledge and measure that bond, from origination to reception, from composition to performance to consumption. With no other band has every step in that chain been documented in so many ways by so many disciplines.

IV

The seventies mark the beginning of the scholarly work on the band as a

subject of interest and merit in and of itself, though most of it still uses them to illustrate broader themes (e.g., Peter Joseph interviewing Garcia on the sixties). In the original liner notes to their eponymous live 1971 release, the Dead quoted several reviews—“Mammoth epiphanies”, “symbiosis on the grand scale”, and “a transcendent event”—each of which describe important themes in the scholarship to come.⁴⁹ In the seventies, though, the scholarship tended to address this indirectly. In an article for medical professionals in field settings, the comparison between a Dead show and a Led Zeppelin concert testifies to the joyous, inclusive community feeling of the former—in stark contrast to the latter—and already notes how the Dead scene in 1973 represents a continuation of spirit of the Haight-Ashbury.⁵⁰ Krippner’s coauthored article is another indirect measure of the power of the band-fan bond, which he correctly believed could be harnessed to test his hypothesis about dream telepathy.

The nature and power of that bond would continue to be the dominant theme in the literature, but the band’s approach to business continued to attract attention as well. On the technology side, work on their instruments would continue, but the major thrust was the sound system. Their legendary Wall of Sound, completed in 1974, would continue to be the source of scholarly attention more than a decade after its dismantling; to the band, it “either verified theories or debunked them.”⁵¹ And everything was subject to question: the theories it tested ranged from the electronics of crossover devices to the physics of speaker cabinet construction to the mechanics of transport and assembly procedures. Fans responded. Amateur taping had begun in the late sixties, but now, with what was acknowledged as the finest concert sound system around, fans began lugging in car batteries and reel-to-reel tape recorders to capture the shows, setting up clubs to trade the results.⁵²

The Wall also created enormous economic pressure on the band, due to the expense in set-up and transport, helping fuel the decision to “retire” for more than a year in the mid-seventies, as Barry Barnes and Kenneth Mackenzie’s chapter here details. Another contributing factor was the experience of running their own record company, which resulted in some worthwhile recordings but proved ultimately too distracting—and expensive. They took a hiatus, shut down much of their operations, went into the studio, and recouped. When they emerged, they had a new album, a streamlined operation, and a renewed commitment to performing that would carry them through Garcia’s death almost twenty years later.

Both of these endeavors underscore two themes introduced in the first wave of work on the band. First, their attitude toward technology was innovative, exceptional, and noteworthy—and in that, we can see a reflection of their attitude toward business (although the articles on that wouldn’t appear until later): to experiment and innovate and learn from failure. It was extending their

philosophy of excellence and improvisation in music to another realm, the technology—and business—of music. That is the second major theme, that even their business philosophy was derived from their musical one developed back in the days of the Haight-Ashbury: don't be afraid to experiment—and like musicians improvising on stage, that meant viewing failure as just another challenge, a sour note to recover from. There is an organic connection between even these dissimilar activities and realms, and that is all integrally linked to and rooted in their approach to their art. It is the theme that unites the scholarship on the band in surprising and tenacious ways. Overall, the work in the seventies is interesting, though scant. The final, mature phase of the scholarly work on the Grateful Dead phenomenon begins in the eighties.

V

As a rock band, especially one based in San Francisco, the Dead always appealed to students and young academics. As they aggressively expanded their touring audience, they found colleges and universities particularly welcoming, with gigs forming seedbeds of dedicated students, especially in the Northeast, that would endure for decades.⁵³ That students would like rock music is natural, of course, but many students would also find the Dead intellectually stimulating as well. Indeed, some would see them as an education: one latter-day fan would write, “the Dead was my window into the best art America has to offer, because through Kerouac you find Thomas Wolfe, and through Wolfe you find confusions with Tom Wolfe and the rhythms of Whitman, and in Whitman is America itself. I don't know how I would have discovered these things were it not for the music of the Dead.”⁵⁴ Band members would not have been surprised; as Garcia commented to an interviewer:

I owe a lot of who I am and what I've been and what I've done to the beatniks from the Fifties and to the poetry and art and music that I've come into contact with. I feel like I'm part of a continuous line of a certain thing in American culture, of a root. ... My life would be miserable if I didn't have those little chunks of Dylan Thomas and T. S. Eliot. I can't imagine life without that stuff. Those are the payoffs: the finest moments in music, the finest moments in movies. Great moments are part of what supports you as an artist and a human. They're part of what makes you a human. What's been great about the human race gives you a sense of how great you might get, how far you can reach. I think the rest of the guys in this band all share stuff like that. We all have those things, those pillars of greatness. And if you're lucky, you find out about them, and if you're not lucky, you don't. And in this day and age in America, a lot of people aren't lucky, and they don't find out about those things.⁵⁵

But Deadheads did. Even the first novel about the Deadhead experience—which involves students and unfolds in a university setting—begins with, “How can you call yourself educated when you’ve never seen the Grateful Dead?”⁵⁶

Some of those student fans would go on to successful academic careers. Chris Byrnes, later dean of the School of Engineering and Applied Science at Washington University in St. Louis, introduced his friend Dennis McNally to the world of shows when they were in graduate school together.⁵⁷ McNally would complete his degree—with his dissertation on Kerouac published to critical acclaim⁵⁸—but decided not to stay in academe, opting instead to go to San Francisco, where he first worked for longtime Dead promoter Bill Graham and then for the Dead themselves, eventually writing the authorized history of the band.⁵⁹

But unlike McNally, many of those student fans would stay in academe, and by the eighties, some had tenure—and that meant that an interested student might be able to study the Grateful Dead phenomenon.⁶⁰ By then the scene had also evolved into a phenomenon of sufficient size and staying power to merit attention from the social sciences. The art had continued to evolve, too, making it possible for students to convince professors that there was enough there to warrant serious academic study. While student work on the band and phenomenon can be found as early as 1971, masters’ theses begin to appear in the mid-eighties.⁶¹ This marks the last phase of Dead studies, which continues today, with a steadily growing number of undergraduate papers, masters’ theses, and Ph.D. dissertations being done in a wide variety of fields. Although some commentators, still laboring under the influence of the stigma attached to the subject, might dismiss this work but for its sheer expansiveness, there are two striking characteristics that emerge from a survey. First, a remarkably high percentage of the student work done on the phenomenon has been published, even undergraduate work. Second, despite the breadth of the fields represented—American studies, anthropology, cultural studies, ethnomusicology, folklore, history, literary criticism, musicology, psychology, sociology, statistics, and more—the work is characterized by a striking degree of commitment and risk. There is a real passion animating these efforts, along with a genuine awareness that this commitment carries with it all of the risks that accompany membership and interest in stigmatized communities—especially this one.

This is true of the published work as well. As Rebecca Adams has noted, Deadheads have encouraged academic study as a way of offsetting negative perceptions, but the literature also shows that academics who have been drawn to study the art, community, or phenomenon have often come to identify themselves as Deadheads.⁶² Together, the student and published work outline a genuinely interdisciplinary discourse, remarkable for the fact that it allows each

discipline to act within its bounds, for each discipline makes the claim that its techniques and methodologies can uniquely explain the Grateful Dead phenomenon, avoiding the “incoherency” and “babel” entailed by the ad hoc cobbling together of disciplines that Stanley Bailis has warned against.⁶³ As the essays in this book show, more than just a common grounding in a discrete phenomenon makes this possible: it is also facilitated by a common bank of ideas and authorities. A casual review of the work reveals how many different efforts from very different disciplines use Victor Turner, Joseph Campbell, and Friedrich Nietzsche, for example; they are part of a core group of authorities whose work resonates deeply with Dead studies and can be applied across strikingly diverse methodologies and disciplines, as several essays here demonstrate. An eclectic and evocative group of concepts is emerging as a kind of Deadhead scholarly vocabulary, with the real power to unleash the rich potential of cross-fertilization that lies at the heart of interdisciplinary studies.

What is perhaps most striking, however, is the way that all of these disciplines fit together in explaining the Grateful Dead phenomenon. The rest of this introduction will map how the essays in this volume fit in with the way these disciplines approach and contribute to the discussion of the Dead phenomenon, tracing the contexts that illuminate the path of the music and its human relationships from their origins to their final diffusion into the larger culture.

VI

As Phil Lesh has pointed out, “Grateful Dead is more than music, but it has always been *fundamentally* music”, and scholarship on the band quite properly begins there.⁶⁴ As Matthew Tift notes in his chapter here, comparatively little work on the music has been done, and his essay in conjunction with the essays by David Malvinni, Shaugn O’Donnell, and James Revell Carr outlines that literature. The best of that work tends to be microcosmic, focusing on segments of the band’s sprawling canon, or even better, on individual songs.⁶⁵ This is where Shaugn O’Donnell’s essay makes its contribution, demonstrating how the band fits into broader musical traditions by focusing on a specific song, the Bob Weir composition “Victim or the Crime.” O’Donnell shows how the Dead approached their craft by studying great art and artists, incorporating those examples into their own craft, but he also shows how the band collaborated, working together to realize the vision of the song’s principal composer.

Showing how the Dead’s work fits into this particular musical tradition echoes the larger theme of the importance they placed on participating in the traditions they were studying. By grounding his analysis in a song composed by Weir, O’Donnell also makes the point that the band had several talented and

ambitious composers, not just Garcia, whose work dominates the literature. Overall, O'Donnell makes a strong case for, not only the propriety of applying the techniques of classical academic musicology to the Dead's work, but its necessity. We cannot understand "Victim or the Crime" unless we understand its relationship with its inspiration, Bartok's *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*. Ultimately, what O'Donnell reveals of this complex, demanding, and at least initially, controversial song is true of the Dead's entire corpus: how their approach to and interpretation of tradition is vital, evocative, and intriguing.

How the band fits into broader musical traditions is a theme that runs through several of the essays here, including David Malvinni's, which also uses the tools of formal academic musicology. His purpose is to explain the Dead's approach to performance and specifically to improvisation; he attributes the "transformational quality" of the Dead's improvisation to their innovative mixing of improvisational modes. More than just a microcosmic analysis, his essay shows how the artistic philosophy of the Dead is successfully imbued in the music itself—that what he calls "the experience of the impossible" is encoded in the band's overall approach to improvisation and even some compositions. Most importantly, he shows how that approach fueled the unique bond between band and audience, which he explicitly acknowledges as transformational. In so doing, he also makes plain how the musical philosophy of the Dead reflects the Haight-Ashbury ethos of seeking out that "knowledge beyond knowledge": not just hidden, suppressed or lost knowledge, which tended to be the terms used by the Haight-Ashbury hippies, but *ur*-knowledge, or epiphany, as will be discussed below.⁶⁶ As the first systematic exploration of their approach to improvisation, Malvinni's essay is a fascinating look at what most commentators would agree is the core of their uniqueness; to Dead scholars, an especially neat piece of symmetry is how his exegesis also makes the case for their musical philosophy being rooted in the ancient belief described by their name.

While traditional musicology can effectively illuminate parts of the Dead's canon and their approach to performance, ethnomusicology has also contributed to Dead studies on a number of levels, as seen in drummer Mickey Hart's work with Fredric Lieberman, Thomas Vennum, and Steven Feld.⁶⁷ Just as Vennum has placed the Dead's work in the context of world music, ethnomusicologist James Revell Carr's chapter here assesses their canon in the broader milieu of folk music. Several commentators have pointed out the degree to which the Dead's work encompasses various American folk musics, but Carr is the first to systematically explore how their oeuvre embodies those traditions.⁶⁸ The perspective of ethnomusicology allows him to explain how the band developed their canon, what its antecedents and inspirations are, and how it fits into the broader categories of folk musics that so influenced and defined it.

Grounding his analysis in a discussion of various band members' participation in the American folk revival also lets Carr point out how the Dead themselves are good students of music history and assess their own place in those traditions. This makes for some difficulties in strict categorization, as Carr explains, but that ambiguity he uses to good effect, exploring the varied definitions of folk music and how they illuminate aspects of the Dead's approach to music, as well as a significant part of the music they composed and reinterpreted. This also provides a way of understanding how fans became interested in the band's roots. As one critic noted, echoing Carr's title, "Some Deadheads track down the original versions of folks and blues classics performed by the band over the years; others pick up guitars and sing the tunes on back porches across America, along with the Dead originals that have become part of the same musical river."⁶⁹ It was why the Dead were more than just good music teachers. As one of Garcia's former students, who became a fan, put it: "Jerry's great gift to me was that he gave me private emotional ownership of the music I played, while helping me to experience that connection in a cultural and historical context."⁷⁰ Deadheads would agree.

All three of these essays illustrate approaches, not only to the Dead, but also provide models of how to approach rock music in general. In so doing, they suggest methods of answering a number of entrenched theoretical and methodological problems in rock studies, from a workable definition of the genre itself to the difficulties in connecting a work of art from creation to consumption, from originator to audience, all of which may require the kind of concentrated, microcosmic analysis of a single band and its corpus to successfully build a foundation for meaningful generalizations.⁷¹ These essays also demonstrate with the music what several commentators, including two essays here, do with the lyrics, showing how the Dead participate in the various artistic traditions that inspired them, sometimes unconsciously, but more often deliberately, thoughtfully—and successfully.

Horace Fairlamb's chapter approaches the lyrics, both original and "covers" (non-original songs they adopted and made a part of their canon), from a cultural studies standpoint, using literary theory to uncover the philosophy they describe. Some of this can be traced to the overtly religious aspects of certain lyrics, which have attracted attention from commentators interested in everything from their use of Christian symbolism and imagery to the Taoist bent to certain songs.⁷² Granville Ganter has described the lyrics as creating a "lifeworld," a notion that contributor Stanley Spector has also explored, showing how their lyrics build a coherent philosophy.⁷³ Fairlamb takes this approach, charting how the band's lyrics establish a worldview anchored in the original hippie perspective of the Haight-Ashbury and is the first to deal with the band's cover songs as vital parts of their work and message.

That message is one of “persistent affirmation,” as Fairlamb explains, rooted in Garcia’s contention that the band’s approach to music and life was fundamentally positive: “We’ve never been motivated by negative trips,” he explained to Yale law professor Charles Reich in an early interview, but he was equally explicit about music’s ability to encompass all emotions, including black despair.⁷⁴ How the Dead’s music embraced the full range of human experience—including sadness and suffering—while reaffirming hope, is a vital part of understanding the transformative power and enduring appeal of the phenomenon. That aspect has escaped much of the mass media accounts of the scene, but even as shallow and incomprehending an assessment as the Maryland Police Department’s evaluation of the Dead noted the appeal of the Haight-Ashbury/sixties aura to teenaged concert-goers in the early 1990s.⁷⁵ Fairlamb provides an explanation of why that is by showing there is a worldview—a philosophy—that emerges in the Dead’s lyrics, and it is rooted in the perspective of the original Haight-Ashbury hippies. In so doing, he not only illuminates its artistic achievement, but he also shows what is at stake in that philosophy. The lyrics reveal the sophistication of the Dead’s philosophy and how that in turn interrogates dominant interpretations of the sixties and especially the counterculture.

Fairlamb is not the first to show how the tools of literary criticism can cast light on the psychological experience of psychedelics. Brent Wood’s essay on Hunter’s work shows how the transformative goals of poetics dovetail with the experience of psychedelics, which so informed the Dead’s early experiences in the Acid Tests and later in the Haight-Ashbury, but he also makes the broader case for applying the techniques of literary analysis to Hunter’s lyrics.⁷⁶ That also describes the approach I follow in my chapter on Hunter’s “Must Have Been the Roses,” a song inspired by William Faulkner’s short story “A Rose for Emily.”

While scholars have pointed out the utility of postmodernism as a context for approaching the Dead’s art, modernism has received comparatively little attention. This is an interesting omission, inasmuch as Hunter has made it a point to acknowledge the influence of several modernist masters, starting with James Joyce. Choosing Faulkner and “Must Have Been the Roses” as subjects may strike some as obscure, the former because most commentators have focused on the Beats as literary antecedents to Hunter, the latter, because it is not one of their more famous songs. But the connections between the Beats and the modernists are well documented; and, as O’Donnell shows, less well-known songs can be revealing. Just as the Beats looked to the modernists, so too did Hunter, seeking that ecstatic burst of inspiration and intuition that Joyce had made famous as his secular vision of epiphany.⁷⁷ And Faulkner, as an exemplar of modernism, provides some surprisingly deep and fruitful comparisons to

Hunter's work.

Nor should this be surprising, given the Haight-Ashbury's emphasis on turning to the past for inspiration. Even Faulkner's celebrated rootedness in the South wasn't entirely alien. Band members were steeped in Southern musical traditions from their participation in the folk revival, and their own rootedness in the Haight-Ashbury and San Francisco and the American West has obvious parallels to Faulkner's belief that one's "own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about ... a cosmos of [one's] own."⁷⁸ The song makes an interesting platform for analysis for several reasons, one of which is its genesis: it came to Hunter in a burst of inspiration. That notion of artistic revelation helps explain how some songs could become, especially in performance, vehicles for audience inspiration as well—as if the songs themselves contained the energy of that originary artistic inspiration, which could be transmitted to listeners and trigger their own insights, unleashed by active listening. This is the next context, how the music and lyrics were experienced and interacted with by fans, especially in concert.

This is where Matthew Tift's chapter fits into the literature. Drawing on several of the same sources that inform Malvinni and O'Donnell, Tift assesses the Dead's performance aesthetic according to British musicologist Christopher Small's concept of active listening, which he calls *musicking*. It is an idea the band would have appreciated: as Garcia once admonished a fan at a show, "No, no, man, you don't understand, this is the part where we play *soft*, and you *listen* loud!"⁷⁹ Deadheads obeyed. Years later Garcia reflected: "They're a good audience. They pay attention. They can get very quiet. We take them a lot of places. They're no slouches. They're not just being there. They're into it, and that's nice."⁸⁰ Critic Jon Pareles singled out that aspect of their approach in his eulogy for Garcia: "Grateful Dead concerts were notably quieter than anything else on the arena and stadium circuit; they didn't bludgeon an audience; they whispered and drew listeners closer."⁸¹

Tift's use of Small's metaphor provides a way of accounting for the manner in which fans contributed to the music, viewing a concert as a mutual, shared creation, not a performance *by* musicians *for* an audience; in short, it is a way of viewing music as an action, not as an object. As Garcia once put it, musing on both band and fans, "All of us have a special relationship to the music which in turn behaves as if it has a mind of its own."⁸² Just as several chapters here discover, Tift finds deeper, even more fascinating connections between the Grateful Dead experience and his referents, from Gregory Bateson's work to Small's contention that *musicking* is about not just actual relationships but desired ones—specifically those that connect us with "the rest of the cosmos" and even the supernatural, "if our conception of the world has room for the supernatural."⁸³ For Deadheads it certainly does: we went to shows precisely for

that experience of transcendence, of transformation, and that is what Small is getting at here.⁸⁴

And Tift quite properly describes the Dead's music as being built around this concept of interaction, explaining why the band focused on process and not results. This is a theme that runs through surprisingly disparate writings on the Grateful Dead phenomenon, as we will see below. But Tift also argues that Small's concept of musicking can happen outside of shows, suggesting that the band was able to endow the songs themselves with, not only that transformative spark, but also a sense of that inclusive, communitarian sensibility, a point corroborated by scattered references in the literature.⁸⁵

That musicking can happen outside of the concert space also speaks to how the Deadhead experience, which is so strongly defined by amateur taping, can contribute to our understanding of what David Morton calls "recording culture."⁸⁶ Just as the band's uneasy relationship with the record industry meant that its success was achieved largely outside of those confines, so too are Deadheads a fascinating way of fulfilling Morton's call "to reevaluate the history of recorded sound, to explore more of its history, and to include with the story of music on 'records' the much wider history of sound recording in general."⁸⁷ The centrality of band-recorded "soundboard" and fan-recorded tapes as conduits of Deadhead culture—what McNally dubbed "the sacred talismans that unite the tribe as a whole"⁸⁸—should make the Grateful Dead phenomenon a fascinating case study.

Though some fans who consider themselves diehard Deadheads never saw a concert, unquestionably the most powerful example of band-fan interaction was the concert setting. The concert arena was the alembic that enabled the Dead's approach to improvisation to unleash the potential in the music and lyrics to achieve the transformation that was the goal of both performer and fan. That transformative potential is the slippery, near ineffable heart of the Grateful Dead phenomenon and the Deadhead experience, and it is what so many scholars have used the very different tools of their disciplines to get at, either directly or indirectly. It is the central theme that runs through so much of the literature, from band interviews to critical assessments to fan encomia. Indeed, one can say that every discipline represented here and in the literature in general is attempting to measure that bond, that relationship, in some way. It was a relationship defined by a mutual commitment to that transformation: that was what both band and fans went to shows to experience. As Garcia said in 1970, when asked if Dead fans believed in magic, "I think that our audience definitely does. Or, rather than dwell on the idea of magic, they know that there's a certain phenomenon that *can* happen and if they come to see us enough, they've observed it, they've seen it, they've been part of it. And that's the pay off. That's the reason to keep on doing it. We know that it can happen"⁸⁹

VII

Noting its occurrence does not explain what that transformation is. To academics, that very subjectivity is one of the greatest challenges of the Grateful Dead phenomenon. What is possible is to trace how that transformation is perceived, from band to fans, following an analogous arc to that described here with these broader interpretative contexts. All of the band members' thoughts about it are on record, but Garcia may have put it most simply when he remarked: "When we get onstage, what we really want to happen is, we want to be transformed from ordinary players into extraordinary ones, like forces of a larger consciousness. And the audience wants to be transformed from what ordinary reality they may be in to something a little wider, something that enlarges them. So maybe it's that notion of transformation, a seat-of-the-pants shamanism, that has something to do with why the Grateful Dead keep pulling them in."⁹⁰ In other interviews, they spoke of being conduits for the music; as Lesh put it:

In our best moments, all our individual quirks disappeared as if they'd never been. We were one in the music, and the music was playing us. To lose oneself completely in a spontaneous flood of music is one of the great human joys: one isn't creating, but being created—in fact, one no longer exists. At the same time, there's a give-and-take, a handing off of ideas that mimics the process of thought itself, as if we were synapses in a greater mind. ... It's not a question of dividing one's self: there is no self. There is only music.⁹¹

It was a sentiment Barlow incorporated explicitly in the lyrics to one of their signature songs with the line, "when the music plays the band," and a concept found in many musical traditions. When Hart spoke of seeking the mystical point where "drummer, membrane and rhythm all meld seamlessly" to Thomas Vennum, he was echoing what musicians have sought for centuries, what one classical music critic referred to as a "symbiotic union such that it is scarcely possible to say whether the performer plays the instrument or the instrument plays the performer."⁹² Ganter's description of the Dead's lyrics as describing a "lifeworld" comes into play here, for it is also a music that describes that transformative bond, as he notes: "the Dead's music can be thought of as the focal point of a communal consciousness. The Dead's sound is a kind of music *about* that interaction."⁹³

And fans recognized that what they were experiencing in concert—what they saw on stage—was itself a manifestation of that transformation, as the band made clear in their interviews: they had become the Dead in order to create the art that courted that transformation. As Mickey Hart explained, "It's what The Grateful Dead does—it has transformative power... It does that thing that makes

you change your attitude. It's entertaining, it's music, but its business is transformation."⁹⁴ And that was as true for the performers as it was for the audience, which was the compelling reason for playing in the band. As Lesh explained:

At one point, I personally knew—and I assume everybody else [in the band] did. I couldn't walk away from this. It was too good, too interesting. Not interesting in the sense that you say about a new play or paperback novel. I mean really interesting—and fraught with meaning, dare I say, of greater breadth and scope and significance than I had ever imagined, even in other forms of music.⁹⁵

That attitude is what made the transformation in concerts communal: concerts were not about fans watching and hearing musicians show off; they were mutual creations in which fans enacted their own transformations. Garcia provided an apt metaphor for this when he likened what the Dead did in concert to opening a door, a portal that everyone could enter, and—hearkening back to the Acid Tests—what they discovered depended on them.⁹⁶

That was also part of the point: as suggestive and evocative as the Dead's music and lyrics were, the band did not preach from the stage. Music was open, and that included dark as well as light, negative along with positive. Both could be transformative: one could learn from either, as Garcia pointed out.⁹⁷ Scholars have found this in the band's music as well, as Fairlamb points out in his essay here; one Deadhead minister has noted how this experience parallels the practices of prayer and meditation, noting the value of insights born from the negative ferment of some of his concert revelations.⁹⁸ That positive potential in even the blackest of thoughts is rooted in one of the central paradoxes of the Grateful Dead phenomenon: how fans could experience that transformation as both communal and yet individual.

It was not a guaranteed occurrence, for either band or fans. As one writer put it, "I confess that I don't always get a perfect hit off the Dead. Sometimes the band is off; sometimes I'm preoccupied and don't connect. On the occasions when it works, though, it's magic."⁹⁹ What that magic was, or how fans experienced it, depended on many factors, as Rebecca Adams found: "Although the spiritual experiences of Deadheads varied widely and included feelings of déjà vu, out-of-body experiences, connecting with a higher power, and living through the cycle of death and rebirth, the most commonly mentioned experiences were inner and outer connectedness—self-revelation and unity with others."¹⁰⁰ And for some, that inner and outer connectedness was mystically unified: it was both communal and yet highly individual. For philosopher Jim Tuedio, that is one of the most remarkable aspects of the Grateful Dead phenomenon: "The atmosphere of the concert-place often evinced the feel of being in a most public of private places, a vernacular (and very homey) public

gathering as individually diasporadic as it was communally focused.”¹⁰¹ The band recognized this, too. Band lyricist Robert M. Petersen wrote of the communion of a show at one of the band’s great San Francisco halls, Winterland, as band and fans would “reach into that system / pulling out dream after dream / all bodies transformed / into a single / amalgam”.¹⁰² It is what moved Blair Jackson to publish his respected fan magazine *The Golden Road*: to document “the transformative quality of the whole Dead experience” and “the palpable sense of communion” among fans.¹⁰³ When one Deadhead described feeling “complete identity with all life and creation and unity with people”¹⁰⁴ at a show, he was echoing Nietzsche’s view of Dionysian revelry and its “ecstatic, mystical union with the primal unity,” as Stanley Spector has pointed out.¹⁰⁵ One of the most basic levels of transformation that occurred at shows was forging that community, the *communitas* Victor Turner described as characterizing rites of passage in many cultures, and as Mary Goodenough explains in her essay here.

Deadheads have described that transformative experience in a variety of ways, as Rebecca Adams found. At one level, it is expressed as insights into themselves or issues. David Gans, one of the scene’s best writers and most extensive chroniclers, wrote that he has “gotten some of my best ideas at Dead shows, cried some of my best tears, solved some of my knottiest problems, received some of my most productive inspirations.”¹⁰⁶ Eminences such as Owen Chamberlain, Nobel laureate in physics, said he liked sitting between the two drummers on stage “because it gives me interesting ideas.”¹⁰⁷ Ken Kesey, a lifelong fan, phrased it more forcefully: “Every so often, listening to a Dead gig, you shift into another gear. It’s what everybody goes for, and the Dead work hours and hours trying to provide it. They’ll work and work and work and—WHAM!—they’ll finally throw it into gear and your mind will hit that thing where you realize this is the area where the solutions lie.”¹⁰⁸ Tuedio agrees; for him, the concert was an environment that facilitated those insights:

In this context, it was easy to see connections in my experiences, to make sense of complexities, or to suddenly see the point of a question in a wholly different way; nor was it so unusual to see a face drawn from a pivotal scene in my life, and to understand its meaning (and my life) in a completely new light. This is why Dead shows were such an indelible part of the lives and minds of Deadheads, why the Dead phenomenon was so personal and yet communal.¹⁰⁹

Robert Hunter put it more poetically: “When the Dead are playing their best, blood drips from the ceiling in great, rich drops. Together we do a kind of suicide in music which requires from each of us just enough information short of dropping the body to inquire into those spaces from which come our questions.”¹¹⁰