

Review of *The Tragic Odes of Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead: Mystery Dances in the Magic Theater*, by Brent Wood, Routledge, 2020.

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Brent Wood's *The Tragic Odes of Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead: Mystery Dances in the Magic Theater* is the latest volume in the Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series. Like other texts in the series, it undertakes musicological analysis of its subject in the context of interpretations that draw on a wide variety of socio-cultural considerations and scholarly fields. For those who teach with the Grateful Dead, Wood's text offers much on a number of fronts: its interdisciplinary scope provides fresh insights about the Grateful Dead in relation to topics in literary studies, classics, philosophy, musicology, and history, among other disciplines.

The Tragic Odes of Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead launches its arguments by drawing together several different strands. One is the influence of British Romantic poetry on neo-Romantic figures whose work and thought informed the early Grateful Dead, such as Hermann Hesse and the Beats. Another element Wood brings into play early in the text is the motif of the Magic Theater, which derives from Hesse's novel *Steppenwolf* and is used by Wood as an entrance into discussion of the theatrical roots of the band's aesthetic. Finally, and perhaps most centrally, Wood presents framing remarks on the term "tragedy," which are informed by Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. Contributing to a sense of unity among all these components, beyond the force of Wood's arguments regarding them, are the striking similarities he identifies between Nietzsche's life and Garcia's, from the early deaths of their fathers and their shared love of music to an overarching biographical pattern of early fame followed by serious health problems. Building on Stan Spector's work on Nietzsche and the Grateful Dead, although curiously not touching on David MacGregor Johnston's essay on the subject, Wood's Introduction comprises remarks on an impressively diverse array of topics, including the Fare Thee Well concerts of 2015, the band's identity as a specifically American phenomenon, the Mime Troupe and the Merry Pranksters, psychedelic experience, science fiction of the 1960s, and the American reception of Nietzsche. The Introduction also makes evident a particular value of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* to Wood's analysis: it opens the door to explorations of both Garcia's personal responses to loss and to the theatricalities of 1960s Haight-Ashbury. Of the many happy surprises one encounters in Wood's work, perhaps the most pleasing is his emphasis in the opening pages on the role of music to Nietzsche's conception of tragedy, a move that is quite persuasive in terms of justifying interpretations of the band's songs in light of the philosopher.

Wood's first chapter, "'Morning Dew' and the Greek Theatre," illustrates many of the best qualities of his project. After entering into his subject with a *narratio* focusing on the 14 June 1985 performance of "Morning Dew" at the Greek Theatre at University of California–Berkeley, Wood brings the discussion, via remarks on a history of the venue, to consideration of Wagner's *Ring* cycle in relation to the Grateful Dead's setlist choices during their summer 1985 run at the Greek. Several pages are also devoted to the band's rethinking of earlier versions of "Morning Dew," including especially the ways the Grateful Dead's version meaningfully revised chord progressions, displayed Garcia's innovative melodic strategies, and added an exceptionally poignant final line, all of which contributed to a profound change in the general contours of the song. Easing the transitions among these topics is the running through-line of "Morning Dew" as comment on mortality, which serves for Wood as evidence of its nature as a "tragic ode." Overall, the brief chapter covers a fair bit of ground, and not only makes sense as an opening piece for the book as a whole, but very much highlights Wood's ability to articulate the power of certain arrangements and historical contexts to the reception of song lyrics.

Each of the succeeding chapters tackles several pieces from later in the Grateful Dead's career in relation to the topic of mortality and to the ways Garcia's experiences may have informed his performance and compositional decisions. In the case of Chapter 2, the songs considered include "Death Don't Have No Mercy," "He Was a Friend of Mine," "Cryptical Envelopment," "Brokedown Palace," "Bird Song," and "He's Gone." Dedicated fans will recognize that many of these are informed by well-documented losses (Neal Cassady, Ruth Garcia, Janis Joplin), while others took on particular significances over time as fellow-travelers and members of the band died (Pigpen, Bobby Sands, Bob Marley). Still others were likely shaped by especially affecting deaths in Garcia's early life and young adulthood (Joe Garcia, Paul Speegle). Wood approaches these songs on the terms of classical tragedy, focusing especially on the nature of *katharsis*, which allows a reading of them as Garcia's means to find joy in the shadow of death.

While space limitations preclude anything here like an extended consideration of the seven following chapters of Wood's book, some highlights are worth mentioning: "Dark Star" discussed on the terms of the ego loss of the Dionysian festivals, Nietzsche, and LSD in Chapter 3; the recognition in Chapter 4 of compositional connections between "China Cat Sunflower," "Cold Rain and Snow," and "Dancing in the Street"; a remarkably enlightening situation of several Grateful Dead songs in relation to Jerome Kern's musical *Show Boat* and Joe Garcia's career, also in Chapter 4; and, frequent and illuminating recognitions of the Biblical sources for lyrics, as is evident, for one example, in the discussion of "Black Muddy River" in relation to Genesis 28.18. Scattered throughout are additional displays of Wood's comfort with and capable understanding of the many ways that composition and performance provide a context for interpretation of pieces like those under consideration.

In spite of its many strengths, there are a few aspects of Wood's book that could be sharpened. This is perhaps especially the case for his treatment of "tragedy": the term is directly approached early in the text, but Wood then proceeds in much of the remainder to vacillate between, on one hand, using tragedy in the colloquial sense of a less than uplifting narrative or event, and, on the other, using it in a more rigorous manner, one strongly informed by classical models and Nietzsche's discussion of the topic in *The Birth of Tragedy*. A related point is that, while Wood's remarks on Nietzsche and tragedy are reliably on-target, a reader ignorant of Nietzsche and his thought might be forgiven for thinking the secondary literature on this titan of nineteenth-century philosophy was rather sparse or that he can be reliably understood without engaging the German originals of his texts at any length. The sparing contextualization of Nietzsche can to some degree be ascribed to Wood's reliance early in the text on Morse Peckham's *Beyond the Tragic Vision*, a study of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche that influenced Phil Lesh. It is certainly wonderful to see that connection explored, but Peckham's book is only one instance of commentary on Nietzsche's thought, and its influence on the largely auto-didactic Lesh doubtless idiosyncratic. In any case, the upshot of the light treatment of Nietzsche prior to the final chapter, where readers are led through a much more rigorous and illuminating elaboration of Wood's

understanding of the philosopher's relevance to the Grateful Dead, is the aforementioned ambiguity in the book's use of the term "tragedy." This ambiguity sometimes gives Wood room to maneuver, to welcome to the fold concepts that might otherwise be difficult to incorporate, although it also occasionally comes across as too loose for incisive scholarly inquiry. Similar problems emerge when the text becomes too speculative, as when Wood asserts (with no evidence) that Garcia was particularly drawn to pieces by Hunter in which he could see his own struggles with addiction, or, perhaps, the broadly sketched claim that audience members found in their own weaknesses cause to sympathize with August West, of "Wharf Rat" (144, 136). These kinds of points may be accurate, and the group of Grateful Dead fans in recovery who self-identify as "Wharf Rats" suggests that Wood may be correct in at least the second case, but he neglects to proffer evidence in support of that possibility. So, while these assertions may be sound, the reader might recognize that they also may not, and the latter possibility can make for some rough spots in the book's argumentation.

Other disappointments that may arise for some readers are less a matter of faults with Wood's argument than issues deriving from his volume's somewhat misleading title. While he does focus on Garcia most of the time, in preference to the Grateful Dead as a whole, the guitarist's solo work and participation in other musical outfits is given rather short shrift. Looking more at Garcia's work outside of the Grateful Dead would fill some holes in the image of his career as presented in *The Tragic Odes of Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead*. Too, Wood refrains from discussing at much length what he intends by identifying certain songs as instances of "tragic odes." The ode has a particular place in tragic drama, and a life outside of it, and while Wood touches on some of its generic history in passing, more consolidated and early remarks on this topic would be a salutary addition to delineations of his book's governing terminology; as is, readers may be left wondering how and to what degree the songs Wood discusses satisfy the category.

Some final concerns pertain to proofing, something one always hesitates to address in a review, unless the gaffes are striking enough to distract. A few here are. There is a misquote of a lyric from "Loser" (the queen of diamonds "smiles" rather than "shines"); the album *Cats under the Stars* is discussed as *Cats Down Under the Stars*; the title of the song "I Know You Rider" appears throughout without its initial pronoun, as "Know You Rider"; and, there is an indication that a recording of the 17 June 1975 concert at Winterland Arena was officially released as the album *One from the Vault* (which album is actually a recording of the 13 August 1975 concert at The Great American Music Hall, while no part of the 17 June 1975 concert has been officially distributed). Grateful Dead fans interested in generating a correct history of the band's performances have undertaken extraordinary levels of detective work over the years in order to clarify longstanding confusion about such details as venues, setlists, lyrics, song titles, recording sources, and dates. Consequently, the sort of relatively minor inaccuracies described in this paragraph's preceding sentences are not only instances of problematic fact-checking, but the potential introduction into the scholarly literature of errors many have worked long and hard to eliminate.

In the end, the reservations expressed above are best regarded as minor qualifications of the praise Wood's book warrants. It offers those interested in twentieth-century popular music insight into how a certain corner of American song took shape in relation to several currents in other cultural spheres. Further, it provides much, and from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, to those wanting incisive and fresh assessments of the Grateful Dead and is generally well-written in terms of both overall structure and sentence-level expression. For teachers who recognize the value such a work may have as a reference for ideas useful in the classroom, or for demonstrating to students how to think about popular culture on the terms of scholarly inquiry more generally, Wood's book is a valuable and highly recommended contribution to the literature.

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