

Teaching (and Studying) the Music of the Grateful Dead

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to provide answers to two questions: *why* teach about the music of the Grateful Dead, and *how* to do so? In an effort to engage the former, this article examines the ways that the Grateful Dead provides a rich and unique case study towards a deeper understanding of American popular music. The contributing factors are their distinct brand of eclecticism, career-long commitment to extended musical improvisations, and the depth and durability of their songbook. In order to answer the latter question (*how?*), I provide a framework for approaching the Grateful Dead's voluminous output from a musical perspective, using their shifting personnel (primarily the keyboardists) as markers for understanding the distinct musical attributes of different eras. My hope is that the argument and framework provided here will assist anyone who is looking to teach or study the music of the Grateful Dead.

Keywords: Grateful Dead, eclecticism, improvisation, songbook, jazz, rock, ontology

INTRODUCTION: WHY TEACH (AND STUDY) THE MUSIC OF THE GRATEFUL DEAD?

I have been teaching a class entitled *The Grateful Dead: Music, Counterculture and Society* at the University of North Carolina at Asheville for the better part of a decade now, and while the curriculum touches on many aspects of the Grateful Dead phenomenon, the course is centered around music. This idea—teaching about the band’s music—begs the question: why teach about the music of the Grateful Dead? Cultural and societal factors are certainly important to their legacy, and I agree with the generally accepted notion that the music of the Grateful Dead can serve as a window into an understanding of the 1960s San Francisco counterculture. But my assertion is that there is more than this here, and that the corpus of the Grateful Dead is an art object in and of itself and demands close consideration as an important component of 20th century popular music. While the worthwhileness of this endeavor will be a foregone conclusion to many, there are others who will view the Grateful Dead as aimless, noodling hippies performing for spun-out, indiscriminate audiences. What follows here are *some* of the reasons that support the teaching (and studying) of the music of the Grateful Dead.

This introductory section is divided into three subheadings—eclecticism, improvisation, and original music—all representative of the musical commitments that were core at the band’s inception in 1965 and served as essential components of the Grateful Dead’s approach until Jerry Garcia’s death in 1995. These three musical commitments are central to the band’s unique place in 20th century musical culture and speak directly to the importance of teaching about the Grateful Dead’s music.

Eclecticism

The Grateful Dead was a rock band, and although “rock” as a genre delineator is nebulous and perpetually porous with regards to other genres, the band’s musical achievements should be viewed in reference to this genre, with which they are typically associated. As such, they were a particularly eclectic rock band, and one that was committed to a type of democratic eclecticism that pulled from many corners of the American musical landscape. This penchant for representing a multiplicity of musical styles under a single umbrella was evident from the group’s inception and a result of the varying musical spheres in which the musicians had operated in their pre-Grateful Dead years. All of the founding members developed a keen interest in music at a young age. In their teens and, in some cases, early twenties, they participated from within their own corners of the Bay Area music scene—overlapping, yet still discrete. Before the Grateful Dead, Jerry Garcia had established roots in the folk and bluegrass scenes and was recognized as an accomplished banjo player. Phil Lesh was a jazz trumpeter and avant-garde classical composer, who worked with other modern classically-oriented composers Luciano Berio and Steve Reich. Ron “Pigpen” McKernan was a versatile blues musician who played gritty harmonica and excelled at improvising lyrics. Bill Kreutzmann was a well-practiced rock and roll drummer who was known for his solid chops, and Bob Weir was an enthusiastic up-and-coming guitarist with an interest in acoustic and electric rock and roll, rhythm and blues, and folk music. The different skills and sensibilities that each player brought from his respective musical “camp” formed the pillars on which the band was built. These same pillars continued to define the band throughout their 30-year tenure.

Other musicians joined the Grateful Dead and played important roles in further expanding the group’s eclecticism throughout their career. Drummer Mickey Hart joined as a second drummer in 1967 and served in that capacity throughout the remainder of the band’s career, save a three-and-a-half year period between February 1971 and October 1974. Hart’s background was as an accomplished rudimental drummer with a particular interest in complex rhythms that were often derived from a variety of African and Asian musics. The Grateful Dead included several keyboardists over the years, including McKernan, Tom Constanten, Keith Godchaux, Brent Mydland, Vince Welnick, and Bruce Hornsby. Although I will expound on the musical contributions of these musicians later in this article, it is important to note that each keyboardist brought his

own unique perspective to the mix. Donna Jean Godchaux, who joined the group as a vocalist from 1972-1979, had the experience of being a studio singer in Muscle Shoals, AL.

The Grateful Dead was a place where these disparate influences could be expressed in a democratic way, both in the studio and in concert. As such, a close listen to the band's music can serve as a gateway to understanding these distinct musical traditions. For example, songwriting partners Robert Hunter and Jerry Garcia were obsessed with and heavily influenced by Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*, the 1952 Folkways compilation that proved so influential in the folk revival movement of the early 1960s. The 84 songs on that compilation had a profound effect on Garcia and Hunter's songwriting sensibilities, and the pedagogical benefits here are twofold: students that discover the *Anthology* through the Grateful Dead can firstly use it as a key to understanding Garcia and Hunter's songwriting approach, and, secondly, as a window into America's musical past.

Improvisation

The Grateful Dead's interest in and commitment to improvisation was a product of their collective influences. One will note that many of the genres mentioned above—jazz, bluegrass, blues, various African and Asian musics—contain substantial improvisational components. Their musical and philosophical approach to improvisation was developed experientially through their participation as the house band during the Acid Tests, which Garcia described as “one of the truly democratic art forms of this century” (qtd. in *Classic Albums* 11:22-11:27). The Acid Tests were, after all, communal efforts—the band wasn't “performing” in the conventional sense. Lesh noted that the Acid Tests were “the only time our music has had a real sense of proportion in an event” (qtd. in Gans 206). Garcia elaborated on their approach: “When we were playing, we were playing. When we weren't, we'd be doing other stuff. There were no sets; sometimes we'd get up and play for two hours, three hours. Sometimes we'd play for ten minutes and then freak out and split. We'd just do it however it would happen. It wasn't a *gig*—it was the Acid Test, where anything was okay” (qtd. in Jackson 92). Indeed, the entire ethos of the Acid Tests, emanating from Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, was based in the improvisational tradition passed down by Beat Generation writers, most particularly the work of Jack Kerouac and the presence of Neal Cassady, the human connection between the Beats, Pranksters, and Grateful Dead.

The Grateful Dead is known for two broad types of improvisation, one where a soloist plays lines over the chord changes of a particular song, and another where there is an extended improvisation within a relatively static tonal environment, usually one or two chords (Malvinni 169). It is this second type of improvisation that is perhaps most unique to the Grateful Dead, at least in the realm of rock music. Jazz, John Coltrane's in particular, was an important reference point for the development of their improvisational approach. Lesh, the most experienced of the group members in the area of jazz, served as the Coltrane apostle for the band at the outset. The bassist recalls, “In pursuit of this ideal, I urged the other band members to listen closely to the music of John Coltrane, especially his classic quartet, in which the band would take fairly simple structures (the show tune “My Favorite Things,” for example) and extend them far beyond their original length with fantastical variations, frequently based on only one chord” (Lesh 59). In keeping with their bent towards eclecticism, their inspirational models for improvisation extended beyond a single influence—the music of Ornette Coleman and Ravi Shankar (whom they saw at the Monterey Pop Festival in 1967) also inspired the group (Watrous 42). The music of Miles Davis was also particularly influential, and the band was both honored and intimidated to have Davis *open* for them in April of 1970 at the Fillmore West. Davis' group was performing electric music in the style of *Bitches Brew* at the time, and it was a synergistic experience for all involved: the Grateful Dead were able to perform on the same bill with one of the musicians they most admired, and Davis was able to build his San Francisco fanbase and “hit it off” with the band, particularly Garcia (Davis and Troupe 301-302, McNally 365).

If the sheer fact that the Grateful Dead incorporated extended improvisations in a rock context was not necessarily unique, the resulting sound was. Any improvisational music is an expression of the individual personalities and contributions of the musicians involved. Given the Grateful Dead's commitment to democratic ideals, their approach to improvisation was governed by a collectivism that went beyond a conventional soloist-with-backing-group model. From the early stages, the band was committed to learning to improvise together, as a unit, not as a group of free-lancers developing their own individual skills. Lesh reflected, "we all learned how to play together, and that's why we play well together" (qtd. in Gans 109). Furthermore, the group worked tirelessly to establish a connectedness. Lesh noted that, "For more than two months we played together every day, and I can't exaggerate the importance of this experience. The unique organicity of our music reflects the fact that each of us consciously personalized his playing: to fit with what others were playing and to fit with who each man was as an individual, allowing us to meld our consciousnesses together in the unity of a group mind" (Lesh 56). This concept of the "group mind" was something the band explicitly articulated and referred to as "bleshing," a term borrowed from Theodore Sturgeon's *More Than Human*, that describes an intense interconnectedness, a cross between "blend" and "mesh." In describing this concept as related to the Grateful Dead, Lesh referred to himself as a "finger on a hand" (qtd. in *Classic Albums* 14:10-14:25).

The collective and democratic nature of their improvisational development gave the musicians freedom to explore non-traditional roles for their instruments within the group context. As such, the Grateful Dead developed a type of collective improvisation that was inspired by jazz but unique in the genre of rock. Lesh, for example, did not play the role of a traditional bassist. Rather, he was free to play an exploratory type of melodic counterpoint, frequently intertwining with other instruments and abdicating the bottom end. It was this approach, where multiple instruments were essentially "soloing" at the same time, that led David Crosby to say that the Grateful Dead's music was akin to "electronic Dixieland" (Paumgarten). Overall, this democratic approach led each member of the band to develop a distinct musical voice.

It is because of their commitment to the improvisational ethos, the different-ness of every song performance and every concert, that the Grateful Dead were worth taping, following around, and now worth studying. This commitment to constant change permeated their concerts and led to wide variation in their setlists on a nightly basis. Songs were reordered, might be played often or not at all, and connected to other songs via improvisatory passages. This variety led fans to keep track of the performance details in a fashion similar to those who obsessively pore over baseball statistics. This aesthetic for a concert experience, which was defined by the Grateful Dead, gave birth to the "jamband" movement, one where touring is the essential component, and every show is a markedly different experience through a relentless commitment to improvisation. Through the now easily accessible trove of Grateful Dead recordings that are available online, one can get a picture of exactly *how* the band developed over the course of days, months, or years. Students can thus utilize these recordings to understand how a working band can develop from night to night. As such, in today's musical culture, where the importance of live performance has further *increased* due largely to the overall *decrease* in physical media sales, studying the Grateful Dead's performance practice can be foundational in understanding our contemporary musical milieu.

Original Music

The Grateful Dead's original songs, of which there are over 100, have become an integral part of the fabric of American popular music, as evidenced by the sheer amount of Grateful Dead cover bands in existence. On the compilation *Day of the Dead* (2016), over fifty bands paid tribute to the Dead, reimagining their songs in ways that are often quite different from the original versions. This compilation is striking for the lack of jambands—the project was cultivated by members of the indie-rock band The National—which shows that the Dead's music continues to spread beyond the genre-specific confines often attached to it.

The songs that make up the Grateful Dead's oeuvre were composed by several songwriters, mostly in pairs. The most prominent and (generally) highly-regarded pair is lyricist Robert Hunter and Jerry Garcia. So important were Hunter's lyrics that he was considered to be a full member of the band from his first contribution in 1967 through the rest of their career. Hunter composed a wide variety of highly regarded poetic texts for the group, ranging from "baroque, fanciful evocations of psychedelic or dream landscapes all the way to simple, plain-language imitations of blues and other traditional styles" (Wood 47). Nick Paumgarten described Hunter's lyrics as "elliptical, by turns vivid and gnomic. Garcia did not like to sing anything that was too on the nose. He and Hunter composed phantasmagoric reworkings of folk songs, recasting American mythologies in a way that often seemed to suggest that Garcia was singing about himself and his mates, or about our experience of following along" (Paumgarten). Bob Weir, who also wrote a few tunes with Robert Hunter, composed most of his songs for the band with lyricist John Perry Barlow. Weir/Barlow songs, which comprise the second largest segment of the Grateful Dead's catalog, provide important counterpoints to those from Hunter/Garcia, both lyrically and musically. Lesh also contributed several compositions, including a notable batch co-written with Robert Peterson. Later on, keyboardist Brent Mydland wrote several songs for the group, many composed with John Perry Barlow. Overall, the Grateful Dead's body of composed songs comprises a unique corner of the Great American Songbook, one that intersects with many eras and genres, yet is also a fully contained world.

In order to study the songs of the Grateful Dead, it is necessary to have a different approach than there is with most rock music, where song identity is intimately connected to studio recordings that are then released on albums or singles. To use Theodore Gracyk's argument, the relationship between the song/recording and audience is ontologically thick, and thus worthy of study (Gracyk 1-21). The music of the Beatles is a good example of ontological thickness—with the band retreating from touring in mid-1966, many of their songs did not have a performance history. Without other versions of the songs to reference, the studio recording essentially comprises the entire identity of the song.

This is not the case for the music of the Grateful Dead, whose songs have more complex identities than typical rock songs. While the band did record thirteen studio albums spanning the years 1967-1989, it is generally accepted that those recordings do not define the songs. In 1981, Garcia famously commented that "our records...have always been neither here nor there" (Gans 44). The Grateful Dead played roughly 2300 shows over the course of their career, and most of those concerts were recorded and are currently available for listening by the general public. Improvisation was at the core of the Grateful Dead's ethos, which drove the band to interpret the same tune differently from night to night. As such, many of their songs have hundreds of different surviving versions that contribute to their complex history. Song identity can thus be triangulated from a multiplicity of places: when the band was actively performing, the concert itself was the ontologically thick moment between band/song and audience, but when *studying* the Grateful Dead today, the identity of a song lies in *all* the recordings of that song, which includes the studio version (if there is one) and every live recording that exists. Although there are other songs by rock artists that have developed the same kind of relational multiplicity, the Grateful Dead's music is a particularly salient example of this phenomenon. It certainly complicates Andrew Kania's assertion that "the work of art in rock is a track constructed in the studio" (Kania 412). This can also support the notion that the Grateful Dead did not participate in a musical practice that was typical to rock music, and that their approach was more akin to jazz.

TEACHING (AND STUDYING) THE MUSIC OF THE GRATEFUL DEAD: A STRUCTURED, CHRONOLOGICAL APPROACH

The Grateful Dead's sound and style went through myriad changes over the course of the group's thirty years as a performing musical unit. From the acid drenched improv-rock band of 1968 to the acoustic-leaning

outfit of 1970 to the nimble improvisational juggernaut of 1974 to the crisp and propulsive unit of 1977 to the arena and then stadium rock group of the 1980s and 1990s, flux was constant. This evolution was driven by many factors: contemporary developments in popular music, emerging technologies of performance, the band's own changing personnel, and the group's commitments to improvisation and eclecticism. Background information can be obtained by consulting the plethora of resources that are available to contextualize the band's music. Although, at this time, there is not a musicologically-focused biography of the band, there are many reliable volumes that contain ample context and some musical details. Dennis McNally's *A Long Strange Trip*, Blair Jackson's *Garcia: An American Life*, Peter Richardson's *No Simple Highway*, David Browne's *So Many Roads*, and Blair Jackson and David Gans' *This Is All A Dream We Dreamed* are all essential volumes and, taken together, provide a strong biographical foundation. David Gans' *Conversations With The Dead* is a seminal work comprised of valuable interviews that, along with memoirs by Phil Lesh, Bill Kreutzmann and Mickey Hart, help elucidate the musical visions of the band members. Barry Barnes and Bob Trudeau's recent volume *The Grateful Dead's 100 Essential Songs: The Music Never Stops*, is an insightful guide to exploring the Grateful Dead's catalog, one song at a time. There is an expanding body of musicological writings by authors such as Graeme Boone, Shaugn O'Donnell, Walter Everett, Michael Kaler, David Malvinni, Brent Wood, James Revell Carr, Melvin Backstrom, and others. The *Deadbase* and *Deadhead Taper's Companion* volumes also contain valuable information that is useful in exploring the Grateful Dead phenomenon, and recent liner notes by Nicholas Meriwether, Jesse Jarnow, and others have brought new historical clarity and insight.

The purpose of this section of the paper is to provide a framework for teaching and learning about the Grateful Dead's expansive musical career. The organizing principle is based around changes in personnel and, perhaps ironically, focuses the lens on its least hallowed members, the keyboardists. Despite their oftentimes-supporting roles, the musicians occupying the keyboard chair(s) had a profound influence on the overall aesthetic of the group, articulated through differing keyboard styles, technological choices, and personality traits. Indeed, changes in the keyboard personnel can serve as signposts in the Grateful Dead's career, bringing clarity to distinct eras and the overarch of the band's musical output. Founding drummer Bill Kreutzmann highlights the centrality of the keyboardists in defining the group's sound in his 2015 memoir: "You can really divide Grateful Dead eras by who was on keys—Pigpen represented the '60s, Keith represented the '70s, Brent represented the '80s..." (Kreutzmann and Eisen 253). In addition to this distinction based on the keyboardists, the sections are further defined based on which drummers were active during each period. The Grateful Dead had two drummers, Bill Kreutzmann and Mickey Hart, and the sections marked with "1 drummer" feature Kreutzmann, while the sections marked with "2 drummers" feature both.

In addition to a summary of each era, I include references to the Grateful Dead's major recordings and stylistic developments through suggested focus on particular songs. In order to encompass the band's evolving improvisational approach, I include a separate category for "durable songs"—those that have appeared in multiple incarnations across multiple eras. Specific live recordings of these durable songs can be found amongst the archival release series *Dick's Picks*, *Dave's Picks*, the *Download Series*, various box sets, and the unofficial recordings available at the Internet Archive (www.archive.org).

A Structure for Understanding the Music of the Grateful Dead

1. Musical Background

This section establishes the Grateful Dead as a quintessentially American band: a melting pot where disparate musical styles merged and were expressed. Highlighted here are the different musical cultures in which the band members participated before forming or joining the Grateful Dead, mentioned above. The different skills and sensibilities that each player brought from his respective musical "camp" explain how the merging of these styles formed the backbone for a distinctive group voice. Band members' pre-Dead work plays an

important role in this analysis, showing how recordings of Mother McRee's Uptown Jug Champions—which featured Garcia, Weir, and McKernan—demonstrate the early, inchoate vision of this unique amalgam.

2. January 1965 – September 1967 (Pigpen + 1 drummer)

This section begins with the formation of the electric group the Warlocks in January 1965. This group can be seen as an electric version of Mother McCree's Uptown Jug Champions that similarly featured Garcia, Weir, and McKernan, but also added drummer Bill Kreutzmann and, later, bassist Phil Lesh. Set against the backdrop of the musical culture of the South Bay during this time, this section explores the band's first experiences together, from their residency at the In Room in Belmont, CA, during the fall of 1965 to the critical period in which they served as the "house band" of the Acid Tests in late 1965. This provides a framework for analyzing early examples of Grateful Dead music and the stylistic tendencies they illustrate, including their early studio recordings and debut LP, *The Grateful Dead* (1967). Live recordings from the band's early days in San Francisco trace the rapid development of their approach, including seminal early performances at the Fillmore and Avalon Ballrooms and Winterland Auditorium. The inclusion of the Grateful Dead's version of Sonny Boy Williamson's "Good Morning Little School Girl" in this section provides an opportunity to engage with issues regarding the perpetuation of sexism in the music of many 1960s rock groups, even during the era of "sexual liberation" (Gallaher).

- i. Recordings and Stylistic Developments
 - 1. *Grateful Dead*
 - a. Song 1: "The Golden Road (To Unlimited Devotion)"
 - b. Song 2: "Cream Puff War"
- ii. Improvisational Approach
 - 1. Durable Song 1: "Viola Lee Blues"
 - 2. Durable Song 2: "Good Morning Little School Girl"

3. September 1967 – November 1968 (Pigpen + 2 drummers)

The sound and style of the band's music on *The Grateful Dead* gave way to a time of sonic experimentation, both in the studio and on stage. This section is comprised of that fertile and challenging period, defined by Mickey Hart's joining the band as a second drummer in September 1967 until Tom Constanten's debut as the Dead's second keyboardist in November 1968. The innovations of their early two-drummer style and musical experimentalism accompanied their move from San Francisco to Marin County, fueled by dissatisfaction with the decline of the Haight-Ashbury scene. This era was defined by the recording and release of their landmark LP *Anthem of the Sun* (1968) and their maturation as a touring band, expanding their reach beyond California and New York to develop audiences regionally throughout the US. Importantly, this period is marked by lyricist Robert Hunter's first official collaborations with the group.

- i. Recordings and Stylistic Developments
 - 1. *Anthem of the Sun*
 - a. Song 1: "That's It For The Other One"
 - b. Song 2: "Alligator"
- ii. Improvisational Approach
 - a. Durable Song 1: "Viola Lee Blues"
 - b. Durable Song 2: "Dark Star"

4. November 1968 – January 1970 (Pigpen + Constanten + 2 drummers)

The Grateful Dead's (particularly Garcia and Lesh's) experimental leanings led to the hiring of Lesh's friend and fellow avant-gardist Tom Constanten as second keyboardist. Though Constanten's influence is

perhaps most distinct on *Anthem of the Sun* (1968), the best representation of his voice as a keyboardist is on the Dead's third LP, *Aoxomoxoa* (1969). Though underappreciated, this album marks a number of vital developments in the band's work, including a prolific outpouring of songs from Garcia and Hunter. The band's growing studio prowess—and its costs— fueled their deepening commitment to live performance, and this era included the recording of the band's first official live release, *Live Dead* (1969), one of their finest achievements. Underscoring that accomplishment were their problematic appearance at Woodstock and sobering involvement with Altamont, festivals that defined the extremes of the hippie movement and cemented the band's association with it.

- i. Recordings and Stylistic Developments
 - 1. *Aoxomoxoa*
 - a. Song 1: "St. Stephen"
 - b. Song 2: "China Cat Sunflower"
 - c. Song 3: "Dupree's Diamond Blues"
 - 2. *Live/Dead*
- ii. Improvisational Approach
 - 1. Durable Song 1: "Dark Star"
 - 2. Durable Song 2: "That's It For The Other One"

5. January 1970 – February 1971 (Pigpen + 2 drummers)

The transition that occurred between 1969-70 is well documented and often celebrated: the band, still in debt to Warner Brothers despite the relative success of *Live Dead*, reigned in its experimental side (in the studio) and created the acoustic leaning *Workingman's Dead* (1970) and *American Beauty* (1970). The seismic shift represented by the sound and style of these records was fueled by the band's collective background in acoustic folk traditions and current trends in popular music, particularly those propagated by their cohorts Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young. The radio-friendly tunes and lush multi-part vocal harmonies fueled a shift in public perception of the group from a niche San Francisco band to one with widespread popular appeal. The band capitalized on this burgeoning audience through relentless touring during this period, furthering their reputation as an adventurous performing act par excellence.

- i. Recordings and Stylistic Developments
 - 1. *Workingman's Dead*
 - a. Song 1: "Uncle John's Band"
 - b. Song 2: "Dire Wolf"
 - c. Song 3: "Cumberland Blues"
 - 2. *American Beauty*
 - a. Song 4: "Box of Rain"
 - b. Song 5: "Brokedown Palace"
 - c. Song 6: "Truckin'"
- ii. Improvisational Approach
 - 1. Durable Song 1: "Dark Star"
 - 2. Durable Song 2: "That's It For The Other One"

6. February 1971 – August 1971 (Pigpen + 1 drummer)

Mickey Hart left the group in early 1971, thus marking the beginning of a new single-drummer era and a return to the original quintet configuration of the Grateful Dead. This change in personnel created a more nimble outfit that could shift improvisational directions easily, a musical trend that is well documented on officially released live recordings, most notably *Grateful Dead* ("Skull & Roses") and *Ladies and Gentlemen...*

The Grateful Dead. Despite Pigpen's increasing health problems, he was featured prominently as a keyboardist, vocalist, and harmonica player during this period. The group continued to tour relentlessly and it became increasingly evident that the surge in popularity fueled by *Workingman's Dead* and *American Beauty* also brought challenges—as the band continued to perform at small and mid-sized theaters, the ticketless hordes outside grew and, at times, became unruly. The band ultimately decided to accommodate the growing throngs by playing larger venues, thus diluting the intimate concert experience they had cultivated throughout their early years.

- i. Recordings and Stylistic Developments
 - 1. *Grateful Dead*
 - a. Song 1: "Playing in the Band"
 - b. Song 2: "Wharf Rat"
- ii. Improvisational Approach
 - a. Durable Song 1: "Bird Song"
 - b. Durable Song 2: "The Other One"

7. October 1971 – June 1972 (Pigpen + Godchaux + 1 drummer)

Pigpen's declining health led to the hiring of Keith Godchaux on keyboards in 1971 and his wife Donna Jean Godchaux on vocals in 1972. This change in keyboardists marked a distinct shift in styles, with Godchaux favoring the acoustic piano over Pigpen's Hammond B3 organ. Although Pigpen left the road briefly in October 1971, he soon resumed touring as a vocalist, second keyboardist, harmonica player, and auxiliary percussionist. Godchaux's skill as a pianist fueled the band's confidence during this period that culminated in the celebrated *Europe '72* tour, where Pigpen also played an important role. His health forced him to leave the road again in mid-1972, and he tragically passed away on March 8, 1973. Garcia and Hunter were prolific in the early '70s; the songwriting duo produced a staggering number of tunes that are considered Grateful Dead classics. Even though there was no studio album recorded during this era, live recordings show the group exploring this new body of material. Inspired largely by the American West, these tunes helped shape a Grateful Dead universe of songs that is populated by outlaws, gamblers and psychedelic aphorisms.

- i. Recordings and Stylistic Developments
 - 1. *Europe '72*
 - a. Song 1: "Tennessee Jed"
 - b. Song 2: "Ramble On Rose"
 - c. Song 3: "Jackstraw"
 - d. Song 4: "He's Gone"
- ii. Improvisational Approach
 - a. Durable Song 1: "Playing in the Band"
 - b. Durable Song 2: "Dark Star"

8. June 1972 – October 1974 (Godchaux + 1 drummer)

After Pigpen left the touring unit in June 1972, the Grateful Dead's personnel remained stable for the next two-and-a-half years. During this period, the band left Warner Bros. and formed Grateful Dead Records, the label on which they released the studio albums *Wake of the Flood* (1973) and *From the Mars Hotel* (1974). In addition to the continued Herculean output from the Garcia-Hunter partnership, Weir's songwriting volume increased during this period, highlighted by frequent collaboration with lyricist John Perry Barlow. This is a celebrated time in Grateful Dead history, one that featured particular variety and experimentation in live performance. The band's increasing popularity led to performances in larger venues. In an effort to make the concert experience as intimate as possible, the band developed the Wall of Sound system that, while

unparalleled in musical clarity, was rather costly to utilize. The bloated payroll required to transport the Wall of Sound would, in part, lead to the decision to take an indefinite hiatus beginning in October 1974.

- i. Recordings and Stylistic Developments
 1. *Wake of the Flood*
 - a. Song 1 – “Eyes of the World”
 - b. Song 2 – “Weather Report Suite”
 - c. Song 3 – “Stella Blue”
 2. *From the Mars Hotel*
 - a. Song 4 – “Scarlet Begonias”
 - b. Song 5 – “Unbroken Chain”
- ii. Improvisational Approach
 - a. Durable Song 1: “Playing in the Band”
 - b. Durable Song 2: “Dark Star”
 - c. Durable Song 3: “Eyes of the World”
 - d. Durable Song 4: “Scarlet Begonias”

9. March 1975 – February 1979 (Godchaux + 2 drummers)

This section begins with the hiatus period of 1975-1976 and ends with the departure of Keith and Donna Godchaux in 1979. *Blues For Allah*, released while the band was on hiatus from touring in 1975, shows the increased influence of jazz-rock on the band’s evolving sound. Mickey Hart officially rejoined the touring unit in 1976, thus transitioning the band back into a two-drummer format. The large overhead associated with running a record label led to the ultimate dissolution of Grateful Dead Records in 1976. The group then signed with Arista and employed two influential producers to oversee their first releases for that label. Producer Keith Olsen’s influence can be heard in the polished sound of *Terrapin Station* (1977) and in the overall refinement of the band’s live sound in early 1977. Little Feat’s Lowell George, who produced *Shakedown Street* (1978), was more in line with the Dead’s improvisational ethos, but those sessions were largely unfocused; the band was forced to finish the album in George’s absence. This is the era of “Disco-Dead,” represented most obviously by the recordings of “Dancing in the Streets” (from *Terrapin Station*) and “Shakedown Street.” Even though some fans decried this change in musical direction, recordings of live performances from this era are celebrated for the aforementioned refinement of the band’s sound and creative extemporizations.

- i. Recordings and Stylistic Developments
 1. *Blues for Allah*
 - a. Song 1: “Help on the Way/Slipknot!”
 - b. Song 2: “Franklin’s Tower”
 2. *Steal Your Face*
 3. *Terrapin Station*
 - a. Song 3: “Terrapin Station”
 - b. Song 4: “Estimated Prophet”
 4. *Shakedown Street*
 - a. Song 5: “Shakedown Street”
 - b. Song 6: “Fire On The Mountain”
- ii. Improvisational Approach
 1. Durable Song 1: “Eyes of the World”
 2. Durable Song 2: “Playing in the Band”
 3. Durable Song 3: “Uncle John’s Band”

10. April 1979 – August 1986 (Mydland + 2 drummers)

Following the departure of Keith and Donna Godchaux, keyboardist Brent Mydland's approach and personality injected new energy into the group, now a decade and a half into their touring career. While Godchaux favored the acoustic piano, Mydland brought with him a variety of keyboards, including Hammond organ, electric piano, and synthesizers, creating a sonic diversity that inspired the other band members. Mydland's keyboard style and distinctively gruff voice brought new colors to recordings from this time period: the studio album *Go To Heaven* (1980) and the live releases *Reckoning* (1981) and *Dead Set* (1981). Even though the band released only one studio album during this seven-year span, they continued to perform steadily in theaters, arenas, and stadiums throughout the US. This is an often-overlooked time period in the performance history of the band, largely due to the decreased output of new songs and inconsistent quality of live performances, a development that was tied to Garcia's drug use and deteriorating health. The guitarist went into a diabetic coma in July of 1986, triggering an unplanned hiatus of five months before touring resumed later that year.

- i. Recordings and Stylistic Developments
 1. *Go To Heaven*
 - a. Song 1: "Althea"
 - b. Song 2: "Lost Sailor"
 2. *Reckoning*
 3. *Dead Set*
- ii. Improvisational Approach
 1. Durable Song 1: "Eyes of the World"
 2. Durable Song 2: "Playing in the Band"

11. December 1986 – July 1990 (Mydland + 2 drummers)

The coma was a wakeup call for Garcia, and for the next few years, he lived a much healthier lifestyle. This was a highly productive era for the band that featured two studio releases, *In the Dark* (1987) and *Built to Last* (1989), and many acclaimed live performances. The self-produced *In the Dark* was the Dead's biggest selling album and contained their highest charting single, "Touch of Grey." This success caused an unprecedented number of people to flock to the Dead's shows, some wanting to see the band, others simply wanting to participate in the scene outside the stadium. Despite these potential distractions, live shows from this era were of consistently high quality, the results of which are well documented on several officially-released live recordings and videos. The introduction of MIDI technology allowed for the musicians to create wildly different sounds with their instruments, which expanded the sonic palette in live performances. While the Hunter-Garcia partnership continued to produce songs for the group, there was increased output from Weir-Barlow and Mydland-Barlow. This shift is particularly evident on *Built to Last*. Mydland, who had ongoing drug difficulties, tragically died of an overdose on July 26, 1990.

- i. Recordings and Stylistic Developments
 1. *In The Dark*
 - a. Song 1: "Touch of Grey"
 - b. Song 2: "Black Muddy River"
 - c. Song 3: "Hell in a Bucket"
 2. *Built to Last*
 - a. Song 4: "Foolish Heart"
 - b. Song 5: "Victim or the Crime"
 - c. Song 6: "Standing on the Moon"
 3. *Without a Net*

- ii. Improvisational Approach
 - 1. Durable Song 1: “Eyes of the World”
 - 2. Durable Song 2: “Playing in the Band”
 - 3. Durable Song 3: “Uncle John’s Band”

12. September 1990 – March 1992 (Welnick + Hornsby + 2 drummers)

Mydland’s death haunted the band, particularly Garcia. Even though the band moved quickly to replace the keyboardist, his absence would loom large over the remainder of the group’s performing career. Bruce Hornsby and Vince Welnick joined the Dead as touring keyboardists in the fall of 1990, with the virtuosic Hornsby proving a worthy foil for Garcia. Ultimately the band failed to regain the momentum that was lost after Mydland’s death. Garcia’s drug use became an increased issue during this time, contributing to the inconsistency of live performances. This vacillation in quality led Hornsby to confront Garcia in 1991 and then leave the group in March 1992.

- i. Stylistic Developments
 - 1. Song 1: “So Many Roads”
- ii. Improvisational Approach
 - 1. Durable Song 1: “Dark Star”
 - 2. Durable Song 2: “Playing in the Band”
 - 3. Durable Song 3: “Eyes of the World”

13. March 1992 – July 1995 (Welnick + 2 drummers)

Vince Welnick assumed the sole remaining keyboard chair in the wake of Hornsby’s departure. Even though Welnick was a fine musician and diligent student of the Dead’s music, he failed to provide the impetus for a band renaissance. Garcia’s continued isolation from the rest of the group was evident on and off stage, which would seem to be the antithesis of the “group mind” philosophy cultivated by the band in their early years. This led to further inconsistency of live performances, marred, at times, by Garcia’s physical deterioration. Despite this, the Dead continued to tour steadily, performing for massive crowds throughout the US. The final “tour from hell” concluded in July 1995, one month before Garcia’s death.

- i. Stylistic Developments
 - 1. Song 1: “Days Between”
- ii. Improvisational Approach
 - 1. Durable Song 1: “Dark Star”
 - 2. Durable Song 2: “Playing in the Band”
 - 3. Durable Song 3: “Eyes of the World”

14. Post-Grateful Dead

The Grateful Dead’s music and ethos has lived on in the decades following Garcia’s death. The band has continued to release official live recordings via *Dick’s Picks*, *Dave’s Picks*, the *Download Series*, and various box sets. The surviving Grateful Dead members have continued to tour in different incarnations, still performing much of the Grateful Dead songbook. These groups have included The Other Ones, The Dead, Furthur, Ratdog, Phil and Friends, the Rhythm Devils, and Dead and Co. The “Core Four” (Lesh, Weir, Hart, Kreutzmann) reunited for five shows titled “Fare Thee Well: Celebrating 50 Years of the Grateful Dead” in June and July 2015 in Santa Clara, CA and Chicago, IL. These shows featured Hornsby, Jeff Chimenti, and, notably, Trey Anastasio of Phish, marking a moment of particular synergy for fans of those two iconic jambands. There are also myriad Grateful Dead cover bands that continue to perform this music, two of the most noteworthy national acts being Dark Star Orchestra and Joe Russo’s Almost Dead.

CONCLUSION

The music of the Grateful Dead provides a rich case study in 20th Century American popular music. The group is noteworthy for their unique brand of eclecticism, their career-long commitment to extended improvisation, and their deep and varied songbook. The music is also very much *alive*, both through the myriad recordings that the band has produced (live and studio) and the many groups that continue to perform their music, night after night. There are some reliable musicological resources about the band's music, and that pool of scholarship is growing. Although I have made a concerted effort here to focus specifically on musical aspects that warrant study, no music exists in a vacuum: it is intimately intertwined with the time and place in which it was created. This is true of the Grateful Dead, and appropriately the group has seen sustained study from a multiplicity of disciplinary perspectives that focus on their cultural, social, business, and other contributions. My hope is that this essay provides a coherent argument for the importance of foregrounding the band's music and a tenable framework for teaching (and studying) that music. When supplemented with the varied and excellent interdisciplinary work that has been done on this subject, it forms a robust learning experience that can elucidate American musical culture of the past and present.

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