

CRAYONS

AND
THE

ART OF ROCK

IMPROVISATION



DAVID MALVIN

Grateful Dead and the Art of Rock Improvisation

David Malvinni



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For Valerie, Sofia, and Joe



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Preface

I first became interested in writing about the Grateful Dead while finishing my dissertation on Gypsy (Roma) music. The more I studied Gypsy music, the more I recognized the shared set of aesthetic values and reception accorded the two musical traditions, represented by each. Both the work of the Dead and Gypsy music were steeped in folk music traditions, or what is called today “roots” music. In these traditions, there is a concerted effort to initiate a conversation with the musical past that speaks to contemporary audiences. This process is accomplished through an improvisatory approach that excites in the listener an ecstatic energy forgotten by modern “rational” music. Indeed, Joseph Campbell compared a Grateful Dead concert to the ancient Dionysian festivals, while Franz Liszt praised Gypsies as “the immediate children of fantasy and pure inspiration,” a treasure to be protected from the “civilized” musical discourses of Germanic composers like Beethoven and Schubert. Because of this heightened response to the music, both musical traditions also appear as something of societal pariahs, falling outside the accepted norms of civilized, mainstream, or “straight” culture.

My first attempt to write about the Grateful Dead occurred in 2000, for an academic quorum that has since become known as the “Grateful Dead Scholars Caucus.” I have continued to write and publish on the band ever since and teach their music in my rock course at Santa Barbara City College. My introduction to their music was as a junior high school student in the 1980s. After many hours spent listening and playing the songs from their classic album *American Beauty*, I attended as many shows as I could featuring

the Dead and other jam bands from the 1980s and 1990s. I became an avid tape collector while attending Rice University. Even now, I attend what I can with what remains of the original members of the band, and my digital and CD collection continues to expand.

Yet perhaps unlike most Deadheads, my attraction to the music was always as a musician first. Like many of my peers from the post–Baby Boomer generation (so-called Generation X; born after 1965), after first dabbling in jazz I moved on to playing guitar in rock bands while in high school. Discovering classical guitar through a disciple of Andres Segovia, Phillip de Fremery, I found myself torn between this older tradition and the burgeoning heavy metal guitar scene (Rhandy Rhoads was my first guitar hero; one of my other guitar teachers was Tony MacAlpine). Then some older classmates invited me to join their Grateful Dead–influenced band. Having studied jazz briefly, I was immediately mesmerized by the Dead’s improvisational style as I struggled to channel lines from lead guitarist Jerry Garcia. More important, and though unaware of it at the time, the Grateful Dead’s music offered a middle path through my indecision between classical and popular musical styles, answering both through the band’s musically diverse output.

While the band itself recedes into the past with aging and even the death of key band members, the richness of their work—musically, lyrically, even socially (in the way they distributed their music)—has lent itself to much good writing and analysis of the sociological, cultural, and even philosophical importance of the band. And yet despite their clear musical sophistication, with a few exceptions, little work has been done on the musicological elements of their oeuvre. This book seeks to fill that gap by focusing on songs and the improvisational practice central to the Grateful Dead experience.



Acknowledgments

In writing this book, I am indebted primarily to the Grateful Dead Scholars Caucus. This group meets once a year under the umbrella of the Southwest/Texas American/Popular Culture Association meeting. It is here that I first had the idea and inspiration to write a book dedicated to improvisation and the Grateful Dead. A similar event in which I was privileged to participate was the symposium “Unbroken Chain: The Grateful Dead in Music, Culture, and Memory,” held in November 2007 at one of my alma maters, University of Massachusetts Amherst. There I was also able to meet and talk with other Deadheads and people involved with the band, including Carolyn Garcia (Mountain Girl), who gave me insights into Jerry’s voracious listening and practicing routine, as well as favorites from his record collection in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Some members of the caucus I would like to thank in particular are as follows: Nicholas Meriwether, David Gans, Shaugn O’Donnell, Rebecca Adams, Stanley Spector, Heather Laurel, Graeme M. Boone, Jim Tuedio, Gary Burnett, Barry Barnes, Mary Goodenough, Richard Pettengill, Mark Mattson, Jake Cohen, Jordan McClain, Helen Baldovinos, Michael Grabscheid, and Revell Carr. I have valued our many conversations through the years and look forward to more.

I owe a lot to readers who reviewed and commented on various chapters and parts of this book while I was writing. Mike Beckerman pushed me to think deeper and more carefully on many of the issues presented in the book. The same for Graeme Boone, whose “Dark Star” project has been a

tremendous source and model for me. Ildar Khannanov gave me advice on matters related to music analysis. Nick Meriwether first solicited a version of what is now chapter 5 for *Dead Studies*, and I am appreciative of his support for my work on the Dead through the years. David Gans got me to question the sources behind some of the naming conventions of Grateful Dead jams, and for this I am grateful. Eric Levy helped check over the African American sources of the Dead, and Ray Allen and Corry Arnold helped with some questions about Grateful Dead and New Lost City Rambler shows in August 1969. Special thanks goes to Alan Trist of Ice Nine Publishing for granting permission to quote lyrics. Also I acknowledge Bennett Graff, my editor at Scarecrow Press, who gave great advice throughout this writing.

Family and friends have been extremely supportive through this project. I owe a special thanks to my father, Joseph, who read lots of the book and shared with me his perspective on the 1960s. My mother, Maryanne, cooked some incredible, healthy meals during this past year that allowed me some extra time and energy to write. My sister and her husband, Denise and Diego Sanson, and my nephews, Diego and Lucas, have kept me entertained with their Skype conversations from São Paulo, Brazil.

Growing up in Ludlow, Massachusetts, I played in various Grateful Dead jam bands with friends—thanks especially to George Perreault (drums), Bill Eagen (vocals and rhythm guitar), and Gary Lord (1967–2003, bass). I also thank the drummer from my current band, Ken Kutcher, for his friendship and willingness to indulge my predilection for improvising. And, of course, I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge all the various members of the Grateful Dead for dedicating their lives to band and making great music; as a guitarist, I remain in awe of the interplay among Jerry, Bob, and Phil.

Finally, I dedicate the book to my wife, Valerie, and our children, Sofia and Joe, whose love and support means everything to me. Valerie's violin and viola playing continues to amaze me, and her practicing grants me almost daily access to the inner world of a master musician. Helping Sofia and Joe with their Suzuki violin practice keeps me in touch with the transformative, magical possibilities inherent in music making.



Abbreviations

ALLI	“Alligator”
BID	“We Bid You Goodnight”
BIRD	“Bird Song”
BORN	“Born Cross Eyed”
BPM	beats per minute
CAUT	“Caution, Do Not Step On Tracks”
CCAT	“China Cat Sunflower”
CUMB	“Cumberland Blues”
DJAM	“Darkness Jam”
DP	<i>Dick’s Picks</i>
DS	“Dark Star”
DSP	“Dark Star” progression
ELEV	“The Eleven”
“Eyes”	“Eyes of the World”
FEED	“Feedback”
“Fire”	“Fire on the Mountain”
GDTR	“Going Down the Road Feeling Bad”
H	half-step
l.n.	lower neighbor tone
LOV	“Turn on Your Love Light”
LTGTR	“Let the Good Times Roll”
maj.	major
MERC	“Death Don’t Have No Mercy”
MLBJ	“Mind Left Body Jam”

NFA	“Not Fade Away”
NPC	“New Potato Caboose”
OO	“The Other One”
PLAY	“Playing in the Band”
“Saint”	“Saint of Circumstance”
“Scarlet”	“Scarlet Begonias”
SCH	“Good Morning Little Schoolgirl”
“Shakedown”	“Shakedown Street”
SIN	“It’s a Sin”
S.N.A.C.K.	Students Need Athletics, Culture and Kicks (benefit concert)
SPAN	“Spanish Jam”
SPEE	“New Speedway Boogie”
STAR	“Dark Star”
STEV	“St. Stephen”
“Terrapin”	“Terrapin Station”
THATO1	“That’s It for the Other One”
UJB	“Uncle John’s Band”
UJBJ	“Uncle John’s Band Jam”
u.n.	upper neighbor tone
“Uncle”	“Me and My Uncle”
W	whole step
WRAT	“Wharf Rat”



Introduction

Given their investment in the Beat culture of San Francisco, the Grateful Dead's early commitment to improvising is not surprising. The beats were fascinated by improvisation in jazz, especially bebop—from Kerouac's digressions in *On the Road* and his jazz poetry in *Mexico City Blues* to Ginsberg's improvisatory poem "Howl," inspired by "Lester Leaps In." These writers tapped into improvisation's deep roots in the African American psyche. The hipsters—or "white negroes," as Norman Mailer wrote about them—also appropriated the slang, lifestyle, and drug preferences of bebop artists as a form of rebellion challenging the straight world:

One is Hip or one is Square (the alternative which each new generation coming into American life is beginning to feel) one is a rebel or one conforms, one is a frontiersman in the Wild West of American night life, or else a Square cell, trapped in the totalitarian tissues of American society, doomed willy-nilly to conform if one is to succeed.¹

The Dead gathered the threads of the previous generation's beat, hip rebellion and forged ahead with a musical agenda that sought the immediate and spontaneous crowd affirmation that only the experience of improvisation could guarantee. It channeled this ideal through the loud, amplified sound of a modern rock band, and the audience reaction was swift, furious, and emotional. It paralleled Mailer's characterization of how white hipsters heard jazz: "it was indeed a communication by art because it said, 'I feel this, and now you do too.'"

Those drawn to the Grateful Dead experience were not always rebels per se, but they usually shared an openness to adventures in sound and traveling not unlike the generation of beat writers. Starting sometime in the 1970s, Dead fans became known as “Deadheads” because of their unwavering and unflinching support of the band, many of them touring with the band. Ideas about a Dead show as a site of transcendental experience, cosmic exploration, or magic—what we call “Deadness”—became deeply intertwined with the band’s reception. But the Dead and their increasingly long improvisations also never fit in to the strictures of the music industry, despite being signed early on by Warner Bros. The band’s earliest detractors were quick to designate the Dead and their countercultural following as “style without substance,” attracted simply to the “glittering” of “the bright, bold, and noisy.” A crass observer of the scene in the 1980s or 1990s might argue that the Dead were clever showmen, in the business of recycling and selling the imaginary spirit of the 1960s. Yet the Dead remained focused on the musical values they pioneered in the 1960s, and though their improvisatory style underwent changes, both fans and bands were still reaching for Deadness until the very end.

To focus on music and improvisation, this book refers to Deadheads as if they were a monolithic group, which they are not. Deadheads agree on one thing—they love the Dead and their music. Beyond that, opinions diverge wildly among fans about what are the best years, songs, or improvisations of the Dead. Because I am writing this book as a Deadhead, I will make my own priorities clear from the start. First, I am privileging live improvisation as the aesthetic core of the Grateful Dead experience. But the Dead were more than just an improvisatory band. They also sang lyrical ballads with expression, crafted and sang traditional songs, and excelled as an energetic dance band. Other Deadheads might find more value in these facets of the band. Second, I consider the early period (before 1974) to contain their finest improvisations. This was the period of the greatest risk taking. Reflecting back on this period, Mickey Hart says,

People have grown up, and things have changed. We’re less willing, on some levels, to explore certain places now. It’s risky out there . . . and sometimes it’s not as rewarding as playing it straight. Sometimes playing it straight is more musically rewarding than going out and playing it weird, because a lot of times when you get weird you don’t bring back that much results. The rate of success is not that high when you are improvising totally all the time.

Thus, if the book pays more attention to the earlier period, it is to try to get at that weirdness mentioned by Hart.

The first chapter is an introduction to the Dead. It lays out the aesthetic category of Deadness as an animating principle of the band's approach to improvisation. Deadness espouses improvisation as a transformative event, one that is encountered live (recalling the oxymoronic album *Live/Dead*). It is also a rock translation of the folk revival's notion of playing authentic, real music—a topic I will discuss. The next chapters deal with specific songs that are important to understanding how improvisation in the Dead works; because of space limitations, I was not able to cover every song I would have liked. The songs chosen each have something singular to say about how the band has approached improvisation through the years. Following numerous writers and critics on the Dead, I will continue to maintain that “Dark Star” signals the richest, riskiest, and most complex of the band's improvisations; as such, there are two chapters devoted to it.

The Dead's first experiments with improvisation began as the extension of their cover song arrangements. To improvise for long time spans, they employed the drone principle, where they would play over a static or unceasing harmony. This freed them to create melodic and rhythmic patterns in much the same way as an Indian musician. Their original improvisatory song vehicles continued along these lines. It was here—especially with songs like “The Other One,” “Caution,” “The Eleven,” and “Dark Star”—that the programmatic, transcendental turn of Deadness became apparent. The event of Deadness sparked, in turn, a philosophical response in the secondary literature on the Dead. Following in this tradition, I will use some concepts from continental philosophy to clarify what Deadness means. Finally, music analysis helps to explain the formal elements that offset these moments of Deadness within long improvisations. This may in turn be a stumbling block to those not versed in music theory. To this end, the appendixes provide some basic background, all of which can be supplemented with the cited websites that can help in this regard. I have strived to keep notated examples to a minimum.

Note

1. “The White Negro,” *Dissent*, <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/online.php?id=26>.

CHAPTER ONE



On Deadness: The Path to Unlimited Devotion

Without the Beatles—and, in particular, the film *A Hard Day's Night*—the Grateful Dead might not have existed. When the movie appeared in 1964, Jerry Garcia was a middling, aspiring musician in search of a platform to match his malleable creativity. As primarily a folk musician under the literary spell of the Beats, his first serious career ambition was to become a bluegrass musician, hoping to join Bill Monroe's band as a banjoist. On a trip back east pursuing his bluegrass dream, Garcia came close to meeting his idol, even recording a Monroe show at the Bean Blossom in Indiana. But Garcia could not muster up the confidence to ask Monroe for a chance to play for him; though he would play banjo off and on again and even play it in a bluegrass band in the 1970s, we still can only speculate on the exact reasons why Garcia left the bluegrass world behind. When he gave up bluegrass, he turned to the jug-band revival led by Jim Kweskin and popular in the Peninsula coffeehouses near Stanford, where he was living and started a group called Mother McCree's Uptown Jug Champions. This was the immediate predecessor for the Warlocks, which became the Grateful Dead, with fellow members Ron "Pigpen" McKernan and Bob Weir. However, though the group had some modest success, revivalist music could not compete with the burgeoning rock scene. In *A Hard Day's Night* the Beatles ingeniously portray life in a rock band as a fun and irreverent endeavor, which powerfully appealed to Garcia and other members of the band. It was a straightforward step for McCree's to morph into a rock band—add a drummer, bass, and some amplification, and with the joining of Bill Kreutzmann and Phil Lesh,

the core of the band was complete. They now had a shot at the mass appeal enjoyed by the Beatles and, more important, a newfound focus to embark on an alternative and adventuresome path in what they viewed as a boring, stale Consumerist America, which young people were increasingly disenchanted with. Yet something was still missing.

In the time frame of 1964–1965, with the right marketing, they could have easily become yet another popular band in the mold of the Beatles or, what seems more likely given Pigpen’s early leadership and interest in the blues, one modeled on the Rolling Stones. But larger changes had been set into motion a few years earlier that would change and upset the course of the 1960s and especially youth culture. This was the psychedelic drug experiments coming from the Harvard Psilocybin Project in 1960, led by professors Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert (Ram Dass), along with the CIA’s program at Veteran’s Hospital near Stanford. Early West Coast adherents to the LSD gospel who would inform the Grateful Dead’s early scene included Beat poet Allen Ginsberg, author Ken Kesey, and Neil Cassady, the latter immortalized fictionally in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*. Ginsberg was introduced to LSD by Leary, while Kesey had participated in the government-sponsored program at Stanford. As the West Coast Merry Pranksters, which included Kesey and Cassady, spread the idea of psychedelic drugs for the masses, they needed a musical soundtrack for their polysensorial, drug-induced reveries. The band invited to play at these Acid Tests were the Grateful Dead (formerly the Warlocks), who—in the spirit of community participation in sync with the erasure of the line separating performer and audience—would also pay the dollar entrance fee.

The legend of the Grateful Dead was borne out of their participation in the Tests, which were trying to institute a “revolution of consciousness,” as it were, with LSD as the primary vehicle for a reclaiming of 19th-century America’s transcendentalist vision of the individual.¹ With the Dead acting as early participants in the rock revolution—as led by the Beatles (with rock and roll being only about ten years old at this time)—the Dead’s reception history has always been linked to the mind-expanding properties of LSD and other psychedelic drugs. Music and drugs (*pharmakon*) have an ancient association, going back to Plato and beyond, and the Dead became known as magicians or wizards in connecting the best effects of both pleasures.

Yet what was this magic that the Dead were reported to conjure? What drove people to ecstasy when hearing their live music? It can be summarized easily in a single word—but a word that is so equivocal that it borders on banal: improvisation. With a venerable history that stretches to the profound world music traditions of India and the Middle East, improvisation was still

viable and important in the careers of such iconic composers/performers in Western music, through Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Paganini, and Liszt. But since at least the 19th century, improvisation had declined in prestige in European culture, literally written out of the concert hall and relegated to folk musicians and the café playing of Gypsy violinists. Its opposite aesthetic ideal had taken hold on the listening public, the idea of music as a holy, inviolable, and repeatable text, capable of inclusion in an imaginary museum of musical works, as it were. And for their counterparts among the American elites and lower classes alike during the era of high modernism, the fixed work ideal of classical music enjoyed the highest prestige.

But predictably, the counterculture reacted to everything it found suffocating the expansion of consciousness, which included the passive reception of art and music via the work concept. Instead, the newly initiated psychedelic gatherings chose spontaneous and free speech and performance art as their ideal. Musically, the most immediate analogue to spontaneity and free speech is improvisation, which renders the idea of the work and especially “masterpiece” “questionable, insecure, contingent, and endangered.”² It was thus a logical step for the Dead to improvise in this social milieu, but lacking viable models, they had to find their own path. In terms of the Beatles, George Harrison’s guitar solos became fixed through recordings, and though perhaps improvised on some level in the studio, they became a work through multiple listenings, even if they were supposed to represent a moment of improvisation in the style of blues or country. And too, these moments were short interludes, commentaries, on the more important matter of the song itself, especially its narrative. As we shall see, the Dead turned to jazz, especially the modal jazz of Davis and Coltrane, and applied their technique of improvisation to simple R & B and blues numbers. Early listeners quickly grasped that the Dead’s improvisations opened up a new frontier in rock beyond memorized improvisations. For the audience, the expectation of improvisation—whether genuine or not—drove the auditory experience of the Grateful Dead’s music. That is, the aesthetic effect of a Dead concert becomes dependent on a mixture of authentic or live improvisation (the players deciding on the spot—more on this later) and the audience’s perception that improvisation is occurring. Throughout the book, I will be addressing this problematic area of real versus imagined improvisation and how it informs and guides the listener’s interpretation of the music.

Thus, the potent mix of improvised rock and roll fueled by LSD, as guided by the types of humor found in *A Hard Day’s Night* or the Merry Pranksters, became the ingredients for the Grateful Dead’s brand of psychedelic music. The early years are always looked on fondly by the few who were there, as a

veritable Garden of Eden as it were, and are crucial for establishing the myth of the Grateful Dead that informs their reception history. Band archivist Dick Latvala has said of the early years (1966–1967) that “it didn’t matter if you took acid because the Grateful Dead were like an acid trip.” Thus, the Grateful Dead had already attained notoriety and cult status among fans in their native San Francisco/Bay Area by the Summer of Love in 1967. However, though they played at Monterey Pops and other large rock festivals leading up to Woodstock, they were never a household name like the Beatles, and concerts could still be sparsely attended. Stanley Krippner, a psychologist and a pioneer in the field of Dead studies, notes that he attended concerts in 1968 in Manhattan where the Dead could not fill a 200-seat room. But with the release of 1969’s *Live/Dead*, featuring the primal “Dark Star” suite, and with the follow-up radio-friendly songs on albums like *Workingman’s Dead* and *American Beauty* in the era’s dominant country-rock style, the Dead’s brand of music finally started to appeal to college students in the early 1970s, and their popularity quickly grew from there.

If the fan base of so-called Deadheads would grow substantially through the decades, because of the drug association the Dead were and still are the kind of the band that most listeners either loved or hated. In the much-cited 1960s saying of Kesey, “You’re either on the bus or off the bus,” which, though referring to the hallucinogenic revolution, applies to the Grateful Dead equally well. For some Deadheads, it only took one concert to get on the bus; for others, perhaps as many as five. The devotion to the band and their sprawling, ritualistic live shows became profound and in many cases bordered on religious reverence.³

Critics and observers of popular music culture have always been perplexed by the loyalty of Deadheads and the enduring popularity of the Grateful Dead. The group flourished through four decades with well over 2,000 live concerts, right until the death of lead guitarist and singer Garcia in August 1995, continuing in the various projects of surviving band members to this day—four of the core members played in the 2009 tour, where they billed themselves as “The Dead,” and currently, Phil Lesh and Bob Weir continue to keep the Grateful Dead torch alive as “Further.” And yet the band never enjoyed sustained mainstream success, having only one song, “Touch of Grey,” in *Billboard*’s Top 10 in its entire career.

Indeed, the Grateful Dead might represent the largest underground phenomenon in music history. But what is the meaning of “underground” when applied to a band with so many followers? Certainly in the early days of psychedelic music, the Dead were an underground phenomenon, maybe one of the first such acts. But by the 1970s this had changed. Perhaps “under-

ground,” when applied to the Dead, refers to hermetic Deadhead perspectives on the band. For example, Deadheads have always tried to protect what is perceived as the sacred space of the Dead show from intrusion and outsider influence. There is also an initiation process that any new fan goes through. Guiding all of this is the shared belief in what I will call “Deadness,” the transformative effect of music that does not seem to apply to other bands in the rock tradition.

Hence, given their longevity and fan base, what is so special about the Grateful Dead? What distinguishes them from other 1960s iconic bands, like the Beatles, Doors, or Rolling Stones? Were they, in the words of promoter Bill Graham, “not [only] the best at what they do . . . [but] the only ones who do what they do”? Why, from the 1970s on, did so many Deadheads follow them concert to concert, rearranging their lives to fit the band’s touring schedule?

Numerous books and articles (popular and academic) and now conferences have tried to explain the Grateful Dead phenomenon.⁴ Recently, even professional philosophers have chimed in.⁵ In this discourse, there are two main reasons for the Dead’s longevity and success. The first, as indicated, has to do with how the band approaches musical performance through group improvisation through its jam vehicles; the second has to do with the unique relationship of band to audience. In this book, I will focus on the unfolding of improvisation both in live concert recordings and in its relationship with the compositional material, yet it is equally important to bear in mind throughout these investigations that the Dead cultivated a dialogical relationship with their audience, to the point that it is undeniable that the audience influenced the improvisational spaces of the show.

The Grateful Dead forged a uniquely hybrid musical style, drawing on primarily American sources and genres, including folk, jazz, rock, R & B, country, and bluegrass. From there, they improvised, drawing on 1960s free jazz and American and European avant-garde art music, with their unbounded willingness to engage with musical chaos and postmodern impulse of mixing high and low. In the first three chapters, I will primarily focus on the popular music roots of the band and will explore the avant-garde sources of the Dead in chapter 4. But this avant-garde freedom to explore any musical content “at the edge,” as it were, became what the band symbolized. Because of their formative experience at the Acid Tests in the mid-1960s, where a mysterious and elusive “X factor” (more on this later) became the goal, the Grateful Dead tended to use the framework of songs as a jumping-off point to reach the transcendental. This X factor might be encountered at any point during a concert, though in the later period

usually in the second half of a night's performance; set 1 songs usually were considered the band's warm-up time, with perhaps a jam or two hinting at what is to come later in the evening. Grounding these experiments were the words to the songs; the verses were vintage Americana and echoed at least decades of literary and folk traditions. Classic lines from the songs became like mantras or Zen koans, reverberating through the audience's minds and displayed figuratively on T-shirts and bumper stickers.

The second reason for the group's longevity is that the goal of the Grateful Dead experience became the creation of a group mind or collective consciousness that united band and audience. The band thrived off of the community and family that sprouted up and evolved with them and their music. In effect, by fostering a performance space that treated the audience as a necessary ingredient to the musical process occurring onstage, the Dead inadvertently sponsored a new way of how to listen and respond to their live, improvisatory music. Deadheads became active musical partners with the Dead, encouraging the band's improvisational flights of fantasy and, in some instances, song choices. Further, as a dance band, the Dead were instinctively aware of keeping a groove going. Along these lines drummer Mickey Hart has stated that the secret power of the show resides in entrainment. This can be described as a process where a "group mind" results from brain synchronization to a basic rhythm. Thus, a Grateful Dead concert was at the forefront of a new era of the rock concert, where the point was not to put a face to a song or see a song faithfully played live as on the record; rather, the concert itself was a transformational journey, again reaching for the X factor. Initially designed to correspond to the peaking effect of LSD, a Grateful Dead concert could feature the representation of metaphysical events—everything from life to death to rebirth. For Deadheads, psychological aspects of the self were discovered, and in terms of fostering community, people would often reunite with fold friends or make new ones.

Yet as with any popular culture phenomenon, there were and will always be detractors. Because the Grateful Dead, for better or worse, have always been associated with the spirit of the 1960s, how one views the band is usually dependent on how one judges the decade and its drug-centered counterculture. For a critic of the Dead, one would argue that the "group mind" and synergy at a Dead show were illusions, in that the use of psychedelic drugs was responsible for what made the scene appear so special to Deadheads. Here the music is ancillary to the drugs. Essentially, a standard line of critique of the psychedelic era's musical scene goes something like this: free improvisation produced noise, not music, and when experienced under the influence

drug use, it became another excuse for self-indulgence and hedonism on the part of the participants. In this negative take on the psychedelic era as seen in the early media reception, Deadheads are reduced to selfish, drugged-out hippies who promote self-satisfaction over the greater societal good.⁶

If the mass media at first helped to feed this negative view, since the 1980s it has reversed positions and legitimized the band as “relics” from the 1960s, with band interviews on prime-time and late-night TV and generally sympathetic treatment in newspaper reviews.⁷ With a sizable number of Deadheads moving into professional positions (on the whole, Deadheads tended to be from the middle to upper classes), the image of the Deadhead as the pleasure-seeking, drugged-out hippie has somewhat faded. Having endorsements from political leaders and famous people has also helped in the revisionist reputation of the band. The line from the Don Henley song “Boys of Summer” brilliantly registered this ambiguous and stealth transformation toward societal acceptance—“I saw a Deadhead sticker on a Cadillac.” Finally, this lyrical recognition by Henley, one of America’s most popular songwriter-statesmen, in combination with “Touch of Grey,” once again their only Top 10 hit, meant that in the late 1980s the Grateful Dead subculture as an embodiment of the 1960s came the closest it ever would to the mainstream.

No matter what the mainstream reception of the Grateful Dead was at any one time, there is not much evidence that mainstream success or lack thereof had much, if any, impact on how the band approached and played music—quite the contrary. Their original psychedelically oriented worldview—one of openness, risk taking, and guided by a search for the X factor—could still inform their music to the very end. For example, the belief in the power of the synesthetic transference of image into sound indicates one of the foundations of psychedelic-inspired music. In his memoir *Searching for the Sound*, Phil Lesh gives a rare glimpse of how this process works. While backstage waiting to go on at the Fillmore West in June 1969, Lesh, other band members, and their entourage drank acid-spiked apple juice. The acid in the juice was so strong that Lesh reports that he could taste it. Lesh writes about the playing experience that night:

At one point, I looked over at Jerry and saw a bridge of light like a rainbow of a thousand colors streaming between us; and flowing back and forth across that bridge: three-dimensional musical notes—some swirling like the planet Jupiter rotating at 100 times normal speed . . . all brilliantly colored and evolving as they flowed, not only the notes that were being played, but all the possible notes that could have been played.⁸

Here Lesh presents a direct and powerful testimony of LSD's effect on live performance. Indeed, the LSD experience suggested to Phil the paradoxical purpose of music itself: "the combination of absolute inevitability and ecstatic freedom."

Lesh does not supply the exact date for this transcendental experience, however, but he does give some context. He does say that the event occurred at one of the four early June shows (June 5–8) at the Fillmore West and that guitarist Elvin Bishop (formerly of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band) was sitting in with them for some songs, at the invitation of Garcia. Lesh also reports that he was surprised to see Bishop on stage with them. Note that this run of shows seems to have had a lot of guest artists, including Bishop on June 8, Janis Joplin on June 7, and Wayne Ceballos (of AUM) on June 8 (and probably June 6).⁹ Lesh says that Elvin was not tripping and that the band was playing the "dragon's-breath version of three-chord polyphonic madness" and "thirteen-bar patterns in a different key than the one we had started," all to the dismay of Bishop. There are only two songs that Bishop sings, both of them 12-bar blues standards that follow a Ceballos-led "Love Light": "The Things I Used to Do" (Guitar Slim) and "Who's Lovin' You Tonight" (actually the Jimmy Rogers song "That's All Right"; note that Pigpen takes over vocals). Note that another one-off blues performed on this run was on June 6, when Ceballos (probably) sang "Checkin' Up on My Baby," in an up-tempo, 12-bar Chicago blues style probably based on the 1965 rendition by Sonny Boy Williamson II (Arthur Rice Miller, 1899–1965), different from Sonny Boy Williamson I, whom Deadheads know from the song "Good Morning Little Schoolgirl." However, listening back to these songs, neither the 13-bar patterns nor the alternate key emerges; it is possible that there is a cut in the tape, and Lesh is referring to another song from the set that is not reported. Yet whether the 13-bar patterns or bitonality ever occurred is really not the point, the idea is still clear: as jam sessions in the early years show, the Dead were not interested in playing commercial rock but were intent on pushing the boundaries of what could be done with a traditional repertoire with the blues, which obviously resonated with their psychedelically altered audience.

As indicated by Lesh, the significance of the LSD experience is that it opened up the belief in synchronicity. Carl Jung (whose follower Joseph Campbell became an admirer of the band) defines synchronicity paradoxically as the "temporally coincident occurrences of a-causal events."¹⁰ Restated, if two random events occur and are meaningfully related to each other, then the concept of synchronicity explains the connection of the seemingly random yet related events. In the case of the Dead, synchronicity has many levels; most commonly, it describes how they perceived their

improvisations as a communion with one another and with their audience. As the band stretched out due to their psychedelic tendencies, the result was what I will term “deep improvisation,” after the geological expression “deep time.” Antithetical to the quick, predictable style of improvisation in pop tunes, in deep improvisation, musical processes might take 30 or 40 minutes to unfold, or they might occur across songs. Finally, it is within deep improvisation that entrainment can happen, where brain waves become synchronized with a specific frequency. Note that in the case of the Dead, much of the entrainment was rhythmic, a process referred to as “auditory driving.”

Yet for the Dead’s stretching out in live improvisation, more than LSD experiences were needed; they owe much to the achievements of the jazz artists of their time, especially the respective ensembles led by Miles Davis and John Coltrane. Both Davis and Coltrane cultivated synchronicity and deep improvisation in terms of group dynamics and the African notion of spirit (*orisha*) possession. Jazz musicians believed that rational thought must be overcome to reach uninhibited performance. According to Samuel A. Floyd Jr., director of the Center for Black Music Research, the goal of jazz improvisation since bebop was for the spirit to “ride” the musician, similar to African trance rituals. For example, Charlie Parker once told a younger musician not to think when playing.¹¹ This also led to a meditative, focused, and spiritually oriented music—for example, witness Coltrane’s religious turn in his album *Love Supreme* (1964). Lesh cites Coltrane and Davis as playing some of the most mind-bending music he would ever hear live.

As the Dead expanded on the synchronicity and trancelike states of collective improvisation, their approach to deep improvisation developed organically: polyphonic exchanges by the group over one or two chords functioning as either drones or ostinatos, spun variations developed in an associative manner (one idea suggests the next), with a rhythmic propulsion (auditory driving) that makes what follows appear as inevitable. Finally, in this vertiginous improvisatory state, everything came together through the perception of synchronicity, of a connection to a *suspended time* that has transcended cause-and-effect relations—a belief in a *now* that is continually unfolding not as a linear point but as an instant that is under constant renewal with no sense of pastness, perhaps best referred to as “swirling.” We can define swirling as the space between freedom and inevitability while improvising, or the impossibility of knowing the cause of a decision.

Toward “Deadology”

While there has been growing appreciation of the Dead by the media in the years since Garcia’s death, the musical achievements of the Grateful Dead

have yet to receive their proper due in musicology or critical popular music studies.¹² Because the Dead tended to indulge in nearly every American popular music genre, the music in any one of those genres can seem watered down or strangely played to an outsider lacking the knowledge of the history of the band. Untangling the stylistic approaches of a repertoire that spans three decades with about 220 songs in regular rotation can be quite challenging.¹³ And it is quite difficult to explain the X factor of improvisation to the uninitiated—to those not “on the bus.”

In terms of material available, there already exists a comprehensive groundwork for musicological inquiries of the Grateful Dead, a “Deadology” as it were. There are more recordings of the Dead available than there exist for any other band. From the beginning, the Dead tried to capture the energy of their live concerts, and they taped (or authorized the taping of) many of their early concerts between 1966 and 1969. The concept of a “vault” of recordings (more on this later) seems to have been an early one at least for some associates of the band, although in the early years, the Dead merely used the tapes to improve on aspects of their performance. Today there is also an official archive of band materials housed at University of California, Santa Cruz, which will continue to grow as it solicits material relating to the Dead and the counterculture.¹⁴

Compared with other bands from the 1960s who would enjoy long careers, like the Who or Rolling Stones (both bands still tour, at least in theory, as of this writing in 2012), the sheer quantity and variety of live recordings of the Grateful Dead are impressive. New tapes from the early period (1965–1969) are still being found. Deadheads also recorded concerts starting in the early 1970s, a movement that gathered steam throughout the decade.¹⁵ The activity was officially frowned upon, and even though roadies were on the lookout for illegal taping, the band’s attitude was more benign. The Dead were also pioneers in allowing fans to tape their concerts, and since being first officially allowed in 1984, Deadheads have faithfully recorded every concert. Thus, for any given concert, there might exist soundboard tapes made by the band, as well as numerous audience tapes. Recordings and videotapes owned by the band (once called the “vault”) are now steadily being released as coproductions between the Grateful Dead and Rhino Records. Much of the best live concert material is already available, through official releases in CD series (*Dick’s Picks*, *Road Trips*, and now *Dave’s Picks*), as well as numerous DVDs.¹⁶ Despite allowing Deadheads to trade tape cassettes of the band freely, including soundboards, ironically the band or their lawyers have not been kind to Internet sites hosting Dead shows for downloads, swiftly moving to shut them down.¹⁷ The best website currently available for legal listening

and downloading, tolerated by the Dead, is the “Internet Archive,” where soundboards from concerts not currently released can be heard and, if there is an audience recording, downloaded.

Deadheads have also been interested for quite some time in gathering set lists of songs from each concert, first collected in the required reference book for any Deadhead, *DeadBase*. Spanning 11 editions, *DeadBase* also contains statistics about the band’s music, such as (1) how many times a particular song opened or closed a concert, (2) how many times a song was played, and (3) how many concerts lapsed between versions of the song. This last point is important because the Dead became notorious for suppressing extremely popular songs for long time spans—songs like “Dark Star,” “St. Stephen,” “Ripple,” “Help on the Way → Slipknot → Franklin’s,” “The Eleven,” to name only a few, which, when brought back again after a dormant period, would be referred to as a “breakout.” Indeed, it seems that statistics available on the Grateful Dead’s music are rivaled in popular culture perhaps only by baseball.

There has already been much biographical research on the Grateful Dead. The band’s publicist was Dennis McNally, a historian whose early specialty was Jack Kerouac. McNally wrote the band-authorized biography of the Grateful Dead, *A Long Strange Trip: The Inside History of the Grateful Dead*.¹⁸ Writer and Deadhead Blair Jackson published a definitive biography of Garcia called *Garcia: An American Life*. Indeed in the years since Garcia’s death, there has been a plethora of excellent essay collections and monographs on the band, and now blogging on the band is also of high quality.¹⁹ Thus, with thousands of recordings available, with *DeadBase*, and with most factual aspects of the band already known and published, the time calls for more sustained inquiry on the music of the Grateful Dead.

Musical Analysis and the Grateful Dead

Using musical analysis to understand nonnotated music always involves both an approximation and a calculated decision of what to leave out. In live performance and improvisatory music, players will often signal important events in ways other than the usual parameters understood by analysis, especially melody, voice leading, and harmony. For example, in a concert setting, timbral events, nonverbal cues, subtle rhythmic accents not necessarily picked up on recordings, and emotional connections among the players can all impart a very different meaning to a chord progression, motive, or connection of harmonies when analyzed and transcribed on paper. These are “lines of flight” (to follow Deleuze) that essentially challenge anyone looking to stabilize musical moments via traditional music analysis.