

*Built to Last*

*A reflection on the enduring legacy of California's own Grateful Dead*

By Helen Meservey

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Gathering the air around us into a tsunami of sound and fixing us fast to the moment, music seized the Oakland Coliseum and all sixty-three thousand tie-dyed fanatics within. It was the moment for which we'd been waiting, working, wandering, the moment we'd once again feast at the high table of spiritual deliverance. We'd dance and sweat and spin like Sufis, sailing a symphonic wave that carried within it some mystical magic that seeped into our blood and bones and moved us in ways outsiders could never understand.

As any true fan could attest—any real Deadhead—music itself beat at the heart of the subculture that coalesced around the Grateful Dead. Without it, there was no center, no gravity. Because of it, there was a way of life and a reason to live, a regular calendar of high feasts and holy days wherein a manic celebration of life always seemed like the only reasonable idea. The music animated a world where “miracles” meant free tickets to the show, and “space” meant freeform improvisation during the second set, a world where the lingering idealism of the 1960s counterculture found full-throated adherence in both spirit and style. **It was a world that esteemed above all the power of live music to transform, transport, and transcend.**

For me, Dead shows unfurled a broad, borderless canvas upon which to paint a rebellion. Mine was a measured, almost curated affair, but it nonetheless blew the shutters off my view of the world. Raised in a conservative household that favored the safe and modest over the daring and bold, I found liberation in my association with the Grateful Dead. Shows—the dancing, the improvisation, the tolerance for everything from the silly to the outlandish—gave me room to grow up. **At shows and in the scene, I found the courage to exchange a mere idea of myself for an actual experience of being alive.**

I got my first close-up in 1983 when the Dead played the University of Vermont. I was studying in the library when a friend's face loomed over the carrel and insisted we check out the spectacle at the gym. I didn't know anything about the band except for recalling its name in drippy, psychedelic letters on somebody's T-shirt. I didn't understand its meaning, felt intimidated by the dancing skeletons that accompanied it, and understood unequivocally that whatever Grateful Dead meant or was, my parents would not approve. I immediately left the library in my penny loafers and L.L. Bean sweater and made my way across campus.

I remember a peaceable scene in which hundreds of decidedly earthy types gathered in festive anticipation. I remember people in macramé vests and bell-bottom jeans, lots of stringy hair, the musky scent of Patchouli and a curious, sweet-smelling smoke. My memory insists some people were grousing about campus security guards who were ushering unticketed ogles away and having words with a skinny man who wore a baby on his back. I also remember that, a few years after this event, I was living in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco, running off to as many shows as I could.

One time, swaying with closed eyes in a sea of people immersed in a second-set jam, I found myself ruminating on a resentment: I'd been unfairly characterized at work, and the sense of injustice haunted me. Worse, the swarm of people grooving around me were not, I was sure, squandering the moment, like me, in psychological turmoil. They were simply enjoying themselves. They were free. Pushing against the bounds of propriety that I lugged around with me—even to Dead shows—I started moving my body wildly. In my silk pseudo-sari and yellow John Lennon spectacles, I flailed my arms and stamped my feet. I shook my long, long hair. I might even have started crying. Shoulder to shoulder with others in that crowded mass, I took up way more real estate than one ticket accorded me, way more room than a considerate young lady should require.

I don't know how long my exorcism went on, but when I opened my eyes, nothing around me had changed: the bodies continued to pulsate, the ambience continued to shimmer. The extra space I'd taken slowly filled back in, and the show went on, oblivious to my tempest.

The experience gave me much to contemplate about self-worth, humility, and letting go. And it was but a single instance. All told, I attended maybe a hundred shows (could it have been two hundred?), and I never imagined once that romping in that bright, sparkly cloud of exaltation was ever the wrong place to be.

While the Grateful Dead sold more than thirty million albums over its thirty-year history, it was live performance—more than 2,300 shows—and the community that celebrated it that defined one of the most enduring subcultures of American music. “There's nothing like a Grateful Dead concert,” vintage bumper stickers proclaimed. The statement holds true even now, twenty-three years after the fatal heart attack of lead guitarist and de facto frontman Jerry Garcia brought the “long strange trip” to its unwelcome end.

Plenty of music festivals—northern California abounds with them—draw from the same demographic and provide it with exuberant music and community and an agenda of familiar shibboleths from its more activist forebears. But **Grateful Dead shows were singular**. They had institutions within themselves. Apart from the ragtag festivities and commerce that roiled in and outside the law at performance venues, the actual shows provided foreseeable moments—comfortable, heartening patterns—that gave fans a familiar narrative arc that fit the bill show after show. From Garcia's plunky guitar noodling in a first-set homage to Americana, to the thrumming anthems of improvisational psychedelia in the second, a Dead show could take you from wistful nostalgia to boundless rapture in the space of three hours—then do it again the very next night.

The Dead frequently played three-show runs. If the first show began with a song by Garcia (a Jerry opener) the second would feature rhythm guitarist Bob Weir (a Bobby opener). Typically, first sets included a deeply grooved bluegrass sound led by Garcia and a blues classic sung by Weir. First sets were elongated by extended pauses between songs, during which time band members would tune and retune their instruments, fiddle with knobs and buttons on monitors and amplifiers and converse with technicians on and off the stage. Deadheads took it in stride: where else would we rather be?

Second sets were wilder. Blasting out of an intermission that could last forty-five minutes or more, second-set openers were, for some of us, the brass ring of the whole circus. Best would be one of the Dead's signature medleys, where one strain would wend languidly or launch feverishly into the next (*China Cat Sunflower* into *I Know You Rider* (*China->Rider*, in the vernacular), *Scarlet Begonias* into *Fire on the Mountain* (*Scarlet->Fire*), *Help on the Way* into *Slipknot* into *Franklin's Tower* (*Help->Slip->Franklin's*). Jubilant, provocative, or wistful, these canticles flooded the faithful with inspiration—"Long distance runner, what you standin' there for?"—or reassurance—"If you get confused, listen to the music play." These would be followed a few numbers later by the percussion duet called Drums by Bill Kreutzmann and Mickey Hart, freeform instrumentation called Space, a sentimental croon known to some as the Jerry ballad, and a vigorous closer that left the masses high and hopeful for the encore, which varied from inspired (*Brokedown Palace*) to pedestrian (*I Fought the Law*).

Despite the predictability of these motifs, every show, every set list, was musically distinct. Drawing from an expansive playlist of original scores and a répertoire that borrowed from folk, country, blues, bluegrass, and jazz, the Grateful Dead plumbed a niche that outgrew its Bay Area roots and outlived the zeitgeist of its formative era.

**Among the most iconic groups of the American cultural revolution, the Grateful Dead helped give voice to northern California idealism.** Once known as the Warlocks, the house band for the famous "acid test" parties hosted in the late sixties by author and LSD proponent Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters, these musicians helped define not merely the soundtrack of a movement but a musical aesthetic, sui generis. From the seminal 1966 Trips Festival popularized by Tom Wolfe in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* to the free concerts in Golden Gate Park and the Human Be-ins of the Summer of Love, the Grateful Dead became known for playing long, interactive, unscripted interludes, often to accompany an audience high on hallucinogens. Fans were eclectic, hippies and free spirits who flocked to the Haight in the wake of the Beats and hipsters of the 1950s. By and large, these so-called flower children rejected the materialist values that had prevailed in the postwar years, promoting instead an ethos of egalitarianism and spiritual exploration. As a group, they were opposed to the American war in Vietnam and critical of the political establishment. Subsequent cultural migrants to the Bay Area and northern California have adopted and evolved these values to embrace a liberalism that prizes all manner of diversity, ecological conservation, and progressive ideology.

To be sure, the legacy of the American counterculture does not belong to a handful of musicians. Yet, like the principles and lifestyle choices that attended that movement, the experimental music produced by the Grateful Dead could not be contained within a generation.

Some music historians credit the group's staying power with the stability of its membership. With the exception of keyboard players—there were four over the years—band members remained the same for the entire thirty-year run: Garcia, Weir, Kreutzmann, and bassist Phil Lesh played together from the beginning until the Dead's final show in 1995; percussionist Hart, who originally came on board in 1967, left for a few years and rejoined in 1975, also played to the end. Similarly vital to the group's history was the work of lyricist Robert Hunter, whose longtime collaboration earned him a place with the band in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Other observers say the musicians' permissive philosophy that encouraged fans to tape-record live shows—and freely share the cassettes—fostered intense loyalty and contributed to fans' esteem. Others cite the Grateful Dead's collective personality, which maintained a modest sense of accessibility, despite the emergence in the mid-1980s of a cultish worship of Garcia.

Though far less rehearsed, Deadhead society itself evolved over the years. From the epicenter of the countercultural events of the 1960s, the Dead's intensely loyal fans drifted into a more insular, groupie community in the seventies. In 1986, after Garcia emerged from a diabetic coma that nearly killed him, an influx of fans capitalized on a phenomenon that suddenly had proved to be as ephemeral as any other moment. In short order, the quasi-underground Deadhead identity became mainstream. The carnival spectacle that had characterized the scene in parking lots and venue environs for years—ponytailed men on unicycles juggling bowling pins—transformed into a crowded, competitive vending bazaar peopled by “fratheads” and “trustafarians” shopping for T-shirts made in China.

By the end, the subculture effected all the conventions and institutions of society at large: commerce and crime, kindness and cruelty, kinship and chaos. **There were druggies and teetotalers, hippies and geeks, fairies and trolls, fanatics and opportunists.** There were dreadlocked tree-huggers from Humboldt who lived in painted school buses and baked homegrown ganja into fudgy confections that smelled like horse hay; craftspeople and artisans who sold blown-glass water pipes and batik tapestries; globe-trotting merchants who peddled Tibetan thangkas or Indian polkhi bangles; people in glittery top hats who walked around on stilts trading cupcakes for bong hits. There were desperadoes who petitioned passersby for rides to Buffalo or panhandled for bail to get their brother out of County. There were hucksters on the edge who pushed counterfeit tickets or balloons filled with nitrous oxide. And at the core remained the generous sorts who handed out taped recordings of last night's concert, people who gave out trinkets and stickers, baubles, and snacks, those who even bestowed upon the chosen extra tickets to the show—the holy grail.

Although Deadheads of all persuasions have since come together for the band's various incarnations and reunions—most notably the fiftieth-anniversary Fare Thee Well tour in 2015—the high watermark of the Grateful Dead marvel belongs to history. Its moment has passed. Arguably, the apotheosis occurred years before Garcia's death. Critics—they were legion—grew to include the more discerning Deadheads, who themselves observed complacency in the band's performances. The music felt uninspired. Lyrics were dropped. Lackluster sets were concluded with dramatic flourish to cue autonomic cheers from torpedied audiences. Fans, too, hastened the end. Outside shows, detritus from rampant illegal vending and other forbidden activities earned us the antipathy of local communities and law enforcement.

While ownership of the entire Grateful Dead phenomenon can be claimed only by those who helped create it, the best parts of its inheritance endure for all. Musically, the torch is carried by tribute groups and other jam bands. Politically, the progressive values championed by the community continue to inform public discourse. Culturally, the Bohemian spirit continues as ever to find its way. Dancing in the sunshine can still help deliver emotional emancipation. Surrendering within some extemporaneous musical groove can still bring intellectual insight. Finding the silver around that “touch of grey” can still lift the spirit. The Grateful Dead didn't invent these truths, and certainly Deadheads don't own them. But through this curious, unwieldy coterie of music lovers, philosophers, dissidents, and dropouts, thousands have learned, in the most lyrical and visceral way, that “once in a while you can get shown the light in the strangest of places if you look at it right.”