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## EDITOR'S COLUMN

### "Lights No Eye Can See": The Hidden Grateful Dead

NICHOLAS G. MERIWETHER

In one of the first musicology essays in Grateful Dead studies, David Malvinni observed that "The ritual of a Grateful Dead show always rested, to a large degree, on what was missing. One driving factor behind a show's power and allure was a profound sense of absence, even in the midst of such musical abundance and richness" (2007, 1). Malvinni's argument was about the extent of the band's catalog and the enduring appeal of the songs the band had retired from active performance, but his broader point speaks to the pull of the hidden in the Grateful Dead phenomenon, which took many forms. For fans, especially those who came of age in the pre-digital era, the hunt for hidden performances and obscure recordings has long been a defining aspect of Deadhead culture.

That activity had much older antecedents, in both the jazz and folk eras, when knowledge was a fundamental indicator of community status, and those who successfully tracked down lost songs and obscure recordings were considered experts. Swarthmore student Ralph Rinzler heeded Mike Seeger's advice to go hear the music as it was being performed, and the pair ended up recording sessions that produced two seminal Folkways albums.<sup>1</sup> And Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music* was at heart an exercise in archival discography, the result of a singular mind and vision of how early recordings wove a complex and forgotten view of American vernacular music, inspiring another generation to seek out songs and styles that had been lost to modern listeners. That was true for several members of what would become the Grateful Dead: Bob Weir was an inveterate tapper of local musicians, and Jerry Garcia would embark on

his own field recording expedition to record his bluegrass heroes where they performed.

The appeal of the hidden taps into the basic human fascination with mystery, and it connects the Dead to those earlier musicultural movements as well as to scholarship in general. In literary studies, the search for lost texts and hidden documents continues to play a vital role (Larsen 2011), but every discipline has its discovery stories; every field has its lost archives and vanished texts. Those could even capture popular imagination: the band emerged at a time when the saga of the Dead Sea or Qumran Scrolls was still unfolding; Elaine Pagels, a member of the early bohemian scene that forged lifelong friendships between Robert Hunter and Jerry Garcia along with Alan Trist, Phil Lesh, and Bobby Petersen, would go on to write a groundbreaking study of those texts (1979). The members of the Dead experienced those fascinations as part of the folk scene; when they formed the band, courting mystery became a core of their approach to performance, and a quality they sought to imbue their compositions with as well. Garcia approached his collaboration with Hunter with that as a goal. “I edit some of them mercilessly,” he explained:

Sometimes I edit the sense out of them ... I always like songs that hint, that hint at either a larger story or something larger behind the scene, shifting around. Maybe something not quite nameable. So I go for that ... what we'll end up with is something slightly more mysterious. (Tamarkin 2009, 36)

Hunter shared that goal, trying to write lyrics that had “as many layers of potential meaning to me when I’ve created them as they do to the listener, and I look for that” (Gans 2002, 28). For both, the result was designed to foster listener engagement, through songs that provided “the raw material for somebody out there in the audience to become his own form of creative listener,” as Barlow put it: “Involving him in the creative process in some way” (Gans 2002, 174. Ellipses in original).

That deep engagement allowed for discovery, which has always been a fundamental part of the Grateful Dead’s project, and it helps to explain why the phenomenon has welcomed scholars and encouraged scholarship. It also helps explain the deeper link between the phenomenon and the scholarship it inspires, and it is a theme that winds throughout

Grateful Dead studies as well, as this first volume of the *Proceedings* shows. That theme emerged with the conference papers and sessions at our first meeting and became even more clear as the papers published here moved through the editorial process. It also defines the works in the Texts and Sources section, both largely unknown yet offering useful insights for scholars and readers.

For years, however, much of the scholarship on the Grateful Dead has occurred in conference meetings that have left only a fragmentary record. This volume represents the Association's commitment to preserving an accurate account of our meetings, with the final conference schedule, abstracts, and presenters, along with selected papers that outline the discussion. Those papers have been revised for publication but remain substantially as they were given; longer essays are reserved for our journal, *Grateful Dead Studies*, and several conference papers are being revised and expanded for inclusion in upcoming volumes.

For our first conference, the Association welcomed thirty-four presenters in eleven sessions, with twenty-six papers and two roundtables. Although we were saddened that the COVID-19 pandemic precluded meeting in Boston as planned, the virtual format made it possible for members to participate who otherwise would not have been able to attend. Presenters and audience members represented fourteen states across the US and four other countries: Canada, England, Sweden, and Israel. The range of disciplinary perspectives and fields was equally diverse, including film studies, history, literary theory, musicology, psychology, sociology, and more. Presentations covered the entirety of the Dead's career, from antecedents to legacy, from their formative days to their final tour, and explored the full range of their work, from lyrics to music, from composition to reception, from performance to recording.

In keeping with the unofficial theme of the conference, the often hidden aspects that informed those efforts also featured prominently, with papers that addressed the mechanisms and mechanics of the band's project, from their business decisions to their philanthropy. The effectiveness of those practices could be seen in the reception of the band's music and example, and presentations explored that in several ways, from the construction of meaning by listeners to how that practice informed

fan resourcefulness and evoked religious contexts. The theme of hidden meanings also helped establish connections within sessions: in the first session, for example, papers teased out hidden interpretations, influences, and connections in a song, “Throwing Stones,” a performance—Woodstock—and a tour, their last one.

One strength of Grateful Dead studies is the degree to which disciplinary approaches that often clash instead work together to provide more complex and subtle insights, and that was a central aspect of the meeting. In the second session, critical theory offered a way to highlight the sophisticated way that silence informs the band’s music, part of why their music both calls for yet often frustrates traditional notation. One paper provided a novel way of resolving that problem, a creative critical response that echoed the kind of resourcefulness fans displayed when the pandemic abruptly ended live concerts as a social ritual, the subject of another paper.

Papers and sessions also connected across the conference. Resilience was an ability the band cultivated, enabling it to survive setbacks that would have ended most business ventures, and that trait was a theme that broadly informed papers addressing band projects, Garcia’s leadership, and the band’s struggles after his death. Garcia was a principal exponent of the Dead’s famously apolitical stance, and that was the topic of an entire session. Three papers explored the way the band developed that approach, how it connected to the Dead’s aesthetic ideals and critical practices, and how fans have constructed their own understanding of the band’s politics, a strand in the discourse with particular relevance today.

Political orientation is a central element of identity, and how Deadheads emerged and evolved historically, psychologically, and individually was a topic that defined one session but extended to several others. The larger issue of race in the Dead phenomenon and how that played out as the band’s influence grew over time was another vital sign that the scholarly discourse of Grateful Dead studies is very much a part of larger cultural conversations and academic issues, and not an isolated subject or boutique discourse.

That was true of the band’s work as well. However ambivalent their attitude toward the mainstream was at any given time, the Dead were aware of their role within it, and that informed their deep sense of

citizenship. John Perry Barlow's work on intellectual property and the Internet was part of that engagement, and three papers examined his ideas and their impact. For several attendees, that session was a highlight that represented a microcosm of the conference's work, connecting Barlow's artistic and intellectual work to larger issues in Dead studies and beyond.

In comments afterward, participants singled out the range of foci as a particular strength of the meeting, from close analyses of individual songs, lyrics, and concerts to macrocosmic surveys of entire tours and career-long issues. Throughout, the discovery of hidden elements, traces, and influences shows how much remains to uncover and explore. It is a reminder of the mission of the Association, which the officers' reports in the Association's closing session made clear. The annual meeting report provides the record of those, but members may be proud of what an independent, all-volunteer nonprofit has been able to accomplish in only a few short years.

In literary studies, the search for lost texts or hidden meanings is often considered a function of maturity, a sign of the sophistication of the discourse on an author or topic (Landy 2020)—a theme that the keynote address touched on. Although that view has its critics, what such efforts do connote is a level of acceptance, a recognition that a topic or figure is considered a valid and appropriate subject for scholarly study. The Texts and Sources section speaks to that point, not only bringing to light important documents that illuminate key elements of the band's work, but also making it clear how much remains for scholars to discover, and the insights that those buried texts can provide.

That is true of the scholarly study of the phenomenon as well. The academic work on the Dead began shortly after their formation, yet as this conference showed, the field is not only far from exhausted, in many ways it is only now approaching maturity. The keynote address made that point, challenging scholars to consider how the Dead's extramusical aspects, which clouded their reception from the outset, continue to complicate the study of the band's work today. The broader issue of academic responsibility, of scholarly ethics and the obligations that scholarly scrutiny entails, are woven into the mission and ideals of the Grateful Dead Studies Association.

The Dead modeled that in their own work, from their acknowledgment of their influences to the way they treated their fans. Central to that work was self-reflection, which is one of the most important ways that the field of Grateful Dead studies connects to the subject of its work. That awareness, and the commitment to self-criticism that informs it, made it possible to build community, to assemble a disparate and diverse aggregation of talents and views and fuse them into a viable whole that could create something meaningful and compelling that could endure, despite setbacks and tragedy. The common cause that brought them together allowed them to transcend often wide differences in opinion and perspective, on stage and off, for decades. And that is the goal of a strong, multi-disciplinary scholarly organization as well, as this first installment of our conference discussion shows.

In “The Attics of My Life,” Hunter uses the image of an attic as a metaphoric repository, “Full of cloudy dreams unreal / Full of tastes no tongue can know / And lights no eye can see (Trist and Dodd 2005, 116). The song is a moving testament to the idea of grace, as Hunter noted, “to communicate to deeper levels and approach the levels of nonverbal experience,” as he explained to a fan (Trist and Dodd 2015, 116n3), but it also gets at the heart of Grateful Dead studies. The elusive, the hidden, the ineffable—all are expressions of the often mysterious ways that experience shapes us, invoking the ideal of perseverance and the power of faith, ideas that the song eloquently wraps in the belief in love and the idea of the quest, both aspects of the ancient obligation to search for knowledge, wisdom, enlightenment. Those are timeless values, and they have inspired countless listeners over the years, but they are also scholarly ideals—and they capture the spirit of the first conference of the Grateful Dead Studies Association.

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#### Note

1. Robert Cantwell discusses this practice generally and this effort in particular (1986, 273). The two albums were anthologies, *American Banjo Tunes and Songs In Scruggs Style* (1957) and *Mountain Music, Bluegrass Style* (1959).

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That activity had much older antecedents, in both the jazz and folk eras, when knowledge was a fundamental indicator of community status, and those who successfully tracked down lost songs and obscure recordings were considered experts. Swarthmore student Ralph Rinzler heeded Mike Seeger's advice to go hear the music as it was being performed, and the pair ended up recording sessions that produced two seminal Folkways albums.<sup>1</sup> And Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music* was at heart an exercise in archival discography, the result of a singular mind and vision of how early recordings wove a complex and forgotten view of American vernacular music, inspiring another generation to seek out songs and styles that had been lost to modern listeners. That was true for several members of what would become the Grateful Dead: Bob Weir was an inveterate tapper of local musicians, and Jerry Garcia would embark on

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