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Learning About the Dead: The Role of Elite Preparatory Schools in Shaping Grateful Dead Experience

GRANVILLE GANTER

In one of the interlude chapters in Dennis McNally's biography of the Dead, he reflects on the sense of community involved in appreciating Dead music, talking about the collaboration between the band and the fans. He hypothesizes that no matter what their differences, many fans seem to be embarking on a similar kind of spiritual quest with the music. He points out that although it seems most people have been drawn to the music by its exploratory frontier ethos, very few actually look like the drug-addled types featured in most sensational media coverage. Acknowledging that many fans tend to be white middle-class males, he also writes that "large outposts of Dead Heads were to be found at upper class prep schools" (McNally 2002, 387). The question this paper asks is, "what about upper class prep-school education has to do with Dead culture?" If we follow the conventional twentieth-century sociology about the function of prep schools, they exist to perpetuate the ruling class. This hardly seems to fit with what how most people talk about Dead fans, much less the species of fan that those of us from around Massachusetts call the "Supah-Fan"—although it should be noted that sociologist Robert Sardiello identifies prep school Deadheads as "stable" fans (Sardiello 1998, 134–5).

My own history is relevant here. I was introduced to Dead music by boarding school students, even though it took a decade for their re-programming efforts to finally take hold. I was the son of an ambitious classics professor who moved to a different school every couple of years in a quest to become headmaster (including the Fountain Valley School in Colorado, where John Barlow was one of his students), so I saw the full-on Dead phenomenon at a couple of different preparatory and alternative

boarding schools by the time I was sixteen. Later, when I made friends from Dead concert culture, it was quite typical for these new friends' home addresses to be in the better parts of the East Side of Manhattan; Englewood, NJ; Wilton, CT; Beacon Hill, Boston; and the Philadelphia Main Line. Many of these friends had once gone to good northeastern boarding schools such as Choate, Kent, St. Paul's, Pomfret, Hotchkiss, and the White Mountain School, and the trajectory of these educations often ended at elite colleges. (Although, in my experience, there was also considerable attrition from higher education during and after the elite boarding school experience).

As conference papers and books on the Dead have made clear, oral testimony and interviews provide an essential body of evidence for Grateful Dead studies.¹ Part of the methodology of this paper was to interview administrators and former students of these elite schools and build an oral archive of how administrators viewed the phenomenon, as well as their students, and build a theoretical model from these narratives. That methodology fell under my university's protocols for research involving human subjects, requiring a federal ethics test and faculty approval. The COVID-19 pandemic delayed the process, but that allowed me to develop some theoretical questions and hypotheses about the topic.

The questions I have begun to ask volunteer respondents are: What are your principal memories of Grateful Dead culture at your school? What sticks out? Were classes and studies influenced? Did non-matriculated visitors appear on campus? How would you characterize the effects of Grateful Dead culture on the educational process at the school? In what ways was Grateful Dead fandom transmitted among students?

One of the first things I would note is that as tempting as it is to situate Dead culture in *opposition* to mainstream higher education, it is important not to fall prey to media caricatures about "Heads" versus "Dean Hard-Ass," after some version of the *Animal House* drama. Of course, some students got expelled from elite boarding schools for smoking marijuana and selling LSD. One admissions officer of an alternative boarding school told me, "The Dead took over this school like no other music group." When I suggested that every youth generation has its superfans, whose affections (or obsessions) range from the Chili Peppers

to the Allman Brothers, she responded, “the Allman Brothers don’t even come close to the frenzy the Dead generated. We basically had to suspend classes during spring tours” in the 1980s. This was the same school where a dozen students surreptitiously “borrowed” a school van to go to a Springfield concert in 1985. The van was returned and never missed, but the driver was eventually suspended on the basis of the rumors of what he had done afterward.

But most of us also know about the talented Deadheads who did not get kicked out of school and whose creativity was highly respected by their teachers. I tend to think of these students as humanities students but I don’t want to lapse into stereotype because they could just as easily be business students or scientists. Foremost in my thinking in this regard has been Rebecca Adams’ work at the university level where her sociology students distinguished themselves by applying academic research methods to the Dead phenomenon while going on tour in 1989 (Adams and Sardiello 2000). It is hard to hold that Deadheadism is antithetical to the academic enterprise when so few other fanbases have inspired this sort of intellectual gravitas from their own ranks, and whose educational effects are quite obvious among the participants at conferences and in the greater world of academe. As Dennis McNally noted in his keynote speech at the first academic conference devoted to the Dead, held at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst in 2007, the worlds of the academy and the Grateful Dead “are not so far apart as we might first think, that in fact there is a very solid bridge between them, spanning the gap and uniting both worlds” (2012, 5).

Another element in my thinking is the question of how we approach the concept of the “elite” when we talk about elite education in general. In online conversations in forums like Reddit, I have read discussions of prep school Deadheads that have postulated that Dead music itself emerged from high culture, with one fan pointing out Garcia’s comment in *Rolling Stone* in 1991 that Brent Mydland faced problems in the band because his cultural background had left him unequipped to deal with the rigors of the work and the road:

[Brent] didn’t have much supporting him in terms of an intellectual life. I mean, I owe a lot of who I am and what I’ve been and

what I've done to the beatniks from the Fifties and to the poetry and art and music that I've come in contact with. I feel like I'm part of a continuous line of a certain thing in American culture, of a root. But Brent was from the East Bay, which is one of those places that is like *nonculture*. There's nothing there. There's no substance, no background. And Brent wasn't a reader, and he hadn't really been introduced to the world of ideas on any level. So a certain part of him was like a guy in a rat cage, running as fast as he could and not getting anywhere. He didn't have any deeper resources. (Henke 1991)

This raises the question of how we interpret prep school education. Three thinkers whose work is relevant here are Peter Cookson and Caroline Persell, whose 1985 book, *Preparing for Power: America's Elite Boarding Schools*, remains seminal, and Pierre Bourdieu, whose theories about the invisible curriculum of higher education are especially germane to this study.

The twentieth-century sociological narrative about elite Euro-American prep schools is a largely dark story about the reproduction of class power. In Europe, the history is even more depressing: preparatory schools are not just for the reproduction of the business aristocracy (as they are in the US), they are also expected to train the next generation of government and military leaders. In contrast, the story told about US schools is that there is a slightly better degree of mobility into the elite that allows the "able" to prove themselves, via standardized tests such as the SAT from the 1930s on, but when faced with high performing non-WASP applicants, America's elite boarding schools quickly changed goalposts, reducing the number of Jewish applicants in the 1950s and '60s, for example. In their review of fifty-five American boarding schools, based on thousands of surveys and interviews with school administrators and alumni between 1979 and 1983, Cookson and Persell concluded that the system was still a machine for reproduction of the ruling elite, composed of 90% Caucasian students, not merit-based promotion of the talented (1985, 67-9).

Cookson and Persell show that preparatory school education was intense and all encompassing: highly structured days, small classes of unusually good quality, required sports and extracurricular activities, and

an emphasis on the development of individual writing skills all combined to strongly shape students. The process and environment make the educational experience akin to joining a club where the paradoxical outcome is the production of a unique individual within the confines a highly regulated system. Untethered from family life, students at a boarding school get an early opportunity to fashion themselves in the mold of their idealistic faculty. But sometimes, the psychic consequences of this sort of pressure leads to failure, burnout, depression, and drugs, topics which Cookson and Persell treat in detail in the central chapters of their analysis.

Recognizing the stress created by this type of training might lead to the conclusion that prep school Deadheads were looking to escape the pressure cooker, that their alienation bespeaks their perception of their culture's failures and that they sought greater meaning than their parents' social and economic prestige. I find this hypothesis unpersuasive, even though I believe it is sometimes partially true. It is entirely possible that Deadheadism at an elite private school might be a counter-reaction to entitlement and privilege. This explanation raises uncomfortable psychic pathologies, suggesting that psychedelic drug use may somehow be a measure of alienation and withdrawal, and that Deadhead Super-Fans may be suffering from a kind of multiple personality disorder. In this view, such fans are tied by family and culture to the next generation of the ruling class but still seek something spiritual to redeem the profanity of lives insulated from harm by the protections of commerce and law. The tortured caricature that Ann Coulter and Tucker Carlson present comes to mind here.

Yet the richer question is, in what ways does elite preparatory school education supply complementary practices to Deadhead fandom? And that has to do with fairly high-level approaches to art appreciation. In the late 1970s, Pierre Bourdieu argued that what higher education teaches is an invisible curriculum of uselessness. Most of us think of elite education as imparting a skill, a vocation, a tool—something “useful.” But that is only half the picture, and in some ways, the habits of the elite actively shun the question of utility. The hungry working poor eat food to get full; the elite, who are not as hungry and are greatly concerned with looking slim, prefer to eat food that looks good on the plate. The poor like art that

has a lesson or a moral or which relieves the pain of the working day; the elite enjoy art that may not reassure them or does not teach a life lesson, other than there is no lesson. As Kant wrote in his *Critique of Judgement*, beauty is “purposiveness without purpose”: high culture aesthetics have no “use,” and that is what paradoxically makes them so valuable (Kant 1914, 67–84).

For Bourdieu, the important part of an elite education is conveying the subtle and typically invisible principles of cultivated, refined taste. These principles are not just the finishing school skill of knowing the proper fork to use; rather, it is how to read the table to laugh winningly at your own embarrassed ignorance of contemporary French philosophy at a dinner party, or how to prefer a black-and-white portrait of a trash barge rather than a quaint island sunset. The climax of Bourdieu’s view of taste is his challenge that, based on what kinds of art we like, he can predict, with about 75–90% accuracy, with what socioeconomic class we identify (Bourdieu 1987, 17; 36–39). Statistically speaking, the poor don’t listen to Shostakovitch, they like Hot 97 dance radio or Van Halen, and everyone uses their aesthetic tastes to shape their sense of power. Bourdieu, whose background is lower class, is sometimes understood to be saying that “art is class warfare” where the elite hide the secrets of their status behind a mystical code, but that is only part of his argument. The relation of art to class solidarity is crucially a two-way street: the poor are very aware of what they don’t like; their response is, “I’ll be damned if you find me drinking fine wine like a rich snob outside a fancy art museum. We are real; those snooty jokers are not.”

In the context of high and low style, Grateful Dead is high art like bebop jazz—it is not for everyone, and part of the reason prep school Deadheads have proliferated is not because they stand apart from what their parents may appreciate at summerstage opera, it is actually part of that rarified aesthetic continuum, even if reeking of patchouli and cannabis. However much prep school Deadheads believe they are rebelling against their parents’ world, I see extraordinary continuity between their fandom and elite modes of aesthetic appreciation.

So where does this leave us? I initially conceived of this project as complicating the “concert recruitment” hypothesis, that whatever is most

important about Grateful Dead happens *at* the concert venue, the “temporary autonomous zone” where a new identity is discovered (Bey 2011). Yet the experience of prep school Deadheads suggests a more complex set of engagements with the Grateful Dead phenomenon, another element of socialization that has less to do with “tuning in and dropping out” than it does with celebrating forms of high art. In that sense, prep school fans’ acculturation as Deadheads draws out the modernist dimension of the Dead’s project. Their approach, and reaction, corroborates what Phil Lesh exclaimed to his bandmates at one of their first rehearsals, “this could be *art!*” (2005, 59).

Note

1. McNally’s band history relies heavily on interviews (2002, 661–665), and works such as Charles Reich’s book-length interview with Jerry Garcia (1972) and David Gans’s *Conversations with the Dead* (2002) have provided scholars with vital oral testimony. Nicholas Meriwether (2006) has written on the centrality of oral evidence in Grateful Dead studies, and more recently, Beth Carroll (2020) and Rhoney Stanley (2020) have highlighted the importance and the challenges of conducting oral history interviews with surviving band staffers and family members.

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