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## SELECTED PAPERS

### Dead Silence: Waiting for the Grateful Dead

ULF OLSSON

Whoever has something to say, let him step forward and be  
silent!

— Karl Kraus (1990, 70–71)

Silence can be seen as the ultimate threat to popular music. In this view, music exists to keep silence away—to hide it, deny it, to flee from it. Yet there are silences throughout the music of the Grateful Dead: obvious silences as well as more hidden ones. The Grateful Dead had an interesting relationship with silence: the band played on it, explored it, denied it, acknowledged it, and welcomed it. Sometimes, even a rock band can approach a silence hidden within the loudest music. This paper offers a brief sketch of the Dead's use of silence with an eye toward how that explains a critical dimension of their approach to performance.

Rock music, even at its loudest, includes silences: often dramatic gestures, these silences allow the audience at a show to be heard for a couple of unplayed beats. They heighten the intensity, sharpen attention, making everyone open their ears. In that way, silence, in the form of a very short pause or break, is *used* or employed by the performers. Perhaps the most obvious example in the Dead's oeuvre is the many performances of "Sugar Magnolia": in those, the silence between the song and its coda could be stretched out to another song, another set—even another day, another show. The Dead found that possibility in others' songs as well, such as Marty Robbins' "El Paso," a song they performed 388 times

from 1970 to 1995 (Scott, Dolgushkin, and Nixon 1999, 101). The lyrics end with the singer dying in his beloved's arms, his last words, "Felina, goodbye." When Bob Weir sings it, he often separates "good" from "bye," at the same time the band stops playing for a bar, before proceeding to a minimal coda. This silence has an illustrative function: the silence between "good" and "bye" is the last breath of a dying man. The Dead's performance stayed true to Robbins' original, released on *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* (1959), but the dead silence that Robbins only hints at becomes central in the Dead's rendition, a point of emphasis for Weir and his bandmates.

Yet "El Paso" and "Sugar Magnolia" are both examples of silence being *applied* to the music: it is a rhetorical figure in a musical language. As such, silence is then handled by a subject; it is intentional and actually quite conventional. But listening, I can hear also another type of silence, full of sounds speaking, one that is unintentional, and really much more interesting but also more difficult to identify than this rhetorical silence.

Silence and muteness are categories in aesthetic theory. This has to do with a paradoxical quality of modernist art, most often exemplified by writers like Kafka and Beckett, which Theodor W. Adorno nails down: "art says it and at the same time does not say it", the artwork "resists speaking" (Adorno 1997, 205). This is a historical phenomenon: it has to do with the autonomy of the modern work of art, at least in Adorno's aesthetics, and how it becomes social by turning its back on society. Modernist works of art do not communicate; instead, "their muteness itself speaks" (Adorno 1997, 286). In this muteness, or refusal to say anything, the work of art becomes persistent: it persists in its turning away from communication. Jacques Rancière, another thinker with Marxist affinities, looks at literature as "mute speech," and he sees writing as "the contradictory mode of a speech that speaks and keeps silent at the same time, that both knows and does not know what it is saying" (Rancière 2009, 33). Now, this silence that is speaking but not saying anything—or, as Adorno has it, the "true language of art is mute"—can also be listened to, and then maybe something can be heard; silence then becomes what Maurice Blanchot calls a "language: it speaks, it doesn't stop speaking, it is like the void that speaks, a light murmuring, insistent, indifferent"

(Blanchot 2003, 219). This muteness and silence of the murmuring work of art generates at least two consequences: one is, I would suggest, *rhetorical*, with the artist “administering” silence—this formulation is Susan Sontag’s, in her essay “The Aesthetics of Silence” (2003, 309). The artist chooses to employ silence as an effect—and it is, I think, easy to see this fetishization of silence at work in popular music. The other consequence might seem close to this rhetorical silence, but is actually its opposite: I would call it *gestural*. Adorno identifies this quality with Kafka’s works: they seem to invite interpretation, but when one tries to interpret them, they refuse to give up their secrets (Adorno 1981). Instead, these works of art allude to something, refer to it—but do not speak out. They gesture; they do not state.

These ideas help us approach and understand a vital element of the Grateful Dead’s music. I am not the first scholar to try to articulate what can be sensed as a kind of paradoxical quality, *a present absence*, in this music. Stanley Spector uses Heidegger’s terminology in his assessment of what the band learned from Miles Davis, whose quintet opened for the Dead four consecutive nights at Fillmore West in April 1970:

One principle was to play around a theme or melody, for example, so that what is not played becomes the site of the music; that is, what is *not* played is the opening or clearing which is concealed or limited by what *is* played, and then the jam that comes out of that opening is what is brought forth into unconcealment. (Spector 2012, 276)

It is this “what is not played” that I am trying to articulate, albeit in a different language than Spector’s Heideggerian, and to make what is concealed visible and audible.

This silence, which I look at as a structural silence, can be heard in the recordings of the Dead’s 1972 European tour. Going to Europe meant performing in a different kind of venue from those the band typically played in the US: in Europe, they played in traditional theaters and concert halls, normally home to classical music and symphony orchestras. This also meant that they, at least sometimes, performed in front of a seated and relatively quiet audience, not the active, dancing crowds that thronged their shows at home. The acoustic conditions were different:

they favored a more nuanced music, rather than straightforward, heavy rock and roll.

On the original album from the tour, *Europe '72*, one can follow how the Grateful Dead, at the Lyceum Theatre in London, performed “Truckin’,” starting with the song as written. But since the Grateful Dead were an improvising band, the song slowly leaves its fixed form behind. When the verses have been sung, the band starts taking the music apart, deconstructing it, draining the song of its rock and roll energy, with *pianissimo* as its ultimate modus. On the original release, this part of the music was given a title, “Epilogue,” as if it were a song, and it was followed by another piece of improvised music, “Prelude.” Though naming these was likely done for copyright and royalty purposes, both pieces were nonetheless related to more standard songs, as an outro and an intro, respectively. When the whole show was issued on CD, as part of the box set *Europe '72: The Complete Recordings*, these titles had disappeared, and the music was instead subsumed by the songs they were finishing or beginning. These formal aspects do say something about the aesthetics of rock music, but more importantly, they tell us something about the problem of silence.

By slowly reducing the music to disparate sounds surrounded by silence, the band acknowledged that silence is an integral part of music. This affirmation of silence meant new possibilities: with the sound level slowly decreasing, and the players better able to hear each other (and not just the beat inside a thunderous noise), it became possible for them to answer each other, and answer what was happening musically. This is, I think, a fundamental aspect of the artist’s work: silence forces the (improvising) artist to reflect on and relate to what she or he is doing; it forces the (improvising) artist to give form to his or her work, to give form to something that is not really there. In this context, it meant that the band members had to respond to each other, while at the same time focusing on the whole of the music they were creating.<sup>1</sup>

The Grateful Dead forged a productive relationship with silence early in their career. From 1967 to 1969, a recurrent segment of the band’s live shows was called “Feedback.” It sounded different each time it was performed: it was improvised, atonal music, and as its title suggests, it

was based on the guitars feeding back into the amplifiers and loudspeakers, combined with the use of percussion, often with gongs playing an important part. The result was distortion, shaped by the musicians as they held their instruments close to the amplifiers and speakers, modulating it in an almost Theremin-like way, but “Feedback” can be summarized as a kind of sonic onslaught. The larger point is that “Feedback” is improvised music, meaning that the musician could not rely on any existing song structure, nor any regular pulse. Instead, the musicians had to create, or produce, sounds out of silence, while at the same time relating to what the other band members were playing. A composed song, one could say, forms a barrier against the threat of silence: it keeps silence at bay; it is already speaking, whereas improvising musicians must listen to the silence, and come to grips with silence themselves. “Feedback” would disappear from the band’s repertoire, but the idea and spirit of the practice would remain, and even be enhanced, under a new name, “Space.” This experimental practice, as Mike Daley describes, can be seen as a “practice of listening, suggesting, accepting, and disrupting” (Daley 2019/20, 55). The dialogical practice of these actions produced a sonic collage, with the ‘spots’ of sound characterized by what Daley calls a “fluidity of tonality, meter, and tempo” (2019/20, 42), surrounded by a sea of silence.

The earliest identified performance of “Feedback” is September 4, 1967. It is brief, just under two minutes long (Grateful Dead 1967). The players use long tones on guitars and organ, in varying pitches, and underneath there is a vibrating bass drone. After 1:30, the loud sounds suddenly come to a halt. The recording does not really tell us whether the music continues or stops, but a few seconds later, a voice is heard, interrupting the silence. The first part of “Feedback” here seems to point to the ensuing silence: the long sounds are trembling, it is as if they are *waiting*, quivering before what is about to come—silence.

This waiting is, I think, an important aspect to add to Spector’s idea of the band playing “around a theme or melody.” The “playing around” often, though not always, generates tensions, and waiting is perhaps the most important of these. A remarkable example of this is the “Dark Star” performed in Portland, Oregon, on June 24, 1973 (Grateful Dead 2018a). The whole performance, more than twenty-seven minutes long, is marked

by an obvious caution. A wave pattern is established, one that will recur throughout the whole performance. The wave moves between a certain serenity and a heightening of the intensity. But even at its most intense, the playing is pending or self-contained: it does not reach out, nor really articulate; instead it is a kind of almost distracted humming. But at certain moments, the intensity is heightened, often through an insistent repetition of a figure, such as Lesh emphasizing a bass riff. Garcia adds to the effect, his singing subdued, vocals impregnated with silence. And there are clouds of silence that sail into the music at intervals, most obviously at approximately 5:20, 18:10, and 22:05, respectively.

This “Dark Star” continues, however slowly, to an atonal crescendo. The players are carefully but discreetly moving towards it, and it breaks through, at 22:30 with sounds thrown around like balls hitting walls. Weir then introduces, at 23:00, another aspect of the silence within the music: he talks through his guitar playing, but it is a muted, distorted speech. Garcia follows, after an intensification of the music, producing this distortion of the music at 26:00—a distortion that also represents tortured speech.

But even at its crescendo, this performance of “Dark Star” remains somewhat distanced or subdued, and the crescendo is followed by a return to a short but cautious ending, leading into “Eyes of the World.” Two days later in Seattle, the Grateful Dead are back on stage, and performing an intense version of “The Other One” (2018b). Launching the song with its signature bass riff, Lesh directs this performance to a large degree. His bass is all over the place, shifting between a strongly insisting riffing and punctuating the flow with sporadic high notes. But this is also a good example of all the players improvising at the same time, with repeated riffs and figures keeping the music together. The performance is divided into two parts, separated by a cover of Kris Kristofferson’s “Me and Bobby McGee.” The first and shorter part is repeatedly drawn towards silence, with Lesh steering the band. After the intermission with “Bobby McGee”, the bass riff again introduces “The Other One,” and this second, longer part is clearly an example of the Dead exploring their jazz chops, with Lesh and Godchaux leading. But even though this is a much more intense performance than the “Dark Star” performed two days before, this

one also repeatedly touches on or gestures at silence: at 6:30, and after the vocals, at 9:30, the song is more or less deconstructed, a long bass tone at 11:00 introducing a move towards atonality, with Weir featured, and at 14:00, a full-blown, atonal crescendo is reached. The intensity is shattering—and what we hear is another, and quite remarkable, example of “mute speech”: the sound of silence screaming.

This active relationship to silence was not isolated, appearing only in a specific, delimited part of a given concert. Instead, it was an integral part of collective improvisation, as generated by certain songs. Of those, at least three should be mentioned here: along with “Dark Star” and “The Other One,” discussed above, it is “Playing in the Band” that should be highlighted. These songs could all, through improvisation, be stretched out to last for thirty or even forty minutes. During the 1972 European tour, the Dead played a thirty-six-minute version of “The Other One” at Frankfurt’s Jahrhunderthalle. Melvin Backstrom has pointed out how this performance is characterized by “a highly differentiated dynamic range, but with a continual sense of developmental continuity” (2019/20, 18). The playing erupts *fortissimo*, introduced by the thunderous bass line, but slowly turns into the opposite, into *pianissimo*, and a wave pattern between these extremes recurs throughout.

But as I have noted, there remains a silence inside the music, even at its loudest. This silence is most clearly discernible in figures of repetition, as illustrated by the forty-six-minute version of “Playing in the Band” performed on May 21, 1974, in Seattle (2018c). These repetitive figures only contain themselves: they do not speak, they have no message; they are—again—only figures waiting for the music to unfold and start happening.

This silence inside the work of art is, however, most obvious on the best album the Grateful Dead never made: John Oswald’s *Grayfolded* (1996). Oswald’s (re)composition is based on a hundred recordings of “Dark Star,” which Oswald, as the title suggests, folded together, layering them on top of each other, combining them in new ways. And, even though one occasionally hears the audience, what Oswald really does is erase any communicative aspects of the music. Instead, “Dark Star” becomes an introverted sound collage, the dark star collapsing into itself. It is as if this music has no resolution: it does not go anywhere; it is directionless.

Oswald opens his work with an expressionless wait for the music: it is pending, pensive, unhurried. One part of *Grayfolded* is called “trans-silence” (which I first read, interestingly, as “trans silence”). Oswald stretches “Dark Star” through its silence and makes it into an autonomous work of art, one that takes on a form beyond artist and audience. The silence heard in *Grayfolded* is not intentional, not by the band nor by Oswald: it is the result of a music folded into itself. It comprises *sounds* that have been granted agency—not the musicians, nor even the arranger. The artist cannot search for this silence in any direct way; instead, it is through the work that silence can be called upon and made present.

Of course, the aesthetic reflection that the acknowledgement of silence engenders is not a theoretical reflection, although it can take that form. More important is that this reflection is objectified in the work of art: silence makes the work of art visible and audible; silence formulates a demand on the artist, even on the artist working in the most commercial and noisy form of art. Maurice Blanchot (2003) formulates the need as well as the usefulness of acknowledging the silence inside the work of art. He does so by referring to the myth of Orpheus’s descent into a “place of dispersion and conflict, where he must all of a sudden face up to things and find, in himself, in it and in the experience of all art, what transforms powerlessness into power, turns error into a path and unspeaking speech into a silence from which it can truly speak and allow the origin to speak in it, without destroying humanity” (2003, 221). In spontaneous or real-time composition, as improvised music is sometimes called, the players must have “Confidence in waiting, staying, delaying, listening, and trusting silence as a field of force in its own right,” Swedish improvising pianist Sten Sandell writes; only then can the musician create “music on the inside of silence” (Sandell 2021, 51). In those moments, even—or perhaps especially—a rock band like the Grateful Dead could find Blanchot’s “silence from which it can truly speak” (2003, 221).

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#### Note

1. I explore different dimensions of the band’s approach to improvisation in *Listening for the Secret* (Olsson 2017).

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