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PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

"Honest to the Point of Recklessness": Talking About the Grateful Dead

NICHOLAS G. MERIWETHER

When the Dead submitted the cover art for their debut album, the Warner Bros. art department was "thrilled," according to Alton Kelley, because they "had been doing covers for Frank Sinatra and had no idea what to do with the Grateful Dead" (Kelley 1984, 10).¹ He was relieved: as the artist who had created the collage, Kelley had been worried that it was a bit too "avant-garde," as he put it, for the suits at Warners, but he had been determined to make a statement, not only of his own ambition as an artist, but of his vision of the band. With an array of images and motifs, the cover presented the band in settings and contexts that challenged viewers in a visual analog of the way the band's music challenged listeners, and that reflected the close connection between music and art in the bohemian mecca of the Haight (fig. 1).

Kelley had studied collage in art school and thought the form was perfectly suited for album covers because of its association with text. In Japan, collage was used to add depth and meaning to texts; the Dadaists viewed the form even more broadly, using it to challenge viewers to consider how they understood art. Kelley did the same with his collage of the Dead: the center image is a twelfth-century Chola sculpture of Yoga-Narasimha, as Deepak Sarma (2020) has explored, illuminated by a sunburst with an array of tubas splayed to the left and Stanley Mouse's artistically obfuscated lettering above. The effect was startling, and it asked viewers: how do we read the Grateful Dead?

That question is perennial, and with the inauguration of the Grateful Dead Studies Association, it takes on a different cast—even urgency.

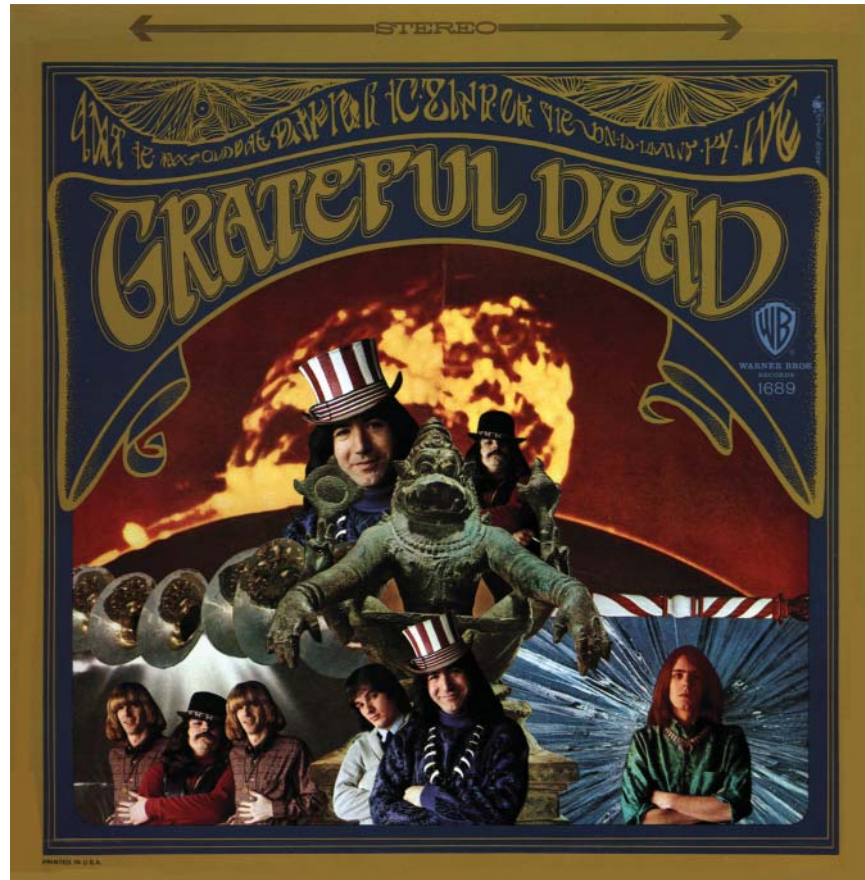


Figure 1. *The Grateful Dead*, front cover. Art by Stanley Mouse and Alton Kelley. © WEA. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

Our first conference represents the start of a new chapter in Grateful Dead studies, and offers a chance to reflect on that question and how it has evolved in the more than half century since the Dead's debut album appeared.

Reading the Dead

The question of how to read the Dead dominated their early press. Older reviewers tended to see them as the house band of the Haight-Ashbury and exponents for whatever they saw as hippiedom, the counter-culture, or the youth movement; younger reviewers were equally likely to

see them as more than just musicians, though that was also a function of the state of rock criticism at the time, which was often as concerned with extra-musical issues as any intrinsic artistic qualities.

That made the Dead especially colorful targets, as their first album made clear: on the back (fig. 2), the band's photograph in front of 710 Ashbury has "San Francisco" at the very top, a point hammered home by the band's roster, which introduced them as "San Francisco's Grateful Dead." In case anyone missed the connection to the Haight's notorious psychedelic proclivities, Garcia is listed as "Jerry ("Captain Trips") Garcia."

Their peers respected the Dead, but only a few established journalists took them seriously, notably Ralph J. Gleason and Frank Kofsky. Gleason's support was especially significant: his columns in the *San Francisco Chronicle* made clear his estimation of the band as early as 1966, an assessment he confirmed in his 1969 book *The Jefferson Airplane and the San Francisco Sound*.²

The band's detractors were just as vocal, but they didn't stop at denigrating the Dead's music: instead, the band were reduced to proxies for what writers saw as the failures of the Haight or the excesses of the counterculture, and scapegoated accordingly. When reporter Burton Wolfe spent a few weeks in the Haight in 1967, including time at the Dead's house interviewing band members, his 1968 paperback account devoted several pages to the band's musical shortcomings—though he grudgingly admitted that Garcia's guitar lines "could be interesting"—and provided an apt summary of their critical reception at the time: "He and the Dead have been ridden by critics as musical illiterates and drug addicts leading flower children down the path of sin" (Wolfe 1968, 39). Wolfe likened Garcia to Ken Kesey, whom he interviewed at length for the book: "Both are basically scholarly men who have deliberately adopted the loose Negro style of life and slang. Both have taken their minds apart with drugs" (1968, 38). His dismissals of their music are equally vehement, but the larger issue is that Wolfe's biased obloquy was published by Signet: it both reflected and helped to define the Dead's early mainstream reputation, along with the extra-musical stigma that accompanied it (cf. Meriwether 2016).

When scholars began to study the Dead, they were far more sympathetic, yet they also tended to see the band as more than just musicians. One of the first to study them was Stanley Krippner, who interviewed band members beginning in 1966 for his study of LSD and creativity (Krippner 1970); he treated them with respect, but as subjects who had been inspired by psychedelics and whose work had been informed by those experiences. Krippner also famously used their concerts at the Capitol Theater in February 1971 as the setting for a study of ESP, which produced one of the first scholarly articles on the band (Krippner 1973). That coincided with the publication of the other foundational article in what would become the discourse of Grateful Dead studies, an essay that used the band's 1973 Kezar Stadium show as a field study for how to provide medical services at rock concerts (Gay et al. 1972).

Both articles appeared in 1973, eight years after the band's formation.² Both made important points about the Dead that went beyond their immediate focus, as I have discussed (Meriwether 2007), but they also reflected an awareness of the continuing stigma attached to the band. Krippner's description of the Dead provided a thoughtful summary of the band's early history and music, but included a quotation from Michael Lydon's 1969 *Rolling Stone* article that reads as a nod to the band's capacity for polarization:

The group has developed a style often described as "black satanic," personifying a "Horror comic monster who, besides between being green and slimy, happens to have seven different heads, a 190 IQ, countless decibels of liquid fire noise, communication, and is coming right down to where you are to gobble you up." (Lydon, 1969.) This image stems, in large part, from the group's association, from its earliest days, with LSD, marijuana, and psychedelic experience. (Krippner 1973, 13)

Conversely, the rock medicine article emphasized the feeling of community of the Dead's concert, which it called a Haight-Ashbury reunion—understandable, given that the authors all worked for the Haight-Ashbury Free Medical Clinic and the concert occurred at a venue on the edge of the Haight. Yet they, too, made the point that the event represented something more than a concert: "in the end, one must recall the atmosphere of the

day and the crowd ... which touched each member of the team ... [with] an overall joyous melding into a flowing unity of life which unexpectedly warped backward in time to innocent, happy days of Hippie Hill ...” (Gay et al. 1972, 197. Ellipses in original). However positive a portrayal they intended to provide, both articles also reflect the enduring shadow of the stigma that attended the band from their earliest days, and mark the transition of the band’s extramusical reputation from early mainstream journalism into the academic literature.

Stigma and Partisanship

The tension between the Dead’s work as musicians and what observers thought the band stood for beyond that arena would continue to complicate the band’s reception for the rest of the Dead’s career. That was especially apparent in the media coverage of the band, but echoes of that tension would punctuate the academic literature as well. A survey of that theme is revealing, but for the purposes of this talk, what is relevant is its currency. Historian Rob Weir’s 2014 article, “Tie-Dye and Flannel Shirts: The Grateful Dead and the Battle Over the Long Sixties” takes issue with what he calls “the hagiography” of the Dead, claiming that:

Dispassionate readers of rock history find fanciful exalted claims of the Grateful Dead’s musical impact, embedded meanings in lyrics and performance, and its cultural and sociological significance. In fact, quite a lot of Deadhead scholarship is at odds with lead guitarist Jerry Garcia’s assertion that the Grateful Dead’s music “doesn’t have a message for anybody” (McNally, 187). (Weir 2014, 138)

Knowledgeable scholars dispute these assertions, beginning with his misreading of Garcia’s comment, but the claim that the Dead’s project does not merit or sustain the scholarly inquiry it has received suggests that something more is at work.

Weir’s larger argument—that the periodization of the Sixties is a construct that obscures as much as it reveals—is widely accepted (cf. Hill 2016), but his formulation of that argument relies on his deprecation of the Dead. For him, it is the denial of the Dead “as embodying the uniqueness its devotees claim” that allows him to treat the band as “a window through which one can view the changing meaning of the Sixties as they played

out in *fin de siècle* America” (2014, 137). Yet even a casual reading of the scholarship reveals that his latter point is a well-established, even defining, theme in the work on the band; it is the former that the discourse of Grateful Dead studies challenges.

And that is where the issue of stigma becomes central. As Weir also observes about the Sixties, “Once created, myths are hard to dislodge” (2014, 138). And one of the more obdurate and durable myths of the Sixties is the one that Burton Wolfe and other early journalists propounded, which is that the Dead were mediocre or undistinguished musicians best viewed as synecdoches for the counterculture and its worst excesses. Weir’s dismissal unconsciously echoed the extramusical stigma that has been the Dead’s *doppelgänger* since their inception; by making it a linchpin for his argument, he not only perpetuated that stigma but reaffirmed its place in the academic literature.

The Dead shrugged off rock throwers, but the scholarly record can be less forgiving, or forgetful. Last year, Sean Zwagerman quoted Weir’s dismissal in his thoughtful article, “‘Comedy Is What We’re Really About’: The Grateful Dead in a Comic Frame” (2020). Zwagerman’s understanding and appreciation of the Dead is substantive and his perspective is nuanced; that makes his quotation of Weir’s views noteworthy, but Zwagerman’s essay warrants attention on its own merits, and it goes to the heart of the issue of how to talk about the Dead.

Drawing on Kenneth Burke’s idea of terministic screens, Zwagerman argues that the band’s sense of humor and consistently self-deprecating attitude were critical elements in their project and exercised a defining role in how they viewed their work. This informs his critique of interpretive frameworks that can be applied to the Dead’s career: the Romantic, the tragic, and the comic. While Brent Wood argues for the utility of the tragic framework in his recent study (2020), Zwagerman argues that the comic not only offers an important addition to the ways that we talk about the Dead, it may be the most persuasive:

This seemingly incongruous alliance of comedy and transcendence is the terministic screen that best identifies what Garcia aspired to on stage: transcending his humble limitations in shared moments of spontaneous and unexpected excellence. Spontaneous experiences, the ability to stand outside one’s self

and observe one's self while acting, the recognition of one's imperfections and failures, and the humility which results are the lasting imprint of the comic perspective that LSD leaves on those who, like Garcia, experience it without mystical motives. (Zwagerman 2020)

Scholars continue to explore how band members viewed ritual, mystery, and their approach to music as a vehicle for courting what can be called mystical states of consciousness, and Garcia gave several interviews throughout his life in which he affirmed his spiritual orientation (cf. Brown and Novick 1995). Indeed, Garcia's self-deprecation, and the band's very strong belief in the power, utility, and centrality of humor in their project, seem more integral to the *social* dimension of their work than their music—a recognition, as Zwagerman correctly notes, of their human frailties and foibles, but one that also served a fundamentally practical function, to smooth the inevitable frictions that running an organization, or a life, entails. Their humor reads as qualitatively different from their modesty, a virtue they practiced privately in critiquing their performance, as well as publicly in interviews.

Their humor also provided a useful buffer against the kind of stigma they experienced over the years. An exchange between Garcia and Deadhead fanzine editor Blair Jackson in 1987 illustrated that: when Jackson asked what Garcia thought “of the idea of scholarship and arts & letters in rock and roll,” Garcia replied: “I think there's a place for it. It's one of those things where it's hard for me to take my own work too seriously, because I know it's just me [laughs]; but on the other hand everything that I like, I like to know about” (1987, 43.) It is right to point out Garcia's self-deprecating humor here, as Jackson did when he transcribed the conversation, but it is equally important to note how Garcia used it to underscore a serious point, which is his validation of a scholarly approach to rock music.

That seriousness not only described his own attitude toward rock, it was something he had sought for much of his life. “When I was a kid, rock 'n' roll was totally disreputable,” he said in 1991:

I wanted to play rock 'n' roll but I wanted it to be respectable. I thought, gee, it'd be nice if rock 'n' roll had the acceptability that

jazz has, that kind of cerebral appreciation. I loved the music, but not the stigma attached to it. (Rowland 1991, 45)

It was a point he made in several interviews over the years.

That seriousness helps to explain why so much of the early scholarship on the Dead can read as advocacy: though that's often true of early work on emerging figures, which necessarily has to justify its attention, Dead studies formed against the backdrop of a well-established media portrayal of its subject that was biased against any positive treatment. No wonder that work appeared partisan, as I commented in an earlier essay (2007, xii)—a point that Zwagerman and Weir both note. Yet the larger context of my remark made clear that the advocacy of that work was in response to that prevailing media portrayal, at a time when any effort to study the Dead had to assume the added burden of providing a corrective to the stigma that prejudiced and even precluded serious consideration of the band's work.

That environment frames Zwagerman's observation that "the comic frame's irreverence toward 'priestly euphemisms' may also serve as a counterstatement to those moments when the scholarship itself becomes a little too devout" (2020). That may still feel premature, asking scholars to look to a time when stigma no longer colors the discourse, but it is always proper to question whether we are taking the band's work more seriously than they did—not just reading too much into it, but distorting it in the process.

That concern is not unique to Grateful Dead studies, especially for scholars studying rock music or popular culture. Simon Frith warned of it in his 1983 study *Sound Effects*, which made a scholarly reading of a rock song ridiculous by juxtaposing it with the musicians' matter-of-fact discussion of its casual genesis (1983, 12–13). That caution cuts both ways, however: fourteen years later, Graeme M. Boone and John Covach considered the same terrain in their introduction to *Understanding Rock*, and reached a very different conclusion (1997, x).

The same holds true for the Dead: those who do not recognize or who dismiss the seriousness of the band's purpose and project must defend that position. That injunction goes more deeply, however: in his 2010 essay, Eric Silverman challenged "scholars of the Grateful Dead

who blur distinctions between *local experience* and the *analysis* of that experience in a manner that risks evolving into an uncritical, sometimes Pollyannaish, apologetics” (Silverman 2010, 217). Silverman does not confuse the Dead’s achievement with flawed scholarship on it, nor does he reduce the band’s work to the caliber of its commentators; rather, he argues that a Dead concert “was *no* trivial experience” whose “experiential force” derived in part from its ability to invoke terror in listeners. His argument is with scholars who fail to take the band’s performances seriously enough. He does, crediting Robert Hunter’s “textually brilliant compositions” and affirming that a Dead show “*at its best* offered a *sublime* experience” (2010, 214).

Although he highlights the unevenness of the work on the Dead, Silverman provides a useful counterbalance to the lingering stigma established by the early journalism on the band and its periodic recrudescences. That extends to the academy as well: although the study of stigma in academe remains in its infancy, it continues to color both scholarship and careers (cf. Martin and Sørensen 2014). For the discourse, the larger point of these critiques is that scholars not only need to think seriously about the Dead’s work, they must also think about how the Dead viewed their work, and that imperative fits with what historians have called the ontological turn.

The Dead and the Ontological Turn

In a groundbreaking 2015 essay in the *American Historical Review*, Greg Anderson pointed out the challenges of what he called “translating lifeworlds” (810), using the example of how modern political ideas have distorted depictions and understandings of classical Athenian democracy. He argued that “if we abandon such categories and instead try to make sense of the Athenian *politeia* on its own terms, we can see that all those notorious alleged contradictions of ‘democratic Athens’ are really problems of our own making” (Anderson 2015, 809).

His frame of reference is much older than Grateful Dead studies, but it is not only useful but strikingly apt for its reminder that the world that forged the Dead, and perhaps especially the world they sought to make with their music, were in many ways starkly and strikingly different from ours. When Anderson writes of the challenges modern historians

face in recapturing the worldview of a vanished past whose legacies are still very much alive today, albeit in radically different contexts, his argument is strikingly apropos of the challenge that we face in disentangling the Dead's project from the concealing cloak cast by media myth and popular stigma—a task made more formidable when those barriers are cushioned and complicated by the band's own self-deprecatory humor.

But if we rise to that challenge, the rewards are more than just the satisfaction of better scholarship, as Anderson makes clear:

[T]his alternative historicism could also yield more valuable “lessons of the past” for our present. A modern academic discipline that takes seriously the ontological heterogeneities of human experience would hopefully help nurture greater sensitivity to the alterities of lifeworlds that have yet to be fully subsumed by Western modernity. And in so doing, such a discipline just might encourage us to think more critically about the ontological commitments of that same modernity, perhaps help us to imagine less exploitative, more equitable, more sustainable lifeworlds of the future. (Anderson 2015, 810)

Of course, the world of the Dead is part of Western modernity, but Anderson's larger point usefully reframes the question of how we read the Dead and makes it clear that only when we see their project as seriously as they did can we begin to assess it according to those terms.

In the context of Dead studies, Anderson's challenge asks scholars to recognize not only the ambition and nature of the Dead's vision but also its scale and scope, and restore those to their proper place in the discourse. That restoration addresses the distortion that stigma creates, but it goes further, suggesting that if scholars fail to take into account the seriousness of the Dead's purpose, not only do they risk the same sort of confusion and misunderstanding that has occluded their achievement, they also risk perpetuating the extramusical stigma that has long been unfairly attached to the band.

This gets at a deeper issue, which is the ethical dimension of the obligations of scholarship, especially when that work addresses stigmatized subjects and marginalized communities. Anderson challenges us to take seriously the worldview of those who saw the world differently; he asks that we see our worldview for what it is, a lens that colors our

perspective. If that lens is difficult to see for scholars of ancient Greece, then how much more difficult is it for those studying a phenomenon so recent that its legacy is still actively contested? Familiarity may conceal the alterity that is Anderson's concern, but for the Dead, it also explains why stigma can continue to hide in plain sight—and still color how we see their work.

Taking the Dead Seriously

Understanding the ethical dimension of our obligations as scholars is one thing; implementing it is another. So what does that look like? The short answer is, the Grateful Dead Studies Association. The Association grew out of the work of many dedicated scholars who believed and continue to believe that the work of the Dead merits, and repays, analysis. That also helps to explain why the work still tends to skew positive, since the discourse is still young, still building a foundation of appreciation, which is critical for any critical understanding.

But a primary metric of the maturity of any discourse—or discourse community—is its ability to include and benefit from disruptive critiques that might be destabilizing to an emerging field. That is why this conference meeting hosted papers on disastrous concerts and problem-plagued tours, and on critical issues such as race and politics—along with studied assessments of why the band's music has exercised a vital influence and continuing appeal with papers that examined powerful songs, evocative lyrics, and enduring performances.

The Dead modeled that gimlet-eyed integrity in the often withering self-criticism they publicly leveled at themselves, from albums to performances. That began early: when Ralph Gleason asked Garcia in 1967 what he was “trying to do,” his reply was, “Get better!” (Gleason 1969, 313). That response was all the more noteworthy, given the attacks they faced at the time, and it reveals a candor that the Dead also expressed artistically, as the line in “Althea” that provided the title of this talk suggests. “Honest to the point of recklessness” describes the kind of criticism they engaged in, and expected: not just criticism on their own terms, but criticism that aspired to objectivity—that took their work seriously, and held it to high standards.

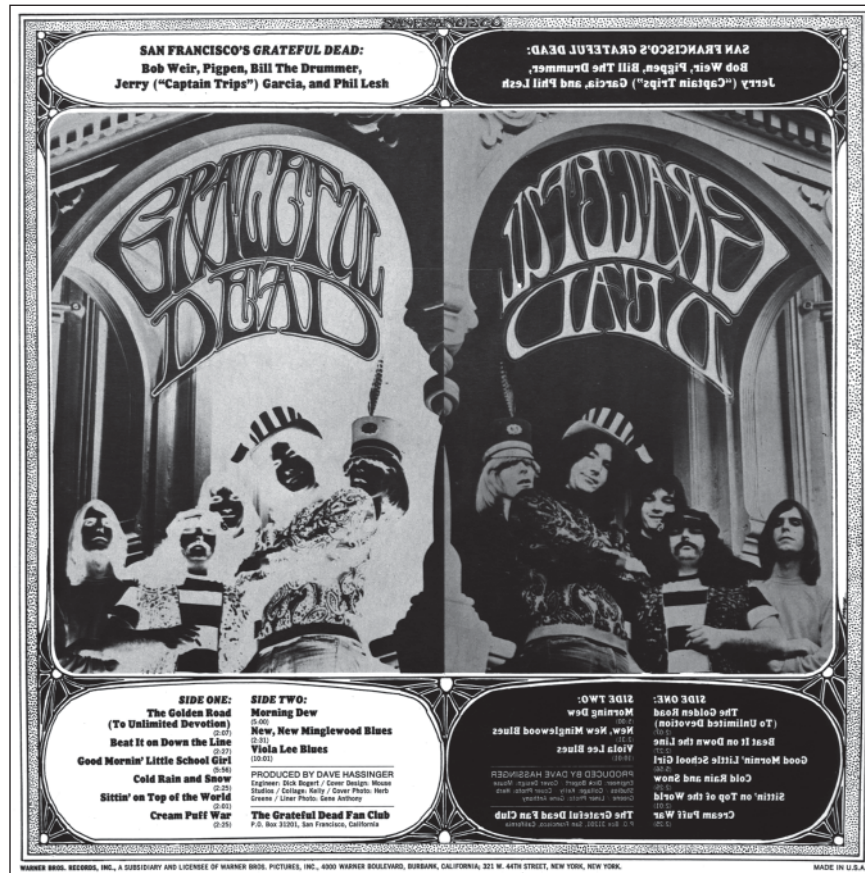


Figure 2. *The Grateful Dead*, back cover. Art by Stanley Mouse and Alton Kelley. © WEA. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

Grateful Dead studies is still engaged in defining that critical foundation. Good journalism on the band represents part of that; so does the good scholarly work that has already helped to define the discourse. As the academic discussion continues, the advocacy and positive bias that emerged in response to stigma will continue to fade, replaced by the kind of dispassionate criticism that signifies the critical and theoretical maturation of the discourse. Critics must establish their own terms for assessment, which is part of the project of the Grateful Dead Studies Association—but that must take into account the Dead's intentions and ambitions, and the perspective that informed those, as we work to understand their achievement.

It is a challenge the band saw from the beginning, as they contended with the range of journalistic responses to their music. The back cover of their debut album illustrates that. Kelley's design placed a photographic negative of one of Gene Anthony's signature portraits of the band in front of 710 Ashbury on the left, with Mouse's lettering above it, reading "Grateful Dead"; it is paired with its inverse, the actual photograph, making the picture of the band members clear—but the band's name is inverted, backwards, difficult to read (fig. 2). It could be taken as whimsical, but Kelley's collages were carefully constructed, and deliberately thought-provoking. This one can be read as a simple duality, suggesting that reading the Dead would take more than the usual perspectives and interpretations; that they would be hard to read, and defy traditional, obvious interpretations.

But the design is a unified whole, which the banner at the top reading "San Francisco" makes clear.³ Read in that light, the art states that there are positive and negative images of the Dead, and that both are necessary to provide a full picture of the band—in other words, for us to be able to correctly read the Dead. And that is what the formation of the Grateful Dead Studies Association represents: a forum for precisely that kind of holistic reading.

Notes

1. A shorter version of this essay was given as the President's Address at the first annual Grateful Dead Studies Association meeting, June 4, 2021. I am grateful to Jay Williams and Dan Lewis for their thoughtful readings.

2. See Gleason (1966a, b); band chronicler Dennis McNally noted that Gleason's "approval and support were gold" (2002, 88), a point that Peter Richardson also emphasizes (2014, 51; 136–37). For more on Gleason and Kofsky and the Dead, see Meriwether (2013/14).

3. The Gay et al. article documents a 1973 concert, but it appears in the last issue of the 1972 volume of the journal.

4. In fact, Kelley's design for the covers worked together, as his advertisement for the *San Francisco Oracle* (Mouse et al., 1967) demonstrated: he used elements from the back cover to frame the front, and the result worked seamlessly.

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