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## Collage, Context, and the Paratextual Connections between the Sound City Acid Test and the Grateful Dead's First Album

JAY WILLIAMS

I will start with a wild claim: The first Grateful Dead album was the Sound City Acid Test LP (released March 1966). It was a precursor to *The Grateful Dead* (released March 1967) in two important ways. One is aesthetic. Both use a collage for the album art as an artistic choice to perform what wasn't yet known as the Sixties. The second way both work together is philosophical. Both albums—their texts and their paratexts—argue that LSD is a legitimate therapeutic technology. The specialness of the Sound City Acid Test recording may have been generated by LSD or by the gathering of certain personalities or the effects of multiple media or the current bohemian zeitgeist at work, or some combination of all this and more. However you define the wellsprings of the Sixties, it nonetheless carried over to the production of the paratext for the Grateful Dead's second album. So this paper is not an argument about sources but rather connectivity.

Both albums were part and parcel of the music and the band's ethos. These first two Dead paratexts—here limited to just the album covers—exude immediacy, enthusiasm, and urgency; to borrow from M. H. Abrams (1953), they worked, not as a mirror, but as a lamp. They didn't reflect, they lit up. They were of the Now. They were meant to be as much a part of the Sixties scene as, say, the first rock posters. Both albums participate in the unconscious creation and definition of the Sixties.

### **The Sound City Acid Test**

Called, simply, *The Acid Test*, this LP gains its status as a Grateful Dead-associated effort in part by its inclusion in Ihor Slabicky's definitive discography of the Dead, where it is the fifth entry (2015, 267). The album is culled from over fourteen hours (some say shorter, like nine hours) of recordings taped on the night of January 29–30, 1966. Ken Kesey, Ken Babbs, and other Pranksters were in Sound City Studio to tape an Acid Test so that it could be a portable electronic guide of sorts for those outside the range of the Acid Tests themselves. Apart from the need to raise money for Kesey's legal defense, the project came from the same desire that prompted the Acid Tests in the first place: to share the experience of taking LSD and all that it entailed.

The owner of the studio, Jim "The Host" Seagrave, is a prominent presence on the recording, sometimes as an innocent, sometimes as a patient for the Pranksters' psychological ministrations. The first track on the album is an interview by Seagrave with Kesey, and it starts with Seagrave's question, "What should we expect from the happenings tonight?" (Kesey and Babbs 1998a, track 3). He is really asking, what is an Acid Test? Kesey replies that Seagrave's tone of voice betrays the answer, that it is ridiculous to ask such a question, and Kesey knows that Seagrave knows it. He's just confused, somewhat lost, and in need of help. So Kesey presses Seagrave to face all that he has repressed in order to feel at home in the new world of LSD.

Here is a moment of what Kesey would call the therapeutic challenge of Pranksterism and the Acid Tests themselves. Therapy is fundamental to the Pranksters' understanding of an Acid Test, as Nicholas G. Meriwether argues, and I agree (Meriwether 1998b, 87; 95). Kesey is drawing out from Seagrave what he perceives as a hang-up, an inability to go with the flow and to let the happening tell you what to do. Kesey is drawing it out in order to have it examined by the group and Seagrave himself, in a safe environment. The group wants to gently steer Seagrave toward a better way to engage the moment. Or, as Kesey next says on the LP, in a completely serious tone, the tone he assumed when speaking in a circle of Pranksters to go over some thoughts with them (see Perry 1990): "I figure that our function on this earth is to reflect the other fellow,

whatever instrument that we can use, be it tape recorder or camera or pencil. Or a mirror. If I can reflect you, and the places where I see the barbs and the hang-ups, and do it with some amount of love and not with hostility, so there's as little pain as possible, it means that you can move on." And since he was talking about the Acid Tests, he added, "[The Acid Test is] completely therapeutic" (Kesey and Babbs 1998a, track 3).

Seagrave, however, quickly ignored the invitation to do some self-healing. Instead, he turned the discussion to a matter near and dear to squares: what do you possibly hope to gain from this event? Nothing, replied Kesey, and here is another Prankster fundamental commitment: "The first Prankster rule is that nothing lasts ... You try to achieve nothing." Why do "you put so much effort into achieving nothing?" asks Seagrave. "We have nothing else to do" (quoted in Meriwether 1998b, 95). As Meriwether comments, "It is perfect Prankster, seesawing from silly to serious and back again." But, as Meriwether more importantly states, this LP "provides an excellent encapsulation of the theories behind the Acid Tests" (Meriwether 1998b, 95). Seagrave wondered at the very beginning what listeners to the LP could expect, thinking he would remain objective to the event. Instead, he became part of the event. The Acid Test, as Kesey says, is "an open circle ... This is different from Beethoven's Fifth, which is finished, and there is no place for me in it, except as an audience [member]" (quoted in Meriwether, 1998b, 96). The therapeutic open circle allows the unexpected, the weird thing to happen. "There is, right now, between you and I," says Kesey to Seagrave, who is making every effort to maintain his role as interviewer, "a weirder thing happening than usually happens, just because we're getting close enough to begin to examine it" (quoted in Meriwether 1998b, 95). Then Babbs starts playing the harmonica, and someone is talking, and Kesey points out that these layers of sound are creating a sonic collage that represents his efforts to live in the Now. The collage is a representation of the end result of the therapeutic exercise.

The Acid Test recording wasn't all about Seagrave. The Grateful Dead were involved, though exactly how is tough to untangle. The Dead do not play on the LP, nor do any single band members, and only Garcia, Lesh, and Pigpen were there. Did they play in the studio without being

recorded? Lesh told David Gans in 1983 that Garcia and Pigpen played with the Pranksters for two or three hours (2002, 205). Towards the end of the recording you can hear Garcia being asked to play by Kesey. But Garcia replies, “My voice is completely shot, Ken,” meaning that he could not sing, or didn’t want to play (quoted in Meriwether 1998b, 97). After all, they had just played a set at the Matrix and then came over to the studio. Or maybe they just didn’t feel like it. Or maybe Lesh meant that Pigpen and Garcia had played in the studio for a couple of hours before the recording started and now his voice really was done.

Whether they played or not, the Grateful Dead were a heavy presence at the event, as they always were during an Acid Test. The collage that is the album cover includes two almost undecipherable photographs. One shows Garcia, Pigpen, and Kesey. Garcia seems to be playing the guitar. Pigpen seems to be sitting at keyboards. The second photograph may include Garcia and Pigpen, but the image is too blurry to tell.

The photographer is not credited, but the LP’s cover art was designed and executed by Linda, Seagrave’s wife (fig. 1). Kesey and Babbs called it “a black and white masterpiece of mostly unintelligible import” (1998b). The only element that is deliberately decipherable is the Herb Caen (1966) news item pasted in the upper right-hand corner. Linda was simply creating artwork that was an outgrowth of the LSD culture, so the cover looks amateurish, the way punk art can look. Still, the collage shows how Prankster therapy centered on the simultaneity of events on acid. Linda’s artwork looks like art done on acid that tells people that art done on acid is legitimate. At the same time it encourages a heightened self-awareness coupled with self-analysis through better chemical living. The test patterns and other elements could induce trance states that encourage self-exploration. Instead of TV, we have the Acid Test for entertainment, and it will be bent and fractured, affording new perspectives and new insights.

The spiraling nature of some of these cut-outs resemble the fractal-based artwork on many *Dick’s Picks*. There seems to be a continuity, intended or not, from one generation of paratext to another. No matter how the Sixties are represented after the Sixties ended, there is always some kind of continuity with how the Sixties was performed.

### The Second Album

The Sixties aesthetic of the Sound City Acid Test carried over to the production of the paratext for the Grateful Dead's second album. For *The Grateful Dead*, the band did not rely on a Warner Bros. designer to influence, capture, or reflect their cultural attitudes. According to Kelley, the "in-house art department had been doing covers for Frank Sinatra and had no idea what to do with the Grateful Dead! They were thrilled" not to have to deal with what to them was an entirely foreign concept (Jackson 1984, 10). The band—actually Danny Rifkin and Rock Scully—turned instead to Mouse Studios. Stanley Mouse and Alton Kelley created an album design that featured, on the back, top-to-bottom black-and-white

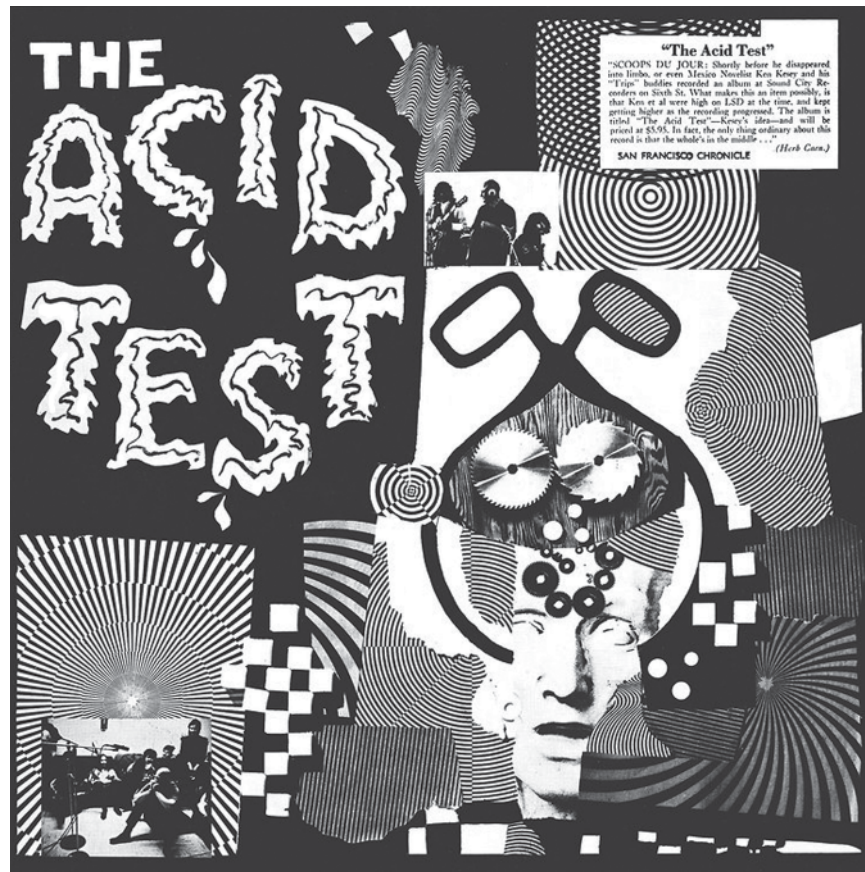


Figure 1. *The Acid Test*, front cover. Art by Linda Seagrave.

mirrored images (see Fig. 2, p.57). The image on the left is a negative photo with readable text. The image on the right is a positive image with backwards text. The text is simply the names of the band members, track list, credits, and the address of the “Grateful Dead Fan Club.” These are the most meager of liner notes. There’s barely enough room for them. The image is all. For a generation digging underground comics, this design fits. It’s familiar to the audience. They see it on posters up and down the street. It is in the Now. It is street art transposed to a new medium, the album cover.

Kelley designed the collage on the front (see Fig. 1, p.47), cutting out images from *Look* and *Life* (Jackson 1984, 10). Mouse’s famously undecipherable lettering tops the art. The collage on the front cover also plays with mirroring and includes cut-out photos of the band members. The art is built on the disruption of symmetry. At first we think we see color portraits of the band members by Herb Greene lined up at the bottom of the artwork. Then, with a second take, we realize that the Phil Lesh portrait is repeated. Garcia’s portrait is right in the middle of the art, at the bottom, but raising our eyes higher we see the same Garcia and the Pigpen color portraits behind the statue. The effect is related to LSD-inspired fruitful misrecognitions.

Judging from Kelley’s account, the choices of the images in the collage were random, but the mirroring is not. It is a representation of a basic tenet of Kesey’s Pranksterism: mirroring the hung-up guy or gal to help them work through the hang-up. The collage for both LPs is a therapeutic aesthetic device. The paratexts for both are about a moment of ahistorical time, the here and now, especially the Now. At Kesey’s place in La Honda, in 1963, “The whole *other world* that LSD opened your mind to existed only in the moment itself—*Now*—,” and any attempt to think in strict chronological terms—“plan, compose, orchestrate, write a script, only locked you out of the moment, back in the world of conditioning and training where the brain was a reducing valve” (Wolfe 1968, 59). In *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* there is an emphasis on the “1/30th of a second barrier,” which is “the sensory lag.” Everything happens always at least 1/30th of a second ago. So, in La Honda, there was a preoccupation with bridging that gap. Acid: It’s a way of living exactly within the elusive Now.

Kesey was an avid reader of Fritz Perls' psychological work and tied it into the Acid Tests and his new sense of time:

When we took acid [in 1962], we cut off our periphery time sense. All the stuff that had come before, and all the stuff that was to come—we said, “Forget that, let’s deal from here on with the present. Just forget what we’re going to do and what we’ve done. It’s all contained right in this instant.” At this time I was seeing a lot of Fritz Perls who was into this thing of having to get into the present to realize our senses. (Quoted in Meriwether 1998a, 87)

Kesey was invited to Esalen, where Perls wanted him to participate in group exercises in experiencing the Now. By exploding one's sense of time, one became in tune with sensory perception rather than analytic skill. For several years Kesey and the Pranksters worked on these ideas, and in 1965 they had a resounding success: A teenager took acid for the first time, had a bad trip, and the Pranksters coaxed her out of it until “she breaks through the freakout, comes through the other side and starts grooving on it, and it’s beautiful” (Wolfe 1968, 191).

Sometimes Prankster therapeutics didn't work. Sandy Lehman-Haupt was one notable failure. Kesey tried exercises he learned from Perls, which gave Lehman-Haupt temporary relief. It's a famous episode recounted in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, and that story could provide somewhat contradictory evidence of what the Sixties meant. Lehman-Haupt regretted his time spent with Kesey, and in his obituary his wife, Fredrika, is quoted as calling that legacy “not something he was proud of” (Martin 2001, 12).

Yet one senses from Wolfe's account that none of the other Pranksters would ever feel the same way. In 1964, they were too deep into consciousness expansion. In his interview with Seagrave, Kesey says, “We can slip back and forth, because we are, once again, teleported above the past into the present, and sometimes tickling the toes of the future,” a statement that Meriwether gives particular weight to: “It is as accurate a summation and as serious an assessment of the Acid Tests as we have” (1998b, 97). We leave the past behind, stay in the moment, and sometimes the moment is the future.



The paratexts for both the first and second Grateful Dead albums are an attempt to represent what living in the moment really means. The images are an attempt to stimulate or overstimulate one's visual perceptions in the way that the record will excite one's auditory perceptions.

The aesthetic precursor for both the cover art for *The Acid Test* and *The Grateful Dead* may be early twentieth-century French surrealism or Robert Rauschenberg's combines; or Wally Hedrick's Christmas tree, as Peter Richardson suggested to me in a recent conversation, or perhaps William T. Wiley or Funk Art in general. Whatever the sources, Kelley called his album artwork "fairly avant-garde for its time" (Jackson 1984, 10). He wavers about its classification because bohemianism cannot sustain the practice of the avant-garde—say, as collage artists—because bohemians just aren't intellectually bent that way. This is one of the defining differences between bohemia and the avant-garde. Bohemians don't fall into schools of thought. They do not treat ideas academically or historically. They may be aware of antecedents in an artform, but they are not responding to problems of form. As Peter Richardson pointed out to me, bohemians are receptive to nearly everything. There's always a youthful eagerness in the bohemian atmosphere, an anticipation of something new being offered next, of a long line of new discoveries. There is no attempt to sort out the difficult questions posed by an artform and then find solutions, working those out in consistent fashion and inspiring others to do so as well. They are not theorists. Bohemians would rather allow for multiple approaches, intuitively divined. Bohemianism, then, forms another strong link between the Sound City Acid Test and the Dead's second album.

Perhaps, like Sixties bohemianism, the therapeutic use of acid lost its appeal. In 1957, Bill Wilson, cofounder of Alcoholics Anonymous, wrote to his friend the philosopher Gerald Heard that "I am certain that the LSD experience has helped me very much. I find myself with a heightened color perception and an appreciation of beauty almost destroyed by my years of depression." In 1968, however, he acknowledged that there were hippies "who have LSD or marijuana troubles" (quoted in Lattin 2012, 238). Acid never became the cure that Wilson had hoped. Kesey's attitudes toward LSD, especially its therapeutic efficacy, also changed. In

*The Last Supplement to the Whole Earth Catalog*, Kesey writes, “I can’t really recommend acid because acid has become an almost meaningless chemical” (Kesey, Krassner and Bevirt 1973, 191). Acid has lost its meaning partly because, as he goes on to say, nothing equaled the quality of acid direct from Sandoz, which was his first acid; Owsley acid, maybe. A second reason for abandoning LSD had nothing to do with chemical impurity. In 1966, as a preface to the Acid Test Graduation, he announced, “it’s time to graduate from what has been going on, to something else.” The point was to go “beyond acid” (Wolfe 1968, 8). Acid was no longer an effective tool: weed, yes; acid, psilocibin, downers, STP, coke, speed, and tranquilizers, no.

Following Jesse Jarnow (2016), I agree that we are in yet another era of LSD consumption and epistemology. If a hope for LSD’s therapeutic power continues today, that hope can be traced in part to what *The Acid Test* and *The Grateful Dead* represent. The moment of ecstatic discovery in the early and mid-sixties was captured by the paratexts of these two LPs and helped generate the hope for truly new avenues for self-exploration. And, of course, the music and the interviews and the weirdness all were in complete sympathy with the paratexts. Texts and paratexts came together as a quintessential Sixties whole. That’s why I claim that the *Sound City Acid Test* is the first Grateful Dead album.

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