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EDITOR'S COLUMN

"Jewels to the Sunset": Representing the Grateful Dead

NICHOLAS G. MERIWETHER

Aoxomoxoa occupies a unique niche in the discography of the Grateful Dead. Its legendary costs, financial and otherwise, are well documented, as are the band's ultimate frustrations with the final results. Yet those are integrally connected to the ambitions that fueled the album, an essential part of the saga of its torturous development that still tends to be downplayed in the band's history. One song on the album that goes to the heart of all of those issues is the whimsically titled "Doin' That Rag." Opaque and elliptical, the lyrics caution against all manner of foibles and temptations while offering an oblique affirmation of social roles and civic responsibilities; these form a *mélange* of metaphors that make combine to make the song a vital chapter of the album's veiled meditation on the demise of the Haight-Ashbury (Meriwether 2019). Hunter's approach to writing lyrics embraced that allusive quality, teasing out what he called "archetypal unconscious resonances" that encouraged listeners to delve into the hidden depths of the band's songs (Gans 2002, 287). That fits with what David Dodd has noted of the lines in the song, "But you can wade in the water / and never get wet," which he traces to the antebellum practice of using popular songs to couch coded advice to aid enslaved people seeking freedom (Trist and Dodd 2005, 79n3).

Hunter's comment, like the song's imagery, evokes the issue of representation, always a complex issue but especially in works such as this, where the surface does not just passively mask the substance of the piece but actively disguises it. That helps explain why representation is a recurrent theme in the Dead's career, one that played out in several vital

and intriguing ways, not least for how it connected their work to the scholarship it inspired. And it makes “Doin’ That Rag” an interesting entrée to the second meeting of the Grateful Dead Studies Association. Every session broached the difficulties of representing the Dead, either directly in the papers or in the discussion afterward, highlighting the inherently interdisciplinary nature of that challenge as well as its continuing, evolving role in the discourse.

Although the online format of the conference made it possible for members unable to travel to participate, several cancellations caused last-minute schedule changes: five presenters ended up being unable to attend, affecting a handful of panels and causing two roundtables to be postponed until the next meeting. But just as the Dead prized the ability to recover gracefully from unexpected setbacks, both presenters and moderators adapted to make sessions flow smoothly. In the end, with twenty-five papers, three roundtables, and thirty-four presenters, this year’s conference was wide-ranging and robust, spanning twelve sessions over three days to make one of the largest areas of the Pop Culture Association. The conference section here provides a detailed outline of the panels with the schedule, abstracts, and presenter’s biographies. A productive business meeting concluded the conference, culminating in our biennial officer elections; members welcomed the new Executive Council and gave a rousing ovation to the retiring officers, who had worked for two years (and some even longer) to launch the Association.¹

That made an especially fitting note to end on, since elections are not only about governance, they are the essence of representation. At a broad level, how to represent the Dead in the academy has always been a defining issue of the scholarship on the band, along with the deeper question of how to represent the Dead more generally. That challenge mirrors the Association’s efforts to represent the discourse and the *Proceedings*’ work to represent the conference. At this year’s meeting, those questions took several forms, from how to represent the band and its music to how to represent the larger Dead phenomenon critically, theoretically, and disciplinarily.

The papers published here all address those questions, both directly and indirectly. Musicologists Shaugn O’Donnell and Michael Crowley

discuss the challenges of representing the Dead's music graphically and textually. O'Donnell's innovative approach demonstrates how two of the Dead's songs capture one of the band's signature musical effects of "rambling and wandering." Crowley traces the textual challenges of transcribing Bob Weir's instrumental "Sage and Spirit," a complex work that highlights the issues the Dead's music poses for traditional musical representation and analysis.

That could describe the debate over the roles played by impersonal forces and individual lives in history, as biographer Jim Newton discusses in his essay. Using the figures of Chief Justice Earl Warren and Jerry Garcia, Newton provides a compelling assessment of how these two very different individuals acting in very different spheres exercised impacts that continue to shape our world today, charting an approach to writing biography that raise a number foundational issues in Grateful Dead studies. Those themes also inform religious studies scholar Deepak Sarma's thoughtful essay on cultural appropriation in the Deadhead scene. His reflection on diversity in the band's audience, the historical context of cross-cultural interplay in the 1960s and after, and the implications of these issues for scholars marks a vital intersection between the scholarship on the Dead and a host of pressing issues that concern the academy and society today.

Those issues have deep roots in a number of disciplines, including literary studies. Scholars such as Wai Chee Dimock (2006) have noted how the Dead's music and lyrics represent intriguing transnational currents in literature and art; Jacob Wayne Runner's essay on Robert Hunter's *The Giant's Harp* extends those engagements in several incisive ways. Runner's perspective as an American who has spent much of his career outside of the US adds a distinctive element to his consideration of this revealing but neglected work.

Hunter's novel is one of several texts that expand our understanding of the ways the Dead's approach and achievement connect to larger scholarly contexts. Two primary works in the Texts and Sources section reflect those links. Timothy Leary, who crossed paths with the Dead over many years, believed that "There is a true and, in the best sense of the word, formal, non-hierarchical, nonecclesiastical religion about the

Dead” (Kelly 1995, 223). Jerry Garcia’s 1976 interview on the television show *I Believe* touched on several reasons why Leary and so many others recognized a spiritual dimension in the Dead’s work. The interview is an example of how Garcia represented himself publicly, but it also provides a deeper look at how his beliefs informed his music. Catholic priest Miles Riley, who created and hosted the show, provides a brief reminiscence of the program, and literary scholar and Episcopal priest Daniel Pinti provides a thoughtful assessment of the interview that frames its insights in larger theological contexts.

Garcia not only worked to express his own beliefs but also his ideas about the Dead’s project throughout his life, and that latter challenge was one that many in the band’s circle embraced. Alan Trist was one of the first to do so and remains one of the Dead’s most indefatigable thinkers and thoughtful exponents today. His unpublished liner notes for the Dead’s 1971 eponymous live album marks one of the earliest efforts to explain the band’s project. It directly addresses the idea of how to represent the Dead, not only in the context of making a live album but more generally: how to convey their project to committed listeners as well as to curious readers, for whom the album might have been their first real exposure to the Dead and their music. The accompanying essay frames Trist’s work in the larger scope of the band’s liner notes, which the Dead’s archival releases, under the stewardship of David Lemieux and Rhino Records, have carried to a new level.

Representation means different things to musicologists and literary scholars; it means something else to sociologists, anthropologists, and historians, and still others to philosophers, art historians, and archivists. Yet all of these disciplines and perspectives have made vital contributions to Dead studies. And just as the band modelled a way to fuse disparate musical genres in their own work, the scholars who gather at Grateful Dead Studies Association conferences work to try to find a way to bridge disciplinary divides and find common ground for addressing even the most fractious issues and contentious ideas.

History helps. The Dead faced the issue of representation early in their career: although their time in the Haight-Asbury was a source of

strength and inspiration to the band, it was also a convenient association that gave critics an easy way to denigrate the Dead's seriousness and mischaracterize their work. The struggle between how the Dead represented themselves and how they were represented by others continues today (Meriwether 2021). For some critics, that basic clash could be seen as nothing more than the often confrontational nature of rigorous journalistic inquiry, but the stigma that early bad press imparted became a serious impediment to the band's work as well as distorting them in its reception, and it continues to complicate the Dead's legacy today. For the discourse of Dead studies, what is interesting is how that friction mimics the challenge of interdisciplinary inquiry, pitting the reality of the band's music—its ambition and humanity—against the media dismissal of that work, in much the same way that opposed theoretical foundations and methodologies clash. The difference is that, however substantive and daunting those divisions can be, the scholars who study the Grateful Dead understand the fundamentally collaborative nature of the field: they recognize that no single discipline—no one theoretical perspective—can capture all of the facets, impacts, and artifacts of the Dead. No wonder representation and its interconnected issues of autonomy, agency, and authority have become central issues in the scholarship on the band.

In many ways, *Aoxomoxoa* marked the band's first sustained foray into that intellectual briar patch. As the first album to showcase Hunter's lyrics and collaboration with Garcia, the album reflected the band's struggle with how to shape recordings to represent their music, just as they struggled to express those songs in the concert setting. That was especially true for "Doin' That Rag." The song had a brief though intense career, with thirty-seven performances from its debut on January 24, 1969, until its retirement in October, making it the ninth-most played song of the year.² Yet it never really found its place in the sequence of a show, the right songs to connect: it floated around sets until the band's shift to the *Workingman's Dead/American Beauty* era finally bumped it from the repertoire. Some of that may have owed to the lyrics; looking back on the album a couple of years later, Garcia commented that "Hunter and I were being more or less obscure and there are lots of levels on the verbal plane in terms of lyrics being very far out. Too far out, really, for

most people” (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner 1972, 92). That was true on a practical level as well: to Garcia, the songs were “just packed with lyrics, or packed with musical changes that aren’t worth it for what happens finally with the song.” Yet he still believed in the original vision of the songs; the problem was “There isn’t a graceful way to perform them and have them have what they originally had” (Gans 2002, 49). That sense of lost meaning permeates “Doin’ That Rag,” creating an elegiac quality that cautions as it mourns.

That fits with its history. Ultimately, the song’s retirement, along with most of the others on *Aoxomoxoa*, also fit with the times: the band’s move to Marin County added a geographic transition to underscore the close of the decade, marking an end to their tenure in the Haight along with the Sixties. For all of the finality of those changes, they did not resolve the lingering questions raised by the Haight—or by the song. During its life, the shifting place of “Doin’ That Rag” in the band’s concerts highlighted its ambiguity: where did the song, and its evocation, best fit?

The Dead understood the power of that context: sets and shows did have a shape, a contour, even if the flow and form varied enormously.³ The constant work to position “Doin’ That Rag” into the flow of a concert reflects the Dead’s awareness of how difficult representation could be. By the time of its debut, they were already veterans of the media wars and had learned what the sting of unfair criticism felt like. Ironically, a central cause of that criticism was also a source of their resilience: the Haight’s celebration of psychedelics made it an easy target, but psychedelics also made the gulf between surface and substance both palpable and stark, showing how wrong-headed and unfair those attacks could be. For the Dead, that experience made representation an idea that was baked into the band’s project from the outset.

“Doin’ That Rag” offered a thoughtful view of that issue, one that revealed a worldly wisdom wrought by those tempering fires. The song reads as a psychedelic parable, a feel that its biblically tinged allusions underscore, but it also has the ring of an acid epiphany, as the fifth stanza suggests:

You needn’t gild the lily, offer jewels to the sunset
No one is watching or standing in your shoes

Wash your lonely feet in the river in the morning
Everything promised is delivered to you (Trist and Dodd 2005, 78)

Those images—and injunctions—have the ring of prophecy, but they evoke the world of scholarship, even though it cultivates revelations through different means. For Dead studies, Hunter’s words can be read as both reassurance and caution: if scholars ensure that their representations remain true to the spirit and nature of their subject, their insights will be sound—and that is reward enough. The larger message is that Grateful Dead phenomenon is a subject that needs no gilding; as long as scholars treat the topic with the same degree of seriousness that the band accorded their work—as long as they allow the subject to help guide, to discipline their insights—the scholarship will capture and convey the insights they seek. And that is an essential part of Dead studies and the promise it offers, as this conference meeting showed, and this volume of the *Proceedings* documents.

Notes

1. Meeting minutes are posted online at the Association’s website, www.dead-studies.org.
2. For statistics on the song’s performance, see Scott, Dolgushkin, and Nixon (1999, 126; 132; 168).
3. Garcia made this point in a 1981 interview with Blair Jackson and David Gans: “We end up closing the door just like we open up the door. In that sense, we create that framework ...” Jackson: “So in a sense, you are conscious of it as a show.” Garcia: “The contour of it ...” (Gans 2002, 54. Ellipses in original.)

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