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CITATION INFORMATION

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Jerry Garcia: The *I Believe* Interview

MILES O'BRIEN RILEY

Miles O'Brien Riley: A contemporary music critic has suggested that the four greatest musicians who ever lived, in alphabetical order, are Bach, Beethoven, the Grateful Dead, and Mozart. And however accurate that music critic may be, we're delighted to have with us Jerry Garcia, the founder and lead guitar and vocalist of the Grateful Dead, who is one of the most prolific musicians today. Jerry explains that that's because he's crazed, he's obsessed. We'll find out in a minute when we meet Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead and find out what he believes.

The question that the program asks at the beginning and the end, and most of the time during the middle, is who are you and what turns you on? So just for a change, instead of sneaking up on you, can I come right in, straight and honest, and say, "Who's Jerry Garcia and what turns him on?"

Jerry Garcia: Well, I'm somebody who plays music, or tries to, and I think of myself as a person who's a music student. And what turns me on is being able to play and being able to continue developing. I think that's it, fairly simply. And then there's concentric circles of greater and lesser turn-ons.

MR: I read at one point where you said, "I'm a slow learner, I'm not very talented, so I really have to work to learn and to grow."

JG: Yeah.

MR: You put a lot of emphasis on that, on the growth, on the experimen-

tation, on the change. You said, "I don't want to end in the cul-de-sac of success."

JG: Right, exactly. Well, my feelings about that are that there is a convention in what you could broadly describe as entertainment that states, essentially, once you have your act down, once you have it together, keep on doing it—that's what the people want. They're coming back to see Judy Garland for the umpteenth billionth time, and they're there to see you do your little dance.

And I feel that's a serious limit on anybody who feels that they're an artist, rather than an entertainer. Not to say that being an entertainer is no good, but I would rather think that I'm involved in something that's more open-ended than that. I'd rather not be able to see the end that clearly.

MR: And it's probably a thing of level; it may even be—I don't know this—one of the reasons that the Grateful Dead now are actually playing in four different groups; that you do this, even encourage this—I mean, you're doing solo work, albums with the group—partly it's explained by the cost of travel and just putting the show together and putting it on.

JG: Right. There are other less obvious reasons that I think that have a lot to do with our attitude toward what we're doing and our feelings about what it is and what it should be. And we felt that by having reached that, the end of a certain level of that cul-de-sac that we were talking about, that for us or for a rock and roll group for a performing musical group, the end of that, really, is the colossal, what we call the mega-gig in a huge stadium. We played in those and that's where we ended up in terms of the largeness of our audience, the greatness of demand for what we were doing and so forth and so on. We felt that was a dead-end, and there was no place to go from there. And at that point, the experience for us got to be one that was totally controlled, in the sense of, it's airplanes to motel, motel to gig; backstage heavy security, nobody near the stage, you know?

And what's worse is that it's also reflected in the way those very large venues deal with people. They deal with them in that sort of cattle prod methodology: lots of cops, lots of frisk lines, lots of tightness. And we felt that what we were doing, and what we wanted to do, was definitely not that; that was clearly not it. So then it became a question of, well,

what do we want to do? Since that represented the end of the line, developmentally, of what's there in America, what exists: that's it, you can't go anywhere bigger, there's no place bigger than those—the Astrodome, or whatever, that's it.

So from there it's a question of, what we would like to do is improve the quality of the experience, both on the level of what we're doing amongst ourselves and how we interact with the audience, and what the audience experiences when we're there. In that sense we're the Don Quixotes of rock and roll. We're doing something nobody else cares to do, which is trying to figure out how to make the experience—which we value and which our audience values—something that's more in line with what it feels like, which is a positive sort of outpouring of good energy.

And that's the reason we stopped, was to think about it and to not have to continually be meat.

MR: Just crank it out.

JG: Yeah. We didn't want that.

MR: The neatest thing that you said about the big amphitheater thing—I was reminded of this: it's so expensive to travel that you said, "We ought to do one of two things, either develop a space, a huge Astrodome or whatever, that would be our home base, that the Grateful Dead would play in and then other groups could use part of the year." And I was going to suggest that Candlestick Park might be available for you. [*Laughs.*]

JG: That's too big. [*Laughs.*]

MR: And secondly, I like your other idea that they declare you a national resource. The government could fund you.

JG: Right, that would be very sensible, in my opinion. [*Laughs.*]

MR: Let's go back. I want to know more about you, but first, while we're talking about the Grateful Dead: in the beginning, it wasn't always—at least, my recollection now, it's hard for me—going back to '67, '68, when you guys were playing with Jefferson Airplane and Quicksilver Messenger Service and these groups, there's one story at least about a drug experience. Now, I know that you were a friend of Ken Kesey's, that you talked about taking acid and even playing on acid. There's a story

about a Kool-Aid thing where acid was dumped in. Is that the truth—that you guys were playing and freaked out?

JG: Yeah, it's true, it's definitely true, it happened more than once. But that wasn't what we did; what we did was always pretty much the same, which was to play music, and that's been our main concern, no matter how weird it got. But because of the times, and because of what was going on, there was the inevitable dealer who, in an altruistic gesture, would say, "Well, here's this jar of apple juice, and I have a convenient 300 hits of mescaline here, and I'll just pop it in treat everybody."

Something along those lines. And then, of course, if you didn't know what was going on and you drank a glass—and this happened to me countless times; it's not like something that happened to innocent victims in the audience, it happened to everybody. I number myself amongst those victims. There was no way to gauge, really, what there was because the whole thing was enveloped in secrecy.

MO: There certainly was a counterculture; you are very much a part of it—you yourself are even spoken of as the guru, the leader, the spokesperson for that rock counterculture. How big a part of that whole movement was drugs? I think it has kind of a happy ending; it certainly does for you all.

JG: Well, I think the drugs were important insofar as that they were a way for people to find out that there was more going on than what they had previously considered to be reality. There was another level of reality, or maybe many lots of levels. That experience proved to be more valuable than most of the other things that have happened to me in my life.

Remember, I'm a person who leads a sort of limited existence. I play, and a lot of my time is devoted to practicing, and I'm focused, and it's fairly singular. That's what I do. I don't really do much else, so in terms of what's available to me as experience, there's not too much. And back in the days when LSD was legal and it wasn't a crime to take it—it wasn't a crime to change yourself—for me it was an incredible opening up. It made me realize that there was a lot more than what I even suspected, and I suspected a lot.

MR: Isn't that amazing. With all of the travel, the reading; you're into art, you're into filmmaking now, you've cut over forty albums, you've been involved in engineering, you all have the most famous sound system in the world; all these interests, and what most people would think of as a variety of experience—you think of yourself as somewhat insulated or isolated?

JG: Right, because—well, basically, I'm functional: I do the things that I'm supposed to do, I'm interested in doing them and always intended to do them, so I don't feel bad about it, but I realize that it's somewhat limited.

MR: When you talk about the high now—I know that you're more concerned about health, and you've talked about consistency, things that drugs won't do that—.

JG: Oh yeah.

MR: So you're not into the drug thing now. How do you get these highs, and is the spiritual a part of this—spiritual consciousness?

JG: Yeah, it is, of course, that's part of the whole consciousness. I'd like to make one point clear about drugs. First of all, I don't feel a certain specific, fixed way about drugs. I think the worst thing about drugs is that they're illegal. I think that's the real thing that creates problems on all those levels. And that's just my own observation; it doesn't mean, make all drugs legal or anything. I'm not saying that, but I think that's what's really wrong about it, more than anything else—no worse than drinking coffee, say. What's a drug?

MR: We have drug stores.

JG: Right, yeah. I think the thing of getting high is really what we were all into at the time. What that means is something that—I can't really say what that means; I can't put a name to it other than getting high, and the people who know what I'm talking about, know what I'm talking about, I'm assuming. Anybody who doesn't know what I'm talking about, either they haven't gotten high—.

MR: We'll be right back with you all and Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead, and we'll get high!

JG: Oh, great. [*Laughs.*]

MR: We're just sitting here in the old studio at KPIX exchanging altar boy stories from the good old days and finding out that even Jerry Garcia, the leader of the Dead, has a few altar boy stories. How does a nice Roman Catholic boy like you, Jerry [*laughs*]—I should be more serious.

We ended the segment talking about turning people on, and from a spiritual vantage point or within a spiritual consciousness-raising context. And that kind of ties in with the fact that you were born and raised a Catholic—or maybe it doesn't. I think that has something to do with the beauty in your music and your art, the drama of your religious heritage.

JG: I think it probably does have something to do with it, yeah. It probably has something to do with the thing of intensely wanting not to blow it, you know? I don't want to be guilty. [*Laughs.*]

MR: Do you still feel that?

JG: Oh, a certain amount, but no, not really. I was sort of a laissez-faire Catholic; my parents were loose Catholics rather than devout Catholics, and so it was the kind of thing where they would send me to church, you know.

MR: That doesn't last.

JG: No, it didn't. It didn't take, really, and I wasn't exposed to the real heavy stuff, Catholic school and so forth. My brother got that but I missed it.

MR: Your dad left when you were very young; your mom raised you and worked, and I heard her death in—what, '69, '70?—had a real impact on you. She was very important for you?

JG: Well, yeah, it was very—it was just strange, you know. I mean, once they're gone, that's it, you know? It's that flash, which I was aware of, really, but—I was never really very close to my mother, so I felt that there's something that I wasn't able to complete, there's something that I didn't really do. I never was able to say to her, "I thought you did okay." I was never able to finish that idea. But I don't feel that our relationship—I don't feel as though it's gone forever. I feel as though that was underlying throughout. She always respected what I did and liked the fact that I was

a musician and liked what I was doing. And she never judged me: even through things like involvement with drugs and stuff like that, she was always pretty good. And so I don't feel really too badly about it. But it's a shock; things like that always are. And on another level, of course, it's interesting how, once your parents are gone, they're gone—that's it. It's strange. On some levels it's liberating; on other levels it's very sad.

MR: Jerry, this comment may sound like a departure from where we are, but I think people would expect Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead, who does not appear on television, they would expect, meeting you this close, a much more far-out, flamboyant, heavy dude-type swinger. I think we have stereotypes of musicians and stereotypes of certainly the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane; there's a whole mystique about the Dead and about Jerry Garcia. And you're very real, very believable, very normal, dare I say. Am I blowing your holy nature?

JG: No, no, I don't think so.

MR: Are you conscious of that? A kind of disparity between who you really are and what people expect of you?

JG: Well, sure, because it works both ways, too. On some levels, the media relation to the reality is always wrong, I think. I believe it never is very accurate, because of—just everything; language itself is one heavy bias. I've been described both ways: more radically than I am, more conservatively than I am, so there's a discrepancy on either level. I don't relate to that, for one thing; I taught myself early not to believe that that's who I am. That's not me, and so I don't relate to it. And luckily, the kind of fame that I'm involved in, such as it is, is low enough of a profile so that I'm not constantly being reminded of it.

MR: People don't run up to you for autographs.

JG: No, it's much cooler than that.

MR: And yet, maybe there's a difference between you when you're on stage performing, communicating musically, and you sitting here—as you said—using words.

JG: Right.

MR: Because people talk about the saint-like quality—.

JG: [*Laughs.*]

MR: I don't mean it in a negative way, but there is an aura about you, whether you're aware of it or whether people put it there. And it's like the thing you were saying before, very meaningfully I thought: I said to you how my churches are empty; I need this crazy tube [*gestures to television camera*] to reach young people. You don't. You can go to Winterland and fill the place up with tens of thousands of young people. And you said, "Yeah, and I feel responsible; I am concerned about that." I think it's that kind of leadership, not an egomania but a concern: "Hey, here I am, because of my talent, because of timing, because of—."

I know that you put words down and say, "Well, words are often lies because you can never communicate the whole feeling, the whole meaning." And music does it better—you've said that many times—because it's freer, it's more open, and it allows for people to come in at different levels, different backgrounds. But you *are* communicating something.

JG: Right. Well, I try to make an effort to, certainly.

MR: Can you describe that or talk about that?

JG: Well, it's difficult since the things that concern me tend to be not verbal in nature, they tend to be experiential. The fact is that most of my life has to do with certain kinds of experience that have been repeated many times. The high-energy experience of playing for a large body of people and for the purpose of reaching some level. So that energy and that thing is something that I know about but I can't really say what it is. So what I talk about, if I can talk about things, I try to make it so that what the content of what I'm saying reflects something that I know on that level. I can't say it, so I have to *not* say it; I have to talk around it.

MR: Your music does that, too, doesn't it? You sort of throw out little snatches, little phrase/thought things; there isn't a whole neat package.

JG: No, there isn't. I personally feel that people like that; I know I do. And on some levels it's all very simple, and on other levels it's difficult to talk about.

MR: Yeah. I think the Grateful Dead probably have done more—certainly, you're one of the most generous major groups in the country. You've done

more free concerts and spontaneous gigs and fundraising things and stuff. But you're very much aware of this continuous feed-and-be-fed, the interaction between you and the audience, which you say can't be captured obviously in a record or even in film. You're doing a film now, on the last five shows at Winterland?

JG: Right.

MR: To see if maybe some experience can be communicated in film?

JG: That's why we tried it: can it happen? Maybe it can or maybe it can't.

MR: It might work well. It's not working too well on TV: the Midnight Specials and so forth, even with all their cameras, you can't—.

JG: I think it reduces it too much. That particular kind of experience, I think it just makes it too small. That's one level of it.

MR: The hard thing is that you don't get any kind of feedback then, because you're not into fame and money.

JG: No, but I'm into a more direct kind of feedback. I like to be in a situation where I can really talk to the people who like our music. And we have a pretty good two-way flow: they write to us pretty freely, and by and large they're pretty articulate. They know what we're doing. And we recognize them by the way they speak to us, so we know that what they're talking about is what we're talking about. So we're aware of that reciprocal thing.

MR: That's amazing. I know you have a mailing list of 35,000 or something and you send out a preview—samplers, audition copies of the albums?

JG: Right. And they send stuff to us, too: they talk to us and tell us about what it's like.

MR: That's a part of you, that collaborative effort. I know in the beginning your music was eclectic: you started with the jug band, kind of the bluegrass sound—banjo, guitar—and then got into blues and jazz, which is a great thing, and you explored all of those ramifications, and now you're into a whole new form for creating, where you do listen at all different levels.

JG: Right, well, it's because it's more interesting. From the standpoint of a person who's involved in lots of different kinds of energy, that is what's interesting to me. And on a certain level that is what I do also. I deal with lots of different kinds of energy and I feel that I'm essentially someone who works into things. I'm not an artist in the solo or in the independent, artist-in-the-garret mold. I'm not that sort of person; I'm part of dynamic situations, and that's where I like it and that's where I feel I function best.

And the Grateful Dead is a collection of people who have come to that idea all through various different ways. And it works; that's really all we have to say about what we do. If you want to see it work, if you want to see a situation work that doesn't have any leader, that doesn't have any plan and is utterly formless, really, from moment to moment, then you don't have to guess about whether something like that will work. We have it and it's working.

MR: How can you do that without bumping egos?

JG: Well, we bump egos, but I think but everybody has learned that the best things happen when everybody agrees and feels that that's the right thing to do rather than one person has an idea and everybody else feels a little funny about it. So we go on that level: if somebody doesn't like it, we don't do it. And we've learned to trust each other. After a long enough time of fiddling around with this idea, we've learned to trust each other, to the point of saying, "Well, if Kreutzmann doesn't like it, it's no good." And that comes from the idea that basically no idea really makes it if you can't include everybody in it, if you can't bring everybody.

MR: This is sounding like marriage, or a good marriage, or a good family.

JG: I think it's just a good way for people to work together. And, of course, it depends on what you're doing. I think you probably run into trouble if you're trying to build a bridge, you know; you can't improvise on that level too well. But I believe that if you had people that were all really skilled at that particular world that they could do it, because on another level—on the mathematics level—architecturally, that's musically what the Grateful Dead does. We're creating architectures, architectural models if you will, of kinds of music. And they work, and each person

adds their own personality to the whole thing, and it works somehow. And I think that everything could be that way, really.

MR: Jerry, when you talk about energy, what's the source of your own? When I think of energy, we have the old-fashioned word we used to use a lot, faith, or the spirit; grace, life, enthusiasm. But what is the source? Where do you go to prime the pump?

JG: Well, enthusiasm, I think. The thing of feeling good about it. As far as I'm concerned, that's the gold in the situation: that's the payoff, if there is one, on the level of why am I involved. I'm involved because I like it and because it feels good.

And the enthusiasm of feeling good about something—I think that's the most important thing about it. On a personal level, what do I get out of it? That's what I get out of it. And I don't think that I could do anything for any other reason; I couldn't. Nothing else would be that kind of a payoff.

MR: Riches, fame, power?

JG: [*Shakes his head negatively.*]

MR: Well, it shows, it shows. You've also described music as your yoga, your meditation.

JG: Right, and by that, I just mean that I think that it's a good thing to have something that you can work on, on more or less a daily basis, and be able to see improvement on your own terms; that is a result only of your own energy being put into the thing: anything that you decided to do, if you did it every day and it was something that you could notice yourself improving, even if it was whatever—cats cradles, crossword puzzles—.

MR: Prayer.

JG: Sure. They're all forms. And I think that the things that keep opening in front of you, that the more you do them the better you get at them, that idea I think is really a nice idea to have in your life. It keeps you centered on something. You don't have to be worried about how you're being judged in some absolute sense, but you can judge your own progress on a day-to-day basis. And when you're doing something like that, you know when you're off and you know when you're on.

MR: You're on. Thank you Jerry, for the discipline and the sharing and

the growing. Thank you all—we'll see you next week. Believe. God bless us all.

Note

This transcript has been edited according to Oral History Association guidelines for clarity, removing false starts, repeated phrases and crutch words to produce a readable text. Readers should consult the original program (Riley 1976) for additional insights into the interview. We thank Fr. Riley for his gracious permission to publish this transcript here.

Source

Riley, Miles O'Brien, dir. 1976. *I Believe*. KPIX–TV, January 19, 1976. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OP2ShTPE69Y.

MILES O'BRIEN RILEY earned doctorates in theology and communications from Gregorian University in Rome and UC Berkeley. He served as priest at several parishes in the Bay Area and was assigned to Mission Dolores in San Francisco when this show was taped. The founder of the Communications Center for the Archdiocese of San Francisco, he published fourteen books and hundreds of articles and reviews. He also produced twelve films and 1,500 television shows, and hosted 4,000 radio programs. He received three Emmys and ten national Gabriel Awards for outstanding radio and television productions.