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## **“Alive, Again” and the Liner Notes of the Dead**

NICHOLAS G. MERIWETHER

When Alan Trist began compiling his papers in 2011, one of the treasures that surfaced was his unpublished liner notes for the Grateful Dead’s 1971 eponymous live album, nicknamed *Skull and Roses*. Written at the band’s request, the essay explained the recording of the album, placing it in the larger context of the band’s project. In just over 2,000 words, Trist explained how the record was a document and reflection of a holistic approach to making music that extended from stage to office, with the release as the culmination of a wide-ranging effort that required a team to produce. When the final gatefold design ultimately could not accommodate the essay, it created a lacuna in the publishing history of the Dead’s liner notes that the essay’s publication in this volume finally fills.

Tapping Trist to write the essay made sense. A published poet and committed writer, he had been hired by the band after five years working as a social scientist at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London, where he had put his anthropology degree to work after graduating from Cambridge University. Trist’s father had cofounded Tavistock to help postwar England rebuild its heavy industries by providing what social psychologist Richard Trahair called “reliable research studies that showed how inefficient, uncreative, rigid, and ungratifying were organizations that were dominated by technology-driven bureaucracy and the assumption that work was performed best by people who were considered to be little more than costly extensions of machines” (Trahair 2015, x). That approach had grown to include other complex management challenges, and at Tavistock, Trist had participated in a series of difficult

projects, from bringing the Turks and the Greeks together to discuss the Cyprus War to numerous efforts to resolve management-labor disputes for UK mining companies and other heavy industries.

The lessons of that work, and the appeal of that approach, never waned for Trist, and at the time, as he watched the 1960s bloom, so did the idea of applying his “action research” skills to the challenges and issues raised by the counterculture. Trist had spent a year in Palo Alto in 1960–1961, where he had been a vital part of the bohemian scene that included Garcia, Hunter, Willy Legate, and several others.<sup>1</sup> When the Dead came to England for a performance in May 1970, manager Jon McIntire met with Trist and explained what the band was trying to build and how he could contribute.<sup>2</sup> To McIntire, Trist’s perspective could help the Dead become “more wholesome in our dealings with ourselves. I was trying to harken our scene back to the heart and roots of 710, the kind of care that everyone took for each other, the kind of openness that everyone had for each other” (McNally 2002, 384). Hunter agreed, and invited Trist to oversee the management of the band’s newly formed publishing company, Ice Nine, which had become Hunter’s project within the larger Grateful Dead organization. That fall, Trist flew to San Francisco and went to work.

It was a good fit, as his liner notes make clear. Trist’s blend of organizational insight and poetic evocation informs the essay, as does his perspective as an insider, a member of the team charged with creating and carrying out the multifaceted initiative that culminated in *Skull and Roses*. For scholars, Trist’s essay is especially noteworthy as the first sustained explanation of the band’s project—a project that the essay itself participates in and represents.

That makes the decision not to publish the piece a missed opportunity in several ways. As a description—and expression—of the band’s project, Trist’s essay marked one of the first efforts to explain what the Dead were trying to do: how their vision of the band represented the continuation and refinement of the Haight’s vision of a new society—a microcosm turned into a model. That would filter out to fans through the *Dead Heads* newsletter as well as in interviews with band members, but Trist’s essay would have been the first sustained effort to explain that philosophy and effort, and in a format that connected those to the concrete

work of the Dead: as liner notes accompanying the official release of a live recording of their music.<sup>3</sup>

For Trist, that was an organic extension of the work he had been doing at the Tavistock Institute. The elder Trist saw his son as “a social scientist within the Grateful Dead and performing anthropological tasks of a participant observer in the counter-culture field,” as Trahair put it, and took an active interest in both the band and his son’s work for them, even if “the lifestyle,” as Alan put it, was “‘a little wide’ for his father” (Trahair 2015, 238).

While “Alive, Again” would have made an important contribution to the album, the essay would have also been notable for rock music in general: that year, scholar R. Serge Denisoff bemoaned “the lack of liner notes” in rock albums that was part of the critical dismissal that rock music as a whole continued to struggle with (Denisoff 1971, 57).

Trist’s essay would have also set a precedent for the band. It would be years before the Grateful Dead made liner notes a formal part of their releases. The dubious Sunflower/MGM release *Vintage Dead* included brief notes about the band at the Avalon (Cohen 1970), but only occasional pieces accompanied official recordings during the band’s career, starting with Willy Legate’s brief pseudonymous notes for *Europe ’72*, commissioned by Trist. Not until *One From the Vault* (1991) did the band’s liner notes really emerge.<sup>4</sup> Though brief, the detailed technical notes for that release explained the challenge of the tape restoration and mastering process, also provided for *Two From the Vault*, released in 1992.<sup>5</sup> Something of a tribute to Ron “Pigpen” McKernan, that release reproduced a 1973 newspaper article extolling a bravura performance by Pigpen at a February 1970 show at the Fox Theatre in St. Louis (Barnes 1973). (In a nice nod, the complete article was included as the liner notes to Dave’s Picks 6.)

But it was not until the band released their first two major retrospectives, *The Golden Road* (2001) and *Beyond Description* (2004), that the band’s liner notes would offer the kind of context that is the heart of Trist’s essay. Written by band publicist and biographer Dennis McNally, Vault Archivist David Lemieux, and several others, those essays surveyed the band’s history with a focus on the recordings in each set, but that

retrospective view also differs markedly from Trist's eye-of-the-hurricane vantage.

For Trist, the decision not to include his essay in the release was eclipsed by the blur of other work; the responsibility for writing it represented only a small part of a very full plate of duties, and life in the world of the Dead moved too swiftly to consider what-ifs or bemoan might-have-beens. Setting up and administering Ice Nine was a full-time job and more, and, as was true for most staffers, innumerable other challenges and projects fell into Trist's lap: shortly after writing this essay, he was sent to Europe to do advance work for the upcoming spring 1972 tour. Nor did he lack for other outlets: beginning in late 1971, the *Dead Heads* newsletter gave him another forum for his writing about the band's project, even if he was typically modest about calling attention to his contributions.

Trist's work on the liner note essay for *Skull and Roses* did not go to waste. Much of it was incorporated into press releases to promote the album, though often under others' names. That makes it especially appropriate for it to appear here, properly credited, as part of the textual work of Grateful Dead studies that the Association promotes and supports.

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### Notes

1. This scene features in several accounts that usefully apply different perspectives: Denis McNally provides the authoritative though brief overview from the standpoint of the band (2002, 28-34); memoirs by participants include Veltfort (2010, especially 44-48) and Harrison (1973). Doyle focuses on Kepler's as a central site for the scene (2012, 189-194).
2. According to McNally's band biography, Jon McIntire extended the offer to Trist (2002, 383-84); I am indebted to Alan Trist for his reading of this essay and clarifying this and several other points.
3. For more on the Dead's approach to live recording and its place in the band's history, see Brackett (2023).
4. Jay Williams (2021) discusses the larger paratextual aspects of the Dead's first recordings; his essay represents the first examination of the larger critical aspects of the Dead's liner notes, using a more expansive definition of that term. For a taxonomy of liner note types, see Biron (2011).

5. The first editions of *One from the Vault* and *Two from the Vault* were in digipak format and included more extensive liner notes. The jewel case editions that followed omitted or truncated those more expansive versions.

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