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SELECTED PAPERS

Rambling and Wandering: Grateful Dead Harmonic Progressions

SHAUGN O'DONNELL

A few music scholars have studied the Grateful Dead's technique of spinning whole galaxies out of a single pair of oscillating chords, such as Graeme Boone's work on "Dark Star" (1997; 2010), while others have examined songs with enigmatic harmonic passages that leave listeners adrift without a clear sense of tonality, such as Walter Everett's work on "High Time" (1999). This paper explores a different corner of the band's catalog: two songs that sound rather conventional but are not quite as simple as they seem. "Ramble on Rose," written by Jerry Garcia, and "Sugar Magnolia," written by Bob Weir, are songs that might be sung around a campfire: accessible, appealing, comforting. That is part of their power: while these songs seem simple and direct, they both exhibit subtle complexities that bely their casual musical surfaces. Understanding that deceptive sophistication provides useful insights into the Dead's music, especially their compositional range and ambition.

Because these two songs are undeniably tonal, not particularly chromatic or dissonant, and the chords used are simple—playable by most amateur musicians—it is somewhat difficult to articulate what is so interesting about the harmonic motions at work here. Guitarists tend to be familiar with the more subtle twists and turns in the Grateful Dead songbook, but it can be challenging to express those to an interdisciplinary audience. This paper provides a graphic representation of these harmonic motions that should correspond with how musicians understand these songs but be accessible to those without that training.

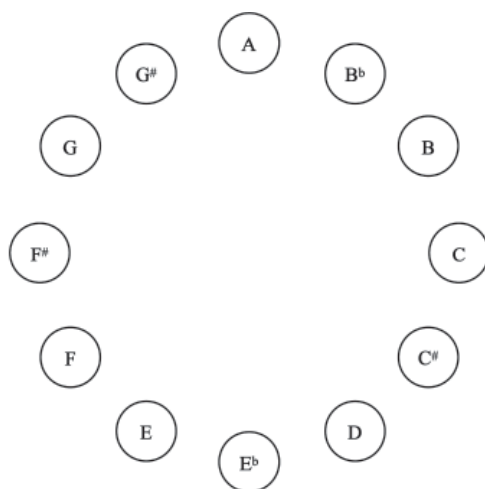


Figure 1. Chromatic Space

A few abstract concepts provide some context for the graphics. There are many ways to represent musical relations visually, but this paper relies on a simple chromatic circle: Figure 1 is a picture of the closed universe of all twelve notes (or pitch classes), one location each. We are all familiar with interpreting this kind of circular space from analog clocks. Any of the note names could have been on top at noon; A is arbitrarily north. This is a good map if you need access to a space with all the notes, but most tonal music—and that includes typical pop/rock songs—do not require the whole clock, just a subset of notes within a single key or mode.

Figure 2 is a reduction to one of those tonal subsets, the musical space that consists of two sharps. This is a generic space until we have additional musical context, a land of many possibilities: D major, B minor, A mixolydian, E dorian, etc. Like the prior space, we are also familiar interpreting closed spaces of seven items (or nodes) like this one from using weekly calendars. Once we know where home is, by audible cues, then we can identify the key and have some musical expectations. For example, if D is the tonic in this map, then we are in D major. We will probably start out there, navigate through the space, and wind up back there in the end.

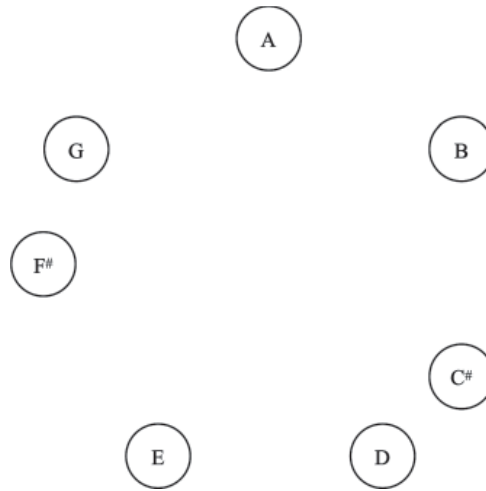


Figure 2. Two-Sharp Diatonic Space

If we build simple chords on each of these locations, only using notes within this space, the results are the set of chords shown in Figure 3. Roman numerals, included here, are often used by musicians to identify these locations, but I will not refer to those much, because I am more concerned with how we *navigate* the spaces than the role of each harmony *within* the space. Here the vii chord is illustrated with a dotted line, and that is because it is diminished and comparatively uncommon in conventional rock music.

These specific case studies use a blend of synchronic and diachronic lenses. The graphic layout and chord charts are from an omniscient perspective, presenting whole phrases as known objects, while navigation of these musical spaces unfolds in real time to the sounding music. “Ramble on Rose” is in D major, but the song’s musical space has a couple of twists that the omniscient perspective needs to add to the space in advance, as shown in Figure 4. First, the II chord in this song is always E major instead of minor. This leans us in the direction of the three-sharp collection, because of the G# in that chord. And next, C major is used as the subtonic VII chord. This leans in the opposite direction, towards the one-sharp collection, because it eliminates the C#. This is the map of the

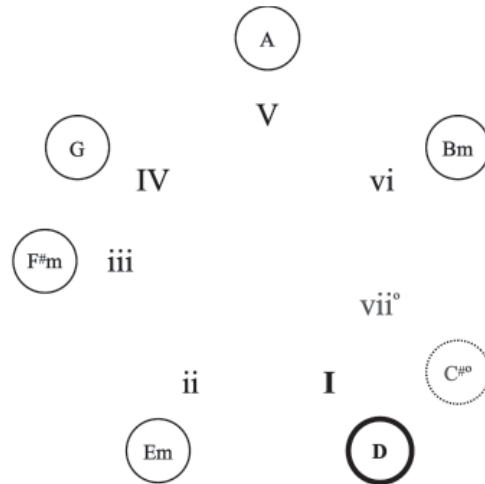


Figure 3. D major Unaltered Triads

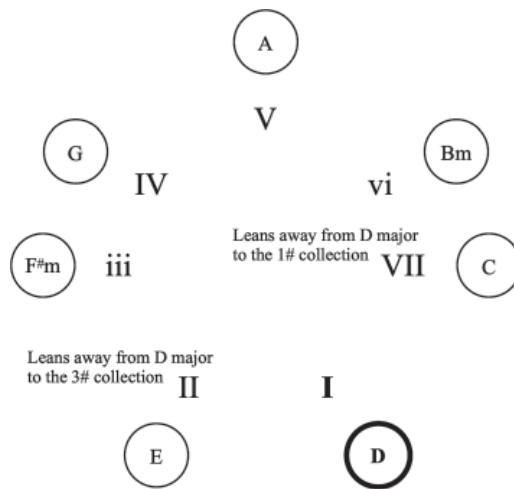


Figure 4. "Ramble on Rose": D-Centered Harmonic Palette

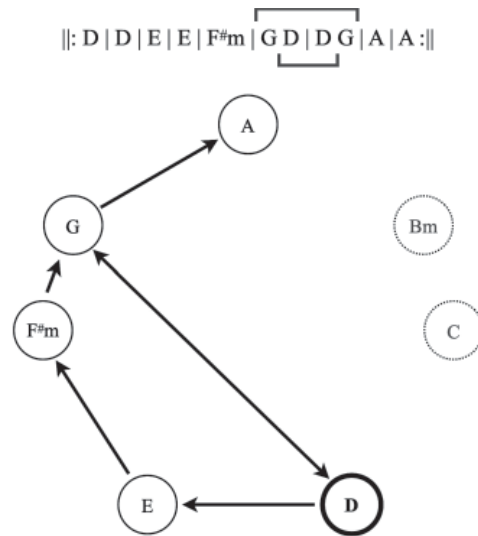


Figure 5. “Ramble on Rose”: Verse

space where the song lives, its specific harmonic palette. D is home, and all the chords are simple and familiar. The examples show how the song moves about this space in real time.

“Ramble on Rose”

Figure 5 represents the verse of “Ramble on Rose.”¹ In this and subsequent figures, the chord progression lies at the top and the musical space in the center. For visual clarity, the nodes not in use for each formal section are grayed out. Analysis offers some omniscient information about each progression, while the arrows illustrate the movement through the spaces. The verse progression shown here is typical in its overall design, starting on the tonic D and aiming to cadence on the dominant chord A. This kind of open structure is useful for setting up a return to the tonic, as it does in this example, both when the phrase repeats and later when it moves on to the chorus, which also starts on D. Yet how this all happens is less straightforward.

The first surprise is the E major chord. I prepared it in our space, and we are familiar with it because we know the song, but in real time

|D|D|G|G|E|E|G|D|A|A|D|D|

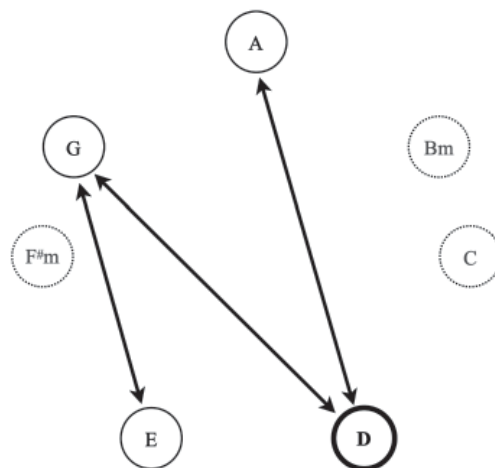


Figure 6. “Ramble on Rose”: Chorus

it remains a surprise. From a musician’s perspective, it means you must play the changes here: you can’t just be in D; instead, you have to adapt. And then within two bars, the G chord undoes that shift in orientation and you are back in D. And by the time we get to that G chord, we think we know where we are going: we are just climbing up the scale stepwise to A. If we did that, we’d have a regular eight-bar phrase, but no, we backtrack home to D for a moment, as if we forgot something there. And the subtle weirdness of this detour home is amplified by being metrically syncopated, starting on the weak half of a bar and continuing into the next bar. The way we get to A—the goal—after that, traveling back through G again, highlights that metric syncopation, as though the D is embedded in the G, as notated by the nested brackets in the chord progression. There is something about rambling through harmonic space this way that feels particularly Dead-like.

Figure 6 moves on to the chorus. This phrase is circular and closed, starting at home on D and returning there for the cadence, another typical design with familiar simple chords. Looking at the pathways synchronically—as though this were a GPS hiking app—what is

| Bm | Bm | C | C | Bm | Bm | C | G |

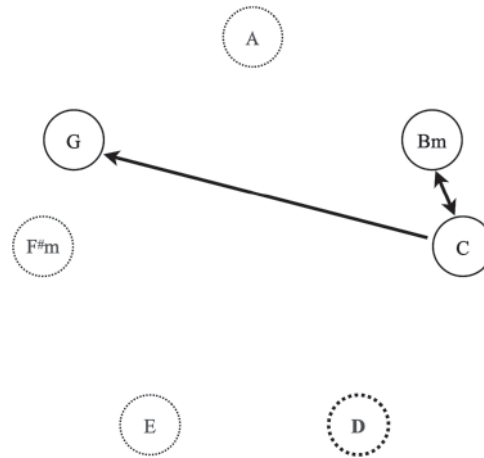


Figure 7. "Ramble on Rose": Bridge (Phrase 1)

immediately striking is the excessive backtracking: everything is an out-and-back. The opening move is just about the most typical possible, D to G, making a great chorus by nicely contrasting the scalar climb we heard in the verse. But then the song veers off to the still slightly strange E major, though only for a bit, because it then travels back to G, but only for a moment, because we have to stop home again, and so on.

Eventually we get to the bridge, shown in Figure 7. A bridge typically offers contrasting material plus a harmonic passage that ultimately creates a desire to return to the primary verse or chorus. This bridge excels in both regards. The launch from Bm is our first visit to this part of the tonal space and then we find ourselves at the surprise C chord. It is familiar to us because we already know the song, but like the earlier E major, it remains a surprise in real time. By the time we hear this short phrase, we have completed the set of roots comprising our full diatonic space. The C major pushes us away from the two-sharp collection, but now in the opposite direction than the earlier E, this time to fewer sharps. It is almost a balancing force, after both the verse and chorus leaned the other way.

The first phrase provides all the contrast we could want in a bridge,

| Bm | Bm | C | C | D | A | Bm | E | E | A | A |

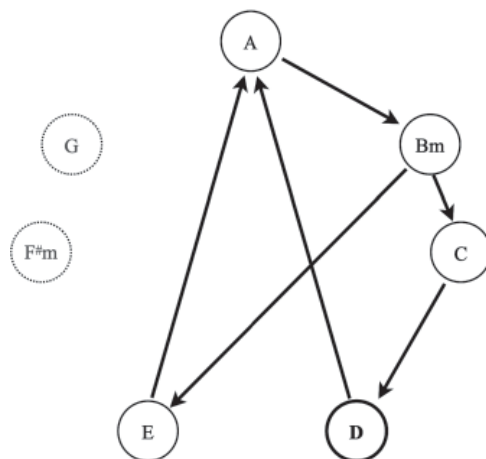


Figure 8. “Ramble on Rose”: Bridge (Phrase 2)

and the second phrase, shown in Figure 8, must do the heavy lifting to get us back home convincingly, which it does. Like phrase 1, it begins with the striking move from Bm to C and then navigates its way back to A so the subsequent verses—either as a guitar solo or sung—can triumphantly launch from the tonic D. Two points along the way are important here. First, this phrase contains the familiar E major, but this is the first functional use of the chord, borrowed from the key of A to emphasize the arrival on the chord A. Notice how it makes that arrival more powerful, particularly in comparison to how the A sounds, a few bars earlier. Second, the Bm in the middle of the phrase also sounds different than the earlier one. By the time that mid-phrase Bm arrives, we have already mostly counteracted the shift caused by the C major.

The pattern established here demonstrates how this phrase really balances the verse phrase in content, if not the precise motions. The verses use five locations, omitting the adjacent pair Bm and C, while this phrase uses five locations, omitting the mirror adjacent pair F#m and G.

From the omniscient perspective, superimposing all the motions used in “Ramble On Rose” on the D-centered space highlights the song’s already slightly unusual chord inflections and its completion of a whole

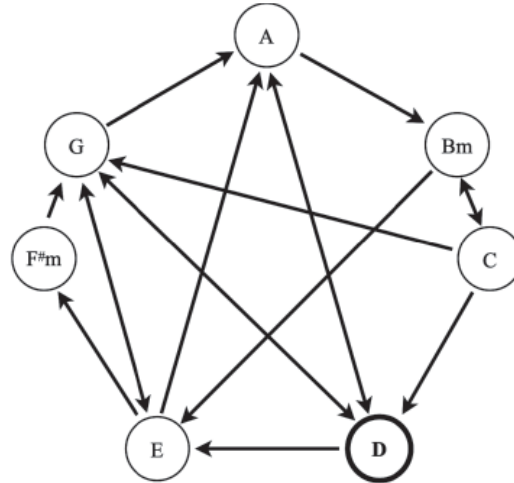


Figure 9. “Ramble on Rose”: Rambling Pathways

diatonic collection. This is how we wind up with Figure 9, the rambling pathways of the song. Though not a complete set of every possible move within this space, it is still incredibly busy for a seemingly conventional song. “Ramble On Rose” meanders here and there, backtracking or stopping home at will, but always getting where it needs to be on time. This kind of maximal variety is about as much as a songwriter can manage, while still retaining tonal directionality well enough so that no one notices how much is going on.

“Sugar Magnolia”

This brings up the second case study, “Sugar Magnolia.” Written by Bob Weir, the music for the song is centered on A, but with the same modifications we found in “Ramble on Rose.” It consists of a set of seven roots that comprise a full diatonic collection, again using the subtonic and major II chords, along with their implications of leaning in opposite directions. Figure 10 illustrates the A-centered harmonic palette for “Sugar Magnolia.”

Figure 11 illustrates the verse.² Immediately, it is much busier than “Ramble On Rose” and the chord progression barely fits in the graphic.

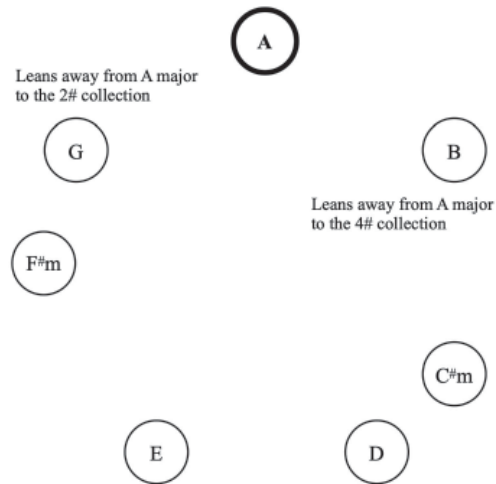


Figure 10. "Sugar Magnolia": A-Centered Harmonic Palette

||: A | ADA | AG | EA | A | C#m F#m | E | DA | A | EA :||

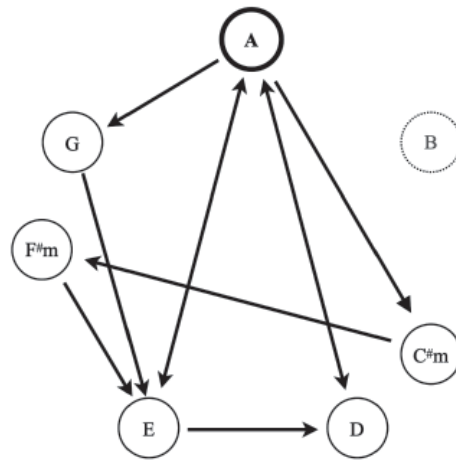


Figure 11. "Sugar Magnolia": Verse

|D|GD|D|AD|D|GD|D|EA|A|EA|

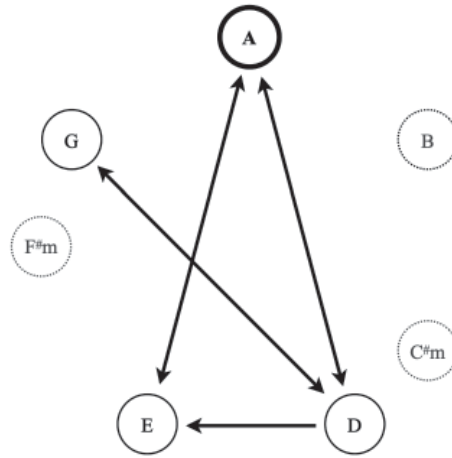


Figure 12. "Sugar Magnolia": Chorus

Also, all the chords except one, B, participate right away. The verse structure itself is relatively typical, a circular closed section starting and ending at home on A. The faster tempo and syncopations make the graphic a bit more difficult to follow in real time, but that just highlights the hectic nature of the motions.

The chorus provides a nice sectional contrast by starting on the subdominant chord D, then navigating back home to A across the passage. Figure 12 illustrates this motion. Like the "Ramble on Rose" chorus, all the chords are common and easy; in fact, they are the same exact set of chords, just in a different context. And again, like the chorus of "Ramble On Rose," there is a high degree of backtracking in this passage when we look at the whole picture.

This brings us to what can be called the refrain, for lack of a better label, shown in Figure 13. There is some debate over sectional terminology in "Sugar Magnolia." This part has been variously called the bridge or chorus, depending how those sources labeled the prior section. I avoid the term bridge here because it does not function like one; moreover, that label works best for the final section before the coda. Regardless of the

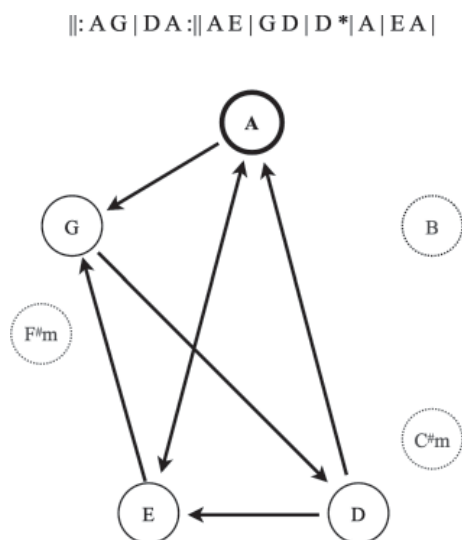


Figure 13. “Sugar Magnolia”: Refrain

label of the various sections, the debate itself suggests that this song has some formal complexity. There are two elements that warrant particular attention along the way. First, the opening repeated segment offers a chance to see/hear what a more typical rock progression looks like in this graphic style. It will happen three times before returning to Grateful Dead-style navigation. That little loop serves as a reference for why all these other motions seem so special.³ Second, once we have moved on from there, there is a noticeable time meltdown somewhere on D—represented by the asterisk—with the drums laying out and an extra two beats thrown in, like a car hitting a slick patch and sliding for a moment before regaining traction. As the GPS composite in Figure 13 shows, these are the same locations used in the prior section, but we have traversed them in an entirely different way in this portion of the song.

A few commentators call the final section shown in Figure 14 a verse, and there are even sources that assign the same old verse chords to the opening four bars, but that is not what happens in the music. The chords are different, and this passage acts as a bridge to the “Sunshine Daydream” coda. The first four bars vary somewhat in detail over the years,

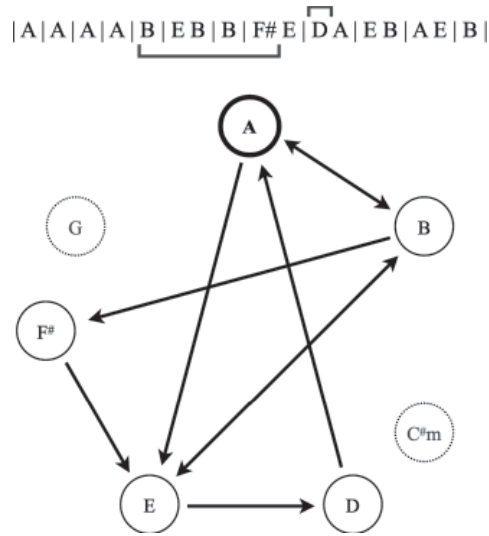


Figure 14. “Sugar Magnolia”: Bridge

but because the reference recording here is the fiftieth-anniversary release, it is basically just an A chord this time. Two elements in this passage merit particular mention. First, the move to B in bar 5 is a surprising shift up a step, strongly emphasized by the rare lack of motion that precedes it. This dramatic B is a new harmonic location, completing the full harmonic space. Second, after that passage, around the F# chord (now major), the meter gets weird. In this chart, it is barred in a steady meter because the extra pairs of beats in two spots cancel each other out in the end, making the final B wind up on a downbeat anyway.

Those who know the song may know that the “Sunshine Daydream” coda is in B. If so, you might expect that once B and F# major arrive in the middle of this phrase, we are already there, perhaps even as early as that first step up to B, as emphasized by the brackets in Figure 14. But we are not quite there yet. The D chord, also bracketed, is solidly back in the original key of A, which in turn creates the need for all the subsequent activity and bustle to make a convincing arrival on the held B that finally sets up the coda.

Returning to our omniscient perspective, Figure 15 superimposes all

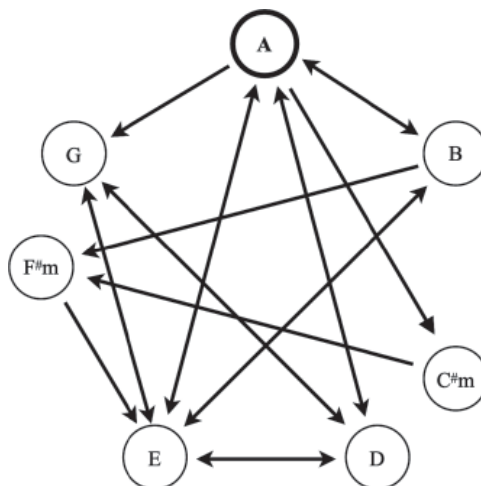


Figure 15. “Sugar Magnolia”: Wandering Pathways

the harmonic motions in the song on this A-centered space, already slightly unusual as previously discussed, revealing these wandering pathways. As in the prior case study, while it is not a complete set of every possible move within this space, it is incredibly busy.

Conclusion

Both “Ramble On Rose” and “Sugar Magnolia” do not fall into any of the usual experimental categories associated with the Grateful Dead catalog. They are not epic modal explorations, nor sequences of chords that do not add up to anything tonally familiar. Rather, they use ordinary chords with typical arrival points for phrases, which creates a clear sense of tonality and form. They seem unassuming, simple, and direct. Yet performing them reveals much more, exposing something convoluted under that smooth surface, showing songs that travel many paths and backtrack in strange ways, continually recasting the same chords in different lights. This rambling and wandering manner of navigating tonal space feels adventurous, even psychedelic, in both the musical and literal senses of the word: the startling encounter with strangeness in the familiar, and the ways that courts insight. Depicting that graphically has always

challenged the Dead's chroniclers, from the first Ice Nine songbooks to more recent efforts by scholars.⁴ The approach here offers a novel solution for depicting the Dead's compositional sophistication, illustrating how some of that elusive strangeness can successfully be pinned down for analysis.

As musicologists delve more deeply into the Dead's canon, broadening the scope of that inquiry include a wide range of songs, including even those that appear to be less complex, offers important insights into the band's work and achievement. The two songs here point to the rewards of that approach, even as they highlight the challenge of illustrating it. Most of all, as representative compositions by each of the Dead's two primary composers, both "Ramble On Rose" and "Sugar Magnolia" make clear that the band's use of deceptively complex harmonic motions within conventional song structures is a vital, defining characteristic of the Grateful Dead's musical universe.

Notes

1. At the conference this paper was presented with real-time animation highlighting the sounding chords and tracking where they went as the audio example played. The graphics model any version of "Ramble on Rose," but the audio examples used in the conference presentation were from May 26, 1972, at the Lyceum Theatre, London, in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of the Europe '72 tour.
2. The graphics model most versions of "Sugar Magnolia," but the audio examples used in the conference presentation were from May 4, 1972, at L'Olympia, Paris, in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of the Europe '72 tour.
3. Watching the three-chord loop in real time to the audio example more effectively conveys the contrast between the harmonic twists and turns in these songs and typical rock progressions.
4. The range of representations given to the band's songbook is extensive; for official efforts, see Grateful Dead (1973; 1979; 1996); for scholarly efforts, see Boone (2010); Daley (2019/2020); and Longcroft-Wheaton (2020).

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