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Alive, Again: The Lost Liner Notes for *Skull and Roses*

ALAN TRIST

Alive, again: In the spring of 1971 the Dead went on a month-long tour of the East Coast with the New Riders of the Purple Sage and a sixteen-track tape machine, operated by Alembic, to make a record. They played twenty performances in thirteen cities and collected some sixty hours of tape, from which the seventy minutes of music on the double album were eventually selected.

This is not a review of that music. It is a kaleidoscope of impressions of the recording and producing of a live album from the viewpoint of the Grateful Dead, taken in its wider sense to mean a creating, producing, technical community. So, for the traditional review-as-judgment, the music must speak for itself. This is a demystification trip about what's going on with one working band, "behind the amps," as they engage the task of making a live recording on the road, reflecting what the Dead are behind the music: an ongoing family community which includes not only musicians—on the new album, the original Dead quintuplet of Jerry Garcia, Bob Weir, Phil Lesh, Bill Kreutzmann, and Ron McKernan—but also managers and accountants, sound engineers and equipment handlers, artists and designers, staffers and secretaries. All of these form an interweaving and layering of domestic scenes: recording facilities and instrument makers, suppliers and craftsman; good friends and protectors, poets and lyricists, communicators all.

Whether it's at Manhattan Center, the Fillmore East, or Winterland—the three venues of the tour from which the best music was eventually

selected—live recording produces a different kind of experience than the studio, a statement in a performance environment, which always affects the content of the Dead's music. Audiences, specifically the Dead's kind of audience, are part of the music, as the band has said: "Sometimes we get off on them, sometimes they get off on us, sometimes it happens together. Any which way, we make music so that what's happening off-stage can be worked into the overall trip." A live recording means that the Dead have responded to the dynamics of their setting, moment by moment. A listener can feel he is part of that setting—on those particular nights, at those places. This album covers all that, with the special mix and range of songs representative of a live concert: new songs—"Bertha," "Wharf Rat," "Playing in the Band"—an old song ("The Other One"), and old favorites: "Johnny B. Goode," "Not Fade Away," "Goin' Down the Road Feeling Bad."

At some point in the making of this record we flashed that it would make a cyclic reference to the past. The Latino Ballroom scene was happening in New York some ten years ago, but later faded out, to be replaced by sit-down concerts and night clubs: live sound and the energy of movement became separated. The ballroom tradition was picked up on again in the mid-'60s in San Francisco. The Carousel created a new fusion of audience and musicians, with different kinds of audiences and newer kinds of music. The quality of high enthusiasm is not the same today in San Francisco as it once was, but New York, long in the doldrums of discothèques and 'The Show,' seems to be re-awakening to the energy of the ballroom. At least that was what was happening at the Manhattan Center gig at the beginning of the tour. Too crowded to move, yet wildly durable, enthusiastic, and open; pressure to perform on every song. A different kind of high from the San Francisco scene—but this is New York transforming the energy in its own way.

Somehow the concert gets advertised as a marathon and the entire audience is equipped with sleeping bags and toothbrushes. Everyone's ready to boogie till daylight, believing the band will play right through, or at least until everyone drops from sheer exhaustion. The Dead play for four hours, nonstop. Hard sweating music, with everyone breathing down their necks because there's no place else to catch any air. The second night

becomes the marathon, as advertised. A marathon of heat, and holding up in all the jostling, I-only-want-room-to-breathe New York zaniness. At the end of the second night the floor is wet from perspiration; even the trash glistens. And when it's all done, people hit the street in the same way. The New York air! Who would believe it would be a joy to breathe the city's atmosphere? But the Dead and freaks alike hang around the back door, where the sixteen-track is set up in a closet. (There is a technical rumor that tape records better at sub-zero temperatures). Gasping in the spring-time of two o'clock in the morning, the freaks go home and wait for the next time. The Dead strike out for three weeks on the road, more recording and more sweat. The Manhattan tapes are in the vault.

"Where is the bus?" The Road Manager is raving at the highs and hassles of keeping the whole damned thing together. To Boston, through Pennsylvania (no Doctor Pepper), changing plans, lows and highs, to North Carolina (thirty-three roast beef sandwiches, etc.). Sometimes we take a plane: it becomes a familiar hassle trying to explain to the air-freight man what the 800 lb. sixteen-track is. ("Couldn't you guys do it on a Sony?")

While the band and crew are ricocheting around the country, invisible to communication in a space-time warp of air shuttles and time zones, the folks back at the office are taking care of other business, always staying in tune with what's happening out on the road, shipping out forgotten items, conveying messages, developing plans. There's been talk of a European tour in 1972. Having recently arrived from England to work in the office, I spring out of this energy and, working by telepathy, return to do the initial advance work, feeling the pulse of the recording across the Atlantic.

Meanwhile, back in New York City again, Bob and Betty establish the recording booth under the stage at the Fillmore East. The equipment crew struggles for the last time with three tons of gear that feels like forty, and road manager Sam Cutler, back at the hotel, is sure he's going to die behind all the changing plans. Everyone's dead on their feet, but incredibly, ready to play! By now, the routine and pace of the show is regular. About 6 p.m. every night, Bob, Betty, Ramrod and several musicians arrive at the hall. Betty sets up the mics, Ramrod checks the band's

equipment and starts turning it all on, and Bob fools around with the sixteen-track, wondering if some day we might be able to do it on a Sony. Electricity goes on. Amps hum and crackle for a minute. The PA amps all go on at once with their fans sounding like flying saucers taking off. The stage crew starts coming in, lights go on and finally people. The Fillmore becomes a transformed world of tie-dye sheets and flashing green and red lights and meters, and the sixteen-track squatting ready to catch every nuance. Everything is trim, snug. A home away from home.

Just before 8 p.m., the lights go down. One more final mic check before the New Riders come on. They played all the concerts of the tour, opening for the Dead and taking the tension off the evening with their laid-back approach, encouraging people to stay cool, get high, and dig that the music was being recorded, and could they please not stand on the stage and stomp in time because it was playing havoc with the microphones. After about an hour, they finish and the great equipment scramble starts. Betty moves the mics. Sparky moves the vocal monitors. Hagen goes off with an armful of Spencer's drums, while Jackson brings on Billy's drums. Ramrod is taking off equipment and Heard is bringing more on. Finally the drums are nailed down, the mics are all in their places, everybody on the stage looks at each other and says, "Ready." Lights low, Sam walks across the back of the stage followed by the band. Next it's tuning up and start the sixteen-track.

The set starts and everybody is at work. The music starts fast, goes through changes. A Weir ballad, a rock and roll tune, now a three-part harmony. The first set lasts about an hour and twenty minutes and is mostly songs and tunes. Twenty-minute break while the tape is changed and the band takes a breather. The second set starts. Longer, more involved communication with the audience happens at this time of night. They respond to the end of the concert as though there were no time and nothing should end.

The audience (knowing that the Fillmore East is to close soon) picks up on all the elements of exhaustion that seem to typify the end of a major tour. It's hard work, hard to play out, to really cook, especially after so many up-tight places, each laying its own peculiarity on you that now sweep around in everyone's personal ozone like mini-memories to disturb

both concentration and expression.

But here is almost home. The band sleeps all day, and evenings are spent at the Fillmore. The Grateful Dead doing their uptown for all New York, with interviews and out-of-mind telephones that never stop ringing, and pretty girls with tired faces who can't imagine why it is that they never turn these musicians on. ("It worked with all the other ones!")

And our friends. The few islands of sanity in the midst of it all. They're taking photos, rolling joints, trying to keep out of the way of people taking care of business. Sam is smuggling Hells Angels through the back door while equipment guys smuggle in ladies through the front, everyone's tripping on the light show, and then Bill Graham is saying thank you, and back to the hotel for one last fling and it's the 9:15 a.m. flight from JFK and we're all going home. Nobody says a thing. Everyone sleeps on the plane.

Back home, one more gig at Winterland and we have the tapes of one month in the life of the Grateful Dead's music, sounding as it sounded on hot evenings, somewhere "out there" on the road, where nobody knew if it was going to be good until we got home and listened to it all again, and then we knew we had a record.

June. The Marin hills are brown and hot, it's time to lay back and let the cosmic fly tickle your nose. Slowly, the band, Hunter, and Bob and Betty, and Steve Barncard, and just about everyone else from time to time, are in and out of the studio: listening and selecting, thinking back to the feeling of the performance, looking for the crisp and chunky, overdubbing a ragged harmony or blunt discord. Somehow it all gets together into quality, to a master tape that captures the real live sound of the Grateful Dead, on stage, in interaction with the audience, leading to the high place of unity, harmony, energy where you can catch a glimpse of a vision ...

Meanwhile Alton Kelley, knowing that that's what it's all about, is working on the album cover art, looking for an image to fit the idea. He digs up the old poster that he and Stanley Mouse created for a Grateful Dead concert at the Avalon Ballroom. Kelley had found E. J. Sullivan's engraving of the rose-crowned skeleton in an old edition of the *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* in 1966. "That's it. The skeleton says it." It all fits in his head and the cover art takes shape: "Grateful Dead" is a

heavy name needing a heavy picture, but one that reflects the ambiguity of joy. The skeleton does just that: strong, light, and elegant; coherence, harmony. It relates to the live sound everyone has wanted on a Dead record since the Avalon days, and a glimpse of a vision ...

When all the pieces are together it's time to get Warner Bros. moving. And now we have caught up with the present. The record is out. The Grateful Dead and the New Riders of the Purple Sage are on the road again: Midwest in the second half of October; South and Southwest in November; East Coast in December. With new material; alive, again.

ALAN TRIST served as longtime manager of the Grateful Dead's Ice Nine Publishing Company. He cofounded Hulogosi Communications, a Eugene-based publishing house that published his *The Water of Life: A Tale of the Grateful Dead* and *Alleys of the Heart: The Collected Poems of Robert M. Petersen*, among other volumes. His poetry and essays have appeared in a variety of books, journals, and other periodicals.