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“Listen to the Music Play”:
The Grateful Dead as
Artistic Inspiration

JASON ROBERT GALLAGHER

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“Listen to the Music Play”: The Grateful Dead as Artistic Inspiration

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THE GRATEFUL DEAD MEAN DIFFERENT THINGS to different people: they are a band, a community, even a way of life. Scholars have explored all of these facets of the Dead phenomenon, yet one of the band’s central roles—and one that connects and runs through all of these meanings—is the Dead’s ability to inspire, to serve as a spur and conduit for creativity itself. This paper addresses that dimension of the band’s project, using a creative nonfiction approach to explore how the Dead’s model can inform and connect to the process of writing a poem, and tracing how that process can usefully borrow from the artistic philosophies and creative practices of the Grateful Dead.

Robert Hunter illustrates the core principle of artistic creation in his lyrics for “Franklin’s Tower.” Though not a song that immediately suggests inspiration, such as “Terrapin Station” or “Scarlet Begonias,” “Franklin’s Tower” offers a more subtle and perhaps ultimately more powerful message with its reminder that, “If you get confused, listen to music play.” It is a striking line, asking the creator of a work of art to move with the act of creation. The implications are profound: not only does the line evoke the ways that one form of art can bleed into another, it also reminds artists that while they are engaging with that other art form, they can find the outlet they need to overcome a creative hurdle.

When we listen to the Grateful Dead, it is not always with our ears alone. Many Deadheads have heard countless versions of the same song that at the same time are completely different from the last version we heard. Even when listening to the same performance of a Dead song, listeners are often surprised to hear something new in a performance they have heard many times before. It is that quality that keeps fans coming back to even their most well-known recordings. And it is this ability of the Dead's music that also engages Deadhead artists, who look at the Dead as a guide and inspiration for artistic creation. The link between the creativity that drove the Dead, and the example they provide of how to unlock that creativity, is the subject of this essay.

Like many others, the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic drove me back to old interests, ones that I had lost touch with over time. There were many things I had been remiss in keeping in my life and it was because of a feeling that I had grown away or out of them. Not to sound like a fifties sci-fi movie, but I was a teenage Deadhead. I fell in love with a copy of *Europe '72* I found in someone's CD wallet at a retreat my freshman year in high school almost thirty years ago. The music was refreshing and expansive without being alienating, and it had just the right amount of Keith Godchaux's piano to impress an aspiring pianist, which I was at the time. I don't know if I would have had the same response to the Dead if the first album I had heard was *Anthem of the Sun* or *Aoxomoxoa*, though I did grow to appreciate those offerings.

From that moment on, I was hooked, my fascination fueled by weekly sessions of the *Grateful Dead Hour*. I became a full-fledged jam band fan, especially of Phish; however, unlike my friends, I was most enamored of the world of the Grateful Dead. Access was a key part of that: the Dead were the most available of those bands in the rural Midwest where I spent my adolescence, and

recordings were plentiful, thanks to the Deadhead tape trading culture.

As I grew up, I fell out of the Dead's orbit. I didn't start to dislike the band, but an important part of my development as a music lover got shunted aside due to external forces that I could not counteract. For a period of my life I just stopped listening to the Dead. What changed that was the pandemic, which put me and my wife in life-changing circumstances. Moreover, I needed to keep my wits about me. There was a feeling that I needed to be back in a place that was familiar and calming but also explored the unknown in a positive way and with a bent toward humanism. I don't know how I found my way back to the Dead but there they were. Part of me must have been thinking, "The way time is passing is different now. You might as well get lost in some jams."

So, with my wife most likely battling the virus, I found myself marooned at an extended stay motel thousands of miles from the city I had called home for almost a decade, and I decided to return to an activity I knew in my soul, the only thing I knew how to do at that moment: I started to write poems and listen to the Grateful Dead, going back to where it all started for me, *Europe '72*.

I am a writer—specifically a poet. Although I sang and played music for many years, I do not consider myself a musician. I wouldn't be writing this if I didn't appreciate music, but I wouldn't consider myself as familiar with music as I once was. For example, I know I have a vocal range but I couldn't tell you when I'm singing out of it. However, there is something about the power of poetry and the power of music. Of course, for much of human history these two art forms were the same. Maybe my interest in music is the reason I became a poet. Sometimes that musicality expresses itself in poems of mine that I consider good, perhaps even very good; other times the results need work—they need to wait and see.

The poems that I wrote under the influence of my first return to the Grateful Dead weren't good.

They are definitely wait-and-see poems: COVID efforts, more like journal entries, where—like all of us—I was trying to figure out how and in what way life was going to go on in a landscape that was foreign. This foreignness produced intense thoughts and feelings, and going through feelings and trying to make sense of them are all part of the writing process.

Any creative endeavor has its process. Beginners rely on the process as the way to learn how to engage with the craft. Every apprentice to a craft has to believe in the process, but also not to worry about doing it in a fixed, rote way. The process is different for each artist. That is useful advice, if perhaps clichéd, yet projects need to be completed, and how writers approach projects stems from how they have related to the process since their early apprenticeship.

A friend and fellow writer recently told me something about her writing process that surprised me. She had just moved to a new place and was still trying to get accustomed to the new sounds in her neighborhood. “I can’t write with music,” she commented. “I can do the first draft, maybe, with sounds, but when I’m really concentrating, I can’t have music playing because I get distracted; I start following the music.” Yet that is the joy of being a Deadhead, and of writing to the Grateful Dead: You are never required to follow the music when listening to the Dead. Part of the fun of the Dead is that it is music to get lost in. I’ve been listening to May 25, 1977, lately because it is the date of my parents’ marriage. It is a concert that means something special, something personal. I can listen to the concert again and again and still find something new about it, yet I am still getting lost in the experience. I have listened to my favorite show from that year, May 19, 1977, dozens of times, and yet it feels fresh and innovative each time I listen to it. I woke up to May 4, 1972, every day for over a year.

My friend who can’t write with music helped me understand what fascinates me about the link

between writing poetry and listening to the music of the Grateful Dead. Finding oneself interested in music that is experimental—that is continually changing and growing in your consciousness—makes writers want to reflect that in their own work. And what makes that possible—what makes that so inspiring and compelling and challenging—is how the Dead’s experimentation is coupled with freedom.

The Dead’s music is about freedom. Both freedom from the confines of what is considered possible and the freedom to wear your influences on your sleeve. The Dead were a band that appreciated the forms and styles that came before them, even those that were peeking out from avenues that seemed counter to where their interests lay. As Charles Reich marveled, “Although the Grateful Dead took old forms like blues and country music as their base, they were incredibly open to new influences and new forms which came their way” (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner 1972, 20). This is a band who invited musicians as diverse as Bo Diddley, the Beach Boys, and Ornette Coleman to play with them. I think it is important to stress that word “play” when talking about the Dead’s collaborations. These musicians did more than open for the Dead. Instead, the Dead asked them to sit in: they incorporated these varied musicians into their own creative process.

It didn’t always work. Yet that is part of the joy of hearing others play with the Dead, listening to the ways that the Dead incorporated their guests into their performances: It is about taking the risk, knowing that you are venturing into unknown places while still looking at those who came before you.

Even if not all of these explorations were successful, the Dead never stopped trying them. The band was never afraid to take those risks; they never worried about losing their audience. The art came first and the audience followed, precisely *because* of the fearlessness of the art. This is the band behind “Dark Star,” of course, but also the

band behind “Feedback,” “Drums,” and “Space,” the band who made “Seastones” a part of twenty-four concerts.¹ A writer needs to find this kind of mix in their creative process. We are our influences. For every “The Wheel” there needs to be a cover of “Man Smart, Women Smarter,” acting as a signpost to what is influencing the artist at the time. If 1977 is considered an artistic high point, the Deadhead can’t forget that spring ’77 was also a time when the band regularly played three Chuck Berry songs a night. For everything new and unique that they were doing, they brought their music back to the reasons that put them on stage in the first place.

The Dead also teach the writer not to be a perfectionist. No piece is truly done. They have no beginning or end. That was something the band built into their magnum opus “Dark Star,” as Tom Constanten explained: “‘Dark Star’ is going on all the time. It’s going on right now. You don’t begin it so much as enter it. You don’t end it so much as leave it” (Greenfield 1996, 126). Textual scholars have long claimed the same of any literary text, an argument that Nicholas G. Meriwether (2023) has shown has particular applicability to the Dead’s approach to their songs. That is especially true of poetry. No poem is ever completed by a living poet as long as performance remains an important aspect of the world surrounding poetry. Nothing is finished—but there is always an origin.

The origin has always been something that has interested the outside observer of the Dead. Describing the creation of a song to Charles Reich, Garcia commented that each song had a different origin story; sometimes he let ideas float around in his head for three or four weeks before setting them down. “I never try to work on stuff,” he explained, “you know, like sit down and labor it” (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner 1972, 78). For him, the process of creation needed to be organic, an approach that also made songwriting a collective effort that allowed for input from Hunter, as lyricist, and the other band members:

And then what it turns into after it’s become a song in your head is it turns into a piece of material for the band—everybody plays an equal role in that part of it—and that’s the way it finally evolves as a song ... If it’s one of my songs, it’s never what I originally heard, it’s always something that includes more than I might have conceived myself. (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner 1972, 79)

That process relies on the Muse, both for Hunter and for him: “that’s the way Hunter writes—he writes his words pretty much the same way. Things just come to him, you know. An idea comes by, or a picture, an image, sort of floats by, it’s all in the air kind of. It’s a matter of being able to tune into it” (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner 1972, 79).

That flexibility—that openness—was not an abdication of discipline. In the end, the Dead were always thinking about craft. As Garcia put it, “We’ve all been doing it pretty long so that the craft is there and luckily sometimes, the flash is there, the brilliance to be able to ... for the craft to have something to hang on to, you know, a little shred, that’s the thing that really counts” (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner 1972, 82. Ellipses in original).

Garcia says that the thing that makes someone a musician is that they “do” music. It is always in your head and you are always working on it. The same can be said for a poet. I am always writing poems. There is never a time when I’m not thinking about the next component of a poem. The poem just continues acting as part of the tapestry of the poems that have come before or after it, both those written by me and those written by my lineage and my contemporaries. Since poetry is a spoken as much as written literary experience, when I read a poem at a poetry reading, the audience is never guaranteed that I am going to read the poem the way that it is written on the page. There is always the possibility of elisions, additions, or substitutions. I am always looking for ways to respond to the energy and interest of the audience, even if that doesn’t mean I’m always

going to be able to meet the audience where they are at the moment of reception.

Garcia also talks about being triggered by something that leads to a song being written in one sitting. This type of creative process has happened to me many times, and I am almost ashamed to admit it. I have written poems in twenty or twenty-five minutes that I went on to perform that same night. I would never say that those pieces could not be improved but I think that Garcia is making a point about the nature of inspiration. Artists don't need to be precious about their art. Works can emerge swiftly and naturally from a wellspring, and their creators can feel how those pieces work differently from pieces that are labored over. I don't think that one type of writing is better than the other—but I believe that with time the writer becomes more attuned to those ebbs and flows in the creative process.

That, too, is something Garcia alluded to in his interview with Reich. He makes the point that there are also songs that do not come easily. “Truckin’” is one of those songs, an effort that “wasn't natural and it didn't flow and it wasn't easy and we really labored over the bastard, all of us together” (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner 1972, 81). That, too, can be the process of writing poetry. I have been working on a book-length project for three years, and while many of the poems have come naturally, as a whole the project has been, to use Garcia's language, a real bastard. What he means is that a finished work can easily belie the effort that went into it. Often, those who engage with artistic creation passively think that only genius propels projects forward. While there is something about genius—perhaps better termed inspiration, or muse—that does drive artist creation, there is also—always—effort, just working at craft, day in and day out. Every writer understands that writing is a skill; you need to do it every day in order to keep it fresh. In a 1976 interview Garcia observed:

I think that it's a good thing to have something that you can work on, on a more or less daily basis, and be able to see improvement on your own terms; that is the 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 ... 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 worry about how you are being judged in an 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. (Riley 2022, 116)

Sam Cutler remembered that, when Garcia was living in Larkspur, he taught himself to play pedal steel guitar with remarkable discipline and intensity:

He had a room downstairs that was off the sitting room that he was in, and he had his pedal steel set up in there, and the TV. He used to play the pedal steel through headphones, so you couldn't hear what he was doing—he'd have headphones on, and the TV would be on ... He wasn't really looking at anything, he was just listening to the pedal steel. (Jarnow 2020)

What impressed Cutler was Garcia's single-minded focus: “he just sat there for ... at least 10–12 hours a day, just to master it. He used to stop, come out, have a joint, I'd talk to him; then he'd go back. He'd stop for food, Mountain Girl would take him some food in there, and he'd stop to sleep, and that was about it” (Jarnow 2020). It is a striking example of the importance of dedication to craft. In classic Garcia fashion, he was always critical of his pedal steel playing, but that doesn't mean that he wasn't proud of the work and time that he put into mastering the instrument.

Even more, the work was all part of the fun. Fun is also one of the central principles of the Dead aesthetic that is not always acknowledged. Reich spent time with the Dead in the studio in

1971, watching them work on their eponymous live album, nicknamed *Skull and Roses*. He was impressed: “There was no room for carelessness, sloppiness, or lack of craftsmanship. But I could see that it was fun ...” (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner, 1972, 17). What Reich saw was perhaps better described as joy in creation, in artistic effort that was succeeding, and it was a phrase that Garcia used often in discussing the band’s work. “We’ve played every conceivable venue, and it hasn’t been it,” he mused in 1973. “What can we do that’s more fun, more interesting?” (Perry 1973, 112).

There are also many moments in the history of the Dead when the band simply had fun. That included hijinks on the road to leaven the grueling nature of touring—firecrackers in a hotel courtyard, a hotfoot for a dozing crew member—to even stage pranks, such as when Lesh had a person in a Barney the dinosaur costume take his place for a few moments. That humor has confused some critics, who have misread that side of the band and even conflated it with their improvisatory approach: after all, if they had a sense of humor, perhaps they somehow were not serious about their music (e.g., Zwagerman 2020). Nothing could be further from the truth. As Owsley Stanley noted, the Dead “always had a sense of responsibility to a paying audience ... Always, right from the beginning. There was never a time that it wasn’t there” (Gans 2002, 312). But that seriousness of purpose, and the underlying commitment that drove it, was clearly different from how they viewed themselves as humans: They knew they were flawed, they recognized their foibles, and they knew the power of laughter as a way to acknowledge those. No wonder that, to a person, they refused to take themselves too seriously.

Their collective project, however, was *always* serious: their music was never something they took lightly, as almost every interview made clear. Appreciating that balancing act is essential if one

is to understand their project: how they could take their work seriously without taking themselves seriously. That, too, is a lesson: often, literary creators take themselves too seriously. The Dead were able to take their work seriously while also having fun—and poke fun at themselves along the way. A look at any of the photo shoots they did throughout their career shows people who can laugh at themselves. They know when to take themselves seriously, and when not to.

Fun is directly related to interest—to the sources that inspire you. The members of the Grateful Dead were known for having interests that ranged far beyond just music. They explored and thought about philosophy, religion, literature, the visual arts including printing and film, and philanthropic causes close to home and around the world. Though some surviving band members became more outspoken politically after Garcia’s death, opining with the occasional Instagram post and dedicating songs in concert to various causes, the Dead were never a political band: they believed in an expanded consciousness, one that derived from much more than just drug experimentation. The Dead had a far more subtle and expansive understanding of what consciousness could be: they were about experimentation *and* acceptance. The Dead tell the writer to look beyond what is conventional and explore wherever the muse takes them. Look at all the genres that find themselves wrapped into the Dead’s musical aesthetic: blues, bluegrass, jug band, jazz, avant-garde, classical, funk, pop, reggae, disco. The Dead were never afraid to explore a different genre or to wear their influences on their sleeves. The Dead are about knowing your roots, your origins, while at the same time looking forward, always forward.

And that is a signal lesson that the band modeled, one that has inspired many writers. As longtime band staffer Alan Trist noted, that is “the path which the Grateful Dead espoused for their own creativity and which opened the doors of creative fire in others” (2010, 10). For writers,

that inspiration has taken many forms: novels by Philip Baruth (1994) and Dean Budnick (2016), creative nonfiction by Douglas Coupland (1996), short stories by Ryan Dunham (2018), poetry by Robert Cooperman (2004; 2018; 2020), and dozens of others.

I count myself in that company. At its core, the Dead's example embodies the sense of tradition and experimentation that also inspires my work, that drives the poetry that I write. One poem about the Grateful Dead, part of an extended sonnet cycle about St. Louis during the 1970s that I am completing now, serves as an example of that lesson—that inspiration—and that inheritance:

I, perchance, am a bastard in the eyes
Of certain gods like Checkerboard Square was
To St. Louis society. Maybe 'cause
No one wants to think about the prize
At the bottom of a Chex box. Surprise!
They got to name the Arena and hear the Ahs
Of the crowd for Zep or the Dead. Sainte
Francoise
Country rockers driving for a reprise

Of "Eyes of the World," or the first "Iko, Iko"
All in the place I only knew as the
Checkerdome. Leave it to Purina. They
Lost interest in the Blues and one "Psycho
Killer" was performed at Kiel not at a
Struggling hockey rink some yesterday.

Notes

An earlier version of this paper was given at the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association conference (Gallagher 2023).

1. "Seastones" was performed from June through October 1974, usually dubbed "Phil and Ned" (Scott, Dolgushkin, and Nixon 1999, 201). *Dicks Picks 12* uses the title "Seastones," which is why that term is used here.

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