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Extraordinary Experiences: Listening to the Grateful Dead

MICHAEL KALER

It is certainly not uncommon for Deadheads to report having extraordinary, life-changing experiences while listening to the Dead's music. In many cases, those experiences are precisely why they became Deadheads in the first place. But experiences by themselves, no matter how powerful, are only part of the whole context that creates an event and what it will mean for us. Our experiences' meanings derive not just from the experiences themselves, but also from what takes place before and after those experiences: the ways in which we have been prepared for them, how we come to understand them, what we understand to be their ultimate sources, and what we want them to mean for us.

Discussing "special things," or anomalous and powerful experiences, Ann Taves argues that their meanings and contextualizations, particularly their "religious" or "spiritual" features, are not inherent. Rather, these meanings are ascribed to them: "people incorporate special things into more complex formations involving practices (and chains of memory related to those practices) in order to (re-)establish or maintain a connection with the special thing over time" (Taves 2011, 48). As Joseph Felser notes, "What if the very point of an anomalous event were lost when it was not seen from the perspective of the experiencer, as an episode in his or her life story?" (2004, 101).

This paper offers some considerations that might affect how we think about these experiences. I will not come to any definitive answers—in this, I follow in the footsteps of the members of the Grateful Dead themselves—but I will present some considerations that I have found to

be useful as I interrogate my own experiences of listening to the Grateful Dead, in the hopes that they will be useful for others as well.

We can begin by defining—or rather, deliberately not defining—a key term, namely “extraordinary experience.” The term is used in some contexts to refer specifically to experiences in which the laws of nature appear to be broken (cf. Hofmann and Wiedemer 1997), but for the purpose of this paper, “extraordinary experience” can be defined more loosely, so that it refers to the sorts of moments that stick with people as being somehow really meaningful even if they can’t quite say how—the sorts of moments that easily get mingled in with their ideas about religion or spirituality. As well, while they are powerful moments, they are moments whose meaning is not completely defined, which makes sense: if they were the sorts of things that we felt we fully understood (such as the elation of getting a promotion, the sorrow of the death of a parent), we would not need to interrogate them as much as celebrate or live through them. These are experiences that captivate us with their power, but that in their core remain elusive.

Before delving into these specific experiences, it is important to note how widespread the idea is that music and extraordinary experiences are in some way linked. Whether expressed in myths and foundational writings or in personal anecdotes and turns of phrase, we all carry with us implicit assumptions that music has the power to do powerful and weird things to us or to the world around us. These assumptions may be formed through mythical stories such as the effects of Joshua’s trumpet on the walls of Jericho, or the sirens’ song that almost lured Odysseus to his death; they may be expressed through prohibitions or regulations regarding music that assume its power, whether those of Plato’s ideal Republic or the discussions of music that we see in Muslim, Christian and Jewish contexts (cf. Beck 2006), or the racialized fear of music’s power that led to the repression of early rock and roll; they may even be transmitted through stories (cf. Willin 2022), cultural tropes or turns of phrase, as when music is discussed using language indebted to religious or spiritual discourse, such as when a friend speaks of a concert as having been “divine” or “life changing.” In a thousand different ways, we have all been made aware that music can be magic; this awareness precedes and helps condition our listening experiences.

This brings us to our first contextualizing moment. It is useful to keep in mind that when we start thinking about music and our extraordinary experience, there is all kinds of history (cultural, social, intellectual, and often religious) lurking behind and around our experiences. If we think here in terms of the psychedelic typology of set, setting, and dose as creating your experience, we can say that there is already a whole lot of set around when we hear music, and that this will inevitably influence how we come to and are changed by the music. Thus, when we find a link between Grateful Dead music and extraordinary experience, we need to keep in mind that we have already been prepared for that in general terms relevant to our culture as a whole, as well as in specifically Dead-related terms—for instance, the idea that “trippy” songs like “Playing in the Band” or “The Other One” are more potent than songs like “Deal,” or that the second set is where the good stuff really happens, or the idea that the band’s magic peaked in 1972, and so on.

Taking these considerations into account does not falsify our extraordinary experiences, but it does contextualize them: it helps us find out where they live in our personal and cultural history. And that history, of course, will be a little different for each of us depending on our cultural inputs and expectations. For example, listening to “He’s Gone” is likely to have a different effect when you think of it as being about Mickey Hart’s father Lenny, who ripped off the band, than it does when you hear it as a memorial to Pigpen—and it is reasonable to think that those with the latter interpretation are more likely to have extraordinary experiences triggered by the song.

The importance of contextualizing the experience is an appropriate place to begin our discussion of music’s power, because part of that contextualization involves recognizing the possibility that we may have some inherited assumptions that would lead us to think that this overlap between extraordinary experiences and music has something to do with the specific physical characteristics of the music. This is not a far-fetched assumption to make: after all, if one has weird experiences when certain columns of vibrating air come into contact with one’s ears, then it makes intuitive sense to assume that the columns of air must be responsible.

And this intuitive understanding is often backed up by cultural and intellectual context. We may feel, with Plato, that certain emotions

are automatically aroused by certain selections of notes in a mode. We may also learn from raga theory that certain complex arrangements of notes, phrases, and cadences carry, or ought to carry, defined emotional resonances. We may let the Pythagorean tradition convince us that there are definite relationships of musical structures to underlying universal structures. Or we may think, in more modern contexts, that the heavy bass frequencies of dub, or the volume of drone metal, will determine the nature of our extraordinary experiences.

In short, this ascription of the nature of our experiences to the physical properties of the musical sound is a common approach to understanding how music can contribute to the listener's experience. However, the range, variety, and culture-specificity of the effects ascribed to musical sounds argues against any simple connection of sound to effect. Dub does not sound like drone metal, which does not sound like Hindustani ragas, which do not sound like the Dead—but they all are able to produce extraordinary experiences in their listeners. A musical figure built from a minor scale might signal sadness in a European classical context, but it might signify power in a heavy metal context—and for those devoted to non-tempered tuning systems, it might only signify painful dissonance. Robert Jourdain discusses this in his *Music, the Brain, and Ecstasy* (2008). He notes the physical effects of the sounds that we hear on the various receptors in the ears, as well as the physical effects of their translation into signals in the brain, but he also argues that the interpretation of these signals—the way that they acquire meaning—arises from the listener's expectations and background.

It seems, then, that the triggering of extraordinary experiences is not entirely intrinsic to musical sounds; rather, the entire context needs to be considered. The work of Christopher Small (1998) is relevant here, as Matthew Tift (2007) has noted. Small uses the verb *musicking* to express the idea that music is not a thing, a noun: it is an activity, a verb, and everyone who participates in a musical event is musicking and contributes to the immediate context of that event—so this would include the musicians, but also the audience, the staff at the venue, and so on. Small stresses that if we want to understand what is going on in any given musicking experience, we need to take the whole context into consideration, including how we are set up by the culture around us to regard the

musical activity—to return to our psychedelic typology, the set and particularly the setting (which in this view arises from and helps to determine the set) as well as the dose. This approach can be valuable in helping us understand, or at least think through, our extraordinary experiences: what were the parameters of our musicking at that time? How were our understandings of what could happen affected by, for instance, the architecture of the space we were in? Or by who we were with? Everyone in the space was musicking; everyone was cocreating the musical experience; and all of this comes together to set up unique spaces within which extraordinary experiences take place.

This leads to the question, if musicking sets up spaces that are amenable to extraordinary experiences, what makes these spaces so special that extraordinary experiences can occur in them? Often it is held that this is because the spaces that musicking sets up can often be understood as liminal or liminoid spaces, in which meanings are in some way floating or open to reinterpretation. As developed by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, liminal spaces are culturally useful spaces where social identities and social meanings are suspended so that folks can transition from one identity to another—from child to adult in an initiation rite, for instance. Significantly, Turner notes that they are although they can of course become tightly structured by tradition and expectations, they are “potentially and in principle a free and experimental region of culture” (1974, 61).

As developed by Turner, “liminoid” refers to the same sort of thing as “liminal,” but in a voluntary, non-universal, and somewhat free-floating sense. A liminal experience might be, for instance, getting bar or bat mitzvahed—it is an official part of a culture, it takes place at a given point in life, it has prescribed structures and longstanding traditions. Liminoid, on the other hand, refers to things that do some of the same work as liminal experiences, but that are more changeable, less rooted in tradition, less tied to a specific time of life. The idea of the liminoid applies to popular culture especially, given its informal nature, its openness to varying levels and degrees of commitment. To illustrate this, we could say that when we see expectations of extraordinary experience getting localized in a particular part of Grateful Dead sets (the middle of the second set, for instance), we are seeing a progression from a liminoid to a liminal situation.

Musical contexts are often understood as setting up or facilitating liminoid situations: they encourage the suspension or even contradiction of typical social roles, the openness to transgression, the feeling of being in “another space” than the day to day one, in which different rules apply. Robin Sylvan describes this as a the “virtual” aspect of music (2002, 21); as Steve Ball notes, “Rock music can introduce us to the tangibility of non-ordinary reality” (1997, 163). Musicologist David McAlester even understands this as one of the cross-cultural, universal aspects of music: “I would say that one of the most important of the universals ... in music is that music transforms experience. Music is always out of the ordinary and by its presence creates the atmosphere of the special” (1971, 380).

How does music do this? Philosopher Kathleen Higgins argues that music provides a sense of ontological security for listeners (i.e., “others feel as I do”), as well as a sense of existential security (i.e., “I am at home in the world”) and a sense of belonging, or social membership, and that these create “a sufficient lack of defensiveness” that “might make one more, not less, prone to experiences of self-transcendence” (2012, 157). This makes sense, although taken by itself, it might imply that all we value in music is smoothness—and by that logic, Muzak would be an especially powerful trigger of extraordinary experiences. Yet that is not how its creators, nor most listeners, view the service, and part of the reason for that has to do with its lack of some degree of roughness or contrast in the music. Musicologist Charles Keil called this “participatory discrepancy”: when musicians are playing in ways that have just the right amount of friction with the expectations of the musical context, such as pushing or dragging the beat a little or playing a little bit flat. That informs his belief that “music, to be personally involving and socially valuable, must be ‘out of time’ and ‘out of tune’” (2005, 96)—or, as Dead listeners might say, it needs to be “together, more or less in line.”

There are good reasons for this. One is the way that these discrepancies build anticipation and tension, as we wait and wonder (for instance) if Lesh’s melodic line is going to catch the chord changes, or if Kreutzmann is going to be able to finish that roll cleanly. Another is the way that these discrepancies model for us a process of life transcending itself: we get to see how the imperfections and stumbles of everyday life get transformed into, or lead up to, an experience of transcendent beauty, and that makes

the beauty more real for us. Particularly for the Grateful Dead, the path to transcendent moments is often crooked, but it still gets us to our destination. Listeners understand: as the folk aphorism has it, the marvel is not that the bear dances well, but that the bear dances at all; so perhaps the ubiquitous image of dancing bears in Grateful Dead contexts can be seen as unconscious testimony to the power of participatory discrepancy.

The liminoid spaces within which music makes its magic are built up in many ways—through how music is discussed, how musicians present themselves, the imagery they use, the way they are presented by the guardians of social order, and so on. Research into the liminoid spaces of popular music often emphasizes the transgressive nature of these spaces and the way that the spaces invoke underground, esoteric cultural currents, such as Romanticism (Meisel 1999), shamanism (Taylor 1985), or even voodoo (Ventura 1985). The fact that these invocations are not always based in reality is not the point: rather, these ideas are important for establishing the esoteric nature of those spaces, spaces in which normal meanings can be suspended and transgressed.

In discussions of rock in general, for instance, it is common to hear assertions that link its capacity to produce extraordinary experiences with traditional African religion and/or voodoo, bluntly argued by Michael Ventura (1985) and with more nuance by Christopher Hill (2017). There is certainly a critical case to be made for an appropriately nuanced, careful examination of rock's indebtedness to such traditions; used uncritically, as they more often are, such references say much less about history or musicology than they do about the way in which the speaker wants rock's liminal spaces to be understood. In such cases the speaker, whether knowingly or not, is more constructing an affective space in the present than delineating that space's historical lineage.

The equivalent within the Grateful Dead world seems to be the description of their music as somehow "shamanic," perhaps best reflected by the discussion of shamanism in Mickey Hart's coauthored *Drumming at the Edge of Magic* (1990), particularly chapter 10, "Shaman's Drum: Skeleton Key to the Other Worlds." A term whose definition is extremely contested, and only after being (problematically) appropriated for use outside of its Siberian context of origin, shamanism in its most basic sense can be taken to refer to "a figure who helps others by working with spirits

in a dramatic public performance” (Hutton 2001, 145). This definition assumes a passive audience who enjoy only a second-hand experience by watching someone travel through another world and wrestle with spirits in order to bring back healing or knowledge. Interestingly, while this is the view presented in *Drumming*, it certainly does not capture the sort of active, personally engaged, communally experienced situation reported by many Deadheads, who often use the phrase “shamanism” nonetheless—an application that psychologist Stanley Krippner has explored, though with far greater precision (2008). Krippner’s work, though sympathetic, recognizes that even the application of this simplified definition outside its context of origin has been problematic, involving as it does both the appropriation of ideas and approaches from one cultural group, and the suppression of legitimate differences in other groups when these practices are shoehorned into the “shamanism” category. As Hutton writes, the heedless or even simply incorrect use of this terminology “has been productive ... of so much confusion and incoherence” (2001, 135).

So when Deadheads (or even Hart and his coauthors) describe spiritual or religious experiences as related to “shamanism,” that usage is not meant to be taken technically. Rather, it simply provides a way of encoding the liminal realm within which the Grateful Dead’s music works with these larger ideas—ones that draw on an unbroken chain of mystery and magical power stretching back through time (at best), and privileged cultural appropriation and the glorification of exoticism and alleged primitivism (at worst).

Sloppy or inappropriate terminology aside, there is a larger convergence suggested by these uses that merits consideration. Perhaps our extraordinary experiences are not strictly triggered by the sonic aspects of the music we hear, but are rather produced in the midst of a context comprising all kinds of factors. These factors come together in unique and not completely predictable ways to produce spaces—or to encourage us to see ourselves as operating within spaces—in which normal frames of meaning seem suspended. We musick into existence the spaces in which extraordinary experiences can take place.

Three broad interpretive currents help to explain how what happens in those spaces can be so special. The most fundamental view holds that

they are places that have to do with our social/cultural/historical identities, where we can affirm those identities or reconnect to them or reimagine them or take whatever stances towards them we find meaningful. Small provides a good example of this, arguing that when musicking, we are in the state of “having experienced, in our own bodies and senses, relationships that we feel to be right and in accord with the pattern that connects. This, we feel, is how the pattern of the world really is, and this is where we really belong in it. This is indeed cause for elation, and ... it partakes of the nature of the religious” (1998, 136).

A second view focuses not on the social or cultural reimaginings but rather on the space that gets opened up for us to inhabit as we engage in those reimaginings. In other words, it is the way that music allows us to enter a meaning-free, eternally ambiguous space that gives music its power. Adherents of this view believe that musicking can take us outside the meaning-structures that we rely on in our lives, and the ineffable pleasure of music is the ecstasy of the dissolution of meaning, of knowing that all possibilities are open and always were. For instance, in discussing minimalist music, Robert Fink notes the way that repetition/minimalism breaks down a sense of a continuing narrative in music, freeing listeners to either escape from the self or to construct alternative teleologies by moving them “into a wide field of intermediate possibilities, of para- and semiteleology” (2005, 43). Similarly, Owen Coggins argues that the ineffability and paradox produced in discourse about drone metal are meant to show the ruptures and incapacities of the inherited, official language: “for drone metal listeners, language is set wandering between a vast range of spatial, temporal, and bodily conscious elsewhere” (2018, 114). Marcel Cobussen, speaking more generally of music and spirituality, argues that “the meaning of music lies in the keeping-at-a-distance of writing, reading, interpreting” (2008, 4)—in his view, the secret of music is the way that it convinces us that there is a secret that is meaningful but that cannot be expressed.

David Malvinni believes that this approach applies to the Grateful Dead as well. He argues that the band’s music at its peak has a quality that he calls “Deadness,” a space that is open to “free play, improvisation, and the unknown in a paradoxical attempt to reach the unreachable.”

For Malvinni, Deadness manifests itself in Grateful Dead jams, which are “unresolvable contradictions” as they oblige us to consider the jams as “stable, repeatable entities,” on the one hand, and as things that exist “outside and beyond these familiar ... categories, as existing without a *telos*” (2013, 139).

Finally, there are some who would argue that there actually is a real meaning to be found in the musical space, one that lies beneath the dissolved meanings that cannot be directly expressed. In other words, the idea is that we break down pre-existing forms and that allows us to have an encounter with something underlying them, something we can't directly name but that is definitely there and definitely real in some way. This seems to be the understanding that some of the members of the Grateful Dead themselves had, describing their music as “channeling the transcendent in the mundane lives” of the band and its listeners, as Lesh puts it (2005, 76).

This would be a natural view for those who came of age when the members of the Grateful Dead did. That era was informed by, for instance, the work of religious studies scholar Rudolph Otto and sociologist Gerard van der Leeuw, who both argued that music creates a space that is numinous and *sui generis*, overlapping with religion, reaching out to the “wholly Other,” something real but undefinable (Otto 1960, 47–49). Although from very different backgrounds, the classical composer Karlheinz Stockhausen and the jazz composer Sun Ra both expressed very similar thoughts. They felt that powerful music tapped into experiences and feelings that were quite definite but that could not be directly conceived of by musicians or audiences, due to limitations in our contexts or in our very natures. Stockhausen claimed that “I'm not communicating anything personally. I'm just making music which makes it possible to make contact with this supra-natural world,” and then immediately goes on to say that “the music is a vessel, a vehicle, by which people can get tuned in to and discover their inner selves by, discover what they have forgotten about themselves” (1989, 4). Sun Ra, for his part, argued that:

What I'm doing is stuff that's beyond human knowledge and on a higher plane. So therefore it can't really be explained, but it can be felt. That's everything I'm about— feeling—because

people have lost that direction as far as intellect is concerned, so they make a lot of mistakes. It is time to eliminate mistakes, and true feelings would never make a mistake. (qtd. in Jung 1986, 11)

Both of these artists were concerned with developing means to enable musicians to play beyond their abilities: to play what they didn't know in order to reach these real but ineffable states.

The modern era of critical theory has not been hospitable to these sorts of ideas. Scholars are uncomfortable with the idea that there might actually be a there there, often for quite understandable reasons—the creation of numinous and *sui generis* spaces for religion or spirituality has often been used as way of shielding them from critique. However understandable, the argument that a concept could be or has been misused is not a refutation of that concept; rather, it is a warning. And recent scholarship has been more willing to entertain the possibility that there might be something more at work in these discussions than just the ecstasy of dissolution.

For example, Jason Bivins' work on jazz and religion argues that “the very abstraction of music, its elusiveness ... [might be] conducive to the sorts of self-realization, collective purpose, or sense of being-in-the-world linked with religion” (2015, 4). This follows in the same line as Cobussen or Fink. But Bivins also notes that “what compels about jazz is precisely its historically identifiable resistance ... to closure as *part* of its pursuit of the sacred” (2015, 23)—only part, not the whole. Creative jazz musicians look for “means of rejecting the control of form and social constraint in the name of openness to divine experience” (2015, 273). In other words, when we get rid of barriers, the cool stuff comes in.

On a more literal level, Steve Silberman has spoken about his perception of a “Grateful Dead deity” that was “both wrathful and benevolent ... It was partly lizard, partly mammal ... It definitely had big teeth. And it would just sit there and look out at you. I would say that all serious, longtime Deadheads have had some experience of that creepy alligator in the night-time sun that would look out at you from the music and was not altogether good” (qtd. in Sylvan 2002, 97). Scholars who study the Dead may shy away from discussing our own experiences, but Silberman's lan-

guage invokes what may be the most important question about extraordinary experiences and the Dead: do our extraordinary experiences give us visions of something real, even if we cannot put it into words, or do they simply give us an opportunity to choose or deny or reaffirm the range of possibilities we already had? When listening to a “Terrapin Station” or a “Dark Star”—or, more prosaically, a “Deal” or a “Peggy-O”—and feeling a sense of joy and wonder, where did that feeling come from? Was the joy coming from the way that your musicking left you feeling like you were free-floating and able to play with the various meanings that make up your life? Or was the joy coming from something real that you could not name, something that came to you through the song, through your social positioning, and through your musicking, like light coming through a stained glass window? In my own experience, it has always been both: I see the light as it has been revealed through my own particular arrangement of stained glass, and I have the freedom to consider whether or not I like the arrangement of panels, and whether changing some of them might give me a different access to the light. But the light is always there, and the panels are always meaningful in the way they relate to the light.

Interestingly, the discussion over extraordinary experience and music is precisely parallel to discussions over the meaning and effect of LSD. Both discussions ask a common question: does the music or the psychedelic drug produce the extraordinary experience simply by corroding our pre-existing constructions of meaning, or does it do this as a first step in providing access to a level of meaning that these constructions bar us from? It is tempting—simpler, and safer—to take the former position, and that is not necessarily an outsider position. It was taken, for instance, by Charles Perry in his *The Haight-Ashbury: A History* (2005, 244–259). My own experiences lead me to be more sympathetic to the presentation by Christopher Hill in his insightful discussion of the Grateful Dead in *Into the Mystic*. Hill acknowledges the appeal of a more down-to-earth understanding, but nonetheless notes that “there’s still something funny about lysergic acid ... acid is still a secret staircase that lets ghosts into the neurological machine” (2017, 136). His words remind us of Jerry Garcia’s remarks to Charles Reich and Jann Wenner, that “when you break down the old orders and the old forms ... you suddenly find yourself in a new

space with a new form and new order which are more like the way it is” (2003, 101). For Garcia and others, it is pretty clear that there really is a there there, even if it is not easy to talk about.

As with so many aspects of the Dead’s work, then, it seems difficult to separate psychedelics—and the experiences they provide—from music and the experiences it provides. Although these experiences may be entirely subjective, in the context of thinking about the Grateful Dead, they are significant. As scholars deepen their engagement with the Grateful Dead, the relationship between psychedelics and music both merits and rewards attention.

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