

PROCEEDINGS OF THE GRATEFUL DEAD STUDIES ASSOCIATION

Volume 3

2023

ISSN 2770-534X (Print)

ISSN 2770-5358 (Online)

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CITATION INFORMATION

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Proceedings of the Grateful Dead Studies Association

Volume 3 (2023)

Pages: 95–98

URL: http://deadstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/GDSA_Proceedings3_Note.pdf

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A Note on the Textual History of the Dead's 1967 Statement

For a document of only 586 words, the Grateful Dead's 1967 statement on their arrest has a surprisingly extensive textual history. Although the statement lacks the elements that would make it a formal press release, its first appearance was at the band's press conference, held three days after the bust, when band comanager Danny Rifkin, the principal author of the statement, read it aloud to reporters at the Dead's house. Extant footage confirms that Rifkin read much of the text that later circulated, but that only reflects the segment that ran on a local news program; it represents less than half of the complete text. The statement was made available to members of the press at the press conference; that was likely the source quoted in the *San Francisco Chronicle's* account of the event published the next day. That article quoted less than half of the text, only 222 words, but confirmed the extent of the original, noting that it was "a two-page statement" (Raudebaugh 1967, 2). That corresponds with the broadside that circulated in the neighborhood. It added a 259-word introduction and made a few minor editorial changes to what Rifkin read aloud; those show a careful hand, such as replacing "off the books" with "changed" in the line, "the law might well be off the books before Thanksgiving," and substituting "easier" for "convenient" in the line, "Now the police find it convenient to arrest ..."

Pinpointing the exact date of the broadside is difficult. That is true for much of the ephemera that circulated in the Haight, even those attributed to known publishers such as com/co, but the text offers clues. The introduction discusses the press conference in detail, suggesting that

it was written by an eye-witness or participant, and notes that the arrestees “will appear before a Grand Jury early in November”; that dates the broadside’s publication to between October 5 and November 1. Members of the band’s extended family speculate that it was almost immediately; that would reflect the band’s sensitivity to their position in the Haight, ensuring that their account of the raid was known, along with their defiant response—despite the consequences. That also reflected the com/co philosophy of instant media, which the style of the publication aped. Still, the hastily typed broadside, replete with typos, suggests that the text used for the broadside was likely the typed copy that Rifkin read at the press conference, which also points to speedy and contemporaneous production.

Despite the effort that went into the statement, and its subsequent publication as a broadside, it was never republished in its entirety. A month later, the inaugural issue of *Rolling Stone* published a substantial excerpt, 180 words (1967, 8). Six year later, Hank Harrison reproduced a larger excerpt, 321 words, creating yet another version that also differed in key ways from the excerpts in the *Chronicle* and *Rolling Stone*. Each of those variants slanted the statement in different ways, reflecting their editorial agenda, but the central issue raised by the statement’s tangled publication history is authorship. The *Chronicle* noted that Rifkin read the statement but did not credit it to him (Raudebaugh 1967, 2), as did Wenner’s unsigned article (1967, 8); Harrison credited it to Rifkin and, erroneously, Rock Scully (1973, 111). Not until Dennis McNally’s authorized band biography *A Long Strange Trip* was Rifkin’s friend Harry Shearer’s role acknowledged, a function of Rifkin’s “difficulties with writing” as well as proximity—Shearer was in the East Bay at the time, an inexpensive phone call away (McNally 2002, 226).

Concealing its authorship emphasized that it was a band statement and therefore a group effort, but that also shielded Rifkin and Shearer from direct responsibility—a wise precaution, given the severity of the charges and the magnitude of the potential penalties. And the statement was far from contrite—a dangerous tactic that defied typical legal defense strategy, as Andrew McGaan points out in his essay in this volume. Yet that did, in fact, speak to the band’s concern for their reputation—though with their peers, not the judicial system (or mainstream society, for that matter).

That stance underscores the significance of the statement, not only in the band's history but also in the larger context of the Haight-Ashbury. It marks one of band's rare public declarations, a press release in all but name—and the Dead gave few press conferences and issued even fewer press releases. This was their first, and, significantly, it would be one of their most pointed political declarations, as Andrew McGaan notes.

The rarity of its content is matched by the scarcity of the broadside. Only one copy has surfaced, preserved by a community member who found it in the Haight at the time. It has never been documented in any rare book catalog devoted to com/co or Haight-Ashbury ephemera, nor has a copy turned up for sale at auction. That obscurity conceals its very real significance, not only for scholars interested in the Dead but for historians studying the era. The essays in this section outline those larger arguments, but for Dead studies, the statement stands as a unique, eloquent, and foundational expression of the band's principles. It reflects the range of the Dead's interests, spanning philosophy and ethics, art and aesthetics, and media and history, distilling ideas and issues swirling in the neighborhood and the counterculture and expressing them in a distinctively Haight-Ashbury format. Although the textual history of the statement is a reminder of the archival challenges posed by the Grateful Dead's history, the broadside is a reminder of the rewards.

N.G.M.

Note

I am grateful to Dennis McNally and Laird Grant for their insights. Both Danny Rifkin and Harry Shearer were contacted but declined to comment.

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