

EDITOR'S COLUMN

“Searchlight Casting”: Thoughts On the Third Annual Meeting

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In the world of high tech start-ups, three years has long been cited as a kind of unofficial milestone, a marker that signified to analysts and venture capitalists that a fledgling enterprise had a better than fighting chance of survival. Although associated with the dot-com boom, that rule has long been applied to a range of enterprises, both before and since—even ones far removed from Silicon Valley.¹ Even so, although the Grateful Dead got their start only a stone’s throw away from what would become Silicon Valley, the band’s unlikely path from counterculture avatars to business exemplars defied all expectations. Indeed, over the last twenty-five years, business insiders, theorists, and managers have acknowledged how the band’s career challenged industry orthodoxy even as their model offered vital lessons for managers.²

Yet even for the Dead, and the scholarly discourse on their work, the three-year benchmark is revealing: the Dead’s third year, 1967, was both pivotal and decisive; and for the Grateful Dead Studies Association, our third year, 2023, also marked a milestone. It was an exciting year, but the highlight was unquestionably our conference. Held in San Antonio in April, this was the first time since COVID that we met in person. As with our first two meetings, our sessions comprised the Grateful Dead area of the Popular Culture Association; with seventeen papers and three roundtables, we represented one of the most robust areas of the PCA, and we added a number of vital arguments and themes to the steadily burgeoning discourse of Grateful Dead studies. This volume of the Proceedings provides a record of the meeting, with the schedule, abstracts, and presenters,

along with a sample of the papers and Association President Granville Ganter's keynote address. The Texts and Documents section also includes essays presented as part of a roundtable devoted to the Dead's 1967 arrest for cannabis. That potentially devastating event provoked an extraordinary response, prompting them to issue their first and most significant public statement. An unofficial press release, it has never been republished in its entirety; it is the centerpiece of the section, which also includes a note on the textual history of the statement along with three contextual essays highlighting its rhetorical, legal, and historical significance.

The papers outline the conference conversation, but as always, a number of themes emerged in conversation during panels and after that were as much a part of the work of the meeting as the sessions. The discussion was lively and the debate spirited, but even when contentious, the clash was collegial, with fusion rather than friction predominating. Conversation continued into evenings, a reminder that interdisciplinarity relies on an often hidden social dimension, a cooperative ideal that the Dead modelled in their approach to music as well.

Collegiality is especially critical when so many theoretical perspectives and disciplines are collectively interrogating a single subject, even one as expansive as the Dead phenomenon. This year's meeting included papers addressing every aspect of the Dead's work, from origins to impact, and covering every era of the band's history, from antecedents to legacies. The literary aspects of the Dead's music have been a fertile area for scholars since the 1990s; Christopher Coffman and Nathaniel Racine added to that work with essays on the larger work of band lyricists Robert Hunter and Robert M. Petersen. The Beats were a central influence on the Dead, and Julie DeLong and Matthew Lynch examined the connections between the work of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg and the band, respectively.

The insights that those contexts offer was part of a larger theme in the conference discussion, which was the continuing reexamination of performances and eras in the Dead. Chadwick Jenkins focused on the band's celebrated August 1972 concert in Veneta, Oregon, and Granville Ganter offered a reappraisal of the band's work in the early 1980s, the most neglected period of the Dead's career. Jenkins concentrated on Phil Lesh's performance at the concert, an approach complemented by fellow

musicologist Shaugn O'Donnell's paper on Bob Weir's guitar work at the show.

The Dead phenomenon often raised larger questions for participants, and several papers explored the religious dimensions and spiritual overtones of the band's music and approach to performance. Jason Gallagher discussed the influence of Catholicism in Garcia and Hunter's work, and Michael Kaler and Deepak Sarma examined broader spiritual aspects of the band's project. Those have deep roots in the band's genesis in the 1960s, which remains a central topic in Dead studies. Four scholars explored the raid on the Dead's house in the Haight-Ashbury in 1967, with a particular eye toward the band's response. Andrew McGaan examined the arrest and band statement from a legal studies perspective, complemented by Susan Balter-Reitz's explication of the band's statement using the lens of rhetorical studies. Media and literary scholar Peter Richardson provided a broader view of the band's history with *Rolling Stone*, whose inaugural issue covered the event. That relationship is part of the larger work on the Sixties that continues to complicate and illuminate Dead studies, which Jay Williams explored. A foundational element in the band's roots in the era that continues to call for and challenge scholars is the Acid Tests, as Ben Luke Williams explained.

Scholarship on the Sixties gains in traction and visibility with every passing year, and that also points to the ways that the Dead connect to issues and concerns that interest scholars working in fields that traditionally do not intersect with popular music studies. The band and scene's efforts to include fans with disabilities was the subject of Nathaniel Kogan's paper; Annabelle Walsh approached that inclusive ethos by applying a theoretical lens to the parking lot scene as a site for Deadhead culture. A primary means of expression in that culture has always been clothing, and T-shirt art has emerged as a form of continuity in that community, as Brett Whitley and Monica Sklar's paper discussed.

Fan fashion is part of the complex ways that the Dead phenomenon continues to adapt and expand. Two roundtables explored that evolution, which continues to unfold in often surprising ways. Starting in the early 1970s, courses on the Dead began appearing in college course catalogs, and over time the pedagogical potential of the Dead has become an

important part of the academic bibliography on the band. Chaired by Natalie Dollar, a roundtable on pedagogical theory brought scholars from diverse fields to discuss the challenges and rewards of teaching the Dead to undergraduates. The members of the Dead were not only students of the musical traditions that inspired them, they were also participants; that engagement gets at why the Dead phenomenon has inspired professionals in such a wide range of fields, even those that might not seem immediately relevant. That was the impetus for a roundtable on the Dead and library and information science, with university library directors Shan Sutton of Arizona State University and Joseph Salem of Duke University. Chaired by Gary Burnett, an LIS scholar who has also published in Dead studies, the session noted how a number of topics and contemporary issues in LIS benefit from and connect to the Dead's example.

Although this was the first conference session devoted to LIS and the Dead, it built on decades of contributions by librarians and archivists to the discourse. This echoed another theme that wound throughout the meeting, which was how previously buried and hidden currents in Dead studies are coalescing and becoming more visible. For many, that aspect of the conference is why meetings are a vital part of our work: just as papers showed how Dead studies embraces and encourages disciplinary and microcosmic approaches, sessions and conversations emphasized how diverse theoretical perspectives and multiple disciplines can intersect in powerful and revealing ways. And, significantly, that range of exposition and exploration is as much a function of the social nature of a meeting as it is the intellectual framework of the setting.

No wonder the history of Dead studies is so strongly tied to conference meetings. That mirrors the nature of the Dead's work: it, too, relied on live interaction, and also sought to link disparate genres, influences, and ideas, uniting them in a larger conversation. That became clear in their third year: 1967 was when they really became the Dead, not only artistically but publicly. Reporters sought them out, quoting band members and highlighting the Dead's status as Haight-Ashbury avatars, the foremost exponents of its philosophy, lifestyle and achievement.

Yet what propelled that was their commitment to their music. Historic appearances at the Human Be-In and Monterey Pop shaped their

popular image, but it was the development of their repertoire and the refinement of their sound in 1967 that established a foundation for their mature work. They released their debut album that spring, almost immediately obviating it with the addition of Mickey Hart and Robert Hunter that fall; they also largely expunged the teen-pop vestiges from their repertoire, developing serious compositions such as “New Potato Caboose,” “Alligator,” and “The Other One.” The pinnacle of this effort, however, was a song that would forever define them, “Dark Star.”

Hunter’s lyrics for that signature opus still challenge listeners. Although “Dark Star” has spawned a wide range of interpretations, one reading is as a metaphor for the human struggle for perspective: the failure of thought (“Reason tatters”), the futility of self-reflection (“Mirror shatters”), and the limits of reason (“Searchlight casting / for faults in the / clouds of delusion”). Read this way, the song is not a celebration of experience but rather a meditation on the work of understanding—an interpretation that makes the song especially apropos of this conference meeting. It is a remarkable statement for a young band, but also a testament of their maturity—as evidenced by the song’s enduring appeal.

For the Dead, “Dark Star” was eloquent proof that they had passed the three-year test of a fledgling enterprise, even if it was more a sign of artistic success than commercial viability. Yet that was the point: the Dead understood that their project was fundamentally artistic. Their standards of success differed markedly from those of the music industry, though in time theirs would bend those norms, and they would achieve remarkable success by even the industry’s most basic index, the box office. It is an example that has inspired scholarship as well, notably Barry Barnes’ analyses of the band’s business practices and their implications for managers and theorists working in vastly different arenas and industries.

There is a deeper resonance. As Dennis McNally has written, the worlds of academe and the Grateful Dead “are not so far apart as we might first think, that in fact there is a very solid bridge between them, uniting the two” (2012, 5). The business of academe tends to fall in the nonprofit realm, but scholarly organizations are also businesses, and even small nonprofits are not immune from the pressures—and metrics—of the marketplace. For the Association, this conference demonstrated our

viability: we passed the three-year mark. And as this volume shows, the Association continues to be a “searchlight casting,” spearheading the discourse of Grateful Dead studies.

Notes

1. See, for example, Burke and Hussels (2013); Donnelly (2021); Kader (2014); Kamdar (2016); and Zinn (2017).
2. Glenn Rifkin (2015/2016) provides a good narrative of the first wave of journalism on the Dead as a business exemplar in his review of Barnes (2011). Other notable efforts include Green (2010) and Scott and Halligan (2010). Barnes has written extensively on the Dead’s business model; his work has been widely cited and is increasingly attracting other scholars (e.g., Hill and Rifkin 1999; O’Reilly 2023/2024).

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