PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Fan Studies and the Grateful Dead

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In the documentary *Long Strange Trip*, there is a memorable scene where tour manager Sam Cutler sits in the open door of his van on the lower east side of New York and talks about a defining moment in his introduction to the Grateful Dead:

> I was sittin' with Garcia, and we had just smoked a joint. I had only known the man, I dunno, three days or something, and I said well, "What *are* the Grateful Dead? *Who* are the Grateful Dead? What is this *thing* called Grateful Dead?" And Jerry said, "Well, if you think of the music business as a forest, the thicket of the music business, and you come to like a little break in the forest, and there's a patch in the sunlight of grass, and in the middle of that patch there's some little flowers growing, those flowers—*that's* the Grateful Dead. (Bar-Lev 2017)[1]

And then Cutler laughs and says, "Jesus, for f**k's sake, but that's how they are!"

As Cutler tells his story, the documentary plays a section from the original 1931 *Frankenstein* movie where Frankenstein comes through a bramble and discovers the little girl, Maria, who gives the monster a flower. It is a beautifully handled moment in the film, and it captures a great deal about the Dead—and Dead studies. Indeed, that vignette accurately represents what makes Dead fan studies so unique: the Dead's is a type of music that exists outside of the "forest" of the music industry, an exception, and one that outsiders (like Frankenstein) are intuitively drawn to in its beautiful and utter marginality to what else is going on in the world. The paradox that this paper examines is how this outsider music became

mainstream in the decades after the dissolution of the band, using the lens of fan studies to outline that process.

There has been an explosion of academic research into fan behavior in the past thirty years, and while there has been much discussion of *Dr. Who*, Trekkies, Madonna, and hip-hop, the field of fan studies hardly mentions the Grateful Dead at all. This lacuna is astonishing but in some ways it is simply another face of the continuing marginality of the Grateful Dead to mainstream society. My fundamental argument in this paper is well established: the principal appeal of the Grateful Dead is not a commercial mass culture phenomenon, even by the standards of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the Dead's popularity exploded after the release of the 1987 album, *In the Dark*. In this sense, there is a significant difference between the industry-driven phenomenon of Disney-artist fans—the machine that puts acts like Britney Spears on the radio—and the deliberately alternative culture of Deadheads, whose music was relegated largely to backwater radio for much of the band's career. Beyond this rather stark contrast are tougher problems, epitomized by the message on the inside of the 1971 self-titled live album, nicknamed *Skull and Roses*: "Dead Freaks Unite! Who are you? Where are you? How are you? Send us your name and address and we'll keep you informed." Does this not sound a little like *Tiger Beat* magazine circa 1971? And if so, then what, if anything, separates what Dead fans do from the rest of the music industry? What separates some kinds of fandom from others?

Current discourse in fan studies can help us through some of these problems. Four central issues that have developed in the past thirty years are useful here, likely familiar terrain to many Dead scholars: first, expanding fan studies into the discursive realm of participatory culture—treating the fan as a productive agent or actor, rather than a passive consumer or receptacle; second, the role of some academic researchers as insider fans, or acafans, who attempt to straddle the divide between informants and analysts, between enthusiasts and critics; third, how to talk about fans without condescension or dismissal—implying their cognitive impairment or emotional derangement; and finally, the remarkable persistence of standards of high and low culture in shaping our discourse about fans. On a political level, fan behavior is shaped by class affiliation and class

disciplinary structures, the difference between labeling someone as part of a *community* or a *swarm*; and on an aesthetic level, high and low stratifications are also at play in the acknowledgement of parking lot riff-raff in the same research that celebrates the "kind heads" who appreciate the sublime poetry of Hunter's lyrics or the band's legendary improvisations.

The history of fan studies in the US often begins with Theodor Adorno's cynical 1938 evaluation of the fan as an unconscious pawn of the culture industry within a paradigm of mass culture marketing. After all, the origin of the word is a contraction of the sports slur, "fanatic," implying a sort of emotional distemper. Adorno's famously snarky remarks about the frenzied jitterbugger or the introverted ham radio operator (whose obsession keeps them at the stage of a "boy scout working on complicated knots to please his parents") argue that much of the music industry is about generating a nutty consumer audience whose only agency is confined to choosing among different purchases (Duffett 2013, 56; Adorno 2001, 53). Over the following fifty years, Adorno's criticism was often applied wholesale to denigrate fan behavior as merely a form of commercial consumerism.

From the 1960s onward, however, there arose several challenges to Adorno's dismissive attitude, some of which came from Marxism itself. In the 1960s and 1970s in England, scholars associated with the Birmingham School such as Stuart Hall and Dick Hebdige wrote about the role of class antagonism in creating positions of fan agency and subculture in relationship to both mass culture and elite society. Parallel with this post-Adorno, neo-Marxist discourse in popular culture, Tom Wolfe's mid-1960s research identified lower and middle-class "status-spheres" that defined a more active agency by fans as well. Wolfe argued that the flush economy of post-War America allowed Americans to generate private constellations of alternative value systems in contrast to the more traditional social hierarchies of kinship or financial status. Bohemians, celebutants, car customizers, and surfers created new kinds of prestige among their communities, an argument eloquently made in his 1965 collection of essays, *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*. Wolfe was curious about hippies because they cobbled together a pirate world made out of the usable bits and pieces they picked up from American culture.

Most importantly, however, in the early 1990s, two other scholars, John Fiske and Henry Jenkins, revolutionized fan studies by arguing that many consumers of popular culture refashion texts to suit their own political or social agendas. Fiske saw music industry-created fans, such as Madonna fans, as appropriating commercial culture and making it their own, a process of turning mass culture into popular culture. Jenkins, who was influenced by seeing Fiske lecture at his graduate program, pushed the participatory elements of fandom even harder, showing that some fans actively "poached" from the media texts that they adored, creating communities of *new* value in a borderland between mass culture and everyday life (Duffett 2013, 66). Both Fiske and Jenkins were aware that they were importing elements of homespun "folk" practices into the process of commercial consumption, a cross-fertilization that Adorno generally refused to validate in his critiques of industry-driven arts and entertainment.

For both Fiske and Jenkins, popular culture is what results when active fans make mass culture their own. Not all of these appropriations are done in a positive way—sometimes fans' behavior is motivated by resistance to, or displeasure with commercial products, lack of access, disappointment of expectations, and so forth, creating both demands on the "industry" as well as reinforcing a flesh-and-blood community of critical fandom. According to this view, even anti-fans—people who love to hate the Dead, including academic critics such as Sean Zwagerman—are actually part of this complex interaction with Dead popular culture.

Fast forward fifteen years and witness the "slash" fan-fiction culture that rewrote *Twilight*'s vampire love intrigue into the softcore porn of *50 Shades of Grey*. (If you're not a fan of *Twilight*, you may not know that in the later erotic novel, the protagonist Christian Grey was E. L. James's rescripting of *Twilight*'s vampire boyfriend Edward Cullen into a dark and lusty Seattle millionaire with a taste for bondage.) Decades before *Fifty Shades*, female Trekkies famously injected themselves into the legacy of the television series in the 1970s and '80s, writing spicy Star Trek episodes for fanzines where Kirk and Spock are lovers, a hijacking of the original television show that has generated torrents of fan-erotica spin-offs for other shows that continues to the present day.

Since the early 1990s, fan studies no longer belittles fans as passive consumers of what the captains of industry dictate—and this insight is

reflected in many of the panels this year at the Popular Culture Association that focus on resistance. As Annabelle Walsh, Brett Whitley, and Monica Sklar's illustrations from their presentations at the third meeting of the Grateful Dead Studies Association showed, practices like underground t-shirt production are both a folk industry and a creative growth of culture around the music. Throughout most of the 2000s, Jenkins has self-consciously stressed participatory culture rather than fandom, and his 2006 book, *Convergence Culture*, took as its goal the recognition that most corporations now build consumer feedback into part of their advertising programs. Most of us who study the interactive reciprocity between the band and the audience in Grateful Dead studies might shrug and say, "So you've discovered America? It's about time!" Yet the key to this insight for the assessment of different kinds of fandom is not simply to recognize that fan participation exists, but learning to measure the qualities and relative degrees of participation.

Within this group of recent fan theorists, one of the most interesting scholars for Dead studies has been David Cavicchi, whose 1998 book, *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning Among Springsteen Fans*, comes closest acknowledging some of the non-industry driven aspects of Grateful Dead fandom. Barely a teenager during the *Born to Run* sensation of 1975, I was initially very skeptical of the Springsteen-Dead connection, thinking of Springsteen as a producer of radio-friendly music—sort of like Jon Bon Jovi but with better lyrics. But Cavicchi's work is persuasive, arguing that there are many similarities between the two. Like the Dead, Springsteen has never fulfilled what the music industry expects of him, often frustrating his record label with albums that present little "hit" appeal. (Cavicchi notes that Springsteen has written over 1,000 songs beyond the two dozen radio tunes for which he is most known.) Further, fans also see him as a rather singular authentic outsider, just as Deadheads see the Dead.

There are behavioral and demographic similarities as well. Like the Dead's fans, Springsteen fans have a slightly evangelical fervor for converting others (Cavicchi 1998, 61–63; 38–59). They also trade bootlegs, and insist that the core of Bruce is in concert, not on vinyl (Cavicchi 1998, 74–77). Springsteen fans tend to be white males, although many of his female fans are attracted to him beyond simple sexual appeal, and like

the Dead, Bruce has a significant fanbase of devoted women. Audiences interact with his songs on a deeply private level, often quite cerebrally. Tellingly, Cavicchi confesses two-thirds of the way through his book that it can be hard for him to determine where the music stops and where the fandom begins (1998, 135).

This profile may resonate with many Dead scholars. It is noteworthy that Cavicchi compares Springsteen fans to the Dead four times in his book, which is four times more than any other canonical fan studies text I've found. Remarkable, too, is Cavicchi's rejection of stiffly politicized readings of fandom as "politically resistant" or "gullible dupes" of the market—he finds that Springsteen fans do not seem to be principally motivated by politics, but rather by a multi-leveled communion with an authentic artist and his meanings. That sounds more like an educational journey than a consumerist stance.

One important bridge between Cavicchi's insights about Springsteen and Dead studies is well evidenced in Rebecca Adams and Robert Sardiello's edited anthology *Deadhead Social Science*. In the introduction to this collaborative work, Adams notes that she initially sought to remain an outsider, a scientist-sociologist of the scene, but admits that stance steadily collapsed over the decade as she started her research in 1989 (2000, 16–19). Initially anxious about this potential loss of scholarly objectivity, of going native and losing prestige in the eyes of her fellow academics, she instead came to embrace the work as a kind of mutual pedagogy, which became a happy fit with her academic role as a teacher and university professor. Preferring to call her informants "guides," the entire collection of essays is an example of living and shared pedagogy, rather than a more conventional objective account of an exotic entity—it's fans educating fans. This philosophy has informed much of Adams' work and she has helped many other scholars, including me, in their work on the Dead.

Cavicchi's next book, *Listening and Longing: Music Lovers in the Age of Barnum* (2011), doubles down on his interest in what the listening community of fans does, rather than what the performers do. Extending his focus backwards into the nineteenth century, he argues in particular that enthusiastic listening—a term I use to signify the religious fervor around Dead music—emerged from a struggle over class. Focusing most-

ly on the sensational tour of Jenny Lind in the United States in 1850 and Wagnermania of the 1880s, Cavicchi excavates the way different social classes responded to the Lind craze with audiences essentially being criticized for being too invested in the wrong elements of music and for the wrong reasons (Cavicchi 2011, 174). He reproduces an 1850 cartoon from *Punch*, showing Lind like a queen on a throne while Americans throw themselves at her feet and jump up in adoring ecstasy (2011, 169). Likewise, he reproduces satires of Wagner fans from an 1884 issue of *Puck*, featuring shaggy-haired Wagnerians who look like bohemian caricatures (2011, 155). With the same language that the American cultural elite criticized loud and boisterous religious camp-meetings—a comparison that scholar Jake Cohen (2012, 241–245) has written about—musical events were shaped and disciplined by class judgement about the proper etiquette for *enjoyment*.

Also useful for Dead studies, Cavicchi thoroughly excavates the class politics of enthusiastic religion and popular oratory, areas of the Old Time Americana sound that many Dead songs self-consciously evoke and refashion. Although what passes for the mainstream's impression of Dead culture still looks slightly funky and déclassé to most outsiders, Deadheads are working nonstop to shape the sound, make music "mean" something vital and important—even sacred—and celebrate it as a precious backwater in American life. This act is a validation of the entire patchouli caravan, as a clearly active part of self-definition and aesthetic self-making encompassing the wide spectrum of Deadheadism, from people who wear ties to work to Spinners clad in homespun who prefer to dance rather than talk. Despite this expressive range, Dead culture is a badge of a specific kind of prestige, pedagogy, and style rooted in being a real alternative to commercial gimmickry.

And on a second level, this rich culture-building activity is not just listeners' lifestyle *couture*, it has become enormously productive and influential as well, inspiring the rave and jam band revolutions from the 1970s onwards. These, too, are not a question of commodity exploitation but rather of alternative community-making that developed quite apart from, if not in rejection of, commercial sponsorship. As I write this in 2023, Grateful Dead logo shirts and accoutrements can be purchased at

any US mall megastore (stores like Aeropostale, Garbage, etc.), but the cultural cachet is sustained by an entirely different activity that generally abhors mall shopping.

One area where Grateful Dead fan studies has shown unique expression, unrivalled by any music fan base I am aware of, is the sheer number of published works emanating from fans themselves: authors whose incomes and validation do not derive from the academy. Some of the best of these are reference works. *DeadBase*, an extraordinary resource created over three decades of research by John Scott, Mike Dolgushkin, and Stu Nixon, documents the band's concerts with a precision that has garnered the respect of band members. A labor of love, *DeadBase* also owes something to the academy, in that its genesis was also driven by John Scott's work as a database programmer.

Likewise, the three-volume *Deadhead's Taping Compendium*, edited by Michael Getz and John Dwork, offered a detailed survey of the fan-based tape trading scene just before it transitioned online; one result of that process is the Internet Archive's Live Music Archive, which features thousands of fan reviews of concert recordings. There is the wealth of accounts of the band by avowed fan journalists such as Blair Jackson, David Gans, David Shenk, and Steve Silberman; these complement the numerous memoirs of people directly associated with the band members as friends, employees, or extended family, including Ken Babbs, Steve Parish, Rhoney Stanley, and Rosie McGee. But there is also a huge output of straightforward fan memoir, from self-published efforts to mainstream press books, a trend that shows no signs of slowing.[2]

What does this output teach us about the uniqueness of Dead culture and Dead fans? First, it shows an extraordinary amount of formalized homestyle participation in the elaboration of Dead music. The past several decades of fan studies shows that even the most commercial of music acts, such as Taylor Swift, can sustain legitimate and viable communities of people whose bonds with the music far surpasses the flavor-of-the-moment marketing that still drives the pop music industry. And yes, in some ways, fan studies can help us see the noncommercial aspects of even mainstream acts like 1990's TLC, the hip-hop industry (cf. Smalls 2022), and even KPOP through the 2020s. But Dead culture, taken as a

whole, appears to be generally "thicker" than these, operating on multiple cultural levels, and of exceptional duration, now spanning sixty years with no signs of flagging.

Proof of that continues to manifest itself in interesting ways. One recent sign is Mark Rodriguez's sprawling 2022 coffee table book on Deadhead taping, *After All Is Said and Done*, which devotes more than 100 pages to the lovingly decorated cassette tape covers of the 1970s and '80s that so many Deadheads spent hours creating. Despite its flaws, it provides a visceral reminder of the love and care that went into this fan art. That was something I understood personally: when I shifted my collections to digital media, I left two tall book cases' worth of decorated tapes on the street of Long Island City; they disappeared in an hour. Rodriguez' book not only evokes those now-vanished artifacts and art works, it also reminds us that the enormous costs of that effort, both in time and money, was beside the point. Those artistic expressions of fandom were how, in Garcia's words, Deadheads could cultivate those delicate flowers amidst the music industry forest.

Notes

An earlier version of this was given as the keynote address of the third annual meeting of the Grateful Dead Studies Association (Ganter 2023)

1. Cutler recounts this story in his memoir as well (2010, 220–21).

2. See, for example, Daley (2019); Conners (2009). For a critique of self-published Deadhead memoirs, see Meriwether (2013/2014).

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