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Jon McIntire and the Philosophy of the Grateful Dead

BARRY BARNES

Jon McIntire worked off and on for the Grateful Dead starting in 1968. He was an important insider who worked for the Dead in a variety of roles, although his contributions are not as well known as those of Danny Rifkin, Rock Scully, Sam Cutler, Richard Loren, and Cameron Sears. Though McIntire discarded all of his files in the early 2000s, a few of his writings survive; one of his most interesting is his 1977 essay, “With Future Events Having an Increasingly Less Predictable Nature,” which Jerry Garcia enthusiastically mentioned in an interview that year.¹ This paper offers a closer look at McIntire’s work for the band with an eye toward how his distinctive views helped inform and articulate the band’s business philosophy, perhaps more so than any other manager.

McIntire grew up in the St. Louis area and was a gifted artistic child, studying piano and acting before attending Washington University, where he became a charter member of the Early Music Society of St. Louis. Like so many of his generation, he heard the siren call of San Francisco and moved there in the mid-1960s, enrolling at San Francisco State to study the history of ideas (McNally 2002, 255). There he connected with fellow student Rock Scully, who was managing the Dead along with Danny Rifkin. “We were all psychedelic revolutionaries,” McIntire explained, “and we all became great friends” (Jackson 1988, 16).

McIntire’s entrée into the Dead scene was through the kitchen at 710 Ashbury, and when the Carousel Ballroom opened in early 1968, he went to work in the kitchen there. This was a very fluid time for the

Dead and its organization, and McIntire quickly became comanager of the Carousel (McNally 2002, 254–255). The Carousel was adventurous and experimental, and it only lasted a few months before Bill Graham took over the lease in summer 1968, renaming it the Fillmore West. Twenty years later, McIntire still remembered that time fondly, especially the festive atmosphere at gigs (Jackson 1988, 16–17).

When the Dead moved to Marin County, McIntire accompanied them, playing a range of managerial roles at various times, including office manager, road manager, tour manager, and band manager. In 1969 Lenny Hart took over the Dead's management, and McIntire became the road manager; his tenure included epochal gigs such as Woodstock and Altamont. After that debacle, the Dead hired the Stones' former tour manager, Sam Cutler, and McIntire became the band manager (McNally 2002, 276).

In 1970 McIntire asked Alan Trist, an old friend of Garcia's and Hunter's, to run Ice Nine Publishing for the Dead. He had studied social anthropology at Cambridge before going to work for the Tavistock Institute, which focused on business management consulting. McIntire wanted to revive the spirit of the 710 Ashbury days and was being challenged by the turmoil that had engulfed the Haight and the Dead as the Sixties ended (McNally 2002, 383). McIntire believed that Trist's experience and perspective would prove useful as the band built their organization, helping them examine and adjust their internal processes to reflect their foundational values and ideals.

But McIntire also understood the Dead's humor, and when the band decided to prank Warner Bros. Records with their 1971 live LP, McIntire was the one who called label president Joe Smith at Warner to discuss their next release. When he blithely informed Smith that the new album would be called *Skullfuck*, Smith howled, "How could you do this to me?" McIntire explained, suavely, "It's not me, Joe, it's *all* of us who are doing this to you" (Jackson 1988, 18). McIntire was a psychedelic brother but he was also a consummate professional, and when the album was released it was simply called *The Grateful Dead*.

If working with Warner Bros. had its challenges, so did road-managing the band. In June 1971, McIntire arranged for the Dead to perform

in France, a remarkable experience that whetted the band's interest in a full-fledged European tour. In 1972, McIntire helped make that happen, helping to shepherd the band through Europe, a job that tour manager Sam Cutler likened to "leading a wagon train through hostile territory" (McNally 2002, 363). Part of it was the sheer scale of the role, which was far more daunting than typically associated with manager, but McIntire also saw that as a function of the way the Dead's organization worked at the time, with managerial roles never fully defined (Browne 2015, 333). That lesson would inform his thinking about the band, as he discussed in interviews and in his writing.

McIntire stepped away from acting as manager after that experience, but he continued to work for the band, even agreeing to serve as tour manager again when they returned to Europe in September 1974. A clash with Kreutzmann led to his departure, an incident characterized in different ways, depending on the source (Kreutzmann with Eisen 2015, 92–93; Greenfield 1996, 172). McIntire took advantage of the break from the pressure-cooker of the Dead's world, traveling and resting. He returned to California afterwards, working first with Richard Loren, who had taken over managing the Dead, before becoming manager for Bob Weir's solo career.

When Weir wound down that part of his work, McIntire moved to Los Angeles to study acting and returned to some of his earlier interests, including philosophy and futurism. When his father was diagnosed with cancer, he returned to St. Louis and also trained as a counselor for drug dependency. He also became active in domestic abuse and rape counseling, devoting nearly two years to those efforts (Jackson 1988, 20).

Despite his limited direct connection to the Dead, he continued applying his thoughts to futurism related to the continually changing world and the need for organizations to effectively adjust. For him this included the Dead's music and organization. In 1977 he wrote a brief essay entitled "With Future Events Having an Increasingly Less Predictable Nature," and it found a receptive audience in Garcia, as Nicholas Meriwether notes. Published in this volume of the *Proceedings*, it offers an insightful and eloquent example of McIntire's contribution to the band. He would continue to pursue his interest in framing the band's project in broader intel-

lectual terms, finding inspiration in, among other sources, the Book of Job and the sermons of Paul Tillich, who bolstered his belief that “the essence of individual transformation,” as he explained to Dennis McNally, is that “we need to be better than we are in order to exist” (McNally 2002, 551).

In 1981, Alan Trist completed an internal report for the band entitled “A Balanced Objective,” analyzing all of the jobs in the Grateful Dead organization (Barnes 2009). Garcia had charged Trist with the project, explaining that “By evaluation of the material at hand we have a perception of the best and with creative invention find a solution” (Trist 1981, 3). The report is remarkable for its detail, scope, and tone, an internal analysis that would be impressive for any business organization, but perhaps especially a rock and roll band. It concludes with a section titled “Response to Evolving Conditions,” which echoes ideas first propounded in McIntire’s memo (Trist 1981, 11). That connection makes particular sense, given McIntire’s role in hiring Trist, with the goal of renewing their old Haight-Ashbury ethos of “Are you kind?”

In 1984, after about a year without any communication with the band, McIntire saw the Dead in Kansas City on July 3. He was disappointed, feeling as if “nothing new was going on,” though he enjoyed seeing old friends. At dinner the next night, Weir asked McIntire to come back to the Dead as tour manager. After talking with Dead insiders including Phil Lesh and Robert Hunter, McIntire agreed to return for the Fall 1984 tour (Jackson 1999, 334). McIntire also knew the band was aware of his work with drug counseling and knew there was a need for helping them to “reform themselves,” not just Garcia, who was visibly struggling at the time (Greenfield 1996, 210).

Three years later, McIntire hired Cameron Sears as road manager. This allowed McIntire to focus on the problems created by the explosive growth of their audience, triggered by the publicity surrounding Garcia’s near-death experience and recovery in July 1986 and the subsequent release of *In the Dark* and their Top Ten single, “Touch of Grey.” Navigating the transition from niche to mainstream has swallowed musicians and bands, and the threats to the Dead’s work and organization were enormous. McIntire had to confront a wide array of problems that surrounded gigs, from campgrounds near the venues to the parking lots,

always tricky sites and especially as crowds swelled and tickets became scarcer (Jackson 1988, 23). It was an ideal role for McIntire, whose intelligence, manners and long experience with the band and scene made him an adept diplomat and adroit problem-solver.

That presence and perceptiveness explains McIntire's centrality to the story of the band. Although McIntire was not a constant in the Dead's world, he was an integral participant in the most significant periods of their career. In 1969 he was involved with Woodstock and Altamont; in the 1970s he helped organize the office, negotiate with the record company, build their infrastructure, and shepherd them on the road. When he returned in 1984, he worked to improve the health of band members and the organization, a role that positioned him to help them navigate the extraordinary pressures of the *In the Dark* era. As Dennis McNally summarized,

Jon was not a trained businessman or deal-maker ... But as a diplomat and mediator within the band and in dealing with the record company, Jon was brilliant ... [and] brought the right style to the process ... He was a psychedelic brother, philosophically and morally committed to the Grateful Dead quest, and in more control than most in their scene. (McNally 2002, 363)

John Perry Barlow, one of McIntire's close friends, noted that he "recognized that it took a gentleman to manage barbarism." That stood out in the rough-and-tumble world of the Dead: Clive Davis, who as head of Arista Records worked with McIntire in the early 1970s as well as in the 1980s, wrote that McIntire was "very organized, very professional ... focused" (qtd. in McNally 2002, 421).

McIntire was especially close to Garcia, calling him "one of the most intelligent people I have ever met." For him, one of Garcia's most revealing statements was, "I'd really like to know what can be created from joy" (Greenfield 1996, 343; 342). McIntire's recognition of the power of that remark goes to the heart of why Garcia admired his intellect and philosophical perspective. When McIntire passed away in 2012, McNally commented that Garcia and Hunter had written "Uncle John's Band" for McIntire. It was a story that had circulated earlier in the Dead's family, but McIntire always demurred. "Hunter did not write 'Uncle

John's Band' about me," he told an interviewer in 1995. "He wrote it for Jerome John Garcia. But even Hunter, after some years, called me Uncle John, so everyone assumed it was me" (Greenfield 1996, 172). Perhaps, but apocryphal or not, the story speaks to the impact McIntire had on the Dead and the legacy he left. His thoughtful 1977 essay stands as an eloquent and revealing testament to that contribution.

Notes

I am grateful to Nicholas Meriwether for alerting me to McIntire's essay and for his editorial work. An earlier version of this essay was given at the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association conference (Barnes 2024); I thank the members of the audience for their questions and comments.

1. McIntire reported that he had discarded all of his files to Nicholas Meriwether in a June 2010 meeting.

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