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KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Dead Studies in the Mix: “All A Seer Can Own”

GRAEME M. BOONE

It is a privilege to be speaking to you on this occasion, and as part of this unique group of scholars, artists, musicians, fans, thinkers and actors of all kinds, and I'd like to thank our guiding light, Nicholas Meriwether, for the invitation to do so. Based on my experience here in the past couple of days, those good old Grateful Dead Studies are very much alive and kicking, with so many voices bringing such warmth and diversity of perspectives to the common goal of illuminating the band, its world, and ours.

My own position in the group, like that of all of us in our different ways, is oriented to my life experience and points of entry into this world of interests. As a San Francisco native, I have been existentially bound to the band since the 1960s; I have played in various kinds of bands ranging from bluegrass to punk to jazz to medieval and world music, inspired by the Dead but also by the influences that molded them in their own development. Meanwhile, as a career musicologist I have studied the nature, meanings, and history of many kinds of music, including rock, folk, and jazz, classical, and avant-garde, and various related topics, including issues of notation, rhythm, linguistic prosody, style, theology, and emotion. In this my thoughts are often inspired by the Dead's example, and in this talk I'd like to outline some perceptions about the current state of the band as an object of reflection and study, and as a life theme.

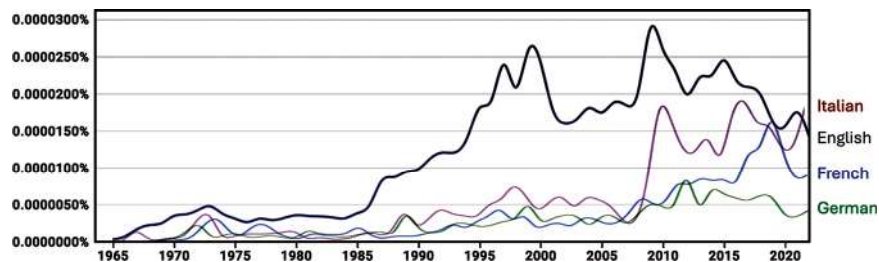
As we so well understand, all kinds of folks have written books and articles about the band: Deadheads above all, but also novelists, artists, academic scholars, culture critics, journalists, photographers, industry

insiders, band members, members of their broader community, and other co-travelers. The relative output of such publications has been increasing over time, with high points in the late 1990s, 2009, and 2015, to judge by an NGram Viewer graph (Fig. 1); as an illustrative enhancement, I've added in the background graphs for publications in Italian, French, and German as well. It is poignant, though not unexpected, to see the quantity of publications rise dramatically after the demise of the band in 1995, and to see a final peak around 2015. A more granular view from the WorldCat interlibrary catalog would also indicate a high point around 2015, that outstanding year in Dead memorialization, marking major anniversaries of the band's beginning and end as well as the celebrated Fare Thee Well concerts.

Impressive to me about this stream of publications, given my own formation, is not just that it exists, but that it should include a distinct component of rigorous scholarly research, one that is continuing to grow today. The definition of such a category is inevitably somewhat vague, but any list of books on the Dead that one compiles is likely to include some that reflect either an academic orientation or an otherwise trenchant mastery of technical analysis. This research dimension is of particular importance to our own Association, given its encouragement and inclusivity regarding academic study; and the good work of our members and conference participants is reflected in the quality and frequency of their publications, which are not only highly prominent in Grateful Dead research, but can fairly be considered trend-setting in the field of popular-music studies more generally.

Although the tally of writings on the Dead that target a scholarly-academic audience may be comparatively small, it fits well into

Figure 1. Grateful Dead Publications



Google Ngram Viewer search for the case-sensitive expression 'Grateful Dead' from 1965 to 2022, the last year of publication currently available.

that great variety of books, journals, online publications, and other media that continue to address the Dead from so many different perspectives, in their own right or as part of a broader theme. Dead-related writing today, inclusively considered, goes far beyond any simple search function, or any traditional benchmarks of academic credentialing. It is a flowering whose density and complexity would seem unmatched by work on any other rock band save the Beatles.

That being said, I'd like to recognize the essential dilemma facing those of us who write about popular music from the perspective of a musicologist: there has been simply too much music produced every day, and too few scholars studying it, to allow any direction of study to develop as some of us might wish it could, or achieve a clear and definitive grip on its disciplinarity. The musicological scholarship that does exist on the myriad byways of pop music commonly lacks an audience large enough, or critically engaged enough, to cultivate a sustainable community of academically grounded knowledge. This concern goes back to the formative era of modern popular music studies decades ago, arising out of a profusion of styles and agendas that resisted any constraints on methodology or goals, at least in musicology. It also arises from the status of popular music not only as an immense musical world in its own right, but also as resistant, if not simply indifferent, to the constraints of written musical notation and the institutions of legitimation and authority that have grown up around it. Most of the research on popular music takes place outside of the field of musicology, if one is to judge by the relative scarcity of formally-trained musicologists in PCA conference programs down the years (contrasting of course with the scarcity of non-musicologists at national musicology meetings!). This is not to set up gates around what 'musicology' could or should be, but simply to recognize a common state of affairs.

In some ways, the too-muchness of pop music is a wonderful thing: a core aporia provoked by its inexhaustible cornucopia. But it enfolds tensions within popular music itself, as well as in its relationship to the constantly evolving world of academic study. Sometimes it seems as if we are faced with a Sisyphean task, being obliged to reintroduce, reconstruct, reimagine our field for each paper, audience, conference, publication, season; you find yourself speaking past other scholars or audiences who, like you, speak from their own islands of

interest and hard-won expertise. This is true in any field to some extent, but I think it reflects the lack of any settled pedagogy—any sense of ‘the field’ in that respect. This issue is also pertinent to work on the Dead: not only do we have an extraordinarily high quantity of recordings of the band, and wealth of data and memories and personalities swirling around them, but we also have a constantly evolving stream of sensibilities, training, and perspectives as new scholars enter the field with new questions, new concerns, new prompts to research and reflection, even as older scholars are still hashing out their approaches to it all.

The paradox of hard-won expertise nested in a constantly renewed cloud of unknowing overlays a more fundamental paradox, namely, of scholarship as a form of communication that is, simultaneously, an act of model-making and an act of storytelling. The tension between these two modes of being is essential to the Grateful Dead’s own music, just as it is to the scattered bones and roses of our work in and around it, ranging from ecstatic fan experiences to cool formal analyses. All of us have stories to tell, but out of these also emerge diverse models of understanding.

Being invited by various academic journals to review submissions over the years, I am struck by the lack of common ground that scholars can manifest in reflecting on, and arguing about, musical manifestations, traditions, and their consequences. But what happens in this group here, in this room today as in the many other meetings I’ve attended, offers the antidote of shared community to the loneliness or cynicism that can arise from isolated achievement. In the gathering of Grateful Dead scholars, I am consistently hopeful that “You can talk about your plenty, and talk about your ills,” but together we gather what each of us spills.

It is ironic (though perhaps not at all, in fact) that the rise of para-academic work on the Dead has coincided with the shrinking of credentialed academic humanities, as tenure-track job opportunities in this area have evaporated over the last fifteen years. Many retiring faculty have frequently gone unreplaced, while the proliferation of over-burdened teaching, practice, and clinical faculty, together with adjuncts, lecturers, and short-term visiting professors, has left many programs scrambling to provide balance or simply find a path forward. According to the Music Studies pages of the Academic Jobs Wiki, at least 85 tenure-track faculty jobs were listed in the academic year 2016–17 for musicology and ethno-

musicology, plus well over 70 other full-time jobs. By 2023–24 the number of professor-level jobs as a whole had shrunk to 57, and many of those appear to have been temporary or non-tenure-track. Graduate students today are frequently doubtful of landing a university post upon finishing their degree; many are preparing for the non-academic marketplace.

This turn has upended our lives even as a recasting of our scholarly mission has transformed the Humanities. Accompanying the post-modern turn of a few decades ago, the progressive multiplication, decentering, or reframing of scholarly topics and approaches reorients our sense of what can and needs to be done in teaching and research.

The Dead might not at first seem well-placed to profit from this turn, and yet we have seen in this group how they can be integral to it when approached through new and transformative thoughtways. To take one potent aspect of the Dead's enduring appeal, consider their visionary status as purveyors of musical Americana. While the term has been around for a long time and frequently attributed to the Dead, only in the twenty-first century has it become a brutally thematic and grandly overarching theme in music, whose status continues to rise today. It was in 1999 that the Americana Music Association was founded in Nashville; in 2010 the Grammys instituted a Best Americana Album award; in 2014 they instituted a Best American Roots Song award; in 2015 a Best American Roots Performance award; and in 2023 a Best Americana Performance award.

The Grammys' very definition of the term 'Americana' is, well, shockingly evocative of the Grateful Dead themselves: "Americana is contemporary music that incorporates elements of various American roots music and vocal styles, including country, roots-rock, folk, bluegrass, R&B and blues, resulting in a distinctive roots-oriented sound that lives in a world apart from the pure forms of the genres upon which it may draw. While acoustic instruments are often present and vital, Americana also often uses a full electric band" (NARAS 2011). It makes sense that, in such an environment, the Dead's relevance to modern musicians and audiences would grow, alongside their primal status in jam band culture.

Another source of increased interest in the Dead today is of course the expanding and evolving range of Dead fans. Even as the boomers who grew up with the Dead continue to publish their histories and ideas, ensuing generations are contributing their voices to the

conversation. It seems reasonable to say that the Dead have never been more broadly or complexly relevant than they are right now, and this is something I see first-hand teaching at the Ohio State University, where so much of my time and energy is spent in large undergraduate courses.

In the 1990s I was concerned by what often seemed more generally to be the tired novelty of recycled, remixed, and repackaged music. At times it seemed as if the entire sense of progression in music that had in so many ways defined my own musical life, going hand in hand with progressive social views and politics across the later twentieth century, was dissolving under a tidal retro wave, which would be redoubled by corporate consolidation in twenty-first century digital media. But if it became increasingly unclear what a 'progressive' music could or should be, I see evidence that youth listening cultures have not only absorbed the retro feedback loop of recent decades, but also have been able to see through it to other horizons, and the primary reason would be the sheer consumption of digital media itself, even as it has brought historical music back with such force and diversity as to give new and opposite meaning to Faulkner's quip that 'the past is never dead, it's not even past.' Applying that idea to our own work here, and in consideration of their transformative influences, we could say that the Dead is never past; it doesn't even have to be the Dead.

I often used to feel I was obliged to drag students into an appreciation of, and receptivity to, old or unfamiliar music, which many seemed to resist with cultural indifference, or view through the narrow lens of a passing fad. But students today seem primed to understand the appeal of things historic and different, and their playlists are frequently wide-ranging. I am amazed to see students wax lyrical about Jimmie Rodgers and Bessie Smith, but also 'chill' to Milton Babbitt and Guillermo Klein: music is a world of horizons to explore and learn, and in that process, an emergent buzzword, in the face of hyperpop and numbingly lush studio production, is authenticity.

Further in this post-twentieth-century vein, as Steve Garabedian mentioned yesterday, is the wholesale transformation among students in their relationship to rock music, which is no longer viewed only as rebellious in the traditional sense, but also as a family music, beloved to their parents and constituting a defining, formative soundtrack for modern childhood. I first noticed this post-rebellion sensibility in the early 2000s,

which evidently resulted from boomer and Gen-X parenting. In my relatively vast rock and roll course (300 students each time), many not only wear those now-ubiquitous historic (replica) rock T-shirts to class, but get on their phones afterward to share what they learned with their parents.

This is not to say that all of my students are Grateful Dead fans; we still see a strong tilt toward Led Zeppelin, '80s hair bands, Metallica, Nirvana, Linkin Park, and a lot of 'straight ahead rock 'n' roll,' however defined. In this respect, the Dead can still today be insurgent and unsettling, just as they were in 1969.

In that regard, together with this hopeful dawn of musical open-mindedness, and specifically to rock-related traditions, I am also seeing what may be an opening of young minds to an old but important dichotomy that grew out of jazz and beat culture after World War II, namely, the opposition between hip and square culture, in and out, or—put into psychedelic terms—being on or off the bus. This dichotomy was an essential if usually unspoken reality in my life and has a lot to do with the Grateful Dead, but in recent decades I had found it losing potency among my students.

One question I love to ask in my large courses is, 'do you get it?' This is not a question about an assignment or pedagogical detail but about life, the cosmos, everything. Do you get it. Students used laugh about this, many quickly raising their hands to affirm that they do not get it, some others that they do, and quite a few that they really don't know. There was a recognition of something elemental and intimately meaningful in the question. But then a growing number of students began to question the question, either not responding or else asking me, "Professor Boone, what do you mean by 'get it'? I don't understand." Not only was it as if they did not 'get it,' but they did not even know what getting it could mean; there was It to Get anymore. In that shift I seemed to be watching the demise of the baby boomer ethic, with its origin in the bohemian 1950s, which would be running parallel to the recasting of the great rock tradition as a family music—milk, as Roland Barthes might have said, vs. wine.

But now in 2024, I find students perking up again to this kind of thing. They get the question again. They are interested, they feel the vibe and the possibilities. In this post-pandemic moment, I find myself hopeful for the future. I find in this gathering, here, the seeds and fruit of a meaningful movement, not just in Dead studies or in

music but in our American lives, that could not only reflect but also impact more broadly the world moving around us. “The desert stars are bright tonight, let’s meet as friends”; but will the thousand stories come round to one again? I don’t think they need to; our community is flourishing in diversity, which is its best insurance for its future.

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