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“The Stars Were Set in Spin”: Ritual, Dance, and Community on Modern-Day Dead Tour

SHIRA COOPER

I was soaring down the highway when I got it. The Grateful Dead’s music suddenly transformed from background noise into a tapestry filled with familiar faces, tunes, and stories. Still, it took two more years and several shows before I finally found my place within the Dead scene. It was the spring of 2021. I had snuck out of work a few minutes early and rushed over to the small amphitheater in Vail, Colorado, for my first Bobby Weir and Wolf Bros show. Sometime during the first set, I spotted a group of about twenty dancers at the back of the lawn. Most of the venue was dancing, but these people were inspired: gravity seemed to warp around them. They were young, too—around my age. I soon found myself dancing besides them, on the periphery of their space.

By the next night, after sharing a dance floor for hours, I had become a friendly face. When I asked who would be at the Dead & Company show in Boston that September, every one of them raised a hand. Who are these people? I wondered. How will they all be at the same venue in three months, when it’s half the country away? I was intrigued. After the shows, I began to weave my way into the social fabric of devoted Deadheads who travel on tour and ritually dance together. I was grateful to have found what we called our family on the road as well as fascinated. A grant from Bowdoin College, where I was majoring in philosophy, gave me the funding to research the summer 2023 Dead & Company final tour. My goal was to document the ethics and structures of the touring Dead scene by

focusing on one group of people whose practices and behaviors seemed illustrative, even representative, of the larger phenomenon.

This essay presents the results of my ethnographic analysis, which focuses on community, ritual, precarious living, and the sociological implications and potential of Dead tour—familiar issues in social science scholarship and in Grateful Dead studies. Yet my dual role, as a touring Deadhead and participant-observer, also made my experience an indelibly personal one; the writing here reflects that, sliding between first-person and third-person narration, allowing me to express the vitality of Dead tour and its impact on me. Often that requires the language that Deadheads use: colorful and even poetic, the ways that fans communicate their experience tend toward metaphor, more artistic than scientific.

Although I heard and read much about Lot Kids and spinners, little of it jibes with what I experienced. At heart, the scene's social structure is dynamic and appealing, offering a utopian dream of a new, more egalitarian future. And it also offers compelling insights into how the older Grateful Dead phenomenon has survived and continues to flourish, almost thirty years since Jerry Garcia's death.



"Philly Ritual Grounds," Citizens Bank Park, Philadelphia, June 15, 2023. Photograph by Grace Lott, courtesy of the photographer. <https://www.instagram.com/gracellott/>.

The grant altered my tour experience in several important ways. For most of the tour I drove my own car by myself. I did not need to jug, a common tour practice where one approaches strangers at a gas station and asks them to fill up a jug of gas. I did not need to work on the Lot, letting me focus on my work and also get enough rest. Funding gave me a measure of security and comfort that many tourheads lack: I had enough food to eat, I made it into most shows, and I felt a general sense of safety. In most other aspects, my experience was no different from my companions: I traveled, slept, loitered in numerous parking lots, and, most importantly, I danced. While the tone of this essay is more academic, the episodic elements of the essay reflect how social media postings documented day-to-day life for many on tour. To protect the identity of my tour companions, I have changed all personal names.

Spinning Community

*spinning a set the stars through which the tattered tales
of axis roll
about the waxen wind of never set to motion in the unbecoming
round about the reason hardly matters nor the wise
through which
the stars were set in spin*

— Robert Hunter, “Dark Star”¹

Stephen’s big eyes beam at me, dilated pupils swirling with fractal sunlight. Scraggly, unkempt hair falls past his shoulder and frames his smile. Stephen, as usual, is wearing a simple shirt and baggy yellow pants with nothing on beneath them. He twitches a bit as we talk; the lysergic energy from last night is still seeping out of his limbs. We are sitting together in a circle with several other friends, discussing spinning, the ritual dance we perform during each Dead & Company show. The air is thick with anticipation; there is another show this evening, and there are few better things in this world than a Dead show. Of course, that is why this collection of pleasure-seeking nomads and peddlers have all ended up on tour, traveling across the country to see Dead & Company play. Tonight will be the twentieth show this tour for Stephen; it will be my sixteenth.

The dominant narrative holds that the Grateful Dead came to a definite end, a full stop etched in stone on August 9, 1995, when Jerry Garcia died.² Some Deadheads even believe this. There is some truth to that position: after that, there were about fifteen years when the scene faltered. But the music never stopped. Mickey Hart's remarks at Jerry's memorial on August 13, 1995, were a challenge to Deadheads across the country and the world:

Well, if the Grateful Dead have been anything ... it gave you the power. You have the groove, you have the feeling ... So what are you going to do with it? That's the question, okay? Now ... take your Dead heads, and you take 'em home, and you do something with all this. (Meriwether 2000, 676)

A pair of my older friends still remember that day fondly; for them, it was a clarion call to spread the light of Deadheaddom. Within a few years, they had opened an alternative preschool, infused with Deadhead ethics, just north of San Francisco: students spend most of their days outside, are not allowed to play with money of any sort, and are always dancing. The preschool is still open today.

The school confounds the narrative that the Grateful Dead came to an end with Garcia's death. The band may have stopped playing, but a death in the family—even of the band's de facto leader and charismatic center—did not call into question the ideals and beliefs that inspired the Dead and their followers. Deadheads adapted and sought other outlets: some began touring with bands like Phish and Widespread Panic; others became mainstays of their local Dead scenes.

And the surviving band members kept performing. Bill Kreutzmann took time off; others did not, and by 1996, almost all were back touring, both with their own bands and occasionally together, first as The Other Ones and finally as The Dead. They played Grateful Dead music with a different tenor, dredging up long-dormant songs and collaborating with a range of other musicians to reinvent the Dead's catalog. In 2015, after the runaway success of the Dead's fiftieth anniversary Fare Thee Well concerts, Bob Weir, Mickey Hart and Bill Kreutzmann formed Dead & Company to carry the banner.

Unlike the previous post-Garcia iterations, Dead & Company was immediately popular enough to play stadiums and arenas. Blue, a com-

panion who spent years working at that preschool, recalled her first shows back in 2015:

After Jerry died, I made a life. I had children, found a stable job, and attended very few Dead shows. In 2015, my niece dragged me out to the Fare Thee Well shows in Chicago. Returning to the Dead and spinning after so long was like coming home. I cried on the floor, surrounded by community and dancing I had missed so dearly. (Blue 2023)

Since that show, Blue has begun following the Dead again, though not for entire tours.

To many, the community they have built in the Dead scene is family. And alongside a resurgence of people following the Dead on tour came an influx of new family members: another generation of Lot Kids, the (current) youngest group of heads on tour who vend, socialize, and make a home in parking lots outside of each show. Today, perhaps half of the people on Dead tour are too young to have ever seen Jerry Garcia. But I found that the spiritual, emotional, and philosophical commitment of these fans to the music burns with the same passion that animated earlier generations of Deadheads. That continuity suggests that the Grateful Dead spirit is not contained in any single aspect of the Dead—not in Garcia, not in the community, nor even in the music. My generation of Deadheads see the Grateful Dead spirit as an energy force that emerges anew at the intersection of each of those elements.

Like the muse, this spirit cannot be commanded, but it can be coaxed. Garcia had an uncanny ability to court it, filling stadiums with its transformative energy. With his death, the Grateful Dead spirit went into seclusion but the resurgence of Deadheads in the early 2010s, spurred especially by Dead & Company, brought the spirit back. Generations of critics and commentators have struggled to explain the ineffable feeling that a Dead show could evoke, and defining the Grateful Dead spirit is equally fraught. But its contours can be seen in the social structure, values, and lifestyles that make up Dead tour today.

Dead tour is a self-contained world built around the Grateful Dead aesthetic—a psychedelic, collaborative, and free-form container for musical, social, and ideological growth. That aesthetic is rooted in the primal, distinctive improvisational style that characterizes the Dead's music: there

is no “lead” instrument, and rarely do the musicians take turns improvising. Instead, they all improvise together, the voices and instruments weaving together in a collage of sound. As one of my narrators put it, “They are a hurricane force spiraling windstorm of transformative and bone melting music. You are not safe in their presence. You can not [sic] emerge innocent with flowers in your hair from this music” (Icepetal 2009). The goal of the Dead’s music is to engage in this process. Enraptured in the spiraling windstorm of sound, the band members and dancers alike are awoken to the possibilities that abound when we reach towards collaboration instead of domination.

The structures of Dead tour manifest those same impulses. On tour, there are no leaders or written rules to dictate how one should live. There is only a shared dream: a high life built around community, bliss, and music—music that itself reflects those cooperative, egalitarian, and psychedelic ideals. More often than not, that dream is realized. It may not be heaven, but for Deadheads, it’s closer than anything on Earth—just “close enough to pretend,” to quote the song “Saint of Circumstance.”

Weaving Family

Stephen stands and stretches, his raised shirt exposing a sinewy, muscular frame. Nearly all of the Kids are just as strong. Our ritual dance—for some, it is spinning, and for others it is ecstatic movement intertwined with turns—is serious exercise. Between songs, after stepping towards the heavens in enraptured bliss, we fall into each other’s arms, oblivious to our companions’ sweat dripping down our own torsos.

Our style of dance and ritual—referred to by a companion as “prayer spin”—is not a new phenomenon in the Grateful Dead world. Deadheads may have begun spinning in the 1960s, although no evidence of that has surfaced, but by the mid-1980s, twirling dancers were commandeering venue hallways for what many practitioners viewed as a sacred practice. By the late 1980s, the number of dancers and spinners had surged into thousands, prompting the Dead to set up speakers in the hallways for them.

The lineage of spinners to which Stephen and I belong can be traced to two origins. The first are the Spinners from the Church of Unlimited

Devotion, known among themselves as “the Family” and to others as “the Cult.” The Family disbanded in 1992, when, following accusations of manipulation and sexual misconduct, members ousted their leader from their enclave in Philo, CA, where approximately twenty people lived (Jarnow 2016, 307; cf. Interlocuter A 2023). The second half of that lineage can be traced back to the thousands of ecstatic hallway dancers who spun and grooved alongside the Family without engaging in their rituals and cult practices. Of the spinners who were alive during the days of the Grateful Dead and are still touring—most of whom are between the ages 40 and 60³—none lived in Philo, and few had more than tangential relationships with Family members.

In the Garcia era, when the Family occupied a prominent role in the dancing space, there was a strong divide between these two groups. Jennifer Hartley, an anthropologist who traveled with the Family in 1989 and 1990, explained:

It must be noted that there are others on tour who spin. Many people use spinning as a part of their dance, and there are people who spin through entire shows, as well. The Family, however, have different reasons for spinning ... One may spin and remain in the material realm, but the goal for committed Family members is to move to the spiritual realm through dance. (Hartley 2000, 142)

Despite the dissolution of the Family, many of us today still seek that same entrance into the spiritual realm through dance.

As with most aspects of Deadheadland, there is no concrete adoption process for joining our tour family—a family in its own right, but without the capital “F” used by the Family. Importantly, though, one cannot be adopted without surrendering to the swirling chaos of the dance floor. Within its embrace, you cannot hide. In that space, there are no rules nor conventional logics; there are only souls and intentions. It is out of that primordial realm that our tour family emerges and builds itself. There are other tour families, or Deadhead subgroups, each with their own sets of values and lifestyles. This study reflects my own tour family: most of the Lot Kids and the spinners. The term “spinner” in this essay aligns with colloquial use on tour. During the post-Garcia era of 1995–2015, the

term lost its connection to the Family. In this essay, “Spinner” refers to the Church of Unlimited Devotion and “spinner” designates its colloquial use.

Today, the term spinner is twofold in meaning. In its literal interpretation, it describes one’s dance style. As an index, the word refers to the spinners section, the zone where we dance every show. The spinners section is amorphous and, unlike in the Garcia era, rarely located in the hallways. At large stadiums, you will find us on the floor, typically towards the back or far left side, and at amphitheaters, you will find us in the “moat,” the flat walkway between the lawn and the seated section closer to the stage, usually the only reliably flat space in the venue. Within this amorphous section are neighborhoods of dancers, grouped both by style and camaraderie. Towards the back, where there is more room, dedicated spinners gather. The ecstatic dancers—mostly younger heads—tend to clump nearer to the stage, where space is limited. Off in the opposite corner of the main section, a collection of others dance, seeking even more room to whirl. These groupings are not rigid and often intermix; there are no dividing lines on the dance floor.

To the unattuned eye, the entire spinners section may appear homogenous, and to some extent it is. Most dancers in any part of the section know each other, at least by face or energy, and share a sense of camaraderie. The term spinner, among younger Deadheads, finds its meaning spatially: one may identify as a spinner if they are a member of the amorphous blob that is the spinners section, regardless of dance style. (It goes without saying that not all the Kids self-identify as spinners, even if they, too, dance in the spinners section.) For many older fans, the term still holds its original meaning: “To me, a Spinner is a member of the Family,” a middle-aged friend explained. “I may spin all show, but I am no Spinner. I don’t want to connect myself to that cult” (Interlocutor B 2023).

That remark gets at how the Deadhead experience accretes, tapping into the band’s long history. As countless tours whip by, new generations of Deadheads inscribe their names, beliefs, and rituals into the Grateful Dead palimpsest. Their words cannot completely obscure those that were written before. Peering into the many layers of this tablet, the past and present seem to dance beside one another: Jerry Garcia whispers a

melody through John Mayer's guitar; an electronic ticket reveals itself in the reflection of vintage sunglasses; a young spinner meets the leader of the Family in an ethereal space. The message inlaid in this palimpsest is a reminder that the past speaks through us, overwriting and inscribing new meaning onto new fans. To follow Dead & Company on tour is to walk amid corpses—of lost revolutions, long-gone band members, and American dreams. As one spins in tandem with their music, those corpses come alive. Whether those ghosts are friend or foe depends on how we memorialize ourselves.

Among those of us who spin throughout shows, regardless of self-identification, there is a particular magnetism. On one hand, there is a tactical benefit to this attraction: it is more fun to spin near others who are spinning. On the other, there is a metaphysical purpose for our connection: *communitas* emerges when we spin together, when we join together as one and traverse its foreign landscape.

In his seminal anthropological study of the ritual process, Victor Turner identified three phases: separation, liminality, and reincorporation (Turner 1969, 94). *Communitas*, a particular type of social relation during which people face each other in “direct, immediate and total confrontation of human identities,” takes place during the liminal phase of the ritual process, where structure, status, and social roles are stripped away (Turner 1969, 131). The world that we create as we whirl, which I call the spin space, takes place during the liminal phase of the Dead show ritual. Its contours are defined by elongated moments of *communitas*, when spinners connect to each other at an almost ineffable level. In the interviews I conducted, few companions could describe precisely what our ritual conjures. The alternate universe that bursts forth, its light pouring through the seams of our material world, is a liminal and mystical phenomenon. It must be felt to be known, as I wrote in one reflection:

On the purest of nights, when there is ample room and the music is on, we ascend. Skirts flutter alongside one another, and hands float on the winds of inspiration. Ecstatic orbits fall in line, and we dance along the pathways of a familiar shape—the flower of life. Stepping in time with one another, surrendering oneself to the superorganism of sacred geometry, is ascendance. The flower, alive and buzzing, holds unspeakable power; we conjure

it, but we cannot control it. The best we can do is hold tight to its churning wheels as they fill our souls with life.

Even on the most cramped of dance floors, and even with eyes sealed shut, spinners rarely bump into each other. This is what inspires Stephen: “When I stand aside and watch the spinners, it is like seeing a superorganism all working together,” he says to me (2023). As a superorganism, our tour family is composed of several, often very different, groups: spinners, ecstatic dancers, high school dropouts, kids, businesspeople, acidheads, sober folk, and myriad other fractals of identity. But, as a superorganism, we are unified in purpose: to stay alive, dance, and keep the party going. And together—only together—can we realize those dreams. Stephen asks: “Does an ant know the majesty that its colony creates by working together?” (2023).

Puddles of Love

It is nearly six in the morning, and the Colorado sun pours down on our homes—a collection of about twenty vans, buses, and cars—warming the seven Deadheads who have yet to fall asleep. Nearly ten people watched the sun rise, bodies tangled in a puddle of limbs, joints, and guitars. Last night, following the first show in Boulder, was a late-night “Dupree Show.” Dupree, a Deadhead from Greenville, SC, has a bun of hip-length hair wrapped behind his head and wears a grey hoodie embroidered with abstract geometric patterns. The hoodie rarely leaves his body; he has had his most mystical experiences wearing it. The hair remains sturdily in its bun. After two years, it has formed into a beavertail, a tangle resembling a single, massive dreadlock.

Hidden inside the hoodie pocket is a plastic bag full of a particular strain of cannabis, Bubba Kush. Dupree swears by it and will not consume any other; modern cannabis genetics have become too potent and produce an uncomfortable high, he proclaims. At three in the morning, with a Bubba Kush joint in one hand and a microphone in the other, Dupree began his late-night show. The show itself had little structure, and mostly involved him making ethereal and primal noises into the microphone, which he then mixed with even stranger effects. The audience—puddled Kids—reacted to the show in force, laughing and chatting amongst themselves.

The strange and psychedelic sounds of a Dupree Show are nothing new to the Kids. Most of them have spent tens, even hundreds, of late nights in parking lots across the country, their minds and bodies slowly finding solid ground again after an evening of cosmic bliss. The group of Lot Kids hail from no particular place—or, rather, every particular place—and have been on the road for varying amounts of time. For some, myself included, this summer is our first tour. I got on the bus in Charlotte, NC; by the time of the Colorado shows, I had been traveling for five weeks. But other Kids have been on tour for years, living full-time out of their converted vehicles and selling wares—wire-wrapped jewelry, food, tie-dyes, more clandestine sacraments—to support themselves. Many of them sought out this life because, as a friend said to me, “having a job is like they’re trying to close you off to the cosmos” (Interlocutor C 2023).

Tourhead is an old Deadhead term that dates back to at least the 1980s. It describes those who have dedicated chunks of their lives to following the Dead on tour. That is still true today, but the term conveys something more: Tourheads do not wait for the world to change around them, nor do they morph themselves to fit into that world. Then as now, the straight lines and rigid boxes of wage labor are not so accommodating of the Grateful Dead spirit.

At the center of Dead tour, then, is a kernel of revolutionary truth: if we hope for our dreams to come true, we must act now to make that happen. Life on tour is a dream, and not always a good one. Money is in short supply, vehicles break down often, and there is little long-term stability. But the revolution—at least the pleasurable one we want—is never going to come alongside a flush of cash. So nobody waits for the right moment to begin living the good life.

Ten o’clock rolls around and people begin to stir, the blazing sun turning each vehicle-home into a sauna. Wearing a paisley wrap skirt, halter top, and more necklaces than I can count, Rosalie walks past my car with a coffee and bagel in hand. “There’s a free continental breakfast at the hotel,” she says. “Just walk past the lobby and you’ll find it—but go quick, it closes at 10!” She wanders off to find a shady spot in the hotel parking lot where we are all posted up.

Rosalie is a “rider,” someone who does not have a vehicle and catches rides with others. Riders have a different set of responsibilities

on tour. They are not expected to pay for gas—though, ideally, they help jug—rarely have a say in navigation, and must have a small number of belongings, not much more than a large backpack and sleeping bag. Riders, too, can be at the whims of their drivers: an older Deadhead, after a show one day, shared a story from tour in the '90s when someone showed up to ride with two large suitcases, a guitar, and a backpack. The head handed him a pillowcase and said that was all the space he would get. Some rules are assumed: Dupree would soon be ousted from the car he was riding in because he spilled honey all over the vehicle.

The precarity of riding, however, is mostly offset by a collective spirit, the love that undergirds our community. Love is perhaps the most consistent piece of the Grateful Dead spirit. This is not the rapturous love that one feels for their beloved, though it is related. Rather, it is the love that forms the common substrate between all living and nonliving beings—a life force that allows everything to live in harmony. Learning to see the world as fundamentally reliant on this unifying love requires changing your understanding of individuality; in brief, it entails seeing own well-being as tied up in the well-being of others. Once that is accomplished, one's conception of the self as independent dissolves, replaced by the knowledge that you are interdependent. The veil of individuality works only to obscure the interrelatedness of all.

You will often hear a Lot Kid saying "I love you" to a new friend. An outsider might brush this language off as empty hippie-speak. For a long while I did as well. But however trite in wording, the language is rich in effect: It is an affirmation of oneness and acceptance more tangible than I have experienced anywhere else. This love—the Grateful Dead spirit—relishes difference. Homogeneity and straight lines are irrelevant in Deadheadland, supplanted by a chaotic and organic array of beings. Viewed up close, as with any fractal, Dead tour is full of sharp ends and dark alleyways. But from afar, it begins to resemble a heart—or perhaps a lightning bolt—full of generative life force. What shape does dominant American culture create when you zoom out?

Riding, too, offers a more direct path into the Kids' social circle, which is notably difficult to infiltrate as an outsider. Annie Bonneau was on her first tour this summer, dragged out by a friend she met on the beach

one day. Annie drives a van, painted with Dead iconography, flowers, and rainbows. Although she had some friends among the Kids, before collecting any riders, she expressed her frustrations to me about the social scene: “There is only one group chat, and it’s full. Nobody else can join. I feel left out” (Annie 2023). Without entrance into the group chats, it’s easy to lose track of the Kids between shows, finding yourself alone for days on end. If one is a rider, though, much of the social navigation is avoided. And there is no better way to become friends with strangers than soaring down the highway for hours in a Sprinter van crammed with bodies, bags, and love.

Gaining admittance into the tour family, then, is a multifold task: it requires attending weeks of tour, hanging around the Lot before and after shows, and, perhaps most importantly, dancing alongside everyone. The exceptional number of transient people in the scene, often popping up for just a few shows at a time, compounds the challenge of becoming a familiar face. Finding footing means making yourself known—a deliberate and difficult task—or already knowing someone within the scene. Picking up riders, too, can ease the lonely challenge. Within a few weeks’ time, Annie was in: at any given time, you could find her van packed with two or three other fans. At night, they knotted tightly into a web of bodies, often fitting three people on the small bed and a fourth on the floor. The sleep was not ideal, nor was it as restful as one really needs when living on the road, but it was sleep nonetheless.

The barriers to entry into this tour family are not malicious and do not necessarily run counter to the spirit of love that energizes tour life. But being on tour is not easy, and one must be mindful about those with whom they choose to cohabitate. With few resources and a limited number of spaces in vehicles, there is, unfortunately, not always enough for everyone. Casey, Stephen’s sibling and a rider themselves, conceded, “When I am not on tour, I am eating the right amount of food every day. Out here, I am lucky if I have two meals a day. My body seems to have adjusted to it, though” (2023, July). Others in the group agreed. On the road, there is too little food, too much travel, too little sleep, too much hustling, and the constant precarity of living out of one’s vehicle. Where there is nothing but shifting ground below your feet, only family can provide stability.

Muddy Water

Once one has been woven into the social fabric of Dead tour, it is almost impossible to leave. The community is a safety blanket, and friends made on tour become vital roots across the country. On a smaller scale, having a close circle on Tour means that people will look out for you. This includes ensuring that you make it into shows—critical, as few people have tickets before show day, and getting in often requires ‘extracurricular’ (i.e., extralegal) effort. Before I was an established face, nobody would have checked in on me before showtime to ask if I got in. By the end of tour, however, family members watched out for me and ensured that I was inside and on the floor each night.

The rosy comfort provided by such a tight-knit family, though, is not without thorns. After a show one day, Bertha and I began chatting about accountability among our family. “Once you are ‘in’ with this group of people,” she said, “it’s nearly impossible to leave. Nobody will kick you out.” A ghost wind blew in through her van’s open door. “Last tour, Charlie Fog raped someone. Nobody knew until the beginning of this tour. And even now that people know, little has been done. He hasn’t taken any responsibility” (Bertha 2023). Charlie Fog, a prominent older Deadhead, has been on the scene for decades—you will find him at nearly every show, limbs whipping about while he dances. Bertha noted that, at the start of summer tour, several men sat Charlie Fog down, told him they didn’t stand behind him, and committed to stop interacting with him. Nearly six weeks after that, few people had stuck by their words. I had been on tour for a month at this point and had not heard once of Charlie Fog’s assault; it was as if it never happened. “He is popular,” she admitted, fatalistically (Bertha 2023).

For younger fans, the ambivalence around this assault smacks of the same apolitical stance that the Grateful Dead maintained. Amanda Diederich-Hirsh argues that the band’s commitment to political nonaction and ambiguity was a defining feature, one that allowed them to evolve and endure for thirty years. They refused to advocate for their own lifestyles or pass judgment on those of others: “Perhaps the central value of the Grateful Dead phenomenon was that of freedom—freedom to be anything, believe anything, and think anything. It also meant freedom

from judgement, labels, and social constraints” (Diederich-Hirsh 2010, 297). Within the Grateful Dead scene, freedom is not a secular idea, it is a sacred ideal, an altar at which one pledges their unlimited devotion.

Freedom became exalted because it gives rise to *communitas*, the centerpiece of every Dead show. Every night, as the Dead set out to traverse these phases of the ritual process, they utilized improvisation to invoke spontaneous moments of *communitas* (Diederich-Hirsh 2010, 307). Spinners at a Dead show still rely on these same principles of improvisation to bring forth their own moments of *communitas*. The loose, structureless nature of ecstatic dance allow for this, Diederich-Hirsh notes: “In the dark and light spaces of these explorations, flashes of spontaneous *communitas* would reveal itself, teasing out of the shadows. Freedom was a requisite agent in attaining transformation; indeed, it created a place of permission” (2010, 307). On the dance floor, within this space of permission, we have the freedom to drop our social statuses and expectations; there, together, we turn our eyes towards the ritual. We move together, in a singular whirling mass of bodies, relying on each other for guidance as we tune into the spiritual plane.

This dance instills in us the knowledge that freedom—to move, to believe, to be—is a type of flying. It also reminds us that flying is precarious: one misstep and you might find yourself tumbling to the ground with the person beside you. Anthropologist Anna Tsing defines precarity as “a state of acknowledgement of our vulnerability to others. ... It is unselfconscious privilege that allows us to fantasize—counterfactually—that we can survive alone” (Tsing 2015, 29). As we spin, we conjure up a chaotic churning of energy. Stepping from stillness into the spin space is like plunging into freezing water. The shock steals your breath; the movement makes you falter. As you turn faster, the instability flips and becomes balance. Learning to survive within the spin space requires creating and navigating the precarity of *communitas* together. Spinning teaches us that when we turn towards one another with outstretched arms, dancing in the same time, a precarious world begins to glisten with pleasure and possibility.

At a small opening in the Gorge Amphitheater, Stella turns. She is short and wears an ankle-length patchwork dress that is held open by

ghostly hands. She dances beside a large wall, leaning into it for protection; a dear friend, Blue, spins beside her. Stella's eyes are sealed shut, and her arms are held in front of her in a broken circle. On an otherwise still night, a stirring wind twists around her. Stella's head is pulled back with the momentum of her turning, and wavy strands of hair whip across her face. Her bare feet step in a small circle, turning her steadily through time. It seems as if she has been like this for years, entranced in a delicate spin.

Before the show that evening, as the sun was setting behind the Columbia River, Stella and I sat and talked. She has been dancing to the Dead's music since the '90s, and her experience spinning is apparent in each step she takes. But other aspects of her past are also clear in her movement. Stella's arms are extended not just in ecstasy, but in self-defense: "I often dance like that, 'holding the baby,' because it helps protect my space. People are often interested in my spinning and think it is all right to touch me" (Stella 2023). She asks me if people ever come up put a finger on my head while I dance, as if I am their personal spinning top; they have.

"You will only ever find me dancing next to a wall and with Blue," Stella notes. "In the '90s, there was a man who had a vision and became certain that I was going to mother his child," she explains. "He followed me around at shows and would often appear out of nowhere, coming up to grab me. Now, I cannot relax and feel safe enough to spin anywhere else" (2023). Stella's outstretched arms grapple with the ghosts that creep in the shadows of her turns. She carries her past with her, not just in memory but in movement: it reveals itself in where she dances and how she is able to express herself.

The freedom that Deadheads prize demands as much balance, commitment, and mutualism as spinning. When we do not share these responsibilities, bodies can collide in a violent embrace. The scars left by these collisions are not simply etched into the skin of the damaged bodies, they are transcribed onto the Grateful Dead palimpsest. One can read this palimpsest by analyzing the topology of the dance floor, the space where we enact our rituals and where the characters in the Grateful Dead mythology come alive. Ghosts creep out of the palimpsest's cracks, filling the spaces between our whirling bodies with memories of our pasts and futures. These ghost stories are entwined with the present.

If you peer across the dance floor, looking at the liminal spaces between spinners and the shadows they cast, you can catch fleeting glimpses of these ghosts. Stella steps among them easily, with confidence. I see Jerry Garcia with her tonight, clad in a dirty black T-shirt and a pair of worn jeans. An unlit joint dangles from his mouth. I watch as his spirit moves in and out of the shadows, and then he passes through Stella's body. The ghost of her stalker suddenly evaporates, and for a fleeting moment, Stella becomes free. Her arms raise high above her head, and her eyes glow bright blue. She begins turning faster, faster, so fast that her body seems to become translucent, ghostlike. And then Jerry moves out of her on the other side, and I see his shadow disappear. Her stalker's spirit materializes once again. Stella begins to slow, and her feet land back on the ground. She dances still, inspired. Once again, Stella's arms form a protective circle out front of her.

Garcia's presence is a reminder that freedom entails responsibility. He was careful to distinguish between freedom and license, calling the latter the "freedom lie," and noting that for any scene to survive its members must have a shared sense of direction, mutual reliance, and responsibility (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner 2003, 37). When we enter onto the dance floor, ghosts and humans together, we embody these values; the living aim our eyes toward ritual by focusing purely on dance and music, relying on each other for support and guidance as we enter into the spiritual plane. This is why we must be responsible travelers because spinning is too vulnerable a task to be careless.

Back in Colorado, the morning turns to midday, and the parking attendants have returned. The hotel where we are parked abuts Boulder Creek and is just a ten-minute walk to Folsom Field, the venue where Dead & Company are playing. It is idyllic: we have access to shade, a gushing river, bathrooms inside the hotel lobby, and free continental breakfast. We could not be happier; the parking authorities, however, are not so pleased. Clad in a bright orange vest with credit card device in hand, an attendant saunters over to the group of us sitting in the shade created by a small purple school bus. A sign on its dash reads "LSD."

"Does anyone know whose vehicle this is?" the attendant demands. We all shrug, knowingly unaware. "Well, they have to pay for parking or

else we are going to have them towed. It is \$60 for the day” (Interlocutor D 2023). We tell her we will ask around but that we aren’t sure who owns the bus. Of course, we all know whose bus it is. But money is tight, and paying \$60 for parking each day of the three-night run is not feasible. Regardless, you need a special tow truck to pull a school bus—a tow truck they likely would not have.

Parking people like these are nothing new to the Kids; when you live in parking lots across the country, attendants are a known hazard. One morning, parked in a Walmart lot after a show, we were awoken by a tow truck driver rapping on our door, saying we had to leave or else; the manager had called the truck on our collection of five vehicles. Most Walmarts allow overnight parking by RVs and nondescript cars; hippie vans, with their rainbow paint and stickers, tend to be less welcome. We left, rubbing the blariness from our eyes, and found another Walmart where we could sleep for a few more hours.

On show days and near venues, the parking people are more rabid, often charging extortionate rates. The hotel in Boulder is no exception. Any other weekend, parking would be free: these three days, it totaled over \$200. Bus owners, buffered by the size of their vehicles, are unfazed by the threat of towing, and riders are studiously oblivious—avoiding vehicle drama is a substantial upside of riding. But for van and SUV drivers, the possibility of having their homes hauled away is real.

In response, Kids have developed a series of gambits. Yesterday, parking vouchers were bright pink; today, they are bright green but have the same text printed on them. Within twenty minutes, a Kid saunters back from a nearby copyshop with a stack of bright-green passes stuffed in his pocket, identical to the official ones. Soon the cars of every Lot Kid display today’s parking pass, letting us focus on other responsibilities: vending goods, resting our bones, and painting our faces in preparation for the show that evening.

The ethics that guide life on Dead tour are often as murky as the water pooling on the floor of the hotel’s locker room. But it would be a mistake to confuse that murkiness for emptiness; a single broken rule does not invalidate the rulebook. We abide by the Grateful Dead spirit, whose contours change based on how we embody it. As one generation of Lot

Kids grows into adulthood, the habits and social structures of our tour life—once the happenings of high, raucous Kids—transform into the new rules and expectations of Dead tour.

When Garcia died, tour was presumed dead as well. The resurgence sparked by Dead & Company rekindled Dead tour. However, the historical knowledge of the old Grateful Dead tour and its unwritten codes of conduct, once passed on directly from generation to generation, have largely been forgotten. Modern tour is a *mélange* of old and new, with the guiding lines of today obscuring those that emerged in the 1980s and '90s. Some of those old guidelines endured; music and love remain the central foci, for example. But some norms and ethics have changed. In this sense, tour is a microcosm of larger social change in the world. Without any organized social structure, the actions of a few Deadheads—most often those who are popular—can quickly become norms. Navigating this shifting terrain is challenging. Maintaining one's moral compass points one to a psychedelic world of bliss where you need not pay \$200 to park on a plot of asphalt that would otherwise sit empty. Fail to uphold deeper values and hold your comrades accountable, and dangerous norms will prevail.

These choices are ours to make; we are on our own. Luckily, the Kids are versed in navigating precarity, and if we are able to hold tight to our interrelatedness and that tangible love, we just might keep balancing.

The Black Asphalt Canvas

*While you were gone
these spaces filled with darkness
The obvious was hidden
With nothing to believe in
the compass always points to Terrapin
Sullen wings of fortune beat like rain
You're back in Terrapin for good or ill again
For good or ill again*

— Robert Hunter, "At a Siding"⁴

Tourheads are perhaps the foremost experts on parking lots around the country, and everyone is pleased with today's offerings. The Lot in Philadelphia is spacious—a quarter mile long—near the venue, with few cops. Although the show starts in seven hours, the parking lot is already packed with stoned, lounging Deadheads and vendors awaiting the flood

of people soon to come. Most of them arrived last night, vans and buses forming a 100-vehicle snake around Lot. Arriving early is important: If you are lucky, you might be able to get in before the parking attendants arrive and dodge the \$100 vending fee; if not, an early arrival at least ensures a good spot near the entrance.

The Philly Shakedown looks awfully familiar. “Shakedown Street” is the name of one of the Dead’s more popular tunes, and in the 1980s, Deadheads began applying it to the outdoor bazaar that Deadheads erect outside of shows to sell wares and make home. The scene varies slightly from town to town, as do the wares, but many faces are familiar, and the energy is the same. Shakedown Street is “the heart of town,” as the song’s lyrics proclaim, and the Grateful Dead spirit—here instantiated as a drive to turn the banal into the bizarre—courses through its veins.

Tourheads brighten the shadowy precincts of industrialized gloom by reclaiming parking lots, land whose history has been obliterated by a rough, oily cap. It is there that Deadheads make home and meaning. Within minutes of arriving at any Lot, Deadheads paint the gray-black asphalt with color. The air pulses with conviviality and an alienated landscape dedicated to hulking metal machines transforms into a living room and a site of commerce, where everyone is at play and those on tour can earn enough to keep the party going. Dead & Company Shakedowns grew more fertile over the years, building on and fueling the Grateful Dead spirit.

The Deadhead impulse to turn a parking lot into a home and marketplace is rooted in a psychedelic understanding of the world. That view holds that beyond our everyday consciousness lies a space of embodied oneness, as real as the physical plane we inhabit. During each show, with or without drugs, Deadheads step into that space and return from it as they exit the venue. The knowledge gained from those excursions infuses the culture and social structure of Deadheadland. Deadheads begin to see a revolutionary potential within even the most banal places: Parking lots are not wastelands, they are blank canvasses awaiting our paints and brushes.

Shakedown is rooted in a particular type of free-form randomness: chaos. Unlike pure randomness, chaos is a type of creative disarray. This is the basis of the Dead’s musical form: each band member improvises on stage at the same time. Sometimes the chaos is simply that; other times,

when synchronically aligned, the musicians and dancers merge and find themselves in ecstatic alignment. That is true of the Lot, too. Without rules to guide, the Lot can be an overwhelming place filled with enterprising—and not always caring—faces.

I wander down the aisles of the Philly Lot searching for my friends. Someone trots past, a small cardboard sign with the letters “LSD!” written on it in held at chest level. Their other hand is stuck straight in the air with a single pointer finger piercing the sky, alerting those in the know that the person is seeking a “miracle.” The finger itself is both an index and symbol. It indicates that the person needs a ticket, ideally a free one. Back in the Garcia era, even at the end, when the Dead sold out stadiums, tickets were affordable. Today, with online ticket resellers and LiveNation’s stranglehold over most arena-sized venues, a Dead & Company ticket is at least \$100 with floor seats easily cresting \$250, and scalping is common. Miracles, then, have a secondary meaning: a revolutionary one. When Deadheads come to a show with an extra ticket and instead of selling it give it away, they are building a less transactional, more caring world—a world where gifts hold more weight than commodities. To some, the gesture is now misinterpreted as parasitic. “I’d rather eat the ticket than give it to you for free,” a grumpy Deadhead once shouted at me. No matter—if they came easy, would they be miracles at all?

Walking around with one’s finger in the air ritualizes chaos by opening up possibility for synchronicity. Each gift reinforces the social fabric of Deadheadland. Perhaps the next head you smile at will be the one with your ticket into tonight’s show. My own finger in the air, I plod through the rest of the Lot. Nearly every booth has a cardboard sign that reads: “I need a miracle!” or “Cash or trade for a ticket.” This tour, tickets are harder to come by than usual. During Dead & Company’s 2022 summer tour, miracles were plentiful for every show. This summer, largely due to the media attention and promoter hype of this as the band’s “final tour,” miracles are scarce and the venues are packed.

In response, most of the Lot Kids have resorted to other means. Finding one’s way into the venue without a ticket is not an impossibility—in fact, tickets or not, the Kids seem to make it into the pit at every show. Although Dead & Company has been hemmed in by corporate confines, driving prices and squeezing out artisans, not every Tourhead

has followed suit. Billy DeLyon, a friend, is extraordinarily talented with a spray can. One day, poring over the art he was selling, I praised one of his patches with “capitalism kills” painted onto it. Without hesitation, he handed it to me. “It’s yours,” he said. “I like to have one with me on tour so that I can give it away whenever someone compliments it” (DeLyon 2023a).

Billy’s ethics align with the mutualistic and anarchist ones that the early Grateful Dead embodied, and his wares reflect those beliefs. Among the goods he sells are scavenged signs reading “Do Not Enter.” He defaces, or refaces, them so they read “Do Not Worry,” with a line of bears marching through the white center line. Like the parking lots we make home, Billy repurposes artifacts of our capitalist world for revolutionary ends. A sign once warning people not to enter twists into an affirmation of goodness in the world; a politics of authority becomes one of compassion.

Finally, I spot my friends resting in the shade beside Jack Jones’s van. Jack has long, brown hair and wears a patched-up leather vest and a pair of stained shorts. His wide grin is infectious and his chipped front tooth, covered with a gold cap, glints in the sunlight. He leans across a grill and embraces me tightly: “Whaddup, Shira? It’s good to see you today” (Jones 2023). I respond, pausing to take in the sight of the table between us, littered with engraved leather lighter cases, cardboard signs, and grilled cheese ingredients before sitting down among friends. One holds a balloon in his hand—filled with nitrous oxide, laughing gas—and takes a deep breath from it. He exhales, making strange noises as he does, and we laugh along.

It’s six o’clock, and I have yet to find a miracle. I am standing with Cherise, one of my closest tour friends, outside of the security line, anxious energy swirling between us. Cherise thrusts a single finger triumphantly in the air, with an ear-to-ear smile; miracles come faster when you look happy and approachable. Her mane of curly orange hair nearly reaches her hips, and she has on a flowing blue skirt. Cherise is a brilliant spinner who turns all show, often at blazing speeds. Locked into a groove, her skirt forms a perfect circle, and her hair splays. Eyes glazed over in ecstasy, she loses herself in the spin and surrenders to the sacred dance.

But now we are neither spinning nor in the venue: we are stuck outside, desperate for miracles. They never come—so finally, muster-

ing up all of our courage, we turn towards the security line and glide past the security guards, gleefully stepping our way to the dance floor. In Deadheadland, not having a ticket does not mean one won't be inside the show. We spin a bit as we walk through the arena hallways, laughing. Once inside, our spirits soar.

High Purpose

As the Kids trickle into the venue and find their way to the floor, the mass of dancers grows along the left side of the pit. Today, we are at Oracle Park in San Francisco for the first of the final three shows of the summer tour. Luckily, every head seems to have on a pit wristband. After the show, I would come to learn that Dupree nabbed an entire stack of wristbands from an oblivious guard. Dupree proceeded to hand them out to every one of our family members, ensuring everyone's spot on the sacred dance floor. (He sold the rest to other Deadheads and raked in a hefty wad of cash.)

The spinners section before a show is a reunion. Friends and family embrace, glad that everyone has made it into the show and onto the floor. Joints and vials are passed around. A short, barrel-chested spinner asks, "Is everyone high enough? Do you need any weed, LSD, or mushrooms?" (Interlocutor E 2023). A good Deadhead, he isn't selling; this is free.

The drugs on tour—mostly psychedelics—are sacraments. Drugs are not necessary to spin or to be a Deadhead; many spinners are sober, and every show features a sizable contingent of "Wharf Rats," sober Deadheads who gather during set break at every show for an AA-like meeting. For many fans, however, psychedelics help create the proper headspace to spin. As a dear friend of mine jokes, "Buddha says: You don't need drugs to enjoy a Dead show—but it helps" (Interlocutor F 2023).

Drugs are an important component of a Dead show because they expand consciousness, facilitating one's passage into the sublime. The sublime is a sister of communitas; both warp our understandings of self, being, and social conventions. For anthropologist Eric Silverman, the postmodern sublime of the Grateful Dead "surfaced during the longer compositions characterized by lengthy unscripted jams, complex improvisations, extemporaneous sounds, cyclical song cycles, and, of course,

Drums and Space” (Silverman 2010, 221). It was through free improvisation and experimentation that the Dead were able to transform their concert venues into sublime landscapes where musical, social, and ontological norms disappeared. These landscapes were, too, fertile grounds for moments of spontaneous *communitas*.

Importantly, this sublime environment can also be dangerous. Silverman notes that the *communitas* typically described during Dead shows is often painted as benign and joyful. He contends, however, that there is something more significant occurring: “I suggest that true *communitas* must also include an element of sheer terror and fright. *Communitas* entails a radical, typically traumatic shattering of everyday social and psychological norms” (Silverman 2010, 218). The experience of a Grateful Dead show, when one is swept away into the swirling sea of musical exploration, is not a trivial experience. It is this ritual violence—and the euphoria that comes with its end—that gives a Dead show its power.

While a Dead show can still be rapturous while sober, psychedelics play an important role in the shattering of social and psychological norms that foster a sublime landscape. Silverman writes that LSD changes one’s frames of understanding, thereby pushing the Dead experience into the sublime (Silverman 2010, 222). LSD also creates substantial preconditions for spontaneous *communitas*. This is because, as Victor Turner wrote, “*communitas* emerges where social structure is not” (Turner 1969, 126). By temporarily eliminating one’s ontological grounding, LSD removes their individual social expectations; when an entire crowd of people experience LSD, social structures dissolve. The Dead show, and the band’s music, act as a container for this collective unraveling. The band holds your hand, guides you into the maw of the unknown, and then, benevolently, returns you to the ground (Silverman 2010, 224).

Revolution

About ten of us are standing in a circle, led in our pre-show stretching by Delia, who teaches yoga when not on tour. Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Billy DeLyon walking onto the floor. He is short with messy blonde hair that is dreaded in a few spots. Today, he is wearing a 2023 Summer Tour tie-dye T-shirt and patchwork drop-crotch pants; the clothes hide his lean and well-muscled frame. A big smile lights up his face as he

traverses the floor towards the spinners section, hopping a bit with each step.

Billy is one of the first spinners I noticed when I arrived on the scene in 2021. As he turns, the world morphs around him: colors seem to grow more vibrant and the ground itself seems to vibrate. A few days earlier, Billy and I sat down to discuss spinning. “I had been spinning for a while, but it was not until the 2021 summer tour that I found my spin. When that happened, I began asking myself, ‘How long can I do this?’ And before long, I found myself in deep meditation, spinning for entire shows” (DeLyon 2023b). When Billy dances, he bounces; there is a grace, a rawness, to his spin. “When spinning started to serve me in psychedelic, spiritual ways, strange shit began happening to me” (2023b). He sees what he does as a combination of spinning and ecstatic dance. “It is easy to just spin or just dance all show. What’s difficult is incorporating both dance and spin together” (2023b). Billy’s spinning is true to the etymology of the word itself: the word “spin” comes from the old English root *spinnan*, meaning to “draw out and twist (raw fibers) into thread” (Etymonline n.d.). Billy weaves together two distinct styles of dance, ecstatic movement and whirling, to create an integrated mystical movement practice.

For most of our waking lives, we inhabit the physical and mental planes. Deadheads believe that beyond those planes are alien realms governed by strange logics. The spiritual plane is one such world; it is an emergent phenomenon that bursts forth in brilliance when the physical and mental wrap together into one. The spiritual plane is accessible through myriad pathways: religious, psychedelic, mystic, meditative, musical, and more. Spinning is one such pathway, and as we spin, we weave together the physical and mental planes, creating the preconditions for spiritual ascendance.

Spinning emerges in the Grateful Dead scene as a supra-ritual, a ritual building upon the process of the show itself that channels the chaotic sublime of a Dead show towards a spiritual experience. The Dead open a portal into the sublime as they play, revealing a landscape that is breathtaking and terrifyingly unfamiliar. Initially, the spin space is similarly disorienting, a space where stationary objects, normal spatial orientation, and even gravity do not exist. But with time and dedication, the relentless whirling gives way to unity, and the superorganism of bodies moves to a

single rhythm, to the pulse of the Dead. This dance extends the moments of *communitas* that emerge naturally during shows, allowing them to persist for hours at a time. There, in this moment outside of space, “the band and the [dancers] become one in a transcendental figurative lovemaking with all present,” Diederich-Hirsh notes (2010, 299).

In Oracle Park, the music begins with an uproarious cheer from the crowd. Immediately, the spinners section comes alive. The mass of bodies writhes in unison, moving in time with the music and relaxing into the movement. During the first set, few have surrendered themselves to the spiritual experience of *communitas*, including me. I have yet to transmute myself into a swirl of energy, and my vision remains clear. As I turn, I take note of those around me: their clothes, their movements, and the colors cast upon them by the stage lights. Ascendancy is a delicate goal that requires intention and attention; it does not happen every show.

The first set turns into the second, and my spin becomes effortless. I twist around myself, skirt rippling below, arms held high. I begin the release, surrendering to the unknown. A dear friend told me once that spinning let him escape, allowing him to “transcend our world and access somewhere else” (Interlocutor G 2023). That somewhere else—the spin space, the spiritual realm—is a complete release from all that is comfortable and known. Inhabiting it requires devotion to the practice, trusting that you will, eventually, find stable ground again. A poem I wrote that summer captures that belief:

I stare from the window of a speeding train
At the precipice of ecstatic delusion

Small dots on the horizon
Melt into long lines of
Familiar faces dancing
Abstract masses of color.

The ground
Crumbles away beneath my feet and
I vibrate,
Sympathetic with the electric air.

My skin cracks,
peeling into a thousand fragments, my
Mind seeping out of the

Open wounds.

I am not spinning but

Being spun

This journey into the unknown is made bearable because I am not traveling alone: I dance in harmony with those around me, all of us limbs of a superorganism. Indeed, one cannot ascend while spinning alone, for ascendance requires a weaving together of the self and the other. That other need not be another person, or even something we perceive as a living being; one can spin in tandem with the Earth, twirling in its same direction and allowing its energies to inspire their movements. Our ritual dance is an interdependent activity that is reliant on the conscious movement and intention of each member of the superorganism. When we all work together, collectively reaching towards the same heights, we can reach that entrance into the spiritual realm.

The harmony of our movements on the dance floor is reflected in our social organization outside of our ritual dance. The anti authoritarian and communal values that define the social structure of the Lot are reified on the dance floor, where we all work together towards the same goals without needing to speak. The chaos of the spin space is the chaos of Shakedown: there are no written rules nor dividing lines, but there is the possibility for synchronic magic. There is no assurance that we will ascend during every show, but we create the foundation for that ascendance hoping that it will occur. And, if we are lucky, it does: when the chaos of free improvisation, spinning, and psychedelic bliss weave together properly, they spin a rope so strong that we can walk it, fulfilling the dream of a high life.

The Twisted Tightrope

An ominous rain cloud has just passed, leaving us drenched and puddled. The moon shines brightly over our dance floor in Raleigh, illuminating our movements as we spin together in silent synchronicity. Today's venue is eerily similar to every other amphitheater on tour, a covered pavilion with seats and a grassy, sloped lawn behind it. All have the same architecture and bland design, even down to the signage. Traveling across the country only to arrive at an identical venue is a blunt reminder

of the industrialization that has left us devoid of place-based identity. However, an empty canvas has never deterred a Deadhead: is there a better place to spread the psychedelic message than a landscape consumed by corporate homogeneity?

Unlike other amphitheaters on tour, the one we are dancing in tonight has a different and better space to spin than the moat. In the moat, constant foot traffic from non-dancers can make it hard to completely lose oneself in movement. Fortunately, in Raleigh there is a large flat patch of grass to the left of the stage where everyone has congregated. The sound is clear enough there, and few people have any reason to pass through—a prime, and private, spot for our ritual dance.

Deep into the second set, we have settled into a groove; the dancing is ecstatic. “Iko Iko” fades into “Drums,” everyone but the two drummers and the bassist leaving the stage. A feature of every Grateful Dead show beginning in the late 1970s, “Drums” has been a fixture at every Dead & Company show, a chance for the band’s rhythm section to stretch out and explore different sonic landscapes. It is also the most primal, ecstatic part of every show. During “Drums” our dancing changes, too: some still spin, but they do so faster, with more intensity. Others, typically those who do not spin the entire show, begin to vibrate their bodies in time with the polyrhythmic chaos that thunders from the speakers. Cassidy, a Deadhead with waist-length dreads who has been on tour for several years, bounces from toe to toe in ecstasy. His lips are puckered into a twisted smile, his eyes rolled back into his head. “Drums” is Cassidy’s favorite part of the show. “It is so primal, and everyone starts to dance with renewed freedom” he explains (Cassidy 2023). The drums vibrate with our hearts. They pull us out of ourselves and into community.

“‘Drums’ feels like an ancient ritual we are all taking part in,” Peggy observes, seated beside Cassidy (2023). Peggy is a brilliant spinner in her own right: in an ankle-length white robe, she spins as if unbound by the material realm, arms splayed out to her sides as her head tilts back, supported by the blazing momentum she conjures. Tonight in Raleigh, Peggy and Cassidy groove beside each other, feeding off their shared energy. They are conjoined in movement, hearts pulsing in time with the drums.

And then clothes begin to disappear. Enthralled in the tornado of

drums, some shed clothes carelessly; who has time to think? Within minutes, twenty heads are nude. Without the encumbrance of clothing—with the novelty of being nothing but a body in a public space—everything is heightened. Limbs jolt faster, electricity flowing through us. We are plugged into the current of the music that flows from the drummers on stage, our bodies moving with pure inspiration.

The three musicians pound on the deepest drums they have together, signaling to everyone in attendance that “Drums” has reached its end. The nude dancers scatter off to find their clothes, but for three unlucky spinners, who left their clothes in inopportune places, it is too late. Although they dress quickly, cops appear, chasing them through the spinners section. They grab the dancers, brutally dragging one across the floor, face contorted in pain. Casey shouts, “They have their clothes on, what are you doing? You’re hurting them,” reaching out to our friend. The cop slaps Casey’s hand away, yelling “Don’t fucking touch me.” At a corner of the grass patch, another cop has tackled an innocent bystander and holds them, arm clenched around neck, to the ground. People swarm around the pair, shouting for the violence to end; eventually, the cop releases his victim and skulks away. The spell has been broken, though: the bliss of freedom has melted into grim reality. We continue to dance for the rest of the show, but now we spin alongside a dark energy, one that always swirls beneath the tightrope we tread so delicately, waiting for us to fall.

The show ends with a mournful “Black Muddy River,” a reminder of the gaping, Jerry Garcia-sized hole at the center of Deadhead life. Still shaken from the encounter with the police, the spinners gather to take their family photo, the final event of each show. William-O, one of the band’s photographers and a fellow Lot Kid, takes the photo. We thank him; soon he will post the picture on his social media page, uploaded as the last in a series of images, mostly of the band.

Deadheads gather and discuss the night’s events. Rubin is dressed as a cosmic cowboy: riding boots, a wide-brimmed hat, prismatic dye, and red cords. Full of machismo, he laments his passivity: “We had that cop surrounded. We could’ve fucking killed him. We should have.” Heads murmur in response, the call for violence garnering more support than one might expect from a group of hippies. Rosemary, a thin spinner who bounces lightly when she dances, as if on clouds, looks at me; we

roll our eyes. Even our crowd can edge towards the values of mainstream America, such as the desire for freedom at any cost, up to and sometimes including violence. The Grateful Dead understood that yearning, but it let them see something redeeming in the Haight-Ashbury and even the Hells Angels, when mainstream America shuddered with disgust. That same ethos infuses the lyrics to “Liberty”: “Ooo, freedom—Ooo, liberty / O ... leave me alone / To find my own way home” (Trist and Dodd 2005, 378. Ellipsis in original).

Many Tourheads desire complete autonomy, and when that autonomy is threatened—be it by a parking attendant hassling them for sleeping in an empty lot or cops arresting now-clothed dancers—the anger can surface. Filled too full, and without a way to release that pressure, even a gentle balloon bursts violently.

The crowd begins to dissolve. Deadheads scatter. Some will begin cooking grilled cheese to feed the hungry mass of humanity streaming from the venue. Others will gather with friends, allowing the stresses of the evening to melt away. A few head off to find companions ensnared by the police, collecting any shoes, jackets, and bags abandoned in the process.

Parking Lot Blues

Walking out of the final show of summer tour, Cosmic Charlie, a dear friend, turned to me and asked, “What percentage of time do you think we have spent in parking lots this summer?” (Charlie 2023) C.C., as friends call him, is a kind Deadhead with long, straight hair and a scrappy beard. Tonight he is wearing loose, technicolor pants and a paisley poncho. He plods along slowly, pupils still wide. We are all tired, but for the first time in two months, we can relax: there isn’t another venue to drive to. It is bittersweet, but of course, faced with the first opportunity to rest in months, there is only one place we would all end up: a nearby parking lot. There is comfort in the familiar, even if that is asphalt.

After about a half-mile walk, we find ourselves face-to-face with a concrete expanse neighboring Pier 48. Within twelve hours, the asphalt land will return to its previous state of alienation. But for the time being, it is something else entirely: a buzzing living room filled with family and friends enjoying the last moments of summer tour together. Walking

through the Lot towards a group of family, C.C. and I pass several familiar sights: tens of pop-up shelters, hissing nitrous tanks, vendors selling homemade pizzas fired in a portable oven or the last of their tie-dye shirts.

One of the knots of lounging Deadheads turns out to be our friends. Nearly twenty-five people are sitting together on the asphalt; warm smiles and hugs greet us. People strum guitars and banjos; the evening unfolds much like any other on tour. Responsibilities and showers loom, but for now, there is little to do but bask in the glow of friends and comrades, watching night turn into sunrise. The lessons of tour will continue to unfold, but for now, it is enough to reflect on the words of “U.S. Blues”: “Wave that flag / Wave it wide and high / Summertime / Done come and gone / My, oh my” (Trist and Dodd 2005, 218).

Notes

1. Trist and Dodd (2005, 50). This final verse or coda appears on the compilation *What A Long, Strange Trip Its Been* (Arista, 1977); it was spoken by Hunter in the studio but never sung in concert (Trist and Dodd 2005, 52n).
2. See, for example, McNally (2002, 616) and Selvin and Turley (2018, 8–9). The band’s December 9, 1995, press release, written by McNally, made that point elliptically (Selvin and Turley 2018, 9); cf. Selvin (1995).
3. The younger generation of spinners and Tourheads are themselves largely between the ages of 18 and 30. The distinct lack of Heads in their 30s is largely attributable to the “dark ages” from 1995 until about 2015.
4. Trist and Dodd (2005, 264). Part of the longer “Terrapin Station” suite, this section was recorded for the band’s album *Terrapin Station* but never performed live.

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