

PROCEEDINGS OF THE GRATEFUL DEAD STUDIES ASSOCIATION

Volume 4

2024

ISSN 2770-534X (Print)

ISSN 2770-5358 (Online)

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CITATION INFORMATION

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Proceedings of the Grateful Dead Studies Association

Volume 4 (2024)

Pages: 5–9

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EDITORS COLUMNS

Chicago, the Dead, and Notes on Four Years

NICHOLAS G. MERIWETHER

This year's meeting of the Grateful Dead Studies Association had a distinctive feel, one that owed as much to place as time. The site of the conference was Chicago, a city with a storied place in Grateful Dead history. The Windy City welcomed the Dead fifty-one times between 1967 and 1995, with another baker's dozen in Rosemont, part of the city's greater metro area. Legendary shows at the Electric Theater in 1969 and at the Uptown Theatre, where the Dead played from 1978 to 1981, forged the band's reputation there, building a passionate cadre of local Deadheads as well as cementing the band's affection for the city. History burnished that bond, with Chicago's famed Soldier Field hosting the band's final shows in July 1995 as well as the last three concerts of Fare Thee Well, the triumphant 2015 fiftieth anniversary celebration of the Dead.

That reunion was about legacy, something Chicago fans saw as a living trust, not a museum piece. Dark Star Orchestra created their distinctive approach to the Dead's music at Martyrs', a beloved music club less than ten miles from Soldier Field, beginning two years after the Dead's final show. One the most famous and durable of the Dead's tribute bands, DSO reflects the city's ability to both honor and renew its heritage, just as their nationwide following shows why the Dead's music still attracts audiences, not as a nostalgia phenomenon but as an actively evolving repertoire that continues to inspire and instruct both musicians and listeners.

That also gets at the appeal, and the challenge, of the work of the Grateful Dead Studies Association, and it made Chicago an especially

welcome host for the fourth GDSA conference. We met as part of the larger Popular Culture Association, but as in years past, our area tended to be self-contained and largely autonomous. A full slate of sessions spanning the entire conference along with a full schedule of evening social events underscored that independence, ably assisted by our local members, who provided expert advice on local restaurants and watering holes. Andrew McGaan, the Association Board member who spearheaded our incorporation, hosted us for a memorable evening at Chicago's famed Harry Caray's restaurant and club, featuring a remarkable concert by noted Chicago band Mr. Blotto. Although the PCA struggled to accommodate the size of our group, attendees were delighted to see a touch of the Dead's spirit in the vendor hall, where one local artist displayed an impressive array of Dead-inspired works.

Our area boasted twenty-nine papers and five roundtable discussions, one of the largest in the conference. Presenters reflected the diversity of Dead studies, spanning recent graduates to emeritus professors and representing seventeen states across the country as well as Canada. Most were members of the Association with a handful of newcomers, several of whom joined during the meeting. With forty-two presenters and more than a dozen guests, we strained the limits of the room we were assigned, with latecomers forced to stand at the back or sit on the floor.

As with all of our meetings, the range of theoretical perspectives was noteworthy, with presentations representing more than nineteen fields and disciplines. That made for remarkably wide-ranging discussions offering useful refinements for participants and fostering the kind of collective inquiry that underscored the central role of conference meetings in building Dead studies. Interdisciplinary discourse is always challenging, with two sessions sparking especially spirited debates, but a hallmark of our meetings is comity, a commitment to collegiality that also provides an effective strategy for fostering cross-disciplinary dialogue. That spirit tempers public critiques and allows debates to continue and become even more productive after sessions and in social events.

As scholars have long observed, the social dimension of a conference is often hidden but essential; for the GDSA, evening events are vital forums, not just ways for participants to network and collaborate but also

form friendships that further their work in profound but less obvious ways. At Harry Caray's, one first-time participant looked around the room and marveled, "This is where the real work happens." The ecumenical spirit of the meeting spoke to that, with older scholars offering newcomers the kind of mentoring that makes Dead studies both welcoming and rigorous.

The papers made that clear, with groundbreaking efforts as well as innovative studies of well-established topics, as Granville Ganter's essay here details. One longtime presenter commented that the conference conversation as a whole marked a broader and deeper level of engagement, a sign of the vitality of the Association's work and the discourse as a whole. That was a defining theme of the meeting: over the last four years, the conference's place in the larger GDSA has shifted from one of many efforts to a core function, one that lies at the heart of our work. Our conference is now recognized as the central forum for scholars to test ideas and arguments, making it the most visible expression of the mission of the organization.

This volume of the *Proceedings* speaks to that role. Association cofounder and past president Granville Ganter provides a detailed survey of the conference sessions; his essay also marks his introduction as coeditor of the *Proceedings*. Musicologist Graeme Boone's keynote address provides a thoughtful and incisive assessment of the state of Dead studies, offering insights into how the discourse also connects with the resilience of the band's appeal. The four papers here offer more detailed insights into the group's conversation, underscoring several of the larger themes that emerged during the meeting. Veteran political journalist and UCLA professor Jim Newton, who is completing his biography of Jerry Garcia for Random House, gave a paper that outlined the challenges and rewards of Garcia as a subject for biography; his paper made the case for why the musician's life and legacy still attract such strong interest, almost thirty years after his death. That continuing appeal informs the band's legacy, which has endured as long as their performing career and shows no signs of diminishing. Shira Cooper's essay on the scene surrounding Dead & Company offers fascinating insights into how young fans have found their own way to enact and interact with that legacy, renewing it for a generation born decades after Garcia's death.

Jayne Stone's essay offers an incisive explanation for part of why that legacy remains so potent. Her exploration of how rhetorical empathy informs the ethos of the Deadhead scene helps explain why the band became such an enduring cultural phenomenon. Stone's analysis highlights the central place of Robert Hunter's lyrics in the Dead's project, which Hunter addressed in his long poem, "The Bride of Empathy." One of his most significant later works, this largely unknown poem offers a deep meditation on the Dead, framed in a lyrical meditation on the Muse as a central way of explaining the timeless, mysterious power of inspiration that forms the core of the band's work. Though slated to be published as part of a trilogy, that did not happen; this paper offers a first look at this neglected, revealing work.

Hunter never refers to the band directly in the poem, and that notion of the unstated and implied informs the Texts and Documents section. It features an unpublished essay whose traces have intrigued scholars for decades. Written by band manager Jon McIntire and enthusiastically cited by Garcia in a 1977 interview, the essay offers a brief but incisive view of the band at a critical juncture as they rebounded from the hiatus and reshaped their project. A compelling example of the kind of introspection the band saw as integral to their work, the essay points to the role that McIntire played, as business scholar Barry Barnes traces. That has never received the attention it merits, as this section highlights.

McIntire's writing and work also offer an apt illustration of the kinds of issues and ideas that make the Dead such a rich and fertile topic for scholars, why the Dead created what one observer in the 1960s called "a cult of intellect" that distinguished their circle. It also helped them survive setbacks and challenges that destroyed most bands. Four years after the Grateful Dead formed, after a year in which they almost broke up, they had one of their most historic years. In 1969, they released two milestone albums, the long-awaited *Aoxomoxoa* and the career-defining *Live/Dead*, and they were a marquee act at the epochal Woodstock Arts and Music Festival, even if their performance was marred by technical difficulties.

The fourth meeting of the Grateful Dead Studies Association was marked by an equally historic feel, though without the fanfare—or the drama. Amidst a political landscape even more fraught and divided than

the country faced in 1969, there is solace to that, and even more, in that work, as the band's history illustrates. The Chicago meeting shows that the momentum the Association has built over four years shows no signs of abating. Bolstered by the unanimous election of officers for the next two years to cap the conference, that energy and commitment bodes well for next year.

NICHOLAS G. MERIWETHER has worked in academic libraries, archives, and museums for more than thirty years. He cofounded and serves as Executive Director of the Grateful Dead Studies Association, and he is editor of the series *Studies in the Grateful Dead*, published by Duke University Press.