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Meriwether, Nicholas G.

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Nicholas G. Meriwether

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A Note on McIntire's Essay: Futurism, Valéry, and the Business of the Grateful Dead

NICHOLAS G. MERIWETHER

In 1977, Jerry Garcia showed *Rolling Stone* reporter Charles Young a typed essay, enthusing:

That's what it's all about: future events having an increasingly less predictable nature. That was written by our old manager, Jon McIntire, a tremendous cat. He's fallen in with some futurists at Stanford. He's interested in formalizing the attitude of the Grateful Dead community philosophically. The trick is to be as adaptable and changeable as possible. What they're studying in physics now—the smallest observable phenomena in nature, charmed quarks and whatever—nobody knows what it is. It could change our entire structure of reality. Literally anything is possible. (Young 1995, 127)

It was a thoughtful and timely message, especially in context, which was a larger discussion about the band's tour. But for fans, the existence of an essay on the band's philosophy was especially intriguing. That made it something of a grail for Deadheads, but thirty-five years would pass before their curiosity would be answered. Published here for the first time, the essay is as interesting as Garcia suggested. Though brief—only 790 words—McIntire's piece offers a number of insights, not only into the Dead at a critical moment in their history but also into the band's approach to business, and McIntire's role in helping to articulate it.

McIntire wrote the essay during an eventful time. The Dead had

returned to touring the year before, a return to the stage made especially complex by the reintroduction of Mickey Hart; organizationally, they had pared down both the office and the road crew, completing the reorganization by signing with Arista. Although musically the band was firing on all cylinders, the lessons of 1974 were still recent enough to cast a shadow, and that feeling informs the essay. Part white paper, part public letter, it was an internal manifesto for the band and staff, outlining the challenges McIntire saw ahead with an eye toward exorcising the ghosts of the past.

That explains Garcia's enthusiasm, but McIntire's essay would have appealed to him on its own merits. It opens with a statement that echoes a key tenet of futurism, the uncertainty caused by the onslaught of technological change; though phrased generally, insiders would have immediately seen its relevance. That elliptical phrasing does not disguise the pointedness of its argument, from its emphasis on individual and organizational flexibility to the need for courtesy as a basis for effective communication. Those addressed specific problems McIntire had seen in the unwieldy machine the Dead's organization had become in 1974, but here the response to those issues was couched more broadly, linking the band's journey to a larger cultural and historical transition. The foundation of his argument turned the Dead's longstanding belief in improvisation as a musical ideal into an organizational principle, but McIntire's essay reflected a broader range of ideas. Futurism was the most recent of those: he managed Bobby's tour for *Heaven Help the Fool* for half the year, but he spent the other half "on my studies and writings, mainly in philosophy—futurism," he told Blair Jackson (1988, 20).

Framing his reading in futurism as philosophy is revealing, since the term had gained a more popular understanding beginning in the mid-sixties (Coates and Jarratt 1989, v). *Time* published an essay on the subject in early 1966, reassessing what had been dismissed as prognostication and recasting it as a wide-ranging effort spanning many fields, noting that "the exploration of the future has become a sizable business" (1966, 28). Its tone was confident: "the futurists predict an era of almost limitless change," the editors concluded, but only four years later, Alvin Toffler focused on the anxiety produced by the rapidity and magnitude of that change in his bestselling *Future Shock* (1970). In 1972, *The Futurists* brought a more

comforting view, describing experts navigating those currents and leaders carefully but boldly stewarding companies and organizations to meet the challenges that rapid and unforeseeable change entailed. Those writers claimed futurism for a popular readership, but in the academy the term had a much longer pedigree, dating back to the international art movement founded in Italy associated with Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876–1944). Despite the movement’s avowed stance as anti-philosophical and anti-cultural, and its later link to Fascism (Bowler 1991), thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci connected futurism to major contemporary philosophical issues (cf. Gounalis 2018). Though their focus differed from the term’s later popular and business-oriented incarnations, scholars argue the movement espoused a discernible philosophy, derived from its theories on aesthetics, epistemology, ethics, metaphysics, poetics, and politics (Riccardo 2013). Interestingly, Mickey Hart’s research into rhythm and percussion would touch on this larger sphere, such as Luigi Russolo’s 1913 treatise *The Art of Noise*, which he called a “futurist manifesto” (1990, 132).

McIntire’s approach fits that more scholarly perspective, which Garcia’s comment about Stanford confirms. While known for its philosophy department, Stanford had faculty in several fields whose work involved futurism.¹ Interestingly, the only authority McIntire cites is Paul Valéry, the French poet whose thought he studied in graduate school at San Francisco State in the 1960s. And Valéry’s work has particular relevance for McIntire’s argument, even beyond the quotation McIntire chose.

McIntire’s interest in Valéry was far from superficial (although, interestingly, they bore a certain resemblance).² Considered “an arch emblem and theorist of literary modernism” by generations of readers and critics (Kunkel 2024, 61), Valéry was hailed by T. S. Eliot as “the representative poet, the symbol of the poet, of the first half of the twentieth century—not Yeats, not Rilke, not anyone else” (1947, 214). Valéry’s prose, however, is what interested McIntire. Valéry’s essays focused on a few great themes: “the death of civilizations, the relativity of history, the crisis of the mind, and the greatness and decline of Europe” (Valéry 1962, xv). Though steeped in a Europe he saw convulsed and reshaped by two World Wars, Valéry’s perspective also spoke to Americans in the 1960s and ’70s, who saw parallels to their own country’s experiences with Vietnam, civil

unrest, and economic and cultural upheaval. Valéry's response was to abjure what he saw as history's stranglehold over contemporary political thought: only by conceding the limitations of the past and embracing the radical uncertainty of the future could nations and peoples move forward.

That belief captured the feeling of ambition and innovation that defined the Dead's early years, but it also went to the heart of the rebirth that McIntire saw as necessary for the band in 1977. And McIntire was correct to see that the nature of the challenges the band faced Valéry would have understood. Most of all, the Dead needed to turn their back on the dark period that prompted the hiatus and the pressures and frictions that defined that time—a view that McIntire's own experience underscored, as Barry Barnes notes in his essay here.

That was no easy feat, as Valéry's writings explored. His ideas belonged to philosophy, but they connected to later popular conceptions of futurism; that linkage also provided a context for McIntire's thinking, which is intellectual but aiming toward the practical. "The absolute novelties now coming into play in every order of things," Valéry observed, "must inevitably result in a strange transformation of our notion of the future" (1962, 69)—a view that popularists subscribed to as well. War and technology were perhaps the most visible evidence of those limits, but Valéry saw those as both symptoms and causes of what he saw as a larger, deeper phenomenon: the pace of change itself. That was the real challenge, and it was only accelerating, with humanity "borne along as we are at a speed now growing so great as to be terrifying, toward a state of things whose complexity, instability, and inherent disorder bewilder us, allowing us not the least foresight, taking away our ability to reason about the future or to make out any of the lessons we used to expect of the past" (1962, 167). This was where futurism fused with philosophy: "all prediction is conservative," Valéry argued, "it demands that we be as we are in whatever future it constructs" (1962, 69). And that was why the study of the past was not just limited but misleading. "History will justify anything," he concluded. "It teaches precisely nothing" (1962, 114).

This gloomy conclusion could be turned on its head, however. Freed of the shackles of the past, humans could embrace a future offering the limitless promise of the new. And that was what McIntire thought the

Dead needed as they entered 1977. When Valéry wrote, “it is by unexplored paths and from uncontrolled events that ideas come,” he could have been presaging Garcia (1962, 64). Even when Valéry decries the limits of discipline, he does so in terms that would have appealed to the band: “All [discipline] asks is obedience and *never anything extraordinary*. It diminishes the role of chance” (1962, 64. Italics in original). No wonder McIntire turned to Valéry here: he saw in Valéry’s work a kind of pragmatism informed by deep thought. When Valéry wrote, “Our philosophy is determined by its apparatus, and not by its object” (de Madariaga 1962, xxvi), that echoed the band’s view of their project as a process, not a product.

In 1973, McIntire told a reporter that “In this scene, when you need something, you just hang on until somebody comes to fill the space” (Perry 1995, 109). That could describe how his essay came about: as the band moved back into full-scale touring and ramped up their organization to meet those logistics, McIntire saw a need to think about what they were doing, and to articulate that assessment in a way that looked to the future. It is significant that he wasn’t employed by the band at the time, even though he was still involved in their larger scene. That vantage point reflected how he perceived his role: years later, he noted that “I have a lot of ethical responsibilities that I’ve foisted on myself that come into play in my day to day work with the band” (Jackson 1988, 15). This essay can be seen as an example of that: to frame the challenges the band was facing in larger terms—ones that would offer both comfort and direction, even as they frankly explained the nature and scale of those challenges.

Fundamentally, however, McIntire’s paper reaffirmed a core principal of the Dead: improvisation meant embracing change, making that a foundation for one’s work. It was a model of how to navigate uncertainty—and a way to carve their own path through that ambiguity, creating their own reality. That possibility was what had drawn McIntire to go to work for the Dead, and what he had helped them do in the early 1970s, as Barry Barnes discusses in his essay here; it was also why McIntire hired Alan Trist, recognizing him as not only a fellow traveler but also someone whose blend of artist and analyst would complement and extend his efforts at organizational self-reflection. Indeed, McIntire’s essay can be

seen as the forerunner of Trist's analysis of the Dead's organization, "A Balanced Objective," which would follow in just a few years.

For scholars, McIntire's essay offers a useful example of how the Dead approached the task of analysis and assessment, incorporating ideas from a wide range of thinkers to help them understand their work and articulate their vision. And for those curious about McIntire, his essay provides a compelling example of the diplomacy and insight that made him such a valued part of the band's extended family. When Garcia singled out the essay in his *Rolling Stone* interview, it was an important acknowledgment of McIntire's contribution, a tribute that also shows why the Dead attracted so many talented colleagues to help them build their organization and accomplish their work.

The way that Garcia explained the essay points to that, but his paraphrase was even more revealing. It is easy to see why the idea of being "as adaptable and changeable as possible" would resonate with a musician who made improvisation a cornerstone of his art, but his final point was especially noteworthy: "Literally anything is possible." McIntire's essay is as cautionary as it is affirmative; Garcia's reading emphasized the positive. That was how he had always seen the band's project: as he told Charles Reich in 1972, he saw the band's record company as "an illustration of the kind of thing we've been trying to do all along: 'Look, man, here we are, we're on the edge, and we can make it. So can you'" (Garcia, Reich and Wenner 1972, 108). Five years later, they still were. By 1977, age and experience may have tempered the Dead's perspective, but they hadn't dimmed the band's commitment, nor their faith—and most of all, their optimism.

Notes

1. See, for example, Gounalis (2018); Gounalis was at Stanford at the time.
2. To his friends, Valéry was "exclusive, aristocratic, lofty" (de Madariaga 1962, xxx), a view that echoed John Perry Barlow's description of McIntire as "a classically beautiful man in the post-Raphaelite style" with "the bearing of one of King Arthur's Knights" (Barlow and Greenfield 2018, 89). Dennis McNally called him "regal-featured" (2002, 363), and even Hank Harrison's more jaundiced view of

McIntire as a “debauched Habsburg Count, gaunt and lean” (1973, 167) invoked the aristocratic European lineage that McIntire proudly claimed (McNally 2002, 363).

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NICHOLAS G. MERIWETHER serves as Executive Director of the Grateful Dead Studies Association. His publications on the Dead include edited anthologies as well as journal articles, book chapters, and museum exhibitions. He is editor of the series *Studies in the Grateful Dead* from Duke University Press.