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The Fourth Annual Meeting

GRANVILLE GANTER

The fourth annual meeting of the Grateful Dead Studies Association in April of 2024, like many moments over the past several years, was presided over by a sense of retrospect. The conference took place in Chicago, where many Deadheads and conference presenters had come to celebrate the “Fare Thee Well” shows of 2015. Almost a decade had passed since then, and the Grateful Dead phenomenon itself was about to celebrate its sixtieth anniversary. It was the second face-to-face GDSA conference after COVID, and conference-goers were in the mood to return to Dead studies as the viral contagion which interrupted most human life on our planet was beginning to subside. And Chicago itself has always been an important crossroads for American academics, a rewarding stop on the intellectual conference circuit. And for the GDSA, meeting in Chicago was not just an evocative site but appropriate, given Northwestern University Library’s work in nearby Evanston to build a Dead studies collection.

The presentations at the conference itself were a representative spectrum of the boldly multi- and interdisciplinary approaches of the Association, with some session discussions even evoking transdisciplinarity, as Stanley Krippner first applied to Dead studies in 2009.¹ Papers ranged from literary, rhetorical, and statistical analysis of Dead lyrics and poetry; close musicological studies of instrumental arrangements and unique versions of the music; the sociology of the taping scene, the parking lot, T-shirt fashion; and deep historical contextualizations of the music in American culture. There was even a remarkable paper by oceanographer Steve Midway on what the tagging of types of fish can teach us

about statistical analysis of the evolution of Dead set lists over a multi-year period.

One of the most noticeable emphases of the meeting was the poetry of Robert Hunter, who had passed just prior to COVID and whose poetics had begun to be explored at the Dead Caucus in Albuquerque in 2020 with several panels honoring Hunter and rich program essays and a research bibliography prepared by Nicholas Meriwether, Jesse Jarnow, and Christopher Coffman. (Coffman's paper drew on research he had undertaken for his forthcoming book on the literary aspects of the Dead, having already presented on Hunter's translation of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*.) At Chicago, two of the panels focused on Hunter's remarkable poem, *A Strange Music*, a 246-page epic about the first Gulf War, initially drafted in daily writing sessions between January and March 1991. The poem was written as Hunter watched the CNN coverage of the war over a several month period, which climaxed in the abrupt rout of Saddam Hussein's forces and their retreat to Bagdad. The narrative itself is shaped by snatches of news coverage, and excerpts from military commanders and pundits—what Hunter calls the “crapulous verbiage of war” in his introduction to the poem—and the poet's own ruminations about America's televised invasion.

The first panel sketched the general contours of the poem, which culminates in a twenty-three-page account of General Schwarzkopf's CNN briefing that revealed the U.S. army's surprise movements during the final hours of the conflict. Jason Gallagher drew attention to the poetic techniques of Hunter's work, transforming television footage with literary forms such as anaphora. This author spoke about the role of propaganda in the poem. Meriwether's contribution (published in this volume) is a study of an ambitious and complex poem written during the same period, “The Bride of Entropy,” which emphasizes the importance of the Muse in Hunter's work, and the linked forces of entropy and creation. Written in 1992, when Hunter seems to be reflecting on the difficult period of the band's creativity between 1989–1991—including Brent Midland's untimely death in 1990 and Garcia's brief collapse in 1992—the poem seems to be about the marriage of creativity and chaos. Because “The Bride” was not included in Hunter's 1993 published collection, *Sentinel*,

Meriwether's examination of this work opened the door to a discussion of Hunter's increasing interest in online publication, of which *A Strange Music* is an important part. Jerry Garcia even drew a color portrait of Hunter during the period he was writing *A Strange Music*, called "The Poet Reflects the War."

The second panel looked even more deeply at *A Strange Music*'s continuities and departures from war poetry. Christopher Coffman argued that it was not a traditional epic poem, using Richard Grusin's theory of remediation to speak of how a new medium refashions older ones. In that light, Hunter's poem draws critical awareness of how television shapes our world and how Hunter's poetry pushes back. Matthew Armstrong, who covered the war as an embedded journalist in Iraq, gave us a glimpse of his forthcoming book, *Veteran Activism and the Global War on Terror*, which discussed Hunter's poem in the context of John Barlow's befriending of Edward Snowden and Julian Assange as critics of the U.S. war machine. And classical scholar Nicholas Cross emphasized Hunter's invocation of the muse of war, Calliope, in Hunter's poem.

The significance of Hunter's turn to poetry in the mid-1980s may deserve explanation for some readers, for it marks a significant new epoch in Hunter's artistic development. For Dead fans who justifiably think of his lyrics as part of the basic fabric of Americana, making a distinction between "song lyrics" and "poetry" may seem arbitrary and foolish. But as Hunter makes clear in several interviews and in the introductory essay to *The Annotated Grateful Dead Lyrics*, he saw lyrics as quite different from poetry. For one, he notes, lyrics typically rhyme. Furthermore, the addition of music to poetry shapes the words, pushing them into an additional rhythmic context. Spoken poetry has a music of its own. Song lyrics, in contrast, often have their internal rhythms nudged by beat and melody. To illustrate this difference, the fast-and-slow pacing of an e. e. cummings poem like "Buffalo Bill's Defunct" ("he used to / ride a watersmooth-silver / stallion / and break clay pigeons onetwothreefourfive pigeons just like that") generates a rhythm different from the more regular beat of a lyric like John Lennon's "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds": "*Pic-ture your-Self on a Boat on a Ri-ver,*" which so obviously uses the musical beat to propel the lyric forward in regular measures. There's plenty of overlap between these two methods of lyrical art, of course, but that's one way we

might visualize the difference between song lyrics and poetry. Hunter's *A Strange Music* is clearly his attempt to use poetry to reshape the voice and imagery of televised war into a kind of poetic music.

Hunter came to see himself as a poet in a more traditional sense only during the 1980s and 1990s (Hunter 1992b). One reason for this late shift was that an early reviewer of a book-length draft of his poems in England in the 1970s complained that they were "stiff" (Hunter 1992a). According to his own account, he was put off by this criticism and did not try to publish his work as poetry for another decade, focusing on lyrics and expanding his work in other genres, such as the poetic romance, *The Giant's Harp* (1986).

Hunter also sometimes winced at the editing process of collaborative song writing. Many of his finest lyrics were taken almost whole, such as "Dark Star," "Ripple" or "Franklin's Tower," but others were edited from longer works in ways that Garcia felt worked best. While most fans have become accustomed to the poetry of songs such as "Fire on the Mountain" or the "Terrapin Station" suite, there are plenty of good lines that Hunter wrote that never made the final cut. From Hunter's point of view, the process did not always result in his best work. He fretted that what he contributed to *Blues For Allah*, for example, was more driven by what the band needed, as opposed to his more polished lyrics (Jackson 1992b, 229). Yet he was proud of his abilities as a professional lyricist who could write fast and whose goal was make whatever revisions necessary for the success of the art (Jackson 1992a, 116–17). He guarded that prerogative, granting Garcia the right to edit his words but rarely and only grudgingly to others—Bob Weir's insistence on adding a line to "Sugar Magnolia," for example, ended their songwriting collaboration for several years.

And so, after Hunter published his translation of Rilke's *Duino Elegies* in 1987, it inspired him to pursue poetry with gusto. Working through the personal tragedy of the loss of his son in 1988, a series of collections followed over a decade: *Night Cadre*, *Idiot's Delight*, *Infinity Minus Eleven*, *Sentinel*, and *Glass Lunch*.

Working with commercial editors' decisions did not always sit well with Hunter either (Burdick). As Nicholas Meriwether chronicles in this volume, Hunter wrote a triptych of poems about the Grateful Dead

experience that was only partially published: “Sentinel,” “The Bride of Entropy,” and “An American Adventure.” Perhaps the most philosophical of those is “The Bride of Entropy,” and when Penguin declined to publish it, the rejection clearly stung. As rapid developments in web publication opportunities began to emerge in the mid-1990s, Hunter poured himself into online venues, such as his journal, as well as Dead.net. His personal website is where “The Bride” was initially published, but even there, he grew frustrated at its lack of visibility. Years later, as Meriwether notes, he added the comment, “Somebody please read it—it took a lot of work!” (Meriwether 2024).

The conference addressed other transformations of Dead culture from past to present as well, most notably the panel of “Legacies and Continuities” with Shira Cooper, and Alfred Guerrieri. Guerrieri’s paper focused on teaching students how to play Dead music using isolated tracks of “Box of Rain.” A cancellation on the panel allowed the second part of session to delve deeply into Cooper’s longer essay on becoming a “spinner” on Dead & Company tour in 2023. The essay, published here, was based on Cooper’s senior thesis at Bowdoin College, and provides a thoughtful ethnographic account of the culture of the contemporary spinners and floor dancers who travel from show to show. Rebecca Adams introduced Cooper’s paper by reminding the audience who the original Spinners were in the early 1990s—a quasi-religious subgroup on Dead tour whose members could be seen twirling on the fringes of the dance area. Although the Spinner community collapsed in controversy before Garcia had died (see Jarnow 2016), the practice of that form of dancing continued, and Cooper’s essay captures the complex world of the traveling community that currently follows both the Dead & Company and Bob Weir and the Wolf Brothers tours. Part of the lasting value of Cooper’s essay is to document the practices and beliefs of ecstatic ritual that derived from Grateful Dead culture, and which continue to this day.

The conference featured numerous other highlights as well, several of which were based on forthcoming or recently released books. Jim Newton’s essay, included in this volume, reflected on his research for his forthcoming *Here Beside the Rising Tide*. Surveying the different kinds of sources available to a biographer of Jerry Garcia, he emphasized the archive of interviews Garcia gave and tracks his relationship to the

Dead's music by their energy. Alan Paul, who had recently published the acclaimed history of the Allman Brothers album *Brothers and Sisters*, discussed the relationship of the Dead and the Allman Brothers in the mid-1970s. Musician and documentary film director Steve Hurburt put together a remarkable roundtable to discuss his collection of Dead-inspired art that he is publishing in a coffee table book, *Sky Yellow / Sun Blue*.

There were provocative and difficult conversations: the popularity of Dead music among right-wing fans is one of the most puzzling. Jayne Stone's essay, included in this volume, offered a rhetorical studies analysis of why the Grateful Dead's music and lyrics seem to bridge the political divide between right and left in American society, grounded in her own experience bonding with her mother over the music despite their political differences. Another spirited discussion of the conference was prompted by Jay Williams' paper, which argued a counter-intuitive thesis that music is a completely open signifier of meaning. After playing a clip from *Blue Velvet* where different characters react very differently to Dean Stockwell's rendering of the "Sandman," Williams argued that the attribution of a specific meaning to song—perhaps especially by the Dead—is a highly subjective act, because notes of music have no solid referent. At one point an audience member declared, "But I *hear* elephants in Henry Mancini's 'Baby Elephant Walk'"—a rich discussion indeed!

The conference ended with Graeme Boone's keynote address about the ongoing role of Dead music in American musical traditions. Although he was skeptical of the Grateful Dead's influence in this particular cultural moment in the first half of his paper, in the second part Boone turned to the rise of roots American music more generally among younger people in the United States. He made a compelling case for why Dead's music will likely be a lasting part of that growing legacy.

Note

1. Stanley Krippner first suggested this idea in a discussion at the 2008 Grateful Dead Scholars Caucus meeting, presenting it in more detail at a roundtable at the 2009 meeting (Krippner 2009) and revisiting it in a 2010 essay (Krippner 2010). At the 2009 meeting, Stan Spector explored Krippner's argument, discussing it

in Foucauldian terms in a paper published the following year (Spector 2010); Nicholas Meriwether (2012) takes a more narrow view, framing the discussion of transdisciplinarity in Dead studies in recent interdisciplinary theory.

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