

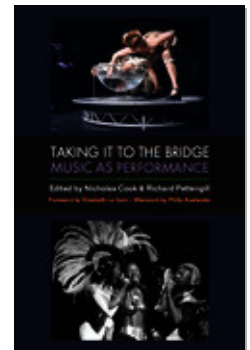


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RICHARD PETTENGILL

Performing Collective Improvisation

The Grateful Dead's "Dark Star"

JOURNALISTIC WRITING ON THE GRATEFUL DEAD, the San Francisco-based band that was active from 1965 until the death of lead guitarist Jerry Garcia in 1995, tends to focus more on the band's countercultural fan base—the hordes of devoted followers that followed the band from city to city—than the actual music they played. When the music is mentioned, the references are usually to the best-known songs on The Dead's two iconic 1970 studio albums, *Workingman's Dead* and *American Beauty* ("Uncle John's Band," "Casey Jones," "Truckin'"), and their one Top 40 hit from 1987, "Touch of Grey." Although journalists occasionally pay lip service to the band's penchant for improvisation,¹ such accounts, until recently, seldom have displayed understanding and appreciation for the most distinctive aspect of the band's musical achievement, which I believe is the art of collective free-form improvisation: the ability to improvise in a collective mode in which all musicians contribute to various extents and in various ways to a performed group exploration.

Much of the scholarly work to date has focused more on The Dead as a cultural phenomenon rather than as a group of skilled improvisational musicians or as performers.² Nancy Reist, for example, has written about the legions of Deadheads who claimed that the concerts were "magical, transforming experiences" that helped them "make decisions, solve problems and cope with the stresses of life."³ Reist argues that fans became Deadheads for the same reasons that humans throughout history have turned to myth: because their participation in that community helped them to "make sense of the world, particularly by acting as links between one's direct material experience and one's concept of the unseen forces that are believed to shape or at least influence that experience."⁴ But Reist makes little sub-

stantive reference to the band as a musical ensemble. Nadya Zimmerman takes a step in a more substantive direction by exploring the irony of the band's non-commercial ideology (they allowed and even encouraged fans to record their concerts) alongside their Fortune 500 status, but also pays refreshing musicological attention to the structure of two of their more rhythmically adventurous songs, "The Eleven" and "Sugar Magnolia."⁵ Zimmerman does not, however, touch upon the band's improvisational ability, or on the individual band members as performers.

Thankfully, this neglect has been rectified by a recent volume of essays entitled *The Grateful Dead in Concert: Essays on Live Improvisation*.⁶ This volume, containing such essays as "Pouring Its Light Into Ashes: Exploring the Multiplicity of Becoming in Grateful Dead Improvisation" by Jim Tuedio and "'Searching for the Sound': Grateful Dead Music and Interpretive Transformation" by Jason Kemp Winfree, complements without supplanting my work in this essay, which ultimately focuses on about fifteen seconds of improvised interaction between members of the band.

I suggest that the mythology that has so dominated discourse on this band could not have emerged without the foundation of their musicianship along with the personae they projected in performance. The music they created onstage was facilitated, I believe, by the relationship between both of these elements: by performing "authentic" personae, part and parcel of which were the subtle gestures, movements, and facial expressions that facilitated their onstage musical communication, this group of musicians was able to excel as an organic, interdependent improvisational juggernaut. Accordingly, my focus in this essay will be on the Grateful Dead's onstage performance behavior as a way to enhance our understanding of their distinctive approach to improvisation and, I hope, the field of improvisational performance studies as a whole. In order to articulate the nature of this approach, I want to pay attention to two videotaped performances of their improvisational magnum opus, "Dark Star."

One significant strain of the jazz/rock music of the late 1960s was what many scholars refer to as "psychedelic rock," the suggestion being that the music was either fueled by or was both lyrically and musically reflective of the experience of hallucinogenic drugs. Within this genre lies a sub-genre of predominantly instrumental music that I call extended, collective improvisation, a form more commonly heard in jazz than in rock. Examples that in my view warrant close attention (and are available on video) are Cream's live 1967–68 performances of "Spoonful" and "I'm So Glad," and Miles Davis's "Call It Anything," the forty-five-minute "jazz rock" group improvisation he performed at the 1970 Isle of Wight Festival.⁷ In the case

of Cream, the launching pad for improvisation is a clearly defined song structure, and Cream's collective explorations always came back around to the original song structure to complete each unit of performance. Davis's Isle of Wight performance was free-form from the start, although careful listeners will pick up recurring themes that originated in the earlier *Bitches Brew* sessions and that Davis revisited in this subsequent period. Other practitioners of collective improvisation in the rock or jazz-rock arena include early Pink Floyd, Soft Machine, Robert Fripp and his various ensembles, and Larry Coryell.

But in the annals of collectively improvised rock music, "Dark Star" holds a special place. Composed by Jerry Garcia with lyrics by Robert Hunter, "Dark Star" began its recorded life in 1967 as an odd studio single that received little attention from listeners and critics alike. But the song quickly found its niche in the band's repertoire not so much as a "concise song structure"⁸ in and of itself, but rather as a launching pad for the band's trademark onstage explorations. Two years later, in 1969, the band decided to place a twenty-four-minute version as the lead track of their first live album, *Live/Dead*.⁹ This pivotal decision can be seen in retrospect as a major artistic statement at a key moment in their career: that they were first and foremost a live band, that you must experience them in concert to know what they are about, and that "Dark Star" is the flagship both of this album and generally of the band in concert.

Without becoming enmeshed in definitional issues about exactly what constitutes improvisation, I first want to reiterate that what I refer to as the band's collective free-form improvisation goes beyond the more common phenomenon of soloists improvising over a more or less fixed rhythmic and chordal structure. Rather, I'm concerned with situations in which all the group members are improvising all together all at the same time, as is common among jazz artists such as Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, Sun Ra, and the Art Ensemble of Chicago. As R. Keith Sawyer writes, "in jazz, no single musician can determine the flow of the performance: It emerges out of the musical conversation, a give-and-take as performers propose new ideas, respond to other's ideas, and elaborate or modify those ideas as the performance moves forward."¹⁰ And Paul Berliner likens jazz improvisation to both a musical conversation and a journey. He says that players "must take in the immediate inventions around them while leading their own performances toward emerging musical images [and] constantly interpret one another's ideas, anticipating them on the basis of the music's predetermined harmonic events." Berliner could just as easily be discussing the Grateful Dead when he writes:

Without warning, however, anyone in the group can suddenly take the music in a direction that defies expectation, requiring the others to make instant decisions as to the development of their own parts. When pausing to consider an option or take a rest . . . the player must have the presence of mind to track its precise course before adding his or her powers of musical invention to the group's performance. Every maneuver or response by an improviser leaves its momentary trace in the music. By journey's end, the group has fashioned a composition anew, an original product of their interaction.¹¹

While Berliner's view of the product of improvisation as "composition" is not universally agreed upon and is in fact controversial,¹² let us keep it in mind as we look at these performances of "Dark Star." While each performance of the song yielded new musical ideas, each one also returned to and recapitulated a number of recurring themes, "maneuvers," and "momentary traces." This unpredictable distinctiveness, coupled with a degree of familiarity, I would argue, was one of the major factors leading to fervent devotion on the part of their fans throughout the thirty years leading up to the death of lead guitarist Jerry Garcia in 1995. Although there were multiple reasons for fan devotion, one of the reasons was because, as Greg Kot has written, they knew that every concert "would be one-of-a-kind."¹³ As Doug Collette writes about a nine-CD set of a 1973 run of performances at San Francisco's Winterland Ballroom:

Invigorated by the songs they are playing, the band generate then ride one rush after another, the apogee of which waxing and waning may in fact materialize on the final night in the form of over a half-hour of "Dark Star"; here the band utilizes the theme of the tune only as a touchpoint for free exploration, thereby consummating the run [of concerts] as other performers, thinking in much more narrow terms, devise their individual concerts.¹⁴

Collette is correct to point out that the band conceived of their overall achievement in much broader terms than just individual concerts; it would seem that they viewed their artistic objectives and achievements in terms, say, of an entire tour of shows rather than by individual shows. Just as each individual concert provided the band with an opportunity to explore uncharted territory, so each concert tour also provided a canvas for developing the band's larger artistic mission and goals. The sheer volume of the band's song repertoire (over a thousand songs), coupled with the infinite possibilities of improvisation, allowed them to conceive their artistic agenda in

gargantuan strokes. The numerous iterations of “Dark Star” endure as an intertextual mass, and the endless variations exponentially increased the number of texts and the possibilities of cross-referencing them.¹⁵

This “touchpoint for free exploration” called “Dark Star,” then, provides rich material for the analysis of the performance of collective improvisation. In order to achieve such richly nuanced and varied improvisational “compositions,” the band not only practiced the art of onstage non-verbal communication, both aural and gestural, but they also upheld the egalitarian ideals that they lived by early on at their Novato ranch and later at their communal home at 710 Ashbury St. in San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury district. While bassist Phil Lesh has written that Garcia early on emerged as the “undeclared leader” of the band,¹⁶ my performance analysis will show that each of the other core band members also exercised leadership when the band entered what Lesh calls “the zone,” the realm of collective musical creation.¹⁷ What emerges from a close reading of this footage, and what I suggest is essential to the success of collective improvisation, is that each core band member (lead guitarist Garcia, rhythm guitarist Weir, bassist Lesh, and drummer Kreutzmann)¹⁸ at different moments can be seen enacting personae that signal, push, and indicate a new direction in the movement of the composition. Each of them also appears willing at various times to cede control and go along with a bandmate’s suggested new direction. My interest here extends beyond the band’s collective musical creation toward, if you will, an improvised set list. That is, I will not only point out examples of non-verbal communication during the playing of both improvisational music and pre-determined song structures, but will also highlight an instance of the band members non-verbally deciding in the musical moment which song to play next.

Musicologist Rob Bowman has commented on this band’s penchant for deciding in the moment the direction that each song sequence will take: “Although the Dead had long been extending individual songs via extensive and wide ranging collective improvisation, ‘Dark Star’ was one of the first, if not the first, songs that the Dead deliberately left open-ended, each night attempting to ferret out a new avenue via which to eventually segue into another piece.”¹⁹ He also points out that the band segued *into* “Dark Star” during this period from a number of songs: “Getting into ‘Dark Star’ was much less predictable, changing virtually nightly, although some of the nicest versions [including the one on *Live/Dead*] grew out of ‘Mountains of the Moon.’” Accordingly, then, since the band’s improvisation of the music itself and also the next song to play were both integral aspects of their free-form agenda, my analysis will examine their choices in both of these areas.

Before I begin to discuss the various personae that the core band mem-

bers enacted in performance onstage and the way they facilitated their collective musical decisions, it will be useful to review Philip Auslander's systematization of Simon Frith's tripartite scheme for the enactment of persona in musical performance. In his essay "Performance Analysis and Popular Music: A Manifesto," Auslander encourages the use of Frith's scheme in the analysis of the performance behavior of popular musicians. He refers to Frith's three layers as: (1) "the real person (the performer as human being)," (2) "the performance persona (which corresponds to Frith's star personality or image)," and (3) "the character (Frith's song personality)."²⁰ Although Auslander suggests that "sound recordings of musical performances [along with videos] should . . . be considered legitimate objects for performance analysis,"²¹ and while contributors to this volume such as Susan Fast and Aida Mbowa have convincingly utilized recorded music for this purpose,²² I will take advantage of the visual perspective offered by these two performance documents because of the nuances of movement and gesture that they reveal.

Let us begin with some highlights of a live outdoor performance in Veneta, Oregon, from August 27, 1972.²³ As lead guitarist Garcia and bassist Lesh play the unison opening riff of "Dark Star" (1/4: 00:04–00:25) and head into the song's theme (a syncopated A–G progression), we see Garcia attentively facing Lesh and making rhythmic leg movements as the rhythm and tempo of the song's introductory elements stabilize. His repetitive movements establish a short-lived ambience of calm, stability, and consistency. But within seconds, as Garcia begins his improvised lead work (1/4: 00:25), he assumes his default physical position onstage: his body faces toward the audience but his attention is focused almost entirely on the fretboard on the neck of his guitar. The persona he is enacting here, indeed that of everyone in the band, is one of seriousness, of interiority, with a focus on their instruments not unlike Auslander's description of guitarist Jorma Kaukonen, in which he notes that the Jefferson Airplane guitarist "looked only at his left hand on the fretboard while playing his solo."²⁴

In case we are tempted to believe that Garcia relies on his ocular focus on the fretboard as a necessary condition for the playing of his melodic lead lines, we then see him turning his gaze "out into space" as he continues to play just as intricately. Clearly, then, Garcia is not dependent on it constantly being within his view. And yet his focus, while physically directed toward the audience, appears to be more inward than outward (1/4: 01:00 ff.). Just a minute later, in fact, he actually turns his back on the audience and begins to walk upstage toward his amplifier (02:00). This action may bring to mind Miles Davis's notorious reputation for turning his back on

the audience and the implied scorn or lack of regard that the stance implied.²⁵ But it is immediately clear that Garcia has done so not to reject the crowd but rather to adjust the knobs on his amplifier. Although his onstage persona does not seem to show great regard for or attentiveness to his audience, it is unlikely that his fans would even begin to take offense at this momentary turning away, especially when it is so apparent that it was to make a technical adjustment. And I would further suggest that Garcia's concern goes beyond the technical; that it is evidence of his seriousness as a musician, and that it conveys his own kind of concern for the audience: he is ensuring that his playing sounds precisely a certain way in terms of volume and/or tone. Although we have no way of knowing what he was thinking as he made these adjustments, one way of reading his actions is to say that he honors his audience's musical discretion by fine-tuning the sound that comes from his amp; he wants to produce the best possible sound for them, and may believe that they can hear the difference.

Soon after, and in a similar spirit, Garcia seems again to shift his focus across the stage toward Lesh, as if to signal a coming change of musical direction. But once again it seems that his concern is for the sound of his guitar: he is turning toward the headstock of his Stratocaster in order to tune the strings. Whereas more theatrical performers seem at times oblivious to technical considerations onstage,²⁶ Garcia's onstage persona is clearly comfortable and not at all self-conscious when it is necessary to attend to technical matters, especially when the outcome is likely to be the enhancement of his sound. Almost never (with the exception of some slightly out-of-tune notes) does the music suffer as a result of his relaxed and efficient adjustments. Indeed, the slightly out-of-tune notes would hardly be noticeable were it not for our ability to see Garcia attending to the strings.

How then shall we account for the persona being enacted in this close-up of Garcia gazing seemingly into space (1/4: 04:07)? Garcia himself has said on the question of their onstage identities, "We're not performers strictly speaking . . . we're musicians more than anything else."²⁷ Indeed, he and his mates have not dressed up for the occasion or painted their faces: they're wearing casual jeans and T-shirts; they're dressed as they might be on an average day at home when they are enacting Frith's first level, just being themselves. They play sensible guitars that are not covered in psychedelic paint or glitter. Their enactment of Frith's second-level performance persona has them standing on stage mostly looking down, occasionally at each other, almost never at the audience, and occasionally off into space. They attend to technical adjustments when necessary. It would appear that that they are being themselves onstage, that they are being authentic.

And yet, these musicians are onstage and are unquestionably performing. The fact that they appear as though they are being themselves does not negate or deny their performative state. They are “performing authenticity”; they are doing their best to appear like themselves, even though they are actually performing a version of authentic behavior. Although the experience of playing music onstage to thousands of people is undoubtedly different than playing, say, alone in one’s living room, the band members (to invoke Richard Schechner for a moment) are not actually being themselves, and yet they are not *not* being themselves, either. And even alone in one’s living room, an implied audience may be present.

A bit further on (1/4: 06:35), we encounter an intriguing frontal perspective on the entire band: they are facing toward the audience but, again, not visibly interacting with or acknowledging them. The music grows in intensity and fervor, anchored by Kreuzmann’s driving beat, and Garcia begins to improvise increasingly aggressive bent two-string chords as he looks intently across the stage (1/4: 07:30). Garcia then initiates the first of two sets of arpeggios that signal coming transitions or changes of direction as the band members make their way toward the non-improvised part of the song: the theme and verse. His visual focus on the other musicians signals the imminent arrival of what Sawyer calls the “group riff” or what I am calling the “Dark Star theme”: the syncopated A–G pattern and accompanying lead melody (2/4: 01:20).

As Garcia settles into the theme and begins to sing the lyrics, he begins to enact Frith’s third layer, the enactment of the song personality or character (2/4: 01:40).

Dark star crashes, pouring its light into ashes.
Reason tatters, the forces tear loose from the axis.
Searchlight casting for faults in the clouds of delusion.
Shall we go, you and I while we can
Through the transitive nightfall of diamonds?

Mirror shatters in formless reflections of matter.
Glass hand dissolving to ice petal flowers revolving.
Lady in velvet recedes in the nights of good-bye.
Shall we go, you and I while we can
Through the transitive nightfall of diamonds?²⁸

One way to characterize the third-level persona that Garcia is enacting here is to analyze the song’s lyrics. Lyricist Robert Hunter employs oxymoronic imagery in both the song’s title and its opening lines. This star

is dark, whereas a star by definition gives off light. Or, as David Dodd has written, a dark star is “the brightest of objects, seen as the absence of brightness.”²⁹ Yet this dark star pours “its light into ashes,” which presumably extinguishes any of the light it previously possessed. The star is not placed immovable in the firmament but is moving toward an unspecified collision point that obliterates its light. While the imagery of Hunter’s first line is a melding of the cosmic (“star”) and the earthly (“ashes”), his subsequent focus on “reason” moves the song firmly in the direction of human concerns: “Reason tatters; the forces tear loose from the axis.” The dissolution or tattering of human rationality results in a chaotic decentering reminiscent of Yeats’s “The Second Coming”: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.”³⁰ Human and earthly concerns also dominate the next image of a “searchlight casting for faults in the clouds of delusion.” Note here that a searchlight casting about for faults is examining the “clouds of delusion,” which inherently contain “fault” since they contain delusion. Once again, Hunter’s imagery melds the earthly (“searchlight”), the cosmic (“clouds”), and the human (“faults” and “delusion”). Hunter has said that he was influenced by T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” which he was reading at the time that he wrote the lyrics,³¹ and to his consciously derivative homage he appends a characteristic image that has been embraced as the title for one of the band’s live releases (“Through the transitive nightfall of diamonds?”).³² These lines have also been read as an invitation to the listener to engage in the musical journey that the band is about to undergo.³³

The lyrics do not engage in literal narrative as do song characters like the rogue cowboy of “Me and My Uncle” or the touring musicians of “Truckin’.” I would suggest that Garcia’s third-level persona in “Dark Star” is that of a beckoning Hunter-esque poet: he is not telling a story, but rather is painting provocative, complex, and multi-faceted images that are entirely consonant with the nature of the instrumental explorations that are integral to the song. In the second verse, as with “reason” and “searchlight,” earthly phenomena such as “mirror,” “glass hand,” and “lady in velvet” give way in each line to abstractions that transcend the earthly or corporeal. Hunter recapitulates his Eliot-inspired line in the refrain, which typifies the song’s melding of concrete and earthly with the abstract and imagistic. In enacting these lyrics, Garcia’s poet persona delivers perplexing imagery without engaging in eye contact or performative gestures that would explicitly acknowledge the audience’s presence. His persona is highly appropriate to the song’s lyrical content, as this imagery is challenging to absorb in the moment, and encourages on the audience’s part an

abstract or, if you will, a “psychedelic” frame of mind that is receptive to the challenging musical ideas that are to ensue.

Moving back to a consideration of performance choices, the band evolves toward an even more intense level of energy and aggressiveness, although continually anchored by drummer Kreutzmann’s steady, driving tempo (2/4: 07:00). Suddenly, Garcia makes a decisive move: he walks forward in front of rhythm guitarist Weir, increasing his physical proximity with Kreutzmann and Lesh (2/4: 07:20). Some change appears imminent. Weir himself, momentarily out of the circle of communication, stops for a few moments, takes a deep breath, and looks around, as if to take a brief break and ready himself for a new direction (2/4: 08:05). Garcia observes Weir’s pause, then moves decisively toward bassist Lesh, looking intently, nodding, signaling (2/4: 08:15). Kreutzmann slows his tempo almost to a standstill (3/4: 00:18), allowing a transition into a drum solo that Lesh quickly joins in on. Kreutzmann and Lesh here exemplify Berliner’s view that “the drummer and bass player must be married,” or completely in sync, because they are the “anchor . . . for the more adventurous performances of the rest of the band.”³⁴ Taking full advantage of this “anchor,” the rest of the band members insinuate themselves back into the fray to the point where Garcia is once again playing lightning-fast atonal leads that again evolve into frenetic wah-wah leads, then again into shift-signaling arpeggios (3/4: 09:10). Lesh picks up the cue and advances toward a new direction with heavy bass lines that soon evolve into a series of crashing two-string bass chords or “bombs” (4/4: 00:25).

Now an illuminating interaction takes place over the span of about fifteen seconds. Lesh’s bombs provide an intersection between improvised music and improvised segue, leading to a momentary misunderstanding on Garcia’s part of the direction that Weir has decided to take the band. Weir wants to lead them toward a seamless segue or transition into another song, but he hasn’t yet revealed which song he has in mind. He signals his intention to take the lead by facing Lesh and Kreutzmann (4/4: 00:38), then offers a clue by chiming, with characteristic understatement, a soft D chord (4/4: 01:28). His strum is almost inaudible, but it’s there. There are a number of Dead songs that begin with a strummed D chord on Weir’s part, so things could go in a number of directions at this moment. Perhaps because Lesh is still immersed in his bombs when Weir sounds the D, he does not immediately register the cue and follow up on it. Also, Weir has his back to Garcia, so Garcia is out of the visual loop and has only aural cues to go by. Attempting to rectify his momentary marginalization, Garcia walks over to join the circle of communication, and interprets Weir’s strum

juxtaposed with Lesh's chords as the introduction to "Morning Dew" and jumps in with his own complementary riff for the "Morning Dew" introduction. Based on what he has seen and heard, Garcia's interpretation is a perfectly reasonable one. In fact, as musicologist Rob Bowman has written, "In 1972, as often as not, 'Dark Star' would give way to 'Sugar Magnolia,' 'Drums,' or 'Morning Dew.'"³⁵ So a segue into "Morning Dew" is a fair assumption and is entirely consistent with what the band has been doing in that phase of their historical trajectory.

But Weir is not, it turns out, cueing "Morning Dew": he is indicating "El Paso," Marty Robbins's early '60s country-and-western hit that The Dead played 365 times between 1969 and 1995.³⁶ "El Paso" also begins with a D chord but also incorporates alternating D and A bass notes along with an ascending line from the lower A back up to the D (4/4: 01:38). Kreutzmann immediately picks up on the "El Paso" elements of Weir's cue and kicks in with his distinctive introductory "El Paso" bass drum beat (4/4: 01:40). On hearing Kreutzmann, Garcia immediately realizes he had gotten onto a different track, then jumps right in with his own melodious "El Paso" lead lines on top of Weir, Kreutzmann, and now Lesh too. Garcia shows himself to be more than ready, despite being the "undeclared leader" of the band, to follow what he thought was Weir's suggestion to play and sing "Morning Dew," and is happy to turn on a dime and play "El Paso" as well, once he realizes his bandmate's true intent. Weir threw Garcia a bit of a curveball when he made a surprising choice, but Garcia got on board in no time.

This fifteen seconds demonstrates the extraordinary non-verbal and aural communication—not to mention the cooperative and egalitarian spirit—that the Grateful Dead at their best manifested in the thick of performance. Garcia's alternate interpretation of aural cues and quick realization of and self-alignment with the band's collective direction exemplifies the essential nature of the band's practices. It makes no difference whether they went into "Morning Dew" or "El Paso"—there are no wrong answers. The Grateful Dead embodied a Zen-like sense that there are no mistakes, there are numerous roads to take, and that all roads lead to places worth inhabiting. In the context of the procedures that the band established for itself, the audience may actually expect Weir to forget a lyric (as he frequently did) or the band to need to find its way into a new tune. Moments where band members seem to be going astray should not be seen as errors or missteps. They are, rather, the way the band operates, the way they fulfill their audience's expectations. Such practices are the direct outcome of their apparent aesthetic and philosophy.

In one additional performance example of “Dark Star” six years later, the band demonstrates an entirely different set of moves and reactions.³⁷ The overall mood of this one is considerably more upbeat. Garcia and Lesh are bobbing animatedly as they move from the opening riff toward the verse. Lesh in particular is smiling, having fun, and moving rhythmically as the initial song structure progresses. Their onstage personae here are far more outwardly performative than in the previous more subdued example of performed authenticity. For one thing, this was the first time in four years that the band had played the song,³⁸ which might account both for the visible excitement of both Garcia and Lesh and also for what appears to be an actual error on Lesh’s part; it’s been a while since he’s played this song. After Garcia sings the final line of the second verse (“Through the transitive nightfall of diamonds”), Lesh is supposed to play a melodic and transitional bass line that is part of the composed fabric of the song, but he fails to do so. His sheepish facial expression and gesture suggest an immediate realization of his omission, but he quickly jumps to attention, employing physical proximity, eye contact, and bended knees to restore his connection with both Garcia and with the song overall. He smiles broadly at Garcia as if to say, “Whoops, I slipped up, but I’m back in the pocket now,” and “Dark Star” proceeds with new assurance.

Despite the prevailing perception of the Grateful Dead as pied pipers of a social phenomenon, I am convinced that the improvisational work done around “Dark Star” exemplifies the abilities that make this band a singular phenomenon in the history of American rock music. While they early on established their ability to create concise song structures, a number of their songs (“Dark Star” being foremost among them) are primarily and essentially vehicles for their singular ability to engage in collective group improvisation, to create nuanced and compelling compositions entirely in the moment through a singular ability to engage in non-verbal, aural, and gestural communication.

NOTES

1. Peter Watrous, for example, writes about a 1992 performance in “Pop and Jazz in Review,” *New York Times*, June 18, 1992, 16, that “those moments came where improvisation, the group’s distinct sound and the audience all melded.” Greg Kot probes more deeply when he writes in “Grateful Dead: Ahead of Its Time,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 26, 2009, 6–1, 6–4, that “Fans paid to see multiple shows on the same tour, knowing that each would be one-of-a-kind. . . . The band improvised its way through thousands of shows, and suggested that songs were not immutable

artifacts, but organic entities that could be bent, folded, and occasionally mutilated to suit the needs of the moment.”

2. One exception I have found is Steven Skaggs’s “‘Dark Star’ as an Example of Transcendental Aesthetics,” which is posted on “The Annotated Grateful Dead Lyrics,” accessed June 26, 2012, <http://artsites.ucsc.edu/GDead/agdl/ds.html>, rather than an academic journal. Skaggs analyzes the experience of “Dark Star” in terms of Eco’s *Theory of Semiotics* (by way of Schopenhauer, Croce, Collingwood, and Jakobson), arguing that “the crux of Eco’s semiotics of aesthetic experience . . . is exemplified beautifully by . . . ‘Dark Star.’” Taking off from Eco’s view that ambiguity, rather than “producing pure disorder . . . focuses my attention and urges me to an interpretive effort,” Skaggs goes on to discuss a performance of “Dark Star” (February 27, 1969) in some detail in light of the “surprise” that he sees as inherent in Eco’s aesthetics as well as the experience of the band’s improvisation with each “Dark Star.”

3. Nancy Reist, “Counting Stars by Candlelight: An Analysis of the Mythic Appeal of the Grateful Dead,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 30, no. 4 (1997): 183–209.

4. *Ibid.*, 183–209.

5. Nadya Zimmerman, “Consuming Nature: The Grateful Dead’s Performance of an Anti-Commercial Counterculture,” *American Music* 24, no. 2 (2005): 194–216.

6. Jim Tuedio, “Pouring Its Light into Ashes: Exploring the Multiplicity of Becoming in Grateful Dead Improvisation,” *The Grateful Dead in Concert: Essays on Live Improvisation*, ed. James A. Tuedio and Stan Spector (Jefferson: McFarland, 2010), 133–51; Jason Kemp Winfree, “‘Searching for the Sound’: Grateful Dead Music and Interpretive Transformation,” *The Grateful Dead in Concert: Essays on Live Improvisation*, ed. James A. Tuedio and Stan Spector (Jefferson: McFarland, 2010), 152–63.

7. Cream performances from 1968 can be viewed on *Cream: Fresh Live Cream*, directed by Martin G. Baker (1968; Image Entertainment, 1993), DVD, and on *Cream—Farewell Concert*, directed by Tony Palmer (1968; Image Entertainment, 1977), DVD. Davis’s Isle of Wight concert is available on DVD as well: *Miles Electric—A Different Kind of Blue*, directed by Murray Lerner (1970; Eagle Rock Entertainment, 2004), DVD.

8. Phil Lesh coins this phrase in an interview in the DVD *Classic Albums—The Grateful Dead: Anthem to Beauty*, directed by Jeremy Marre (1967–71; Eagle Rock Entertainment, 1998), DVD.

9. Although this version is just one of 232 that the band performed during its thirty-year career, it is this version that (by virtue of repeated listenings) has become seared in the consciousness of their fans.

10. R. Keith Sawyer, *Group Creativity: Music, Theater, Collaboration* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003), 4.

11. Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 348–49. The Dead have at times been compared to jazz musicians. Bill Graham, the rock promoter, often placed them on the same bill as jazz artists such as Miles Davis, and critic Ralph Gleason has referred to them as “really a jazz band” (see Zimmerman, “Consuming Nature,” 208).

12. Philip Auslander, in the essay included in this volume, offers a good summary of the various and at times conflicting musicological viewpoints regarding improvisation as a form of composition.

13. Greg Kot, "Grateful Dead: Ahead of Its Time," *Chicago Tribune*, April 26, 2009, 6:1.

14. Doug Collette, *Grateful Dead: Winterland 1973—The Complete Recordings*, posted June 29, 2008, <http://www.allaboutjazz.com/php/article.php?id=29832>.

15. In the two-CD set *Grayfolded* (1995; Recall Records UK, 1999), John Oswald explored the intertextual possibilities of numerous "Dark Star" performances by "folding" them together into an extraordinary aural mélange.

16. Phil Lesh, *Searching for the Sound: My Life with the Grateful Dead* (New York: Little, Brown, 2005), 135.

17. As Lesh has said in an interview, "We were manifesting this togetherness or this unity or this single organism. And we just grew and grew in that direction. In fact, I still feel that I'm a finger on a hand. We used to [say that] if we could be the finger on a guitarist[']s hand, each of us could be one finger playing one rhythm, [and] that would be ideal." *Classic Albums—The Grateful Dead: Anthem to Beauty* (1998).

18. I have not included keyboardist Keith Godchaux as a "core member" in this formulation for two reasons: (1) he was a temporary member of the band throughout the '70s prior to his death in an automobile accident, and (2) while he was a competent musician he was not a particularly assertive one. I acknowledge, however, that Godchaux may well have been influential in ways that are not readily apparent to me.

19. Liner notes to *Grayfolded*, The Grateful Dead, Recall Records UK, 1995.

20. Philip Auslander, "Performance Analysis and Popular Music: A Manifesto," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 14, no. 1 (2004): 6.

21. *Ibid.*, 5.

22. In the book *In the Houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the Power of Rock Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), Susan Fast writes that "the performer's body is very much present" in Zeppelin's recordings. And Mbowa, in her essay "Abbey Lincoln's Screaming Singing and the Sonic Liberatory Potential Thereafter" (this volume) writes, "To record, to make a record is to make something seemingly ephemeral such as sound into a material object."

23. I invite readers at this point to go onto YouTube (assuming the clips are still available) to familiarize themselves with the performance I am about to discuss. This performance was filmed with the intention of being released as the first feature-length Grateful Dead concert film called *Sunshine Daydream*, but the poor image quality led the band to decide to abandon the project. However, it has long made the rounds among aficionados of the band and is, as of March 2013, available on YouTube. The first of four clips comprising this performance of "Dark Star" can be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YLzUme1gN8c>. Alternatively, one can search "Grateful Dead Dark Star 1972" on YouTube.com to find these four clips. I will refer to these clips as 1/4, 2/4, 3/4, and 4/4.

24. In Philip Auslander's *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 18, he contrasts the flamboyance and theatricality of such glam rockers as Marc Bolan and David Bowie, Ray Wood, and Suzi Quatro with what he calls the "anti-ocular" or "anti-theatricality" of what he and other writers refer to as "psychedelic rock musicians."

25. See John Szwed, “Miles: The Voice, the Man,” *So What: The Life of Miles Davis* (Simon and Schuster, 2002) for an illuminating discussion of Miles’s “turning of his back” on audiences and the extensive controversy it engendered.

26. A striking example of a musician who is truly oblivious to technical matters onstage is Marc Bolan, shown in concert in the film *Born to Boogie*, directed by Ringo Starr (1972; Sanctuary Records, 2005), DVD. Bolan’s Les Paul, which he wields as though he were a child with a new toy, is horrendously out of tune, but both he and his audience appear neither to notice nor to care; a splendid time is nonetheless guaranteed for all.

27. *Classic Albums—The Grateful Dead: Anthem to Beauty* (1998).

28. As was occasionally the case in certain performances of “Dark Star,” Garcia in this iteration never gets around to singing the second verse. But it will be worthwhile to reproduce those lyrics here in order to draw parallels between the song’s lyrical and musical content.

29. See David Dodd, “The Annotated ‘Dark Star,’” accessed June 26, 2012, <http://artsites.ucsc.edu/GDead/agdl/darkstar.html>.

30. William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming,” accessed June 26, 2012, <http://www.online-literature.com/yeats/780/>.

31.

“Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table.”

32. *Nightfall of Diamonds: Meadowlands Sports Arena, E. Rutherford, New Jersey, October 16, 1989 [LIVE]* Performed by The Grateful Dead (1989; Arista, 2001), CD.

33. Jurgen Fauth posts in “The Annotated ‘Dark Star,’” (February 28, 1995) that “the song actually talks about itself; the ‘transitive nightfall of diamonds’ being the ensuing jam, or to put it the other way ’round, the jam does its best to define the ‘transitive nightfall of diamonds’ every time the song is played, differently every time. . . . This would make ‘Shall we go . . .’ Jerry’s (or the implied narrator’s) invitation to the listener to join the band on the ensuing musical journey.” <http://artsites.ucsc.edu/GDead/agdl/darkstar.html>.

34. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, 349, 353. I should point out here that Berliner refers to a standard drums-and-bass configuration of jazz, whereas the usual configuration in the Grateful Dead (and in other bands such as The Allman Brothers) is bassist and two drummers. This concert is unusual in that it took place during a hiatus of the band’s second drummer Mickey Hart.

35. Liner notes to *Grayfolded*, 1995.

36. This segue from “Dark Star” into “El Paso” can be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCG-kLnsX2s>. Alternatively, one can search “Grateful Dead 1972 El Paso” on YouTube.com.

37. This performance is commercially available on the DVD *The Closing of Winterland*, The Grateful Dead (1978; WEA/Rhino, 2003).

38. According to Bowman, “When they resumed regular touring [following a hiatus] in the summer of 1976, ‘Dark Star’ was nowhere to be found. In fact, it would not be played again until 1978.” Liner notes to *Grayfolded*, 1995.