

The Grateful Dead In Concert: Essays on Live Improvisation

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Reviewed by Melvin Backstrom

It is not at all surprising that the field of improvisational studies has, for the most part, concentrated its attention on manifestations of improvisation in avant-garde contexts, given the still pervasive suspicion of the value of popular culture within the scholarly community. Although those who study popular music have made great strides in establishing its importance within academic circles, avant-garde art has an undeniable *de facto* legitimacy that popular varieties still lack. It is therefore a welcome opportunity for me to review this recently published collection of essays concerning a musical group that over 30 years and some 2300 performances likely performed for more people than any other in history. This is not the first edited volume to focus on the Grateful Dead (see also Weiner; Dodd and Spaulding; Gimbel; Meriwether), but it is the first to focus specifically on the improvisational character of their music and the broader “deadhead” culture that came to so thoroughly define them. For despite the critiques of the value of improvisation to, and indeed its actuality in, popular music (Frith; Adorno), its importance to the Grateful Dead (hereafter simply the Dead) would be difficult to overstate. Although its ideals were not always lived up to in their practice, improvisation did define them in a myriad number of ways that the essays in this volume explore.

Passion and care for the music of the Dead and its attendant “deadhead” culture are clearly evident throughout *The Grateful Dead in Concert*; producing this volume was obviously a labor of love for those involved. Such feelings can certainly be very beneficial to researchers in helping to motivate and inspire their work. However, one of the perennial problems faced by scholars of popular culture is sufficiently disengaging from their emotional attachments in order to give a scholarly, as opposed to fan-based, account of their object of study. For the most part, the authors in this collection accomplish this detachment. A notable exception, however, is David Malvinni who—in what is overall an interesting and provocative discussion of the ways in which the Dead’s usage of the blues and musical technology can be understood as realizing a Heideggerian “saving power” of reconnection to the *ekstasis* of Being—lapses more than once into uninterrogated fan-speak. Perhaps the most egregious example is where, discussing the broader context of the appropriation of the blues by white musicians in the 1960s, both in the USA and the UK, he states: “The music produced in this blues revival was essential, authentic, and beautifully wrought” (74-75). Beautifully wrought some of it might well be, but how is one to plausibly conceive of any variety of music as “essential”? (To whom? And how?) In addition, to invoke a particular music’s purported authenticity (as he does a number of other times), without qualification, is baffling given the voluminous amount of work that has appeared in recent decades critiquing the application of this concept to music (see, among others, Taruskin; Kivy; Peterson; and Moore). One wishes that Malvinni had avoided such hyperbole, because despite the many interesting points he does make, it puts his overall judgment into question and serves to reinforce prejudices against the study of popular culture as lacking in seriousness and objectivity.

In her essay “Examining Grateful Dead Improvisation as a Catalyst for Creating Sustained *Communitas*,” Amanda Diederich-Hirsch uses Victor Turner’s description and analysis of the liminality of ritual processes through the concept of *communitas* to explain what was (and continues to be today) one of the most fascinating aspects of the Dead: the passion, loyalty and communal involvement of their many “deadhead” fans. Eschewing the conventional essay form, Diederich-Hirsch instead uses a loosely related series of short sections that explain the history, motivation, experience, dilemmas and conflicts of deadhead culture.

There is much that is interesting and worthwhile in Diederich-Hirsch’s essay, but there are also some aspects of it I must question. First, the ostensible apolitical nature of the Dead and their music has often been remarked upon (most notably in Brightman), and Diederich-Hirsch follows suit, writing that though they “seem to personify counterculture ideals [. . .] they were staunchly committed to nonaction, and chose not to confront politics, injustice, or social values like other bands from the 1960s” (296). Although it is true that the Dead were in general quite reticent about explicitly addressing politics, on more than one occasion they did indeed do so. The song “Throwing Stones,” for example, written in the early 1980s, addresses quite directly the specter of nuclear war; and “We Can’t Run” does the same for the long-term effects of environmental degradation. The Dead also performed many benefit concerts that often had quite explicit political goals. One could argue that these are the exceptions that prove the rule, but they, at the very least, complicate the conventional blanket denial of the Dead’s political interventions and suggest a deeper questioning of what was understood as politics by them and their fans. Can we not understand the continuation and propagation of the counter-cultural ideals of the 1960s through the 1990s and beyond, that the Dead facilitated

(through their nearly constant touring) and the deadheads realized (though often imperfectly), as implicitly political? Therefore, rather than simply denying the role of politics within the Dead community, it would be more useful to think through how the Dead might have suggested a political understanding through their improvised musical practices, despite the generally apolitical character of their lyrics.

Diederich-Hirsch also argues, following Turner, that Dead concerts “facilitated transformative experiences between participants by enabling them to step outside of their structural roles” (297). That is, rather than being defined by differences of class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so forth, within the *communitas* of the Dead concert experience, the individual experiences of attendees transgressed these normally stable categories. Diederich-Hirsch goes on to state, “that the population in the Grateful Dead’s following bore a strong resemblance to the rest of twentieth-century America’s population” (298). Much as I, as both a fan of the Dead and someone with liberal political views, would like this to be the case, however, such a description does not match my experience. Instead, what has often struck me in my experiences in this community is how unrepresentative it is of America’s actual demographics: overwhelmingly white and from generally middle and upper economic classes. Although Turner’s account of the socially transgressive possibilities attendant to the liminal-dimensions of *communitas* is of some use in explaining the, in some ways, quite remarkable difference, diversity, and flux of the identities that make up the individuals at a Dead concert, it seems naively utopian to think that structural social processes, and the identities that make them up, do not affect its constitution. Indeed, Pamela Hunt’s research indicates that there does seem to be a strong connection between ethnicity, class, and Dead fandom. So although Turner’s understanding of *communitas* is explicitly at odds with the universalism of Pierre Bourdieu’s account of aesthetic distinction, Diederich-Hirsch’s essay would have greatly benefited by taking Bourdieu into consideration—even if only to argue for the limited application of his theory within liminal states.

Jay Williams’s essay, “Bears and Flags: The Grateful Dead’s America and Bohemian Nationalism,” complements Diederich-Hirsch’s discussion by both contextualizing the Dead and their counter-cultural ideals within a history of bohemianism in California and by exploring the ways in which they negotiated their assertion of these ideals within late 20th-century America. Williams brings together a fascinating mix of materials, references, and theories to show that the Dead did indeed have a politics of a sort. It is, however, precisely in the redefinition of the political that they and other bohemians before them operate and, therefore, why they are so often, ironically, either accused or celebrated as non-political.

Jim Tuedio’s “Pouring its Light into Ashes’: Exploring the Multiplicity of Becoming in Grateful Dead Improvisation,” is a very interesting and provocative Deleuzian account of the Dead’s practices. Following Deleuze and Guattari’s discussion of rhythm and musical improvisation in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Tuedio deftly explores the many ways in which the Dead deterritorialized their audience through their purposeful embracing of chaos in the continual ongoing re-creation of their music. Rather than live performances characterized by set lists that stayed more or less the same, made up of songs that as closely as possible reproduced their studio recorded versions, the Dead’s sets were “assemblages,” in the Deleuzian sense of agglomerations of highly heterogeneous elements (from the most simple folk/country songs to the furthest reaches of the 20th century musical avant-garde), as their always improvised songs remained in a perpetual state of “becoming” (Deleuze and Guattari). Given such an exploration of the Dead in Deleuzian terms, however, it is strange that in an introductory discussion of the group’s practices Tuedio approvingly quotes a 1969 article on the Dead (by someone named Lydon) that, “Each time it is Jerry [Garcia their lead guitarist] who leads them [the group] out” on their improvisational journeys (134). Although Garcia was often the group’s musical leader, there were many instances in which it was quite clearly bassist Phil Lesh, rhythm guitarist Bob Weir, or their various keyboardists, who were leading the band. This was, in fact, one of the most interesting qualities of the group. Despite Garcia’s status as the group’s first-among-equals and leader in all but name, they realized a highly democratic musical conversation that did not depend on a single, stable source of authority, but that was instead characterized by a remarkably non-hierarchical, horizontal multiplicity that remained open to change and diversity. Despite the many problems that arose from Garcia’s refusal to use his authority (David Gans discusses this in his essay, 329-31), it is, I think, no coincidence that of all the psychedelic musical groups to come out of the 1960s, only the Dead remained together and continued to tour year after year until Garcia’s death in 1995. Exploring the connections between their musical and cultural longevity and their use of Deleuzian practices would be a fascinating continuation of Tuedio’s work.

Graeme Boone, the author of two essays in this volume, should be familiar to music specialists interested in the Dead, as he is the author of a 1997 article that is notable as one of the first published attempts to apply traditional methods of musical analysis to the Dead’s music. In “Mandalas and the Dead,” Boone explores the Dead’s connection to the widespread shift towards, and increasing interest in, Eastern spiritual traditions in the West in the 1960s. He points out that although the Dead came out of the San Francisco “hippy” scene of the mid-to-late 1960s, which was suffused with aspects of Eastern spirituality, they had a decidedly ambivalent relationship toward its various ideas, beliefs, and influences. On the one hand, the album covers of their first three albums all feature

imagery that strongly invokes Eastern spirituality; on the other hand, lyrical references to any Eastern spiritual traditions are notably absent from their songs, even those on the above-mentioned albums. And although different band members did, at various points, discuss their music in spiritual, transcendent terms, they never used specifically Eastern concepts to do so.

What music from Asia might have influenced the group, however, is a more difficult question to answer. Boone states categorically, "Despite the imagery on these early album covers, the Dead did not plumb the sounds of the East for the music of the records themselves" (33)—and he is correct, up to a point, with the notable exception of the prominent use of a tamboura on the 1968 single version of "Dark Star"—but they did realize an Eastern musical evocation in other ways, perhaps most explicitly with a musical section generally referred to as "Spanish Jam." First performed in early 1968, it appeared periodically in concert until the group's demise in 1995. Although its title refers to Spain rather than anywhere in Asia, this is a distinction without much meaning given that the specific "other" that it connotes can hardly be so specifically identified (although research into the origins of its name might be highly useful in understanding the discursive implications of musical structures within the deadhead community). Also, although "Spanish Jam" never officially appeared on a studio album, a brief hint of it does occur within the song "Born Cross-Eyed" on *Anthem of the Sun*; the same basic chords are used, only here with a trumpet solo in addition to guitar (Light Into Ashes).

Given the well-known disdain of the Dead's members, however, as well as many of their fans, for their studio albums in comparison to their live performances,¹ it would be useful to consider their live musical material that did not appear on studio albums in a discussion of their relation to the influences of the East. In this regard, I would venture to include not only "Spanish Jam," but also their various odd-time signature songs and jams ("the Seven," "the Eleven" and "the Main Ten") that came out of drummer Mickey Hart's studies of Hindustani rhythmic principles. Furthermore, given the familiarity of the Dead's members with Indian music, one could well argue that the harmonically-static, modal type of improvising that the Dead so often made use of was derived not only from the modal jazz of Miles Davis and John Coltrane (as is often acknowledged), but also from Indian music's lack of harmonic movement and its similar melodic and rhythmic inventiveness. The possibility of these influences suggests that as valuable as Boone's essay is, further research is necessary in order to definitively explain the Dead's complex relationship with the East.

Boone's other article, "Dark Star Mandala," follows through on a suggestion he made in his earlier article on "Dark Star": "If 'Dark Star' is considered to be a cumulation of many performances, or a distillation of them, comparison of all available recorded versions might uncover its essential nature" (172). However, given its 200+ live versions, such a task would be at least a book-long project; therefore, Boone here limits himself to 63 "Dark Stars" from the song's embryonic studio recordings from late 1967 to April 1969 when a high level of abstractness from its formal elements (what Boone refers to, appropriately, as "space") were realized "as an actual sonic dwelling place within [it]" (100). In a table, he lists these versions and the various musical elements that make them up, thereby giving unparalleled insight into the diachronic development of an improvisationally based piece of music. He also creates two mandala-like images in order to portray the synchronic interrelationships between the various elements: a lesser one for the more limited versions up till early 1969, defined by the antipodes "stability" and "tension"; and a greater one for those that came later, in which the realization of an expanded pallet of possibilities necessitated a wider antipodal relationship that Boone labels (respectively) "cosmos" and "chaos." Because of the array of symbols used, interpreting these graphics required some degree of effort on my part, but the process was quite valuable in furthering my understanding of the musical relationships that make up "Dark Star," and that Boone has done such a remarkable job analyzing and describing.

Anthropologist Eric Silverman's "'Mysteries Dark and Vast': Grateful Dead Concerts and Initiation into the Sublime," is an especially important work of scholarship on the Dead because it so effectively takes on two unfortunate tropes concerning the Dead: (1) that their music was facile and unserious; (2) the prominence of insufficiently critical comparisons and appropriations of non-Western myths and cultural practices (most notably those of Joseph Campbell) in understandings of their music and its relationship to the broader deadhead culture. Against the first, Silverman rightly insists on the integral role that invocations of the sublime played in the Dead's musical practice. Although many of the Dead's songs are structurally quite conventional for pop-rock music (though not at all in their often highly improvised realizations in live performance) and positive in their emotional expressivity, in almost every one of their concerts they performed music far outside standard song structures and of a very "dark" variety. Whether referred to as "Feedback" (as on the 1969 album *Live/Dead*), "Seastones," "Drums>Space," or understood instead as a particularly far-out section of one of their more improvisationally adventurous songs, these more exploratory aspects of their musical vocabulary used the sonic palette of the 20th century avant-garde to create music that, depending on one's mental state, could be bafflingly bizarre, hilariously weird, or absolutely terrifying. Despite the prevalence of this kind of sonic experimentation in their repertoire, however, these explorations have received little attention from music critics, journalists, or even scholars of the Dead. I hope that this article will prompt further study of the fascinating stylistic musical mélange that the Dead achieved through their improvisational practice.

Silverman's critique of the second trope is, in fact, related to the first. The mythologist Joseph Campbell has been a favorite reference point for deadheads since he attended a Dead concert in 1986 and later compared it to a neo-pagan, Dionysian celebration of communal *ekstasis* (215). As Silverman rightly points out, however, Campbell's structuralist reduction of local, higher-order differences in myths and religious practices to ostensibly universal, lower-order sameness does violence to the importance of difference to the vast array of cultural practices among which he sought commonalities: "To this 'world ecumenist' who reduced all myths and rituals everywhere to the same spiritual oneness, the devil was indeed in the details! His exegetical method was thoroughly modernist by reducing all local voices, meanings, motivations, and interpretations to a univocal, universal 'monomyth'" (215-16). Silverman perspicaciously draws a connection between the appropriation of Campbell's denial of difference by deadheads with the denial, or at least effacement, of the importance of terror to an understanding of the experience of their concerts. Silverman here turns to Victor Turner's conception of *communitas* to insist (in contrast to its usual use by scholars of the Dead who stress only its ecstatic, carnivalesque character) that it "must also include an element of sheer terror and fright. *Communitas* entails a radical, typically traumatic shattering of everyday social and psychological norms—a literal deconstruction of the normative content and categories of thought. [. . .] *Communitas* is serious ritual violence" (218). Rather than an all-embracing feeling of peace and love within the Campbellian rubric "All Is One," Silverman brilliantly illuminates the fear that Dead concerts at their best conjured, as a mirror of that which psychedelic experiences themselves almost always involve. This is not to deny the validity or importance of "the overt ethos of peacefulness, compassion, family, collaboration, and kindness that suffused the Grateful Dead experience" (225); rather, it is only by coming to terms with their ever-present darkness and terror that the full phenomenological power of the group, and the remarkable loyalty of its fans, can be fully understood.

This volume represents perhaps the strongest evidence to date that far from being simply another pop-rock group, the Grateful Dead were one of the most important American musical-cultural phenomena of the late 20th century and are of significant import to the study of improvisation. Its editors did a remarkable job in gathering such a wide ranging and high quality collection of essays; I only wish they had been more careful in their editing, as I did find a number of small problematic details that I do not have space to go into here. Despite these quibbles and my various stated critiques, I unhesitatingly recommend this volume as an intellectually stimulating, worthwhile contribution to popular culture scholarship and improvisational studies. Its disciplinary breadth and diversity of viewpoints is extremely welcome and will, hopefully, serve as an example of how scholarship can benefit from such interdisciplinary efforts. The field of Grateful Dead studies is very young, but the appearance of this volume suggests not only its vitality, but also its promise as a particularly fruitful arena for the study of improvisation, popular music, and culture.

Notes

¹ Although the Grateful Dead recorded 13 studio albums in their 30-year career, it was their live performances that defined them to a far greater degree. Those interested in exploring this side of their music are advised to go to <http://www.archive.org/details/GratefulDead>, where thousands of copies of their live performances are available for streaming and/or downloading.

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