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Review Essay: The Birth of an Interdisciplinary Area: Studying the Grateful Dead

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Connors, Peter. *Cornell '77: The Music, the Myth, and the Magnificence of the Grateful Dead's Concert at Barton Hall*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017. 223 pp. ISBN: 9781501708565.

Jackson, Blair, and David Gans. *This Is All a Dream We Dreamed: An Oral History of the Grateful Dead*. New York: Flatiron Books, 2016. xxiv + 486 pp. ISBN (paper): 9781250098160.

Olsson, Ulf. *Listening for the Secret: The Grateful Dead and the Politics of Improvisation*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017. xii + 184 pp. ISBN (paper): 9780520286659.

Studies of popular music are inherently interdisciplinary, opening to simultaneous consideration ethnographic and anthropological concerns related to listeners, endless questions of a musicological nature, literary interpretations of song lyrics, technological matters pertinent to sound production and recording, and economic analyses of sales of recordings and other music industry trends, among many other topics. One nascent area of popular music studies is related to the American rock band the Grateful Dead, whose thirty-year career is especially storied, whose fans are uniquely devoted, and—perhaps most importantly to scholars—whose performances are remarkably well-documented. And, just as the Grateful Dead's performances won them an exceptional place in American popular music, so the study of the band and the culture that surrounded it has steadily matured into its own interdisciplinary field, Grateful Dead studies (see especially, for another perspective on the growth of the field, Nicholas Meriwether's Introduction to *Studying the Dead: The Grateful Dead Scholars Caucus, An Informal History* [Scarecrow, 2013]). Indeed, the birth of this field is an instructive example of how arguments that initially take shape in discrete disciplinary silos converge and cohere into a productive area of interdisciplinary scholarship.

Interdisciplinary approaches to the study of the Grateful Dead have from the first been inspired by the band's own unification of diverse perspectives and enterprises, an enthusiastic synthesis that led concert promoter Bill Graham to declare, "They're not the best at what they do, they're the only ones [who] do what they do." As performers, they were remarkably eclectic, bringing several idioms of popular music (blues-based rock and roll, jug band, bluegrass, and folk) together in the context of a dedication to extended improvisation typically encountered only in the world of post-WWII jazz. Contemporary composition contributed its influence as well, in part because erstwhile band member Tom Constanten (and, to a lesser degree, founding member Phil Lesh) studied alongside Steve Reich and under such figures as Luciano Berio, Henri Pousseur, and Karlheinz Stockhausen, and corresponded with La Monte Young. Later pieces incorporated as well elements of disco, country and western, and reggae. On stage, the group was joined at times by a list of figures as catholic as the styles they engaged: Bob Dylan, author Ken Kesey, folk maven Joan Baez, blues singer Etta James, jazz legends like David Murray and Ornette Coleman, rock heroes including Mick Taylor and Bo Diddley, percussion masters Sikiru Adepoju and Babatunde Olatunji, pop stars such as The Bangles and Huey Lewis—the list could be much extended. This wide-ranging set of influences, educations, and coconspirators resulted in performances that sounded a little bit like everything else, yet remained *sui generis*; hence, among the more popular slogans for fans' bumper stickers: "There is nothing like a Grateful Dead concert" (albeit that claim had much to do, for many, with elements that extended beyond the music itself).

That the band made improvisation central to its performance, and scorned repetition in set lists, meant that no one Grateful Dead concert was like any other Grateful Dead concert. One consequence was that Grateful Dead fans became invested not only in going to occasional concerts and buying records, but in going to

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every concert and securing recordings of every note played, an impulse that led to the growth of a live-concert taping (and tape-trading) culture, that was at first sub rosa and then, starting in 1984, officially permitted via “taper tickets” issued by the band to recording-gear-laden fans. This practice resulted in the generation of a record of the band’s aural history that remains unequalled in its extent. Too, a travelling community that followed the band from performance space to performance space grew simultaneously, and this nomadic community developed its own vocabulary, economy, and mores. Taken together, these factors allowed for listeners who are especially devoted and knowledgeable (one might say obsessive) about the band and its performance history, disputing minutiae with something of the fervor fans of Wagner might bring to conversations about the Bayreuth Festival if that event had also had its birth in the world of the Merry Prankster’s multi-media, psychedelia-drenched “Acid Tests.”

Furthermore, Graham’s aphorism holds true for the band’s extra-musical identity, as well. Grateful Dead, Inc., was remarkably inventive as a business entity, founding various enterprises, including its own record labels (Grateful Dead Records and Round Records), equipment and instrument design company (Alembic), performance spaces (the Carousel Ballroom), travel agency (Fly by Night), ticketing service, fan club, charity (the Rex Foundation), and publishing company (Ice Nine, a name inspired by Kurt Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle*) as a means of supporting their work as musicians without needing to deal with unwelcome interference from the corporate music industry. In addition, the band members’ work as authors of memoirs, their involvement with film (especially *The Grateful Dead Movie*), their lyricists’ books of original and translated poetry, and their efforts in the visual arts resulted in something that is in some senses, and in spite of the music’s centrality, more fairly understood as an arts collective than as a simple rock band.

More to the point here, the group’s history has long been entwined with the world of higher education. While based in San Francisco, their most lucrative fanbase developed on the East Coast, including especially students at the string of prep schools, colleges, and universities that stretches between DC and New England. Their early national journeys in search of paying gigs essentially defined rock’s college touring circuit, a vein they continued to work until their popularity made many college- and university-sized performance spaces impractical. Along the way their venues included spaces at small colleges like Franklin and Marshall (04/10/71) and larger institutions such as American U (9/30/72), Boston U (11/21/70), Columbia (05/03/68), Cornell (first on 05/08/77), Dartmouth (05/05/78), Lehigh (09/25/81), MIT (first on 05/06/70), Princeton (04/17/71), and Yale (07/31/71). On the west coast, favorite venues included the Greek Theater at UC–Berkeley (first on 10/01/67) and the Frost Amphitheater at Stanford (first on 10/09/82). And, in reviewing the catalogue of appearances, one finds mixed among the musical performances events like the 1971 concert that led to one of the first peer-reviewed publications to mention the group (S. Krippner, C. Honorton, and M. Ullman’s “An experiment in dream telepathy with ‘The Grateful Dead’” [*Journal of the American Society of Psychosomatic Dentistry and Medicine* vol. 20, no. 1 {1973}, pp. 9–17]. The very first article to mention the Grateful Dead in a refereed journal appears to be George R. Gay, Robbie Elsenbaumer, and John A. Newmeyer’s “A Dash of M*A*S*H, The Zep and the Dead: Head to Head” [*Journal of Psychedelic Drugs* vol. 5, no. 2 {1972}, pp. 193–203].) and the 1986 symposium at UC–Berkeley that brought band members Mickey Hart and Jerry Garcia into public conversation with such famed academics as mythographer (and appreciative listener) Joseph Campbell.

Book-length publication on the group began early in their career, with Hank Harrison’s 1973 *The Dead Book: A Social History of the Grateful Dead* (Harrison was a friend of the band, and father of rocker Courtney Love). Academics got more consistently involved as early as 1991, when Hart began publishing volumes co-written with UC–Santa Cruz musicologist Fred Lieberman, and academic publishers especially around the turn of the century, with the release of Robert G. Weiner’s *Perspectives on the Grateful Dead: Critical Writings* (Greenwood, 1999), and *The Grateful Dead Reader*, edited by David G. Dodd and Diana Spaulding (OUP, 2000). Publication of peer-reviewed articles blossomed around the same time, spurred by two journals, *Dead Letters* (2001–2009) and *Dead Studies* (2011–2013, on temporary hiatus as it moves to UC–Santa Cruz and gains an online presence). Activity at scholarly conferences has also been consistent for

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about two decades, and includes not only one-off symposia like those at UMass–Amherst in 2007 and San José State in 2014, but also a long-running presence at the Southwest regional Popular / American Culture Association's annual meeting so consistently strong that it has become its own sub-entity—the Grateful Dead Scholars' Caucus.

Additional growth of the aforementioned developments in scholarship on the band was encouraged by the events of 2015, which proved a banner year in terms of wider awareness of the group and of speculation about its import as a musical and cultural phenomenon. Although band members had performed together fairly regularly in various combinations since the death of Garcia in 1995, at which time the "Grateful Dead" moniker was retired, 2015 was marked by five heavily-promoted concerts that were somewhat misleadingly presented in the popular press as not only a fiftieth-anniversary celebration, but also a final reunion. In some senses the presentation of these concerts as the end of something is valid, as they were contractually the last times the "core four" of the six surviving performing members of the band would appear together on the same stage at the same time. However, official promotional materials generally dodged referring to the performing group of 2015 as the "Grateful Dead," which made claims for a reunion somewhat dubious, and all four of the band members involved have continued to perform, and have done so both solo and together in various two- and three-person combinations, which makes it evident the "Fare Thee Well" concerts were more properly part of the journey, rather than its conclusion. In any case, the excitement among fans and the media coverage generated by these concerts set the stage for increased publication on the group, and this review essay considers first one of the best of the trade books to have appeared roughly concurrently with the resurgence of interest that the fiftieth-anniversary events fomented, Blair Jackson and David Gans's *This Is All a Dream We Dreamed: An Oral History of the Grateful Dead*.

Jackson and Gans have strong credentials. Jackson penned several books on the band (*Grateful Dead: The Music Never Stopped* [Putnam, 1983], *Garcia: An American Life* [Penguin, 2000], *Grateful Dead Gear* [Backbeat, 2006]), co-produced the band's compact-disc box set *So Many Roads* (2001), published a weekly blog on the official website (dead.net) for about two years, and wrote about the group extensively as a journalist for the rock music magazine *BAM* and for his own Grateful Dead fanzine, *The Golden Road*. Gans has hosted the nationally-syndicated radio show *The Grateful Dead Hour* for two decades, and has written or edited several books about the band, including *Conversations with the Dead: The Grateful Dead Interview Book* (Da Capo, 2002). Still, one may be inclined to wonder what *This Is All a Dream We Dreamed* can add to our understanding; there are, after all, quite a few histories of the group, including the official *A Long Strange Trip*, by Dennis McNally (Broadway, 2002), and other collections of interviews, like Gans's own.

From the perspective of the interdisciplinary scholar, *This Is All a Dream We Dreamed* stands out in relation to much of the competition because of the authors' decisions to reach far beyond the ranks of performing members of the band for material, and to quote directly, rather than to paraphrase, the many figures whose voices contribute to the book. Consequently, readers are offered first-hand insights from office staffers, equipment crewmembers, production company representatives, friends, fans, musicians, and others. Too, each of these quotations is relatively brief, which prevents any one voice or perspective from dominating. In this fashion, the story of the band opens into a conversation that offers a sense of how deeply this music is embedded in wider cultural practices. Some quotes are especially illuminating in this respect, as when manager Rock Scully, commenting on the degree to which the band enjoyed an almost iconographic status even in the 1960s, says of their appearance at the 1969 Woodstock Music and Arts Festival, "they really wanted us there and thought we should be there; even back then we were sort of a mythological, sociological movement rather than a musical one" (131). Given the ongoing interest in the music's fans as an exemplary case of a late twentieth-century subculture (see, for example, the essays collected in *Deadhead Social Science*, edited by Rebecca G. Adams and Robert Sardiello [AltaMira, 2000]), remarks such as Scully's are valuable for demonstrating the degree to which a dance band from San Francisco, or more properly Palo Alto, became within a very few years a nationally-famous emblem of a cultural phenomenon that was not at all limited to music. The diversity of voices in Jackson and Gans's book also has the pleasant effect of enlivening

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the text. Even when histories of the band come in the form of illuminating insider tales, like Phil Lesh's *Searching for the Sound* (Back Bay, 2005) or Bill Kreutzmann's *Deal* (St. Martin's, 2016), readers cannot help but notice the monovocal treatment of what is very much a collective enterprise. For this music, in particular, an effort to harmonize many narrative voices is not only a historiographic method, but also a testament to the musicians' efforts to unify their many voices each time they entered into spaces of collective improvisation.

If Jackson and Gans's book is a model example of how one might compose a history that is at once likely to engage popular audiences and useful to the interdisciplinary researcher, Ulf Olsson's *Listening for the Secret: The Grateful Dead and the Politics of Improvisation* illustrates something else: how aspects of that history can be read as the subject of extended scholarly inquiry. As mentioned above, scholarly presses have been releasing books about the Grateful Dead for almost two decades, but Olsson's book is the first monograph about any aspect of the group issued by a university press, and it is likewise the first volume in the University of California Press's newly-launched Studies in the Grateful Dead series. The University of California is central to Grateful Dead studies in several senses, not least in that UC–Santa Cruz has, since 2008, housed the band's archive (excepting audio and video materials) under the curatorship of Nicholas Meriwether, who also serves as editor for this series. Olsson's book has much to recommend it, but this reviewer wants first to note what is perhaps the major difficulty it poses: as anyone with any knowledge of the band recalls, they adamantly disavowed any interest in or commitment to politics. They were at pains to establish that any causes they supported, with the possible exception of the Black Panthers, were apolitical. Those unfamiliar with the band may expect them to be of a piece with the 1960s left, but they found it tiresome at best, and often downright dangerous. Famed radical Jerry Rubin, for example, sounded to them nearly "fascistic" at points (McNally, *Long Strange Trip*, 179). At the same time, they professed no sympathy for the other end of the political spectrum: in their eyes, Reagan's America appeared "a rabid dog ... biting itself in the leg" (Olsson, 76). Indeed, Garcia repeatedly declared not only the band's distrust of authority, but also their unwillingness to take on the mantle of authority themselves, as when he stated, "Our trip has never been to go out and change the world," and continued with the question, "I mean what would we change it to?" (Olsson, 76). Because they resisted advocating for particular political positions, their social circles, coverage in media outlets, and fanbase were welcoming to all persuasions: one reads of them chatting with Huey P. Newton one day and hanging out with the Bohemian Club the next; likewise, ardent fans can be found at almost any point on the political spectrum, from Ann Coulter to Al Gore. To be fair, there are some exceptions: the sharply critical lyrics of "U. S. Blues," "Ship of Fools," and "Throwing Stones" come to mind, as does the monumental requiem for King Faisal of Egypt, "Blues for Allah." But, such songs are more the exception than the rule, and a book on the band's political identity needs to establish clearly and early how it will proceed given their declared disregard for the overtly political. Unfortunately, this difficulty is one that Olsson does not address until his second chapter, more than a third of the way into the book. The long delay leaves the reader wondering how the band's pronouncements can be reconciled with the intentions of the scholarly text at hand—a discomfort that should be alleviated much earlier.

Aside from this problem, which is basically just one of organization rather than a fundamental conceptual flaw or research error, the volume is strong. Olsson's argument is that the Dead are not at all apolitical, but practitioners of a politics that creates community on terms that are the equivalent of those governing musical improvisation—not entirely directionless or formless, but adaptable, continually renewable, and encouraging to unfamiliar voices. These qualities describe, Olsson contends, both the group and its fans, as a collective and as individual subjects. Consequently, the band's music does not merely articulate cultural conditions, but constructively negotiates, and often resists, the ideological and material dominants of their time. The argument unfolds across three long chapters. The first considers the "dialectic of tradition and avant-garde" in the music (21). While rock is a well-established and relatively limited idiom, the Grateful Dead's incorporation of unstructured or unconventionally structured components deriving from their familiarity with innovations of contemporary composers and the boundary-pushing playing of free jazz artists means that the unaccountably sublime finds a home in their work, in pieces like "Space," "Feedback," and the portions of songs like "Dark Star" and "Playing in the Band" that drift free of harmony and tonality. For Olsson, the tension in the Dead's

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music between the familiar conventions of popular music and the “dislocation and displacement” of free improvisation is a means to preserve opportunities for critique within the framework of mainstream music, paradoxically finding normative terms for staging anti-hegemonic positions that model and suggest the value of an unconventional political position.

Olsson’s second and third chapters look more closely at the nature of these anti-hegemonic positions. After a sensitive and complex consideration of the band in relation to late-twentieth-century drug culture—including not only mainstream culture’s attitudes to drugs, but also commentaries from an array of critical theorists—he proffers a most incisive insight that builds on a passage from Jacques Rancière: the Grateful Dead and the community that surround them translate aesthetic apprehension of freedom and equality into practical terms for social life (72). When turning more directly to the political import of improvisation, he draws heavily on Derek Bailey’s taxonomy of improvisational modes, focusing especially on the critical function of free improvisation. One of the strengths of Olsson’s book is his acknowledgement that later bands who practice advanced improvisation within the rock idiom share much with and can help illuminate the Dead’s work. This recognition allows him to situate his remarks on the value of improvisation within context provided by the always-articulate Kim Gordon (whose former Sonic Youth bandmate, Lee Renaldo, is a professed fan of the Grateful Dead), one of whose assertions cited by Olsson echoes Garcia’s interest in failure as a kind of beauty. Gordon, like Garcia before her, suggests that the presence of the imperfect in an improvised passage speaks to the power of destruction, which sets itself against the conventional in a fashion that threatens the coherence of all wholes, including especially that of the metaphysical subject. Building on these insights from Bailey, Garcia, and Gordon, Olsson argues that improvisation’s aversion to closure necessarily resists commodification: one sells products, not something in development, and, like all radical improvisation, the Grateful Dead’s music (like Sonic Youth’s) remains forever unfinished, self-critical, and outside capitalist production’s temporality of completion and conclusion.

Ultimately, then, Olsson’s argument advances a consideration of how an aesthetic activity proffers itself as a model for the political. As he asserts in his conclusion, this model is one that valorizes diversity and possibility, a politics of “*happening*” rather than one of self-replication (129). In this sense, Olsson’s study is not only an inspiring model of interdisciplinary research in that it brings together the political and aesthetic under the umbrella of critical cultural theory, but also in that he has selected a subject that interrogates itself, refusing, like any good interdisciplinary study, to accept that any one perspective will reveal anything resembling the best understanding.

While Olsson’s book undertakes an inquiry that demands he consider the Grateful Dead’s entire career, Peter Connors’s *Cornell ’77* takes the opposite approach, focusing on the significance of a single performance. On May 8, 1977, the Grateful Dead played a concert in Barton Hall, on the campus of Cornell University. Fan surveys have for many years ranked this among the greatest nights of their career, an assessment that was celebrated by the nation when it was added to the National Recording Registry of the Library of Congress in 2012 and by the band when it was released as part of the *Get Shown the Light* box set in 2017 (the *Cornell ’77* book was packaged in the box with the audio recordings, but is also available separately). There are a host of reasons that this show has garnered plaudits, but Connors’s book is not just a collection of encomia. Rather, it supplements praise with a wide-ranging consideration of the performance’s context, demonstrating how one preternaturally good evening can be viewed as a microcosm of the Grateful Dead as a musical unit and cultural phenomenon. In so doing, it demonstrates one of the great virtues of interdisciplinary scholarship: the recognition that multiple approaches can illuminate a single object of study in mutually-reinforcing ways that yield a result greater than the sum of the parts.

After opening with a brief autobiographical narrative, Connors turns in one of his most insightful chapters to the strange presence of the Dead in the musical landscape of 1977. As he explains, their music was certainly not of a piece with the year’s pop pabulum, and it was in many ways the antithesis of punk. Other than punk, the primary underground alternative of the mid-1970s American music scene was disco, which had been

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growing in popularity for several years, but had largely been confined to loft parties in New York City (it would explode into national awareness late in 1977, upon the release of *Saturday Night Fever*). In many ways, the birth of disco was akin to that of the Dead: both subcultures foregrounded the use of psychedelics, made space for alternative lifestyles, and viewed dancing as central to their celebrations. Unlike the Dead, disco would soon go mainstream, in a manner Conners asserts is similar to the “code switching” that disco’s original fans—those marginalized due to sexual orientation or race—needed to practice in order to coexist with the rest of America in the 1970s (18–20). This is a provocative point, and one that the reader of *Cornell ’77* might want explored in more detail. The Grateful Dead would, after all, enjoy massive popular success in the late 1980s, and one wonders what makes their version of underground culture so different from that of disco parties during the early- and mid-1970s. Any listener can hear musical differences, or see contrasts in fans’ dress, speech, and dancing styles, but one feels here the lack of scholarly clarification of more fundamental cultural distinctions. Unfortunately, Conners ends his point without elaboration, simply asserting: “However, the Dead weren’t disco” (20).

In succeeding chapters, Conners looks at a variety of other factors in a more illuminating fashion, including local contexts for the May 8, 1977, concert, from the unusual weather (snow in May) to the shaky relations between the student-run Cornell Concert Commission and the university administration following destructive rioting at a CCC-organized concert by ZZ Top and Deep Purple in 1973. Another interesting section concerns the place the recording of the Cornell ’77 concert had in the collections of many fans. Because the quality of the recording was higher-than-usual and because it was widely disseminated among listeners, it was better known than many other shows that were musically strong but less available. Conners uses this observation as a way into consideration of recordings of the band, by fans and by the band itself. This inquiry allows something of a history lesson, stretching from the earliest days of experimentation with recording equipment to the massive “Wall of Sound” amplification system the band designed and used in 1974, through the performing hiatus of 1975 and the return to the stage of 1976 and 1977. It includes as well a chapter on Betty Cantor-Jackson, the recording engineer whose tapes of the band (the “Betty Boards”) are widely regarded as exceptionally superb recordings of live music, although the history of their preservation is one of nearly scandalous neglect. Yet another chapter summarizes assessments of the Cornell ’77 concert by many of the best-known writers on the band, such as McNally. At the heart of the book are two chapters that offer comment on each song played at the concert, illuminating their histories and particularly notable qualities on May 8, 1977.

For the interdisciplinary researcher, the many components of Conners’s book are collectively a strong example of how any rich object of study profits from examination from a variety of approaches. His synthesis of arguments regarding recording technologies, campus politics, pop-cultural history, and musicological aspects of the Cornell ’77 concert demonstrate not only its importance to the history of a rock band, but also the necessity of considering the way that the performance was shaped by the many contextual elements that have contributed to its legendary status. This broad consideration of so many factors also provides a more general lesson about how one concert can serve as a valid subject for apprehending the constellation of features that shape reception of aesthetic activities in general. In so doing, this book models the manner in which interdisciplinary research can facilitate what Wolfgang Iser—following Wilhelm Windelband—asserts is a particular strength of interdisciplinarity: its potential to recognize the degree to which the “idiographic component” of an individual case implies certain knowledge at a more general, “nomothetic” level of validity (see Iser’s “Interdisciplinary Cases and Disciplinary Knowledge: Epistemic Challenges of Interdisciplinary Research” in *The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity* [OUP, 2017]). When taken in hand with the strongest non-academic publications on the Grateful Dead, and with other scholarly publications on the band, such as Olsson’s monograph, *Cornell ’77* serves in a similar but more extensive fashion: readers encounter in these books examples of the growth of interest in a particular subject matter, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the patterns that shape the first steps toward a new field of interdisciplinary inquiry.