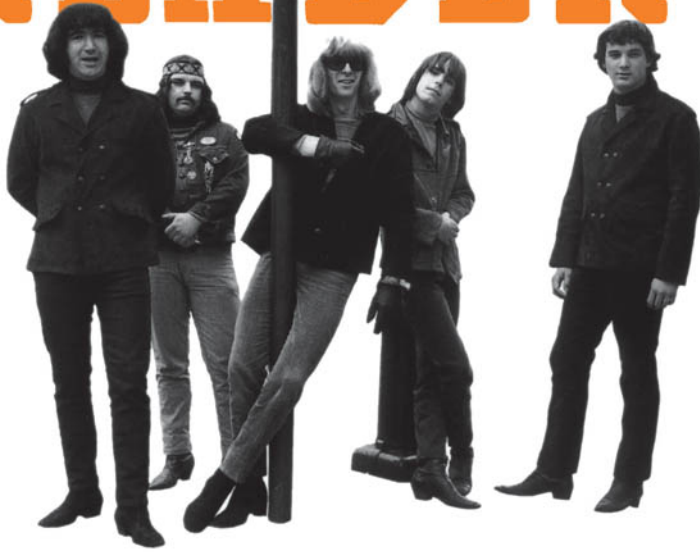

THE GRATEFUL

DEAD

READER



EDITED BY DAVID G. DODD AND DIANA SPAULDING

The Grateful Dead Reader

READERS ON AMERICAN MUSICIANS
Scott DeVeaux, Series Editor

The
Grateful Dead
Reader

Edited by David G. Dodd
Diana Spaulding

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**To the Pseudo Brothers: Eugene Grealish, Doug Kaplan,
Michel Welmond, and in memory of John Green.
Thanks for the education!**

-DD

To David: For sharing his passion.

-DS

“I know this song it ain’t never gonna end.”

–Robert Hunter, “Ramble On Rose”

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Editors' Prefaces

"What a long, strange trip it's been."

There. I said it. Spoken plain in that way, alone and out of context, this phrase sums up the entire media perception of the phenomenon of the Grateful Dead. But there's more in this tiny sentence than meets the eye.

First, it's a line from the most autobiographical of Dead songs, "Truckin'," written in 1970 by Robert Hunter and the rest of the band to reflect on what was already a "long" history, making it a legitimate statement *by* the band *about* the band. Years of being on the road—years that were to stretch out farther than anyone could have reasonably predicted at the time—had already begun to seem like an eternity when the band was only five years old.

Second, individual Deadheads may have highly personal associations with the line, so that when sung in a concert situation it could suddenly take on an immensely charged collective meaning or set of meanings. Each concertgoer's long trip, depending on the miles traveled to reach the venue, or the particular substances that listener may have ingested, is evoked. Hearing the line, the listener may think about a particular psychedelic experience or, simply, the course of one's life. It may evoke, for some, the psychedelic era as a whole—the collective post-LSD experience of Western Culture—or, more broadly, the Beat tradition in which the Dead squarely placed themselves (with its continent-crisscrossing narratives), or the twentieth century, or the entire evolutionary history of the planet. All long, strange trips.

The phrase was lifted and used as the title for so many articles and books (and for a greatest hits album of the Dead's music), as well as for many a cleverly turned take-off phrase, during the subsequent three decades, that it is now, truly, a cliché. Hunter himself has been accused of having used a cliché in writing the line! It is, perhaps, the single most widely integrated

contribution of the band to the culture at large, corresponding to, say, "To be or not to be."

How many times did the Grateful Dead sing this line in concert over the years? (For it was a collectively sung line, not belonging to any particular vocalist. I can see, in my mind's eye, Phil Lesh stepping to the mike to join in singing this line, even during the late '70s, when he rarely sang at all; and I, ever the romantic, imagine the drummers shouting it from behind their drum sets.) Well, as a matter of fact, that number is probably available by now, thanks to the existence of *DeadBase*, that authoritative statistical handbook of all things Dead. Certainly the song was performed well over 500 times.

But I guess the reason I wanted to start this book with the line is that it represents the power of words to summarize, to really *get at* things that do not readily lend themselves to verbal expression at first take. Song lyrics, in the hands of Robert Hunter, become empty vessels into which the listener can pour personal meanings. Was it Elvis Costello who said that "writing about music is like dancing about architecture," with the implication that such an enterprise was foredefeated? (Remember, Robinson Jeffers pointed out that even those, such as architects, who work in stone are "foredefeated challengers of oblivion.") Perhaps it's true, but there are some wonderful writers who give it their best shot, and who's to say that a talented dancer could not communicate something of the essence of a great building? (Remember Jeffers's grudging admission that "stones have stood for a thousand years / and pained thoughts found the honey of peace in old poems.") The pieces in this book have been chosen for their ability to capture, to evoke, and sometimes even to explain something about the unexplainable phenomenon of the Grateful Dead.

Over the past couple of years, I have tried to read everything written about the Grateful Dead—first, as a means to the end of assembling a comprehensive bibliography of these writings, and second, out of a deep attachment to words and to the music of the Grateful Dead. The bibliography is done, and what remains is the belief in the power and ability of words to communicate, at least occasionally, something of the magic of the Grateful Dead. Some of the magic stems from the music itself, some from the surrounding context, some from the personalities of the band's members, some from the words of the songs they sang, and this anthology is an attempt to serve up the best of the attempts to capture those elements over the past thirty years. The writers range from those celebrated on the main stage of American writing to those known only to the relatively small group of Grateful Dead aficionados, the Deadheads.

There are some unifying characteristics that underlie the writing through-

out this book, owing to the writers' efforts to capture the band's performance qualities. First is the use of "randomness," in the sense of mixing up the narrative flow on purpose—note, also, the frequent use of the word *random* throughout the various pieces in the anthology. Another characteristic is the constant search for a metaphor to capture the band's playing. These metaphors range from "like a river" to "like a crazed square dance" to "ground zero in a nuclear explosion" to "the answer to the atom bomb." And last, I would point out the use of the word *meditation* in the titles of several of the excerpts—as well as a general meditative flow to a great deal of the writing. These writers are not just writing about music, they are pondering.

The bibliography I compiled with my co-author, Rob Weiner, comprised entries for well over four thousand individual articles, books, papers, and other written works relating to the Grateful Dead. Here, we present forty. Hard choices had to be made, and there is no way to be certain that what is represented here is necessarily the "best." Indeed, some works of very high quality are left out because they are readily available elsewhere. Some that are readily available elsewhere are here because they are singular in their ability to convey some aspect of the Grateful Dead experience. I suggest that this book be taken as one possible starting point among the many available. Certainly, much more will be written as time goes by and as the band itself fades into dimmer memory—in the words of Robert Hunter, "melt[s] into a dream."

I would venture to generalize that all of the writing about the band falls into three categories: writing from *within* the band itself (this would include everything from liner notes, to press releases, to the lyrics of the songs themselves), writing by mainstream or professional journalists, and writing by Deadheads for other Deadheads. This anthology tries to present some of each but definitely leans toward the work of professional journalists (with the largest representation coming in the form of professional journalists who are Deadheads, such as Blair Jackson and Steve Silberman, but who write for a larger audience).

If the Grateful Dead experience was rooted in the Acid Tests, and in the psychedelic adventures of the early days of the band, so too was the early journalism that chronicled the era. Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* set the standard for writing that embodied, echoed, and embraced the "swirl" of the times. William Craddock chronicled the era in what some say is the "best Hippie book." Ed McClanahan's article for *Playboy*, combined with his examination of the lyrics to "New Speedway Boogie," is an excellent example of gonzo journalism, in which the writer is a primary subject and character in the story.

From the mid to late 1970s, the Grateful Dead were largely ignored by the mainstream rock press, and indeed by the nation at large, while they continued to build their fan base and write songs and record them on albums that sold moderately well while drawing faint-praise-damning or outright hostile reviews.

One way in which the Dead built their core fan base was through a wonderful newsletter that was mailed to the Dead Heads mailing list and that contained poems, stories, and even occasional news about the band, written mostly by Hunter, Garcia, and Alan Trist.

Rolling Stone magazine gave the Dead an occasional blurb in "Random Notes": but 'round about the late '70s, something happened that made several writers take notice: the Dead were still playing. Amazing. And they seemed to have become a kind of backroad traveling circus, drawing adventurous souls out on the road and continuing to attract new, young fans. Writers like Charlie Haas and Lee K. Abbott wrote about the phenomenon. And in the early '80s, Blair Jackson wrote a book about the band and founded an elegantly produced "fan magazine" (though *The Golden Road*, as it was called, looked nothing like any other fan magazine ever produced, except perhaps *Dance Index*). Other books followed, aimed at the large Deadhead market, while the band that had never had a top-ten hit continued to tour relentlessly.

Then: the unexpected. In 1987 "Touch of Grey," a catchy Garcia/Hunter tune, *did* hit the top ten. A wildly popular video dominated MTV. Deadheads were amazed--this song had been around for *years* before it was finally recorded. What was all the fuss? I recall being gratified at the recognition, but worried at the same time. During my college years, I had been impressed by a bathroom graffito: "Good Deadheads don't proselytize." And now, new Deadheads were crawling out of the woodwork. The crowds grew quickly, and the backroad circus hit the interstate, with the Highway Patrol in hot pursuit. The press coverage swelled, books proliferated, and it became impossible to get a ticket.

The market for Deadhead-oriented writing gave rise to five major fan magazines: *Relix*, *The Golden Road*, *Dupree's Diamond News*, *Unbroken Chain*, and, in England, *Spiral Light*. The most serious of these was *The Golden Road*, which was co-edited by Blair Jackson and Regan McMahon, both professional journalists who produced the magazine as a labor of love. Jackson's writing, in particular, has always been the most clear-sighted, well-informed journalism one could hope for from someone who is a rabid Deadhead.

Upon Garcia's death in 1995, a vast new ocean of ink was spilled, and several good pieces were included in the waves of obituaries, reminiscences, feature stories, and opinion pieces. Several are presented here because of their quality of summing up, of truthfully weighing, the meaning of the artist's life.

For me, and for countless others, a world without Garcia, and without the Grateful Dead, is a world lacking the possibility of ever again experiencing quite the same level of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual ecstasy all at once. Which makes the world a little more difficult to bear. But I am so glad to have been on that ride...

David Dodd
Capitola, California, and Singapore
1998

For me the Grateful Dead represent a cultural enigma that I will never quite come to terms with. My co-editorship of this anthology was an attempt to understand the wonder that has inspired not just these authors but so many of my friends and acquaintances, and especially my husband David. I suppose the time has come to admit the horrible truth: I am not a Deadhead. There, I said it and it doesn't seem so awful. It was only after meeting David in 1990 that I even went to a show; and I only went to two altogether. Still, I do love the music.

I hope that others who are curious about the band and the subculture or who want to understand what their friends are reminiscing or raving about will pick up this book and become enlightened. Maybe I'll even catch an "Other Ones" concert myself in the years to come.

Diana Spaulding
Capitola, California, and Singapore
1998

Note: Headnotes written by David Dodd.

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Introduction: Gathering the Sparks

Steve Silberman

There's a wonderful poem by Denise Levertov that describes a series of religious paintings, each presenting an image of God that differed from all of the others. The poem ends by suggesting that *all* of the artists were accurate, and that only in the presence of *all* of the visions—together—are we closer to comprehending the whole that inspired them all.

I feel that way looking through this book. Writing about music is tricky business. If the music is very good, the writing tends to sound lead-footed and foolish soon after it's written, while the music endures to speak to each generation with a voice that seems perfectly fitted to the times. That's what makes it painful to read the liner notes on the back of old jazz albums—the poor authors are blurred by the myopias of the historical moment they're writing in, while the playing soars above the humble circumstances in which it found itself born into this world.

The best writing in this book, however, sees past its occasion. There was something about the Grateful Dead that made writers want to reach beyond the syntax of their times, to weave of language a ghost trap for something ineffable, something that seemed important. An imperative something that ruled out pretense: "No time for poetry but exactly what is," as Kerouac wrote. The words in these pages are charged with an intensity of purpose that has served the authors well.

Starting from the earliest accounts, it's amazing how much of what the Grateful Dead would be for so many people, through many different eras, was evident from the beginning. From William Craddock's description of Jerry Garcia's "explosion of discord made harmonious by the suspension of time"

to Tom Wolfe's utterly strange (and right) image of "a lightbulb in a womb," the Dead's signature juxtaposition of the marvelous and the terrifying, the absurd and the sublime, presents itself.

Sure, the Dead had the misfortune to come of age in interesting times (to paraphrase an ironic Chinese blessing); but even if the entire electric Kool-Aid mythosphere hadn't been spun around them by Wolfe and hundreds of other commentators and footnoters on the Haight-Ashbury "scene," their larger-than-life-ness would still have been hanging around, a side-effect of the scale of the music itself, making it hard to see the Dead as they saw themselves—as working musicians.

It's that tension between what the fans hungered to see and how acutely the musicians were aware of their shortcomings and humanity that makes for some of the funniest moments in this book, especially in the interviews with Garcia and Robert Hunter and in Ed McClanahan's and Charlie Haas's portraits of the band members' facing off with the odd characters who would inevitably find their way backstage. As much as the music could be glorious and subtle (or volcanic and primordial), there was always a whiff of scrofulous, priapic Coyote Old Man malingering behind the altar and guzzling from the communion cup, to keep things from getting too precious.

It's that spirit in these writings that should keep this from being a book to evoke pious nostalgia, a yearning for the time when Ye Olde Grateful Dead trod the boards, plucking the tunes of yesteryear. Deadheads were sent to jail for insisting on freedoms they claimed as their birthright (many are still incarcerated as I write this); the only fitting tribute to the ecstatic moments recorded here is to act with as much hope, as much abandon, and as much faith as possible that, with craftiness and joy, you can build a bridge to an order beyond planning and naming—and love will see you through.

Love.

Near the end of his life, another poet, Ezra Pound, wrote: "What thou lov'st well remains, the rest is dross." The *Grateful Dead Reader* is a chronicle of loving well, whether it's Garcia, falling under the spell of the tale-spinning improvisations of old-time fiddle player Scotty Stoneman ("I just stood there and don't remember breathing"); Jack Britton's friend Carp, rapping about "the swirl" ("the thrill of spontaneous creation and total propulsion into the unknown"); David Gans, transcribing his mindstate at ground zero in the Phil Zone ("now I try to keep moving through the fiery bubble of it, solving riddles and posing thoughts"); Paddy Ladd, releasing his heartbreak and frustration during the Dead's last tours after Brent Mydland's death ("something deeper than music has left with his passing, some elemental reality of the fundamental pain of real life and the possibility of transcending it by facing it, at least

onstage"); and finally, Hunter, left alone on Earth, crafting for his best friend a gift of poetry to outlast the dust ("May she bear thee to thy rest. / the ancient bower of flowers / beyond the solitude of days. / the tyranny of hours").

For Deadheads, loving well was one way of participating in the mystery. Or is it the way the mystery participates in us?

For many who danced in that place that the music seemed to reveal, the Dead arrived in their lives with an uncanny familiarity, like a true love. Perhaps love is how we learn to recognize those around us, like Levertov seeing the divine in all those faces of the sacred.

From that fire, these sparks.

Steve Silberman
Brooklyn, New York
October 1998



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*“Get Prepared,
There’s Gonna Be a
Party Tonight!”*
Carving Out a Territory
1967-1974

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