

Matthew Tift
University of Wisconsin-Madison
“Grateful Dead Musicking”
Toronto 2000: 6 November MM

DO NOT QUOTE WITHOUT AUTHOR’S PERMISSION

@All rights reserved by author

Although the Grateful Dead are found in the *Guinness Book of World Records* under the category “most rock concerts performed,”¹ they never repeated a setlist. In fact, they played more than 2,000 shows from 1965 to 1995 – the year the Jerry Garcia died and the Dead disbanded - and every one of them was a unique process. The Grateful Dead are known for their extended jams, unpredictability, eclectic influences, and their propensity to entice the “hippie subculture,” a.k.a. “Deadheads.” However, few analysts have the tools to describe the remarkable musical relationship between the Grateful Dead and Deadheads. In fact, only a limited number of scholars consider the endlessly fascinating musical practices of the Grateful Dead. My broad aim is to show one way of “connecting” the Grateful Dead and Deadheads.

My point of departure is Christopher Small’s 1998 book, *Musicking*, in which he challenges the dominant Western idea of music as a thing and explores the idea of music as an activity. “To music,” according to Small, “is to take part in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance . . . or by dancing.”² Drawing from Small’s theory of musicking, I suggest a theory of one “style of musicking,” (*M*, p. 136) “Grateful Dead musicking,” or “GDM.”³ I posit a metaphorical arrangement of activities in one space: activities that can be described both collectively and individually as Grateful Dead musicking.

Small’s theory draws largely from his readings of the English anthropologist Gregory Bateson. Bateson’s theory of “connectivity” has an obvious presence in *Musicking*, which is largely about relationships. Small writes (my emphasis):

Each individual mind, each set of processes of giving and receiving information as it goes on within each individual living creature, may in itself be simple or complex, but it is at the same time a component of the larger and more complex network. Bateson calls this vast network “the pattern which connects” because it unites every living creature with every other, *some intimately*, some remotely, but not one excluded from the pattern. (*M*, p. 53)

Although an infinite number of activities can be described as GDM, I am interested in this “intimate” network. I will discuss GDM by dividing it into three different - sometimes overlapping - types: first-set GDM, second-set GDM, and supplementary GDM. My goal is not to explain *what*

¹ *Guinness Book of World Records 1998* (Stamford, CT: Guinness Publishing, 1997), 182.

² Christopher Small, *Musicking* (Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1998), 9. Hereafter abbreviated *M*.

³ Small has mentioned various kinds of musicking in other places. For example, Small uses the phrase “European musicking” (50) in his 1987 book *Music of the Common Tongue*. In a 1995 lecture at the University of Melbourne, he said that there are “thousands of different kinds of musicking.” Likewise, in *Musicking* he mentions “Western musicking” (151, 152) and “serious musicking” (*M*, p. 212). Because Small has mentioned these “sub-types,” I feel that “Grateful Dead musicking” is one relevant extension of Small’s inquiry.

the so-called Grateful Dead experience means. Rather, I explore two broad questions: *How* did the so-called “Grateful Dead experience” mean? *How* did meaning change?

Although Grateful Dead songs did not have an archetypal model, songs performed in the first set were generally shorter, more “conventional,” and less “exploratory” than the songs in the second set. Small notes, “Performance does not exist in order to perform musical works, but rather, musical works exist in order to give performers something to perform” (*M*, p. 8). In the first set, the Dead often followed the musical work more closely. Songs in the first set were akin to songs that the Dead recorded in the studio.

I will play a brief excerpt from a studio version of the Dead’s “Uncle John’s Band” as an example of first-set GDM. Although not what we might call “perfect,” the harmonies are reasonably tight and the musical idea is uncomplicated. It has conventional harmonic progressions, clear cadences, and a strong sense of dominant and tonic. My point is not to show that this is simple musicking. Rather, I am trying to provide something to which I will later compare second-set GDM. First, however, I want to discuss the role the audience played in first-set musicking.

Small states, “performance is the primary process of musicking” (*M*, p. 113). Although the Grateful Dead were performing, they were not the only ones musicking, even in first set. For example, the people dancing in the audience were part of the process. The person running the lights was part of the GDM. The drummers and dancers assembled in “drum circles” in the parking lot and in the halls of the show were musicking. All of these activities contributed to the “pattern that connects,” a space that I am calling Grateful Dead musicking.

Another section of this “de-centered” space, which included activities unlike “traditional” Western musicking, was second-set GDM. In the liner notes to the album *Infrared Roses*, released in 1991, producer Bob Bralove writes:

Somewhere in the middle of the second set of every Grateful Dead show the band turns a corner. They enter a musical environment without walls or structure. The song form is abandoned, and the very element of music may be called into question. The only mandate is to explore new territory. It is . . . a musical adventure where composition and performance are one.⁴

Bralove’s description is an accurate summary of the second set, which normally contained longer jams, a wider harmonic vocabulary, and exploratory sections called “Drums” and “Space.”

Shank and Silberman’s *Dictionary for Deadheads* says the following about “Drums”:

[It is] percussionists Hart and Kreutzmann’s opportunity . . . to explore the Zone . . . [a] state of being to which bandmembers and the audience “travel” together when the music is [*sic*] most intense, exploratory, and collective . . . [During Drums,] Hart raises his mallets before striking the big drum, encouraging the audience to send up power to the stage.⁵

They mention an explicit connection between the Grateful Dead and the Deadheads. Like some other rock bands, the Dead have a special relationship with their fans. Now I would like to play two excerpts from live performances of Drums to help illustrate its diversity. The first one was later titled “Parallelogram” by longtime Dead lyricist Robert Hunter.⁶ Notice how audience sounds are

⁴ Grateful Dead, *Infrared Roses*, Grateful Dead ® Productions, Inc. GD CD4014.

⁵ David Shank and Steve Silberman, *Skeleton Key: A Dictionary of Deadheads* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 21, 72, 336. Hereafter abbreviated *DD*.

⁶ *Infrared Roses*.

mixed in before Hart “strikes the big drum.” The second excerpt, “Speaking in Swords,” is more reliant on digitized sounds.⁷

Drums often led to Space. The *Dictionary for Deadheads* describes “Space” as “the freeform musical conversation by guitarist and keyboardist.” The Dead’s relationship with the audience was not the only relationship that contributed to Space. Shank and Silberman write,

Though the inspiration for the Dead’s extraterrestrial excursions is usually traced to free jazz (like Ornette Coleman and Sun Ra), the Dead’s ventures into the swirl were also inspired by the tape music experiments of Steve Reich, Musique Concrète, the compositions of Karlheinz Stockhausen . . . Béla Bartok, and . . . Charles Ives. (*DD*, p. 266-267)

This part of the show was clearly influenced by their relationship with numerous 20th-century musicians. For example, Steve Reich was a “former schoolmate and a friend” (*DD*, p. 197) of Dead bassist Phil Lesh. Lesh and Constanten studied with Luciano Berio at Mills College. John Cage was another influence. When Dead drummer Mickey Hart was asked in a 1996 interview if John Cage was an influence on Space, Hart replied, “Absolutely. He was the influence on everything.”⁸ Jerry Garcia and Mickey Hart even sent Cage a tape of their music for his 75th birthday. Cage wrote back and said, “Thank you very much, I took your two minute tape and played it back at half-speed. It was beautiful, it was marvelous, thank you so much - John Cage.” Hart told Garcia, “Jerry, he just cut up our work and played it back at half-speed.” Jerry smiled and said, “Yeeaahhh ... John Cage!”⁹ Clearly, the Dead’s relationship with these people influenced their performance.

However, we must not forget the audience. During Space, musicking in the audience regularly affected the musicking on stage. Small says,

Musicking is about relationships, not so much about those which actually exist in our lives as about those that we desire to exist and long to experience: relationships among people, as well as those between people in the rest of the cosmos, and also perhaps with ourselves and with our bodies and even with the supernatural, if our conception of the world has room for the supernatural. (*M*, p. 183)

The extent to which the audience physically or spiritually affected the musicking on stage is not clear, but during this part of the show, we start to see why many Deadheads see themselves as “the 7th band member.” Next, I will play a piece called “Riverside Rhapsody,” which illustrates one example of the Dead moving from a song to Space. It was common for the end of one song and the beginning of the next song to be unclear. Thus, one motive could be seen as a middle, an end, or a beginning. I will first play the “end” of the Uncle John’s Band that I played earlier, followed by the “beginning” of “Riverside Rhapsody.”¹⁰

All of the examples that I have played thus far are examples of first-set or second-set Grateful Dead musicking. However, what happens when they release a piece called “Crowd Sculpture” that sounds like this? The sounds you are hearing are not coming from the stage, they are coming from the parking lot. This piece is perplexing: Is this the Dead’s version of Cage’s 4’33”? Is the band assigning “power” to the audience? “Crowd Sculpture” is a musical product. It is a piece recorded on this CD - I am not denying that. We could ask, what does “Crowd Sculpture” mean? However, the interesting question is, “how does it mean?” How does it strengthen the relationship between the Dead and the Deadheads? I suggest that “Crowd Sculpture” was a musical “event,”

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ http://hotwired.lycos.com/talk/club/special/transcripts/96-09-11_hart.html

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *Infrared Roses*.

produced by audience musicking, related to the “event” produced by the band’s musicking, which were both burned onto this CD. Both of these musical events were generated from Grateful Dead musicking - they extend GDM, make GDM socially significant, and interact with our GDM.

There are many kinds of supplementary GDM, some more “intimately” related than others. When bands, like the Dark Star Orchestra, recreate actual Dead shows they are involved in a kind of GDM. Singing “Uncle John’s Band” in the shower is also GDM. Even wearing a tie designed by Jerry Garcia could be GDM. The possibilities are virtually endless. Additionally, there are many questions regarding the “limits” of GDM: What activities are *not* GDM? Was there Grateful Dead musicking before the Dead? Can listening to Mozart be GDM? Although I have thought a lot about these questions, I have tried to focus on what Bateson called the “intimate pattern.”

There is, coincidentally, a relationship between Gregory Bateson and the Grateful Dead. Bateson was a pivotal player in secret government experiments with mind-altering drugs, such as LSD. In the 1960s, Bateson introduced various figures in the Dead’s history, such as Beat poet Alan Ginsburg, to cybernetic experiments in California where they were given drugs free of charge. Correspondingly, original members of the Grateful Dead were “turned on” to various psychedelic drugs courtesy of the C.I.A and, in part, Bateson. I do not know if Small is aware of this relationship - it is not relevant to his study. Nevertheless, I point this out not only because Bateson’s philosophy informs this inquiry, but because it is possible that the Grateful Dead influenced Bateson’s way of thinking. One can only speculate the limit to these “intimate relationships.”

Critics of this study might suggest that the relationship between the Grateful Dead and the Deadheads was not any different from the relationship between any band and its most devoted fans. However, how many bands are legally linked to the actions of their fans? On the final page of his extensive legal examination of the relationship between the Grateful Dead and Deadheads, Adam Kanzer concludes, “The Dead Heads, in fact, may be considered part of the band’s expression itself. Without the Dead Heads, there would be no Grateful Dead.”¹¹ What Kanzer goes to great lengths to “prove,” is something that Deadheads and the Grateful Dead have known for a long time: the Dead and the Deadheads needed each other, and they were both part of a larger symbiotic “pattern that connects,” which was and continues to be full of meaning.

¹¹ Adam M. Kanzer, “Misfit power, the First Amendment and the Public Forum: Is there Room in America for the Grateful Dead?” *Columbia Journal of Law and Social Problems* 25 (1992): 565.