

"PLAYING IN THE BAND": THE GRATEFUL DEAD AND "MUSICKING"

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In his 1998 book, *Musicking*, Christopher Small challenges the dominant Western idea of music as a thing and explores the idea of music as an activity. "To music" (or its gerund form, "musicking"), 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 (what is called composition), or by dancing" (9). Although Small's book examines the relationship of the activities that contribute to a symphony concert and their influence on individual and social identity, his study can serve as a model for other scholarly research, such as this look at Grateful Dead musicking. (According to Small "the added *k* is not just a caprice but has historical antecedents" [9].)

Drawing from Small's new approach to music as an activity, this paper investigates the musicking that contributed to Grateful Dead concerts. Tape trees, touring, illicit drugs, dancing bears, and Deadheads, in addition to the band itself, all contributed to Grateful Dead musicking; the intricate relationships between these activities defined musicking at

Grateful Dead concerts. After defining Grateful Dead musicking, I will examine how this, in its current form, which includes Internet surfing, sharing recorded tapes, and buying Jerry Garcia ties, continues to influence other kinds of musicking. This new approach, by focusing on the rituals (actions) associated with Deadhead culture, will help to elucidate why the Grateful Dead inspired a truly sui generis way of musicking.

Before taking a closer look at musicking, it is important to note *why* this study is important. Although many people talk about "the Grateful Dead experience," I think that my term "Grateful Dead musicking" or "GDM" is more appropriate because it is "rooted in music." Whether or not one can "experience" the Dead today is debatable. However, anyone can take part in GDM. GDM until Jerry Garcia's death was different from today's musicking. Christopher Small states that "performance is the primary process of musicking" (113). Since the idea of GDM is rooted in performance, the activities that occurred on the stage were obviously the most important aspect. With this assertion I am by no means attempting to negate the worth of the music (sounds) produced by the band. The activity of performance was more important than any *thing*, but many other activities contributed to this experience and can be linked to the activities of the band using one word: musicking.

Further examination of musicking shows us that although defined by individuals, it is a "highly social experience" (Small 136) and that looking only at the "performance" aspects does not tell the whole story. Regarding the Acid Tests, Garcia maintained:

The Test would start off and then there would be chaos. Everybody would be high and flashing and going through insane changes during which everything would be demolished, man, spilled and broken and affected, and after that, another thing would happen, maybe smoothing out the chaos, then another, and it'd go all night long. (Lydon 28)

The Acid Tests were one place where the term musicking has an obvious use. The Tests were about much more than just listening to music. The formlessness of this event was, in some ways, akin to performances of the aleatoric works by John Cage. Garcia said that "there was no pressure on us because people didn't come to see the Grateful Dead, they came for the Acid Test; it was the whole event that counted." He continued, "we weren't required to play anything even acceptable. We could play *whatever* we wanted" (Trager 6). At some points they would play and then they would just stop playing and possibly start again. Similarly, but more simply, Small noted a "meta-narrative" that exists in any novel, play, piece of music, etc.:

Order is established.
Order is disturbed.
Order is reestablished. (160)

Small and Garcia both point to important facts about musicking of any kind: there is an ebb and flow. To help discuss these changes that occur in GDM, I will expand the typical idea of a performance and describe the components of a Grateful Dead concert using four categories: composition, anticipation, performance, and post-performance. These divisions are not absolute, but will rather serve as general guidelines to discuss the various aspects of this new idea. (A look at all of the aspects that contribute to GDM would be impossible, so I will limit the number of examples that I use.)

Composition marks the beginning of GDM. Musicking can take many forms, but GDM can only be songs performed or composed by the Dead. An examination of the processes of composition is often overlooked. Garcia noted that composition was not something that he particularly enjoyed. He said:

I don't wake up in the morning and say: "Jeez, I feel great today. I think I'll write a song." I mean, *anything* is more interesting to me than writing a song - "no, I guess I better feed the cat first" You know what I mean? It's like pulling teeth. I don't enjoy it a bit. (Henke 248)

Whether or not Garcia, Weir, Hunter, etc. enjoyed composition is not as important as realizing that it was the beginning of GDM. New composition obviously does not play a role in today's GDM,

although arranging is an activity that is related to composition and helps us understand the traditional musical elements in a performance.

For the Grateful Dead, the written composition does not necessarily dictate the music played, in other words, the sound is by no means an exact replication of the composition. The following is a look at an arrangement of "Uncle John's Band" - which could be substituted with myriad other songs performed by the Dead. It is in the traditional chorus form with an introduction, a chorus, and verses. It uses *conventional* harmonic progressions with a strong dominant - tonic relationship. We also see a *formulaic* compilation of *basic* melodic patterns. *Conventional*, *formulaic*, and *basic* are not words that one would normally use to describe the Grateful Dead. Yet anyone with even some familiarity of music theory could acknowledge that the arrangement is not unique. (The words that accompany the music are of a completely different nature and an in-depth discussion of their meaning, historical significance, and symbolism, is beyond the scope of this essay.) A basic knowledge - as described above - of the "musical product" of composition is critical in understanding GDM and is another often overlooked aspect of Dead research (*i.e.*, most book-length discussions of the Grateful Dead

are of a biographical nature). Since the score to "Uncle John's Band" does not fully illustrate GDM, we must look elsewhere.

Whereas the usual influential suspects for "Uncle John's Band" include country Western, bluegrass, Greek-Macedonian musicking, or even the Bulgarian Women's Chorus (Trager 381), let us not forget the audience. Garcia said that this song was "a *major effort*, as a musical piece. It's one we worked on for a really long time, to get it working right." Although Garcia was probably referring the band, the "we" might include far more people than Jerry was thinking about at that moment:

John Barlow, a philosophe in cybernetic circles, who cofounded the Electric Frontier Foundation, subscribes to a theory of "creative synergy" whereby listeners who participate intensely in a creative process modify it in some fundamental way, not just themselves individually but collectively, for the group. It's a popular theory among Deadheads who see themselves as the "seventh band member." (Brightman 149)

I am not necessarily implying that there was something transcendent about a Grateful Dead concert (which might have been the case for many listeners) or the song "Uncle John's Band," but rather as the song was performed from place to place, the audience also participated in its composition. Small has much to say about the various worlds in which musicking can take place. Here is an example:

Musicking is an activity by means of which we bring into existence a set of relationships that model the relationships of our world, not as they are but as we wish them to be, and if, through musicking we learn about and explore those relationships, we affirm them to ourselves and anyone else who may be paying attention, and we celebrate them, then musicking is in fact a way of knowing our world - not that pre-given physical world, divorced from human experience, that modern science claims to know but the experiential world of relationships in all its complexity - and knowing it, we learn to live well in it. (50)

It was, perhaps, the "human experience" - the various levels of the relationship - between band members and the audience that made "Uncle John's Band," or maybe for some, those relationships influenced how they remember "making it." The degree to which audiences influenced the early stages of the song, before it was performed, is more difficult to describe. But as we look at the different versions of this work and GDM, it is important to realize the audiences' contribution to the many activities that comprise musicking.

Is there an extant "product" of the efforts of the Band members? The score may only *show* us five (or maybe seven) distinct chords, but recordings tell us a different story. The version on the album *Skeleton's from the Closet* (one of more than a half-dozen released albums that feature this song) follows the version in the *Grateful Dead Anthology* (56-62) closely, although the guitar embellishments, percussion, and (at times, advanced) vocal

harmonies are not notated. Live concert recordings that feature this song - such as those at Fox Theater, Atlanta (5/19/77), Folsom Field, Boulder, CO (6/8/80), or Boston Garden, Boston (9/28/93) - include longer instrumental sections and a broader harmonic vocabulary. In a concert at Jai-Alai Fronton in Miami, FL on 23 June 1974, we hear the Dead perform "Uncle John's Band," with a length of almost eight minutes, whereas the version on the *Skeleton's from the Closet*, also from 1974, is almost five minutes. The live version is longer, but not as long as other live versions. The form is the same, as expected and the extra time is a result of longer instrumental solos.

Depending on the placement in the program, "Uncle John's Band" normally lasted between six (see, for example, 2/18/71, Capitol Theatre, Port Chester, NY; 4-29-71, Filmore East, New York, NY; and 10-31-70, SUNY Stonybrook Gymnasium, Stonybrook, NY) and nine (see, for example, 6-8-90, Cal Expo, Sacramento, CA; or 9-18-74, Palis de Senne, Paris, France) minutes. According to *Deadbase X* (Scott), there were more than 300 performances of this piece. Any of the innumerable concert recordings of live performances from the fall of 1969 to the summer of 1995 tell a similar story - yet both the studio versions as well as the live concerts are undoubtedly products of the Grateful Dead indicating to what degree GDM can fluctuate. A look at other works shows us

an even larger variation from studio to concert, with pieces lasting three or four times longer. These variations on the composition show us how much the composition is influenced by other musicking.

There are numerous comparisons between GDM and other musicking that is heard on tapes and seen in the notation. Using traditional musical analysis, other comparisons of GDM - recorded or live - are possible with bluegrass, country Western, blues, jazz, American folk, and other rock and roll musicking. With the Grateful Dead, live versions are normally (almost without exception) longer and more repetitive than studio versions. By Timothy Johnson's credible definition, some live versions actually employ a minimalist technique. Johnson's criteria of "continuous form," "repetitive rhythmic patterns," and "simple (often diatonic) harmonic materials" (770) is heard in most live performances. But, the likelihood of anyone (familiar with the Dead) confusing "Uncle John's Band" with Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* or Reich's *Different Trains*, for example, is not likely. Richard Middleton, in his highly important book, *Studying Popular Music*, points to the reason for any confusion:

Common-sense criticisms of the prevalence of repetition in popular music usually derive from a specific analytical error: a particular conventionalized proportion of repetition to non-repetition is naturalized; most popular music is then said to transgress this norm. (268)

Because GDM contains repetition does not make it unique since all of the above-noted styles of musicking are sometimes described as repetitive.

Traditionally, Western thinking, teaching and conversing in music circles places much emphasis on the "product" of composition. We musicologists learned from our first music theory and music history classes, instrument lessons, etc., that the written product is a sort of puzzle filled with secret messages to be found, labeled, and codified. Thus, when we encounter scores of Debussy we are not sure how we can categorize them: Are they tonal? Are they formulaic? Was he informed by the past? When we look to John Cage or La Monte Young we do not really know how it fits into even our most "advanced" ideas about music. As we have seen, there are similar problems found when looking at the musical "products" or compositions by the Dead. It is easy label the chords and discuss the musical structure if we look at the published score, but that tells us little about GDM. Maybe it tells us as much as it does about Debussy musicking or even Mozart musicking. The published version of "Uncle John's Band" contains obvious similarities to other musics, however, it is important in distinguishing GDM from other kinds of musicking to

examine the other activities that make GDM unique. Now that we have noticed the similarities, we can continue.

Composition leads to performance, but before performance, there is anticipation. The first kind of anticipation is that of the performers. Small says that "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" (183). Both performers and listeners enter a musicking experience with goals and expectations. When Jerry Garcia picked up his guitar, tuned, and started warming up, that might have marked beginning of his musicking experience. It might have started when he woke up anticipating that night's concert. It was individual. Wherever it started for him was not certain, but it likely occurred long before the beginning of a performance. This anticipation stage is musicking as much as strumming an "Am" chord on a guitar.

This pre-performance (anticipation) period for some musicians is very difficult. I am not sure if members of the Grateful Dead needed to read *The Inner Game of Music*, wherein Barry Green discusses some of the mental obstacles that all musicians must face on some level. (A 1993 article in *The New Yorker* mentioned, for example, that Garcia "still has bouts of stage-fright" [Barich 262].) His book, based on W. Timothy

Gallwey's book, *The Inner Game of Tennis*, uses the following formula:

$$P = p - i$$

P is performance; *p* equals potential; and *i* is interference (12). Green discusses strategies - that seem to help many musicians - whose goal is raising the "level" of performance, P. P, nevertheless, is only one part of musicking. The formula for GDM might look something like this:

$$\text{GDM} = P + \textit{listeners} + \textit{dancers} + \textit{stage crew} + X$$

But there is no simple formula for GDM because it changes as we change and X can be literally anything else. Borrowing Middleton's description of popular music, musicking is "not of a monolithic bloc but of a constantly mutating organism made up of elements which are symbiotic and mutually contradictory *at the same time*" (38). Unlike Green's formula for performance, which has an upper-limit ("potential"), the formula for GDM does not; after X one could include Y or Z or beyond. The musicking formula at any concert is determined, in part, by the anticipation, which has another form.

The second kind of anticipation is that of those surrounding the performers; there is no performance without listeners.

Driving to a concert to see the Grateful Dead, listening to a

concert tape in the car, or singing with friends might be the beginning to this experience, and may or may not have the same effect on the individual as watching the actual performance.

However, listening is not always an easy part of GDM; Green, for example, did not write *The Inner Game* just for the performer, it is also intended for the listener:

Listening to music seems as if it should be the simplest thing in the world, but it often isn't. It can seem difficult because we don't understand the "language" the music is speaking; because we are "listening in the wrong place," trying to find feelings "outside us" in the music when they have been inside us all along; because we bring expectations with us that aren't satisfied; or simply because we're distracted by the people around us. (143)

One distinct difference with GDM from the examples above is that everyone is capable of understanding the "language." The Dead did not preach elitism and GDM is not a special musical language understood by a select few that have attended X number of concerts. Green touches on many good points relevant to musicking. The "language" of the music, the past experiences with the musicking, if any, and those around us, distracting or not, all contribute to our anticipation. When Deadheads or others went see a Grateful Dead concert, there was anticipation. Maybe what they experienced was not what they expected or maybe the experience exceeded the expectation; these expectations certainly influenced their reactions, which might have included dancing,

singing, or screaming. As these responses - the listener musicking - changed, they likely contributed to the "feel" of the performance for all of those around them.

This brings us to the third part of the musicking experience: the actual performance. Small writes: "performance does not exist in order to present musical works, but rather, musical works exist in order to give performers something to perform" (8). The performance is perhaps the most obvious part of the equation for GDM because our traditional ideas about music are founded on performance of some kind. Many times, when referring to performances of "popular music," critics will note its "accessibility." Because of the assumed accessibility, it is easy to draw hasty conclusions. However, the performance is a dynamic experience. Middleton warns against looking only at *connotation*:

Much popular music analysis, commentary, and criticism are marked by a "rush to interpretation," centering usually on the area of *connotation*: the feelings, associations, evocations and ideas aroused in listeners by songs. This is a pity, for at least two reasons. Semiotic theory emphasizes that connotation is always built on a prior system of denotation; it is secondary. Moreover, while there is no doubt that most music does give rise to connotations in most listeners, there is good reason to believe that semantic processes more directly tied to syntactic structure are particularly important in music. The temptation to skate over this level, often founded on the assumption of the syntactic impoverishment of popular music, should be avoided. (220)

As I noted earlier in this paper, the Grateful Dead worked hard on composition. Discussions that focus only on "feelings" and do not mention the musical syntax do not the Dead's work justice. Contrariwise to Middleton's description, Bill Barich's ideas assumed a musical value based on connotation:

In the end, it seemed to me, that the Dead's success isn't really mysterious. They work hard and enjoy what they are doing. They never underestimate their fans, and give them full value for their dollar. People are delighted to go to a concert and return home knowing that they got more than their money's worth. (270)

Barich might not assume a complex musical structure, but acknowledges the hard work of the Grateful Dead. His postulation is based on more than musical syntax, in part because he recognizes the other factors that contribute to GDM.

Middleton reminds us that "verbal translations of musical thought and feeling, while unavoidable and not entirely invalid, are problematic." Small "translates" at least one part of the "musical thought and feeling" that is a by-product of GDM with the following assertion: "Those who take part in a musical performance are in effect saying - to themselves, to one another, and to anyone else who may be watching or listening - *This is who we are*" (134). Each concert attended, each tapes played, each album purchased, each sticker placed in a window or on a bumper,

all contribute to who we are. The "musical thought and feeling" is unique to each of us. However difficult interpreting the connotations may be, "the belief that music produces sense, or conveys meanings, is unquestioned." The physical response is based not only in the semantics, but also in the "musical 'thought'" and "musical 'language of feeling'" present in every occurrence of GDM (172). Despite difficulties in describing the "feel" of any performance, the existence of an unwritten interaction between the performer and listener is not widely disputed and is another part of GDM.

In addition to the physical and semantic factors, GDM has "structural" influences that contribute to the performance. Small discusses at length the impact that the music building (in this case a concert hall) has, or is supposed to have on the listener. The design of most performance venues suited for symphony concerts, which could also serve as performance venues for GDM, discourage interaction and encourage quiet listening (19-29). Clearly, there are differences between the audience participation at symphony concerts and Grateful Dead concerts - dancing is not normally a part of the symphony experience. Because GDM is unique and the performance was influenced largely by the activities of the audience, DGM continued after the performance,

The last part of the Grateful Dead musical experience is post-performance. When the audience left the performance, but kept singing and being social, GDM continued. Perhaps a student wore a T-shirt from the prior evening's performance the next day and the intense feeling of the performance continued to ruminate. It was at this point where the musicking becomes blurred, but most definitely present. Sharing a tape the next day with a friend who, perhaps, did not see the concert the night before extended the musicking experience - for this new person it might have been a new beginning to the former person's continued experience. This new person was a part of the experience, but on an admittedly different level. The possibilities were virtually endless and were defined by each individual's social experience.

The area between post-performance GDM and today's GDM is not clear. When Garcia died in 1995, GDM changed. Robert Stone says "no doubt the term 'the end of an era' is going to get a workout now" (281). There is certainly something to Stone's idea, but is it an "end"? The "era" of the Grateful Dead sharing their ideas in a live setting might be over, but GDM continues. So what is Grateful Dead musicking today? The composition has stopped, but the ideas continue to spread. The songs of the Grateful Dead continue to be performed, surely, and the recorded sounds continue to circulate (on tapes, the Internet, etc.), influencing

today's musicking. The post-performance aspect of the musicking experience is a large part of today's GDM. Small writes:

Verbal discourses about musicking thus play an important part, not as substitutes for, but as adjuncts to, musical experience; talking about musicking and comparing musical experiences is not only an inexhaustible source of conversational and literary topics but can enrich the relationships which taking part in performance has created. (210)

These verbal discourses continue in many forms and are a part of today's GDM.

The verbal discourses, which contribute to part of today's GDM, are found in many places. The Internet has changed society and the Deadheads have changed with the times. Although some Web sites have remained relatively unchanged or perished with the death of Jerry Garcia, many continue to flourish. Tape trees - complex structures that Deadheads use to share recorded tapes - provide another opportunity for sharing music as well as discourse. Since Jerry Garcia died, there were a large number of books published that dealt with his life and, by association, the Dead. Although often biographical, these books continue to spread the ideas about GDM. Verbal discourses are part of GDM, but there is much more.

There are a large number of bands that modeled their performance style after the Grateful Dead. One of the most

popular bands that is often associated with the Dead is Phish. Although Phish musicking is unique as well, it shares common traits with GDM. Garcia's performances with the Jerry Garcia Band and the other undertakings of the other living members are directly linked to GDM.

After this discussion of what is musicking, an obvious follow-up question would be "what is *not* musicking?" Small maintains that "everyone is born capable of musicking" (210). Musicking is generally limited to those who wish to participate, but in some way, GDM is unlimited. There is no special musicking club, which requires a special skill, knowledge, or way of dress for entry. This idea, alone, fits very well with my understanding of values displayed by the members of the Grateful Dead and thus substantiates this study. The number of tapes that one has in his or her collection or the number of concerts that one has attended does not make a person more or less a part of GDM.

One problem calling something "Grateful Dead musicking" is that it is another attempt to codify something that has resisted description from the beginning. Jerry Garcia said, "Let's have faith in this form that has no form. Let's have faith in this structure that has no structure" (*Wisdom*). Although the term "musicking" challenges traditional ideas about music, it is a useful tool to help bring together the many aspects of the

Grateful Dead. Garcia was probably correct when he said "the Grateful Dead is truly a twenty-four-hours-a-day thing. It doesn't ever stop" (*Wisdom*).

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