

FARE THEE WELL

Fifty Years of the Grateful Dead

Written by Jacqui Ipp



Deadheads "shakin' their bones" at the first run of the reunion at Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, California. Photo © Jacqui Ipp

What a long, strange trip it's (almost) been

When I was a kid in the 1980s, I dressed in tie-dye and ripped jeans. Scarves or flowers crowned my hairline, beads dangled from my neck, and my fingers were adorned with silver and gemstone rings. I listened to the Grateful Dead, Dylan, the Doors, Floyd, Fleetwood, the Stones, Zeppe, Janis, Joni, Joan. I was consistently told I was born into the wrong decade.

But I was born into the right family, one that loves

and cherishes the music of the 1960s. My brother, eight years my senior, had a profound effect on my musical education, and helped me tumble down the rabbit hole of rock and roll adoration I have not risen out of to this day. While Bob Dylan was my hero, my guru, my poet, I would get lost in Grateful Dead lyrics that told kaleidoscopic stories of colorful characters, as the addictive melodies soothed me, made me think and sent a warm rush through my blood flow. It's hard to

describe, but it's one of those things—if you know, you know. And if you don't, you definitely don't.

Because of our age difference, while my brother was gallivanting from one Grateful Dead show to the next, exploring the music, his adolescence, the depths of his soul and, on occasion, the outer limits

“Returning to the place it all ended was something I could not, and would not, let pass me by—even if getting a ticket would be like finding a stick of deodorant in a drum circle.”

of his mind, I was not allowed to tag along. While I romanticized what it would be like to come of age in the 1960s, on a more obtainable level, I just wanted to be a part of this fascinating scene, this tribe, this magnificent musical-cult-family adventure my brother and his friends were so deeply enveloped in. I wanted to experience it in my own lifetime, outside of my Walkman.

In the summer of 1995, I had finished my first year of high school and just turned 14. My “innocence” was fading, and my brother decided the time was right to expose me to “life on tour.” After months of persuading my parents, he finally convinced them to let me go with him to my first Grateful Dead show.

The anticipation was overwhelming. Every long, hot, lazy teenage summer day passed by like a slow train to nowhere at the northern Ontario summer camp where we were staying, and brought me one day closer to what I envisioned would be a phenomenal, life-changing journey.

August came and we were just days away from our departure to Rich Stadium in Buffalo, NY when the devastating news arrived: Jerry Garcia, the lead singer, the band's spiritual center and musical soul, had died.

I would never see a Grateful Dead show.



*Such a long time to be gone,
and a short time to be there.*

Fast forward to January 2015. Rumors had been brewing for months about the possibilities of a Grateful Dead 50th year anniversary concert. What would they do? Who would they be? Where would they do it?

And then a video message from Trixie Garcia—Jerry's daughter—plus articles in Billboard magazine and just about every newspaper from here to Timbuktu confirmed that the surviving “core four” members of the Grateful Dead—Bob Weir, Phil Lesh, Mickey Hart and Bill Kreutzmann—would reunite for the last time at Chicago's Soldier Field for three concerts, dubbed “Fare Thee Well: Celebrating 50 Years of Grateful Dead.” Bruce Hornsby, Jeff Chimenti and Phish frontman, Trey Anastasio, would join the band from July 3 to 6 to memorialize the 50th anniversary of the band's birth in San Francisco, and the 20th anniversary, almost to the day, and on the same field, of their final concert with Garcia. Like in the days of old, tickets could be requested by mail order, and would be given out on a first-come, first-served basis followed by an online Ticketmaster sale weeks later.

The complicated mail-order process involved: having your envelope postmarked no earlier than January 20, filling money orders for multiple amounts ranging from \$95- \$215— as well as the differences between the amounts—to ensure your best chance at getting a seat in one of several tiers, including a self-addressed, stamped envelope and an index card with the dates you wished to be in attendance, your personal information, and your first choice of ticket price and seating section. Lastly, in honor of tradition, everyone was strongly encouraged to decorate his or her envelope.

Despite the fact that the band's remaining members have been playing on and off in their own bands for decades now, keeping the Dead catalogue of music alive and well, their seemingly eternal followers, young and old, went ballistic with excitement over the prospect of returning to the “scene,” and lined up at post offices everywhere to send in their mail orders. The old “I Need a Miracle”

ticket mantra went rampant across social media. Deadheads posted a petition on Facebook asking Soldier Field authorities to allow them to park their cars and/or camp out in the parking lot for the weekend so they could find their miracle, or at the very least, to just get closer to the music...and the party.

While I will always have a sort of ingrained pang that I will never see Garcia in the flesh—or see the real Grateful Dead live—I have had ample opportunities to see the surviving members in the Dead-esque bands they have formed since his death, as well as a few instances when the “core four” played together. That a massively magical element is missing never escapes me, but I have still been able to dance, sing, and be wrapped in the warmth of the Dead's music, played live, in this community I dreamed of being a part of as a child. Returning to the place it all ended was something I could not, and would not, let pass me by—even if getting a ticket would be like finding a stick of deodorant in a drum circle.

I made it to the North Berkeley post office on January 20, the first day the mail-order ticketing opened, with two and half minutes to spare before closing time. The three rows of lines, each with its fair share of long-haired, bearded, patchouli-scented senior citizens in tie-dye T's, merged into one line right out the front door. “Oh, fuck,” I mumbled to myself, perhaps not as quietly as I had intended.

When I finally got to the front, I requested my money order and frantically asked if it would be mailed today. “If you mail it before 5, it will,” barked the tall, handsome postman, who wore a name tag that read “Big Dog.” It was already 5:01. I fumbled with the calculator on my iPhone trying to add, subtract, and divide while my brain did somersaults about the baffling amounts I would need per money order.

“You have less than 30 seconds,” Big Dog said in a more than annoyed tone.

My hands were shaking my neon, color-crayoned envelope, where I had drawn Jerry's face surrounded by Dead Roses, Jerry Bears and Dead lyrics. It was sort of eye-catching, but

also sort of looked like something I might have drawn with my left foot.

"You and everyone else in here with your bright, happy envelopes and confused money order requests," Big Dog said, partly irritated, partly sympathetic, and partly amused at my overwhelming sense of desperation. "Everyone wants tickets to see the Grateful Dead today. I've had just about enough Deadheads I can take for one day."



The music never stopped.

The Grateful Dead formed in the Haight-Ashbury district in San Francisco in 1965. They played free shows in Golden Gate park by day, the Avalon Ballroom, the Matrix, the Fillmore and Winterland by night, for a few dollars a pop, and were the house band at Ken Kesey's Acid Tests at the dawn of the psychedelic era. They quickly became one of the most iconic symbols of the Northern California hippie movement, and together with their convoy of Deadheads, who followed them relentlessly, formed a cultural phenomenon, an unstoppable legacy that continued long after they lost Garcia, after the band disbanded and their original universe broke into several other Dead-ish planets.

But not all of their fans support this eternal tour idea—and the 50th reunion is a case in point. Some are thrilled, while others roll their eyes in disdain. "Let me tell you what it was like at the Fillmore West in 1970," says Joel Selvin, rock columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle from 1970-2009, who covered the Grateful Dead in great depth throughout his career, "when they played until 4:00 in the morning because they just didn't know when to stop and everybody was high on LSD. I mean everybody. Everybody on stage, everybody backstage, everybody in the audience. Talk about a musical social laboratory—the experiment was on, everybody was a willing participant."

Selvin, who first saw the band in 1967 outside Berkeley High School, says as the band became more mainstream, the music became more "codified," and as Jerry got more and more ill, "They got a lot less interesting."

While each of the remaining members pursued their own projects post-Jerry,

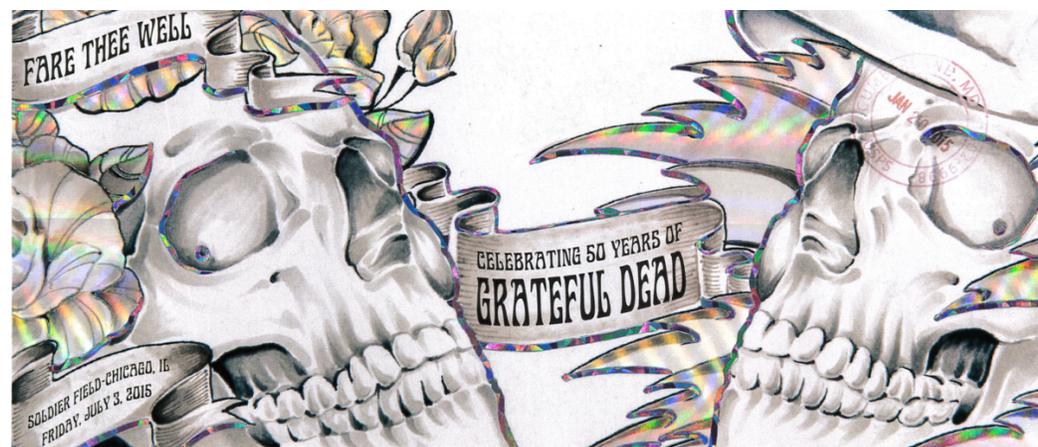
they kept joining forces in small combinations. In 2000, all four surviving members got back together as the Other Ones, playing their same old songs in their same old trippy way. They disbanded again, then changed their name to simply the Dead and came back for another go in 2009. Again, it didn't last long, and the musicians returned to their own Dead-ified projects.

As for the 50th anniversary, Selvin says: "Why? Answer: \$3 million. Period. Paragraph."

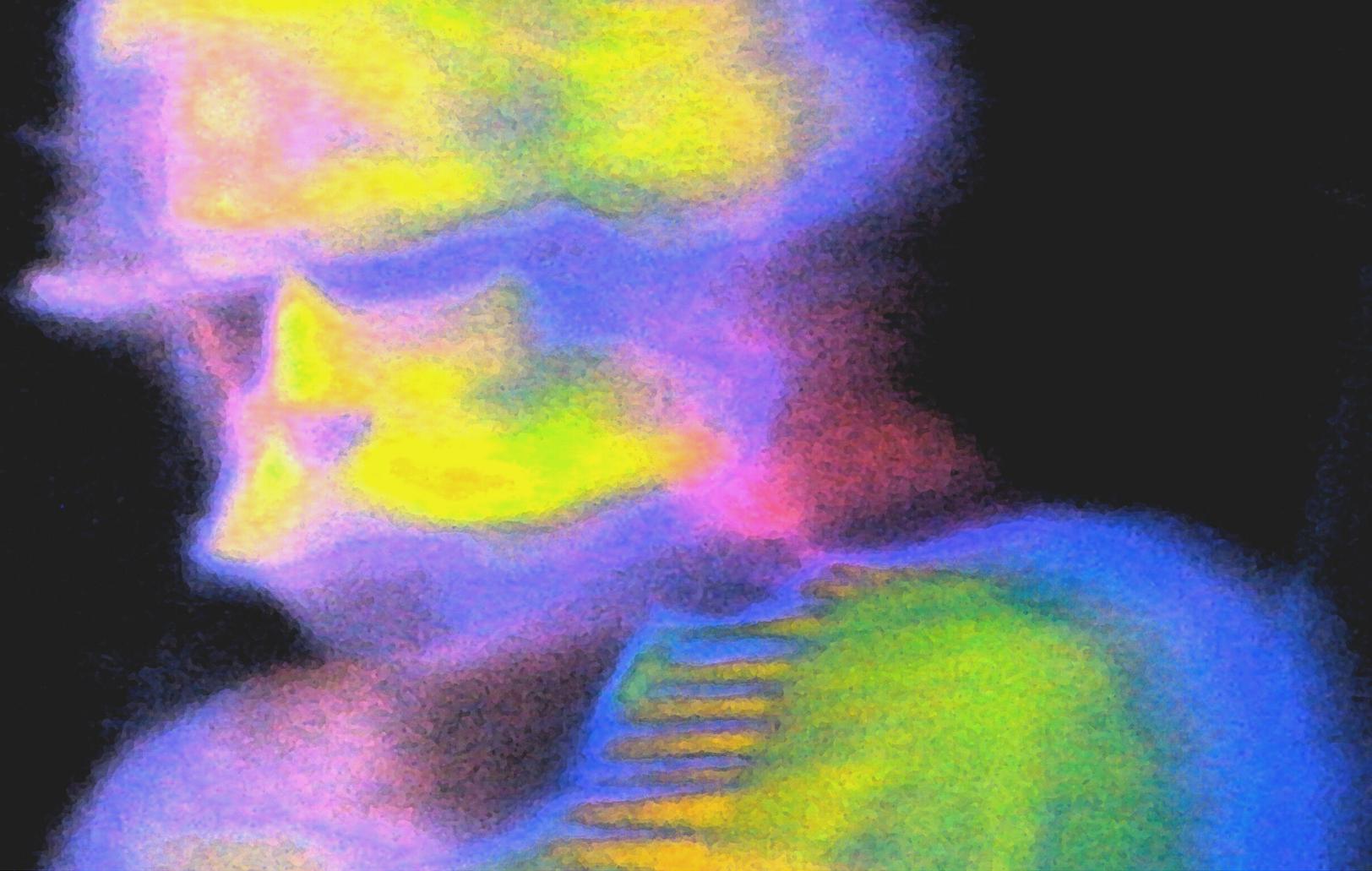
"They hate each other," Selvin continues. "They can't get along, they don't care about the fucking music. 'Oh, we're in it for the music, brother?' Well, if they were in it for the music, they'd be at Golden Gate Park doing it for free, which is what

would be happening if Jerry Garcia was still alive and if the band was still together." His voice is heavy with scorn. "So, I'm completely unimpressed with this on every level," he says. "On a professional level: nice gig. On a socio-cultural level: money grab. On a musical level: empty. Emp-tee."

But for the Deadheads, each of these reunions and new formulations gives them a chance to gather and hear the music that has become part of their very being. "My baseline feelings about the Grateful Dead experience can be summed up in a phrase I heard loudly uttered, basso profundo, by someone in the audience during a pause in the music at a Winterland show circa, I don't know, 1974, to wit: 'EVERYTHING MORE NOW!'" says Burr Snider, who succeeded in



One of the three concert ticket designs for Chicago's Soldier Field shows



Grateful Dead founding member, rhythm guitarist and vocalist, Bob Weir, in the groove. Photo © Jacqui Ipp

scoring reunion tickets. Snider has seen hundreds of Dead shows since his first in 1972, and as a music critic did extensive interviews with Garcia, Weir and Hart. "This instantly became my life's mantra, my working philosophy and my daily aspiration, and I'll always thank those boys and the marvelous give-a-fuck culture they engendered for that. And when I say 'give-a-fuck' I mean about everything but the music, which was their only god."

Die-hard Heads say that if you like the band, you love them. It's something that stays with you, by you, and inside you for life. "I truly believe that us Deadheads have this special DNA that's built into our souls," says long-time rock photographer Jay Blakesberg, "It's a special DNA chip, a special psychedelic DNA chip that makes us want to tap into and experience that lifestyle, be a part of it."

Blakesberg first saw the Grateful Dead in 1970 and says the experience changed his life. He was a 15-year-old from suburban New Jersey who went to see the Grateful Dead and took some LSD shortly after. The combination of the two "blew my mind and made me want to

experience more," he says. "And as I did, I found other like-minded individuals that became my friends and my family."

Blakesberg travelled with this "family" and got to experience the "bliss that rock and roll provides us," he says. "Live rock and roll isn't for everybody. It takes a special, unique individual to enjoy and love that lifestyle and make it an important part of your life. We're not casual fans."

As for the farewell shows, Blakesberg says, he doesn't see them as a wake or a funeral, but a celebration. "I think that the band's lyrics and music have touched people in a very unique way," Blakesberg says. "A large percentage of Deadheads have never stopped experiencing the Grateful Dead zeitgeist after Jerry died. The 50th anniversary is just a great opportunity for the tribe to get back together and have a celebration. It's not really closure, because all four of those guys continue to play music. Over the years since Jerry has passed away there's been an ongoing, never-ending way for people to celebrate and experience the Grateful Dead's music, so I think this is just one more way."

And fans like Blakesberg argue that much of what fans embraced in the 60s and 70s is now considered ordinary, simply part of liberal culture, but it still resonates with them today. "I think Wavy Gravy said it best: 'The hippies were right,'" says Blakesberg. "You know why they were right? They were right about the food, they were right about the environment, they were right about sustainability, they were right about progressive thought, they were right about women's rights—the hippies were right about all these things at the end of the day. We were even right about which drugs were the good drugs, and which music was the good music."

Like Blakesberg, many others see the value in keeping the music alive, making it accessible to generations that fell in love with the Dead catalogue but missed out on the chance to see live shows in the band's heyday. "I'm about to turn 62, and though I don't play as hard, I still rock as hard. It adds a spring to my step, and reminds me of how fricking old we're getting," says Chris Stanton, a Dead fan whose private and professional lives fused together after he built one of Lesh's homes and remodeled one of Weir's.

"I love seeing the next generations into it. I keep seeing shadows of my old (then young) contemporaries at the shows. The Dead and their fans are an extremely important counterbalance to the soul-flattening power of the rational, literal, greedy TV-driven dominant culture [we now live in]." And then there are people like Selvin, who argue that the Grateful Dead's music matters much more than the touring culture fanatics built around it. The band has a substantial body of music and they've made an important contribution on that level, Selvin says. He recalls how in the course of an evening the Dead would touch on influences ranging from Ornette Coleman to Bill Monroe, Django Reinhardt and Chuck Berry—"and it's a pretty extraordinary template for music which the pop field has kind of narrowed down," he says. "So I have a lot of admiration for what the Grateful Dead accomplished in their career. But as far as this subcultural sort of cult following they created, we never understood it, even back in the 60s."

When the Dead were on a bill, people who didn't come to other concerts would show up, Selvin says, "And they were stinky and would come on public transportation and they danced like kelp in the ocean. They quickly became known as Deadheads, but it was always sort of 'Oooh, look who's here tonight, ugh.'"

Tongue-in-cheek or not, Selvin's stance that the Deadheads ruined the Grateful Dead scene, rather than created it, has comedic value. But he's serious when he argues that the show could not go on without Garcia, and that the band didn't play a single good show even in the ten years before his death. He thinks every incarnation the remaining members have formed since has been "awful," and believes that there was "nothing important" about the Grateful Dead other than Garcia. Although, he adds, "I was one of these old fogies who never thought the band recovered from losing Pigpen." (Ron "Pigpen" McKernan, one of the founding members of the Grateful Dead, died in 1973).



*Fare you well, fare you well,
I love you more than words can tell
listen to the river sing sweet songs
to rock my soul.*

By the time I left Big Dog at the post office, I was hopeful that I might get tickets, yet I knew there was a better chance my mail order wouldn't be filled. But, I did not expect the demand to be nearly as outrageous as it was.

“They hate each other. They don't care about the fucking music...If they were in it for the music, they'd be at Golden Gate Park doing it for free, which is what would be happening if Jerry Garcia was still alive and if the band was still together.”

- Joel Selvin

The Grateful Dead ticketing office in Stinson Beach, California received over 60, 000 letters within 48 hours, requesting over 350, 000 tickets. Soldier Field has a capacity of 61, 500. Quickly, the Dead camp announced that they would no longer be accepting mail order requests, and the Ticketmaster pre-sale would be cancelled. They would re-open a Ticketmaster online sale for a select number of tickets once they determined how many tickets they would have left to release.

And so just a few days after I sent my mail order, the devastating news arrived. "As in days of old," the letter began. "We had an overwhelming mail order response for these shows, and, unfortunately, we are unable to fill your order." Weeks later came the Ticketmaster sale, another catastrophe, which sold out faster than you can say, "I need a Miracle." I didn't get my miracle. Secondary ticket sites immediately started selling tickets ranging from \$400 to one-fucking-million dollars.

Then the band announced two more shows that would take place in Santa Clara, California on June 27 and 28, the weekend before the

finale in Chicago. Tickets were sold by an online lottery. Same shit. No luck.

They announced they'd live stream all five shows on Pay-Per-View through a pre-sale in May offering the webcast for \$79.95. But livestream isn't the same as live.

And so now, although I've seen every reinvention, reincarnation, and redevelopment of the Dead... ..

I will never see a Grateful Dead show.



One of the three concert ticket designs for Chicago's Soldier Field shows