Ensemble Stuff: The Grateful Dead's Development of Rock-Based Improvisational Practice and its Religious Inspiration

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Abstract:
This dissertation examines the Grateful Dead's creation of a distinctively rock-oriented approach to open improvisation in the mid to late 1960s. In the first section of the dissertation, I draw on live recordings, presented diachronically, to examine how the band developed this approach to improvisation. In the second section, I address the issue of why they developed this approach; in so doing, I move from strictly musical to religious concerns in order to demonstrate the fundamentally spiritual impetus that drove the band to devise and devotedly practice such a radical approach to rock playing, in the process linking their religious motivations with similarly transcendence-focused aspirations of other radical improvisers of the 1960s.

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Introduction

"Thirty years ago it was as if rock had tapped into a wellspring where Being gushed forth in a play of light and sound that was free and unnamed and not yet frozen into the forms that history and culture demand … as if [fans] had stepped through a waterfall to behold nothing that could be named, nothing that one could carry back, but just a promise, a possibility, a mystery … Rock insisted that meaning emerges only when we have dispensed with the narrative of coherence."[1]

The Grateful Dead was one of the first rock bands to incorporate the extensive use of improvisation into their musical practice. Along with several other groups that formed in 1965 and 1966—including the Velvet Underground, Pink Floyd, the Jefferson Airplane, and Cream—the Grateful Dead extended the range of rock's improvisational possibilities, creating a distinct approach to playing rock music that emphasized ensemble-based and collaborative spontaneity. In this dissertation, I will be examining their pioneering work on two levels.

In the first part of the dissertation, I will focus on *how* they did it, detailing the performance model that they developed in order to render possible the practice of rock improvisation. In addition to looking at the creation of this model, I will discuss its development and put it into context with the work of several of the Grateful Dead's improvising contemporaries.

In the second part of the dissertation, my focus will be on discussing *why* they chose to develop this unique approach to playing rock music. I will argue that their practice was at least partly inspired by, and was designed to be coherent with, transcendent religious experiences that several band members underwent in 1965 and 1966 under the influence of LSD. The

[1] Nick Bromell, *Tomorrow Never Knows: Rock and Psychedelics in the 1960s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 118-119

Grateful Dead, I will argue, cannot be understood simply as a rock band. They must be understood as a group that was motivated by religious imperatives as well. To bring out the distinctiveness of their religio-musical approach, I will compare and contrast it with several contemporaries who combined religious inspiration with extensively improvisational practice, namely Sun Ra, John Coltrane, and Albert Ayler.

My discussion will illuminate the earliest period of the Grateful Dead, who were one of rock's most popular bands over their thirty-year career. More generally, it will contribute to the exposition of the nature and development of rock-based improvisation, a hidden stream of tradition whose importance is only beginning to be realized. Finally, it will extend our understanding of the ways in which new religious movements operate, and how art and religious revelation can be combined.

Chapter One: A Religiously Motivated, Improvising Rock Band

A *rock* band …

The Grateful Dead were a San Francisco-based rock band whose career lasted 30 years, from their formation in 1965 to their breakup in 1995 following the death of lead guitarist and vocalist Jerry Garcia (1942-1995). In this dissertation, I will be discussing the first decade of their existence, from their formation in 1965 to 1974. The band took most of 1975 off, only returning to full live performing activity in 1976, and thus 1974 provides a logical break in the band's career and has been treated as such by fans and scholars. When the band returned to activity in 1976, they deemphasized the open improvisation that had been a characteristic of their earlier years. Both because of the break and the change in emphasis, 1974 is a natural place to break off my work. As well, my focus in this work is on the band's development of new, rock-derived methods of improvisational playing. Their fundamental work in this regard was complete by the time of their break from performance.

There are suggestions that the band was exploring new improvisational possibilities in 1975. Speaking of their earlier improvised music, Garcia noted that "we used to rehearse a lot to get that effect. It sounded like chaos, but was in reality hard rehearsal. So the thing is, we need the stuff that lets us play at that edge of chaos, but doesn't require rehearsal, dig? …The next level of development was when we went to *Blues for Allah*. There, we came up with some very interesting, *other* alternate ways to invent openness that would be developmental as well."[2] As Garcia goes on to discuss in this interview, one other way of "inventing openness"—used in their song "Blues for Allah"—involved holding chords and gradually, incrementally and freely changing them so as to cause them to transform into different chords and melodies. This approach, however, was not one that the band pursued, and indeed would have worked

[2] Blair Jackson, *Going Down The Road: A Grateful Dead Traveling Companion* (New York: Harmony Books, 1992), 10.

against the band's professed desire (and economic necessity) to provide music for ecstatic dancers.

Garcia, drummer Bill Kreutzmann (b. 1946), rhythm guitarist Bob Weir (b. 1947), and bassist Phil Lesh (b. 1940) were members of the band for its entire career; second drummer Mickey Hart (b. 1943) joined in 1967, left the band in 1971, and then rejoined in 1974. The Grateful Dead changed keyboard players repeatedly: in the period that I will be discussing, their keyboardists were Ron "Pigpen" McKernan (1945-1973) who played with them from their founding until 1972; Tom Constanten (b. 1944) from 1968 to 1970; and Keith Godchaux (1948-1980), who played with the band from 1971-1979. Donna Godchaux (b. 1947) sang with the band from 1972-1979.

The Grateful Dead's music showed the influence of many styles of North American popular music, including folk, rock and roll, rhythm and blues, and jug band music. Their music of the mid- to late 1960s can be seen as prefiguring heavy metal and hard rock in some regards, due to its volume and use of distortion; much of their music from 1969-1971 could be described as "roots rock" or "country rock," linking them with contemporary trends in rock music; their early 1970s music could be linked to jazz-rock such as that being produced by Miles Davis.

The Grateful Dead were known for being one of the pioneering "psychedelic" bands, a band whose music was intended to express and induce altered states of consciousness and became inextricably associated both with the hippie movement of the late 1960s and the drug LSD. They rose to prominence as members of the San Francisco music scene of the mid- to late 1960s, a scene that also included such bands as Quicksilver Messenger Service, Big Brother and the Holding Company, and the Jefferson Airplane.

Throughout their career, and particularly during the period under discussion, the Grateful Dead were committed to live performance; their records sold respectably but they did not have a real hit until 1987's "Touch of Grey." Rather, their reputation was built around their shows, which were known for extended improvisations ("jamming").

During the period under discussion, the Grateful Dead released a number of live and studio albums, including *The Grateful Dead* (Warner, 1967); *Anthem of the Sun* (Warner, 1968); *Aoxomoxoa* (Warner, 1969); *Live/Dead* (Warner, 1969); *Workingman's Dead* (Warner, 1970); *American Beauty* (Warner, 1970); *The Grateful Dead* (a.k.a. *Skull and Roses*, Warner, 1971); *Europe '72* (Warner, 1972); *History of the Grateful Dead, Volume One* (a.k.a. *Bear's Choice*, Warner, 1973); *Wake of the Flood* (Grateful Dead, 1973); and *From the Mars Hotel* (Grateful Dead, 1974).

Over the past twenty years, they have released many more live recordings from that period on their own Grateful Dead record label, including a *From the Vault* series that included three volumes; a *Dick's Pick*s series (named for band tape archivist Dick Latvala) that ran to 36 volumes; a *Digital Download* series ; a *Road Trips* series that summarized tours rather than focusing on individual shows; numerous special collections, such as *Winterland 1973: The Complete Recordings* (presenting the shows played on Nov. 9, 10 and 11 1973 at the Winterland Arena in San Francisco) or the 72-disc (!) collection of the band's tour of Europe in 1972; and, now, a *Dave's Picks* series (named for David Lemieux, who succeeded Latvala as band tape archivist) that seems designed to take over where the *Dick's Picks* series left off.

In addition to these official releases, many of the Grateful Dead's fans were committed to making and circulating tapes of the band's performances. The vast majority of Grateful Dead performances are accessible, in recordings of greatly varying fidelity. These recordings, which originally circulated through "tapers'" networks, can be accessed at the archive.org site. In this dissertation, I deal almost exclusively with live recordings, which I will identify both through references to the collection at archive.org, and through reference to the release that they appeared on, if they have been officially released. My reason for this is simple: I am interested in understanding how the band worked as a group of musicians who were dedicated to real-time, improvisational practice in a rock idiom. Reference to the archive.org collection enables the reader to quickly access the material that I discuss; details about each of the shows that I mention will be given in the bibliography section at the end of the dissertation.

An *improvising* rock band …

"Improvisation," when applied to musical contexts, can mean a great many things. In a general sense, it is often used to refer to music that is marked by the "suddenness of the creative impulse"[3], and improvisation is often contrasted with "composition." However, the "suddenness" of improvisation does not mean that it is ungoverned, for "improvised music is not produced without some kind of preconception or point of departure. There is always a model which determines the scope within which a musician acts,"[4] and the "improvised" aspect of the performance represents the musician's spontaneous negotiation of this model, as the "composed" aspect represents the negotiation of this model that was enacted prior to the performance. Thus in his influential article on the topic, Nettl concluded by arguing that "perhaps we must abandon the idea of improvisation as a process separate from composition and adopt the view that all performers improvise to some extent."[5] The limits and characteristics of their improvisation are determined through the interaction of the performer and the models within which he or she works.[6] Thus improvisation is defined by Nett as "the creation of a musical work, or the final form of a musical work, as it is being performed. It may involve the work's immediate composition by its performers, or the elaboration or adjustment of an existing framework, or anything in between." Improvisation is a universal activity, since "to some extent every performance involves elements of improvisation, although its degree varies according to period and place." Improvisation is always guided by "a series of conventions or implicit rules."[7]

In the work of many of those who study improvised music: there is a strong tendency to leave "improvisation" as a general concept along the lines of Nettl's definition, and to allow its meaning in the specific context to arise through the examination of the musical practice in that

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[3] Bruno Nettl, "Thoughts on Improvisation: A Comparative Approach" (*The Musical Quarterly* 40 [1974]), 2.
[4] Nettl, "Improvisation," in *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, ed. by Don Michael Randel (Cambridge: Belknap, 2003), 406.
[5] Nettl, "Thoughts on Improvisation," 19.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Bruno Nettl, "Improvisation," in *Grove Music Online*, accessed March 8 2014, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/subscriber/article/grove/music/13738#S13738

context. This is the approach taken in works by, for example, Qureshi,[8] Berliner,[9] Jost,[10] Bailey,[11] Porter,[12] Heffley,[13] Borgo,[14] and Malvinni;[15] this will be my approach in this dissertation as well. When I speak of the Grateful Dead or other groups as being "improvising" bands, what I mean to say is that they pursued an approach to music in which aspects of their music were open to in-concert negotiation to a greater and more explicit degree than was the case with the music of most of their peers.

The Grateful Dead were an improvising rock band whose origins are to be found in the earliest years of rock's "modern" period, which can be conveniently, if roughly, considered to have begun with the emergence of Beatlemania in 1963 in England, spreading to North America in 1964. While we can never know exactly what may have been transpiring in the British and North American garages and basements in the first half of the 1960s, it is in late 1965—the period of the Grateful Dead's formation—that extended improvisation by rock-associated bands starts to make its way into the public arena. This period sees the emergence of a number of groups who were well-known for their improvisational approach to some or most of their music-making, with the Grateful Dead being one of them.

The New York based band the Velvet Underground, formed in 1965, became known for its distinctive fusion of pop, pop art, raga-influenced avant garde sonic aesthetics, and the willingness of its members to improvisationally stretch the boundaries of popular music, particularly with regard to timbre and dissonance. Although the band would, later in its career,

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[8]Regula Qureshi, *Sufi Music of India and Pakistan: Sound, Context and Meaning in Qawwali*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).
[9] Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999).
[10] Ekkehard Jost, *Free Jazz* (New York: Da Capo, 1994).
[11] Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (New York: Da Capo, 1993).
[12] Lewis Porter, *John Coltrane: His Life and Music* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1999).
[13] Mike Heffley, *Northern Sun and Southern Moon: Europe's Reinvention of Jazz* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005),
[14] David Borgo, *Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music in a Complex Age* (New York: Continuum, 2005).
[15] David Malvinni, *Grateful Dead and the Art of Rock Improvisation* (Lanham: Scarecrow, 2013).

come a good deal closer to the rock mainstream (in terms of its music, if not its popularity), one thing that never altered was the use of extended, often drone-based improvisation.[16]

In London, meanwhile, Pink Floyd formed in 1964 and discovered the potential of improvisational playing in 1965 during their residency at the Countdown Club.[17] By 1966 the band was playing enormously extended songs for the very first wave of the psychedelic generation of rock fans, although they would replace the Velvet Underground's love of Brill Building-style[18] pop and minimalism with an appreciation for instrumental rock music such as that made by the Shadows,[19] and surrealistic whimsy and science fiction would take the place of pop art in their underlying conception.

Also in the early/mid-1960s, the London-based Yardbirds—at that time known as a rhythm and blues band—had become famous for their "rave ups," instrumental sections of their songs that had the potential for some quite prescient leaps into improvisational freedom. Hicks writes that "the rave-up was a pseudo-double time section with a corresponding intensification of dynamics … the rave-up made a small narrative curve that introduced a basic conflict (backbeats versus offbeats), drove that conflict to a climax (by getting more and more raucous), then resolved it (by returning to a normal beat)."[20] The break in the song "Here Tis" from their *Five Live Yardbirds* album displays the proto-improvisational tendencies of the rave-up quite well; Cutler, an eyewitness to the early British r&b and psychedelic scenes, affirms that

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[16] "Drone" has been defined as "a long, sustained tone in a piece of music …usually pitched below the melody" (Dom Michael Randel, ed., *Harvard Dictionary*, 254). Here and elsewhere, I use the term to refer to single tones that are used extensively and prominently in a given piece of music. Whether or not such tones are literally sounding without change at every second of the piece in question, they do provide a more or less unchanging background to the piece.

[17] Nick Mason, *Inside Out: A Personal History of Pink Floyd* (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 2004), 30.

[18] The Brill Building was located in New York, on 49th street, and devoted many of its offices and studios to the music industry. During the 1950s and 1960s, such songwriters as Burt Bacharach and Hal David, Gerry Goffin and Carole King, and Tommy Boyce and Bobby Hart worked there, and the term "Brill Building" became associated with the sort of sophisticated and professional pop/rock compositions produced by these and other songwriters.

[19] In an insightful essay on the development of British progressive rock music, Chris Cutler points out the importance of such groups as the Shadows, and says "listen for example to the guitar in 'Astronomy Domine' [an early Pink Floyd song]—it could be Hank Marvin [lead guitarist for the Shadows]" (Chris Cutler, *File Under Popular: Theoretical and Critical Writings on Music* [New York: Autonomedia, 1993], 17).

[20] Michael Hicks, *Sixties Rock: Garage, Psychedelic and Other Satisfactions* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 31.

the band's live sets were considerably more improvisational and experimental than the band's recorded legacy suggests,[21] a point seconded by Clayson.[22]

Eric Clapton was the first of the Yardbirds' three influential lead guitarists, the other two being Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page. After leaving the Yardbirds, Clapton formed the group Cream, the first rock "supergroup," in 1966. Cream brought an unprecedented degree of instrumental virtuosity to their blues-rock, which they expressed through lengthy improvisations—although these improvisations were often more "soloistic" and more clearly linked to earlier blues or jazz understandings of improvisation than was the case with the Velvet Underground or Pink Floyd. Cream's enormous popularity and the reputations of the individual members did a great deal to legitimate heavily improvisational playing in rock, although they also served to rehabilitate it, diminishing its radicality and its potential for distinctively rock, egalitarian group improvisation.

Another significant early improvising band, based like the Grateful Dead in San Francisco, was the Jefferson Airplane, formed in 1965, with a musical approach that featured a driving and aggressive take on folk rock, and in which improvisation soon came to play a significant part, both in specific pieces (as for example their early showpiece, "The Thing") and in their general instrumental approach, particularly with regard to bassist Jack Casady and guitarist Jorma Kaukonen.

Extended rock-based improvisation was in the air in this period, and as we will see the Grateful Dead were one of the major bands to participate in its development. Their importance was increased by their longevity. Cream and the Velvet Underground broke up after fairly short careers, while Pink Floyd and the Jefferson Airplane went through dramatic changes in aesthetics and musical approach, effectively (and in the case of the Jefferson Airplane's change to the Jefferson Starship and then Starship, officially) becoming different bands. The Grateful Dead certainly did change musically, but their changes were more gradual, more developmental, than those of the other bands that I have mentioned, and were furthermore

[21] Cutler, *Popular*, 18.
[22] Alan Clayson, *The Yardbirds* (San Francisco: Backbeat, 2002), 62.

supported and integrated smoothly into the group's overall evolution through their dedication to ongoing live performance.

The rock improvisational tradition has never died out, and streams of it are to be found in many of the significant rock "scenes" or movements.

1) The high energy Detroit rock tradition relied on such heavily improvisational bands as the MC5 and the Stooges

2) Early German “kosmische music,” more colloquially known as “krautrock” was based on improvisational jamming

3) Hawkwind and bands such as Ozric Tentacles showed improvisation’s applicability to space rock

4) In the early punk rock scene Television demonstrated the joys of extended improvisation, while Black Flag, Hüsker Dü, and Toronto’s Nomind did the same in the later hardcore scene

5) Sonic Youth showed its importance for the noise rock that started in the late 1970s (presaged by such improvisationally-minded noise bands as Red Crayola in the 1960s or the Taj Mahal Travellers in the 1970s)

6) Its importance for the "jam band" scenes of the 1990s and 2000s (Phish, Blues Traveller, and so on) goes without saying

7) Many of the bands in the “free” or “freak” folk movement of the 1990s and early 2000s, such as Animal Collective, Sunburned Hand of the Man, and Espers, drew on it

8) Recently there has been a new wave of what one might call "heavy psychedelic music" played by such groups as Black Mountain and Wooden Shjips [sic], featuring extended improvisation. Bands of this style tend to draw heavily on the influence of Neil Young’s ongoing work with Crazy Horse.

The Grateful Dead stand at the head of that tradition—while they were not the first rock band to open their songs up to improvisational exploration, they were among the first wave of

such bands, and they were the most consistent in terms of sticking to their original vision. Ultimately, too, they were among the most popular rock bands of any sort. Hence they are an extremely important band for any understanding of rock's development.

Furthermore, consideration of the Grateful Dead's improvisational activity is important for our understanding of a significant body of non-rock music as well. Atheir peak, the Grateful Dead were able to play sets that included 15 to 30 minute, largely improvised pieces before thousands—even on occasion hundreds of thousands—of appreciative people. By speaking of the Grateful Dead in the same contexts as we speak of such musicians as Anthony Braxton, Derek Bailey, or Cecil Taylor, we might find it possible to nuance, develop or even alter any number of standard scholarly tropes, especially ones having to do with the interaction of extended improvisation and commercial and popular success.

A *religiously motivated* improvising rock band

In this dissertation, I have two main jobs. The first job is to trace the parameters and development of the Grateful Dead's improvisational practice in their first decade—and we have just seen how important this task is, both for understanding the Grateful Dead specifically, and for understanding the broader rock improvisational tradition. As we cannot understand a musical practice without understanding its context of origin, my second job in this dissertation will involve discussing the religious (or, if you like, spiritual) experiences that seem to have motivated the Grateful Dead, especially in their formative period, but to a lesser degree throughout their career.

Improvisation as defined above is a universal musical phenomenon, but for that very reason we must expect that the motivations behind it and the musician's or the listener's understanding of it will vary quite widely. In some traditions, it is built in, included as an integral part of musical activity, as is the case with the Indian classical music tradition and jazz.

Often, more or less improvisatory playing is brought into a religious context and made to do religious work. Thus we find abundant use of improvisation in such musico-religious

contexts as north Indian and Pakistani qawwali performances, Near and Middle Eastern religious ceremonies, African-American gospel events, and free and "spiritual" jazz performances.

This is not to say that improvisational playing *must* have a religious underpinning—for example, to the best of my knowledge Derek Bailey never associated his work with any metaphysical or religious aspects, and the same could be said of contemporaries and musical fellow travelers of his such as Paul Rutherford. But improvisation certainly *can* have motivation of this kind—Steve Lacy, for instance, another of Bailey's contemporaries, was open about the influence of Confucianism, Buddhism, and other religious traditions on his work;[23] likewise Alice Coltrane with regard to Hindu thought,[24] and we will discuss the religious understandings of John Coltrane, Albert Ayler, and Sun Ra in the second half of this dissertation. There is considerable evidence to indicate that the Grateful Dead's motivation was also religious in nature.

This will be discussed in great detail below; for the present, we can say that extant testimony reveals that the Grateful Dead developed their improvisational approach to rock at least partly in response to, or through the inspiration of, their religious experiences in the mid- to late 1960s while under the influence of LSD. I will address the issue of the interaction of religion and drugs at length in the second half of the dissertation: for the moment, I will summarize the discussion by saying that, speaking from an ethnomusicological or historical point of view (as opposed to, say, a theological or religiously committed one), the use of LSD or other drugs in provoking an experience does not rule out the possibility that such an experience might be legitimately considered to be "religious," at least or if only from the point of view of the experiencer and/or the standards at play within his or her context.

Hence my second job in this dissertation is to look at how this religious aspect of the Grateful Dead's collective experience was manifested through their music, how it influenced

[23] Jason Weiss, *Steve Lacy: Conversations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 79-80.
[24] Franya Berkman, *Monument Eternal: The Music of Alice Coltrane* (Middletown: Wesleyan, 2010).

the music, and how it influenced the band's understanding of itself and its mission. The conjunction of this discussion with the strictly musical discussion will result in a more complete presentation of the Grateful Dead as a musical/religious phenomenon than has previously been possible.

Discussion of the religious aspects of the Grateful Dead involves choosing the personal narratives and interpretations that one wishes to deal with, as objective validation is not possible. As I will discuss below (section 2.2), the tendency in Grateful Dead scholarship has been to look at things from the outside, but for the purposes of this dissertation, that approach is not satisfactory. In order to link the religious aspects of their experiences to their practice, we need insider discussion, coming from the band members.

I know of no discussions of religious issues by Kreutzmann or Pigpen, and although Weir does mention it occasionally, he does not provide much information, being more concerned to downplay the messianic roles that some fans have ascribed to the members of the band.[25] Hart discusses it more than Weir, but nonetheless, Garcia and Lesh are by far the most outspoken on the matter, with Lesh tending to be much more detailed and clear about his interpretation.

Lesh's autobiography, which I will be drawing on heavily, provides a considered and reflective view of the matter that we lack from Garcia, whose interviews, as we will see below, indicate that he is very invested in *not* clarifying whatever religious conceptions he may have had. Consequently, while Lesh cannot be taken as the *authoritative* voice on the religious significance of the Grateful Dead's music and their development of it, I will be using him, to a greater degree than the other members, as the *representative* voice, due both to the volume and the clarity of his testimony.

It is my hope, then, that this dissertation will shed light on the Grateful Dead's improvisational practice; anchor its development in its religious and musical context; help to

[25] As he notes, "It's not that one doesn't appreciate the adulation, but some of the importance that people ascribe to what we're doing may be undue …" (Gans, *Conversations*, 11). More bluntly, he notes that "I know the guys in the band pretty well, I think. By and large they are some philosophically adept individuals. But I wouldn't go so far as to call any of them spiritual masters" (Gans, *Conversations*, 190).

make rock music more visible in the modern scholarly interest in improvised music; expand our knowledge of the ways in which religious experience translates into this-worldly practice, especially in artistic realms; and increase our understanding of one of the many new religious movements that arose in the 1960s.

Writing about Improvisation

In my work on the Grateful Dead, my interest has focused on their major musical and conceptual breakthrough, namely, their decision to incorporate an unprecedented degree of improvisational freedom into their music. As I have mentioned above, they—along with a handful of other bands—stand at the start of rock's improvisational tradition; thus in looking at them, I am concerned to establish how they built a conceptual model that would render possible and give form to their improvising, and to discuss why they were led so strongly in an improvisational direction that was quite unprecedented when they began. My goal is to unveil the motivation and details of the Grateful Dead's quest for improvisational freedom, while being less concerned (in the present context) with the always-evanescent moment of improvisation itself.

For my present purposes, then, my concerns are best served through a diachronic and technical approach. The construction of the Framework, which is my name for the model that underlies the Grateful Dead's development of an improvisational style proper to rock, took place over the period of 1966-1968; following this (1968-1974), the Framework itself underwent changes as the band explored new musical imperatives. In what follows, I will describe this development and these changes as providing broad, structural groundings (always, be it noted, provisional) for the band's work.

In his discussion of jazz-derived free improvisation, Mike Heffley speaks of three aspects of musical freedom with regard to the form:[26]

1) freedom from form, the revolutionary act of "shaking off constraints";

[26] Heffley, *Northern Sun*, 284-5.

2) freedom to form, "the simple access by one body of information to another" that enables someone working in one genre to draw on aspects of another genre; and

3) freedom in form, which involves knowledge and "mastery" of the conventions of a given form and "fulfilling [its] potential in new ways."

The Grateful Dead were, if revolutionary, quietly so; as I will discuss below, the majority of their music and the principles upon which that music was based fit into broad understandings of what "rock" music was, unlike for example more noisily transgressive groups such as the Red Crayola or the Velvet Underground. And although the Grateful Dead were clearly aware of other musical traditions, we do not hear in their music the sort of wholesale and explicit adoption of characteristics of these traditions that are found in some other bands, whether blues-rock bands such as Cream, or jazz-rock bands such as Blood, Sweat and Tears. In my view, therefore, the Grateful Dead's improvisational approach is a clear example of Heffley's third category, freedom in form—the form of 1960s rock music—and it is as such that I have discussed it.

This leads us to the issue of the interaction between culture and improvisation. As was discussed above, improvisation is a universal practice that is manifested in different contexts and responds to the exigencies of those contexts..[27] In short, improvisation, like language, is a universal practice that takes different forms and serves different ends depending on the different contexts in which it occurs. Thus discussions of improvisation are most useful when they clearly articulate—and respond to—the concerns of the context that they deal with, as it is only within such contexts that the meaning of the musical event can be determined.

For example, Regula Qureshi's discussion of Qawwali improvisation[28] is integrally linked to the musical, social and (Sufi) religious context in which it is performed. She assesses the various improvisational acts of the musicians with regard to how those acts are chosen so as to

[27] Nettl, "Thoughts on Improvisation.".
[28] Qureshi, *Sufi Music of India and Pakistan*.

increase, maintain, or control the degree of religious ecstasy aroused in listeners, and how they serve to guide the listeners through a complex and complete religious and aesthetic experience.

Similarly, David Borgo's analysis of improvisation,[29] with its emphasis on systems theory, is based around the goals and approaches validated in modern free improvised music. Implicit in his discussion of such "difficult" artists as Evan Parker and Peter Brötzmann is an affirmation of the ideal of the autonomous experimental artist wrestling with "pure" sound and the expectation of audience passivity and assimilation of the artistic experience that is provided by the musician. Appropriate ways of discussing improvisation thus vary greatly depending on the context; in my discussion of the Grateful Dead's music, I have therefore been concerned not to discuss "improvisation" as a reified category, but rather to discuss the process by which the band facilitated improvisational playing and the reasons for which they did so.

Jazz and rock share a variety of characteristics—ensemble sizes; links to popular tradition as well as ties to the "art" world—and thus it is tempting to examine rock improvisation using tools developed for the study of jazz. However, there are two significant differences between the traditions that render this problematic.

First of all, rock as a form tends to privilege the group, rather than the individual or the tradition within which the individual works. There are, of course, many exceptions to this rule, but often even the exceptions show the influence of the rule. To take three notable examples of solo artists, Neil Young has been associated with Crazy Horse throughout his career; Bruce Springsteen with the E Street Band; and Sting's music is rarely discussed without reference to the Police. The Grateful Dead are faithful to this group-centred approach in their understanding of improvisation as a group practice, with the group as a structured whole (i.e., with the different instrumental roles maintained) that moves spontaneously through musical contexts. This understanding differs significantly from what we see in mainstream jazz (where the individual player rather than the group is the focus of attention and the form is usually understood as being broadly established for any given piece) or "art" music (where the

[29] Borgo, *Sync or Swarm*..

individual composer and his or her intentions, or deliberate lack of intentions, for the piece tend to be the focus of attention).

We must also keep in mind that the Grateful Dead stand at the head of a tradition. They belong to the first generation of rock bands to bring to consciousness and develop what had up to then been an underground, inchoate tradition of rock improvising. For this reason, the sorts of analyses that one often finds of jazz improvisational practice, relying as they do on the existence of an acknowledged tradition of jazz improvisation, are not appropriate to the Grateful Dead's contemporary situation, nor can we use these methods as models for retrospective looks back at the rock improvising tradition, as it has not developed in anything like the same way that the jazz tradition has developed. For example, the sort of approach taken by Berliner, in which he exhaustively details the many and varied aspects of the jazz tradition so as to provide "documentation of traditional learning practices," [30] will not suffice here; see below, section 1.3, for discussion of Monson and other jazz writers on improvisation.

Interestingly, one jazz-related approach that does illuminate our present situation is that taken by Ekkehard Jost in his *Free Jazz*, precisely because he is not talking about the mainstream jazz tradition. Jost points out that the first and second waves of free jazz produced "a large number of divergent personal styles … their only point of agreement lay in a negation of traditional norms; otherwise, they exhibited such heterogeneous formative principles that any reduction to a common denominator was bound to be an over-simplification."[31] Like me, he sees his subjects as standing at the head of their traditions, and thus deals with their innovations in their own terms, with the (strong but not sole) emphasis on their status as unique creations rather than evolutionary developments of a tradition. In his analyses, Jost focuses on creating "style portraits"[32] of the major groups or leaders, showing the ways in which unique approaches to musical organization were created and describing these approaches. As will be seen in what follows, Jost's approach has been very influential on my

[30] Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*,15.
[31] Jost, *Free Jazz*, 9-10.
[32] Jost, *Free Jazz*, 10.

analysis of the Grateful Dead's practice; I regard it as an exemplary method for discussing large scale and coherent innovatory endeavors.

Several recent works have dealt specifically with the improvisational aspects of Grateful Dead or Grateful Dead-inspired music. Robert Freeman's chapter, "Other People Play the Music: Improvisation as Social Interaction"[33] offers the best model I have encountered for how to examine the practice of an improvising rock band such as the Grateful Dead. This is understandable, as his article is a summary of his research on the Other People, a jam band formed directly and consciously in the lineage of the Grateful Dead, and whose goal was to induce a state of intense interaction and unity among the musicians, a state which they saw the Grateful Dead (at their best) as modeling.

Freeman's perceptive analysis provides a taxonomy for assessing improvisation in a rock idiom. He discusses songs as models, including the relative density/openness of required material for any given piece, the moods that the piece evokes, and typical approaches in playing a given piece, moving on to address musical role conventions, including the usual function of each of the instrumentalists, both in terms of rock's common practice and the developments of that practice made by the Grateful Dead and picked up by the Other Ones. How players work within and around those conventions, how they affect the band's improvisational practice and how they help to structure it, leads into an analysis of how they *accomplish* structure (the cues and keys that provide structure to otherwise less structured sections), *push* structure (the way that the band negotiates in open sections and in passage points between songs, places where things are theoretically up for grabs), and their use of transitional strategies that communicate or disrupt emergent structure.

Finally, he takes apart the improvisational passages with a typology of their musical elements: melody, counterpoint, rhythm, symbolic interaction (cues), with the manipulation or interaction of these elements creating tendencies that come together into formalized

[33] Robert Freeman, "Other People Play the Music: Improvisation as Social Interaction" (pages 75-106 in Rebecca Adams and Robert Sardiello, ed., *Deadhead Social Science: "You Ain't Gonna Learn What You Don't Wanna Know"* [Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 2000]).

approaches or structures, which then must themselves be contested in the interest of maintaining improvisational freedom. His analysis is both perceptive and compelling, and its application goes far beyond the Other People. Indeed, Freeman's conclusion could apply equally to the Grateful Dead when he remarks:

> [C]reativity is not simply a product of the initiative or abilities of individuals. Rather, it may be a systemic outgrowth of organizational forms that institutionalize playful and deconstructive processes rather than enforce rigid hierarchies. Such social forms reshape themselves in response to both external inputs and the creative solutions and contributions of individual elements. By allowing lower-level elements to self-referentially reprogram upper-level processes, flexible social forms open their very structures up to adaptation ... The lesson is to build porous forms with room for individual contributions rather than rigid structures to ward off chaos.[34]

I hope to corroborate and further Freeman's conclusion by outlining the "porous form" that the Grateful Dead constructed early in their career, and tracing some of the ways that it was "reprogrammed" as time went on. Although the way that the Dead developed their signature approach to improvisation evokes and deeply reflects the complex cultural ferment of their times, there are far broader lessons in the Dead's work for scholars studying improvisation, as Freeman's chapter suggests. In providing a close listening to concert highlights from the band's formative era, this section of my work expands Freeman's assessment to indicate some of the potential and rewards of the practice of improvisation within popular music generally. As shown here, that practice is one that the Dead did much to define.

Another analysis of Grateful Dead-style improvisation is provided by Jim Tuedio and Stan Spector in their introduction to *The Grateful Dead in Concert: Essays on Live*

[34] Freeman, "Other People."

Improvisation.[35] They argue that there are three forms of improvising. "Hierarchical improvisation operates whenever musicians play spontaneously and extemporaneously in front, or against the background, of an underlying structural framework," giving as an example a soloist playing over the chord changes of a jazz standard. "In contrast, associative improvisation is more free-flowing, insofar as the underlying structure and framework are abandoned by musicians busy setting in motion suggestive new ideas."

In addition to these more common forms of improvisation, they argue, the Grateful Dead improvised in a way that they describe as "fusion" or "psychedelic." "They [the Grateful Dead] had to practice: first to learn the structure of the songs; then to learn how each player could solo within the structure (hierarchical improvisation); then to learn how each instrument and player could participate in a free-flowing musical conversation no longer tethered to the structural framework of the song (associative improvisation), and finally, to play the song as a Grateful Dead song in which each player makes a musical statement not so much in response to another player's statement as in response to *the song itself*."[36]

Their division is interesting, but not as useful as it might seem at first glance to be. First of all, the consistent use of the word "solo" is problematic, as it evokes associations that are only rarely applicable to any of the players except Garcia. Secondly, its sequential presentation is potentially deceptive. In some cases, we have clear evidence of parts of songs arising from the band's jams before being incorporated into specific songs, thus inverting Tuedio and Spector's third and first two steps. For instance, in an interview with David Gans, Bob Weir said that "about half the songs I write have their basis in some jam somewhere."[37] This supports my argument that it was the "free-flowing musical conversation" that was the basic level of Grateful Dead musicking, whether fitted into the contexts of the various songs or being exposed freely on its own in jamming sections. In this regard, the way that the Grateful Dead played their songs would be somewhat reminiscent of how a jazz rhythm section typically

[35] Jim Tuedio, Jim and Stan Spector, ed. *The Grateful Dead in Concert: Essays on Live Improvisation* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2010).
[36] Tuedio and Spector, *Grateful Dead in Concert*, 13, italics theirs.
[37] Gans, *Conversations*, 17.

interprets a standard—which also does not fit into Tuedio and Spector's overly neat categorization.

At this stage in my research I have chosen to work broadly, identifying the macro-level characteristics first of the approach to improvisation that the Grateful Dead seem to have followed from 1965-1967, and secondly of the developments of that approach that took place in subsequent years. I do hope, in future work, to go into considerably more detail regarding the ways in which the band's practice played out in performance, but when charting unmapped territory, one does not begin with the small details: rather, one begins by getting the overall contours.

In *Grateful Dead and the Art of Rock Improvisation*—the longest and most detailed examination of the Grateful Dead's music to date—David Malvinni is looking at an aspect of the band's style of playing which he calls "Deadness" (sic). This "aesthetic category" involves the creation of performance rituals and musical codes, but it is nonetheless open to "free play, improvisation, and the unknown in a paradoxical attempt to reach the unreachable."[38] In his book, Malvinni attempts to outline some of the rituals and codes that gave the Grateful Dead a structural underpinning for their evocation of "Deadness." Although he does discuss song or jam structure to a limited extent, he is mainly concerned with the band's use of modal approaches to playing: modal jams are "the foundation of the Dead as a psychedelic band."[39] Thus where I hear and discuss the band's progression through jams as a succession of sections that develop from preceding sections, and where I present the Framework (discussed below) as a "musical code" that permits the band to achieve "Deadness" (in Malvinni's term), Malvinni argues that it is the group's overall modal understanding that is key to their playing: "Remaining constant through these years … is the modal organizing principle behind a Dead jam, where the tendency is to dwell on a chord or two and explore the linear application of the scale or mode."[40]

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[38] Malvinni, *Grateful Dead*, 13.
[39] Malvinni, *Grateful Dead*, 202.
[40] Malvinni, *Grateful Dead*, 138.

This small example illustrates another aspect of Malvinni's work that distinguishes it from my own, namely his synchronic focus. Whereas my concern has been to illustrate a particular phase in the broad historical narrative of the Grateful Dead's career, Malvinni views that career as finding its fulfilment, its true realization or *telos*, in a specific period (1972-74) in which true "Deadness" came the closest to being realized: "shows from 1972 to 1974 represent the pinnacle of the Grateful Dead live concert"[41], whereas earlier jamming is described as "primal Dead."[42]

In addition to his modal analyses of the music, Malvinni also explores the philosophical ramifications that he sees in the band's pursuit of the "unreachable." His work is informed by the philosophy of Heidegger and his followers, especially Deleuze and Derrida, which he justifies on the basis of the "open-ended quality of the Grateful Deawhich] invites such a substantive approximation to continental philosophy."[43] Although Grateful Dead jams are incorporated into more or less conventionalized structures, Malvinni argues that these jams are Derridean aporias, which are "unresolvable contradictions that present a double bind for analysis" as they oblige us to consider the jams as "stable, repeatable entities," on the one hand, and as things that exist "outside and beyond these familiar … categories, as existing without a *telos*." Jams thus represent efforts to overcome the "limits of convention" and in so doing can lead audiences to "ponder the unlimited, dynamically expanding and infinite nature of the cosmos" as well as the inherent paradoxicality of improvisation. The jam creates "a singular event indeterminable by analysis."[44]

Overall Malvinni's work can be seen as an attempt to divorce the idea of "Deadness" from history, turning it instead into a timeless and fascinating cipher that remains distinct from history while interacting with it. From his point of view, the key to "Deadness"—insofar a key exists—lies in the application of Heideggerian philosophical analyses to it. It should be noted in this regard that Malvinni's choice to use this particular hermeneutical key is not supported by

[41] Malvinni, *Grateful Dead*, 137.
[42] Malvinni, *Grateful Dead*, 142.
[43] Malvinni, *Grateful Dead*, 15.
[44] Malvinni, *Grateful Dead*, 139.

testimony from the band members themselves, none of whom were known to read continental philosophy or to have seen it or its hermeneutical goals as inspirational for their work. Malvinni's analysis is profoundly etic (although he himself is a Deadhead of long standing).

Malvinni's book is an interesting attempt to discuss the Grateful Dead from a point of view that is very different from my own. In this dissertation, my concern is to ground the band's musical developments in a firmly diachronic context, showing the band's musical development and their relationship to their context. I will discuss the significance of their activities in terms that arise directly from the band members' own testimony, rather than considering it from a point of view that, while potentially illuminating, is alien to the band members' own conceptions.

Chapter Two: Setting the Scene

Art does not come from a vacuum. Works of art, like the motivations of their creators, are best understood when we know the contexts from which they arose. The Grateful Dead are no exceptions, and their embrace of improvisation was not without support from the contexts in which they lived and worked. As I will discuss below, it seems to have been their religious experiences under the influence of LSD that definitively moved them in an improvisational direction, but the groundwork was laid by the valorization and expanded possibilities of this technique in their immediate environment.

Broadly speaking, artistic improvisation enjoyed a great rise in its fortunes in the period following the Depression, which Daniel Belgrad has ably charted.[45] In all spheres of art, there was an increased appreciation for the use of spontaneous techniques as generators or structuring agents. In his book, Belgrad emphasizes the different and successive justifications that artists brought to their use of such approaches, including the Jungian pursuit of access to the unconscious through invocations of "primitive" myths and symbols and the Gestalt therapy-related "celebration of spontaneous art."[46] The justifications as laid out by Belgrad all cluster around the central concept of gaining access to an otherwise hidden realm of authenticity, whether this authenticity is thought to reside in the recesses of one's own psyche, in the Orientalized "purity" of Eastern cultures, in the reverence for the profound depths of "primitive" cultures, or in the transient potential of the fleeting moment.

Jazz

Musicallyspeaking, in the early to mid-1960s, jazz enjoyed a special cachet among progressive listeners: it was, or was capable of being, "serious" music that made significant aesthetic statements, while not being as conservative and culturally rehabilitated as mainstream "serious" or classical music. Furthermore, (some) jazz at that time was in the process of moving into realms of previously unimagined possibilities, improvisational and

[45] Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America.* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998).
[46] Belgrad, *Spontaneity*, 11; see pages 9-12 for an overview.

otherwise, with the development of an approach to playing that could focus on modes rather than chord changes, and free jazz, with Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler and Cecil Taylor as its figureheads.

For those working in or listening to these styles of jazz, extended improvisation was often regarded both as a liberatory gesture, freeing its practitioners from overly restrictive genre-based and ethnicity-related restrictions, and as a means of extending musical parameters, of discovering and exploring new realms of possibility.[47]

Song and album titles, as well as comments in interviews, by musicians working through either or both of these approaches often show a pursuit of new possibilities and a sense of universalism,[48] a sense that was enhanced by the tendency of newer forms of jazz to move away from many of the musical tropes of the bebop and "cool" jazz period. The lack or diminished importance of these tropes, such as the use of the standard 32 bar form, the obligatory "walking" bass line, and show-tune style cadence patterns, simultaneously made the new jazz seem less limited by or tied to history than older forms might have been, and also may have rendered it more accessible to listeners and players who were not steeped in its (or any) tradition.

For the first wave of improvising rock musicians generally, and for San Francisco musicians specifically, John Coltrane's work with his classic Quartet was particularly important, as testimonies from Spencer Dryden,[49] David Crosby,[50] Jerry Garcia,[51] and Phil Lesh[52] show.

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[47] E.g., from a variety of viewpoints, Joachim-Ernst Berendt, *The World is Sound: Nada Brahma* (Rochester: Destiny, 1991), 223-225; Paul Bley, *Stopping Time: Paul Bley and the Transformation of Jazz* (Montreal: Véhicule, 1999), 86-90; Frank Kofsky, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), 207-243; George Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 29-43; John Litweiler, *The Freedom Principle: Jazz after 1958* (New York: Quill, 1984), passim; Eric Nisenson, *Ascension: John Coltrane and His Quest* (New York: Da Capo, 1993), passim; John Szwed, *So What: The Life of Miles Davis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 169-173; Valerie Wilmer, *As Serious as Your Life: John Coltrane and Beyond* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1992), passim.

[48] Universalism could, for instance, be expressed through references to non-Western cultures, whether African (John Coltrane's *Africa/Brass* album or Sun Ra's song "Ancient Aethiopia"), Indian (with, again, Coltrane's album *India* as a notable and influential example, as well as Pharoah Sanders' *Karma*), Japanese (Pharoah Sanders' song "Japan") or indeed extraterrestrial (as with many of Sun Ra's album titles, such as *Other Planes of There* or *Interstellar Low Ways*).

[49] Ralph Gleason, *The Jefferson Airplane and the San Francisco Sound* (New York: Ballantine, 1969), 249.

Frank Kofsky wrote at the time that "while Coltrane enjoys a comparatively small but nonetheless dedicated following among rock listeners, his reputation among working rock *musicians* could hardly be higher."[53]

Coltrane not only demonstrated the range of potential in improvisation that was moving away from bebop idioms, but also showed that such potential could be actualized without the elaborate harmonic frameworks characteristic of earlier jazz. As Phil Lesh writes, "I urged the other band members [of the Grateful Dead] to listen closely to the music of John Coltrane, especially his classic quartet, in which the band would take fairly simple structures … and extend them … with fantastical variations, frequently based on only one chord."[54] This is not to say, however, that the Grateful Dead (or their contemporaries) simply aspired to play jazz. As Allbright points out, for the hippies "collective … expression was emphasized. Jazz, always chiefly a soloists' art, gave way to rock music, which was built on a more integrated concept, emphasizing textures that rose in vertical blocks of sound."[55] Coltrane, as well as much free jazz, was more amenable to this aesthetic than bebop or hard bop.

Classical Music: India

In addition to these jazz-related approaches to improvisation, there were two classical music traditions that impinged on the Grateful Dead's musical scene that valued improvisation. Indian classical music, aN improvisatory art, was becoming more and more present in North American musical circles during the period of the Grateful Dead's formation. Thanks in no small part to the propagandizing of Yehudi Menuhin, during the mid- to late 1950s Ali Akbar Khan's *Music of India: Morning and Evening Ragas* was released on Angel Records, a classical label

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[50] Peter Lavezzoli, *The Dawn of Indian Music in the West* (London: Continuum, 2007), 163-4.
[51] David Gans, *Conversations with the Dead: The Grateful Dead Interview Book* (New York: Citadel, 1995), 66.
[52] Phil Lesh, *Searching for the Sound: My Life with the Grateful Dead (*New York: Little, Brown, 2005), 27.
[53] Kofsky, *Black Nationalism*, 189.
[54] Lesh, *Searching*, 59.
[55] Thomas Allbright, *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-1080: An Illustrated History.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 166.

based in New York, while Ravi Shankar released *The Sounds of India* in 1957 on Columbia, with introductions to the pieces by Menuhin.[56]

These records, along with live work in the West by both Shankar and Khan,, helped to bring Indian classical music to a new level of prominence in North America. George Harrison's use of sitar on "Norwegian Wood" (December 1965) was both a sign of the times, and a powerful intensifier of the interest. But even before this, in 1961, Ali Akbar Khan had begun teaching at McGill University, and in 1965 he began teaching at the American Society for Eastern Arts (its very name another sign of the times) in Berkeley.[57]

Indian classical music, then, was in the air. Furthermore, it seemed to offer a legitimizing way into improvisational playing for popular musicians who might be intimidated (especially harmonically) by mainstream jazz. As Mickey Hart notes, "Raga is a virtuosic form. But when you first hear it, you say 'I can do that' … Jam bands came from raga, as far as I'm concerned. It gave us a license to jam, made it legal. It was different from jazz because jazz … was harder to understand."[58]

Indian classical music is certainly no simpler a system than jazz, but to the uninformed Western listener it can seem to be, which made it inviting for relatively novice improvisers. As Charles Perry puts it, "when it came time for the [typical San Franciscan] guitarist to take a lead break, he often noodled up and down the notes of the scale in a way that might owe as much to inexperience in improvisation as to the influence of Indian ragas. The musicians were also stoned a lot of the time, another reason to stick to simple [sic] raga-like improvisations."[59] For the Western listener, coming to Indian classical music *with* a point of view informed by Western Orientalizing, exoticizing or esotericizing tendencies, and *without* an understanding of the structuring principle of the underlying rag and the tal pattern or the importance of tradition in

[56] Lavezzoli, *Dawn*, 59-61.
[57] Lavezzoli, *Dawn*, 65.
[58] Lavezzoli, *Dawn*, 94.
[59] Charles Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury: A History* (New York: Wenner, 2005), 68.

guiding the soloist, it can seem to be entirely improvised, a simple and "natural" manifestation of pure music.

Classical Music: The Western Avant Garde

Hart was introduced to Indian classical music by Phil Lesh.[60] Lesh himself might well have encountered it in his work in the new music scene, because it was present in the Bay Area avant-garde classical music tradition that I briefly discuss here, from which (or as a reaction against which) minimalism arose. The definition of minimalism is disputed[61] and the term itself was not universally popular among composers associated with it; however one defines it, its links both to improvisation (especially in its early days) and San Francisco, and even to a member of the Grateful Dead, are clear.

In Lesh's account, avant-garde art music is unambiguously presented as laying the foundations for his work with the Grateful Dead. Lesh enrolled at UC Berkeley in 1961, studying music, with a particular interest in avant garde music, including Stockhausen and Boulez. He volunteered at radio station KPFA, which featured extremely diverse programming, and used the opportunity to listen to and make his own recordings of European avant garde music.[62]

After he dropped out of UC Berkeley, Lesh audited a graduate composition class at Mills College led by Luciano Berio. Lesh had arrived at UC Berkeley just a few years after the departure of La Monte Young and Terry Riley, pioneering minimalists. Young, who left San Francisco in 1960, has spent the rest of his career in New York, but Riley returned to San Francisco in the spring of 1964 and premiered his piece *In C* in 1964 at the Tape Music Centre.[63] I have not come across any references by Grateful Dead members to this piece, and there is no indication that Lesh was present at the premier[64] , but the way that *In C* moves gradually and

[60] Lavezzoli, *Dawn*, 90.
[61] K. Robert Schwarz, *Minimalists* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 8-13, and note his emphasis on the influence of non-Western music.
[62] Lesh, *Searching*, 21-22.
[63] Schwarz, *Minimalists*, 43-44.
[64] Riley writes that "Phil Lesh was always around the Tape Music Center ... There was a lot of crossover," but he does not specifically state that Lesh was at the premiere, and Lesh himself does not mention it in his autobiography, leading me to assume that he was not—although, of course, he would have been aware of it (in David Bernstein, *The*

somewhat raggedly through its 53 different modules, with instrumentalists changing at will (admittedly within a prescribed order and meter) to create an overall band feel that is never precisely defined, has significant similarities with practices that the Grateful Dead would adopt.

It was also in 1964 that Lesh first took LSD. He writes that "with my first psychedelic experience I had broken through my depression and was now ready to seek out less solitary forms of creative pursuit ... first I ran into my Mills composition classmate Steve Reich," who was working as musical director for the Mime Troupe, a San Francisco-based anarchist artists' collective, and who was also working with Riley. Lesh notes that Reich was "heavily into improvised music" and he and Reich were looking for "a chance to do some improvised music making." [65] The resulting piece involved dance, lights and music, and is described by Lesh as follows: "we just wanted to throw all these elements together ... and see what happened ... This event, the manifestation of a collective *unconscious*, served as the prototype for what became the Acid Test (at that time, of course, lacking the Main Ingredient [LSD]), a manifestation of collective *consciousness.*"[66]

Lesh's point is clear: he sees this event, firmly rooted in the avant garde art music scene, as providing an *avant la lettre* demonstration of the technical aspects of what would arise at the Acid Tests, drug-fuelled multimedia parties that will be discussed below (section 2.3). But this precursor event lacked LSD and hence also the directed ("conscious") purpose that LSD provided for Lesh and his bandmates.

In short, there was a thriving avant garde musical scene in San Francisco, one in which Lesh and future Grateful Dead keyboardist Tom Constanten were involved. The music being produced and consumed in this scene featured electronic experimentation and manipulation of sound (as in the work of Reich and European composers such as Berio and Stockhausen), minimalistic music that emphasized repetition with small, incremental variations (as in Riley's *In*

San Francisco Tape Music Center: 1960s Counterculture and the Avant-Garde [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008], 221). Lesh does say that Reich was a classmate of his (Lesh, *Searching*, 42).

[65] Lesh, *Searching*, 37.

[66] Lesh, *Searching*, 38.

C), an appreciation for the spontaneous "artistic" event that presaged future Happenings and the Acid Test, and, just as importantly, a feeling of belonging to an advance guard, a revolutionary community. As Bernstein notes, "adopting an artistic and social agenda shared by avant-garde artists and musicians, the Grateful Dead saw themselves as members of an independent musical subculture."[67]

Stewart Brand was one of the organizers of the 1966 Trips Festival, which was intended to carry on the multi-media agenda of the Acid Tests, but with a wider representation of San Francisco's bohemian underground. In Brand's view, the Grateful Dead appropriated many of the innovations developed in the San Francisco avant-garde underground: "The Trips Festival was like a changing of the guard in the Bay Area [arts scene]. The Pranksters [Ken Kesey's associates] and the Grateful Dead pretty much stole the show. Bill Graham ... grabbed that and ran with it ... *It was the beginning of the Grateful Dead and the end of everyone else.*"[68]

This coheres with Lesh's view, cited above, although of course the perspectives are different. But both Brand and Lesh agree that significant elements of the Grateful Dead's practice and artistic approach were borrowed from, or influenced by, contemporary developments in the avant-garde music scene.

One aspect of minimalism that may well have influenced the Grateful Dead's practice is its rethinking of the teleological or goal-related imperatives of much of Western art music. Robert Fink argues that "there are some truly nonteleological musical styles (John Cage, La Monte Young, Brian Eno), but any music with a regular pulse, a clear tonal center, and some degree of process is more likely to be an example of *recombinant teleology.*"[69] Recombinant teleology refers to musical approaches that do not abandon teleological gestures, but rather utilize them as a means instead of an end. Thus motion towards climax and climax itself, can be integrated into their surrounding musical contexts, rather than defining or completing those

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[67] Bernstein, *Tape Music*, 247.
[68] Bernstein, *Tape Music*, p. 243-44, italics mine.
[69] Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 43, italics mine.

contexts.

Such integration often involves using extended time scales or “splitting off the tension-release mechanism from the 'rest' of the musical fabric … marking a ... break with classical teleology."[70] Fink writes that "the actual experience of repetitive music is often a series of fragmented tensionings and releases with (let's be honest) periods of directionless ecstasy—or wool-gathering—in between. The shape of the piece no longer coincides with the shape of the teleological mechanism as we experience it.”[71]

What arises out of such experimentation is an array of structural possibilities: "Detach teleology from form and an entire panoply of new arrangements opens up: One might create tension-release arcs that organize only some of the musical space ... or a composer could present incomplete tension-release cycles ... or, more interestingly, long build-ups with no clear moment of release."[72]

The structurally-bounded but teleologically open space that Fink describes is startlingly similar to the musical space in Grateful Dead jams, with the difference that the Grateful Dead access such space through improvisation rather than compositional preplanning. Nonetheless, the boundaries between these two approaches are porous, and particularly so in the present case, as minimalist composers often incorporate space for improvisation (for instance, with regard to how long one plays a given melodic cell in Riley’s *In C*), and improvisers often build structures in the course of focused rehearsals and live performance. In their early days, the Grateful Dead spent a great deal of time rehearsing, developing improvisational possibilities and (after Mickey Hart joined the ban) learning how to work in different time signatures than rock’s standard 4/4, such as 11/4 (“The Eleven”) or 10/4 (“Playing in the Band”).[73]

It is possible that the Grateful Dead picked up ideas about “recombinant teleology” through their association with specifically minimalist new music circles in San Francisco, and

[70] Fink, *Repeating*, 46.
[71] Fink, *Repeating*, 46.
[72] Fink, *Repeating*, 47.
[73] Dennis McNally, *A Long Strange Trip: The Inside Story of the Grateful Dead* (New York: Broadway Press, 2002), 258-9; Joel Selvin, *Summer of Love* (New York: Cooper Square, 1994), 156.

incorporated these ideas into their playing, specifically into the Framework's creation of ongoing movement between peaks and swells and changes of direction all contained within the broader outlines of the piece as a whole. The approach that Fink describes certainly coheres more closely with the Grateful Dead's improvisational practice than most jazz practice (with its conversational, soloistic emphases), and is somewhat more apropos than the emphases on raga exposition and development found in Hindustani art music. It could also be argued that the Grateful Dead's open improvisational approach to playing music is comparable to the minimalist emphasis on "audible structure," in which "part of early minimalism's mystique was to have no secrets, to hold the music's structure right in the audience's face, and have that be listened to"[74]; the Grateful Dead's spontaneous movement through sections allows the audience to hear the music's progress as it happens.

Rock Grows Up

There is one last development that I want to mention, less easy to pinpoint or underline but nonetheless significant, which is the increased sense of self-confidence and artistic autonomy and status that many rock musicians seem to have enjoyed. In its earliest years, rock (or rock and roll) tended to be marked as disreputable juvenilia, or as the younger and less respectable sibling of more established musical genres, especially blues, r&b, or country. It took time (and technological innovations) for rock to develop a sense of its own aesthetic identity, on all levels.

For instance, rock bass playing of the 1950s tends to be not only unaccomplished technically, but also, and much more importantly, it is usually indistinguishable from uninspired examples of country or, especially, blues acoustic bass playing.[75] It is not until the rise of instrumental and surf music in the very early 1960s, forms in which the specifically electric bass is fundamental, that we see a distinctively rock and distinctively electric approach to bass-

[74] Kyle Gann, "Thankless attempts at a definition of minimalism" (pages 299-303 in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, edited by Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner, New York: Continuum, 2004), 302-303.
[75] This is a general statement, and of course there are isolated exceptions, such as Elvis Presley's powerful and defiantly electric bass introduction to "You're So Square (Baby I Don't Care)."

playing emerge, one that could only have come from electric instruments being played in a rock context.

Jim Roberts, in fact, argues that the electric bass was the fundamental innovation required for rock to truly become itself. Specifically, he critiques the idea that it was the electric guitar that led in the rock era. "The notion of rock as an important musical and social force is directly linked to the acceptance of the electric bass. The other crucial rock instruments—the electric guitar and the drum kit—had been around for decades, but the 'new bass,' which changed the way rhythm sections worked and altered the dynamic contours of popular music, was the last piece of the puzzle."[76]

The upright bass is used in early rock and roll music, but "there was still a need for an instrument that could assert a well-defined bass sound and enable the music to get louder (and therefore more powerful),"[77] and hence "… it was really the Fender bass that made possible the forward progress of this new genre,"[78] with the early 1960s surf/instrumental music period as the period when electric bass became absolutely essential to rock.[79] "The Fender bass gave bass players a new, assertive identity … They could take a more prominent role in the music and use different bass patterns,"[80] especially when given the extra boost in both volume and clarity of the new bass amplifiers that were developed in the early 1960s, such as the Bassman combo amp, with a 50 watt head and a 2x12 cabinet.

Rock approaches to electric guitar, as well, developed along with the guitars and amplifiers that the musicians played, and again, many of these innovations came out of surf music.[81] In both cases, too, the overall level of virtuosity in rock increased, although this is less important for rock's development than is the production of a distinct variation in aesthetics.

By the mid-1960s, then, rock had roots—it had been around long enough to constitute a tradition in which many of its practitioners had grown up, rather than being a novelty style. And

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[76] Jim Roberts, *How the Fender Bass Changed the World* (San Francisco: Backbeat, 2001), 85-6.
[77] Roberts, *Fender*, 40.
[78] Roberts, *Fender*, 42.
[79] Roberts, *Fender*, 51.
[80] Roberts, *Fender*, 58.
[81] Kent Crowley, *Surf Beat: Rock's Forgotten Revolution* (New York: Backbeat, 2011).

in addition to roots, it had a distinctive sound. Furthermore, spearheaded by the Beatles and their astonishing commercial, social and aesthetic success, it was in the process of acquiring significant amounts of cultural capital[82] and, thanks to the good economic fortune of the first wave of baby boomers, financial power as well.

All of these elements led to an increased sense of self-confidence for rock musicians. They were coming to regard themselves as artists and—with the influence of folk-related tropes regarding the status of the musician—even potentially as representatives of their generation, as in some ways prophetic figures in the mold of the Hebrew Bible, who have the potential to speak from the divine point of view in order to reveal the true spiritual nature of their time. This in turn increased their willingness and their ability to reach out into new musical realms, particularly ones that combined high status with a somewhat daring reputation. Improvisation was one such realm.. And, as we have seen, for the musicians of the San Francisco scene, it would have been especially accessible, thus laying the essential conceptual groundwork for the Grateful Dead's own innovations.

There is one further aspect of rock's maturity that should be mentioned in this context. As Heffley points out, improvisational activity often arises from knowledge of and comfort in a given tradition: "improvisation qua improvisation, then, is not a universal way for musicians from various situations to collaborate, any more than mastery of one language equals mastery of another." Rather, "the master improvisers/composers of Western art music [such as Bach, Mozart, Beethoven] were so because they were comfortable and proficient in [their] court tradition."[83] The first generation of rock improvisers included the first generation of people to have grown up with rock and roll, which became rock. They were the first people for whom the music had been a presence since at least their adolescence, if not their childhood. They lived in rock, and felt comfortable in it, in a way that their older siblings or parents could not.

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[82] Bernard Gendron, *Between the Mudd Club and Montmartre: Popular music and the Avant Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 158-224.
[83] Heffley *Northern Sun*, 281; see also Moore 1992.

The San Francisco Scene

The musical developments that we have discussed established the potential for the Grateful Dead's musical breakthroughs. Potential, however, needs to be actualized in a given context. The San Francisco rock music scene in the mid-1960s, just before its emergence as one of rock's major centers (both in commercial terms, and in terms of its reputation for innovation), was particularly conducive to such actualization. As I see it, there are three main elements that made the scene such a hospitable environment. The first is its "end of history" celebratory aspect, privileging experimentalism, eclecticism and diversity; the second is its communal focus; the third is its emphasis on dancing.

A Carnival at the End of History

The jazz bandleader Sun Ra had a song whose lyrics went, "It's after the end of the world/Don't you know that yet?" Many in the San Francisco scene shared that feeling—except that rather than lament their perceived situation, they preferred to celebrate it. Speaking with Phil Lesh of the origins and significance of the name, "Grateful Dead," interviewer David Gans noted that it could be taken as "a rationale for hedonism—'we're already dead, let's party!'," a suggestion that Lesh supports and extends: "Sure. Hey, what do you think the Acid Test was, partly? You're dead when you're born."[84] At the dances that anchored the scene, "there was a sense of confronting ultimate reality, moving toward a breakthrough";[85] Ken Kesey and his co-workers, the Merry Pranksters, too, felt that they were living in a new messianic age.[86] By joining the hip[87] scene, one was committing to "living in the new world."[88] Bromell presents a very compelling and insightful discussion of the ramifications of this feeling of living outside of, or after, history, which often arises with the use of psychedelic drugs. He argues that the use of psychedelics gave "insight into the world's instability,"[89] bringing trippers to an awareness of

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[84] Gans, *Conversations*, 202.
[85] Perry, *Haight*, 54.
[86] Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux,1982), 119-121.
[87] "Hippie," like "beatnik" before it, was originally a mildly pejorative term, meaning "junior grade hipsters" (Perry, *Haight*, 5).
[88] Jerry Garcia, Charles Reich, and Jann Wenner, *Garcia: A Signpost to New Space* (New York: Da Capo, 2003), 5.
[89] Bromell, *Tomorrow*, 79.

the world's "radical pluralism"[90] and a feeling that they were "submerged in the pluralism of the fluid world, no longer presuming to stand above it and no longer troubled by the seeming 'unreality' of the social construction that has fixed this world in place." The combination of psychedelic drugs and rock music, Bromell argues, created the feeling that "meaning emerges only when we have dispensed with the narrative of coherence."[91]

The San Francisco scenesters absorbed, consciously or not, the contemporary countercultural trope of the "plastic" or artificial nature of the modern world. Such a critique was common to a number of vangardist political and artistic movements, but was perhaps most cogently expressed by Guy Debord and the Lettrist International, which became the Situationist International.[92] This critique harmonized well with the views of many in the various art scenes at the time that fundamental breakthroughs were in the process of being made, which Ken Kesey described as a "Neon Renaissance": 'It's a need to find a new way to look at the world, an attempt to locate a better reality."[93] Even just within the music world, this is the period of the birth of minimalism, conceptual art, and the first wave of free jazz,, to say nothing of rock's transformations in this period with the explorations of new possibilities in terms of timbre, harmony, rhythm, and melody. The members of the San Francisco scene took this period of creativity and the inauthenticity of modern society as an invitation to pillage what had come before, with a manic energy: "Costumes. Dressing up. Playing a part. It was all a glorious game, everyone feeding off each other's fantasies …"[94]

As Mike Pritchard, a member of the Charlatans, put it: "Bohemians have a tradition of what bohemia means. It was centuries old, really, and it meant being sensitive, being willing to suffer for what you believed in. We were more eclectic. We had no real roots. We attached ourselves to whatever was available, picked up on whatever caught our attention—blues, art

[90] Bromell, *Tomorrow*, 69.
[91] Bromell, *Tomorrow*, 119.
[92] Ken Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology* (no city: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006).
[93] Blair Jackson, *Garcia: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 78.
[94] Gene Sculatti and Davin Seay, *San Francisco Nights: The psychedelic Music Trip 1965-1968*. (New York: St. Martin's, 1985), 27.

nouveau, comic books."[95] Thus for instance George Hunter could move smoothly from an interest in John Cage and electronic music to founding the Charlatans, perhaps the pioneering San Francisco group, and one whose look and sound appropriated the atmosphere of the 1890s, psychedelically augmented.[96]

The Grateful Dead drew from this openness. Indeed, the extremely varied backgrounds of its members (Lesh: avant garde art music; Garcia: folk and bluegrass; Kreutzmann: rock and roll; Pigpen: blues; Weir: folk and rock) are typical of the San Francisco approach, as was their rejection of the purism that is often associated with several of those backgrounds. As Ralph Gleason put it, "in the hands of the Grateful Dead, rock was the soundtrack for a scene agog at the unfolding spectacle of psychedelia. Mystical eastern arcana, Indian headtrips, sci-fi fantasy flights, the secret teachings of the delta blues fathers, motorcycle fetishism, the Beat cosmos, the Wild West and the next frontier—somehow the Dead personified it all."[97]

The one common denominator seems to have been the ludic atmosphere, the refusal to take anything too seriously, especially in terms of status. Whereas Happenings in New York could be quite serious affairs, presenting themselves as Artistic Statements,[98] the San Francisco scene was more playful and lighthearted. This comes out clearly in Ralph Gleason's review of performance by New York's Exploding Plastic Inevitable, featuring the Velvet Underground: "Warhol's films are a triumph of monotony into boredom. The Plastic Inevitable is the same principle applied to a rock 'n' roll dance."[99] Perry notes that "what was unique to the hippies was their attitude—an expansive, theatrical attitude of being cool enough to have fun."[100] Speaking of the impact of the Beatles on the Grateful Dead's scene, Garcia chooses not to

[95] Sculatti and Seay, *Nights*, 23.
[96] Sculatti and Seay, *Nights*, 24.
[97] Gleason, *Jefferson*, 72.
[98] See, for example, the chapter on "Concept Art" in Branden Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage* (New York: Zone, 2011), 153-212.
[99] Gleason, *Jefferson*, 36.
[100] Perry, *Haight*, 5.

emphasize their music—rather, he notes that "they were making people happy. That happy thing—that's the stuff that counts—something that we could see right away."[101]

What this meant for the Grateful Dead is that they were part of a scene in which experimentation was encouraged, with an overall atmosphere of exuberance and enthusiastic amateurism. The "after the end of the world" feeling diminished concerns about "authenticity" or about how one could fit one's artistic activities into a pre-existing artistic hierarchy, thus encouraging the sort of invention and experimentation that the Grateful Dead engaged in. Furthermore, the scene's openness to all sorts of stimuli made it easier for a band to have faith in its inspirations, when those inspirations (which, I will argue, involved having transcendent religious experiences while playing rock music on acid) might easily have seemed laughable in other contexts.

Community feeling

The San Francisco scene was known for its strong community feeling, particularly with regard to the Grateful Dead, who were an iconic band almost from the start of their career. Speaking of Thanksgiving 1966, McNally writes that "the band had achieved a particular kind of status within their world. They'd been a band for less than two years, yet there was an apartment … in the Haight whose tenants sold buttons that read 'Good Ol' Grateful Dead."[102]

This feeling that the band was a beloved institution is to be expected, given how the Grateful Dead's activities overlapped with many of the characteristic features of, and main players in, the San Francisco scene. They were integrally associated with the iconic Acid Tests at the start of their career, they worked with all the major promoters, most notably Bill Graham, they helped to pioneer the tradition of free public performances, they were known for their friendship with the Hell's Angels—wherever the San Francisco hip community looked, it would see the Grateful Dead reflected there.

[101] Garcia, Reich and Wenner, *Garcia*, 14.
[102] McNally, *Trip*, 175.

Psychedelic drug use also played a significant role in establishing this scene's identity and linking it to rock music, dancing, and the promise of a new age. "Throughout the spring and summer of 1966 there were at least two rock dance concerts each weekend night, all marked by the same accepting spirit that presumed that anyone who came was hip to psychedelics and probably stoned. The mere fact of being immersed in a sea of like-minded heads produced an intoxication of its own. San Francisco's LSD users developed a special confidence about what they were doing … they were publicly outrageous."[103]

The hip community was theoretically open to all: it merely required its members to recognize themselves as members—that is, for them to recognize themselves as not belonging to the "square" world, or indeed to prior and now outmoded bohemias of the past, although such bohemias could be drawn upon for influence or revered as forerunners, as was the case with the Beats, two of whose icons (Neal Casady and Allen Ginsberg) crossed over to the new scene. As Garcia put it, in discussing his first LSD experiences and decision to drop out of mainstream culture and join the counterculture, "it made me immensely happy because like suddenly I knew that what I thought I knew all along I really did know and it was really, it really was the way I hoped it might be."[104]

The community did not adjure hierarchical power arrangements, but there was an effort made to keep the hierarchies within the community. As Ralph Gleason notes, for instance, the new promoters "were unlike any that I had ever seen … They entered into the occasion as participants, not organizers."[105] Some musicians, too, paid at least lip service to egalitarian ideals—as Garcia put it, "the leader thing don't work because you don't need it. Maybe it used to, but I don't think you need it anymore because everyone is the leader."[106] Others took these ideals much further, including the activists united under the name of the Diggers, a guerilla

[103] Perry, *Haight*, 52-3.
[104] Garcia, Reich and Wenner, *Garcia*,19.
[105] Gleason, *Jefferson*, 8.
[106] Garcia, Reich and Wenner, *Garcia*, 49.

theatre group active in distributing food and anarchist ideology in San Fransisco in the mid to late 1960s[107]

In addition to often seeing (or at least presenting) themselves as part of the community, musicians also represented the community in that many of their songs emerged from and/or sought to articulate the drug experiences that were defining for so many members of the scene, whether musicians or not. The musicians "were speaking of the Great Unspeakable of being stoned, like prophets emerging from the community to address its deepest concerns … they themselves had faced the situations described in the lyrics in all the vulnerability of being stoned on psychedelics."[108]

This dichotomized "hip versus square" approach meant that the various experimental or marginal groups or scenes could overlap in this larger scene, with Kesey and the Merry Pranksters collaborating with avant garde theatre group the Mime Troupe and the experimental musicians from the Tape Music Center to set up events, attended by Hell's Angels among others, at which the music would be provided by the new generation of rock and folk-rock bands.

There were a few landmark events in terms of establishing this sense of community.[109] Several sources present the Rolling Stones show in San Francisco on May 14, 1965 as having been an important harbinger of the new scene:[110] "in amongst a smattering of prescient adolescents, the mildly curious, and the simply misplaced were a handful of people with nothing better to do than to take all the seething, unfocused energy of the time and manhandle it into a scene."[111]

Another landmark event was the opening of the Matrix Club in August 1965, which established an artist-run, "hip" foothold in the San Francisco music scene, as the club was

[107] Perry, *Haight*, 104-112; for manifestos, broadsides, and history of the movement, seehttp://www.diggers.org
[108] Perry, *Haight*, 53.
[109] For a much more detailed examination, see esp. Perry, *Haight*; also McNally, *Trip*, and Gleason, *Jefferson*.
[110] Gleason, *Jefferson*, 26.
[111] Sculatti and Seay, *Nights*, 19.

founded and co-run by Marty Balin of the Jefferson Airplane.[112] The Rolling Stones returned to California later that year, playing in San Jose on Dec. 5. Adding to the importance of this day for the scene, the second of Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters' Acid Tests took place that night, also in San Jose, and was the first at which the Grateful Dead performed.[113]

Several more Acid Tests followed over the next month, culminating in the Trips Festival (January 21-23 1966), which was the event at which the scene self-consciously came into being. Many of the people who were important in the hip scene at the time were present at this show, and the Festival drew a very large and flamboyant audience. The feeling that a new community had emerged was palpable—as Sculatti and Seay put it, "the idea was to gather up all the separate but equally groovy elements of the local scene, toss 'em into one big pot, and invite the whole town to supper"[114] even if for some—such as Stewart Brand, quoted above—the Trips Festival was an ending rather than a beginning.

In addition to this more generalized community, the Grateful Dead's scene itself (frequently, and significantly, referred to as a "family") was strongly linked, with strong musical, romantic and/or social ties between many of the participants going back for years.[115] The band made efforts to maintain this family, or tribal, feeling: as Garcia put it in 1972, "our whole scene had been completely cooperative and entirely shared. We never structured our situation where anybody was getting any money. What we were doing was buying food, paying rent, stuff like that."[116]

Dancing

The San Francisco scene was a dancing scene. Indeed, one of the reasons that rock-based improvisation became so firmly identified with that scene is precisely because long jams over rock beats was what the dancers wanted. People went out to the San Francisco ballrooms

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[112] Gleason, *Jefferson*, 33; Jeff Tamarkin, *Got a Revolution: The Turbulent Flight of the Jefferson Airplane* (New York: Atria, 2003), 24-32.
[113] Wolfe, *Electric*, 210-213.
[114] Sculatti and Seay, *Nights*, 59.
[115] Jackson, *Garcia*, 28-85; McNally, *Trip*, 22-106.
[116] Garcia, Reich and Wenner, *Garcia*, 34.

to dance, and bands obliged them with dramatically extended songs.[117] "The improvisation and stylistic blends that came to characterize the … San Francisco sound weren't the result of sophisticated musical savants stepping boldly into the unknown … the Avalon and Fillmore faithfuls weren't interested in skill. All they required was bands that could play long and loud … Suddenly, people wanted to dance … and their stamina was daunting."[118]

As we have seen, the range of influences that the bands could draw from to support such extensions was vast, but in order for a band to survive commercially, they had to be adept at bringing those influences into a danceable, rock context. Consequently, "the Dead, along with all the other successful psychedelic aggregates in the city, was first, foremost and finally a dance band."[119].

The San Francisco scene did later become notorious for overindulgence—not every band, and certainly not every lead guitarist, could sustain interest over extended lengths of blues-derived soloing. But at least in the beginning, the emphasis on danceability served to give the bands focus. Whatever else they might have intended to do, they needed first of all to make sure that the dancers kept dancing. As long as they could do that, they could play "In The Midnight Hour" for over half an hour without complaints, as the Grateful Dead did, or could incorporate hitherto unheard of amounts of dissonance into their music.

This emphasis was not lost on the bands. When an interviewer pointed out that "the music that the Dead, Quicksilver and the Airplane performed at concerts beginning in 1966 included long instrumental pieces," manager Rock Scully responded "that's because those early concerts were dance concerts, and the dancers didn't want the songs to end. Dancing was a real important part of it, and the band wasn't always the focus of attention."[120] Taking up the same point, but from a different angle, when discussing the Grateful Dead's efforts to imply rhythm rather than explicitly state it, Garcia pointed out that at the same time they are

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[117] Sculatti and Seay, *Nights*, 73-5.
[118] Davin Seay and Mary Neely, "Prophets on the Burning Shore" (pages 187-217 in *Stairway to Heaven: The Spiritual Roots of Rock and Roll*, edited by Davin Seay and Mary Neely [New York: Ballantine, 1986]), 198-9.
[119] Sculatti and Seay, *Nights*, 73.
[120] Jackson, *Road*, 115.

concerned to "keep it groovy and yet make it so people can still move to it … we still feel that our function is as a dance band … and that's what we like to do. We like to play with dancers … nothing improves your time like having somebody dance. Just pulls the whole thing together. And it's also a nice little feedback thing."[121]

Conclusion

The Grateful Dead were fortunate enough to begin their career in a context in which a variety of new and/or different musical approaches that privileged improvisation and experimentation were available to be drawn on as resources. The environment in which these resources could be deployed was one that emphasized celebration and eclecticism, thus encouraging musicians to take chances and expand their approaches. It also had a strong communal element, with the community made up of friends and fellow-musicians of long standing as well as people brought together and feeling themselves to be unified simply by virtue of enthusiasm to develop and parade their individualist approach to life. This sense of community provided a nurturing environment for development in all sorts of activities, music being one of them.

This development was grounded, on the one hand, by the commercial need to ensure that, no matter how experimental it might get, the music would be (mostly) danceable; on the other hand, it was furthered by the enthusiasm of the dancers for extended pieces—unlike, for example, the late 1970s and early 1980s hardcore scenes, which were also predominantly dancing scenes, but in which the musical requirements were extremely tight and hence limiting: "although the [hardcore] philosophy implied 'no rules,' the music wasn't avant-garde, experimental, nor did it have unlimited possibilities. It was about playing as fast as possible."[122] The San Francisco dancers of the mid-1960s seem to have been more tolerant than this: as long as "it's got a good beat and you can dance to it," they were willing to accept a great deal of sonic and structural experimentation.

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[121] Gleason, *Jefferson*, 315.
[122] Steven Blush, *American Hardcore: A Tribal History* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2001), 42.

Chapter 3: How the Grateful Dead Learned To Jam

An ideal thing would be to go onstage with absolutely nothing in your head, and everybody get together and pick up his instrument and play and improvise the whole thing … And perhaps that's a place where we can all get. But it's in the experimental stage. It's kind of like an alchemical experiment that you have to repeat. Again and again and again, the same experiment, exactly the same … We don't repeat the music—the details of the music—over and over again. *There's a framework for that too*. But it's like the same effort. The effort is to get higher.

Jerry Garcia[123]

In this section I will explore the Grateful Dead's transformation from a fairly conventional folk/blues/rock band into the exponents of a unique, new improvisational way of playing rock music. In doing so, I will be working both synchronically and diachronically—that is, both with and without reference to their broader musical development over time.

Close examination shows that the band's performance practice for the period that I am discussing can be broadly fitted into a conceptual model that I will call the Framework, and which will be synchronically detailed below. The Framework developed in the first half of 1966, reached its full expression in the latter half of 1966 and into 1967, and then was partially superseded by the band's artistic and professional development—although it never disappeared completely.

The Framework represents a way of understanding the Grateful Dead's early solution to the problem of designing a means through which live rock music could be transformed into a flexible, improvisational art form. Interviews with the band members and insider accounts,

[123] Douglas Hall and Sue Clark, *Rock: A World Bold as Love* (New York: Cowles, 1970), 164, italics mine.

detailed and discussed in the second half of this dissertation, suggest that the impetus to create and develop their improvisational approach to rock music derives from what can only be described as the revelation of a new mode of consciousness for the band. The Grateful Dead's early career can only be fully understood when it is seen at least in part as the attempt to recreate and represent their experiences of this new mode of consciousness; it is in that conceptual environment that the Framework's true usefulness becomes apparent.

More or Less in Line

Overall, the Grateful Dead's approach to improvisation can be described as the group's spontaneous creation of, manipulation of, and progression between musical structures. Only extremely rarely do they approach "free" or unstructured improvisation; there is almost always a pulse in their music, usually a rhythm, and the tonal center is rarely in question. Furthermore, while most shows in the band's first decade (1965-1975) did feature periods of "outside" music, the vast majority of the Grateful Dead's improvisation took place within relatively tightly structured songs.

What we find in the Grateful Dead's music, then, is not the rejection of structure, but rather the freedom to work with structure, to move from form to form either directly or with periods of liminal formlessness in between. This motion through forms is not soloistic or individualistic, but rather is guided and cued by the spontaneous interplay between band members and the commitment to group solidarity. The Grateful Dead do not abandon structure—or rather, they do so only very briefly, and not at all in the period currently under discussion. Instead, they take an outsider's view of it, seeing it as unfixed and impermanent, thus allowing themselves the freedom to move freely within and around it. At any given moment the group will be more or less invested in a given form, but not identified with it. While playing within a form, they also play *around with* it; throughout, they retain their collective autonomy.

The Grateful Dead's approach was influenced by jazz practice, particularly (to judge by interviews) the more open, modal jazz of the late 1950s and early 1960s, rather than the free

jazz that was developing contemporaneously with them. Although Jerry Garcia did appear on an Ornette Coleman album,[124] this was not until many years later. Interviews with band members throughout their career show them to be unstinting in their praise for the work of John Coltrane, particularly his work with his celebrated Quartet, but one searches in vain for references to more radical players such as Albert Ayler or Cecil Taylor. Nonetheless, the influence of jazz upon their musical concept is clear, and guitarist Bob Weir went so far as to say, "our basic premise is rock and roll … we just approach it from a jazz point of view."[125]

However, the Grateful Dead's concept is significantly different from that typical of jazz groups, especially in terms of the status of the interrelationships between the musicians—that is, whether those interrelationships are seen as means or end. Jazz improvisation has frequently been likened to a conversation, a discussion between separate voices individually responding to and commenting on their situation.

Although the conversational element is certainly present in the Grateful Dead's playing, here it is the means to the end rather than the end itself. The Grateful Dead functions very much as a *group*—one whose musical directions arise from the interaction of its component members, true, but nonetheless the focus throughout is on the organization as *one* thing composed of *several* independent but aligned voices, unified if raggedly so. As they put it in their song "Truckin'": "Together, more or less in line."

The importance of a ragged-but-right, laid back approach to ensemble playing for the Grateful Dead is made clear when we consider "Cleo's Back," an instrumental 12-bar blues song that was released by Junior Walker and the All-Stars as the B-side to "Shake and Fingerpop."[126] "Cleo's Back" came out at the same time that the Grateful Dead were forming, and Garcia singled out this song as being an especially significant influence on the Grateful Dead as they were developing their aesthetic. It is easy to hear why: the various instruments interact in a ramshackle way as the song ambles along, occasionally to the point of seeming to stumble over

[124] *Virgin Beauty* (Sony), released in 1988.
[125] Gans, *Conversations*, 182.
[126] Willie Woods, "Cleo's Back," Motown TMG 529 (B), 1965.

one another (1:50). Furthermore, while each instrument (sax, guitar, keyboards, bass and drums) plays a conventional role, no one of them is overwhelmingly in the forefront. The song's identity is provided not by a lead melody, but by a catchy two-note guitar riff; however, this riff disappears for the last two choruses of the song. Despite all this surface-level incoherence, however, "Cleo's Back" has a very distinct identity, one created through the sensitive, apparently spur of the moment, and more or less egalitarian interaction of its various musicians. As we will see, all of these characteristics were present in the approach that the Grateful Dead would develop.

Playing in the Band

The modern discussion of improvisation in Western popular music has been heavily influenced by jazz practices and aesthetics. This is reasonable, given the emphasis that jazz places on improvisation, but it does have its consequences. As it seems to me, those who work in the jazz world, and hence as well those who work in the improvising scenes that come from the jazz world or draw heavily on it, have a strong tendency to favor the extreme ends of a continuum that stretches from individuals to the overarching tradition when they conceptualize the social organizations at play in the music.

What I mean by this is that the presentation and discussion of jazz music and the jazz scene often focuses on the *scene*, or more widely the *tradition*, as the conceptual container, within which *individuals* work and interact. When we speak in jazz terms, then, we tend to talk about specific musicians, who emerge out of musical-historical contexts and are either representative of, or perhaps not representative of, those contexts—and this has been the context of much discussion of improvising musicians.. A look at recent[127] issues of the Canadian journal *Critical Studies in Improvisation*, to take one example, presents us with articles on specific improvisers, the broader social environments and (musical, sexual, civic, legal) contexts of improvisation, and even improvisation as a process of individuation. But there are no articles about improvising groups. Similarly, books on the development of improvisation tend to deal

[127] Resource accessed March 10, 2014..

with musical scenes or regions[128]or individuals[129] rather than groups. There are books on Miles Davis' career as a whole[130] or segments of it[131], but there are no books that I know of dedicated specifically to any of the bands that he led, although in the latter half of his career his contribution as a bandleader was arguably as significant as his contribution as an instrumentalist.

Thus, the discourse about jazz and improvised music often presents the individual as being fitted within the context of his or her scene or tradition, and the *band* as being less important—it acquires its significance insofar as it provides the vehicle for the realization of a given musician's musical goals, or the space within which the dialogues between individual musicians can take place. We might talk about musician X, whose sound is characteristic of mid-1950s Detroit tenor players with some influence from what was going on in St. Louis, for instance, and who was influenced by musicians Y and Z. Musician X certainly played in bands, but those bands will probably not be the focus of our discussion (except insofar as the bands are presented as the manifestation of a given musician's compositional or conceptual development)—rather, we will focus on Musician X, Musician X's branch of the tradition, and the other musicians with whom Musician X worked with.

Consequently, a good deal of the writing on jazz and jazz-derived improvisation has had a strongly dialogic focus, in two ways. Jazz music-making is often presented as an activity whose goal is to produce a space—defined conceptually by the tradition or scene—that structures the sorts of dialogues that the individual players can have with each other, Ingrid Monson's *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* being the classic example. Sometimes the conceptual space is felt to be too constricting, and then liberatory impulses arise, seeking to loosen the rules, as we see throughout the history of jazz, perhaps most strongly—certainly

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[128] For example, Lewis, *Power*; Heffley, *Northern Sun*; Bailey, *Improvisation*; Wilmer, *Serious*; Borgo, *Sync*.
[129] E.g., Ben Watson, *Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation* (New York: Verso, 2004); Berkman, *Monument*; Jost, *Free Jazz*; Litweiler, *Freedom*
[130] E.g., Szwed, *So What*;
[131] E.g.,for his "jazz rock phase," in which he touched most closely on rock norms and approaches, Paul Tingen, *Miles Beyond: The Electric Explorations of Miles Davis, 1967-1991* (New York: Billboard, 2001); Philip Freeman, *Running the Voodoo Down: The Electric Music of Miles Davis* (San Francisco: Backbeat, 2005).

archetypally—in the creation of free jazz. At other times, or with other people, there will be the perception that the dialogues need tighter structures in order to be meaningful, and then there comes a call for more fixed forms or greater respect for tradition.

Alternately, the musician's tradition can be presented as a dialogue partner, when the musician's musical choices are analyzed as responses to the traditions within which he or she is working, and the other musicians present assume the role of assistants or bystanders in these interactions with the tradition. See, for a very clear example, Hall Crook's discussion of tradition in the introduction to his instructional book, *Ready, Aim, Improvise: Exploring the Basics of Jazz Improvisation*: "Of course, a certain degree of originality … is important when improvising in the jazz idiom. But here, especially during the early stages of learning how to improvise, a soloist's search for originality must be balanced and tempered with authenticity and tradition … Knowing traditional jazz vocabulary influences the shapes and sounds of a player's more modern and creative improvised ideas."[132] Or, as Berliner puts it, one "learn[s] to speak jazz" by "acquiring a complex vocabulary of conventional phrases and phrase components."[133]

This standard jazz approach, however, is not the only way to go about things. In between the extremes of the individual and the scene or tradition, there lies the middle ground of the band, and there are musical traditions in which the band, not the individual musician, is the privileged vehicle of musical identity.

Of course, when dealing with a continuum, there are no hard and fast divisions. For example, the classic Coltrane Quartet, made up of John Coltrane, McCoy Tyner, Elvin Jones, and Jimmy Garrison, is one of modern jazz's greatest icons, and it is iconic not just because of the musicianship of the individuals—and this despite the virtual deification of John Coltrane—but also because of the group feeling that has been ascribed to it.

Thus Eric Nisenson speaks of Jimmy Garrison joining the group by saying that he was "the last piece to [Coltrane's] classic group," and goes on to say that the group became "a

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[132] Hal Crook, *Ready*, *Aim*, *Improvise: Exploring the Basics of Jazz Improvisation* (Rottenburg: Advance Music, 1999), 17.
[133] Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, 95.

whole greater than the sum of its parts but absolutely dependent on each of the four parts."[134] Bill Cole, too, takes Garrison's arrival as creating something sui generis: "These weren't just four individuals in Trane's band, but a unit led by a matured spirit …The fruits of the quartet's relationship began to manifest themselves from the moment that Garrison stepped into the band."[135] Such an appreciation for the band as a musical grouping is not entirely alien to jazz, then, but it is not foregrounded the way that it is in some other traditions. Jazz bands, for all their distinctness, are often closely identified with the leader, as with Miles Davis' classic quintet and subsequent electric bands, or with the orchestras of Count Basie or Duke Ellington; from the late 1960s on, the presentation of a jazz group as a group is often accompanied by an association with a rock or pop context, as in the case of Weather Report or Return to Forever.

This group feeling is somewhat exceptional although not unknown in jazz contexts, but it is fundamental in the rock world(s): rock musicians tend to be strongly associated with bands, and even many of the apparent exceptions such as Neil Young or Bruce Springsteen have ties to their previous or ongoing bands. Rock musicians are individuals just as jazz musicians are, of course, and they live and work in a scene, but the basic unit of the rock scene, conceptually and practically, is the band, which coalesces out of the individuals in the scene. Bands are units, more or less stable, whose artistic role is to create a unique group approach to music. In their richest and most successful manifestations, such group approaches create a whole symbolic or mythological universe, a cosmos with distinctive approaches to symbolism, iconography, and for lack of a better word, headspace, as well as music.

For rock players, then, the band becomes the fundamental location of identity, and the creation of the band and development of the band's unique approach is the musician's basic task. We can illustrate the difference this way: Jazz musicians (and, by and large, improvisers) establish their backgrounds and social status by talking about which people they've played with; rockers talk about the bands they've been in.

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[134] Nisenson, *Ascension*, 129 and 141.
[135] Bill Cole, *John Coltrane* (New York: Da Capo, 2001), 134 and 139.

The band is a social context that can produce extremely interesting music-related art; it also provides a wonderful example of one way in which we can steer our artistic practice past the Scylla of facile individualism and the Charybdis of sterile and anonymous social process—and thus it can provide a model for our non-art practice as well. Thinking in terms of bands valorizes the creation of unique, nuanced, and collaborative works of art that have organic extension through time. Working in a group places great demands—artistic and social—on musicians and listeners (it can be difficult for listeners or players raised on or in more dialogic art forms to fully appreciate or even perceive the subtle artistic worlds that bands create), but when the band is successful, these demands are more than repaid by the quality of music produced.

By defining themselves so clearly as a band, the Grateful Dead fit into the mainstream of the rock and popular music tradition; as an improvising band, they stand out. Given that we are thinking in terms of bands, and keeping the Grateful Dead's focus on dancing in mind, it might seem logical here to draw a comparison with a funk band. Here, too, the soloist is not ignored, is accorded the foreground, but the emphasis remains on the group as a cohesive unit whose purpose is to induce dancing. However, funk music is often static in a way that the Grateful Dead never are, and is also precisely and polyrhythmically organized (see discussion of rhythmic congresence in African-American music below, section 1.4), whereas the Grateful Dead's *modus operandi* allows for—even necessitates—a great deal of creative disorganization.

A better comparison would be with an African dance band, say a Nigerian juju or highlife band: in listening to the music of such artists as I. K. Dairo, the Oriental Brothers, or Sunny Ade, we find the same focus on the group as a gathering of individuals and the soloist as an element within that group, the same extended songs, the same openness to changing parts and lines to suit new developments in the music or its surrounding context, the same willingness to accept and even revel in a certain degree of looseness, or openness.

There certainly are musical precedents for the Grateful Dead's approach to music; however, non-musical influences also play a role. During this period, the band members were

on what can be understood at least in part as a religious or spiritual quest, which will be discussed at greater length in the second half of the dissertation. Their goal, at least from the point of view of bassist Phil Lesh, was to create a group consciousness that would enhance or fulfil rather than suppress the individuality of the various band members, and that would be able to create in spontaneous yet unified ways, with its members being intuitively in sync. As Lesh puts it, they were seeking

> [T]o learn, above all, how to play together, to entrain, to become, as we described it then, 'fingers on a hand' ... The unique organicity of our playing reflects the fact that each of us consciously personalized his playing; to fit with what the others were playing, and to fit with who each man was as an individual, allowing us to meld our consciousnesses together in the unity of a group mind.[136]

This sort of perception of experiences of group consciousness could well be attributed to the band's use of LSD (with the exception of Pigpen) and their willingness to be influenced by experiences and insights received while tripping. But the band's drive to create this group consciousness could also be framed in terms of contemporary American popular culture, specifically contemporary science fiction. Lesh says that "for us, the philosophical basis of this concept was articulated" in Theodore Sturgeon's science fiction novel *More Than Human*, and in his autobiography Lesh uses Sturgeon's neologism "blesh" ("blend" and "mesh") to describe the state of group consciousness.[137] Related descriptions of small but advanced groups being linked mentally can be found in other classic works of science fiction popular at the time, including Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* and "Lost Legacy," Olaf Stapledon's *Odd John*, Frederick Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth's *Wolfbane*, and Henry Kuttner's *Mutant*, to name a few.

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[136] Lesh, *Searching*, *56*.
[137] Lesh, *Searching*, 56.

The hopes and aspirations for radical transformation (whether on a personal, social, cosmic, or species level) that are found in speculative fiction, in the form of books, stories, and comic books, played an underappreciated role in the various intellectual and cultural revolutions of the 1960s. Speaking specifically of the Merry Pranksters, they treated several science fiction books as "precognitive myths," including *More than Human*, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, and Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End;*[138] Thomas Wolfe also brings out the importance of comic books for Kesey.[139] For any contemporary reader of speculative fiction, the group consciousness theme would have been difficult to avoid, especially after having been sensitized to it through shared psychedelic experience.

The flexible group consciousness that was the Grateful Dead's *raison d'être* is manifested in several interesting ways. First of all, it is noteworthy that traditional instrumental roles are rarely challenged in the Grateful Dead. It is rare indeed, especially in the early days, for Weir or Lesh to play a solo, for instance (although beginning in mid-1966 Lesh is almost always a lead voice); conversely, Garcia's guitar is almost always the lead instrument, playing lines and only rarely strumming chords.

But although Garcia is the lead voice, he is not always the leader. As I will show in this chapter, the impetus to move the band into new musical spaces can and does come from any of the members; any of them can become the momentary center of musical attention, the group's leader, and the others will adapt their parts accordingly.[140] In other words, the traditional division of roles within the group (lead guitar playing lead lines and melodies; bass playing lines that establish the rhythm and harmony; rhythm guitar playing midrange lines and chords; drums playing the rhythm and giving signalling structural changes; keyboards playing chords and ostinatos) is largely retained; what changes is where the emphasis is placed at any given point, the source of that moment's guiding inspiration. The vision of the band as being a whole

[138] Jay Stevens, *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream* (New York: Grove, 1987), 238-9.
[139] Wolfe, *Electric*, 27 and 33-35; see also Stevens, *Storming*, 97; Stephen Tanner, *Ken Kesey* (Boston: Twayne, 1983), 93-4.
[140] This is theoretically true. Practically speaking, however, Pigpen very rarely takes the lead in improvisational developments.

and each of the musicians as playing a given and predetermined role within that whole, based on their instrument, is firmly maintained.

Practically speaking, this choice lessens the "shock of the new" for the band's audience, enabling the band to continue to function as the dance ensemble that at heart they were. On a more abstract level, it brings to mind both Sturgeon's group mind in *More Than Human*, whose members have interlocking but separate and defined roles, and also and crucially the Christian tradition of seeing the community of believers as one body with each of the parts having its separate roles, a tradition that stretches back to the ecstatic Christian community addressed in Paul's Corinthian correspondence (1 Corinthians 12:4-31). Phil Lesh, for one, has invoked traditional Christian sacramental terminology to describe the effect of the Grateful Dead's music, referring to improvising as "praying" and saying that their approach to musical transcendence is to play and then "hope" that "the dove descends."[141] In the epilogue to his autobiography, he strikes the messianic note very strongly: "it felt as if we were an integral part of some cosmic plan to help transform human consciousness."[142] And, of course, many have theorized about the relationship of drug-induced transcendent experience and religious experience.

As the traditional instrumental roles are more or less unchallenged, so too do song forms retain their integrity. Some aspects of these forms are treated as being mutable, in the sense that there might be a variable amount of time spent grooving before a song starts, or instrumental breaks might extend for an extra few bars. [143] But by and large, songs are played the same way every time, with the improvisational section occupying a precise and unchanging (save for its length) slot in the tune. The essential structure of the songs, like the traditional roles of the players, is respected, if elastic.

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[141] Carol Brightman, *Sweet Chaos: The Grateful Dead's American Adventure* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 8; cf. also Lesh, *Searching*, 68-76.
[142] Lesh, *Searching*, 333.
[143] For example, in their first set on Nov. 29 1966, the band played the instrumental groove of "Viola Lee Blues" for 14 bars; in the second set, 20. The second set's performance also featured an extension of the jamming between the first and second verses. https://archive.org/details/gd66-11-29.sbd.ret.20448.sbeok.shnf.

And as with the song, so with the playing. The Grateful Dead's music almost always has, if not a precise rhythm,, then at least a strong pulse; although energetic, it is rarely chaotic; although the band frequently abandons specific chord changes, their music usually has a clear tonal center; and extremes of strong dissonance are generally avoided, at most being treated as special effects. At its heart, the Grateful Dead's music remains traditional and easily comprehensible in ways that do not apply, for instance, to the music of contemporaries such as Albert Ayler, Cecil Taylor, or AMM.

In other words, the music that the band produces is experimental in a distinctly modernist way: it plays *through* forms, more than playing *within* forms, but it does so without a postmodern flaunting of disturbance or abnormality. The Grateful Dead's real innovation, their distinctive approach, lies in their determination to show the potentialities that lie hidden within the structures and codes that make up normal lived experience. What the Grateful Dead do is not so much to change these codes and structures—the song remains a song, the band remains a band—but rather to crack it open and show the freedom at its heart.

In *The Deadhead's Taping Compendium*, Nicholas Meriwether writes that "from their first definite if inchoate stirrings in 1966 through their last shows, there was usually an element in the Dead's jams that approached what they began to do more formally beginning in 1967 … a free-form group improvisation."[144] As Meriwether points out, this "element" took time to develop, which is understandable, given its novelty—and not only time, but a mechanism by which, or a conceptual playing context within which, it could be nurtured. This context, which for the sake of simplicity I call the Framework, can be discerned through the analysis of the band's earliest forays into improvisational rock.

The Framework

The Framework, the conceptual model that underlies the band's first explorations into improvisation, can be summarized as follows:

[144] Nicholas Meriwether, "The Acid Tests" (pages 84-91 in Michael Getz and John R. Dwork, *The Deadhead's Taping Compendium: An In-Depth Guide to the Music of the Grateful Dead on Tape* [New York: Holt, 1998]), 90.

- Extended improvised sections *may* occur in some songs (such as “You Don’t Have To Ask”); invariably *do* occur in other songs (such as “Viola Lee Blues”); and *do not* occur in yet other songs (such as “Cold Rain and Snow”).

- When found, these extended improvisational sections occur at the end of the song, after the form has been played through, although shorter, more restricted improvisational sections may occur at the very start of the song or between verses.

- The extended improvisational sections emerge from the main groove of the song, as defined by a combination of rhythm, characteristic riffs, and harmonic movement, and return to it when they are finished.

- The improvisational sections are made up of a variable number of smaller sections, each lasting from 15–60 seconds.

- Movement between these sections will be initiated by band members making musical statements that are either joined in on by other band members, or used by them in constructing new musical contexts.

- Any member can make such statements.

- Although traditional instrumental roles are not challenged, any of the band members can opt to move into the foreground; thus leadership both in terms of direction between contexts, and within a given context, is potentially available to any member.

- Jamming sections tend to conclude with a climax, a high point (if not necessarily the highest point) in terms of dynamics, volume, and/or frenzy.

- Following this climax, the band will frequently either reintroduce the main groove of the song, with or without a sung coda, or play the song's characteristic riff.

In the period discussed here, extended improvisational activity takes place in a number of songs, the most notable of which are listed in Table 1. The amount of improvisation in the band's sets steadily increases as time goes on. Thus for example while there is only one extended number, "Caution," in the set from February 25 1966[145], by October 22 1967 the entire set is made up of pieces that feature extended improvisation. From 1966-1969 there is a gradual increase in the amount of improvisational activity in the band's sets, both in terms of the number of songs with such activity and in terms of the length of the improvisations.

Table 1. Improvisational Activity

Song	**Significant Improvisational Activity**
"Alligator"	Always
"Caution (Do Not Stop onTracks)"	Always
"Cream Puff War"	Maybe
"Dancing in the Streets"	Always
"Death Don't Have No Mercy"	Maybe
"Good Morning, Little Schoolgirl"	Maybe
"In the Midnight Hour"	Always
"Morning Dew"	Maybe
"New Potato Caboose"	Always
"The Other One"	Always
"The Same Thing"	Maybe

[145] https://archive.org/details/gd1966-02-25.sbd.unknown.20346.sbeok.shnf.

“(Turn on Your) Love Light”	Always
“Viola Lee Blues”	Aways

Of the various styles of songs in the Grateful Dead’s repertoire, the least represented in this list are the driving rock or folk-rock tunes such as “Going Down The Road Feeling Bad” (which only later became an extended vehicle), “Cold Rain and Snow,” or “You Don’t Have To Ask,” with “Cream Puff War” being an exception to this general rule.

The improvisations found in Pigpen-sung, R&B or blues rave-ups with extended vocal exhortations (especially “In the Midnight Hour,” “Good Morning Little Schoolgirl,” and “(Turn on Your) Love Light”) are structured differently from that found in the other material, and will be discussed in section 1.5 below.

Thus even from the band’s early period there are two streams of improvisational practice at work. One stream lead the band into fairly open improvisation, in which potentially all aspects of a song, including its rhythm and harmony, could be spontaneously renegotiated. The approach to jamming that the band adopted for the material led by Pigpen, by contrast, is less open (albeit frequently more danceable), especially in terms of the basic rhythm and the harmony, which do not vary. The Pigpen songs represent a less radical form of improvisation: it is not so very different from what one could hear other rock, blues and r&b bands do when they “stretched out” in concert.

With regard specifically to the Framework material (that is, the non-Pigpen songs), in the period currently under discussion improvisation takes place in up to three sections in a song:

1) in the introduction, in which case it is relatively restrained;

2) in brief instrumental statements between verses, again with restrained improvisation; and

3) in full-on jamming sections that take place at the end of the song, after the verses have been sung—at a point where one could imagine the song going into a fadeout, were it a 45 rpm single.

For example, a typical performance of "Viola Lee Blues," a blues composed by Noah Lewis and first recorded by him with Cannon's Jug Stompers, would begin with the main groove, with some elaboration, perhaps in the form of a guitar solo, followed by the first verse. Between the first and second verse, there would be more elaboration, again most likely in the form of a guitar solo, with the band getting somewhat more expansive; following this would come the third verse, and after this the jamming would begin in earnest.

At this stage in their career, the Grateful Dead do not jam from one song into the next—or at least, extant recordings have not preserved examples of this. Nor do they develop songs out of amorphous beginnings ("jam into a song," as a Deadhead would say); rather, songs will definitely start, following the clear finish of preceding songs, and they will begin with the form, or if not the form then at least with a statement of the main groove. This statement, if present, may be extended, but rarely for very long, and what jamming takes place stays fairly close to the original groove.

As an example, take the version of "Cream Puff War" performed 7 Oct. 1966.[146] The instrumental section begins (2:04) with Garcia soloing over a two-chord vamp. After four times through the progression, the band moves to slightly different territory, cued by Lesh's choice to extend the main chord of the progression slightly (2:28), to which Garcia responds by going up the neck into a higher, modal solo. They play the progression another four times through, as Lesh increases both his level of activity and the intensity of his playing. This rise in dynamics cues Kreutzmann to bring things together with some propulsive hits (3:16) as Lesh continues his driving bass line.

At several points in the jam (e.g. 3:36) it sounds as if Garcia and Lesh are thinking in terms of a one-chord structure, dropping the second chord of the vamp, but Pigpen's

[146] http://archive.org/details/gd66-10-07.sbd.unknown.14102.sbeok.shnf.

monotonous riffing on the organ prevents this change. Weir shows his willingness to suspend the chord progression (for example at 4:16–4:19), and introduces a very effective high chord at 4:39, incorporating drone strings that moves the jam into a more ambiguous, open, context before it returns to the vamp at 4:51. This in turn leads into the cue for the end of the song at 5:25, indicating that this open section—the high point of chaos and uncertainty in the improvisation—has been taken by the band to be the climax to the piece.

This piece clearly demonstrates the movement from the song proper into the jamming section, and also shows how changes in harmonic motion can be used as markers. It is significant that the Grateful Dead's trajectory in this regard is toward simplicity and ambiguity. Although the main groove here involves a two-chord vamp, there is a tendency to break away from that vamp in favour of harmonic stasis (as in the case of Garcia and Lesh's tendencies to extend the first chord in the vamp) or, more subtly, in favor of creating a harmonically ambiguous area, essentially conceiving of the general tonal environment of the jam as a mode rather than a chord.

This tendency can be seen quite clearly in the band's treatment of blues and blues-related tunes, in which turnarounds and standard I-IV-I-V-I progressions are used during the verses and then often drop out of the improvisational sections. One striking example of this is their treatment of "Death Don't Have No Mercy" from 19 Mar. 1966[147], in which the band chooses to understate the chord changes at 2:34-2:50, in order to keep the open drone on I going, or at 3:34-3:47, when they pedal on the I following a turnaround, rather than immediately move into the form. The blues song "The Same Thing" is limited in harmonic motion, with no move to the IV and only a final V-I turnaround, but even this harmonic motion tends to be dropped as the band improvises, as can be heard in their 16 Sept. 1966 performance.[148] The Framework was in a developed state by that time, and the following breakdown of the version of "Dancing in the Streets"performed at that show illustrates how it was put to service in performance.

[147] http://archive.org/details/gd66-03-19.sbd.scotton.81951.sbeok.flac.
[148] http://archive.org/details/gd1966-09-16.117435.vinyl.sbd.indidarkstar.flac24.

Time	Event
0:01-08	Introduction, with the band playing the basic groove: a midtempo rock backbeat with a two-bar pattern that moves from I-bVII; both the rhythm and the harmony create a call-and-response pattern, with the second bar responding to the first
0:09-2:07	Body of the song, Weir singing lead throughout
2:05-2:38	Beginning of the jamming: The band starts by playing the introductory groove while Garcia plays a lead, with emphasis on triplets; as time goes on, the rest of the band (led by Kreutzmann, cuing with a drum roll at ca. 2:20) begins smoothing out the rhythm so that the underlying feel is simply a backbeat, with less of the call-and-response feel
2:39-2:42	Garcia pauses; Weir comes briefly to the forefront, calming the music down
2:43-3:06	Garcia returns to soloing at the same high volume and with the same trebly timbre, but the rest of the band plays more quietly before coming up in volume and dynamics again at ca. 2:50, with Pigpen playing an offbeat pattern that drives the rhythm
3:07-3:32	Pigpen moves away from offbeat pattern to play sustained chords; when he ceases, the band brings the dynamics down somewhat, although Lesh gets more active throughout this section
3:32-3:44	Garcia ends his lead and switches to playing a simple 2-bar figure emphasizing A, B, and G over a droning A an octave below; Weir plays a high voicing over top of Garcia's rhythm; Pigpen fits his chords into this structure, creating a dense and disorienting texture
3:40-4:04	Lesh moves into the forefront, no longer playing lines or establishing the rhythm, but rather playing over it with a strong triplet feel ; Garcia breaks off briefly (3:46-3:52) from his riff to play a complementary line, and then returns to the riff
4:04-4:48	Garcia begins soloing again, while Lesh continues to play strong, active lines; Pigpen switches to playing a single note riff in a 2 bar pattern with occasional chord pushes that sound haphazard, not in precise time with the rhythm
4:49-4:57	Weir moves into the foreground with a high held note; following this, Weir creates harmonic tension by emphasizing the I strongly, and builds rhythmic tension by playing against the rhythm
4:56-5:26	Lesh moves into the upper register, creating the pre-climax feeling; Weir keeps playing high chords, but places them even more jaggedly. At this point, only Pigpen is keeping the chord changes going; the combination of heightened dynamics, lack of harmonic motion,

	and movement of the bass into its upper register create a chaotic, climactic feeling
5:27	The band settles down into the main groove again
5:32	Weir sings the final chorus

Jamming

As noted above, the jamming section will begin at the end of the form, at the point where a contemporary pop recording might go into a fadeout. As Bob Weir put it, the improvisation came in at the point where, 'we weren't done playing, but the tune was over."[149] The Grateful Dead do not introduce these sections abruptly; there is no jarring discontinuity or sudden change in basic musical parameters. Rather, they begin by simply continuing the main groove of the song, playing in a controlled, precise fashion, usually gradually bringing the dynamics up, and almost always with an introductory guitar statement by Garcia. They ease the listeners in to the jam, keeping the dancers dancing and establishing a point of reference for later explorations. An example of this would be the 19 May 1966 version of "Cream Puff War."[150] As they vamp over the main riff, Kreutzmann begins smoothing out the song's pronounced 3-3-2 rhythmic accents into a straight 4/4 backbeat beat (at 2:22). As he is doing this, Garcia loops a lead figure above him as a holding pattern, providing stability while this rhythmic change is being worked out. After ten seconds of this, Kreutzmann starts incorporating the accents of Garcia's phrase into his playing; by 2:42, it is clear that the band has moved into the jamming section proper, and Garcia takes off into a solo.

What goes on while the band is jamming? It is not a question of riffing, of the rhythm section playing ostinatos while one member solos. Nor is it a question of the band settling into a groove. Rather, the Grateful Dead's practice in the midst of jamming can be likened to that of a jazz rhythm section. The parameters (tonal, rhythmic, melodic, etc.) of the piece are understood, the feel is broadly expressed, but within that context the players are free to play as

[149] McNally, *Trip*, 91.
[150] http://archive.org/details/gd1966-05-19.sbd.miller.106828.flac16.

they see fit, continually adjusting their lines and phrasing to express their take on what is happening at any given moment or to respond to what the other players are doing—and also, potentially, aspects of the song's harmony or rhythm.

The major point of potential difference would be that most of the time, a jazz rhythm section is carrying out all of this activity against the backdrop of a more or less defined song structure, ranging in specificity from the rigidity of a standard to the openness of a piece based around modes and having few chord changes. When the Grateful Dead are jamming, the texture against which they are working at any given moment tends to be understood as a certain tonality, a certain dynamic level, and a certain rhythmic feel—keeping in mind that the band's tendency is to break down chord changes, thus emphasizing the bare, unadorned tonal centers of the songs more strongly. When they are jamming, the band creates an undulating, loosely unified space, filled by the different voices of the various band members making their own idiosyncratic contributions from moment to moment.

The version of "Dancing in the Street" performed on March 18, 1967,[151] features a particularly elegant and illustrative entry into the improvisational section.

The jamming starts (2:05) as a guitar solo played over the main groove, and the song continues in this vein for 20 seconds. At 2:24 Kreutzmann interjects a series of small drum fills that function as pointers, indicating that the texture is changing. Lesh responds to this at 2:30 with an extra few notes before returning to the main groove.. By 2:40 the jam is in motion. Garcia finishes one statement and leaves a little bit of space; Weir immediately increases his volume and Kreutzmann also gets more active, driving the rhythm. Garcia then launches into another statement, playing more aggressively, picking up on Kreutzmann's increased energy; by 3:02 Weir joins in by playing open, ringing chords rather than clipped ones, and Lesh is beginning to roam more freely. Having moved through this gradual increase of dynamics, they coast on this level for thirty seconds or so until Garcia signals the move into a new context.

[151] http://archive.org/details/gd1967-03-18.sbd.sacks.1594.shnf.

In this brief segment, we can hear the musical "ball" being passed from player to player, featuring the incremental intensification of the collective music through players responding to each other's markers, in this way moving from the main groove of the song into uncharted territory. The art of working successfully in this style lies in creating a musical space that is well enough defined to give the band something to play off of and the dancers something to dance to, and yet not so precisely defined that it inhibits spontaneous action and reactions. It is the combination of having boundaries *and* the open space that they surround and protect.

The jamming sections are always full of motion, and this is particularly noticeable in terms of the rhythm section's playing. The Grateful Dead do not work in terms of a lead guitarist soloing over a static backing band. Rather, the overall group feel is created through continuous and independent although united movement in all the voices (Pigpen being the member most likely to simply riff through jams). In addition to this continual motion of the individual band members, there are several characteristics of the group's playing that are significant in keeping the jamming sections mobile and interesting.

First of all, especially as the jams lengthen, there is an ongoing alternation between periods of expansion and contraction, particularly in terms of dynamics or rhythm. The band is continually moving to a high point—of intensity; of rhythmic drive; of volume; generally, of excitement—briefly sustaining it, and then moving back to a lower point. The rare exceptions to this principle (such as the extended, droning three note riff in "Viola Lee Blues") are effective precisely because they are exceptions.

In addition to this rise and fall motion, there is also ongoing motion in terms of shifting the contexts of the jam. Broadly speaking, the band stays in any given "feel" for not less than fifteen seconds, and not more than a minute. At regular intervals, some aspect of the feel will change, whether that means someone introducing a new harmonic texture into the jam or dissolving harmonic progressions (often Weir's approach), tightening up or loosening the rhythm (typical of Kreutzmann), significant shifts in register or attack (Lesh), or looping riffs that are used as jumping-off points (Garcia).

Take, for example, the version of "The Same Thing" performed on 29 Nov. 1966.[152] The improvisational section of this performance is carefully and subtly developed, offering a particularly translucent version of the band's process. The improvisational section begins (4:49) with Garcia's solo over a more or less static backdrop. By 5:15 the intensity of the band has definitely begun to increase, cued by Lesh.

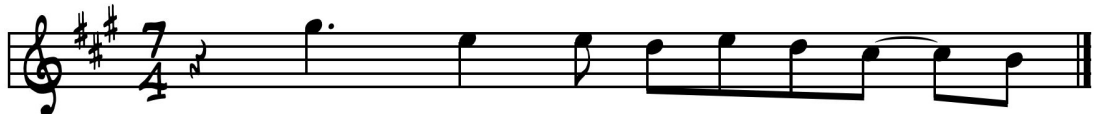
Garcia teasingly introduces a brief figure at 5:39, joined by Lesh to create a momentary respite from the main groove of the song. But he very soon drops the figure, only to bring it back again at 6:06, where it is looped and used as a marker to cue a leisurely intensification that smoothly turns into a double-time acceleration at 6:56. By 7:30 they have settled into a quick shuffle rhythm, with Garcia playing low notes and the whole band producing a very dense rhythmic structure, which Garcia eventually breaks out of (8:04), and then back into (at 8:24), quickly breaking out yet again to start another statement. At 8:51 comes the most interesting part of the jam. Garcia begins looping a triplet riff, holding it for close to thirty seconds as the rest of the band assimilates this new context—Lesh by droning; Weir by staying on one chord and moving from playing a counterrhythm to firmly supporting Garcia's rhythm; Pigpen by introducing a very effective high organ voicing. Overall, the effect is of something opening up, like a flower unfolding its petals. It is a lovely, evocative moment. Just as it threatens to become dissonant (with the dissonance led by Weir), Garcia breaks loose to continue his solo.

Here we have seen the regularity of the movement between sections, with significant changes in context taking place roughly every 30 seconds—enough time for the listener or dancer to get the feel of a new context; not enough time for them to grow bored. Although many of the changes were cued by Garcia, the piece does not come off as a guitar showcase, but rather as a collective movement through different environments. Here as elsewhere, Garcia is the leader, by virtue of his sensitivity to possibilities and his willingness to point the way to new adventures; this is more of a "first among equals" situation than the leadership usually assumed by a lead guitarist.

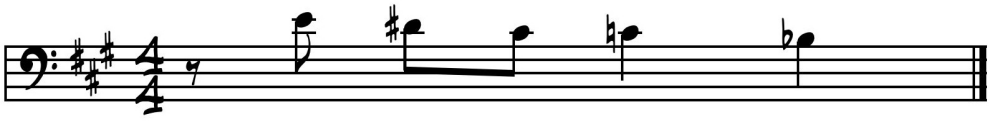
[152] http://archive.org/details/gd1966-11-29.sbd.thecore.4940.shnf.

Changes in feel will usually be signalled and initiated by one member briefly rising to the fore and making a musical statement, leading the other band members to echo or respond to it. These rise-with-statement moments we can understand as *markers*, and generally speaking they perform one of two functions.

Sometimes they work as statements that lead the way to momentary interludes that involve focusing via playing a riff or tightening up the rhythm, as we find for example in the version of "Dancing in the Street" played on 3 Sept. 1967.[153] From about 5:15 to around 6:38, the band is jamming in an open, free-floatingly conversational context that extant recordings suggest is unprecedented at this point in their career. At 6:38, however, things solidify: Lesh introduces a riff in 7/4 and it is quickly picked up by Garcia; this marker serves as a grounding, in that it briefly anchors the jam, bringing them down to earth before they return to floating territory.



At other times, markers work as statements that inspire the band to change feels, whether to a great or small extent; in these cases, I refer to them as pointers. An example of a pointer would be Lesh's bass run at 2:43-45 in the same version of "Dancing in the Streets," which problematizes the tonality of the jam and suggests a move into the "spacey" atmosphere that prevails in the next section of the jam.



Pointers may lead the way into new territory, or they may simply signal that someone thinks that the given feel has gone on long enough, and is suggesting that things change, without necessarily taking a stand on how they should change, as is the case with Garcia's looped triplet riff in "The Same Thing," mentioned above.

[153] http://archive.org/details/gd1967-09-03.sbd.miller.43.sbeok.shnf.

Pointers lead to new musical territory, while groundings provide a momentary contrast to the more free-floating textures that are typical of the jamming section. Some markers are clearly intended to belong to a specific category when played, but often their ultimate function will be determined retrospectively, depending on the reception that the marker receives from the rest of the band. An example of this can be found in the version of "Alligator," performed 5 May 1967.[154] The jam begins at 3:15; by 3:59, Garcia has finished his introductory statement and Lesh has descended to an ominous low note. Garcia takes these markers as pointers, ushering in a somewhat new texture by playing lower and more quietly; Lesh, on the other hand, seems to take them as groundings, momentary respites before he returns to the fray, this time accompanied by Pigpen. Overall, markers can be, and are, played by any of the members of the band (with Pigpen using them least), usually in ways that reflect their traditional instrumental roles—e.g., Weir will usually play markers that involve harmonic changes or chordal riffs, whereas Garcia's markers involve melodic lines or single note riffs.

Jam sections end with a climax, built by the group as a whole, although their onset is frequently cued by Garcia. This climax will be at a high point in terms of the intensity and volume of the playing, but not necessarily the highest point in the jam. Rather, the climax is distinguished by the fact that it presents the most dissonant and/or chaotic playing in the song, the point where things come the closest to sounding out of control. While some climaxes may arise from spontaneous excitement, it is clear from other cases that this is a deliberate strategy—and an effective one, providing a moment of tension that is simultaneously a moment of destructive liberation, as the forms that the band has been manipulating momentarily dissolve and the listener is brought face to face with the raw sound that underlies all form.

It is typical of the Grateful Dead's aesthetic as a dance band, no matter how experimental, that such moments are nonetheless controlled, in two ways. First of all, the climaxes themselves are not as noisy, as extended, or as dissonant as they might have been,

[154] http://archive.org/details/gd67-05-05.sbs.yerys.1595.sbeok.shnf.

especially in the early period—they are mild compared with, for example, contemporary music made by the Velvet Underground or La Monte Young. Chaos is *represented*, but not *enacted*. One can easily imagine them driving dancers into a frenzy, but they are not so disruptive as to make the dancers actually stop dancing, at least in this period—one noteworthy exception to this is the climax to the "Viola Lee Blues" performed at Toronto's O'Keefe Centre on 4 Aug. 1967,[155] when the music turns into a howling mass of electronic sound, a harbinger of what is to come in the next phase of the band's development.

Secondly, the climaxes are followed by a return to the main groove of the song. This return initiates a settling-down period that is formally similar to the introduction to the jam in reverse—the groove is played, the musicians calm down, and often Garcia will take a solo before the song ends, sometimes with a sung coda that symbolizes a return to the song's form after the jamming section, as they do in "Dancing in the Streets" or "Viola Lee Blues."

Thus the chaotic part of the jam, and indeed the jam as a whole, is encapsulated within the song, in an elegant chiastic structure. We are never in doubt (at this point, anyway) as to what song the band is playing, but it is made clear that the structured, formal face of the song is only part of its identity, only the public face, so to speak; the Grateful Dead's practice unveils the private face as well, the part of the song that opens out into infinity, and that is (theoretically at least) always potentially present.

Development of the Framework

The Framework was not the Grateful Dead's ultimate solution to the challenge of improvisation within a rock idiom. There are at least three other models that they employed as their career progressed, including the aggressive "acid rock" approach that developed out of the Framework and came to its height in 1968–69; the extremely flexible, layered, and nuanced approach that peaked in 1973–74; and a quite formalized and structured approach that was solidified by the end of the 1970s, and in which they continued working for the rest of their career.

[155]https://archive.org/details/gd1967-08-04.10355.sbd.hurwitt.shnf.

The Framework should be seen as but one step on a longer journey, and the time frame covered in this chapter enables us to see it as it is being developed, at its height, and then as it is in the process of being superseded by the next phase of the Grateful Dead's improvisational journey. We will look at these aspects in greater detail below; here, I will summarize three especially significant alterations to the Framework that took place in 1967 and that eventually led to a new approach to improvisation, which occurred at the set list level, at the song level, and within the jamming sections. Fundamentally, these alterations have to do with the relation between the parts and the whole on different levels, and with a tendency to privilege the latter over the former—or, to put it another way, to see smaller forms as constituents of larger forms.

On the level of the set list, the band moves towards deemphasizing the autonomy of the individual piece. Whereas in the Framework pieces have definite beginnings and definite endings, in the next phase of the Grateful Dead's journey there is a tendency to have starts and endings of many (though not all) songs become amorphous, and frequently connected by jamming. In some cases, such as the "China Cat Sunflower"/"I Know You Rider" combination, the songs paired in such ways are consistent. But in other cases, things are much more open, with potentially any song leading into any other—thus, for example the move from "Dark Star," the band's most open and exploratory song, to Marty Robbins' rather leaden cowboy song "El Paso" that the band performed on August 27, 1972.[156]

The effect that this unpredictable fusion of material, connected by jamming, has is to shift the listener's focus up an order of magnitude, so that the set becomes perceived as the basic context, with its constituent songs being the pieces that make it up, rather than the other way around as would be typical for a rock band. Conceptually, this has parallels with the relationship of the band members to the band as a whole. As the individual songs define but work very much within the collective identity of the set, so too the individual players define but work very much within the group spirit and essential unity of the Grateful Dead.

[156] http://archive.org/details/gd1972-08-27.sbd.hollister.2199.sbeok.shnf.

On the level of the individual songs, the old placement of improvisational parts in the "fadeout" section, following a period of grooving on the main riff of the song, is challenged compositionally as the band begins writing sections that function as taking-off spots for improvisation, or what I call "trap doors." The placement of the jamming section in "Alligator"—at the end of the song, but within the song's form rather than in fadeout position over the main groove—is a clear step along this road, as is the placement of the jamming section in "New Potato Caboose."

This development allows for greater variety in terms of the placement and basic premises of improvisational activity, and also has an effect on the perceived interaction of the composed and improvised sections of songs. The Framework model presents composed and improvised sections as being linked in their contexts of origin—that is, both develop out of the same basic rhythm and tonal area. They are linked by the fact that they come from the same place, and return to it.

On the other hand, the increasing use of compositional placement of improvisational sections unites composed and improvised sections in a different way. Although they may be different in rhythm or tonality, they are seen as constituent parts of the larger whole that they make up. Perhaps the clearest model would be the improvisational section of "Uncle John's Band," a song composed a little later than the period under discussion but sections of which pop up in jams long before the song itself is unveiled. The jamming section for this song is in a different key than the composed section (Dm versus G major), has a different time signature (7/4 versus 4/4), and ends with a bridging chord accompanied by a suspension of the rhythm to enable the players to return to the feel of the composed section of the song.

In all of these instances, the improvisational sections are joined with the composed section; they are not radically discontinuous. But as was the case with the songs in relation to the set as a whole, so here within the songs we see a move towards deemphasizing the autonomy of the sections in favour of seeing them in terms of, and fitting them into, a larger whole.

Finally, within the improvisational sections we can also hear distinct advances, having to do with changes in consistency and density. The tendency in the earlier material was for the jamming sections to be made up of more or less identifiable and distinct segments, with motion between them cued by markers and with the band playing in a relatively restrained manner, and often one that was expressive of the dominant idiom of the given section. By mid-1967, however, the band is playing much more exuberantly, particularly Lesh, and they are playing at full tilt, all the time.At any given moment the playing will tend to be more exciting and impressive than before, but it is also true that the long jams can simply be exhausting, lacking in respite or change of atmosphere. The effect is to turn the jams into more homogeneous affairs, again reducing the separations between sections in favour of emphasizing the unity of the whole in which they are contained.

Chapter 4: Improvisational Tactics 1965-1974

"What we're thinking about is, we're thinking, we're trying to think away from solo lines. From the standard routine of *this* member comps, *this* member leads. We're trying to think of ensemble stuff, you know. Not like Dixieland ensemble stuff, [but rather] something which we don't know anything about."[157]

The Grateful Dead's improvisational practice developed and changed over time, particularly in the first decade of their career. Having looked at the development of their practice above, in this chapter, I will argue that this practice can be broadly classified under eight headings, or approaches—although of course I acknowledge that these divisions are (hopefully) heuristic tools, and not hard and fast rules.

They are also outsider formalizations, and although I do believe that the analysis that I will present below is accurate, I certainly do not intend to argue that the band members themselves formulated things in this way, although of course they might have. My intent in this chapter is not to confine or lock in our understandings of the Grateful Dead's improvisational practice; rather, it is to give us some new ways of looking at it, so as to increase our awareness of and appreciation for its flexibility and nuance, and simultaneously to remind us of the conceptual and practical roots that supported it and made it possible.

Eight Approaches ...

These eight approaches are the following:

1) Soloing over changes, in which a song's structure is maintained and a soloist improvises while the rest of the band follows the chord changes and keeps the rhythm flowing.

[157] Jerry Garcia, quoted in Gleason, *Jefferson*, 314.

2) “Dance tunes” model, in which dance songs are stripped down to their most fundamental structural elements and played with a great deal of emphasis on rhythm and dynamics.

3) “Within songs” model, which concerns the band’s method of playing songs, in which a prearranged and unaltered structure is nonetheless interpreted spontaneously.

4) The Framework, discussed above.

5) Sounds, in which the band uses timbre and dynamics as the basis for its improvisation.

6) “Movement through sections” model, in which the band collectively improvises its way through a string of predetermined musical feels or environments.

7) “Trap doors” model, in which songs are written so as to include a section that dramatically shifts one or more elements of the song and provides a “launching pad” for improvisation.

8) Modules, in which the band, in the course of its improvisational playing, spontaneously invokes and works with small, pre-composed musical patterns or progressions.

Two of these approaches—namely, soloing over changes and the “dance tunes” models—can be clearly and easily traced back to models common in popular music. Soloing over changes needs little explanation, and the Grateful Dead’s use of this approach produced what was perhaps the most traditional of all their improvisational music. The “dance tunes” model refers to the more circumscribed style of jamming that the band would often engage in during two- and three-chord dance tunes, such as “Turn on your Lovelight” or “Scarlet Begonias.”

While Pigpen was still alive and appearing with the band, the Pigpen tunes (discussed below, section 1.5) would function as "dance tunes"—that is, relatively simple songs that put the emphasis on maintaining danceable rhythms, while interest was provided primarily through dynamic changes and fairly subtle textural alterations of the basic feels of the songs. After Pigpen died, and coinciding with the band's move towards playing slower and more spacious music, the group composed or incorporated a number of songs that filled the same role in the set that the Pigpen songs had, including "Eyes of the World" and "Fire on the Mountain," as well as the above-mentioned "Scarlet Begonias."

The other improvisational approaches, though not without precedent in music generally, are less commonly found in popular music of the period. The "within songs" model refers to the band's tendency—or better, commitment—not to play definite and precisely repeated lines in their pieces, but rather to improvise their accompaniments to their songs, even when playing set arrangements with vocal verses and choruses. Although the Grateful Dead as a whole and bassist Phil Lesh in particular take this approach to extremes, as we shall see, the model itself can be seen as a conceptually straightforward use of a jazz approach to rock- and folk-derived material—again calling to mind Bob Weir's description of the Grateful Dead as playing rock music with jazz syntax.[158]

Conceptually, literally, or both, the five remaining approaches develop out of or can be related to the Framework, which was, as we saw above, the Grateful Dead's first step in creating a model for the spontaneous improvisation that they chose to practice.

To begin with, the Framework itself continues to be recognizably present in their work, from its development in 1966 onward. Secondly, its tendency to climax in "noisy" or relatively open sonic exploration eventually results in the creation of more or less autonomous and improvised pieces of music. This begins with the feedback explorations that the band engaged in starting in 1967, and continues with the expansive soundscapes that characterized many

[158] Gans, *Conversations*, 182.

jams in the 1972-1974 period, particularly those emerging from or around the songs “The Other One” and “Playing in the Band.”

Another characteristic of the Framework is that it involves the band moving spontaneously through a succession of “feels” or “sections,” playing improvisationally but with the overarching harmonic or rhythmic parameters being set in any given section. In such pieces as “New Potato Caboose," the band incorporated this sort of movement into their compositions, in the process adding to the detail and precision of the sections and taking advantage of the freedom offered by composition so that some songs or parts of songs were defined by a predetermined succession of open but precomposed sections.

In the Framework, improvisational jamming begins after the composed material of the song has been played, with the band looping the main riff or rhythmic feel and gradually moving away from it. The main riff, then, provides a “jumping off point” for the band’s improvisations. In the “trap door” approach to improvisation, the band varies the Framework approach, building in sections that lead to improvisation and that vary in placement and/or content from what we see in the Framework. Finally, when one listens to a number of Grateful Dead jams one comes to note the presence of a number of themes, or as I call them “modules,” independent sections that pop up in various songs, punctuating or giving definition to the improvisation.

... and Four Phases

In our discussion of these approaches, we will see as well how they changed and developed over time. But the Grateful Dead’s early career as a whole can also be—needless to say, very roughly—divided into phases, marked by changes in emphases, lineup, and also contextual issues with regard to the culture at large. In reading primary and secondary sources, it becomes apparent that, on a very rough level, most would agree that the period between the band’s formation and its hiatus in 1974 can be divided into four such phases.

1) In the Early phase (late 1965-mid-1967), the band is developing the Framework, and learning to jam interactively and spontaneously. During this phase, concerts are presented as collections of many discrete songs, and the band does not jam from one song into another. During the jams, the musicians' links to folk, rock and blues traditions are very clear: the jams have the feeling of (potentially unlimited) extensions of and variations on older musical forms, rather than creating new forms of their own.

2) In the Acid Rock phase (mid-1967-late 1969), the band shifts its focus to larger structures and a much greater use of improvisation, including integrating it with composition in novel ways; musical textures become increasingly dense as well. Concerts begin to take on the feeling of a small number of enormously extended pieces, with jamming being often used to obscure the distinctions between potentially or actually independent compositions—hence for example in the show performed on March 2 1969,[159] the second set begins with a 4 minute long version of "Alligator," followed by a seven minute drum solo, a 25 minute jam, and then a nine minute version of "Caution (Do Not Stop on Tracks)," which at times is only distinguished from the preceding jam by its distinctive bass line.

The texture of the band's jams is at its most dense in this period—not only is the band itself as large (a septet) as it would ever be, but the players (particularly Lesh and Garcia, but also the drummers) play constantly and aggressively, filling in all the potential cracks in the musical texture. The band's sound systems in this period were not as sophisticated as they would later become, and thus the mix can frequently become cluttered and overly biased towards the mid-range. The band's approach to playing in this period coheres with their approach to the setlist: the overall effect is to submerge the listener in a totalizing musical experience operating both synchronically (in terms of texture) and diachronically (in terms of the merging together of songs).

3) In the Americana phase (late 1969-1972), the band retreats somewhat from the apocalyptic excesses of the Acid Rock phase, now valorizing more traditional forms of rock,

[159] Released in 2005 as part of *Fillmore West 1969: The Complete Recordings*, disc ten.

blues, country and folk-pop music—in a sense, returning to the approach of the Early phase. Concerts begin to take on a two-part structure, with more song-based material earlier in the evening, and more extended improvisation later.[160] Particularly in the first set, songs tend to be presented as separate, discrete entities.

Texturally, too, the band is more stripped down in this period than in the Acid Rock phase. They begin moving in this direction in 1970, even before the departure of drummer Mickey Hart, as can be heard for example in the comparatively restrained version of "Caution (Do Not Stop on Tracks)" performed September 20, 1970.[161] When Hart left the band, they were reduced to a quintet (Garcia, Weir, Lesh, Pigpen, Kreutzmann) which, given Pigpen's illness and tendency to underplay, was often actually or effectively a quartet until Keith Godchaux joined on keyboards in October of 1971. There was considerably less jamming in this period than in the Acid Rock phase: rather than build sets around three or four enormously extended songs, in this period the band would often play an assortment of short songs combined with one or two extended songs.[162]

This de-emphasizing

of thE jamming can be related to the band's desire in this period to be seen as a straight-ahead roots rock group—as Garcia noted of *The Grateful Dead* (a.k.a. *Skull and Roses*), their 1971 live album, "people can see we're like a regular shoot-em-up saloon band"[163]—at least, that is what they were trying to be at that point in the band's career. Such a desire fits well into the context of rock as the 1960s turned into the 1970s. It was a period in which there was a degree of recoil on the part of many rock musicians and fans from the utopian ideals and rampant experimentalism of the late 1960s, in favor of claiming a traditional grounding for rock music and the rock scene, as can be seen from some of the later works of the Beatles, Creedence Clearwater Revival's success, the Band's late-1960s rise to popularity, and Bob

[160] They also sometimes perform acoustic opening sets in this period, emphasizing their connection to folk and roots music.
[161] http://archive.org/details/gd1970-09-20.aud.weinberg.bunjes.81728.flac16.
[162] See Getz and Dwork, *Deadhead's Taping Companion*, for details.
[163] Garcia, Reich and Wenner, *Garcia*, 70.

Dylan's turn to country music and his return to sparse, folky music with *John Wesley Harding* in 1967.[164]

4) Just as the song-focused Early phase was followed by the heavy-jamming Acid Rock phase, so too the Americana phase is succeeded by the Jazz Rock phase (1972-1974), in which improvisational playing again takes the fore. This time, however, the jamming is more leisurely and nuanced than was the case in the Acid Rock phase, and the band has a wider variety of material to play on.

The influence of the first generation of Jazz-Rock or Fusion music is evident in this phase, particularly the groundbreaking work of Miles Davis (who opened for the Grateful Dead in April 1970 with many of the players that performed on his seminal *Bitches Brew*[165]). This is also the period in which the Grateful Dead made considerable advances in their live sound, culminating in the development of the Wall of Sound, an elaborate sound system that presented their music with unparalleled clarity and fidelity.[166] It is quite likely that the improvements to the band's live sound contributed to their musical development, making it easier to conceptualize and deliver the sorts of drifting improvised playing that can be heard for example in the "Playing in the Band" performed on Nov. 21, 1973.[167]

As the Americana period was analogous to the Early period, so too this period is reminiscent of the Acid Rock period, particularly in its renewed valorization of extended improvisation. However, the difference here is that the two-part structure to concerts, developed in the preceding phase, is still present in this period—indeed it continues on the road towards the quite formalized approach that will predominate for the rest of the band's career.

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[164] For the rise of country-rock, see Richie Unterberger, *Eight Miles High: Folk Rock's Flight from Haight-Ashbury to Woodstock* (Berkeley: Backbeat, 2003), 171-202; Peter Doggett, *Are You Ready for the Country? Elvis, Dylan, Parsons and the Roots of Country Rock* (London: Penguin, 2000).
[165] See Lesh, *Searching*, 177-8.
[166] See Blair Jackson, *Grateful Dead Gear: The Band's Instruments, Sound Systems and Recording Sessions from 1965 to 1995* (San Francisco: Backbeat, 2006), 131-150.
[167] http://archive.org/details/gd73-11-21.finley.warner.22096.sbeok.shnf.

The Approaches

Before beginning, I should caution that these approaches are not at all mutually exclusive; they overlap, sometimes considerably. They are tactics rather than rules. In this chapter, my goal is to advance the discussion of the Grateful Dead's improvisational approach in three ways—first, by shedding some new light on the specific tactics; second, by bringing these tactics together to create a somewhat comprehensive overview, something that to the best of my knowledge has not been done before; and third, by discussing improvisational tactics that were *not* used by the Grateful Dead, and taking these roads not taken into consideration along with the roads that were taken.

1) Soloing over changes

This approach to improvisation needs little introduction, due to its widespread popularity in rock, pop, jazz, folk and blues music.It puts the focus on the lead player, who improvises lines over relatively subordinate and static accompaniment in which backing musicians play predetermined and set riffs, figures, and/or chord progressions. In rock performances, the soloist will typically be the lead guitarist or the keyboardist; in the Grateful Dead, Jerry Garcia is far and away the predominant soloist, with the keyboardists often working in an accompanist's role. Keith Godchaux, the keyboardist who joined in 1971 to replace Pigpen, was the exception here, as he did play more leads than his predecessors, but nonetheless, Garcia remained the primary soloist.

In an interesting discussion with Ralph Gleason in 1969, Jefferson Airplane lead guitarist Jorma Kaukonen argued that the musical incapacity of many rock musicians had diminished the appeal of this traditional approach, saying that "rock rhythm sections are usually so sloppy in terms of laying down a solid foundation for a soloist to solo on, so they have to do other things."[168]

[168] Gleason, *Jefferson*, 128.

Such technical incompetence may well have provided the spur for improvisational creativity for some bands, but was not the case for the Grateful Dead, who were all competent or better players, especially by the standards of their time and context. In particular, Kreutzmann “was already a working band veteran” and drum teacher when he joined the Grateful Dead;[169] Garcia had years of experience playing bluegrass and folk music;[170] and Lesh had been trained in composition and had performing experience as a trumpeter.[171] Rather, the Grateful Dead, as a band, throve on interactive spontaneity, and thus this approach to improvisation did not feature as strongly in their music as it did in the music of many other blues-influenced rock bands, such as the Allman Brothers. As Lesh noted in one interview, specifically with regard to his own solos but in words that are generally applicable, "the concept of standing out there and doing a solo just seemed alien to the whole idea of what we were trying to do." To which the interviewer (Blair Jackson) responded, "It [the Grateful Dead] is an ensemble, first and foremost." Lesh agreed: "Yeah. Essentially, that's what I feel it is. Or that's what it is when it's at its best, because the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”[172]

Of the four chronological periods discussed above, the soloing over changes approach to improvisation is most notable in the first and third—that is, periods in which the band is focused on its roots, either because it had not yet developed beyond them (first period) or because it was engaged in a retrenchment, a step back from acid rock adventurousness (third period) and a reconceptualization of their mission, including the incorporation of more traditional approaches to music that validated the "soloing over changes" approach.

In terms of repertoire, this approach is most prominently found in songs that have clear and strong roots in rock, blues or country traditions. However, a song's traditional rooting does not necessarily guarantee the adoption of this approach to improvisation. While the band approached such Chuck Berry classics as "Johnny B. Goode" and "Around and Around" as vehicles for Garcia's guitar solos, their playing on the equally-iconic, equally traditional "Not

[169] McNally *Trip*, 78-9.
[170] McNally, *Trip*, 69-73.
[171] Lesh,*Searching*, 8-27.
[172] Jackson, *Road*, 180.

Fade Away" (composed by Buddy Holly) was far more adventurous and collaborative, and its status as a "jamming song" meant that it would often be integrated into extended improvisational episodes arising from such songs as "The Other One," "Dark Star," and/or "St. Stephen," as on April 28 1971,[173] when it emerges from "St. Stephen," which itself emerged from "Dark Star."

One might be tempted to assume that the narrative, lyrical focus of the Berry tunes had something to do with the band's adoption of a conservative improvisational approach; this assumption must, however, be nuanced by taking the Johnny Cash song "Big River" into account. Also a strongly narrative piece, the band as a whole nonetheless tended to play it more freely and spontaneously than they did the Chuck Berry songs mentioned above, although never as freely as "Not Fade Away."

I would suggest that the treatment of the Chuck Berry songs could be accounted for by Berry's reputation as an instrumentalist, as well as a songwriter. Cash and Holly were known as singers and songwriters, while Berry, in addition to his work in these two roles, also stands as one of the canonical rock lead guitarists. In playing his songs, one is implicitly entering into a dialogue with the rock guitar tradition, staking one's place in it: this might explain the focus on "straight" guitar soloing in the Grateful Dead's renditions of these songs. Berry, with his historical, iconic status within the rock canon, looms over anyone who plays these songs, and it is this sense of presence that evokes a traditional, "wailing" lead guitar solo approach as a response.

2) Dance tunes

As we discussed above, the Grateful Dead saw themselves, above all, as a dance band. Especially in their early years, they worked in a musical environment that put a strong emphasis on dancing. For a detailed and contemporary look at the importance of dancing for the San Francisco scene, see Ralph Gleason's article "The Bands ... That's Where It's At: The history of

[173] The performance was released in 2000 on the Grateful Dead label as part of the *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Grateful Dead* four-disc set.

the San Francisco rock scene."[174] Gleason sums the situation up by saying that "what has marked the San Francisco bands from the beginning is that, unlike the bands in New York or Los Angeles, they are bands whose target is personal performances at dances and concerts."[175] Jerry Garcia, interviewed later in the volume, concurs: "we still feel that our function is as a dance band … and that's what we like to do. We like to play with dancers … nothing improves your time like having somebody dance. Just pulls the whole thing together. And it's also a nice little feedback thing."[176] In conversation with Frank Kofsky, Garcia took up this point again: "As far as I'm concerned, the ultimately responsive audience is a dancing audience."[177]

In this discussion, Garcia brings out an interesting difference between hippie and jazz-audience practice. Kofsky notes that "the jazz audience has tried for so long to overcome its feelings of inferiority that they put [dancing] down very strongly," to which Garcia assents: "You don't blow your cool. Well, here's the thing, is that everyone's so tired of keeping their cool—me, at any rate—that I would rather just blow it, you know? … Rather than concentrate on keeping my cool, I would rather have my mind blown."[178] This attitude, one shared with numerous hippies, helps to explain the popularity of ecstatic dancing at Grateful Dead shows.

This emphasis on dancing, combined with the concurrent emphasis on the use of mind-altering and (potentially) ecstasy-inducing chemicals, produced an audience that was ready and eager to dance for a long time. This helps to explain the presence in the Grateful Dead's repertoire of a number of songs in which the band considerably adjusted its improvisational approach to suit the dancing needs of their fans.

For those who have a taste for the band's sense of rhythm, almost all of the Grateful Dead's music is quite danceable. By and large, the Grateful Dead did not sacrifice their groove on the altar of art—although this aspect of their music is not apparent to everyone, hence the

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[174] Gleason, *Jefferson*, 1-82.
[175] Gleason, *Jefferson*, 69.
[176] Gleason, *Jefferson*, 315.
[177] Frank Kofsky, "A Thread to the Collective Unconscious: Jerry Garcia and Bob Weir on music, the Haight, and the Sixties." *Dead Studies* 1 (2011), 64.
[178] Kofsky "A Thread," 64.

need to state it explicitly. I make no judgment as to whether the Grateful Dead "really" are or are not always danceable; objectivity is clearly not attainable here. Suffice it to say that millions, including me, have found their music to be very danceable. But in addition to this general truth, universally accepted by fans of the band, we can say specifically that there were a number of songs in which they put the improvisational accent firmly on the dancing side of things.

These songs, the ones that I have called the dance tunes, are often extremely long, with a great deal of improvisation, but with that improvisation confined within strict musical boundaries. Dynamics may and do change considerably, but in these songs the basic chord changes and rhythms do not change during the jamming, and characteristic riffs, too, will often be present or suggested throughout the improvisation. In the dance tunes, the band plays within very tight limits, but with a great deal of focus, in order to give the dancers music that is solidly anchored and yet variable enough not to be boring.

Precedents for this approach to music are particularly to be found in African-American popular music, particularly r&b, funk and soul, and yet the Grateful Dead took striking liberties with these precedents. Most notable of these, perhaps, is the absence of tightly organized rhythmic congrescence in the African-American sense as discussed by Earl Stewart,[179] Richard Ripani,[180] and Kevin Le Gendre.[181] As Stewart puts it, African-American groove is based around contexts “when several melodies (or musical events) occur at the same time,” forming “a rhythmic plexus: an interconnected network of musical events. The events that occur in a plexus are not arbitrary and consequently do not have the same function. Some events merge with other events. When this happens the listener does not hear the individual events, but instead hears the cumulative effect, or unison, of all of them. This effect is called *rhythmic congrescence*.” It can also be described as “a type of rhythmic harmony.”

[179] Earl Stewart, *African American Music: An Introduction* (New York: Schirmer, 1998).
[180] Richard Ripani, *The New Blue Music: Changes in Rhythm and Blues 1950-1999* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006).
[181] Kevin Le Gendre, *Soul Unsung: Reflections on the Band in Black Popular Music* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012).

Stewart notes as well that the events making up the congrescence are "constant or mildly variable (they maintain the same basic shape) and generally form ostinatos." Variable elements of a plexus, on the other hand, provide rhythmic tension, another fundamental aspect of African-American music—and "the most important of all inconstant events in African-American music is improvisation.". In Stewart's view, the plexus is defined by the interaction between the congrescent and conflicting (variable) aspects of its constituent musical events, with the congrescent events being dominant: "conflicting events are therefore parasitic on the underlying congrescent rhythm."[182]

As Ripani notes, the development of funk and r&b music in the mid-1960s and following highlights this emphasis on congrescence rather than conflict, moving in the direction of ever more complicated and precisely interlocking parts, and "an essential mind-set in this type of music is that *a musician is expected to play the exact same part throughout a song section, or perhaps even the entire song.*"[183]

James Brown is the classic innovator in this regard, and the breakthrough is found in his 1965 hit, "Papa's Got A Brand New Bag." Stewart describes the aesthetic as follows: "each aspect of the arrangement constitutes a distinct melodic idea: that is, the patterns played by the drums, the horns, the bass, the guitar, and of course the lead vocal ... were distinct, with their own melodic and rhythmic character. Yet all the ideas blended with each other symbiotically, creating a higher rhythmical unity, an effect greater than the sum of its parts. This is the very definition of rhythmic congrescence in the strict African sense."[184]

The Grateful Dead do not fit neatly onto this grid of African-American musical practice in their improvisational practice, especially with regard to the groove tunes. Fundamentally, the Grateful Dead's music occupies a middle ground. When improvising, the band works within a continually shifting musical space that is defined at any given point by a tonal center and a basic

[182] Stewart, *African American*, 11, italics his
[183] Ripani, *New Blue*, 49, italics his.
[184] Stewart, *African American*, 25-6.

rhythm. In the non-groove tunes, the tonal center and the rhythm will be potentially subject to fluctuation and change, thus rendered more vague; in the groove songs, they will be made more stable through being incorporated into a motif (a riff, a chord progression, or the combination of the two) that underlies most or all of the jamming in the song.

So in this sense, the dance tunes come closer to the idea of rhythmic congrescence than do the non-dance tunes. But to say that they "come closer" is a far cry indeed from saying that they model it, for the characteristic motif is spontaneously and independently variable by any member of the band or by the group as a whole, in practice as in theory. These motifs are not played as stable parts or as interlocking ostinatos; they are resources, bases for interactive experimentation.

Stewart identified the primacy of congrescent events as being fundamental for African-American music, and conflicting events as being parasitic. In the Grateful Dead's improvisational aesthetic for dance tunes, the point seems to be for the individual members to work in the borderlands where conflicting and congrescent events overlap, and to fashion from that space a continuously changing mesh of sound that is roughly defined by the melody, harmony and rhythm implied by the dominant motif.

I would argue that the Grateful Dead's practice could fit in with African-American rhythmic congrescence in a loose sense, particularly as it manifests in musical styles such as Dixieland—if we can imagine the heterophonic approach of the front line being extended to all the instruments.

But the Grateful Dead's approach is not nearly so amenable to the stricter approach to rhythmic congrescence that Stewart and Ripani identify as arising in the mid-1960s, a variety which has less place for group improvisation and spontaneity, especially on the part of the rhythm section.

In other words, it seems to me that African-American dance music and the Grateful Dead were coming from similar places but heading in different directions. This might help to explain why, although they drew a great deal of their material and inspiration from traditions

associated with African-American culture, they did not incorporate African-American songs composed after the mid-1960s into their repertoire.

For the first two periods of the band's career, and into the third, the dance tunes would typically be led by Pigpen, and would be drawn from African-American popular material, especially blues (for example, “Good Morning Little Schoolgirl”) or r&b (“In The Midnight Hour,” “Turn On Your Lovelight”). After Pigpen left the band, most of the dance tunes associated with him were dropped from the repertoire—some would later reappear (such as “Good Lovin’,” sung by rhythm guitarist Bob Weir), while others were permanently abandoned.

In the meantime, the Grateful Dead introduced several new dance tunes of their own. These songs showed the influence of African-American dance music (such as the disco rhythm in “Eyes of the World”); however, they were original songs, rather than covers, and they did not feature the vocal call-and-response approach that was so characteristic of Pigpen's songs.

Furthermore, these songs were played considerably more slowly than was the case with the first wave of dance tunes—a characteristic that might be related to the much larger venues and audiences in which and to which they played, contexts that privileged mid-tempo grooving over manic velocity.

In short, this new crop of dance tunes (including "Franklin's Tower," 'Scarlet Begonias," and "Fire on the Mountain," in addition to "Eyes of the World") differ considerably in some regards from the first wave of Pigpen-led songs. Nonetheless, it seems to me that the two groups can be legitimately coupled, given their similarities in terms of function, improvisational method, and their common use of African-American musical references, particularly in terms of their rhythms.

The dance tunes give the most straightforward presentation of the Grateful Dead as an improvising dance band, and thus as a band working with and on behalf of its audience, thus accentuating the celebratory and communal ethos that lay at the heart of their music, and doubtless helped to account for their long popularity.

3) “Within Songs” Improvisation

What it means to “play a song” varies greatly among musical contexts, and involves dealing with challenging questions having to do with the very definition of songs. The question is complicated, and only becomes more so the more improvisation is brought into the picture.

Fortunately, for our immediate purposes we need not go tremendously far away from the common practice understanding of "songs"; in most of their music, the Grateful Dead seem to have adopted a definition of vocal “songs” as composed of definite melodies, sung over fairly definite if sometimes implicit harmonic and rhythmic accompaniment. What differentiates them is the fact that within these guidelines the band members had the liberty to improvise their accompaniment, to a much greater degree than is typical with rock bands—as mentioned above, the band approached their material in a way that can be compared to a jazz band, rather than a typical pop band.

The impetus in taking this very open approach to accompaniment can be traced back to developments taking place in the rhythm section, and there are several aspects of these developments.

To start with the drummers: In the fall of 1967, drummer/percussionist Mickey Hart joined the band, playing alongside drummer Bill Kreutzmann. The idea of a rock band having two drummers (as opposed to a drummer and a percussionist) was somewhat unprecedented at the time, with few models. The approach that the Grateful Dead took to this situation was an interesting and intuitive one. Rather than constructing their rhythms so as to feature precise and predetermined interlocking parts—that is, rather than heading in the direction of rhythmic congrescence—the band opted to keep the rhythms fundamentally the same, but greatly augment their density and flow. Hart and Kreutzmann, playing off and around each other, thickened and nuanced the basic pulse.

This approach produced a constant flow of rhythmic commentary, in which the basic beat was technically maintained, but was at times almost submerged, and subject to endless discussion and spontaneous alteration. The effect was to produce a web of rhythm, or an ever-

flowing current of guided improvisation that both expressed and commented on the beat being played, as can be heard for example on the version of “The Eleven” performed Aug. 23 1968[185] and released in 1992 on *Two From the Vault* on the Grateful Dead label; at all times, the rhythm is maintained by at least one drummer, while the other one is free to play fills or lines that layer other rhythms over top (such as the triplet and offbeat feels heard on the bell at the start of the performance), or that thicken the percussive texture (as happens at 4:00-4:15).

The effect of this approach was not to call the rhythm into doubt. There is no question of such ecstatic deconstructions of the beat such as we find, for example, in the work of many of the free jazz rhythm sections—for instance, Gary Peacock (bass) and Sunny Murray (drums) on Albert Ayler’s *Spiritual Unity* At most, the rhythm may be lost for seconds, or in very rare cases as long as a minute or two, in the climax of songs.

Rather, the effect of the Grateful Dead's drum section, from their second chronological period onward, was to establish the fundamental groove as a basic principle, and then to add layer upon layer of skittering commentary on it, playing with and around it as well as simply playing it. This principle applies, in theory and often in practice, to any of the Grateful Dead's songs. Speaking in reference to the "cowboy songs" that the band would cover, including “El Paso” (by Marty Robbins) or ”Mama Tried” (by Merle Haggard), the most fixed songs in the band's repertoire, Kreutzmann still pointed out that playing them “is not ever mechanical ... even though we play a lot of songs of more or less the same lengths, we really do change the interiors of them all the time—change the carpet, so to speak; paint the walls.”[186]

Another development that increased the potential for improvisation within songs was Bob Weir's growth as a rhythm guitarist. He was the youngest member of the band, and indeed had at one time been a student of lead guitarist Jerry Garcia. His earliest work draws heavily, obviously, and not always comfortably on folk, rock and blues licks and riffs. But as time went on, he developed a unique and powerful voice on his instrument.

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[185] http://archive.org/details/gd1968-08-23.sbd.sniper777.tomP.116193.flac16.
[186] Jackson, *Road*, 157.

Rather than, in typical rock rhythm guitarist fashion, focusing on barre chords and steady patterns, Weir kept his parts open and flowing, making innovative use of unexpected chord voicings, at times jagged rhythmic pushes, and a willingness to play less and to freely move about the fretboard. The underlying principle behind Weir's playing is the same as with the drummers: Weir usually does not challenge or contradict the basic beat or chord changes, but rather nuances and interprets them, doing so differently each time he plays a given song.

But the most significant break from tradition in terms of improvisation within songs comes from bassist Phil Lesh, who asserted a degree of melodic, harmonic and rhythmic freedom that is unprecedented then or since. Lesh's adventurous, contrapuntal approach to bass playing seems likely to have derived from two main sources. First of all, his own experience in classical music and early training as a trumpeter, that is, a lead instrumentalist. Secondly, his appreciation for jazz, a genre in which bassists are typically granted a much greater degree of musical freedom than their popular music counterparts—playing a walking bass line, the mainstay of jazz bass playing, does after all produce a continuous string of improvised lines, although of course within fairly tight rhythmic and harmonic parameters.

We should also note that the period in which the Grateful Dead formed and defined their musical vision was one that was marked by the liberation of the bass guitar. The rise of such inventive and influential players as Paul McCartney, Jack Casady, Jack Bruce, John Cale, and John Entwhistle, to name only a few, along with developments in amplification and sound manipulation, demonstrated the increased potential for the bass guitar in a rock context, and also legitimated the sort of experimentation that Lesh was engaged in. Electric bass guitar is a fundamentally different instrument than upright bass. The mid-1960s saw a generation of rock musicians coming to terms with this insight.

All of these factors came together to inspire Lesh to develop a bass guitar style that was, and still is, unique to him. Its expression was hampered at first by his lack of fluency on his new instrument (Lesh only took up bass upon joining the Grateful Dead[187]), but by mid-1967 he had

[187] Lesh, *Searching*, 46.

gained sufficient command of his instrument to present his vision, which was one of a spontaneous and improvised approach to bass.

Just as was the case with Weir, Kreutzmann and Hart, so too Lesh acknowledged the formal structure of the song as a framework, but rather than clearly and unambiguously expressing this framework, he played with and through it, producing a liquid flow of notes that curled around the framework. As a jazz player would, Lesh improvised his way through all of the band's material, vocal or instrumental, only very rarely playing the definite lines or stock phrases that typically are the rock bassist's responsibility. His playing represents a significant transgression of the standard role for rock bassists; his age, personality and training gave him the authority that he needed to carry out this transgression, and he was fortunate enough to be working in a social and musical environment that, as we saw, encouraged the taking of artistic liberties.

The cumulative effect of all these liberatory gestures from the rhythm section was to move the band away from the concept of playing set parts, and instead to turn Grateful Dead songs into an ever-shifting web of music, in which the composed aspects of the music were understood but not necessarily played, and in which specific lines were collectively and spontaneously negotiated by the players. And, be it noted, this approach was just as applicable (theoretically if not always practically) to the instrumental accompaniment to the sung verses and choruses of the songs as to the instrumental jamming.

The vocals, too, are variable, but to a much lesser extent than the instrumental aspects of the songs. Lyrics are never changed (unless by accident); melodies, inflections and timbral approaches do not vary more than would be the case with any other band—and considerably less so than in some bands, such as the Jefferson Airplane. There may have been many reasons for this, including the band's lack of a truly commanding and versatile lead vocalist. Another possible reason that comes to mind, however, has to do with the band's identity as a pop/rock band; in such a context, I wonder if the vocal melodies and lyrics as written might be considered to be essential defining features of the songs and hence not easily changeable.

I have discussed this issue at length, because I feel that it is one of the more significant, yet unheralded, aspects of the Grateful Dead's improvisation. It shifts our understanding of them, and helps us to see them not as a band that plays songs and frequently jams, but rather as a band that is committed to improvisational playing in all contexts, whether they are in the throes of voyages into “outer space,” or whether they are playing a cowboy ballad such as “Me and My Uncle.”

This aesthetic is common in jazz, but it is considerably less so in rock. When it is approximated by rock bands, there is often a sharp divide between the amount of freedom permitted to the lead instruments, and that permitted to the other instrumentalists, as we will see below, for instance, in the discussion of the Paul Butterfield band’s “East/West.” In that piece, the bass and drums stay locked into ostinatos while the guitarists are free to solo over top of their foundation. The liberation of the rhythm section that the Grateful Dead practiced was a crucial step forward for rock improvisational playing; it was also a step forward for this improvising rock band, integrating both the “rock” and the “improvising” sides of its nature. Finally, it permitted the band to provide a living demonstration of the fact that freedom, and even possibly transcendence, could, given the right spirit, be found or created anywhere.

4) The Framework

I have already discussed the Framework at length in section 1.3 above, and will only briefly recap that discussion here. The Framework is a model for the approach to improvisation developed in the Grateful Dead's earliest period (1965-mid-1967). Pivotal experiences in late 1965 and early 1966, both musical and spiritual in nature, convinced the band that they could play, and in fact needed to play, in an improvisational, open style, but at that time there were few models for rock musicians as to how to accomplish this in a manner that was faithful to rock music as a form in itself, rather than being borrowings from jazz or new music practice. The Framework was the Grateful Dead's first original solution to the problem of how to integrate substantial amounts of group improvisation into their music.

This was indeed an elegant solution, and one that suits the band's chosen identity as a rock dance band. The placement of the improvisational material at the end ensured that the band was warmed up by the time the jamming began, and also satisfied the audience's desire to hear the song—lyrics, chorus, and hooks—before getting down to just dancing.

The placement also brings up associations with fade-outs, a popular way to end singles at that time. The purpose of the fade-out is to symbolically dissolve temporality, making it seem as if the song can overleap its finite boundaries and enter eternity. Properly executed and properly heard, a fade-out can give the impression that the song never ends, but merely moves away from the listener until it is inaudible. The Framework evokes a world in which the listener can keep following the fade-out as it recedes, bringing its tantalizing promise of never-ending musical pleasures into reality.

Furthermore, it is often the case that musicians will play more expressively, or more freely, in the fadeout than in the song proper. This makes sense, especially in contexts with an emphasis on capturing live performances, as was generally the case in pop/rock recording of the mid-1960s. During the body of the song, the musicians would be constrained by the need to record a “keeper” take, and would not want to risk making a mistake or playing something that didn't gel with the other musicians, or that took away from the main melody or the focus on lyrics and hooks. Having made it safely to the end of the song, however, with the singer either silent, or repeating an already-heard chorus, or using his/her voice as an instrument, the other musicians had a brief grace period in which to experiment or play more expressively. As well, the gradually diminishing volume in fadeouts also can be used to render mistakes unnoticeable, which would further encourage musicians to take chances. As the fade-out recedes, then, it can change subtly, with players taking more liberties, just as happens in the Framework.

However, the point of a fade-out is that it fades away. Eventually, no matter how attentively one listens, the song ends, or, better, vanishes. This is not the case in the Framework. Here, instead of fading to nothing, the song makes a return. Following a climax, a

point of maximum separation from the original tune, the band falls back into the defining groove of the song and sings one last chorus.

The effect that this has on the listener is profound. First of all, it gives a sense of finality. There is a definite ending. Second, and to my mind more significantly, it serves to encapsulate the improvisation within the song as a whole. No matter how strange or distinct the jamming may have been, the final return to the main groove suggests that we never really left the song. All that transpired during the jamming section, all the changes and potential that it contained, are thus symbolically present within the song itself. The Framework's placement of the jamming section, and its return to the song's theme, takes that feeling one step further, showing that a song can be elastic enough to contain anything that the band, working together, could conceive of.

The Framework was a first step, and by mid-1967 the band was already engaged in developing new models or tactics that would facilitate their improvisational activity. However, they would still make use of the Framework, both in the songs that originally featured it, such as "Dancing in the Streets," and in some newer songs.

5) Sounds

Manipulation of sound is what a musician does. Amplified music permits access to a new world of sounds. In this new world, not only can never-before-heard sounds be experienced, but they and more mundane sounds can also be made to transcend previously definitive limitations of volume, sustain and timbre. The Grateful Dead, like other groups of their generation, were pioneers in terms of exploring these new realms, in their songs as well as in their jams.

When I speak of sounds here, however, I will be referring only to the points in the Grateful Dead's improvisations when melodies, chords, and other normal delineations of music dropped away, along with the conventional uses of their instruments, and when the band focused on creating sound collages, especially making use of feedback (particularly in the Acid

Rock phase) and musical space (particularly in the Jazz Rock phase). These sound collages tend to be identified on set lists as "Feedback" (in the 1960s shows, although feedback is only one of the sonic options) or "Space."

As we saw, one characteristic of the Framework was that jams would build up to a climax before returning to the main groove. This climax could be defined simply by dynamics and intensity, as was the case for the climaxes in 1966 and early 1967. However, as time went on and the climaxes grew more extreme, there was a tendency for them to become more dissonant as well—pushing at the boundaries of conventional tonality and melody, and disintegrating the fixed beat. By mid- or late-1967, climaxes could go even further, into sonic realms that many would have considered to be altogether non-musical, in which feedback and distortion played a major musical role. A case in point would be the Grateful Dead's 20 minute long performance of "Viola Lee Blues" in Toronto on August 8, 1967.[188]

I would suggest that we might well see in such climaxes the origins of the "sounds" approach to improvisation. However, we should note as well that the development of such an approach necessarily requires the willingness, and the ability, to hear such sounds as music. Contemporary developments in European art music would have developed this ability in listeners, as would developments in "out" or free jazz and even in popular music as well—this is a period in which artists of all sorts were experimenting with the increases in timbral potential made possible by electricity. The Beatles' "I Feel Fine," for example, with its introductory feedback, was released in 1964, while the Who made use of "noisy" guitar sounds in their songs "Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere" and "My Generation," both released in 1965; at the same time, John Cale was incorporating his heavily amplified and dissonant approach to playing viola in the Velvet Underground's music,[189] while in England Pink Floyd were creating electronic

[188] http://archive.org/details/gd1967-08-04.09110.sbd.vernon.shnf.
[189] Victor Bockris and Gerard Malanga, *Up-Tight: The Story of the Velvet Underground* (London: Omnibus, 1983), 30.

soundscapes as elements of their live performances, influenced by the experimental music group AMM.[190]

Tracing the early develop of the Grateful Dead's use of sound in this sense is difficult. After all, the Grateful Dead were not only an experimental music ensemble; they were also a commercial dance band, and as such had to take into account the expectations of their listeners, the owners of the venues in which they played, and the promoters that organized the shows. Hence it is reasonable to assume that their performance practice in commercial environments was, at least in the very early years, more conservative than their practice in rehearsal or in non-commercial settings, particularly with regard to such "non-musical", "noisy" sounds.

Garcia points this out in discussing the appeal for the band of the Acid Tests, the multimedia parties at which the band's religious vision came about (see section 2.3 below).. He says that in 1965, "we got more into wanting ... to take it farther. In the nightclubs, in the bars, mostly what they want to hear is short, fast stuff ... so our trip with the Acid Test was to be able to play long and loud ... Of course, we were improvising cosmically too ...".[191]

By late 1967, the band's popularity had grown considerably from their earliest days. Also, and probably more importantly, the band was performing in contexts in which all sorts of "trippy," or strange sounds were permissible as music, and before audiences who enjoyed hearing extremely loud music. In these contexts, the Grateful Dead could indulge to the fullest their desire to work with sound—although, as it happened, that desire did not extend quite as far into the realms of dissonance as, for example, the Velvet Underground or AMM. It is not impossible to work compositionally with this sort of sound, even live (although it is a great deal easier to do in the studio). Nonetheless, such sounds by their nature are difficult to control, or to preconceive beyond a general idea, and they thus encourage an improvisational and spontaneous approach—which is the approach that the Grateful Dead took.

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[190]Julian Palacios, *Lost in the Woods: Syd Barrett and the Pink Floyd* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 101-2.
[191] George-Warren, Holly, ed., *Garcia, by the Editors of Rolling Stone* (New York: Little, Brown, 1995), 87. See especially Lesh, *Searching*, 63-76 for his discussion, and interpretation, of the Acid Tests.

As I suggested above, improvised “sounds” sections seem to have begun as the climaxes to jams. But they quickly expanded beyond this role. At a show on November 10, 1967, we can hear the “sounds” emerging *out of* the climax to the preceding piece, namely “Caution (Do Not Stop On Tracks).”[192] In a show played on January 22 1968, the “sounds” arise *after* the climax to the preceding piece (“Born Cross-Eyed"), creating what seems clearly intended to be a new piece, although with its roots in the old;[193] this approach will be generally followed in the rest of the Acid Rock period.

"Sounds" episodes are less common in the Americana period, although not entirely absent. When they return in full force for the Jazz-Rock period, the tendency is for them to take place in the middle of longer and more conventionally musical jams that would arise out of such songs as "The Other One," "Playing in the Band," or "Dark Star."

A good case in point is the performance from April 26, 1972, released as *Hundred Year Hall* in 1995 on the Grateful Dead's label. On disc two of the performance, the band jams from "Truckin'" into an extended version of "The Other One." By 21:30, they have wound down the momentum of the previous jamming and moved into playing very open, spacious music, with Lesh taking the lead; the playing becomes more abstract and at times dissonant, until by 25:00 they are fully into a "sounds" section. By around 28:00 they have begun to pull out of it; by 28:25 they are again playing non-"sounds" music, albeit still improvising; by 33:30 they have returned to the main theme of “The Other One.”

One of the most interesting characteristics of the Grateful Dead as an improvising band is their flowing nature. Many of their contemporaries embraced discontinuity and the creation of jarring effects, which often, somehow, ceased to jar as their novelty value evaporated. Indeed, the use of such features, abetted by the new possibilities of the recording studio, would become characteristic of the emergent genre of psychedelic music, with the Beatles’ “Revolution 9” from the *White Album* being perhaps the most famous example. The Grateful

[192] http://archive.org/details/gd1967-11-10.116171.sbd.motb-0172.flac16.
[193] http://archive.org/details/gd1968-01-22.sbd.miller.97342.sbeok.flac16.

Dead's overall preference was for continuous but non-mechanical, ever-fluctuating movement. Even when that continuous movement led the listener to some very odd and distant places indeed, as on their tour de force *Anthem of the Sun* album, still the operative verb is "lead," rather than, say, "catapult."

This tendency extends to their live use of sounds as well. Although, as noted, parts of these sections could be quite jarring indeed, the Grateful Dead tended to lead up to them, gradually increasing the intensity or dissonance of the sounds—listen, for example, to the buildup to dissonance in the latter half of "Playing in the Band" from Dec. 2, 1973.[194] By 12 minutes in, the song's rhythm has been abandoned, although a pulse still remains; by 13 minutes, the musicians are playing jarring fragments of lines, and Kreutzmann has largely abandoned timekeeping. At 14:30, Lesh cues a move into even less traditionally "musical" space by striking his bass (or so it sounds to me), producing a crackle of low end sound, and scrabbling at his strings; Garcia picks up on this by increasing the intensity of his playing, making use of his Wah pedal and producing a flurry of indistinguishable notes that turns into a climax at 15:20 while Weir manipulates feedback. From this point on, the music is very open, without a clear rhythm or structure, while the musicians use harmonics and effects (such as Lesh's jarring use of distortion starting ca. 17:45) to produce a very dissonant sonic texture.

It is important to note in this regard that "sounds" sections generally arose out of preceding songs, rather than beginning sets. "Sounds" sections were places that the listener was taken to. Just as the improvisation in the Framework arose out of the main riff of the song, so here too the movement is from normality to strangeness, the impression being that of a sudden change of perspective, so that what was normal now is revealed to be strange. But the perception of the strange is presented as being liberatory, rather than being basic; in other words, it follows, rather than precedes, the perception of normality, revealing what lies behind that facade.

[194] http://archive.org/details/gd73-12-02.aud.vernon.17278.sbeok.shnf.

Their willingness to experiment with sounds gave the Grateful Dead the opportunity to take their improvisations beyond the limits of "songs" and many conventionally accepted aspects of music. It is important to note, however, that such conventions were implicitly supported in a general sense even when violated in a specific sense through the restricted use of the "sounds"—that is, the "sounds" episodes provided a designated space for the violation of convention within an overarching and broadly conventional structure.As Garcia put it, "now that we have this new thing, these electronic sounds, it's a question of how can you use them in such a way so that they are musical instead of a racket?"[195]For the Grateful Dead, by and large, in the period under discussion such sonic explorations were reserved for their own sections, and would not intrude when the band was playing more conventional songs.

This distinguishes them from other bands that were exploring non-standard sounds; Pink Floyd, for example, would keep a steady flow of such sounds happening, using them as permanent parts of the context of the song, as can be heard on their soundtrack to the film, *Tonite Let's All Make Love in London … Plus*.[196] The Grateful Dead, on the other hand, did not tend to integrate these "sounds" with their other songs, thus implicitly validating the distinction between the two approaches to playing music, and furthermore increasing the sense of motion in the music. Rather than putting the listener in an entirely "normal" or entirely "spacey" or "noisy" context, the Grateful Dead would lead their fans through one context and into another.

6) Movement through sections

Another approach to improvisation that might have developed out of the Framework involves striking a balance between improvisation and composition through structuring music around the improvised movement through somewhat predetermined sections. A given section may be identified by its tonality, basic rhythm, melodic elements, harmony, motifs and/or riffs. In a sense, it is fixed, with definite outlines. But these outlines are less apparent, less specific, and less restrictive, than the outlines of songs proper. The outlines mark out the musical space

[195] Gleason, *Jefferson*, 318.
[196] See For Miles Records, 1990.

in which the band works; they do not provide a roadmap giving specific paths through that space.

Although there is no evidence of a direct causal linkage, this practice of movement through sections can be seen as the spiritual descendent of the Framework's tendency to work in a certain feel for a period of time before moving onto another feel. It is an extension of the idea of taking voyages, of moving consecutively through different musical environments, which as we will see below was tremendously important for the band. However, the sections tend to be more sharply differentiated from one another and to last longer than the feels that the band will move through when playing according to the Framework. As well, the sections function on a higher level of organization: they are macro-organizing principles that oversee large sections of jams, not micro-organizing ones.

Now, whatever its links to the Framework, this approach to improvisation does owe obvious debts to contemporary jazz practice. There is an especially striking parallel in the John Coltrane Quartet's *A Love Supreme* album, an enormously and widely influential work at the time.

Although Coltrane's career had many highlights, *A Love Supreme* has generally been seen as his masterpiece, especially for those who are not jazz insiders, being epic in scope and with a spiritual, almost sanctified, feel, standing mid-way between the "straight" jazz of *Giant Steps* and the freer, less accessible music that would follow it. *A Love Supreme* was released in early 1965, immediately prior to the Grateful Dead's formation. The album is structured as a suite, with several different movements. Like the “movement through sections” approach, it involves the band improvising its way through these movements, these different musical territories.

Blair Jackson notes[197] that with the development of the suite idea and jamming between tunes, “the band could play for an hour or more without stopping between songs … This had never been done before in rock. Even in jazz … there were rarely attempts at fusing pieces

[197] Jackson, *Garcia*, 142.

together the way the Dead did, much less figuring on the spot, through inspired improvisation, ways to create transitions between songs that hadn't previously been joined." This formal innovation took their music in different directions from those pursued by Coltrane. But Coltrane was not the only jazz musician exploring such extended forms at the time. Indeed, Ekkehard Jost's discussion of Don Cherry's work[198] shows that from the mid-1960s on Cherry was moving in similar directions to the Grateful Dead, using "themes" (as Jost calls them; I would call them "sections") as fundamental structuring principles for his music, giving the underlying material over which and through which his bands improvise. But given Coltrane's iconic status generally, and specifically his importance for the Grateful Dead, and combined with the fact that his greatest work using this approach was done just shortly before the Grateful Dead's formation (from *Africa/Brass* 1961 to *A Love Supreme* in 1965), it is likely that his work would have been primarily influential as the Grateful Dead moved to larger but still improvisational forms, a progression in musical approach that would eventually find them structuring whole sets as "suites" made up of sections to be played through successively.

A related approach is that taken by the Butterfield Blues Band in their "East/West," released by Elektra in 1966 on the album of the same name. "East/West" was an important work, for its concept as for its execution—it was extremely long by the standards of its day, and possessed a power and sophistication that impressed contemporaries, as did the band's lead guitarist, Mike Bloomfield.[199] Prown and Newquist write that "East/West" "had a dramatic influence on nearly every guitarist in San Francisco and clearly anticipated the days when long, exotic solos and psychedelic jams would be commonplace in rock and roll."[200]

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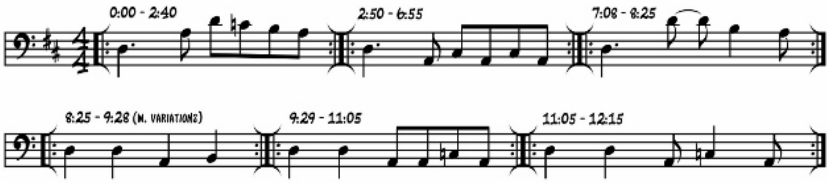
[198] Jost, *Free Jazz*, 133-162.

[199] Bloomfield was "the first American guitar hero" (Summer McStravick and John Roos, *Blues-Rock Explosion* [Mission Viejo: Old Goat, 2001], 23). Both Eric Clapton (Christopher Hjort, *Strange Brew: Eric Clapton and the British Blues Boom* [London: Jawbone, 2007], 37) and Jorma Kaukonen (Gleason, *Jefferson*, 111) cited him as an influence, and the influence of his tone and approach are clearly audible in Garcia's early work. John Kahn, the bassist for the Jerry Garcia Band, said that "Jerry told me that when he was first playing in San Francisco, Bloomfield was the one guitarist who really impressed him" (Jackson, *Garcia*, 107).

[200] Peter Prown, Peter and H. P. Newquist. *Legends of Rock Guitar* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 1997), 38; for testimonies to the impact that Bloomfield had on the San Francisco scene, see also Jan Wolkin and Bill Keenom, *Michael Bloomfield: If You Love These Blues* (San Francisco: Miller Freeman, 2000), 126-7.

The song is divided into sections, each one underpinned by a single bass riff with improvisation over top, gradually building in dynamics until a climax is reached, at which point another improvisatory cycle begins. Each section is underpinned by a subtly different bass riff (played by Jerome Arnold) which serves as a bed for the improvisation, establishing the atmosphere for the section.



This was an innovative piece, possibly inspired by Miles Davis' "Flamenco Steps," in which each of the soloists moves through a series of modes as they solo. Jerome Arnold, serving as the fulcrum for the band, stayed locked in to one set pattern at a time, but his periodic changes of the pattern maintained interest and allowed the band to explore new areas without the song being fundamentally destabilized. Bandmember Mark Naftalin says that "[guitarist] Elvin Bishop started with a long solo, then retreated to tamboura-like droning while Mike [Bloomfield] soloed on a sequence of sections, using a different mode in each section. Some of the modes were more Eastern, some more Western."[201]

The Butterfield Blues Band was a well-respected and well-known band in the mid-1960s. There is no evidence that "East/West" was directly taken as a model by the Grateful Dead, but the way that it moves through environments while maintaining a strong basic tonality and rhythm makes it comparable to, and possibly influential upon, the development of the Framework. Naftalin argues that it was inspired by an acid trip that Bloomfield took, in the course of which Bloomfield "had a revelation and told me that he now understood how Indian music worked. On our next gigs … we began performing the improvisation that we called 'The Raga' for a while, until it was given a name: 'East-West'."[202] If this story is true, and if it was known to the Grateful Dead, one can easily imagine that it would have been inspiring to them

[201] Wolkin and Keenom, *Butterfield*, 116.
[202] Wolkin and Keenom, *Butterfield*, 116.

as they worked out their own approach to improvisation based on the contents of their acid trips.

The "movement through sections" approach to composition mixed with improvisation is ambitious and complex, placing great demands on the musicians, and it is therefore not surprising that the band's use of it was limited. It is most prevalent in the second, Acid Rock period; one of its classic presentations is found in the complete “That's It For The Other One” suite, as found on the band's second album, *Anthem of the Sun*. As mentioned above, the band's tendency in this period was to merge songs together, creating continuous pieces of music that could last entire sets. Lesh speaks of these as “sequences,” with the “Dark Star” – “St. Stephen” – “The Eleven” – “Turn On Your Lovelight” progression being their “major” sequence in 1968/69.[203]

This tendency can make it difficult at times to distinguish between songs, multi-section songs, and modules; it must have been especially difficult for people in the audience, and this should caution us against being too hasty to draw distinctions between songs. To take an example, technically, the song called “New Potato Caboose” is distinct from “That's It For The Other One,” but both in the recording on the aforementioned *Anthem of the Sun* studio album and in the live performance of August 24 1968, (released in 1993 by the Grateful Dead on their own label as *Two from the Vault*), there is nothing to tell the listener that “New Potato Caboose” is a separate song, rather than simply being part of the overall “That's It For The Other One” composition.

Similarly, the band could move seamlessly through songs from “Dark Star” to “St. Stephen” to “The Eleven” and into “Turn On Your Lovelight,” as they did on their *Live Dead* album, with a song-fragment inserted between the second and third pieces —although this album is made up of material drawn from several different shows, the progression reflects their actual concert practice at the time. How would this music have been perceived, and how did the band intend it to be heard? As four pieces? Five? As one very long piece? Perhaps as all or

[203] Lesh, *Searching*, 142.

none of the above, depending on the listener, her mindset, and her familiarity with the band's music. As David Malvinni reports, "we know from accounts of these early shows that the audience in many instances and especially under the influence of LSD had no idea what they were actually hearing—it was truly an aural journey into uncharted territory for many."[204]

The band's practice indicates that they were comfortable with a certain degree of ambiguity in terms of distinguishing songs, and indeed even courted it; in this period, the set as a whole seems to be the band's focus, and thus distinctions between songs, sections in songs, and modules is not as clearly marked as it would be in the early and mid-1970s, when the band returned to this approach for such epic compositions as "Terrapin Station" and "Weather Report Suite." Both of these songs are extended works with a great deal of jamming in the sections, but those sections are clearly divided through obvious changes in such musical parameters as feel, tonality, and rhythm. There is far less ambiguity, far less interweaving of modules, sections and songs in these pieces than in the band's live practice in 1968 and 1969.

Another shared aspect of these compositions is their susceptibility to being stripped down as time went on and the band rehearsed less. On the one hand, it was only fairly rarely that the full versions of any of these three songs would be performed;[205] on the other hand, excerpted segments of these compositions *would* be performed regularly. Indeed, "The Other One" would become one of the band's most sturdy musical workhorses, along with "Let It Grow," a section of "Terrapin Station."

The "movement through sections" approach incorporates predetermined, composed features to the improvisational playing . One always knows where one is going, even if there is some uncertainty about how one will get there. It is a challenging and intricate way of

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[204] Malvinni, *Grateful Dead*, 55.

[205] Even though complete versions of "That's It For The Other One" and "Weather Report Suite" were rarely performed, it is still possible to establish what the complete versions consisted of. "Terrapin Station," by contrast, exists in a variety of forms, and it seems as though no complete version exists. The version found on the Grateful Dead's *Terrapin Station* album has seven sections, but to the best of my knowledge the Grateful Dead never performed all of these sections live. Robert Hunter, the band's lyricist, continued composing sections even after the recording, and himself recorded a version of the song with several extra sections on his *Jack O' Roses* album (Dark Star Records, 1980).

organizing larger pieces, one that (when done well) enabled the band to play extended but coherently unified works without the "burnout" factor from over-complexity that is an occupational hazard of progressive rock bands. Use of this tactic causes these longer pieces to be heard not as a collection of lines or riffs, but rather as the sum of several large musical environments within which the band is free to move about.

7) Trap Doors

In situations involving movement between composed material and improvisation, the question "when do I start improvising?" will naturally arise. Another, equally natural, question is, "How do I start?" Granted that once the improvisation has begun the musicians can rely on spontaneous inter-band reaction, nonetheless they still need strategies for determining the initial content of the improvisation—that is, the material from which one jumps off.

As we have seen, there are a number of options available in terms of negotiating the placement and initial characteristics of improvisation. In the case of the Framework, the main location is set as the end of the song, and the initial content is set as the basic groove of the song. The improvisation thus follows and develops out of the song. In the movement through sections approach, the improvisations are guided and structured by the overarching characteristics of the sections in which they are found, with one section following another in a predetermined pattern.

The Trap Door approach is another approach to solving this problem. In this approach, paradigmatically visible in the songs "Uncle John's Band" and "Playing in the Band," there is a distinctive and repeated phrase found within the song that identifies the location and initial characteristics of the improvisation. These phrases stand in marked contrast to the feel of the rest of the songs in which they are found: to borrow an expression used by Garcia in a different context, they could be described as "signposts to new space." In “Uncle John’s Band,” for instance, the phrase over which jamming takes place is in Dm, while the rest of the song is in G; it is 7/4, while the rest of the song is in 4/4; and it possesses a very tight and distinctive rhythmic structure, while the rest of the song tends more towards a loose, open rhythmic feel.

In naming this approach, the image of a trapdoor appealed to me because it brings to mind the ideas of revelation and exploration of unsuspected potential; a trapdoor is a way to get out of the obvious levels of the structure in which one is in and to explore previously hidden areas. After these explorations, of course, one returns to the original structure, just as the wardrobe in C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is the means by which the children both enter and leave Narnia.

To the best of my knowledge, the earliest use of the Trap Door approach, or at least an intriguing precursor to that approach, is to be found in one of the earliest of the second wave of band-composed pieces "Alligator." In this song, there is a sudden and radical change of rhythm and harmony found at the very end of the song, taking place under the last section of vocals. One notable difference, however, is that this section of "Alligator" never returns to the main body of the song; rather, it is the end of the piece, thus representing something of a compromise between Framework standards (end the song with extended improvisation taking off from a basic groove) and Trap Door standards (introduce a different riff or feel as a jumping-off point for improvisation).

"Alligator" was one of the first of the band's more sophisticated compositions, having been introduced by January 1967. The Grateful Dead always performed at least some originals, but early compositions such as "The Only Time is Now," "Cream Puff War" and "Can't Come Down" are derivative, drawing respectively on earnest folk balladry, garage rock (particularly Love's version of "Hey Joe" from their first album) and faux-Dylanesque folk rock. The band's second wave of original material, including "Alligator," "Cardboard Cowboy" and "Dark Star," features songs that are much more original and idiosyncratic, incorporating the musical developments that the band had made in the meantime—in the case under discussion, the early application of the Trap Door approach.

These Trap Doors have a dramatic effect on the listener. One's expectations and understanding of the musical context are first shifted rapidly—by the jump to the Trap Door riff or feel, which usually contrasts in one or more ways with the rest of the song—and then shifted

more slowly, as the band begins jamming in this new musical space. One is introduced to a new and exciting musical world that is to be found hidden within the old world.

The impression created by the Trap Door songs is not so much that of a journey, as in the "movement through sections" approach as discussed above, but rather one of the juxtaposition of two worlds, an esoteric and usually longer, stranger and more disconcerting one, nestled within an exoteric one. It is reasonable to suspect that we have here a homological invocation of the sort of sudden enlightenment experience that was so important for the band, and for their community and fans. One starts in more or less mundane, discursive reality; suddenly one is somewhere else, having unpredictable adventures; and then one returns to mundane reality, but with one's understanding of this context altered and nuanced by one's experiences "through the looking glass." The parallels of this sort of progression with drug-related experiences are evident as well, of course.

8) Modules

Finally, there is the way in which jams can be punctuated through the use of more or less independent modules, that is, chord progressions with associated melodies and rhythms. These modules,[206] which are often several bars in length, are related to the sections discussed above; indeed, they can be conceptualized as free-floating sections, mini-compositions that were, whether for a period or permanently, allowed to drift free rather than being integrated into a composition.

Such integration could come later, of course; indeed, these modules can represent nascent forms of what will become fully developed songs, as is the case with a module in 10/4 known as "The Main Ten," which later became incorporated into a song called "Playing in the Band." Tom Constanten, who played keyboards with the band at the time that module was developed, notes that "there was a slow ten figure that we'd run through from time to time ...

[206] The best sources for overviews and discussion of these modules, often referred to as jams, are found in William Polits, "Grateful Jams." (p. 59-61 in Getz and Dwork, *Taping*) and Caleb Kennedy, "The Dead's Early Thematic Jams" (http://deadessays. blogspot.com/ 2010/01/deads-early-thematic-jams.html.).

It was amusing to notice it later in the middle section to 'Playing in the Band'."[207]. Similarly, drummer Bill Kreutzmann notes that their song "The Eleven" "was really designed to be a rhythm trip. It wasn't designed to be a song. That more or less came later, as a way to give it more justification or something, to work in a rock 'n' roll set. We could've used it just as a transition, which is what it was, really."[208]

Another example of this approach concerns one of the band's best-loved songs, "Uncle John's Band," in which an instrumental version of the verse and chorus arose out of a jam on Nov. 1 1969, a full month before the song was premiered (Dec. 4 1969). Interestingly, the band moves into the "Uncle John's Band" module from another module, one that would often serve as the coda to their version of the folk tune, "Going Down the Road Feeling Bad." In this performance, then, we see the invocation of both of these modules before they acquired their more or less permanent forms/locations

On a somewhat different note, it can also happen that a module becomes associated with a given improvisational segment, as is the case with the "Feeling Groovy Jam," based around a descending D major scale and inspired by the Simon and Garfunkel song "The 59th St. Bridge Song,"[209] which was very often played in the jamming that led from "China Cat Sunflower" to "I Know You Rider." Such modules have ambiguous associations. While not fully incorporated into a song, they do become associated with a specific song or combination of songs.

On the other hand, many of these modules never became songs of their own. Indeed, in some cases the movement goes in the other direction; they are rather to be described as stripped down versions of other songs, musical borrowings—thus the "Mind Left Body Jam," an A7-Dadd9-Dmadd9- A progression which frequently appeared in jams from the early 1970s, was based on Paul Kantner's song, "Mind Left Body." And then in some cases, the modules simply

[207] Tom Constanten, *Between Rock and Hard Places: A Musical Autobiodyssey* (Eugene: Hulogosi, 1991), 79.
[208] Jackson, *Road*, 182.
[209] Polits, "Grateful Jams," 60.

represent familiar territory, comfortable musical environments that the band would choose to revisit from time to time, such as the E-F-E progression of the "Spanish Jam."

Whether they are potential sections of as-yet-unwritten songs, musical orphans, or borrowings from other artists, the modules provide moveable composed segments, which can be brought in—or hit upon—in the course of improvisation; indeed, in some cases they probably result from the remembering and repeating of particularly fortuitous moments in other jams. They serve to ground improvisational sections, to give them a touch of stability and a temporary destination—but a destination whose appearance does not also invoke a whole chain of other musical associations. The use of these modules develops in the second, Acid Rock phase, logically enough, as the band builds up its musical vocabulary, and as it "road tests" new or as yet unfinished pieces.

In addition to functioning as temporary destinations, the use of modules also helps, for band and audience, to integrate the immediate musical context with the larger musical context. The appearance of a theme that is familiar, but not specifically or necessarily attached to the song that the band is playing at the moment of its appearance, serves as a reminder that all of the Grateful Dead's specific songs are played within a larger musical universe which also contains wandering musical elements in addition to the sorts of fixed systems represented by the songs as such. To extend the image: if, in this musical universe, the songs can be seen as solar systems, and the purely improvisational sections as the space between systems, the modules could be compared to asteroids, points of solidity moving through space, occasionally intersecting the star systems but then going their own way again. On a more prosaic level, these modules work as tools for the band as well, giving them a context in which they can rekindle their inspiration for further exploration, or providing a signal that a return to some sort of stability is needed or imminent.

Modules, then, signal both familiarity and otherness, stability and change: they ground the band and listener, but they also remind them that the context in which one is grounded is one that includes more than just songs and space.

Excursus on "Dark Star"

Of all the Grateful Dead's songs, it is "Dark Star" that best epitomizes the band's spirit of adventure and improvisation, especially in the band's early years,[210] and the song has attracted more critical attention than any other single song in the Grateful Dead's repertoire;[211] the reader is referred to these discussions for in-depth analysis of the song.

Starting as a peppy, short number, and even released as a single, the song expanded in length and slowed down in tempo over the first year of its performance. By late 1968 it had become a lilting, at times languid, piece of music over which the band could jam for half an hour or more. Dodd notes that "generally the version from [the band's 1969 album] *Live/Dead* ... is the acknowledged standard,"[212] a summation with which I would agree, certainly in terms of the song's rhythm and overall feel. Other features of the song could and did change dramatically every time it was played. By this point, "Dark Star" had acquired the following characteristics:

1) A brief introductory flourish, played mainly on the bass guitar, leading into

2) a two-chord progression played over a mid-tempo rhythm, which was the main point of departure for improvisation, interrupted by

3) two sung verses with choruses. The verses are largely played over the main progression and rhythm; the chorus changes the rhythm, time signature and harmony.[213]

Of these three characteristics, only the two-chord progression and the improvisations arising from it are absolutely essential to identify the song as 'Dark Star." The second verse and chorus, in particular, were often dropped in concert, as the band moved from jamming directly into another song. "Dark Star" can be best understood, then, as a fairly open improvisational

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[210] By 1972, "Playing in the Band" was emerging as another vehicle for the group's most far-ranging explorations, and it took over this role fully by the mid-1970s when "Dark Star" was dropped from the repertoire.
[211] For the most thorough example of this, see Malvinni, *Grateful Dead*, *passim*. See also Graeme Boone, "Mirror Shatters: Tonal and expressive ambiguity in 'Dark Star'" (pages 171-210 in *Understanding Rock: Essays in Musical Analysis*, edited by John Covach and Graeme Boone [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997]).
[212] David Dodd, *The Complete Annotated Grateful Dead Lyrics* [New York: Free Press, 2005], 51
[213] For an in-depth discussion of "Dark Star" with transcription, see Boone, "Mirror Shatters".

field, whose initial parameters are roughly defined rhythmically and harmonically, a field that is potentially interrupted by the pre-composed verses and choruses, when present.

When we try to categorize this piece, the way that the musically set verse/chorus combinations arise from improvisation and then sink back into it tempts one to see them as modules that have been attached to this specific song. But upon closer examination, we see that this impression is misleading. As mentioned above, the verses begin by using the same harmony and rhythm that underlies the improvisational section. Only as the verse progresses, and especially as we enter the chorus, do distinctions emerge. This creates a slow and understated move away from the main groove into new territory, led by the vocal.

One could, then, see the verse/chorus combinations as a slow and organically arising build up to a momentary suspension of the main feel of the song, creating anticipation for the return to the main feel or (as would be the case after the second verse/chorus) creating an open space in which a new song can be brought in. Overall, the effect is quite elegant, an inspired solution to the problem of how to navigate between composed and improvised sections.

Conclusion

In this discussion we have examined some of the tactics used by the Grateful Dead to facilitate, structure, and nuance their improvisational practice. I would like to end this discussion as I began it, by stressing the heuristic and somewhat arbitrary emphasis of this examination. These various tactics are, for one thing, not exclusive. We have seen how Trap Door pieces arose from modules; modules themselves can be the free-floating stuff of sections, when and if they are set into definite orders; even the most pro forma solo over changes will include "within song" improvisation on the part of the rhythm section; and of course the links of most of these approaches with the Framework is clear as well. So there is no question of using these categories exclusively. Their sole purpose is to give some points in a multi-dimensional continuum, consideration of which might enhance our ability to discuss of the Grateful Dead's improvisational practice.

In so doing, I have chosen not to examine the actual in-the-moment act of improvisation—that is, I have not discussed precisely how, for example, Lesh responded to Garcia's response to Kreutzmann at 12:14 of "Playing in the Band" on June 19, 1973. Rather, my focus has been on looking at some of the formal parameters within which these moment-to-moment decisions are made. My choice in this regard was determined by my desire to express a rock-derived conceptuality and aesthetics, rather than one derived from jazz scholarship.

With the exception of Garcia, none of the Grateful Dead were consummate individualistic "improvisers" such as one finds among musicians coming out of the jazz or new music traditions—we might think of Steve Lacey or William Parker. One of the distinctive aspects of rock, and one that is often underappreciated, is the fact that it is profoundly a group endeavor, groups being in many ways the fundamental elements of rock music, rather than compositions or specific players, as I discussed above. The ability (or lack of ability) of individual players is much less the point in rock than the way in which they fuse together into a group—thus, for example, collections of untalented players such as the Ramones or the Stooges can come together and create masterpieces. Group activity is guided by shared assumptions or understandings, whether explicit or implicit. In this chapter, I have tried to lay out some of the understandings

The Turning Point

In looking at a band's career, it is necessary to harmonize two conflicting, but equally essential, aspects. On the one hand, retrospective examination often shows clearly that there are phases to a band's career. One sees that at such and such a point, the band had such and such an approach (to aspects of its songwriting, or performance, or whatever the case may be); at another point, things had changed, and now the band had a distinctly different approach. Given characteristics of a band's playing or writing will, when examined carefully, fit unproblematically into one phase, and will either not be found in another, or will acquire a different resonance.

But on the other hand, bands are organic groupings working within commercial and social structures that affect both their development, and the perception and manifestation of that development. We can say when a new approach is presented to the public, but often we cannot say how long it may have pre-existed in the intentions or dreams of band members, and it is also often the case that the inaugural steps of a new direction are not perceived as such at the time that they are made.

It is necessary, then, to be both nuanced and cautious when discussing the way that bands change and develop. With these caveats in mind, then, I would like to suggest—in a nuanced and cautious manner—that there are two foundational periods, or—to change the image—two absolutely crucial turning points for the Grateful Dead as an improvising rock band. The first took place in late 1965, when, under the influence of transcendent experiences, tendencies in jazz and modern classical music, and a mystical belief in the band's distinctiveness and musical potential, the group opened their music up to collective improvisation and spontaneity. It is from this period that the Framework, the development of the dance tunes model, and the soloing over changes approach date.

The second turning point, as I see it, is to be found in early to mid-1967, with the introduction of a "second wave" of original compositions (including "Dark Star," "Alligator," "New Potato Caboose," and "That's It For the Other One") that facilitate or inaugurate the rest of the improvisational techniques that I have discussed in this chapter. The band's songwriting takes several leaps forward, and new songs are brought in that use the "sections" approach, such as "New Potato Caboose."

As I have argued above, "Alligator" can be seen as using a proto-Trap Door approach, thus inaugurating this particular tactic. It is during this period that the band's jamming, especially on "Viola Lee Blues," begins to enter the realms of pure sound during climaxes. And finally, steady gigging over the past year and a half have developed Weir and Lesh's competence, and loosened up Kreutzmann, to the point where they can improvise "within

songs" more freely.[214] By the middle of 1967, then, the band had had a year and a half to become comfortable with their musical direction, and had the confidence that pursuing it would not prevent them from finding an audience; this conjunction of familiarity and security might explain why they were able to take these steps forward. At this point, I would argue that the foundations for the Grateful Dead's future improvisational work had been laid; the thematic outlines were in place. What followed in subsequent years involved working out and nuancing these broad approaches.

Motion: Continual, if not steady

So far in this chapter, we have discussed a number of tactics that the Grateful Dead used in order to facilitate, organize, and indeed render possible the improvisational approach to rock music that they adopted. Our understanding of the band's approach and values can also be furthered through examination of some tactics that they did not use.I freely grant that arguments from silence are intrinsically weak. Nonetheless, "weak" and "insignificant" are not synonyms. There is value in examining some of the roads that the Grateful Dead did not choose to take, especially when these are roads that their contemporaries, successors, and/or influences, *did* take: we see the Grateful Dead's motivations more clearly when we understand the options that they eschewed.

Three tactics immediately come to mind.

1) Drones

First of all, there is the use of drones. The improvisational use of drones of various sorts and taken to various degrees would have been a familiar part of the Grateful Dead's musical environment, coming in from a number of directions. One of these would have been Phil Lesh's exposure to minimalist music. In the early 1960s, "Phil Lesh was always around the [San Francisco] Tape Music Center, and he and Steve Reich bought a tape recorder together and

[214] The band's use of newer and more powerful gear is important in this context as well—see Jackson, *Gear*, 54-6.

shared it."[215] Bernstein also notes that "both Lesh and [Grateful Dead keyboardist Tom] Constanten were active participants in the Bay Area new music scene,"[216] a point brought out by Lesh himself as well in his autobiography.[217] Several members of the Grateful Dead, Mickey Hart foremost among them, showed a strong interest in Indian classical music.[218] We also cannot rule out the possible influence of the improvisational experiments of such contemporaries as the Velvet Underground (with whom the Grateful Dead shared several bills in 1969[219]).

Of course, depending on how loosely one interprets the term, "drone" can mean a great many things, and certainly there are aspects of the Grateful Dead's improvisational practice that could loosely be described as "droning." But we do not find any extended use of drones such as would be provided by the tambura player in a Hindustani classical ensemble, for instance, nor of the sort that one encounters in the music of LaMonte Young or the Velvet Underground (particularly in live performance, but also on record in such songs as "Venus in Furs"). As I mentioned above, it is possible that minimalist aesthetics had an effect on the Grateful Dead's improvisational approach, but the minimalism in question was what Fink describes as pulse pattern minimalism, minimalism as "repetition with a regular pulse, a pulse that underlies the complex evolution of musical patterns"[220] rather than the drone minimalism of a composer such as La Monte Young.

The idea of a constantly held long tone that underpins a song or improvisational section is, interestingly, not found in the Grateful Dead's music.

This is particularly striking, considering that drones would have already been linked to improvisation for various of the members, and also considering the fact that drones are

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[215] Terry Riley, quoted in Bernstein, *Tape Music*, 221.
[216] Bernstein, *Tape Music*, 246.
[217] Lesh, *Searching*, 33-38.
[218] See discussion and extensive interview with Hart on the subject in chapter 5 of Lavezzoli, *Dawn:* "Tal Mala: Mickey Hart."
[219] See Caleb Kennedy, "The Velvets and the Dead" (http://deadessays. blogspot.com/2010/09/velvets-and-dead.html).
[220] Fink, *Repeating*, 20.

especially easy to produce and effective with the use of electrically-amplified instruments played at high volume. This absence, then, needs to be seen as a road that was seen, but not taken; it cannot have been due to ignorance of the technique on the band's part, nor to inability to produce effective drones.

2) Riffs

For a band as influenced by blues, especially electric Chicago blues, as the Grateful Dead, their avoidance of riffs is striking. Perhaps the clearest example of this can be seen when we compare their versions of the traditional blues tune, "Good Morning Little Schoolgirl," with the roughly contemporary version found on Junior Wells' influential *Hoodoo Man Blues* album (as discussed in detail below—see section 1.5). This latter version is absolutely underpinned by the defining bass riff, which the bassist repeats unchangingly throughout the vast majority of the song.

Now, the Grateful Dead played this song many times. When they played it, they would use this riff to introduce and identify the song, and would work with it as a motif during the song, but it was never simply replicated with the same mechanical repetition as that employed by bassist Jack Myers in the Junior Wells version. Even when Lesh was playing it, the riff would be continually varied to greater or lesser degrees, and it was quite common for him to abandon it altogether, and for the motif to be passed around the band members to be played or suggested.

As this discussion shows, on the one hand Grateful Dead songs do possess characteristic motifs, progressions, and even the sort of figures that could be used for riffs, but on the other hand they lack the unison riffing approach that underlies the improvisational playing of many of their hard-rock and blues-rock brethren and sistren. You will never hear all the members of the rhythm section come together to repeat a figure in the way that is so common with other improvising rock bands such as, for example, Hawkwind, the MC5, or the Stooges.

3) Noise

Finally, we come to noise. I use the word "noise" to distinguish it from the "sounds" to which I referred earlier. I must stress, though, that the two are not absolutely distinct, but rather separate points on a continuum. When I speak of noise here, I am referring to the sort of chaotic, often energetic, so-to-speak “unmusical” soundscapes created on the one hand by musicians playing in the "energy music" approach to free jazz (for instance, Albert and Don Ayler), and on the other hand by musicians who can be linked to the emergent "free improvisation" scene, such as the members of AMM.

At their most frenzied, the Grateful Dead would occasionally approach these extremes, but this was rare and almost never sustained. When it did occur, it took place either at the climaxes of jams, or in the “feedback” sections that sometimes closed their shows, especially in their Acid Rock phase—again, as a sort of climax, but this time to the set rather than to the song. Such noise was at no point the group's *modus operandi*, as it so frequently was for Albert Ayler, for example. The idea of building entire songs much of whose raison d'etre is the generation of a noisy, assaultive tumult that tries to break down the boundaries of music altogether is foreign to their approach.

As I have noted in discussing the Framework, the Grateful Dead as a general rule are musically experimental, but only to a point: basic, traditional conceptions of music are affirmed and only rarely undermined in their songs and in their approach to instrumental practice and roles. No doubt this has to do both with their personal inclinations, and with their status as a working rock band with a large audience and also large overheads.

Their practice on many levels—from instrumental roles to songwriting to staging of concerts—shows that the band was interested in traditional forms and in devising ways to work freely within them, rather than abandoning them. Furthermore, as a band they were not marginal, as were most of the free jazz musicians, and they thus needed to appeal to a popular audience as "entertainers" as well as "artists," unlike many of the early free improvisation players. The need—and, one suspects, the genuine desire—to play for a large, popular

audience also placed certain constraints on their practice. As former soundman Augustus "Bear" Owsley noted, the members of the Grateful Dead "have always had a sense of responsibility to a paying audience."[221]

Stasis

One thing that all three of these eschewed approaches have in common is that they create a feeling of stasis—they eliminate or relativize motion. The drone creates an unchanging sonic space, a constant to which the rest of the piece responds and by which it is defined. When bands focus on riffing, they create a defined and tight and theoretically never-ending space within which the music is set. Finally, noise (when carried to the extremes mentioned above) eliminates motion by carrying it to its frenzied extremes, to chaos, or prevents it by creating a context of such indeterminancy that it rules motion out.

This is not to say, of course, that change, including development, is impossible when any of these approaches are used. Old sections or lines can collapse into a drone and new ones can be born out of it; riffs can change; noise can change texture. In all of these cases, it is possible to make and move between large structural elements and distinctions. However, these approaches do rule out the sort of ongoing and flowing change on a microscopic level that is so characteristic of the Grateful Dead's esthetic, in which nothing is ever repeated exactly, although at times the changes are extremely subtle.

The Grateful Dead are always traveling, always negotiating new musical environments, exploring them, and moving on. The movement tends to be gradual and dialogic, but it is always present, and it is usually relatively smooth. The improvisational approaches that we have discussed in this paper are ways of structuring and contextualizing, but not eliminating, such motion; it flows through everything that the band played.

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[221] Gans, *Conversations*, 313.

Journeys and Environments

The Grateful Dead's valorization of this sort of movement can be seen, then, not just in their practice, but also in what they do not practice—that is, their eschewal of improvisational tactics such as droning, riffing, or noise, that are opposed to it. The lack of use of these tactics links up with what I have noted above relating to the tactics that they do use, to give us an overall picture of a band whose musical focus is on creating environments in which spontaneous but nonetheless gradual, flowing improvisation is facilitated, often involving relatively smooth motion through a succession of "fields" or sections rather than sudden jumps. The Trap Door approach may seem in some ways to be a contradiction to this general principle, but in fact is not: it provides an abrupt starting point, true, one that is often in contrast to the rest of the piece, but all it really does is to provide the improvisation with a distinct starting point. From this point, the jamming develops as freely in Trap Door songs as in any other material.

Chapter 5: The Pigpen Songs

Thus far we have looked at the evolution of what I have called "the Framework," as a method of guiding much, but not all, of the Grateful Dead's early improvisational practice. In this section, I will be discussing the way that the Grateful Dead improvised over a select number of African-American popular songs. Understanding this approach to open rock improvisation over blues and soul songs is significant not just for our understanding of the Grateful Dead specifically, but also for our grasp of the rock improvisational tradition more generally. This is because a great deal of the earliest extended rock improvising on record was set in musical contexts that owed a great deal to precisely these musical genres—listen, for example to such early extended rock pieces as the Rolling Stones' "Going Home" (*Aftermath*, Decca, 1966) or Love's "Revelation" (*Da Capo*, Elektra, released January 1967)—and even as time went on, playing blues or blues-related music remained a characteristic of many improvising rock bands, such as the Allman Brothers or Blues Traveller (although the use of such blues-related musical vehicles has grown less common in the contemporary jam band scene).

It is not hard to see why bands would choose to "stretch out" over blues-related songs or feels. Blues songs offered circular, repetitive forms over which soloists could play as long as they felt inclined, and their regularity and the shuffle rhythm gave the band support when rhythm section members took chances. Jazz standards, of course, would have offered equally circular forms, but they were also a great more difficult to play for novice or informally trained players. There was already a strong tradition within blues and r&b performance practice of open-ended songs, rather than the stereotypical 3 minute limit for pop songs, giving support and a model to rock musicians as they began to work in extended forms. As well, the majority of pre-British Invasion rock and roll was based on such forms, and even into the 1960s and 1970s a great deal of rock music used them: they would thus have been familiar territory for

rock players, and the work of players in these styles would have provided accessible and comprehensible models for rock players's developing interest in instrumental virtuosity.

In addition to these musical advantages, the use of blues-related material gained cultural capital for rock bands, in that such material bore (not unproblematically) connotations of "authenticity," "naturalness," and "soulfulness" for the predominantly white audience that supported such improvising rock bands. Thus, for example, it was said that in bringing blues songs into the Grateful Dead's repertoire, keyboardist/vocalist Ron McKernan (a.k.a. "Pigpen") "brought to the Dead blues roots [and] genuine soulfulness …,"[222] an argument that takes a well-trodden line in equating "soulfulness" and "roots" with invocations of African-American musical tropes. The ramifications, both oppressive and liberatory, of such equations are beyond the scope of the present paper; for better or worse, however, they played a significant part in making playing "bluesy" music attractive for rock musicians.

Given the importance that this sort of material had for improvising rock bands, and given too the Grateful Dead's status as one of the foremost such bands, it will be informative to examine the ways in which they approached their blues-related material, working with it so as to create potential vehicles for extended improvisation and models for the many groups that came after them. This is all the more true in that it is an area that has not been addressed at length by Grateful Dead scholars. Musicological analyses of the Grateful Dead's work tend to avoid the Pigpen songs and focus on their "acid rock" material, such as the iconic "Dark Star"; this is certainly the case for the most extensive such analysis, David Malvinni's *Grateful Dead and the Art of Rock Improvisation*, which focuses on the Grateful Dead's work in the early 1970s, whereas my concern is for the music that they made in 1967-68.

Malvinni's concern in discussing the Pigpen-sung material differs from mine in two other regards. In terms of context, Malvinni presents the Pigpen material as it relates to the Grateful Dead's other improvisational material, whereas in this paper I am interested in showing how

[222] David Shenk and Steve Silberman, *Skeleton Key: A Dictionary for Deadheads* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 220.

the band's improvisational strategies differ from Framework-related strategies. In terms of trajectory, Malvinni presents the Pigpen material as steps on the road ("primal Dead") to what he considers to be the band's most fully realized music, which was produced in the early 1970s, whereas in this section I am concerned with the material for itself. That said, Malvinni's work will be referenced as necessary, and will be of interest to any who seek to take their investigation of the Grateful Dead's improvisational strategies further.

The Grateful Dead drew musical inspiration from a wide variety of sources, and African-American music, particularly r&b and blues, was especially important for them. When they performed contemporary r&b and blues songs, it was usually though not always their keyboardist (real name Ron McKernan, but known as Pigpen), who sang lead.[223] Some of these songs (for example, "Smokestack Lightning") were performed fairly "straight," that is, with little structural improvisation beyond extended guitar solos, and hence will not be discussed here.

Other songs, however, became contexts for extended workouts, during which the band jammed while audiences danced. These songs included "In the Midnight Hour," "Turn On Your Lovelight," and "Good Morning, Little Schoolgirl," all of which will be discussed below, as well as the less-frequently played "Hard to Handle" and "Good Lovin'"[224] which for reasons of space I will not discuss. After Pigpen's death in 1972, many of his songs left the band's active repertoire for several years, although over time many of them would re-emerge, usually sung by rhythm guitarist Bob Weir. Based on my experience and my discussions with Deadheads, I would argue that even when revived, the Pigpen songs were so-to-speak canonized as Pigpen's own, and thus were understood in large part as evocations of and homages to Pigpen's work: David Malvinni writes that, for example, the song "In the Midnight Hour" "for the later Dead seems to have functioned as a nostalgic glance back at the 1960s."[225] Be that as it may, the Grateful

[223] The Grateful Dead's repertoire also included jug band songs and spiritual songs; for these, Jerry Garcia or Bob Weir would sing lead. Weir also sings lead on "Dancing in the Streets."
[224] "Good Lovin'," as sung by Bob Weir, re-entered the repertoire years after Pigpen's death, and became a frequently played song in the latter half of the Grateful Dead's career.
[225] Malvinni, *Grateful Dead*, 47.

Dead's improvising practice, on the Pigpen songs as on their other material, changed greatly over time; in this section, I will be discussing the material in the Pigpen era only.

Before proceeding to the examination, there is one more point that needs to be clarified. Because he wrote few songs and died relatively early in the band's career, it is easy to underappreciate Pigpen's importance for the early Grateful Dead. To do so, however, would be to overlook the fact that Pigpen was by far the most charismatic figure in the early band, and could well have been taken for the band's leader—indeed, it is his face alone that appears on the band's first t-shirts.[226]

As Bob Weir put it, "Pigpen was our showman."[227] And not only that: Kreutzmann says that in the early days "he was the leader of the band."[228] Garcia biographer Blair Jackson concurs: "In 1966 it was Pigpen, not Garcia, who was viewed as the leader of the band by most people; certainly he had the most commanding stage presence."[229]

Pigpen did not keep up with the musical development of the other members of the band, nor with their psychedelic explorations, but he was fully competent on the band's early r&b and blues material. For the first few years of the band's existence, Pigpen would have been seen (along with Garcia) as one of the better, or at least more reliable, musicians in the band, and certainly the band's best vocalist. Phil Lesh, interviewed years later, describes the situation as follows: "Now we know how to play well enough that we can play with other people, but for a long time it wasn't true—except for Jerry, who had a head start on all of us, and Pigpen, who was the king."[230]

Garcia stressed his importance for the band's popularity as well, saying that "Pigpen was the only guy in the band who had any talent when we were starting out … It's hard for me to

[226] A re-edition of which can be seen at http://www.dead.net/ features/pigpen-t-shirt-fan-club.
[227] Gans, *Conversations*, 126.
[228] Jackson, *Road*, 164.
[229] Jackson, *Garcia*, 110.
[230] Gans, *Conversations*, 109.

say what it was about him that people loved. But they loved him a lot. … Like I said, he was the guy who really sold the band, not me or Weir … Pigpen is what made the band work."[231]

Finally, the Pigpen songs were the band's premier dance numbers—and we have seen above how important a dancing audience was to the Grateful Dead. "Pigpen brought to the Dead blues roots, genuine soulfulness, and raunchy and riveting showmanship";[232] musically speaking, "when Pig's in charge, the grooves get fatter ('fur-lined' is the term we used), each beat has just a little more weight and the space around it is more vivid," as bassist Phil Lesh put it.[233]

Even when we listen to them in isolation, it is easy to hear how these songs would have gotten people on the dance floor. Taken in the context of long sets that might—especially in the Acid Rock or Jazz Rock phases of the band's career—have included half an hour or more of exploratory jamming, their importance for the audience becomes even more apparent: they were refreshing returns to earth, or exhilarating warm-ups, getting the crowd enthused for the show to come. "Turn On Your Lovelight," in particular, was very often used as a set-closer, especially during the Acid Rock phase.

The band's improvisational practice when backing Pigpen on these considerably extended blues and r&b tunes differs significantly from their Framework-related work, and it is for this reason that I have chosen to discuss them separately. The Pigpen songs all feature a) extended jamming over b) static harmonies and c) fairly consistent rhythmic feels, d) with extensive use of dynamic shifts, all of this led, guided, or cued, by e) Pigpen's rapping over top.

The consistency of the harmony, rhythm, and implicit or explicit presence of a structuring riff or chord progression marks these songs as different from the Framework material; so too does their structure. As we recall, in the Framework, the jamming starts up at the end of the song, with a final return to the song after the jamming has finished. With these songs, the structure is much more fluid, and the band never really moves away from the song.

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[231] Jackson, *Road*, 29.
;[232] Shenk and Silberman, *Skeleton*, 220
[233] Lesh, *Searching*, 151.

Rather, the song—stripped down to its essentials as a backdrop for Pigpen's rapping—is always present; the band's jamming brings it to life.

The band's approach to the Pigpen songs did, of course, change over time; however, the changes are less significant than the developments that take place in the Framework-related material, since the formal boundaries of the Pigpen songs remain tight—in other words, the underlying harmony and rhythm are not challenged, and the focus is firmly on providing a danceable backdrop for Pigpen's showmanship. The Pigpen songs get longer as time goes on,[234] and more frenetic, but their basic template does not, by and large, vary during his lifetime.[235] It is for this reason that I have felt it preferable to examine three songs from one (fairly early, exceptionally good) show in some detail, rather than proceeding developmentally as I did in discussing the Framework material.

I should briefly note that there are two original songs, both sung by Pigpen, that might seem at first sight to qualify as "Pigpen songs," namely "Alligator" (introduced January 1967[236]) and "Caution (Do Not Stop On Tracks)," one of the group's earliest original compositions, which appears on their first demo recording in the fall of 1965. However, upon closer examination, neither one fits into the mold created by the Pigpen songs.

"Alligator"'s verses tells the story of a "sleepy alligator in the noon-day sun" in a loose verse-refrain structure which lasts until a new section is introduced out of the refrain at the end of the composed part of the song. It is in this new section that most of the jamming takes place. Although Pigpen does sing lead during the composed part of "Alligator," he does not sing in the

[234] And then, sadly, get shorter again towards the end of Pigpen's life, as he lacks the energy to drive the band through the sort of half-hour rave-ups that were played in the late 1960s.
[235] This is a general rule, and as such subject to exceptions, such as the version of "In The Midnight Hour" performed on Sept. 3 1967 at the Dance Hall in Rio Nido and later released on the two-disc compilation *Fallout from the Phil Zone* (released 1997 on Grateful Dead Records) (http://www.archive.org/details/gd1967-09-03.sbd.miller.43.sbeok.shnf). This version of "In The Midnight Hour" is, at 32 minutes, one of the longest that the band ever performed, and in its jamming goes very far "out" indeed. But this was an exceptional performance—Pigpen songs from shows preceding or following it (for instance, versions of "Turn On Your Lovelight" from the O'Keefe Centre the month before [http://www.archive.org/details/gd1967-08-04.10355.sbd.hurwitt.shnf] or the Winterland Arena the month after this show [http://archive.org/details/gd1967-10-22.sbd.miller.116257.flac16]) are much more controlled and conform more to the structure that I am discussing in this chapter, as are other versions of "In The Midnight Hour."
[236] Dodd, *Complete*, 38.

jamming section, and the song's construction shows it to be a case of a development of the Framework, as I have discussed above; particularly important here is the fact that the jamming section at the end of the song is not anchored by a riff or chord progression, but rather is loosely organized around a tonal center and broad rhythmic feel.

"Caution (Do Not Stop On Tracks)" is much closer to being the sort of Pigpen song that "Midnight Hour" and "Turn On Your Lovelight" are. However, it is differentiated from them through the band's performance of it. When playing "Caution (Do Not Stop On Tracks)," the band did not adhere to the formal restraint characteristic of the Pigpen songs. Rather, it became the setting for some of their most adventurous explorations into dissonance, noise, and open (though usually aggressive) exploration, often being played at the end of a concert, preceding and leading into "Feedback," as for example on Feb. 28 1969.[237]

Also, as I mentioned above, the Pigpen songs will have a musical core (a riff or chord progression over a distinctive rhythm) which is usually implicitly or explicitly present. By contrast, the walking bass figure in "Caution (Do Not Stop on Tracks)" that is its most prominent instrumental characteristic, is treated loosely in performance, often vanishing for a time:[238] it serves not to structure the song (as the main riff in "Good Morning Little Schoolgirl" does), but merely to signal it.

In this section, I will examine three of the classic Pigpen songs, namely "Good Morning Little School Girl," "Turn on Your Lovelight," and "In The Midnight Hour," songs originally associated respectively with Junior Wells, Bobby "Blue" Bland, and Wilson Pickett. In each case, I will begin by discussing the versions performed by these artists, and then will discuss the Grateful Dead's versions of the songs. My goal will be to show how the Grateful Dead transformed these pieces, and how the transformed versions of—or better, approaches to—the Pigpen songs relate to the Grateful Dead's approaches to other sorts of material, as well as the ways in which they are distinct.

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[237] Released in 2005 by the Grateful Dead label on disc 5 of the *Fillmore West 1969: The Complete Recordings* box set (Grateful Dead Records, 2005).
[238] As for example at 2:00 in the version from Feb. 28 1969.

The Grateful Dead performed all three of these songs many times; for the sake of clarity and simplicity, I will be drawing on the versions heard on the night of Feb. 14 1968.[239] That show has come to be regarded as one of the greatest of the band's performances. Bassist Phil Lesh writes in his autobiography, "When we listened back to the [tapes of the] show, it was spectacular—vivid, protean and relentless."[240] Michael M. Getz, writing in *The Deadhead's Taping Compendium*, says that "serious listening to this show reveals such a sheer depth of soul-wakening power that it astonishes me to remember just how young a band they were at the time."[241]

As is natural with improvised music, no two versions of a given song are alike; at this show, two of the Pigpen tunes were kept relatively short compared to their renditions elsewhere—"Turn on Your Lovelight" is 8:58 here, while at other shows, it could stretch to 20 or 30 minutes, and the same is true of "Midnight Hour," which is just over ten minutes long in this version. "Good Morning Little Schoolgirl" here is almost thirteen minutes, about as long as it ever got. Despite the fact that two of the three songs are presented in (comparatively) abbreviated forms, the general principles behind the Grateful Dead's approach to them are as clear in these versions as they are in the longer versions—indeed, the relative brevity helps us, by enabling us to focus more precisely.

"Good Morning, Little School Girl"

"Original" version

This song was first recorded in 1937 by Sonny Boy Williamson in country blues style, and was recorded many times afterwards.[242] In 1965, Junior Wells recorded it for his *Hoodoo Man Blues* album on Delmark, an album of scrappy, loose songs played with a ragged energy and recorded with a very raw, live sound and approach. On this record, he played "Good Morning

[239] Released in 2009 as *Road Trips Volume 2.2* on the Grateful Dead label.
[240] Lesh, *Searching*, 122.
[241] Getz and Dwork, *Taping*, 151.
[242] Bill Dahl, *All Music Guide to the Blues* (New York: Freeman, 1996), 283.

School Girl"[243] in an electric Chicago blues style, with the tune being defined by its repeated and propulsive pentatonic bass riff. It is this form of the song that was picked up by the Grateful Dead,[244] and indeed, it is not unreasonable to think that it was Wells' version that they drew from. In some early versions of the song, Pigpen can be heard breathing into the microphone as an expressive device, as Wells does, and making small, wordless sounds that seem very similar to Wells' own approach (as I discuss below), suggesting that he was drawing on Wells' mannerisms, at least until his own approach to the song was fully developed.

Wells' version of "Good Morning Schoolgirl" begins with a snare hit that ushers in the rest of the band, playing the song's main riff. Its arrangement is simple; there are five choruses of 12-bar blues (one instrumental, two vocal, one instrumental, one vocal), followed by an extended vocal outro section, where Wells gets playful with his vocals while the band drones on the main riff.

The rhythmic feel of the song is "half swing," a term which "is often used to designate swing that is somewhere between the straight-eighth feel and triplet swing."[245] As was the case with a number of early electric blues, rock and roll, and r&b songs, the rhythm in "Good Morning Schoolgirl" is to be found somewhere in-between swung and straight eighth note pulse.

Billy Warren, the drummer on this song, expresses this alternation through his hi-hat playing, which goes back and forth between a swing and straight feel. His tendency in this piece is to switch to, or at least imply, a straighter feel in the second half of the third bar of each four bar section in the instrumental verses; in the vocal verses his move to a straight feel tends to coincide with the end of Wells' vocal line and can be heard as a response to or continuation of that line. Jack Myers, the bass player, is "holding it down," playing very straight rhythmically

[243] The song has variously been known as "Good Morning Little Schoolgirl," "Good Morning Schoolgirl," and "Schoolgirl."
[244] The Yardbirds also recorded the song, but in the country blues version, without the bass riff and with the title "Schoolgirl."
[245] Ripani, *New Blue*, 53.

and with a dull, flat tone, producing the riff and its minor variations with no fills. Buddy Guy, the guitarist, on the other hand, consistently uses a swinging feel.

Guy's playing illustrates a fundamental structural issue of the song. Throughout the piece, movement away from the I chord is accompanied by (somewhat) looser, more expressive playing. Thus Guy plays a repetitive riff on the I chord, but when the progression moves to the IV and V-IV sections he moves away from that riff, first playing melodic lines (in the first solo verse, first vocal verse), and then as the song progresses switching to soloistic lines (in the other verses) with variations on the melody. These changes in approach are subtle, the sort of thing that could slip by the casual listener; nonetheless, they have an effect on the song, giving it a back and forth feel, moving from tightness to momentary looseness, then back to tightness.

In his singing, Wells uses many speech-like nuances and emphases, particularly as a means of finishing lines, and is comfortable working with the microphone—for instance, breathing audibly into it. He sings the first two lines of each verse in the same way, but changes his phrasing of, and approach to, the third line in every verse. This also applies to his harmonica playing in the instrumental verses.

We can describe the main body of the song as a series of repeated 12-bar cycles, with movement within these cycles being governed rhythmically by the alternation between, or the tension generated by the simultaneous coexistence of, swing and straight feel. In terms of the musicians' playing, the harmonic progression translates into movement from a solid, riff-based texture (on the I chord) to ones of greater expressivity (on the IV, and then more so on the V-IV progression) and finally back "home" again to the I.

The song ends with an outro section, stretching from 3:05 to the end of the song; this outro is thus fairly extended, occupying roughly 15% of the song's 3:55 length. In this section

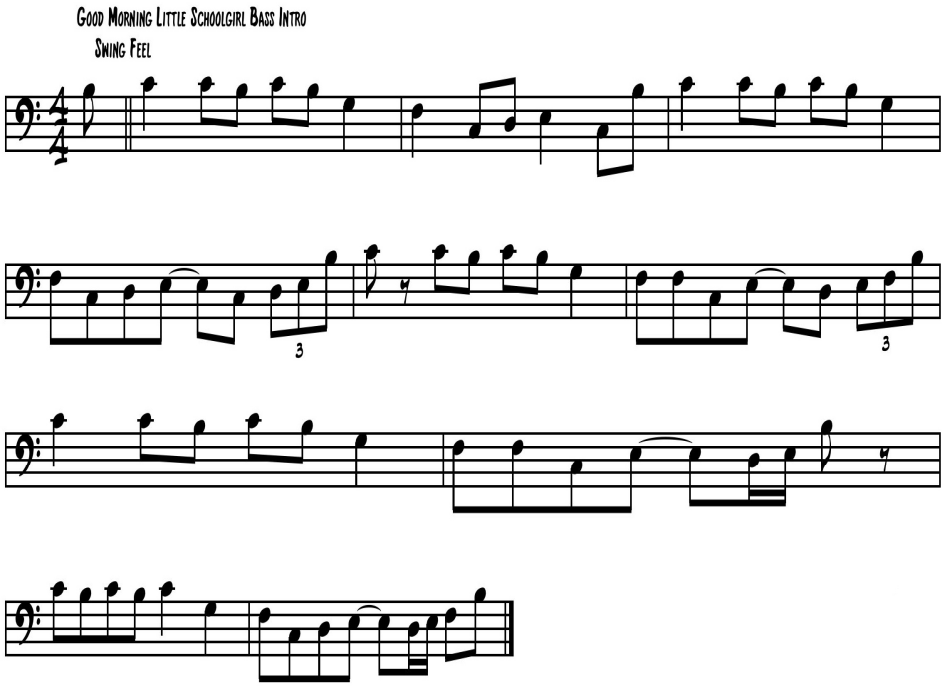
the band sits on the riff and brings down the dynamics, while Wells talk/sings over top, repeating “Good morning, little schoolgirl, can I go home” with variations in rhythm and melody. The guitar does play some fills in this section (at 3:29 and 3:34, both times as responses to the vocal line) but the bass and drums play the same line throughout. The ending is cued abruptly by the guitarist, playing a very “stock” turnaround lick that disrupts the rhythm and signals the end of the song, which finishes (as it began) with a drum crash.

Grateful Dead Version

In their version of the song, the Grateful Dead take the same approach to the verses that Junior Wells did, in terms of playing tightly on the I chords and loosening up on the other chords, bringing the tension and drive of the music up and down in a cyclical motion.

The Grateful Dead also retain the idea of ending the song with a lead vocal rap over a static I chord—as well as using this technique between verses. Throughout these sections, the band frequently follows Pigpen's lead, although the way in which they do this varies—sometimes through responding to his calls, sometimes using his vocals as cues to raise or lower the intensity, sometimes taking up and working with melodic or harmonic ideas derived from his vocal lines. However, there are just as many times when the instrumentalists turn to each other for their ideas, rather than to Pigpen's cues, as we see for example in the section starting at 10:26, when Weir begins a phrase and Lesh immediately picks it up.

Also noteworthy is the fact that the Grateful Dead ease into the song, using the main riff and variations on it, just as they ease out of it with the main riff. The twelve bar blues section of the song is thus introduced by, interspersed with, and completed by jamming based on the tonality, contour and rhythm of the main riff. In dealing with this riff, its duration and broad melodic outline are kept unvarying, while the riff itself can be played, developed, excerpted, or ignored. The riff is always potentially present, but not always actively present.



In terms of call and response, the band does respond to Pigpen's cues, but not in a mechanical or predetermined way; rather, the cues are used as the basis for improvisation and taken as guides rather than orders, indications of musical direction that invite active and spontaneous interpretation on the band's part. This can be heard in the instrumental section following the last of the vocal verses, as the band moves into what was, in the Junior Wells version, the ending of the song, holding the I chord while Pigpen vocalizes (starting at 4:48).

As Pigpen talk/sings, the band improvises, steadily increasing their volume and the complexity of their interplay for the next thirty seconds (to approx. 5:27), when they settle back into a groove related to the main riff, and then move into a response after each of his lines. Pigpen starts playing harmonica at 6:00; this seems to be a sign for things to get unsettled and complex again, which they do for the next 30 seconds, until Garcia moves into the lead role. His solo soon takes on a call and response flavor, with the band including Pigpen (on harmonica) responding to his phrases. In all this time, the band has stayed on the I chord, as they do until the song's end.

"In The Midnight Hour"

a) Original Version

The original version of the song, recorded in 1965 by Wilson Pickett,[246] possesses a rolling, majestic feel that owes a great deal to its sense of time. Rob Bowman has pointed out that the song has "a minutely delayed beat two and four"—as guitarist Steve Cropper put it in an interview with Bowman, "We started being more conscious of putting the kick drumbeat dead on and delaying the 'two, four' ... We worked on that. That was not something that was accidental ... It was never behind the beat, it's just delayed."[247] The effect of this delay is to produce a laid-back, unhurried feel that almost compels the listener to succumb to its recreation of time.

The majority of the song consists of a simple I-IV groove, which provides the harmonic underpinning for the verses and most of the instrumental material. The solidity of this inexorable progression is emphasized by the "delayed" feel and the unchanging and unsubtle bass line. Only in the horn-led introductory material, in the chorus, and in the bridge does the song move away from this groove.

In the first half of the song (up to the bridge), interesting variations on the basic groove are introduced. Although he plays no fills, still, in this section the drummer (Al Jackson) very subtly varies his snare drum hits, playing them with a different degree of intensity each time. Similarly, while Cropper largely restricts himself to chopped chords on the 2 and 4 for the verses, with more flowing playing for the choruses, nonetheless he does get slightly more energetic and ragged as the song goes on; at 0:50, the sound of his guitar strings ringing out is audible, and at 1:06 and 1:22 his single note lines are played somewhat more vigorously than was the case in the first verse.

The horn section, too, contributes to these variations. In the first part of the first verse, there is a saxophone line playing a response to the vocalist's call, with the horns switching to

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[246] *The Exciting Wilson Pickett* (Atlantic, 1966).
[247] Rob Bowman, *Soulsville USA: The Story of Stax Records (*New York: Schirmer, 1997), 61-2.

chording for the second half of the verse. In the second verse, the response line is gone, but now the horn section is in from the top, playing a counter melody line that outlines the chords, but does so with more movement than in the second half of verse line. With all of this taking place against the backdrop of an unchanging, thudding bass line, the effect is that of a slow, somewhat staggered build in intensity, one without clear markers but that is nonetheless present.

This slow build leads the listener into the bridge, which presents a new level of intensity as the drummer doubles up on the snare drum, the bassist likewise doubles up to phrase in eighth notes rather than quarters as previously, and the guitarist starts playing on every note, rather than just 2 and 4 (although his playing is different on 1 and 3 than on 2 and 4, thus preserving the emphases of the original feel). The horns take the lead here.

When Pickett returns with the vocals, the drummer and guitarist play slightly less intensely (the bass, of course, thuds along as always), but this loss of energy is compensated for by an increase in complexity, with two different horn lines playing new melodic calls and responses, Pickett singing a different melodic line over top, and of course the interlocked groove of the rhythm section continuing to drive home the two chord main progression—which has become the hub around which everything else revolves, the simple constant in the midst of ongoing musical development.

b) Grateful Dead Version

The Grateful Dead begin their version of this song in the same manner as the Pickett version, that is, with a drum roll, followed by a four-bar chord progression (D, B, A, G) leading into the two chord E-A groove of the song. It seems, in fact, as though one of the drummers is being extremely faithful to the Pickett version, to the point of replicating the characteristic solid, delayed thud for the first few bars of the song (to 0:08). However, as the song develops, the feel changes, with the other drummer bringing in off-beats and fills, while Lesh plays with a dancing, exuberant approach that is quite different from the stolid approach on the original.

It is also significant to note that the way that the Grateful Dead's rhythm section plays lends the song its own, instrumental, call and response feel, with the second half of each bar leading back to and responding to the first half.

It is over top of this back-and-forth interplay that Pigpen sings. Whereas the Pickett version of the song was marked by a slow increase in energy and raggedness, taking place over top of a static bass and drum pattern, here we have the reverse situation; the drums and bass provide dynamic and not always predictable forward motion, the second half of the bar completing the phrase in the first half and leading the listener on, while the guitars by and large serve as the stabilizers. The band plays two verses and choruses before heading into the bridge, and the second verse and chorus are approached no differently than the first verse and chorus; there is no gradual build as in the Pickett version.

In the bridge (1:27-1:45), Garcia plays a version of the horn melody line from the Pickett version. There is a switch to doubling up on the snare on the part of one of the drummers, but this fidelity to the original version is nuanced, or undercut, by the fact that the other drummer does not join in, but rather keeps playing around the beat. The original arrangement is acknowledged, but not strictly followed.

Three more verses follow, in which Garcia and Lesh play more and more independently. The fifth verse is marked by call and response interplay between Garcia and Lesh, and by the fact that the band does not go into the turnaround; rather, Pigpen keeps singing and the band sings responses until they all eventually drop out (by 3:40), leaving Pigpen to rap over top of instrumental music.

But although they have stopped singing, the band does not come down in intensity here; rather, they stay up, jamming energetically and independently. Pigpen's vocals thus function here as part of the overall sonic web, rather than as the dominant voice. By around 3:59 the band has begun taking off in a number of directions; however, throughout the jam that follows, the band never leaves the basic two-chord progression behind, nor do they

fundamentally alter the underlying rhythm. Throughout the jam, then, the band manages its improvisations so as to keep constant the basic harmonic and rhythmic kernel of the song.

Pigpen has returned to singing by 7:25, but again, his vocals function as a backdrop to Garcia's chording and Lesh's energetic playing. The band does calm down by 7:42, but then as Pigpen makes it clear that he is not going to sing another verse right away, Lesh gets active again, sounding eager to keep jamming. Note that in this section, Pigpen is still singing, contributing interjections to the jam, more textural and rhythmic than melodic. From 8:00-8:30, it again seems as though the band is making space for Pigpen to take a more active role, looping a quiet riff. By 8:38 one gets the impression that Garcia has tired of waiting and is preparing to take off again, but he is countermanded by Pigpen, who brings the verse back in at 8:44, finishing the song.

In this song, we have seen the importance of the basic two-chord pattern. Although it is no longer linked to a specific and repeated bass line as it was in the Wilson Pickett version, nonetheless it remains the fundamental organizing principle of the song. For this reason, I cannot agree with Malvinni's presentation of the improvisation in this song (working from a version performed on Sept. 3 1967) as "the epitome of controlled chaos … with Deleuzian lines of flight expanding on the source material to the extent that the source disappears."[248] The source does not disappear; rather, it is stripped down to its most fundamental—and, significantly, most danceable—level and used as a basis for the band's interactive improvisation. With regard to Pigpen, we have seen how he functions here as a member of an improvising ensemble; the band plays with and around him, making space for him when necessary but prepared to go on without him should he choose not to enter.

"Turn On Your Lovelight"

a) Original Version

[248] Malvinni, *Grateful Dead*, 47.

This song, credited to Deadric Malone[249] and Joseph Scott, was first recorded by Bobby "Blue" Bland in 1961.[250] It was also covered in 1966 by the Irish band Them for their second album, *Them Again*. Although some members of the Grateful Dead were influenced by Them's music, enough so that their early original, "Caution (Do Not Stop on Tracks)," is clearly derived from Them's "Mystic Eyes," the Grateful Dead's version of "Turn On Your Lovelight" draws on Bobby "Blue" Bland's original arrangement, and not Them's more laid back and less sharply defined version.

In Bland's version, the song's basic, jaunty rhythm does not vary at all, and its I-IV harmony pattern is constant with the sole exception of a four-bar section in which the drums play alone, found in the first half of the piece. The bassist and pianist, too, play their simple parts with little variation.

The guitarist alternates between three approaches. When the horns play their punches at the very start of the song, he plays a chord-based riff that accompanies them; following these punches he switches to a "shave and a haircut" chord rhythm that he plays until Bland has sung his first line; at this point, he switches to single-note melodic lines, which he continues until Bland reaches the climax of the verse, at which point he briefly returns to the "shave and a haircut" line, and then the riff that accompanies the return of the horn punches. After this there is a drum solo, and then the pattern continues: he riffs when the horns are punching, plays the rhythmic chords until Bland has finished his first line, and then plays the melodic single-note line under the rest of Bland's singing.

In terms of the rhythm section, this alternation of guitar patterns provides the only contrast in the arrangement. As the guitar is not foregrounded, and as it does not change exactly in synch with Bland's vocals, the alternation has a subtle effect; the listener feels that

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[249] Deadric Malone was a pseudonym used by Don Deadric Robey, founder of Peacock Reconrds, "to claim authorship of things he didn't write," as Charles Farley puts it (*Soul of the Man: Bobby "Blue" Bland* [Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011], 87). Charles Shaar Murray argues that the songs in Bland's recordings credited to Malone were actually written "by members of Bland's … band, notably trumpeter/arranger Joe Scott and guitarist Wayne Bennett" (*Boogie Man: The Adventures of John Lee Hooker in the American Twentieth Century* [New York: St. Martin's, 2000], 165)

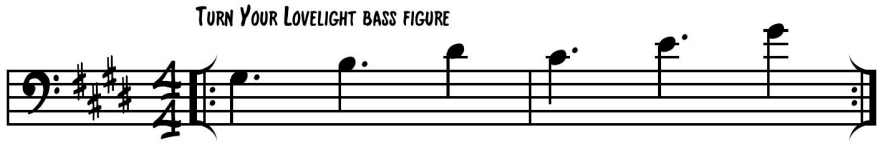
[250] Available on *Turn on Your Love Light: The Duke Recordings Vol. 2* (MCA, 1994).

something is changing, but is not immediately sure what it is, especially given the driving constancy of the bass, drum and piano playing.

With regard to leads, there are three sets of horn punches that serve as punctuation, and for the final twenty seconds of the song the horns shift to a more rhythmically propulsive pattern underneath Bland's vocals. Bland's vocal takes the lead for the majority of the song, the only exception being the saxophone solo from 1:43-2:02. The song ends with a fadeout as Bland sings "I feel all right! Let it shine!"

b) Grateful Dead Version

At this show, "Turn On Your Lovelight" emerged out of a band composition called "The Eleven," with Garcia signalling the move to a new song by playing the distinctive single note guitar riff. As the song begins, Lesh switches to his "Lovelight" bass line, showing that he has understood Garcia's signal, and Garcia moves to a chord-based figure.



For the first 25 seconds of the song, Garcia, Lesh and Weir play interlocking lines, establishing the song, before coming down in volume and moving to a more ragged and minimal feel for Pigpen's vocal entry.

The band brings up the dynamics as the verse proceeds, until by the time Pigpen has hit the chorus (0:44) they are almost back to their former level, and playing the interlocking parts. The chorus ends with a drum break, as in the Bland version of the song, although this break is 12 bars long. Pigpen sings another verse, with only the drums accompanying him, and there is an interesting moment at 1:30, where one of the drummers plays a response to Pigpen's vocal on his kick drum, and then crosses the bar line with this response, extending it into a full phrase of its own.

At end of the vocal verse they move into an improvisational section, in which the underlying I-IV progression is maintained by Pigpen's organ playing. At around 3:01, Garcia starts playing a descending chord line that seems to be a cue to bring things down; at least, it is interpreted as such by Weir, who drops the intensity and volume of his own playing, soon followed by the rest of the band.

After this, Garcia leads the way back into the main riff, as he did at the start of the song, but Pigpen re-enters before the band is ready for him; they have not yet come down as low as they did in the introduction to the song (3:16). Their response to this is simply to keep playing, while Pigpen sings over top.

The song's second drum break, starting at 3:50, is considerably longer than the first. Pigpen starts singing again at 4:08, but sounds uncertain, so he retreats, tries again at 4:12 and 4:14 and retreats again both times. The drummers have brought things down at 4:14 to make a space for him to enter. But when he does not come in, they get more active again, apparently shifting their plans and intending to extend the drum break (4:16), just before Pigpen definitely decides to re-enter (4:19). This time, when Pigpen gets to the chorus, the rest of the band joins in singing responses to his calls. He in turn extends this section, talk/singing over top as the instrumentalists bring things down, following his cues. When he then sings "turn it on up, bring it on up" (5:28), Garcia responds by coming in quietly on guitar (5:32), with the backing vocals spontaneously dropping out to facilitate this. Garcia continues playing leads as Weir's vocals return, now singing a different line ("Little bit higher" 5:37). As the song's intensity rises, Weir sings louder, Garcia plays louder, and Lesh plays more firmly over the underlying two-chord progression, Pigpen talk/singing all the while.

At 6:06, Pigpen drops out, and Garcia plays a riff where Pigpen's vocal would have been. After Garcia plays the riff a second time, Lesh begins responding to it in his own playing; following this, Lesh integrates the riff into his bass line and starts working with it (6:12), just as Pigpen starts singing again, with Weir providing responses. Garcia then shifts to play the introductory single note riff, and the band starts to build things up again, with Pigpen leading

them on. At 7:09 Garcia takes off on a solo, starting out in a high register but shortly afterward (7:20) dropping down and getting more active as Weir heightens the activity of his own playing. At around 7:28 Garcia pauses; at 7:32 Garcia comes in with a lead riff that interlocks with Weir's rhythm guitar riff. After establishing this pattern, Weir breaks from it, switching his line so that it includes a response to Garcia (7:40). They continue in this fashion until 7:49, when Garcia brings the song to a close (7:56).

The guiding principle underlying the Bland version of the song was the idea of building the piece up through the successive introduction of lines. The core of the song (the rhythm and the harmony) never changes—rather, it provides the stable basis over which the song develops and changes. This is also the case with the Grateful Dead's version, except less so. In their version, while the essential rhythm and harmony do not change, there is much more that is "up for grabs." No member or members of the band are responsible for expressing the fundamental elements; rather, they are conceptual aspects of the piece which can be manifested by different members at different times. Furthermore, whereas the Bland version introduced its variations and developments in what seems to be a predetermined order, the Grateful Dead's variations are, as we have seen, frequently the result of spontaneous interaction between the band members.

Just as there is no one member responsible for "holding it down" in the background of the Grateful Dead's version of "Turn On Your Lovelight," so there is no unambiguously foregrounded member. Certainly, Pigpen is the "leader" of the band during this song, but his leadership is of the "first among equals" variety; he signals changes, but does not control how those changes are expressed.

Conclusion

Playing the main groove

The songs examined above are not tremendously complex in their essential structures. In their original versions, they all consist of a repeated main element—whether a riff, or a chord

progression over a rhythm—that plays through the majority of the song, with one or more periodically-occurring interludes that move away from, and then back to, this element.

In “Good Morning Little Schoolgirl,” the main element is the song’s riff, and the moves to the IV and V-IV chords are the interludes that contrast with it, not only by virtue of the change in harmony, but also because the playing gets (somewhat) looser and more expressive in these sections. In “In The Midnight Hour,” the main element is a two-chord vamp, and there are two interludes, namely the four-bar series of chords that open the song, and the V-IV chord progression that ends the verses, both of which differ dramatically from the vamp. In “Turn On Your Lovelight,” the main element again is a I-IV vamp, with the interlude being the horn shots that are played over it before verses and during the saxophone solo.

The Grateful Dead’s tendency when playing these Pigpen songs is to render these interludes more or less faithfully. They do not use them as vehicles for wide-ranging improvisation. This is most clear with regard to “In The Midnight Hour,” in which their use of the interlude figures conforms with the way that these figures are used in the original version of the song, and they are dropped during the improvisation. In “Good Morning Little Schoolgirl,” the nature of the interlude figure is somewhat obscured by the fact that the band does not maintain the same distinctions in terms of approach between the I and the IV or V-IV sections that we noted in Wells’ original. Nonetheless, it remains true that when the band shifts from guitar solo to group improvisation, the chord changes, in other words the interludes, are dropped; all that remains is the main riff and what the band makes of it.

Finally, in “Turn on Your Lovelight,” the interlude figure is brought in more frequently than in the original—a necessary step if one is to maintain interest and danceability in a piece this long—but otherwise is kept much the same.

Thus in both the Grateful Dead’s versions of the songs, and those performed by the original artists, the interludes fulfil roughly the same function, namely to give the listener some sort of contrast to the main elements, the riffs or vamps that make up the majority of the piece. The Grateful Dead’s versions differ from the originals in their treatment of these main

elements, which are a) enormously elongated, and b) considerably varied. When the band is improvising, they work exclusively with the main riffs or vamp. There is one apparent exception to this general rule. In other, longer versions of "Turn On Your Lovelight," the band breaks up sections of improvising with the interlude figure. However, this use of it is less of an exception to this rule than it may seem, for—unlike the interlude figures in the other two songs—it is played over the same chord changes that make up the main vamp. There is, therefore, no fundamental break in the main vamp.

The band's use of these vamps or riffs contrasts with their improvisational practice in the non-Pigpen, Framework-based songs. As I have discussed above, their practice in the non-Pigpen songs is to move from section to section of the improvisation, changing feels and working within musical areas loosely defined by a tonality and a rhythmic sensibility. Chord changes are dropped; riffs may be picked up, but are sure to be dropped as well; there is a gradual but continual flow through a variety of musical environments. The emphasis is on group interaction and exploration—everyone is listening to their fellow musicians to pick up hints of possible new directions to go in, places to explore.

Here, though, in the Pigpen songs, the situation is different. With these songs, it is the band's inventiveness that is tested, their ability to work within strict limits, not their ability to explore, as they stretch these looped one and two bar cells out to great length. There may be scattered instances where the cells are temporarily left behind—such as in the drum break in "Turn on Your Lovelight"—but by and large they are present throughout.

Pigpen and Power

a) Pigpen as Bandleader

In the Pigpen songs, Pigpen is front and centre, presenting an individualistic and very personal charisma that is very different from the somewhat distanced, formal approaches favoured by the other vocalists. Like him or not (for many his singing is at best an acquired taste), Pigpen is *present* in his singing in a way that Garcia and Weir are not. We could say that

he inhabits the song, rather than singing it. Consequently, he becomes a defining force in the songs he sings, and indeed, this is necessary, for the songs themselves lack inherent structure, and the lyrics tend to be both simple and repetitive. Much of the organization of the music, then, is left up to him. Thus it is appropriate to consider the issue of power and its enactment with regard to the Pigpen songs.

At first glance, it would appear that Pigpen has the power in these songs, and that they therefore present a patriarchal model in which a dominant male figure "lays down the law," defining the context within which the band and the audience will work.

First glances, however, are notoriously untrustworthy. With regard to the band, even given that Pigpen is a defining force, he is not nearly so much of a controlling one. As we have seen in our discussion above, he guides the band, inspires it, cues it, but does not dictate the ways in which it will relate to his cues. The Grateful Dead's ethos of spontaneity remains active even when they are being led; they follow, but in their own, idiosyncratic way. It is noteworthy, however, that Pigpen does not follow the band in these songs; he remains the leader when he is singing or playing harmonica, although when the band is jamming and he switches to organ, he then takes up a more subordinate role.

b) Pigpen and the Audience

As we saw above, the technique of using vocal call and response, is noted as being especially characteristic of African-American music. And as we also have seen, the Grateful Dead make a great deal of use of this technique in the Pigpen songs, with Pigpen as the leader and the band as respondents, whether their responses are delivered vocally or instrumentally.

However, there is one intriguing difference between the Grateful Dead's practice and the use of this technique found elsewhere; this difference relates to the role of the audience. Although Pigpen will frequently directly address the audience as a whole or individual members of it, the audience is not invited to reply to these addresses. One feels that, with rare exceptions, there is a considerable distance between the "implied audience" of Pigpen's raps,

and whatever real audience may have been in the venue that night.[251] Only the band replies to Pigpen's calls, and they do so in unpredictable and idiosyncratic ways. This contrasts with what might happen in a more conventional r&b performance, in which the band might play fairly static or rigidly organized lines over top of which the lead singer and the audience could relate in a fairly predictable fashion; with the Grateful Dead the band itself reacts improvisationally to Pigpen's vocals.

This difference in approach has multi-layered effects on the way that the music comes across. It certainly separates the band from the audience to a degree, and one could see this as having the effect of negating the audience, of diminishing their significance by removing their chance to speak up.

But on the other hand this separation can be read as being empowering. For after all, when a more typical call and response situation is set up, the responders are put in a situation with strict limitations. Insofar as they choose to stay within the call and response context , their response is predetermined by the caller. When s/he says “Let me hear you say yeah!”, s/he is ensuring that “yeah!” (or silence) will be the response.

In my view, this sort of call and response is not truly dialogic; rather, it is designed to provoke testimonials to the power of the caller, and thus can be described as autocratic, even if only playfully so. This emphasis on the assertion of the caller's power is shown by the role assigned to the band in such a situation; the musicians must simply back up the caller, or respond to him as the audience does, in quite controlled ways.

The Grateful Dead’s use of call and response in the Pigpen songs, on the other hand, is *quite* dialogic. One gets the sense that there is a conversation going on between Pigpen and the rest of the band, one in which Pigpen takes the leading role, but in which the autonomy of the other band members is respected, where a fairly wide variety of responses are permitted.

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[251] The version of “In The Midnight Hour” from September 3 1967, referred to above, is again an exception in this regard: by the end of the song, Pigpen’s exhortations to audience members to get up and dance sound authentic and unscripted—in short, the product of real interaction with real people.

It is true that the audience does not actively participate in this dialogue, at least insofar as recordings present the situation. There is a clear separation between band and audience, a demarcation of their respective spheres. But we need not assume that the audience is merely watching passively as the band plays. Rather, they are dancing; they are talking; they are doing whatever comes to mind. In short, they are musicking in their own way. As a contemporary witness might have put it, they are "doing their own thing" as the Grateful Dead do theirs, both groups doing their complementary jobs to ensure the success of the musical event.

The full context of the musical event, then, includes both the band and the audience, something that is easy to forget when working with recordings that include only the band. But what these recordings do capture, what they do drive home, is the fact that the Grateful Dead's vision is not one where the entire room unites as one; rather, it is a vision in which multiplicity and independence—the essential preconditions for dialogue—are affirmed, both within the band and within the event as a whole. This is the case both in jams conforming to the Framework, and in those that involve a member of the band being put forward as the musical director. The Grateful Dead were successful in finding a way to use Pigpen's celebrity and his ability to spur on a dancing crowd that did not sacrifice their commitment to dialogic musicmaking.

Chapter 6: Other Improvising Rock Bands: A Comparative Look

I have discussed above some of the reasons why rock music should have developed an improvisational imperative in the mid-1960s, and of course the Grateful Dead were not the only band to go this route. In this section, I will briefly discuss several other significant improvising rock groups that began in the mid-1960s, and I will look at how their practice relates to that of the Grateful Dead. This will not only shed light on the approaches to improvisation that they devised, but will also enable us to better understand the Grateful Dead's practice. As we will see, the improvisational approaches that these bands developed had a great deal to do with the respective groups' status and reputation—in other words, their context within the world of popular music. Improvisation, even when it is only a matter of improvisation within a given genre, is not a "one size fits all" approach to playing—rather, it establishes a general field, within which a variety of specific strategies can be devised, depending on the requirements of the group in question.

The groups that I will examine are the Jefferson Airplane, who will give us a contrasting example from within the Grateful Dead's own San Francisco scene; the Velvet Underground, from New York, who came out of a very different aesthetic background and with different musical goals from the San Francisco bands; the English band Cream, whose take on improvising music draws from a jazz- and blues-influenced validation of soloistic virtuosity; and Pink Floyd, the iconic representatives of the London-based psychedelic rock scene.[252] I must

[252] Cream, too, were based in London, but they were not so clearly identified with that scene, and particularly the UFO club, its heart, as were Pink Floyd. From their beginnings, Cream were presented and understood as a "supergroup," an entity unto itself, rather than being a representative of a local scene. Thompson notes that "Cream (or their management) not only distanced themselves from the nuts and bolts of the psychedelic movement, they did so with a deliberation that bordered upon arrogance. It wasn't only the Happenings that they steered clear of. Almost alone of the major bands of the day [in London], Cream never played UFO or the now-swinging Middle Earth, the pulsing heart of British psychedelia" (Dave Thompson, *Cream: How Eric Clapton Took the World by Storm* [London: Virgin Books, 2006], 173). Furthermore, their real development as an improvising band seems to have taken place during their stay in San Francisco in late August and September of 1967 (Thompson, *Cream*, 188-192; Chris Welch, *Cream: The Legendary British Supergroup* [London: Balafon, 2000], 114-118).

stress that this is not the place for a full examination of these groups' improvisational work—rather, my concern here is to draw out some of the broad parallels or contrasts between these groups and the Grateful Dead, in order to present a picture of the range of approaches that were possible.

The Jefferson Airplane

The Jefferson Airplane, along with the Grateful Dead, Quicksilver Messenger Service, and Big Brother and the Holding Company, were one of the main bands in the San Francisco scene, which indeed vocalist Marty Balin helped to start by cofounding the Matrix club.[253] Drawing on similar folk/rock roots to the Grateful Dead, the Jefferson Airplane can in many ways be seen as the Grateful Dead's "big brother" band[254]—they were actively playing before the Grateful Dead, they established themselves on the scene before the Grateful Dead did, and they quickly achieved a level of commercial success that would elude the Grateful Dead until the 1980s. They also shared with the Grateful Dead a drug-fuelled[255] willingness to experiment musically on the basis of their folk/rock template, particularly with regard to their bassist, Jack Casady, who played the same model Gibson Starfire bass that Phil Lesh would adopt, and who—also like Lesh—showed an eagerness to explore nonconventional (particularly distorted) timbres.[256] In his autobiography, Lesh credited Casady with showing him a model for the rhythm/lead style of bass playing that he sought to develop.[257]

Hence the Jefferson Airplane present an interesting case. On the one hand, they were

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[253] Tamarkin *Revolution*, 24-5

[254] Such a relationship between bands working in the same scene is not at all uncommon—we see it for example with the Sex Pistols and the Clash in England in 1976-77, with the Replacements and Soul Asylum in Minneapolis in the early to mid-1980s, or with the Lowest of the Low and Dig Circus in Toronto in the early 1990s.

[255] Both bands used a wide variety of drugs, and indeed acquired well-deserved reputations as drug bands. But whether it was through their work at the Acid Tests, their association with famed LSD chemist Augustus Owsley Stanley, a.k.a. "Bear," or the perfect aptness of their music for tripping, the Grateful Dead became particularly associated with LSD, an association that would remain current throughout their career, even as band members moved on to focus on relative sobriety (Weir [Gans, *Conversations*, 12; McNally 2002, 160]), alcohol (Lesh [Lesh 2006, 225-6]), or heroin (Garcia [McNally, *Trip*, 500]). The Jefferson Airplane's attitude as expressed by guitarist Paul Kantner was rather that "acid for us was just a tool rather than a religion, like a good dessert after a fine eight-course meal. It was as good as several other tools" (Tamarkin, *Revolution*, 20).

[256] Gleason, *Jefferson*, 203.

[257] Lesh, *Searching*, 51.

musically, professionally and socially linked to the Grateful Dead, and both bands worked in an environment in which improvised jamming of some sort was taken as a normal, expected way of playing; on the other hand, there is no record of their having had the sort of religious conversion experiences that, as I am arguing in this dissertation, were understood by the Grateful Dead to have led them to their particular approach to improvisational playing. The Jefferson Airplane were an allegedly, often incoherently, revolutionary band, but they were not a mystical or religiously-inspired one.

In the fall of 1967, the Jefferson Airplane recorded *Bless Its Pointed Little Head* (released 1968 on RCA), a live album drawn from performances at the Fillmore West (in San Francisco) and the Fillmore East (in New York). This album displays the band's aggressive, but also ramshackle approach to live performance: as it is an easily-accessible and well-known document, I will use it to illustrate my discussion of their improvisational approach.

Other live recordings of the band from the mid- or late 1960s circulate, whether as bootlegs or as official releases (for example, the recently released *1966 Jefferson Airplane Early and Late Shows*, Collector's Choice, 2010), and they show similar characteristics to the music on *Bless Its Pointed Little Head.* Members of the Jefferson Airplane (mainly bassist Casady and guitarist Jorma Kaukonen[258]) did get involved with jamming with other San Francisco musicians, as in fall 1968 when, for example, Casady played along with Garcia and Mickey Hart in the ad-hoc group Mickey and the Hartbeats, and Casady and Kaukonnen formed the band Hot Tuna in early 1969, but in what follows, I will be discussing only the work of the Jefferson Airplane.

Interestingly, the music on *Bless Its Pointed Little Head* shows the Jefferson Airplane to be simultaneously tighter and looser than the Grateful Dead. They are *tighter*, in that their songs remain themselves. With the exception of "Bear Melt," a loose jam that is related to the piece called "The Thing" on other recordings, the Jefferson Airplane do not venture far away from the basic structure and feel of their material. They may extend introductory sections of songs as in the extended, layered introduction to "3/5's of a Mile in 10 Seconds," in which the

[258] Gleason, *Jefferson*, 205.

drums play alone for 16 seconds, after which the bass joins in, shortly followed by the guitar, with the vocalists coming in to start the verse at :30; similarly, the band improvises over the introductory chords and rhythms of "Somebody to Love" for 55 seconds before the vocals enter. In those two songs, they also incorporate instrumental sections played over the chord progressions of the verse. However, the Jefferson Airplane do not perform anything comparable to the extended, developmental improvisatory excursions that one finds in the Grateful Dead's Framework and post-Framework music. Rather than the song proper being superseded by the jamming section, in the Jefferson Airplane's live performances the song is always present, albeit elaborated. As Grateful Dead manager Rock Scully put it, "The Jefferson Airplane certainly never [performed] anything they didn't have down cold. The Dead would play stuff that they didn't even remember having written that day."[259]

We can surmise that this was not always the case in rehearsal, as Casady's work with Mickey and the Hartbeats is considerably more open than this. There is, furthermore, a widely-available bootlegged studio outtake from sessions for the Jefferson Airplane's third album, *After Bathing at Baxters* (RCA, 1967), that features Casady, Kaukonen and Dryden jamming quite freely, only loosely adhering to an Am-Bb progression. The latter nine minutes of this outtake were released on *After Bathing at Baxters* as "Spare Chaynge"; the first fifteen minutes have never been officially released. But in their live work as the Jefferson Airplane, with the exception of "Bear Melt"/"The Thing," they play their songs as songs.

This leads us to the way in which the Jefferson Airplane are *looser* than the Grateful Dead. While the song is always present, the Jefferson Airplane play with a more aggressive and informal feel than the Grateful Dead—rather than the Grateful Dead's "electric chamber music" effect that Phil Lesh has spoken of,[260] with its thoughtful and deliberate interlocking of parts, the Jefferson Airplane's performances in this period are reminiscent of jam sessions, or of the sort of "go for the throat" intensity that would be raised to a high art by the MC5, with Casady in particular taking the lead in this regard.

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[259] Brightman, *Chaos*, 137.
[260] McNally, *Trip*, 578.

Furthermore, while in the Grateful Dead's music the vocals tend to be stable and presented the same way every time, defining the song and serving as structured sections in contrast with the open jams, with the Jefferson Airplane the vocals too are subject to considerable spontaneous reinterpretation. Lead singers Marty Balin and Grace Slick interact heterophonically, contrapuntally, and in call-and-response style, as well as harmonically, taking chances that are not always successful, and there is a ragged edge to their voices that intensifies the feeling of being "in the moment." The Grateful Dead's vocals could be ragged as well, but with the exception of established repeated chants (such as the backing vocals in "Lovelight" or the "anymore" chant that ends "Bertha"), one suspects that this was more often due to their attempts to sing the song correctly than to vocal improvising.

Overall, then, this Jefferson Airplane album and the other live material from the mid- to late 1960s that I have heard shows a powerful, driving band that is willing to take chances and "stretch out" on their material, but one that is not (again with the exception of "Bear Melt"/"The Thing") willing to develop its songs into entirely new realms, as the Grateful Dead was doing at that time. In keeping with that is the more individualistic feel of the musicians in the Jefferson Airplane, producing the impression of an excited and exciting interplay of distinct voices rather than the creation of a polyphonically unified band sound.

We could argue that part of this difference in approach was due to the Jefferson Airplane's status as a commercially successful rock band with hit singles and the audience expectations in terms of "delivering the hits" that this status led to; on the other hand, we could also note that the Grateful Dead adhered to their improvisational approach even at Woodstock, and even when they became rock stars in the 1980s, so the difference might well have more to do with basic artistic differences between the two bands.

But overall, what we see when we compare the improvisational practice of the Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead is an aspiration on the latter's part towards greater band coherence and a willingness to grant autonomy to spontaneous musical developments. The Grateful Dead work as a group to create and explore new musical territory, whereas the

Jefferson Airplane explosively jam on or over already-existing songs.

As I have mentioned above, and will discuss at greater length below, both of these distinctive aspects of the Grateful Dead's improvisational practice can be linked to their understandings of the significance of the foundational religious experiences that they underwent in 1965 and 1966. It is clear from their similarities that the two bands emerged from very similar musical contexts; their differences show their contrasting motivations.

The Velvet Underground

The Grateful Dead and the Velvet Underground knew, or knew of, each other: they played on the same bill several times (February 7 and April 25-26, 1969[261]), and members of the Velvet Underground were openly scornful of the Grateful Dead—as lead singer and guitarist Lou Reed put it, the San Francisco scene was "just tedious, a lie and untalented ... You know, people like Jefferson Airplane, Grateful Dead are just the most untalented bores that ever came up."[262]

This disdain, although to be expected of the famously cranky Velvet Underground, is ironic, as the improvisational strategies followed by the two bands have a great deal in common. Both groups drew extended and at times extremely "outside" jams out of basic rock songs, built on basic rock rhythms and melodies and in both cases strongly influenced by garage rock: furthermore, these basic rock songs were performed more or less "straight"—that is, the song would usually be rendered in what seems to be a standard and predetermined form, with the major variations and spontaneous contributions being reserved for the jamming section. With the Grateful Dead, as noted above, improvisational developments take place even within these structured segments, while the Velvet Underground play them a good deal straighter.

As well, while it is difficult to quantify this observation, one gets the impression in listening to the Velvet Underground and the Grateful Dead that there is in their improvisations

[261] See Caleb Kennedy's post at http://deadessays.blogspot.ca/2010/09/velvets-and-dead.html for a detailed discussion of the interactions between the two bands.
[262] Bockris and Malanga, *Up-Tight*,, 66.

a pursuit of something more significant than simply a good jam. One feels that they are making statements, that they are deliberately moving the listener into a different conceptual world from the one that she would normally inhabit, rather than simply playing well.

In the case of the Grateful Dead, this aspect can be understood religiously: it can be seen as a movement into a Turnerian liminal[263] state appropriate to their transformative/spiritual mission (to be discussed in greater detail in the second half of this dissertation). In the case of the Velvet Underground, I would suggest that it is due to their self-understanding as, among other things, an art rock band—at a period, let us note, when such a designation was something of a novelty. Founding member John Cale came into the band with a strong grounding in the Western art music tradition, albeit working within a very modern and underground stream of it; Lou Reed brought his "poetic" sensibility to the group, having been influenced by and studied with Delmore Schwartz; and vocalist Nico had worked for Fellini and was associated with Andy Warhol's Pop Art scene, which adopted the band.[264] Consequently, the Velvet Underground can be seen and were understood at least in part as an Art-with-a-capital-A band[265], whose medium was (ironically) primitivist rock.

John Cale, in a 1967 interview with the *New York World Journal Tribune*, said that "we're putting everything together—lights and film and music—and we're reducing it to its lowest common denominator. We're musical primitives."[266] But of course, there is inevitably some level of artistic irony present when a classically-trained, avant garde musician refers to himself as "primitive." Real musical primitives do not refer to themselves as such, nor do they tend to

[263] Or, more precisely, liminoid. As Turner put it in his "Variations on a Theme of Liminality," "liminal phenomena are centrally integrated into the total social process, forming with all its other aspects a complete whole … On the other hand, liminoid phenomena develop most characteristically outside the central economic and political process, along their margins, on their interfaces, in their 'tacit dimensions' (though, later, liminoid ideas and images may seep from these peripheries and cornices into the centre)" (Viktor Turner, "Variations on a theme of liminality" [pages 36-52 in Sally Moore and Barbara Myerhoff, ed., *Secular Ritual*, Assen: Van Gorcum, 1977], 44).
[264] see John Cale and Victor Bockris, *What's Welsh for Zen: The Autobiography of John Cale*. (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 81 ff. for details of their integration into the ongoing artistic life of Warhol's Factory.
[265] To take one example: Detroit's MC5 played with the Velvet Underground at the Boston Tea Party, Dec. 12-14 1967. The MC5's public image at that time was trendily "revolutionary"; when guitarist Wayne Kramer was asked by Victor Bockris if the Velvet Underground also had a "revolutionary rep," he responded by saying "No, I think they had more of a rep with people who were into art, a cultish kind of a thing" (Bockris and Malanga 1983,148).
[266] Bockris and Malanga, *Up-Tight*, 81.

associate or work with La Monte Young, Xenakis, and Morton Feldman, as Cale did[267] (although Cale's claims to have worked with John Cage have been called into question[268]). As drummer Maureen Tucker notes, "most of the places we played were for older art people ... At first, when we were with Andy, we played places like art shows."[269]

For both the Grateful Dead and the Velvet Underground, then, there was a palpable sense of (aesthetic or religious) significance that surrounds their music, a sense of mission—which is all the more striking given that both bands also embraced the modernist collapse of distinctions between high and low art, juxtaposing the influences of classical and experimental music of European and Indian descent with popular rock and roll songs and a determinedly irreverent attitude.

For all their similarities, however, the Velvet Underground differ strongly from the Grateful Dead in two major aspects: their use of dissonance, and their love of drones. I noted above that the Grateful Dead tend to gradually work their way up to dissonant sections in their improvisation, and that these sections tend not to be unduly extended. The Velvet Underground made a great deal more use of strong dissonances and outright noise in their music, and while they could work their way up to it, they also reveled in the shock that could be produced through its sudden imposition (as can be heard in "European Son" on their first album, *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, and "I Heard Her Call My Name" on their second album, *White Light/White Heat*), or through its prolongation, as can be heard on versions of "Sister Ray" from the *Bootleg Series Volume One: The Quine Tapes*[270] (recorded in 1969 and released on Polydor in 2008).

Especially in their early days, the Velvet Underground seem to have regarded destabilization and disorientation as valued goals of improvisational playing, a confrontational aesthetic that coheres with their approach to their early staging of their shows, performing at

[267] Cale and Bockris, *Zen*, 36 ff.
[268] Richard Witts, *The Velvet Underground* (London: Equinox, 2006), 28.
[269] Albin Zak, *The Velvet Underground Companion* (New York: Schirmer, 1997), 139.
[270] The Velvet Underground, *Bootleg Series Volume 1: The Quine Tapes*. recorded 1969. Polydor/Universal 314 589 067-2, 2001, compact disc.

high volume, obscured by blinding lights, and potentially accompanied by staged S/M performances (for a contemporary description of the band's early performances, see the article by Larry McCombs from the Boston Broadside of July 1966[271]). Part of this was no doubt due to the assaultive aesthetics favored by many avant garde artists: part of it can also be ascribed to a desire to homologically model their noisy, urban environment; part of it can be understood as a musical evocation of the rampant amphetamine abuse in Warhol's scene.[272]

Their emphasis on disorientation might seem paradoxical when we take into account the band's simultaneous love of drones and stasis. Some of this emphasis is easily explainable, as bassist/violinist John Cale had worked with LaMonte Young in his drone-based Theater of Eternal Music, while the Velvet Underground in their early days were closely associated with Andy Warhol and his stasis-based approach to film. As Torgoff notes, "In all of Warhol's early films, the camera never once moved, and the sense of time was … slowed down even more by the techniques of loop printing, frozen frames, and retarded projection speeds. The effect was to take something completely static to begin with and render it trancelike, otherworldly."[273]

There is evidence that Lou Reed, too, was independently interested in drones even before his association with Warhol, to judge by his early (pre-Velvet Underground) composition, "Do the Ostrich," in which all six strings of the guitar were tuned to the same note. Musician and film-maker Tony Conrad, who was selected to play in the ad-hoc band that Pickwick Records assembled to promote the song, writes that Reed "said, 'Don't worry, it's easy to play because all the strings are tuned to the same note,' which blew our minds because that was what we were doing with La Monte [Young] in the Dream Syndicate."[274]

But John Cale left the band in 1968, while the band's association with Warhol ended in 1967, and Reed's tuning experiments with the Primitives were not repeated in the Velvet Underground. The constant drone element throughout the Velvet Underground's career was

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[271] reprinted in Heylin 2005, 24-27
[272] see, for example, Martin Torgoff, *Can't Find My Way Home: America in the Great Stoned Age* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), chapter 5.
[273] Torgoff, *Can't Find*, 166.
[274] Bockris and Malanga, *Up-Tight*, 24-5.

drummer Maureen Tucker, who took musical minimalism to previously unknown heights.

Tucker was unquestionably a *rock* drummer, not an avant-gardist like Cale or her predecessor in the band, Angus MacLise. She laid down solid, powerful rock rhythms, but these rhythms were stripped down to their bare essentials, as was her kit: she notes that "I think I had a bass, a tom-tom, and a snare, and maybe I had one cymbal."[275] Complementing her minimal setup, Tucker was prone to playing extremely long songs with few variations or even fills, as her performances on *Bootleg Series Volume One: The Quine Tapes* show very clearly. On the 17-minute long version of "Follow The Leader,"[276] she plays two fills in the first minute and a half; following this, with the exception of adding brief snare hits to cue the chorus at 4:30, 6:06, and 7:51, she plays no fills or variations on her driving rock backbeat until 11:05. From here until 11:29, she responds to the rhythm guitar's accents by playing a Bo Diddley beat; following this, she returns to the backbeat, and plays it without fills or variations until 14:50, where she interjects a few extra snare hits to emphasize the chorus; following this, she returns to her basic beat and plays it without change until the end of the song.

Although Tucker was perfectly capable of maintaining a metronomic rock beat for extended periods of time, she never created the sorts of complex rhythmic webs that Grateful Dead drummers Bill Kreutzmann or Mickey Hart delighted in, which meant that at its bottom level, the Velvet Underground's sound was profoundly static. As Tucker put it, "now, playing the drums, I didn't learn to do a roll for five years. I was lucky, because if I was Ginger Baker, the music would not have sounded the way it did. ... Since all I could do was beat [the drums], that's what I did, and it made a certain style."[277]

Her stolid determination as a player may also have partly derived from her awareness of gender issues: as a woman working in a hugely male-dominated context, she was determined not to show weakness. As she put it, "I guess I always had it in the back of my mind that it wasn't gonna be me who had to stop the song. If they lasted twenty minutes, so was I going to

[275] Zak, *Companion*, 165.
[276] Velvet Underground, *Bootleg Series*, disc 2.
[277] Zak, *Companion*, 154.

last twenty minutes."[278]

But precisely because this stasis was so profound and so simple, it had the potential to be endlessly involving, rather than boring. Her lack of fills and elaboration enabled Tucker to create a conceptual space that felt timeless, eternal, an endearingly human and yet also robotic emptiness in which anything might happen, because it ruled nothing out—something like the effect created by the endless drone of the tambura in Hindustani classical music.[279] By eschewing variation, Tucker also liberated her band's music from ever needing to end.

The liberatory significance of her drumming style has been noted by others. In his article "The Velvet Underground: Musique and Mystique Unveiled," published in *Circus* magazine in June 1970, Phil Morris writes that "Maureen's drumming was a distillation of all the rock that had gone before, and yet she played with mallets on two kettle drums while standing up. She's methodical and steady like some entranced Zulu witch doctor."[280] Similarly, Wayne McGuire writes that "no other drummer in the world could play the archetypal 1234 with such perfection, with a weight that verges on religious ritual."[281]

M. C. Kostek, who edited the pioneering Velvet Underground fanzine *What Goes On*, strikes a similar note when he recounts his first experience of Tucker's drumming: "And the drummer—not only has she stood all night, but she's pounded steadily with those big mallets all the while, raising one up over her head for the big BAMP-BAMP-BAMP. Steady. I'm not quite sure how long this went on. It seemed a half hour—but time, space ... meant nothing. I was

[278] Zak, *Companion*, 169.
[279] Wayne McGuire, too, in an article on "The Boston Sound" for *Crawdaddy* in 1967, noted the comparison with Indian drones: "Essential to [the Velvet Underground's music] is the drone. Not the pencil thick drone of Indian music which emanates from spirits and nervous systems which think they've found it and probably have within their limited structure of things, but a drone which is as broad as a house, a drone which is produced by New World Citizen nervous systems plugging into the Cosmic Whirl" (Clinton Heylin, *All Yesterday's Parties: The Velvet Underground in Print, 1966-71* [New York: Da Capo, 2005], 71). This connection is particularly apt given Cale's work with La Monte Young, who was hugely influenced by Indian music especially as regards drones, to the point of issuing a recording of himself and his wife Marian Zazeela playing tambura drones on *The Tamburas of Pandit Pran Nath* (released in 2004 on the Just Dreams label).
[280] Heylin, *Yesterday's*, 169.
[281] Heylin, *Yesterday's*, 72.

gone. No drink or drugs, I was flattened by the raw power."[282]

In this context, with its emphasis on timelessness, the Velvet Underground's use of noise and dissonance takes on a new aspect. They were shocking, but also alienating, in the sense of separating the listener from her customary sonic environment and moving her to a new or alien perspective. In combination with the monumental and also monotonous rhythms, they had the potential to put their audience in a different and affectively eternal sonic context. As Wayne McGuire put it, "The feedback at peak moments is a suspended mystical ecstasy."[283]

This focus on creating such timeless structures through repetition and droning remained even in cases where the music was less abrasive. Whether one thinks of the chordless droning of the early piece "The Nothing Song,"[284] or the seemingly endless alternation between the I and IV chords in "The Ocean,"[285] the effect is the same.[286] While their studio albums were driven by a variety of different, more cerebral and abstract motivations, in their live performances the Velvet Underground sought to stop time, to invite their listeners to enter an unchanging realm that they created in the middle of the modern world, using such archetypally modern tools as avant-garde art, classic Brill Building pop songwriting, and electrically generated instrumental timbres. As Jon Savage aptly summarizes, "their drones evoked both the eternal Now of the drug experience and the possibilities opened up by the incredible acceleration of Western culture."[287]

This, finally, is the key to the distinction between the Velvet Underground and the Grateful Dead in terms of improvisation. Although they started in many ways from similar places—a modernist appreciation for the musical potential of new instruments; an understanding of their performances as significant events rather than just gigs; a desire to

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[282] From *What Goes On* 1, recounting a performance from March 1969: Bockris and Malanga, *Up-Tight*, 157.
[283] Heylin, *Yesterday's*, 71.
[284] This can be heard on the bootleg *If It's Too Loud For You, Move Back!*, released by Nothing Songs Limited, recorded in Columbus Ohio, Nov. 4 1966.
[285] As heard on *1969 Live*, Polygram, 1988, compact disc)..
[286] Witts identifies the non-resolving chord progressions that the Velvet Underground used as adaptations for a rock context of La Monte Young's use of static harmonic fields to stop the perceived passage of time (Witts *Velvet Underground*, 80).
[287] Johann Kugelberg, *The Velvet Underground: New York Art* (New York: Rizzoli, 2009), 168.

integrate these new perceptions into their popular music tradition; a love for extended forms—they were headed in different directions. The Velvet Underground, in their improvisations, worked to stop time and to reveal the unchanging repetitions that lie at the heart of the world; the Grateful Dead, by contrast, witnessed to and manifested the incursion of an endlessly active and fertile power into our world.

Cream

Most bands build their reputations as they develop; Cream, on the other hand, began their career as a "super group": as Welch puts it, "each member of Cream came to the group with a formidable reputation for musical excellence, hard-won on the thriving British R&B scene."[288] Guitarist Eric Clapton had come to fame as a member of the Yardbirds, a group that he left over issues of musical "authenticity" and blues purism, and had then worked with John Mayall's more traditional Bluesbreakers; drummer Ginger Baker was well known for his work with the Graham Bond Organization, also a blues and r&b band; and bassist Jack Bruce had worked with Graham Bond, Mayall's Bluesbreakers, and the blues-rock group Manfred Mann.

As befitted the traditionalist associations of its three members, Cream played an important role in terms of rock's increasing legitimation in the 1960s by modeling a standard of rock virtuosity that borrowed heavily from already-established blues and jazz standards. Hence, while not conceptually radical, their approach was impressive; while their virtuosity was not easily attainable, it was familiar and comprehensible in a way that, for instance, Bob Weir's own distinctive musical contributions were not. To put it simply, Cream took jazz and (especially) blues and blues-rock clichés, and performed them at great length and at high volume, extending rather than altering genre-based expectations. As Clapton said, "it became a question of finding something that had a riff, a form that could be interpreted, simply, in a band format."[289]

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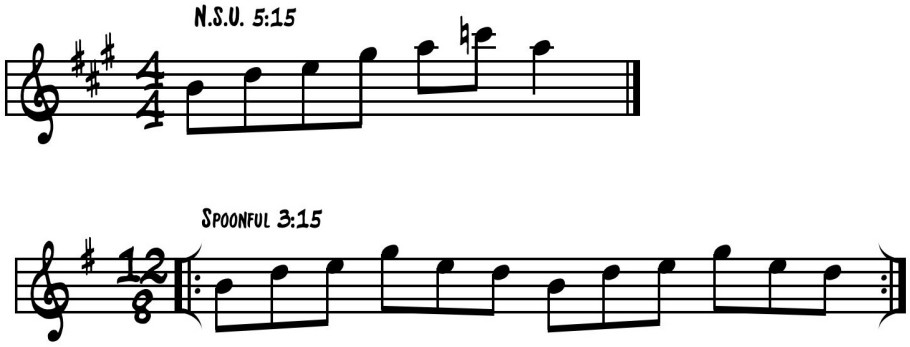
[288] Welch, *Supergroup*, 24.

[289] Dave Headlam, "Blues Transformations in the Music of Cream" (pages 59-92 in *Understanding Rock: Essays in Musical Analysis*, edited by John Covach and Graeme Boone [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997]), 69; Headlam's article is highly recommended as a discussion of the way that Cream adapted blues structures to rock

If, as mentioned above, the Jefferson Airplane used their songs as a canopy to cover and delineate their aggressive individual interplay, it could be said that Cream used the blues-rock tonality and rhythms in the same way: in other words, they jammed over top of their chosen *genre*, and it is the genre-linked characteristics of their playing that make their music coherent as a group effort.

In listening to the improvisation on the widely-available bootleg recording of their show at Detroit's Grande Ballroom on October 15 1967,[290] for instance, it is striking to note how similar Jack Bruce and Eric Clapton's lines often are. Although they are playing an octave or two apart, their moments of real togetherness frequently come about when their lines overlap or mirror each other (rather than being complementary), because they are playing the same sorts of licks, or even the very same licks, based on the same pentatonic blues scales (for instance, at 5:15 on "NSU" or in the tradeoff in "Spoonful" where Clapton introduces a riff at ca. 3:15 and Bruce then picks it up).[291]



This is all the more striking when the harmonic motion is reduced to a single chord, as during the long jam on "N.S.U." (stretching from 2:01-15:19) or in "Spoonful" (from 3:10-17:20).Stripped even of the stereotypical twelve bar progression and its goal-oriented movement, we are left with nothing more than essential "bluesiness" in its rawest form. Dynamics rise and fall throughout the performance—although the overriding tendency is for all

contexts.

[290] *Live at the Grande Ballroom 1967*, bootleg.

[291] Bruce's style in this period, in fact, has been aptly described as involving "relentless forward motion and creative use of the blues scale" (Welch, *Supergroup*, 52).

three members to play very loudly and very busily when jamming—but the band stays within its chosen genre, key, and overall rhythmic feel. The variations that arise in the jams, while powerful, are not subtle and do not change the overall parameters of a given piece in the way that changes in the Grateful Dead's jams have the potential to do.

This need not be taken as an aesthetic failing on Cream's part. Rather, it shows very clearly the value that their approach assigns to, for lack of a better word, purity. As we saw above, all three members of the band had been strongly associated with blues-rock before joining Cream, and blues-rock at that time in England tended to have strong purist associations.[292] Early Rolling Stones bassist Dick Taylor's description of their first gig gives the feeling: "You could hear people saying ... 'Ah, rock and roll, are they?' Before we'd played a note, we could feel the hostility."[293]

Indeed, Clapton's departure from the Yardbirds had been precipitated by concerns on his part that their single, "For Your Love," was too "pop." Bassist Paul Samwell-Smith recalls that Clapton "hated 'For Your Love' because he thought we were selling out to market pressures—which we were." The decision to use it as their single instead of an Otis Redding song left him "very disappointed, disillusioned."[294]

Cream's improvisational approach, then, can be best understood when looked at in the context of a concern for genre-based purity. Although in many regards (including their instrumental volume and timbres, the length of their jams, their sartorial flamboyance and cult of personality, and their privileging of original and pop-influenced material) they left the purist standards of mid-1960s British blues behind, they made clear through their playing that they were proceeding along a trajectory that extended directly outwards from the blues.

This strongly distinguishes their improvisational work from the Grateful Dead, who enthusiastically embraced an almost post-modern hybridity, in which the band was free to

[292] A good description of the scene can be found in Philip Norman, *The Stones* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 2001), 49 ff.
[293] Norman, *The Stones*, 63.
[294] Clayson, *Yardbirds*, 76.

invoke an extraordinarily wide range of generic signifiers, including those associated with folk, blues, jazz, pop, avant garde classical, musique concrète and rock . This made the band difficult to categorize, and probably had an adverse effect on their popularity in their early days, although it also probably contributed to their longevity.

This transgressive hybridity, which relied on the extremely wide range of musical experience of the various members, was made possible through the band's commitment to being open to the moment in their playing, to following what arose in the act of collective improvisation whether or not it transgressed genre boundaries. In pursuing the aesthetic of living in the now, responding to the music being played in a given moment, the band was obliged to turn their backs on the predetermined purity that enabled Cream to play in such a powerful, striking and conceptually unified way.

Pink Floyd

Pink Floyd drummer Nick Mason writes about their early exposure to the London underground scene when they played at the Marquee in March 1966: "I found the whole event pretty strange. We were used to playing R&B parties where the entry fee was a keg of bitter. Suddenly we were performing for a 'happening' and being encouraged to develop the extended solos that we'd only really put into the songs to pad them out ..."[295]

The solos that Mason refers to soon became something quite different from standard rock solos: discussing this period, manager Peter Jenner writes that "what intrigued me [about Pink Floyd in 1966] was that instead of wailing guitar solos in the middle, they made this weird noise. For a while I couldn't work out what it was. Then it turned out to be [guitarist] Syd [Barrett] and [keyboard player] Rick [Wright]. Syd ... was doing weird things with feedback. Rick was also producing strange, long shifting chords. Nick was using mallets ... This was avant garde!"[296]

Their avant-garde tendencies were encouraged in the shows at the All Saints Hall in the

[295] Mason, *Inside Out*, 31.
[296] Mason, *Inside Out*, 31.

summer of 1966, where they were playing for full-fledged “freaks” and, as Mason recalls, “the effect on us was terrific. They responded so well and so uncritically to the improvised sections in our set that we began to concentrate on extending those rather than simply running through a sequence of cover versions.”[297]

The impression one gets from discussions of the early Pink Floyd is that they wanted very much to belong to the underground scene, and to suit their music to this social context. The starting point of their early music was rhythm and blues, particularly Bo Diddley; added to this, one can clearly hear the inspiration of surf and spy theme music in the guitar and keyboard tones respectively. But as Palacios points out, in lead guitarist Syd Barrett’s approach one can also hear the influence of the pioneering sonic explorations of such British rock guitarists as Jeff Beck and the Who, and experimentalist Keith Rowe, whose group, AMM, played many of the London underground events.[298] The result was a “free-form r&b.”[299]

Peter Jenner notes that “even the Grateful Dead, they had improvisations but they seemed a perfectly ordinary group, playing with chords. The Floyd didn’t play with chords.”[300] This impression is borne out by early recordings of the band improvising, such as the versions of “Interstellar Overdrive” and “Nick’s Boogie” found on *Tonite Let’s All Make Love in London* and recorded in 1967, in which odd, unfamiliar, and definitely science-fictional sounds pulse and fade in and out over top of a throbbing beat.

This music truly is “space rock” *avant la lettre*, music that combines the kitsch appeal and the genuine strangeness of 1950s and 1960s science fiction movies and television shows. It is also profoundly environmental music, particularly its improvised aspects, music made to create an evocative sonic space, and it is easy to see how the band arrived at it through tailoring their experimentations to the multi-media psychedelic events at which they made their reputation. Manager Peter Brown remembers that at these events Barrett was "inspired.

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[297] Mason, *Inside Out*, 40.
[298] Palacios, *Lost*, 47; 68; 71-2.
[299] Palacios, *Lost*, 45.
[300] Palacios, *Lost*, 78.

He would constantly manage to get past his limitations and into areas that were very, very interesting. Which none of the others could do." Wynne Wilson, a friend of the band, recalls that "It was at UFO that everything started to gel. There's no doubt that the music they played at UFO was the best they ever did .... Syd's improvisations would go on for extended periods, but would be absolutely immaculate."[301]

Making it work

When considering improvisational strategies—or, indeed, any artistically experimental strategies—with working rock bands such as these, we need to take at least a moment to consider their economic and professional impacts. Rock musicians do not have access to the same amount of institutional support that is enjoyed by jazz, classical or other "serious" musicians: there are and have always been major biases in funding and support that reflect broader societal biases. Rock musicians, one segment of music's "blue collar" workers, are expected to earn their income from paying customers in non-institutional settings to a far greater degree than "art" musicians, who are presumed to be at least potentially white collar "professionals" or "refined" artists and hence worthy of society's support for their efforts.

This situation, for all its classist bias, has benefitted rock music (if not the individual rock musicians) in many ways, but it does pose challenges to musicians who seek to take artistic chances and who nonetheless need to continue attracting to their concerts fans who might not be primarily interested in supporting their heroes' experiments. It will be interesting, therefore, to look at the ways in which these improvising bands integrated their practice into their professional lives.

From its inception, Cream based its appeal on its members' reputations for instrumental virtuosity. Contemporary accounts show that people went to see Cream precisely because of the musicians' chops[302]: as I have discussed, Cream's improvisations displayed those chops in a

[301] Nicholas Schaffner, *Saucerful of Secrets: The Pink Floyd Odyssey* (London: Sidgewick, 1991), 49-50.
[302] Jorma Kaukonen of the Jefferson Airplane, for example, said that "when I saw Cream for the first time, I thought they were the most incredible performing band I had ever seen in my life. That may still be true" (Thompson, *Cream*, 175).

blunt and easily accessible way, one clearly related to blues standards. Thus the improvisational activity that Cream engaged in could actually be seen as fulfilling rather than challenging its audience's expectations. Clapton himself acknowledged that the band sometimes got lost in "endless meaningless solos … [in which] we were not indulging ourselves so much as our audience, because that's what they wanted."[303]

The Jefferson Airplane, on the other hand, were stars because they represented the "poppy" side of the San Francisco music scene. With their hit singles, "White Rabbit" being the most successful, and hit albums such as *Surrealistic Pillow*, they were working in the mainstream popular music market; on the other hand, what made them distinctive in that market was the way that they represented "hip" values and musical directions associated with the influential San Francisco scene. In concert, they lived up to their multifaceted image by giving their fans the hits, but not straight: their aggressive jamming fit into their public persona by emphasizing that they were not just a pop band like the Monkees.[304]

For Pink Floyd, the turn to improvisation enabled them to fit in with what was at the time the most active and exciting scene in their London milieu. As a conventional r&b band, they were one of thousands; by being willing to get "weird" in their playing and moving away from standard pop music, their music became an appropriate backdrop for the multi-media events in which they made their reputation.

The existing documentation leaves no reason to doubt that for Syd Barrett, at least, the decision to play this sort of abstract, explicitly "spacey" music was heartfelt. His ongoing experimentation and sonic exploration strongly suggests that he was genuinely excited by the new possibilities for the spontaneous creation of otherworldly sound. As Palacios puts it, "Syd put great amounts of energy into illuminating his performances with the vibrant and immutable

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[303] Alan Clayson, *Beat Merchants: The Origins, History, Impact and Rock Legacy of the 1960s British Pop Groups* (London: Blandford, 1996), 257.

[304] Although by 1967 even the Monkees were incorporating some degree of improvised jamming into their live performances. Baker writes that "throughout the two month jaunt the Monkees immersed themselves in a feast of real live musicianship, both on and off stage. Extended jams were a regular occurrence, featuring all four Monkees [and] the Jimi Hendrix Experience (whilst on the tour)" (Glenn Baker, *Monkeemania: The True Story of the Monkees* [London: Plexus, 1997], 73).

[sic] magic that was his trademark. Blinding lights, visions of space, AMM's spontaneous jazz, Cantabrigian folk, mutated Bo Diddley riffs, the jangle of the Byrds, Bloomfield's blues-raga epics ... Experiment, whimsy and spontaneity were his great contribution to the new music."[305] Nonetheless, it also cannot be denied that it was an extremely good career move for the band as a whole, enabling them to establish a unique brand in an extremely crowded popular music market.[306]

As for the Velvet Underground, they were a band who did aspire to—and briefly enjoyed—the status and patronage accorded to "art" musicians, at least in a New York pop and avant garde art sense, and in their early attempts to work their way into the rock scene they strike me as coming very definitely and very deliberately from a pop art perspective, reaching out from the art world into the rock world as an artistic Statement at least as much as a desire to be working rock musicians. Cale, for example, describes the band's early motivations as follows: "The idea that kept us struggling with rock and roll as the medium of choice was the combination of the study of time through sonic backdrop from La Monte [Young], and the venomous subconscious of Lou [Reed]. It was an attempt to control the unconscious with the hypnotic."[307] Such an understanding of the group's motivation shows the influence of a conceptual, classically artistic approach on the band's music and sense of mission.

The Velvet Underground's extended improvisations fit into this approach, marking them as the sort of "artistic" and "difficult" band whose claims to high art legitimacy are intended to earn them their audience's respect and indulgence. Their early improvisational activity is both transgressive in its simultaneous embrace of stasis and dissonance, and at the same time grounded in legitimating high-art tradition, invoking both La Monte Young's musical experimentation and Andy Warhol's cinematic and, more broadly, philosophical contributions

[305] Palacios, *Lost*, 103.
[306] And of course it is significant to note that the band's improvisational approach became much less radical as time went on, especially following Barrett's departure. Later Pink Floyd has many virtues, but it does not challenge listeners' expectations in the way that the music produced in 1966 and 1967 still has the power to do.
[307] Cale and Bockris, *Zen*, 113.

to pop art. They make clear that in listening to the Velvet Underground, one is listening to artistic music with a pedigree.

This changed as the band moved away from its high-art associations. After breaking with Warhol and the departure of singer Nico and John Cale, the group continued to improvise droningly at great length, but those improvisations were much more grounded in rock tradition: rather than the chordless, pulsing jams of "The Nothing Song" or "Melody Laughter," we find the use of extended repetitions of rock riffs (as in "Sister Ray") or chord patterns, over which the band plays, as can be heard on *Bootleg Series Volume One: The Quine Tapes*. This much more rock based approach to improvisation accompanied the band's move to a popular music context of performance, stepping away from the Warholian or Youngian art context of their genesis in order to play for younger and less sophisticated audiences.

In all of these cases, a band's use of extended improvisation, as radical an idea as it might have seemed to be, was made to fit into their overall professional context—and indeed, it was affected by that context. How, then, do the Grateful Dead fit in here?

In this regard, the Pigpen songs are much more directly comprehensible than the Framework songs. We have seen that the San Francisco audiences liked to dance, and that the Grateful Dead enjoyed playing the part of a dance band. The approach that they took in the Pigpen songs is ideally suited for dancing, combining the exhortations of a charismatic front man with extended dance grooves that vary little except in terms of dynamics.

The Framework is at first sight more difficult to explain in terms of its rapport with the group's working context, until we realize the importance that they placed on professionalism, on giving the audience a good performance. As Grateful Dead soundman and associate Augustus Owsley Stanley ("Bear") noted, the Grateful Dead "always had a sense of responsibility to a paying audience."[308] Manager Rock Scully points out that "though we

[308] Gans, *Conversations*, 312.

considered ourselves hippies, we weren't the hippie movement. We were musicians first ... we wanted to be recognized as musicians."[309]

As we listen to the almost exhaustive documentation of the Grateful Dead's performances, we can see this commitment to professionalism very clearly in the astonishing rarity of flubbed notes or obvious mistakes—instrumentally speaking, at least: the band was far more hit or miss vocally.

The Grateful Dead was committed to improvising, to taking musical chances; shows were long, potentially running up to three or more hours of solid playing; and members were inclined to significant amounts of drug use.[310] But despite all this, one hears remarkably few errors—by which I mean actual mistakes—in their playing. This is not to say that every musician is "on" at every moment, nor is it to say that there are not questionable artistic decisions being made on the fly. It is merely to say that the Grateful Dead committed themselves to maintaining a certain baseline level of musical professionalism in their playing.

This is all the more impressive given the number of extant recordings of the band. While there are intonation and tuning issues and minor errors scattered throughout their work, glaring mistakes—such as the clearly miscued introduction to "Dark Star" from their show of Jan. 20, 1968, at the Eureka Municipal Ballroom[311]—are disconcerting not so much for the error itself, as for the rarity of errors of that degree.

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[309] Sandy Troy, *One More Saturday Night: Reflections with the Grateful Dead, Dead family, and Dead heads* (New York: St. Martin's, 1991), 116.

[310] Grace Slick has argued that "if you talk to the Dead, they didn't really play that much on acid … you could snort a little. Break off little bits with your fingernail and snort it, and you got high rather than so blazing you couldn't play. That's how people like the Dead would do it, but not full-bore" (Torgoff, *Can't Find*, 140). Part of this, no doubt, is Slick's competitive desire to portray her band, the Jefferson Airplane, as the real, go-for-broke drug band by downplaying the Grateful Dead's drug habits. But given the Grateful Dead's commitment on the one hand to LSD-inspired musical exploration, and on the other hand to professionalism, her story does not seem implausible, as it would have given them the best of both worlds. We should also note that LSD was not the only drug circulating in the San Francisco scene, and while I do not know of any formal studies of this, I at least have found that large amounts of marijuana or alcohol can make it more difficult to perform competently than up to moderate sized doses of LSD.

[311] http://archive.org/details/gd1968-01-20.sbd.miller.97340.sbeok.flac16.

The Framework, I believe, should be seen in the light of this commitment to professionalism. It was a supple form that nonetheless gave some degree of structure and guidance to the band, so that they could dedicate themselves to the pursuit of improvisational transcendence even on evenings when inspiration was in short supply, or when one or more of the musicians simply wasn't "feeling it." The Framework and its developments gave them support when they needed it, serving as a tool that enabled them to go out and play upwards of a hundred shows a year, year after year, as they furthered their dual imperatives of giving professional performances and following their improvisational muse.

What the Grateful Dead were doing was challenging and unexpected, and the Framework and its developments, not being consciously expressed, did not directly or obviously affect their public image—unlike, for example, Cream's virtuosic displays of blues-rock. What it did do was enable them to live up to that image.

Conclusion

In this brief examination, we have seen a variety of approaches that were supported by improvisation. The Jefferson Airplane used it as a way of bringing their songs to life onstage; Cream, on the other hand, used it as a means to create an extension of the blues tradition, moving it into the psychedelic era. Both the Velvet Underground and Pink Floyd used it as a means to generate profoundly alien musical contexts—in the one case, drawing on a contemporary high-art appreciation of drones and an invocation of immobility; in the other, drawing on contemporary popular art evocations of interstellar travel and sonic experimentation.

All of these examples also overlap in some ways with the Grateful Dead's practice. The virtuosic and thunderously loud conversations between the members of Cream bring to mind some of the interplay between Lesh and Garcia; the Jefferson Airplane's spontaneous group recreations of their songs are comparable to the Grateful Dead's fundamental understanding of ragged ensemble playing; the Velvet Underground's movement from popular songs into extended jams is reminiscent of the Framework; and Pink Floyd's exploration of truly alien sonic

realms is comparable to some of the places that the Grateful Dead's music would go to at its most extreme, particularly in the early 1970s—for example, in the half-hour-long version of "The Other One" performed on April 26, 1972 in Frankfurt, Germany.[312]

For all their similarities, however, in none of these bands do we find the sense of developmental group exploration of spontaneously generated musical contexts that we hear in the Grateful Dead's music, and whose parameters I have attempted to outline above.

Another difference lies in the range permitted by the respective approaches to improvisation. All of the approaches that I have discussed are in some way absolutist, and limiting. They all stop at some point: they all carry with them inherent conceptual boundaries. For the Jefferson Airplane, the limits are imposed by the songs that they are playing. For Cream, they are imposed by the tradition within which they work (although they did extend that tradition as far as it could go). For the Velvet Underground, the limits were imposed by their drive to static eternity, while finally, for Pink Floyd the limits are to be found in their science fictional and atmospheric aesthetic.

The Grateful Dead, by contrast, prioritized continual motion and continual conversation. Their limits were human ones, namely the limits of the musicians in the band; beyond that, they were free to ramble wherever their pursuit of their muse took them. One could well argue that this made their work less coherent as a group artistic expression than the work of the other groups that I have mentioned, but even if so, this de-emphasizing of formal coherence in favor of perpetual motion is by no means necessarily an aesthetic failing, and as I will discuss below, could even be seen as a religious necessity.

However we regard it, it is also clear that the Grateful Dead's approach to improvisation was both more nuanced, and less commercially comprehensible, than the approaches of the other bands that we have examined. On the one hand, the logic behind it is not clear or straightforward; on the other hand, when actually heard in concert, it makes perfect sense and

[312] http://archive.org/details/gd1972-04-26.sbd.vernon.9197.sbeok.shnf.

seems the most natural thing in the world—a typical situation when dealing with the Grateful Dead.

Chapter Seven: Searching for the (Sacred) Sound

The Grateful Dead's unprecedented approach to playing rock music did not spring from purely musical motivations. Rather, it emerged out of and was perpetuated by certain extremely potent experiences that the band members underwent while performing together, beginning in late 1965 and recurring intermittently throughout the rest of the band's career. These experiences convinced the band members that the Grateful Dead's music could provide a bridge between quotidian reality and a higher state of being. In the next several pages, I will establish this point, and give the reader some idea of how this transcendence appeared to the members of the band, by presenting some of the abundant testimony to this religious understanding of the importance of their music.

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Lesh: "The Grateful Dead are trying to save the world."[313]

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Garcia: "I think basically the Grateful Dead is not for cranking out rock and roll … it's to get high. To get really high is to forget yourself. To forget yourself is to see everything else. And to see everything else is to become an understanding molecule in evolution, a conscious tool of the universe. And I think every human should be a conscious tool of the universe …I'm not talking about being unconscious or zonked out. I'm talking about becoming fully conscious."[314]

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Lesh: "I couldn't walk away from this. It was too good, too interesting. Not interesting in the sense that you say about a new play or paperback novel. I mean really *interesting*—and

[313] David Dodd and Diane Spaulding, *The Grateful Dead Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 73.
[314] Garcia, Reich and Wenner, *Garcia*, 100.

fraught with meaning, dare I say, of greater breadth and scope than I had ever imagined, even in other forms of music."[315]

**

David Gans: "One time I came home from a concert and wrote, 'The Grateful Dead is immortal, but the men who play in the band are not.'"

Garcia: "That's exactly right, and that's the way we feel. It takes the responsibility out of our hands, which is comfortable. It's scary if you feel like you're responsible for it—that's a lot of energy to be responsible for."[316]

**

Lesh: "To make music for dancers like [the ones at the Fillmore in the 1960s] is the rarest honor—to be coresponsible for what really is the dance of the cosmos … The fervent belief we shared then, and that perseveres today, is that the energy liberated by this combination of music and ecstatic dancing is somehow making the world *better*."[317]

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Garcia: "We know from our own experience that enough things happen [in performance] that aren't the result of signals or planning or communication that we're aware of, but that are miraculous manifestations, that just keep proving it out, that there's no way to deny it. We're involved in something that has a very high incidence of synchronicity. You know the Jungian idea of synchronicity? Well shit, that's day to day reality for us."[318]

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[315] Gans, *Conversations*, 196.
[316] Gans, *Conversations*, 52.
[317] Lesh, *Searching*, 69, italics his.
[318] McNally, *Trip*, 619.

Hart: "We've got transformation going here. We don't have a popular musical group. That's what the trappings may look like … but that ain't what we have … People come to be changed and we change 'em."[319]

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Lesh: "The Grateful Dead group mind was in essence an engine of transformation … It felt then as if we were an integral part of some cosmic plan to help transform human consciousness."[320]

**

Garcia: "Music is the key to a whole spiritual existence which this society doesn't talk about. The Grateful Dead play at the religious services of the new age."[321]

**

Lesh: "I've always felt we could do something that was not necessarily extramusical, but something where the music would be only the first step, something even close to religion, not in the sense that 'the Beatles are more popular than Jesus,' but in the sense of the actual communing. We used to say that every place we play is a church … the core of followers is not the reason it feels like church, it's that other thing, 'it'."[322]

**

Garcia: "Magic is what we do. Music is how we do it."[323]

**

Speaking of mystical or esoteric power:

Lesh: "Ever since the Acid Tests we've been into that power. That's what powered the Acid Tests behind the acid, and it later became apparent that you didn't need drugs … It was a

[319] Brightman 1998, 133.
[320] Lesh, *Searching*, 333.
[321] Jackson, *Garcia*, 191.
[322] Gans, *Conversations*, 164.
[323] Brightman, *Chaos*, 157.

rawer order of energy, less information riding on that raw carrier wave of power, but the power was always there."[324]

**

Hart discussing being drawn to the Dead:

Hart: "It felt like some kind of force field from another planet, some incredible energy that was driving the band … It was prayer-like music … The music is everything; it is a musical organization. But we're not necessarily involved primarily in music."[325]

**

Discussing the nature of the revelatory aspect of the Grateful Dead's music:

Garcia: "[The state created by the music] might be a completely functioning, already existing reality which has always been energized by humans for this purpose—which is largely invisible or largely magical … It might have always been there … and still is, and that's what we're involved in: the rediscovery of it. As long as life goes on, as long as there's energy, this thing might always want to express itself."[326]

**

Hart: "Sometimes I think of what happens in a shamanistic sense of embarking on a collective journey … Other times I think of our music as something almost organic that we've grown over the past twenty-five years, a living entity that exists in another time-world."[327]

**

Lesh: "After this many years, man, there's nothing awesome about [being in the Grateful Dead] except the moments. Those moments, when you're not even human anymore, you're not a musician, you're not a person—you're just there."[328]

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[324] Dodd and Spaulding, *Reader*, 133.
[325] Gans, *Conversations*, 251.
[326] Gans, *Conversations*, 242.
[327] Mickey Hart, *Drumming on the Edge of Magic: A Journey into the Spirit of Percussion* (San Francisco: Harpers, 1990), 228-230.

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Speaking about the Grateful Dead "thing":

Lesh: "We're just a piece of it, too."

Garcia: "That's right … we're not *it*—"

Lesh: "No. *It* is informing all of us."

Garcia: "That's exactly right. So our opinions are just that. They're our opinions, in our tradition … But everybody who experiences it, on whatever terms anyone experiences it, is right about it."[329]

**

Lesh: "When we play, we're praying … And then you have to hope that the dove descends."[330]

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Garcia: "The thing we do depends so much upon the situation that we're in and upon a sort of magic thing … whether [a given performance will be] magic or not is something we can't predict … there's a certain phenomenon that *can* happen."[331]

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Lesh: "I have faith in this thing, whatever the fuck it is."[332]

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[328] Gans, *Conversations*, 110.
[329] Gans, *Conversations*, 214, italics in original.
[330] Brightman, *Chaos*, 8.
[331] Garcia, Reich and Wenner, *Garcia*, 98-99.
[332] Gans, *Conversations*, 215.

Chapter 8: Talking Religiously about the Grateful Dead

In preceding chapters we have discussed the Grateful Dead's musical practice. As interviews with band-members and writing on the band show, however, the Grateful Dead as a phenomenon also had strong religious/spiritual overtones, for both musicians and fans. To judge from the testimony of band members, there was a religious imperative that lay at the core of the band's musical development, one that even helped to trigger that development. In what follows, I propose to examine that imperative, tracing its origins and showing how it relates to their musical practices.

There has been a great deal of discussion of the Grateful Dead and religion in the past, as shown for example by several articles in *Perspectives on the Grateful Dead*[333] and *Deadhead Social Science*[334], articles in the journal *Dead Letters*, and other works such as Davin Seay and Mary Neely's "Prophets on the Burning Shore" (a line from a Grateful Dead song) in *Stairway to Heaven: The Spiritual Roots of Rock and Roll*[335] and Robin Sylan's "Eyes of the World: The Grateful Dead and Deadheads" in his *Traces of the Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music.*[336] In this discussion, there have been a variety of approaches taken to the topic, but the two most popular are:

a) interpreting Grateful Dead songs (usually lyrics) through the lens of an established religious intellectual tradition,[337] and

b) taking a sociological approach to analyzing the band or (especially) the behavior of their fans.[338]

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[333] Robert Weiner, ed., *Perspectives on the Grateful Dead* (Westport: Greenwood, 1999).
[334] Adams and Sardiello, *Deadhead Social Science.*
[335]Seay and Neely, "Prophets."
[336] Robin Sylvan, *Traces of the Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music (*New York: New York University Press, 2002).
[337] As for example in Stan Spector, "Who is Dionysus and Why Does He Keep Following Me Everywhere?," (*Dead Letters* 2 [2003]:19-28).
[338] As for example in Robert Sardiello, "Studying Deadhead Subculture" (pages 267-280 in Adams and Sardiello, *Deadhead)*.

Both of these approaches are interesting and potentially valid; however, in this part of the dissertation, I will take a different approach altogether.

I should note too that I will be using the term "religious" in a wide sense. "Religion" will be understood here as having to do with

a) fundamental attitudes toward life and values,

b) particularly insofar as those attitudes and values are related to or derived from a supramundane or transcendental level of existence, as well as

c) the mediations between this supramundane level of existence and the individual person, and

d) the organizations founded to regulate these mediations and

e) the personal conduct and ethical concerns arising out of these mediations.

Religion or Spirituality?

I freely acknowledge that "religion" can be something of a dirty word in popular usage, sometimes being associated with oppression and closed-mindedness, and this is certainly the case within Grateful Dead circles. When, at the 2010 meeting of the Grateful Dead Caucus at the South West Texas Popular Culture and American Culture Association convention, I spoke of "religious" aspects of the ways in which the members of the Grateful Dead and Deadheads regarded Grateful Dead music, I was met at first with blank incomprehension, and then with the response that there was nothing "religious" about any aspect of the Grateful Dead phenomenon, although it was "spiritual"—a view shared, as we will see below, by members of the Grateful Dead. In light of this opposition, I feel that my use of "religion" rather than "spirituality" requires some explanation.

"Spirituality" as a heading loosely covers non-institutionalized approaches to religion, particularly ones that emphasis personal religious experience and the priority of feeling over

dogmatic systems: in a North American context it can often be traced back to Transcendentalist and other 19th century thought.[339] While American religiosity in general has not decreased over time, "spirituality" (as opposed to "formal" or institutionalized religiosity) has been particularly important for the Baby Boom generation,[340] which has been explained by reasons including post-World War II optimism with regard to the ability to remake the world, the popularity of mind-altering drugs, an increasingly ethnically and hence religiously diverse society, and the impact of mass media.[341]

In contemporary non-scholarly discussion, spirituality is often presented as the positively-valued counterpart to heavily critiqued institutionalized religion, particularly amongst Baby Boom "seekers." "Intense seekers prefer to think of themselves as 'spiritual' rather than 'religious.' They feel most acutely the tension that exists between spiritual experience and its expression in conventional religious forms."[342] In this quote, Roof identifies another characteristic aspect of discourse about "spirituality," namely an emphasis on personal experience. In a later work, Roof aptly notes that "for a considerable number of people ... 'religion' appeared to be in disfavor, and 'spirituality' was in vogue. It was not always clear what was meant by the latter term, but its usage to refer to something distinct from religion and deeply subjective was obvious ...Talk about spirituality was often rambling and far-ranging."[343] This is borne out in King's attempt to summarize the range of potential meanings of the term, which I will quote at length in order to illustrate the "rambling and far-ranging" nature of such discussions:

> Speakers 'choose' how to define the term to indicate inwardness or to

[339] Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005).
[340] See e.g. Wade Clark Roof , *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); and particularly, Annette Wilke and Oliver Moebus. *Sound and Communication: An Aesthetic Cultural History of Sanskrit Hinduism* (Religion and Society vol. 41, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 820 ff.
[341] See Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 46-76; Robert Fuller, *Spiritual but not Religious* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
[342] Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 79.
[343] Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 81-2.

> emphasize relationship. They may understand spirituality to refer primarily to the great religious traditions or in a way that includes any religious-like phenomena (which may well include the growth of popular beliefs in corn circles, extra-terrestrials, near death experiences, regression to earlier lives, magic, etc.). People can detach spirituality from institutionalized religion or regard it as its essence. They can define the spiritual in opposition to the material, the corporeal, the rational, the scientific, the secular or stress their fusion and interconnectedness. And of course none of these usages need be exclusive. They are contextual—that is to say, they reflect the situation in which people find themselves.
>
> What spirituality means is very much bound up with who uses it. The word has a long history but it has acquired new associations from its use by New Age writers, by psychotherapists, by ecologists, by feminists, by gays, by black people, by ethnic minorities. It has been linked with protest and with the creation of new paradigms. If 'religion' is seen in terms of inherited structures and institutional externals and 'worldview' has cognitive associations, spirituality has become a term that firmly engages with the feminine, with green issues, with ideas of wholeness, creativity, and interdependence, with the interfusion of the spiritual, the aesthetic and the moral. [344]

The vagueness of such a definition is typical, and both frustrating and comprehensible. It is comprehensible because this vagueness serves well to guard against the possibility of "spirituality" becoming an institutionalized, organized, and/or potentially repressive phenomenon; however, the vagueness also renders the term effectively unusable for precise discourse.

Roof attempts to resolve this problem by changing the spirituality/religion dichotomy to

[344] Anna King,"Spirituality: Transformation and metamorphosis" (*Religion* 26 [1996]:343-351), 345.

a contrast between spirit and institutions, carried out on the playing field of religion: "'spirit' is the inner, experiential aspect of religion; institution is the outer, established form of religion."[345] But this is not simply to valorize spirit—as he points out, "this fluid, less contained form of spirituality does have its limitations. If official religion can become encrusted and rigid, highly personal religion easily suffers from a lack of institutionalization. Mystical experiences, so much a part of religious life, are highly sporadic and volatile; they tend not to encourage lasting loyalty to social organizations,[346] privileging instead the individual's own inner world. But without an institutional and communal context, it is difficult to regularize religious life around a set of practices and unifying experiences ... or even to sustain personal religious identity."[347]

Wuthnow, for his part, takes the opposite approach, folding both institutionalized religion and "spiritual" religion (i.e., religion that emphasizes subjectivity, individualism, and experience) into the category of "spirituality," but arguing that there has been a move over the past half century from a spirituality of dwelling which "requires sharp symbolic boundaries to protect sacred space[348] from its surroundings" to a spirituality of seeking which draws "fewer distinctions." "One type of spirituality seems more secure; the other appears to be less constraining ... both types of spirituality offer freedom, but the meaning of freedom is quite different ... Places that are familiar offer the freedom of not having to worry about where one's next meal is coming from."[349]

I find Wuthnow's discussion of these two sorts of spirituality interesting, but of questionable value in the present context given the strong associations in modern usage that the term "spirituality" has with what Wuthnow would describe as "spirituality of seeking." His "spirituality of dwelling" is fundamentally equivalent to what is often condemned as "religion" or "institutionalized religion." However, Wuthnow's discussion does do good work in reminding

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[345] Roof, *Generation*, 31.
[346] Roof's point here is generally valid, but needs to be nuanced, as there are social organizations—such as Sufi lodges—whose raison d'être is the production of mystical experiences. However, such organizations do often subordinate (at least in theory) the organization to the experience whose production is the organization`s goal.
[347] Roof , *Generation*, 39.
[348] Wuthnow speaks of space and dwelling as images: dwelling-style spirituality need not be associated with a specific place, and when it is, that place need not be a dwelling.
[349] Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 5.

us that there can be freedom in stability and familiarity, indeed even in "institutions," no matter how maligned they may be by some spiritual seekers.

This reminder is particularly relevant in the present example, for the Grateful Dead were clearly engaged in founding an institution, even if it was to be a remarkably mobile one, and this institution contained all the features that one would naturally associate with a religious movement. The Grateful Dead and their fans created

a) a *social network* (whose folkways and distinctive language were spread through oral communication, example, and such publications as Shenk and Silverman's *Skeleton Key*), in which there was

b) an interest in *transcendent spiritual experience,*[350]

c) a rudimentary *ethics* (although lacking for the most part in *paraenetic* discourse) along with

d) equally rudimentary but strong *soteriological* and *ontological* speculations,[351]

e) characteristic *iconography* (tie-dyes, the use of skull and roses imagery, the ubiquitous "steal your face" or "stealie" logo[352]),

f) a somewhat nomadic lifestyle that involved medium-grade tension with mainstream society,[353]

g) a belief in the potential *manifestation of supernatural forces*, particularly in the context of the *ritual* and *cultic* activities related to the band,[354]

h) a unique and distinctive *artistic* (especially musical) *sensibility*, as shown in the idiosyncrasies of the Grateful Dead's style, discussed above and picked up by

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[350] See e.g. David Bryan, "The Grateful Dead Religious Experience" (pages 146-162 in Nicholas Meriwether, *Reading the Grateful Dead: A Critical Survey* [Lanham: Scarecrow, 2012]).
[351] See e.g. the papers gathered in Meriwether, *Reading*, section three: "Experiencing Community Through Grateful Dead Improvisation."
[352] See, e.g., http://www.dead.net/store/home/d-cor/classic-syf-placemat-board.
[353] As described in Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 48-49, and as brought out with regard to the Grateful Dead in Adams and Sardiello, *Deadhead Social Science*.
[354] See e.g. Shenk and Silberman, *Skeleton*, 336-7.

numerous groups arising from or playing for the Grateful Dead's audience, including Toronto's Days of You;

i) a foundational *"myth of origins"* centering around the Acid Tests, to be discussed below (section 2.3),

j) a collection of more or less *authoritative writings* subject to endless exegetical work and interpretation, namely the lyrics of songs, especially those written by Robert Hunter,[355] and—most importantly of all, perhaps—

k) a *shared ritual* experience, the band's concerts, that took place literally thousands of times over a period of three decades.[356]

From the Acid Tests on, the Grateful Dead's explorations of potential relations with a transcendent power were set within a formal context with a definite institutional, or ritual, cast, borrowing the structures (physical, social, and musical) of popular music performance contexts (concert halls, outdoor festivals, and eventually sports arenas), organizing performances into sets (with the sets becoming more and more defined as the years went on), having definite points in the sets in which certain definite kinds of transcendent manifestations were held to be likely to occur (songs amenable for extended improvisation were slotted in towards the end of the first set and throughout the second set), devising strategies for facilitating such occurrences (as we have discussed above), and building up a repertoire of motifs to express the significances of the occurrences (the "steal your face" or "stealie" logo; tie-dyed clothing). As lyricist John Barlow writes, "there was a religious aspect to it. That cannot be denied. Nor can it be denied that it was a fundamental element of both our commercial success and our longevity."[357]

The similarity between the Grateful Dead's activity and "religion" was strong enough to be explicitly addressed by Barlow and the band's other lyricist, Robert Hunter, as we will discuss below; their resolution not to provide dogma for this religious movement does not remove the

[355] See e.g. Steve Gimbel, "The Other One and the Other: Moral lessons from a reluctant teacher" (pages 191-199 in Tuedio and Spector, *Grateful Dead in Concert*).
[356] For an exhaustive discussion of these events in the first decade of the band's career, see Getz and Dwork, *Taping*; also Tuedio and Spector, *Grateful Dead in Concert*.
[357] John Barlow, "Foreword," in *Everything I Know About Business, I Learned from the Grateful Dead*, by Barry Barnes (New York: Hachette, 2011), xxv.

religious connection, but only shows that they took that religious connection seriously and treated it with respect, if also in an idiosyncratic manner.

It could be argued that the individual band members, with their wide range of reading interests, fascination with such topics as ancient Egypt and shamanism and more generally "gnostic" interests in esoteric learning,[358] are typical of the broad lines of American unchurched religiosity or spirituality that has been chronicled by Fuller and others. Furthermore, the scene that developed *around* their music and their concerts could be described as a miniature cultic milieu in the sense defined by sociologist Colin Campbell,[359] who found that traditional sociological organizations of religious movements into churches, sects and cults was inadequate to deal with the reality of non-mainstream religious change and development. Instead, he found it more useful to speak of a "cultic milieu" from which many new religious movements arise and into which they dissolve again.

The cultic milieu is "the cultural underground of society … it includes all deviant belief-systems and their associated practices. Unorthodox science, alien and heretical religion, deviant medicine, all comprise elements of such an underground … In addition, it includes the collectivities, institutions, individuals and media of communication associated with these beliefs."[360] The cultic milieu "consists of a loosely integrated network of seekers who drift from one philosophy to another in search of metaphysical truth … Members of the cultic milieu tend to be avid readers, continually exploring different metaphysical movements and philosophies … A significant part of their lives is devoted to the pursuit of intellectual growth, however undisciplined that may be in conventional academic terms."[361] From this point of view, Grateful Dead shows would provide a physical, cultural and ritual center that held together a very wide and shifting constellation of elements, manifested by fans, concerned with various aspects of "spirituality" or religiosity, albeit of the unchurched variety. The fans would come together at

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[358] See especially Hank Harrison, *The Dead* (Millbrae: Celestial Arts, 1980), 248-254.
[359] Colin Campbell, "The Cultic Milieu and Secularization" (*A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5 [1972]:119-136).
[360] Campbell, "Cultic Milieu," 122.
[361] Robert Balch and David Taylor, "Seekers and Saucers: The Role of the CulticMilieu in Joining a UFO Cult" (*American Behavioral Scientist* 20 [1977]:839-860), 849-851.

shows, and particularly in the parking lot outside of the venues in which the band performed, to recreate each night a Deadhead cultic milieu.[362]

These are valid descriptions of the social context within which the Grateful Dead lived, or which their fans created. But when we are speaking specifically with regard to the Grateful Dead's approach to music, which as we will see below was inspired by the hopes of contact with, or actual contact with, a higher power through the medium of a ritual event that was at least theoretically duplicable and whose outlines were broadly formalized, it is clear that these activities can and should be described as properly (if unconventionally) religious activities. To sum up: On a general level, the "spirituality" label is too fuzzy for nuanced work, while in this specific case, it does not apply.

"Religion" problematized

There is another potential challenge to my use of the term "religion," one that comes not from participants but rather from scholars of religious studies. Over the past several decades, a small but quite vocal group of scholars have developed a critique of the very concept of "religion." Such scholars—among whom might be included Anne Taves, Craig Martin, and Russell McCutcheon—argue that the creation of such a category is an attempt by defenders of "religion," and particularly members of powerful religions, to create a conceptual space that would be immune to deconstructive and other forms of criticism. Thus Anne Taves has argued that speaking of "religious experiences" is improper, as it creates a special category of "experience" and thus implicitly supports the heavily-contested idea of "religion" as a sui generis phenomenon. She would prefer to speak of "experiences *deemed* religious"[363] putting the emphasis thereby on the process by which an experience is interpreted as being religiously significant.

In her view, people do not have religious experiences per se; rather, they have experiences that are marked as being special through their uniqueness or anomalous nature,

[362] See "The Parking Lot Scene" (Shenk and Silberman, *Skeleton*, 215-216; also see Adams and Sardiello, *Deadhead Social Science*, and the essays gathered in Meriwether, *Reading*, part 3: "The Deadhead Experience."
[363] Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 10.

experiences that the subject feels "stand out" from the rest of his or her life. In defining these "special" experiences as "religious" experiences, subjects are not recognizing the nature of the experiences, but rather are engaged in constructing a religious meaning for them, whether consciously or not.

Coming, so to speak, from the opposite side of the problem, Patrick Lundborg, a writer on psychedelia, argues that the tendency of many authors to ascribe religious significance to drug-aided psychedelic experience is illegitimate, forcing this experience into a grid and leading to misinterpretation. He notes that "It is difficult to disentangle the psychedelic experience from the various religious Frameworks that have been wrapped around it over the past century ..."[364]

This emphasis on the *construction* of religious meaning is an important one. But it does not seem to me that such an emphasis necessarily requires us to abandon the use of the term "religion" in general or with reference to psychedelic experience when we are speaking—as we are here—of the subjects' own attitudes towards their experiences. I am not arguing in this dissertation that the events claimed by the members of the Grateful Dead did (or did not) take place—and neither am I working through the process by which an intellectual context for the experiences was created. More modestly, I am simply arguing that the band members themselves believed that their experiences were of a sort that could legitimately be described as being religious, according to the rough definition sketched out above, which corresponds to a "lowest common denominator" definition of religion. Thus they participated in what Alan Segal would describe as ``a religiously interpreted state of consciousness."[365] I believe that the quotations which I presented as an introduction to the second half of this dissertation serve amply to demonstrate the existence of that belief.

This being the case, the "deeming" to which Taves refers, the ascribing of these

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[364] Patrick Lundborg, *Psychedelia: An Ancient Culture, a Modern Way of Life* (Stockholm: Lysergia, 2012), 359; see also his discussion of a phenomenological approach to the study of psychedelia, p. 16-28.

[365] Alan Segal, "Religious Experience and the Construction of the Transcendent Self" (pages 27-40 in April DeConick, ed., *Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism* [Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2006]).

experiences to a religious conceptual space, is a definitional move that has already been made by the subjects. Were I to refuse to speak of these events as "religious," I would be privileging my armchair scholarly perspective over the testimonies and experiences of the subjects in question.

Understanding Religious Experience

As we have seen, many have found it valuable to use religious themes and approaches in speaking of the Grateful Dead. This outsider perspective coheres with the insider perspective. There are manifold testimonies from Deadheads describing the band in clearly religious terms, from the banal ("Jerry [Garcia] is God, man!") to quite detailed. Steve Silberman speaks, for example, of a "Grateful Dead deity" that was "both wrathful and benevolent … It was partly lizard, partly mammal … It definitely had big teeth. And it would just sit there and look out at you. I would say that all serious, longtime Deadheads have had some experience of that creepy alligator in the nighttime sun that would look out at you from the music and was not altogether good."[366] At least one formal religious organization, the Unlimited Devotion Family, was dedicated to the band.[367] However, it is important to note that the tenets of this organization did not hold that the band members were divine, but rather that they (especially Garcia) could serve as conduits for divine energy. In other words, "they did not believe that the persons in the band were divine persons, but they did believe that the process of Grateful Dead music was a channel of divine intelligence,"[368] a point of view shared by some of the band members themselves, as can be seen from the quotes assembled above.

Most importantly for our present purposes, there is evidence that at least some of the band members had what we can describe as a religious view of the Grateful Dead and its mission. The most outspoken members of the band on religious issues were bassist Phil Lesh, guitarist Jerry Garcia, and percussionist Mickey Hart. In this discussion, as in this dissertation

[366] Sylvan, *Traces*, 97.
[367] Jennifer Hartley, "We Were Given This Dance: Music and Meaning in the Early Unlimited Devotion Family" (pages 129–56 in Adams and Sardiello, *Deadhead*).
[368] Sylvan, *Traces*, 99.

generally, I will be focusing on Lesh, as his interviews and autobiography provide the most extensive discussions of these issues, but before I do so, it will be interesting to briefly note the differences between the three spiritually outspoken members in terms of how they discuss this issue.

I must begin, however, by noting that there is no question in my discussion of establishing the "facts" of the situation, of detailing "what really happened." Speaking from the outside, in my role as a scholar of music and religion, I have no way of knowing whether or not the claims made by Lesh, Garcia, or Hart are "correct," "correct if properly understood," or "incorrect"—nor can I say whether any of these judgments are even potentially applicable to the situation.

Over the past thirty-five years there have been extensive debates over the nature and status of "religious experience," with few definitive conclusions having been reached. The battles were primarily waged between those who felt that there was some element of religious experience that was common to all or many religious traditions and the supporters of constructivism, who felt that religious experience was socially constructed and inextricably linked to (indeed, solely created by) the experiencer's social or physical context of origin. The first shot was fired by Stephen Katz in 1978,[369] but the battle heated up in the 1980s and following.[370]

Constructivism has become the more or less de facto fallback position for the non-religiously-affiliated academic study of religion, but advances in neuroscience over the past several decades[371] have provided unexpected support for the perennialist position—clearly not in the sense that they have given any proof to the objective existence of a transcendent level of existence (nor have they disproved it), but rather in the sense that they suggest that the

[369] Stephen Katz, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (London: Sheldon, 1978).
[370] See for instance Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Forman 1990 and 1998; William Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997); David Yamane, David,."Narrative and Religious Experience" (*Sociology of Religion* 61[2000]:171-189).
[371] See Andrew Newberg, *Principles of Neurotheology* (London: Ashgate, 2010).

capacity for some sorts of religious experience are "hardwired" into the human brain, and thus at least potentially independently accessible to people in very different times and places.[372]

The great virtue of the battles in the field of religious experience between supporters of perennialism or essentialism and supporters of constructivism is that they reminded scholars—of whatever stripe—that the content carried by or ascribed to transcendent religious experiences is to some degree created after or before the fact, based on prior expectations, social environment, and the subsequent interpretation of whatever "significant" experiences people may have had.

Whatever validity there may be to a claimed religious experience, this validity is never directly, transparently accessible to the claimant or her audience. Rather, it is profoundly affected by and emerges from prior expectations and post-facto constructions. We thus have to do with a continuum, stretching from the whatever basis there may be for the claimed experience, through the way in which it is clothed in language, or meaning, or integrated into a system, and on through the way in which it is received and transmitted by others.

As Earl Waugh puts it, "at bottom, [the tradition-producing experience] is an experience that is brought out of a context and made conscious as an authoritative memory. The experience is not [necessarily] invented, but rather the process of it becoming a tradition reflects the 'religifying' capabilities of one's psychology and culture. It also signifies the importance of the formative for us, since that formation is the apparent grounds for further interpretation."[373]

As in so many things, one's approach must depend on one's position. In this dissertation, as I mentioned above, I am not discussing what "actually" took place in the religious experiences that various members of the Grateful Dead underwent. Indeed, I share with the constructivists a conviction that as scholars we will never be able to access the experiences themselves, unfiltered by pre- and post-facto constructions and interpretations.

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[372] For a fascinating and very readable example, see Jill Taylor, *My Stroke of Insight* (New York: Penguin, 2009).
[373] Earl Waugh, "Dispatches from Memory: Genealogies of tradition" (pages 245-266 in Steven Engler and Gregory Grieve, ed., *Historicizing "Tradition" in the Study of Religion*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), 251-2.

However, my goal in this dissertation is simply to discuss the ways in which these experiences were constructed by the members of the Grateful Dead, and the ways in which their constructions affected their musical practice.

My approach is, then, phenomenological, in the sense described by Jason Blum, in that it is "designed to disclose the meaning of religion, as understood and experienced from the religious consciousness. Conceptualized in this fashion, phenomenology of religion does not posit the existence of transcendent, religious or sacred realities … Rather, it employs epoché and suspends judgment concerning these matters, and instead focuses on interpreting the consciousness and experience of the immanent religious subject."[374]

In this context, the ascription of religious status to these experiences can be seen as a move that has already been made, by the subjects. My role is merely to interpret that move, rather than to critique it.

Religious experience and drugs

The Grateful Dead's religious experiences came about when they were under the influence of LSD, and band members freely acknowledged the tremendous significance of the drug for their religious development. This ascription of chemical origins to their religious experiences would lead some—perhaps many—to argue that the experiences themselves were thus necessarily invalid.[375]

There are several good reasons, however, for not adopting this approach. First of all, the association of drugs with various sorts of religious experience is widespread. Were we to rule that drug use alone invalidates religious experience, we would be obliged to rule out a priori the experiences of all Rastafarians, some Sufi groups, some Hindu traditions, and many Native American religious traditions, at the very least—and indeed, writers on drug use throughout

[374] Jason Blum, "Retrieving Phenomenology of Religion as a Method for Religious Studies" (*Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80 [2012]:1025-1048), 1027.
[375] An early, sustained argument to this effect can be found in R. C. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969); see Roger Walsh, "Chemical and Contemplative Ecstasy: Similarities and differences" (pages 72-82 in Charles Grob, ed., *Hallucinogens: A Reader* [New York: Putnam, 2002]) for a rebuttal.

history make claims of varying strength for drug use in many other religious contexts[376], hence there is hardly a religious tradition that would emerge entirely unscathed. We would also have to rule out the extra-institutional experiences of the many people in the 1950s and 1960s who found that drug use did or could have a legitimately religious impact, including such reputable figures as Aldous Huxley, Alan Watts, Walter Pahnke, and Huston Smith. Smith, very sensibly, points to the distinction between religious experience and the religious life, arguing that drug-inspired experience is valid, but not apt to lead to anything more lasting unless combined with faith and discipline.[377] I would argue that the Grateful Dead's vision of creating a concert experience in which transcendent experience could be facilitated, and their commitment to building a musical form that permitted them to achieve this and then touring with it, demonstrate both their faith in their religious experience, and their discipline in pursuing it

I would go one step further and argue that to treat "drug-produced experience" as a special category is itself an illegitimate move. Drugs are chemicals that are used to induce altered states of consciousness, and there are many ways of creating altered states of consciousness, including fasting, prolonged repetitive action, prolonged immobility, or unusually intense physical exercise such as dancing.[378] Were we to argue that any religious practice that associates self-imposed physical or physiological alterations with religious experience is invalid, what would we be left with except a few of the most austere and abstract Protestant traditions?

Secondly, the very word "legitimate" brings up problems. Speaking as scholars, as I have mentioned above, we are not competent to discuss whether or not a given religious experience "really" (that is, objectively) took place.. Our concerns here should address more pragmatic issues—what does the person claim to have happened? How do these claims relate to the

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[376] See, e.g., Paul Devereux, *The Long Trip: A Prehistory of Psychedelia* (Brisbane: Daily Grail, 1997); Huston Smith, *Cleansing the Doors of Perception: The Religious Significance of Entheogonic Plants and Chemicals* (New York: Putnam, 2000).
[377] Smith, *Cleansing*, 31.
[378] See Michael Horowitz and Cynthia Palmer, *Moksha: Aldous Huxley's Classic Writings on Psychedelics and the Visionary Experience* (Rochester: Park Street Press, 1999); Daniel Merkur, "The Visionary Practices of the Jewish Apocalypticists" (pages 119-148 in L. B. Boyer and S. A. Grolnick, ed., *The Psychoanalytic Study of Society, Volume 14: Essays in Honor of Paul Parin* [Hillsdale: Analytic, 1989]).

person's social and intellectual contexts? Does the person's post-experience life show that the experience was important to them, and do they continue to construe it as being religiously important?

It is clear from their religious uses that drugs have the potential to create "special" experiences in those who take them, and LSD is no exception to this rule. As Hayes' collection of trip accounts[379] makes clear, LSD can provide a "trigger"[380] for special experiences, but whether or not drug-inspired experiences will be taken as being religious in nature depends on the person undergoing them, the specific context in which he or she takes them and the dosage that he or she takes, and his or her intellectual, social, religious and historical context.

Different drugs do, however, create different sorts of experiences, and I will argue below that characteristic aspects of the LSD experience affected the religious understanding that members of the Grateful Dead derived from their experiences.

In the foregoing pages, we have seen evidence that the members of the Grateful Dead, as well as fans and scholars, felt that there was at least potentially a supranormal experience associated with their music. I have argued that this experience can be best described as religious, rather than merely "spiritual." Against those scholars who would argue that "religious" is a reifying category rather than a sui generis one, I have argued that whatever the merits of their case, this ascription of transcendent experience to a sacred realm is not one that I am carrying out, but rather one that the Grateful Dead themselves accomplished. My analysis is situated in a context in which the religious ascription has already been made. Against those who would argue that the source of the band's religious inspiration renders it unworthy of respect, I have argued that if we refuse to grant legitimacy to any religious experiences that took place in a deliberately-altered state of consciousness, we must rule out the vast majority of the world's religious traditions, clearly a case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Having presented my case for considering the Grateful Dead's experiences as religious

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[379] Charles Hayes, *Tripping: An Anthology of True-Life Psychedelic Adventures* (New York: Penguin, 2000).
[380] Marghanita Laski, *Ecstasy in Secular and Religious Experiences* (New York: St. Martin's, 1961), 41 ff.

ones, I will now turn to the presentations of experiences themselves.

Mickey Hart: A shamanic journey

Hart, in his autobiography, *Drumming on the Edge of Magic*, suggests that the Grateful Dead stand in the lineage of shamanic journeys, at least as this lineage and these journeys are conceived in the modern popular context. As he says, "sometimes I think of what happens in a shamanistic sense of embarking upon a collective journey in which we are all allies. Other times I think of our music as something almost organic that we've grown over the past 25 years, a living entity that exists in another time world ... and that can only be accessed when all of us are on stage."[381]

According to this view, the Grateful Dead's music provides the soundtrack, and even the engine, for religious and intellectual traveling, and it is natural that such traveling would pass through a variety of regions. The journey begins and ends at fixed points—one starts from home, and one returns home—but in-between these points, the goal is to travel, to keep moving, and the person who returns home is not exactly the same person who left.

In his discussion of the Grateful Dead's music specifically, and music generally, Hart often invokes the powers of entrainment, the tendency for rhythms to link up, both in terms of how the band members link up to one another, and how the audience links to the band. As he writes, "from the stage you can feel it happening—group mind, entrainment, find your own word for it."[382] This idea is at odds with his invocation of shamanic ideas properly speaking—in a shamanic context, the shaman does the travelling on her own, while the "audience" watches and awaits her return.[383] However, "shamanism" has been the subject of a great deal of loose discussion over the past century[384], and it is clear that Hart does not use the term in a strict sense.

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[381] Hart, *Drumming*, 229.
[382] Hart, *Drumming*, 230.
[383] See e.g. Ronald Hutton, *Shamans: Siberian Spirituality and the Western Imagination* (London: Hambledon, 2001), 85-98.
[384] Hutton, *Shamans*, 114-149.

Jerry Garcia: Keep it open …

Garcia, too, emphasized the travelling aspect of the band's music, although it seems from the sources that I have read that his understanding is not focused on the goals of the journey or its overriding rationale as much as on the journey itself. As Garcia noted, speaking of John Coltrane's improvising, "I've been impressed by that thing of flow, and of making statements that to my ears sound like a paragraph—he'll play along stylistically with a certain kind of tone, in a certain syntax, for X amount of time, then he'll like change the subject, then play along with this other personality ... Perceptually, an idea that's been very important to me in playing has been the whole 'odyssey' idea—journeys, voyages, you know? And adventures along the way."[385]

This view coheres with a more general view expressed by Garcia in many places elsewhere, emphasizing that he was far more interested in the act of musical exploration, including the transcendent moments that this would entail for the members and audience of the Grateful Dead, than in laying out goals or explanations for this exploration.

As he argues, "... everybody experiences it on their own terms, but from the point of view of being a player it's this thing that you can't make happen, but when it's happening you can't stop it from happening ... I've tried to analyze it on every level that I can gather together, and all the intellectual exercise in the world doesn't do a fucking thing, doesn't help a bit, doesn't explain it one way or another. The Grateful Dead has some kind of intuitive thing ... We talk about it, but all those things are by way of agreeing that we'll continue to keep trying to do this thing, whatever it is, and that our best attitude to it is sort of this stewardship, in which we are the custodians of this thing."[386]

Garcia was often seen as the spiritual spokesperson for the band, as incarnating the Grateful Dead's principles—a prophetic or charismatic figure, in other words. But his comments on the religious aspects of their project, the ineffable "it" that the Grateful Dead pursued are

[385] Gans, *Conversations*, 66.
[386] Gans, *Conversations*, 66.

noteworthy for their humble, personal, and non-systematizing nature. While he was perfectly willing to acknowledge that the band did have spiritual goals that extended beyond their function as an amazingly popular dance band, Garcia was extremely leery of precise definitions. As he characteristically said in 1983, "everybody who experiences 'it,' on whatever terms, is right about it ... I want 'it' to surprise me, to continue to surprise me. I don't want to know anything about it."[387] While acknowledging a spiritual, transcendent element to the band's music, he consistently opposed attempts at precise definition or limitation of that element.

This attitude is exemplified by his explanation of the band's choice not to get involved in political or social causes, religious or otherwise. He argues that "it's our responsibility to keep ourselves free of those connotations. I want the Grateful Dead experience to be one of those things that doesn't come with a hook. We're all very antiauthoritarian. There's nothing that we believe so uniformly and so totally that we could use the Grateful Dead to advertise it."[388]

Garcia was not alone in this refusal. Members of the Grateful Dead inner community seem to have been quite aware of the potential dangers of religious organization, both in terms of its tendency to impede access to transcendent experience, and in terms of its potential for creating rigidity and oppression on the social level. In discussions by Grateful Dead members, one often finds the word "religion" being used to express only these negative connotations. Thus for example Garcia states that "I don't like the word *religion*. It's a bad word. I'd like to not have that concept."[389] Also illustrative of this attitude are remarks delivered by John Barlow, one of the band's two lyricists, in an unpublished keynote address delivered at the 28th Southwest/Texas American and Popular Culture Conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on February 16, 2007.[390]

Barlow notes that at some point early in the band's career, "we realized that [fans of the Grateful Dead] were assembling themselves into something that had certain cult-like

[387] Gans, *Conversations*, 214.
[388] McNally, *Trip*, 174.
[389] Gans, *Conversations*, 214.
[390] quoted in Gimbel, 'The Other One," 192-3.

characteristics." Recounting a conversation that he had in the early 1970s with the Grateful Dead's other lyricist, Robert Hunter, Barlow went on to say,

"I said [to Hunter], 'This [i.e., the perception of the band by some of its fans] is turning into a cult, or a religion, or something.' And he said, 'Yeah.' And I said, 'So far it doesn't have any dogma, which makes it kind of okay as a religion, but it's got ritual, it's got iconography, it's got all these characteristics of religion, it just doesn't seem to have a belief system.' And he said, 'Well, I've been thinking about that. If it's going to get a belief system, it's going to be because of us … But you don't want to do that and I don't want to do that.' … And so we agreed that we would never write anything that could be taken as dogma."

In this passage, Barlow makes very clear his discomfort with "dogma" and "belief systems," a point of view that seems to have been shared with other members, and his association of these negative things with "religion"—i.e., the fans' appreciation of the Grateful Dead is "kind of okay as a religion" because it has no dogma.[391] I should note here that Barlow was not present for the first two years of the Grateful Dead's existence; he was an old school friend of guitarist Bob Weir, but they lost touch in the early 1960s and did not meet again until mid-1967.[392] In this section I am discussing spiritual and musical developments that took place before he reappeared on the scene; however, his attitude does fit in with comments made in interviews with Garcia and Lesh, and with the reactions that my own use of the word "religion" elicited at the Grateful Dead Caucus.

To sum up, we can say that while Hart placed the band's musical journeys within a (popularized understanding of a) shamanic context, Garcia seems to have tried not to place them into any such ritual, teleological context. Where Hart sees the band as leading the audience on a mission, Garcia sees it as going off on a ramble.

As for Lesh, he does indeed have a prescriptive conceptual framework worked out, as we will see. But whereas Hart's framework is based on entrainment and the concept of the

[391] Barlow would later go on to describe dogma as "the most toxic aspect of religion" (Barlow, "Foreword," xxv).
[392] McNally, *Trip*, 200.

shamanistic *journey*, Lesh's concept is phenomenological, viz. it is based upon *experience*. In this regard it coheres with Garcia's understanding of the religious aspects of the Grateful Dead's music. However, where Garcia is content to leave things as open as possible, Lesh has a much more detailed understanding of the situation.

Phil Lesh

We turn now to bassist Phil Lesh. His understanding of the band's music is focused less on the journey and more on the experience as a guiding image, the experience in question being that of contact with, and the manifestation of, a mobile, ever-changing transcendent level of reality. As Lesh put it, "I've always felt, from the very beginning—even before the Acid Tests—that we could do something that was, not necessarily extramusical, but something where music would be only the first step. Something maybe even close to religion ... in the sense of the actual communing. We used to say that every place we play is church." Hence it is logical that he would refer to improvising as "praying" and says that you play and then "hope" that "the dove descends"[393]—that is, that the band will touch upon transcendence.[394]

As Lesh's use of the verb "hope" suggests, the transcendent experiences that the band pursued cannot be compelled, but one can increase the likelihood of this taking place by creating conditions favorable to it, foremost among which is the attitude of openness. The band's efforts to pursue this manifestation, and its adventures in the continually shifting reality that the manifestation reveals when present, correspond to the journeying that Garcia and Hart speak of; Lesh's view can thus be seen as enfolding Garcia's and Hart's views, but expanding on

[393] Brightman, *Chaos*, 8.

[394] The Christian references in Lesh's comment are especially interesting. It was common within the 1960s counterculture to ascribe "exotic" origins to transcendent experience, hence leading for example to descriptions of Indian classical music, with its tight connection to Indian religio-philosophical teachings, as presenting a more "spiritual" avenue for Western musicians to explore. The Grateful Dead, unlike many of their contemporaries, did not do this (nor did their mentor, Ken Kesey, although Timothy Leary certainly did): one listens in vain to hear "hip" use of sitars, tablas, or harmoniums on their recordings. Rather, the band, in this period as in their later work, emphasized their ties to the various strands of American artistic and musical traditions. Drummer Mickey Hart is the only member of the band, to my knowledge, who has published his views on Indian music, and in these comments (see chapter 5 in Lavezzoli, *Dawn*, or Hart's account of his introduction to Indian music in Hart, *Drumming*, 141-3) he speaks of it as a source of technical ideas, a tradition, and as a musical inspiration, but not as a source of transcendent religious experience.

them as well as modifying them by putting the accent on the strictly religious focus of the interplay between ethical and practical issues, ritual, and the divine (with strong soteriological overtones, in the form of a realized, or intermittently realizable, eschatology).

In what follows, we will be dealing mainly with Lesh's point of view. For the purposes of this discussion I will narrow the focus even more, and will deal mainly with the material found in Lesh's autobiography, *Searching for the Sound,* which provides a look back over Lesh's career with the Grateful Dead.

The religious theme enters Lesh's narrative along with drugs. He first gets high while in university with poet and lyricist Bobby Peterson, who he sees as "a true artist, following an artistic and spiritual quest"[395]—a quest that, in Lesh's view, was incorporated into the efforts of those involved in the 1960s cultural revolutions to work toward "a culture built on love, respect, and the quest for spiritual values."[396]

This quest involved the use of cannabis and psychedelic drugs, which Lesh sees as (at least potentially) entheogens, substances that can have valid religious and spiritual effects. Entheogens have been used "to manifest the numinous and sacred, tools that had been in use for thousands of years by shamans, by oracles, in the ancient mystery schools, by all whose mission was to penetrate beyond the veil of illusion ... they were explorations into the super-real, voyages designed to bring a larger sense of reality back into human consciousness, which had become irredeemably bogged down in the material world."[397]

In this passage, Lesh links the Grateful Dead to a tradition beloved of esotericists, namely the "Golden Chain" of enlightened teachers allegedly stretching back into prehistory. In Lesh's telling, human existence is characterized as being "bogged down" in the material world and thus separated from the realm of the "super-real," a separation that must be overcome, at least temporarily or intermittently, through mystical experience triggered by ritual, meditation, magic, or—as in the case of the Grateful Dead—drugs and music. On this level, Lesh's

[395] Lesh, *Searching*, 15.
[396] Lesh, *Searching*, 16.
[397] Lesh, *Searching*, 36.

presentation shares obvious features with Platonic and gnostic traditions in the Abrahamic/Hellenistic religious world, as with Hinduism and Buddhism further east. However, as we will see, Lesh's theological views differ from these traditions in key ways.

Chapter Nine: The Acid Tests

Lesh's own, drug-assisted journey on the quest to experience the super-real found its Frameworkatic realization in the Acid Tests. These were events organized by the Merry Pranksters, a guerilla art group led by author Ken Kesey, and best described in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. The Merry Pranksters possessed a strong, almost messianic, sense of mission and a high commitment to mind expansion, to be achieved with the aid of sensory overstimulation and psychedelic drugs. Their goal, insofar as they had one, seems to have been to enable people to break through the normal limits of consciousness and attain to a state of inspired intuitive oneness with universal forces. As Kesey noted, "We have to do something to break us out of that rut, the rut of our minds ... You can't have a new idea. You can't strain ... and go forward and find a new idea ... [but] you can be enlightened, which is, like, 'Ah!' But to do that, though, you have to wander into a new area."[398]

The Acid Tests were of pivotal importance for the Grateful Dead. The band's career did not literally begin at the Acid Tests, but it was at these events that the Grateful Dead collectively discovered its vocation, its defining environment. When asked in an interview in 1983, "When did you start realizing that there might be something of greater human significance available to the Grateful Dead?," bassist Phil Lesh was quick to respond: "[At the] Acid Tests. That's when it really hit me," adding later in the interview, "I know that if the Acid Tests had never happened, we would have been just another band."[399] When asked, also in 1983, "how did the personal, collective quest [for musical transcendence] turn into this incredible myth?", Jerry Garcia responded that it happened "as soon as we were playing at the Acid Tests."[400] In an earlier interview, conducted in 1972, Garcia had presented it very clearly: "the Acid Test was the prototype for our whole basic trip. But nothing [that the band had done

[398] From an interview with Ken Kesey by Frank Fey, January 8, 1966, from a bootleg CD release, *Grateful Dead and the Merry Pranksters: The Acid Tests Reel*.
[399] Gans, *Conversations*, 202 and 206.
[400] Gans, *Conversations*, 212.

since] has ever come up to the level of the way that the Acid Test was."[401]

In religious terms, then, the Acid Tests and the meanings that were derived from them can thus be described as the Grateful Dead's foundation stories, and it is in that light that I will now examine them.

Religions need myth, and they particularly need foundational myth, the creation of which involves the establishment of a "year zero" that is crucial to any religious movement (providing the *axis mundi* that supports the religious world, as William Paden might have put it[402]) from which aspirations can be derived, esthetic and ethical standards set up, and the future predicted or pre-enacted. Since foundation stories describe the establishment of the sacred period from out of its secular historical context, it logically follows that they delineate three situations: a state of potential that sets the stage for the foundation story; the foundation period, in which a particular period is liberated from history and moved into an archetypal realm, and in which the bases for the religious movement and its values are set; and the move out of the liminal realm and back into history, which presents particular challenges for the new religious movement. In the discussion that follows, we will see how this tripartite delineation played into the Grateful Dead's relationship to the Acid Tests.

To illustrate the importance of foundation stories for the understanding of religious movements, we could mention, for example, the way that scholarly discussions of the New Testament or other early Christian writings are crucially concerned with the ways in which authors craft their presentations of the Christian foundation myth so as to legitimate their own understandings of Christianity, especially with regard to the writing of the canonical gospels.[403] This principle of claiming legitimacy through attachment to the foundational period applies as well to such works as the gnostic writings found near Nag Hammadi in Egypt, in which

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[401] Garcia, Reich and Wenner, *Garcia*, 94.
[402] William Paden, *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion* (Boston: Beacon).
[403] The concern to understand the ways in which the gospel authors constructed their competing foundation myths is evident throughout scholarly work on the gospels (to take just three examples, see Kink 2010, Koester 2007, Perkins 2007), and has profound ramifications for the study of redaction history, the Historical Jesus, or source critical approaches.

challenging reconstructions or re-presentations of mainstream Christianity are very often legitimized through their ascription to the apostolic period.[404]

Foundation stories derive from the historical period that marks the beginning of the religious movement in question. They lift this period out of history, turning it into normative, Frameworkatic myth and the template for future ritual. In this way, "the actual processes of human agency … are overlaid with a historiography that confers legitimacy to religious claims and practices."[405] As Paden notes, "Each religious world has its own past … these pasts and histories are given form … through the memory and continuity of tradition. Every past rises up around key events and exemplary figures." Myths and foundation stories arise from "prototypical time in which divine events and words have been definitively posited."[406] Or, as Roland Barthes more jadedly put it, this sort of myth "has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification and making contingency seem eternal."[407]

Whether or not these myths are literally true is not the point. As Mikael Rothstein puts it, when discussing issues of truth/history from religious points of view, "It is necessary to acknowledge that the mythical rendering of time and history is much more important than 'history' in the everyday (secular) sense of the word. Here I have to emphasize that 'mythical formations' are different from 'lies.' … Things that are not factual may easily be appreciated as true in religious contexts."[408]

The Creation and Maintenance of a Foundational Myth

I have been arguing that the Grateful Dead's inspiration can in some sense be described as religious. As for when and how this aspect of things enters the picture, there is no evidence

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[404] See e.g. Nicola Denzey Lewis, *Introduction to "Gnosticism": Ancient voices, Christian worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), chapter 17: "Apostolic Traditions in Conflict."
[405] James Lewis and Olav Hammer, *The Invention of Sacred Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 4.
[406] Paden, *Comparative*, 76-78.
[407] Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice" (pages 179-189 in *Images, Music, Text* [Glasgow: Fontana, 1977]), 142.
[408] Mikael Rothstein, "Scientology, Scripture and Sacred Tradition" (pages 18-37 in Lewis and Hammer, *Invention*), 29.

in any of the sources that I have examined for any of the original members having had any strong attachments to any organized religious groups prior to the band's formation, nor in the interviews that I have read do band members speak of spiritual crises or religious concerns before 1965. Nor does it seem that the mere fact of playing rock music was religiously fraught for them, a notable difference from the experiences of many earlier rock and rollers such as Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard, and Elvis Presley.[409]

To speak generally, and to judge by the extant accounts—and also by the band's musical developments—it was their use of LSD, which began in 1965, that led several of the Grateful Dead's members to start feeling that their music was potentially of religious significance. It was, however, at the Merry Pranksters' Acid Tests that these more or less inchoate feelings turned into something more definite. At the Acid Tests, the Grateful Dead found a community, and with it an identity and a legend—they were no longer merely an unusual folk-rock-blues group, but rather became "the Acid Tests band," Ken Kesey's "faster than light drive," the house band for a new kind of public experience. In *The Electric Kool Aid Acid Test*, Wolfe presents the Grateful Dead as, essentially, the Acid Tests house band. It might be argued that Wolfe, as a non-hippie New Yorker, could easily have been ignorant of the real situation, but as band insider Bear put it: "Grateful Dead were Pranksters. They were musicians, but they were also Pranksters."[410] He adds that "all I know is, I joined up with a band that were Pranksters; they were part of the scene that was doing something that was right on the edge …"[411] It is with the Acid Tests, then, that their distinctive myth really begins, as Lesh and Garcia make clear.

The Acid Tests were all-night, drug fuelled multimedia parties, a source of inspiration for psychedelic "happenings" and the later rave scene. The point of these parties was to encourage people to be as picturesquely weird and open to the moment as they could be, all this to be done in an environment that combined unpredictability with sensory overload and as much of

[409] Turner brings out this extremely interesting difference between many of the first-wave rock and roll musicians and their successors when he notes of the Beatles that "They were typically second-generation rock and rollers in that none of them suffered any anxiety over a secular-sacred split in their lives" (Steve Turner Turner, *Hungry for Heaven* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995], 49).
[410] Gans, *Conversations*, 307.
[411] Gans, *Conversations*, 311.

an absence of control as was possible for events sometimes drawing thousands of people. Many of the participants would have taken LSD—hence the name "Acid Tests"—and so a night at an Acid Test would be passed in the company of very stoned, often oddly dressed or oddly acting people, while strange music played, often provided by the Grateful Dead, ambient sounds and conversation were fed into the PA, and images and lights were projected on screens.[412] By all accounts, attendance at an Acid Test could have a tremendously powerful impact on the participant, often changing lives for good or ill.

Based just on that description, the Acid Tests could have been no more significant than simply great parties—not so much different than ones that we might have attended as undergraduates. What turned these parties into foundation stories was the way that they were mythologized after the fact—or, to put it another way, the sorts of meaning that were ascribed to them, the future activities that were suggested or rendered possible by them. Ram Dass writes that "the Acid Tests were extraordinary. I felt that they were sheer magic. And they were scary magic. In many ways I saw it as religious ritual."[413]

The impact that the Acid Tests had on at least some of their participants is clear; their meaning is less clear—perhaps by design. They were carnivalesque events, at which participants were encouraged to "freak freely," to express themselves as fully, flamboyantly and unpremeditatedly as they liked, responding to the sensory overload environment and drugs, and at which magic was felt to arise from the conjunction of spontaneous events, particularly when enhanced by the Grateful Dead's music—for which reason the Pranksters described them as a "faster than light drive." One of the main Pranksters, Ken Babbs, writes that "We always thought of the Grateful Dead as being the engine that was driving the spaceship that we were on."[414] The Acid Tests bear strong similarities to some of Victor Turner's ideas about liminal spaces, in which social roles are altered or suspended and a ludic approach to life is privileged. But for some participants, they were significant in ways that transcended

[412] For details, see Meriwether's excellent description of the 10/2/66 Acid Test: Meriwether, "The Acid Tests."
[413] Paul Perry and Ken Babbs, *On the Bus: The Complete Guide to the Legendary Trip of Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters and the Birth of the Counterculture* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1997), 148-9.
[414] Robert Greenfield, *Dark Star: An Oral Biography of Jerry Garcia* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 73.

sociology. As Farber writes, the Acid Tests were "geared toward maximizing psychic, sensual input, loading up the mind and pushing tripsters toward a vast collective experience that roared toward the unknown. The Acid Tests pointed toward the creation of enclaves, social spaces in which visionaries played out new collective games."[415]

In a 1969 interview in *Rolling Stone*, Garcia said that the purpose of the Acid Tests were to "do away with old forms, with old ideas … Nobody was doing something, y'know. It was everybody doing bits and pieces of something, the result of which was something else … when it was moving right you could dig that there was something that it was moving toward, something like ordered chaos."[416] Garcia does not elaborate on the origins of the order in this "ordered chaos," but later comments from him[417] and Lesh[418] suggest that the order arose through the visible manifestation of universal consciousness—the "uncontrolled anarchy" was actually "the dance of the cosmos."[419]

This freely occurring magic—the overwhelming presence of what was felt to be deeply meaningful, if often inexpressible, coincidence—was interpreted by several band members as being signs of the manifestation of a divine energy, invoked by this most modern and ad hoc of rituals. The most detailed discussion can be found on pages 63-76 of Lesh's autobiography, which he concludes by writing that "It's safe to say that in the 90 days or so that the Acid Tests existed, our band took more and longer strides into another realm of musical consciousness, not to mention pure awareness, than ever before or since. At the beginning we were a band playing a gig. At the end we had become shamans helping to channel the transcendent into our mundane lives and those of our listeners."[420]

Thomas Wolfe was a close but non-convert observer of the Acid Tests and Kesey's

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[415] David Farber, "The Intoxicated State/Illegal Nation: Drugs in the Sixties Counterculture" (pages 17-40 in Peter Braunstein and Michael Doyle, ed., *Imagine Nation: American Cultural Radicalism in the 1960s* [New York: Routledge, 2001]), 26.
[416] Jackson, *Garcia*, 1999, 92.
[417] Gans, *Conversations*, 78-79.
[418] Lesh, *Searching*, 66-70.
[419] Lesh, *Searching* 69.
[420] Lesh, *Searching*, 76.

scene. In his *The Electric Kool Aid Acid Test* Wolfe makes it very clear that the Merry Pranksters, the loose organization that Kesey founded and that hosted the Acid Tests, took on some of the characteristics of a new religious movement. Kesey served as the charismatic leader, and there was a shared view of their activities as being spiritually significant, a sense that in their daily lives they were taking part in extremely important immanent metaphysical explorations. William Plummer speaks of the sense that a "new church" was being founded: "the landscape was littered with portents … Increasingly, they were coming to believe they were in an I-Thou relationship to the universe."[421]

Looking back, Kesey argued that "when we got into acid with a group of people, we felt that we were dealing with the end of time."[422] Garcia points out that "I've been lucky enough to meet people like Kesey, who've been able to illuminate some sense that this is not just a drug induced fantasy, but part of the larger picture of consciousness which we're making an effort to map out … well, we're making an effort to evolve … [without the influence of people like Kesey] I tend not to believe that the voice I hear is the voice of God …"[423] The religious nature of the events, and Kesey's dominant role in them, is clear.

In *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Wolfe cites Joachim Wach's theory[424] of the primacy of the religious experience in founding new religions: the experience is brokered by a leader, and those who have undergone this life-changing experience come to recognize themselves as a unique new group, in need of new means of expressing and accessing transcendence.

Although this theory is not universally applicable, it certainly does apply here. This is the purpose that the Acid Tests served for Kesey and the Pranksters; as well, they were the group's major public statements, their first steps outside of their own tight scene to engage the outside world and build a place for themselves there. Very literally, the Acid Tests were laying the

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[421] William Plummer, *The Holy Goof: A Biography of Neal Cassady* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1997), 124 and 126-7.
[422] Peter Whitmer, *Aquarius Revisited: Seven Who Created the Sixties Counterculture That Changed America* (New York: MacMillan, 1987), 204.
[423] John Rocco, *Dead Reckonings: The Life and Times of the Grateful Dead* (New York: Schirmer, 1999), 126.
[424] Joachim Wach, *Sociology of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944).

foundations for Kesey's new movement, and Wolfe presents them in his book as the ultimately unsuccessful (more on that later) attempts to found a new religion. Plummer concurs: "There was an undisguised messianic purpose behind the Tests"[425]—as Kesey put it at the time, "the millennium started some months ago."[426]

In the quotes from Jerry Garcia or Phil Lesh that I presented above, we can hear the mythologization of the Acid Tests: they have become archetypal events sufficient to provide the starting point, the legitimation, for an approach to music that sustained the Grateful Dead through a thirty year long career. Venturing out from the band itself, the numerous discussions of the Acid Tests in fan-based works[427] show that the Acid Tests have become foundational, and that they are being used to furnish and to orient the shared mythological cosmos that the founders and members of this odd new religious movement inhabit.

Although the musicians were by no means as accomplished as they would later become, nonetheless it was at the Acid Tests that the transcendent potential of their music became clear to them, as we have seen. Indeed, in later years they would discuss the Acid Tests as their soteriological high-point, as being the purest manifestation of what their music could and was intended to do.

Thus it is clear that the Acid Tests were fundamental experiences for the band, particularly when considered as a religiously motivated organization. They functioned in the band's mythology much as did the period of Jesus' earthly ministry for later generations of Christians—that is, they represented a period when the parameters and standards for the new movement were established, when miracles were possible and utopia dimly visible, when the walls between the transcendent and human realms were thinnest. The tale of the Acid Tests represents a foundation story for the Grateful Dead seen as a religious organization.

David G. Bromley and Douglas E. Cowan note that "Because they are literally religions-in-the-making, new religious movements (NRMs) offer a particularly fruitful source of insight

[425] Plummer, *Holy Goof*, 140.
[426] Plummer, *Holy Goof*, 141.
[427] Such as Shenk and Silberman, *Skeleton*, and Getz and Dwork, *Taping*.

into the processes by which religion is socially constructed."[428] In this case, as we have seen, the Acid Tests provide us with a reminder of the unexpected ways in which religious feeling can manifest.

The End of the Beginning

By necessity, foundation stories require some kind of delimitation. Logically speaking, if the apostolic period, the golden age, is forever, then how can it be perceived as a golden age? Furthermore, life and history being what they are, sooner or later things fall apart in some way for any movement, let alone one that presents radical new understandings about religious matters and hence poses challenges to the established orders of its period. Thus the foundation story also needs to make religious sense out of the end of the golden age, and to explain how the religious movement is still, or could still be, legitimate.

In many foundation stories, this is done by presenting the founder as laying down authoritative moral codes, rules of succession, and/or guidelines during or at the end of the golden age. Mohammed, for example, passed the Koran on to his followers; Jesus appeared to and instructed his disciples after the resurrection; Mani codified his teachings into several books; the Buddha's sayings were remembered and orally passed on; and so on.

The Grateful Dead and the Acid Tests were different, however, in that the leading figure most qualified to fit into the role of founder, namely Ken Kesey, had lost a great deal of his prophetic charisma by the time of the last Acid Test. This was the Acid Graduation ceremony, at which even the Grateful Dead deserted him in order to play a different show—as Thomas Wolfe brings out quite clearly in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Tests*, itself a work of mythologization, of course, but the general details of which are regarded as being historically reliable.[429] By this point, Kesey had lost the respect of—or been superseded by—the San Francisco hippie community whose expression and aesthetics he had influenced so strongly, and even his group

[428] David Bromley and Douglas Cowan, "The invention of a counter-tradition: the case of the North American anti-cult movement" (pages 96-117 in Lewis and Hammer, *Invention*), 97.
[429] Scott MacFarlane, *The Hippie Narrative: A Literary Perspective on the Counterculture* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2007), 108.

of Merry Pranksters had splintered. "The hippies, at the last moment, rejected Kesey," making the Acid Graduation "one of those pivotal moments that you find in myths, when the hero fails a crucial test because he lacks faith."[430]

Although Kesey remained part of the Grateful Dead family, and they did perform to support his family-owned creamery in Oregon[431], where he retired after the collapse of his charisma, their discussions of him and other presentations of his impact show that his role as a potential mass-movement leader ends with the Acid Tests. His group was fractured; his ideas had been taken up and popularized by others, not least the Grateful Dead; he was not trusted by such power-brokers as Bill Graham and Chet Helms; on a popular level, he and the Pranksters seem to have been distrusted by a hippie movement that at any rate was considerably younger and less focused than him; and he was embroiled in legal troubles that led to him serving jail time, after which he moved away from San Francisco entirely.

In short, Kesey and the Pranksters created a new and at least partly religious phenomenon, the Acid Tests, which had a profound influence on the Grateful Dead's aesthetics, design, and aspirations. And yet despite this, the collapse of his prophetic charisma did not cause the collapse of the spiritual psychedelic movement that first manifested in the Acid Tests and with which the Grateful Dead identified themselves. This counterintuitive result might well arise from the Grateful Dead's well-known distrust of authority figures and would-be leaders, but it also supports James R. Lewis' argument that the importance of prophetic figures is often overstated.

In an article focused on the Native American Ghost Dance tradition, Lewis notes that "a key factor in causing academics to attribute ephemerality to messianic movements is a mistaken theological perspective that portrays the personal charisma of the founder as the 'glue' holding together alternative views of reality. Such a perspective misconstrues the role of charisma. In the first place, no matter how charismatic a prophet, his message must somehow

[430] Stevens, *Storming*, 325.
[431] The benefit for the Springfield Creamery in Springfield Oregon took place on August 17, 1972. The show was filmed and made into a movie, *Sunshine Daydream*, that remained unreleased until 2013.

address the concerns of the community in a satisfactory manner if he is to convince more than a handful of close associates. In other words, a contagious new vision has more going for it than merely the personality of the revealer. In the second place … the actual adoption of an emergent religion by a human community recruits the forces of social consensus to the side of the new revelation … Because social consensus is the real glue that maintains the plausibility of any given worldview, potential sources of crisis in the life of a religious movement lie in the areas of breakdown of social consensus, not the passing away [or loss of charisma] of the prophet."[432]

Lewis' point is valid, and evidently there was enough of a social consensus within the Grateful Dead community that Kesey's innovations were valuable enough to keep them going. At least in his early days, Kesey felt that one could find transcendence through LSD inspired visionary experience set in a very public context that encouraged sensory overload and was joined with an aesthetic of spontaneity and a hyperactive Zen reveling in the moment. The messianic significance of this idea survived Kesey's own passing as a prophetic leader.

However, my present concern is not so much with the actual continuation of the movement, as with the way that that continuation is rhetorically constructed. So I would like to discuss the ways in which the Grateful Dead's Acid Tests foundation story deals with these issues, protecting the band's mission from the collapse of Kesey's own mission.

The Grateful Dead's lack of public discussion of the end of the Acid Tests is in itself one way of doing this—in their accounts and in the writings of their fans, the Tests are remembered as the glorious events that spawned the Grateful Dead's way of approaching music and life, and their ending is glossed over or ignored. We might compare this to the way that John the Baptist's story is incorporated into the story of Jesus in the New Testament, with his fall and death being an addendum to what is presented as being his real significance as forerunner.[433]

We can see another way in which the Grateful Dead safeguarded their foundation by

[432] Lewis and Hammer, *Invention*, 56-7.
[433] Matthew 3:13-4:17; Mark 1:1-1:11; Luke 3:1-3:22; the point is made especially clearly in John 3:25-30

turning our examination from the end of the "golden age" to its start—the period in which the new religious movement began. Titus Hjelm makes an interesting and relevant point when he discusses "'conversion' as an implicit legitimating strategy" and argues that "the religious group a person affiliates with conditions the depictions of the 'past life' and the conversion experience itself."[434]

He gives as an example his work among Wiccans, in which most of the respondents presented entry into Wicca as being a question of manifesting or realizing something they already felt, and notes that "the 'logic of conversion' in Wicca seems to be the opposite compared to, for example, evangelical Christianity. Whereas the evangelical Christian is 'born again' and sees her previous life behind her, with a sharp break between it and her current status, the Wiccan finds her past life in front of her: the past is defined as something which now has a name."[435] This strategy, Hjelm argues, foregrounds individualism and "relegates tradition to a less important … position"[436]; it also enables the respondents to "identify with Wicca, while at the same time distancing themselves from it."[437] New Wiccans are not indebted to the tradition, and nor have they changed so as to affiliate themselves with it: the tradition's power derives solely from its correspondence to the convert's sense of self.

Hjelm's presentation of Wicca casts light on the way that Grateful Dead bassist Phil Lesh and guitarist Jerry Garcia discussed their introduction to the Pranksters and the Acid Tests. Although, as we saw above, they acknowledged the Acid Tests as in some sense the beginnings of the Grateful Dead's spiritual mission, nonetheless in several accounts both of them can be heard to emphasize not only that the band and its scene existed prior to the Acid Tests, but also that its mission was in some way present then as well. As both Lesh and Garcia presented it, the Grateful Dead's religious significance arose from the time when the band was exposed to, and starts playing under the influence of, entheogonic drugs including most prominently LSD, well

[434] Titus Hjelm, "Tradition as Legitimation in New Religious Movements" (pages 109-123 in Steven Engler and Gregory Gieve, ed., *Historicizing "Tradition" in the Study of Religion* [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005]), 116.
[435] Hjelm, "Tradition," 117.
[436] Hjelm, "Tradition," 118.
[437] Hjelm, "Tradition," 117.

before their participation in the Acid Tests.

Thus for Lesh, it is the two month period of gigless rehearsal in the fall of 1965 that enable the band "to meld our consciousnesses together in the unity of a group mind," the necessary precondition for musical transcendence, and they have already played their first "big gig" before Lesh "wangled invitations for the band to the first [Acid] Test"—to attend as guests, not to play. Lesh describes this first Acid Test as being "subdued," in need of "some kind of focus" to "transform diffuse individual energies into coherent collectives. Clearly, music was the answer …" and it is when the Grateful Dead bring their music to the second Test that the Tests become truly magical. As Lesh puts it, "we knew we had something, but we didn't know how deep it was. We directed and focused it through these parties."[438]

Garcia, for his part, makes it clear in his interview with Charles Reich and Jann Wenner that the fundamental changes in his attitude towards life and music that LSD caused had all taken place well before the first Acid Test,[439] and that the Acid Tests, for all their mystical powers, were ways for him to continue in the musical direction that he had already mapped out. As he puts it, "In the night clubs, in bars, mostly what they want to hear is short fast stuff … and we were always trying to play a little, stretch out a little … So our trip with the Acid Test was to be able to play long and loud. Man, we can play as long and loud as we wanted and no one would stop us."[440]

When the Acid Tests started happening, Garcia said, "we were ready for something completely free-form. It kind of *went along with where we were going*, which is we were experimenting with psychedelics, as much as we were playing music."[441] When asked directly, "Were you under Ken Kesey's tutelage?", Garcia responded, "Not really. I was getting high with those guys, but 'it' wasn't coming from them—it was coming from 'it,' whatever 'it' was."[442] Lesh states that "we were always more aware of ourselves as a unit, as a band, than as

[438] McNally, *Trip*, 112.
[439] Garcia, Reich and Wenner, *Garcia*, 17-20.
[440] Garcia, Reich and Wenner, *Garcia*, 21.
[441] Jackson, *Garcia*, 86.
[442] Gans, *Conversations*, 78.

representatives of the culture, or any other abstract—that's why we didn't stick with the Acid Tests, because we wanted to be the Grateful Dead, and not the Acid Tests house band … I remember that as an unspoken but totally conscious thought."[443]

As Hjelm might put it, the band's past is being presented as something that was defined at the Acid Tests as something that now had a name—but that nonetheless existed before it acquired that name. In Lesh and Garcia's presentations of the Acid Tests, then, they become a glorious, definitional moment, but a moment into which they enter as a group, to get a foretaste of apocalyptic perfection and validation of their direction. The Acid Tests are integrated into a longer spiritual voyage, being seen as the early, revelatory stage of a journey that extends before and after them.

My point is not that this is factually incorrect—indeed, I am inclined to believe that it is a correct representation of the band's situation. I merely want to emphasize that it is also *rhetorically useful* for navigating the presentation of the Grateful Dead's history between the the Acid Tests' undeniable importance, and their equally undeniable demise with the collapse of Kesey's charisma.

The complicated attitude that the Grateful Dead took with regard to the Acid Tests is expressed by their associate and sometime manager Augustus "Bear" Owsley. He notes that when the Acid Tests were going on, "no matter what else we were doing, we *had* to be at the Acid Tests every week,"[444] but that his own view was that "here was this band of incredible musicians making this magic music which I thought was more important to do than [the Acid Tests]."[445]

Although he presents his view as having been controversial within the band's scene at the time, it was the one that prevailed, once the undeniable excitement of the Tests was done. As Lesh noted, "When the Acid Tests went their way, we still had a band to operate."[446] As

[443] McNally, *Trip*, 168.
[444] Gans, *Conversations*, 307.
[445] Gans, *Conversations*, 312.
[446] Gans, *Conversations*, 206.

Kesey's "faster than light drive," the Grateful Dead had been one of the means to the Acid Tests' ends (as Joel Selvin put it, "the Dead played house band to the dawning of the psychedelic apocalypse"[447]); with the collapse of the Acid Tests, the situation was reversed.

This validation of the band and its career serves two purposes—not only does it shield them from the effects of the Acid Tests' collapse, but in so doing it also transfers the ultimate spiritual authority from the Acid Tests to the band. Rather than the Grateful Dead being known for taking part in the Acid Tests, as contemporary accounts suggest was the case, the Acid Tests become significant insofar as they fit into the Grateful Dead's career. The parallels with the presentation of the career of John the Baptist in the New Testament are again clear: the authors of the canonical gospels, or the traditions that they pass on, have significantly diminished his contemporary significance, so as to cast more light on the career of his most famous disciple, Jesus.

In this section, I have addressed some of the ways in which the Grateful Dead used the Acid Tests as a foundation story, and also the ways in which they defined themselves separately from the Tests, seeing the Tests as the place where their mission was revealed to them, but maintaining enough distance from them that their eventual collapse and Kesey's loss of charismatic authority did not cause insurmountable difficulties for the band.

While the Grateful Dead recognized the fact that Kesey and the Pranksters functioned as incubators and innovators, bringing to light a new vision and a new context that achieved social consensus (as witness the influence of light shows, psychedelia, etc.), their integration of that vision into their overall context freed them from too much dependence on the Acid Tests' founder, thus giving support to the argument that James Lewis makes specifically with regard to the Ghost Dance.

On a broader theoretical level, this examination has presented foundation stories as consisting of essentially three parts: a state of potential that sets the stage for the foundation story; the foundation period, in which a particular period is liberated from history and moved

[447] Selvin, *Summer*, 40.

into an archetypal realm, and in which the bases for the religious movement and its values are set; and the move out of the liminal realm and back into history, which presents particular challenges for the new religious movement.

We have seen how the Grateful Dead navigated these phases, how they drew upon the Acid Tests as a foundation period, but kept their own identity to some degree separate, so as to allow them to survive the collapse of the golden age.

Interpreting the Acid Tests

We have discussed what took place at the Acid Tests, and the way that they were constructed so as to serve as foundation stories for the Grateful Dead. Having established their status, I would like at this point to look at their meaning for Phil Lesh. Garcia's published comments on the Acid Tests emphasize their importance as "magic" events, but do not pin down the nature of this magic. Lesh, on the other hand, has left us a more detailed interpretation of the meaning of the Acid Tests. Again, I want to stress that this interpretation is not necessarily "true," or truer than anyone else's interpretation. When we work with religious experience, we cannot access any sort of absolute meaning. All we can do is observe how meaning is constructed by participants in the events that we study. In his autobiography, Lesh makes his own construction accessible to us in considerable detail, which makes it an appropriate one to focus on, all the more so because it does not contradict and is not incompatible with any of the other extant testimonies about the Acid Tests that I have encountered.

On pages 68–69 of *Searching*, Lesh describes the Acid Tests as being about the attempt to let go of all humanly imposed control over the flow of events. Instead, one opens oneself up to the universe and to whatever arises. For this to take place, it was necessary to have an environment in which there is enough freedom, or fluidity, to permit the spontaneous emergence of structure principles, such as patterns and waves. The Acid Tests, which were such an environment in Lesh's view, were "ordered only by those same mysterious laws that govern the evolution of weather patterns, or the turbulence in a rising column of smoke."

In Lesh's view, this same characteristic applies to the dancers at early Grateful Dead shows (which to some degree overlapped with the Acid Tests). These dancers manifest "the same sort of spontaneous consensus seen in flocks of birds, schools of fish, or clusters of galaxies." Indeed, "to make music for dancers like these is the greatest honor—to be responsible for what really is the dance of the cosmos. If, as some savants of consciousness suggest, we are actually agreeing to create, from moment to moment, everything we perceive as real, then it stands to reason that we're also responsible for keeping it going in some harmonious manner. The fervent belief we shared then, and that perseveres today, is that the energy liberated by the combination of music and ecstatic dancing is somehow making the world better, or at least holding the line against the depredations of entropy and ignorance."

I mentioned above that Lesh's theology resonates with aspects of Platonic and gnostic traditions. But there are striking differences as well. Rather than presenting the divine realm as having a fixed structure, being made up of a realm of unchanging Forms (to speak Platonically) or a higher Pleroma of fixed emanations proceeding from an unchanging Source (to speak gnostically[448]), Lesh presents the "super-real" level as being energetic but changeable. It sends out or moves through structures, but it is not defined by these structures. Rather, it is defined by its dynamism, creativity and inherent experiential rightness. As we will see below, this description coheres very strongly with aspects of the LSD experience, which presumably inspired it.

Fittingly, considering the influence of the Beats on the Grateful Dead and its scene,[449] Lesh's conception provides a theological counterpart to the intense, energetic drive to be found in works such as *On the Road* or *Howl*. Also contrasting with the Platonists and some gnostic authors, Lesh does not evince any essential discomfort with the material world. In his view it is intrinsically less real than the higher realm, true, and needs regular connection to that realm,

[448] See e.g., the *Tripartite Tractate* from Nag Hammadi codex I, although the motif is found throughout gnostic writings.
[449] Gary Cioco, "How Dead Beats Became Dead Heads: From Emerson and James to Kerouac and Garcia" (pages 63-74 in Steve Gimbel, ed., *The Grateful Dead and Philosophy: Getting High Minded about Love and Haight* [Chicago: Open Court, 2007]).

but it is not necessarily flawed. His is a dualistic but fundamentally irenic view, in which the role of the Grateful Dead is to create a vital connection between the two realms, which they do through their music.

The soteriological note is clear, as is the messianic tone, which intensifies as Lesh continues to speak of the Acid Tests. He adds that "by this time [1966], everyone in the band, except for Pigpen [who was averse to psychedelics], had been taking acid at least once a week for more than six months. It's safe to say that in the ninety days or so that the Acid Tests existed, our band took more and longer strides into another realm of musical consciousness, not to mention pure awareness, than ever before or since. At the beginning, we were a band playing a gig. At the end, we had become shamans helping to channel the transcendent out of our mundane lives and those of our listeners. We felt, all of us—band, Pranksters, participants—privileged to be at the arrow's point of human evolution, and from that standpoint, everything was possible."[450]

Aided by LSD, which he calls "the sacrament," the Grateful Dead's music thus takes on a "hymnlike" character, and the band begins to have "fuzzy visions" of "the Meaning of It All" and to experience "ecstatic ego loss."[451] There are also deliberate attempts to encourage this ego loss through forming a group mind: "The unique organicity of our music reflects the fact that each of us consciously personalized his playing: to fit with what the others were playing and to fit with who each man was as an individual, allowing us to meld our consciousnesses together in the unity of a group mind."[452] Or as Garcia noted in 1969 about the Acid Tests, "Nobody was doing *something*, you know, it was everybody doing bits and pieces of something, the result of which was something else."[453]

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[450] Lesh, *Searching*, 79.
[451] Lesh, *Searching*, 74.
[452] Lesh, *Searching*, 59.
[453] George-Warren, *Garcia*, 61.

Summarizing what Lesh has to say, we come up with the following: Lesh is first of all arguing for the existence of a deeper, hidden level of universal structure or active structuring principle, which in his view became apparent or manifested during the course of the Acid Tests.

Access to this level is desirable because a) it is intrinsically fascinating, b) it is ontologically "truer" than the everyday level, and c) it has the potential to improve existence on the everyday level. One cannot guarantee access to this level, but by constructing an external environment that has some degree of form, but which is designed to facilitate open, creative expression, and by coming to this external environment with an internal, subjective mindset of enhanced receptivity to events, one makes it possible for these otherwise hidden aspects of underlying universal structures to manifest themselves spontaneously. As Hart puts it in *Drumming on the Edge of Magic*, "The unexpected is ... courted; magic won't happen unless you set a place at the table for it."[454] These structures are not slow, but rather quick, changeable, and evocative. They come and go, forming patterns out of chaos.

Evoking or properly seeing these patterns has to do with having a certain mindset. In one sense, it cannot be deliberately done, but in another sense it can—at the very least, one can encourage these experiences to take place by creating the space for them to occur, and by keeping oneself unfixed and open so as to be a perceptive conduit for them. The participant's power has to do with this creation of environment; she cannot compel the desired manifestation, but she can construct a situation in which it *might* take place.

Ideally, it seems, participants in the ritual environment will join together, linking their efforts toward transcendence and pattern-realization, and this will increase the potential for universal manifestation. This quite definitely applies to the musicians as well. As Lesh points out, the Grateful Dead's goal was to unify their voices in the band so as to form a group mind.

This unification within the band, however, does not have to do with everyone playing the same thing, nor with creating and reproducing stable interlocking patterns. Rather, the goal is to be fully, individually, and spontaneously expressive in the context of a group effort aimed

[454] Hart, *Drumming*, 230.

at facilitating religious manifestation. United in goal and approach, the players need not be strictly, literally unified. Or, as the song "Truckin'" puts it, "Together, more or less in line."[455]

There is, in fact, an aesthetic of raggedness to be found throughout the Grateful Dead's music and lyrics, and Lesh's deliberations in *Searching* enable us to see how it can be understood theologically. Some degree of concerted effort, and some amount of organizing structure, is necessary to create the space in which "it," the spontaneous manifestation of transcendence, can take place, but an overly rigid unity would involve approaching the experiment in an inappropriate state of mind and thus ruling out the proper, spontaneous unity that allows for cosmic manifestation; similarly, an overly-determined or controlled environment would not provide the most fertile ground for this manifestation. We can, perhaps, understand Garcia's reluctance to be too precise in his discussions of such matters as arising from the fear of reifying the experience, of trying to capture it within an ideological construct that would ultimately prevent it from functioning.

It is important to keep in mind that when Lesh speaks of the Acid Tests, or of Grateful Dead concerts, he is not describing scenes of purely spontaneous transcendence. The Acid Tests, the templates for the Lesh's vision, were deliberately (if eccentrically) organized events. There were people running the show (the Pranksters), a cover charge (albeit only $1) was collected, the Tests were promoted (if idiosyncratically), the external space in which they were to take place was prepared beforehand, advance expectations were guided through word of mouth and print publicity and iconographical resources (flyers), and people were urged to prepare their internal space through drug taking.

In other words, although the mindset and immediate environment were to be informal and unfixed, there was nonetheless an organized, defined border around this liminal zone in which the transcendent events were to take place. This border created the social, physical, ritual, and psychological space within which the spontaneous manifestation that was the goal of the event could take place. The concept of this border is perhaps the strongest element

[455] Dodd, *Complete*, 131.

distinguishing Lesh's view of the Grateful Dead's theological significance from Garcia's view. Garcia's preference for playing contexts was "total and utter anarchy. Indoor anarchy … our experience with these scenes is that's where you get the highest."[456] Lesh, by contrast, understood the Grateful Dead's religious phenomenon as being one that existed within a definite and limited context. And it is his view that prevailed, as the Grateful Dead's subsequent career as a commercially successful rock band shows.

[456] Garcia, Reich and Wenner, *Garcia*, 65.

Chapter Ten: The Model and the Music

The religious model that we can derive from Lesh's autobiography is not unique. The formal, explicit creation of a liminal space, a protected and established environment in which the normal rules of day to day life are suspended, is common to almost all religious ritual activity, and has been discussed most famously by Viktor Turner.[457] However, the structural similarity between the Grateful Dead experience and many other religious manifestations should not blind us to their profound differences in terms of content.

The creation of a space that is deliberately intended to be anarchic so as to avoid preconceptions that might interfere with the manifestation of the divine, rather than one having its own set of divinely sponsored rules and customs, is perhaps the most striking difference. The idea of divine manifestation being played out through the spontaneous creation, and perception, of structures by the participants is likewise unusual. Both of these aspects are atypical of religious ritual as practiced in many contexts.

Charles Glock and Rodney Stark created a taxonomy of religious experience[458] that might be usefully invoked here. They argue that the essential thing about religious experience is "*some sense of contact with a supernatural agency*."[459] They divide such experiences into four categories having to do with the relation between the human actor and divine actor. Rising from most common to least common, these categories consist of 1) experiences in which the human actor simply senses the presence of the divine actor; 2) experiences in which the perception is felt to be reciprocal; 3) experiences in which perception is reciprocal and an affective component (love, affection) is sensed as present in the divine actor, and 4) experiences in which the human actor feels herself to be "a confidant of or a fellow participant in action with the divine actor."[460] It is clear that Lesh is speaking of experiences that fit into this

[457] Viktor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2007).
[458] Charles Glock and Rodney Stark, *Religion and Society in Tension* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965), chapter 3.
[459] Glock and Stark, *Religion*, 41, italics in original.
[460] Glock and Stark, *Religion*, 43.

fourth category. However, the odd thing is that his conception of the divine actor is rather impersonal—it consists of structured, significant activity, rather than personality.

When we turn our attention back to the Grateful Dead's musical practice, we note that a very similar juxtaposition of structure and freedom is to be found in the way that the band incorporates improvisation into their rock practice, as discussed above. There was, as Garcia pointed out, a framework to the band's improvisational activity. Song structures, considered broadly, were usually fixed. It is true that introductions to songs and their endings might be improvised (the band would "jam into" or "jam out of" songs), sections within songs might be extended[461], and occasionally one song would move to another without finishing. This aside, verses, choruses, and bridges or interludes were presented in a predetermined order, when presented.

But although Grateful Dead songs do possess specific chords, riffs, lines, rhythms, and so forth, and although a certain consistency of performance practice did exist, nonetheless it is true that in theory and often in practice the songs were open to interpretation by the individual players as they worked within these general limits, especially in the first decade of the band's career. The musicians could play what they wanted, as long as it fit within these larger, but quite flexible and expandable, structures.

The sort of interpretation that was thus privileged was not primarily soloistic, nor was it about individual self-assertion. Rather, it involved displaying sensitivity to the other band members in the construction of a group sound, as well as to the overall "flow" of the particular moment. The point was to be open to the spontaneous musical impulses of the moment, and

[461] For example, when the 10/4 introductory riff of "Playing in the Band" comes back in the middle of the song it could be stretched out almost infinitely, even to the point of encompassing other entire songs before returning to "Playing." The same holds true of the 7/4 Dm-based riff in "Uncle John's Band." The two songs were in fact merged through jamming on these riffs at the Cow Palace in Daly City on March 23, 1974 (accessible at http://archive.org/details/gd1974-03-23.aud.connors.hughey.gems.78599.flac16; also released as *Dick's Picks Volume 24* [Grateful Dead, 2001]), where the band began with "Playing in the Band," used its introductory riff as a tool to jam into "Uncle John's Band," and then used that song's Dm riff to jam into "Morning Dew," which they then played. Having finished it, they jammed back into the Dm riff and completed "Uncle John's Band," and then made their way back into the 10/4 introductory riff to "Playing in the Band," and completed that song as well.

to express those impulses as a group in a harmonious if not necessarily uniform fashion—with all of this to be taking place within a definite, organized structure, that of the songs themselves.

This approach plays out particularly clearly in Lesh's approach to the music. In many musical forms, and especially in rock and blues music, the bass is usually the most restricted instrument in the band. The bassist is typically obliged to clearly and stably outline the fundamental harmonic and rhythmic structure, and to do little else. Thus stability ("just lay it down, man!") is especially prized for bassists. This general expectation highlights Lesh's extremely contrasting approach—and this is particularly the case considering his historical context, having begun his bass-playing career coincident with or even before the careers of many of the emancipators of rock bass, such as Paul McCartney, Jack Bruce, or Chris Squire.

As a player, Lesh works improvisationally within the rhythmic, melodic and harmonic structures of the songs, rather than by preconstructing repeatable, definite lines. The outlines of the songs are set, by and large, as are certain architecturally significant riffs. But what precisely happens within those outlines is not, and varies from bar to bar, song to song, and performance to performance. It is determined partly by Lesh's background and convictions, but also very much by his perception of, and spontaneous response to, the overall group context.

In this regard, the way the songs are approached replicates in miniature the structure of the Acid Tests as presented in Lesh's religious vision of the band, as discussed above. In both cases, one creates a flexible but nonetheless present structure to provide boundaries to the liminal experience. With these boundaries, the transcendent experience can take place and its effects can become manifest if the participants are in the correct mindset, which involves an openness to improvisation, valued not so much in itself as for its ability to permit the spontaneous revelation of hitherto-unsuspected structures which correspond to the deep, and ordinarily hidden, formal underpinnings of the cosmos. The band's music is not intended simply to represent the transcendent experience, to present it or proselytize for it; rather, at its height, the music *is* the transcendent experience, which reaches its fullest expression when "the music

plays the band" (to quote a line from their song, "The Music Never Stopped"[462]), rather than vice versa.

As Lesh's writing suggests, then, the band's choice of improvisational practice was prompted by spiritual, even religious, imperatives. Their improvisational practice models, and also enables, the sort of spiritual experiences that they underwent in the Acid Tests. As Garcia notes, "We play rock and roll music and it's part of our form—our vehicle so to speak—but it's not who we are."[463]

We see in the history of the Grateful Dead a progression commonly found in the broader history of religions. First of all, we have a group of people who share experiences of overwhelming power and significance. These experiences lead the members of the group to question and recreate their old ways of thinking and living, with the goals of aligning their lives and work with the values revealed or suggested by the experiences, and/or of creating conditions in which the experiences are more likely to recur, thus blurring the lines between ethical, ritual, and social/practical issues.

Many such groups have existed throughout history, and it is common for them to have as their centre a charismatic leader who takes the lead in determining the conditions under which the new community will live—Jesus Christ, Mohammad, Joseph Smith, and Charles Manson being some examples of such leaders.

The Grateful Dead, however, did not have such a leader. Neal Casady ("Dean Moriarty") was an icon, but hardly a leader; Ken Kesey does not seem to have exerted the same authority over the Grateful Dead that he did over the Merry Pranksters; Garcia himself was probably the closest thing that the band had to a leader, but as such he seems to have made active efforts to undermine his status, acting as a non-leader. The Grateful Dead was a band first and foremost, and so instead they had their music and their identity as a rock band to give them focus as a young religious community. The great challenge for the Grateful Dead, as for all such groups,

[462] Dodd, *Complete*, 249.
[463] Garcia, Reich and Wenner, *Garcia*, 101.

was to find ways of creating the conditions—social and personal—in which the conversional experiences could be recreated and communicated to others, a task that they undertook as a group of musicians. Earlier in this work, I have shown some of the musical tactics that the band adopted in order to do so.

A Coherent Spiritual/Musical Phenomenon

We are now able to see not just a religious dimension to the Grateful Dead, which as we noted has been apparent to many, but we can also see first of all that in Lesh's mind this religious understanding is fairly clearly conceived, and second that this conception plays out in terms of the band's musical practice as discussed above. Hence we can now perceive the Grateful Dead phenomenon as a more or less coherent whole, with a theological level that is in harmony with its musical level. Not only this, but it becomes clear that this coherence did not come about by chance, or without sustained reflection on the parts of at least some of the band members. The Grateful Dead's improvisational practice—its development of a unique mode of playing that enabled them to work spontaneously within a dance/rock band context—is inextricably linked with this religious dimension. It is not, however, linked homologically—that is, it does not seek to mirror or represent the religious conception on which it is based. Rather, it is linked causally or functionally: the music is as it is so that it can do the religious work that it is intended to do, create the context for a divine manifestation.

It is my hope that acknowledgement of this coherence will open up a new pathway for future researchers examining the Grateful Dead phenomenon and its links with religion, one that not only takes into consideration the attitudes expressed by the band members and associates, but that also integrates those attitudes into examinations of the band's actual documented practice. Their combination of music, spirituality, structure, and spontaneity was unique, making it a fascinating topic for those of us who study religion; their abiding popularity and social impact lends them a significance that accentuates the need for a clear view of them, and their aspirations.

Maintaining a Focus on Charisma

As pointed out in the classic works of Max Weber[464] and Joachim Wach[465] on the sociology of religion, it often happens that new religious movements come together on the basis of shared ecstatic or transcendent experience among the members.

In the more recent study of new religious movements, however, the importance of religious experience for the creation and growth of such movements has been overlooked, at least in academic circles, an oversight that James Lewis argues can be traced to the fact that the field of religious studies itself is fairly new, and consequently has been struggling for legitimation. "As members of a discipline generally perceived as marginal, most religion scholars were reluctant to further marginalize themselves by giving serious attention to what at the time [the 1970s and 1980s] seemed a transitory social phenomenon … As a consequence of this situation, the study of new religions was left to sociologists until relatively recently."[466] This resulted in an emphasis on the role of social interaction and social conflict rather than religious experience, as brought out for example in Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge's *The Future of Religion*, in which analysis of the formation of religious groups focuses on doctrinal innovation, social ties and the degree of tension between the new group and its context, but not on the role played by religious experience.

Social factors are certainly important. But as James Lewis notes,

> many alternative religions hold out the possibility of life-transforming experiences … Is the attraction of transformational experiences really so hard to comprehend? What if we actually could let go of the burden of our past and be reborn as new people? Such transformation may or may not be attainable, but the attractiveness of the possibility is certainly understandable.[467]

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[464] Max Weber, *Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: The Free Press, 1947).
[465] Wach, *Sociology*.
[466] James Lewis, *Legitimating New Religions* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 2003), 31.
[467] Lewis, *Legitimating*, 25.

I would also note the social costs that attach to membership in new religious movements, and would argue that heart-felt religious experience would help to explain the evident willingness of members to incur such costs if necessary. Lewis concludes by arguing that

> an important aspect of the phenomenological method as it is properly deployed in religious studies is that religious experiences are taken seriously. Without pronouncing judgment on the ontological status of spiritual agencies encountered in such experiences, a disciplined effort is made to understand the consciousness of those for whom the encounter with the sacred is ultimately real and meaningful.[468]

Such an encounter is often felt to be of overwhelming importance, and is associated with a new world view or new set of priorities. It is what binds the members to each other. The period in which the experience is the basis of the religious community is (if the religion survives) later seen as the "golden age" for that religion—as, for instance, the period of Jesus' ministry and the Spirit-infused period immediately following (as detailed in Acts) are for most Christian groups.

The problem is that this period inevitably fades: either the charismatic leader leaves or dies, taking with her the gift of the spirit, or rigidity and with it staleness set in, and again the original spirit is lost. As they lose this inspiration, and as they become more organizational in focus, new religious movements must deal with what Weber called the "routinization of charisma," which involves formalizing the group's innovations, and establishing set lines of authority and doctrine. This helps to ensure the movement's survival, and grants it consistency and focus, but at the expense of that transcendent experience that lay at its heart originally.

Thomas O'Dea has usefully discussed (O'Dea 1963) five dilemmas that affect religious movements at this point in their development, and summarizes them as follows: 1) The dilemma of mixed motivation—no longer just wholehearted fervor, but also such motivators as

[468] Lewis, *Legitimating*, 41.

power, status, etc. 2) The symbolic dilemma: objectification versus alienation—in other words, when sacred ritual "is no longer simply a derivative of the psychological needs and drives of individual participating worshippers, but rather imposes upon them its own patterns of attitude and response" (O'Dea 1963, 79) 3) The dilemma of administrative order: elaboration and alienation—the problems of the development of a bureaucracy 4) The dilemma of delimitation: concrete definition versus substitution of Letter for Spirit—while the religious ideal must be expressed in some manner, at some point in the institutionalization process the expression in itself becomes reified and 5) The dilemma of power: conversion versus coercion.

Now, it will be clear from the foregoing that the transcendent experience is what the Grateful Dead were originally all about, at least from Lesh's point of view—and Garcia's as well. As Garcia notes:

> We were doing the Acid Test, which was our first exposure to formlessness. Formlessness and chaos lead to new forms. And new order. Closer to, probably, what the real order is ... What we're really dedicated to is not so much *telling* people, but to *doing* that thing and getting high. That's the thing; that's the payoff and that's the whole reason for doing it, right there."[469]

Thus I would like to raise the possibility that the band's valorization of this ineffable experience, combined with their ongoing determination to keep it ineffable rather than defining it too precisely, and their commitment to creating a space (musical, social and spatial) in which this experience could be modeled and enacted, can be seen as attempts to resist the routinization of the Acid Tests' spiritual and charismatic gifts, to keep the magic alive.

In other words, the band did not want the experience to turn into the sort of religion to which Garcia refers when he said "That word *religion* has a whole lot of ... negative to it ... I don't like the word *religion*, it's a bad word. I'd like not to have that concept."[470] In his view,

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[469] Garcia, Reich and Wenner, *Garcia*, 102.
[470] Gans, *Conversations*, 214.

> I think basically the Grateful Dead is not for cranking out rock and roll ... It's to get high. To get really high is to forget yourself. And to forget yourself is to see everything else. And to see everything else is to become an understanding molecule in evolution, a conscious tool of the universe. I'm not talking about being unconscious or zonked out, I'm talking about being fully conscious.[471]

Or as Lesh writes,

> Every time I walked out on that stage, I knew in my heart that the infinite potential present in that moment was available to us all, if we could only reach out and take it. That remained my goal—to walk out every night and play as if life itself depended on my every note, to wrest meaning from the jaws of entropy and decay, and to transform every place we played into a shrine of expanded consciousness.[472]

If this is the case, we can sum up the current examination by saying that certainly Phil Lesh and possibly other members of the Grateful Dead as well do seem to have been interested in being a part of a new movement that in many ways can be described as having religious aspects. But we are not speaking here of religion in the sense of a solid monument to a primordial and unrepeatable inspiration, from which dogmas and doctrines proceed.

Rather, for Lesh as for the earliest Christians through to the Montanists of the second century, or the Sufis, or the first generation of Latter Day Saints—to take only a few examples—religious organization reaches its peak when it clears a space for the ever-present possibility of the spontaneous manifestation of transcendence. This is what Lesh and others saw happening in the Acid Tests, and this was the incentive that led the band to develop their unprecedented approach to rock improvisation.

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[471] Garcia, Reich and Wenner, *Garcia*, 100.
[472] Lesh, *Searching*, 260.

Chapter Eleven: Religious Understandings of Avant Garde Musical Improvisation

I have been focusing in this work on the Grateful Dead's religious inspiration for their improvisational practice. It is clear, however, that musical improvisation and religious concerns have been frequently associated, as happens for instance in the Near Eastern concepts of *tarab,*[473] the creation of transcendent states through Pakistani *Qawwali* music,[474] the expression of fundamental cosmic principles through Indian raga-based improvisations,[475] or indeed the invocation of the Holy Spirit through gospel music.[476]

All of these approaches to improvised music bear some similarities to the Grateful Dead's practice, thus suggesting that a link between improvised music and religious experience is worldwide. Murphy's quoted description of an African-American gospel meeting in the 1930s, for instance, is surprisingly and strongly reminiscent of the Grateful Dead's improvisational practice: "Scraps of other words and tunes were flung into the medley of sound by individual singers from time to time, but the general trend was carried on by a deep undercurrent, which appeared to be stronger than the mind of any individual present, for it bore the mass of improvised harmony and rhythms into the most effective climax of incremental repetition that I have ever heard. I felt as if some conscious plan or purpose were carrying us along, call it mob-mind, communal composition, or what you will."[477] Racy's description of *tarab* procedure is also applicable to the Grateful Dead's work: "flexible musical interpretations produce tremendous ecstasy through the use of highly evocative musical devices … the interpreter teases out the compositional form without breaking it, tantalizes musical expectations without totally violating them, and presents refreshing departures without obfuscating their essential

[473] A. J. Racy, *Making Music in the Arab World: The Culture and Artistry of Tarab* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
[474] Qureshi, *Qawwali*.
[475] Lavezzoli, *Dawn*, chapter 2: "Nada Brahma: The way of raga."
[476] See e.g. Joseph Murphy, *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora* (Boston: Beacon, 1994).
[477] Murphy, *Working*, 149.

points of references. In all, the manipulation of preconceived structures renders the musical message more potent. Ecstatically speaking, it brings out the 'real music'."[478]

Furthermore, the joyful playfulness that is characteristic of the Grateful Dead's music is mirrored in Indian attitudes that combine hedonism and deeply religious understandings. Wilke and Moebus note that in contrast to Western discourse from Plato on that emphasizes the possible dangers of music, Indian discourse simply regards it as a good thing:[479] in this context, musical mysticism is "the conscious cultivation of the 'void' of great transcendency experience, which is linked with the sensory experience of music, and the connection between emotional fusion and cognitive abstraction. Music, musicians and musical experience are socially coded with 'incorporeality,' 'superindividuality' and 'detachment from the world' while at the same time they make the Brahman accessible in a sensorily affective and substantial fashion in the audible, musical Nada. One should note that this occurs very simply as delight, untrammeled joy, and immersion in the music –without being overloaded with theology."[480]

However, the Grateful Dead's *social* position is fundamentally different from all the groups mentioned above. Most importantly, the Grateful Dead were not anchored in an established religious position, and indeed took care to decrease the possibility of such a position being created around them. If we want to truly understand the Grateful Dead's contemporary position, we need to consider them in the context of their peers, other contemporary avant garde artists who used improvisational tactics that were carried to extreme levels, with explicitly religious motivations. In order to contextualize the Grateful Dead, I will be comparing their understanding of their work with the understandings of Albert Ayler, Sun Ra and John Coltrane. The list is selective; had we the time, it could have been much longer, and could have included such musicians as Pharoah Sanders, Alice Coltrane, and Terry Riley as well.[481]

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[478] Racy, *Tarab*, 93.
[479] Wilke and Moebus, *Sound*, 873-4.
[480] Wilke and Moebus, *Sound*, 878.
[481] LaMonte Young would seem to fit into this category, with his drone-based and raga-inspired approach to inspiration. However, while he borrows techniques developed in Hindu cultural contexts in which religion and

Broadly speaking, during this period there were several streams that came together to create a welcoming conceptual environment for such religious/improvisational crossover, including:

a) an increased interest in artistic improvisation and spontaneity;[482]

b) an "unchurching" tendency for North Americans to look for spiritual or religious significance in non-traditional settings;[483]

c) an artistic and cultural opening, even if laden with exoticizing tendencies, to non-Western cultural and religious influences;[484] and

d) a liberatory move by jazz artists to validate and contextualize much of their experimentation through religious ascriptions—thus "mantra-like melodies, static harmonies, pentatonic improvisations, dynamic ensemble interactions and increasing freedom from metre constraints came to signify both a religious attitude and a new ecstatic spiritual practice in its own right."[485]

The music that these avant garde artists made was marked as more than, or different than, traditional religious music by its experimentalism and distance from mainstream North American conceptions of music, particularly in terms of timbre, consonance, and harmony; by its separation (not absolute, but largely) from established religious movements and cultural contexts; and by the power, significance, and/or radical effects that were ascribed to it. It is marked as more than, or different than, more straightforwardly aesthetic approaches to avant garde experimental music by its refusal to stay within the aesthetic or intellectual spheres; its

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music overlapped, I have not found clear evidence in writing by or about him that he also had a strongly religious understanding of his music. The issue is, however, complex, and Grimshaw makes the intriguing argument that Young may have absorbed significant influences from his Mormon upbringing (Jeremy Grimshaw, *Draw a Straight Line and Follow It: The Music and Mysticism of La Monte Young* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011], chapter 5: "Space Exploration Part 2: Mormon cosmology and *The Well-Tuned Piano"*).

[482] Belgrad, *Spontaneity*.

[483] See above, section 1.2.

[484] See e.g. Jonathan Bellman, *The Exotic in Western Music* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), particularly the chapter on "Indian resonances in the British invasion"; also Norman Weinstein, *A Night in Tunisia: Imaginings of Africa in Jazz* (Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1992) and Lavezzoli, *Dawn*, passim.

[485] Berkman, *Monument*, 53.

explicit religious or spiritual goals; its fervent claim to real-world efficacy or significance; and its socio-cultural positioning, in that it did not emerge from or move through traditional, accrediting domains (such as universities or "legitimate" concert halls).

The artists that I have chosen to discuss are not directly linked, aside from the fact that they were exploring experimental improvisation-based music at roughly the same time and in the same country—with Ayler, Coltrane, and Sun Ra working in roughly the same avant garde jazz scene, and with Ra performing as well in rock contexts.[486] Thus it makes sense to consider these three together, as their respective deployments of experimental improvisational music in their respective religious contexts harmonize with each other in interesting ways, giving an overview of the ways in which this versatile tool was applied to the artistic realization of religious ideals. As we will see, the Grateful Dead were not alone in their general approach; they were, however, unique in the interpretation that they made of their musical/spiritual interaction.

Albert Ayler: The Prophet[487]

Albert Ayler (1936-1970) was a saxophonist who, along with Cecil Taylor and Ornette Coleman and a handful of others, helped to start the free jazz movement in the early 1960s. His music was the most nakedly emotional of the first wave of free jazz musicians; his lines alternately sobbed and shrieked, conjuring up a strange other world in which folk melodies that seemed to be drawn from 19th century America coexisted with manic "sheets of sound."[488]

Ayler was raised in a religious (Christian) household, and showed a deep concern with religious matters in his personal and artistic life, as shown in his song and album titles ("Truth is

[486] "As [Sun Ra's] Arkestra's reputation spread, they became vaguely identified somewhere between the new rock and roll and free jazz of New York" (John Szwed, *Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra* [New York: Da Capo, 1998], 240; see also 243-246).

[487] Unfortunately, there is no published, definitive biography of Ayler, a serious lacuna in scholarship that I very much hope will be filled in the near future. With the exception of the Wilmer material, my references for this section were drawn from the invaluable work of Jeff Schwartz, who wrote a monograph on Ayler in 1992, entitled "Albert Ayler" (Jeff Schwartz, "Albert Ayler." http://www.geocities.com/jeff_l_schwartz/ ayler.html, accessed April 15 2012), and from personal correspondence with Jeff.

[488] A description originally applied to John Coltrane's work, but far more applicable to Ayler.

Marching In," "Zion Hill," "Spiritual Unity," and so on) and in his comments in interviews. This Christian background seems to have influenced Ayler's conception of history: he spoke of being guided by the Holy Spirit, which was leading him and others into a new phase of the world. "The Holy Ghost has been favorable to me. Music is one of the gifts God has given to us. It should be used for good works. We should always thank the Lord: then, we will understand how rich His blessings are in spiritual value and truth. We must let the sacred spirit of God enter our bodies and keep it there preciously." Once this is accomplished, "the Holy Ghost will lead all of us through the world someday."[489]

As he said, "those who have found Truth are able to communicate Love, to help those who suffer, people of the Earth as I call them. That the will of God be done, not that of men and women. The will of God is always loving and truthful; it includes harmony and generosity; it permits freedom and is always constructive. When we let the will of God produce itself in us, we will work with Him, and we will be blessed in all our actions. He will also help us to think justly and kindly. When all the people understand what links them spiritually to one another, Peace will reign on earth. All men will be men of good will."[490]

The meaning that his own style of freely improvised music, sometimes referred to as "energy music," had for him was intimately linked to this eschatological conception. Other musics had been appropriate in other periods, but playing freely was the appropriate approach in the current era. Thus for instance, Ayler said of bebop that "it's a new truth now. And there have to be new ways of expressing that truth. And as I said, I believe music can change people. When bop came, people acted differently than they had before. Our music should be able to remove frustration, to enable people to act more freely, to think more freely."[491] To quote from an interview with Albert Ayler and his brother Don:

Don Ayler: The thing about New Orleans jazz was the feeling it communicated that something was about to happen, and it was going to be good.

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[489] Albert Ayler, "Untitled" (*IT: International Times*, 13 March 1967: 9).
[490] Ayler, "Untitled."
[491] Wilmer, *Serious*, 99.

Albert Ayler: Yes, and we're trying to do for now what people like Louis Armstrong did at the beginning. That music was a rejoicing. And it was beauty that was going to happen. As it was in the beginning, so it will be at the end.[492]

If the new, free music seemed difficult to listen to, Ayler argued, it was the fault of the times, not the music. People who were attached to the old state of being were unable to hear the music correctly. "When there's chaos, which is now, only a relatively few people can listen to the music that tells of what will be. You see, everyone is screaming 'Freedom' now, but mentally, most are under a great strain. But now the truth is marching in, as it once marched back in New Orleans and that truth is that there must be peace and joy on Earth. I believe music can help bring that truth into being ..."[493] Or, as he said elsewhere, "In my music, I'm trying to look far ahead. Like [John] Coltrane, I'm playing about the beauty that is to come after all the tensions and anxieties. This is about post-war cries; I mean the cries of love that are already in the young and that will emerge as people seeking spiritual freedom come to spiritual freedom."[494] Thus for Ayler, free jazz was not just an extension of the possibilities inherent in jazz, or a development of jazz: rather, it was a part of the divine economy, a music that heralded and expressed the times to come.

Ayler's discovery of free playing seems to have come to him as the resolution to a search on his part for validly divine music. As Beaver Harris, a drummer who worked with him, recounts, Ayler "said there was something missing in music and he wanted to find whatever that was. I'm sure it was the spiritual thing he was talking about."[495] Lloyd Pearson, a saxophonist whose band a young Ayler joined in 1951, notes that Ayler "used to come to me and tell me he had found the real music and the real religion, and it had a lot to do with God—which sounded strange to me at the time."[496] Ayler himself said that "there are musicians all over the States who are ready to play free spiritual music. You've got to get ready for the truth,

[492] Wilmer, *Serious*, 99.
[493] Wilmer, *Serious*, 99.
[494] Wilmer, *Serious*, 99.
[495] Ed Hazell, "Portraits: Beaver Harris" (*Modern Drummer* November 1989:51-52).
[496] Wilmer, *Serious*, 100-101.

because it's going to happen … Consider Coltrane. There's one of the older guys who was playing bebop but who can feel the spirit of what's happening now. He's trying to reach another peace level. This is a beautiful person, a highly spiritual brother. Imagine being able in one lifetime to move from the kind of peace he found in bebop to a new peace."[497] Thus free music came at the end of a spiritual quest, for John Coltrane as for Ayler himself.

Free music was the music of the era that was dawning; having found it, one thereby aligned oneself with the new age. Furthermore, one's ability to play it revealed and developed one's spiritual status, one's fitness for the new age. As Ayler says of the impact of John Coltrane's playing on him, "to listen to him play was just like he was talking to me, saying 'Brother, get yourself together spiritually.' Just one sound, that's how profound this man was..."[498] Or, as Ayler said of his landmark album *Spiritual Unity,* "We weren't playing, we were listening to each other. The most important thing is to stay in tune with each other but it takes spiritual people to do this."[499] On the other hand, "since we are the music we play, our way of life has to be clean or else the music can't be kept pure. I couldn't use a man hung up with drugs, because he'd draw from the energy we need to concentrate on the music …I need people who are clear in their minds as well as in their music, people whose thought waves are positive. You must know peace to give peace."[500]

In short, as Ayler saw it, free improvisation was the musical form that was appropriate to the coming eschatological period; its appearance showed that that period was at hand; it was the goal of the quest of all those who sought to play genuinely spiritual music; and its proper performance required that the musicians themselves be spiritually pure, making themselves the firstfruits of the coming era while living in the present world, a deeply Christian (and specifically Pauline) conception.

However, the story does not end here. In late 1967, Ayler had an apocalyptic vision,

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[497] Unknown, cited in Schwartz, *"Ayler."*.
[498] Frank Kofsky, liner notes to the Albert Ayler album *Love Cry* (New York: Impulse Records, 1968).
[499] Wilmer, *Serious*, 105.
[500] Nat Hentoff , "The Truth is Marching In" (*Downbeat* 17 November [1966]:16-18, 40), 17.

which he described in an open letter, the "Mr. Jones" letter, which appeared in the *Cricket*, a New Jersey-based music magazine edited by Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal. This vision detailed the apocalyptic times to come, in language influenced by the New Testament, especially the book of Revelation; it included the descent of a star to earth, the future reign of Satan, and the eventual establishment of a "new Jerusalem."

In this vision, we see the literal, conceptual fulfillment of expectations raised through his spiritual understanding of the world's historical progress: it is as if he went from the presentation of John the Baptist's role in the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark to the Book of Revelation. Ayler's sense of urgency is expressed in the conclusion to the "Mr. Jones" letter, where he writes: "The time is at hand. Make up leaflets and pass out to all people Revelation 14, verse 7 to 10. This is very important that everybody should know this will save your soul and you will see a beautiful eternity … The time is now." It is significant to note that no reference to music is found either in this closing exhortation, or anywhere else in the Mr. Jones letter.

The literalization of Ayler's message that we find in the Mr. Jones letter coincided with what is often presented as a loss of artistic vision on his part and an attempted or coerced turn towards the mainstream, or at least towards the white counterculture.[501] To a degree, no doubt, these views are valid—few would deny that Ayler's playing, in the studio at least, lost some of its ecstatic quality; he experimented (not successfully) with rock and r&b derived songs and accompaniments; he took up singing, using the "spiritual" lyrics composed by his partner, Mary Parks; his public statements in this period could seem "preachy," to the point of being condescending. But some of his behavior can also be interpreted as Ayler turning the eschatological aspect of his thought away from an open, experiential basis and towards a more restricted, more precisely defined conceptual message. His vision of 1967 provided the eschatological details and certified him as a prophet; on his album of 1968, *New Grass*, he

[501] Some have argued that Ayler's less-successful artistic decisions in this period were forced upon him by his record company, in a misguided attempt to turn him into (or moving him closer to being) a commercially successful popular artist. This is not the place to deal with this controversy at length; suffice it to say that Ayler's interviews and his spoken word piece on *New Grass*, the "Message from Albert," suggest that he was at least a willing participant in these schemes, if not their initiator.

anoints himself the "Perfect Man" and presents a number of propagandistic gospel songs about the new world to come. In the earlier part of his career, the music was the message; in the last few years of his life, he seems to have viewed it as a vehicle for his message, and for presenting his own status. Free music was the herald of the new day; in the Mr. Jones letter and in his musical activity in the last few years of his life, Ayler seems to be expressing the view that now that that day has come, the herald is no longer as important as it once was.

To sum up, we can say that for Ayler, we lived in the midst of a dramatic changeover of spiritual realities, as the world moved into a new age of the world, an age of the spirit. Playing or supporting improvised music showed one's membership in this new world; it helped to bring about its manifestation on earth; and it helped to turn one into the sort of person who could belong to this new world. That full-throttle scream that was so characteristic of Ayler's work truly was the sound of "truth marching in," to quote one of his song titles. This was a messianic, deeply Judeo-Christian conception, in which divine realities manifested diachronically through the changing phases of human history, and in which the age of the holy spirit was signaled by ecstatic improvisation.

Sun Ra: Playing Cosmic Music[502]

Albert Ayler lived in expectation of the eschaton; Sun Ra had no such hope. In Ra's gloomy vision, this world was lost in darkness, a place of exile to which he had been sent.[503] As he said, "I came from somewhere else, but it [the Creator's voice] reached me through the maze and dullness of human existence. But if I hadn't been [from someplace else] it couldn't have reached me and I'd be like the rest of the people on the planet who are dancing in their ignorance."[504] His life was dedicated to investigating what he understood to be the real nature of things; to expressing that understanding in music, art, and poetry; and to building up a

[502] John Szwed's definitive biography of Ra (Szwed, *Space*) provides a thorough, accessible, and insightful overview of Ra's life, music, and thought.
[503] There is an intriguing tension between Ra's writings and comments, which tend to be quite serious and often angry, depressed, or mournful, and the carnivalesque joy of the Arkestra's performances. Although in this section I will be discussing Ra's discussions and comments, the reader should keep in mind the ecstatic, inclusive joys of his live performances which function as a counterbalance.
[504] Szwed, *Space*, 5.

musical community, an Arkestra, within which he could live and work. Ayler's career can be understood when seen as a manifestation of the Judeo-Christian prophetic archetype; to understand Sun Ra, we need to turn to the archetype of the esoteric scholar, with more than a touch of the trickster—in other words, a Pythagoras, or, perhaps better, a Gurdjieff.

Ra did not admit to having been born—rather, he "arrived on the planet" in 1914, in Birmingham, Alabama. He claimed to have had several experiences in his youth, including an alien abduction, that marked him as special[505]; by the time that he was in his thirties, he was deeply engaged in the study of all sorts of mysticism and esoteric religious thought,[506] and had begun to pull together a group of others to research and expound on these topics. He expressed his beliefs and research through his name, his poetry and other writings, his style of dress, and the music that he made—which, while jazz-related, was also eclectic and experimental. Through his use of unusual harmonies, sound effects and other futuristic timbres, "noisy" or "nonmusical" sounds, group chants and solo recitations, Ra created an utterly distinct form of music that relied heavily on guided, but often nonetheless quite open, improvisation.

Improvisation served many different purposes in Sun Ra's music. To start with, it was a way of overcoming the contradictions that keep us ignorant of higher realities. Trapped in the material world, humans (a group to which Sun Ra felt he did not belong) were unable to consciously understand cosmic realities. Our intellects are corrupted, untrustworthy. However, if humans were given the right sort of training, such as Ra claimed to be able to provide, there was hope that they could at least get their feelings correctly aligned, if not their intellects. As Ra put it, "what I'm doing is stuff that's beyond human knowledge and on a higher plane. So therefore it can't really be explained, but it can be felt. That's everything I'm about—feeling—because people have lost that direction as far as intellect is concerned, so they make a lot of mistakes. It is time to eliminate mistakes, and true feelings would never make a mistake. If people could activate that part of themselves that is their *true* feelings, then they can strive for

[505] Szwed, *Space*, 28-31.
[506] Szwed, *Space*, 63-73 and 106-109.

something on a greater plane."[507] Or, as his trombonist Philip Cohran said, "it was a question of attitude. You had to think space. Had to expand beyond the earth plane."[508]

These views should not be read as a primitivist appeal to feeling as superior to thought. Rather, they stem from Ra's condescending denigration of feeling: intellect, for Ra, is preferable to feeling, but as far as Ra was concerned, we as humans are incapable of developing our intellect sufficiently. Thus we and he are forced to work with the second best option, feeling; one develops feeling so that one can improvise one's way to producing music of a higher order than one can conceptually understand.

Taking the same point more broadly, improvisation opens up the possibility of building bridges to other worlds. Because it goes beyond what was planned or conceived by the musician, it can serve as a conduit. Thus Ra argued, in distinguishing the "natural" music of this world from the intergalactic music that he played, that jazz as a musical form existed on the "advanced-natural" plane. "To me, the best point about jazz is that the idea or being of jazz is based upon the spontaneous improvisation principle"; thus it was able to be "a bridge to something else." He stresses that "I did not cross the bridge to go to intergalactic, I crossed the bridge of jazz to come from where intergalactic music is," and he chose jazz for this purpose "because it is a spontaneous creative form of art."[509]

Furthermore, as Ra saw it, the cosmos is not static or stable, and hence music should not be static or stable either. In order to make real, valid music, it is necessary to adjust one's expression in order to fit one's context, in the broadest sense, something that is brought out when we consider the agonistic element of Ra's validation of improvisation.

For Ra, music was like a game or a challenge, an effort to express cosmic realities against opposition, whether this opposition came from other humans, the nature of the material world, or the active efforts of the powers that rule the world. Performances, then, were battles against unpredictable opposition, and thus musicians need to be able to adjust

[507] Darryl Jung, "Attempting the Impossible" (*Now Weekly*, February 6-12 1986:11).
[508] Szwed, *Space*, 141.
[509] Tam Fiorfori, "Sun Ra's Space Odyssey" (*Downbeat*, May 14 1970:14).

their tactics and react based on the challenges that they face; they had to be able to rely on their spontaneous reactions in the course of performance. As he noted, "in the army you have to go through disciplined training. After that, in battle, you are confronted with something different from what you have learned, so it's necessary to invent on the spot. If you're not capable of finding something else, you're not a good soldier. Discipline ought to permit people to find the most natural things."[510] Sun Ra keeps things open because, as band member Lucius Randolph recalled, "that way they gotta rely more on their feelings, their intuition ... That way, the band never sounds complacent."[511]

To sum up, we can say that for Ra, an esoteric scholar, improvisation was important because it permitted the demonstration or representation of the true spiritual underpinnings of this fallen world. Improvisation enabled tragically imperfect humans, trapped in a world of change and opposed by forces beyond their comprehension, to nonetheless create sonic monuments to a galactic truth that they could never understand. Whereas Ayler's understanding put him in a Christian intellectual lineage, Ra's understanding fits more coherently into an older context. The idea that music serves to illustrate fundamental cosmic laws, or the nature of celestial reality, is one that is often associated with Pythagoras in Hellenistically influenced cultures (such as our own), but it also underlies, for example, the Indian theoretical understanding of sound as being the audible aspect of vibrations that underlie all creation.[512]

It is this alleged representational property of music that made it such a crucial element of education in antiquity and the middle ages; in the modern period, we see this understanding of music expressed in the resurgence of what is called "cosmic music," exemplified in the work of Arvo Pärt—see especially the work of Joscelyn Godwin[513]; this music, also described as

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[510] Szwed, *Space*, 115.
[511] Szwed, *Space*, 124.
[512] See, e.g., Alain Daniélou, *The Ragas of Northern India* (London: Cresset, 1968), 21-2; Wilke and Moebus, *Sound*, 980-981.
[513] Joscelyn Godwin, *Harmonies of Heaven and Earth: The Spiritual Dimensions of Music from Antiquity to the Avant Garde (*Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1987) and *Cosmic Music: Musical keys to the interpretation of reality* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1989).

"sacred minimalism"[514] is not to be confused with 1970s rock-derived German "kosmische musik" a.k.a. "krautrock." Whereas the Hellenistic tendency was to see a theoretically smooth connection between the various levels of reality, Ra's understanding assumes a rupture, a break in the cosmic chain, with our world on the wrong side of this break, a view of things that can ultimately be traced back to the fusion of Hellentistic and Christian thought known of as ancient gnosticism.

John Coltrane: The Monk[515]

John Coltrane was the highest profile and most commercially successful musician to be associated with the free jazz eruption of the early to mid-1960s; in addition to this, he was one of the most highly respected jazz musicians of his time, and his support of and involvement in the free jazz scene gave a great deal of legitimacy to the ecstatic and experimental music being made by such artists as Albert Ayler, Sun Ra, Pharoah Sanders, Cecil Taylor, Archie Shepp, and others. Coltrane's interviews, song titles, album titles and album liner notes show a consistent interest in religious themes, with his classic work, *A Love Supreme*, being but one example in a corpus that also included the albums *Ascension*, *Om* and *Meditations*.

This interest may well have derived from his upbringing—both his grandfathers were preachers, his parents were devout Christians, and he participated in African-American church life in his youth[516]—but it also can be traced to a religious experience he had in 1957, while in the process of overcoming his dependency on drugs and alcohol. As he wrote in the liner notes to *A Love Supreme*, "During the year 1957, I experienced, by the grace of God, a spiritual awakening which was to lead me to a richer, fuller, more productive life. At that time, in

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[514] Wilke and Moebus, *Sound*, 828.

[515] There are several biographies of Coltrane, all of which suffer to one degree or another from their authors' hagiographical impulses—see e.g. Nisenson, *Ascension*; Cole, *John Coltrane*; J. C. Thomas, *Chasin' the Trane: The Music and Mystique of John Coltrane* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1975). Many of his interviews are conveniently collected in Chris DeVito, *Coltrane on Coltrane: The John Coltrane Interviews* (Chicago: A Cappella, 2010).

[516] When asked in 1965 if he had "discovered" God, Coltrane said that "Rediscovered would be a better word. Religion has always been with me since I was a kid. I was raised in a religious atmosphere and it has stuck with me throughout my life" (DeVito, *Coltrane*, 239).

gratitude, I humbly asked to be given the means and privilege to make others happy through music."[517]

This experience does not seem to have been a content-rich, classically apocalyptic revelation such as Albert Ayler describes in his "Mr. Jones" letter. Although Coltrane felt that he was "somehow touched by God,"[518] it seems that the experience was in the nature of a commitment: in return for God's help to quit heroin, Coltrane dedicated himself to using his musical abilities in service of "the force that is truly good."[519]

The divine force was not to be identified with any one religious tradition or set of dogmatic beliefs, a point that Coltrane made clear both explicitly—"The truth doesn't have any name on it"[520]—and implicitly, through his evocation of many different religious traditions in his song and album titles ("Om," "India," "The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost," "Psalm," etc.). Nor was Coltrane's religious thought eschatologically focused, unlike Ayler's—and in this, Coltrane also breaks with strong tendencies within African-American Christian religiosity. I have found no evidence from Coltrane's recorded comments or discussions of him that he anticipated any kind of end or rupture in the world's unfolding. Rather, for Coltrane, the religious life involved continual movement towards an ideal in an ongoing process of self-development and self-improvement. As he put it in 1966, "I believe that men are here to grow themselves into the full—into the *best good* that they can be."[521] Coltrane felt that his role in this process was "to uplift people, as much as I can. To inspire them to realize more and more of their capacities for living meaningful lives."[522]

The role that improvisation—particularly the dramatically extended improvisation that he engaged in— plays in this religious context was never explicitly discussed by Coltrane. However, Coltrane did associate his long and open improvisations with his desire to play

[517] DeVito, *Coltrane*, 225.
[518] Nisenson, *Ascension*, 40.
[519] 1966 interview with Frank Kofsky; DeVito, *Coltrane*, 311.
[520] DeVito, *Coltrane*, 277.
[521] DeVito, *Coltrane*, 277.
[522] DeVito, *Coltrane*, 263.

everything conceivable, to "fit it all in," developing ideas as far as he could take them. As he said, "when we start playing, we feel the inspiration and foresee the possibility of accomplishing good things, and then it seems illogical and unreasonable for us to cut short our soloes … My ideas have to develop naturally in one long solo."[523] This is because "there are always new sounds to imagine, new feelings to get at."[524]

The connection could be described as follows: Coltrane's religious understanding led him to view the religious life in terms of progression towards a goal of self-improvement; an open, improvisational musical context gave him a space within which that progression could take place, giving him the freedom both to express and to refine himself, as well as to model the process of self-improvement for others. Thus for Coltrane there could be no question of ever concretely realizing the religious aspect of life (as with Ayler), nor of expressing it (as with Ra), nor of being present at a manifestation of it (as with the Grateful Dead). Rather, religion provided an unattainable goal to inspire people to live lives of ever more coherent and exalted self-realization, and improvised music provided, so to speak, the gym within which Coltrane exercised and perfected himself.

As the image of a gym suggests, Coltrane's vision is in many ways an agonistic, athletic one. He differentiates himself, however, by understanding this vision in a socially unitive rather than competitive way. There is no sense, at least in his public persona, that Coltrane was competitively minded. He did not criticize other musicians publicly, and especially in his last years was graciously willing to share the stage with musicians who were considerably less developed than he was, to the dismay of some of his colleagues.[525] Thus while the athletic image captures some of the determination with which he pursued his goal, as well as the sheer physical embodiment of his practice, it does not suffice: it needs to be completed with the image of the monk or nun, receiving his or her vocation through a divine calling and earnestly—even doggedly—pursuing a perfection that will forever be beyond his or her reach. As Saint

[523] DeVito, *Coltrane*, 174.
[524] DeVito, *Coltrane*, 264.
[525] Ben Ratliff, *Coltrane: The Story of a Sound* (New York: Picador, 2007), 153-4.

Paul, the Christian model par excellence for the realization of monastic ideals, presented the relationship, "athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one" (1 Cor 9:25). When, in 1966, Coltrane was asked what he would like to be in "ten or twenty years," Coltrane responded, "I would like to be a saint."[526] This succinctly captures both the ultimate goal, and his implicit acknowledgement that the goal required ongoing dedication and continual effort.

LSD and Music[527]

As we have seen, the ritual aspects of Grateful Dead performances were of a very fluid nature, delineating a space of musical or spiritual openness rather than prescribing the order or nature of activities to take place within that space. Rather, the potential for transcendence to happen was created by the band-members' willingness to open themselves up to the moment and to spontaneous interaction with their fellow musicians—in other words, to improvise. The band could not guarantee by doing this that transcendent experiences could take place; this approach merely created the necessary preconditions for them to happen. For the Grateful Dead, then—or at least for Lesh and Garcia, who were the most willing to discuss these aspects of the band's career—improvisation provided a musical and ritual space within which the divine can manifest, a field within which participants can be immersed in the ever-changing nature of ultimate reality.

The Grateful Dead were far from alone in viewing experimental, avant garde approaches to improvisation as having the potential to be religiously significant. But their religious understanding of improvisation differed from the understandings of the artists we examined above. For the Grateful Dead, improvisational activity was not linked to future-oriented

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[526] DeVito, *Coltrane*, 270.

[527] In this section, I will be discussing the effects of LSD, but not the chemistry of the drug or its precise physiological functioning, subjects on which I am not competent to speak. For details in this regard and extensive references, see Daniel Perrine, *The Chemistry of Mind-Altering Drugs: History, Pharmacology, and Cultural Context* (Washington: American Chemical Society, 1996) or David Nichols and Benjamin Chemel, "LSD and the Serotonin System's Effects on Human Consciousness" (pages 121-146 in Etzel Cardena, and Michael Winkelman, *Altering Consciousness: Multidisciplinary Perspectives. Volume 1: History, Culture and the Humanities. Volume 2: Biological and Psychological Perspectives* [Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011]).

eschatological fervor, as it was for Ayler; indeed, such apocalyptic enlightenment as Ayler recounts in his Mr. Jones letter is described and critiqued in the Grateful Dead song "Estimated Prophet." Guitarist Bob Weir describes the song's inspiration: "Every time we play anywhere there's always some guy that's taken a lot of dope, and he's really bug-eyed, and he's having some kind of vision. Somehow I work into that vision, or the band works into his vision, or something like that. He's got a rave that he's got to deliver … If there's a point to 'Estimated Prophet' it is that no matter what you do, perhaps you shouldn't take it all that seriously. No matter what."[528]

Nor is improvisation linked to the creation of representations of the existent but hidden and separated universal order, as it was for Ra—and one could read several lines from the Grateful Dead's song "Cosmic Charlie" as a critique of excessive concern for this level of being: the unnamed narrator of the song, speaking to Cosmic Charlie, says that "I just wonder if you shouldn't feel/Less concern about the deep unreal." According to the narrator, things are much simpler than this: "The very first word is 'How do you do,'/ The last, 'Go home, your mama's calling you'."[529]

Finally, improvisation for the Grateful Dead was not a field within which one could struggle one's way to spiritual perfection—indeed, Bob Weir has stressed the lack of spiritual mastery of his bandmates: "We aren't accomplished masters of any sort of spiritual realm, and for people to ascribe to us those qualities ... I know the guys in the band pretty well, I think. By and large they are some philosophically adept individuals. But I wouldn't go so far as to call any of them spiritual masters."[530] The band was a vessel for the divine spirit—as Garcia put it, "from the point of view of being a player it's this thing that you can't make happen, but when it's happening you can't stop it from happening ... The Grateful Dead has some kind of intuitive thing ... We talk about it, but all those things are by way of agreeing that we'll continue to keep trying to do this thing, whatever it is, and that our best attitude to it is sort of this stewardship,

[528] Gans, *Conversations*, 11.
[529] Dodd, *Complete*, 66.
[530] Gans, *Conversations*, 190.

in which we are the custodians of this thing."[531] The necessary elements were the presence of these specific people onstage, and their willingness to engage with divine inspiration and follow where it led; it was not necessary that they be in a ritually or morally pure state, and members were not granted spiritual privileges. As Garcia put it, "You don't gain an improved position just by virtue of being in the Grateful Dead. We're frequently seen as being privileged somehow, but being in the Grateful Dead is by no means a privilege. It doesn't exempt you from anything particularly, and the reward is a fleeting existential kind of reality."[532]

The Grateful Dead's religious vision was thus not a prophetic, monastic, or Pythagorean one, unlike those of Ayler, Ra, and Coltrane. Rather, open improvisation was the means through which the Grateful Dead and their audience could participate in a moment of *realized* eschatology, by opening themselves up to an incursion of divine significance, even when that significance is without specific content. Testimonies from band members, cited above, reveal that this significance was perceived as meaningful, but not as possessing definite meaning. It was not incorporated into a clear doctrinal or ideological system; rather, it represented an unfixed sense of importance, a tantalizing awareness that one had entered a liminal zone whose very atmosphere was magical. Generally speaking, this feeling is a common reaction to strong art: when powerfully moved in an aesthetic sense, one often feels transported into another world that is in some indefinable way special—the work is felt to be powerful even when the meaning is not understood. Greil Marcus and Simon Frith draw on the work of Roland Barthes on "signifiance" to argue that when listening to powerful music "we do not respond to symbols … though we seize on such symbols and connect them to historical events or personal situations in order to explain our response; we respond to symbol creation."[533] As Frith puts it, "what is involved in musical pleasure is … the work of signification; our joyous response to music is a response not to meanings but to the making of meanings … as the terms we usually

[531] Gans, *Conversations*, 53.
[532] Gans, *Conversations*, 58.
[533] Greil Marcus, *In the Fascist Bathroom: Writings on Punk 1977-1982* (London: Viking, 1993), 211; see also Barthes, "The Grain."

use to construct and hold ourselves together suddenly seem to float free."[534] I would argue as well that there could be another origin for this sense of meaningfulness-stripped-of-attached-meaning, associated with ceaseless change.

As we have seen, the Grateful Dead discovered their sense of mission in a context that was saturated with the use of LSD. Their foundation period was at the Acid Tests; their early manager and patron was LSD manufacturer Augustus Owsley "Bear" Stanley; LSD experiences had huge effects on the band's development; and the countercultural scene in which they worked was symbolized and partially defined through LSD use. We must, then, consider the Grateful Dead in the context of LSD—which has, of course, very frequently been associated with religious experience for its "capacity reliably to induce states of altered perception, thought and feeling that are not experienced otherwise except in dreams or at times of religious exaltation."[535] I follow Lundborg in his argument that psychedelic experiences need to be treated phenomenologically, rather than having religious categorizations simply imposed upon them. However, the association between psychedelic drug use and religion is a natural one to make, due to the "portentousness" aspect of psychedelic drugs and their ability to produce "experiences of ultimacy."[536] Religious systems derive their authority from claims to represent or define the "true," fundamental or ultimate nature of existence; thus any experience that strikes the experiencer as being of unparalleled meaningfulness, significance or power will have a quite understandable tendency to be understood as falling within the religious realm.

This is all the more true given that the middle of the 20th century was a time "when a great deal of the educated reading public shared psychologist Abraham Maslow's view that all religions have their origins in the 'peak experiences' of certain extraordinary individuals … In this view, the primary datum of all religion is the attainment of altered states of

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[534] Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 164-5.
[535] Perrine, *Chemistry*, 256.
[536] Wesley Wildman and Leslie Brothers, "Neurophysiological-semiotic model of religious experience" (pages 347-413 in Robert Russell, Nancey Murphy, and Michael Artib, ed., *Neuroscience and the Person* [Vatican City, Vatican Observatory Publications, 2002]).

consciousness"[537], conceivably similar to those attained under the influence of LSD.

Hicks argues that LSD has "three fundamental effects … dechronicization, depersonalization, and dynamization. Dechronicization permits the drug user to move outside of conventional perceptions of time. Depersonalization permits the user to lose the self and gain an 'awareness of undifferentiated unity'."[538] Dynamization involves the perception that everything that one sees or hears is "in constant motion, animated, as if driven by an inner restlessness," to put it in Albert Hoffmann's words.[539] This description overlaps with Alan Watts' argument that LSD leads the user to focus on the present and to become aware of polarity, relativity, and eternal, unceasing energy in his or her environment.[540]

I would add to Hicks' and Watts' breakdowns a further, and very important, element, defined by Freedman as "portentousness—the capacity of the mind to see more than it can tell, to experience more than it can explicate … from the banal to the profound" (Freedman 1968, 331). In other words, LSD creates the impression that whatever the subject experiences is deeply significant and encourages him or her to invest it with meaning, no matter how far-fetched the meaning may seem to observers. This sense of meaningfulness without connection to any specific meaning has been compared to Rudolph Otto's concept of the "numinous" as an essential quality of divinity,[541] thus enhancing the LSD/religious experience overlap.

All of these aspects can be understood as subsumed under the general presentation of LSD as a corrosive and facilitating, rather than inherently creative, agent. It functions by disabling the mental mechanisms that use categories and distinctions to organize the flow of impressions that the brain perceives. In so doing, it allows the mind to construct new interpretations of those impressions, and vests the new constructions with a feeling of profound meaningfulness or significance. As Humphry Osmond, an early researcher of LSD, put it, "the brain, although its functioning is impaired, acts more subtly and complexly than when it

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[537] Robert Fuller, *Stairways to Heaven: Drugs in American Religious History* (Boulder: Westview, 2000), 48.
[538] Hicks, *Sixties Rock*, 63-4.
[539] Albert Hoffmann, *LSD, My Problem Child* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), 17.
[540] Alan Watts, *Does it Matter? Essays on Man's Relation to Materiality* (New York: Pantheon, 1968), 81.
[541] Nichols and Chemell, "LSD," 129; Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

is normal."[542] Furthermore, subjective, internal impressions may be present quite as strongly as externally created ones. "Signals arising from introspective and interoceptive processes, virtually imperceptible during waking consciousness, may then represent a significant portion of the incoming data available for processing during the actions of a hallucinogen."[543]

Charles Tart, a prominent researcher into altered states of consciousness, argues that the powerful psychedelics, including LSD, break down normal states of consciousness, but do not permit the creation of a stable altered state of consciousness,[544] instead keeping the subject floating and unable to stabilize. Nichols and Chemell argue that "psychedelics perturb key brain structures that inform us about our world, tell us when to pay attention, and interpret what is real."[545]. For this reason, as Stevens notes, "the hippies used LSD as a deconditioning agent"[546]—and this probably explains the CIA's interest in it as well.[547]

In an impressively lucid discussion, Perry takes up this approach, arguing that "LSD suppresses the mind's ability to discriminate according to levels of importance and to form persisting notions about reality … In a sea of perpetually changing impressions, the meaning of anything can differ wildly from moment to moment. The exaltation of being stoned might be the dawn of birth, the moment of death or a mystical unity of the two. The world might be the play of eternal archetypes or nothing but the moment-to-moment flashing of spontaneous energy."

Thus LSD hallucinations are "not full-fledged visions of things that are not there, but extraordinary and uncontrollably shifting interpretations of things that are." In the San Francisco scene, these experiences were taken as "a gateway to experience itself, to spontaneity, to visions of unsuspected connections between things; an equivalent of the

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[542] Humphrey Osmond, "A review of the clinical effects of psychotomimetic agents"(*Annals of the New York Academy of Science* 66 [1957]: 417-435), 423.
[543] Nichols and Chemel, "LSD," 139.
[544] Tart 2000, 123 and 153-5
[545] Nichols and Chemel, "LSD," 139.
[546] Stevens, *Storming*, 301.
[547] Martin Lee and Bruce Shlain, *Acid Dreams: The Complete Social History of LSD: The CIA, the Sixties, and Beyond* (New York: Grove, 1991).

contemporary avant-garde art project that combined ritual, psychodrama, political amelioration and the expounding of secret things."[548] LSD provided "the experience of seeing everything disappear into a ceaseless froth of change";[549] under the influence of LSD, "life could become a fathomless and evanescent flow of events, which you were supposed to trust,"[550] and out of which one spontaneously built meanings and interpretations that could be used as guides until the flow of events transformed them into new meanings and interpretations.

We have seen that the Grateful Dead did trust this evanescent flow of events; indeed, the Framework's ceaseless motion, and the band's dislike of formalized religion can both be seen as showing a desire to valorize continual revelatory experience, rather than settle down into a given context, whether intellectual or musical. In the Grateful Dead's jams, as in the experience of the world when one is under the influence of LSD, one can follow structures of meaning as they arise from the "ceaseless froth of change," only to dissolve back into it again as new structures take their place. In this regard, the Grateful Dead's liberation of the rhythm section plays a huge role in that it opens up the underlying harmonic and rhythmic structures that would otherwise define and lock in the band's music.

This is particularly true in the band's Acid Rock period (1967-1970), during the height of the counterculture and the public fascination with LSD and its effects. Performances in this period usually feature successions of songs that fade into one another by means of extended jamming, to the point where the songs themselves can take on the aspect of temporary structures arising from and disappearing into the waves of change. The band eventually embraced a two-set model for their concerts, with the first set being a warm up for the more psychedelic and improvisational second set. As Garcia described it, "Our second half has a shape which is inspired by the psychedelic experience … it has a risk. It's taking chances, and

[548] Perry, *Haight*, 244-5.
[549] Perry, *Haight*, 256.
[550] Perry, *Haight*, 255.

going all to pieces, and coming back, and reassembling. You don't despair about letting yourself go to pieces—you just let it go."[551]

Overall, then, both the band's improvisational practice, and their religious understanding of that practice, can be plausibly linked to their use of LSD—all three things work together. The popular association of the Grateful Dead with LSD is thus justified, and not only because of the band's early performing contexts or the fondness of Deadheads for hallucinogens, although these are significant as well. The Grateful Dead, particularly in their early years, can be seen as an impressively coherent and developed approach to working through or working from the implications of the LSD experience, with those implications developed both on the level of craft (the band's music) and theory (their theology). This fidelity to their understandings of their LSD experiences is what makes the difference between the use of LSD as a trope or motif, as so many late 1960s groups did, and using it as a foundational element of the religious and musical world that the Grateful Dead constructed. John Coltrane is said to have taken LSD, and his *Om* album was said to have been recorded while he was under the drug's influence,[552] but Coltrane did not allow the drug to define his musical worldview in the thoroughgoing way that the Grateful Dead did: "Coltrane's LSD experiences confirmed spiritual insights he had already discovered rather than radically changing his perspective … Books, however, continued to be the main source for Coltrane's intellectual and spiritual search."[553]

I have seen no evidence that any of the members of the Grateful Dead ever regretted their use of this drug. This was not due simply to a general "laissez-faire" attitude within the band: indeed, band members and associates were known to criticize the use of heroin or cocaine, for instance, which even Garcia, the band member most partial to their use, referred to as "dead-enders."[554] It is clear that the band members valued very highly the musical

[551] Shenk and Silberman, *Skeleton*, 256.
[552] Nisenson, *Ascension*, 166-7.
[553] Nisenson, *Ascension*, 167.
[554] George-Wallen, *Garcia*, 184.

approach that the drug helped them to create, and the access (as they saw it) to transcendent realms that it allowed.

The reader must decide for him- or herself whether this thoroughgoing assimilation of the LSD experience into an artistic practice and lifestyle is a good or bad thing. But whatever one's evaluation of the experiment might be, it cannot be denied that it is certainly an *interesting* thing, an impressively realized and unique experiment out of which emerged some truly innovative and powerful music.

Chapter Twelve: Conclusion

So What?

Over a period of four years, from 1963-1967, rock music underwent enormous changes and almost unbelievably rapid development, in every aspect of its being, whether we speak of timbral possibilities, compositional strategies, instrumental virtuosity, ensemble playing styles, social context, or other aspects. This period and these changes have become so much a part of our cultural history that we can be tempted to take them for granted; however, to do so is to lose sight of the magnitude of the changes, comparable perhaps to the developments in jazz in the first years of bebop but spreading much more quickly than did the bebop developments.

One of the most significant developments of this period was the possibility for rock bands to incorporate extensive amounts of improvisation into their performance practice. As I discussed above (section 1.2), this period sees the birth of a distinctively rock improvising tradition which, if lacking in the subtlety and musical finesse associated with such traditions in other musical forms such as raga, qawwali, or jazz, nevertheless is noteworthy for its vigor, physicality, and adventurousness—and also, now, for its longevity, as it reaches the half century mark. The Grateful Dead are one of a very small group of innovators who devised ways to incorporate improvisation into a rock context, with all that such a context requires, and thereby expanded the possibilities of rock performance; for this reason, it is important that we know what they did and how they did this, and that we understand the mechanisms that they invented to make it possible.

In addition to *how* they did what they did, it is also important to know *why*. The Grateful Dead's choices with regard to their music were hardly traditional ones. The question of originating impulses of improvising musicians is all too rarely asked, and yet it is a crucial one. What leads a musician to play in this way? Rather than leave this important question unaddressed or vaguely answered, in this dissertation I have argued that their motivation was

at heart a religious one, and thus that their career cannot be understood without taking this aspect into consideration.

The significance of their musical work extends beyond the Grateful Dead, and indeed goes outside the confines of the musical scene. It is hardly unusual to speak of religious experience in the context of the 1960s, or LSD. Both the period and the drug are strongly associated with experimentation of all kinds, including religious experimentation. Yet all too often the discussion of experimental religiosity in the 1960s and subsequently presents that experimentation as something transitory, and hence with little impact on other aspects of the subjects' lives, or as something leading to institutional affiliation. The presentation that I have made of the religious aspects of the Grateful Dead's musical inspiration is therefore valuable because it reminds us that religious experience can be taken seriously and acted upon—indeed, can serve as the basis for a thirty-year career—without ever being formally organized: it can be inspirational without being institutional, manifesting through the practices that it underlies.

Thus, the religious experiences that members of the Grateful Dead underwent in the mid-1960s, and the musical practices that those experiences inspired, are significant for our understanding of rock's development; for our understanding of the development of improvised music more generally; and for the reminder that they give us of the range of ways in which religious experience can manifest.

My work in this dissertation increases our knowledge of the modern development of open improvisation and specifically opens the discussion up to include improvising rock bands. It also puts an accent on the religious motivations of improvisation and improvisers, which have not been adequately appreciated, and thereby furthers a properly ethnomusicological understanding of how music relates to and works with culture—or, in this case, how music integrates into culture elements that are perceived as coming from outside of culture. Understanding religion as forming a "sacred canopy," to use Peter Berger's phrase, not only tells us where the boundaries of culture are established; it also tells us where to find the

interactions between culture and perceived transcendence, interactions which religions are designed to mediate.

The work that I have done here has further ramifications for the modern study of religion, in two particular ways. First of all, there is a tendency in modern studies of religion to downplay the significance of religious experience, and to undercut its importance for the founding or joining of religious movements—in other words, origins and conversion accounts and so on are often reinterpreted so as to lessen the significance of whatever religious experience may be claimed to have inspired them. Rather, such claims to experience are often seen as legitimators, things used to justify the religious infrastructure that grows up in the movement or the socially-motivated decision to convert. Religious experience, from this point of view, excuses or explains religious affiliation, rather than provoking it—see especially Proudfoot's work[555] and constructivist use of attribution theory more generally, which are summarized by Ann Taves;[556] see too Barnard's rebuttal of attributionist theory.[557] See also chapters 8 and 14 in Stark and Bainbridge's *The Future of Religion*, dealing with the formation of new religious movements and the way that they recruit new members: in neither chapter of this enormously influential work is religious experience on the part of founders or followers seriously addressed.[558]

My discussion of the Grateful Dead problematizes this devaluation of religious experience. I have shown, instead, the pivotal importance of religious experience—and efforts to ensure access to it—for a group that was not concerned to create a religious infrastructure and thus did not need the legitimation.

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[555] Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*.
[556] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 93-98
[557] Barnard , *Exploring*, 101-129.
[558] I can personally attest to the distaste for discussions of religious experience within academia, having tried recently to initiate such discussions in the study of the gnostic works from Nag Hammadi, the majority of which feature presentations of religiously-ascribed altered states of consciousness. My efforts were dismissed, with one senior scholar of Valentinian gnosticism, a textual critic whose work is remarkably subtle and nuanced, sweeping the matter under the rug by announcing that "I am not interested, because everyone knows they were all faking this stuff anyway."

Secondly, in broader discussions of modern developments in North American spirituality, there is the tendency to see things as going in one of two ways: as the traditional religious forms decline, people move either into diffuse, "unchurched" spirituality, which is presented as being fairly vague and exploratory (e.g., the idea of the cultic community, the rise of New Age thought), or into tight and explicitly organized religious structures—as we see, for example, in the example of "Jesus People," religious seekers with countercultural backgrounds who embraced fundamentalist Christianity in large numbers in the 1970s. In short, we are often presented with the contrast between diffuse "spirituality" and hardline "religion" as characteristic responses to North American religious crises in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Our discussion of the Grateful Dead problematizes this distinction as well. In the Grateful Dead's career, we see an example of a situation in which the religious experience was used as the motivating force for the creation of a defined musical and business entity. The Grateful Dead's religious vision was coherent enough and focused enough not to fall on the fuzzy spirituality side of things, but it was also unstructured by design, with no attempt made to turn it into a religious group or to affiliate it with such a group. Indeed, as we have seen, this was considered to be a threatening possibility and consciously avoided. A comparable case with interesting overlaps to the Grateful Dead's experience can be found in the experiences of Werner Erhard, founder of est, whose experiences of transcendence gave him the conceptual framework for the seminar business that he founded.[559] Erhard's experience, like that of the Grateful Dead, shows how religious insights or experiences can be coherently and consistently put to work in the world without first being reified into an organized religion. We might call this an example of "(deliberately) unchurched religiosity," and it is what motivated the Grateful Dead's pioneering efforts in rock improvisation.

[559] Werner Erhard, *The Transformation of a Man: The Founding of est* (New York: Crown, 1978), 108 ff. and 164 ff.; see N. J. Demerath *Sacred Companies: Organizational Aspects of Religion and Religious Aspects of Organizations (*Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) as well.

Ethnomusicology can be most succinctly defined as the study of music in culture. All cultures have limits, the most clearly visible of which are the natural limits, such as birth and death and illness. As Peter Berger argued many years ago,[560] one essential role of religion is to safeguard these limits by creating a protective canopy or wall. But religion does something else as well: inside these protective, enveloping walls are what we might call wormholes, or escape routes, which promise the escape from transitory culture into something eternally valid. Religion encloses culture, but it also holds out hopes for transcendence of cultural limitations. These hopes may be illusory, even deliberately deceptive, but that does not mean that they are insignificant. A full map of culture ought to show not just the walls that surround it, but also the holes in those walls; hence, a real study of music in culture can potentially include the places where people see wormholes, or escapes from culture.

These wormholes may or may not lead to areas beyond culture. But whether or not they do, the part of them that is within culture is affected by its culture. While the place to which people want to escape might or might not be derived from the surrounding culture, the materials used to build the wormhole are. In the 1950s and 1960s, a number of groups took up improvisation as a strategy for creating these wormholes, for touching on something deeper and more valid. We have looked, for example, at the work of the Grateful Dead, John Coltrane, Sun Ra, and Albert Ayler in this regard. Their work focused around holes in the sacred canopy, holes that held out the promise that one could escape into something ultimately valid, and also that there was a gap through which revivifying energy could flow into the cultural realm. In this dissertation I have discussed the way in which the Grateful Dead created their wormhole, and what they thought lay beyond it.

[560] Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion (*New York: Anchor, 1990).

Grateful Dead performances referenced in the text[561]

With regard to personnel:

1) Jerry Garcia (vocals/guitar), Phil Lesh (bass/vocals), Bob Weir (vocals/guitar) and Bill Kreutzmann (drums) played at all the performances listed below.
2) Pigpen (vocals/keyboards) played at the performances up to and including April 26 1972.
3) Keith Godchaux (keyboards) played Oct. 22 1971 and at the subsequent performances.
4) Mickey Hart (drums/percussion) played at the performances from Oct. 22 1967 to Sept. 20 1970.
5) Tom Constanten (keyboards) was a member of the Grateful Dead from 1968-1970; however, he does not appear at any of the shows discussed in this dissertation.
6) Donna Godchaux (vocals) played at the last four performances listed.

March 19 1966

Available at http://archive.org/details/gd66-03-19.sbd.scotton.81951.sbeok.flac.

Venue: Carthray Studios, Los Angeles

May 19 1966

Available at http://archive.org/details/gd1966-05-19.sbd.miller.106828.flac16

Venue: Avalon Ballroom, San Francisco

September 16 1966

Available at http://archive.org/details/gd1966-09-16.117435.vinyl.sbd.indidarkstar.flac24

Venue: Avalon Ballroom, San Francisco

October 7 1966

Available at https://archive.org/details/gd66-10-07.sbd.unknown.14102.sbeok.shnf.

Venue: Winterland Arena, San Francisco

[561] Information from Getz and Dwork, *Taping*; the archive.org listings; and http://www.dead.net/venues.

November 29 1966

Available at http://archive.org/details/gd1966-11-29.sbd.thecore.4940.shnf

Venue: The Matrix, San Francisco

March 18 1967

Available at http://archive.org/details/gd1967-03-18.sbd.sacks.1594.shnf

Venue: Winterland Arena, San Francisco

May 5 1967

Available at http://archive.org/details/gd67-05-05.sbs.yerys.1595.sbeok.shnf

Venue: Fillmore Auditorium, San Francisco

August 4 1967

Available at http://archive.org/details/gd1967-08-04.09110.sbd.vernon.shnf

Venue: O'Keefe Centre, Toronto

September 3 1967

Available at http://archive.org/details/gd1967-09-03.sbd.miller.43.sbeok.shnf

Venue: The Dance Hall, Rio Nido, Ca.

October 22 1967

Available at http://archive.org/details/gd1967-10-22.sbd.miller.116257.flac16

Venue: Winterland Arena, San Francisco

November 10 1967

Available at http://archive.org/details/gd1967-11-10.116171.sbd.motb-0172.flac16

Venue: Shrine Auditorium, Los Angeles

Jan 22 1968

Available at http://archive.org/details/gd1968-01-22.sbd.miller.97342.sbeok.flac16

Venue: Eagles Auditorium, Seattle

January 27 1968

Available at http://archive.org/details/gd1968-01-20.sbd.miller.97340.sbeok.flac16

Venue: Eureka Municipal Auditorium, Eureka, California

August 23 1968

Available at http://archive.org/details/gd1968-08-23.sbd.sniper777.tomP.116193.flac16

Venue: Shrine Auditorium, Los Angeles

September 20 1970

Available at http://archive.org/details/gd1970-09-20.aud.weinberg.bunjes.81728.flac16

Venue: Fillmore East, New York

October 22 1971

Available at http://archive.org/details/gd1971-10-22.set2.sbd.miller.86728.sbeok.flac16

Venue: Auditorium Theatre, Chicago

April 26 1972

Available at http://archive.org/details/gd1972-04-26.sbd.vernon.9197.sbeok.shnf

Venue:Jahrhunderthalle, Frankfurt, Germany

August 27 1972

Available at http://archive.org/details/gd1972-08-27.sbd.hollister.2199.sbeok.shnf

Venue: Old Renaissance Fair Grounds, Veneta, Oregon

November 21 1973

Available at http://archive.org/details/gd73-11-21.finley.warner.22096.sbeok.shnf

Venue: Denver Coliseum, Denver

December 2 1973

Available at http://archive.org/details/gd73-12-02.aud.vernon.17278.sbeok.shnf

Venue: Boston Music Hall, Boston

March 23 1974

Available at http://archive.org/details/gd1974-03 23.aud.connors.hughey.gems.78599.flac16

Venue:Cow Palace, Daly City, California

May 14 1974

Available at http://archive.org/details/gd1974-05-14.sbd.miller.114462.flac16

Venue: Adams Field House, University of Montana, Missoula, Montana

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