


GRAT EFFUL DEAD

**Here was music to be experienced then rediscovered,
an experiment that has continued for over 25 years.**

Evolution. It's a process measured in eons. But every so often, when a historic juncture is reached and critical mass achieved, evolution takes a breathtaking leap forward. In one moment, things are as they always were. In the next, they will never be the same again.

San Francisco. 1965. It was a time and place where the potent charge of rock & roll hot wired an epochal transformation, a generational shift that set the world wobbling. Music was an express agent of that change, articulating and animating the social and spiritual convulsions shredding the air.

But as much as music was the midwife of sixties revolution, it was also being revolutionized, goosed up the evolutionary ladder by a once-in-a-lifetime assemblage of pilgrims and pioneers, staking out new frontiers of consciousness along the rugged Western edge.



From the sixties through the nineties, the music has never stopped. Clockwise from left, Jerry Garcia, Bill Kreutzmann, Ron "Pigpen" McKernan, Bob Weir, Mickey Hart and Phil Lesh.



The early Dead: Phil Lesh, Bill Kreutzmann and Jerry Garcia play the Haight in the sixties.

They called themselves, though not at first, the Grateful Dead. Originally it was the Warlocks, the misbegotten sum of some very unlikely parts:

Jerry Garcia, with his five o'clock shadow and portly grace, stalked the South Bay scene playing earnest bluegrass in the Hart Valley Drifters and everything else in Mother Macree's Uptown Jug Champions. He was, in the manner of the time, a purist — acoustic, eclectic and obsessed. Pulling the great strains of American musical tradition into his intense and absorbing orbit. Garcia's polymorphous guitar style prefigured the grand synthesis to come.

The skeletal angularity of his frame reflected the serious agendas of Phil Lesh. Drawn to classical complexity and the three-dimensional interplay of be-bop, Lesh trained as a trumpeter in the Kenton school, composing dissonant, atonal orchestral works with the other hand. It was in the mathematical matrix of that flood of notes that he unlocked the equations of his own demanding muse... and redrew the expressive boundaries of the bass guitar.

And it was the pagan spirit of the band, a libidinous, B3-fueled abandon that invested the singing of Ron "Pigpen" McKernan. There was a haunted undertow to his blues and R&B meditations, alternately wicked and full of sorrows, an old soul blowing the harp of doom in a paradise of Flower Children.

For Bob Weir, with his heartthrob hair and wide-eyed exuberance, the band's music was a perpetual series of surprises, a delicious sensory overload. His breathless, edgy rhythm guitar fills, mutated from Chuck and Bo and the Brits, always found their place in the nick of time, pushing the sound forward by the sheer thrill of discovery. Weir was wired into all the risky potentials of the next eight bars, high on the top spin that took the sound aloft.

With Bill Kreutzmann, thin-lipped determination and dead center precision signaled both the blessing and burden of the drummer's chair. The burden was that prodigious



Garcia, Kreutzmann, Lesh and Weir.

expenditure of pure rhythm required to keep the band on an even keel. The blessing was a gift for improvisation the equal of any of his confederates. Kreutzmann would resolve the paradox with a ferocity all the more awesome for its lucid clarity.

By the Summer of '65 — Year One of the Aquarian Apocalypse — they had become the Grateful Dead, a name evoking that transcendent realm into which they would shortly venture, taking with them a generation.

But what, ultimately, would single out the Grateful Dead to lead this one-way journey through the doors of perception? Any number of aural adventurers gathered at the Golden Gate could claim the right to jam; rock & roll improvisation, posited by the Yardbirds, had solidly connected with the free-form dance frenzy bursting from San



Late '70s: Keith Godchaux, Kreutzmann, Garcia, Mickey Hart, Donna Godchaux, Bob Weir and Lesh.



JIM MARSHALL

San Francisco's seedy ballrooms. The eclecticism of the Lovin' Spoonful, the Byrds and other folk-rock formulators was at least the equal of the Dead's. And from Butterfield to Bloomfield, Kooper to Kalb, the blues had already become a priestly profession for white boys.

The difference, in a word, was evolution. Music was about to change and the Grateful Dead was the crucible of that change. It was a phenomenon not, of course, without precedent. Blues and country had fused in Presley to create rock & roll. In the Dead, rock & roll fused with the Pyschedelic Experience to create the ecstatic.

Chemicals and electricity. The Grateful Dead tapped powers elemental and barely controlled. The band's early mentor, LSD baron Stanley Owsley, is said to have liberated the group's sound when he designed a custom PA system to replace their garage band squawk boxes.

It's a fitting creation myth — the alchemist bestows the gift of wattage. The potency that surged through the group in those heady early days — playing Kesey's Acid Tests or beneath Panhandle Park's swaying eucalyptus fronds — came as much from the blown minds of the crowd as the gas-guzzling generators behind the flatbed truck. The glow and hum of *gestalt* was ultimately the group's most potent energy source.

While the drugs, dreams and delirium of those watershed years may account for the initial linkage between the band and their audience, it was the music that would, in the truest sense of the term, take on a life of its own. What

the Dead would forge in the endlessly elaborating interplay of their sound, went beyond mere synthesis: knowing folkies would recognize strains of "I Know You Rider" or "Morning Dew"; teenyboppers could pick up the gist of "Johnny B. Good" or

"Dancin' in the Streets"; blues scholars would cite the works of Muddy Water and Howlin' Wolf.

But from the raw material of their vast and encyclopedic repertoire, the Dead were moving toward a grand unifying principle of spontaneous generation. And, if the band touched on the universal nature of music by bending and blending a dozen separate strains, they were also about the business of creating a wholly new sound, never before heard.

It's an accomplishment best exemplified in their original material. Most often underscored by the psychoactive lyrics of Robert Hunter, the Dead's signature compositions — from "Dark Star" to "Saint Stephen" to "The Eleven" and beyond — reconfigure the entire vocabulary of rock & roll, hewing huge chunks of free floating, unfettered sound from the protean elements of popular music.

By 1968, with the addition of a second drummer Micky Hart, the group's music took an existential leap forward into a resonating matrix of shape shifting sound. It's a sound revealing itself in the very act of creation, a prodigious feat of continuous innovation, cyclical and self-perpetuating.

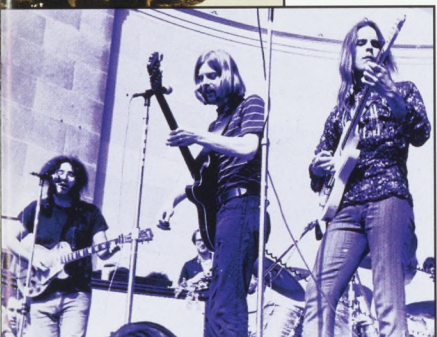
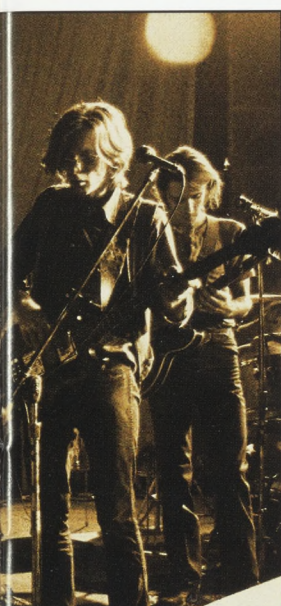
It's an experiment that has continued, unabated, for over 25 years. In the process, the Grateful Dead have become one of a handful of the most successful live attractions in modern music. Their virtually ceaseless touring schedule maintains the group's unprecedented connection to their international following — a symbiotic cohesion that confounds traditional roles of artist and audience. Their acolyte's axiom says it all: there is, indeed, nothing like a Grateful Dead concert.

It's a consistency the group has maintained through all manner of internal flux. To Ron McKernan, dead in 1973, must be added a myriad of creative cohorts come and gone, — fellow travelers like Tom Constanten, Keith and Donna Godchaux, Brent Myland, Bruce Hornsby, and most recently, keyboardist Vince Welnick. Evolution is change.

And through all changes, the Dead continue making music, note by note, song after song, moment to moment. It's never been done this way before. And it will never be done this way again.

—Davin Seay

Garcia, Weir, Kreutzmann, Lesh and Hart.



Garcia, Lesh and Weir.



Weir, Garcia, Hart, Kreutzmann, Lesh and Brent Myland.

PETER HUNGOTT



SAN FRAN CISCO

The Sound of Freedom.

T

he word on the street was that Big Brother and the Holding Company, one of San Francisco's preeminent rock bands, was going to perform in Golden Gate Park. For free. So one morning in 1968, at age 14, I stuck out my thumb and hitched a ride from Mill Valley, where I lived, into

San Francisco to see one of my favorite bands.

I was let off near the park, and it took perhaps 15 minutes to reach Speedway Meadow, a long grassy expanse serving as the concert site. Even before my arrival, I knew I was close because of the guitar-driven rock & roll coming through the trees.

A crowd of a few hundred people (which would grow to perhaps 2000) had gathered. I took in the idyllic scene: Groups of young (though all older than me), long-haired men and women sitting together on colorful blankets digging the sounds; the sweet smell of weed and incense in the air; a frizzy-haired guy blowing



From a whisper
to a horse scream
Joplin could get
you that close
to ecstasy.



The acid-rock combo that mixed up rock, blues, folk and love: the Jefferson Airplane.

bubbles; a woman sunning topless; a few tripped-out souls dancing near the stage; couples making out in the grass.

Eventually Janis, the epitome of the "hippie chick" with her long wild hair, oval granny glasses, numerous bracelets, beaded necklaces, Southern Comfort bottle and seemingly free spirit, and her Big Brother band mates — guitarists James Gurley and Sam Andrew, bassist Peter Albin, drummer David Getz — took the stage.

The performance Big Brother gave that day stands as one of my greatest rock & roll experiences.

And not just because I witnessed Janis' bawdy, impassioned, liberating onstage persona and that wiser-than-her-years voice that so deeply conveyed heartache and heart-break, love and lust, pity and pain.

Big Brother rocked!

They were loud, hard, savage rock & roll rebels tough enough to survive being the house band at Hell's Angels beer busts. Janis' vocals, from a whisper to a hoarse scream, could get you that close to ecstasy.

Big Brother were the Nirvana of their day. Their raw, brutal sound predated both the punk movement of the mid-seventies and the grunge scene of the eighties. Their repertoire — "Down On Me," "Piece of My Heart," "All Is Loneliness," "Call On Me," "Ball and Chain," "Light Is Faster Than Sound," "Coo Coo" and others — was exquisite, their

delivery visceral and often transcendent.

I like Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart's off-the-cuff review. Recalling his first Big Brother sighting, at a closet-size club called the Matrix, Hart told me: "Big Brother were going crazy feeding back and Janis stepped to the mike and it split your head open."

At the end of that magical afternoon, as a cool wind began to blow fog in off the ocean, I walked out of the park, stuck out my thumb and was soon back in Marin. Perhaps there was another place during the late sixties where you could experience some of the world's greatest rock & roll for free, but I doubt it.

The Sound of the City

Because the "San Francisco Sound" coalesced amid the utopian idealism of the Bay Area's hippie movement, the civil rights effort, leftist politics, environmental concerns and the psychedelic drug culture, it is impossible (and I believe pointless) to isolate it from its context.

Such trippy, exotic jams as the Grateful Dead's "Dark Star" epic, Country Joe and the Fish's "Section 43" or Big Brother's reinvention of "Summertime" are, for me and I think for anyone who had the chance to wander down Haight Street in the mid-sixties, or attend a dance concert at the Family Dog's Avalon Ballroom, the sounds that go with the sights of that strange and wonderful time.

The bands provided the soundtrack for the dance-concert "light shows," exotic multimedia wall paintings composed of ever-changing slides, film loops, liquid projections and other effects staged by such oddly named visual art groups as the North American Ibis Alchemical Co. The soundtrack for a day of dreaming impossible dreams out in the park, of making love for the first time, of LSD and marijuana-tinged visions, of spiritual possibilities.

Since the mid-seventies and the arrival of punk and harder drugs, it has been fashionable to dismiss the idealism, optimism and ecstasy of the San Francisco Scene. One young writer, a Twentysomething born too late to experience the scene firsthand, recently wrote, as if it were something to be proud of, that she has "little empathy for sixties nostalgia or the remnants of the hippie dream."

Now I'm the last person to pine for what was, but as an adolescent in love with rock & roll, I was there. I walked the Haight, amazed by the freewheeling, bazaar-like atmosphere, "far out" music wafting from open windows, the sidewalks crowded with "groovy" kids. I went to the Avalon and the Fillmore, the Carousel Ballroom and Winterland. I stayed up listening to DJs at KMPX invent free-form underground rock radio and I dug the psychedelic posters, the handiwork of Wes Wilson and Moscoso and Rick Griffin and Mouse & Kelley, that went up in the windows of book stores and coffee houses announcing upcoming concerts.

The Twentysomethings have a vested interest in denying a past they missed out on. I can understand that. They want their own culture, and they want it to feel IMPOR-

TANT. But to deny the window into Utopia that existed, at least for a few years, in San Francisco is to deny history.

Freedom Calling

The San Francisco Sound was the sound of freedom. Freedom to dress, behave, and live the way one wanted, to escape the confines of a straight, square, normal, inhibited, nose-to-the-grindstone middle-class life. Some of us even believed that a pursuit of one's art took precedence over the pursuit of money.

Today, of course, in the age of AIDs, the homeless, gang violence, a shrinking job market and all the other social ailments plaguing our society, that sounds so naive. Something only a kid (or a spaced-out hippie) could be sucker enough to buy into. Right?

The general details of what happened in San Francisco are known. How, to note one example, a bunch of folk and blues musicians plugged in, dropped a lot of acid and, calling themselves the Grateful Dead, created a psychedelic American roots music that has a larger following today than it did in the sixties.

Most of the important bands have been written up so many times that telling their stories seems redundant. The Jefferson Airplane, the acid-rock combo with the phenomenal singers Grace Slick and Marty Balin, mixing up rock, blues and folk with lyrics about both love ("Today") and radical politics ("Volunteers"). The Quicksilver Messenger Service, whose mercurial lead guitarist, John Cipollina, took the primal rhythms of Bo Diddley into a mindboggling realm with his endlessly creative improvisations. Country Joe and the Fish, pioneers of a hallucinogenic brand of spaced-out rock that can be heard on their priceless, appropriately titled debut album, *Electric Music for the Mind and Body*.

So many cool bands: the Charlatans, Moby Grape, the Beau Brummels, the Flamin' Groovies, Sly and the Family Stone, Creedence Clearwater Revival, the Sons of Champlain, Clover, Blue Cheer, Flying Circus, the Mystery Trend, the Great Society, the Sparrow, the Steve Miller Blues Band, the Sopwith Camel.

The Fans Would Rip You Apart

The San Francisco Sound was so accessible. At the Avalon and Fillmore, when the musicians weren't on stage, they were often on the dance floor. "As soon as you got through performing you could go down and dance in the audience," Grace Slick once recalled. "I did that. We'd wander in the crowd before and after we played. You can't do that now. The fans would rip you apart."

I remember another day, back in the late sixties, when I attended an afternoon concert at McNear's Beach in Marin, and grooved to a wonderful, now forgotten band

called the Sopwith Camel (remember "Hello Hello"?). There was no sealed off "backstage." Members of the audience could wander behind the stage, talk to the group's charming lead singer, Peter Kraemer, or his band mates. Phil Lesh of the Grateful Dead was hanging around, digging the vibe, talking to anyone who approached him.

Musicians flocked to the Bay Area during the late sixties and early seventies. Most didn't hide behind gated mansions. In those days, you might find Jerry Garcia chillin' out at underground radio pioneer Tom "Big Daddy" Donahue's even bigger house on Mt. Tamalpais, Marty Balin walking the streets of Mill Valley and Jesse Colin Young of the Youngbloods picking up some supplies in the quaint town of Point Reyes Station. No bodyguards.

The late Michael Bloomfield, at the time one of America's most popular and influential rock guitarists (ranked up there with Clapton, Beck and Page) thanks to his work in the Paul Butterfield Blues Band and on the "Super-



Sly and the Family Stone: black/white, male/female, rock/soul.

sessions" album, had a funky old two-story house not far from the center of Mill Valley. He might have been a big star, but Bloomfield was happy to open his door to a couple of high school kids who wanted to hang out, hear the stories about his gigs with Bob Dylan and learn about the blues.

Now it's all different in San Francisco. Walking down Haight Street, past the crack dealers on the corners, the scraggly-haired and dirty drug casualties sitting on the sidewalk, the blank-faced skinheads and spaced-out Deadheads, it's like seeing what once was refracted in some ugly funhouse mirror that turns dreams into nightmares.

On occasion, I come across new bands that, in their own way, have some of that stubborn, unconventional San Francisco spirit. In years past I've seen it, and heard it, in bands like the Mutants, Romeo Void and Translator. These days the Red House Painters, the American Music Club and Counting Crows carry on the legacy of the San Francisco Sound in their own inimitable ways.

No, I'm not nostalgic. Why should I be? I was there. I know what it was like. And it was fine, damn fine.

—Michael Goldberg