**The band Grateful Dead said a final farewell in a series of gigs in the **US **last weekend, leaving more than 10,000 live concert recordings from almost 50 years on stage to comfort their legions of followers. But, an equal number of music fans loathe them. Andy Battaglia considers why the band’s peculiar brand of psychedelic rock has so divided the critics.

Music fans not yet consumed into the cult of the Grateful Dead have plenty of potential gateways into fateful states of conversion. Here’s one, from a recent offering: near the end of the first song on The Box of the Grateful Dead, a new 50th-anniversary box set covertly as the ultimate start line for a band that lasted for years, a fairly conventional garage-rock song wends down in a familiar fashion, after some jangly guitar riffs, upright bass and a rhythm section, and a punch-out solo that proves conclusively butt-crotch.

The song has a sense of wiggle and shake to it that wasn’t heard on many other specimens from the 60s, but otherwise is pretty ordinary, just another psychedelic rock song from a time when it was easy to hate, or at least to dismiss as a bad idea. But then, after the mind has zoned out and turned over to ponder what might come next, a wave of sounds washes over the stage in a giant flying roll-up.

This first official live recording from the band’s long and nearly impossible to comprehend run in the early 80s, with musings and reviews of all kinds. “It’s probably the most difficult time to come in for a major lesson in just how the Dead have meant to their legions of fans all this time.”

In America, a report on National Public Radio ascribed the Dead as “a rock band that embodies two quintessentially American traits: innovation and excess.” That goes well to the good and the bad, both of which feature in considerations of a group not known for editing or self-censorship. Last summer, an excellent radio show played with the notion of the Dead as a “band of heroes without peer.”

For them, the answer is less important than acknowledgement of the fact that opinions tell only part of the story. Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in The Wall Street Journal, The Paris Review and more.