

review music

this week's essential reading

'Will Angela Merkel Save the European Ideal?' by John Cassidy, *The New Yorker*

» 'If the EU is viewed as a remote and punitive body, one that can't adjust its workings for a member country where a quarter of the population is out of work, its prospects are grim'

Dead good?



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 conscripted 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 Best of the Grateful Dead*, a new 50th-anniversary set conceived as the ultimate starter kit for a band that lasted for ages, a fairly conventional garage-rock song winds down in a familiar fashion, after some jangly guitar riffs, spirited call-and-response singing, and a fuzzed-out solo that proves curious but compact.

The song has a sense of wiggle and shake to it that won't be heard in many other specimens from the 1960s, but otherwise it is pretty ordinary, just another psychedelic rock song from a time when songs of the sort abounded.

But then, after the mind has zoned out and moved on to wonder what might come next, a surprise: a bizarre chord, odd and dissonant and out-of-place. It sounds like a mistake but too deliberate to count as one for certain. What kind of band ends a song so strangely? For what reasons and rationales? Had the effect of it been telegraphed all the while, or did it really come out of nowhere?

The Grateful Dead specialised in seeding confusion. From their beginnings in the Sixties – the song with that quizzical chord, *The Golden Road (To Unlimited Devotion)*, comes from their first album in 1967 – the band ventured as widely and wildly as any before or since. Improvisation was their main mode, and eccentricity was celebrated with a mix of serious esteem and goofiness too. Among their many graphic insignias was a flock of cartoonish dancing bears. One of its founding members was named Pigpen. An episode from Dead mythology includes a concert with an invasion by a character streaking over the stage in a giant flying roll-up.

All of the above made the Grateful Dead just as easy to hate, or at least to dismiss as a bad idea never to be indulged. But surprisingly many, of all ages and affiliations, have latched onto the Dead as a band of heroes without peer. For them, the Dead are something more than a band, something more than a mere musical entity. What they are exactly is less important than acknowledgement of the fact that facts tell only part of the story.

All of this has been on grand display in recent weeks, as the remaining members of the Dead reunited to play their final concerts, in California and Chicago, under the banner of "Fare Thee Well". It has been nearly 20 years since beloved frontman Jerry Garcia passed away and effectively ended the lineage, but the memory hasn't dimmed. To observe it from a distance as a curious interloper, in fact, has been to come in for a major lesson in just what the Dead have meant to their legions of fans all this time.

In America, a report on National Public Radio assessed 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-restraint. Last summer, an excellent release played with the notion of the Dead as improvisers who could sometimes work magic and other times fall flat: *Grayfolded*, a nearly two-hour collage by composer John Oswald of live recordings of *Dark Star*, a concert staple for the Dead that could stretch to more than 30 minutes on a given night.

Later this year, in September, the band itself will issue *Thirty Trips Around the Sun*, a massive box set of concert recordings on 80 CDs or a computer hard-drive (the price for either is an astounding Dh2,570).

Expansiveness of that sort makes the Dead a perfect band for now, oddly enough. They were '60s creatures from the start and will remain so for the rest of time, but the amount of material to explore makes them an ever-present entity, like a surreal band from a Jorge Luis Borges story. The coffers are vast, and they're suited to listeners who like projects related to taxonomy and appraisal. With dozens of official releases and bootlegs identified by the day, delving into the Dead is like mining a data dump. More than 10,000 live recordings are ready to be listened to at a moment's notice online at archive.org, and it seems that few, if any, other utterances have ever gone unheard. Certainly the recent reunion was well-documented. The glut of coverage has been a blast to take in, with musings and reviews of all kinds. "It's probably the most ridiculous-looking site in the world, but in reality, there's more manners displayed, more

consideration, than any other place I've ever been," said a fan in a parking lot outside the first concert on a video online at *Rolling Stone*.

The magazine's critic, Will Hermes, was on fire in a series of dispatches from the final run of shows. Of the last three, in Chicago, he liked the first one, dissed the second ("And that's the thing about Grateful Dead shows," he wrote: "Sometimes everything comes together. Other times? Not so much"), and waxed rhapsodic over the third ("magnificent"). In a moving line near the end, he wrote: "The relationship Deadheads have with these songs is deeply personal: we've eaten, slept, and breathed this music, bonded and tripped and f**** and fallen in love to it."

President Barack Obama offered a message directly to the band itself, in a White House memo that read: "Enjoy this weekend's celebration of your fans and legacy. And as Jerry would say, 'Let there be songs to fill the air!'"

The quotation is an allusion to *Ripple*, a song on the Dead's treasured 1970 album *American Beauty*. That's the one that newbies often take to first, and this relative newbie can attest to its earthy, rooty charms. Another, Tom Ewing of the astute UK music site *Freaky Trigger*, came across it as part of a listening exercise and posted online: "The up-

shot is I'm listening to the Grateful Dead's *American Beauty* and it's ... really, really enjoyable. What danger have I landed myself in?"

Treachery is a frequent fate with the Dead, who had more ideas – or swellings of spirit – than inclinations toward taste. That's another way in which they are suited for the present age: matters of good and bad are in many ways immaterial, or at least in part beside the point.

On a lively online Yahoo! Answers page entitled "The Grateful Dead Bad or Good?," a very contented commenter writes, "I have seen 40+ Dead concerts and I can say by far they are the best band of the '70s-'90s if you are looking for a chill band where everyone just listens to the music and they just jam on and have a good time." Others differ in their sentiments. As another commenter writes: "To me they are hands down the worst band in the history of mankind ... period."

There's something to be said for a band that elicits opinions like that. What that something is exactly 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, Frieze, The Paris Review and more.



Top, from left, Trey Anastasio, Phil Lesh and Bob Weir perform at a Fare Thee Well show in Chicago last weekend. Above, members of the Grateful Dead in 1960. Jay Blakesberg/Invision for the Grateful Dead/AP Images. Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images

▶ the playlist three 'live' Grateful Dead recordings that matter

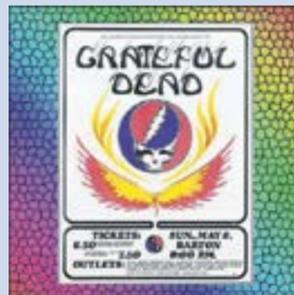
Grayfolded
Grateful Dead & John Oswald
Swell/Artifacts (1994)

Sanctioned by the Dead but otherwise created entirely by experimental composer Oswald, this curio presents a gloriously long mosaic of the anthem *Dark Star* at its expansive, digressive best.



Live at Barton Hall, Cornell University on 1977-05-08
Grateful Dead

This bootleg recording has long been a favourite, with free-floating versions of songs that take circuitous paths to the point (see an 18-minute *Fire on the Mountain* and a 16-minute *Dancin' in the Streets*).



Live/Dead
Grateful Dead
Warner Bros. Seven Arts (1969)

This first official live release is a document of the Dead as a dark, blues-bent band of wandering experimentalists, with all sorts of psychedelic adornment on songs that move in many directions at once.



Jerry Garcia performing on stage in 1969. Getty Images