

MUSIC

LONG PLAYING: 'DARK STAR'

Dead's Hit Is Revived On Vinyl

BY ANDY BATTAGLIA



THE GRATEFUL DEAD

spent decades trying to unlock the many mysteries of "Dark Star," the band's best-known jam.

The lore around the famously elastic song—"Dark Star" could run anywhere from a few minutes to more than a half-hour—

made it an anthem and enshrined its mystique. Decades after it was first played, Canadian composer John Oswald was inspired to make a composite of live performances of "Dark Star" that reflected the song's evolution over nearly 40 years.

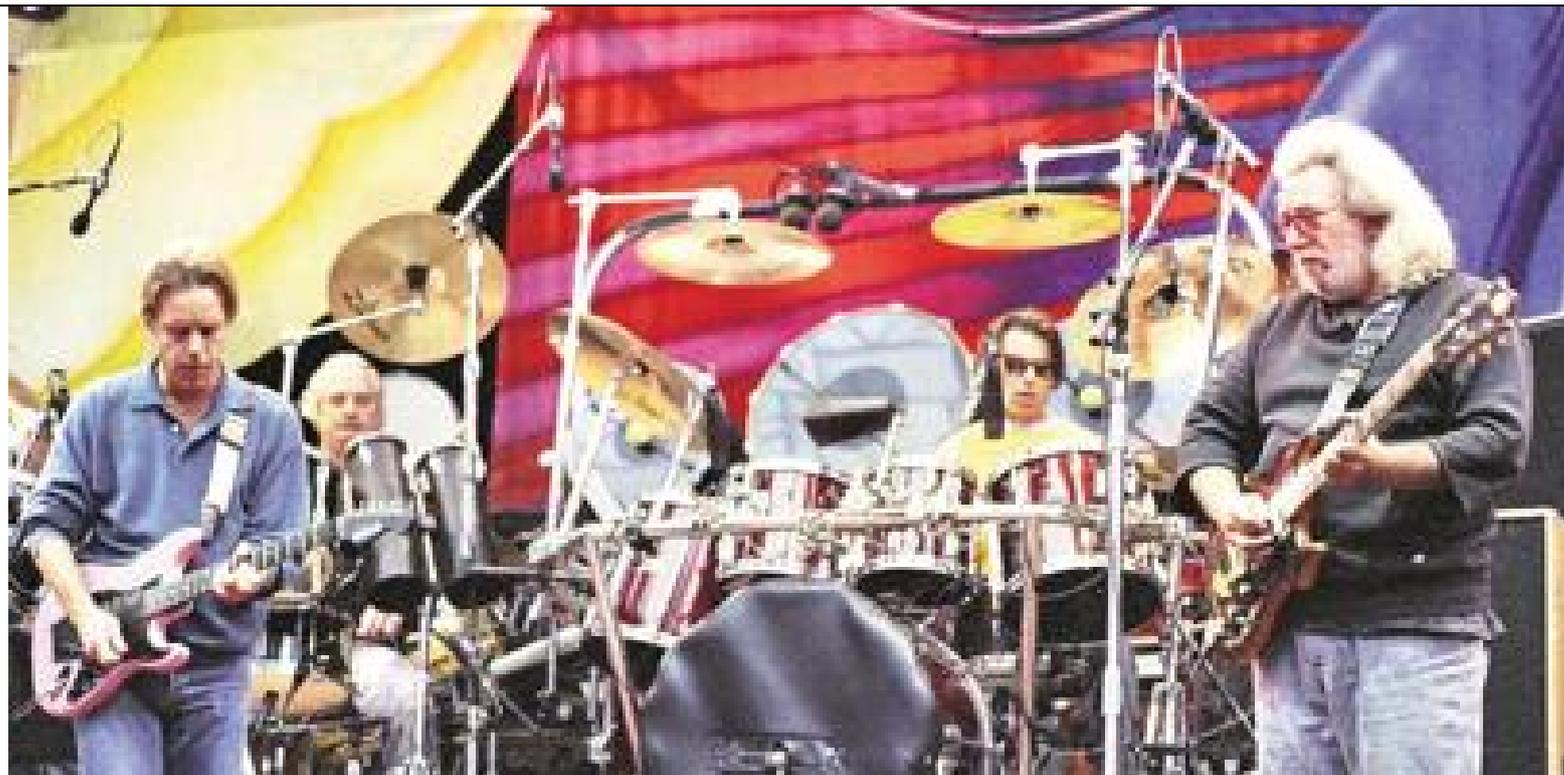
His epic remix, first released in 1994 under the title "Grayfolded," will be reissued Tuesday as a set of three records. The initial release sold more than 80,000 copies on CD. Now, reverting to an older format, Mr. Oswald's handiwork—which clocks in at 110 minutes and draws from 105 live performances—is coming out on vinyl from Important Records of Groveland, Mass.

The Grateful Dead improvised ceaselessly on "Dark Star," hoping to uncover new dimensions. Over the decades, it incited psychedelic fantasies and was continually requested at concerts.

Mr. Oswald, 61 years old, didn't know much about the Dead when he came up with the idea for a "Dark Star" master take more than two decades ago.

"I was aware that they were the highest-grossing touring band in North America, so there was something happening there," he says, "but I didn't pay too much attention." That let him approach the project, which received the band's blessing, "with fresh ears to the whole thing," he says.

The Grateful Dead released "Dark Star" in 1968 as a short single with lyrics that could be interpreted as poetic or opaque. ("Glass hand dissolving to ice petal flowers revolving.") At shows, the band offered up ex-



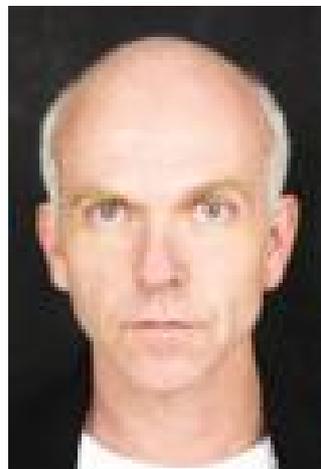
Getty Images (above); John Oswald (below)

tended versions of the song with various introductions and interludes, positioning them at different junctures in their sets.

In 1993, Mr. Oswald traveled from his home in Toronto to San Rafael, Calif., where the band gave him unusual access to their vault of concert recordings. He sifted through boxes of tapes, searching for renditions of "Dark Star" with Grateful Dead librarian Dick Latvala. For about a month, Mr. Oswald listened to versions of the song seven days a week, eight hours a day.

Mr. Oswald assembled his findings on a computer into a sprawling master take, layering versions from decades of shows. Most snippets that figure in his "Grayfolded" composition are about 15 seconds long. Some are shorter; others run for 15 minutes. How many different parts make up the whole? He estimates: "Well over 10,000."

Mr. Oswald made his reputation with an early remix technique he named "plunderphonics." The term,



LONG STRANGE TRIP Oswald, left, listened to hours of Grateful Dead performances.

which the composer coined in 1985, came to encompass his tinkering, as far back as the '60s, with music on archival records and tapes. In one effort, he radically reassembled a Beethoven melody; in another, he slowed down a Dolly Parton recording until her voice sounded like a man's. He released albums with collections of his works, later compiled on the retrospective set "Plunderphonics 69/96," and was at the vanguard of today's flourishing remix and mash-up culture.

Mr. Oswald ran into resistance from the record companies whose artists' work he appropriated. A redo of Michael Jackson's song "Bad" caused copies of a 1989 plunderphonics album to be destroyed under threat of litigation. But his approach piqued the curiosity of the Dead's bass player Phil Lesh, who met Mr. Oswald through the experimental guitarist Henry Kaiser.

Mr. Oswald had an "improviser's ears to hear what was going on, and that's one reason he was given the keys to the vault," Mr. Kaiser said.

The initial release of "Grayfolded" in 1994 didn't spark much reaction from members of the Grateful Dead, who left the composer alone on his project. "I remember Phil saying it sounded kind of long," Mr. Oswald says, "so I made a 1.5-second version for him as a sort of joke." David Gans, a musician and author of "Conversations with the Dead: The Grateful Dead Interview Book," says "Dark Star" is "the Grateful Dead's most important work."

"There really isn't much to it, so it makes the case for the Dead as improvisers," says Mr. Gans, who also hosts the widely syndicated "Grateful Dead Hour" radio show. The original concert versions and especially the expanded "Grayfolded" form, he says, guide listeners "through all these different places: inner space and outer space, delicate silences that last for several seconds between notes and then, minutes later, this place that feels like a soundtrack to a war movie."

► Listen to an excerpt from the "Grayfolded" remix at WSJ.com/Art.