

NOTES FROM ACADEME *By Paul Basken*

## Learning From the Dead

**E**VEN GRATEFUL DEAD TOURS—those months of escapes into the sweet land of peace, love, and understanding—had moments when the real world intruded.

The band's 2,333 live shows brought countless golden moments spent pondering the mystical beauty of Robert Hunter's poetry spun through Jerry Garcia's guitar. They also brought the occasional lost ticket or mud-filled pit outside the portable toilets.

The "Unbroken Chain" conference, which pulled dozens of authors and academics to Amherst last month for the largest university conference on the religious, philosophical, and economic implications of the Grateful Dead experience, brought its own unplanned lesson for the band's admiring scholars.

The Grateful Dead, one of the world's most successful touring bands for much of three decades, arose in the culture of campus-based protest in 1960s. With trademark serendipity, its academic disciples came to the University of Massachusetts on the same day its students walked out, protesting such matters as high fees and undercover police in their dorms.

So when a junior theater major, Sarah R. Finer, struck up a conversation with Mr. Garcia's former wife, Carolyn Adams Garcia, alongside a table of bumper stickers and books preaching peace, politics, and pot, the result was quick. The 61-year-old Ms. Garcia, who still goes by the name Mountain Girl and who divorced Jerry Garcia a few years before he died in 1995, immediately invited Ms. Finer, a member of the campus pagan organization, to come to lunch in the Student Union ballroom and give the latter-day hippie fest an on-the-ground update.

Ms. Finer told the welcoming crowd that one of the protesters' complaints concerned the administration's habit of renting Student Union meeting space to others, such as the Grateful Dead conference itself, leaving fee-paying students few opportunities to stage their own events. "That's not fair," Ms. Finer said.

Cutting even closer to the bone, Ms. Finer looked out across the audience of mostly pale and male academics, several sporting ponytails and multicolored jackets, and reported the protesters' complaint that racial diversity on the campus remains more hope than reality.

"It was a bunch of middle-aged white folks," said one protest organizer, Jeffrey J. Napolitano, president of the UMass Graduate Student Senate, "who in their day may have been just as riled up and upset about these things as these students were."

The Grateful Dead conference was the inspiration of John R. Mullin, the university's dean of graduate studies. Mr. Mullin is not a devoted "Deadhead," but he appreciates the music. He's also a retired Army general and city planner who likes to think in new ways.

Mr. Mullin envisioned last month's academic dissection of the Grateful Dead and its fan base as the first in a series known as "UMass Connections," designed both to break down walls between academic disciplines and to build links between researchers and the wider world.

Mr. Mullin chose the topic in part because of its intellectual value. Thousands of Grateful Dead fans have attended dozens of concerts over three decades, many putting their entire lives on hold to follow the music and the accompanying scene. Studying that behavior to learn

what motivated such an intense passion, Mr. Mullin says, could be invaluable to his fellow city planners, who he says should be designing "communities of interest, rather than communities of propinquity."

And that's just one possible spin. One conference attendee, Joel W. Martin, dean of the College of Humanities and Fine Arts, said he heard wide-ranging discussions of the band and its mesmerizing lyrics that explored ethics, classical literature, Henry David Thoreau, and social movements of the 1830s.

"It's our obligation to study everything that human beings do," from ancient times to the current day, Mr. Martin said.

Those presenting at the conference included Glenn Rifkin, an author of business books, who extracted lessons from the seemingly chaotic Grateful Dead business model (one key principle: emphasize product quality and commitment to the customer over profits).

Others included Lee Johnson, a composer who created a symphonic work based on Grateful Dead songs, and Dan Healy, whose development of the band's sound system incorporated a cutting-edge use of computers and acoustical dynamics.

They were joined by an array of historians, sociologists, communications specialists, language experts,

mers, and the role of CIA-financed LSD tests in getting the band started.

And exactly how far the Grateful Dead experience translates is another matter. One question highlighted by the conference, both during the seminars and at the after-hours parties and tribute concerts, is how deeply the Dead community reflects its own ethos of global inclusiveness.

As Sarah Finer discovered, Deadheads—in addition to their more-recognized political and recreational divergences from national norms—are whiter and richer than most Americans. Most obtain college degrees, many finish graduate school, and those who are students often earn more than their nontouring counterparts, said a 2003 summary of Deadhead survey data.

Such data might reflect not only the wealth and high levels of education among those who can afford to spend months following a rock band around the coun-



Bob Weir (seated, left) and Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead are surrounded by fans backstage at a concert benefiting the Cambodian Emergency Relief Fund, in Oakland, Calif., in 1980.

environmentalists, and ethnomusicologists. Not all, despite Dean Mullin's promise of academic rigor, enjoy the strong backing of their colleagues in academe. One, Stanley Krippner, a psychology professor at Saybrook Graduate School, is known for his 1971 experiments that tested whether Grateful Dead audiences aided by LSD could send telepathic messages to volunteer mystics stationed miles away.

**Y**ET EVEN the more widely accepted members of the establishment agreed with Mr. Mullin that the Grateful Dead and their followers can yield useful social-science insights. For example, the band's lyrics deliberately provoke thoughts and raise questions, while steadfastly avoiding answers, said Steven J. Gimbel, a professor of philosophy at Gettysburg College.

"There was a very conscious reasoning behind that," to allow listeners to bring their own interpretations, he said.

Still, not every topic could get covered in two days. Those now ripe for future academic exploration might include the precise instructions of the Grateful Dead's mail-order ticket system, the social structures of twirling dancers, the Dead's signature use of two drum-

try, but a certain amount of self-selection among fans who appreciate blues- and jazz-flavored music but may have preferred to hear it from Jerry Garcia more than from his muses, like Muddy Waters or John Coltrane.

As Dean Mullin says, the Deadhead society can provide important lessons on topics such as building inclusive communities. As Mountain Girl knows, it also fell short in some ways. She joined the scene in 1965 as a member of the Merry Pranksters, which held the "acid tests" where the Grateful Dead got its start. The San Francisco-based Pranksters traveled the country on a festively decorated bus, spreading the word about LSD, which was still legal. Yet, despite her life alongside the band's most recognized member, she struggled to become a fully privileged member of their society.

"The Prankster bus was extremely egalitarian," Mountain Girl told a conference session on gender relations, "but it was also very male dominated, as far as where the bus went.

"The bus drivers were all men," she said. "In fact I never did get to drive the bus. I always wanted to. I hadn't thought about that in years. I never did get to drive the bus."