

Land of the Dead:

San Francisco, Where It All Began

By Ben Fong-Torres

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When in the mid-Sixties San Francisco came to represent nothing left to lose, there was a handful of identifiable pioneers that changed the face, the sound and the style of pop culture. The changers included the concert promoters Bill Graham and Chet Helms, poster and light-show artists, hosts and alchemists like Ken Kesey and Augustus Owsley Stanley, radio pioneer Tom Donahue, jazz critic Ralph J. Gleason and - yes - *Rolling Stone*.

At the epicenter, of course, were the musicians. Early on, the Grateful Dead, along with a few others, played free concerts as often as paying gigs. Extending their songs into jazz-like improvisatory jams, they broke down the lines between artist and audience.

Back then we -- *Rolling Stone* and the Grateful Dead -- were brothers in arms. The Dead did it onstage; we watched and listened, reported, ranted and raved.

For our very first issue -- published in November 1967 -- we lucked into a story for the ages: the Grateful Dead getting busted at their Haight-Ashbury digs. The police had had it up to their badges with freaks flaunting various laws. Inviting local media along for the roust, they barged into the house at 710 Ashbury St., where most of the Dead and their old ladies lived, and arrested two band members and nine associates and friends on dope charges (Jerry Garcia wasn't one of them; he was out at the time).

Baron Wolman, *Rolling Stone's* first photographer, snapped shots of Bob Weir walking down the front steps, cuffed to Phil Lesh's girlfriend, and Ron "Pigpen" McKernan and Lesh outside their bail bondsman's office across from the Hall of Justice. The next day, after a festive press conference at the house, Wolman shot photographs of a band of unrepentant freaks -- now joined by Garcia, posing in front of 710, with Pigpen brandishing a rifle. The photos took up most of a two-page spread.

The lead, by an uncredited Jann S. Wenner, was textbook hook-'em news writing: "That's what ya get for dealing the killer weed,' laughed state narcotics agent Jerry Van Ramm at the eleven members of the Grateful Dead household he and his agents had rounded up into the Dead's kitchen."

The band and the magazine always had a special relationship, despite the occasional negative album review or report on an unpleasant incident --or *Rolling Stone's* move to New York in 1977. Our common roots transcended trivia; our love of great music kept us bonded.

One day in early '70 we got an impromptu visit from the management and various members of the Dead. The band had just wrapped up recording *Workingman's Dead*; it knew the album was something special, and the band wanted to share it right away. Magazine staffers gathered in the only sizable office (Jann's, of course) and listened in awe to pedal steel licks and tight, pretty country harmonies – from the Dead! – on "Uncle John's Band," "Dire Wolf" and "Casey Jones." Our minds, as someone would later say, were young and blown.

In later years I had occasion to interview Garcia and profile the Dead. Every five years it seemed there would be an anniversary of some sort, and the Dead were always there. And Garcia was always there—was always present – for you. Even his most offhand remarks rang true, like the best of Robert Hunter's lyrics.

It was a Saturday afternoon in late November 1975, and we were preparing for a special issue on the 10th anniversary of the San Francisco scene. Garcia greeted some scruffy press at His Master's Wheels, a studio in an alley off Market Street, in San Francisco, and I asked him about the warping of time.

"It seems like hundreds of years," Garcia said, "and it also seems like not too much time at all. I don't know. Time, you know. Some things haven't changed at all, really. And the world has changed." Perhaps not enough, but in his own quiet, unassuming, different-beat way, Jerry Garcia did his best to change it - or at least to loosen it up a little.

In his successes, in his failures and in the way he addressed them both, with candor, humility and beatific good humor, he was quintessentially San Franciscan. We were his, and he was ours.

The Grateful Dead were at the vanguard of what became known as the San Francisco Scene, the Summer of Love, the '60s. But of all the bands, it was the Dead that remained intact (more than less) and carried the San Francisco banner for three decades.

Sure, the Dead moved out of their Haight-Ashbury digs shortly after that bust in fall of '67, fanning out to Marin County to the north. But they were forever tied to San Francisco and the '60s, and they never resisted or disavowed those bonds. It wasn't just that the Dead were born in the city. It was that the city was reborn with the Dead. San Francisco, as Ralph Gleason put it, was suddenly "the Liverpool of the West."

And in the spirit of a restless town in restless times, the Dead rolled on, breaking and making up rules as they went, eschewing recordings as a steppingstone to riches and relying on concerts instead. But as far from home as the road took them, they returned to punctuate their tour schedule with New Year's Eve concerts in Oakland or San Francisco, yearend runs that took Bay Area Deadheads to Mardi Gras, Halloween, Chinese New Year and Acid Test all at once.

"Jerry was a true San Franciscan," says Deborah Koons Garcia, his wife of a year and a half, by way of explaining why any memorial event, any celebration of Jerry Garcia's life, would have to be in San Francisco. And so it was, in the Polo Field of Golden Gate Park, where the Dead played the Human Be-In in 1967 and, most recently, the memorial concert for Bill Graham in 1991. This time, the Dead's music was on tape, and the band members were there to address the crowd.

Bob Weir, his arms raised to the heavens, said that Garcia "filled this world full of clouds of joy. Just take a little bit of that and reflect it back up to him." And they did – 50,000 arms lifted to the sky, holding imaginary mirrors and sending a bit of San Francisco to wherever he might be.