

The Grammar of the Grateful Dead

by Gary Shank and Eric J. Simon

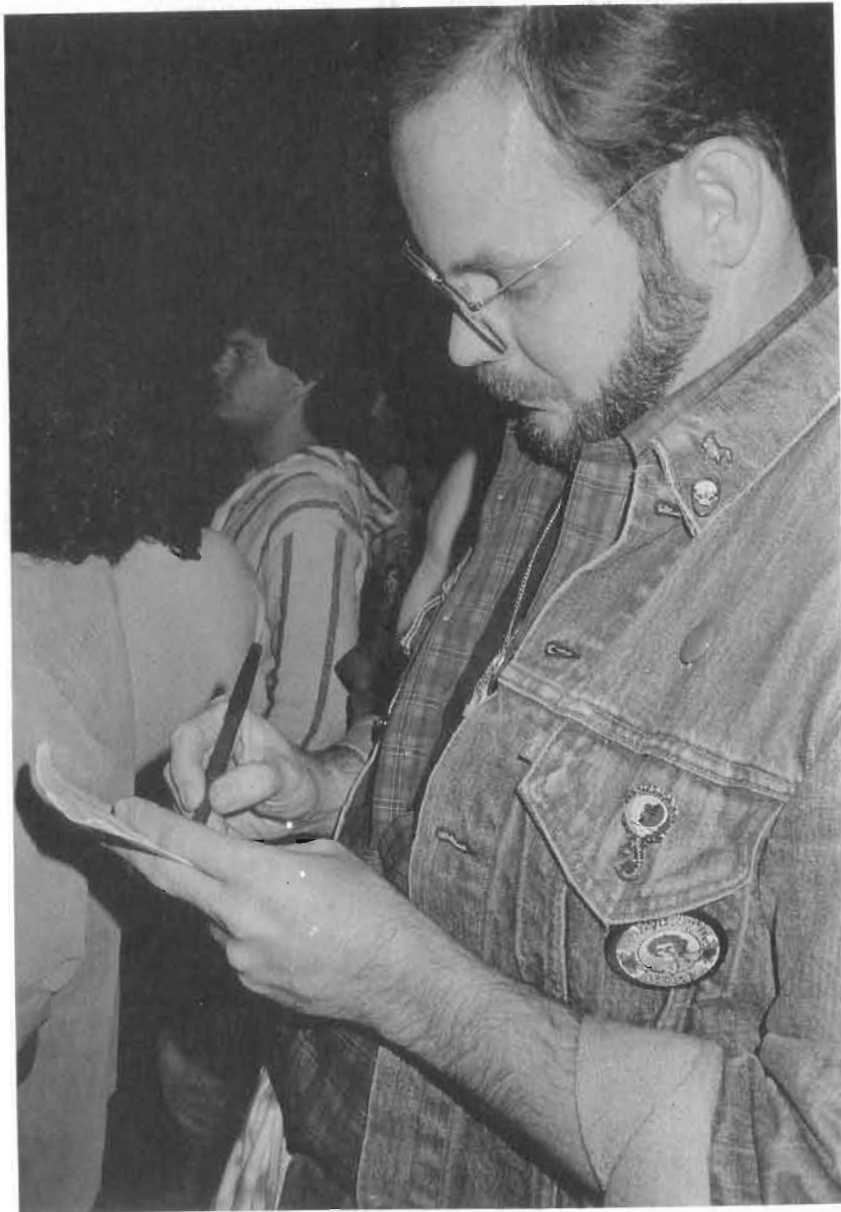
Simon's Personal History

I was a pretty serious Deadhead in college (Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, site of a Dead show the day after the much acclaimed 5/3/70 Harpur College show), once seeing six shows in seven days without missing a single class. My concert-going habit peaked senior year, during which time I also finished a Master's degree and was accepted to a Ph.D. program in biochemistry at Harvard University. I knew that I had to let off steam during my one summer between college and graduate school.

To take advantage of my last truly free time for many years, I toured throughout most of Summer Tour '89, catching 14 shows during June and July. That tour was a highlight of my life. I taped all the shows, sold homemade tie-dyed t-shirts to pay my way, and hitchhiked from show to show, making lifelong friends along the way.

Upon arriving at Harvard in the fall of 1989, my brain was in need of serious refocusing. My graduate work was to be in computational biology, and I needed to get back up to speed with computer programming. I decided on a fun exercise: writing a series of computer programs to perform statistical analyses of the Grateful Dead shows that I had seen (how many different songs I had seen, what songs I had seen the most, what the longest set was, etc.). I wrote the software to perform this task in Fortran and posted some of my early analyses to `rec.music.gdead`. The reactions to my analyses came in one of two types: "Cool! Can you also do such-and-such?" and "How useless!" I decided to embrace the inherent silliness in such a nitpicking analysis of the Dead's work. Thus, *Useless DeadStats* (Simon, 1999) was born.

I greatly expanded the capacities of the program, including arcane analyses by days of the week, protagonist, rarity of a show, etc. I regularly posted my data as tours were completed, wrote *Annual Years in Review* with co-author Randy Jackson, and created a personalized database of information for any Deadhead who emailed their list of shows



Deadhead keeping setlist. Photo by John Rottet.

to me. Eventually, the *Useless DeadStats* program was standardized into an email server, which peaked at about 50 inquiries a month in the early 1990s. While my work on *Useless DeadStats* has never directly benefited my career as a scientific educator and researcher, it did provide a fun way to practice writing statistical analysis software in Fortran, a skill that proved valuable both in my graduate research and in a postdoctoral position I held with Cray Research, Inc.

In 1992, I was contacted out of the blue by Gary Shank, an established academic researcher who had read my analyses on the Internet. He was working on a semiotic analysis of Grateful Dead setlists and had some ideas that needed statistical backing. He wrote to me and asked if I would be interested in a collaboration. I agreed, and over the next several months, he sent me specific inquiries. I modified my code to generate the pieces of information that he requested. Gary and I have never met in person, but our email collaboration resulted in a published paper and our contribution to this book.

Shank's Personal History

As a researcher, I am attracted to the Grateful Dead because of their inherent semiotic richness. While I enjoy their music now, I was more interested during the '60s in the music of the Doors and of such jazz greats as Charles Mingus and John Coltrane. I saw my first Dead show in decades at Soldier Field in 1992, and it was there that I realized that they had transmogrified into the Great American Band. My contributions to this paper derive entirely from that flash of insight.

One final note: Even though I have not met Eric face-to-face, I have enjoyed our collaboration as much as any other joint project I have worked on. I hope such virtual projects become more and more common in our new cyber era.

A View of the Gathering

Imagine the following scenario: A linguistic anthropologist has come upon a large gathering of people. Almost all of them are wearing colorful costumes that are striking in their variance from the normal drab and formal clothes that are usually found in this area of the world. The gathering has herded itself into a large outdoor arena. Dusk is settling, and it is early summer. While most of the tribespeople are chatting informally and casually among themselves, they continue to monitor covertly a stage area at the front of the arena. A large assemblage of musical paraphernalia has been gathered upon the stage. Finally, amidst

the wild cheering of the audience, six musicians come on stage. Two of them settle behind a collection of percussion instruments. Three of them carry guitars. The final musician sits down to a keyboard. The guitarists plug into amplifiers, and proceed to fine-tune and test the sound pickup. The crowd cheers more wildly than ever. There is an electrifying tension in the air and an anticipatory mood continues to build. For the most part, the musicians turn their backs to the crowd as they concentrate on getting ready to play.

After completing these preparations in a steady and unhurried way, the musicians finally turn to face the crowd collectively. They shout things to each other, nod their heads, and slowly begin to make music. At first, they are noodling around, testing the sound and checking to see if everyone is ready to play. At no time have any of the musicians said anything at all to the crowd. Eventually, a musical theme starts to emerge. Perhaps it is from the bass guitar or maybe it is a particular rhythm line laid down by one or more of the drummers. More often than not, the theme seems to be led by either the rhythm guitarist or the lead guitarist. As the theme takes shape, the members of the crowd, who have been standing since the musicians arrived, begin to howl gleefully and dance. Then, either the lead guitarist or the rhythm guitarist steps up to a microphone and begins to sing. Upon recognition of the song, the crowd begins to dance more wildly, cheer with Dionysian abandon, and sing along.

The band continues to play for between 45 minutes and an hour, playing six to nine songs. At the end of the final song, the rhythm guitarist says to the crowd, "We'll be back in a little bit." After 30 or 40 minutes, the band returns to the stage and performs the same tuning and noodling ritual. People in the crowd shout song titles, but the band members seemingly ignore these vocalizations. They start playing again, settling into a series of songs that runs into an extended drum session, a long free-form improvisational instrumental segment, and finally back into two or three songs. In all, the second set lasts between 90 minutes and two hours. After a rousing final number, the band leaves the stage silently. They are beckoned back for a single encore. At the end of the final song of the night, the lead guitarist says to the audience, "Thanks and goodnight."

Over a three-hour span, the members of the band have said exactly eleven words to the crowd. And yet, the anthropologist observed a sense of profound closeness and intimacy between the band and the crowd. What the anthropologist observed was a typical Grateful Dead concert.

How is it that the Grateful Dead was able to create a powerful and intimate concert experience with so little overt verbal communication? Why were Grateful Dead concerts treasured by audiences as unique and transformational experiences? And why was the Grateful Dead more popular when they ceased playing together in 1995 than they were in the '60s?

Research by social scientists into the nature of rock 'n' roll is not all that unusual, but most of it deals with ethnographic (Kotarba & Wells, 1987) or participant observer (Goodall, 1991) activities, including research dealing explicitly with the Grateful Dead experience (e.g., Pearson, 1987). In this paper, we are less interested in the sociological dynamics of the Dead and their audience, and more interested in the semiotic characteristics of the music (Henrotte, 1992) and the larger semiotic codes of culture (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993; Solomon, 1988) encapsulated in the Grateful Dead phenomenon. Toward that end, we will use the nature of the Grateful Dead setlist as the basis of our study into the social and semiotic dimensions of their music. Furthermore, we will expand upon the semiotic structure of the concert to look upon the entire tour experience not just as a series of unique concerts, but as the embodiment of a curious and powerful temporal anomaly that can be best understood via postmodern scrutiny. Our strategy will be to start with the modernist approach of structuralism, and see how far that allows us to go in an explanatory direction. In the end, however, postmodern concepts and ideas will be used to try to shed new light on the most unique and perplexing phenomenon of popular music: The Grateful Dead and their legion of Deadheads.

Some Necessary Contextual Grounding

In dealing with any complex phenomenon, it is necessary to lay out a few ground rules in the beginning. Otherwise, the study of that phenomenon can grow and expand in any number of directions. This is the case with the Grateful Dead. Some of the areas of potential examination which will not be explored here are the whole motif of the Sixties and the youth revolution, the Deadhead culture, the link between the band and drug use, psychedelic art and music, marginalization of the music of the band and of Deadheads in general, and so on. While these topics are worthy of study, they can only be presupposed for the sake of this presentation.

One area that is critically important for subsequent understanding is the origin of the name of the band. The name "Grateful Dead" suggests images of death, violence, and alienation that, when matched with

the skeletal imagery that pervades the visual presentation of the band, leads the uninitiated to equate the music of the band with heavy metal and possibly satanic strains of popular music. Actually, the music of the Grateful Dead is an amalgam of American popular music from bluegrass to country and western to pop music to jazz and blues, as well as atonal "space" music and the signature psychedelic riffs that characterized most San Francisco rock bands of the late Sixties. What, then, is the significance of the name "Grateful Dead," especially in the face of so much real and potential misunderstanding and miscommunication?

There are a number of legends about the choice of the name. The most likely explanation is that the name reflects the ancient folk motif of the "grateful dead man." As Thompson (1977, p. 50) notes,

The helper in a notable group of European and Asiatic tales is a mysterious person known as the grateful dead man. In all these tales we learn of a hero who finds the creditors are refusing to permit the burial of a corpse until the dead man's debts have been paid. The hero spends his last penny to ransom the dead man's body and to secure his burial. Later, in the course of his adventures, he is joined by a mysterious stranger who agrees to help him in all his endeavors. This stranger is the grateful dead man. The only condition which the dead man makes when he agrees to help the hero is that all winnings which the latter makes shall be equally divided.

One of the critical assumptions for this paper is that the band deliberately personifies many of the characteristics of the grateful dead man of legend, and that this personification is at least implicitly understood and practiced by most fans.

Perhaps the best way to see this process at work is in the handling of concert tickets. First of all, Grateful Dead tickets were distributed in a totally unique way. The band often charged the same price for all tickets, regardless of where the seats were. Furthermore, they sold approximately half of all venue tickets themselves via mail-order, and the band selected the seat assignments for reserved seating venues. In Gary's case, during the 1993 Rosemont Horizon run, where he ordered four tickets for each of the three nights they played, he received first row center lower balcony seats the first night, seventh row floor seats the second night, and left side upper balcony seats the last night. For most California shows, all seats were general admission, leaving the fans to seat themselves in a civilized and equitable manner, which they generally did. Ticket prices were also usually below prices for similar rock groups. For example, in the summer of 1994, ticket prices in the Chicago area were as follows: Bonnie Raitt (\$40), Rolling Stones (\$50),