

Do Not Speak Ill of the Dead

The story of a great American rock band, by its historian and publicist.

A LONG STRANGE TRIP

The Inside History of the Grateful Dead.
By Dennis McNally.
Illustrated. 684 pp. New York:
Broadway Books. \$30.

By Will Hermes

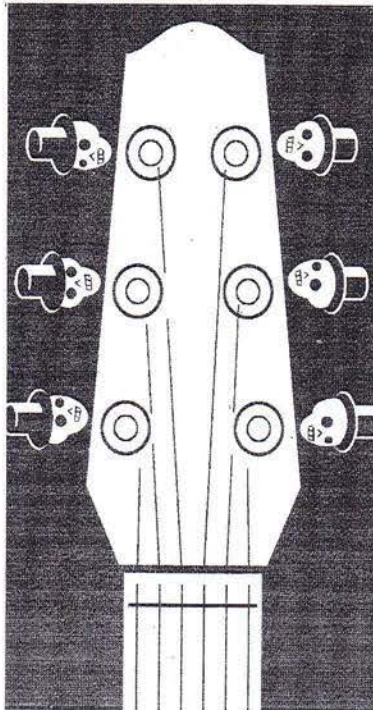
WELL, what else was he going to call it? Years after the band's demise, so much about the Grateful Dead still invites parody, from its tie-dyed minions — following the tours in VW buses held together with hummus and dancing-bear bumper stickers — to lyrics like this book's title, invoked like biblical wisdom by a bleary-eyed generation. Even before anti-cool avatars like Al and Tipper Gore came out as Deadheads, merely mentioning the group's name set eyes rolling.

It was not always thus. The Dead came together in mid-60's San Francisco, the counterculture's ground zero, where the band was hot-wired by Ken Kesey, the author of "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," who was the nexus of the LSD-fueled scene documented in Tom Wolfe's "Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test." The Dead was enlisted as house band for Kesey's "acid tests" — basically interactive concerts where people got supernally high — and soon became rock's foremost psychedelic warriors. They adopted the legendary LSD chemist Owsley Stanley as sound man and patron, spreading acid consciousness like eyedropper-wielding Johnny Appleseeds while making poetic, far-ranging and frequently abstract music for a worshipful audience. This was hardly about courting the mainstream, let alone future vice presidents.

Yet as the band's cosmic Americana came to represent the zenith of hippie idealism, and its fans the nadir of hippie cluelessness, the Dead had almost incidentally become, for a time, perhaps the greatest of American rock bands. It's this sense of cultural context and musical accomplishment that Dennis McNally brings to his exhaustive and occasionally exhausting history, which enters the stacks of a thriving micro-genre one might call "Dead Lit." It includes biographies (Carol Brightman's ambitious "Sweet Chaos"), fan catalogs ("The Deadhead's Taping Compendium"), academic studies ("Deadhead Social Science"), even psychic post-mortem dialogues ("In the Spirit").

But McNally, an American history Ph.D. and author of the wonderful Jack Kerouac biography "Desolate Angel," is distinguished by being the Dead's hired "historian" and publicist. This may not make him the most objective biographer, but it does make him a devoted one. In the preface to "Desolate Angel" (1979), McNally confessed of Kerouac's Beat posse, "I do not think it is a breach of my respect for scholastic accuracy to acknowledge that I regard these alienated American prophets as my spiritual and intellectual ancestors." While he brings a similar awe

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to his employers in "A Long Strange Trip," his hagiographic breathlessness doesn't stay his ability as a historian. Mostly, it seems to drive his ambition.

The early chapters center on Jerry Garcia, the Dead's musical and spiritual anchor. An asthmatic, artistically inclined troublemaker from a broken home, Garcia hung out in San Francisco's North Beach at Kepler's Bookstore, savored art films like "The Saragossa Manuscript" and fell in love with folk and bluegrass music. Much time is devoted to the group's diverse aesthetic roots. The bass player Phil Lesh studied composition with Luciano Berio and staged multimedia events with the minimalist composer Steve Reich; the singer-keyboardist Ron McKernan, known as Pigpen, was expelled from high school, guzzled bootleg whiskey and hung out in blues clubs; the guitarist Bob Weir strove to emulate the jazz pianist McCoy Tyner; the lyricist Robert Hunter cribbed from T. S. Eliot, Gary Snyder and Hans Christian Andersen; the drummers Bill Kreutzmann and Mickey Hart explored self-hypnosis and classical Indian drumming. These streams would converge in epic, ever varied concert sets that were equal parts church service and bacchanal, spinning mythic tales of hard luck and serendipitous redemption with a cast of shaggy New World archetypes.

Entering the Dionysian headspace of a Dead show experience is key to understanding the group's mystical appeal, and McNally does a great job of articulating it. In a series of interstitial chapters strung like love beads along the book's narrative line, McNally describes a typical arena concert from the mid-80's — when the band's

seasonal tours had become as much a part of American entertainment culture as the N.F.L. These riffs range from backstage preparations and fan babble ("The Grateful Dead represents the high-water mark of civilization") to musical parsings that, even when they overreach, evoke the rapture with insight. On an improvisational passage: "Garcia's guitar simply squeezes out the lead, the same sure descent but with overtones of pathos and majesty," and then the band members "send it up one more time and then speed it up and split it into a shimmering waterfall glissando of grace notes, tears from the goddess muse. And a little ... feedback, too." On the signature song "Uncle John's Band": "This is the American voice as Whitman and Kerouac and Ginsberg and William Carlos Williams dreamed it, but wrapped in dance trance."

McNally also salts in Dos Passos-ish newsreel bits that connect the exploits of the largely apolitical band to the culture at large. He notes the Dead's F.B.I. file, and links the group to the notorious antidrug "Blue Boy" episode of "Dragnet," the birth of underground FM radio, the Woodstock festival, the infamous Rolling Stones concert at Altamont, the inventor of the mountain bike, even the mythologist Joseph Campbell, who called a Dead concert the "antidote for the atom bomb." At times, the narrative reads like "Forrest Gump" with a road crew and a pharmacopoeia.

By the mid-80's, however, the bloom is off the hippie-era rose. Garcia — who would have turned 60 this month — was burdened with the status of subcultural guru, and developed a taste for heroin. As the band succumbs to the quintessentially American tendency toward overexpansion, the story takes the familiar arc of a "Behind the Music" episode. McNally doesn't skirt the ugliness of Garcia's decline (although readers wanting to wallow in full details are referred to Robert Greenfield's oral history of Garcia, "Dark Star"). Yet writing your employers' biography must be a touchy business, and by the time the author begins appearing in third person as "Scrib," the book begins to bog down in tour shenanigans and trivia, leaving latter-day muck largely unraked and even breezing by potentially fascinating events like the band's extended collaboration with Bob Dylan.

Garcia's death in 1995 ended the band as it ends "A Long Strange Trip," which despite its flaws remains the most complete Dead chronicle we are ever likely to get. But as the author notes, the band's legacy persists. In addition to projects by its remaining members, there is an entire subgenre of "jam bands" who, like the Dead, use improvisation and dance rhythms as their modus operandi; drawing fans who collect live recordings and follow their favorite acts from show to show. The psychedelic idealism of rave culture, the online world of MP3 file-sharing, the annual American freak-fest known as Burning Man — all reflect the sense of radical community the Dead engendered. Those seeds of gentle anarcho-utopianism continue to sprout in unexpected places, promoting what one critic called "the quaint notion that art can save your life." If it can't do so forever, there's still reason to be grateful. □