



The Gratefulest Story Ever Told

Dennis McNally's *A Long Strange Trip: The Inside History of the Grateful Dead*

Broadway Books, \$30.00

Reviewed by Richard B. Simon

To journalists seeking face-time with the Grateful Dead, publicist Dennis McNally tends to come across as a real hardass. Since 1984, he has been the firewall protecting their off-stage personae from the scrutinous public eye—but the publicist gig has always been a side job. A trained historian with a PhD. from the University of Massachusetts, McNally was first tapped by guitarist Jerry Garcia in 1980, to write the band's history, *A Long Strange Trip: The Inside History of the Grateful Dead*.

"I've learned how to be a publicist, and I'm glad to do it," said McNally, 52, as the Other Ones' rehearsal thundered through the wall at the Dead's Club Front studio/office in Marin County, "but this is what I came for."

McNally was working on his dissertation when a friend dragged him to his first Dead show, turning him on in one fell swoop to the psychedelic experience, the Dead, and a broader vision of his life's work—a two-volume history of bohemia in post-World War II America. Volume one would be told through the life of Kerouac (*Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation, and America*), and volume two through the Grateful Dead.

"I saw these connections between these two great social phenomena—

and, fortunately for me—so did Jerry," McNally said. "A couple months after he and I first met, he sent a couple of guys that worked for him, and they said, 'Jerry says *why don't you do us?*' And I said '*good idea!*'"

A Long Strange Trip reads more like a work of hip scholarship than a gossip column. McNally followed the lead of Lytton Strachey, considered the father of modern biography, whose *Eminent Victorians* (1918) told the story of the times through the lives of four individuals.

Like a singular occurrence of a repeated pattern in an intricate tapestry, the Grateful Dead appear at the convergence of myriad threads of American culture: the place where bluegrass, the Beat generation and Miles Davis meet the Hell's Angels, Joseph Campbell and the CIA. McNally covers every major event of the '60s and further, and the Dead are tangential to or directly entangled in much of it, influencing the culture as much as the culture influences them. Sometimes, they are simply in sync—while they play three shows at the Great Pyramid in 1978, U.S. President Jimmy Carter is at Camp David negotiating peace between Egypt and Israel.

The book opens at the beginning—of a show, of course—literally setting the stage for the story to be told:

Shortly before every Grateful Dead concert, there is a luminous, suspended moment. The doors are still closed. The band has not yet arrived. Bathed in the subliminal hum of the stage's electric potential, you smell the ozone of 133,000 burning watts and realize that the elegantly arranged castle of equipment around you is alive—not just stuff, but a sentient alchemical sculpture. You are surrounded by an enormous electronic beast that can link the group consciousness of six musicians and an audience of thousands to transmute notes, thoughts, and volts, fusing boogie dancing, high-tech doodah, and the act of performance into a subtle, profoundly human ritual of celebration. This stage is a giant alembic, the fabled alchemical chamber where the magical transformation took place. It is a portal to the mysterious world beyond daily life.

The main line travels chronologically, from Garcia's and bassist Phil Lesh's childhoods through Garcia's death and the scattering of his ashes in 1995. The book bulges with great new stories, from brushes with straight society (dosing *Playboy* honcho Hugh Hefner on television; sharing a hotel with presidential candidate George McGovern in 1972, and confounding his Secret Service detail with a room-to-room fireworks battle), to the more personal, such as the "firing" of singer/keyboardist Ron "Pigpen" McKernan and guitarist Bob Weir; the violent effect of Dead membership on keyboardist Keith and singer Donna Godcheaux's marriage; and the band members' chronic confrontation avoidance and stunted emotional ability to deal with big problems—like keyboardist Brent Mydland's death and Garcia's drug use.

The linear narrative is cut with "Interlude" chapters, describing a typical year on the road in the '80s-'90s, and within that construct, a typical show (the band takes the stage at Chinese New Year, with Weir flubbing the lyrics to "Truckin'" as the crew works out technical kinks. By the time we get to "Drums," it's October.) Other interludes highlight promoters, the crew, or—through ample quotes—the band's take on themselves, effectively showing the Grateful Dead as a living, breathing beast, snorting and snarling amid its own fabled history.

True to Grateful Dead form, McNally gives us the thorns with the roses, remaining fair to his subjects, without whitewashing the story.

"A publicist is there to represent his client," he said. "I wrote this book to tell the truth."