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BOOKS

A Long Strange Trip

From bohemian utopia to drug abuse and death, the Dead's official historian records it all without blinking

The Inside History of the Grateful Dead ★★★

Dennis McNally *Broadway Books*

IMPRESSED BY DENNIS MCNALLY'S 1979 BOOK *Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation and America*, Jerry Garcia suggested, soon after meeting him, "Why don't you do us?" The Dead were hardly known for inviting strangers into their world, but, as when he was improvising onstage, Garcia believed that if you trust the inspiration of the moment, it will take you somewhere compelling. And if it plunged you into disaster, well, that was an acceptable part of the trip, too.

This time, Garcia chose wisely. Beginning in 1980, McNally became the band's "historian" and eventually its publicist. Dubbed "Scrib," he was — and continues to be — a fully enshrined member of the Dead family, and he witnessed or participated in all the notable events of their personal and professional lives once he came on the scene. *A Long Strange Trip* is the result of his adventures, and even at a daunting 684 pages, it's a smart, engaging, moving journey.

McNally took his task as historian seriously. Perhaps to derail any assumption that

the book would be some sort of stoned rant, he researches every subject meticulously — from the Acid Tests of the Sixties to the evolution of the group's legendary sound systems. His affection for the band members doesn't prevent him from indicting the "emotional cowardice" of their passive refusal to confront problems — cocaine and heroin abuse, managerial power plays — that frequently threatened to destroy them.

Predictably, McNally's chronicling of the bohemian utopia that was San Francisco in the Sixties — fully half the book — is the strongest, sweetest part of his story. As Garcia's anarchic flair and Zen detachment descend near the end into drug-induced inertia, the tale

grows sadder. McNally's reporting at that point remains responsible and never lurid. You can practically feel him steeling himself to get through it. It's a painful end to a saga that is otherwise filled with joy, lunacy and hope — as well as a sense of wonder and possibility that the music world is unlikely to see again.

ANTHONY DECURTIS

