

BOOK REVIEWS

Dead spread will feed the heads

A LONG STRANGE TRIP

THE INSIDE HISTORY OF
THE GRATEFUL DEAD

DENNIS MCNALLY

(BROADWAY; 600 PGS.; \$30)

By PHIL GALLO

Rock 'n' roll and its associated lifestyles usually look most attractive to the fringe players, the folks who concertgoers see standing on the side of the stage during the show with all-access laminates around their necks and — in the case of many during the '60s and '70s — a passel of drugs in tow. Dennis McNally, who approached the Dead 22 years ago with the intention of being their biographer and historian, and then became their publicist in 1984, certainly has that vantage point over the last 14 years of the band's existence. But it's the deep digging into the players' origins and the social setting from which the band sprang that makes "A Long Strange Trip" such an engaging read. "Trip" is certainly proof lightning only strikes once: Any band that uses the Dead's tale as a primer on how to succeed in the music business without really trying will find themselves collapsing in the starting blocks.

It's no surprise that Jerry Garcia is his central character. What is a surprise is how Garcia's personal ennui and the Zen-like peace he derived from leading without decisiveness gave the Dead their overriding character. The Grateful Dead, quite bizarrely, was a sum of its parts

though hardly reflective of a collective personality; as a unit, the Dead functioned without direction, effectively swallowing Bob Weir, Bill Kreutzman, Mickey Hart and Phil Lesh despite their occasional kicking and screaming to be more than just a bandmate of Garcia and/or Ron "Pigpen" McKernan.

The band appeared perpetually out of control away from the stage, and McNally's book essentially confirms that. Under Pigpen's tutelage, the act rose in Northern California as a dance band specializing in uptempo blues; once they became associated with psychedelics, they started to splinter into factions: the LSD-saturated space-out players and the gritty, whiskey-chugging blues/R&B enthusiasts. That both parties stay married throughout the Dead's existence is something of a miracle — virtually every other band that dabbled in as many genres as the Dead did were forced to find a singular focus or else render



themselves irrelevant.

"They did not particularly want to pursue the American dream of financial success; rather, they wanted to invent a new dream and a new mythology," McNally writes. "The original American dream — that anything is possible, and that the frontier

was

to be sought and then left behind — remained real for them. After psychedelics, everything is new, is possible; the frontier is shown to be within."

It was as McKernan's health was failing that the Dead, with lyricist Robert Hunter, began to forge a vision of a new West on albums such as "Workingman's Dead" and

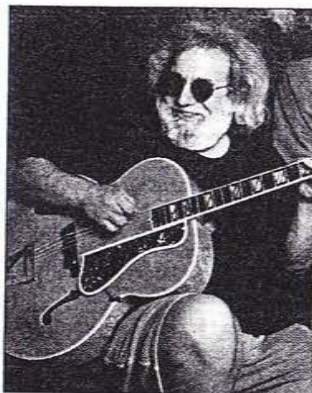
"American Beauty." McNally is evenhanded when it comes to praising some discs and chastising others, realizing those two early '70s albums, along with Europe '72," remain the cornerstones of their recorded output.

McNally makes a gamble — and it pays off nicely — breaking up the historical track by placing the reader in the here and now with McNally as our eyes and ears backstage, in a hotel, on a flight. His deep research is the real jewel here, particularly as it relates to Owsley Stanley, the man nicknamed Bear who first manufactured and supplied the group's LSD and then became their concert sound engineer. His story, so redemptive that it's practically a parable, weaves in and out of that of the Dead; he scales highs, suffers

lows, and even becomes a bit of a healer.

McNally's first biographical tome was on Jack Kerouac ("Desolate Angel") and it benefited from the perspective of the Beat author's traveling partner Neal Cassady. Cassady is part of the Dead's story, but the role he played is taken over by Bear; were there ever a film made on the Dead, Bear's p.o.v. would be a fine way to go.

David Kemper, who played drums for Garcia's side band until he was fired with no explanation, summed up the Dead's and Garcia's antipathy toward producing a quality show or record time in and time out. "It didn't matter if it was good or bad or who he had on stage with him," Kemper says of Garcia, especially in the guitarist's later years. "And I don't blame them. Being in the same room with Jerry was pretty damn wonderful place to be." For anyone who shares that sentiment, this will be their book of the year.



UNCLE JER'S BAND: Jerry Garcia's ennui and Zen-like peace gave character to the evolving band.

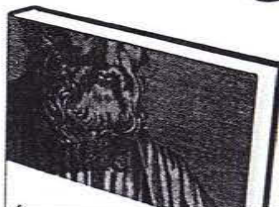
The author digs deep into players' origins and the milieu of the band.

My big fat Greek guide helps scribes

ARISTOTLE'S POETICS
FOR SCREENWRITERS

MICHAEL TIERNO

(HYPERION; \$19.95; 192 PGS.)



logue and character comes first. The ability to plot comes later."

Aristotle, and by extension Tierno, is most helpful with story structure, focusing for the balance of the book on the approach that has made Robert McKee and Syd Field household names to the

appeal. Focusing only on recent movies like "American Beauty," "Titanic" and "Road Trip" (yes, that "Road Trip"), he has clearly chosen to go after an audience not steeped in the Greek classics.

In an unfortunate effort to add his own voice to the proceedings,