

OK Fine, We'll Lecture: Protest and Social Commentary in the Lyrics of the Grateful Dead

[start at Prezi station #2--main display screen]

Opening Remarks

1. The word "apolitical" shows up all over the place when talking about the Grateful Dead, which some people find odd, considering the time and place they came from.

-My friend John. [Prezi #3 image of John]

2. However, I submit that a number of Grateful Dead songs did contain protest and social commentary.

3. There's also a lot of talk about how the Dead's very existence was a protest that carried a hippie ethos through the burnt out 1970s and 80s.

-Alroy: "If anyone's still a hippy all these decades later, it's got a lot to do with their efforts.

And in my mind that's definitely a good thing."

-Important to note that this was not nostalgia either; their continuous growth and change

meant it was a live thing, proved it could sustain in all times and climates.

4. Two threads to the Dead's songs as protest and social commentary:

-Direct protest

-The endorsement of another way of life.

So, let's examine these points.

Is It Fair To Say the Dead Were Apolitical?

-That exact word was used by multiple critics and journalists to describe them.

-But were they? [Prezi#4 image of R,K,M] Yes and no. Yes, many personal lefty opinions, but they didn't want to express it in the music.

-[Prezi #5 Reagan] Garcia says he doesn't like Reagan (Alice Kahn in Dodd and Spaulding

203)

-Lesh on hearing about the Kennedy assassination [Prezi #6 Kennedy] said "That was the day my illusions were blown away, one hundred percent" (McNally 54).

-Hunter says the political side of folk never interested Garcia (McNally, 32), and states flat out "the Grateful Dead was not a political band" (Mary Eisenhart in Dodd and Spaulding 189).

-Weir on Vietnam: "We weren't into protesting it--we were realistic enough to realize that there was nothing we could do that was going to change anything" (McNally 174).

-They felt it wasn't their place to say anything, and Garcia was outright scared of the idea

-[Prezi #7 McGovern] Garcia's reaction to a call from George McGovern's campaign asking for help: "To hear that somebody who might be president even knew my name--I put the phone under the pillow for the rest of the weekend" (McNally 442).

-As far back as 1967 "We don't have anything to tell anybody. We don't want to change anybody" (Jackson 120).



So, as a band at least, they didn't want to be political, which leads to an important question [Prezi #8 Haight Ashbury]:

Were the Dead Really Out of Step with the 1960s by Not Being Political? In San Francisco at least, it doesn't look like it

-Numerous references say the Haight scene not being political, with a particular strong contrast to the Berkeley radicals. [per Kathryn, hippies and Yippies did not share goals-- Yippies anti-draft. hippies anti war]

-At the Human Be-In event itself: Garcia said that hearing Jerry Rubin speak on he [Garcia] was on LSD he got images of Hitler in his mind--that kind of angry rhetoric (Jackson 121).

And yet, the Grateful Dead did put their imprimatur on a number of causes.

Not Avoiding Protest

1. Benefits: Black Panthers, [Prezi #9 Dead playing at, I think, MIT] striking students at MIT & SF State (McNally 304). In the wake of Kent State, [Prezi #10 the fist close-up] Weir silk screened a red fist on the bass drum heads, People's Park (which had experienced fraught protests) (McNally 310), rainforest benefit in 1988 (Jackson 380).

2. Garcia and Lesh, both played on David Crosby's very pointed "What Are Their Names?"

Protest Songs

[Prezi #11 all song images]

1. New Speedway Boogie

- about Altamont. Not an accident that this is their first really topical song; Altamont is seen by many as the end of the hippie era/Sixties/what have you. Since the Dead were invested in that alternative society, it makes sense they'd write about it.

-Even so, in 1971 Garcia said he considered it "an overreaction" (Jackson 176).

2. Morning Dew

-Dobson's spoken intro makes it abundantly clear that it's a song about post-nuclear war. The Dead were smart people, they knew what they were singing. Not explicitly political, but certainly an anti-war sentiment, an idea that we weren't fighting the commies, we were fighting both governments' willingness to destroy human life.

-and it's very interesting that they first performed it at the Human Be-In in 1967 (McNally 179, Jackson 121-2), which was a triumph of hippies, not activism.

3. We Can Run But We Can't Hide

-A straight up environmental message, used in an Audobon PSA (McNally 571). Nice thought but, sort of proving everyone's point about message songs, it's not particularly rich in its imagery the way so many other Grateful Dead songs are.

4. [Prezi # 12 Blues For Allah cover] Blues For Allah

-Interesting case. This is very explicitly political--even Hunter thinks so (McNally 483).

But, was performed only three times, at least two of which had no vocals, and the lyrics are heavily garbled by a weird vocal effect. I'm going to play a couple of key lines,

edited together [Prezi # 13 Blues For Allah, music]. For anyone who didn't already know

the lyrics, I don't know if you were able to make out "What good is spilling blood? It will not grow a thing" and "The flower of Islam, the fruit of Abraham."

-It's a song that again, stresses togetherness, pushes peace--no anger.

-Remember Weir's remark that he didn't think the Dead could do anything to affect the Vietnam War. Yet there was even less they could do about the Arab-Israeli conflict, and there's Blues For Allah. Change in perspective as they got older? Or easier because it was something farther away?

5. [Prezi #14 Aldrin] Standing On The Moon

-Has a *lot* of references to war. Mentions El Salvador, which was at that time embroiled

in ongoing violence with U.S. support ("Timeline") and Southeast Asia, which of course is

the location of Vietnam, though the war was long over by 1989.

-Still: not a strident anti-war song for all that. A different message, more about how none of that stuff matters in the long run. The narrator hears both victory and defeat--a balance. Also the image of the US flag. "Someone" planted it "long ago." Lost to history, a message of how little any of the conflict gets us.

-And the message at the end is "I miss you, this amazing achievement is no compensation"--so it still tempers things with an emphasis elsewhere, in this case a basic love story.

6. Throwing Stones

-McNally: Originally "'No politics' and 'no lectures' were the implicit and fundamental rules of the Dead's lyricists as far as Barlow was concerned" (544-5), but he was infuriated by the Star Wars MRVs in Wyoming.

-Easily the most explicitly political song in the Dead's repertoire, and yet it's also largely

unfocused when it comes to specific targets. Weir has said it's "an anarchistic diatribe" (McNally 545).

-"Ashes, ashes all fall down." McNally repeats the idea that Ring Around the Rosie is about the Black Death (545) [Prezi # 15 Black Death], but most research shows that's not true ("Ring Around"). Whether or not Barlow and Weir thought that was largely irrelevant, because it's pretty clear what ashes they were concerned with in 1982 [Prezi #16 mushroom cloud **CLICK TWICE**] making Throwing Stones a cousin to Morning Dew, both of which avoid blaming specific parties in favor of pointing out we're all screwed in the event of a nuclear war.

-Interestingly, the song still ends up at the Dead's original political disengagement. It concludes the whole world's power structure is run wrong which means there's nothing worth engaging with. Then there's the line "the kids they dance and shake their bones"--Barlow's alternative isn't revolution or protest but a party, dancing, art. We've come back around to "tune in, turn on, drop out."

7. My Brother Esau

-McNally says it's about Vietnam, and this is a possibility--killing a hunter, especially when

Esau himself is a hunter, might imply war, and the mention of 1969 implies Vietnam. He's also said to fail at war--is Esau America? Vietnam's really the first war we lost.

-Agreement from one poster on Annotated Site (Chris Keiner qtd. in Dodd "Annotated"). Another one says it's about Altamont, with "killed a Hunter" meaning Meredith Hunter (alex allan qtd. in Dodd "Annotated").

8. U.S. Blues- ambiguous, and lots to unpack

For:

-"Shake the hand that shook the hand/Of P.T. Barnum/And Charlie Chan."

Was the character of Charlie Chan racist? Maybe. Actually created by an author who hated

the Yellow Peril stereotype ("Charlie Chan") of the 1930s, but he arguably just used

a

different stereotype.

-Barnum- the phrase "a sucker is born every minute" was actually said disparagingly about his business by a rival (Sellers), and the phrase predates both of them ("There Is"). However, it is very commonly attributed to him. Considering that the the phrase and its attribution have entered the realm of American myth, it seems reasonable to assume that Hunter was thinking in that direction, thus associating Uncle Sam with a con.

-"ain't no luck/learned to duck" Unflattering view of politicians--and again, Uncle Sam is

all politicians or even America itself. Avoid trouble, don't face responsibility. **Kay also says this is a reference to Vietnam- duck a bullet.**

-"run your life/steal your wife."

-"Wave that flag." **[Prezi # 17 definitions]** Most sources indicate that this or "flag waver" had been a negative phrase for at least 80 years, connoting jingoism/empty patriotism.

Penguin English Dictionary: flag waving

informal a passionate appeal to patriotic or partisan sentiment; jingoism
flag-waver *noun*.

Merriam-Webster: flag waver

(1894) 1 : one who is intensely and conspicuously patriotic 2 : one who waves a flag in signaling 3 : a song intended to rouse patriotic sentiment

Merriam-Webster: flag waving

(1892) : passionate appeal to patriotic or partisan sentiment :chauvinism
MacQuarie Dictionary: flag-waving

1.
an emotional, aggressive, or excessive display of patriotism.
2.
adjective of, relating to, or denoting an excess of patriotism.

Oxford English Dictionary:

flag-waver n. one who tries to arouse popular enthusiasm.
1894 Westm. Gaz. 28 June 2/3 The Pretoria flag-wavers.

flag-waving n.
1892 Pall Mall Gaz. 12 Nov. 2/2 Flag-waving is all very well, but it is a miserable proceeding when influenced by such sordid motives.

See also CCR's diss "some folks are born/made to wave the flag" and [Prezi # 18 '04 tour poster] The Dead's Wave That Flag 2004 tour--they could've named it anything, referenced any of their lyrics. With W in office and the second Iraq war a year in, this was not an accident. And as a colleague pointed out to me, the flag's upside down in that poster.

Against:

A friend suggested USB is actually a song about how the Dead are Americans too. He puts it as:
- "we're dirty drug-taking hippies but we're part of America, too" (Hammel qtd. in

Berg np).

Some critics agree

-Charlie Haas: "for [the fans'] purposes, the Grateful Dead *is* America. Not the crypto-optimistic America of Jimmy Carter, but the real America, where the roof is

caving

in and all concerned are too fucked up to feel it" (Haas in Dodd and Spaulding 137),

and

Blair Jackson said the song was "a declaration that their traveling circus was as American as apple pie" (249).

image

-Characters: Chan was an attempt at inclusiveness ("Creating" 29), and Barnum's

and

as showman and con man isn't necessarily negative; Americans tend to romanticize

and

venerate people who don't play by the rules.

-This all correlates with Garcia saying in 1967 "I don't feel like I'm any kind of subversive force, you know; I feel like an American, and I'm really ashamed of it, lately" (McNally 186-7). Many people would've argued that he was subversive, but Garcia says not only that he's as American as any hawk, but that he and what the Dead represent are a part of America--can't be subversive because they also represent what the country's about. And the war does make him ashamed, in contrast to anarchists or total drop-outs from society.

“Lifestyle Protest”/Alternate Mode of Living

1. [Prezi #19 Old West] The Dead set many songs in the old west, and I think they did this because regardless of its reality, as a piece of American myth it's very widely known and incredibly potent, and its reputation is of maximum freedom. Note "Cowboy Neal" in *The Other One*, mixing iconic free spirit Neal Casady with the Old West. That's only one of several things they did to use the Old West as a jumping off point where everyone could get on, but then move on to another world entirely.

-Fennario, the mythic land in *Peggy-O* and *Dire Wolf*, has hallmarks of an Old West setting, but it isn't actually anywhere.

-Further note: Jack Straw. As my railfan father told me, and as other pointed out on David Dodd's *Annotated Grateful Dead Lyrics* site, the Great Northern was a rail company, not a train, so you couldn't catch it out of Cheyenne, and the Detroit Lightning never got anywhere near Santa Fe. Jack Straw's trains take the real world and twist it just a bit into something new. It's hard to say if Hunter did this on purpose or just took names that sounded good, but this approach *is* definitely present on purpose in *Stagger Lee*, *Casey Jones*, and *Dupree's Diamond Blues* (McNally 302), which all adapt both real life events and older songs to the Dead's aesthetic.

-Ned Lagin underscores this absorption and remaking of American myth: "The Grateful Dead, when I met them, were all wearing cowboy boots, but they were counterculture. They incarnated all the different heroes that you'd grown up with, particularly on TV: cowboys, space guys, counterculture guys, and even wild crazy bachelors on the loose [laughs]--all those American mythologies. And that's part of what they sang about, in their own way" (Gans 356).

-Note also that none of this content was blindly mythologized. There were lots of songs about hard luck and bad ends. This idea that freedom wasn't safe gives it dimension and, like the lack of specific political references, helps it last. Because it's not blindly utopian, it doesn't sound naive. Doubtless a large portion of the true otherworldly nature of the Grateful Dead was actually being at a show, but I think these types of lyrics gave Deadheads a different mental place to inhabit as well as the physical.

This clearly worked no matter what decade it was.

2. In my research, I found numerous writings about how the Dead provided an alternative in the 1970s-1980s to the empty hedonism and conservative yuppie times. It's crucial to note that there were always teenagers at the concerts--they Dead continuously attracted a new young audience, people who wanted what only they could provide.

3. Intriguing dissenting opinion: on the hiatus/breakup at the end of 1974: "The *Village Voice* quoted Ron Rakow: 'Listen, if there's one thing we learned in ten years on the road, it's that celebration is a valid form of revolution.' The paper replied, 'He's wrong. There are any number of reasons why the Dead are going into hibernation, and one of them is that they tried to run their revolution as though it were a celebration. It didn't work'" (McNally 479).

Conclusion--Aftereffects, Lasting Impact, etc.

There's a lot here to discuss, and I don't have a neat conclusion for everything. But I think the evidence of history does suggest that a lot of the period-specific protest music, while sometimes excellent, had a short shelf-life in terms of meaning, while the Dead's brand of a self-contained alternate world had the broader appeal *and* was the thing that could last, so that keeping it going is part of the Dead's larger cultural impact. It's worth considering that three of the biggest jam bands going, Phish, moe., and the Disco Biscuits, in addition to carrying over many performance oriented innovations of the Dead, also all have rock operas.

I'd also say that the Grateful Dead *did* protest in their lyrics, more than they're given credit for and maybe even more than they consciously wanted to. But again, by using literate and ambiguous images, they avoided stridency and instead opened a dialogue with their listeners. They didn't say "think this," they said "think." Thank you.

[Prezi #20 Works Cited]