As a librarian, I am in the business of information. Recordings of the Grateful Dead’s live shows are a huge, some would say a key, part of the information about them, yet for many years they were like items in special collections—they were hard to get to, they weren’t part of the collection that most patrons had easy access to. And like special collections, though this was not done on purpose to keep people out, it nonetheless had that effect. You had to make time to visit their world, and you had to make effort to get there.

The Dead put out a lot of live albums over the course of their career, but until the 1990s, none of them were taken from a single show. And until *Hundred Year Hall*, none of them showcased the extremely long, abstract, out jams of 1970-74 that mark a high point for Deadheads and a maximum of difficulty for the uninitiated, meaning that a huge and contentious piece of their story spent 30 years away from the public. Nowadays whole show releases are common, and plenty of the Dead’s are from the first half of the 1970s, but that ground had to be broken. I’m going to explain what I think the Dead previously were after with their live albums, and why *Hundred Year Hall* was such an important step along the path to today.

Although nothing is more natural to Deadheads than to want a complete recording as is, the goal of the live album in the traditional market was not the sometimes flawed product that traders consider a fair exchange for a complete, one of a kind document. It was a polished product, a controlled document. If a song performance had a flubbed note or something, they didn’t use it, or they overdubbed it. Many live albums were culled from a tour’s worth of recordings, or at least a couple nights’ worth in order to have multiple takes of songs (Mountain, ABB at Fillmore, and yes, *Live/Dead*). They’d also mix versions slide into one version for the album, and/or do overdubs, which amounts to the same thing—an effort to manage the music as a perfect album artifact.
This type of controlled live album is about selling a product, but it also has a narrative aspect. In their official presentations, bands and labels are telling a story about the band to the public. Slide For instance, Pitchfork’s review of Wilco’s *Kicking Television: Live In Chicago* mentions that rather than being just a souveneir of a tour, *Kicking Television* joins the Wilco studio albums in charting the progression of their sound. The *Ghost Is Born* material (and everything else) is very different with Cline and Sansone in and Bach out. So, what story were the Dead telling with their live albums?

*Live Dead* is the story of the Dead’s movement, in just four years, from a bar band with a bassist who’d never played bass before, to a brilliant psychedelic unit famed for their improvising. That was the beginning of the Dead’s “you gotta see ‘em live” reputation, and *Live/Dead* actually does a decent job of conveying a show of that era on record. It includes both the then standard Dark Star→St. Stephen→The Eleven sequence, and Pig Pen’s tour de force, Turn On Your Lovelight. Slide As you can see in this survey of concerts from November 1968-February 1969, that was pretty standard material. And Dark Star, soon to be a springboard to completely unpredictable improvisation, had a fairly standard form at that time (remember Grame’s presentation--progression from late 1968-early 1969, always hit that same peak, went to the same place. Pretty soon, the idea that Dark Star would always end the same way would become a bad joke). Because of that repeated form, the *Live/Dead* Dark Star was not conceptually so different from other side long tracks on ‘60s or ‘70s live albums, though it was better than most any of them.

However, two things keep *Live/Dead* firmly in the traditional live album column. The first is that it’s a composite, made from three shows. The second is that even at that early date in the Dead’s history, a whole show couldn’t fit on a double album. To refer to the setlists
again, most also had a Cryptical/Other One, and all had another shorter song or two—Clementine, Cosmic Charlie, Dupree’s, etc. This was a limitation of the medium. Slide I love vinyl, but it has serious space limitations—usually 22 minutes per side, at the maximum, for rock music. And capturing a whole Dead show on it got difficult very quickly. Three months after the *Live/Dead* shows, the first *Workingman’s Dead* songs started appearing in concert. Slide By a year after *Live/Dead*, there were 18 new songs in the repertoire between *Workingman’s* and *American Beauty*. Slide But, even more so, the jams had gone nuts. On *Live/Dead*, Dark Star and Lovelight took up a side each; by early 1970 they’d need two sides each and that takes care of your album—which no one was going to do.

Slide As a triple album, *Europe ’72* actually had that kind of space, and it’s from a tour in which The Other One and Dark Star were played regularly, and regularly lasted half an hour each, if not longer. For Deadheads, those epic excursions are some of the main appeal of the tour. But *Europe ’72’s* length isn’t used to record that. Mostly it gets a lot of songs that hadn’t been recorded in the studio slide, none of which are much longer than 6 or 7 minutes. The only taste of the live Dead experience that couldn’t’ve come from the studio is the China→Rider, a long Truckin’, and Morning Dew. And it’s also got a bunch of vocal overdubs. To tape-trading Deadheads, overdubs interfere with the in-the-moment performance, and leaving out the amazing, long improvisations from that tour is crazy. The effect of that narrative choice is visible in the *New York Times’s* original review, which said: “some critics and old fans are annoyed by the band’s growing emphasis on the simple end of the spectrum, believing that there is a promise of further innovation unfulfilled, and they have a point.” Tape traders knew there was nothing simple and plenty that was innovative about the music from that tour, but its publicly face was largely a collection of more Americana tunes. In the context of presenting
what were new songs to a non-trading public in order to broaden awareness of the Dead’s expanding songbook and have new material to sell more casual music fans, this choice of information makes perfect sense. (note—as of the morning of the presentation, Rhoney Stanley backs this up, says they focused on songs instead of jams to try to sell more records)

And that’s the way it went, all the way til 4/15/1991, when One From The Vault (8/13/75) came out, a type of release made possible by the advent of the CD, which moved the time limit from not even 30 minutes a side to 80 minutes a disc. It’s a complete show, and almost in order, but it’s past the era of the Dead’s really exploratory jams. It was also a show that had been broadcast on radio, which made it relatively easy to get ahold of. Two From The Vault’s also complete (8/24/1968), but plays best as an addendum to Live Dead, covering similar territory in terms of repertoire and performance style. Something about the series must not’ve worked for the band though, because Three From The Vault failed to materialize until 2007, and it would be two more years until the next full show release.

When that happened with the start of the Dick’s Picks series, there was a substantial change from convention--they were made from two track recordings. The Dead didn’t originally make these tapes for the fans—they made them so they could evaluate their playing. The first volume (12/19/1973) was released in December of 1993 and while the sizable break of releasing a two-track recording for public consumption should not be ignored, there was still some caution involved. It was cut to fit on two discs for one thing, and Phil Lesh edited out his bass solo from Playing In The Band, the longest jam on the album. Furthermore, it would be two years before volume two (10/31/71) arrived, in March of 1995. When it did, it was severely truncated—only one disc—and while it had the mega jamming vehicle of Dark Star, at 23 minutes it wasn’t nearly as out there as it could’ve been. Plus, the pre-first verse segment hews
closely to the melody, and the back half is mostly a two years in advance preview of Eyes of the World, which is great and interesting, but also pleasant and fairly normal-sounding—it doesn’t mess with the listener. The series picked up steam, with volume three coming out only 8 months later. But before it did, yet another live album, *Hundred Year Hall*, was released on September 26.

*Slide HYH* is an album that combines the traditional shape of a live album with the secret world of tape traders. It takes advantage of the CD to show off what a lot of Deadheads consider the real meat of Europe ’72, the tour’s superlative and very “out” improvisations; inaccessible to casual Dead fans for 23 years, in this case a spectacular Truckin’→Other One jam in which just two songs eat up 58 minutes.

Nor did they ease into this idea; *HYH* gets the full treatment—a fresh mix of Betty Cantor’s 16 track tapes, full artwork, an essay by Robert Hunter, and a title instead of just a date. There’s no confusing this with a Dick’s Picks, although the full show idea had gained traction in this more manicured release as well, all the material coming from just a single show, 4/26/1972. Plus, Weir’s flubbed vocals in Truckin’ were left unmolested. And yet, the experience of listening to it is rather different than listening to a whole show tape. There is still effort to control the narrative. With the exception of Lovelight, disc 1 is all short songs, editing pieces of sets I and II together and tacking the ending and encore onto the flow of the first set. In many ways, it’s *Europe ’72* redux, and it can easily appeal to a listener who appreciates the Dead as a rock & roll and Americana act.

Disc 2 is the long jam. They were pushing outward by including that, never gave that kind of weirdness to a mass audience before, and putting it on disc 2 was something of a safety valve. The psychological aspect of the physical separation of the discs is not to be overlooked.
Conditioned as we are to the idea that a CD is a complete listening experience, disc 1 could be safely listened to, and disc 2 easily avoided, if need be. The narrative becomes a Choose Your Own Adventure. How calculated an idea was that? I think partially so, and partially by chance. In an interview with David Gans and Marty Martinez, Weir and Lesh say the Dead declined to release the whole show on three discs because of the performance and/or condition of the tape for the tracks they left out, and because three disc sets didn’t sell well.

Something must’ve changed their minds though, and the long form jams on disc must’ve proven a success, because about 4 months later they put out Dick’s Picks volume 4, which is three discs long and features three 30 minute songs in a row, starting with the end of disc one. That one’s made from two shows, but still approximates one in its running order. From there on out, Dick’s Picks would almost always be one show releases, and consist of however many discs were necessary for the whole thing. As two track tapes they were less costly to produce, but other multi-track whole show releases followed as well.

On a final note, I think it’s interesting to position HYH with its contemporaries. Phish had a similar idea with A Live One, which was actually released a few months before HYH, and had a 33 minute Tweezer on disc 2. However, ALO was also a traditional live album, just one born in the CD age. It was compiled from a whole bunch of 1994 shows, and in some ways has more in common with Europe ’72, in that it showcased a number of non-album tracks. Both albums may have influenced other bands’ two disc live albums with a long second half, such as Santana’s Live At The Fillmore ’68 and Ween’s Paintin’ The Town Brown, released in 1997 and 1999 respectively, and both featuring a 30 minute track on Disc 2. However, the Dead still stood ahead of the curve when it came to full show releases. It would be six years before anyone else started a series of whole show releases, and oddly enough it was Pearl Jam,
starting with a full summer tour release in September 2000. Phish and moe. followed in September and November of 2001, and of course there have been many since. But it’s the Dead that started it all, and *Hundred Year Hall* stands out as an odd, but important transitional point.

Jerry Garcia in 1974: “We’re not the band that makes albums—that’s just a guise we adopt to get by in the studio. As soon as they invent a means of putting five hours of music at a time at some kind of realistic price, we’ll release all of our shows.”