

# DEAD BEATLES

The best musical improvisation, in ensemble, re-creates the play of animals and children. This musical playfulness can be experienced by listeners and dancers, and can serve to connect us with the playfulness of The Trickster archetype. And the more the Trickster is welcomed into the collective psyche and political reality, the more irrational play is embraced, the more society advances.

I forego definitions of music, though I will explore the nature of improvisation as this proposition unfolds. But let's begin by answering the question *What do I mean by play?* since play is less commonly understood.

Play of the non-competitive sort, *Original Play* (Donaldson 14-21), is what happens when one or more beings get together to have fun and experience belonging and acceptance. Nobody gets hurt. All animals, including humans do it, but humans are best at it during their first few years.

Play is intrinsic. It pre-dates culture but doesn't rule it. All players know that they are playing and observe the rules of an imagined reality, though those rules are flexible and can be changed by mutual agreement. Thus play is founded on transient, not studied, competence. Players are spontaneously creative, and they play, irrationally, with no internal moral objective and no external judgment. They have no goals, winners, losers, or products. Their play has meaning, but not purpose.

There is play in the pretend-fighting of dogs, where the dance of *I am going to bite you* is feigned and then suspended before any harm is possible. There is play in the life of dolphins, that "[i]t has been observed by many scientists that [dolphins] are pranksters, that they have a sense of humor...[p]lay seems to be their default state (Casey)." There is play in infants and toddlers. If you get down on the ground with a child under the age of four, and roll around without clutching,

tickling or hitting, you can have great fun without it ever becoming an actual game or without any moral lessons attached to the cavorting. For the purposes of this investigation, we synthesize a definition of *original play* from those of Diane Ackerman, Johann Huizinga, and O. Fred Donaldson:

1. Play is voluntary. Players are free to choose to play and free to choose to quit playing. Players can recognize when playing has ceased.
2. Play exists within AND apart from culture, it is beautiful and it is fun. It has no moral function, and it is irrational.
3. Play is actively engaged in, so it is not lounging or boredom, but it does include daydreaming and fantasy.
4. Play has rules that emerge, they are not imposed. Players can do the unexpected, change the rules, and experiment with novel behaviors and ideas. As a pure form of creativity, competence is not judged, and play is more accurately described as loosely structured than as unstructured.
5. Play frequently has an *as-if* quality defined by its rules and the marking off of a sacred circle that all the players understand—for example, the boundaries of a playground; entering a fantasy world; when pretending that a cardboard box is a car; or when dogs pretend to growl and bite but do not harm. Play is about means, not ends, and the meaningfulness of the activity itself, not of anything that is goal-directed or purposeful. Intrinsically motivated goals are within the process, not extrinsic to it.

Though play is prevalent in the behavior of animals and infant-to-toddler children, it's energy is retained and sustained by some youth and adults. This most frequently manifests in the arts, and theories of play offer a critical insight into musical creation and performance, and implications for society at large.

While it is universal, even across life forms, and life-nurturing, the irrational and unpredictable nature of playfulness challenges the conception of society as an orderly state run by adults following rules and norms that sharply divide adulthood and childhood. The normal functioning of our society relies on the enforcement of generational identities that separate play from the so-called real world. Imagine the harsh consequences of presenting a case to the Supreme Court dressed as a clown. Or broadcasting that due to a mild winter and a decrease in the spaghetti

weevil population, Swiss farmers were enjoying a bumper crop of spaghetti.<sup>1</sup> Or throwing a pie at the richest man in the world. Or throwing dollar bills from the gallery onto the floor of the NY Stock Exchange. Or making fun of war.

We haven't found the way to open that box and allow a more pervasive role for Play, for fear the chaos or different social arrangements it might bring. Playfulness calls the forced orderliness of society into question. Yet history is dotted with nifty, silly, and bold tricksters and pranksters who pull down the pants of the social order and rip open rationality, just to see what might emerge.

### **Improvisation**

Play can bubble up at a live musical performance. Jazz established an improvisational style, primarily imported from West Africa, of sensitive interplay traced to Congo Square in New Orleans, the earliest Dixieland, and the seminal jazz performances of Louis Armstrong's Hot Five and Hot Seven (1925-28). This jazz ethos of collective improvisation never went away. In bluegrass as well, "the instruments talk to each other" (Pooley 9). But to attain this level of playfulness generally requires, among other things, instrumental competence and advanced musicianship. That is, the practiced ability to express musical ideas fluidly, and the hours of ensemble playing required to become responsive to other musicians.

And then, with the added element of right-stuff attitude and simpatico audiences, musicians can recreate interactive play in live concert performance settings.<sup>2</sup> So the concept of "transient competence" in play is rendered here as the transience of a musical idea, not the transient competence of the musicians.<sup>3</sup>

In play, no idea or 'game' is allowed to dominate for too long, and in the best jams—jazz, rock, and otherwise—ideas bounce around for a little while, and after they've been played with, experimented on, and exhausted, the musicians move on to another corner of the playground. In

other words, in the best improvisational music, the musical *ideas* are playing with each other in the same way that animals and infants do. In the best improvisational music, play is fully animated and present.

In the following comparison of the Beatles and the Grateful Dead, I will describe how the play element manifested in each, specifically in terms of how their respective careers did or did not allow for improvisational skills to develop and the consequences of such. These two bands' stories seem wildly divergent, but their intentions as they embarked upon their journeys and their songcraft were remarkably comparable: exquisite ensemble playing to loyal, regional audiences; traceable lines to traditional roots; advanced and innovative chord progressions and voicings; seamless changes in and out of odd time signatures; heartfelt, honest and sophisticated melodies and lyrics; and bold vocal harmonies.

### **Playing with the Band**

Play, in this very nuanced form, best describes what the Grateful Dead were able to manifest on a regular basis for thirty years. At their shows, the interaction, or play, between audience and musician was intense, archetypal and visionary. The seed of this phenomenon was sown in the Sixties.

The Dead had observed the hazards of the starmaking machinery, and they resolved to avoid them and sustain their lifeblood, the live show. They drew their own community around them, maintained an ideological distance from their record company, and an aversion, intended or not, to overnight popularity. By building their audience gradually through live performance and avoiding pop wars for domination that require image-building and combative ambition (like any capitalist enterprise), they were able to cultivate an approach to song, improvisation, and mutual musical response that nurtured and sustained play in their music. They had their ups and downs,

and even broke up for a short time, but overall, they invoked the carnival, as "...a band beyond description...a rainbow full of sound... fireworks, calliopes and clowns..." [Grateful Dead (Blues for Allah), *The Music Never Stopped*, Grateful Dead Records, US, September 1975/UK, September '75]. Their legendary longevity was held aloft on the breath of the musical playfulness that ebbed and flowed at their live shows. By some counts, they held the record for most live performances of any band.<sup>4</sup>

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Whether as children or adults, if you and I are rolling around on the ground and getting into *Original Play*, a scenario might proceed thus: we wrestle gently, laughing, rolling around, pushing, arching, squealing, not clutching at each other, not tickling, not sexually arousing, just playing. At one point the energy might change, and we could get involved in a game with our hands, where I would make a gesture and you would mimic it, I would mimic back, you again, adding an improvisation, me again, adding yet another variation. This would continue until the game morphed into something completely unlike what we had begun, then perhaps returning somehow to the original theme; or, before the interaction became tiresome, predictable or boring, we would bring it to a climax or a fizzle, and then try something novel and in a different direction.

This playfulness is not dissimilar from the musical interplay of a Grateful Dead concert. A jam that to the uninitiated might seem like interminable wandering and noodling was, to those in on the conversation, a musical invitation to play, virtually identical to *Original Play*. Musically, the Dead relied on a number of figures and cues with which they were all familiar. They used repetition much more sparingly than is usually found in rock bands; the Dead instead played minor variations on an otherwise repeated figure, which would lead them away from and eventually back to the tune; and they favored a similar jazz approach to drumming, playing around the beat and

with the relative volume of the drums lower than is common in rock. Their idiosyncratic approach was most obvious in the way Phil Lesh played bass, breaking more of the rock rules by avoiding repetition, inventing unique harmonies, soloing during a song, dropping ultra-low ‘bombs’, and rarely sustaining play within a narrow register. Even without Jerry Garcia’s leadership, inspiration, virtuosity, and feelingfulness, Hart, Kreutzmann, Lesh, and Weir comprise one of music’s best and most unique rhythm sections.

They were like children playing, but not just by themselves in park or a playground. They transformed New York’s Fillmore East, San Francisco’s Winterland, London’s Strand Lyceum and countless other venues from Alaska to Egypt into playgrounds for their many fans, night after night, and this open approach to playing invited interaction, inclusion, and influence with the audience. A lay explanation of the collective Grateful Dead experience is that the listener enters an abstract cognitive state that sequences in a manner fully correspondent and rhythmically responsive to the live music. Wordless music listening, but on a more sensitized and interactive plane.

[It] was a six-piece band. Each played his instrument, i.e., himself, passionately and with all his soul. Each of them, different as he was from all the others, was his own music, his own words, his own rhythm. Each sang his own song with all his might—and, miraculously, they found in the end that they belonged together and needed each other. I still cannot quite understand how one movement could unite within itself such heterogeneous elements. But in the [...], these individuals shone like the colours of the rainbow, as if they had been produced by the same process of refraction.

The brackets could easily contain the words *Grateful Dead* and be accurate, but the author of this quote is Hans Richter and the brackets omit *Cabaret Voltaire*, from Richter’s description of this energetic artist troupe of dadas in Zurich circa 1916. Poetic proof. The six-piece band is not Garcia, Weir, Lesh, Kreutzman, McKernan and Hart, but Janco, Tzara, Ball, Emmy Hennings, Arp, and Huelsenbeck. Richter’s description of the founders of dada has the same spirit of

collective play and the collective consciousness that the Grateful Dead regularly visited. The archetype repeats, and this time around the heightened consciousness radiated on a larger scale.

Amid the Sixties zeitgeist and with the advancement of concert amplification, the Grateful Dead's music built a brokedown palace that welcomed in a broad range of souls, no strangers to suffering yet innocent enough to open their hearts and minds to a musical and spiritual space built on the exploration of the possible. It was far from perfect but it could contain a lot. It was playful and also sensitive to the breakdown of the play principle.

I can share a not-so-subtle example. Sometime around 1969 I attended a Dead concert at San Francisco's Winterland with some friends, we were all about sixteen. The place was packed. The dance floor was ringed with a few rows of church pews where, along with the balcony, one could sit instead of stand or dance. Miraculously, we found an empty row and we occupied it, but there were still lots of empty seats to my left, and me and my mates couldn't figure out why. Until we looked down. There on the floor was a couple making love. Nice looking folks, too. A slightly embarrassing feast for our virgin eyes, but a scene we definitely took in. The music and drugs were good, too. Until the security guards came to separate the couple. Both of the participants were clearly enjoying themselves, but the security, by force of habit I suppose, pegged the male as an instigator/perpetrator, even rapist. They quickly covered the woman in a blanket and took her away, but they handcuffed the guy, hitting him with their nightsticks as they pulled him up, and held him standing in front of the clearly distracted crowd. He showed no shame or remorse, he stood proud. And naked.

Now despite the color and drama of this event, it would be pretty hard to tell what was happening from the stage. We were all towards the back of the hall and it was loud enough and rollicking rock and roll. But there in the middle of the concert, in the middle of a song, the Dead

stopped playing. Cold. Just stopped. How could they know? What did they know? Did an audience member tell them? How could they shout above the music and interrupt the band if they did?

After the guy was led away and the hubbub subsided, the Dead started playing again, but they changed the song from what they had been playing to *The Same Thing*, first performed in the 1920s by Bo Carter, but later credited to Willie Dixon and popularized by Muddy Waters. Here are the lyrics Pigpen sang that night:

What makes men go crazy  
When a woman wear her dress so tight? (repeat)  
Must be the same thing  
Makes a tom cat fight all night.

Chorus:  
That old Same Thing  
That old Same Thing  
Tell me who's to blame  
The whole world's fightin' about  
That Same Thing.

Why do all of these men  
Try to run a big-legged woman down? (repeat)  
Must be the same thing  
Makes a bulldog hug a hound.

Chorus

What makes you feel so good  
When your baby get an evening gown on? (repeat)  
Must be the same thing  
Makes a preacher lay his bible down.

That old same thing.

Coincidence? Perhaps. But dial down this melodramatic example of musician/audience interaction and response, and you will find innumerable smaller moments where the musicians and the audience respond to each other in subtler, perhaps even telepathic ways. Through dance, selection of notes, of songs, dynamics, rhythms, and inflections, the Dead shared a special relationship with their audience. Fans called it the *groupmind*, and it was a theme that fascinated



in 1960s San Francisco. Paul Kantner of the Jefferson Airplane lifted the literary “think-together” from a 1955 science fiction novel, *The Chrysalids*, by John Wyndham, and wove it into the Airplane’s 1968 album, *Crown of Creation* [RCA].

The best live improvised music, and even some art music performances, carry aspects of this interaction. Almost all performers feed off of their audience to some extent, and attract particular types of crowds. The punk phenomenon, heavy metal, EDM, tribal music, dance hall swing, gospel, groups assembled by Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, Bill Evans, Charles Mingus, John Coltrane and countless other sensitive jazz ensembles all bear examination. New Orleans’ Preservation Hall Jazz Band may be the longest unbroken chain of this special infectious musician interplay. In fact, the Grateful Dead have often been likened to the group improvisation found in the best Dixieland bands.

And if the Dead’s magic was unique, its pursuit was not. Bob Dylan’s 21<sup>st</sup> century band emulates them after a fashion. A number of jam bands embark on the quest. And Neil Young discovered and still explores some otherness beyond music:

Way back, playing “Farmer John” when he wasn’t yet 20, Young remembers, the music got really wild. “I had never played like that before. We were just *slamming* it. We played the song *without* the song, we played what the song was *about*,” and in that moment his musical identity was born...

“At a certain point, trained, accomplished musicians hit the *wall*. They don’t go there very often, they don’t have the tools to go through the wall, because it’s the *end of notes*. It’s the other side, where there’s only tone, sound, ambience, landscape, earthquakes, pictures, fireworks, the sky opening, buildings falling, subways collapsing.... When you go through the wall, the music takes on that kind of atmosphere, and it doesn’t translate the way other music translates. When you get to the other side, you can’t go back. I don’t know too many musicians who try to go through the wall.... I love to go through the wall” (Erickson 28).

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Impressionism made possible dada, which in turn inspired the Surrealists, who sought a mass movement that was as much about culture, dreams, and personal growth as it was about politics. In a historical rhyme, the Hippies were inspired by the Beats, and took the dada-Surrealist

intentions even further. Due in large part to West African influence—through rhythm & blues—rock bands in the Sixties found, for a louder, longer moment, that grail that had eluded the Surrealists. “The D-S [dada-Surrealist] expedition overturned no governments and never reached the people,” surmised Roger Shattuck (40, 44). He continues:

Occultism, objective chance, the revival of the chivalric and Arthurian traditions of erotic love, magic, and alchemy, the cult of the supernatural in woman—all these unstable items fed a faith that had unmistakable elements of transcendence. It comes out with intensity in much Surrealist poetry, in prose narratives full of quests and epiphanies, and in visionary paintings.... The work with which the Surrealists tried to conjure so often, “*le merveilleux*,” belongs to a sustained attempt to find spiritual values in everyday life.

The dada-Surrealist vision was reborn and found new life amongst rock artists who successfully excited a mass appeal for blues/R&B-based music that delivered a message of play via the burgeoning mass media of records and concerts. Dylan and the Beatles revisited Arp, Valéry and Rimbaud. Jim Morrison and the Doors brought a sense of séance ritual to the rock concert, as Jimi Hendrix evoked surreal and fearlessly playful sex voodoo. Frank Zappa with his Mothers of Invention satirized and ridiculed the media culture while slyly building an awesome oeuvre of 20<sup>th</sup> century composition.

All of the above exceeded the popular impact of their dada-Surrealist forebears. But as the Beats reintroduced play in art through poems like Ginsberg’s *Howl* or Jack Kerouac’s stream-of-consciousness, or Neal Cassady’s protean talents (managing to BE the link. He was a main character in Kerouac’s, Kesey’s, and the Grateful Dead’s lives), the Dead grabbed the baton and pushed the cultural possibilities for all they were worth. Their audiences enthusiastically hopped on for the ride, and the idea of music as a collective experience, as *communitas*, was viscerally in evidence, and spawned an entire subculture. Fans would follow the band from city to city, and buy tickets for consecutive performances. It was all for the cultural event, the music, the *end of notes* and the sense of possibility that unfolded.

This intensity was perhaps excited by the use of psychedelics amongst Deadheads. Certainly it traced to the Ken Kesey acid tests,<sup>5</sup> where the Dead's style was born. There, they laid out a lexicon of group improvisation, and subsequently they took the rock concert format and utilized it to expand their consciousness-altering brand of musical play. During their concerts, the audience could experience the aforementioned *groupmind*, not unlike the state of shared conversations described by David Bohm (1990), who brings the play principle to spoken dialogue. And the musicians were particularly talented and idiosyncratic. With Garcia's and the band's 1995 demise,<sup>6</sup> we find ourselves fortunate yet stymied by the awesome challenge of following and leading that energy to its next social context.

Here was a budding possibility for a social order deeply influenced by the spirit and actions of *Original Play*. In a very real sense, Grateful Dead concerts were prototypical models of a play society that, if they did not sustain a community (this could be debated), nonetheless made inarguable suggestions for a more liberated existence.

The Beatles made their bones in Hamburg. The Dead had the acid tests, a unique opportunity for cultural experimentation, to create a new musical tool for the synergy to come. To play. Jerry Garcia's description in the Jeremy Marre documentary *Anthem to Beauty* (1997) provides a definition of play as good as any:

We were also lucky enough to have experienced the acid test, which was one of the truly democratic art forms to appear in this century. The audience didn't come to see us; they came to experience something altogether different. So we could play or not, you know, so we had the luxury of being able to experiment freely in a situation which didn't require anything of us. It didn't require that we be good, it didn't require that we repeat a song, you know, it didn't require that we be intelligible on any level. You know, I mean, for a musician, that's like *carte blanche*. That was great fun. But that acid test experience gave us glimpses into the form that follows chaos. You know, that if you throw everything out, and lose all rules, and stop trying to make anything happen on any level, other stuff starts to happen, and that became a key to the way we dealt in an interior way with our music and our own interior politics and everything. It's part of why we've been able to stay together for so long. We learned important stuff there. I can't imagine any other context which would have allowed us to learn that.

Garcia is reminding us that, in almost every situation that calls for interaction, be it in business, politics, relationships, even the arts, we feel compelled to make *something* happen on *some* level. But given a medium, like music, and the privilege and opportunity to *stop trying to make anything happen on any level*—one leaves behind the pressures of achievement, and enters into a realm of play, and a horizon-bending expansion of possibilities. Once one is unafraid in this new environment and rudimentary ground rules are followed, the adventure commences.

With the Grateful Dead, it was around their approach to music. Like other bands, they had a commonly understood song/improvisation structure, but on the playground afforded them by the acid tests, their approach to playing—brought forth multiple opportunities to depart from the folk, blues, rock, jazz, or other traditional idiom and summon their muse. Then, given the social setting of a collective urge to discover new possibilities for social interaction and community, otherwise known as the Sixties sensibility—the Grateful Dead shows became places where new energies and potentials were discovered, or at least viscerally imagined...*groupmind*, if you will. Are there possibilities for such a phenomenon beyond the live music show?

It is not coincidental that the most experimental of rock and roll bands should have the deepest roots in traditional music. Bluegrass, jazz, blues, African, art and electronic music—each with identifiable classic forms—fueled the Dead's creative brew. No matter how exceptional the Dead experience might seem, it had its roots in traditional music, and that traditional music informed the *groupmind* states.

The Dead readily admit that they had a set of nonverbal rules agreed upon amongst themselves, a formula by which they arrived at their own musical form that existed in a unique and playful context. And from that form sprung the possibility and play so elegantly manifested in music. *Dark Star* and *The Other One* emerged as two improvisation frames that are

idiosyncratically Grateful Dead and less connected to traditional music; they were also a resource for extended improvisations that they would integrate into conventional (like *Truckin'*) and less conventional (like *Playing in the Band*) songs as well. In 1972, before the heat of the Sixties had dissipated, Garcia sat down with Jann Wenner of Rolling Stone magazine and Yale professor Charles Reich to give his report. In this excerpt, “play” could easily be substituted for “music”:

*Garcia:*                    *Music is a thing that has optimism built into it. Optimism is another way of saying “space.” Music has infinite space. You can go as far into music as you can fill millions of lifetimes. Music is an infinite cylinder, it’s open-ended, it’s space. The form of music has infinite space as a part of it, and that, in itself, means that its momentum is essentially in that open place.*

*Reich:*                    You said you would only play on optimistic days, or I said I would only write on optimistic days.

*Garcia:*                    *That might be optimum, but my experience has been that a lot of times we’ve played sets that we didn’t like or that I didn’t like or I didn’t like what I was doing, but it got on and it sounded good on tape and the audience got on. There’s lots of degrees. I don’t like to try to paint everything in those real, specific cartoony figures, because there’s degrees all over the place. For example, if I’m super-, super-depressed, I sometimes play the highest music I play.*

*Reich:*                    How do you do it?

*Garcia:*                    *Because music can contain all of it. It can contain your bummers, it can contain your depressions, it can contain the black despair, man, it can contain the whole spectrum. The blues is a perfect example. The blues is that very effect operating in a very sublime way. You hardly ever hear anybody say they’re depressed because they’ve heard a lot of music. That’s a pretty good example, right there. Even the worst music—the poorest, baddest, most ill-thought-of music on earth—doesn’t hurt anybody.*

*Reich:*                    I read a book on rock & roll recently that said the real medium of rock & roll is records and that concerts are only repeats of records. I guess the Grateful Dead represents the opposite of that idea.

*Garcia:*                    *Right. Our records are definitely not it or ever have been. The things we do depend so much upon the situation we’re in and upon a sort of a magic thing. We aren’t in such total control of our scene that we can say, “Tonight’s the night, it’s going to be magic tonight.” We can only say we’re going to try it tonight. And whether it’s magic or not is something we can’t predict and nobody else can predict: and even when it’s over and done with, it’s one of those things where nobody’s really sure. It’s subtle and it’s elusive, but it’s real.*

*Reich:*                    And the magic comes not just from you but from the whole thing.

*Garcia:*                    *The whole thing. The unfortunate thing about the concert situation for us is the stage; and the audience has either a dance floor where they all sit down or seats where they all stand up. It’s too inflexible to allow something new to emerge. It’s a box that we’ve been operating in, and we’ve been operating in*

*it as a survival mechanism, yet hoping to get off when we can. But basically it's not set up to let us get off, and it's not set up for the audience to get off either. The reason is that anarchy and chaos are things that scare everybody, or scare a lot of the people—except for the people that get into it.*

Wenner: Why doesn't it scare you?

Garcia: *Because I've had enough experience with it to where I like it. It's where new stuff happens. I have never understood exactly why people get scared, but they do get scared for reasons, like to protect oneself, to protect one's own personal visions of oneself. They're all paranoid reasons. That's the thing you stimulate if you fight it. It's like any high-energy experience: If you fight it, it hurts; if you go with it, it's like surfing, it's like catching a big wave (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner 95).*

Such creative platforms are uncommon. In *Deep Play*, Diane Ackerman's examples of ways in which adults regain a play state are non-interactive, whether occurring in the act of writing a poem, riding a bicycle, climbing a mountain or experiencing the Grand Canyon. Her eloquent descriptions are of the individual state one attains, not on the potential for interactive play or a *groupmind* sort of experience. But at the height of the Sixties, the idea of mutual and interactive play on a collective level was all the rage. Political scientists have a word for this: revolution.

By comparison, the Beatles brought many of the same qualities to the table, but traveled a very different road.

### **The Lonely Hearts Club Band**

The Beatles arced in a unique parallel to that of the Grateful Dead. Both bands were formed by particularly talented musicians with a fondness for traditional American and English music. In the US, the Dead grew out of a bluegrass and jug band; in Liverpool, the Beatles started out as a skiffle band, playing English and American folk tunes. Both bands drew heavily on rhythm and

blues and soul, like Muddy Waters and Motown, and great rock originators like Chuck Berry, Carl Perkins, and Buddy Holly. Both bands developed local followings of passionate and loyal fans. And both bands began to develop their improvisational, danceability, and ensemble skills by night-after-night playing to those enthusiastic fans, cultivating a special rapport and connection with them. Here the similarities seem to end.

The Beatles, especially Lennon, were known and loved for their flip attitude with the press and their wry sense of humor, and they orchestrated their saga and their art on a mythos of being at play. But the endless hype and promotion, the intrusiveness of the press, the inability to form intimate relationships and the stress on existing relationships were all real, and enough to thwart less capable artists. But the Beatles, right up until their final act, even when they no longer played live, were able to sustain the image of four boys eternally at play in the world. Every album sparkles with playfulness. Their consistent message was that life's main purpose was to love and to have fun. Despite the percentage of this that was hype, it could not have sold so well if there were not a resonant truth behind it.

The Beatles had a mixed blessing, inverse to that of the Dead: their marketability was discovered quite early in their careers. The commercial potential, their ability to reach and excite huge numbers of white teens, was the sweetest candy the entertainment industry had ever tasted. And it exploited them for much more than a taste.

All this was set in motion a few years before the Dead formed. In fact, it was upon hearing the Beatles that Garcia and company decided to drop the jug band and form the Warlocks, a rock and roll band that became the Grateful Dead.

Like any other band trying to make a living, the Beatles sought a recording contract, not realizing how it would affect their craft. They had an unprecedented knack for producing hit

singles, the current coin of the realm and the main stimulant of the ensuing madness and media hype. Beatlemania need not be further reviewed here, except to note its unprecedented scale. Through the media capacity of long-playing records, singles, television, movies, magazines, AM radio, and endless souvenirs, the world responded vigorously.

The band had a highly playful attitude that was evident in their press conferences, movies—in particular *A Hard Day's Night*—and stage presence. They created playful caricatures of themselves, in particular Paul's mugging, Ringo's sad sack, and John's droll humor. They experimented playfully with their image, for example, cartooning in *Yellow Submarine*, and outraging with the US "butcher" cover for *Yesterday and Today* [The Beatles (*Yesterday and Today*), Capitol, US, June 1966]. But despite their hardy constitutions and determination to continuously grow and be creative, as a band they were overwhelmed by their media-hyped popularity and the screaming audiences, and they were forced to stop performing live—any intimacy or chance at growth through live performance had long since passed by 1966.<sup>7</sup> John Lennon confirms:

*Jann Wenner:*            *Always the Beatles were talked about and the Beatles talked about themselves as being four parts of the same person.*

John Lennon:            Well, to make up . . . yes.

*Wenner:*                *What's happened to those four parts?*

Lennon:                 They remembered that they were four individuals. You see we believed the Beatles myth, too. I don't know whether the others still believe it. We were four guys...I met Paul and said 'You want to join me band?' you know. Then George joined and then Ringo joined. We were just a band who made it very, very big, that's all. Our best work was never recorded.

*Wenner:*                *Why?*

Lennon:                 Because we were performers—in spite of what Mick says about us—in Liverpool, Hamburg and other dance halls and what we generated was fantastic, where we played straight rock, and there was nobody to touch us in Britain. As soon as we made it, we made it, but the edges were knocked off. Brian put us in suits and all that and we made it very, very big. But we sold out, you know. The music was dead before we even went on the theatre tour of Britain. We were feeling shit already because we had to reduce an hour or two hours playing, which we were glad about in one way, to twenty minutes and go on and repeat the same twenty minutes every night. The Beatles' music



died then as musicians. That's why we never improved as musicians. We killed ourselves then to make it. And that was the end of it. George and I are more inclined to say that. We always missed the club dates because that's when we were playing music. And then later on we became technically efficient recording artists, which was another thing. We were competent people, you know, and whatever media you put us in we can produce something worthwhile (Lennon and Wenner 45-46).

Thus the potent creativity of the Beatles was overmatched by the mass energy (some would say hysteria) it released and were thus unable to develop as a live music phenomenon. That the teen frenzy the Beatles touched off was so extreme is possible testimony to the intensity of the 1950s repression of celebratory, carnival energy (Stallybrass and White; Hyde) that preceded it.

The Beatles retreated from live performing in 1966.<sup>8</sup> And that same year the Grateful Dead fully assembled their sound. Their creative juices were just beginning to flow. The pop stardom that accompanied Top Forty hit singles eluded the Dead, and in the shadows of cult-level popularity, they were able to nurture a special relationship with their audience and continually refine their “playing together” ability. The Grateful Dead could play live and also inspire live Play in their audience.

The Dead got what Lennon was after, and it could have been the Beatles' path as well: they had the chops, the connection to traditional music roots, and the fan base. But the onslaught of mass popularity cut short their maturation as a live band.<sup>9</sup> And though the incessant and maddening leviathan of Beatlemania deprived them of the live performance's ebb, flow and dynamics, their creativity and playfulness were irrepressible. As Lennon said, “...whatever media you put us in we can produce something worthwhile” (Lennon and Wenner 46). The studio, not the concert hall, became their playground.

And just as Dylan's playfulness was more in his lyrics than his live shows, the Beatles imbued their alternate outlets—songs, records, film, drawing, painting, and other experiences (the Maharishi, the bed-in, Apple Corps, etc.)—with play. They never lost a beat.

One of the most stunning Beatles triumphs of playfulness was the *Magical Mystery Tour* album and movie. An echo of Ken Kesey's *Furthur* adventure, this one-hour film is about a mystery tour bus. Mystery tours were a common form of inexpensive tourism in England. You would bundle up the kids and get on the bus, which would tour you to destinations unknown, somewhere in the nostalgically venerated English countryside (Baxter-Moore 156-158). The film, which takes place in a world shared with David Lynch, Monty Python, Salvador Dali and Federico Fellini, includes the surreal masterpiece *I Am the Walrus*, with Dylan- and Lewis Carroll-level lyrical phantasms and the most sophisticated composition and orchestration of any Beatles song. John's most obscure yet evocative lyrics. Signature rock swagger in a gorgeous pop setting, with wailing backgrounds, rock 'cellos, psychedelic interludes going out of rhythm and leading perfectly into the bridge, music *concrète* set in the background. The best of the art rockers, from Roxy Music to Radiohead still wish they could write and perform songs this good. *Revolution #9* went too far for most listeners. This is the *Revolution #9* that worked beyond John's wildest dreams. In fact, this was his wildest dream. And *A Day In The Life*, masterpiece that it is, didn't transport the pop listener, through lyrics and music, as far into the Ether of Music that *Walrus* does. The lyrics alone are a slice of psychedelic pie:

I am he as you are he as you are me  
 And we are all together  
 See how they run like pigs from a gun  
 See how they fly  
 I'm crying  
 Sitting on a cornflake  
 Waiting for the van to come  
 Corporation T-shirt, stupid bloody Tuesday  
 Man you've been a naughty boy  
 You let your face grow long...  
 Yellow matter custard  
 Dripping from a dead dog's eye  
 Crabalocker fishwife  
 Pornographic priestess  
 Boy, you've been a naughty girl  
 You let your knickers down...

As *coup d'édada*, the penultimate song in the *Magical Mystery Tour* film is *Death Cab for Cutie*, performed by the Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band, England's answer to Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention. The Bonzos perform as the house band in a strip club, and a lovely stripper accompanies the tune. Satyrs of satire!

This underappreciated piece of Beatles art had to be censored (the stripper completes her dance); was a commercial flop; yet it yielded an album with more Number One songs than any other. From the spaghetti shoveled by waiter John Lennon onto the plate of Ringo's distraught and sobbing aunt, to the Victor Spinetti military vocalizations of unmistakable tone and impossible meaning, *Magical Mystery Tour* stands with *The White Album* as the most avant-garde and uninhibited piece of Beatles art—they dared to be playful in darker tones. And while the Beatles were deprived of that ability to develop the live show and reestablish rapport with a live audience, these two albums pushed the limits of playfulness in the studio (We can try anything!) in ways that the Grateful Dead admittedly never could master (with the possible exception of *Anthem of the Sun* [Grateful Dead (*Anthem of the Sun*), Warner Brothers, US July 1968]).

Anyone who sustains their child-like ability to play into adulthood is going to encounter and personify some Trickster characteristics. And the Beatles were no exception. Ringo was always a playful character, Paul's playfulness translated into an innocence of song and George's into his strong relationship with the Monty Python crew.

But as sure as dada liberated the Trickster in Western society, and that the Trickster archetype is an antiwar figure, it is just as certain that John Lennon was a Trickster figure.<sup>10</sup> Besides his poetry and painting, and his role in the antiwar satire *How I Won the War*, all playful, he connected his soul to dada when he married its most talented prodigy and standard-bearer, Yoko Ono.

This is what it looks like when playfulness sustains into adulthood and the Trickster archetype holds forth: Lennon and Ono's 1969 bed-in for Peace.

They knew that anything they did in public would be mobbed by media, so they decided to make that relationship an opportunity for play, an opportunity for peace. On their honeymoon, they celebrated their sexual love and voiced their opposition to the Vietnam War by stripping down to their pajamas, getting into bed and inviting the press into their Amsterdam hotel room...for two weeks. Totally hippie, totally dada, totally play, and nothing less than the beatific union of Yoko Ono's and John Lennon's art.

The potential of play unleashed was and is threatening to the order of things. Paul was content to frolic within the confines of commercial success, but an artist like Lennon could never be stopped from testing the limits of playfulness that the media empire had temporarily licensed. In a society that has not completed an integration of the playful, play in the hands of artists will lead to transgression. Having cited the examples of *Magical Mystery Tour*, the "butcher" album cover, Lennon's political activism and the like, I should like to suggest that the inevitable artistic trajectory of the Beatles was the reason the band had to break up and the "idea" of the Beatles had to die...because the world would not have accepted them developing into a truly transgressive entity.

Those farther from the spotlight made that connection and acted on it with the rock and roll outrages of the MC5, The Who, The Velvet Underground, Frank Zappa's Mothers of Invention, The Doors, The Kinks, The Rolling Stones, and Jimi Hendrix. Each in their own way were all upsetting to the established order, and thus attracted persecution.

The Grateful Dead had their run-ins with the law, but their ethos and the messages and vibes of their shows would appear to have either finessed or transcended that transgressive challenge to

the ruling order. I believe that it is because they had discovered a more sublime alternative reality...that *groupmind* phenomenon...that they were able to slide past the high/low conflict inherent in the carnivalesque and manifest a level of transcendent *communitas* (See Stallybrass and White).

Further investigation and understanding of these phenomena can create a perspective for understanding the various evolutions of the live concert experience since. From punk to EDM, rap to R&B, and the multitude of festivals and settings where live music is performed and connected to by a public at once more connected and more atomized by technology and media.

Still, the original events that inspired audiences to greater levels of consciousness, lovemaking, and other assorted boundary-smashing Play managed to lift a few of the gauze veils that cloud the light of a new possibility. What's at stake is a life that gets its bearings from an alternate set of values and reality: namely, one where play in its many forms is given greater license. Thus, despite the media-monster's absorption of rock and roll excess, the original acts still reverberate, a baton has been passed somewhere, the idea is still in the air.

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## Notes

- [1] The BBC broadcast of this hoax archived at <https://youtu.be/MEqp0x6ajGE> (retrieved 16 July 2016).
- [2] And by performance, I mean it in the most conventional sense of buying a ticket for a show and attending, listening, dancing; and that when such performances summon collective celebration, a deeper form of performance also occurs: “the social activity of creating who you are by performing who you are becoming” (Holzman).
- [3] Though that was part of what defined garage and punk rock...there can DEFINITELY be other types of a communal vibe at a punk rock show, or in any other genre.
- [4] “The 1998 edition of the Guinness Book of World Records recognized them with a listing under the heading, “most rock concerts performed” (2,318 concerts). They played to an estimated total of 25 million people, more than any other band, with audiences of up to 80,000 attending a single show.” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grateful\\_Dead#Live\\_performances](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grateful_Dead#Live_performances) (retrieved July 16, 2016).
- [5] Well-chronicled in the Alison Ellwood & Alex Gibney-directed film *Magic Trip: Ken Kesey’s Search for a Kool Place* (2011) and Tom Wolfe’s *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968).
- [6] There have been numerous regroupings and re-formations since, with the *Grateful Dead* moniker being definitively retired after five 2015 reunion shows.
- [7] The Beatles’ popularity created the need for the folks who do the sound for live bands and all the sophisticated amplifiers, speakers, boards and technology that were yet to come. The Beatles had no such luxury of modern rock amplification, and they could not be heard over the screamers in the audience. This as well put an end to their live performing days.
- [8] And so did Bob Dylan. Dylan himself shared the recognition of the potential and value of live performance, and he was fortunate enough to be able to return to it in 1974. And since 1987, he has performed almost continuously, in the Never Ending Tour.
- [9] Fame + media hype + the vulnerabilities of being out there live combined to create danger, and the spirit of live performance was sacrificed and lost due to the technical, logistical, and safety shortcomings of live performance on the scale that Dylan and The Beatles required at the time. It played out differently, but in the abstract, there were these similarities.
- [10] Full explanations of the Trickster myth/archetype are found in Paul Radin’s seminal work *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (New York: Schocken, 1956), Lewis Hyde’s *Trickster Makes This World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), and the author’s in-process book *Disruptive Play: The Trickster in Politics and Culture*.

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