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My Life with the Grateful Dead

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*Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very Heaven!*

— William Wordsworth, “The Prelude”

During the waning of the fifties, the first stirrings of what would become a full-blown counterculture were surfacing in university and college towns all over the country; in Palo Alto, for example, several venues had sprung up where like-minded people could meet and share ideas, books, music, and more.

The Peninsula Peace Center, run by Ira Sandperl (who would soon become well-known as Joan Baez’s political guru), served the more politicized folk — nuclear disarmament activists, protesters, etc. — mostly a committed and focused bunch; but in order to pay the rent, Ira and his partner, Roy Kepler (owner of Kepler’s Books), provided rooms for Stanford students and other itinerants. They also threw huge parties that drew freaks from all over the area, providing stimulating intellectual interaction — and an endless supply of food and drink — to the local bohemians. One of these parties was my first introduction to the “underground,” defined as that alternate culture surrounding any great center of learning — mostly composed of former students, perennial students, and nonstudents.

St. Michael’s Alley, run by Vern Gates, was the classic bohemian coffeehouse — smoky dive, lots of small tables, real strong coffee, and an occasional open-mike night; most of the time, people would sit at the tables playing and singing together: in short, a very loose scene.

of “free celebrations, happenings, events, and ideas.” The quote on the poster read:

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is darkness, light;

and where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so

much seek to be consoled as to console;

to be understood as to understand;

to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

— St. Francis of Assisi

Armed with about a dozen brand-new Fender amps, we arrived at the Polo Fields on June 21 to find two stages, one at either end of the field. Theoretically, the distance between them was great enough to make moot any sonic conflict, as the setup was designed to allow two bands to play at once. However, once we got started, the extra power of the “donated” gear made the situation a little lopsided. Escalation soon followed, and for those lucky few in the center of the field it must have been a metamusical moment: two bands, each trying to play loud enough to drown out the other. If only they could have marched around the field . . .

Everyone in the Haight knew that there were some serious problems looming with the expected influx of thousands of seekers. The massive media coverage of the scene had generated widespread interest in what was increasingly seen as an alternative lifestyle. The general vibe on the street had degenerated badly from its peak six months

earlier. The city wasn't much help — the Board of Supes passed a resolution deeming the expected visitors “unwelcome.”¹ When the summer came, tens of thousands of young people thronged the streets of the Haight, in what I saw as a throwback to the medieval Children's Crusade, coming from all over the country to seek whatever it was the media had told them to expect — free love, enlightenment, like-minded companionship, the freedom to just be themselves — and instead finding hard drugs, rip-offs, rapes, and murders. It seemed that the “love generation” was seen by many to be an easy mark, a passive target for exploitation. The Diggers, an offshoot of the Mime Troupe dedicated to radicalizing the culture by giving away free food, and other groups such as the recently formed Haight-Ashbury Free Clinic, a medical collective, tried valiantly to provide some modicum of assistance to the mostly cash-strapped pilgrims. Alas, it was like trying to hold back the tide with beach toys — there were just too many, and the indifference or outright hostility evinced by the city establishment virtually sealed the fate of the Haight-Ashbury communal experiment. If we'd only had eyes to see, the whole Summer of Love catastrophe could have been read as a metaphor for the Grateful Dead's future: the influx of hard drugs, the increasing isolation from and indifference to one another, the resultant failure of communication and shared responsibility.

We couldn't stay around to watch. We had gigs all over the place that summer of '67. First a quick Northwest run (Seattle, Portland), two gigs in Santa Clara, and a super-fun evening at the Straight when

¹Prompting this response from Willie Brown, then state legislator for the Haight-Ashbury and later three-term mayor of San Francisco: “the issue is whether you can by fiat declare a minority ‘unwelcome’ in our community. . . . I suggest instead that you direct the city agencies to a positive effort of cooperation with those organizations trying to deal with the problems rather than to suppress them. . . . We can have a summer of peace or of dreadful discord. . . .” *San Francisco Oracle* 8 (June 1967).

spent two leisurely weeks hiking, swimming, and sweating out all of the past year's tour grime, cleansing ourselves in the cold, clear river water. It was a considerable relief to know I would be able to take the fall off and enjoy some of the ordinary moments in everyday life.

Meanwhile, management had been trying to figure out how to get through the rest of the year while Jerry recuperated. To that end, three plans were submitted to the band in a document entitled:

Ways to Survive the Next Few Months So Jerry Can Get Better

Plan A: assumes local shows in October and December

1. cut back salaries immediately by $\frac{1}{3}$ across the board
2. continue salary cuts through December
3. possible reallocation of a few people to other entities
4. cut back other expenses — equipment, outside contractors, etc.
5. give modest Christmas bonuses and hopefully go back to full salaries in January (or even December if a lot of shows in December)

Plan B: assumes no shows until December

1. same as Plan A except cut back salaries to 50 percent starting in November, back up to $\frac{2}{3}$ or full in December if income in December is sufficient to cover December and January

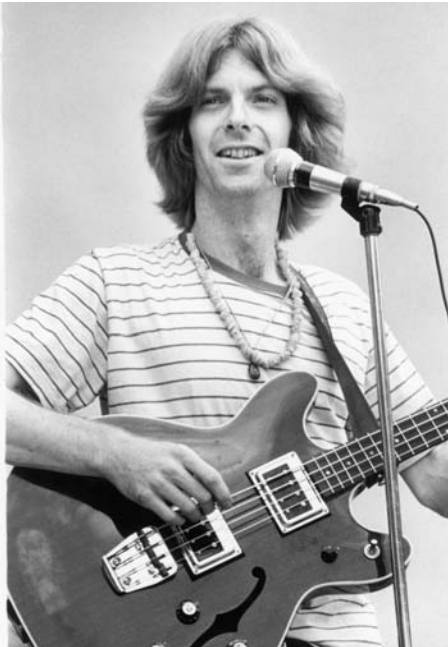
Plan C: assumes no shows for remainder of 1992

1. salaries cut by $\frac{1}{3}$ immediately, to 50 percent in October or as soon as it appears that shows unlikely for remainder of year
2. cut back expenses further by laying off everyone except for those necessary to maintain office and operations until we regroup in 1993

Golden Gate
Park Panhandle
in 1967 (© Jim
Marshall)



Phil in San Francisco, 1967 (© Jim Marshall)



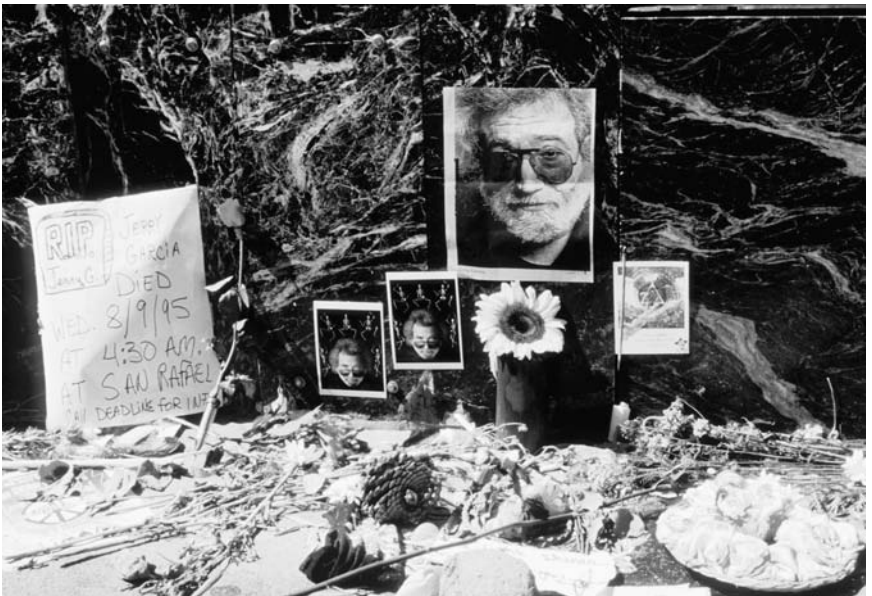
Phil in 1968 (© Tom Copi)



Playing for free on Haight Street,
1968 (© Jim Marshall)



Garcia Memorial in Golden Gate Park: David Graham, Jill with Brian on her back, Grahame, Phil, August 1995 (© Jay Blakesberg)



Garcia Memorial, Haight Street, August 9, 1995 (© Jay Blakesberg)