

1. Popular Avant-Garde: Renegotiating Tradition

When studying the Grateful Dead—both the band and the wider cultural phenomenon—one should not be surprised if the image discovered is mixed or even contradictory: Was the Grateful Dead a rock band at all? If not, what was it? Jerry Garcia early on could claim that the band was not for “cranking out rock and roll” but “to get high.”¹ Bob Weir stated that “we’re a jazz band. I won’t say we’re nothing but a jazz band, because our basic premise is rock ‘n’ roll. We just approach it from a jazz point of view.”² Phil Lesh talked about the music that the band played as “electric chamber music,”³ emphasizing that the “Grateful Dead is more than music, but it has always been *fundamentally* music . . . this ongoing experiment in collective creativity.”⁴ The three band members apparently agree that they did not form your average rock band, but at the same time they formulate rather different visions of what the band is about. Even within the band, opinions differ on what must have been a central issue—but that issue could not be settled outside of the music, it could only be worked out, resolved *in* music. In that practice, positions could shift, often in just a few bars—Garcia searching for an Apollonian exactness and clarity, the definitive CD version or interpretation of a song, and Lesh pushing the music into the ecstatic unknown, promoting improvisation and madness, the Dionysian version of the Dead. Or, as Mickey Hart put it, the band “is in the transportation business. We move minds.”⁵ Dennis McNally, band publicist and historian, claims that “the point is the Grateful Dead is not a rock ‘n’ roll band. They use rock modalities, but to evaluate them purely as a rock ‘n’ roll band, they’re not. They are a twenty-first century American electronic string band.”⁶ McNally might risk making the band too traditional, but he is right in suggesting that the Dead cannot be looked upon squarely as a rock band, although the “rock modalities” must form part of the horizon that frames the band’s work.

This hesitancy about the identity of the band (even the FBI files on the Grateful Dead are uncertain: “It would appear that this is a rock group of some sort”) also could be turned into insider references or, later, commercially quite viable slogans, for instance: “There is nothing like a Grateful Dead concert,” or “They’re not the best at what they do; they’re the only ones that do what they do.”⁸ These catchphrases, as well as others, point to the Grateful Dead as an alternative type of act, as something else—something different, something perhaps even unique. The band “grew up” as part of a San Franciscan, bohemian culture, for which commercial success was not crucial, or at least was not openly sought, and it became part of what Ellen Willis called the “San Francisco countercultural ‘rock-as-art’ orthodoxy.”⁹ But, as Mary Harron comments on this era of rock music, the “paradox (and the profits) lay in the fact that rock’s anticommmercialism became the basis of its commercial appeal.”¹⁰ Harron emphasizes how “quickly and easily the new hippy culture fitted into the existing commercial structure” and states that “the new counter-culture simply found different strategies for selling sincerity.”¹¹ We must, then, remember a simple fact, bluntly put forward by Ellen Willis: “basically rock is a capitalist art”¹²—meaning also that moralisms about “selling out” should be avoided. Or as Jerry Garcia chuckled: “We’ve been trying to sell out for years—nobody’s buying.”¹³ If we would do what Harron did, browse the lists of gold records, singles, and albums in *Billboard* magazine, then the Grateful Dead would long be absent. There was no commercial success from the start, even though the band did land a recording contract with Warner Bros. early on. With time, their albums would sell enough to go “gold.” During its existence, the band also changed and adapted to different conditions, most of all to a growing popularity. That and other factors—both within and outside of the band—naturally influenced how band members looked at themselves and at the band, and pushed them to define themselves in an era of political, social, and cultural upheavals. The Grateful Dead of 1995 was not the same group that it was in 1965, but I claim that the band worked on keeping its roots, and an original creative impulse, alive throughout the groups’ career.

Harron’s argument is much too general, but she does have a point in this paradoxical success of the anti-commercial: The Grateful Dead did become a mega-phenomenon, partly because they seemed to ignore the conventions of the music industry. Still, this resistance against the culture industry was to some degree a myth cultivated by band members, as when Garcia maintained that the band worked outside the music industry: “we’re really not quite in that whole world as it’s presently constructed. We’re like the

exception to every rule."¹⁴ A perhaps more nuanced standpoint is articulated by Phil Lesh: "Although we had to be a 'business' in order to survive and continue to make music together, we were *not* buying into the traditional pop music culture of fame and fortune, hit tunes, touring behind albums, etc."¹⁵ Reading the many different touring contracts that the band signed with different promoters, and that now are collected in the Grateful Dead Archive at the University of California, Santa Cruz, there are some recurrent paragraphs, which inform us of a band working within the heart of capitalism but still trying to do things its own way, trying to formulate and control its own working conditions—even though contracts are a formalized genre, its standards dictated by the Union and promoters. For instance, contracts state that the band "shall have the unqualified right to perform at least four (4) hours. Employer understands and agrees that Artist's reputation will be substantially and materially damaged if Artist is prevented from performing for said full four hours."¹⁶ Other and older contracts, such as one contract from 1976, stated the band's performing time was up to five hours, and these formulations had to do with the fact that the band was fined for playing too long—which of course sometimes happened.¹⁷ The contract with Bill Graham Presents, for a concert at the Greek Theatre in Berkeley in 1987, also states that the band must not "be sponsored or in any manner tied with any commercial product or company" and the band "shall not be required to appear and perform before any audience which is segregated on the basis of race, color, creed or sex." This latter paragraph might seem surprising, because audiences were not segregated in the United States in the 1980s, but one can perhaps assume that this formulation was inserted into contracts after the so called "Sun City boycott"—Sun City being a South African "Bantustan" to which artists were lured to come and perform during the apartheid regime.

The contracts in general are very careful to define the security measures that the employer must observe on behalf of the band and the crew, as well as the audience and anyone working at the arena. Most contracts also state that vending of alcohol at the arena is not permitted, and in later years, they also stipulate that ticket buyers be provided with information about "campsites, inexpensive restaurants and hotels, hospitals and medical facilities, and other social services in the area"—this, of course, to try and ease any tensions caused in a local community from the invasion of "Deadheads" (defined as Grateful Dead devotees and fans). The last contract rider, from 1993, includes a paragraph about the band wanting to "provide speakers in the lobby area to give the fans a place to dance without blocking the aisles." What the band here also does is an act of remembering: they began as a

band to dance. As Garcia once emphasized, “We feel that our greatest value is as a dance band and that’s what we like to do.”¹⁸ The Grateful Dead remained a dance band for the whole of their career—and the surviving members even played, as The Dead, at one of President Obama’s inauguration dances in 2009. Dance was one of the more or less ritualized practices that held the community together; therefore, even though Theodore Gracyk claims that the band’s emphasis on dance “did not last,”¹⁹ I think he is wrong. The point is that even when the music was not really what some people would expect dance music to be, Deadheads still managed to dance, albeit in their own, inimitable free-form style.

This resistance towards “selling out”—which is how I interpret aspects of these contracts—did help to guarantee the band a special position during an era when the music industry became more and more industrial, even if it at the same time produced margins for both experimental and political music. We may call the Grateful Dead “unique” if we compare their survival to the early deaths of most other San Francisco bands from the same time. Although the machinery of the music industry at large kept grinding on, the Grateful Dead became this touring unit on the outskirts of the soundscape of the culture industry. Their uniqueness can be disputed; they did after all work with the major record companies and the most successful promoters, and a rock band cannot really be run at this level of commercial success without being part of the industry. The crucial problem is the effects that integration within the culture industry has on the music. And, not least, can one ask whether music as eclectic as that performed by the Grateful Dead should be discussed in terms of uniqueness? Often coupled with the emphasis on uniqueness is the notion of authenticity—as if the singularity of the unique guaranteed the authenticity of this singular end product. I do think that the band was unique, or rather became or grew to be unique, and not because this idea legitimizes this book. Rather, the Dead’s uniqueness must be scrutinized carefully to avoid a solely and overtly ideological celebration of the band. Any evaluation of what the band was about and what its significance is must be based on a dialectical analysis that moves between the actual music and the social conditions under which it was performed.

Therefore, this first chapter suggests different ways of understanding the Grateful Dead as a kind of hybrid aggregate, assembled from different and sometimes even conflicting parts. Taking as a starting point the Western political and cultural dislocations of the sixties and the counterculture they generated, the discussion focuses on the role of tradition and avant-garde respectively. Framing this discussion is the problem of the public sphere in

which a rock band also must work: What happens to the public sphere under the conditions defined by the culture industry? Was it even possible for a counter-sphere to exist? This discussion, which the Grateful Dead substantially contributes to in different ways, provides a foundation for the rest of the book, and for a discussion of the Grateful Dead as the nucleus in a form of resistance.

I

Dennis McNally suggests that the “dislocations of race, class, gender, and culture that defined the 1960s and generated the Dead can . . . be best understood by looking at them through the lens of improvisation—through the Dead itself”²⁰ I take his lead, both in using improvisation as my guide, and in hinting at the band’s dependence on and contributions to those “dislocations” McNally that points to: improvisation is a relation or attitude to the world, and therefore it can at times, and under special conditions, function as precisely a type of dislocation, and then not only of a musical composition.

These dislocations were far from isolated to popular music, and it is impossible to understand even the Grateful Dead without taking the larger, social dislocations of the 1960s into consideration. Those dislocations can be seen on a global scale, but their immediate effects also could be felt by every individual—the American war with Vietnam was broadcast to every home around the world that could afford a television set. Other dislocations settled in the individual body but were effects of collective movements in the society of late capitalism, such as black liberation, women’s liberation, and the beginning of gay liberation. Here, “hippies” must be included as well, along with student protests around the globe. Fredric Jameson gives us an important reminder, however, by noting that “the 60s, often imagined as a period when capital and First World power are in a retreat all over the globe, can just as easily be conceptualized as a period when capital is in full dynamic and innovative expansion, equipped with a whole armature of fresh production techniques and new ‘means of production.’”²¹ This expansion of capital—which the music industry exemplifies—momentarily generated what Jameson calls “an immense freeing or unbinding of social energies, a prodigious release of untheorized new forces,” forces that Jameson exemplifies rather conventionally as different political movements—the counterculture is not included, unless it is covered by the suggestive formulation, “movements everywhere.” But Jameson also warns that this “sense of freedom and possibility” of the sixties is a “historical

illusion”: while this freedom was enacted and enjoyed, society transitioned “from one infrastructural or systemic stage of capitalism to another.”²² One consequence for the analysis of a historical era is that it must dialectically include both power and resistance, both capital and labor. Stephen Paul Miller offers—using Foucauldian terms—a view of the “episteme” or “epistemological horizons” of the sixties as “derived from consumer culture and was in fact immediately merchandised. But in itself it was something else. The forces of the marketplace helped bring sixties culture together and then sold that culture, but the phenomenon of the sixties was a kind of Frankenstein monster that defied the commercial codifications that helped constitute it.”²³

Jameson’s rather negative view, perhaps limited by his academic orthodoxy, cannot perceive the kind of community that the counterculture generated and that was forming around the Grateful Dead. Yet a dialectical analysis must be more flexible, and there are other theoreticians who are more open to the potential political significance of countercultural phenomena like the Grateful Dead. In *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri seem to imagine a potential Deadhead in what they call a “massive transvaluation of values.”

“Dropping out” was really a poor conception of what was going on in Haight-Ashbury and across the United States in the 1960s. The two essential operations were the refusal of the disciplinary regime and the experimentation with new forms of productivity. The refusal appeared in a wide variety of guises and proliferated in thousands of daily practices. It was the college student who experimented with LSD instead of looking for a job. . . . The entire panoply of movements and the entire emerging counterculture highlighted the social value of cooperation and communication.²⁴

Hardt and Negri, being much more open to the diversity of the resistance to disciplinary regimes, agree with Jameson about the expansion of capital, which they see as subsuming “all aspects of social production and reproduction, the entire realm of life,” an absolute and totalizing tendency in capitalism observed already by Marx and emphasized by the Frankfurt School, as when Herbert Marcuse talks about how the dynamic character of capitalism means that it can “join and permeate all dimensions of private and public existence.”²⁵ This dynamic, and its resulting penetration of every aspect of everyday life, is observed also by non-Marxist thinkers, as for instance Hannah Arendt in her description of Modernity as “the rule by nobody”—that is, a bureaucratic rule that could become tyrannical. Arendt also sees how society, in its varying historical forms, imposes “innumerable

and various rules, all of which tends to 'normalize' its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement."²⁶ Hardt and Negri observe how "production processes and economic structures" were being redefined by "cultural relations": a "regime of production, and above all a regime for the production of subjectivity, was being destroyed and another invented by the enormous accumulations of struggles."²⁷ I think the key issue is the "production of subjectivity": the culture industry of Adorno and Horkheimer is still shaping consciousness, subjectivities are still being produced and stylized by impersonal apparatuses, by power relations. The concept of "culture industry" refers to "the entire network by means of which culture is socially transmitted, in other words, it refers to the cultural goods created by the producers, and distributed by agents, the cultural market and the consumption of culture."²⁸ What this industry produces is ultimately "conformism through stereotypes, obedience through identification, intolerance through normalization"; it is, Adorno and Horkheimer writes, "enlightenment as mass deception."²⁹ Although this analysis basically rings true, it leaves out the simple fact of resistance: every power relation also generates resistance within these relations. Many small, independent record companies issue albums with music of every noncommercial type; rock bands producing noise music are being formed every day; and rappers appropriate a language that has been distorted by power. Even under an all-encompassing capitalism there always is a margin where other divergent voices are being formulated. This resistance, in its many diverse forms, must not be idealized—but neither should it be neglected. It might not be anti-capitalist but rather anti-commercial, anti-bureaucratic, anti-authoritarian: an opposition against power, consumer society, or simply the boredom of modern life—even if it might be "untheorized," as Jameson complained.

Herbert Marcuse (from whom Hardt and Negri must have taken their lead) tried to theorize this situation, in which the oppositional finds him- or herself immersed in an "affluent" society which, Marcuse says, could "develop and satisfy material and cultural needs better than before."³⁰ Against this integration into capitalist society, Marcuse posits "the emergence of new needs, qualitatively different and even opposed to the prevailing aggressive and repressive needs: the emergence of a new type of man, with a vital, biological drive for liberation, and with a consciousness capable of breaking through the material as well as ideological veil of the affluent society."³¹ Marcuse went on to include "the Hippie" in the resistance against "efficient and insane reasonableness," seeing hippies partly as demonstrating "an aggressive nonaggressiveness which achieves, at least potentially,

the demonstration of qualitatively different values, a transvaluation of values.³² In other words: what is so wrong with “peace, love, and understanding”? The alternative values generated within the counterculture did not endure, though, and one can wonder what impact they actually had—on both general and more local levels—if they became mere ideology or materialized in different forms of life praxis.

Marcuse is roughly contemporaneous with the Grateful Dead; several of his most important writings stem from the sixties. He seems to try and come to grips with new forms of resistance and refusal, forms that the Grateful Dead, among others, practiced and lived, but he was at the same time very critical of “white” rock music, which he saw as false.³³ His *Essay on Liberation* (1969) is a meditation on the new social movements of the sixties and it has apparent relevance for a discussion of the Grateful Dead. Dedicated to “the rebels,” *Essay on Liberation* forms into a plea for an “aesthetic ethos,” and “a universe where the sensuous, the playful, the calm, and the beautiful become forms of existence and the *Form* of the society itself.”³⁴ This vision—whether we want to call it naively utopian or not—Marcuse finds embodied in the rebels to whom he dedicated his book: “Today’s rebels want to see, hear, feel new things in a new way: they link liberation with the dissolution of ordinary and orderly perception.”³⁵ The Grateful Dead were part of a creative rebellion, they remained part of it although the forms it took had to be constantly renegotiated, and their rebellion, which had one source in the experimentation with perception, formed into an aesthetic ethos—as Lesh said (quoted above), the band was always “fundamentally music.” Marcuse denied that the hippies could be called a revolutionary class, and the Grateful Dead certainly were no political revolutionaries, but the rebellion in which they participated hinted, as Marcuse writes, at “a total break with the dominant needs of repressive society.”³⁶ In his seminal study of the sixties, Todd Gitlin thinks that it is better to talk of “dissidents” than of revolutionaries: What could be seen as originating as “teenage *difference* or *deviance*” soon turned into a more pervasive dissidence.³⁷ But Gitlin sees a strong duality within the counterculture, a tension between an “individualist ethos” and “communality,” between “hip collectivity and the cultivation of individual experience.”³⁸ It even can be said that the Grateful Dead, as Ryan Moore put it, “personified the dueling musical responses to modernization—folk and experimentalism—but also the promise that a youthful counterculture was poised to transcend this duality in an alternative vision (or hallucination, if you prefer) of modernity.”³⁹

This opening up of a space seemingly filled with possibility, a space where a transvaluation of values, a disruption of normativity, was at stake, allows

the first incarnation of the band, the Warlocks, to transform into the Grateful Dead; it allows that same Grateful Dead to move from the elementary and sometimes embarrassingly imitative rock and roll on their self-entitled debut album, *The Grateful Dead* (1967), into an avant-gardist and experimental second album, *Anthem of the Sun*, only a year later (1968). These larger social and cultural dislocations, however, also would generate a growing need to hold on to something, to a tradition more solid than contemporary pop and rock music, a tradition not totally commodified and therefore not directly subjected to the culture industry's policies. There is—and this is the basic hypothesis of this chapter—an interesting dialectic of tradition and avant-garde at the heart of the Grateful Dead's music, a dialectic that might be generated by the larger dislocations taking place on a worldwide scale, but enacted within a community, forming around a group of musicians, that would gradually grow until it became a national, and to some degree even an international, phenomenon, albeit one limited predominantly to the Western world. Improvisation is one form of intentional dislocation, a musical one, of course, but one that also works on a more general cultural scale, if understood as a non-programmatic approach to trying out of different ways to gain control over one's life. Humans improvise constantly, in adjusting to all different aspects of everyday life, but improvisation might also be a specifically cultural and political attitude, a way of relating to the world—and not only a minute navigation of one's daily existence.

An early example in the Grateful Dead world of this dislocating or *displacing* force of improvisation is "Caution (Do Not Stop on Tracks)" from the band's second release, *Anthem of the Sun*. A big step from the debut album, *Anthem* contains music that combines many of the influences that the band brought together, but still without really melding them into one, or making the sound their own. In this song, we can hear at least some of the different parts that made up the hybrid, tension-filled whole. The title, quoting a common road sign warning drivers about railway crossings, suggests a railroad song, rooted in the tradition of the Blues and of American folk music, and in some versions underscored by the band playing a chugging rhythm, almost in unison—in many performances, the percussionists stick to this rhythm, even when the other players go into outer space. But the lyrics actually tell another clichéd story, that of a visit with the "gypsy woman," a fortune-teller. The singer, Pigpen, belts out the lyrics in typical rhythm and blues fashion, and some versions take the song into an apparent call-and-response form, with the response performed either by the lead guitar or by backup vocals. The music really serves as a starting point for improvisation, however, with no apparent relation to the lyrics.

On *Anthem of the Sun* as well as in many other performances, the band takes the song into atonal regions, including tape effects as well as distortion. Thus, popular culture—in the form of the improvising rock band—at once displaces and relocates its sources. Here, the blues meets the improvisational practice of John Coltrane and the collage technique of Charles Ives and contemporary electronic music—but in the form of rock music. “Caution” might also be considered a collage, or *montage*, its different parts still audibly distinct.⁴⁰ The montage form signals that the music is a construction, something *made*, even though tradition tends to make its products appear as natural (or as “second nature”). This tendency to naturalize, or harmonize, the music is balanced by the still unreconciled parts which make up a whole, searching for and striving to *form*. In his memoir, Phil Lesh looked back to *Anthem of the Sun* as the band’s “most innovative and far-reaching achievement,” seeing it as an “attempt to convey the experience of consciousness itself, in a manner that fully articulates its simultaneous, layered multifarious, dimension-hopping nature.”⁴¹

The montage form also is clearly audible in what became something of the band’s signature song, “Dark Star,” its different components not always part of every performance. Slowly, with the years, the montage form—so acclaimed by the avant-garde because it juxtaposes rather than hierarchizes—takes on a different function for the band. Finally, the concert or show as a whole would take on the collage form, and the different tunes, respectively, were given a more fixed identity. Here we could add that the Grateful Dead were neither the only nor the first band to experiment with collage forms and different forms of manipulating sound. On the contrary, the band is part of a powerful “culturalization” of rock music, which enters an experimental phase in the mid-sixties, with bands as diverse as the Beatles, the Beach Boys, the Mothers of Invention, and the Velvet Underground—all investigating what the potential for aesthetic expression and form that rock music allowed or even invited. Artists such as Frank Zappa and Captain Beefheart explored montage forms in different, elaborate forms. What sets the Grateful Dead apart from their peers and contemporaries is that, from this perspective, improvisation had such a prominent role in the band’s music, and that dancing remained a favored activity, honored by both band and audience.

The band’s musical montages are more reminiscent of Don Cherry’s *Organic Music Society* or the music played by the Art Ensemble of Chicago, both of which combine free jazz with different forms of black music and “World Music,” as opposed to the carefully controlled montages of rock music. The Dead could also be compared to Pink Floyd, another group with

psychedelic credentials, which likewise explored the montage form, most interestingly perhaps on the album *Ummagumma* (1969), made up of both live recordings and studio cuts. On subsequent albums, however, Pink Floyd strived for more of a coherent whole, though that meant that the band became a kind of ideology machine. The title track on *Atom Heart Mother* (1970) is a symphonic piece of music that includes a choir, alluding to the kind of search for an origin found in, for instance, Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* (1935–36): the pieces making up the montage are not kept separate, and bringing them together erases their respective character for them to be able to build this master whole. The result is suggestive, but eerily authoritarian in a way that is radically opposite to what the Dead tried to accomplish. It is a question of form: Pink Floyd's music tended to be an expression of something preconceived and exterior to the music as it unfolded; and the scream of anguish in the Dead's music was generated from *inside* the song—at least in the band's best moments.

In the mid-sixties, an aspiring rock and roll band did not have a wide range of traditions to draw from. The big exception, of course, was the blues, which handed down to rock music not only musical forms but also an attitude, an intensity, and a close relation to its audience. Aside from the blues, however, there wasn't much of a rock tradition. Jerry Garcia, for instance, talks about listening to doo-wop and rhythm and blues, realizing that "there is the black version of stuff that's good and then there's the lame white version of stuff sometimes."⁴² Rock music was still young, albeit growing rapidly both commercially and artistically. The situation made it possible for an ambitious rock band like the Grateful Dead to *invent* its context, expressed by the quite impressive move from the conventional album *The Grateful Dead* to the experimental *Anthem of the Sun*. This expansion also generated a type of displacement, with, for instance, the blues inserted in an experimental soundscape. Or perhaps it is the other way around: pieces of music quite foreign to rock music are inserted within a blues-based frame. It simultaneously meant that alternative traditions could be acknowledged and recognized, musically and ideologically. For the Dead, bluegrass is perhaps the best example.

Twentieth-century art can be said to be marked by its dislocations or "déplacement." Key words for characterizing twentieth-century art in general probably could include categories such as "Modernism," "Experimentation," "Avant-Garde," "Culture Industry," "Exile," and "Improvisation." These categories, of course, all are related to each other; they all also are situated within in a process of dislocation: their meanings are not given definitively. The Dead improvised, and with time improvisation became the form that

experimentation took in their music. They were not expelled from their (musical) “home country,” but sought a form of voluntary, interior exile, an active rejection of mainstream America as well as of the culture industry. But were they modernists? There is no doubt a strong Modernist impulse at work both in the music itself and in the band’s understanding, and even mythologizing, of itself. When Phil Lesh, as quoted above, talks about *Anthem of the Sun* as an attempt to “convey the experience of consciousness itself,” he is articulating a quite typical Modernist agenda, formulated again and again throughout the history of Modernism, but often attributed to French poet Charles Baudelaire, whose description of his new art form, the prose poem, can be used as a description also of large parts of the Grateful Dead’s music: “musical without rhythm or rhyme, supple enough and striking enough to suit lyrical movements of the soul, undulations of reverie, the flip-flops of consciousness.”⁴³

Although assigning a Modernist identity to the band is accurate and productive, we perhaps should remind ourselves of the 613 performances of their most frequently performed tune—the cover of John Phillips’ cowboy song, “Me and My Uncle.” I have heard only a few of these performances, but none of the versions I have listened to differ very radically from the others, even though Jerry Garcia often does his best to vary his accompaniment and his ornamentations of Bob Weir’s vocals. Perhaps the band’s coercive emphasis on the Modernist project to “Make it new!” should thus be balanced by a “stick to the tradition” attitude, which emphasizes the crafting of a song and includes a search for the ultimate, definitive, and perfect version of certain songs.

Another aspect of including cover songs in the shows is, of course, that of memory and history. Performing Marty Robbins’ “El Paso” or Johnny Cash’s “Big River,” as well as Reverend Gary Davis’ “Death Don’t Have No Mercy” or Elizabeth Cotton’s “Oh Babe, It Ain’t No Lie,” for instance, is a way of remembering the roots of the band, as well as being a tribute to history, to the forerunners. These cover songs sometimes were done rather traditionally, but this musical material also could be tried and tested, stretched out: the band could set Cash’s “Big River” on fire, or they could slow down Merle Haggard’s “Sing Me Back Home” to an exquisite and almost unbearable tempo. Also, when seemingly performing the most traditional music, such as bluegrass, Jerry Garcia and his mandolinist partner David Grisman would, like true avant-gardists, stretch and bend on that form’s unwritten rules, as when dedicating most of an album (*So What*, 1998) to music by Miles Davis and Milt Jackson.⁴⁴ Hence, it is no coincidence that there is actually an album featuring some of the Dead’s sources,

original or traditional versions of the Dead's most frequently performed cover songs: *The Music Never Stopped: The Roots of the Grateful Dead* (1995).

Against this backdrop, it might sound a bit odd to ask if the Grateful Dead also were avant-gardists. "Popular" the Grateful Dead were and are, in the sense of having a huge audience, in their refusal to deny or reject their popular heritage, and in their adherence to a popular tradition that incorporates both roots music and commercial products. It might seem contradictory or even absurd to call something that has such a mass basis "avant-garde." The question of the Dead as avant-gardists must be asked, however, and eventually be answered in the positive: avant-gardists with a mass audience. This was what so attracted pianist Tom Constanten to the Dead that he joined them, and performed with them for some time. Having studied with avant-garde composers Luciano Berio and Karl-Heinz Stockhausen, Constanten observed that the Grateful Dead "had something that avant-garde art music didn't have, and probably never will: a vast audience. You almost have to be a graduate student to enjoy some of these experimental pieces, but rock music attracted a larger audience, so you could say things from a platform and there would be people there to listen."⁴⁵

To understand how avant-garde aspects could survive within mass culture, under the auspices of the culture industry, we must look at the meaning of "avant-garde," a concept or category having a definition that is far from clear. The concept of avant-garde also might seem problematic here because we might think of avant-garde as having to do with different extreme forms of art, of provocation, perhaps even including violence—and the Grateful Dead, with its "fundamental lyricism," as Blair Jackson formulates it,⁴⁶ does not seem to have much in common with such characteristics of the avant-garde. Even if we do remember avant-gardist aspects of the band, especially during its early history, then we, along with Michael Kaler, might say that the Grateful Dead were not as radical as the Velvet Underground or LaMonte Young: "Chaos is *represented*, but not *enacted*," Kaler writes.⁴⁷ But I am not so sure that Kaler's characteristic is accurate; many parts of "Dark Star" seem to be more enactments than representations. "Dark Star" would for many years serve as the band's signature melody, its status comparable to that of Coltrane's many renditions of "My Favorite Things" and, just as that song did for Coltrane, "Dark Star" served as a vehicle for improvisation—meaning that it never sounded the same, not even twice. The same goes for "Space" and "Drums," which became centerpieces of Grateful Dead shows in the seventies.

II

There is an often-reproduced photograph taken by Jim Marshall in the late sixties of the Grateful Dead in performance. The band members have their backs to the audience, instead turning towards the amplifiers and loudspeakers, holding their guitars to or scratching them against the equipment to produce distortion and noise, using their instruments in a way that they apparently were not originally intended to be used. This is a classic avant-gardist gesture—and it does, of course, also imply an act of violence. This photograph, then, suggests that maybe the Dead were not only into peace, love, and understanding, that there might be something other than harmonizing pastorals inside the band's music.

The long-dominant view of the avant-garde is represented by Renato Poggioli's study *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, originally published in Italian in 1962. Poggioli's examples of avant-garde art are, at least by today's standards, rather conventional—what we today often call the "historical avant-garde," meaning Dadaism, Futurism, Surrealism, and others. Poggioli first emphasizes that the avant-garde is a movement, meaning that it cannot be isolated to certain individuals, certain countries, or certain works—any concept of the avant-garde must be flexible. But Poggioli still distinguishes certain traits that he sees as defining entities for the avant-garde. The first is that the avant-garde is always an "*activist*" movement: it wants something; it is goal-oriented and does not remain passive—which could be said of the Grateful Dead as well, the band wanting more than just mere survival. Secondly, however, Poggioli sees the avant-garde as always agitating "*against* something or someone," and this is what he calls the "*antagonistic*" aspect of the avant-garde. A typical example is Marcel Duchamp's "L.H.O.O.Q" (1919), in which the artist put a moustache on da Vinci's "Mona Lisa." The Grateful Dead never seem to have engaged in that kind of activity. In "Foolish Heart," when Robert Hunter writes, "sign the Mona Lisa with a spray can, call it art," he is ironically distancing himself (and the band, it seems) from that kind of antagonistic artistic practice.⁴⁸ But we must also remember the violent practice of using instruments and sound systems in unintended ways, producing distortion and noise—the Grateful Dead was not bereft of this avant-gardist impulse, rather it was a central aspect of the band's improvisations. In his third characteristic, Poggioli even sees the avant-garde as engaged in a "transcendental antagonism" that he calls its "*nihilistic*" moment—but the Grateful Dead never were iconoclasts. They once did play a benefit for the Black Panther Party, but the Black Panthers were radicals and revolutionaries, not nihilists.⁴⁹ Finally,

Poggioli raises the stakes even more with his fourth characteristic, which he calls “agonism” or the “agonistic moment”: the avant-garde, according to Poggioli, does not heed even “its own catastrophe and perdition.” Together, these four moments form what Poggioli calls the “dialectic of movements” of the avant-garde.⁵⁰

According to this established (but, as we also shall see, problematic) view of avant-gardism, it is obvious why a band such as the Velvet Underground—or even the Sex Pistols—might seem more radical, more subversive, and more avant-gardist than the Grateful Dead. It does not help that there are interesting or at least tantalizing connections between the historical avant-garde and the Grateful Dead. When Jerry Garcia found the name “Grateful Dead” while browsing a dictionary at random, he is echoing the way that pioneering Dada artist Tristan Tzara found the word “dada” while browsing a dictionary at random. What we have here are different varieties of the same myth of origins, however true the stories might be. Additionally, members of the band did once perform—together with a symphony orchestra in the United States—a classical (yes!) avant-gardist piece of art, John Cage’s *4’33”* or “the silent piece.” We also know, however, that when Garcia and Mickey Hart sent Cage a tape with music for the composer’s 75th birthday, Cage wrote back: “Thank you very much, I took your two minute tape and played it back at half-speed. It was beautiful, it was marvelous, thank you so much.” Cage here displays, I would say, a truly avant-gardist attitude in this appropriation of someone else’s work—and perhaps Garcia did the same, when smiling approvingly at Cage’s reply.⁵¹

There is at least one moment—on the best Grateful Dead album the band never made—when the Grateful Dead welcome their own perdition, and that is on John Oswald’s *Grayfolded* (1994–95), when he at one point stacks more than a hundred different live versions of “Dark Star” on top of each other, which results in a crescendo of white noise, erasing every trace of the musical material it is based on. Having Oswald manipulate all these versions of “Dark Star” displays an avant-gardist attitude: the tune is not given, no single version is sacred or canonical, and when the band was done with it, it could be handed over to someone else. That the band commissioned Oswald to do something with its music is typical of the way the Grateful Dead did things. Oswald had so successfully applied his “plunderphonics” to Michael Jackson’s “Bad” that he was sued and sentenced to destroy all existing copies of the album. The Grateful Dead, however, apparently interested in how Oswald aimed to create or construe new music out of existing music, and instead welcomed him to “plunder” their music, and providing Oswald with essentially free access to the band’s famed “Vault,”

which contains soundboard tapes of most of their shows. Initially, Oswald intended his project to include not only “Dark Star” but also two other staples of the band’s repertoire, “China Cat Sunflower” and “The Other One,” but the work process apparently made him change his mind.⁵²

The point of Oswald’s “plunderphonics” is, as Chris Cutler writes, three-fold: “Thus plunderphonics as a practice radically undermines three of the central pillars of the art music paradigm: *originality* (it deals only with copies), *individuality* (it speaks only with the voice of others), and *copyright* (the breaching of which is a condition of its very existence).”⁵³ The band’s openness to Oswald’s use of its music can be seen as related to Garcia’s oft-repeated viewpoint that once the band was done with the music, the audience could have it.⁵⁴ In his discussion of Oswald, Cutler emphasizes the importance of the medium, stating that it is “*only what is not recorded that belongs to its participants while what is recorded is placed inevitably in the public domain*”—which of course is what has happened to the Grateful Dead’s music, with so many of the band’s performances available on the Internet in both audio and video. This sharing has one of its roots in the avant-gardist project of erasing the borders separating “art” from “life,” and *Grayfolded*, as well as Ned Lagin’s and Phil Lesh’s project *Seastones* (released as an album in 1975), contribute to what Cutler maintains is happening: a “general aesthetic convergence at the fringes of genres once mutually exclusive—and across the gulf of high and low art.”⁵⁵

Another example of what Poggioli sees as typical of the avant-garde is that it often chooses to use “an enemy’s insult as one’s own emblem: we need cite only the decadents and the *Salon des Refusés*.”⁵⁶ We can think of the first call for contact with the audience made on the 1971 eponymous live album, nicknamed *Skull and Roses*: fans were addressed as “Dead Freaks,” soon to be dubbed “Deadheads,” even though the first meanings of that word in *Webster’s* online dictionary still are “one who has not paid for a ticket” and “a dull or stupid person.”⁵⁷

These examples, however, suggest that the Grateful Dead might have something to do with the avant-garde, even though the band itself really does not fit very well with Poggioli’s emphasis on the avant-garde as antagonistic. When Greil Marcus in his *Lipstick Traces* discusses—or rather hails—the Sex Pistols, relating them both to the historical avant-garde in the form of Dada, as well as to the political avant-garde of the 1960s in the form of the left-wing French Situationists, he wholeheartedly (and without critical discussion) accepts a definition of the avant-garde like Poggioli’s precisely for its emphasis on antagonism, which in Marcus’ view suits that band perfectly, though others might say superficially.⁵⁸

Yet, it is easy to see that this type of analysis is highly problematic and, moreover, that the energy feeding the Sex Pistols flares up briefly—only to evaporate just as quickly. The Grateful Dead might seem less politically revolutionary than the Sex Pistols, and less aesthetically radical than the Velvet Underground, but it is the Dead that actively resist the same culture industry that produces, distributes, and exploits the Velvet Underground as well as the Sex Pistols—and forms or shapes both these bands. It is Jerry Garcia, and not Lou Reed or John Lydon, or Sid Vicious, who criticizes what he calls the “fascist” aspects of rock’s crowd control in live performances.⁵⁹ Indeed, both Reed and the Sex Pistols exploited those aspects of the mass audience. The lack of theatrics and of rock-and-roll poses was a central point of the Dead’s enduring appeal and, for outsiders, their mystery.⁶⁰ This problem, or contradiction, might be at least partly resolved if we look at the avant-garde from a different angle. For that angle, I use the German theoretician Peter Bürger’s *Theorie der Avantgarde* (1974), a study that to some degree serves as a critique of Poggioli’s work.

When Duchamp painted a moustache on the “Mona Lisa,” was he really attacking da Vinci, or was his target tradition? With Bürger, one must note that Duchamp did not paint on da Vinci’s original painting in the Louvre museum in Paris, rather he used a cheap reproduction. In that way, anyone can sign the “Mona Lisa” and call it art—and that is precisely what the avant-garde is about, it radically changes the relation between art and beholder, between book and reader, between music and listener, and ultimately between artist and artwork. The Grateful Dead taking part in a performance of “4’33” is then logical, as that piece involves the audience as much as the performers. It does so not by attacking individual works of art such as the “Mona Lisa,” but by questioning and attacking art as *institution*. Duchamp can be seen as criticizing the isolation of this painting to a museum, the distance between it and the life outside the museum walls, and that art has become synonymous with these isolated, individual, but ultimately reified works, and he mourns that art no longer is an activity, a practice. Something similar could be said of Cage; he, too, searched for ways to make art legitimate again. The avant-garde is also attacking the commodification of art in late capitalism. Bürger writes that the “category *art as institution* was not invented by the avant-garde movements. . . . But it only became recognizable after the avant-garde movements had criticized the autonomy status of art in developed bourgeois society.”⁶¹

In a 1993 interview, Jerry Garcia talked about his youthful ambitions, “I used to have these fantasies about ‘I want rock & roll to be like *respectable* music.’ I wanted it to be like art. . . I used to try to think of ways to make that

work. I wanted to do something that fit in with the art institute, that kind of self-conscious art—'art' as opposed to 'popular culture.' Back then they didn't even talk about popular culture—I mean, rock & roll was so *not legit*, you know."⁶² In a way, young Garcia's wish was fulfilled: rock music is now the object of musicological as well as aesthetic analysis. But rock music reached that position at least partly by *not* becoming "respectable," displaying a remarkable capacity to renew itself in forms such as punk, grunge, rap, electronica, noise—forms often exploited by the industry, but momentarily opening up a space of potentialities. If rock music is "art," and not only "popular art" or a "mass product," it is not only because musicians have managed to produce meaning within the forms they find inside rock music, but also because their audience has acknowledged the consecration of rock into art. There is a dialectic between the artist and the audience, between production and reception, that results in the acknowledgment of a work as art.

It is here that an understanding of the avant-garde according to Bürger becomes productive for any discussion of the Grateful Dead. For Bürger goes on, in his Marxist discourse, to state that what the avant-garde "negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men."⁶³ Under capitalism, art loses its former social functions, such as representing power, and instead becomes *autonomous*—meaning that it becomes isolated as art, and as different kinds of art, and its new social function is actually, if we follow Bürger, to keep this institution working, isolated from everyday working life. The work of art is reified, takes on the commodity form, and functions in its isolation only as self-reflection and entertainment. This was of course what the Sex Pistols once attacked—a rock music that had become totally commercialized and vacuously technical—and they wanted to bring it back to its basic three chords, potentially played by anyone. Yet, they did it in a highly marketable form. Today, even "Anarchy in the UK" has been reduced to Muzak. . . .

The Grateful Dead did it in a different way but, yes, Bob Weir once remarked that the Dead had been called "punk's old lance."⁶⁴ It is not only a question of the Dead forming their own record company, or organizing their own ticket sales, though such institutional forms are important and created a material foundation for the music. What is most central here remains the music, and most of all the concert or show. If band members' public deprecation of their studio releases was as much rhetoric as reality, that attitude did describe the primacy they all placed on the concert, or rather, the "*show*." The term is significant, for "*show*" implies a more-inclusive concept and that must be emphasized. Today, we can go to museums and scrutinize avant-gardist sculptures, or buy avant-gardist music on

CDs—Ben Lerner is basically right in saying that the “problem is that these artworks, no matter how formally inventive, remain artworks. They might redefine the borders of art but they don’t erase those borders; a bomb that never goes off, the poem remains a poem.”⁶⁵ Lerner, however, is talking about literature and literature’s inclination to take on the form of the work. Another way to look at the avant-garde is offered by Bürger in saying that “[i]nstead of speaking of the avant-gardist work, we will speak of avant-garde manifestation. A dadaist manifestation does not have work character but is nonetheless an authentic manifestation of the artistic avant-garde.”⁶⁶

The same goes for the Grateful Dead concert: it was, in all its different aspects, “an authentic manifestation” of what the band really was about; fundamentally music, as Lesh says, but also something more. This “something more” has to do with what Bürger calls “life praxis.” Bürger does not really elaborate on this concept, but we can infer from his discussion what he means. The Dead’s music, then, somehow changed—or at least influenced—the ways of living for many of its listeners. This goes to the heart of what Mickey Hart has said: “People come to be changed, and we change ‘em.”⁶⁷ He is not alone; there is an enormous mass of testimony from Deadheads, both newcomers and seasoned concertgoers, who went to a concert, or a series of shows, and came out altered. As Peter Connors put it, summarizing his first Dead show, “[W]hen I walked out of Kingswood Music Theatre in 1987, I had been profoundly changed by what I’d just experienced.”⁶⁸ The fans’ experience does not occur in isolation, the musicians’ lives are also involved. For them, their “life praxis” takes form in the tension between tradition and avant-gardism, between popularity and exclusivity. Here, the band once again displays a hybrid character: it resisted or opposed the culture industry in many ways, but the band’s popularity and status is at the same time an inextricable aspect of the culture industry. In this, I believe, as Andreas Huyssen writes, that it “was the culture industry, not the avant-garde, which succeeded in transforming everyday life in the 20th century.”⁶⁹ As a part of the culture industry, but by stretching and bending the ways that industry worked, the Grateful Dead sought to achieve what might seem impossible: creating and disseminating avant-garde art on a mass scale. How that happened, how it was possible for precisely this band to do that, is a topic about which Phil Lesh has much to say.

III

A few years ago, Phil Lesh published his memoir, *Searching for the Sound*, which offers an informative text for considering the relationship between

the Dead and the avant-garde. Lesh draws an image of a conventional middle-class upbringing, but also of what could be considered a quite representative trajectory for how to become an experimental rock musician. The key, in Lesh's representation of this complex, is how the individual, in its different appearances, could be combined with the collective. What Lesh's story tells us is that the avant-garde is not certain techniques, not certain styles; it is a *culture*, composed of many different aspects—esthetic, political, and social—and if that culture had not been there, no drugs in the world would have created the Grateful Dead.

Each player who has been part of the Grateful Dead has his or her own story to tell, and it is obvious that the band gelled only after very hard work during long rehearsals as well as performances. The point is that the diversity of traditions the different players came from is wide. Those were of course rock and roll, but also big band jazz, rudimental drumming, folk music, blues, gospel, bluegrass, rhythm and blues, classical music, avant-garde music, and more. To become a rock band, the players almost had to force these different parts together, as if assembling parts of a machine or juxtaposing them in a montage form. The eclecticism that is so tangible in the Dead's music has one source in this diversity. At the same time, however, this music cannot be dismissed only as eclectic, because the Dead managed to fuse the musical types and make that synthesis their own. Ultimately, that triumph has to do with the appropriation of tradition and the simultaneous stylization of these traditions, guided by an insight Lesh had when listening to a young Garcia perform a traditional folk song. Watching the young guitarist at a party, Lesh felt a hush fall over the room as Garcia mesmerized—and Lesh understood that folk music, too, "could deliver an aesthetic and emotional payoff comparable to that of the greatest operatic and symphonic works."⁷⁰

It was by trying to extract aesthetic value from simple rock music that the Grateful Dead came into their own, and that is how Garcia's vision of rock as art came about—not by imitating existing "art music" but through the extraction of aesthetic pleasure and meaning from jamming on one chord or through interpretations of old ballads and folk songs. It was not so much the result of conscious intention, as much as the effect of the combination of artistic practice and the mentality of the times, of dislocations going on both generally and concretely. Jerry Garcia intimated as much in a 1988 interview, saying, "The world out there created the Grateful Dead as much as we did. We just agreed to do it and be pushed along by it."⁷¹ Garcia also pointed out that he felt that he was not an "artist in the independent sense, I'm part of dynamic situations."⁷² There is also a certain perceptible

and problematic tension in the relation between the avant-garde culture, already a force in the Bay Area in the mid-sixties, and the Grateful Dead. For some time, the Grateful Dead and, for instance, a typical avant-garde project such as the San Francisco Tape Music Center—typical in that it generated a sort of loose-knit, collectively based art community—had some interaction: both Phil Lesh and Tom Constanten participated in the Tape Center scene, which extended to the San Francisco Mime Troupe. But the worlds of electronic and rock music, respectively, never really coalesced. The mid-sixties, in Stewart Brand's view, marked "the beginning of the Grateful Dead and the end of everybody else."⁷³ Meanwhile, other future band members were also searching for other traditions to partake in and belong to—and tradition here also means precisely community.

IV

Long before joining the Grateful Dead, the individuals who were later to make up the band were searching for viable traditions—traditions that could still maintain relevance and carry authority. The most obvious example is Jerry Garcia and his early interest in bluegrass music. Garcia performed with his banjo in bluegrass groups around the San Francisco Bay area, but he also—together with mandolin player Sandy Rothman—went searching for the original source, in the form of a 1964 pilgrimage to bluegrass hero Bill Monroe in Bean Blossom, in southern Indiana. Rothman would later play with Monroe, but Garcia never got the chance. Rothman and Garcia carried with them a tape recorder, and they were far from alone in doing that; this experience of being a taper later informed Garcia's attitude towards the tapers in the Grateful Dead audience.⁷⁴

The attraction of bluegrass for a bunch of urban musicians was probably many-layered. Bluegrass must be described as a form of music that rapidly came to privilege virtuosity. Still, it had contacts with its roots in old-time string band music—often with obvious Christian overtones. Bluegrass is most of all instrumental music, however, and as bluegrass historian Neil Rosenberg writes, "occasionally used for dancing, it is most frequently performed in concert-like settings, and sound media—radio, records, television—have been important means of dissemination for the music. Bluegrass depends upon the microphone, and this fact has shaped its sound."⁷⁵ This technological dissemination of course meant that bluegrass was accessible, and could be listened to and learned even in California—at the same time as migration brought both players and their music to California, inspiring young Californians to take part in traditions, but also

encouraging them to put a twist to those traditions. Modern technology also produced Harry Smith's seminal *Anthology of American Folk Music*, a collection of enormous importance for a generation of artists such as Bob Dylan, and for the Grateful Dead.⁷⁶

As Rosenberg emphasizes, however, bluegrass still has festivals at its core,⁷⁷ and these festivals include both concert-like performances as well as widespread playing among those present, offering participants a chance to learn from the masters. The festival culture made pilgrimages like Garcia's necessary, and they were also part of the tradition. Folklorists, anthropologists, and ethnomusicologists traversed America, searching for and recording traditional music wherever they found it. As Rosenberg notes, famed folklorist Alan Lomax "furnished a model for those interested in finding such performers. Young revivalists followed his path in making 'field trips' into the South and Afro-American communities. . . ."⁷⁸ Jerry Garcia was one of them, carrying that tape recorder with him when searching for the bluegrass grail. What bluegrass taught Garcia was, I would suggest, how music is dependent upon a community, and how it can shape and build that community; how music and community could form a dynamic unit, at least momentarily, but perhaps also how such communities could be closed to outsiders such as Garcia himself and Sandy Rothman. A Latino and a Jew from the West Coast were not allowed immediate access to Midwestern cultures—a lesson that would come to good use with the Grateful Dead. Bob Weir apparently also was an early taper, and recorded performances by Jorma Kaukonen and others.⁷⁹

Later, another member of the band would engage even more profoundly with what was to be called "World Music." Mickey Hart worked with musicians of very different backgrounds, such as Nubian oud-player Hamza El-Din and Nigerian master drummer Babatunde Olatunji. Hart produced a series of World Music-genre albums for the Rykodisc label, and he has worked with scholars from the Smithsonian Institute and the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress to collect and archive indigenous and endangered music from around the planet. The research Hart has conducted and sponsored has informed several books on drumming and percussion instruments, including his coauthored volumes *Planet Drum*, with musicologist Fredric Lieberman (1991), and *Drumming at the Edge of Magic*, with Jay Stevens (1990).

When considering the culture of bluegrass, it is obvious that the Grateful Dead were far from the first artists to engage in a closer interaction with their audience. Jazz promotes audience involvement as well, but with a different aim, and in a different genre context. Probably more strongly than

bluegrass musicians, jazz players understood that to make their music possible they must organize themselves. Ajay Heble even states that jazz is about precisely “building purposeful communities of interest and involvement, about reinvigorating public life with the magic of dialogue and collaboration.”⁸⁰ Both jazz and bluegrass can be seen as having strong roots in America’s underclass, although neither form can be reduced exclusively to an expression of the oppressed. Although the bluegrass community in part was based on a somewhat conservative endeavor to keep the music within a traditional form, jazz musicians of the sixties organized to perform and develop their music *beyond* tradition. The examples are abundant, and include pianist and composer Horace Tapscott forming the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra in 1961, with the double aim of both preserving and remodeling African-American music. The Arkestra soon evolved into the Underground Musicians Association, which became the Union of God’s Musicians and Artists Ascensions, but the Arkestra seems to have remained at the center of the organization: “Fusing art with social activism, the Arkestra developed and preserved black music and art within their community, performing on street corners, in parks, schools, churches, senior homes, social facilities and gathering spots, and arts centers, and at political rallies.”⁸¹ Other examples include the record company Debut, formed in 1952 by bassist and composer Charles Mingus, his wife Celia, and drummer and composer Max Roach; an artist-controlled company, it was devoted to producing new jazz. Similarly, the Jazz Composer’s Guild—an organization formed in 1964 by trumpeter and composer Bill Dixon—was dedicated to the promotion of the new, so called free jazz. Still active today is the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) in Chicago, formed at the initiative of pianist/composer Muhal Richard Abrams in 1965 and dedicated to performing and teaching what the Art Ensemble of Chicago, one of its member ensembles, called “Great Black Music.” The importance of the AACM must be emphasized; its members have continued to produce some of the most vital music of the last fifty years, and at the same time the AACM has worked locally to provide training to aspiring young musicians, forming a vital part of the local community.⁸²

These examples of self-organization might have inspired the Grateful Dead. Their importance is not so much in their possible status as role models for the band, but rather in their demonstration of a type of margin at the peripheries of the culture industry, and at the outer borders of (white) middle-class America, in which self-organization and a different kind of music were made possible. As Jacques Attali remarks, free jazz might have

displayed its “inability to construct a truly new mode of production” but all the same it “was the first attempt to express in economic terms the refusal of the cultural alienation inherent in repetition, to use music to build a new culture.”⁸³ Composers and performers of written (notated) Modernist and avant-garde music also have tended to a sort of community building, as exemplified by the San Francisco Tape Music Center, but this music has had a strong academic patronage—illustrated by the Tape Music Center moving to Mills College in Oakland. While the Grateful Dead engaged directly with their local community in their early days, the ways in which they did it differed from the ways jazz musicians did it; they did not engage in teaching, for example, although they did perform for free in parks and streets. They were a neighborhood band—but they did not have to fight against racist structures in addition to the culture industry. Still, their music was radical enough to demand a certain measure of self-organization to be able to grow and expand, a self-organization that connected them to an avant-garde tradition. The Grateful Dead were part of the famed Acid Tests, they co-owned the Carousel Ballroom together with other bands, and in 1973 the band formed its own short-lived record companies, Grateful Dead Records and Round Records, the latter dedicated to musical offshoots from the Grateful Dead. The band tried to be in control of its touring, organizing mail-order ticket sales; it also engaged in the development of audio technology. Every community needs a material basis for it to be something more than only imagined, and the Grateful Dead carefully built this foundation for themselves. Now, in the post-Dead era, both Phil Lesh and Bob Weir are taking on a mission as elderly statesmen, teaching younger musicians how to play Grateful Dead music, and to improvise collectively, at their respective sites, Weir’s TRI studios and Sweetwater Music Hall, and Lesh’s Terrapin Crossroads.

V

Tradition is a problematic word. What does it mean to be in a tradition, to be traditional? Or to be outside of tradition? Traditions are basically ambiguous; they can imprison the musician but they also provide a well from which musicians can draw ideas. Tradition can be understood as a type of collective memory or archive that contains what can no longer be formulated in language. In music, Adorno writes, “survives what is otherwise forgotten and is no longer capable of speaking directly.”⁸⁴ We find a similar point in Attali’s *Noise*; music “repeats the memory of another society . . . a society in which it had meaning.”⁸⁵ Tradition, for the Grateful Dead, seems

to have worked precisely as a well for the musicians to go to, find ways to play in. Through tradition the band could memorize, or imagine, a long-lost Western landscape, or perhaps Romantic English poetry, a ballad tradition, with memory then taking on both lyrical or literary form as well as musical, concretized in, for instance, Robert Hunter's translations of Rainer Maria Rilke's poetry.⁸⁶ But the band also formed its own tradition: Those 613 performances of "Me and My Uncle"—is that not a type of imprisonment within, or at least a both remarkable and problematic fealty to a tradition that the band by and by made into its own?

Tradition can be seen as an archive, containing repertoires of songs, techniques, and gestures; but more importantly it is an attitude, a relation between musician, music, and audience. Yet, tradition remains alive and meaningful only if generating new varieties of expression and updating old ones; and tradition becomes even more problematic and ambiguous under the commodification that late capitalism generates. In that system, tradition runs an acute risk of ossification, of becoming an object of mere academic interest, left behind by the culture industry and commodified into albums, CDs, and other formats. This risks killing tradition and in its place inserting a law: *This* is the authentic version, *this* is the canon that every musician must observe; all else can and should be ignored—the criticism directed against Bob Dylan for "going electric" comes to mind. Tradition, however, also can be commodified as material for new products, new hit songs, new styles in popular music. Tradition remains a source only if it remains part of a community, only if it is shared, and therefore part of transformative and dynamic practices. As Walter Benjamin emphatically stated, "Every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it."⁸⁷ What Benjamin points to is the urge, generated by modernity, to rescue some form of tradition to which one could belong. John McCole points out that "tradition" for Benjamin was "less a particular canon of texts or values than the very coherence, communicability, and thus the transmissibility of experience."⁸⁸

The Grateful Dead phenomenon is one such example of a more or less coherent tradition: It is very much about sharing experience, about forming a collective body—but not by just reproducing traditional music. The question of tradition becomes of decisive importance because, as Paul Ricoeur emphasized, he "who is unable to reinterpret his past may also be incapable of projecting concretely his interest in emancipation."⁸⁹ Not the passive reproduction of tradition, then, but the active reinterpretation of it—if imprisoned within tradition, music risks being reduced to serving non-musical ends, and Adorno maintains that with the development of

the culture industry, the “autonomy of music is replaced by a mere socio-psychological function. Music today is largely a social cement.” The culture industry destroys tradition, imprisoning music but in the commodity form; this gives it a superficial mobility and variety, which actually is its exchangeability. Adorno further sees two basic types of mass behavior in relation to music—“the ‘rhythmically obedient’ type and the ‘emotional’ type.”⁹⁰ This of course is a very rough division, but it is still worth asking whether we—an entire arena moving to the Grateful Dead—are not “rhythmically obedient.”

The kernel of musical tradition is its repeatability, but commodified it becomes nothing *but* repetition—such as 613 performances of “Me and My Uncle,” all sounding very much like each other, always already identified, despite superficial variations in tempo, coloration, or set-list placement. As Attali writes, contemporary music heralds “the establishment of a society of repetition in which nothing will happen anymore.” Music, Attali claims, was once an “instrument of differentiation” but has become a “locus of repetition.”⁹¹ Therefore, music tends to be “too often only a disguise for the monologue of power.”⁹² Attali might seem extreme in his verdict, but he does have a point—and he acknowledges that music not only performs power, but also heralds what he calls “the emergence of a formidable subversion.”⁹³ The breakthroughs in audio technology during the twentieth century—including radio, gramophone, and tape recorder—pave the way for commodification and repetition. Therefore, as Attali points out, “performance becomes the *showcase for the phonograph record, a support for the promotion of repetition.*”⁹⁴ But here the Grateful Dead differs: although there normally is an obvious relation between records and touring—an industry norm the band ignored—the band produced fewer records over time, privileging the live concert instead, which gained an independent value.

Technological transformations change the conditions for tradition—often drastically. If we look at tradition as some kind of belonging, a sense of being part of something bigger than the individual, then technological development and commodification breaks tradition apart. Here, as Benjamin pointed out, it is “as if a capability . . . has been taken from us: the ability to share experiences.”⁹⁵ Instead of the shared, collective experience, music turns into an individualistic enjoyment of a substitute product, illustrated by everyone listening with earphones—as if we are all connected to the same source, listening to the same monologue but individually, separated from each other. Attali points to how audio technology promotes repetition, which “requires the ongoing destruction of the use-value of earlier repeti-

tions, in other words, the rapid devaluation of past labor and therefore accelerated growth."⁹⁶ This is the logic of capital and commodification, and no musician—or anyone else—escapes it. It is a dismal perspective that Attali offers us, yet he sees possibilities for challenging power through “the route of a breach in social repetition and the control of noisemaking.”⁹⁷

In its own way, even a rock-and-roll band like the Grateful Dead tries to subvert power structures. Self-organization, the dialectic of tradition and avant-garde, the focus on live performances, the careful cultivation of craftsmanship, the forming of and reliance upon a community—these are factors that combine to generate what Attali (naturally without referring to the Dead) calls “a music produced elsewhere and otherwise.”⁹⁸ Another word for that is, of course, marginalization—but it is in the margins that possibilities sometimes appear.

Walter Benjamin points to the ambiguous character of modernity and what he calls “the age of technical reproducibility,” an era beginning in the nineteenth century, when “technological reproduction not only had reached a standard that permitted it to reproduce all known works of art, profoundly modifying their effect, but it also had captured a place of its own among the artistic processes.”⁹⁹ Repetition, then, is what technology makes possible, but a repetition quite different from the repetition that is an integral part of ritual. Although repetition in ritual generates the wholeness of tradition, technological repeatability, on the contrary, is a form of fragmentation. As Jacques Attali writes, “repetition entails the development of service activities whose function is to produce the consumer. . . .”¹⁰⁰ Yet this repeatability has another function as well, and Benjamin emphasizes how “technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual.”¹⁰¹ According to Benjamin, this means that the original work of art can “meet the recipient halfway, whether in the form of a photograph or in that of a gramophone record.”¹⁰² The de-ritualized availability of the work of art in reproduced form means that its foundation can no longer remain the collective and ritual tradition, but instead becomes a “*different practice: politics.*”¹⁰³ Repetition, then, might not only be the constant stating of the given, and instead perhaps is a powerful pointing to something else, something different.

I come back to “politics” elsewhere in this text, but Benjamin’s analysis offers important leads to the ambiguous character of the Grateful Dead phenomenon. On the one hand, the Grateful Dead are, from their earliest days, deeply invested in mastering audio technology, experimenting with ways to optimize sound for both musicians and audience, as well as for different settings. The most famous example is the “Wall of Sound,” the

enormous sound system used by the band for live performances during the mid-70s, though ultimately too complicated and expensive to sustain.¹⁰⁴ On the other hand, the concerts took on a life of their own, generating the Grateful Dead phenomenon, attracting a steadily growing audience—and an audience that was not an ordinary rock audience. Even when addressing the problems posed by the band's growing popularity, band members were careful to refer to their fans as "the best audience around; supportive, civil, and hip to the realities of America in the late 20th century."¹⁰⁵ This was an audience that did not expect the Dead to sound like their records, but on the contrary wanted, encouraged, and expected them to reinterpret and renew their music.

A Grateful Dead show could then take on the form of a carnivalesque festival, including masks and costumes, jugglers and dancers, food and drugs—a celebration of life and of communal bonds.¹⁰⁶ The ever-critical Nadya Zimmerman states, "The Dead's concerts might very well have been communal folk festivals, but they were experienced within the cocoon of technology and consumerism."¹⁰⁷ But how could it be otherwise? And does such a close-fisted remark really do justice to the cultural phenomenon of a Dead show? The key word, though, is "experience." Grateful Dead concerts became an arena for reinstating what was lacking in any reproduction, what Benjamin calls "the here and now of the work of art—its unique existence in a particular place."¹⁰⁸ The experience of this uniqueness was, of course, *collective*, and took on a Dionysian, carnivalesque or circus-like form of ritual; the Grateful Dead show became a space radically different from the surrounding society. The ritualization of the show as event even generated cultic elements, and Garcia in particular suffered from fans looking at him as some kind of demi-god—with a wry sense of humor, Garcia distanced himself from this devotion, stating that he would "put up with it until they came to me with the cross and nails," another acknowledgment of what Garcia called the "fascist" element of rock music's power over the audience.¹⁰⁹ The uniqueness of every show made Deadheads travel with the band, catching not only one or two shows but several, to be part of this event in which the work of art *happened* when the band was "on." Sometimes it didn't happen—but if it didn't, there were always recordings of shows where it did happen circulating among the fans. The show took on a ritualistic dimension in its Dionysian excess, and, as I discuss below (see Chapter 2: vi), its heterotopic character emerged—even as the music changed with every show, and improvisation of different kinds kept the music not only alive but also constantly shifting. The Grateful Dead phenomenon is then marked by a tension between technological reproducibil-

ity and ritualistic uniqueness—which is another form for the basic tension between avant-garde and tradition in the band’s music.

“Tradition” for the Grateful Dead was not only playing in a bluegrass band such as *Old and In the Way*, which Garcia did, nor was it in only performing all-percussion music, which Mickey Hart did, sometimes with Bill Kreutzmann. Both of those examples suggest that tradition for the band did not mean reproduction of something lost, but rather an appropriation and remodeling of heritage, an endeavor to adjust it to new conditions of possibility. For the band as a unit, tradition was not only a matter of including traditional material in shows and on albums—foremost covers of blues or country and western tunes—tradition also was reformulated and articulated anew in the band’s own music. The most obvious examples are the albums *Workingman’s Dead* and *American Beauty*, but many of the new songs first released on the live album *Europe ’72* also explore tradition to ferret out what is most usable. This remodeling of tradition also marked Robert Hunter’s lyrics for the band; in “Uncle John’s Band,” for example, the lines “When life looks like Easy Street, there is danger at the door,” and “Think this through with me, let me know your mind,” hint at the traditional role of the storyteller, in Walter Benjamin’s understanding of him, as a “man who has counsel for his readers.”¹¹⁰ Hunter has also characterized some of his lyrics as “proverb songs,” including “Deal,” “Ripple,” “The Wheel,” and “Loser.”¹¹¹ At the same time, Hunter acknowledged that the conditions actually had changed, that tradition had been destroyed, and his counsel—a term he might resist—took on an ironical or paradoxical form: “Comes a time/ when the blind man/ takes your hand/ says: Don’t you see?” (“Comes a Time”).¹¹² The Grateful Dead became the storytellers of their community (a function actually thematized in Hunter’s lyrics to “Lady With A Fan,” on *Terrapin Station* (1977)), but the image of the world that the music, together with the lyrics, distributed was that of a world turned upside down. In this reversal—really a turning upside down—of hegemonic culture and established forms of conduct, types of resistance being formed. But resistance against what? And what was and is the political significance of the culture germinating around a constantly touring rock band?

VI

The resistance that the Grateful Dead offered was not a resistance to capitalism as such, but rather one directed against a society in which commodification, conformism, and hypocrisy ruled, where power was rendered

anonymous. There was a protest against a society that constantly is at war—both abroad and at home—against its own population. The band could be quite clear-eyed about what was going on in the world, as when Garcia talked about the war in Vietnam as “an effort on the part of the establishment to keep the economic situation in the United States comparatively stable”¹¹³ or, in another early interview, when he stated that the band was “interested in lending our support” to what he calls a “sub-economy in the United States,” one that “doesn’t depend on the rest of the straight, American capitalist system.”¹¹⁴

The type of resistance to the “American capitalist system” that the band was part of, however, then must be understood not as a direct negation of power, but rather as a turning away from hegemonic ideologies and an affluent society emptied of life and vitality. In other words, the Dead engaged in forms of resistance which were informed both by avant-gardism and tradition. Nadya Zimmerman sees the band sharing this stance with the “counterculture” in general and the contemporary San Francisco bands specifically. In her view, their music “reveals that the countercultural sensibility was pluralistic, not oppositional; it embodied an anything-goes mindset, not an antiestablishment stance; it attracted people who sought on the whole, to disengage from mainstream society, not to transform it.”¹¹⁵ Other scholars see the counterculture in a more positive light. To Terry H. Anderson, “[t]he counterculture must be defined broadly. The movement developed as a counter to the political establishment: the counterculture was a counter to the dominant cold war culture.”¹¹⁶ Anderson’s analysis, however, might be too narrow: The counterculture cannot be reduced to a reaction against the “political establishment,” rather, it was a rebellion against the dual commodification and technologizing of everyday life. Zimmerman’s analysis, conversely, is very general, and in the case of the Grateful Dead is not wholly accurate. She securely fastens the band, even early on, to a simple production of nostalgia “for a populist aura of a time and space long ago.”¹¹⁷ Zimmerman simply reproduces a critique of the band, recurrent in reviews and articles in the music press at least since the onslaught of punk, and even if the band cannot be totally acquitted of this accusation—younger fans clearly did find the band to be a powerful conduit for a view of the sixties absent from the mainstream—it is not very accurate. Listening to, for instance, the two boxes of live recordings of concerts comprising almost the entire spring tour of 1990—*Spring 1990* and *Spring 1990 The Other One*—one hears a band adding a sharp edge to the music, a band actually and actively resisting nostalgia. What a Grateful Dead show offered was a relief, however temporary, from normative hegemony,

from “Reaganomics” and authoritarian society, but the band never really engaged in any revival of the sixties, nor did it invest or traffic in that kind of nostalgia.

A critique of this type does raise the question of what sort of demands we can place upon—and what expectations we can reasonably make of—a rock-and-roll band. Early on, the band was hounded by demands that they should play for free—and the Grateful Dead did play for free quite often in those early years (and later played innumerable benefits), but even musicians need an income, and the band had to defend itself against accusations of being just another greedy moneymaking machine, even though their ticket prices remained far below those of comparable acts. Also, is it reasonable to demand of a group of musicians that they take some sort of anti-capitalist stand? Jerry Garcia made a relevant comment on that kind of moralism, saying, “Well I think the musician’s first responsibility is to play music as well as he can, and that’s the most important thing. And any responsibility to anyone else is just journalistic fiction . . . or political fiction.”¹¹⁸ As Phil Lesh pointed out, the Grateful Dead and the culture surrounding the band seemed to survive the sixties in much better condition than most of the more directly political movements—or overtly political bands—of the time, and there is probably a lesson to be learned there.¹¹⁹

The culture surrounding the Grateful Dead—of which the band is only one of many parts and not the sole instigator—can be seen as a public sphere: a quite momentary, provisional, and mobile public sphere, that perhaps also (to a great degree) is imaginary. Michael Warner sees the public as the effect of a symbolic address or interpellation: “To address a public or to think of oneself as belonging to a public is to be a certain kind of person, to inhabit a certain kind of social world, to have at one’s disposal certain media and genres, to be motivated by a certain normative horizon, and to speak within a certain language ideology.”¹²⁰ The band and its music addressed an audience (“Dead Freaks Unite!”) that formed into a public, but at the same time the band also was a channel through which an address was distributed. The imaginary character of this public is easy to see: Simply imagine dancing hippies. This “imagined community,” however, a community based on volunteers imagining something that bound members to one another (I come back to this concept below), also was supported by material institutions, and then not only by the band’s concerts, but also records, tie-dyes, drugs, head shops, magazines, and the Internet. One must look at this public, in all its complexity, as exemplifying the kind of interaction which, as Warner writes, though seemingly without political aspirations, “can be seen as attempting to create rival publics, even rival modes of

publicness."¹²¹ I do think that the Grateful Dead phenomenon qualifies as such a "counter-public"; and this alternative public is also called forth through an address to the strangers comprising the mass audience, but these strangers are, as Warner writes, "socially marked by their participation in this kind of discourse; ordinary people are presumed not to want to be mistaken for the kind of person who would participate in this kind of talk or be present in this kind of scene."¹²² Warner's description fits Deadheads nicely, as well as the presumed ordinary citizen's reaction to the spectacle of Deadheads gathering for a show.

There are quite a few testimonies about the Grateful Dead phenomenon, ranging from coffee-table books to autobiographical narratives such as Peter Conners' *Growing Up Dead*, and scholarly discussions from sociological and ethnological analyses, to business analyses and dozens of journalistic accounts.¹²³ A shortcut to the complexity of the Grateful Dead phenomenon as a counter-public is offered by browsing the fanzine *The Golden Road* (edited by Blair Jackson and Regan McMahon) from between 1984 and 1993. *The Golden Road*—one of several fanzines—was very well edited and written, and the early issues from 1984 and 1985 give a vivid image of the Deadhead community. The magazine included articles on taping and presenting new digital equipment, and had juridical articles informing readers about their rights when harassed by the police, for example. It featured interviews with band members and also with staffers such as Eileen Law, the undisputed heroine of the office, and Dan Healy, master of the soundboard. A multi-issue feature discussed the band's cover songs, referring readers to the original sources and later recordings. *The Golden Road* also had classifieds: contact ads, tape trading, and ads offering services: "Get high on the Dead without drugs! Licensed psychotherapist; six years substance-abuse counseling experience." *The Golden Road* formed an important part of a sort of pedagogical discourse that informed the Deadhead community: older Heads taught younger Heads how to behave, and the magazine was part of this educational process, helping to transform a growing mass audience into some sort of community.

At the center of this counter-public is a rock-and-roll band, a simple but at the same time highly complicated machinery for distributing an address, a call to strangers to join the world that the music establishes—in that sense, the Grateful Dead phenomenon also is what Warner states characterizes every public: it is a "poetic world making."¹²⁴ This suggests that it is worthwhile to look into, and even sharpen, the question of what kind of world this music generated: a real world, not the imaginary world of the song lyrics.

VII

What was it that was changed during those years when the music played the band *and* the audience? What world did the music generate or produce? Obviously, the music did not change the politics of this nation, nor bourgeois society—if the United States can be called that—or the workings of late capitalism; nor did it affect the political arena, even though members of the band did show up in a few political situations, and even though you could find Deadheads in prominent political positions—and not only in the United States, but abroad as well.¹²⁵

What Bürger alludes to with his concept of “life praxis” (*see* section ii, above) is his fellow German theoretician, philosopher, and sociologist Jürgen Habermas’ theory of the public sphere. That sphere, which presupposes a private sphere, always has a material foundation, but is itself not reducible to material institutions. Rather, it is a symbolic space where citizens come together to discuss common matters and decide on the future of society. Habermas would later also distinguish the two “systems” of state and market from the “lifeworld.” These two levels of society can be imagined separately, but in reality are interrelated.¹²⁶ In the lifeworlds, people lead their daily lives, look at themselves, perform themselves, and decide who they are and how they are it. This, of course, is influenced by what’s happening in the systems, which through politics and economics, laws and values, bureaucracies and markets, condition and regulate—and in late modernity tend to colonize—the lifeworld.

Now, if art has lost its representative functions within the systems, and its dominant social function instead has become that of upholding art as an institution as Bürger claims, then it must find ways to be meaningful in the lifeworld. Art, Habermas suggests, “is a sanctuary for the satisfaction of those needs which become quasi illegal in the material life process of bourgeois society.”¹²⁷ This is a role that the Grateful Dead show, and to some degree the band’s recorded output, has fulfilled: it awakens needs that social rationality denies, and any Deadhead recognizes those needs and their illegality.

The point here is that not any artwork can fulfill this function, but rather art as event, in forms related to the avant-gardist manifestation: Jerry Garcia repeatedly points to this in interviews, as when he speaks of the original Acid Tests as a whole, and not a performance by the band: “It was the whole event that counted,” he emphasized in 1972. He looked at the later Grateful Dead shows in much the same way, talking about the shows in Egypt 1978: “If you were to think of this whole thing as a piece of

concept art, rather than as a performance, they [the spectators] are full participants."¹²⁸ It is precisely this inclusion of what for (almost) any other band would have been an audience of consumers, and not of participants, that generated the effect on the life praxis of Deadheads. If not, the audience would have been merely consuming their records for a few years, and then could move on to something else.

The band's insistence that the audience was, or must be, part of the event—that only band and audience together could form the Grateful Dead experience, a claim that is not original but which has more relevance for the Dead than for most rock groups—is gestured at through practices such as having the lights directed on the audience, or leaving it to the audience to sing the lyrics of a song ("Not Fade Away"), or including a "sound sculpture" from the parking lot scene outside the concert arena on the album *Infrared Roses* (1991). Although such practices might be considered "democratic," as a way of sharing the performance through gestures of inclusion, they don't necessarily have that much to do with art as such, but instead they gesture towards the community-building aspect of the Grateful Dead phenomenon, delimiting the Deadhead audience from the mainstream outside. Another aspect of this sharing is that it allows the musicians to get out of a certain position: lyricist Robert Hunter once memorably wrote that "when the Dead are at their best, . . . we perform a kind of suicide in music,"¹²⁹ a poetic description of the very real way that the different musicians become engulfed by the music, abdicating control, and surrendering to the music. This leads up to a somewhat paradoxical situation: at these peak moments, the audience is participating in a collective work from which the artists have disappeared. . . .

This is not at all a private or subjective testimony, but rather what with José Ortega y Gasset must be recognized as "dehumanized art."¹³⁰ This should not be understood as some sort of mechanical or automatic form of art, but rather as art *happening* but not performed. There is no subject deciding what will happen, and how it will happen, yet the work itself *is* happening, and producing the artists, those on the stage as well as those in the arena: "one isn't creating, but being created—in fact, one no longer exists," as Phil Lesh put it.¹³¹ This is not at all a religious experience, but a classical *aesthetic* experience. As Michel Foucault states about literature in his "What is an Author?" the thing is to create an "opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears."¹³² Prime examples in the Dead's oeuvre that illustrate this disappearance of the artist are improvisations such as "Feedback" on *Live/Dead*, many versions of "Playing in the Band" and "Dark Star," as well as the whole of Oswald's manipulations of "Dark Star"

on *Grayfolded*. One also can sense this dehumanization on cover songs, however, such as “Death Don’t Have No Mercy” and “Morning Dew,” when the band seems to shift into overdrive, producing formidable crescendos of noise. There are several other examples, although it doesn’t happen in all shows nor in all performances of a song, and these examples do not include *Infrared Roses*. That album instead tends to fetishize this “dehumanized” aspect of the music, isolate it in pieces without the surrounding show, give these pieces separate titles, and present the music by combining these fragments into a false whole. Dehumanization, however, probably does not unfold in any of the 613 performed versions of “Me and My Uncle.”

When it does happen, it is the effect of improvisation. Improvisation here must be understood both as an aesthetic practice and as a sort of cultural tradition. Improvisation is the key both to this loss of the superego, or even the subject, that musicians and audience experience, and to the Grateful Dead phenomenon as at least an attempted collective transcendence of established forms of “life praxis.”

Improvisation (I revisit “improv” in Chapter 3) can provisionally be understood as “composing in the moment.” The improvising musician has very few rules as guidance, and to be part of the music instead must listen intently to what is going on around him or her. Improvising means composing, creating form through responding to what others are playing, to what you yourself just played, and to the space in which the music is happening, a space that also is defined by the reactions of an audience. This is, of course, a compositional tradition quite different from the traditional Western canon, in which one scores a piece of music and then hands it over to someone else to perform as faithfully as possible, although we should acknowledge that improvisation is an important part of much notated music today.

The improvising musician is not naked, though. There is a tradition or, rather, several traditions, for the musician to relate to and find support in, and improvisation always happens in relation to what has been played before. For the Grateful Dead, one can single out jazz, blues, bluegrass, and folk music as being important sources of improvisational traditions, both aesthetically, for the band, and culturally, for the Grateful Dead phenomenon. Within these traditions, the relationship between performers and audience differs from that of Western classical music, as well as from that of most products of the culture industry.

Improvisation is not the same in these different forms of music. In bluegrass, improvisation, with a slight generalization, is a “gestural improvisation”

based on the advance knowledge of the forms of this music, its conventions, its language, and restricted to variations on the given. Bluegrass, then, is a music that respects what has been handed down; it respects order so that it can add something to that order. Bluegrass also is a virtuosic refinement of a tradition that it confesses to honor, but also actually transgresses: as Neil Rosenberg states, instrumental bluegrass compositions “feature alternating solos, as in jazz—a clear stylistic departure from the old-time southeastern string band music from which bluegrass developed.”¹³³ Jazz improvisation started out as a “gestural improvisation,” but has become much more differentiated to include very different forms of improvisation, spanning from melodic variation to free form.

This tension between different improvisational practices is found within the music of the Grateful Dead, too. What some critics call “aimless noodling” is basically this gestural form of improvisation. The typical example is the many different versions of “Eyes of the World” in which Garcia could endlessly vary the harmonic and melodic constituents of the song, while the band more or less faithfully accompanied him, keeping up the pulse and rhythm of the tune. Improvisation here gestures, so to speak, towards what it treats as given. At the other end of the spectrum are those parts that Lesh described as “free improvisation,” first called “Feedback” and later “Space,” as well as “Drums.” In those parts of a performance, nothing is presumed. The form is open, initiatives are welcome, and often the instruments sound deformed. Distortion and digital technologies were used to transform the expected, regular sound into something strange and unfamiliar, even uncanny. One can say that this is music that explores what is *possible*, instead of relying on what is already there.

In between these poles, we find something that Lesh in my interview called “deconstruction.” He described how the band played “Bird Song,” and when discussing the version found on *Without a Net*—and later included on *Spring 1990*, featuring Branford Marsalis on soprano saxophone—he called it a “deconstruction” of the song’s melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic parts, to make obvious and investigate the material that comprises the song.¹³⁴

VIII

The sort of work which the Dead performed was made possible not only by the musicians themselves—their skills, and diverse knowledge of different musical traditions—but also by the audience. Garcia should be taken seriously when he emphasizes the audience as a participant. The audience formed a space with roots that harkened back to jazz and bluegrass audi-

ences and their ways of forming communities around the music; but the Dead did it on a much larger scale, and for a much longer time. I think we can talk of the band as being the center of a “*counter-public sphere*.” It is in this sphere that the Grateful Dead phenomenon—which is nothing but the (loose) organization of a collective experience—shows similarities with other forms of resistance towards a central authority or an economic system, as for example the growth of the European workers’ movements of the late-nineteenth century. Not included within the public sphere of bourgeois society, the workers formed their own organization, their own “counter-public”—and self-organization is, of course, what the Dead phenomenon was and is all about.¹³⁵

If they were a product of their time, then they certainly were not alone in the effort to rule themselves. As Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge wrote in the seventies, when counter-movements of different kinds were quite visible, “there are emerging impulses toward a public sphere that attempts to break through the context of exploitation. This is not a question of abstract alternatives: the capitalist process of production itself produces this countermovement.”¹³⁶ We find this figure of thought in Foucault as well, but there in a seemingly even more general form: “Where there is power, there is resistance,” Foucault notes, but he does not stop there: “and yet, rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.”¹³⁷ Foucault’s reminder is important for any discussion of the Grateful Dead, and it warns us to be careful in our consideration of the band’s trajectory: the alternative or counter-sphere is always interior to existing power relations. As Foucault also emphasizes, however, “points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network . . . a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations.”¹³⁸ Power relations form a constantly shifting, mobile condition of possibility and, as Miriam Hansen states in her introduction to Negt and Kluge’s work, “we have to confront the fact that not all counter-publics are equal or proceed from the same conditions of subalternity.”¹³⁹ Resistance, then, is also multiple; it takes on many different forms, and disguises itself in everyday practices—such as dropping out of school for a few months to follow a rock band on tour, or to develop and elaborate a dervish-like dancing technique practiced at Grateful Dead shows.

The role of tradition within this counter-sphere is then not only that of a warm-up for the band, nor is it the effect of nostalgia on the part of Garcia

or Weir: the hundreds of performances of “Me and My Uncle” serve as a glue for the counter-sphere, with tradition as the point that the participating audience can refer to. And although the avant-garde forms of the music transform and even dehumanize us, tradition reminds us that we are all humans, all social beings, all doing this together: tradition ties the net, so that it is strong enough to hold even “Feedback.”

“Feedback” is a beast. So was “Seastones,” the electronic work composed by Ned Lagin and performed and partly improvised by him and Phil Lesh. So, too, was the institutionalization of free improvisation known as “Space” in the choreography of later Dead shows, along with “Drums”—which was partly performed on “the Beast,” as Hart’s drum and percussion installation was called. The improvisations that inhabited songs such as “Dark Star,” “Playing in the Band,” and “The Other One” are musical beasts, or monsters—“monstrous” in the early sense of the word, meaning something that has not yet been given form. The free, improvised music is in the process of attaining form, but what form that will be is always open for negotiation. This work of giving form includes a moment of stylization, which has a double significance: stylization can give tonal material a “Dead-ish” identity but, conversely, stylization also, as Ortega y Gasset emphasizes, might “deform reality” and lead to “dehumanization.”¹⁴⁰ To have a working rock band like the Grateful Dead rely on this form of musical practice is to install a beast right in the heart of the culture industry. Some of the most majestic versions of “Dark Star” and “Playing in the Band” from the early- to mid-seventies have an undeniable quality of the monstrous—which in aesthetic theory also is known as the sublime. At their best, the Grateful Dead played a music that *was* truly sublime, that overwhelmed the listener with sensations of might and fear, of danger and threat, of life at risk. Moving into atonal regions; leaving meter and beat behind, as well as vocals and song formats; producing a quite contradictory music, also was a way of lending legitimacy to the band’s work. As Theodor W. Adorno writes in his *Aesthetic Theory*, “Scars of damage and disruption are the modern’s seal of authenticity; by their means, art desperately negates the closed confines of the ever-same; explosion is one of its invariants.”¹⁴¹ Tradition, whether made up of cowboy tunes or ballads, Chuck Berry or Garcia-Hunter compositions, was not there only, if at all, to serve as a unifying glue for the community. Tradition served to keep the explosive monster at bay, it kept dislocation and displacement framed within a recognizable world.

It must also be asked whether tradition won out in the long run. The Grateful Dead of 1995 is not the same as the band of, say, 1972 or 1969. Of

course, it could not be—but for varying reasons. Given that the avant-garde is always a historical moment, always situated, one can look at the Grateful Dead as the result of a crack opening in hegemonic culture, of new conditions of possibility being generated. There also and always—if we are to believe Roland Barthes—comes “a moment when Order recalls its vanguard . . . the *avant-garde* rarely pursues its career as a prodigal son *all the way*; sooner or later it returns to the bosom which had given it, with life, a freedom of pure postponement.”¹⁴² The Grateful Dead did resist and postpone their inclusion in mainstream American culture for a remarkably long time, and considering rock music’s role within the culture industry, the band’s trajectory is truly impressive. Surely, however, the fact that the band, its music, and the surrounding culture are the objects of academic research and a growing scholarly discussion, testifies to the Grateful Dead’s status as part of established culture. No longer something left behind, shunted to the side of the mainstream, existing at the margins of normativity, the Grateful Dead have now been integrated. Integration within mainstream culture, or within hegemonic normativity, also has shades and nuances, however, varying with time and situation. The Grateful Dead, even today, carries an oppositional edge that makes integration uncomfortable.