

“AND THEN FLEW ON”:
IMPROVISATIONAL MOMENTS OF RHIZOMATIC ASSEMBLAGE
IN GRATEFUL DEAD MUSICAL EXPERIENCE

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Music has always sent out lines of flight, like so many “transformational multiplicities,” even overturning the very codes that structure or arborify it; that is why musical form, right down to its ruptures and proliferations, is comparable to a weed, a rhizome.

--Deleuze and Guattari,
A Thousand Plateaus

The Grateful Dead are well known for having cultivated a unique improvisational approach to musical performance. Manifestations of improvisation can be found throughout their concert performances, an overly abundant number of which are available for scrutiny and analysis as audio recordings. Thus, while the band itself is no longer a touring phenomenon, precious remnants of Grateful Dead improvisational experiences continue to ensnare the minds and bodies of nomadic spirits with tantalizing gestures wrapped in evocative melodies, spacey interludes, flowing refrains, and wandering jams. While these recordings cannot replicate the original concert setting or scene of attunement, they can articulate the spontaneity of the nomadic sojourns experienced in the music. As such, these recordings provide valuable access to a performative field of play in which improvisational momentum continues to hold sway.

Of course, the more familiar we are with a particular concert recording, the less spontaneity and rapture we can elicit from the auditory engagement. But the improvisational moments are not contingent on the element of surprise. Surprise surely enhances the Deadhead’s experience, but familiarity does not diminish the musical synergy manifest in the performance. Key lyrical phrasings are sung with spontaneous feeling and emotion. Subtle nuances and expressive points of emphasis are afforded a voice of the moment. Rhythmic, spiraling jams are woven into and out of the fabric of tonic measures and aphoristic portals. Nomadic jams roam between songs to “stretch out” the temporality, giving vibrancy to the immediacy of the performance, even within the format of a live concert recording. If the auditory experience is fresh and provocative to the receptive ear, spatial dimensions of rapture will open up within intermezzos of deterritorialization, as they often did in concert settings, once again dissociating us from the mediating bonds of our sedentary attachments and conveying us along new lines of flight.

Among the multitude of songs written and performed by the Grateful Dead, “Dark Star,” “The Other One,” “Playin’ in the Band,” “Truckin’” and “Birdsong” have served as particularly striking vehicles for especially evocative forms of improvisation, as have innumerable variations of what Deadheads affectionately refer to as “Space.” But there is in fact an impressive variety to the forms of improvisation revealed in Grateful Dead performances. Songs like “Morning Dew,” “Wharf Rat” and “Fire on the Mountain” reveal a tighter, more powerful and expressive space of improvisation. Songs like “Dancin’ in the Streets,” “Let it Grow,” “Eyes of the World,” “Estimated Prophet” and “Shakedown Street” catch a heady groove and dance like rainbow spirals in the dilated pupils of a mind’s eye. Songs like “Stella Blue,” “Terrapin,” “Crazy Fingers” and “China Doll” draw us closer to the heart and suspend us in the delicate textures of aphoristic phrasings. Engaged within these experiential fields of improvisation, the listener becomes one with the dance as the dance becomes one with the music. Each song moves between the territoriality of the refrain and the diagonal or transversal lines of force that produce deterritorializing forms of expression. If we ask how this is accomplished, “the clearest, easiest answer seems to be provided by a formalizing, linear, hierarchized, centralized arborescent model.”¹ For example, we might schematize our central nervous system as a “coded linkage of spatiotemporal forms,” one in which a series of command centers hold sway over discrete moments of choice. On this model:

a higher functional center goes automatically into operation and releases an appetitive behavior in search of specific stimuli (the migrational center); through the intermediary of the stimulus, a second center that had been inhibited up to this point is freed and releases a new appetitive behavior (the territorial center); then other subordinate centers are activated, centers of fighting, nesting, courtship . . . until stimuli are found that release the corresponding executive acts. (*TP* 327-28)

But the improvisational processes at work in Grateful Dead musical assemblages reflect a different mode of production, one “favoring rhizomatic, rather than arborified, functioning,” one that dissolves the “oversimplified binarities” that otherwise “risk reintroducing souls and centers [of command] at each locus and stage of linkage.” For while we might be tempted to hypothesize a localization of productive energy, a closer look reveals a more prescient “distribution” of collateral forces, just as with any localization of brain function there is always also the permeation (or the “distribution”) of an “entire population of neurons” that have been “selected from throughout the central nervous system,” as we find in the function of an internet or cable network. The implication is that “in considering the system as a whole we should speak less of automatism of a higher center than of coordination between centers, and of the cellular groupings or molecular populations that perform these couplings.” From the standpoint of this schema,

¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, translation by Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press: 1987), p. 328. Hereafter cited as: *TP*.

there is no form or correct structure imposed from without or above but rather an articulation from within, as if oscillating molecules, oscillators, passed from one heterogeneous center to another, if only for the purpose of assuring the dominance of one among them. This obviously excludes any linear relation from one center to another, in favor of packets of relations steered by molecules: the interaction or coordination may be positive or negative (release or inhibition), but it is never direct, as in a linear relation or chemical reaction; it always occurs between molecules with at least two heads, and each center taken separately. (TP 28)

How might this apply to the creative genius of a musician like Jerry Garcia or Phil Lesh? For Deleuze and Guattari, “creations are like mutant abstract lines that have detached themselves from the task of representing a world, precisely because they assemble a new type of reality history can only recontain or relocate in punctual systems.” (TP 296) To link this general point to musical creation, Deleuze and Guattari draw a parallel to the influential analysis of Pierre Boulez, who distinguished between the “pulsed time of a formal and functional music based on values” and the “non-pulsed time of a floating music.” (TP 262) Following Boulez, they consider how the gifted musician operates:

[A] great musician, in a very different manner in each case, invents a kind of diagonal running between the harmonic vertical and the melodic horizon. And in each case it is a different diagonal, a different technique, a creation. Moving along this transversal line, which is really a line of deterritorialization, there is a *sound block* that no longer has a point of origin, since it is always and already in the middle of the line: and no longer has horizontal and vertical coordinates, since it creates its own coordinates; and no longer forms a localizable connection from one point to another, since it is in “nonpulsed time”: a deterritorialized rhythmic block that has abandoned points, coordinates and measure, like a drunken boat that melds with the line or draws a plane of consistency. (TP 296)

On this view, “speeds and slownesses inject themselves into musical form, sometimes impelling it to proliferation, linear microproliferations, and sometimes to extinction, sonorous abolition, involution, or both at once.” As a result,

The musician is in the best position to say: “I hate the faculty of memory. I hate memories.” And that is because he or she affirms the power of becoming... The important thing is that all [great] musicians have always proceeded in this way: drawing their own diagonal, however fragile, outside points, outside coordinates and localizable connections, in order to float a sound block down a created, liberated line, in order to unleash in space this mobile and mutant sound block.... (TP 296-97)

Garcia and Lesh were masters of this form of improvisation. Playing with and off each other, their musical talents gave birth to extraordinary “lines of flight.” These lines of flight mark the upsurge of rhizomatic assemblages -- evolving

musical multiplicities capable of dynamic change. These assemblages reveal ever-expanding connections, which in turn implicate new or shifting “determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions,” which “cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature.” (*TP 8*) On this view, the cut of the diagonal dispels “any relation to the One as subject or object,” disrupting the unity which would otherwise serve as a “pivot” for capturing the music within boundaries of replication and repetition. This disruption marks a transformation in the relation between notes (or “points”) and vectors (or “lines of flight”) in the constitution of improvised musical passages, such as we might encounter in a classic spatial intermezzo (or diagonal line) bridging the lyrical or tonal refrains of a masterful rendition of “Dark Star” or “The Other One.” Deleuze and Guattari characterize this transformation as the “reverse subordination” of a sedentary point to lines of flight:

The diagonal is often composed of extremely complex lines and spaces of sound. Is that the secret of a little phrase or a rhythmic block? Undoubtedly, the point now assumes a new and essential creative function. It is no longer simply a question of an inevitable destiny reconstituting a punctual system; on the contrary, it is now the point that is subordinated to the line, the point now marks the proliferation of the line, or its sudden deviation, its acceleration, its slowdown, its furor or agony. (*TP 297*)

Where most musicians endeavor to work within the limits of a stratified refrain, improvising performers work the boundaries in search of a threshold to “smooth space,” where they can be free of stratifications that otherwise bind their performance to repetition and submission to limits. What Deleuze and Guattari say of rhizomes applies with equal force to the classic improvisational spaces in Grateful Dead music:

Every rhizome contains lines of segmentarity according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc., as well as lines of deterritorialization down which it constantly flees. There is a rupture in the rhizome whenever segmentary lines explode into a line of flight, but the line of flight is part of the rhizome. These lines always tie back to one another. That is why one can never posit a dualism or a dichotomy, even in the rudimentary form of the good and the bad. You may make a rupture, draw a line of flight, yet there is still a danger that you will reencounter organizations that re-stratify everything, formations that restore power to a signifier, attributions that reconstitute a subject -- anything you like, from Oedipal resurgences to fascist concretions. (*TP 9*)

This pressure to reintroduce concrete stratifications into musical performances remains a constant menace to the improvisational impulse. The antidote to succumbing to this pressure is to engage in a perpetual transgression of boundaries. As Deleuze and Guattari point out, this can be a difficult challenge for anyone:

Groups and individuals contain micro-fascisms just waiting to crystallize. Yes, couchgrass is also a rhizome. Good and bad are only the products of an active and temporary selection, which must be [endlessly] renewed. (*TP 9-10*)

In its primal forms, Grateful Dead improvisation could occupy this transversal orientation with a magnitude uncommon to most musical improvisation. Of course, this is not unique to the music of the Grateful Dead. All forms of improvisation capture some semblance of this radical openness, and as such play with thresholds in a manner consistent with the deterritorialization of rhizomatic assemblage. "Music has always sent out lines of flight, like so many 'transformational multiplicities,' even overturning the very codes that structure or arborify it; [and] that is why musical form, right down to its ruptures and proliferations, is comparable to . . . a rhizome." (*TP 11-12*) Clearly, such undercurrents of spontaneous connectivity are the signature expression of Grateful Dead interplay.

The emphasis of their improvisational play focuses on displacing a typified stratification of notes and replacing this predictable structure with an "experimentation in contact with the real." Such musical performance eschews "a logic of tracing and reproduction" in favor of a "mapping" activity that "fosters connections between fields," which in turn promotes "the removal of blockages" and "the maximum opening" of the performing body "onto a plane of consistency." The key point is to see the "map" as an element of the rhizome. "The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification." Most significantly, "a map has multiple entryways, as opposed to a tracing, which always comes back 'to the same'." (*TP 12*) Like so many Grateful Dead songs, "the map has to do with performance, whereas the tracing always involves an alleged 'competence'" geared to producing accurate reproductions. Grateful Dead concerts were famous for providing live, spontaneous renditions of familiar songs. When the band was on, the song had a life of its own. The performance was not structured by means of a logic of repetition, but rather, through a logic of performativity in which the nuance of the moment was allowed to speak through the familiar structure of a well-traveled songline.

By displacing a logic of reproduction in favor of a logic of singular performance, the full-fledged investment in improvisation characteristic of Grateful Dead performances succeeds in large part because it simply "rejects any idea of pretraced destiny." (*TP 13*) By suspending the more popular and commonplace dependence on "tracing" activity, the improvisational impulse so characteristic of Grateful Dead music draws on "an immanent process" of mapping that continually "overturns the model" without losing touch with the identifiable structure of the songline. The singular group performance accomplishes its creative assemblage within a familiar mapping that affords each performer the space to "connect any point to any other point" within the songline's structure, and which works most effectively when it produces an unfolding songline "perpetually in construction," always on the verge of

“collapsing,” and “composed not of units but of dimensions (or rather, directions in motion).” (TP 20-21)

The dominant rhizome in the case of Grateful Dead improvisation grew from the interplay of a broad diversity of musical traditions. These influences bled into the technical development of the various members of the band. This is evident from the training and performing tendencies inherent in the evolving assemblage of each musician’s diverse musical tastes. The rich and varied musical styles influencing Lesh and Garcia are now well-chronicled. They include a broad and diverse array of conceptual influences (including overlapping interests in the liberating approaches John Coltrane, Miles Davis and Ornette Coleman brought to their jazz performances in the early 60’s). In the case of Garcia, these influences harbored an especially rich texture of musical techniques, manifest initially in his intertextual mastery of the banjo and acoustic guitar, and later mapped onto his protean mastery of the electric guitar.²

² See Blair Jackson’s discussion of musical influences on Garcia and Lesh in *Garcia: An American Life* (Viking: 1999), pp. 107-08; Dennis McNally’s *A Long Strange Trip: The Inside History of the Grateful Dead* (Broadway Books: 2002), pp. 91-92; and Phil Lesh’s autobiographical reflections in *Searching For the Sound: My Life With the Grateful Dead* (Little and Brown: 2005), pp. 17-48.