Jamming the Blues: The Grateful Dead’s Development of Models for Rock Improvisation

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Introduction

Although much of the discussion of modern Western improvisation focuses on jazz and art music traditions, rock too has an improvisational tradition, one stretching back nearly a half century. The Grateful Dead were one of the pre-eminent early improvising rock bands, along with Cream, the Velvet Underground, and Pink Floyd, all of which formed in 1965. As forerunners, these bands were obliged to find their own solutions to the problems of integrating improvisational freedom with the audience and industry expectations and requirements that confronted working rock bands playing for dancing audiences. Rock is of course strongly indebted to R & B and blues music, both of which can incorporate significant degrees of improvisation. However, what we see emerging in 1965-1966 in the rock scene is the desire to develop forms of improvisation that moved away (to varying degrees) from the forms characteristic of blues and R & B. As Bruno Nettl demonstrated many years ago, different genres of music require and develop different approaches to improvisation: in 1965-66, rock was in the process of developing its own.

In earlier work on the Grateful Dead I have discussed the band’s creation of what I called “the Paradigm,” an approach to—or conceptual framework for—spontaneous rock jamming that served to guide much, but not all, of their early improvisational practice (Kaler, “Learned to Jam”). The Paradigm was a powerful tool for the Grateful Dead, enabling them to integrate their resolution to perform open, improvised rock music with their cultural and commercial obligations. This conceptual model can be summarized as follows:

- Extended improvisational sections occur at the end of the song, after the form has been played through, although shorter, more restricted improvisational sections may occur at the very start of the song or between verses.
- The extended improvisational sections emerge from the main groove of the song and return to it when they are finished, but the main groove often is not present during the improvisational sections.
- The improvisational sections are made up of a variable number of smaller sections, each lasting from 15–60 seconds.
- Movement between these sections will be initiated by band members making spontaneous musical statements that are used by other band members in constructing new musical contexts into which the band moves.
- Jamming sections tend to conclude with a climax—a high point (if not necessarily the highest point) in terms of dynamics, volume, and/or frenzy.
- Following this climax, the band will usually either reintroduce the main groove of the song or play the song's characteristic riff.

The Paradigm was a fascinating construct, one that the Grateful Dead developed over a period of several years (1965-1968). Other improvising rock bands produced similarly distinctive approaches that guided them in their work—we might mention, for instance, the Velvet Underground’s emphasis on monotonous rhythms and harmonic and melodic drones; Cream’s practice of stripping their songs down to the lowest common “bluesy” denominators in concert; or the early Pink Floyd’s development of an approach that relied on the creation of science-fictional soundscapes over stripped-down rock rhythms. As time went on, the approaches devised by Cream, the Velvet Underground, and Pink Floyd would provide improvisational inspiration to many subsequent groups; the more complex, nuanced approach taken by the Grateful Dead, on the other hand, would find less widespread adoption, except within the circle of “jam bands” explicitly inspired by the Grateful Dead. But in all of these cases, the ultimate goal was the same: to come up with an approach to rock practice that would permit the incorporation of significant degrees of improvised playing.

The Paradigm was employed by the Grateful Dead in their explorations of the original material in their repertoire, as well as the more pop or folk cover material. But the Paradigm was not used to guide the band in their improvisational
work on much of their blues-, soul-, or R & B-oriented material. In their work on this material, they often took a distinctly different approach, a less formally sophisticated and idiosyncratic one than the Paradigm.

Understanding this approach to open rock improvisation over blues and soul songs is significant not just for our understanding of the Grateful Dead specifically, but also for our grasp of the rock improvisational tradition more generally. This is because a great deal of the earliest extended rock improvising on record was set in musical contexts that owed a great deal to precisely these musical genres—listen, for example, to such early extended rock pieces as the Rolling Stones’ “Going Home” (Aftermath, Decca, 1966) or Love’s “Revelation” (Da Capo, Elektra, released January 1967)—and, even as time went on, playing blues or blues-related music was a characteristic of many improvising rock bands, such as the Allman Brothers or Blues Traveller (although the use of such blues-related musical vehicles has grown less common in the contemporary jam band scene).

It is not hard to see why bands would choose to “stretch out” over blues-related songs or feels. Blues songs offered circular, repetitive forms over which soloists could play as long as they felt inclined, and their regularity and the shuffle rhythm gave the band support when rhythm section members took chances. Standards, of course, would have offered equally circular forms, but they were also a great deal more difficult to play for novice or informally trained players. There was already a strong tradition within blues and R & B performance practice of open-ended songs, rather than the stereotypical three minute limit for pop songs, giving support and a model to rock musicians as they began to work in extended forms. As well, the majority of pre-British Invasion rock and roll was based on such forms, and even into the 1960s and 1970s a great deal of rock music used them: they would thus have been familiar territory for rock players, and the work of players in these styles would have provided accessible and comprehensible models for rock players’ developing interest in instrumental virtuosity.

In addition to these musical advantages, the use of blues-related material gained cultural capital for rock bands, in that such material bore (not unproblematically) connotations of “authenticity,” “naturalness,” and “soulfulness” for the predominantly white audience that supported such improvising rock bands. Thus, for example, it was said that in bringing blues songs into the Grateful Dead’s repertoire, keyboardist/vocalist Ron McKernan (a.k.a. “Pigpen”) “brought to the Dead blues roots [and] genuine soulfulness” (Shenk and Silberman 220), an argument that takes a well-trodden line in equating “soulfulness” and “roots” with invocations of African-American musical tropes. The ramifications, both oppressive and liberatory, of such equations are beyond the scope of the present paper; for better or worse, however, they played a significant part in making playing “bluesy” music attractive for rock musicians.

Given the importance that this sort of material had for improvising rock bands, and given, too, the Grateful Dead’s status as one of the foremost such bands, it will be informative to examine the ways in which they approached their blues-related material, working with it so as to create potential vehicles for extended improvisation and models for the many groups that came after them. This is all the more true in that it is an area that has not been addressed at length by Grateful Dead scholars. Musicological analyses of the Grateful Dead’s work tend to avoid the Pigpen songs and focus on their “acid rock” material, such as the iconic “Dark Star” (e.g. Boone 1997); the most extensive such analysis, David Malvinni’s Grateful Dead and the Art of Rock Improvisation, focuses on the Grateful Dead’s work in the early 1970s, whereas my concern is for the music that they made in 1967-68.

Malvinni’s concern in discussing the Pigpen-sung material differs from mine in two other regards. In terms of context, Malvinni presents the Pigpen material as it relates to the Grateful Dead’s other improvisational material, whereas in this paper I am interested in showing how the band’s improvisational strategies differ from Paradigm-related strategies. In terms of trajectory, Malvinni presents the Pigpen material as steps on the road (“primal Dead”) to what he considers to be the band’s most fully realized music, which was produced in the early 1970s, whereas in this paper I am concerned with the material for itself. That said, Malvinni’s work will be referenced as necessary, and will be of interest to any who seek to take their investigation of the Grateful Dead’s improvisational strategies further.

When the Grateful Dead performed contemporary blues and soul songs, it was usually Pigpen who sang lead. Some of these songs (for example, “Smokestack Lightning”) were performed “straight,” that is with little structural improvisation beyond guitar soloing and hence will not be discussed here. Other songs, however, became contexts for extended workouts, during which the band jammed at length while audiences danced. These songs included “Turn On Your Lovelight,” “In The Midnight Hour,” and “Good Morning, Little Schoolgirl,” which will be discussed below, as well as the less-frequently played “Hard To Handle” and “Good Lovin’” which for reasons of space I will not discuss.

The songs that Pigpen sang were the band’s premiere dance numbers—and the San Francisco scene was a dancing scene. People went out to the San Francisco ballrooms to dance, and bands obliged them with dramatically extended songs (Sculatti and Seay 73-5). “The improvisation and stylistic blends that came to characterize the […] San Francisco sound weren’t the result of sophisticated musical savants stepping boldly into the unknown […] the Avalon
and Fillmore faithfuls weren’t interested in skill. All they required was bands that could play long and loud […] Suddenly, people wanted to dance […] and their stamina was daunting” (Seay and Neely 198-9). Consequently, particularly on the Pigpen material, “the Dead, along with all the other successful psychedelic aggregates in the city, was first, foremost and finally a dance band” (Sculatti and Seay 73), a dance band whose mandate included playing for dancers who were young, excited, often high, and for all these reasons comfortable dancing for ten or fifteen minutes at a stretch.

As mentioned above, the band's improvisational practice when backing Pigpen on these considerably extended blues and soul tunes differs significantly from their Paradigm-related work. The consistency of the harmony, rhythm, and implicit or explicit presence of a structuring riff or chord progression marks these songs as different from the Paradigm material, in which the musical textures are much more changeable and fluid, and so too does their structure.

As I showed in my earlier discussion of the Paradigm, when the Grateful Dead are improvising using this approach the jamming starts up at the end of the song, with a final return to the song after the jamming has finished; thus a typical Paradigm-structured song will go for two to three minutes as a pop song would, briefly establish the sort of groove that one might hear in a fadeout on a record, and then develop improvised structures of increasing complexity and diversity out of that groove, before eventually returning to the groove. With the Pigpen songs, on the other hand, the band never really moves away from the song. The formal boundaries of the Pigpen songs remain tight—in other words, the underlying harmony and rhythm are almost never challenged, and the focus is firmly on providing a danceable backdrop for Pigpen’s showmanship.

February 14, 1968

In this paper, I will examine three of the classic Pigpen songs, namely “Good Morning Little School Girl,” “In The Midnight Hour,” and “Turn On Your Lovelight,” songs originally associated respectively with Junior Wells, Wilson Pickett, and Bobby “Blue” Bland. I will begin by discussing the versions performed by these artists, and then will discuss the Grateful Dead’s versions of the songs. My goal will be to show how the Grateful Dead transformed these pieces so as to make them amenable to extensive jamming.

The Grateful Dead performed these songs many times; for the sake of clarity and simplicity, I will be drawing on the versions heard on the night of Feb. 14 1968. That show has come to be regarded as one of the band’s greatest performances. Bassist Phil Lesh writes in his autobiography, “When we listened back to the [tapes of the] show, it was spectacular—vivid, protean and relentless” (Lesh 122). In The Deadhead’s Taping Compendium, Michael M. Getz says, “serious listening to this show reveals such a sheer depth of soul-wakening power that it astonishes me to remember just how young a band they were at the time” (151).

“Good Morning, Little School Girl”

“Original” Version

This song was first recorded in 1937 by Sonny Boy Williamson in a country blues style, and was recorded many times afterwards (Dahl 283). In 1965, Junior Wells recorded it for his Hoodoo Man Blues album on Delmark in an electric Chicago blues style, with the tune being defined by its repeated and propulsive pentatonic bass riff. It is this form of the song that was picked up by the Grateful Dead.

Wells' version of “Good Morning, Little Schoolgirl” begins with a snare hit that ushers in the rest of the band playing the song’s main riff. Its arrangement is simple; there are five choruses of 12-bar blues (one instrumental, two vocal, one instrumental, one vocal), followed by an extended vocal outro section where Wells gets playful while the band drones on the main riff.

The rhythmic feel of the song is “half swing,” a term which “is often used to designate swing that is somewhere between the straight-eighth feel and triplet swing” (Ripani 53), often used in early rock and blues songs. Billy Warren, the drummer on this song, expresses this alternation through his hi-hat playing, which goes back and forth between a swing and straight feel. Jack Myers, the bass player, is “holding it down,” playing very straight rhythmically and with a dull, flat tone, producing the riff with no fills. Buddy Guy, the guitarist, on the other hand, consistently uses a swinging feel.

Guy's playing illustrates a fundamental structural issue of the song. Throughout the piece, movement away from the I chord is accompanied by looser, more expressive playing. Thus Guy plays a repetitive riff on the I chord, but when
the progression moves to the IV and V-IV sections he moves away from that riff, first playing melodic lines, and then as the song progresses switching to solistic lines with variations on the melody. These changes in approach give the song a back and forth feel, moving from tightness to momentary looseness, then back to tightness.

We can describe the main body of the song as a series of repeated 12-bar cycles, with movement within these cycles being governed rhythmically by the alternation between or the tension generated by the simultaneous coexistence of swing and straight feel. In terms of the musicians’ playing, the harmonic progression translates into movement from a solid, riff-based texture (on the I chord) to ones of greater expressivity (on the IV, and then more so on the V-IV progression) and finally back “home” again to the I.

The song ends with an outro section, stretching from 3:05 to the end, roughly 15% of the song. In this section the band sits on the riff and brings down the dynamics, while Wells vocalizes over top. The guitar does play some fills in this section (at 3:29 and 3:34, both times as responses to the vocal line), but the bass and drums play the same line throughout.

**Grateful Dead Version**

In their version of the song, the Grateful Dead take the same approach to the verses that Junior Wells did, in terms of playing tightly on the I chords and loosening up on the other chords, bringing the tension and drive of the music up and down in a cyclical motion.

The Grateful Dead also retain the idea of ending the song with a lead vocal rap over a static I chord—as well as using this technique between verses. Throughout these sections, the band frequently follows Pigpen’s lead, although the way in which they do this varies—sometimes through responding to his calls, sometimes using his vocals as cues to raise or lower the intensity, sometimes taking up and working with melodic or harmonic ideas derived from his vocal lines. However, there are just as many times when the instrumentalists turn to each other for their ideas, rather than to Pigpen’s cues, as we see for example in the section starting at 10:26, when Weir begins a phrase and Lesh immediately picks it up.

Also noteworthy is the fact that the Grateful Dead ease into the song, using the main riff and variations on it, just as they ease out of it with the main riff. The 12-bar blues section of the song is thus introduced by, interspersed with, and completed by jamming based on the tonality, contour, and rhythm of the main riff. In dealing with this riff, the Dead keep its duration and broad melodic outline unvarying, while the riff itself can be played, developed, excerpted, or ignored. The riff is always potentially present, but not always actively present.

In terms of call and response, the band does respond to Pigpen’s cues, but not in a mechanical or predetermined way; rather, the cues are used as the basis for improvisation and taken as guides rather than orders, indications of musical direction that invite active and spontaneous interpretation on the band’s part. This can be heard in the instrumental section following the last of the vocal verses, as the band moves into what was, in the Junior Wells version, the ending of the song, holding the I chord while Pigpen vocalizes (starting at 4:48).

As Pigpen vocalizes, the band improvises, steadily increasing their volume and the complexity of their interplay for the next thirty seconds (to approx. 5:27), when they settle back into a groove related to the main riff, and then move into a response after each of his lines. Pigpen starts playing harmonica at 6:00; this seems to be a sign for things to get unsettled and complex again, which they do for the next 30 seconds, until Garcia moves into the lead role. His solo soon takes on a call and response flavour, with the band including Pigpen (on harmonica) responding to his phrases. In all this time, the band has stayed on the I chord, as they do until the song’s end.

**“In The Midnight Hour”**

**Original Version**

The original version of the song, recorded in 1965 by Wilson Pickett,\(^5\) possesses a rolling, majestic feel that owes a great deal to its “minutely delayed beat two and four” (Bowman 61-2). The majority of the song consists of a simple I-IV groove, played under the verses and most of the instrumental material. The solidity of this inexorable progression is emphasized by the “delayed” feel and the song’s unchanging bass line. Only in the horn-led introductory material, in the chorus, and in the bridge does the song move away from this groove.

In the first half of the song (up to the bridge), interesting variations on the basic groove are introduced. In this section the drummer (Al Jackson) very subtly varies his snare drum hits, playing them with a different degree of intensity
each time. Similarly, while guitarist Steve Cropper largely restricts himself to chopped chords on the 2 and 4 for the verses, with more flowing playing for the choruses, nonetheless he does get slightly more energetic and ragged as the song goes on; at 0:50, the sound of his guitar strings ringing out is audible, and at 1:06 and 1:22 his single note lines are played more vigorously than in the first verse.

The horn section, too, contributes to these variations. In the first part of the first verse, there is a saxophone line playing a response to the vocalist's call, with the horns switching to chording for the second half of the verse. In the second verse, the response line is gone, but now the horn section plays a counter melody line that outlines the chords, but does so with more movement than in the second half of the verse line. With all of this taking place against the backdrop of an unchanging bass line, the effect is that of a slow, staggered build in intensity.

This slow build leads the listener into the bridge, which presents a new level of intensity as the drummer doubles up on the snare drum, the bassist doubles up to phrase in eighth notes rather than quarters, and the guitarist starts playing on every note, rather than just 2 and 4 (although his playing is different on 1 and 3 than on 2 and 4, thus preserving the emphases of the original feel). The horns take the lead here.

When Pickett returns with the vocals, the drummer and guitarist play less intensely, but an increase in complexity compensates for this loss of energy. As two different horn lines play new melodic calls and responses, Pickett sings a different melodic line over top, and the interlocked groove of the rhythm section continues to drive home the two chord main progression—which becomes the simple constant in the midst of ongoing musical development.

**Grateful Dead Version**

The Grateful Dead begin their version of this song in the same manner as the Pickett version, that is, with a drum roll, followed by a four-bar chord progression leading into the two-chord groove of the song. It seems, in fact, as though one of the drummers is being extremely faithful to the Pickett version, to the point of replicating the characteristic solid, delayed thud for the first few bars of the song (to 0:08). However, as the song develops, the feel changes, with the other drummer bringing in off-beats and fills, while Lesh plays with a dancing, exuberant approach that is quite different from the stolid approach on the original.

It is also significant that the way that the Grateful Dead's rhythm section plays lends the song its own instrumental call and response feel, with the second half of each bar leading back to and responding to the first half.

It is over top of this back-and-forth interplay that Pigpen sings. Whereas the Pickett version of the song is marked by a slow increase in energy and raggedness, taking place over top of a static bass and drum pattern, here we have the reverse situation: the drums and bass provide dynamic and not always predictable forward motion, the second half of the bar completing the phrase in the first half and leading the listener onward, while the guitars by and large serve as the stabilizers. The band plays two verses and choruses before heading into the bridge, and the second verse and chorus are approached no differently than the first verse and chorus; there is no gradual build as in the Pickett version.

In the bridge (1:27-1:45), Garcia plays a version of the horn melody line from the Pickett version. There is a switch to doubling up on the snare on the part of one of the drummers, but this fidelity to the original version is nuanced, or undercut, by the fact that the other drummer does not join in, but rather keeps playing around the beat. The original arrangement is acknowledged, but not strictly followed.

Three more verses follow, in which Garcia and Lesh play more and more independently. The fifth verse is marked by call and response interplay between Garcia and Lesh, and by the fact that the band does not go into the turnaround; rather, Pigpen keeps singing and the band sings responses until they all eventually drop out (by 3:40), leaving Pigpen to rap over top of instrumental music.

Although they have stopped singing, the band does not come down in intensity here; rather, they stay up, jamming energetically and independently. Pigpen's vocals thus function here as part of the overall sonic web, rather than as the dominant voice. By around 3:59 the band members have begun taking off in a number of directions; however, throughout the jam that follows, the band never leaves the basic two-chord progression behind, nor do they fundamentally alter the underlying groove. Throughout the jam, then, the band manages its improvisations so as to keep constant the basic harmonic and rhythmic kernel of the song.

Pigpen has returned to singing by 7:25, but again, his vocals function as a backdrop to Garcia's chording and Lesh's energetic playing. The band does calm down by 7:42, but then as Pigpen makes it clear that he is not going to sing
another verse right away, Lesh gets active again, sounding eager to keep jamming. Note that in this section, Pigpen is still singing, contributing interjections to the jam, more textural and rhythmic than melodic. From 8:00-8:30, it again seems as though the band is making space for Pigpen to take a more active role, looping a quiet riff. By 8:38 one gets the impression that Garcia has tired of waiting and is preparing to take off again, but he is countermanded by Pigpen, who brings the verse back in at 8:44, finishing the song.

In this song, we have seen the importance of the basic two-chord pattern. Although it is no longer linked to a specific and repeated bass line as it was in the Wilson Pickett version, it nonetheless remains the fundamental organizing principle of the song. For this reason, I cannot agree with Malvini’s presentation of the improvisation in this song (working from a version performed on Sept. 3, 1967) as “the epitome of controlled chaos [...] with Deleuzian lines of flight expanding on the source material to the extent that the source disappears” (47). The source does not disappear; rather, it is stripped down to its most fundamental—and, significantly, most danceable—level and used as a basis for the band’s interactive improvisation. With regard to Pigpen, we have seen how he functions here as a member of an improvising ensemble; the band plays with and around him, making space for him when necessary but prepared to go on without him should he choose not to enter.

“Turn On Your Lovelight”

Original Version

This song, written by Deadric Malone and Joseph Scott, was first recorded by Bobby “Blue” Bland in 1961. It was also covered in 1966 by the Irish band Them for their second album, Them Again. Although some members of the Grateful Dead were influenced by Them’s music, enough so that their early original, “Caution (Do Not Stop on Tracks),” is clearly derived from Them’s “Mystic Eyes,” the Grateful Dead’s version of “Turn On Your Lovelight” draws on Bobby “Blue” Bland’s original arrangement and not Them’s more laid back and less sharply defined version.

In Bland’s version, the song’s basic, jaunty rhythm does not vary at all, and its I-IV harmony pattern is constant with the sole exception of a four-bar section in which the drums play alone. The bassist and pianist, too, play their simple parts with little variation.

The guitarist alternates between three approaches. When the horns play their punches at the very start of the song, he plays a chord-based riff that accompanies them. Following these, he switches to a “shave and a haircut”/clave chord rhythm that he plays until Bland has sung his first line. At this point, he switches to single-note melodic lines, which he continues until Bland reaches the climax of the verse, and at which point he briefly returns to the “shave and a haircut” line before the riff that accompanies the return of the horn punches. After this there is a drum solo, and then the pattern continues: he riffs when the horns are punching, plays the rhythmic chords until Bland has finished his first line, and then plays the melodic single-note line under the rest of Bland’s singing.

In terms of the rhythm section, this alternation of guitar patterns provides the only contrast in the arrangement. As the guitar is not foregrounded, and as it does not change exactly in sync with Bland’s vocals, the alternation has a subtle effect; the listener feels that something is changing, but is not immediately sure what it is, especially given the driving constancy of the bass, drum, and piano playing. Bland’s vocal takes the lead for the majority of the song, the only exception being the saxophone solo from 1:43-2:02. The song ends with a fadeout as Bland sings, “I feel all right! Let it shine!”

Grateful Dead Version

At this show, “Turn On Your Lovelight” emerged out of a band composition called “The Eleven,” with Garcia signalling the move to a new song by playing the distinctive single note guitar riff. As the song begins, Lesh switches to his “Lovelight” bass line, showing that he has understood Garcia’s signal, and Garcia moves to a chord-based figure.

For the first 25 seconds of the song, Garcia, Lesh, and Weir play interlocking lines, establishing the song, before coming down in volume and moving to a more ragged and minimal feel for Pigpen’s vocal entry.

The band brings up the dynamics as the verse proceeds, and by the time Pigpen has hit the chorus (0:44) they are almost back to their former level and playing the interlocking parts. The chorus ends with a drum break, as in the Bland version of the song, although this break is 12 bars long. Pigpen sings another verse, with only the drums accompanying him, and there is an interesting moment at 1:30, where one of the drummers plays a response to Pigpen’s vocal on his kick drum, and then crosses the bar line with this response, extending it into a full phrase of its own.
At end of the vocal verse they move into an improvisational section, in which the underlying I-IV progression and groove are maintained by Pigpen’s organ playing. At around 3:01, Garcia starts playing a descending chord line that seems to be a cue to bring things down; at least, it is interpreted as such by Weir, who drops the intensity and volume of his own playing, soon followed by the rest of the band.

After this, Garcia leads the way back into the main riff, as he did at the start of the song, but Pigpen re-enters before the band is ready for him; they have not yet come down as low as they did in the introduction to the song (3:16). Their response to this is simply to keep playing, while Pigpen sings over top.

The song’s second drum break, starting at 3:50, is considerably longer than the first. Pigpen starts singing again at 4:08, but sounds uncertain, so he retreats, tries again at 4:12 and 4:14, and retreats again both times. The drummers have brought things down at 4:14 to make a space for him to enter. But when he does not come in, they get more active again, apparently shifting their plans and intending to extend the drum break (4:16), just before Pigpen definitely decides to re-enter (4:19). This time, when Pigpen gets to the chorus, the rest of the band joins in singing responses to his calls. He in turn extends this section, vocalizing over top as the instrumentalists bring things down, following his cues. When he then sings “turn it on up, bring it on up” (5:28), Garcia responds by coming in quietly on guitar (5:32), with the backing vocals spontaneously dropping out to facilitate this. Garcia continues playing leads as Weir’s vocals return, now singing a different line (“Little bit higher” 5:37). As the song’s intensity rises, Weir sings louder, Garcia plays louder, and Lesh plays more firmly over the underlying two-chord progression, Pigpen vocalizing all the while.

At 6:06, Pigpen drops out, and Garcia plays a riff where Pigpen’s vocal would have been. After Garcia plays the riff a second time, Lesh begins responding to it in his own playing; following this, Lesh integrates the riff into his bass line and starts working with it (6:12), just as Pigpen starts singing again, with Weir providing responses. Garcia then shifts to play the introductory single note riff, and the band starts to build things up again, with Pigpen leading them on. At 7:09 Garcia takes off on a solo, starting out in a high register but shortly afterward (7:20) dropping down and getting more active as Weir heightens the activity of his own playing. At around 7:28 Garcia pauses; at 7:32 he comes back in with a lead riff that interlocks with Weir’s rhythm guitar riff. After establishing this pattern, Weir breaks from it, switching his line so that it includes a response to Garcia (7:40). They continue in this fashion until 7:49, when Garcia brings the song to a close (7:56).

The guiding principle underlying the Bland version of the song was the idea of building the piece up through the successive introduction of lines. The essential core of the song (the groove and the harmony) never changes; rather, it provides the stable basis over which the song develops and changes. This is also the case with the Grateful Dead’s version, except less so. In their version, while the essential groove and harmony do not change, there is much more that is “up for grabs.” No member or members of the band are responsible for expressing the fundamental elements; instead, they are conceptual aspects of the piece that can be manifested by different members at different times. Furthermore, whereas the Bland version introduced its variations and developments in what seems to be a predetermined order, the Grateful Dead’s variations are, as we have seen, frequently the result of spontaneous interaction between the band members.

Just as there is no one member responsible for “holding it down” in the background of the Grateful Dead’s version of “Turn On Your Lovelight,” so there is no unambiguously foregrounded member. Certainly, Pigpen is the “leader” of the band during this song, but his leadership is of the “first among equals” variety; he signals changes, but does not control how those changes are expressed.

Summary: Playing the Main Groove

The songs examined above are not tremendously complex in their essential structures. In their original versions, they all consist of a repeated main element—whether a riff or a chord progression over a groove—that plays through the majority of the song, with one or more periodically occurring interludes that move away from, and then back to, this element.

In “Good Morning Little Schoolgirl,” the main element is the song’s riff, and the moves to the IV and V-IV chords are the interludes that contrast with it, not only by virtue of the change in harmony, but also because the playing gets (somewhat) looser and more expressive in these sections. In “In The Midnight Hour,” the main element is a two-chord vamp, and there are two interludes, namely the four-bar series of chords that open the song, and the V-IV chord progression that ends the verses, both of which differ dramatically from the vamp. In “Turn On Your Lovelight,” the main element again is a I-IV vamp, with the interlude being the horn shots that are played over it before verses and during the saxophone solo.
The Grateful Dead’s tendency when playing these Pigpen songs is to render these interludes more or less faithfully. They do not use them as vehicles for wide-ranging improvisation. This is most clear with regard to “In The Midnight Hour,” in which their use of the interlude figures conforms with the way that these figures are used in the original version of the song, and they are dropped during the improvisation. In “Good Morning Little Schoolgirl,” when the band shifts from guitar solo to group improvisation, the chord changes—in other words, the interludes—are dropped; all that remains is the main riff and what the band makes of it. In “Turn On Your Lovelight,” the interlude figure is brought in more frequently than in the original—a necessary step if one is to maintain interest and danceability in a piece this long—but otherwise is kept much the same.

Thus in both the Grateful Dead’s versions of the songs and those performed by the original artists, the interludes fulfill roughly the same function, namely to give the listener some sort of contrast to the main elements—the riffs or vamps—that make up the majority of the piece. The Grateful Dead’s versions differ from the originals in their treatment of these main elements, which are both a) enormously elongated, and b) considerably varied. When the band is improvising, they work exclusively with the main riffs or vamps.

The band’s use of these vamps or riffs contrasts with their improvisational practice in the non-Pigpen, Paradigm-based songs. As I have discussed elsewhere (Kaler, “Learned to Jam”), their practice in the non-Pigpen songs is to move from section to section of the improvisation, changing feels and working within musical areas loosely defined by a tonality and a rhythmic sensibility. Chord changes are dropped; riffs may be picked up, but are sure to be dropped as well; there is a gradual but continual flow through a variety of musical environments. Everyone is listening to their fellow musicians in order to pick up hints of possible new directions in which to go, new places to explore. And such exploration, of course, runs the risk of taking the band into places where their audience’s desire to dance would be sidelined.

Here, though, the situation is different, and it is the band’s inventiveness that is tested, their ability to work within strict limits as they stretch these looped one- and two-bar cells out to great length. While this approach places great demands upon its practitioners, it is nonetheless a more straightforward approach than the Paradigm, and one that is more clearly related to mainstream rock approaches, such as the “rave-up” pioneered by the Yardbirds. Thus, it presented a model that could serve as a relatively clear and accessible guide to other bands as they developed their improvisations on the basis of blues-related songs.

Notes

1 The motivations behind this move towards improvisational playing of course varied from group to group. I have argued elsewhere (Kaler, “Searching”) that in the Grateful Dead’s case, their musical developments were inspired by religious experiences that core members underwent while under the influence of LSD.

2 After Pigpen’s death in 1972, many of his songs left the band’s active repertoire for several years, although over time many of them would re-emerge, usually sung by rhythm guitarist Bob Weir. Based on my experience and my discussions with Deadheads, I would argue that even when revived the Pigpen songs were, so to speak, canonized as Pigpen’s own, and thus were understood in large part as evocations of and homages to Pigpen’s work. David Malvinni writes that the song “In the Midnight Hour,” for example, “for the later Dead seems to have functioned as a nostalgic glance back at the 1960s” (47). Be that as it may, the Grateful Dead’s improvising practice, on the Pigpen songs as on their other material, changed greatly over time; in this paper, I will be discussing the material in the Pigpen era only.

3 This is a general rule and, as such, is subject to exceptions, such as the version of “In The Midnight Hour” performed on Sept. 3, 1967 at the Dance Hall in Rio Nido and later released on the two-disc compilation Fallout from the Phil Zone (1997, Grateful Dead Records) (http://www.archive.org/details/gd1967-09-03.sbd.miller.43.sbeok.shnf). This version of “In The Midnight Hour” is one of the longest that the band ever performed, and its jamming goes very far “out” indeed. But this was an exceptional performance—Pigpen songs from shows preceding or following it (for instance, versions of “Turn On Your Lovelight” from the O’Keefe Centre the month before [http://www.archive.org/details/gd1967-08-04.10355.sbd.hurwitt.shnf] or the Winterland Arena the month after this show [http://archive.org/details/gd1967-10-22.sbd.miller.116257.flac16]) are much more controlled and conform more to the structure that I am discussing in this article.

4 Released in 2009 as Road Trips Volume 2.2 on the Grateful Dead label.

5 The Exciting Wilson Pickett (Atlantic, 1966).

**Works Cited**


