Book Review

Grateful Dead and the Art of Rock Improvisation

David Malvinni
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Reviewed by Melvin James Backstrom

As the first scholarly monograph on the music of the Grateful Dead, David Malvinni's *Grateful Dead and the Art of Rock Improvisation* is a significant addition to popular music scholarship. Although numerous edited volumes of essays focused on the band have been published in the two decades since the band's demise after the death of lead guitarist Jerry Garcia (Weiner; Adams and Sardiello; Gimbel; Meriwether; Tuedio and Spector), this is the first by a single author to focus entirely on a musicological assessment. And since it has often been the sociological aspects of the Grateful Dead phenomenon that have received the most attention, especially the audience—colourful fans known as Deadheads, it is a refreshing change for a scholar to focus entirely on what should be of primary importance for a musical ensemble: its *music*.

The Good

There is much that is worthwhile. The first chapter focuses on how the group used older musical traditions—blues, R&B, country and folk—as the basis for their often highly experimental improvisational performance style. Although the countercultures of the 1960s have often been seen as wholly contrary to traditional mores, Malvinni's grounding of the Dead's musical practices in musical traditionalism serves as a reminder that for at least some countercultural elements a recuperation and re-articulation of tradition was central to their identity. He also discusses what differentiates the Dead from other rock groups of the 1960s: the foregrounding of collective improvisation within a musical performance in order to realize a collective experience of transcendence (5-6).

In the second chapter, Malvinni traces the development of the band's improvisational style through in-depth analyses of a number of key performances that have thankfully been preserved. Of particular focus here is how important R&B songs (e.g. "In the Midnight Hour," "Viola Lee Blues," "Good Lovin'") were in the 1960s for this purpose. With their most potent R&B influence—vocalist Ron "Pigpen" McKernan—a still vital force within the band (he unfortunately died at the age of 27 in 1973), they often most profoundly stretched song boundaries in their early years with him singing.

The third and fourth chapters focus on a song that perhaps best exemplifies the Dead's improvisational strengths: "Dark Star." In chapter three, Malvinni contextualizes its compositional history and spiritual-religious significance; analyzes its compositional structure; and discusses how its specific harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic characteristics not only reflected the diversity of the band's influences, but also enabled its members to connect it with other songs to form extended performances lasting sometimes over an hour. Particularly valuable are graphs that list the various ways from January 1968 to July 1971 that the band connected "Dark Star" to other songs (91, 94-95).

Chapter four enhances these insights through the lens of Heidegger's influential text, "On the Origin of the Work of Art." Malvinni argues that "Dark Star" represents a "rift" in Heidegger's sense of authentic art, one that opens up new forms of awareness even as it simultaneously negates its own identity. He also discusses the influence of the postwar avant-garde—in particular that of Stockhausen, Berio, and Cage—and of modal jazz on the development of "Dark Star" in performance. The chapter ends with an in-depth analysis of the band's April 24, 1972 performance of "Dark Star" in Dusseldorf, West Germany. 1972 was one of the best years for "Dark Star," and this rendition, a performance very much the product of in-the-moment group improvisation, clearly deserves Malvinni's exemplary discussion.

Chapter five focuses on the band's unique development of jazz-fusion in the first half of the 1970s. Whereas most fusion was a product of jazz musicians adopting the influence of rock and R&B, the Dead moved from rock and R&B *towards* jazz, thereby creating a unique synthesis of disparate genres. Chapters six and seven then discuss how the band continued in the late 1970s and 1980s to develop their improvisational practice in, for the most part, more restrained, less overtly experimental ways than prior to their break from touring between October 1974 and June 1976.

The Not-So-Good

Along with these many strengths, however, there is much in this monograph that could have been improved. Poor and unclear writing too often mars the book, sometimes diminishing the reader's experience in significant ways. Towards the end of a generally good discussion of a March 1, 1969 performance of the suite *That's It For the Other One*, we learn that "After Weir's second verse, the song winds down . . . and we are reminded of the death of the hero" (69)¹ [my italics]. I can only assume the author is referencing Joseph Campbell's influential structuralist work on mythology (especially *Hero With a Thousand Faces*), since it has been commonly invoked as an interpretive framework of the Grateful Dead experience (Carroll; Silverman 220-22; Meriwether passim). While Malvinni references Campbell twice before, he never mentions "the hero," dead or otherwise, nor is there anything further to explain this reference. Similarly ambiguous references appear throughout.

A number of quotations and factual claims also lack citation (two on the second page of the introduction), and there are several clear errors. Malvinni claims that "we can still only speculate on the exact reasons why Garcia left the bluegrass world behind" (1). In fact, Garcia talked frequently about his reasons for doing so.² Malvinni may be looking for a deeper analysis, but his failure to acknowledge the record is a significant oversight.

There are several errors in musical description and analysis as well. Garcia is not "wiping through D-major pentatonic runs" around the 18 minute mark of the Dead's September 3, 1967 version of "In the Midnight Hour;" he is, instead, clearly using D minor pentatonic (46).³ The chorus of "Estimated Prophet" may be tonally centered on G major, but it is not, as Malvinni claims, in 4/4 (182); rather, the entire song is in 7/4.⁴ The third of an A dominant seventh chord is C#, not G (129).⁵ "Spanish Jam" (a name commonly given to an improvisational space the Dead sometimes used) is indeed made up of an oscillation between E and F major (192); however, it is inaccurate to refer to this song as "[Bob] Weir's" because as a "jam," a collectively improvised musical structure, it is the product of the entire group even if Weir's guitar part forms its compositional core.⁶ Furthermore, "Spanish Jam" is not in E Phrygian as Malvinni claims: because of the G# in E major, rather than the G natural in E minor, the scale that best fits the E and F major chords is, instead, the fifth mode of the harmonic minor scale (sometimes called Harmonic-dominant or Phrygian #3) starting on A: E-F-G#-A-B-C-D-E. Finally, not only is the transcription of the "Slipknot!" riff incorrect (the second half of the measure should be straight 16th notes: E-D-B-G-E-G-B-A), but the version he is referring to was performed on June 14, 1976—not June 6—at the Beacon Theatre in New York City.⁷

Malvinni's treatment of modes and keys will strike music scholars as too loose and lacking in theoretical support: he treats them as largely synonymous despite significant differences. Although the various scales and modes he refers to are notated in "Appendix 1: Scales and Modes" (all with C as their tonic starting point), they are merely listed with no accompanying explanation (235). Are modes merely melodic realizations of underlying harmonies, as understood by jazz chord-scale theory, or do they function as quasi-keys with a single mode defining multiple harmonies, as understood by music theorists in the 16th and 17th centuries? I wish Malvinni had answered this question, particularly when he states that lead guitarist Jerry Garcia plays a B Mixolydian scale over an A major chord (219). Here, "key," "scale," and "mode" are confused: when the same pitches that make up the B Mixolydian mode are played over an A major chord, the mode is no longer B Mixolydian, but A Lydian, since they are both modes of the pitch collection that makes up the E major scale.⁸

There are also a number of overly broad statements that would likely trouble scholars. When discussing a notable extended example of the Dead's cover of Wilson Pickett's "In the Midnight Hour," Malvinni observes that "After nearly 15 minutes of exposition, the Dead present psychedelic blues at its finest moment—in all its gritty, revealed glory [. . . H]ere the band explicates the soul of the blues with a mature understanding that is hard to fathom given its relatively young age" (46). Malvinni is to be credited for providing his personal investment in the music, but the ambiguities here are jarring. What noun the final "its" is replacing (the Dead or the soul of the blues) is unclear, but the bigger issue is how a style of music, psychedelic blues or otherwise, could possibly be represented by a "finest moment." Equally vague is the Dead's supposed explication of "the soul of the blues." This is fine journalistic prose, but is ill suited to a scholarly context.

A similar ambiguity extends to many of the terms he uses in his analyses. In a section of chapter seven titled "Toward an Improvisational Schema in the Grateful Dead," he posits the existence of two kinds of improvisation (202-03). "Type 1" is a modal style with only one or two chords and "no set number of measures" that, because of its freedom from pre-composed structures, can sometimes break into completely free improvisation. Songs that fit this schema include "Dark Star," "The Other One," and the middle section of "Playing in the Band." "Type 2" is a more limited style, but one also far more common in the Dead's repertoire, wherein improvisation occupies only a set number of measures within a pre-composed harmonic progression.

The problem with this terminology is that it conflicts with a long-standing definition of Type 1 and Type 2 improvisation in the music of another improvisatory rock band closely connected with the Dead: Phish. In 1997, independent scholar John Flynn first argued for a distinction between what he called “Type 1 and Type 2 jamming,” or group improvisation. For Flynn, Type 1 “is based around a fixed chord progression,” whereas Type 2 “improvises chord progressions, rhythms, and the whole structure of the music” (qtd. in “Jamming Types”). What should be obvious is that Flynn’s definition of Type 1 corresponds to Malvinni’s Type 2 and Flynn’s Type 2 to Malvinni’s Type 1. If Flynn were unique in his nomenclature, then Malvinni’s opposing definitions would perhaps be understandable, but since 1997 this distinction has been widely influential among fans of not only Phish, but also other rock groups, including the Dead, who use a significant amount of improvisation in their musical practices.⁹

Other issues of relevance also occasionally arise. For instance, there is a great deal of useful historical information and musical analysis that I appreciated in the second chapter, “Primal Grateful Dead Improvisation.” Yet at its end we are left with the rather mundane point that “a common thread running through their jams [in their early period up until 1969-70 is . . .] *an emphasis on the idea of a serious tone in improvisation* reaching its climax in the notion of the sublime” (69-70) [my italics]. Though he goes on to note, “this serious tone is always mitigated by some other,” further explanation is again never given. The way such “serious tone” supposedly reaches “its climax in the notion of the sublime” is also left undefined. The sublime is indeed a useful category for approaching the Dead’s music—and its members clearly took their improvisational practices very seriously—but ending an entire chapter with such a conclusion seems like a missed opportunity for a more thorough, critical examination of what constitutes improvisational practice.¹⁰

Some of Malvinni’s assertions are also questionable. In a discussion of unusual chord progressions that original Dead songs sometimes feature, he notes that “the soundscape of these unconventional chord relationships occurring within a conventional harmonic framework *produces a novel effect in the history of music*,” defining such supposed novelty as “a sound that is at once predictable, comfortable with the formulas of tradition, but that challenges the staticness of the tradition by complementing it with ‘other,’ foreign, or even exotic elements at its heart. It is an appropriation of tradition that simultaneously destabilizes it” (171) [my italics]. There is certainly some truth to such observations, since the appropriation and re-articulation of traditional elements was clearly a major part of the Dead’s musical practices, but these efforts hardly represent a “novel effect in the history of music.” Complementing (or synthesizing) traditional musical forms and styles with “other” elements is, rather, practically the definition of musical Romanticism going back at least to the penchant for “Turkish” topics in Viennese Classicism.¹¹ Such chord progressions may have been novel for rock music of the late 1960s, but Malvinni exaggerates their historical significance within a wider Western classical/jazz context that he elsewhere asserts was so influential on the Dead.

Conclusion

Malvinni clearly has a deep love for the Grateful Dead and has certainly devoted considerable thought to their music. As someone who shares that love, I appreciate what he is trying to do, but this book too often reads like a first draft filled with good ideas in need of further refinement and—especially—editorial revision. I also wish he had maintained a consistent focus on who the target audience of the book would be. On the one hand, much of its content is too scholarly, too musicological for non-academic Deadhead fans of the group.¹² On the other hand, its status as a scholarly text is compromised by numerous errors: prose that is often vague, subjective, and journalistic in tone; and unexplained references that only devoted scholars and fans could possibly understand. These errors are especially regrettable in that they further the canard that scholarly appreciation of the Grateful Dead is shallow and largely the province of amateurs. Although *Grateful Dead and the Art of Rock Improvisation* contains some very good information that would likely expand one’s understanding of the Dead’s music, the context all but overwhelms the ideas. There is a good book in this text, but this is not the edition that best presents that work.

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Notes

¹ That is, the second verse of the suite’s second major section, which was called “Quadlibet for Broken Feet” on its first official release on the album *Anthem of the Sun*. However, Malvinni follows another precedent in referring to it as “Cryptical Envelopment,” its name on *Hundred Year Hall*, the live release of an April 26, 1972 performance on which it appears. But on *Anthem*, “Cryptical Envelopment” is, in fact, clearly marked as the name for the suite’s first part, sung and apparently composed (as this is to whom it is credited) by Jerry Garcia. After this first part of the suite was dropped from their repertoire in 1971, “The Other One” became the most common name for this musical piece.

² See Jackson 66-67.

³ I do not hear major pentatonic implied at all in this song's improvisational section. Given the song's clear R&B provenance, the minor pentatonic scale and its blues scale additions fit far better than would the major pentatonic scale and its attendant country music associations. I also wish the author had chosen clearer language: the precise meaning of "wiping through" escapes me.

⁴ Also, since the other chords used are C and F major, the chorus is arguably in C major with a modal tonicization of G Mixolydian.

⁵ To be fair, after incorrectly listing G as the third of an A dominant seventh chord, Malvinni does later state this correctly as C# (129).

⁶ Official releases of performances that include "Spanish Jam" credit it to the entire band, not Weir. See the credits for *Dick's Picks Vol. 6*: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dick's_Picks_Volume_6.

⁷ Poor editorial work is again on display here. Though the date is incorrect in the text, it is correct in the accompanying citation. In addition, three separate transcriptions of different elements of "Slipknot!" are labeled Figures 7.1, 7.2, and 7.3 (213-14) when they actually follow Figure 7.3.

⁸ The E major scale and the E Ionian mode have identical notes (E, F#, G#, A, B, C#, D#, E) but different meanings. Whereas the mode refers merely to a specific ordering of pitches, the scale is defined by a formal harmonic syntax built around movement between its tonic and dominant chords. For a recent treatment of the role of mode, scale, and key in rock music, see Biamonte.

⁹ Click on the following link to see this distinction applied to the Grateful Dead: <https://archive.org/post/45752/type-ii-grateful-dead>.

¹⁰ On the use of the sublime in interpreting the Grateful Dead, see Silverman, "'Mysteries Dark and Vast': Grateful Dead Concerts and Initiation into the Sublime" (Tuedio 214-31).

¹¹ The most famous such example of the "Turkish topic" in 18th century Viennese Classicism is likely the "Alla Turca" third movement of Mozart's Piano Sonata No. 11 in A major (K. 331). For an even older example of such borrowing of "exotic elements" within the Western art music tradition see Alex Ross's discussion of the *chacona* (22-25).

¹² The book's most challenging scholarly material is undoubtedly found in Malvinni's significant use of fairly difficult and abstract Continental philosophy. These include his discussion of Derrida's conceptualization of the "work of mourning" in chapter three, the section "Heidegger on the Art Work: Preserving the Rift" in chapter four, and "Twilight: Deleuze, Improvisation, and Memories of the Grateful Dead" in chapter seven.

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