

Grateful Dead 1970: From Workingman's Dead to American Beauty

MARK PRENDERGAST EXAMINES HOW THE GRATEFUL DEAD MANAGED TO REINVENT THEMSELVES AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 1970S, WITH TWO ICONIC ALBUMS

In Nov 1969 The Grateful Dead finally achieved what many thought was impossible, a perfect distillation of their legendary live sound they had developed to a mercurial intensity from 1965. Hundreds of thousands of dollars were spent on soupy studio experiments, but nothing caught The Dead in excelsis as did the lead track on the new album 'Dark Star'. Taken from multiple sets at the Fillmore West from Feb 27th to March 2nd 1969, LIVE/DEAD was one of the first 16-track recordings.

Every single note of those legendary San Franciscan shows was eventually released in Nov 2005 in a humongous 10-disc box set *Fillmore West 1969-The Complete Recordings*. On Disc 2 you can hear Garcia solo on the acoustic guitar, put it down, pick up the Gibson SG and pierce himself into history. The legendary spikey riffs circle as the bass, drums and percussion shift their weight around as the track builds to its first chorus.

In a situation where reality is perfectly mirrored by art the opening track of their next album *Workingman's Dead* would perfectly sum up the Dead's situation post Nov '69: "when life looks like easy street there is danger at your door", the lyric of the Hunter/Garcia song 'Uncle John's Band' gently warns. After the high of *LIVE/DEAD* came the complete bummer of the Altamont Speedway fiasco of Dec 6th 1969.

A spectre seemed to hover over The Dead now. In January 1970 they suffered a heavy drugs bust in New Orleans. Pianist Tom Constanten left the band, and that March Mickey Hart's dad emptied the band's coffers of \$155,000 before escaping to Mexico. Still in debt to Warner Bros., and with no reserves, The Dead had to come up with something succinct, great-sounding and above all commercial if they were to survive.

Having left the intensity of the Haight for Marin County, Garcia and lyricist Hunter shared a house where the songwriting was taking on the influences of Crosby, Stills & Nash, The Byrds, Bob Dylan and especially the first two albums by The Band. Garcia wanted clarity and enlisted the help of their live sound engineers Bob Matthews and Betty Cantor. A veteran of the Haight and a

friend of Garcia's since the early days, Cantor wanted great sound with "the clearest reproduction possible". When Garcia called Cantor was always ready with the 16-tracks.

Pacific High Studios (later Alembic) was chosen. With a clutch of great songs the band played them live to get a sequence. Matthews made cassette demos and the group went off and woodshedded the material for a week, then took a total of nine days to record the album, *Workingman's Dead*, in February and March 1970. The results were extraordinary: though mostly acoustic the album also featured three electric stand-outs 'New Speedway Boogie', 'Easy Wind' and 'Casey Jones'.

The latter was inspired by a real-life locomotive crash caused by a drunk train driver in 1900 but transposed to the present with cocaine as the villain. The stinging 'New Speedway Boogie' refers directly to Altamont, its finale imploring "one way or another this darkness gotta give". 'Easy Wind' was Ron McKernan's standout dirty blues workout and the grittiest blue collar song on the record, Garcia spitting out the melody on his guitar, the band rollicking along behind. Live it would take on a life of its own.

Acoustic heart

But the kernel is the acoustic material. 'Dire Wolf', one of the first songs written by Hunter for the album, was inspired by seeing a Sherlock Holmes film, its old-timey sound enhanced by Garcia's Zane Beck pedal-steel guitar. 'Cumberland Blues', a speedy riposte to the laid-back Nashville scene, is defined by David Nelson's (of The New Riders Of The Purple Sage) swift electric picking and great

banjo/acoustic guitar backing by Garcia/Weir. 'High Time' was specifically written to feature Garcia's pedal-steel and is full of space and melancholia.

Even better was 'Black Peter', one of Garcia's greatest vocal performances and one of the finest songs about death ever put to record. Contemporary in its late 1969 writing and the song that would propel the album into the charts was 'Uncle John's Band', a gorgeous acoustic bounce of a song propelled by the triple harmonies of Garcia's tenor, Weir's baritone and Lesh's alto. It opened the album, charted and helped *Workingman's Dead* reach 27 in the U.S. chart after its release in June 1970. Future President of Warner Bros. Joe Smith was ecstatic at the results – you could hear all the voices and that the songs were to the point and not overlong. For his commitment and craft Robert Hunter appeared for the first time on a Grateful Dead album cover.

In terms of performance 1970 was a changing year for The Dead. First of all there was their alliance with a new country rock band The New Riders Of The Purple Sage, fronted by John Dawson with David Nelson on guitar. It started out with Hart, Lesh, Bob Matthews and Jerry Garcia (pedal steel) added to the lineup, but eventually the band recruited David Torbert on bass and Spencer Dryden drums, with Buddy Cage taking over Garcia's role on steel guitar.

The Dead settled on a format of the New Riders opening, an acoustic set mixing all their new numbers and then an extended electric set with extemporisations. Concerts became longer and longer. In June/July 1970 The Dead did a train tour of Canada immortalized in the film *Festival Express* with The Band, Janis Joplin and The Flying Burrito Brothers. Inspired, Robert Hunter reeled off one song after another. One day he tossed Garcia a piece of paper "ripple in still water" written on it. At the next stop Garcia got off the train, sat on the tracks with his acoustic