Nicholas G. Meriwether

"More than just ashes when your dreams come true"

Libraries, archives, and the Grateful Dead

When I was hired to be the Grateful Dead Archivist at University of California- Santa Cruz (UCSC), Robert Hunter's lyrics to the Grateful Dead song "Fire on the Mountain" kept echoing in my mind.[1] A marvelously elliptical allegory about perseverance in the face of an indifferent or even hostile environment, the song has particular resonance for the work of building the Grateful Dead Archive into a high-level scholarly resource.

The trials faced by the song's protagonist—an anonymous runner addressed by an absent narrator, at times admonishing, at times incredulous—evokes the very real challenges posed by curating this kind of pop culture archive, even as the line quoted in the title of this article points out the enormous potential that undertaking has for scholars, fans, and the archival and library professions.

When the Grateful Dead gave their archive to UCSC in 2008, it was a massive, variegated, complex trove spanning several hundred linear feet of papers and artifacts that over the years had lost almost all of its original order.[2] It also came with no funds for processing and was governed by restrictions and obligations to its creators, Grateful Dead Productions. And it landed in an institutional context defined by its relative youth—UCSC was founded the same year as the band, 1965—that was, and is, undergoing a transformative transition. The library at UCSC had no collection that approached the magnitude of the Grateful Dead Archive, it had never attempted to process and develop a collection of this size and complexity, and it had the obligation of gearing up for this while fulfilling a high-profile IMLS grant to create a digital archive partially derived from the physical, on a grueling timeline with significant deliverables. Heavy publicity and the attendant expectations it created were compounded by California's extreme budgetary duress, which placed enormous pressure on development efforts. Those efforts were complicated by the unusual nature of the potential donor pool, who otherwise had no interest in the university or library, and tended to be unfamiliar with the norms of traditional philanthropy.

A further complication was the bureaucratic context, part of an institutional culture that was historically characterized by a collegiate system favoring decentralization. This meant that development efforts, the IMLS grant, and archival processing all had different mandates, operating within a dotted-line reporting structure burdened with the pressures of a downsizing university that would have created challenges for any organization. Finally, the library was undergoing a multiyear seismic retrofit that prevented the collection from being assembled in one location, a logistical hurdle that hampered fundamental archival tasks, such as an effective records survey.

These issues are part of the reason why UCSC's experience with the Grateful Dead Archive makes a fascinating case study, as archivists and librarians grapple with chang-

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ing public perceptions and user expectations, a drastically altered funding landscape, and an ongoing debate over professional identities and institutional roles, both within the professions and perhaps especially in the academy. Our experience with the Dead Archive broadly mirrors that of the artistic organization and sociocultural phenomenon the archive documents: a long, strange trip that is marked by its fair share of setbacks and difficulties, but ultimately defined by successes and triumphs. This article provides an overview of the Dead Archive, a summary of the challenges it poses to librarianship and archival theory and practice, and a brief sketch of the implications these have for the professions.

What's in the archive

The heart of the band's archive is not at UCSC. The recordings that document the most important part of their cultural legacy, the music they created, remain the property of Grateful Dead Productions, under the superb care of Grateful Dead Archivist and Legacy Manager David Lemieux. What we have at UCSC is the counterpart to that: the records that provide the context for researchers to understand the significance of those artifacts.

Grateful Dead Archive logo by Gary Houston. © Grateful Dead Archive.

Prior to their incorporation in 1970, the band's record keeping reflected the intensity and somewhat chaotic nature of their work: they had several managers and their base of operations moved often, which hindered, if not obviated, any real records management mentality.[3] What they created almost immediately, however, was an aura of historicity: their music was compelling and their concerts were widely acknowledged as transformative. In 1966, band members and fans began

calling Dead shows "church," and they did not use the term lightly, or sacrilegiously.[4] It meant that the band focused on making music; their fans, employees, and friends all collected their records, defined here broadly to encompass ephemera, artifacts, memorabilia, as well as business records, correspondence, and contracts.[5] The range of evidence and formats, and the distributed nature of their aggregation, are inextricable parts of the challenge of creating an archive that documents a subcultural phenomenon.

This paradigm continued until the band's dissolution in 1995, and it describes a central challenge—and appeal—of their archive. When employees left, they often took their records with them. From a records management standpoint, this is problematic at best; but from a field archivist's standpoint, it is a miracle—those records meant enough to those employees to save them. And the pride of having participated in the phenomenon can be tapped and cultivated so that those records can eventually rejoin their cousins to rebuild the archive. Already, several former employees have donated materials to the Dead Archive, filling in significant lacunae in the band's original bequest.

This is in many ways the antithesis of the Shellenbergian model of winnowing an abundance created by well-organized records management that smoothly transitions into an archive.[6] Instead, it is an exercise in archival paleontology, where the archivist is more than just a good field archivist but also a cultural historian, charged with ferreting out and assembling records from a wide array of fans, former employees, and band family to flesh out a skeleton whose dimensions have to be determined from public documents,

private papers, interviews, and more. This is perhaps the greatest challenge the Dead Archive poses.

Why a Dead Archive

Fundamentally, the purpose of the archive is to fully document the Grateful Dead phenomenon: assembling collections that describe the entire arc of subcultural experience, from artistic creation to cultural reception, from the handwritten lyrics and fragments of musical creation to the business environment and entities that mediate and channel that art to its ultimate reception by fans, and finally how that reception is diffused into culture and history, particularly as reflected, refracted, and shaped by mass media. From a scholarly standpoint, that is one of the primary attractions of studying the Dead: nowhere else in popular music is that chain potentially so well documented, from origination to reception, consumption, and cultural diffusion.[7] At its most basic, that is the challenge of the archive: to create a representative collection of this vast, 30-year phenomenon.

Fans were an inextricable part of the phenomenon and they remain the primary audience of the Dead Archive, one whose resources and needs are at the forefront of our discussions over collection development and exhibits. But the litmus test of any academic archive is the degree to which it can sustain and encourage high-level scholarly attention, and as more and more scholarly attention focuses on the 1960s, the Dead Archive has the potential to help shape our understanding of that era, the counterculture, and the associated cultural and theoretical contexts informing that discourse.

Our goal is, quite simply, to build the Dead Archive into a marquee scholarly collection that can support both microcosmic and comparative analyses in a wide array of fields, not just history but also literary criticism, cultural theory, sociology, anthropology, business theory, and more. To date, the scholarly literature on the Dead spans 22 disciplines and fields, and what is more remarkable is that the more than 50 peer-reviewed articles

and chapters, five PhD dissertations, and more than 24 master's theses comprising that literature all were done without access to the Dead Archive.[8]

The interdisciplinarity of Grateful Dead studies also goes to the heart of the next level of challenge, which is using the archive to integrate the broad spectrum of archival functions into a unified, coherent framework that links collection development with processing, access (including digitization), and monetary development; and this, in turn, must dovetail with the ongoing development of Special Collections into a major national scholarly repository.

Accomplishing these objectives is no mean feat, but the success we have enjoyed to date makes me more than optimistic: I am confident that we will, to paraphrase Faulkner, not just survive but prevail; that confidence in part stems from the implications our work has for both the library and archival professions.

Collaboration and community

At the most general level, our work confirms the relevance and necessity of the increasing calls for collaboration seen throughout the archival and library literature. While this echoes a theme by now so familiar that it's almost a cliché, the Grateful Dead Archive is a sandbox that grounds that often vague and diffuse injunction in a set of concrete specifics: It requires collaboration with the community to build the archive; it requires collaboration with researchers to shape access to the archive; and it requires the financial support of the community to create and steward the archive.

Each of those specifics supports theoretical insights, but the archive has broader theoretical implications, as well. For appraisal theory, the way that the Dead Archive evolved and is now accreting suggests a novel way of reframing the discussion over macroappraisal theory generally and documentation strategy in particular: the archive offers a novel context for reapplying the positive lessons learned from successful projects and addressing the problems encountered by

others.[9] This should not be surprising, since documentation strategy was born of the goal to broaden the idea of the archive to include "contemporary social movements, underrepresented groups, and cultural shifts not well represented through traditional acquisition practices," as Doris Malkmus noted in 2008.[10] She could well have been describing the Grateful Dead phenomenon.

On a microcosmic level, the Dead Archive offers a lens for rethinking representation theory, to focus on how competing voices, both community and even literary, are portrayed within the archive.[11] The chance to connect representation within the archive to how the archive in turn represents this broader cultural phenomenon is especially intriguing, and has particularly profound implications for a number of trends in representation theory, connecting it across disciplinary divides that archival theorists have not bridged before.

For the discourse on community archives, the Dead Archive offers an opportunity to explore and address some of the more contentious issues over authority and professional governance, or what has been called the move to democratize archives, especially in Europe. The approach being taken with the Dead Archive reifies the role of, and need for, professional governance while frankly acknowledging its limits by encouraging, honoring, and embracing the need for community involvement in the creation, curation, and stewardship of an archive documenting a marginalized, generally misunderstood and often despised population. This may not only

Poster advertising the Grateful Dead Archive's opening exhibition, "A Box of Rain," by David Singer. © David Singer and Grateful Dead Archive.

mitigate some of the contentiousness of that discourse, but obviate it by reformulating the terms of the debate: the Dead Archive represents a novel amalgam of a variety of archival models and norms, and that variegation suggests strategies for reassessing and perhaps even resolving disputes that at times seem to founder on the shoals of ideology.[12]
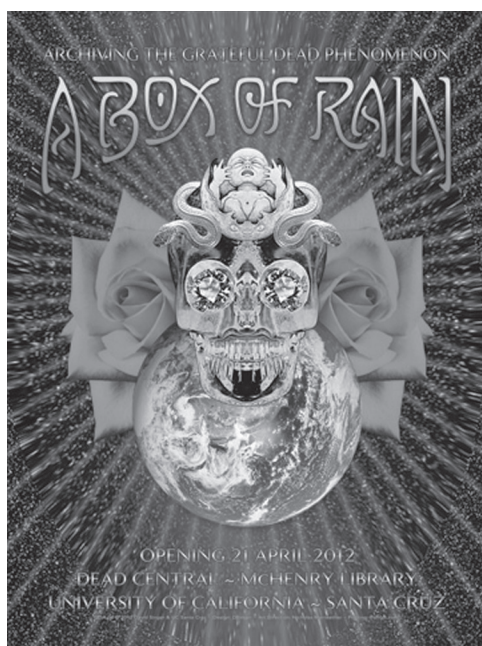
Last, even the pragmatics of funding and the economic landscape of higher education in California (and in the United States) take on new coloring in the fading Day-Glo of the Dead Archive, and that is an extension of the degree to which the archive itself connects creation to reception in such a powerful and immediate way. Constructing an archive like this, and at this time, and in this institutional context, demands that we transcend the atomization that characterizes academic bureaucracies and develop a holistic view of archives, one that integrates collection development, access, and monetary development in a way that is coherent, inclusive, and that honors and is in accord with not only the institutional context supporting the effort, but also with the ideals of the phenomenon the archive documents.

In so doing, we can at last address the longstanding and increasingly important need for archivists to incorporate fundraising into their professional mandate, first called for by Richard Cox more than 20 years ago and now recurring with greater force and frequency throughout the literature.[13]

Given the magnitude of these challenges, why undertake the job of curating and stewarding such a collection? For UCSC's McHenry

Library, acquiring the Grateful Dead Archive represents a logical and ambitious extension of its Special Collections, which includes signature collections of Kenneth Patchen, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Lou Harrison, and others. But the decision to undertake this mammoth task represented more than a devotion to the collection. For UCSC, stewardship of this kind of complex, controversial, and enormously significant scholarly effort harks back to its founding ideals, when campus planners envisioned an academic city on the hill that espoused the finest in academic and scholary traditions applied to innovative, unorthodox, and cutting-edge initiatives.[14]

None of those involved deprecate the very real ongoing challenges posed by a UC system adapting to a radically redefined economic foundation. But as our professions increasingly focus on the need for collaboration with stakeholders, as the academy increasingly emphasizes interdisciplinarity, archivists and special collections librarians can take heart at the degree to which our work already involves and relies upon others, so that when mystified colleagues ask why we choose to work with unorthodox and extraordinarily challenging collections, or to do so in untraditional or straitened circumstances, we, too, can point to the larger communities we serve. And when we do, we may be surprised at how Robert Hunter's ringing words describe how what we have created is indeed "more than just ashes when our dreams come true."

Notes

1. Robert Hunter, "Fire on the Mountain," *The Annotated Grateful Dead Lyrics,* ed. Alan Trist and David Dodd (New York: Free Press, 2005), 273.

2. This first bequest represented about half of the entire collection, with two sections that had to do with the band's ongoing business withheld; one of those I recently added to the archive.

3. Dennis McNally, *A Long Strange Trip: The Inside History of the Grateful Dead* (New York: Broadway, 2002). The band and fans refer to the Dead as a collective plural.

4. John Platt, "Reddy Kilowatt Speaks: An Interview with Phil Lesh," *Spiral Light* 30 (Nov. 1993): 40. For more on Deadhead spirituality, see Robin Sylvan, "Eyes of the World: The Grateful Dead and Deadheads," in his *Traces of the Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 83–116.

5. Robert Hunter, "Foreword," *The Grateful Dead: The Illustrated Trip,* by Blair Jackson, Dennis McNally, Stephen Peters, and Chuck Wills (New York: Dorling Kindersley, 2003), 7.

6. Theodore R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).

7. Nicholas Meriwether, "Introduction," *All Graceful Instruments: The Contexts of the Grateful Dead Phenomenon* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007), xi-xli.

8. Meriwether, "The Dead in the Academy: A Checklist," *Dead Letters: Essays on the Grateful Dead Phenomenon,* Vol. 3 (Columbia, SC: Dead Letters, 2006), 121-28.

9. The literature on documentation strategy is extensive; for a recent overview, see Doris J. Malkmus, "Documentation Strategy: Mastodon or Retro-Success?" *American Archivist* 71, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2008): 384-408.

10. Malkmus, "Documentation Strategy: Mastodon or Retro-Success?" 385.

11. Meriwether, "'Listening to the Secret': Representing Bobby Petersen in the Grateful Dead Archive," paper given at the Southwest/Texas American Culture and Popular Culture Association conference, San Antonio, Texas, April 2011.

12. Jeanette A. Bastian and Ben Alexander, eds., *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory* (London: Facet Publishing, 2009). Cf. Randall C. Jimserson, review of *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory, American Archivist* 73, no. 2 (2010): 686–91, especially his remarks on Richard J. Cox's conclusion.

13. See, for example, Patricia J. Rettig, "Water Tables: A Case Study of a Successful Archival Fund-Raising Event," *American Archivist* 73, no. 1 (2010): 204–18.

14. See Byron Stookey, "Starting From Scratch: The University of California at Santa Cruz," *Harvard Review* 3, no. 1 (1965): 22–34.