



American Legends: The Life of Jerry Garcia

Charles River Editors

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“I read somewhere that 77 percent of all the mentally ill live in poverty. Actually, I’m more intrigued by the 23 percent who are apparently doing quite well for themselves.” – Jerry Garcia

Despite the enormous esteem he has garnered from virtually every corner of the music world, Jerry Garcia has continued to elude both fans and music historians as they attempt to determine his origins and categorize his art and influence on American music. Part of their difficulty lies in the fact that his work as the frontman for the Grateful Dead, “one of the most prolific and iconic guitarists of the twentieth century,” tended toward a blending of the traditional with the experimental, in which he was willing to use almost any and every available ethnic musical resource. In terms of ethnic material, Garcia’s passionate interest in virtually every nook and cranny of American music, particularly rural music, made the task of following his concepts from moment to moment an unpredictable and inexact science. In his explorations and elaborations on old musical treasures, whether familiar or obscure, he fully indulged in almost all of them at one time or another. For Garcia, this was not a career move but a joyous personal search to create a vast palette of harmonic, rhythmic and textural escapades.

As an iconic example of the “communitarian, drug-positive hippie subculture of Haight-Ashbury,” and fulfilling all the expectations of the devotees who immersed themselves in the era’s music, Garcia could just as easily draw from classical music as he could from American jazz. He performed highly regionalized blues in all of their dialects, along with country music, numerous shades of rock music, and any combination of all of them. In one late career example, he even took on the genre of disco, meeting the public backlash head-on. Despite its waning popularity and status as a Saturday night indulgence for teens, in Garcia’s mind, it was a native American musical form and therefore worth studying and mutating into new hybrid forms and sounds. He could (and constantly did) synthesize new musical treatments and old, time-tested themes without inflicting any damage on the historical source, and among his various bands, he spun lengthy, expansive guitar improvisations, aided by masterful colleagues who melded the music to fit the emotional and intellectual profiles of their audiences.

By all accounts, Garcia’s place at the front of the stage made the event magical, and even though he was not a fine singer in the conventional sense, he could produce “delicate, mournful, rough-around-the-edges vocals,” reflecting the same inviting atmosphere that his physical presence conveyed onstage. With the Grateful Dead alone, Garcia performed over 2,300 concerts during his three decades of work, and his efforts spent with other groups were similarly prodigious. Despite being a frail, sickly youth, Garcia found the enthusiasm and energy in adulthood to work with three bands simultaneously, all while indulging a lifelong interest in film and art. Garcia’s laid-back persona, along with others of his musical generation, worked like an irresistible force within the industry, and by the mid-90s, had left it forever altered.

American Legends: The Life of Jerry Garcia examines the life and career of one of America’s most famous musicians. Along with pictures of important people, places, and events, you will learn about Jerry Garcia like never before, in no time at all.

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