



Dead is Alive

UC Santa Cruz's Grateful Dead Archive finally opens to the public

BY DNA

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It might be a slight exaggeration to say, "in the beginning was the Grateful Dead and post-modern culture flowed forth from that mighty stream"—but, the band's new archive at UC Santa Cruz makes a compelling case.

The exhibit, entitled "A Box of Rain: Archiving the Grateful Dead Phenomena"—which officially opens to the public on June 29—features a wide variety of Grateful Dead memorabilia, and is housed at Dead Central: a 1,400-square-foot space inside the McHenry Library at UCSC.

Archivist Nicholas Meriwether, the silver-haired gentleman who oversees the ambitious project, has streamlined the ragged adventures of the Bay Area rock band into one exciting, cohesive visual experience. Meriwether contributed all of the graphics, and designed the layout and typesetting for the exhibition himself.

The purpose of the exhibit is twofold: to tell the story of the archive and how it came to be, and to tell the tale of the band with associated cultural and historical phenomena. The ways in which the two stories intersect and interact is up to archive visitors to discover. The memorabilia housed inside the glass room has the charm, power and mystery to captivate fans, scholars and the curious.

One such display features one of the band's guitars, which was used by a Stanford physicist interested in acoustics. "It documents the fact that academic rigor and scholarly study have been associated with the band since 1966," says Meriwether. Another case contains volumes of fan zines created by Deadheads and other publications that came directly from the band. "And this makes the point that immediately the band consisted of more than just people performing on stage for a static audience—it's a great big participatory ritual," Meriwether adds.

In another exhibit, a note that was handwritten in 1962 by Jerry Garcia to one of his guitar

students, is also on display. "This was before he was in Mother McCree's Uptown Jug Champions, which is the band that preceded the Warlocks, which preceded the Grateful Dead," explains Meriwether. The note is one example of the tabatures that Garcia would scribble down at the end of each class, in order to break down his students' favorite songs into chords they could practice at home. "I think this is something that is often overlooked—Jerry and the rest of the band were really fine teachers," says the archivist. "They were good teachers in the sense that they made it clear they were students themselves."

Aside from their roles as educators, Meriwether hopes that the archive will shed light on the band's important role in American culture overall. "One of the things I needed to do is reassure skeptics of the band's enduring significance," he says.

The archive chronicles everything from the band's early involvement with the Palo Alto art scene of the late 1950s, to The Acid Tests, to Woodstock. There are plenty of novelties for the entertainment of Deadheads, including the actual long wooden table the band used for meetings—but, the devil is in the details.

Within one glass case there are five PhD dissertations in a variety of fields, 27 master's degree theses, and more than 50 peer-reviewed scholarly articles. But, when asked what aspect of the archive excites him most, Meriwether pointed to the eye-popping graphics that seem to beckon the viewer. "What other academics get to actually commission such wonderful posters to document their gatherings?" he asks with a smile. **ST**

The public opening of the Grateful Dead Archive will take place from 1-4 p.m. on Friday, June 29, at UCSC's McHenry Library, 1156 High St., Santa Cruz. No cover.