

Teaching the Grateful Dead with Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*

Stanley J. Spector
Modesto Junior College
Modesto, CA 95354
spectors@mjc.edu

Friedrich Nietzsche published his first work, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* in 1872 and his last work, *Ecce Homo* in 1888. In not only these two works, but also in his other writings as well, one of the ideas that he consistently emphasized was the idea of life affirmation and vitality: first, how they were expressed in Ancient Greece and then how they had been neglected in Western culture from the fifth century BC to the end of the nineteenth century and finally how regaining life affirmation and vitality might occur in a post nineteenth century world. To start at the end of his trajectory, an initial observation is that chronologically the Grateful Dead (1965-1995) was a post nineteenth century band, and in order to justify a claim that the Grateful Dead expressed Nietzsche's ideas of life affirmation and vitality, we need first to understand Nietzsche's characterizations of the Greek period to contrast with what was lost in the middle period when life affirmation and vitality were underemphasized and replaced with an over-emphasis on reason, and then grasp how life affirmation and vitality can come to the forefront again in the twentieth century. Then, we can confidently demonstrate how closely the Grateful Dead exemplify some of what Nietzsche projected for the future.

Nietzsche introduced the idea of life affirmation in his first work, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* (1872). Even though this early work is somewhat flawed in its metaphysical claims and framework, it still resonates with me for three reasons. The first is that Nietzsche was the first philosopher I encountered who emphasized vitality over knowledge and shifted the emphasis away from abstract and absolute truth to a celebration of living a life. The second is that he initiated a new sense of philosophy as he not only saw himself standing at the end of a philosophical tradition begun by Socrates, but also projected a new beginning in philosophy. The third reason is that his analysis of art and life before the time of Socrates, that is, an analysis which articulated the development of the Dionysian impulse of life, as well as his projection of life and art in the future, again, also in terms of the Dionysian, speaks directly to the Grateful Dead experience.

Nietzsche, through his demonstration of the development of Greek art, showed that Greek art achieved its greatest expression in the tragedies of Aeschylus, and to some extent Sophocles, but not, as is commonly thought, in the tragedies of Euripides. In fact, it is Euripides, often considered the best of the ancient tragedians, who, Nietzsche asserted, actually killed tragedy in the fifth century BC. Through the first part of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche traced the histories of the development of the Dionysian and Apollonian principles as they were expressed in Greek art and showed that what made the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles the highpoint of Greek art was the harmonious balance between these two impulses. Nietzsche then argued that

with Euripides, the Dionysian impulse disappeared, and with it the Apollonian as well, thereby eliminating the Apollonian-Dionysian duality and destroying what was great about Greek tragedy. Nietzsche ended *The Birth of Tragedy* by arguing that it was not until Modern German music, specifically the music of Wagner, that what was great in Greek tragedy was again realized. Although he later wondered if he was wrong about Wagner, he never wavered about the centrality of the Dionysian, in life or in his philosophy. The new music in a new age would have to recapture the Dionysian impulse in life. In terms of the Grateful Dead, we can show how their music is indeed a modern expression of art expressing what made great the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles; we can identify both the Dionysian and the Apollonian tendencies in their music and then show how songs like "Dark Star," for example, express the harmonious balance of the duality.

Besides the idea of the Dionysian, another idea which pertains to the Grateful Dead that Nietzsche introduced in *The Birth of Tragedy* delineates an historical timeline. Nietzsche argued that the intellectual and philosophical tradition of Western culture began with Socrates. For Nietzsche, there is pre-tradition history, one which allowed for the great art that celebrated Dionysus. That Socrates and Euripides were contemporaries was no accident; Nietzsche actually claimed that it was Socrates' influence on Euripides that allowed Euripides to destroy tragedy, for by eliminating the chorus and having the protagonists in his plays explain themselves rationally, Euripides broke from a tradition in art that celebrated the Dionysian element in life. Nietzsche thought of himself as a thinker who recognized the mistake of the last 2,500 years or so, and believed that just as he was a new beginning in philosophy, so, too, was Wagner a new beginning in music. Fifteen years after the publication of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche questioned his assessment of Wagner; however, he did not offer a musical alternative. Christof Cox has rightly pointed out that Nietzsche, in his "Attempt at Self-Criticism," rejected his earlier claim that Wagner's music was Dionysian music of the future and asked anew "what would a music have to be like that would no longer be of romantic origin, like German music— but Dionysian?" (*BT*, "Self-Criticism," 6). Cox argued that the avant garde and electronic music of the twentieth century accomplished this feat. The Grateful Dead emerged in the mid-twentieth century, were influenced in part by the avant garde and electronic music, and instantiated the necessary shift away from the Socratic theoretical framework in both their lyrics and their music. The Grateful Dead's music also answers Nietzsche's query: it, too, is Dionysian.

I have taught two different classes using the Grateful Dead and Nietzsche. One of these classes was specifically designed to examine the interface of philosophy and the Grateful Dead. In that class, students were already familiar with the Grateful Dead's music, they were conversant with some of the history of the band and the musicians, they already had a sense of the band's emphasis on live improvisation, and they resonated with the idea that "There is nothing like a Grateful Dead concert." In that class, the focus was on showing how different aspects of the Grateful Dead phenomenon(a) illustrate some of Nietzsche's ideas in not only *The Birth of Tragedy*, but also in passages throughout his corpus.

The other class I taught was a *Philosophy of Art* class. Here the challenge was to find examples that illustrate the philosophical ideas. I used the Grateful Dead in relation to *The Birth of Tragedy* and had the dual task of helping students navigate through Nietzsche's ideas as well as helping them understand how and why the Grateful Dead were a useful example. So, since students were unfamiliar with the band, then besides reading and learning Nietzsche, we had to spend time listening and learning the Grateful Dead as well.

For the purposes of this paper, I limit the discussion to only the first two thirds of a single Nietzsche text, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, and I highlight those passages that relate specifically to the Grateful Dead.

There are twenty-five sections in *The Birth of Tragedy* which are organized into three major parts, each with a central theme. The first part, Sections 1-10, introduces the ideas of the Dionysian and the Apollonian as tendencies in the production of art and traces the development of Greek art from its beginnings to its

culmination in Greek Tragedy, the highest form of art. The second part, Sections 11-15, examines the decline of Greek art by demonstrating how tragedy was destroyed by Euripides, under the influence of his contemporary, Socrates, whose optimism and over emphasis on rationality replaced the healthier Dionysian-Apollonian tensions that initially gave rise to art, philosophy and life. The third part, Sections 16-25, focuses on Wagner and modern German music as approximating earlier Greek art and tragedy. Also included in the volume is an “Attempt at Self Criticism” published in 1886, fifteen years after the *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* first appeared in which Nietzsche criticized, among other things, his earlier acceptance of the metaphysical dualism of Schopenhauer.

Nietzsche began Section 1 with a general claim about art and an introduction to the concepts of the Dionysian and the Apollonian. He wrote:

...that the continuous development of art is bound up with the *Apollonian* and *Dionysian* duality...The terms Dionysian and Apollonian we borrow from the Greeks, who disclose to the discerning mind the profound mysteries of their art...in the intensely clear figures of their gods. Through Apollo and Dionysus, the two art deities of the Greeks, we come to recognize that in the Greek world there existed a tremendous opposition, in origin and aims, between the Apollonian art of sculpture, and the nonimagistic, Dionysian art of music. These two different tendencies...eventually... appear coupled with each other, and through this coupling ultimately generate an equally Dionysian and Apollonian form of art—Attic tragedy (*BT* 35).

In this first paragraph, Nietzsche marked the difference between two kinds of arts, each generated by different artistic tendencies—one giving rise to the plastic arts of images represented by the god Apollo and one driving the nonimagistic art of music represented by the god Dionysus. It's important to note that Nietzsche's descriptions and understanding of the figures of the gods and what they represent differs from the standard view that has dominated the literature since the dissolution of the Golden Age of Greece which was the time of Attic tragedy. After the collapse of ancient Greece, the meanings of the gods shifted and Apollo became the god of art as well as poetry and sculpture. Before the collapse of Greece, Dionysus was the god of music. Also, after the collapse, Dionysus was relegated to an almost comic and incidental figure, the god of wine and drunken intoxication. In the earlier Greek period, Dionysus was the god of life's destruction and generation, whose sense of intoxication was in the service of the annihilation and recreation of life and not just simple revelry.

After introducing the figure of the gods and identifying them with the tendencies in art, he also claimed that although these are definably different tendencies, historically in the development of art, they have come together in different proportions, until finally, they achieved an equal balance and produced the greatest achievement in art with the Greek tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles.

In this paragraph, Nietzsche focused on the object of art, namely, sculptures, music, and plays. A full account of art must also take into account the artist and the spectator, and through the following sections in the first part of the text, Nietzsche primarily considers the objects of art along with the spectators, without fully treating the artist himself, except through analogy and extrapolation. Tragedies were staged and performed in theaters filled with the spectator audience. In terms of the Grateful Dead, we can identify the audience/spectator. The object of art in relation to the Grateful Dead is problematic since the band no longer performs. What is available now as objects are recordings and film, but during the time they were active, the object of the art was the live performance itself, that is, the concert, which actually included the artist and the music as it was performed and the audience.

The clue to understanding the difference between the Apollonian and Dionysian tendencies, Nietzsche

continued, is to “conceive of them as the separate art worlds of *dreams* and *intoxication*” (BT 35). Leaving aside Nietzsche's analysis of Apollo and dreams for the moment, his analysis of the Dionysian in this beginning section captures the experience of the audience as they dance to the music. The physiological clue to the Dionysian, for Nietzsche, is intoxication, but not in the ordinary sense of the word. The first definition offered by the *Oxford English Dictionary* is to poison. The second entry is closer to what Nietzsche described:

To stupefy, render unconscious or delirious, to madden or deprive of the ordinary use of the senses or reason, with a drug or alcoholic liquor; to inebriate, make drunk (OED 1471).

This definition though still does not capture what is more fundamental for Nietzsche. For him, intoxication is not merely being inebriated. He wrote:

Either under the influence of the narcotic draught, of which the songs of all primitive men and peoples speak, or with the potent coming of spring that penetrates all nature with joy, these Dionysian emotions awake, and as they grow in intensity everything subjective vanishes into complete self-forgetfulness (BT 36).

In the Dionysian state, Nietzsche argued, what collapses is the *principium individuationis*, that is the principle of individuation. And so:

Now, with the gospel of universal harmony, each one feels himself not only united, reconciled, and fused with his neighbor, but as one with him. In song and in dance man expresses himself as a member of a higher community; he has forgotten how to walk and speak and is on the way toward flying into the air, dancing. His very gestures express enchantment (BT 37).

In terms of the Grateful Dead there are two points to be made here. The first is that these descriptions seem accurately to describe the images of the audience that we see in concert footage: how they shared a physical space, how they danced, and how they expressed enchantment. Consider this description from a seasoned concert goer:

The music started and everybody was dancing. Nobody was dancing with each other; they were all just kind of dancing. Everybody's up and down. I looked at all these freaks and thought, “What the hell is goin' on?” Then I looked down and all of sudden I'm dancing. All these heads are going this way and that way, but pretty soon there's a groove going and all of a sudden everybody's dancing together. Everybody's like one, and the crowd gets excited. Then the band starts getting excited, and then the crowd gets more excited. Everyone just starts feeding on everything and then this magical thing just happens. It's just so beautiful. You see, when you listen to music, it comes in, but when you listen to Dead music, it comes out (Johnston 51).

Unfortunately, not all concert footage shows the audience's interacting with the music, nor does any of it really show the energetic dynamic between the audience and the band. However, there is enough footage to show how the audience moved with the music. By showing videos, students not only get to see the band as it performs, but they also begin to hear the music and listen to the songs. Again, not all concert videos show the audience. Usually concerts filmed indoors or at night focus on the stage and rarely scan the audience. The classic concert film that does show the audience and simultaneously serves as an introduction to the Grateful Dead phenomenon(a) is *The Grateful Dead Movie*, recorded in 1974 and released in 1976. Unlike later concert videos which focus primarily on the band with occasional shots of the audience, *The Grateful Dead Movie* filmed the entire Grateful Dead scene from fans waiting in line to enter the venue, to the crew setting up the

stage, to activity in the halls and concession stands, all against the backdrop of the band's playing on stage and the audience dancing on the floor.

It is important to note that just as not all of Nietzsche's philosophy is contained in a single text, the entire Grateful Dead phenomenon(a) is also not contained in a single concert or concert video. The band played for thirty years, from the 1965 Acid Tests to the summer of 1995 when Jerry Garcia died. During that time, they played 2,318 shows, performing 420 different tunes. The original quintet (Garcia, Lesh, Weir, Kreutzmann and Pigpen) played for two years before adding a second drummer (Hart) in 1967 (until 1971) and another keyboard player (T.C.) in 1968 (until 1970). They played as the original quintet again for a year in 1971 before adding another keyboard player (Godchaux). The band stopped touring for a year and a half after the 1974 concerts filmed for *The Grateful Dead Movie*, and there is not nearly as much concert video from before the break as there is after, primarily because of the technology that became available in the 1980's. Some of what is available does chronicle the Grateful Dead's playing and the audience's dancing. The "Hard to Handle" and "New Speedway Boogie" from *Festival Express* and the entire "Sunshine Daydream" video from the 1972 concert in Veneta, OR, are excellent examples, although, be advised that the concert in Veneta was on its hottest day ever on record, and it was 1972, so, be prepared for total nudity by some of the audience.

Unfortunately, even in these examples, there is little video of the audience's dancing during slower tunes and during tunes with space-like psychedelic jams. This is not because people were not dancing, but rather than show the audience, the videos during these segments simulated the early light shows of the mid 1960's or used new technology to depict a stream of kaleidoscopic psychedelic images. In a few places in *The Grateful Dead Movie*, for example in the jam of "Playing in the Band," or the ballad of "Stella Blue," or the jam before "Morning Dew," the camera does catch the audience in different kinds of movements, unlike those of hard driving rhythmic tempo. In these tunes, the audience danced differently: slower, more fluidic, and in a more melodic swaying way than the heavy rhythm driven standard rock n' roll tunes.

The second point to emphasize at this stage is Nietzsche's description of how the Dionysian relates to intoxication, and here it is important not to diminish the role of LSD (acid) in the formation of the band when the drug was still legal. That LSD is a different "narcotic draught" from alcohol, other depressants, stimulants, tobacco, marijuana, cocaine and heroin is clear. In terms of its effects, it belongs in a class of its own with similar compounds, colloquially called psychedelics. Prior to becoming the Grateful Dead, all of the band members, except Pigpen, had taken LSD. So, in 1965, when they connected with Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, it was an easy transition for them to be involved in the Acid Tests, the acid fueled parties that the Pranksters staged in the winter of 1966. Except for Pigpen who never said anything about that experience, the other members of the band were in agreement about the freedom they had at the tests to play if and when they wanted to as well as what to play and for how long. They were not the main attraction; the Acid Test itself was, and so, they felt no professional pressure to perform. All of the participants at the Tests were equally "intoxicated" with LSD, and as the research has shown, they, too, "were expressing themselves in song and dance," as Nietzsche put it. Now it is true that the Grateful Dead from then on, even after LSD was declared illegal in October 1966, were associated with the drug. They used it, and many members of the audience did as well. Eventually, the band stopped performing under the influence of LSD, and more and more audience members stopped as well. It turns out that LSD was neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the band's playing as they did nor was it either necessary or sufficient for the audience's dancing. Nonetheless, it is an historical fact that cannot be overlooked nor downplayed about how prevalent the use of LSD was in the formation of the band with its audience and the music they played.

Of the Dionysian tendency, what is of primary importance for Nietzsche is not the fact of an actual narcotic draught, for after all, as Nietzsche recognized, "the potent coming of spring" is as powerful a causal agent as any drug. What is of primary importance, at least with this provisional account in Section 1, is the

effect that is produced, namely, the shattering of the principle of individuation in consciousness. When the band first began playing, LSD helped achieve the state of conscious non-individuation, for both the band and the audience. As the band continued performing, they manifested the Dionysian tendency through the collective improvisational dimension of their music which simultaneously allowed the audience to express that tendency as well through movement. Michael Kaler, in his analysis of how the band learned to jam, described the relationship between Grateful Dead improvisation and the psychedelic consciousness this way:

Interviews with band members and insider accounts suggest that the impetus to create and develop the band's improvisational approach to rock music derives from what can only be described as the revelation of a new mode of consciousness for the band. My argument is that the Grateful Dead's early career can only be understood fully when it is seen at least in part as the attempt to recreate and represent their experiences of this new mode of consciousness... (Kaler 11-12).

Nietzsche continued to add to his description of the Dionysian tendency in Section 2. There, he not only reinforced what he had set up in the previous section, but also added that the Dionysian artistic impulse of non-individuation is more primordial than the Apollonian impulse of clarity afforded by dreams indicating figures and objects. In a Dionysian state, Nietzsche wrote:

The very element which forms the essence of Dionysian music (and hence of music in general) is carefully excluded as un-Apollonian—namely the emotional power of the tone, the uniform flow of the melody, and the utterly incomparable world of harmony. In the Dionysian dithyramb man is incited to the greatest exhalation of all his symbolic faculties... The essence of nature is now to be expressed symbolically; we need a new world of symbols; and the entire symbolism of the body is called into play, not the mere symbolism of the lips, face and speech but the whole pantomime of dancing, forcing every member into rhythmic movement. Then the other symbolic powers suddenly press forward, particularly those of music, in rhythmic, dynamics, and harmony (*BT* 40).

The way the audience danced at shows exemplified Nietzsche's description of the way music allows listeners to move freely and rhythmically.

One of the themes Nietzsche developed in the rest of this section and in the following two is one of the youthful errors he referred to in his "Attempt at Self Criticism." His still being under the influence of Schopenhauer's metaphysical dualism led him to present a picture of human experience in three distinct realms: the non-individuated Dionysian state of intoxication, the individuated Apollonian state of dreams, and the ordinary, everyday waking state. He showed in the next three sections of the text how the foundation for Apollonian dreams was the undifferentiated Dionysian state, which for him was, in fact, the primordial unity of existence. The clarity of individuation in dreams are illusions whose foundation was the more primal experience of non-individuation. Our ordinary, waking state, driven by the logic of space, time and causality is also a derivative for Nietzsche. It, too, is an illusion of the direct, primary experience of the non-individuated Dionysian state. The illusions of the dream state, then, are illusions of the illusions of the waking state, still fundamentally grounded in the Dionysian. Nietzsche recognized this problem of hierarchical levels of existence, and in spite of the importance of the Dionysian tendency for his discussion of life affirmation, he did not refer to Dionysus again until he resolved the metaphysical issue and brought Dionysus back into his philosophical thinking at the end of *Beyond Good and Evil* in 1886. Nonetheless, even if we bracket the problem of hierarchical levels of existence, the Apollonian and Dionysian tendencies in art and life can still be useful in understanding the Grateful Dead experience.

Turning to the Apollonian in contrast to the non-individuated world of intoxication, Nietzsche wrote

that the Apollonian world is:

The beautiful illusion of the dream worlds, in the creation of which every man is truly an artist, is [also] the prerequisite of all plastic art, and, as we shall see, of an important part of poetry also. In our dreams we delight in the immediate understanding of figures; all forms speak to us; there is nothing unimportant or superfluous (*BT 34*).

It is in the figure of Apollo, the god of light and clarity and individual form, that we find the impulse for the arts of painting, sculpture and poetry, and therefore also the impulse for the lyrics to the songs of the Grateful Dead. Before focusing on poetry (Sections 5 & 6), Nietzsche again re-articulated his central contention, namely, that in art, and it will turn out in life as well, the two tendencies of expressing either non-individuation or clarity are present in every form of art in some degree or another: there are no purely Dionysian or Apollonian arts as all objects of art have elements of both tendencies, sometimes more Apollonian and sometimes more Dionysian. So even though poetry is primarily Apollonian, it at least includes the Dionysian elements of rhythm and melody. Also then, music, which is primarily Dionysian includes the Apollonian element of a chord structure. Nietzsche also reiterated his contention that although the ordinary, waking state is derivative of the Dionysian ground of existence, it is more deceptive than the dream state which also is derivative of the Dionysian ground of existence.

As he turned to an analysis of the historical development of Greek Tragedy in Sections 5 & 6, Nietzsche identified two distinct forms of Greek poetry: the epic poetry of Homer and the lyric poetry of Archilochus, and he marked their difference both in terms of content and in terms of their respective modes of delivery. The adventures of the gods and heroes was the subject matter of epic poetry, a poetry whose verses were composed to be recited, sometimes in a sing-song voice by rhapsodes. On the other hand, subjective states reflecting the pain, joy and contradictions of life make up the subject matter of lyric poetry whose recitation was always sung, usually with the accompaniment of the lyre. Of the two, epic poetry is more Apollonian since its figures and images are clearly individuated. Conversely, lyric poetry is more Dionysian precisely because of its direct relationship to music and its subject matter's attempt to articulate that which cannot actually be articulated, namely, the suffering and joy of the primal unity of life and non-individuation.

Nietzsche, in the context of *The Birth of Tragedy*, first considered epic and lyric poetry in isolation from each other and did not really consider a blending of the two. Grateful Dead lyrics do not easily organize in one category or another. One reason is that their poetry might be considered epic, that is, those songs that tell a story usually include a subjective reflection about those details. For example, while telling the story of the train ride in 1970 in "Might as Well," the narrator sings "Never had such a good time, in my life before..." (Dodd 253). Another example is "Truckin," an informal history of the band. After reflecting on these events, the singer sings "Sometimes the light's all shining on me/Other times I can barely see/Lately it occurs to me/ what a long strange trip it's been" (Dodd 132). Or, consider "Scarlet Begonias," a tale of a chance meeting between the narrator and a girl, and as their interaction ended, the narrator "...had one of those flashes that [he'd] been there before," and he reflects that "I ain't often right but I've never been wrong... [and that] once in a while you get shown the light in the strangest of places if you look at it right" (Dodd 229-230).

Not all of their tunes followed this epic-lyric dynamic. Some tunes expressed subjective reflection about life within the context of an epic tale. For example, "The Music Never Stopped," a tune about a band coming to town and the excitement it generated. "Say, it might have been a fiddle, or it could have been the wind./But there seems to be a beat, now, I can feel it in my feet now/Listen, here it comes again." But then "No one's noticed that the band's all packed and gone [and the narrator wondered] Was it ever here at all [and nonetheless] But they kept on dancing" (Dodd 250). The dancing motif and the idea of rhythms in the world all around us figure prominently in Nietzsche's celebration of the Dionysian. Still other Grateful Dead

tunes seem to be purely lyric, such as "Ripple" (Dodd 126-127) and "The Wheel" (Dodd 256-257). The lyrical element in all of these tunes reflect the psychedelic consciousness that came out of the psychedelic experience.

By 1967, when Robert Hunter, the band's primary lyricist came to San Francisco, the band had already established for themselves what we can call a psychedelic worldview. They had used LSD frequently and their insight into the Dionysian state of non-individuation permeated their music and their lives. Hunter, too, was steeped in a psychedelic world view, having participated in LSD experiments at Stanford in 1962. In his discussion of Hunter's poetry, Brent Wood wrote of the psychedelic experience:

...the psychedelic experience ought not to be seen as a distortion of reality, but rather as an alternative experience of the universe in which the compartmentalization of reality endemic to our rational, everyday mind-set begins to break down and the ability to see connections between one sphere of experience and another is set free (Wood 41).

Put another way, the psychedelic experience breaks down the principle of individuation and focuses on the connections which presents fewer and fewer individual objects and more and more a sense of a non-differentiated whole, always getting closer to a primal unity. Hunter's lyrics reflected this Dionysian/psychedelic insight while incorporating elements of both epic and lyric poetry as Nietzsche described them.

When introducing an interview with Hunter, Blair Jackson put it this way:

But take a moment and think about the incredible range of this man's work: the nearly Taoist simplicity of "Ripple" and "Attics of My Life"; the fractured psychedelia of "China Cat Sunflower" and "The Eleven"; the playful metaphors of "Deal" and "Run for the Roses"; the colorful portraits of working stiffs in "Cumberland Blues" and "Easy Wind"; the dreamy disconnectedness of "Row Jimmy"; mythological journeys throughout the psyche by way of "Terrapin Station" and "Franklin's Tower"; straightforward declarations of love like "To Lay Me Down" and "If I Had the World to Give"; the cartoonish whimsy of "Tennessee Jed" and "When Push Comes to Shove"; the world-weary existentialism of "Stella Blue" and "Black Muddy River"; and the steadfast stoicism of "Playing in the Band" and "The Wheel." There are hundreds of songs in the Hunter canon, most of them widely different from each other, but all of them shoot points of light into humanity's mirror to give us fleeting glances of our inner selves (Jackson 29).

Many of these tunes' lyrics, albeit inspired by the Apollonian impulse for individuation, have a Dionysian foundation, as Hunter's tunes give us a glimpse of our inner self in relation to the world and others. Nietzsche's point is that all poetry, in spite of the fact that it uses language which by its very nature individuates, is still driven by the Dionysian sense of non-individuated primal unity of existence. So, if even purely epic poetry, which is an extreme case of the Apollonian tendency, rests on a Dionysian foundation, then surely lyric poetry, which comes closer to the Dionysian impulse reflecting suffering, pain, joy and the contradictions of life which arise from a non-individuated state of nature and psyche, similarly rests on a Dionysian foundation. The poetry of the Grateful Dead, by incorporating the insights from the intoxicant LSD, has transcended the two categories of purely epic and lyric poetry. Now, no matter whether the tune is whimsical, mythological, stoic or playful, every tune will express some dimension of the psychedelic/Dionysian experience.

Having provisionally described both the Dionysian and Apollonian tendencies, Nietzsche then turned in Sections 7-9 to the interplay between the two tendencies in the development of Greek art, shedding more light, not only how the object of art reflects a fundamental Dionysian dimension, but also how the Dionysian impulse is expressed through the spectator's engagement with the object. It was through Dionysian tragedy, Nietzsche claimed, "that...the gulfs between man and man give way to an overwhelming feeling of unity leading back to the very heart of nature" (BT 59). And so it is with the audience at a Grateful Dead concert.

The gulf between person and person is lessened as everyone is focused together to listen and dance.

Dancing at Grateful Dead concerts was different from other kinds of dancing though. First of all, most audience members did not dance with a partner nor did they follow a particular choreography. The music of the Grateful Dead was polyrhythmic, polytemporal and polymelodic, and so audience members could not simply just stand there; they “had to move/ “really had to move” (Dodds 141). And people generally moved in the space they had. Folks packed in close to the stage and could not twirl as those in the back of the venue. Everyone, though, according to Nietzsche, expressed the music through the “the entire symbolism of the body... not the mere symbolism of the lips, face and speech but the whole pantomime of dancing, forcing every member into rhythmic movement (*BT* 40).

Grateful Dead music was almost always an interplay between Apollonian and Dionysian tendencies. Certainly, the instrumental interludes—be they brief solos or jams in the middle of a song or the more musical explorations that often happened between songs—were more Dionysian, even though there was always an element of the Apollonian. Songs have chord structures and a beginning, middle and end, and, in the extreme case when the band jammed out on one note, there was always a place to return and call home. If the music got too far out, anyone in the band could call the “and one,” returning the music to a semblance of structure. And songs with lyrics, although more Apollonian, still had a Dionysian component, both in the music of the song and in the poetry. Michael Kaler described the process of Grateful Dead improvisation within a fabric of structure this way:

Overall, the Grateful Dead’s approach to improvisation can be described as the group’s spontaneous creation and manipulation of, and progression between, musical structures. Only extremely rarely do they approach “free” or unstructured improvisation; there is almost always a pulse in their music, usually a rhythm, and the tonal center is rarely in question. What we find in the Grateful Dead’s music is not the rejection of structure, but rather the freedom to work with structure, moving from form to form, either directly or with periods of liminal formlessness in between. This motion through forms is not soloistic or individualistic, but rather is guided and cued by the spontaneous interplay between band members and their commitment to group solidarity. (Kaler 12).

For Nietzsche, what made Greek tragedy the apex in the development of art was the perfect blending of the Apollonian and the Dionysian; that is, when Apollo spoke through Dionysus, and Dionysus spoke through Apollo. In the case of Greek drama, there was perfect blending of the actor’s speeches with the role of the chorus. The chorus was delivered in song, and the content of their words rarely spoke to the plot or character of the play.

At this point in the text, Nietzsche has described both the Dionysian and the Apollonian in isolation from each other and then showed how the interplay between these dual impulses can account for the development of art in ancient Greece, be it sculpture, painting, poetry or music. With the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles the tensional interplay of these two impulses expressed a balance, when the dreams of the Apollonian and the intoxications of the Dionysian express themselves through each other. These tragedies were performed, and so the spectator’s response also reflected these dual tendencies. The spectator, through the performances of the tragedies, experienced the interplay of the individuation of dream states with non-individuation states of intoxication. In this way, the spectator affirmed life along with its vitality. Following Nietzsche’s order, with the Grateful Dead, we began by looking at the audience in a Dionysian state, then briefly sketched the band’s improvisational method of playing music, and finally considered the poetry of the songs which revealed an Apollonian-Dionysian duality within the lyrics.

The one classic example of a Grateful Dead song, which like the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles

incorporates the music and the lyrics together in such a way as the complete tensional balance of the Apollonian-Dionysian duality expresses itself within a single song is "Dark Star."

The composing and first performance of "Dark Star" occurred in December 1967, two years after the band had formed. They had already developed a distinctive style of playing that reflected both their personalities and musical sensibilities. Blending folk, bluegrass, jazz, jug band, rhythm and blues, jazz, the avant garde, and electronic musical influences, they did not sound like an ensemble in any one category. Elements from each genre found their way into the music as they played it. The band's early history then is analogous to Nietzsche's history of the development of Greek tragedy. They were learning to play their instruments at the same time that they were learning how to play together and how to play songs, all primarily Apollonian. However, when they began to learn how to improvise a jam, either in the middle of the tune or in the space between tunes, their music was becoming more Dionysian. When they explored the genre of psychedelic music, they and their music became even more Dionysian in the sense that the improvisations were primarily free form, shattering the principle of individuation. During the song, the jam often bore no relationship to the melody and structures of the verses. In addition, they were innovative within an already complicated framework of influences. As Lesh explained:

I don't want people to play lead guitar or rhythm guitar or keyboard. I want everybody to play lead and rhythm. I'll do the same thing, and so will the drummer. What you then have...is a web of melodic and rhythmic ideas. (Coryat 45)

Or, what you have is music that is polyrhythmic, polymelodic and polytemporal.

In September 1965, the band played multiple sets a night at the In Room in Belmont, CA, for six weeks during which time they began to develop their unique style of improvisation while playing cover tunes—more Apollonian than Dionysian. It was during this time that they learned how to jam improvisationally—more Dionysian than Apollonian. Again, according to Lesh:

We had started out by expanding tunes through extended solos, mainly make them last longer since there are so few of them. However, the longer the solo, the less interesting it became to play the same material as background, so those of us who weren't soloing began to vary and differentiate our "background" material, almost as if we were also soloists... (SS 59)

It was also at the In Room where they experimented with feedback and started to write songs designed to open up into a musical explorative space, for example "Caution (Do Not Stop on Tracks)." This was followed by tunes that spoke directly to and about the psychedelic experience, namely, "The Other One" and some of the other tunes released on the *Anthem of the Sun* record—each tune becoming progressively more Dionysian as the jams opened up an aural space not tethered to a particular rhythm, tempo or melody. Finally in December 1967 they debuted "Dark Star," their signature space out tune. Dennis McNally put it this way:

The Dead had found their fulcrumatic song; "Dark Star" was to be their magic carpet, a vehicle that allowed them to approach music as an unfolding dance. "Caution" had been that sort of song, but "Dark Star" was simply much better and more beautiful. The Dead had also found their voice (McNally 221).

There is no doubt that "Dark Star" expressed the band's psychedelic experience and vision, both musically and lyrically. Musically, as Phil Lesh wrote: "This theme, because of its infinite mutability, became our signature space-out tune, consciously designed to be opened up into alternate universes" (Lesh 101-102). Lyrically also, in so far as the song is filled with psychedelic imagery opening up into alternate universes, it is similarly more Dionysian. Yet, as Dionysian as the music of "Dark Star" is, it still has an Apollonian

form—chord structure. No matter how far they went out in jamming, there was always a root note to return to. Their lyrics, although ostensibly Apollonian, have a Dionysian twist in so far as they reflect a psychedelic experience. The images in the song interrupt our ordinary understanding of the words and are filled with images that suggest, as Wood put it, “an alternative experience of the universe” (Wood 41). A dark star pouring light after it crashes and mirrors shattering into formless reflections of matter are just two examples of juxtaposing words and concepts in a way that interrupts our ordinary understanding. “Dark Star,” then, satisfies the criteria Nietzsche laid out for the apex of Greek tragedy. Apollo speaks through Dionysus, and Dionysus speaks through Apollo; form through chaos and chaos through form. David Malvinni, echoing Michael Kaler’s assessment (Kaler 12), summarized the dual nature of “Dark Star” this way:

...it is precisely because of its active non direction, its call to the chaos of the unknown as a doing. Insofar as “Dark Star” resists the song narrative and becomes “a new space” for seeing, it still attempts to engage with chaos paradoxically via predefined structural means (Malvinni 79).

And both for the band and the audience the possibility of life affirmation and vitality shows itself in every performance.

After completing the first of the three sections of the text, Nietzsche then turned to how what was great in Greece suddenly disappeared, both in the plays of Euripides and the philosophical practice of Socrates. By becoming extremely rational, tragedy not only no longer had need of the chorus, that is the Dionysian element, but also presented its characters as rational, now explaining and giving reasons for what earlier had been regarded as dream illusions. This turn in art and life away from the Dionysian and towards the rational also meant that the Apollonian impulse disappeared along with the Dionysian. Nietzsche believed that this new tradition, lasting for over two millennia, had finally come to the end, and that a new possibility for the future, one which would recapture the Dionysian, was imminent. The Grateful Dead emerged almost a century after Nietzsche first identified the shift and heralded a new era, and the band’s music and performances clearly expressed Nietzsche’s hope for the future. In fact, they said so themselves in a lyric of “Dark Star.” “Reason tatters,” the singer sings, “the forces tear loose from the axis” (Dodd 49). Nietzsche had characterized the philosophical tradition as being rational no matter what the cost, and that strategy was successful for some problems, but not for all; it cannot explain the mystery of Dionysian non-individuation, and the experience of vital life affirmation in a deep and fundamental way.

Ideally, in a teaching situation one can use parts of Nietzsche to help explain aspects of the Grateful Dead phenomenon(a) or use aspects of the Grateful Dead to help explain parts of Nietzsche; in either case, there is heuristic back and forth between the text and the phenomenon(a). Both Nietzsche and the Grateful Dead speak to the subjective experience of life affirmation, not as mere cognitive recognition, but rather as a physiological state of being. For both Nietzsche and the Grateful Dead, the Dionysian dimension of life comes to the forefront through the body, whether experiencing the unity of nature and others through the intoxications resulting from participating in the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles or through dancing with the music of the Grateful Dead.

WORKS CITED

- Cox, Christof. “Nietzsche, Dionysus, and the Ontology of Music.” *A Companion to Nietzsche*, edited by Keith Ansell-Pearson, Blackwell Publishing, 2006, pp. 495-513.
- Coryat, Karl. “Lesh is More: Portrait of an American Beauty,” *Bass Player*, 2000, pp. 39-49.
- Dodd, David. *The Complete Annotated Grateful Dead Lyrics*. Free Press, 2005.

- Sunshine Daydream*. DVD. Dir. by John Norris. Prod. by Sam Field. Performances by the Grateful Dead. Canis Major, 2013.
- The Grateful Dead Movie*. DVD. Dir. by Jerry Garcia and Leon Gast. Prod. by Edward Washington and Ron Rakow. Burbank Studios, 1974.
- Jackson, Blair. "Robert Hunter: The Song Goes On." *The Golden Road*, 16 (Spring), 1988, pp.29-38.
- Johnston, David Macgregor. "The Electric Nietzsche Deadhead Test: *The Birth of Tragedy* and the Psychedelic Experience." In *The Grateful Dead and Philosophy: Getting High Minded about Love and Haight*. Edited by Steven Gimbel. Open Court, 2007, pp. 51-62.
- Kaler, Michael. "How the Grateful Dead Learned to Jam." *Grateful Dead Studies* 1, 2013-2014, pp.11-32
- Lesh, Phil. *Searching for the Sound: My Life with the Grateful Dead*. Little, Brown and Company, 2005.
- Malvinni, David. *Grateful Dead and the Art of Rock Improvisation*. The Scarecrow Press, 2013.
- McNally, Dennis. *A Long Strange Trip: The Inside History of the Grateful Dead*. Broadway Books, 2002.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*. Translated by W. Kaufmann, Vintage, 1967.
- Festival Express*. DVD. Dir. by Bob Smeaton. Prod. by Gavin Poolman and John Trapman. New Line Entertainment, 2003.
- The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, vol.1. Oxford UP, 1971.
- Wood, Brent. "Robert Hunter's Oral Poetry: Mind, Metaphor, and Community." *Poetics Today*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2003, pp. 35-63.

AUTHOR BIO

Stan Spector is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy. He has written on the Grateful Dead phenomenon(a) in light of philosophers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Buber and others. A frequent presenter to the Grateful Dead Scholar's Caucus, he has published his work on the Grateful Dead phenomenon(a) in *All Grateful Instruments: The Contexts of the Grateful Dead Phenomenon* (Cambridge Scholars, 2007) and *Countercultures and Popular Music* (Ashgate, 2014). His co-edited volume, *The Grateful Dead in Concert: Essays on Live Improvisation*, was published by McFarland in 2010. His current research focuses on the interface between the Grateful Dead phenomenon(a), specifically dancing at shows, and the body, specifically in terms of Merleau-Ponty's analysis of perception.

RECOMMENDED CITATION

APA

Spector, S. J. (2022). Teaching the Grateful Dead with Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, 9(1 & 2). <http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v9-issue-1-and-2/teaching-the-grateful-dead-with-nietzsches-birth-of-tragedy/>

MLA

Spector, Stanley J. "Teaching the Grateful Dead with Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*." *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, vol. 9, no. 1 & 2, 2022. <http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v9-issue-1-and-2/teaching-the-grateful-dead-with-nietzsches-birth-of-tragedy/>

