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## Is There Life After The Dead? Deadheads and the Death of Jerry Garcia

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**Abstract:** The Grateful Dead is a rock and roll band formed in 1965. For thirty years the Grateful Dead have attracted a following of faithful fans, numbering in the hundreds of thousands, known as Deadheads. The lead singer, guitarist, composer and figurehead of the band was Jerry Garcia. Beginning in the late 1960s, a community grew around the band. To some Deadheads, Jerry represented a father, grandfather, guru, spiritual leader or a god. I argue that this community of fans constitutes a subculture. A discussion and description of this subculture is included. In August of 1995, Garcia died in his sleep. Six months later the surviving band members announced their decision not to continue as the Grateful Dead. Many Deadheads were deeply affected by the loss of Jerry and the end of the Grateful Dead. This paper examines the mourning of Deadheads: who was affected, how it was expressed, and the reasons behind it. Many feared the loss of the subculture, although a strong commitment to continue was evident. A discussion of the future of Deadheads, the possible role of cyberspace, and the commitment of Deadheads to retaining their community is included.

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### Introduction

*We're not human beings having a spiritual experience,  
we are spiritual beings having a human experience.<sup>1</sup>*

This paper is a summary of a much longer work and is based on fieldwork undertaken between February of 1996 and April 1997.<sup>2</sup> This paper examines the reaction to and the mourning surrounding the death of Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead. Before his death I had been planning on researching specific areas of the Grateful Dead subculture, such as Deadhead ethics, belief systems, and enculturation. After Jerry's death I reformulated my research questions, as I became interested in discovering if Deadheads grieved for Jerry, and how they expressed their grief. A second component of my research focused on if the subculture could continue without the Grateful Dead at its centre.

One purpose of my research was to investigate if it was the death of Jerry Garcia himself that Grateful Dead fans (known as 'Heads' or 'Deadheads')<sup>3</sup> were mourning. If Deadheads did grieve for Jerry, how was their grief expressed?

What were Deadheads mourning, and why? Did Jerry's death and the disbanding of the Grateful Dead cause major adjustments to be made in the lives of Deadheads? If so, what aspects of their lives were affected? Did Jerry's death mean the end of the community of Heads focused on the Grateful Dead? Before I could begin to answer these questions, I had to answer some more basic questions about Deadheads. Who are Deadheads? What do they believe? What do they do? Do Deadheads constitute a subculture? What is distinct about a Deadhead subculture, if it exists, from other subcultures?

In order to answer these questions, I used questionnaires and informal interviews of forty-one individuals who were fans of the Grateful Dead.<sup>4</sup>

### **Methodology**

I define a Deadhead as any person who enjoys the music of the Grateful Dead. Deadheads are a diverse lot; crossing traditional barriers of age, class, gender, occupation and religion. The music of the Dead was influenced by various musical and ethnic traditions, including African, Latin, and Japanese. Despite the diversity in music, however, most Deadheads are Caucasian, although Heads of any colour are welcome in the community.<sup>5</sup> The Deadhead community is composed primarily of members from all across North America, as well as from Europe. I wanted to have a sample representative of the diverse geographical, occupational, ethnic and class backgrounds that are found at every Dead show. Through contacts, I was able to mail or deliver questionnaires to Deadheads in southern Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia. The Internet provided a wonderful opportunity to conduct research with international subjects, without the expense of travelling, long-distance phone calls or postage. The anonymity offered by cyberspace entices people to participate who might otherwise decline to be interviewed in person. I sent the questionnaires via e-mail, and they were returned to me the same way.

I was initially disappointed at the rate of returned questionnaires. I had hoped to have two hundred questionnaires completed. Forty-one did not seem adequate to reflect the population of Deadheads. However, the people that answered my questionnaire were intelligent and articulate. They answered my questions thoughtfully and with honesty. The time invested in each questionnaire was more than I had anticipated and the effort expended is evident in their answers. Due to the quality of the answers I received, I was able to present a variety of opinions and voices in my thesis.

The references used in this project come from a variety of sources. My literature search began in the library, including searching CD Roms and abstracts. Information on Deadhead subculture in academic journals and books is scarce. Turning to the popular press and via the Lexis/Nexis search available on the Internet, I was able to find scores of material. I amassed a large collection of

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books on the Dead and magazines featuring articles on Jerry. Even while I was writing, I continued to peruse the Entertainment section of the newspaper for updates on the band and the law suits against Garcia's estate. In addition, I have checked the newsgroup "rec.music.gdead" since Jerry's death in 1995, and have collected information from that time until the project was completed in the spring of 1997. Several magazines dedicate most of their content to the Grateful Dead: *Dupree Diamond News* (which has been "documenting/furthering the Deadhead experience" since 1986), *Relix*, *The Golden Road*, *Unbroken Chain*, and *Spiral Light*. These magazines are difficult to find in Canada and are expensive when found.

## Background

*I'd like to disappear gracefully...*

- Jerry Garcia (Kelly 1995:243)

Jerry Garcia died on August 9th, 1995 at Serenity Knolls, a drug treatment centre in the San Francisco Bay area, at the age of 53. He died of heart failure caused by massive hardening of the arteries. Although he was receiving treatment for his substance abuse, an autopsy showed he had used heroin recently, probably the day before his death (Bicklehaupt 1995:54). Hundreds of thousands the world over mourned his death. Jerry was a singer, guitar player, and reluctant composer/song writer. For many he was the heart and soul of the band known for thirty years as the Grateful Dead.<sup>6</sup>

The Grateful Dead had their genesis in the mid-1960s in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco, the birthplace of flower power, hippies and the love generation. In 1964, Garcia and Bob Weir formed Mother McCree's Uptown Jug Champions. Mother McCree's became electric and changed its name to the Warlocks with the addition of Pigpen (Ron McKernan), Bill Kreutzman and Phil Lesh. A year later, Garcia discovered the phrase "the Grateful Dead" while flipping through a dictionary.<sup>7</sup> The band changed its name and music history. They became the house band for the Acid Tests, sponsored by Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters. In 1967, the Monterey Pop Festival boosted their popularity, while playing at Woodstock brought them national exposure two years later (Troy 1991:1-24).

In the early seventies, the demise of talented artists and the break-up of many bands left the Grateful Dead as the last of the psychedelic sixties bands.<sup>8</sup> Their popularity soared during the early seventies and stayed constant during the disco craze later in the decade. It was not until 1987 that another rise of popularity occurred when the Dead released the album *In the Dark*. This album contained their first and only top ten song, *A Touch of Grey* (Troy 1991:4-21). Until this time, the community of fans surrounding the band had waned and waxed through the years without influence from the mainstream. At the time of Jerry's death, the Grateful Dead had performed 2,137 shows<sup>9</sup>, in 298 cities. In their thirty-year run,

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they were among the top five revenue-producing touring acts in North America since at least 1991, and they were the most successful touring band in the history of rock 'n' roll<sup>10</sup> (Bauder 1995; Cullingham 1996; *The Economist* 1996:67; Evenson 1995). In December 1995, the surviving band members issued a press statement announcing what many fans had already guessed: the "long, strange trip"<sup>11</sup> of the Grateful Dead had come to an end (*The Los Angeles Times* 1995).

It is not Jerry Garcia who is the focus of this study but his fans; the Deadheads, the "lost tribe of American youth" (Goldstein and Hochman 1995:4). They are often rock and roll's most "dedicated" fans because of their loyalty and devotion to the Dead. Deadheads have created a nomadic subculture centred around the band that has lasted a generation and a half. Jerry's death sent shock waves through the community of Deadheads. This paper is a discussion and analysis of the reaction to, and the mourning surrounding Garcia's death.

It is difficult for those outside the subculture to understand the void created by Jerry's death. Many Heads say that the grief they experienced was similar to, or more pronounced than, grief at the death of family members or friends. To appreciate the extent to which Deadheads mourned, Jerry's death must be examined in the context of the subculture. It is not sufficient to view his passing as the death of an individual or the death of a rock star. Jerry's death signified the demise of a subculture, a community and a way of life. It was the end of an era. Deadheads mourn his death, then, for the changes it brings, the losses it entails, the friends it separates, and the tours<sup>12</sup> that will never happen.

## Discussion

*Strangers stopped strangers  
Just to shake their hands.*

- Robert Hunter, *Scarlet Begonias*<sup>13</sup>

In his youth, Jerry Garcia wrestled with whether to become an artist or a musician. Had his choice been different, so would rock and roll history. Despite his assertion that he was but one member of a group of musicians, Garcia was the linchpin of the Grateful Dead. "Clearly, Jerry was the soul of the Dead. Not the leader, but the unreplaceable one," says consultant<sup>14</sup> Dan Friedman of California. To legions of Deadheads, he was everything but simply a member of a band:

*Jerry was a fatherly, perhaps grandfatherly figure to some Deadheads. To those of us who didn't live through the 60's, he was the ideal; he was Captain Trips! Of course, the image and the ideal were just that; they weren't reality. Jerry was real, but we heaped god status on him (Peter Talmadge, 27, Connecticut).*

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*He was our spiritual leader and guru. Even though he didn't want to be, that's what he became (John Morrissey, 20, Illinois).*

*He was the leader on our journey (Marissa, 22, Oklahoma).*

Despite the roles Deadheads had imposed upon him, Jerry was indeed mortal. For hundreds of thousands of Deadheads, his death was not simply the death of a famous stranger. Jerry's death was viewed variously as the death of a friend, a guru, a legend, a father, an uncle, a grandfather, a way of life, a vision, a religion.

For three decades Dead fans, known at the beginning as Dead Freaks, gathered during shows, in parking lots and campgrounds, and travelled with strangers to the next show. A community developed, sustaining itself through various musical fads and growing considerably in the band's second decade. I treat this community of Deadheads as a subculture. A subculture is defined here as a "segment of the population that is observed to share a distinctive pattern of values, beliefs and behaviour and to exhibit a style of life which differs significantly from the dominant culture and the other subcultures" (Zurcher 1977). Deadheads themselves often recognise their distinction from mainstream society. Deadheads differ in the way they see their group. They, too, describe themselves as being a community, a tribe, a family, or a culture. Degree of commitment, and the length of membership and involvement in this alternative world varies by individual. There are those for whom the Grateful Dead was no more than an escape from Babylon (mainstream society). For others, it was purely entertainment; a product to be consumed and abandoned at the end of the show. Still others viewed the Grateful Dead as providing an alternative lifestyle, a community of strangers, and music steeped in magic.

Dress, jargon, icons and symbols, all of which denote membership, distinguish the community. Style is a form of cultural expression. The three main elements of style are image, demeanour and argot. The main images of Deadheads are long hair and dreadlocks, Guatemalan and tie-dyed clothing, bare feet, beaded jewellery, and VW vans. Spacedancing and touring are behavioural indicators of membership, as is the use of deadified speech. Deadification is a term coined by *Skeleton Key* authors Shenk and Silberman (1994:66). It refers to the appropriation by Heads of an icon or scrap of jargon from mainstream American culture. Deadified slogans or images turn the parking lot into a living museum of cultural parody. Deadhead swipes at popular culture are both a source of harmless parking lot scene fun and a way of weaving mainstream images into the fabric of their community. The Steal Your Face and Dancing Bear symbols and other Grateful Dead images are material evidence of membership. These unique images, symbols and behaviours announce a member's affiliation with the Deadhead community to fellow Heads, and to mainstream society.

A Deadhead may not always be recognisable from outward appearance alone. Deadheads who took part in my research did not fit the stereotypes of the Deadheads that mainstream media portray. They are older, more educated, with

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careers in a variety of fields, and are often married or parents. As Deadheads mature and change, the style elements of the subculture may no longer appeal to their tastes. Despite the often mainstream lifestyle led by older Heads, the Grateful Dead continue to be an important part of their lives. Their identity as Deadheads is often something they do not share with co-workers, family or friends. Some Heads indicate their subcultural membership only when touring or at shows. This is often due to pressure from families or employers and fellow workers to conform to mainstream expectations. For several people, the subculture is a link to their youth or a part of themselves that is not divulged frequently.

Adams (n.d.) has noticed criticism aimed at Deadheads, especially professionals, who do not openly admit their membership in the subculture. Praise is heaped upon celebrities such as former basketball star Bill Walton (600+ shows) who has said, "My life is scheduled around theirs," and often slips lyrics of Dead tunes into his interviews (*People* 1995:53; Scully with Dalton 1996:312; Shenk and Silberman 1994:197-198). The belief underlying such praise, says Adams, is that perceptions of reality can only be changed by challenging them. The dirty, lazy, dropout image cannot be erased unless professionals—well-known, respected people—admit that they, too, are Heads. This situation parallels that of the gay and lesbian subcultures. People in positions of power or who are publicly known are encouraged to come out publicly as homosexuals. If they do not do so willingly, they sometimes are "outed" by others.

Membership in a subculture indicates deviance from mainstream culture. However, subcultures are not necessarily a homogenous entity. There are subgroups even within subcultures. The Deadhead subculture is so diverse that defining a single group identity is likely insufficient. Jenson (1994:55) believes that "it's missing the point to try to describe a 'typical' Grateful Dead fan, because if there's one thing they have in common it's that they're anything but typical." Within the subculture surrounding the Grateful Dead, there are many subgroups that are differentiated from the larger community. These include Deadheads whose activities are specialised such as tapers, halldancers, paramedics, and vendors.<sup>15</sup> Deadheads involved in special interest groups such as recycling centres for the parking lots, Queer Deadheads, Deafheads, the Wharf Rats,<sup>16</sup> and the Grateful We Aren't Dead support group are subgroups within the larger Deadhead subculture. Diverse groups such as Tourheads, the Spinners, and the Yahshuas<sup>17</sup> can also claim sub-group status.

Many outside the Deadhead subculture believe Deadheads to be "wanna-be hippies" stuck in a time warp. The majority of Heads, however, are firmly rooted in the present. It is the ideology and philosophies of hippies and the earlier beatniks that appeal to Deadheads, as well as the style. Even those who live mundane, ordinary existences outside of the subculture do so with a different outlook than their peers. Peacefulness, generosity, honesty, liberty, freedom and tolerance are cherished values of Deadheads. These values draw many to the

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subculture. As many Heads have similar beliefs before becoming a part of the subculture, many Heads believe that the community can sustain itself on these similarities, even without the Grateful Dead.

Jerry never personally met the vast majority of his fans, but he was well known to them. A religious figure to some Heads, Jerry was regarded as a family member to many. Adam, a 26-year-old respondent from North Carolina reports that Jerry was very important to him personally and that "he became like a favourite relative you loved to see". Another respondent Schwa, explains Jerry's appeal to Deadheads:

*When I think of Jerry, I think not only of a great musician, but Jerry was also comforting. He had a grandfather-type of quality. Can you think of any picture where Jerry wasn't smiling...This is something that a lot of Deadheads may have been missing in their lives (Schwa, 18, Vermont).*

Deadheads themselves provide a family-type environment for those who seek that from the subculture. The ethics of the Deadhead world puts an emphasis on kindness, friendship, generosity, honesty, flexibility and open-minded acceptance of difference. In this context, fellow Heads, although unknown, are all friends who are yet to be met. Friendships commonly became intense, familial relationships, complete with the responsibilities and obligations associated with family ties.

Considering everything the Grateful Dead, Jerry Garcia, and the subculture offers a Deadhead, it is not surprising that many people experienced Jerry's death and the break-up of the band as a personal loss. He was pivotal in the lives of many Heads because of the importance they placed on the subculture. The subculture is focused upon the Grateful Dead, and the Grateful Dead is focused upon Jerry. Without Jerry, the subculture is endangered. Because of his importance to the subculture, and because Jerry is regarded by many to have been an intimate, the grief of fans was multifaceted. The significance of this loss differs from one individual to another, but for many of my respondents, it was experienced as a deep, profound loss. A large number of respondents felt bewilderment, disbelief and shock upon hearing the news that Jerry had died. Sadness, despair, numbness, relief or anger followed this state.

Several respondents compared Jerry's death to that of a family member or close friend. Many Heads felt a lack of legitimacy when grieving for him. Many felt, or were told, it was inappropriate to grieve so intensely for a stranger. Jerry had been well known to Heads through his music, his words, the media and through Deadhead lore. However, many outside and even within the subculture could not understand how deeply and personally some Heads felt Jerry's death. Even family members and friends who were supportive of grieving Heads did not fully understand.

The majority of respondents cite several different reasons for their grief. Deadheads grieve for many reasons. Some long to return to the Scene, to feel the "vibe" and to experience the magic of a Dead show. Others fear that although they themselves remain committed, the community of Heads will dissipate. Many fear that friends made on tour will be lost forever, as many people were transient, known only by aliases, and are scattered across the continent.

Jerry's death and the end of the Grateful Dead changed the lives of many Deadheads. Respondents report changes in patterns and frequency of travel, social life, mental state and lifestyle, romantic or sex life, family life, and some report experiencing a mid-life crisis.

The Deadhead community has never been a stagnant, static entity and will undergo many more changes in the future. Future projects by former Dead members and bands that attract large numbers of Deadheads will allow Deadheads to congregate. How these environments are received by existing Deadheads, and whether others will "board the bus" is not known. There are mixed reactions from Heads concerning former Dead members' solo pursuits. Some believe that bands such as Phish and Rusted Root, which had long attracted Deadheads, will soon occupy the niche once filled by the Dead. Regardless of their intentions regarding other bands, respondents from Canada, the United States and England hold a similar view of the future of their subculture. There is a strong commitment to maintain the community, to indoctrinate new members, and to survive even without the Dead.

Other bands may attract some Heads but most of my respondents do not believe the Dead can ever be replicated or replaced. Deadheads, for the most part, are committed to keeping alive the unique phenomena that is the subculture surrounding the Grateful Dead. The subculture itself is the drawing point for many Heads, the music being a secondary attraction. Whether the subculture has become an entity separate from the Grateful Dead is still unclear. It remains to be seen if the Deadhead subculture can sustain itself without the Dead at its centre. Whether the label Deadhead will still be relevant in the years to come is not yet known. Most of my respondents believe it will still be relevant so long as the music is still cherished.

Jerry's death alerted many people to the fragility of life and the importance of living each day fully. All we can really hope for is for our lives to be meaningful, to touch others, to be forgiven for our follies, to give and receive love, and to be remembered in fondness when we are gone. Jerry has accomplished this a thousand fold. Live tapes have captured his masterful, majestic music. He lives on through his music and in the hearts of the thousands of Deadheads that loved him.



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The Lord's Prayer (revised)<sup>18</sup>

*Our Garcia, who art in heaven,  
Jehhreeeeeeee be thy name.  
St. Stephen come  
and Dark Star be sung  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our Grateful Dead  
and forgive us our vending  
as we forgive those  
who decline to miracle us.  
Lead us from Babylon  
and deliver us to Terrapin. For  
thine is the kind, sublime  
bending of mind  
for ever and ever,  
Amen.*

--Rozone

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> A bumper sticker seen at a Dead show in California (The Economist 1996).

<sup>2</sup> This is a summary of my undergraduate thesis, undertaken as partial fulfillment of an Honour's degree in Anthropology at the University of Waterloo. This project was conducted under the supervision of Dr. Dorothy Counts, for whom I owe unending admiration and gratitude. It was completed in April 1996.

<sup>3</sup> The term "Deadhead" is also spelled "Dead Head" in some publications. According to Kanzer (1992:1, footnote 6), the Grateful Dead prefer the latter spelling, whereas the press prefers the first. Following the lead of "Deadhead Sociologist" Rebecca Adams (Shenk and Silberman 1994:63), I have chosen to use the former spelling. Throughout this paper, the terms "Deadhead" and "Head" will be used interchangeably.

<sup>4</sup> I would like to take the opportunity to thank the many people whose help with my project was invaluable. A heart-felt thanks to the forty-one Deadheads, friends and strangers alike, who shared their thoughts and feelings. Also, to my advisor and mentor, Dr. Dorothy Counts for her patience, skilled editing, encouragement and flexibility. To my sister, Janette for her editorial help. To Dr. Rebecca Adams of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro for her generous donation of the first chapter of her book on Deadhead friendships. To

S.F. for photocopying, Steve Bennet for the loan of valuable material, and to Kanna Howe and David McQuaid, two Internet Deadheads who mailed me videos, photos and essays on the Dead. Thank you.

<sup>5</sup> See Shenk and Silberman (1994:65-66) for more information on Deadheads of Colour.

<sup>6</sup> Throughout this paper, the Grateful Dead, the Dead, and Dead will be used interchangeably.

<sup>7</sup> The quote found by Garcia, from Funk and Wagnall's *New Practical Standard Dictionary of the English Language*, Vol. 1, 1995:

*The motif of folk tales which begin with the hero coming upon a group of people ill-treating or refusing to bury the corpse of a man who had died without paying his debts. He gives his last penny, either to pay the man's debts or to give him a decent funeral. Within a few hours he meets with a travelling companion who aids him in some impossible task, wins him a fortune or saves his life. The story ends with the companion disclosing himself as the man whose corpse the hero had befriended* (Jenson 1990:16; Shenk and Silberman 1994:120; Golden 1996:A12).

According to Alan Trist, the author of *The Water of Life: Grateful Dead Folktale*, the earliest literary reference to the term is about two thousand years old. In an interview with Gans (1996), he says, "I think people have been aware that there is some mythic connection in their name."

<sup>8</sup> The Grateful Dead's music was classified by radio and record executives as "psychedelic." The band, however, never thought of themselves as a psychedelic band. It would be more correct to say the band members were on psychedelics, rather than to say that the music itself is psychedelic.

<sup>9</sup> Deadheads call Dead concerts *shows*. Usually only outsiders, including the media, call a Dead show a concert. A concert is ordinary, typical and mainstream. A Dead show is a carnival, a performance, an improvisation, and a work of art.

<sup>10</sup> A detailed history of the Grateful Dead, while it would be interesting, is beyond the scope of this paper. For the interested reader, there is an abundance of material on this subject (See Brandelius 1989; Gruskin 1983; Harrison 1973; Ruhlmann 1991; Scully with Dalton 1996; Shenk and Silberman 1994; Troy 1991).

<sup>11</sup> The phrase a "long, strange trip" is taken from the Hunter/Garcia song *Truckin'* (Hunter 1993:230). For Heads, it has come to symbolize both the band and the community of Deadheads. After Jerry's death, it seemed every other article concerning him included this phrase somewhere in its title.

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<sup>12</sup>"Tour," for Deadheads, means "to follow the band from venue to venue, seeing as many shows as possible in a series. Most band itineraries are from ten to twenty shows long. Deadheads 'tour' or 'do tour' as 'Did you do Spring Tour '87?' Heads who go out on tour regularly are sometimes called tourheads... 'Tour' can also be used as a noun, to describe the community of Heads following the band" (Shenk and Silberman 1994:291-2). Dennis McNally, publicist for the Dead, estimates that approximately three hundred Deadhead vehicles (and their occupants) were on any given tour.

<sup>13</sup>Hunter 1993:197.

<sup>14</sup>Within the discipline of Anthropology, it is customary to call those people from whom you have gained information from *informants*. That term has very negative implications within the Deadhead subculture - that of being a "narc" or a "snitch" for the purpose of gaining information about illegal drugs for the police. Most Deadheads would take offence to being called one, regardless of the context. For this reason, I use the term *respondents* and *consultants*.

<sup>15</sup>While some Heads support themselves while on tour by vending, all vendors are not necessarily Deadheads. There are people who make a living selling T-shirts, clothing, jewelry or food to Deadheads. See the movie *Tie Died* (1995) for an interview with one such individual.

<sup>16</sup>The Wharf Rats is a group based on the principals of Alcoholics Anonymous, providing support for Deadheads who are recovering alcoholics. Grateful We Aren't Dead is a support group for Heads who are recovering drug addicts.

<sup>17</sup>The Spinners and the Yahshuas are nicknames given to two different religious denominations centred around the Dead. On the East Coast is the Community (Yahshuas), and on the West Coast is the Family of Unlimited Devotion (formerly the Church of Unlimited Devotion, nicknamed the Spinners by Heads). See Shenk and Silberman (1994:41-2).

<sup>18</sup>This glorious tribute, a supreme example of deadification, was posted on the "rec.music.gdead" newsgroup in February 1995. The author, who wishes to be known only as Rozone, graciously granted me permission to use it.

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