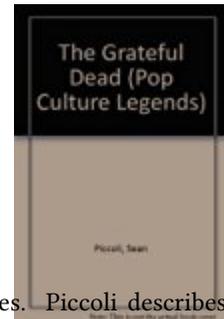


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sean Piccoli. *The Grateful Dead*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1997. \$9.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7910-4454-4; \$22.95 (library), ISBN 978-0-7910-3250-3.

Reviewed by Robert G. Weiner (Mahon Library, Lubbock, Texas)
Published on H-PCAACA (April, 1997)



Chelsea House Publisher's newest addition to their Pop Culture Legends Series (which includes books on Marilyn Monroe, Madonna, Stephen King, and Bruce Springsteen, among others) is a short history of the legendary Grateful Dead (GD). These, books designed for young adult readers and the general public, provide a unique perspective on popular culture icons. Scholars of Popular Culture can study and analyze books like these in order to have a greater understanding of how such figures fit into the popular milieu and mind-set of our culture. *The Grateful Dead* traces the group's beginnings in San Francisco in the mid-sixties through the death of Jerry Garcia in 1995 and the subsequent breakup of the band.

Piccoli, a journalist for the Washington Times, begins the story of the GD with Jerry Garcia's childhood and the traumatic events which eventually shaped his world view and his interest in art, philosophy, literature, and music. A teenage Garcia read works by Kant, Heidegger, and Schopenhauer, and when Garcia first heard artists like Chuck Berry and Gene Vincent in the late fifties, he knew he wanted to play music. Piccoli also describes how Garcia's interest in bluegrass music during the early sixties led to the formation of the Warlocks—which ultimately became the GD. (Mention of the fateful meeting between Garcia and his friend and thirty-year song-writing partner, Robert Hunter, during the early sixties is strangely absent).

From the band's beginnings as the Warlocks, they experimented with improvisation and free form song structures which became their trademark throughout their thirty years. The band's sound appealed to those "weary of the same pop" (p. 30). The author also looks at how the GD fit into the San Francisco music scene and the

drug culture during the later sixties. Piccoli describes how early Warlocks/Grateful Dead performances provided the sound-track for Ken Kesey's infamous Acid Tests (an experiment with drugs, music, and media which Kesey and his band of Merry Pranksters staged in the mid-sixties). Piccoli explains how all these activities fit historically into the overall scheme of the sixties and mentions other key players in the drug culture: Timothy Leary, Allen Ginsberg, and Augustus Stanley Owsley. There are chapters discussing the GD's role in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district and the ill-fated performances at the Monterey Pop Festival (1967) and Woodstock (1969). The author also explains, why, four months after Woodstock, the Dead did not play at the Altamont Speedway concert where, during the Rolling Stones performance, a spectator was stabbed.

Piccoli describes the GD's recording career in minor detail, spending most of the text discussing the early albums. He does discuss the later albums briefly. Piccoli only casually mentions the GD's own business venture (in the early seventies the band started their own record company), and their historic 1978 concerts at the Pyramids of Egypt. He does, however, point out throughout most of the eight chapters how the band's fan base, the "Deadheads," remained a constant factor in the band's life and history for thirty years. The band's ability to be the world's most popular touring attraction showed no signs of slowing down after thirty years. During the last few years of the band's existence the demand for tickets outweighed their availability, causing severe problems on their last few tours.

Piccoli concentrates on the first seven years of the band's existence and this is the strongest section. While he mentions the cultural phenomenon of the Deadheads,

he does not really analyze its significance in the larger picture, which should have been explained in more detail. There are a few minor historical errors concerning release and performance dates. Although Piccoli does eventually mention lyricist Robert Hunter, the band's other major songwriter/lyricist John Perry Barlow is absent. It appears that Piccoli is really an outsider to the scene surrounding the Grateful Dead, having attended only one GD concert.

The Grateful Dead's greatest strength lies in the author's prose ability. The writing is lively and informative and weaves the band's tale in a very non-judgmental and objective way. Despite its shortage of detail, *The Grateful Dead* is an interesting read and can be finished in one sitting. For the well-versed fan, there is nothing new here, but the novice interested in a short, cursory understanding of the GD's history needs to look no further. An official, and comprehensive history still remains to be written. *The Grateful Dead* is profusely illustrated and new

artwork by famed rock artist Stanley Mouse adorns the cover. (The preface contains a brief history of Stanley Mouse who has done art work for the GD since their beginnings. "As a visual historian of rock music, Mouse has truly earned a place among pop culture legends" [p. 9].) *Entertainment Tonight* co-host, Lezza Gibbons, wrote the foreword stating that, by studying different pop culture icons, we "ultimately learn more about ourselves" (pp. 6-7). Piccoli provides a brief discography, chronology, and index. *The Grateful Dead* will make a welcome addition to any public library and those academic libraries with special collections on popular music and American popular culture.

This review is copyrighted (c) 1997 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations. It may be reproduced electronically for educational or scholarly use. The Associations reserve print rights and permissions. (Contact: P.C.Rollins at the following electronic address: Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pcaaca>

Citation: Robert G. Weiner. Review of Piccoli, Sean, *The Grateful Dead*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. April, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=969>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact P.C. Rollins at Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu or the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.