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Sections: Shows



Dark Star Orchestra

by Daniel Q. Marek
February 19, 2003

Dark Star Orchestra
Nita's Hideaway -- New Location
3300 S. Price Road, Tempe, 480.966.7715
Friday, February 21, 7 p.m.
\$20

Before the onslaught of jam bands in the late nineties like String Cheese Incident, Moe, and Phish, there was only one -- The Grateful Dead.

The Dead stretched outside the boundaries along side many of the Height / Ashbury crowd by adding musical improvisation to their sets that evolved into 'jams' that would become a signature for the super group.

Throughout their successful career, the band focused on the atmosphere of their show as much as the music they played during it. Dead Heads flocked to concerts ready to see the carnival-like environment surrounding the sold-out stadiums where hordes of people gathered to catch a glimpse of the band when 'it all came together.'

When Jerry Garcia passed away in 1995, many of the fans following the band hung their hats along with their heads and put their music collections on the shelf because the tapes couldn't compare to the aura surrounding the live shows.

Two years later in a small bar in Chicago, a group of ex-travelers and fans created a venue to recreate the environment of the shows by reenacting set lists performed by their heroes. The Dark Star Orchestra was born and within weeks, the small club was selling out shows and the band's future fate seemed more uncertain than ever.

Since it's conception, the DSO has set out to recreate individual Dead set lists each night they hit the stage.

Probably the most critically acclaimed cover band in history, DSO was met with praise by the top music press in the country and even more important -- the actual members of the Grateful Dead.

College Times had the opportunity to talk with guitarist Rob Eaton and keyboardist Scott Larned before their "10/14/83" show in Michigan about the history of the band and the music they love so much.

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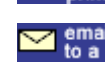
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College Times: When was the first time that you heard the Grateful Dead and knew that they would forever be a part of your life?

Scott: I hung out with so many guys in high school and that was just the music that they listened to. It wasn't until I saw my first Dead show that I realized that I was in for life. It was unlike any concert I had been to or any situation I'd ever been in -- all these colorful people, everybody really happy and then the music was just fantastic. I had heard it on stereos, but hearing it live and seeing it come off the stage - there was something really real about the whole experience that didn't strike me in so many other bands.

How would you say that you recreate the aura of the Dead at your shows?

Rob: I think that was the main point about going to shows, the intangible that you had when it all came together.

Scott: The Dead didn't really do anything on stage and we don't either -- there is no choreography or anything like that, we arrange our gear like they did, so when somebody looks at our stage they think, 'wow, they look just like the Dead.' In terms of the aura at our shows, it's totally out of the audience. It's interesting from town to town, some cities we'll hit an older crowd and then there is something really intangible about the atmosphere in the room those nights -- when you have a bunch of people who saw hundreds and hundreds of Dead shows compared to playing to a 20-year-old crowd.

Since you're actually covering set lists, how do you treat the improvisational work?

Rob: The way I look at it is: You have a sketch of a painting for instance, the outline is there, but you have to fill in the blanks with what ever colors and textures you feel are appropriate. We stay very true to the form of the arrangements of any particular time period that we are doing. Keeping the stage set up and the technical end of it as close to what it was as possible. Once we have all of that in place, then it makes it easier to fall into ... where they were at that time. Once we have the sound, the sound dictates a lot of how you play, so if we're doing something from the late 70s, it sounds different from the late 80s, thus you play differently because of it.

Scott: I have the task of being three or four different keyboard players on any given night. Each of those guys had their own personality; their own gear and they had different ways that they would play the song. So on one given night, if I'm Keith Godchaux, I have a mindset and a certain vocabulary that I will use in the jam. There are certain things that Keith would have never done on piano that I won't do those nights. If the next night I'm Brent Mydland, I get to play the organ and everything and again a whole different vocabulary. So within the framework and the structure of itself, we can all talk to each other using these languages that the Dead created. They are such distinct musical styles that they almost lend themselves to being imitated in a way.

How do you choose what set list you're going to play each night?

Rob: It depends on the market and what we did last time we were in town. If say we did a show for '85 last time, or a single drummer show, the chances are we won't do that again and we'll do something else. We try to

keep in mind what we've played so we don't repeat songs and eras.

What was it like when a Dead member walked on stage to play?

Scott: Its really indescribable having spending most of my youth touring around and watching these guys from the audience, then having a few years playing their music and feeling so comfortable with it, then the combination of the two -- it was really surreal. To look over and have Bob Weir standing there ten feet from me on stage looking at me -- wow. I have to say that there was a little part of us that was a little nervous. We didn't know how they were going to take it, are they gonna' think it's a cheesy rip-off, are they going to like it, will they play with us? We had no idea what to expect. Every band member that we've come across -- we've played with four of them now -- have been the nicest, most genuine down to earth cool guys that we had ever met. They were almost humble about playing with us, which was a really weird thing. It made us feel really good.

What is the best thing that you get out of DSO?

Scott: I think that we all feel a sense of historical importance in what we're doing. It's one thing to get up and bang out a bunch of songs and have people dance, but for most of the guys in the band, being pretty serious Dead Heads ourselves, we really feel an emotional connection to the music and the role it made in our lives. I hate to say it, but the Dead changed my life severely a couple times. But when Dark Star started, I was sort of hit with a resurgence of that same feeling. It feels really good to know that we are able to fill a part of people's lives in that way. Like the guys who are bringing out their old tapes because we were the catalyst for them getting back into the music that they loved for most of their lives. At the same time we are able to convert kids that weren't able to see the shows -- they don't really have anything and it all makes more sense when you see it on stage. Then when you listen to their next tape, you understand how the two drummers sound together, the different keyboard players, Jerry's different solo styles or whatever -- it all makes sense. It feels really good to be able to share that with people young and old alike.

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Dark Star Orchestra

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02/19/2003 [If anyone likes the Grateful Dead's...](#) Steve

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