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David Gans: Dialed In

Chad Berndtson

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It's safe to say that David Gans knows his Grateful Dead: the radio show he hosts, the beloved "Grateful Dead Hour"— still broadcasted on KPFA 94.1 in Berkeley, California and syndicated nationwide – is twenty years old in 2005.

But what makes Gans especially compelling, even after twenty years charting the thrilling and oft-murky waters of this unique music, is that the show itself is but the tip of the iceberg in his own music-oriented career. Gans acknowledged in a recent interview the ongoing importance and prestige of the Grateful Dead Hour, but made clear that it will, in the end, be only part of his multifarious legacy –a superb musician in his own right, making music will always be his first and truest love, even if he's lost none for the music of the Dead, which still continues to excite him.



"I haven't counted lately, but I think it's in the sixties. It comes and goes," said Gans of the Dead Hour's syndication stats. "We lose one, we pick another one up. I would say the trend over the past ten years has been downward. The radio business gets tougher, the Grateful Dead business recedes into history a bit, but I've tried to keep the show fresh and keep things exciting."

To mark the show's anniversary, Gans logged a 16-hour marathon on February 19, exploring as many facets, periods and Dead annals as he could without letting his head explode.

"I did my first fundraising marathon on KPFA in 1986. I felt, if I'm going to do this, why not do a really long one and why not do sixteen hours? Once you go in there, you might as well pump it out," he says. "And you don't try and make it the definitive Greatest Broadcast Ever. It's not like you're going for broke. I just wanted to come up with something unusual, some rare live performances or curious vault material or something."

While a lot of music journalists yearn to be performers, and indeed, do occasionally become them, Gans' early career took the exact opposite path. He was a Bay Area staple in the early 1970s and performed solo and played with bands around town, but then became a successful music writer, first at the San Francisco-based BAM, and then at Jann

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Wenner's short-lived Record, with still another stint as music editor of Mix. His journalism certainly increased his knowledge about the music business, as well as informed the analytic, scholarly approach he would later take to the airwaves.



Gans' magazine experience brought him to book writing, and in 1985 he co-authored, with Peter Simon, "Playing in the Band: An Oral and Visual Portrait of the Grateful Dead," about the band which was by then already a long time favorite, let alone now. Among a seemingly inexhaustible amount of Dead literature, "Playing" remains one of the five or six essential reads about the band, and its acclaim led Gans to producing a show on the Dead for a local radio station.

The three-way bond between Gans, Dead music and KPFA was formed, and the Grateful Dead Hour was born. Gans received his approval from no less than the band members themselves – and permission to enter the sacred tape vaults to glean material for his shows. He developed a close knit friendship with the late Dick Latvala, the Dead's longtime archivist and the namesake of the "Dick's Picks" series.

"It's just really fun, and I've never gotten tired of this music. I've managed to keep it interesting by keeping myself interested," Gans said, looking back over two decades. "It was so incredibly thrilling when I got to go into the vault 20 years ago. It's probably a little bit less mindblowing at this point, but it's still pretty damn cool. It's been a long time since I've been in the vault, per se, but discovering the music itself has always been the main thing. There's always incredible music coming down the pike."

In 20 years, every facet of Gans' career has continued to flower. In addition to the "Grateful Dead Hour," he also hosts "Dead to the World" Wednesdays on KPFA, a show that started in 1992 and allows him to mix vault Dead material with music of interest from a daunting range of other artists (his favorite "newer" bands include Railroad Earth and Donna the Buffalo). As an author and editor, his credits include "Conversations With the Dead: The Grateful Dead Interview Book" (1991) and "Not Fade Away: The Online World Remembers Jerry Garcia" (1995), and he's given producing talents and written liner notes to and for everything from the 1999 Dead boxed set "So Many Roads (1965-1995)" to various Dead and Grateful Dead Hour compilations and other artists' interpretations of Dead material.

Then, there's his own music. Though performing and songwriting had become dormant, Gans decided it was time for a full-blown revival after Jerry Garcia's death in 1995 and the end of the Grateful Dead. He used the radio show for stable income, and in 1997 released "Home by Morning," an album of duets with Berkeley singer-songwriter Eric Rawlins. Since then he's released a single, "Monica Lewinsky" (as David Gans and the Broken Angels, 1998), and also "Solo Acoustic" (2001), which finds him doing original material (some of it co-written with Dead lyricist Robert Hunter) and songs Gram Parsons, Gillian Welch and others. There's a DVD, too – Gans' scintillating performance captured on "Live at the Powerhouse" (2002).



Through everything, the format of the "Grateful Dead Hour" hasn't much changed. The wonders of digital technology and the internet have made it easier than ever to access Dead material (archive.org hosts more than 2500 freely downloadable shows, for example), but don't seem to affect the future or mission of the show itself.

"I've never programmed the show for the hardcore collectors," Gans says. "That the music is so widely available is a great thing, and I feel like I'm hear to add something. I'm a scholar and a historian of this music, and the choices I make and the value that I add in producing this show is of zero interest to lots of people, but it's of sufficient interest to sufficient numbers of people."

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One thing Gans has always consciously avoided is the notion that his position in Grateful Dead history – however unique relative to the fan side of things – at all makes him some sort of exalted, end-all-be-all Grateful Dead expert or number one fan.

"One of the things I've known for as long as I've been doing these shows is that there are a lot of people who could do it. It drives me fucking batty when I read headlines of magazine articles and stuff where they proclaim me, like, the premier Deadhead," he says. "Obviously, I know what I'm talking about and bring something to the gig that the 'average' Deadhead might not have, but by no stretch of the imagination do I see myself as the premier Deadhead."

"My approach has always been to approach this as a musician. The reason I got this gig and had Garcia, Weir and Lesh all say 'yeah, man, you can do this,' was that they all understood that I know what I'm talking about," Gans continues. "I have a musician's point of view, and I understand what's going on when that music is played and what's happening within."

The Dead may be a love of Gans', but it certainly isn't his whole life.



"Contrary to popular belief, I don't sit around listening to Grateful Dead music when I'm not working on the show," Gans explains. "I've got 6,000 songs in my iPod and I listen to everything from Al Jolson to Bach cello suites, from the Beatles to Bob Dylan. I listen to Donna the Buffalo, live stuff, and I also get dozens of CDs in the mail and I try to listen to some of that. With everything that's going on with my own music, too, my listening to the Dead is actually fairly low on the list (of outside priorities)."

Still, Gans says, if we are to get into favorite periods, he'll tell you his favorite era is 1972-1974. And then 1969. And then 1970. And then, oh yes, 1971 has tons of gems.

"And the next thing you know," he chuckles, "you've got everything you know. There are very few periods that don't have anything to say. The early 90s maybe, when things were sort of grim, but then at times they'd come blazing back. I remember seeing them at Cal Expo in May 1994, worried that Jerry was going to keel over dead right then and there, and then after that they played some pretty amazing shows back east. You could never count them out at any time, so part of my plan from the beginning in the radio show was to try and cover all of the periods. I mean, there are an awful lot of Deadheads who didn't get on the bus until the eighties."

If the show hasn't really changed in 20 years, Gans said, it's perhaps his perceptions of the band that have changed – or, more, evolved.

"My friend Bruce Harvey, who is an instrument builder up in Washington state, said the smartest thing I've ever heard about the Grateful Dead," Gans offers. "They are the most overrated and underrated band ever. The mainstream underrates the Grateful Dead terribly and their devoted fans tend to overrate them terribly."

"I have a more realistic assessment of what they were good for and what they weren't good for, without diminishing my love for what they did," he adds. "Some of it was sloppy, some of the singing wasn't tight and some of their jams were long and self-indulgent. Anybody listening to it for a long time can recognize it and have a more realistic perspective about it, but still love it."

In terms of current incarnations of the Dead and the ongoing (and in many cases, thriving) projects of its surviving members, Gans definitely has his opinions, but prefers to offer them with a more pragmatic, learned air than to assault certain facets of the Dead camp or, like many Dead-devoted complainers, hurl insults or stacked criticism.

"I'm not one of those people who thinks the world is necessarily better place if all those guys – Phil, Mickey, Bobby and Bill – are playing together," he said. "I mean, Phil Lesh & Friends and RatDog are more interesting bands than the Dead with all four of them playing together. I know that's a controversial opinion, but then again, I don't really have an opinion on the whole thing. They should do what they want to do, and obviously people are going to keep coming out to see them in whatever the context. I want to sort of stay neutral. I mean, it's OK with me if they don't do a tour this year. There's a lot of political bullshit with that, too, that I'm aware of but am not going to get into." They should do what makes them happy and not just 'do it.'"

Gans says he does keep up with all the projects, though he's yet to really hear Hydra, the spacey alliance between Mickey Hart and technofied, Los Angeles space funk rockers Particle. He's a definite fan of the ongoing Phil Lesh & Friends lineups – the latest of which reunites Lesh with guitarist Jimmy Herring and keyboardist Rob Barraco, and will guest-star none other than country rock troubadour Ryan Adams on July 15 and 16 in Colorado – but he seems most excited about Bob Weir's RatDog, which recently celebrated its own tenth anniversary.



"I'm so excited about what RatDog is doing, I mean, they're just blazing right now!" Gans exclaims. "With all due respect to Rob Wasserman, getting a new bass player is the best move they could make. Rob is a great, great musician but I don't think he belonged in an improvisational rock band. It was a very smart thing to do (replacing Wasserman with bassist Robin Sylvester), and they're developing into a much stronger group."

These days, Gans is comfortable with all of the major facets of his career with music: one, as a disc jockey, commentator and historian, and the other as a touring and songwriting musician. This year, no less than three musical projects – not to mention his ongoing solo stuff -- have taken over his performance time.

The first, Guilty Pleasures, began as a collaboration between Gans and Zen Tricksters bassist Klyph Black.

"Klyph and I have been horny to play together for a long time," Gans says. "He's a wonderful young player and a really sweet human being, and we did a bunch of dates together in February back when I started doing a monthly gig at Sweetwater called 'The Invitation.' Some of it tended toward bluegrass or Americana, some of it was jammy and Dead-sounding, and I told Klyph that when he had some time off, we'll do a gig at Sweetwater and pick up a few more shows to pay for your plane ticket and just have fun."

Gans and Black arranged for a series of four gigs in and around the Bay Area, and brought in a drummer, Adam Perry, and Dead-world heavyweights Barraco (The Dead, Phil Lesh & Friends, Chris Robinson's New Earth Mud) and guitarist Barry Sless (David Nelson Band, Phil Lesh & Friends) to round things out. David Nelson himself took over for Sless on the last night of the four.

"Both (Sless and Barraco) – mutual friends of both Klyph and myself – really liked the idea," Gans said. "I called Adam, who's a young (22) player, but is way into the Dead, and Phish, and the greats of jazz and funk and all this stuff, and I just had a feeling he would love it. We made the time and we booked four gigs, and we named the band Guilty Pleasures because I thought we just going to get together and jam on old favorites."

That's exactly what happened, but, as is the tendency with ad hoc ensembles that find an immediate and even intangible chemistry, everything clicked and transcended to higher plains than the original "just fooling around" mentality might have suggested it would. The initial jam session, at Sless' house, lasted six hours, and stopped only because Gans had to be at KPFA.



Of the three initial gigs, it was the third – May 7 at Lalo's in Mt. Shasta City, CA – that Gans says “went beyond what we had rehearsed.” Gans was kind enough to send me the recordings, and the band that night was indeed Swisswatch-tight: a gallery of Gans and Barraco originals mingling seamlessly with Dead classics (an instrumental “Attics of My Life” and a Gans-described off-the-cuff “Terrapin Station” really stand out) along with some other curious cover selections (Steely Dan’s “Kid Charlemagne” for one, and the booty-shaking take on Sly Stone’s “Thank You (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin)” to close the evening).

“We had no intention of doing ‘Terrapin’ or ‘The Other One’ that night. Everyone was so into it and the musicianship was so good,” Gans said. “It was easily one of the most satisfying musical experiences I’ve ever had, and I think we all wanted to do it again.”

Beyond the Guilty Pleasures shows, Gans has more recently also made plans to tour with friend Jim Page, a Seattle-based songwriter extraordinaire who recently wrapped a spot on the Spirit of Guthrie tour with Rob Wasserman and Leftover Salmon’s Vince Herman. He looks at this endeavor as lending his own talents to help showcase Page’s – “just getting up there on stage with him, supporting his harmonies here and there, and putting his amazing songs across.”

Finally, there’s collaboration between Gans and the Rowan Brothers, Chris and Lorin (whose older brother, Peter, is a bluegrass and Americana legend). The three of them meet at an especially pleasurable common ground: Beatles songs.

“There was a friend of ours who was going through chemotherapy, and we were hanging out at her house and just singing Beatles songs,” Gans recalled. “Later, the Rowans came to a Guilty Pleasures show at Mill Valley and we did a three song mini-set. We’re going to do more, and we’re going to go out on the road as ‘Rubber Souldiers.’”

Busy man, this multifarious Mr. Gans, but somehow, for a man who spends his life imbibing music into memory and then exporting it to the minds of others, you’d expect nothing less.

“I’m enjoying the hell out of it. I’m a really happy camper!” he proclaims. “It’s just the greatest thing to be able to do that with people.”

Photos by Susan Weiland and John Rottet

For more on David Gans, and for a list of syndicating stations for the Grateful Dead Hour and playlists for the Grateful Dead Hour and Dead to the World, visit trufun.com and gdhour.com. Recordings of many of Gans’ live shows circulate and are available for free download at archive.org/audio.

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