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::Forever Grateful

A KyndMusic interview with David Gans, who is celebrating his 20th year on the air with the Grateful Dead Hour

By: Chris Connelly, KyndMusic Features Editor

I have an admission to make. One that will likely shock and appall many of our readers, as well as my fellow editorial staff. Brace yourselves:

I don't like the **Grateful Dead** [editorial staff: we are shocked and shall make Chris listen to nothing but Dead bootlegs from now on].

For some reason, the Grateful Dead has never been a band that clicked with me; as somebody who was introduced to jam music by **Phish**, the Grateful Dead always marked a foreign entity that didn't ever pique my musical interests. This is certainly not to say that I hate the Grateful Dead, or that they haven't written some great songs. But ultimately, they're just not for me.

My secret is out.

But, of course, the Grateful Dead has amassed one of the most loyal fan bases in the history of recorded music so when I was asked to interview **David Gans**, the seminal rock radio disc jockey who has been the guiding force behind the nationally syndicated **Grateful Dead Hour** for the past twenty years, I was a bit uneasy. Gans has been a guiding force for Deadheads for the tenure of his radio program and, given my lack of affinity for the band, I wasn't sure how to speak with him. But Gans was quick to offer me, and the rest of us, an insiders' view and an explanation as to why the Grateful Dead remains a force in American music.

"[The Grateful Dead's music] matters because lots of people love it," Gans explains, when asked why the music he loves is so important. "It's all just a matter of taste. Music that people like matters because it makes people happy. A friend of mine – Bruce Harvie, an old friend who was a Deadhead when I first moved to Berkeley in the early 70's – he said that he thinks the Grateful Dead is the most overrated and underrated band ever. And what he means is that their fans tend to overrate them, and others tend to underrate them. Their fans think it is the best music ever written, but I think it is a bit more nuanced than that. It is music that fails by certain criteria, it's kind of sloppy and a little homely or whatever, but it is music that hits people really hard where they live, and it matters to them a lot."

The music of the Grateful Dead has certainly mattered to David Gans. The Grateful Dead Hour began as the "Deadhead Hour" on February 18th, 1985, when Gans appeared as a guest on KFOG-FM in San Francisco. At the time Gans was working as a music journalist who was appearing to promote his recently published book, **Playing in the Band: An Oral and Visual Portrait of the Grateful Dead**. He enjoyed himself so greatly that he asked if he could come back and the rest, as they say, is history.

"I was a musician, and then got involved in writing for music magazines in the mid-70s because that was an interesting thing to do," Gans explains. "And it was definitely enriching for my musical endeavors, which lead to writing a book. That led to going on the radio, and that was just fun and fascinating. I enjoyed it and it became a living. I never made a plan to do it but 20 years later it's still my living. It's been a great life."

As the host of the Grateful Dead Hour, Gans is the only radio show host with complete access to the Grateful Dead's tape library, also known as "the Vault." Consequently, many consider Gans to be one of the foremost experts on the Grateful Dead in the world – without a doubt, a weighty moniker for one of the most dedicated fan bases in the world. However, he speaks with ease and humility about the job that has occupied his professional life for the past two decades.

"I have been doing the same job for 20 years; picking out really great music from the flow of stuff going by and putting it on the air," Gans explains, with almost dismissive humility. "There are a lot of people that really enjoy having access to it. I'm able to put music across and do interviews and find other music that could be of interest to this audience. I think of myself as a scholar of this music and a journalist of this culture, and I've done my best to bring music into other people's lives. The social status was never really the thing. I'm not interested in being the world's foremost expert on the Grateful Dead – I could name a half of dozen people who have heard more Grateful Dead than I have, who have larger collections than I do. I'm not really unique in that perspective; I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity and enterprising enough to take advantage of it."

"There have been any number of little hassles and struggles and things, but dealing with the Grateful Dead has always been a combination of pleasure and pain," Gans states. "But it's a privilege to be able to earn a living doing something that I totally enjoy and turning people on to music that I think matters in the world. It's been an opportunity to do something good in the world, and profit from it."

However, he has seen his role in the Grateful Dead world change with the passage of time. When the Grateful Dead Hour started, it became popular as the only way Deadheads could listen to live music on their own, without trading tapes or other popular methods. It was the only mass media outlet for the Grateful Dead. However, in recent years, that role has changed, though Gans has made an admirable effort to remain connected to his listeners.

"I used to get a lot of direct feedback from people," Gans says. "At the time the radio show started, it was a lot harder to get a hold of great new music, and nowadays, with everything downloadable on the web, it's just ridiculous how much music there is out there. I think the importance of the show has changed. It doesn't really interest the hardcore collectors as much as it used to. There are so many places for Deadheads to communicate these days, online and in the world. The radio show is less important as a community nexus. It is not as central to the life in the Deadhead."

Given my unique opportunity, however, as a non-Deadhead, I had to ask what Gans would say to somebody who has never been able to appreciate their music. His answer was telling – not only about the music he loves, but also about his views on music as a whole:

"I'd say to you, A) it's not for everybody, B) keep trying, and C) be open to something that doesn't fit your previous notion of what music is. I mean when I was a kid, I came to it from a standpoint of a singer-songwriter, and the jams, I didn't get them at all. I was completely lost in there and it took me a couple of years to recognize what was happening in there and to pay attention to it. I would say that it might not be something that is to your taste, and that's okay we can still be friends, or you might be somebody that just might need to listen to it more. I wrote an essay once that was comparing the Dead to a baseball game; there are moments of real excitement in between moments that seem boring. But not everybody wants that from music. Music means different things to different people."

Largely as a result of this viewpoint, Gans doesn't see the Grateful Dead Hour as ending any time soon. Gans, who also maintains his own musical career, sees his job as the perfect profession for his unique situation. Additionally, his job as a disc jockey and his exposure to the Grateful Dead has allowed him to grow and mature as a musician.

"I'm enjoying doing the radio show," Gans proclaims, when asked about its future. "I get tremendous satisfaction from it. My day job is perfect for my life as a musician – I can go on the road for a couple of weeks at a time and just produce the radio show for a couple of weeks at a time. I mean, I'm getting what I want from my day job and providing something that makes other people happy."

And Gans's music is once again becoming a flourishing part of his life. He has struck out once again with his own music, having learned a great deal from his exposure over the years. With influences like the **Beatles, Crosby, Stills, and Nash**, and **Elton John** among others, Gans creates a unique melding of pop sensibilities and jam tenets. And though recognizing his fame for his radio program, Gans has made considerable efforts to establish himself as a legitimate music act independent of his disc jockey reputation – a battle that has occupied much of his own mind.

"My life was changed by the Grateful Dead," Gans explains further. "When I went to my first Grateful Dead concert, I was a young songwriter in sort of a **Cat Stevens, Jackson Browne** sort of mode, and the Grateful Dead completely redefined my sense of what music was and what songwriting was. So much of what those guys had to say was different and an expansion of what they could do. I feel like my musical life has been greatly enriched."

Ultimately, after 20 years on the air, David Gans's life is about juxtaposition and balance – between the music he loves to make himself, and the music of the Grateful Dead that he loves to share. But he doesn't fail to recognize the lessons the past two decades have taught him.

"Everything that I've done in the last twenty years has taught me a lot about my sense as a musician," Gans says of this balance. "I got to interview all these famous musicians, lots of people who had a lot to say about the music world and that taught me a lot. I think that had I tried to be a musician in my early twenties I would have burned out and started working in a gas station. But now I'm here and a better musician than I would have been had I gone that other path. I'm old enough and smart enough to do it in a healthy way – I don't

drink, I don't take a lot of drugs, I don't screw around. I go out on the road, I hike, I take photographs, I get to play music with great friends. I stay with friends on the road."

Gans ultimately sees the importance of the two careers in his life: one as a vehicle for his own self-expression, and one to help others express themselves through the music they love. But maintaining this balance hasn't always been easy, especially now that he has returned to the musical career that he originally left to go on the air with the Grateful Dead Hour.

"I don't feel that my onstage persona and my radio persona have anything to do with each other," Gans explains. "I have to be more outgoing on the air, but it's not really me – I'm just introducing the music. On the radio, it's not about me. On stage, it's about me and my music. It also confuses matters, especially in the early years when I started touring. People started saying, 'He's a radio disc jockey, what is he doing on stage with a guitar in his hands?' Its not a new thing, I'm not just sort of cashing in on my radio visibility – I had to sort of prove myself as a musician on my own terms so I felt like I had some credibility there.

"It's been a long contest. I feel confident that what I'm doing musically is worthwhile. I feel like I'm a good musician, I get good feedback from people, I keep getting gigs," Gans says, with a tone of satisfaction. "So I feel like I've established myself as a musician and a songwriter and a performer. I think that both of these identities, musician and radio host, are secure at this point. It took me a few years – I had to just get out there and do it so that people were familiar with me. I think in the beginning there were people who booked me because I'm a radio host and I could bring in a crowd. But I didn't want to market myself that way. I would sort of squirm when I'd look in the paper and see 'Grateful Dead Hour host David Gans.' I live for the day when I can see my name on the bill, rather than 'host of the Grateful Dead Hour.' I don't deny my name – I don't pretend that I'm not the radio host but I'm a musician that happens to also be on the radio."

For more information on David Gans and The Grateful Dead Hour, click [here](#).

Editorial Staff: The Grateful Dead are the greatest band in the world. For more information on them, click [here](#).

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