



Garcia: An American Life

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He was there when **Dylan** went electric, when a generation danced naked at Woodstock, and when **Ken Kesey** started experimenting with acid. **Jerry Garcia** was one of the most gifted musicians of all time, and he was a member of one of the most worshiped rock 'n' roll bands in history. Now, **Blair Jackson**, who covered the Grateful Dead for twenty-five years, gives us an unparalleled portrait of Garcia--the musical genius, the brilliant songwriter, and ultimately, the tortured soul plagued by his own addiction. With more than forty photographs, many of them previously unpublished, **Garcia: An American Life** is the ultimate tribute to the man who, Bob Dylan said, "had no equal."

Garcia: An American Life Details

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Author : Blair Jackson

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From Reader Review Garcia: An American Life for online ebook

Fredonia7 says

He was there when Dylan went electric, when a generation danced naked at Woodstock, and when Ken Kesey started experimenting with acid. Jerry Garcia was one of the most gifted musicians of all time, and he was a member of one of the most worshiped rock 'n' roll bands in history. Now, Blair Jackson, who covered the Grateful Dead for twenty-five years, gives us an unparalleled portrait of Garcia--the musical genius, the brilliant songwriter, and ultimately, the tortured soul plagued by his own addiction. With more than forty photographs, many of them previously unpublished, Garcia: An American Life is the ultimate tribute to the man who, Bob Dylan said, "had no equal."

Jeremy says

A passionate, insightful, knowledgeable portrait of the leader of the Grateful Dead. Jackson gives a very human, balanced, and detailed account of Jerry's life. Great quotes throughout from Carolyn Adams, John Kahn, and Robert Hunter lend a tone of credibility to a story that has been told by many folks in different ways.

archive.org allows you to create a soundtrack as you read through the book and experience the evolution of the music as a part of the reading experience - I highly recommend it!

Jon says

I've been wanting to read this for quite some time now, glad I came across a copy of it at my local library. It's probably the most thorough and thoughtful Dead related book I've read yet, it was great that Blair Jackson had access to so many in his circles.

Robin Martin says

"It could be that music is one of those things left that isn't completely devoid of meaning. Talk--like politics--has been made meaningless by the endless repetition of lies. There is no longer any substance in it. You listen to a politician making a speech, and it's like hearing nothing. Whereas music is unmistakably music....Music goes back before language does." JG

Jackson has done a remarkable job weaving this tale of Jerry Garcia so that all of the different threads of the man and the music and the times come together. It is a well-wrought tapestry: engaging, respectful (while illuminating the subject's less-flattering quirks), informative. I especially appreciated the focus on the partnership with Robert Hunter, the origins and timing of the songs they wrote together, the descriptions of the shows and how they changed over the years, and even the critique and analysis of the way JG performed particular songs at particular times of his life. It neither glamorizes or demonizes drug use and other elements of hippie lifestyle often portrayed as fringe behavior. After reading this, I feel as much a part of the Deadhead tribe as I did in 1985.

"People need celebration in their life,' Garcia said. 'It's part of what it means to be human. We need magic and bliss and power, myth and celebration in our lives. And music is a good way to encapsulate a lot of it.'"

Phil Thoden says

As he once so beautifully sang, "You gave all you had. Why you wanna give more? The more that you give, the more it will take. To the thin line beyond which you really can't fake."

A musician I am glad to have heard perform dozens of times.

Bill Williams says

This is one of the first books I ever read that wasn't in some way, shape, or form mandatory. It really sparked the love of reading I have today and the stories are just amazing. I haven't gone back to it in some time and should probably download it and read it again soon. It was an awesome portrait of Jerry and the band and really makes you feel like you were there with them. The Acid Test parts especially where they mess up the dosage were great.

Elyssa says

I borrowed this from Goodreads friend Ethan (thanks!) and it was a great overview of Jerry Garcia and The Grateful Dead. This book is best for serious fans because there are in-depth passages about particular songs that are more meaningful if you know them.

I most appreciated the honest depiction of Jerry Garcia and his addiction, which prevented him from having optimal relationships with fellow bandmates, friends, and family. After reading the specific timeframes of his active drug use and his periods of sobriety, it's been interesting to return to the music and hear the difference. Garcia definitely had some vibrant eras as a musician and it's sad to think about the music he could have produced without the deadening influence of heroin.

Travis Haight says

The only reason it took me forever to read this one is because I read several music books before it, including two other Dead books (Long Strange Trip and Phil Lesh's memoir). I am glad that I finally finished it, because it was an amazing, balanced, well-informed but not slanderous book. I was fully expecting there would be nothing but, or mostly hero worship, with the writing supporting that. Another really good music book, and not just for Dead Heads. I love how you get the whole story, and not just white washed pieces to make Garcia seem like a hero. Now, everyone knows that while he was a wonderful guitar player, writer, and also an overall pretty nice guy, he sure as hell wasn't perfect, or an idol, which is what some books would lead the reader to believe.

M. Milner says

This is a big summer for Grateful Dead fans, both the 20th anniversary of Jerry Garcia's death and the 50th anniversary of the band's formation. It's no wonder the band is getting back together and playing a few shows – albeit at a rather expensive ticket price.

And in the years since the band's legacy has changed a bit: people generally look past the troubles of their later years (rough performances, riots among fans, a grueling tour schedule) and focus on the brighter spots. Recent archival releases include their gig at the Gaza Pyramids, two box sets of their spring 1990 tour and an incendiary show from February 1968. So, lots of good times, then.

So with the big anniversary, it seemed appropriate to finally get around to Blair Jackson's biography of the Dead's lead guitarist: Garcia: An American Story. It's a thoroughly researched, interesting book and does a good job charting his unlikely rise and all-too-predictable fall.

Garcia was born into a musical family: his father played in local bands and opened a bar that featured live music. But his upbringing was rough and troublesome: his dad drowned and Garcia wound up splitting time between his mom and grandparent's place. He drifted into a rough crowd, dropped out of high school and spent time in the Army before falling into a burgeoning folk music scene.

These early years in San Francisco had a lasting impact: he met future band mates, his first wife and Robert Hunter, who'd have a life-long working relationship with Garcia: Hunter wrote the words and Garcia the music for many of the Dead's most famous songs.

Jackson takes readers through these years fairly quickly, showing Garcia as a drifting, rootless musician: he'd crash with friends, play around in bands and didn't seem to have much of a future planned. Eventually, one of his bands went electric and started playing around as The Warlocks; soon, they'd rename themselves as The Grateful Dead. They were certainly in the right place at the right time, quickly becoming the house band for Ken Kesey's infamous Acid Tests.

From there the story is generally familiar to heads: the band slowly shot to fame, playing both Monterey and Woodstock and started releasing albums. But even at this point, Jackson shows Garcia's darker side: he left his first wife and child to hook up Carolyn Adams, aka Mountain Girl, coming across as someone who doesn't really think about consequences. It's an attitude that comes up again and again.

As Jackson points out, Garcia's musical career was long and varied. But except for the Dead, most of his side projects were very short lived. His bands with Merl Saunders lasted five years before Garcia abruptly fired him; Old and In the Way lasted just more than a year before falling apart. Despite his image as a friendly, almost grandfatherly figure, Garcia was a demanding musician for most of his career while also being someone who'd change directions on a whim – and leave the firing to someone else. It was often the same in his personal life, where he'd leave one partner for another, often leaving them hanging in the wind.

Early in the book, Jackson says he tried to write a positive biography – “the Forces of Light win in this book,” as he writes – but even so, Garcia's story is tragic: starting in the mid-70s, he started using cocaine regularly and eventually graduated to smoking heroin. Compounded with a poor diet and a serious smoking habit, Garcia's body gave out several times; a diabetic coma in 1986, a serious illness in the early 90s and

eventually a massive, fatal heart attack in 1995.

However, the unspoken aspect of Jackson's statement isn't about how he's treating Garcia, but about the reaction to an earlier oral biography of Garcia: Robert Greenfield's *Dark Star*, a book that paints a dark picture of Garcia and his final years: already in poor health and surrounded by enablers, Garcia worked himself to death by relentlessly touring, both as part of the Dead and in his solo vehicles.

While Greenfield's book is much darker than Garcia, both work well together: Greenfield for the darker elements of the life (including his relationships with doctors and enablers), Jackson's for the positive aspects. It's worth noting Jackson never specifically blames anyone for Garcia's problems, but does come to the same general conclusion as Greenfield: the Dead just toured too much and for too long, especially when Garcia probably should've been relaxing and taking care of his health.

As a biography, Jackson's book is packed with first-hand sources and interviews and provides a reasonably clear picture of Garcia: a talented musician, but someone who didn't like taking responsibility and didn't like (or react well to) the pressures and trappings of fame. There are moments where he perhaps overwrites a bit:

"His guitar could cry tears born of existential longing one moment and roar like a firebreathing dragon the next. Sometimes one crystalline, perfectly formed note was all it took to draw a tear or a smile or even ask a question."

But then again, it's *The Grateful Dead*, so you've got to expect a bit of hyperbole.

All in all, a fully enjoyable, well-researched biography and one I'd recommend to fans of the Dead or Garcia's solo music. There's a nice annotated discography in the back, too, although it's quite out of date at this point.

Rick says

Excellent account of the life of Grateful Dead guitarist, Jerry Garcia. Was a very complete and insightful account, using lots of first hand information from people in the Dead family who were very close to Jerry. Jerry comes off as a super nice guy, though not a guy who always nurtured his closest relationships---particularly with his wives and children. He was a musical "everyman" though who played and loved many different styles of music and excelled at all of them.

The moral of the story: stay away from drugs (particularly heroin), and watch what you eat. Take care of your heart. When you ignore warnings from your body, you're gonna end up dead. With better care of his body, Jerry would still be making music today.

Justin says

I can't put this book down. I especially loved the first part of the book, detailing the interrelationships of the musicians during this time. They all played together on an informal basis and knew each other in different lights, but they recorded as separate acts. What energy was moving through that part of the country that

incited such clarity and creativeness, not just in music, but art and philosophy and politics?? and this was before LSD...

Dawn Lennon says

A well-written biography, especially an extensive one, is a gift and that's the case with Garcia: An American Life. It is thorough and beautifully constructed to chronicle events and to capture the cultural conditions and essence of relationships in Garcia's world.

The power of the book to me was the insights it provided into the genius of a great musician who is so completely given over to his talent for a lifetime. It was fascinating to be absorbed by the extraordinary diversity of musical influences that Garcia mastered and brought to his song-writing and gigs as part of the Grateful Dead, the JGB, and other musical collaborations.

Garcia's lifetime in music spanned more than three decades, during which his drive to create music and to experiment with it (yes, and with drugs) was insatiable. But what was most fascinating to me was the way success and fame evolve, often without intention. And then how it takes on a life of its own and consumes the artist, in this case Garcia. He never really sought fame; it sought him. And one day it was clear that he was the leader of a multimillion dollar enterprise for which hundred of people and families depended. The clutches of those responsibilities, coupled with his mindset as an artist, and later his abuse of drugs and poor health habits, took a deadly toll.

As a beginning student of the acoustic guitar, I received from my teacher Grateful Dead, Garcia and Grisman music to listen to, and then he shared this book with me. The awarenesses that were opened have broadened my appreciation of music, musicians, and the musicians life. I was in awe.

Alex Gleason says

Until the end, feels more like a chronicle of the Grateful Dead than a biography of Jerry.

Rick says

a fine entry into the field of biographies of pop stars. Jackson is an insider in the Dead 'family', and speaks with years of authority and after considerable access. His is a polished, readable, and eminently fascinating account of the one of the great rock guitarists. I'm not sure that Jackson offers anything that will surprise die hard fans, but in some ways that's okay; he has produced the definitive biography in one easily accessible location. Best read while a '69 Dark Star roars in the background.

Tony Foxhoven says

what a life
