Get Shown the Light

IMPROVISATION *and* TRANSCENDENCE *in the* MUSIC *of the* GRATEFUL DEAD

MICHAEL KALER

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Acknowledgments

This book began as an idea that I discussed with Rob Bowman, of York University, when I was thinking about studying there. As I had a wealth of practical experience and a doctorate in religious studies, but little formal musical training, I was hoping to get admitted as an upper-year undergraduate student; I was more than a little surprised when Rob suggested I might be a candidate for the doctoral program in ethnomusicology. The idea that we discussed I probably would not have developed without Rob's ongoing encouragement, smart feedback, and really deep knowledge of all things relating to popular music. Thanks, Rob!

My Deadological investigations have benefited enormously from Nicholas Meriwether's enthusiasm and erudition, and his tireless and multifaceted efforts to advance the study of the Grateful Dead. I was impressed by his writing before I ever met him; over the past decade that we've worked together on various projects, I've been even more impressed by—and have benefited from—his skills as editor, archivist, and community builder. Thanks, Nick!

I've worked on these ideas in a variety of contexts, sometimes publicly, and I am very grateful for permission to make use of adapted versions of earlier work in some chapters. Thanks to the *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, *Critical Studies in Improvisation*, and to *Grateful Dead Studies*, and thanks again to Nicholas Meriwether for permission to use material published in the book *Reading the Grateful Dead: A Critical Survey*.

I have been extremely fortunate to have worked with a wide range of talented, dedicated, and welcoming musicians. I have learned (and explored) a lot about how to do this whole improvisational rock thing in my work with two bands in particular, the Starfires and Alaniaris, and my association with the Toronto improvising scene through such organizations as the Association of Improvising Musicians Toronto and the dearly missed club Somewhere There. So I owe thanks to a whole lot of people, including (but not limited to) Jonny Bakan, Chris Cawthray, Mike Daley, Scott Good, Michelangelo Iaffaldano, Pete Johnston, Arnd Jurgensen, Germaine Liu, Martin Loomer, Geoff Marshall, Dan Monich, Conny Nowe, Paul Newman (the Toronto sax player, not the actor), Karen Ng, Alexei Orechin, Nicole Rampersaud, Michael Rosenthal, Erik Ross, Mark Segger, Joshua Skye Engel, Joe Sorbara, Andrew Staniland, Jason Steidman, Scott Thomson, Jack Vorvis, Ben Walker, Andy Yue, and Mark Zurawinski. Thanks, everyone!

This book is dedicated to two musicians in particular, both guitarists, and both of whom have now left the planet. It was Alaniaris' guitarist, Ken Aldcroft, who more than anyone taught me about how improvisation could be approached as a rigorous, challenging, and fulfilling art form; it was the Starfires' guitarist, Braz King, who more than anyone showed me how grandeur and joy—pure rock magnificence—could emerge out of any jam. Neither of them will have the chance to read this book, but I wouldn't have been able to write it without their friendship and our mutual explorations of improvisational music-making. I hope you both are having interesting times, wherever you are!

And, as always, this book wouldn't be what it is—and I wouldn't be who I am—without the love and support of my partner, Wendy Banks (along with the cats, whose love is somewhat more transactional but no less real). Love to you (and the cats—not that they care).

An Autobiographical Introduction

In this book, I discuss how a group of people got together, realized that their music had the potential to be magic, and created a way to help it realize that potential. In this introduction, I will be talking about how and why this book came to be, so you can know its origin story.

The book came out of my time in the Toronto improvising or creative music scene, which I was involved in from roughly 2005 to 2015. I had spent the 1990s mostly playing rock music, with a side order of dishwashing, before making a fairly radical shift to studying ancient gnosticism full time, starting in 2000. Heavily influenced by Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces*, I had come to see ancient gnosticism as the spiritual origin of many of the currents in modern culture that most interested me. I'm talking about things like situationism, Discordianism, Jung, the Church of the SubGenius, the psychedelic anarchy of thinkers such as Robert Anton Wilson, and, of course, punk rock and hardcore music. In fact, I still think that the myth structures and critiques created by these mostly anonymous early Christian writers are the best, smartest, and most visionary challenges to institutional power and hierarchy that anyone has ever come up with, and they set the stage for a lot of what came after. If you want to develop your ability to see through bullshit, you could do a lot worse than spending some time with some of the gnostic writings, like the Gospel of Truth, the Gospel of Thomas, or the Gospel of Philip. I'll never regret the years I spent doing just that.

But—and this is a big but—the gnostic authors don't seem to me to be nearly as strong when it comes to talking about what you see once you've seen through the bullshit. They speak of liberation, but it's never clear (at

least, it was never clear to me) how that liberation felt, or what it meant in the lived experience of the authors and readers of these texts. This was at least partly deliberate: for one thing, gnostic authors emerged out of a milieu that highly valued esoteric, coded communication, and, even when they were being more or less direct, their discussions were deeply influenced by language and approaches indebted to contemporary intellectual movements like Neoplatonic philosophy. Neoplatonic philosophy is great for many things, but clarity is not one of them. Consequently, it seemed and seems to me that gnosticism provides the smartest, trickiest, and most detailed "no" that I have ever encountered, but it's kind of weak on the "yes" side of things—"big no, little yes," you might say.

The "yes" is essential, though, if we don't want to spend our whole lives in a state of cranky disillusionment. And, for me, that "yes" has always come through music—mainly rock music, with a few exceptions (some free and spiritual jazz, some free improv, some ambient music, some minimalism, some dub). After several years of just focusing on gnosticism, I got reminded of how "yes" could really feel when I was exposed to the Toronto improvised music scene, which at the time—around 2005—was going through a creative renaissance. If you knew where to look, you could find a plethora of tiny shows in deserted back rooms and dingy clubs, with utterly dedicated musicians playing some of the most powerful music I'd ever heard, much of it completely improvised. This music promised (and sometimes even delivered, for seconds on end!) an escape from history, happening in real time right in front of me. I got obsessed.

I also got unemployed; 2008 was not a good time to be launching a career in the study of weird, esoteric early Christianity. After my wife, Wendy, sensibly pointed out, "You're good at music, and you're good at academia. Why not combine them?," I enrolled in York University to study ethnomusicology. My focus was on rock-based improvisation. Most of the musicians I was seeing and, by this point, playing with were coming from a jazz background, or an avant-garde classical one, or from non-European traditions that valued improvisation. However, as someone whose first favorite band had been the British psychedelic space rockers Hawkwind, and who had been a pretty serious Deadhead in the 1980s, I knew full well that rock also had an improvisational tradition, and I wanted to explore it, as a way of defining myself in the scene as something other than the rock barbarian. Also, I had rediscovered my love of the Grateful Dead's music, after about fifteen years of not feeling it or feeling ashamed of it (there are few bands less cool than the Grateful Dead). Since they were the rock improvisational band par excellence, it made

sense to me to go back to their earliest preserved performances in order to figure out how they came up with an authentic rock approach to improvisation. I spent many hours listening to hissy, muffled, and often wonderful tapes of the band from the mid-to-late 1960s, ultimately deriving the "framework" that I describe in this book.

Understanding how the band did what it did was only half the battle; the other half was to understand—at least a little bit—why they did it. The idea that there was some kind of transcendent, spiritual, or religious significance to the Grateful Dead's music was not foreign to me: remember, I had been a Deadhead, and, anyway, the topic was impossible to escape in writing about the band. However, discussion of the Grateful Dead's music and its relation to transcendent experience focused on the reception of the music—in other words, whether it was carried out by condescending popular media people or by worshipful Deadheads, it tended to be about how the band's fans felt about the music.

What I found when I started digging into interviews with the band—and especially into bassist Phil Lesh's autobiography—was that the band themselves not only agreed that their music had the potential to manifest transcendent experiences but also that they seemed to have worked deliberately to develop an approach to playing that would make such experiences more likely. The framework wasn't just a vehicle for artistic expression; it was an approach to playing that could, once in a while and "in the strangest of places," serve to bridge heaven and earth. These thoughts never left me; for a number of years following, I kept chewing over them and developing them, in papers and conference presentations as well as more informal discussions. This book is the result of that thinking and development.

I've tried to write this book in such a way that it can be appreciated regardless of your own views on the Grateful Dead. Like I said, I'm a Deadhead, which is to say that I believe that they were right, and that this musical machine that they built really did have the potential to pay off with a "big yes" that could balance out and fulfill the "big no" that I found in gnosticism. You don't have to believe that to enjoy this book, though: the Grateful Dead's innovations and justifications are fascinating whatever your perspective, and they occupy a tremendously important place in the modern Western rediscovery of improvisational art. But I think it's important to let you know that I am not speaking as an outside observer here.