

# DARK STAR ORCHESTRA

“This is a great band, and I had a great time”

**Bob Weir, Grateful Dead founding member (guitar/vocalist)**

“Inspired and accomplished musical discourse at such a deep and serious level:  
I had no problem at all believing that this was what the Grateful Dead sounded like 40 years ago.”

**David Gans, Grateful Dead Hour**

“I've always been impressed by DSO, but the other night I thought they'd taken it to a new level.  
It was some of the best Grateful Dead music I've heard in the past 20 years, and that covers some ground.

Somehow, Jeff Mattson manages to play Jerry's parts perfectly in the spirit,  
but without any sense of being imitative. And boy, does the band pick up on this energy. Big fun!”

**Dennis McNally, Grateful Dead publicist & biographer 1980 – 1995;**

**Author “A Long Strange Trip: The History of the Grateful Dead”**

“As one who is classically trained, I actually always thought that DSO was very cool,  
treating Grateful Dead music as repertoire- much as I've tried to do in my various bands.”

**Phil Lesh, Grateful Dead founding member (bass/vocals)**

“Playing with Dark Star Orchestra is something that feels just exactly  
like it felt when I was playing with the Grateful Dead.”

**Donna Jean Godchaux, Grateful Dead vocalist, frequent DSO guest**

“There are moments where I can close my eyes and go back 30 years and have it be every  
bit as rewarding and satisfying. Dark Star is an amazingly legitimate representation of the Dead.”

**Dan Healy, Grateful Dead sound engineer 1966 -1994**

“Thank you for a real good time.”

**Jon Fishman, Phish drummer after sitting in with DSO**

“The Dark Star Orchestra re-creates Grateful Dead shows with a flashback-inducing meticulousness.”

**The New Yorker**

“...recreates the Dead concert experience with uncanny verisimilitude.  
In fact, Dark Star Orchestra often sounds more like the Dead than the Dead sometimes did...”

**Chicago Tribune/Andy Argyrakis**

“Quite possibly the most talented and accomplished tribute band out there...  
they've definitely mastered their inspiration's vagabond nature.”

**Rolling Stone**

“Channeling the Dead”

**USA Today**

“The hottest Grateful Dead tribute act going.”

**Washington Post**

“A perfection-oriented practioner of homage...uncanny precision.”

**Denver Post**

“An incredible simulation of the Dead's post-1972 incarnation(s). You'll swear you were there.”

**Relix Magazine**

“With eyes shut, it is almost impossible to tell the difference between the Grateful Dead and DSO.”

**The Frederick News-Post**



## DARK STAR ORCHESTRA AT BROOKLYN BOWL:

# TOO MUCH OF ANYTHING IS JUST ENOUGH

Dark Star Orchestra at Brooklyn Bowl – Monday, May 13th, 2013

*-Chadbyrne Dickens*

For decades the adage went, “There is nothing like a Grateful Dead Concert.” Today, with the magical jam act long defunct, there is nothing that comes closer to that euphoric and unique experience than a Dark Star Orchestra concert. The energy, the emulation and the excitement make DSO today’s definitive Grateful Dead musical experience. The current incarnation of the band includes Rob Eaton (vocals/rhythm guitar), Jeff Mattson (vocals, guitar), Rob Barraco (keys), Skip Vangelas (bass), Lisa Mackey(vocals), Dino English (drums), and Rob Koritz (drums). Founding member and bassist, Kevin Rosen, recently announced his retirement from the band and is the longest running member of Dark Star Orchestra having performed over 2000 shows since they formed in November 1997.



On Tuesday night, the band played to a near sell-out crowd at Brooklyn Bowl, the most prolific venue in the Tri-State area. There are 324 Grateful Dead cover bands in the U.S. according to [www.gratefuldeadtributebands.com](http://www.gratefuldeadtributebands.com), which include quality outfits like Furthur, Reflections, Ship of Fools, Splintered Sunlight, Dead Sessions, Cosmic Charlie **and** Stella Blues Band. However, none is ultimately as fulfilling as Dark Star Orchestra. With original Grateful Dead members in Furthur, there is an expectation that can't be realistically fulfilled, whereas DSO usually overreaches and surprises newly converted fans.

The upbeat “Bertha” started the night out with spunk and purpose. Lisa Mackey provided deeper on-key vocals and seductive dance moves, when compared to Donna, inciting others to join the dance party. The always flamboyant “Good Lovin” followed and drew immense crowd adulation as newbies freaked out with exuberance at the familiar cover song while most veterans yawned in wait for the good stuff. Mattson’s repeated background vocal chorus of “Good Lovin” was eerily like Jerry’s patented poignant one.

Copyright © 2013

<http://liveforlivemusic.com/reviews/shows/dark-star-orchestra-atbrooklyn-bowl/>

“Loser” had a different take with a much punchier percussion section – showcasing the effectiveness of carrying two drummers just like the Grateful Dead did. “It’s All Over Now” was a beat slower when juxtaposed to the usual Dead version, but the call and response at the crescendo lifted it to another level. Eaton watched and chuckled as his “oldest and dearest friend” Skip bombarded the audience with bass bombs at the conclusion of “It’s All Over Now.” Eaton flips his hair and leans back when performing with mannerisms and a vocal similar enough to pleasantly recall Weir, but his own distinct personality maintains his own signature style and presence.

The band downshifted for a forgettable “Peggy-O” and “Passenger” before lifting off into a fiery and fast-paced “Jack-a-Roe”. For those who haven’t memorized Deadbase, it was clear that the show would be an original, “elective” one and not patterned from a classic Dead one when they concluded the 1st set with the Jerry Garcia Band staple, “Mission in the Rain.” With Mattson leading the way with stellar guitar leads, the song was deep in breadth and scope and the highlight of the evening’s festivities. Creating an original set allows a fan the enjoyment of hypothetical “What if the Dead played that?” complete with unheard of segues between numbers and other pleasant surprises.

At set break, the debate if Jeff Mattson or his predecessor in DSO, John Kadlecik, (once dubbed “Fake Jerry” and “Fake Fake Jerry” respectively, is the more gifted Jerry emulator. With his tight guitar chops on this night on cuts like “Fire on the Mountain” and “Lazy Lightning”, it was hard not to support Mattson’s candidacy. The second set provided a respectable “Help>Slip” before the crowd erupted in response to an energetic although otherwise by-the-numbers, “Franklin’s Tower.” The crowd screamed, “I need a Miracle” before the band segued into a lengthy and mesmerizing “Black Peter” which was reminiscent of arguable the Dead’s finest version at Las Vegas 1991.



One unfamiliar with the Grateful Dead scene may think that 5 DSO shows in 6 days around the Tri-State area would be overkill, but as Bobby sang, “Too much of anything is just enough.” With an abundant touring schedule that rivals the busiest of touring bands, an outpouring of energy and emotion that doesn’t waver and an ever growing base of hungry fans of Grateful Dead music, Dark Star Orchestra is here for the long haul. There may just be nothing like a DSO concert.

## Dark Star Orchestra's Rob Barraco and the quintessential Grateful Dead show

Published: February 20, 2013  
By BLAIR R. FISCHER

When you first learn someone is a Deadhead, invariably the first question an inquiring mind wants to know is: How many Grateful Dead shows have you seen? For years, the answer would almost always end with "so far," nowadays, of course, it's finite -- as The Grateful Dead officially disbanded in 1995 following leader Jerry Garcia's death. And for Rob Barraco -- the keyboardist/vocalist for the Dead tribute band, Dark Star Orchestra -- he's seen "upward of about 80." DSO, itself, has performed more than 2,200 shows over its 15-plus year career, including several with ex-Dead members Mickey Hart and Phil Lesh.

In advance of DSO's show at Jacksonville's Freebird Live on Feb. 24, Lowcountry Current caught up with Barraco to talk to him about when he became a Deadhead, if he's still able to listen to The Dead casually, and what he believes is the all-time greatest Dead show.

**Question. Do you remember the first and last Grateful Dead shows you saw?**

**Answer.** Oh, absolutely. My first show was 3/28/72 at The Academy of Music in New York City, and my last show was -- I don't know the exact date -- but it was March of '94. I saw most of my shows before 1980. I did some shows in '73 and '74. I did a lot of shows in '76 and '77. By '79, I kind of got myself out of the Dead scene. But I saw some shows in the '80s and a sprinkling of shows in the '90s. By March of '94, my last show, I couldn't go back again because Jerry was just "affected," if you will, that I just couldn't do it.

**Q. Prior to seeing them when you were 15, were you a fan or did you become a fan?**

**A.** I was a fan before but I had no idea what I was getting myself into at all. At that time, I'd only seen one concert before, and it was the Allman Brothers. A friend of mine was playing a tune on the acoustic guitar, and I was like, "What is that?" And he says, "A band called 'The Grateful Dead' and it's called 'Casey Jones.'" And I was like, "Wow, it's really cool." And then you know how when you're not aware of something and then you become aware of it and it's everywhere? I'd be walking through the mall near my house and the whole window of the record store would be decorated in Grateful Dead. All of the sudden they were everywhere, and they were on FM radio. They were playing the "Workingman Dead"'s album, so I heard "Uncle John's Band." Once I heard "Uncle John's Band," I was a fan.

**Q. Knowing you make a living performing The Dead, can you still listen to The Dead as a fan?**

**A.** Yes. Believe it or not, I can. A lot of The Dead listening I do now is for reference purposes, for shows we're doing. Just to be era specific. I never really was a huge Brent [Mydland] fan growing up, and I rediscovered him through playing with Dark Star and really appreciate him now. So he's the guy I know the least of. Now I know him really well after all those years playing with DSO. But I really got into the jazz world for a really long time. That's still where my passion lies. But, man, when I get a chance to listen to some of that Europe '72 stuff or September of '72, I'd sit down and just lose it because they were the most cutting edge rock band there ever was, I think.

**Q. What do you think The Dead would be up to if Jerry were still alive today?**

**A.** Who knows, man. There's a part of me that wishes after Brent died [in July 1990] that they hung it up. I'm sure Jerry would still be playing. He'd be doing his own thing. After Brent died I saw a lot of Jerry Garcia Band shows, and he never failed to [impress] me in those shows. ... And then you'd go see The Dead like two months later and it'd be painful because he just didn't have the spark.

**Q. Can you play any Dead song?**

**A.** I think we're 99 percent right now. I think the only songs that we don't know -- or, at least, some of us don't know -- are the very latter day Dead tunes. Maybe some of those Phil [Lesh] tunes from the end. I got to actually play a couple of those tunes with Phil but I know them the least of all the songs. As a band we've never done any of those songs. But, as far as the rest of the repertoire goes, pretty much we can cover anything.

**Q. Is it more important for DSO to sound like The Dead or perform like them?**

**A.** That's an interesting question. We want to be era specific. So if we're doing an '81 show, we got the right instruments, the right keyboard set-up, the right drum set-up. And we make sure the arrangements of the songs are specific to '81, because they morphed over time. But as far as the playing itself however, it's unscripted. It's all improvised.

**Q. For you is there a quintessential Dead show?**

**A.** That's a hard one. My favorite Dead show is Sept. 27, 1972 [at the Stanley Theater in Jersey City, N.J.]. There's just something about that show. It's electrifying. From the very first note till the end, it's really psychedelic too. They were starting to show their chops.



Words by: [Suzy Perler](#) and Tim Walther | Images by: [Suzy Perler](#)

Dark Star Jubilee :: 08.31.12-09.02.12 :: Legend Valley :: Thornville, OH

After flying over 500 miles to reach the destination, nothing felt more 'at home' than being at [Dark Star Jubilee](#). Set in the beautiful rolling hills of Legend Valley in Thornville, Ohio, it was a perfect setting for music, friends and family. Entering the festival grounds early Friday morning, one could immediately feel the camaraderie and good spirit amongst the crew as they were finishing up their last minute preparations for this long anticipated inaugural event. The friendly and positive nature of owner, **Tim Walther** of [All Good Presents](#), was clearly infectious.

The members of [Dark Star Orchestra](#) were our welcoming hosts. When not performing, they spent the weekend intermingling with the crowd of loyal fans. I took a leisurely golf cart ride with DSO drummers, **Rob Koritz** and **Dino English** and was pleased to see them stopping often to just say hello and chat with fans and friends. People liked seeing the band hanging around – it made everyone feel more connected.



*DSO's Jeff Mattson and Rob Eaton  
by Suzy Perler*

The festival kicked off late Friday with [The Rumpke Mountain Boys](#), [Cornmeal](#) and then a 4 hour set by DSO. Early Saturday morning arrived with heavy rains, causing some structural issues with the main stage. Not sure how the show was going to go on, a brilliant decision was quickly made to create an alternate stage in the VIP tent, complete with comfy couches, rugs and tapestries. There was no complaining in this crowd. The communal spirit of braving the elements made this festival even better. Everybody involved felt they were a part of something very special.



*Mickey Hart Band Drum Circle by Suzy Perler*

Some of Saturday's bands included [Jorma Kaukonen](#), [The Donna Jean Godchaux Band](#), [Matt Reynolds](#) (also DSO's tour manager!) [Keller Williams](#) and DSO playing another 4 hour set. The [Mickey Hart Band](#) was then scheduled to play, but his band couldn't fit on the alternate stage. The crowd waited patiently for the outcome. It was then announced that everyone should grab their percussion instruments and join Mickey Hart in an impromptu drum circle. Everyone circled in the intimate glow of the VIP tent and created music with the band. Other musicians joined in, including DSO drummers, Rob Koritz and Dino English. Mickey Hart said it was one of the best times they've had. It was a magical and memorable highlight of the festival for everyone.

The Sunday sun dried up the damp grounds, and the music played on all day with [The Folkadelics](#), [Donna The Buffalo](#), [The Infamous Stringdusters](#), [Great American Taxi](#), [7 Walkers](#), [Perpetual Groove](#) and many more. The festival

ended with another 4 hour rockin' set by DSO. [Bill Kreutzmann](#) even joined in on a few songs. "We Bid You Goodnight" was the final and fitting song of the night.



## The Best of the Fests: 19 Cool Summer Festivals

Peak summer festival season has arrived! Check out the wildest blow-outs still to come, from Lollapalooza to the Gathering of the Juggalos

### *Dark Star Jubilee*

WHEN: August 31st-September 2<sup>nd</sup>

WHERE: Thornville, Ohio

TOP ACTS: Dark Star Orchestra, Mickey Hart Band, 7 Walkers Feat. Bill Kreutzmann, Keller Williams

The greatest [Grateful Dead](#) cover band ever is throwing their own blowout in their hometown, playing three straight nights alongside actual members of the Dead.

PRO TIP: Throw your own mellow jubilee – the festival welcomes acoustic guitars and small campfires.



<http://www.rollingstone.com/music/pictures/the-best-of-the-fests-19-cool-summer-festivals-20120711/dark-star-jubilee-0184893>

## Dark Star Orchestra: Reanimating the Dead

By Jack Miller



Rob Barraco has played keyboards for Phil Lesh and Friends, The Dead, The Other Ones, Chris Robinson & New Earth Mud, and since 2005 he's been an official member of Dark Star Orchestra, the most accurate Grateful Dead tribute band there ever was. The group is currently celebrating its 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and Barraco couldn't be happier with the quality of the music it's producing. They play the Dome at the Oakdale on Friday, December 7<sup>th</sup>.

"Right now the band is playing at a really high level and we're constantly raising the bar for ourselves," he says. "We're taking the music into new directions and we're trying to live 'Being the Moment' — having that as our mantra. Let it go where it needs to go and don't worry about trying to be exact. You start thinking that way and, it's not fun first of all, but also it's not going to happen."

Barraco began playing with DSO part time following the death of original keyboardist Scott Larned in 2005, splitting his time between Phil's projects and the group until he was offered the full-time position.

"It made more sense to me than anything else," he says. "Phil, at that time, was very fickle about what he wanted to do, and I've got to make a living, so it turned out to be the best move for me."

No bridges were burned in the process, however. Phil respected Barraco's decision and still occasionally invites him to play, which he'll be doing in December when he reunites with the Phil Lesh Quintet, a.k.a. "The Q" — an all-star band consisting of himself, Phil Lesh, drummer John Molo of the Allman Brothers Band and guitarists Derek Trucks and Warren Haynes. In fact, Barraco isn't going to make it to the Oakdale show as a result of the Q reunion. Furthur keyboardist Jeff Chimenti will be filling in for DSO.

Barraco is looking forward to his Phil vacation.

"It's always an honor, and it's extremely adventurous," he says. "The two of us have a rapport that's gone back quite a while."

Back to 1999, that is. Barraco remembers what it was like the very first time the pair played together.

"I was absolutely shaking in my boots, but he was so disarming that I wasn't nervous for very long," he says. "And then we started playing and I got nervous again, but we started jamming and the shit just started happening. You don't have time to be nervous, you've got to react. It's a whole different ballgame when you've spent your whole life listening to someone play and then all of a sudden you're thrown into the mix playing with them. There's no time to be afraid."



Phil returned the favor just last month, sitting in with DSO for the first time for an entire set at the Fillmore in San Francisco on October 13<sup>th</sup>.

"What a trip that was," says Barraco. "It was really wonderful. He was just a member of the band for the set, and he really played his ass off and brought the best out of all of us."





DSO recreates Dead shows by taking existing song-for-song setlists from Grateful Dead history, and then playing them using rough approximations of the sounds from the era the show was played in. Rhythm guitar player Rob Eaton (DSO's Bob Weir) figures out what setlists to play.

"It's a pretty arduous task," says Barraco. "I would never want to do it. But he's great at it. He picks great shows and we're really fortunate to have someone willing to go the extra mile."

Barraco barely noticed that it was DSO's 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

"I was oblivious," he says. "It was like the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary yesterday. Time just cranks man, it really does. Each year that goes by for me goes by way too quickly. Then I look back at the number of shows I've played and I can't believe it."

As for Barraco's personal favorite era of the Dead? That'd have to be 1972,.

"The whole Europe deal," he says. "I saw my first show, the last show in New York before they went to Europe. 3-28-72. I got to see Pigpen once. From when Keith joined in October of '71 to the show at the Stanley Theatre in Pittsburgh on September 27, '72 they were speaking this other language, it's tremendous how they've grown in a year. [Editor's note: The Stanley Theatre show was actually in Jersey City.] I'm constantly blown away. It never ceases to amaze me."

## Saturday Highlights

**Dark Star Orchestra :: 7:30 PM – 11:30 PM :: Main Stage**

Following solid performances from six different quality performers on Saturday, it was finally time for the main event. Many people had not arrived for Friday night's festivities, but rather chose a more leisurely drive up on this sunny Saturday, and the more amply filled audience demonstrated that. Dark Star had already surprised the night before with a superior set of acoustic music that opened with "Aiko Aiko" and included the moving "Sitting in Limbo" and a touching "Bird Song > Ripple." The boys clearly relished the opportunity to spark the Saturday night groove in a festival they were headlining, their energy apparent to all. After opening with the ho-hum, dark Weir/Barlow "Hell in a Bucket," they segued into an energetic and tight "Bertha" that fully buoyed the audience to participate. They dug in for a slew of tunes including the bouncy "BIODTL" and poetic "Ramble on Rose." The standout was the "Let It Grow" first set closer. **Rob Eaton** sang it with the authority and passion it deserves, and the jam included at the end indicated to me it had been recreated from only a few options - they were replaying a show I had fortuitously attended: MSG 9/12/91.



*Dark Star Orchestra by Suzy Perler*

Energy was crackling as the first familiar notes of "Sugar Magnolia" permeated the clear mountain air. The vast majority who didn't know they were replaying a set playlist were surprised when it abruptly ended before parlaying into the usual "Sunshine Daydream" but rather directly segued into a very fresh, eruptive "Foolish Heart." After happily jamming along to the chorus - "When you give your love my friend..." - I turned to tell some strangers, "Jerry would be proud." They concurred. The boys were on tonight and the energy amped to 11. After the requisite "Playin," they sparked into the meaningful opus that can only be "Terrapin Station." As I was with a group of younger folks who didn't know the song and asked why I was suddenly lifted with such excitement, I pointed out, "Just wait until they sing 'inspiration!'" DSO delivered eloquently as the audience chimed in with the monster chorus vocals of "Terrapin! Terrapin!" It was a participatory sing-along that all true music lovers appreciate and the older generation adores passing along. Terrapin is one of the Dead's most beautiful songs and this was a beautiful moment.



*Dark Star Orchestra by Suzy Perler*

After a solid run of familiar tunes, they reeled off a long, intense "Sunshine Daydream," which inspired harder dancing than I witnessed all weekend. From all the encore options at hand in the Dead's repertoire, it was a relief that this show offered up "Box of Rain." After the energetic romp in remembrance turned celebration, DSO provided a bonus of some inspirational and popular fillers including "Saint of Circumstance," "China > Rider" and "Satisfaction." DSO's performance was as good as I had ever experienced, yet I wish they hadn't concluded with "Satisfaction." The Grateful Dead only played it 30 times and not very well. It is a definitive Stones tune that they should play exclusively. Yet, the show left many dripping with sweat, leaning on one another for a breather and exchanging expressions of adulation regarding it. As entertaining and musically fulfilling as it was, fans were spoiled in knowing another four hour set was scheduled to close the festival on Sunday. Besides, one didn't have much time to bask in its glow with The Machine set to commence moments later. There was more dancing to come - keep your rings on your fingers and bells on your shoes.



Review and Photos by David Brais

**Dark Star Orchestra ~ Date: February 16, 2012 ~ Venue: House of Blues ~ City: Cleveland, OH**

I used to brag to all my friends that if you needed to know anything about the Grateful Dead, I was your man. I had seen them numerous times over the years, traded tapes, told numerous stories of my good ol' days traveling around to follow the band. So, when I was given an assignment to cover a Grateful Dead tribute band called Dark Star Orchestra, I was quite skeptical not only of the assignment, but that anyone could really capture the spirit, and especially the music, of my all time favorite band.



I'll be completely honest here. Dark Star Orchestra took me completely by surprise as they performed onstage at the House of Blues in Cleveland. Their musicianship was impeccable. As the group launched into "Alabama Getaway", "The Greatest Story Ever Told" and "Sugaree," I even closed my eyes at various moments just to reconfirm what was transpiring on stage. The music, for lack of a better word, was 'dead' on. The attention to the little nuances the Grateful Dead were always known for in concert was captured in stunning detail right in front of me. Let me tell you something. Calling Dark Star Orchestra a tribute band was a true disservice to these remarkable musicians.

Also so my surprise, this show was broken up into two separate sets. Both lasted about two hours, which was also remarkable given most shows last two hours and that's it. But we're talking about the music of the Grateful Dead here, and no two shows of this band were ever alike. Tonight, I found out DSO was recreating the Dead's September 6, 1980 performance in Lewiston, Maine. For all you Deadhead tape collectors, the group had just released their eleventh studio recording, *Go to Heaven*, like a week before. This was their first show supporting the record. I asked a roadie in between sets about the stage set up, and she told me Dark Star Orchestra recreates 13 different stage designs from original Grateful Dead tours. Now that's attention to detail.

The 800 plus people in attendance were there to rekindle old memories, and relive them as well. Throughout the night, I found time to talk to various people in the crowd. To my amazement, I discovered almost no one in the crowd was from Cleveland. These DSO fans had travelled from Philly, Detroit, Syracuse, Pittsburgh and points beyond to see this band perform. I was rather shocked that a city of Cleveland's musical stature was so misrepresented this evening. Then again, who was I to talk? I had no idea of the greatness that lie within the Dark Star Orchestra until I witnessed it first hand.

Over the years, I've listened to other groups attempt to cover Dead songs and fail miserably because of one important missing link – the bass player. Not here, not with this band. DSO's Kevin Rosen mimicked the Dead's Phil Lesh lick for lick. Whether he was playing "Me and My Uncle" or "Uncle John's Band," Rosen worked his instrument to perfection as he recreated the past. His steady work was augmented by the duel drum work of Rob Koritz and Dino English. These two were another delightful surprise. They drove the music with a steady, driving beat and were in perfect synchronization song after song after song. Their strokes on such songs like "Friend of the Devil" and "Sugar Magnolia" reminded me of pistons revving up a 442 engine.



This brings me to Jeff Mattson and Rob Eaton. Their fretwork provided a bottomless pool of guitar licks and leads that many Deadheads in this crowd would have loved to drown themselves in. Who knows, they probably did. If I had any lingering doubts as to the validity of Dark Star Orchestra tackling the Grateful Dead repertoire, it was put to rest with Rob Barraco's magnificent keyboard work. There aren't enough metaphors I can use to describe not only his work, but his fellow musicians as well. Trust me folks, this band is the real deal.

You could pick any song from this evening's show, and Jeff Matson vocals sounded so much like the original, it literally sent shivers up and down my spine. Again, all you had to do was close your eyes, and you'd swear it was Jerry Garcia onstage singing "Tennessee Jed", "Shakedown Street" or "Not Fade Away." This talented group of musician's skills wasn't lost on the crowd either. They truly appreciated the depth and scope DSO undertook to copy everything Dead.





Throughout the night, those in attendance sang every word to every song. This was not an audience that would ever be fooled by imitators. They completely understood what was unfolding before them and were more than 'grateful' to be a part of the experience. When each tune was completed, they showered DSO with thunderous ovations.

I'm a bit ashamed Dark Star Orchestra has escaped my attention all these many years. The fact I'm telling you my favorite song of the evening, "Little Red Rooster," only touches the surface of my admiration for this group. Rob Eaton's vocals and slide guitar were impeccable. Not only did his vocals capture the very essence of Bob Weir, but his slide technique was a cross between Weir and Dickey Betts. I swear I felt like a gushing school boy with a crush on his teacher watching him perform.

The one thing that always rang true with Dead songs is their length. No one tune ever had a prescribed stopping point. Every song was open to interpretation the night the band performed it. Watching Eaton and Mattson trade leads was an almost magical experience. This crowd knew it as well. Everyone around me was completely into what Dark Star Orchestra was recreating on stage. I was so lost in the moment, or moments I should say, the first two hours of the show literally flew by.

The second show started at 10:30 with "Shakedown Street", "Lost Sailor", and "Saint of Circumstance." The crowd favorite was "Uncle John's Band." The eclectic makeup of the audience really encompassed all ages. They jumped and danced with more energy in the second set than the first. DSO showed their appreciation by not sparing one ounce of energy in their effort to deliver the original "Dead" setlist from that 1980 Labor Day show.

After the second set ended with "Sugar Magnolia", I was literally drained and just flat out tired. But I soldiered on for the encores "One More Saturday Night" and "Broke Down Palace." That was it for me. I just couldn't take any more. I was officially on Grateful Dead overload.

For the uninitiated like yours truly, the Dark Star Orchestra was truly an eye-opening experience. Everything about this group was brilliant. This band is so close to the real thing, I found out that it's not uncommon to find family members from the original Dead attend a Dark Star Orchestra performance. That is the highest compliment you could ever pay a tribute band. And again, the word tribute really doesn't do DSO justice.

I walked into the House of Blues earlier in the night a confident Deadhead. I walked out a complete 'dudhead' instead. Here I thought I knew everything there is to know about the iconic Grateful Dead, yet a group of DSO's stature had escaped my notice all these many years. I won't ever be making that mistake again. It's time for Cleveland to wake up as well.



# Dark Star Orchestra: don't call them a cover band

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2010

BY RICHARD ANTONE FOR THE MONTCLAIR TIMES  
THE MONTCLAIR TIMES

With surviving Grateful Dead members occasionally touring as The Dead and working on solo projects like Phil Lesh and Friends, Bob Weir and Ratdog, and Mickey Hart's Planet Drum, the band's music is as popular ever. The Dark Star Orchestra isn't just playing the band's songs, but re-creating entire Grateful Dead concerts, while leaving plenty of room for improvisation.

John Fishman and Mike Gordon of Phish have sat in with the band, as well as Dead musicians Bill Kreutzmann, Tom Constanten and Vince Welnick. The Dark Star Orchestra is playing at the Wellmont Theatre on Tuesday, Dec. 28. Keyboardist-guitarist Rob Barraco spoke from a van in Las Vegas about his influences and ideas.

"I saw the Beatles on Ed Sullivan and I knew what I was gonna do. There was no doubt in my mind," said a confident, relaxed Barraco. The Westbury, N.Y., native first played with the band in 2005, replacing the late Scott Lanerd. At 14, he heard a friend play the Grateful Dead's "Casey Jones" on acoustic guitar. Then he heard "Uncle John's Band" on the radio. "Within days it was everywhere. It was pervasive," he said.

"That following week I was at my cousin's house and she had (the album) 'Workingman's Dead.' I said, 'Can I borrow this?' She said, 'Sure.' That was it for me. I was hooked." Barraco also checked out Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, The Doors, Yes, Gentle Giant and New Riders of the Purple Sage. Poco fed him with "music that was way more country and had a much softer edge to it and beautiful harmony." As a young man soaking up all this music, he felt that "the possibilities were endless." And then there was jazz.

"Once into the Dead, it was almost natural for me to become a jazzhead," he said. "I was completely in the jazz world - (John) Coltrane, Miles Davis. That was the focus of my life for a really long time." Jazz pianists who influenced Barraco included Keith Jarrett, Herbie Hancock, McCoy Tyner, Bill Evans and Don Pullen, who is his favorite. "He's my hero," Barraco said. "I aspired to play that way, to write that way. All of those influences played into the Dead thing because of the improvisational aspect of the music."

And it's music that the band takes very seriously. Barraco enthuses, "We go out each night hoping to take each other on a journey. We do all different kinds of shows, so the way to get to that place is different sometimes — but we're all hoping we're gonna get there. I think it's the audience's wish to be taken on that same journey. Last night, we played in Los Angeles. Right from the very first note, the energy was palpable. They were with us every step of the way. There was a give and take between the audience and the band. We blew the roof off the place. It was really cool."

Barraco recalls the first time he played with Dead bassist Phil Lesh at the Grateful Dead's rehearsal studio up in Marin. "Being in the moment with him is just another animal. As an improviser, you have to react to the things he's playing, and he's reacting to the things you're playing. He's a really unique bass player. There's no one that plays like him ... it was very powerful. We had an instant rapport. Within a year we solidified the band, which he's referred to as the Q, the quintet ... that was me and Phil, John Molo, Jimmy Herring and Warren Haynes. That was a great band — a real force to reckon with."

Having earned Dead cred from working with Lesh, lyricist Robert Hunter (on the album "When We All Come Home"), he got feedback from another band member. "We got to play with Bob Weir. He's actually sat in with the band a few times. He seemed to really enjoy himself. I think it was kind of surprising for him that a band people call a cover band was actually improvising the music every night."

As for the term "cover band," Barraco thinks it doesn't apply to the DSO. He says, "That's just the way it is, that people have to label everything, so they call it a cover band, but I'm here to tell you that we're way more than that. It's a living breathing organism that all seven musicians contribute their own thing to. It morphs every day. Our guitar player, Jeff Mattson (who has also played in Phil Lesh and Friends), was my band mate in the Zen Tricksters for many years. There's nobody out there that can do what he does."

So what does Barraco think of bands that do note-for-note renditions? "I look at it as entertainment," he says. "We're improvising everything. There's no room to maneuver in those (other) situations."

The idea of a band playing an evening of an artist's music is not new. The orchestras of Artie Shaw, Duke Ellington and Count Basie survived their bandleaders' deaths. The Dead still tour and deliver for their fans. For Dead devotees who live their music, the Dark Star Orchestra delivers for them as well.

# DSO

## Deadheads Say O.K.



By Todd Altschuler

Photo's by Clay Hall



Can a band that plays an entire repertoire of another band's songs make original music? It may sound like an oxymoron, but Joe Cocker did it; The Jerry Garcia Band had success with it in the early years; and Dark Star Orchestra may currently be proving it possible.

"Once the first note starts, the whole thing is improvisation. We're obviously paying penance to The Grateful Dead but it really takes on a life

of its own once it gets going," says Dark Star Orchestra keyboardist Rob Barraco of his band's music.

DSO played their first show in Chicago in 1997. Although their concept has been emulated, the idea of re-creating entire shows from the Grateful Dead's history was very unique back then. Their timing was also impeccable because 1997 was a year when an Illinois Deadhead would



have been hard pressed to attend a live concert with a living member of The Grateful Dead because Phil Lesh was working on the Terrapin Station project and Bob Weir was playing great shows with Ratdog, but the majority of those shows were close by his home in California.

“There wasn’t that real Grateful Dead live experience available,” explains drummer Dino English who joined DSO in 1999, “Dark Star Orchestra rose out of that need to keep the music alive and the party going.”

The Chicago audiences were falling in love with the DSO concept and sound. Their secret weapon was lead guitarist John Kadlecik, whose vocals sounded remarkably like those of Jerry Garcia - so much so that



he left DSO in 2009 to play the “Jerry role” in Lesh and Weir’s band Furthur. As DSO played in front of sold out crowds in the Chicago area, a buzz about the quality of their music began to seep out. Then, on their first anniversary, Mike Gordon and Jon Fishman (both from Phish) sat in as special guests, officially letting the world know that this band was legitimate.

Over the ensuing 14 years, with a myriad of different musicians and configurations, DSO has definitely “kept the party going.” Their shows capture the vibe of a Grateful Dead concert better than any other cover band and there is strong debate amongst Deadheads (yes, even those that have seen hundreds of shows “with Jerry”) as to whether a DSO concert gets you off more than a show with the living Grateful Dead members.

The debates are spurned by the fact that there are so many facets of a DSO show that delight the audience. First off, there is the chance to showcase your Grateful Dead knowledge by pinpointing the year and possibly even the show that the band is re-creating. Then there’s the improvisational manner in which the music is played.

“We really extend our jams naturally,” says English, “we’re not The Grateful Dead by any means but when the Dead were on, they would play massive jams and it often feels like that to us.”

“We can play the same song every night for a week and it won’t be the

same,” says Barraco, who has also played keys and bass in bands with Lesh and Weir. “We get so lost in the music.”

That brings us back around to the stellar musicianship in DSO. In 1999, Lesh performed three different runs at The Warfield under the name Phil Lesh & Friends. For each run, he invited a guitarist and keyboardist to play with himself, Steve Kimock and John Molo. In April he tapped Trey and Page to play. In June it was Jorma and Pete. Then, for the last run in October, Jeff and Rob got the call. Many of you might recognize those first two combos as legendary musicians from Phish and Hot Tuna respectively. But now, and especially in 1999, Jeff Mattson and Rob Baracco from The Zen Tricksters (now with DSO) were hardly household names. Just to reiterate... after members of Phish and Hot Tuna, Phil Lesh thought that Mattson and Baracco would suit the music of The Grateful Dead the best.

It’s Mattson that has propelled DSO to new levels musically. Both Barraco and English singled him out as the main reason they are playing so well in 2011.

“(Jeff) has opened up completely new vistas for us. He’s really a jam master and the whole band is feeding off of it and taking it to new lev-





els,” Barraco said. “We are getting lost in the music and the audiences are going wild.”

“It’s been unreal. During the last show, we played a 30 minute Other One,” says English. “People are really connecting with Jeff’s playing. It’s from the heart. I’ve also noticed less naysayers since he joined the band, he brings a real authentic kind of a thing.”

DSO is celebrating their new inspiration with a new project – a CD full of original songs, one of which was written with Grateful Dead lyricist Robert Hunter. “People are coming to see us for Grateful Dead music, and we know that. We won’t play the music at the shows, but if people want to hear the CD, they can and if they don’t, then they don’t have to,” English commented.

Colorado DSO fans will have a chance to see the band in Aspen, Boulder and Fort Collins in April. Both English and Barraco also hinted that they will be part of the lineup at the newly rebuilt State Bridge sometime over the summer. “We love playing in Colorado. You have kind people and beautiful venues,” says Barraco.

As DSO closes in on their 2,000th show, a debate will always rage as to whether their music is “original.” Surpassing the 2,388 shows The Grateful Dead played and having other bands use their concept won’t lessen the debate, but it does lend credence to the fact that they are wildly popular and have the fans on their side. At the very least, they are keeping the spirit of The Grateful Dead concert alive.







A Rob Barraco interview by Todd Altschuler

Photo By Peter Wechniak

Rob Barraco has been playing keyboards in Dark Star Orchestra since 2005. His music career spans over 30 years and although he has spent time as the house band on The Cosby Show and in almost every post-Jerry Grateful Dead incarnation, he has found a home in DSO. On a day when it snowed 10" in Telluride, speaking with Rob was the highlight of my day. You can hear the passion in his voice. He loves life, loves what he does for a living and is one heck of a story teller. Here are a few excerpts from our conversation...

**TA: Who are your biggest influences and what current keyboard players impress you?**

RB: My whole thing is filtered through jazz eyes. I'm not a big rock guy so there are not too many guys that jangle my cod so to speak. Bruce Hornsby is one of the most tremendous pianists out there and one of the greatest American songwriters of all time. But my main influences are all jazz guys... people like Chick Corea, McCoy Tyner, Oscar Peterson and Keith Jarrett. There are guys in the jamband scene too. I think Kyle Hollingsworth is a great keyboard player and I always enjoy hearing his lyrics too. Robert Walter is another guy that I think is a really good player.

**TA: You've mentioned songwriting and lyrics a few times. Is that important to you?**

RB: I'm a big proponent of songwriting. You can put together a band and be great improvisers but if you don't have songs as a basis, it gets old really fast. Think about The Grateful Dead. The thing that's so endearing about their music is the songs and it's that body of work that's their legacy. And without that body of work there could be no DSO. It's all about the songs; and Robert Hunter's lyrics.

**TA: What are a few of your favorite lyrics or songs?**

RB: As I said, I love Hunter's lyrics. I'm a big sucker for the Garcia ballad... Comes a Time is heart wrenching. And Wharf Rat and China Doll, how could your heart not break wide open when you hear those lyrics? I also like some of the psychedelic stuff especially China Cat and Dark Star... great lyrics.

**TA: Didn't you get to work with Robert Hunter?**

RB: I had the great fortune of being able to work with him on my CD When We All Come Home. Robert wrote the lyrics to 7 of the songs. He is the most prolific writer I've ever been involved with, and the most disciplined. He goes to his studio every morning from 9 to 2 and just writes. When I went to visit him there, we were in the kitchen - and sitting on the kitchen table was a pile, no a ream of lyrics.

I said, "What's that?"

He said, "Oh that's the stuff I've been working on in the last month." And it's all great. I don't think I've ever read any of his lyrics that weren't beyond.

**TA: What was a day writing songs with Robert Hunter like?**

RB: We didn't sit down and do it together like he probably did with Jerry. At that time I was playing with Phil or The Other Ones so I would send him stuff. I initially sent 3 songs and he sent me an email back that said something like "your music is speaking to me, give me a week and then call me." So I called him and he said he had some initial drafts and he asked me to come for a visit. When he handed me the lyrics I was singing them in my head and it was amazing, he captured every note. I had a tear in my eye. He has an uncanny ability to capture the spirit of the music in a way that I could never do. I always felt that my lyrics were too self-indulgent. I would sit there and say I can't stand to read my own shit. But Robert speaks from an everyman, in that anybody can read his

lyrics and relate. If you think about the great Garcia tunes they're all taken from the perspective of the any man.

**TA: Even though you list Hornsby as a big influence, DSO doesn't play many shows from his era. I looked back through the setlists on your website and could only find one or two.**

RB: A big problem there is the fact that there are two keyboard players. But this past year we decided to broaden the scope of the band and play shows from those years. It's the same reason that we never played any of the Europe stuff because they had Ketih on keys and Pig on organ. But we decided to take the liberty in order to make it happen. We did our first Bruce show last year and for me it's wonderful because I really get to stretch out in a way that I normally wouldn't do with DSO. If you listen to Bruce's playing, anything he did with The Dead at least, some of his playing is just so out there; Especially on that Europe tour in 1990. (DSO Drummer) Rob Koritz was on that tour and he said there was one show that Bruce was doing some solo thing pre-drums and Weir was just completely captivated. He said Weir just sat down on the drum riser was just completely mesmerized and rightly so because (Bruce) is a master player. What chops, Wow!

**TA: In 1996, I read something to the effect that Rob Barraco has "Hornsby-like fluidity" and it made me go see your band The Zen Tricksters for the first time. Does it feel good to be compared to someone that you respect so greatly?**

RB: Well I never read anything like that. But one time John Molo was talking to Bruce on the phone and Bruce said that he dug my playing and that was the best compliment I ever got. I guess besides the fact that Phil wanted to play with me. I mean when Phil came up to me and said he liked my playing, I thought, "Stick a fork in me now, I'm done." That was the ultimate compliment.

**TA: What was it like to play with Phil?**

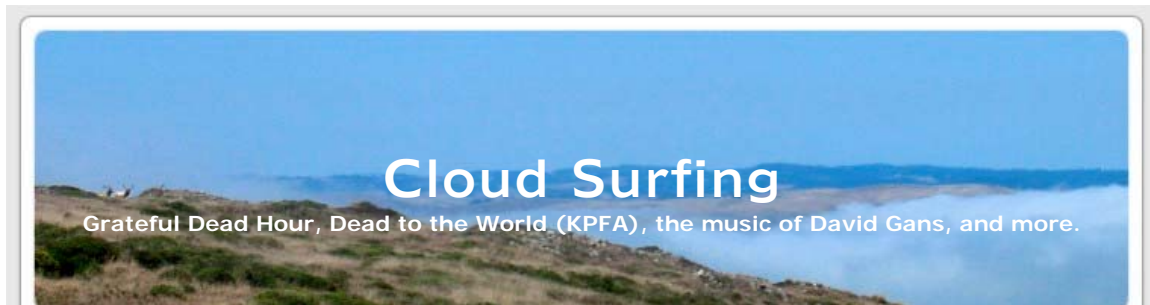
RB: It was a great honor. Phil was always my guy. From the first time I ever saw those guys, it was all about Phil for me. So now I'm getting the opportunity to play with my hero and what's the first song I play with him? Jump by Van Halen. I wanted to kill myself. And I have to sing it! It's one of the most awful moments in my life. Having to go in front of that crowd at The Warfield and hearing their collective sighs when I played (makes Jump intro sounds with his voice). I was like "Oh god-kill me now."

**TA: That reminds me. Didn't you once play bass in Ratdog?**

RB: I was Ratdog's first electric bass player after Wasserman left the band. I did a small tour with them and it's the most fun I've ever had. I love playing the bass. Jeff (Mattson) and I have a side project called Mattson, Barraco & Friends and I play bass in that group. We play in New York City from time to time when we're not touring with DSO.

**TA: So you've been in Phil & Friends, The Other Ones, The Dead and Ratdog. What's it like being in DSO?**

RB: When the DSO manager called to help out after Scott (DSO's original keyboardist) passed away, I had a month between projects so I gave it a shot. When I was playing with them, it hit me very quickly what genius it was and what they were trying to do. At the end of that month, I let them know that I'd really like to do this again. I came back and did a fall tour with them and again it was such a hoot. At that point, I had to make a decision as to where I wanted my life to go. As you get older you have a lot more responsibilities and I had to make a decision on what was best for me and my family. It's been great, we're making tremendous music. I really found my home here.



## Blown away by Dark Star Orchestra

This entry was posted on Sunday, November 28th, 2010 at 1:57 pm and is filed under "Grateful Dead", music.  
By David Gans

I spent the last two evenings with Dark Star Orchestra at the Regency Ballroom in San Francisco. Friday night they played 6/7/77, very much in the band's wheelhouse for all incarnations. But last night they covered some new ground: an April 1969 show that had originally happened in the ballroom right next door to where we were!

This new edition of the Dark Star Orchestra is a bit less reverent and a good deal more aggressive than the last, while clearly remaining respectful of the tradition they are inhabiting. Jeff Mattson is a more muscular guitarist than his predecessor, John Kadlecik. John is now doing great work with Furthur, and Jeff is driving DSO to new places. Everybody wins! Bassist Kevin Rosen has stepped up, too, playing with the same fierceness that Jeff brings. The whole band is delivering: Rob Barraco is covering the Pigpen vocals, and he is also covering Phil's vocals in this configuration (good for the music, however offensive to the few who get all dogmatic about this stuff). Drummers Rob Koritz and Dino English dug into their dual trap-kit excursions with the same sense of entertainment that you hear crackling off the tapes we've been hooked on for all these years. Rhythm guitarist Rob Eaton, who has done a magnificent job of tracking the changes in Bob Weir's playing style and hardware through the ears, is right on top of his mission here as well.

Most of the people who call themselves Deadheads came on board during the era of the avuncular, laid-back, gray-haired and overweight Jerry Garcia. The Grateful Dead of 1969 and 1970, led by a thin and black-haired Garcia, delivered a much more in-your-face musical attack. DSO portrayed that astonishingly well last night. I want to hear more Pigpen-era stuff from these guys.

Amazing that this music is powerful enough to incarnate itself in multiple places, and in multiple phases, today. Bob Weir and Phil Lesh are indeed taking it "furthur" with a new band, continuing their mutual evolution in a most satisfying way. And Dark Star Orchestra is continuing an earlier conversation that has come nowhere close to exhausting its possibilities. And of course there are tons of musicians out there playing Grateful Dead music, and Grateful Dead-inspired music. The David Nelson Band works a similar conversational style with a slightly different vocabulary.

This is music that gets people high. It gets you high to play it, and it gets you high to dance to it, and it gets you high to close your eyes and listen to it with all your might. It got me high to watch my friends engaging in this inspired and accomplished musical discourse at such a deep and serious level: I had no problem at all believing that this was what the Grateful Dead sounded like 40 years ago.

# Dark Star Orchestra recreates famed local Grateful Dead show at the Fillmore Auditorium

December 13, 2010

In addition to the countless acts that have paid tribute to jam band patriarchs [the Grateful Dead](#) in both sound and spirit, there are countless local groups in every city that deal exclusively in the Dead's extensive songbook. However, as far as close-your-eyes-and-you-could-be-there replication goes, there are few who can compare to the obsessive detail provided by [Dark Star Orchestra](#), a band that has spent the past 11 years touring the world and recreating specific Dead shows.

DSO stresses accuracy beyond everything else — faithfully tailoring their line-up, equipment, stage position and vocal arrangements to the corresponding era and creating an experience that is as close to the real thing as possible. An educated Deadhead could have instantly determined that Saturday's set at the [Fillmore Auditorium](#) was between the years of 1971-1976 on account of only one drummer (Dead drummer Mickey Hart was on hiatus during this period). Further, the vintage equipment on the stage, including the Stratocaster played by the group's Jerry Garcia clone Jeff Mattson, indicated that the show likely fell on the earlier end of that range.

Dark Star Orchestra played the Fillmore Auditorium on Saturday night, recreating the Grateful Dead's November 21, 1973 show at the Denver Coliseum. Photos by Todd Radunsky, [heyreverb.com](#).

A theme for the band's current tour has been to recreate a show historically from the cities in which they've been playing, and last night's choice came from November 21, 1973 at the Denver Coliseum (the band allows fans to spend the show guessing before announcing the date at the end). 1973 was a transitional period for the Dead, which was still firmly rooted in the Americana, bluegrass and roots-rock they had begun exploring late in the previous decade, while beginning to explore some of the extended, proggy compositions and funkier rhythms that would define their work in the later '70s.

The set kicked off with several short (i.e. between five and seven minute) renditions of classic staples like "Sugaree," "Jack Straw" and "Here Comes Sunshine" before diving into the twists and turns of the extended "Weather Report Suite," played rarely in its entirety.

The second set consisted of several extended, multi-song jams, including the show's centerpiece, a classic "Playin' Sandwich," in which the band began with the song "Playin' in the Band," which morphed into the tune "Wharf Rat," then back into "Playin'" before ending with an extended run through the anthemic "Morning Dew," making for a nearly 40-minute chunk of uninterrupted music. Upon listening to the original recording of the show as performed by the Dead, it is truly remarkable how faithfully Dark Star recreates the work of their forbearers, in every aspect from the original songs to the extended improvisational passages that were the Dead's bread and butter.

DSO represents something far beyond a tribute act. It is a living, breathing love letter to the music and spirit of the Grateful Dead, a band whose indelible legacy remains vibrant even as its surviving original members enter their twilight years (bassist Phil Lesh celebrated his 70th birthday earlier this year). That this group has been able to sustain itself for over a decade — in which they played upwards of 1,800 shows — is a comforting testament to the fact that even after its creators are gone, the legacy of the Grateful Dead, and perhaps that of the music of 1960s in general, will live on.

*Jonathan S. Gang is a Denver-based writer, musician and general adventurer.*

*Todd Radunsky is a Boulder-based photographer and a regular contributor to RevYrb.*





## Dark Star Orchestra: Life After Dead

By: Jarrod Dicker || Page 1 of 3

"We are NOT the Grateful Dead," professes Dark Star Orchestra's rhythm guitarist and vocalist Rob Eaton. "I think the main misconception is that we strictly copy the Grateful Dead's music or somehow mimic their persona and none of that is true. We love this music, we live and breathe this music and when we step onstage there is no thought process of us trying to be or do anything except serve this music."

Established in 1997, Dark Star Orchestra embarked on a single mission: reincarnate exact setlists from the Grateful Dead's tour catalog which, throughout its 30 year existence, accumulated nearly 2,500 live performances. Dark Star Orchestra conveys these live performances by employing two distinct methods - a "recreation set," where DSO mirrors a historical setlist of a genuine Grateful Dead performance, and the "elective set," where the group generates their own setlist of Grateful Dead songs.

The tradition of Dark Star Orchestra's pedigree is for members to adapt terminology and choral arrangements originally exhibited by the actual Grateful Dead. By doing this, they are able to familiarize the audience and transcend them spiritually to a nostalgic time when the Grateful Dead were an active, animate part of the rock & roll scene. Thus, rather than label themselves a "cover band," DSO prefers a more accurate, incorporeal term.

"I say we are a spirit band," Eaton explains. "We play the music in the spirit that it was originally conceived. The heart, soul, emotion and spirit of the music are the only things we can do to carry it through. It is impossible to copy a setlist exactly. You cannot recreate a show. You can play a setlist, but you absolutely can't recreate it. That's basically something that happens in the moment."



*Dark Star Orchestra by Peter Wochniak*

The group's commitment to heavy improvisation goes all the way back to the formation of their band name. The Dark Star Orchestra moniker was chosen deliberately by founding members who believed that the Hunter/Garcia song "Dark Star" was the single most fitting piece to categorize the fundamental nature of the Grateful Dead. Meagerly including a sizeable verse/chorus arrangement, the song highlights the non-structure inventiveness of the Grateful Dead more than any other song in their extensive catalog. "Orchestra" was affixed onto the group's name to communicate the obligation these artists felt to keep this music alive by communicating to the world the classic compositions of the Grateful Dead.

"The name 'orchestra' in our band is so apt because when you think about what an orchestra does, they're recreating classical work," DSO keyboardist Rob Barraco observes. "The difference is classical work is really orchestra, but we're kind of approaching it in a similar way. We're trying to be true to a particular era and sound, but by the very nature of what Grateful Dead music really is, you have to live in the moment of the music."

In October 2008, the group performed its 1,600th career show. They are one of the only tribute groups that have achieved such heightened notoriety, having played major festival's like Bonnaroo, Gathering of the Vibes and Summerfest, as well as nurturing a devoted nationwide following with a relentless touring schedule.

This past December, Dark Star Orchestra co-founder and lead guitarist John Kadlecik announced that he would be leaving the group after 12 years to join Bob Weir and Phil Lesh with their current project, Furthur. While this news initially stalled the DSO freight train in its tracks, the band kept playing on, electing Zen Tricksters founder and Donna Jean Godchaux Band guitarist Jeff Mattson to fill the "Jerry" role... for now.

"There is another guitar player that we're going to be taking out and touring with in April," reveals Barraco. "It's only to be fair, because you don't want to simply choose one guy and then realize later that you made a mistake. So, we're going to be going out with Stu Allen [JGB] and doing a whole West Coast tour with him. He's a tremendous player, has a beautiful voice and a really nice sound. Then after we play with Stu, we will have a clear idea of where we're going to go in terms of Kadlecik's official replacement. We'll see after we play with Stu in April what the final decision will be."

The current touring DSO lineup includes Jeff Mattson, Rob Eaton, Kevin Rosen (bass, vocals), Lisa Mackey (vocals), Rob Koritz (drums), Dino English (drums) and Rob Barraco. As mentioned, Kadlecik was a founding member of the group along with the late Scott Larned, and his presence and veteran role in DSO most certainly



*Dark Star Orchestra by Peter Wochniak*



*Stu Allen by Susan J. Weiland*

## Dark Star Orchestra: Life After Dead

By: Jarrod Dicker || Page 2 of 3

will be difficult to replace. However, with the addition of Mattson, the band believes that he will not only be able to aptly fill the departed's shoes, but also inject a new element into the group that they have never experimented with while Kadlecik was involved.

"John Kadlecik became a Deadhead a lot later than Jeff because of the fact that he's younger," Barraco states. "I think John's real forte is playing more of the later '70s and '80s Grateful Dead. The one thing that Jeff has above everybody else is that he really understands the earlier bend on the Dead. The late '60s, early '70s. He does it so well and that's something that we really haven't concentrated on in this band until now. Jeff brings just a little more grease, that psychedelic greasy element that was missing in John's playing. Not to demean John's playing, because he's brilliant. That's just what Jeff brings that is different."



*John Kadlecik with Furthur by Susan J. Weiland*

"[Mattson] comes at it from a place of its inception almost," Eaton interjects. "He understands where it started and how it started and what it felt like when it started. He brings to the table a really deep understanding of what Jerry meant to this music in a pretty profound way that I didn't realize until I started playing with him."

Mattson's comprehension and knack to play early renditions of Dead music has transcended the group to places they've never been before. A few weeks back, drummer Dino English and his wife welcomed a child to the world, which understandably prevented him from attending the opening week of tour. Dark Star couldn't play a show that called for two drummers if only one, Koritz, was going to be present. So what did they do?

"We decided to do a whole string of Europe '72 shows and recreate those concerts [these shows feature just drummer Bill Kreutzmann]," says Barraco. "Dark Star had never done that before, all that old Pigpen stuff. Jeff was just ripping it up. It's been so psychedelic."

The Europe '72 shows were chosen by Eaton, who holds the chief responsibility of deciding the setlist for every DSO performance. He is a three-time Grammy Award winning producer as well as a former Grateful Dead taper who recorded throughout the late '70s and early '80s. He produced all of Pat Metheny's records for the past 20-25 years and has recently worked with Peter Wolf and Richard Bona. Joining DSO in 2001, Eaton had always selected setlist material with one "Jerry" in mind, John Kadlecik. Have any complications come about creating setlists to compliment their new guitarist?

"Nope, not at all," Eaton confidently proclaims. "He did five shows with us in November, mid-tour, and I threw the gauntlet at him to see what he was made of. I gave him EVERYTHING! I gave him a show from '89, and it had some stuff we've never even played before. There were some songs that John Kadlecik just didn't want to learn sometimes. Certain shows would have a song called 'California Earthquake' that we never got around to doing. So, I threw that at Jeff - I said, 'Learn this song. We're going to do this exact show' - right out of the box without any rehearsals or anything like that. I tested him right away and he passed all the tests with flying colors. At the end of the day, the exocentric components of a specific tone are all about the heart and soul of the music and what the emotional content of it is. The emotional content with Jeff is very strong. That I think, at the end of the day, is what Grateful Dead music is all about. It's all about the emotion."



*Photo of Jeff Mattson by Peter Wochniak*

---

---

**John Kadlecik became a Deadhead a lot later than Jeff [Mattson] because of the fact that he's younger. I think John's real forte is playing more of the later '70s and '80s Grateful Dead. The one thing that Jeff has above everybody else is that he really understands the earlier bend on the Dead. The late '60s, early '70s. He does it so well and that's something that we really haven't concentrated on in this band until now. Jeff brings just a little more grease, that psychedelic greasy element that was missing in John's playing. -Rob Barraco**

---

---

The duty of arranging the setlist night after night is no simple task, and none of the others envy Eaton's role. On a nightly basis he must satisfy the desires of the crowd as well as those of his bandmates. He and he alone holds the vital judgment of whether to execute an "elective" or a "recreation" set.

"I look at what we've done at a venue and go back to the last five times we played that city on tour. If we haven't done one of our own setlists [elective] in four or five years, then we are due for one," says Eaton. "I plot out what it is that we should be doing and then I start

## Dark Star Orchestra: Life After Dead

By: Jarrod Dicker || Page 3 of 3

going through setlists to put the Rubik's Cube together and make it all work. It's quite a tedious process, but it keeps it interesting for us and gives the fans something different every time we come to town. They know they're not going to see the same thing."

The relationship between Dark Star and living Grateful Dead members is congenial. As mentioned, John Kadlecik left DSO to join Furthur. Jeff Mattson is the guitarist in the Donna Jean Godchaux Band and has co-written a song with Barraco on Phil & Friends' There and Back Again. Barraco has played in The Other Ones, The Dead, RatDog and Phil & Friends. All remaining DSO members have either been involved with previous Grateful Dead affiliations or tribute groups, too. But it's Barraco who had the grand opportunity to work side by side with a key Dead "member," Robert Hunter. Meeting him while on a string of shows with Phil & Friends in 2001, Barraco humbly introduced himself to the lyricist and from that moment on a friendship bloomed. This segued to the production of a co-written studio album in 2007 titled *When We All Come Home*.



Rob Eaton by Peter Wochniak



Dark Star Orchestra by Peter Wochniak

"We started talking about songwriting as a craft and I looked at him and said, 'I got some stuff.' He just stopped me in my tracks and said, 'Send it to me, and let me hear what you're doing.' He gave me his address and I went back to my girlfriend at the time's place in Portland and sat in the bedroom for days doing demos. I was so excited that Robert Hunter was going to listen to my music," Barraco explains. "I sent him three songs, and three weeks later I got an email stating, 'Your music is speaking to me.' In that, he sent his phone number and said to give him a call in a week or so. So I called him up and he says, 'Listen man, can you come down here to San Rafael? I got some really good stuff for you.' I went down and visited him. I sat in his living room and he handed me these sheets of paper. In my head I'm listening to my music and reading his lyrics and I was just so blown away because he captured the spirit of it all - I basically did not have to do any editing with it, he did it perfectly. I looked at him, dumbfounded, and said, 'Do you think you're up for a little more?' And he just said to lay it on him. After that, I just started sending him stuff and in a very short period of time it became an album's worth of material."

Dark Star Orchestra's claim to fame with fans will always be their magical reincarnation of the Grateful Dead's music. However, some original creative expansion is taking place removed from the Dead catalog.

"We've started working on an original project," says Barraco. "We all live in different parts of the country though, and it's hard for us to get together in the studio at given times. Rob Eaton is a Grammy Award winning studio engineer and [he's] just brilliant. He's a brilliant producer and a brilliant recording artist. One of our drummers is a really good producer as well, and is really into recording. We all have Pro Tools on the road, so the way we do it is somebody comes up with an idea and we pass it around, see what one another could make of it. They'll play a part and put a part down, and so on. So, we started working on that and so far it has been really cool. Unfortunately, John [Kadlecik] leaving the band sort of put a little monkey wrench in that for the time being, but whoever we end up with as our guitar player, they're both down to do it."

Dark Star has constantly had to deal with misconceptions about what they do. Dismissing the tag of "cover band," the group feels that their mission and performance expands way beyond the generic label. Yes, they carry out a catalog of music created by another group, but it is in the spirit of the improvisations where they shine most uniquely. They do NOT think they are the Grateful Dead, and as Eaton puts it, they know damn well who they are.

"Here's a great analogy I have used before," explains Eaton. "Say I'm a painter and I have a setlist and this wood frame. The wood frame on this white canvas is the setlist, the order of the songs and the arrangements of the songs. All the colors and textures and patterns that get splattered on this canvas over the course of the night are the improvisations that differ on a nightly basis. I think that's all we can do, to be true to ourselves and to be true to the emotional content of the music. We play it with heart and soul, and that's really what the people get. People get the feeling. When you can transfer something you're feeling into sound that someone else could hear and feel that's a great thing. Jerry was really great at it. If we can tap into even a little part of that, that's really what it's all about."

"We honor that music like Bach, Beethoven and Chopin because we think that this music needs to live on through the ages," Barraco continues. "It's incredibly important, it's uniquely American, and we want to honor it that way. We want to approach it the same way they approached it. We want to take ourselves on that journey. By the very nature of doing that, we take the entire audience on the same journey."

**JamBase | Ridin' That Train | Go See Live Music!**



## Features

### Truckin' On: Rob Koritz On DSO, Post-Kadlecik

By Chad Berndtson

November 16, 2009



One of the scene's most visible bands has a certain void, [now that word's out](#) that John Kadlecik will exit Dark Star [Orchestra](#) early next month. But in an exclusive interview with *Glide*, DSO drummer Rob Koritz reminds us not to worry -- Jeff Mattson's aboard (at least for now) and Dark Star has big things ahead in 2010.

#### Monday marks a big transition for the band...

Yeah, it's a kind of day I'm not looking forward to, but it's also going to be exciting. There are a lot of unknowns right now. I'm sure we're going to be fine, and we always have that to fall back on. It's a bit of an uneasy thing. But I have to remind myself, we've been through stuff like this before. We spent so long trying to get a rhythm guitar player -- Rob [Eaton] was in and out. We went through a bunch of guys. Then, we dealt with it again, more unfortunately, with the Scott [Larned] situation. We can do this.

#### Can you take me through the process through which "John is going to play with Furthur became "John has to leave Dark Star Orchestra"?

Well, it all started when we heard about it and he got the call. He wasn't sure then if he'd be departing. He was presented the opportunity to play with Furthur with Bob and Phil. Every single man's reaction in the band was, oh my god, congratulations, fantastic. Let me be clear that no one has any ill will. Any one of us would have taken this opportunity. I mean, you get to do this job with The Guys! How cool is that? We are all totally thrilled for him.

For whatever reasons, though, it turned out that John...well, they needed John to be available, and with our touring schedule, that's just not possible. We tour hard, as you know. It turned out that John decided to resign and that needed to be the best move. We've known this for a while so it's been hard. No one could come out and say it right away because we had certain days of ours ready and about to be announced. Also, we wanted to show them [Furthur] the respect they deserve -- as, in a way, we always try to. But John is leaving the band. It's bittersweet. I love John and it's been such a treat to play with him.

At the same time, it's been [pretty](#) exciting. Right off the bat, Jeff Mattson is going to come in and take over in the immediate future. We've played with Jeff and had him play with the band for ages, and we've all played with the Zen Tricksters one time or another. We're all good friends, so we're totally psyched to have Jeff -- it's going to take our jams in a lot of different directions. Not better directions or worse directions, just different than what we've done for the past 12 years. It's also a definite added bonus that he and Barraco played together in a band for 11 years and were roommates for 9 of those years. Jeff can literally jump right in and keep it rolling. That's extremely important. We have to come out slamming right from the get-go without John to show people that this thing is not going to die. We have to nail it.

#### Let's stay with the John decision a minute. When did he inform you guys that he planned to resign?

We first found out in August or September that there would be more Furthur. We'd just come off tour and we were about to go on one of the longest breaks we've ever taken. We knew about it then and we thought that he was going to be able to do both. Then, we got a call letting us know that he wasn't going to be able to do it in 2010 [Dark Star]. We were all taken aback by it -- we thought he might be able to do both. You know I can't speak for John. I don't know what they asked him. I know for certain that they want to have him be available as much as possible, and you know, maybe there's other mitigating factors. He's been doing this for 12 years so that might have been part of it, too.

#### How did he notify you of his decision?

He called each of us personally. We've been together for so long, and we don't need to use managers to talk to each other. Really, we wish nothing but the best for John.

#### Do you think John worries at all about how shaky some of those Dead members' projects can be? That he's making the wrong decision?

I'm not going to say no comment because that response fell like a ton of bricks in your last interview with us [laughs]. You'd have to ask John I think.

#### Seeing as Barraco was in the Phil Quintet and then [the Dead](#) do you think John sought out his advice on how to proceed?

I really don't know. I'm sure they talked but the decision was 100 percent John's.

#### When it was clear Dark Star would have a void in the guitar chair, was Jeff your first call?

He was an automatic. We talked and we said, there are two things we have to figure out. We need to know the long term plans, sure, but we also need to think about the short term: we have gigs lined up this year and we need someone who can step in right away. So, let's call Jeff. It was instantaneous. He's the first person we'd think of on talent alone, but because of the he and Barraco thing it seemed even easier. Let's call Jeff.

#### Has Jeff been offered the permanent gig?

[Pause] You know, when Scott died, we were thinking about Barraco immediately. At that point, we didn't even know how to get in [contact](#) with him immediately. God bless him, though, he called us, and said, if you need help to keep this going right now, say the word. Hopefully that's going to happen again. Jeff has a lot going on. He made a big change in his own music by parting ways with the Tricksters, and I know they're still going to play together here and there, but he made a big jump to do his thing with Donna Jean.

#### If he decides he wants to then, does Jeff get the Dark Star spot?

We would love to have him. I don't think it's completely out of the question. We also love Donna -- she plays with us so much -- and we'd never want to get in the way of anything she'd want to do musically. It's hard to say.

#### Do you have other guitarists in mind?

I can't name names. We have some other names in mind and people who have known what was going on whose opinions we trust and who know other guitar players. Right now, we're addressing the guitar spot the way we did the keyboard spot after Scott. We're covered for the moment. Jeff is going to help us best he can, and who knows how long he'll do it or even want to do it. We'll be listening and keeping our eyes open.

#### What is your message to Dark Star fans at this moment? How are you letting them know don't worry, this thing is alive and well?

Don't worry, this thing is alive and well! [laughs] Seriously, that's been the hardest part of this whole thing -- just trying to do this in the proper way. We didn't know what the proper way was. It had to play itself out and show itself to us. People who were big fans of the band kept coming up at shows and asking what was up, and not being able to tell them anything was hard. We weren't in a position where we could come public with this. We had to make sure we had our ducks in a row and Furthur and John had to have their ducks in a row.

#### What are you saying to fans who bought tickets to, say, New Year's Eve expecting to see John there?

I don't think we owe an apology to our fans, but to the ones who felt like we didn't give them enough information, I'm sorry. We really appreciated how many people were trying to be a voice of reason on this -- at our shows, on message boards, everything. Those were the people who said, this is how they make their living and I trust and respect that they will handle this the right way.

#### Indeed. And there has to be a comfort -- you said it's almost exciting -- in knowing word's out and you guys can push forward now that you've brought us all up to speed.

The time is right, and everything is in a row. The music is bigger than any one of us, and I think our fans know us well enough to know we're not going to go onstage and knowingly put an inferior product out there. We're going to work our tails off to keep this thing alive and keep it great. Don't worry about us. We're going to come out rocking like we always do.

*Chad Berndtson writes for The Patriot Ledger, Glide, Hidden Track, Relix, PopMatters and other publications. He lives in New York City; drop him a line at [cberndtson\[at\]gmail\[dot\]com](mailto:cberndtson[at]gmail[dot]com).*



# DARK STARS

## HARD-WORKING TRIBUTE BAND EMULATES THE GRATEFUL DEAD BY RE-CREATING ENTIRE SHOWS



**RAY DUCKLER**  
MONITOR COLUMNIST

**S**oundman Dan Healy and keyboardist Rob Barraco moved seamlessly through every topic, like an improvisational jam by the band that first dared to try it.

They are two pieces of Dark Star Orchestra (DSO), whose recreation of Grateful Dead shows, song by song, has allowed fans to relive something through more than just compact discs or tapes.

DSO will appear Tuesday at 7:30 p.m. at the Capitol Center for the Arts, marking, to the date, the band's 11th anniversary show. They'll play 22 shows from Nov. 7-Dec. 6, starting the tour in Washington, D.C., cutting through New England, Philadelphia and New York City, and eventually finishing in New Jersey.

As for the set list here, the date and year of the show, and the city in which it was performed, your guess is as good as mine. That's part of the fun.

Healy is a genuine insider; the Dead's soundman for nearly 30 years. He was there near the start, in the mid 1960s, when LSD was legal, and the band indulged and built a sound that would evolve several times through the next three decades.

He may be a bit biased, but

when you hear Healy say by phone, "There are moments where I can close my eyes and go back 30 years and have it be every bit as rewarding and satisfying," you've got to believe that DSO does its job well.

And fans simply don't want to let go.

DSO plays around 150 shows per year, covering 220 days, according to media relations man Dave Weissman of Ohio. That's more time than the Dead invested annually through its last 10 years or so of touring, before lead guitarist

*Dark Star Orchestra  
plays around 150  
shows per year,  
covering 220 days.*

Jerry Garcia died in August 1995.

It says a lot, about both bands, about their passion for the music, their taste for adventures in improvisation and where it might lead.

Barraco, 52, joined DSO a year ago. He's been playing professionally all his adult life. He toured with the living members of the Dead in 2002 and '03. He knows all about playing outside boundaries.

"Sugar Magnolia, I played that song more than any other, and there was a time in the mid '80s where I said, 'If I never play this song again, I'll be happy,'" Barraco said. "But it's because everyone is willing to take chances. How can I stay in the moment and make it new? Everybody embraces that

See DSO - D6

## Learning to love the Dead

By CLAY McCUISTION  
Monitor staff

I knew about the Grateful Dead, of course.

Everyone knows about the Grateful Dead - or at least recognizes the band's distinctive iconography. Skeletons with top hats, rainbow-colored teddy bears, grandfatherly Jerry Garcia.

What I didn't know about the band was its music. Sure, I'd heard a bit of it in college, rambling stuff played on tinny boomboxes in ramshackle houses. But I didn't know it.

That all changed (as do a surprising number of things in my life) with a video game. *Rock Band*, the music simulator that includes plastic guitar and drum set, makes several of the band's songs available for play. I was charmed and diverted by one song in particular, "China Cat Sunflower." It bubbled



**Garcia**

weeks, I was hooked.

I didn't become a Deadhead. That takes years of practice, dedication and pharmaceuticals. But I made an important discovery - you don't have to be a Deadhead to appreciate the band.

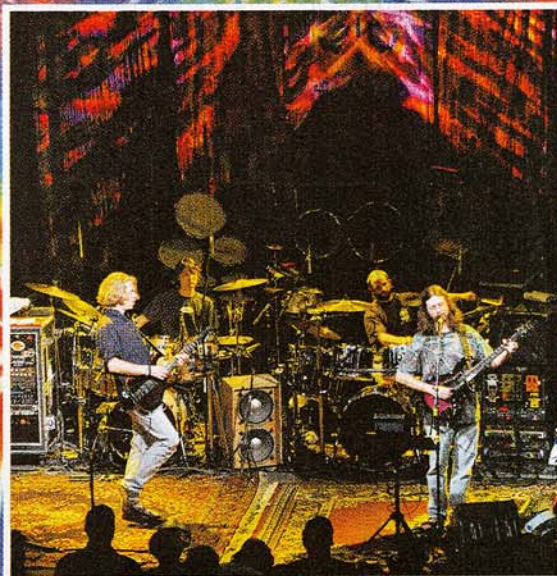
It's true.

You see, the Grateful Dead was, above all else, overwhelmingly musical, a collection of plain-

with psychedelic energy.

One quick trip to Borders later, I had the band's psychedelic album *Aoxomoxoa* in hand. Soon after, I bought the classic *American Beauty*. Within a few

See DEAD - D6



Courtesy photos

The Dark Star Orchestra, a Grateful Dead tribute band that plays complete shows from the Dead's touring history, shown onstage and off.



## DSO Continued from D1

spirit. You have to be of that mindset, that anything can happen, and you have to accept it."

It's the thumbprint left by Garcia, who started playing bluegrass in the early 1960s and then took his music in every possible direction after that.

As Healy, a close friend of Garcia's, says, "He was an artistic enabler. If you're taking your best shot, even if you were insecure, that's what (the Dead) did, and that's what he gave us."

Early Dead shows were different, a communal experience based in the communal capital of the world, San Francisco. The shows were sometimes free, drugs were prevalent, and the mainstream media and society in general scratched their heads and wondered what the hell was going on.

They never realized, or didn't care to know, that the counterculture grew out of racism, out of a war in Southeast Asia, out of corruption in politics.

Dead lyrics, though, unlike those of other bands of the era, weren't exacting. But nothing the Dead ever did had much structure. It was always open to interpretation.

"We were rebels without a cause, but we were never shiftless people," Healy said. "We weren't vandals. We were only restless so far as there was an expressive outlet that needed to open up for us. Then we realized we were not bad seeds and juvenile delinquents. We were extremely thankful that we weren't bank robbers, we weren't Bonnie and Clyde. When we found

out what drew us together, it was creative and it didn't hurt anybody and it didn't leave any huge wakes behind us."

But it left a huge impression that lasts to this day.

### These things mattered

What did the Dead open with? What did they end with? What did they play coming out of the space jam?

The songs melted together, non stop, leaving fans salivating over what was next.

In the world of the Dead, these things mattered, somehow revealing, we thought, what kind of mood the band was in that night, or how tired the members were, or how optimistic, or how down.

Each show had a different set list, each song had varying versions, and each fan embraced the work and creativity that the Dead put into every show.

Garcia's teardrop leads, so delicate, so fragile, yet so hopeful and melodic, carried the band's message of fear tinged with optimism.

With the Dead, there was always, "danger at your door," as the song "Uncle John's Band" states, but, ultimately, truth and love would triumph.

In the end, though, the movement, the whiff of tolerance and compromise and acceptance in the 1960s, failed to sustain traction. The drug scene that accompanied it and eventually killed Garcia and other musicians earlier only tarnished the vibe.

Still, the Dead became a cultural

phenomenon and a money-making machine, although hardly over night.

Bob Weir, the Dead's rhythm guitar player, once labeled the Dead as "the slowest rising rock 'n' roll band," and he was right. Its albums weren't commercially successful through the 1960s and '70s.

Fans, instead, opted for live bootlegs, which they could tape themselves, then trade, compilations of the Dead and its tapping section, which was roped off behind the sound board.

And, of course, there were live shows, the core of the program for a fiercely loyal but relatively small subculture.

### Changing times

Things changed dramatically, however, after the release of *The Dark* in 1987. Suddenly, word was out about the sound, about the free-for-all, about the music, about the drugs.

A Dead ticket became a hot commodity, eventually being offered through mail order only. Drug dealers, fans without tickets, bootleg merchandisers and others who simply wanted to hop aboard for the ride, with little regard for the music, began infiltrating the scene.

Healy says Garcia was never comfortable with his immense popularity. He was the heart and soul of the band, whether he liked it or not. He tried to shake his demons, the drugs, but died while in a rehab clinic. Healy thinks

fame and the absurd hero worship that followed the band contributed to Garcia's death.

"I do think that," Healy said, softly. "The money started to flow, and the wheels started to fall off the wagon... Jerry wanted a private life, and he was always really sad. This wasn't part of the deal. It took us by surprise, an unsavory realization. In the end, it killed him."

But the journey continues, through the rest of the Dead's musicians, the ubiquitous bootlegs and DSO.

Barraco saw the Dead more than 400 times. That's a lot of shows, sure, but in the context of the Dead, it's really not that unusual.

Barraco recalls his first show, March 28, 1972, like it was a monumental time in history. And for him, at age 15, it was.

"I was already a fan of the music," Barraco said. "But I had no idea of the length that these guys went as far as improvisation—al music was concerned."

DSO began playing in Chicago on Nov. 11, 1997. It was founded by lead guitarist John Kadlecik and keyboardist Scott Larned, who died of a heart attack in 2005.

The shows reflect different eras. For instance, Lisa Mackey will sing during a concert from the 1970s, when Donna Godchaux served as a backup vocalist.

The band regularly attracts around 1,500 fans, Weissman said, and once played in front of nearly 3,000 in Albany, N.Y. The musicians

aren't rich, but they make a good living and have mortgages.

It's a dream job, true, but a hard one.

"It's a grueling schedule," says Weissman, DSO's media relations director the past six years. "We have a crew, but they don't take care of everything. The band members are involved in setting up and taking care of their own gear. Set up two hours, sound check, four-hour show, load up, gone again."

Adds Barraco, "After a couple of weeks, I get homesick. I have a girlfriend who supports what I do. Is she happy about it? No. But she loves me, and she would rather have a happy Rob over a sad Rob."

They take three-week breaks from traveling, time spent recharging their batteries and regaining a hunger that comes from improvising and a pure love for the music.

"DSO plays the music from within their hearts and has a great devotion and commitment," Healy says. "That's why I do this."

And that's why the fans, known as Deadheads, are doing this as well. Graying hippies, now in their 50s, and teenagers who were in nursery school when Garcia died now mix for DSO shows.

They'll converge this Tuesday at the Capitol Center, keeping something alive that, for some strange reason, never got old. Explained Barraco, "Fans get it. They're along for the journey."

(Ray Duckler can be reached at rduckler@cmonitor.com.)

## Dark Star Orchestra to bring Grateful Dead's mellow vibe back to State

By Jim Catalano :: Staff Writer :: Published: Nov 13, 2008

The Dark Star Orchestra's last visit to the State Theatre was a momentous occasion: in front of a sold-out crowd, the group recreated the set list of the Grateful Dead's Barton Hall show, 30 years to the date after that legendary show at Cornell University.

"It was great to get all the Deadheads and the families out, and see the way the town responded," said DSO guitarist-vocalist Rob Eaton on the road in Concord, N.H. "That's what it's all about, anyway—just celebrating the music. The energy and the vibe was just wonderful."

That night was captured on "Ithaca 30 Years Later," a double DVD set. "We weren't planning on it, but they had done some filming so they decided to release it," Eaton said.

Tuesday, DSO returns to the State Theatre for the first time since that show. General admission tickets for the 8 p.m. show are \$27.50 and available at the State Theatre Box Office (105 W. State St.), by calling (800) 919-6272 or online at [www.stateofithaca.com](http://www.stateofithaca.com). One dollar from each ticket will directly benefit the REX Foundation.

Unlike that night, DSO usually doesn't announce in advance which Dead show's set list that they will be recreating. "There's no way to copy what they did—you don't even want to," Eaton said. "And you don't want to look at it that deeply. You just want to take the basic vibe of the music and play it. If you're trying to copy it, you're sort of going against what it's all about. So it's just a set list of tunes, really, for us."

When it comes to the music, Eaton points out that DSO has one advantage over the Dead. "One of the things we have that the Dead never had was access to all of the material at one time," he said. "The Dead would go through their career and drop songs and add others—the repertoire would shift over time. For us, since we've played so many different eras of the Grateful Dead's history, we have more songs at our disposal at any given time than they had. We almost know their entire catalog that we can play on any given day, whereas the Dead never had that. We have hundreds of songs and different ways to play them."



The Dark Star Orchestra returns to the State Theatre Tuesday night. (Provided)



Members of the Dark Star Orchestra performed on May, 8, 2007, at the State Theatre to mark the 30th anniversary of the Grateful Dead's legendary Barton Hall show. (BILL WARREN / Journal Staff)

DSO recently recruited Dan Healy, the Dead's longtime soundman, to mix their shows. "He's very talented and we're very lucky to have him," Eaton says. "For me, going to Grateful Dead concerts all those years, I only know what the Dead sound like through his ears. He's the one who brought the music to the people, in a way, and it's very special to have his interpretation of it delivered at our shows."

"He's riding on the bus with us, as opposed to the Four Seasons and Learjets with the Dead," Eaton continued with a big laugh. "But he enjoys it. He loves the music and you see him out there dancing and singing. It's all part of the trip. We're all just out there celebrating the music that we all love and the culture that it produced. He's a big part of that and a big part of why we're all Deadheads."

The Grateful Dead may be defunct, but bands like DSO carry on their music to new generations of fans. "To me, that's the cool part-- seeing the kids who came a generation after the Dead were here, and the smiles on their faces singing along to the songs, like I did when I was a kid," Eaton says. "For me, it's not so much about converting the crusty Deadhead to like what we do. It's more about turning the younger kids on to the music, because they're the ones who are going to keep it going. And it's way of life, it's a community and a mindset. It's a subculture of our society that I think it's important that still exists."

To learn more, visit [www.darkstarorchestra.com](http://www.darkstarorchestra.com).  
[jcatalano@gannett.com](mailto:jcatalano@gannett.com)

**If you go :: Dark Star Orchestra**  
**What: Grateful Dead tribute**  
**When: 8 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 18**  
**Where: State Theatre**



# ENTERTAINMENT



## Bringing the Dead to life

### Dark Star Orchestra to reenact memorable Grateful Dead shows

By A.M. WERTZ  
awertz@sungazette.com

#### IN THEIR OWN WORDS

***"Dark Star Orchestra isn't a cover band. It's shows are not meant as tributes. What Dark Star Orchestra tirelessly strives for and achieves is a continuation of the spirit of what has now become over forty years of the Grateful Dead's timeless music."***

Dark Star Orchestra will celebrate its 11th anniversary with a Friday performance at the Community Arts Center, 220 W. Fourth St.

The show, which is set to begin at 7:30 p.m., is part of a 22-part tour in support of the Rex Foundation, a non-profit organization that was started in 1983 by members of the Grateful Dead to "proactively provide extensive community support to creative endeavors in the arts, sciences and education," according to [rexfoundation.org](http://rexfoundation.org).

The band — which includes John Kadlecik (Jerry Garcia), Lisa Mackey (Donna Jean Godchaux), Dino English (Bill Kreutzman), Rob Koritz (Mickey Hart), Kevin Rosen (Phil Lesh), Rob Eaton (Bob Weir) and Rob Barraco (keyboardist) — has recreated more than 1,000 complete historic Grateful Dead shows and occasionally incorporates their original ordered set lists of Grateful Dead songs to create a unique experience.

Founded in Chicago, the band doesn't try to repeat every note — Barraco thinks the improvisational aspect would appeal to Jerry Garcia, former frontman — but each member does strive to find the proper phrasing, stance and aura.

When original member Scott Larned died of a heart attack during the band's 2005 tour, Barraco permanently joined the band in the summer of 2007 as one of the

Dead's five keyboardists.

"Since I'd been working with the Grateful Dead and Phil Lesh for years, they knew that they wouldn't have to rehearse somebody and I had a window of time that worked perfectly," Barraco said. "So, I went out on tour with them and was really enjoying myself. I shared my time between them and Phil Lesh and at some point in 2007, they approached me and asked me to make a commitment and it seemed like a good thing to do. I love the music."

The band's name originated from a signature Grateful Dead song, "Dark Star," that, according to Barraco, was a jam song.

"It's very open-ended with one small section of melody and lyrics," he said. "It's mostly about exploration and it became synonymous with the Grateful Dead, given the premise that they create the experience."

Each day, Dark Star Orchestra prearranges a different show that they've chosen

to recreate. One day might include a 1982 show, without a female vocalist, because the Grateful Dead did not tour with a woman at this time, but a 1970s show would include singer Mackey, who provides the female harmonies.

"We have the script, the set list, but really what we're doing is we're improvising, we're reliving this experience ourselves, it's very unpredictable with what's happening," Barraco said. "The fact that we're actually recreating shows — no one else is doing that."

The stage set up is incredible, varying from era to era, Barraco said.

"We have to wear very many hats in the band. There's different keyboard setups, different guitar setups, the drummers have a huge setup for the '80s show. There's more instruments than I've ever seen."

The band also is joined by Dan Healy, sound engineer for the Dead for years, to perfect the authentic sound.

Dark Star Orchestra has brought the Dead to life all over the country and also to Europe and Mexico. On occasion, members of the Grateful Dead have toured with the group, including Bob Weir, singer and guitarist, and Bill Kreutzmann, drummer, and Phish's Mike Gordon also sat in with the band earlier this year.

"A couple of times when I had my back to John (Kadlecik) onstage and he started to sing, I had this weird sense that it was Jerry," Weir commented in a July 2002 article in Rolling Stone magazine.



PHOTO PROVIDED

**Dark Star Orchestra — which includes John Kadlecik (Jerry Garcia), Lisa Mackey (Donna Jean Godchaux), Dino English (Bill Kreutzman), Rob Koritz (Mickey Hart), Kevin Rosen (Phil Lesh), Rob Eaton (Bob Weir) and Rob Barraco (keyboardist) — has recreated more than 1,000 complete historic Grateful Dead shows and occasionally incorporates their original ordered set lists of Grateful Dead songs to create a unique experience.**

"Micky Hart's wife came to see us and said, while it was outstanding, that it would break his heart," Barraco said.

DSO also is celebrating the release of a live double DVD set, "Ithaca 30 Years Later: The Video," shot on location at the State Theater of Ithaca at the band's sold-out performance of Dark Star Orchestra's May 8, 1977, 30th anniversary recreation, in the city it originally happened in, 30 years later.

DSO's "Rex Caravan Tour" is contributing \$1 per ticket to benefit the foundation, which has granted more than \$8.2 million to some 1,000 recipients since its inception.

Dark Star Orchestra has been able to raise more than \$130,000 for the Rex Foundation.

"We feel that it's such an honorable cause," Barraco said. "In the last couple of years, Rex has raised so much money and we've been a large part of that. Now different bands are starting to climb on board throughout the whole country."

Merchandise, including the DVD set, will be sold at the show. Tickets start at \$26 and may be bought at the Community Arts Center Box Office.

For more information, call 326-2424 or visit [www.darkstarorchestra.net](http://www.darkstarorchestra.net).

# Bring out your Deadheads

By James Buescher, Sunday News | Published: Nov 25, 2006  
© 2004-2006 Lancaster Newspapers, Inc.

LANCASTER COUNTY, PA - It's not every day your child grows up to be Jerry Garcia. But John Kadlecik, who portrays Garcia nightly in the touring Grateful Dead cover band "Dark Star Orchestra," says his parents are "cool with it."

"My mom bought me my first electric guitar, and my dad got me my first acoustic one. They're incredibly supportive of what I'm doing," said Kadlecik, speaking in a telephone interview just before a concert in Rochester, N.Y. "They've known I've loved music since I was a kid," he said. "In fact, by the time I was 18, I'd already studied violin for six years and been doing self-taught guitar for three."

Kadlecik's group, which he describes as an "art adventure," isn't like other cover bands that tour regional clubs, echoing the hits of their musical heroes. In fact, Dark Star Orchestra has gained a national following of its own because it recreates Grateful Dead live shows of yesteryear.

"There's a classic misconception out there that we're redoing the Dead note-for-note, and that's just not true. What we're doing is improvising within a framework captured in live recordings," Kadlecik said. "There are rules here, and we're playing within those rules."

"Each show has an aspect of recreation going on, but also creation, too."

Dark Star Orchestra features Kadlecik portraying Garcia, Lisa Mackey as Dead vocalist Donna Jean Godchaux, Dino English as drummer Bill Kreutzmann, Kevin Rosen as bass guitarist and singer Phil Lesh, Rob Koritz as drummer Mickey Hart and Rob Eaton as rhythm guitarist Bob Weir.

## Fine tuning

Each night, the Chicago-based band recreates historic Grateful Dead set lists in much the same way a chamber orchestra might interpret Bach or Mozart.

"We were all Grateful Dead fanatics, so when we came to this, it was like Deadhead finishing school," Kadlecik said. "Because we were already musicians, as well as big Grateful Dead fans, it was more a matter of fine tuning rather than straight-out learning."

Raised in the Midwest, Kadlecik briefly attended Harper College in suburban Chicago before dropping out to pursue a music career. After playing in Wingnut, a jazz-fusion band, and covering artists from Bob Dylan to Pink Floyd in a band called Hairball Willie, Kadlecik and his current mates started playing Tuesday night gigs at Martyrs' Restaurant & Pub, an eclectic Chicago nightclub, in 1997.

A year later, members of the celebrated progressive-rock band Phish caught one of Dark Star Orchestra's shows and created an industry-wide buzz. Soon after, a profile in the Washington Post declared the band "the hottest Grateful Dead tribute act going."

Today, the group tours almost nonstop, surprising each audience with its choice of Grateful Dead concert date. The band announces the date and location of the show they've been performing only at the end of the set.

"I like to think of us as being something like Old and in the Way," said Kadlecik, referring to Garcia's early-years San Francisco bluegrass band. "We're paying homage to these Dead songs in a very traditional way, in somewhat the same fashion that Jerry Garcia once played folk music on his banjo."

When Dark Star played Martyrs', Kadlecik said, most of the early concerts were something of a best-of compilation, but as time passed and the group improved, they began choosing set lists from the 2000-plus live shows the Dead performed in its 30-year career.

"At the beginning, we just followed those set lists, but then we started understanding the different subtle changes in the songs," he said. "Once we had that understanding, we started expanding on patterns. Then, with that framework down, we were able to improvise."

## A long, strange trip

Formed in San Francisco in 1965, the Grateful Dead's early music was heavily influenced by R&B and LSD. In fact, the band served for awhile as the de facto resident band of Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters, a sort of mobile 1960s-era circuit party that traveled across the country in a psychedelic school bus.

Touring constantly, the Grateful Dead developed a signature laid-back style famous for its extended jam sessions, often employing "group mind" improvisations with each band member riffing individually while still blending with the whole.

Jerry Garcia's well-publicized battle with obesity and drug addiction ended with his death on Aug. 9, 1995, the result of a heart attack he suffered during a stay in a California drug rehab center.

"I'm not going to speculate on what Jerry Garcia would have thought ... about what we're doing. I don't feel it's my place. But I do know that Mountain Girl liked us, and that's pretty amazing," said Kadlecik, referring to Carolyn Garcia, Garcia's ex-wife and a former Merry Prankster. "What we're doing here ... it's just a different approach of honoring the Dead."

*Dark Star Orchestra will play Lancaster's Chameleon Club, 223 N. Water St., at 9 p.m. Wednesday. You must be 21 to enter. Tickets cost \$18 in advance or \$20 the day of the show. For more information, call 393-7133 or visit [www.chameleonclub.net](http://www.chameleonclub.net).*



# Having a near-Dead Experience

Jeff Spevak, Staff music critic | November 16, 2006 | Copyright © 2006, The Rochester Democrat and Chronicle

Beethoven was a notorious slob who wore filthy clothes and left uneaten food strewn about his apartment. Yet you wouldn't expect a conductor today to take his position at the front of the orchestra and, just before launching into the opening notes of *Symphony No. 9*, kick off his mud-stained loafers and set his half-eaten, Styrofoam carton of chicken wings on the lectern in front of him. Interpreting music isn't like acting the part. It's less a mirror than it is a window.

"We have some members that resemble the Grateful Dead, in some ways," concedes Dino English of Dark Star Orchestra, a Grateful Dead tribute band. "It's not an on-purpose kinda thing. It's not about going for the look. It's really about the music."

Dark Star Orchestra, which plays Nov. 21 at Water Street Music Hall, was created nine years ago by a fellow named Bob Matthews, who was a producer and engineer with the Dead from the 1960s into the '80s. The idea was for each show to be a recreation of a different Grateful Dead set, song by song, over the course of the evening.

There have been Grateful Dead tribute bands playing for decades now, but after Garcia's death in 1995, "the crowds went up," says English, a 38-year-old St. Louis native.

"I was playing for some of the different bands and was starting to take it more seriously, just to try to keep the music going. I wanted to make sure the music was played with integrity and played right. It was always falling short of that."

Until a night in Chicago seven years ago when, while playing drums with another band, English took a break and wandered down the street to another club. Dark Star Orchestra was playing. "I decided, 'As long as someone's getting it right, there's no point in me doing it,'" English remembers thinking. "Shortly after that, I saw an advertisement on their Web site. They were looking for a drummer.

"My first show was my audition, playing for 400 people."

No small deal for English, who from then on would be Bill Kreutzmann to thousands of Deadheads who won't let go. Through its history, the Dead played about 2,500 shows, virtually all unique. "We know maybe 300 different songs at any one time," English says. "With rehearsal we could probably play another 100." Dark Star is up to about 1,300 shows, which includes 900 different Dead sets. They've pretty much mined dry a favorite era, 1976-78, meaning repeats are necessary if Dark Star Orchestra wants to play anything from that time. And about one in four shows is a free-for-all of songs, including music from the Jerry Garcia Band and various side projects.

Which show the band is playing for each gig is a secret, to be revealed only at the end of the night. Until that moment, Deadheads hear the music played on the same type of equipment that the Dead used. Dark Star Orchestra even has a Brent Mydland keyboard and one of Phil Lesh's basses. For further authenticity, former Dead members Donna Jean Godchaux, Bob Weir, Vince Welnick, Tom Constanten and Kreutzmann (whom English does not even remotely resemble) have even performed with the Dark Star Orchestra.

"We're trying to get a similar tone out of the instruments, not a note-for-note thing by any means," English says. "We want the song structure to be similar, the melody to be there, the harmonies to be there, the chord structure. When it comes to the improvisation that happens, we try to stretch it as much as we can. We use the songs as a launching pad. We're not trying to copy anything."

You wouldn't expect the band to copy one of the less-desirable aspects of the Dead legend. Yet that, sadly, has happened. Four of the Dead's keyboardists have passed away over the years, most recently Welnick. During last year's tour, one of Dark Star's founding members, keyboardist Scott Larned, died of a heart attack. According to English, his death wasn't attributed to that most-rock-star of deaths, drugs, but the quiet killer of thousands every year: high cholesterol.

So there are limits, and the band members may feel grateful for that.

Guitarist John Kadlecik didn't have to sacrifice a finger to make the band: As all Deadheads know, Garcia lost one of his in a childhood ax accident. And, "We don't have the parking-lot scene in most places we go to, like they did," English concedes. "They had tens of thousands of people coming to a show. Although I'm sure before our show people are eating their veggie burritos and smoking whatever they've got."



# DENVERPOST.com

## Dark Star Orchestra fit to be dyed

Cover band's jams keep Dead alive

Article Last Updated: 7/25/2005 02:58 AM By Elana Ashanti  
Jefferson Denver Post Staff Writer, DenverPost.com

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, the Grateful Dead's surviving members must feel the Dark Star Orchestra's long, strange tribute is a singular honor.

Dark Star, named after one of the legendary band's classic songs, draws from a music well that includes 2,500 Dead songs performed over the course of three decades. The cover band, which makes a series of Colorado appearances this week, goes to exhaustive lengths to reproduce sets from classic Dead shows, even duplicating the number and placement of microphones on stage.

Speaking from the road recently, singer/guitarist Rob Eaton said the mistake music fans often make is assuming every single note is a precise replica. That, after all, would not be a jam - and as anyone worth their tie-dye knows, the Grateful Dead were the high priests of jam-band rock.

"We pay attention to Dead history, but we have no idea what's going to happen on any given night," said the Vail resident. "We assimilate and approximate tones and arrangements, but everything between the lines is improvisation.

"The whole point of Grateful Dead music is what happens when the people and the music get together," he added.

Eaton should know. The musician estimates that over the course of two decades before Jerry Garcia's 1995 death, he saw the Dead live more than 400 times. "The Spring '77 tour was one of my favorites."

Lately, this tribute is beginning to feel like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

For one thing, DSO's new music DVD, "Live at the Fillmore," showcases scenes from a May 2004 gig at the Fillmore San Francisco; the original venue that helped launch the Grateful Dead. That footage just happened to be captured by the Dead's longtime sound engineer, Robert Matthews. A high school buddy of Dead guitarist Bob Weir, Matthews is credited with helping shape the Dead's sound; he recorded such signature albums as "Workingman's Dead" and "Europe '72."

Adding to the aura, singer Donna Godchaux, a longtime Dead collaborator, joined DSO on stage for that concert.

But the spookiest similarity goes beyond the music as the tribute band unexpectedly lost one of its pivotal members to heart disease earlier this year. Keyboardist and co-founder Scott Larned was a clean-living 35-year-old who died in a hotel after a heart attack.

"It's quite a mystical coincidence how art imitates life, since the Grateful Dead lost three keyboardists during their career," says DSO publicist Dave Weissman.

Larned was part of "Live at the Fillmore." Trucking on down the road in spite of communal tragedy is DSO's highest tribute yet, honoring both Larned and the Dead.



DSO is a Grateful Dead tribute band. In an eerie echo of the Dead's own ill-fated keyboard players, DSO co-founder Scott Larned (second from left) died in April.

"If (Scott) was here now, he would be telling us to get out there and keep going, keep doing this," Eaton said. "The music, he would say, is bigger than any one of us."

The live footage fuses tight shots of players mid-song, enthralled by the music and the scene rather than mugging for the camera, with panoramic shots of the stage swathed in psychedelic light and tie-dye fabric. Fans swing their arms above their heads and shake their hips in front of the stage.

"It's about exposing people who weren't around for the scene and giving them a snapshot of what it was like," Eaton said. "It's not about converting old Dead Heads."

Not that Eaton is above seeking approval from fans who are essentially his peers. "That's the thing that's most flattering, when the old Grateful Dead family comes and sees us and ... continues to come to see us," he said.

The Dead themselves enjoyed covering other artists' songs, which is why "Live at the Fillmore" includes Dead-like takes on the Chuck Berry signature "Johnny B. Goode" and The Rascals' song "Good Lovin'."

Eaton, a former sound engineer in New York City, insists the Dead shtick never gets old.

"Every night is different," said Eaton, who worked with the likes of Madonna and Eric Clapton before stepping out from behind the soundboard for good to tour behind his favorite catalogue. "No song is ever played the same way twice.

"We're not beating any one thing to death because of the freedom this music gives us."

Staff writer Elana Ashanti Jefferson can be reached at 303-820-1957 or [ejefferson@denverpost.com](mailto:ejefferson@denverpost.com).

Dark Star Orchestra

The traveling cover band that re-creates famous Grateful Dead shows trucks through Colorado this week.

DENVER|Cervantes' Masterpiece Ballroom, 2637 Welton St.; 9 p.m. Wednesday|\$18-\$20, 866-464-2626 or 303-544-5875; [cervantes.baselineticketing.com](http://cervantes.baselineticketing.com).

ASPEN|Belly Up, 450 S. Galena St.; 9 p.m. Thursday|\$22, 970-544-9800; [bellyupaspen.com](http://bellyupaspen.com).

BELLVUE|Mishawaka Amphitheatre, 13714 Poudre Canyon; 8 p.m. Friday with The Hot Buttered Rum String Band; 7 p.m. Saturday With The Hot Buttered Rum String Band and Kan'Nal|\$25-\$40 (two day passes available); through TicketsWest, 800-325-7328 or [mishawaka.baselineticketing.com](http://mishawaka.baselineticketing.com) or [ticketswest.com](http://ticketswest.com).

# Dark Star Orchestra keeping Dead alive

Article created: 05/26/2005 08:20:49 AM

SEAN SPILLANE [sspillane@ctpost.com](mailto:sspillane@ctpost.com)

In 1997, John Kadlecik had the idea of taking the Grateful Dead cover band concept one step further. Instead of just playing the Dead's well-known tunes, Kadlecik thought it would be better to go back into that band's past, pick a concert and re-create that show in its entirety and Dark Star Orchestra was born.

After slowly building a fan base at Martyrs nightclub in Chicago, Dark Star Orchestra has blossomed into a solid touring act, playing, drummer Dino English estimates, "around 150 shows a year."

The group performed its 1000th show in October 2004 and recently released a three-disc set of that performance.

Fans attending a DSO concert never know which of the thousands of the Grateful Dead shows they will see performed, but the band keeps tabs on such things and rarely, if ever, does the same show in the same town.

"We keep track of everything that we've done so far and then we try to mix it up as much as possible, giving the audience a different era than they heard last time [we played that town]," said English, who joined the band in 1998. "That's a nice twist we offer the Deadheads. It's kind of fun for them to come and take a guess at what the show might be like, sharpen their Deadhead skills. "A lot of hardcore Deadheads are really serious about spreading the knowledge that they have and they have the ability to pick out the show. It's kind of a fun little game us Deadheads play."

The only limitation on Dark Star Orchestra's choice of what era of Dead music it chooses to perform is the size of the stage, a factor that comes into effect when DSP plays two nights at Toad's Place in New Haven Sunday and Monday nights.

"The size of the stage is limiting as far as what show we can do," English said. "For the '80s setup, it takes a lot more room because we have to put up The Beast [a replica of the Dead's massive percussion instruments]. The Hammond organ also takes up more space. "So when we are in those kind of situations, they're generally shows from the '70s. That's why we haven't been able to do much other stuff, like at Toad's, other than '70s stuff. Although, we will fudge from time to time and do a '90s show with kind of a smaller setup."

Being basically a cover band, it is rather remarkable that DSO has enjoyed the success it has, but Deadheads are a loyal bunch and are always on the lookout for something to fill the void left by the original band's demise. English, however, isn't that surprised by his group's accomplishments.

"I do know how tough it is to get where we are, so it's amazing in that aspect," he said. "In another aspect, I think we deserve it. I mean, the quality of the group of people we've got together, we're able to conjure up the sound [of the Grateful Dead]."

It helps that every member of Dark Star Orchestra is a tie-dyed-in-the-wool Dead fan.

"Yes, most definitely," English said. "Everybody in the band is a Deadhead, it's kind of a prerequisite. They've got to know what they're doing and they've got to have a love for the music."

The Deadheads in Dark Star Orchestra have had a few brushes with their idols, including original Grateful Dead members Bob Weir and Bill Kreutzmann, as well as former member Donna Godchaux. For English, there's no doubt as to his favorite moment.

"Bob Weir. He was a lot of fun to play with and it was a complete thrill," he said. "I was on cloud nine when that was going on."

From the highs of the band came a staggering low as keyboardist and co-founder Scott Larned passed away on April 24 at the age of 35 from a heart attack. One member of the DSO organization expressed his belief that all that time on the road, and not eating right, was a major factor in Larned's death.

"Ultimately, it's our own responsibility to take good care of ourselves and some of us try to do it a little harder than others," English said. "It's easy to not take good care of ourselves. We have the choice to eat at McDonald's or whether we want to eat a healthy, well-rounded meal."

The group canceled the remainder of its spring tour and will use a guest keyboardist for its present tour while searching for a replacement. English and the rest of the band feel it's important to keep both Dark Star Orchestra and Larned's memory alive.

"That's something we're in the process of doing," English said. "It's hard to think that the whole thing even happened in the first place. As far as picking up the pieces, we're all united in our purpose and will continue on. Personally, I would like to see this continue on for a very long time. Hopefully, it will outlast me and outlast everybody else that's in the band now."

"It's a good way to just keep the Grateful Dead music alive. Grateful Dead music is considered in a large part folk music. And the definition of folk music is that it's passed down through generations and one day I will pass it on as well."

Dark Star Orchestra performs Sunday and Monday nights at 8:30 at Toad's Place, 300 York St., New Haven. Tickets are \$22 in advance and \$25 at the door with a two-day ticket available for \$40. For more information, call 562-5589.



# Dark Star Orchestra show is Dead-on

The Dallas Morning News  
Tuesday, February 17, 2004

By **MATT WEITZ**  
Special Contributor

## POP MUSIC REVIEW

There's always a demand for cover bands. Dallas has seen in recent years groups devoted to the canon of the Kinks, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and Weezer, as well as the Grateful Dead.

But there's also always been (at the very least) a whiff of opportunism behind such efforts, as musicians whose original material doesn't bring in enough to keep a band in mac 'n' cheese exploit the public's thirst for the familiar.

In an effort to distinguish themselves from endeavors such as Club Dada's popular early Saturday evening Dead Thing — often just an exercise in drunken frat-rat buffoonery — the Dark Star Orchestra takes a different tack.

It re-creates entire shows, song-

for-song, with all the historical attention of a true fan. The actual performance reconstituted isn't revealed until the evening's end, and a lot of fan enjoyment is derived from trying to suss out just exactly what show is being played.

There are, as always, questions about building a rep upon the work of others. Lead guitarist John Kadlecik is obviously a gifted picker. On the one hand, why would he want to work so hard to sound like another artist? On the other hand, given the choice between plowing ahead with original material nobody really cares about or re-creating "Disco Inferno" for yowling conventioners at Holiday Inn, channeling Jerry Garcia isn't *that*

bad a gig.

Especially when — as Mr. Kadlecik and the Dark Star Orchestra did Saturday night at Deep Ellum Live — you can draw almost 700 aficionados to swirl, twirl, hop and boogie to Dead classics such as "Stagger Lee," "Feel Like a Stranger," the hit "Touch of Grey" and the psychedelic masterpiece and band eponym "Dark Star."

Mr. Kadlecik not only plays but sings like Mr. Garcia. To his right is Rob Eaton, who not only sings and plays like Bob Weir but also looks uncannily like the rhythm guitarist. Kevin Rosen is a low-note-lovin' six-string bassist very much in the Phil Lesh mode. Keyboardist Scott Larned does a mean Brent Mydland, not only vocally but also on the Hammond B3 organ.

All of this might be a tad creepy

if the tribute wasn't made with such palpable enthusiasm and even joy. Relying on memory — and without an actual show tape to listen to before and/or after a performance, it's hard not to think that the songs are often done with more crispness and energy than the source material.

In any case, it was somewhere around 3½ hours of music, played to please the faithful. Earlier in the day a decidedly different crowd had celebrated in much the same way at the Gaither family homecoming concert. The two shows were more alike than any fan of either might want to admit.

And the original show? It was July 12, 1990, at RFK Stadium in Washington, D.C. — and the next best thing to being there.

E-mail [mweitz@dallasnews.com](mailto:mweitz@dallasnews.com)



## Back From the Dead



**NOW** Eaton (left) and Kadlecik channel Weir and Garcia in Boulder, Colorado.



**THEN** Weir and Garcia onstage in San Francisco, December 17th, 1987

# Dead Come to Life

The Dark Star Orchestra re-creates classic Dead shows

ON A RECENT SATURDAY night in San Francisco, Bob Weir, the Grateful Dead's rhythm guitarist, is sitting backstage at the Warfield Theater, where the Dead had performed many times. In fact, he's listening to a Dead show – the same concert the band had played at the Warfield on October 14th, 1980. But on the stage, instead of his former band mates, are the members

of the Dark Star Orchestra, with Rob Eaton, who looks and sounds and moves remarkably like Weir, right in the center of the action. "I have to say it's pretty weird watching Rob," says Weir, "kind of like looking in a mirror, but not really."

Out onstage, the band is more nervous than it has ever been in the 654 performances it has given since November 11th, 1997, at a Chicago club called Martyrs', where they

copied an October 8th, 1981, Dead show in Copenhagen. "It's weird doing this impersonation thing and having the real guy show up," says keyboardist Scott Larned. Weir is a relative term in the DSO; the Dead's keyboard players tended to die young and often, and Larned could play (if that's the right term) one of three dead people, depending on the show.

The DSO's fanatical attention to detail – including the placement of microphones onstage and the use of guitars and amplifiers from the correct era – is the stuff of Dead-fan fervor. John Kadlecik, the DSO's Jerry Garcia, came up with the concept for the band while thumbing through the definitive expression of rock & roll madness: *DeadBase*, a compendium that lists the order of songs done at every Dead show.

At the Warfield, in the middle of the second set, Weir walks onstage – and Eaton walks off. "He wanted me to stay," Eaton says.

"But how can you have two Bob Weirs onstage at the same time?" Weir played for about an hour, with the audience of 1,700 clamoring for more. "A couple of times when I had my back to John and he started to sing, I had this weird sense that it was Jerry," says Weir after the show. "This is a great band, and I had a great time. And if Rob keeps this up, he's gonna make me look good for posterity." —TOM ZITO

## Jerry Garcia Get \$1.5

Highest price ever instrument

TWO OF JERRY GARCIA'S guitars were sold to an unnamed buyer for record-breaking prices at a May 8th auction, ending a protracted legal battle and making a millionaire of a destitute craftsman. Tiger, the guitar Garcia played almost exclusively from 1979 to 1990, fetched \$850,000, nearly doubling the \$450,000 paid for the previous record holder: the Stratocaster used by Eric Clapton to record "Layla." Wolf, Garcia's ax in the mid-1970s, brought \$700,000.

The sale closed a long, strange and, some would say, sad chapter in Grateful Dead history. Garcia, who died in 1995, left his five one-of-a-kind, museum-quality guitars to Doug Irwin, the California luthier who built them to Garcia's specifications. The surviving band members, however, claimed that Grateful Dead Productions had always owned the guitars, so Garcia had no business

## Dark Star Orchestra: 1,660 Shows to Go!

The Dark Star Orchestra interprets a different Grateful Dead show in every concert it does. Since forming in 1997, it has played 654 different sets – leaving roughly 1,660 live Dead performances to go. Dark Star doesn't reveal the date of the show it's performing

until after it's over. But here are some of the shows most requested by Dark Star fans:

**June 21st, 1985,** Alpine Valley, Wisconsin  
**March 19th, 1973,** Nassau Coliseum, Uniondale, New York  
**October 3rd, 1987,** Shoreline Amphitheater,

Mountain View, California  
**October 12th, 1977,** Manor Downs, Austin  
**May 18th, 1972,** Congress Hall, Munich  
**November 11th, 1973,** Winterland, San Francisco

**SUMMER TOUR DATES:**  
 6/1 Northampton, MA  
 6/2 Portsmouth, NH

6/5 Toledo, OH  
 6/6 Royal Oak, MI  
 6/7-8 Garrettsville, OH  
 6/11 Bloomington, IN  
 6/13 Chicago  
 6/14 Black River Falls, WI  
 6/15 Lesterville, MO  
 6/16 Chicago  
 7/7 Milwaukee  
 7/12 Veneta, OR  
 7/19 Englewood, CO

### Meet Dark Star



**Kevin Rosen** bass  
Plays: Phil Lesh

**Dino English** drums  
Plays: Mickey Hart

**Scott Larned** keyboards  
Plays: all five keyboardists

**Rob Eaton** guitar, vocals  
Plays: Bob Weir

**Bob Weir** guitar, vocals  
Special guest

**John Kadlecik** guitar, vocals  
Plays: Jerry Garcia

**Lisa Mackey** vocals  
Plays: Donna Godchaux

**Rob Koritz** drums  
Plays: Bill Kreutzmann



# DARK STAR ORCHESTRA

**W**hen is a Grateful Dead cover band not a Grateful Dead cover band? When it's the ultimate Grateful Dead cover band, according to Dark Star Orchestra's keyboardist, mastermind and manager, Scott Larned.



(L-R) Dino English, Kevin Rosen, John Kadlecik, Lisa Mackey, Rob Koritz, Rob Eaton & Scott Larned.

While it may sound like a prankster's answer to a ridiculous riddle, there's a serious theory at play here, and it's working. DSO has quickly risen from a Chicago club favorite into a national touring phenomenon.

"A lot of original bands didn't ... want to play Dead covers because they didn't want to get pigeonholed and stereotyped as a 'Dead cover band,'" explained Larned, who cut his teeth with the Freddy Jones Band, among others.

"So, we just thought, 'Well, let's go the opposite way and we'll make a Dead cover band and that's all it will be!'"

Dark Star Orchestra sets itself apart from a plethora of Grateful Dead tribute outfits by not merely performing covers of the band's material, but by completely re-creating its shows, right down to the legendary improvisational breaks and jams.

Fans don't know – unless they were there for the original concert – what show DSO is re-creating on a given night. The band announces the date and location of the original gig at the end of the show.

A recent sold-out concert at the Hammerstein Ballroom in New York City was a duplication of the Grateful Dead's October 19, 1989, performance at The Spectrum in Philadelphia, Jerry Garcia guitar noodles and all.

Larned acknowledges that what Dark Star Orchestra does (it never performs the same show twice) is not just a musical copycat act – there's an element of theatre involved, too.

The Dead was famous for tinkering with set lists and songs, often midconcert. Some gigs featured two drummers; on other nights, there was only one. During a period in the 1970s, a woman – Donna Godchaux – toured with the band. And there's the band's famous "hot seat" at keyboard, which saw numerous personnel changes, sometimes due to tragic circumstances.

DSO re-creates the instrumentation, lighting, set design and personnel faithfully to the show being performed. Singer Lisa Mackey may take the stage in the Donna Godchaux "part" one night, and be absent the next. Larned may have a Hammond organ onstage for one show; for the next, it might be a piano.

One might think that would mean a lot of time devoted to rehearsing for specific shows, but Larned shrugs off the suggestion. These guys are Deadheads from way back; their knowledge of Grateful Dead gigs and styles is organic.

"There's been years of preparation – in terms of the fact that we all spent so much time going to see the Dead and collecting tapes and listening to them – that by now, it's sort of second nature," Larned said, admitting that the seven band members have easily seen more than 1,000 Grateful Dead concerts between them.

"We have little discussions depending on what era we're playing on a given night. ... So there are little minute changes the Dead made to their songs throughout the years and, having done this a little more than four years, we're pretty familiar with where those changes occur and how to implement them in our own staging," Larned said.

One problem with a band that performs only concert re-creations is a lack of recording opportunities. The original gigs are easily available from DeadBase, a Deadhead tape-trading network. Booking agent Jeff Laramie of Madison, Wis.-based SRO Artists acknowledged that not having records to tour behind presents its own set of challenges.

"Their merch sales helped them get their name identity out there with the T-shirts, hats, beer glasses, etc.," Laramie told POLLSTAR. "But the merch table also serves as a point of sharing information with fans. They have their set lists there, they can talk about future shows, their fans pick up information about the setup on the stage, and who's doing what, and share stories about the 'days of the Dead' or whatever. So it's an information table as much as it is a merch table."

According to Laramie, DSO played some 170 shows in 2000 and about 160 last year, but the venues have gotten larger as word about the band that "channels the Dead" has spread.

"We really developed them as a headliner, which has been both exciting and rewarding," Laramie said. "Our strategy is not what you would have with a recording group – to put them on a big tour or something with other acts. They've really had to do their own thing."

That's especially true since a typical Dark Star Orchestra concert can run up to four hours.

"We just went out locating places that wanted to have a band that did this. We didn't worry about the money. We worried about good, quality tours in cities and locations where we felt the music would do well," Laramie explained.

"For some highlights, they recently sold out the Riviera in Chicago, they basically sold out the Hammerstein Ballroom in New York City, they've played a very full house at the Orpheum in Boston. ... We haven't booked them bigger than they are. They follow, logically, the progression of the interest in the band and it just all seems to be working.

"The sky's the limit." ★

"So, we just thought, 'Well, let's go the opposite way and we'll make a Dead cover band and that's all it will be!'"