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Music: Score one for the Dead

You aren't a Deadhead until you've heard 'Sugar Magnolia, movement VI'...

by Greg Cahill
Pacific Sun Staff

"I'm sure you've heard your share of tribute albums, both good and bad," says composer Lee Johnson. "I feel that every tribute album should absolutely enter the throne room with fear and trepidation."

When a friend approached Johnson in the mid-1990s about inking a symphonic tribute to the Grateful Dead, a band with which Johnson had no familiarity, the composer agreed with one caveat.

"I accepted on the condition that all those who were familiar with the band would take their time as I became educated about their music," he says, during a phone call from Lagrange College in Georgia, where he teaches composition, music technology and related subjects. "When that process was completed, then everyone involved had to trust the composer could do what he needed to do as long as the preparation was complete."

A decade later, in 2005, the Russian National Orchestra recorded the resulting Dead Symphony No. 6, which received its concert premiere last August with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra under conductor Marin Alsop. The work will get its West Coast premiere next week at a pair of Bay Area concerts by the California Symphony, under music director Barry Jekowsky of Tiburon.

The concert is part of a tribute that includes an exhibition of images of the band taken by photographer Herb Greene. Other featured guests will be Johnson, official Grateful Dead biographer Dennis McNally and David Gans, host of the syndicated radio show "The Grateful Dead Hour." Jekowsky will moderate a panel discussion after each concert.

It was music producer Mike Adams who conceived of the idea back in the '70s. "He was a Deadhead and had attended a lot of shows," Johnson recalls. "He heard symphonic implications in their sound and decided it would be something he would pursue. It took its time coming about, because he had to find, as he puts it, the maestro."

"That happened to be me."

But Johnson didn't warm up to the band's freewheeling jams right away.

"I had to find the nuances between shows and versions of studio takes, live concert performances and commentary to find the patterns and procedures that they used," he says. "Until I came in contact with 'China Doll,' I was still in a place where I believed, well, this might be possible, but I'm not sure. That tune let me know this project was achievable in every way. It became the gold standard."

Why did that tune produce an epiphany?

"It's so incredibly well written—it's set up in such a way with its harmonic structure and phrases. It's just artfully done—it's master-craftsman songwriting," Johnson says. "Once I had that tune, I just had to find the other songs that the same level of detail, craft and inspiration. But 'China Doll' told me that not only was this going to happen, it was going to happen in a really big way."

In all, Johnson selected 12 Dead songs as the foundation for a dozen movements. He also packed the work with obscure musical references; the symphony even quotes the 19th century Italian pop song "Funiculi, Funiculà," which Dead guitarist Jerry Garcia used to play at the band's soundchecks.

"I went out of my way to make sure that someone exposed to their first experience with a symphonic performance would find this to be a journey they'd enjoy," he says. "I didn't want to frustrate or bewilder them—I wanted to celebrate what they love."

Dead bassist Phil Lesh, a student of modern classical composition, reportedly plans to write a Grateful Dead symphony. Johnson looks forward to hearing it. "I assume that if Phil ever finishes his Grateful Dead symphony," the soft-spoken composer says, "it will kick mine in the butt."

"Until then, we have Dead Symphony No. 6."

The California Symphony will perform Dead Symphony No. 6 on Jan. 25 and 27, at 7:30 p.m., at the Leshner Center for the Arts, 1601 Civic Drive, Walnut Creek. \$39, \$59. (925) 943-SHOW

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