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## 'Grateful Dead Symphony' gets West Coast premiere in band's home turf

By Jim Harrington  
Oakland Tribune

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The upside to taking on any project that pays tribute to an established music act, especially one enshrined in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, is the built-in market that should be at least interested in the end result.

Hand in hand with that, however, is that the homage never can stand on its own. It will be compared to the honoree's original song book and critiqued by protective fans.

And, arguably, no act in rock history has nurtured a more passionately protective fan base than the Grateful Dead. Even 14 years after the death of the band's leader, Jerry Garcia, "Deadheads" remain fiercely loyal to the music.

### A tall order

Lee Johnson certainly didn't want to disappoint this faithful flock when he was commissioned in 1995 to compose the first symphony based on the Grateful Dead song book. Thus, he knew he had to come up with something more than just elevator-friendly Muzak versions of Dead tunes.

"You don't want to be that guy who takes a band like the Grateful Dead and, after all that work, ends up with a sound that is lifeless," the composer said

from his home in Atlanta. "That would be horrible."

Fortunately, what Johnson did end up with, some 10 years later, was "Dead Symphony: An Orchestral Tribute to the Music of the Grateful Dead," a work that many Deadheads and other critics agree is anything but lifeless. Johnson received rave reviews for the "Dead Symphony" CD, performed by the Russian National Orchestra, as well as for the piece's concert debut last year in Baltimore.

Now the "Dead Symphony" is headed to the Bay Area. Music director Barry Jekowsky will conduct the California Symphony in the West Coast premiere of Johnson's composition, in a program that also includes Stravinsky's "Firebird Suite." Performances are Sunday and Tuesday at the Leshner Center for the Arts in Walnut Creek.

These performances are the centerpiece of a regular Dead-a-palooza — "a real happening," as Jekowsky puts it — going on at the Leshner Center those two nights.

Noted Dead historian Dennis McNally will be on hand to sell and sign copies of his great band biography "A Long Strange Trip: The Inside History of the Grateful Dead," while Johnson will be autographing his "Dead Symphony" CDs. After each performance, Jekowsky will moderate a panel discussion with McNally, Johnson, "The Grateful Dead Hour" radio host David Gans and possibly others. Concertgoers can also visit the Leshner Center's Bedford Gallery to see an exhibition of Dead work by noted photographer Herb Greene.

### 'Home turf'

Johnson says he's excited about having the symphony performed on the band's "home turf," in front of some of the most discerning rock music fans imaginable. At this point, Johnson could hold

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his own in a discussion with even the most knowledgeable Deadhead, but it certainly wasn't that way when he first took on the project.

"I only knew the name of the band and maybe knew a song name or two," he says. "I became a student of the Dead and took my time. I just treated it like other subjects — I've never met Beethoven, but I became pretty familiar with him as well."

What he quickly figured out was, to put it mildly, that the Dead wasn't like other rock bands. The group's songbook was filled with memorable, catchy melodies, and it was built mostly on fairly standard folk/rock/country/blues framework, but what the players did with those tunes in concert produced the real magic.

The Grateful Dead is the most famous jam band of all time, the one that Phish and all other noodlers will be measured against for eternity. The group earned that reputation onstage by using its songs as launching pads for spacey, psychedelic explorations that often shared little in common with what was heard on record.

Johnson traveled a similar path with this tribute. Instead of merely transcribing the Dead's music for an orchestra, he took hold of the melodies in "Stella Blue," "Sugar Magnolia" and other fan favorites and used them to fuel his own classical musical adventures. The resulting 12-movement symphony — each movement honors a different Dead tune — should appeal to Deadheads, yet doesn't reek so heavily of patchouli that classical music fans will dismiss it.

"As a composer, Johnson did what the Dead do — he improvised," says McNally "For me, it's a wonderful validation that great music, great songs, can prove themselves by being transmutable. It's lovely."

Jekowsky agrees that the music of the Grateful Dead works in this symphonic setting.

"I am not an expert on the music of the Grateful Dead, but I would not put anything that is not fantastic music in a concert," he says. "Even if you didn't know it was the music of the Grateful Dead, you'd probably just think it was a wonderful symphony."

Reach Jim Harrington at [jharrington@bayareanews.com](mailto:jharrington@bayareanews.com). Read his Concert Blog at [www.ibabuzz.com/concerts](http://www.ibabuzz.com/concerts).

**PREVIEW WHAT:** California Symphony presents "Dead Symphony: An Orchestral Tribute to the Grateful Dead," by Lee Johnson  
**WHEN:** 4 p.m. Saturday; 7:30 p.m. Tuesday  
**WHERE:** Leshher Center for the Arts, 1601 Civic Drive, Walnut Creek **TICKETS:** \$39-\$59, 925-943-7469, [www.lesherartscenter.org](http://www.lesherartscenter.org), [www.californiasymphony.org](http://www.californiasymphony.org)

**Grateful Dead: The mashups**  
Through the years, several artists have been inspired to take the music of the Grateful Dead in new directions. Here are a few of the more notable musical makeovers of the Dead's song book: "Deadicated" (1991): An array of contemporary pop-rock stars, from Los Lobos to Suzanne Vega, cover Dead tunes in mostly satisfying ways. Highlights include the Cowboy Junkies' hypnotic take on "To Lay Me Down" and Jane's Addiction's drastic reworking of "Ripple." "Fire On the Mountain: Reggae Celebrates the Grateful Dead" (1996):

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Wailing Souls, Steel Pulse, Judy Mowatt and other reggae musicians take the Dead's song book on a trip to Jamaica. "Pickin' on the Grateful Dead: A Tribute" (1997): Hot-pickin' bluegrass musicians cover "Casey Jones," "Friend of the Devil" and other Dead staples. "Wake the Dead: A Celtic Celebration of the Songs of the Grateful Dead" (2000): Bay Area band Wake the Dead combines Dead songs with traditional Irish jigs and reels. If you like this one, also check out Wake the Dead's "Buckdancer's Choice" (2004). "Dark Star: The Music of the Grateful Dead" (1996): Oakland saxophonist David Murray leads his octet in an avant-garde jazz exploration of seven Dead tracks, including the mighty "Dark Star." "Cumberland Blues" (1998): A musical, based on the compositions of the Grateful Dead, debuts to full houses in San Jose, but fails to incite much excitement elsewhere.  
-- Jim Harrington

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