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Updated: January 22, 2009



Who's hiring in Santa Clara County? The Census Bureau

The U.S. Census Bureau is about to fill nearly 650 jobs in Santa Clara and Santa Cruz counties as the federal government prepares for its once-a-decade head count in 2010.

- [Special report: Census and demographics](#)

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2008: Silicon Valley's worst year for home sales in decades



The median price of a single-family resale house in Santa Clara County plunged to \$457,000 in December 2008, a 38.2 percent drop from \$739,000 a year ago, as sales continued to reflect an anemic market dominated by foreclosures and a stagnant market in more-expensive homes.

California controller warns of cash crunch, but rejects \$1.3 billion furlough plan



Democratic State Controller John Chiang sides with unions in a lawsuit arguing that Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger exceeded his authority by ordering employees to stay home two days a month without pay.

Grateful Dead tunes make a long, strange trip to Bay Area symphony hall

There's new life for the Grateful Dead: in the concert hall. The 'Dead Symphony,' an orchestral reinvention of tunes by the trippiest band of the '60s, is about to have its first West Coast performances.

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- Thunder edges Warriors at buzzer - 01/22/2009 12:08 AM PST
- Mitty girls use height advantage against Valley Christian - 01/21/2009 10:38 PM PST
- Who's hiring in Santa Clara County? The Census Bureau - 01/22/2009 04:55 AM PST
- Kennedy withdraws her bid for Senate seat - 01/21/2009 10:45 PM PST
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Beyonce, Shakira, others at inauguration parties; Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes hit the Valkyrie London premiere; more.

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San Jose couple delivers baby

Maya Lozano rushed into the world on Monday afternoon, delivered by her mother, LaShay, and father, Miguel, in the family bathroom.

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ABC7: UC Berkeley's link to Obama

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Grateful Dead tunes make a long, strange trip to Bay Area symphony hall

By Richard Scheinin
Mercury News

Posted: 01/21/2009 08:59:30 PM PST

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There's new life for the Grateful Dead: in the concert hall. The "Dead Symphony," an orchestral reinvention of tunes by the trippiest band of the '60s, is about to have its first West Coast performances.

And Carolyn Garcia — Jerry Garcia's widow, better known as Mountain Girl to Deadheads — offers this warning: "It's not rock 'n' roll."

And she's OK with that. Composer Lee Johnson's 50-minute tableau of Grateful Dead songs, to be performed by the California Symphony on Sunday and Tuesday at the Leshner Center for the Arts in Walnut Creek, is "emotional stuff," she said, "exquisitely pretty" at times and mysterious, too. "Lee kind of does these interesting dissections of the melodies. So it's hauntingly familiar, but you can't quite put your finger on it."

What a long, strange trip to the concert hall. Composer Johnson, 4 years old when the Grateful

Dead formed in 1965 in Palo Alto, grew up in Minnesota without listening to the band. His tastes ran from Shostakovich to, gulp, the band Kansas. But now here he is, courted by Dead connoisseurs and anticipating his work's Bay Area debut.

"It's the soil from which this music grew," said Johnson, professor of music at LaGrange College, near Atlanta. "Oh my gosh, there are no words to describe how pumped I am to be flying out to hear it."

With its 12 movements — 10 devoted to specific Dead tunes, including "Saint Stephen," "Sugar Magnolia" and "Stella Blue" — this is not your typical symphony. But this past Aug. 1 (which would have been Jerry Garcia's 66th birthday), that didn't stop 2,500 Deadheads (Mountain Girl among them) and symphony lovers from packing a Baltimore concert hall for the world premiere of Johnson's work.

"The Deadheads owned the whole evening," Johnson recalled. "They were wound up to a frenzy by a jester before the concert began. And the ovations between movements, with all those people decked out in tie-dye, standing on their feet and cheering — at the symphony? I didn't expect it."

Of course, not every Deadhead will love the "Dead Symphony." Some will say "Saint Stephen" is a symphony in itself, and doesn't need further transformation. Some will say "Sugar Magnolia" is already a sweet little tone poem and should be left alone.

But most reaction has been positive. And what that shows, said Dennis McNally, author of "A Long Strange Trip: The Inside History of the Grateful Dead," is that "the band's music was so strong that it can be endlessly readapted. And 14 years after Jerry died, 14 years after the last Grateful Dead show, the

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The Mercury News

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desire to hear that music has not gone away."

The idea of a "Dead Symphony" really isn't all that strange. Phil Lesh, the band's bassist, was classically trained (and once said he intends to compose his own symphonic rendering of Dead tunes). McNally remembers hearing Gustav Mahler on Bob Weir's stereo. Mountain Girl said "a number of the band members were familiar with Stravinsky," whose "Firebird" Suite will also be performed at the Walnut Creek concerts.

Barry Jekowsky, the California Symphony's conductor, said pairing those pieces is an effort to "break down the fears people have about going to the symphony." He likened the upcoming concerts to "putting a stick of dynamite into the insecurities that people have about what a symphonic concert is like."

"Dead Symphony," the sixth of nine symphonies composed by Johnson, had its beginnings in 1996, when an Atlanta-based Deadhead and recording-studio owner named Mike Adams tried to interest him in composing a Dead-themed work. Johnson studied every Dead songbook and disc he could find and fell for the music. Garcia's ballad "China Doll" was his "gateway" to the Dead, Johnson said, a piece with "lyricism and mystery. And then there was Lesh's great bass line, which exists in counterpoint to the melody."

It was a song, he said, that "could retain its identity and not just survive but be flattered by the transformative process of classical composition." The symphony "slowly percolated" until 2005, when Johnson conducted the Russian National Orchestra in a recording of his completed work. (The CD is available at www.deadsymphony.com.)

"Dead Symphony" may not sound quite like the Grateful Dead, but, for some, it's strikingly familiar

in its strategies. "It takes the melodies and uses them as jumping-off points to completely different destinations," said Santa Cruz County Supervisor John Leopold, who saw his first Dead show in 1981 in Philadelphia and followed it up with 250 others. "And that's what we looked for in the Grateful Dead, that sense of taking the music to unexpected places. It was a joyful experience."

Contact Richard Scheinin at rscheinin@mercurynews.com or (408) 920-5069.

California Symphony

Lee Johnson's "Dead Symphony"

When: 4 p.m. Sunday, 7:30 p.m. Tuesday

Where: Leshner Center

for the Arts, 1601 Civic Drive, Walnut Creek

Tickets: \$39-\$59;

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