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Soul and Substance of the Grateful Dead

By NEAL KARLEN

The trouble for superheroes is what to do between phone booths," said the writer Ken Kesey, referring to the failure of many of his fellow counterculture icons to write second acts to their lives. He would have known; his last good book had already come out by 1965, the year he hired an unknown jug band fronted by a nine-fingered guitarist named Jerry Garcia to provide the live soundtrack for his San Francisco-based, LSD-laced hippie revolution.

Mr. Garcia, who died this week at 53 in a California drug treatment center, solved Mr. Kesey's superhero problem by forever staying in the same phone booth in which he had alchemized into the famous Captain Trips of the Grateful Dead. And though the 1967 Summer of Love died faster than you could say President-elect Richard Nixon, Jerry Garcia just kept playing on with the psychedelic optimism of one who still actually believed that flower children could stop war by sticking daisies into rifle barrels of National Guardsman.

His formula worked for 30 years. The Grateful Dead are the world's most popular touring band, last year grossing \$50 million and drawing rock's longest-lasting mass audience.

But Mr. Garcia will always be remembered for unpretentious magnetism. As The New York Times obituary noted, "Within the music business, the Dead exemplified integrity in a sphere of hype and artifice." ABC's "Nightline" provided an appropriately hallucinogenic scene of Ted Koppel, the musician David Crosby and Senator Patrick Leahy exchanging elegies to Mr. Garcia's enduring greatness.

Lost amid the nostalgia, however, were several less-romantic realities.

There were always paradoxes to the group's version of anti-success. "We don't do what the system says," declared Rock Scully, the group's manager in the 60's. "When all the other groups were making it, we were playing free in the park, man."

But to Joe Smith, the button-down Warner Brothers executive who signed them, the anticommercialism worked as a marketing tactic. "We found we couldn't sell the Grateful Dead's records in a traditional manner," he said. "The packaging was important. The cult was important. Free concerts where you handed out fruits and berries were important."

And so was the acid. Mr. Garcia said that after he first took LSD, "the whole world went kablooey." Indeed. Drugs were his inspiration and his albatross. Besides his massive lifetime intake of hallucinogens, he also spent years as a heroin addict (a relapse sent him to the clinic in which he died) and a lifetime as a three-pack-a-day cigarette smoker and junk-food junkie.

To his credit, Mr. Garcia, unlike most rock stars, made no bones about what he was up to. "All kinds of drugs have been useful to me," he said in a 1991 Rolling Stone interview. "As far as I'm concerned, the results are not in." The final results came in on Wednesday, and though the death certificate indicates heart failure, few doubt that he died from anything but a lifetime of playing Captain Trips.

Mr. Garcia's legions, meantime, had been increasingly violating the band's ethos of better living through chemistry and good karma. This summer's tour was marred by a riot between rock-throwing Deadheads and the police at a concert in Indiana. It was really nothing new: wasted, unruly gate crashers had reached such alarming numbers in recent years that the band outlawed overnight camping at concert sites -- long a staple of a Deadhead pilgrimage.

Even Jerry Garcia seemed to give up. He appeared listless at his final concert on July 9 in Chicago, and even with the help of a Teleprompter he stumbled on classic lyrics. He had long stopped speaking between songs, wishing to escape the scrutiny of obsessional fans who analyzed his every utterance.

Still, Jerry Garcia will be remembered fondly by even today's rock fans who prefer their music to reek of youth, grunge and despair. Consider what happened in San Francisco in 1993 at Lollapalooza, the traveling Generation X concert-cum-circus that is as organized and cutting edge as Dead concerts were anarchic and retro. Dr. Timothy Leary mounted the stage and announced, "I'm having a flashback! Twenty-five years ago at this city's Golden Gate Park, there was the first be-in in the world!"

The cynical crowd was unmoved by the irrelevant history lesson. The one-time acid guru then pointed to the sky. "Look! There's the Jefferson Airplane!" More silence. "And Janis Joplin." Nothing. "And the Grateful Dead!" With those words,

the audience finally let loose with a roar that was as long, loud and joyful as a Jerry Garcia guitar solo on the bearded Buddha's best day.

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