



PRAISE THE DEAD

GARCIA WAS GENTLE FATHER OF A MERRY FAMILY

Jerry Garcia plays to the crowd in Essen, Germany, during a 1990 concert.

S&S: File



Two Deadheads grieve Wednesday.

By ROBERT HILBURN
Los Angeles Times

There have been other bands that made better music, sold more records and did more to shape rock during the last three decades than the Grateful Dead, but no group forged a deeper or more visible bond with its audience — and Jerry Garcia was at the heart of that bond.

As much a guru as a musician to millions, Garcia radiated gentleness and warmth, and his death Wednesday will touch much of the rock world as deeply as the earlier losses of such icons as Elvis Presley and John Lennon.

As living symbols of the '60s hippie ideals of peace and brotherhood, the Dead did more than attract an audience. Garcia

and the Dead turned ordinary fans into believers, followers into disciples — not in a dark, insidious cult sense, but with a rich, uplifting sense of community. For the true Deadhead, it wasn't just a matter of liking a band. It was a case of adopting a lifestyle.

Whether you were part of the cadre of young people who supported themselves by following the Dead from city to city and selling food or crafts to other fans, or a doctor or accountant who jetted in for the weekend, you stepped into another world when you attended a Dead show. There was no initiation or no rules, really, . . . other than to celebrate the music and experience the generous fellowship.

The Beach Boys may have sung about good vibrations, but the Dead were the ones who — concert after concert, city after city — created good vibrations.

Some artists — such as Bob Dylan and

Lennon — touch the pop world with their ideas and music. The Dead touched its fans with their actions and music. They didn't lecture. Their message was simply a celebration of the durability of the human spirit. It was a reminder of the importance of remaining true and free.

Though the band often grossed more than \$1 million a night with its stadium shows, the Dead remained to its fans a populist voice — an alternative to the tarnished world of commercial rock. The surprise at the Dead shows wasn't seeing people in their 30s, 40s and 50s coming back year after year, but in seeing thousands of young people joining the Deadhead world.

On first visit, a Dead concert seemed like some special theme park — maybe a Woodstock exhibit at Disneyland. It seemed to be an easy, perhaps even superficial way for today's youngsters to return to the music and ideals of the so-called golden age of rock. But the more you saw of Dead shows and of Dead audiences, the more you realized that there was more at work than simply curiosity.

The young followers found something important at the Dead shows — a break from the materialism and hardness of the rest of their world.

Musically, the Dead — from its earliest days in San Francisco — wove blues, jazz, country and folk into a rootsy style that was delivered in a fluid, unhurried manner. The band's marathon concerts were characterized by the extraordinary sense of communication between the musicians, which enabled them to move freely in a song without threatening the overall texture or rhythm.

While two 1970 albums, *Workingman's Dead* and *American Beauty*, remain treasures of American rock, the Dead's music generally didn't offer the kind of challenge or innovation that made them consistent favorites of critics.

Yet the Dead represents a rich and fulfilling chapter in rock history, and the band — quite rightly — was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1994.

Upon learning of Garcia's death Wednesday, what I recalled best wasn't his music, but his graciousness. Though I wasn't known as a champion of the Dead's music, Garcia was unfailingly polite and helpful in the few times I happened to meet or interview him.

Once, backstage at a festival, I needed a couple of quotes for a story about the event. Some rock stars wouldn't bother with answering just a couple of questions. If they weren't the focus of the story, they'd rather use the time before going on stage to relax.

But Garcia took the time, and he showed the same gentleness and sweetness that he exhibited on stage. As I headed out of the dressing room, he smiled and asked teasingly if I was finally getting into (liking) the Dead's music.

Without waiting for an answer, he added, "Well, if not today . . . then someday."

Then he waved goodbye.

The sadness for millions of fans of Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead is that now there will not be any more "somedays."