

## Shall We Go?: On “Dark Star” by the Grateful Dead

By Jennifer Finney Boylan

What did the Deadhead say when he ran out of pot?

“Whoa! This music sucks!”

I had never heard this joke when Dewey Williamson first came over to my friend Kenny’s house and slapped “Dark Star” on the turntable. I wasn’t thrilled about it the first time I heard it. As the song unwound, I remembering thinking it was strange and impenetrable, an unfolding dissonance that mirrored a state of mind that I found frightening.

That I eventually came to love and revere that music may mean that I came to a sense of truce with dissonance, both musical and psychological. Or it may only mean that if you listen to anything long enough, you begin to see patterns. This is no less true of Dark Star than it is, just to pick an example, of the now-untranslatable rongo-rongo tablets on Easter Island, although it should be pointed out that, unlike the native population on Easter Island, the Grateful Dead did not, after reaching a certain level of rarefaction, decide to eat each other.

“Dark Star” – a polyphonic jam in the key of A bookended by a matching set of inscrutable lyrics – is, more than anything else, a reflection in music of a particular state of mind, an outlook on the world that combines sadness, humor, a sense of profound aloneness, and a hope that we all may yet be found. It combines elements of bluegrass, jazz, acid rock, and the experimental classical forms pioneered by Edgard Varese and Stockhausen. Plus the Colonel’s secret recipe.

Its average length in the early days was about fifteen minutes, although as the years went by its length increased, and not only because its average tempo gradually slowed during the twenty-seven years the Grateful Dead performed it.

One of the charms of the song that there is no particular way it “goes”; of the two hundred thirty-two times the band performed Dark Star, no two are similar. (It was performed live for the first time at the Dance Hall in Rio Nido, California, on September 3rd, 1967; the last performance of it was at the Omni in Atlanta, Georgia, on March 30th, 1994.) There’s a version of it recorded in a studio that is about three minutes long, which concludes with Jerry Garcia playing the banjo and lyricist Robert Hunter performing something he calls “verbal salad.” There are a number of versions of it well over an hour long, in which they never do get around to the lyrics. The version performed at Woodstock – while the rain

poured down, the stage collapsed, and the instruments gave the boys electrical shocks – is so hilariously, vulnerably bad that the Dead never allowed their performance to be released, in any of the Woodstock movies or records. (Yes, by their own admission, the Dead sucked at Woodstock, apparently a pattern summed up by Garcia's plaintive observation, "We always blew the big ones.") That there are any number of versions of it in which the whole thing falls apart mid-tune, or morphs into some other song altogether, is another of the song's unearthly, homely delights.

It is, therefore, the perfect music to accompany a period of staring into space, thinking and dreaming. The very first time Dewey Williamson put it on the stereo at my friends house, he said, "Okay, tell you what. We'll all meet back here in twenty minutes." (This is the same Dewey in whose Camaro I barfed on New Year's Eve 1976, which is another form of morphing altogether.)

There are certain set moments to Dark Star, like stations in a relay. For instance, it usually begins with a phrase on the bass that indicates to the other members of the band that Dark Star is impending. Then the main riff begins, a vamp that bounces back and forth from the A major chord to the E minor. This part of the song can last from a minute or two to an hour, depending. For the first decade of the song's life, there was no drumming in the opening, just a few maracas or other shakey-things vibrated by the drummers Mickey Hart and Bill Kreutzmann. Garcia played a lovely, circular, noodly riff over the main A major/E minor chords, and bassist Phil Lesh provided counterpoint in the spirit of *musica concret*. For legions of Deadheads, it's the prettiest part of the song, and it's known as "The Part Before They Sing."

This is followed by Part 2: the Part Where They Sing. Robert Hunter's lyrics were written to correspond to the mood of the song, and consist of a series of eerie and elusive images: Dark Star crashes, pouring its light into ashes. Reason tatters, the forces tear lose from the axis.

And so on. Achy Breaky, it's not.

The "verse" of Dark Star, if you can call it that, consists of the phrase: Shall we go? You and I while we can, through the transitive nightfall of diamonds?

Hunter says he intended this last phrase to be evocative, rather than figurative, which is a good thing, because, even after hearing this song, oh, about eight jillion times, I am still not sure what a transitive nightfall of diamonds is, exactly.

To paraphrase the members of the Supreme Court, though, even if you can't say specifically what a transitive nightfall of diamonds is, you know one when you see one.

Hunter allows as how he was inspired – or stole – part of that phrase from T.S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," which of course begins, "Shall we go then, you and I, while the evening is spread out across the sky like a patient etherized upon a table." This is a good moment to recall another line attributed to Eliot, "Amateurs plagiarize; professionals steal."

That line also serves as an invitation to the listener. Shall we go? The band and the audience are agreeing to a contract at this moment that whatever ensues is an adventure they will embark upon together. On a good night, the response to the invitation is, okay. Take us there. Whatever you got, dish it out.

Which is reassuring, because what then follows, in "The Part After They Sing" is complete chaos. I have heard performances in which this third part of the song just descends into complete anarchy: weird warping crescendoes, symbol crashes; antonal static from Mars, lizard music. Sometimes, this part of the song consists of silence. Sometimes the silence is broken by what sounds like wind, or electronic weeping. There's also another signature phrase that Garcia plays at this point, a banjoesque riff on the guitar, a circular formation that collapses in upon itself and often ends with feedback.

It's hard to imagine someone whose ears were formed by, say, Madonna, finding the idea of extended silence, or "electronic weeping" a good thing. But for years and years I adored it. It seemed to reflect a sense of profound cosmic loss – and hope-- that could not be expressed by verses that rhymed. I could point to the vast aural topography that was being designed before my ears and say, this is what it my heart is like exactly. But girlfriend, one might say. Why listen to this bitter noise?

Because it is bitter, one might reply. And because it is my heart.

And also, because the boys do manage to find their way out of that canyon in time. The way out is always different – although often it's Garcia finding something that resembles a melody out of all that dissonant threnody. For me, this is always the most moving part of a good "Dark Star": the moment that harmony first peeks out from the noise, like the sun breaking through the clouds. It should be said, though, that there were plenty of occasions when this part of the song never arrived, and the boys just had to put their instruments down and leave, or the whole thing collapsed and they had to play one of their after great pain a formal feeling comes songs, like "High Time," or "Morning Dew" or

“Stella Blue.” These are the lullabys you sing to the wounded, to let them know, as Dylan observed, you will not die, it’s not poison.

After all that, the fourth part of the song is usually an instrumental re-statement of the main theme. By now the drums have joined in, and the whole thing has gathered momentum. Depending on the performance, we now either prepare to return to the Part Where They Sing Again, or, if it’s a good Star, something else entirely. There are several occasions where the boys move on to some other song, only to return the next night – or even several days later – to play the second half.

(It’s one of the plaintive facts of the song, and the band, that the last performance of the song, on March 30, 1994, featured only the first set of the lyrics, after which the whole thing dissolved, was overtaken by drums, and eventually turned into a song called, “I Need a Miracle Every Day.” Perhaps, if that request for a miracle is indeed granted, there will come a day, somehow, when Jerry Garcia is alive again, and all of us are young, and the boys will come together once more, and finish the song they began.)

Regular listeners to Dark Star have their own name for its various passages, and I have my own. There’s a place I used to call The Valley of the Pharoahs, about which the less said the better. There’s another place I call Disco Inferno, which involves Bob Weir on the Telecaster and Tom Constantin on the organ passing around a certain riff like a volleyball. There’s a little Mexican configuration that used to raise its head in the early days that a friend of mine used to call Un Poco del Todo. (A little bit of everything.) Then there’s something called the Well of Souls. I can only say that it was during the Well of Souls, on December 26th, 1979, at a beach house in Ventnor New Jersey, that I saw a series of skulls emerge from the fireplace, gather around my head and say, How much longer do you intend to keep the true nature of your being a secret?

All together now: Like: Wow! Somebody get me a Scooby-snack!

After all of this, Garcia performs one of his most memorable guitar phrases, a circular buildup to the crescendo that ends with one plaintive bent note, sounding exactly like a human voice crying, three times. And then we all do the electric slide and sing again: Mirror shatters, and form its reflections of matter. Glass hand dissolving, into ice petal flowers revolving.

I first heard this shocking noise-set-to-poetry in 1973, and in the years that have followed, I’ve never really let it go, although it’s true that I tend to visit this dark space less and less frequently as I grow older and my children approach the age that I was when Dewey first came over.

When I do listen to Dark Star, though, it's not just the changes in each version of the song I reflect upon. It's the changes in me. Was it Lacan who said, When you listen to Dark Star, remember that Dark Star is also listening to you?

I remember listening to it in high school in rooms full of bong-smoking boys, each of them asking themselves some version of the question that that skull asked me, which is itself a variation of the question Shelley's doppelganger allegedly posed on the day before his death: How much longer do you intend to remain content?

I listened to it in my bedroom during a rainstorm one July day during college, with my girlfriend Julie, whom I'd met in London. We put on "Dark Star" and for a half hour looked out a window and watched the storm approach, the lightning coming down, the rain rushing down the street outside, as blossoms blew out of the trees. We kissed.

I listened to it in the car in Nova Scotia as I drove north the year after my father died. I wasn't quite sure if I was going to kill myself when I got to Cape Breton or not. I wanted to weigh my options.

I listened to it the night my first child was born, and I came back from the hospital and tried to imagine the amazing world that now lay ahead.

I listen to it, sometimes, as I drive in to work to teach English at Colby College in Maine, as the new-fallen snow lies twinkling in the meadow by the stream.

You could make the case that it's not Dark Star that keeps morphing over time, that keeps changing into something else; it's the listener. And thus the thing I like most about Dark Star is the premise at its heart – that anything is possible, that a song, like a life, can morph and evolve and wind up as something unexpected. On a good day, there's the sense that our lives can all change into something better, something we could never have foretold, even with the gift of prophecy. Or, as the Kinks would remind us: I know tomorrow we'll find better things.

"Dark Star" never fails to delight me with its possibilities. Even now, when I receive that invitation, Shall we go? I think, the hell yes. A transitive nightfall of diamonds? Let's go boys. Dish it out. We'll meet back here in twenty minutes.