Jerry Garcia: The Complete 1985 Frets Interview

By Jas Obrecht, September 1, 2010

I spent the morning of Saturday, January 12, 1985, at a hotel in San Francisco, interviewing Yngwie Malmsteen, the extraordinary Swedish metal guitarist, for his first English-language cover story. As soon as that meeting was over, I switched cassettes in my tape recorder and headed over the Golden Gate Bridge to meet Grateful Dead spokesman Dennis McNally at a restaurant in San Rafael. Dennis led me to the home of a Grateful Dead supporter who, it turned out, was letting Jerry Garcia live in her basement. My mission: Interview Garcia for a cover story in Frets, a magazine devoted to acoustic music.

I've never been a Deadhead, but friends who are tell me that my meeting with Jerry took place during one of the lowest points of his life. Garcia, unwashed and disheveled, shuffled slowly into the living room, his black T-shirt sprinkled with white powder. His fingertips were blackened in a manner consistent with "chasing the dragon," as smoking heroin was commonly referred to in the Bay Area. Ten minutes into our interview, Garcia nonchalantly chopped a large rock of cocaine into about twenty lines and consumed all of it during the next hour.

My pal Jon Sievert, who showed up midway through the interview to shoot photos, observes, "Jerry was probably at his absolute nadir at the time of the interview, as witnessed by his bust in Golden Gate Park six days later on January 18. In between the interview and the bust, the band and Mountain Girl staged an intervention, in which Jerry was told he had to choose between drugs and the band. In the few times I was around Garcia in a private setting, that was the only time I saw him openly snort coke. What I remember most, however, was how articulate he remained when talking about music. As you can tell by listening to the tapes, his enthusiasm never waned."

I have to agree with Jon: Garcia was bright and articulate throughout the interview. In fact, he was fun to talk to. He laughed often and revealed far more about his creative process than most musicians could. Portions of our conversation were presented as the July '85 Frets cover story, but the vast majority of this 10,000-word interview remained untranscribed until this blog. As he made his way across the living room and settled into a chair, Jerry smiled and began the conversation.

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Jerry: Have we met before?

Jas: Yes, probably at the Tribal Stomp in 1978.

Oh, yeah. I recognize ya. You're familiar.

Do you know about Frets magazine?

Yes, I do.

So this is for the cover story on the 20th anniversary of the Grateful Dead.

Say! [Laughs.]

What's the appeal, for you, of acoustic music?

What is the appeal? Hmm. First of all, my appeal is just music, you know. And I don't really distinguish. It's not like one kind of music is more appealing to me than others. For me, the acoustic guitar is a different instrument. I don't think I would do it, really, if it weren't for the technological advance of the successful electric-acoustic guitar, like the Takamine that I play onstage. I've never had any luck at all with the acoustic guitar and microphone.

Too much squeal?

Too much everything. Too much boom. It really has to do with the kind of microphones that you use, and the kind of guitar. Most acoustic guitars are built to project in a room, just acoustically. And most microphones are designed to hear a small source, like the bell of a horn or a voice, and a guitar is something you hear all over it - I mean, in order for it to really sound like an acoustic guitar where you hold a microphone up to the soundhole. For example, if it's a big guitar, like a D-28, it woofs and booms and does all these things that are non-musical in nature. There's stuff you don't intend to be heard. They are part of the sound of the guitar, for sure, but they are not what you mean when you're playing. It's the Frankenstein nature of the microphone as an electric ear that makes it so I haven't had much luck with just acoustic guitar. Also, the difference in touch is too radical. The way you have to dig in with an acoustic guitar and a microphone, as opposed to the way you play an electric guitar, if I were to try to do both, my electric guitar chops go way downhill.

Do you tend to pick up an acoustic less frequently than an electric?

Well, electric is my instrument. But I like playing acoustic, especially now with this advance, because it means I don't have to radically change my touch so much, but I get the nice qualities of the tone and, you know, the pretty features of an acoustic guitar. But only really because I take that line in and get a nice clear signal that sounds to my ears like an acoustic, so the behavior of the instrument and the idioms that I find myself pulling out of it are what I associate with acoustic guitar. For me, they're very different. It's like they're very different instruments.

Does your way of visualizing the fingerboard or your playing approach change?

Uh, yeah. Very much so. For me, on the electric guitar I have a holistic approach to the fingerboard. On acoustic guitar, I have a preference for the first position and the open sounds, the open quality. I don't use a capo on acoustic guitar, but I would. But I would never do that on an electric guitar. On electric guitar, I deal with the whole neck as a harmonic medium. I don't see it in patterns or groupings. All those have become continuous for me.

In the last Guitar Player interview, you spoke about finally making that breakthrough.

Yeah, I'm through that. Yeah.

What have you found on the other side?

What it is is that there are really endless numbers of overlapping patterns [laughs], that's all. That's what it really boils down to. Depending on what half-step or whole-step, what partial you want to start on, you have all series of fingerings. You can either play them across the fingerboard or up the fingerboard or up the strings or across the fingerboard or any combination thereof, and really that's just a matter of fluidity and a matter of breaking out of position playing. For me, it's become a matter of now I play for a preference in the tone that I get, like playing high notes on low strings. For me, it's much more a matter of what sounds nice - not where I play it, but where the lick sounds. So I can play the same lick in any of, say, three or four positions on the neck - the same lick in the same octave - and the tone is very different depending on the thickness of the strings you're playing on. So that's the kind of stuff. For me, it's a matter of having much more choice over harmonic series, harmonic range, and tonal quality.

Do you know what you're doing in theoretical terms?

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I couldn't not. There was a time when I could get by with not knowing, you know, but not anymore, not with the caliber of musicians I play with. Besides, for me it isn't satisfying to not know. It's not satisfying to bluff. I like to know because for one thing, it makes it a lot easier to communicate what you're doing. Just that alone is a good reason to know.

How has your approach to soloing changed?

It keeps on changing, but I don't have an approach. I still basically revolve around the melody. I think I come more from the point of view of the melody and the way it's broken up into phrases as I perceive them. With most solos, I tend to play something that phrases the way the melody does. The phrase is maybe more dense or have different value and so forth, but they'll occur in the same places in the song as they do in the melody. Basically, most of the time there's some abstraction of the melody in there - at least that's what I'm thinking. I'm not necessarily meaning to communicate that, but that's what my mind does.

When you're onstage, what influences the types of notes you choose?

Anything and everything! [Laughs.] Nothing in particular. I don't watch my decision-making process that carefully. But usually the reason I start on a course of action is because I have a kind of a loose plan in mind going into a chorus. I take a chorus as a unit, generally speaking. I have sort of a loose plan there. Or something else that happens elsewhere in the music gets me going, like some rhythmic figure or that kind of stuff - detail.

Can improvisation be learned or is it inherent?

No, I think it can be learned.

What advice would you give someone who had lessons and theoretical knowledge, but wanted to find more freedom on the instrument?

Mostly, the best possible thing, really, is to have somebody else to play with. One other person to play with. If you have one other person who plays the guitar, then you just trade of choruses or you play, like, five choruses against each other. You know what I mean? Like one guy backs up for five choruses or four choruses, and the other guy backs up for four choruses. That's really the best way to do it, I think, to get a handle on it. I don't know. It's not the sort of thing that advice helps. It's really one of the things where time spent is more profitable.

Do you do much practicing?

I don't do as much as I'd like to, but I go in and out of that. I go in and out of it. I'm about to enter into practicing.

Anything in particular you want to work on?

Yeah, there's a whole bunch of stuff. I've got two or three books that I've been wanting to crack for some time, but I haven't made myself go into them. I'm lazy, just like everybody else is [laughs]. But these are some real nice studies on fourths and some really nice, just melodic humps that are very good. That's why I'm going into a little woodshedding there - there are some things in there that I like.

Do you have favorite books that you've gone over more than once?

No, I rarely go over them more than once. If I take a book and decide I'm going to go over it, I really go over the sucker. I go over it in depth and really do it, and after that, I'm done with it. Then it's an absorption process, you know. Unless I've really forgotten something - and I haven't gotten to that point yet - I may be losing stuff down at the back end somewhere [laughs]. But as soon as I get to the point where I look at a book and draw a blank and then open it up and find a bunch of little marks and stuff and realize I've been through this book and I don't remember a thing about it, then I'll start going back. I haven't gotten to that point yet - but soon, I hope! [Laughs.]

Do you do much jamming?

Virtually 90% of the playing that I do is jamming.

What about outside of the band?

No, I don't. There's not a situation around that has both a loose enough structure and good-enough-quality musicians where I can get into it and enjoy it. The level of musicianship that I exist at right now, it's not much fun to play unless the people play really well. You know what I mean? There aren't too many situations where you can just jam with somebody.

When do you play your best?

I wish I could tell you that! Because if I could tell you it, it would mean that I knew when I was gonna play my best. It's something I don't know, when I'm gonna play my best. And a lot of times, I can't even judge if it's my best or not, until, say, like, later on I might listen to a tape and say, "Geez, that's the best I've ever heard myself sound." And that happens to me a lot. Almost all the time when I listen to a tape, I can't believe it's me. My own mental image of myself is that I play a lot worse than I actually do. I'm usually surprised when I listen to tapes.

Are you self-critical?

Yeah. Almost to the point of nihilism [laughs]. If it was left up to me, if I'd never heard anything, I think I would have given up long ago. Yeah, I am self-critical. Yeah.

Do you ever feel like you're in a rut?

All the time. Yeah. Then I do something about it. When I feel like I'm really seriously stale, that's when I start to crack books, because you really need something to move. And there's so much to music, there's no excuse for feeling stale. Nobody is such a great musician that they could be burnt out on all of music, you know. [Laughs.] So for me, it's just a matter of going out and putting a little bit of effort into it, and I can almost always find something that I don't know anything about and pick up on it and start a sort of itch-scratch cycle.

Does listening to other musicians or bands ever inspire you?

All the time. Yeah. Yeah. There's nobody playing right now who knocks me out completely. I mean, there's nothing that I hear right now that really makes me want to dash to my guitar. But there's plenty of stuff in the past. You know, if I go looking for stuff, I can find it. But there's nobody really playing right now who kills me. Music right now - everything that I hear right now is pretty derivative sounding.

What's your source? Do you listen to the radio or MTV or . . .

All those things. I'm just a human in the world - you know what I mean? And then I have a huge record collection. And I also have access to music stores, some of which are pretty hip, where the people who run them are music collectors and like that. That's helpful. It's helpful to have somebody's taste. And also, the society that I'm in has a lot of musicians in it, and musicians are always turning you on to music, so there's always input.

What are your views of young guitar players now?

Well, it's a little hard for me to listen. The thing is, they're much more accomplished than they used to be, but that just means that the instrument itself has a much better book than it used to have. The electric guitar has an enormous vocabulary and several different kinds of mediums, all of which have expanded enormously in the last 10, 15 years. That's all to the good - it just means the instrument has expanded. But young players, even if they're really brilliant technically, there's a thing like a guy like John Lee Hooker or somebody like that who can play two or three notes so authoritatively on a guitar. There's like 60 years of real mean person, right, who can scare the pants off you in one or two notes played with such immense authority and such soulfulness. There's that, and that's a real thing. For me, I'd much rather hear something like that than a lot of facility.

Do you ever listen to people like Eddie Van Halen?

Not seriously, no. Because I can hear what's happening in there. There isn't much there that interests me. It isn't played with enough deliberateness, and it lacks a certain kind of rhythmic elegance that I like music to have, that I like notes to have. There's a lot of notes and stuff, but the notes aren't saying much, you know. They're like little clusters. It's a certain kind of music which I understand on one level, but it isn't attractive to me.

If you could go back in time and question any old musician, does anyone come to mind?

Uh, yeah. I'd still follow around what's his name - the Gypsy guitarist?

Django Reinhardt?

Yeah, Django. I can't remember anything, and my mind is gone. I have all of Django's records - every single one of them. Most of what he plays is even hard to understand, no matter how much I've listened to it, in terms of the actual technical how it's happening. Because I listen to it and I hear when a note is being struck and when a note is being articulated with the left hand somehow. And he does things I don't know how he's doing them. I can't imagine. You know, he's got fingers that are about half-a-mile long. I mean, I just don't know how he's doing it. And this is with a fucked-up left hand. [Blogger's note: Reinhardt's fretting hand was injured in a caravan fire.] He's able to cross his fingers over this way [demonstrates cross-finger techniques]. He was able to do runs where the middle finger crosses over the index finger. That much I've figured out because there are things he plays that work that way, and he couldn't do them any other way. There's no other way he could do them. And they're lightning fast. His technique is awesome! Even today, nobody has really come to the state that he was playing at. As good as players are, they haven't gotten to where he is. There's a lot of guys that play fast and a lot of guys that play clean, and the guitar has come a long way as far as speed and clarity go, but nobody plays with the whole fullness of expression that Django has. I mean, the combination of incredible speed - all the speed you could possibly want - but also the thing of every note have a specific personality. You'd don't hear it. I really haven't heard it anywhere but with Django.

The other guy I'd like to hear live would be Charlie Christian, who has an incredible mind, an incredible flow of ideas - they're just relentless flow of ideas that are just bam, pouring out. It has this intensity that's really incredible. And he has also a tone that I think is very hip. It sounds very modern to me. His whole playing, to my ear, it sounds very modern. And it's amazing because what people extracted from his playing, the Top-40 stuff in his playing, doesn't have that quality, really. People pick the lamest shit from his playing. But that great Solo Flight album, you know - I mean, that improvisation is amazing! You listen to that, and still it sounds incredible, to this day.

He's really the first guy who could cut it with the horns.

Yeah, right. Right, exactly. And could play the way a horn plays, play with that kind of flow of ideas. What horn players have to do is they have to learn chords as arpeggiations. They don't have to think of playing all the notes at once. Well, he's the first guy to play the guitar the way horn players play through changes. He has that sense of where everything goes harmonically.

It's amazing what Charlie Christian accomplished in 17 months.

Yeah, right. That's the way it is, man. [Laughs.] That's the way things are sometimes, you know. Yeah, well, he's a guy I would love to be able to hear. And those are the two guys whose reputations are well-deserved. They're the solid gold of American-derived music, guitar playing.

Where would you put in somebody like Robert Johnson?

Well, he's a primitive genius. And there's others that I like that I feel are in that similar category. Blind Blake. Rev. Gary Davis too, when he was young, but he was always great. I had a personal preference for Mississippi John Hurt - his early records sound so smooth. They're just like magic. And, you know, one or two others whose playing is just extremely beautiful to my ears. I like Chet Atkins.

Are there non-guitarists?

Oh, yeah, sure. Art Tatum is my all-time favorite. Yeah, he's my all-time favorite. He's the guy I put on when I want to feel really small [laughs]. When I want to feel really insignificant [laughs]. He's a good guy to play for any musician, you know. He'll make them want to go home and burn their instruments. [Laughs.] Art Tatum is absolutely the most incredible musician - what can you say?

What era of Tatum's piano playing appeals to you?

Well, all of it is fascinating, and I also haven't heard everything, but I've got the two big sets from Norman Granz, and everything on those is beyond the pale. It's just so incredible, you know. What a mind!

Were you a fan of the bluegrass masters?

[Tentatively] Yeah, uh, but bluegrass for me is band music, and I'm a fan of bands more than I am a fan of musicians. The musicians I like sounded best in a certain context - to my ears. So my favorites are certain bands, you know, certain vintage bands. That's the way I think of bluegrass music. I am much more attached to that side of it than I am to individual players, because there are so many good players in bluegrass. But not all bluegrass bands are good.

What are your favorite bands?

I think one of my all-time favorite bands was Bill Monroe's bluegrass band when he had Bill Keith playing banjo and Kenny Baker playing fiddle - I guess that must have been right around '64. '63, '64 - somewhere around there. That was a great band. And Del McCoury playing acoustic guitar and singing. That was a great band, really a sensational band.

You saw that band?

Oh, yeah. A bunch of times. And the classic Reno & Smiley band, with Mac Magaha playing fiddle. Also, the original Bill Monroe band with Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs. Also, the classic Lester Flatt-Earl Scruggs and Foggy Mountain Boys band - that was a great band. I loved Jim & Jesse when that had either Jimmy Buchanan or Vassar [Clements] and the two great banjo players they had at the same time - what's his name? It's been such a long time with banjo players. They had two real great banjo players back in the old days. They both had the same big, square-style sound. They both had rhythmically a real symmetrical style. It's hard to describe, but it's that era, back when Vassar was playing with them or Jimmy Buchanan. Both about the same era. That was also in the early '60s, right around there. They had a couple of really great bands in those moments back there. And also the Stanley Brothers. My favorite singers were the Stanley Brothers. Ralph Stanley was my all-time favorite singer, I think.

What was your banjo style like? Could you describe it?

No. [Laughs.] No, I couldn't. I really couldn't describe it. I can't describe it any more than I can describe my guitar playing.

Do you still have a banjo?

Sure, I've got several banjos. Great ones.

Ever have a 6-string banjo?

No.

Those things sound loud.

I bet they sound like hell! [Laughs.] I don't think I could stand a 6-string banjo. I don't think I could stand the combination. It'd be too alien for me.

Do you still play sometimes?

Uh, once in a while. Once in a very great while. But like I say, I burned out on banjo. I'm a burned-out banjo player. I really am. I went to the end of the rope, you know. It's the band that counts. If I could play in a real great bluegrass band once or twice a week, I would definitely get my chops back together on the banjo.

Were you a 5-string man?

Oh, yeah, yeah. Bluegrass banjo - that was it.

Do you think much of the technique transferred over to guitar?

It doesn't transfer.

The right hand?

No really. Not really. No, to me, again, it's apples and oranges. They really aren't the same instrument. They have strings and a bridge and frets, and that's it, you know. Other than that, they really are very different. Also, I thought there might be some crossover when I took up pedal steel, but they're not the same either. The technique is very, very different. And the concept is also very different. And so when you're dealing with those instruments, it doesn't help to try to take one to another.

Are there songs that you only play on acoustic?

Yeah.

How large is your repertoire?

Well, I don't know. I haven't played through it yet. [Laughs.] I know a lot of songs - I know an awful lot of songs because I was into the traditional music scene. I like music! So I've learned a lot of songs in my life. I know a lot of 'em. And I know bits and pieces of a lot of 'em, as well. And there are also a whole lot of songs that I plan on learning. For me, repertoire isn't a static thing. And even when I go on now with John and we do our acoustic thing - John Kahn who plays bass with me - there's always a few songs I think of on the road that I think would be fun to do. And if I don't remember them, I go and find a book somewhere that has them in it or something.

Are you always adding songs?

Oh, yeah. Part of the thing about music is the thing of staying interested, and you have to motivate yourself to some extent.

Do you compose on acoustic guitar? Have you written any Dead songs on acoustic?

I have done that a few times, but more often I tend to compose on the piano. It makes me think differently.

Do you know as much musically on piano as guitar?

No.

Maybe that's why it's easier to compose.

It is, because it just puts me in a different head. Theoretically I know as much, but my hands don't know anything. I don't know the instrument. But I can sit and figure anything out, you know, if I have a little time.

Art Tatum.

[Laughs.] Yeah, right. Give me 20 years and another head!

Why have the Grateful Dead more or less limited their acoustic sets?

I don't know. I don't think [Bob] Weir feels comfortable playing acoustic music. I don't know. I'm not sure exactly why. I personally would like to do it more often. Bob doesn't seem to like to do it very much. So we don't press it. If anybody feels even a little negative about something, we don't do it.

How did the 1980 acoustic Dead sets come about?

I just thought it would be a good idea, so we tried it. It was fun. And also the technology came into place. That was one of the reasons why we didn't do it for so long, because we used to try it with microphones. It really didn't work. But the technologically it's much, much easier now that you have instruments - like I say, the improvements in electro-acoustic instruments have been vast.

Did your audience react as well to acoustic music?

Oh, they have reacted as well, sure. They like it a lot. I like it a lot too. It's a nice way to play. It's a nice way to constitute. I like the combination of drums and electric bass and acoustic guitars. I think it's really a nice sound. There used to be a nice-sounding band with those two good English fingerpickers with Bert Jansch and whatever the fuck his name is - that other guy - in a band called Pentagram that played in the early '60s.

Pentangle, with John Renbourn.

Pentangle. Yeah, John Renbourn and Bert Jansch. And they were great! I mean, they had a nice little jazz drummer, a tasty jazz drummer that played brushes, and an excellent acoustic bass player and a lady that sang in sort of a madrigal voice [Jacqui McShee], and English voice. It was a lovely band. The texture was really nice, and it sounded great onstage. We played a lot of shows with them, and we heard them a lot in certain circumstances, and they sounded beautiful. It had a lot of possibilities, that combination of two acoustic guitars and so on and a standard rhythm section.

Do you miss having a second guitarist when you play in the duo?

No. No. It's just a different thing. For me, the more the merrier. I like playing in a band. But when it's an acoustic thing, it's challenging to play with just two instruments. I like to think of relating to just one other instrument, especially if it isn't another guitar.

What's the appeal of working with John Kahn?

He thinks like me. He's got the same "fuck it" attitude that I have. [Laughs.]

Are you as willing to go out on a limb?

Yeah.

Is he good about following you?

Oh, he's real good about following me, and that's the thing about it. He and I have very, very similar - we have the same musical taste, with a slight overlap. It's almost guaranteed. I mean, that's why we've played together for so long - we think like each other.

What are your audiences like with the duo? Mostly Deadheads?

I imagine they are. I imagine they're from Deadheads. But the audience is much more sensitive, I would say. We can get down to a whisper, and that place shuts up, man. I mean, nobody hollers nothin'. We can get it down to [gives a quiet whistle], where it's really whispering, where the strings are just [quietly] ping, ping. Little tiny sounds are coming out, and the place is just [whistles quietly]. You can draw them down to absolute silence.

Ooh, that's good.

Yeah, it is. It really is. It's something real special. I don't know how many audiences would do that, but I found that in every case when I go out acoustically with John and I playing, we can do it every time.

What's the difference in pressure between fronting your own acoustic duo versus playing with the Dead? Do you feel more weight on your shoulders?

Uhhh. I do, in some cases, but that's just because I have a martyr complex [laughs] or something like that. You know, a "poor me" complex here. No, no. Actually, it's great to be able to play at all for anybody under any circumstances and have anybody like it. That's really an incredible thing. And it would be so small minded of me to complain about any, any part of it. You know what I mean? It would be so chickenshit, you know? Ah, man, how could anybody think differently? To complain about any level of it would be so, ah, so . . . [laughs].

What do you feel an artist owes his audience?

Everything. Shit. I mean, either he doesn't owe them anything at all . . . I don't know how you even get an audience. Ideally, nobody owes anybody anything. You know what I mean? In other words, everybody gets paid off. The artist gets off playing, and the audience gets off listening, and that's it - that's what it's about. You know, the rest of it is somebody else's story. That's what I think the thing is about. And for me, being in the audience and getting off myself - I've never wanted any more than that. And the times when I'd get off, I love it! There's nothing better. That's where I get it from. The reason I'm onstage is because I've been in the audience.

What your favorite part of your business? Of everything you do, what do you enjoy the most?

I just love music. All of it - listening to it, playing. I mean, all of it. Everything about it, really. There's really nothing about it I don't like. Possibly interviews is the worst of it [laughs uproariously]. Well, that's the most non-musical part, you know what I mean? [Laughs.] That's the part that's the strangest. Music is easy. Talking is not so easy. And it's really something you have to learn. You learn how to bullshit, really. [Laughs.]

Do you play any music that doesn't come out onstage?

Yeah. Yeah, sure. There's a lot of music. Yeah, right! I have this kind of a weird kind of music that I play, mostly just to myself, for myself, at times that's just weird. [Laughs.]

Can you describe it?

No, I can't really. It's only just something I do when I'm sitting around with a guitar and there's nobody else around. Sometimes I get off into these zones that, to me, are very fascinating for some reason. I've never tried to record it, so I have no idea really what it's like. But I know as far as getting absorbed in something, I can get really absorbed in these things. But I have a feeling that they probably don't sound so great.

Is it more abstract?

Yeah, yeah. I can get really carried away. Yeah. It's formless music - music that doesn't have any form. It's not even music that I could play with somebody. I think it's that weird. I'll have to try and record it sometime and see what it

really sounds like. I've never really objectively gotten away from myself and listened to it. This is not something I do all the time, but once in a while I fall into this zone, you know, when I'm comfortable enough and have a nice-enough instrument and I just feel like playing and I don't have any ideas or anything like that. I drift into a few kinds of areas that I just don't really know what they're like.

This is on electric guitar?

Any kind of guitar.

Is it more like playing solos?

[Laughs.] I don't know what it's like. It's just playing, you know. Like I say, it doesn't have any form. Sometimes it's chordal things, sometimes it's progressions, sometimes it's just chords, you know. Sometimes it's kind of weird chord melodies that just have leading tones. Sometimes I play a whole bunch of real dense chord things that have these leading tones, but they aren't songs. It's just music. Sometimes I'll get this idea that has a kind of counter melody of some kind in it, and I'll start stretching it out and fooling around with it, and gradually it'll turn into this whole thing. But it's never stuff that I can repeat or remember, and I don't even know whether it has any musical value or not. It's just stuff I do. You know, it's kind of a free-form music. Sometimes ideas come out of it.

Do you ever get a musical idea without an instrument?

Yeah!

And then apply it to the instrument?

Oh, absolutely! That's where "Terrapin" - you know "Terrapin," that Grateful Dead tune? - that's where that came from. Dropped into my head - boom.

Which part?

The end part. The big theme. It not only happened, it came fully orchestrated too. Yeah. I've had melodies drop into my head a lot, but they're usually short. They're usually not that long. That's quite a long melody. And all of it came in - the conversational part of it, the way the instruments answer each other and that. Yeah, that's one of those things. Yeah, that happens to me. Not very often, but it does. And then I do try to apply it. But usually I lose it. Usually I forget it. Usually I get a great idea, and then eengh! By the time I get somewhere where I can either solidify it with an instrument or write it down or something like that, it's gone.

Ever have song ideas come to you at really strange times?

That's the only time they come to me! [Laughs.] There's always some music continuum going on, that I can sort of turn it on and off like a radio. But usually it's just mind rot; it's just stuff. Every once in a while a good idea comes through, and I never know when it's gonna be.

Have you heard musical sounds that can't be gotten on traditional instruments?

Not yet. No. Nothing that can't be got. I haven't heard anything that can't be got yet.

What are your limitations as a musician?

Shit, I've got nothing but limitations! I mean, I'm limited by everything. I'm limited by my technique. I'm limited by my background. I'm limited by my education. I'm limited by the things I've heard. I'm limited by all that stuff. I'm limited by being a human being. Yeah. I think in a way that a musician - and particularly a musician with a distinctive style - is, in

fact, a product of their limitations. What you're hearing is their limitations, really. I assume that almost everybody plays at the outside edge of their ability, so that's usually what you're hearing - as good as they can do.

How long could you last in a band where when you went onstage, you'd have to duplicate what's on a record?

Not a minute! [Laughs.] I don't think I could last very long. I mean, that would be so dull for me. In fact, I don't even think I could do it.

What percent of a Grateful Dead show is improvisation?

Oh, about 80%. I mean, almost all of it, really. All the stuff that isn't the words and the melody.

What happens when someone else in the band wants to go off into an improvisational tangent that you might not necessarily be able to follow or want to get into?

You have to make an effort. Then I'll lay out. If it's something that I don't have a handle on, then I'll lay out. If somebody's got something going, rather than wreck it by playing stuff that fucks with it, I'll lay out until I either apprehend it - you know, understand it on some level and can do something to support it - or else I'll just lay out, because that's the best thing to do. And I lot of times I just like to listen to what's going on, because a lot of times there's some beautiful things happening that don't have anything to do with me, and it's nice to be able to just listen. The Grateful Dead can be very fascinating that way. I love to lay out, because sometimes Weir and Brent get into some incredible things. I mean, everybody does, really, so it's nice to just stop: "Wow! What's that?" I like that.

Can you psyche yourself into creative moods?

Uh, I almost always have to. I mean, yeah, they don't come to me. In other words, if I don't sit down and work at stuff, I don't get song ideas. I'm not that creative, really. I'm not real prolific. I write maybe three, four songs a year, if that. And I have to work at 'em. I have to say, "Now I'm gonna work," and sit down and work. It's one of those things where I'll work for a couple of hours and nothing will happen. I won't get anything. I'll stop for a while, pick it up again and work for a couple of hours, nothing will happen. The next day I'll do the same thing, and the next day, and the next day. Maybe three or four, five days into it, I'll get a little idea: "Hey, this is kind of nice." You know, it's like that. Then every once in a while you get a stroke - you get something, "Oh, far out!" But then usually then once I get going, once I've got the first idea, then maybe three, four songs will come out in the next two days. That's the way that works for me, generally speaking.

Were any of the songs you've written particularly frustrating?

Oh, yeah. Some were really frustrating. "Reuben and Cherise" took about three years to write, literally - maybe longer than that. I kept writing and writing versions of it - "Oh, this sucks." Hunter would rewrite the lyrics: "No, that doesn't make it." I'd write a new melody: "No, that isn't it." It's so utterly and totally different from the very first conception of it. That went on forever. It just went on forever.

Did any songs happen spontaneously?

Yeah! A whole bunch of 'em. A lot of 'em. I'd have to go through the whole list and say, "Yeah, this one, this one, this one." An awful lot of them have just boom - they come out real quick. Because usually we're cooking, Hunter and I, when that happens. The majority of our songs are cooking. It's that first one or two or that really different one occasionally that we had to labor like crazy at or whatever.

Do you give Robert Hunter a chord progression?

We do it all different ways. He gives me lyrics. He gives me a stack of lyrics this big [holds fingers a couple of inches apart], and I give him about two melodies [laughs uproariously]. You know, his output is enormous. My output it teeny. But usually what happens is I go over to his house, and we just work on something.

On piano?

Yeah.

Then do you teach it to the other members of the band at a rehearsal, do you give them a cassette . . .

No, I let them guess it! [Laughs.]

Onstage, right?

Yeah! No, I like to just teach it to 'em. I just tell them the chords: "Here's the chords." Like that. I like to keep it simple.

Are there any songs you're particularly proud of?

Oh, yeah, there's a bunch of them that I love. I really do love them. There's a lot of them that I'm proud of. I don't know. All of them are songs that I can perform time after time and not get bored with, and that's saying a lot.

That's a good sign.

Yeah, it really is. They live for me. And after I've written them, I don't feel like they're mine anymore - luckily, because I'm self-conscious about my own work if I think about. If they reminded me of myself somehow, I don't think I'd be able to stand to do them over and over again. So it's nice. They don't have any context, in a way, so it's nice. I can perform them over and over again in lots of different moods, with lots of different coloration, and still feel good about 'em.

Are there songs you'll only call out to play when you're in a certain mood?

Geez, that's hard to tell. For me, playing onstage is so subjective, I don't know how I feel about it a lot of the time. It may be that there are, yeah. There are definitely songs that a lot of times I am not in the mood for, so it works that way for sure. Whether it works the other way, I'm not so sure. That is to say that it's possible that if I'm in the right mood, I can play any song. I can feel like doing any song. So I don't know about that part of it. But I know on the negative side of it that there are times when I definitely don't feel like playing a certain song. This is not true with every song, though. There's only a few songs that are sort of mood-triggered or attached in some way to a mood - for me, in that subjective sense. [At this point photographer Jon Sievert comes in and we take a short break.]

You were talking about composing . . .

I'll tell ya, I don't think of myself as a composer. I only do that because that's what you do. I learned how to do it. It's a craft. I can do it as a craft. I know about the craft of writing, but I don't think of myself as a composer. I've never been compelled by my own compositions. I don't feel that I'm particularly gifted in that area.

If somebody wanted to hear the essential Jerry Garcia, are there any cuts you'd tell them to listen to?

No, not really. I don't think of myself as being on records. But any half a dozen live concerts of the Grateful Dead or my band would pretty much give them the more or less of it.

Do any concerts stand out?

I don't keep track. No, I don't.

You're not like your fans, huh?

No. For me, it's the next note. It's not the last one.

When you make a mistake onstage, is that your attitude?

Yeah. Oh, yeah. There's no such thing as a mistake. [Laughs.]

Do it again, and it's improvisation.

That's right. There's no such thing as a mistake.

Are you satisfied with your accomplishments and your career?

Not at all. No. No, no, no, no, no. I still think of myself as someone trying to learn how to play the guitar. If I learn how to play the guitar, I'll be really happy.

Why do you think you've attracted such a loyal following?

It must be really hungry out there. [Laughs.] I blame the general low quality of life, you know.

Yeah?

Well, yeah! I don't know why. To tell you the truth, I don't know why the first person stayed for the first song. It's been a mystery to me, because there was a time when that didn't happen. I played for a long time, and nobody cared about it at all [laughs]. That was never a criteria, as far as I was concerned. I would keep playing for nobody if that was what was happening. People hanging out and liking it is just another one of those things of just tremendous good luck, I think. Or at least that's how I feel about it. I'm glad it's that way - I'm glad people like it - but I don't know how or I don't know why or what, particularly. It's hard to appreciate from this side of it.

Have you perceived a large change in your audience?

Our audience has changed a lot of times, but our audience is still a Grateful Dead audience. That is to say, the kind of people that they are - I think there's a certain kind of person, maybe, that likes Grateful Dead music. I don't mean that in a narrow kind of way, because it seems to cut across all kinds of lines. I mean, it cuts across all kinds of cultural and social lines, so it's not some easy formula for the Grateful Dead person. Our audience now are people who are 16, 17 years old, 18 years old now, that weren't born when we were started. [Laughs.] That's a sobering thought, you know.

Does the ambience of the concert seem the same?

Oh, yeah. Well, pretty similar, except there are some large differences, but they seem to be basically cultural in a big way in America. On the East Coast, they're more vehement, you know. They're more yaaah! The energy is higher, frankly. But the energy is higher on every level on the East Coast. You know, New York has that thing that only New York has. The West Coast has a thing that only the West Coast has. Those kind of differences, you know. But other than that, the Grateful Dead audience basically is the same kind of people. They get along pretty well with themselves, from coast to coast and all around. They seem to be a pretty good-natured lot. I like 'em. They're good people.

For the work I do, I have to see a lot of heavy metal and jazz and different types of music . . .

Lucky you! [Laughs.]

Any bands you'd go out of your way to see?

There are a few, yeah. Let's see - the last band I went to see is Dire Straits. That was the last band I went to see live, a couple of years ago. There are others that I would, but most of the time I'm out working and stuff. So I don't really get a chance. But there are more that I would go to see if I were in a situation where I wasn't working nights so much. I would go out more. But yeah, there's actually a lot of music that I would go to see. It's just the opportunity doesn't present itself that often. That's the problem. Time and space, you know.

Do you ever have trouble with being recognized in public?

I've given up worrying about it, because I'm recognized almost everywhere now. It bothers me sometimes, because there's that thing - you'd like to not have to think about yourself all the time. That's the drag - the thing of constantly being forced to think about yourself all the time. And there are times when you'd like to, uh, . . . I feel some sense of responsibility toward that person too, the public Garcia person, you know. In other words, I don't feel that I have the freedom to get roaring drunk and start fights and scream at people and do all the kinds of stuff that I might do perfectly comfortably if I were just nobody. You know what I mean? [Laughs.] I don't like to be obnoxious. There are things you might to be able to do in perfect comfort if you felt that you didn't have to answer for it in some way. And I feel some sense of stricture. Although I might not ever do those things, I do feel some sense of restriction down at that end of my personality. And sometimes I have mild fits of resentment about it, but shit, mostly people are very nice to me, and so far I've had no really bad experiences. I've had a few weird experiences and a few close brushes with total weirdness of one sort or another, but nothing that's really freaked me out or made me feel too awful about it.

That'd be a great book title: "Close Brushes with Total Weirdness."

[Laughs.]

What's your acoustic guitar?

Takamine. I don't know what model it is, but it's a lot like a D-21 except that it's got a cutaway. A dreadnaught with one cutaway.

With slider controls?

Yeah, little slider controls. It's got a high and low cut and boost and a volume, so it's got three sliders as opposed to two. It's right off the shelf - it's a showroom model.

Do you have it set up to approximate an electric?

No, I use significantly heavier strings and also a higher action and all that. I have it set up like an acoustic guitar.

How much preparation do you have to do, playing wise, before you go on tour and onstage?

Well, I like to warm up. Before I go on tour, I like to spend two or three days with John, just warming up my chops on the acoustic guitar. We've done it enough now where it only takes a few days to warm up, chops wise. And then before a show, I'll do more and less as the tour goes on - warming up before a show. There's the long-term warming up, and the short-term warming up.

On acoustic, do you have to make many compensations in terms of technique with your right-hand picking attack?

Yeah, it's a whole different ball of wax, yes. It's very different. I hold my whole hand kind of differently. And just the position of the guitar and the thickness of the guitar and everything means my whole arm and wrist and everything have a whole different attitude. Electric guitar is real thin, so my elbow is close to my body and my wrist is close to the guitar. It's all in here [demonstrates close-up playing position]. With an acoustic guitar, it's all out here [hold arms further away from his body].

Do you hold the pick the same way?

Pretty much, yeah. But I move it around all the time while I'm playing anyway. I don't have "a" way I hold the pick in an iron grasp. I constantly adjust it. I more it around a lot.

Do you always use the pointy end?

Yes.

A lot of guys lately have been using the rounded shoulder.

Yeah, I know. It's because it makes it seem like you can play faster. But what you pick up in speed you sacrifice in point. I like to have a lot of control over the point of the note, the attack. And when you use the point of the pick, it means that by relaxing or tightening upon the pick itself you get, uh, . . . I use a real thick pick, one with absolutely zero flexibility. It's like a stick. And the point is you get a lot of change in touch and a lot of change in tone and point attack of the note and coloration on that level and harmonic content of the attack by holding on to the pick tighter or looser. That makes a big difference in the tone. And on acoustic guitar, that's one of the ways you can really color your playing.

Can you play a vibrato with your fingers the same way on acoustic?

I do a slightly different kind of vibrato. I don't do the same, because I use heavier strings, for one thing. It's a different thing. But yeah, I don't have any trouble with vibrato on acoustic.

Which fingers do you use?

I tend to draw my vibrato from my whole hand.

Like a violin player rather than B.B. King?

Yeah, yeah. I don't do independent vibratos with my fingers very often. Once in a while I do. More often, I do a vibrato with my wrist.

Do you bend strings much on acoustic?

Yeah, but I don't make an effort to. On an acoustic guitar, I'm more likely to bend a half-step.

Will you back the finger bending with other fingers?

No. Usually it's unsupported.

You must have strong hands.

Yeah, yeah. I always use relatively heavy strings for rock and roll guitar and a high action.

Do you play in open tunings on acoustic?

Never. Well, no, I wouldn't say never. There are things I especially do, but I never perform in an open tuning. If I had another guitar that I could tune up in an open tuning and leave it there . . . I hate to retune the guitar onstage. I feel they settle into a tuning, and I don't like to retune them for that reason - because you lose that sense of settling in.

How do you amplify?

I just run it into the board, because usually I travel with the same P.A., the same monitor system. I bring it up through the monitor, so it's plenty loud. Sometimes I use just a little Twin Reverb onstage as a failsafe - just in case something goes wrong, I can still hear the guitar.

Do you have plans for acoustic recordings?

No plans, really, but if something comes up, maybe. Really, the acoustic thing, the thing of performing as an acoustic artist, is something kind of new to me, really. I still see a whole lot. Like, John and I are just starting to get a feeling for it, and we're starting to flash on how many kinds of things we can do. We can do all kinds of different styles of music - we haven't even started to touch on it yet. I'm just doing a few things that are very available. I haven't started to put a whole lot of effort into it. But John and I are starting to think of all different tunes we could do and different styles and all that, so in the future I think there's a lot more happening in that acoustic format. I feel real good about that. John and I both do. It's really a kick to do that.

Is a lot of your acoustic repertoire drawn from traditional tunes?

Yeah, yeah. A lot of it is, because I love those tunes. I just do whatever I love.

Would you feel comfortable playing, say, a reggae song?

I don't think so. I might find some comfortable way to do it, but no, I'm too conscious of style. I associate style with the way it is. I don't like taking a style and doing an inferior version of it. I don't like trying to choke a style down into some package. Reggae is really an ensemble style - I would feel funny about trying to sort of force that down to one instrument or two instruments. It wouldn't work for me.

Can you comment on your plans for the future?

No, except that I have plans for the future! [Laughs uproariously.] I plan to have a future, yeah! That's as far as I'm gonna go.

That's good enough for me.

Yeah, me too.

Any predictions for the future of rock guitar?

I'm sure it's just going to get more interesting - at least I hope so. Or maybe it won't. It seems as though guitar goes through those things of being like - there was sort of a reductive school of guitar playing that went on there for a while during the '70s. There was kind of an anti-guitar school.

Minimalist.

Right, right. And that was kind of okay, you know. But I'm a guitar player.

It put more of a focus on tone versus notes.

Yeah, that's true. And sometimes it's a good idea to get down from the guitar tree. I also am not that much of a nut about guitar music, just guitar music. I like music music. It's the thing of a guitar as a voice in the music - that's really the thing. So it's the music that counts to me. I mean, I'll be happy whatever happens, as long as something happens. [Laughs.] You have to keep adjusting. I'd rather feel good than bad, you know. So given the choice of worrying about the development of music or being optimistic, I think it's easier to be optimistic.

Are you concerned about what you'll be remembered as?

God, no. I hope people don't remember me beyond what's necessary. Don't hang anybody up by having to remember me too much - that's what I would hope. It's like, remembering is dangerous.

How would you like to be remembered as a musician?

As a pretty okay musician. I don't know. I don't really expect to be remembered - that's way ahead of me. I'm still trying to just get good. If I get good, then I might say I hope people remember how good I am. The idea of being remembered would be embarrassing to me at this point.

You've got a humble attitude.

If you were me you wouldn't think so! [Laughs.]

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Epilog

Jerry Garcia gave his last concert with the Grateful Dead on July 9, 1995. Three weeks later he died in his sleep at the Serenity Knolls rehabilitation center, where he'd been undergoing treatment for drug addiction. By year's end, the Grateful Dead had announced their official retirement.