

Sharing with the Deadheads

Fan communities have been a major focus of this course. Most of these have been on television/movie fan communities, and more often than not they represented a shared culture. Aspects like fan fiction, fan club memberships, fan videos, zines; these are all representative of the shared community. They revolve around relationships with others through the canon. Many media fan communities have these ideas in common.

However, in music fandom, one sharing fan community was very unique at its conception and remained so for over thirty years. Deadheads, the names of loyal followers of the Grateful Dead, represent a distinct music fan community that is also a shared culture. The focus of this paper will be on two aspects of the Deadhead community, the creating and trading of concert tapes and the notion of “living on the road,” and what aspects of the band itself that invoked and allowed these characteristics.

Since the beginning of the touring days of the Grateful Dead, many concert goers personally audio recorded the show. Deadheads revel in the concert going experience, and taping was a form of immortalization that took place all throughout the band’s touring experience. One of the reasons for this was personal use and enjoyment. What better way to remember a performance than to listen to it again at another time? However, sharing these tapes was a more driving influence.

Deadheads who were avid tapers were also avid traders. The tape trader created tapes to listen to, but also had them to trade to get new ones and also share their own

concert experience. In the Deadhead community, sharing concert stories was often partnered with sharing tapes. One of the most important aspects of this tape trading was that it was indeed *trading*; very rarely did money ever change hands. There was no monetary motivation in this phenomenon. A majority of the tape trading was done in the time before concerts started, in the parking lot. That was the prime time for the Deadhead sharing community to interact, which will be discussed further shortly.

Tape trading of the Grateful Dead is still very common, even with the disbanding of the main band and the loss of Jerry Garcia. [The Deadhead's Taping Compendium](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Oracle/3088/GDmenu.html) is a collection by Michael Getz and John Dwork that represents an entire database on recordings of the concerts. In addition, the Internet is a thriving place for Deadheads to still share tapes, even from over forty years ago. (Ex.

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Oracle/3088/GDmenu.html>) Tape trading is a very important reason as to why the Deadheads represent a thriving sharing fan community. As previously alluded to, much of the early tape trading took place in the time before concerts at the venues, the all important time to anyone “living on the road.”

“Living on the road” refers to Deadheads who went on tour with the Grateful Dead. Many Deadheads would follow the band from show to show, seeing as many of them as they possible can. Many of these Deadheads would follow the band daily for as much as three weeks. (Sheptoski, p 164) These fans portray an incredible amount of devotion and love for the Grateful Dead. There were the lucky few fans that were financially stable enough to do this without making any money in the process. However, the most interesting subgroup was the vendors: Deadheads who sold products at the shows to pay for their life on the road.

Vendors would show up to the venue parking lot for the concert that night hours early to set up for sale that day, very similar to the tape traders. There was incredible amount of varied products for sale any given day, the broadest categories consisting of mostly food, clothing, alcohol, or jewelry. Again, these are the most common of categories, there are endless accounts of the most obscure items being sold. One show even had a man tattooing people in his bus. (Sheptoski, p 163) Yet, the most interesting feature of the vendors was the subsistence lifestyle. Like trading tapes, making a profit was not the concern of the vendors.

These Deadheads only wanted to make enough money to keep going on tour. Gas, food, and ticket money was what was important. With this notion, prices remained reasonable and vendors honest, with of course a few exceptions. Not only were vendors avoiding taking advantage of their fellow Deadhead, many were intent on aiding them when they could. Accounts of discounted prices or just giveaways are clear and numerous. Vendors sold useful products for Deadheads, things they themselves would want to purchase.

Vendors were also unworried about competition. The focus was on community and the ability to keep traveling with that community. Older vendors were more than willing to help younger ones get the hang of it. Vending was to keep the Grateful Dead concert going experience as long as possible, while helping your fellow Deadhead along the way.

Between tape trading, living on the road, and the many other intricacies of the Deadhead community, it is clear that it was indeed a sharing fan community. Meeting and experiencing with your fellow fan is part of the joy of the music. But what about the

Grateful Dead made this possible? Although this culture can be seen present day for bands similar to the Grateful Dead, (Phish, Moe, etc.), this movement was almost completely unique to this band when it arose. Let us focus on a few aspects of the band which promote these ideals.

The first is the band themselves putting emphasis on the communal experience. It is a well known critique of the band that their studio albums just do not compare to the live shows. The Grateful Dead fed off the crowd and each other arguably more than any other band of the era. The concerts have often been described as spiritual experiences, and each band member was well aware of this trend. In addition, song lyrics and musical tone are mostly positive. The songs inspire.

More specifically, the band also explicitly endorsed the taping and trading of their shows. In October 1984, they even started having set areas in the venues where people taping could stand for a good aural reception. It was the Grateful Dead themselves who instituted the no money exchange policy. It was a total embrace of the recreation and redistribution of their materials.

Despite all of these reasons, the most important aspect of the band that promotes the shared fan community is the common claim that they “never played the same show twice.” Due to the sheer number of songs (over 150 original songs) and emphasis on improvisation, every concert was different in set list and experience. This makes tape trading so much more desirable; each one is distinctive. It also is a reason why the Grateful Dead are worth going on tour with. If every show in a month was the same, people wouldn’t spend all of their money to see each of them. In addition, this is an example of fandom interacting with the subject. The Grateful Dead knew their fans

expected something new from show to show, and it kept them fresh to the Deadheads for well over thirty years.

The Deadhead community is a shared community much like many media fan communities. Relationships among fellow fans make the focus of the fandom that much more special. However, the Grateful Dead and their Deadheads are a community mostly unique to others in music fandom. The band itself embraced the communal experience, encouraged the free distribution of their materials, and guaranteed to bring something completely new to every show. Through these particulars of the Grateful Dead, the Deadheads were able to form an incredible shared fan community complete with facets like tape trading and living on the road. The result is one of the most incredible fan phenomenons in history.

Bibliography

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