

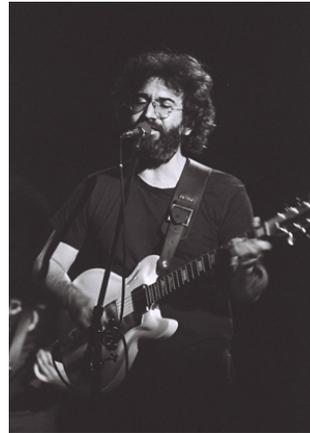
Barton Hall Concert--The Grateful Dead (May 8, 1977)

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Essay by Scott W. Allen (guest post)*



Concert poster



Jerry Garcia

On the afternoon of May 8, 1977, a sunny 60-degree Sunday, the Grateful Dead were in town--Ithaca, New York, a bohemian college enclave on the southern tip of Cayuga Lake in the central part of the state--to perform at Cornell University.

The campus was abuzz, an excitement that had been brewing since last semester when Mike McEvoy, a Cornell Concert Commission member who would later work for rock promoter Bill Graham, booked the Dead. "It took a lot of arm-twisting over many months," McEvoy remembers.

A handful of Cornell students wearing red-and-white Concert Commission jerseys, ancillary security for tonight's show inside Barton Hall, the school's archaic athletic facility opened in 1915, merrily strode across the bustling campus commons on their way to the gym, dodging Frisbees being tossed by sun-loving classmates wearing shorts and sandals.

The warm weather soon gave way to blustery conditions, with temperatures plummeting into the low 40s and sleet and rain falling. Inexplicably, the doors to Barton Hall (capacity 5,000) remained closed, forcing fans to wait outside in the cold. When only one gym door was finally opened, frustrated concert-goers shoved forward. Like clay being forced through the opening of a Play Dough toy, the lava-like flow of bodies was funneled into a tiny, rectangular opening, with fans dangerously pressed against the door frames and the glass panels in the gym's closed doors.

Inside, a party was in full swing. The crush to enter as temperatures dropped and show time approached made it impossible for the overwhelmed Concert Commission students to adequately search everyone. Fans were able to bring in six-packs of beer, wine sacks and countless bottles of liquor.

The chaos also allowed the ticketless to sneak in.

The show began with the Delta classic "Minglewood Blues." Lead guitarist Jerry Garcia was tearing it up on his Travis Bean TB 500 guitar, which he had been playing onstage with the Dead since the summer of 1976. Garcia had just used the Travis Bean to record the band's soon-to-be-released ninth studio album, *Terrapin Station*, produced by Keith Olsen, noted for his work on "Fleetwood Mac" (1975). With the Dead, Olsen was a taskmaster in the studio, forcing them to

rehearse endlessly, which had a major impact on their live performances during the spring of 1977.

In an incendiary 12-song first set clocking in at just under 90 minutes, the group hit their stride early with “Loser” and band lyricist Robert Hunter’s on-the-road novella, “Jack Straw.” Seeing as it was Mother’s Day, rhythm guitarist Bob Weir added an apropos cover of Merle Haggard’s “Mama Tried,” after which bassist Phil Lesh commented, “Thanks, Mom.”

Dr. Mark Nathanson, then an 18-year-old recent high school grad, recalls, “During the intermission, I became really hot, and we were in the coolest spot. My embroidered white cotton shirt was drenched. We knew it was a really exceptional show, which definitely contributed to the perception of heat.”

By the time the houselights dimmed for the second set, as many as 6,000 people were crammed into the tiny gym, adding to the sauna-like environment and forcing the band to perform their “Take a Step Back” routine to ease the crowded conditions in front of the stage. Even the normally stage-silent Garcia made a plea: “All these people in front are getting horribly smashed. That means all you people in the back have to move back.”

In their epic one hour-and-twenty-minute second set, the Dead conducted a high-speed chase across just six songs, skipping the drum solo due to drummer Bill Kreutzmann’s ailing wrist, the vicissitude only adding to the exigency of their playing. The band romped through a raucous 23-minute weave of “St. Stephen”-“Not Fade Away”- “St. Stephen” and, arguably, all-time versions of both the “Scarlet Begonias”-“Fire on the Mountain” couplet and Garcia’s brilliant guitar elucidation “Morning Dew,” their customary exclamation point on a stellar show.

“I had seen the Grateful Dead a couple of dozen times prior but this time it was clear they’d upped the ante,” recalls Rick Bleier, who celebrated his 27th birthday that night. “The band looked amazed. I have a clear-as-yesterday memory of Garcia’s face as he shook his head and grinned from ear-to-Cheshire-cat-ear.”

Was May 8, 1977 *the* Grateful Dead performance?

Some Deadheads believe it wasn’t even the best of the three consecutive nights--May 7 (Boston), 8 (Ithaca) and 9 (Buffalo)--played by the group. Dick Latvala, who served as the Dead’s tape archivist from 1985 until his passing in August 1999, while also curating the Dick’s Picks series of the band’s live archival releases, had his own opinion. Of a May 22, 1977 show in Pembroke Pines, Florida, that closed with “Terrapin Station”-“Morning Dew,” he wrote in a journal he used for show notations: “May 22 tears apart Ithaca.”

So how did the Cornell show attain its legendary status?

“May 8 is among the most collected, traded and downloaded concerts by any band ever,” says noted Grateful Dead historian Blair Jackson. “That’s not hyperbole, either. The original, pristine recordings of this show started circulating among tape collectors shortly after the concert and quickly became a favorite of everyone.”

“Renowned taper Jerry Moore’s meticulous recording became the most-commonly traded version of what is, unquestionably, an outstanding show,” states long-time Long Island Deadhead Charlie Rogers. “Add a cool concert poster [designed by graduating Cornell senior Jay Maybrey] and throw in a few salty tales about the travails of the weather, the problems getting in, and the Animal House-like debauchery going on inside. Top it off with a killer set list and you’ve created the legacy of May 8.”

“Something happened in that gym that cannot be extrapolated or appreciated by those who were not in attendance,” declares Bleier. “I believe the near-mythical reputation of this show originated from those who were there, rather than from those who heard the tapes.”

As the crowd departed Barton Hall through the same single door that only hours earlier had been the site of a near-catastrophe, two neatly piled stacks of garbage that had been slowly building on each side of the door throughout the night were now being crowned by the last of the exiting.

Outside, a half-foot of snow lie on the ground, flakes still gracefully falling from the sky, as if nature were affirming something special had just taken place. “A block off-campus was Pop's Diner, where we made our way,” recalls Bleier. “It was filled to capacity with other hungry but contented Deadheads.”

Scott W. Allen is the author of “Aces Back to Back: The History of the Grateful Dead” (Outskirts Press, 2014). Mr. Allen served as a Senior Writer, columnist and feature article writer for “Relix” magazine for eight years. He also holds a B.S. in Journalism from the University of Oregon ('84) and an MAT in Special Education from Manhattanville College ('94).

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.