



Lesh Grateful for ‘cosmic flow’

By [Dave Roepke](#), The Forum

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Even within the context of the Grateful Dead, Phil Lesh has always been somewhat of an eccentric.

With a red, white and blue wristband always on his right forearm, Lesh – the original and only bassist for the original jam band – seemed to be the Dead member most struck with spacey sonic wanderlust, relishing vehicles for trippy improvisation like the pliable “Dark Star.”

Most of Lesh’s musical exploration these days is done with his band Phil Lesh and Friends – a rotating lineup that this summer includes Larry Campbell, Bob Dylan’s former guitarist, and Joan Osborne on vocals. The group will play two sets Friday night at the 10,000 Lakes Festival.

Below are edited excerpts of a phone interview with Lesh last week.

The Forum: Is this tour the first time Trey Anastasio has joined your band on a regular basis?

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Phil Lesh

Phil Lesh: Pretty much, yeah. We did three shows way back in '99. Frankly, I've been trying to get something going ever since. With scheduling and all that other stuff with both of us wouldn't permit it. This worked out really well. He had a band co-headlining as part of the tour, and it just felt like he wanted to come and sing and play.

Is it difficult constantly working with a rotating group of musicians, or do you take a lot of pleasure from that?

I do take a lot of pleasure from it, mainly because it's a challenge to convey the idea of what it is we're trying to do. Also, to let them find their way into the music in a way that won't color – I don't want to give

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them any prejudiced views of the music. I want to let them find their way into it themselves so they can bring whatever unique qualities that they're bringing with them.

You've always been notoriously picky about sound quality. Has technology made it easier in recent years to reproduce the sound you're imagining?

Yes and no, in that technology has advanced to the point that it's possible to narrow what the problems are in a given venue and deal with them to a certain extent, but there are some issues that can't be addressed, like the basic acoustic design of the building. My preferred venue is still outdoors with no walls and no roof. That's what sounds best.

When you're doing a tour like you are now where you're playing a lot of indoor spaces, do you want to know before you play there what the acoustic dynamics are?

Yes and no, again. In these summer tours, we usually play the same places over and over. The sheds are seemingly what there is out there at a certain economic scale. Those are the places we play. We know what the problems are there, so we bring technology with us to deal with that as best we can. It's never, ever quite satisfactory. These sheds are designed as multi-purpose rooms. Which means acoustically, they're built for a kind of a hodgepodge designed to project the sound of a symphony orchestra as well as the sound of an amplified rock band. Those kind of acoustic compromises never work well in the terms of amplified music. Amplified music has its own unique acoustical problems that don't ever seem to be addressed by the builders of these facilities.

What current bands really impress you and why?

I just heard (blues musician) Jackie Greene's new album and I saw him at Bonnaroo. I was really impressed by Jackie, especially the guitar playing and the orchestration of the mix and the soundstage on his record. It's the kind of thing I really like to hear, where there are all kinds of different instrumental sounds and textures going on, a lot of them simultaneously and yet you can hear every little detail. You can hear how they link to one

another. It's just a constant source of delight to listen to that record. Of course, I'm a major Ryan Adams fan. I played some gigs with him last year. I'm just really in love with his songwriting and his singing and his guitar playing and all that. He's bringing lots of various songs into our repertoire in my band. They fit so well.

Do you look at the growing number of improvisational rock bands and feel, in a sense, paternal?

Not particularly. I kind of feel like the old fart who's being left behind. Some of these kids can really play, and they're really making some interesting music. Umphrey's McGee is another band that I like a lot. They're making really great music that engages you. I'm not so much paternalistic as jealous that I can't play with all these guys all the time.

You have such a distinct approach to playing the bass. Is it difficult to find drummers who can handle it?

I know it's really more a question of mentality than drumming ability. It's how you think about music. It's how flexible you are. It's can you play what I like to call art groove? Everybody play in one, instead of play in four or three or six or seven or any kind of meter. Just play in one. Every beat is somebody's downbeat. Drummers that think like that don't grow on trees, but I haven't really had to search because I've been working so well with (John) Molo all these years.

It's often assumed that the jam band audience was spawned by the fan base the Grateful Dead had. Is that how you see it?

No, I don't see it that way. I see it as a composite of the fandom of all of the jam bands. The Grateful Dead stopped touring in 1995. It really has been after that that this whole thing came to life. I guess you could think of it as a diaspora – Deadheads going out and seeding other bands. But a lot of these bands were already going when the Dead was playing. They just grew.

What made you want to start working on the “Oral History” movie?

It's funny, cause it's getting to be 40 years on from Haight-Ashbury and the summer of love and all those events that shaped my life and the culture I grew in. I started thinking, “There hasn't been, just like there wasn't a book about the Grateful Dead written from the inside until I wrote mine, a transmission of the feeling and thoughts of the people who were the counterculture in any concrete way, at least the ones that weren't involved in the political.” There's a hole and people are starting to pass way. We've lost (author and prankster Ken) Kesey. We've lost (Grateful Dead vocalist and guitarist) Jerry (Garcia). We've lost Allen Cohen from the San Francisco Oracle. We lost (San Francisco promoter) Bill Graham. The ranks are thinning. I wanted to start talking not so much to the celebrities, but to the people on the streets – Deadheads who followed us for all those many years. “Why did you do that? What values did you glean from that community, that scene, that culture that came out of San Francisco in the sixties? How do you apply that in your life today?” I want to ask the young people: “What drew you to this? You were too young to have seen the Grateful Dead touring. You were too young to have been in Haight-Ashbury. What ideas, what values, what concepts drew you to this scene.” I also want to ask them “How did we screw up?

How would you have done it better? What would you have done?" I don't really know what I'm going to do with it.

You've already started these interviews?

I've just done one set, and it's sort of a panel. I think we'll end up doing individual interviews and panels. We ask people to testify about their miracle moments in their lives, even the ones that weren't closely related to the Dead. There are moments of synchronicity. That's one of the core concepts of the Haight-Ashbury culture – go with the flow, let the synchronicity happen.

I read once that you feel like "Dark Star" is always playing and when played onstage you're just tapping into it on that occasion. Are there other songs you feel that way about?

What I'm referring to is the cosmic flow of the music of the spheres that's always playing somewhere in the universe on some plane that weren't not always aware of. Any band is locked in together in a certain way psychically. You have to get rid of your personality and your egos, a lot like meditation. You have to let all that stuff go, and the group mind coalesces and becomes aware of itself. That's when you can tap into that other dimension, that music that's always playing. It's the music that underlies everything. You've heard about string theory, right?

Yes, I've heard of string theory, sure.

What is string theory made up of? Vibrating string. What do vibrating strings suggest? Music. ... It's just a question of tapping into it. ... When it's happening, you can't put a finger in the wrong place. You can't misunderstand what the other musicians are playing. You're all of it. At the same time, you're nothing at all. All you are is the music.

Tell me how jamming requires, to a certain degree, telepathy.

I totally believe that. In fact, all ensemble music to some extent involves that.

Can you expound on that a bit?

Well, what do we think telepathy is? Is it the transmission of thoughts between minds in a nonphysical manner? To me, it's more on the level of the collective unconsciousness. ... The thing about music is that it's half telepathic already. It doesn't really exist physically. If it does, it's so transitory it's like an isotope in a cloud chamber, the atoms smacking into one another and all these little sparks and particles flash into existence for nanopicoseconds and then disappear, going back to the primordial ooze or wherever. Musical thoughts and ideas are a lot like that. As I said earlier, it's not so much telepathy as common consciousness. It's not two isolated nodes sending information back and forth, like two computer connecting on the Internet. It's the two computers becoming one computer, or five computers becoming one computer.

Was the experience of writing the book (Lesh's 2005 biography "Searching for the Sound") what you expected it to be, or were there some emotional surprises?

Writing it was fascinating. I find myself able to really return in time in my

own mind to those events and those situations and those friends and everyone who was part of the scene. It was really quite pleasant to be able to go in there and realize that even though I had been there, I still remembered it. Of course, there was a lot I didn't remember, and that wasn't in the book. It tried to make it my story, to convey the experience of what it was like for me to live through it.

If you hadn't become a musician, what other occupations do you think you'd have done?

It's really hard to say. Music was such a big thing for me, since age 4, that there really wasn't a chance for anything else to get in there.

So you couldn't conceive of doing something else?

Well, I did for a little while. When I was in the first and second year in college, I read some books by Thomas Wolfe. Have you ever read him? "Look Homeward, Angel," "Of Time and the River," that guy? That changed my life. After that, I thought, "Geez, maybe I want to try to write." It just absolutely blew me away. I started writing some stuff and the initial flush fades away and you try to look at what you've done in the cold light of day and it didn't seem very promising. So I shrugged and picked up my trumpet.

I've always wanted to know. Why do you wear those wristbands?

It's really difficult for me to play the instrument when my arms get all sweaty and my forearms stick to the finish. When you're playing with a pick, you have to move your hand up and down across the strings. If my forearm sticks on the instrument for even just a little bit, it throws off the angle of the pick. When it hits the strings, I can't play the chord right. It was purely practical. I decided I like those tri-color wristbands, and I got a whole bunch of them.

Readers can reach Forum reporter

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Photo caption: Phil Lesh May 9, 2000 Former Grateful Dead bassist Phil Lesh will play a headlining set with his band, Phil and Friends, at the 10,000 Lakes Festival on July 21.

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