

*REFLECTIONS
ON THE
GARCIA —*

One mans' string of memories

made upon the passing of a friend...

(revised 9/7/2009delete this line at printing)

A PERSONAL REFLECTION ON THE GARCIA

“SLITHER GARDEE CAME OUT OF THE SEA..”.

God, I loved Chet Atkins...

And if it hadn't been for that, I probably wouldn't have met Jerry Garcia.

Truly!

Since it's my tale, my reminisce, it makes sense to lay out a bit about my beginnings.

I was born in 1940 in Muskegon, Michigan, a beautiful part of the state, and grew up in a woods and wetland area. I spent a lot of time in those woods with only my dog for company. Fished in the creeks and small lakes in the area but where I lived there were no 'kids next door' I felt....

Very isolated.

I was the scrawny, “four-eyed geek” in your high school class. No social graces whatever and pimples besides. My basic teenaged insecurity was further complicated by having a mild speech impediment and double hearing-aids in my glasses. (I have a high-frequency loss which means that I don't hear sibilants and consonants in conversation.)

The Curse of the adolescent is, of course, to feel 'different' from others ...

And sometimes I felt different from my classmates.

Sometimes I felt like Quasimodo.

Music had a big affect to me as a kid...My dad sang and played guitar and my Uncle John played excellent Hawaiian steel guitar. They got together and played from time to time. Never often enough to suit me but I know those gatherings were among my favorite memories ever since I was a toddler. I was totally fascinated seeing that...seeing people actually *making* music with their *hands* on instruments.

Making Music was truly Making *Magic*.

I was pretty much a loner but I also discovered a love for performing in high school shows and other small gatherings. Since music always brightens a show (and makes girls smile) it's no surprise that I was drawn to playing a musical instrument.

Actually, I had started my musical quest very young on a ukulele. I graduated to a baritone uke and then to guitar as I got bigger.

When my dad turned me on to Chet Atkins, I knew I'd found THE WAY to play guitar. It was variously called "Travis Style", "Finger Style", and "Chet Atkins Style". To play that way meant that you could take a guitar and a thumb pick and you could play songs all by yourself. No sidemen required..

PERFECT.

So I began the labor of love that is still ongoing . To learn, however imperfectly, the soloing style refined and made famous by Merle Travis and particularly Chet Atkins. It was the perfect guitar playing method for a kid who lived in the scrub oak boondocks because it was an encompassing solo method... no one else was needed to make the music listenable.

In my later teens I fell in with what nowadays would be called "Hill-billy" musicians, people who played the simple country music of the fifties along with a lot of bluegrass songs. I spent a couple of summers with a family of three brothers and a father who all played. They would put a stack of country records on the stereo to listen to at suppertime and after we ate we'd go into the family room and play.

I learned a lot of guitar from those folks. I learned band etiquette and learning that to survive musically you had to be quick to adapt and learn in playing otherwise you couldn't participate.

Somewhere in all that guitar learning, in 1959 I had another life changing event. I first heard "*Randy-Lynn Rag*" By Flatt and Scruggs, featuring Buck Graves on the Dobro when it was played during one of those suppertime album listenings .

I was e-lectrified!

What a *sound* the Dobro had!

I didn't know *what* it was but I knew *that* was something I had to learn to play! I eventually did but it was years into the future.

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It was during this period of my life was where I really learned to love performing, playing music in public.

The ultimate Escape of losing yourself “playing under a light” and making music. There is nothing like it and if you can play it matters not how shy you might be or what other limitations you may have in your daily life, when you're playing Music...

You undergo a Transformation.

You are the Magician making the Magic that is music.

You are the one making music with your hands.

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These were the Eisenhower years. I was in white bread, conservative, Midwest, small-town, black-and-white TV, lower-middle-class America!

California was a Legendary Far Country about to slide into the sea and accessible only via TV, books and movies. A Magic Land. A place of Fantasy

And Michigan's' climate was shortening my mothers' life.

My dad was a carpenter but due to Michigan's weather extremes winter was a time of no work in the building trades. Life was spending summer working to make up for the bills you ran up in winter.

Primarily because of my mothers' ill-health (a respiratory problem that eventually went to emphysema) and with an eye to better employment prospects, California seemed the place to be, so my parents moved there, settling in Mountain View, California.

Compared to Michigan's seasonal round of killing heat and brutal cold, the climate was heavenly and it has a salutary affect on my mother's life.

I tried to stay in Michigan being your typically rebellious, if stupid, youth,. I was going to be independent and Seek My Fortune.

It didn't take me long to realize I couldn't earn enough at my job as a stock boy in a department store to pass the winters in MI. So I, too, moved to California and lived with my parents in a Mobile-home park.

I made my final move there in 1962 at the age of 22.

I was a pretty fair guitar player by then. I'd gotten the "independent thumb" so important to finger style guitarists and I was feeling pretty cocky about it.

But I was definitely un-hip. Still a virgin, too shy to really hit on a girl and limited in social possibilities because I didn't drive a car.

I picked up a job at Sunset Magazine working in the Shipping and Receiving department. This got me a little income so I could pay my parents some rent.

I then proceeded to try to find Musicians to play with without much success. There just weren't any young people around playing music, country music in particular.

I earned enough money to buy my first Gretsch "Chet Atkins Tennesseean " guitar. That, and a little amplifier made me think I was sumpin' *else*.

(In my own mind, anyway!)

One thing I knew. Being that not many people played finger style I figured this was to be my means of entry into the musical community.

So I hit upon a plan.

I called various local music stores and asked for someone who taught finger style guitar, figuring that it was a case of "find the well, find the water". If I could find someone who played like me he would probably know musicians of a similar taste.

I was told to find one Jerry Garcia, a guitar and banjo teacher at Dana Morgan's Music Shop. It was a small acoustic guitar retail and repair store with teaching rooms in the back located in Palo Alto just a few miles away from Mountain View. A fifteen minute bus trip.

Dana Morgan's' turned out to be a laid-back place with very accessible instruments. As long as you limited your picking to used instruments,

you were allowed to play them. You just had to learn what instruments not to play. Particularly when the owner, Dana Morgan Sr., was around.

So it was bus trips to Palo Alto hunting the elusive Garcia who never seemed to be there when I was. I was ready to give it up when we at last connected at Morgan's'.

The day finally arrived and I met the man, who would one day become a World Icon. A True Legend. A Friend.

What does a future World Icon look like when he's only twenty years old?

This one was short-haired with a nicely trimmed Van Dyke beard. Jeans and sneakers and a very warm demeanor. He had kind, "Smiley" eyes and spoke quietly but with animation in his voice.

I quickly found that one of his strongest qualities was the ability to make you feel at ease. There was a gentle Kindness about him. It soon became evident that he had a Great Curiosity about things Musical. But he also radiated an acceptance of life, taking things in stride with a great sense of humor.

He had a Bemused Look when talking to you (or to me at any rate) as if he was certain the next thing you were going to do or say was going to be vastly entertaining.

I remember the first time I shook hands with him. That chopped middle finger of his kind of poked you in your palm and was mildly startling when your hands clasped in the handshake mode. It kind of felt like he was passing something to you in the handshake. It became his semi-trademark later in life of course but it never seemed to bother him and certainly didn't affect his ability to play any instrument he touched.

I remember one guy asking him why he didn't use his middle finger when he played the Banjo. Simple. "I don't *have* one."

No hang-ups there.

He had rather small hands. I'm not sure why I find that so remarkable but they *seemed* a little small. I guess most people assume Legendary Musicians all have rather large, long fingered hands but this was not the case here.

Well, anyway, I told him I was looking to improve my technique and I had heard he taught finger style. He passed me a guitar and told me to play a couple of my favorite pieces. He wanted to evaluate my playing.

I was an *instant* hit!

I played “*Saturday Night Shuffle*” by Merle Travis and he was instantly impressed. He said that he couldn’t teach me any more in that vein, *but* if I wanted to meet people to play with he’d definitely help introduce me around and *we* could play also. This started a friendship that was to last, close and distant, for thirty years.

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I was on unemployment by that time. My job with the magazine had dried up. I fell into a routine of picking up my bi-weekly unemployment check and drifting down to Morgan’s and playing with Jerry if he wasn’t teaching. He demonstrated some pretty adept finger style playing of his own. His influences were people like Earl Scruggs (who plays fabulous guitar as well as his trademark banjo playing). He played some Kirk McGee rags, he played some Doc Watson finger style. But it wasn’t all showoff. We usually just played together for the pure joy of playing and swapping licks.

Many times there would be other musicians there that would join in and we’d jam. When we wanted to take a break from playing there was always the coffee shop just down the street from Danas’. If anybody had any money it was down to The Creamery or occasionally St. Michael’s Alley for coffee and conversation about Life and music making.

The local hangouts.

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Now while all this was going on you must bear in mind that California, to me, was an intimidating, frightening world at that time. It was the land of Hells Angels (who I *knew* would chain-whip me on sight) and Marijuana-smoking Beatniks and various and sundry (surely predatory) Riff and Raff that would most certainly corrupt my virginal, innocent, Midwestern soul. You can imagine my relief to finally find the herd safety of musicians. People who talked the same language. The Common Bond...

And, my *god*...my first musical contact had a *beard*!

Jerry came down to Mt. View to meet my folks once. My dear Mother was one of these people that always worried about “what the neighbors would think.” I almost had to get her a tranquilizer when I told her I had invited a man with a BEARD into her home. He passed muster but I don’t think she ever got over it. Poor Mom.

But, bearded or not, he was a diverse, multi-instrumental musician of wonderful ability as well as a source of humor and guidance for not only this ignorant transplant, but a myriad of other locals. He was, from the beginning, an iconoclastic, if raggedly poor, free man.

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At this time in the nation, the Folk-Music-Hootenanny boom was The Thing and, in Palo Alto, *The Tangent* was the place to Do It.

The Tangent was a Hofbrau with an upstairs loft that was made over into a low budget musical showroom. It seated about 75 souls at a few small tables but a lot of the patrons ended up sitting on the floor. It had a small two or three microphone stage and a Green Room for tune-ups and run-throughs. Over the top of the stage, near the ceiling was a long white banner that proclaimed “**Zaplawa**” a mysterious word that was never explained but was always cause for a smile.

The Tangent featured what we would now call an “Open Mic” format. People would get up and do three songs or fifteen minutes then give way to the next performer. It was a dollar cover charge to non performers to help with the rent. The performers were not paid. (Of course.)

Folk music. Acoustic music. Sing-along stuff. *Hootenanny’s*

And there I was with my shiny new Electric guitar. (Electric guitars were Tools of the Enemy, you know...) A no-no at *The Tangent*. I had to borrow acoustic guitars for my musical contributions.

Jerry, in those days, had his heart set on being a bluegrass banjo player. He was awfully good at it. Being a conscientious teacher, he believed in knowing and being able to play what he taught and he played and taught all forms of banjo.

He could “frail” the banjo and play “Old Timey” and clawhammer stuff as well as straight ahead Bluegrass. He just loved to play and it didn’t

take much encouragement or much of an occasion to get him to throw a “band” together.

For sidemen he would use whoever was handy to fill out his “band,” often-times naming the band on the way to the gig.

This is how I met David Nelson, Ron (Pigpen) McKernan, Bob Hunter, and Troy Weidenheimer the players and personalities who formed the core of my musical buddies in those days.

“HE CAUGHT ALL THE OTHERS”

Ron, “Pig Pen” McKernan

Was about seventeen when I first set eyes on him. It happened this way...

Jerry and I were playing in the front showroom in Dana Morgan’s on a fine afternoon. As it goes, he’d play some then I’d play some because that’s what musicians *do*.

During one of the turns I heard this beautiful, sweet, reedy sound coming out of nowhere. I looked over my shoulder and I knew I was gonna *die!*

“Pig” was, of course playing his Harmonica, but what jolted me was his Levi vest, done-in Jeans and a *railroad spike* thrust in his belt! Add a greasy D.A. haircut and a *bad* case of acne and you have (to me) what looks like a Thoroughly Dangerous Man.

But he could really play that harmonica. I’d never heard anything like it back home in Michigan.

Well he didn’t stab or slug me with the railroad spike and seemed content to play his harmonica in the appropriate places. I eventually relaxed figuring killing me wasn’t on his agenda.

When Jerry and I were alone later I asked him if “that guy was some kind of thug.”

“Pig?” He said, “Not Pig. He’s harmless. He just looks scary.”

“Pig” was always “around.” Being more Blues oriented, he didn’t sit in with us much in those days. I noticed that even at seventeen he had a wine-drinking problem that eventually led to The Dead’s first Great Loss.

For years I thought “*Ripple*” was a song about Pigpen and wine. (I can’t understand sung lyrics so I assumed “Ripple” referred to the wine.)

He seemed to be a trouble magnet almost by choice.

Once at a party he pitched the host's cat into a swimming pool. No specified reason. Just felt it was “time for the cat to go into the pool”. He did some damage on some other person's borrowed pickup truck and when the Dead got busted for possession of Marijuana of course it was “Pig’s” picture on the front page.

He never seemed to be much for conversation but he, like the rest of us, loved to play.

Still, he was luckier, if that’s the word, than most when it came to getting in trouble it seemed.

But he could *blow!*

Robert Hunter

Kind of adopted me and explained things to this poor, lost rube Midwesterner. It was evident that he and Jerry were a strongly bonded friendship. He and Jerry were very different people but they shared a communication that was to last all of their working lives.

Hunter and Garcia pointed out things for me, like, it wasn’t too cool for me to refer to people who wore “those Mercedes-Benz (pacifist) buttons” as “ban-the-bomb nuts”. I was pretty naive in a lot of ways. I required some gentle enlightenment and got it. My Midwest conservatism was fading as my attitudes and outlook on life changed.

Along with mentoring me Hunter played Bass and Mandolin and sang (pretty well, too) as I remember.

Hunter, at least I think it was Hunter, owned this old wreck of a car; a Plymouth or a Pontiac, I can’t recall which, that he shared with Jerry.

That was their only car. It ran pretty good but I remember it seemed to be lacking brake shoes.

Made for an all-hands driving experience.

Everyone would have to scan the road for hazards ahead because stopping that car was a planned event. No *way* could it stop on a dime. You were always extra glad to reach your destination riding in that car. It gave you cause to believe in miracles.

This brings to mind a Garcia tale in which Jerry was driving this contraption. Hunter was in the passenger seat. David Nelson and I were in the back. It was just getting dark.

Jerry asks to borrow Hunters' *glasses*. I immediately break into a sweat. I turn to Dave and ask, "*Glasses*. How can he drive with someone else's *glasses*?"

Dave just grins and shrugs. "Jerry has bad night-blindness. He'll use anybody's glasses when he drives at night."

Which was part of my education of how to take things in stride, a pre "goin' with the flow" attitude...?

Another time, Jerry was driving me home to Mountain View in a pouring rain. We came to a railroad crossing and *whoops!* Somehow we're on the wrong side of the road. No explanation. We just were staring at on-coming headlights coming right at us.

V. exciting.

After one particularly harrowing white knuckler I told him that he'd have to DO something with or about that car.

Very quietly and gently he said: "Look, all I want to do is to live my own weird little life my own weird little way and play music for a living."

That was the essence of The Garcia to me.

His dreams and aims, as it were. wrapped up in one sentence.

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David Nelson

Hunter remarked once that Nelson looked like a Young Mark Twain.

He played excellent Bluegrass guitar on, I believe, a Martin D-18. A marvelous instrument. *Everybody* used his guitar. (You'll remember I was Under Suspicion because of my Electric guitar.) I performed on that Martin a lot. Jerry used it when he needed a guitar to play on. *Everybody* used it.

Ol' Dave, if I recall properly, worked part-time in the display department of a local Department store at the time. He was the only one of us four that had a job (except for Jerry's teaching of course.).

We all were very broke most of the time. Dave was the only one with a real job and it wasn't a full time thing. I have known Dave to buy

strings for his guitar before he would buy groceries particularly when he had a gig up coming

Some people have really sensitive hearing. When you restring a guitar you get extra high overtones from the strings and the guitar has brighter, more distinct tone. He wouldn't let anyone touch his guitar if he'd just put new strings on it because he could tell that the new string "edge" was gone if it got played.

Poor Dave. *Everybody* used his guitar!

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Troy Weidenheimer

Troy taught guitar over at Swains House of Music, a piano store in Palo Alto.

He would get together with us from time to time. He eventually helped me get into teaching, guitar but more on that later.

He bore a startling resemblance to Spike Jones (some say he looked more like Billy Graham, the Evangelist) when he grinned.

Troy was an excellent guitarist. He played and taught electric Jazz and Rock. He would laughingly refer to Jerry's music as "Hamburger Music" but he would come by and jam all the same.

"BUT HE DIDN'T CATCH ME..."

Hunter, Nelson, Garcia and I hung out together a lot. We would pool our money and go to Saint Michael's Alley or the Creamery or a restaurant called Stickney's and nurse cups of coffee for hours.

Did we talk about *COSMIC* things?

Nah. We talked about the things everybody talks about. Staying alive. Of course, being musicians, we talked about getting gigs and maybe getting famous one day. "Fame! Cookies! Comic Books!" as Garcia would say.

Everybody smoked cigarettes like chimneys so my contribution was being the "Ciggieman" as David called me. I would load up with extra smokes and share when we'd congregate. They knew all the coffee shops that would let us nurse coffee refills for hours on end. You carefully rotated them so as not to wear out your welcome. It was a way of life.

Or we'd meet and jam at Danas'.

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One thing remarkable about Jerry was that he was almost always playing on something if there was any kind of instrument around to be had. When he would get his hands on a top-of-the-line Banjo it made him hard to hear and understand over the music. A Banjo is a *noisesome* thing, particularly when you're sitting right in front of it. Once I asked him why he insisted on playing the thing during a conversation.

"I'm practicing so I can talk while I play," he said.

Two phrases were always on his lips: "Practice" and "Play it CLEAN." So that's what he did. Practice. Constantly...

He also liked his instruments to be *loud*. It was a requirement.

Jerry made me aware of artists on Guitar and Banjo I had never heard of...Doc Watson, Mike Seeger, Libba Cotten; a raft of people I never knew existed. He would play the latest dazzle by Earl Scruggs followed by Roscoe Holcombe's "High Mountain Sound." He would run off some of Kirk McGee's wonderful finger-style guitar as well as some of the Mississippi Blues. Then out would come some Doc Watson stuff. He could do *some* of everything.

Not to show off, but because it was FUN!

He also had this wonderful quality of encouraging the timid player, drawing them out. Making them feel their contribution was as valuable as anyone else's.

Now the guy was human and all, but I can't remember him blowing his stack, ever.! Try to find the good humored solution. It seemed a better way to go.

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Jerry lived at a place called "The Chateau," a rambling, two story red and white house on a rise off Sand Hill Road in Palo Alto. It was an old two story house, red with grey and white trim. It had been divided into little studio rooms with a communal bath and kitchen.

Lots of odd, different characters lived there. Steinbeck would have loved them. I was shy when I was up there and stayed pretty low key and only came alive when I got to play. My refuge and security was my music which was better than Linus's Blanket.

You get to Play. And when you play music the shyness melts and bonds form.

And play we did. As I already noted, Jerry and Hunter introduced me to *The Tangent* and as long as I kept my electric guitar out of sight I had a nice niche as a featured player and sometime sideman. I really wanted to play in Jerry's' Bluegrass group-of-the-moment but all the spots were filled. Jerry on Banjo, David Nelson on Guitar and Hunter playing Bass or mandolin when we could get an instrument.

Jerry said "Too bad you don't have a Dobro. We could use a Dobro player."

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A DOBRO BRIEF

Dobro is a brand name for a type of guitar created in the late twenties by the Dopyeara brothers National Guitar Company.

The basis of the design features a metal resonator under the bridge that functions somewhat like a banjo head to increase the volume and "cut" of the instrument. The resonator had a decorative metal cover, so it looks like a guitar with a hubcap or a colander on it.

Most National guitars were made of metal.

The National Guitar Company eventually split up due to personal conflicts and the brothers formed the Dobro company.

The Dobro people used a different style of resonator and featured a wooden body on most models. Bluegrass players preferred the Wooden Dobro and, as years passed, "Dobro" became a generic term for any resonator guitar. Bluegrass players played them horizontally using a metal steel, "Hawaiian style". Using that metal slide gave the instrument a rollicking, ear-catching sound. A truly happy sounding instrument.

Well, it just so happened I had an uncle (my Uncle John mentioned at the beginning of this missive) who had a National all metal Duolian model. And it just so happened that my parents had to go back to Michigan to arrange the sale of their house so I went along and picked up the guitar.

A wooden Dobro would have been preferable...

Close enough! If a metal one was all we had we'll take it.

So now I was a clueless Dobro player. Jerry showed me how to tune it for bluegrass, showed me some basic ideas about the proper approach and said “You gotta learn how to “crack” it like “Uncle Josh” (Buck Graves).”

God love ‘em, these guys cheerfully put up with what was some really *bad* Dobro playing.

It wasn’t a wooden Dobro and I couldn’t play it very well, but I was IN.

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So off we went. Jerry would let me know when a Playing Opportunity was coming up and if I could, I would shag the bus up to Palo Alto.

We four would load us and our instruments into that old car and go anywhere we could play. I could fumble around on a bass a little so Hunter and I switched off so he could play more mandolin and we just had a *grand* time. We were kids, actually, playing for the moment and loving it.

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A Digression...

We played a LOT of little playing gigs, usually at no pay. Sometimes it would just be a house party. Sometimes a coffeehouse in San Francisco. They were all “gigs” to me.

Playing Opportunities.

I never kept track of how many or for who or where they were.

We didn’t care.

We’d just pile in the car, get there, set up and play, get done, get in the car and go home. We didn’t *think* “archival”. We didn’t think ‘historical’. We just played as much as we could.

Sometimes they even fed us.

They seldom paid us.

I suppose I could gather up all the books on The Dead and narrow down the specific dates and places these little things happened. But that would just change this to a tedious lecture cluttered with details that didn’t seem important then and don’t seem important now. I think the feel of the experience is what a memory is all about...

“.....YOU CAUGHT ALL THE OTHERS, OLD SLITHER GARDEE..”

Bob Hunter, around this time, had signed up as a volunteer testing psychedelic drugs under controlled laboratory conditions. They would put him in a room with a cot, a table and chair, some writing and art materials and record his reactions.

Tales of those Trips made for fascinating coffee-shop discussions. It also livened up at least one band road trip one day...

Hunter was in the back seat and started ducking his head and yelling "Oh God!" every time he saw a passing car. He had the problem of seeing All Traffic heading Right For Him.

I never saw any pot-smoking or other drug things going on at that time. It certainly hadn't reached the state of usage we see today by a long shot. I remember asking Hunter about such things. He said that Jerry smoked pot on occasion. "Watch for people coming in here wearing dark glasses. Dead giveaway." So I watched for about twenty minutes, looking for "drug fiends" then forgot all about it.

I missed a lot of shows because I didn't drive and transportation for me was always a problem. To top it off I was uneasy about crashing at a strangers' house so I was a limited participant. Once they came and got me and we took along my father's VM reel to reel tape recorder. We recorded a couple of songs in our rehearsal but for some reason Jerry and Hunter were not around when I felt it was time to go home. The other occupants said I could crash there if I wanted but I hardly knew the others and just didn't feel comfortable with the idea of staying there.

So I walked from the Chateau to Mt. View carrying a fifteen pound tape recorder.

I got stopped two or three times by local police. They listened to my tale, checked the serial number, clucked sympathetically and each, to a man, claimed they would give me a lift but their jurisdiction was 'just a little ways up the road' and it wouldn't be much help.

This is about four miles.

That was quite a walk toting a load

Not recommended.

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I guess my peak playing show with these guys was the 4th Annual SF State Folk Music Festival where Jerry and the late Rodney Albin got me in the Guitar Stylists lineup.

Rodney was an example of the uniformly warm people that Jerry surrounded himself with. So many of his friends had this fun “let’s play music” outlook.

Rod loved to sing Merle Travis’ version of “*I Am A Pilgrim*” and have me play Travis-Style guitar backup for him. He was so fascinated by the guitar playing that he’d get distracted and forget the words so I’d feed the next line to him as I went along. (Very funny to watch)

I took some flack from the hard-core folkies because I used my electric guitar in my “Stylists Workshop” demonstration, but I got past it by showing the transition and similarity of acoustic to electric. I’d play a piece on my electric and play the same thing on the acoustic. Using Dave Nelson’s D-18. (Of course)

Same music, same technique. Different guitar.

The Folk Purists had a hard time realizing that a guitar is just that.

A guitar.

Purists will only see things their way.

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On more than one occasion I was the Tuning Guy.

Often when we would get to a gig the boys would put me in a room with all the instruments and I would take my tuning fork and get all the instruments in tune. The boys would then grab their weapons and fine-tune them to their taste. Otherwise you would get a bunch of nervous musicians all trying to tune at once. Bedlam.

Jerry was always fighting the tuning on his Banjo.

It is in the physics of any fretted instrument to never be perfectly in tune. The effect is more pronounced in an instrument that is tuned to an open chord (as a Banjo is)..

It just does that. It’s the *nature* of the beast.

So we would be clipping right along, and, *Twang!* Jerry would stop in the rush of the song and commence tuning.

You had to love him.

I was also, at times, The Capo Guy because David and Jerry were notorious for mislaying their Capos; and you cannot play Bluegrass without a Capo.

So I just gathered them up when we started to load up.

Little items like that are pretty important to a musician in ways a non player can't understand.

I remember once when we got to a gig Jerry announced "I don't have my fingerpicks."

"Where are they?" we asked.

"They're on the mantelpiece at The Chateau."

"Use mine." I said.

"You can't use someone else's picks!" he said, "That's like wearing someone else's *socks*."

So we dispatched someone to go back to The Chateau and get them...

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Lo, it came to pass that Jerry met Sara Rupenthal, the lady who was to become his first wife and Mother of Heather, his eldest daughter.

Sara was a sweet, quiet lady with straight light brown hair. She played guitar and "Old Timey" Banjo and sang old mountain folk songs. (I can still hear her in my mind performing "*The Cuckoo Bird*.")

And Lo, it came to pass that Jerry and Sara got married.

Quite a show.

All of Jerry's friends in what was their version of formal wear.

That was a sight. A lot of folks clothes didn't match.

Borrowed neckties. Lots of "em.

GQ it wasn't

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Also, right about this time, Troy Weidenheimer intervened in my life.

He explained some very basic things about reading music and musical theory and then said: "I'm sick of you being on unemployment! Go get a job teaching!"

So I did. At Goetz Brothers Music in Redwood City.

Of course my first student was a *Banjo* student. No easy start for me. I had no clue how to actually play the banjo.

But, thanks to listening to and watching Jerry, I knew enough about banjos to stay about five pages ahead of this poor kid because I at least knew what Banjos were supposed to *sound* like. Over the years I turned out some pretty decent Banjo players.

And Lo, it came to pass that Evelyn (My girlfriend and to-be Mother of my son, Geoff) and I wanted to marry.

I lined up a Preacher and Sara and Jerry were our witnesses.

Sara made us this little two-layer cake with orange frosting, as I remember.

Sweet people.

Then we did the Couples thing. “Got Together for Visits,” greeted the arrival of each others’ children, etc.

Very domestic!

Bobby Weir surfaced in my view right around then.

Rumors were abounding that Jerry was “secretly” playing *electric* Blues and Rock with people, Bobby Weir and Pigpen among them. Hmmm.

Bob Weir was one of Jerry’s students as I recall. Just a very nice kid. I say “kid” but remember, I was only 24, Jerry was 22, so music-wise a 16 or 17 year old kid even if he was a very viable musician, was still a kid. None of us were very old. We were all certainly kids in our *outlook*.

It was also around this time that Jerry, Troy, Dave and, I think, Hunter and I played a STATEMENT at *The Tangent*. The boys felt that there was a “snob” attitude creeping into the *Tangents* musical format. The boys thought it was getting too “exclusive.” The abovementioned Purists were starting to take over.

So, as a “statement,” Troy arranged a Bach piece for us that we played for one song using straight instruments. Jerry on banjo, Nelson and Troy on guitar, Hunter on mandolin and myself on bass.

Then we played “*Wildwood Flower*” with nose flutes, stovepipe horns, Kazoos and Banjo (of course).

Then, hooting like maniacs, we ran out of the room.

I don’t think any one of us played *The Tangent* again.

~/~

THE REGALDOBRO

Just prior to that abovementioned Final at *The Tangent* I was at *Goetz Brothers* waiting for a student to show, when this little guy walked in carrying a battered guitar case. I remember him as looking like a young Peter Lorre.

Somehow I *knew* he had a Wooden Dobro in that case!

“Do you people buy guitars?” he asked.

“Sometimes,” sez I, “Whatcha got?”

He laid the case on the counter and opened it and...

Sure enough. It needed some work done on it, but there it was.

A Sho’ ‘Nuff *Wooden Dobro*.

The name on the peghead said Regal instead of Dobro but it *still* was a Wooden Dobro. It looked identical to the classic two screened Dobros. It had a little wear on it and someone had written the fret numbers in white ink on the fretboard. Obviously tricked up as a ‘student’ instrument. Then some guy had cut the nut down to try to play it Spanish style. On a square necked Dobro.

All fixable stuff.

As it turns out, on this particular model the Regal bodies were manufactured in 1935 by the Kay guitar company and used metal parts made by Dobro and were made specifically for Montgomery Wards catalog distribution.

“How much?”

“Well, I need bus fare to Milwaukee. Is 35 dollars too much?”

“Wait right here.” I said, and ran to my boss and asked for an advance on my pay so I could buy it. He declined saying that they were “funny guitars” and would not sell and besides he wouldn’t give pay advances to his employees.

HELP!

I immediately called Jerry and said, “Hey, I got a Wooden Dobro down here for cheap!”

“Is it loud?” (You remember ‘loud’. it was the familiar Garcia instrumental criteria.)

“I don’t know I’ve never been this close to one.”

“How much?” he asks.

“Thirty-five bucks.”

“We’ll be right down.”

So they (Jerry and Sara) came down to the store. Jerry opened the case, gave it one strum and said "We'll take it."

Sara writes a check. Oops! Out of town bank. I almost have to sign my name in blood to get the store owner to accept it.

But he did and the guitar was Jerry's'.

I saw him play it once at *The Tangent* and then it went under their bed.

"YOU CAUGHT ALL THE OTHERS..."

As I recall it was very near that time that Jerry went on his Decision Quest.

We all knew that one of his main dreams was to be a Bluegrass Banjo player with specific hopes to get on with of Bill Monroe or some other top-flight group. But he had, as I've indicated, been secretly "fooling around" with an electric group.

Decision time.

So he shaved his beard (!) and Went to Scope the Lay of the Musical Land. Bill Monroe had his standards. Beards were Not Amusing to Bill Monroe and his generation of musicians.

Jerry was gone for a month and a half or so. I'd check at Dana's regularly, awaiting his return.

Once I stopped by and saw Bobby Weir. I asked for Jerry and Bob, who didn't know me very well and hadn't heard me play, assumed I was there for a guitar lesson. (He was filling in for Jerry.) I declined the lesson of course. Jerry said later, "You should have taken the lesson. Bob wouldn't have known *what* to do with you."

Well, back Garcia came, He'd had his Decision Quest and The Answer was Rock and Roll...

But different.

I don't think I ever played with him again after that to my everlasting sadness...

~/~

Time went on and *The Warlocks* happened.

David Nelson joins "*New Riders of the Purple Sage.*"

Then *The Warlocks* became *The Grateful Dead.*

I think it was Bobby Weir or possibly Bob Hunter who first told me the new name. I didn't like it. Thought it too grim. Thought it wouldn't catch on.

Fat lot I knew.

I *did* ask Jerry if I could borrow The Regal Dobro seeing as how he was going all electric.

Of course, Jerry, being who he was, agreed immediately.

~/~

Time passes on. The Longshoreman's' Hall gigs happen. Winterland happens. Fillmore happens. Free concerts at Golden Gate Park, The Polo Grounds, Bill Graham...

Somewhere in there, Troy Weidenheimer hears the Drums of War coming closer. Vietnam was gathering our young men and shipping them overseas. Troy removes to Canada and opens a Music Store there.

From time to time I would still talk to Jerry on the phone and keep in touch.

It was kind of exciting to see him Doing It!
My old pal! Name in the Paper and *Everything!*

I believe it was during a Longshoreman's' Hall gig they did when I got a panic call on a Sunday morning.

"Weir's Gibson quit working. Can you help us?"

The trouble was an intermittent short which can be a Real Bitch to track down. They clattered over to my apartment and dropped the guitar off and I managed to get the thing to work in time for the show though I recommended they have it overhauled ASAP.

They wanted to pay me but of course I refused.

Then Bobby Weir says, "Come with us. You can play with us. People will love you."

"Don't be silly," I said. "I don't know any of your stuff!"

Bobby says "Don't worry we'll give you something that, along with the lights, will make *anything* you play be perfect."

"We owe you *something*" Jerry said. "You saved our asses."

“Tell you what,” sez I, “When (not “if”) you guys get famous, don’t forget who I am.”

~/~

By this time I had hired on at Gelb Music in Redwood City as a Guitar and Banjo teacher.

All that Hippie stuff of the sixties and seventies passed me by. I was really straight. My daily outfit was black coat, black tie, black vest and black pants, white shirt. Got my hair cut very regularly.

Like a black and white cartoon.

Straight Arrow w/ wife and kid.

I played a lot of local dives and saloons C&W gigs, mainly and a lot of solo “Background” music in those days. I found some Folkies to polish my Dobro playing with but I didn’t play it in public much. Still, I kept busy playing and made some money besides.

I followed Jerry and The Dead’s progress but I never came close to being a Deadhead. The LSD experience didn’t interest me at all. (I’ve only taken it once, never to repeat it.)

I never was a very good spectator or concertgoer. If I ain’t playin’ I feel stifled, bored. So I just never got into the Grateful Dead Experience.

But I thoroughly enjoyed knowing that Jerry seemed to be playing his own music pretty much on his own terms; making a living at it!

Nice if you can get the work.

One day he stopped by Gelb and bought a Twin Reverb amplifier.

What criteria motivated the purchase? Tone? Range?

What was *the* requirement for The Grateful Dead’s guitarist?

“Is it loud? It’s gotta be loud.”

I guess it was. I heard that his crew had to build a new cabinet for it because the original plywood cabinet started to separate in layers.

At that time they were recording for Warner Bros. at a local studio.

So, after wrapping up the purchase he invited my wife and I to come and watch him record at Pacific Studios in San Mateo that night. We accepted, of course. Besides I wanted to give him his Dobro back. I was

getting too attached to it. I figured that if I gave it back now it would be easier than having him need it later and losing it suddenly.

So Evelyn, my son Geoff, The Regal Dobro and I traipsed down to the studio. And one of the first things Jerry did was to...

Roll up a *joint* and *smoke* it right in *FRONT* of us!

MARIJUANA!

Heavenly *Days*, McGee!

We quickly recovered from the shock and had a pleasant time watching not much happen. Studio work seems like that, sometimes, if you're not a part of it. He was experimenting with microphone techniques involving pianos, pickups and vocal mics.

I had brought along a speaker-driver and rubber tube "guitar talker" I had cobbled together. Steel players came up with them a long time ago. They enable you to channel your guitar sound into your mouth and make your guitar "talk."

I had told Jerry about it and he was curious about it so I brought it along and flat out gave it to him. (I'd had my fun with it.)

I doubt he ever used it. It gave you headaches and made you drool. Yuk!

When it came time to leave I said "Here's your Dobro.. I figure you might want it back."

Jerry opened the case up, gave it a strum and said:

"No, that's yours. It always *was* yours."

That, too, was The Garcia.

"BUT YOU WON'T CATCH ME.."

RON NAKAMURA

Was one of my guitar students at Gelb's. He was fourteen or so when he started with me on guitar.

I didn't know it at the time but he would show up for his guitar lessons dosed on LSD. I couldn't figure it out. He wouldn't practice that I could tell. He'd just say "Play."

Big smile and an inner buzzing noise that only he could hear.

He seemed to pay no attention to his lessons at all so after awhile I told him (or he decided) to part company. I thought he was wasting his Moms' money and my time.

I didn't see him for a couple of years but when he came back the LSD was gone but he was a MONSTER on that guitar.

And he was also a Deadhead. Not a hard-core Deadhead, but a Deadhead nonetheless.

~/~

Somehow Jerry and I would keep in touch. He would give me his phone number and I'd call once in awhile just to see how he was doing. then he would have to change his phone number because too many people passed it on to their friends and his phone wouldn't stop ringing. But he usually gave me the new one sooner or later.

Once, as a favor to Ron, I got us on Jerry's backstage guest list when Jerry and Merle Saunders were doing a benefit at Winterland.

As it turned out it was a benefit for the Hells Angels. Something Bill Graham wasn't too happy about at the time but that's another tale..

We walked backstage and there was Jerry noodling on one of those beautiful custom-built guitars someone had made for him.

He immediately passes the guitar to me and says "What do you think?" Talking "guitar stuff." Just like at Dana's

I opined that it was a superb guitar. Jerry liked surprisingly stiff action, set up much like a Martin (at that time anyway) for the sake of the Tone and, of course, playin' *Clean*. Playin' *Loud*.

Meanwhile, where's Ron? Huge, evil looking Bikers all over the place and no Ron.

He comes strolling up with a can of beer in his hand.

"Where did you get that?" I asked.

He points to several tubs of ice and beer and says "From over there. There's LOTS of beer."

"Idiot!" I said. "That's the Hells Angels beer. You're lucky you didn't get caught. I told them I didn't know you!"

Ronnie was ready to leave any time when he heard that.
 Ronnie was like that.
 Impulsive.

~/~

A couple of years went by and Jerry, David Grisman, Vassar Clements and others made an album called "*Old and In the Way*"

It came to pass that some of that group was to play at a venue in Palo Alto called Homers' Warehouse. I'm not sure how, but I again had crossed paths with Jerry via phone and he invited me to come see him for a bit.

He understood that *watching* shows was not my favorite thing. It never seemed to bother him. But we hadn't seen each other for a long while and he liked to keep in touch.

By this time I was a confirmed Pot smoker. The "Preacher Outfit" was gone. I had the long hair, the Hat, Feather and Beard that has since become my trademark. He'd never seen me hirsute and I thought I might have a problem being recognized,

I took the bus to Palo Alto proper and cabbied the short distance to Homers' Warehouse. (Very direct. Can't get lost, right?)

Amazingly, he recognizes me right away in the parking lot when I got out of the cab. "I'd recognize that Mug anywhere." he said. We just talk quietly and warmly as we always did...playing a little verbal 'catchup'.

We adjourned to the backstage dressing room and there, on the floor knelt two young women rolling joints out of a HEAP of Pot as fast as their little fingers could fly.

We (the musicians, Jerry and I) were sitting on a long couch.

Someone had handed Jerry a three inch machine made joint in the parking lot so he said "Let's do this one."

When it came to him he took a hit and politely, with the Garcia Bemused Look, offered it to me. (figuring I'd pass.)

Not so.

His reaction? Two words. "Et Tu.?" We had a mutual chuckle.

I felt tough! I could Handle it! I was the Experienced Pot Smoker!
 I think I only took two hits off that thing. I got so stoned I could hardly see...

Jerry went to play and I left. I figured I could walk to Palo Alto from Homer's Warehouse easily, find the bus station and zip on home.

I found the main drag. El Camino Real and knew it led to Palo Alto.

Well, I walked for a good while. Couldn't really tell if I was even going in the right direction. Considered myself lost. Gave up. Saw a phone booth. Called a cab.

"Where to Sir?"

"Greyhound Bus Station."

"In what town, Sir?"

"Downtown Palo Alto, of course."

"O.K. Sir."

...and he drives me across the street.

I'd called literally in sight of the bus station.

I gave him five bucks....

~/~

Then Somebody stole my Guitar. My fancy red electric Gretsch.

Actually it got stolen twice but the second time it didn't come back.

I was devastated

I virtually quit playing.

I bought a new model of the same guitar but it just wasn't the same. I was in deep mourning.

After about a year of this self pitying crap, Ronnie Nakamura *made* me join this little band he was in called "Polecat."

There was me, Ron, Dan Swetlik, Jimmy Carmichael and Ed Donnellan forming up the group. They played what would probably best be called 'folk-rock'

I, from that day forth, became known as a Dobro player and my guitar playing became secondary.

I still played guitar. In fact Ronnie and I played a lot of guitar at The Sunflower Coffee Shop in San Mateo. I kept my "Real Guitar" hand in that way but still, I was marked as a Dobro player by most people who saw me play.

“Polecat” played a lot of Grateful Dead stuff which was odd, if you think of it. I was playing Grateful Dead music without the benefit of hearing it on the records or seeing the shows.

Playing with those guys restored my musical confidence and was the start of Ronnie encouraging me to try to get back in touch with Garcia.

~/~

Life went on. Divorces, bad relationships, interesting relationships, life as it happens. I left Gelb Music after thirteen years and started at (now defunct) *Barney Steel's Bar and Grill* (in 1976) and would remain there for the next twenty years. Kevin Jarvis (of Gelb Music) sold me my wonderful single cutaway Country Gentleman Guitar. Nice as that guitar was and is it seldom got played in public.

Still, it was my ultimate guitar. Made me feel like a *guitarist* again.

The public hasn't seen it much but Chet Atkins fans know that that was THE guitar of the time and style

(*They, the public, think I'm a Dobro player.*)

And so I was. I got so I feared man nor beast on the Dobro. I wasn't the best in the land but I could hold my own and I had a certain 'mojo' that people found entertaining..

Amazingly, one of the first bands I saw at *Barney Steel's* was Bob Hunters' "Road Hog" band. Equally amazingly, he recognized me right away. I sat in with them as a matter of fact at *Barney's* and another local club and had a *good* time.

~/~

Meanwhile the Grateful Dead become big business.

Though I didn't actively seek out The Dead's' music I couldn't help occasionally hearing Jerry's' presence as a guitar player on the airwaves.

Great Hands Great Touch.

Unmistakable

Jerry got more insulated and impossible to "get to" as time went on.

It was grand to see my old buddy making a living doing exactly what he wanted to do, playing what he wanted to play and not having to worry about money, but I missed him.

I was reluctant to intrude on him because Jerry's life had become a search for privacy... fans haunting him and so forth.

Not to mention my fear of being forgotten.

This went on for years.

Then the disturbing rumors started to be heard and read about.
Drug problems. Jerry being involved with dangerous powders.

“YOU CAUGHT ALL THE OTHERS, SLITHER GARDEE...”

Ron Nakamura matured to be quite a guitarist. He played with the musicians up in Marin County a lot.

He crossed paths with various people associated with the Dead and tried to connect me up with Jerry. Ron and my son, Geoff, really urged me to re-establish the old ties.

Since I'm listed in some of the Grateful Dead books I Xeroxed some of the material and wrote letters to the Dead organization . "This is me," etc.

No Luck.

Jerry has his Diabetes attack.
I see my old friend's hair going white.
I hear Rumors of stress.
The seductive White Powders.

Ronnie keeps pushing me to see the man but we can't seem to find a way to get to him.

Jerry collapses, allegedly from dietary abuse, weight gain and lack of exercise.

Ron comes up with a plan. He has met and played with the drummer from The Jerry Garcia Band, Donnie Baldwin.

He kindly sets us up with two backstage passes for the Warfield Theater where Jerry was playing on a certain night. (Thanks Donnie. I owe you.)

I was nervous as a cat. It had been so long since I'd seen him that I thought we were on a fools' errand. I expected an embarrassed vagueness, if that, after so many years... *“ Oh, yeah... I remember you... what was your name again...?”*

The Backstage area of The Warfield is actually in the basement. You first see a large room with a couple of tables and a doorway. Through that doorway, set into a windowless wall, were the dressing rooms themselves. A friendly but large Security Guy at the doorway wordlessly lets you know that “you ain’t getting past me, Bubba...”

Ronnie and I take seats at a table. I see Jerry zip past the doorway a couple of times. It was apparent that he knew *somebody* was there but he wouldn’t look over at us to see if he knew us. If he were to look directly at us he would be acknowledging us and it might be some sleeve-yankin’ fan and he just wasn’t in the mood. He looked very uptight.

I finally come up with a one shot, make or break password and the next time he zipped by I tried it...

“Dana Morgan’s’ 1962.”

He stopped dead in his tracks and without really looking at us, (still avoiding direct eye-contact) said:

“What about Dana Morgan’s’?”

“That’s where I met you in 1962.” said I.

Then he looked right at me and said, “Norm Van Maastricht, I don’t believe it!” thereby fulfilling a promise made almost thirty years ago... remembering me. My relief was palpable.

He looked wonderful!

We grinned at each other, did the hug bit, beamed almost visible sparking mental memories at each other like anyone does after a long separation. At the same time it was like we’d only last seen each other a week ago.

I met lovely Deborah Koons-Garcia, his wife. He referred to me as one of his “weird musician friends from days gone by.” (If Jerry called you “weird” he meant it as a “one of us” term. No offense.) We talked for a good little while, talked about playing some Bluegrass music. Getting together for old time’s sake.

I wanted to show him how well I could play the Regal Dobro. I wanted him to *see* it. I had restored it to its maximum potential.

He allowed that his Banjo was virtually untouched since “*Old and In the Way*” days, but the idea of getting together and playing was good. We also shared a chuckle and a shudder about him playing with Vassar and Grisman. Meaning that, world famous guitarist or not, some musicians were *still* intimidating. Once again we traded phone numbers and promised to get together somehow. “I’m never home,” he’d said, “but keep trying.”

Once again, and for the last time, the old, familiar, “Bemused Look.”

“YOU CAUGHT ALL THE OTHERS BUT YOU WO...!

...that was in August of 1994.

I never saw him alive after that.

It is to my eternal sadness that we never got to play again...
Never got to compare paintings, show him my Country Gentleman...
Never got to share the things, the music, that could have been.

“*Slither Gardee*” was a bit of poetry I’d heard Jerry and Hunter recite in unison once, so very long ago. I originally thought they had made it up but now I believe it was Shel Silverstein’s work. I think Dave Nelson told me that.

When I heard the first “unconfirmed” announcement that Jerry was dead I started thinking about “*Slither Gardee*.”

Slither Gardee caught my ol’ Bud...

During the Folkie years there was a song...Jerry used to sing it a lot.

“He was a Friend of Mine.”

I’ll never forget him.



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p.s.

...on August 20th '95 I played the RegalDobro for the first time since Jerry died. Jammed with Bob Kolb, an old friend, another Dobro player. The last song we played was "Ripple."

~/~

**Slither Gardee came out of the sea.
 You caught all the others,
 But you didn't catch me.
 You caught all the others, Slither Gardee
 You caught all the others,
 But you didn't catch me.
 You'll catch all the others, Slither Gardee.
 You'll catch all the others,
 But you wo
 -----Silverstein**

Sad Note: Ron Nakamura died of Cancer on June third, 2005...

**Norm Van Maastricht
 P.O.Box 2206
 Redwood City Cal 94064
 e-mail
 the_norm@att.net**