

*Fare Thee Well – by Tony Greer*  
Soldier Field · Chicago  
July 2015



One of my tenets as a music fan is understanding that the real magic happens on the road. A rainbow may have formed over the Santa Clara shows but there was enough love and energy for the Grateful Dead to light up the entire Chicago skyline during Fourth of July weekend 2015.

After all the media hype, *Fare Thee Well* was the perfect living tribute to the Grateful Dead's history as an American band and celebrated the unique relationship they have with their fans. The initial offering was twice over-subscribed.

From the original four, to stand-in guitarist Trey Anastasio, to the grand stage created by producer Peter Shapiro, to the sea of Deadheads in attendance – everything fell into place on this momentous occasion the way they often do. Fans got what they came for. The Grateful Dead got what they deserve. *"Everybody's dancing..."*

They turned the museum next to Soldier Field into a memorabilia mecca, the South parking lot into a beautiful freak show and they opened each night like they would have opened any outdoor show in Grateful Dead history - with plenty of daylight left on the clock and a set list built to last. The final form of the Grateful Dead strutted out a little after seven o'clock for each show, had a group hug and proceeded to celebrate life.

From the first note they transformed the overflowing crowd at Soldier Field into what felt like a small-town celebration mass in someone's backyard complete with *fireworks, calliopes, and clowns*. They opened Night One with *Box of Rain* to pick up with the song Jerry left off with on his final night at Soldier Field 20 years ago. They featured Dead mashups like *Scarlet > Fire* and *Help > Slipknot > Franklin's* for fans who live by the classics and the 'greater than' sign translating 'one song into the next.'

The original four - Bob Weir, Phil Lesh, Bill Kreutzman, Mickey Hart - embraced the occasion as much as the attendees. They've aged but they were clearly rejuvenated for the final run with energy from shows past. Jerry Garcia got a fitting tribute to the music he wrote and to his spirit which lives on through the bands deep tradition. He may be gone but his impact at the heart and soul of this band won't be forgotten. Screens all over Soldier Field pulsed with black and white pictures of a young Jerry with matted down kinky hair and that familiar peaceful grin on his face. *"Those were the days"* shared a seventy-something hippie standing next to me with flowers in her hair, clutching a metal flask. I couldn't imagine.

When 85% of a show's attendees come from out of town you create the enthusiasm and attitude cocktail you need to throw a serious party. The Grateful Dead opened the second night of celebration with *Shakedown Street* and it went exactly as I remembered from a Giants

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Stadium opener I caught in the early 90's. Phil dropped the first atomic bass bomb and a human waterfall of Deadheads cascaded over the padded walls onto the floor. My personal Night Two favorites were *Deal* at sundown, *Bird Song* to start the second set, and a *West L.A. Fadeaway* they played so slow your blood pressure dropped. The July 4th celebration would not have been complete without the widely predicted encore - *U.S. Blues*.

***“Red and white, blue suede shoes. I’m Uncle Sam, how do you do?”***



Special thanks should go to Jeff Chimenti, Bruce Hornsby and Trey Anastasio for complimenting the original four. Chimenti and Hornsby provided keyboard action that would have made “Pigpen” and Brent Mydland proud. Trey Anastasio standing in for Jerry Garcia, I would argue, could not have been done by another musician. Trey’s affinity for grass roots rock and roll, for the Dead, and for Jerry’s style all speak for themselves via Phish’s music. It’s no secret that Trey spent a lot of time learning Grateful Dead songs for *Fare Thee Well*. The result was Trey brilliantly channeling Jerry but remaining true to his own style and that’s why I’ll be listening to these shows for months to come.

Like Jerry, Trey has mastered the art of the imperfect rolling guitar solo that will mash a smile right onto your face. I lost count of how many times I

got mashed in Chicago but *The Music Never Stopped*, *Althea* and *Throwing Stones* were the perfect tracks for Trey to showcase his creative jamming skills while staying true to Jerry’s pace and tone. It’s no coincidence Trey took control of *The Music Never Stopped*. I’m certain he drew on it more than once scribing Phish songs and he knocked the Chicago version out of the park.

By the time the final Dead show rolled around I had an anxiety thorn in my side. This is not the time in our nation’s history to put the Grateful Dead Tour up on blocks. It took no more than the opening chords of the *Chinacat > Rider* opener to calm my nerves but it wasn’t until Bob

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Weir released some of his philosophy on the crowd that I broke through to the other side.

During *Throwing Stones* Bobby sang his own line with flair: “*You can buy the whole Goddamn government today.*” There is comfort in knowing that the bearded, Birkenstocked lead singer in faded jeans not only dresses like you, but also thinks a little like you too.

*Throwing Stones* and Bob’s line led to the best decision I made all weekend – not to move my feet for the set break. That decision put me 25 yards from Trey for four consecutive first downs: *Truckin’*, *Cassidy*, *Althea* and a monstrous *Terrapin Station* that nobody thought they would tackle their last night on stage. Let the record state they crushed *Terrapin* into the Soldier Field turf.

Their set list sent a real message with the finishing touches they put on Night Three. They segued from Space into “*Blue light rain, whoa Unbroken Chain...*” like the last Jerry show at Soldier in ‘95. They followed with *Days Between* reflection:

***“Walked halfway around the world on promise of the glow,  
Stood upon a mountain top, walked barefoot in the snow.  
Gave the best we had to give, how much we’ll never know.”***

The band may never know how much they gave but we all knew the show was ending. It got harder to hold it together. As they faded out on the final song of set two only the crowd was left singing “*You know our love will not fade away...*” That was *Fare Thee Well*’s most surreal moment. I’m sure the sparse drumbeats softly fading out as the band went silent against 71k strong chanting their grungy lungs out was a unifying communal experience that won’t take place in a music venue ever again. It was too long in the making.

Thank the rock Gods they lightened the mood with a *Touch of Grey* encore. That song choice reflected on their mortality and belted out everyman’s song of survival - “*I will get by.*” In our best Jerry voice for good measure.

*Attics of My Life* came last with black and whites scrolling across the screens. Everyone got their chance to reflect on what 50 years of the Grateful Dead meant to them. I’m sure it meant a lot of things to a lot of people but the bands point was clearly made with three nights of masterful musicianship. Their parting message was simple: “be kind.”

I finally wiped my face dry with my T-shirt and split.

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***No one's noticed, but the band's all packed and gone  
Was it ever there at all?***

If you could hold back the tears then you are a stronger man than I am. I hopped a Pedi-cab and headed for home. The millennial hippie driving the bike joked with me as I collapsed on its bench with literally nothing left in the tank - *"That's it Bro?"*

*"That was it."* He turned on the bicycle boom box as loud as it could go and we made our way up

Columbus Drive to the *Fare Thee Well* opening tune. The real magic always happens on the road, right? His JBL speaker never sounded so good.

***"Look out of any window...***

***Any morning...***

***Any evening...***

***Any day..."***

I'm trying not to be sad it's over. I'm trying to be glad it happened. The reality is there aren't enough kind words to be said about 50 years of the Grateful Dead but I know we'll be listening for 500 more. *"God Bless This Terrapin Nation"* is right, Phil.