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than the relentless churning of a mediocre, commonplace music.

However the position isn't completely hopeless. There are a few bands today who have been together for long enough to have not only a history of their own, but also firm links with the roots of rock. One of these is the Grateful Dead.

The Dead are without doubt the archetypal San Francisco band, but they're rare visitors to this country, having made only two previous visits in recent years. Although they have a large following in the States and are appreciated by growing numbers here, they've never achieved the kind of commercial success of groups like the Doors and the Jefferson Airplane. For example the Doors have at least five gold discs for their LP's, while the Airplane rank second to Elvis Presley in terms of sales for the RCA record label. In spite of this the Dead are in many ways the most important band playing rock today.

They are, first of all, a band that has never lost touch with its roots, and, because of this, successive LP's give us a unique example of the way that rock music develops. The Dead have in fact precisely documented how influences are absorbed, re-fashioned, dissected and synthesised (although this has probably not come about consciously). But this doesn't only include the traditional fore-runners of rock, like the blues and white country music, but involves the re-statement of the band's own music. For instance, the studio version of St. Stephen, which appears on their third LP Aoxomoxoa (1969), is simply a rehearsal, a probing of certain ideas and themes, for the magnificent 'live' version found on their next LP Live/Dead (1969). The first take is muddled, it lacks that feeling of spontaneous drive which characterises their best music. But what makes this so interesting is that one can see exactly how the music has been re-shaped using the basic idea defined in the first attempt.

Live/Dead really shows why the Dead are the finest band in rock today. All the musicians are first rate improvisers, and it's on a kind of collective improvisation that their music largely depends. Of course there are times when it just doesn't work, when the threads don't tie up, but this isn't uncommon in live, improvised music - especially in jazz. And the musicians of the Dead have the kind of empathy that one normally only finds among jazz players. This is what makes Live/Dead such a masterly piece of work.

It's a curious type of record - a 'live' studio recording, in which characteristics of a live situation, with a wildly enthusiastic audience specially imported for the session, have been combined with

all the technical sophistication of the recording studio. In this kind of open-ended situation the musicians can explore freely, linking the basic elements of 'composed' music with passages of rehearsed and spontaneous improvisation. Often these are lengthy detours which take us well away from the original themes of the piece; as in many of the performances of Cream, these original themes are little more than jumping-off points for explorations which follow. In The Eleven, from Live/Dead, for instance, one can actually hear how ideas are passed from one musician to another. It's a complex system of musical signals which can only work because they are able to draw on the experience of six years playing together. The ease with which they move between rhythmic patterns of 8/8, 12/8 and 11/8 is quite extraordinary.

One of the most surprising features about the Grateful Dead is that seven musicians from such different musical backgrounds should be able to form a successful band at all. The musical situation in America in the early 60's, as far as rock was concerned, was one of almost total stagnation. The first fires of rock and roll had burned themselves out, and while there were minor pockets of interest such as folk music, blues and bluegrass music, there was nothing on the scale of rock into which the many young, talented, but slightly disillusioned musicians could move. This situation changed drastically with the appearance of the Beatles' film A Hard Day's Night.

Phil Lesh, the Dead's bass player, maintains that this roughly coincided with Kennedy's assassination and "things looked pretty down. And then all of a sudden here was the Beatles' movie. It was very high, and very 'up', you know. And high and up looked better than down and out, really." This explanation may seem simplistic and unconvincing, but it does convey the spirit of the music that was to follow. Lesh himself was a classically trained musician who had studied under the Italian composer Luciano Berio, whilst lead guitarist Jerry Garcia had been an itinerant bluegrass banjo player. Second guitarist Bob Weir came from the coffeehouse centres of folk music and drummer Bill Kreutzmann was a competent jazzman. And Rod McKernan, the legendary Pigpen, had been playing and singing blues since he was about 14 years old. But all these musicians had something in common. They lacked not only an audience, but also fellow musicians with whom they could play. They had all grown up in fairly isolated surroundings, and they have always been an evasive band. In fact it's now rumoured that they have become part time recluses; having occupied a ghost town they spend much of their time living out the myths of the West, brawling and gambling.

Although there are a great many influences in the Dead's music it often seemed to be completely dominated by one particular type. It 'happened' in 1968/9 when they were very much preoccupied with electronics, with sound and the sheer volume of the music. Here the American tours of Cream had a great impact. Many of the American bands were becoming very sophisticated by 1967. Cream made them stand up and take notice, for they were also getting mildly complacent about their position at the top of the hierarchy of rock. The influence of Cream made the Dead play harder and louder. Eventually this trend was to produce the masterpiece Live/Dead in 1969. But at the end of this LP there is a crucial change of direction. After eight and a half tortuous, even torturous, minutes of Feedback, a piece of purely electronic music created by feedback between the group's instruments and amplifiers, one hears an unearthly melody, extruded like a thread from the mass of sound by Jerry Garcia. After the agonising music that has gone before, this is a vision of calm, and as the music ends the band begin to sing unaccompanied:

"Lay down my dear brothers,
Lay down and take your rest"

It's an uncompromising final moment, but for the Dead it's also a beginning. Having dragged us through those minutes of nerve-wrecking visions the Dead don't leave us gasping, but offer a way out, a breath of air. This breathing space is the prelude to a new phase in their music, represented by their two subsequent LP's: Workingman's Dead and American Beauty. It appeared that they had abandoned the electronics and lengthy improvisations for much simpler forms which owed much to bluegrass music and the legacy of Woody Guthrie.

But this change of direction was simply the exploration of one particular area in the Dead's music. It didn't in any way imply that their music was deteriorating into banal country and western. One writer mistakenly noted that "the adrenalin has gone out of the Grateful Dead". It certainly wasn't the sound we were used to hearing from the band, but this diversion - the expansive use of one particular influence, namely white country music - was definitely necessary, as their most recent live double LP, called simply Grateful Dead, seems to affirm. It would be difficult to imagine them succeeding with a piece like Wharf Rat without the knowledge and techniques gleaned from Workingman's Dead, with its sumptuous harmonies and beautifully developed melodic lines.

In fact this new LP gives us a panoramic view of the Dead's music. In many ways it is for the Dead what the 'white' double LP of 1969 was for the Beatles: a complete summing up of their music, and of the styles of popular music in general. Like the Beatles, the Dead seem to have isolated and resynthesised their roots and influences once again, and it's all documented on this record. At one extreme there's the simplicity of Chuck Berry's Johnny B. Goode, which is brief, restrained, but definitely works. The Dead aren't tempted to make a vast improvisation out of the song with flashy virtuoso guitar-playing: they keep it roughly in its original form, with brief instrumental breaks, just as Chuck Berry himself would have played it. However when we come to Buddy Holly's Not Fade Away, the music literally bursts as if the musicians are unable to contain their natural tendency to extend and elaborate the music. And so this song is full of rhythmic shifts and jabbing improvisatory phrases.

At the furthest extreme from this is The Other One, which is itself a remake of early Dead material from around 1968. This extends their musical techniques almost to the limit, and it's a synthesis of all the different elements to be found on the LP. The texture of the music is much less dense than that of Live/Dead, partly because the Dead have reduced their number from seven to five. The individual lines are more complex than ever, yet they're held together so delicately that often it seems the whole structure is going to collapse. Each time, though, it is reinforced from within. It's unquestionably their finest music to date.

DAVID MABEY.