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A LONG, STRANGE TRIP: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORANGE COUNTY AND THE GRATEFUL DEAD

MARY CARREON | JULY 28, 2016



The Dead's double-set performance on Tuesday night marked the very last time the band will ever play in Orange County. This news may be completely irrelevant to some, but for those who experienced the traveling circus first hand— last Tuesday's show at Irvine Meadow's Amphitheater was somber. Long haired hippies draped in swirling rainbow tie-dye held up the two-finger peace-sign with joints hanging from the sides of their mouths, while women in floral skirts with waist-length hair danced

the sides of their mouths, while women in floral skirts with waist length hair danced twirling their hands above their heads on the grassy knoll of Irvine Meadows. At the end of the show women leaped around completely topless, causing other female audience members to jump and twirl with similar freedom. People rolled down the grassy hill as they waited for the crowd to usher out of the amphitheater. The venue's security stood still and with wide eyes unsure of how to approach the debaucheries going on in front of him.

For decades, the Dead's been more than just a musical outfit: they're a culture; one that's embodied the very essence of sex, drugs and rock n' roll. Sadly, that basically means there's an entire culture of music that won't ever step foot in Orange County again due to the closing of Irvine Meadows—the only venue big enough to host a band like the Dead (and the parade of wild hippies that follow them.). But from the late '60s to last Tuesday, the Grateful Dead have performed nearly 30 times in Orange County. They performed at the Newport Pop Festival in Costa Mesa at the fairgrounds back in 1968 and then played at Irvine Meadows from then on out. Surprisingly, however, Orange County wasn't exactly fond of the Dead and the massive hippie-cult that followed them (shocking! Right?). In fact, after their Orange County debut in '68—where they shared a two-day bill with Buffalo Springfield, The Byrds and Jefferson Airplane—Costa Mesa city officials vowed that they'd never have another massive concert again. The show drew nearly 100,000 rock fans, which terrified Costa Mesa PD because of the riots and violence that *could* have taken place—even though the event was reported as being “peaceful” and “mellow” by fans who attended the festival.

“Right as I walked into the arena someone handed me a tab of LSD,” says Greg Thorne, a long time Laguna Beach native who works at the Sawdust Festival. “There was so much LSD, so many lights and tons of dancing hippies. At that show I remember vividly making love to a beautiful hippie girl just by touching our hands together slowly and beautifully—it was one of the most erotic moments of my life,” laughs Thorne.

Craig Marshall, the founder and lead guitarist of Grateful Dead cover band, Cubensis, remembers that show as being one of the defining moments of his life. “I remember at the festival the Dead played this song called ‘Feed Back’ and they made their instruments screech and scream. Normally you want to avoid the feed back, but it was

a part of their psychedelic trip. The Dead changed everything for me—they're the reason I've decided to live my life they way I have.”

The Grateful Dead rubbed Orange County the wrong way from that point forward. Once Costa Mesa decided to never let another massive concert happen again, the band rolled through Irvine every Spring drawing sell-out crowds. Between 1984 -1989 the band played 16 times at Irvine Meadows. In other words, Deadheads stopped annually in Irvine, and that didn't sit well with Larry Agran, Irvine's mayor, and a majority of the Irvine City Council. After consecutive years of peace, love, drugs and Deadhead mayhem, an anti-Grateful Dead movement began among city officials when the band played three-nights at the amphitheater in 1988 and an estimated 3,000 people showed up without tickets. Hundreds of people were arrested for sneaking in and a riot nearly broke out when a massive group of Deadheads rushed security at the entrance in order to get in. Although camping was still allowed in '88, people camped on private property nearby and trampled the crops in neighboring fields.

People ran around naked, drugs were sold and ingested, and fans partied their faces off. Graffiti and a massive trash pile was left in the Dead's wake after their 3-night performance, causing Agran and the Irvine City Council to put a ban on the Dead from coming back to Irvine. Yes, you read that correctly: The Grateful Dead was banned from Irvine in 1988. An *LA Times* article reported:

“[Irvine resident] Larry Coffing, who owns a golf driving range and a storage lot for recreational vehicles on Irvine Center Drive, about a mile south of the amphitheater entrance, said that Dead fans had not caused serious problems for him until last year. They camped on his property, broke into RVs and slept in them, littered, urinated and defecated in the open, set fires, and created a traffic jam that forced him to close his business for 2 days.”

Coffing wrote a complaint letter to Agran, stating that he was “surrounded by a sea of questionable humanity” who called themselves Deadheads.

But Irvine Meadows decided that the mayor of Irvine and his team of council members shouldn't have the power to decided who plays at the venue, so the Dead

came back to play on April 28-30 the following year for another trio of performances. Although camping was banned in '89 in order to appease the city of Irvine, the performances conflicted with the El Toro Air Show, causing an “epic” traffic jam on Irvine Center Drive and the 405 freeway. There were 70 arrests made that weekend for possession of drugs, disturbing the peace and vandalism.

Cameron Cosgrove, a previous Irvine City Councilman, led the fight against the Dead from ever coming back to Irvine after the set of shows in 1989. His reason, according to a later *LA Times* report was because the gathering could have caused a “potential riot.” He then went on to say that it was apparent that people were breathing more than just oxygen in the Amphitheater, which does not live up to Irvine’s standards of what’s appropriate.

After the set of shows in '89, the Grateful Dead never returned to Orange County, at least with Jerry anyway. And although the Dead’s experienced an ebb and flow of guitarists and singers—none of whom as magical as Jerry—the version of the band with John Mayor is shockingly excellent. As much as I hate to admit it, John Mayor fits seamlessly with Bob Wier, Mickey Hart and Bill Kreutzmann on stage. I overheard the girls behind me at the show saying, “The only acceptable version of John Mayor is Grateful Dead John Mayor—it erases the fact he was ever with Taylor Swift.” And that might be the truest statement ever made.

But because Irvine Meadows is set for destruction in September, the Dead (and other massive bands of the like) are likely to never return to OC, making last Tuesday night a true fare thee well. According to Marshall, the best thing we can do is keep listening and breathing new life into the Dead. “To keep the spirit of [the Dead] alive, you have to go see them whenever they come around and show their music to people who’ve never listened to them before,” he said. “As long as that happens, their music will continue to change lives and they’ll never cease to exist.”

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