

December 2021
by Wade MacNeil

MY PAGE



I'll Get Up and Fly Away

The pioneering post-hardcore musician finds his way to the Grateful Dead during the depths of recovery.

By WADE MACNEIL

MY NAME IS WADE MacNeil. I'm a recovering alcoholic and addict, and I'm a Deadhead. For many people, drugs and the Dead go hand in hand. But for me, it wasn't until I got sober that the Grateful Dead became my favorite band. I found the band at a time in my life when I was really struggling. When things were the darkest, their music was a little spark of light.

In the summer of 2019, my life began to fall apart. My marriage was ending and a series of childhood experiences I had long buried had started to reemerge. Even though doing drugs stopped being fun a while ago, they became necessary to get me through the day. Nothing was working and everything began to feel overwhelming. I would put on an old punk record that I had listened to a

hundred times or more, and it sounded different. Instead of giving me that cathartic release of chaotic energy, it was anxiety-inducing. This was a turning point. The "old ways" weren't working anymore, so I began searching.

Ultimately, I was searching for a way to heal. I was searching for the strength to make some huge life changes—to feel OK in my own skin. It was during this time that I found the Grateful Dead. I say "found" because I think that's important with this band. I don't believe anyone hears the band for the first time and is immediately drawn in. You need to *find* your way into the Dead.

I found the band during a very heavy year of my life. Their music felt like a safe haven. The songs were mellow. Jerry's voice was kind. It was music for

me to get lost in. It helped me immensely and quickly became the only music that I listened to. It seems absurd to say that you only listened to one band for two years without hearing everything that band has ever produced but, with the Grateful Dead, I still feel like I've just started to scratch the surface. At first, I made my way through their studio albums, then I started digging through the live recordings, reading the books, watching the documentaries, learning about the art and the artists they collaborated with. My interest and appreciation for the band continued to bloom.

The Dead is a band like no other. Some people listen and hear the greatest music ever made. Others listen and hear a cacophony of noise—just utter nonsense. It's really incredible that, for some, the band inspires

so much joy and devotion while still being completely lost on so many others. That's probably why fans of the band feel such a connection with each other. It's as if we've realized something that others fail to appreciate. If I'm wearing a Dead shirt, then someone inevitably comes up and talks to me about it. They don't just say "great band" in passing as we walk by each other on the street; it's always much more. They walk up to me and tell me about how they traveled to San Francisco to see the band play in 1979. It's truly something special.

The music that resonates with people the most seems to always have the power to transport you back to a very specific point in your life. It will always sound the way it did when you first heard it. It's frozen in time. When I hear the Dead, I think about putting my life back together. I think about going to rehab, letting go of the past, moving on with my life and doing my best to feel OK for the first time in a very long time.

As of today, I'm one year, seven months and 12 days sober. I'm drinking a cup of coffee and I've got a live recording of the Dead in Egypt from '78 playing while I write this. I'm getting ready to release an album called *Dooms Children* that I'm very proud of. The sun is shining, so I think I'll go ride my motorcycle on some country road where there won't be a car for miles. I can honestly say I'm very happy. Music can save your life. It has saved mine a number of times. "Once in a while, you get shown the light/ In the strangest of places if you look at it right." 🍀

Wade MacNeil co-founded the pioneering post-hardcore outfit Alexisonfire. Since then, the Canadian singer, guitarist, songwriter and composer has put together the punk outfit Black Lungs, fronted the U.K. hardcore act Gallows, worked with Anti-Flag, Cancer Bats and Bedouin Soundclash, and scored a handful of feature films and video games. In October, he released a self-titled album under his Dooms Children moniker via Dine Alone Records.