

## Story of the Betty Boards

In 1987, one of the most significant developments in the entire history of live concert tape trading occurred. A huge stash of master and first-generation Grateful Dead soundboard tapes made their way into the hands of Deadheads. These tapes came to be known as the "Betty Boards" because they were recorded by one of the Dead's recordists, Betty Cantor-Jackson. Betty had stashed these tapes in a storage facility and, after failing to keep up on monthly payments, they were put up for auction. The rest, as you are about to read, is history.

Dougal Donaldson, one of the more passionate and thorough tape traders on the scene, now relays his perspective on his role in this grand series of events:

**Dougal Donaldson:** This was the summer of 1986. At this point I had been taping seriously since 1978 and had amassed a collection of more than 1100 tapes on cassette. I had gotten almost everything I wanted that was available at that time and was kind of stuck in an in-between space in terms of taping. There wasn't really anything in the cassette world I wanted, and nobody in the reel-to-reel world wanted to bother with a lowly cassette trader they had never heard of. Here was my big chance to enter a new world of big-league, high-quality taping. I had moved out to the Bay Area from Maryland the year before, specifically for that purpose. I had already met a couple of the front-of-board digital tapers through a mutual friend. I was hoping if I could get digital clones of whatever they had, then perhaps I could parlay that into gaining access to some of the legendary collections that I knew existed in the mecca of Grateful Dead-land. Unfortunately, even that did not work.

As it came to pass, in January of 1987, I had the opportunity to purchase some reel-to-reel tapes out of the collection of a San Francisco trader who was transferring much of his material to beta hi-fi tracks. I now had some older material on actual reel-to-reel tapes! My thought then was to find a reel-to-reel deck with which to play these tapes and transfer them to digital. I put the word out to everyone I knew that I was looking to borrow one.

Finally, my friend Brent told me about someone he knew named Stephen who was looking for a digital processor with which to transfer some old reel-to-reel tapes to digital. To me, it sounded like a perfect match, so I had Brent tell his friend to give me a call. When Stephen called me, he didn't seem at all interested in the reel-to-reel tapes I had. He only wanted to know if I was willing to part with my digital processor for a couple of months in exchange for receiving copies of whatever tapes he transferred to digital. He claimed that they were all excellent soundboards and that absolutely nobody had them, but he was very mysterious when I questioned him about their source. When I asked him what shows were on these tapes, he listed a few of the dates. Tapes of some of the dates he mentioned, such as the '71 Port Chester shows and the '78 Duke and William and Mary shows, ranked among the worst-sounding but best-played shows I had on tape. Others, like the '72 Berkeley shows, were shows I had never heard of anyone having in their collection. Still others, like the closing of Winterland and Fox Theater '78 shows, were widely available in excellent quality at the time.

I was skeptical that this guy really had some great secret stash of tapes. After all, I had never heard of him. I agreed to meet with him anyway, just to check his story out. I had my own car, after all, and could leave with my equipment at any time if I so desired.

The meeting took place on a Saturday morning in the parking lot of the Whole Earth Access store in San Rafael. I was to go there, buy tapes, and look for a long-haired guy in a green Datsun. I bought a few boxes of blank beta hi-fi tapes and sat in my car waiting. Pretty soon a black BMW pulled up and out stepped none other than Bob Menke, at that time the most legendary of Bay Area tapers. He had been pointed out to me a couple of times at shows while his reputation was being greatly expounded upon. I had mixed feelings about this, as Bob had not been very friendly on the one occasion when we had been introduced, nor did he have a very positive reputation among tapers that I knew. However, if he was involved in this project, it must be more significant than I had originally thought.

Finally, a green Datsun pulled up and out stepped a scrawny, Tennessee Jed-looking guy with stringy blonde hair. That was my man. I got out and walked up to him as a third car pulled up. From that car stepped a man and a woman with big smiles on their faces and looking like the prototypical shining, lively Deadhead couple. As I found out later, in their case, looks were in no way deceiving. They both turned out to be the kind of sharp, intelligent Deadheads that were typical of

people who got on the bus in the seventies. They didn't wear tie-dyes, but their clothes were beautiful and looked handmade. He was tall and lean with long, thick curly black hair tied back in a ponytail, and sharp, clear eyes. She wore a beautifully embroidered jacket over a dress and also had long, thick curly black hair. She looked just like the picture of the hippie earth mother I had in my mind.

I introduced myself to Stephen, who introduced me to the couple. I immediately got a warm feeling from them, and could tell that my previous misgivings would prove to be unfounded. They gave a quick hello and started in on explaining the plan. We were to follow them for the two-and-a-half-hour drive to their house. Part of the journey was on a deeply rutted dirt road, so there was some concern whether my little Toyota would be able to negotiate it. I said I was willing to make the attempt, and off we went.

As promised, about two hours into the drive into the backcountry of the north coast, we turned off onto a dirt road that was, indeed, well rutted. It was a beautiful, sunny California day as we drove through oak groves and small vineyards. Along the way, we passed the occasional farmhouse, crossed over a wooden bridge, and over another bridge made from an old flatcar dropped into the creek. My initial trepidation was beginning to creep back when we came to a stop. The couple wanted to switch their vehicle into four-wheel drive to get through the next section. I looked ahead and saw a very muddy dip followed by a steep, curvy, freshly graveled incline. I shrugged and reasoned that in situations like these, one needs to keep with the flow.

While waiting for the other two cars to make their way up the hill, it struck me that the couple leading us on this merry chase must have known they had found whom they were looking for, as the two cars following them both had vanity license plates referring to Grateful Dead songs. Finally, I revved up, splashed my way through the mud, and darted up the hill, fishtailing back and forth around the curves. When we reached the top, I found myself in a little cluster of small hand-built houses, the last of which belonged to our couple. We all made ourselves comfortable in the living room portion of the small, cozy house. It was essentially a one-room house with a loft. They had built the house themselves and had moved in the year before. It was decorated with Grateful Dead paraphernalia, crystals in the windows, knickknacks everywhere, and had a casual feel to it, lots of stuff but not messy. The house, I later found out, was powered by some solar cells supplemented with a gasoline generator.

The couple brought out three large boxes filled with reel-to-reel tapes, and placed them at our feet. While I picked through them, astounded at the enormity of the find, our hosts proceeded with their story.

It seems that there was a storage locker rented by one Betty Cantor-Jackson, former sound engineer of the Grateful Dead. Betty had neglected to keep up with the payments on the locker, so the owner, after sending numerous notices to her and receiving no response, told her to retrieve the items out of the locker and close her account. Again, there was no response, so the owner did what is usually done in these situations: he placed an ad in the local newspaper and auctioned off the contents of the locker. Most of what was auctioned included furniture, clothing, kitchen utensils, mostly common banal household items one would expect to see at a typical storage locker auction. The contents of the locker were displayed in a completely disordered fashion.

However, among these items were hundreds of tapes. Many of the tapes were brand-new sealed 7" and 10" reels and take-up reels. Most of the others were cassettes, others were 7" and 10" reels, some in boxes, others not.

The locker contents were divided up randomly into lots. There were three main parties bidding at the auction and a few minor ones. A box or two of clothing or other items would come up for bid, and thrown in with them would be a frying pan and a couple of tapes. After the first few rounds of bidding, the three main parties agreed it was ridiculous to drive up the prices, so they took turns on the various lots. This worked well for them until later in the day, when another bidder showed who seemed bent on bidding on everything and went home with several boxes of tapes, both cassettes and reel-to-reels. No one knows who that person was or where they went. This was the fate of most of the tapes sold at the auction. Since many of the tapes were thrown into various lots and since several people were able to get the lots, most of the tapes in the locker were scattered to the four winds. With the possible exception of the last party, none of the bidders were there for tapes. They turned out to be a pleasant bonus.

Unfortunately, a substantial amount of the items suffered from water damage. It appears that many of the items were stored in lockers located in San Rafael around 1981 or '82, when there were floods. Those lockers did not escape that fate. There was a flight case full of tapes that also was full of standing water. The tape boxes had disintegrated and were unreadable. Some of the reels had unraveled and looked like spaghetti, while everything was covered in mold and smelled awful. This pile of tapes was left in a nearby dumpster.

Most of the bidders were people who make it their living to attend these auctions and resell the stuff at flea markets. However, one of the parties turned out to be big Pink Floyd fans. They were friends with our hosts, with whom they traded Pink Floyd tapes. Thinking that our hosts may be able to identify these tapes, they invited them to come over and look at the tapes. It actually took about six months for our hosts to make it over to their house, but when they finally did and tried to play the tapes, they were only able to get what sounded like one channel playing out of both speakers. When our hosts heard their story, they determined that these must be a batch of soundboard tapes recorded on a two-track tape deck. When they took an inventory of the tapes, they recognized the dates and realized they had discovered an unbelievable stash of soundboard tapes from many of the best shows ever played. This was Betty's own private collection!

While a good many of the tapes were on reel-to-reel, about two-thirds of them were on cassette, many of them duplicating what was on the reels. If one takes into account that there were three main parties bidding on the tapes, that many of the tapes were unsalvageable, and that most of the tapes were cassette, it is astounding to conceive of the number of tapes that did not fall into the hands of our hosts' friends. What this inventory represented was only a small fraction of the total tapes from the locker. Yet it was an enormous find, nonetheless. The sound quality on them far surpassed most tapes available to that point. One can only wonder how the tape collection of a professional sound person that had been put together with such care could have fallen into such chaos as these tapes had.

The question then became how to get them out. They knew they needed a tape deck capable of playing tapes, and they knew that they wanted to get the tapes transferred to the digital format that had been out for a couple of years. They also knew, however, that they couldn't make their discovery very public, so they would have to be discreet with their inquiries. Having been longtime Deadheads, they too, had heard of Bob Menke and were able to get in contact with him. He, of course, had the proper tape deck to play the tapes, and was willing to lend it out for the project, but didn't know anyone with a digital processor. At the time, there were not that many people with digital equipment, and those who did were the younger in-show tapers who didn't really know the older crowd of casual tapers, the latter group to which our hosts belonged. However, their friend Stephen knew some of these digital tapers, but since he was not able to be explicit with his explanation of the tapes' origins, nobody took him up on it until he contacted me.

The people and the equipment had thus been gathered. Bob and I began to set up our respective equipment while our hosts explained their intent at putting this project together. They had been part of the lower echelon of tapers since the early seventies and had always disliked the taping hierarchy that existed. It had always been difficult to get tapes out of the upper echelon, even though they all knew one another and went to all the same shows. What they wanted to do here was use these tapes to break the hierarchy, to distribute these tapes far and wide to the growing number of lower echelon tapers. In order to get these tapes, the upper echelon would have to open up their collections. A fatal flaw in this theory was the presence of Bob Menke. Bob was the essence of the taper hierarchy and for years had been at its very top. Unfortunately, he was the only person known by our hosts to have a deck capable of playing these tapes. Most of the tapes were recorded in two-track at 7 1/2 ips. The majority of the tapes were 7" reels yielding forty-five minutes per tape, plus or minus two minutes, depending on the reel. The rest were 10" reels, which yielded ninety minutes per tape.

Once the equipment had been set up, we started with the first tape. Our hosts picked out the show that happened to be their personal favorite, 5/26/73 at Kezar Stadium in San Francisco. They began describing in vivid detail their memories of that sunny afternoon a few blocks from Haight Street with three long sets by the Dead. The sound quality was stunning. The slow realization came to us that in these three boxes, filled with over two hundred tapes representing approximately seventy shows, were incredibly high-quality soundboard recordings of some of the greatest shows the Grateful Dead had ever played. The energy in that little house became electrified. We were all absolutely giddy, bouncing up and down, in and out of our chairs, and putting our heads next to the speakers and in the headphones in utter

disbelief at the amazing sound quality, and at our good fortune. By the time we got to the third wonderful set, Bob Menke himself said, "All tapes should sound like this!"

The rest of the afternoon was spent poring over the reels, cataloging the dates, trying to figure out how many more blank tapes each of us would need to finish the project. As the sun began to go down, our hosts informed us that we needed to power down the equipment for a moment so that he could switch over to the gasoline generator. As he stepped outside to check on the fuel level, I went over to the table with all of the equipment on it. It included:

- 1 Technics 1506 reel-to-reel tape deck
- 1 Sony PCM-501ES digital processor
- 1 Panasonic VHS hi-fi VCR deck
- 3 beta hi-fi VCR decks
- 1 other VHS hi-fi VCR deck
- 2 cassette decks

It was hard to believe that the greatest Grateful Dead taping project in history, utilizing all this equipment, was to occur in a little hand-built house deep in the Sonoma hills, powered by solar cells in the day and a gasoline-powered generator at night. Incredibly, our hosts finished the project in seven weeks, making five separate copies of forty-seven full shows and pieces of twenty-one others. Even more incredibly, I was to get them all.

#### **The Betty Boards:**

- 2/18/71 The Capitol Theater, Port Chester, New York
- 2/19/71 The Capitol Theater, Port Chester, New York
- 2/20/71 The Capitol Theater, Port Chester, New York
- 2/21/71 The Capitol Theater, Port Chester, New York
- 2/23/71 The Capitol Theater, Port Chester, New York
- 2/24/71 The Capitol Theater, Port Chester, New York
- 4/5/71 Manhattan Center, New York City (End Of 2nd Set Only)
- 4/6/71 Manhattan Center, New York City
- 4/7/71 Boston Music Hall, Boston, Massachusetts
- 4/8/71 Boston Music Hall, Boston, Massachusetts
- 7/2/71 Fillmore West
- 10/19/71 Northrop Memorial Auditorium, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN
- 11/15/71 Municipal Auditorium, Austin, TX
- 11/17/71 Albuquerque Civic Auditorium, Albuquerque, NM
- 12/4/71 Felt Forum, New York, NY
- 12/6/71 Felt Forum, New York, NY
- 12/7/71 Felt Forum, New York, NY
- 12/10/71 Fox Theatre, St. Louis, MO
- 12/14/71 The Hill Auditorium, Ann Arbor, Michigan
- 3/21/72 Academy Of Music, New York, NY
- 3/22/72 Academy Of Music, New York, NY
- 3/23/72 Academy Of Music, New York, NY
- 3/25/72 Academy Of Music, New York, NY
- 3/26/72 Academy Of Music, New York, NY
- 3/27/72 Academy Of Music, New York, NY
- 3/28/72 Academy Of Music, New York, NY
- 4/8/72 Empire Pool, London, England
- 4/11/72 City Hall, Newcastle, England
- 4/14/72 Tivoli Concert Hall, Copenhagen, Denmark
- 4/17/72 Tivoli Concert Hall, Copenhagen, Denmark
- 5/3/72 Olympia Theatre, Paris, France

- 5/4/72 The Olympia Theater, Paris, France
- 5/7/72 Bickershaw Festival, Wigan, England
- 5/25/72 Strand Lyceum, London, England
- 8/21/72 Berkeley Community Theater, Berkeley, California
- 8/22/72 Berkeley Community Theater, Berkeley, California
- 8/25/72 Berkeley Community Theater, Berkeley, California
- 8/27/72 Old Renaissance Faire Ground, Veneta, Oregon
- 3/15/73 Nassau Veterans Memorial Coliseum, Uniondale, NY
- 3/16/73 Nassau Coliseum, Uniondale, Long Island, New York
- 3/21/73 Memorial Auditorium, Utica, New York
- 3/22/73 Memorial Auditorium, Utica, New York
- 3/24/73 Spectrum Arena, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- 3/30/73 Community War Memorial, Rochester, NY
- 3/31/73 Buffalo Memorial Auditorium, Buffalo, NY
- 4/2/73 Boston Garden, Boston, MA
- 5/26/73 Kezar Stadium, San Francisco, California
- 6/22/73 Pacific High Exhibition Coliseum, Vancouver, BC
- 6/10/76 Boston Music Hall, Boston, Massachusetts
- 6/11/76 Boston Music Hall, Boston, Massachusetts
- 6/14/76 Beacon Theater, New York City
- 6/15/76 Beacon Theater, New York City
- 6/17/76 Capitol Theatre, Passaic, NJ
- 6/18/76 Capitol Theatre, Passaic, NJ
- 6/19/76 Capitol Theatre, Passaic, NJ
- 6/21/76 Tower Theatre, Upper Darby, PA
- 6/22/76 Tower Theatre, Upper Darby, PA
- 6/26/76 Auditorium Theatre, Chicago, IL
- 6/28/76 Auditorium Theatre, Chicago, IL
- 6/29/76 Auditorium Theatre, Chicago, Illinois
- 2/26/77 Swing Auditorium, San Bernadino, California
- 5/5/77 New Haven Coliseum, New Haven, Connecticut
- 5/7/77 Boston Gardens, Boston, Massachusetts
- 5/8/77 Barton Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York
- 5/9/77 War Memorial Auditorium, Buffalo, New York
- 9/29/77 The Paramount Theater, Seattle, Washington
- 10/2/77 The Paramount Theater, Portland, Oregon
- 10/28/77 Soldiers & Sailors Memorial Hall, Kansas City, Missouri
- 10/29/77 Field House, Northern Illinois University, Dekalb, Illinois
- 10/30/77 Assembly Hall, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana
- 11/01/77 Cobo Hall, Detroit, Michigan
- 11/5/77 War Memorial, Rochester, New York (End Of Show)
- 11/6/77 Broome County Arena, Binghamton, New York
- 4/7/78 Hollywood Sportatorium, Hollywood, Florida
- 4/10/78 The Fox Theater, Atlanta, Georgia
- 4/11/78 The Fox Theater, Atlanta, Georgia
- 4/12/78 Cameroon Indoor Stadium, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina
- 4/14/78 Coliseum, Virginia Polytechnic, Blacksburg, Virginia
- 4/15/78 William And Mary College, Williamsburg, Virginia
- 7/7/78 Red Rocks Amphitheater, Morrison, Colorado
- 7/8/78 Red Rocks Amphitheater, Morrison, Colorado
- 10/18/78 Winterland, San Francisco, California
- 4/22/79 Spartan Stadium, San Jose, California