

# zigzag

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THE ROCK MAGAZINE



CAVIAR

**POCO**  
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# A CONVERSATION WITH PHIL LESH

Some of you out there probably think that ZigZag has just about OD'd on the Grateful Dead recently, which is a fair criticism considering that in the last ten issues we've had them on the cover twice, and carried a 21-page three-part history plus a feature on the technical aspects of their equipment. But with the advent of their visit last September I just couldn't, on any account, let the occasion slip by without talking to at least one member of the band, and for reasons which you no doubt know if you read ZZ35, I was especially pleased that it was Phil Lesh who I finally got to interview formally.

It was on the Saturday morning before the Dead were due to play Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday night at Alexandra Palace that the 'phone rang and the band's copyright/publishing manager and co-ordinator for their visit, Alan Trist, spoke amidst a riotous cacophony of noise from the other end. Before I had time to even imagine the purpose of his call, he asked me . . . in the sort of voice you'd expect if say a mate rang up and said come down to the pub for a pint . . . he asked me if I'd like to come over later in the day to the 'tour headquarters' just off the Fulham Road to chat with Phil Lesh. Unf\*\*\*ingbelievable!! Just try and stop me.

Well, naturally, the rest of that day was spent in feverish anticipation preparing a load of questions and wondering whether he'd turn out to be the 'genius' I'd reckoned him to be. When I arrived at the house (appropriately enough, a huge four-storey building of the sort you'd expect to find in Ashbury, San Francisco), I was greeted by a variety of friendly Americans, all having the appear-

ance of being . . . er, shall we say 'slightly out of the game', when, from the depths of the basement appeared a stocky live-wire of a figure sporting a full-grown beard and looking more like a cross between a studious university professor and Santa Claus than the bass player in a rock band. After all the introductions, we found our way to the quietest room in the house and there we talked for well over an hour, mainly about the different types of music from Lesh's experience that manifest themselves in the Grateful Dead at different times, and also about his own personal history and influences. Inquisitive as to why a proper interview with him had never appeared in print before, and why I had been given the opportunity to put that straight, I was well chuffed, as you can imagine, to find out that he'd read my articles in ZigZags 35, 36 and 37 and had been impressed enough to want to talk.

"I don't like to do interviews very much because everybody always wants to talk to Jerry, and I just sort of got off the trip. Besides, nobody ever asks me anything interesting. I used to get the same old questions, you know, how did you find the name?—that sort of thing. Did you guys really take all that acid? It just turned out to be boring. But after reading your articles it seemed that you might have another kind of slant. I'm sure you might want to talk to Jerry too, because you could say that Jerry has the big picture. Or he'll give you what he thinks is the big picture. Also Jerry's the guy who will always answer questions and always talk. He's always got something to say. Me, I've not always got something to say, I don't always want to talk, I'm not always interested."

Well, on that afternoon he had a hell of a lot to say, and fortunately for me he was very enthusiastic, going to great lengths explaining the more complicated areas of his musical interests. By the time we'd finished talking I'd learnt more about music in general than I probably have in the last three years, and my estimation of him as a person as well as musician remains unparalleled.

Okay, here it is, edited and arranged for consumption by Dead-heads and Zig-Zaggers, starting with . . .

## Early Days

"Well, I picked up the violin at about age 8 because one year at Christmas, the last school day before Christmas we had this big party in the third or fourth grade, this kid came and played the violin all by himself . . . that was his trip for Christmas . . . He played 'We Three Kings Of Orient Are', or something, and I thought 'Wow, that's far out!' But even before that my grandmother had introduced me to music. When the Philharmonic would broadcast on Sundays over the radio she would invite me into her room to sit down and listen to the music, and the reason she did it was because one day when the music was on she happened to walk out of the room and she saw me sitting on the floor with my ear against the wall. My mother told me this, I don't remember at all. And so, she said, 'Well listen kid, come on in and dig the pretty music.' And I remember it very well—the first time. It was Brahms' First Symphony, played by the New York Philharmonic. What a flash! I think that's probably the biggest single flash I've ever



had in my life, except for the first time I took LSD. Which might give you an idea of how heavy it was for me. After that, whether it was subconscious or not, I knew what I had to do. I had to have something to do with that. It was just the heaviest thing I have ever imagined. And so I started taking violin lessons which wasn't very good at all, and I got to the point where I could play second violin parts in orchestra pieces. However, I'd always wanted to play the trumpet but my teeth were f\*\*\*ed up, so after my teeth got straightened I started taking trumpet lessons which by then I was age 14. That lasted for about 6 years. I went all the way through Junior College playing in the jazz band and writing. That's where I started doing some real writing for the jazz band. And after that I came up to Berkeley, the University of California, Berkeley, and went into their music department, but it was so jive. I suppose it was like colleges everywhere. You have to take all of the stuff that doesn't really mean anything . . . they want to make you into a music teacher. If you get to talk to Ned Lagin he'll tell you about this, even in graduate school that's what they wanted to do to him. They wanted to make him conform so that he could go out and teach other aspiring musicians how to be music teachers. It was a circle of mediocrity which fortunately he wasn't into, I never even got that far, I dropped out of Berkeley in the middle of the first semester because it was incredibly lame. Even so I did learn, just being around a large university like that it is impossible not to learn something. So I was able to learn enough and keep my hand in enough so that when the time came I was ready, thanks to the intervention of my room-mate who was also a composer, who had gone to see Berio at Mills. He said, "Hey, Berio's gonna be at Mills," and even then I knew who he was. He said to Berio, "My room-mate is interested too, can I bring him along?" and the guy said, "Yeah". So I went along. The guy is so amazing [Berio], he doesn't teach you a f\*\*\*ing thing, he just does his thing, and you have to do your thing. But he'll play tapes for you and we went through the Rite of Spring and that kind of thing. He doesn't teach you anything about composition because he knows it can't be taught. So after that it was like completely open and I kept composing and staying in that area of music for a couple of years, but it was like getting to be a dead-end both philosophically and practically, because in order to get anywhere in that area you just have to know somebody, and also you have to have the right credentials, and you have to have gone to school somewhere, you have to have graduated somewhere, and you have to have gone to graduate school. There are no short cuts. You can't be like Ives, although Ives is the wrong example because he actually went to school for four years and studied music and then he went into the insurance business because he knew music wasn't where it was at. While he was at school he played piano at the movies or in the bars. But you just can't come out of nowhere and get your music performed and so I just gave up and thought 'f\*\*k it!' At that point I was out of music entirely. I had nothing to do with it except I was a great listener.

Then I figured, well man, if I can't be a musician I'll be a great listener, and great listeners are very important. Without them some music might not survive. And then it turned out that a year later one of my old friends had this rock'n'roll band, so we all took some acid and went down to hear his rock'n'roll band at this pizza parlour in Menlo Park, California. Good God, it sure was a great scene! At some party, I guess a month before that . . . we'd just been to see the Rolling Stones, and The Byrds had been in town, this was in '65, their first gigs ever . . . and I just happened to mention in passing to Garcia . . . he was at the party too, we were both stoned out of our minds, he had the band even then, Weir came along with some grass and we went along to the car and got high . . . and I happened to mention sometime during that evening to Garcia, "I think I'll take up the electric bass and join a band." The next month, or the next whatever it was, we go down to hear the band, and Garcia takes me aside and puts a beer in my hand and says, "Listen man, you're gonna play bass in my band." "But I . . . er . . . who me? Well Jesus, that might be possible." Actually, it excited the shit out of me because it was something to do. And the flash was, "Oh shit, you mean I can get paid for having fun!" Of course, it was so ironic because before I'd gotten to the point where I just wanted to quit music entirely, I hated rock'n'roll music, I didn't think it was anything, I hated it, I thought it was so lame. I said, "What can you do with three chords?"

ZZ: So that story about you learning to play in two weeks, is that true?

PL: "Two weeks before the first gig, yeah. I didn't play too good man, it was a real wooden sound, real stiff. But we actually did play a gig two weeks afterwards. And for three or four years after that when I would tell people how long I had been playing bass they would say, 'amazing!'. Now it's been almost ten years so I don't have an excuse any more."

## Tunes and Musical Structure

ZZ: It seems to me and perhaps a lot of other people, that rather than Jerry, you are the musical centre of the group.

PL: "That's kind of hard to really pin down in my opinion, since Jerry writes most of the tunes, along with Hunter, although I have been getting back into writing tunes lately. I didn't do it for a long time, but we all sort of contribute to the evolution of a so-called tune. Before we were into doing tunes like with a whole bunch of lyrics and very little instrumental and a beginning and an end, that sort of thing, I always felt that I was able to bring into the rock'n'roll medium a little kind of highly structured symphonic kind of flow to the music which has been sadly lacking in rock'n'roll music for one thing and especially in our music since we started trying to focus it all down into tunes—or narrow it down to tunes. I personally think that tunes, that is songs with lyrics . . . you can only go so far with them, you can't take them into a new realm, and you can

hardly ever develop them. In other words, all it is is the melody and the lyrics and a chord change, and if you're gonna have a tune that's comprehensible you have to more or less be musically repetitive. I personally have never been into that kind of music, although I love to play, and the part of playing when we get off the best is the part that's not structured like that, that is repetitive, over and over. I mean structure is necessary, some kind of structure is necessary in music if it's gonna be communicative at all. It just seems that tunes don't go past a certain level. That's just a personal opinion. There are some people who do tunes very well. As far as I'm concerned, I don't think that our tunes are that great. I think what we do best is improvise, with some kind of spontaneous structure occurring at the time of the improvisation going on. There are a lot of people who write really good tunes but that's all they are, they're tunes. And I suppose that's a criterion of value judgement at this point in time, especially since the Beatles and all that, who managed to put a lot of development in their tunes, as far as I can tell. I may have missed something between then and now, but there's nobody yet who has equalled what they did with a tune. I have always been kind of wary of us trying to do that ourselves because that's not what we do best. Eventually, there might be some musicians who come along, or a single musician, who can do all of those things, who can improvise and stretch out, in a meaningful manner, and at the same time condense everything down to a tune where every note is meaningful, and so on. I don't think it's happened yet. 'Cause when the Beatles first came along they weren't doing that, they learned to do it with a little help from their friends, I think. I don't know how they did their recording sessions, but George Martin must have had a hell of a lot to do with it. A hell of a lot. 'Cause after they broke up and they weren't using George Martin, even their last records when they were using Phil Spector it wasn't the same. It just wasn't the same. But anyway, enough about them."

## Classical Influences

ZZ: Who else besides the people you've mentioned do you listen to, or admire?

PL: "I come from classical music myself, so my roots run back to Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Debussy, Mahler, Chopin and Ives, and that's the kind of thinking that I would like to bring to any kind of music that I am involved in. It's a kind of larger scale kind of thinking. Since about 1970 the Grateful Dead hasn't been into that too much. It's been like I say more or less small-scale tunes that repeat themselves. As far as rock'n'roll music, or contemporary music, or whatever you want to call it, there are very few people I listen to. My collection consists of people like the Allman Brothers, The Band, Bob Dylan. I have a few Rolling Stones records and I have a lot of Beatles records. I have more jazz actually than I do rock'n'roll."



melodies, because in that sense it's counterpoint?

PL: "Yes I do, because the bass line always has to be like that. Although it's a little slower than the main melodic line which is up on top, or even some of the voices. Yes, I can see them like that—polyphonic counterpoint or as much as I can which, when you've got four musicians playing pitched instruments, that excludes the drums, it's real easy to step on someone else's lines or notes. In recent years I've slacked off a little bit in that concept, just because first of all we've narrowed it down to tunes, and Keith came along and he's very accomplished and can do all that stuff. Sometimes I like to just play on the high register of the bass and let Keith play the bass line. Which doesn't fit as well with the drums, but it's a different texture. I never have liked having the same texture in a band, or any kind of musical entity because where's it at if it's the same all the time?"

ZZ: Can you throw some light on this business of improvisation? There are

times in your performances where one instrument changes the basic pattern and everyone follows one by one over a certain number of bars until you are doing something else completely. But there always seems to be somebody in charge.

PL: That's just the way our group does it. There are some people who can do it faster than that. Some bands, like jazz bands, can do it faster than that, although they don't very often, they've gotten to be more same-sounding. If we were more aligned in the jazz area it would be just like jazz music, that is solos, the head, the first melodic statement, then everybody takes a solo, and maybe there's a drum solo, and then the head comes back again and it's out. Which to me is a pretty lame structure, surely. Even in so-called modern jazz, guys do the same kind of thing. They play the head, although it's more complex, then they do a bunch of solos, then they do the head again and then it's out. I don't know, that's more simple than any kind of structure that was ever used in pre-

classical music even, a baroque suite or anything like that. So we're not into that level. I think that my group improvisation is more interesting, that's what I've been trying to inject into the way the Grateful Dead thinks about things. Everybody in the band is more or less inclined towards that. It's just real difficult to do because some people just want to get into a rut, as it were. So group improvisation is real difficult to do because you just have to be super-intuitive about it. Although, like you were saying, it's true there's always someone that leads it into that direction and then the rest of the band will pick it up. Sometimes it's all at once, but mostly though it's one at a time as you say. I think it's pretty interesting the way it works out. The first idea comes out and then somebody else picks up the other end of that to a point where everybody's doing something completely individual, and then were do we stop? I don't know what will carry on from that. I hope a higher level of togetherness. Because there was one point when we were thinking as one person. None of that was ever recorded of course. The only good it ever did was that we knew we could do it. It's very fragile, it depends on people's state of mind, how many drugs they've had, what kind of drugs they've had in their system that day, how they're getting along with their ladies, how many stops you had to make on the flight, how many drinks you had, it's so gradual. On our last US tour we played Ohio, Chicago, Virginia, Washington DC, New York and Philadelphia and out of those six gigs there were three that were good. Unlike four years ago when our average was higher. The thing about the kind of music we play is that you can't do it that well every night. I seem to recall when I was playing in orchestras and stuff like that, when I was at classical school, I thought I'd become a conductor or something like that, I always thought that if I had been born a hundred years ago that's what I'd be. Anyway, our averages were just so much higher then, it was easier."

ZZ: How far have the possibilities of your instrument been extended? You've got probably the most sophisticated bass guitar anywhere, if you can call it a bass guitar.

PL: The instrument, as it was originally conceived, would have been at one end of the spectrum an electric bass with which you could play rock'n'roll music but with entirely different tone colours, new tone colours. Like every note would have a change in it rather than just being a note that was attacked, sustained and then died away. During that period it would change internally, that was what I was after on one end of the spectrum. On the other end of the spectrum it would have been a synthesiser which would have been controlled by the strings of an electric bass, so that I could still use my hands to play the electric bass, which I've learned to do fairly well in ten years, and still have a synthesiser to modify the sounds and make a new kind of music with this relatively simple instrument. Unfortunately, that didn't happen so what I have now is a super electric bass which is real easy to play, and has all kinds of great tone colours just for the electric

bass, but it doesn't have that synthesiser capability of being able to change or like play around and say every note have a different tone colour and that kind of thing. That's what I was really after and it just hasn't happened. It's possible that something like that could happen in the future, but with the present synthesiser technology it's just real difficult because everything is voltage controlled and you get voltage out of an electric bass but it's voltage according to amplitude—how loud you play, not what you play, and the hang up of the system that I was going to have built was that we couldn't get a frequency to voltage converter. That is something that will pick out what note you are playing in the audio spectrum and convert it to voltage, a certain amount of voltage, which would then cause your filters, or whatever else you wanted to use, to track along with what you were playing. So it's like still in the future but I do have a great electric bass, it's just a flash, it's just a trip to play. The people from Alembic built it essentially. Rick Turner built the wood, built the instrument itself and the pick-ups, and George Mundy who is an electronic technician you might call him, he used to work for Alembic but now he's on his own, he's freelance."

## Drugs

"I can't say for sure that the music would have been the same without the drugs, in fact, I'm not qualified to say. The thing about the audiences was that they were exactly where we were, we

didn't even have to play good. It was like we were them, they were us, and when you're just standing there on the stage boogying away and you can see 5,000 people going up and down in a wave like an ocean, it tends to give you a feeling like you're doing something right. I guess that was where we got the idea that we could play whatever we wanted and it would still work. But the drug influence sort of diminished, and at a certain point there was none of us that would take any of those drugs, none of us. Like at the Monterey Pop Festival in '67, everybody was as stoned

as they could possibly be except us, because we'd been there before, and nobody wanted to go on that trip at that time. I for instance, I do it all the time, acid I mean. All the time. I love it. I think that it's one of the greatest tools for learning about yourself. It's my quality knob. I take a few drops of acid and I turn up my quality knob. Listening back to what I've played later on a tape, because the drugs can't have any influence on a tape, I find that generally speaking the quality is just what I thought it was. Especially about what I, myself, was playing. The relationship between what I was playing and the whole band is not always that good because not everybody is always on the same plane. Or on the same trip. I've seen some people take acid and just get bombed out horribly, and I'm sure you have too. It all depends on your state of mind, but as for now, the drug influence now, I would say it's a lot lighter than it was at the peak. It's like we're coming down off the other side

of the mountain, and besides the quality of available acid has gone down to such an alarming degree that you just can't get good shit, and apart from that there's all these other new drugs that have come around, whose names I don't need to mention I'm sure. Most of which I don't care to use. Cocaine, for instance, makes me evil and makes me hate music. I hate music when I'm under the influence, so I can't use it, it's just impossible."

## The Rock Press

"In the United States we've got a million of them and they're just so jive. What I do, I usually pick up the classical magazines like 'The Gramophone', 'Records and Recordings', and stuff like that, and I've been noticing that our latest records have been getting a lot of flack over here. One guy in 'Records and Recordings' said something like, 'Well, this here band has been getting a lot of flack for the last couple of years and everybody seems to have forgotten how great they were when they came over here and played, and at that time everybody was getting on the bandwagon for superlatives. So why don't we just look at it as a sort of ongoing process. Just because it's not like it was, or not like you expect it to be, is that bad? That doesn't make it bad.' However, I would say that it's really difficult to perceive, just through the recordings, some kind of continuity rather than like we're just churning them out."

□ ANDY

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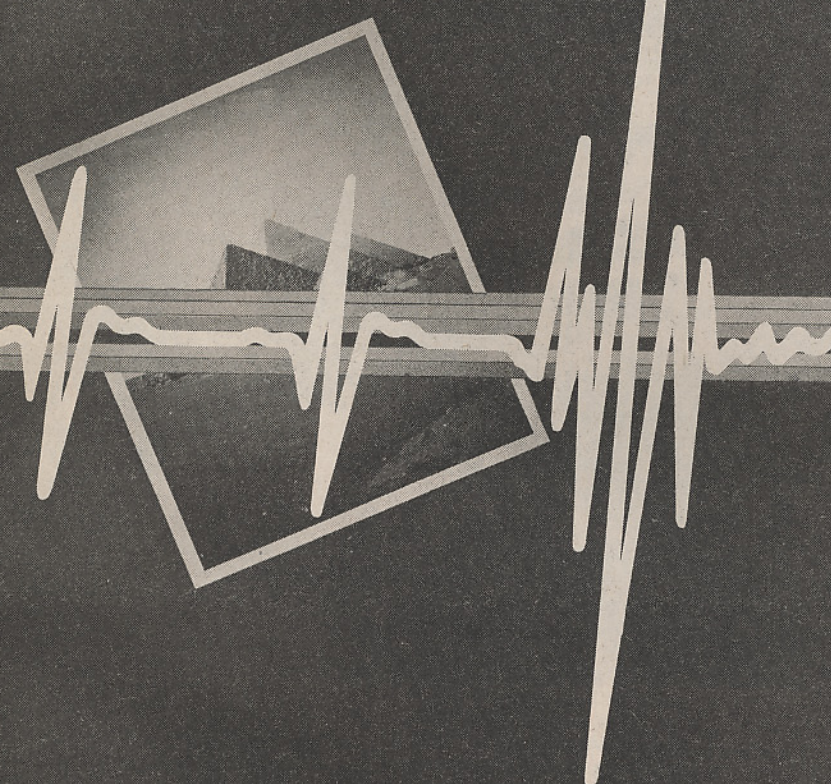
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