



Dawn of the Dead: The Grateful Dead & the Rise of the San Francisco Underground

The Grateful Dead

Sexy Intellectual - SIDVD569 (DVD)

Available from [MVD Entertainment Group](#).

A review written for the Folk & Acoustic Music Exchange
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It's not often that a musically-linked documentary work will speak in sociological terms, but that's what the Sexy Intellectual label's latest does and in the most entertaining of ways. Wryly titled *Dawn of the Dead: The Grateful Dead & the Rise of the San Francisco Underground*, the DVD chronicles how psychedelics fueled the vanguard of the arts movement which then pushed the entire American culture into the future, whether it wanted it or not. Though the Dead are cited as the leading edge figures of the psychedelic explosion, with Haight Ashbury as the spawning ground, the DVD covers many other proponents as well—Jefferson Airplane, Quicksilver Messenger Service, The Charlatans, and so on—while revealing much that the mainstream press of course wasn't about to play to. For instance, didja know part of what founded the Grateful Dead were certain members' love of the avant-garde, particularly Karlheinz Stockhausen and Luciano Berio? Yep, it's true. And to spoof pedestrian matters, the opening sequence to the film, once the title is displayed, is inadvertently hilarious footage of newsman Harry Reasoner treading the pavement in the Haight almost as though one of the whickermen in Monty Python's famous sequence. Framed to have the commentator appear to be the fresh breath of status quo sanity with things firmly in control, he's almost instantly trailed by youthful scenesters dogging his every step, grinning, reversing the power play in playfully understated pseudo-menace.

Period films that I'm betting even few dedicated Deadheads have seen pop up all over the place, as well as abundant inside info and bouncing factoids. Barely a minute goes by that some insight isn't rendered by an array of those who were denizens of the arena: Peter Albin (Big Brother), Rock Scully (Dead manager), Mike Wilhelm (Charlatans, and possessor of a voice so low and gravelly he could give Coast to Coast's John B. Wells a run for the money), Ken Babbs (Kesey's best bud), and many others—and then latecomer journalists / weekend warriors Robert Christgau and Richie Unterberger, who, though they're Sexy Intellectual regulars, are highly debatable in terms of commentaristic trenchancy (hardly matters, the gents aren't all that prevalent here or in other DVDs, though the increasingly airheaded Christgau rather shockingly airs his lugubrious bourgeois prejudices pretty arrogantly). *Dawn of the Dead* follows a linear sequencing allowing the viewer to understand how things unfolded progressively, the ways in which connections were made, how clubs were spawned and perished alongside venues, fests, spontaneous free concerts, and etc. To see and hear it from the top dogs' own mouths is a treat and vastly more immediate than any journalist or crit could possibly make it.

Nor is the primacy of acid scamped. Its influences are omnipresent. Thus, Ken Kesey's centrality, he and his Merry Pranksters, to the San Francisco movement becomes ever clearer. If the Dead were the co-signers, Kesey was the father figure, a well-established artist (writer of *Sometimes a Great Notion* and *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*) whose experiments with drugs pretty much defined what was to come. Thus, the Acid Test, later the Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test, was born and the era of mind-bending commenced, music most radically affected. The Charlatans served as the Acid Test's "house band", but they were soon joined by a group known as the Warlocks, which, of course, was the nascent Dead. A defining moment between the artistic mind and the business wont is unearthed when a key anecdote arises: the meeting of Kesey and soon-to-be rock business legend Bill Graham, wherein Kesey basically shuts down Graham's equally legendary mouthy "greed" with a single offhand gesture. Still, ya gotta love Bill despite his many flaws. Without him and Chet Helms, an era may have foundered before it stood up.

Dawn of the Dead is not a paean to the Dead per se, it's much more a contextualization of them in their era, placing the infamous drug bad boys properly in the depths of waters in a small ocean of people who all made it happen together, something I suspect the late Jerry Garcia would very much appreciate has not been slanted incorrectly. I've rendered enough here to whet your appetite, o reader, and I **never** want to give too much away—after all, a large part of the visio-sonic experience is the element of surprise within expectations—so if you found yourself as enamored of this imprint's other excellent productions as I have, *Dawn* also runs true to form: almost 2-1/2 hours long, extremely well done, nostalgic to a fare thee well, and a harbinger of the growing new era in rock and roll journalism. Yes, the format's been done before, and often nicely, but this company is evolving it. Until they sell out, and I don't see that happening, I'll sing their praises far and wide.

Oh, and if, like me, you lived through that time, though not via San Fran, and are tired as hell of all the assholes who present the day as an unrelentingly dark troubled era exclusively of drug casualties, this DVD will remind the rest of the culture as to what was really going on. I think it'll be seen as a verity that those of the Baby Boom generation who indulged in that all too short heady period of freedom in the late 60s and early 70s will go to their graves wistful for the times because nothing since has come close to equaling them. That's quite evident here, despite the later fall-out, communally and culturally. We are, after all, just monkeys.

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to equalling them. That's quite evident here, despite the later fall-out, communally and culturally, we are, after all, just monkeys...
but some of us actually know it and have as much of a ball as we can anyway.

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