

Bob Weir and Ratdog to perform in Tucson Tuesday

BY LARRY WIDEN
SPECIAL TO THE HERALD/REVIEW

So ingrained in our culture is The Grateful Dead that a mere mention of their name invokes memories of a time when young Americans migrated to places like San Francisco to explore their inner selves.

One of the things these travelers found was a thriving music scene that included Janis Joplin, Jefferson Airplane and The Dead, all performing frequently at local clubs such as the legendary Fillmore.

For more than 40 years, through their music and diverse personalities, the Dead has kept the spirit of those times alive as they philosophize about a lifestyle that isn't just centered on commerce. In a word, The Dead have always been the living embodiment of freedom.

And musically speaking, while the band thrived on its unique fusion of six minds, they quickly found the phenomenal sound that made them The Grateful Dead could, at times, restrict them creatively.

The late Jerry Garcia was the first member to create a musical side project, The Jerry Garcia Band. Shortly afterward, another founding member, guitarist Bob Weir, followed suit with bands such as Bobby Ace & the Cards from the Bottom of the Deck and Bobby & the Midnites before assembling a group that came to be known as Ratdog.

Dennis McNally, author of "The Grateful Dead: A Long Strange Trip" and the Dead's publicist since 1979, recently gave the *Herald/Review* an exclusive interview about Weir's upcoming show in Tucson.

Bob Weir was pretty young when he met Jerry Garcia. Was that the beginning of The Dead? Bob was a baby! Actually, he was a high school dropout (later diagnosed with dyslexia) who had been

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Bob Weir and Ratdog

WHERE: Rialto Theater, Tucson

WHEN: 6-8 p.m., Tuesday

TICKETS: \$35 (General Admission), \$36 day of show

playing guitar since he was 13.

On Dec 31, 1963, Bob and one of his friends were wandering around Palo Alto, Calif., when they heard music coming out of this store. It happened to be the place where Jerry was giving banjo lessons.

Being Jerry, he probably hadn't noticed it was New Year's Eve, and was waiting for his student to show up!

Anyways, Bob and his buddy liberated some guitars from the front of the store and the three of them jammed for a good part of the night. Within three days, they formed Mother McCree's Uptown Jug Champions, which later became The Warlocks, and then The Grateful Dead.

The Dead is still so successful. After all this time, why do the members feel the need to have their own bands?

Bob's been doing this since 1972 in one form or another. As for Ratdog, well that band has an interesting evolution.

Bob ran into Rob Wasserman in 1994 when they did a benefit concert together. They discovered they loved playing with each other and began as a duet. In 1996, they added a drummer and did a tour as a blues band. Over the years Bob's format has evolved from a sedate blues band into a rock and roll band with some jazz players. That ever-changing musical expression is what RatDog is all about.

Bob's music seems to be heavily influenced by the blues. Well, it's impossible to be part of rock and roll for very long without running into the African American blues. Those blues had a lot

of children, and one of them was rock. And the blues has always been at the core of The Dead, because Jerry had a fundamentally scholastic bent. He went back and looked at the roots of everything.

What are some songs the Tucson audience can expect?

They're going to get a great show, with the best of both worlds. This will be a Dead concert punctuated by Ratdog songs. Bob likes to do the old Son House song Walking Blues. Sometimes he'll do some of Jerry's songs, like "Althea" or "Touch of Gray." He does some his own Dead songs too, "Playing in the Band," "St. Stephen," "Truckin'" and "Sugar Magnolia." The band's got a such a large repertoire that it would take five nights to play it all.

Bob really tries to make each set unique, so there's no telling exactly what they'll play.

Still, it sounds like this a pretty solid show. Oh yeah. Ratdog does two 90-minute sets, so they get a lot of songs in there. I think it's a great value for the ticket price.

Since you went there, it seems The Dead have always been concerned about their fans. That's been true since the very beginning. Part of the Dead tradition is not to charge as much as they possibly could. They've always been responsive to audiences.

The Grateful Dead were the first to allow fans to bring recording equipment to the shows. And they still do, whether it's the full band or one of the side projects.

Bob certainly encourages

taping at the shows. And for fans who just want a souvenir, we record the show ourselves and sell CDs as people are leaving. Again, it's very fairly priced, I think. A great audio quality three-CD set for \$20. People seem to appreciate the chance to buy one.

Garcia once compared being a Deadhead to running away and joining the circus. Is that philosophy as prevalent with the post Grateful Dead bands like Ratdog or Phil Lesh and Friends?

The cultural phenomenon of Deadheads, the fans who travel from city to city with the band, yeah, Ratdog is certainly connected with that tradition. We have some fans who travel with us like that. But for most fans, they come to a show where music rules for a few hours and then you move on.

So is the myth, if you want to call it that, still alive? Initially the Dead scene was connected to the Bohemian tradition, which goes back to the

1840s in Paris, and then here with Whitman and Thoreau, all those people who said getting and spending isn't the only way in life. Kerouac and Ginsberg and the Beat poets of the '50s were certainly one of Jerry's major influences. At the same time, it's not San Francisco in the early 1970s anymore.

At that time you could be at the bottom of the earning scale and still live in the city. That's just not possible anymore. We live in a different time, but Dead bands like Ratdog are a touchstone that represent musical and social freedom. You can't always do as you please, but you can live it for a while through the music.

Are there plans for The Grateful Dead to regroup for an '06 summer tour? At this time, no. But I wouldn't rule it out. The Dead don't plan. If it feels right, they'll do it.

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