

A rejuvenated Grateful Dead winds up first tour in five years

By Paul Liberatore

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Grateful Dead bassist Phil Lesh (left) and guitarist Bob Weir (front) perform at the Shoreline Amphitheater. The Dead performed its first homecoming show at the end of their first tour in five years in front of a packed house of fans at the Shoreline Amphitheater in Mountain View on Sunday. (Special to the IJ/Douglas Zimmerman)

Fourteen years after Jerry Garcia's death, the four surviving members of the Grateful Dead have finally come together again as a band.

And the 20,000 Deadheads who sold out the Shoreline Amphitheater Sunday night for the band's homecoming show couldn't be happier about it.

The Shoreline concert, the first of two at the airy Mountain View venue, came at the end of the Dead's first national tour in five years.

"It's everything I could have hoped for," said 49-

year-old Scott Bucey of Corte Madera, a member of the Marin Symphony board and a Deadhead since 1978. "It brings us back to where we were before Jerry died in 1995. I only wish that they had done this sooner."

Wearing a tie-dye T-shirt, Bucey was at the concert with his



Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart address the crowd to be patient for the start of the concert because thousands of ticket holders were still outside the amphitheater at the scheduled start of the concert Sunday. (Special to the IJ/Douglas Zimmerman)

wife, Jennifer.

"The people in the audience are saying, 'This is it, finally,'" she said. "It's taken 14 years, but this is it."

After they lost Garcia, the Grateful Dead's lead guitarist and charismatic paterfamilias, the four other founding members - guitarist-singer Bob

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Weir, bassist Phil Lesh and drummers Mickey Hart and Bill Kreutzmann - feuded over business and personal issues. The only thing they seemed to agree on was dropping "Grateful" from their name in honor of their fallen bandmate.

That's why this 20-plus-concert reunion tour has become such a milestone in the 40-year history of the Marin-based band.

And even in the worst economy since the Great Depression, the Dead remain a highly attractive touring act, playing major markets like New York and Washington D.C.

"We're selling 15,000 to 20,000 tickets every night," said Tim Jorstad of San Rafael, the Dead's business manager. "In this economy, that's really good. The guys are stoked."

Mickey Hart certainly was, standing backstage before the show with a lit cigar in one hand and a drumstick in the other.

"We really found each other on this tour," he said with his characteristic energy and enthusiasm. "We're renewing our friendship. We're starting to



Grateful Dead fan Tahoe Jimbo 420 wears tie-dye shoes before the start of the concert. (Special to the IJ/Douglas Zimmerman)

become a group again."

The man who has promised to reunite the country, President Barack Obama, also did his part in reuniting the Dead.

They came together for the first time at a Warfield fundraiser for Obama the night before the California primary. And a huge Obama benefit concert in Pennsylvania last year sealed the deal for this tour.

The president was so grateful for their support that he invited them to visit him in the Oval Office when the band played in Washington D.C.

Rolling Stone magazine ran a photo of him and the band under the headline "Deadhead in Chief."

And it turns out that several members of the president's staff, including senior advisers Pete Rouse and David Axelrod, are Dead fans. With other West Wingers,



Huntington Beach resident Julie Postel (center) holds a Grateful Dead poster before the start of the concert. Her first Grateful Dead concert was in 1985. (Special to the IJ/Douglas Zimmerman)

they were happily grooving at the band's April 15 show in D.C.

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That same night Hart invited Tipper Gore, a longtime friend, to sit in on drums on "Sugar Magnolia."

At Shoreline, the Dead started 45 minutes late, waiting for the jubilant crowd to file in from the vast parking lots, and played past the amphitheater's 11:30 p.m. curfew. Bolstered by lead guitarist Warren Haynes of the Allman Bros. Band and Government Mule, and keyboardist Jeff Chimenti from Weir's band Ratdog, the Dead played classics like "Sugaree," "Sugar Magnolia" and, to close the first set, an operatic rendition of "Uncle John's Band" with pipe organ harmonies.

The packed house seemed to move with the music like one giant undulating organism at a pot party. Balloons and beach balls floated above the crowd and occasionally bounced onto the stage.

The Dead, concentrating on their trademark improvisational rock, may disdain showmanship, but they know how to put on a show. During their traditional "Rhythm Devils" and "Space" numbers, a sexy group of five female fire dancers came out to add even more heat and light to the far-out proceedings.

The Dead seemed extra soulful on more introspective songs like "Unbroken Chain" and a 20-minute version of "Help on the Way." Because they are now among rock's senior citizens, choosing "Touch of Grey," their only Top 40 hit, as their final encore seemed symbolic.

Asked if they will tour again, Hart said, "We need to get through this tour first."

But the sense was that, as long as they remain healthy, this tour may be the beginning or a late career revival. Or not.

"Since Garcia died, everyone was unsettled musically and personally," said Hart's wife, Caryl. "It took a long time to find a new balance, and that's what you're seeing now."

The Dead play again at Shoreline on Thursday night. There's no telling when they may do that again. As someone close to the aging band said: "If you're a Deadhead, you don't want to sit this one out."

Contact Paul Liberatore via e-mail at liberatore@marinij.com

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