

The Stars Were Set in Spin: *Ritual Dance, Counterculture, and Community on Dead Tour*
Sam Cooper, Class of 2024.5

The Grateful Dead may have disbanded in 1995, but the community built around the band is anything but dead. Hundreds of “deadheads” still follow Dead and Company, the modern iteration of the Grateful Dead, on tour, traveling from show to show and living out of cars and busses. This summer, I joined the vibrant counterculture of pleasure-seeking nomads and peddlers while simultaneously conducting research in philosophical anthropology. Methodologically, I engaged in participant observation and interviews, which are cornerstones of ethnography. The final product of my summer—still in process—documents life on Dead Tour through my eyes and the relationships I forged.

Like all social scenes, Dead Tour is comprised of myriad sects of deadheads with different values, ways of life, and meaning-making practices. As such, my work specifically documents my two communities, known as “the Spinners” and “the Lot Kids.” Both groups are forged on the dance floor at each show, where we partake in a type of ritual dance known as spinning. Spinning is a cross between social dancing and moving meditation, where we whirl for hours on end, reaching across the mental and physical planes of existence toward something higher. The rest of my community is built off the dance floor, in the parking lots where those on tour vend and park their homes. Before and after shows, often alit by the tendrils of a rising sun, the Lot Kids socialize, play music, dance, and become entangled in a puddle of bodies.

On tour, expectations of capitalistic, transactional relationships are subverted in favor of community and joy; music is the central focus of life, not money or power. Tickets are given away for free, vehicles and sleeping places are shared with fellow heads, and collective consciousness is prized above individuality.

My work enters both spaces—the dance floor and Lot—through relational and dialogic means. Accordingly, it documents tour life through my eyes and the relationships I formed and is a portrait of the modern Dead Tour, which has received little scholarly attention. I envision my role as that of a community scribe; the scribal work I am doing, however, is filtered through the lenses of philosophical depth and anthropological granularity. I have yet to find anything as fulfilling and life-giving as spinning at a Dead show alongside tens of my dear friends. The subversive scene that is Dead Tour is kaleidoscopic and a boon to the world at large; as such, I am proud to document it with the care and precision that it deserves.



in ritual

Photos by
Jay
Blakesberg

Faculty Mentor: Aliosha Barranco Lopez & Shreyas Sreenath

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