

A Gentle Push Into The New Year

December 1972

I was losing interest in life (Nixon, you may recall, had just been re-elected by a landslide and the evil of Watergate was yet to be revealed) My second year in college and school seemed like a black hole of meaninglessness; I'd not yet met anyone I was in love with; I was a lost soul as the sixties were fading into oblivion, feeling like I'd missed that bus. For reasons that go deeper than I care to dwell on here, I was so disturbed at the thought of spending New Year's doing nothing, that I left my house late on December 30th & hitchhiked to San Francisco. I had the clothes on my back, about \$15, a small bag full of oranges, and 3 grams of opiated hash in the pocket of my Levi jacket. I was determined to see the Dead, nothing more. No plans to return to LA, I was headed out to find myself with no thought beyond that night (I'd seen them before in LA a few times, at the Palladium and some other places, but they were still just another band to me; rumor had it that the place to really see them was on their home turf). I got to San Francisco and made it to Post & Steiner (the street corner of Winterland) about 10:30 AM and sat down in a line to purchase one of the 500 tickets reserved for sale the day of the show. I knew I was at or past the cutoff point that would get me a ticket, but what was I going to do? "No such thing as a sellout," was one of the few truisms I'd picked up from my father, and sure enough, I found someone willing to sell me my ticket for \$10 (face value was \$7.50), that left me \$5 to get some food before the show. Alone in SF on New Year's Eve day I wandered around more than a little lost, metaphysically speaking, hoping for some kind of communal experience that never materialized and headed back to the Winterland line late into the chilly afternoon feeling even more disconnected than when I'd left. In the cold and fading light I began wondering what I was going to do for a place to sleep after the show.



I remember being let into the Winterland around 6PM that night and finding a seat on the periphery just off the floor (the very few seats there were only around to the sides and rear; the floor was all festival style seating; that is - no seats, just a hard wooden dance floor), I'm not quite ready to jump in with both feet - I'm Mister Jones in "Ballad of a Thin Man". But I was not immune to the vibe, or the view, of people milling around in their dayglow paint under the black houselights; bright white smiles bracketed between electric green, orange and yellow designs painted on cheeks, noses and foreheads, arms, hands, legs and toenails; the same stuff I'd seen outside, only now I could see it. Happy, beautiful people; friendly guys and cute women in flowing peasant garb or tye dyed skirts and noticeably braless under tank tops pranced, danced and twirled about me; the

walls I'd felt outside on the street seemed to have vanished; a lovely lady stretched out an arm and opened her hand revealing a palm piled high with tiny tiles of window pane acid radiating like a purple pot of gold at the end of a rainbow under those UV lights. "Here, take some," she said. Well, the bus came by and this time, I got on. In the meantime I shared some of my hash with those around me; they shared some fruit and saved my place while going to the head or drinking fountain. The Sons of Champlin took the stage for a little over an hour, their music and the din of the crowd reverberating off the walls of this ancient ice rink started melting into my brain. The New Riders of the Purple Sage came on next with Jerry playing pedal steel. A very suspect memory tells me my head began exploding as Marmeduke wailed through "Somebody Robbed the Glendale Train."



The peak was headed in my direction; I'd never taken LSD in this kind of enclosed, crowded environment and it was closing in on me fast; heading into overload. Slowly sinking onto the floor / into the floor, I was watching/feeling the entire arena levitate up and synchronize to the height that the music and the crowd had reached. I had no choice. It was time to step into the mystic or implode. For the first time I really let go of myself, and just like the story John Lennon tells of meeting Yoko at the art piece where he sees the word "YES," I opened up and let the world in. As if reading my mind (or having traveled on this path before) a beautiful young maiden reached a hand down and asked if I needed any help. She pulled me up just as the crowd was starting to crush together in the pre-New Years rush towards the stage.

The PA boomed the count down; from slightly above the balcony seats over the darkened stage, on each side of the hall was a large box lit up with the numerals "19" on the left, "72" on the right. An old bearded man in one of the boxes, another adult clad in only a diaper and sash in the other; slowly the boxes were being pulled together to meet above center stage at the stroke of midnight; "Happy New Year!" blasts over the PA, as the "72" changes to "73" in the split second between the countdown ending and lights illuminating the Dead, on stage dressed in sequined jackets that blasted my eyes right out of my head, they land full force with "Around & Around" ringing through the moment, as balloons and confetti are falling (a seemingly unending deluge), the boxes containing Old Man (Bill Graham - I now know) and the diapered adult baby (with the sash lettered,

"1973") drop onto the stage; an unbelievable show of synchronicity that the entire universe directed just at me, as if to say, "This is where you belong!" A tidal wave of group high has swept up and carried me over the edge to never-never land. Truly a cathartic, religious experience like I've never had before (yes, you do have to hit me over the head, but eventually I get it!), "There is nothing like a Grateful Dead concert!" is beaming in and out of every pore of my being; I feel a part of the community at last, and spend the next couple of hours peaking, dancing, grooving to the sound while a liquid light show projected overhead bobs and weaves with the music. A brief interruption when the Dead stop playing as some bits of the roof start dropping onto the stage. Slight panic and some alarm as this guy has entered the arena through a hole in the roof and is letting himself down on a rope high over the heads of Jerry & Co; he manages to land on one of the light bars suspended above the stage and the crowd erupts in cheers! He is helped off the catwalk and the Dead come back to play on into the night; high drama, but a happy ending...



I have surfed the acid wave through the curl and I'm still standing, as the massive energy quake propels me past the whitewater, I'm deep into the boogie sea and float on into the wee hours, still higher than high, I'm grinning from ear to ear, totally into the moment, each moment, connected like each note from the band to the one before and the one that follows; everyone is friendly, everyone is my friend, I'm slowly oozing through the crowd when another remarkable moment occurs. Although every face seems like an old friend at this point, I actually perceive one face more familiar than all the others; an acquaintance, a friend of a friend who I've shared a joint or two with at some parties in LA, Roffer (his name is Steve Romoff, but so he's been nicknamed from all the dope he smokes); he and some buddies were backpacking through Yosemite but got too cold and headed for SF. He's tripping too and is just as shocked seeing me there as I am to find him. Now I have a 'true friend' I'm connected with as we journey together through the rest of the show. Ever so slowly we are coming down to only about 10 atmospheres above the earth as the Dead jam through "The Other One," which drifts/ melts into "inner space." Two blacklight spotlights are trained onto the mirrored ball suspended over our heads; the rotation of the ball speeds and slows with the space jam, sending hundreds of black light particle beams into the crowd and onto the walls/bodies surrounding us; we all swirl into yet another aural/spatial experience, dropping ever so gracefully into "Morning Dew." How

many transformative moments can you have in one evening? That song was like an externalization of the thoughts in my head with those light beams working like lasers to cut away the cobwebs inside my brain. I let go of a lot of crap that was holding me back; I saw my way back to the child who'd been missing for so long and knew that I was going to be ok. Not that I wasn't still a pretty screwed up person, but I saw that light and a direction to follow, and it was a start!



Finally, five extended songs after "Morning Dew," the Dead are off and Bill Graham comes out to say good morning, he offers all a bagel, cream cheese & OJ breakfast, and tells everyone to relax and take our time heading out; a gentle push into the New Year. When we finally emerge from that holy palace, its dawn, and the city is sound asleep. We're still pretty dingy from the drugs. Roffer, who somehow is capable of driving, gives me a lift to the place he is crashing at. I'm not sure I can sleep, but I lay myself down to try and comprehend what I've just come through (am still coming through); I need a toke to help recapture that magic space. Reaching into my coat pocket for my pipe and the remaining gram of hash I should still have, I discover a hole in my pocket where the hash has slipped into the wool lining and I slip into unconsciousness rooting around for it (probably spent the rest of the 70's randomly searching through that coat for that missing gram - never did turn up). When he is awake, Roffer offers to drive me back to LA; during the six hour drive home I realize he is as lost about his future as I am (he has already graduated). We are so stoked from the show though that the residual effects of what can only be defined as 'Grateful Dead New Year's energy momentum,' drives us to bold new plans for ourselves; I decide to

transfer to UCLA and apply to Film School; he decides to go to Oregon State University, and study forest management. The music was ringing out in my head for a few weeks after getting home, flashbacks that moved me forward to follow through on those plans. Roffer & I remained good friends for several years. I finally lost track of him working somewhere outside of Steamboat Springs, Colorado as a forest ranger and white water river guide. I wonder if I'd have made it this far without that show? Its over 35 years later, but listening to the tracks as I write this in April of 2009, that epiphany is as vivid as my hike through this morning's dew in Griffith Park.
