



## Handout 1 - "The Wharf Rats: Concert-Goers and Drug-Free Culture"

*From Mountainside.com*

For music-loving, concert-going folks in recovery, the idea of setting foot in a music festival or any concert arena feels uneasy. It can be a tough environment to navigate with all the triggers for a major setback. After all, rock 'n' roll and drugs have always walked hand-in-hand. But, it doesn't have to feel that way. Follow the "yellow balloon" and you might discover a whole new way to enjoy the music you love, find sober living support, and experience kind fellowship.

It all started in the '80s, with a small group of Grateful Dead fans (aka deadheads) in recovery. They had given up the binge drinking and the high but weren't ready to give up the music. With Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotic Anonymous meetings under their belt, they started getting together at concerts to support each other's sobriety. The group would hold meetings inspired by the 12 Step program right in the middle of a concert's intermission, signaling its presence by flying yellow balloons marked with the letters NA or AA. The group's name is a reference to a 1971 song from The Grateful Dead called "The Wharf Rat," which sings the story of a down-and-out dockside alcoholic.

Fast forward. Today The Wharf Rats are a well-established group of concert-goers, with more than three thousand Facebook members who have chosen to live alcohol- and drug-free. They define themselves as "a group of friends sharing a common bond, providing support, information, and hope in a rather slippery environment." They are not affiliated with AA, NA, or any other 12 Step group. However, their concert break meetings are about sharing experiences in the same ways, without some of the formalities established by these other fellowships. The yellow balloon goes around, and you may or may not share your story. The core mission of the group is that they are there to support your sobriety in "whatever way it works for you," said a table volunteer in a recent Phil Lesh concert at the Capitol Theater, in Portchester, NY.

Don't forget you will be out in the open, letting a medley of concert-goers know that you've had a drug problem, which for many is one of the most rewarding aspects of the group. It takes courage to let the world know you can enjoy the music sober. You can set an example to others that are right there next to you struggling with their addictions, because it's true: music culture is fueled by drugs. It's not groundbreaking news. What might be news for some is that you can enjoy it and have lots of fun completely sober.

The Wharf Rats can be found in all major Grateful Dead-related concerts and other jam bands, where a volunteer will always be available to greet you and let you know how the concert intermission meetings work. They offer a great deal of support to those who seek to "get high" simply through music. "We Don't Need Dope to Dance," "Wharf Rats High on Music," and "A Show at a Time" are some of the cool stickers you can find on their information table, which is signaled by lots of yellow balloons.

In light of the example set by the Wharf Rats, other similar support fellowship groups have also emerged, and are now known as the "yellow balloon" groups. These groups allow you to enjoy the full concert experience and forge new friendships while taking your sobriety to a new level. "I have found a whole new joy in going to shows and festivals through Wharf Rats and the many other yellow balloon groups that have been cropping up all over," wrote Brian S. in his testimonial for The Wharf Rats' newsletter, which can be found on their website.