



Station 3 - Grateful Dead Free Concerts

Read the blog entry below, and examine the accompanying chart. Then answer the following questions:

Why might the Grateful Dead have organized and played so many free, large outdoor concerts in their career?

How do you think the Grateful Dead benefited from staging these inclusive, audience-friendly events, often with multiple bands sharing the stage?

How is the modern music festival similar to these events?



First Free Grateful Dead Concert In Every City (Business Innovations)

From <http://lostlivedead.blogspot.com>

Music in Late Capitalism, and performance in general, was designed to be a scarce resource, withheld until payment was offered. If music was performed too freely, than people would stop paying for it. As a practical matter, this led to some mid-century nightclub economics that Jerry Garcia derided as “Cabaret”: playing a short set to sell drinks, and then taking a break, and either turning over the house or forcing everyone to buy more drinks for the next set. Radio disrupted this model, but not by much, since a listener didn’t know when their favorite song would be played, and thus kept listening to ads while they were turned in.

The Grateful Dead had a contrary assumption about music. To the Dead, if you gave people music for free, they would just want more of it, and pay for that privilege. Prior to the Grateful Dead, free concerts in the music business were the actions of the desperate. Free concerts in 1966 and ‘67 San Francisco upended the notion that music was a finite commodity, and the Grateful Dead were fundamental to that equation. When free concerts became an untenable promotional scheme, the Dead moved to live FM broadcasts, another area in which they were pioneers. Ultimately, the Dead formally encouraged their fans to tape concerts in the mid-1980s, again undermining decades of music business orthodoxy. Thus the Dead are credited with “inventing” internet marketing, since giving it away in the hopes that people will pay later is the go-to business model for the internet.

I am hardly alone in the formulation that the Grateful Dead were foundational in enticing fans by simply playing music for free. Of course, Bob Weir and others have said that the Grateful Dead often did what was easiest, with little forethought, and so assigning them as incipient marketing geniuses may not be entirely warranted. While I think the Dead’s influence in the music business has been overstated, however, it isn’t irrelevant. Whether the Dead gave away music for free by accident or design, it has had a profound effect on the 21st century live music market. Today, free concerts abound all over cities and college campuses in America, and many performers accept that at least some free performances help get your music across to people who otherwise might never hear it. This post will look at the Dead’s free concerts as a commercial endeavor, primarily by examining the first free concert in any city where the Dead played. Since the 20th century is now complete, this analysis probably has no current commercial value, but it should make for an interesting catalog.