

I'M A BUCKEYE

Musicologist Graeme Boone is equally at home with the songs of early Renaissance composer Guillaume Dufay (circa 1400–1474) and those of the Grateful Dead (1965–95). He was born and raised in San Francisco, home base for the Dead and the '60s psychedelic music scene.

A guitarist and banjoist, Boone has taught at Ohio State since 1997. Over the years, he has written about and given “psychedelic lectures” about “Dark Star,” a favorite song of many a Deadhead. While the original single was less than three minutes long, it became a concert staple, often lasting a half hour or more.

Boone used the form of a mandala, a spiritual symbol based in Hinduism and Buddhism, to create the Dark Star Mandala for the improvisational work.

How would you describe “Dark Star”?

It is a song the Grateful Dead performed for many years and that turned out to be useful for musical explorations. “Dark Star” manages to be simple and straightforward in its structure, but open-ended and provocative at the same time: no mean feat. And the lyrics, with their apocalyptic romantic theme, are an inexhaustible source of meaning for the band and its fans.

What inspired you to create the mandala?

As a teacher and researcher in popular music, I am interested in the ways that people experience it and in a technical analysis such as musicologists commonly perform.

The mandala idea came to me as I was thinking about psychedelic rock music and its connections to the later 1960s, particularly in San Francisco and the music of the Grateful Dead. I examined recorded performances of “Dark Star” (there are more than 200), analyzed the musical events in those performances, and constructed a mandala that organizes the analysis into a circular pattern.

I chose that form because mandalas were frequently part of the Grateful Dead visual environment, and they can be an expression of a holistic and healing environment. As I published this research in 2010, I decided to make a movie out of my mandala, which would follow a recording of the song and evolve as the song unfolds.

Mandalas are associated with psychedelia.

Does yours lend itself well to what some would describe as the classic psychedelic rock song?

Mandalas can be psychedelic, but they have roots in Eastern spirituality and Jungian psychology. That combination is appropriate to psychedelic music and the Grateful Dead. Many who know the

Dead well, or psychedelic traditions, respond with appreciation to the idea of a mandala as expressive of musical experience.

When I gave my first talk on the Dark Star Mandala, at a Grateful Dead conference in 2008, I was astounded, and moved, at the audience reaction. They got it completely.

Could any song be interpreted in this manner?

A friend of mine whose psychedelic/spiritual experiences go back to the mid-1960s thinks I should make an iPhone app that would create a visual mandala for any music. This could be done; but there is a spiritual poetics in the nature of the mandala that responds to a more profound and searching music. “Dark Star,” with its unpredictably cosmic improvisations, provides an excellent vehicle.

What kind of feedback have you received from fans, members of the Dead, or the Dead tribute band Dark Star Orchestra (DSO)?

Some fans have been very excited by the mandala, including members of the DSO. The Grateful Dead

Graeme Boone

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TALK TO GRAEME

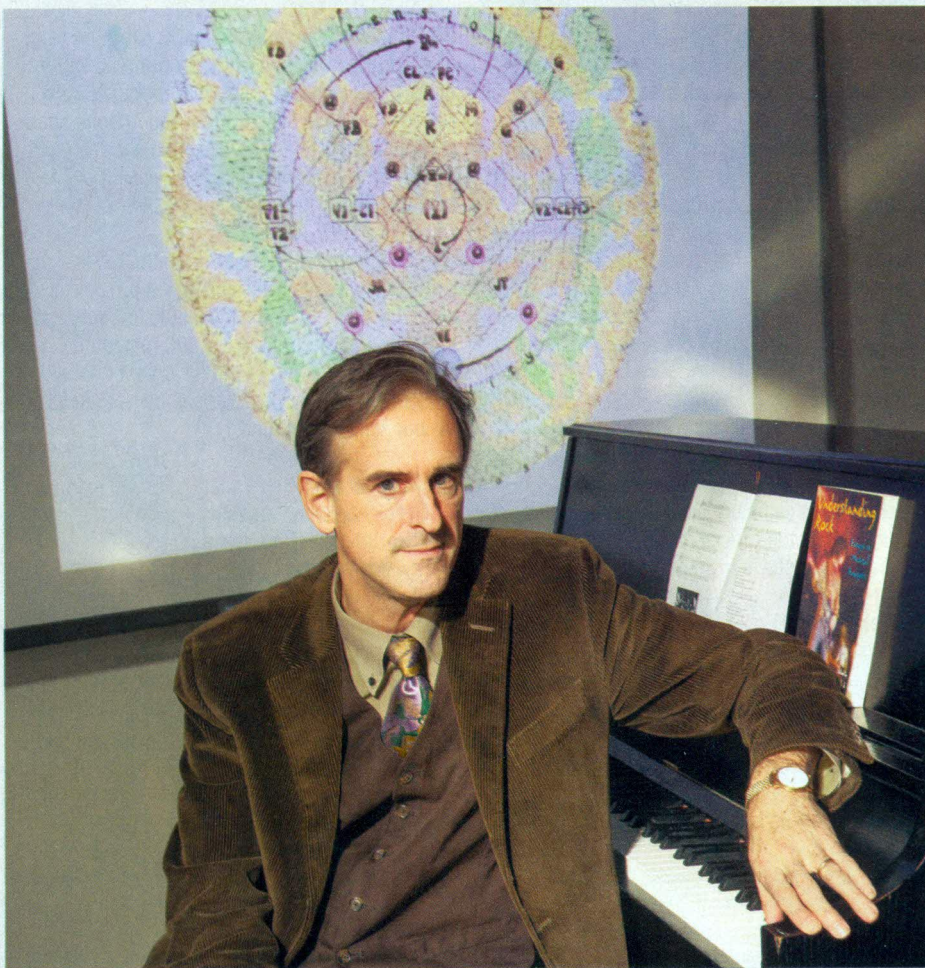
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were given copies of my first paper on “Dark Star” (circa 1993), and even within the band, different members responded to it in almost opposite ways. That’s the way it is with popular music: everybody has their own distinct view, and in an important way, everybody is right.

How can the mandala be used?

The mandala invites musicians and listeners to model their musical experiences in a creative and nonlinear way, one that gives the experience of the cosmic or spiritual a place in the analysis. ■

Interview by GARY BUDZAK



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