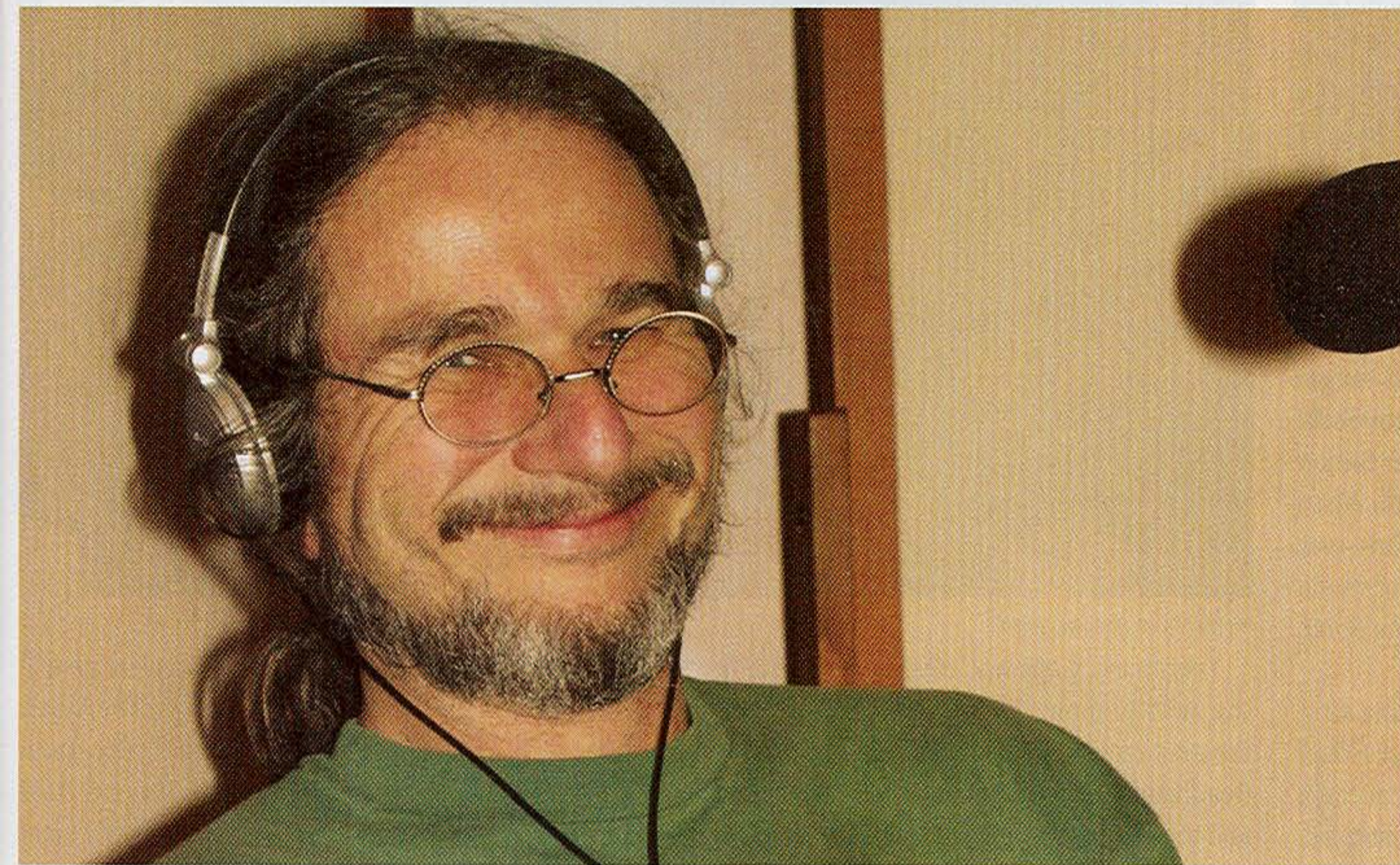


# Radio Head

David Gans Celebrates 20 Years of Dead Air



BY

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**T**he atrium walls of KPFA-FM in Berkeley, California, bear portraits of noted leftist revolutionaries—the communist Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, the gunfighter Pancho Villa, black activist Angela Davis, Bille Holiday, Mother Jones. On a knee-high corner table is a Mexican Day of the Dead-style shrine, with candles, painted bottles, bits of rope, masks, small drums—and an assortment of skeletons and skulls. Every Wednesday night, David Gans comes here to do “Dead to the World,” a two-hour offshoot of the nationally syndicated show.

Over the station’s monitors, the Dead, circa Brent Mydland, are thumping away at Dylan’s “When I Paint My Masterpiece.” When the tune ends, Gans—with a gray ponytail and the gray beard popular among musicians in the post-Garcia world—fades out the crowd, flips the headphones onto his ears, leans to the mic and breaks in.

“Well, hello, everybody. Thanks for tuning in tonight to ‘Dead to the World.’ You’re listening to New Year’s Eve, 1988, Grateful Dead at the Oakland Coliseum with Clarence Clemmons, the Big Man, sitting in on saxophone on “Wang Dang Doodle” and “West L.A. Fadeaway”... I’ll play the rest of the first set for you in a couple of minutes, but I want to tell you about a bunch of things that are coming up...”

Gans rattles off the details of at least a dozen upcoming Bay Area shows—including his own serial “invitational” gig at the legendary Sweetwater, this time with members of Dark Star Orchestra. He puts the tunes back on, answers the phone and gives away a pair of tickets to Phil Lesh’s Mardis Gras show in San Francisco. Finally, he spins around to his trusty laptop and uploads the program log to the show’s website.

# dedicated

A onetime computer jock, Gans was among the digital pioneers messing around in online forums in the Internet's earliest days. When Deadheads across the country started hooking up on the WELL's Dead Conference (March 1, 1986), they also started lobbying their local radio outlets to pick up "The Deadhead Hour." The Dead struck gold with the hit song "Touch of Grey" in 1987—and by 1988, Gans was making a living.

Gans is really good at remembering dates. And for 20 years in radio (so far), he has made a living remembering the dates of auspicious Grateful Dead concerts. "The Grateful Dead Hour" has long been part of the band's mystique—the disembodied voice reaching dark and distant corners from dorm rooms to prison cells, enlightening the uninitiated and giving the old heads their weekly fix of live Dead.

"The Grateful Dead Hour" actually began on San Francisco station KFOG, sans Gans, in 1984. Gans was working as a rock journalist, interviewing stars like Pat Benetar, Rod Stewart, and Les Paul for *BAM* and *Rolling Stone's Record* magazine. He was invited to cover the Jamaica World Music Festival, where he fell in with Peter Simon who was working on a book about the Dead. When the journalist on the project bailed, Gans was invited to take his place—and the book of interviews, photos and Dead lore, *Playing in the Band*, was released in 1985.

So, it was to push the book that Gans first appeared, as a guest, on "The Deadhead Hour" (February 18, 1985), then hosted by a local radio personality who was decidedly not a Deadhead.



Marin Music Festival, 9/6/03

Eventually, Gans was offered responsibility for the whole show. Shortly thereafter, Hartford, Connecticut's WHCN called, asking to air "The Deadhead Hour." Gans cut a deal with the band—and the next thing he knew he was syndicating his

"The radio show became a way to alert people to this mystery," Gans says. "I just put the music out there—and I didn't want to dumb it down and explain it too much, so I guess there was a certain quality about it that was like, you knew something was going on here and you had to figure out what it was ... I wasn't saying "lead guitarist Jerry Garcia" every time."

Today, "The Grateful Dead Hour" reaches "a couple hundred thousand" listeners on 76 traditional radio stations, three online stations, and XM satellite radio. But Gans relishes the local show, begun at KPFA in 1990, with its extra hour of freeform (read: non-Dead) radio, that helps him keep things fresh. The daylong Grateful Dead marathon, begun as a fundraiser for the public radio station in '86, is a Bay Area institution, now heard worldwide on the modern Internet.

Among other recording projects in recent years, Gans produced The Persuasions' disc of a capella Dead covers, *Might as Well*, and *Postcards From The Hanging*, a collection of Dylan tunes as played by the Dead. He also worked on the Dead retrospective box sets *So Many Roads*, *The Golden Road*, and *Beyond Description*. He has become more visible as a performer, too, even playing with members of the Dead. Phil Lesh

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Gans put together a documentary on the Dead tune "The Greatest Story Ever Told," the basic rhythm of which was provided by a pump on drummer Mickey Hart's ranch.

"Mickey got the master tape out, and played me the pump track and he played me the drums that he laid on top of it," Gans explains. "He played me Bobby's rhythm guitar part. He did a little deconstruction mix for me of all the pieces. So I did this little feature about that song. I had so much fun doing that, that I asked if I could come back and work on the radio show some more."

own radio show.

"Twenty years later, and god, what a long, strange trip it's been!" he says. "I'm a grizzled, old veteran of broadcasting."

Condoned by the band, who gave Gans access to their vault of live recordings, the show became a sort of massive file-sharing system, essentially disseminating live Dead tapes over the airwaves to fans who would record the show at home. Featuring full sets with few interruptions and minimal explanation, the show retained some of the band's dark allure.

Grateful Dead marathon: KPFA studios, 2/19/05

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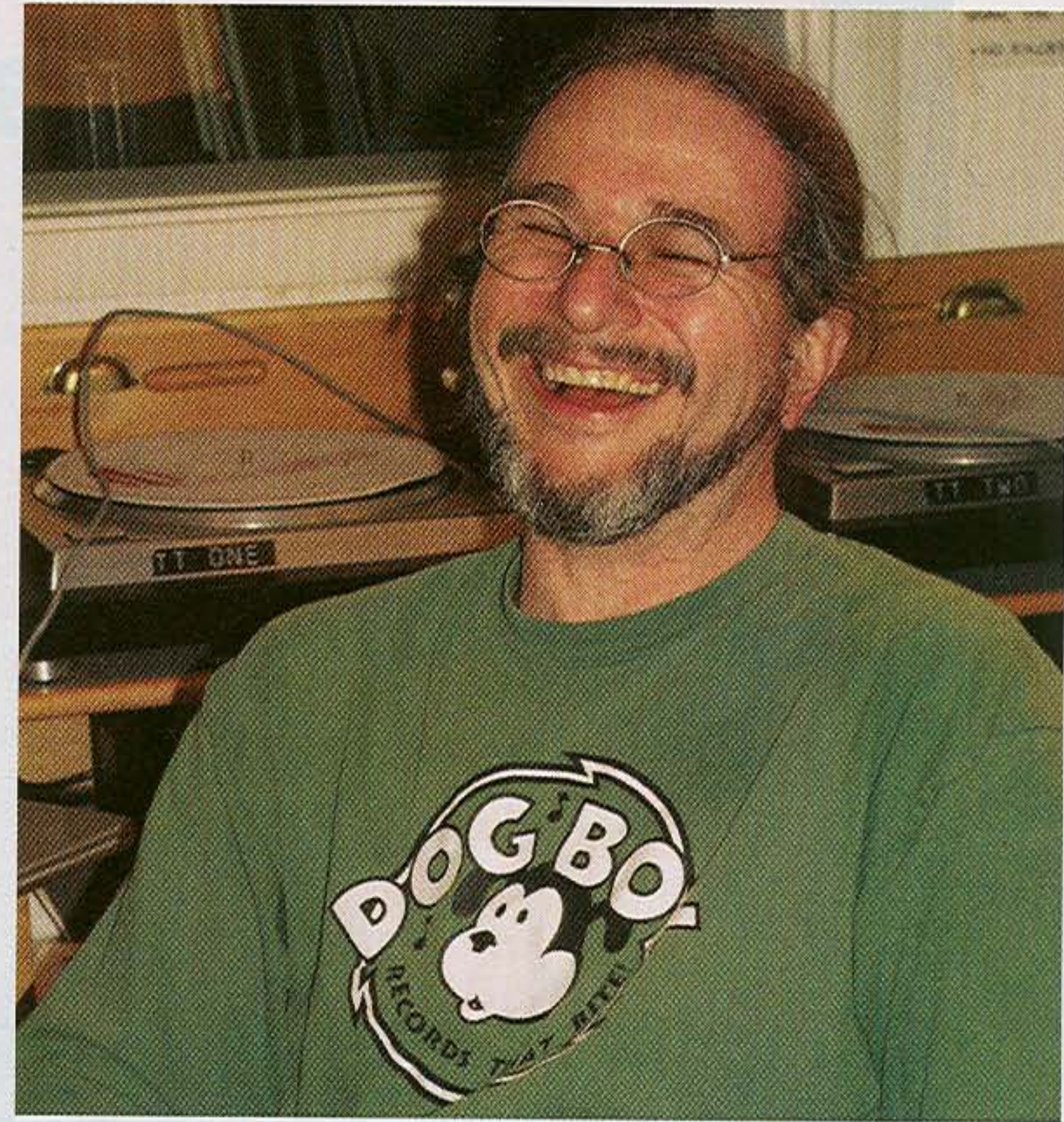
had credited Gans with awakening him to the myriad musicians reinterpreting Dead music, when Gans invited him to sit in on a Dead night at the Berkeley nightclub Ashkenaz in September 1997. It was a realization that helped spawn the rotating Phil Lesh and Friends lineup. Gans remembers the night well.

“[Lesh] was standing at the back of the dance floor with my wife, and he said ‘I’ve never seen anything like this,’” says Gans. “He saw the guys up onstage playing his music, speaking it like a language, like Dixieland or any of a number of idioms that has a book that goes with it. I later came offstage, and other people were playing, and I said, ‘Dude, multiply this by about a hundred and

you get a sense of what it felt like for us to be in the audience at your shows.’ He’d never been to a Grateful Dead show!”

While Gans’ own musical endeavors have benefited from his proximity to the Dead, being a “famous Deadhead” has its drawbacks, too—from Dead-hating mainstream journalists who will not take him seriously to Deadheads who see his own music as an attempt to cash in on his name recognition. But ultimately, Gans’ twin professions have served each other well.

“I’ve been playing that music for 30 years just with my friends, and that was one of the things that got me moving as a journalist in the Grateful Dead world, ‘cause I knew how that



music works, as a player. And Phil said that. The second interview we ever did together, we were talking about some particular thing that had happened musically, and he sort of interrupted mid-sentence, and he said, ‘Man, you really have done your homework, haven’t you?’ I said, ‘well, I play this music.’” ★