

1 July 2015:

We stand in the queue and wait to board the early morning flight to Chicago, all around, strangers stopping strangers, just to shake their hands.

“Were you there?”,

“Both nights....” Is a regular response that punctuates the air in the departure lounge at SFO.

At least 25 bleary eyed Deadheads smile and laugh, discuss setlists and of course, Trey.

We’re all pretty wired and upbeat considering the hour, phone numbers are exchanged, tickets begged for and the one consistent phrase you hear is, “Have a good show!”.

We touch down in Chicago and the madness begins, bags, hire car, apartment, shower and Uber to our first show of this run. It’s Wednesday the 1st and we’re off to a small club on the North side to see Forgotten Space, a Texan Dead cover band supported by John Kadlecik. It’s a funky bar with a stage that would be so much bigger if it wasn’t saturated in drums and equipment, John K hovers above the monitors and plays some soulful covers on his acoustic guitar before being joined on stage on Harmonica by one of his mentors. The set is relaxed and chilled, barely audible above the big city crowd as the travelling circus starts to set up camp outside the venue. Tie-dyes, pins, art and pipes a small scale street scene erupts as the crowd filter outside to suck on their vapourizers before the main act starts.

Forgotten space take the stage and the energy starts to rise, the sing-a-long begins in earnest as they swing right across the GD’s songbook. After the set-break they re-emerge for a blistering 2nd set, about halfway through they invite John K back onstage, the years he spent in DSO and in the lead guitar slot of Furthur explode out into the receptive crowd, an incredible way to start the week, the energy is High and the vibes are good for the rest of what we have in store.

2nd July

We race downtown, caught in the peak hour traffic and arrive at the Chicago Theatre, walking underneath the suspended railway lines and shuddering as the trains screech around each bend makes me laugh as I think of Jake and Elwood in that tiny little room. Tonight’s gig is a benefit for the Rex Foundation, one of the Grateful Dead’s charitable groups that raise funds and supports a wide variety of arts and music based causes. We’ve paid the extra \$\$ so get there early, VIP status for this show. We go inside to the bowels of the theatre greeted by enthusiastic staff, I grab a beer and survey the room and over walks Trixie Garcia, one of Jerry’s daughters. She shakes my hand and thanks us for supporting the Rex, we have a quick little conversation about her attempts to install a Hologram Jerry, and then it’s off into the Theatre.

Keller Williams fronts the Infamous Stringdusters in this regal expanse, a real tribute to the opulence and love of the arts that exists in Chicago. They take off quickly, the bands working in beautiful harmonies and intricate picking to give us the Grateful Dead bluegrass style. Clouds of smoke fill the air and the constant tapping on my shoulders as hot glowing coal after hot glowing coal is passed around the receptive ground. People on their feet, dancing and grooving, encouraging the band to play that little bit harder. It's difficult not to be infected by Keller's wild spirit and wonderful interpretations.

We take a breath and take our seats during the break and relax as the main course is about to be delivered. Greensky Bluegrass take the stage and immediately the energy changes. They've grown so much as players and band since we first saw them 4 years ago and they take us on a sweet friendly ride. Their songs are open and free and they welcome our individual interpretation, the solos a journey and the singing like rosebuds in our ears. I'm torn, the music a joy, but it's time to split, and we race out of there and to the Concord Theatre to catch Gene Ween's crazy set.

It starts at midnight and is full of that psychedelic rock that Ween explore so well. It's just Gene and band but they cook, blazing through the cock rock guitar solos with wild abandon only stopping to breathe when Gene picks up his acoustic and sings us the B side classic, "So Long Jerry",

It's a different crowd, not the 40 something eco hippies that dance to the bluegrass, not even the hipster top knots that hold that Ween vinyl so dear. It's the 30 something festival crowd that bays at the moon, howling as Gene's guitarist says goodnight, playing his guitar behind his head, a la Hendrix.

3rd July

It's off to the lot to soak in the vibe, expectations are high for the GD's first Chicago show in just under 20 years, we hang around the scene, ticketless but smiling. It's crazy out here and people are just on the edge of letting go.

We are off to see The New Riders Of The Purple Sage so start the long trek over the railway tracks away from Soldier Field, we stop at the top of the bridge and can see the enormous video screen, the sound of Jack Straw wafting across the city trails behind us.

We get to NRPS and wait around a while, a strange little club in the central northern suburbs. It's late at night when they hit the stage, quite appropriate for their psychedelic trucker soundtrack. Last Lonely Eagle gets me all a flutter and I tap my feet at the back of the crowd as David Nelson hits 11 on his amp and blasts us all down that diesel fuelled highway, white line fever into the early hours.

It's back downtown to the House Of Blues, another bold venue with exciting sight lines and quality sounds. We've come to see Moe in their 25th year and they take to the stage in a flurry of smoke, their jazzy, proggy, noodly rock bounces around the venue and echoes down the halls. The wide eyed fans stagger in from the Dead shows and mix with the "moerons" as the electric rock

pounds our eardrums. It's an early morning stumble to a 24hr hour diner, the coffee is just what I need to give me enough energy to make it home.

4th July

Early morning start and off to the docks. The Anita Dee II to be exact, 400 lucky souls board the boat as Melvin Seals and JGB dance us out of the harbour, the funky yacht takes a turn around the lake as Shakedown St thumps in time to the engines. The crowd is loose and high and the sticky sweet smell of Hashish fills the air, making the Ghiradelli Chocolate brownies served on deck all the sweeter.

We meet some great heads on board and laugh away the afternoon, stretching out and relaxing, preparing for the night ahead. After the boat docks we walk the 3 miles along the foreshore, sharing the path with thousands of smiling faces heading to Soldier Field.

Section 322, straight in line with the stage, middle of the stands, incredibly wonderful tickets. We take our seats and wait for the show to begin amid the thousands of costumed and smiling faces around us.

Now there's tens of thousands of reviews of the shows, and they would all be true. The one constant about the Grateful Dead is that it's a subjective experience. The sound quality is just right, getting louder and louder with every song. The crowd are jumping, hollering, screaming, they're twirling and bouncing, dancing. There's another constant too, it's one big sing a long, everyone knows the words, (even better than the band sometimes), and the goosebumps don't rise, they're permanently displayed as wave after tingling wave embraces me. These songs are my friends, my counsel, my saviours. They open me up to all the possibilities and I embrace them in return with thanks and love. It all sounds kinda corny when you put it like that, but it's another time and another space, separate from everyday reality. It's a world where we sway and swoon, where we feel the tiniest ripple grow into an enormous wave as notes from Guitars and Bass and Drums resonate through the concrete coliseum.

We leave the show and breathe a long deep sigh, we're tired but ecstatic, and we head off to see the Hobo's. Railroad Earth the hardworking road warriors that genre cross without missing a beat. Named after a Kerouac line they embrace the road, they're music encapsulates the freedom of America and pays homage to every songbook's lineage. From folk to blues and Bluegrass, beautiful songwriting and inspired playing. The Waterboy's Fisherman's Blues starts a wonderful sing a long as I reacquaint myself with the friendly Hobo's, (RRE's equivalent of Deadheads) and smile as the Gypsy Pirate Girl hands me one of her Divine Creation Chocolates.

5th July

It's onto the bus with not much sleep and head downtown to the historic Palmer Hilton Hotel. Brunch and coffee and into a hall to be fed a banquet of Dawg music. It's a 2pm show of David Grisman and his Bluegrass band and this bearded genius speaks softly about Jerry Garcia and the music they shared. We sit respectfully and I close my eyes as Grisman's mandolin delivers a million notes, all combined in his Russian Lullaby as a lone hippie twirls vibrantly in the front row, flailing and vibrating in time with the music. Grisman doesn't miss a beat and punctuates the shows with a couple of old Banjo jokes but there is nothing old about this music. It's fresh and real and so softly acoustic. The perfect entrée to the night ahead.

We walk out of the city and back to Soldier Field, the city of Chicago awash with tie dye pride. Smiles, embraces and serious setlist discussions abound. Everyone has brought their A game and are full of positive energy. Tonight is our opportunity to say thanks. A collective hug from audience to band, and it is with a melancholy fervour I enter the arena. Directly in-line with the stage, 6 rows off the floor. Surrounded by good lovin' and eccentric heads. A young buck behind me leans forward and invites me to partake of his Electric Soda, I hug him and decline, he understands and floats on his way. Clouds of smoke burst through the summer sun as anticipation rises and nerves jangle.

They say no one ticketless got into the shows, but really, that's a laugh, there must be at least 80,000 crammed into the arena, nearly all of us on the way up at the same time. We chatter nervously with our new found comrades in the surrounding seats, the attitude of celebration apparent in everyone's eyes.

Just when the tension was becoming unbearable, the rag tag band hit the stage. The tuning and twinkling noodling and meandering until the crowd explodes to the first notes of China Cat Sunflower. It's a beautiful song and the perfect way to start, we all get excited cause we know what's next, the jam evolves into I Know You Rider and 80,000 people wail each word, "I wish I was a headlight, on a Northbound train...." At the top of their collective voices, the decibel level peaking in time with Trey's guitar.

The show goes on, song after song, jam after jam. Each song selection greeted with energy and excitement, the band pushing and playing as they smile and encourage each other to go Furthur and Furthur. Like I said, I could give you a review but it would only be my opinion, the view, the sound the visuals the energy would all only be described from my perspective of my microcosm of the Grateful Dead's universe, but that would not do it justice, not in the slightest.

I was part and still am part of a collective embrace, a yearning for the past and a hunger for the future. The forgiveness of transgressions and the encouragement of exploration. The band and the

fans have never been the ones to sit on their laurels. There's a freedom that's encouraged and developed when you immerse yourself in the music. Tiny molecules of positive energy infect your being, shadows alight and words dissolve, meaning and definition just precursors to understanding. To the novice it's one big party, and that's true, to others, it's ingrained and part of your make up and psyche.

The true reason I travelled all the way to Chicago to hear and see a band was to say thanks, thanks to the whole organisation for being what they are, thanks to the musicians and writers and crew that make every effort to bring joy into the world. Thanks to the artists and creatives that pepper the music with colourful dalliances, tickling my mind and awakening my senses. Thanks to the wheelers and dealers and chemists and cooks that all contribute to this blissful soup.

So with tears in my eyes I cheered, with every photo that displayed on the screen, as the last rose of summer pricked my fingers, tears rolled down my cheeks. The music still played and it lives inside me. I'll let it out whenever I can.

It's hard to tell if it's the end or the beginning.....