

History of the... DARK STAR ORCHESTRA

It's really about the sound that's created. It's about a sense of familiarity. It's about a feeling that grabs listeners and takes over. It's about a contagious energy: it's about the experience.

Dark Star Orchestra has been delivering this experience to old and new Grateful Dead fans since 1997, after guitarist John Kadlecik contacted keyboardist Scott Larned with a concept -- performing complete Grateful Dead shows from out of the band's long touring history. When Scott mentioned having the same idea, John knew they were on to something.

The newly formed Dark Star Orchestra secured four Tuesday night gigs at Martyrs' in Chicago. The first night, November 11, 1997, saw only 78 people, but by the fourth week they had sold out the room. One year later, on the eve of their first anniversary, Mike Gordon and Jon Fishman of Phish joined the band at Martyrs' after their own show in Chicago. Fishman sat in for the majority of the evening, which included a rollicking drum section with four percussionists!

The ensuing buzz caused national interest in the band. That winter, their Colorado tour sold out almost every performance, their MP3 website was getting millions of hits and everyone wanted to know how they got their sound so precise. *The Washington Post* declared them "the hottest Grateful Dead tribute act going" and *USA Today* raved that DSO was "channeling the Dead." Dark Star Orchestra had arrived.

Committed to their original mission of recreating the Grateful Dead's live experience, Dark Star Orchestra has performed as many as 250 dates in a single year. They continue to grow their fanbase, playing at larger venues for two and even three night stands. Fans haven't been the only people joining in, as the band has featured guest performances from original Grateful Dead members Bob Weir, Bill Kreutzmann, Donna Jean Godchaux-Mackay, Vince Welnick, Tom Constanten and even toured with longtime Dead soundman, Dan Healy.

Tragically, during the band's 2005 spring tour, band co-founder Scott Larned died of a heart attack. The band reeled from the loss but continued on, featuring the talents of a series of guest keyboardists and vocalists until Rob Barraco permanently joined the band in the summer of 2007.

A much happier parting came in 2009, when John Kadlecik was asked to join original Grateful Dead members Phil Lesh and Bob Weir, in their new band, Furthur. Temporarily filling in, Jeff Mattson (of Phil Lesh & Friends, Donna Jean Godchaux Band and the Zen Tricksters) brings Garcia's fluid guitar work to life with uncanny verisimilitude.

The core of Dark Star Orchestra remains strong and as the members' musicianship refines, their recreations ring ever truer to the Grateful Dead's sound and style. Playing a full Hammond B3 and on vocals, Rob Barraco channels to the sound of three of the Grateful Dead's keyboardists. When the show is from the 70s, vocalist Lisa Mackey provides the female harmonies, performing the Donna Jean Godchaux parts in perfect key. Dino English combines his training in percussion and jazz and his experience in Dead-oriented groups to deliver the rhythmic drumming sounds of Bill Kreutzmann. On the other drum set, Rob Koritz, a classical and jazz influenced musician gets into the soul and spirit of the music while filling the Mickey Hart role. Like Phil Lesh, Kevin Rosen provides a very distinctive and fluid style of bass playing in addition to his devotion to the music of the Dead. On rhythm guitar and vocals, Rob Eaton provides an extension of the incredible feeling, instrumentation and tone created by Dead co-founder Bob Weir.

Over 12 years since the band first performed together, Dark Star Orchestra has gone on to perform over 1800 shows worldwide. What they do is not simply a tribute to the Grateful Dead, but a testament to the enormous catalogue of shows the band performed in addition to original set lists created to give the listener a wholly unique experience. "For us it's a chance to recreate some of the magic that was created for us over the years," Eaton explains. "We offer a sort of a historical perspective at what it might have been like to go to a show in 1985, 1978 or whenever. Even for Deadheads who can say they've been to a hundred shows in the 90s, we offer something they never got to see live."