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California Symphony to rock with West Coast premiere of the *Dead Symphony*



Grateful Dead tribute to include exhibit of Herb Greene photography and signings with official biographer Dennis McNally and composer Lee Johnson

The West Coast premiere of Lee Johnson's *Dead Symphony: An Orchestral Tribute to the Music of the Grateful Dead* will be presented on January 25 and 27 by Music

Director Barry Jekowsky and the award-winning California Symphony.

As part of the California Symphony's own Grateful Dead tribute, an exhibition of images of the band taken by noted photographer Herb Greene will be on display at the Bedford Gallery in the Leshner Center for the Arts from January 15 – 31. The featured guests at each concert will be composer Lee Johnson, who will be visiting from Atlanta, and official Grateful Dead biographer Dennis McNally. Johnson will sign CDs of the

Dead Symphony, released by Omi Records in 2007, and McNally will sign out-of-print hard copies of his *New York Times* bestselling book, *A Long Strange Trip: The Inside History of the Grateful Dead*. Both will also participate in a panel discussion to be moderated by Jekowsky following each performance.

Live performances of the *Dead Symphony*, along with Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite*, are scheduled for Sunday, January 25, 2009 at 4 pm and Tuesday, January 27, 2009 at 7:30 pm. Both concerts will take place at the Leshner Center for the Arts, 1601 Civic Drive, Walnut Creek, CA 94596. Tickets are \$39 - \$59, and can be purchased online at www.LeshnerArtsCenter.org or by calling (925) 943-SHOW. For more information: www.CaliforniaSymphony.org.

Among the most enthusiastic supporters of the *Dead Symphony* have been Deadheads (as the band's legion of passionate fans are known). Many attended the world premiere in Baltimore in August. "The audience was electric. For an orchestral premiere, I've never seen anything like it. There were ovations *between* the movements!" Johnson says.

Calling it an "extraordinary work," Blair Jackson of www.Dead.net wrote in 2007: "To say that I was skeptical when I heard that there was a new CD with the imposing title of *Dead Symphony: An Orchestral Tribute to the Music of the Grateful Dead* would be an understatement. After all, there is a long and ignoble tradition of butchering rock songs by rearranging them in lame and unimaginative 'classical' settings....So what a delightful and unexpected treat it was when I finally popped Lee Johnson's *Dead Symphony #6* into my CD player and discovered that the Georgia-based composer and educator had succeeded in creating a work of great passion, depth, subtlety and imagination. Rather than merely being straight orchestral transcriptions of famous pop tunes, Johnson has used ten Grateful Dead songs (dubbed "movements") as jumping-off points for an imaginative and emotional journey through both obvious and suggested melodies, harmonies and motifs in the various tunes."

"I think what the Grateful Dead did is such a part of more than one generation," Johnson says. "It's long overdue to be taken as a phenomenon beyond the music itself, and in my case, out came a symphony." The work is comprised of twelve movements dedicated to the band's hits "Saint Stephen," "Here Comes Sunshine," "Mountains of the Moon," "Blues for Allah," "Sugar Magnolia," "To Lay Me Down," "If I Had the World to Give," "Stella Blue," "Bird Song," and "China Doll."

Commissioned by Atlanta producer Mike Adams shortly after Jerry Garcia's death in 1995, the piece ultimately took ten years to complete – in part because Johnson first had to familiarize himself with the Dead's extensive, ever-evolving repertoire. "This is a band that was in perpetual, spontaneous creation all

the time,” he says. Johnson was also only four years old when Garcia, Phil Lesh, Bob Weir, Ron McKernan, and Bill Kreutzmann formed the Grateful Dead in 1965. Even later, the award-winning composer, conductor and full-time college professor wasn't paying that much attention to popular music. “I grew up studying 'dead' composers, but the other kinds – the Stravinskys, the Beethovens and all those,” he says with a laugh.

“Although a basic five-chord rock 'n' roll band, the Grateful Dead's multiple-time signatures, harmonies and rhythms have had its fans swearing for decades that they could hear the sounds of Beethoven and other classical composers echoing throughout the music,” John Rogers of the Associated Press noted in 2007. “No one took them very seriously, apparently, until Johnson; perhaps, he says, because adapting the music to a classical format was no simple task. If there was one constant in the Grateful Dead's approximately 2,500 concerts, it was that the band - partial to long, experimental jams - rarely played the same song the same way twice.”

When asked how he feels about the *Dead Symphony's* long-awaited Bay Area debut, Johnson enthused: “This is huge! This is the soil from which it sprang. It's a *big deal!*” Of the selection of the California Symphony to present it, he adds: “They have a great music director. Barry saw it, wanted it, and asked for it.”

The *Dead Symphony* is the second of four out-of-the-box subscription programs being presented this season by Jekowsky, known for his innovative way of fusing classical music with pop culture to create 'event' programs. Later this season, the California Symphony will perform the world's first live symphony in 3-D, as well as the world premiere of a second cutting-edge score from electronica d.j. and classical composer Mason Bates. Last October, CSO presented Samuel's Barber's *Adagio for Stings* visually interpreted by Russian handstand acrobats at standing-room only performances.

About Lee Johnson

Johnson has composed nine symphonies, numerous chamber works, four musicals, two operas, concerti, choral and vocal works, works for ballet theater, feature and experimental film, and hundreds of works for multimedia and interactive technologies. He has conducted and recorded with such world class orchestras as The Russian National Orchestra, The London Symphony Orchestra, The Talliesin Orchestra, The London Session Orchestra, The American Rock Orchestra, and The Cyberlin Philharmonia. His works can be found on over ten major labels. Among his numerous accolades for original compositions, Johnson has received an Emmy Award (1991, “It May Not Be Tara”), was named Georgia Artist of the Year (1995) and has won ASCAP (1993) and ADDY (1996) awards. He is a full-time

Callaway Professor of Music Chair at LaGrange College in Georgia. For more information, visit www.LeeJohnsonMusic.com and www.DeadSymphony.com.

About the California Symphony

Founded in 1986 by Music Director Barry Jekowsky, the California Symphony was named "America's Best Symphony Orchestra" by *Reader's Digest* in 2005. Jekowsky is the recipient of numerous honors, including the prestigious ASCAP Award for including at least one American composition on every program he conducts with the California Symphony – a tradition now in its 22nd year, and the BMI Foundation Award for creating the Young American Composer-in-Residence Program (YACR), the first and only program of its kind anywhere in the world to nurture new talent through unparalleled access to the orchestra as a laboratory to hone their craft. Notably, YACRs have gone on to win two of the three BBC International Masterprizes to date in the world's leading competition for composers. Long before it became a national trend, Jekowsky began presenting gifted young musicians in their professional concert debuts in the United States. Among those who have gone on to international acclaim have been violinist Sarah Chang and pianist Joyce Yang. In 1997, he led the California Symphony to critical acclaim with the recording of its first CD – *Lou Harrison: A Portrait*, featuring Al Jarreau (DECCA/ARGO) – which garnered rave national and international reviews and was named "CD of the Month" in *Gramophone* magazine. For more information: www.CaliforniaSymphony.org.

About Herb Greene

Herb Greene photographed the rock musicians and other members of San Francisco's cultural milieu during the height of its creative productivity. Greene, a friend of many of San Francisco's most influential musicians, worked as few photographers have: not as a documenter from the outside, but as a participant within the music scene he was photographing. Many of his images have become signature portraits of these musicians. His revealing portraits of The Jefferson Airplane, Jeff Beck, The Pointer Sisters, The Grateful Dead, Janis Joplin, Led Zeppelin, Carlos Santana, Sly Stone, Rod Stewart and many others helped create astonishing family album for an entire generation. To view his collection, visit www.HerbGreeneFoto.com. Signed open edition prints can be ordered by calling 978-897-4923, or email greenei@mac.com.

About Dennis McNally

McNally received his Ph.D. in American History from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in 1977 for a biography of Jack Kerouac, published by Random House in 1979 under the title *Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation, and America*. After settling in San Francisco in 1976, he became a freelance journalist for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, among other publications, and the first archivist for Bill Graham Presents. In 1980, McNally was selected as the Grateful Dead's authorized biographer and became the band's publicist a year later. From 1984 to 1995, he toured with the band, in the process working on its behalf at the United Nations, the White House, and Congress.

About the Bedford Gallery

Established in 1968, the Bedford Gallery – under Curator Carrie Lederer – is a program of the City of Walnut Creek's Department of Arts, Recreation, and Community Services. The Gallery organizes and presents five to six exhibitions each year, and offers lectures, workshops, panel discussions, and many other kinds of public programs. For more information, visit www.BedfordGallery.org or call (925) 295-1417

CONCERT DETAILS

WHAT: "California Symphony Rocks!" Music Director Barry Jekowsky conducts the West Coast premiere of Lee Johnson's critically-acclaimed *Dead Symphony: An Orchestral Tribute to the Music of the Grateful Dead* and Igor Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite*. Special events: Exhibition of Grateful Dead photography by Herb Greene at the Bedford Gallery in the Leshar Center for the Arts; CD signing by the composer and book signing by *New York Times* bestselling author Dennis McNally of his authorized biography of the band during intermission; panel discussion with McNally, Johnson and Barry Jekowsky following each performance.

DATES: Sunday, January 25, 2009 at 4 pm & Tuesday, January 27, 2009 at 7:30 pm.

WHERE: Leshar Center for the Arts, 1601 Civic Drive, Walnut Creek, CA 94596

TICKETS: \$39 - \$59. Call (925) 943-SHOW or purchase online at www.LesharArtsCenter.org

MORE INFORMATION: www.CaliforniaSymphony.org

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