

Dead from the Scaffolds

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Aside from being a first performance by the band on campus, the 1977 Grateful Dead Barton Hall show was a first from the production perspective too. I had worked as a volunteer at many shows on campus by this time, running a large Super Trouper spotlight in Barton and a smaller Trouper in Bailey (I had also built the railing rig for lights that was used in Bailey – but that’s another story). The two Super Trouters in Barton were the property of the Gamma chapter of Alpha Phi Omega, the co-ed national service fraternity that grew out of the Boy Scouts, for which I was a graduate advisor. How APO came to own these spots I don’t recall as it happened before my arrival in Ithaca in 1974, but APO was also in charge of concessions sales during shows in Barton and gave the proceeds to local charities. When APO decided to sell beer at Barton concerts, they gave the proceeds to the Tompkins County Alcoholism Council.

For all the other shows I worked in Barton up til this time, one Super was located on the bleachers at rear of the hall a good 100 meters from the stage and the other was on the ROTC “building” at the side of the hall. I remember really struggling at the Beach Boys show in 1975, hugging the Super to try to keep the light steady with that long “throw” from the rear of the hall. These were monster spotlights – (yes the Abba song is about them) – about 2 meters long and 50 cm wide. So you can imagine my surprise when I arrived for the Dead show several hours before doors opened (wading through a wonderfully colorful crowd outside), to find a scaffold set up about 15 meters in front of the stage, about 8 meters high, with a couple of pieces of plywood on top, with the Super resting on it.

The scaffold was rickety, shook when I clambered up it (there were no steps – you climbed on the scaffold crossbars), and had a 220-volt line running to it for the Super. Now the Super Trouper’s of the time were carbon arc - they would send out sparks if you weren’t careful and you had to wear thick leather gloves, use pliers to replace the (very hot) copper-jacketed graphite rods that you had to keep burning at the focus of the parabolic mirror inside the housing. The graphite rods needed to be changed (re-trimmed) every 20 minutes or so as they burned up, and you put the stubs of the old hot rods in a #10 can to let them cool. Looking back, it was simply insane that they’d put a huge, heavy carbon-arc spotlight with such hot material on wooden scaffolding with no guide-wires or any real supporting structure except some cinderblocks at the bottom in the middle of Barton – but they did.

My next surprise was Candace Brightman – in all the shows I’d run before then (and after at Cornell too), there was never a female voice directing the “bumps”, “fades” and numbered calls for the light operators through the wired headsets used to coordinate the show. I remember being impressed that she was totally cool throughout the long show,

and never railed at anyone if they missed a cue or messed up a color change, which frankly we all did since after all we were students not the pros that big touring shows would expect. I have no memory of sound check since I was mainly trying to get used to the swaying of the scaffold and make sure the colored lighting gels Candace gave us were all in the correct order and working smoothly.

Then the doors were opened. Those brief moments are one of my most vivid memories of all my years at Cornell. I had just been in classes on population ecology taught by Lamont Cole, one of the founders of the field, and a young Peter Brussard who told us all about voles. Lemmings were on my mind. From the scaffold high above the floor, it was as if a magical transition had occurred. A whoosh of multicolored people simply flowed all around the Barton floor and in seconds the scaffold was surrounded by flowered shirts and what appeared to be hundreds of small “trees” holding mics. There was no one guarding the scaffold but luckily the audience was calm and I suspect high, given the fragrance that wafted up to us throughout the night.

One of the downsides of working these shows, and I did several others in Barton from scaffolding after this one, was the need to concentrate on the job and calls for lighting changes, not the music. The old Clear-Com headsets we used were not conducive to enjoying the performance at all. So despite my perfect vantage point for the Dead concert, I actually have much clearer memories of the first appearance by Jerry Garcia in 1975 at Bailey Hall with his band. I didn’t run a spot for that and was astounded by Nicky Hopkins blistering piano.

The snow upon leaving Barton late that night, after I had helped haul the Super down from the scaffold, was a surprise. My dissertation topic involved the impact of temporal environmental variation on plants, using probability theory. On the morning of May 8 I had taken a photo of the flowering trees on the Arts Quad, so I got up early on May 9 and went to the quad to capture the snowy image from the same location. I used the slides of those photos in many of my research talks over the next several years – I still have them.