

Interview with Robert Hunter and Greg Anton, August 25, 1997

Zero: You Can't Keep a Good Band Down

by [Christian Crumlish](#)

I finally arrive at Hunter's home in Marin, having botched the directions twice, where he's graciously granted me an interview to talk about Zero, a band with whom he's been writing songs since the early '90s, and his collaborative process with Greg Anton, Zero's drummer and co-founder, and the rest of the band. As I turn into the living room, I see, sitting facing me on the piano bench, back to the piano, the imposing presence of Anton himself. Without making any promises, Hunter has produced Greg, and stands back now, beaming.

Note: (In the interview, Robert Hunter's words are indicated by **RH**, Greg Anton's statements by **Greg**, and my questions by **xian**.)

Money, Mandolins, and Marin County Musicians

Before we started the interview proper, Hunter's advice to me to transcribe the interview soon afterward, and his reminiscence about interviewing Blind Melon for Creem, reminded Anton that Banana, a former Zero keyboard player (and currently the rhythm guitarist in Steve Kimock & Friends), was looking for an old custom-made mandolin he had pawned years ago. Hunter goes off to get his precious Scott Wood Gibson-style F-5 mandolin:

RH

This mandolin is Banana's?

Greg

Yeah.

RH

I'll never get another F-5.

Greg

Banana's been playing with Grisman and he played Grisman's mandolin and said to himself, "Oh man, I need my right mandolin!" He asked me to find out if you're real attached to it and ask if you'd be willing to sell it or trade it for something.

RH

If it's his mandolin then I've got to give it back. Jeez, that puts me in a bit of a quandary. I'm very *proud* of the instrument, but I don't play it much and he would and oh, god!

Greg

Well, think about it.

RH

Well, no. You know how it is. Money aside, that's his mandolin. It got into my hands circuitously.

xian

Aren't ethics a bitch?

RH

Yeah, they are. I don't see what else I can do. When I gave a way that A-4, I missed having a mandolin, so I went down and bought this. I figured it was my karma to get a good F-5, you know?

Greg

And I guess he got it when he was way back in the Youngbloods or something.

RH

I'll see what I can do, damnit.

Greg

I'll see how serious he is about it. If he's really serious about playing this stuff.

RH

I can't keep it. If I played it all the time, which I don't.... I work it up every once in a while, play with Nelson and Rothman at the office Christmas party once a year. I don't see what else I can do. I don't play mandolin enough to deserve to have such a fine instrument. That's kinda where it goes. It's his. It's his, and money doesn't really cut it.

Who's Been in Zero All Along?

xian

How do you think Zero has managed to continue being Zero all along with some of the personnel changes? Do you think it's just that certain people have been there through the whole time or is there something about being Zero that you can bring a musician in and they can learn to be Zero too?

Greg

I don't know how to answer your question. It's been a core.

RH

It's been you and Steve. You and Steve are Zero.

Sitting in with Zero, an Acid Test of Sorts

xian

This electric fiddler who had once sat in with Zero told me that being between you and Steve on-stage was a very scary place for a musician to be. I think he meant that there was such a ferocious groove that jumping in the middle of you guys was a terrifying prospect.

Greg

Most people who've sat in with the band, and there's been many, many of them, get that "deer in the headlights" thing. I was just talking to Howard Dancheck, our sound man, about this. There's a whole bunch of big open spaces in our music all the time, and most players aren't used to that.

For us, what is not played is as important as what is played. We're very respectful of each other, musically courteous, not trying to play as many notes as possible. We're trying to play less and less, and let the thing float along. So when somebody sits, there's so much room that they're often overwhelmed and they'll start playing all over the place. Over and over again, a guitar player, say, will sit in with us, and when they hear a space they jump into it as if, if it weren't for them that night, we wouldn't have a solo! As if we wouldn't be able to pull it off without that one person sitting in that night.

I think that Steve is one of the best guitar players playing right now, and I think Martín is one of the best tenor players playing right now, and Chip is one of the best B-3 players playing. We're really lucky to have these great, great soloists in our band.

Hammering Away at that Understatement Thing

xian

At a recent Maritime Hall show (August 15, 1997), you guys did a Tangled Hangers and almost got through the whole song without ever really stating the main theme. Sure, it came up a lot, but it was hinted at, and sketched at, and not played. You just sort of danced around the melody the whole time. Every time I hear you do a tune I've heard you do before, you're building on top of what's already there, and the song gets thicker and thicker in my memory.

Greg

Yeah, well that's what's happening on the stage too. See, that's the advantage of the history of having a *band*. That's a very common compliment we get: that we sound like a band. It's one thing to get six equally accomplished players together, but we've been playing together for so many years. Some songs we've been playing for years and years and years, so we ourselves have played the "head" so many times that we play around it and don't actually come out and state it. It's very understated.

xian

It forces you to come up with something new about an old song.

Greg

Right, Exactly. And that's what's fun. That's what's challenging. If we're ever going to play this song again, and we've been at it for ten years, let's try to do something different with it.

Do Songs = Instrumentals + Lyrics?

xian

I think the most obvious question I could ask is, "How different is it to have so many more songs, with lyrics? The audience seems to believe that a song and an instrumental are really different beasts, but when I listen to a tune like Catalina, I think that if you, Robert, hadn't come along and put words to it, it would have fit well with a lot of instrumentals I've heard Zero play in the past.

RH

They did it as an instrumental before I put words to it.

xian

Is that right? OK, so I'm not totally off base here. But it must change something, the dynamic of the song. There's at least another musical voice, in this case literally - Judge's voice - you have to accommodate, right?

Greg

It's been a big difference. It's put some structure to the thing: sooner or later you're going to get to a chorus and everybody knows it, everybody in the audience and everybody in the band. I remember when we first started putting these lyrics in. I was really blown away about how integrated it felt. It just felt really natural. We'd be going along, playing, and then here would come a verse or a chorus, and it seemed like the words made sense with what we'd been doing up till then, for all those years. It just somehow worked.

xian

That makes me also wonder, Robert, what it was like for you - I guess it's the other side of the same question - walking into a band that already had a musical train rolling down the tracks, jumping on like a hobo with a sack of lyrics, and fitting in so well. Was there some trick involved there? Was there a different muse that had to inspire those words?

RH

Let's just say there's probably a different muse that inspires each and every song, if you want to use *muse* that way. I'm not trying to copy myself. Whatever Zero was doing, I just wrote for that. Beyond that I can't even tell you what I do. You know, if it sounds right and it fits the characters who are doing it, then it's working and that's sort of automatic.

xian

Have the songs so far usually come to you with a melody and a structure before you put lyrics to them?

RH

Yeah, they did, pretty much.

Greg

Yeah, I'll just give you some chord changes and...

RH

To me it's not the changes so much as having them played. Greg's real good on the piano. He lays stuff down and I know what that beat is going to sound like when it finally gets on stage, because he's the drummer. He plays piano with a lot of drummer consciousness to it. Or I'll get something like Spoken For, which was completely arranged. I remember Steve's guitar playing on that thing seemed to tell me what that song was about. That was an unusual experience, a very high experience, writing Spoken For.

Greg

I remember Hunter called me up and said "Come on over, man, I've got a new invention." I said, "an invention?" and he said "Yeah! It's not really a song and it's not prose and it's not poetry, so it's brand new. It's an invention." And it *is!* That song is like nothing else that that *I've* ever heard. I'm real proud to have put that on the record.

Instrumental + Lyrics = Song

Greg

I'll give you an example from when we started that shows how Hunter was sensitive to what was going on. We had played together, years before. Then we kind of lost touch for a couple of years, and we ran into each other at a party of a mutual friend. He asked me, "How's the band?" and I was kind of lamenting about not being hugely successful, blah blah blah, and he said, "Well you can go on being one of the most respected bands around town by other musicians, or you could do some songs and maybe take it to another level."

We had just made a new record, *Nothing Goes Here*. I gave him that record and said, "See if anything appeals to you." He took the outro from Nancy Germany on that the record, and he wrote Chance in a Million. Now, I had just been sitting at this party drinking beer and going "oh boy, it's so tough, the music business..." and he comes up with this song that talks about a "chance in a million"!

xian

Does having lyrics give you a way to connect with an audience that maybe can't follow music that's purely instrumental?

Greg

I don't know.

RH

We'll see....

Greg

We're not trying to do any kind of formula. We're just doing what we feel like doing.

The Five-Minute Song Challenge Story

xian

Isn't a song on the new album, Ermaline, also built off the outro of another song?

Greg

Hunter was in the studio with us where we were recording, and I said "Stick around and check out this next track. We're trying to play Home on the Range with a whole different groove, and we need some help, maybe with some phrasing, or more words or less words to make it fit." He said "OK," so I put the track up.

The track was up for about a minute when he said "The hell with this." He said, "Turn off the vocals," and he grabbed a legal pad and a pencil and started writing like crazy. The track played from front to back, five minutes or something, and he stood up and said, "Give me a microphone." Then he ran into the vocal booth and laid down the vocals himself for Ermaline, a brand new song to those changes. Then you know we redid it a little bit and Judge put the vocals down, and that's where Ermaline came from. It was just written (snaps his fingers) right there on the spot. It was amazing. I saw the lyrics written and you can hear the lyrics on the record, and I don't think there was much more than one or two words crossed out on the whole piece of paper of lyrics, it just came that fast. Nobody could believe that.

xian

So where'd it come from?

RH

Well, I boasted that I could do it and then I had to make good on the boast. "You get one time through this track."

xian

It also seems that the name, Ermaline, seems to relate to other classic rock and roll tunes, with names like Maybelline, Nadine, and Evangeline.

RH

Let's just say that when you're writing that fast, you don't have time to consider what your influences are. *(He and Greg laugh.)*

To Road-Test or Not to Road-Test

xian

Do you have to make an effort not to lapse into Home on the Range when you're playing Ermaline?

Greg

I try to do different stuff on the drums. We all try to do different stuff with it. We played it last week twice, once in Santa Cruz and once in San Francisco. In fact, I've been planning to bring Hunter a live version of Ermaline, because it's the reverse of what usually happens. We played it for the first time in

the studio and now we're trying to perform it, and it's just really come into its own this past week, in my opinion.

xian

Most of the songs in the past have been road-tested before they get on the album. Do you feel different this time, like you're coming out with stuff that's more naked because it hasn't had time to grow hair on the road? Does it feel different working from a studio version as your primal version of the song?

Greg

It was intentional. We worked out the stuff on *Chance in a Million*, mostly me and Steve on my little home studio, and Nicky Hopkins, and if you go back and listen to those [demo] versions of Catalina and Home on the Range and Chance in a Million, they're so fresh. It's this theory that freshness works. We wanted to take something brand new, and play it for the very first time in the studio, instead of getting it together on the road.

You see, when playing live, you're doing some kind of projection thing for the audience. It's kind of a knee-jerk reaction. You do this, and everybody goes, "Yahoo!" and so you do it more. That translates live but it doesn't necessarily translate onto the tape that way.

One song on the new album, 8 Below Zero, we've never played that live.

xian

Yeah, I was going to ask. I've never heard that song played.

Greg

We've never played it except one time in the studio. We were talking about it the other day, that we'd like to play it live, and we will. We're going to try to work out something that works, but we've never even tried it. I look forward to playing it.

RH

Hey (to Greg), when you do do it live, please add the first verse, because that's the setup. It *will* work without it. On the record they did a little bit to shorten it, took the first verse off. It's just set up about Washington Square, and the weather, and the emotional tone it sets, and then it gets into the lead. Probably wisely, for what it is, they shortened it a bit.

New York Stories

xian

The album seems to have a lot of New York in the lyrics, at least in that song and in Pits of Thunder.

RH

Yeah, I wanted to do some New York stuff.

xian

I think it fits. Maybe it's the funkiness, but Zero always sounds like a city band to me, like a street-smart band, so that New York, urban, street scene thing fits like a glove. Maybe it's just my stereotypes of funk.

Greg

We do a lot of blues, you know. The roots of a lot of the music is blues.

A Genre is Just a Label

xian

A lot of your music, Hunter, seems to have grown out of folk, out of the language and sometimes the structure of folk music, although a lot of other rivulets lead into the stream. And "folk" isn't the first word that comes to mind when I think about Zero or their sound. Is that just a musicologist's distinction that's meaningless because it's all just music or rock and roll?

RH

I don't know if it's meaningless but I don't examine myself from that point of view. What I liked about folk is that the lyrics lasted, made sense, and they made sense for a reason, whatever that might be. I never had much use for lyrics that only kept the rhythm or only had a nice tag line. I just never concerned myself with that stuff. So I'd say that the *sense* in good folk lyrics, in good old-timey lyrics, has come through, and that's what I consider a good song to be, but I also understand I'm working with rock and roll, and you can get a lot snappier.

xian

You can't have 20 verses each with twelve lines?

RH

You can.... I do. (Greg and Robert laugh.)

How Lyrics Work Live

xian

Robert, you performed Pits of Thunder at your last Fillmore show and you were halfway into the first verse before I connected it to the versions that I'd heard Zero doing for the last few years. On the chorus it's unmistakable, but even there you take that chorus with a very different feel from the way Zero does it.

RH

I did it to favor the lyrics.

xian

It was nice because I actually hadn't discerned them before. Until you've heard a song a few times or in a few different contexts, it's hard to learn the words. Getting Zero's latest album just last week, I finally understood what the lyrics were about for some of those songs.

RH

You only need to catch a few lines on a song. I've realized that over the years. With a stage-performance type song, the lines aren't cumulative. Each line is a song, almost, in its own right. The audience will get *this* one, and then while they're thinking about this, a couple of more lines pass by before they "come to" again and stop thinking about that one. Or they're grooving to the music and all of a sudden a line will jump in. So you've got to stack the deck that way, and you can't depend just on story content.

Stage Myopia

xian

You mentioned that you don't take to songs that have just a hook, but some songs need a hook, don't they? I've been in the audience where people did not know the song Pits of Thunder when it started, and when it re-coalesced again out of some incredibly spacious jam or some percussion thing, everyone's singing along with the chorus.

Greg

Really?

xian

Oh, yeah. Especially down close, where it's not a mosh pit-- it's a hippie audience-- but it's kind of a pit down there, lots of people making eye contact, and there's a kind of feel that the song is narrating the events. You must have noticed that the song does get a great response?

Greg

No, I never really noticed that.

RH

He's back behind those cymbals.

Greg

Yeah. Yeah, I don't know. I can't really tell what's going on out there.

RH

I can't either. As a soloist performing, I can't really tell what's going on. Except for in Portland, playing during the day. I could actually see the audience, at Furthur. That was one of the few times I've been able to see my audience, see what effect I was having. I don't know if I like it or not. I did like it that day.

Greg

Yeah, it's a myopia or something that happens. I've noticed that. People, a lot of times good friends, have said "I came to your show, and you were looking right at me, man. Didn't you know I was there?" It's kind of a survival necessity, in order to do your work. It takes such concentration right then just relating to those people on the stage.

RH

You're probably interacting but you don't know it, because if you know you're interacting, then you're doing something other than performing your song. You start being mirrors on mirrors: me watching them watching me watching them watching me, that you can finally forget your lines and blow your chords. You've got to concentrate on your music.

We're an Accessible Band

xian

I went to one of those Steve Kimock & Friends shows and I saw you pop out of the backstage area at one point. I wonder if that gave you the feeling of being in an audience? I think that's something that fans appreciate, the way they may run into Martín hanging out in the audience before a show or just the sense that you guys aren't up on some 20 foot stage. You seem like real people.

RH

You've got to make a button that says "Martín Told Me to Shut Up"! You'd sell a lot of them.

xian

Yeah, I went to one of Martín's Sunday gigs at New George's. We got there early and I was shooting some pool with my friend Nick and Martín came by and leaned over as I was making a shot. It happened to be a good shot, thank goodness, and he went "Oh man!" and I said "You gave me good luck!" and he said "Oh shut up." Nick turned to me and said "Martín Fierro personally told you to *shut up!*" (Greg and Robert laugh.)

Greg

Yeah, you've got to be careful with that, if you hang around with Martín. Next thing you know, you're

talking to some stranger, a waitress or something, and you just say "shut up"!

Nancy Germany, take one (Catalina)

xian

I wanted to go back to Nancy Germany. Was it Catalina that came out of that one?

Greg

No.

RH

Chance in a Million.

xian

Chance in a Million, right. OK, but, the title Theme from--

RH

Catalina came from the soundtrack that Greg did for a dramatic live stage presentation of the Pawn Broker --some very, very fine music from that. What became Catalina was in that.

Greg

Yeah, but actually before that it came from a thing that I was working on with Donna Godchaux. I actually I played that song on the piano and she sang along. She just scat sang. There weren't any lyrics to it. We recorded a Front Street. It was very melodic. Then we used it on the soundtrack, and then I gave those changes to Hunter, and he put the lyrics to Catalina to it. And that's that's how we found Judge.

The Catalina One-Word Judge Audition Story

xian

You had a talent search or something, didn't you?

Greg

It was unintentionally like that. The word got out that Hunter was writing lyrics for us and a lot of people thought they were the person to sing them and wanted the gig. Martín knew this guy, Judge, and called me up one day. He said "Hey man, I've got this guy that's got a set of pipes. You've got to hear this guy's voice," and I said, "Forget it, man." I said, "I have had singers coming out of my ears. I'm taking a break. No more auditions, no more, not right now." I was really burning out on it because it was a lot of people.

So naturally, Martín being the way he is, he just shows up at my house with this guy. I'm sitting at the piano. I've just come from Hunter's house and I have this little shred of paper: a song with one word, basically. Martín walks in with this guy, and he goes, "Hey, Greg, you gotta hear this guy sing, man. Give him something to sing to." So I was kind of pissed off and said, "OK, wise guy. You want to sing? Here's a song that's got one word. Let's hear you make it a song." The guy goes, "*Cat-alina!*" and I practically fell over backwards! It was so strong when he sang that word, and I said, "Wow, you just made one word into a song!" As it turned out, it's one of the band's very favorite songs.

xian

It's kind of a signature tune, I think.

Greg

Yeah.

What about the "More Instrumentals" Crowd?

xian

There's been a little bit of discussion on the mailing list. From some people who've been seeing the band a long time one of the regular complaints is that they want more instrumentals. They want to hear the old stuff. They take pains not to blame Judge, know, but they sort of focus on him as the guy singing the lyrics.

Greg

My experience of it is different. I'm always surprised to hear that comment, because we do so much playing. We play Home on the Range, which has a whole bunch of words, and no matter how many words there are in the song, we still play four times as long. We do all the lyrics, we do this gigantic long jam, and then maybe come back to the lyrics, depending on the song. There's so much playing on almost all of our vocal tunes. there's so much instrumentation built around the lyrics. When we play Pits of Thunder, there's so much playing in that, and then eventually we repeat the last verse to close the song. We do that every time. But sometimes we really stretch out, some times more than other times.

xian

I've noticed that. They've put some sound clips up on the Zero web site, some snippets from the album but also some live cuts so people can compare, and I listened to the Pits of Thunder, which is under five minutes on the album, right? It's very concise, though it still has that wide open groove. There's a live version from somewhere on the web site that's about 15 minutes long.

Greg

Really?

xian

And about five minutes into it, it's still the drum solo to introduce the song! So right there you could fit the album track three times into that live version of it.

Greg

So for people who say, "more instrumentals," that song is as long as any regular band's instrumental song would be. There's as much jamming on it.

RH

It wouldn't be the Net if people didn't take contrary views to what you've decided to present to them.

Greg

I personally like some of the concise songs, like Horses. We do a sax solo in the middle, and we do a guitar solo outro, but it's fairly brief. It's just presented as a song, as a ballad. I love playing that song, I love playing Catalina, I love playing Roll Me Over. I like playing ballads, on the drums, and I like the words, and I love listening to them. As many times as I've heard them I still like listening to them.

Nancy Germany, take two (The Burning Question)

xian

Let me see if I can get back to just one stupid question, but it's just something that has plagued me, and it's Nancy Germany. The title of that song is Theme from Nancy Germany?

Greg

Yeah.

xian

What does that mean? Is that like the theme from a movie, or is that just an imaginary title, or what?

Greg

With instrumental songs, you get a name by somebody making a joke or whatever. We first played that song in the studio. The first Zero recording we did was me and Steve. I played piano and drums and he played bass and lead, and we came up with the core, the main five or eight instrumental songs (some of which Hunter's since written to). So, we were in a studio, working, and Steve was watching some old news clip on TV, some old World War II news reel. They're talking about Nazi Germany, and the guy's got this accent: "Natsy Germany, Nazi Germany." Steve said it sounded like Nancy Germany, and he said, "That's a nice name, isn't that? Nancy Germany?" He came in and told me about this, and I said, "Yeah, let's call the song Nancy Germany," and that was it.

RH

I didn't know that.

How Many G's in Greg?

xian

Some of these questions are short. Some of them are just things that I've always wanted to know.

Greg

Some of them are things I've always wanted to know.

xian

Is Greg spelled with one 'g' or two, at the end?

Greg

I spelled Gregg's Egg's with two g's because of the eggs, but now everybody thinks I spell my name that way.

xian

That messed your life up.

Greg

I don't care. It's really one g. Yeah, but I spelled g, r, e, g, g, apostrophe, s, e, g, g, *apostrophe*, s. I used to raise chickens and sell eggs, and I called them Gregg's Egg's.

xian

You don't do that anymore?

Greg

I got chickened out.

Roots of Zero

xian

Before Zero, what were some of your other bands. I gather from a Keith & Donna album that you played with Steve.

Greg

I was playing with Keith and Donna in a band. We had some guitar player and Keith wanted another

guitar player, and we were playing at Front Street, which is the Grateful Dead studio. Kimock came to try out for this band, sat down, and Keith did not even look up. Kimock set up and after a while asked what song he was playing or at least what key he was in. Without looking up, Keith said, "If you can't figure it out, there's the door." (He laughs.) Then, after Keith died, Steve and I played in Donna's band until she started to get more into religious music.

A Political Song

xian

Possession (one of the songs on the new album) has a political message.

RH

Well, that's a song that really, really needed being written! For years I've been aware of all our fans getting salted away. When the Grateful Dead plays, it's "a field day for the heat." All the people sitting in there-- I feel helpless about it. Sometimes I feel like we oughtn't to be *playing* or something. I think the message is clear when people are arresting your fans: "unless you decide to stop playing...." Getting the quota.... Something needed to be said about that.

xian

I think Zero fans are kind of from the same subculture.

RH

You bet they are, and especially Greg, who's an attorney, and has had to fight a lot of these cases. He called and told me about a friend of his, who'd been busted. He was going over to San Francisco County Jail to visit him.

Greg

I came over here from there and I was just blown out. I was saying "this great guy, how can they do this?"

RH

And I just thought, "OK, it's time to write that song. Let's get it written, and hope it goes out there, and does what it's supposed to do," Somebody's got to register a complaint about that particular thing.

When I Can't Tell the Song from the Singer

xian

Since you know that Judge is the vocalist, do you write into his voice or his sense of phrasing, or do you just give him the words and it's his "art" to figure out how to sing them.

RH

That's a subliminal thing. I've never been able to give a truly correct answer to that. I don't write for anyone's sense of *phrasing* but my own. It's a hard question. I don't really know. I bet there was a time when I thought I would write something different for Jerry than I would write for myself, for example. Generally though, there were things I would say that he wouldn't, and I wouldn't say those things.

Jerry didn't want to get into political rave-ups and stuff and I appreciated that and didn't go in those directions, though I was quite capable of it. With Zero, I can get a little more into that stuff, like the Wounded Knee business in Spoken For and in Possession. They're more politically conscious. I had no desire to be entirely apolitical or anything. It's a stance I took which happened to fit the Grateful Dead pretty well. It hasn't fit Zero that well. They're more political beasts than the Dead was.

xian

You and Jerry kind of co-evolved a vocabulary of songs that part of the audience took to be Jerry talking to them, though some people knew they were your words most of the time. Millions of hallucinating people believed that this voice was telling them something, but with Zero there's seem to be much more of a consciousness that Robert Hunter, the well known established lyricist has now joined forces with this band.

RH

Jerry was a magnificent, charismatic star, and anyone within 20 miles of him was over there in the limelight somewhere. That's not the case with Zero. Zero is not a personality cult, and the Grateful Dead was, to a large degree. The rest of us took on a hazy sort of half-life while Jerry radiated out there.

The Dead Audience and Zero

xian

It sometimes feels like the whole Dead thing and the whole "Kimock sounding like Garcia" thing that a lot of fans focus on, whether or not that's true, seems to dog Zero a little bit just because, who wants to be so much like any other thing? On the other hand, perhaps Jerry's disappearance from the material plane, and the Dead not being a performing band, has opened up more space for other musicians, other bands. even literally, in that dollars that maybe went to a Dead show are now free.

RH

Reading stuff on the Net, though, people are starting to more and more vocably *demand* that the Dead reform in some way. They're not content that we all have our own little individual spaces that we're developing right now. They're even tending to look at Zero as *spare parts* for re-forming the Dead. This is disturbing.

xian

Your collaboration with Zero arguable lends some of the Dead cachet to Zero, as a marketing tool or a cultural thing, doesn't it? That's a double-edged sword.

RH

True, but if you actually look at it phenomenologically, I'm adding *my* cachet to Zero, but if they're identifying me as the Dead, then they think I'm adding the Dead cachet. It's all definitions, isn't it?

It's weird, and I have to not let it influence me as much as possible. When I sit down to write a song, I just write a song the same way I ever wrote a song, and that stuff goes away. But the way people accept it is in terms of known categories, and maybe, for that reason, they're hearing their fantasies overlaid on what's really there. I'd like to see some new audiences come in for something like Zero, some people who're maybe a little even "Dead innocent," so they can truly hear Zero.

xian

You don't want one band to have, as it's ultimate the goal, the whole audience of another band. You want people who didn't know about or didn't like the Dead, but, maybe because they like jazz more, or...

RH

Anybody who likes Coltrane likes Miles, right? You don't get mistakes about that. And anybody who likes Zero's gonna like the Dead, and I assume vice versa. There is a local loose-limbed, jamming sort of thing--I would tend to call it indigenous San Francisco music - of which the Dead partook, rather than the Dead created it and anybody else who works in that form is somehow copping off the Dead. I don't think that Zero *does* cop off the Dead.

xian

Is that an issue for you at all, Greg, or is that just audience bullshit that doesn't mean anything to you?

Greg

The latter.

Kimock's Role in Composing Zero Tunes

RH

Kimock has a unique guitar voice.

xian

Greg, you mentioned that you've brought some songs to Hunter with a Kimock lead and melody there already, and other times it's just raw chords and the melody comes in, guitar line comes in later. Is there anything you want to say about how you work with Steve?

Greg

Usually, I give Hunter some chord changes, and we go back and forth. I'll try to fit the words on in, I'll ask him for another chorus, or this or that. Then Steve usually will rearrange it to some extent, add a bridge, add a chorus, or leave it alone. That's pretty much how it's gone. With *Chance in a Million* we went through a whole bunch of verse ideas, re-wrote the song a bunch of time, worked up the verses, and finally came up with *Chance in a Million*. But with *End of the World Blues*, I don't think one word or syllable or lick changed from the original thing. It just snapped together. So every song's a little bit different.

The Maestros Work on a New Song

RH

Maybe it's time to demonstrate. How 'bout those changes?

Greg

The reason I brought it over today is I'm not sure how....

RH

You can let it roll. [pointing to tape recorder]

Greg

So let's see.

[G plays piece through]

RH

Could you play the main figure just one time through, so they don't bleed into each other?

Greg

Actually, I've got an A, B, and C part to this thing, and I could stretch any one of them out to make a verse. I was trying to do something a little different. So here's the intro, the "top" or whatever couple of verses: [playing]. So that's like one part.

RH

OK.

Greg

And then, I had two ways. I had it going in the same rhythm: [playing], or we could go with a half-time bridging kind of thing: [more playing].

RH

You mean this instead? Oh no, the other, the first one, and I'd repeat that figure three times. I'd give it about three repetitions because those'll be a strong voice in there, for a statement.

Greg

Well, then OK, but I'm going to go back and at the end of it: [playing, elegiac ending]. This is the last time.

RH

Say on the third repetition, play a higher-end version to make it a little bit different [sings to demonstrate].

[G accompanies R on piano, they come to a crescendo]

RH

That's interesting!

Greg

Yeah, [keeps playing], that's an old version I had, about three days ago.

A Hanging, Suspended Chord Could Be Nice

RH

And then a big, nice suspended chord to add it all off, a suspension.

[G plays]

RH

Let the suspension hang a little and then go into your C part.

Greg

[plays with hanging suspension] Like that? A half-step up?

RH

Yeah, and then move into whatever your C part is, or your chorus line or something like that. That really gives it some simplicity and power down in that B point, where you can actually say something and then resolve into whatever's going to happen in the C part. Could be nice, could be nice.

Greg

Well, you've answered all my questions, man, because now I'd like to go back to work.

RH

All right!

Greg

I can stretch those things out and make 'em.... You like that power chord thing rather than the half-time minor thing?

RH

Yeah, I can hear the band just *leaning* into it. And then you could get your half-time stuff into the middle

of the C section, maybe even into the A section, whatever seems right, but I think the B section there, having that much meat in it, and then a suspension, you could say something.

Greg

I've been working a lot on this thing, and after working on it so much, I'm going, "Man, I need a change-up." Maybe I *don't* need a change-up. You know, I'm going "Oh shit, I've gotta do something totally different, half-time or something," because it's starting to get to me that it was too repetitious, but if it just can rock all the way through...

RH

Repetition's not going to do any harm at all there because I'll lay something on it, you know? And it'll just give it some gravity.

The A, B, C's of a New Song

Greg

Let me show you, then, one time through, and it'll be fairly brief, I don't want to spend a long time on each section.

RH

Could you say "A," "B," and "C" as you go through the different ones so I don't get lost in it?

Greg

Yeah, so here's A: [plays]. OK, here's the B: [keeps playing] ... C! [Plays final section, then singing] Back to A.

RH

You might want to mate that suspended chord in the earlier section to one at the end of the C section or B section. I don't know what section you got there. Mate it to another one. I love "sus" chords. They just give you all that traveling space and more room to whip around in there too.

Greg

Well check this out. It could go: [plays], sus chord [keeps playing].

[R walks to piano and starts playing single-finger on the high end of the piano, takes a few notes to find the key, and then starts improvising a melody, somewhat reminiscent of All Along the Watchtower.]

Greg

Yeah, some kind of melody like you were just plunking there, or something like that. It turned out stronger... I think it's going to be a rock song, you know? a rockin' song.

xian

Instead of a ballad?

Greg

Yeah. We were talking about doing a ballad.

RH

That ain't a ballad.

Greg

No.

xian

Would that B section repeat then? When you played it A, B, C, you played it through once, but is it gonna repeat a couple times through?

Greg

Yeah, it'll probably go a couple times through. I find when I play instrumentally, just to repeat and repeat something without any words makes it seem too long, but then when I get the words, it makes total sense. For example, we do three verses of Catalina before we do a bridge. We were gonna do the third verse after the bridge - two verses after the bridge - but now we do three verses, a bridge, and one verse, and I love the way we push it and push it. I really like the tension that creates. Now if you play Catalina on a piano, all that length, from the beginning to the bridge, just goes on forever.

How to Write a Song

xian

For composing, do you mainly just sit at a piano, and mess around?

Do you have a method?

Greg

I work for hours and hours and hours on this thing before I bring it over here, and still it's like floundering around.

xian

When I said "mess around," I didn't mean to imply that it's not together. I'm not a musician so I wouldn't know the first thing you would do. Play a note? Play a chord? a phrase?

Greg

I had this thing right here: [plays first chord, holds it, plays second and third], and I liked the sound of it. So then I had this variation: [plays original and variation], and I liked the way those create some kind of tension back to back. I got real excited when I came up with the second thing, and it took me two weeks to come up with that, not 24 hours a day, but every time I was near a piano.

I bang around, basically. I play drums on a piano. When I'm working on a *melody*, and I've just been noticing this the past couple years, it'll go [plays the melody of Gregg's Egg's, first two phrases], you know that melody, to Gregg's Egg's? I sat there [plays first half phrase] and plunked along in my slow way forever, but I was looking for the right note, and when I finally got it (snaps fingers) I knew it immediately.

This thing right here, where it goes like this [phrases of new tune, with suspensions, then hits higher chord], when I came across that, I really liked it, and I'm not sure where exactly it goes [plays up to higher still]. Something like that and probably [restates and finds turnaround back to original phrase, then repeated with triumphant air and melodic trills, not unlike the watchtower-y "solo" Hunter tinkled earlier, then trails down.]

In this particular tune, I'm trying to create the release between minor and major so it goes minor, minor, minor, major--like, ta-da! I'm trying to make it sound like that: Ta-da!

Close Enough for Jazz

RH

Remember that last thing that you gave me, last year? I couldn't do anything. There just wasn't a place to creep in. All the available space was taken with inventive stuff, which is *fine* for a jazz band. What I said that time was, "Get Kimock or something on it to give me a clear shot past that rhythm and inventiveness

in it."

Greg

Well, that's what I learned: to try anything out, sometimes I'll do some flourish or something, but I'm just trying to keep... [plays first phrase, beats time twice, second phrase, beat, continues]. Now what I can finally do [keeps playing], is do that again [keeps playing]...

RH

Good.

Greg

... and then double it. [plays to demonstrate], one more time, [plays], no wait, [plays through], now... [plays, with suspensions, higher chord, again, again, again but now steps up to major, and back to original phrase], like that, and then do that around again, you know, two or four times, and *maybe* then, by the time we've done all that, we could go to this half-time bridge, and just have more time in the song: [plays half-time bridge, through and back to first phrase].

RH

That might be a nice place actually to put a guitar figure rather than words. I could hear a counter-guitar figure without words messing with your playing at that point.

Greg

And give those words a kicker.

RH

Yeah, you're just looking for a countermelody. I wouldn't fancy that the words would be paralleling what you're doing there as much as finding a hook into a melody, up above, that those [chords] are laying the ground for.

xian

I'll keep my ears open at shows.

Greg

Who knows what's gonna happen? You never know. It goes through so many changes.

They're a Band Beyond Rehearsal

xian

How often does the band get together just to work on material, or rehearse?

Greg

Oh, once every couple of years whether we need it or not.... Sometimes we get together a lot, and sometimes we don't.

RH

You've got to get those weeks that are just writing weeks. That's part of the whole cycle. You have to take that time away from gigs, time to rest up after the last bunch of gigs. Then you go into the studio and spend some of that time when you could be out making money, gigging, to write new songs.

What's Next for Hunter?

xian

So are ever going to see a joint bill, with Zero and Robert Hunter?

RH

Go away.... Chut up!

Greg

I thought somebody told you *personally* to "shut up"!

RH

I don't have big plans for what I'm doing. I'm just trying to keep it manageable. I don't have big ambitions, just to write my own material and get out of the house once in a while, but I can't do more than about two-and-a-half weeks out there. At my age, it's a hobby.

xian

Maybe it has something to do with how you define success. Perhaps right now success means continuing to write songs that you're happy with.

RH

Yeah. For me, that's what it is, and I don't want anybody getting dependent on me or figuring out how I might fit into their picture of the larger scene. The point is to do it for pleasure.

xian

Do you feel like you have that space now? Are you at a point in your life where you can do anything you want to do?

RH

I can call my own shots because I know what those shots are and I know what they're not. I don't get led very easily, to do things I don't want to do.

xian

Are you working on anything new?

RH

Oh yeah. I've got some stuff. [Gets up and walks to piano, points to tape.] You can't have that machine on, though.

xian

OK, I won't tape it.

<click>

Hunter then played me The Song Remains, a tune he's been discussing in his journal lately. It's hard for me to recall the music that passed my ears then, untaped, but it was beautiful and the song sounded fully realized to me, without hearing the words.

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