

Dead Can Dance in Berkeley, California -- 9 August 1996

-- Jay Reynolds Freeman --

Dead Can Dance played at U. C. Berkeley's Greek Theater Friday evening, August 9, 1996. I was eager to attend, and fortunate enough to be able to do so.

It took some planning to get there on time. I drove from Palo Alto, almost eighty kilometers away, and Bay Area highways are notorious for stop-and-go traffic, particularly in Friday afternoon commute hours. A bunch of us had planned a dinner rendezvous, figuring that we had to eat some time and that an early departure might avoid some of the rush. It worked for me, but that seemed an exception. Of the eight people who had intended to meet at La Fiesta, an excellent Mexican restaurant at Haste and Telegraph, only three showed -- the rest were stuck with travel problems. Fortunately, one of those who did make it was Ramona, my companion for the evening.

I do love Berkeley. I went to U.C. there for my physics Ph.D., and grew to admire the town for its fascinating diversity. Esoteric concerts provide an opportunity for esoteric dress, and Berkeley is one of the few places I know where many will appreciate it and no one will dare object. Though, come to think of it, what's the fun shocking people if no one objects? Anyhow, I anticipated that the San Francisco gothic community would be out in force for the concert, and most of the folks I had planned to rendezvous with are fairly active goths. I am not really much into the gothic subculture, but it seemed only courteous and proper to try to fit in. So I wore the black pseudo-Medievall that will get me unobjectionably into everything from SCA events to weird San Francisco clubs -- loose, long, laced muslin shirt, wide tooled belt, jeans tucked into knee-high pointy-toed boots, all in black, with unusual jewelry. I didn't put my fangs in till after dinner.

My friend was more elegantly dressed -- her long, close-fitting crush-velvety dress, in vaguely vampish style, beautifully complemented her willowy figure, and was itself complemented by long gloves and a slinky feather boa. Her garments were all black, and she had put up her black hair and highlighted it here and there with a shade somewhere between purple and maroon. We both regretted that it had been too hot to wear cloaks -- temperatures were declining from afternoon highs near 100 F.

There were lots of other goths out for the evening. At one point a happy band of Hare Krishna types wandered past chanting, as a group of more somber and monochrome Dead Can Dance concert-goers eyed them darkly from across the street. The orange robes of the former and the black garb of the latter conspired to create a deliciously

cross-cultural sense of Hallowe'en. "Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Trick or Treat!!" I do love Berkeley.

La Fiesta is a Telegraph Avenue fixture that has been there for at least three decades. It is one of the two or three best Mexican restaurants I know, with an ample menu that includes reasonable amounts of vegetarian fare. I had feared there might be a wait getting service for dinner, but there was none, and no late-comers in our party straggled in to stretch things out, so we finished early. It was only a short walk diagonally across campus to the theater; we were seated an hour before the scheduled start of the concert, well before sunset.

The Greek Theater is a magnificent venue. Located at the east edge of the Berkeley campus, where the terrain begins to slope sharply up into the Berkeley Hills, the outdoor construct fills a natural amphitheater, a half-bowl shape facing out over the Bay, toward the Golden Gate. The slightly elevated stage turns its back to the campus; its colonnaded backdrop and ample width face rows of simple concrete and stone benches, set in a semicircle against the steeply rising ground. Above the topmost seats, a grassy hillside substitutes for a balcony. The whole is surrounded with plenty of well-established eucalyptus and pine. From the stage, a performer sees a high horizon laced with trees, and the open sky beyond.

I had luck in getting seats. I was first in line at a Tower Records store when tickets went on sale, and the seats I got were only a third of the way back in the reserved section. (The ticket seller, BASS, has 240 outlets, and they probably all had lines. BASS can sell 3000 tickets per minute. The person behind me in line got seats ten rows further from the stage.) However, most of the closer seating is in the pit, somewhat below stage level, and perhaps did not have quite as good a view. We were just about at the center, a few feet above the stage, three rows into the rising benches.

One of the neat things about arriving early is watching everybody else come in. About a third to a half the audience was gothed up, and many costumes were indeed elegant. One woman whom my friend and I both admired wore a low-cut dress whose bodice was shiny black leather, almost wet-look -- perhaps a corset -- and had long gloves to match. Her hair was black, but about a hand's breadth above her forehead it had been solidly colored almost the red of a maraschino cherry, and hints and streaks of that color had been worked further back into the rest of her hair. The effect was as if a bright red spotlight had been focused on the front of her hair, or perhaps as if her locks were self-luminous. Another woman with long, straight dark red hair wore a simple and rather modest dress of purple so deep as to appear almost black, and had made up her face and neck with something off white in a direction I could not quite determine, that blended and integrated these two hues. The effect was subtle and very well done;

it is rare and pleasing to see costume and make-up go together so perfectly.

We drew occasional attention ourselves. My companion is head-turningly pretty, and although she is sufficiently used to it not to notice, or at least to give the appearance of not noticing, I was aware that frequent stares were focused immediately to my left. My own costume was as unremarkable as I am, but a couple of people commented on my inlaid wood Coyote string tie slide, and on my vampire fangs, which I was wearing out for the first time, in the hope of startling friends who are more used to me in more conventional attire. Besides, I had not yet had dessert. But I am not really much into the gothic subculture.

The start of the concert was delayed because not everyone was seated yet. The background music got rather muzaky at times -- not at all what one would expect associated with Dead Can Dance. It didn't quite descend to "It's A Small, Small, World", but almost, almost. Yet as the sun settled below the horizon, the already beautiful site became serene and unearthly. The sky turned the pellucid lavender of twilight, subtle in hue and infinite in depth, hinting of but not revealing the oceans of night beyond. Presently a handful of first-magnitude stars came out -- Arcturus, Antares, Altair, Deneb, and Vega -- and there, right there, was the yellow-white light of Jupiter, shining warm and brilliant through the high branches of a eucalyptus at the south side of the amphitheater.

Dead Can Dance walked on not quite half an hour late, to loud cheers and applause. Lisa Gerrard wore a blue outer wrap over a white gown, and had her hair down -- when I saw her perform at the Palace of Fine Arts in October, 1995, she had it braided and wrapped about her head at temple level. Brendan Perry wore a sport shirt and comfortable-looking slacks. None of the rest of the band wore anything much unusual -- all their clothes would have been perfectly at place on the street... well, at least, in Berkeley... well, at least, on Telegraph Avenue.

The band was in fine form, the site acoustics were good, and the electronic support was well-handled. I am not a sufficiently dedicated fan to recognize Dead Can Dance's entire repertoire on hearing, so I did not attempt to write down a complete song list, but most of the pieces presented were from more recent albums, including but not limited to the new one, *Spiritchaser*. Among the works that I recognized well enough not to risk embarrassing myself by naming were "Rakim", "Song of the Sybil", "Tristan", and "Sanvean".

I had a good small binocular with me, and had fun looking at things close up. How wonderful to watch Lisa Gerrard's face! She seemed to smile a lot more than at the Palace of Fine Arts. It was particularly neat to watch her expression while she was neither singing nor waiting for an immediate cue. She would half smile, half

close her eyes, and look happy and dreamy, obviously enjoying the music and at one with it. The audience loved her -- the most frequent comment called out when she was entering or leaving the stage was "Goddess!!"

Brendan Perry was a strange combination of intensity and informality; he was all the zealous professional while performing or preparing to do so, but while changing instruments or between numbers seemed entirely relaxed and at ease -- he would walk to the side of the stage to consult with the person handling sound, or make some remark to another performer, all very casually. I suspect this deportment is a sure sign of a real pro.

Drummer and percussionist Ronan O Snodaigh (with accents acute on the first three vowels) was particularly fun to watch. He is a very talented and very active percussionist, who moves every muscle of his body in time to the beat.

A concert makes clear the surprising amount to which Dead Can Dance's sound depends on percussion. At any given time, typically more than half of the instruments contributing to the music were percussion instruments which cannot normally make more than one or two tones. Having been made aware of this emphasis by seeing it, one can listen again to the albums and hear it, but for me at least, it was not quite so obvious until I had seen as well as heard them.

The band played for about an hour and a half, as the soft glimmer of twilight changed to the not quite darkness of urban night. At one point I noticed that my companion had wrapped her feather boa around her; the temperature had indeed dropped, so I asked if she was cold. She said no, the boa was quite warm, and offered to share it with me. I wasn't cold at all, but when opportunity knocks, open the door! I dare say I looked fetching in half a black feather boa, with fangs.

On closing, the crowd gave a standing ovation, whereupon they came back and did two encore numbers, then another standing ovation, and one more encore, for a total of not quite two hours of music. One encore number was a rousing percussion instrumental combo of great power and intensity. Eight minutes of somewhat similar new drum music is on the CD which is packaged with the tour book for ten dollars -- a bargain, you should by all means get it if you have the chance.

Following the concert, the rest of our wayward party at last collected itself. Through some ingenious mechanism of ticket-swapping and calling in favors that I did not quite understand, four of the late-comers had ended up in the front row! One of them, Rick, has a knack for that sort of thing; it was he who vaulted through the orchestra pit to present flowers to Loreena McKennitt when she played at Flint Center in Cupertino. He and his lady, Heather, had brought several friends whom I did not know. My friend Kathryn was there; she is usually Miss Dark Gothic to the ninth, avidly studying the natural history of bats and forever worrying about her blonde roots, but she

surprised everyone by wearing a frilly white blouse. "Such a \*pretty\* neck...", said I, as I tilted her head back, exposed my artificial acrylic canines, and prepared to take a bite.

We flitted off to Cafe Mediterranean -- another Telegraph Avenue institution -- for coffee and munchies. I still had my fangs in when I ordered, but the counter man didn't even blink. Perhaps I should have asked for a-oh-positive instead of a double espresso. Ah, Berkeley. Our table was replete with gorgeous fabrics in jet black, blood red and rich purple. I'm not really much into the gothic subculture, but it sure is nice to be able to be elegant without feeling like you have sold out. And there is surely no better occasion for elegance than a concert by featuring the beautiful and powerful music and vocals of Dead Can Dance.

-- Jay Freeman  
freeman@netcom.com