



PIGPEN FOREVER: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF RON MCKERNAN

By Blair Jackson

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One of the clearest memories of my first Grateful Dead show, at the Capitol Theater in Port Chester, New York, March 20, 1970, is the sight of Pigpen, confidently moving out from behind his Hammond B-3 organ to the front of the stage, grabbing a microphone, and with a little cock of the head and swing in his hip, launching into "Turn On Your Lovelight." The band was bopping behind him, tired but smiling (it'd been a *long* evening). I was still trying to figure out how to dance to this strange and wonderful music, as the already initiated in the crowd spun and gyrated and clapped along in an ecstatic frenzy. There was no question that Pigpen was in total control of this scene, and

he had somethin' on his mind:

"Now *wait a minute!* I'm gonna tell you all about, just about my baby. Just about my rider, the way she make me feel so good. I ain't gonna tell ya all. I'll tell ya a little bit. Just a little teeny bit, 'bout the way she love me, yes I will...

"Sometime I wake up early, early in the mornin', just before the day is dawnin'. And sometimes I get kind of lonely and all I need, all I neeeeeeed, is lovin' on my side, yes I do. But I want to tell you fellas something about that. Because you may wake up early in the morning. You might be kind of hungry for some sweet little thang to come around. But what you got to do ... I got a little advice for ya — "

The band was in an easy groove behind him, flicking off little rhythmic accents and punctuating Pig's rap with zesty R&B flourishes. I was hanging on every word, 'cause obviously this was a guy who knew what he was talkin' about. He turned around to the band, and with a drop of his right arm said:

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"Hey, wait a minute you guys!" Then turning back to us, "I don't want them to hear it all. C'mon you guys, turn your backs!" And the band dutifully obeyed. "Let me tell you fellas somethin' about that. I know that sometimes you may get kind of lonesome, right? Well, the first thing you got to do, the *first thing* you got to do, before you get anything goin' on

— don't interrupt me, please — is get your hands out of your pockets and playin' with somethin' that's *better than that!* Pocket pool is a long time ago, man!

"So what you got to do now, fellas, is if you find yourself standin' next to a young lady, turn over to your side and say, 'Scuse me, Ma'am, my name is so-and-so, and what is yours?' And while you're doin' that you reach in her pocket book, take a look at her wallet and find out if she's 18. After you get all that business straight, all you got to do is find a place to go. And if you can do that — HA! Good love!"

I was too chicken to approach any of the young ladies dancin' around me, but fortunately I was sitting too far from the stage for Pig to get on my case. He danced a little dance, and the band started building a ferocious R&B groove behind him. The jam rose and receded a few more times over the next couple of minutes and finally he led the band into the big, big build-up at the end, shouting and screaming and testifying. "Little bit higher! Little bit higher! Shine on me! Shine on me! Turn on your lovelight! Let it shine on me!" And on it went until it exploded into a blast of noisy chords and drum shots and feedback that just about ripped the top of my head off, leaving me sweaty and breathless. I guess you can say it *worked*.

I was fortunate enough to see Pigpen perform more than a dozen shows in '70 and '71, and my memory landscape is dotted with powerful images of Pig at his best: unleashing a searing harmonica solo during "It Hurts Me Too"; playfully harassing the crowd to get down and *get it on* during "Lovelight"; matching Bobby scream for scream at the climax of "Not Fade Away"; surprising me with bright, soulful organ fills during "Truckin'" and "Goin' Down the Road"; sitting alone at center stage with an acoustic guitar, eyes closed, singing "Katie Mae." Mostly I just remember his vibe: he looked and acted tough, but you could always tell that the bluster and braggadocio was part of his act. 'Cause you'd see the warm smile peek out from under the drooping mustache; or you'd hear him utter a soft, sincere "thank you" at the end of some rip-roaring monster R&B tune; or you'd see him trading sly, smirking glances with the other bandmembers. And, of course, the bottom line is that he was often extremely funny. He'd crack up the crowd

and the band. As Garcia once said, "He had more nerve than I could believe!"

Unlike some, I never thought of what I'll call the Pig pen *character* as either arrogant or misogynist — on the contrary, in most of his raps and his songs he was usually completely under the spell of women; bewitched and bewildered, and talkin' a better game than he was playin'.

And what all those songs were about ultimately was love. Carnal love and spiritual love. "Turn On Your Lovelight" didn't just mean find a way to get laid; it meant find a way to let love fill your life. It was a beautiful message from a cat who looked like he'd kick your ass if you looked at him sideways.

It's hard to explain Pigpen's magic to Deadheads who never saw him perform, who never saw him work a crowd. Tapes don't capture his essence, because a lot of it was the way he moved and the way the band grooved behind him. He was not a technically great singer, nor was his keyboard or harp work truly remarkable. But he had an incredibly powerful presence and he could really put a song across. As a singer, nobody ever mistook him for Otis Redding or Wilson Pickett or Muddy Waters, but still, you could tell this guy was the *real deal*. And when Pigpen and the Dead tackled a tune it became theirs, so original was the group's approach to R&B.

It was 20 years ago this March that Pigpen — Ron McKernan — died at the age of 27 after a long battle with liver disease aggravated by years of heavy drinking. Recently I was watching a video of the Dead in Copenhagen in '72; it was Pigpen's last tour. He looked thin and pale, but there was still a sparkle in his eye when he sang. Most of all I was struck by how *young* he looked, even in his dissipated state. Hell, 27 is still a *kid* practically (or so it seems from my vantage point at 40). Certainly it's too *young* to die (tell that to Janis, Jimi and Jim Morrison, who were also 27 when they moved on), or at least to die *like that*.

And so, ultimately, even this celebration of Pigpen must end in tragedy; there's no way around it.

Still, "Pigpen was not a tragic figure," says Jerry Garcia. "The fact that he died was a tragedy, but he was not tragic in the sense of being a doomed personality — brooding and suicidal. He wasn't like that at all. He was more like a pixie; like an elf."

This is a story I've wanted to write for several years, but it wasn't until we went to the annual format that I had the time (or space) to get into it in the depth it deserves. There was a downside to waiting so long: some of my best potential interview sources died — both of Pig's parents, his dear old buddy Bobby Peterson, and in mid-'92, his girlfriend of many years, Veronica Grant.

Nevertheless, over the course of more than six months of work, I did manage to track down a large number of Pigpen's friends to help tell his story. And here's something that blew my mind: not one person had any negative things to say about Pigpen the man. He was adored by everyone I spoke to, a fact that makes his demise all the sadder. A thousand thanks to the fine folks who graciously consented to be interviewed for this article:

From the Dead, **Jerry Garcia**, **Bob Weir** and **Robert Hunter**; former GD managers **Danny Rifkin**, **Rock Scully** and **Jon McIntire**; **Laird Grant**, who was in Palo Alto at the beginning and was The Warlocks' (and the Dead's) first equipment guy; **Sue Swanson**, the original Deadhead, a GD family member from Day One; **Bob Matthews**, also one of the first fans, as well as an equipment specialist and, later, producer of GD records; **Eileen Law**, who's been part of the scene since '65 and working for the band for more than two decades; **Annette Flowers**, another longtime GD family member and GD office staffer; **Ken Kesey**, **Ken Babbs** and **Wavy Gravy** from the old Acid Test gang; former GD keyboardist and Pigpen roommate **Tom Constanten**; guitarist **David Nelson**, who also was part of the early '60s Palo Alto scene; **Peter Albin**, of Big Brother fame, a close friend of Pig's in Palo Alto; former Ice Nine Publishing administrator **Alan**

Trist; Palo Alto historian **Steve Staiger**, and Bay Area music critic/historian **Phil Elwood**. And special thanks to San Francisco *Chronicle* writer **Joel Selvin** for sharing his unpublished interview with **Veronica Grant** and **Willy Legate** for the deep background.

Where I have used quotes from other sources, the year of the interview appears in parentheses.

PART ONE: AIN'T IT CRAZY

The Pigpen story really begins with his father, Phil McKernan, who was a disc jockey on Berkeley's musically progressive radio station KRE from the mid-'40s to the mid-'50s. "I was with him on a program called *The - Alarm Clock Club* in '44 and 45," remembers Phil Elwood, a veteran Bay Area jazz and pop critic. "We went from 6 to 9 in the mornings. We played records, gave the weather, did a few ads. That was 78 rpm days. At that point, most of what we played was ordinary pop music and a lot of military band stuff. Later, I got into some of the better contemporary jazz stuff that was out — big bands, Ellington and some reissues of people like Bessie Smith. McKernan loved that stuff; he loved the blues. Later on, Phil did pretty much R&B stuff exclusively. He really knew that music.

"I remember when Pigpen was born," Elwood continues. "Don Hambley (the station's pioneering station manager] called to see if I could go down to the station because McKernan's baby was being born."

The date was September 8, 1945, and at the time Phil McKernan and his wife, Esther, were living in San Bruno, a small working-class community south of San Francisco. By 1950 Ron had a sister, Carol, and five years later a brother, Kevin, followed. The years from 1951 to 1955 were the peak of Phil McKernan's radio career; he had his own blues and R&B program on KRE, and was known by the colorful moniker "Cool Breeze." The elder McKernan had a huge record collection at home, and young Ron spent countless hours listening to every one from Lightnin' Hopkins to Big Joe Turner to The Coasters. The mid- and late '50s saw the birth of rock 'n' roll, and though Ron dug most of the early rockers, in his household the happening cats of that era were Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf, who were just hitting their primes.

Geography also played a role in Ron's fascination with black culture. In the early '50s, Phil McKernan quit radio, took a job as an engineer at the Stanford Research Institute,

and moved his family a few miles south on the San Francisco Bay Peninsula to the eastern outskirts of Palo Alto. Now in most people's minds, Palo Alto is considered a wealthy, lily-white suburb of San Francisco. It's the home of Stanford University, the picture-postcard-perfect rich kids' school, and most of the city boasts a quietly elegant suburban charm. Exclusionary housing policies effectively kept blacks from buying property in most of the city, except on the eastern fringe, bordering East Palo Alto.

Today, East Palo Alto has the unfortunate distinction of being the murder capital of the United States — in 1992 it had the highest per capita murder rate in the country. Crack is king there and drug deals-gone-bad spur most of the violence. The population is overwhelmingly black, though in recent years poor Asian immigrants have also gravitated there because it is one of the few affordable places to live on the Peninsula. "There's always been a certain amount of political isolation between Palo Alto and East Palo Alto," says Peninsula historian Steve Staiger. "Prior to World War II, East Palo Alto was not a black community; it was working class whites. But East Palo Alto became the area blacks could move into because there weren't as many restrictions as in other communities on the Peninsula."

Though the McKernan homestead was in Palo Alto proper, it was in a region close to where the construction of the Highway 101 freeway had split East Palo Alto in the mid-'50s. While still largely white, it was definitely working class, and the part of East Palo Alto that lay on the west side of Highway 101 exerted considerable influence on the area. Though it wasn't nearly as dangerous a place in the '50s as it is today, it was still a rough 'hood, and it was not a place where many white kids hung out.

Perhaps because of the influence of his liberal-minded parents, and his own love of blues and R&B from such an early age, Ron didn't harbor the same kind of prejudices against blacks that were so common among white working-class kids, especially Irish Catholics (which the McKernans were). Quite the contrary: Ron was naturally drawn to black people and black music. During his high school years, he hung out with both black and white friends, and he spent much of his free time listening to blues records and

learning the rudiments of blues piano, harmonica and guitar.

Whether his penchant for drinking cheap wine was something he developed to better emulate the blues singers he admired, or was just a function of hanging out with other like-minded folks who liked to party, we'll probably never know for sure. But the fact is, Ron started drinking very early — at 12, by some accounts — and by his middle high school years it was already a problem. East Palo Alto was an easy place to score booze, particularly for someone like Ron who always looked older than he was: at 16 he already had a mustache and goatee. He dressed the part of a tough guy, with tight-fitting pants, boots and leather vests or jean-jackets. Though he was somewhat of an outsider in school — he didn't exactly fit the mold that would have made him Mr. Popular — he was never lacking for friends; it's just that most of the people with whom he socialized were also outsiders.

"I remember him in high school," recalls Connie Furtado, who in the mid-'60s would go on to co-found the first Grateful Dead Fan Club, called The Golden Road (to Unlimited Devotion), in the mid-'60s. "The hallways would clear when Pig pen walked down, for whatever reasons; I was never sure. [He had) women on each arm, maybe. I just remember him in his last days at Palo Alto High School before he was expelled. He was sort of an unforgettable character."

School was definitely not Ron McKernan's bag, and neither was what seemed like an increasingly confining life at home, so he spent most of his time hanging out with a wide circle of friends, many of whom were part of the burgeoning folk music scene in Palo Alto. In the mainstream, "folk music" meant clean-cut singers like the Kingston Trio and Peter, Paul & Mary. But out in the fringes — and the Peninsula scene was certainly that — the term included old-timey, bluegrass and blues, and the heroes of the day were lesser-known lights like Dave Van Ronk, Elizabeth Cotten, Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee; basically anybody who was playing what today is considered American roots music.

"The folk movement flourished mainly in college towns, so in this area that meant Palo Alto, Berkeley and San Francisco," historian Staiger notes. "You had well-educated, liberal sub communities in these places at a time when the country as a whole was pretty hard-line conservative. I don't think Palo Alto was particularly unique in that regard."

Perhaps not. Stanford's presence in the community undoubtedly fostered the proliferation of coffee houses and "hoots" where folk music was played. Also because of Stanford, the Palo Alto Peace Center, started by local bookstore owner Roy Kepler, always had fresh recruits to help out with various activities. The city was peppered with bohemian enclaves that attracted mainly artists and writers, such as the now-famous Perry Lane crowd that included Ken Kesey and various other early psychedelic explorers.

Something was happening on the Peninsula, though in the early '60s, it wasn't clear exactly what it was. Basically, the musicians in the scene were just looking for good times wherever they could find them, whether it was at places where they played, like Kepler's Bookshop, St. Michael's Alley, The Tangent and the Boar's Head, or the houses different folks in the scene inhabited. Everybody was pretty much just living hand to mouth, day to day, not exactly waiting for something to happen, but perhaps sensing that something big was just around the next corner. For a disaffected high schooler named Ron McKernan, the swirl of activity around Palo Alto was as intoxicating as the sickly sweet screw top wines that were his social lubricant.

Laird Grant: There were a lot of things going on. There were all these different hoot places — St. Michael's Alley. It was really ethnic-go-woody in those days. It was the folk period and we were listening to blues, jazz — Coltrane was coming in strong. If you could play something and you had a buddy who was doing a gig — which was basically you went up there on the mike and you got all the beer you could drink — you could go up and sit in, as long as you could follow the bouncing ball. Jerry was up there playing banjo and singing with Sarah, his love [and first wife]. And then here comes David

Nelson and all these other guys. And people gravitate toward that. If you're somebody who plays an instrument and you're sittin' there in your closet playing and then all of a sudden there's a place to go and play, you *do it*. That's basically how that happened. It all kind of fell together. It was like somebody taking a handful of rocks and throwing them up in the air, and a bunch of them kind of all came down together.

Jerry Garcia: When I first met Pigpen he was 14 years old. He was hanging out around Palo Alto and I was the only person around that played any blues on the guitar, so he hung out with me. And he picked up, just by watching and listening to me, the basic Lightnin' Hopkins stuff. Then he took up the harmonica and everyone called him "Blue Ron" — the black people anyway. This is when he was 14 and 15! That's when he started drinking wine, too.

I was living in East Palo Alto with some friends and we were hanging out in the black scene there. All the black people loved Pigpen. They loved that he played the blues. And he was a genuine person — he wasn't like a white boy trying to be black. And he was pretty good, too. You know, Pigpen's best shot was sitting around a room like this with his bottle of wine and an acoustic guitar, playing Lightnin' Hopkins. He could improvise lyrics endlessly; that was his real forte.

Peter Albin: My first memories of Ron are probably from around the summer of '62, when my brother [Rodney Albin] and I were involved in the Boar's Head, which was sort of a coffee house where people played folk music. That summer my brother started the Boar's Head with this guy named George Howell. It was a little place on San Carlos Avenue [in San Carlos]. Downstairs was this used bookstore called the Carlos Bookstall. George was this renegade high school student and a wannabe beatnik — he was a very cynical and critical guy, not a peace freak at all. He smoked dope here and there, which was fairly unusual for that time, and he looked older than he was. Anyway, George and my brother had this idea of turning this upstairs loft at the bookstore into a little coffeehouse kind of place where local people would play. My brother played banjo and fiddle and guitar; I played a little guitar, and a lot of our friends played various

instruments. So we opened it in the summer of '62 and we had little get-togethers on Friday and Saturday nights only. I'm pretty sure that's where I first saw Ron, 'cause everyone who was hanging out in the area at that time would come down pretty regularly.

My brother was friendly with Jerry and Hunter, who were living at the Chateau at the time, I believe. Rod would go down to Kepler's, where you could always find Garcia hanging out in the back, and he invited Jerry to come down to check out what we were doing. Garcia and his friends came up a lot during that summer.

David Nelson: Rodney is the one who took me down to Kepler's bookstore and we introduced our selves to Jerry Garcia, and here was this guy sitting with an open shirt, playing a 12-string and I think he had a wreath in his hair, like on a Greek statue. It was kind of a thing in those days.

Laird Grant: The Chateau was this large house that was probably built in the late '20s or early '30s on this little knoll [in Palo Alto]. It's still there — there are people of cool preserving it. At that time it was owned by a guy named Frank Seratone, who was an artist. He'd do these drawings and then put a watercolor wash on them. They sold at City of Paris (an SF department store) and places like that. He had this big place people called The Chateau, and he had extra rooms that various people would be renting or staying in.

After a while, friends would bring their friends and all of a sudden he was surrounded by all this really young energy. [Merry Prankster] John Page Browning was there. Lee Adams was there. Jerry lived in the pump shed for a while. Hunter was there on and off. It was like a real family of people who came together in a world that really wasn't that strange and alienated to us at that point — not like it is today. We felt like there was some kind of a need to form this kind of a thing. Pigpen would come around, sometimes with some of his friends from East Pali, sometimes alone, and hang out there.

Then about five or six blocks away, Kesey had his place [on Perry Lane) and then there

was a place called Homer Lane, which was up off the golf course, and there was a scene there, too. These were places that were built in the '20s and '30s when Stanford was really happening; they were like little artist colonies. Anyway, at these sort of places, people just kind of came together; a whole bunch of strange people came together. Joan Baez, Jorma Kaukonen, Jerry and all these other interesting people in one little teeny area of California that seemed to have bloomed at once with odd thinking. I can't really tell you what happened exactly, but I know that it was extremely unique and that even now, at the age of 50, I have evenings when I sit and puzzle the fact. Why? What?

Pigpen (1970): I was hanging around the Chateau, around 1962, give or take a century, and we started to drink some wine once in a while — Ripple wine. Then we graduated to Hombre and Thunderbird, Golden Spur ... man that stuff was horrid! I can tell you everything about the worst rot-gut around. Joe [Novakovich] was big on Bali-Hai and I was big on Hombre. Me and David X and Lester Helums drank that Hombre. Lester Helums was a saxophone player. We called him Yellow Kid Wild.

Peter Albin: David X was the nickname of this black guy named David McQueen, who was one the characters who was around a lot in those days and friendly with Ron. He would come down to the Boar's Head. In fact, one day someone saw me and my brother and David X together — a couple of white kids and this black guy — and they raised a big stink about the Boar's Head. San Carlos was a pretty lily-white town and there was some controversy about it. They wanted to shut us down, and we had to go in front of the town board and explain that we weren't a business; it was all volunteer. They thought we were undesirables, beatniks.

I first knew Ron as one of the kids who came up with the Palo Alto people to (San Carlos) to see Garcia. And he was one of the guys who had played with Garcia.

Laird Grant: A lot of people don't know that Jerry was really into blues back then and could play that stuff pretty well. Years earlier, when Jerry and I were hanging out as

kids, one of the guys Jerry dug the most was Big Bill Broonzy.

Jerry Garcia (1967): Pigpen's father was the first rhythm & blues guy around here, you know. And [Pigpen] heard blues since he was a tiny kid and he played piano for a long time, just simple C blues runs and stuff like that, and he'd sing. And he took up the harmonica as well back in those days. He was deathly afraid to play in front of anybody. He'd been playing harmonica secretly for a long time, and one time he got up on stage at a folk music place and I backed him up on the guitar; he played harmonica and sang. And he could sing like Lightnin' Hopkins, which just blew everybody's mind! He's really the master at the shady comment in blues. Whatever it is — really a sort of complicated thing — but he's into it heavier than anybody I know

Robert Hunter: He was a real scuzzy teenage kid with a terrible complexion. He must've been 16 or 17 when he started hanging around the Chateau. He had a scuzzy beard and he drank Thunderbird back in those days, and wore a fatigue jacket. He was the sort of guy that one would ordinarily discourage from showing up at one's parties except that he played a hell of a harmonica, and that was his passport. There weren't many people around at that time playing the kind of music he was, and I didn't know any harmonica players at all.

Pigpen ('66): I began singin' at 16. I wasn't in school; I was just goofin'. I've always been singing along with records — my dad was a disc jockey, and it's been what I wanted to do.

Laird Grant: Pigpen was one of the guys who would show up at Kepler's bookstore, which was just a place where people hung out. He had his harp in his pocket and he was doing that thing, whatever you want to call that. He was kind of emulating the blues players of the time, I guess. I was one of the guys who could always go out and get a short neck of sweet port, Thunderbird, Swiss Up or White Port & Lemon Juice. In high school I think he drank mainly sweet wine, again following the traditional facts of the blues singers' lives. Even when we could afford bourbon, why buy a half pint of bourbon

when we could get a quart and a half of wine?

David Nelson: It was amazing how this guy could play Robert Johnson and Lightnin' Hopkins stuff. There just weren't that many people doing it then. I was driving to the store the other day listening to a radio station that doesn't come in real clear. It was Junior Wells doing "It Hurts Me Too." He sang a couple of lines and I thought, "Oh, it's a Pigpen tape!" He was so authentic. It was stunning sometimes.

Peter Albin: It's hard to describe his attitude toward performing back then. He definitely didn't have the same kind of ambition that Janis had, for example. He would not go onstage with that kind of attitude — "I want to make people love me. I want to be famous and I'm gonna do it by doing this and here *it* is, everybody." Pigpen was just doing his schtick, his blues thing. I felt he was a fairly honest performer. The only problem was he basically was a white boy from the Peninsula, like myself. Every once in a while I felt a little guilty. Here we were trying to do down-home blues, and it really wasn't that much of our culture, although Pigpen probably had more of a legitimate reason to be into that because of his father's DJ work and the fact that he had a lot of friends in East Palo Alto. He did hang out with a lot of black people.

Laird Grant: He played folky blues mainly. It was like he knew something that the blues singers knew. They sang it and laid it out, but it didn't work for them — they'd get \$5 for a session; the white man got all the money selling the records back to black folks. Pigpen would take songs and change them a little bit, and it was like there was a different soul put into it. It was like he'd picked up what those people had put out. He was going to try to make people *understand* what the fuck he was singing about — what the words were.

Peter Albin: He used to hang out with a lot of interesting characters. Besides David X, a good friend of Ron's was a guy named Tawny. He was kind of wild — I remember stories about him doing a handstand on a motorcycle while it was running, and he also supposedly drank gasoline, although I didn't see him do either of those things. A pretty

wild cat, but I don't think Ron was really that wild. He was pretty quiet, though he liked to have a good time.

Laird Grant: One of the people he hung out with a lot was a black dude we called Pogo, whose name was Norm Fontaine, an artist who became quite a prominent painter. There were always parties going on at his house, which people called Pogo's Place.

It seemed like Ron was mainly hangin' out most of the time. He went to school, and I suppose he did most of the things he had to do in school, but it seemed like he cut a lot, too. And then, of course, he dropped out.

Peter Albin: He would be around playing at different places or at a party or something. It was all pretty informal. He'd play guitar mostly, and harmonica, and he played with Garcia once in a while. A lot of times Dave McQueen would sing. This vision that comes to mind is Dave McQueen sitting on a little wooden chair with Garcia on a little platform behind him. And McQueen would always have a tennis ball that he would squeeze while he sang. He'd look at the floor and sway back and forth singing the blues. Actually, he didn't really do the blues that well. I think Ron was a better singer, even though he was white.

Laird Grant: He wasn't white. He had no color. Hey man, he and I used to go down to the black bars in East Palo Alto. He and I could walk into the Anchor Bar, the Popeye Club, sit in the back end and drink Ripple and they'd never ask for our IDs. The black folks didn't fuck with us, the cops never came in the bar anyway — they'd never dare. Many times we'd be sittin' there at 11, 12 o'clock at night —there'd be shootin' and knifings going on outside — fuckin' si-reens, man — and me and Pigpen would be sittin' there emptyin' a shelf of Ripple. We'd wait till all the action went down and then we'd split. There are very few white *adults* I know who would go in these places — and we were teenagers. We were *allowed*, because we preserved our cool, and our cool preserved us. There were times we'd walk in and the bartender would say, "Hey man,

it's hot, get the fuck out of here," and we'd book on out the back door. But we'd be in there when there'd be two or three guys playing — a guy on a set of traps or bongos, and a saxophone, and we'd hang out. We were the cool gray ghosts.

Peter Albin: Ron came to my parents' place and they always looked leery at him. He had a real bad case of acne and unfortunately he looked dirty. Actually he was a pretty clean guy back then. He just had a greasy appearance because of his acne. He was real self-conscious about his skin problems. In fact, that may be one of the things that drew Janis and Pigpen together later on, because she had bad skin, too. He'd use Clearasil or whatever, but he still looked greasy. He also wore clothes that seemed undesirable to the straight people then. A lot of people thought he looked like a real tough guy, but he wasn't of course.

David Nelson: I was there the night that Pigpen got his nickname. We were doing a Boar's Head thing with Rodney Albin. First the Boar's Head was at the Carlos Bookstall upstairs in the Houchings bookstore. The next summer he got the Jewish Community Center in San Carlos, which was a bigger room. One of those Thursday nights at the Jewish Community Center there were lots of people playing there, including Ron McKernan. A whole bunch of us were all sort of milling around out on the sidewalk after it was over, and we were wondering whose house we could go to to party, and everybody was excitedly talking and yelling. And Sherry Huddleston turned around and said to Ron McKernan, "Oh *Pigpen*," and it just clicked. Everybody laughed and it stuck. Everybody read [the comic strip] "Peanuts," which was relatively new at that time, and knew that character Pigpen.

Laird Grant: I think his name just evolved. It's like me and the name Barney. I had a leather hat that I wore that looked like a Robin Hood hat — actually it was the bottom of a purse. I turned it around and I wore it when I'd ride my bike because it would shed bugs real good. And Pigpen said, "Hey man, you look just like a *Barney*." What does a Barney look like? I don't know, but I became Barney through Pigpen.

Peter Albin: I never called him Pigpen. I always called him Ron. As far as I was concerned, [Pigpen] was an insult and I don't know whether he liked it that much. I've been told he didn't mind after a while, but I was never comfortable with it.

Jon McIntire: By the time I came into the scene [1966] everybody called him Pigpen. Way back when I was trying to find out, "Gee, shouldn't I really call him Ron?" and Garcia told me, "Nah, even his mom calls him Pigpen."

Laird Grant: I met his dad a few times. The man always seemed like anybody's dad to me. He wasn't Johnny B. Goode or some hip cat. He didn't present himself as anything other than what he was, which was a concerned dad: "Hey Ron, you make sure you're back at ..." It was basically parental things I saw. I never saw any cool from him. But as a child myself, I wouldn't have looked at it any other way than as a kid trying to help another kid get out from underneath his mom and dad.

Peter Albin: I know he admired his dad a lot. Ron showed me a lot of his records and he'd say, "Ah, this is stuff my dad used to play." He had a fantastic collection, including a lot of old blues 78s.

Jerry Garcia: Pigpen grew up with that music in his ear, so it was real natural for him. I don't remember hearing Pig pen's dad on the radio, though it's possible I did and just didn't know who he was. 'Cause I didn't know Pigpen back then. My older brother started listening to R&B like in '53, '54, and that's when I started hearing a lot of it. His dad hadn't been on the radio for a while by the time I met him. He was a nice guy, but real quiet.

I spent a lot of time over at the Pigpen house, but it was mostly in Pigpen's room, which was like a ghetto! I sat in his room for countless hours listening to his old records. It was funky, man! Stuff thrown everywhere. Pigpen had this habit of wearing just a shirt and his underpants. You'd come into his house and he'd say, "Come on in, man," and he'd have a bottle of wine under the bed. His mom would check in about once every five hours to see if he was still alive. It was hilarious! But yeah, we'd play records, I'd hack

away at his guitar, show him stuff.

Laird Grant: He was mainly into blues, of course, but he also loved the old-time and jug band stuff that was around then, because it had rhythm; it had a beat. What was neat about all that old-time music was you could take it and put it in innumerable different forms and it was really still the same music.

Peter Albin: At least one group I played in with Ron was the Liberty Hill Aristocrats. Actually, it wasn't a formal group or anything. It was usually me and Rodney and various other people like Ellen Cavanaugh, and Ron played with us a couple of times, I think. The one I remember best was at the San Francisco State Folk Music Festival, probably in '63. On that particular occasion, Mike Riggs was on bass, and I think Dave Nelson was playing guitar, but I'm not sure. My brother would wear a tuxedo from a second hand store. We'd wear things like red vests with a red bow tie, kind of a bluegrassy kind of group. Ron fit in kind of oddly, because we didn't really do blues — it was more old-timey music, But we played some stuff that was right for him, like "Hesitation Blues." He played harp and I can't remember if he sang or not.

Pigpen (1970): I was in a band with Troy Widenheimer (who ran Dana Morgan's music store, where Garcia and Kreutzmann worked occasionally) called The Zodiacs. The Zodiacs were playing beer-drinkin' fraternity parties at Stanford, and Troy played lead, his old lady Sherry played rhythm, Garcia would occasionally sit in on Fender bass, Roy Ogborn would play bass and drum, and I'd sing and play harmonica.

The Zodiacs played really wet gigs, man. We played Searsville Lake and they'd rent the men's dressing room and we'd play in there with the showers and benches. [Then] we met these three black guys and we'd play for these weird frat house parties and stuff, and the leader of the black guys was named Don Dee Great! And that would bring in R&B, and they changed their name to Dr. Don & The Interns. We played Playland [the late, great SF amusement park], Robert's at the Beach. They'd do Coasters tunes and we'd back them. Tents in the San Jose Fairgrounds ...

Troy got the gigs; he was the leader. Each of us would make 20 bucks per gig. But it ain't worth having to contend with 200 football players. At one Stanford party, some fullback named Charlie hung by his ankles from the rafters and fell on his head, and it didn't even faze him. Then they filled a plastic raft with water and put it in the pool and all 200 people got in with their clothes on and water over-flooded, and we got electrocuted. They thought we were strange, long-haired freaks.

[We'd play] "Searchin'," "Walking the Dog," "Sensation," "San-Ho Zay," (a Freddie King instrumental), some Jimmy Reed tunes. We played Gert Chiarito's *Midnight Special* show on KPFA. Me and Jerry did one, too. I played harmonica and Jerry played guitar.

Peter Albin: Just about everybody in the scene did something on the KPFA *Midnight Special* shows — which were like hootenannies — at one time or another. I went up a lot with my brother and Pigpen. I remember one time Pigpen and I and a couple of black dudes went up in this funky car with a broken window. All I remember is shards of glass from the broken window hitting us in the back seat going 60 miles an hour up [Highway] 101. Pigpen always had this bottle in a brown bag. I never knew what it was; I just drank from it. It was usually something like Hombre or Silver Satin; fortified wines, sickeningly sweet.

I'm pretty sure that one time at the *Midnight Special* Pigpen and Janis [Joplin] were both there the same night. She was up for about a year around 64, playing around and stuff. She also spent some time in New York and in Venice [California] before going back to Texas for a while. I don't know if she and Ron actually knew each other during this period, but I know he knew who she was. Anyway, at the *Midnight Special* they'd sometimes have like a round robin; maybe ten people would play in a night. I remember seeing the Chambers Brothers there doing their acoustic gospel thing, and I remember Janis being there and me being next to her in this round robin. I think Ron might have been there, too. She was certainly around a lot there for a while, and Ron might have been there times without me, too. I know he was aware of her because when she came back and joined Big Brother he was definitely very friendly with her.

Bob Matthews: How I came into all this originally is I went to Menlo-Atherton school with Bob (Weir]. There were a bunch of us there who were folkniks. We'd go up to Berkeley, and hang out at the Tangent in Palo Alto and the Offstage in San Jose. Garcia was teaching banjo at Dana Morgan's and I took banjo lessons from him. We all had guitars and hung out and played together, and we went and saw all the big names when they'd come through. One of the popular music formats of that time was the jug band. We used to go see Jim Kweskin and Dave Van Ronk, and at one point Weir and I and this guy I went to Peninsula [High] with, Rick McAuley, decided we were going to start a jug band. Rick never really stayed with it, though. Bob and I were into it. In high school, Weir and I would go to first period, which was 8 to 9 o'clock, and then at 9 we'd get out on the highway and hitchhike to Dana Morgan's and cut the rest of school hanging out with Jerry. One of these mornings we went in and told Jerry we had started a jug band. In those days, he spent *all* his time playing. You could have a conversation with him, but it was always *while* he was playing. He said, "Oh that's nice. I'm in." And that's how Mother Mc Cree's Uptown Jug Champions were born.

I'm not positive, but I think (David) Nelson is the one who came up with the name. It sounded like a jug band name, which is what we were after. A lot of different people eventually played with the jug band, but at the beginning there was Garcia, who played banjo, Nelson on guitar, Dave Parker and I played wash board and Weir played washtub bass. Hunter was around, Pig pen was around and played occasionally.

We played all the regular jug stuff that other groups were playing, some old-timey, some blues. Basically we stole from everybody's repertoire. But that's what everyone did.

David Nelson: Pigpen used to come over to Hamilton Street when I lived there. That was the house where the jug band was formed — in my room downstairs. When I could no longer keep up the \$35 a month rent they put me downstairs in this basement room and I made that into a little clubhouse. We started playing jug band music, and these

new kids — these youngsters — Bob Weir and Bob Matthews and another guy came over. They were enthusiastic about playing in a jug band. And Dave Parker was playing washboard. Pigpen would come over sometimes and bring a pint of something to drink, sit down and play in the kitchen. He'd talk and play.

I was in it for the first few gigs. Then Bob Hunter and Rick Melrose and some other people and I went to Los Angeles. That's where I met the Pine Valley Boys and Herb Pederson.

Bob Weir: I think I first met Pigpen in Garcia's garage in Palo Alto at the first jug band rehearsal. Garcia had said he knew this guy Pigpen who played real good blues, and even though he'd been around, I'd never really heard about him until that day.

I was only 16 at the time and I was kind of in awe of these guys I was playing with, because I was not any kind of journeyman musician at that point; I really had almost no experience.

Robert Hunter: I had seen Pigpen play guitar and harmonica a bit at the Tangent and I was impressed with how good he was solo. Then he played with Mother McCree's, of course, and he was seemingly the most professional of anybody in the group. He had his act down completely very young. Obviously he developed other parts of his music as time went on, but you could see what he was very clearly, even at the beginning. You could tell this was a guy who understood and could play blues.

From a Mother McCree's Live Tape, 1964:

Garcia: We'd like to have Pigpen McKernan ... known in more esoteric circles ... Mr. Pigpen McKernan would like to sing a Lightnin' Hopkins song called —

Pigpen: I wouldn't like to, but I will anyway.

Garcia: He's gonna sing a song called "The Rub," and we're not gonna be responsible for its contents, or his.

Pigpen sings: *I said mama got a rub on, sister got the tub/ Doin' around doin' the rub-de-rub/Ain't it crazy, ain't it crazy/Ain't it crazy one day, to keep on rubbin' that thing/ Well I see that woman goin' behind that hill/I'm gonna find that girl, I'm gonna do my will/ Ain't it crazy, etc.*

Bob Weir: I think every now and again we would do a gig at a place that would have a piano and Pigpen would play some, but he mainly played harmonica and sang. We played coffee galleries, parties. We might have gone home with 10 bucks a head on a good night. Actually, ten bucks was a lot of money back then.

Jerry Garcia: As early as when we were playing in The Zodiacs together [late '62], I discovered that Pigpen was not a guy who wanted to be a performer. I had to practically force him to perform. He'd always be out in the parking lot or somewhere when we were supposed to go onstage. He was a real reluctant performer, but once you actually got him onstage he was great.

Bob Matthews: I think the jug band was in existence for about a year and a half and probably went through about 20 different musicians at different times. I think I only lasted about six months. I went from washboard to first kazoo, to second kazoo, to being out of the band. I think I was out of the band the night we were playing and Jerry leaned over to me in the *middle* of a tune and said, "Why don't you take a break," and I got off the stage.

Sue Swanson: I went to high school with Bobby at Menlo-Atherton High School. I met him in my junior year. They were Mother McCree's Uptown Jug Champions at that point and then somewhere between September and December (of '64] or January (65], they started up a rock 'n' roll band. I think I went to maybe the second rehearsal — they wouldn't let me go to the first one. And that was it; they never got me out again.

Bob Matthews: British rock 'n' roll — mainly The Beatles and the Stones — was happening, and the decision was made — you can probably relate it to Jerry — that it was time to start an electric blues band, coincidental with the fact that Jerry was

teaching at Dana Morgan's and Bill Kreutzmann was teaching drums there.

Jerry Garcia ('71): As a matter of fact, it was Pigpen's idea. He'd been pestering me for a while — he wanted me to start up an electric blues band. That was his trip. Because in the jug band scene we used to do blues numbers like Jimmy Reed tunes, and we even played a couple of rock 'n' roll tunes, and [plugging in] was just the next step.

Laird Grant: Pigpen wanted to get into playing the organ, and you can't do that acoustically unless you have a lot of slaves pumpin' air.

Jerry Garcia ('71): [So] theoretically it's a blues band, but the minute we get electric instruments it's a rock 'n' roll band, because, wow, playin' rock 'n' roll is fun. Pigpen, because he could play some blues piano and stuff like that, we put him on organ immediately, and the harmonica was a natural, and he was doin' most of the lead vocals at the time.

We had a really rough sound, and the bass player (Dana Morgan) was the guy who owned the music store I had been working in, which was convenient because he gave us all the equipment; we didn't have to hassle to go to raise money to buy equipment. ... We were The Warlocks, with the music store owner playing bass and Bobby and me and Pigpen and Bill. And so we went and we played. We played three gigs at that pizza parlor [Magoo's].

Sue Swanson: The first fans were Connie [Furtado] and I and Bob Matthews, Barney [Laird Grant] and Bobby Peter son. Connie and I were pretty wild. We used to do all kinds of crazy things and we were up for it all. We were not exactly the kind of girls who stayed home and behaved. We were gone, we were history. We were out. One of the things we used to do was practice getting into hotel rooms — any band that came around we would break into their hotel rooms for practice so when The Beatles came to town we'd be ready! We always got in, too — Eric Burdon & the Animals, the Dave Clark Five, Chad & Jeremy, Sonny & Cher, the Rolling Stones. I asked Keith Richards, "I know these guys who have a band — what can I tell them? What's your advice?" He

said, "Write your own songs." So I passed along that information.

Laird Grant: I was The Warlocks' equipment guy. I was known as the Van Master, because I could put more shit into a small space and get somewhere on time and set it up.

The acoustic thing was fun because it could be done anywhere without any problems. You just kind of set up and people huddled near, or you found a corner to play in. It was really easy — when the gig was over with, everyone grabbed their axes and left. Then, when you got into club situations, you needed some amplification and it just kind of grew. It started out with a little Fender twin reverb [amplifier] and eventually became 50 tons of equipment!

Sue Swanson: Dana Morgan was the bass player then and they used to practice at his father's store. They did a lot of traditional stuff — "I Know You Rider" and things like that. They would listen to a lot of 45s to learn songs. My job was to change the 45s. "Play that part again!" It was a crummy little phonograph that would sit on the counter at Dana Morgan's. I'll never forget the sound of them practicing in there, and all the cymbals and everything in the whole room would be going. The *whole room* would be making all this noise.

David Nelson: I remember The Warlocks rehearsing at Hamilton Street a little bit. I remember the first rehearsals at Dana Morgan's. Me and Eric Thompson went over and checked them out. Garcia was just railing on Weir. "No, no, *goon* child! No, no, I told you a thousand times!" He'd be yelling about some passage in the song. "Let's try it *again*." But it was all very good-humored. Everybody was laughing.

Sue Swanson: After Dana was out of the band they rehearsed wherever they could. They rehearsed at Matthews house, they rehearsed at Connie's house, they rehearsed in my backyard a few times, they rehearsed at Phil's house a little bit — he and his girlfriend Ruth had a house on High Street that became a big hangout. In fact that's where they found the name [Grateful Dead] later. They played anywhere they could find

a place.

Bob Matthews: It seemed like they never had a place to practice. Sue's parents would be out of town for a weekend and we'd practice over there. There was a night when my parents were out and they practiced in my living room.

My parents found out, and to this day my mother still reminds me about the Ripple bottles in the garden.

Sue Swanson: It was Ripple, not Thunderbird?

Bob Matthews: It was Thunderbird!

Phil Lesh (1981): Somebody came in with the word that Garcia's band was playing such-and-such a night at Magoo's Pizza Parlor.... We took acid and went down there. ... We came bopping in there and it was really happening. Pigpen ate my mind with his harp, singing the blues. They wouldn't let you dance, but I did — we were so fucking stoned!

During the set break, Jerry took me off to a table and said, "How'd you like to play bass in this band? Our bass player is not a musician, and we have to tell him what notes to play." I said, "By God, I'll give it a try!"

Sue Swanson: When Phil came on board he was just learning to play the bass and to sing. I used to hold his music. I think the first song he ever did with The Warlocks was "Do You Believe in Magic," and I'd sit there and hold his music and make faces at him and try to make him laugh.

Bob Matthews: I wasn't doing anything much. I was just part of the energy. Then we started the fan club and that was something to do.

Sue Swanson: I could be quiet and cool and I had a car and a credit card for gas; that helped. So they let me hang around.

Bob Matthews: Weir and I were underage, but I sort of had a car and we used to take advantage of Pig, because he could walk in anywhere. He was only slightly older than us, but he could walk into any liquor store and they weren't going to ask him nothin'. So we'd drive him over to East Palo Alto, pay for his Thunderbird, and he'd buy us a big six-pack of Rainier Ale. We called it "green death." We'd go hang out with somebody, maybe try to find some ... [he whispers] *marijuana*.

Sue Swanson: In the beginning, I knew Bobby the best and I was always a little afraid of Pigpen. He looked like a Hell's Angel — big and scary.

Bob Matthews: At that point Pigpen wasn't spending much time at home, from what I could see, but I think his parents were fairly liberal. We sometimes had to sneak him out or sneak him back in, but it wasn't anything like what Weir and I had to go through, out past curfew: "Be home by 11!" "Sure, sure." Come back at 2 in the morning, talk your way out of being grounded the next weekend, and do it all over again.

Phil Lesh ('84): When we started out, I elected myself to be the guy who would crawl through the window and wake up Pigpen. First of all, I made him make sure that the telephone was by his shoulder when he went to sleep at night, because otherwise he wouldn't hear it in the morning — and he wouldn't get up to practice.

He lived at home with his family in Palo Alto. We'd go there, and the guys would wait in Jerry's Corvair, and I'd either knock on the window or crawl through. Sometimes I actually had to crawl through and wake him up physically. He'd crawl out the window so he wouldn't disturb anybody, and he'd bring his bottle of Southern Comfort. This would happen every day, seven days a week. It was 9, 10 o'clock in the morning.

Sue Swanson: Jerry used to have this little yellow Cor vair, and we'd be going down to Magoo's or whatever, and I can remember he and Pig would be behind us in their car and Matthews and I would just be laughing, laughing, *laughing*, because they had what was for that time real long hair and Pig had the big, droopy mustache. We called them the Ugly Sisters.

Pig was like a professional dirty old man. He always was there with a sexual innuendo. But at the same time he was a total gentleman, so you knew he was kidding. I mean, he would never force his attentions on a woman who wasn't interested in him. But he always talked *dirrrty*, so dirty. I didn't even know what he was talking about most of the time; didn't have a clue — that's how naive I was. All he did was embarrass me. That's who he was — he wore those clothes and talked that talk, but he was a very soft, sweet and gentle guy. He just had this persona.

The first time I really spent any time talking to him was when they played at Frenchy's over in Hayward and he kept coming out to Billy's station wagon, where I was hanging out because I was too young to go in, and Pigpen told me the whole story of *The Hobbit*. It was really sweet.

Bob Matthews: I had this old beat-up 55 Plymouth wagon, which I think was the original equipment car. On one occasion I remember Pig driving me up to the city — he needed some "bitches," some "wimmins." It was an adventure. The car blew up and all sorts of other stuff happened. Pig always had someplace to go, somethin' to do. He was out to have a good time.

Sue Swanson: It seems like we all hung out together constantly — 24 hours a day. Well, 20 hours a day. People slept in different places, but that was about it. Basically, we hung. What could be more fun? We were very young — the oldest of us was 22. We were still just kids, really. Those were the golden years.

PART TWO: "I WENT DOWN TO SEE A GYPSY WOMAN"

Some of the jug band repertoire survived the transition to the electric band (including Pigpen-sung tunes like "Big Boss Man" and "The Rub," which appears on Lightnin' Hopkins' records as "Ain't It Crazy"), but the group also played tunes by the Stones and the Lovin' Spoonful, oddities like Gordon Lightfoot's "Early Mornin' Rain" and a few largely forgettable original songs. The one song Pigpen sang on the band's first demo tape (recorded 11/3/65) is the only group original that survived more than a year: "Caution."

"How the 'Caution' jam developed," says Bob Weir, "is we were driving around listening to the radio, like we used to do a lot, and the song 'Mystic Eyes' by Them was on, and we were all saying, 'Check this out! We can do this!' So we got to the club where we were playing and we warmed up on it. We lifted the riff from 'Mystic Eyes' and extrapolated it into 'Caution, and I think Pigpen just made up the words."

The song opens with a locomotive rhythm, propelled by Bill Kreutzmann's rumbling tomtoms, sharp rhythmic bursts from Garcia and Weir, a rolling bass figure from Phil, and percussive spurts and wails from Pigpen's harmonica. The jam rolls on, almost like some demented surf-rock riff, until Pigpen comes in with his cryptic, ominous lyrics:

I went down to see a gypsy woman

I wanna find out what's wrong with me

I said, "Pleee-ease, please, please tell me now, what's wrong with me?"

Well she looked at me and said, "Man, ALL you need, ALL you need, ALL you need ..."

Now Pigpen is shouting it out like some gospel preacher, you can almost picture the

sisters in the Amen corner shouting it back at him.

"ALL you need, ALL you need is a mojo hand,"

That's what I'm gonna do; get myself a mojo hand

Then everything'll be all right ...

And the jam fades. In '67 and '68, the "Caution" jam would really blossom as the band got more intense and played weirder and weirder.

The key to The Warlocks' success wasn't just that they were an eclectic jug band that had plugged in; they were also a rock 'n' roll band that had turned on. Except for Pigpen, that is. While the other bandmembers were smoking pot and taking LSD fueled excursions to inner space, and listening to some unspoken dictum to *stre-e-e-e-etch* the music, Pigpen happily stuck to his bottle. He smoked pot a few times and didn't like it, and LSD scared him, so he avoided it. How he managed to play the first few Acid Tests without getting dosed is anybody's guess. And one can only imagine what he thought of the craziness that surrounded him at those affairs. Still, there he was at every one, sitting behind that cheesy-sounding but relatively reliable Vox Continental organ, adding bluesy and soulful flourishes to this dance music that was getting stranger (and louder) by the week.

Pigpen's material expanded with the rest of the repertoire, and by early '66 — after The Warlocks had changed their name to the Grateful Dead and the group had moved to San Francisco — Pigpen's long vocal romps through Wilson Pickett's "Midnight Hour" highlighted most Grateful Dead sets. He would involve the audience, cajole them, make them participate; again the Baptist preacher analogy is apt. He had the black street patois down, and with Pigpen it never seemed forced or phony. He'd come by it honestly, through friends, through life, really.

Bob Matthews: From Day One I really thought they were great; I still do. The Warlocks definitely started as a blues band. The standard 12- or 16-bar blues in E was just a

loose format, and in a psychedelic environment it really gave a lot of room to work around, and that's where the long jams developed. Jamming in E. It was the loose format that enabled the Grateful Dead jam to develop. When Phil joined is when it started to get really interesting musically. There was still a lot of blues, but it was really exploring what you could do in that medium; seeing where you could take it; playing with it.

Jerry Garcia: Our earliest incarnation was kind of a blues band, in a way. We were kind of patterned along the same lines as the Rolling Stones. This was during the British Invasion. Everybody went and saw [The Beatles film] *A Hard Day's Night*. "Yeah, that looks like fun. Let's go play rock 'n' roll!" Me and Pigpen both had that background in the old Chess Records stuff — Chicago blues like Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters, and people like Jimmy Reed, Chuck Berry. It was real natural for us, and we even did those kinds of tunes in the jug band. So it was an easy step to make it into sort of a proto blues band. The Stones were already doing all the old Muddy Waters stuff.

Remember that old Junior Walker & the All-Stars instrumental "Cleo's Back"? That was also real influential on the Grateful Dead — our whole style of playing. There was something about the way the instruments entered into it in a kind of free-for-all way, and there were little holes and these neat details in it — we studied that motherfucker! We might have even played it for a while, but that wasn't the point — it was the conversational approach, the way the band worked, that really influenced us.

When we first started The Warlocks I thought, "Wow, Pig pen's this guy who can play some keyboards, some harmonica, and he's this powerhouse singer." He was the perfect front man, except that he hated it; getting him to do it was really a bitch. I think he was just a shy person.

Rock Scully: The first time I got tight with Pig was at the Big Beat Acid Test [12/11/65], which was in this weird kind of A-frame building. At that Acid Test we had America Needs Indians, which was Stewart Brand's trip. We had stages at either end of the

room. At one end was Kesey's stage and the other end of the room was the Dead's stage, and in the middle of the room was Neal Cassady juggling his hammer. He'd toss it all the way up to the rafters, talk to you for a few seconds, then catch it and do it again.

At the time I was still very leery of LSD. I was a graduate student out at SF State and I'd met Kesey a couple of times. He and Owsley invited me to come to this Acid Test, right off the freeway in Palo Alto. But I came straight. I had no intention of going to an Acid Test on acid. It was still scary to me, though I'd taken mescaline once and smoked some very good pot. But in those days we were more into drinking red wine and playing music in the kitchen.

So I went down to this club and Pig and I just immediately hit it off. He introduced himself as Ron. I was standing by the bar and he walked up to me wearing his biker jacket with all the medals on it and he says, "Owsley told me to come over and talk to you. He says you're gonna manage us or something." I was working with the Family Dog at the time. I said, "Yeah, I'd like to. I don't know what we're gonna do though — you guys are ugly as sin." He said, "Yeah, aren't we?" I said, "Yeah, that's neat! The Rolling Stones are ugly, too!" He said, "Yeah, we do the same kind of music, except we do it better!" Anyway, he and I struck up a friendship right away because we were the only two people in the whole room who weren't high on LSD, so he probably figured he could trust me.

Eileen Law: I'd been hanging out in North Beach the summer of '65 and the movement was just starting to take place with some of these bands. I think the first notice I saw of any of them was a flyer for the Airplane on telephone poles — they were playing the Matrix. So I found myself going there pretty often, and then one night there was a group called The Warlocks, and I'll never forget Pig, because the closest I had ever come to seeing someone who looked like him were the Hell's Angels I'd seen up in Rio Nido, where I'd grown up during the '60s. There was Pig, with hard blue jeans and his boots, kind of creepy-looking, but he carried the show. From then on, all those groups started

playing — Quicksilver and the Dead. I always thought Pig was the star of the show and Billy was the foundation. And of course Jerry was an amazing guitar player.

Sue Swanson: It was always Jerry's band. But Pigpen was the only one who was really a showman. He'd get out there and work the audience and the band would be behind him. They were not a backup band for Pig; that isn't how it was. But he definitely was the showman, and they would definitely let him take the reins and back him up. But by no means were they a backup band for him or did he ever really lead them. I guess he had a lot of influence on the type of music they played, but they all had that bent, too.

Jon McIntire: When I first saw them, they had just quit being The Warlocks and they were not necessarily that good, with the exception of Pigpen. Pigpen could sing really well and play really effective blues organ; I mean *really* good. I think everyone would admit that he was the best musician at the beginning; certainly the best singer, by far. You'd be hearing this weird music and all of a sudden this really sweet, compelling voice would come out of the p.a., and I'd look up and it was the weird guy who looked like a Hell's Angel playing the organ!

Jerry Garcia ('67): He listens to Jimmy Smith more on the organ than anybody else. And he's only been playing organ as long as the band has been together. He doesn't really work at it too hard — not as hard as the rest of us do, for example — but he's got real clear ideas. And he's always got a way ... he can always make a song nicer by the thing that he plays. He's a real great supporting organist. He hasn't got a real heavy chord background or anything, but he's got a good mind for lines.

Peter Albin: When he would come over to my parents' place in the early '60s, he would tickle the ivories and I thought he was pretty good — though I never thought he'd become a keyboard player for a rock 'n' roll band. I thought he was an *excellent* harp player and that the band was stifling the guy. In the beginning his style was more like Sonny Terry than it was Chicago style, or Butterfield style. But he could've developed. I thought that he could've been as good as Butterfield, if not better, if they'd let him do his

thing. But I guess the harmonica didn't really fit in with a lot of the direction they were taking, so he played more keyboards.

David Nelson: He was from the old school where you drank and got numb. I remember he asked me to help him carry his organ off the stage and lock it up over across the hall at the Longshoreman's [Hall] Acid Test in January of '66, and he looked just feeble and weak and his voice was shaky and his eyes were sunken in. Sometimes when you're high on acid, everything seems so alive and in technicolor and then you see some people who seem to be behind a cloud or something. That's how Pigpen looked to me that night. I thought, "Oh man, if Pigpen doesn't get with this it'll run off and leave him!" I remember thinking, "There's got to be a way to get Pigpen into this."

But you can't make a person want to get into acid if they're scared of it. And if you were straight at the Longshoreman's Hall, that could really offer some scares for you, because people were just nuts. It was really, really wild.

For me it was an incredibly solid thing - one of the most solid hits in my life. The universe seemed like time stopped and molecules changed; it was so exciting. It was such a secure, solid feeling. I realized that the world had changed now and it was going to go this way. There was nothing bad happening, there was no immoral stuff going on. There was no innuendo or hidden stuff. It was just plain, simple fun. But everyone from the outside looking in was morally outraged, as if there was some betrayal there.

Laird Grant: I remember how excited Pigpen was when finally got his Hammond B-3. I think it was early in '66. We were still rehearsing over in Sausalito at the heliport when we got it over at Sherman & Clay [a piano/organ store] over in Oakland. Man that thing was heavy! Me and John Page Brown ing used to flip a coin to see who got front or back to carry it up the backstairs at the Avalon. That's how I ruined my back, as a matter of fact. We didn't have any insurance in those days; I would've been on total disability.

Ken Babbs: My first real memory of Pigpen was actually of that big organ he played, and carrying it into one of the Acid Tests or a gig somewhere.

My favorite early memory of Pigpen himself is when we went up to Portland in The Bus to do an Acid Test up there. All the Grateful Dead was aboard, and [the Pranksters] were all aboard and George [Walker] had just put new brakes in and we took it up to La Honda to have it checked out and the wheel bearings greased and everything, and the guy didn't put grease in the back bearing. As we were driving up the freeway there toward Williams, Pigpen was lying on one of the bunks singing, and that guy could sing more rhythm & blues songs than anybody I ever knew, just right off the cuff. All of a sudden someone said, "I smell smoke!" So Pigpen looked out the window and just continued singing about how the bus was on fire, and he had this whole song going. So we had to park the bus and get a U-Haul rent-a-truck, and we all had to go up to Portland in the back of that. Pigpen sang the whole way.

Rock Scully: One thing led to another and then the next thing we knew we were all living in Los Angeles [February/March '66], woodshedding in this house in Watts [a largely black section of L.A.], which Pigpen loved, of course. I would produce these shows to keep them in front of people. See, the Dead didn't have a book; we didn't have our own songs. We needed to go somewhere and work on songs, and Owsley came up with this house. He'd be tabbing LSD upstairs, he financed us, bought us all this equipment, worked out the experimental stereo sound system. We could've stayed in Northern California, but the deal was I didn't want them playing around for a while, because they'd used up their book. They had, like, four sets and it was almost all old covers. They had a couple of originals, like "Otis on the Shakedown Cruise," which was this wonderful song that I think Pig and Jerry mainly put together. There must be tapes of it around somewhere. We were going to put it on as the B-side of "Don't Ease Me In."

Jerry Garcia: I think we started ("Otis on the Shakedown Cruise") in San Francisco, but we worked it up in L.A. It was kind of an R&B thing that had changes that worked a little bit like "Get Off My Cloud" or "Louie Louie"; maybe a little more complicated. It was a straight-ahead 4/4; it wasn't a shuffle, which was unusual for us in those days, 'cause we played mostly shuffles. It was a pretty good tune, but we threw it out at some point — maybe when Mickey joined the band — because we went on to other stuff.

Rock Scully: Actually, Pig and I wanted to move back to San Francisco the minute we got there. But Owsley was paying for us to be there and looking after us and it was a good woodshed — they came up with a lot of good material there.

Jerry Garcia: We didn't get "Good Mornin' Little Schoolgirl" from Muddy Waters or whoever. Our version came from Buddy Guy and Junior Wells. I remember listening to that record endlessly when we were down in L.A. There was something really snaky about it, so we went with that approach, which was sort of a different feel and a different melody even.

Wavy Gravy: I remember when we were all down in L.A. for the Acid Test, I'd sometimes have to go wake up the band. I think this is when they were staying over on Hoover Street. Anyway, I'd look at the floor and I couldn't tell what was the floor and what was the band. In some especially funky corner somewhere in there, Pigpen would be Z'n away, lying on this little bedroll and matted papers. It was pretty scary.

Danny Rifkin: I first met the band in Los Angeles. I was going to school at [SF] State and the band was in L.A., sort of at the tail end of the Prankster run [the L.A. Acid Tests]. They were starting to do their own things. Bear [Owsley] had asked Rock to manage the band and Rock said, "Can I bring in my partner Danny?" So we'd go down there. We had worked at the Family Dog before Chet [Helms], with Luria [Castell]. We were also — I don't know if you'd call it "managing" The Charlatans in those days, and we put on some dances at California Hall. We went to L.A. and there were the Grateful Dead, sort of with the Pranksters, but they had their own house. Bear was underwriting them. We'd rent places like the Slobovian Hall or Armenian Hall, we'd put out flyers and put on dances. A couple of hundred people might come to a dance. This was very early.

Rock Scully: The way we moved back into San Francisco after being in L.A. is that Danny was being the landlord at 710 Ashbury and I had a room upstairs and we had to find a way to get everybody out of the house because we needed the whole house. Pig was so anxious to get back to San Francisco he said, "Here's what we'll do: you and me

come back to the house, even if we have to live in your room." I said, "Nah, why don't we just live in the kitchen?" Now Pigpen was so frightful looking to regular people in those days. So me and Pig would just stay up late at night drinking in the kitchen of 710 Ashbury and then one by one, the residents began to move out. We did have a couple of holdouts that we had to really boot out. But as each one would move out, more Grateful Dead would move in. When we got the first guy out Garcia moved in; then Weir moved in.

Jon McIntire: I first met the band at 710 Ashbury in '66. I was working in antiques on Sacramento Street but I took most of my evening meals at 710 because I was real good friends with Jimmy and Annie Courson, who ran the house back then. Rock and Danny had brought them in. It was a commune and everyone's a sloppy hippie and we needed someone to sort of keep it all together, so that's what Jim and Annie did.

Then one day — I don't know when exactly, but I hadn't been there very often — I was out in front of the house and I sort of struck up a friendship with Pigpen. Pigpen was the first guy I really befriended in the band, and I think we became friends the way most people became friends with Pig, which is I sat down and drank with him. He was real open and friendly. There was already enough "star" vibe around Garcia and a glamor vibe around Bobby, and he was kind of spaced because he was a macrobiotic type, and Phil was not living at 710. But Pig was real open and available and a lot more immediately warm, to me anyway, than the other guys were. I think that was a relatively common reaction for folks who weren't already friends with all of them.

Ken Babbs: Pigpen definitely took acid a few times, but I know he didn't like to perform on acid, and it got to the point where he was afraid of anybody giving him anything to drink. In fact I can remember lots of times when he'd say, "Hey, Babbs, go down and get me a pint of Southern Comfort, and bring it back with the seal unbroken!"

Laird Grant: He didn't smoke pot because it made him feel stupid. He and I would get high occasionally, but he really didn't like it. He didn't like speed. He didn't like

psychedelics — in fact basically he was very fearful of them, although he did get dosed a couple of different times. When he'd get dosed he'd come to me because we were buddies. He'd get pretty worried — "What the fuck's going on with me?" — and I'd try to tell him it was cool; "Let's go over here and sit down, smoke some cigarettes, talk, blow your harp." He was wiggled. And he'd sit there and blow his harp. I wish I had tapes of some of those times!

Wavy Gravy: Every now and again he would get dosed and he was really hysterical. He would get extremely excited and old Babbs would just torment him — cutting off the power to his keyboards in odd moments, taking him right through the roof. But it was all in good, clean, cosmic fun.

Peter Albin: Pigpen and I were extremely similar because we both drank; that's what we liked. In my whole life I've only had acid twice; I don't like it. I like reality and I like to get loosened up a little by booze, and Pigpen and I could do that and we found that to be our way of being altered a little bit. We weren't the kind of people who were going to get so fucked up we'd fall off a chair or something or get the DTs. But Pigpen drank bad shit most of the time.

Rock Scully: He was scared to death of psychedelics. I think that's one reason he and Janis got along so well. Janis hated them, too. They were really tight about that.

He was already an alcoholic when I met him. I mean, he drank all the time. But you never had a feeling he was abusing it because he could hold so much. I guess later on you could tell it was affecting him when "Lovelight" would go for over 40 minutes and he'd start to ramble a bit.

From Ralph Gleason's "On the Town" column in the SF Chronicle, August '66:
[The Fillmore Auditorium] has become, in recent months, the general headquarters for the artistic revolution that is taking place here. Last weekend, for instance, two rock bands played there on Friday and Saturday nights and Sunday afternoon. They were the Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead. They loaded the place to capacity with a

crowd whose diversification in dress was characterized only by a departure from Ivy League or Montgomery Street.

On Saturday night, the police cars blocked off Fillmore at the corner of Geary, while upstairs the jammed house listened to a half-hour-long rendition of Wilson Pickett's "Midnight Hour" performed by the massed band and sung by Marty Balin (from the Airplane), Pigpen (from the Dead), Joan Baez and Mimi Fariña. It was quite a night.

Eileen Law: It was so easy to meet all the musicians in those days. You could just go out on the dance floor and they'd be there watching the other bands playing. I remember at the Avalon the dressing rooms were off the dance floor and they'd leave the doors wide open. You'd look in and see Janis sitting in there and everyone hanging out. Pig would be in the dressing room hanging out with a lot of people.

Bob Matthews: He didn't come to that many rehearsals. As the band started to make it, though, Pig became very show-conscious. We'd sit down and talk about what he was going to do. He didn't want things to go wrong because he wanted to look good, because he wanted to be a star. But he was a very mellow character. Very sensitive.

Peter Albin: The Dead and Big Brother both lived in Lagunitas [in Marin County] for a while in '66 and Pigpen would come over to the house pretty often to hang out with Janis and the rest of us. This was an old summer camp that had fallen into disrepair. It had a pool that was empty and a lot of funky little cottages. And there was a building that we practiced in.

Rock Scully: That whole summer we were living in Lagunitas, Pig and Janis had a big love affair. They'd stay up and drink Southern Comfort, and there was a piano out in the chow house. Pigpen would play piano and they'd sing, and they had their guitars out there, too.

Peter Albin: Shortly after that they moved back to the city to 710 Ashbury. Big Brother stayed up there for six months and then moved back to the city in February of 67.

PART THREE: "I'M A HOG FOR YOU, BABY"

Sometime during the summer of '66 Pigpen met the woman who would become the love of his life, a charismatic African American named Veronica Grant, known simply as V. Raised by her Seventh Day Adventist mother in the working-class Bay Area port city of Vallejo, Veronica moved to San Francisco in 1965 and got a job working for Wells Fargo just before the Haight-Ashbury scene mushroomed. "At first I was hanging around the Blue Unicorn [a club in the Haight]," she told SF writer Joel Selvin in 1991, just half a year before her death from a stroke. "It had a Bob Dylan-Richie Havens kind of crowd. This was between the Beats and the hippies."

When the Matrix started booking bands like the Airplane, the Dead and Quicksilver, Veronica became a regular there. She liked the Dead best of all: "There was something different about them, about their music. Their music was unique — I'd recognize it instantly whenever I heard it." One night at the Matrix, Pigpen spotted V and a girlfriend in the crowd and invited them to a party out at Rancho Olompali (in rural Marin County), where the Dead and others in the SF scene partied away from the hustle of the Haight. The two hit it off that afternoon, and the next thing V knew, Pigpen was asking when he could call her again. "I get home from work at 6:05," V told him. And at 6:05 the next Monday, Pigpen called her. They gradually saw each other more and more, and within a year, she had quit her Wells Fargo job and moved into 710 Ashbury with Pigpen.

Eileen Law: I met this real nice lady named Veronica at one of the dances, and she told me she liked Pigpen. She'd say about Pigpen, "I'm gonna catch that man!" She was always getting sweet potato pies for him and this and that. She's probably the one who took me over to 710 the first few times I went there. Pigpen had a room off the kitchen downstairs. I think he was the only one who had a TV, and so everyone always used to go hang out in his room.

He had this aura about him that I always thought he was such a ladies' man, and I was

always scared to be caught in that dark hallway at 710 because he could plant a good hand on your ass as you walked by. One night I remember we got pretty loaded on pot, and I didn't want to take a taxi or a bus home and so I crashed in their upstairs front room on a couch. I remember in the middle of the night wakin' up and seein' somebody walkin' down the hallway. It was Pigpen and I thought, "Oh no, he's gonna hit on me!" I didn't know what he wanted. Maybe it was the fact that I pretended I was asleep, but he just gently came and put a cover over me and left. I didn't expect that.

Rock Scully: Pigpen's room at 710 was really dark. I can't remember if there was a window in it or not. If there was, it was into our next door neighbor's wall, most likely. Between his room and my room there were these sliding doors that he locked up. He put up an American flag or some drape. Then Janis did some redecorating during her visits, and then when Veronica moved in she took care of it. It was a dark little cave.

Bob Weir: It was the Pig's world. It was a place unto itself. The rest of the house was just a funky old house, and then there was the Pig's room. He had his own coterie that he'd entertain in there. The band had a coterie we entertained, and Pig pen had his own separate group of people he hung out with; folks from everywhere.

Bob Matthews: He was a homebody. He'd have weird friends from the old days come over. They'd sit around and share a bottle of Southern Comfort; Pigpen would play bottleneck guitar. He was pretty good at it too, though he never played it onstage. He'd hold court. It was The Pigpen Show. He'd be the host. They'd talk about books or movies or whatever. Pigpen might play some music for them.

Jerry Garcia: You'd go in there and there might be half a dozen hippies and some black people hanging out, drinking wine and listening to Pigpen doing whatever he was doing. He was a real crack-up. People'd be hanging on his every word.

He was so clever. He'd be making up songs with these hilarious words he'd make up on the spot. He was real charming — hell, he was Irish. He could charm the pants off the Pope!

Rock Scully: Once we had the house, he rarely went out, except to sit on the front porch. But he loved sitting out there in the afternoon. He'd sit out on the stoop and talk to people; anybody who wasn't afraid to stop and talk to him, that is.

Jon McIntire: I think he really liked living at 710. He had folks around him. Sitting around and talkin' is what he loved to do more than anything. There was always a lot of stuff going on there, interesting things happening. Like when Neal Cas sady's foot came through Pigpen's ceiling, because Neal was crashing up in the attic. He went through the rafters and his foot went through the ceiling. He was walking around and he was fucked up and he put his foot in the wrong place and went through Pigpen's ceiling. This big foot was poking through! Pigpen got the biggest kick out of that. He told that story for ever — I'm sure there wasn't a three-month period for the rest of his life that that story didn't come up once.

Danny Rifkin: I think he liked being in that scene, because it was loose. There were a lot of girls, a lot of sex, no one was judging anybody. The living situation was fairly comfortable — he didn't really have to do any work. He'd walk down the street and he was a culture hero, and I think he probably enjoyed that.

From Jann Wenner's "Doin' the Thing" column in the Daily Californian, October 26, 1966: What's happening are Pigpen T-shirts, which come in three assorted, various, sublime, colorful colors. If you don't have a friend in the group who could've given you one free, they're available for \$2.50 from the Grateful Dead fan club.

Sue Swanson: It's no coincidence that the first T-shirt was a Pig pen T-shirt.

Jon McIntire: V said to me one time way back when, "I don't know about these hip pies. They like these bright colors and all this." And I said, "Wait a minute! Don't you consider yourself a hippie?" And she said, "No!" I thought we *all* were hippies.

Danny Rifkin: She wasn't your street black person. She was a very sweet lady. A real partner in the household and very devoted to Pig pen. They both liked to watch TV a lot.

Eileen Law: Pig would make her jealous because he did like women and liked to flirt around. When Otis Redding] came around for a three-day run at the old Fillmore — after Monterey Pop — Veronica was flirting with Otis to get Pig jealous. And I thought that was great — big time!

Sue Swanson: One of the things I thought was really sweet was they said if they ever had a child, they were going to name it Fat Chance.

Bob Matthews: It's hard to describe their relationship; it was unique. They seemed to be devoted to each other. On the one hand it was Pig's epitome of what his archetype was: having a black lady. But that's only a superficial aspect of it. Veronica kept you on your toes, she was constantly on your case, and she was that way with Pig. But it was out of genuine concern and affection. She did it with all of us. They played off of each other and had their little show.

Laird Grant: They had a strange relationship. That was Angelfood McSpade [one of R. Crumb's most caricatural black cartoon characters] and Pigpen. She played that kind of role in a way, but you could tell underneath that she was much more intelligent than that. She was just goofin'. He'd jokingly call her "bitch" and "nigger," and she'd throw shit at him, but it was kind of like a black and white Mutt & Jeff kind of a show, and I don't know how much of it was serious, how much of it was put on for the folks that were around.

And then later [in '68] — bang! — she had this aneurysm, didn't know who she was.

Sue Swanson: Pigpen called our house that morning looking for Rock [Scully] — you know how it is, when things fall apart, those guys look for their manager — and I could tell from his voice that something was really wrong. "What's the matter?" "Well, Veronica's had a stroke." I was like eight months pregnant with my son at that point and Veronica was a very close, dear friend of mine — like a big sister — and when Pigpen told me that I about lost it; I couldn't believe it. I said, "What can I do?" and he said, "Pray." For Pigpen to say "Pray" ... well, it was the most serious thing I'd ever heard him

say. It was obvious she was close to death. But she came back. It was amazing.

Jon McIntire: She couldn't walk or talk for quite a while. Her family took care of her and slowly she came back.

Laird Grant: Pigpen devoted himself to her as much as he could. She got back on her feet and became a nurse and got her own life. She definitely changed after the stroke, as you might expect, but they got back together.

Tom Constanten: Pigpen helped her pull through, and then later she stuck by him when he was having health problems, as well.

Jerry Garcia: They had one of those on-again, off-again relationships, but it was mainly on. I don't remember him ever having a long-term relationship with anybody but her. She was great.

Bob Weir: Veronica was a lot of fun. She was quick, she was spunky, she was unsuppressable. She overcame a severe stroke and came back and was her old bubbly self again. She had endless effervescence.

PART FOUR: "MUMBLIN' AT BITCHES AND WAGGIN' HIS TAIL"

In early 1967, the band traveled south to Los Angeles to record their first album for Warner Bros., under the direction of producer Dave Hassinger. The intention of the record was to capture the band's live energy, so the approach in the studio was essentially to play live and do as few overdubs as possible. For a number of reasons, the band was dissatisfied with the experience and the end-result, but most agree that Pigpen's one vocal/harmonica workout, the slithery and sensuous "Good Mornin' Little Schoolgirl" (originally recorded by Sonny Boy Williamson in the late '30s), was generally quite successful, showcasing both Pig's and the band's ability to explore and develop a solid groove. A second Pig tune, a conventional blues dubbed "Tastebud," was also recorded but failed to make the album.

Pigpen's organ work on the album is solid throughout — though he never played anything particularly flashy or trippy, he was an able accompanist on most of the early Dead material; one forgets how integral he was to the group's sound. He could navigate the swelling tides of "Viola Lee Blues" or percolate brightly through the speedy old versions of "I Know You Rider." When his Vox organ was retired permanently in favor of the warmer Hammond B-3, his instrumental work took on a greater richness and soulfulness — listen to his blues drenched keys on the old versions of "Death Don't Have No Mercy."

His repertoire in '66 and '67 consisted largely of just a few choice blues and R&B tunes: "Midnight Hour," Junior Parker's "Next Time You See Me," Slim Harpo's slinky "King Bee," Howlin' Wolf's "Smokestack Lightning," Elmore James' "It Hurts Me Too," Jimmy Reed's "Big Boss Man," The Coasters' "Hog for You Baby" and Bobby "Blue" Bland's "Turn On Your Love Light" (which really caught fire beginning in '68). With the exception of "Midnight Hour," none were big hits outside the R&B charts, which meant the songs were essentially new to most of the Dead's mainly young, white fan base. Pigpen sang

a pair of originals, too: "Caution" and the mutha of 'em all — "Alligator."

"Alligator" marked the first collaboration between Pigpen and lyricist Robert Hunter: "I must've written it in late '65 or early '66," Hunter told me in 1986. "I wrote 'China Cat' and 'Alligator' when I was living on Ramona Street in Palo Alto, and then I went off to New Mexico. Before I went to New Mexico I went over to 710 Ashbury and gave it to the guys. Then, when I got back, they told me they were doing those tunes and I was more or less invited to be "The Writer." Phil and Pigpen developed the song's musical structure together, and Pigpen added the entire final verse: *"Ridin' down the river in an old canoe/A bunch of bugs and an old tennis shoe/Out of the river all ugly and green/The biggest old alligator that I've ever seen/Teeth big and pointed and his eyes were buggin' out/Contact the union, put the beggars to rout/Screamin' and yellin' and lickin' his chops/He never runs, he just stumbles and hops/Just out of prison on six dollars bail/Mumblin' at bitches and waggin' his tail."*

Who or what "Alligator" is about is beyond me, but it became the springboard for some of the most exciting jams the Grateful Dead ever played — long, complex and usually highly rhythmic voyages that revealed the full dimensions of the still-developing Grateful Dead beast: not only did this dragon have a long, spiny tail; it breathed fire, too! "I can't remember the number of times I looked up on that stage and Pigpen's organ was the alligator," says Annette Flowers with a laugh. "He was just playin' the alligator!"

In 1967, Pigpen was riding high, a true hero of the Haight; the guy who could always get a crowd off with his energy, his wit and the sheer power of his stage persona. His wardrobe was funky and funny; sort of thrift shop biker with odd flourishes like a sash tied around his waist, a paisley headband or odd hats.

Laird Grant: He grew into his image. Someone calls you Batman long enough, pretty soon you start wearing wings and a caped hood. The funkiness was always there with Pigpen because that was his way of being earthy. I don't think he did it to be funky like a Gypsy Joker [a motorcycle club]. He kept himself clean, or he'd be funky, fuck, the

man drank. I'd go out and score for him and Janis and whoever. It was not unusual for him to go through a quart of Southern Comfort in a night; along with a lot of beer and soda pop. And he fell into that patois he used onstage almost permanently.

Connie Furtado (1992): I remember Sue [Swanson] and I washing his hair for him, which was something he took great delight in; asking us to help him wash this great long, thick black hair. Bending him over the kitchen sink at 710 Ashbury. He loved it and we adored doing it for him. Absolutely, I'll never forget it.

Danny Rifkin: He had a very powerful stage image. He liked girls, and they liked him. He'd talk to them from the stage in those long raps. And I think he messed around with some of them. He was sort of a back-door man. He wasn't an extrovert about his activities. He was kind of quiet about it.

Laird Grant: He had his "bitches," as he called them, but it was always more in jive than anything else.

Jerry Garcia: Black women loved him; they loved him from the very beginning. They were devoted to him; they'd die for him. He was so cool. He was so smooth — for such a weird looking guy. I mean, he looked like a biker's nightmare, but he had a personal charisma that was so charming.

Laird Grant: I think his [stage] act was a combination of white boy paranoia drunk and black *cool*. I know [hepcat comedian] Lord Buckley was a heavy, heavy influence because Pigpen would do something, then mumble something out of Buckley, and it always fit, because no matter what Buckley did, it fit. That was from that whole teeny era of cool and jazz. It was real special, and there were only certain people who could dig on what the man was saying. And it wasn't what he was saying — it was what he was sayin'. And if you didn't know that, then you didn't know. Pigpen was tuned into that.

Danny Rifkin: He listened to all those blues records. He did a thing where he compared going to bed with a girl with cranking your car, which I know I'd heard elsewhere. I don't

think he was so original. He was a very good mimic. He stole a lot of it, I'm sure. And I'm not judging him negatively for that; that's what culture is — you steal what you can and hopefully make it your own.

Bob Matthews: I think a lot of it came from listening to contemporary music and creating his own licks out of it. Wilson Pickett, James Brown — all these guys had their little raps, and while they didn't go on as long as Pigpen's, if you went to their shows you'd find out they went a lot longer than the four bars on the records. With Pigpen it started with "Midnight Hour," I guess. He saw that, and then the Grateful Dead gave him the opportunity to try it: what better vehicle could you get for stretching out? Pig wants to stretch out? Great. You'd find the rest of them right there giving him every opportunity and encouragement. He'd get encouragement from the band and from the audience and then there was no holdin' back, because it fed upon itself; he started to create his own style. The audience picked up on that and really liked it. Here's Pig, down and dirty, talkin' about the basics: gettin' laid.

Jerry Garcia (1981): Pigpen's orientation used to be straight-ahead sex. He'd get really dirty a lot of times. He occupied that position.

Bob Weir: He didn't start off doing [raps] with us, though he was always good at it. He could sit there with a guitar and just make stuff up, take an old Lightnin' Hopkins tune or something, do a couple of stock verses and then, as often as not, he'd throw in other lines from who knows where. He had a cache of lines or couplets he could pull out and then he'd try to tie those together.

Jon McIntire: Pig doing that was the direct link back into black blues and R&B. It was in his genes and his baby memories, so he was really that way for real. You were watching this sort of ritual link with the past — because what he was doing was formula raps. He had these *leitmotifs* that he liked and got him off. He was a big, big fan of Lord Buckley and those kinds of guys, and of course he was great at just making up stuff.

Jerry Garcia: He loved Lord Buckley, and W.C. Fields was another of his faves. But I

don't see that influence much in the music; more in him as a guy.

I have no idea where he picked up most of that stuff [in the music]. Some of it was bits and pieces of lyrics from old tunes that he'd pick up, and then he'd extrapolate. But, like, I have no idea where he got that thing he used to sing (during "Lovelight"): "She got box back nitties and great big noble thighs, working undercover with a boar hog's eye." Don't ask me — I don't know *what* the fuck that's all about!

It's some weird mojo shit or something. But he could always pull that stuff out. He could do that as long as I knew him.

When he was on, he was amazing.

Danny Rifkin: I saw Pigpen pretty much as a frontman for a while. Absolutely. He did a lot of the singing and he was the most dynamic-appearing character of the whole group. I remember one of those early gigs, we had these big Voice of the Theater speakers, and I hurt my back (carrying them) and I had to stand in the truck going to the gig. I remember standing in front of Pigpen at this gig, and he blew my mind — he kind of made me dance and got my back healed; it was that kind of experience. He had an almost shamanic quality; kind of a revival tent meeting type thing. I liked those grooves — "Midnight Hour," "Good Mornin' Little Schoolgirl," "Lovelight" — kind of tribal, primal, great to dance to. He had a nice round voice and he played the crowd like a preacher. You knew Jerry was a great guitar player, and he could really move you, but it was a subtler thing. Pigpen was right out front.

Laird Grant: He loved bein' up there onstage at the Fillmore, or wherever. But I don't think "a career" in music is something that ever even occurred to him. I mean, I even saw him right before he died — he and I had a long talk — and even at that point [music] was still just something that was happening. But as far as going out and saying, "I'm gonna go out and blow my harp and make a lot of money and be a famous musician," somewhere in the back of his mind it might have occurred to him that it could happen. But he did it for the music; it was for the pleasure and for the creativity. I know

he wasn't in it for the money, and there really wasn't any of that anyway. We could go play a club and make \$200 or we could play free in the park — Well, fuck, let's play free in the park! We didn't have nothing. It was week to week, gig to gig. Thank god for Wolfgang Grajonca — Bill Graham — and also Chet Helms [of the Family Dog]; they helped support us.

[Back in '66] we'd play in the park and there might be a couple of thousand people on a good day. And then, when we did the Gathering of the Tribes [the Human Be-In, 1/14/67] — jumping Jesus! — there weren't that many people in the *world*! How could you get them all in Golden Gate Park? That was kind of freaky. It was freaky for me because of the equipment side of it, and it was freaky for everyone because I don't think anything like that had ever happened before. It was a great shock, and I think it put into the minds of everybody that was there that hey, there's 20,000 of us here doing this, why not 50,000? Why not 100,000? I think it was one of those quantum-leap thoughts in the mind, where if a little bit is this good, a whole bunch has got to be fuckin' better!

Pigpen was fine with gigs the size of the Fillmore, but he hated it when there were a lot of people. When it got beyond what I would call mind-touch — you get up onstage and there are 500 people in the room, you're a performer and a musician, but you're also a magician, whether you know it or not, and you really can communicate with all of those people in that room. When you get 50,000, forget it. So somewhere in there it started losing it for Pigpen and getting more and more fearful, and in his case that meant more booze. Not so drunk that you can't go out there and play your music without fucking up, but enough that you can blank it out because it's fuckin' scary; it's really scary up there. Pigpen was scared about it. Even Jerry was freaked.

Jon McIntire: After I had been working with them for a while, Garcia and I went into Tommy's Joynt [a San Francisco restaurant] and we were sitting in a booth in the back and people would say to him, "Aren't you a member of the Grateful Dead?" They didn't say, "Aren't you Jerry Garcia?" *Pigpen* was really the most recognizable figure in the band the first few years. It took a few years for the phenomenon to happen that so much

of the focus was on Jerry.

Jerry never wanted to be the center of everything; he always wanted everyone involved in everything. Even though there was a definite hierarchy about things, we were in a commune — 710 was a commune — and whenever we'd go up to the Russian River [in Sonoma County] to compose, it was the whole band in there working away — on "The Other One" and "The Eleven." Those weren't focused individual compositions; they were everyone getting together and coming up with this stuff — under very intense circumstances. That was the dream; that was the ideal.

PART FIVE: "YOU ONLY GOT YOURSELF TO BLAME..."

By the end of the fabled Summer of Love (1967), the Haight's bright bloom was fading fast and the Dead were anxious to move on to greener, less crowded pastures — literally; the open expanses of Marin

County lay just across the Golden Gate Bridge. Still, the dissolution of the commune at 710 was hastened by the famous 710 pot bust, October 2, 1967. San Francisco Police, with reporters in tow, raided the Dead's pad and managed to snare ten people, including two bandmembers — Pigpen (whose photo graced the front page of the *San Francisco Chronicle* the next day) and Weir. The others busted were managers Rifkin and Scully, equipment boss Bob Matthews and, as the *Chronicle* report put it, "six girls, variously described as 'friends,' 'visitors' and just 'girls.'" The "friends" group included V, who later said, "It was an experience getting arrested, but I didn't like being put behind bars."

There was tremendous irony in the fact that Pigpen was busted — he was not a drug user of any kind. Alcohol was his drug of choice, of course, and that in itself was viewed as unusual in this scene where psychedelic experimentation had been such a driving force.

Danny Rifkin: He was not much of a risk-taker. I think his self-perception was the blues life — he kind of spoke black English vernacular, had a black girlfriend, played the blues, drank wine. He was definitely of a different consciousness than the rest of us. He never took dope. He was scared of it. The one time I know of that he got dosed, at San Francisco State College [Acid Test 10/2/66], he went home, saying, "I don't feel well; I'm going home." So he was sort of an anomaly in that way.

Tom Constanten: He proudly claimed he turned Janis Joplin on to Southern Comfort. Then later he moved onto Bourbon Deluxe, which is what he drank when I lived with him [in '70-'71]. He had a hip flask of it that he always kept full.

Veronica Grant ('91): Janis got Pig into Southern Comfort. She'd come over and they'd play till 4 in the morning. I'd go to sleep and they'd just play. Elvin Bishop came by a lot; so did [jazz pianist] Vince Guaraldi. He was a close friend of Pig and the Dead.

Wavy Gravy: It's a trade-off. Pigpen made the trade and *became* the blues; he became the harbinger and brought that into the music and it was real, the real jelly.

Jon McIntire: I thought it was a drag that he drank so much. It seemed like sort of a throwback thing. Because we were all convinced that we needed to turn on the world to acid. And if you were going to turn on the world, you certainly wanted to turn on Pigpen! But he didn't like it. It scared the hell out of him. He didn't like drugs at all; not any kind.

We wanted to believe that anyone should be able to do what they wanted to do. But I think at the same time there was a lot of mistrust of alcohol. That was the straight world's drug.

Bob Matthews: There was an attitude of: who are we to cast stones? Because who knew which was worse: taking LSD every Saturday night and smoking a pound of pot in between, or drinking a fifth of Southern Comfort every day?

Danny Rifkin: None of us drank at all. Drinking was *square*. Lame people did that. We never drank beer or anything. We were dopers; psychedelics. And the concern was that he was doing this lame thing that turns you off. I think the concern was more that he wasn't into psychedelics than concern about the ill effects of alcohol.

Eileen Law: There was always a running joke, "Get Pig high!" There was one story — I don't even know if it's true — about how one lady friend had some liquid (LSD) in her mouth and went and planted a good one on Pig to try to get him that way.

Bob Weir: We were all into fucking with each other, so dosing Pigpen fell into that category.

Bob Matthews: Everybody else was always trying to get him to get high and it just

wasn't what he wanted to do. He was happy with what he did. But there was a feeling that he was not participating. At that time, that's what was going on. To me it sort of became old business. His contribution to the band was what it was, and it did not necessarily require that he be on the same wavelength as everybody else, even though everybody else being on the same wavelength contributed a lot to the lo gotype of the band's music. But T.C. never got high; no way. He never even drank.

Rock Scully: Pig was our anchor. No matter how screwed up we got on LSD and how crazy it got for us, you could always look to Pigpen to bring you down to Earth and be there for you. Even musically, when the band was going way, way out in "Dark Star," they knew they could listen to Pig and have some sense of where they were. So he was reliable in that way. You knew he wasn't seeing snakes. When Garcia's guitar neck turned into a snake, Pigpen saw it as a guitar, and Jerry could rely on him to do that.

Jerry Garcia: He was our anchor. We'd be out of our minds, just YOWWWGOINNNNNNGG, and we'd be tethered to Pigpen. You could rely on Pigpen for a reality check. "Hey, man, is it too weird, or what?" He'd say, "No man, it's cool." Everybody used him on that level. He was like gravity. Hell's Angels would be sitting around his room fucked up on acid and Pigpen would be taking care of *them*. It was so great. Pig pen was like a warm fire, a cozy fire.

Tom Constanten: It was a different consciousness but they accepted there was a possible connection. Phil would make the point that there were a lot of creative people who were able to get high on booze — Dylan Thomas, a lot of writers in fact.

Ken Kesey: I think people tried to make believe there was some sort of gap between Pigpen and the others. I think now if he were to somehow resurrect, he would feel like they have caught up to him, not the other way around. His music was very natural. It took the rest of the band a long time to be as natural a feeling as he started out with.

And he never was straight, really. He was a boozier. Some people are weed heads, some people are acid heads, some people are Jesus freaks; to each man his own

poison. His was booze and it got him high.

Bob Weir: I don't think there was a gap, either. It was more just a formality. We were all formally psychedelized and he wasn't, though in all truth, he was as open and game in all kind of things that one might associate with being a member of the psychedelic cult. He had all those attributes. It's just that he had never done the formal deed in voluntarily taking the psychedelic.

PART SIX: "YOU GOT ME WORKIN' BOSS MAN"

After the bust, Pigpen and V moved for a brief period into an old converted church on Belvedere Street, still in the Haight, but then joined the migration to Marin County, setting up house with Weir and his girlfriend Frankie in Novato. In late '67 and early '68, the band's music started to take a fairly radical turn to the left, as the group became more interested in writing their own songs and experimenting with unusual rhythms and time signatures. Part of this was the direct result of the addition of Mickey Hart as a second drummer, and the influences he brought to the music. The longer, more complicated pieces the Dead were writing during this period required more practice and better technical chops, as well as greater sensitivity and focus during the extended improvisational flights that were fast becoming the band's metier. "That's It for the Other One," "New Potato Caboose" and, of course, "Dark Star," all pointed in a bold, exciting direction for the Dead — out, in the jazz sense.

Rehearsing had never been one of Pigpen's favorite activities, yet this was music that demanded it. He usually showed up, though only grudgingly. And "space" was not a place Pig pen called home, so his involvement with the band's new, trip pier songs was minimal. True, he added some tasteful and distinctive organ runs to the live versions of some of the *Anthem of the Sun* material, but often he just laid back in the music, adding little. And occasionally on "Dark Star," he might play the same monotonous six- or seven-note organ pattern the entire song.

Pig's inability and unwillingness to grow with the Dead's increasingly dense music was a source of some frustration for the other bandmembers, and there was even a brief period in the fall of '68 when Pigpen and Weir (who was also viewed as an inferior player) were dismissed from the band, as the recording of *Aoxomoxoa* was beginning at Pacific Recording in San Mateo. Tom Constanten was brought in to play keyboards on the album, and he also began touring with the band as the group's sole keyboardist. In

fact, Pigpen did not even play on *Aoxomoxoa*, which consisted entirely of songs written by the team of Hunter, Garcia and Lesh.

Danny Rifkin: Pigpen was not really a keyboard player, and I can recall people complaining that he wasn't evolving musically the way the rest of the band was; that he was kind of a drag on the band musically. And eventually they got another keyboard player and Pigpen became a singer and harmonica player. He was a great blues singer, but he got lost as a player. I think he had a ceiling or limit in his ability as a keyboardist that he couldn't get past. I don't know if taking drugs would have helped him there. But he definitely saw himself as a blues man.

Tom Constanten: There was a time there when he and Weir had a period of lesser security in the band context. Part of the problem in Pigpen's case is that when he fronted the band it became something else, because his thing was so cultivated and established in its own right that it became its own thing — sort of a psychedelized blues band. I've seen it in print and heard it said that the Grateful Dead at that time was two bands: when Pigpen was fronting the band and when he wasn't. A dynamic like that cannot but cause some result somewhere. What it was from his point of view I'm not exactly sure; we'll never find out, I guess. This corresponds to the period of Mickey Hart & the Hartbeats, in which I could see Phil and Jerry getting more into the modern jazz-type of atmosphere of improvisation and musically interesting time signatures and rhythmic patterns, which is exactly what Weir and Pigpen were less into.

Danny Rifkin: He couldn't anticipate where the music was going. When it was his thing he did fine.

Sue Swanson: I think they left him in the dust musically. He was in over his head on the keyboards — especially when the others really got loaded [on psychedelics] and really got out there and he was drunk. I mean, how could he possibly follow? Obviously it was a source of some frustration — I mean, they got T.C. and then later they got Keith [Godchaux].

Jon McIntire: The real far-out spacey stuff wasn't what Pigpen related to; that wasn't his gig.

Bob Weir: Somebody once described his keyboard playing as earthbound. But you know what, we played *around* those six notes (in "Dark Star"); played the ball as it lay if that's what he was gonna do. We'd take that and weave around it. It certainly wasn't the wrong place for him to be.

Rock Scully: Jerry kind of put it on me to [fire Pigpen and Weir]. It was a totally musical decision. Bobby wasn't progressing — he was still playing the electric guitar like an acoustic guitar, and Jerry was trying to get him to loosen up and be a rhythm guitar player. Bobby was still a student, but not listening. God knows what they thought was going to come out of [the firing], but we were recording in this studio down on the Peninsula.

Sue Swanson: I can remember many times when one or the other of them was going to be fired from the band. They played up in Toronto for Expo '67, and I remember during that week Bobby was supposed to be fired, but obviously it didn't happen.

Rock Scully: I don't think that Pig, without being high on LSD, could quite understand the direction the music was taking. And their music did change a lot in that period. Jerry spent a lot of time trying to describe and explain where he thought the music was going — and so did Phil. Phil was a very high dude in those days. Now he's considered a genius, but in those days he was just this weird ex-postal worker who'd just taken up the bass but had some really neat ideas musically. He was willing to push that envelope.

But if [the firing] had to happen it came at a good time, because we were just sort of doodling in the studio. We weren't making any money. We didn't have any gigs booked, so there was really no loss, except emotionally. I was against it, but Jerry put it on me as the manager to do it. Phil was behind it, and so was Kreutzmann. But to fire nearly half your unit ...

Pigpen took it very hard. It was horrible for him. He was crying about it later. I was really upset about it myself. I was upset with Jerry and Phil for making me do it — I thought it was something they should have handled. I think they meant it as a warning that turned into a weird event. I spent a lot of time with Pig through that period, because it was a number of weeks before he played with them again. What he did was he played the piano all day and all night. But I don't think it was ever meant to stick. Bobby went off to practice, too, so they both took it to heart. It was a terrible event in my life.

Jerry Garcia: My memory of it is that we never actually let him go; we just didn't want him playing keyboard, because he just didn't know what to do on the kind of material we were writing.

It seemed like we were heading some [musical] place in a big way and Pigpen just wasn't open to it. It's not that he couldn't have cut it; he actually could have dealt with it. He had the musicality to deal with it. He was a real musical guy; he was innately musical.

But you know, the other thing is we were sort of off on a false note, you know what I mean? We were doing something that was forced; it wasn't really natural. We were doing music that was self-consciously weird. If we had paid more attention to Pigpen, it probably would have saved us a couple of years of fucking around

Jon McIntire: I remember one time there was a band meeting and there was a confrontation with Pigpen about not pulling his weight. I can't remember who it was, but one of the guys in the band was attacking him, saying, "You just sit around and watch television all the time. You don't work on your act," and going on and on. And Pigpen said, "Yeah, that's who I am." And that blew my mind, because I'm so obsessed with improving the self and all of that, and he just wasn't into that at all. And his honesty with himself about it, and his honesty with the room about it, really blew me away. In that way, he had a real solid knowledge of himself.

Tom Constanten: I don't think he felt that threatened by me coming into the group).

After all, they already had two guitarists and two drummers, and the interpersonal dynamics among the players were already strange enough without worrying about the mitigating effects of instruments. In other words, it's strange enough relating to the guitarists and drummers already — in terms of the music, dynamics, balance. If anything, adding my keyboard stabilized it, rather than disrupted it. I never felt any professional jealousy in that situation; it seemed much more like brotherhood and connection. If he did feel jealous, he concealed it well.

Jon McIntire: I think his reaction [to T.C. joining the band] was denial. Pigpen was relegated to the congas at that point, and it was really humiliating and he was really hurt, but he couldn't show it, couldn't talk about it. He never came up to me and said, "I can't stand what they're doing to me," or anything like that. I bet he didn't say it to anyone; I don't even know if he said it to himself — maybe when he went for the bottle the first time after it happened he said it to himself. It was sad. For me it was sad because my first recollection of something happening musically with the band was his voice. He gave me a compelling sweetness of voice and depth of feeling I could relate to. Then, later on, when "The Other One" came out, that was a whole different ballgame. There was something else great going on, too.

Sue Swanson: It probably hurt his feelings a little bit, but then it also might have been something of a relief. I mean he was not stupid. He knew his playing was not keeping up.

Rock Scully: The diminished role in the studio probably didn't hit him that hard because he had such a huge role in the show at that point and he was so loved by the community. Wherever we went, Pigpen's songs were the most popular part of the show.

In the studio, he was always a little reticent. He was a guy who really came alive in front of an audience; the studio was not his forte. He had a hard time with his vocals in the studio, because most of his vocals were so audience-directed. He'd pick out a chick in the audience and sing to her; then tell me to go out and invite her backstage.

When we'd record, he'd bring his cooler and kind of keep to himself. He was kind of complaining in the studio a little bit. He didn't dig the atmosphere. He'd find a couch and hang there until he was needed; till it was his turn. I think he was bored there.

Tom Constanten: [In concert] I copped some of his lines where they seemed to be part of the piece. He was pretty good actually; his playing was commensurate with the type of music he was playing. There's a certain bag of tricks you learn how to do. Then you rub the sticks together and get fire. If anything, I was trying to pick up on some of the stylistic things he was doing, 'cause a lot of our non-competitiveness came from the fact that we came from such different traditions. We were looking to reach out.

Beyond that, [not playing organ) freed him up as a vocalist. He could stand up front with a microphone, which he was really good at, and to judge from appearances, he liked. I think Jerry did some things to make Pigpen feel included, like featuring his songs and encouraging him. The perception I had was that Jerry was always encouraging him, and he felt that Pigpen's thing should have a platform in the band's context.

Jerry Garcia: The live show was what we did; it's who we were. The record [*Aoxomoxoa*] was like dicking around. It was like a day job or something; it wasn't that relevant.

PART SEVEN: "MAMA, I'M SURE HARD TO HANDLE"

It's true that many of the best versions of "Lovelight" the band ever played came in 1969, when T.C. was in the band, and Pigpen's role in the show was never really diminished. "Good Mornin' Little Schoolgirl," though played less frequently than in 67-68, was still always a popular number. More and more, "Smokestack Lightning" came to fill the musical function of "Schoolgirl" — the snaky, sexy midtempo blues ooze, loaded with dark mystery and innuendo.

The brightest Pig-led addition to the repertoire in '69 was "Hard to Handle," which was a relatively obscure R&B rave up by the great Otis Redding, who'd been dead for less than two years at that point. Pigpen delivered the song with the sort of gruff, cocksure delivery that was utterly convincing; damn if he didn't *look and sound* hard to handle as he stood at the lip of the stage, both hands on the microphone, his head bobbing from one side to the other under the well-worn hat that became his visual trademark, the words tumbling out of one corner of his mouth. He sounded dangerous, but you could tell he was totally diggin' it, too. You could tell by the way he'd cock a hip, or smile as the band cooked behind him, building that big, chunky R&B groove that on the best nights hit a sort of James Brown-on-acid kind of space.

And then there was "Good Lovin'," a song that had been a huge pop hit for the Young Rascals just a couple of years earlier (and a minor R&B hit for The Olympics before that). This song, too, became a major showcase for the band's R&B chops, as they'd roll through umpteen riffs and grooves over the course of a typical version. You could hear the Isley Brothers, Archie Bell & the Drells, James Brown, all sorts of different R&B streams flowing through the jams in "Good Lovin'." And Pigpen sang the song with more urgency than anyone ever had before (or since).

In 1969, the band traveled outside of California more than it ever had before. And though *Aoxomoxoa* was a commercial bust, the Dead's reputation as one of the great

live bands in America brought the group plenty of work — at colleges and at rock festivals ranging from Miami Pop to Woodstock to Altamont (where the Dead were scheduled to play, but didn't). In general, Pigpen kept to himself on the road, staying in his room and watching television or reading (and drinking, of course), away from the wild action that invariably surrounded the rest of the band.

Jon McIntire: He just stayed in his room all the time and would never do anything. But I remember he was real stoked about St. Louis because of the arch. He had followed the building of it for some reason; it was a really big deal to him. So being from St. Louis, this was my big chance to get Pigpen out of the hotel. So I arranged for us all to go down there and have dinner at the Crest House, a restaurant owned by the National Stockyards Association, where you could literally get the best beef in the world, no two ways about it. It was a pretty fancy place and, needless to say, we were not very fancy. We didn't want to be thrown out, so I had my mom arrange with the owner that we were going to be well taken care of. I even got Pigpen to go along with us. This was a big accomplishment. We were about halfway through the salad course and Pigpen turned to me and said, "McIntire, this is the longest I've spent at any meal in my life!" But he had fun. He got to see the arch and he loved that, and he did like the meal, so I viewed it as a great success!

From the tape of 5/24/69, Hollywood, Florida:

Announcer: It'll be best, at the beginning, for everyone to sit, so the ones in back of you can see.

Pigpen: Don't sit! Stand up!

Announcer: Yeah, well, we'll do that, too. But at the beginning -

Pigpen: Don't be programming it, baby! Let's get it on!

From Ralph Gleason's "Perspectives" column in *Rolling Stone*, July 12, 1969: The Dead ended their set [at Winterland] but the crowd wouldn't let them leave and they had

to play an encore. If there's a fault with this great band it's that they have not really expanded their repertoire for concerts. They keep changing the structure of the things they do, but they come up with relatively few new numbers. Pigpen no longer plays the organ. Tom Constanten does that while Pig stands behind a conga drum, an incongruous Western dude who wandered down to Havana still toggled out from the rodeo. Humphrey Bogart late-show flicks have characters like that sitting around in the background in Caribbean saloons.

Sue Swanson: We all got to Woodstock at different times. Mickey and Cookie Eisenberg [Mickey's girlfriend], Josh [Sue's 1-year-old] and Mickey's dog Glups the Great Dane flew back together. We got as far as Mickey's mom's summer place, which was about eight miles from the site, the night before. We stayed the night, and in the morning of course there was no way we were going to be able to drive to there. Forget it! We had a big X out in the yard in case the helicopter came for Mickey, but it never showed up. So we decided we had to walk. So we left the dog and Josh with the grandmother and we walked to the site. By the time we got there, the fence was down and it was madness everywhere. Our minds were blown; we didn't know what to think. We finally found our people and we ended up sleeping there that night. I got up really early the next morning and it was raining and I'd lost my shoes, but I knew I had to get back. So I found these guys who were really loaded on acid and driving around in circles and I said, "You boys need something to do! Why don't you take me home." Miraculously we found our way back to the house. Mickey's mom's husband, Milt, put me in his car and drove me to the hotel where the band was staying. The streets were filled with people and it was crazy. Tom Constanten was still there and Pig was still there; everyone else had been helicoptered in. Suddenly I found myself having to deal with getting the band there. And getting Pigpen out of that hotel room was almost impossible. I went up there four times. I actually had him out the door at one point, out in the hallway. "Nah, I gotta get some thin'." "C'mon Pig, the helicopter's waiting for us! We have to go." Wouldn't go. *Wouldn't go*. What ended up happening was Josh and I went onto the helicopter alone and T.C. was left standing there to deal with it. Maybe it

was nerves. I don't know. I would've been nervous. But the thing with Pig is it didn't matter if it was Woodstock or it was a club. He was hesitant, and it was hard to get him onstage. It was always, "Where's Pig?"

Ken Babbs: When I'd be at one of these scenes and they'd be getting ready to play and there would be interminable delays getting mikes to work right and everything. And I'd be leaning on Pigpen's organ and he'd say, "Babbs, go out and tell 'em a story." So I'd go out and start yakking and pretty soon the band would start playing; they'd be playing right away. I think the last time he did that for me was at Woodstock. I was up there and it was starting to storm and things were *real* disconnected.

Tom Constanten: Pigpen was real comfortable onstage. You play that many shows and it becomes quite comfortable to you. I've noticed I get "stage calm." On tour you're hassling with hotels and flights and connections and stuff, and onstage with your instrument becomes the only time you feel totally comfortable in your surroundings. I think Pigpen liked what there was to like about traveling on the road. But getting up at 7 in the morning when it's 15 degrees below zero outside and you have to make a flight, nobody's going to like.

Jon McIntire: [The day of Altamont, 12/6/69] we were all at the helicopter launching pad, and the old ladies were there, and they wanted to see the Rolling Stones. Lenny (Hart, the band's manager) was still there and he was shmoozing with the Rolling Stones and dragging them over — "You remember Jerry, right Mick?" and they'd never met before, and that kind of shit. Even though we were to perform before them, the Stones helicoptered over before we did — they were the Rolling Stones, so whatever they wanted to happen, happened.

Then we started getting weird reports from the site. It sounded like the next step might be major riots. So I wouldn't let the old ladies come with us and I told them I'd come back and get them. I think I even promised. Once I got out there it was fucking *mayhem*. I couldn't get back if I wanted to, but I would not have brought them out, because I

couldn't tell what was going on. I didn't know if we were in jeopardy — as a matter of fact I very strongly felt that we were, but I thought we'd be able to get through it. But I wasn't about to bring women and children out there, because I was a sexist pig — I mean women and children have a right to be maimed along with the rest of us, right?

We were standing on the back of the stage watching this horrendous, awful, ugly scene go down. I remember our equipment truck, devoid of its equipment, was pulled up right next to the back of the stage. So there were 500,000 people there, all of them angry. And Pig was sitting on this amplifier in the middle of this empty truck and I hear this "Psst! Psst! McIntire, come here! Sit down!" I guess he could tell I was maximum stressed out. And he pulled out a flask of Southern Comfort and we sat there and drank Southern Comfort for a while and talked about anything but what was going on.

PART EIGHT: "LIVE FIVE YEARS IF I TAKE MY TIME"

By early February of 1970, T.C. was out of the band, and Pigpen went back to occasionally playing some organ with the Dead — though certainly not as much as he had in the pre-T.C. days. The kind of material the band wrote during this period indicated a shift away from hardcore psychedelia, in favor of more concise and conventional songs, many with a softer country flavor to them. This is the time of *Workingman's Dead* and *American Beauty*; of tighter harmonies and sets of acoustic music; of long tours but still plenty of good times back home in Marin.

Despite his background in the early '60s singing blues in coffeehouses around Palo Alto, Pigpen didn't show much interest in the group's 1970 acoustic sets. Some nights he'd play Lightnin' Hopkins' "Katie Mae," but most nights he'd wait for the electric sets to make his appearance. He had one song each on the Dead's albums that year: "Easy Wind," written by Hunter alone, was the toughest song on *Workingman's Dead*, and the most representative of the group's live power and energy. Pigpen also played the mournful harmonica solo on "Black Peter." He contributed a song he wrote by himself, called "Operator," to *American Beauty*, and it fit in beautifully with the rest of the record. It's a light folk-blues with a little shuffling beat, sweet and somehow sad, soft but unmistakably Pig pen. Alas, he performed the song live only four times.

Otherwise it was business as usual for Pigpen: "Lovelight," "Hard to Handle" and "Good Lovin'" were his showstoppers, "It Hurts Me Too" was his main down-home blues, and there was an added treat in '70 — James Brown's loping "It's a Man's Man's World," another perfect vehicle for the Pig persona. Unfortunately, the rest of the band struggled with the backup harmonies on that song, and they never quite found the sort of compelling groove that would really take the song somewhere, so it wasn't too surprising that they dropped it eventually.

1970 was Pigpen's last year as a fully participating member of the Grateful Dead. He

got to share in their great successes that year and he seemed to be content living a quiet life at home, sharing a house in Novato with V and T.C.

Bob Matthews: *Workingman's Dead* was an album that was done very quickly. I was given a lot of freedom as producer of the album along with the Dead. After the experience of *Aoxomoxoa* — so much time, so much loss of direction, so many hands involved in it — [on *Workingman's Dead*] we went into the studio first, spent a couple of days basically rehearsing — performing the songs — all the tunes; recording them on 2 track. When that was done, I sat down and spliced together the tunes — beginning of side one to end of side one; beginning of side two to end of side two. I got that idea from listening to

[The Beatles'] *Sgt. Pepper*: Before we even start, let's have a concept of what the end-product is going to feel like, sequencing-wise. We made a bunch of cassette copies and gave them to the band; they rehearsed some more in their rehearsal studio, and then came in and recorded. At all times there was the perspective of where we were in the album.

I remember doing "Easy Wind" was fun, and it didn't take a lot of work. I remember working with Pigpen was easy. He was a professional. That was a mellow time, because we'd learned a lot of ways not to do things and nobody was trying to be in charge.

Bob Weir: "Easy Wind," to my way of thinking, was one of our coolest tunes. We didn't play it that much, but I always liked it.

Jerry Garcia: [Pigpen] didn't write it, but he contributed a lot to the way it works, the way it feels. He understood how it was supposed to be. It wouldn't have worked unless he did it.

Robert Hunter: How I wrote "Easy Wind" was I'd been listening to Robert Johnson and I was liking Delta blues an awful lot, so I sat down to write down a blues *a la* Robert Johnson. I played it for Pigpen and he dug it, so he did it. My arrangement was a little

bit closer to one of those slippin' and slidin' Robert Johnson-type songs because it was just me and a guitar. Then when the band got hold of it, it changed a bit, as they always do. Still, a lot of that original style crept over into the band's version.

Tom Constanten: We had roomed together on the road and we got along great, and then it just sort of happened that we lived together. He had a nice-sized house that was affordable in those years. We split the rent and it was not unpleasant. I hate to say it, but he was a pretty normal guy. We'd play music, listen to music, talk, hang out. We had an upright piano in that house and a music room which we didn't use that much.

He knew the archive of the blues as well as anyone I'd ever known. Pigpen went way back with the blues, which is the kind of thing you need to do if you want to get that effortless depth that is like recalling something that happened last Thursday: "Oh yeah, that was Blind Willie McTell." He had absorbed it that much — Reverend Gary Davis, the Folkways archives. But he listened to it like a painter looking from a distance, to get a feel of something more, instead of ... like Weir would listen with the idea of copping a lick. I just heard "Honky Tonk Woman" on the radio yesterday and there's that riff that Weir lifted from that and threw into "Casey Jones," which came out about the same time. I shared a house with Weir at that time, too. Pigpen didn't have a fear of an inability to come up with something on his own. He would listen for getting a feeling for a person's style, and as often as not it would be something non verbal — some nuance — which is probably why people like he and Janis Joplin, for instance, were so effective. You get above the timberline where words can describe how to do it.

Alan Trist: I remember the first time I was really caught in the imagination of his character was the first time I went to see the Grateful Dead in California, which was at the Santa Rosa fairgrounds in December of 1970. I remember seeing Pigpen, against the lights from backstage somewhere, hunched over the microphone with that harp and that hat and that voice and that soulfulness. That was a very strong impression upon me. To see American blues music. Throughout the '60s I'd mainly heard it as recorded music. It was a very strong iconographic presence that I felt from him.

Tom Constanten: Pigpen was the best man at my first wedding, in Berkeley in 1970. He got the rings backwards. He was more nervous than I was. Because [my wife's] father couldn't be around, Pigpen gave her away, too, so he did everything. He dressed up for it, put on a tie — I didn't even know he owned a tie.

Eileen Law: I was out in Olema [in rural west Marin] for a winter with a whole bunch of people, staying on this property that was like 350 acres, with nobody around. There were cowboys that kept their cattle on the land. It was real rural. All sorts of people used to come out to visit: Lew Welch, the Angels. And then our crew came out — the Dead guys. They had acquired a few guns and they'd have target practice. We were the outlaws! Pig would come out, sometimes by himself, sometimes with Veronica, and hang out. It was real quiet. He was into the target practice, too. The guns started getting a little fancier. I loved this little Colt pistol they had.

Veronica Grant (1991): Pig liked antique guns. I remember a scene at a show in New York where I went backstage and Pig told me to come in and shut the door, because he was looking at some guns the Angels had brought him to see.

David Nelson: Occasionally when the New Riders were on tour with the Dead, I'd go to Pigpen's room late at night and he would tell stories when he got to a sufficient drinking level. They were funny, too. I remember one about God's own drunk, which was sort of a shaggy dog story. The punchline was "I'm not drunk, I'm God's own drunk!" or something like that. He had one about going out in Alaska for a beer and then the guy comin' back getting beaten up by a bear and sayin', "There's a woman out there but she's more than I can handle." It goes on and on. He had a million of 'em and he could tell 'em really funny.

Robert Hunter: Ron was "good folks." You'd stop in his room, watch television with him, hang out. He'd sit around in his shorts drinking whiskey. I know he liked me, because he'd offer me his canteen often enough, which is not something he did unless he really liked you.

PART NINE: "AND THE RIVER KEEP A-TALKIN'"

Pigpen's health had been shaky at points in 1970, but by 1971 the ravages of many years of conscientious alcohol abuse really began to show. He was sick for extended periods and his once-full frame was now thin.

Doctors diagnosed him as having advanced liver disease and got him to stop drinking, eat healthier foods and take better care of himself.

He toured with the band through August of '71, but didn't take quite as active a role in concert. He played keyboards only occasionally, which meant that, with Mickey Hart's departure from the band in February of that year, the Dead frequently played as a quartet. There was one new Pigpen-Hunter original unveiled in '71, the jaunty "Mr. Charlie," which fit right in with several other rhythmically playful tunes Hunter and Garcia worked up during this period, including "Tennessee Jed," "Ramble On Rose" and "Sugaree." "I thought Mr. Charlie was a great tune," Garcia says. "I'm sorry we never got a chance to do that one in the studio."

Despite his frail appearance, Pig could still build a good head of steam when he got goin' onstage. I suppose it's ironic that the song he really shined on the first half of '71 was "Good Lovin'": "I was feelin' so bad / *Axed* my family doctor 'bout what I had / I said 'Doctor, Doctor, Mr. M.D. / can you tell me what's ailin' me?'" Some of Pig's longest and funniest raps came during versions of "Good Lovin'" from this period, so evidently the moments when he was in the spotlight must have been relatively pleasant for him.

Pigpen was so sick by the end of August that his doctors told him he shouldn't go on tour, and he was even hospitalized for a period in October. At the end of September the Dead hired Keith Godchaux to play keyboards, and Keith remained in the band even after Pigpen returned to limited performing in early December. The handwriting was on the wall.

Phil Lesh (1984): It was OK for Pigpen to lay out. We kept wanting Pigpen to be there because he was *one of us*. He really was. But he would lay out and that was OK, too. He didn't mind; we didn't mind. There was no ego problem there.

I don't think he ever got pissed off because we wanted somebody who could play keyboards, because that wasn't really his forte.

Jon McIntire: At a certain point the chemical [in alcohol] twists you around and it's not enlivening you or giving you inspiration; it's enervating you in many different ways. That's kind of how I perceived Pig's playing for a while — in the beginning it was really imaginative and the tempos were good, and then, after a while, after a certain number of years, it got into that maudlin space where it was just not good playing. The timing was off. I think it led to a lack of musical communication, and that's a band where musical communication was everything

Bob Weir: I think the drinking actually might have helped his performances for a while there, because he used to drink and that got him loose enough that he could do his rap. Alcohol definitely loosens the tongue. At the same time, though, I think it hindered his writing, and of course it took a tremendous toll on him physically, but that happened fairly slowly.

Jerry Garcia: He was never too drunk to perform. He was never a *blear*. Pigpen was not a drunk; he was a drinker. He drank all the time — first thing in the morning, all day long. But you never saw him out of it. You hardly ever heard him slur or anything. He'd just get more mellow. He'd get warmer. He was no stumbling drunk.

Tom Constanten: The important thing (with someone who is abusing a substance) is to say something that will have an effect. The problem is, most of the time, when anything is said, like in an intervention or something, the person who is trying to be saved takes an adversarial posture or assumes that everyone else is. And it doesn't work or it makes things worse. I don't think it was ever really tried on Pigpen. The doctor was the first to tell him. And hey, that was a time when everybody was doing so many things that the

laissez faire attitude was as much: "Who are we to tell him?"

Alan Trist: I heard in the talk-around that there was a real serious problem with Pigpen, but there definitely was an attitude that every man could look after his own health, and to try to be positive about things. To introduce negative thoughts or worrisome thoughts or anxieties is not a good thing. As we got older I think people were more prepared to take those sorts of initiatives. But when you're young, you don't expect your friends to be deteriorating, so you don't put a lot of energy into either worrying about it or taking care of them. It was obvious to everyone that Pigpen was a good ol' drinker, you know, but so were other people in the scene.

Jon McIntire: I remember one day Garcia coming into my office and saying, "Look, I'm really worried about Pig; I think his life is in danger, and I want to do whatever we can. The band'll pay for everything. Let's find out if there's anything we can do." So I researched it and I found out the most famous place in the world for liver problems was Sheila Sherlock's clinic in London. But my doctor, Sandor Berstein, said there was a guy at UCSF (University of California at San Francisco) who was as good. So we slotted Pig with him. And Pig jumped in and did it, too. He stopped drinking and he learned all the things about nutrition he could. He really tried but it was just too late.

Laird Grant: They were down on him for boozing all those years, and they gave him a lot of shit and a lot of hassle, while here are people doing coke and calling the kettle black. Then he got sick and he couldn't perform — and I saw people kind of turning their back on him, like he wasn't there.

Rock Scully: I don't think any of us were that aware of what was going on at the time. We were all kind of spun out a little bit, by our success, by the amount of work we had, being ginning to make money, people were spreading out, plus the fact that we were using drugs we had no experience with. Our experience had basically been with alcohol, pot and psychedelics. Then suddenly there was this new mix — cocaine enters the picture and I don't think any of us really understood what that was all about. At the

time it seemed recreational and non-habit forming. None of us thought of it as a danger; none of us really saw what it was doing to each other. We didn't get hip to that until further down the line. I think 1974 was probably when we started to figure out what was going on with heavy drugs. Before that we thought of it as an L.A. trip. That's where we got turned on to it.

With Pigpen and his drinking ... He had a way of being able to drink a lot and not show it. He had binges where he'd be obviously too drunk to handle things, but to be honest, we weren't that aware of alcohol abuse. America wasn't. It was a legal thing and Pigpen prided himself in the legality of his drug, as opposed to ours. We didn't even think of alcohol as a drug.

Jon McIntire: When we did Chateau D'Hourville in France [the band's European one nighter 6/21/71], Pig made it for that and it was just really great that we could go to Europe with Pig. He wasn't in very good shape then.

I don't usually think of the latter part of his life; I usually think of earlier times when he wasn't struggling with his liver.

After a while, his doctors decided that he couldn't go on the road. It was real black and white: he physically could not do it. I remember his doctor telling me at one point that there wasn't much hope, but I don't think I believed him. I don't think I even said anything about it to anyone. I think he knew he was really, really sick and it must have been scary as hell for him. It must have been. And he didn't have the cushion of alcohol to hide in.

Jerry Garcia: When he got really sick in '71, we thought he was going to die. At the time we just assumed it was all because of his drinking. But apparently he had this disease that was not diagnosed at the time that had to do with the enlarging of his organs. Apparently it's in his family; it's a genetic thing.

Wavy Gravy: Pigpen, before his demise, suddenly became like Mr. Tidy. The Pigpen

name no longer applied. Here was a streamlined, hair tacked back, impeccably attired gentleman of the keyboard.

Rock Scully: He started turning very pale. His cheeks started getting sunken in. I don't think we would've even noticed if we hadn't still been using psychedelics, because you can see it so easily when you're high. Psychedelics do instill a certain amount of honesty and vision. Pig started getting listless and losing weight and looking sallow. And you could just feel that there was no enthusiasm. One thing Pig always was was enthusiastic; he was very up about things. And he started to turn kind of sour. Bobby will tell you, there was a smell about him; his sickness started to ooze out of his pores. At that point it was so late in the game. We didn't pay attention to it, mainly because we were all sort of fucked up ourselves — that's basically where it's at; that's a terrible thing to say. And I'll say it about myself and let others say it about themselves. I wasn't paying that much attention, and I was closer to him than some of the bandmembers.

Medicine wasn't as hip as it is today. And his diet was certainly poor. His idea of breakfast was bacon. He loved pork chops and greasy food. His idea of food was to go to Banks' barbecue on Haight Street down by Fillmore. If he was going to eat a vegetable it was going to be pumpkin pie or sweet potato pie. The rest of it was ribs and beef.

Jerry Garcia (1971): He's pretty sick. But he's living. He was really, really, *extremely* sick. I don't really know *how* sick, because I never hung out at the hospital that much, although I did give him a pint of blood. We all did. He was really fucked up; his liver was full of holes, and then he had some kind of perforated ulcer — just all kinds of bum trips from juicing all these years. And he's a young dude, man. He's only 26.

From juicing! He survived it and now he's got the option of being a juicer or not being a juicer. To be a juicer means to die, so now he's being able to choose whether to live or die. And if I know Pigpen, he'll choose to live. That's pretty much where he's at. For the time being he's too sick, too weak to go out on the road, and I wouldn't want to expose

him to that world. It would be groovy if he could take as long as it takes to get him to feelin' right, and then to work on his solo album, and get himself together in terms of becoming. It's sort of like stepping out of the blues story, 'cause Pigpen is sort of a guy who's been a victim of the whole blues trip. It's like Janis, in which you must die. That's what the script says. So Pigpen went up to the line, and he's seen it now, so the question is how he's going to choose.

PART TEN: ROCKIN' PNEUMONIA AND THE BOOGIE-WOOGIE FLU"

Actually, there was no real choice: Pigpen didn't drink for the last 17 months of his life, and his liver disease continued its cruel progression anyway. Still, there was guarded optimism in the Dead camp when Pigpen returned for the last dozen concerts of 1971, which included shows in the East, Midwest and back home at Winterland on New Year's Eve. The Pigpen sense of humor was obviously still intact: he and the band worked up a version of Chuck Berry's "Run Rudolph Run" for the Christmas-month shows. And on New Year's Eve, he introduced an excellent new song of his own: "Chinatown Shuffle." Like "Mr. Charlie," it fit wonderfully with the direction the band's writing was going: it bounced along happily like an early forerunner of "U.S. Blues," with sort of a jump-blues feel in parts. Lyrically it almost had the feel of a Hunter composition, with short, clever phrases and a dash of old Americana:

Take it, you can have it,

What I've got baby I can't hold If you've got the secret, tell me how to build a mold

Get it right, do it nice

If you make a mistake, pay for it twice

But if you need it, got to have it

Get yourself a shotgun and bring it back home

I'm not sure just what the message is here, or what the title refers to, either.

Pig was back on the road in the spring of '72, introducing another new song, "Two Souls in Communion," during the band's week-long run at New York's Academy of Music, right before the band jetted off for their fabled Europe '72 tour. "Two Souls" was another very strong composition, different for both the Dead and for Pigpen. It's a slow with Keith

Godchaux gospel blues, and the theme is decidedly dark, almost remorseful: *"Did I take a wrong turn on life's winding road? / Won't somebody help me find the right place to go? / I might need some correction, alteration in direction / Won't someone comfort me for a while?"*

At that point, Pigpen didn't really have the vocal chops to completely put the song across, but it's still a haunting and powerful tune, made all the more eerie by his demise a year later. Unfortunately, neither song made it onto *Europe '72* (the band instead chose "Mr. Charlie" and a not particularly inspired "It Hurts Me Too" as Pig's only lead vocals for the album), and obviously we'll never find out how either song would have developed with repeated playings.

Though he got the green light from his doctors to go on the Europe tour, he was not a well man by any means. Still, he gave his all night after night, gamely doing that Pigpen thing on "Good Lovin'" and "Lovelight" for one more round, singing his new songs and chestnuts like "Next Time You See Me" and "Caution" with all the gusto he could muster, and even tackling a new tune — another one soaked in irony, Huey Smith's "Rockin' Pneumonia." Keith Godchaux played piano (brilliantly) on that tour, and Pigpen sat night after night behind his B-3, coming out to the front of the stage just a few times. Two weeks after the Europe tour he made it down to Southern California for what would be his final show — a one-nighter at the Hollywood Bowl, June 17, 1972. "Rockin' Pneumonia" was the only song he sang that night.

Sue Swanson: When people were still planning the Europe tour, Pig told me, "Don't you dare talk Veronica into coming on this tour," because she was just about done with her nursing degree — she was so close — and he knew that one word about going on the tour and she would've said, "I'm outta here."

Jerry Garcia: We were so delighted when he was able to come to Europe with us, 'cause he'd been so sick. And then when we were there he played and sang real good. He had a great time. He wasn't as strong as he had been certainly, but he was there.

Annette Flowers: Although I'd known him for years — since the mid-'60s — we became really close on the Europe tour. He was sick and I got incredibly sick, and we stayed behind in Munich together for a few days and caught up with the rest of the band in Zurich; the two of us flew alone. So we spent some time together there.

I lost 30 pounds on that tour. I got some kind of a bug or a parasite and it was really rough. He was going through some of the same things. It was difficult for him to travel and he was in some pain.

Rock Scully: He couldn't drink but his temperament was real good. Even though everyone else around him was drinking. He was real positive. He loved Europe; he really loved it. He rode on the hard bus, this Danish bus, which was sort of like the crew bus. It was the quieter of the two buses usually. Pigpen lived on the back bench of that bus.

Annette Flowers: The dynamic of who rode on what bus was pretty funny. It was usually determined by who was getting along with whom. You usually didn't know till people came out of their hotel rooms in the morning. The hard part about it was the bar was on one bus and the bathroom was on the other. So we had to stop a lot.

Rock Scully: He got knocked off of that bench five or six times. He rolled off of that bench and a couple of times he really hurt himself — I could see it; he really hurt his kidneys and bruised himself. I'd have to help him off the bus.

Annette Flowers: I remember being on the bus and riding for ten hours a day, these long bus rides going bump-ba bump. He and I were both progressively getting worse. I remember at one point him sleeping on the back of the bus and we came to a sudden stop and — boom! — he fell right off the back bench. I remember being so sick in Germany I was wishing they'd just leave me by the side of the road and shoot me.

Pigpen and I missed the most beautiful part of the tour — they stopped in Lucerne and stayed in a castle, went boating out on a lake.

But his mood was always pretty good. He was a sweetheart, a beautiful cat. He was a trooper. He didn't complain; I complained a lot more than he did. Pigpen was trying to give me his medication, hoping to cheer me up. I think that trip sort of sunk it for him; put him over. It was really grueling in a lot of ways.

Eileen Law: When they came back from Europe the rest of the band would go on tours. Keith went out and Pig stayed home. Pig would call the office — it was just a skeleton crew — and he was really having a hard time with the band being on the road and him being out of that. He would call and just want to talk. We all felt really bad for him because here was this person that I once thought was a Hell's Angel, and now he was this little thin person. It was like seeing someone get cancer and then just deteriorate. He had this thin, thin face, but he'd still have his little hat on.

Bob Weir: He had been slowing down and gradually getting sicker, and his musical output was tapering, so by the time he finally had to stay off the road, he hadn't been contributing that much so it didn't have that major an impact; it happened so slowly.

Coincidentally, I started to get my stride around the same time, and with Pigpen sick, there was a need for me to do more as well.

Annette Flowers: I always felt kind of bad about bringing in Keith and Donna because it was almost like bringing in Pigpen's replacement before he was gone. I think it was a sign to him that everybody else sensed that he was fading, too. Setting up for when he wasn't around.

From the tape of 7/26/72, Portland, Oregon:

Bobby: You folks who are hollerin' for Pigpen numbers might notice that Pigpen ain't with us tonight. He's home in, home sick in bed. And, uh, we'll all send your best wishes back to him."

Phil: Yeah, if that's OK with you.

Tom Constanten: He was obviously having a lot of problems. He was on this no-sodium diet. No alcohol. Things were quite different. He had a medicine chest full of medications. But his attitude was pretty good. He kept reading and playing music, keeping his mind active.

Annette Flowers: In his declining health I visited the hospital up the road in Novato, and after he went home I stayed in touch with him a lot. I spoke to him on an almost daily basis when he was in the hospital.

Danny Rifkin: I saw him at his house. He had edema, swelling of the legs. Remember how when the Shah [of Iran] got sick he became this little man with a little voice? Pigpen was like that a little bit; not physically, but he became very quiet.

Laird Grant: God knows what kind of emotional shit he went through near the end, between trying to keep up with the band and keep up with that alcoholic jones that he had. When it got down to where he couldn't drink, that really knocked him for a loop because then he was in a total void — he had no place to hide. He didn't smoke weed, he didn't take psychedelics, he couldn't drink. And there he was. It was like being shuffled off to the side track and watching the freights go by.

Bob Matthews: I know that in the last couple of years of his life he was being encouraged to do an album by both the band and the record company. I had set him up with my own little portable Ampex half-inch 4-track machine and a little Ampex two-channel, four-microphone mixer, and I built this little passive mixer, called it the Pig Mixer. It allowed him to overdub. But I never heard any of the stuff he did with it.

Alan Trist: During that period when he wasn't on the road with the band he was actually working on an album, working on songs. Around that time, the solo album thing really took off — Jerry was the first, then Weir, and Mickey, and Pigpen was right in there, too. He was working up songs, planning it out. I remember going over to his house in the Marin County town of Corte Madera] a couple of times and hearing odd tapes that he played. His way of projecting the blues through his singing was so soulful and authentic,

whether it was with the Grateful Dead or by himself at home.

Bob Weir (1972): Pigpen, if health permits, will be coming up with some surprises pretty quickly. His album is still in the future. It's not a concrete reality plac yet. He's written some very good songs. But as far as I'm concerned he's not ready to do an album yet because he's not going to make the mistake I did [with Ace] of not being absolutely ready.

I left a lot of stuff to chance. I did it purposely. But in Pig pen's case, it would be pretty much advantageous to really know what he's going to do. The way I see it, he could do a record best if he did it in a week. It'd have the spontaneity that Pigpen can just put out.

Rock Scully: I don't think it was really going to be a solo album. I think the way he looked at it was it was going to be part of a Dead album. He wanted three songs on a Dead album. A couple of them were beautiful. He didn't have enough for a whole album; he wanted a significant part of a Dead album again. He'd worked up a couple of really nice songs. They were a little sad, but with Jerry's influence I think they could have worked beautifully with the Grateful Dead.

Laird Grant: I was doing all this shelving and remodeling some offices and stuff [for the Grateful Dead] and I'd be out there working and he'd come by. We'd have a smoke and we'd rap and stuff. He was looking pretty wan, pretty gaunt. He'd complain, "Aww ... the doctor this, doctor that ... but I'm workin' on some tunes, man, and the doctor says I can go out on this next tour as long as I'm cool behind it." But he said, "It's really cold out there, man, me bein' sick and shit. It's just not the same, man. But it's OK."

Rock Scully: Pigpen was supposed to come back. All the reports I heard were very positive that he was getting better. He didn't do anything to fuck up; it's just that his body gave up.

Sue Swanson: Veronica and Pig separated shortly before he died. My personal opinion — and I never talked to her about it, because it seemed to be too private and too

painful, even for someone as close to her as I was — was that he knew what was happening, that he was dying, and he sent her away. There had been some friction between them. But I think he did it on purpose, to help her, because he knew what was coming.

Tom Constanten: I visited him at his house about a week before he died, and he wasn't very well, but I was still surprised when I heard that he'd died; I was planning to see him that weekend. Paul Boucher, a disc jockey from KTIM, called me and told me, and my first thought was — this is so weird how your mind works — my first thought was, "Far out, I'll have to ask him what that experience was like when I see him next week." It just didn't register.

Laird Grant: I had my half pint of cherry brandy or something and was smoking a joint, doing some work out in the yard, and Pigpen said something like "Have one for me." I killed the bottle and threw it in the garbage can and he got in his little Ford Cortina, or wherever he was driving. I went and finished my day, went on home to Bolinas and the next thing I knew Sue Swanson was phoning me, telling me that Pigpen was dead.

Sue Swanson: I was at home. Jon McIntire, Danny Rifkin and I shared a big house up in Novato, and I remember sitting around the table early that morning trying to remember to call everybody, because poor Mountain Girl had read it in the paper. We hadn't called her early enough. We were all completely in shock. I mean even though everyone knew he was really sick, it still seemed sudden. I think everyone wanted to believe that he'd make it in the long run.

Jerry Garcia: When he went in the hospital in '71 and we all gave him blood, they were saying, "That's it, he's not going to make it," so in effect we went through it — we went through the pain. Then he came out of it for a while and it was great. And actually I thought he was doing pretty good. When he died he kind of just snuck away. But I guess the stress on his system was finally just too much for him.

From *Rolling Stone*, April 12, 1973:

Corte Madera, Calif. — Ron McKernan, better known as Pigpen, was found dead in his apartment here March 8th. The organist and singer, a founding member of the Grateful Dead, was 27.

The body was found at about 9 p.m. by his landlady. She had noticed that for a couple of days his car had been in the garage, the lights in the house left burning, and the back door open. McKernan was found lying on the floor beside his bed, half-dressed as if about to get into bed. He had apparently been dead for two days.

At press time the Marin County Coroner's Office had not issued a final autopsy, but the suspected cause of death was hemorrhaging of blood vessels around the liver and the point where the esophagus enters the stomach. He had been under a doctor's care for cirrhosis. [Note: The final autopsy concluded the acute cause of death was a "massive gastrointestinal hemorrhage," and also mentioned the diseased liver and a "massively enlarged spleen" and some pulmonary edema.]

Rock Scully: For Pigpen to die alone — that was one that we really beat ourselves up about for a long time. We had somebody looking after him and everything, but she wasn't around when it happened.

Annette Flowers: The whole thing with [the woman looking after him] was kind of strange. I don't really want to talk about it. But I wish I had taken a leave from my job and moved in there with him to help him out.

PART ELEVEN: "GOOD-BYE, GOOD-BYE, PO' KATIE"

Discovered in Pigpen's apartment shortly after he died were tapes of several songs, including one slow, somber, gospel-flavored tune that featured Pig singing over a simple piano line:

Look over yonder, tell me what do you see?

10,000 people looking after me

I may be famous, or I may be no one

But in the end, all the races I've run

Don't make my race run in vain

Don't make me live in this pain no longer

You know I'm gettin weaker, not stronger

My poor heart can't stand much more If you're gonna walk out that door, start walkin'

I'll get by somehow

Maybe not tomorrow, but somehow

I know someday I will find someone

Who can ease my pain like you once done

Three days after Pigpen's death a wake/party was held at Bob Weir's house. The next day, March 12, there was a traditional Roman Catholic funeral at a mortuary a few blocks from where he'd died. About 200 people attended, including Pigpen's and Veronica's families, members of the Dead family, Merry Pranksters down from Oregon

and even a dozen Hell's Angels, including New York chapter president Sandy Alexander. Pig pen was buried that afternoon at Alta Mesa Memorial Park in Palo Alto, just a few miles from the McKernan homestead.

Sue Swanson: [The wake at Weir's] was the first time everyone wanted to go out and get drunk. It was very shocking and very sad, and so untimely. I mean almost nobody was even 30 at that point, so to lose someone at that point was almost unthinkable.

Jon McIntire: I chose the booze for the wake and we bought cases and cases of stuff. I mean what are you gonna do, man? A favorite thing in Pig's life was drinkin', so what are you gonna do if you throw a party for Pig? You're gonna drink a lot, and we did, and we told lewd and rude stories about him all night — and there are lots of them to tell. It was wonderful. It was a great party because it was loose and it was desperate and it was full of love. Because nobody disliked Pig; I mean nobody disliked Pig. Same with V. Everybody loved V.

Alan Trist: The wake was quite wakeful. It was a real one, that's for sure.

Laird Grant: I didn't go to the wake at Weir's. Me and Bobby Peterson and a couple of ladies had our own wake in Bolinas.

Bob Weir: It was a riotous affair. There must have been 500 people here. It was raining to beat hell that night. There were people everywhere — in the bushes, you name it.

Rock Scully (1973): [At the funeral] his family really blew our minds. They had him laid out in an open casket dressed in his leather jacket and his brown cowboy shirt, with his hat on the pillow.

Sue Swanson: I was in complete shock. The Kesey people came down from Oregon. All I remember about it was not going by the open casket. We were sitting three or four rows back, I was on the end and I just turned and walked out. I couldn't do it. I didn't want it to be my last view of him. I couldn't handle it.

Eileen Law: It was hard seeing [V's] family and his family. People were really upset. And you could see Pigpen's hat peeking up above the casket and all the stuff you knew Pig by.

Rock Scully: I just remember the funeral as totally depressing. I was just totally brought down. I've never seen Jerry more unhappy, ever. God, he was devastated; we all were.

Laird Grant: It was pretty sad. There are a lot of funerals you go to and you feel OK about it — the guy's been dying for six months or whatever so everyone expects it — but with Pig pen it was sort of like: OK, here's *this* one. Hang onto your hats kids! You ain't seen shit yet! Here goes Pigpen! Now what happens?

PART TWELVE: "LET IT SHINE, SHINE, SHINE"

Three days after the funeral, the Dead went back out on 'the road for a two-week East Coast tour. It had been nine months since Pigpen had played with the band, so in essence the Grateful Dead was already in its post-Pigpen mode. On March 19 at Nassau Coliseum, the band played "He's Gone" for the first time since Pig's death, and many in the crowd responded by flicking their lighters in a quiet tribute to the fallen bandmember. As Robert Hunter told me in 1991, "it became an anthem for Pigpen" for quite some time. *Bear's Choice*, an album of 1970 performances that the band released in 1973 shortly after Pigpen's death, became a de facto tribute to Pig, as well: it contains three Pigpen songs, including an acoustic "Katie Mae" and electrifying versions of "Hard to Handle" and "Smokestack Lightning."

It would be several years before the band would touch any of his material, and it wasn't really until the late '70s, with the introduction of songs like "Shakedown Street" and "Feel Like a Stranger," that the Dead tackled the ferocious R&B grooves they specialized in during Pigpen's heyday. Weir sang "Good Lovin'" for the first time at the group's last pre-"retirement" show in October '74, but didn't begin performing it in earnest with the group until '77. And then he changed the arrangement considerably, away from the riff-heavy R&B of the Pigpen version, to a lighter, almost Caribbean feel. And in Bobby's "raps" on the song (which were a far cry from the lascivious raves Pigpen specialized in), he usually paid tribute to his old buddy, sprinkling in lines like, *"It's like a good friend of mine used to say: 'Deep down inside you got a light/You gotta turn it on, let it get strong, let it get bright.'"*

By '84 Weir had revived "Smokestack Lightning." The following year he brought "Lovelight" back into the rotation — again minus the Pigpen grit — and in '91 he resuscitated "The Same Thing." "It's only come up as it's come up," Weir said of Pigpen's material in 1985. "It hasn't been forced."

Rock Scully: Right from the get-go after Pig died, Jerry stated it out front: "This'll never be the same again. It'll always be something else. It's just a whole different thing."

Jon McIntire: Frankie went to work on Bobby and did a very effective job. She talked him into a frame of mind of trying to get himself more musically disciplined and trying to think of himself as being able to be more out front and assert himself more onstage. And she did it very out front, as well as very subtly and very consistently over a period of a couple of years. And it worked. Frankie was very close to Pig, very close to T.C., and we were very close friends, too.

Bob Weir: We'd been getting used to [Pigpen's absence] all along, so it wasn't a sudden change when he died; it was a very gradual change that became formal when he wasn't here anymore at all.

Jerry Garcia: We played without him for almost a year [before he died], but still, after he died, you'd go out there [on stage] and it'd be like, "Where's Pig?" And we missed all those songs. It was like operating with a broken leg. So we went to our next strong suit, which was kind of a country feel; the American mythos, the Hunter songs. And our other strong suit was our [musical] weirdness. So we went with our strong suits that didn't involve Pigpen.

Jon McIntire: His dad sent us a letter after Pigpen died that was amazing. He was telling us that it wasn't our fault; it was *his* fault. And he told us how much we meant to Pigpen, how we were his life and how great it was that we were there for him. I felt like I wanted him to transform this grief and this blame on himself into something else. There we were — you know the reputation the Grateful Dead has, and it was even stronger than about external indulgences, and he wasn't blaming us. It was the opposite. And there was a sweetness in it that was really deep.

Robert Hunter: While we were up in Point Reyes rehearsing for the *Wake of the Flood* album, somebody left a Ouija board lying around. So Donna and I, having nothing much to do, and neither of us having ever had any luck with a Ouija board, put the Ouija board

on the table, put our fingers on the glass and decided to call up Pigpen. Well — that glass started moving like greased lightning. I know Donna wasn't pushing it, and I know I wasn't pushing it. We were sitting there watching this thing! It was Pigpen. So we started asking him questions. Where was he? Well, he was in heaven. Oh ... was it nice there? Yeah, it was nice. Then we asked, "What do you do there?" And it went to "T-V." How do you get around up there? "V-W." Do you have a message for anybody? "V." So Pigpen's safe in heaven watching television, driving around in a VW and he has a message for V, which he can now deliver in person since she's now undoubtedly there with him. Donna and I got a little weirded out behind that, so we gave the glass up to — I think it was Billy and Weir, and that damn glass kept moving; it did it for them, too. That was it, man. I never touched a Ouija board again.

Ken Kesey: If Pigpen hadn't died the Dead would be a completely different band. They all had to fill in the space that he left and that forced them to extend themselves. Have you seen *White Men Can't Jump*? Well, Pigpen was the *black* side of that movie. He could rap in a song, make up words, make up situations. He could jive. None of the other bandmembers have been able to do that. Not many white guys can do it. It's a real black-guy thing. And that was something really special that he brought to the band.

Bob Weir: After a number of years it finally occurred to me that doing a Pigpen tune here and there was a fitting tribute to the old boy himself. At first, nobody wanted to touch any of those songs, but then we started looking at it differently. They're all good songs. Every time we play "Lovelight" I think of him — every time.

Jerry Garcia: "Lovelight" will always be Pigpen's tune. That's sort of like our tribute to him; we're calling him back a little when we play that.

Sue Swanson: All that I carry with me is a lovely, soft, warm person who loved me and who I loved, who was truly my brother. The only time I ever saw him get violent was some guy fucked around with me when the Dead was playing a concert in the Panhandle on a flatbed truck; the guy was hassling me, and Pigpen put his boot out and

BAM, that guy went flying. He was a very special person to me, like a big brother, very protective of me.

Peter Albin: I had a lot of fun with Ron and I really miss him. He was one of the real characters of the scene.

Jon McIntire: I don't know if the younger Deadheads can get Pigpen, if they can really understand what was going on with him, because the documents aren't really there. There's a lot of raucous organ work on the first album, and it's also very happy, very joyous. When you watched Pigpen playing the crowd — and he played the crowd very well in those raps — he did it in such a way that he evoked a very warm response.

Jerry Garcia: He never really performed at the top of his ability. He could have been *really* great. If he pushed himself, he could have been in the category of someone like Van Morrison. 'Cause he really had it. But he had no drive and no ambition. He didn't care about being center stage. It didn't mean that much to him. He didn't have the celebrity head.

Tom Constanten: He was almost the exact opposite of his public image. He looked like a pirate who would run you through with a sword, but he was one of the sweetest gentlemen I've ever encountered. We were probably as close as two heterosexual males could be in this society.

Jerry Garcia (1988): It's hard for me to say what it was about him that people really loved. But they loved him a lot. I know I loved him a lot, and I couldn't begin to tell you why. He was a lovable person. Really, it hasn't felt right since Pigpen's been gone, but on the other hand he's always been around a little, too. He hasn't been entirely gone. He's right around.

Laird Grant: I think what needs to be done before this decade is finished is a real comprehensive collection of stuff that he did — even if it's funky. Who cares if it's not on the fucking beat? You listen to all these scratchy blues records, and it doesn't matter

that they're not proper. But there's *soul* there. I'd like to see real long CD of nothing but Pig.

Phil Lesh (1981): If I could have one wish in the world, it would be that Pigpen was still with us. I think it's safe to say we *all* miss Pigpen.

Jerry Garcia: I really miss him. He was lovable and he was so much fun — he was a fun hang-out. I don't know anybody who didn't like him.

Bob Weir: You had to see his cute little dance steps and stuff like that to catch the whole impact of the Mighty Pig. He was a whole lot of fun.

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