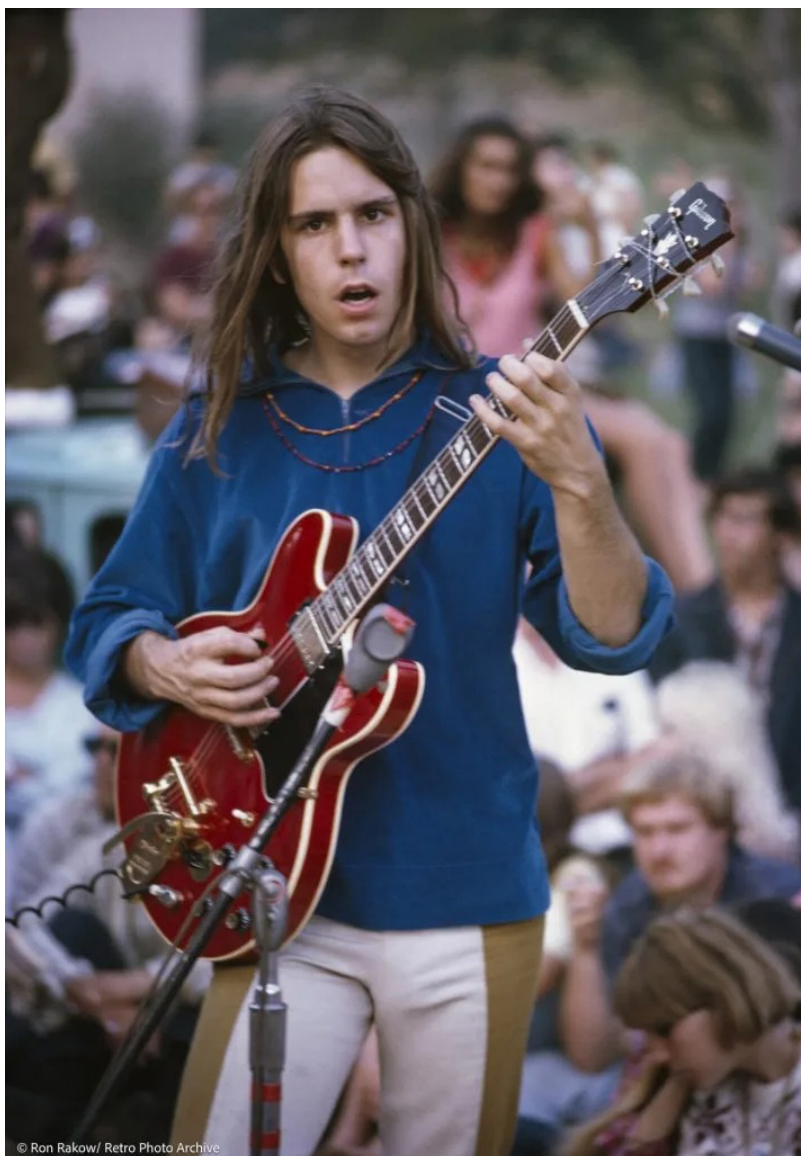


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Art & Exhibitions

## Long-Hidden Grateful Dead Photos Emerge From the Archives

"An American Beauty" at David Kordansky in New York resurfaces images from the Dead's heyday.



Ron Rakow, Bob Weir performing in Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, CA, 1967. Photo: © Ron Rakow / Retro Photo Archive. Courtesy the artist, Retro Photo Archive, and David Kordansky Gallery.

by **Min Chen** Jun 23, 2026

The **Grateful Dead** is surely more than a band. Yes, the group did define the contours of jam music, but over decades, it has spawned its own subculture, defined by a psychedelic visual language and populated by its ever-loyal Deadheads who trail the band from city to city in a swirl of tie-dye. "It's truly a community and a lifestyle," curator **Ricki Blakesberg** told me.

Ricki and her father, veteran photographer **Jay Blakesberg**, are behind the traveling exhibition of photographs capturing the Dead in its heyday and the scene that grew up around it. After originating in San Francisco, with stops in Las Vegas and Los Angeles, "An American Beauty: Grateful Dead 1965–1995," is opening this week at **David Kordansky** in New York, where more than 30 photos will be on view, offering a breathtaking glimpse of the Dead universe.



© Greg Gaar/ Retro Photo Archive  
Greg Gaar, Grateful Dead, Winterland Arena, San Francisco, CA, March 18, 1977. Photo: © Greg Gaar / Retro Photo Archive. Courtesy the artist, Retro Photo Archive, and David Kordansky Gallery.

Deadheads are in for a treat. Most of the images featured here are emerging for the first time from the archives of photographers—among them **Suki Coughlin**, **Adrian Boot**, **Bob Minkin**, **Rosie McGee**, and Jay himself—where they've been hidden away for decades.

"There's so much Grateful Dead in the zeitgeist already, now more than ever," Ricki said. "When we were working with David on the show, we were trying to figure out how to make this show unique and exciting for viewers, so it wasn't just something they've seen before."



Ron Rakow, Jerry Garcia, Château d'Hérouville, France, July 1971. Photo: © Ron Rakow / Retro Photo Archive. Courtesy the artist, Retro Photo Archive, and David Kordansky Gallery.

## Unearthing the Dead

For the uninitiated, the Grateful Dead formed in 1965 in San Francisco, in time to soundtrack the decade's countercultural swell. Over three decades, the band would create music that melded elements of rock 'n' roll, folk, blues, psychedelia, and sounds in between. They toured relentlessly—logging more than 2,000 shows between '65 and '95—graduating from local joints to stadiums, most notably traveling with their massive 600-speaker sound system, known as the "Wall of Sound," in the 1970s.

"American Beauty" aims to capture the breadth of that experience. Here, you'll find rare pictures from the band's 1978 visit to Egypt, scenes of Deadheads during the golden days of Haight-Ashbury, offstage moments such as one of

frontman **Jerry Garcia** hanging out with **Ken Kesey**, and previously unseen shots including one of guitarist **Bob Weir** in jail following a 1967 drug bust.

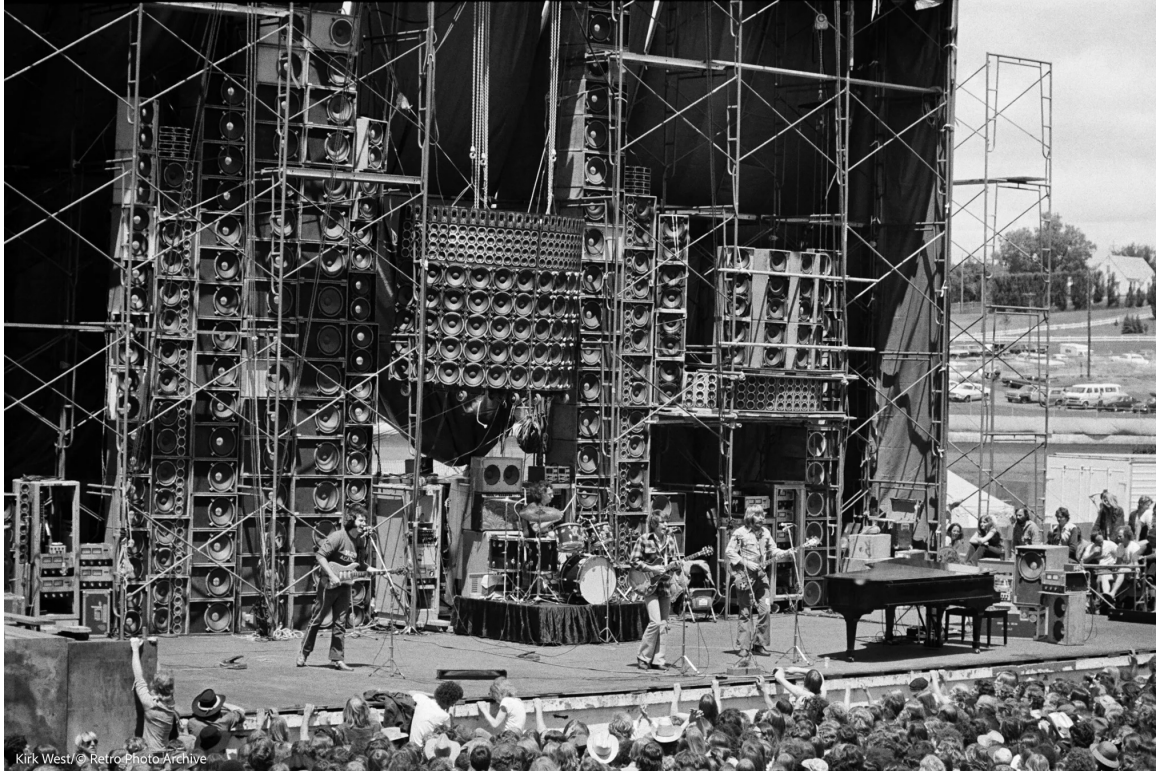


Rosie McGee, Ken Kesey and Jerry Garcia backstage at the Newport Pop Festival, 1968. Photo: © Rosie McGee / Retro Photo Archive. Courtesy the artist, Retro Photo Archive, and David Kordansky Gallery.

Why have these images gone unseen for so long? As Jay and Ricki explained over a video call, photographers in the 1960s through '80s had limited avenues to circulate their pictures in the absence of the internet or social media. What went unpublished simply disappeared into their archives. To help bring the work back into the light, the Blakesbergs launched **Retro Photo Archive** in 2025, a boutique platform dedicated to licensing these long-overlooked images.

The rediscoveries are aplenty. There are works by **Ron Rakow**, who managed and photographed the Dead both on and off stage in vivid color—"he didn't even do it for the band; he just did it for himself," Jay said. Portland-based **Bruce Polonsky** and longtime **Allman Brothers** photographer **Kirk West** both witnessed the Dead's "Wall of Sound" era, capturing the sheer scale of these shows in black-and-white.

The images of street photographer **Greg Gaar**, who chronicled San Francisco's musical history as a hobby, are seeing publication for the first time (Retro Photo Archive is releasing a book of his street scenes). Photojournalist **Elizabeth Sunflower** shot very little of the Dead, Jay said, but was present, with camera in hand, when Weir was arrested in '67.



Kirk West, Grateful Dead, Wall of Sound, Des Moines State Fairgrounds, Des Moines, IA, June 16, 1974. Photo: © Kirk West / Retro Photo Archive. Courtesy the artist, Retro Photo Archive, and David Kordansky Gallery.



Elizabeth Sunflower, Bob Weir, City Jail, San Francisco, CA, October 2, 1967. Photo: © Elizabeth Sunflower / Retro Photo Archive. Courtesy the artist, Retro Photo Archive, and David Kordansky Gallery.

"When we acquired the archive from Elizabeth's family, we had no idea that photo was in there," Jay added. "When I showed that picture to Bob, he said, 'Wow, a photograph of me that I'd never seen before.'"

Of course, there are numerous pictures of Deadheads—many decked out in psychedelic hues, often with eyes closed and bodies in motion, in thrall to the music (and with nary a cell phone in sight, Jay pointed out). Some sport their own creations: one striking image by Jay from 1979 depicts the back of a fan's denim jacket, resplendent with a hand-painted design, as the man grasps a bumper sticker that reads, "Warning: I brake for hallucinations."

"We were trying to find these moments that felt ephemeral—the fans, the color, and the excitement of the dancing and the signs—but we also want to have these quiet moments," Ricki said. "We wanted visitors to feel like they were part of that moment."



Jay Blakesberg, *Deadheads*, Laguna Seca Raceway, Monterey, CA, May 10, 1987. Photo: © Jay Blakesberg/ Retro Photo Archive. Courtesy the artist, Retro Photo Archive, and David Kordansky Gallery.

## Revisiting the Dead

The Blakesbergs are also quick to credit Kordansky—one of "the last generation of OG Deadheads," per Jay—for recognizing the significance of the Dead's visual legacy. Besides bringing the show to Los Angeles and New York, the gallerist has

published its accompanying book. In a statement, he called the images "crucial documents for understanding how American culture—including music, visual art, and technology—has evolved since the 1960s."

That these photographs are being rediscovered for new generations of Dead-heads is something the Blakesbergs appreciate firsthand. As father and daughter, they naturally view the photos from entirely different vantage points shaped by age and experience. A photograph that Jay might dismiss on technical or professional grounds, may resonate with Ricki for its moment or feeling. Seen through two sets of eyes, the archive is less fixed than richly alive.



Jay Blakesberg, The Warfield, San Francisco, CA, September 27, 1980. Photo: © Jay Blakesberg/ Retro Photo Archive. Courtesy the artist, Retro Photo Archive, and David Kordansky Gallery.

"He's a professional photographer and I'm not. The way we look at certain things, it can be really different," Ricki said, adding that McGee has told her much the same. "She was like, 'So many of the photos that you put on the [Retro Photo Archive] website aren't photos that I would have picked. It's so exciting to have a fresh eye on my archive.'"

"My professional photographer mentality gets in the way sometimes, to be honest," Jay added. "Ricki has really changed my perspective on what is okay—it doesn't always have to be a perfectly composed or perfectly lit photo. I look at these photographs in new ways because of how Ricki approaches them."

*"An American Beauty: Grateful Dead 1965–1995" is on view at David Kordansky, 520 West 20th Street, New York, June 23–August 7.*