

OBSERVER

Jay and Ricki Blakesberg On Becoming Stewards of the Grateful Dead's Visual History

The father-and-daughter team behind Retro Photo Archive discuss the Neal Cassady slide that started it all, the unlabeled film rolls that yielded the jail-cell portrait Weir had never seen and what it means to give these photographs a wall at David Kordansky Gallery.

By Dan Duray • 07/17/26 3:31pm



Jay and Ricki Blakesberg. Photo by Peter Fisher. Courtesy of Retro Photo Archive and David Kordansky Gallery

Late last month David Kordansky Gallery opened "An American Beauty: Grateful Dead 1965-1995," on view at its New York space at 520 W. 20th Street through August 7. Curated by the father-and-daughter team of Jay and Ricki Blakesberg, it gathers 20 large-scale prints and more than a dozen smaller ones by 11 photographers who shot the band from the Haight-Ashbury days through the Jerry Garcia years. The New York iteration opens five months after the death of Bob Weir, which sets a different and elegiac tone for the work. We caught up with the Blakesbergs to hear about the manager who became one of the band's earliest photographers, the slide of Neal Cassady that started the archive and the jail-cell portrait Weir had never seen.

"Between the Dark and Light" opened at the Haight Street Art Center in July 2023, timed to Dead & Company's three-night farewell at Oracle Park. David Kordansky came through the exhibition without introducing himself, then approached you that night at the concert. How did a five-day fan show become a David Kordansky book and exhibition?

Jay: Dave saw the exhibition at the Haight Street Art Center in San Francisco and it really moved him. He sought me out after that and reached out, but I had no idea who he was or what his gallery was. I just said sure, let's talk, not expecting to ever hear from him again.

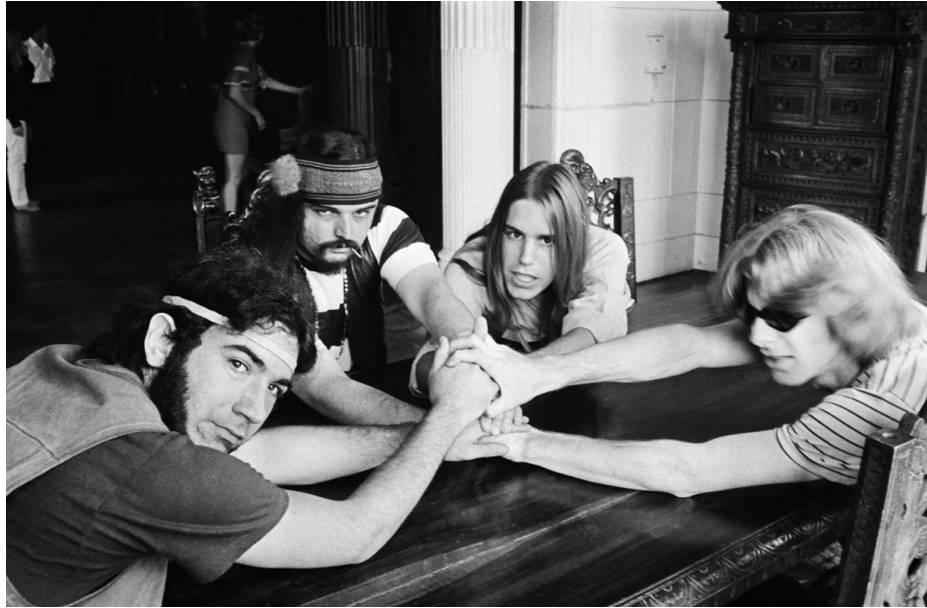
After our first conversation and a little research, I realized who Dave was and how important David Kordansky Gallery is. I could also see how much he loved the Grateful Dead. Once we built a rapport, we started discussing the idea of a catalogue/book based on the original exhibition.

The next iteration of the exhibition was in Las Vegas during the Sphere run with Dead & Company. When we did that show, Dave saw even more photos than what was in the SF exhibit and kept asking, "Are these gonna be in the book?" I said absolutely, and it kept growing.

After those two exhibitions, we had a meeting in L.A. where Dave brought up the idea of doing a show at his Los Angeles gallery, which we ended up doing in June 2025. We are so thankful to Dave for seeing the uniqueness and beauty in these photographs and giving us a platform to put them out for so many more people to enjoy.

The 2024 version sat inside the "Dead Forever Experience" at Sphere in Las Vegas. That version was a two-story fan space with merch, Mickey Hart's artworks and David Lemieux's tape collection. It saw more than 65,000 visitors. In New York, there are 20 large-scale prints and two-dozen-plus smaller ones, in editions of three. How do you decide what goes into each iteration of this show? Is it hard to decide what's cut?

Jay: Ricki took the lead in curating both the L.A. and NYC shows and worked very closely with Dave, where they share a very similar aesthetic. Dave's aesthetic for his exhibitions is often "less is more," and when Ricki and I started to curate the exhibit, we knew we had to do a really tight edit. We looked for imagery that was really strong, but also helped tell the story of this band and their career arc from 1966 until 1995, when Jerry Garcia passed away.



Ron Rakow, *The Grateful Dead*, 1967. Courtesy of the artist, Retro Photo Archive and David Kordansky Gallery

Nearly every 1967 image in the show is Ron Rakow's, the band's one-time manager: the 710 Ashbury portraits of Pigpen and Weir, Potrero Hill, Golden Gate Park. The book widens his run to Owsley Stanley, Neal Cassady and the first-album sessions. How did the manager become the band's primary early photographer?

Jay: Ron Rakow was an amateur photographer who took it very seriously. He had a camera and knew how to use it. Rakow always had his camera on him and was capturing intimate moments of the band on and off the stage. Because of his access, Rakow was constantly photographing the band, and publications would often use his work. Since Rakow would send his slides and negatives in to be used, a common outcome was not getting them back. Because of this, a large number of his photos were never returned to him, so there are still a huge number of images that were lost to time.

One thing to note: in these early days, bands often didn't have their own photographer, but rather relied on the people surrounding them who captured the in-between moments. Rakow did this so beautifully. His images help tell the early story of this band, from when they were truly just kids. The other photographer who was around in the early days with a camera was Rosie McGee. She was Phil Lesh's girlfriend, and also worked for the band at various times in the early 1970s. She is part of the current exhibition as well as the one in Los Angeles.

You've said you found treasure troves of never-before-seen photographs in bankers boxes and shoeboxes hidden for decades, with close to 200 unpublished shots in the book version of this exhibition. Do you have a favorite photo that you've surfaced, and how much is still out there?

Jay: Ricki and I feel so lucky to work so closely with so many special and iconic archives. Ron Rakow's archive is one of the first large archives I "discovered." My pal and sometimes co-book publisher Josh Baron was interviewing Ron for a potential book project and Rakow mentioned his photographs. Josh connected me to Rakow and it turns out there was an amazing collection of negatives and slides sitting in a storage room in SoCal. After a lot of back and forth, I was finally able to see the archive in person and take it home with me to San Francisco.

After five hours of driving, I got home late in the evening and immediately launched

into looking at the slides. I took out a three-ring binder labeled "710 Ashbury 1967." One of the first slides I saw was of the legendary Neal Cassady, in color, in focus, sitting in the living room of 710 Ashbury. I started to cry! I couldn't believe I was being transported to 710 Ashbury through this never-before-seen photo. I often think of that photo as the start of this Retro Photo Archive journey.

Most images carry a credit line for Retro Photo Archive, the operation you and Ricki oversee. What is it? How do you feel about stewarding these photographs?

Jay: Retro Photo Archive was founded by my daughter Ricki and me in 2021. Our ethos from the start was to help underrepresented photographers get their work in front of more eyes and be paid what they deserve. We want this work to be preserved, and ALSO—this is important—stay in the name of the photographer for many, many decades! It means so much to us to be able to preserve, properly digitize and bring these important pieces of history into the world. We feel incredibly lucky that David Kordansky has given these photographers a voice in such an established gallery. Opportunities like this are rare, and we're grateful for it.

Ricki and I share very similar taste in photography. We love the look and feel of film, so Retro Photo Archive works exclusively with photographs shot on film. We find archives that are long forgotten or dormant and bring them back to life.

Ricki, you co-curated this with your father. What do you bring to editing this material that he doesn't, and where did the two of you disagree about which pictures made the cut?

Ricki: I feel incredibly lucky to be working alongside my dad and collaborating on so many projects. We have such a great working relationship because we don't always agree with each other, and I think that's what makes for a strong collection of photographs, both in this show and in our overall archive.

I see things differently than my dad might as a photographer, especially when it comes to his own work. He might overlook a photograph I find incredibly unique and strong. One of my favorite shots of his, also featured in the show, is a moment of a car passing the Warfield in San Francisco in 1980. The car passes a marquee ahead of a Dead run reading "They aren't the best at what they do, they're the only ones that do it." My dad and I always talk about how archival photography can transport someone to a certain time period, and what makes that photo clear is that it is not from the modern day. This photograph captures the nostalgia of that era through the scene around it (the cars, the clothes, etc.) while the emotions stay true.

A lot of times I have to convince my dad to put an image he created out there, because he shot the image and has his own perception of how it fits into his archive, which might have been different 40 years ago when he made the image vs. today. I believe I have made him look differently at his own work and appreciate the beauty in images that he maybe once thought were not his strongest. Over the years of working together, we've learned so much from each other, and he's come to see how his outlook might differ from someone with a newer eye, from this generation. That's why we work so well together.

Stuart Krimko's essay in the book version, "Spirit Photography," reads this work as images shot through with darkness and loss, and names Keith Godchaux and Brent Mydland as its two lost figures. The show opened in June, five months after Weir's death. Is this exhibition partly an act of mourning?

Jay: We were already talking about this New York show before we lost Bobby. After he was gone, our main goal became honoring his legacy, honoring the legacy of this band, and having this exhibition be part of the entire, ongoing cultural zeitgeist of the Grateful Dead moving forward. We always wanted to honor the importance of this band, and since Bobby's passing, the show holds even more weight in this ongoing adventure called Grateful Dead!

These are decades-old photographs, printed now as archival giclée prints in editions of three, dated like "1967 / 2026." It's fascinating that we're now in an art market where documentary images made for no market become collectible objects. How do you set an edition on a picture never made to be precious?

Ricki: While these photographs weren't necessarily captured to be hung in a gallery, the value of the subjects and the history they hold now carries a different meaning, given how much the world has changed. I also think we're living in an era of nostalgia more than ever, and these archives bring people back to a time and place in their life, which has its own level of value. Additionally, because of constant digital intake, I think we're losing the notion of living in the present that so many of these photographs were able to catch, or the intimate access to musicians that photographers no longer have in the same way. That scarcity makes the photographs more desirable and special, especially within something like the Grateful Dead world, where many of these images have never been seen before.

Elizabeth Sunflower's photograph puts a barely-adult Bob Weir in a San Francisco jail cell, October 2, 1967. Krimko describes it as "goofy, sheepish, barely post-adolescent Bobby Weir getting busted." What's the story behind that image, and why give it a wall?

Jay: When the Grateful Dead got busted at their house at 710 Ashbury on October 2, 1967, it made headlines in San Francisco. It was on TV. It was written about in *Rolling Stone*. Over the decades, a handful of photographs have shown up again and again documenting that moment.

After we acquired Elizabeth Sunflower's archive, I was going through everything and came across two rolls of unlabeled film. When I saw them, I knew I'd found something really unique. I got to give Bobby Weir and his family a tour of the exhibition in Las Vegas in 2024, and when Bobby saw that photograph, he pointed at it and said, "Wow, there's a photograph of me I've never seen before." So even Bobby was paying attention to all the photos that have been seen over and over again, and I think he was pretty impressed by it, as was I. I have a great photo of Bobby standing next to that print from that Vegas exhibition tour.

One of the large prints is "Deadhead at the Oakland Auditorium," a single fan, not the band. The press materials frame these images as a communion that happened before cellphones. What do the crowd and fan pictures carry that the band photos can't?

Jay: Deadheads are certainly not like any other rock band's fans. Their story is just as intriguing, interesting and adventurous as the band's story. Having a handful of images of Deadheads in this exhibit shows how important that aspect of the Grateful Dead experience is, and was. The Deadheads helped make the Grateful Dead who they are. And I am one of them!
