Most of our gigs are very local. Our route includes Palo Alto, Berkeley, Marin County, the Haight. While we’re still doing the Acid Tests, I function more as a road manager (and even that is very undemanding). All our gear pretty much fits into Kreutzmann’s Dodge station wagon. The whole thing. Sometimes we have to make a separate trip for his drums. Take them down first, have one of us sit on them while we go back for the rest of the equipment.

The Dead don’t have a pot to piss in, but they have the best amps, guitars, and drums money can buy. Owsley is always laying equipment on the band. He’s our patron. He’s making so much money from making LSD he can afford to bankroll the Dead. He is willing to do it as long as we do it on his terms.

We’re playing music and making mistakes and not being all that graceful about our bungling. A recurring theme of these early shows is all the fucking up. But everybody reacts differently. Jerry’s attitude is always “Hey, we messed up, but these things happen. We’ll get it together.”

Just remembering the lyrics is good enough for Bobby. Phil is very touchy about his playing. You can’t praise him; he’s so self-critical. He’s a classically trained musician and holds himself to a higher standard. What would Prokofiev have done if he played bass? At first I say things like “Man, you were so hot tonight!” and he snaps back: “Scully, you’re so full of shit, you don’t know what you’re talking about.” Finally I wise up and keep my big mouth shut.

Everything is going along smoothly as we approach the first Trips Festival, a kind of public, larger-scale Acid Test at Longshoremen’s Hall, early 1966. The Dead, Big Brother and the Holding Company, the Pranksters and God knows who else in performance. It is the night before the Trips Festival, the Pranksters have been setting up all day, and Steward Brand suggests they take a break and go up on the roof and smoke a joint. Kesey, typically, has a better idea: to cross over to the roof of the house next door. Unfortunately there are people living under that roof who don’t know them or what they’re doing and the air soon reeks of pot. There is a commotion in the alley. They look down and what do they see but some cops in a squad car pulling up. The cops get out and go in the building next door --- which is actually the building they are now on the roof of. But they don’t yet realize this. They’re stoned, after all. They casually discuss the situation.

“Gee, I wonder what they’re doing down there.”

“They can’t be after us. They’re in the wrong building.”

A minute later they turn around to find a dozen cops right behind them on the roof. Kesey freaks big time. He has a prior. He’s out on bail. One of the cops finds the weed. Kesey snatches it out of the cop’s hand and tries to swallow it, almost choking himself to death in the process. When this doesn’t work, he tries to throw it off the roof but the cops grab it.
Kesey is wrestling with them and they’re hitting him with their flashlights. Then one of the cops pulls out his gun and says: “Okay, stand clear! I’m going to blow his head off.”

Mountain Girl, Kesey’s girlfriend is grabbing at the cops arm, screaming: “No, no! Don’t shoot him! Peace!” The cops eventually quell him with a couple of good clobbers, but it isn’t easy. They handcuff Kesey and Mountain Girl and take them off to the San Francisco County Jail.

The following day, the day of the Trips Festival, they let him out. This is he Pranksters’ big show. Not only do they have to show up at Longshoremen’s Hall and act like everything is normal, they also have to perform. Great! They drive straight to the Trips Festival from jail, putting their costumes on in the car because by now it’s five o’clock and they’re late setting up. People are beginning to show up. Hundreds of people. Kesey’s bust has got a lot of coverage. It’s made the Trips Festival even hotter.

Kesey, in gold lame space suit with helmet, jumps out of the car and runs up to the stairs…. By the time we get into the hall the Trips Festival is in full swing. We are immediately bombarded from all sides by the familiar Prankster maelstrom of slides, 16mm film, liquid lights, tape recorders all whirring away, all spewing out a phantasmagoric brew in flashing lights, gibbering voices, and roiling chaotic feedback. Kesey has video cameras and video monitors strategically set up around the room so as you walk around you constantly have jarring confrontations with yourself on the screen.

In the middle of the floor is the Thunder Machine, an amorphous metallic sculpture made by Ron Boise. Big metal figures fucking in different positions. The Thunder Machine is huge, like something you’d put in a children’s playground. It’s also a musical instrument. You can get inside it and bang on the different panels with wooden mallets and hammers. It’s like a huge steel drum, so big that six people can play it at once. Like being in the belly of an iron whale.

Everything is designed to envelop and overwhelm. There’s a Moog synthesizer with sound coming out of sixteen phased speakers so the sound rushes 360 degrees around the hall like a sonic demon. There are ices spiked with LSD. A gigantic speaker painted in spectacular Day-Glo colors is set up on the edge of the stage. It is so big that you can get inside it. At the top of the speaker box is a working tweeter and on the bottom is a couch. You climb in, lean back into it, and go, “Whoa!” Terrible speaker, but the effect is fantastic.

Neal Cassady is rapping, doing his cool world bit. Kesey orchestrates these things so that everybody has a chance to get on the mikes. Several delirious hippies have curled up at the base of the microphones like huge mollusks.

Ken Babbs, being master of ceremonies, is issuing orders to the hall on one mike and Kesey is on another mike mixing in the odd random noises while running novel fragments on the overhead projector. Big Brother is on.
After one song Babb’s voice booms over the PA: “A big hand of applause, ladies and gentlemen, freaks and friends, for Big Brother and the Holding Company. And now a little something from the great Tony Bennett...” Babbs has been babbling all evening about “jungle bunny music” and such. Like a lot of the Pranksters he’s from another generation entirely — Babbs was a marine, for chrissakes — and the thing about acid is that whatever is there is going to bleed through. He’s so out of it that whatever he thinks, he says. Totally unedited mind-gibber.

Chet Helms, who manages Big Brother, leaps up onstage in his afghan coat like a skinny myopic Genghis Khan and grabs one of the microphones:

“Goddammit! Big Brother was brought here to play four songs and they’re going to play four songs. What do you say, audience?”

And everybody, of course, yells “Yeah!”

I know Janis from the Grant Street coffeehouse scene. She was already astonishing back then. She blew the folk madonnas away. In combination with Jim Gurley’s John-Coltrane-on-Mars guitar playing and the buzzy, lysergic sawmill of Big Brother, the effect is operatic, Janis so identifies with the girl in the song that she becomes her: Daisy Mae as Big Mamma Thornton comes to full-blown, Technicolor life, rips a hole in the song and jumps out. When Big Brother finishes their set, Garcia shakes his head in awe.

As we’re talking we look up and see words curling out of the overhead projector. Words writing themselves. Well, how else would they get there? Huge uncial lettering with serifs and loops. But it is not writing the usual Dada utterances:

“JERRY GARCIA, PLUG IN.”

And then, in a flash, it's gone. The moving finger writes and having writ moves on.

“Fuck, did you just see that?” Jerry asks.

“Unless we’re both receiving the same subliminal telegrams, I’d say it’s time.”

But when Jerry gets up onstage he finds the neck of his guitar has snapped. The bridge has broken off, it’s completely sprung, with strings sticking out everywhere. He cradles it in his arms like a wounded animal. The Dead play about five numbers that ramble on way past midnight.

Around two o’clock, the fire chief --- like a character from light opera --- shows up. The place is just going nuts, and he marches in with these four fire guys in full regalia --- hatchets, firehoses, the whole bit. They look around. A beat as they take in the swelling scene and then it’s “Oooookay, let’s turn it off now. EVERYBODY OUT! The party’s over, folks.” Permits, warrants, writs, and other fancy legalisms are being bandied about. In the midst of this a voice booms through the auditorium. Some guy has got hold of the
microphone, he’s standing on the balcony going, “I AM LOBAR SPEAKING TO YOU FROM THE FUTURE...”