

Doug, Dead, Leon carve up Armadillo for Thanksgiving '72

A thousand orphans showed up for a free, impromptu musical feast



11/23/72 L-R Leon Russell, Sweet Mary, Benny Thurman, Phil Lesh, Bob Barnett, Jerry Garcis, Doug Sahn. Framed photo by Burton Wilson hung at Threadgill's.

The Grateful Dead had a gig at Municipal Auditorium the night before Thanksgiving 1972 and they worked up a deal with the nearby Armadillo to cater the pre-show meal for band, crew and entourage. As Jerry Garcia

looked around the 1,500-capacity hall, he said, "I'd love to play this place." In earshot was owner Eddie Wilson, who said to tell him when. "Well, we're not doing anything tomorrow," said Garcia. The Dead had a day off, but only Garcia and bassist Phil Lesh were gonna be in Austin, as the rest of the band was headed to Corpus after the show with Frances Carr and Dead tour manager Sam Cutler, later partners in Manor Downs. Garcia's good friend Doug Sahm said, "let's have a jam session, man, and let everyone in for free!" Later that night, Leon Russell was backstage at the Grateful Dead show when Garcia asked if he wanted to stop by the 'Dillo and play some piano. It would be a Thanksgiving jam to beat 'em all.

The next morning, Eddie Wilson called up radio station KRMH ("Good Karma Radio") and said that the 'Dillo, which was scheduled to be closed on Thanksgiving, would be open after all for a free show. "A bunch of friends got nowhere else to go today, so they're gonna be jamming," Wilson said. Since the Dead had played the night before, it didn't take most folks long to figure out they'd be involved. The special surprise was Leon Russell, who had the number two album in the country in '72 with *Carney*. Wilson was tight-lipped about his appearance because they didn't want a bunch of townies showing up and yelling out requests for "Tight Rope."



Leon Russell and Jerry Garcia confer with Doug Sahm. Photo Scott Newton.

Garcia, Lesh and Russell got there early, at about 3 p.m., but wouldn't start until Sahm arrived about half an hour later. "Doug knows a thousand songs," Jerry told Leon, who admitted later to Wilson that he was not much of a jam guy so "it was one of the worst days of my musical life." Leon was on hand a month earlier when the Armadillo re-opened with a Freddie King show, after renovations doubled capacity from 750 to 1,500 and moved the stage from the south end of the building to the north end. "Freddie always called the Armadillo 'The House That Freddie Built' because that reopening show really got things going for us," says

Wilson.

Soon after the jam started, a torrential downpour bore down, so one of the first songs they played was “Stormy Monday” by T-Bone Walker. “It was my first realization of what a leader- an instigator- Doug Sahm was,” says Lissa Hattersley of Greezy Wheels. “They all played great, of course, but Doug was clearly the band leader of the night.” Garcia played pedal steel all night, with Sweet Mary Egan from Greezy Wheels a standout on fiddle on the first set, which was heavy with country songs, while the second set was more blues and rock. Russell played both guitar and piano and several local drummers sat in, including Jerry Barnett of Shiva’s Head Band. Hank Alrich, who would co-own the venue late in its run, had loaned his Stratocaster to various jammers and during a lull a cohort said, “Why don’t you go up and play your guitar? Everybody else has.” Alrich recalled his first number onstage: “As Leon kicked in to ‘A Hard Rain’s a Gonna Fall,’ rain began to fall on that old, big metal roof. This was before we’d gotten the underside insulated with spray-on paper foam, and the sound of the rain was the perfect touch to the intro.”

Twas a magical day and night, ending with an all-hands-on-deck medley of Chuck Berry’s “Roll Over Beethoven” and Little Richard’s “Good Golly Miss Molly.” About 1,000 lucky fans had reason to be thankful that night.

It was not a day to be starstruck. After the jam, Jerry Garcia approached adventurous violinist Benny Thurman about going on tour with his band. "You're a starling and I'm a crow, so I must decline," said Thurman, the former 13th Floor Elevators bassist, whose mind was often in another planet's Zip Code. "You don't want to be in the Grateful Dead?" someone asked Thurman, after Garcia walked away. "Oh, shit," said Thurman. "Is that who that was?"