

Dead Beat

Bands inspired by the Grateful Dead often copy the jam band's style of music. But Widespread Panic and Umphrey's McGee are unique



SANJOY Narayan

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AS A recovering Deadhead, I sometimes still crave for never-ending jams, pointless and deliciously aimless guitar wanderings; drum solos that veer so far away from the original beat of a song that when the band eventually decides to get back to the main melody, you no longer care what is happening.

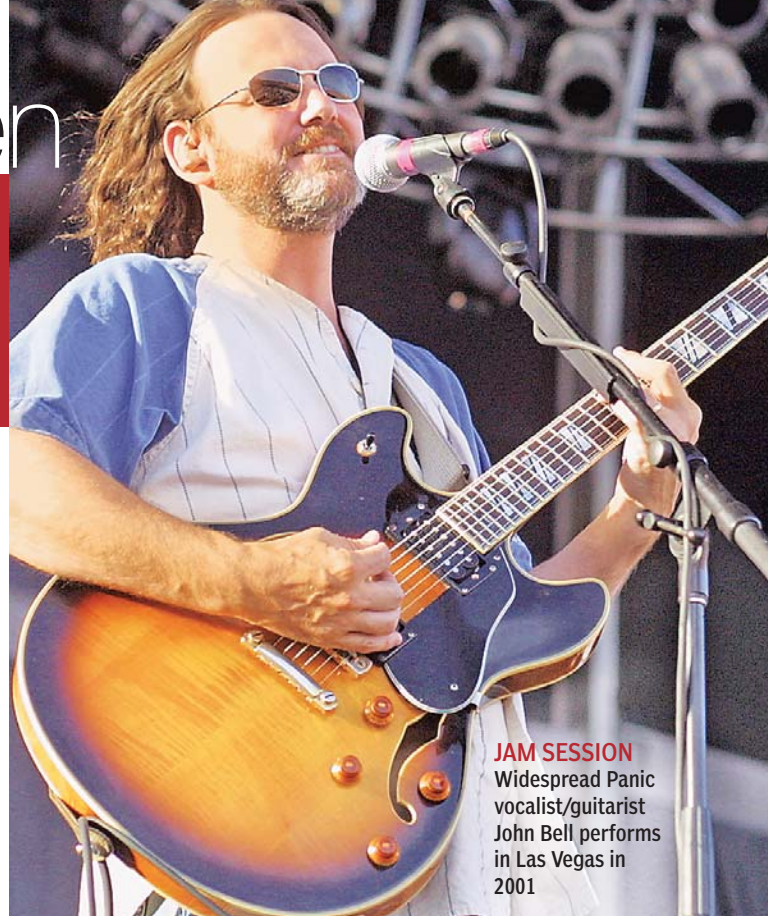
Yet I can't bring myself to rummage in my dusty stash of Grateful Dead tapes to look for the tape of a 43-min 27-second *Dark Star*, the longest I am told, that they played at a December 6 concert in 1973. As I said, I am recovering.

No, I try my best to reach for methadone instead. Sometimes I find it. Like when I accidentally found Widespread Panic eight years ago. Hailing from Athens (in Georgia, USA), Panic are a six-member rock band with an itinerant tour schedule and thousands of loyal fans that follow the band around. Like the Dead? Yes, but Widespread Panic is far from being a Grateful Dead clone. Their sound has an unmistakable southern undertone and frontman John Bell's raspy vocals grow and grow on you. Panic began in 1986, playing local gigs in Athens (which, incidentally, is the hometown of R.E.M. too). Their lead guitarist for the first 16 years was Michael Houser, who always played sitting down, face hidden by a mess of wiry long hair and had a penchant for using the volume pedal excessively. Sadly, Houser was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer – and, although he toured in that condition for a while, he died in 2002.

Houser's death saw Panic experiment with a couple of lead guitarists before settling recently for Jimmy Herring, a versatile axeman who's played, among others, with Aquarium Rescue Unit, the Allman Brothers Band and even, ahem, Phil Lesh & Friends. Besides frontman Bell and guitarist Herring, Widespread Panic's other star is bassist Dave Schools. A great thwacker of the thick strings, Schools, a founder-member of the band, is also a popular sessions man, jamming with many touring bands and a fixture on the festival circuit.

The best thing about Panic is that you get all their concerts downloadable in mp3 format or in a loss-free flac format from their website (www.livewidespreadpanic.com) within days or a week after the show. So, last week I picked up their two-day Halloween show in New Orleans. Played over October 31 and November 1, the setlist has many of my favourite Panic originals – including *Surprise Valley*, *Diner* and *Imitation Leather Shoes* – but also two gems, covers of *Brown Sugar* and *Proud Mary*, both as encores. Great recordings, direct from the soundboard.

There are many bands, mainly in the US, that are inspired by the Dead's itinerant touring and their practice of encouraging fans to record their shows and distribute copies freely. Some of them make the mistake of trying even to copy the original jam band's style of music. Those are the ones to be avoided. Instead, I try to search for the ones that tour like mad but play their own brand of music. Panic are one such. Another is Umphrey's



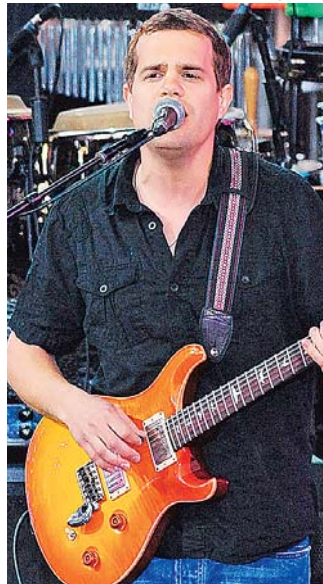
JAM SESSION
Widespread Panic vocalist/guitarist John Bell performs in Las Vegas in 2001

REUTERS

McGee. Formed more recently, in late 1997, Umphrey's are a six-member band, led by guitarist and vocalist Brendan Bayliss. They hail from Chicago and play hugely improvisational music. And, although like the Dead, Umphrey's tour and tour and then tour some more, their music is more influenced by older progressive rockers like Frank Zappa, Rick Wakeman (of Yes) and King Crimson. Yet, even heavy metal band aficionados will find Umphrey's agreeable.

Although Umphrey's, like Widespread Panic, have published a few studio albums, it is their live shows that best represent their music. Long jams, seat-of-the-pants improvisations and unpredictability are their hallmark. You start listening to a tune and then it suddenly takes on a form that you hardly expected. And there's a quirky aspect to their music that loyal fans recognise. Umphrey's McGee, for instance, began exploring improvisations at a friend's wedding reception at a venue in a hotel called the Jimmy Stewart Ballroom, named after the late Hollywood actor, James Stewart. Since then their frequent improv take-offs during concerts are simply labeled Jimmy Stewart, always looked forward to for their surprise element.

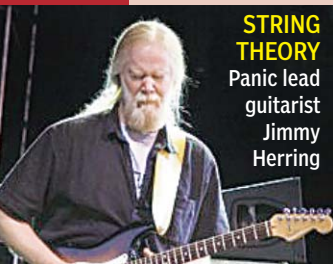
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Here's the thing. Bands such as Widespread Panic and Umphrey's McGee (there are dozens more of their ilk) have built their own business models. They tour incessantly, release records infrequently and depend on fans to spread the word of concerts by spreading their own recordings of shows. The Internet has made things easier for them. Like Panic's live download website, Umphrey's gigs are available for downloading on their site (www.umlive.net) within a day or two of the shows. You can buy pristine quality recordings from there. Or, if you first want to sample the stuff they play, go to the free podcast sites for both bands. Both these bands as well as their fans, regularly put out podcasts of their music just to spread the word and often it is a good (and free) way of sampling new music before you buy the stuff. As usual, the web version of *Download Central* has the links.

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LED BY GUITARIST AND VOCALIST BRENDAN BAYLISS, UMPHREY'S MCGEE PLAY HUGELY IMPROVISATIONAL MUSIC



STRING THEORY
Panic lead guitarist Jimmy Herring