

Looking Back on *Relix's* Own Long, Strange Trip

Former editor Toni Brown captures the history of the magazine's first three decades in a new book

BY JEFF TAMARKIN

TONI BROWN MAKES one thing very clear in her introduction to *Relix: The Book—The Grateful Dead Experience*. “I never set out to publish *Relix*,” she writes, “but I was a pivotal player in taking it where it needed to go.”

She's being modest. For 22 of this magazine's 35 years, *Relix* was Toni Brown's baby. She was the one who decided what made it onto these pages and what didn't—and why. It was her voice that set the publication's tone, which, by extension, meant that Toni Brown served as a spokeswoman for the ever-growing community that swelled around the nexus that was the Grateful Dead. To resort to a familiar but apt cliché, it was a long, strange trip and *Relix: The Book* (Backbeat Books), in 256 full-color pages, is a vivid reminder of what it was like to take that ride.

Brown wasn't there at the beginning. *Relix* was founded in 1974 by two Deadhead tape traders, Les Kippel and Jerry Moore (who passed away earlier this year). Moore served as the first editor, followed by this writer for a couple of years. Brown came on board as editor in 1979, 10 years after witnessing her first Grateful Dead show, and became publisher in 1982, as Kippel concentrated on running *Relix's* record label and merchandising arm. When the magazine fell into her hands, Brown felt the tug of destiny. “I believed, from the moment of my first Grateful Dead show, that I was supposed to do this,” she says now.

What Brown could not have anticipated were the ups and downs that would follow, including the necessity of covering Jerry Garcia's health issues—beginning in the '80s—and his ultimate demise. “I dealt with the darkness and I did what I had to do, but I tried to keep the light and what was beautiful about the scene, the music and us as people,” she says.

That's not hyperbole—anyone who's met Brown knows that that's just the way she speaks. “I was never your typical editor-publisher,” she says. “It was always, ‘Let's see what feels right.’ I went organically, and to this day that's the way I work. That was what I carried with me and that's what I felt *Relix* should exude.”

Relix: The Book is filled with hundreds of reprints of articles, photographs (including



many of the covers) and even letters to the editor, going back to issue number one. Jorma Kaukonen contributes a glowing foreword and Grateful Dead publicist Dennis McNally provides the afterword. In between, is a look back at the scene as it unfolds and morphs. It's “a happy hippie helping of my experience with *Relix*,” says Brown, who, while working on the book, re-read every single word that made it into the magazine from the beginning through its sale to a new publisher in 2000 and the end of her editorship in 2001.

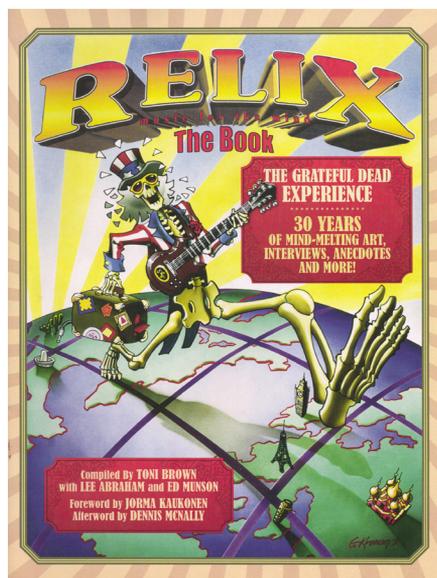
“To me, it was a privilege to take the best of *Relix's* early years and compile it,” says

Brown, who is also a performer and recording artist in her own right (her new album, with Ed Munson, is titled *State of Mind*). “There's some amazing stuff in there. I wish I could have put twice as much in the book, because there was twice as much worth putting in. It was very hard deciding what not to include.”

Naturally, to paint an honest portrait, Brown had to chronicle not just the high times, but also the low times. “As I read through every issue, it was like knowing the end of a really sad movie. When Jerry died it was like the train hit the wall.”

Even after Garcia's 1995 death, Brown remained focused and forward-looking. *Relix*, which had always covered other artists of interest to Deadheads—and, admittedly, some that were not—carried on, applying the same ideals to the nascent jamband world. “I always tried to keep the best of us in *Relix*,” says Brown. Now the best of *Relix* is in one place, for all to see. ●

Contributing editor Jeff Tamarkin has been writing for *Relix* for much of its 35-year history, serving as editor from 1978-1979. *Relix: The Book—The Grateful Dead Experience* is available at www.tonibrownband.com and via bookstores and standard online booksellers.



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