

= Ron " Pigpen " McKernan =

Ronald Charles McKernan ( September 8 , 1945 ? March 8 , 1973 ) , known as Pigpen , was an American singer and musician . He was a founding member of the San Francisco band the Grateful Dead and played in the group from 1965 to 1972 .

McKernan grew up heavily influenced by African @-@ American music , particularly the blues , and enjoyed listening to his father 's collection of records and taught himself how to play harmonica and piano . He began socializing around the San Francisco Bay Area , becoming friends with Jerry Garcia . After the pair had played in various folk and jug bands , McKernan suggested they form an electric group , which became the Grateful Dead . He was the band 's original frontman as well as playing harmonica and electric organ , but Garcia and bassist Phil Lesh 's influences on the band became increasingly stronger as they embraced psychedelic rock . McKernan struggled to keep up , causing the group to hire keyboardist Tom Constanten , with McKernan 's contributions essentially limited to vocals , harmonica and percussion from November 1968 to January 1970 . He continued to be a frontman in concert for some numbers , including covers of Bobby Bland 's " Turn On Your Love Light " and the Rascals ' " Good Lovin ' " .

Unlike the other members of the Grateful Dead , McKernan avoided psychedelic drugs , preferring to drink alcohol ( namely whiskey and wine ) . By 1971 , his health had been affected by alcoholism and liver damage and doctors advised him to stop touring . Following a four @-@ month hiatus , he resumed touring with the group in December 1971 but was forced to retire from touring altogether in June 1972 . McKernan was found dead of a gastrointestinal hemorrhage on March 8 , 1973 , aged 27 and is buried at Alta Mesa Memorial Park in Palo Alto .

= = Biography = =

= = = Early life = = =

Ronald Charles McKernan was born on September 8 , 1945 , in San Bruno , California . He came from Irish ancestry , and his father , Phil McKernan , was an R & B and blues disc jockey , who had been one of the first white DJs on KDIA , a black radio station . Ronald grew up with African American friends and enjoyed black music and culture . As a youth , he taught himself blues piano , guitar and harmonica and developed a biker culture image . McKernan moved to Palo Alto , California with his family , where he became friends with musician Jerry Garcia at the age of 14 . He built up a substantial collection of old blues 78s from labels such as Kent Records and Chess Records .

McKernan began spending time around coffeehouses and music stores , and worked at Dana Morgan 's Music Store in Palo Alto with Garcia . One night Garcia invited McKernan on stage to play harmonica and sing the blues . Garcia was impressed and McKernan became the blues singer in local jam sessions . He was initially nicknamed " Blue Ron " before settling on " Pigpen " . Onomastician Adrian Room has suggested McKernan was given the name due to his untidy and unclean habits while band biographies say he got the nickname owing to his similarity to Pig @-@ Pen , the permanently dirty character in the comic @-@ strip Peanuts .

= = = Grateful Dead = = =

McKernan was a participant in the predecessor groups leading to the formation of the Grateful Dead , beginning with the Zodiacs and Mother McCree 's Uptown Jug Champions . Guitarist Bob Weir and drummer Bill Kreutzmann were added and the band evolved into the Warlocks . Around 1965 , McKernan urged the rest of the Warlocks to switch to electric instruments . Bassist Phil Lesh joined soon after , and they became the Grateful Dead . The group were keen to involve McKernan in the band , as he was the group 's original leader and was considered the best singer and frontman .

The Dead 's early sets centred around blues and R & B covers chosen by McKernan . By the end of 1966 , Garcia had improved his musical skills and wanted to assert himself more as a leader and musical director , changing the band 's direction and reducing McKernan 's contributions . In 1967 , drummer Mickey Hart joined the Grateful Dead , followed by classically trained keyboardist Tom Constanten in 1968 , further changing the group 's style . Constanten often replaced McKernan on keyboards in the studio , as McKernan found it difficult to adapt to the new material that Garcia and Lesh composed for the band .

In October 1968 , McKernan and Weir were nearly fired from the band after Garcia and Lesh believed their playing was holding the band back from lengthy and experimental jamming . Garcia delegated the task of firing them to Rock Scully , who said that McKernan " took it hard . " Weir promised to improve , but McKernan was more stubborn . According to Garcia biographer Blair Jackson , McKernan missed three Dead shows before vowing not to " be lazy " any more and rejoining , while Kreutzmann objected to replacing McKernan and said the event never happened . Following his discharge from the United States Air Force in November 1968 , Constanten officially joined the band , having only worked in the studio while on leave up to that point . Road manager Jon McIntire commented that " Pigpen was relegated to the congas at that point and it was really humiliating and he was really hurt , but he couldn 't show it , couldn 't talk about it . " He began to take Hammond organ lessons and learned how to use the various drawbars and controls .

After Constanten 's departure in January 1970 over musical and lifestyle differences , McKernan nominally resumed keyboard duties . He contributed instrumentation to only two tracks ( " Black Peter " and " Easy Wind , " the latter as lead vocalist ) on Workingman 's Dead ( 1970 ) , the band 's breakthrough studio release . Consequently , the group 's next studio album ( 1970 's American Beauty ) served as a showcase for session keyboardists Howard Wales and Ned Lagin , while the 1971 live album Grateful Dead featured three overdubbed organ parts from Merl Saunders in addition to McKernan 's contributions on " Big Railroad Blues " , " The Other One " , and " Me & Bobby McGee " . While Garcia expressed frustration at McKernan 's missed rehearsals and his inability to keep up with new material , Lesh was more forgiving , opining that " it was okay for Pigpen to lay out ... we kept wanting Pigpen to be there because he was ' one of us . ' "

= = Musical style and influences = =

While in the Grateful Dead , McKernan sang and played blues @-@ influenced organ and harmonica . He initially played a Vox Continental organ , but later switched to a Hammond . McKernan sang lead on several standards he wanted the Dead to cover , such as Otis Redding 's " Pain in My Heart " and Wilson Pickett 's " In the Midnight Hour , " with the latter serving as one of the band 's main improvisatory vehicles from 1966 to 1968 . Unlike fellow vocalists Garcia and Weir , he sang lead without playing any instrument except harmonica and actively interacted with the audience , occasionally walking out into the crowd . During the band 's first year when they played straightforward blues , McKernan performed the majority of lead vocals , attracting an early audience that came specifically to see him sing and play harmonica . He took on early management duties in the band , ensuring they would be paid and promoted properly for gigs .

Though McKernan 's garage rock style was appropriate for their early recordings , it was less suited to the group 's later psychedelic and jamming styles . He went from contributing to every song and singing lead on all of side two of 1968 's Anthem of the Sun to little more than sporadic appearances on the following year 's Aoxomoxoa . He continued to front the band for long stretches during their live performances and suggested new material for the Dead 's concert repertoire , including Redding 's " Hard to Handle " and James Brown 's " It 's a Man 's Man 's Man 's World . "

McKernan achieved a new prominence in 1969 covering " Turn On Your Love Light " ; initially introduced in 1967 , the song gradually evolved into the band 's show @-@ stopping finale , often taking fifteen to thirty minutes to complete . He improvised lyrics over the band 's accompaniment , using phrases he had heard from African American friends , such as " rider " ( slang for " lover " ) , " she 's got box @-@ black nitties " ( referring to female underwear ) and " boar hog 's eye " . When the Grateful Dead appeared at Woodstock , the band 's set ( which was marred by technical

problems and general chaos and described as one of their worst shows ) ended with " Turn On Your Love Light " . Even as his instrumental contributions waned , McKernan 's vocal performances remained an integral part of the band 's live set ; by early 1971 , the band 's cover of The Rascals ' " Good Lovin ' " ( initially covered by the group in 1966 featured at shows at the Fillmore East later released as Ladies and Gentlemen ... the Grateful Dead ) began to emerge as a secondary showcase of his improvisatory talents alongside " Love Light . "

McKernan was not a prolific songwriter , preferring to concentrate on blues covers and improvised lyrics . He composed the infrequently performed " Operator " for 1970 's American Beauty . Several new songs emerged from a creatively fecund period coinciding with his health problems in 1971 , most notably " Mr. Charlie , " a collaboration with Dead lyricist Robert Hunter . The song appeared on the live album Europe ' 72 , his last with the group .

Tony Sclafani has compared McKernan 's role in the band , initially strong and pivotal but gradually declining , to that of Brian Jones in the Rolling Stones , particularly since both men were primarily influenced by the blues over rock ' n ' roll and died aged 27 . These comparisons are not entirely accurate as McKernan was always encouraged to sing material live and left the group due to ill health , while Jones was fired .

After McKernan 's death , a number of recordings were found in his apartment , which have appeared as the bootleg recording " The Apartment Tapes " . This included two songs recorded in 1964 with future Jefferson Airplane guitarist Jorma Kaukonen . On the bootleg , McKernan played acoustic guitar and piano , instruments he seldom used with the Dead .

= = Personal life = =

McKernan was close friends with American singer @-@ songwriter Janis Joplin due to common musical influences and lifestyles , particularly a shared love of alcohol over other drugs ; a poster from the early 1970s showed them together at 710 Ashbury . Joplin joined McKernan on stage at the Fillmore West on June 7 , 1969 , with the Grateful Dead to sing his signature " Turn On Your Love Light , " reprising this duet on July 16 , 1970 , at the Euphoria Ballroom in San Rafael , California .

McKernan was good friends with fellow band member Tom Constanten , based on their mutual aversion to psychedelics . He eventually served as best man at Constanten 's wedding . While his bandmates and friends were using cannabis , LSD , and other hallucinogenic drugs , McKernan preferred alcoholic beverages such as Thunderbird and Southern Comfort . Ironically , McKernan was arrested and fined after the cannabis bust on November 9 , 1967 , at 710 Ashbury Street , the Dead 's communal home , even though he did not use the drug . The event was covered in the first issue of Rolling Stone , where the reporter noted McKernan had a substantial rifle collection and McKernan 's picture appeared on a contemporary report in the San Francisco Chronicle . Because neither took illegal drugs , McKernan and Constanten were the only members of the band not arrested on the January 31 , 1970 , bust that inspired the lyrics of the band 's song " Truckin ' " .

In the early years of the Grateful Dead , McKernan was easily recognisable by his biker image , making him a minor celebrity . In 1969 , the band 's record company , Warner Bros. Records ran a " Pigpen Look @-@ Alike Contest " .

= = Health and death = =

McKernan 's alcohol abuse had begun to affect his health by his mid twenties . By the early 1970s , he also began to experience symptoms of congenital biliary cirrhosis , a rare autoimmune disease which was unrelated to his use of alcohol . After being hospitalized in August 1971 , doctors requested that he stop touring indefinitely . Pianist Keith Godchaux was subsequently hired and remained a regular member of the Grateful Dead until 1979 . McKernan rejoined the band in December 1971 to supplement Godchaux on harmonica , percussion , and organ . Manager Rock Scully alleged that McKernan passed out in front of his Hammond organ at one show during this period . After their Europe ' 72 tour , his health had deteriorated to the point where he could no

longer continue playing live . He made his final concert appearance on June 17 , 1972 , at the Hollywood Bowl , in Los Angeles , California . He subsequently broke off all personal relationships with the band , explaining " I don 't want you around when I die . "

On March 8 , 1973 , aged 27 he was found dead of a gastrointestinal hemorrhage at his home in Corte Madera , California by his landlady . Though his contributions to the band had slowly diminished over the years , the other members were devastated at his death . McKernan was buried at the Alta Mesa Memorial Park in Palo Alto , California . Garcia spoke at his funeral , saying " After Pigpen 's death we all knew this was the end of the original Grateful Dead " .

= = Legacy = =

Despite his outward image , friends and band biographers have described McKernan as a quiet , kind and introspective person . Hart later said " Pigpen was the musician in the Grateful Dead . " Kreutzmann said McKernan was " the sweetest guy anybody had ever met . "

Weir later became influenced by McKernan 's ability to work a crowd and improvise lyrics . He took over de facto frontman duties in concert and began to reintroduce material originally chosen by McKernan into the Dead 's live set after his death . Weir began singing " Good Lovin ' " with the Dead in 1973 , and the group recorded the song on 1978 's Shakedown Street . " Turn On Your Love Light " was revived in 1981 , with Weir singing lead . He also revived the 1960s standard " Big Boy Pete " , originally sung by McKernan , as a one @-@ off in 1985 . Jimmy Reed 's " Big Boss Man " , covered by the group on Grateful Dead ( Skull and Roses ) with McKernan singing lead , was revived by Garcia and performed occasionally through the 1980s and 90s .

" He 's Gone " , originally appearing on the live album Europe ' 72 subsequently became a eulogy to McKernan by his former bandmates . Hunter said " it became an anthem for Pigpen " .

= = Discography = =