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PIZZA RAG



May 15th, 1992

I got the call from my deep-cover mole in the Cannondale bicycle factory. "The Grateful Dead just bought ten new mountain bikes. This might be a story; do you think you can check it out?"

Since I live in Marin County, California, which is also where the Dead have their headquarters, it wasn't too difficult to get the unlisted number of the Dead office. When you call this number, a woman picks up the phone and says, "Hello," and after some interrogation, admits that this might be the Dead office, who wants to know? "I just heard that you people bought ten mountain bikes. Is that true?"

"Gee, I don't know anything about that. Let me put you in touch with the publicist."

She gave me the number. "Hi. I'm working on an article for a cycling magazine, and I heard that some of the Dead bought mountain bikes. Can you tell me anything about that?"

"I don't know anything about bikes. Look, I've got a new album coming out, and a video, and I'm working full time on those. I can't help you with bicycles."

Having exhausted the official channels, I went for what the Reagan administration refers to as a "second channel." I called my friend Howard Danchik, who works for UltraSound, the Dead's sound company. "Howard. I just got word that you guys ordered ten mountain bikes. What's the story?"

"True."

"Are the Grateful Dead really mountain bikers?"

"Not really. Most of the bikes are for the sound crew, but one of them is for Bob Weir."

"Bob's a mountain biker?"

"Yeah, he's pretty far into it. In fact, he broke his shoulder riding his mountain bike."

Now we're getting somewhere. The fact that Bob Weir was a mountain biker seemed like a good story idea, and I decided to see if he wanted to do an interview about his mountain biking. Once again, this meant getting past the bureaucracy surrounding the Dead. Bob is well-protected, so I sent the message to him through several channels: his personal management, Howard from the UltraSound crew, and mountain bike mogul Gary Fisher, who was my roommate for four years before he was who he is.

Progress. A couple more calls to Bob's personal management, and I was told that Bob had agreed to do the interview. After swearing me to secrecy, they gave me his home phone number. Bob lives in a semi-remote location near a network of mountain bike trails. The best way to conduct the interview seemed to be taking a ride together, so we made arrangements to meet at his house. Bob said, "Let's go in the afternoon. I want time to go out and get a helmet before I get my picture taken on a bike."

THE DIRT RAG INTERVIEW WITH

BOB WEIR

FAMOUS CELEBRITY MOUNTAIN BIKER

BOB met me on his deck, shirtless, wearing gym shorts and high-tops, and looking remarkably fit for a musician. Three mountain bikes waited patiently while Bob gave instruction on their use to a pretty blonde woman. I did my best to present a non-intimidating image of a regular guy who didn't want to bug him about the band or blow him away with my riding; as part of this strategy I showed up wearing jeans and a t-shirt rather than full-on cycling togs.

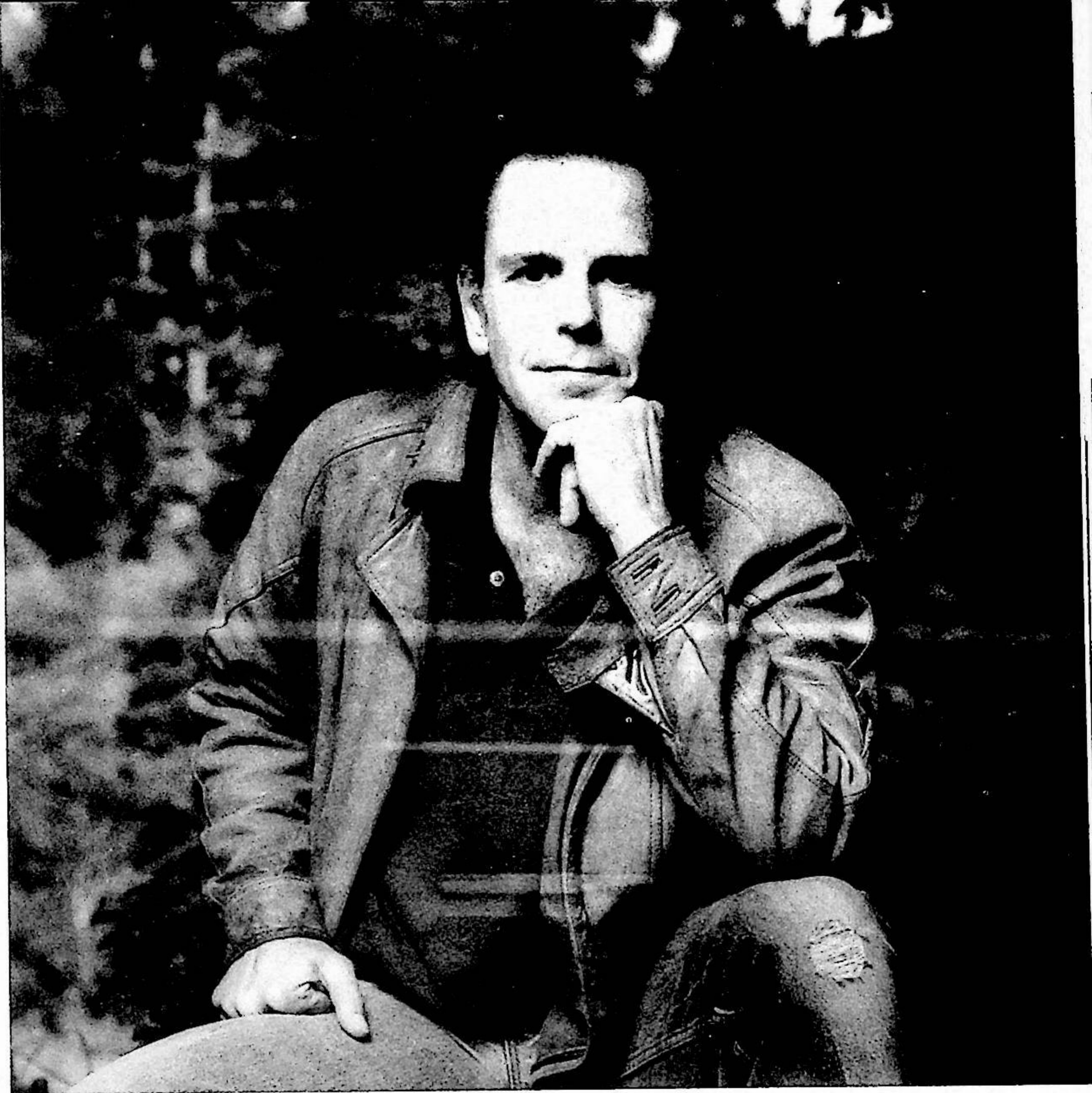
Bob told me he didn't know why bike riders would care for his thoughts on cycling, but he was game to talk. "I'm no expert on bikes, but I have some pretty firm opinions on them." In return, I admitted that the deeper I got into this the less of an idea I had as to the direction this interview was headed, that I didn't come prepared with a single question, and that all I brought was my camera and tape recorder.

"Great. Let's ride and talk."

A few minutes later, Gary Fisher showed up and the four of us prepared to ride. For Bob this meant replacing a few small parts on his bike, cleaning and lubricating the chain, and

DIRT RAG VISITS THE CELEBRITY HOMES OF THE MOUNTAIN BIKES OF THE STARS

BY
CHARLES
KELLY



fastening a small tape recorder just like mine to the handlebars. "Is the tape recorder to keep me honest?" I asked.

"Not at all. I get a lot of ideas when I'm out riding, and this is really a convenient way for me to take notes."

We started up the road into the hills. Bob's lady friend was new at this and didn't care to join us on a hard-core ride, so Bob gave her a map and instructions that would take her on a short but pleasant round trip. Bob, Gary and I headed uphill, and I waved my recorder near him while I asked a series of dumb questions, punctuated on the tape by heavy breathing from both of us.

I wanted to know how Bob got turned on to cycling.

"I had a bike when I was a kid; I don't even know what kind it was. I dropped bikes when I was thirteen or fourteen. About my middle to late twenties I took up running for exercise; I was a distance runner in high school. In the late seventies, running was starting to happen, and it got my attention. I ran pretty much daily for about ten years. I got as high as seventy miles a week, although I averaged more like thirty."

"Last year about this time I was on tour in Colorado with Kingfish. It was a really short tour and we ended it up in

Vail. Between this friend in Vail, and Howard from UltraSound, they dragged me out...Howard had been promising to get me on a bicycle because he knew I was a runner, and he thought I wouldn't have any problems getting into bicycles. He knows that I have an appreciation for 'tech.'" Howard is Howard Danchik, a longtime Dead sound man, and the first from that association to take up mountain biking.

If there is any passion the Dead and their immediate associates share besides the music, it is an appreciation for things that are well made and work right.

"Howard figured I was a natural for mountain biking, and he was right. He got me on a mountain bike in Vail, and the first time I tried it we got to about 12,000 feet. And I had to do it again the next day. The next day I came home and I called Gary [Fisher]."

Gary met the Dead in 1966 when he was a junior bicycle racer, and the Dead, along with Quicksilver Messenger Service, were hired to play a post-race dance at a bicycle race. Gary, who sported nearly waist-length hair during the early seventies, became one of the unofficial "Party Krew."

Turn the page...

...From last page

"I didn't even know who Gary was, but Howard said he had a friend who made bikes, so I called him. I guess Gary remembered who I was" (interviewer laughs), "but I'd never known him by his real name...we always called him Spidey."

(Interviewer) "It must have been some time since you two had run across each other."

"Yeah, but it didn't take me long to recognize him."

(Interviewer) Tell me about breaking your shoulder.

"The second day I had my bike, for want of anything better to do, I rode all the way to the top of the mountain, and that was wonderful, just ducky. I got all pumped with endorphins going up there, and then we came down. I was with a friend who was also more or less a novice, so we were making up the rules as we went along. We were pumped with endorphins, and by the time we got halfway down, adrenalin as well. I was less cautious than might have been prudent. I hit a particularly pernicious crag in the road, and did what I understand is called a 'Polish Wheelie.'"

"I landed in a driveway, right at this guy's feet, and fortunately he turned out to be a doctor. Well, he was an eye doctor, but at least he was a doctor. My shoulder wasn't working right, and my arm wasn't working right, and I couldn't figure out why. I had a bump in my shoulder; I figured it was dislocated. Anyway, it was broken, and I was laid up for about a month.

"Garcia, fortunately or unfortunately, was also laid up at the time, so it didn't mess up too much. So having seen the pavement, I'm not really anxious to do anything like that again."

At this point I shut off my recorder and concentrated on keeping up with Bob, my camera gear and jeans not helping much. Bob and Gary finished the main climb nearly an hour later a hundred yards ahead, so apparently my non-intimidation plan was working. We parked the bikes and hiked another quarter mile to a mountain top, where we surveyed the Bay Area.

(Interviewer) "Why don't you expound philosophically on why bikes are the coolest invention since the guitar?"

"I've heard...that the bicycle is the most efficient machine ever devised by man in terms of calories expended for work done. Philosophically, I like that a lot. It's Technology, Servant of Man, in its very finest form.

"I was into running, and I was a real tough guy. I thought bicycles were for yuppies initially, and anyone who wanted a real workout could put on their running shoes and go out the door and get a real workout.

"All the time I was thinking that, Howard Danchik...was saying that sooner or later he was going to get me on a bicycle and I would be hooked. And he did and I was. Now I get every bit as good a workout on a bicycle as I did running, and I have more fun."

(Interviewer) "A lot of runners get more and more into their sport until they reach a point where their bodies start to rebel. Did you ever have any problems like that?"

"I was fortunate and I worked through a lot of that. If you get maniacal, you can hurt yourself with anything. I realized that and I took it slow and easy. Bicycling too; I've hurt myself bicycling, and I didn't waste any time. You can hurt yourself doing anything; you could drink a lethal dose of water. There's a toxic or lethal dose of just about anything, and I found the toxic dose with both running and biking, but I realized that and was able to cut back to well within my limits.

"Whatever you do, if you intend to do it for any length of time, you want to adjust your way of doing it, your schedule or whatever, to make sure you allow for fun, or you'll start inventing reasons why you can't do it. And I need the exercise. I also need the fun."

"The risk factor is not really in the same neighborhood. It's your approach; in both cases, if your approach is right, it's not going to get you, and if it's wrong, it's going to get you. If you're a little bit careless by nature on a bicycle, sooner or later that'll get you. But if you're a little bit careless by nature at running, sooner or later that will get you in terms of a long-term injury like tendonitis. [By comparison], bicycling got me real quick."

"You said that Bill [Kreutzman] was the only other bike rider in the band."

"And he not much, but that may all change."

"Does he own a bike?"

"No. If he did he probably would [ride]. He's into running. I'm not pushing him, but I think sooner or later he'll discover bicycles himself. From what I can see, anyone who's into running can get into biking, although there have to be a few people who prefer running to bicycles."

Several nights later, the same group of Bob, Gary Fisher and myself took a more adventurous ride, a full-moon excursion to the same mountain top, starting at 1 a.m. from Bob's house. Just as on the previous ride, the pace up the hill was brisk, and conversation was sparse and punctuated by heavy breathing. Arriving at the top about 2 a.m., we watched while the lights of the Bay Area were slowly obscured by fog.

(Bob) "This is Technology, Servant of Man, this is what it gives us. You were talking about stuff that works right; we made it up here in not much more than an hour."

"I've got a hurdle that I'm just about past, if I can train my way past it, that would put me up here pretty easily under an hour. On certain inclines I've just got to sustain a spin, or one gear that I'm not quite [using]. All I have to do is just get mad."

Bob consults his wristwatch, which he has laid on a rock. "Seventy-one point one degrees."

"If there's a fixation that I hold on stuff that works right, this is why. [The bikes] got us here quickly, quietly and pleurably. Nothing more need be said. For the Gentle Reader, we're sitting on top of a mountain, surrounded by moonlit clouds maybe five hundred feet below us in all directions, with a couple of holes, through which we can see the lights of civilization, peeking and winking at us. All is quiet."

(Interviewer) I'll say. Except for that damn cricket.

"A couple of years ago I was in Cabo San Lucas (Baja). One of the friends I was visiting had a boat and we went out

THE
DIRT RAG
INTERVIEW
WITH

BOB WEIR

fishing; I got bored with that. We found ourselves in the middle of a big school of dolphins, I mean acres. I had fins and a mask and a snorkel, and I lost my little mind and dove in and just started swimming along with them. At first they wouldn't pay any attention to me; it's not like they were running away, they just wouldn't pay attention to me.

I was sort of chasing them, and I didn't notice how far away from the boat I was getting. I got somewhere between a quarter and a half-mile away from the boat before I looked back and saw it way off.

"Suddenly I was surrounded by those guys, and they'd come up to me and check me out and swim around. They were curious. They made squeaking and clicking sounds. As far down as I could see, about a hundred feet, and as far around me in any direction as far as I could see, there were these six to ten foot dolphins swimming around. Really beautiful; it was just another world. I lost all sense of time and any consideration other than the desire to communicate with these guys. And they were trying to communicate with me, and I was trying to communicate with them, and I don't know that we didn't get something across, because we were all trying.

"God knows what level they communicate on; I don't think they see time like we do. Or much of anything else for that matter."

(Interviewer) It would be pretty hard to have any common concepts.

"All we really had was just eyeball to eyeball."

"I got pretty close [to a whale] on a surfboard once. I was going out to play with a pup where they were breaching. I headed out to play with the pup, and up popped mama. I tried

...From last page

to go around her one way, and she moved a little bit forward, and I tried to go around her the other way and she moved a little bit back, presenting an insurmountable obstacle. They don't like stuff that's hard, apparently, and she could hear the waves against my board.

(Gary Fisher) The fog is moving in.

"It's going to be thick when we go down there. I'm going to have to go slow. I'd piss a lot of people off if I got myself hurt right now."

(Bob) "Why don't more people do stuff like this?"

(Interviewer) Everyone wants adventure, but they want it to be safe.

"Or just fun. 'I want to be a real cowboy for two weeks I'm not talking about no Frontierland, I want to be a real cowboy.'"

(Interviewer) There a a lot of people who have never done anything remotely as physical as this...

"They could be here too, rather easily, in a few weeks time, if they took it easy, a little bit at a time. It isn't like they would be sacrificing themselves; it would be enjoyable for them, and they just don't know it yet. But they will; I have a lot of confidence in people."

(Interviewer) You put the tape recorder on your bike because you said you get inspiration while you're riding. Does the rhythmic activity of bike riding give you musical ideas?

"As often as not I get lyrical ideas; the lyrics come with

a melody and the whole thing [is] in a complete package.

(Gary) "Riding a bike is one of the few places you can go any more and not be interrupted."

(Interviewer) "That's true; a lot of people want your (Bob's) attention. In this instance I can get it because I'm willing to jump on a bike and follow you around."

"You get an entirely different side of me than the people who get me between the hours of ten and six on the telephone. I'm a fairly busy fellow, and the number you have, only the people I want to talk to have. Even so, during the hours when we would normally talk...well, you know what it's like; I've got a billion projects.

"I do it, and I don't mind it so much that I'm thinking pretty fast. My manner of speech and my delivery must be a little bit different when you get me during those hours. I use different language; it's just that I'm in a different world. When I'm up here...we went for ten, fifteen minutes at a time without saying anything during the ride up here, and I was never under the fear that the conversation would be over and the phone would be down, and that you'd be unreachable on the phone?"

"I have times of day when [I deal with] mundane matters, like taking care of my gate, my garden, the mechanics of keeping my business rolling... I do [this] in late morning. In the early afternoon I get in touch with people with whom I have projects going, and we go through mechanics. By early mid-afternoon most of what I'm doing is going into the meat of whatever projects we're talking [about]. That's followed by a bike ride on a good day, if this is a well-orchestrated day. Then I get back, have a couple of capper

conversations on stuff that I've been working on, and it starts turning into evening.

"There are times of day when certain stuff works best. Often I'm not going to be at my creative best when I'm fresh out of bed, but I can think nuts and bolts pretty well."

(Interviewer) You say you don't do all your creating on a bike, but you must do some.

"Oh yeah. I don't generally get on my bike until after I've had a few good flings at something fairly creative, and then I get to pack that off on my ride."

(Interviewer) You kind of chew on the stuff before you ride, then digest it while you're riding.

"It works out really well that way. On a ride, I'll put the headphones on and remove myself from everything entirely, going uphill. I don't wear headphones going downhill because I consider that to be dangerous. Uphill, I figure if I stay to the right, I'm not going to get hit by anything behind me, and I can see ahead, and I'm not going fast enough to present much of a danger to anything.

"For training, it's great; it's just like music in the dentist's chair. You get a better workout. When the song ends, I can click the tape off, and what I've pushed aside when I clicked the tape on, comes flooding back, and it'll all be different."

(Interviewer) So you get your subconscious working on the problem while you devote your higher brain to riding.

"I don't even need the headphones to do it. I can get myself far enough away from what I've been thinking of just by pushing myself to the point where I'm starting to deal with

THE
DIRT RAG
INTERVIEW
WITH

BOB WEIR

things like pain and...my aerobic limit. It isn't a particularly new way of thinking. Socrates used to teach his classes at a brisk walk. He was a firm believer in the notion that aerobic exercise produced higher thought."

(Gary) Do you do some type of thinking when you're playing your music?

"Yes... It's thought, but I'm not thinking in English. It's just a different language. I really like it, needless to say.

"When I'm on a bike and I'm listening to music, I often bring tapes that I might not normally listen to and might not normally expect to appreciate. But when the endorphins kick in, and I get to that aerobic high stage, I'm a little more open, I can accept things a little more easily, and I appreciate things a little more readily. I'm a big fan of a lot of kinds of music now that I never thought I'd be. It's opened me up, and as a musician that's nothing but good for me. These days I'm really big on Shostakovich (SP?).

"For the Gentle Reader's information, the fog has completely surrounded us, and there are no lights peeking through. We are an island at this point, in the bright moonlight." ❀