

Locals honor Garcia

Jerry Day pays homage to singer's neighborhood roots

By Carolyn Jones

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Long before he was lead singer for the Grateful Dead, Jerry Garcia was a scrappy kid in the Excelsior — pulling fire alarms, sticking his hands in wet cement, throwing cherry bombs in the Al-

emany tunnel.



Jerry Garcia

“Seems like we were always in the back of a police cruiser,” said Garcia’s childhood buddy, John Clark, a writer and filmmaker who now lives in Or-

lando. “The Ex-

celsior was a lot of fun for us. Harrington Street was our world.”

The Excelsior is now embracing Garcia once again. Commemorating Garcia’s 63rd birthday on Aug. 1 and the 10th anniversary of his death on Aug. 9, residents of the Excelsior are hosting Jerry Day at the McLaren Park amphitheater.

The free event, scheduled for Aug. 7, will feature four bands, food booths and arts and crafts.

Organizers are expecting 1,300 to 1,500 people to attend Jerry Day, which is in its third year. The purpose is to celebrate Garcia’s life, art and music, as well as bring people to the Excelsior — a neighborhood that doesn’t get nearly enough attention, promoters say.

“I know what it feels like to grow up out there, not feeling like you’re part of the city,” said organizer Tom Murphy, who was raised in the Excelsior and now works in finance on the Peninsula. “We’re trying to build pride, community spirit, bring positive attention to the neighborhood.”

Garcia fans have also gathered 1,000 signatures to rename the McLaren Park amphitheater after the world-famous singer and guitarist. Three years ago, they printed and sold T-shirts with Garcia’s artwork to raise money for a new playground at the park. In all, they netted \$5,000. The playground was completed in 2003.

There’s also a movement to declare his childhood home, at 87 Harrington St., a landmark and place a plaque out front.

“Jerry Garcia and his accomplishments help put the Excelsior on the map,” said Supervisor Gerardo Sandoval, who represents the neighborhood.

Sandoval is particularly pleased with the Garcia celebration because “it’s a well-kept secret that

Fans remember Jerry Garcia's childhood home

► GARCIA

From Page F1

I'm the only Deadhead on the board. I have more than 50 shows under my belt."

Garcia's family has been very supportive of Jerry Day and efforts to commemorate his childhood, Murphy said. His family donated an original Garcia painting to auction to raise money for Jerry Day. The painting will be auctioned at a fund-raiser Thursday at Cafe Mama, 4754 Mission St.

Fans say they can hear the Excelsior's influence in Garcia's music. Although he was a hippie icon for three decades, he also favored bluegrass, blues and other working-class types of music — a throwback to his youth in the blue-collar Outer Mission.

Sandoval noted that Garcia was originally trained as a Spanish classical guitarist, a reflection of the traditional lifestyle and Latin influence of the Excelsior.

Garcia isn't the Excelsior's only famous son. Boston Red Sox Hall of Famer Joe Cronin, Mix Master Mike of the Beastie Boys and former heavyweight champion Pat Valentino also hail from the foggy streets of the Outer Mission.

"North Beach had Joe DiMaggio; we have our own Hall of Famer," Murphy said.

Garcia grew up at 121 Ama-

"Jerry Garcia and his accomplishments help put the Excelsior on the map."

Supervisor GERARDO SANDOVAL

zon St., then moved when he was 5 to his grandmother's house at 87 Harrington St., where he lived until he was a teenager. Clark lived a few doors down at 32 Harrington.

"We were pretty inseparable," said Clark, who later wrote a book called "Dead Angel" about his childhood with Garcia.

Garcia, at the time of his death in 1995, was also working on a book about his youth, called "Harrington Street." It was published posthumously. Clark first met Garcia in the comic book aisle at the Central Drug Store, which is still in business near Mission and Excelsior Avenue. They spent their youth "mostly getting into trouble and having fun," Clark said.

They built tree houses, played

Harrington Street

In Jerry Garcia's posthumously published "Harrington Street" (Delacorte Press, \$22.95), he writes about his childhood. These are some of his memories of his Excelsior neighborhood:

"When I lived at 87 Harrington St., the neighborhood church was Corpus Christi (body of Christ) located one block northeast of Harrington Street and occupying about one half block of area. It was, when we first moved there, a typical wooden frame, sort of classic little old church-in-the-lane cum here's the church, here's the people, open the doors, etc.... kind of deal."

On another page, he wrote:

"The Excelsior district of San Francisco was ethnically mostly Italian and Irish. My family was pretty much Spanish-Irish, a stricken combination of Catholicism's Weirder Interpretations. ... One block, scarcely 100 yards from the door at 87 Harrington, was God's House! In those days they still had the wonderful Latin Mass with its resonant sonorities and mysterious ritual movements, the incense, the music, choir, organ, bells, candles, the muted light through the stained glass windows."

Union and Confederate soldiers in vacant lots, made an underground fort complete with periscope, went on Easter egg hunts at McLaren Park, cleaned the park's horse stables in exchange for rides, and exploded a lot of firecrackers.

"As a kid, Jerry was very fun-loving, very kind. A little lost, in a sense," Clark said. "I remember once we were walking down the street and he was singing 'When the Red Red Robin Comes Bob-Bob-Bobbing Along,' and thinking, 'Boy, I hope he doesn't be-

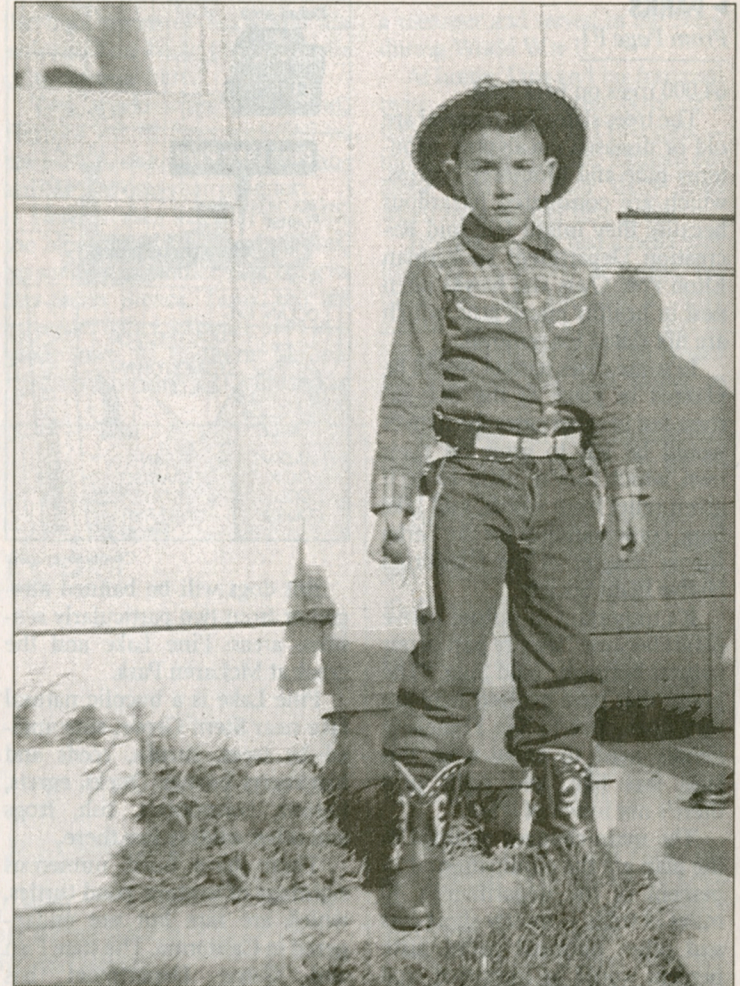
come a singer.'"

Clark and Garcia stayed in touch over the years, although Clark never considered himself a Deadhead.

Nonetheless, he plans to return to the Excelsior for Jerry Day and emcee the event.

"I haven't been back to McLaren Park in years," he said. "I still remember stealing the Easter eggs out of Jerry's basket there."

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Jerry Garcia, who grew up in the Excelsior, dressed up as a cowboy when he was young. Jerry Day celebrates his roots.