

Levon Mosgofian

Tea Lautrec Printing



by Walter Mederios

Levon Mosgofian

1907-1994

by

Walter Medeiros

INTRODUCTION

This is not intended to be a finely produced book, but rather a readable document for those who are interested in in this series on concert poster artists and graphic design. Some of these articles still need work.

Michael@Erlewine.net

Here are some other links to more books, articles, and videos on these topics:

Main Browsing Site:

<http://SpiritGrooves.net/>

Organized Article Archive:

<http://MichaelErlewine.com/>

YouTube Videos

<https://www.youtube.com/user/merlewine>

Spirit Grooves / Dharma Grooves

You are free to share these blogs
provided no money is charged



LEVON MOSGOFIAN: 1907-1994

by Walter Medeiros

{Levin Mosgofian}, master printer and proprietor of {Tea Lautrec Lithography}, printed all the weekly rock poster for {Bill Graham Presents} from 1967 until the closing of {Fillmore West} in 1971, and many afterward, until his retirement in 1984. In declining health for several years due to Alzheimer's disease, Levon suffered a systemic infection last October. After a couple of emergency trips to the hospital, and the development of pneumonia, his family complied with his expressed desire to pass on, rather than exist bedridden on artificial life support.

On January 16, ten days after his death, a memorial celebration was held at the social hall of St. John's Armenian Church, in San Francisco. Those who knew Levon only as a printer and businessman had opportunity to learn more of his life experience and his personal qualities. After opening remarks, his eldest son, Denis, provided a biographical outline of Levon's career. His other son, Seth, and numerous other relatives, close friends and coworkers recounted additional significant and memorable experiences with Levon.

Born in Chelsea, Massachusetts, Levon grew up there and, from about 1918 to 1924, in the culturally rich and proud Armenian-

American community of Fresno, California. Since a young man Levon was known as a "battler", as one relative put it. Courage and fighting skills were developed in grammar school, where he was often attacked by racist schoolmates. In high school he "decked" an athletic instructor who offended him with an ethnic slur. That cut short his formal education, but had no effect on his intelligence and ambition.

Strength, endurance and courage were basic to Levon's character. At age 18 he was struck by an auto, which came to rest with a wheel on his back. The car was soon lifted off him, and he got up and continued his walk to work, since he didn't have a nickel to ride the streetcar-and a doctor's visit was an unthinkable extravagance. There's little doubt this accident caused his early back pain and later arthritis, yet throughout his life he never shunned physical confrontation, especially in defense of his moral and social principals.

During his early twenties, in Los Angeles, he experienced several years of poverty, of odd jobs and the cheapest lodgings. For awhile he slept on the fabric rolls of a garment shop, departing before the workers arrived at six a.m. A job as a pressman's assistant introduced him to the printer's trade. He was also a carnival worker, though he disliked the crude, predatory, dishonest atmosphere. Levon's values were exactly opposite.

As his son Denis remarked, "Dad was always bright, intelligent and very honest. He spoke English well and was a dedicated student of life. During this period, the other guys at one hotel nicknamed him Einstein. Whenever someone wanted to know something, someone would say, "Go ask Einstein." Despite his intellectual ambition, Levon was never one to become a reclusive scholar. He was knowledgeable and self-confident in the affairs of men. He liked card games, and he became such an accomplished player that he attracted an offer of sponsorship by a professional gambler, which he declined.

About 1931, during the hard times of the Depression, Levon moved to San Francisco, a city he came to love. He worked as a tailor at a dry cleaning shop and eventually became proficient enough to make fine suits. In the latter 1930's, as part of the federal WPA labor program, he worked as an artist and also on construction project in {Golden Gate Park}. Levon's career coincided with the growth of the labor movement and radical socialism. Personal experience, the existing social conditions and international events led him to the study of Marxism. He became a lifelong socialist, a fierce antifascist and, for nearly a decade, until 1944, a member of the Communist Party. He was an ardent unionist (during one strike demonstration he was arrested three times in the same day), dedicated to the working class, and an equally strong opponent of bureaucracy and corruption.

Rejected for military service because of his bad back, during the war years he worked as machinist in an armaments factory. As the elected union shop steward in this large plant, his dedication to justice on the job and his radical politics led to an attempt by management and the FBI to frame him for sabotage. Levon had the full support of his coworkers; they denounced the charges, which were dropped when proven false. He also had occasion to oppose the position and violent tactics of a fellow union. In support of a machinist's strike for lost wages just after the war, Levon confronted the powerful longshoremen's union, the ILWU, and its celebrated leader Harry Bridges, who sided with the U.S. government. At one point, Levon stood off several dozen ILWU men who were sent to break up a machinists' picket line. Holding a big stick and speaking very firmly, he reminded them of the basic right of union laborers. Apparently convinced of his determination to forcefully defend the picket line, the goon squad backed off.

Soon after World War II Levon returned to the printing trade. With his exceptional mechanical skills he quickly mastered the techniques of lithography and operation of the press. In 1947

Levon began working for {Neal, Starford and Kerr}, where he assumed responsibility for the shop's lithography production. Several examples of Levon's craftsmanship, resourcefulness and diligence were recounted by former colleagues. Still a union activist, he became an official of the San Francisco Lithographer's Local, and is remembered as an inspired leader and a tough negotiator for workers' rights and benefits. A woman who worked in the industry during the 1960s praised Levon's successful campaign for equal pay for woman. He alone held out against the opposition not only of management but of his fellow union members as well until he convinced them that he was right. A younger woman, who worked a {Tea Lautrec} in its last years, told of Levon's value as a mentor and his enthusiasm about her developing skill as a press operator.

In early 1967, through Levon and pressman {Joe Buchwald} (father of {Marty Balin} -one of the original members of the {Jefferson Airplane}), the shop began printing {Bill Graham's} posters, and Levon and Joe worked closely with all the Fillmore poster artists. Management indicated that the long-haired artists should use the back door, however, lest their straight customers take offense. By years end NS&K went out of business. In lieu of wages owed, Levon acquired some lithography presses and related equipment and set up his own shop. At {Tea Lautrec} Lithography (a verbal pun and homage to the 1890's artist) everyone came in the front door. The San Francisco rock poster movement provided opportunity for Levon, then approaching retirement age, to finally become his own man in his chosen craft, and he brought to it his customary energy, creativity and dedication to people. He and his crew provided the artists full cooperation, including technical advice, in achieving the finest possible lithographic prints while under constant pressure to meet Bill Grahman's deadlines. Levon retired in 1984, and the shop continued under different management until 1991. The name "{Tea Lautrec} Lithography" remains the property of his son Denis.

Many people cited Levon's generosity with his time, as well as his money, and revealed other aspects of his character. "Dad was never a taker, he only wanted to give and to teach," Denis remarked. During their teens Levon held weekly philosophy sessions with his sons and a group of their friends. Denis also recalled, "He was a really great and creative cook," specializing in Mediterranean dishes such as shish kabob and dolma (and a variety of such delicacies were served at this event). Levon's neighbor of thirty years told of their long friendship based on a mutual and active interest in gardening. Levon's affectionate involvement in the psychedelic poster movement at age sixty certainly indicates an open, youthful spirit. And this quality was further supported by a forty-something man who in recent years occasionally took Levon out for a drive in the city. He remarked that Levon especially enjoyed riding around listening to the rock music of his latter heydays.

In St. John's social hall a few rock posters were on display, and two posters commemorating Levon's seventieth birthday (presented to him at a large party organized by his sons in 1977) by {David Singer} and {David Goines}. Also family photos and {The Art of Rock}, which was open to the text and photography of Levon. Singer was out of town, but David Goines attended, as did {Lee Conklin}. The most direct and intimate representative of Levon's rock poster days was his longtime associate, master pressman Joe Buchwald, who spoke of his "old pal" with deep and moving affection.

Also attending were members of "The Fort Point Gang," a group of elderly trade unionists, radical socialists, longshoremen and seamen and their spouses, who meet weekly for a walk (and then breakfast) from Marina Green to Fort Point at the southern edge of the Golden Gate. At a recent meeting there they eulogized their old friend and "gang" member, and cast red carnations on the water.

Besides his two sons, Levon is survived by his wife of fifty-six years, Lilyan. Several grandchildren and other, younger members of his extended family expressed their respect and affection directly as well as through affirmation, in various modest ways, of family and cultural pride. From all the testimony of friends and relatives it was apparent that Levon was a man of great heart and soul, an estimable patriarch whose love and strong moral influence extended beyond his immediate family and his lifetime, a man to be celebrated.

[Note: This article originally appeared in {Wes Wilson}'s publication "{Off The Wall}," and is used with permission of Wilson and the author. Copyright © Wes Wilson and Walter Medeiros]