

Classic Posters - The Grande Ballroom

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by Michael Erlewine

The Beginnings

San Francisco was where the 1960's dance-hall culture budded and bloomed, but it was not the only area of the country where the alternative ("hippie") culture flowered. While New York City (surprisingly!) never really got with it, there were major dance-halls and alternative culture scenes in both Texas and Detroit. After San Francisco, the next big scene to take root was in Detroit, with the advent of the Grande Ballroom and its owner Russ Gibb.

Russ Gibb, who was raised in the Detroit area, came up listening to pop music, but also was exposed to race music and began attending concerts at places like the Paradise Theater and the Graystone Ballroom in Detroit in the late 1940s. It was here that he heard acts like Moms Mabley, Ivory Joe Hunter, and Count Basie.

Russ Gibb:

"I remember, that Nellie Lutcher was the first black artist that I think, in my mind, crossed over to White radio...and Ivory Joe Hunter and Ed MacKenzie were playing. Ed was known as 'Jack the Bellboy' back then. Nellie Lutcher had records called, "Hurry On Down to My House" and "Fine Brown Frame," and that was really one of the first black artists that I heard on what we called regular radio, on pop radio."

Gibb was an elementary-school teacher, working in Howell, Michigan, a very conservative school district northwest of Detroit. In fact, so conservative was it that no dancing was allowed in the school, and all teachers had written into

their contracts that they were to drive 20 miles from Howell to take a drink and must attend church at least twice a week! Gibb, who had witnessed the success of teen-age sock hops in Detroit by DJs like Robin Seymour of Keener (WKNR) radio, thought he would try his hand at it putting on some dances.

Russ Gibb:

" So, I said I'll rent the ...I want to call it the Elks Club on Michigan and Grand River Avenue. It may have been the VFW. I can't remember. But I rented it and I put on a dance up there on a Saturday, and I made more money than I made in two weeks of teaching."

This was in the mid-to-late 1950s. Soon Russ Gibb was active as a radio DJ for WKNR on Sundays, and doing record hops ("Sock Hops") on Fridays or Saturday nights. The sock hops really made money, and before long Gibb had teamed up with Keener-DJ Gary Stevens and rented a UAW hall on Van Born Road in Detroit. They called the club the "Pink Pussycat, and it was open every Friday and Saturday night." They did not have a live band. Aside from Gary Stevens as DJ, the club featured whatever recording artists were in town that week, who would drop by and lip-synch to their records. So by the time the 1960s rolled around, Russ Gibb was very familiar with running dances, and appreciated the extra income. His teaching job paid something like \$2200 a year.

The Trip to San Francisco

In the late summer of 1966, Russ Gibb flew out to San Francisco to attend the wedding of his old friend Jim Dunbar, a radio announcer who went on to be enshrined in the Radio Hall of Fame.

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Dunbar was already an important figure in the Bay Area and had hosted Bill Graham as a guest on his show.

Graham, who valued the publicity and was courting Dunbar, saw to it that the radio host had plenty of complimentary tickets to the Fillmore Auditorium.

Dunbar decided to use some of those tickets and take his old friend Russ Gibb with him to the event. And Bill Graham, who wanted to impress Dunbar, gave them the royal tour, personally escorting them everywhere, both out front and behind the stage. Russ Gibb, coming from the 1950s-style sock hops of Detroit, was blown away by the whole scene. From the moment he walked into the Fillmore and experienced his first light show, Gibb was smitten. This was something else!

With the wheels of Russ Gibb's mind already turning, he began to ask Graham all kinds of questions about how this kind of setup worked. Bill Graham's first question to Russ Gibb was: "Where are you from?" When Gibb said, "Detroit," Graham asked him "How far away is that?" "Oh, about 2500 miles," said Gibb. Only then, did Bill Graham agree to answer his questions and show him some of the inner working of the dance-hall venue. Russ Gibb clearly remembers seeing the equipment of the Byrds being loaded or unloaded backstage, and registered the odd spelling of the group's name. This places his night at the Fillmore to be September 16, 1966, since that was the first time the Byrds had played there.

Back in Detroit

Russ Gibb, who was taking all this in, was already converted, and was making plans in his mind to implement this kind of scene back home. In fact he no

sooner got back to Detroit, than he set about looking for a building where he could create his own version of what he had seen and experienced at the Fillmore, the light show, the posters, the new-style music -- the works. The older ballroom scene in Detroit had just about faded, with many venues closed, and the few big bands still left being reduced to playing at places like the Edgewater Amusement Park.

Gibb looked at several venues and finally settled on the Grande Ballroom, a dance hall/ballroom used since the 1940's for everything from your standard ballroom dancing, to a roller rink, and even by Detroit DJ Frantic Ernie Durham. In 1966, it was standing idle, and had been closed for some time, filled with old mattresses. Gibb sought out the landlord, managed to pull together the \$700 it would take to rent it on an ongoing basis, and set about cleaning it up. In 1966, \$700 was still a nice bit of change. The only painting that was done was to paint the walls white on either side of the stage, so the lightshow would have something to project on. The rest was just cleaning out the place. But finding the Grande was only part of the solution. Russ Gibb knew next to nothing about the hippie scene, the music, art, and the alternative culture that he had experienced at the Fillmore in San Francisco.

He knew that his patrons would be college-age kids, but the crowd at the Fillmore was anything but conservative, so Gibb headed on down to Wayne State University and to the alternative-press tabloid, the Fifth Estate. It was through this contact that he first met John Sinclair. From that point onward, he was in good hands. Sinclair was

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already a local guru of alternative everything and more than happy to help out.

Sinclair soon took Gibb to see a local band he was considering managing, the MC5, at the Wayne Civic Center. Gibb says the group were all dressed in suits, and looked like The Beatles. Sinclair would soon rectify that. The MC5 became pretty much the house band at the Grande and John Sinclair the resident master of the hip scene. In an interview I did with Gibb, he went on and on about how grateful he was to Sinclair, for helping the Grande Ballroom to be 'cool'. While Russ Gibb handled the concessions and the books, Sinclair, who was never paid for his work (he got his band book there pretty much steadily), was glad to take over the creative ambiance for the Grande, including the light show, the booking of local bands, the atmosphere, and, of course, the posters. It was Sinclair who introduced Gibb to Rob Tyner, whose high-school friend Gary Grimshaw just happened to be visiting. And it was Grimshaw who would do that first poster, with almost no notice, turning it around literally overnight.

According to Russ Gibb, it was about three weeks from when he saw the Byrds in San Francisco (September 16, 1966) and had some sort of epiphany at the Fillmore Auditorium, to when the Grande opened on October 7th. That is some fast footwork. It took a few more weeks before the specially ordered Strobe light arrived from California, but the place was already growing by then.

And it is pretty remarkable that a Detroit schoolteacher, who put on local sock hops, and had not dropped LSD or smoked a single joint (never has since,

either) could take in that whole 1960's scene in San Francisco and come back and do a solid rendition of it in straight Detroit in something like three weeks. Even with John Sinclair's help, this is no mean feat. And its trajectory was not to be without bumps.

Posters, Handbills, and Cards

Although Gibb started with full-sized posters, after a few weeks it was clear that although posters worked fine on the streets of San Francisco, the same was not true for Detroit. It was not just that they were expensive; it was hard to find places to post them, and what places there were did not attract the kind of clientele the Grande was aiming for. Gibb was looking for the youth, college kids, and the alternative scene in general. Posters were soon supplemented and eventually pretty much eclipsed by handbills, and later still, by postcards.

After the first three posters, Gibb switched to handbills, punctuated by the occasional poster. Then, almost a year after the Grande opened, the handbills gave way to postcards. From that time forward (September of 1967), there were almost always cards, with the occasional poster, and the very occasional handbill. In time, the cards pretty much dominated and it was not only because they were less expensive to produce. The key to the cards was that they reached the audience the Grande wanted to reach, the youth. It was easy for Russ Gibb to give school kids and volunteers a big fistful of postcards and a free pass to the Grande for that event and have them go and hand out the cards to the right people, whether in the schools or on the street. And this seemed to actually work. While

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there was no 'right' place for the posters and not even enough places for the handbills, passing out cards on a one-to-one basis and in the schools seemed to bring in the crowds.

Yet, no matter how hard they tried, the Grande had trouble rising above the just-paying-your-bills level. While the local scene was active and dedicated, it was still too small to break through the threshold of break-even. What to do?

National Acts

Russ Gibb decided to take a risk and reach out for some national acts. He stopped booking only local acts such as the MC5, the Rationals, the Prime Movers, and began to book national acts like Cream, the Fugs, the Grateful Dead, Jimi Hendrix, and so on. This began in late June of 1967, just as the 'Summer of Love' was taking off, when the "Jefferson Airplane" was booked into the larger Ford Auditorium in Detroit. As luck would have it, the 'Airplane' gained some real national attention between the time it was booked and the date of the performance. They got full press coverage and the whole thing just worked. People came and money was made. The Grande was transitioning to another level.

The advent of national acts, meant that local headliners like the MC5 were relegated to just opening the show, and this was at first viewed as a demotion. But the truth was that there was nothing these local groups would have rather done than to play on the same stage with their idols, groups like Jimi Hendrix, Cream, the Grateful Dead, and others, so it was soon cool with everyone. With the addition of national headliners, the Grande Ballroom reached a new and more lucrative level.

The Poster Artists

What the addition of extra cash meant for the graphic artists was the more-frequent return of the full-sized poster, and work for some of the main artists, in particular Gary Grimshaw. By the end of the summer of 1967, Grimshaw was once again at the artistic helm and producing significant work for the Grande. Grimshaw's Grande work is stunning, and there is no question that he set the poster standard for this venue. Please see the section of Grimshaw for more detail.

Although Gary Grimshaw is considered the primary artist, when the Grande is discussed, he is by no means the only artist that produced significant work for that venue. Carl Lundgren and Donnie Dope (AKA Don Forsyth) both made major contributions to the venue and each took over as the major Grande artist at different times in its history.

Although Lundgren plays it down, collectors never cease to marvel at the magnificent "Vanessa" poster. It is both very large and very striking, and while originals are hard to come by, the reprint is generally still available. The same goes for the Jeff Beck (1968-11-01) and the Jefferson Airplane (1968-11-21) cards, both of which have been reprinted as full posters. These are stunning pieces and there are a lot of others as well.

Don Forsyth, today going under the name 'Max Elbow', and known in the Grande years as 'Donnie Dope' has also provided significant work for the venue, perhaps most noted for the Canned Heat Blues Band postcard (1968-12-06), which collectors still wish would be reissued as a full poster.

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By the early 1970s, much of the dancehall scene had declined and vanished, with the Family Dog leading the way in the end of 1968. The Grande Ballroom kind of sputtered out early in 1970, while the Fillmore series struggled on until the spring of 1972. An era had ended.

As someone who was there at the beginning, with our band, the Prime Movers Blues Band, on a number of posters, and having been there many more times, just jamming or hanging out, the Grande was to us what the Avalon Ballroom and Fillmore were for San Francisco. And it was not a just a poor imitation, thanks to the resolve of Russ Gibb, the 'hip ness' of John Sinclair and others, and the sheer youth and need for some space like this on the part of the rest of us. Detroit was no San Francisco, which makes it all the more remarkable that the Grande Ballroom was as free spirited and wonderful as it was. But pot and LSD, which most of us had partaken of, was pretty much the same, and the psychedelic vision was the same from coast to coast. The Grande was plenty hip and the place to be in the Midwest in those years.

And much of the poster art holds up as well. No less of a poster-art expert than Eric King states in his guide that the Grande art rivals the best work of the major San Francisco artists, and deserves to be considered in the same league. Posters like Gary Grimshaw's first 'Cream' poster and Lundgren's beautiful "Vanessa" are lasting examples of the posters of that entire era.

The Grande Collectables

The Grande material, which was never printed in large quantities (often 1000 or

less), has a solid following among collectors, who continue to seek it out. Since the cards were the mainstay of the venue and exist in larger quantities (and are less expensive), they remain the most popular. The set of 81 'main' cards is still pretty much attainable, with a couple of difficult ones, and one more-or-less impossible card, the "Who/Toronto."

As for how many items exist to collect in the Grande series, there is not complete agreement. Collectors argue and agree to argue about what should or should not be included as part of this venue. And there is the fact that the venue kind of petered out, with a few shows being held under that name, but not by Russ Gibb, and so on. And then some shows were held years later, etc. You get the idea. Eric King, the generally acknowledged expert on this venue, includes a variety of events that are Russ Gibb related or loosely attached to the Grande or to that whole scene in his valuable guide to this venue. (See: Eric King Guide)

But to put you in the ballpark, there are approximately 47 posters, 51 handbills, and something like 101 collectable cards. The posters and cards are vigorously collected, because of their art and primarily because most are in color. The handbills are almost an acquired taste. There are a quite a lot of them, what are for the most part monochromatic, and the majority of them are not very artistically interesting. And they have not survived in appreciable quantities, a few as a single copy. Still, for those who develop a taste for them, they can be addicting, and a fierce ongoing interest in them survives among a small group of collectors.

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The posters are very collectable and many are stunning, in particular those of artist Gary Grimshaw. Many collectors feel that this is Grimshaw's finest work. For my money, I prefer his 1970's period, but who cares. I enjoy and collect them both.

The set of 81 cards, which is commonly considered the main set for the Grande, includes the Southbound Freeway gig on September 22/24, 1967 as #1 (the "Shiva" card) to #81, which is the "Frost" on a date for August 6/7, 1969. Many of these cards are often available on this site. Hard ones to find include the #7 card (MC5/Gold) and, of course, the near impossible "Who/Toronto."

Grande Free Pass

The "Good for One Free Trip at the Grande" pass has more than passing meaning. It was the key to distributing the Grande postcards on the street and in schools. Volunteers, mostly high-school-aged kids, would get a stack of cards to pass out, plus a free pass to the Grande for themselves. Russ Gibb, who ran the Grande Ballroom, says that this was the ticket, so to speak, to bring in the crowds. While posters in Detroit did not have the effect that posters in San Francisco had, and handbills were only somewhat better, the cards turned out to actually work best. These cards are quite rare.

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