

Interview with Paul Grushkin of "The Art of Rock" by Michael Erlewine

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"The Art of Rock" and "The Art of Modern Rock"

interview by Michael Erlewine, 20 February 2003

Born: September 3, 1951, New York City

Grew up in Bergen Co., N.J.

Paul Grishkin: When I have seen probably over a thousand people open up "The Art of Rock". What happens is inevitable this: They open up a couple of pages, their fingers sneak out and they go [gasp]... "I was at that show." A couple of more pages [gasp] "I wanted to go to that show. My brother was thrown out of that show by Bill Graham." You wouldn't believe this. See, what the art does, it stimulates people's recollections of what it was like to actually be with rock and roll. We can all have CD's; we can all do downloads and MP3's. There are many, many ways to access music since time immemorial. But, what posters show is the commonality of us in going to the show, wanting to go to the show, and the shared experience of what it was like to be at the show.

All through art, the ironic part of this whole thing is that now time has progressed and the album has morphed into the cassette, the cassette morphed into the CD, and the 8 track and the 45 single before that. Now of course, it's the CD with very little album art, and the MP3 with no album art at all.

So people are actually hungry for art; it's an innate thing within them. They respond to posters, and why else then would there be this enormous

renaissance of poster art in the year 2003.

Okay, let's explore that first thing because this is the actual genesis of the art of modern rock. That is that music perhaps because of MTV and just the exegesis of time and the human community moving forward is that rock and roll bands don't last as long as they used to, that people access music by the moment, and then they move on from that band's one song that grabbed them to the next band and the next band and everything is such a blur. Yet the human spirit is such that wonderful things want to be acknowledged and wonderful things want to be preserved and that actually happens to be the reason for poster art, ok? There is a certain utilitarian aspect to it, this band is playing at the Capital, come on down.

Many young poster's artists are either approaching the bands or approaching the promoters and wanting to do a poster for ephemeral events. Events that happen and then disappear into time, and yet the poster becomes this thing that people grab on for a longer period of time than the show. They look at it, and they go, "Man that was a good time! Look at that art." It's just like what I heard last night at the,,," Michael ,this is happening in every corner of the United States and around the world in the greatest profusion of silkscreen offset and digitally inspired art that's ever been.

Michael Erlewine: I agree.

Paul Grishkin: This is in 2003, with the MP3 upon us, the disappearing thing of music, and yet the appearing thing of poster art. When I was doing "The Art of Rock"... Well, let's go back a little farther... the first book that I did... I'll

Interview with Paul Grushkin of "The Art of Rock" by Michael Erlewine

even go back farther. I grew up in a book publishing family. My mom is a librarian; she's 82 years old, and she is still a librarian at the Englewood-New Jersey public library. My dad passed away a couple of years ago, but he was one of the century's foremost designers of books. In fact, in his career, he had become the senior vice-president and art director for "Harry Abrams," the world's largest, biggest, art-book company. My home in New Jersey, Michael, has 10,000 art books. From the basement to the third floor, and this is what I was raised in.

Michael Erlewine: Cool.

Paul Grishkin: I went to Stanford during the war years, during 1969-1974. But, I was raised in book publishing, so all of my experiences with the "Grateful Dead," hanging out with them, the members of the band, at their office, lead into, in 1983, the publication of the "Grateful Dead, the official book of the Deadheads", which has now sold almost 400,000 copies. It's in its 15th printing, and it was the first time that the Dead archives had ever been accessed. I was very fortunate to be in that place, but my love and my conviction lead me to that opportunity. I was on the publication on "The Book of the Deadheads", that Bob Abrams, son of Harry Abrams, flew west to find somebody to do the poster book, and I could do the Art of Rock, and he knew of me because of our family association, and quite frankly, he put it to me within the first half hour. Are you the guy that's willing to do "The Art of Rock"? Little did I know what this would entail some two and a half years of being persuasive, beyond my own belief, that I could be that persuasive.

Michael Erlewine: And you're pretty persuasive.

Paul Grishkin: And I'm pretty damn persuasive. Basically, obtain the situation for a book where we would begin with Elvis and the Black acts of the 1950s and letter-press, and go all the way through punk and new wave with deep, deep explorations into psychedelic, and essentially honor all of the artists that we could possibly find. There was also a time, when "Poster Art"... This is the book that was published in 1987. It's been reprinted four times. It has a tiny folio edition that came out in 1990. But, the situation was that San Francisco Bay Area was still the king of posters. There were certain wonderful things, with Van Hammersveld and others in Southern California, with Gary Grimshaw in Detroit. God-damned nothing in New York City, little bits and pieces here and there, but essentially you had a west-coast renaissance of poster art, which is absolutely true, is absolutely believable. The historical record shows that to be so. So we were all very fortunate for the very first time, things that we had been pursuing intuitively to find this art was now, "codified" in a huge 500-page oversized nine-pound book, brought out by Abbeyville, son of Abram's. How lucky we all were.

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Paul Grishkin: Within the first month or so, people starting going to dealers and their friends and going, "Page 16, plate 34, you got it? I want it!" Okay?

So, people began to pursue things in a more sophisticated, a more targeted... They had more information now. They understood that the length and breadth of Rick Griffin's career, or

Interview with Paul Grushkin of "The Art of Rock" by Michael Erlewine

Alton Kelley's, or Stanley Mouse's or Grimshaw's or whomever really extended much further than they thought. So, people really started to pursue this art with love, vigor, and conviction, whatever... And the book, "Art of Rock, Poster's from Presley to Punk," AOR became a standard work all over the world, in every auction you would encounter, Sotheby's, Christie's, and all the independents.

A poster was given a provenance by the plate and page number in "AOR"... "AOR, 3.336 ... That's the one, see, look at it, ok?" That's not to say these posters didn't exist before "Art of Rock." Of course they did. But the fact is that collector's and the poster dealers and the artist's themselves, in the end willingly, or I had to persuade, beat on them and shame them into doing it, mostly, came together in a book that would otherwise never would have happened. And it never has happened before and since.

Michael Erlewine: I agree.

Paul Grishkin: Sometimes in life you are presented with a situation where there is goodness in intent and there is goodness to produce. This is so with "The Art of Modern Rock". But clearly with, "The Art of Rock", yes, I was somewhat...I was young in that, and we were all learning how to make a book together. But, by God, with two exceptions, the book is exactly what was wanted, needed, cared for, and ultimately came out as.

Michael Erlewine: That's true.

Paul Grishkin: It's remarkably ego less. The stories were told. Even though rock and roll stories are mostly apocryphal and who's know among the shifting quicksand of history as to whether it

really did happen that way, most of what appeared in, "Art of Rock", actually did happen, generally speaking, that way.

The stories are true, from the heart, and it works, not only people. People can also see that rock and roll, well, my parable in all of this is that there are many, many, many, many, many, many, many, many kinds of rock and roll. And it's happening all at once. So we can't always say there is a straight chronology from A to B, and ultimately, to Z. Because, A, B, and Z are all happening at the same time. So the way we deal with that, many of us historians, is to say, it's not when you got on the bus, it's that you got on the bus. That mean's that your brothers and sisters that got on in 1954, with the Black acts and with Elvis in 1955, or your other brothers and sisters that came alive in the late '80s with punk and new wave, they are all on the same bus of rock and roll, which is, the thing that made it different, the thing that changed your head, the thing that allowed you to look at the world differently, that made you a rebel, that...and on and on. Okay? That's what rock and roll is the embrace of all that.

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Paul Grishkin: So even if you loved Tom Jones, or even if you grew up on New Kids on the Block, it's the same thing as growing up on Quicksilver Messenger Service or Queens of the Stone Age. It's rock and roll. Poster's have always been there. It's almost like the guys working in frescoes for the Medici, you know. You want to commemorate it. It's so powerful and so meaningful and it's changing society and your part of it. That is why you look at those early Fillmores and Family Dogs, and you realize what the

Interview with Paul Grushkin of "The Art of Rock" by Michael Erlewine

freshness in spirit there was. They were making it up, just as the bands were making it up, all at once. In that environment, comes out genius, maybe like Victor Moscoso, absolutely, from the heart ...and on and on...

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Paul Grishkin: So, in 1987 was birthed "The Art of Rock". Here we are 16 years later. Why did it take 16 years? Hey, I started a family. My wife and I had to support a family. We all had day jobs. I was very lucky that I stayed 25 years in rock and roll merchandising as VP of sales at Winterland and Sony Signatures, and Signatures, Company X.

And now I'm with New Vista, a division of Quantum Color. We do translucent, vital posters! Yeah! Still there baby, still there. Now, in that 16th year, has come the opportunity to do the "Art of Modern Rock," and it was not easy to get this situation together, because unfortunately our economy is such that major publishers are no longer willing to put up the decent dollar to produce beautiful art books.

Many companies, like Little Brown, the famous Little Brown imprint, gone! The famous Viking Studio imprint for big beautiful oversized photography and art books, gone, gone, destroyed, gone. So that you can't automatically set up a bidding situation between Little Brown, Viking, Abrams, Simon & Schuster.

They're not doing that. They're not putting their money into it. Things are too ephemeral. Things are moving too quickly. So, one has to look for the great independents, the ones who have been making their money by doing it, not so much by doing it underground, but just working with certain things like, say the

National Basketball Association, Ok, and doing all their wonderful publications.

So, I came to a place two, three years ago with my friend Joel Selvin, the rock critic of the San Francisco Chronicle. There had not been up to that time a book on the Hard Rock Café's world-famous memorabilia collection. How could that be? Well, the Hard Rock is a difficult entity to work with, and many, many egos and what not, and there was one man who finally stood up and said I can help you challenge that. His name is Jim Forni. He was the president of a company called Rare Air, and he and I successfully convinced the Hard Rock Café, who had no photography of their own, that if they put up a million dollars in cash, we would essentially create 45,000 books for them and send crews around the world and do the photography and assemble a mighty, mighty book, and which we did.

It is so successful, and people everywhere around the world love it, because it looks like the Hard Rock Café. This fantastic production team that doesn't work for Simon & Schuster, William Morrow, and the rest, has been quietly doing books of extraordinary taste and deep conviction for subjects that are very like, Hard Rock, or the NBA, or whatever it may be.

So, Jim Forni migrated to a company called, NVU, he actually founded it, called NVU Productions, and it is here that he raised his hand and said "It is time Paul, Dennis King, my co-author, yes, let's do art of modern rock together. Let's make it a real... let's put the money into the production and let's give the world again a 500 page oversized art-book in which all the great artists, the

Interview with Paul Grushkin of "The Art of Rock" by Michael Erlewine

minor artists, people you've never heard of, the upcoming bands, the established bands...but, by God the truth of it is going to be in the poster art itself, if it's good art it goes in the book."

Michael Erlewine: That's great.

Paul Grishkin: Whoa, what an opportunity Michael!

Michael Erlewine: I agree.

Paul Grishkin: So here we are. We have begun that process, Fall 2003. Dennis King and I put out the word, because this site gig posters exists. There is a lot of dialogue between the artists, a lot of chatter going on. This is good. This is where things stand in 2003, that building a dialogue with your fellow man in cyber-space, and so. We put out the word that the book was now going to happen, indeed, and the publisher is in view, and let's rock. So what has happened, in the past 6-8 weeks is that thousands upon thousands of posters have been physically been sent. Now this is a very interesting little story I am about to tell you. That is, when we did the first "Art of Rock", there was no question that there were posters. That's all there was. There were no .jpegs, or .tiffs, or digital files, or CD's, in which you burned and what now.

Michael Erlewine: That's right.

Paul Grishkin: There was only the paper poster that somehow came into being. Either an entity like BGP was fronting the thing, or somehow, guys like Gary Grimshaw, and Russ Gibb in Detroit, and off-set runs were produced. But you see now, with this incredible proliferation, the poster explosion as we call it, the new renaissance of print making, with silk-screen being made in every corner, and cranny of the US. Leia

Bell, in Salt Lake City, and Drowning Creek in Commerce, Georgia, and everywhere in between. They're doing it in runs of 20, 50, [laughs], 75, 150, Oh God, a huge run, 250 pieces.

This is not 5000 pieces produced by BGP. These are things you have to hunt down, persuade, please, please, send. Well, I know it's your last three, but if we get it in the book, man, your going to...you know, it will be such a joy and pleasure for everyone else to enjoy, but mostly yourself. Please indulge, send the poster.

Oh Paul, can't I just send a .jpeg? Well, how do I know that it's actually a poster?

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Paul Grishkin: Did you post it? Was it up in a window? These are some real interesting questions that are starting to emerge here in an age when you can create digital art and go, "Well, I intending it for being a poster. Well, I never quite got around to...really, you know...it's a really great piece of art." Well, how big is it? "Well, I never printed it."

Worse than that, did it actually get off the computer? You know, there are many variations on that little thing. Well, we'll create one fiery print. We'll make some color Xeroxes off of that. (Yawns). Well, that's postering in the modern age.

Let's do 20 of them. That's all I can afford. Let's see now, silkscreen. I'll create a silkscreen press in my home studio here, in my garage. I'll print like 75 of them. I can't afford more paper than that. You see, there is even these weird exigencies, that's the word about doing this book, because, now once again it's the cajoling, it's the please, please, please send the poster.

Interview with Paul Grushkin of "The Art of Rock" by Michael Erlewine

Michael Erlewine: Right. How's it going?

Paul Grishkin: It going great. It's wearing me out.

Michael Erlewine: I'll bet.

Paul Grishkin: It's going great. Yes, when I receive stacks of digital prints, I kind of wince. But, that's what's happening.

Michael Erlewine: That's true.

Paul Grishkin: Yes, when I see these incredibly beautiful silk-screens, my heart just goes pitter-patter because I'm seeing American folk-art in its glory.

Michael Erlewine: I agree.

Paul Grishkin: I'm seeing rock and roll in its truest spirit, and that's a very heavy deal. When you see kids who are hungry, hungry, hungry, to make posters, to see posters, to touch posters....to go ahhoohhh, man, man...and variations on that.

Michael Erlewine: That's true.

Paul Grishkin: It's part of the human spirit to look at a piece of art and go...fluu (fuck???)... we were doing it in our day, and the young ones are doing it in their day. But Michael, the hardest thing is to not look down your nose at somebody else's music.

Michael Erlewine: Well, yeah, you have to be egalitarian about it.

Paul Grishkin: Well, the moment you say it was better in my day, the moment is that...it's passed you pal. It's not fair to say that, to my son, "Well, whatever your listening to sucks. It was better when John Cipollina was doing it.

That's not to say that everybody is the best artist. Some artists are lesser;

some artists only have two great pieces; some artists have a 100 great pieces.

Michael Erlewine: That's right.

Paul Grishkin: I guess Dennis and myself, along with the production team, are sifting through all that and making a magnificent book, not to diss people by going, "Well, you're a one poster guy, or an eight poster guy," but simply finding the mini-themes. Ones of the interesting things we are trying to do with this book is not make it chronological, because as I said there are many different kinds of rock that is happening simultaneously. So to say that one came before the other exactly, is not totally the truth. However, you can look at scenes like Texas, and the huge burgeoning of posters.

Michael Erlewine: I know.

Paul Grishkin: And it has ripples, ripples right into the present day. You can look at Seattle and San Francisco of course, but now there are themes, like silk-screening, power tools, you know things you can do with your computer

Michael Erlewine: Yeah.

Paul Grishkin: Certain bands that resonate because of their name and therefore create wonderful bodies of art, like Guided by Voices. What a great name for a band! Doesn't that suggest incredible posters.

Michael Erlewine: Right. Queens of the Stone Age, what, with a series of some 30 posters this summer?

Paul Grishkin: There it is man, there it is. So, I think the challenge in all of this is to at the moment when production is cut-off, I mean production begins at no more choices, that's it, these are the ones, the text has been written, and

Interview with Paul Grushkin of "The Art of Rock" by Michael Erlewine

that's probably end of June, 2003 and then it takes about 60-90 days to print and bind and warehouse and get ready for release.

Michael Erlewine: Wow.

Paul Grishkin: And if we're lucky, and I think I still we are still very much on track for October of this year.

Michael Erlewine: That's great.

Paul Grishkin: The other thing that we want to do more than anything else is to involve the collector's.

Michael Erlewine: Sure.

Paul Grishkin: The rock and rollers, the poster artists, the venues, and create some traveling exhibitions.

Michael Erlewine: Sure.

Paul Grishkin: Tell each other where the great websites are, and celebrate the living shit out of this.

Michael Erlewine: Don't forget the archivists and catalogers like me and others.

Paul Grishkin: No...that's a key destination.

Michael Erlewine: Because you got to archive, you have to catalogue something, to make it collectible.

Paul Grishkin: You got to. That's right, so I'm going to ask you a question. Why do you archive? Why are you so possessed by this?

Michael Erlewine: Well, you know when I was young, it was stones, and salamanders, and bugs, and snakes. I guess I am compulsive about it.

When I first started the All-Music Guide, when I was on guy in a little office in the middle of Michigan somewhere, many of the well-known music writers that I

contacted laughed at me, because how could anyone be so arrogant to try to do "all" music. But I kept at it, and all of those guys that laughed at me ended up working for me as freelance writers. I ended up working with over 500 freelance writers that wrote for us... today there are something like 950 freelance writers and a couple hundred full-time staff members at AMG.

Paul Grishkin: But what is it in the human spirit, Michael?

Michael Erlewine: Well to me, first of all, it's a delightful thing. I mean that I'm one of these people that I cannot wait to get up in the morning. I can't sleep, because I can't wait for the next morning, right? I can't wait to get up. I can't wait to go and just do what I'm doing, because it's an unfolding, right?

I love all of it. That's what I was trying to say, I was trying to say that it's not just the big ones, the good ones, the best ones. It's each of the areas that are distinct. They are valuable in itself. I pride myself in being able to treat everyone and every area equally, so that the treatment is going to be the same. I'm going to try to bring out, even if I don't like it, those kinds of art that I don't like, personally. That has nothing do with it, right? It has to do with this existed and people do like it and it represents something.

Paul Grishkin: Did you enjoy the punk and new wave art?

Michael Erlewine: I enjoy it, yeah. I do enjoy it, I do. I collect it. But, remember that I'm 61 years old, so I'm enjoying it more as an archivist than I am as someone that is like 25 years old. For instance, David Singers recent String Cheese Incident with a woman on a rocket.

Interview with Paul Grishkin of "The Art of Rock" by Michael Erlewine

Paul Grishkin: Yep.

Michael Erlewine: That's awesome to me. That's just a beautiful thing. So that's the kind of stuff I think is gorgeous.

Paul Grishkin: Did you fall in love with letterpress?

Michael Erlewine: You mean when I started?

Paul Grishkin: Well, yeah, I mean you were a child in some way of the 60's.

Michael Erlewine: My mother was an artist her whole life. I grew up in a family of artists and craftsmen. My dad was a businessman, a magician, a photographer, and a collector, so I was constantly surrounded with culture.

Paul Grishkin: Yep.

Michael Erlewine: So I grew up in that. I got into posters because I had a band in the 1960s. The only way I could make advertisement was I built my own silk-screen shop with drying racks, designed my own posters, printed them and put them up. That's how I got into the thing.

Paul Grishkin: And as is today. Many kids are doing it in that same spirit.

Michael Erlewine: I cut Rubilith by hand. And of course, when I played at gig at the Grande Ballroom or something, I'd take the poster of my own gig.

Paul Grishkin: Yep,

Michael Erlewine: One of them is worth something like three grand now.

Michael Erlewine: Yeah, so I don't know what makes me an archivist. I mean, the truth is, if I did, I probably wouldn't be doing it. If I could figure myself out.

Paul Grishkin: No, I mean, I think that's the neat part about it too. I look at

Dennis King in much the same, in much the same light. He also has an internal flame within him too. Now he's an archivist. He cares deeply about the artists themselves.

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