

Interview with Poster Expert Dennis King by Michael Erlewine

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Saturday, May 12, 2001 at D. King Gallery

Birth Data

Dennis King: September 24th, 1952

Dennis King: Yeah, it was 7:16 PM Oakland, California. And that's Daylight Savings Time.

Michael Erlewine: What was your given name?

Dennis King: Dennis Michael King.

And I grew up in the Bay Area. Here's some little groups of collectors and dealers that came out of the Bay Area, and it's really interesting to see the different generations that got into this. And it's kind of funny, because I'm in a kind of a limbo-age bracket.

There's a number of people who are older than me. There's a number of people that are younger than me by two or three years, like Jacaeber Kastor, but I kind of came out of the beatnik thing more than anything, because I lived around here. And I was a real big kid and I was real precocious. And you know, I got kicked out of junior high school for wearing Roman sandals and all this kind of stuff. It was like 1963 or something like that. So I used to come to Telegraph Avenue, because it's in the neighborhood, and it was the Telegraph scene. If you talk to Country Joe or any of those guys ... we talk about it sometimes. But very interesting, because there's a real international and intellectual atmosphere around Berkeley

...

Michael Erlewine: What year is this?

Dennis King: Well, this is early '60s

Michael Erlewine: Early?

Dennis King: Late '50s early '60s

Dennis King: And I didn't realize it at the time, but there was a very Japanese influence, because I have come back to look at that, to figure out where it all came from. It wasn't really obvious to me, but you look at, you know, the whole Alan Watts, Zen Buddhism....

But there was something very Japanese, in retrospect, about the Berkeley experience. And I can't quite put my finger on it. That's why I go back and I try to pick up pieces of history, to see where it came from...

Michael Erlewine: The Beat experience in general, I was here in 1960...

Dennis King: So, at any rate, I basically came out of the whole Berkeley thing, more than San Francisco. I think the first time... Well, interesting recollection is FD-14, the 'Zig Zag' poster, was a big deal. I remember walking down Telegraph Avenue. It's sitting up in the window of Shakespeare & Co. Books, and you're looking at this thing sittin' here, saying, "My god! How the fuck did they have the balls to put this thing up there?," because everybody knew what it was. And that was kind of my whole perception of, well, what the hell's goin' on in the city?

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The Zig-Zag Poster

I don't remember when I first got over to the Haight, but at some point I went over to it with somebody and went to one of the things in the Pan Handle. It was one of the early things and I just don't ... 1966 sometime. But then I started heading over to the city a bit more, but I was still pretty young at that time. I was 14 and a half or 15. I was out and about, all over the place. And that's when I started picking up posters.

And you know, if you go to the poster store, they used to be a buck. And it was like, Ok, I gotta' scrape together a couple a bucks to buy a couple posters every once in a while. It's like, you know, at that age, it was kind of ... if there were things going on, it was a big deal.

So, at any rate, that's kind of how I got involved in the poster scene. And it kind of went on from there. What really touched it off, I think, was early '70s ... around 1970. I used to be into comic books when I was a kid. I started reading comics in 1956, and I kept a bunch of the stuff, and I went to a flea market and I realized somebody was trafficking used comic books. So I took a box of mine out there and sold them all

off, and then, you know, started to get into that whole paper scene. And realized, "Hey, there's a couple of guys out here." This guy who's doing comic books, he's got a couple posters. So I picked up a poster or two, and then one thing led to another and I realized, wait a minute... It's kind of like the way a lot of people collect or the way I see a lot of people collecting over the years. It's like: These are the ones I really want. You know, get the ones I really want.

And then you see some other ones and you say, hey, this one's pretty good too; let's pick this one up. And by the time you realize where you are, you say god, you know, I've already got half of these things. These other ones aren't so bad. You start pickin' these up. You start working on a set. So by the time 1971 or 1972 rolled around it ... 1971 I guess, I was out looking for collections. I was buying them and keeping a set for myself and selling some other ones off to pay for my collections, which is also something I did with comic books and later I did too with baseball cards, which I made a lot of money off of and survived off of, for a very long time.

So I kind of started out in flea markets. And I never reacted really well to being in a dirty, dusty flea market, bakin' in the sun all day. It didn't last very long for me. That lasted less than a year. I said, "To hell with that." I did posters on the side for a really long time. I started doing comic books for my first papered collectables library, I put myself mostly through college doing that.

Michael Erlewine: Just right here in town?

Dennis King: Yep, I graduated from Berkeley here.

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And I ended up in... I used to go and do comic book shows a lot. There was big comic book show down in San Diego. It was the big deal once a year, and Stanley Mouse used to come down there, came down a couple of times. He would air brush t-shirts. And Rick Griffin was down there with Gordon McClelland, who was representing him at the time. Rick would come down every year and he'd be at the show. There was actually a little fringe poster thing going on down at the comic book show. And so I did a little bit of comic book stuff down there. And then when I got out of college in 1976, I actually got a teaching credential too, and I taught for 3 months and I said, "Fuck this."

You know, it's like nobody cares. I taught high school. Nobody cared. They didn't give a damn. There was a whole big political thing in the administration and I said this is not why I'm here. I'm out.

I wasn't really interested in doing business. I had always been pretty anti-business, even though I was doing a kind of flea market business on the side, anyway. But I had a friend, who graduated business from Berkeley, and he'd always wanted to have a retail establishment. And we were going to do kind of a comic books, sports collectables, posters -- all paper collectables. And he was going to run it, and I was going to travel around and buy things to bring back and sell. He had all these ideas, like we were going to pipe laughing gas into place, so people would be happy when they buy things.

And anyway, we spent about 2 or 3 months, basically putting everything together, finding a location, figuring out

how to do the financing. And he had like a girlfriend, who just turned 18. He got hooked on her and was gonna' get married. She said, "I'm not going to get married to a guy who runs a store doing this kind of stuff." And so he ended up pitching the whole thing and became a commodities worker, which he still is.

And after my spending all this time I said, "You know, fuck it! I put all this time into this, I'm just going to do it myself." And just intuitively I thought, you know, maybe there's a place here. Maybe there's a place in Berkeley. I could see this place. There's a little, kind of alcove where they have like some little tiny stores, off Telegraph Avenue. And I saw it in my mind. And I went over and I looked around and there was nothing. But there was a door that had some plants and a couple of brooms and things sitting there. It was really a closet with a glass door.

So I went to the guy at the place next door and said, "Hey, what do they do with that closet over there?" "Oh, go talk to Willie." So I went down to talk to Willie and I said, "Hey, you know, what about this place here. Can you rent me this place?" And he was a really funny guy. He's a Chinese guy. He was probably pushing 70 years old, and he used to wear a Chairman Mao cap, and he used to go around... He hated everybody. He was like, "I hate niggers, I hate whites, I hate chinks" -- all this stuff. He said, "But you know kid. You're all right. I like you!" [Laughs].

And he said, "You got guts man. I'll tell you what. I'll rent you that place for \$50 a month." And so I rented this 4 foot by 12 foot closet for \$50 a month and put a couple portfolios of posters there, put some comics on the wall, put some

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sports cards in there. And then I went around and started calling all the TV stations and all the newspapers and said, "Hey, I've got some stuff here that your viewers and your readers are really going to love. They've never seen this stuff before. They'll never see it again. You come out. We're gonna' have a thing for the media here and we'll have some wine for you to drink. And you can take a look at these things and do whatever you want."

A lot of them didn't really respond. But the guy at the Daily Californian, who's the U.C. Berkeley newspaper editor, was just real into this for some reason, and he wrote up ... he talked to me for awhile, I guess, and then he said, "Well, we'll send somebody over." So, the photographer shows up and he was totally not into it. He said, "Oh, this guy can't be in the paper. I don't know why he sent me over here." Next thing you know, the next day, when I'm opening for my 'Grand Opening', I'm on the front page of the Daily Cal, my picture, "THE KING OF THE CARDS!", and I show up to work at like noon, when I'm supposed to open the place... I've got like 25 people waiting to get to my place.

Then I start getting the other local newspapers... they picked it up, and such. But then I got Channel 4, NBC, and they said, "We're sorry, we couldn't come, but I'm really interested in this," and they came out to tape something, and they were so into it that they ran a three-part segment, three days in a row, on the 6 and 11 o'clock news.

Michael Erlewine: Wow!

Dennis King: I got all this publicity when I first started. So I sat in this little closet going claustrophobic, put some mirrors on the walls so it wouldn't drive me too

batty, for about 3 or 4 months, and then somehow or another, the synchronicity kicks in, and across the way the travel agency went out of business and I got into their spot. So I really quickly got into a bigger spot and started off. So I been, basically, you know, from 1976 on, I've been doing this full time.

And the posters were ... it was a three-part business, really. It was all three of those kinds of collectables, and I couldn't have done it without any one of them at the time. There was no way. But between the three of them, it was enough to carry the whole thing. And I've been doing it ever since.

Michael Erlewine: What stuff do you like for yourself? I mean what do you like to collect? What do you think is beautiful from the whole poster scene, just personally?

Dennis King: Well, the thing that I'm most interested in collecting is original artwork.

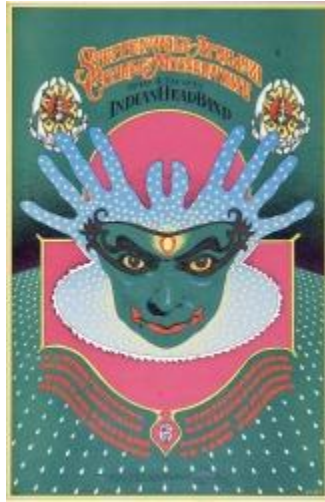
And that may have something to do with the art gallery kind of sensibility. A lot of art collectors are really interested in drawings and sketches, because you see the stylistic elements and how the things built up. I don't know if that's what it is or not. It's really hard to say. It's so exclusive.

You know, there's one made and it's sittin' here. Owning that one piece. Its something that I've really kind of pursued, and I pursue it with some of the more modern artists as well.

Michael Erlewine: Putting originals aside and just talking about the art itself, what kind of things do you think are beautiful? If you can even think of it that way. Maybe you don't.

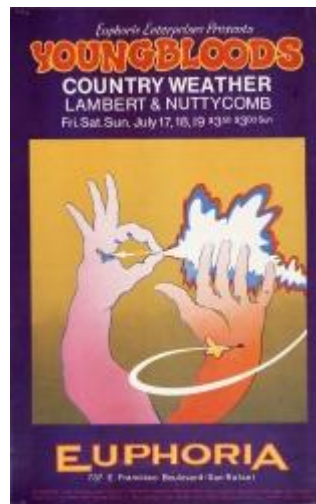
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Dennis King: No, I do. But, you see, I started collecting so long ago. I mean, I really started collecting in 1967. I went through phases of this ... that I've collected. I wouldn't say I'm omnivorous, but there's so many different types of posters, handbills, postcards -- all that kind of stuff -- that I've collected, that it is kind of hard to look at it that way, because most of what I've had, I've had for quite a while. I don't add much to my collection these days. There's certainly things that stand out among the work. Some of Wes Wilson's at the end of the Fillmore run, the last 20 or 30 posters that he did in there in 1967, are just really one of the pinnacles of that whole era. There's some peripheral things that he did, like that "Open Up and See" poster for J. Walter Thomson that he did. A beautiful piece. The Levi's piece. There is a lot of that stuff that's really great. That's really one of the high points. Bob Fried, the really psychedelic Bob Fried stuff, because cause Bob was... his whole point was to try and capture the psychedelic experience on a two dimensional surface. And it's really obvious, when you look at things like the FD-115, the guy with the green hands coming out of the head. That's one the most psychedelic posters ever made. I'm sorry. You look at that and you say "L.S.D." There's nothing else you can really say.



FD-115

Michael Erlewine: I feel that way about the Euphoria poster.



The Youngbloods at Euphoria

Dennis King: Yeah.

Michael Erlewine: And I saw the original acetate poster of the man walking across the books on stilts. That says a lot to me, intellectually -- a beautiful concept.

Dennis King: Well, I believe, and I'm not sure that that, I don't know if it's a Dore, or who it is... I don't know how much of that is really his work.

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Michael Erlewine: I think it might be pretty much his work, but who cares, the poster is fantastic.

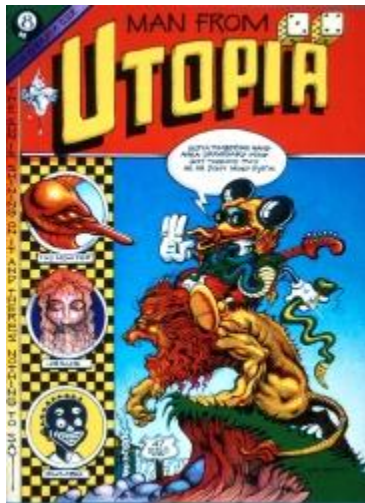
Dennis King: I'd be very surprised. And then the Rick Griffin stuff, obviously.

Michael Erlewine: Do you have a favorite Griffin?

Dennis King: Yeah.

Michael Erlewine: What sort of things?

Dennis King: My favorite Griffin stuff is the "Man from Utopia," the big, oversized comic book. That's my favorite Griffin stuff. The really psychedelic stuff grabs you because the imagery's so strong. It captures the experience



Man from Utopia

It was interesting, because one of the other things that, really, I haven't thought about it too much, but I thought about it a lot at one point, was growing up and living in the Bay Area. There was a whole kind of consciousness that a lot of people that I was around had, but it was very hard to relate to other people, who were not from the area, because there was something for whatever kind of words you want to throw up around, you know, the '60s were a special time

or whatever you want to say. There was a very special feeling in the area in 1966-1967 that goes beyond the trappings. This very profoundly influenced who I am and how I relate to people.

You know I think it's interesting when you look at the group of poster dealers, and I don't know that I wanna' go into this too far, but it's interesting, because Jacaeber Kastor grew up in Berkeley, but most of the poster dealers really are not from the Bay Area. It's kind of interesting. Most people are either transplants... and, I don't know how to put it, it's probably... Let's not go there.

Michael Erlewine: Yeah, one question I have is: Posters as memorabilia, posters as art. There seems to be, in my view, a shifting now. We've kind of exhausted the memorabilia aspect of it.

Dennis King: I don't think so.

Michael Erlewine: Not to stop it, but I don't know what else one can do to accent it that hasn't been done. I'm thinking that the fine art part of it is starting to come into its own. I wonder what your thoughts on it are?

Dennis King: Well, I think there are three categories: One is memorabilia, one is historical documents, and the other is art. And I think the historical document aspect has not been hit, has hardly been scratched, and I think that's one of the I mean certainly a lot of the posters and such don't fall into the art-world realm, as much as they fall into the historical documents realm.

Michael Erlewine: Well, I mean Lautrec and stuff like that are, I think, very collectible and very much considered art. It is a fact that ALL posters are

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historical documents of one type or another.

Dennis King: Well, because they're both. For example, you pick something like this. This is not art.

Michael Erlewine: No, but something like Rick Griffin's Oxomoxoa.

Dennis King: Oh no, I understand, but I'm just saying that within the realm of poster collecting, there are these three categories. And one of the things that makes posters so attractive to collectors is they do cross these different boundaries. You get into the best pieces, they represent memorabilia, nostalgic memorabilia; they represent historical documents that are extremely important because the documentation of a turning point in our history; and they represent art. So whenever you have things that have these three crossovers or four crossovers then ...

Michael Erlewine: As we grow older and die, the memorabilia probably doesn't work. It won't be other peoples' memorabilia.

Dennis King: That's true, but the historical document aspect will be even more important and I think that's been overlooked.

Michael Erlewine: I think you're right. A good point.

Dennis King: And I think that's why you see things like the acid test poster. Nobody's ever going to look at that as art. I mean, you know, basically the artist Gut took Captain Marvel and threw in a big "Shazamm!" Here we are guys. You know it's like part of that whole comic book thing that was happening. In fact, it's very interesting because the whole comic book thing underflows all that late 1965, early 1966.

You start seeing "Tribute to Dr. Strange" and that was a big deal. I don't know if you know about "Dr. Strange." He was a marvel comic book, the master of mystic arts. It'd be interesting at some point to explore really what the roots are, the comic book roots of the poster artists, because Rick Griffin obviously was very influenced. He did a lot of underground comic book work. Victor Moscoso did underground comic book work, so there's a lot of that happening, as well. I think there's a tendency of a lot of collectors to think that they're the center of the universe and to mistakenly think that, because myself and my generation are going to be gone, no one's gonna want this stuff anymore. I think that's very egotistical on the one hand and very misguided on the other, because I think the historic implications of these pieces are much greater that most people really recognize. We are still so close to that time period, that we're not really... we don't have the distance to take a look at it and see how significant they really are.

I'm not real into, you know, touting all that, but I understand what you're saying. The interesting type of feedback that I get from customers is that I'll see customers that I haven't seen in 10 years or 15 years, and they'll come back to me because they say, "Well, I trust you. You'll tell me the truth," and my philosophy, not only in this business, but in my other businesses as well, is that I'm in for the long run. I've been doing this for however long this is. I mean you think about posters ... 30 years, and I've always felt like I'm not doing this for this year and for next year. I'm gonna be doing this in ten years. I'm gonna be doing this in 20 years, and if I'm going to continue to make this my livelihood, I

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have to be honest with my customers, tell them the truth, help them when they need some guidance, for where they wanna' go, help them find what they wanna' do rather than what I wanna' do. Because then they remember me, and they come back to me. And I think that kind of sums up my business in a nutshell.

Michael@Erlewine.net