

Classic Posters Interview with Alton Kelley by Michael Erlewine

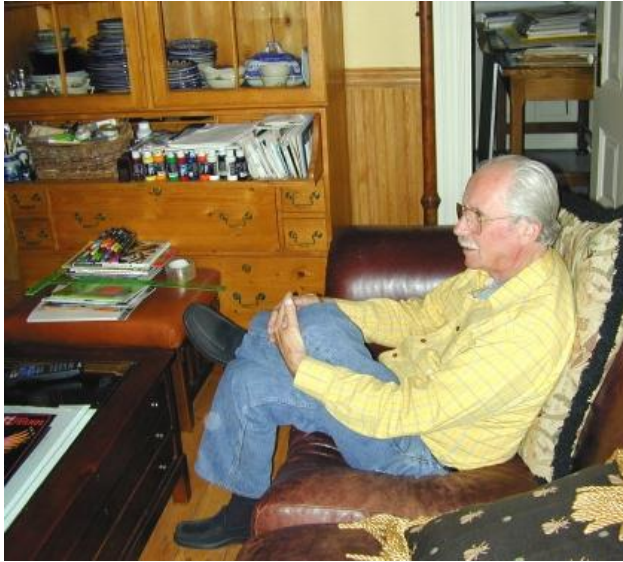
Classic Posters Interview with Alton Kelley by Michael Erlewine

Friday May 11, 2001

Petaluma California, Kelley's home.

Beginnings

Alton Curtis Kelley
June 17, 1940
Houghton, Maine



Alton Kelley in his Studio

Michael Erlewine: What was your given name?

Kelley: Alton Curtis Kelly. My middle name was after the doctor who delivered me, because he delivered my father.

Michael Erlewine: Wow. And how long did you live in Maine?

Kelley: Until I was six. And we left Maine and went to Connecticut. My father was working in the shipyards in Maine during the War World II, and then we moved down to Connecticut and he went to work for Chance Vought, building the Corsair, the navy fighter.

And then Vought moved out of Connecticut, moved to Texas, and they

said we could move to Texas or stay in Connecticut. We stayed in Connecticut. We didn't want to move to Texas. And I grew up in new England.

Michael Erlewine: How did art come into your life?

Kelley: I always drew pictures as a kid.

Michael Erlewine: Cartoons or real life or ...?

Kelley: Just everything, anything and everything. My mother has got paintings from when I was ten years old, oil paintings and stuff... portraits and so on.

Michael Erlewine: And how did that carry through middle school or high school?

Kelley: In high school I did cars and I ...

Michael Erlewine: You mean similar to Mouse, pin stripping ...

Kelley: Yeah.

Michael Erlewine: Flame jobs?

Kelley: Yeah, flame jobs and that kind of stuff yeah. I really got involved in the hot-rod world.

Michael Erlewine: Oh right, I remember that.

Kelley: And I had hot rods and all that stuff, motorcycles or hot rods. I had a chop Merc in high school and a motorcycle.

Michael Erlewine: I had a '51 Ford Victoria hardtop.

Kelley: Wow . That's great.

Michael Erlewine: It was a beautiful car.

Kelley: Mine was a 47 Merc coop with a chop on it and a hopped up flathead in it.

Classic Posters Interview with Alton Kelley by Michael Erlewine

Michael Erlewine: I was part of a club called the 'Tachs', with a plate hanging off the back bumper, and so on. You knew Stanley Mouse. He had his father managing him; He was really making money.

Kelley: Ooh God! Stanley was famous, yeah.

Michael Erlewine: Did you make money doing car stuff?

Kelley: No, I just did it. I did it for friends and stuff like that.

Michael Erlewine: And did you ever do formal art training?

Kelley: Oh yeah, I did. I took art lessons, when I was a kid. My mother sent me to some teachers, a number of teachers, who were very good. And I went to art school in Philadelphia Museum and College of Art. And I went there in New York City.

Michael Erlewine: And what were you interested in?

Kelley: Industrial design.

Michael Erlewine: Do you do a lot of freehand drawing or were you doing structural drawings and that kind of stuff?

Kelley: All kinds of stuff.

Traveling to California and the Beat Scene

Michael Erlewine: And how long that go on?

Kelley: I did a year in Philadelphia and... I was partying too much. It was too good. And so I came out, I hitchhiked out to California in 1959, to San Francisco, North Beach.

Michael Erlewine: The Beat scene?

Kelley: Yes, the Beat scene.

Michael Erlewine: I hitchhiked there in 1960.

Kelley: I was there in 1959, the Co-existence Bagel Shop, and City Lights Bookshop and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Gregory Corso, and Alan Ginsberg and so on.

Michael Erlewine: We used to wait and get the bread they threw out from the bakery, at about three o'clock in the morning.

Kelley: Yeah, yeah, and the milk deliveries.

Michael Erlewine: Did you ever go down to L.A.?

Kelley: Yeah, Eric North and Venice West.

Michael Erlewine: I knew Eric North. Do you remember the Gas House?

Kelley: Yeah, sure.

Michael Erlewine: I lived in the basement of the Gas House on Venice Beach, in an abandoned walk-in freezer. I was trying to be an oil painter at that time.. Did you know Tamboo and Mad Marge? Do you remember who that is?

Kelley: Yeah, sure.

Michael Erlewine: I wanted very much to be a beat, but it I was just too young.

Kelley: Yeah, then like the hip scene came on.

Michael Erlewine: Did you stay on the West Coast from that point on?

Kelley: No, I stayed there for a while, you know, for a summer. Then I went down to Mexico. And I stayed there a little while. Then I went back East and I went to school in New York, at the Art Students League. And that was OK. It

Classic Posters Interview with Alton Kelley by Michael Erlewine

was a looser school, but then again, it was the wrong time, because they were teaching abstract painting and all that kind of thing, and that's kind of hard to comprehend, especially for a young person. Give me a break! (laughs)

Michael Erlewine: Right! Yeah.

Kelley: So I lived there and that was fun. And then I got married in 1961. And I had a kid and stuff. And I went to work at Sikorsky aircraft as a helicopter mechanic.

Michael; You were good with your hands?

Kelley: Yeah, I could fix stuff, which was always fun. And I worked there for a while, I guess a year... two years ... two and a half years or something like that, and I got laid off.

Michael Erlewine: Hmm, even then back in those days.

Kelley: Yeah, there were the layoffs. But it kept me out of the military, because with the whole draft-age thing. I was valuable, so they didn't draft me. Yeah, cause I had the right kind of job. And then I went to work a motorcycle shop, Honda shop... Honda, BSA, Triumph...

Michael Erlewine: Remember the old Nortons?

Kelley: Oh, yeah .

Michael Erlewine: Those were great bikes.

Kelley: I had Indians. Yeah, I've had monster bikes. Yeah, but I've never in my whole life, ever owned a Harley.

Michael Erlewine: Did you ever go to Laconia in New Hampshire?

Kelley: Oh yeah, sure. I've raced at Laconia.

Michael Erlewine: oh really. Do you remember the crowds up in Laconia?

Kelley: Oh God! Yeah, party. Get down at night, and the hill climbing through the forest and Jesus ...

Michael Erlewine: And it would go on all night, because there'd be a crowd of people and two guys would wanna' race first gear and the crowd would just open a little bit to let them do that. And when they veered or slipped, their handlebars would tear into the chests of the crowd and people would get hurt. Ambulances ran all night.

Kelley: Yeah ... into crowd, which would part and close behind them.

Michael Erlewine: That's right

Kelley: PPPPLOUGH!

Michael Erlewine: Right. That was a trip.

Kelley: Yeah, drag racing.

Michael Erlewine: That was in 1961. I'm thinking of.

Pine Street and the Family Dog

Kelley: Yeah, I came I worked there and I hated it. And I said. "Well, I'm gonna' go back to California." So I had a little Triumph TR4, sports car, and I drove down to Mexico, and I went to Mantinea, and stayed there for a couple of months during the winter, in Mantinea. I had a whole bunch of bikes that I sold, so I had a lot of money.

And I repaired a bunch of antique bikes and restored them, so I made some pretty good money. And then I came back up to San Francisco, and I went to see a friend of mine from back East, who had just moved out here... . and he had a little weed, and I said, well where'd you buy the weed? And he said I bought it from this guy Dutch. And I

Classic Posters Interview with Alton Kelley by Michael Erlewine

knew Dutch from when I was here first, in 1959.

And he was a real a good character. He was one of the guys I went to Mexico with back in the '50s and so I called Dutch, and when I came back up from Mexico on this trip with my little Triumph, I had 22 lbs. of clean weed.

Michael Erlewine: Wow. But I don't think they were even looking for it then.

Kelley: No. Yeah with sticks, no seed. I cleaned it all before I left. And that's how I met everybody on Pine Street. Bill Ham was my landlord and Dutch lived at 2111, I think, Pine Street. We were at 1836 at the Dog House and ah, Mike Ferguson was living there, and Ellen Harmen and Luria Castile, and that whole thing. And then these folks came down from Virginia City. They got the Charlatans to go up there, so we all went up there and worked on the Red Dog Saloon.

Michael Erlewine: The 'Seed' poster was about that time.

Kelley: Yeah. And so we went up to Virginia City and spent the summer in Virginia City being wild animals. It was just something surely great. Virginia city was really a great thing. I mean everybody had a good time. Everybody was always stoned.

OK, so we were in Virginia City. Then, when we came back from Virginia City, we figured, you know, we can't just be pot dealers or drug dealers. We were thinking that's stupid and dangerous, so we figured that, because we knew the bands were all playing together the Charlatans and the Great Society and the Jefferson Airplane and Warlocks and so on and so forth. Everybody was forming these little bands all over the

place, so we figured we'd just start throwing some dances and ...

Michael Erlewine: Who was involved in this?

Kelley: Myself, Jack Towle, Ellen Harmon and Luria Castell were the first four people in the Family Dog.

Michael Erlewine: Really. That's the beginning of it.

Kelley: Yeah.

Michael Erlewine: Where'd the name "Family Dog" come from?

Kelley: I thought up the name "Family Dog," because we had a building ... everybody in the building had dogs and the original family dog was a Rhodesian ridgeback named "Animal" and he got hit by a car on California Street and killed. And then after, there was a dog, the ugliest dog in the whole world, that belonged to Tim Cammerman in. And it was just this disgusting little tick hound. It was just, uggh, old. And there was some other dogs... Bill Ham's big German shepherd and stuff, so it just sort of came natural that we picked some kind of dog name, so it was the "Family Dog."

Michael Erlewine: And where did the logo come from?

Kelley: Ah, the logo came after everybody quit the original dog, and Chet Helms took over ...

Michael Erlewine: How did that happen?

Kelley: Now Chet, I guess, had invested some money with Luria. And made some kind of arrangement that he could use the name, because it was already an established thing, and all that. Wes Wilson put together a logo.

Michael Erlewine: Cool.

Classic Posters Interview with Alton Kelley by Michael Erlewine

Kelley: Yeah, it's a great logo.

Michael Erlewine: And then how did you get in to doing the artwork for it?

Kelley: I had done early handbills, and all that kinda' stuff.

Michael Erlewine: Really. What kind of events?

Kelley: For the first three dances, in fact.

Michael Erlewine: You were doing the handbills and then you were working with Chet to do the posters?

Kelley: Later, yeah.

Alton Kelley and Stanley Mouse

Michael Erlewine: How did you and Stanley Mouse hook up?

Kelley: Stanley came to town to visit some people on Pine Street, in the Pine Street neighborhood... Jim Gurley, who was the lead guitar player for Janis Joplin and Big Brother and the Holding Company and his wife, that were old friends of Stanley's, and we were living in the same building. That's how I met Stanley and we hit it off and became good friends.

Michael Erlewine: And to me that's one of the most interesting things. Seldom are two people able to work together.

Kelley: Yeah, very unusual.

Michael Erlewine: And what was that like?

Kelley: I was sort of like an art director to Stanley Mouse.

Michael Erlewine: Walk me through how that would go.

Kelley: I generally came up with an idea, and an image, and Stanley would do lettering or design work or whatever we worked together.

Michael Erlewine: And you'd share the money?

Kelley: Yeah, split the money. For our first poster, we got \$37.50 a piece.

Michael Erlewine: Wow! That's not bad!

Kelley: Hey! We were doing good. Yeah pros, you know.

Michael Erlewine: (laughs) Cause I know when I asked Gary Grimshaw, he said that in all the years that he worked for all the Grande posters in Michigan, the most he ever got was \$75 at the very end of the whole tenure.

Kelley: Yeah, yeah.

Michael Erlewine: I think you guys did better out here.

Kelley: We got a hundred, at the end.

Michael Erlewine: Oh really. Is that all?

Kelley: Yeah.

Michael Erlewine: Wow, incredible.

Kelley: Yeah

Michael Erlewine: And not even the rights?

Kelley: Yeah. yeah.

Michael Erlewine: Incredible, but you and Mouse worked for many years. Do you still do stuff?

Kelley: Yeah, we still do stuff

Before the Scene Faded, the Scene Faded

Michael Erlewine: I'd like to know what happened when things at dancehall scene started to fade. What did you do? Each of the artists I've asked have done different things, had different ways of surviving and doing, switching careers or ...

Classic Posters Interview with Alton Kelley by Michael Erlewine

Kelley: I got on the road, got out of town, cause it was going to hell.

Michael Erlewine: this would be 19??

Kelley: 1968.

Michael Erlewine: It wasn't long, the whole scene was quick.

Kelley: Oh yeah it was great, good party; it's a long time, long time actually. For something that good to last that long. That was a long time.

Michael Erlewine: And Ann Arbor was good, I can remember one day. In the center of the University of Michigan is a big grassy place, called the Diag, where all the students walk through, can walk diagonally through the campus. And I remember a group of people walking through and saying that everyone was going to this big arboretum to just be together and have a Be-In. But this whole thing was hardly even verbalized. It was like just a wave and everyone was tuned into this one big mind, everyone just sensed it. And we all just got up and all went. It was an incredible time.

Kelley: Yeah, obviously a different time. I don't think it will ever happen again.

Michael Erlewine: No, not for us any way.

Kelley: Yeah.

Michael Erlewine: But we were lucky to have it once.

Kelley: Oh Yeah. God! I mean, as far as I'm concerned, I was born in the best time in all of history.

Michael Erlewine: Yeah, I feel that way

Kelley: And I've seen so much happen and stuff. It's been great.

Michael Erlewine: It's still happening.

Kelley: And we did really change everything.

Michael Erlewine: Well yeah, we were riding the crest of that wave.

Kelley: Yeah, and it did change everything. I mean before that it was just such a ...

Michael Erlewine: The '50s were so uptight.

Kelley: I don't think it was uptight as much as it's just kind of naïve and stupid.

Michael Erlewine: The whole Eisenhower years, and living in the fear of the bomb. Remember that?

Kelley: Yeah, but that wasn't that much to me. The idea that we had won the war and we were the hot stuff and all that, you know, and could do no wrong. It was all kinda' naïve.

Michael Erlewine: So you got out of town and went traveling and then?

Kelley: Oh I went up to Portland Oregon, did some posters up there, and then I headed back East. I drove across the country. Had a VW bus, I painted up and stuff. It was really nice looking bus. I had painted it black and yellow, and I had Elsie, the Bordon's cow, with a daisy on the front of it.

Michael Erlewine: Oh really.

Kelley: Yeah. And so it looked like I was the official Elsie the Bordon's truck or something.

Michael Erlewine: (laughs)

Kelley: And I drove across the country with Elsie and went to Boston, went through New England, went up to Boston. Got a job in Boston, working for a company called Intermedia Systems

Classic Posters Interview with Alton Kelley by Michael Erlewine

Corporation. And at the same time, I got a job teaching at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

Kelley: And I taught graphics, color and design, and airbrush. Yeah that was fun. And while I was working for Intermediate Systems Corporation, they got a call from the guy who threw Woodstock, and so I went to Woodstock and set up a silk screen shop there, long before the gig. I was there probably about six weeks before the whole thing happened.

Michael Erlewine: Really.

Kelley: ...Set up a silk screen shop, made all the signs for the event, and the areas and where the hospital was, and maps, and big billboards, and parking and no-parking, and security. And I printed all the coat jackets that said "Woodstock" and "security," and you know, and "backstage," and all that stuff. So that was a knock out thing, to be there for that. And that was real fun.

And I didn't like teaching that much. I felt that the administration was awful and the students were just as bad. Boston is a very strange place. It's so academic. It's all teachers and students, and that's the mentality there. And it's really hard to cope, to deal with that kind of mentality -- student/teachers. I guess 75% of the population in Boston during the winter, is students and teachers.

Cause it's all schools! I mean what are there: 11 major colleges in Boston alone. You know MIT and Boston University, and on and on and on, I mean ... Woah!! (laughs)

Absolut Vodka

Michael Erlewine: How does one get the Absolut Vodka poster that you did? Did they ever make those available or anything?

Kelley: Yeah, you've gotta' look for it, but they did run a bunch off, and they went out to like Absolut distributors and all that kind of stuff, and they flew me and Margaritte to Cleveland, to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame for a big party.

Michael Erlewine: Really!

Michael Erlewine: We were talking about the High Society poster ...

Kelley: Oh!

Michael Erlewine: Looks like it's going to be beautiful.

Kelley: Yeah, it's neat. I'm happy with the painting.

Michael Erlewine: Do you work with computers at all?

Kelley: Nope.

Michael Erlewine: So do it by hand.

Kelley: Yeah. I can do it much faster. And at the end, I can run a magnet over it and it doesn't even bother it. (laughs)

Michael Erlewine: When did the Absolut Vodka vodka thing happen?

Kelley: 1999

Michael Erlewine: Are you doing much work at this point?

Kelley: Here and there. I've got another new poster.

Michael Erlewine: I'd love to see it.

Kelley: ...Somewhere in here.

Michael Erlewine: Oh wow, that's great.

Eric: That is nice, I like that!

Michael Erlewine: Is this you and mouse or just you?

Kelley: Just me.

Eric: I'm sorry do you know the Maritime Hall?

Classic Posters Interview with Alton Kelley by Michael Erlewine

Michael Erlewine: Oh yeah, I've got most of the posters for it.

Eric: OK, fine.

Michael Erlewine: I'm also a poster collector. So when I look at this, you know, I would say to myself ... Mouse and Kelly, Kelly and Mouse, so each of you can do what you did together, separately. Is that what I'm understand? Cause this could as well be a collaboration, right?

Kelley: Oh yeah. Right.

Michael Erlewine: If one wanted to know, how would you separate ...

Kelley: Later on, you can't really.

Michael Erlewine: Maybe at the beginning, you would direct it. He would like do all the lettering, but you would indicate how?

Kelley: Yeah.

Michael Erlewine: And this kind of stuff. Where does that come from? That's just something you guys came up with?

Kelley: Yeah.

Michael Erlewine: Wow, that's great. And this is a magnificent thing.

Eric: Yeah, that's one of the great ones.

Michael Erlewine: One of the great images of all time.

Kelley: Yeah, they won the Grammy for best album cover.

Michael Erlewine: They did!?

Kelley: Yeah, that year. It went to the art director at the Warner brothers or whomever ... Capitol Records, yeah. And he didn't have a god-damn thing to do with it.

Eric: Really? That is disgusting.

Michael Erlewine: Is that right?

Kelley: Yeah, because he ran the art department at that time.

Eric: So he got the award

Kelley: Yeah he got the award for Stanley and my work.

Michael Erlewine: How long would it take to do something like that? A piece like that would take? I have no clue.

Kelley: Ah, all these, they vary from like a few days to a week or two, depending on the size of it and things. And I generally would like to work at pretty good size. This was like 30x40... the painting for this ...

Michael Erlewine: The High Society poster?

Kelley: Yeah, the High Society one is a 30x40, also. So, it's good size, you know.

Eric: That's why they're so tight. You shrink them down first.

Kelley: Yeah.

Kelley's Body of Work

Kelley: Well, you know there's a whole period of time. I would like to know myself, how much stuff I've done.

Eric: It's enormous; the body of your work is enormous.

Michael Erlewine: Give us a little time ... I'll keep that in mind and I'll ...

Eric King: Yeah, if you let us dig around, I was unaware that you .. that this was information, you didn't have yourself.

Kelley: I mean I have no clue.

Michael Erlewine: So over the last, well, many years, you've kept doing art, ever since the end of the whole '60s period. You have just kept producing posters,

Classic Posters Interview with Alton Kelley by Michael Erlewine

all along? Are there other kinds of commercial art you have done?

Kelley: Well, yeah, album covers and posters and funny stuff like the Absolut Vodka and... That was on the back cover of Rolling Stone magazine and Spin.

Eric King: I just thumbed through one, and it hit me and I said " MY GOD! That's! and there it was, it was you know who it was.

Kelley: Yeah, so it was all youth-oriented magazines, and music-oriented things, because of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. And then they gave me a case of liters of Absolut vodka.

Michael Erlewine: Oh really!

Kelley: Yeah, and it was like all the flavors, orange and currant, regular, and high test and (laughs), you know?

Michael Erlewine: I hope you gave it away.

Kelley: So, I gave some of it away. You know, it's like the guy next door, who is a computer guy. He rents out computers. And so when I was working on this I would go to his house and he would have a little digital camera and take a picture and we'd email it to the art director in New York.

Kelley: So, he got some vodka.

Michael Erlewine: Sure! Were they not gratified when they saw your work?

Kelley: Oh yeah, they were more than happy.

Eric King: I can't imagine they wouldn't jump up and down. They're not going to get something like that out of, you know, anybody that they take out of art school.

Kelley: No, they were real happy.

Michael Erlewine: Well that's cool.

Kelley: And they bought the painting.

Michael Erlewine: Wow, well they should.

Eric King: sure

Michael Erlewine: I hope you socked it to umm.

Kelley: Yeah, yeah. Yeah

Eric King: Yeah, they're rich.

Michael Erlewine: (laughs) that's cool.

Kelley: And they paid good, really good for the job so, it was a good year.

LSD and Peyote

Michael Erlewine: And there was acid then?

Kelley: Oh God yes! There was acid before that.

Michael Erlewine: When did you first have LSD? I had acid in 1964 for first time.

Kelley: Oh, I guess '65, but before that, back East I had gone through peyote and all that kind of stuff.

Michael Erlewine: Yeah, me too.

Kelley: Because I picked up a comic book, right? EC Comics ...

Michael Erlewine: I grew up on them. The Crypt Keeper and all that...

Kelley: ... And in the back was this ad from these cactus gardens, from gardens Royal Town, Texas. \$15 dollars for a thousand peyote buttons,

Michael Erlewine: Whoah!

Kelley: So myself and two friends chipped in \$15 bucks a piece. And I sent away and got three thousand peyote buds for \$45. Right?

Classic Posters Interview with Alton Kelley by Michael Erlewine

Michael Erlewine: Wow.

Kelley: ... and we said, you know, how much do you take? So we figured, you know, ten buttons is a hit, so we were taking ten buttons at a time.

Michael Erlewine: You got really sick, I'll bet.

Kelley: Yeah. Well, we got it down though, so that you could quick take 'um and when it would start to come on, then stick you finger down your throat, throw it up, and you feel fine. Not sick.

It was great. So we were partying like crazy on that, and then they made peyote illegal. Right? And so the feds come to the house and they said we have from the cactus guys here, your address, and it says you bought some peyote buttons. And I said, "Yeah, that's right." Ad they said, "Do you have any left?" and I said "Yeah, and I had a bag of like 20 that I was selling to some guys up at Yale. And I said, "Sure, here, take them," and about a month later, I got a check for 45 bucks from the U.S. government.

Michael Erlewine: Really!

Kelley: Honest to god!

Michael Erlewine: On what grounds? I mean ...

Kelley: Because it wasn't illegal when I bought it, they reimbursed me my money, because they came and got the buttons. And we used to ride around on our motorcycles on peyote and stuff and go... There was this place called Savin Rock, outside of New Jersey, like an amusement park and they had bumper cars. And we'd go in there with our crash helmets and gloves and jackets and everything, and drive these bumper cars, blasted. And we'd freak them out

cause what we would do is... we would all line up side by side and we'd run into a wall and the building would go boooom! And they said, "You can't do that! You can't do that!" (laughter)

Michael Erlewine: Bad boys! That is funny.

Michael Erlewine: That's great, and you haven't dropped acid lately.

Kelley: Nope.

Michael Erlewine: Me neither.

Kelley: (laughs)

Michael Erlewine: Long time right? (laughs)

Eric King: Long time.

Kelley: Yeah, no it's too physically ...

Michael Erlewine: Isn't it? Well, you have to get up for it, right?

Kelley: Yeah, yeah.

Michael Erlewine: It just always puts me through stuff right, and acid really does it.

Kelley: Oh god, I don't even want to think about it.

Michael Erlewine: Yeah.

Eric King: Yeah, I'm too old.

Michael Erlewine: It was good then, I mean it really opened my eyes.

Eric King: It was the greatest.

Kelley: Yeah, I thought it was very interesting.

Michael Erlewine: (laughs) Yeah, same here.

Eric King: Yeah, on the other hand, Alpert said it, "Once you get the message, hang up the phone."

Kelley: Yeah

Classic Posters Interview with Alton Kelley by Michael Erlewine

Michael Erlewine: Yeah. True

Kelley: I always went out and went around.

Michael Erlewine: You mean walked around town or something.

Kelley: Did stuff. Oh yeah.

Michael Erlewine: So did I'd go to see the people I should have talked to all the time.

Kelley: I would go to Golden Gate Park and I watch the people in the park and that was always good. I'd go to Chinatown, Chinatown was a mind blower.

Michael Erlewine: That would scare the hell out of me.

Kelley: Oh, it was great, wasn't it? What are they doing, you know? Everbody's got this bag, (laughs)

Michael Erlewine: Right

Kelley: Chinatown, all these Chinese people, and they were just like perfect. It was too good, and I'd go ride around on the cable car. That was great, yeah. Drive around on a motorcycle.

Michael Erlewine: Now that I wouldn't do.

Eric King: That, yeah, I tried to drive my car once and I said "Nope," pulled it over, and left it,

Kelley: Oh really? Huh.

Eric King: I couldn't drive. I was too confused to.

Kelley: I used to go wheely-ing all over the town.

Eric King: It's, does different things to different people.

Kelley: yeah

Eric King: I could not drive I would've driven right over a cliff.

Kelley: Ahhh hah

Michael Erlewine: I have a funny story. The first time I took it ... the first time you take it, you don't know what it is.

Kelley: Yeah.

Michael Erlewine: You hear all the stories. So I had this girlfriend who promised... I said "Well, I'm gonna' take it. This was Berkley in May 6th of 1964.

Kelley: I remember that night.

Michael Erlewine: So I said no matter what I do, no matter what I do, don't leave me. Right, so then I came on and, you know, I'm very, in my own way, authoritative, you know, so I said, "No, I'm ok. Go on home." She just left. (laughs) Right? So I'm wandering around Berkley campus and just For me it was, well I had to go through a dying thing. And the skies were dripping blood

Kelley: Oh really.

Michael Erlewine: No, but I got through that, kind of purged myself and I had a great good morning. I ended up in Berkley campus in the morning just celebrating life reading Ovid's "Metamorphoses." Just feeling fantastic.

Kelley: Oh I was thinking of the other man what's his name.

Eric King: Oh, Kafka

Michael Erlewine: Oh well, I've read him, of course. That's another story

Kelley: (laughs) Kafka. That's a great story.

Eric King: You don't wanna' wake up to that one.

Kelley: The cockroach. (laughs)

Classic Posters Interview with Alton Kelley by Michael Erlewine

Michael Erlewine: The greatest Kafka anecdote I know is... Kafka was asked one time, you know, how does he... how can you write this incredible stuff? And he said ... his answer was, "Well no, I don't do anything special, because each line I write, it already has perfection. Which means, you know, he's managed to get himself into a very special space and whatever he writes, generates perfect words.. So anyway I thought that was funny.

Kelley: Yeah, well Kafka's a great writer.

Michael Erlewine: Yeah he is.

Kelley: Have you read George Ade? He's an American writer. He writes fables.

Michael Erlewine: But, ones that are cool?

Kelley: OH! Really good! I mean they are absolutely fabulous. Each one is probably, maybe two pages. And they blow you away. This guys got a real vision.

Kelley: I think it is called "Fables in Slang," or something like that but, George Ade is a great American writer.

Michael Erlewine: Cool, yeah I don't know.

Kelley: Now I think about, probably the same period as Ambrose Bierce.

Eric King: Oh, it's back awhile.

Kelley: Yeah.

Eric King: Yeah, I had not heard of him either.

Kelley: No, I read him because of Jean Sheperd.

Eric King: Oh, sure.

Kelley: I used to listen to Jean Sheperd on the radio back east all the time. He

had his own radio show, and he turned me on to George Ade and the fables.

Michael Erlewine: Any other things like that you love to read. That's something I've never heard of.

Kelley: Ahh, I read constantly,

Michael Erlewine: Really.

Kelley: Yeah, I love to read. Right now, I just read current magazines, science magazines, and aircraft magazines.

Michael Erlewine: Did you fly? I am not crazy about heights.

Kelley: Yeah, I flew for a little while, when I was working the Sikorsky. One of the guys there was a pilot, and I used to go out with him all the time. All I had to do is pay for some gasoline and I got free flying lessons.

Michael and Eric King: Wow.

Kelley: Yeah, so it was fun.

Kelley: I don't like heights. Flying doesn't bother me, but I don't like those elevators on the outside of buildings.,

Michael and Eric King: Yeah

Kelley: I face the buildings.

Michael Erlewine: So do I.

Kelley: I don't like that. I don't like looking over the edge of things.

Michael Erlewine: Well, that's what I'm talking about.

Kelley: I get that vertigo thing.

Michael Erlewine: My mind is maybe like yours on that point; I'm right out in there.

Kelley: But whereas flying ...

Michael Erlewine: Well, once you're up there, I don't care.

Kelley: Yeah, it doesn't mean anything.

Classic Posters Interview with Alton Kelley by Michael Erlewine

Michael Erlewine: I like to drive, so I think I drive too fast for you but ...

Eric King: No! I have no trouble.

In the Studio

Michael Erlewine: I'd love to get a photo of you,

Kelley: Sure

Michael Erlewine: And if possible a photo of where you where you work, or something to do with how you draw.

Kelley: Ah! I work right here. [points to the glass-topped worktable we are sitting around].

Michael Erlewine: Oh, Ok.

Kelley: Believe it or not.

Eric King: I was going to ask you that. Is this your work space?

Kelley: Yeah, right here.

Eric King: Ok

Michael Erlewine: Cool.

Eric King: I kinda, I noticed that and it's interesting. It's not studio. It's right in the house, and it's right.

Kelley: It's where I've always worked.

Eric King: Interesting, you worked on the kitchen table. This is the kitchen table.

Kelley: Yeah

Eric King: Interesting, it's a marvelous piece of furniture

Michael Erlewine: Yeah, it's great.

Kelley: Yeah, and it's good, cause it's you know it's got the drawers in it, so that I can keep stuff here.

Eric King: Yeah, it's one of the things you see in artists, all of the artists have, in their house, they have lots of drawers.

Kelley: Yeah

Eric King: Big drawers. Big.

Kelley: Yeah, well that's an interesting machine, what kind of machine is it?

Compiling Poster Data

Michael Erlewine: This is a Hewlett Packard, just a windows PC Notebook. It's not too heavy. I don't travel much, so I've never used a notebook before. I have always used desktop computers ...

Kelley: Well, good for you, compiling all this stuff. I find it very

Eric King: This is why I'm enchanted with this, because people have been asking me to do this for 10 years and I said...

Kelley: You know I'm familiar with the other books. Oh that's good gosh!

[referring to Erlewine as the founder and developer of AMG, the All-Music Guide, the largest database of music-related material on the Internet, or in the world for that matter.]

Michael Erlewine: If you were to take the All-Music Guide Web site which is big and make them into books like this one, it would be like, well probably by now it would be like 15 feet of books four-inches thick, all in very small type.

Eric King: Wow!

Michael Erlewine: We've gone beyond being able to put this much information in books. There's no way to print them anymore and have more than just a selection, so it's pretty amazing really.

Eric King: Yeah, when Michael first told me what he wanted to do I said "Yeah man, good luck." I didn't believe he could do it, I really didn't.

Michael Erlewine: Well I got waylaid and I sold the All-Music Guide/All-Movie

Classic Posters Interview with Alton Kelley by Michael Erlewine

Guide, and due to their going bankrupt, I never got paid. And I offered to build a concert-music poster site, and even them my personal posters data and they were going to put the site up (and own it of course), and they didn't do it. So they just scuttled it. And I'd written biographies of all you guys, the poster graphic artists. I hadn't personally, but I'd had it done. And now I no longer own those biographies, and they don't even care about them. So I'm writing new ones myself. I'm enjoying it. I'm doing a much better job, since I know the material first hand.

Eric King: I was going to say they're going to get a much better job done on them.

Michael Erlewine: Yeah cause as I read the ones I ordered, it was superficial. They didn't fully understand the art. And this way, I'm going... And I hear what you're saying and I will make a special effort to catalog your stuff Kelley, but you might have to help me some, I might have to send you some things to look at and did you do this and did you do that.

Kelley: Yeah.

Michael Erlewine: Something like that.

Kelley: Yeah, because you know, I didn't keep much, and I'd go through stuff, and I'd give it away, and people buy things, and then I don't have them.

Michael Erlewine: Almost every artist that we've talked to has said the same thing. They don't have much of their own stuff.

Kelley: Yeah.

Michael Erlewine: They sold it. It got stolen...

Eric King: Well, and they gotta' make a living.

Michael Erlewine: Or somebody capitalized on it and owned it, and that kinda' stuff, so anyway ...

Kelley: Yeah.

Michael Erlewine: I photographed yesterday a significant amount of unpublished Grimshaw stuff, that Grimshaw no longer owns, that are now owned by Phil Cushway, done when Gary was working for him. But this is stuff that maybe no one will ever see, because it was never published. Beautiful, beautiful pieces that I'd never seen. I bought one, but I wish I could afford more.

Kelley: Gary's great.

Michael Erlewine: He is great. And he's a special favorite of mine, maybe because he's a Michigan guy.

Kelley: Oh yeah.

Michael Erlewine: As a musician, I played at the Grande Ballroom, but I don't remember him very well from that period. I remember meeting him, but we were all

Kelley: Did you ever go to the Mouse House and all that and meet Stanley's mom and all that?

Michael Erlewine: Nope. No I didn't.

Kelley: Livonia?

John Sinclair

Michael Erlewine: No I was in a band, I was a musician, and, Stanley, I don't think I ever met him back then.

Grimshaw, I did, and I knew John Sinclair and all those people. John and I still see each other once in a while. We used to be a little antagonistic, back in

Classic Posters Interview with Alton Kelley by Michael Erlewine

the day, because I was more into just being in the art scene, and he represented kind of a political thing,

Kelley: Yeah, I know.

Michael Erlewine: John is a trip. He was always trying to stir it up, you know.

Kelley: Yeah, I know John Sinclair.

Michael Erlewine: Now we're all the same age, so John and I go out to have dinner, a couple old guys and we enjoy each other and have a good time. So back then, it was a little testy, at least on my part.

Kelley: (laughs)

Michael Erlewine: Jerry Garcia would come into town, and we would all get together at the park to play and jam, just an unscheduled or unadvertised thing. We'd just all be jammin' and bringing different musicians' in. There'd be crowds and the cops would come nicely and just be watching, not causing any problem, and Sinclair would stir the cops up, try to get them to do that thing that we hate for them to do, so that everyone could hate them.

Eric King: Yeah, that was, there were people like that here too.

Michael Erlewine: I didn't like that.

Eric King: Yeah.

Michael Erlewine: Not my nature. Ok, let's see, can I get a picture of you just like this. We'll try and see, I'm not an expert at this.

Digital Images

Kelley: This the digital?

Michael Erlewine: Yeah this is a little Nikon digital.

Kelley: Boy, Chet's sure havin' a good time with his digital camera.

Michael Erlewine: Yeah he and I talked, and I'm going to speak with him about. I'm trying to help him get the images for the family dog,... I scanned all of his images at a high resolution, but they're about 50 MGB big, but not big enough. I did it as a favor in order to use small images of the Family Dog a couple years ago, but he still has not been able to get his images out, so that he could do something new with them.

Kelley: Yeah, because Chet talked to me. I was going to do stuff for the book, and all this and, and this has been going on for a really long time. Jaceber Kastor is involved, you know.

Michael Erlewine: But I may produce some books too, just because I also produce books. But I wouldn't want to offend anyone. But I would like, you know... I want to make sure Grimshaw ... Grimshaw needs some attention. He hasn't gotten much.

Kelley: Yeah, yeah.

Michael Erlewine: And all you guys, yourself included. And Bob Fried has had so little credit given to him. I feel really bad about. it's just I think that he did a lot of good stuff.

Kelley: Yeah he did a lot of good stuff.

Michael Erlewine: He didn't get much credit, so let me try this and see whether this things going to behave in here light wise. Sometimes it does.

Kelley: Does it zoom and do all the stuff?

Michael Erlewine: Yeah. What this does is: it takes little flash cards you push in. This card that's in there now can shoot 234 high-res images.

Eric King: Wow.

Classic Posters Interview with Alton Kelley by Michael Erlewine

Michael Erlewine: And then you just pull out another card and put it in. I went to an archive yesterday and shot a lot of rare Grimshaw stuff. I think I took 1000 pictures, which is a lot of art work.

Kelley: Wow.

Michael Erlewine: And I just had to keep switching batteries and keep switching cards. And it's not just the best. These are good for thumbnail identifications. You couldn't reproduce anything with it, but it is good enough to be able to identify stuff. So, if you knew people that have good collections of your art work, that might be something that you eventually would make available.

Kelley: I don't know...

Michael Erlewine: Cause I could go there and I'll photo-document the stuff.

Kelley: I mean I don't know. I did a series for the dinosaurs.

Michael Erlewine: Those 11 posters or so. They are yours, right?

Eric King: Yeah

Kelley: But, you know, those are like, they're just gone. (laughs)

Michael Erlewine: I've got those except for maybe two, and I love them. I saw them and said I've got to have these. And I have nice pictures of those. You could get them from me.

Kelley: Yeah, I did them in the old style, the old way.

Michael Erlewine: Yeah, absolutely.

Kelley: I couldn't find the paper, so I had to take regular paper and turn it over and use the wrong side.

Eric King: (Laughs)

Kelley: Wrong side (laughs)

Eric King: I didn't know (laughs)

Kelley: I couldn't get that paper that was flat, everything was all finished and nice now.

Eric King: Yeah.

More

by Michael Erlewine

Michael Erlewine: Let me get just a picture of this. Maybe I'll stand up a second and get this out of the way.

Kelley: Yeah, it's the studio.

Michael Erlewine: Well, that's what I'm trying to do for each of you artists. And it's fascinating. Each of you is so different.

Eric King: Yeah, there is a tremendous amount of differences. Whatever way works.

Michael Erlewine: It's very cool. Have you been to David Singer's place?

Kelley: Oh yeah.

Michael Erlewine: Everything is like very neat, so incredibly, it looks like a crystal or something.

Kelley: Yeah

Eric King: That's David!

Kelley: Yeah he is very neat. Yeah, he's out there picking leaves off the lawn.

Eric King: YEAH! He was doing that while we were coming out.

Michael Erlewine: And then Victor Moscoso is totally different. His place is like a wild place, right?

Eric King: Yeah, yeah.

Michael Erlewine: With stuff all over. An artist's workshop. He's cool.

Classic Posters Interview with Alton Kelley by Michael Erlewine

Eric King: You gotta' step around and over and ...

Kelley: Yeah.

Wes Wilson

Michael Erlewine: I would like to know how Wes Wilson arrived on the scene, from your point of view. How did he suddenly get into posters?

Kelley: Wes was working for a printer here in the city; I think Chet Helms knew him. And I can remember meeting Wes real early; he stayed in the house on Pine Street, the 'dog house'.

Michael Erlewine: The dog house, that's right (laughs)

Kelley: I had Wes and Eva's wedding invitation. I used to have that some place; gone now, I guess. But way back, it wasn't even.... it was just they got married and all that kind of goodness, and Wes was just a natural. He just hit it right on the head. His wedding invitation was fabulous.

Michael Erlewine: Really

Kelley: Fabulous.

Michael Erlewine: Wow.

Kelley: He designed while he was working for 4-H Press, I think it was called.

Michael Erlewine: What was it called.

Eric King: Double H was a different... I don't remember.

Michael Erlewine: No it wasn't 4-H. I believe it was Contact Printing. It was in the basement. It was a printer that was in the basement that had been catering to kind of to the jazz and beat scene, a little bit. This is what I remember from trying to do a biography of Wes. And Wes came in and became a partner, an

apprentice-printing partner. And then he started doing things for Chet first, and then for Bill Graham.

Kelley: Yeah.

Michael Erlewine: And he was in the right place at the right time.

Kelley: And his stuff is good, you know, so fabulous. My god.

Michael Erlewine: Are you still in touch with him?

Kelley: Yeah. And he's such a nice guy

Michael Erlewine: Yeah, he's cool.

Kelley: And his work is awesome, as far as I'm concerned I mean like wheeew!

Michael Erlewine: Yeah, I think so too.

Eric King: He opened the door.

Influences

Michael Erlewine: Which leads me into another question: artistically what are your influences? At the very beginning, who influenced your work, either in the fine arts or psychedelically?

Kelley: Well, you know, in the beginning, like Stanley Mouse and I didn't have a clue. (laughs) So, I went to the library and I just started looking at everything. I was influenced by the Art Nouveau period and influenced by American Indian stuff, Japanese stuff, Chinese stuff, everything, you know --- turn of the century, early 20th century... Rocketship in to the future, science fiction, I mean it was across the board. I mean it was just everything.

Michael Erlewine: So you just would go through art books and look through illustrations whatever looked interesting.

Kelley: I would use old postcards.

Classic Posters Interview with Alton Kelley by Michael Erlewine

Michael Erlewine: So how would you remember... these would just soak in your brain? you'd borrow the books out or? How would get the images if you needed them?

Kelley: Oh. we'd just go to the copy machine.

Michael Erlewine: Really.

Kelley: Yeah.

Michael Erlewine: And then trace them from there or something ...

Kelley: Yeah, cause we went back in the stacks, in the back of the library. It wasn't like in the regular shelves. In the old library downtown San Francisco, there were all these stacks, and there was just all this reference stuff. World War II posters and posters from you know Art Nouveau period, and posters to the 30's, and post war and pre war.

Michael Erlewine: Posters? How were they preserved in there?

Kelley: They were just in books.

Michael Erlewine: Oh, I see. Right,

Kelley: You know, and you could just take them up, lay it on the copy machine.

Michael Erlewine: And both you and Stanley Mouse would go together?

Kelley: Yeah, yeah both Mouse and I. Yeah.

Michael Erlewine: And you found this out together, or you were doing this first?

Kelley: I was doing it first.

Michael Erlewine: And what about a fine art?

Kelley: I thought everybody was a fine artist.

Michael Erlewine: Yeah, OK.

Kelley: Ah, yeah. I can't put a definition on fine art,

Michael Erlewine: That's cool.

The Joint Show

Kelley: Because, you know when we were ... when we had our show, the Joint Show, right, in 1968 or whenever it was ... That was one of the questions the reporters asked us, the art critiques or whomever they were, and they said "Are you gonna' go on to serious art from here?" (laughs)

Michael Erlewine: Woah.

Eric King: (Laughs)

Kelley: And we went "Gee, I don't know. Should we just stay with the comedy stuff?"

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Kelley: And I don't know. (laughs) It's like "What?"

Eric King: What, yeah, where do you get the nerve to ask that then?

Michael Erlewine: Speaking of the Joint Show, I have a personal question. What, how did you guys respond to the Moscoso piece, cause I think that's an unusual Moscoso piece for that show.

Kelley: What show?

Michael Erlewine: The Joint show.

Eric King: What we were talking about.

Kelley: Yeah, the Joint Show.

Michael Erlewine: For the Joint Show, Moscoso did a piece with a woman.

Kelley: Yeah.

Michael Erlewine: That, It was typical. I was wondering whether you guys,

Classic Posters Interview with Alton Kelley by Michael Erlewine

whether you remember what people thought of that.

Kelley: No, I don't remember what everybody thought of it. It was fine! Well he was doing collage. He started to do a little bit of collage stuff.

Michael Erlewine: Ok, so that was some of that.

Kelley: Yeah.

Michael Erlewine: And those are all pretty big posters, some of them.

Kelley: Well, they're all, I think, pretty much the same size here.

Eric King: Double size

Michael Erlewine: Yeah, double size. Big ones.

Kelley: Yeah.

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