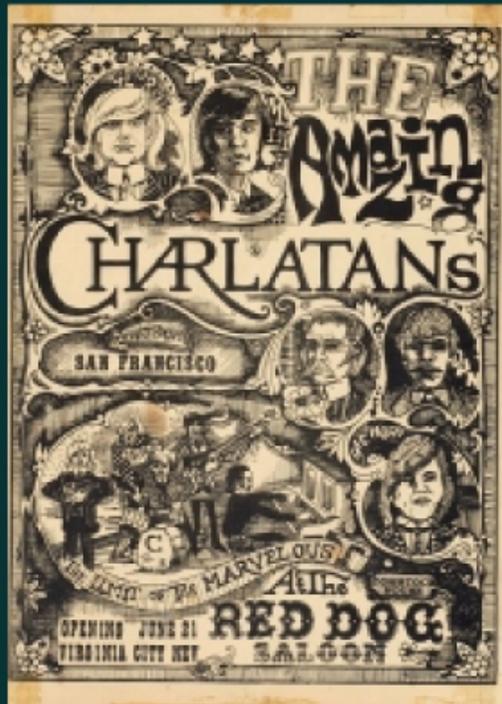


Brief History of Rock Posters



by Michael Erlewine

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INTRODUCTION

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

Michael@Erlewine.net

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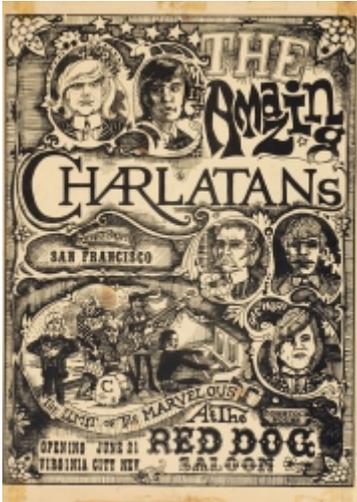
Brief History of Rock Posters by Michael Erlewine

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The Sixties Dancehall Scene Beginnings

So, when the very different sixties-style posters began to appear in San Francisco in 1965, it heralded a big change in approach. For one, these new posters were event specific (pre-printed) and consisted of but a single pass through the printer.

The first poster of the new era that marked the start of the new hippie culture has, appropriately, been called "The Seed." It was done for a gig the Red Dog Saloon in Virginia City, Nevada in June of 1965. It was not that the scene started here, for it was already fomenting in San Francisco, according to key figure Chet Helms. Helms says that the summer of 1965 at the Red Dog Saloon was more of a woodshed experience, a place for many of the San Francisco regulars to gather, try out things, and just have one heck of a good time with one another. It was when they came back to the city, in the fall of 1965, that the actual scene began.



The Seed

And the San Francisco hippie scene was built from the bottom up, rather than the top down. In other words, it was a grass-roots movement, not something organized by the establishment. In fact, those first Family Dog posters were only a little more than glorified rent parties. And the first posters were, as mentioned above, one pass affairs - single printings. In the beginning, this can be explained by the small size of the event and the almost hand-made nature of the actual posters, most of which were quite small.

And these first get-togethers grew out of informal parties, attended by those hip enough to hear about them. And the subsequent slightly more formal events were an attempt to re-gather these same folks (and more like them), rather than to attract the straight public. This emerging counter culture at the start was, above all, enjoying its own company - like meeting like.



The 2nd Family Dog Dance

LSD is Different

And part of the 'like meeting like' was the growing group awareness of the value of psychedelic drugs. This was a lot of what was being shared, the drugs and the particular awareness that came out of those drug experiences. It is important to understand that psychedelic drugs were different from the substances of choice used up to that point, alcohol, tobacco, and even marijuana and hashish, not to mention heroin. And this difference is at the root of much misunderstanding about what the emerging hippie culture was all about. This is worth at least a few words here.

First, psychedelics were very different from drugs like marijuana, as to what the taker of the drug could take

away from the experience. Alcohol or marijuana both put the user into some form of enjoyable (at best) state, a state during which you could have interesting thoughts, feelings, or even act differently, but one that ultimately you came out of, returning to your normal sense of yourself. If you wanted to have that feeling again, you had another drink or smoked another joint. In this way, these drugs (alcohol and pot) were equivalent and a matter of preference.

But hallucinogenic drugs had one major difference. It was possible to take a drug like LSD, have a real come-to-Jesus experience of one sort or another, come down from the drug, and have a completely changed view of the world. This was not so for alcohol and pot. LSD changed lives, mostly for the good, sometimes for the worse.

What broke down on a strong dose of LSD (and those early hits of acid were strong, according to researchers) was the difference between me, in here (between my ears), and you and 'it' out there - outside of me. Not only did this great dichotomy weaken, but of equal importance, it was clear to LSD takers that what they saw out there looking at them was very much a reflection of what they felt and believed in here, between the ears, so to speak. And it is that feature that made LSD and similar hallucinogens drugs different.

One could take LSD, suddenly see that in many ways we are creating our own world and then having to live in it, come down from the drug, and yet still remember what was experienced. Then it was up to each of us to figure how to re-program our life, in

order to take advantage of and put to use what we saw and experienced on LSD.

In summary then, it was not the LSD that was so important, but the awareness that came out of that experience that was of value. Most were not into the drug for itself, as for the awareness that came from using the drug. Of course, this can be a thin line, and even hallucinogenic drugs were also abused, and not just used. But for many, it was not the drugs, but the awareness. And it was this awareness that people were sharing in those first Family Dog dances and the series of gatherings called the Acid Tests. Without understanding this very important fact, much of the hippie counter culture does not make sense.

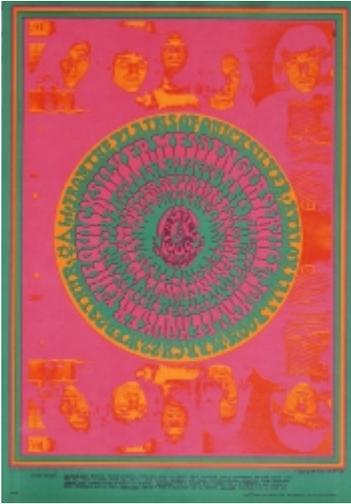
Sixties Posters

And so, this informal style of poster carried over and settled in, as the movement and the posters grew larger. Not only did they continue to be one-pass posters, specifically featuring a single event, but also they were purposely made hard to read, with strange and exotic lettering and subject matter. In fact, it is almost as if during its embryonic stage, this nascent culture needed to keep out the 'straight' people and bring in those of a similar mind bent, so that it could grow and flourish. And this is what happened.



Family Dog Poster FD-04

So-called straight people could not or would no bother to read these strange posters, but fellow 'freaks' would spend all the time necessary to decode whatever messages were locked in the poster, often standing and puzzling over them for long periods of time. In fact, artist Victor Moscoso made a point of sitting in a nearby coffee shop and observing passersby, who would stop and ponder his most recent effort, tacked to a telephone pole.



A Moscoso Poster, to be read slowly, if at all

Again, here is a complete flip-flop from what went before. Where before, we had a single picture or no picture at all, and large, clear type, we now see multi-colored posters, with complex imagery and hidden messages, that were almost impossible to read. I guess this is what cycles are all about.

And although these posters first appeared in San Francisco, it was almost no time at all before their counterparts were flourishing in places like Detroit, Ann Arbor, and Austin, to name a few. The new culture spread like wildfire, mostly fueled by traveling folks, who shuttled back and forth, from coast to coast, by car or simply by hitchhiking. It did not take long for the word to spread.

Posters as Commodities

But something else was also taking place, something that had never happened before, and this was the fact

that these posters (that had been printed to announce an event, like all posters had up to that time) were becoming commodities in themselves. After all, fans, from the time that posters first appeared, have pulled the occasional poster off a telephone pole and taken it home to display in their room. That was understood.

But suddenly, music-concert posters were being handed a poster or card at the end of each concert, as a reward to ticket buyers, and this helped to create a whole aftermarket for these items. And card-sized posters were being sent by mail to ever expanding mailing lists prior to each concert, not only in San Francisco, but also in Detroit. And these cards were being kept and collected.

Even the tickets began to be issued with images on them, and the small post-card-sized handbills were readily distributed. This practice continues to this day, and concertgoers at Bill Graham Presents events at the Fillmore West are given full-sized posters at the end of each evening. This whole idea of everyone getting a "piece of the rock" was new. A whole collectable market sprung up in tickets, cards, and posters. In the history of posters, prior to this, there were no cards, and few colored tickets.



The Hawaiian Aoxomoxoa Proof, with cards

Moreover, another almost unheard of practice sprung up, that of reprinting the posters and cards. In the past, event posters were never reprinted, because the event was over. It was not long before promoters were thinking in terms not only of printing enough posters to advertise a concert, but also of printing enough extra posters for the aftermarket demand for them. And reprinting in-demand posters became commonplace, and gave rise to a generation of poster experts, who would guide us to which were originals, which were reprints, and which were pirate editions. There was money in this paper. And all of this was collected, not only as memorabilia, but also for the art itself.

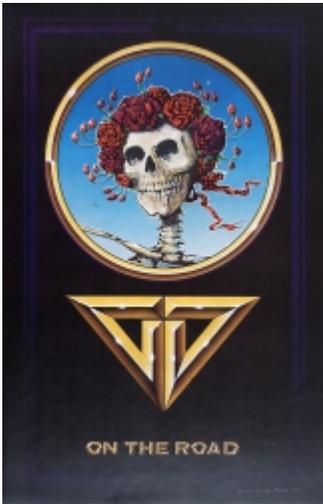
Most of this huge surge in creating collectable posters more or less died down by the mid-1970s, the reasons for which deserve a book in itself. Suffice to say that there were at least two main reasons or signs

of the end of the 'Summer of Love' and all that it entailed.

The Scene Fades

As poster expert Eric King pointed out to me, one main reason was that the drug scene had moved from being useful as a wakeup call in the beginning, to well beyond this usefulness, and on into drugs for drugs sake, and hard drugs like heroin at that. This changed things. Where before, you went to a dance or gathering, and welcomed any and all into your home to come down and rest up, spend the night. It was a real community of like-minded folk. But after drug abuse became the norm, if you invited someone into your pad, you could wake up in the morning and find your stereo gone. That effect was one major killer of the community spirit.

The other was the fact that the dancehalls themselves were the first victim of the huge success of music groups like the Grateful Dead that arose from the cultural movement of the sixties. What began as get-togethers and almost cultural celebrations, with music, light shows, drugs, and sex, eventually resulted in the record companies and capitalism, in general, favoring the music groups. They alone seemed to be elevated to star status. They were where the money went.



Tour Poster

In the beginning, the spread and sale of the San Francisco posters themselves across the US heralded the coming of the bands featured on the posters. Outside of the Bay Area, no one had ever heard of these bands. The posters traveled first; the bands followed, in due time. But as the bands gradually became the icons, they soon grew beyond the simple dance halls where they had begun. Instead of an auditorium, bands like the Grateful Dead now needed a stadium or a coliseum to hold all their fans. They eventually left behind even places like the Fillmore East and Fillmore West. Instead of gigging around the town they emerged from, they were almost always on tour. The venues they left behind withered, faded, and were often closed. The sixties as a cultural phenomenon were over. But the business of the sixties lived on.



Coliseum Bands

Record Companies Gain Control

And pre-printed band or tour posters (many with places for overprinting) came to the fore once again. As these now-famous bands grew and flourished, the type of posters they used changed with them. No more silkscreen posters; they were too time consuming and expensive. Instead, they now had large offset posters, some of them brandishing supporters like Miller or Budweiser beer. Often these posters were designed by some of the original San Francisco artists, but as often as not these artists had fallen into the trap of having to imitate their own earlier work. The public wanted more of what they did in the heyday, not something progressive.

In the end, the establishment, had managed to get their arms around the sixties cultural phenomenon, although it took them a while. So, once again, we had the slick tour and promotional posters. The

psychedelic poster scene ended or just became a part of the business.

Punk and New Wave Artists

But as the sixties scene played itself out and all that it represented became part of the hype, a new music was already peeking out, brought forth by a generation that despised the slick tour posters and the packaged sounds. This was the birth of punk rock and the rise of the punk poster.

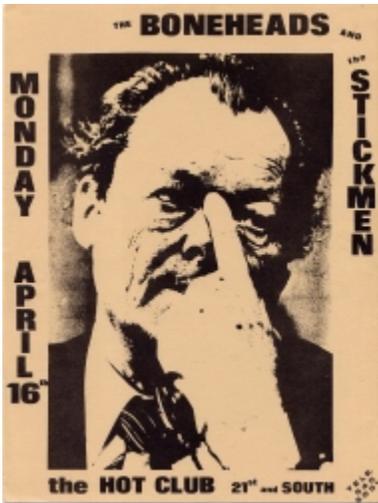
As pointed out above, the sixties posters had morphed from simple flyers to large, multi-colored posters, with spiritual themes and group consciousness. As Shakespeare said "Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds," and the commercialization of the sixties movement was particularly hard to stomach for those who were there. Gradually, the record companies wrestled control away from the hippie movement, and replaced psychedelic posters with just another generation of slick band posters. The idea of community, so important for the San Francisco dancehall scene, was all but forgotten.

However, the emerging new punk posters were, in reality, anti-posters. For one, they were small. And they were done in twos and threes, tens and twenties -- almost always in small quantities. A great many were unsigned. It was part of the cool. They were seldom done by artists that had been active up to that time. Many were just made by fans, who pasted them up or drew them out on 8.5x11' paper, and photo-reproduced them. Almost all were black and white. They were everything the sixties posters were not.



1977 Punk Poster

The theme of the emerging punk culture was not the peace and love of the hippie culture, the 'Summer of Love'. Again, just the opposite. There was a pre-occupation with everything disgusting and dirty, whatever was shocking and rude. Instead of band names like "It's a Beautiful Day" and "Quicksilver Messenger Service," there were names like the "Butthole Surfers" and the "Circle Jerks." It was as in-your-face as possible. That was the point.



Punk Poster

But the punk movement was not without thought. In fact, it was quite literate, compared to the hippie culture. It has been documented that the Beat era was highly literate - sophisticated even. Many of the hippie leaders were beatnik wannabes, who arrived too late on that scene to participate, but were perfectly positioned to lead the next cultural wave, the dancehall scene. And one of the areas that they led in was that of introducing the hippies to the basic liberal arts - writing, philosophy, and spirituality. They were well read and the typical hippie was not.

Therefore it comes as a little bit of a surprise to find that the typical punk devotee is quite literate, or at least is aware of that dimension. An easy misunderstanding is to mistake the trappings of punk with what the trappings represent. In other words, the punk image and style is in your face, disgusting in fact, and filled with as much of the grim as can be shoehorned in. But this is a conscious choice and

effort on the part of the artists and musicians, and not what they in-fact are. In fact, they are more reminiscent of the more educated beatniks. They are thinkers.

Punk Beginnings

When did all of this take place? We don't really see much significant sign of this new movement, this about-face in poster style, until around 1977, and then only in a few places, like CBGB's in New York City, where groups like Patti Smith, Talking Heads, Dead Boys, and the Damned begin to show up, complete with these B&W posters.

Also then there was the Hot Club in Philadelphia, with groups like the Cramps. The main artist for the Hot Club was Bobby Startup. And of course, the Mabuhay Gardens in San Francisco, and groups like Blondie, the Nuns, Crime, Hoi Polloi, Ratz, Novak, Devo, and many others. Artists for the Mabuhay include James Stark, Jerry Paulsen, Don Evenson, Steccone, and John Seabury. Yet all around these few clubs, in the stadiums and vintage clubs, business was going on as usual. I mean Led Zeppelin and Ted Nugent were at Madison Square Garden, Pink Floyd and the Eagles were at the Oakland Coliseum, Marvin Gaye was at the Portland Coliseum, and so on. And the Armadillo World Headquarters in Austin was still serving beans and brown rice. These new punk clubs were just ignored or not on the radar screen yet.

And in 1978, we begin to see venues like the Artemis, the Hot Club in Philadelphia becoming more prominent, and The Bird in Seattle, with graphic artists like Frank Edie and Gary Panter. There was

even a little new-music action in the Keystone in Berkeley that year, and quite a lot of attention in this new genre coming from overseas, Germany in particular.

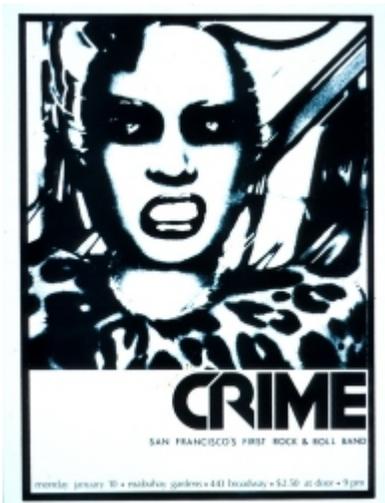


Artist Gary Panter

By 1979, we see the Mabuhay Gardens, and Deaf Club in San Francisco at full tilt. One of the main centers of this new music, Philadelphia, was also going strong by then, with the Etage (artist Jim Meneses), Grendel's Lair, and still cookin', the Hot Club. And there was The Golden Crown in Seattle, with poster artists Dennis White and Satz.

With the new decade, 1980, we have really turned the corner. By this time, Detroit had joined in with Altier's, Bookies, and the Madison Theater, with art mostly by Gary Grimshaw. And Philadelphia continued to grow, with Emerald City, Omni's, and the Starlite Ballroom. The Back D.O.R. (artist Joseph Prieboy) and

Showbox (artists Art Chantry, Justin Hampton, Stranger) were cooking in San Francisco, and Berkeley Square in Berkeley. CBGB's and Max's Kansas City were happening in NYC, and Austin had begun to turn punk too, with the Club Foot (artist: Jagmo). And there was Pancho's in Seattle, with artist Robert Newman.



Mabuhay Gardens Poster

Frank Kozik

And with this emerging culture taking hold of the minds and hearts of this coming generation, there came new artists to lead the way. And it was no longer going to be all about black and white. In the dozens of interviews I have done with artists that remember this period, almost all agree that it was the landmark work of poster artist Frank Kozik which led the way. Kozik had no connection to or great affection for the sixties art and the San Francisco scene, in

general. He was all about this new music and he had his own ideas about the art that went with it.

And Frank Kozik had a new method of marketing his services, something that Victor Moscoso had done years before him. Instead of being at the mercy of promoters and oddball print shops, Kozik went to promoters with a deal they could not refuse. He would give them, for free, 100 posters that he would design, if they would allow him to print an extra 500 or so, to distribute how he wished. They jumped at the chance: no-expense posters, custom made for them, and no printing hassles. Kozik made money on the aftermarket and got to work with the printers he wanted to work with. Pretty soon, he was making this offer to major venues across the country. He soon controlled the market. This pretty much turned the poster market in a new direction, and sent a lot of poster artists scouring for jobs. They were not prepared to compete with him.



Early Kozik Poster

And these were not your black and white photocopied paste-ups. Kozik was soon into color and lots of it. Gone were the saccharine themes from the sixties. At first, Kozik's work was subdued, in monotones, perhaps one or two colors. And the themes were mock serious: long faces and bulging eyeballs, and of course, half-naked women, S&M themes -- all of the more or less predictable shtick from the punk culture that came before it.



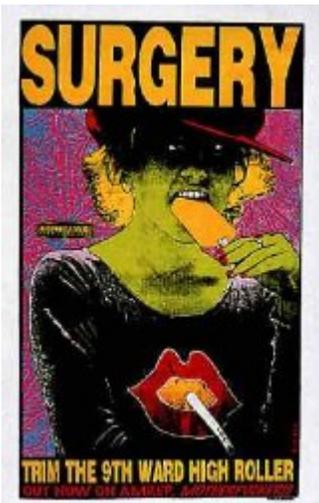
Half-naked Woman

But by 1990, Frank Kozik had begun to loosen up a bit. For one, he was now working more and more with color. There were still a lot of naked babes and some ghastly stuff, but it was increasingly becoming cartoony, with a handful of solid colors. Yet, sprinkled in the midst of these were some striking pieces. In fact, there are a lot of striking pieces. Kozik was an expert in a variety of styles.



Cartoon-like Kozik

I am not a great lover of the cartoon-like posters of Kozik (after all, I am an old fart from the sixties), but every time I sit down and go through the Kozik catalog, I am struck at the great of number of incredible pieces that are not like that. He was just very creative. No doubt about it.



Pure Kozik

Frank Kozik was the leader in a revolution of younger poster artists, but he was by no means alone. In fact, part of his appeal to the younger artists is that they immediately felt that they could do that too. Hundreds of artists picked up on where Kozik was at and there soon was a flood of cartoon-like posters, all with "in-your-face" themes. It became what rock posters were all about.

There were, however, exceptions, like Detroit artist Mark Arminski, who came on the scene about the time Frank Kozik did, and was also brought up in the "in-your-face" culture, but with sensibilities that hearken back to the sixties artists. Not since Victor Moscoso do we find a master of color, as we do with Arminski. He, among modern artists, stands alone, with one foot in the '90s and one firmly in the '60s. This may be why so many collectors of sixties posters also collect Arminski.



Arminski Poster

New Wave Posters

The "new wave" poster artists, as they sometimes have been called, have exploded until concert-music posters have more artists and more collectors than ever before. Some people think there are more artists than collectors. And this expansion has gone in all directions, with everyone trying for a piece of the pie. A whole book needs to be written about all of this, but lets just cherry pick a few items.

The Punk poster movement was softened somewhat, and turned into what came to be called the "New Wave," which really was punk without the worse grit. It was a kind of sanitized punk. And there are a lot of New Wave artists.

We could say that punk art is in your face and brings you up short with all of the hard facts of what man has done to man and the environment. Then another whole wave of poster artists appeared, that brought into focus all of the icons of American culture, especially if they were trashy or sleazy. These artists were not interested in real grit so much as they were in finding humor in popular social icons. And they were all about cartoons.

Retro-Icon Artists

We could call this the Retro-Icon Movement, and a good example is the work of Coop, whose work features plenty of plump and amply endowed women, either naked (with green or red skin) or dressed in a tight-fitting devil's suit. A lot of these women have little horns too. This is an example of this style of posters,

in this case keying off the American pinup and all of its history. Again: images are in cartoon mode, and any common-denominator piece of American culture is fair game, everything from all kinds of monster hot-rods, to strippers, and tattooed ladies.

Today, we are in the midst of a poster explosion, as hundreds of new artists take up postering. As for styles and trends, it becomes harder to follow, probably because we are still too near to it, but also because a wide variety of poster styles exist today, with each proliferating in its own way.

And the whole cartoon-like style of posters, begun by Frank Kozik and almost ubiquitous by the 1990s, have reached the end of its pendulum swing, and has turned. Graphic artists like Jermaine Rogers and, in particular, Justin Hampton, and others, who began to produce cartoon-like graphics, but with more flat posterized areas, with themes less sarcastic, images less funny, and everything more just good-looking art.

The New 'New' Artists

This trend has been carried to its current state by brilliant new artists like Brian Ewing and Scrojo, who have turned the cartoon style on its end, making cartoons (or line drawings) serious once again - definitely not funny. Using large areas of color and a simplified, but compelling, drawing style, these artists have commanded the attention of their peers.

Artists like Tara McPherson and, in particular, Leia Bell have taken the poster scene by storm, with their homey slice-of-life approach. With Leia Bell, there is

no sarcasm, no punk residue, and no attitude. Instead, what we find images that are unsettling in their very direct approach to common everyday experiences, like brushing your teeth, or relating to a younger sibling -- heartwarming images. Heaven forbid! Who would have thought?

So posters has turned the punk and new wave corner, opening up a host of new and different styles, many of them (like Brian Ewing and Leia Bell), deeply refreshing. And the whole way posters are made is changing.

Poster Processes Change

For one, gone are the days of posters being laid out, shot with film, separations made, and the thing printed. Sure, that still happens a lot, but today there as so many other ways to produce a poster. We have color copiers, and color printers. We have large drum printers and inkjet printers. We have the very expensive Giclee (pronounced Gee-Clay) printers. Poster artists are running off as few as three or four, or twenty, or fifty, and that is the run. Signed and delivered. And there is some humor in all this.

Poster experts, dealers, and collectors at first threw up their hands and howled at the artists. You can't do this! You can't do that! You can't make a poster on a copy machine! You can't do it at home on an inkjet printer! We don't like that! This response really happened.

But the artists could care less, because they were able to design their posters on a computer and print it out, on the spot, in whatever quantities the market

required. Objections are purely academic, because the cat is out of the bag and the simple fact of business is: there are all kinds of ways to produce posters. Good luck about keeping editions separate or telling what is an original and what is a reprint. That is history. What remains is the art. You like it or you don't.

And we don't just have gig posters anymore. There was a rash of what were called "Commemorative Posters," where artists would do now a poster for a great music event in the past. We might see a "Grateful Dead" poster for some obscure (but historic) date, for which there never was a proper poster. Artist Denis Loren did a whole series of commemorative posters for the Whisky-A-Go-Go in Los Angeles. ArtRock produced many posters of this type. More subtle were the artists that produced a poster for an upcoming event, but not at the request of the promoter. Often the poster was much better than the official poster, but this soon resulted in problems and lawsuits. Many artists did it just for the joy of celebrating one of their favorite music groups. However, where there was money involved, there were cease and desist letters sent.

Some bands (like Pearl Jam and String Cheese Incident) have cut through all of this and produce all their posters themselves, selecting the artist, the theme, and overseeing both printing, and distribution - the whole deal. Anyone who messes with this process from the outside gets a lawsuit.

Most of this kind of thing has died down now, and we have settled into the business of there being a great many good artists and not always enough gigs for

them to create posters for. And the community of poster artists is very active, as can be seen from gigposters.com, the main watering hole for young artists. It is a great place to check out.

Michael@Erlewine.net