Classic Posters – The Seed, The Start of the Dance Hall Scene

by Michael Erlewine

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Here is the poster that most experts agree launched the '60s era of alternative culture. This poster features the band "The Charlatans" at an extended gig in Virginia City, Nevada at the Red Dog Saloon. It was designed by members of the band.

The Seed

cp006145.jpg (52.5 KiB) Viewed 8 times

"The Seed" was printed in two versions, one with a date of "June 1-16, 1965" and the second (and final) version with "June 21." Apparently the Red Dog Saloon had not finished their redecorating in time for that first poster, so the second was printed, and in many respects the art was redrawn. Version one is said to have been printed originally in blue, but was then printed in black, which is considered the standard version.

The poster was created by two of the Charlatan's members, George Hunter and Michael Ferguson, with Hunter having devised the logo, and Ferguson doing most of the actual drawing, including the portraits.

Poster expert Walter Medeiros wrote the following in a catalog for a poster show that was produced fro the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1976:

"The Seed is unique for being completely hand-drawn, in a densely patterned format, and was much different from rock posters that existed then. Yet it is reminiscent of nineteenth-century carnival, medicine show, and music hall posters, in that it boldly heralds a spectacular event that shouldn't be missed. It has a funky character about it, and 'funkiness' was one of the most prominent characteristics of hippie sensibility. And the poster carries off this feeling because of the lightness and capriciousness which permeates the whole work."

The poster was given the name, "The Seed" by the authors of "Eureka, The Great Poster Trip," the first book on psychedelic posters, published in 1968. It is a fact that the Charlatans were the heralds of the coming of the alternative culture that was about to emerge in San Francisco, and the "The Seed" was the first poster that broke with the tradition of the boxing-style posters in use at the time.

There is no question that the interest in Victorian clothes, old-time music, and the style and embellishments of an earlier era are reflected in this poster.

While I can see in these two posters the elements of the hippie culture that loves old clothes and the like, what is entirely

missing to my eyes is any sign of the kind of consciousness shift (that was already present in the community) typical of hallucinogens like peyote and LSD, although these drugs were very available in 1965, and had been for some years. The closest to anything new age or signifying a new consciousness are the few symbols and signs that were drawn in, like the planet Saturn, the Moon, an Iron Cross, and a swastika (first version only).

One of my main interests is to trace the history of the psychedelic influence in '60s art and music. After all, the whole genre of posters is often called "psychedelic posters," and I don't see much of the psychedelic in "The Seed."

For that, you have to look at that first Family Dog dance flyer by artist Alton Kelley, for October 16, 1965, a gig with the Jefferson Airplane and Charlatans at Longshoremen's Hall. There you see the Tibetan-style flames throughout the poster, something commonly used throughout the era to represent the intensity and awareness of altered consciousness.

And if we want to have no doubt whatsoever of the advent of the psychedelic element in posters, then just move right to the "Can You Pass the Acid Test?" poster by artist Norman Hartweg, an event on December 18, 1965 held at Muir Beach. The poster is all about LSD, and the poster is unquestionably psychedelic.

My point is that, although "The Seed" serves to mark the advent of the new culture and a different (but still mostly retro) approach to posters, it does not really put the word 'psychedelic' into psychedelic posters. It took a few more months for that to take place.

Family Dog First Dance