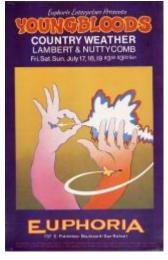## Classic Posters - Poster Numbering Systems

by Michael Erlewine

How do we keep track of and refer to posters? What is the best method to identify posters? If music-concert posters are to become known to a wider audience, what systems will make it easier for newcomers to indicate which poster they are referring to? These are questions worth examining.

Before we get into it, let me give you the result of all the talk that will follow now, so those of you who don't want to reason through it, can just get on with using it.

Youngbloods at Euphoria July 17, 1970

We need to quickly and accurately identify this poster, so if I email you the identification number, you have a very good chance of knowing what I am talking about.

The Euphoria Youngbloods poster for 1970-07-17 by Bob Fried.

The CPC ID for this poster is:

EUP 1970-07-17 P-1

Here is how to read it.

EUP = Acronym for the venue, which I made up, without adding much of my own.

1970-07-17 = Date of the Event, in sortable order

P = poster

1 = 1st printing or edition

Now for the discussion:

As you know, there are several methods for identifying posters in use. Here are the most popular:

SERIES AND NUMBER

Only the best-known poster series have been given consecutive numbers, most notably the original Family Dog and Bill Graham, numbered series. For example, we have the Family Dog series, numbered FD-1, FD-2, and so on. It is important to note that these numbers were given by the promoters themselves, not by collectors. This is an important fact.

Despite its shortcomings, this is without a doubt the most popular and universally used of all the systems. However, most venues have not yet been numbered, and may never be numbered in any sequential fashion.

The main problem with fixed numbering posters in a series includes the fact that as new posters, handbills, cards, etc. for the series are discovered, there are no numbers for them. If I find a poster that was issued between FD-10 and FD-11, I cannot issue it a unique number, but must call it FD-10-A or something like that. When you have many newly discovered posters, this becomes very cumbersome.

When numbered systems run into the many hundreds, like the original Bill

Graham (BG) and the New Fillmore (NF) and Bill Graham Presents (BGP), with the exception of a few numbers, even these numbers are not easily retained in memory. We have to look them up. If I ask you about the New Fillmore Series poster # 471, how many of you out there will know that this was an Indigo Girls concert? Not many, if any. You will have to look it up from a list, if you can find a complete one.

And then there are the countless posters that don't fit into a series or for which it is not common to count the series. Small series, like the Neon Rose or the Kaleidoscope, lend themselves to numbering, but even here collectors prefer nicknames or tend to refer to the musical acts or nicknames (Chambers Brothers, Blushing Peony, Clean-In, etc.).

NICKNAMES

We have given names to the very best known posters, so that when I say the "King Kong," you know I am talking about the second poster or handbill in the Family Dog series and so forth. While this system is excellent for a relatively small number of items, it does not work when we get into the many hundreds and thousands of posters. Most of us cannot remember that many words, with accuracy. There are also alternate nicknames for the same poster in use, which only adds to the confusion.

BAND and VENUE and ARTIST

Many posters are referred to by the band that played the gig. For example, everyone wants the "Who-Toronto" card in the Grande Ballroom Series. Most of you will know what poster I am talking about, if I say the "Who-Poco" or perhaps I should qualify it and say "Griffin's Who-Poco."

DATE AND VENUE

This is a popular method, where the date of the performance is linked to a particular venue. Eric King has used this successfully to label the Russ Gibb/Grande Ballroom series. The advantage of this method is that as new items are found, they are integrated into the series by their date. While this is without-a-doubt one of the best ways to organize posters for academic purposes, this method is seldom used in ordinary conversation, since it requires that we look the numbers up.

For example, everyone seems to say BG-105, some call it the "Flying Eyeball," but I have yet to hear ANYONE say the Bill Graham poster from February 1 through 4, 1967 with Jimi Hendrix, or using Eric King's method, "Bill Graham Fillmore 19670201." This fact speaks somewhat loudly in favor of the habit of referring to posters by nicknames or numbers of one kind or another, if we can manage it.

All of the above conventions are in use and there are no-doubt others too. This is really an academic argument I am presenting. When we get out of the common territory of the BG-105s and into the many, many thousands of posters there are to be catalogued, then these academic considerations become valuable. In the world of collections and libraries, perhaps the most universal method for identifying any kind of collection is the unique sequential ID, which is very straightforward. At this point, music-concert poster identification does not have this feature as part of its system. We need to include this method along with the others.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

To date, the most flexible system is one that combines the venue acronym, date, type, edition, and variant. Eric King has used this method in his guide to label venues like the Russ Gibb/Grande Ballroom series and others. Example:

G/G-661021-P-1

G/G = Russ Gibb/Grande Ballroom

661021 = October 21, 1966

P = Original Poster

1 = First Edition

This is the most flexible system in use. However, it is not perfect. In the above example, the "661021" does not reflect that the actual event was held on October 21 and 22. We could remedy this by adding:

661021/22 = October 21, 1966 through and including October 22, 1966

And as long as we have to deal with a string of date numbers, why not expand the date format to make it more readable, we get:

G/G 1966-12-21/22 P-1

There are posters that have a schedule for events for a month or more on them. In this case, one is forced to use the first date on the schedule, but this is not particularly helpful. At best, we kind of get in the ballpark. It is somewhat more helpful if we use the above method to handle this:

MH 1997-03-03/21 P-1 (Maritime Hall, dates from the third through the twenty-first)

Or is a concert is held on two separate dates, we could have:

MH 1997-03-03+21 P-1 (Maritime Hall, events on the 3rd and on the 21st))

MORE NUMBERED SERIES

Here I am going to suggest something that may be very unpopular with some of you and I will offer my reasons for doing so. In addition to the above numbering conventions, I feel we should attempt to number (as in the FD and BG series) all major venues that appear to be in more or less stable condition - no new posters have been discovered for some years.

My reasoning is very simple: the crowds of newcomers we expect to bring into this field would be better served if they could confidently identify an event by a venue and number. Having long strings of date-numbers and codes, while decipherable and understandable to all of us, is just plain off-putting. It does not make things easier for the uninitiated.

I suggest that we would have for the Kaleidoscope series in Los Angeles, a KAL-1, KAL-2, and so forth. The same system would be applied to other identifiable venues and promoters, at least from the vintage '60s era. We have to weigh the advantages against the disadvantages. Thus we would have:

KAL-01 1967-04-14/16 P-1

The above would satisfy both the archivists and newcomers. The newcomers could call it "Kal-01' and it could also be referred to as "KAL 1967-04-14/16."

As time passes, most runs or sets of posters settle down, as far as new members in the collection. It is hard, almost impossible, not to assign numbers to posters. Since there is inevitably a first poster in a series, it is hard not to refer to that fact. "Do you have the first Kaleidoscope?" That is a fair question. What follows automatically are references to the 2nd, 3rd, and so on in the series. And when posters are

found, in a series, that predate the first posters, they are assigned the number zero, and so forth. This is true for the BG series, the Neon Rose series, and the Grande Ballroom. There would be no attempt to number a series that is still being organized. But those that have been around for 30 years or so, and for which new members have not been discovered, might as well be numbered.

We should resist adopting the method outlined in the preceding two paragraphs, that is: attempting to assign a first, second, third, etc. It is bound to be self-defeating, as earlier and mid-sequence items are found. You will inevitably be stuck with 107-A, 107-B, etc. This is a mess.

It makes much more sense, in the long run, to simple use the acronym for the venue (KAL - Kaleidoscope) and the date and edition identifier sequence, thus:

KAL 1967-04-14/16 P-1

This would identify the first posters in the Kaleidoscope series, with the venue, the date range, and the fact that it was a first-edition poster. We should RESIST permanently labeling this event as Kaleidoscope #1. Yes, we can still say "Do you have the first Kaleidoscope poster?" or even the "Do you have the 4th Kaleidoscope poster?," but this would always be relative to whatever was currently considered as the 1st or the 4th poster, subject to change and not locked into the vernacular.

We can still have nicknames, for those more popular items and, as we know, there are a number of different nicknames for some posters. But we can agree that we will disagree as to what those nicknames are.

Promoter Numbered

In cases like the BGs, BGPs, NFs, and Avalons, where the promoter themselves has numbered the series, then this numbering system should be used, although it necessitates using adding newly-found or mislabeled items, with the "108-A" approach, which is less than satisfying. And the promoter makes mistakes or misses a number too.

COMPUTER IDENTIFICATION: Another Issue

As if this were not enough, I suggest we also add a unique image identification number, for computer use and for making positive identification without long lists of date codes.

THE UNIQUE IMAGE ID

Unique numbering systems are very simple: just number all unique image items, starting with the number one and counting upward incrementally. Examples of unique items would be posters, handbills, cards, ads, and artwork. Each variant of each poster, card, etc. would also have a unique catalog number. There is no attempt to remember what poster each item refers to, only the need to have this available in a lookup table of some kind. Also, there is no attempt to have these unique numbers in any particular order relative to the posters they refer to. For example, if FD-1 has the unique number "1040," FD-2 might have a unique number that is nowhere sequentially close, such as "12299."

These numbers can then be organized via computer database in dozens of ways, including all of the commonly used poster identification mentioned above. There can be no numbering confusion, because each item has a

unique number. One requisite with this method is that users must have a linking table to know what the number means. For example, I give you poster #4848, which means nothing to you. If I provide you with a linking table, you can look up #4848 to see that this refers to BG-105, the Flying Eyeball.

These unique image numbers are very useful when working with databases, if only because they take up less space. Also, archivists and experts will find them useful as a crosscheck against any other methods of identification. When we have a master database up on the web, we can have a unique-number lookup that will save us from having to remember potentially thousands of venue names.

MORE TO COME

Just think about it: There have been music-concert posters of one kind or another for over a hundred years. If we just limit our interest to the psychedelic posters of the '60s to the present, we still have a huge quantity of material. And keep in mind that, for the most part, all of the posters we know of are restricted to what appeared in the largest cities, in the Bay Area in particular. What about the thousands of smaller towns and cities? Did they not have some form of poster advertising? The answer is that they did have advertising, but we have not documented these yet. Perhaps these are of no consequence, but I will wager many are of interest. So we are talking about possibly hundreds of thousands of posters, handbills, etc., in all their variations.

MAKING IT SIMPLE

Now that we have had somewhat of an analytical discussion of number posters,

what shall we in fact do? Here are some examples:

When all is said and done, to identify a poster, we need the date, the bands, the venue, the format, and perhaps the artist, such as:

The Euphoria Youngbloods poster for 1970-07-17 by Bob Fried. That is what we need, and while we can nickname the most familiar, as soon as we get into strange territory, we need all that information to make sure we are talking about (or buying/selling) the same poster.

When I specify "Euphoria," I am saying what venue I am speaking of, but often that will not be specific enough. There are many venues that are used by many promoters, where the event takes precedence over the venue, such as the Bread and Roses Festival (B&R) held at Berkeley's Greek Theater (GT), so I could say:

B&R 1979-10-05 P-1

I am speaking of the 3rd Annual Bread and Roses Festival held at Berkeley's Greek Theater. I suppose I could say:

GT 1979-10-05 P-1

Yet, many promoters use the Greek Theater, but by saying "Bread and Roses Festival," I am narrowing it down to one of six events, since that is the number of years that festival was held.

We could quibble about any of this. The important thing is to come up with a consistent method of describing posters that will identify the poster and not be too cumbersome.

For the most part, I have resigned myself to writing these things down. I like Eric Kings approach, but don't want to spend the rest of my life hyphenating

dates in my mind, so I would much rather see "1970-07-17" than "19700717," not that I can't decipher King's version. I want to make it as easy on myself as possible, in particular, as I may be doing this for a long time and handling any number of posters. So, for the Euphoria poster:

EUP 1970-07-17 P-1

In summary, I plan to use the following:

EUP = Acronym for the venue

1970-07-17 = Date of the Event

P = poster

1 = 1st printing or edition

I suggest that we abandon the idea of trying to indicate a range of dates, in favor of using this ID# to get into the ballpark, identify the poster we are talking about, after which we can discover all the fine points and details about it.

Legend

P = Poster

H = Handbill

C = Postcard

T = Ticket

BS = Bumper Sticker

BU = Button

LC = Lobby Card

PRO = Promotional

TOU = Tour Posters

AD = Advertisement

AC = Awards Ceremony

BP = Backstage Pass

CAL = Calendar

FC = Fan Club

MAI = Mailing Piece

MM = Memorabilian

ST = Sticker

MN = Menu

PRM = Promotional

SP = Speciality

3D + 3-Dimensional Item

1= Original

2 through 'N' = Reprint

OA = Original Artwork

X= Pirate

F = Forgery

PP = Printer Proof

PROG = Progressive Proof

ONK = One-of-a-Kind

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