

Classic Posters – Meet the Poster Experts

Classic Posters – Meet the Poster Experts

by Michael Erlewine

Every field has its experts, those who care enough to document and study the details, the fine points, and posters is no exception. These are the folks who learn all the details, and to which we turn whenever we have questions. Here is a brief overview of the experts I am aware of.

In the beginning there were just the posters and a lot of them got pulled down and put up on the wall. A lot of them just got tossed out. Of the many people I have interviewed, not one really knew these posters were going to be worth what they are today. For many, they were just 'really nice' and you just pulled them down, took them home, and stashed them away.

Among the artists themselves, none of them became what we would call an archivist and expert for the whole genre, with the exception of Randy Tuten. Not only was he one the finest artists back then (and still is now!), but all seem to agree that he alone among the artists had the most incredible collection and actually was into the fine points of their seeming endless variations and editions. He has to be the first serious collector, at least among those actually creating this genre.

Among the experts that I have been able to discover, the next earliest collector/expert seems to be Eric King, who reports encountering some of the Family Dog posters, quite early in that series, along Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley. This was early in 1966. King, who had some training in archiving, readily admits he had no idea at the time that these posters would become

as valuable as they are today. He just liked them and picked them up, here and there, and began to attend some of the dances. It was the art that interested him in the flyers and posters.

It was not until the fall of 1966 that Eric King began to seriously collect the numbers in the various sets that he was missing. He stored them in flats, by venue, and began to compare notes with other collectors. According to King, he made no written notes, kept no records, and was able to keep this knowledge in his memory.

At some point, he met Greg Davidson, who was buying and selling these posters at the Marin Flea Market. Davidson like, King before him, also was drawn to the posters by the art. At some point in the 1970s, King and Davidson got together and compared notes. It must have been quite a series of meetings. Here are two of a very few experts in the world, sitting down and going through the various series, poster by poster, and comparing notes on the variations, relative rarity, and so forth. When they finished, it was Eric King who went on to actually write this material down for the very first time and distribute it.

King was not the only person who had this kind of knowledge, but he was the first to care enough about it to publish it, so that all could better understand this emerging field. And he did this at the encouragement of the artists themselves, whom he had been interviewing and had come to know. Around this time, the sale of the posters had reached a point where pirates and unauthorized reprints had begun to appear. Unless there was some guide that clearly stated which were the

Classic Posters – Meet the Poster Experts

originals and which the reprints, the now-emerging market could quickly become stained and confused. King was told by the artists themselves that he owed it to them, the artists, to write his knowledge down and make it available. And he did this.

It took six months and he published his first guide in 1977, a slim 100-page edition (today it is more like 500 pages). King readily admits that first volume was very rough and incomplete in many ways, but it was eagerly received by the poster community nevertheless.

On a parallel course was Berkeley collector Dennis King, who also can remember posters from the 1966 period of time. By the early 1970s, he too was buying and selling posters. In 1976, King found a little nook of a place along Telegraph Avenue, that he used as a shop. He was soon selling flyers and posters, along with baseball cards and what not. Soon graduating to a larger store, the D.K. Gallery is still open for business in Berkeley.

So we have a couple of "Kings" here, both who lived (and still operate) in Berkeley, and who are two of our most expert poster people. Dennis King is co-authoring the "The Art of Modern Rock" with author Paul Grushkin, which should be out very soon.

Jacaeber Kastor was raised in Berkeley and Eric King and Kastor remember meeting each other, when Kastor was just a school kid, running around with a cigar box full of handbills. It was King who helped Kastor, years later, replenish his collections, when rats gnawed through a bunch of it. Kastor began buying collections in the mid-1980s, feeling these valuable posters were undervalued. In 1986, he opened

the Psychedelic Solution Gallery, which was to become the largest poster gallery on the East Coast. Over the years, Kastor has developed pretty much of an encyclopedic knowledge of the entire field, and according to Eric King, Kastor knows more about the whole genre of concert-music posters than anyone he has met, including himself. That is quite a compliment coming from King.

From another whole direction came Phil Cushway, not Bay-Area bred, but from the Midwest, Ann Arbor in particular. Cushway too had fallen in love with poster art and, fearing that he had already entirely missed the boat (that it was too late), set about to create a company that not only collected posters but also published them. This was in the late 1980s and the company was ArtRock, which has become the largest concert-music poster business in the world, at least until very recently. We will get to that later.

Phil Cushway systematically set about to purchase these now-somewhat-rare posters, wherever he could. He soon found himself moving to San Francisco, where he bought out legendary poster dealer Ben Friedman (who had in turn bought huge quantities of the Family Dog from Chet Helms and the Bill Graham Presents series from Bill Graham), and many other large stashed. Cushway also went to the artists themselves, in many cases buying all they would sell. And to top it all off, he began to publish his own poster series, using the best artists available and helping to launch a number of careers, like those of Mark Arminski and Frank Kozik. I have been told that Cushway had over a million posters at the height of his collecting period. But there is more.

Classic Posters – Meet the Poster Experts

Since Cushway was sitting on 'the' mountain of posters, he was in a position to control their sale, availability, and pricing. And he set about to do just that. He was the first to publish full-color catalogs that pitched these posters as art. I understand he has distributed millions of these catalogs, and they had the desired effect of consolidating the market and raising prices. And Cushway himself was not the only one to benefit from all this. It affected the entire field and helped to raise posters as collectables to a new level of sophistication and cost.

Meanwhile, about the same time that Cushway was building ArtRock, Ed Walker, also in San Francisco, found himself in the same business. S.F. Rock is one of the two main concert-music poster stores in San Francisco. Walker along with his partner Grant Mechinan, both poster experts, continue to operate one of the most popular stores in the country. Both are very knowledgeable and their emphasis is on original posters, not reprints.

And just to round this story out, in the early 2000s, entrepreneur Bill Sagan purchased the entire Bill Graham Archives, including all their posters, going all the way back to the beginning. In addition, he purchased all the FD and BG material from ArtRock's Phil Cushway (which was a lot), making him the owner of the largest collection of music-concert posters that we are aware of. He is now the king of the poster hill.

Well, that is a brief account and a few details about some of the principle figures in the history of poster experts. There are others, of course, and young ones coming up like Oakland's (J.C.

Hall, and Jacob Grosse on the East Coast. And there are a lot of experts out there that have moved to the side, for one reason or another, and done other things.

Michael@Erlewine.net