

Classic Posters - Ben Friedman, The Poster Man

by Michael Erlewine

Ben Friedman and Postermat

Ben Friedman was born in New York City and raised in upstate New York. He relocated to San Francisco after World War II, where he worked as an egg broker, from Petaluma, the self-proclaimed egg capital of the world. He eventually invested in a store on Grant Street, with a friend, as an outlet for bankruptcy goods, mostly clothes. In time Friedman bought up a large collection of water-damaged records, some 100,000 albums. This led to more and more records being added and, in time, his partner moved on, leaving Friedman with half of the store empty and plenty of bare walls. He was calling the store "Gorilla Records" at the time. As it turned out, a poster wholesaler pitched him on adding posters to go along with this records, and the combination soon increased sales to such an extent, that the clothes and odd stuff was phased out. He changed the name to the "Postermat."

In early 1966, posters for both the Family Dog and the Bill Graham started to be dropped off at the shop, advertising the dances. After customers showed an interest in them, Friedman devoted considerable wall space to the posters. The interest further increased. They were popular.

Soon Friedman decided to contact Bill Graham directly and asked him about getting some of the posters. Graham told him that he could not

be bothered, and said he just gave them away or had them posted. He didn't have time to mess with making special arrangements. Friedman then asked him to sell him fifty copies of each of the first 40 posters for a \$1000. Bill soon brought the posters to Friedman's shop himself and collected the money. Friedman planned to double his money, turning a 50 cent investment (per poster) into one dollar. And that was the real start of these posters as a business. Up until around 1970, Friedman sold most posters for \$1 apiece.

Friedman's shop soon had walls of poster with colored light playing on them to music, and a special black-light poster room. Ben Friedman went on to buy up back stock not only from Bill Graham, but from Chet Helms, and the Bindweed Press. He cornered the market.

Friedman lived above his poster store and treated the store like his living room, hosting collectors and customers late into the nights. Stories about Friedman abound, and in these accounts, he appears as a likable character, who nursed many a well-known collector along the road to poster acquisition. He is famous for seemingly never exhausting his stock of posters. According to accounts, he never sold you all that you wanted, but always kept you coming back for more. And he always seemed to have just one more copy of that poster that nobody else could find.

When Friedman decided to liquidate his archives, he sold them to Phil Cushway of Artrock, who now has taken over the mantle of the 'deep stock' and from whose vaults posters

Classic Posters - Ben Friedman, The Poster Man

now eternally spring. Ben Friedman pioneered the poster store and the selling of posters. For many years, he was the common thread that linked hundreds of collectors together, his store their meeting ground and point of connection.

Ben Friedman died on Jan 4, 2003 at the age of 91. His ashes were cast on the San Francisco Bay from his friend Eugene "Dr. Hip" Schoenfield's 60-foot yacht.

Michael@Erlewine.net