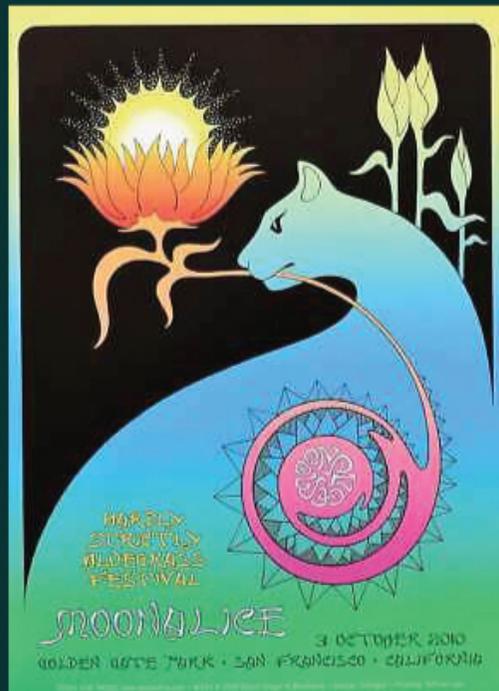


# David Singer

## Graphic Designer



Interview with Michael Erlewine

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Graphic Designer

Interview

by

Michael Erlewine

## 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.

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## **Interview with David Singer**

by Michael Erlewine

[David Singer produced more posters for the Fillmore series than any other artist. An impeccable craftsman, Singer is equally well-known for his montages, many of which were in his concert posters, but others (not poster oriented) are incredible. These montages deserve more wide acclaim. This interview was at David Singer's home in Petaluma, Californian, when I was taken there by poster-expert Eric King.]

### **Beginnings and Working at Home**

**David Singer:** Oh yeah you wanna' know my birthday.

**Michael Erlewine:** Birth date, year, and place of birth.

**David Singer:** Well I was born in, in a suburb of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, called Fountain Hill.

And I grew up in ... let's see the date was March 11, 1941, right at the beginning of World War II. I was born six months before the war started.

**Michael Erlewine:** So, he's older than we are.

**Eric King:** Yeah!

**Michael Erlewine:** But not by much.

**David Singer:** I was born six months before the war started. I was born in March, and then you know I think that's nine months or whatever.

My father was an upholsterer. Behind our house he had an upholstery shop and a drapery making shop, so he had several employees working for him. He had all these sewing machines, long tables of sewing machines, so the draperies would be sewn. I had a great aunt that worked there. She worked up into her 90s at this, and when I was growing up, she was like in her 70s and 80s, and I used to go back there.

And she was a real neat lady and really liked me, and I used to sort of hang over the sewing machine (laughs) talking to Aunt Martha. I ended up calling her Aunt Martha, though I think she was my great aunt. And I'd be looking at these sewing machines, and they're always elaborately decorated with 'Singer' on them (laughs). And so, "Singer" always stuck in my mind, because of the Singer Sewing Machines. You know it's just 'cause I was raised around them. My father had at least a dozen Singer Sewing machines, and he had a collection of antique Singer sewing machines, some of them were like, incredible, you know?

So, I used to trip out to the designs on the things. Somehow or another 'Singer' just stuck with me.

## **Art Beginnings**

**Michael Erlewine:** So, at what age were you into art? How did your art develop?

**David Singer:** Well it started because I was around antiques all the time I grew up. There's a lot of antiques in Pennsylvania, as you know, especially in the area you grew up.

**Michael Erlewine:** Yeah, Amish and Mennonites,

**David Singer:** ... in Lancaster and,

**Michael Erlewine:** I grew up with all the Hex symbols and stuff.

**David Singer:** Yeah, exactly. And that got me into geometry, which is... you know I teach a class in geometry.

**Michael Erlewine:** No, I had no idea!

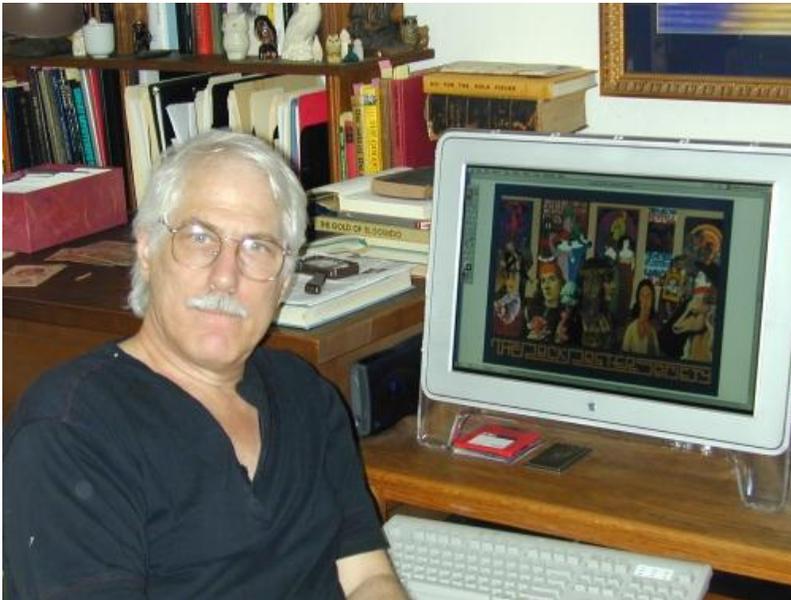
**David Singer:** Sunday's my first class. I teach in a university... I'm really into geometry; especially what they call sacred geometry or symbolic geometry. But it started with hex signs, when I was growing up, with all the hex signs around and on documents..

**Michael Erlewine:** On barns.

**David Singer:** And my mother, my stepmother, Dorothy had the dream of being a painter, at one time. And she married Late. She married my stepfather late, and I think they were in their late thirties or mid-thirties, and she had gone to art school. The house was covered with... I mean there are a lot of paintings in the house that she'd done as an art student.

And, it's actually a Santa Fe ad that she had reproduced as a painting. She copied it. And I actually, in my archive, have the Santa Fe ad that she copied. And that was over my bed, all the time I grew up.

And it really kind of hit me that the reason, well various times in my life I've looked at it and thought about it. It's the 'image maker'. It's a guy, Indian sitting in front of the fire making Kachina dolls.



**Michael Erlewine:** Great face.

**David Singer:** And Santa Fe had a... they used to have all these old ads, back in the 20's, 30's, and 40's, where they would have an artist paint the picture of Indians doing something, and then they would

reproduce it with the Santa Fe Railroad. "See the magic of New Mexico" or something. And they would even have some that you could send away for a print of it. Well, this is one that you could send away for the print.

This guy e-mailed me and said that, you don't know me, but last night or a couple nights ago, I was looking through my photographs, when I was growing up, and I saw this photograph of me in my bed room with my mother, who used to collect your posters. That's how he started out. And she had the last Fillmore poster, BG-287.

And she'd put it next to my bed all the time I was growing up. And I was looking at this photograph, and it kind of (I'm 32 now), you know, surprised me. I hadn't thought about it for a long time. I ran out and got the Art of Rock book, so I could see the print. And there it was.

And he says, "When I looked at it in the Art of Rock book, I had a flash of such intensity." (laughs) This is the way he put it in the e-mail. "That it brought back my.. I realized it was one of the earliest images that I can remember."

"And I remember I used lie in bed thinking "What is that cat thinking? What is the dog thinking?" And I thought, God that's amazing, cause that's what, in a way, I had that experience with this image, because I grew up with it, and it was over my bed all the time I was growing up. And I don't know why she picked that one. I guess because I was little boy, and you know it's a boy kind of picture.



But most of the paintings were landscapes or flowers and stuff. Anyway, she had this thing about being an artist, and she painted for a while.

Her paintings were not really very imaginative. They were good, technically. And then she got married and all the time I was growing up, she wasn't doing anything with it. I think that later, in the end, she kind of started painting again, but by that time it was a little late. And so when I was growing up, she recognized right away that I had artistic talent or at least I had the flare for design and stuff, and I used to draw all the time, But it was a mixed blessing, because the kind of stuff that I would doodle would be like, you know, Rick Griffin-ish, kind of oddball stuff.

**Michael Erlewine:** Cartoony or not really?

**David Singer:** Yeah, cartoony, and weapons and explosions and (laughs) oddball designs and all kind of weird stuff.

**Michael Erlewine:** Right.

**David Singer:** And the people that I was around didn't appreciate that kind of stuff. So, they kind of like encouraged me on one hand, but discouraged me on the other.

And actually, I kind of so suppressed the kind of stuff that I would draw, that I stopped drawing. By the time I got out of grade school, it was little drawing I did. But I was around all these antiques. My mother was an antique collector. So, she had chests with all the Pennsylvania Dutch design.

**Michael Erlewine:** Yeah, which is wonderful stuff.



**David Singer:** And my father and they had a little... we lived in a house and the front room of the house was turned into... had a window, was in the main street of Quakertown, and they had turned this one room in the house into a store front window. And one room in the house, which we closed off from the house, was their shop, which during the day my mother would be, in the house, but when someone would come in the door and ring the bell, than she went in and it was for, basically, draperies.

And then my father worked in the shop behind the house. And here I am in my studio, behind the house that I have my studio in. I developed this thing early on of working at home. That was one thing I inherited from my upbringing. My parents worked at home. My mother eventually got back into school. She had gotten into school teaching, so she became a grade school teacher again and the shop was only open on certain days. I grew up. My father was a craftsman. He used to do a certain amount of woodworking. What he was specialized in was really fine antique furniture; sofas, Art Nouveau sofas and he would have to strip it down to the wood. So he'd have to take all the cloth, all the stuffing, and pull out all the nails, and all the webbing, and all that crap.

And that was one of the jobs that I did when I was growing up. There'd be a sofa in front of me, and I had to strip this thing down until there was just wood and no nails and tacks and they maybe it had been upholstered three times already, and so there were tacks everywhere.

And I had to take all the tacks out. And then, after it was done, if it wasn't... I would say, half the time, my

father was going to take all the wood apart and re-glue it back together. And he'd start out from scratch, and then he would do all the webbing, and build up all the ... and do the cushions and end up with a completely restored piece of like antique... And he was very good at it and the problem was, that like most of those things, with the hours involved, it was very hard to get the amount of money you need.

But he used to get a lot of clients that were like... We were in Bucks County. Bucks County was filled with areas where there were pretty well-to-do people, and we weren't well-to-do. I used to get into a lot of people's homes, and see a lot of stuff. I liked to go around and look at all their paintings. So, we used to get into doctors and lawyers, and you know writers, and whatever.

We used to end up in their houses. A lot of times they weren't there, but we were delivering or picking up a sofa or chairs or installing draperies. I installed more draperies when I was growing up than... If I never install another drapery, it's fine with me, but I used to wander around these houses and look at everything.

That was an eye opener for me. In that way, I saw a lot of arts and crafts and stuff. I always had a sense of design.



## Singer the Sign Maker

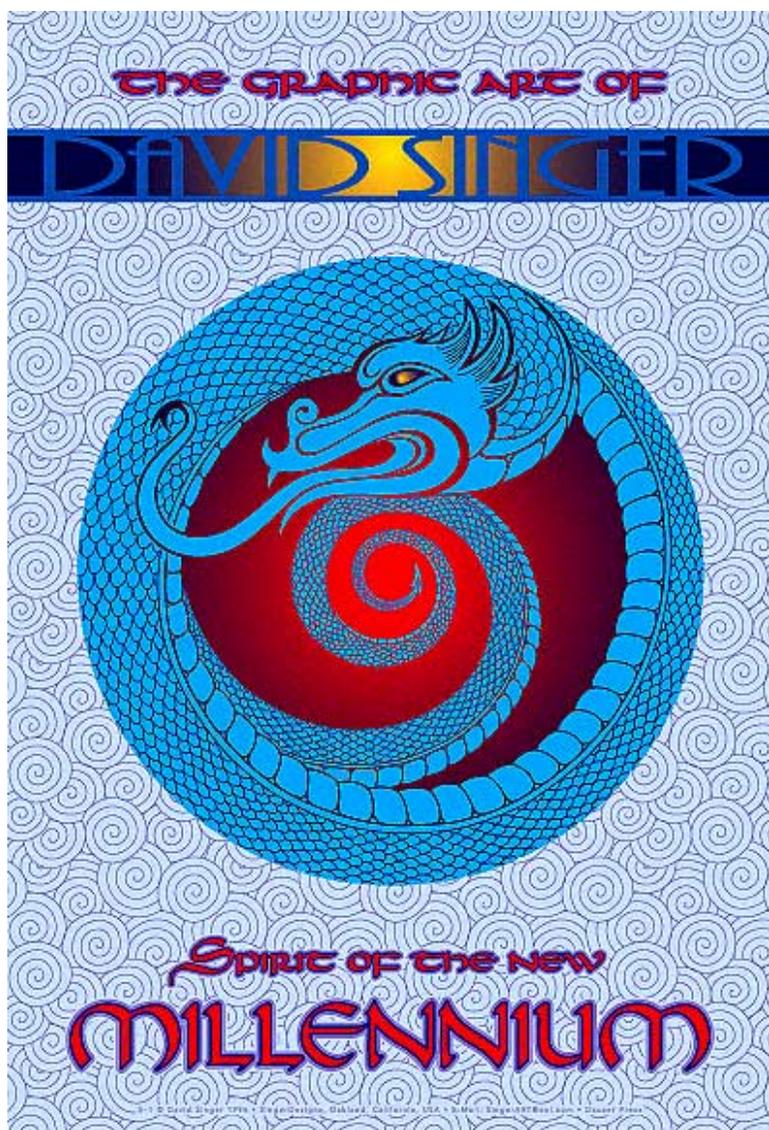
One thing that happened to me in high school was I was always asked to do the signs. Very early on in my life, people realized that I could actually, even if it was just with a piece of crayon or something, I could make things they wanted to say, like "Keep Out of the Lockers" or something. I could letter it, so that it could be readable, and I'd spell it right. And the letters were at least evenly enough spaced that you could actually read it a little, and it was on the piece of paper.

**Michael Erlewine:** I've been hearing that, and I'm asking you the same thing, right? I'm coming to you and saying do some lettering for "Classic Posters." Isn't that odd? Or, actually right on point.

**David Singer:** Yeah, weird, exactly. It always happened to me. And it wasn't anything I ever went

after. I was just able to... even if I wasn't trying.. make it and stuff. And one of my earliest recollections in school... I was thinking about this the other day. I had an experience when I was in grade school. I don't remember what grade it was. It was like 4th grade or something, where we had to do penmanship and we had to do it just exactly the right way. And this one particular day, I reached the point in this penmanship exercise we were doing, where I just couldn't stand the rigidity of it any more and I kind of freaked out and I took my pen (laughing) and I did all these... and I kind of freaked out and filled this whole pad with letters that were, you know, with all kinds of different squiggles on them and. And my teacher's going "Geez," you know. I don't know that I got in any trouble for it, 'cause I think it kind of surprised her (laughs). But it was like I had a thing for lettering. It just came naturally. I didn't really ever I don't know... I just knew how to make lettering spaced so you could read it.

And it was that way through.... I spent a year in college. I ended up doing signs for the walls in college.



**Going to College**

**Michael Erlewine:** But you didn't study art in college?

**David Singer:** Well, I didn't, but I went to Penn State. I mean, their art school was like you know, Phhh! I took a couple art classes and I didn't know what I was doing in college, but my parents had this whole thing that I was going to be a scientist. My mother always saw me as a scientist. She'd say "Oh you're so precise; you're so detailed; you're so orderly." I mean I had the most orderly room in my house. Everything was... (laughs) I put things away. I cleaned up my room, had my books over here. I had drawers, and our house was kind of higgely-piggely, but in my house, my room was very organized, so they thought, you know, "Organizer. He's precise. He's gotta', you know, we'll get him into science." Science was the thing. So, I was going to become a scientist, engineering and science.

But you know I didn't have any desire for that, and I was in college and not knowing what I was there for, and so after about, not even the second semester, and I thought "I gotta' get out of here." And I knew I couldn't get out, without really disappointing my parents. I could just run off, but I didn't really want to disappoint them that way. So, I just joined the Navy, and of course, once I joined Navy, I was joined. (laughs) There's nothing you could do about it. Kind of freaked them out

**Michael Erlewine:** I bet.

**David Singer:** But, it was kind of a way for me to kind of make sure that they couldn't undo it, or talk me out of it, or change it, or, you know, because I was already signed up and also it resolved the problem of what was I going to do to make any money if I left

college. And I signed up so I could go to California too. They'd send me to San Diego.

**Michael Erlewine:** That's right.

**David Singer:** So, I'm going back to San Diego. Are you going to San Diego? [to a poster show there, "High Society"]

**Eric King:** No, but it seems like a fascinating thing to do.



**David Singer:** I'm going down to this show they're having at this museum, but anyway, I ended up in

San Diego, and went through the Navy there. Also I was there in San Francisco, was here in the Navy. I came here in the Navy.

**Michael Erlewine:** And what kind of art were you doing? Any art in the navy?

**David Singer:** Well, the same thing happened in the navy.

**Michael Erlewine:** Ah hah.

**David Singer:** I started doing signs everywhere, for everybody. First time, I ended up doing a sign. A lot of times I'd volunteer. Someone would say "Oh we need a sign over here." So, I'd go. I'll do a sign, you know, and then someone would see that and say "Give it to Singer. He does good signs." So that's how I ended up being the sign maker (laughs) on these various duty stations, and I was on a ship for a year and a half that went in and out under the Golden Gate Bridge and the station was at Treasure Island.

**Michael Erlewine:** What years are these roughly?

**David Singer:** Well, I got out in 1964, mid 1964, so I would say 1963 and part of 1964, and even part of 1962, I was on the ship. I was stationed in Treasure Island. This is when they still had ships that would leave the dock on Treasure Island, go under the Bay Bridge on one side, go around, and under the Bay Bridge on the other side, cause it was too shallow to just go out, and then go under the Golden Gate Bridge.



So, we were going to go under three bridges. We'd go out 500 miles, and then we'd go around in a twenty-mile circle for thirty days and then come back. And they had six stations off the west coast, and you had to relieve a ship and come back. So, we were like the floating radar station. These six ships were plugged in the Norad system, which is part of the air force, so we actually worked for the air force. It was like the navy had loaned these ships some how, I don't know. I was actually in the air force for a couple years. I mean I was not in the air force, but I was working for the air force.

### **How I Got to San Francisco**

**Michael Erlewine:** How did you get plugged into the whole psychedelic scene or the 60's scene?

**David Singer:** Well, it sort of all happened, bit by bit. I got out of the Navy, and then I went home for a while. And I didn't like it back there anymore, and I'd seen

California. And it was kinda' like "Gee that was cool. I'll go back," so I went back to California. And I arrived in California and all I had was this car. I didn't have any money. I spent it all getting there. In fact, the car blew up half way across the country.

There's a place called Big Springs Junction, Nebraska. A few miles from Big Springs Junction, the car blew up (laughs) and BLAHHHHEEWWW! (laughs) in the middle of the night, And so, I walked into Big Springs Junction and, you know, all that was there was a diner, a truck stop, a garage, and a few houses. And I ended up in the diner, and I asked everybody about who runs the repair truck, and they said "Oh, he comes in every morning," and so pretty soon, the guy came in and I sat down and talked to him and he went and towed the car, and then I was there for like 2 weeks.

I didn't have any money, so I had to work for the guy at his truck stop (laughs) to get him to repair the car. He had to send away for parts to what was some big city in Nebraska. So, I was there over two weeks. I was there so long, that actually he asked... he wanted me to stay and he wanted to hire me (laughs) permanently. But I wanted to get to California, so I ended up in California with this car and I was literally out of the car and I didn't have any money left, but you know, I just had enough to get there and ended up in this like old folks home basically. It wasn't a bed and breakfast. It was like an old folks home.

And they'd hire people, and they didn't... they wouldn't give you any money, but you could eat and sleep there. So, we had a room with six other guys (laughs) or something in fact, just like in the navy. And

so I worked there for like, oh god, I think I worked there for 3 or 4 months, and was just walking around town wondering what I was doing. I went through a period of like real confusion about what it is I was.

**Michael Erlewine:** Curious, did you read a lot? Did you do read poetry?

**David Singer:** Oh yeah. I was a very heavy reader especially.

**Michael Erlewine:** What did you read? What did you like?

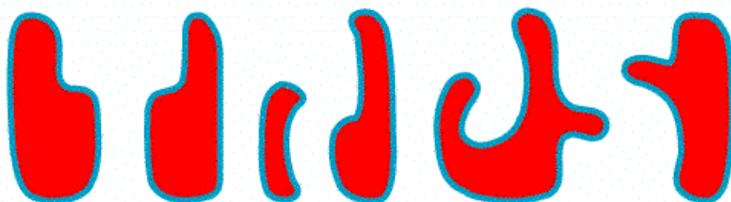
**David Singer:** Well, I read lots of novels, and like lots of science fiction. I was seeking in my head and stuff, so I used to read a lot of serious books, you know, the meaning of religion (laughs), all kinds of stuff.

But it wasn't with any kind of plan. I just used to go to the library and scan all kinds of stuff until I'd find something that seemed interesting. I was always kind of a loner, so I was kind of alone and I didn't have any guidance. I didn't know what I really wanted to do in life. And when I was in the navy for instance, before I was on the ship, I was in Okinawa for a year and a half and I was in san Diego. I was on the radio, so I was a Morse code operator, dot-dash dot-dot. I was really good at it, and I'm still good at Morse code. In fact, I got into being the Morse-code operator, because of the first test at boot camp.

## **Singer and the U.S. Navy**

**David Singer:** Have you ever been in the service?

**Michael Erlewine:** Nope.



*The Rock Poster Society*

**David Singer:** Well, we got to boot camp. I had to come across country. We had been up at odd hours traveling. We ended up in boot camp, and of course the first thing they do in boot camp is they herd you into some sort of area, and then they wait until they get some other guys, before they form a company, and then they go up, but it takes three or four days for people.

And you're just there. You sleep on the benches. You eat out of the canteen machines they have. I mean it's like, by the time everybody assembles in the company, everybody's sick, everybody's got colds, everybody's like just a semi-basket case and then of course they immediately herd you in somewhere and shave your hair off, take every stitch of clothes off, put everything you own in a box, and you have to ship it somewhere.

You're kind of like reborn into this reality and then they herd you around and do all these things, and one of the things they did the very first week I was there, when I'm totally spaced out, don't know these guys that I'm with...I'm sick. I'm tired. You know, my hairs shaved off. I'm in these starchy weird uniforms that

smell of moth balls and, you know, getting odd hours of sleep and weird food. They herded me one day into this auditorium and there were maybe 20 companies.

They herd, so it was like thousands of guys in this auditorium. Some guy comes out on the stage and gets everybody's attention and says you'll notice there's a piece of paper and a pencil on the desk before you. We're gonna' give you a Morse- code test and they said, ok, now listen up. This is "A" dit-dah ...does it a few times, this is an "N" da-dit. Ok. "A" is dit-dah, "N" is dah- dit, and this is an "E" dit, and this is a "T" da.

You get the four easiest letters, you know and he does them each a couple times. Ok, now write down what you hear. And then they just threw this Morse code, so I wrote down what I heard, and then about a week later, I was called into this room, when we were going through trying to determine what rate we were going to be in the navy.

Are you going to be a fireman? Are you going to be a whatever? Are you going to be a navigator, bosens mate, whatever. I went into the room and the guy says "Well, you're a radio operator," and I said "Well, couldn't I... ahh what do you mean?" And he says, "Well, you aced the score in the radio test. And so that means you're a radio operator." You don't have a choice in the matter, you know.

**Michael Erlewine:** Right

**David Singer:** So, I said, "Oh," and I ended up in radio school, and I was very good at it, so I got to be a

good Morse code operator. I could do Morse code in my sleep.

So, I got to Okinawa, after I was out of radio school. I went over with about 20 guys that ended up in this big troop ship and went to Okinawa. The troop ship was kind of all these marines, all these air force guys. It was this huge monster ship filled with young guys just out of various schools going over for overseas duty. There was this incredible storm and everybody in the ship got sick, so the ship was virtually awash in puke.

And if you didn't get sick from the seasickness, you got sick from the fact that there was puke smell everywhere.

**Michael Erlewine:** Yeah, that happens.

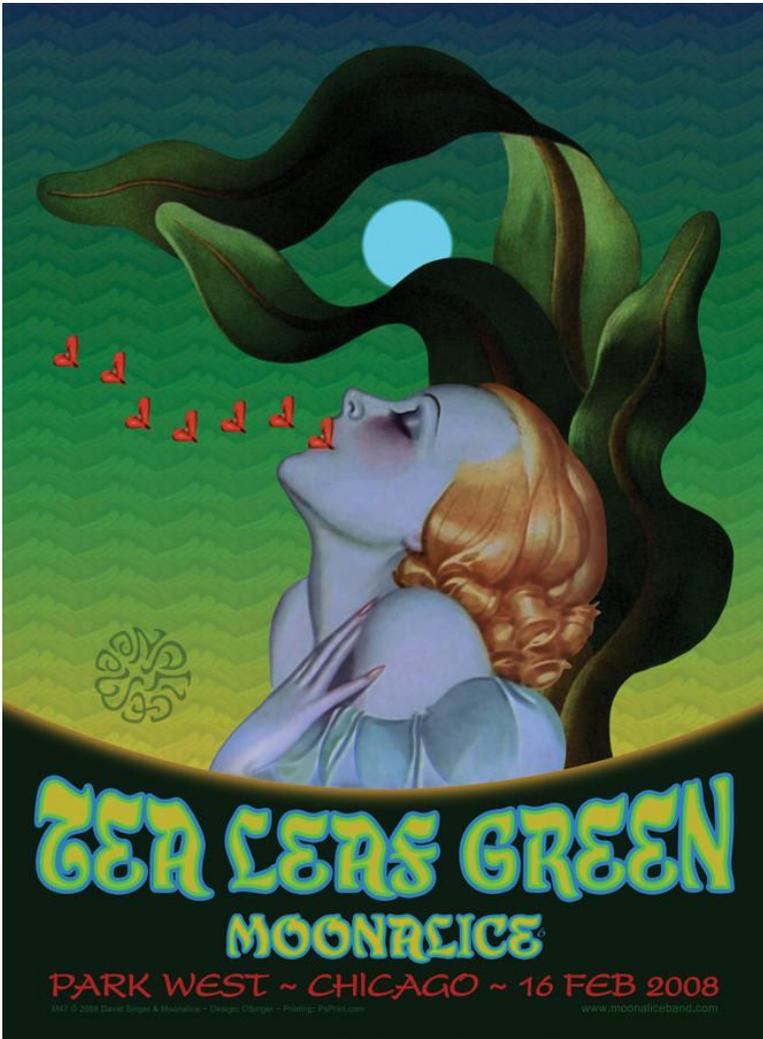
**David Singer:** So, everybody got sick except for like maybe 5%. Well, I was one of the 5%. I felt sick, but I never actually threw up. I mean I didn't actually get sick. So, I ended up being, the 5% that didn't get sick, so we had to clean it up. (laughs) So I spent like a couple days cleaning up puke, hosing everything down. It was unbelievable.

And I ended up in Okinawa, and the first thing the guy said to me... we were looking in awe. There were about 20 of us under the navel-air station in Okinawa, which had a big communication center and fifty guys working on Teletype machines. It was like for the whole pacific fleet or something on that side of the pacific, and he looked at all our records and he says "Oh, you're a crack Morse code operator. Yer' not down here; you're up at the hill. So, he sent me up to this hill, and on top of the, on the edge of the base, it

was a big hill with these big antennas and then a couple Quonset huts. And in there were four radio stations that they had to have one guy on duty all the time, monitoring these Morse-code radio stations. So instead of working in this big communication center, I worked all alone. Once again, I'm completely alone, up in this Quonset hut in this thing. And strangely, I was just thinking of this the other day too, because one of the main ones we had to monitor, were the Morse-code messages that the guy in the plane running down the Taiwan straights between Red China and Taiwan, like the one that was just forced down.

That's what was going on at that time. This was like in 1963. And so, this has been going on forever, and once an hour they'd send an encrypted message but in Morse code, which I'd have to intercept and then send. It was all encrypted, so I never could read it, and then I'd have to send it by this Teletype machine down at the communications center, to the top-secret room. And it was probably their position and whatever, I don't know. There were four major circuits that I had to monitor, and then what happened was I ended up in a situation where I had all this time.

There wasn't much to do, so I read. I spent a year and a half reading.



## Finding My Way in San Francisco

**Michael Erlewine:** How did you get into the art scene like in San Francisco? How did that happen? You weren't there at the very beginning.

**David Singer:** Well, what happened is that I was in San Francisco, and I finally realized after working for a few months in this place, I had to get a job and I went to all these job agencies. And, of course I didn't have any skills, as far as they were concerned, except I'd been in the Navy as a Teletype operator. I knew how to run the Teletype machines. I'd learned Teletype, and of course Morse-code didn't do me a bit of good.

I was in communication, so they had a hook and they could plug me into Teletype situations in downtown San Francisco. Next thing I know, I'm working for stock brokers, running teletype machines. I had to get to work at 5:30, 6 in the morning, because the stock market opens at 9:30 AM in New York.

And we had to open at the same time, so it was a really odd job, where I had to get up real early and get there real early. And mostly, it was just sending stock trades back and forth by Teletype to the floor of the stock exchange.

And so, I did. Then from that I got a better job at another place in the communications department. At P&O Lines, in the shipping lines.

And I befriended this guy that was working there, the first gay guy I ever really knew, beyond that "he's gay", you know, and we became friends. We used to go have coffee together all the time. And he was the assistant to the art director of this place and it sort of stirred up all that design part of my past.

And there was another aspect of this whole thing too, and it was actually before this. I had decided when I

was running around San Francisco for awhile, trying to figure out what I was going to do, that I should go to art school. So, I collected together a bunch of sketches. I pulled together whatever I could and I went around to various art schools. I even borrowed a car from a friend and drove to Los Angeles (laughs) trying to get into the Art Center School, which is a really well-known commercial graphic arts school in L.A., and the Otis Art Institute in L.A., and they all turned me down.

So it was kind of depressing and it put me into a state of depression, and I figured that I couldn't really get anywhere without having some training, cause I didn't have any training, and so I ended up in this company, and here's this friend of mine, who is an assistant to the art director, and he announces to me one day he's quitting.

I was just working in the communications, the Teletype, you know, communications and I thought, "Man, that's what I should get. If I can't get into art school, I'll become an assistant to an art director." So I marched into the employment guy there, and I said I want George's job. And they said well do you have any experience? And I said "Well no, but you know..." Well, he wouldn't give it to me, and so I went to see the art director. He liked me and he said "Well, I don't know; it's up to the employment... I can't really say."

Anyway this thing went around and around and finally I said I'd quit, if they didn't give me the job. So, they knew I was serious and they worked it out, and we had a meeting one day with the employment guy, and the art director and he says " Well, let's give him a chance." (laughs) So they gave me a month's chance,

and I did fine, so that was for like a year or something. I was coordinating the different brochures they sent out for various kinds of tours. This is a big shipping line, where they sold tours.

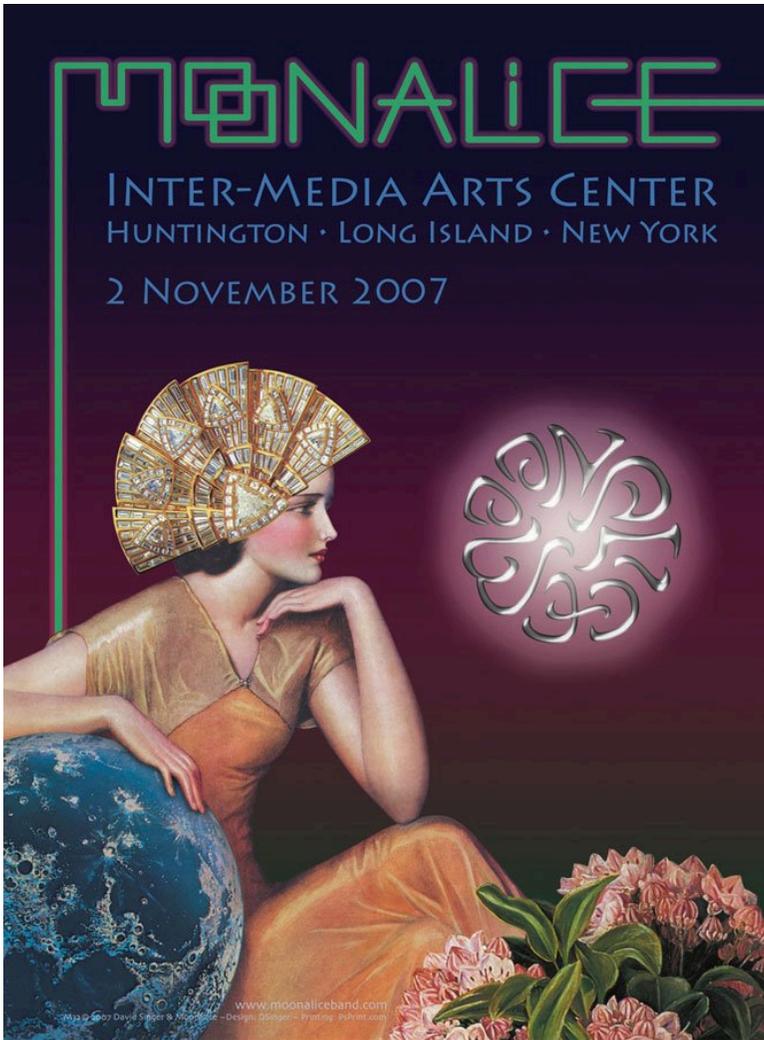
And they were working through a few of the commercial artists, who worked in the downtown area, and I was like the guy who would run over to the commercial artist to get the stuff and coordinate everything. So, I suddenly was in all these artists' studios. You know these commercials, and this was real hack downtown commercial design stuff. But suddenly I was in all these guys commercial art studios and seeing what they did and everything. A lot of it really turned me off because it was crank and grind, and they were like always against the time and essence, and it was you know...

This guy had Bank of America as a client and the P&O line and he had three guys forward at drawing tables you know, working, learning at night, laying out stuff and they'd just throw everything on the floor and you'd wade through piles and piles of typeset stuff that they'd cut things out of to paste down on and art board and throw the rest on the floor. And they'd sweep it up once a week and it was just... This guy had a wall in which he took his paintbrush while he was getting a little color here to put a little color on his rough drafts and stuff and he'd go against the wall, take the excess paint and the whole wall was like paint blobs of these...

It was like an abstract painting or something. And they were kind of crazy, but I met them all, and I kinda went "Geez, you know and this is what I want to get into?" (laughs) But then, you know, at the same time,

there was all this hippie stuff going on and I was pretty much a loner. I didn't have a lot of friends and I wasn't involved in any of that stuff, but I met George in the street one day and now George (who's job I took) was working at the LSD Pizza Shop on Haight Street, Ok? And next thing I know I'm at the LSD Pizza Shop on Haight Street and hanging out with George and smoking joints. And I started looking at all the posters and everything, and they just blew me away, so I sort of got into the whole scene.

I started going to a lot of concerts. And actually, I'd been already going to concerts, so I knew something about posters. Even when I was in the Navy, someone offered me a joint and I smoked it and it didn't do anything to me. It didn't connect me into anything. It didn't affect me into anything. But somehow I was on Haight Street and I started smoking grass and hanging out and one thing led to another, and I started going to concerts and everything changed for me. I started looking at posters more...



## Commercial Art and Psychedelic Art

**Michael Erlewine:** Which poster artists did you look at? Which one's affected you?

**David Singer:** Well, all of them. What blew me away about the whole thing was that they all looked so

much more spontaneous than what was going on in the commercial arts. See, I was seeing both sides. I was out there now going to concerts and looking at all this stuff. And then there was like another scene going on in the downtown commercial art building.

And while all this was sort of going on, actually, as this whole thing was developing, I had this guy come to me one day and said "You ought to get out of here and come work with me." And he took me to lunch and said that he was working for this large firm. He was their guy who was in charge of all the advertising and sales promotion material. And he was going to become a vice president in a year, and he needed someone to train to become, first his assistant, and if I was good enough, I could step into his job. Well, certainly he was much higher paying, so I went and the next thing I know I'm his assistant, you know, designing wine stuff, and coordinating, mostly coordinating.

So, what was happening was that I was at this cross road and began to realize that this is really where I belong, in this kind of design milieu, but at the same time, the path that was being set out for me, that I was sort of... I mean here I could step into this guy's job in a year. I'd be a big honcho in this corporation. I'd get a car every year and I'd have a secretary, and I'd have a good job and I could, you know, go on from there. But, what it really was, it wasn't designing; it was managing design. It was like art directing and it was all putting stuff together to present to the corporate meetings, so that they could look at it. And the more I saw what was going on there, the less I was really interested.

And at the same time, I'm getting more and more... On the weekends I'd smoke dope and go to (laughs) the Avalon and Fillmore up on Haight Street and I'm thinking, "God, you know." And I just kinda' went through this period where I just announced that it was done.

**Michael Erlewine:** You weren't doing that much actual art?

**David Singer:** No, I wasn't really doing artwork so much, although what happened was I moved up to the Haight-Ashbury. I moved up on Frederic Street and got an apartment. I had these three or four cardboard boxes filled with magazines and pictures, not for anything particularly. It's just that every since I was a kid, I'd been pulling the pictures out when I liked the picture. I'd started very early cutting pictures out and I always had these boxes full of pictures and magazines

**Michael Erlewine:** Is that right!

**David Singer:** I was a magazine person.

**Michael Erlewine:** And you'd cut them out with a razorblade or scissors or?

**David Singer:** Yeah, a knife or scissors or just pull them out of the magazine. I always had this thing about magazine pictures and so I had these cardboard boxes filled with magazines. And then what happened was, I was in this apartment. I didn't have much furniture. It was a nice hardwood floor, big living room, bigger than the room in there, but with no furniture.

So, I thought "Wow, you know." So, I dumped these cardboard boxes out one day and started putting all these pictures in piles and then one thing led to another. I started making collages. And I'd seen some of the hippie collages around, you know, and Victor Moscoso was doing collages, I saw some of his stuff, and there was a bunch of them around.



**Michael Erlewine:** Did any of those artists befriend you?

**David Singer:** I didn't know any. I didn't know anything about the scene at all. I mean I used to go to the Avalon and Fillmore on occasions, but I was just one in the audience. I wasn't part of anything, you know. I was sort of removed from the whole thing, and so I started doing collages. And one day I just upped and quit my job and I said "This is it! forget it." And it started when I went in one day and I think I drew a peace sign on something.

**Michael Erlewine:** Oh, that'll do it.

**David Singer:** And my boss had sent it back to me, and he'd turned the peace sign into a bomber, with wings, with bombs coming out of them. And I looked at this and I thought that's really where it's at. We're on completely different sides of (laughs) everything, you know. So, I just quit and he was blown away.

He went through this whole thing. I had to stay to train someone else and you're giving up your career and I said "Well, it just isn't for me." And here's this guy, who's like in his late thirties and he's had ulcers and he had all kinds of....he was smoking like a fiend and going out and having lunch and getting half drunk everyday with the people that he had to... all his printing salesmen, and the paper salesmen, and you know. And then they all drink together and it's all that scene of like constantly dealing, and I thought I couldn't possibly get into hanging out with all these salesmen, getting drunk every lunch, so I could get their .... Forget it! So, I just quit. And then I had no money. (laughs) Well I had saved a little, and so I just ended up in this place on Frederic Street, making collages.

**Michael Erlewine:** How did you ever get to work for like Bill Graham?

**David Singer:** Well I ended up with ah .... It partly had to do with my boss, God bless him and even though he was completely freaked out, when it finally came to the day that I left, he went out and bought me an art portfolio, cause I told him I was going to become a graphic designer and on my own, you know.

And he asked me about how would I have done this, and what do I know about it, do I have any connections? I said "No, but I'm going to do it." And so, he went out and bought me a kind of an art case, black art case, the first one I had. He gave it to me as a going away present.

By that time, he'd realized, and then he found someone else that was much more....and I kinda' trained him for a couple weeks. And so, I had this portfolio. At one point, I had all these collages and started.... and there's a lot of poster companies going on and this was like in, god I don' t know, 1966. And I started going around to all these poster companies, thinking that these would be greeting cards or like ahh... I don't know. Maybe someone... they were kind of small for collages, but I'd.... I went to East Totem West right off, and they were doing these greeting cards along with their posters.

And I met Johnny Q. ???? and then got to know him for real over the years. He said "Well, you should go to Bill Graham, man." And I thought "Geez, you know." I didn't really see myself doing concert

posters. And I hadn't been doing lettering for a while, so it was like kind of

....I hadn't really had to do lettering. I did sketching for my job and making layouts and everything, but it was sort of rough.. So, after I went to all these different companies and then I did go to see Victor Moscoso. I don't remember exactly how I found his number. It escapes me how it happened. I called him up one day and went to see him.

And Victor looked at all my collages and said he really liked them and the rest is history.

**Michael Erlewine:** And your things are dramatically different than anyone else's.



## Meeting Bill Graham

**David Singer:** Well that was another experience. I walked in there with this portfolio full of collages and the guy, Pat Hanks was Bill Graham's right-hand man at the time, and was there that day. And he said, I have this artwork I'd like to show somebody. And he said "Oh, come with me." And he took me into where

the rest room was and there was a door up the side, there was a little room that was about as big as the bathroom there, maybe a little bigger or like the alcove in there. And it was filled with artwork that people brought in and left there.

And he said, "Well you can leave it in here." And I said, "Leave it! Oh, I don't want to leave it." And he says, "Well, you have to." And I said, "Well, can't you just look at it?" He said, "Well, every so often Bill needs another artist and he'd come in here and look at all the stuff and you know. If something appeals to him then he'll hire them. But you know we don't look at stuff on an ongoing basis. He has this series of artists that are working." And I said, "Well, I can't leave this stuff here. It's valuable. It's my

baby and what am I going to use to go around and show other people." And he says "Well, what do you got anyway?"

So, I opened my thing and I show him these collages. And he went, "Geez, you know I've never seen anything quite like this." And they were nice, you know. He didn't know quite what to say. So he went and took one in and showed Bill, and then it happened. I heard them talking over there and then finally he comes out and says, "Well Bill says he'd see you. Come here."

So, I went into Bill's office, and Bill is on the phone, you know, and he says, "Yeah, just line them all up over there." So, I took all of my collages, took off the tissue paper. I had them all tissue papered nice and neat (laughs). But I lined them all up and then Bill gets off the phone and we shook hands and he says,

"What do you got here?" And then he starts looking at the collages and he looked at me and looked at these and looked at these and then he says "Geez. Hmmm," and he ran out of the room and he told Marishka Green, Herb Green's wife at the time, who was Bill's secretary (laughs) And that's how I first met Herbie Green. But anyway, he went out and told her to hold his calls for a half hour and ran in and closed the door.

And then he'd just sit there, and for about half the half hour, he just sat there and looked at these collages. Didn't say a word. He's like silent, you know. And then he kinda' leaned back in his chair, and the other person in the room was Pat Hanks, who was still there. And he said to Pat, "Well, what do you think, my summer series?" And Pat says "Yes, that's a thought."

And then next thing... and then he looked at me and says "Do you know how to do lettering?" (laughs) I'll never forget this and I thought "Lettering?" Well yeah! I can do lettering and he said "Well, there you go." And that was it.

One thing led to another, so I just suddenly had these 12 posters to do, and I really had never done any lettering, with a tool, that was ever published, and but I could do it, and I did. I worked out a design that was the same for the first twelve. which saved, whew, saved my ass.

Well, he really liked it. When I first did the first lettering layout, he really liked it, because it was readable, you know?

And he kept saying that to me, he said "I really like your posters. They're readable!"

**Michael Erlewine:** Couldn't deal with that Wes Wilson, right?

**David Singer:** Well he'd been, you know... Not Wes Wilson, Lee Conklin. He'd just gone through Conklin period.

**Michael Erlewine:** Oh really!

**Eric King:** Oh god!



## Meeting Randy Tuten

**David Singer:** And I think he was done with Conklin, but Randy Tuten was doing a lot of posters then. When I came along, Randy was the main guy. Randy didn't cotton to me too much

And Randy was a stoned-out head, you know, from Hollywood, raised in Hollywood. High, hip, you know really, you know... And I was kind of square. I was still had a lot of Pennsylvania in me and I was like a kind of a loner

I went to Randy's studio a few times and it was amazing, I was like suddenly in an artist studio that I could kind of relate to. I mean, even though Randy was in another dimension than I was, he was really into...from my view at the time... He was a druggie (laughs). you know?

**Michael Erlewine:** Right. I have been to Randy's studio.

**David Singer:** I mean I had smoked some grass, but nothing like... I mean Randy was like, you know, he was really into it. And he gave me some. I remember one time I was in Randy's studio, but he was with some friends, or maybe they came by later. Oh no, they came by, and this guy had some grass and they said, "Do you want to smoke grass with us?" And I said "Sure," and they rolled a joint, and we smoked a joint, and it was like on another total level from the grass I'd smoked.

**Michael Erlewine:** Right.

**David Singer:** I mean this was like catatonic, you know. You know that kind of grass.

**Michael Erlewine:** Yeah, absolutely.

**David Singer:** I never liked that kind of grass very much, but this was like... and I had smoked a couple

hits of this joint, and then that's what happened to me. I kind of went into this catatonic trance for like about an hour, you know, and they were just... God, it was the funniest thing. In fact, Randy, for a long time used to kid me about that. He has a whole story about it. Didn't jog with my memory of it, but anyway it was really interesting. I was never real heavily into drugs. I was surrounded for years by people who were... not that I didn't do any, but, and there were, you know, some years where I'd get stoned fairly regularly, but it was mostly just grass. And I had a certain grass, it was a certain kind of mellow kind of grass.

**Michael Erlewine:** Did you do acid?

**David Singer:** Oh yeah. I did my share of acid trips. Not by the hundreds, you know. I used to have a friend (laughs), they'd count their..."Oh, I did acid 387 times. This is my 388th."

**Michael Erlewine:** Sure

**Eric King:** No, yeah sure, we all knew people like that.

**David Singer:** I did some acid trips, but nothing, you know. Yeah, I, I was just too... a little bit too cautious. And partly it had to do too with when I was still in the navy, in the last year and a half, I was stationed on the ship. They used to come in and out of San Francisco. And at that time, we'd finally come into San Francisco. We'd be in port for a week and a half. And you could get on the bus, and then off at the downtown station, there at Mission and First. And at that time, there were still some remnants of World War II in the downtown. Cause you know, downtown

San Francisco had been where the service men all went and I'll tell you some interesting stories about that.

But one of the things that was still there was, you could come out of the bus station, and to the left over there, there were a couple businesses that were on the ground floor had the machines you could look in and see naked women.

You put in a quarter and...

And they would sew any patch on your uniform. There was still the uniform thing downstairs, and then upstairs you could rent a locker, put street clothes on, and put your uniform in, and wear street clothes. So, I rented a locker, and

for like a year and a half I'd come in for a week in San Francisco and I'd go in there and put my street clothes on and I'd wander around town.

And I forget what the point of that was. What were we talking about?

**Michael Erlewine:** Where I'm at is you got the gig with Bill Graham and you did more posters than anyone! So, is that right?

**David Singer:** Well it turned out that way, but I mean, you know.

**Michael Erlewine:** But, I'm kind of wondering, that when the whole scene died, how... what was the exit strategy? I mean how did you get out of it? Each of you artists have done different things.

**David Singer:** Well, I'm still struggling to figure that out. I mean my whole life has been a struggle to figure out what I'm doing.

**Eric King:** (laughs)

**David Singer:** (laughs)

**Michael Erlewine:** Well, I just want to make a comment, that from what I saw today, I mean I've always liked your work (I have your work on my walls at home), but I think what I saw today is like your best work from my point of view, is in there, in the collages.

**David Singer:** Sure.

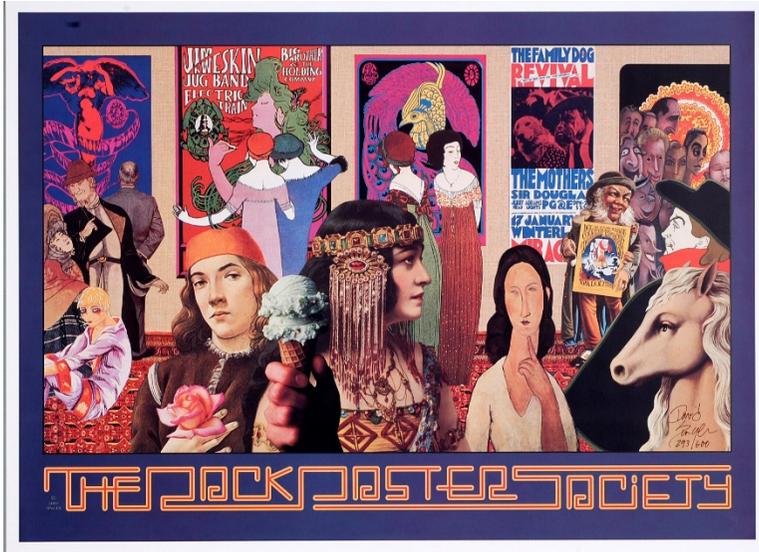
**Michael Erlewine:** Because, I think that you have a huge future and that you just need to get...

**David Singer:** Well, I felt for the last year or two I'm moving into a completely other career.

**Michael Erlewine:** Right.

**David Singer:** And the computer thing has been part of it. And I'm really pretty savvy now with that, and I don't particularly want to do commercial design though.

**Michael Erlewine:** No that'd be... fine art is what you're going to be doing.



## Sacred Geometry

**David Singer:** Yeah, yeah, and I think that's the direction I should go. Well it's interesting that you are from Pennsylvania. You know where the hex signs are. That's where my interest in geometry started! When I was about 6th grade or 5th or 6th grade, I very specifically remember we were... You know, you get art classes or whatever. And I was always, in every school setting I had, all through my high school years, if we had any kind of art thing, I was always the one that kind of really stood out, in a certain way. And so, I'd get either special attention, or they tried to... tend to try to ignore me, because they had to deal with all the other kids, it seemed. And what would happen was... I remember this very specifically. I was always bored in school, a lot of the time, and what would happen was... what happened this one particular day was we were taught how to take a compass, foot and draw a circle, and then put it in the

edge and draw six circles around and make this classic hex sign.

## **David Singer's Studio**

**Michael Erlewine:** That's right.

**David Singer:** And I was blown away. I was so blown away that I went off on this kind of compass thing for like, (laughs) I don't know. It ended up coming back at me the rest of my life. I mean I'm really into geometry, and it's sort of like it was a very empowering moment, because it made me realize that it was like...the thing about geometry that is so powerful is always..

Geometry was very much used in the ancient times by a lot of these mystical systems, mystery schools, various... It was used by the Egyptians as well, where they would get all the potential...And they were in power positions in the culture, so they could sort of look out and pick out the ones, the ones that were gifted or whatever. But what they would immediately start to do was teaching them certain types of geometry. Because if you could get them into geometry, and show them certain things in geometry, you could immediately see which one's the mind went....

Because what was happening was, you were showing them something that was completely empowering, in the sense that it had nothing to do with what they thought about it, or what they brought to it. It didn't matter whether you were old or young, what your religious view was, whether you were a male or female. It didn't even matter whether you were an Egyptian or any other culture. What they were

showing you was something that was totally universally real. It didn't even matter what the teacher thought about it. It worked or it didn't, and if you could somehow grasp the magic of that, where like suddenly you are shown something that is in itself completely empowering, it could be a revelation.

And I had that kind of experience, when I was growing up, with geometry. And so later they'd see those students, who would be blown away with what they were teaching them, and they'd pull them into a mystery school, and they'd become the priests. (laughs) And that was one of the... They used geometry as one of the gauging....

**Michael Erlewine:** This is an interview, but we can have a little dialog here. That was one aspect. I mean I think that's true of.. that's what's called 'pointing out' right, and your life says this and you say that and in Buddhism, they have pointing-out instructions, the teacher points out and sometimes the student gets it, then it's an "Aha!" that you were talking about.

**David Singer:** Mm hmm.

**Michael Erlewine:** They suddenly... It doesn't have to be geometry. It's the fact, it's now you're looking at the mind.

**David Singer:** Right, yeah. Well geometry has a very unique power, in the sense that it's almost part of everything else. I mean there's hardly anything you could mention that...

**Michael Erlewine:** In a sense, I'm saying it's not unique. What is unique is the pointing out and then...

**David Singer:** Yeah. Yeah. I understand what you're saying. In that sense your right. There are other things that.

**Michael Erlewine:** And the idea of empowerment and transmission is something that's big.

**David Singer:** Right, well I had that experience with that because...and then I got so into it. In school they had art classes and whatever we had there, they were all very important to me. And I ended up being the... I used to design stage sets for the various plays in school and stuff, and they were corny, and, you know, cut-outs and stuff. And but I used to do that, and I ran several campaigns when I was in school. I got my best friend elected as the class president by putting up 400 posters around school. You know. "Vote for Dick cause he's a Prick," or whatever.

**Michael Erlewine:** (laughs)

**David Singer:** I just would do all these signs and put them up everywhere, and they were the best signs, and they looked all great (laughs), little posters. They were actually posters.

**Michael Erlewine:** Right!

**David Singer:** And stuff like that. And when I was in 8th grade, they had just completed a new senior high school and my class was going to be the first class that was going to be in the new senior high school. And they decided to hold a school-wide contest for a seal, logo, for the school. And of course older kids were really into it. And very few in my class got into it. We were in 8th grade, but I did submit a design and

won the contest. I was like... "When I was in high school, I created the school seal." So, I had this kind of little bit of a, you know... I don't know what you call it (laughs)

**Michael Erlewine:** Special.

**David Singer:** I had a little bit of a fame there.

**Michael Erlewine:** Yeah that's cool.

**David Singer:** And we put it on everything. It was going on the flag and their stationary and you could get it sewn on jackets and all kinds of stuff.

They still use it too. So, you know, I had this kind of you know, skill.

### **Bill Graham Pre-Fillmore Story**

But there was something else I was going to tell you about the Haight- Ashbury thing. The first time I went to Fillmore was... I was with some guys, and this particular night, for some reason, we didn't change clothes or I can't remember the circumstances around why we were still in uniform. But, I was in my navy uniform with this other guy, this one other guy. And we went up market street and, at that time, the place that became Fillmore West, which at that time it was the Carousel Ballroom. It had this kind of light in it and it liked swirled around and they even used it during the Fillmore. It was still a USO club, from World war II.

I mean this was like in the 60's, but I mean early 60's, but they still had this... (laughs) You could go in there, and they'd pass out little cards on the street or in

various places. You'd get one to go to get a hot dog or something. They just had these little cards that, you know,

"Come up to the USO," you see. So, one day, with this friend (we were in navy uniform), we ended up all the way up there at Van Ness, and there was the USO. So, we went in, walked up the stairs, and went into the USO.

Well, at the time we were looking for girls, and there were a bunch of girls there, but they were... it was highly chaperoned. And it was really kind of a dead place, but we stayed there for a couple hours, dancing with these girls, and had coffees and doughnuts and that kind of stuff (Laughs), you know? And finally, we just left, and years later, I went up there to show Bill Graham my art.

And I remember I told Bill that story one time. I said. "You know Bill..." This is after I knew him for a while. We were standing there one day. And I told him the story of how the first time, we were standing at the steps. Because he had taken... He had asked me to take the collages that I'd done and paste them down on a board and they were going to put it there on the middle of the steps, where you came up the steps one way, and then turned around and went the other way. There was a big wall there and they had 200 prints on there.

So, I took a piece of board and put my 12 collages... I laminated them and put acrylic all over them, you know. It looked really nice. I arranged.... just took the collages out of the posters. And he put it up there, and we were standing there looking at it. And I told

him I said..., I told him about the first time I walked in there, in the navy and this was a USO, and it blew him out. I don't know if he even knew that before. But it was a really nice piece too. And they had it framed and I'd done a... There was a little area and I put "David Singer" in there and a nice little collage, but it burnt up in the fire.

**Michael Erlewine:** Too bad.

**David Singer:** They had a fire there and...Yeah, because, well, he moved it to the offices, and then it burnt up in the office.

**Eric King:** I was there when he opened the office.

**David Singer:** Yeah it burnt up in the fire.

## **New Collages / Alton Kelley's House**

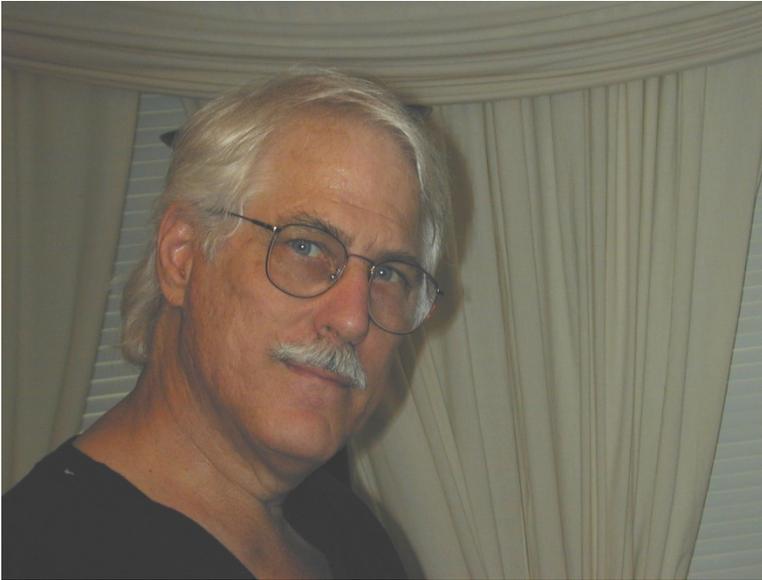
### **David Singer Collage**

**David Singer:** I seem to be moving more and more into people, than I used to. Like this one, was a Gauguin piece and the one with the Rock Poster Society, it has lots of people in it... I like the challenge of putting all of these people in the different setting. And I thought of another one to do, which is the stage set, behind the scenes.

Where I put, if it was like, say Hollywood, behind the scenes, you could put any kind of character from any movie, or any movie star, all from the 20's and 30's, you know, like the older ones. And, they can all fit in there, any character you want, because they'd be all

back behind the scenes. And that would be an interesting one.

**Michael Erlewine:** I have no problems with your imagination.



## **ALTON KELLEY'S HOUSE**

**David Singer:** (laughs) Ever been to Alton Kelley's place?

**Michael Erlewine:** No! now I've never met any of you until now.

**David Singer:** You've been there haven't you, Eric?

**Eric King:** No!

**David Singer:** Oh geez! His house is like... First of all, it's one of the heritage houses of Petaluma. And they fixed it up. It's filled with antiques and it's just like a museum.

**Eric King:** They have real taste.

**David Singer:** And he's got his artwork integrated everywhere and Margaritte's art work integrated and the house is actually a work of art, I mean (laughs) it's just ... They've gotten into the house itself and the way, and all the stuff, the designing, the painting, and the wallpaper.....,

Kelly's house looks like it would be Kelly's house. When you're in there for a while you say Yeah, (laughs) this is what you'd expect.

End Interview



## Concluding Remarks:

David Singer is often categorized as having a touch of the surreal. I can see what the critics intend, but my thoughts on Singer's work probably don't fit neatly into this view. Yes, he has done stunning work and is considered one of the great poster artists of the Sixties.

However, for my two cents (and I am a great fan of singer's work, especially his design, lettering work, and many collages), I consider Singer a design refugee, who took shelter in the concert poster scene of the 1960s, but whose talent ranges far beyond that.

I see it in the collages, many of them not well-known, and the logo and lettering work he has done. Singer's refinement, color, and subtle sense of form somehow defy language. His design skills set my mind at peace in a way that few artists can. Singer renders complexity as simple beyond any elaboration.

-- Michael Erlewine, February 2020