

Gary Grimshaw

A Short Biography



with Michael Erlewine

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Brief Biography

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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.

Michael@Erlewine.net

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A Brief Biography of Gary Grimshaw

by Michael Erlewine



Gary Grimshaw

Gary Michael Grimshaw born February 25, 1946 in Detroit, Michigan was the first major poster artist outside of the San Francisco scene to attain national status. Although he now lives in the Bay Area, we Michigan residents claim him as one of our own. For those of us in the Detroit area, Grimshaw's work was our introduction to the psychedelic era. He was the principle poster and light show artist for the Grande Ballroom in Detroit, which for many years was the most important psychedelic rock venue east of the Rocky Mountains. Grimshaw's work graced not only that dance-hall venue, but could be found throughout the Detroit/Ann Arbor area from the mid '60s through the mid '70s.

Grimshaw comes from a family of graphic artists. As a student in the Lincoln Park area, he worked in his uncle's print shop in Dearborn, Michigan, where he was introduced to the printing process. He was drawing all the time. In high school, he was involved in graphic projects, including designing T-shirts with his friend Rob Tyner, who was to become the lead singer for the notorious band, the MC5. Grimshaw went on to be the principal artist for that group.

After graduating high school in 1963, Grimshaw took in some college courses and worked for a year in a steel mill. He then saw a tour of duty in Vietnam in the navy from 1964 to 1966, where he served on the U.S.S. Coral Sea, an aircraft carrier. He spent seven months in the war zone on the South China Sea. As luck would have it, at the close of his tour of duty, Grimshaw's ship was sent to San Francisco for service. It was during this time, in 1966, that he was first exposed to the music and the political and cultural scene that was just then emerging in the Bay Area. He was immediately drawn into the scene, participating in marches and political rallies. The account of his discovery of the San Francisco scene is well worth reading. It is given in the excellent book, "High Art: A History of the Psychedelic Poster," by Ted Owen and Denise Dickson.

From 1966 to 1970, Grimshaw traveled frequently between the Detroit area and the San Francisco scene, sometimes staying for long periods in either place. He was a frequent contributor to West Coast underground press publications like the San Francisco Oracle (he did 13 issues) and the Berkeley Tribe. Back in Michigan, he worked with underground papers like the "Fifth Estate."

In August of 1966, Grimshaw returned to Detroit, where he roomed with his old friend Rob Tyner. Through Tyner, Grimshaw was introduced to Russ Gibb, the promoter of the Grande Ballroom. Gibb had just returned from a pilgrimage to San Francisco, where he had experienced the dance-hall scene in its early stages. He was determined to create a similar scene in Detroit via the Grande Ballroom.

Grimshaw became the first and primary artist for Detroit's Grande Ballroom, from its inception in late 1966 until somewhere around May of 1969. Over the years, he contributed dozens of designs for the Grande, designs that appeared as posters, handbills, flyers, and cards.

Grimshaw also did the light show at the Grande, in the early years.

In May of 1968, after a warrant was issued for his arrest for a minor drug violation, Grimshaw, who did not have the money to defend himself, left Michigan for two years. He was forced to turn his Grande Ballroom art chores over to Carl Lundgren, who went on to create some fine work. Grimshaw first traveled to Boston, where he studied macrobiotics, and then, late in 1968, he moved to the West Coast. He remained in the San Francisco area until early in 1970, at which point he returned to the Detroit area.

Back in Michigan, Grimshaw's life took a different direction when friend John Sinclair, poet and White Panther Party leader, was arrested for the possession of two joints of marijuana. The arrest resulted in a 10-year prison sentence on July 28, 1969 for Sinclair. He found himself working almost full time during 1970 and 1971 to help create a broad-based coalition to "Free John!," as the slogan went. In January of 1967, John Sinclair and Grimshaw created Trans-Love, a newspaper.

This effort culminated in the historic John Sinclair Freedom Rally in December of 1971, which was attended by such notables as John Lennon, Yoko Ono, Stevie Wonder, Bob Seger, and a host of other musicians, poets, radicals, and celebrities, people like Allen Ginsberg, Jerry Rubin, Bobby Seale, Phil Ochs, and Archie Shepp. This rally resulted in the Michigan State Legislature reducing the fine for marijuana possession from a felony to a misdemeanor and the release of Sinclair within a few days. For a while, possession of small quantities of marijuana was a \$5 fine in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Even today, it is only \$50.

Grimshaw had increasingly become more involved in political activism, working diligently in the anti-war movement, and his art frequently could be found in underground newspapers throughout the Detroit/Ann Arbor

area, as well as in Berkeley. He eventually was appointed Minister of Art for the somewhat-radical White Panther Party, working with its chairman John Sinclair at their center at 1510/1520 Hill Street in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Grimshaw was a strong advocate of Native American rights, and his work appeared consistently in the party publications, Sun/Dance and The Sun, a weekly.

In the early 1970s, Grimshaw produced a number of full-sized posters for music events that were sponsored by the University of Michigan Activities Center, a student-run organization. These UAC/Daystar events, as they have come to be called, gave Grimshaw an opportunity to produce some of his finest work, a series of posters of great quality and beauty. Grimshaw's work from this time is just now beginning to be fully appreciated. There is no doubt these are some of Grimshaw's finest works of art and some of the best posters of the era. When I pointed out to Grimshaw that this series of posters seemed much more relaxed than a lot of the earlier material, his comment was that, unlike the Grande days, with UAC, he had more than 24 hours to complete the design! Grimshaw also did posters for other colleges and venues in the area and in neighboring Ohio.

In 1972, Grimshaw became the art director for the Ann Arbor Blues and Jazz Festival, producing posters for the 1972 and 1973 events. Grimshaw created the initial poster when the festival was revived in 1992, as well as for the 2000 event. When the White Panther Party evolved into the gentler-sounding Rainbow People's Party, Grimshaw worked with Rainbow Productions to provide a wide range of graphics for venues, organizations, and the alternative community in general.

In 1974, Grimshaw relocated from the West Coast back to his home town Detroit, where, for the next fourteen years, he provided graphics, posters, album covers, logos -- you name it -- for the music scene. He also became Associate

Art Director for the prestigious Creem Magazine for the years 1976 to 1984. An interest in the emerging alternative/punk scene in Detroit found Grimshaw working as the handbill artists for two of the primary venues for this new music, Bookie's Club and Traxx. He also worked with Ceremony Productions, another major promoter of alternative rock in the area.

In 1984, Grimshaw, Frank Bach, and John Sinclair formed Music/Media Services Associates (MSA) art agency that, while short lived, included clients like the Chene Park Riverfront Concert Series, The Music Hall Theatre, and the City of Detroit summer festivals, not to mention a variety of club venues and groups.

In 1986, Paul Grushkin published the "Art of Rock: Posters from Presley to Punk," which contained a number of Grimshaw's posters. The effect was to bring to the attention of poster lovers a fact that the Midwest had long known: Gary Grimshaw was perceived as being on an equal stature with the major San Francisco artists. One very tangible result was Iggy Pop (who was raised in Ann Arbor) hiring Grimshaw to create the cover for his 1987 album, "Instinct," on A&M Records.

In 1988, Grimshaw was hired by Phil Cushway as art director for the then fledgling ArtRock poster company, which was being formed in Ann Arbor, Michigan. When Cushway decided to relocate his business to San Francisco, Grimshaw and his wife Laura went too, and, for the next several years, Grimshaw created a series of 22 remarkable posters for ArtRock. This lasted until 1991, at which time Grimshaw resigned, citing disagreements with the owner.

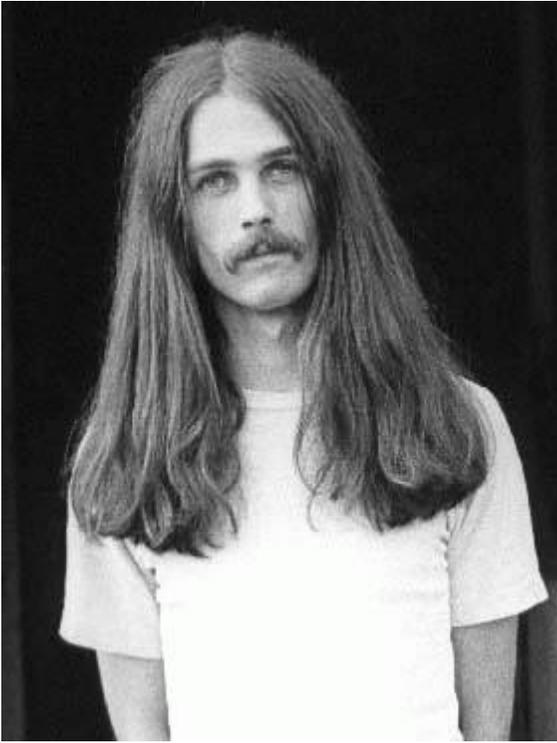
Grimshaw remained in the Bay Area, where he supported himself with freelance work and produced a series of reprints of some of his earlier material. Over the years, he has created and self-published more than 35 original or

reprinted posters, produced a mail-order catalog, and contributed a number of original posters for the Bill Graham Presents venue. This is in addition to the many album covers he created.

Grimshaw held three one-man shows in the Detroit area, in 1984, 1987, and 1996. In addition, he participated in group shows at the Detroit Institute of Arts (1974 and 1980), the Motor City Joint Show (with Stanley Mouse) with Wes Wilson and Mark Arminski in 1993, at the San Francisco Rock Poster Expo (1992, 1993, 1994), the Temporary Insanity Show, (San Francisco, 1995), and the Visual Jams Shows at the opening of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (1995).

In November of 2000, Gary Grimshaw and fellow poster artist Dennis Loren (also from Detroit) launched their gallery/store "Paper Song," Artist's Workshop West in Swan's Market in downtown Oakland, California. Paper Song closed in late 2002, and today Gary Grimshaw works from a spacious studio in downtown Oakland.

In March of 2004, Gary and Laura Grimshaw left Oakland, California and moved back to Detroit, Michigan, where he is setting up his studio. "I'm Home," he told this writer.



Gary Grimshaw back in the day.