Classic Posters - Tips for Cataloging Posters
by Michael Erlewine

I archive my information using the FoxPro database on the PC, since it is the fastest database available for the PC. For those of you who have no database experience (and may not be ready for any), it is still worthwhile to pay some attention to how you store your data, so that later, when you do want to database it, it will be easier.

It can be helpful to store your data in spreadsheet format using Excel or something similar. I would consider a spreadsheet as an intermediate step that will be useful later, when you need to move it to a true relational database.

As a systems programmer, I will be happy to come up with a separate article (and we can have discussions) about how to set up a poster database, but for now let's just keep it simple. You need some way to identify the poster image with its name. I have had many years of experience with this, working with millions of records, so I do know what I am talking about.

Ultimately, it is not helpful to try to encode a description of the poster into the image file name. Sure, it is tempting to name a photo image file "FD84.JPG," but this becomes more problematical for non-series posters like "Grope for Peace.jpg," and so forth. Get a few thousand of these named files in a directory and you have a mess. After all, that is what spreadsheets and databases were created for: linking one thing with another, an image with a poster description.

It is best to simply number your files, numerically, perhaps using some sort of alphanumeric code as a header. Be sure to make allowance for the total number of posters you wish to document. For example, I might use the two-letter combination "CP" as a header, followed by a numerical sequence. Thus: "CP00001," "CP00002," and on to "CP99999." Notice that I do not name the file "CP1," "CP2," and so on, since these names will not sort or appear properly in a directory. You need the extra zeros, to make them sort properly. That is how files can be named.

At this point, we have shot some images, named them, and archived them to disk. You might think our job is over. Far from it. The time consuming part is just beginning.

Post-Processing Data: Compression

I do my entire post-session image processing with Photoshop, since it is (for me) the most powerful tool I have been able to find. I know there are other similar tools, which also do a fine job.

At this point, I have a directory of very large image files. Next, I process the files, converting each very large file to something more manageable for day-to-day examination. I reduce each file from its native (NEF 8 MB) format to about a one megabyte JPG file.

Here is not the place for an extensive discussion of compression formats, but let's do

say a few words to whet your appetite (or send you running). The problem is that these huge images (40 megabyte TIFF files, etc.) are VERY difficult for the computer to handle, with any speed. They are slow to load, slow to modify, and slow to save. I am working on a dual-processor workstation with a megabyte of RAM and it is still slow!

Therefore, I save the native original file and create a smaller, working file, as mentioned. With most forms of compression and all forms of extreme compression, there is some loss of information (read: quality) involved. And there are many forms of compression, .JPG, .GIF and so forth, each with their positive and negative qualities. There is always a tradeoff. The greater the compression ratio, the smaller the file (which is great), but also the poorer the quality of the compressed image (not so great), when it is later decompressed.

So like most things in life, there is a compromise that must be negotiated. JPG compression is a lossy compression that can have a compression ratio from 2 to 100. In other words, the JPG method can compress up to 100 times, which is a lot. For my purposes, I am using JPG files compressed to a ratio of about 6, which is not a lot of compression.

There are programs that allow you to control the amount of compression you want to use in your JPGs. There are even programs that let you compress one part of the image more than another, so that you could preserve the features in a person's face (for example), while not worrying about the ocean in the

background. We won't go into that now, but it is interesting.

Now I have a file that is about one megabyte in size, which my computer can play with and not be slowed down to the point that nothing gets done.

I. Cropping the Images by Michael Erlewine

Cropping

Next, I load each image into Photoshop and crop it. I separate it from the board on which it was photographed. Since I am only using these images for identification purposes, the cropping can be "pretty good." If I were helping one of you create a poster book for publication, we would have to take greater pains AND work with the giant images.
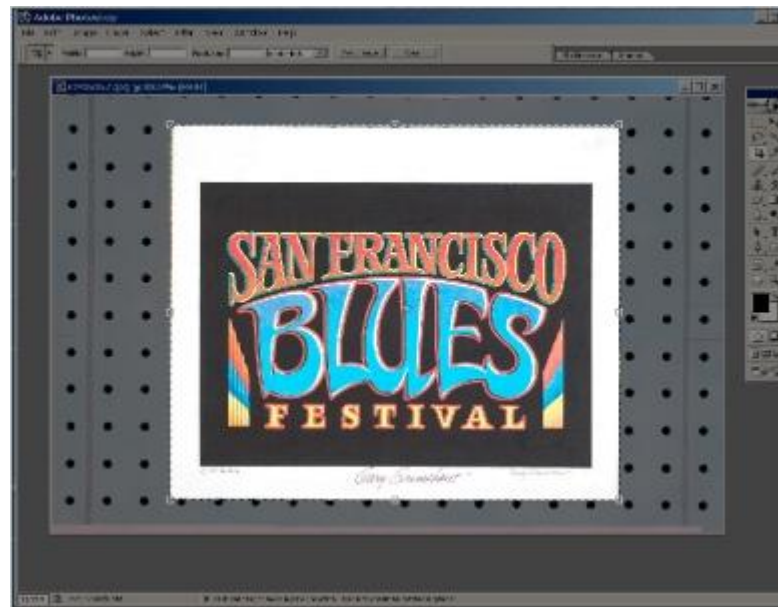
Cropping in Photoshop

Note: When we are talking about photo-documenting posters, I want to emphasize what

should be obvious that if you wish to use these poster images in a publication, you must negotiate that permission from the artist who created the image and perhaps with the venue that contracted the work. For example, the Family Dog images are under the copyright of Chet Helms. He would be the one to contact, if you wanted to publish a book with some of the FD series in it.

II. Adjusting Brightness Levels in Photoshop

After cropping, the next step is to check the image for any obvious problems, something that could be corrected by adjusting the color or brightness levels of the image. In almost all cases, some correction is required and Photoshop makes this pretty easy. Using the ADJUST LEVELS command, one can manipulate the small histogram so that the point that represents the blackest black is marked and the point the represents the whitest white is also marked. I won't go into all the details, but the general idea is to balance the image, so that it is not too dark (can't see it) or too light (washed out). If you are going to use these images on the web in very small size, then you may want to sharpen the image, as well.

Adjusting the levels in Photoshop

Using the Levels feature in Photoshop, take a look at the small histogram and note if there is blank space on the left and right of the graph. In this case, there is space on both sides. They you move the small triangles on either end and under the black horizontal line, from the right and left… in until they are under the start and end of the graph. In this illustration, I have moved each inward, so that the left-hand triangle is at the beginning of the dark part of the image, and the right-hand image is at the beginning of the light part of the image. Removing this dead space will give you good light levels for the image.
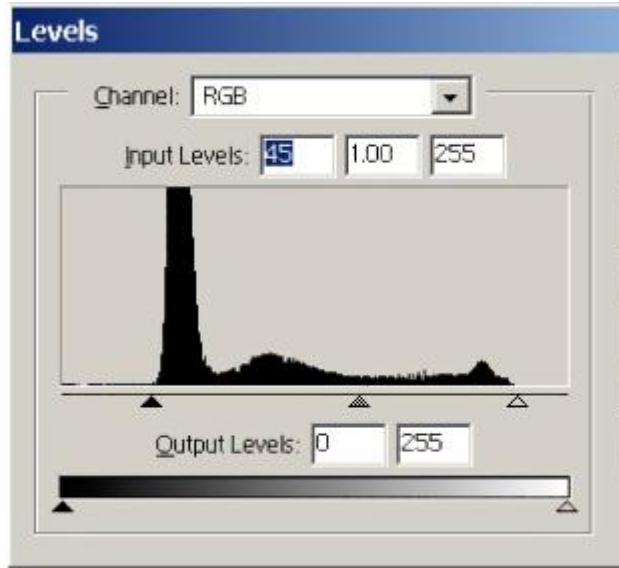
Levels graph or histogram

The resulting, balanced image is now cropped, light-leveled, and ready for use.

Finished image

III. Cataloging Images

Now we have an image that is ready for cataloging. Let's talk about that for a moment, although we really should have a series of articles on this, at some future point in time.

We need to be able to find a particular image, on demand. Since we have numbered them in an orderly way, all that remains to be done is to link the image number to whatever data on the poster we are interested in. This usually means the date of the concert, the bands who played on that date, the venue where the gig was played, and, last but not least, the artist who produced the poster.

This can be entered into database, a spreadsheet (like Excel), or a word processor, in order of potential usefulness. It is a habit easily acquired, but a bad one, to skimp on documenting the images. If you put the data into a word processor, then at least enter the data in some form of table or separate the different fields (date, venue, etc.) by tabs or some mark that can be accessed later. If you put the data into a spreadsheet, then you already have it in columns, which are easily converted to a database. The key thought here is to have identical pieces of information for each entry. If you have no info for a certain field, like the name of the artist, you would enter "" or something, just to keep the sets of data even. Otherwise, they can't easily be databased.

Keep a list or database

The point is simple. If you are successful and accumulate a run or series of images, sooner or later, you will wish they were in a true database. You can visually look through a hundred or so posters, but when that scales up, it becomes increasingly impossible to find anything. For example, I am working with a database of about 25,000+ images at this point. If this were in a word processor, forget it. Even in a spreadsheet (most of which have size limits anyway), it becomes very difficult to find things once several thousand items exist. For those interested, here is a list of fields for you to keep track of:

Date: 1966-06-03 (YYYY-MM-DD -- use this format, because you can sort on it)
Venue: Avalon Ballroom
Bands: Grass roots / Big Brother and the Holding Company / Stone Façade /
Artist: Victor Moscoso
Size: 13 x 20"
Notes: 2nd printing

The database I use for the 25,000 thumbnail images is over 1.5 gigabytes in size, but I can very easily pull up any combination of date, bands, venue, artists -- whatever. I can have in seconds what would take days of work to assemble from a word processor, if ever. I can sort on date, venue, city, artist, promoter, etc. I can easily examine sizes, conditions, editions, notes, and alternate images -- whatever.
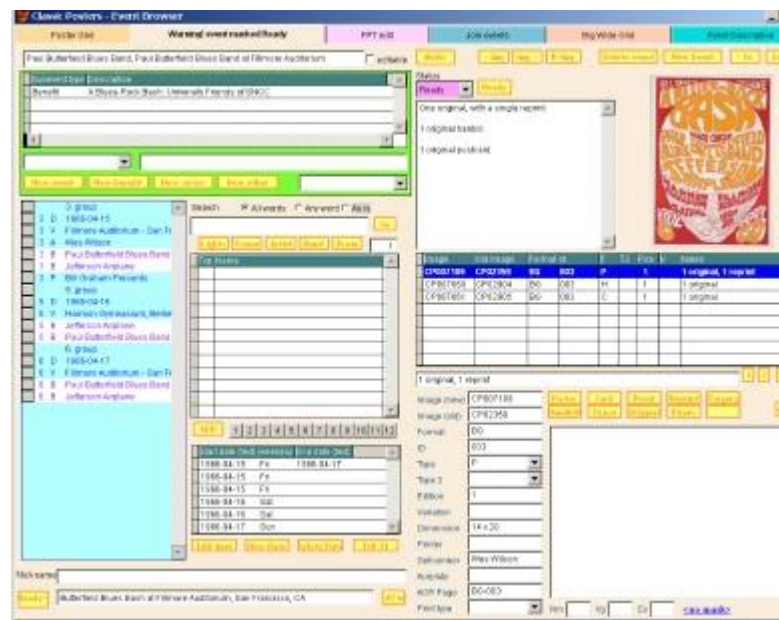
Classic Posters data application

My point is that you can make your data entry database friendly and future oriented or otherwise. Make it friendly, by keeping things in columns, numbering items as mentioned above, and the like. If there is interest, I would be glad to go into excruciating detail about how to set up poster data. Just let me know that this interests you.

The Advantages of Poster Documentation

by Michael Erlewine

In any discipline, there is a need for cataloging and documentation. Posters have been up to now, largely seen as memorabilia. There are no comprehensive attempts to document all known posters. Pioneers like Eric King, Jacaeber Kastor, and Fred Williams have attempted to order and document and PUBLISH various parts of this field. Each of these has produced lists of posters with some variation detail, in particular Kastor and Eric King. There are many of you out there with great knowledge of posters, but not the compulsion to put it into print and share it.

It is my opinion that we are in a transition phase at this point, where posters (at least those from the '60s) are beginning to be seen as something more than simply memorabilia. What we have here is art and fine enough art to warrant inclusion in any discussion of graphics in the 20th Century. Posters are collectable, affordable art that appreciates, plain and simple. And a bargain at that!

What remains to be done at this point is to market this concept and to bring awareness of posters as art to a greater circle of people. Documenting images and data, organizing that data, and publishing appropriate catalogs or guides are just the obvious first steps required to bring a more academic aspect to the field.

In many ways, this can be approached using a divide-and-conquer plan. Most of us have some area of knowledge, some part of the world of posters th make that catalog available for all to use. I have a track record of doing this with music and film. Those sites have proved to be useful for a very large number of people -- millions, in fact.

Photo documenting and cataloging posters is only the initial framework. We also need essays and articles on every aspect of poster collecting, repair, storage, pricing, selling and trading, and so on. This is in addition to biographies of all known posters artists.

So, we have a lot of work to do. It should be a lot of fun.
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