

Classic Posters - Eric King --
PosterArchivist Pioneer

by Michael Erlewine



Victor Moscoso and Eric King

Eric King's connection with psychedelic posters and the San Francisco scene goes back to the mid 1960s, when he relocated from the east coast in August of 1965 to become a graduate student in English literature at the University of California at Berkeley. Early in 1966, while walking down Telegraph Avenue, in Berkeley, a kid gave him a handbill for a Family Dog dance. He thinks it was probably, "The Love." "What the hell is this?," he thought. "It's neat!," and he stuffed it into a book. He soon found himself going to one of the early dances.



'The Love' Family Dog Handbill

What he experienced at the dance halls of San Francisco was a far cry from the New York concerts, shows by Alan Freed, and other rock events, that he had known. The light shows, the extended music, the whole experience was something new.

"I think I went first to the Fillmore. Well, this wall is jumping all over the place and there's all these people hopping up and down. And it was just incredible. I'd heard people tell me about them. It was hard to describe these things, even to somebody who'd been to rock and roll shows; and it's very hard to communicate now, to anybody, what these things were like, because they really were something like nothing else. It really was the greatest party since the fall of the Roman Empire."

"People would shake hands, dance a couple of times and leave and (chuckle) go screw; there was a lot of sex going on. This was an intensely sexualized environment. All these people had lived through the incredibly uptight fifties. It was like -- in the words of a cousin -- like letting a lion out of a cage, meaning the sexuality of a large segment of the

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population was literally released. Remember there was this doorway between the coming of the pill and the coming of aids. People did a lot of screwing. There wasn't a lot of conversation. You danced. You danced with people. It was like watching whooping cranes dance up and down and mate."

All of this made a real impact of King, who saw the posters as more than announcements. He knew he was looking at art, and began to collect them from early on. When he returned from a summer in Florida, in August of 1966, he was aware that he had missed a lot of posters and set about finding them by putting up signs on telephone poles along Telegraph avenue, asking who had some for sale. He ended up buying a whole stack of them.

Being highly organized and of a collector's (archival) mind, he found himself organizing what he had into piles, storing them by venue, and comparing notes with other collectors. He states that he was trading with other collectors no later than the spring of 1967. At this point, he kept all of his information in his head. He did not make notes. King also was on the mailing list for the major venues, to receive their postcards. Eric King, according to his own account, was soon interviewing many poster-related figures, artists, printers, and related people, with constant questions.

King credits two other collectors with systematically accumulating information, the artist Randy Tuten, and a fellow collector by the name of Greg Davidson.

"Davidson also accumulated a massive amount of information, and what happened was that I took my entire

collection over to this fellow's house. He had sold at the Marin Flea Market for years. People would come up to him and say "I've got twenty posters." and he'd buy them. He'd take anything that was different and put them in his own little pile. He tended to have the same mentality as Jacaeber, and I. He had a good eye and he would remember what he had seen. If he saw something new, he did not have to have the old one next to him."

According to King, he and Davidson would get together, sit down and go through their collections, comparing posters, one by one, variation by variation, all from their knowledge and memory. They went through everything.

Then, in the late 1970s, when poster reprints were abundant and some unscrupulous dealers began to make extra money selling reprints as originals.

"At this point the artists came after me. They said, listen, if this goes unchecked no one will collect this stuff, and we will lose out. It is not as though our art will die, but there will be much less interest in it, we will make less money and our reputations will be besmirched. You are the only person who has all this information and we gave it to you. We gave you hours and hours and hours; we put up with you and tolerated you, because we liked you, but you bothered the hell out of us. You owe us. Write a book. I said "Ah man, I don't want to." And they said, "Don't give us any shit. Our reputation for the future is going to rest on whether there is, or is not." They all had the foresight at this point to recognize that there had to be a guide. This was in 1977."

"I knew people knew that I was working on this thing. What happened was I said

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to everybody -- and I mean there's like two hundred people -- "I'm not going to lose money on this. You send me a check for twenty dollars. I will not cash the check until the book is done. And it'll take me six months." Over the period of about a month, I got a lot of support. People said: 'Yeah, we really want this.'

"I sat down at that point and typed it. It took me six months. I went to a photocopy place and printed it up, then cashed all the checks and mailed all the books. There are probably some people, who still have it but I don't. What I have is the original manuscript."

In 1978, Eric King finished the first edition of his book, a slim 100-paged document, with no illustrations. He had a whole group of people who had put money down for a copy.

'The Collector's Guide to Psychedelic Rock Concert Posters, Postcards, and Handbills 1965-1973, Volume 1' is now in its 5th edition. Copies can be had by emailing Eric King. See: Collector's Guide to Psychedelic Rock Concert Posters (BOOK)

The guide is the only comprehensive and detailed analysis of major venues like the Family Dog, the Bill Graham venues, the Neon Rose, and the Grande Ballroom. It sets the standard for all works of this type to come after. Every serious collector of this material should have a copy, sitting right next to the "Art of Rock," another indispensable book.

Today, King continues to pursue information on any of the venues he covers in his guide. When asked where volume II is, he laughs, and says that is mostly a joke. "Volume II will be done by someone else." He has enough on his plate for now.

For those of you new to collecting, it is important to understand the value to the poster community of the guide that Eric King has produced. Previous to King's work, there was no attempt to define how original posters could be identified from reprints, forgeries, pirates, and so on. None with any real details.

The artists were right to ask King to do this, because without such a document, the value of these posters, and their value as investments to all of us could be in doubt. In order to build an investment in collectable concert-music posters, one must know without a doubt what is the real thing and what is a reprint. Eric King has provided that information, and his book can be found on the shelves of every serious collector of this material that I have ever met. In these matters, it is the bible for the industry.

This is not to say that other expert collectors do not have this same information or their version of it. They do, in fact. Experts like Jacaeber Kastor, Dennis King, and Phil Cushway, among others, have extensive knowledge and collections of this material. The main difference is they have not taken the time to put it down and make it available to the rest of us.

So we here at Classic Posters have made a special place for Eric King in our "Poster Expert Hall of Fame." His guide put a stop to much of the confusion about originals and reprints, and shored up the entire posters-as-collectibles arena at a time when it was very much needed. Eric King continues to keep a vigilant watch on our growing community's resources.

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