

# West Wilson Concert Poster Artist



with Michael Erlewine

Wes Wilson

Short Bio

Notes

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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## A Brief Biography of Wes Wilson

by Michael Erlewine, Founder of the All-Music Guide



Wes Wilson, early photo

Wes Wilson, who is generally acknowledged as the father of the '60s rock-concert-poster, was born Robert Wesley Wilson on July 15, 1937 in Sacramento, California. Wilson grew up without the special interest in art that is typical of most of his contemporary poster artists. Instead he was more interested in nature and the outdoors, studying forestry and horticulture at a small junior college in Auburn, California. He attended San Francisco State, but dropped out in 1963, where his major, at that time, had become philosophy.

Wilson's first poster was self published. Done in 1965, it has been nicknamed the "Are We Next?" poster. It

notoriously features a swastika within an American flag motif, a protest by Wilson to the ever-increasing U.S. involvement in the Viet Name War. It is a clear example of Wilson's politics, and his willingness to speak out and be counted continues to this very day.

Wilson's introduction to the Bay Area scene is an example of serendipity at its finest. The time was late 1965 and early 1966, and the whole San Francisco alternative culture scene was just emerging. We then bring together Wes Wilson, who had a natural talent for art and an interest in printing, with Bob Carr, who had formed, in his basement, the small firm, Contact Printing. Carr was in touch with the whole San Francisco beat poetry and jazz scene, which was now in the process of transforming itself. Wilson, who had become Carr's assistant and partner, was doing the basic layout design for most of the work. The press also did handbills for the San Francisco Mime Troup fundraising benefits, the so-called 'Appeal' parties, as well as for the Merry Prankster Acid Tests. The Mime Troupe and the Acid tests were linked to the emerging dance hall scene through this series of benefit concerts, so it is no surprise that the new dance venues like the Avalon and Fillmore soon found their way to Contact Printing.

Wilson designed the handbill for the first TRIPS festival, now considered one of the seed events marking the advent of the emerging San Francisco scene. He also attended this event and was deeply moved by what he saw and experienced.

Before long, Wilson was doing the posters for promoter Chet Helms -- his shows at the Open Theater. It was Wilson who designed the original logo

for the Family Dog. Helms went on to use him as the primary artist for Family Dog at the Avalon Ballroom. Soon he was doing that, plus posters for Bill Graham and the Fillmore Auditorium. After several months, Wilson stopped producing for the Family Dog venue and concentrated almost exclusively on posters for Bill Graham and the Fillmore events. He cites that with Chet Helms and the Avalon Ballroom, he was often given a theme around which he was asked to improvise, while with Bill Graham and the Fillmore, he was given complete freedom to design whatever he wanted. Wilson enjoyed the added artistic freedom.



The Sound, classic Wilson style.

Wilson is also reported to have been inspired by Alphonse Mucha, Van Gogh, Gustav Klimt, and Egon Schiele. Somewhere around this time, a friend showed him a copy of a 1908 poster done by the Viennese Secessionist artist, Alfred Roller. It contained an alphabet and lettering style quite similar to what Wilson had been doing and marked a direction toward which he aspired. It was not long before Wilson absorbed the Roller style, altering it to his own needs. What followed was an explosion of lettering creativity that changed the poster scene permanently.

Wes Wilson single-handedly pioneered what is now known as the psychedelic poster. His style of filling all available space with lettering, of creating fluid forms made from letters, and using flowing letters to create shapes became the standard that most psychedelic artists followed. It helped put the 'psychedelic' in the art. The first clear example of this, and a key piece in Wilson's history, was the poster BG-18, done for a show with the Association at the Fillmore Auditorium. Set in a background of green is a swirling flame-form of red letters. With this poster came a new concept in the art of that time, perhaps the first true 'psychedelic poster'.

Then, in late 1966, Wilson created a poster for the Winterland venue, that has been nicknamed, "The Sound." It combines two aspects of Wilson's style that are unmistakable: his ability to fill all available space with vibrant, flowing letters (mentioned above) and his admiration and respect for the feminine form. In fact, this is one of a handful of posters from that era that are considered representative of the entire period,



another being the Soundproof Production's poster by Rick Griffin, nicknamed the "Aoxomoxoa."

In this writer's opinion, Wilson's treatment of women and the feminine form is one of his most lasting contributions to the poster art of the sixties. Not deliberately erotic, his nudes never skirt pornography. Instead, his admiration and appreciation for the feminine form and all that it represents, is clear. Wilson's nudes are definitive of the period.

In summary, it is safe to say that the psychedelic poster, as we have come to know it, was defined by Wes Wilson, sometime in the Summer of 1966. Wilson pretty much reigned supreme among the poster artists at that time.

Wes Wilson passed away on January 24, 2020.

But by mid 1967, there were any number of good artists, many of whom had cut their teeth on Wilson's lettering and style. A disagreement with Bill Graham about what had been agreed to, as far as payment, led to Wilson resigning his tenure as the primary Fillmore poster artist. Fairness to him in these matters was a matter of principle.

Wilson did his last poster for Bill Graham in May of 1967, although he continued to produce posters for a number of other venues, including several more for the Avalon Ballroom. In 1968, Wilson was surprised to learn that he was to receive a \$5000 award by the National Endowment for the Arts for "his contributions to American Art." In fact Wilson, who was considered a leader, if not the 'key' artist, of the psychedelic poster scene was also profiled in such major

magazines as Life, Time, and Variety magazines. Wilson also created a new technique in enameling glass as art and developed a watercolor style, which was well received at his one-man show in San Francisco in 1973.

Then in 1976, Wilson relocated his family to a cattle farm in the Missouri Ozarks. With the publication of the, now classic poster book, "The Art of Rock," Wilson was invited, in 1989, to exhibit his classic poster work at the Springfield Art Museum. The success of the resulting show, "Looking Back: Rock Posters of the 1960s by Wes Wilson," rekindled Wilson's interest in the poster scene and he went on to create and publish "Off the Wall," an in-depth journal on poster art and contemporary ideas. The nine issues of this, now out-of-print, publication are eagerly sought after by poster enthusiasts. Wilson was also the executive producer of three Rock Art Expos -- large poster conventions on the West Coast. Over the years Wilson has also been featured in a number of gallery exhibits, both his classic and his contemporary works.

Today, Wes Wilson creates paintings, but still occasionally does new posters or new art of interest. He is in good health and has six children and five grandchildren -- so far. He and his wife of 35 years, Eva, who is now a doctor of psychology, are still living on their farm in southwest Missouri.