

Classic Posters - A Brief History of Music-Concert Posters

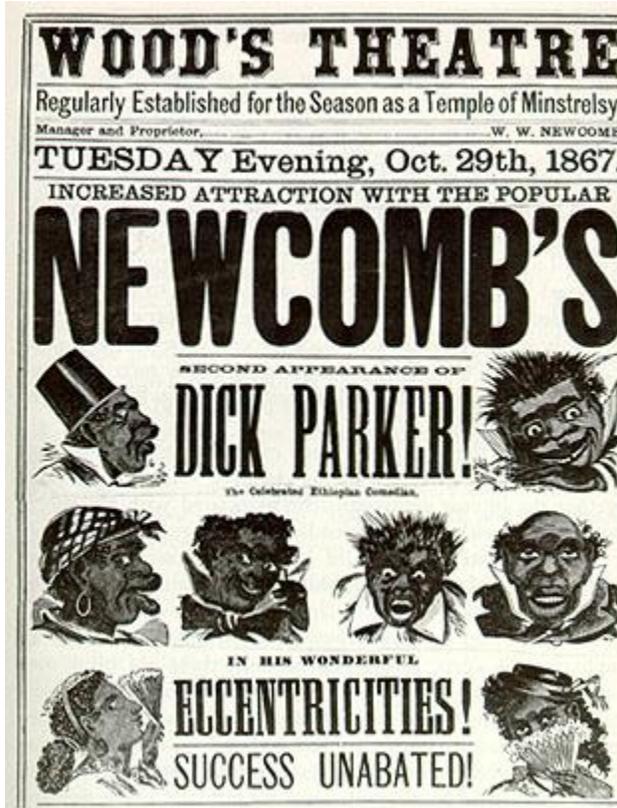
Classic Posters - A Brief History of Music-Concert Posters

by Michael Erlewine

First, a quick apology: What follows is just a quick-glance at the history and types of the concert-music poster, for those of you who don't have the time to seek out a real book on the subject, sit down with it, and give this subject the attention that it deserves. This sketch may help you recognize some of the main formats and styles of poster you will encounter.

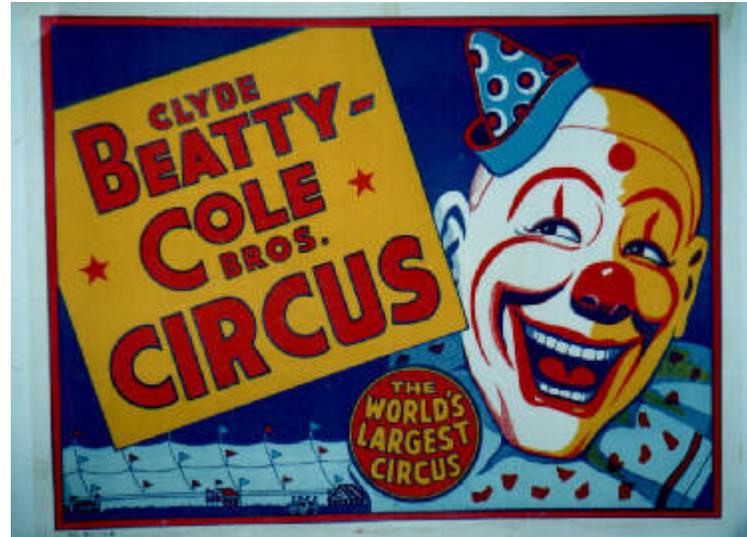
Early American Posters

The modern poster, as we know it, has its roots in the simple posters and flyers used to advertise circuses, vaudeville acts, local carnivals, etc., reaching all the way back to 1840's and the advent of the minstrel show.



Early Minstrel Show Poster

Perhaps the best known of all, the ubiquitous circus poster remains virtually unchanged to the present day, and can be found each year in virtually every town of any size in America. They have a beauty all their own and should evoke some nostalgia. After all, we grew up with them, all of us.

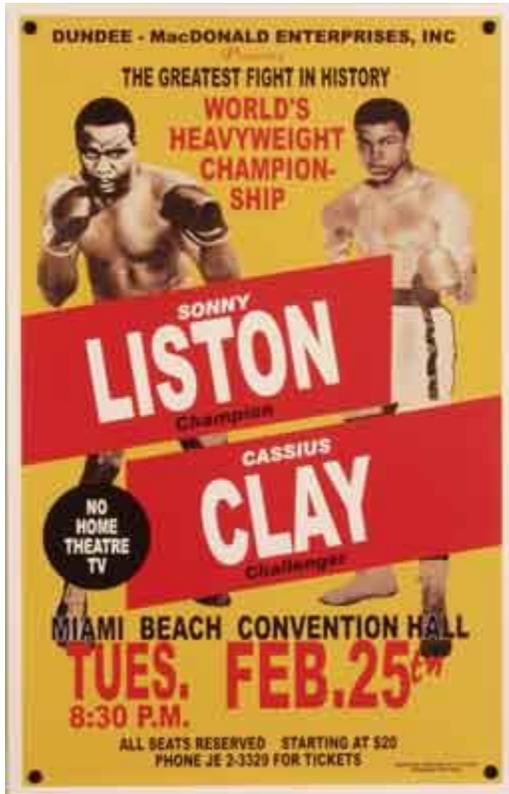


Typical Circus Poster

Boxing-style Posters

In the 1950's, the rock poster grew out of the generic block-lettering poster, what is often called the "Boxing Style" or sports posters. These were simple posters with large block lettering, often grouped around a photograph of the performer or with no photo at all, usually printed on cardboard. It was nothing more than an announcement of the event, the date, and the place - who, when, and where.

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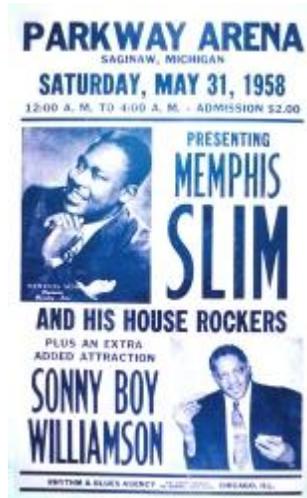
Boxing-style Boxing Poster



Typical Music Boxing-style Poster

For Black or 'race' music and performers, there was no such thing as radio play on the White stations. Traveling Black performers depended almost exclusively on posters and handbills to announce music events.

The Black sections of town would be peppered with posters, at all times.



One-Color Boxing-style Poster

When the budget would afford it, a second color (and pass through the press) was added to highlight key information on the poster, like the performer, the date, and the venue.

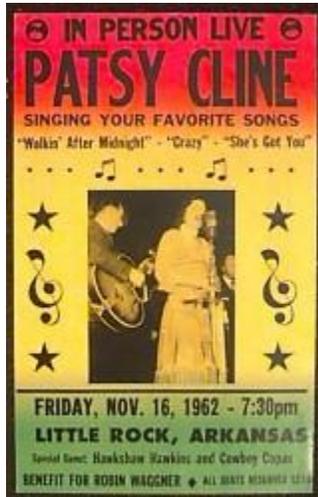


2-color Boxing-style Poster

Since every additional color mean an additional pass through the letterpress, and thus more expense, printers often used a one-pass printing technique called "split-fountain" to achieve more than one color in a single pass of the press. The would put different colors of

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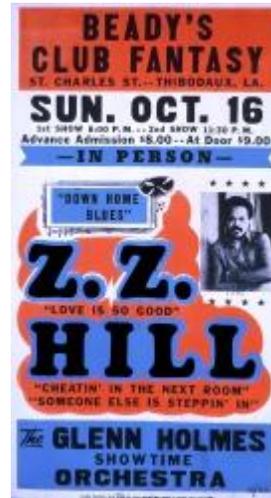
ink on the same plate, mix them together in the center and let them sort themselves out during the run, producing a rainbow-type effect.



Boxing-style Poster using the Split-fountain process

One thing missing from the early boxing-style poster was "Art." And while they have a beauty all their own, part of that beauty is the absence of any attempt to stylize them or introduce flowing design, lines, and form. They were blocks of type, maybe a photo, and at the most probably two colors.

The Globe Printing Company on the East Coast introduced vivid colors to boxing-style style posters in the 1950s and these brilliant colors came to be associated with Black performers, for the most part. Of course, modern poster artists use these colors all the time.



Vivid-color Poster from Globe Printing

R&B Style-Posters

In time, these boxing-style posters took on some color, and a few artistic flourishes, but still were pretty much straight-ahead information presentation. The majority of these posters were printed by only a handful of large printing companies around the country, including the Hatch Show Print Company in Nashville (covered country and southern cities), the Tribune Press in Indiana (Chicago and surrounding states), the Globe Printing Company in Baltimore (East-Coast posters and handbills), Tilghman Press in California (West-Coast coverage), and others.

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Multi-colored R&B Style Poster

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