

Classic Posters - Poster Sets - I Never Met a Set I Did Not Like

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by Michael Erlewine

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I never met a set I did not like, but that's just me. What is it about having a complete set of something that is so satisfying? I have no idea, but I am an addict, that's for sure, which is not to suggest I don't collect posters in ones - singly. I am an addict for those too! But, let's just talk about sets.

Before we get too far, let's be clear that aside from those sets numbered by the publisher, what constitutes a set is something more or less agreed upon by senior collectors, rather than a simple process of counting them up. There are very few numbered sets that are that simple. Even the so-called classic numbered sets of the Family Dog and Bill Graham Original Series are based on what collectors consider the numbered set, a particular set of posters, but not necessarily every piece of paper with 'Bill Graham Presents' on it.

The same is true for the Family Dog Numbered Series, which consists of some 147 events, complete with their particular posters, handbills, and cards. And this is just what is called the 'original series,' and does not include all the pre-Family Dog dance series, the Family Dog at the Great Highway, and the Family Dog series at Maritime Hall. These are not considered part of the main set, although there is no absolute reason why they could not be, since the same promoter, Chet Helms, holds all the copyrights. They are considered mini sets of their own.

The Bill Graham situation is even more complicated, as most of you reading this already know. Let's review it:

Bill Graham Original Series of posters, handbills, and postcards, some 289 events

Bill Graham Presents (over 300 posters)

Bill Graham New Fillmore (over 500 posters)

Bill Graham Special Events (about 31 posters)

Bill Graham Fillmore East (a dozen or so posters)

The above are all quite distinct series, but, in addition, there are any number of flyers and handbills and what-nots for special event shows. How about all the B&W flyers by artist Randy Tuten for Bill Graham? Where do they fit in?

Anyway, you get the idea. We have somewhat of a clear idea as to what the main sets are, but we are walking on kind of shaky ground here, should we decide to look down at all of the pieces of paper that may have fallen through the cracks. Collectors agree to ignore those.

Non-California Sets by Michael Erlewine

There are other posters that are collected as a set, such as the Kaleidoscope series of round posters from Los Angeles, but even this set has a couple of items that may or may not be considered necessary as part of that set, and they are square. And then there is the Grande Ballroom, that very much collected series from Detroit.

With the Grande Ballroom, we have a choice of collecting full posters, handbills, and cards or any one of them.

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A lot of people collect the cards, and the posters are also widely collected, but some of the posters are quite rare. With the handbills, which are very rare, there are some numbers with as few as perhaps a single known copy. The handbills have fewer adherents, but they are a very determined lot. And like all the venues mentioned above, there is the falloff factor to consider. It is kind of like walking out into a lake and reaching a drop off. Do you keep going and declare more and more as part of what you collect or stay with where you are, and call it a set?

Using the Grande Ballroom as an example, do we collect only the Russ Gibb events at the Grande Ballroom itself, or do we collect all the Russ Gibb events, even those held out of state and out-of-country? Do we collect some of the shows held there after Gibb's tenure, like the Grande Family shows, various John Sinclair-oriented fund-raisers, or just any event held there? Do we collect posters for events held at the Grande Ballroom (after all, it was in use for decades before Russ Gibb) before the Russ Gibb Grande shows? These are questions that only you, the collector, can answer.

However collectors of Grande Material more or less agree that the Russ Gibb material is what they will collect, with perhaps the three Grande Family cards thrown in for good measure, if you can find them.

Two Types of Sets by Michael Erlewine

To clarify: there are two types of sets generally collected, those numbered by the original publisher, and those numbered by collectors. Of all the sets numbered by the original publisher,

perhaps only the Neon Rose is locked-in-stone as a fixed set. There are 26 Neon Rose. Period. The artist, Victor Moscoso, numbered them.

When you get into the other numbered sets, there are 147 numbered Family Dog events and 289 numbered events in the Bill Graham Original series. With both of these venues, there are all kinds of variations, with respectful arguments or discussions about what is the first printing and what was printed after the event, for aftermarket sales.

What is the point of all this? It is that in all but a very few cases, the numbered sets are held together by the intent of the original publisher's numbering system (and these are sometimes miss-numbered) or by the glue of collectors' agreements as to what constitutes a set. However you look at it, it all works out and the system seems to be working.

The Value of Sets Compared to Selling Them Individually

There is some argument as to the value of sets. One would think that a complete set, with all the missing spots filled, would be worth more than selling the same set piecemeal. We have adherents on both sides. Some collectors state that a complete set is worth something extra, a premium to cover the expense and time to hunt down and collect all posters in that set, while others think that, because there are fewer buyers available for the really large and expensive sets, that it is better to break up the set and sell it off that way. Those who would break up sets and sell them figure that there are those few buyers for the really expensive pieces, who (ironically enough) will buy them to complete their own sets. The rest (smaller pieces) can be sold off

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elsewhere, with the net result being, so they say, more total dollars. The sell-as-a-set folks feel that, while there may be fewer buyers able to afford a complete set, you only need to find that one buyer who appreciates the work involved in building a set and the beauty of having the entire set on hand. And they are out there. Having a complete set is very satisfying and something to behold. It is also a good investment, in most cases. These things appreciate.

Downside of Set Collecting

However, one of the downsides of collecting a set is you end up buying a certain amount of really ugly posters, or posters of no real consequence (as to the bands at the gig, or the artwork itself), posters you would never collect otherwise. You have to fill those empty spots to complete a set.

And rarity of a numbered set is totally dependent on the weakest link in the set: whichever poster happens to be the rarest - fewer copies exist. And these most-rare posters can be rare because everyone like them and took them home to keep (and won't sell them), or because they were ugly and no one took them home and they were left as trash in the street. An even more fickle reason for a poster to be rare, and this is probably the most common one, is that something happened to that poster on the way to the event, like a printing mishap, an under-run, or whatever. In one case (The Who/Toronto card in the Grande Ballroom series), that card is rare because custom officials refused to allow it to cross the border into Canada from the U.S. because they were protecting Canadian printers and advertisers. There are all kinds of reasons why a poster can be rare.

Whatever the reason, that one weak link in the set, that "most rare" poster limits the total amount of sets that can exist. Period. Of course, some collectors, anxious to complete their sets, have tried to declare this poster or that poster as not needed for a complete set, but these mostly-bogus reasons have not held up and reason has prevailed. Any poster, handbill, or card that was printed BEFORE an event to advertise that event is to be considered part of the full set. And the fact of the matter is that all these collectors who try to disqualify a really difficult poster to find, fight like mad to add that same poster to their collection. End of story.

Image Sets

Another very popular practice is to collect an 'image set'. An image set is a complete set or run of the posters, but not with original printings. Instead, any printing (reprint) is considered fair game to build an image set, whether it be a poster, handbill, or card. The key is to have all the images. An image set usually contains both originals and reprints as part of a set. Image sets can bring real bucks too.

There are probably as few as 10 near-complete sets of the original Grande posters known. No less an expert than archivist Eric King says there may be as few as 30 complete sets of originals for the Family Dog and Bill Graham series of posters. In the Family Dog series, the numbers 1, 2, and 7 are very rare. In the Bill Graham Originals, that first poster with the Peter Bailey "East Wind Printers" on it is very rare, as is the 2nd, the original Batman poster.

Poster collectors will continue to argue the merits or lack thereof of collecting

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sets. For my part, I say: there is something very nice about a set.

Some Major Sets

So, some posters that are collected in sets or runs include:

Bill Graham Original Posters, Handbills, and Cards (289 main events), Bill Graham Original Series

Bill Graham Fillmore East Posters, Set: Fillmore East Posters

Bill Graham Presents (larger non-Fillmore events, 200+ items), Set: Bill Graham Presents BGP

Bill Graham New Fillmore Events (560+ events), See: Bill Graham New Fillmores BGF

Bill Graham Special Events (29+ events), Set: Bill Graham Special Events

Family Dog Pre-series Events (9 or so events), Set: Pre-family Dog

Family Dog Original Posters, Handbills, and Cards (147 main events), Set: Family Dog Series

Family Dog at Denver (13 events), Set: Family Dog Denver

Family Dog at the Great Highway (perhaps 80 pieces), Family Dog Great Highway

Family Dog at Maritime Hall (20 or so pieces), Family Dog at Maritime Hall

Retinal Circus Cards (32 cards), Set: Retinal Circus Cards

Kaleidoscope Venue (20 pieces), Set: Kaleidoscope L.A.

Neon Rose (26 posters), Set: Neon Rose

Mountain Aire Festival (20 or so piece), Set: Mountain Aire

Charlatans Triptych in the Family Dog See, Set: Charlatans Triptych

Alton Kelley's Dinosaurs (11 or so pieces), Set: Dinosaurs

Grande Ballroom Posters, Handbills, and Cards, Set: Grande Ballroom Cards

Collectors also collect the complete numbered series for artists like:

Mark Arminski

Derek Hess

What Items Comprise the Major Sets

Below, we will present the required elements in most of the major sets that are collected. If you are serious about collecting the Bill Graham Series, the Family Dog Series, the Neon Rose Series, and the Grande Ballroom series, you will need to invest in what is the definitive book that provides the details to discriminate between originals, reprints, pirates, and bootlegs of these important series. This is the book by poster archivist Eric King. You can get details here: See: Collector's Guide to Psychedelic Rock Concert Posters (BOOK)

The Family Dog Original Series Set: Defined

Since I am asked what constitutes a complete set of Family Dog, I will include it here, thanks in part to Jacaeber Kastor, Phil Cushway, and most of all to Eric King for clarifying this material. As mentioned above, if you do not have Erik Kings indispensable book on this venue, then you have no way to discriminate properly all the variations and difference between originals and reprints.

Numbers 1 through and including 147

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Denver Family Dog at Family Dog at Denver at 1601 West Evans Street

It is considered necessary to have BOTH color variations of FD-121

Within the 1 to 147 set are three of the Denver posters, and they are FD-79 (FDD-01), FD-82 (FDD-03), and FD-84 (FDD-04)

The 13 Denver Posters that are not in the set:

That leaves numbers: 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 18. There is no FDD-17, and while FDD-16 exists in plate form, it was never printed. It is rumored that this poster will be printed in a special edition.

Family Dog Handbills

There are 41 handbills, running from FD-001 to FD-041. According to Eric King, a set is complete with one image, and variations are not considered necessary. Also Eric King states that the alternate (and rejected design) for FD-02 is NOT considered necessary, as it was never distributed, and distribution to advertise an event is considered a requirement for inclusion.

Family Dog Postcards

The postcards start at Family Dog FD-042 and continue to FD-147, and also include all of the Denver (FDD) events, with one exception, that there is no FDD-09 card.

After FD-147

Eric King's book makes it clear that, although many items exist after FD-147, there is no way of defining a complete set beyond that number. There are many problems. Although Chet Helms went on to hold events at "Playland," which were called "Family Dog at the

Great Highway," some of the events went organized by Helms, and others were events where he loaned the venue for a particular night to another promoter. Some have the Family Dog logo, some do not. There is a lot of disagreement here and I suggest (once again) that those interested order King's book for complete details.

There are also problems with the Family Dog at Denver, where other promoters held concerts and even used Chet Helm's logo, but without his knowledge or consent.

Bill Graham Original Series Set: Defined

Many of you have asked why we have no images for the Bill Graham series of posters, at least for the earlier dates, so some explanation is in order. It is not because we have not researched this series. We have, of course.

The Bill Graham archives, including the copyrights to all the Bill Graham posters up to the year 2001 were purchased from the Bill Graham organization, which itself is now owned by Clear Channel. The new owner of these copyrights has notified us that these images are his copyrights and that we are not to show any of these images on our site, even in the thumbnail size we use. We respect his right to do so, but feel sorry that this is the case, because of the part these posters have played in the lives of many of us who grew up in the sixties. We hope that they will reconsider this decision.

Thanks for the following, in part to Jacaeber Kastor, Phil Cushway, and most of all to Eric King for clarifying this. If you do not have Erik Kings indispensable book on this venue, then you have no way to discriminate

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properly all the variations and difference between originals and reprints.

Here is what a set consists of:

Posters

The Bill Graham Original Series set begins with "0," rather than "1," which is simply out of order, and runs to number 289.

There is no BG-234

A number of these items have alternates, so you also must have: BG-140-A, BG-215-A, and BG-232-A.

Also, with BG-276, it is acceptable to have either version 'A' or 'B' to complete a set.

Bill Graham Card Set

To hold a complete set of Bill Graham cards, it is necessary to have BG-274-A, which was only issued in a card format.

There are NO CARDS for BG-000, BG-004, BG-014, BG-017, BG-019, and BG-021.

A complete BG card set also requires that you have the three-color variants for cards printed with the split-fountain technique, and these are:

BG-053, BG-056, BG-062, BG-235, BG-236, BG-273, and BG-274. Also needed is the polychrome reprint of BG-062.

Here is an article by poster expert Jacaeber Kastor on the BG set and sets in general. !A CP000040 001 "Lines in Tomorrow's Sand by Jacaeber Kastor"

The Bill Graham New Fillmore (BGF) : Defined

The original Bill Graham series ended in early July of 1971, with two additional concerts, one in June of 1972 and another in June of 1973. That was the end of the original scene at the Fillmore

West. In March of 1988, the Fillmore West was reopened and the series began once more. It is still going strong today and boasts over 500 posters. Now, that's a set! Here is what constitutes a set for BGP:

Starts with number 1 and runs sequentially through

BGF-112 and BGF-112-A, An event for the B-52's on 1989-07-28

BGF-118-A Bodeans on 1989-10-04

BGF-118-B George Clinton on 1989-10-20

BGF-120 NO SUCH POSTER EXISTS

BGF-277 Los Van Van 1997-06-21

BGF-277-A Alice 97.3 1997-06-24

BGF-299 NO SUCH POSTER EXISTS

BGF-394-A Stroke-9 2000-01-20

BGF-395-A Pretenders, 2000-02-14

BGF-462-A Badly Drawn Boy, 2001-05-19

BGF-479-A, Ween, 2001-08-28

BGF-479-B, Megadeth, 2001-09-14

BGF-530 Breeders, 2002-07-11

BGF-520 Vida Blue, 2002-07-11

... The list goes on

The Bill Graham Presents BGP:

The Bill Graham Presents series started in 1985 and is still running today. It boasts over 300 posters. It differs from the BGF series (which is held at the Fillmore West) in that all of these events are held anywhere but at the Fillmore venue. Usually, these are large-scale events, requiring a stadium or coliseum, for groups like the Rolling Stones and so forth. And, unlike the New Fillmore Series, which hold events every week,

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the Bill Graham Presents BGP series is periodic, as needed, and correspondingly there are fewer of them. Some of these posters are oversize, very rare, and thus hard to find, for example:

BGP-032-A Who, 1987-08-29

BGP-032-B, Royal Danish Ballet, 1989-06-07

BGP-039, New Kids on the Block, 1991-02-10

BGP-039-A, Paul Simon, 1990-02-10

BGP-128, Steve Miller, 1995-08-24

BGP-128-A, Horde Festival, 1995-09-03

BGSE: Bill Graham Special Events:

The Bill Graham Special Events pieces are just that, shows put together by the Bill Graham folks for some special, often private, event or VIP gathering. There are about 29 of them at this point in time. Hard ones to find include:

BGSE-007, Eastern Acoustic Works, 1998-09-27

BGSE-007-A, KPMG, 1998-09-27

BGSE-016 Casey-Werner Distribution

BGSE-016-A Gore 2000, 2002-09-17

BGSE-024, Musicmania, 2000-04-29

BGSE-024-A, Goo Goo Dolls, 2000-04-29

BGSE-026, Who VIP Party, 2000-10-03

BGSE-026-A, MGD, 2000-10-26

The Fillmore East

I don't have a firm handle on the Fillmore East situation. I know there were about 65 events during the run at the Fillmore East, but I don't know how many had their separate posters, shared a poster, and so forth. The expert on the

Fillmore East is Jacaeber Kastor and I am looking to him for guidance in his area. I have never collected this venue.

Grande Ballroom Set

A standard set of Grande Cards is said to consist of the 81 postcards starting with the Southbound Freeway show on 2000-09-22 and ending with the Frost show on 1969-08-06. But there are a number of other items that could be collected, some of them very rare like the Terry Reid card (1969-01-10/12), which is a Russ Gibb event at the Grande Ballroom. This is NOT generally considered part of the series, because it was for a scheduled event that was cancelled. There were five printer's proofs made, and these were never distributed. There are perhaps two known copies.

There is also some argument about including what is called Grande Card #7, since it was not actually a Russ Gibb event, but rather a Trans-Love event. Trans-Love figures in a number of Grande/Gibb productions and was very much part of that whole scene and it should be included. Most collectors I know (myself included) certainly consider the #7 card part of the set and collect it assiduously.

There is also much discussion about the various shows that were held in places like, Cincinnati and St. Louis, Chicago, and Cleveland. As Eric King correctly points out in his definitive treatment of this venue: ""Since no one wants to include them (everyone wants the cards. They just do not want them required for a set to be complete.)"

I totally agree with Eric King. No one wants them required, but EVERY collector (save one) that I have met

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desperately wants to find them for their own collection.

The Grande posters and handbills are much more rare than most of the cards. We can pretty much say that we know what comprises a complete collection of Grande posters, and this would include both the St. Louis and Cincinnati Pop Festivals, both cards and posters.

With the handbills, it is much more difficult. There are only a few hardcore collectors of the handbills, and new items continue to be discovered, as recently as within the last few years, and most of them are very rare.