

Classic Posters Interview with Grant Mechinan of S.F. Rock

by Michael Erlewine

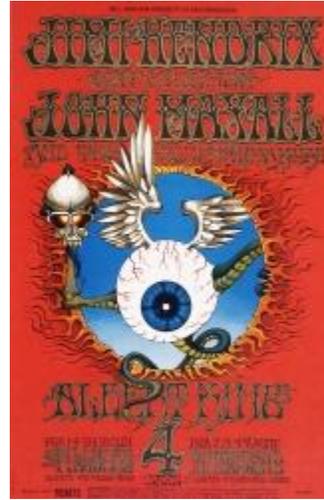
Michael Erlewine: What is your birthdate, with the year?

Grant Mechinan: June 2, 1959, in Mobile Alabama.

Michael Erlewine: How did you get into posters?

Grant Mechinan: I started out in a similar, but different industry of dealing comic books and comic book related material, in the 1970s. As a matter of fact, one of my great stories that I love to tell people is how I first met Rick Griffin, and he really introduced me to the rock and roll art work, because I only knew him from Zap Comix and the underground surf stuff. And he was slightly older than me. This is about 1977, at a big comix convention in San Diego, the biggest one in the world

This older fellow, who had gone to Woodstock and stuff hit me on the shoulder and said "See the guy with the long hair? That's Rick Griffin walking down the isle." And I zoomed over there, chased him down, and shook his hand. "You know, I'm a big fan of yours. What do you have that you could sell me, that you could autograph for me?" And he had a big black portfolio, and he pulled out what later turned out to be the second printing, which is sad for me, the Flying Eyeball poster that he did of the Jimi Hendrix poster, signed it, and gave it to me for \$15. You know that's over \$1000 nowadays for one of those signed by him.



Flying Eyeball by Rick Griffin

And that was really my introduction. I had never really seen any rock and roll poster stuff. Up until then, I was living in San Diego on the beach and...

Michael Erlewine: You hadn't seen the Flying Eyeball before?

Grant Mechinan: Had never seen it, and the artist who drew it handed it to me. It floored me. I still didn't see to much art work. I had that one piece for a long time, and then in the mid-eighties, I moved up here and I started seein' it everywhere. I'm going to go check out North Beach, and I drifted into the Poster Mart, the old shop over on Grant street that had stuff for sale. And at the time right when I first moved here, I started working security for Bill Graham, and so I was doing a couple hundred concerts a year, and they were printing posters at the Fillmore and at other venues as well. And so I started grabbin' those and started realizing this whole legacy that was around here. And I was working with a fellow up on Haight Street, selling comic books and ...

Michael Erlewine: Ah, just a side thought: What kind of comic books did

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you personally really love and collect the most?

Grant Mechinan: Honestly, probably my biggest collection of stuff was, or is like horror and science fiction from the 1950's. I liked the EC Comics a lot.

Michael Erlewine: Oh really. So you know all of those.

Grant Mechinan: A lot of the more obscure publishing companies disappeared really fast. I don't know, I was always drawn to that crazy stuff, the sci-fi and the horror, when I was a kid.

Anyway, the fellow that I was working with sold these rock and roll posters on his wall too, as well as mostly comics, but there was this rock and roll stuff and I just started falling in love with it. And then he started a partnership with Ed Walker.

Grant Mechinan: And we all opened up a store down in the cannery and the third partner was Rick Griffin, and he came in and hung his own art work in the gallery section of the store. And that was all well and good, until Rick died.

And Griffin left no will, and so the court or whatever came and stripped our walls down, roughly handling the art work, and just throwing it in the back of a car, the framed stuff, just stacking it on top of each other.

Grant Mechinan: And that partnership fell apart, and Ed asked me if I wanted to stick with him and just sell this stuff, and I said "yeah!" And we came and opened this store and we haven't looked back.

Michael Erlewine: I understand according to Ed that you know a lot about a lot stuff, but what is the stuff that you know most? What is the stuff you

love most in the whole poster business? What's your favorite stuff?

Grant Mechinan: Oooh... that's too hard to narrow down.

Michael Erlewine: Well, some of it then.

Grant Mechinan: I collect the Detroit area, Grande Ballroom type things are one of my biggest collections. I'm a big fan of the Velvet Underground. Another collection that I am chasing is the whole back end of the Art of Rock -- the punk section. I have almost a hundred of those images, original flyers that I've been collecting and posters.

Michael Erlewine: You mean like the Mabuhay Gardens?

Grant Mechinan: Exactly, exactly all of that and let's see, another thing that I collect is old sixties garage and psychedelic bands from around here such as the Count Five and the Seeds and the Chocolate Watch Band and several others of that ilk. And it goes on and on.

Michael Erlewine: And how do you see the poster business going? Are there more people becoming interested in it?

Grant Mechinan: We feel that there are more people coming into it, because our business keeps getting better. We have more people right now that are asking for rare items that we've already found for all our previous customers, and it's like here's a new fellow and he wants this \$3,000 item as soon as we can get it. You know, and there's a really strong market right now. Really strong, which is surprising because of the way most of the economy's happening right now, but if you've got a really good item, it doesn't matter. There's someone out there that wants it.

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Michael Erlewine: What about people that are new, that have just come in and, and they don't have \$3,000. They just want to start collecting posters. How do you handle those people? What do you recommend to someone who wants to get in the scene of collecting

Grant Mechinan: One of my favorite rules is collect what appeals to you, collect what you really like. So first things: Do you like certain artists? Do you like a certain band? And go from there, If you're on a tight budget, you can get reproductions of a lot of things, and even some of the reproductions might cost you \$200-\$300, still might be better than paying the \$2000-\$3,000 for the original. For high ticket items, we do lay away. We're perfectly happy to make an inaccessible piece accessible to someone who isn't a doctor, or isn't a lawyer, or an investment banker. Cause we have a lot of lawyers and investment bankers and doctors and such that have the money to drop on whatever they want.

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Grant Mechinan: And we have a lot of working class guys that grew up in this city, grew up in the bay area, and that just fell in love with it as a kid. And now they're doing their regular job, whatever that may be, but they have a family to support, and they have the mortgage to meet and all that.

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Grant Mechinan: And this is a luxury and that's something' that can't be forgotten about. You know, it's not bread and it's not milk

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Grant Mechinan: It's not somethin' you need to take home everyday, but, we'd like you to, you know. (laughs)

Michael Erlewine: What about posters as an investment.

Grant Mechinan: There was a long period up until say 1996, 1997 that the prices were kind of holdin' steady.

Then in 1996 -1997, the market really started pickin' up, and more and more people had to find things to do with their money, as well as getting back into some of this stuff that they enjoyed as a youth or what have you.

Michael Erlewine: I understand.

Grant Mechinan: But there's a lot of things. If it's a boring piece to begin, with it sittin' at that \$75 level, and that's as far as it's gonna' go for awhile. If it's a really ugly image, and there's no strong bands on it, or the artist you know.... if it doesn't have the three or four things that really make a poster...

Michael Erlewine: Which are what?

Grant Mechinan: Which is the band, the artist, the rarity, you know. If it doesn't have some of those items attached to it... There's thousands of pieces that languish you know in the \$150 or less range, and a lot of them are going to stay that way, because there's just not that much desire for them. But the things that are good, the Jimi Hendrix pieces, the Rolling Stones pieces, the Doors, all those key bands that are still perennial sellers. You go and you look in record shops and CD stores now, and those guys are sellin' more records than they did when they were in a band, you know? It's astounding, and a lot of those people are really fascinated by seeing the images of the actual concerts.

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Michael Erlewine: And another question for you: of the artists out there that made these posters, or the venues, however you want to look at it, what are the I don't want to say bargains... what are the under-appreciated artists/venues that are bargains now, in a sense. Do you know what I'm saying, that no one really likes, ones that you think are cool.

Grant Mechinan: There's some decent images in the Matrix club, that's still relatively accessible. There's Pepperland across town, most of the major clubs are well defined, and a lot of people are after it now. Let's see, here, artist-wise you can still get a lot of Lee Conklin art.

For a fair amount, a lot of his posters are still pretty reasonable which I find astounding, because I think he's one of the strongest, in a pure psychedelic sense, because a lot of the artists back then and I love Stanley Mouse and I love Alton Kelley and I love David Singer and those guys. But a lot of that work is collage work, which has it's own merit. But like Lee Conklin or Rick Griffin, the more the artwork gelled in their brain and poured right out in a pen out of their arm, you know, and that I have a higher appreciation for...

Lee Conklin I think is just amazing for the amount of detailed pen and ink work that he did, where as the next person, looks at is a photograph slapped on with some lettering by someone else.

So, I think Lee Conklin is under appreciated.

Michael Erlewine: Any others you can think of?

Grant Mechinan: Well, a mutual love that you and I have is Gary Grimshaw. I

think is he has one of the strongest bodies of work that there is, of any of these artist and to quote I believe Eric King, if he'd lived on the west coast, he would have been part of the Joint Show. He would have been major artist, kickin' everybody's butt out here, you know. He really would have because he has a real strong sense of color.

Michael Erlewine: Yeah. I agree.

Grant Mechinan: He has a really good fine line, and he's a really nice person too.

Michael Erlewine: Just my comments. No one has done more work than Grimshaw, no one has done more physical quantity of work.

Grant Mechinan: There's one guy that come close.

Michael Erlewine: Who?

Grant Mechinan: Randy Tuten. Randy Tuten started in '68 and is still...Every single decade, he has worked for Bill Graham Presents, he's on his firth decade now of doing posters, and he's probably done a couple of thousand, whereas Gary's probably done 3000 or 4,000, or somethin', you know?

Michael Erlewine: I interviewed Randy Tuten the other day and Tuten is one of the few artists that is consistently turning out quality work.

We could agree on the numbers, probably, but Grimshaw, because it didn't pay well in the mid-west, he had to do an enormous amount of stuff for the alternative community, just for every kind of little tiny bar. I just photographed a lot of it. it's just an enormous amount of work.

Grant Mechinan: Five jobs for every two that the guys out here had done.

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Michael Erlewine: These guys got rewards much faster out here. They were paid better, although still not well. It was a cool scene in the Bay Area.

Grant Mechinan: More clubs.

Michael Erlewine: Yeah, I don't think that Gary Grimshaw got that kind of attention. Grimshaw was part of a cause. I was there. He was part of the alternative community, like he was helping the community, helping radio people, and all that stuff, doing every little benefit, every little thing there was a little flyer that needed to be done. You've probably seen a lot of them but I've seen and there's just tons of them, more than I would have ever imagined.

Michael Erlewine: Anyway, we share that love for Grimshaw.

Grant Mechinan: Oh yeah, and I wish he was still really working.

Michael Erlewine: He's not doing a lot?

Grant Mechinan: He's not doing a lot right now.

Grant Mechinan: One of our original things that we started out when we opened the store is that Ed Walker and I collect original things. We don't really like collecting reproductions and reprints. And so, we sell what we collect. And that's one thing that's been a strong selling point for us in that we don't like to collect reprints, so we don't really want to sell reprints.

And that's become a really strong tie for a lot of our customers, because they know when they contact us they're going to get the real deal.

Michael Erlewine: And that's the stuff that appreciates.

Grant Mechinan: yes, and that's the stuff that's always going to appreciate more.

We have so many return customers, and so many people that refuse to buy from anyone else. There was a fellow that came in yesterday from Chicago, that two month ago I sold a BG-1 to for over \$6,000. He bought it sight unseen from me, just letting me describe it to him over the phone. And he was a doctor and he was in town for some huge meeting thing. And he spent over \$4,000 with us yesterday.

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Grant Mechinan: It's so simple, to just treat people like human beings, treat them the way that you feel that you should be treated, you know? And they come back in droves. It's shocking. We just treat them like a human being. That's all we try to do.

We're a little off the beaten' track. We don't we don't have any national advertising or anything. It's mostly been word of mouth and people stumbling on us, when we put up our web site. You know searching up something and your web site came up and so I called your 800 number and now they're hooked with us.

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