Rock poster artists of the '60s like Victor Moscoso are being revalued both financially and artistically, changing the kaleidoscope lens of history and passing the joint to today's rock'n'roll Rembrandts.

by Shana Ting Lipton

In 1971, the Louvre Museum in Paris held an exhibit for which it acquired a collection of psychedelic rock posters from the 1960s, recounts Victor Moscoso, one of the pioneering Northern California rock poster artists. In order to fund the show, the institution (arguably one of the most respected museums in the world) apparently traded in three of its priceless works by dwarfish and decadent 19th century French painter and lithographer Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.

This may have seemed unthinkable at the time—considering many of the early rock posters were obtained free of charge by zealous hippies who tore them off record shop and music venue walls. But, 35 years later, on the heels of *Rolling Stone* magazine proclaiming "Rock Memorabilia Market Booms," it seems *more* incredible that few foresaw the '60s posters' increasing artistic, pop cultural and monetary value earlier. "The Beatles '66 at Shea Stadium went at auction for $133,000," says Grant Feichtmeir, a poster appraiser for the online rock memorabilia website Wolfgang's Vault.

Today, many of the elaborately designed posters from the era are piquing the attention of collectors, rock fans and art aficionados alike. In March, the book *Sex, Rock and Optical Illusions* (Fantagraphics Books) will be released. It is the first overview of Moscoso's poster art and subsequent comic book illustrations—over three decades in the making. Once wallpaper for a rock'n'roll era, his work and that of peers like Wes Wilson, Stanley Mouse, Alton Kelley and the late Rick Griffin—known to many poster collectors as "the Five"—spawned the so-called second wave of poster artists in the late '80s. Today, rock poster art is its own, new popular culture—rock'n'roll's bride in an open marriage.

FIRST WAVES

The '60s era, with its climate of decadence and romance, was a cozy womb for these visual expressions of rock life. If bands like the Rolling Stones and the Doors created the soundtrack of the times, the poster artists created the seemingly limitless visual landscape—replete with spiritual icons, appropriated imagery and far-out color palettes.

Moscoso laughs at the irony of the Louvre trading the Lautrecs for a bunch of wild, drug-friendly posters. "It was perfect," he says, "because Lautrec did the Moulin Rouge posters." He compares the early days of San Francisco's leading rock venues—the Fillmore Auditorium and the Avalon Ballroom—to Lautrec's colorful and debauched cabaret scene in the Paris of the late 19th century. "You created yourself each day," he muses. People would parade around the clubs sporting top hats, cowboy hats and marine jackets, clad in costumes like "cowboy," "solider" or "Indian."

Wes Wilson remembers the older San Franciscans, who had lived in Victorian townhouses, dying out, and their young relatives laying claim to their possessions. "Some of the bohemians, artists, poets and musicians took the odds and ends from trunks because it was free and really stylish." At the same time, many of the rock poster artists were discovering or digesting the early 20th century and 1920s Art Deco and Art Nouveau styles, whose aesthetic signatures were dynamically flowing lines, decorative designs and geometric patterns. Artists like Alphonse Mucha provided the inspiration. "Art Nouveau and Art Deco and psychedelics really click," he says, elaborating that both shared a love of kaleidoscopic imagery.

In 1966, amidst the fledgling psychedelic rock poster era, talk of "the girl with kaleido-

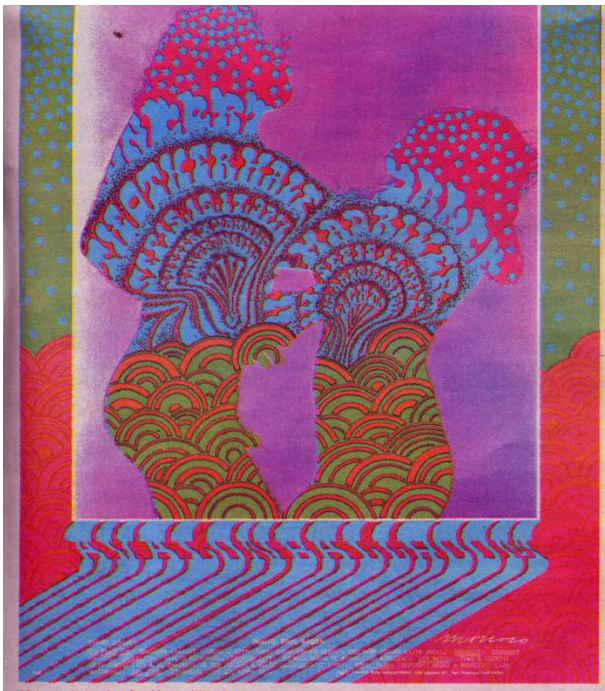
The sometimes illegible psychedelic lettering prevalent on the posters was a tribal way of ensuring that the "hip" people, not "squares," found their way to whatever concert was being promoted.

Moscoso's typical, barely legible writing here advertises a Quicksilver show.

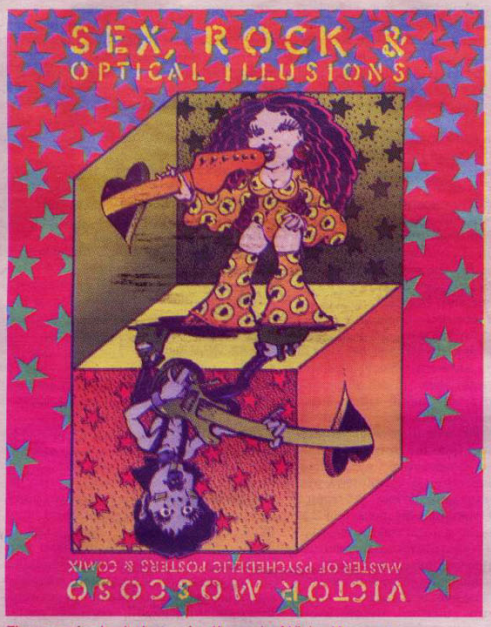
scope eyes" was imminent in more ways than one. Psychotropic drugs like marijuana, LSD, mushrooms and peyote played an undeniable role in germinating what would develop into some sophisticated, expansive and—quite simply put—"trippy" rock concert advertisements. This was, after all, the language of the people: young adults, to be more specific. According to UCSB Film Studies and Art Studio professor Dick Hebdige, the sometimes illegible psychedelic lettering prevalent on the posters was a tribal way of ensuring that the "hip" people, not "squares," found their way to whatever concert was being promoted.

But the drug-induced state didn't just influence the art—in the form of transposed and contorted images and text, seemingly moving graphics and eye-catching symbols (like the third eye and the skeleton)—it *was* the art. One of the most memorable works of the era was Mouse and Kelley's 1966 "Zig-Zag" poster, advertising a Big Brother and the Holding Company and Quicksilver Messenger show at the Avalon. Presaging the marijuana-referencing Phillies Blunt trend by three decades, the image from Zig-Zag rolling papers was a pop art drug culture slap in the face to "the man." "It was almost scary, taboo," says Mouse.

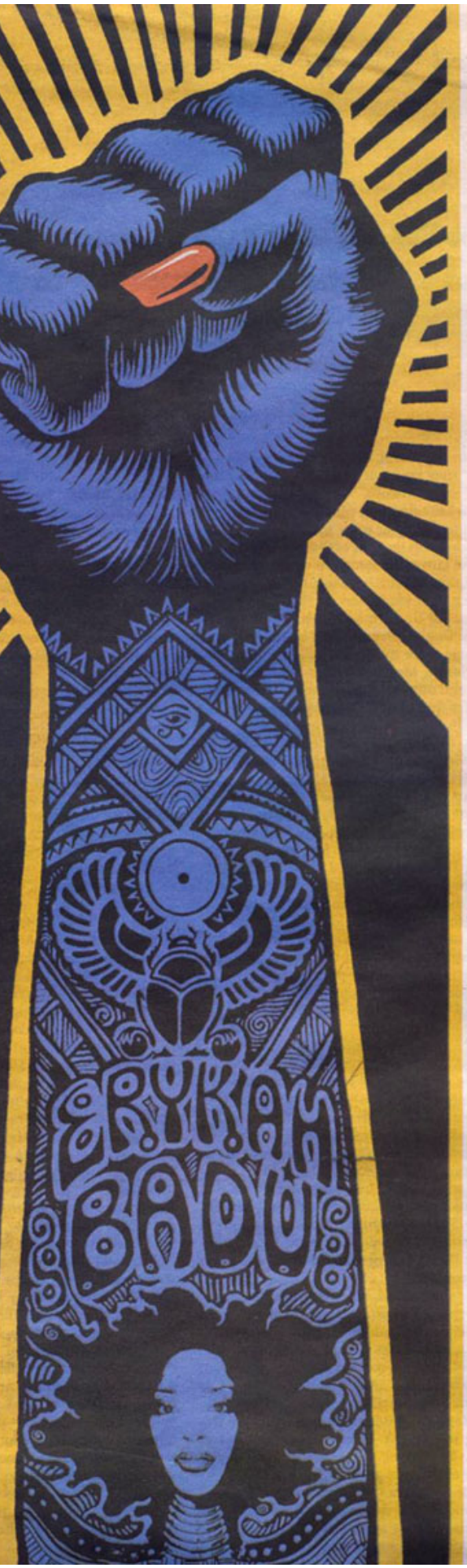
Just like the crude prehistoric cave paintings at Lascaux evolved into Renaissance canvas work, so did the simplistic first stirrings of rock poster art into the icons of their heyday. Some of the very early posters were graphically more



Moscoso's poster for Youngbloods.



The upcoming book showcasing the work of Victor Moscoso.



"In the '70s, you couldn't give the posters away. It might have been part of a government plot—disco and the ruination of psychedelic posters." —Stanley Mouse

naïve: in black and white, printed on colored paper. "They were not artistically as interesting to me," says Moscoso. "But because they were only printed once, and with just a few of them, they go for a higher price than a better poster that's printed in the tens of thousands later on."

The latter phenomenon of greater poster distribution would be executed by the two major concert promoters in San Francisco in the '60s: Bill Graham and Chet Helms (whose "Family Dog" concerts were infamous), who held large-scale music festivals in the Avalon and Fillmore. Moscoso, Wilson, Mouse, Kelley, Griffin and others designed posters advertising shows for the Grateful Dead, the Doors, the 13th Floor Elevators, Jefferson Airplane, Big Brother and the Holding Company among others, for the two seminal West Coast rock venues.

Big Brother and the Holding Company even practiced in Mouse's loft studio. Many of the poster artists were firmly entrenched in the rock'n'roll scene—well respected by fans and musicians alike. Mouse, in fact, recalls the day that Big Brother auditioned a spunky ragamuffin by the name of Janis Joplin to be their singer. One of the members of the band went so far as to ask for Mouse's opinion on the decision. Mouse responded, "She's either *really* good or *really* bad." In an added testament to Joplin's extreme vocal brand, the police later arrived on the scene concerned after having received a report of "a woman screaming."

THE COME-DOWN

The scene that had surrounded the Summer of Love—which Moscoso, feeling that it was already commercialized by 1967, calls "The Summer of Hype"—was centered in San Francisco and Haight-Ashbury in particular. Moscoso notes, "Usually L.A. is the dominant culture—Hollywood. For a time, San Francisco became the focus and center." Record companies from L.A. set up studios in San Francisco in order to record local bands and get the SF sound that everyone was going crazy over.

For this reason, among others, there was an artery running from the "Hashbury" (as it was affectionately dubbed, pun intended) to Los Angeles. L.A. was viewed as the commercial center of the '60s rock movement where San Francisco was the artistic center. Famous L.A. residents like the Doors, Love's Arthur Lee, Frank Zappa and Buffalo Springfield were traversing the SF/L.A. artery for shows, and of course, as part of the nomadic rock'n' roll lifestyle of the time.

The Southern California wing of the rock poster movement was in some ways a bi-product of the surfing subculture. Fab Five poster artist Rick Griffin hailed from Palos Verdes and was a staff artist for *Surfer* magazine, credited with the creation of the everyman surf character "Murph the Surf." Peer, friend and L.A. native poster artist John van Hamersveld created a visual relic of Southern California's 20th century history with his poster for the classic surf film, *Endless Summer.*

Griffin packed up and left for San Francisco where he was commissioned to do posters for Graham and Helms for the Fillmore and the Avalon. Van Hamersveld stayed in L.A. where he attended Chouinard School of Art. "Downtown was where the scene was," he he says about his art school environs. His fellow female students, according to Van Hamersveld, "wouldn't wear bras, wore beads and walked around with bare feet like little princesses." These art school imps would apparently go to rock concerts and invite the musicians to their house parties. This would parlay into Van Hamersveld not only creating and designing, but also commissioning posters for his concert production company, Pinnacle. He would then hire artists like Moscoso and Griffin to create posters for the concerts.

As the rock'n'roll era was peaking, a couple of the Five poster artists—perhaps on some level sensing the dreaded come-down—migrated to another subculture: comic book illustration. Moscoso and Griffin were commissioned by Van Hamersveld to do a poster for B.B. King's show at L.A.'s Shrine. The two artists looked down at the three-paneled design they had created and suddenly got the idea to do a comics magazine. In a moment of synchronicity and fate, the two happened to pick up a copy of the legendary *Zap Comix* #1 by R. Crumb.

"When Griffin and I saw *Zap* #1 it was a mind-blower," recalls Moscoso. He and Griffin went on to collaborate with Crumb and S. Clay Wilson on *Zap* #2, leading to a profound association with the revolutionary comics company. *Zap* also started the career of L.A. artist Robert Williams who, in a twist of rock/comics symbiosis, was responsible for the original (banned) cover painting of Guns n' Roses' 1987 album *Appetite for Destruction.* It's only logical that some of the poster artists from the '60s (and later, as poster art dipped in the 1970s as well) would also create album cover art. Van Hamersveld designed the Rolling Stones' *Exile on Main Street* cover in 1972. Moscoso did a cover for the Steve Miller Band. Mouse did many covers for the Grateful Dead.

During the pivotal year of 1969, dark events conspired to officially bring an end to the peace-and-love epoch and its experimental, free-for-all lifestyle. In L.A., Charles Manson and his Family minions—who, to the "squares," represented the hippie long-haired's—went on a murdering spree in one of the most violent slayings of the 20th century. In Livermore, a concert at the Altamont Speedway—headlined by the Rolling Stones and policed by the Hell's Angels—spiraled into a bad trip, resulting in a man slain to the tune of "Sympathy for the Devil." These countercultural upheavals only punctuated the already declining morale in a country waging a long, drawn-out war in Vietnam. The party was over.

photo by MALCOM DA

The second wave of poster artists exhibited their works last month in *Your Kids Belong To Us* at Scion.

THE FLASHBACKS

In the microcosm of the rock poster world, the marketing machine had caught on by the '70s and the psychedelic style and fonts that had seemed so edgy were being mass-produced, and thus disempowered. Moscoso sites a Supremes album cover as an example, emblazoned with psychedelic lettering. "[The Supremes] had nothing to do with psychedelics and the scene, but Berry Gordy felt obliged [to give the album the look] because of what was happening at the time," he says. "It was the Hula Hoop of the day, graphically speaking." Also to blame for the decline of psychedelic rock posters in the '70s was plain dollars and cents. As new forms of advertising such as radio and television began to dominate, posters were no longer deemed financially viable as a marketing and advertising investment for promoters and bands.

Ironically, this was about the time that the art world started to pay attention—most notably the Louvre, as well as New York's Museum of Modern Art. In time, as Moscoso tells it, the work would appear in an increasing number of international galleries and museums including the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, England, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C. More recently, the early psychedelic rock posters—in the form of acquisitions by long-time collector Paul Prince—appeared in the University of California Santa Barbara Museum last year for the show *High Society*.

Despite the museum shows, as the '70s wore on the active art of rock poster creation seemed to have dropped off the map. Rock'n'roll was in many ways co-opted by disco. "In the '70s, you couldn't give the posters away," says Mouse, jokingly adding, "It might have been part of a government plot—disco and the ruination of psychedelic posters." This type of distaste for the uber-trendy dance music of the day later gave way to the "disco sucks" movement and eventually paved the path for another rebellious subculture: punk.

Yet, this first wave of punk seemed ill-suited to the expansive and luxurious creativity of rock'n'roll posters. Black and white flyers (today considered low-tech) were the call of the day. For anyone alert to the cyclical nature of pop culture, alarm bells would have been going off. The punk rock flyers with their crude grazings weren't so different from the early psychedelic rock posters in '65 in their simplicity, cost-effectiveness and underground distribution and appeal. But it wasn't until the late '80s, when a second wave of punk hit—the punk that was coming out of the Reagan era and the materialistic "me decade"—that the rock poster subculture would resurface, revitalized as a torch to be carried by new, zealous would-be illustrators.

In 1987, a book by Paul Grushkin called *The Art of Rock* was published. An overview of the classic psychedelic rock posters with hindsight, the book became an instant classic—a must-have catalogue of the rock culture relics of an era. "Collectors use *The Art of Rock* as the bible of '60s and '70s posters," says appraiser Feichtmeir. "For a long time, people shied away from [the '60s psychedelic rock posters] because they were druggie oriented," says Mouse, adding, "When Grushkin did that book, it legitimized it as an art movement and put the whole thing on the map."

Poster artist Emek, who was part of the art form's second wave that really took off in the early '90s, credits the book with having played a role in rekindling the poster art movement. "A lot of newer bands saw this book and said, 'We want to belong to that pantheon, that golden age of rock history, we want to have posters done for us." Emek also believes that the book inspired popular culture by prompting ad agencies to appropriate from its artists' style. "All of the sudden these big billboards were around [L.A.] that ripped off stuff from *The Art of Rock* book."

Emek, who says he was greatly inspired by Moscoso's color combinations, was exposed to the buying, selling and evaluation of posters by such early artists when he was working at a poster shop in Studio City called L'Imagerie in the mid-'90s. It was, and continues to be, owned and run by Debi Jacobson, an avid collector since the age of 19, whose mother dealt in Art Nouveau posters. When Jacobson first decided to join forces with her mom by adding the '60s rock concert ads, she says it was not uncommon to see old Art Nouveau posters alongside those by their tripped-out '60s descendents.

In the late '80s, obsessed with following the trail of the early poster creators, Jacobson ended up in Texas. "We wanted to find out what happened to the '60s artists, and instead we ended up finding Frank Kozik." Jacobson started publishing off-set lithographs by Kozik who was creating posters for L.A.'s Avalon Attractions. She would play a significant role in the revitalization and appreciation of the art form via her support of Kozik and other big poster artists like the L.A. collective Taz. The second wave had hit. The other prominent poster creators riding the wave along with Kozik are Coop, Art Chantry, Jeff Kleinsmith, Taz, Derek Hess, Emek, Justin Hampton and Jermaine Rogers, among others.

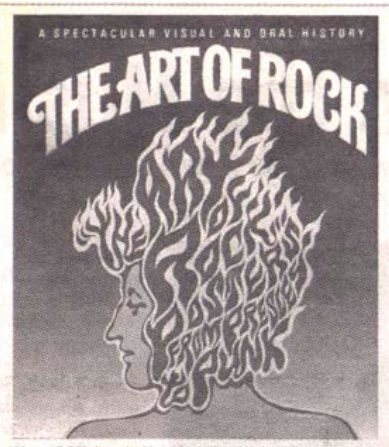
The subculture bridging the late '80s and early '90s second coming of rock poster art was the grunge movement, centered in Seattle, home of contemporary poster artist Justin Hampton. Big names like Kozik and Coop were also creating incredible poster works of art for bands like Nirvana, Pearl Jam and Soundgarden. According to the later seminal book *Art of Modern Rock*, the poster collective Taz came to life during a raucous Nirvana concert after-party when drummer Dave Grohl and members of the band L7 requested poster art for an imminent "Rock for Choice" benefit.

While Emek's posters still look cool, the music is another story.

Emek's modern day psych poster for PJ Harvey.

Interest in both the classic poster artists and the second wave has grown exponentially with each passing year. A benchmark was 2004 when Grushkin, author of *The Art of Rock*, collaborated with Dennis King on the aforementioned *Art of Modern Rock: The Poster Explosion*. This contemporary illustrated tome did its part to increase public awareness of the 'second wave' as well as to bolster the idea of rock posters as a vital 20th century art form in general.

Van Hamersveld, who had been out of the rock scene for two decades, was recently surprised to find a demand and renewed interest in his posters like the classic Hendrix/Shrine (which he has recently done a fourth re-printing of). The original first printings of the posters now go for $3,500 to $5,000, he says. Not everyone can fork over that kind of money, however, even for a piece of rock history. Apart from avid poster collectors intent on amassing the original pieces, the '60s artists have also found a new audience in the youth of today's renewed interest and veneration of classic rock—their vehicle, the significantly cheaper, more accessible re-prints. Clearly, as long as rock is around, there will be an interest in the genre's posters.



the 1987 book that cemented '60s posters as art, not trash.

PERMA-STONED

Just last year, musicians Dave Navarro and Tommy Lee opened the doors of their night venue Rokbar, just off of Hollywood Blvd. The dimly lit hot spot proudly showcases works by Taz with an almost museum-like reverence. Navarro's contemporary rock'n'roll décor notwithstanding, he is also a fan of the '60s work that preceded it. "Artwork of that era harkens back to a time when rock and roll was visually exciting and musically inspiring," Navarro emphasizes, "It was collectable, something you could own or hang on your wall—a bit more than just web code."

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> —Dave Navarro

The '60s rock poster art that paved the path for the second wave, may well be the jurisdiction of out-and-proud Luddites. Its very hands-on, low-tech craftsmanship is perhaps something of a novelty amidst the computer aesthetic of which Navarro speaks. "You had to hand-letter stuff. You had to be trained to do that," says Mouse. This certainly made for an exclusive club—Moscoso was formally art schooled, and Mouse made a living by custom-airbrushing and pin-striping hot rods. These days, the rock poster design market is filled to the brim with would-be artists thanks to the point-and-click simplicity of PhotoShop. The democratization of poster art may have barraged the movement with too many hopeful creators, but that certainly doesn't preclude true talent from standing out in the din. According to Hampton, "The majority of people that work on posters today work on the computer." He explains that it's simply less mess.

Certainly, the computer has been an aid to both veteran and contemporary artists in displaying and selling their work. Last year, online rock memorabilia giant Wolfgang's Vault bought two tremendous collections of vintage rock posters—one from Clear Channel (which had acquired promoter Graham's stock), the other from fanatical New York collector Jacaeber Kastor. The latter's collection (reportedly the world's largest collection of psychedelic rock posters) was so vast and complete that, says Feichtmeir, "When we first brought the posters over, it took us five semi-loads to move them into our building." Wolfgang's Vault also sells the newer posters, which they say are a hit with college students looking for something inexpensive (in the $50-$100 range) but meaningful to collect. Poster aficionados can, in many cases, also buy direct from the artists, most of whom have web sites and online catalogues. Apart from L'Imagerie (which has gone in a more fine arts direction, according to Jacobson), Mr. Musichead in Hollywood also carries the old and new posters.

The Rock Poster Society in Richmond, known by the pithy and appropriate acronym TRPS, throws regular events that draw classic poster artists like Moscoso and his ilk and provide a place to buy and discuss the work. A sense of community also permeates the contemporary rock poster scene. Just last month, Emek, Hampton and Rogers exhibited their works together in a group show, *Your Kids Belong to Us: Post-Neo Explosionism in Los Angeles*, at Scion's art gallery space in Culver City.

Emek, who says he does all of his art by hand, believes that the interest in the original '60s posters is a reaction against the mass-production that is so inextricably linked to today's culture. "Here is something that's handmade and shows it," he says. He also sees the current neo-conservative political climate as another catalyst for the counterculture poster movement of yesterday and today. "People want escapism because we're entering the Dark Ages where politicians are not accountable for anything and nobody can stop them." Moscoso quotes Freud: "Repression equals culture." Mouse sees today as a similar climate to the one that spawned the original poster movement. "There's a war and everybody is faced with the corporate nothingness of the dot com'ers."

As the old adage goes, the more things change, the more they stay the same, both politically and culturally. It took decades for the Moulin Rouge poster ads to be appreciated as art. Sixties psychedelic poster art started as ephemera and was soon imbued with the stamp of approval by international art institutions—blazing a trail for its next-of-kin post-grunge artists. Maybe rock poster art has become an art form, but—in the true rebellious spirit of their creation—its architects refuse the pretensions of the art community.

Moscoso jokes, "We're old masters at best. Old bastards at worst." LAA