Grateful Dead ‘Fare Thee Well’: Meet the Artists Behind the Limited Edition Posters

By JOHN JURGENSEN

This weekend offers Grateful Dead fans their last three chances to see the band live—and to scoop up official concert merchandise.

At Chicago’s Soldier Field stadium, there will be 22 different pieces of 50th anniversary apparel available, from skull-and-lightning bolt tie-dye T-shirts to dancing bear onesies, along with tchotchkes like coffee mugs and pins in five styles. But the swag that hardcore collectors are salivating most over are the concert posters sold exclusively at the venue, which in most cases are different than the ones hawked at last weekend’s Dead dates in Santa Clara, Calif.

For the grand “Fare Thee Well” finale in Chicago, the band commissioned nine different posters and two triptychs (consisting of a three interconnected posters). Most have been printed in limited editions of—wait for it—2015, and will be sold for up to $70 each.

“If we only had one or two designs, we’d need to print so many that it would be far less special,” says Ted Mattes, Creative Director for Global Merchandising Services. The company also makes merch for acts like One Direction and Motorhead, and won the exclusive rights to produce gear for the Dead’s 50th anniversary concerts.

Mattes recruited the artists who produced the posters, including some who had not created stuff for the Dead or similar jam bands before, such as U.K. illustrator Richey Beckett. (His poster, featuring a nude maiden clutching an American flag, is said to be bassist Phil Lesh’s favorite.)

“The thing that happens in this world is that the stuff for Gov’t Mule starts to look the same as Widespread Panic which looks the same as Furthur. I’m not interested in that,"
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Mattes says. Still, the Dead inspired some of rock’s most famous iconography, and fans want to see those skeletons, roses and flying eyeballs in their souvenirs. Mattes adds, “At the end of the day it’s commerce. And Deadheads in general are quite picky.”

They can also be obsessive when it comes to Dead symbolism. Mike DuBois, a Woodstock, N.Y., artist who created his first official design for the Dead in 1986, says he has been fielding non-stop questions since last week’s premiere in Santa Clara of a holographic poster featuring an Uncle Sam skeleton riding down a golden road on a motorcycle. Not only do fans want signed copies, they also what him to decode the symbols, such as the appearance of Jerry Garcia’s handprint on a pyramid.

DuBois says he incorporated images inspired by about 15 different songs into that poster, assembling them “like a puzzle.” As for the handprint, it’s not a clue about a secret Garcia tomb in Egypt or anything else. “It just worked there in the composition. It’s completely random,” he says.

For the holographic piece (printed by Good Thoughts Printing in Boulder, Colo.) he drew and painted much of it by hand, then scanned it into a computer and used a digital drawing tablet to finish it. His triptych, which includes one poster for each of the three Chicago concerts, took him a couple months to complete and was hand-drawn with pen and ink, then colored using a computer.

New York artist Taylor Swope first got the idea for her poster—featuring the Uncle Sam skeleton giving a female skeleton a ride on a Harley—11 years ago, after watching a remastered version of “The Grateful Dead Movie,” which included an animated version of Cycle Sam.

“But I was a beginner artist at the time,” Swope recalls. “I didn’t know how to draw skeletons or roses.” Her design skills bloomed along with her apparel company, Little Hippie, which specializes in licensed Dead gear for kids.

She has two pieces of official apparel at the “Fare Thee Well” concerts, a children’s T-shirt and a women’s tank top. After her poster idea also got approved, she had to crank it out on deadline. By then she had learned a lot by sketching from books of flowers and an anatomical skeleton she had purchased. “The kicker is then I had to learn how to draw a motorcycle,” she says.

With most official products, artists make money off each item they sell, and pay a percentage to the Dead through a license administered by Rhino Entertainment. The deal for the “Fare Thee Well” concert merchandise works differently. The artists were paid a flat fee for their designs up front. They also get to keep a small batch of “artist proofs” that they can sign and sell at a premium after the concerts are over.

Justin Helton, whose Status Serigraph studio is based in Knoxville, Tenn., has created art for everyone from Phish to Queens of the Stone Age, but he says “Fare Thee Well” is the biggest project he has ever worked on. He contributed three t-shirts and three posters total for the Santa Clara and Chicago shows.

The job allowed him to create something for his musical heroes, including Phish’s Trey Anastasio, who is handling lead guitar for the Dead. Helton also got to let loose with visual palette that is very particular to the Dead. “A lot of bands don’t respond well to skeletons. It’s such a loaded image,” he says.

In his work, he incorporates found imagery and old engravings created in the 19th century. His Chicago poster features the city skyline and a skeleton tipping a top hat as he sails off in a hot-air balloon loaded with roses.

The 34-year-old artist says he put a lot of pressure on himself to perfect the illustrations, knowing they’d be joining a long lineage that goes back to the ‘60s, when Bay Area artists such as Stanley “Mouse” Miller and Rick Griffin helped define the artform.

Helton says, “They had a huge hand in showing me what poster art even was when I was younger.”

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