



Past
Exhibition

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Copy/Paste/ Print/Repeat

Mike King & the Art of the Gig Poster

April 24–November 2, 2025

Mike King is America's most prolific gig-poster artist. What began as a means of promoting his own bands' shows in the late 1970s gradually morphed into a full-time specialty in the art of the eye-catching concert poster. Today, there are few major venues or bands that have not worked with him—his imagery has saturated the tapestry of American music culture, appearing on album covers, T-shirts, and, most importantly, posters.

In 1983, Mike walked into a promoter's office in Portland, Oregon, looking to book a gig for S.P.I.K.E. (Society's Problem is Killing Everything), a band in which he performed. He noticed a guy in the corner struggling to make a half-decent flyer for another group, and, ever precocious, announced that he could do it better. A few hours later, he returned with a finished poster and the promoter gave him the job of creating posters for various bands.

At the time, Mike worked at a copyshop, allowing him unfettered access to a photocopy machine that would become the primary tool for most of his early work. He had learned the basics of graphic design from a friend's mother when he was a kid, realizing that if one did not have access to expensive rub-down type or a complete alphabet from which to make a zine or flyer, large text photocopied from magazines was the next best thing. Over the years, he scoured publications for interesting lettering and copied pages from Dover typography books that he would then cut up, rearrange, and paste to a sheet of paper alongside swiped images to create everything from zines to handbills. Armed with X-Acto knives and a glue stick, Mike became a one-man design studio reflecting the current of the Pacific Northwest's late-20th century counterculture of grunge and punk.

The posters in this exhibition represent a mere slice of a much larger visual pie, a taste of some of Mike's posters—both common and rare—from a 30-year spread within his ongoing career. They highlight shifts in the available technology for making posters, from fully analog to digital, and demonstrate how the function of gig posters has evolved from advertising to collectible merchandise. Rather than being presented strictly chronologically, each section focuses on Mike's process for creating the pasteup or digital file necessary to produce each type of poster.

All posters in this exhibition are part of the Poster House Permanent Collection.

Whenever feasible, Poster House reuses materials from previous shows to drive sustainable practice.

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Special Thanks

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Copyshop Designer

Mike's earliest posters predate the digital era, meaning every element had to be manipulated by hand without the use of a computer before being passed on to a commercial printer for execution. The final object given to the printer during this period is known as a pasteup or makeready, a piece of paper typically measuring 11 x 17 inches that included glued-down black-and-white text and imagery. The type and color of the paper, as well as the ink, were usually decided by the printer, not the designer.

Mike typically starts a poster with the text. During this period, this often included a combination of lettering taken from proper typography manuals and commercial publications as well as hand-drawn letters and, occasionally, the band's official logo. He would lay out this cut-up text on pale-blue graph paper, the lines of which would not show up when run through a copy machine, creating a seamless grid as the foundation for every design.

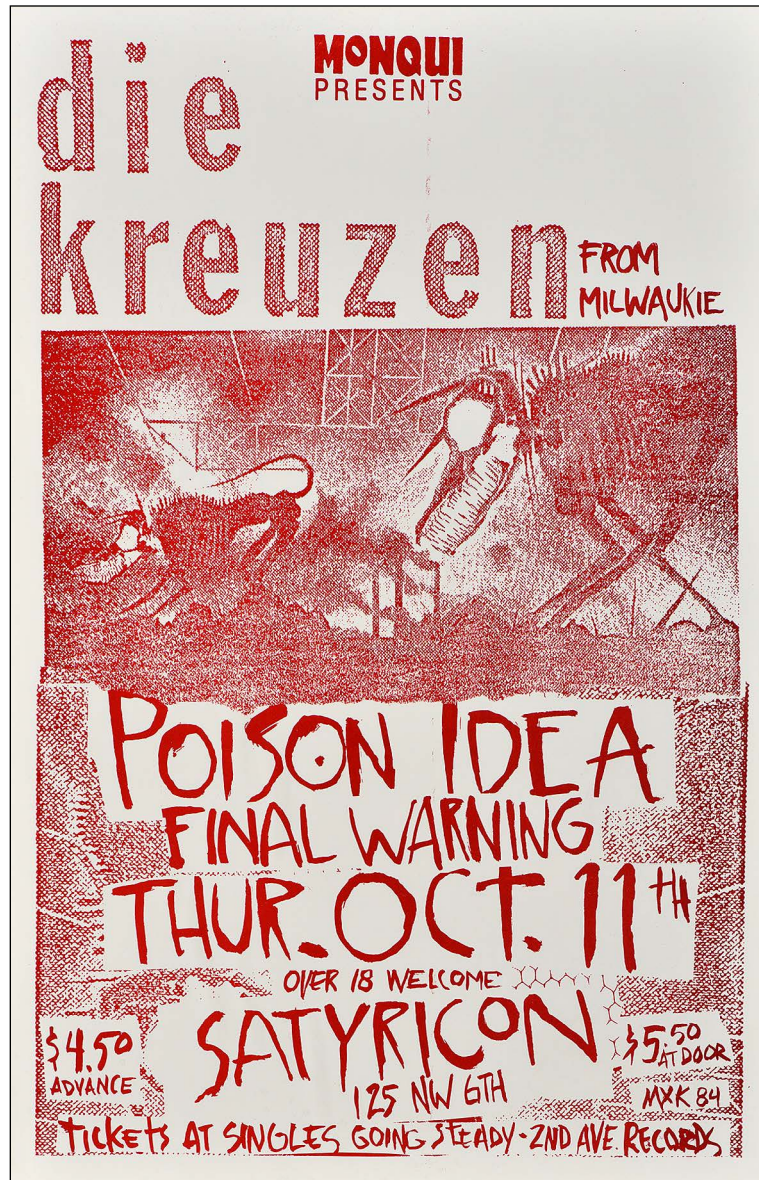
His imagery was equally random, ranging from official publicity photographs of a band to whatever visuals he felt properly expressed the essence of a group's style. While he may not have been able to listen to every performer before he produced a poster, Mike was always aware of their particular genre within the music scene and found novel ways to convey that in his work. His best posters from this time mix elements of pop culture, like a photograph of Tammy Faye Bakker with Alice Cooper-style gothic eye makeup or a bevy of Fred Flintstones, both used years apart to advertise the iconically named Butthole Surfers.

During this early part of his official career as a gig-poster artist in the late 1980s, Mike teamed up with fellow graphic designer Steve Birch to form Crash Design, a ragtag studio that was essentially a landline phone and a Canon NP9030—one of the first copy machines that allowed the user to enlarge imagery and text along both the x and y axes and put halftone screens over photographs (a process that turns images into dot patterns of various sizes and densities). Texture could be added by reversing elements (flipping imagery from positive to negative), drawing on them, and then reversing them back—the drawings appear as white on the page, filled by the color of the paper, while the original lettering or photography shows up in black. Additional copy-machine “tricks” included putting vellum between a design element and the glass to make it appear fuzzy and moving the text as the copy bar shifted to stretch or distort it.

The Pacific Northwest's Music Scene

The Pacific Northwest had a music-advertising culture that was distinct from that of the rest of the United States. The region's notorious rain meant that posters might not even survive a day before being turned to sludge on the side of the road. When combined with the explosive concert scene of the 1980s and '90s, this resulted in a visual cacophony of announcements wallpapering Seattle's and Portland's many telephone poles alongside the detritus of yesterday's gigs. The newfound popularity of the copy machine as a means of creating cheap, effective design meant that almost all of these posters were the same size and were often printed on the same Dayglo-colored papers that visually popped even in the most overcast weather conditions.

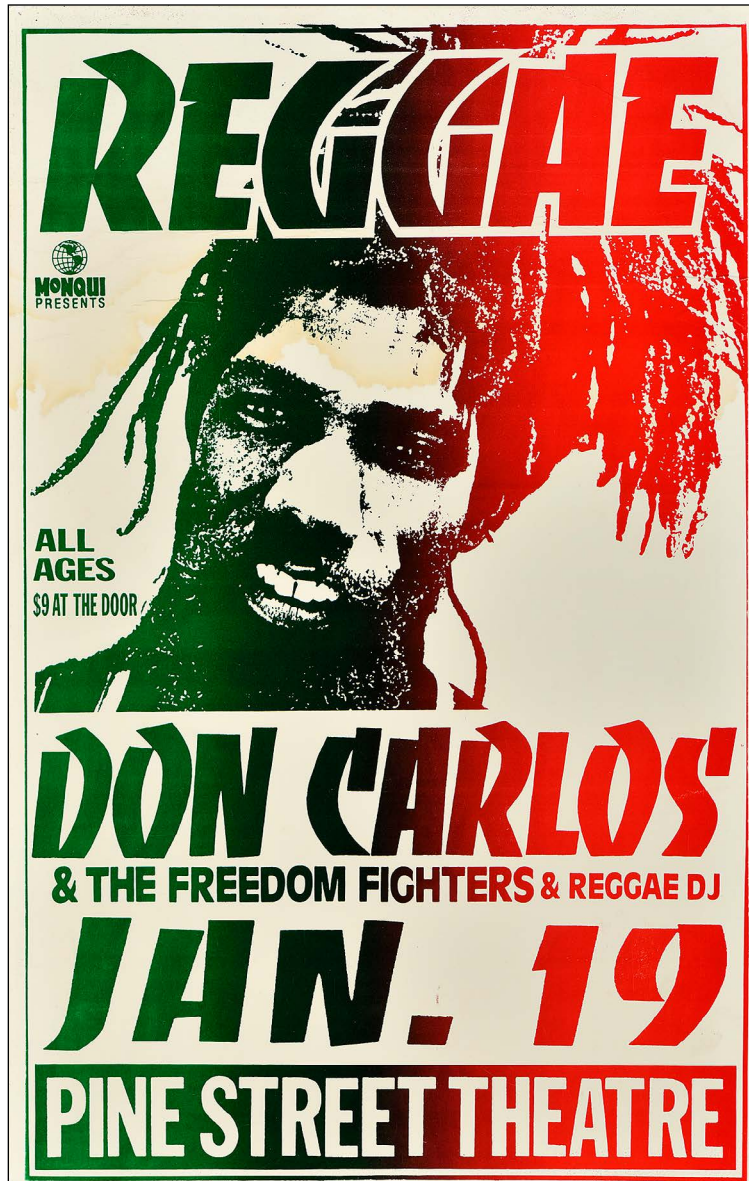
As local promoters often worked for venues rather than directly with a band, there was no requirement (or even ability) for a band to approve the poster—the only requisite was that the advertisement would be legible from a passing car and that it stood out from the visual noise of the dozens of other announcements. Work would be assigned three to six weeks in advance of an event, and Mike could typically turn around a project in a few days. At his busiest, he could create two posters in a single day—a number that may sound low today; however, in an era when everything had to be done by hand and any edits could mean restarting a composition from scratch, it emphasizes his commitment to the quality of his designs and his skill at executing them.



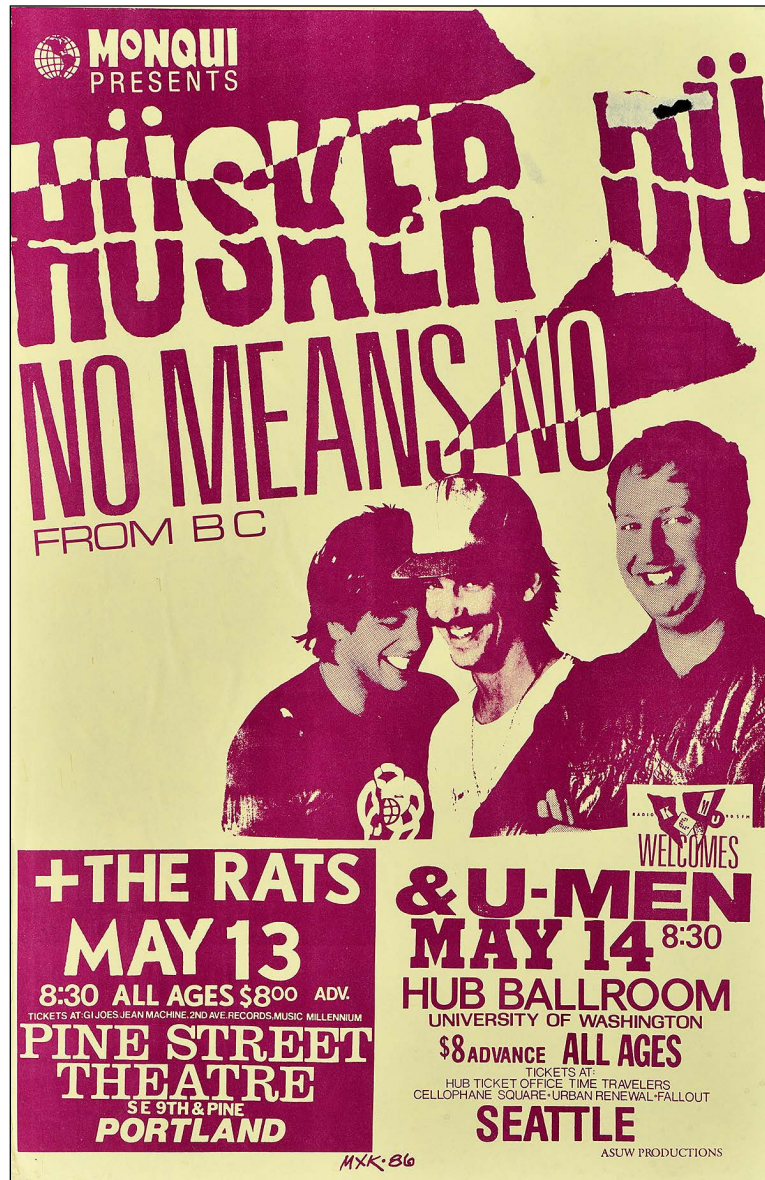
Die Kreuzen, 1984



SNFU, 1985



Don Carlos & The Freedom Fighters, c. 1986



Hüsker Dü/No means no, 1986



Hellcows/Snakepit/More & More, 1986



Butthole Surfers, 1987



Sonic Youth/Hell Cows, 1987



Sun Ra, 1988



Antone's West Blues Revue, 1988



Skinny Puppy, 1988



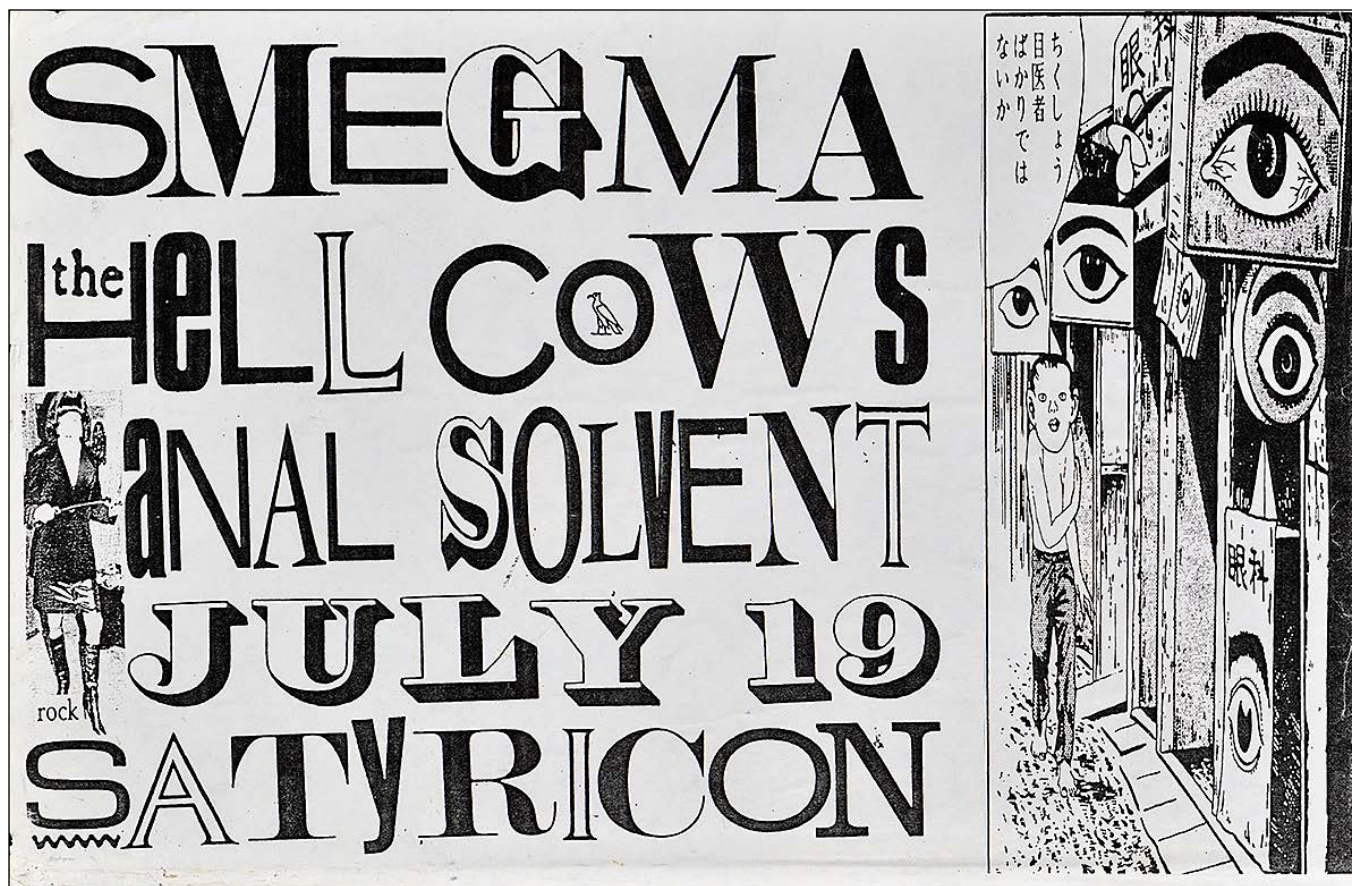
Fishbone/Living Colour, 1988



Butthole Surfers, 1989



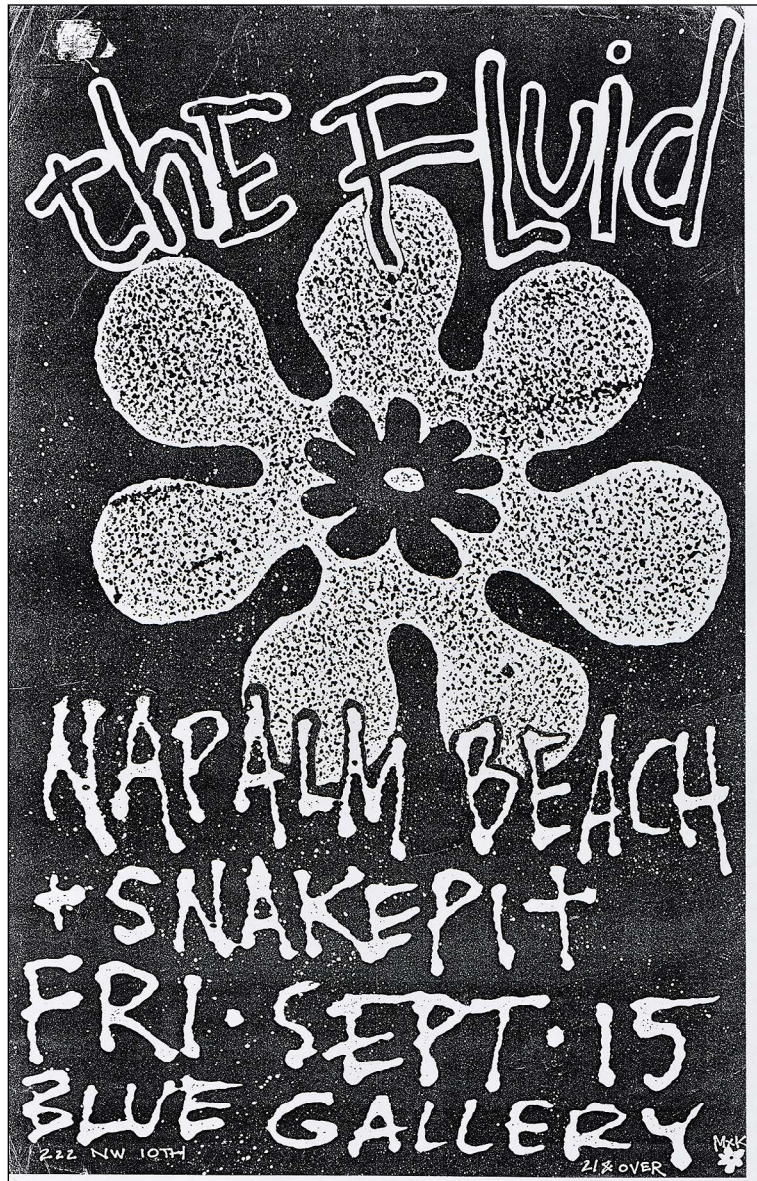
Hell Cows/Indigo Zeros/Crackerbash, 1989



Smegma/The Hell Cows/Anal Solvent, 1989



The Replacements, 1989



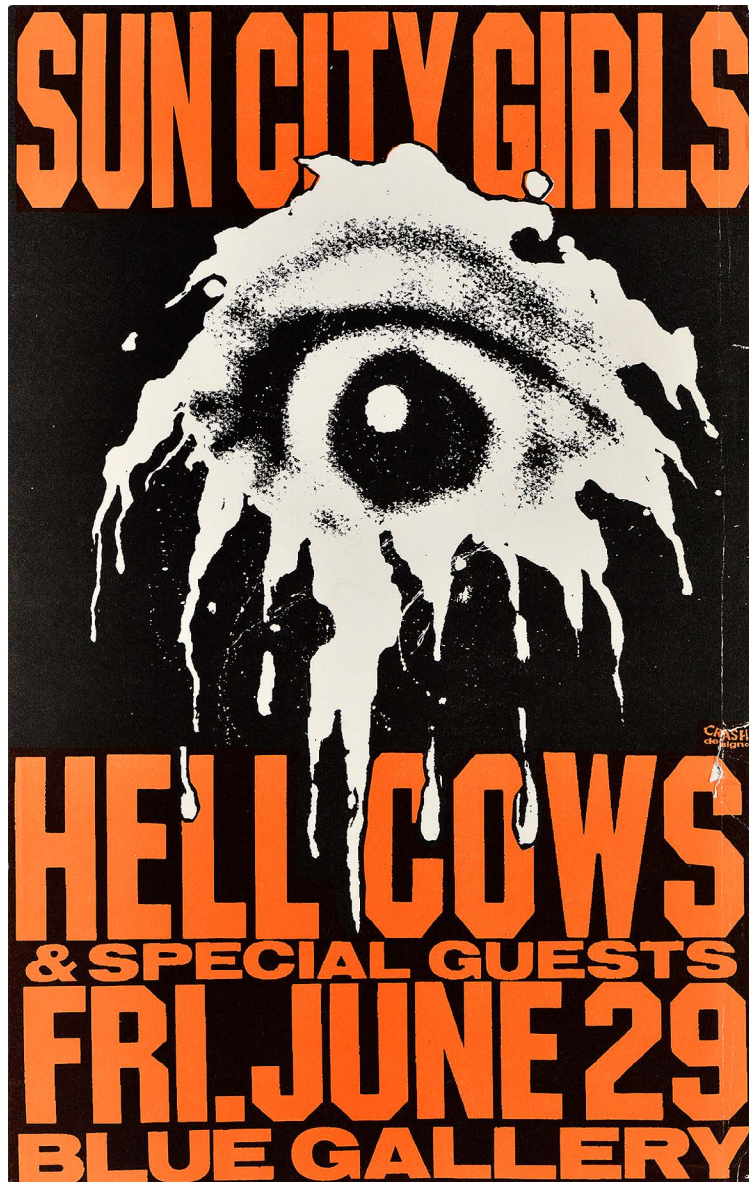
The Fluid, 1989



Fugazi/Beat Happening, 1989



The Cramps, 1990



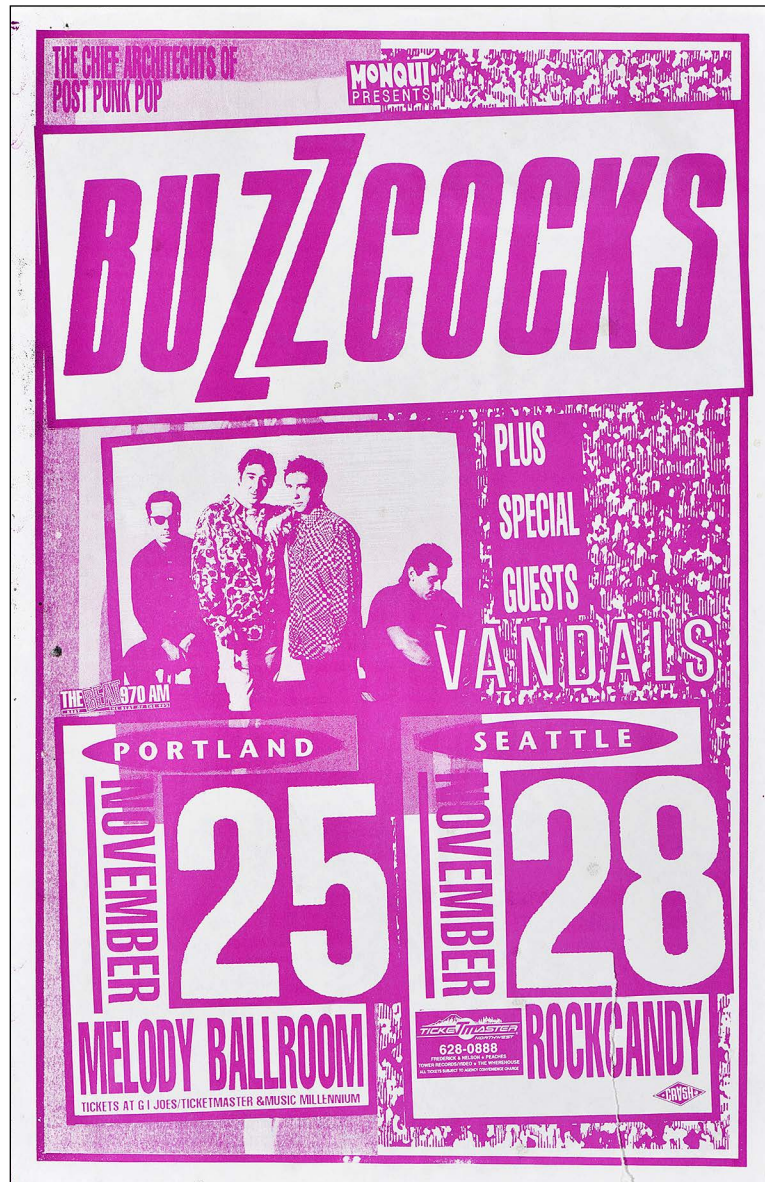
Sun City Girls/Hell Cows, 1990



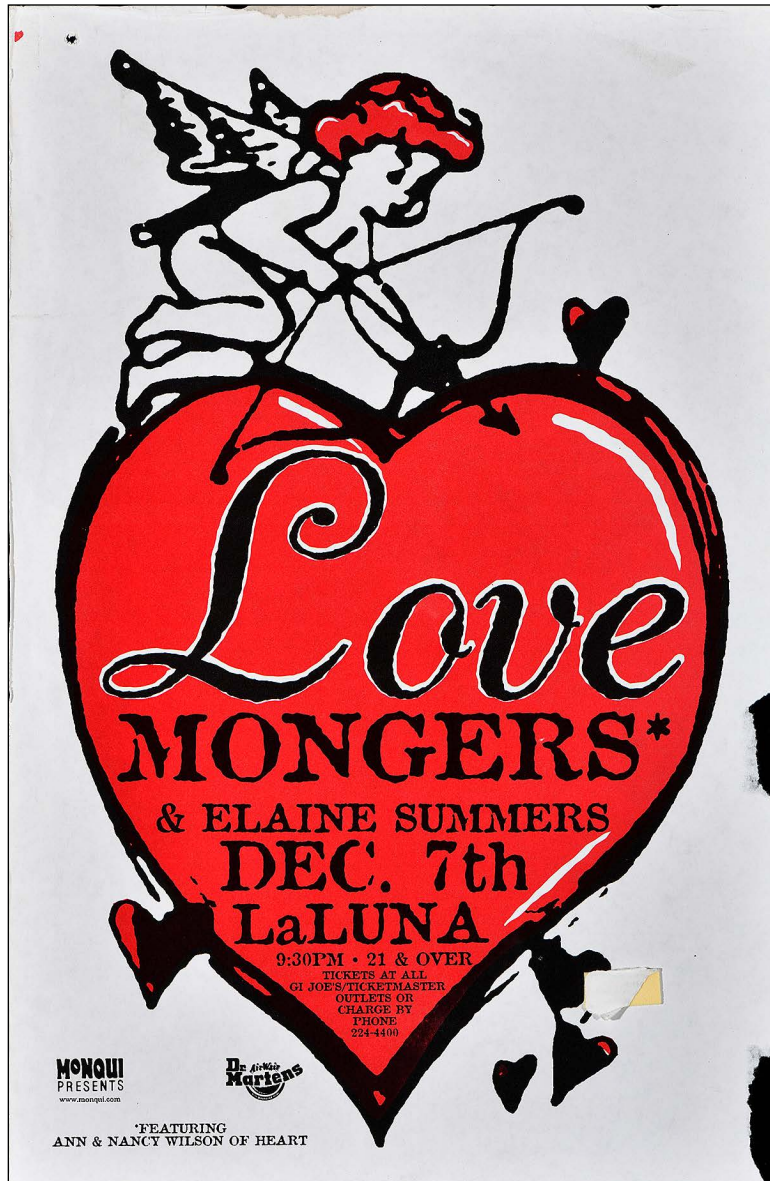
Nirvana/Mudhoney, 1991



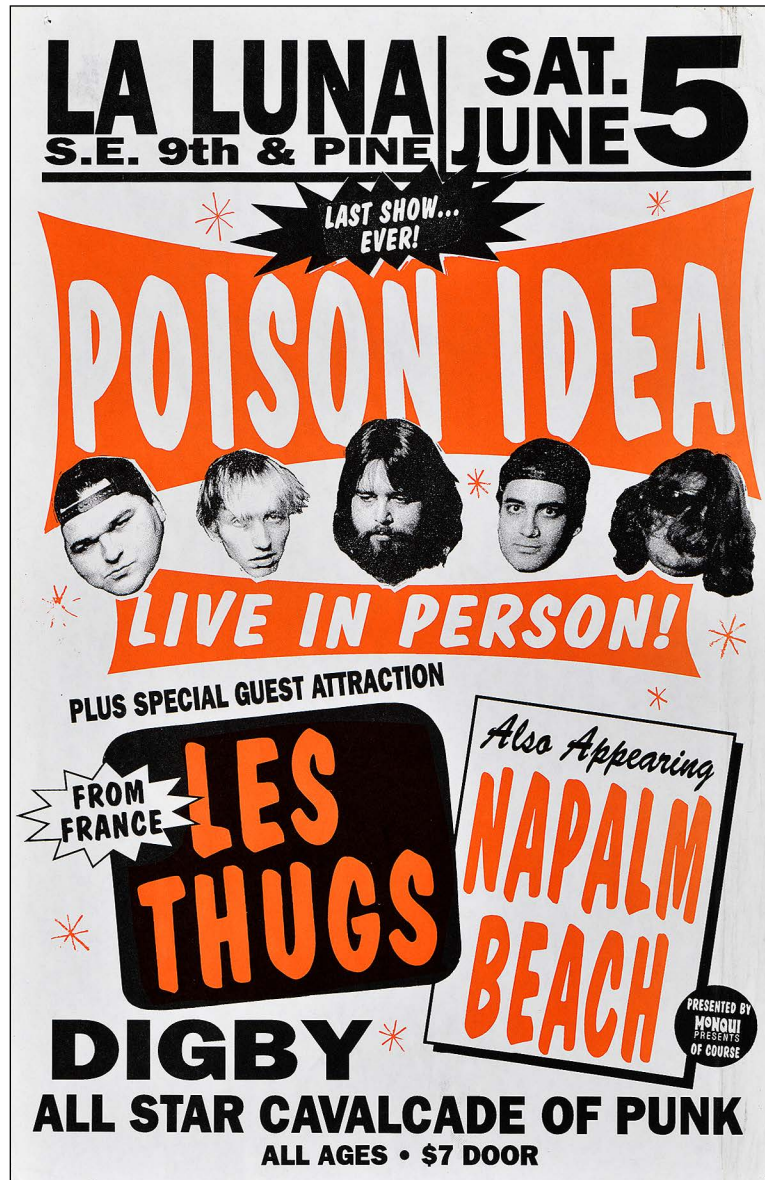
Nomeansno, 1991



Buzzcocks, 1992



Love Mongers/Elaine Summers, 1992



Poison Idea, 1993



Poison Idea/7 Year Bitch, 1993



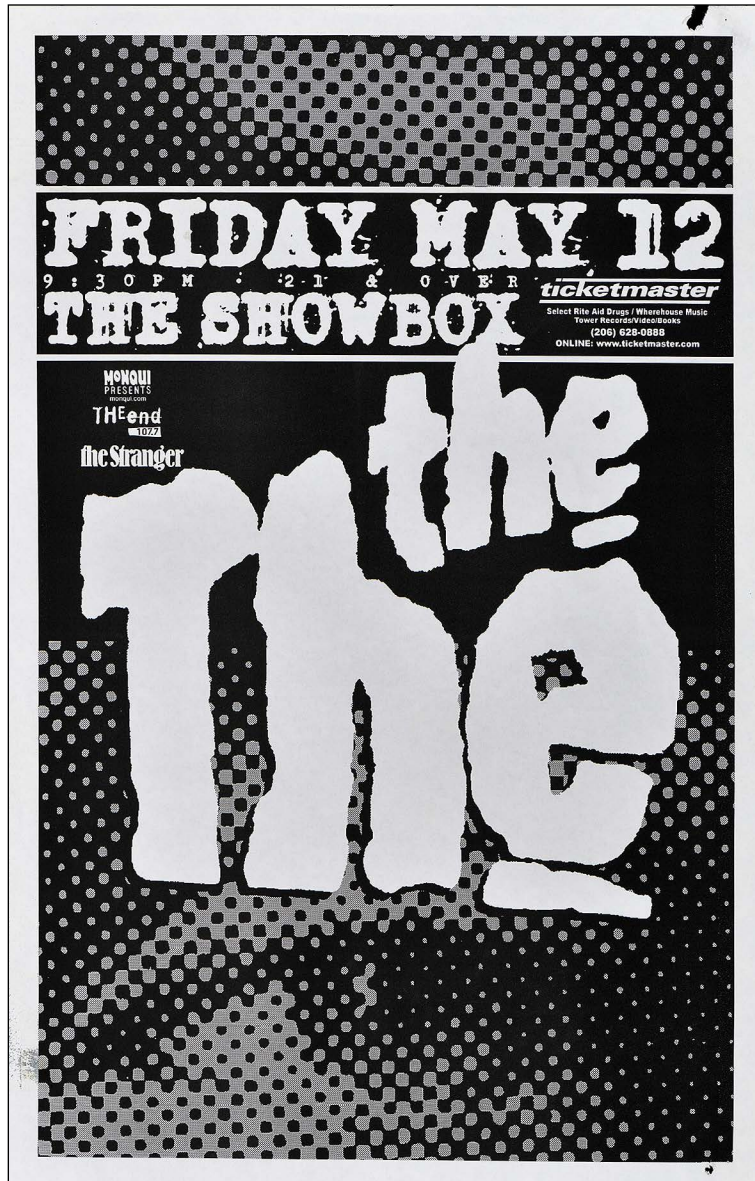
Butthole Surfers, 1995

The Dawn of Digital

The advent of computers resulted in a more efficient way to generate lettering for posters. Rather than spending hours cutting out photocopied alphabets, Mike could now easily print out lines of text to scale in a variety of fonts that he would then recompose manually within a pasteup. While early versions of TypeStyler and other software came with basic font families, most of what Mike incorporated into his posters were alphabets, all stolen in some manner, passed around by like-minded designers.

Photocopiers were still essential during this period, as they allowed designers to manipulate traditional typography through various tricks during the copying process. More importantly, imagery still had to be sourced from preexisting publications or drawn by hand, as bringing those elements into the digital space would have required a designer to go to a third party for a scan of the image on a floppy disk and then import it into Photoshop, a software still in its infancy. Building the composition in a half-analog fashion proved far more flexible.

By the late 1990s, Mike slowly transitioned from creating fully manual pasteups of a poster to composing entire designs on a computer. This shift resulted in the death of the old-fashioned cut-and-paste makeready and secured the primacy of digital files that could be sent to printers over the internet.



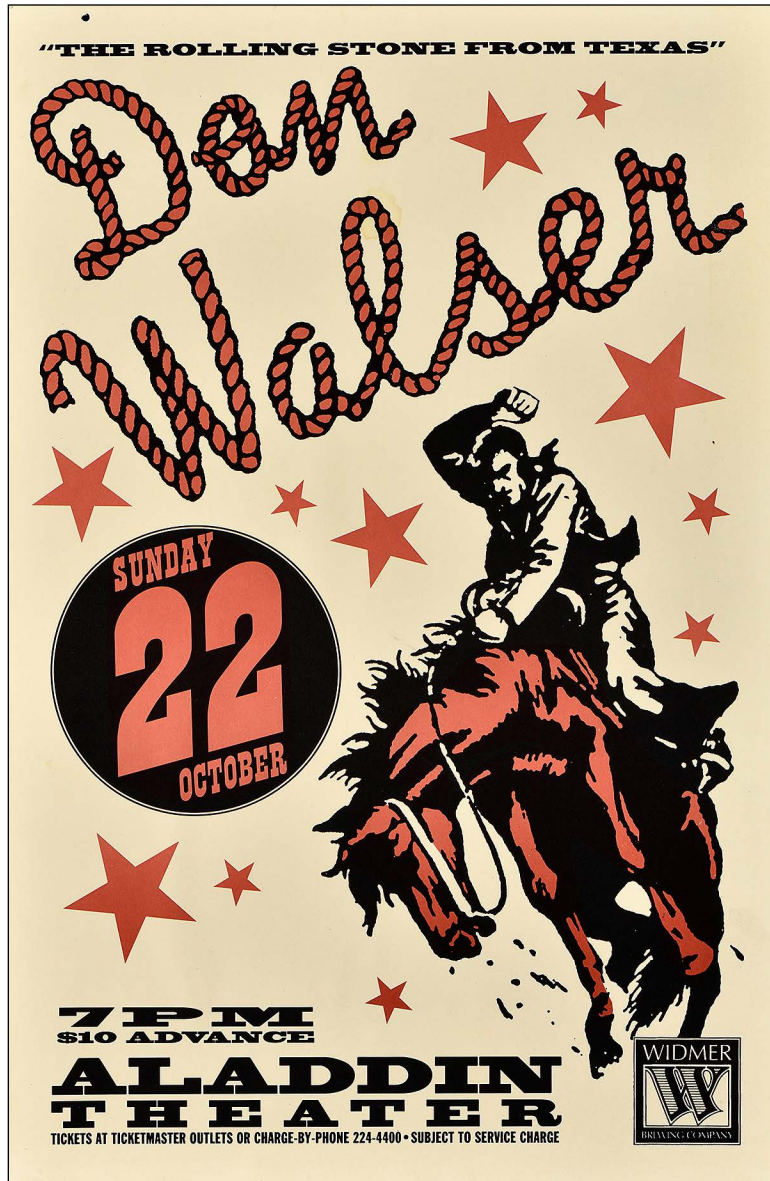
The The, 1995



The Renegade Saints, 1995



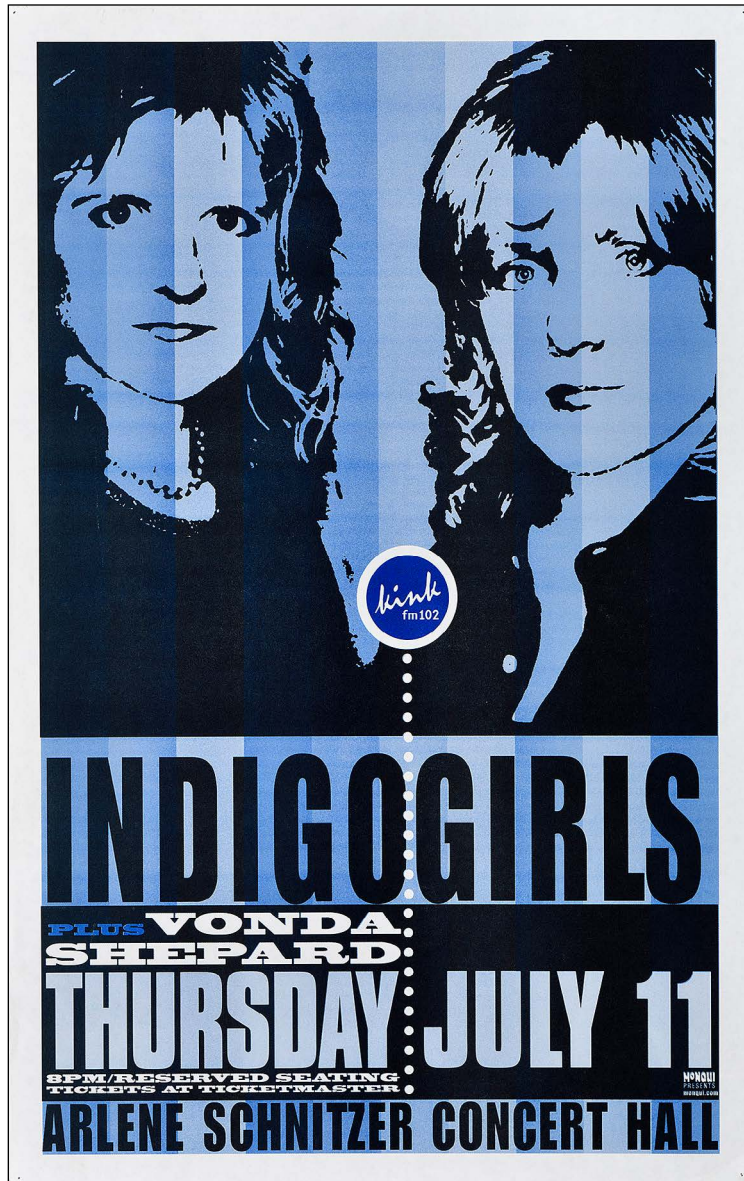
Five Fingers of Funk, 1995



Don Walser, 1995



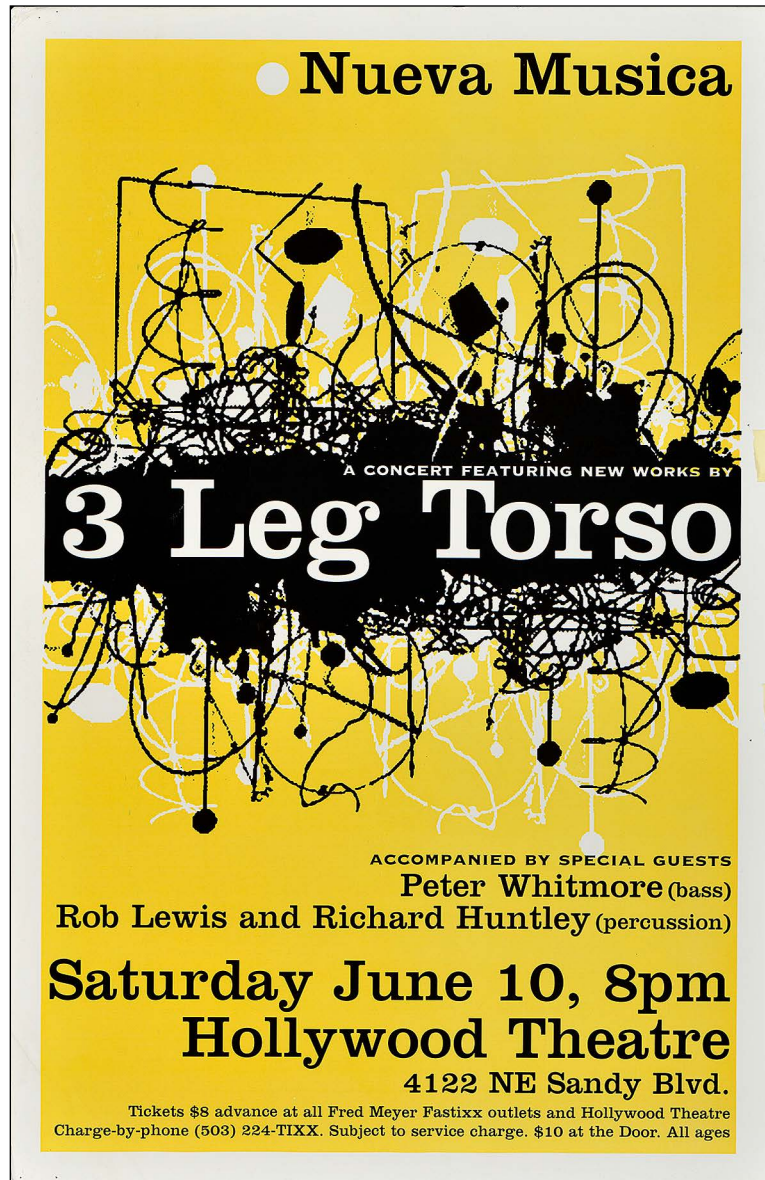
Alison Krauss & Union Station, 1995



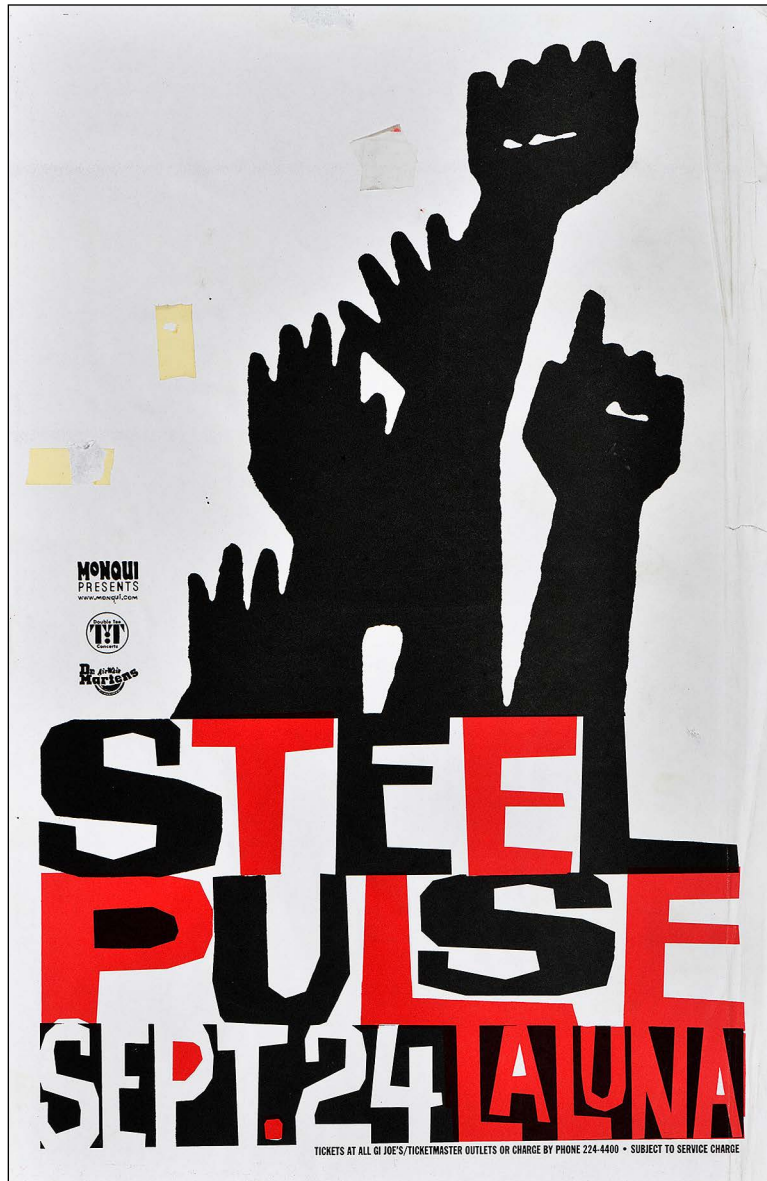
Indigo Girls, 1996



Bobby "Blue" Bland, 1996



3 Leg Torso, 1996



Steel Pulse, 1997



Five Fingers of Funk/Rubberneck, 1997



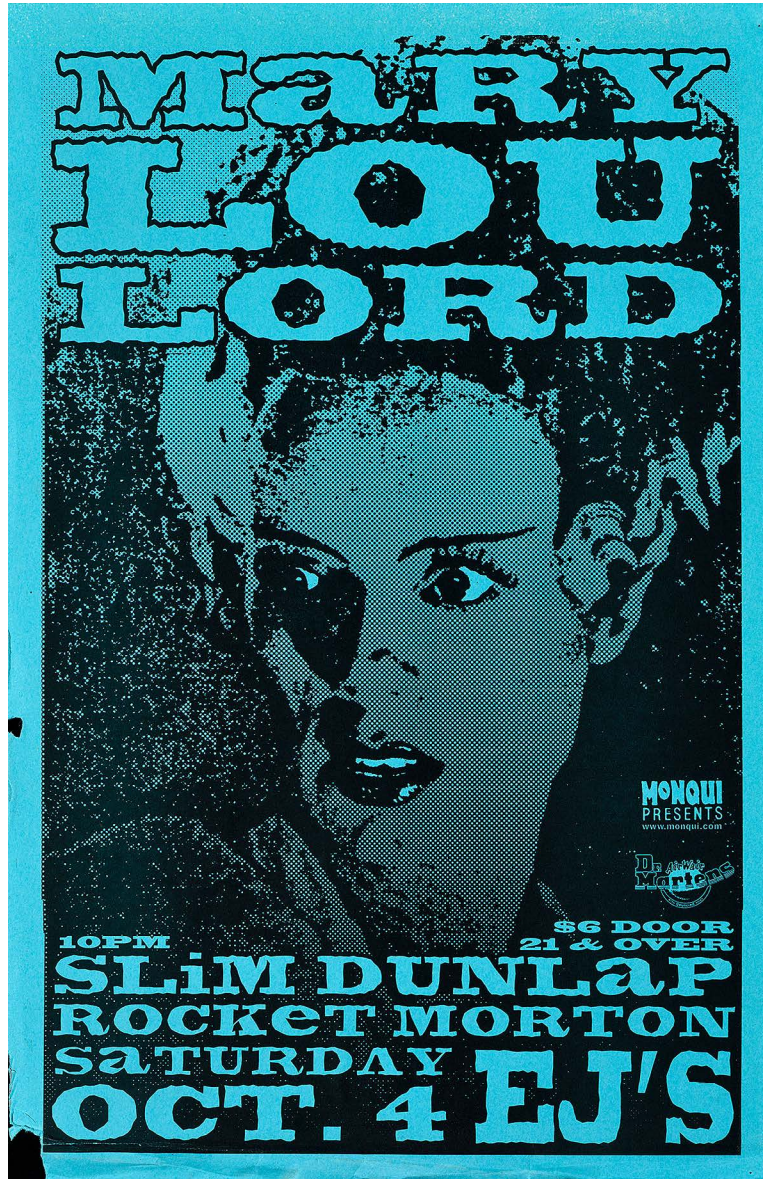
Man or Astro Man?, 1997



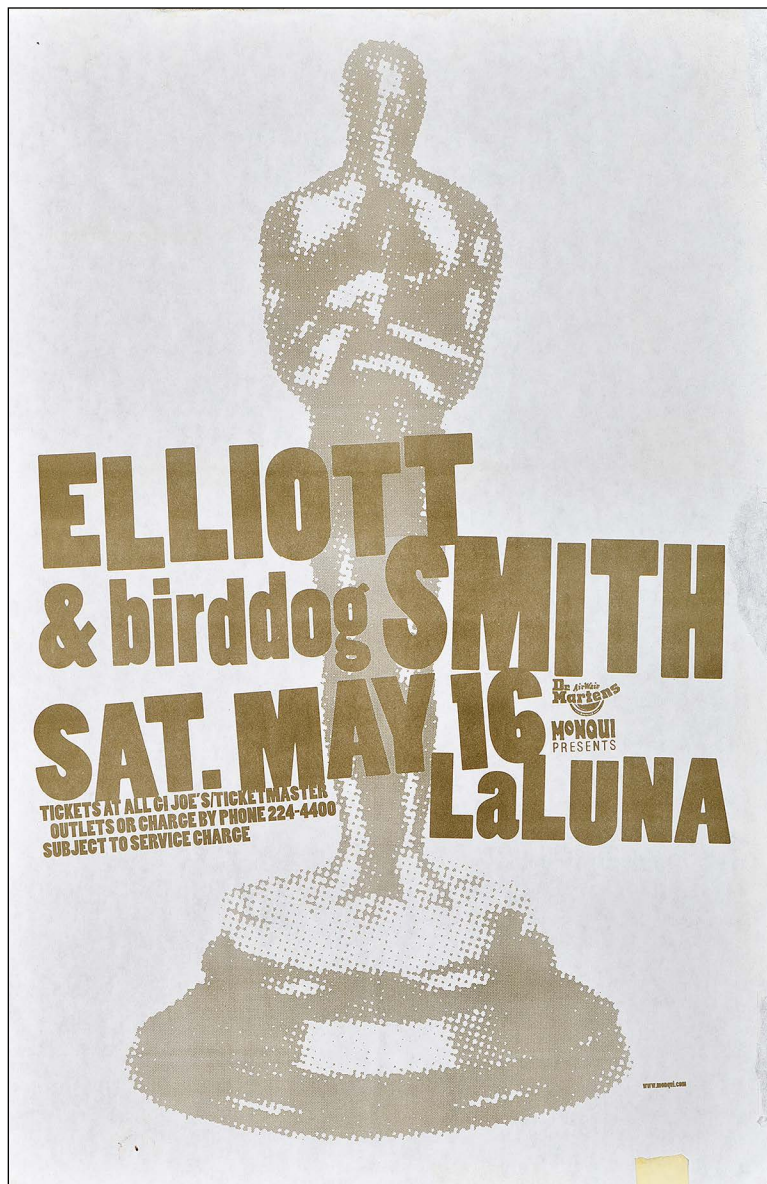
Local H/Stanford Prison Experiment/
The Superjesus, 1997



Artificial Joy Club, 1997



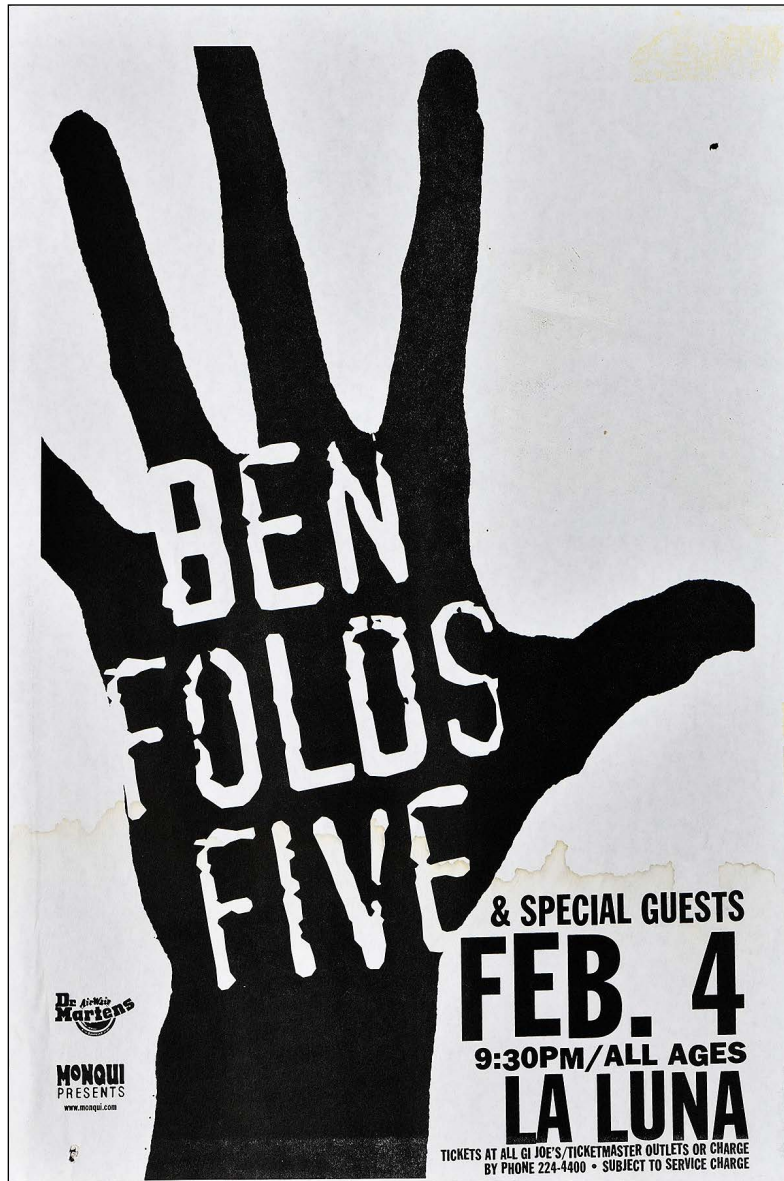
Mary Lou Lord, 1997



Elliott Smith, 1998



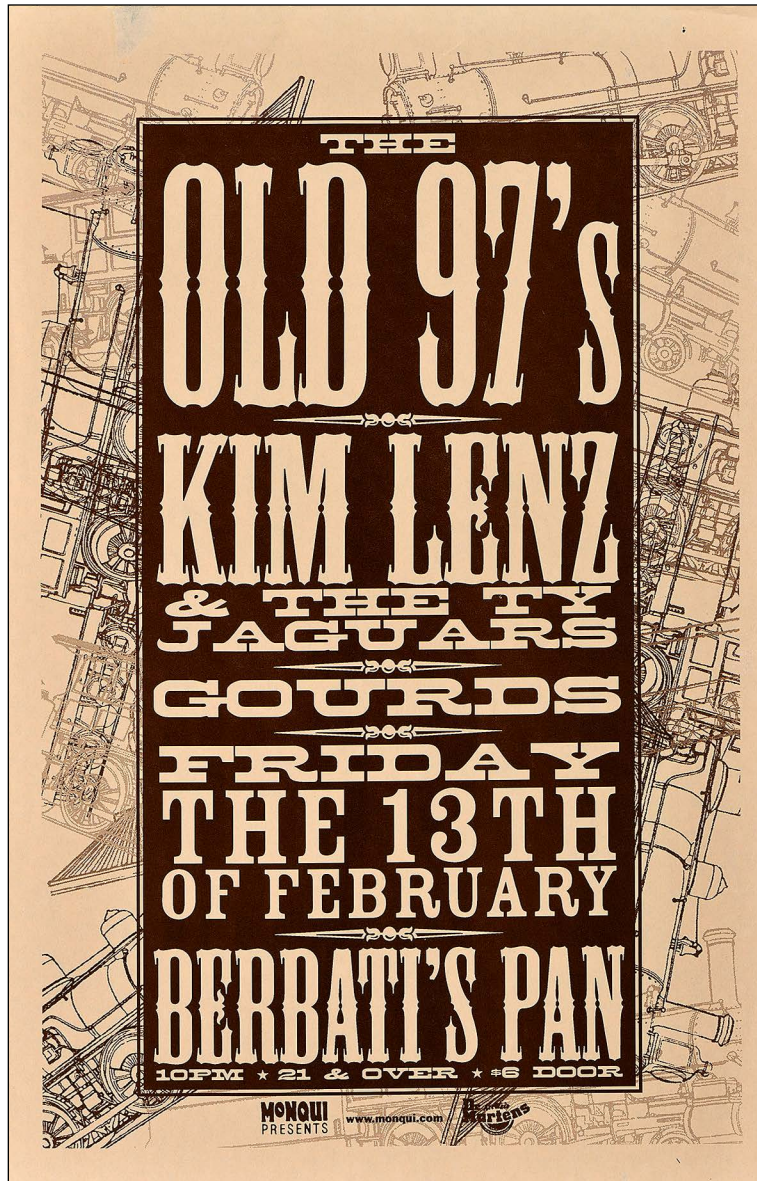
The Makers, 1998



Ben Folds Five, 1998



Pink Martini, 1998



The Old 97's/Kim Lenz
& The TY Jaguars/Gourds, 1998



Nomeansno/Royal Grand Prix, 1998



Cornershop, 1998



John Paul Jones, 1999



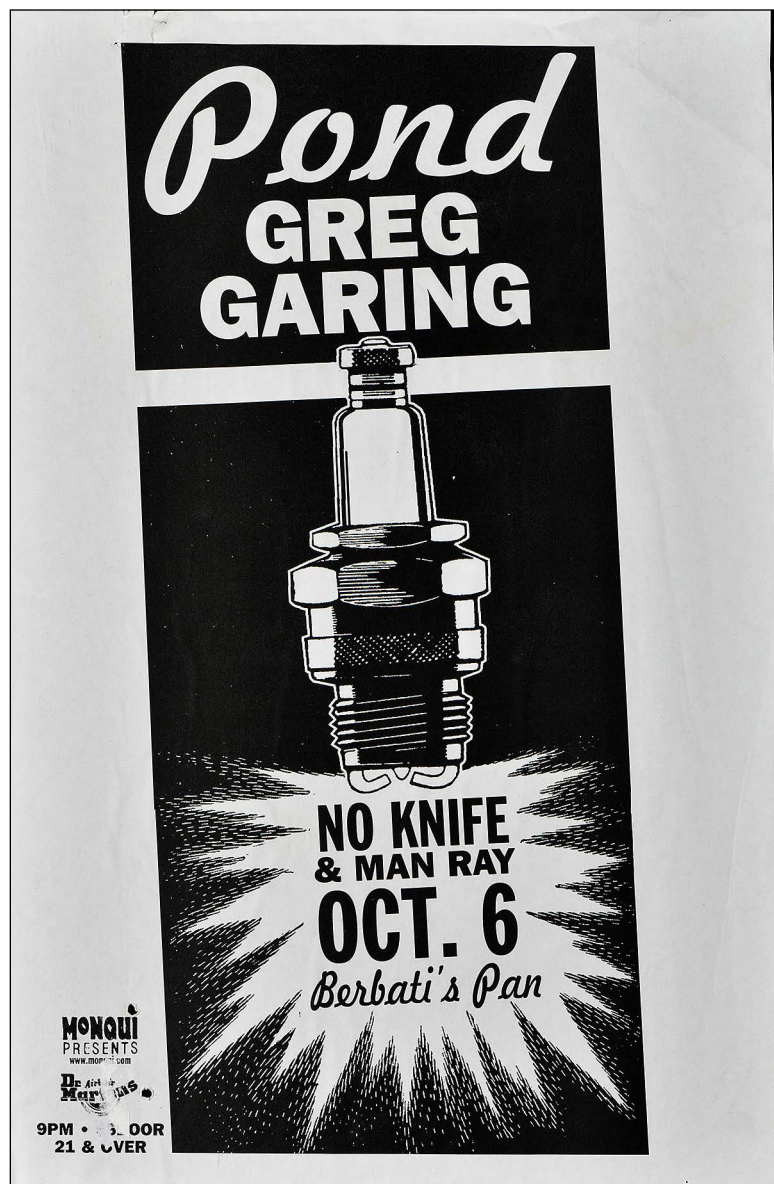
The Chemical Brothers, 1999



Super Furry Animals/Sunset Valley, 1999



Afghan Whigs, 1999



Pond/Greg Garing, 1999



Joe Strummer & The Mescaleros, 1999



Collective Soul, 1999



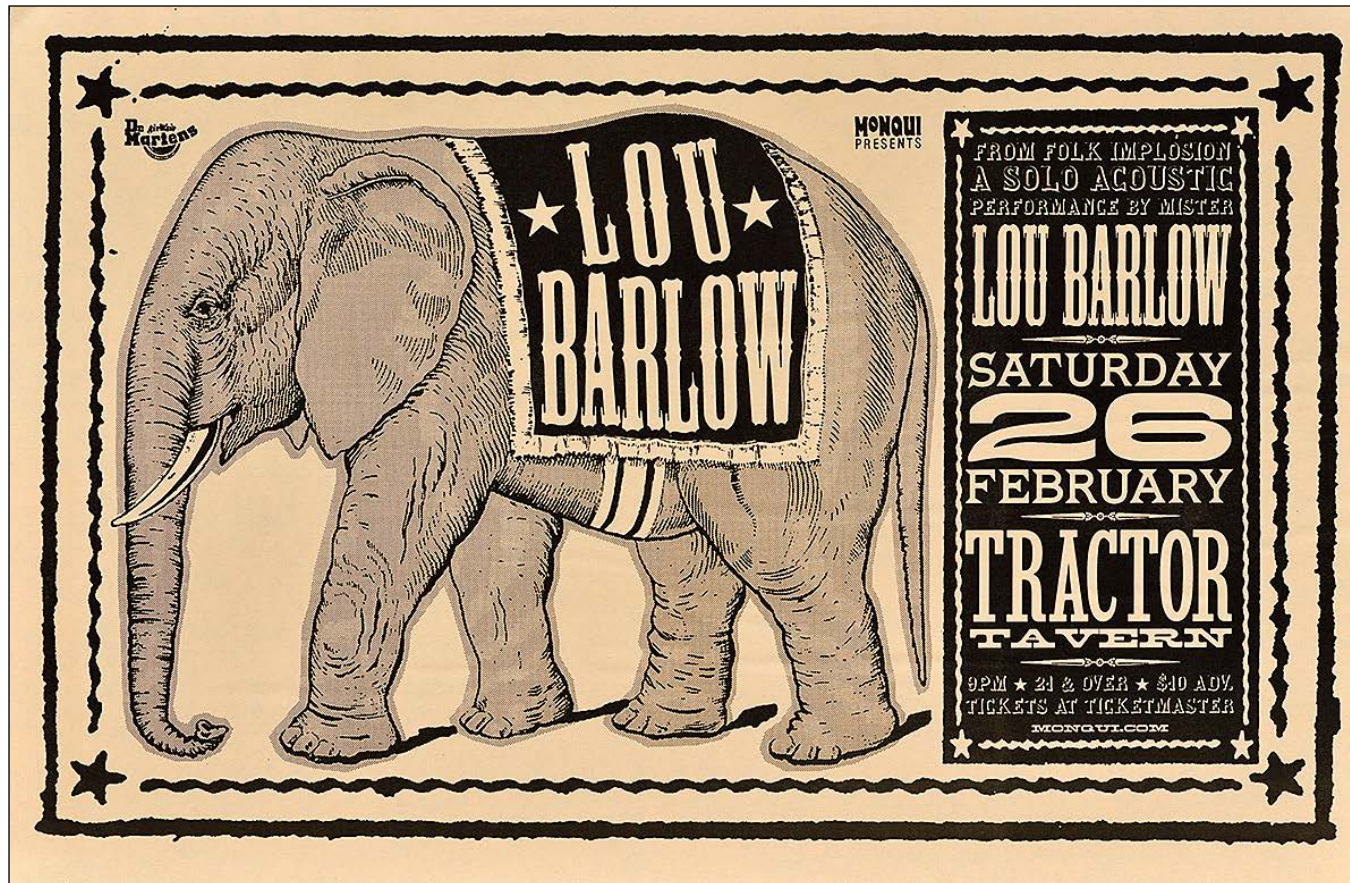
Patti Smith, 2000



Yo La Tengo, 2000



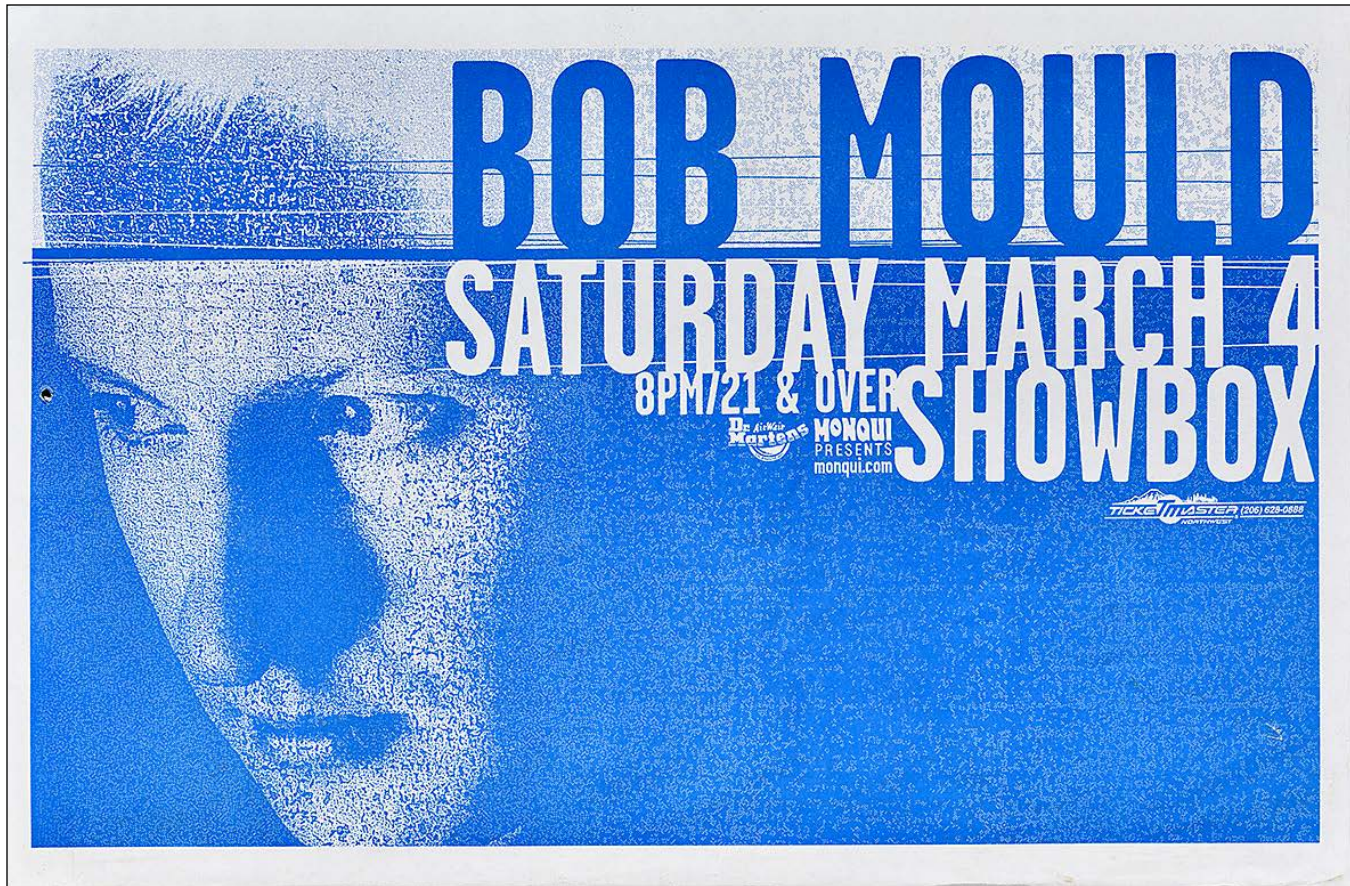
Yo La Tengo, 2000



Lou Barlow, 2000



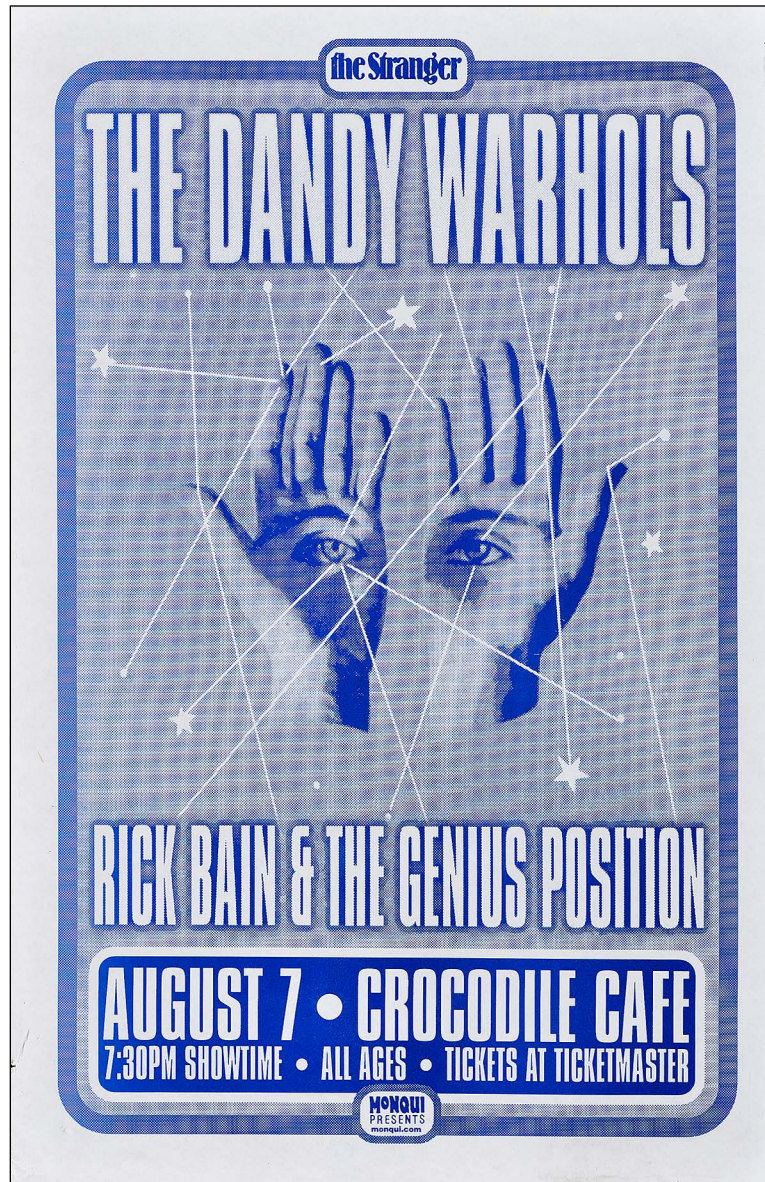
3 Leg Torso, 2000



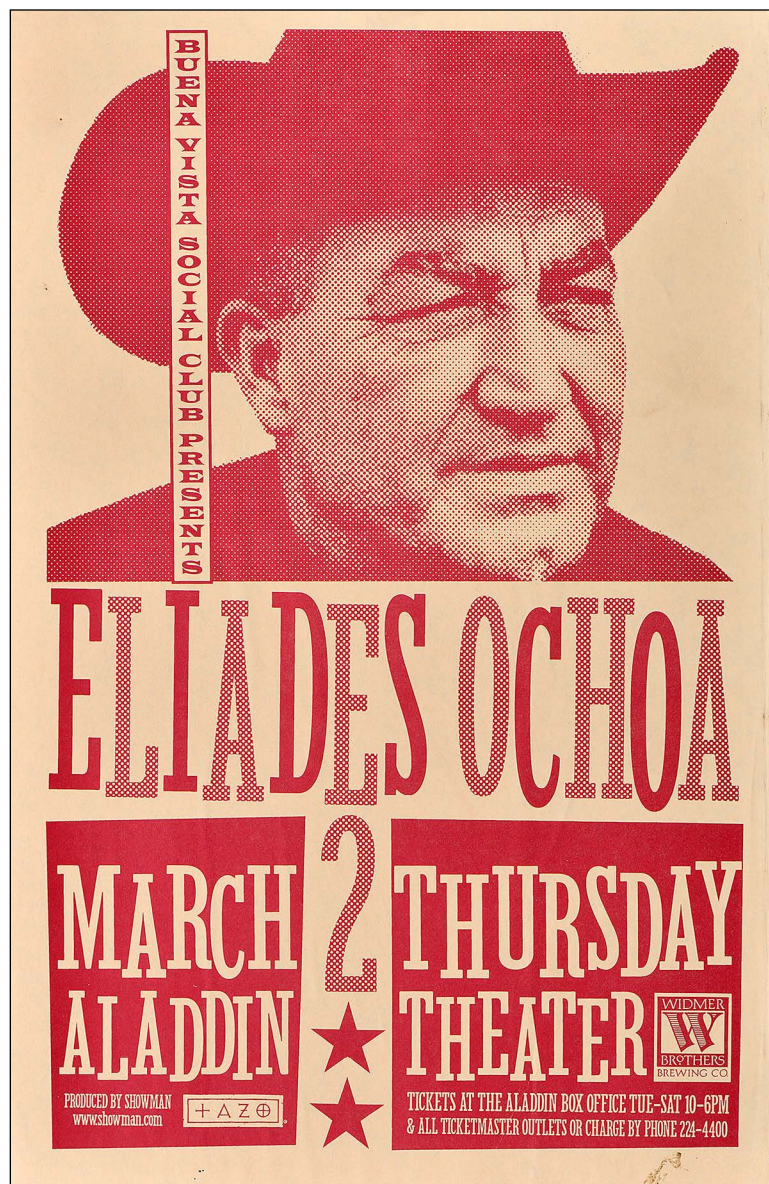
Bob Mould, 2000



Smashing Pumpkins, 2000



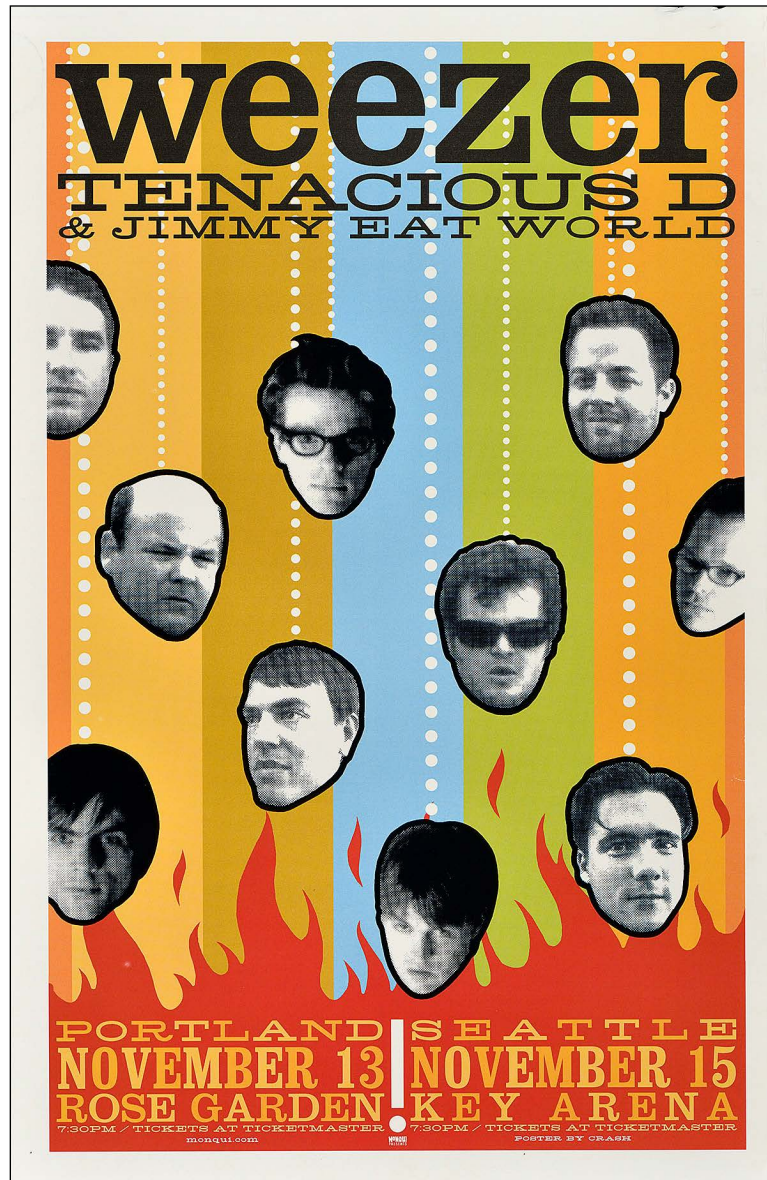
The Dandy Warhols/Rick Bain
& the Genius Position, 2000



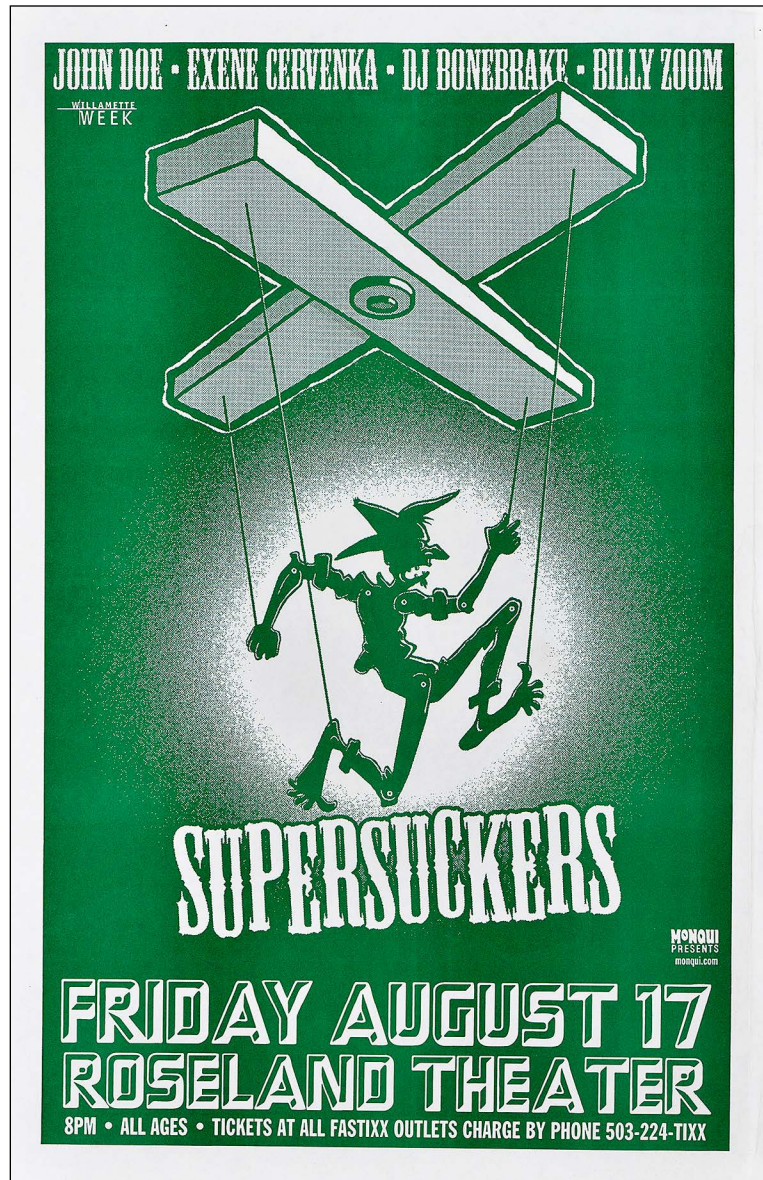
Eliades Ochoa, 2000



Joseph Arthur, 2000



Weezer/Tenacious D/Jimmy Eat World, 2001



X/Supersuckers, 2001



Mike Doughty, 2001



Reverend Horton Heat, 2001



3 Leg Torso Sextet/Black Cat Orchestra, 2001



Mogwai, 2001



Steve Earle & the Dukes, 2001



The Union Underground, 2002



Bright Eyes/Arab Strap, 2001



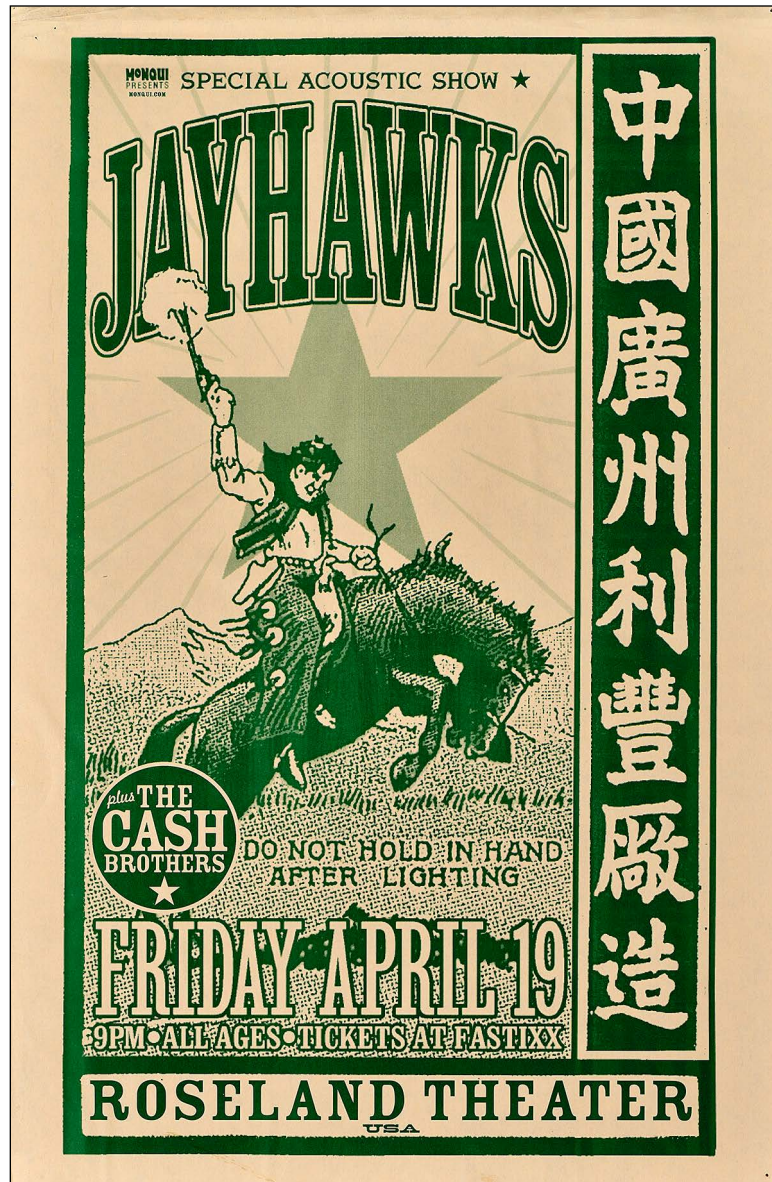
Frank Black, 2001



Powderfinger/Ours, 2001



Mercury Rev/The Shins, 2002



Jayhawks, 2002



They Might Be Giants, 2002



Lyle Lovett & His Large Band, 2002

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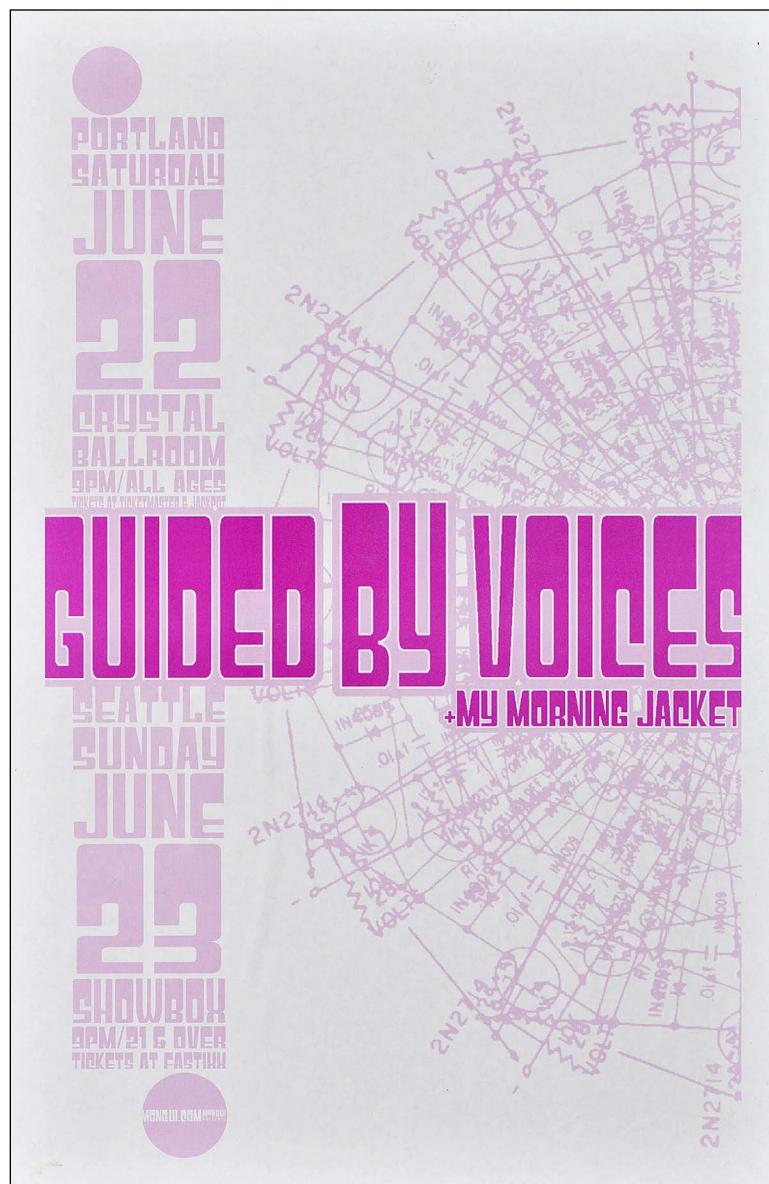
Reel Big Fish/The Starting Line/
The Kicks, 2002



The Jon Spencer Blues Explosion/
Yeah Yeah Yeahs, 2002



Cracker/Sound of Urchin, 2002



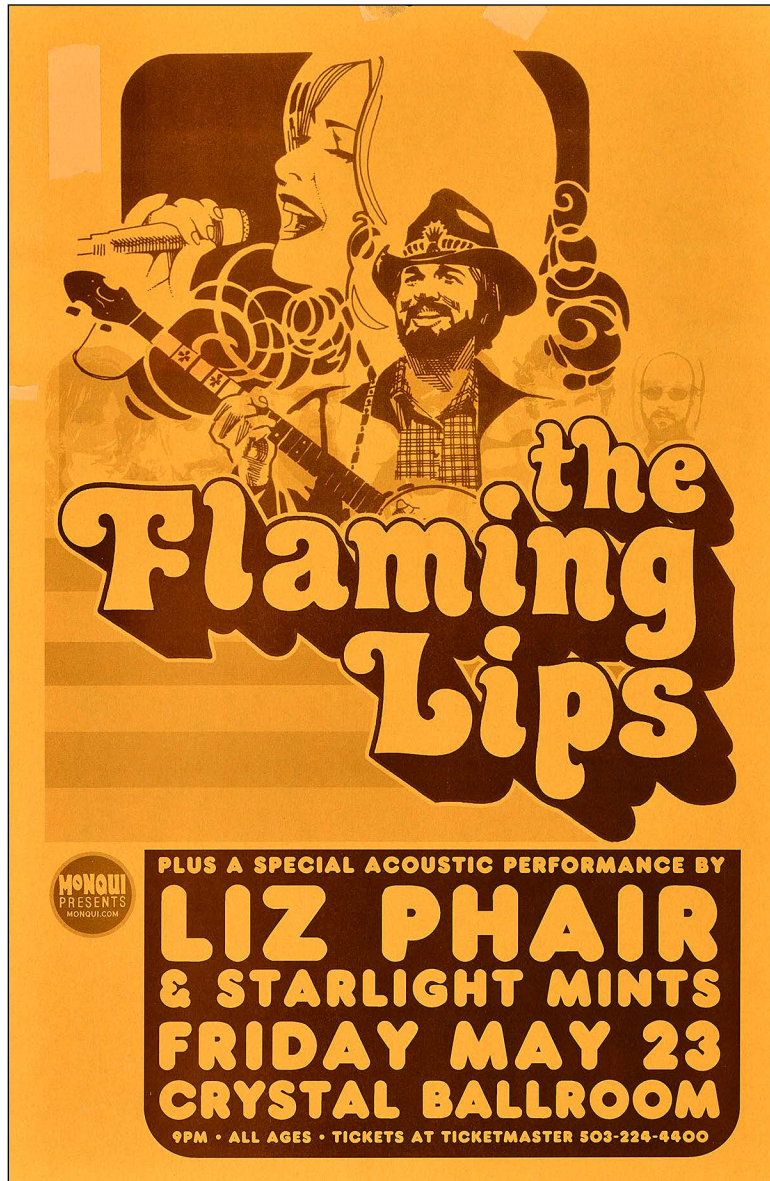
Guided by Voices/My Morning Jacket, 2002



The Vines/OK Go, 2002



The Faint, 2003



The Flaming Lips/Liz Phair, 2003



Satan's Pilgrims/Sleater-Kinney, 2003



Pixies, 2005



Sonic Youth, 2007

When Advertising Becomes Merch

While Mike first learned screen printing in high school, he did not really experiment with the medium until 1981 when he created a poster for his own band, Jungle Nausea. Even then, these designs were very simple and consisted of one or two colors, as he had difficulty mastering the necessary registration (alignment between screens) to produce more complex compositions. This changed around 1993 when he began collaborating with a silkscreen printer who demystified the craft for him.

Creating a screen-printed poster requires a few specialty tools. First, the design needs to be separated out into individual colors. This is most easily achieved by digitally converting each color to an image so all of its elements print separately in black onto transparent film (i.e. all the blue parts print as one layer, all the red parts as another). Each of these transparencies is then pasted onto a screen that has been covered with a light-sensitive emulsion, and is then exposed to a very bright light. The light hardens the areas of the screen that are not covered by the silhouette of those particular design elements. After washing off the screen, the only part where ink can transfer through it are those places originally covered by the design. Making sure to retain the same registration on each screen, the artist then builds the composition one color at a time, typically starting with the lightest and ending in black. While Mike has produced posters with up to ten different colors (and therefore ten unique screens), most of his designs incorporate between three and six colors.

By the early 2000s, the music business was no longer making massive amounts of money through record sales. From Napster to LimeWire, digital files were increasingly how people experienced music, the proceeds from which were significantly lower for all parties involved. Desperate for new revenue streams, bands switched their focus to live performance as the main source of income, tapping into the power of the poster as an additional way to generate cash—limited-edition designs, many of which were printed through silkscreen and signed and numbered by the artist began appearing at each venue. Mike was the ideal adapter for this new era in gig posters, creating some of the most memorable concert imagery of the 21st century for both mainstream and indie bands. Today, he continues to make hundreds of unique posters each year, all of which retain the same dark humor and distinctive visual sensibility that defined his earliest work.



Bikini Kill/Sleater-Kinney, 1996



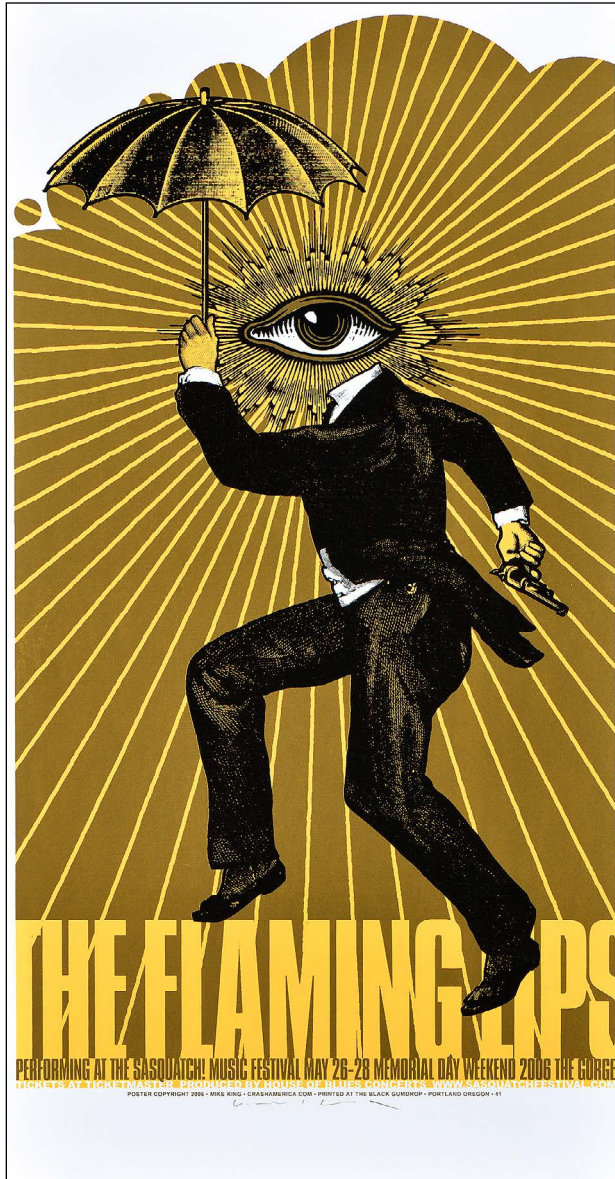
Hasidic New Wave, 2000



Cheap Trick, 2001



Quasi/The Jogger, 2004



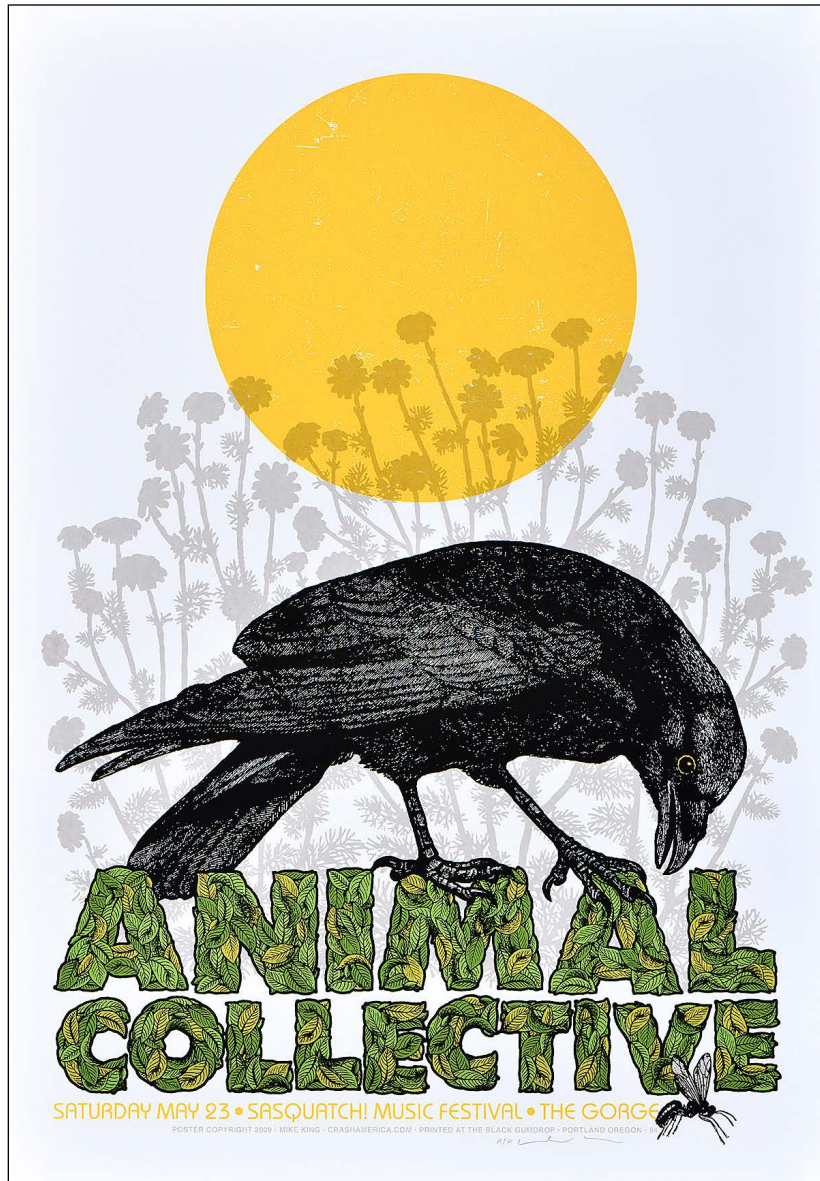
The Flaming Lips, 2006



R.E.M., 2008



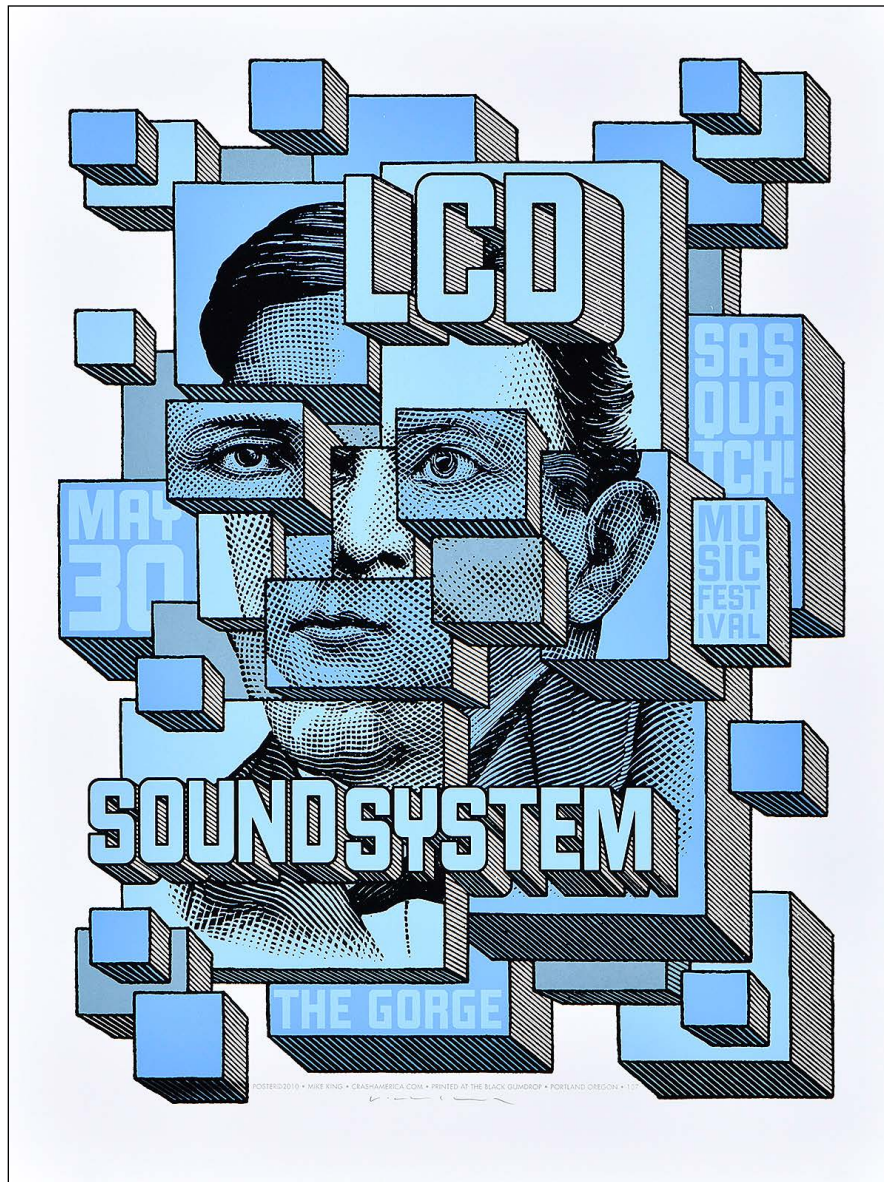
Vampire Weekend, 2009



Animal Collective, 2009



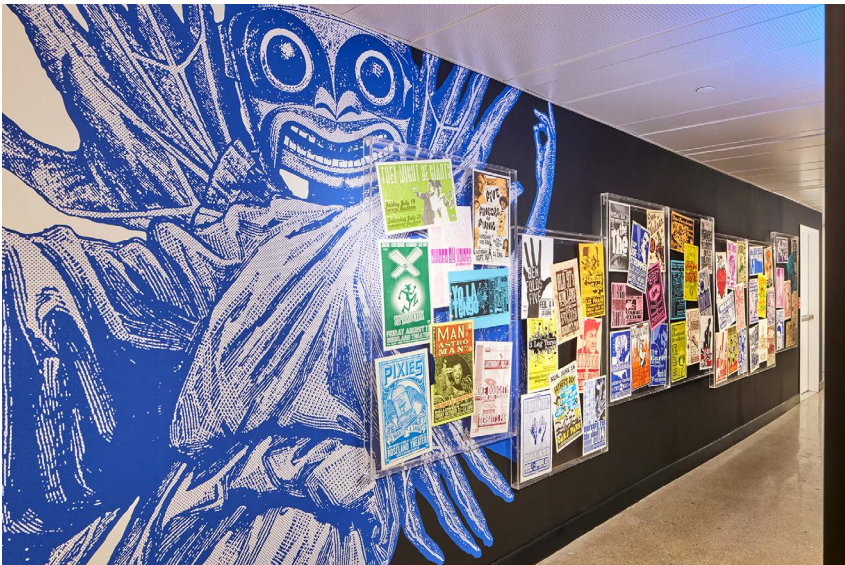
Yeah Yeah Yeahs, 2009



LCD Soundsystem, 2010



Iron & Wine, 2011



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The New York Times

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ATOMIC REDHEAD

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