

Homegrown:

Austin Music Posters 1967 to 1982

Alan Schaefer



The opening of the Vulcan Gas Company in 1967 marked a significant turning point in the history of music, art, and underground culture in Austin, Texas. Modeled after the psychedelic ballrooms of San Francisco, the Vulcan Gas Company presented the best of local and national psychedelic rock and roll as well as the kings and queens of the blues. The primary medium for advertising performances at the venue was the poster, though these posters were not simple examples of commercial art with stock publicity photos and redundant designs. The Vulcan Gas Company posters — a radical body of work drawing from psychedelia, surrealism, art nouveau, old west motifs, and portraiture — established a blueprint for the modern concert poster and helped articulate the visual language of Austin's emerging underground scenes.

The Vulcan Gas Company closed its doors in the spring of 1970, but a new decade witnessed the rapid development of Austin's music scene and the posters that promoted it. Austin's music poster artists offered a visual narrative of the music and culture of the city, and a substantial collection of these posters has found a home at the Wittliff Collections at Texas State University.

The Wittliff Collections presented *Homegrown: Austin Music Posters 1967 to 1982* in its gallery in the Alkek Library in 2015. The exhibition was curated by Katie Salzmänn, lead archivist at the Wittliff Collections, and Alan Schaefer, a lecturer in the Department of English



Gilbert Shelton. The Golden Dawn & the Thingies. Vulcan Gas Company. November 24 & 25, 1967. 28.5" x 22.5". Texas Music Poster Collection, The Wittliff Collections, Texas State University.

at Texas State University. The exhibition catalog, edited by Alan Schaefer and featuring essays by Texas music and popular culture scholar Joe Nick Patoski and poster artist and scholar Nels Jacobson, was published by the University of Texas Press in March 2015.

The *Homegrown* exhibition comprises approximately one-hundred and forty posters, handbills, and flyers selected from the Wittliff Collections' permanent holdings. The Wittliff, an archive and research center located on the campus of Texas State University, is dedicated to the preservation of the cultural, literary, and photographic legacy of the southwestern United States and Mexico. Documenting Texas music and songwriting and the culture that nurtures these endeavors is central to the Wittliff's mission, and donations of music posters date back to the Wittliff's founding in 1986.

In the mid-2000s, a colleague of Austinite Tom Wilmore, Sharon Sandomirsky, contacted Dr. Gary Hartman of the Center for Texas Music History at Texas State University and mentioned that Wilmore had expressed interest in placing his poster collection in an archive. Wilmore, who made his way



Jim Franklin. Shiva's Headband, Hub City Movers, and Whistler Armadillo World Headquarters. August 7 & 8, 1970. 11" x 17". Tom Wilmore Poster Collection, The Wittliff Collections, Texas State University.

to Austin in 1974 and quickly immersed himself in the city's nightlife, had amassed a diverse and thorough collection of posters from the era. Hartman visited Wilmore at his home in Austin, looked through the collection, and soon put Wilmore in touch with archivists at the Wittliff. Wilmore donated his collection to them between 2004 and 2008.

Wilmore's posters serve as the inspiration for *Homegrown*, and the majority of the exhibition pieces are from his collection. Other items were either donated by or purchased from a number of notable figures in the Austin music scene, with a couple of key pieces on loan from others. The Wittliff Collections already held a selection of posters from music journalist and biographer Joe Nick Patoski; Nancy Coplin, a promoter and booking agent; and Jodie Fischer, a long-time assistant to Willie Nelson. In order to fill out *Homegrown*, the Wittliff acquired additional posters from Houston White, a founder of the Vulcan Gas Company, and many of the artists themselves, notably Danny Garrett, Sam Yeates, Kerry Awn, Nels Jacobson, and Jesse Sublett. Artist Micael Priest and Bobby Earl Smith, a record producer and bassist and founder of Freda and the Firedogs, both loaned important pieces for the exhibition. These posters complement collections at the Wittliff such as the papers of poster and comic artist Jack Jackson, a.k.a. Jaxon, and the Oat Willie's collection.

The posters of the Vulcan Gas Company, produced by art directors Gilbert Shelton and Jim Franklin, along with likeminded experimentalists including Tony Bell, Jim Harter, and John Shelton, offered a profound reconsideration of the visual art of blues, soul, and rock and roll. Shelton, the creator of classics of underground comix such as *Wonder Wart-Hog* and *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*, was the club's first art director.¹ He introduced the Vulcan crew to split-fountain




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SOAP CREEK SALOON

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FEBRUARY	WED 6	THUR 7	FRI 8 and SAT 9		TUE 12	WED 13	THUR 14	FRI 15	SAT 16	FEBRUARY
	Augie Meyers	BUCKDANCERS CHOICE	*Augie Meyers* and the Western head music company		REX FOSTER <small>CLASSIC MONDAY CLASSIC</small>	Greezy Wheels <small>TEQUILA-NITE</small>	Plum Nelly	Greezy Wheels		
	SUN 17	TUE 19	WED 20	THUR 21	FRI 22 SAT 23		SUN 24	TUE 26	WED 27	THUR 28
	Shakers <small>FROM PATTON SQUARE</small>	BUCKDANCERS CHOICE	Greezy Wheels <small>TEQUILA-NITE</small>	Plum Nelly	Greezy Wheels		Augie Meyers	BUCKDANCERS CHOICE	Greezy Wheels <small>TEQUILA-NITE</small>	Plum Nelly

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Kerry Awn. Soap Creek Saloon calendar. Soap Creek Saloon. February 1974. 17" x 11". Texas Music Poster Collection, The Wittliff Collections, Texas State University.

PATTI SMITH



WITH SPECIAL GUESTS
JULY 12-8 PM Austin Opera House
TICKETS: INNER SANCTUM · TICKETS · SPICEWOOD SOUNDS · BACKSTAGE

Rick Turner. Patti Smith. Austin Opera House. July 12, 1978. 17" x 11". Tom Wilmore Poster Collection, The Wittliff Collections, Texas State University.

inking, a labor-intensive but remarkably striking blending of colors on the same ink roller to achieve a gradual transition from one color to the next.² Shelton and company's technical advances lent themselves to the psychedelic aesthetics of the period, and the results rivaled the work of their San Francisco colleagues. Collaborations between Vulcan artists were common, and one sees a notable example with Franklin and Shelton's flyer for a bill featuring Austin acid rockers Conqueroo and Bubble Puppy. Shelton also collaborated successfully with Tony Bell, a colleague of Shelton's at the *Texas Ranger*, the University of Texas's now defunct student humor magazine that featured a who's who of early 1960s Austin underground movers and comic artists.

Following Gilbert Shelton's departure for San Francisco in 1968, Jim Franklin took over art direction at the Vulcan

GRAM PARSONS



ARMADILLO WORLD HQS.
WED. NIGHT FEB. 21
REMEMBER, RESTAURANT OPEN TUES. to SAT.
Ken Featherston © 1973 for Directions Co.

Ken Featherston. Gram Parsons. Armadillo World Headquarters. February 21, 1973. 17" x 11". Tom Wilmore Poster Collection, The Wittliff Collections, Texas State University.

Gas Company. That same year Franklin introduced the armadillo as a symbol of the Austin underground. Franklin's first flyer featuring the armadillo was for a drug bust benefit at Woolridge Park in downtown Austin, just across the street from the city jail. Rather than try to visually represent the long list of bands booked for the benefit, Franklin chose an image to represent the audience of psychedelic scenesters: an armadillo smoking a joint.

Soon after the Vulcan Gas Company shut its doors in 1970, Austin's new home for adventurous music was established just south of the Colorado River at 525 ½ Barton Springs Road. The Armadillo World Headquarters was a "cultural arts laboratory" spearheaded by Eddie Wilson, the then manager of Austin psychedelic pioneers Shiva's Headband and current owner of Austin's Threadgill's restaurants.³ Jim Franklin played a key role in the establishment of the Armadillo and produced



Guy Juke. Dinettes, the Next, and the Dicks. Raul's. June 25 & 26, 1980. 14" x 8.5". Tom Wilmore Poster Collection, The Wittliff Collections, Texas State University.

the poster for the opening-night concert that featured Shiva's Headband. A decade-long experiment in diverse booking practices, the Armadillo helped firmly establish the city as a musical center. A loose collective of artists known as the Armadillo Art Squad, whose ranks included Jim Franklin, Micael Priest, Ken Featherston, Henry Gonzalez, Guy Juke, and Sam Yeates, produced posters for the venue that carried the spirit of psychedelia into a new decade and combined it with a surreal take on the imagery of Texana and unique interpretations of performers' musical motifs. The Armadillo brought everyone from Frank Zappa and Captain Beefheart to Sun Ra and the Ramones to Austin, and artists relished the opportunity to promote and illustrate the various musical offerings. Friendly competition ensued between artists, and a variety of styles were on display. Jim Franklin's posters offered surreal treatments of bands' musical aesthetics and lyrical



Gilbert Shelton and Jim Franklin. Conqueroo & Bubble Puppy. Vulcan Gas Company. May 31 & June 1, 1968. 7" x 5". Texas Music Poster Collection, The Wittliff Collections, Texas State University.

content. Micael Priest, who led Directions Company, Austin's first counterculture advertising agency, produced dense compositions with remarkable portraiture, comical images of debauchery, and bold lettering. Ken Featherston's skillful crosshatching resulted in intricate portraits of such Armadillo favorites as Gram Parsons, B.W. Stevenson, and Austin music scene pioneer Kenneth Threadgill. Guy Juke, whose bag of styles was as diverse as any Austin artist, moved seamlessly from comic book-inspired visual narratives to what Micael Priest describes as "cubist bebop."⁴

The Armadillo World Headquarters was by far the most prominent patron of Austin poster art in the 1970s. However, as the growth of Austin's music scene accelerated throughout the decade, new venues emerged and poster artists helped develop their visual aesthetics. The Soap Creek Saloon, a rock and roller's hideout located just outside the Austin city limits, benefitted from the monthly calendars produced by





Jim Harter. New Moan Hey and Onion Creek. Vulcan Gas Company. July 18 & 19, 1969. 11.5" x 8". Tom Wilmore Poster Collection, The Wittliff Collections, Texas State University.

Kerry Awn, a Houston native who was influenced by the work of Rick Griffin and Ed “Big Daddy” Roth. Awn’s serial body of work for the Soap Creek Saloon reads like a comic book; it is an ongoing chronicle of the bands who performed and the regulars who frequented the out-of-bounds roadhouse. Another artist who offered comic book-inspired sensibilities to music-related visual art is Jack Jackson, a.k.a. Jaxon, one of the key figures in the development of underground comix. His poster for Sir Doug and the Texas Tornados’ *Texas Rock for Country Rollers* tour features sequential panels advertising each stop on the tour, which included an engagement at Soap Creek where Sir Doug and company were regular performers.

The mid-1970s saw the emergence of East Sixth Street as a home for music venues. First was the Ritz Theater, which was taken over in 1974 by Jim Franklin. Franklin booked a roll call of country, jazz, blues, and rock and roll luminaries. The most notable of Franklin’s Ritz-era posters are his portraits of bluesmen such as Bukka White and Bo Diddley. Franklin’s Ritz Theater was short lived, but an enterprising musician and blues aficionado from the Texas Gulf Coast kept the blues alive on East Sixth Street. Clifford Antone opened his Antone’s nightclub in 1975. Antone’s established itself as a blues institution, and it was Danny Garrett who became the venue’s go-to poster artist. Antone requested respectful portraits of blues performers for his club’s posters, and Garrett obliged with ornate renderings of blues pioneers such as Muddy Waters and B.B. King. Garrett produced a notable body of work for the Austin Opry House, too, which includes posters for Lou Reed, Warren Zevon, and Willie Nelson.

The gradual emergence of punk throughout the 1970s reenergized rock and roll and the visual art that accompanied

it. The Ramones at the Armadillo World Headquarters was arguably the first punk concert in Austin, and it was Micael Priest who riffed on the band’s first LP cover for a poster promoting the steamy July 1977 gig. Fellow Armadillo Art Squad stylist Guy Juke lent his ever-evolving style to the new waves of punk and rock and roll with posters for Devo and local punk innovators the Dicks. Rick Turner, whose poster and design work evolved throughout the 1970s, transitioned successfully into the punk era. He produced notable posters for national acts Devo and Patti Smith along with flyers and monthly calendars for Raul’s, Austin’s nascent punk venue, located just across from the University of Texas. Another Raul’s artist, Michael Nott, a.k.a. NOXX, was the most prolific poster artist of Austin’s early punk era. Musicians were getting in on the act, too. Jesse Sublett of the Skunks, one of Austin’s very first punk ensembles, lent his cartoon and collage-inspired skills to a number of flyers. Randy “Biscuit” Turner and Tim Kerr of the Big Boys, Davy Jones of the Next and the Hickoids, and Cam King of the Explosives produced posters and flyers for their own bands’ shows.

Austin’s music posters illuminate the unique artistic and cultural forces from which the city’s identity emerges. Music scholar and poster enthusiast Rush Evans notes, “This kind of poster image is certainly common to many major cities with live music. But in Austin, where the music and its history are so entrenched in the community’s way of life and its economy, there seems to be an incredible interest in the story behind each one.”⁵ And while the *Homegrown* exhibition is now over, the posters remain housed at the Wittliff Collections and are available for students, scholars, art enthusiasts, and music fans to view.★

Notes

- 1 Emerging in the mid-1960s in response to the censorship imposed by the “Comics Code,” underground “comix” were humorous and progressive publications that emphasized counterculture activity, sex, and social malaise. Key figures in the creation and publication of these comix include such notable figures as Robert Crumb, Frank Stack, and *Homegrown: Austin Music Posters 1967 to 1982* artists Gilbert Shelton and Jaxon.
- 2 Nels Jacobson, “Colorful Tales and Early Techniques: Postering in Austin,” in *Homegrown: Austin Music Posters 1967 to 1982*, ed. Alan Schaefer (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2015), 17.
- 3 Eddie Wilson, interview by Alan Schaefer, October 25, 2013, Austin, TX.
- 4 Micael Priest, interview by Alan Schaefer, June 7, 2013, San Marcos, TX.
- 5 Rush Evans, “Concert Poster Art Austin, Texas Style,” *Discoveries for Record & CD Collectors*, March 1996, 29-35.