

Post No Fliers

Emek's art is a sound to see

Billboard in 2007 published a list of "The 25 Best Rock Posters of All Time," one of those grand run-downs so favored by music magazines dedicated to debating the historical-importance hierarchy of everything from "Smells Like Teen Spirit" to the 20 most bitchin' speed-metal guitarists in the universe.

Notching slots among the poster immortals is the late-'60s/early '70s work of David Singer and Randy Tuten, which traffics in broad gestures and uber-earnest symbolism, and the unmistakably wonky lysergic balloony of psychedelic masters like Wes Wilson and Rick Griffen. Then there is the lamentable paucity of strong, original work in the '90s (barring the inexplicable absence from said list of the seminal, Mudhoney-era posters by Art Chantry, or anything from the '80s punk explosion, especially the iconic work of SST maven R. Pettibon).

What really stands out on the *Billboard* list—surprisingly, as this double-aught decade already has been quantified, qualified and ceremoniously cursed as nothing but an un-innovative rehash of retro styles—is the recent work of Portland-based artist Emek, who also designed this year's blazingly creative and perhaps already legendary Oregon Country Fair poster.

Neither completely out-there nor patently plagiaristic, Emek's work is at once a nod to the entire history of rock posters as well as a totally new development for the genre—a giant, mold-breaking leap forward in terms of what the rock poster can do and be, conceptually and stylistically and politically.

Dubbed "the thinking man's poster artist," Emek—born 1970, in Israel, unto a family of artists—is utterly in and of this 21st century, a young artist conversant with the lineage of his chosen medium and confident in the conveyance of his attractively idiosyncratic vision. Take a look at his brand-new book, *Emek ... the thinking man's poster artist...*: In posters promoting musicians far-ranging as Erykah Badu and Kraftwerk to Pixies and Audioslave, this 300-page retrospective reveals an admirably wide reach of styles, as well as an uncommon flair for the innovative and downright surprising.

For instance, there is the somber, sepia-tinted Decemberists poster, akin to a piece of 1920s Polish prole propaganda, in which a monstrous and somehow melancholy whale hovers above a stark agricultural moonscape of bare trees, graves, wheelbarrow and windmill. Now jump to the squared-off flier for DJ Shadow, as minimalist as the former is complexly detailed, and a quintessential work of Emek iconography, featuring a blood-red thumbprint spun under a turntable's needle, like a piece of vinyl.

Emek's artwork often blends, to stunning effect, organic or biological elements with the cold architecture of mechanic or post-industrial machinery, and his apocalyptic landscapes are animated by an overarching concern for our sad planet's ecological health—or lack thereof. His politics are strong but subtle, and never tendentious. "When possible, I like to put in some kind of a social message," Emek told me last week by phone from his home in Portland. "Rock posters have been kind of a fun vehicle."

And, with each new rock poster, Emek unflinchingly captures some essential aspect of the band at hand, even while leaving the inimitable mark of his artistry. Whether it is one of his gorgeous, intimate posters for Badu, or the medieval impressionism of his work for The Mars Volta, or the Terry Gilliam-like steampunk-cum-Gray's-Anatomy of a Pixies flier, the artist never fails to honor his subject with a sort of respectful scrutiny and intense focus on both the medium and the medium's message.

"Because I was raised in my parents' art studio, for them the philosophy of art was you should have a message or an idea," Emek explains. "You start with that. You have to conceptualize. Basically, you're your own art director. Once I have a concept, I figure out what style I am going to work in. For me, the most important thing is the style... One day I could be drawing skulls and monsters, another day I could be drawing trees and flowers," he adds.

Emek, by the way, charted three posters on *Billboard's* top 25, landing as high as fourth on the all-time list for his haunting Coachella 2007 poster. Despite garnering such high accolades (including praise from R. Crumb and Art Chantry), his work remains essentially demotic, decidedly unstuffy and a bit rough-hewn in terms of approachability. Emek's posters are the equivalent of garage rock—art made in the basement for the sheer joy of making it.

"I came of age during punk rock," he says of what was arguably the most poster-prolific era in music so far. "This is art you can put on the street. DIY (Do It Yourself) came way before the punk movement. The history of rock posters was more about street culture. On several levels, I try to make my art affordable, because it's people's art."

Even so, Emek says he is comfortable negotiating the vagaries of the marketplace without compromising his vision. "I don't look at it as branding in the same way as other products," he says of creating posters for bands. "I try to keep my stuff looking not so slick or corporate... I'm lucky enough that I get to pick and choose my jobs, and I found a niche that works for me. I don't know what 'selling out' really is," he adds.

"I think a lot of people come to me because they like my aesthetic," Emek says. "Of all the types of commercial art I could do, I chose music because, on a primal or basic level, it's a sort of coming together for people."

Granted, it's natural for fans of Emek's work to wonder about different projects he may be planning down the road a ways, say in five or ten years. Will he someday paint expressionist triptychs of watermelons in watercolor? Polaroid photography of refrigerators? Though Emek doesn't rule out the possibility of some day making a jump to a new format, his answer to inquiries of "What's next?" is refreshingly blunt and totally sensible.

"People ask me that question, and you'd think after all this time I'd have an answer," he says of moving beyond poster art. "It's still fun. It's still about listening to the music and coming up with an idea, and the whole adrenaline rush of a deadline. Every project has its own challenges and it keeps it new and interesting. When it ceases to be fun, I'll take a more active look," Emek adds. "So far this has been working, so I keep doing it." EW



EMEK IN TOWN

WHAT: Artist reception

WHERE: WOW Hall, 291 W. 8th Ave.

WHEN: 5-7pm Friday, July 29

WHY: Emek will be on hand to sign copies of his posters and new book for sale