



LOVING THE SUMMER OF LOVE

Salem museum explores rock concert posters and counterculture fashion of the 1960s by Bob Keefer

It was 50 years ago today — well, more or less — that my generation found itself.

Rock 'n' roll turned grand and pretentious that year, 1967, when Sgt. Pepper taught the band to play with a real live symphony orchestra. Here in Eugene, KLCC went on the air for the first time, and the Oregon Country Fair was two years away from being born.

Across the ocean, Vietnam was purring along like a macabre lawnmower.

That was the year of the Summer of Love.

I was 15. My friends and I sat on the beach in Los Angeles smoking dope and reading Camus and Lenny Bruce and predicting the imminent legalization of marijuana. (It was inevitable, we knew, because pretty soon all the judges and legislators would be potheads, too. It just took a bit longer than we expected.)

Cut forward half a century. I've been married for decades and have a grown son. I'm on Social Security and Medicare. And even as an editor at Eugene's alt-weekly I'm definitely part of what we always used to deride as the Establishment.

And so now I'm walking into a building in Salem to see a chapter of my youth "pinned and wriggling on the wall," as T.S. Eliot once put it, in an exhibition that's just opened at Willamette University's Hallie Ford Museum of Art.

Behind the Beyond: Psychedelic Posters and Fashion in San Francisco, 1966–71 was the brainchild of Oregon artist Gary Westford, a trim gray-haired fellow who greets me in the museum lobby with a rush of enthusiasm. Westford is a painter recently retired from teaching studio art and art history at Linn-Benton Community College. As a 20-something in 1968, he lived just a few blocks from Haight-Ashbury.

"I came a little late to the scene in terms of the Summer of Love," he says. "But there was still a palpable sense in the air that all things were possible. Something big was happening."

Much of that "something" was in the form of rock 'n' roll concerts being staged by such bands as Jefferson Airplane, the Jimi Hendrix Experience, the Grateful Dead and Big Brother and the Holding Company. The streets near Westford's apartment were alive with bright, colorful posters advertising the concerts.

He started collecting them, sometimes pulling them down off telephone poles and sometimes buying them for a dollar or two at concert halls. Then, like so many young people did in those days, he thumbtacked them to the walls of his apartment.

At least one poster in the Hallie Ford exhibition, now properly framed to museum standards, still shows Westford's thumbtack holes. Along the way he picked up posters from a new generation of artists, including Victor

Moscoso, Wes Wilson, Stanley Mouse, Alton Kelley, Rick Griffin, David Singer and Bonnie MacLean, all represented in the exhibit.

Looking back now at the imagery in those posters, which were commissioned and published by concert promoters such as Bill Graham, I see traces of the adolescent car- and surf-culture doodling that all my grade school friends and I used to do in class to infuriate our teachers: winged eyeballs, surfboards, snarling monsters, smoking tires on drag racers.

It's good to realize, 50 years later, that a few kids who were drawing those things made a career out of it.

Westford understood, even in his youth, that these posters were more than mere decoration.

"When I was 22 and these posters were on my wall, yes, they were emblematic of our era," he says. "But I also recognized early on that they were exciting works of art. I thought, 'Someday I'll do something with these posters.'"

Over the years, Westford has collected hundreds of examples from the psychedelic era of poster art, which centered on San Francisco and a small handful of music promoters and graphic artists. The exhibit he's curated at the Hallie Ford, with the help of museum director John Olbrantz, makes a strong case that these works are in fact art and not mere ephemera. It contains just more than 100 posters, photographs and other items.