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I like Madison Music.
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The gig poster

Madison's contribution to the art

By S.J. Barlament

[CLICK](#) for a slide show of Madison gig poster art.

Most people don't give much thought to the fliers they see on kiosks and storefronts around town — the ones advertising pop concerts. But the best fliers — or gig posters — rise to the level of art. They're part of a tradition that includes the UK's Hapshash & the Coloured Coat, Raymond Pettibon and Leia Bell, who has gained a following for the work she's done for (among others) Moby and Weezer.

There wouldn't seem to be much call for truly inspired poster making in a city the size of Madison. "The area is limited, and the venues are even more limited," says Barry Kalpinski, a local graphic designer who's fanatical about gig posters as an art form. "When you think of a poster scene, it usually goes hand-in-hand with a music scene. Austin, Seattle, Portland and Minneapolis all have great gig-poster artists *and* music scenes. Being stuck between Milwaukee and Minneapolis doesn't help the scene in Madison as much as you'd think it would."

But despite its size, Madison has nurtured a few notable gig-poster artists. Says Rob Oman, who has created posters for both local favorites (Knuckel Drager, Droids Attack) and touring acts (Neko Case, Shonen Knife, Man or Astroman?), "I think it's kind of cool that you have so many people taking the time to do silk-screened posters in such a small city."

Oman, who plays guitar for Madison's the Mandalorians, started off by doing posters for his own band. And then? "Other people wanted me to do stuff for them. I think that's how most people get started. I'll do a poster for my band, the other bands on the bill like the poster, they want a poster for their next show, those bands see that poster, and on and on."

It was much the same for Nathan Meltz, an elementary school teacher who creates posters for such local bands as Digibot, the John Ashcroft Fanclub and the Super Eights (of which he's a member). "I first started making posters and other silk-screened merchandise when I was playing in a touring band," he says. "We needed promo tour posters to send out to clubs. I didn't start taking it too seriously until a couple years ago."

In October, one of Meltz's creations, for a show at the Slipper Club last January, won "poster of the week" honors on [gigposters.com](#), a Web site featuring impressive work by poster artists from all over the world. The [poster](#) is notable for its crayon-drawing style and a look that would be appropriate for a demented illustrated edition of *Wind in the Willows*.

And Meltz isn't the only Madison-based poster artist who's gained a bit of fame lately. Consider James and Melissa Buchanan, two former UW art students who



**The Little Friends of
Printmaking**

started making gig posters just over two years ago and who are now better known as the [Little Friends of Printmaking](#).

Like Meltz, James and Melissa didn't think much of what they were doing when they first got started. "Early on, we were just doing one poster here and one there," says Melissa. "We didn't start taking it really seriously until much later."

The Little Friends of Printmaking have now created works for everybody from Death Cab for Cutie and Yo La Tengo to Madison's WSUM, much of it notable for phantasmagorical and animal imagery. Says Meltz, "Just when I think they can't do anything more with their visual vocabulary, they do something really different, but still consistent. Weird animals that are rough or scary. Or a giant metropolis inhabited by suicidal bears."

With their distinctive style, the Little Friends have carved out a place for themselves in the music industry. As Melissa puts it, "Concert promoters and the bands who hire us do so with a certain expectation of what we'll deliver. So to an extent we're free to just do our thing."

But that doesn't mean they don't feel a certain responsibility to the artists whom their work ultimately represents. Says James: "The challenge of designing a concert poster is to say something new and interesting about an artist or an event while still remaining appropriate. We've actually turned down work because we didn't feel like we could make something appropriate for the band."

Gig posters have changed a bit since the cut-and-paste days of the mid-'80s. "The days of sitting at a typewriter, tracing band logos by hand, and cutting and pasting graphics with scissors and glue are pretty much over," says Matt Quigle, a database administrator who does gig posters for the Slipper Club and the Inferno on the side. "Now people have easy access to all sorts of graphic design programs, the Web for snagging whatever graphics they need, and professional serigraphy equipment in their basements."

But that's not to say just anybody can make a poster worthy of respect for anything beyond its utility. "Composition, color, shape and typography used together effectively are what make any great design," says gig-poster artist Mike Kerwin. "It's the artist who takes all these factors into account who's going to be able to create a great poster. But that's not as easy as some might think."

Kevin Wade, creative director at Madison's Planet Propaganda and the creator of a few award-winning gig posters of his own, says that the best posters are "hand-crafted, limited-edition mementos, uniquely created for a very small, passionate group of music/art subversives, specific to an event. The art is amazing, and it's deserving of gallery display."

Indeed, the Little Friends of Printmaking embarked on a cross-country gallery tour earlier this year with Canadian poster artists Serigraphie Populaire. They were surprised to find the shows attracting big crowds: "We ended up booking 25 dates across the U.S. and Canada, and with a few exceptions, the shows were very successful," says Melissa. "We showed at Soap Factory in Minneapolis and drew 800-plus visitors to our opening."

Madison had its own gig-poster gallery show last summer at [Firecracker Studios](#). According to the gallery's Sam Johnson, another respected local gig-poster artist, the turnout was fantastic. The exhibit featured works by Meltz, Oman, Wade, the Buchanans and two former Planet Propaganda employees who have since gone on to establish the well-regarded Minneapolis-based outfit Aesthetic Apparatus.

Meltz's posters are inspired by contemporaries like Aesthetic Apparatus, Oman and the Little Friends' Buchanans.

"My elementary-school students are constantly teaching me more about taking risks in art, too," he says. "Using raw, immediate imagery and keeping it simple. Lately, I've been exploring this 'machine versus organic' type of thing, which is really just aping painters like Charles Demuth and Charles Sheeler and some of the Dada

collage artists."

Quigle finds inspiration in what he calls "trash culture."

"I did a set of 'nudies' for Pachinko at O'Cayz Corral where I used glitter and clear glue to create swimsuits to cover the female naughty bits and the male naughty bits. Folks would stand in front of them and frantically wipe all the glitter off until they could see all the T and A. And D. There's nothing like glitter all over the street and a nice shot of a naked gal or guy to get folks to shake their head at a Pachinko show. It represented the band and the show well."

So making gig posters has brought a few local artists fame and a sense of satisfaction. Does it do much, generally speaking, to help them earn them a living?

"God, no," says Quigle. "I'm a database administrator. I mock up most of my fliers on the laptop while watching movies with my gal pal at night. It's relaxing — that's why I do it. I get paid in burritos and beer, which is fine with me."

See more local gig posters on www.thedailypage.com.

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