

# Todd Slater Interview



by Paul Gruskin

# Todd Slater

Interview

by

Michael Erlewine

## INTRODUCTION

This is not intended to be a finely produced book, but rather a readable document for those who are interested in in this series on concert poster artists and graphic design. Some of these articles still need work.

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## **Interview with Todd Slater**

by Paul Grushkin

Produced by Michael Erlewine

"He caught on pretty quick." That's the word on the hot, new Texas-based poster artist Todd Slater, coming from collectors, fellow artists, and even his screenprinter, Steve Horvath of D & L Screenprint in Seattle. Horvath prints as many as 20 posters a month (often in 400 piece, 8-color, large-format runs) for Justin Hampton, Emek, the artist- association known as PNE (Hampton, Emek, and Jermaine Rogers), and beginning recently for David Witt and Rob Jones.

Slater's work from halfway through 2004 to the present shows how a burgeoning poster talent and a master screenprinter can combine to create spellbinding concert advertisements for major alternative bands that have become collectible art pieces. Says Horvath, "Todd at first wasn't hip to all the possibilities. But when I showed him proofs of Emek's work, and in discussing the mechanics of building Justin's work, he saw how color enhancement thru metallic inks and unusual color blends can increase the richness and depth of the final piece. I see him really beginning to hit his stride. Now when I get a new design in from Todd, I often think to myself, 'this is going to be fun.'"



*Yo La Tengo by Todd Slater*

I spoke over the phone with Todd at his design studio in his home, two hours as the crow flies outside of Dallas.

Paul Grushkin: So tell me, you're a Texan?

Todd Slater: I am now. I was born in Peoria, Illinois. We moved to Texas when I was five years old. I was in Austin for many years and then I went to college in east Texas and I'm still regretting that [laughs].

Paul Grushkin: Where did you go to school in east Texas?

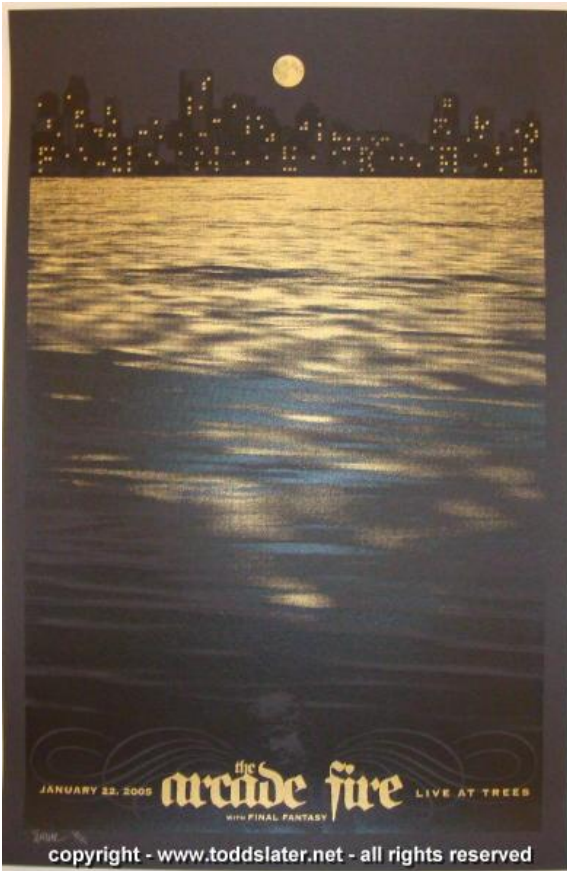
Todd Slater: Stephen F. Austin. I graduated with an art degree in 2003 with an emphasis in graphic design.

Paul Grushkin: What did you do post- college? Did you immediately seek work at an ad agency?

Todd Slater: I looked for straight jobs and I couldn't get any. So I continued working in a screen printing shop (Tattoo Productions - smart guys.) doing illustrations for t-shirts. I'd done that part-time while I was in school and I just took that on full-time when I got out. I didn't do much of the printing myself, but the elements I learned there definitely helped with my knowledge of the printing process for posters.

Paul Grushkin: That meant mechanically you were instructed in the proper roots way with Rubylith.

Todd Slater: Yes, there was a LOT of cut Rubylith [laughs].



*Arcade Fire by Todd Slater*

Paul Grushkin: As a kid, were you a scribbler?

Todd Slater: I always drew. I even draw when I'm on the phone - I make little concentric circles when I'm talking. I'm always drawing something. I sketch every day. I was lucky in that my parents were always encouraging.

Paul Grushkin: The things that you picked up in college, how were they germane to your work today?

Todd Slater: In college, I found looking through art history you discover what you like - you're educated as to all that happened previously. You're taking art history classes, always good, and you're learning some of the basics, which is good and bad depending on who's forcing what down your throat (laughs). College makes sense if it gives you perspective and focus. But it can be insular too. You know, like living on an island.

Paul Grushkin: Were you influenced at that time by knowledge of the Austin scene and Frank Kozik's meteoric rise in the early 1990's?

Todd Slater: I knew the name Kozik, but I wasn't that influenced by rock & roll poster artists. On the other hand, there was this Chicago movement from around 1966 - 1968 called the "Hairy Who." I think Keith Herzik mentioned it in ART OF MODERN ROCK as having influenced him too. When I tripped over it, I thought, 'this is great. This is exactly what I want my own stuff to feel like.' My work doesn't look like that, but I'm still really influenced by it.

Paul Grushkin: So you like 'rebellious deconstructivism,' something of that nature?

Todd Slater: Yes, because you're taught art is supposed to be 'this,' and then you see something completely different from your earlier points of reference, as in seeing what Peter Saul was all about . . . and I really, really liked it. It was funny. It turned me on. I just liked everything about it. I liked the rebellious parts too.



*Rev. Horton Heat by Todd Slater*

*Taking Back Sunday by Todd Slater*





Paul Grushkin: Is it in art school you're taught to faithfully reproduce a concept or direction, to be able to see something and replicate it - especially in terms of commercial potential? Then, only when you have that capability down will 'they' allow you to deviate from that point. Am I right? I've never been to art school.

Todd Slater: Yes, I would agree with that.

Paul Grushkin: Because in commercial work you're basically asked to fulfill a campaign. If it's advertising a product, basically it's less interpretation as it is a form of replication and enhancement.

Todd Slater: Definitely. So many people ask me to ape styles and stuff like that. I can't tell you how many times I hear that!

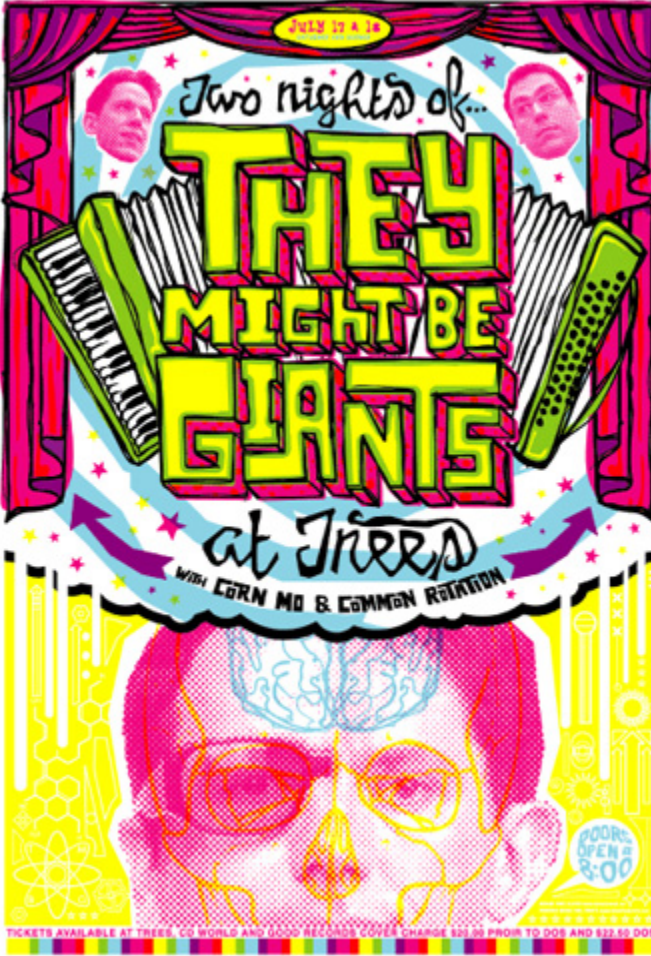
Paul Grushkin: Which gets pretty frustrating if you're a rock and roller who by nature wants to break out.

Todd Slater: Oh yes [laughs], you don't want to do that - duplicating effort over and over. You always want to do your own thing. You want to have as little compromise as humanly possible.

Paul Grushkin: So, did you manage to leave east Texas?

Todd Slater: Well, I'm still . . . I'm in Tyler, Texas right now which is still east Texas, but while I was working at that screen printing shop I found Gigposters.com. For the first time, far from the 'happening scene,' I was able to put names to people's work that I'd seen before. I realized after a couple of weeks of looking at this site that making concert posters was something I absolutely wanted to do. ClassicPosters.com also has increased my knowledge of the overall poster scene, especially the artists of the psychedelic period.

Paul Grushkin: Were you listening to a lot of rock and roll all through high school and in college?



*They Might Be Giants by Todd Slater*

Todd Slater: Yes. I mostly listened to a TON of Ween. I also was listening to Sonic Youth, the Pixies and the Meat Puppets. Yes, I was listening to rock and roll all through college. I was exposed to a lot of different new music styles - which is part of the reason to go to college.

Paul Grushkin: Just looking at the 57 pieces currently posted on Gigposters.com of your work, in the beginning you didn't have a style, or hadn't yet found a style. I mean, you liked bright color, that was pretty clear. But you were not yet someone who'd truly cut loose.

Todd Slater: When people first start posting on Gigposters.com their posters always look a certain way, almost clumsy like. Then you look at what everybody else is doing and you start seeing other posters that have more relevance than yours. It's at that moment your thought process opens up. The possibilities just start to make sense, and seem endless rather than constricted. Maybe my first efforts were restricted in their scope of imagination because I didn't make those posters for other people to see 'outside of my neighborhood.' I made them thinking a few people will see them and that's that. But . . . when you submit something to a powerful site where hundreds if not thousands of people are watching, you begin to realize a lot of people are going react to your work in relation to a whole lot of other work, and you start thinking harder about things like typography and image choice. Of course, given the spotlight, there's also the tendency to over-think and get too arty! You never want to get too full of yourself.

Paul Grushkin: I agree, great poster art is a marriage between technique and imagination. Jeff Kleinsmith of Sub Pop and Patent Pending says that the real breakthrough comes from a better understanding of typography. The hardest task is to integrate type with an off-the-wall idea. You want to be loose as heck, but poor type choices can trip you up, mess with your statement, pull power from your concept. How do you deal with your work getting looser, but still having the need to communicate as an advertising piece?

Todd Slater: I always think my posters come out better when it's for a band I haven't yet listened to. I think the pressures off then. In fact, I think the best way to get loose is to do a poster for a band you don't even listen to. You're forced to work more creatively at it, to get at something meaningful that draws attention to their show.

Paul Grushkin: In other words when you feel you're in uncharted territory, you're better off.

Todd Slater: My dream job would be to do a poster for every date of a Ween tour, but I think the pressure would just kill me. I think I'd be thinking . . . because I'm such a big fan of the band. . . I'd be thinking 'what would they think about this?' Everything would have to be impossibly perfect. I'm sure I'd over think each piece because I know their own work too well. Compare that to, say, Velvet Revolver, which is not a band that I listen to. But I like the way the poster came out - in fact, the concept and execution came almost easily.

Paul Grushkin: Well, then you'd have to say one of the hardest things would to have been the Ames Brothers and forcing yourself to reinterpret Pearl Jam 200 different times.

Todd Slater: I've the utmost respect for Coby and Barry at Ames. Their work is a perfect example of loose and tight. Ames, and Patent Pending, Aesthetic Apparatus, and Heads of State . . . for just those reasons we've been speaking about, these would be a few of my favorite poster artists.

Paul Grushkin: What do you admire about their thinking, or take from their approach?

Todd Slater: The best poster artists re- invent themselves. When they're on a roll, every one of their posters is completely different. And talk about the pressure in which to think like that - the Ames Bros. alone are at the top of the class. I remember reading in ART OF MODERN ROCK that sometimes they didn't get the green light until Monday, with the finished piece due on Friday to make a concert date. And it had to shine, had to stand out, among all that had come before. Amazing. You can learn from that, you know!

Paul Grushkin: Very true!

Todd Slater: To be able to just bang them out in that short amount of time and to be able to come up with interesting images every time, my oh my.

Paul Grushkin: Well at Ames, they've created an image bank where things that they've seen, not quite from childhood, but certainly from college on they've thrown into various drawers, files, and folders. So this way they've a rich repository to pull from and rely on to get some instant-active imagination. But the fact is to even create that archive you have to be actively watching the world go by. Kozik's like that - he has a great library. I'd imagine Mike King does too.

Todd Slater: Somehow every poster Coby and Barry do looks totally different but still says "Ames." It's just crazy. I'm hoping I might achieve something like that over the course of time.

Paul Grushkin: I'm going to take not such a wild leap and say that with your new Rev. Horton Heat, Taking Back Sunday, Cramps, and Velvet Revolver pieces, you're beginning to hit your stride. Something's happening here. Now, do you feel that too?

Todd Slater: Yes. I think because I'm doing this every day now, there's not a day that goes by I don't work on a poster.

Paul Grushkin: Is it your day job?

Todd Slater: My day job is a freelance graphic designer. I do other freelance design, but posters are a lot of that and it's becoming more and more of that.

Paul Grushkin: Are you now seeking gigs or are people coming to you?

Todd Slater: I do still seek out gigs, but more and more people are coming to me.

*Bad Religion by Todd Slater*



*Pretty Girls Make Graves by Todd Slater*

Paul Grushkin: Give me an example of people coming to you.

Todd Slater: I'm doing a final poster for Luna's final four shows at the Bowery Ballroom. I always wanted to do something for a New York venue and the Bowery Ballroom is this legendary place so I'm really excited about that.

Paul Grushkin: As excited about having done the Modest Mouse and Keane posters for the 'new Fillmore' series?

Todd Slater: Yes, I was happy to do those. Knowing the history of the Bill Graham series and how many great artists have been associated with it - from Rick Griffin to Chris Shaw - I approached Arlene Owseichik, who was the longtime Art Director there until very recently. I basically begged her to give me that Modest Mouse poster [laughs]. And she didn't want to either; she didn't know who the heck I was. But I'm a good persuader (laughs).

Paul Grushkin: Exposure in major cities is a must. Even though the New Fillmore' series pays dirt cheap, the fact is, now you're IN the Fillmore series. But the bigger picture is of course getting work for tour, through the merchandising companies like Bravado, FEA, and Signatures Network.

Todd Slater: I do a lot for Signatures, maybe a couple jobs a month for them now. Scott Corkins, Aimee Bruckner, Darryl Kenwood, Tania Chu are great to work with. I just finished stuff for the Yeah Yeah Yeahs and I got approvals on a couple of designs for Incubus, Madonna, and Primus. Their roster is certainly as good a mainstream roster as there is in rock and roll. They usually give you about a week to do the jobs, which is fine. I like that there are basically no laborious revisions involved; they either take it or they don't.

Paul Grushkin: Now do they further adapt them for the purpose of adding the type and any logo treatments et cetera?

Todd Slater: Yes, I always have to send them an Illustrator file and they tweak it from there. I've seen the finished product and the printing on the shirts is top quality. No problems with their hitting high production standards.



*Misfits by Todd Slater*



Paul Grushkin: Well they've one of the legends of rock and roll working for them - Frank Vacanti, their production coordinator. Have you ever spoken with Frank?

Todd Slater: No, but I've heard a lot about him.

Paul Grushkin: Frank ran production for Signatures' predecessor, Winterland Productions, in San Francisco and later, briefly, in Oakland. He owns the records for t-shirts printed in an hour, in a day, in a week, in a month, in a year, and for a tour. He supervised printing for the largest tours on record, Grateful Dead, Springsteen, Madonna, U2, New Kids, Ozzy, you name it.

Todd Slater: I can appreciate that. Even in the shop I worked at, there was a super competitive level that motivated everyone through the complete job. It was always, how many shirts can we print in a day? Can we keep that high quality all through the run? I think that sets you up for doing quality work in printing posters too. I mean, it's what I've come to respect from Steve Horvath's work at D & L Screenprint; my job is to come up with inspirational ideas, and his is to execute top quality production that also makes the deadlines. I just try not to make too many changes by the point he begins to burn the screens!

Paul Grushkin: Now, you chose D & L because of Justin Hampton?

Todd Slater: Actually, poster dealer Dave Mayer at PhilaArts in Philadelphia said he was a good guy to print with and I went to Steve's website and saw he printed for Emek and Hampton and the PNE team of Emek, Hampton, and Jermaine Rogers. So I arranged to get a poster printed with Steve and he gave me a really fast turn around time, and the quality was top notch. Then, I began doing so many posters that I was sending him the files on Monday and he was having them printed and shipped by Wednesday. This was all my stuff from the fourth quarter of 2004, when I was doing two posters a week. It was a lot for him to print, for sure. Without Steve's attention to detail and his teaching me about metallic inks and such, I don't think I'd have achieved the next level in my work so quickly.



*Cramps by Todd Slater*

Paul Grushkin: Todd, I'm going to say this as best I can: You're probably the finest new artist not to have appeared in ART OF MODERN ROCK.

Todd Slater: I appreciate that very much, Paul.

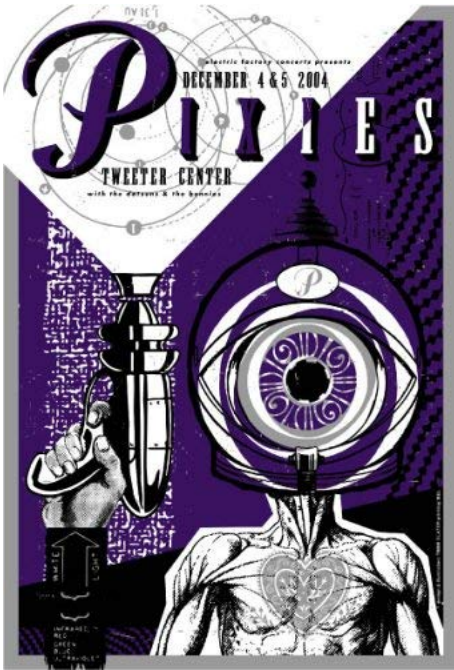
Paul Grushkin: When Dennis King and I first got to know you, things were still... well, you hadn't broken out in terms of style or interpretation quite yet. Sure, that was Dennis' and my opinion, but I think you'd agree. In a funny way, we kind of regret the book came out when it did, just before Christmas, because it never had a chance to include your truly emergent work. But that work appeared literally just after, when the book had to go to press.

Todd Slater: I knew that my posters were improving - and I've still got a long way to go - but knowing about the book, knowing that so many top quality artists and designers were going to be in it, like it was going to become the 'ultimate yearbook' of our modern-day scene, was a form of motivation all in itself.

Paul Grushkin: When you look back at your earliest work, which we can still see on Gigposters.com, and comparing it to the stuff that started to come out in the fourth quarter of 2004, how do you explain the difference?

Todd Slater: I wish that I could take the first stuff off Gigposters; I really don't want anybody seeing that anymore [laughs]. I just think that when I did those first posters, I wasn't really thinking about posters as much as I do now. I wasn't thinking about an efficient way to communicate whatever I was trying to say. I just think as I kept doing posters there were less and less intrusive elements in the posters and the concepts kept getting tighter.

Paul Grushkin: For example, right now you're expressing a great love affair with headshots that are twisted and bent in your imagination.



*Pixies by Todd Slater*



*Slayer by Todd Slater*

Todd Slater: That comes right out of Peter Saul's influence on me. He had a show of heads and portraits that sort of looked liked enlarged "Garbage Pail" kids or something. It just comes from really liking that guy, I think.

Paul Grushkin: You also had a period of time when you fell in love with black and red. Tell me about that because Rob Jones went through the same thing with part of an earlier White Stripes series.

Todd Slater: Yes, Rob's a good friend. After I made my separations I always flip the color. I'm able to flip the colors on the computer digitally very quickly and see, okay do I want it to be these three colors or these two colors. Red and black just became the most forceful to me. I just thought that scheme worked best, and also financially it was cheaper to do two colors because I was printing so many posters.

Paul Grushkin: After that black and red period when you were teaching yourself simplicity in color management, then you went into a further reductive mode, in other words stripping out lots of the complex content that was in those pieces and then concentrating on the head shots themselves, manipulating the shapes of the faces and changing their angularity or ellipse aspects, at that point it became tremendously interesting for the person enjoying the exercise. When you're moving away from the prosaic into the deconstruct/reconstruct, suddenly you're making people a believer in unusual shapes.

Todd Slater: Actually a lot of the posters do start off as just kinds of shapes. Like there was a sort of diamond shape for the Rev. Horton Heat poster, that was just kind of interesting to me, and I thought what other kind of shapes can I put around this, and it's like okay, well, this is kind of turning into a face now. A lot of times the full thought process originates from something as basic as an interesting starting shape.



*Col. Claypool by Todd Slater*

Paul Grushkin: Now, you also like thinking big and I guess that Steve Horvath is very adept at realizing things in big formats. With the exception of the Fillmore poster, is most of the last of the stuff from 2004, 24" x 36"?

Todd Slater: It's usually been 17" x 24". I think that's a good poster size. I've bought posters as a collector and when you're shelling out something over \$25, like \$35 or \$50, it's always a nice bonus when it's a big poster.

Paul Grushkin: What pound weight is the paper you're using?

Todd Slater: It's 150 pound, manufactured by French.

Paul Grushkin: It's paper that is very agreeable to silkscreen, am I correct?



*Franz Ferdinand  
by Todd Slater*

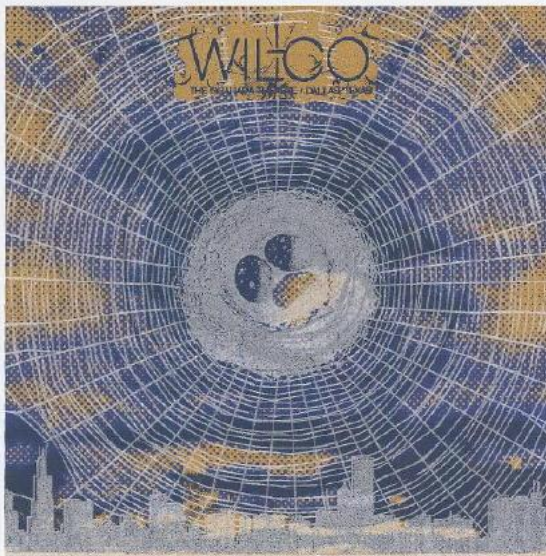
Todd Slater: Yes, that's one of the ways they advertise their product. It's really nice paper.

Paul Grushkin: Why is that paper critical to silkscreen? What is it about the process about laying ink upon that paper that makes that paper useful?

Todd Slater: It's not that absorbent, so the ink doesn't soak into the paper and get it wrinkled. It doesn't bleed very much; it holds ink very well. They have a Speckletone paper that I really like; it has such a nice texture. Good paper is important to achieving production deadlines, actually. With good paper that dries well, Steve can do an edition of 150 - 200, maybe two to three colors, in a single day, even if I sent him the films that morning.

Paul Grushkin: Are you sending him through an FTP site?

Todd Slater: Yes, I either FTP him or I send them directly through e-mail. We both have big e-mail accounts so we can attach big files.



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*Wilco Fire by Todd Slater*



Paul Grushkin: That is such a change in the weather. Stainboy was telling me what he and Andy Stern at Diesel Fuel are doing now could not be achieved otherwise.

Todd Slater: Right. It makes things a lot easier. Hugely easier.

Paul Grushkin: So you say that your editions are generally about 150 pieces now?

Todd Slater: Yes. It was a 100 for a long while, but I've been moving to 150. Hey, there's a demand (laughs). Got to go with the demand (laughs). But don't get me wrong, I'm grateful there IS a demand.

Paul Grushkin: Your arrangement with the club or the concert promoter and the band - are you seeking permission first from the club owner or concert promoter?

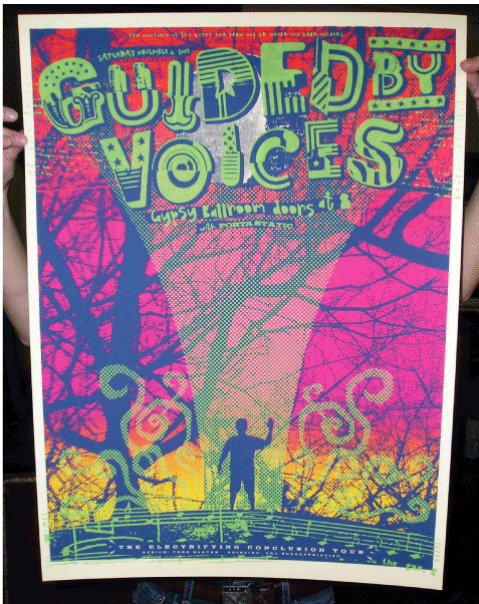
Todd Slater: That's usually the way I do it, I usually go through the promoter. I'm doing Neko Case and Luna at the Bowery and the arrangement I have with them now is that I'll give 50 posters of the 150, they can have those for merchandise to sell that night and then the other 100 are mine to sell to make up printing and design cost.

Paul Grushkin: And the Bowery of course will get a portion for posting.

Todd Slater: Yes, I send 25 to them for promo and I send a digital file too for them to print off, if they want to use that.

Paul Grushkin: Do you know in fact they're using the work for promo?

Todd Slater: Yes. There's that criticism, that concern. I read that a lot coming from artists and collectors - do these things ever get hung? I know when I do posters for Dallas gigs, I hang some of them myself. I'm, say, two hours outside of Dallas and I do check with the clubs and make sure that they're putting my pieces up, so people can see them.



*Guided by Voices Fire by Todd Slater*

Tod Slater: But, if you're going to do an edition of only 150, then after the split to think the whole city is going to be papered with them, it's not going to happen. But there are now key places where posters are always posted, and people have learned to expect to see them there. So I'm legit (laughs).

Paul Grushkin: On that point, one of the key criticisms expressed since the modern rock poster scene doubled, then tripled, then quadrupled, was made by Chloe Lum from Seripop - a poster isn't a poster until it's posted in a public space. It can't just be a digital file passed among friends or seen only on a website. Even when we were composing ART OF MODERN ROCK, the rule was that you had to send in the actual poster. Posters are physical works. If it's shown to the public publicly, it qualifies, just as it did in the Belle Epoch time of Toulouse Lautrec and Cheret, or Stanley Mouse and Rick Griffin in late '60s San Francisco, or John Van Hamersveld in Los Angeles or Gary Grimshaw at the same time in Detroit.

Todd Slater: Good point, not to mention that posted posters are promotional for you the poster artist, as well. They're like giant business cards when you hang them up around a city. The goal has to be, "I'm gonna be known as the Dallas poster guy."

Paul Grushkin: Are some of your editions now completely gone? Are they truly collector's items now?

Todd Slater: Oh yes, I tried to archive 10 for myself at the very beginning, but it just didn't happen. There were times when I needed the money, and pretty- printed paper equalled money. There are a couple of posters where I may have only one or two left. It's tricky collecting modern rock posters in these small editions. It's like you have to cultivate certain artists and be instantly aware when they've issued a new piece. It's funny when pieces start at \$25, and suddenly the issue is gone. You can see why they'd be worth \$100 or more, depending. And in ten years, or twenty years, who can say?

Paul Grushkin: I was just at a show in Sacramento and saw some of Paul Imagine's pieces going for \$200 - \$300, because they were the last ones of a run. The only ones left. If you love his work, that's what it's legitimately worth. I think Emek was the first of the modern day artists to understand this. He's been very consistent in holding to legitimate prices based on, initially, demand and then in due course, scarcity.

Todd Slater: Right. There's a lot to learn from the experience of the top artists, and from the marketplace itself. Jermaine Rogers had a quote in *ART OF MODERN ROCK* about how the worth of something is exactly equal to what a person is prepared to pay for it. I mean, what is a great, sold out, low-run Jeff Kleinsmith poster worth, these days? Close to \$500, I should think. Probably more.

Paul Grushkin: On the other hand do you think we'll get to the point where it's no longer a \$20 poster in the beginning, but more like a \$30 or \$40 poster?

Todd Slater: I would say yes if you're going to do something like Emek is doing, where the production budget on the poster is much bigger, which speaks to his amazing 3D posters. I believe if you're going to ask that, you're going to offer something that merits more money.

*Velvet Revolver by Todd Slater*



Paul Grushkin: As you look around at the best modern rock today, did you ever imagine you'd be at the top of your game with the top bands?

Todd Slater: No [laughs]. No, I'd never pictured that early on, as I was just someone who loved alternative rock. Maybe not until recently. Not to get ahead of myself here, but the point of being RIGHT THERE is that the best bands are writing the songs and doing the gigs, and you're making the posters. In a weird way, in these times, that's what you're being counted on to do. I mean the inspiration is the music itself. It's pretty much all there for listening and taking the next steps as a graphic artist. If you don't know what to do for a band, go and listen to their music.

Paul Grushkin: I guess it goes like this: you pick up the CD, you go through some songs, you listen to what jumps out and hopefully your drawing hand twitches.

Todd Slater: Right [laughs]. It's all in your mind. You could hear a lyric and what comes to mind is maybe something from your childhood, or what happened a year ago just out of college, and while it might not be the same thing Wilco's Jeff Tweedy was thinking about when he wrote the lyric, it's ok - it's your singular thing that you're saying there, it's your idea for them. People should check out the approach Decoder Ring has taken in doing their new Modest Mouse series, which is their - the poster designers - interpretation of lines from songs, setting up the concept for the concert posters.

*Keane by Todd Slater*



Paul Grushkin: Do you feel that you can remain in Texas and work out of your home or do you feel that someday you'll want to relocate?

Todd Slater: Because of the Internet, the world is electronic. I can work out of my home, wherever my home is. Nevertheless, east Texas is east Texas, and maybe living in a bigger city, even Austin, certainly Dallas, would provide additional stimulation. I'd love one day to live in New York. That would be my dream for sure, to live in New York.

What you miss by not living in San Francisco or Seattle or New York are the things going on everywhere around you. Things you can see on weekends or nights when you're not working - the things that don't happen in small towns or smaller cities. It's that stimulation thing. You want to keep expanding your brain with the weirdest things imaginable.



*Green Day by Todd Slater*