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Internet service here hosting huge online rock poster auction

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Had you snagged that Stevie Ray Vaughan handbill when he played Fitzgerald's, it could one day end up paying for modest-sized automobile.

Long replaced by the T-shirt as the rock souvenir du jour, the concert poster has returned to coveted relic of music iconography.

Newer posters by artists like Frank Kozik, Derek Hess and local musician Uncle Charlie, are popular again with the indie rock underground. And vintage posters - having survived light, time, dirt, thumbtacks and other elements - have appreciated handsomely, especially for items that often didn't cost anything more than the gumption to pull them from the wall of a venue years ago.

In July a woman brought a 36-year-old poster from the Texas International Pop Festival, a Dallas concert that featured Led Zeppelin and Janis Joplin, to the Antiques Roadshow, guessing it might be worth \$10.

It was appraised at \$2,500.

The Discovery Channel has a program similar to Antiques Roadshow called Pop Nation that, true to its name, is geared more toward popular culture. Its music memorabilia appraiser is Jacques van Gool, who with his wife, Kelli, runs Backstage Auctions Inc., an Internet auction service (www.backstageauctionsinc.com) that operates in the Heights and puts music ephemera into the hands of fans.

Backstage is currently hosting what might be the largest rock-poster auction in history. On the block are thousands of posters from the mid-'60s to the present. There are hundreds of loose items and some mammoth collections: complete sets of "Family Dog" and "Bill Graham/Fillmore" posters, rare relics from hallowed venues from rock's past.

The loose posters are more likely to be that birthday something for someone, whereas the collections are for the big dogs.



Dave Rossman : For the Chronicle
A variety of rock posters at Backstage Auctions includes ones of Stevie Ray Vaughan, Steve Miller and Janis Joplin.

Bidding for a complete Bill Graham Fillmore West set of posters started at \$120,000.

Numerous other nuggets aren't caught up as part of a pricey set. A 1975 poster plugs Bob Seeger, before he dropped an "e" from his last name.

A ZZ Top tour program from 1976 is an interesting rarity. All of the programs from that tour are rare because they're nearly three decades old. But in the original printing, a concert goer was pictured on the right-hand side of a page. He seems to be pantless and there's a potentially scandalous shadow near his crotch. The image was recropped, the programs reprinted, and only one box of the uncensored version got out.

There are dozens of items for bands like the Grateful Dead (one of several bands with posters designed by legendary poster maker Stanley Mouse), Bruce Springsteen, the Who, Sonic Youth, Iggy Pop, Steve Miller, Willie Nelson; the breadth is startling. Mouse and longtime collectors Mark Powers and Kevin Phillips are responsible for contributing most of the items to the auction.

Then there is that Stevie Ray handbill from the late '70s. Due to Vaughan's enduring legacy and the scarcity of some of his early promotional items, Jacques van Gool believes they have the greatest potential to be the first among late-'70s and early-'80s posters to reach five-figure prices.

Bidding in the poster auction is open until Sunday afternoon.



Dave Rossman : For the Chronicle
A poster promoting a Willie Nelson-Waylon Jennings concert in Austin is available from Backstage Auctions.

Of course, putting a price on any given poster is always a questionable process. The always-correct answer to what something is worth is: whatever somebody will pay for it. A 1952 Topps Mickey Mantle baseball card was listed at about \$5,000 in various price guides in the '80s. If a quick scroll through eBay is any indication, it's worth about the same today.

But posters, like baseball cards, also hold loaded sentimental value based on the band, the time or the place. Sometimes, for those who attended (and remember) a show, the value is placed on the band, the time and the place.

That value is perhaps the best litmus test for collectors versus collectors.

Jacques van Gool recounts a moment from Pop Nation (which will air this fall) when he informed a poster

owner that he had an item worth about \$10,000.

“He barely blinked and said, ‘Oh, OK,’” he says. “The director yelled, ‘Cut! Can you try to act a little more excited?’”

A collection of proudly framed black-and-white KISS photos and Kelli van Gool's vintage KISS shirt suggest the van Gools know about sentimental value. Both joke that it can be hard to let some of the items go. He's been collecting KISS memorabilia since he was a kid.

The couple met in the early '90s while working in separate branches of a global engineering firm; he was in his native Netherlands, she worked in Houston, where she was raised. They spent time in New York and Washington, D.C.; Jacques van Gool became U.S. citizen in 2001; and then Kelli van Gool brought him to her hometown. In 2003 they started Backstage Auctions Inc.

Their business goes well beyond posters. The van Gools have hosted online auctions for all stripes of rock 'n' roll memorabilia.

The biggest hangup, they say, is the stigma of desperation associated with a musician hocking personal goods.

“Some artists have a hard time getting over that whole taxman cometh, Willie Nelson thing,” Kelli van Gool says. “How will people perceive me if I'm selling off my history?”

“Her husband adds, “The last thing any rock 'n' roll star wants is this image that they need money.”

Backstage Auctions has tried to massage out that bad mojo and instead act as a facilitator for fan/musician interaction without the urgency of an outstanding tax bill.

They have the artist sign a certificate of authenticity for memorabilia. “Buying some of these items creates a unique experience between the fan and the artist,” Jacques van Gool says.

The van Gools' workspace is a rock-geek wonderland, with crates of posters and stray memorabilia from past auctions.

When items fail to sell, Backstage Auctions offers the option of serving as a consignment shop. Such is the case with a Ted Nugent auction that sold about 80 percent of its items. A row of guitar cases, some plaques (for album sales, as well as one from United Sportsmen of America), a hunting dog “training ball” and some camo hunting attire line the floor and shelves; all are available through the Backstage Web site.

They have had auctions for Jacques van Gool's beloved KISS, and have another KISS auction planned later this year. One auction included the wedding dress of Lydia Criss,

ex-wife of KISS drummer Peter Criss. ``A guy actually bought it," van Gool says.
"Everybody knows they're the gods of merchandising.

"I guess some of their fans will buy anything."

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