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Music and Movements: Psychedelic Rock Posters and the Counterculture

A concert promoter working for Bill Graham is walking down the sidewalk in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco. The year is 1968. Every block or so, he takes a moment to tack a poster advertising next weekend's concert at the Fillmore Ballroom onto a telephone pole. Behind him follow young men and women, taking down the posters as quickly as they are put up, going home to add them to the assortment already covering the walls of their apartments and houses. By the time the promoter has worked his way through the stack of posters he had on hand, the only ones that remain are the ones taped to shop windows, the rest taken home by the very people the posters were meant to attract.¹ That the posters were removed so quickly by their target audience speaks volumes to their success in attracting the type of person who would enjoy a psychedelic rock show. However, the posters were also much more than just advertisements. Posters for psychedelic rock bands made during the mid to late 1960s were distinct in both form and function, serving to simultaneously advertise a concert while protesting the very nature of consumerism. The goal of the posters, and of the artists who made them, was "to make people go crazy," acting as a beacon for the counterculture community.² Collected by fans of both the bands and of the poster design itself, these psychedelic artworks

played a key part in the development and self-identification of the counterculture youth movement in San Francisco and beyond in the 1960s.

It is understandable why the posters became such a highly desired object for collection among the counterculture society of the mid to late 1960s. With bright, complementary, potentially headache-inducing colors and often indecipherable lettering, the posters themselves bring to mind the sensations experienced by a person taking LSD and other psychotropic drugs, sensations that most people involved in the rock scene of the time would have been more than familiar with, and sensations that would have been present at the concerts themselves.³ Through these design techniques, artists at the time, such as Wes Wilson and Stanley Mouse, created posters that had to be studied to be understood. Often, they would only be looked at closely enough to be deciphered by the exact people they were intended to attract.⁴ Psychedelic rock concerts provided not only the opportunity to enjoy music, dancing, and drugs, but also the chance to meet like-minded people who were also a part of the movement against straight society.

“Straight society” was the term used by those in the counterculture movement to describe what today would be more commonly known as mainstream culture.⁵ Members of straight society were the people who worked a 9 to 5 job before coming home to a wife and kids in their house with a white picket fence. They were people who were complacent with the direction society was heading, content to follow the establishment and live in the consumerist world that America was steadily building. The counterculture movement, however, was desperate to create a new, improved society, one of anti-establishment and anti-consumerist ideals. Although the psychedelic rock posters in question were to some extent by their very nature consumeristic, due to being advertisements, they simultaneously served to embody the core tenets of the

counterculture movement via the unique choices made while designing the posters. While there were some instances of straight society interacting with psychedelic rock posters, such as at the Joint Show in 1967, an exhibition of art from the main 5 poster designers at a high end art gallery, there was still a strong sense of separation between the two sects of society.⁶ The members of high society who attended the Joint Show had a sense of uncertainty and confusion about both the artwork and the members of the counterculture movement who were attending the show.⁷

One of the most iconic features of psychedelic rock posters of the era, particularly in terms of separating counterculture from straight culture, was the fonts used. Often undulating around the images at the center of the poster and making use of negative space to form the letters, these fonts could not be read at first glance, instead requiring a passerby to draw to a halt and carefully study the poster in order to figure out exactly what message it was trying to convey. This was done in a direct act of rebellion against the advertisements of the 1950s and early 1960s, which were designed to be read instantaneously, often from the window of a moving vehicle.⁸ In addition to this, there was a sense of kinship that came with being able to understand the posters. It showed that the viewer was part of the select few who were intended to read the poster and was by extension a part of the society the poster represented. The fonts, when combined with the imagery that often adorned the posters, also served to communicate with the viewers messages that were more than just the date, time, and price of the next concert at the Fillmore Auditorium or the Avalon Ballroom.⁹

A key example of the messages conveyed can be found in Wes Wilson's poster commonly called the *Flame Flier* (figure 1). Wilson was one of the key artists of the psychedelic poster movement. He was a member of the group of poster artists known as the Big Five, all of

whom played key roles in the design of posters at the time. The red-orange words of the poster are difficult to read when against the green background, and are made even more indecipherable by the font itself, which blends the words into the illusion of the flames in a form and color often described as similar to a lava lamp.¹⁰ While this was not Wilson's first poster, it is certainly one of the more unique ones as, by comparison, it is rather plain, consisting only of the flames and letters on the plain background. This is unlike many of Wilson's other works, as well as the work of many other artists at the time, as human figures and other decorations were often incorporated. This uniqueness is perhaps what made the popularity of the *Flame Flier* so high.

The subject of the poster, the flames, also helps to show some of Wes Wilson's intentions with his art. The 1960s was a time of turmoil, the counterculture movement being a way to go against the society that was causing so much distress in an attempt to create a better society.¹¹ With the *Flame Flier*, this idea is visualized. The main body of the poster is a large flame, but within the flames is a description of a concert and dance that will be happening. Like this, the counterculture movement is the positivity that formed within, and in spite of, the embroiled flames of society.

It is not unreasonable to believe that this kind of imagery was intentional on the part of Wilson. He first reached success with the creation of his poster titled *Are We Next?* (figure 2) which was designed in protest of the Vietnam War, depicting the American flag reimagined with the stars being inside a blue swastika rather than a blue square, the words "Be Aware" incorporated into the bottom of the design. The poster was "intended to provoke," serving to suggest parallels between the U.S. government and the Nazi regime.¹² It also served as a precedent for the inclusion of political messages in his artwork, which was fitting for psychedelic

rock posters, as many of the bands of the genre incorporated political and countercultural messages into their music.¹³

While he may be one of the most notable, Wilson was not the only one to incorporate counterculture ideas of protest into his designs. Stanley Mouse, who often worked with Alton Kelley, both being members of the Big Five, also used the posters he designed to advertise ideals as well as concerts. Mouse often made use of pop culture elements and other familiar images in his work, as both a way to present something the audience was familiar with while also providing criticism on the culture itself. For example, in his poster designed for the band Blood, Sweat, and Tears, the focal image of the poster is the Statue of Liberty (figure 3). The font is in a color that is only a few shades lighter than the tendrils it is written on, meaning that the eye of the viewer is drawn to the Statue of Liberty, depicted using black shadows and negative space. A single tear rolls down Lady Liberty's cheek, standing out as a stark white against the black shadow. This in turn serves two functions: one, to reference the name of the headliner band, Blood, Sweat, and Tears, and two, to give commentary on the state of American society at the time. 1968, the year the poster was made, was also the height of anti-war protests against the ongoing Vietnam War. Here, Lady Liberty is shown solemnly shedding a tear at the loss of the ideals that America was, in theory, founded on. The poster served to advertise so much more than just a concert.

It was also by no coincidence that many artists of the time strived to imitate design elements of the Art Nouveau movement of the late 19th and early 20th century. Wes Wilson admits that his iconic font was based heavily on the Viennese Secessionist lettering created by Alfred Röllner.¹⁴ Stanley Mouse cites Alphonse Mucha,¹⁴ perhaps the most influential artist of the Art Nouveau movement, as a heavy influence on his posterwork.¹⁵ Mucha believed that art was

meant to be available to everyone regardless of social class, as in the 19th century art was intended for the societal elites.¹⁶ The Art Nouveau movement was counterculture for its time, and so by utilizing design elements that evoke the style, such as geometric borders framing a poster (figure 4), artists like Mouse and Wilson also evoked the ideas of protest against class distinction and elitist culture.

Stanley Mouse said “I don’t do art for music, there’s music in my art.”¹⁷ Building on this idea, the art of psychedelic posters in San Francisco in the mid to late 1960s was not done with the intention of being for the counterculture movement. Rather, the counterculture movement itself was in the artwork, influencing artists such as Wilson, Mouse, Kelley, MacLean, and so many others to create iconic posters that embodied the sensations of attending a dance and concert at the Avalon or the Fillmore and transmitted those sensations to anyone who chose to look close enough to see them, capturing the ideals and messages of the movement and the time in bright colors and psychedelic imagery, while at the same time advertising the core tenets of the counterculture movement as clearly as they advertised the performing bands.

Notes

1. Sandhaus, *Earthquakes, Mudslides, Fires & Riots : California & Graphic Design, 1936-1986*, 230
2. Mouse, *interview*, 2:30
3. Mouse, *interview*, 3:43
4. Terry, *Summer of Love : Art, Fashion, and Rock and Roll. San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco*, 32
5. Terry, *Summer of Love : Art, Fashion, and Rock and Roll. San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco*, 33
6. Moffat, *Who's Who: Hippies, Straights Turn Out for Art*, 2
7. Mouse, *interview*, 20:27
8. Mouse, *interview*, 10:53
9. Montgomery, *The Joint Show: high art in the Summer of Love*, 4
10. Skirboll, *How a Psychedelic Concert Poster Rocked the World*, 1
11. Montagne, *Psychedelic Font: How Wes Wilson Turned Hippie Era Turmoil into Art*, 1
12. Montgomery, *Radical Trips: Exploring the Political Dimension and Context of the 1960s Psychedelic Poster*, 7
13. Montgomery, *Radical Trips: Exploring the Political Dimension and Context of the 1960s Psychedelic Poster*, 6
14. Lippert, *Wes Wilson: From Art Nouveau to Psychedelic*, 1
15. Mouse, *interview*, 22:19
16. Taggart, *6 Themes That Defined Illustrator Alphonse Mucha's Iconic Art Nouveau Posters*, 4

17. Mouse, *interview*, 24:18

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Smithsonian Institution, 1 May 2016,

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/psychedelic-concert-poster-rocked-world-180958780/>.

Stanley Mouse, (artist, member of the Big Five), in discussion with the author via phone, Davis, California, March 5, 2022

Taggart, Emma. “6 Themes That Defined Illustrator Alphonse Mucha's Iconic Art Nouveau Posters.” *My Modern Met*, 29 Mar. 2021, <https://mymodernmet.com/alphonse-mucha-themes/>.

Images

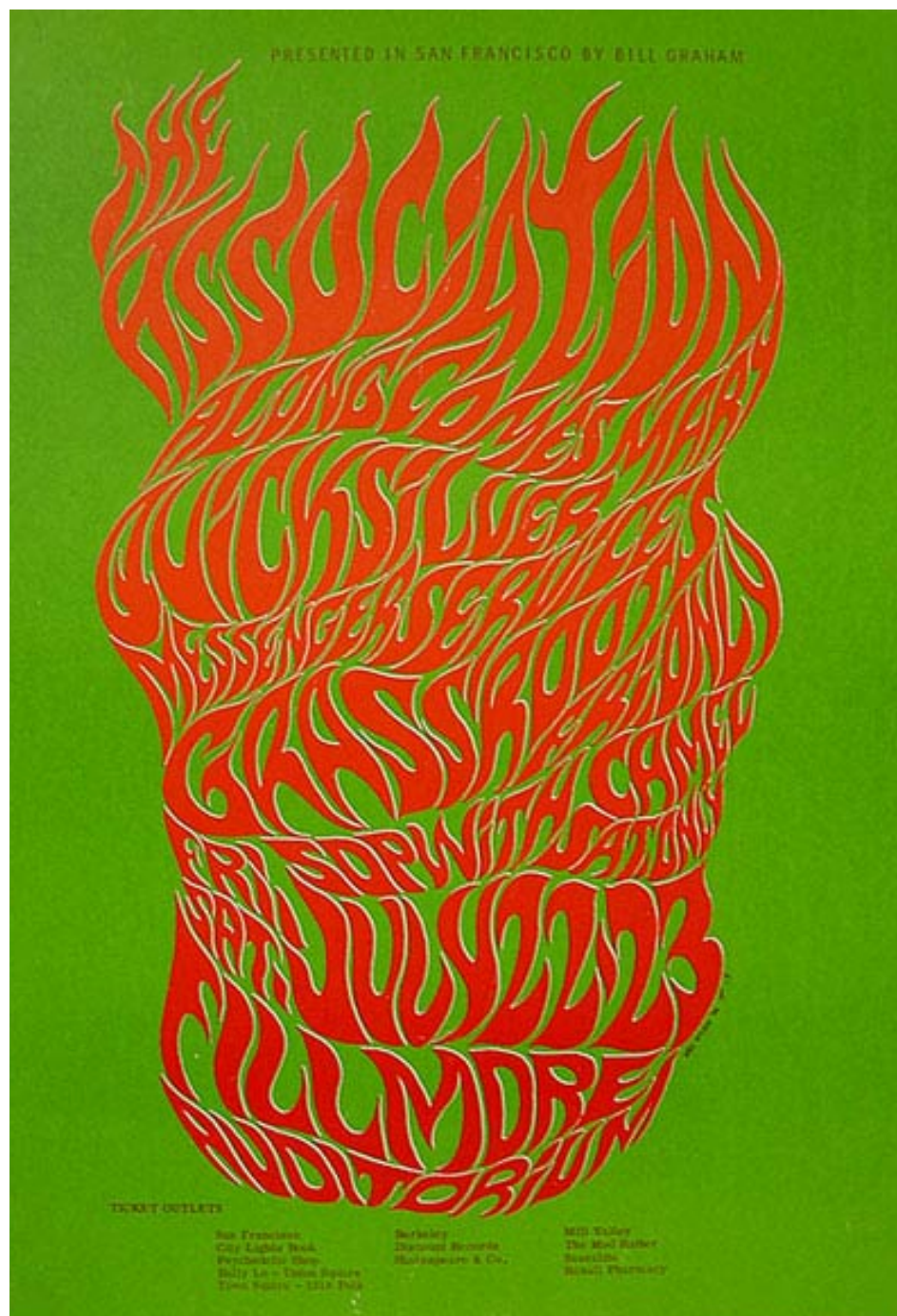


Figure 1, Wes Wilson, *Flame Flier*, July 1966, Archives and Special Collections, Shields Library

UC Davis, Davis CA

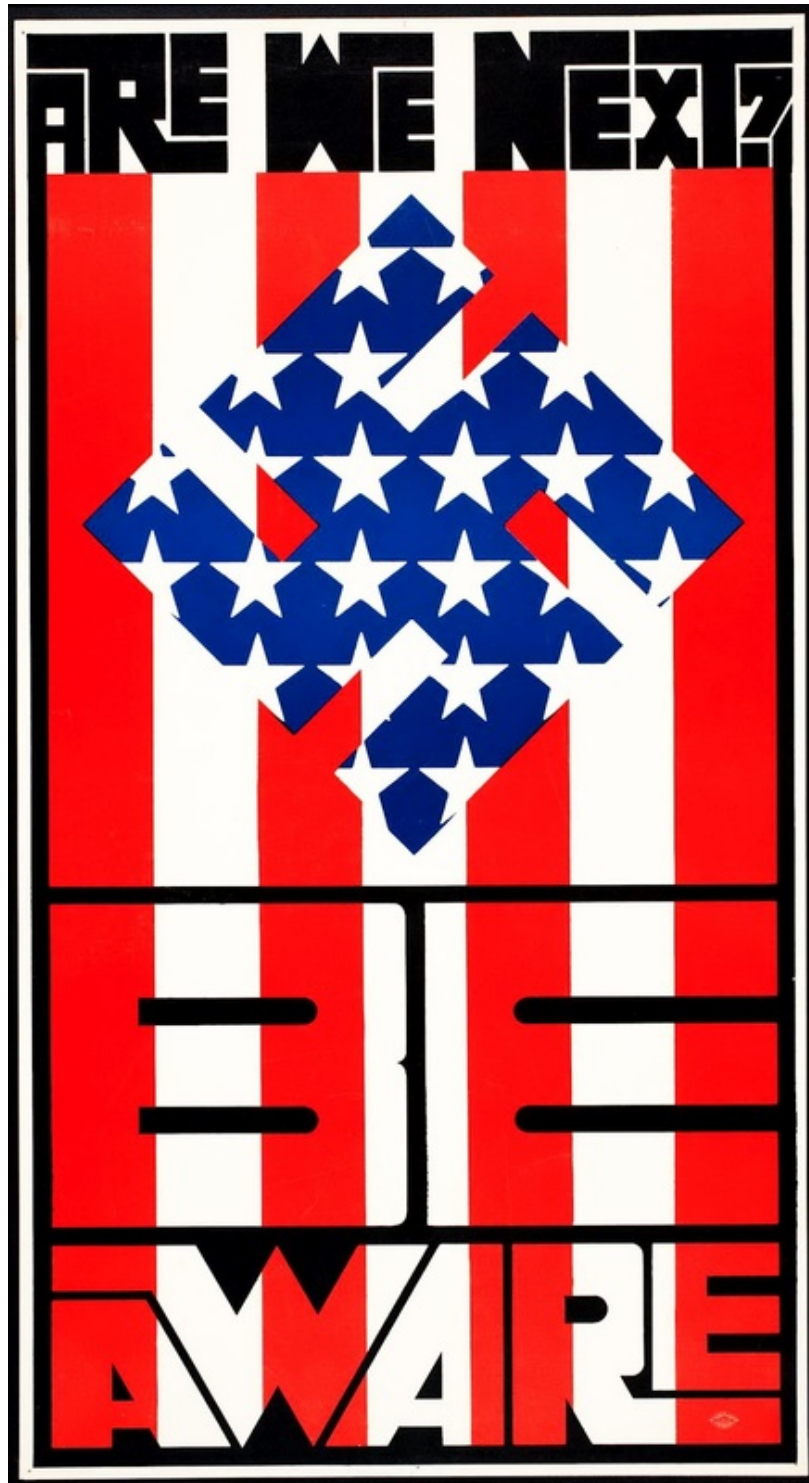


Figure 2, Wes Wilson, *Are We Next?* 1965, private collection

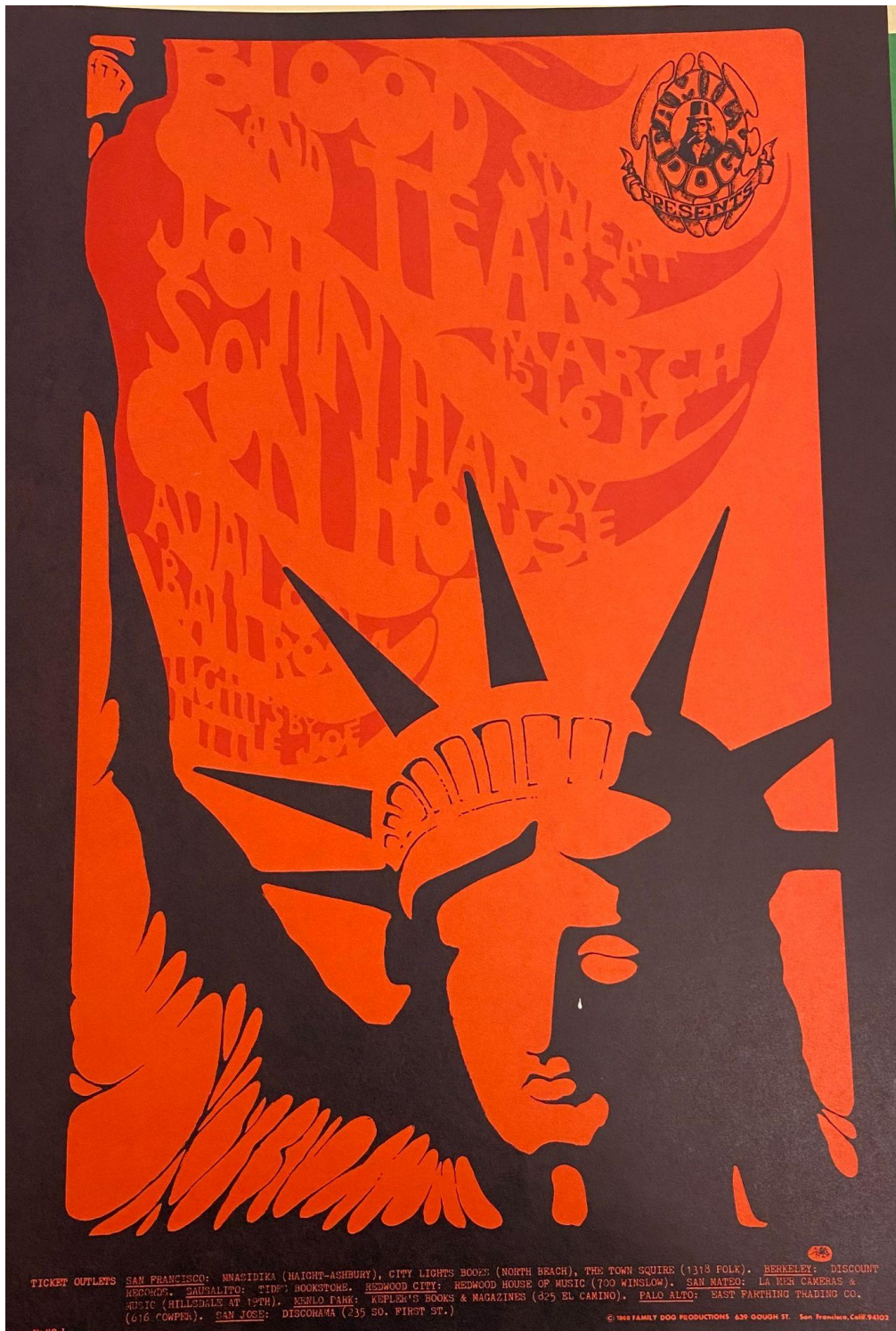


Figure 3, Stanley Mouse, *Blood, Sweat, and Tears*, 1968, Archives and Special Collections,

Shields Library UC Davis, Davis CA

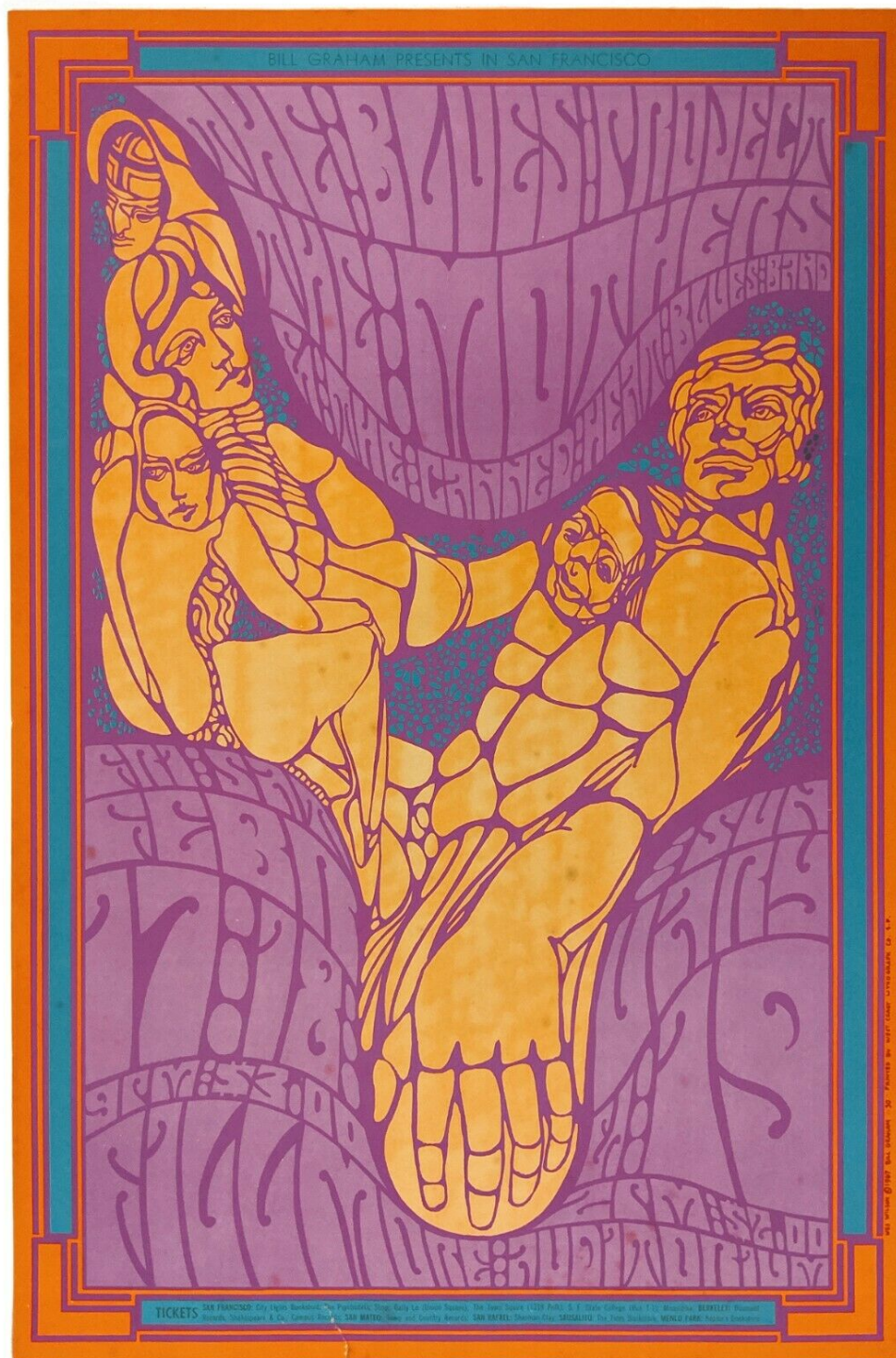


Figure 4, Wes Wilson, *The Blues Project*, February 1967, Archives and Special Collections,

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