

"Not Just the Poster Guy: A Look at El Jefe Design"

El Jefe Design

Interview with Jeffrey Everett

By Angela Kinzie

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In English, El Jefe translates to "the Chief" or "the Boss," and for those who have followed the creative talents of Jeffrey Everett, the title is an impeccable fit – even if its origin was a good-natured marital rib. "El Jefe is a play on my name that my wife would jokingly refer to me as," he explained.

Everett created El Jefe design while working on his MFA in graphic arts at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. "In heart, El Jefe Design started in 2003," he added, "legally I believe it started in 2007. ... It started as a side project in grad school. We were told to make a project or business and bring it into reality. I just kept going with mine."

Everett's resume isn't short of clients that "my mom can brag about:" names like The New York Times and The Washington Post. However, El Jefe Design is perhaps still most recognized for the iconic illustrations attached to the posters of bands like The Gaslight Anthem, Alkaline Trio, The Bouncing Souls and Flogging Molly, images that also helped earn much recognition for the bands themselves.

A longtime fan of D.C. based Girls Against Boys, Everett recently worked with the band and sighted them as part of the reason he initially settled in the nation's capital. As they're scratched from his bucket list, he admits Henry Rollins' name is still there. "I have done a few pieces for him, but they always seem to get screwed up along the way, usually through miscommunication with management. I would like to do one for him that goes smooth. I have been lucky as most posters I've done are for bands I enjoy, so in a way each one is a bucket list client."

Among the elite of El Jefe Design's clients was the late Lou Reed. "He was an interesting fella and the story of him chewing me out makes for a fun section in my lectures." I asked if he would explain and he continued, "After we did the incredibly successful first poster for Mr. Reed, he wanted us to do a poster for his performances of 'Lulu' in Europe. The album is about a ballet dancer who, through twists of misfortune, ends up a prostitute. We came up with a sketch of two identical women facing off in a doorway – one meek and covered and the other sexy and dangerous ... and trapping her. He took to the sketch and wanted to expand on it and make it a series of five posters, each one becoming more and more sexual and violent. I won't give too many details as they were quite crude, but it ended with one spitting blood into the other's mouth after having violent sex. His exact quotes for the sketches were: 'Make it harsh. Make it x-rated. Make it clear.' Well, after I showed him the harsh, x-rated and clear sketches, he threw a fit, calling me up and belittling me, calling me every name in the book. I could have argued I was just doing what he asked for, but really I just embraced the fact that I was being scolded by a legend. How often does that happen?"

The Gaslight Anthem's steady rise from side-stage hopefuls to major label recognition was accompanied at many steps by Everett's images, designing both the "American Slang" and "Handwritten" covers as well as posters and a number of other projects for the band. Recently, however, it was made known that El Jefe and the band will no longer be working together. "I love the band and think after working together for so long we both wanted to spread our wings. Working with them allowed me to work for bands like Rancid, Tegan and Sara, Paramore and A Day To Remember. I still work with Brian Fallon on his solo and side projects, so it isn't like the relationship is severed."

Though Everett's signature style may be forever celebrated and linked with the bands he loves, the essence of El Jefe Design is often presented in a less obvious form. Websites, in the D.C., Maryland area, for the legendary Merriweather Post Pavilion, The Papal Foundation and Montgomery County Humane Society are some of the largest examples of Everett's work.

"I would like to move away from doing concert posters and start working for other clients in the entertainment field, be it for theaters, performers, wrestlers, etc.," he told me. "I am just refocusing. At this point, I want my day-to-day work to be focused on bigger projects that studies the breadth of design - interactive, web, apps, logo and branding, collateral, and yes, some posters. I no longer want to be 'the poster guy' as I have more to offer.

I also want to 'like' doing posters again," he added. "Burn out is too small of a word to describe how I feel about posters and bands. As fun as doing posters for a band is – and it really is – there is a lot of work and hassle that goes with it, as well as little pay for all the work. I am lucky that I have done better and better each year, much to my accountant's chagrin! I can now take a step back and focus on doing more posters for bands I want to work with *and* for gallery shows."