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By Robin A. Rothman, Times Herald-Record

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"Someday, everything is gonna be smooth like a rhapsody/ When I paint my masterpiece" — "When I Paint My Masterpiece"

New Paltz artist Mikio Kennedy is, like most who work in any capacity with or for the Dead, a fan. His career as a visual artist began in 1977 in the parking lot of a Grateful Dead show, where he made and sold tie-dyed T-shirts. Since then, he's gone on to create art for official Grateful Dead merchandise, The Jimi Hendrix Estate, Parliament Funkadelic, Woodstock '94 and Arista Records. Among the most recognizable of his art work is the cover of the Grateful Dead tribute album "Dedicated," 1991 (Arista)

Mikio created our cover illustration by digitally altering an existing painting, which was previously commissioned by Arista Records for a short-lived series of Grateful Dead archive releases called From the Vault. The local scene depicted originated as a picture snapped by Jen Rog, photographer-in-residence for the traveling museum Merlin's Wheel Gallery.

And art director for the festival promoter Terrapin Presents and co-curator (with archivist Matthew Rick) of Merlin's Wheel Gallery.

The Gallery originated with the Dead's first official reunion as the Other Ones on the Furthur Festival tour, named for the bus Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters drove around in during the 1960s.

"Matthew Rick had a close working relationship with the Keyeses," Mikio explains. "He had gotten his masters thesis on Kesey's work and often times the Pranksters would e-mail him with questions about themselves that they had forgotten. So in a way he's a Kesey archivist."

As a stipulation for using the name Furthur for the festival, the Pranksters asked to have an a gallery highlighting art by artists of their liking.

"And they liked my work. They were tickled about the idea of our doing a road gallery," Mikio says. "We've been doing it ever since."

The art on display includes art by Kesey, Garcia, acid pioneer/artist Stanley Owsley, and iconic artists Mikio and Stanley Mouse.

Here's a detailed look at where our cover came from, in the artist's own words:

In 1995 Grateful Dead records made the decision to turn over the From the Vault recordings to Arista Records to allow them to distribute these recordings, as well as the mainstream Arista releases. Prior to this Arista got "In the Dark" and Grateful Dead Records distributed Dick's Picks and From the Vault only directly to fans.

So we get a call — we being me and William Giese, but me being the spokesperson — from Amy Finkel ?the Grateful Dead creative director at Arista Records — that they want two paintings for multiple use including advertising, poster and promotional CD for Best Buy to celebrate this event, the availability on a mass scale of From the Vault.

About three-quarters of the way through the project, Jerry Garcia dies.

Me and Amy Finkel in particular are devastated because we'd been seeing this band for so long and it was such a presence in our life and Jerry as a person was so loved. Amy tells us she's pretty sure we can put the project on hold. She calls us in a couple hours and says 'I can't believe it but some of the powers that be at Arista want you to keep working.'

Our reaction and hers was that the last thing you need to do at this time is advertise anything. In about a week, we had the piece completed.

So, if you look in the shadow of the vault door — and this has never been pointed out — in the bottom shadow of the vault as it's opening there's a cat in the shadow. It's the "Cat's Down Under the Stars" symbol for Jerry. It was our way of acknowledging and showing respect and love and loss.

At that point in time, those folks at Arista, who hadn't fully understood what Jerry's death meant, after they had their banner sales week of all time, they got it. And they realized 'We're going to do this in the most laid back of fashions.' And they greatly reduced the ad campaign, pulled the ad from Rolling Stone and Spin. We wound up doing the poster, one ad in Tower Records' magazine Pulse and the Best Buy CD.

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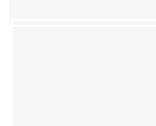
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Both pieces took about two and a half weeks total, but artists don't work nine-to-five. Sometimes I paint when William sleeps and he works when I sleep. There's a lot of coffee and other metabolic supporters that goes into doing a piece like that, because you have to get into the rhythm of painting all day, but be able to handle a phone call from high-energy record company creative directors.

My friend Jen Rog (apprentice/intern/assistant/friend) is the photographer in residence for our gallery. She ran out and took some cool shots of the cliffs and the view and on Route 44/55. I took her work and shifted some colors to be in the same spectrum and range as the rest of the painting. I airbrushed some sparkles and rays and glows over that, then took the original Go! elements and 'bonied' it.

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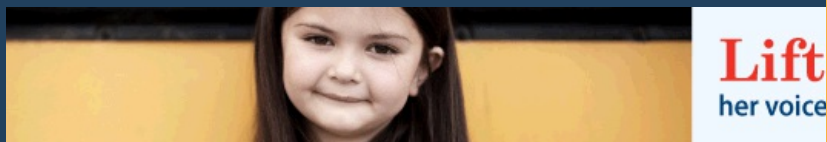
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