



ROCK 'N' ROLL BILLBOARDS OF THE SUNSET STRIP



The Sunset Strip, circa 1967. Stephen Stills of Buffalo Springfield called it right: “*There’s something happening here... what it is ain’t exactly clear.*” What was happening then is now absolutely clear. Rock and Roll and the kids who lived it were coming of age—right there on the Strip. And, as if to define the era, a few independent minds in the music industry posted giant, temporary monuments that said it all. Billboards. Bigger than life. Hand-painted homages to Rock. The Doors led the way. It seemed that billboards would chronicle rock forever.

Sadly, the Rock and Roll billboard era was short lived. It began with The Doors’ revolutionary campaign in 1967 and lasted just barely into the early 1980s. That’s when the emergence of MTV and the slickly produced music videos it spawned spelled the end for hand-painted billboards as monuments to success in the record business. Still in that brief time span the Sunset Strip exploded with thousands of unique billboards displaying the artistry and energy of an entire youthful generation bent on redefining the world.

In so doing, the Sunset Strip was temporarily transformed into the world’s largest drive-thru art gallery. Billboards depicting the latest work of top recording artists ranging from The Beatles and Bowie to The Who and Led Zeppelin dominated the Strip as elite record companies vied for space on its handful of key posting locations. At the same time the world’s best graphic artists, even the occasional fine artist, vied for the jobs of designing the album cover art from which most billboards were adapted. The final strokes were applied by a small group of highly trained commercial painters employed by outdoor advertising companies who brought these massive 14-by 48-foot monumental visions to life.

Robert Landau was right there, a kid with his first camera, living a block from the Strip. Early on he noticed that the billboards had a short life span and they would routinely be whitewashed and repainted with newer images. So he began shooting color transparencies in order to have slide shows for friends who wouldn’t otherwise get to see them.

Decades later, he rediscovered his Kodachromes, the only extensive collection of photographs that document those iconic billboards. Impassioned, he interviewed the artists, record producers, and designers who shaped those placards, bringing fresh insight to the culture of the day and its lasting impact on the world. In the book, **Rock 'n' Roll Billboards of the Sunset Strip** (Angel City Press) he and designer Frans Evenhuis show and tell it like it was, through the people who lived the music, the time, the energy...and the billboards.

For more information on the book visit: www.rockandrollbillboards.com

Presented by the City of West Hollywood through WeHo Arts as part of a 50th anniversary celebration of the counterculture era on the Sunset Strip. For more information visit www.bit.ly/SunsetStrip66





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EXCLUSIVELY ON



FOSTER and KLEISER



RHINOCEROS/ELEKTRA RECORDS

(1968)

In 1967, **Jac Holzman**, the head of a small New York-based independent label called **Elektra**, was sensing a declining interest in folk music. Holzman decided to relocate to Los Angeles intent on catching the rising tide of California's burgeoning Rock and Roll scene. From his new office in West Hollywood, Holzman made two enterprising and historic decisions. First he signed a recording contract with a little known local band playing in clubs on the Strip called **The Doors**. Then he had the notion to promote their debut album with a billboard on the Sunset Strip.

Until then Sunset Strip billboards had primarily been used for advertising the likes of automobiles, cigarettes, booze, and the occasional lounge lizard act playing the Vegas casinos. Nobody was promoting records there. Holzman was just acclimating himself to L.A.'s car culture when it occurred to him that influential people in the entertainment business, including radio disc jockeys who were driving along Sunset to work in Hollywood, would see these giant signs and take notice.

When the billboard featuring the hand-painted faces of Jim Morrison and company was first installed, the band members were on hand for the unveiling and dutifully climbed atop their gigantic likenesses for a photo op.



With the phenomenal breakthrough success of The Doors campaign Holzman signed on for a year's worth of billboard space on the Strip and The Doors were followed by other Elektra acts, including the band **Rhinoceros** who were represented by this enormous psychedelic pachyderm. Formed in 1967 as a potential Super Group, Rhinoceros never lived up to the label's expectations. No matter the fate of those recording artists, a revolutionary new commercial art form promoting Rock and Roll music was born and the Sunset Strip would never be the same.

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THE BEATLES / ABBEY ROAD

(1969)

In December 1969 **Capitol Records** erected this billboard for the Beatles' **Abbey Road** release at a key location at the heart of the Sunset Strip. Derived from the iconic album cover designed by Kosh for Apple Records in London, the now legendary billboard was adapted in Hollywood by Capitol Records art director Roland Young. In the billboard version Young maintained the uncluttered copy-free simplicity of the original album design while adding the inspired touch of allowing The Beatles shaggy heads and well known profiles to extend off the top of the billboard frame and out into the blue Californian sky.



Right around this same time rumors with no factual basis were inexplicably running rampant that **Paul McCartney** had suddenly died. Fans were tearfully decoding clues — seeing a funeral march in the album cover's iconography and even hearing morbid hidden messages while playing tracks of the record backwards. When the press began to report on this phenomenon, record sales soared even higher than usual so little was done to squelch the rumors and McCartney was kept out of sight.

Then at the height of all this commotion, Paul's extended wooden billboard head mysteriously went missing. When Capitol Records was alerted to this wanton act of vandalism, Roland Young intuitively surmised that the headless billboard would garner even more attention, and elected to not have it replaced for the duration of its posting.

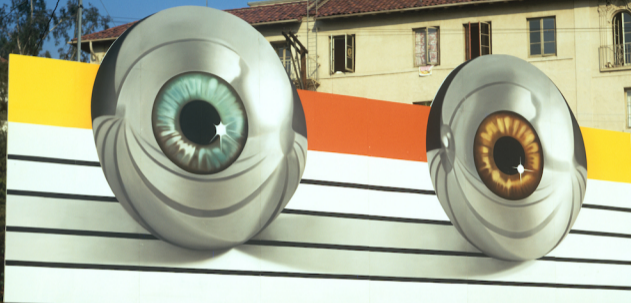


Some 40 years later around the release of the book **Rock'n'Roll Billboards of the Sunset Strip** author/photographer Robert Landau tracked down the culprit, **Robert Quinn**, who performed the wooden decapitation as a prank on his 18th birthday. Now in his sixties, Quinn has had it all these years and Paul's head proudly adorns the living room wall in his San Fernando Valley home. And, thanks to Quinn, a small but important piece of the Sunset Strip's Rock and Roll history was preserved.

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PACIFIC OUTDOOR



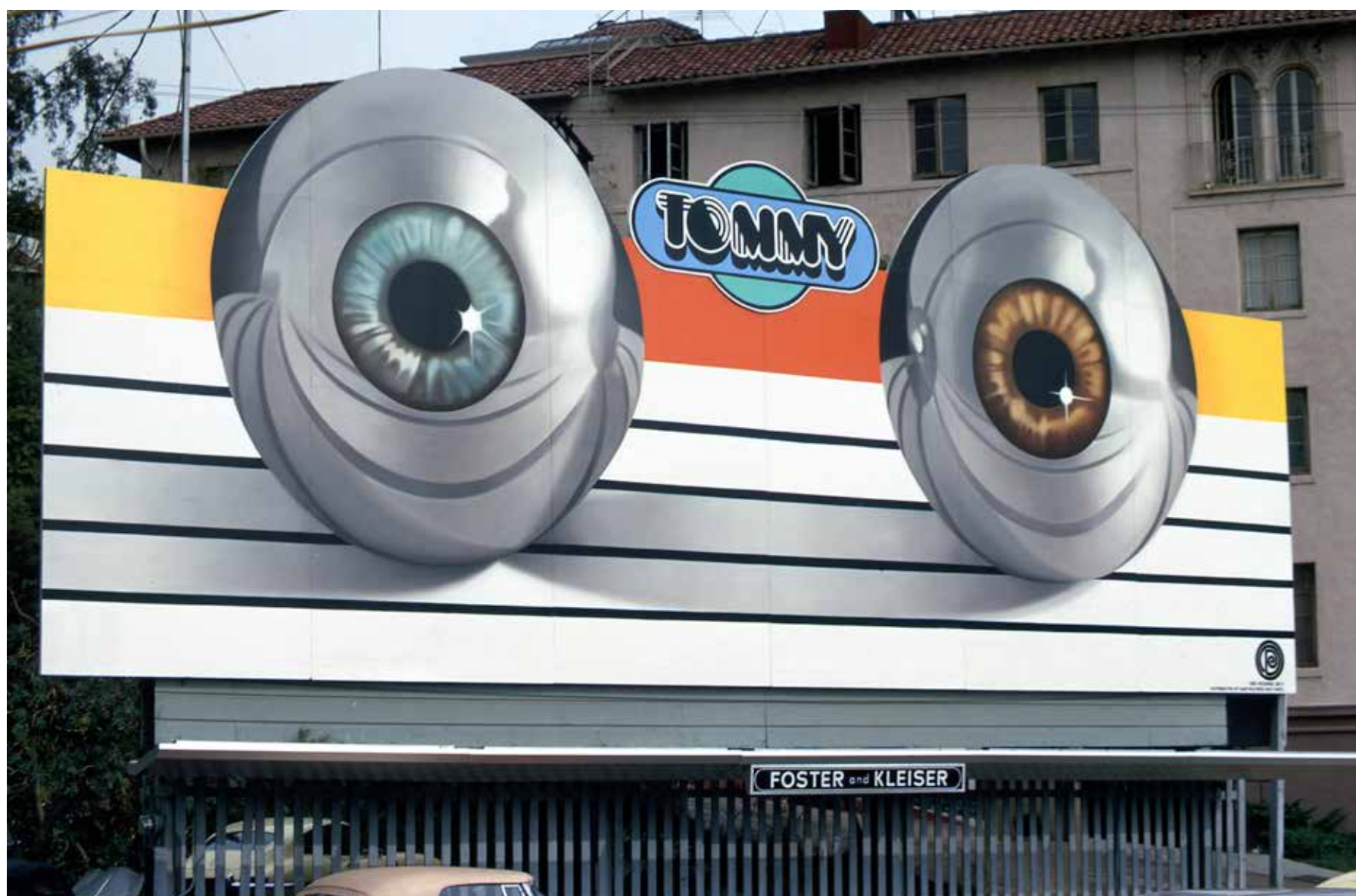
FOSTER and KLEISER



TOMMY/ THE LONDON PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA (1972)

Great hand-painted billboards from the classic Rock and Roll era on the Sunset Strip often left passersby scratching their heads in confusion. Just what was being advertised? Most likely only a handful of people who stopped to gawk at this amazing piece of oversized artwork would have recognized that the shiny chrome balls with multi-colored eyes glaring down from their billboard perch were pinballs – and that they alluded to “the blind, deaf and dumb” pinball wizard protagonist of **The Who**’s classic rock opera **Tommy**.

Such was the artistic license afforded to graphic designers by record companies and music moguls of the period. They were not so much trying to sell product as they were trying to create buzz around a new project within an elite niche of Hollywood insiders and taste-makers. No doubt



ego played into the phenomenon as well as the large sums of money being made and the relatively few acceptable outlets for advertising new records.

Music producer **Lou Adler** commissioned Tom Wilkes to design the *Tommy* artwork after he already had many successes in the recording industry, including producing one of the all-time best-selling records

with Carole King’s *Tapestry*. Lou was a big proponent of creative billboards and in an interview conducted for the book *Rock ‘n’ Roll Billboards* he recalled that, ‘Not only were they good for the artists, I just loved to do them.’

The *Tommy* billboard dazzled Sunset Strip denizens for several weeks and only near the end of its month-long showing did the title of the record finally appear.

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Donald Byrd
Lou Donaldson
Ronnie Foster
Gene Harris
Bobbi Humphrey
Bobby Hutcherson
Elvin Jones
Dom Minasi
Alphonze Mouzon
Moacir Santos
Horace Silver

BLUE NOTE. THE COLOR OF JAZZ.

FOSTER and KLEISER

BLUE NOTE RECORDS/VARIOUS ARTISTS (1972)

The explosive arrival of **Pop Art** in the 1960s signaled a seismic shift not only in the Art World but throughout all of American culture. Inspired by commercial imagery seen on popular products and advertising, a generation of fine artists led by Andy Warhol co-opted that style, gave it a new ironic spin and repositioned it in galleries and museums. Shortly thereafter commercial artists re-appropriated the look and brought it back into the public realm.



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This type of stylistic interchange has taken place throughout history, and in the 1970s the worlds of fine art and commercial art never seemed closer. Proponents of both schools worked to blur the once clearly defined boundaries. Graphic artists designing record album covers and Sunset Strip billboards were given carte blanche to create mind-bending and traffic-stopping displays – the results of which were often highly artistic by any measure.

While this 1972 billboard for **Blue Note Records** owes a debt of gratitude to Jackson Pollack and other abstract expressionist artists, it points out two important things. First, jazz artists never sold as many records as Rock and Roll stars of the period – hence the group billboard; and second, great art is great art no matter the intent or medium.



Op art, pop art, abstract expressionism, minimalism and even the work of conceptual environmental artists like Christo became tools in the trade of billboard designers in this uniquely creative period of the Sunset Strip history.

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PACIFIC OUTDOOR

SALES
LIBERTY
AGENCY

LIBERTY
AGENCY

SOUL
CITY

MACEY LIPMAN MARKETING

THE FUND FOR
ANIMALS
WE SPEAK FOR THOSE WHO CAN'T
302 SHERBOURNE

M.B. SCOTT
BUILDING

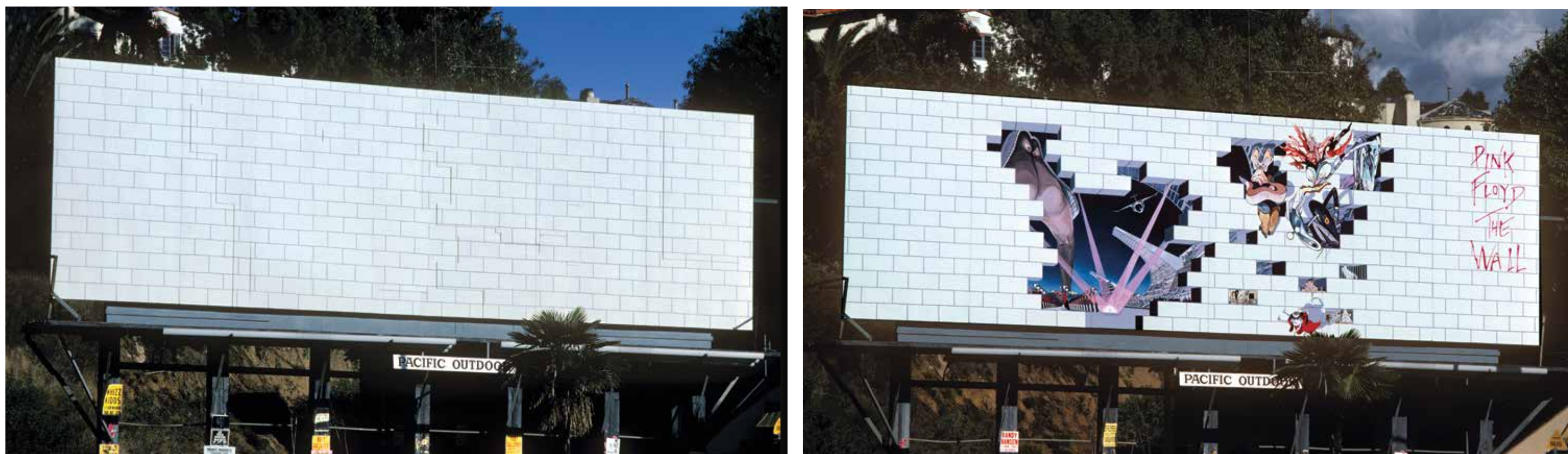
PINK FLOYD/ANIMALS

(1977)

In the mid-1970s live Rock and Roll shows were changing to meet the heightened expectations of a youthful concert-going public. What had begun in the early 1960s as raw musical stage performances by singers and groups like Elvis Presley and The Beatles, was evolving into more theatrically staged audiovisual extravaganzas designed as large-scale arena productions.

Rock groups of this period, particularly those with an artistic bent like **Pink Floyd**, began integrating sophisticated visual elements into their live performances. Their shows often employed creative lighting, oversized stage props and motion imagery projected onto large screens in order to help convey the more complex themes of their music. In so doing, the fans seated far from the stage could still be engaged visually with the performance.

Pink Floyd scored several huge successes in the 1970s with concept albums such as **Dark Side of the Moon** and **The Wall** – and the cover art and billboards associated with each project were cleverly conceived and coordinated to communicate a unified message. Their 1977 release entitled **Animals** had an Orwellian theme and the billboard for that record depicted an almost child-like representation of the record's key figures: a pig, a dog and a sheep with no accompanying text.



A later Sunset Strip billboard campaign for Pink Floyd's 1979 release of *The Wall*, took an equally unorthodox approach to announcing its arrival. At first a billboard depicting a blank brick wall appeared on the Strip and remained that way for several days. Over the next several weeks, the individual bricks were peeled away – slowly revealing graphic imagery and eventually the appearance of the record's title.

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Their New Stereo Album



Atlantic Records & Tapes



DAVE MASON



Do Your
Ears
Here!

RECORDS + TAPES



CROSBY, STILLS & NASH/CSN

(1977)

“Super Groups”, a phenomenon of the 1970s, were comprised of individual music stars from hit-making bands of the 1960s who then reformed in new configurations to sell even more records to a global market. There are several successful examples of this, but at the top of that list is **Crosby, Stills & Nash**. Their pedigreed line-up included Stephen Stills of Buffalo Springfield, David Crosby of The Byrds, Graham Nash of The Hollies, and occasionally Neil Young another Buffalo Springfield alum.

By the time this billboard appeared in 1977 the Sunset Strip had decisively become ground zero for everything Rock and Roll. Iconic nightclubs like The Whisky a Go Go and The Roxy were packing in the crowds for elite rock performers and budding talents alike. Classic record stores like Tower Records and Licorice Pizza could hardly keep shelves stocked with the latest LPs and audio cassettes. Music moguls like David Geffen (Asylum Records), Lou Adler (Ode Records) and Elliot Roberts (Lookout Management) had offices and/or stakes in clubs on the Strip. To top it off the rockers themselves were often ensconced in several of the Boulevard’s swank hotels like the Chateau Marmont, Sunset Marquis and the Continental Hyatt House (re-dubbed the Riot House for the host of nefarious rock-related high jinx that transpired there).



While most of the business supporting the Rock and Roll machinery took place during day time, the Strip really came alive at night. That’s when young people swarmed the street and restaurants; and nightclubs and record stores kicked it into high gear. The best billboards of the period were designed to work equally well at night when stark and dramatic designs combined with powerful illumination to make them the focal point of the ever present parade of car and pedestrian traffic.

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LOVE STORM



NATIONAL

TOWER RECORDS

RECORDS - TAPES
SUPER *Discount* PRICES



TOWER RECORDS

(1977)

Tower Records with locations around the globe was among the most successful retail chains selling recorded music. At the height of the vinyl record-buying era, no location was more successful or iconic than the one on the Sunset Strip. It opened in 1971 and closed in 2006. Located at the intersection of Sunset Boulevard and Horn Avenue in the midst of the Strip's world-renowned nightclubs, hotels and eateries, it attracted a broad cross-section of music lovers from fans to famous musicians themselves.



The building, which still stands today, is a low-slung architecturally non-descript commercial rectangle. But in its heyday the exterior was festooned with so many hand-painted renderings of current album covers that it resembled a giant billboard gone amok. The bright red on yellow Tower Records logo across the top of the building beckoned to passing motorists cruising the Strip and competed for their attention with larger billboards nearby.



In 2015, a documentary film directed by Colin Hanks titled *All Things Must Pass* accurately captured and portrayed the magic of the Tower Records years, focusing a great deal of its attention on founder Russell Solomon and the Sunset Strip store. That location is now controlled by Gibson Guitars, which lends hope that the music vibe created there in the past by Tower will live on in the future.

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NO
RIGHT
TURN

Includes
"Get To Give It Up"
Album and
Autograph Book
On Marine
Awards & Tapes.

LIVE

MARVIN GATE
AT THE LONDON PALLADIUM



WALK

OLD WORLD
RESTAURANT

BREAKFAST
LUNCH
DINNER



MARVIN GAYE/ LIVE AT THE LONDON PALLADIUM (1977)

In 1972 **Motown Records** relocated its headquarters from Detroit to an office on Sunset Boulevard just as the divisions that once kept musical genres confined in neatly segregated markets were beginning to fade. In fact popular music in the 1970s allowed for more cross-over commercial success for records of all varieties than ever before. Tuning into a hip FM radio station in Los Angeles in those days meant hearing musical genres encompassing pop, hard rock, folk rock, blues, R&B, soul, funk, even progressive, latin and country-tinged rock. The Sunset Strip billboards of the 1970s showcased this unique development on hand-painted oversized panels.

Throughout the majority of the decade Motown seemed to have a lock on one of the best and most highly visible billboard locations on the Strip. Perched just atop the Old World restaurant at the central crossroads of Holloway Drive and Sunset Boulevard, billboards installed there commanded the view of all eastbound traffic as it snaked its way through West Hollywood and into Hollywood proper. A three-way traffic signal at the intersection ensured that that drivers and passengers stuck in the constant and heavy traffic would have plenty of time to absorb imagery promoting Motown's roster of world-class recording artists like **Smokey Robinson**, **Marvin Gaye** and **Diana Ross**.



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LIVE AND MORE
DONNA SUMMER

A special two record set

Produced by Giorgio Tommasini
with special assistance from Robert Margolis
© 1975 Warner Bros. Records Inc.



FOSTER and KLEISER

DONNA SUMMER/LIVE AND MORE (1978)

Just a short decade after the appearance of revolutionary and generation defining Sunset Strip billboards for 1960s era bands like The Doors and The Beatles, it was clear that the world of popular music was changing yet again. The emergence of the **Disco** craze at the end of the 1970s brought with it new stars like **Donna Summer**, and a new look that had more in common with show business as usual than rebellious Rock and Roll.

The arrival of MTV in the early 1980s clearly spelled the end of the Rock and Roll billboard era. The money in advertising budgets that had been earmarked for the promotion of new records and once flowed freely into the creation of artistic Sunset Strip billboards was now being diverted into the production of slickly produced music videos.

The occasional music related billboard still found its way to the Strip in the 1980s, but for all intents and purposes one of a kind hand-painted billboards would never again define the cultural success of musical performers.



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