

# What's on the Shelf?

By Helen Marketti

## Rock 'N' Roll Billboards of The Sunset Strip

... "the billboards were seen, admired and quickly replaced in a city so hip it had no time for nostalgia..."

Rock 'N' Roll Billboards of The Sunset Strip (Angel City Press, 2012) is a pictorial history of amazing artwork of album covers that mark a time that is no longer. Author and photographer, Robert Landau allows readers to reminisce as we look back at images that many of us will remember while we flip through our own record collection.

In 1969, Robert Landau was 16 years old. He and his family moved near the Sunset Strip in Los Angeles. Once settled in and discovering the area, Robert noticed enormous billboards along the Strip that were so incredible to look at, he wanted to take photos of them to show his friends. "I remember thinking the billboards looked like giant pop art paintings. Many of them



were just images without any text," recalls Robert. "If you had the albums then you knew what the photo meant and which band. It seemed more like art than commercial advertising. Another important element was that I noticed the billboards were changed every 30 days or so. I thought it would be cool

to take photos and start documenting them; never really having insight at the time that I was capturing history or that it would turn into a book 40 years later."

Robert discusses how the book came to fruition. "I've always photographed Los Angeles professionally; its urban landscapes and other aspects of the city. It was four years ago when someone at the Getty Center asked me if I would do a slide presentation called, "Disappearing Los Angeles". It was, of course, about all of the things in LA that have come and gone. The billboards were part of my presentation. After the show, many people expressed to me how they had never seen the billboards before and said there should be a book about it. I did some research and found that no one else had written a book about the billboards. It's a unique slice to the history of LA but also to the history of rock and roll. A great deal of work, pride and ego went into the creation of those billboards. They were all hand crafted; some were three dimensional and some had moving parts."

Robert continues, "1967 was the start for the rock and roll billboards when The Doors appeared on one along the Sunset Strip. Jac Holzman, the head of Elektra Records was the first

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one to see the possibility of advertising record albums on billboards. Before The Doors and even before The Beatles released Sgt. Pepper, young kids were mostly buying 45 records just for the singles. Around '67 is when the albums started coming more into vogue and were the main marketing tool. We saw

amazing artwork for the album covers. The Doors are really the first band credited with tying it all together and putting a rock and roll billboard on the Strip. Jac Holzman then was able to have each of his artists acquire a billboard as well. Once that started, the other record executives followed suit."

Research for Robert's book included interviews with many of the artists, designers and photographers who helped create the billboards. "I have always been very visual," he said. "I love the music too, but have always been fascinated by the record album covers. These people are my heroes in addition to the musicians. In fact, some of them who designed album covers also oversaw the billboard project. Record albums and the information included with them gave us a window to who the artists were. Since everything is downloaded now, you lose the experience, we are now geared towards computer screens."

Each billboard represents an album cover, a song, an experience or a story. As with many of the billboards, there is usually a story to go along with it. For example, The Beatles billboard for the Abbey Road album has quite an interesting story. "One night some kids climbed up to the billboard and cut off the head of Paul



McCartney as a prank," said Robert. "What makes this more fitting for the time is it was also around then that rumors were circulating that Paul was dead. Unbelievably, the person who took Paul's head still has the artwork in his living room! He was 19 when he pulled the prank and is now in his 60s, so something from the billboard era has been preserved."

As we know, nothing ever stays the same in life and certainly not in the music industry. "The billboard era began in 1967 and then fizzled out by 1982 once MTV came along. People started watching MTV to see their favorite artists. Money went into making those slick videos and the billboards became irrelevant but they did have a pretty good run."

Rock 'N' Roll Billboards of The Sunset Strip is available at Barnes & Noble and Amazon.com  
Photos from Rock 'N' Roll Billboards of The Sunset Strip by Robert Landau, published by Angel City Press

For more information about Robert Landau and his work:

[www.rockandrollbillboards.com](http://www.rockandrollbillboards.com)

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