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Bob Heimall was awed when he walked into a posh release party for the Doors' "Soft Parade" album almost four decades ago. Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix and, of course, Jim Morrison were at the party, signaling it was a good time to work for Elektra Records. Heimall, 63, of Vernon, recently highlighted some of the roughly 3,000 album covers he designed for rock n' roll icons during his long career, notably the heyday of record design in the late 1960s and early '70s. The Sussex County Arts and Heritage Council will display 24 of his

original album covers — plus 45 covers in a portfolio stand — at its “Blues” exhibit from Sept. 1 to Oct. 20. The color blue, feeling blue, and the blues music that created rock n’roll will blend into a single theme in the gallery at 9 Moran St., arts coordinator Linda Hirsch said. “My artist members like to have themes,” she said. “It kind of gets them going with exploring different directions to go with their artwork.”

Seeing life in squares

Whether it was snapping cover photos, adding design elements or making creative decisions, Heimall met with artists such as Dickey Betts, Carly Simon and Bread to catch listeners’ eyes in the record shop. Raised in Livingston, Heimall took up oil painting in high school with an affinity for the impressionist work of Claude Monet and Pablo Picasso. He attended the Newark School of Fine and Industrial Arts, where professors noted he could earn a living in commercial art, but would sacrifice the joys and creativity of fine art.

He spent the next five years working at ad agencies in the winter and surfing in the summer until an employment agency placed him at Elektra Records.

His portfolio as a graphic designer impressed the company and he worked up the ladder.

“After that, I didn’t go surfing any more,” he said. “I threw everything I had into a career, because I loved it.”

Indeed, it was an enviable gig. He’d listen to a tape made at the end of recording sessions — before mixing, mastering and pressing — to interpret the music and make a graphic image for the album art.

“Literally, I struck it rich,” he said.

The job also brought him to numerous performances across the nation — Muscle Shoals, Ala., Los Angeles, the Midwest — everywhere.

He sometimes ran into Linda Eastman, a fellow photographer who later found fame on her own.

“She used to say, ‘I’m going to marry one of these guys and make it big,’” Heimall recalled. “I said, ‘Sure, Linda,’ but then she went and married Paul McCartney.”

More than pretty faces on a record

There’s a framed hand-written letter on the wall of Heimall’s home office at Victorian Acres Farm. It’s addressed to Heimall and simple in nature, but it has a special closing: “Love, Carly Simon.”

“It’s magic the way the light seems to be coming right through the paper,” part of the letter says.

Simon is referring to a blue rayon print Heimall had used on her “Anticipation” album cover, giving it a special luminosity.

Heimall also colored a black-and-white photograph of Carly Simon for

her self-titled album. In an eerie coincidence, he learned that his color rendition matched the original colors of her outfit.

"They said, 'How'd you know?'"

Throughout his career, Heimall usually met with the artists in addition to their managers.

"My main focus was satisfying the artist," he said. "We related to each other."

While still a young gun with Elektra Records, Heimall asked a man in a green snake-skin suit to let him through the doorway in the office.

As he passed the man, he noticed it was Jim Morrison. Collecting himself, he managed to say, "Hi, I'm Bob."

Morrison left the world at age 27, as did Hendrix and Joplin, and Heimall's job had led him to encounters with each of them. But no artist's death was more devastating to him than Jim Croce's in 1973. Croce had sung his newest album to Heimall — who was working on the cover art — two weeks before a plane crash ended the singer-songwriter's life at age 30.

Heimall heard the tragic news on his car radio.

"I had to pull over," he recalled. "I was in tears."

Evolution of an album cover

From his home collection, Heimall picked out a self-titled album by the artist Baby Grand to explain how he had taken a musical concept and translated it into visual art.

"When you hear 'Baby Grand,' what do you think of?" he asked.

Not wanting to throw a piano on the cover, he sat down and listened to the first track, titled "Never Enough." He looked up and saw a painting by Fernando Botero, a well-known South American painter.

The family portrait of chubby, cherubic figures suggested they could never get enough at the dinner table.

It worked, "not being a grand piano, but grand babies," Heimall said.

"And it's 'never enough.' They can't stop eating."

In one of his most important decisions, Heimall chose a stark, black and white photograph of Patti Smith with a jacket over her shoulder for her album titled "Horses." The photo was taken by Robert Mapplethorpe, who was living with Smith at the time.

Heimall added the simplest text he could find to keep the photo's mood intact. The text went on the top third of the album, a standard visibility rule since records were sold in step-down bins at the store.

Rolling Stone magazine chose it as one of the Top 100 album covers of all time.

A changing field

The advent of computers "changed everything," said Heimall, who was

used to laying out album art on a board.

"I had to learn a whole new technology," he said.

Record company secretaries could take photos and enter album text on software, essentially sweeping work away from Heimall's trained eye.

The diminutive size of compact discs can't match the grand canvas that LPs once had, and the record business is "not doing well" as mp3 downloads and online song purchases take hold, he said.

Still, Heimall is optimistic that listeners will download album art to accompany their tunes.

"You still need a visible image," he said.

New Beginnings

After Elektra, Heimall worked for Arista Records and his own studio in New York City, where he made artwork for Pioneer electronics' laser disks, or precursors to CDs.

Ever the athlete, Heimall has managed corporate softball leagues in New York City for a couple decades as a primary source of income.

Heimall said he has returned to creative fine arts such as painting and devotes his talent to the Lord after an eye-opening accident in Vermont prompted him to accept Jesus as his Savior.

In a nod to the impressionist style, Heimall recently used a palette knife to paint various scenes he saw in on a missions trip to the Dominican Republic.

He has reproduced many of the paintings in prints and postcards for a man's business back in the Caribbean nation. The man had lost his leg in an accident, and the paintings give him a manageable line of work to support his family.

Heimall seems to have captured the island nation well in his village scenes depicting children at play.

"When I showed these to the people in the Dominican Republic," he said, "they knew who these children were."

Bob Heimall

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