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Hatch Show Print steps into spotlight

New attention to an old print shop drives profits

BY NAOMI SNYDER • STAFF WRITER • AUGUST 31, 2008

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Sandwiched between a store selling Jack Daniel's branded black cowboy boots and American Apparel in downtown Nashville is the 129-year-old Hatch Show Print, one of the few commercial letterpress printers in the country that have survived decades of obscurity and are now enjoying a revival in the midst of a digital age.

While many downtown businesses thrive on tourists looking for a country experience, Hatch Show Print keeps a low profile.

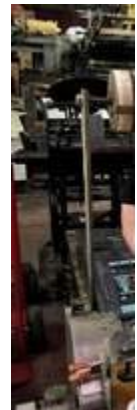
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"There's no mannequins, no costumes, love ya, but I've got to get back to work," said the shop's longtime manager, Jim Sherraden.

After years of financial struggle, Hatch Show Print is booming.

CNN hired the business — whose designers handcraft posters using wood or metal blocks in much the same way printers did for hundreds of years— to design and create nearly all of its promotional materials for its presidential election coverage. Belmont University will hand out Hatch Show Print posters to everyone who attends the upcoming presidential debate on the college campus.

Clients from Nike to Neil Young have been ordering posters from the shop. The Ryman Auditorium



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continues to offer a Hatch Show poster to all its artists to go with each show and be sold to concertgoers. Hatch Show has been doing the Ryman's posters since at least the 1920s, and its vintage designs have become an integral part of Nashville's image.

Some 16 to 20 interns, mostly college students, will put in stints at the shop this year, as university art departments across the country have begun buying antique letterpress printing machines and encouraging students to learn the almost forgotten art.

"We're providing a graphic design look you can't get with digital design," Sherraden said. "The computer is the best thing that ever happened to us."

On a recent afternoon, employee Mary Louise Sullivan carefully spread red ink on a metal CNN logo and the word "tonight," which she had arranged from individual wooden letters. Then she pressed a piece of tracing paper on them to capture the image and dabbed the wet ink in cornstarch — all so she could show the proofs to CNN before the materials are made.

Sullivan had to walk down the block to FedEx Kinko's to digitally send photos of the proofs to CNN. There is no computer on Sherraden's wooden desk, which is covered with letters and paperwork. Anyone who wants to order something needs to send a fax, not an e-mail.

"I always wanted to do something more creative than sitting at a computer typing buttons," Sullivan said. "It feels more real to me, to be able to touch them and get ink on your clothes."

Later, Sullivan would paint ink on finished CNN blocks and hand press the poster onto paper using one of several antique machines that are no longer being manufactured. The newest printing press in the shop was made in the 1960s.

The walls are covered with wood shelving made decades ago out of discarded wood blocks. Piles of images are stacked to the ceiling — with labels like pine tree, pair of lips and baseball boy.

Old fluorescent light rods dangle from the ceiling.

This is the same shop that made Elvis Presley's posters, Hank Williams' and Bill Monroe's. It has created posters for Pearl Jam and the Beastie Boys. It supplied traveling circuses and vaudeville acts with the posters that advertised shows in the earlier part of the last century.

"We're huge fans of their work and their approach," said CNN's marketing director, Scot Safon. "Anyone who cares about design knows what they do and loves what they do."

Safon and Sherraden didn't want to divulge the value of their contract, but Safon said the TV airtime was worth north of \$5 million and Sherraden said the contract "keeps the lights on Thursday, Friday, Monday and Tuesday."

Shop Struggles

It hasn't always been this way.

In fact, since the Country Music Foundation acquired the shop from Gaylord Entertainment Co. in 1992, Hatch Show Print managed to make a profit only during the past four years. Last year, the shop grossed \$700,000 in revenues and a profit of \$191,000. The surplus is being used to support the nonprofit mission of the foundation, which also operates the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, said museum Director Kyle Young.

 [Hatch Sh](#)

[Video: Hatch](#)

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Hatch Show Print struggled to break even for decades.

Sherraden, in his book *Hatch Show Print: The History of a Great American Poster Shop*, remembers: "The phone didn't ring much in the late 80s, but occasionally some voice out there would order copies of our most famous poster, Elvis Presley 1956, in Jacksonville, Florida."

Bill Denny, who bought the business on two separate occasions in the 1960s and 1980s, said it "had some tough days where it really didn't carry its own weight." He said he bought the business because he saw other owners selling off some of the historic wood blocks and wanted to keep them together.

Later, he sold the business to Opryland USA, which would become Gaylord Entertainment. For two summers in 1986 and 1987, Opryland officials tried making posters for tourists at their theme park, but that didn't take off.

Revival Begins In 1990s

Sherraden was happy to keep the business going, though. If it wasn't hugely profitable, it was preserving an enormous archive.

Gaylord Entertainment finally unloaded the business in 1992 by giving it to the Country Music Foundation. That same year, the business moved from a spot next to the Ryman to Broadway, making room for the looming AT&T Building.

That generated more tourist traffic into the shop, plus letterpress printing experienced a revival of sorts in the 1990s. People were rediscovering historic printing techniques, according to Michael Phillips, the editor of the industry newspaper *The Printer*.

Just when digital typesetting became the standard, the old-fashioned way became much cooler.

People who 15 years ago could salvage a Vandercook hand-operated proof press for \$200 now would have to pay \$5,000 or \$6,000, Phillips said.

Shops began opening in garages to print wedding invitations and posters. Nowadays, some printers are charging more than \$1,000 for 50 wedding invitations hand-crafted on letterpress.

"Everything in this age is so digital," said Brian Wagner, marketing manager for the Ryman Auditorium, which buys all its concert posters from Hatch Show.

"People are craving authenticity. They want to get to the roots of this artistry. When you look at a Hatch poster, it's authentic. It's one of a kind. It doesn't have that slick glossy feel that computer-animated printing has."

At Hatch Show, 100 posters cost roughly \$300. Restrikes of old posters can cost as little as \$10 or as much as \$400.

The growing interest in historic printing has led the Smithsonian Institution to sponsor a traveling art exhibit of Hatch Show Print pieces, a show that will open Oct. 11 at the Experience Music Project|Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame in Seattle.

"It has history and heritage," said Jason Skinner, off-air art director for Country Music Television, a customer of Hatch Show Print. "That's the root of graphic design. The history of typography is all right there."

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rockriter wrote:

Great article about an awesome business! The help is always friendly and my kids love going in there to visit their pet cats who roam freely around the store, they really add to the ambience!

8/31/2008 7:41:27 PM

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twanger1 wrote:

I was lucky enough to get some of the Hatch Show prints of Acuff, Uncle Dave Macon, etc. They were repros, but I still treasure them. Long live Hatch Show Prints. A great part of Americana.

8/31/2008 8:34:21 AM

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emncunc wrote:

I'm glad they are doing good and still around. I remember strolling by their shop at the original location in downtown Nashville back in 1955 when I first cam to Nashville to begin my career. I'd look in the window and see the people at work on the presses. It is good they are still around and doing what they do best. A lost art indeed.

8/31/2008 4:32:03 AM

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