

Steve Marcus Redraws the Visual Narrative of Jewish Pop Art

Guided by 1960s artistic sensibilities, a dreadlocked street artist becomes an observant Jew.



'The Chazon Ish Blotter Art,' by Steve Marcus, 2024. Steve Marcus

Where would 1960s counterculture have been without the Jews? A glance at the prominent '60s activists, artists, writers and musicians turns up a long list of Jewish names. There is the co-founder of the Youth International party, Abbie Hoffman, along with his "Yippie" sidekick Jerry Rubin. Then there is another "Yippie," and publisher of satirical underground newspaper, The Realist, Paul Krassner. Poet Allen Ginsberg, folk singer Phil Ochs, and psychologist Richard Alpert — better known as Ram Dass — were also among those who played a significant role in reshaping the youth culture of the era. Oh, and who can forget the freewheeling troubador Bob Dylan?

East Village Pop Artist Steve Marcus was born at the tail end of the decade — in 1969 — but he has a show entitled "Psychedelicatessen," that recently opened at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research and the Center for Jewish History, which draws on this legacy and runs until December. His collection of bright posters borrows directly from the heyday of thematic hippiedom, using well known sixties slogans and tropes with a Judaic twist. Mr. Marcus restores some of the overlooked Jewish origins of early Freak Culture, while also creating a playful alternate reality.

Take Gilbert Sheldon's Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers, for instance, those rascally staples of 1960s underground head comix. Mr. Marcus transforms them into the Fabulous Furry Frum Brothers, translating their roommate squabbling from English into Yiddish. Other times he takes highly revered figures from the Jewish world and give them a sixties makeover. He gives us portraits of figures such as the Chazon Ish and the Lubavetcher Rebbe, but printed onto (blank) blotter sheets of LSD.



'Passin' Thru' poster by Steve Marcus, 2024. Steve Marcus

Mr. Marcus has engaged in this kind of sly camp before, mashing seemingly incompatible corners of the zeitgeist in a unique and colorfully funny way that still remains accessible to those unfamiliar with his . As he explained to the Sun: “I like to take pop culture and combine it with Judaism and Jewish culture to share my ancestral roots — regardless of whether you’re Jewish or not, rich or poor, right or left, young or old —c an enjoy and spark a meaningful or fun conversation.”

Mr. Marcus’ approach brings these contrasts into sharp, comical relief. There is probably no university student alive who hasn’t seen the R Crumb “Stoned Again” poster in a dorm room, where a man sitting at a table collapses into a surreal puddle under the influence of weed. Mr. Marcus changes the stoned man into a Yeshiva student with the caption “Daf Yomi Again,” referring to the seven-and-a-half-year cycle of daily Torah study that covers all 2,711 pages of the Babylonian Talmud. It’s enough to melt your head in an entirely different way.

In making these off-color comparisons, Mr. Marcus is not attempting to draw equivalences. Rather he underscores Judaism’s talent for both particularism and hybridity and its talent for adapting to broader cultures while maintaining a strong sense of its own identity. The contrast also highlights ways in which Jewish and gentile culture have strongly influenced each-other. When he draws underground comic hero “Mr. Natural” striding past a delicatessen under a large Grateful Dead Stealie, emblazoned with a Star of David, something clicks. Crumbs terse, bearded sage would definitely have strong opinions about a pastrami sandwich, and he doesn’t look that far off from a Rabbi.



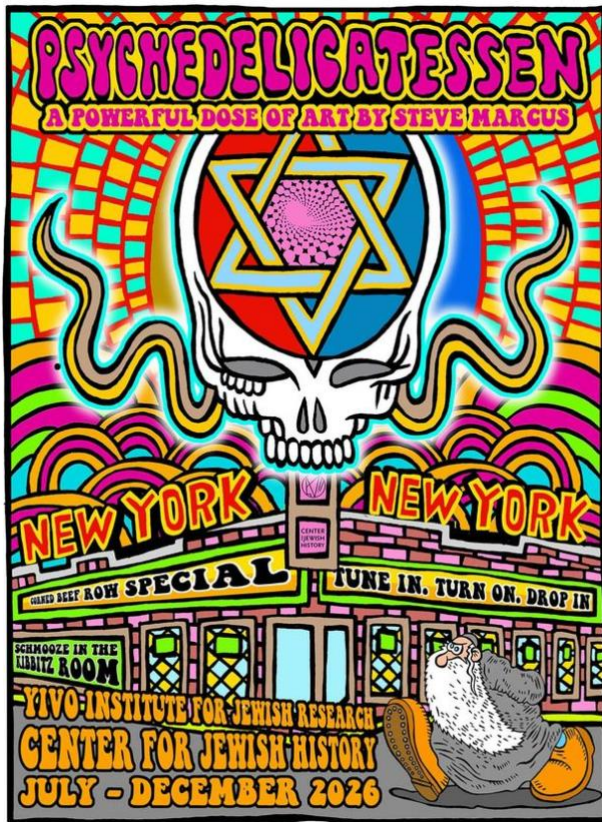
Steve Marcus in his New York city studio. Via Sid Kaplan

A freewheeling rebel from New York City underground countercultural scene, Mr. Marcus has long garnered international success producing posters, illustration, murals and magazine campaigns. His work has probably been seen by millions internationally. He also has a line of skateboards, including three that feature Moses on Mount Sinai, with two others devoted to the Ten Commandments. He is especially known for his artwork on “The Cuban Hip Hop All Stars Album,” a 2008 release that bypassed official state labels, giving the world a grittier taste of life behind the sugar cane curtain. His Havana mural and photographs from the project were included in two scholarly books, and the project is credited as a key turning point in Cuba’s recent dissident history.

Witnessing inequality and dysfunction in both capitalist and communist countries, however, led Mr. Marcus into a crisis. He grew disillusioned with politics and more drawn to his spiritual roots. This process accelerated when his father died of a heart attack on Rosh Hashanah. Never having previously being a particularly observant Jew, Mr. Marcus decided to recite Kaddish for his dad. He reasoned: “He had brought me home from the hospital...showed up as my pops every day...and I can’t say something three times a day for 11 months?” In seeking a place to help him recite it properly, he found himself rejoining his community.

“I began to say Kaddish, a prayer said when one loses a parent,” Mr. Marcus said. “It was during that year that I found myself learning daily at a very well-respected yeshiva in the Lower East Side. I still go every morning, so my pivot to incorporating Jewishness into my work came from learning at the yeshiva.”

In doing so, Mr. Marcus has uncovered what could be termed a “rebel” thread in the Jewish tradition. In his humble opinion, his shift from dreadlocked street artist to observant Jew is not as drastic as many would believe. Jews in diaspora have always maintained a complex and delicate relationship with their host cultures, remaining distinctly, and stubbornly, separate in some ways while fully joining along in others. Witness the small but loyal contingent of orthodox Jews that are to be found dancing and swaying with abandon at any Phish concert.



'Psychedelicatesen' exhibition poster by Steve Marcus, 2026.

I ask Mr. Marcus if the current exhibit is about underscoring the rich contribution of Jews to the sixties counterculture. He tells me that his intent is not to celebrate or advance any particular cultural agenda, but rather to open a conversation. An approach that is Talmudic rather than dogmatic, in other words.

He added: "I like my work to be relatable on many levels."