

# TexasMonthly

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## Q & A with Justin Ishmael, Creative Director of Mondo



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Originally hailing from Kansas City, Justin Ishmael has parlayed a lifelong fascination with comics, toys, movies, and art into a plum post as Mondo's Creative Director. Together with Mitch Putnam and Rob Jones, Ishmael has grown Mondo from a t-shirt shop in the corner of Austin's Alamo Drafthouse to a design studio that contends with studios and works alongside legendary directors. Ishmael is now in the enviable position of making the exact sort of posters, t-shirts, and even arcade games he's always envisioned, while still maintaining a fan's wide-eyed appreciation of everything offbeat. Just don't ask him to do a *Yogi Bear* poster.

**Texas Monthly:** How do you find an artist for the posters?

**Justin Ishmael:** It depends on what the project is. We look at the original poster first, and see if we can beat it. If there's not an illustrator who can straight-up beat the poster, we have to think, is

there some design element or other way we can approach it? We think of an artist who can do something interesting with a character or a scene. Then we can do different things with printing. Once we get the image in, we think: "What else can we do? Can we add metallic, can we add glow?"

With the Rolling Roadshow, we were asked to something cohesive, by one artist. We wanted to do something simple, two to three colors per poster, something that could fit a whole wall, and would look good together. Jason Munn had done a *Dr. Strangelove* poster for us last year, and it sold out really quickly. Plus, he had never seen a lot of the movies. Sometimes when you have someone who's seen a movie a bunch, they want to throw everything at it. But he was seeing *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* for the first time. It was good to get someone fresh.

**TM:** How much do you find artists adhere to traditional aesthetics of movie posters? How much do you want them to?

**Ji:** Movie posters nowadays aren't anything to write home about. Most of what our artists turn in is better than the best movie poster. Our posters are never just a giant head with a big actor name beneath it.

**TM:** What response do you get from the filmmakers?

**Ji:** Quentin Tarantino likes us a lot. We did a *Kill Bill* poster for Quentin's birthday. For *There Will Be Blood*, P.T. Anderson bought twenty of them. Eli Roth is into us. And then we're doing all these director

series, so we're working directly with them. Guillermo del Toro approves everything. We'll send it to him, and he'll give us notes. Same thing with Zach Snyder, Wes Craven. We're working more and more with the actual creators of the movies.

**TM:** Do the studios ever resist your posters?

**JJ:** Sometimes we get into trouble with likenesses. With *Iron Man 2*, we had Samuel L. Jackson on the poster, and his people wrote back and said you have to make Samuel blacker. [Laughs] We didn't know what that meant.

The toughest part about working with the studios is the credit blocks. You have to have all the proper copyright lines. You were asking earlier, do we have to stay with the old aesthetic; the only time we have to adhere to the old style is if there are rules like 'Tom Cruise's name has to be x inches tall.' The studios care more about that than what's on the actual poster.

**TM:** What's the effect the posters have on people?

**JJ:** When people first think about them, it's as collectibles. They're limited edition, highly sought after, sold on eBay. But we try to only work on things that we like. If someone came to us and said 'Do something for *Yogi Bear*,' we wouldn't do it, even if they were paying us. We take our reputation seriously. People will go see the movie because we put the poster out; it gives the movies a second life in some circles.

**TM:** Among our peers, a franchise like *Star Wars* gets talked about in very emotional terms. People feel they have a serious, emotional connection to the characters, to the storylines, to the makers. Do you think there is an equivalent to that in contemporary cinema?

**JJ:** *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* are definitely that. But *Star Wars* had staying power. Thirty years later—honestly, it's bigger now than it was back then. *Lord of the Rings* is big, but even now there aren't people making mash-up shirts with Frodo. There's not a huge nerd thing going on with those movies like there is with *Star Wars*.

**TM:** What's the one poster you would absolutely love to do?

**JJ:** Selfishly, I would want to do a *Howard the Duck* poster. It's my favorite comic book of all time, and even though the movie had nothing to do with the comic book, it had so much fun visual stuff: the monster, Jeffrey Jones. You could make the poster for *Howard the Duck* that would make it seem like the greatest movie ever made.