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Face the music: Dave Muller's album-oriented portraits

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Artist Dave Muller will participate in Three Day Weekend, a series of events Saturday through Monday in Snowmass Village and Aspen.

ASPEN — Given the location of Dave Muller's art installation — on the wall of the new Elk Camp restaurant at Snowmass Ski Area — perhaps an obvious theme for the work would have been food. But Muller is far more interested in what people put in their ears than in their mouths. A burly 48-year-old with

a purposeful but also gentle demeanor, Muller is a singer, instrumentalist and DJ as well as an artist, and much of his visual work has centered around musical themes.

Muller was part of Marlon Brando, Pocahontas, and Me, a 2008 group exhibition at the Aspen Art Museum inspired by the Neil Young song “Pocahontas”; other group shows he has contributed to include Sympathy for the Devil: Art and Rock and Roll Since 1967, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and last year’s The Record: Contemporary Art and Vinyl, which showed in North Carolina, Boston and Miami.

His latest local project draws on the collective musical tastes of 86 Aspen Skiing Co. employees, who were asked to list their favorite albums. Muller turned the data into a 29-foot wide wall mural — “Aspen Ski Company Music Survey Results and Generated Topography (The Hills Are Alive...)” — that includes the titles of all 500 records mentioned, and a mountain landscape whose peaks correspond to the albums that were named most frequently. The musical chart is surrounded by elements that catch the local flavor: skiers and snowboarders, bears and birds, a chairlift. A separate part of the installation is a framed acrylic painting, “Aspen Ski Company Top Ten,” of the top 10 albums as picked by the Skico employees, a fairly predictable selection that includes the Beatles’ “Abbey Road,” Nirvana’s “Nevermind,” the Who’s “Who’s Next” and the Rolling Stones’ “Beggars Banquet.”

Muller isn’t done showing the Aspen area how deep his music interests go. Muller, who was in town this past fall to work on the piece, returns to host Three Day Weekend, a series of events that culminates on Monday, Feb. 18, with Muller DJ-ing an après-ski party at the Sky Hotel in Aspen.

“The Hills Are Alive” isn’t merely a list of popular albums, but a look into a collective personality. He refers to the top 10 painting as a “portrait” — but the information he’s recording is the musical taste of a group, rather than one individual’s eye color and jawline. Muller believes his method is, in an odd way, more reliable than customary portraiture: A person is less self-conscious when asked to name his favorite music than he is when he is sitting for a painting.

“You make a straight portrait, people try to look good, pull their cheeks in,” Muller said this past fall at the Aspen Art Museum, which, in conjunction with Skico, is presenting Muller’s activities here. “People aren’t acting when they make these music choices. You catch them just being themselves.”

Someone who believes as deeply in music as Muller does is going to find much significance in other people’s musical preferences. “I’m interested in trying to figure things out about people, about groups of people, getting some inroads into what people think,” he said. “This is one way to do that. A straight portrait of someone’s face is a depiction of physical data. This is another way of somewhat practically, somewhat clumsily, gathering some other facet of portraiture.

“Music is constant for me, a filter I look through. The names of records, the language used in records, choruses and refrains — it’s the language I use. Or maybe my second language.”

Muller recognizes that any effort to depict a person is going to have its clumsiness. In another component of “The Hills Are Alive” project that could also be termed both practical and clumsy, Muller asked Skico participants to list their height; the height of the mural corresponds to the average height of those people who responded to his poll. “I wanted to relate it to your body, to something corporeal,” he said.

But Muller seems to prefer the more internal look at the group that he got from the music tastes. “I’m of the ilk that you are what you eat, you are what you consume,” he said. “That includes what you listen to. It’s really hard to figure out what people are. All we have are specks in a dark room. This is as good as anything else we have. This is how we can understand each other. You’ve got a lot of choices, but everyone listens to music.”

That last part is especially true of the Aspen area. “Like any ski place, there’s music everywhere,” Muller said. He added that, while most of the Top 10 albums painting reflects choices that could have been made anywhere in the English-speaking world, there was at least one outlier, specific to the Colorado mountains: the Allman Brothers’ “Eat a Peach,” which he attributed to the local “hippie element.” The full list of album

names reflects another local idiosyncrasy; not everywhere would someone pick “John Denver's Greatest Hits.” But the list also reveals the cosmopolitan nature of an international resort — there are two albums by Australian hip-hoppers Hilltop Hoods.

Muller's own tastes span much wider, and weirder, than the 89 Skico employees included in “The Hills Are Alive.” From 1995 to 2004, he toured as a member of the art-noise band Destroy All Monsters, which had been founded by the late musician and visual artist Mike Kelley in 1973. Muller played bass “and anything else that makes sound. Whatever. All sorts of music-making objects,” he said. Currently, Muller's primary musical pursuit is playing sousaphone in a brass band in the northeast kingdom region of Vermont; the band is closely associated with the ambitious Bread & Puppet Theater.

For his listening pleasure, he favors, for the moment, Tame Impala, an Australian band that plays psychedelic dream rock, and singer Julia Holter, a graduate of the California Institute of the Arts who last year released the album, “Ekstasis.” Muller's iTunes is crammed with music from the Middle East, Japan and North Africa — sounds which, he says, are not all that exotic. “People are really using a lot of this stuff, the ethnographic pop music, today,” said Muller, who began playing trumpet at age 9, and was a radio DJ while attending the University of California, Davis. He also has room for the most mainstream of sounds. “I still listen to the Beatles a lot,” he said.

Over the last decade, Muller has narrowed his focus as a visual artist mostly to music-related projects. Many of pieces over that stretch have been commissioned portraits of an individual's taste in music, similar to “Aspen Ski Company Top Ten.” He also did a self-portrait that featured albums by the Stooges, collections of music from Bali and Burma, and the Runaways' “Live in Japan.”

With the decline of the record album, and the shrinking of album art from LP to CDs to, in the MP3 era, basically nothing, the visual component of music has, as the story goes, disappeared. Gone are such masterpieces as the twisted group portrait that was the cover of “Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band,” or the unsettling narrative of Pink Floyd's “Wish You Were Here,” featuring a man in a formal suit on fire.

Muller was among the people who decried the state of album cover art. “CDs and cassettes, they just looked terrible,” he said. But then he did a painting of cassettes, and had a change of heart.

“It turns out they're much more fun to draw than I would have imagined,” he said. “The plastic is crinkly and glistens. I ended up buying a whole lot of cassettes that I never listed to, just so I could draw them.”