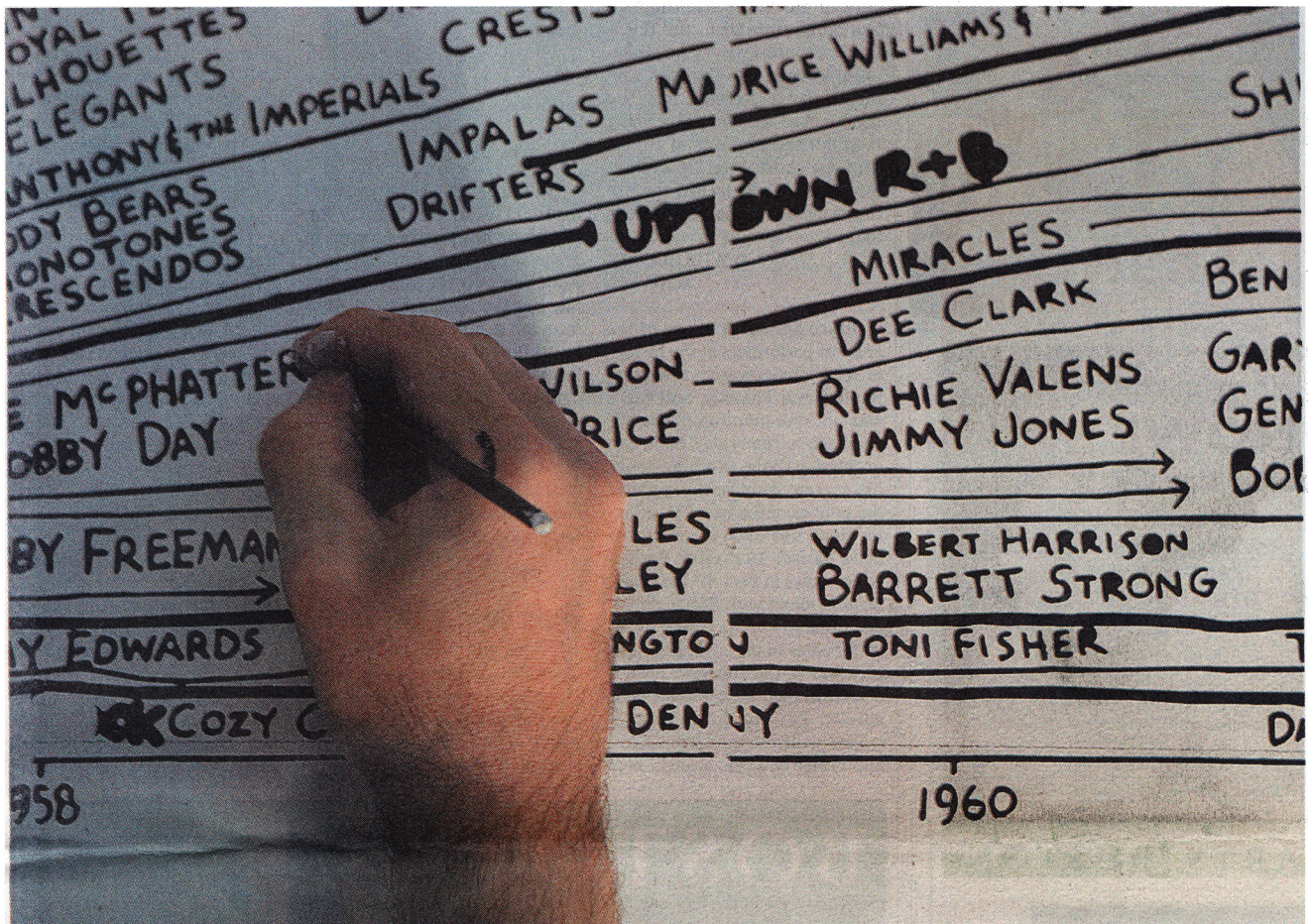


wall of sound

A MUSICAL INSTALLATION AT THE ICA PLAYS WITH THE QUESTION:
WHOSE ART IS IT, ANYWAY? BY GEOFF EDGERS | GLOBE STAFF



PHOTOS BY DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF



Artist Dave Muller (above) has re-created a timeline of rock 'n' roll from a book, making it part of his installation "As Below, So Above" (below right).



Dave Muller spends about \$3,000 a month on music. "That's a lot of money," he acknowledges during a recent work break at the Institute of Contemporary Art. "It's not as much as my mortgage, but it's still a lot of money."

The artist pauses. "That's like \$100 a day," he says, then flashes a mischievous smile. "That's pretty crazy."

But Muller, 43, can justify his CD and vinyl bills. They're tax-deductible, as anybody who walks into the ICA over the next year would understand.

It took the Los Angeles artist a week to install the sprawling rock 'n' roll-inspired mural "As Below, So Above" in the ICA's lobby. Filled with text, watercolor brushstrokes, and framed portraits of record-sleeve spines, the piece is a departure from the previous mural in the lobby, Chiho Aoshima's playful anime-inspired "The Divine Gas." Muller's installation, commissioned by the ICA, comes with a soundtrack, a constantly playing rotation of 136,125 songs. The playlist put together by the onetime DJ — he still does a wedding here or there — is designed to run for 399 days without repeating a tune.

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His work is the soundtrack of an artist's life

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Muller calls his musical setup, a Macintosh hard drive connected to speakers in the lobby, a radio station. Jen Mergel, assistant curator at the ICA, describes this electronic jukebox, a snapshot of Muller's music collection at the moment, as a kind of "self portrait" of the obsessive record collector.

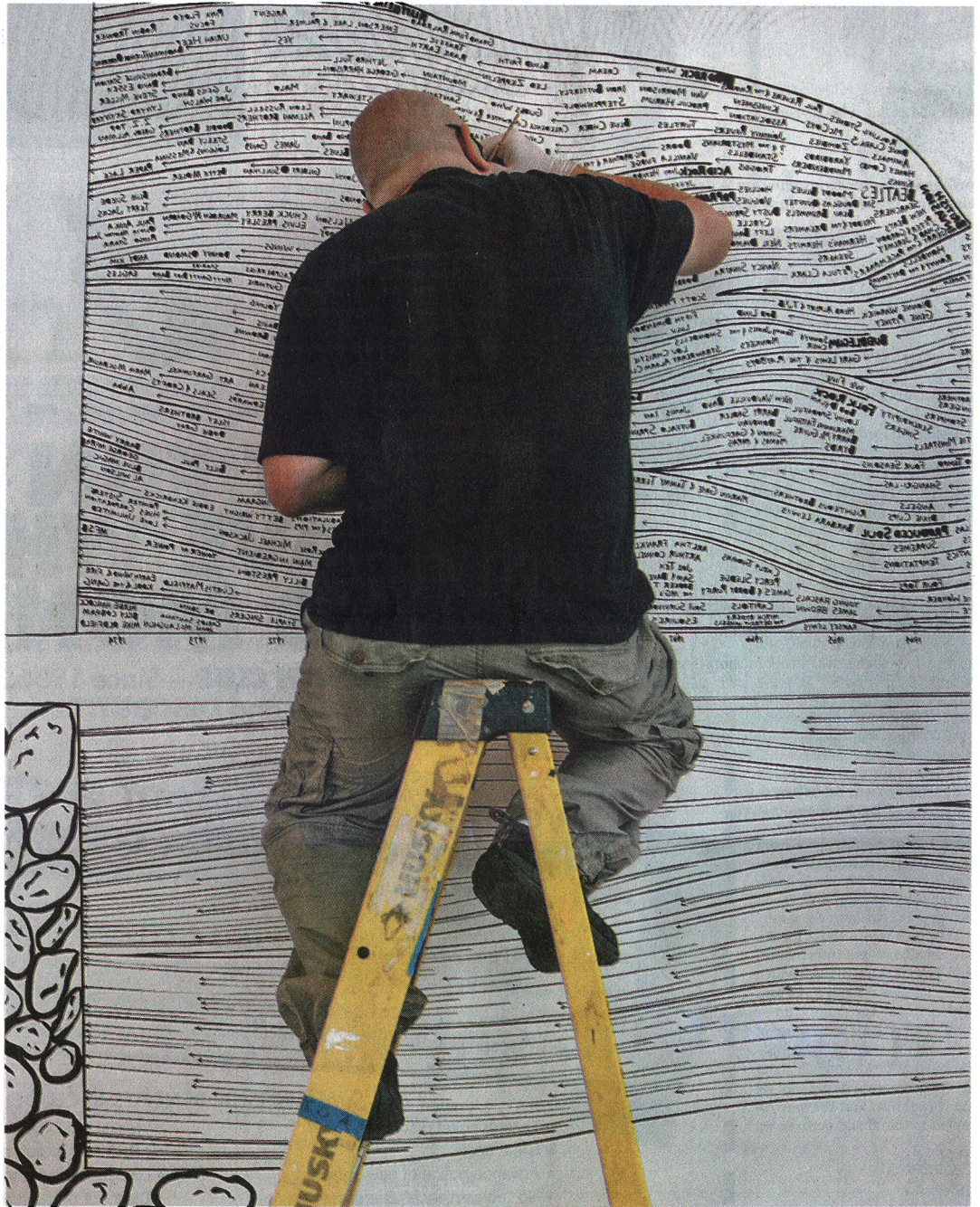
A central component of the mural is not Muller's creation. It is a chart chronicling the advance of rock 'n' roll over two decades starting in 1955. Reebee Garofalo, now a professor at the University of Massachusetts-Boston, created the text by studying record sales charts and translating them into the swirling design, which traces how the Kingston Trio led to Bob Dylan, how Fats Domino paved the way for Stevie Wonder. The chart was published in "Rock 'n' Roll Is Here to Pay: The History and Politics of the Music Industry," a now out-of-print book Garofalo coauthored with Steve Chapple in 1977. (A poster of Garofalo's chart can be purchased in the ICA store and online.)

To illustrate his view that rock history is an organic living entity, Muller has painted Garofalo's chart in black watercolor and surrounded it with a kind of rock garden on the ICA wall. It's a landscape seen in cross-section, with trees, grass, and autumn leaves, as well as an underground area in which Muller has placed a tribute to Sun Ra.

"Somehow, I'm just trying to relate that all the different kinds of music are connected somehow, the same way an ecosphere is connected," Muller says. "I'm also trying to figure out how you deal with history and the future."

Though he has his own strong opinions on music, Muller didn't mess with Garofalo's original design. The chart is the chart, a cultural history he won't alter.

"This is something we all share," Muller says. "It's more interesting to me as an artifact. If I want to show the people the music I love, the next time I DJ they can pay attention."



DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Toru Nakanishi works on a rock 'n' roll timeline mural, part of artist Dave Muller's installation at the ICA.

A blend of styles

Sideburned and slightly pudgy, Muller looks like a less crazed Jack Black, the actor known for embodying rock geekdom in "High Fidelity" and "School of Rock." He's talkative and extroverted; according to his New York gallery representative Barbara Gladstone, Muller is "really sweet and friendly and interesting and very LA to me. He's a dude."

Though Muller came to art late, he bought his first record, the Royal Guardsmen's "Snoopy Vs. The Red Baron," for a quarter at a garage sale when he was 8. He started playing the trumpet at 9, and he still occasionally performs in artist Mike Kelley's band, Destroy All Monsters.

Muller took his first art class in his early 20s. In 1989, after earning a degree in art and chemistry from the University of California at Davis, Muller worked as a party DJ and organized shows for other artists, mainly around Los Angeles. He also developed his style, which blends realistic and almost cartoonish paintings with text. For a time, he created what looked like posters for shows featuring his friends, only they were used as art, not posters.

A creative epiphany came in the late 1990s when Muller stumbled upon Garofalo's chart while thumbing through a book at a girlfriend's place. The chart appealed to Muller through its sheer mass of musical reference points, with everyone from Chuck Berry and the Beach Boys to the James Gang and Marvin Gaye. As an artist, he also found himself drawn to the undulating black-ink drawing, which looks like the striations on a topographical map.

Muller did a piece based on Garofalo's chart for the first time in 2003 at a London gallery. With the ICA commission, he will have repeated some version of it a half dozen times, including one work that appeared in the Whitney Museum of Art's 2004 biennial.

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At the ICA, Muller, working with three assistants, has created a timeline that starts in the 19th century, the beginning of recorded sound. He's picked up Garofalo's chart in the 1950s and duplicated it in reverse on the right, as if in a mirror image, as the timeline continues to 2079. Muller's framed paintings, including a blown-up spine of a Velvet Underground record, are assembled on the wall.

Muller calls his radio station "A Year in Review (Give or Take a Month)." The songs are listed, with each play, on a monitor hanging on the mural wall. On a pedestal in the lobby, visitors can thumb through a 1,418-page hardcover book listing each track, from the first — "The Sun Always Shines on T.V. (Extended Version)" by a-ha — to the last — "Alarm on Wind Clock," a sound effect. They can also sign the book anywhere inside.



OFF THE WALL

View an audio slideshow on Muller's work at boston.com/ae/theater_arts

Matthew Higgs, a New York-based artist and friend of Muller's, says that the two sides of the work — the digital radio station and the handmade wall painting — play off each other.

"Clearly, it transcends any particular genre," says Higgs. "It's an amplification of the infinite, and what digital technology has given Dave access to." Juxtaposed with the radio station, he adds, the mural "looks almost like a cave drawing."

Sampled image

Muller's use of the chart has created a complication. The artist considers his use of it appropriation; he likens it to the way a rapper might sample an older song. Though it is standard in the music world to pay royalties for such samples, in the art world, images and texts are regularly appropriated without compensation.

Muller doesn't hide where the chart came from, even painting a roughly 2½-by-3-foot panel featuring detailed information on Garofalo and Chapple's book as part of the mural.

Garofalo, though, says he has mixed emotions about Muller's use of his chart.

"On the positive side, I get a thrill when I see a piece of work I did blown up to a 20-foot or 30-foot art mural in art institutions around the world," Garofalo says in a phone interview.

But Garofalo says he was upset that Muller didn't call him before he came to town to let him know about the commission. He learned of it from a friend who happened to visit the ICA and see Muller and his crew installing the chart. Garofalo says it frustrates him that the ICA's press release for the show doesn't mention him.

"It's complicated," says Garofalo. "In this instance, I feel like the term appropriation is a difficult term. In fact he's using 100 percent of the design, and it is the central design element of the installation."

Looking back, Muller says he wished he had called Garofalo to give him a heads-up. (He did leave him a phone message last weekend.) But he says he's been swamped and even forgot to call friends who he had hoped would come up to see him in Boston. Even before hearing of Garofalo's concerns this month, Muller says, he'd been mulling over how to pay some kind of licensing fee when works based on the chart are shown.

As for Garofalo's complaints about how the ICA has publicized the work, Muller says, "I don't know what to do about that. I don't do anything but make art. I'm not a publicity machine. That's not my end of the thing. I don't write the reviews. But I do write on the art where it came from."

■
Dave Muller's "As Below, So Above" is at the ICA through Oct. 12. 617-478-3100, icaboston.org

Radio station for sale

With his art career thriving, Muller has reached the point where he no longer needs a second job. He and his wife, the artist Ann Faison-Muller, live comfortably with their two daughters in a house in Pasadena. Muller can even afford to pay an assistant to digitize his acquisitions; he estimates that 60 percent of his purchases are vinyl, the remainder CDs.

The radio station at the ICA, he says, is for sale, though Muller and the Gladstone Gallery won't say for how much. But for a price, a collector will get to take home the book along with a Mac G5 loaded with music — digital versions of everything from the Royal Guardsmen record he picked up for a quarter in 1972 to Andre Almuro's "Kosmos-Musiques Experimentales," a rare LP he bought from a French dealer for \$144.28 in September.

Muller has sold one art wall, sans radio station, to a contemporary art museum in Leon, Spain. He's also sold four freestanding radio stations. The ICA art wall will be up for a year.

What would the Recording Industry Association of America, known for suing college students who take part in illegal file-sharing, think about Muller's willingness to sell a hard drive stocked with 399 days of music? He shrugs.

"It looks bad on paper because I'm basically selling a huge iPod," Muller says. "But in the world of fair use, in a way this is a self-portrait based on everything I've accumulated. If you're living with this piece and it's in your house, you're living inside Dave Muller's head. That's my take."