Instructor feted at San Francisco literary festival

One of the walls in Lee College instructor David Ensminger's campus office is covered with a hodgepodge of fliers promoting punk rock band appearances and concerts — but the dozens of paper leaflets are only a tiny sampling of the nearly 5,000 pieces he has collected over the last 30 years.

"If I don't retain it and preserve it, who will?" asked Ensminger, who teaches courses in English, humanities and folklore. "To me, it's the art of my generation and it deserves the same kind of attention as any other."

Drawn into the punk world before he was even a teenager, Ensminger is widely considered one of the world's foremost experts in the genre. He has written several award-winning books and articles exploring various dimensions and impacts of punk as a cultural movement, including "Left of the Dial" and "Visual Vitriol: The Street Art and Subcultures of the Punk and Hardcore Generation," which documents many of the fliers in his collection. In addition, he co-edited a biography of legendary blues man Lightnin' Hopkins that won a Certificate of Merit in September from the Association for Recorded Sound Collections.

Ensminger's body of work was celebrated this month at the 10th annual San Francisco Lit Crawl, billed as the world's largest literary event of its kind with some 10,000 attendees each year. His panel discussion, "Punk: The Permanent Revolution," featured icons of the movement like three-time Grammy nominee Peter Case, Jack Grisham and Mia Simmans.

Ensminger examines punk through the lens of a folklorist, analyzing the characteristics and traits of the genre in an attempt to reveal what makes it distinct. His research has expanded understanding of the punk movement beyond the traditional images of wild-eyed young men with crazy hair and black clothes, to include recognition of the contributions of gays, women, minorities and even members of the deaf community.

After the publication and release this year of "Mavericks of Sound," a collection of interviews with indie and roots artists, Ensminger is now working on a new book that puts the spotlight on politics and punk. The 300-page investigation will explore the conscience of the movement by focusing on how punk musicians invest their money in political and social causes, an indication of whether their anti-establishment spirit and messages of rebellion were truly authentic.

"Studying the lyrics is just a literary exercise," said Ensminger, who instead aims to shift historical perceptions and attitudes about punk. "I can change that sense of the narrative, and to me, that's why you put out books. That's what's important."

Sporting tattoos and piercings of his own, Ensminger admits he does not fit the image of the typical college instructor. He encourages students in his classes to be similarly unafraid of bucking convention in pursuit of their dreams, and enjoys watching them grow over the course of their educational journey.

“I’m thankful to be a teacher in those moments,” Ensminger said. “As a community college graduate myself, I want the kids to know that nothing should stop them. Have ambition, work hard, seek excellence and persist.”