

Kicks in Style: A Punk Design Aesthetic

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Abstract and Keywords

In parallel to the broad diversity of musical styles that accompanied the early punk explosion, the graphic design and visual communication strategies tell a similarly wide-ranging story. This chapter explores the complex relationship between the stereotype of “authentic” do-it-yourself (DIY) punk graphics and the music industry professionals who created many of the visual conventions that came to be closely associated with the subculture. While the groundswell of amateur artists, illustrators, photographers, typographers, and other cultural producers inspired by the subculture to create a new aesthetic should not be underestimated, their story has become almost the default history of punk graphic design. The role of design professionals—often with many years of experience within the music industry—has frequently been overlooked, an embarrassing secret kept in the closet for fear of undermining notions of authenticity and punk’s revolutionary rhetoric.

Keywords: punk, DIY, authenticity, graphic design, music industry, art production, professional design

Like the music that accompanied it, punk graphic design cannot be tied down to a single set of approaches, processes, or concepts. Punk’s visual style was often aggressive and rhetorical, reflecting and commenting on its surroundings, and with a corresponding focus on individuality, creativity, and personal expression that set itself in opposition to the norm. Punk witnessed an explosion of new sounds and styles, from music to fashion, art, graphic design, film, writing and publishing, and embraced a number of ideological positions, including the notion that expertise is unnecessary (anyone can do it), a call-to-arms for action and independence (do-it-yourself, or DIY), and an implicit critical questioning of authority (see Bestley and Ogg 2012; Kugelberg and Savage 2012).

Punk was a term that could be applied to an eclectic and disparate range of activity. This was clear with regard to the diversity of music that fell under its umbrella as the subculture began to coalesce and define itself in the late 1970s, but was equally apparent in relation to punk’s visual and graphic languages. Dick Hebdige (1979) first theorized punk’s approach to bricolage as a radical process whereby an assemblage of disparate signs was employed as an act of countercultural aggression, primarily through clothing and dress,

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and subsequently via the use of collage or other visual strategies on flyers, posters, and record sleeves. Hebdige linked these approaches primarily with Jamie Reid's work for the Sex Pistols, and went on to suggest that the visual and aesthetic codes of early UK punk rock, disseminated through a variety of means, were directly related to the "first wave of self-conscious innovators" (Hebdige 1979, 122), an elite vanguard of cultural style-makers.

This suggests that these original innovators created authentic moments of resistance through the employment of bricolage in the construction of new meanings, though the limitations of Hebdige's theoretical model have more recently been questioned (Cartledge 1999; Muggleton 2000). Michael Bracewell (2005, xiii) reflected on the range of interpretations of punk identity, noting that "the history of punk rock has subsequently raised countless issues of ownership and authorship; and at the heart of this dispute lie further questions relating to authenticity. Which was punk rock's real identity? Which version was closest to the founding spirit of the idea?" This notion of "punk authenticity" might be better understood as a reflection of motive and intent, a personal reinvention by participants from a range of backgrounds rather than a stereotypical (and often mythological) voice of "the street." Hebdige went on to argue that once these stylistic innovations were publicized, the subsequent marketing of a style to a wider audience created a distinction "between originals and hangers-on" (1979, 122). However, dress codes also provided punk followers with a collective identity (see Figure 1)—as Frank Cartledge later noted, generic styles were widely adopted, creating a common bond among punk fans: "For the 'average' punk a more likely scenario would be that clothing was regarded as an expression of style, a cultural language that formed a community" (Cartledge 1999, 150).



Figure 1. Music press advertisement for punk style clothing, at "dirt cheap prices," *New Musical Express*, November 1977 (author's collection).

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Punk's musical and visual identity was at least in part about group solidarity, although it was often expressed in a language that proclaimed individuality and autonomy. Graphic design styles relating to the punk movement follow similar patterns—the need to be recognized as a part of the new style is counterbalanced by the desire to stand out as an individual or to display an originality of intent. (For a further discussion of subcultural participation and notions of agency and subcultural capital, see Thornton 1995.) Punk's graphic language needed to be recognizable to potential audiences—to be effective, record sleeves generally had to communicate that they contained punk material—but at the same time designers often strove for an individual identity for the band or label within the developing field of punk iconography. While record sleeves could be said to be at the less formal end of the graphic design profession, it is important to note that they are closely related to branding, packaging, and identity design, and that the recognition of visual codes by an intended audience is extremely important to a record's success. Record sleeves, in the most basic sense, are a form of packaging: they protect a fragile plastic disc, while at the same time offering graphic information to a potential buyer.

The provocative, deliberately awkward and amateur image of the early punk explosion—in the UK in particular—also obscures a number of contradictions that merit closer scrutiny. The first of these is the complex relationship between the new generation of punk musicians, artists, and designers and the established music industry, media, fashion, photography, and graphic design professions. While a notion of punk's "Year Zero" has prevailed within the mainstream media, much academic research has questioned this by placing punk on a continuum of subcultural activity dating back to at least the late 1960s and evolving up to the present day in a variety of local and global incarnations (see, for example, Bestley and Ogg 2012; Bestley et al. 2019; McKay 1996). The rhetoric of autonomous youthful rebellion and anti-commercial individuality (a myth in large part derived from the previous two decades of rock 'n' roll history) was to become more closely associated with independent production as the punk subculture evolved.

Graphic design as a practice stemmed largely from the discipline of commercial art in the early 20th century. The role of the designer, particularly in relation to the preparation of artwork for print production, changed radically between the mid-1950s and late 1970s. A shift towards photolithography in the UK and Europe after World War II led to the widespread adoption of photographic techniques in engraving and plate-making. The professional graphic designer's activities centered on a process of specification, whereby a team of skilled practitioners in what was termed the "art production department" (phototypesetters, type compositors, illustrators, plate-makers, printers, and print finishers)—at least within larger studios—would be given a series of instructions in order to achieve the desired end results. (For further reading on the history of graphic design and links to technological change, see Cherry 1976; Hollis 1994.) The designer's role was to plan, predict, and specify required outcomes, rather than to originate them in their entirety at the drawing board stage. Even with smaller studios and freelance designers, the complexity of the printing process and the cost of machinery placed tight restrictions on the range of activities that could be undertaken without access to larger commercial print operations. The power of the print unions at the time should also not be un-

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derestimated, with closed shop agreements across the industry severely curtailing access for nonprofessional designers. Any design material sent to print production had to be stamped by a senior designer affiliated to the print unions before the job could be run. Do-it-yourself punk designers could often fall foul of such rulings, unless alternative production methods could be sourced outside of the print profession (such as photocopying, stamping, screen-printing, and other hands-on techniques), as Malicious Damage designer Mike Coles later recalled:

A lot of artwork in those days had to have a union stamp on the back, but I had a very accommodating studio manager at one of the studios who'd stamp the back of my jobs so that they went to print OK. ... I remember the suited and booted union reps coming round to one studio for a meeting with all the freelancers, threatening all sorts of doom and destruction if we didn't all sign up. It was like a visit from the Krays [notorious London gangsters]. (quoted in Bestley 2016)

To an extent, the techniques adopted by Jamie Reid for the Sex Pistols were already widely accepted as the established graphic languages of anger and protest. The *samizdat* tradition of lo-tech graphic material disseminated through personal networks, originally a feature of the postwar Eastern European underground, where the term denoted the clandestine copying and distribution of government-suppressed literature or other media, led to the evolution of a particular visual style associated with subversion and revolution. The natural limitations of simple tools and materials, as well as the quick production of graphic work by untrained designers, led to a repetition of certain graphic conventions: simple black-and-white or two-color artwork, hand folding and binding techniques, and hand-rendered, simple letterpress or typewritten text. It is also important to make a distinction between the origination of artwork for print reproduction and the final artifacts that resulted from the printing and manufacturing process. Reid's original collage and paste-up artwork has been collected by major cultural institutions, including the V&A Museum in London, but the designed objects themselves—mass produced record covers or printed posters, for instance—are often treated as ephemeral and lacking cultural significance. Confusion between the origination and reproduction of graphic material has also led to common misunderstandings, with early punk record sleeves sometimes described as “DIY” purely on their aesthetic qualities, ignoring their commercial mass production.

The long-standing relationship between rock and pop music production and art school training has been investigated by a number of writers, including Simon Frith and Howard Horne (1987). Connections have also been made between punk and earlier art movements, notably to the Situationist International (SI) during the 1960s, in part reflecting interviews with Malcolm McLaren and Jamie Reid, both of whom had a strong interest in the SI, along with the wider late-1960s counterculture in general (Reid and Savage 1987; Savage 1991), but it would be erroneous to extrapolate this personal interest as being reflected by other punk designers. Similarly, connections between the early work of Peter Saville or Malcolm Garrett and modernism have been well established (King 2003; Poynor 2003), but again a direct relationship between the work of later designers within the post-punk subculture and, for instance, Russian Constructivism, is harder to pinpoint. The

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impact of Herbert Spencer's classic book *Pioneers of Modern Typography* (1969) upon graphic design and typography students in the 1970s should, however, not be underestimated.

A number of thematic design methods can be associated with the punk movement, though they should not be seen in isolation. While precursors to a particular visual approach may be apparent to the art historian, it should not be automatically inferred that the designers knew of those connections when they created the work. New punk graphic styles were often developed by untrained designers, and it would be erroneous to assume an art-historical context, rather than seeking parallels elsewhere within popular visual culture or considering the expediency of designing with available techniques and materials—or indeed simply picking up on the contemporary zeitgeist and their peers in the same scene. The use of parody and pastiche, for instance, has been a common design strategy in political satire for hundreds of years, while visual codes denoting or reflecting a sense of immediacy and the quick dissemination of ideas had been a feature of political propaganda throughout the 20th century. Jamie Reid's awareness of the work of the US and European counterculture may have led him toward more informed interpretations of agitprop graphic material, but many subsequent amateur and do-it-yourself punk designers made no such historical allusions. The look was simple, dirty, and aggressive, and it meant "punk."

Surprisingly, little attention has been paid to the commercial and professional relationship between antecedents in popular culture and punk, particularly the role of the music industry and the business that operates behind the creation and development of new styles and markets. This includes not only investors, managers, marketing teams, promoters, manufacturers, distributors, and other commercial sponsors, but also designers and branding and identity consultants. Punk brought a sense of urgency and energy to a music industry then in a period of stagnation and complacency, and many established professionals took the opportunity to contribute positively to the new movement.¹ While the evolution of a new form of punk-inspired visual communication enabled a generation of young, innovative designers in the UK—from those with art school experience (Jamie Reid, Malcolm Garrett, Linder Sterling, Gee Vaucher, Peter Saville, Neville Brody) to the punk-inspired amateurs who struggled against the odds without any clear historical or aesthetic reference points (Mark Perry, Tony Moon)—it also owed an obvious debt to a generation of graphic designers who could utilize their skills in the marketing and branding of the new style. These included experienced design industry figures such as Barney Bubbles, George "God" Snow, Bill Smith, Jo Mirowski, Paul Henry, Nicholas de Ville, and David Jeffery, along with up-and-coming professionals such as Chris Morton, Russell Mills, Rob O'Connor, Alex McDowell, and Jill Mumford.

A number of professional photographers also moved into music graphics alongside their photographic practice, including Michael Beal, Jill Furmanovsky, and Phil Smee. At the same time, smaller independent operations were obviously much less likely to incorporate a design team, and graphics were usually either produced by the punk groups or labels themselves, or through freelance contracts and commercial pre-press studios. As a

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result, a do-it-yourself ideology that initially focused on the relationship between authorship and control of an artist's music was extended to their visual identity and the artifacts that were marketed under their name—notably record sleeves and other graphic material.

In some ways, early punk's diversity was its core strength. Creative responses to punk's call-to-arms were often witty and engaging; sometimes radical, challenging, innovative, and experimental; and sometimes simplistic, superficial, or downright inane. There was no inherent punk "style," at least beyond the restrictions imposed by amateur production and a lack of skills or technique—early punk fanzines, for instance, shared aesthetic similarities that were largely a product of the process of design and print manufacture, rather than a set of coordinated intentions. Mark Perry has said that he set out to create a "proper magazine" with *Sniffin' Glue* but admitted that he lacked the skills to create a professional product (Perry, in conversation with the author, Logan Hall, London, November 10, 2016). The result was something of a happy accident—a graphic style that embodied the urgency, energy, and attitude of the new punk DIY generation. Other punk fanzine producers followed suit, though again the visual aesthetic and graphic style reflected as much the tools and techniques employed as it did a desire to emulate successful punk fanzines already in existence. In fact, the opposite is closer to the truth—punk fanzine producers wanted their own work to stand out from the crowd, to retain a sense of individuality and autonomy, in the same way that many bands were looking for their own unique stylistic or rhetorical point of difference.

A New Wave: The New Punk Designers

By the end of 1975, British punk scene-leaders the Sex Pistols were developing their own punk visual style. During the early part of 1976, Helen Wellington-Lloyd designed the first Sex Pistols logo and created a number of early gig flyers for the band, frequently using type cut out from tabloid newspapers, felt pens, and Letraset (a dry transfer, rub-down lettering system used by designers to set small amounts of type) to create a hard-hitting visual aesthetic (see Bestley and Burgess 2018). Jamie Reid began working directly with manager Malcolm McLaren and the band in the summer of 1976, and developed the aesthetic further over the following year. The "ransom note" typographic style was to become synonymous with the Sex Pistols, and to an extent with the wider punk movement itself, though its origins are contested. Various accounts have attributed the origins of the visual style to Wellington-Lloyd and photographer Nils Stevenson, as the latter recalled: "The punk aesthetic was simple. Me and Helen Wellington-Lloyd were doing the handouts for the Pistols, and we ran out of Letraset so we cut up a newspaper and pasted it. If we hadn't run out of the Letraset there wouldn't have been the blackmail lettering. We made things from what was available" (quoted in Robb 2006, 207).

This version of events contradicts earlier statements, including those of Reid himself, who attributes the first use of the ransom-note style to a flyer he produced for a gig at the 100 Club in August 1976 (Reid and Savage 1987). Paul Stolper and Andrew Wilson also note

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that the design of flyers changed radically that autumn, when Jamie Reid took over full design direction for the group (Stolper and Wilson 2004, 30–32). Elements of the style had certainly been in evidence within Reid's work for SI-influenced Suburban Press in the early 1970s, for which he later recalled, "[W]e had to produce cheap (no money), fast, and effective visuals, so collage was the dominant look; things cut out from papers and magazines—photos and lettering—which [became] the so-called 'blackmail punk' look, which looked great" (quoted in Stafford 2015).

The success—and notoriety—of the Sex Pistols as the figureheads of the new movement was reflected in the wider public acknowledgement of a set of visual stereotypes that sat alongside media clichés and commonly held assumptions about punk music, fashion, and behavior. In terms of graphic design, this was a double-edged sword: on the one hand, punk was beginning to develop a recognizable set of visual styles, largely centered on Reid's work for the Sex Pistols (the "Anarchy in the UK" promotional poster and press ads, and gig flyers, as well as the iconic record sleeve and posters for the group's most notorious single, "God Save the Queen"). However, the sheer power and dominance of that aesthetic coupled with the subculture's self-professed focus on individuality, autonomy, and authenticity meant that other up-and-coming punk bands were conscious of the need to avoid being seen as copying the Sex Pistols and stand out on their own from the pack. Largely due to its powerful visual impact, ransom-note typography—along with safety pins, razor blades, and, more problematically, swastikas—quickly became symbolic of early UK punk in the mainstream media, and therefore a cliché to be best avoided unless the designer's intention was parodic.²

When asked to create a visual identity for Buzzcocks, Malcolm Garrett later noted, "I'd already resolved to develop a graphic style for Buzzcocks that was as distinct from what was the visual norm in the rest of music and pop world, as it was from the rough and ready, cut and paste vernacular of the Sex Pistols. I wanted to set Buzzcocks apart from this Punk look, which merely exploited a style that was already proving clichéd and consequently locked in time" (quoted in Brook and Shaughnessy 2016, 9). Garrett attempted to reflect the ironic obtuseness of Buzzcocks' music and lyrics in his approach to their record sleeves and posters, to capture something of their sardonic wit in visual form: "I felt that this approach reflected the group's lyrics, which were on the one hand quite 'domestic,' but also bittersweet, slightly dehumanized (there is no 'he' or 'she' in a Buzzcocks lyric), and somewhat aggressive all at the same time" (quoted in Bestley and Ogg 2012). Other strategies adopted by Garrett included playfully highlighting the production process itself and labeling specially designed bags for the debut album with the word "Product." For the 1978 single "I Don't Mind"/"Autonomy," the United Artists logo and catalogue number were massively enlarged to dominate the sleeve instead of the usual band name and song titles (see Figure 2). Garrett had visited the pressing plant at United Artists and noted how records were known throughout the entire process simply by their catalogue number, with no reference to artist, songs, or musical style, and he chose to focus on this mechanical production concept for the design approach. Both songs on the single were taken from the debut album (contradicting punk's widespread value-for-money ideology), a label strategy that Buzzcocks themselves and Garrett disagreed with: the

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deliberately obtuse promotional poster boldly stated “marketing ploy: the single from the album ... this single out now, new single out soon.”

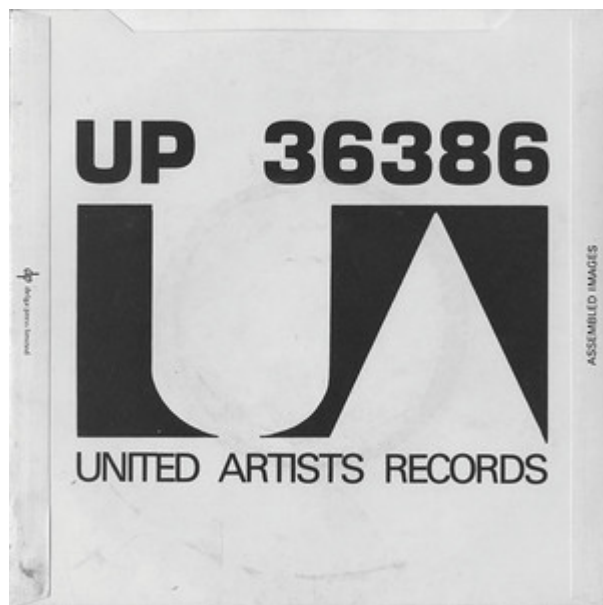


Figure 2. Malcom Garrett’s design for the rear cover of Buzzcocks’ “I Don’t Mind”/“Autonomy” single playfully highlights the production process itself (Designer Malcolm Garrett, used with permission).

A number of other designers gained their punk graphic design reputations through close collaboration with up-and-coming groups and labels, including Barney Bubbles (Stiff Records and Radar Records), Gee Vaucher (Crass/Crass Records) and Mike Coles (Killing Joke/Malicious Damage Records). A loan from Dr. Feelgood singer Lee Brilleaux helped to set up the new, independent Stiff Records (founded by Brinsley Schwarz manager Dave Robinson and former Dr. Feelgood manager Jake Riviera), which was to become closely associated with punk after signing the Damned and issuing their debut single, “New Rose,” in October 1976, and the album *Damned Damned Damned* in February 1977. Stiff employed graphic designer (and former Hawkwind lighting man) Barney Bubbles to lead their visual identity, along with Chris Morton (aka C-More-Tone), in the process helping to establish a fresh, contemporary, and witty brand image that was to prove influential across the wider punk and new wave subculture (see Balls 2014; Gorman 2008). Details such as these illustrate some of the continuities across the industry as punk apparently exploded, as well as the degree of movement between the old and the new within creative teams behind the scenes.

When Riviera left Stiff to form Radar Records with former United Artists A&R manager Andrew Lauder in late 1977, Bubbles worked across both labels, creating a strong visual identity for Ian Dury and the Blockheads at Stiff while also continuing to work with former Stiff charges Elvis Costello and the Attractions, Nick Lowe, and the Yachts at Radar. Although Bubbles was more experienced within the graphic design profession, having worked as a senior designer for the Conran Group in the 1960s, and subsequently de-

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signed album sleeves for Hawkwind, the Sutherland Brothers, Kevin Coyne, the Edgar Broughton Band, and many others, his connection to the music and his attitude toward the corporate music industry helped set him apart. Malcolm Garrett saw himself and the new generation of punk-specific graphic designers as fundamentally distinct from the professional design studios that dominated the music industry, and included Bubbles in his summary of that perceived divide—as part of the “new”: “I definitely felt at odds with, if not exactly at war with, the in-house designers and felt that their attempts to produce work for the Stranglers or 999 or whomever was simply not ‘authentic’ in the way that mine or Barney’s or Jamie’s was. It isn’t really to do with age or generation, just about attitude and ‘involvement’” (Garrett, personal correspondence via e-mail, November 6, 2018).

Gee Vaucher was an experienced commercial illustrator, having studied art and design at South-East Essex Technical College and School of Art between 1961 and 1965 (see Vaucher 1999; as well as Binns 2018 and Shukaitis 2016). In 1967 she set up an open house in Epping Forest, Essex, with fellow art graduate Penny Rimbaud (Jeremy Ratter), and both were involved in the late 1960s counterculture. Vaucher traveled to New York in 1977, where she worked as a freelance illustrator for mainstream magazines, including *New York Magazine* and the *New York Times*, before returning to the UK to rejoin Rimbaud, who by this time had established a radically outspoken punk group, Crass. Vaucher’s visual work for Crass and for the label that they established, Crass Records, was highly charged and strongly political, reflecting the aesthetic and ideology of the group themselves. In turn, Crass would become hugely influential on a new punk subgenre, retrospectively known as anarcho-punk, and Vaucher’s design aesthetic, employing a collage/photomontage sensibility, though in practice largely hand-drawn by the artist herself, helped to establish a visual style for the movement. Virtually all the new designers who attempted to follow in Vaucher’s footsteps lacked the technical skill and subtle appreciation of art history and philosophy that was embedded in her work, but at least some rudimentary graphic principles did translate—including stark, black-and-white designs featuring stencil typography and images depicting senior politicians, antiwar themes, animal exploitation, or gender relations.

Mike Coles, by contrast, had only briefly studied art and design prior to becoming involved in the industry. Coles attended art school in northeastern England in the late 1960s but found the atmosphere stifling and left within his first year, spending some time drifting and working in various low-key occupations before relocating to London in 1976. He managed to secure a job as a freelance paste-up artist at a studio that, in his words, was “one of the last of the old-fashioned, traditional art studios left in London—hot metal type, Cow Gum, Letraset, and a tea lady” (personal correspondence via e-mail, August 22, 2016). A chance meeting with a group of musicians looking to set up a new record label gave Coles the opportunity to apply his design vision to a collective identity, Malicious Damage Records. The commercial success of the main band on the label, Killing Joke, afforded the designer a creative outlet, though he still had to work on commercial briefs for other clients in order to pay the bills. Coles’s early work for Killing Joke combined collage with drawing and his own photography, and was as much a product of the mechanical

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processes he employed as his handiwork. He made extensive use of the photocopier, re-copying repeatedly to increase the grain and tone of the image, along with the PMT camera (a large machine used in pre-press studios for scaling monochrome images and producing film copies ready to print) (see Figure 3). Like Vaucher and other successful punk and post-punk graphic designers, the level of autonomy that the scene provided was key to Coles's approach: "In my early studio days I wasn't allowed within a typographical mile of a creative brief as I had no training or qualifications, but the artist in me was all the time struggling to get out. Hence the eagerness to get involved with the Malicious Damage set-up" (personal correspondence vial e-mail, August 22, 2016).



Figure 3. Artwork by Mike Coles for the gatefold cover of Killing Joke's 1980 eponymous debut album (Designer Mike Coles, used with permission).

Manufacturing Dissent: Design Professionals and DIY Producers

Within the graphic design groups at the major record labels, the need to tap into an evolving market while at the same time offering a sense of uniqueness and originality to artists on the roster was also very familiar. George "God" Snow's identity for the punk group 999 at United Artists was direct, colorful, and hard-hitting, with the group's signature "logo" based on a simple cloakroom ticket. At Polydor, meanwhile, Bill Smith was tasked with the creation of a graphic style for the Jam. Smith chose to tile a wall in the photography studio, break the tiles and spray the name of the band over them—photographed in high contrast monochrome, the raw aesthetic communicated urgency, rebellion, and urban decay, in much the same way that Roberta Bayley's group portrait on the cover of the eponymous debut album by US punk pioneers the Ramones had done the previous year. Such strategies were far from new—while an evolving "punk visual aesthetic" was developing through 1976 and 1977, a number of influential images and identities were the product of professional graphic design studios and designers who had experience of marketing youthful rebellion through rock music going back nearly twenty years. The Rolling Stones, the Who, Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, Slade, Alice Cooper, and countless others had been branded as authentic representatives of rock music's dark mission, and the punk brief was not entirely unfamiliar in this respect.

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Some of these professional designers had a distinctly un-punk background. Bill Smith created identities for the Jam and the Cure, as well as dozens of other artists from disparate musical fields such as the Fatback Band, the Count Basie Big Band, Peggy Lee, the Hollies, and Hank Williams, while Jo Mirowski created record sleeves for Sham 69 alongside designs for Bing Crosby, the Dubliners, Slade, and James Last at the same label. George Snow designed sleeves for 999, while also creating work for the Groundhogs, Rick Wakeman, and others, and Paul Henry's work for the Stranglers sat beside his sleeve designs for Jan and Dean, Bing Crosby and Shirley Bassey. Prior to working with the Adverts, Nicholas de Ville had enjoyed a successful design career producing record covers for Roxy Music, Sparks, and King Crimson. Jill Mumford, meanwhile, worked within the Polydor and Virgin design teams, creating graphics for punk and new wave groups including XTC, the Depressions, Siouxsie and the Banshees, the Skids, and Sham 69 alongside an eclectic selection of artists, including rockabilly performer Charlie Feathers, reggae artists the Gladiators, Sly Dunbar, and Prince Far I, and more traditional family fare such as Bert Kaempfert and His Orchestra, Captain Beaky and His Band, and the Band of Her Majesty's Royal Naval Home Command, Portsmouth.

Much like the muddy history of punk's musical evolution, the visual languages that came to be associated with punk had many antecedents and parallels. In some instances, the two came together—the rock photographer Michael Beal's June 1976 sleeve for the second single by the Canvey Island rhythm and blues outfit Eddie and the Hot Rods (a cover of Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs' 1965 hit "Wooly Bully") featured a striking graphic image that he would rework in colorized form for the group's debut album as slightly reinvented punks, *Teenage Depression*, later the same year. Eddie and the Hot Rods were at that time part of a wider pub rock scene that embraced hard-hitting rock music and a down-to-earth approach to live performance that was highly influential on the nascent UK punk scene.³

Not only did the music of some of the harder-edged pub rock groups (including Dr. Feelgood, Brinsley Schwarz, and Ian Dury's first band Kilburn and the High Roads) cross over to punk, a number of approaches to visual communication followed suit. Pub rock scene-leaders Dr. Feelgood released their debut album, *Down by the Jetty*, in January 1975, and the sleeve by A.D. Design featured a raw, black-and-white photograph of the band with the windswept, industrialized Thames Estuary behind them. In some ways the design harked back to the era of Chicago blues, from which the band sourced much of their musical inspiration, but at the same time it looked ahead to the urban grit of a punk aesthetic. Dr. Feelgood subsequently topped the charts in the summer of 1976 with the album *Stupidity*, an album that captured the band at the height of their power in live performance. The cover designer for that album, Paul Henry, would be heavily involved in marketing new United Artists signings from the punk scene, the Stranglers, the following year. The similarities did not stop there—plans for the Stranglers' debut initially centered on a live album titled *Dead on Arrival*, recorded at the Nashville Rooms, London, at the end of 1976. The album was intended to follow in the footsteps of Dr. Feelgood while at the same time capturing the spirit of the new wave, but plans were scrapped in favor of a

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studio recording of the same material, released under the title *Rattus Norvegicus* in April 1977.

Another important factor was the evolution of a do-it-yourself independent punk and post-punk subgenre, whereby groups took control of the whole process of recording and production of their records, usually along with the design and reproduction of sleeve artwork (see Dale 2012). Independence thus became an overtly ideological position as well as an example of self-initiated cottage industry for production and manufacture. As Kevin Lycett of the Mekons reflected on the sleeve design of the group's debut single, "Never Been in a Riot" (Fast Product, 1978), "the DIY letrasetting and collage came from a strongly held stance—no way were you going to let a designer near your artwork. You knew what you wanted to say and you were going to say it. No designer was going to come and pretty it all up and mess with what you were saying, making it just a pose" (quoted in Bestley 2007) (see Figure 4). This touches on a key issue in regard to rock music graphics more widely, and particularly to punk graphic design—the notion of authenticity and the difficulties faced by writers and critics when attempting a dispassionate and rational analysis of the visual form without relating this directly to the (sub)cultural capital of the artist. Divorcing claims to authenticity—and thus credibility—of a group or artist from the visual communication of their brand identity (through record sleeves and promotional images for instance) is problematic. Adding a critique of the level of direct engagement and authorship further complicates matters for the academic researcher, especially when the punk subculture prides itself on notions of DIY and the avoidance of being seen as a "poseur" through artifice or calculated marketing.



Figure 4. The Mekons, "Never Been in a Riot" single cover: "no way were you going to let a designer near your artwork."

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Authenticity came from the ways in which the apparently “natural” and uncorrupted style of punks such as Johnny Rotten struck a chord with audiences. However, this conceit of an apparent absence of staged performance—whether intentional or simply a product of naiveté—only added to a number of paradoxical dilemmas within the subculture, as outlined by Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor:

It was widely believed that punk’s message was one of being authentic, of cutting through the bollocks and simply telling it how you saw it. But the reality was far more confused. Punk was riddled with a series of paradoxes: it hymned authenticity but relied heavily on simulation in its performance; it aspired to success on its own terms but glamorized failure; its do-it-yourself aspect raised the issue of how to take and keep control in a genre that glorified the individual against the corporate machine; and it presented itself both as simple negation and as something far more knowing. (Barker and Taylor 2007, 265)

Of course, do-it-yourself ideals and practices predate the punk explosion of the 1970s, from traditional folk music through to the bottleneck rural blues players of the 1930s and 1940s, the 1950s UK skiffle boom, and early 1960s US garage bands. As Louis Barfe (2005) and Travis Elborough (2008) have each noted, popular music traditionally centered on performance, and songwriting and publishing remain at the heart of the industry. Thus, ownership of the *creation* of original music was essentially always central to the medium, with the additional layers of recording and reproduction (records and other physical formats) a secondary, though lucrative, consideration. The punks turned their own do-it-yourself vision into a mantra associated with authenticity, but they were inheriting a tradition that was established many years earlier and would expand much more widely through the following four decades, particularly with the advent of new technologies and the shift toward digital recording and distribution.

While an early independent punk band such as Buzzcocks communicated DIY principles through the context of their debut release (*Spiral Scratch* EP) and associated media commentary, others, such as the Desperate Bicycles, went one stage further, specifically encouraging others to action via the content and the medium itself, through song lyrics and graphic design strategies. Five hundred copies of the Desperate Bicycles debut, “Smokescreen”/“Handlebars,” were released on the group’s own Refill label in April 1977, with both songs pressed on each side of the record due to the proscriptive cost of cutting a master for two separate sides. The end of the second song features a sole shouted voice—“it was easy, it was cheap, go and do it!” The first pressing sold out within four months, resulting in a profit of £210. Using this money, a second pressing of one thousand records was made, which sold out in a fortnight. The profit from that was used to finance their second release, “The Medium Was Tedium”/“Don’t Back the Front” in July 1977, again with both tracks pressed on each side of the record. “The Medium Was Tedium” repeats the lyrical theme and cultural instruction—the words “it was easy, it was cheap, go and do it!” form the chorus. As if to graphically reaffirm the point, the sleeve notes on the back sleeve of the single read, “The Desperate Bicycles [would] really like to

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know why you haven't made your single yet. ... So if you can understand, go and join a band. Now it's your turn." (The Desperate Bicycles 1977) (see Figure 5).

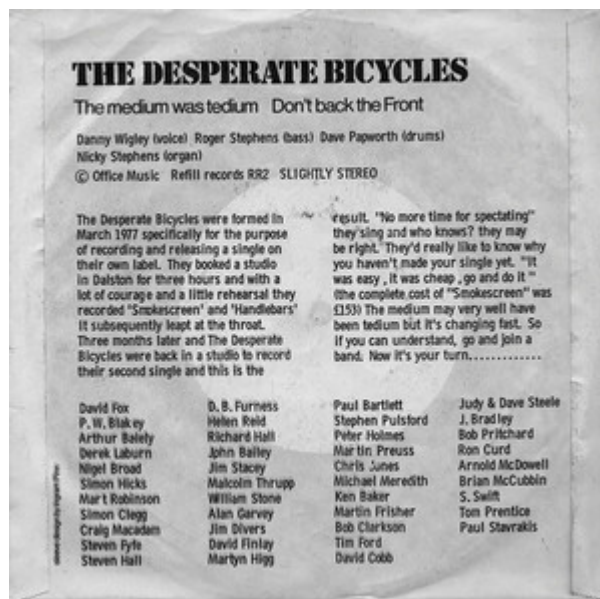


Figure 5. On "The Medium Was Tedium" single cover, the Desperate Bicycles graphically reaffirm and encourage punk's DIY practice: "Now it's your turn ..."

However, even at this level of punk do-it-yourself activity, the notion of authorship and control of the full means of production is problematic. While the Desperate Bicycles had some autonomy in the creation of their own music, they were at the mercy of commercial facilities for recording, cutting, pressing, and distribution of their records, as well as the printing, folding, and gluing of sleeves and labels. Songs were recorded at a small studio in Dalston, East London, and the records were pressed at Lyntone, an established commercial pressing plant in Holloway. Sleeve artwork was designed by Diana Fawcett, who worked as a junior designer with Barney Bubbles, and the sleeves were commercially reproduced—a single color print (red) for the first release and in two colors (blue and black) for the second. In many ways, perhaps, this level of scrutiny regarding the full process of design and reproduction is unnecessary—the Desperate Bicycles were, like most other punk DIY ambassadors, true to the spirit of independence and had their hands tied by the very nature of the physical processes involved in record reproduction. In short, they took control of as much of the process as they could within the means available to them at the time.

Even so, an analysis of such nuances and detail can help to unpack the notion of punk "independence." Barry Lazell's working definition on the establishment of an Indie Chart within the trade journal *Record Business* in January 1980 suggests that in order to be classed as independent, records had to be "independently distributed: produced, manufactured, marketed and put into the shops without recourse to the major record companies" (Lazell 1997, ii; see also Ogg 2009 for a detailed history of independent

record labels in the United Kingdom). Part of the problem here lies in the complexity and machinery involved in the manufacture of physical music formats—at least in the late 1970s and early 1980s, prior to the evolution of digital formats and streaming technologies. The major record companies were deeply enmeshed in recording studios, record cutting and pressing plants, and especially commercial distribution at the time—even pioneering independent labels such as Chiswick and Stiff Records established production and distribution deals with major labels, and the success of punk and post-punk artists created a situation where a much greater volume of records needed to be manufactured, distributed, and sold in order to meet demand.

Conclusion: A Punk Graphic Design Legacy

The anarcho-punk and hardcore scenes from the early 1980s onward helped to establish an ideology of punk DIY that has to an extent been internalized by participants and retrospectively applied to the entire history of the subculture as a benchmark for authentic participation. In practice, do-it-yourself activity during the early period of punk was often limited to live performance and fanzine production, along with the rhetorical notion that “anyone can do it,” while the music industry still maintained a tight grip on the production and distribution of recorded music (see Bestley 2018). Internal debates within punk communities have also at times failed to recognize the much broader, and longer, history of do-it-yourself cultural activity involving myriad participants unrelated in the slightest to “punk” (see McKay 1998). It is true, however, that the legacy of those earlier punk DIY ideals can still be seen in networks of underground punk activity, notably in the field of live gigs and music distribution. To a degree, contemporary punk’s marginalized position in relation to the commercial music industry helps participants to retain a level of autonomy and agency, at least on a relatively small scale of activities, and many punk and hardcore scenes operate largely on a system of mutual support and social networking.

But an accurate history of punk visual aesthetics, and particularly the graphic design styles and methods embraced by the subculture, requires a greater degree of flexibility and nuance. Punk was a continuation of long-standing countercultural themes, and at the same time it was a musical trend that both drew upon and reacted against its immediate context and history. The scope of punk graphic design ranged from the raw and untrained outpourings of teenage rebels to the construction of sophisticated new visual approaches at the hands of active punk participants with a degree of technical training or skill. At the same time it encompassed the branding of successful punk and new wave artists through traditional music industry conventions. Punk’s initial commercial success led to the adoption of methods of mass production and distribution, which fitted neatly with the practices and traditions of the industry. At the same time, new styles arose from the contribution of lesser-known artists and designers who could target niche audiences and embrace complex and labor-intensive methods in the production of short batch runs of records and other ephemera. This resonated with punk’s rhetoric of independence, autonomy, and au-

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thenticity and enabled it to grow into an international subculture that continues to evade recuperation by the industry that (perhaps inadvertently) helped bring it to life.

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Notes:

(1.) Of course, the music industry has long held a reputation for maverick approaches to business and commercial operations, and an implicit recognition of the "rebellious" nature of creative artists was certainly not something that suddenly arrived with punk.

(2.) Parodies include, for example, *Television Personalities* (1978), *Where's Bill Grundy Now?* EP, London: Kings Road; the Monks (1979), "Johnny B Rotten," London: EMI Records.

(3.) The group headlined the Mont de Marsan Punk Festival in the south of France in August 1976, with the Damned in support, and returned a year later to headline again, alongside the Clash, the Damned, the Police, and another successful British rhythm and blues group that also overlapped with the early punk scene, Dr. Feelgood.

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