

REASONS TO BE CHEERFUL

The life and work of Barney Bubbles

Paul Gorman

NEW
EDITION
expanded
revised
updated



Essay **Peter Saville**

Foreword **Malcolm Garrett**

Introduction **Billy Bragg**

A chat with **Art Chantry**



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This edition would not have proceeded without the blessing, participation and generosity of the following, to whom I offer my thanks: Brian Griffin, Brian and Jill Jewiss, Jake Riviera, Lorry Sartorio, Aten and Giana Skinner, Doug Smith, B. Syme and Nik Turner.

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I am deeply indebted to Jenny Ross of Adelita: vision, commitment and great, big heart. She's simply the best.

This book is dedicated to Caz Facey. You make my heart sing.

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Author's note

'All it is is rock and roll and it's no big shakes. But at the same time I think commercial design is the highest art form.'

Barney Bubbles, The Face, 1981



THIS PAGE: Colin Fulcher, 1965.

Welcome to the second edition of my book about the important body of design work created by Barney Bubbles over two decades in the late 20th century.

It now seems we are on the way to achieving the aim of greater recognition for Bubbles' legacy.

These days a Google search will bring forth thousands of returns, and his name is mentioned in the same breath as those of Peter Saville, Hipgnosis et al on design blogs, in magazines and within educational institutions.

There are Facebook groups and my own companion blog to this book (at <http://barneybubbles.com/blog>).

A leading museum intends to incorporate Bubbles into a forthcoming exhibition on post-war British design, and is simultaneously looking to acquire items for its permanent collection.

In September 2010 I made my own modest contribution with a show delineating Bubbles' working practices at London's Chelsea Space gallery.

All this is a far cry from the late-night bout of record-playing in 2006 when I showed my wife a selection of Bubbles' designs for sleeves, posters and books, pointing to the beguiling detail and juxtaposition, the accomplished art direction and the audacious use of colour and typography.

She said: 'This is incredible. Has no one written a book about this guy?'

And that's how it all started.

As architecture authority Neil Spiller has written of Daniel Libeskind, the work of Barney Bubbles is "steeped in enigma and open to interpretation".

This book investigates the enigma of the man born Colin Fulcher, and how he drew on his considerable educational and practical experience to problem-solve on behalf of his unusual and often sympathetic clients, delighting in the process by interlacing his work with interventions, strategies and powerful symbols to engage and bewitch.

In his critique *Art Of The Sixties* (and Bubbles was very much a product of that schismatic decade), Hugh Adams expressed the view the ideal artist 'usually opted for blankness and anonymity. For the most part he avoided confining himself to any single genre or medium and genuinely operated at the interstices of media.'

Substitute 'designer' for 'artist' and Adam may as well have called his unidentified exemplar Barney Bubbles, who, when asked to supply a photograph of himself to *The Face*, delivered a manic self-portrait constructed from splashes, splotches and pieces of card.

Bubbles was a truly alternative designer, a radical thinker unable to conform to the norms of signature and recognition and unwilling to be pinned down to method, style or medium.

Yet – as Art Chantry points out in this new edition – Bubbles' work is often recognisable. Maybe this is because his designs were rarely, if ever, static and reflective; they exude a kinetic force.

'That's Barney,' Malcolm Garrett explained to me recently. 'Looking at his designs is like being around Barney. He emitted nervous energy, you could feel it crackling off him, and that's what makes his work so intriguing. He was capable of injecting himself into it.'

As Design Museum director Deyan Sudjic put it this spring on BBC Radio 4, the qualification of design as 'quote-unquote art is tough territory for designers'. You may judge for yourselves the aesthetic value of Bubbles' extraordinary corpus in this new edition, which has been enhanced by the addition of many rare images and new quotes from a range of individuals, from Simon Cowell's half-brother 'Record John' to Wreckless Eric.

There is also much freshly unearthed information, not least a publishing scoop: details and quotes from no less a design authority than Professor Brian Webb about Bubbles' first job on leaving art school, at the exacting 60s London design practice Michael Tucker + Associates.

I'll finish by pointing out again that the title of this book was chosen in the spirit of celebration; Bubbles didn't actually design the cover of the 1979 single of the same name by Ian Dury & The Blockheads.

The sleeve for *Reasons To Be Cheerful Part 3* was of course designed by Dury's former teacher Peter Blake, who has said about Bubbles: 'He was so good I couldn't have really competed with him.'

Paul Gorman
London 2010



Drumheads

TOP: 'Chilli Willi' for Pete Thomas, 1974.

MIDDLE: 'Greatest' for Pete Thomas, 1977.

BOTTOM: 'Blue Genes' for Will Birch, 1982.

Towards the canonisation of Barney Bubbles

Peter Saville

The work of Barney Bubbles expresses post-modern principles: that there is the past, the present and the possible; that culture and the history of culture are a fluid palette of semiotic expression; and everything is available to articulate a point of view.

Even though we didn't know him personally, Barney Bubbles was a guiding inspiration to me and my friend Malcolm Garrett when we were at school and art college together in the early- to mid-70s in Manchester.

Barney's presence in our lives was a combination of showing a way and/or reassuring us about our own inclination to a way. Just as, later, I was encouraged to investigate the imagery of Fantin-Latour – for the cover of New Order's *Power, Corruption & Lies* – by the opulence and juxtapositions of Scott Crolla and Georgina Godley's clothes shop in Dover Street; and just as Philip Johnson's proposals for the AT&T building in New York had reassured me that the later work of Jan Tschichold was of contemporary relevance, so Barney's work served as an exemplar.

In the summer of 1977, in Virgin Records' basement shop in Piccadilly in Manchester, I came across the cover he did for the single *Your Generation* by Generation X, which features the deconstructed numerals 45 in the style of Russian designer El Lissitzky. (I think Malcolm Garrett and I found the sleeve together, but he may remember it differently.)

We saw the Generation X cover and received a very clear signal: Mr Barney Bubbles – whose work we already knew from Hawkwind and Stiff – was saying, 'Constructivism has my blessing.' Our response was, yes, this is the way.

Barney's work was replete with anarchic intelligence and was often, in the context of commercial practice, entirely subversive. It was funny as well, though not in an exclusive, 'witty' way. Any kid could understand his concepts but simultaneously he was capable of highly intellectual interventions into the mechanisms of business.

To set the work of Barney Bubbles in context, it is important to clarify the cultural patchwork of the UK in the period of post-war socio-cultural democratisation.

We can see clearly now that, in the second half of the 20th century, that which had been almost entirely the exclusive domain of the privileged was disseminated through the medium of pop culture. This pretty much occurred initially through formative pop and then the attempts at broader engagement by institutions in response to the new society in the early 70s: the Royal Academy's Tutankhamun exhibition and the BBC's screening of Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation* spring to mind.

It's very easy to understand rock'n'roll and pop music as the first platform for the new element of society: the teenagers who gave birth to the notion of youth culture. Of course Jon Savage's book *Teenage* reveals that there was youth culture before rock'n'roll, but as a mass issue it didn't really kick in until the post-war period with the creation of a tangible audience to be sold to.

This dissemination of culture, and the political possibilities which were part of the gift, came about initially through rock'n'roll and pop. Music joined people together across the US and Europe to create a platform for civil rights, sexuality, gender, independence. In this way, popular music from Elvis to The Beatles provided the first political voice for the new society.

Then fashion entered the realm of possibilities, providing individuals with the ability to identify themselves. Pre-war, people had clothes. In the 60s, and in particular the 70s, there was fashion, which disseminated ideas, codes and opportunities. It

also empowered those like me inspired by such artists as Roxy Music and David Bowie.

The reason I mention all of this is that it's very difficult for young people to understand – and for some older people to remember – the cultural landscape into which the work of Barney Bubbles emerged.

Even as late as 1974 – when Malcolm Garrett and I entered art college – modernism and even the Bauhaus weren't discussed, let alone to be found on the curriculum. In the industrial cities of the north-west of England, we found ourselves growing up in a culture-free zone. Imagine a place where George Best's boutique is the pinnacle.

Add to that the fact that there was nothing modern in either the way we lived or our methods of communication. Every so often there might be something sexy in the *Sunday Times* colour magazine to do with fashion or pop art. With the remarkable exception of Peter York's essays in *Harpers & Queen*, that was it.

Our only access to an international – and in particular visual – cultural awareness was provided by the record cover. The regional element to this experience cannot be underestimated. And nor can Barney's role in this process.

Those were the days of division in pop: there was rock music and there was dance music, and there was no understanding between them. If you were into dance music you were beaten up by rockers and if you liked rock music you were beaten up by skinheads. It was as simple as that.

When Malcolm and I were at St Ambrose College, an independent Catholic grammar school in Altrincham, he was inclined towards rock while I preferred 'fashion music' – Bolan, Bowie and Roxy, and then definitely Kraftwerk. Malcolm was a massive Hawkwind fan, which is why I knew about Barney Bubbles. I loved his work but the music was not to my taste.

Then, when we left school, something occurred which was as important to our development as Barney, and which would in turn feed our appreciation of him as an avatar.

Malcolm was labouring under the illusion that it was better to go to a university than a polytechnic. So off he went to Reading, then the only university in the country with a graphics course. I, on the other hand, did a foundation year at Manchester Polytechnic.

Reading proved dry and academically-oriented. When we got together at Christmas we compared notes. I told him the crazy things we got up to – mad, deliberately disorientating exercises, making buildings out of paper and painting them in the dark, that kind of thing. He sighed and said: 'Well, we looked at redesigning a Do Not Break label...'

We immediately conspired to get him off that course and on to first-year graphics at Manchester. And it came to pass that he joined me there.

Malcolm brought with him something we didn't have – the graphics books from Reading's prescribed list. During the foundation year they'd maybe recommended we read something, but we hadn't taken much notice. Now, here was a stack of volumes which, on investigation, led us directly to the moment in the early 20th century when modernism had informed what was to become graphic design. As the books beat a path to the Russian Revolution, the early period of German modernism and De Stijl in Holland, formative contemporary practices and principles were revealed.

While we were still absorbing this, in the summer of 1976, full-blown punk arrived, though Malcolm was initially antagonistic.

Musically, he'd progressed to Frank Zappa and co; I think, to Malcolm, punk represented an anarchic rock sensibility which he'd already found expressed in a more mature way by other people.

By the time he'd come back to college for the second year, there had been a transformation. Malcolm embraced the new punk movement and was very soon working with Linder Sterling, who was a year ahead of us doing illustration.

He also became friendly with the Buzzcocks frontman Howard Devoto and was quickly full-on with the band, having single-handedly invented a kind of pop constructivism which drew parallels between Dada and the new punk sensibility. Malcolm was distilling the knowledge he garnered from the Reading University reading list and combining it with the new youth culture's day-glo aesthetic. He went on to work with the Buzzcocks and, eventually, alongside Barney Bubbles himself at Radar Records.

I, meanwhile, made my own way at Factory Records. It is interesting to note now, in the context of Barney Bubbles, how my Factory work is on a charmed pathway into the canon. It's been routed into fine art, served well by the fact that it was done outside commercial motivation. There existed at Factory an idealism and altruism which place it in a special capsule between business and art. This is a central distinction between my work and Barney's, and why I believe it has taken so long for him to achieve wider recognition.

At Factory, there was never the notion of trying to sell something: New Order recorded *Blue Monday*, a seven-minute single, which then had to be on 12in, and was put in a cover by me with nothing written on it, and the cost far outweighed the income. I think it is true to say that no one at Factory cared about profitability until 1990–91, when Tony Wilson borrowed £800,000 to refurbish a building. And that was the beginning of the end at Factory, but that's another story.

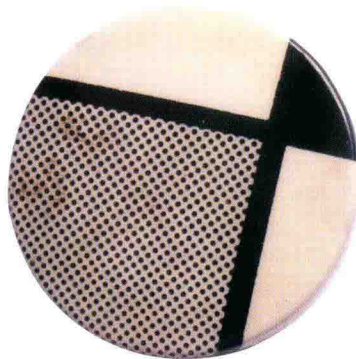
Certainly, in the late 70s and early 80s, I shared, alongside Malcolm, Neville Brody and Al McDowell at Rockin' Russian, Barney's palette of codes and directions.

For example, I was astonished by the cross-cultural transposition of his sleeve for Elvis Costello's *Armed Forces* in 1979. It is genius. The notion of appropriating (wildlife artist) David Shepherd for the cover came, as I understand it, from Stiff co-founder Jake Riviera, but Barney's realisation – he hired an artist and then art-directed the painting along with the sleeve's disparate elements – is a practice we would more likely associate with the late 90s period and one of the YBAs.

I sense from this and much else in Barney's work that, academically at least, he had not been taught up to the top of his head. From his experiments in modernism, constructivism and various other crossover points between design and art in the 20th century, it seems to me that he was both curious and intuitive.

This is another reason why Barney is exceptional and significant; he evidently had a natural artistic talent. My guess – since I didn't know him – is that he could draw, for example. And that is important because it takes the work to another level of sophistication. Because Barney wasn't handicapped by what he could photocopy or copy-camera, his work is more alive; he could just do it.

I always imagine Barney as somebody who didn't fear making a mark on the page, since he possessed genuine artistic skill. Of course, that is a great advantage, though strangely it can be a handicap: it is not unknown for such people to literally paint themselves into a corner.



In terms of his methodology, I can see what lay behind his use of scale when either condensing a larger image or blowing up a smaller one until the elements degraded. That kind of approach is only understood by praxis – you learn by actually doing it.

It is also a means of obtaining a better perspective on what you have created. Designers and artists find it very difficult to look at work until it is done, because you lose the ability to see clearly. I used to look at my stuff in the mirror in order to see it differently.

By contrast, I always worked at the size something was; if it was for a single, my frame was 7sq in. I think that is because, compared to Barney, I am maybe more insecure in my work. There is a tentativeness, which I don't detect in his.

Let me explain. Recently, I was reading a book about the culture of museums, and it came to me that there is a certain stillness to my work which comes from that insecurity. Barney's work, on the other hand, is active and very loaded. There is a pent-up energy, which is relevant to his compression of scale.

By reducing the graphic, Barney was containing it, and this is why his images appear as if they want to break out of the frame. This is a condition which pertains to graphic work, an impulse found in the work of graphic artists as opposed to graphic designers – to boldly go, to state, to push everything else to one side and say, 'Here I am.'

Yet, within the overloaded thoroughfare of commercial aesthetics, this can become another noisy element in an already noisy environment, which is possibly where my concerns stem from.

The negative aspect of the stillness in a Peter Saville cover is: he is a bit uncertain about what he is trying to do here. The positive side is that it creates space around itself – a gallery wall or white cube. That tends to happen with my covers – they impose themselves in a different way; you know, it is time to think now.

Everyone goes through a psychological reconditioning when they enter a gallery space, and I am fully aware there is a characteristic of my work which imposes that same mindset on the viewer. My feeling is that if you took Barney's work and put it in a white space, it would command the respect it deserves.

I wasn't in the least surprised to find out that one of Barney's personal traits was that he would sporadically go missing, disappear from contact. That was obviously his coping mechanism. Let's face it, the music business isn't even a formal business, so the demands and pressures on those who take pride in their work are often intolerable. And the only way to retain pride is never to say 'that'll do'. The evidence of Barney's work is that he never said 'that'll do'. His heart, soul, commitment, pride and sense of self are apparent.

The primacy of the record cover as a pre-culturalised pop medium was of vital importance to the work of Barney Bubbles. But in contradiction to that primacy is the continuing lack of importance the record cover has in professional graphic practice. Not that record covers are really significant any more. Music iconography is now familiar from childhood through to what we might call the establishment generation. There is a common awareness – the old guys know about younger culture (through their kids or even worse by trying to keep up). You're as likely to have a 60-year-old into Coldplay as a 21-year-old.

When record covers did mean something – from the 60s through to the 80s – the incumbent establishment of the graphics profession was predominantly male and already middle-aged.

They had been the first pop generation, so acknowledged the importance of their own culture in the 50s and early 60s. There was this notion that they were the ones who changed the world and anything which came afterwards received short shrift.

That's why the graphic work achieved on the margins of pop culture during the critically important period of the 70s and 80s registered nowhere on the establishment radar.

The more serious practitioners of problem-solving communication design have never thought much of the record cover. It is not seen as design – up until 1980, it wasn't granted a category in the D&AD Awards. Milk packaging and train timetables were and still are deemed to be more important, because they embody 'proper' communications design. And in a way they're right; as a communications medium, the record cover is not significant.

Its only function is keeping the primary artist happy. If you're doing a Madonna cover, there's only one thing that matters: is Madonna happy?

It is only in the last decade that I have even encountered the notion of selling an album through the medium of the cover. The proverbial brown paper bag story is true. The thinking is that this is a product that, if the market wants it, will be bought regardless of what packages it.

It is also a fact that, during Barney's lifetime, the graphics establishment did not have the language to decode his or other artists' work, because they were not part of youth culture, the finishing school in fashion, art and design.

But the record cover was the quintessential vehicle of an aesthetic language which spoke to millions, across continents.

It is also important to consider that visual material of Barney's level of creativity comes to the consumer in the context of cult-ish pop music, a medium of obsessive interest to young people.

The images on the Factory covers entered the consciousness of the audience because they were wrapped around the music of Joy Division, New Order and so on (the same visual material put on a postcard and posted through their letterboxes would have made little impact). The impression was made at an incredibly receptive time in the lives of the audience – usually boys between the ages of 15 and 20. Thus, Barney's work must have been of enormous importance to a generation of people who were just learning about the visual environment and considering art, fashion, photography and design as avenues of exploration.

The impact of, for example, *Armed Forces* on the 'fine art generation' would have been considerable. At that time, Elvis Costello was a mainstream figure in pop; he'd had hit records. So the cultural disorientation and aesthetic questioning were significant and the result is that we now have figures leading contemporary culture who were influenced by work such as Barney's in the late 70s and early 80s.

The era Barney was working in was influenced by fashion, if we understand that to mean the communication of a sensibility through a look. What happened in fashion and music was reflected in what happened at a more sophisticated level in graphics.

So, work such as *Armed Forces* can be seen as a blueprint for 'the now'; the fluency between disciplines, the silent form of ideas – these and other factors were part of a revolution in communications.

Personally, I am now not keen on the now. With a broader sense of appreciation have come the marketing people. And they use all of what has been achieved by artists and designers like

Barney to seduce, corrupt and entice.

The appropriation into business of visual work of Barney's standard is depressing. I think I speak for him as well as myself when I say: 'We just wanted things to be better.' By which I mean we wanted to share our enthusiasm for what was possible with our contemporaries. Having that requisitioned by marketing to make a product look cool is saddening.

Nevertheless, Barney's achievements will survive. People say that design gives you answers, art asks questions. Barney's work fits into the category of asking questions.

Therein lies the disconnection between Barney's work and what we would call 'professional' design, which only understands the notion of answering questions.

When I was with Pentagram in 1990, it was suggested by one of my senior partners that my cover for New Order's *Republic* was 'not graphic design'. He could not see how it functioned even then, so imagine how Barney's work was judged, if at all. They categorically did not understand what we were doing.

The next edition of Meggs' *History Of Graphic Design* is being published soon, and they have finally acknowledged that, since the first edition came out in 1983, I have been overlooked. Barney died that year, so what chance does he have?

At the time he was working, contemporary art did not really figure in this country. If he had been in New York, he'd have been what he really was, an artist, not a record sleeve designer.

During the 80s, art was 'in-waiting' to become a popular issue in Britain as the cohorts gathered at Goldsmiths willing it into existence. And it finally arrived, in the early 90s, when Jay Jopling and Damien Hirst built the bridge between contemporary art and British society. The arrival of the YBAs marked the moment when it became viable again to practise fine art in the UK, for the first time since the 60s.

All of which makes it important that we now recognise Barney's contribution. I see it as a duty.

The publication of *Reasons To Be Cheerful* is, in my view, missionary work; Barney Bubbles should be canonised.

I see a vision of a modern world

Malcolm Garrett



Barney Bubbles is something of a mythical figure, though most who actually knew him would probably say that 'mythical' is an inaccurate epithet, and almost certainly not one he would have sought for himself. Personally, I'm not so sure. His was too shrewd an intellect to divorce itself from the reality of the image. And he was a master of image within an image business. That's not to say he aimed to deceive us, or himself, but that 'knowledge' can be cruel, and a public persona can be difficult to avoid if your work is unavoidably in the public realm.

While still at school I shamelessly plundered his work for those counter-cultural rebels Hawkwind (in many ways the original indie band), in order to pass my art A-Level. To say his work was inspirational is an understatement. It helped direct me towards the inevitable: a compulsion to design record sleeves. And from there my own history began.

A few years on from school, when my punk career was blossoming, my chief 'competitor' (if you will) in the narrow field of pop-constructivist graphics was an anonymous talent at Stiff Records.

I was stunned when told that this was none other than my hero from previous hippy days. I'd lost track of what Barney was up to between 1974 and 1978 – as music itself had lost track – but here he was, large as life and twice as beautiful, and still showing me the way.

Barney's unique blend of photographic imagery and gleeful celebration of ephemera, shameless plunder of fine art and almost painterly dexterity with the hard edge of the Rotring pen demonstrated a masterly command of a new school of typographical graphics. He precipitated a raft of pale imitators (myself included), making his mark in the music industry initially, and then by extension the graphic world at large, as youth lifestyle slowly became respectable and his lineage respected.

Barney's work was irreverent, individual, inventive and incisive, at a time when graphic design with a socio-political edge was not the norm in this field. His effect on me was profound. I like to think I knew him; certainly I identified with him (and still do), but of course I didn't know him. How could I? Yes, I met him. Our paths crossed. I have some proof – a fabulous drawing he left at the bottom of a note to me one day in 1978. I'm still not sure whether it is a drawing of him or me (note the Bauhaus nostrils).

Sadly, he'll never know what he gave me. Nor what I took from him. In purity and perfection he reached a level I never could.

Making misfits magnificent

Billy Bragg

In an age of pretty boys, Barney Bubbles was a godsend. My first album had to stand out in a marketplace swamped with the high-gloss values of early 80s pop. Spandau Ballet set the tone, ABC camped it up, and the Human League, who outsold everyone, relied on the prominence of their lead singer's fringe. These were tough times for solo singer-songwriters. Think of the ridiculous lengths that Howard Jones had to go to in order to get into the charts. The hair! The clothes! The goofy dancing! The hair!

I had none of these advantages. In place of a 'look', I had an attitude, one that put me at odds with the image-obsessed artists of the day. Where they expressed themselves through style, I relied on content. With the charts full of records with glossy production values, my debut album was, in stark contrast, recorded straight to tape without any extra instrumentation or enhancement.

I was fortunate in finding Peter Jenner who, as manager of Ian Dury & The Blockheads, had worked with Barney during his Stiff days. He shared my disdain for 80s pop and was trying to set up a label that offered a more radical sound. These were austere times and Pete wanted to launch an austerity record label.

His suggestion that we should go to see Barney Bubbles for sleeve art was, for me, a dream come true. A massive fan of Elvis Costello, I'd admired the man as much for his album covers as for his songs. Frustratingly, there were never any design credits on Elvis' records. Yet there was a discernible signature to the work, visible in the detail on the sleeves: the way the slogan 'Surfing The New Wave' undulated on the back cover of My Aim Is True; the 'off-centre' image on This Year's Model; whatever that thing was that sat at the top right-hand corner of Get Happy!.

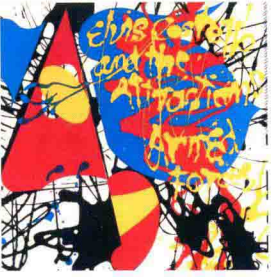
And if, among the heightened illustrations that adorned Armed Forces, his typical flourishes were harder to discern, it was the functionality of the sleeve itself that gave the game away, the total redesigning of what is more or less a two-dimensional object into a multi-layered tour de force of artistry that was breathtaking in its audacity. This is pop art at its best – immediate, engaging, challenging on every level.

The brief for my debut album was somewhat different – how to reflect its back-to-basics approach in an eye-catching way. Jenner had the classic Penguin book covers in mind as a template, and Barney took that idea and ran with it. A light bulb – one of his favourite images – graced a front cover full of open spaces and clean lines. The back was similarly uncluttered, although it did contain a small signature Barney design in the shape of the 'Beware the Squander Bug' logo.

When Life's A Riot With Spy Vs Spy finally appeared in the summer of 1983, Barney's sleeve stood out from the other albums in the racks before anyone had even heard its contents. In a world filled with distractions, he had made me distinctive.

And that was Barney Bubbles' unique talent. I'm not talking about his amazing skill as an artist, the appreciation of which this book will surely enhance. I'm referring to his unerring ability to make unprepossessing blokes look cool. Elvis Costello, Ian Dury, Johnny Moped, me – we were misfits in the pantheon of pop and Barney made us look magnificent.





A chat with Art Chantry

US designer Art Chantry discovered the work of Barney Bubbles in 1977. In an e-interview with Paul Gorman, he discusses the impact on his own practices and his belief that Bubbles' ideas are now 'part of the shared language of graphic design'.

When did you first come across Barney Bubbles' work?

Living in the remote north-west corner of the United States, I was in college when punk started to emerge (in the Pacific Northwest, that was the mid-70s) and that's when I encountered him through the work for Stiff Records and Elvis Costello.

I was a budding young graphic design student, reared on hippie/disco culture, comic books/TV and fine art history. Encountering Barney Bubbles' work in a record store was like looking at messages from Mars; this was utterly alien to everything I had learned about design and art. Several things struck me. Of course, he had an intense colour sense. His personal palette comprised bright primaries and stark contrasts, unlike most of the work of the 1970s, when earth tones dominated in the designs produced by people like Gary Burden for the mainstream Southern California rock scene: Eagles, CSN&Y, Linda Ronstadt, Jackson Browne. To be suddenly smacked between the eyes by Barney Bubbles' colours was a sound jolt.

But the really contrasting aspect was his thinking. Whatever was going on, he did the opposite. It may not have seemed that way in his mind (for instance, his commercial work in your book beats a seamless path to the work on The Damned LP cover Music For Pleasure), but to the general pop culture trend around him, it came from an alternate position...

Compare his careful, studied, playful work to the other major design tastemaker of the period: Jamie Reid. Again, he is totally opposite. It was even startling from the punk perspective.

The other major factor that grabbed my attention was his sense of humour. He must have been a wonderful guy to hang out with. Every one of his covers is a carefully rendered inside joke. To me he is at his most marvellous when he references the very process of design itself – through intentional MISTAKES!

I found the off-register version of Elvis Costello's This Year's Model in the import bin and it blew me away. In America, they released the cover which eliminated the joke. Apparently, the captains of the music industry thought it was a real mistake, or something. You could only find the original design in the import section – along with most American punk, which had to be imported before it could be sold. Strange times.

This Year's Model completely flabbergasted me. It actually took me a long time to figure out it wasn't a misprint. And, when I realised it was a joke, I never looked at graphic design in the same way again.

I firmly believe that "contrary thinking" was his biggest contribution to graphic design. His ability to step outside the accepted conventions and poke them with a stick endeared him

to an entire generation of designers desperately trying to reinvent the language of design. And that's why punks loved him.

Do you detect a coherence given Bubbles multidisciplinary approach and unstylised use of form, method and materials?

Yes, definitely. I hate to use Picasso as a comparison in any context, but Barney Bubbles' use of medium precluded his method and style. It really didn't matter what his material or form, his work remained idiosyncratically his own and simultaneously reflective of the mood of the times.

Picasso worked in graphite, oils, assemblage, or metal or stone or ceramic etc, yet the end result was always 'a Picasso'. Barney Bubbles' masterful approach made his chosen method or style just a simple tool to convey his message.

The work was never anonymous. You could always spot him, no matter how dramatically his style shifted from project to project.

Tell us about your favourite Barney Bubbles design.

Aside from This Year's Model, that would be the imported-from-Europe, 'un-American' version of Get Happy!! by Elvis Costello And The Attractions. That carefully scraped 'wear ring' around the area where the record label would actually have rubbed through the printing as it was handled? That knocked me for a loop.

As I examined the cover further, I saw how he crudely overlapped colours to create new levels of imagery, just like the old-time album sleeve designers in the era he was referencing. It just nailed it for me. Get Happy!! is a brilliant tour de force of inside-graphic-design fetish-collector humour.

Do you detect his influence on other designers?

His influence works directly through people like me. Then there are the successive generations who not only see his work but mine and that of others like Paula Scher and Tibor Kalman, and follow the trail. His influence has become so diverse and foregone that it is used and referenced without awareness. His ideas have worked their way into the shared language of graphic design to such an extent that he is one of the most often imitated master thinkers, and it's all unnoticed. He has become a prime influence through his imitators.

Where do you think his work would be at today?

I think it would stem from his manipulation of processes. He would be one of those guys taking computer systems apart and exquisitely breaking them and rewiring them to do things they were never meant to do. I wish his voice were still active. We need more monkey-wrenchers.

Why is the interest in Bubbles occurring now?

The idea of 'graphic design' as a worthy discipline is still in its infancy and its history is still in the hands of academics and amateurs. They tend to gather around the imagined 'great men' of graphic design, ignoring the vast majority of design language that is created by direct interaction with popular culture.

Barney Bubbles' work is learned and intellectual, but decidedly outside academia, so he has been hidden from the mainstream of design culture thought.

Most of the truly great design dismissed as 'vernacular' by academia is unfairly judged to lack introspection, history and authorship. Nothing could be further from the truth and Barney Bubbles personifies my point. The historical and visceral power of his ideas is as plain as the nose on your face.



A1 Good Guy 1942-1968