

# DESIGN O' THE



**Shakespeare Albama (Diesel Park West) by Stylorouge**

**T**his is the designer decade. The word has become a hollow prefix to any number of items on a shopping list than spans stubble, jeans, water, drugs, sex, violence and all points between.

It means nothing. The '80s have become so coated in gloss that they're actually slipping out of our greedy hands.

While fashion designers like Katherine Hamnett and Jean-Paul Gaultier are elevated to pop status, lifestyle gurus such as Terence 'Habitat' Conran carve a giant niche for themselves, and even a humble magazine layout boy like Neville Face Brody can wake up a 'personality', what of those designers whose every piece of work is SQUARE, whose art is generally stacked in your home so that only a 2mm spine is left visible – the record sleeve designers.

Sleeve design is a cut-throat, hard-sell, limited edition, 3-D, gatefold, CD remix branch of graphics; the cut of a record's wrapping can be almost as important as the cut of the disc (or the cut given to a radio station.) The record sleeve has progressed way beyond information – we want sensation, titillation, inspiration and we also want lyric sheets. Who are these men and women that meet our demands?

## LOVE NOT MONEY?

**I**t's obviously glossy, but . . . I'm flicking through record sleeves designed by **STYLOROUGE** with their creator **ROB O'CONNOR**, and every now and again he'll offer an ideological apology, or else he'll dismiss a particular job as "Rent!" He's smiling when he says it. We're looking at eight years worth of record packaging which ranges from Siouxsie And The Banshees and Killing Joke to Paul Young and George Michael. Forced to pin their work down to a recognisable style I'd say nice photo plus tasteful typography – but this would be a glib generalisation for one thing, and relevant only to their 'rent' work for another. While the Stylorouge cover art for George Michael's 'Faith' might be

one of their more known works, I doubt it holds much sentimental value for Rob.

He's a sleeve designer made good from one person working out of a single room on the Edgware Road, to seven full-time staff and three floating in an attractive Lancaster Gate mews (where, crucially enough, there's always something for them all to be getting on with). If this rise and rise could easily spell megalomania and cocaine-complacency to you – forget it. Rob O'Connor loves music.

Are you known within the biz as Mr Photo-and-type?

"Well once the ball gets rolling, you do get typecast, but we're always busy enough not to have to go looking for a particular kind of work – which means we end up working day by day."

Rob started out working in Polydor's design department (hence the impressive Siouxsie CV. That's Rob's handwriting you'll see on 'Kaleidoscope', and he was hanging over the bath during Siouxsie's risqué shoot for The Creatures' 'Wild Things' EP). The Stylorouge studio is a generous and spacious working environment where the mess looks important.

"It's a little company but it won't get any bigger – I really want to keep the personal touch. I'm more into music than I am design." The studio has a well-stocked record cupboard, too.

How easy it is to maintain a personal touch when Stylorouge have such a

constant, demanding turnover?

"Work can go out that we're not happy with, for various reasons, and quite often it's because of interference from other areas like the artists and the record company. You have to succumb to what they want and you end up with an artwork job rather than a design job, and forgetting to put your own credit on it."

"Sometimes you have to admit that you're a commercial service, and other times you can actually assume a more creative pomposity."

Does one half of your work pay for the other?

"It does work like that, but not by design. There are some jobs we've lost money on."

Regarding major record company jobs, the bulk of Stylo's work, the image of confrontation keeps cropping up. ("We fought for the type being small . . .") Good design, whatever that may be, is under constant fire from either the cold-hearted strategies of marketing departments, or else the so-called 'artistic' control of the bands themselves, Rob tells me.

If anything remotely resembling what we might call 'art', or at least something more than aesthetic hot air, escapes from the machinery, surely we must hold it dear to our bosom. But can (or should) a 12" square envelope ever exist as an entity in its own right?

"No. It shouldn't be separate. Evaluating the success of a record cover is how well it promotes and lives with the record inside it."

"Taken literally, fans are fanatical, and to them, their fanaticism will make that record cover far more special than it is – objectively. I have record covers now that I think are particularly special because I like the artist. I really like the new Mary Margaret O'Hara album, but I don't even want to look at the cover! I would dearly love it to be better."

While this genial, unthreateningly-stubbed gent in a long-term investment ponytail might easily be a well-practised PR exterior, my guess is that Rob O'Connor, leading oarsman of a (water)tight little ship, is no glorified accountant with a marker pen, but a real music fan who's just contributing from

### STYLOROUGE SLEEVES

SIOUXSIE AND THE BANSHEES  
 GEORGE MICHAEL  
 SQUEEZE  
 JESUS JONES  
 DIESEL PARK WEST  
 SANDIE SHAW  
 LOVE AND MONEY  
 MAXI PRIEST  
 ALISON MOYET  
 PAUL YOUNG  
 KILLING JOKE  
 ADAM ANT  
 DANSE SOCIETY



**Love And Money in too small type**

his chosen area. He spends "a fortune" on records. *Spends!*

"It irritates me that there are some people in the record business who don't experience that thrill anymore."

When a new band on the receiving end of a record company push (like Love And Money, one of Rob's fave recent jobs) fails to tickle the fickle out there in Top 40 Land, it will be all too easy for those marketing johnnies to blame the low-key record sleeve with the too small type. I imagine that you're on thicker ice with a subject as bankable as G Michael – less chance of becoming a scapegoat.

"But with a big artist, instead of worrying about whether this record's going to sell, they start worrying about subtleties of quantity, like, is it going to be eight million, or it is going to be 10

million – and the marketing of that can make a lot of difference.

"If George Michael were to bring out an album next year with a bad picture of him, or no picture at all, there *would* be a case for it selling less, even if it were a better album. *His* existing fan base is still predominantly interested in what he looks like."

Sigh. Is there any fun in this game for you anymore?

"Professional satisfaction; knowing that you're doing the job to the best of your ability – making people look the best they can without lying – *too* much! What's fun is meeting nice people."

Where do Stylorouge fit into the great scheme of things?

"We're just a service. I always feel that our role is subservient to that of making music."

Rob O'Connor and Stylorouge – the Michael Caine of the record sleeve world. Michael will happily do *Jaws 4* in order to afford himself the luxury of working on *Hannah And Her Sisters*, and what's more, make no bones about it. Rob is a success story who hasn't gone to his own head. Pity really. I was hoping for some power, corruption and lies. Ah well – sometimes the nicest people turn out to be the nicest people.

## 23 AND COUNTING

**T**wo summers ago I was browsing around the Royal College Of Art degree show when I chanced upon the work of photography grad Simon Larbalestier. His pictures were mysterious, Victorian-looking sepia biographies, beautifully framed and presented; clearly the fruits of a very personal and dedicated craftsman.

I described him at the time as very 4AD. There was I, the last defender of this myth-tangled record label, using it as an adjective! Shameful . . .

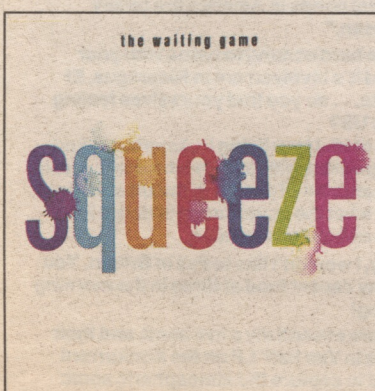
Except that a few months later, The Pixies released their debut mini-LP on 4AD, 'Come On Pilgrim' – and whose photography do you think graced its sleeve? Correct. It seems that **VAUGHAN OLIVER**, 4AD's creative department, had also been a-browsing round the Royal.

What a pickle. 4AD, a *unique* independent by anyone's standards,

are forever having to defend themselves thanks to having a thing about quality. All but a few of their entire back catalogue of sleeves have been the work of Oliver, the man behind V23 (which used to be 23 Envelope before photographer Nigel Grierson went solo, paving the way forward for our Simon!).

The qualities that unite these sleeves can only be described using the same words that music journo's are always trying *not* to apply to 4AD music (Cocteau Twins, This Mortal Coil, Dead Can Dance). If anyone's more guilty of creating the ethereal ambrosia myth than 4AD's mastermind Ivo Watts-Russell, it's Vaughan.

I'm not here to stitch him up, 23 Envelope have given me too many hours of visual stimulation in the greedy, garish 'designer' '80s. Vaughan's studio sits at the top of a



**Squeeze: surely some mistake?**



**Vaughan Oliver (right) and a piece of ethereal-ambrosia (l'Esclave Endormi by Richenel)**





# TIMES



**Ultra Vivid Sceney by U23**

wrought-iron spiral staircase above 4AD's office. There are two drawing boards—at one sits Chris Bigg, whose input is becoming more and more apparent on 4AD sleeves (watch out for him), and at the other sits a soft-spoken Geordie in black, Vaughan himself. It's all very clean and compact, and an ambient CD barely pierces the silence.

Do 4AD bands differ in the way they like to work?

"Yes, in terms of how much information they give you initially. The Wolfgang Press have always had very strong ideas about the image they want to appear on the sleeves. We share a similar sense of humour, and I really enjoy their music, but *their* interpretation of how their music should be represented tends to differ from mine quite a bit. Whereas with the Cocteau Twins or This Mortal Coil the brief has been so wide and so open that they've been able to accommodate our more personal ideas.

"With Dead Can Dance, Brendan (Perry) will come in with the sleeve virtually designed himself. I let him get on with it.

"The Pixies' stuff I'm really enjoying doing. Charles (Francis) loves David Lynch films, so there was an immediate reference for me—he's a personal favourite of mine, I could relate that to certain atmospheres in the music, the lyrics, the ideas..."

Vaughan is 30. The Pixies make him feel 16 again. He did three years national service in mainstream packaging design, during which time he met Ivo, who was setting up his own label. On the strength of an empathy for the same kind of music, Ivo poached Vaughan in 1983 and 4AD blossomed forth from there.

"Record sleeve design doesn't attract good designers, or attract *designers*, because it's a badly paid area. It's only *now* that the Malcolm Garretts and the Peter Savilles have educated the record companies that the record designer's much more than a layout artist, but even then I'm sure they'd say it was lowly paid. You've got to have a real personal interest or obsession."

So how would you approach a Paul Young album cover? Vaughan answers with a question: would he want to in the first place?

"A lot of designers would say you should do that, y'know, you're poncing about with the old Cocteau Twins sleeves—give yourself a challenge. To me a challenge would be to get the Cocteau Twins to put their portrait on the sleeve. I don't think Paul Young is a worthwhile challenge. I had enough of that when I was working on baked bean cans!"

I mention how frustrating I found

## VAUGHAN OLIVER SLEEVES

THE PIXIES  
M-A-R-R-S  
THE COCTEAU TWINS  
ULTRA VIVID SCENE  
AR KANE  
THROWING MUSES  
COLOURBOX  
THIS MORTAL COIL  
MODERN ENGLISH  
WOLFGANG PRESS  
DEAD CAN DANCE  
DIF JUZ

designing the *NME* 'Indie City' cassette cover last year.

"Cassettes I've always hated. It's an awful thing to *hold* at the end of the day. It's a bind. CD's are as well, to a degree. I hope that 12" vinyl doesn't go 'out'. It's a pleasurable object. Maybe we're both Luddites in that respect!"

Except that he's not. Earlier, Vaughan was waving around his latest Throwing Muses artwork which he'd been playing with on a (gulp) computer.

"That computer has completely changed my approach. I've just done those over the weekend, it's a f—ing brilliant tool. There's only two of these machines available to work with commercially at the moment, with high resolution screens, and you have to work quick because they're expensive."

But no matter how lovely one of your sleeves is, it still ends up in an unsympathetic record rack in an ugly branch of Our Price. Shouldn't it be more eye-catching to fulfill its purpose in life?

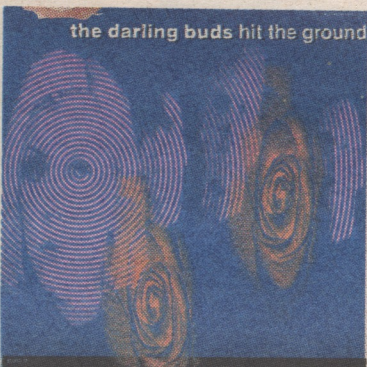
"In the first place, no. I would like it to have an immediate response; to intrigue—especially when a lot of our records don't get a lot of airplay, so the first time people come across them is in the racks—but the main thing is for it to have a bit more shelf-life at home."

My advice to you, then, is to go out and liberate a 4AD record now! Take one home and give it a saucer of hot milk, and be grateful that you, the punter, have been credited with a little intelligence, and a little patience.

Where do you see yourself in the scheme of things, Vaughan?

"Coming to Wandsworth every day and working at me desk, by meself, with a horrible carpet."

Very 4AD!



**The work of Budding designers**

# REPUBLIC ENEMIES

**C**HILL BOMB CARNAGE! LOUDNESS IS A FORCE! THE UNITED COLOURS OF TROUBLE! You are now entering **THE DESIGNERS' REPUBLIC**—a bang on the ear and a kick in the eye for anyone who thinks you have to live in London and go to art school in order to be a successful top-notch record sleeve designer. **IAN ANDERSON** and **NICK PHILLIPS** have blagged their way into the Woolworths chart rack, snooty design mag *Blueprint*, and your bedroom, from a position of "intentional isolation", ie their shelter in Sheffield. And their house-style shouts out LOUD!

Designers' Republic, among their many credits, have given you Krush, the entire Age Of Chance catalogue, The Funky Worm, The Darling Buds' flower power, the new kitsch Fuzzbox product and the imminent '89 Pop Will Eat Itself onslaught-to-go.

"It started when I was managing a band signed to Epic called Person To Person. I'd had no training but I'd been doing posters for one-off clubs that I'd run in Sheffield. The band liked the stuff I'd been doing and asked me to do their

sleeves as well.

"I basically learnt all that I needed to know initially by bullshitting my way into the art department of the record company who assumed that I must know what I was doing if I was there," explains Ian, a walking piece of his own graphics, in gold-embossed shirt, geometric sideburns and stripey trousers. "I met Nick, who left Salter Lane College where he was doing sculpture, and we teamed up as Designers' Republic."

"We do it for ourselves because we enjoy doing it, and all the bright colours and the high contrasts, the insignia, the trimmings, are part and parcel of what we like. Thankfully other people like it too."

Looks that way. It's certainly caught the imagination(?) of the majors (always a factor if you're looking to get on). But how does working for WEA or RCA differ from designing for a cosy little indie?

"Whereas FON or Native might release a seven inch or a 12", here we're looking at a seven, 12, remix, limited edition seven inch pack, coloured vinyl, fold-out, CD singles, cassette singles—the workload increases, which we enjoy because within the world of Designers' Republic, you've then got more formats."

What's the secret of your success?

"There is something personal about our work, a lot of in-jokes. It sounds contrived, but we break off and have a drink down here and dance around. We enjoy being here. It's not Vaughan Oliver."

"His is close to fine art; the pair of us are much more interested in the commercial side—that's why a lot of it is tongue-in-cheek, because you talk to record company people and you just think, bullshit!"

Do you see a record sleeve as wrapping, or is it art?

"It's packaging. Because of our infatuation with commercialism and all the modern media evils, it would seem pointless for us to veer away from it."

You get off on the hard-sell?

"Yeah, but it's not like a con. One of the best moments was when we saw a piece in *Cut* magazine—it wasn't a review of 'Kiss' the record, but a review of the sleeve! This bloke had tried to decipher everything on the back.

"It was brilliant—we were down here laughing! Everything we'd ever wanted to do in terms of playing visual games—no disrespect to the punter—had come true!



**Age of Chance: Republic nuisances?**

"Our sleeves shouldn't exist without the record. You should know from the sleeve what kind of record it is inside.

"As a basic rule, if you've got a single that lasts three minutes, there should be three minutes worth of sleeve. If you've got an album that's 40 minutes long, you've got 40 minutes of attention for the sleeve."

A sound philosophy.

Citing an example, I believe that Age Of Chance are as perfect a crystallisation of music and packaging as 4AD's Cocteau Twins, and yet the very contrived nature of this relationship somehow makes the whole thing even more exciting.

I've had 'One Thousand Years Of Trouble', the AOC LP, for ever and I haven't stopped playing with the sleeve yet.

"The whole thing about Age Of Chance is that they stole bits and pieces, cut up style, and the graphics is like that—we pinch things here and there; we *modify* things.

"Even in years to come, it'll still have that special place, because of the time—the first fully-realised version of what we wanted to do."

Would you take on a Paul Young LP?

"We'd definitely take it on—that's a challenge in itself. The way we do things, ie creating a world, you've actually got something you can build around—so you'd have the 'World Of Paul Young'. Even if the photo was the worst photo in the world you can put it in context, it's just the way you frame it."

"A real challenge would be to do the 'World Of Barbara Dickson'!"

Ian's self-styled tack attack T-shirt reads SUPERSONIC. It might equally

say ENJOY. Of the three design companies I visited on my quest, Designers' Republic appeared to be the most fuelled by FUN. Maybe it's down to their truly independent location; their far from naive sense of place.

Maybe in a year's time they'll have relocated in the South and taken on a gallery of artworkers and compromised their hard-hitting style. But then again... YOU CAN LIVE FOREVER WITH THE DESIGNERS REPUBLIC!

## DESIGNERS REPUBLIC SLEEVES

THE DARLING BUDS  
POP WILL EAT ITSELF  
KRUSH  
THE FUNKY WORM  
THE AGE OF CHANCE  
FUZZBOX  
SOHO  
CHAKK  
SEDITION  
LOVE STREET  
PICNIC AT THE WHITEHOUSE  
PERSON TO PERSON  
JUNK  
SCREAMING TREES  
TREEBOUND STORY  
ERIC RANDOM



**Ian Anderson (left) and Nick Phillips—Supersonic youth!**

