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Anarchy in the Grids – Rebellious Rock Covers of the 1970s.

The following exhibition has been curated to demonstrate that even throughout a single decade, the nature of album cover art is forever evolving, and that despite their seemingly trivial nature, album cover designs are heavily influenced by design theory and the several cultural upheavals that occur in a decade such as the 1970s. The 5 selected covers are all linked by the defiant spirit of rock music, and the exhibition will trace the shift from the lingering influences of modernism through to the expressive chaos that is punk and postmodernism. Taking place in the historic Brixton Academy, the aim is to immerse the viewer in the visceral power of the artwork, all while doing so in a venue that is ingrained in rock music lore.

Fig 1 – The Rolling Stones (1971) *Sticky Fingers* [Album cover]. London: Rolling Stones Records.

This is where the exhibition begins and represents how the 1970s was a decade that for the most part was never fully modernist and neither wholly postmodernist but instead was a bridge between the two. Even when at times the scales seemed to tip in favour of one or the other, the decade always seemed to return to using both as a tool to enact rebellion and force viewers to think in different ways.

That's where the exhibition starts, with an album cover that while it attempts to escape modernism, it's still impacted by its lingering influence.

Sticky Fingers by the Rolling Stones, designed by Andy Warhol, flips the modernist desire for utilitarianism on its head, with the real working zipper (on original vinyl pressings) aiming to break the passive and thoughtless consumption of art – inviting interaction while also aligning itself with the band's provocative image at the time, with Norman stating that "Warhol's design for *Sticky Fingers* was a perfect fusion of art and commerce, a provocative gesture that turned the album into an object of desire while mocking the very idea of packaging rock as a product." (Norman, 2012, p.345).

The photograph used on the cover, a close-up shot of a crotch in jeans, plays with the idea of commodification, acting as both a literal and metaphorical unzipping of the social norms of this period and encourages consideration of the counterculture defiance of the early 1970s. Furthermore, while the sans-serif typeface ties into modernism's simplicity, it feels subservient to the raw energy of the photo – tying back to the idea of the 1970s being a decade wavering between design trends.

Fig 2 – Pink Floyd (1973) The Dark Side of the Moon [Album Cover]. London: Harvest Records

Pink Floyd's Dark Side of the Moons's album cover stands alone in this exhibition as being the only piece that does not conform to the typical imagery of rock music, abandoning the gritty type and posed photographs for a far more geometrical design, which in itself is how this album cover expresses rebellion. However, the design itself is

far deeper than that. The now iconic prism refracting light into a spectrum is a perfect example of minimalism and is a design that leans heavily on modernist principles while simultaneously hinting at the conceptual idea that would define postmodernism. The designer of the cover, Storm Thorgerson says that “The prism was chosen for its simplicity and its ability to suggest something beyond the immediate - a scientific metaphor for the unseen forces shaping human life” (Thorgerson, 1997, p.78) - The single geometric shape that makes up the cover conveys ideas about science and perception as well as ideas about the human experience.

While not an act of rebellion in the typical sense – think smashing guitars on the ground and swearing on live television. Hipgnosis’ design subtly challenges the norms and commercial expectations of what is a typical album cover. When many artists defaulted to band portraits to brand themselves as a commodity, Pink Floyd reject this idea altogether and choose a design that challenges their viewer to engage with the concepts that the album attempts to discuss rather than the personalities behind the music. While the design avoids embracing the pastiche that would later define postmodernism, the design itself still aims to question the certainties and truths that typically define modernism. It’s a design that rather than scream and shout like the punk covers of the late 70s, *The Dark Side of the Moon* instead aims to get viewers to intellectually interact with the work itself, using an abstract form to show that the expression of rebellion doesn’t always have to be rooted in emotion and anger, and can instead focus on intelligence to question social norms.

Fig 3 – Springsteen, B. (1975) *Born to Run* [Album Cover]. Columbia Records, New York.

Featuring one of the most iconic music images of all time, Bruce Springsteen's *Born to Run* stands at the centre of this exhibition. Modernism, with its focus on legibility and simplicity are at the forefront of this album cover, at least visually. The monochromatic colour scheme, as well as the photograph itself continue this rather simple ethos, presenting the already famous Springsteen and fellow saxophonist Clarence Clemons as two friends captured in a candid moment, rather than the larger-than-life figures that rockstars are often presented to be.

A decade still dealing with segregation's aftermath, showing a white man and a black man in such an intimate way is a rather quiet way of challenging the racial divides that were still in existence during this time, while simultaneously dealing with the often hypermasculine nature of rock music, abandoning the typical album cover shots for a depiction of pure camaraderie - "The cover of *Born to Run* captured a moment of raw authenticity, a rejection of the overproduced gloss of the era, and presented

Springsteen as both everyman and rebel." (Marsh, 1987, p.23). While Punk felt the need to be loud in its rebellion, *Born to Run* is far more subtle, taking on a far more humanist feel to convey a culturally progressive message. It's a design that takes modernist conventions, which are often seen as conformist, and utilises them as a tool of rebellion with the resulting album cover being both timeless while urgently of its moment all at once.

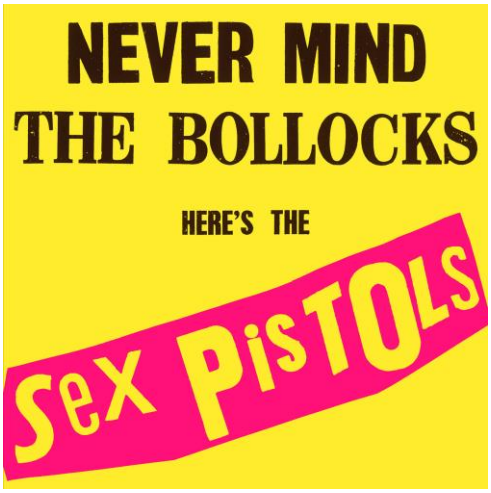

Fig 4 – Sex Pistols (1977) *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols* [Album Cover]. Virgin Records, London.

While *Born to Run* aimed to blur the line between modernism and postmodernism, *Never Mind the Bollocks* fully envelopes itself in the anger and the fury that culminated in the British Punk movement. The simple monochromatic tones of *Born to Run* are ditched for a distasteful and ugly pink and yellow, while the grids and sans-serif typeface makes way for a ransom-note set of type, and the track list on the back abandons any sense of hierarchy and layout. The Sex Pistols art direction has been

described as “a deliberate assault on design itself - ugly, chaotic, and unapologetic” (Savage, 1991, p.321).

Britain in 1977 was marked by economic stagnation and social unrest and the Sex Pistols are an amalgamation of the emotions felt by Britain’s youth. Springsteen’s nostalgia and Pink Floyd’s escapism are replaced by a more situationist approach, with both Malcolm Mclaren and Jamie Reid, the band’s manager and album cover designer respectively, both being heavily influenced by situationists. From their lyrics, public actions and album artwork, the Sex Pistols deliberately attempted to undermine all forms of authority and to reject the status quo by hijacking capitalist media to rattle a seemingly complacent British society.

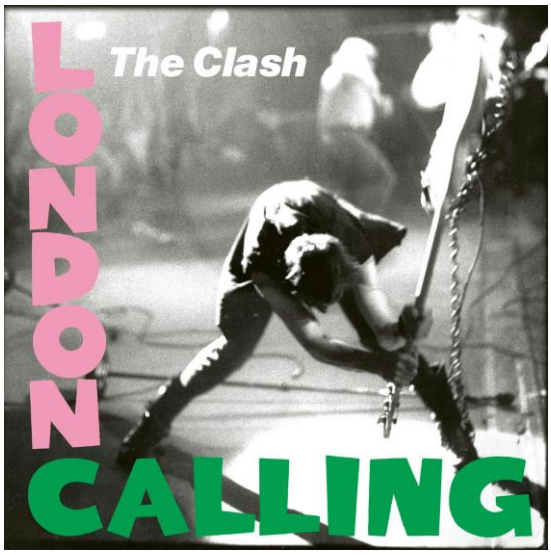

Fig 5 – The Clash (1979) *London Calling* [Album Cover]. CBS Records, London.

London Calling, released in 1979 is often said to be one of the greatest albums of all time, with its album cover being equally as iconic. While the Sex Pistols fully rejected modernism in a fit of rage and anger, The Clash had evolved beyond this and attempted to harness aspects of modernism, postmodernism as well as still utilising punk's DIY ethos to convey their message.

The cover itself is a nod to Elvis Presley's debut album (1956); however, it does not do this as an homage, but rather as a pastiche, by hijacking the Rock'n'roll legacy of Elvis and pairing it with a violent image of a bass guitar being smashed on the ground, with Pat Gilbert stating that "The *London Calling* cover was a nod to rock's past and a rejection of its sanctity - by smashing the bass, they smashed the myth of the untouchable rock star." (Gilbert, 2004, p.234). The cover reflects the Clash's shift from the initial nihilism of punk towards a more expansive commentary on society, becoming a cultural collision, wanting to undermine rock music's past while establishing a new and defiant identity.

The photo, which has since become iconic, was initially rejected by photographer Pennie Smith due to its out of focus and unposed nature, but Joe Strummer insisted that it was the perfect photo for the album cover due to its authentic nature acting as a middle finger to the commercialised industry standards. Then, when paired with the pink and green type, it creates an album cover that holds both modernist values, with its simple layout consisting of just a photograph and type, as well as postmodernist values by incorporating pastiche as well as rejecting the polished precision often associated with modernist design.

Releasing as the 70s came to a close, the album is a fitting capsule of a decade that at times leaned fully into modernism's order and focus on grids, and at times ditched that altogether for an ethos that aimed to offend and go against all that came before it. Aiming to blend all of this into a single album cover, London Calling is the final piece of this exhibition.

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