The big design groups aside, design studios and individual designers promote themselves in a notoriously haphazard way. It's different with the big multinational design groups. They are pumped full of marketing steroids, and they know how to get a foot in the doors of big rich corporations hungry to spend millions having their brand image burnished. The big groups have the money and the expertise to promote themselves by using sophisticated marketing and communication techniques. But since many of them no longer even call themselves 'designers' – preferring the term 'brand consultants' – there is probably not much for the independent-minded designer to learn from them. Nevertheless, smaller design groups and individual designers have to promote themselves, too. We've already discussed the benefits of word of mouth exposure in generating new work for studios, but in truth, what we are talking about is the cultivation of a reputation. Designers depend almost entirely on their reputations for their livelihoods. It pays to have a good one.

Acquiring a reputation isn't easy; you have to earn it and it has to be forged out of the raw materials of your personality and your work. But there's a problem here: notions of fame and celebrity have invaded design's body politic. The design world's obsession with celebrity hasn't reached the feeding frenzy proportions of the music industry or Hollywood, but graphic design now has its own star system: a celebrity A-list of big name designers, followed by a B-list and C-list of less well-known individuals, and, for all we know, if we scour magazines and websites around the world, we might find a Z-list, too.

The upshot of all this is that the design world has come to confuse fame and celebrity with reputation. It is now possible, even as a moderately successful designer, to be written about, to be interviewed in magazines and to be invited to lecture at colleges and speak at design conferences. This used to be done by the great and the good of the design world: designers who had acquired eminence over decades. Today, such is the appetite for graphic design, many designers – and not just the establishment figures – have the spotlight thrown upon them. We've also witnessed studios arriving on the scene boasting some sparky work and attracting instant attention. Magazines write about them, and despite having been in existence for less time than it takes to blow your nose, they manage to publish a monograph. Suddenly, the studio acquires minor celebrity status. Other young designers look admiringly at this and think: it must be good to be the object of so much adoration.

Not much wrong with that, you might think: but in fact, unwarranted attention can be destructive. Being the 'next big thing' is rarely desirable. It will perhaps help propel the studio forward for a few months, by opening a few doors and attracting a few new clients. It will certainly be fleetingly enjoyable to have your views sought by design journalists, and to have your work featured in magazines and sexy new design books. But unless this interest is built on real foundations, it will evaporate. Just flip back through the design press from the past three or four years, and you'll see what I mean: you'll find designers tipped for success that no-one's heard of since, you'll find reviews of monographs from studios that don't exist any more.

There is even a theory, currently gaining widespread credence in design circles, that predicts that if you have too much fame it boils over and scalds your feet. Immediately after his epochal one-man show at London's Victoria & Albert Museum in 1988, and the publication of a best-selling monograph,[1] the British designer Neville Brody went bankrupt, and for the next decade was forced to find work abroad. More recently, in a reader's poll run by the British journal *Creative Review,* the eminent British designer Peter Saville failed to retain his crown as the 'Best Graphic Designer Working Today,' a category he'd won on two previous occasions. This was unexpected: the designer had just enjoyed a year of staggering success. He'd held a much-admired one-man show at London's Design Museum; he'd published a long-awaited monograph,[2] and he'd enjoyed an unprecedented (for a designer) amount of coverage from the non-design press. In an article *Creative Review's* editor, Patrick Burgoyne, reflected on this: 'Peter Saville in particular seems to have suffered from the exposure afforded by last year's Design Museum exhibition and book: from winning best graphic designer two years in a row he now fails to make the top three. It's no reflection on his work or his long term place in the design firmament, I'm sure, but perhaps an example of the contrary nature of whatever passes for fame in the graphics micro-world.'[3]

'Micro-world' is right. Fame in graphic design circles is a bit like fame in dentistry; it doesn't travel far. If you are a member of a boy band, your views and opinions will be eagerly sought by print and electronic media. But no-one is interested in the thoughts of graphic designers beyond the confines of graphic design, and in truth, very few graphic designers are able to rise to the occasion. When exposed and cross-examined outside of the cozy world of design, graphic designers tend to come over as self-centered and only interested in graphic design.

1 In 1988 Brody published the first of his two monographs, which became best-selling graphic design books – combined sales now exceed 120,000 copies. The accompanying exhibition at the V&A attracted over 40,000 visitors before touring Europe and Japan.

2 The book was called *Designed by Peter Saville* (edited by Emily King). The exhibition was called 'The Peter Saville Show,' Design Museum, London, 2003.

3 *Creative Review,* October 2004. The designer Mark Farrow won, with Michael C Place and Stefan Sagmeister as runners-up.

The lesson is simple: we must not confuse admiration and respect with fame or celebrity. A number of groups have sought to acquire fame and celebrity by hyping themselves and behaving more like boy bands than design groups. In recent years there have been some spectacular culprits. The ostentatious gesture of the bravura book project is a typical ruse: a big fat book arrives on the scene, stuffed with visual pyrotechnics, which on the surface appears to show the group as dynamic and boundary-stretching, but on closer inspection is revealed to be egotistical and pointless graphic doodling. And for those who play this game, it is dangerously easy to believe your own hype. It usually ends up with some sort of implosion or dramatic reversal of fortunes.

Getting noticed

Yet, if fame and celebrity are illusory, and no guarantee of success or lasting recognition, you still need to get noticed. You can't hide in a hole in the ground and expect to be spotted by clients. There are various legitimate actions you can take in order to get noticed. In the next few pages we'll explore some of these options. However, nothing works as well as the simple expedient of doing great work. If you do great work, if you do effective, original and striking work full of emotional or intellectual resonance, you are unlikely to go unnoticed.

This willingness to recognize and acknowledge good work done by others is one of the design world's more endearing features. And it's just as well, because this is how reputations are forged. A reputation begins in the design world, and only when it is firmly rooted there does it spread out into the bigger world of clients, commerce and the culture beyond. Designers with good reputations in the design world slowly begin to acquire a reputation elsewhere. If you are one of the big muscular design groups I talked about earlier, then you can work at building a reputation in the world of business – but for small independent designers, this is out of the question. You have to start within the design world, confident that if your reputation is strong it will be picked up by alert clients, and you will find yourself worming out of the sealed-off world of design into the bigger world of clients, money and connections and opportunities.

Besides doing great work, there are one or two other things you can do to help the process: you can be generous about the work of other designers; you can help new designers through teaching, mentoring and offering work experience; you can give talks and take part in conferences; you can write about design (and not about yourself); and you can conduct yourself ethically.

Work done for the portfolio, not the bank balance

Designers often imagine that if they write their own briefs they will produce the sort of work that will boost their profile. This sometimes works. Self-initiated projects are often necessary for the individual's – or studio's – psychic health, and the urge to experiment and explore is perfectly reasonable. But the blunt truth is that clients are simply not as impressed with self-initiated projects as they are with a great piece of work done in response to a real live brief. By all means, do personal work, but do it for personal reasons, and don't kid yourself that it will open doors.

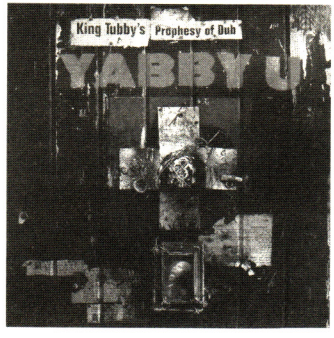
Instead, try and find a client who you can do a deal with. Try and find a client who will let you do some boundary-defying work in exchange for a substantially reduced fee. This might be work undertaken for a good cause: a charity or a non-profit organization. Or it could be an opportunity to give your skills to a client who, in the normal course of events, might find you too expensive. There is an unwritten rule that states the more money a client spends the less freedom they permit, but if you can find one – a real living and breathing client – who will permit and encourage you to produce ground-breaking work, it will be much more beneficial to your reputation than a self-initiated project.

But this must not be used as an opportunity for indulgence. Quite the opposite: it is not about pleasing yourself. Despite the ostensible freedom that you have negotiated, and despite the absence of fees, you must be resolved to work with all the gusto, imagination and focus, you would muster for a job with fifty times the budget. Because in graphic design circles, what really gets a client's red blood cells circulating is seeing work that *works* – aesthetically and commercially.

Where do you find such a client? Start by approaching a subject, or an area, that is normally devoid of good design: don't approach a cool sports brand or a publisher who only produces beautifully crafted books. Go and see a local garden center or a dentist. Or you can do what we did at Intro and design CD covers for reggae and dub labels. Here's what happened: an old and valued friend of mine came to see me and said he was putting together a CD label called Blood and Fire to release Jamaican dub and reggae classics from the seventies. Although my friend had backing from some prominent figures in the UK music industry, he didn't have an open checkbook and budgets were tight. I recognized an opportunity to do some great work. Original Jamaican record sleeves have a visceral, untutored kick greatly appreciated by fans of the music. But the repackaging of Jamaican music by American and European labels tended to be patronizing and clichéd; it was all palm tress and Rasta colors. Here was an area of music packaging that hadn't been touched by design. I told my friend that if he trusted us to go down a previously untried path we would create something remarkable for him.

Mat Cook took on the task of designing the first batch of Blood and Fire covers. At this time, graphic design was in thrall to the newly arrived Apple Macintosh computers: there was a template-like, digital-sameness to most of the graphic design that was around at the time. With typical contrariness, Mat headed off in the opposite direction. He got out a hammer, some rusty nails, some old fencing and a few cans of industrial paint, and he made a series of crumbly installations that looked as if Robert Rauschenberg had been working in a scrap-yard in Kingston, Jamaica. When Mat's sculpture-like installations appeared on CD covers, not only were the covers praised, but hard-nosed music retailers and distributors admitted that the covers were a significant factor in the label's early success.[4]

At a crucial time in the history of Intro, this brought us a welcome injection of attention. All sorts of people including non-music-industry clients approached us with offers of work as a result. Journalists called asking to do profiles, and students wrote asking for jobs – the two sure-fire signs that told us we were on the map. Yet, looked at in strict accounting terms, doing this work was a short-term disaster. We took a loss on all the work we did for the label. But this was carefully monitored: we evaluated the sacrifice needed, and we had faith in Mat's ability to create genuinely iconoclastic work. We made sure we didn't let our outside costs get out of control (fencing and rusty nails are cheap), but we were unstinting in the amount of time we gave to the project.



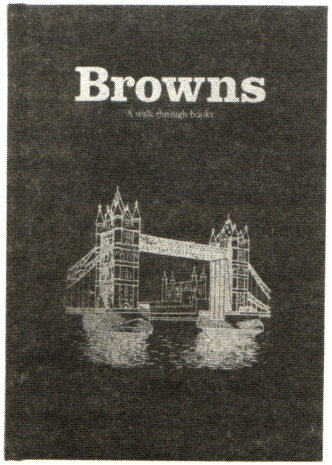
Courtesy of Intro

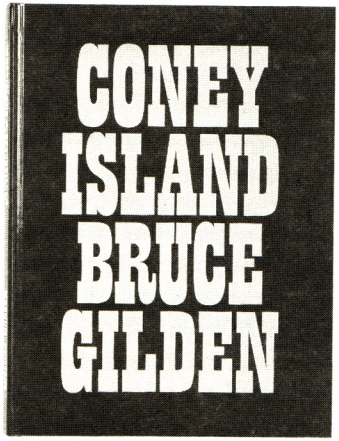
King Tubby, *Dub Gone Crazy*,
Yabby U, *King Tubby's Prophesy of Dub*
Album covers by Mat Cook at Intro

4 Mat didn't even like dub. But as the great Blue Note designer Reid Miles proved, you don't have to like the music to do great covers for it: Miles famously didn't like jazz, and never listened to the music of the artists he had to create cover designs for. As these two examples prove, if you have sufficient cultural awareness you can produce work that is culturally appropriate.

It paid off: over subsequent years, this work generated a vast amount of new work from firms, bands and other record labels who were admirers of the Blood and Fire look, and it enhanced our reputation at a critical moment of our development. Every designer and studio should have a client like Blood and Fire.

The design group Browns, founded by designer Jonathan Ellery, chose a different path. Since their inception Browns have published their own books. Subject matter is invariably image-based, and their published output to date adds up to a substantial achievement and has contributed significantly to building Browns' reputation as one of the UK's most accomplished and craft-based design studios. But Ellery didn't set out to produce books that would act as promo-trailers for his company. 'On reflection, our early book projects were in response to what we felt at the time to be a very corporate, clinical, graphic design world,' he notes. 'The incentive and the energy to produce our own books came from a mixture of desperation, no clients and a love of the printed page. I wish I could say there was a commercial or PR strategy in place, but there wasn't. At the time, our accountant told us that it was pointless and to this day still struggles with the concept.'





Browns A walk through books and *Coney Island Bruce Gilden* designed by Browns

Courtesy of Browns

Their accountant should wise up. The strategy has paid off handsomely. Today, Browns work for a diverse range of clients and while their success is down to more than the books they produce, their small catalog of lovingly crafted publications appears to have made a substantial contribution to the studio's growth and reputation. As Ellery explains: 'People have always found our books of interest, which is very gratifying. They seem to find their way into design, photography and art magazines which has given us profile over the years, and in a way has defined us as a studio. We do a lot of other things, but the books seem to be the projects with the most resonance. It continually surprises me when I get a call from the likes of fashion designer Dries Van Noten asking us to design a book for him. Over the years he had acquired some of our publishing projects and related to them.'

Ellery's reluctance to formalize Browns' publishing activities into a calculated promotional activity paradoxically makes them all the more effective as promotional tools. The books are done from conviction – from love, you might say – which makes their impact all the more potent. 'We're now enjoying a time,' he notes, 'where the books we have designed and published are strangely creating business opportunities. Image library Photonica is another example of a client paying good money for us to design a book for them. In a funny sort of way our publishing activities – a purely cultural gesture on our part – has made good business sense.'

Design competitions

Opinion is split on design competitions. For many designers, the notion of 'competing' like athletes in a race is anathema. And you can see their point: winning a design award, detractors will note, doesn't necessarily mean that you are 'the best.' For a start, if you don't enter, you can't win. On top of this, you usually have to pay to enter so only those who can afford the entry fees can take part, which means that if you win a design award you are in fact only winning 'The Best of What's Been Entered' award. Furthermore, you also have to submit your work to the scrutiny of fellow designers who are, typically, your rivals in business. How can you be sure of their impartiality?

Other designers take a more trusting view: they make a point of entering every competition possible on the reasonable premise that if they win they are gifted an invaluable promotional opportunity, and receive that most precious of designer accolades: peer approval. (Winners also acquire drab-looking 'statuettes' or faux parchment scrolls decorated with bad calligraphy to display in their studios. Which prompts the question: why do design awards usually look so dreadful?)

And despite all the moaning and controversy that surrounds the winning entries ('Why did they choose that? I did something identical six years ago') it usually is the good stuff that wins. Something else I've noticed: I've sat on quite a few design juries, and I'm always impressed by how generous designers are about each other's work. Sure, you meet some sour and resentful individuals, but they are the exception rather than the norm. The first time I sat on a jury I expected it to be a snakepit of fear and loathing, but my fellow jurors were generous, considerate and tirelessly fair. And this has been true of the other juries I've sat on (not that this precludes some absurd decisions from time to time).

All scruples about design competitions, their artificiality, their fundamental unfairness, vanish when we win. It is very sweet to win a design prize, and winners must publicize and exploit their successes. Send a short e-mail to your clients announcing your win (don't crow about it – mention a few other winners, too) and never forget to include your client in any celebrations – you wouldn't have won it without them.

Professional organizations

There are numerous professional bodies offering support, advice and education for the fledgling designer.[5] Most countries have them; a list of established bodies and institutions appears at the end of this book. Most require membership fees and in return you get helpful advice and useful opportunities to learn more about design and design-related matters from fellow professionals. Of course, some designers prefer to remain aloof from communal activities: they see joining design institutions as a step towards losing their independent status and becoming linked to the design establishment; they tend to dismiss professional organizations as smug and self-admiring. Others, with more clubbable instincts, relish the camaraderie that comes with banding together with like-minded individuals, and become energetic participants.

5 In describing itself the AIGA sets out its aims and intentions: 'AIGA sets the national agenda for the role of design in its economic, social, political, cultural and creative contexts. AIGA is the oldest and largest membership association for professionals engaged in the discipline, practice and culture of designing. Founded as the American Institute of Graphic Arts in 1914 as a small, exclusive club, AIGA now represents more than 16,000 designers through national activities and local programs developed by 48 chapters and more than 150 student groups.' www.aiga.org

The fundamental altruism of the various professional bodies and associations, and the degree to which they promote the interests of design and designers, cannot be questioned. In recent years, they have made conspicuous and vigorous efforts to become more inclusive, with particular emphasis on helping and encouraging students and recent graduates. They run lectures, educational sessions and have made extensive and effective use of online material. But, inevitably, in their attempt to become all-encompassing, they tend to represent the mainstream: if your interests are in the margins and slipstreams of design and contemporary culture, they are perhaps less relevant to you. Whether you join is a matter of personal judgment.

Attending conferences and lectures

There is today no shortage of design conferences for the design enthusiast to attend. They are held all over the world in attractive cities that no-one minds very much having to visit. They are organized by the design press, by publishers, by professional bodies and by arts centers, and provide congenial opportunities to hear other points of view and to discuss pressing issues with fellow designers. But are design conferences – usually held in the sorts of hotels and conference centers that make living in a tent on the edge of a busy road seem attractive – any good? Do they offer anything substantial to the young designer? They are certainly not cheap to attend, yet large numbers of people flock to hear famous designers talk and show off their work. They can't be that bad.

The writer and conference organizer Alice Twemlow, wrote an article in *Eye* magazine[6] about the design conference phenomenon: 'Design conferences are the places where we hear designers' voices most literally,' she wrote. 'Yet, of all the apparatus and artifacts that the graphic design community uses as professional buoys, conferences are the least evolved and most perplexing. Books, annuals, magazines and exhibitions are, after all, native territory to graphic designers, and academic curricula and professional associations are firmly established in the discipline's psyche. Conferences, however, are relatively new additions to the field and they sit somewhat uneasily within it. Their styrofoam coffee cups, skirted buffet tables, 'Hello my name is …' badges and PowerPoint presentations bring with them the foreign whiff of Shriners' conventions and the annual industry gatherings of travel agents, car insurance brokers or dentists.'

Twemlow is spot on with her 'styrofoam coffee cups' and 'skirted buffet tables'; and her comments about the sometimes uneasy fit between designers and the conference arena are shrewd. But having attended conferences both as a participant and as a visitor, I've always learned something – even if it's only to be thoroughly prepared if you're a speaker, and to take some Tylenol along if you're planning any late-night socializing.

6 *Eye* 49, Autumn 2003.

Not as grandiose as conferences, lectures are an essential part of the education of a designer – especially if the lecturer is a good speaker with an interesting tale to tell. Show and tell sessions can provide invaluable insight into the creative process. I've often been forced to re-evaluate a designer's work after attending his or her lecture. There's something about the elemental format of the lecture room that enables us to get to the heart of the matter. In design, we too often assume that there is only ever one way to do things, but listening to designers, especially those from different cultures, alerts us to other possibilities. I took part in a lecture session with some Japanese designers in Tokyo. Their work was exciting, but they were excessively modest about it – almost apologetic. And while I'd never advocate arrogance, they made me realize that you can be too humble.

Maintaining relationships with art colleges

There are many good reasons why it's worth maintaining connections with your former college, or forging links with new ones. Designers have an unwritten duty to pass on their experience and give support to the next generation of designers. It is relatively easy to do this. Colleges are keen to have visits and lectures from professionals. And since the colleges and schools usually pay for our time, there is no excuse for not doing it. Many designers develop a taste for teaching and discover an aptitude for mentoring. Some become external examiners, while others enjoy giving occasional talks and presentations. But maintaining links with schools and colleges needn't be just about altruism. Designers have much to gain in practical terms from associations with educational establishments.

In an interview I conducted with Paula Scher of Pentagram for *Design Week*, she identified one of the fringe benefits of teaching: '... It's very good for recruiting. I get to hire the best students,' she stated, before going on to say, '... teaching is a great way to have the sort of dialogue I can't have with my clients: about aesthetics, about color theory, about design theory. It's very beneficial to have this other perspective.'

So, teaching is good for the soul, and good for recruiting. And, I'd add another benefit: today's students are, in some cases, tomorrow's clients. I was once contacted by a woman who ran a large government department dealing with education matters. She was looking for a design company to undertake a large-scale project. She said that normally this would be handled in-house by her team of designers. They rarely, she explained, commissioned external independent studios. But on this occasion, the project was too big for her team, and in order to find a suitable design company she had asked one of her designers to recommend a studio. By chance, the designer she consulted had attended a talk I had given at his college. He'd been impressed and put forward my name. The woman visited our studio, and after the inevitable pitch the project was won.

Now, this is not going to happen every time you give a talk or show some work at an art school. The point here is that it *can* happen, and therefore you should view contact with colleges both as an opportunity to give something to the next generation, and also with the confidence that your altruism might be repaid at some time in the future.

Dealing with the design press

Designers imagine that coverage in the design press – an in-depth profile, or a casual mention – means instant success: they envision clients rushing to hire them after reading about them and seeing their work in the glossy pages of one of the sleek design zines. Alas, it is rarely like this.

Exposure in the design press is an important step on the way to acquiring a reputation in the design world, but it should not be mistaken for a passport to instant success. Exposure in the design press is desirable and worthwhile, but its effects are cumulative. People need to see two or three pieces of work, or read a few articles or news items, before the word of mouth process starts in earnest. And of course, when we get our opportunities to bask in the spotlight, we have to be sure that we get everything right and don't use the moment to make fools of ourselves.

How do you get your work into the design press? Editors and journalists are constantly on the look-out for fresh voices and new faces. It's their job, and if you are any good they will find you. But there are ways to help them find you. Develop the habit of sending magazines details of your latest work. Include a brief description of the project in question, the name of the client and any other relevant information. Keep it brief: if an editor is interested someone will contact you about the details. The document, with accompanying visuals, must be sent before the subject is due to be exposed to the public, or its intended audience, and it should be sent in plenty of time for the magazine's deadline. Most magazines want striking work, they want newness, and they want high-quality images.

You need to study the design press and decide which magazines and periodicals (online and print) your work is most suited to. It can sometimes be beneficial to appear in a less obvious magazine from time to time, although it can be hard to persuade editors who don't regularly feature graphic design to report graphic design stories. You also need to decide which sections in magazines would suit your project. A call to the magazine will enable you to find out the publication's deadlines, its policy on receiving submissions and who to send your work to. Look out for special features such as regional surveys or analysis of specialist sectors such as digital design or moving image. Timing is vital: miss an issue and you'll have to wait another month before your work can be included, by which time the project might be old news.

You must also keep in mind questions of confidentiality (does your client want their product exposed before it is launched?). Most clients enjoy seeing the work they commissioned written about in a magazine, but it is essential to always get their permission. However, the most important thing to remember is that journalists are inundated with material, and although most of what they receive is dire, there is no shortage of good projects for them to feature. Consequently, they will only use a tiny percentage of what they are sent, so only send your best work. And I've always made a point of not sending material to more than one publication at a time. All magazines demand exclusives, so you will quickly run out of friends if you are seen to be flogging your wares to everyone. Choose which magazine is best suited to your project, and send your information to them, and them alone.

Once you are known as a reliable supplier of exciting visual material, journalists will contact you to see what projects you have in hand, but until that day comes you need to get in touch with them. Journalists might also discover that you are a reliable supplier of quotes, and invite you to contribute comments to articles: this way you get to spout off on your favorite topics.

If you are really hot stuff, you might be made the subject of a profile. Unless you are very confident, I'd avoid giving interviews over the telephone. Journalists are fallible, and sometimes comments and observations are reported wrongly, with dire consequences. One of the first magazine interviews I did was conducted by telephone. The result was a disaster. A busy journalist spoke to me about some work I'd done: I could sense his haste. In his rush he confused my client with a rival company, and I spent weeks patching up the rift that opened up between my upset client and myself. Try and do interviews via e-mail. This gives you time to think about your answers and avoid gaffs. Some journalists prefer to do interviews face-to-face, and you have no choice in the matter: but take it slowly, and don't be shy about supplementing your answers via e-mail after the interview.

Another possibility is to offer to write articles for the design press. Editors often welcome contributions from working designers. You have to be able to write, of course. Although a good copy editor can knock rough-edged prose into shape, editors usually prefer to commission someone whose prose doesn't need too much surgery. But if you have an insight into some aspect of design, suggest it to an editor.

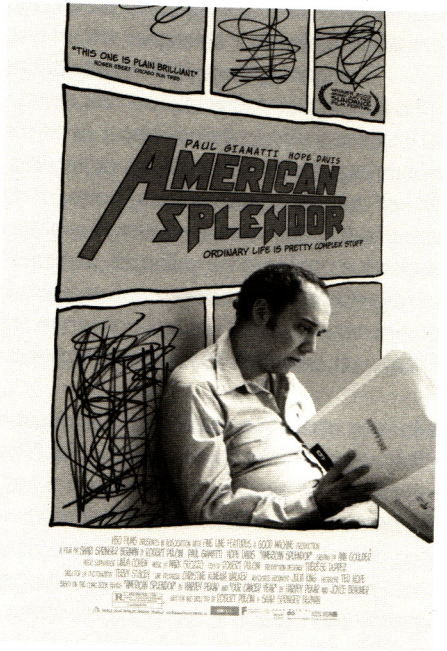
Designers need regular injections of exposure, but don't let it become a fixation. The benefits are fleeting and transitory at best. Think about acquiring a lasting reputation for good work done consistently over a number of years – and not over the past month. If you want to be famous, the first thing you have to do is stop wanting to be famous.

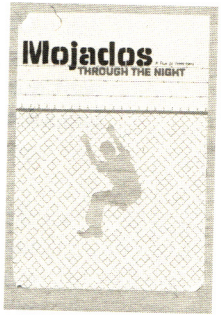
How to be a graphic designer, without losing your soul

Corey Holms

Corey Holms was born in 1970 and graduated from the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in 1996. Until recently he was an art director at Crew in Los Angeles, where he worked on posters, ad campaigns and print media to support major motion pictures. His clients included Warner Brothers, Universal, Imagine, Paramount, 20th Century Fox, Sony and HBO. Before Concept Arts, he worked for Sapient Corporation on websites for a range of corporate clients. From 1996 to 1999 he worked at Frankfurt Balkind, where he designed the logo for the *Sopranos* television series, as well as poster designs for the Getty Museum. Since 1996, as well as holding down full-time employment, he has maintained a thriving freelance practice doing work for numerous clients in the fashion and architecture sectors. He currently resides in Brea, California, with his wife and twin daughters.

www.coreyholms.com





Designed by Corey Holms

Courtesy of Corey Holms

AS What inspired you to become a graphic designer? CH Record sleeves and comic books. I didn't have an art class in school after the fourth grade, including the first two years of college. But I was obsessive about collecting things that were designed. Then I started noticing that a lot of the things I was buying were done by the same people: The Designers Republic, Dave McKean, Bill Sienkiewicz, Neville Brody, Malcolm Garrett and many more.

After two years of college, I decided to try my hand at art. I drove out to CalArts to talk to someone about it and happened to meet Jeff Keedy, the then director of the design program at the school. I was interested in doing some form of fine arts that involved typography. Keedy said that design was the only program that allowed students to take type classes. So I decided to be a designer at that point. I think I would have failed miserably as a fine artist, and it was rather fortuitous that design found me.

Do you look back on aspects of your education that didn't seem important at the time, but which now appear important? Many: I wish I had paid more attention in my classes overall, but specifically to my type design class (taught to us through calligraphy, which I thought was a waste of time), and design history, where I slept through several of the classes. I think that it is incredibly important to understand the history of design, otherwise you make glaring errors in your choice of typefaces. I have seen so many designers choose inaccurate or inappropriate typefaces for projects because they have no knowledge of what the connotations are. At one company I worked, a designer consistently chose 1930s typefaces for horror movies. For every horror presentation, there would be a selection of posters that looked like they were designed for the Orient Express, and the designer never understood why the typefaces were wrong.

You worked for a big design company, and yet managed to do personal projects. Can you talk about this? When you work for a big design company, there are often fewer chances for personal vision than if you work in a small shop. The personal projects are a way for me to see a project from inception to hand-off all on my own. It keeps me honest, if you know what I mean. It would be very easy to lose some skills that aren't used in the day job (like typesetting), and I do it partially for the experience.

I also do it because I love design. I can't stop doing design (much to the chagrin of my wife). I stay up late at nights on the sofa with a bad movie playing, while I work on a typeface, or on a self-initiated project. I find that a day job doesn't afford me the opportunities to do everything I want (like type design, or experimentation with forms), so I do it on my own time after everyone has gone to sleep.

What are the advantages of working for big studios? For me, it's primarily security. Although the advice I get from all of my design friends is to set up my own studio, I have a family to take care of and the thought of the price of major surgery, or missing a mortgage payment absolutely terrifies me. It's the main reason I stayed at a large agency. I got a regular salary, paid vacation and health insurance (among other benefits). I could never take a vacation if I worked for myself, and my nerves would be a mess.

I am a very bad businessman, so I need someone to take care of that aspect of the job for me. To run your own studio you need to be a great designer, an account executive and an accountant. I struggle enough with being a designer; I can't do the other two. Another advantage in working for a large agency is the clientele. I'd never have got to work for so many wonderful clients if it had not been for the safety and the peace of mind they get from the corporate machine.

You worked for an astonishing array of clients. Were you able to pick and choose the jobs that came in? Unless there is a real issue with either the project or the client, I work on what is assigned to me. There have been occasions where a client is not appreciative of the work I do, so it was decided to take me off that account and for me to concentrate on another account where the client likes what I do. But beyond that, it's pretty much whatever is in the shop at the moment.

Since I am not financially independent, the day job has afforded me the opportunity to choose projects that are the most rewarding to me, in my private practice. Of course there are sacrifices that must be made – the private practice gets nowhere close to the amount of time it deserves, but that's a concession I regrettably have to make. Hopefully, in the future the two schedules will reach a state of equilibrium, but for now that's not an attainable goal.

How do you approach jobs that on the surface appear to offer little scope for creative input? Sometimes those are the most interesting. I know that sounds like a rehearsed answer, but it's true. When given complete free rein, I tend to run around in circles for quite a while before settling into the ideas I wish to pursue. But with limited creative scope, you can sometimes really get into the details. I'll try to set little goals for myself like custom-kerning an entire document, so that at the very least the type will be perfect.

Recently I designed a brochure that needed to have a French WWII feel to it (but was very restrictive design-wise), so I researched the type of the period and made certain to use only historically accurate typefaces and typographic details. It was incredible fun, and I learned some lessons that I can't wait to use on an appropriate personal project. I think the key lies in finding one special thing about the project and getting lost in that particular bit of minutiae. I'm not saying that every single job is like that, but you can find something in the majority of them.

What do you think about the current design scene? I am amazed by how quickly design cannibalizes itself. Since we live in a global culture, trends and influences spread much quicker than they used to. The current design scene assimilates 'new' within a matter of weeks, and spits it out on a commercial level six months later. I don't know if this is a good or a bad thing. But I'm interested in seeing how this affects design ten years from now. Just in the period since the internet has come to prominence, there has been a profound change in the way designers work, communicate and source inspiration.

There are designers who currently make their living designing things for other designers to consume. I cannot think of another service industry that has its own sub-industry catering to itself. There aren't chefs that only cook for other chefs – and before you say it's because that's a non-creative industry, what about architecture? I can't think of any architects who design only for other architects. But designers do.

Who inspires you? Wim Crouwel, Peter Saville, Michael Place, Otl Aicher and lots of random little things I'll see through the day. I carry a camera with me everywhere I go, and I'm always taking pictures. There are times when I see a color combination that I know I won't be able to remember, so the camera is handy for all sorts of cataloguing. I find things all the time that are inspirational. I've recently started a series of posters that are based on jpegs that I saved to my hard drive, but somehow have become corrupted. They're beautiful shifted color grids that have inspired me to figure out the pattern and try to replicate it in Illustrator. I guess everyday stuff inspires me as well.

I found a discarded paper lying in the gutter the other day. Other bits of trash were laid over the top of it, cropping it in the most interesting way. It was completely eye-catching. It pissed off everyone I was with, but I got my camera out and stepped into the street to get the angle I wanted.

What do you say to a young designer starting out today? Pay attention. Honestly, I think that's the best advice I was ever given. Just stop talking, and start watching and listening. I was very arrogant coming out of school, and missed out on a lot of great opportunities because of it. I could have accomplished so much more if I wasn't so concerned about trying to convince people that I was always right and had the best solution (and a good chunk of the time, you'll find that you aren't correct). I'm not saying you should let go of your ideas, I'm just saying you should listen to the comments that others are making.