

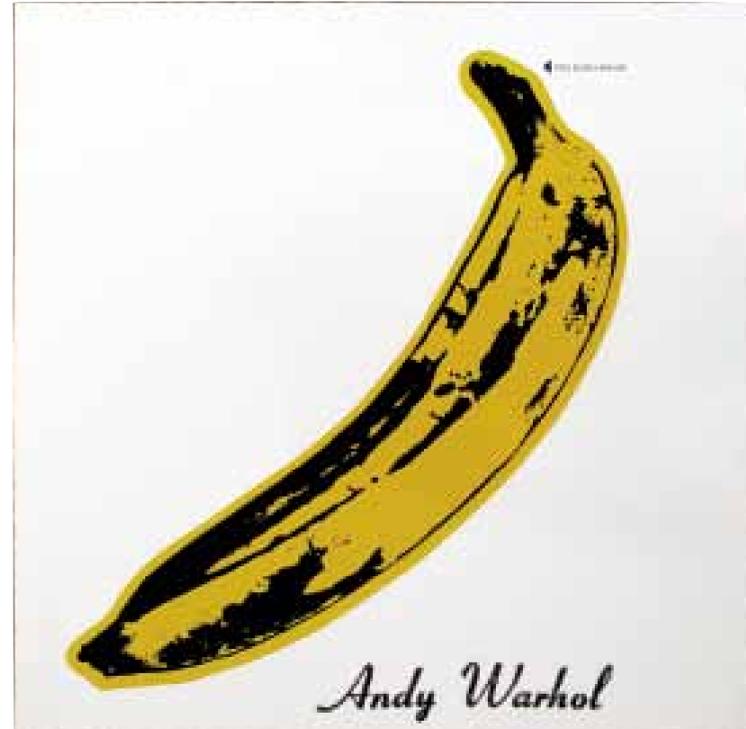
A Sticker Geek's Story

DB Burkeman

Stickers are a sort of timeline linking the different eras of my life. Early on there was a self-destructive period of only caring about rock 'n' roll and drugs, then there was skateboarding and DJing, and now I have a family. This book started as a hobby, but it ended up becoming an all-consuming, obsessive labor of love. I love this collection of stickers for their graphic design and their connection to the different scenes I've been a part of and that have spawned and influenced my artist heroes. In 2002, I had one of those *oh-now-I-get-it* moments after seeing an issue of *Tokion* magazine in which founder and editor Adam Glickman revealed how the things I had fallen in love with since making America my home were all linked, like skate and punk on the West Coast, and graff and hip-hop on the East Coast. Things developed a little differently in the London punk scene, which I came up in. A lot of the people, like myself, who had been influenced by original punk had gone into the techno and club scenes because we could use the same DIY attitude and aesthetics. (Plus we couldn't rap.)

The very first music sticker I fell in love with was the banana on the Velvet Underground's debut album (it was probably 10 years later before I realized that *Andy Warhol* was the designer of the sleeve, not simply the name of the LP). I saw the record when, at the age of 14, I was politely asked to leave school in London, and since I was only barely literate my parents sent me to a weird progressive boarding school in Devon. (I ended up with a very skewed education and a premature introduction to sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll.) Most of the other students (delinquents) were older than me and had great record collections. I found out years later that the Velvet Underground record I had seen

was the first pressing. It included an extra sticker because the band had been sued by a Warhol star, Eric Emerson, over the back cover photo of the band standing in front of a wall onto which an image of Emerson had been projected upside down. They airbrushed him out of the next pressing, but rather than destroy the originals, they slapped a fat sticker over him and gave those out as promos. A pristine one is now worth a small fortune. I also remember the thrill I got from opening Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* and *Wish You Were Here*—both of



which came with beautiful stickers designed by the hugely influential British design group, Hipgnosis. Even against advice, I always stuck stuff on my treasured belongings. At 15, I cut up a rare 60's acid poster and glued it onto my kick drum, ruining both the poster and the sound of the drum.



Sex Pistols, 1976, previously unpublished photograph by DB.

Around the same time I bought The Glastonbury Festival live triple album, *Revelations: Glastonbury Fayre*, mostly because of the incredible packaging and design. And, when home in London for the holidays, I went to a venue called the Roundhouse on Sundays—much to my mother's concern—on the chance that the guy who did the crazy psychedelic light shows might be there. While working on this book, I stumbled across *Reasons to be Cheerful* by Paul Gorman in a second-hand bookshop. Gorman's book details the life, work, and (premature) death of the British graphic designer Barney Bubbles. I can't describe the goose bumps I got as I turned each page and discovered that this was the guy who had been inspiring me visually from the age of 13. I had already started to work on a Stiff Records page for the book, but had no idea that all those sleeves, posters, and stickers were by Bubbles, as he never put his name to them. He also did the *Glastonbury* album and those light shows at the Roundhouse! (Thank you Paul Gorman.)

When I dropped out of school at 16 (with barely any education and absolutely no qualifications), I had naive but high aspirations of being a photographer. I had turned my back on music and design by "educated" artists, and had become seduced by punk rock's DIY ethos. (I do, however, have to admit

an embarrassing taste for the stickers of a band that are the very antitheses of punk: the Grateful Dead. I really hated their music, but couldn't resist the artwork by Mouse and Kelley, and the late, great Rick Griffin.) I took lots of photos of the punk bands I loved, but typically never did anything with them. Sadly, the music—and particularly the company I was attracted to—led me to a few years of heroin addiction.

Drugs and photography lured me to New York City for one year in 1979, but photography didn't really pan out, so I got a part-time job as the token English punk at Bleecker Bob's. As payment each week I used to take one of each new 7-inch single along with any stickers that were left by bands and labels. By nights I pretty much lived at Max's Kansas City or CBGB's (which had more stickers on all its surfaces than anyplace I've ever seen). New York was pretty nuts back then. The city was officially bankrupt, there were rolling blackouts, and the garbage trucks were on strike so huge mountains of rotting rubbish would pile up 10 feet high. I would wander around downtown and marvel at the decay—and what was about to be called *street art*. There were remains of a wheat paste campaign everywhere: PUNK IS COMING (see page 36). And an artist named Richard Hambleton was just about to begin his now famous "Shadow Man" series of men-

acing figures brush painted directly onto buildings, which would disturb an already pretty freaked out city even more. Hambleton stuck up a precursor to that series, a life-size self-portrait, in Times Square in 1980. All of this chaos and darkness fit my mental and emotional state perfectly.

At the time I considered the way I was living to be as cool as it gets, shooting smack in the dressing room of Max's with Johnny Thunders, or having Nico desperately banging on my door at the Chelsea Hotel, wanting to buy drugs. Now I find it very sad, really. Just like the people I knew then, very few stickers made it out alive. Some important ones that did were influential to me later on, including Stiff Records's classic slogan (see below and Deep poster page 13). Another favorite is Johnny Thunders and the Heartbreakers's "LAMF" (Like a Mother Fucker) from 1977—check out the drips! There was another sticker that came before "LAMF," "DTK" (Down To Kill), but it has disappeared in the mists of time.

Also that year, every time I got into the backseat of a cab I noticed that it had been hit with a silver foil sticker that read NEON LEON'S RAINBOW EXPRESS in orange lettering. It made me nuts that anyone was able to take so many cabs just to promote themselves in such a blanket blitz way. Gyda





Gash, former girlfriend of Dead Boys's guitarist Cheetah Chrome, gave me the story on this 30-year-old mystery. "Allegedly Leon was a pimp," she recalled, "he gave all the girls he was running his stickers and they went up and down the city hitting the taxis."

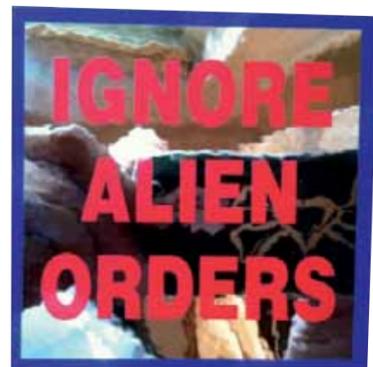
Stewart Stewart, the man behind the infamous "Why Not?" stickers, cleared up another mystery. "With what was going on in the world," Stewart told me, "everybody was complaining and asking 'Why?' when in fact, the question should have been, 'Why not?' My caricature was created by Ed Wexler, a college student who later became a major animator. There were close to 100,000 stickers plastered all over the five boroughs—they were on the doors of commodes in some of the city's best restaurants. Some made it



to London, Paris, Barcelona, and Tel Aviv." In 1982, Stewart Stewart was arrested by the anti-vandal squad while hitting a subway car. Even the arresting officers and prosecuting judge asked for autographed stickers.

Sometimes it's because images have been appropriated so often that the origin is lost. Mos Def was the first artist I'd seen appropriate the Run-DMC logo. Sometime around 2007, though, it hit the zeitgeist (see page 31). I'm not sure the people using it even know what they are ripping off. I worked at Profile Records (Run-DMC's label) from 1991 to 1997, so I thought I was in a position to find out who designed the original. Gary Pini (the former vice president of Profile) suggested I reach out to the designer Janet Perr, as she had done the sleeve for *Raising Hell*, the album that the single *My Adidas* is on, which is what most people associate the logo with. But Janet could not remember designing it. Others have suggested it was HAZE, Rick Rubin, or the group with Russell Simmons. Turns out, it was actually designed for *King Of Rock*, the album prior to the sleeve Perr designed—and Gary later remembered it was done by Fourth and Broadway, the British label that licensed the first two Run-DMC albums from Profile.

If you've ever wondered about the "Ignore Alien Orders" sticker on Joe Strummer's guitar in The Clash video for *Rock The Casbah*, well, I figured it out. By Googling the three words (what did we do before Google!) I found a site giving away free "Ignore Alien Orders" stickers. Curious, I emailed the site and ended up in contact with a very cool 74-year-old gentleman named Jon Sagen, who wrote, "In the 1960s I was in a band called West. Bob Claire, our arranger, gave me an 'Ignore Alien Orders' sticker that his brother Ted had made. Bright red words printed on throbbing green Mylar. Ted and a friend were on a backpacking journey before going into the Army. They found an enamel sign that read STAY ON THE TRAIL. Orders to be obeyed. So they created an enameled sign that read IGNORE ALIEN ORDERS and bolted it beneath the other sign. After he returned home unharmed from the Army, Ted made eye-popping silkscreened stickers with that phrase. By 1970 I had lost touch



with Ted and Bob, so I started printing the stickers. I have had the joy of passing on at least 3,000 of them, all over the globe." He was less clear on how Strummer got the sticker, but it's a great story about how culture is spread—especially pre-Internet.

I definitely had a sense that culture was spread in this way while I was growing up, in 1960s London. My mom always had interesting American friends. One of them came over from LA with a couple of the first generation of commercially produced skateboards and I learned to "ride" (or, go down a hill without falling off) before I'd seen another skater on the streets—or even a film of one. Years later, after officially giving up drugs and the fantasy of being a photographer, I felt like I'd been given a second chance at life and was filled with a new unstoppable energy. In '82 skateboarding was really taking off in London and I started to skate where and whenever I could, collecting the new, eye-popping stickers that were available at the hangout and shop Slam City Skates, below the punk record shop Rough Trade. I would always try to get doubles and would squirrel away the second, unused sticker. I was also very fortunate and started working full time as a DJ.

In '88, on a wave of acid house, I headed back to NYC with a couple of sticker-covered boxes of records and fell in love with the energy of the city, but quickly realized that these hip clubs where I was playing were not going to give me any kind of life if I wanted to live on more than pizza everyday. So by 1990 I was throwing club nights and



raves and making stickers to promote them. (I have to give props to Freshjive owner and designer, Rick Klotz, whose designs were my inspiration). NYC was awash in graffiti, but I didn't know any writers and couldn't read most of it, so it was just something I liked but never truly embraced—it felt like a very closed-off subculture to me.



The moment of my graff/street art epiphany came in 1990, when I first saw the giant roller tags and then the photocopied sheets of Cost and Revs. With statements like COST FUCKED MADONNA, I was hooked. So inspired, I got up the courage to promote our outlaw party, Deep, by sticking up fly-posters around lower Manhattan and Brooklyn.



What is it about stickers that some people find so intriguing, while others (the majority) either don't notice them or just think of them as stuck up pieces of crap? For me the fascination started at such a young age I don't remember how old I was. I fiended for the stickers that came in bubble gum cards. My mom tells me that when the supermarket cashier gave her the Green Shield sticky

stamps, I was known to throw a temper tantrum if I couldn't have them. I've watched kids, including my own Max and Eve, go bonkers over stickers. It's certainly a child-like (some would say childish) attraction, but for some of us it never goes away. I feel that the people who love stickers think of them as tiny, portable works of art. At first I thought it was just geeky OCD types like myself that were into stickers, but I've found so many different kinds of people with sticker collections and stories—even some of the artists I'm in awe of.

I reached out to the Buzzcocks via their MySpace page, not really expecting a reply. To my surprise a couple of the original band members got back to me and put me in touch with Malcolm Garrett, their original designer, who in turn was interested and helpful. When I asked Ryan McGinness if he would let me reprint one of his classic stickers for the peel-off section of the book he offered to create something entirely new for the section explaining, "I really like the idea of the book as a time capsule, and if you didn't get the sticker back then and hang on to it, well then, too bad. And, by not reissuing the stickers, you honor those who *did* get the stickers then and hung on to them." Now this project was really rolling and I asked one

of my all-time favorite bands, Radiohead, and Stanley Donwood, their artist, if they'd like to be involved. "Yes sure," Donwood emailed, "I like stickers. I've made a lot over the years, my favorite said: I THINK OF MY GENITALS MORE OFTEN THAN MY HANDS BUT USE THEM FAR LESS." It's reactions and involvement from people like these that has made this project so rewarding and fun.

It has also been an amazing couple of years of scouring the streets for stickers. It's been a great way for me to hang out and have fun with my son Max (aka "Eagle Eye," for his amazing ability to see a hard-to-spot-sticker—while we were visiting my dad in Soho, London, Max was the one who spotted a hand-drawn Anthony Lister.) Max—and kids in general, I think—are much more open to absorbing art in a profound way when it's on the street and not in a sterile gallery. Our routine was to head to a specific area of town, kitted-out with our tools—a sharp blade, baby powder to neutralize the glue, and baby wipes to clean the dog piss and other crap off our hands. Max would sometimes ask me if I thought the artists would mind us taking their stickers down. This question did bug my conscience sometimes, but I came to a peaceful place, thinking that the artists would probably be happy to know their stickers will last a lot longer in a book.

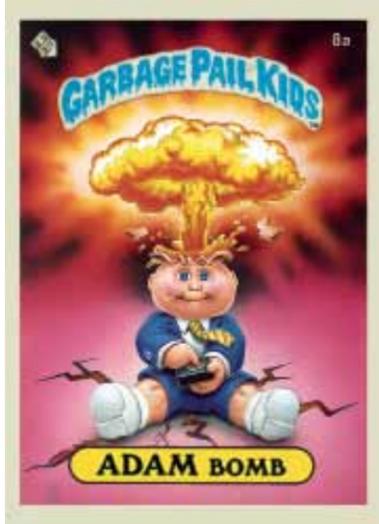
One of my favorite stickers from this project came in just as we were wrapping up. It was peeled from a lamppost by my wife Wini—and that's important because it was her first contribution to the book. I was touched



that she actually noticed a sticker in the street and brought it home. When I examined it, it surprised me again. As I picked at it, it started to come apart, and I realized that it was made up of five separate pieces—that took time and skill to make.



Researching the history of stickers has also been fun. It has become clear to me that most people in my world—those born in America, anyway—had their first warm and fuzzy feeling about stickers because of a company called Topps. Topps are the American sticker gods! Their “Wacky Packages” and “Garbage Pail Kids” set the standard for kids with warped senses of humor. They strike as the very first example of commercial logo and culture jamming.



I also found that street art has been around for a very long time. During the French Revolution, in the late eighteenth century, propaganda posters were stuck up in the streets, in order to hammer home the ideas of the revolution to the French public, portraying images of King Louis XVI as a drunken pig and of Marie Antoinette in sexually explicit positions. And when I met the incredible sticker artist Jeroen “Influenza” Jongeleen while he was in NYC for a group show at Chelsea’s Marianne Boesky Gallery, he told me about the German artist Kurt Schwitters, who began a project in the early 1920s called *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery* (what a brilliant name). Schwitters was also a sticker artist who put up red or white stickers around his hometown of Han-



nover that read ANNA BLUME, partly to communicate his sexual experiences. Anna Blume was a poetic name he used to refer to women as objects of desire. While walking in the East Village in 2008 I spotted a red vinyl sticker on a lamppost with a graphic of a girl’s face and the text, ANNA. Seeing it gave me chills, and made me super aware of what a cool and weird subculture stickers are.

It’s always appealed to me when an artist uses the medium of stickering as a way of dealing with personal issues: exorcising their inner demons and using the streets as their free therapist or confessional. Cost and Revs were the first guys I’d seen venting, but now I see it everywhere. One of my favorites is Kook. His short messages are tragic, funny, or desperate. (Kook, believe me, I’ve tried for nearly two years to get in touch. I even left a sticker for you at Gorilla Coffee, in response to your message, KOOK NEEDS A COFFEE.)



Another simple, yet interesting, example was brought to my attention by Rey Parla of the Inkheads. Once when we were talking about kids, he told me about this graffiti he’d seen that reads: PAPA LOVES BABY. I found out that sometimes it is written, PAPA LOVED BABY. What was the story here? One anonymous blogger wrote, “A terrible tragedy struck and Papa lost Baby...”. I also found several people who said that the phrase is actually a tag—one guy told me that the writer is an older graff guy who had changed his name, while others claim the writer is “a hot Asian chick from New Jersey.” I don’t even want to know anymore. I just love that three simple words can have such an effect.



Since sticker-printing technology has evolved, advertisers no longer have to deal with sloppy wheat paste. Even subway posters are now giant peel-off stickers, which has opened up creative possibilities to media companies. This new kind of vinyl

sticker poster has also spawned a new kind of artist—Poster Boy. During a Museum of Modern Art advertising campaign, in which 57 works from the museum’s permanent collection were reproduced on sticker paper and plastered around Brooklyn’s Atlantic-Pacific subway station, Poster Boy went to town rearranging the iconic works by sampling bits of the images and mashing them up, creating original collages. Poster Boy was quoted in a *New York Magazine* article as saying, “...as long as I did something to those advertisements and that saturation, it’s political. It’s anti-media, anti-established art world.”

With the brouhaha following Poster Boy’s exploits, and the vandalism laws that dog all of these artists, it’s totally understandable that graff writers keep a low profile. But it does make for a funny contradiction: They have this compulsion to write a made-up version of their name in as many places as possible, so the most amount of people will see it, yet they’re not able to tell people who they are. If the goal is saturation rather than finesse, BNE has achieved it. As far as tags go it seems like he’s the guy everyone loves to hate. If you’ve seen his name up around NYC, Tokyo, Prague, San Francisco, Milan, or Hong Kong, you know what I’m talking about. San Francisco mayor, Gavin Newsom, even offered



a reward to anyone that could help stop BNE. For some examples of finesse, Faust, Sure, Kosbe, and Overconsume are four guys that have really impressed me with their style and commitment. They are mutual fans, but other than Faust and Sure, who are best mates (and even write each others’ names), the four of them did not know each other until I reached out to all of them. I set up a meeting to talk to Faust, and coincidentally Kosbe called me back while I was on my way there—unbelievably, while on his way to meet Overconsume for the first time. I suggested we all meet for coffee.



Not really understanding how nervous these guys were about strangers, I tried to ease the obvious tension by flippantly joking about being an undercover cop, who in one fell swoop was going to clean up downtown. No one laughed.

It took almost an hour of me geeking out about stickers, and my love of TWIST, ESPO, and REAS for them to chill to the point of offering me loads of handmade stickers, and even—after an initial hesitation—of allowing Kosbe’s girlfriend to snap a picture of the historic moment these four princes of NYC street stickers got together for the first time.

Ironically, the same addictive personality that got me into so much trouble when I was young has given me the perfect personality to create this book. I obsessed over finding stickers I knew existed and hounded artists and writers. (Apologies to all if I was obnoxious in my relentlessness. I hope you are pleased with the final document.) I’ve worked in music for most of

my adult life, either doing A&R for record labels or as a DJ. Curating—which is what I feel my partner in this project, Monica LoCascio, and I have done—is similar. Putting together a DJ set or a music compilation is about selecting bits of music and arranging them in an order that you *hope* people will enjoy. We had the same goal for this book. One incredible thing to me about this project is that of the hundreds and hundreds of artists, writers, and other sticker geeks we asked to contribute, only one person actually said no. None of us know why. Guess he’s just an asshole in an art lover’s suit.

DB Burkeman fell in love with stickers and street art at an early age via skateboarding and punk rock. He made a name for himself as DJ DB, DJing between his two homes in London and New York.

