

trance of savagery

by Jon
Bywater

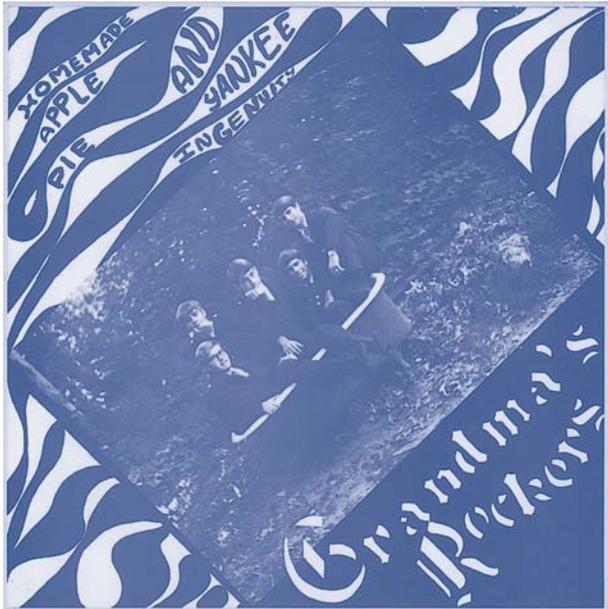
If I had to pick my favourite New Zealand record covers, I'd root for two of the **Axemen's** gatefolds, the **Clean's** first two EPs and the **Say Yes To Apes** double album. In this exhibition record covers have to stand on their own as items of purely visual interest. But the look of these covers is not all I'm basing my judgment on. As a fan of the music, the question I've answered, I suspect, has flicked the words into another order: *What are the covers of my favourite New Zealand records?* I'm not entirely clear what is fudged in this semantic sleight. These are not necessarily my all-time-Nick-Hornsby's-*High-Fidelity* favourite New Zealand records – I haven't let the cover's consideration drop out altogether – but they are records I really like. That's the thing I can't get away from. When I bring my eyes to the record crate, the idea of 'good design' in some sense abstracted from the music feels like a blunt knife, a spanner the wrong size.

I don't need to go into what these records sound like though, to show how the spirit they brim with found the kind of visual expression it did in the early 80s in a local context. Close to the surface is the relationship between what a record cover looks like, and the ethos and conditions of possibility the record emerges from, that is part of any album cover.

Next to the professionally designed covers in The Designers Republic **Sound Design** show, these conspicuously homemade looking items may not seem the best choices to represent design in Aotearoa. The fibre-tip cartoon of the **Clean**, the typewriter blat of the **Axemen**, is taken to its peak of pencil-case-casual by **Say Yes To Apes**, whose vivid marker and biro inscriptions have no pretensions at all to mimicking higher scale production values. For these bands, however, this homemade quality was a point of pride. Buried in the three-ways-up, hand-doodled notes on the back of the **Clean's** second EP, *Sounds Great* it says:

**"ALL SONGS – written! and performed by the Clean ...
cover and label by us to!!!"**

The puppyish over-punctuation sets the record against a particular moment in local culture, one that borrows from and shares with first the UK, then the world, the youth cultural impact of 70s punk rock. The early 80s independent releases I've singled out share an historical moment downstream from punk, as the work of post-punk



or so-called 'DIY' bands.¹ In most cultures for most of history we can presume that music has been made by people for themselves. In 1982, however, when the **Clean** made their boast, 'do it yourself' was established as an explicit ideology in Western rock music, recorded in the still reigning historical narrative: punk was about musicians seizing the means of production to return music to authenticity, giving rise to the freedoms of the DIY era.

The English band the **Desperate Bicycles** were pioneers of DIY. They sang about the need to make music for yourself and advertised the means they used to release their own records. Their contemporaries the **TV Personalities** printed the costs of making their single *Where's Bill Grundy Now?* on the back of the sleeve, and the Bicycles proselytised in their lyrics: "It was easy/it was cheap/go and do it!"

Jamie Reid's famous **Sex Pistols** typography, a key part of punk's visual identity, was the work of a professional designer and produced by a large record company. Appearing rough and spontaneous, Reid employed the sinister implications of ransom notes and the radical chic of *Lettrisme*². The **Clean** and the **Axemen's** similar raw collage work with the young Flying Nun also drew on this oppositional spirit. Being DIY, though, their cover designs appear handmade due to a mixture of political conviction and simple exigency. It is likely that the earliest direct precedents³ would have been completely unknown to them at the time: the thrifty teen improvisation of hand-collaged, lettraset, typewritten, pen-drawn covers by an earlier generation of punks, some of the first full album private releases by US garage bands of the '60s – obscure collectors items like the **Bachs**, **All Of Thus**, **Grandma's Rockers**, and **Nightshadow**.⁴

These techniques and materials along with screenprinting, rubber stamps and stencils are characteristic of worldwide late 70s/early '80s DIY look.⁵ Along with the matching sounds of second hand keyboards and the tape hum of cheap recording equipment, the aesthetic comes with the means suitable to small production runs and low budgets. However, my favourites aren't typical DIY covers by any means. Decorated with words as much as with images, often handwritten and hand drawn, there's something unusually dense and verbal about them, perhaps peculiar to New Zealand.

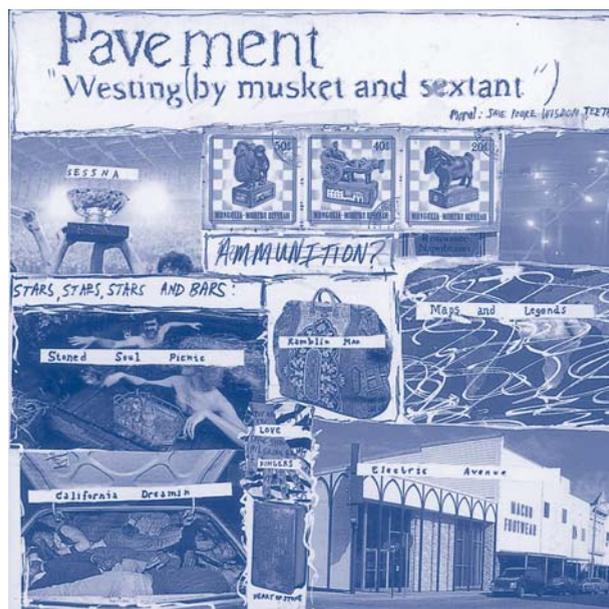
The closest British DIY-era examples to these New Zealand covers

are some of the early **Fall** album covers (for *Step Forward*) and the backs of **Swell Maps** singles (for *Rough Trade*). The **Fall's** *Hex Enduction Hour*, for example, has a handwritten track listing and is decorated with words and phrases that riff on the lyrics, newspaper headlines and captions.⁶ Various lettered, they make a notepad-cum-painting. The **Fall** were influential in Aotearoa: the inscription “2hrs 2hrs 2hrs 2hrs 2hrs 2hrs” on the **Axemen's** *A Scar Is Born* alludes to the **Fall's** “(Ihr) (Ihr) (Ihr)” from *Hex Enduction Hour*. The connection is made explicit by the song *Mark E. Smith—AH!* about the **Fall's** leader, who they let us know is “a guy [they] respected”. (Incidentally, **Chris Knox**, who drew the front cover of *Boodle, Boodle, Boodle*, did a cover for the New Zealand-only **Fall** record *Fall In A Hole*).

These musicians are music fans, and like high schoolers decorating their bags and pencil cases, they cover their albums in references to things they identify with. The title of **William Burroughs's** *So Who Owns Death TV?*⁷ appears enigmatically on the spine of *The Decline and Fall of...*, for example, and even **Say Yes To Apes's** record label, TV Eye, is named for the Stooges song. Like the more obvious reference to *A Star Is Born* in *A Scar Is Born*, the **Axemen's** other double album title *Three Virgins, Three Visions, Three Versions* makes an elaborate joke on the **Yoko Ono & John Lennon** LP *Two Virgins*.

The catalogue numbers for the **Clean's** *Sounds Great* (Flying Nun GOOD 001) and the **Axemen's** *A Scar...* (WHAT 004), amongst many similar gags, **Say Yes To Apes** offering an alternate title for *The Decline And Fall...* — *Trance of Savagery* by **Max and the Puffins**— and the **Axemen** joking ‘as seen on TV’, all seem somehow reminiscent of ‘Hi Mum’ placards on TV sports coverage: This wave of DIY bands play with the conventions of commercial packaging intoxicated with the novelty of appearing in the medium at all.⁸

Not much of this mode of cover design survives. In innumerable ways, the conditions of possibility have shifted. Not pressed in New Zealand since 1987, LPs have since become a boutique format rather than the simplest way to publish recordings. Since the ‘alternative music’ boom of the 90s, the format itself, as well as the handmade look of DIY, can read as a homage to the punk/post-punk tradition. In this period Sony used a handwriting font called Grunge and mocked up blurry snapshots for their album design. The handmade



look became part of a deliberate modesty that went with intentionally 'lo-fi' recording strategies and the self-deprecating lyrics of 'losercore'. Interestingly, the early Flying Nun catalogue achieved an international renown for its DIY ethos, as did a '90s home of the New Zealand underground, Xpressway. The American band **Pavement** made an explicit homage on the cover of their *Westing (By Musket and Sextant)* LP (Big Cat, 1993) by including the Xpressway release *Do The Void* by the **Terminals** amongst various song titles in a Fall-esque collage.

Designing covers for compact disc is a different activity in many respects than for vinyl. Besides the obvious effects of medium and scale, social and political change has meant that in the entrepreneurial 90s an independent label like KOG, 'the new Flying Nun' as they have been referred to, are more inclined to get on with the business of selling recordings. Many of KOG's releases are designed to look part of a label family, reworking motifs for brand consistency. Their common threads are the use of scientific diagrams out of context, blended with images of the natural, local world. The emphasis on science and technology is typical of international electronic music's presentation.⁹ Most obviously it reflects the technology used for making the music, which also makes computer-aided design and technologically processed images appropriate. At KOG, a co-founder of the label, **Pat Hammond**, and DJ and associate **Fiona Jack** have shared the majority of the design work, so despite the crisply finished design, it represents a contemporary form of DIY. The range of techniques available to people working on this scale has simply increased.

In the wake of this history, recent examples of the handcrafted look appear quoted or knowing. They can represent the handmade as art object, as collectable.¹⁰ **Lovely Midget's** beautiful unique covers for a Pink Air release, for example, use the appeal of the rare and the handmade as a more or less exclusive alternative to the mass-produced.

Despite the fact that Photoshop is a more popular art school subject than screen printing these days, painting and drawing continues. **Chris Knox**, one of the people here whose work would sustain its own show, has kept drawing from the front

cover for *Boodle, Boodle, Boodle* to date, for his band the **Tall Dwarves** and for solo work. Like **Jad Fair** of American punk act **Half Japanese**, **Chris Knox** is a musician-artist who has maintained the original punk impetus; and like American folk eccentric **Michael Hurley**, also a cartoonist-musician.¹¹ Other prominent local musician artists include **David Mitchell** (**Goblin Mix, 3ds**), **Michael Morley** (**Dead C, Gate**) and **Violet Faigan** (**Space Dust**). The painter and musician **Kim Pieters** has done covers for several bands, amongst them the **Kiwi Animal**, the **Terminals** and her own **Dadamah**. She is now using computers to produce innovative CD packaging designs for Metonymic, the post-Xpressway improvisation label, which releases music by her combos **Sleep, Rain** and **Flies Inside The Sun**.

Album designers are perhaps easier to name in cases like these where they are famous for something else, especially art. While many 50s and 60s covers were designed anonymously, visual artists were usually credited.¹² In the early 70s for instance the work of **René Magritte** was used by **Jeff Beck** and by **The Rascals**, and M.C. Escher's images by **Mott the Hoople** and **Beaver & Krause**; in Aotearoa the **Human Instinct** likewise found a fittingly psychedelic expression in the magic realism of **Michael Smither's "Stoned Guitar"**. Well known artist **Dick Frizzell** designed covers for **Corben Simpson**, **Serenity** and others. Since then, contemporary artists **Ronnie van Hout** and **Saskia Leek** have made covers for the **Pin Group** and other early Flying Nun bands, and for **Space Dust**, **Chris Heazlewood** and **Constant Pain**, respectively.

It's not irrelevant either that Leek and van Hout both have other ties to the music scene. It's important to note a straightforward description of the conditions of production here: Like many areas of commercial design, album cover design is shaped by the scale of the industry in Aotearoa and the market that it operates in. Most simply, there's little room for complete specialisation. The majority of the covers in this show were devised by musicians or their friends.

What is so close to the surface in the DIY – the affiliations and aspirations of the musicians – is a raw version of what even a

designer for hire might work with. Aesthetics, visual and aural, reflect ethos. Album cover design will often reflect the same attitudes and values as the music. A slick, no nonsense, professional musician might in a slick, no nonsense, professional way hand over the design of their album cover to a slick, professional designer. A band like the **Axemen** who are 'playing with [them]selves, working with what [they've] got' will likewise do the design themselves. This is as true for the **Pink Flamingoes**' defiantly sexist 80s vision of glamour as it is for the **Clean's** slightly shy, shaggy haired underground pop appeal. The sound of the records, too, the squalling scrabble and rattling dub of the **Axemen** and the exposed and gentle electric folk of **Say Yes To Apes**, both make sense of their visual accompaniment. Trying to separate the look and everything else, I find that they've bonded, like an old price tag on the cardboard. Try and peel it away and a bit of the cover comes with it.

Thanks to Andrew Manning, Ron Moore, Violet Faigan, Duane Zarakov, Saskia Leek, Stuart Page, Bob Cardy, Fiona Jack, Anna Miles and everyone else who helped with information or discussion.

¹ The history of DIY music in Aotearoa is outlined in the chapters "The Sounds of the South" and "The Cult of Cult" of John Dix's *Stranded In Paradise*, Paradise Publications, Wellington, 1988, pp.282-293, pp.294-301.

² The situationist content of the Sex Pistols' work is famously expounded by Greil Marcus in *Lipstick Traces*, Harvard Press, Cambridge MA, 1989.

³ Indirectly, of course, the handmade aesthetic has precursors in the rock-art personalism of classic 60s hand-drawn covers like Bubble Puppy (International Artists) and in the 70s Gong (Virgin) and, especially in the case of the Axemen, the 'reefer-wave optics' of George Clinton's Funkadelic. Further back, kiddie and western records, especially, had 'handwriting' covers in the form of personal message liner notes (typically in the form of 'letter to the fans').

⁴ Coincidentally the Grandma's Rockers LP pictures the band sitting fully

clothed in a bath, just as the Clean's first EP does. The album title is DIY proud: *Homemade Apple Pie and Yankee Ingenuity*.

⁵ The leading authority on the DIY phenomenon internationally is Chuck Warner, whose analysis of the phenomenon can be read at www.hyped2death.com/mestheticsisms.html.

⁶ The Fall's *Hex Enduction Hour* was released in Aotearoa by Gap Records under licence. The band's relative popularity here is legendary, New Zealand being the first country in which the band made the top ten with *Totally Wired* in 1981, their first Top 20 record anywhere.

⁷ W.S. Burroughs with Claude Pelieu and Carl Weissner, Beach Books, San Francisco, 1967.

⁸ In ways that can't be done justice here, the Axemen, for example, took up every opportunity to represent themselves in pop music media (posters, stickers, badges, stage uniforms) apart from album covers. (Not to mention record labels and any message pressed into the inner groove of the record itself!)

⁹ This phenomenon has been explored by British music writer Simon Reynolds. See for instance "Ecstasy Is a Science: Techno-Romanticism" in *Stars Don't Stand Still In The Sky: Music and Myth*, edited by Karen Kelly and Evelyn McDonnell, Routledge, London, 1999, pp.198-205.

¹⁰ The use of lathe cut records made at Peter King's Geraldine home business, as documented by Crawlspace Records' *Fit For Kings* compilations, reflects a general tendency towards the artefactual aura of the limited edition. That megastars the Beastie Boys have had records made by King is an exceptional case in point.

¹¹ The comix influence on Knox's work is clear from the Zap-esque illuminations of the Toy Love album's inner sleeve. Cartoon in album design go back to the first 'albums', the 78 bound sets from the 1930s. Famous comix artists who have worked on album covers include Rick Griffin (for the Grateful Dead and Quicksilver Messenger Service), Robert Crumb (Big Brother & the Holding Company, Yazoo reissues) and Jack Davis. In the punk era Raymond Pettibon (for Black Flag) is notable (his brother is the group's bass guitarist).

¹² Some of the most famous artists who have been commissioned to do album cover design are Salvador Dali for Jackie Gleason, Andy Warhol for the Rolling Stones, the Rev. Howard Finster for Talking Heads, Robert Longo, Robert Williams and Jean-Michel Basquiat.

