

BITS & BEATS

By Joan Manuel Jubany*

An analogy could be made between the revolution fuelled by the sampler in the world of so-called dance music, and the revolution in graphic design sparked by the Macintosh personal computer. In both cases, accessible technology is used from the home and without the years, the best dance music using technology which does not require the ability to play a musical instrument or the capacity to read a musical score. The sampler- whose principle function is the extraction and memorisation of a sound or sound fragment, which is later manipulated to produce something partially or entirely new – is the reflection of the invention of the personal computer. Both allow bits of reality to be captured, stored and manipulated. With the sampler, sounds can be taken directly from the surface of a vinyl record or a compact disk, or from any other type of recording (street noises, human voices, etc.). The personal computer uses a scanner to copy images or type straight from the printed surface. Many different programmes may be used to manipulate the images or text. In both cases the creative limits are only determined by the ability of the person who is sitting in front of the keyboard. The main difference between these two processes, the audio and the visual, is found, perhaps, in the external projection of the results obtained. The commercialisation of a musical idea requires a longer, more arduous journey, than that of graphic design. A computer assisted graphic design can become printed material in a matter of hours.

Of all the different mediums through which graphic art takes on form and meaning (books, magazines, newspapers, posters, etc.) the flyer always seems to be at the forefront. Thanks to its ease, speed and economy, it can be singled out as the most dynamic, spontaneous and changing form of expression in graphic design,.....

And this unique quality of constant change has a lot to do with the innovative talent of dance music assisted partially or wholly by a sampler. The unstoppable dance floor rhythms generate styles, phenomena, and tendencies that can be seen in other fields of creative art such as fashion or advertising, but only in the flyer does it find its equal in speed and energy. This is because the flyer translates into ink and paper the immaterial language of the melodies and the rhythms of the clubs.

Flyers are the little brothers of a large family of mediums used for graphic inventiveness. Their big brothers are corporate image and graphic design in the publishing world. You only have to remember how, up to now, the most reputable awards in the sector continue to ignore the existence of this little brother. Of course, this lack of institutional recognition does not worry the creators. On many occasions they see flyers as a form of diversion; a game where they can try out new things. Because of the spontaneity and a lack of inhibition, flyers sometimes become the most interesting part of a graphic artist's production.

One could attempt to organise their personal collection of flyers into falsely absolute categories such as "text", "psychedelic" or "cyber". But sooner or later, a rebellious exception would defy any single category or apply to many: a flyer outstanding as "text", for a "psychedelic" treatment

of images, and, at the same time, for a very “cyber” combination of colours. The same happens with dance music. Classifications tend to fit something unknown into a determined context, but all this overuse of names and prefixes is only a desperate attempt to control the uncontrollable, to include something excluded. Getting rid of all the labels would not be a bad idea, allowing us to talk in simple terms, about what we like or do not like, what seems new or retro, what excites us or leaves us cold.

If we trace the aesthetic evolution of flyers, we find behind every new tendency an innovation in the hardware or software of Macintosh personal computers. Their commercialisation in 1984 completely changed the workflow in the graphic arts. A historic change comparable to the advent of variable typesetting. By designing a computer that was easy to manage, that smiles at you every time you switch it on and uses intuitive tools and language based on icons activated by a simple click of the mouse. Apple introduced a system which could be understood by anyone, thus substituting the complicated codes used in information technology. When club fever and the first flyers arrived in our country, the Macintosh was already in common use in the graphic artists’ studios. Precisely at the start of the 90s, Photoshop, a programme for manipulating images, became the common tool used by designers. A great number of flyers appeared which used the standard Photoshop options and filters. A good example of this is the filter which allows you to distort an image into a whirlpool of colours, something before unimaginable. In these first attempts, it seemed as though the application itself had made the decisions. As time went by, people learned to use these options not as an end in themselves, but rather as a way of arriving at an idea of their own.

Among the most important software innovations to have an impact on flyer design, we find Fontographer, a programme for designing and digitising new fonts, or typefaces. The arrival of more powerful computers with larger amounts of memory meant that designers could incorporate renders of very complicated images such as fractals and 3-D constructions and apply complex special effects. These new images reinterpreted, in the 90s, the sensorial apertures of 60’s psychedelia: synthetic landscapes in the era of virtual reality. The most elegant vision of this neo-psychedelic fever was prevalent in Javi Navarro’s flyers.

Along with the modernisation of technology came the idea that originality no longer exists. We perceive as original, something that has been reconceived with a different or previously unseen attitude or look. Therefore it is not very difficult to trace the influence certain designers have had and continue to have among the creators in our country. The work of Neville Brody (the art director of the British monthly magazine *The Face* in the 80’s) is a prime example. Brody made the giant leap in abandoning traditional photocomposition and the use of Letraset transfer types in favour of Macintosh personal computers. He was one of the first people to realize the possibilities the Mac offered in distorting type and combining images.

It was precisely one of Brody’s disciples, Swifty, who reinterpreted the typography and colour of one of the most brilliant chapters in the history of graphic design, the album covers of the Blue Note jazz label. Swifty became known thanks to the magazine *Straight No Chaser* and the corporate image of the British label *Talkin’ Loud* and *Mo’Wax*. Swifty’s style was taken up by

Barcelona's Charly Brown. Charly B's first flyers, splattered with his sharp sense of humour, should go down in history for laying the foundation of the "club culture" concept in our country. Rafamateo's first flyers take their reference point from Designers Republic (responsible for the image of the British Label Warp). With his impeccable recreation of futuristic Japanese iconography (all those signs and pictograms) combined with the austerity of the Helvetica typeface (standard in the Swiss design school and still today the perennial symbol of modernity), Rafamateo became known as "Terrordesigner" and proclaimed himself an "unofficial" member of the Designers Republic in Spain.

From California, the duo formed by Zuzana Licko and Rudy VanderLans launched the international design magazine *Emigre*, and in doing so they contributed to the definitive renovation of typefaces in the 90's. The multitude of new typefaces presented and commercialised from the pages of *Emigre* encapsulated an attitude which would find a faithful equivalent, from our country, in the flyers signed by Typeware. The members of Typeware created flyers filled with inventive typefaces, which they themselves had created, digitized, and commercialised under the name Garcia Fonts.

Finally, the name of the American David Carson who, from his position as art director of the magazine *Ray Gun*, questioned the basic tenets of design such as legibility, order and balance. The pages of *Ray Gun* seemed to represent graphically the communicative cacophony brought about by new technologies (faxes, mobile phones, modems, laptop computers, etc.). The omnipresence and simultaneity of this volume of information which assaults our senses, and the lack of enough space and time to analyse all this data, means that we live in the middle of a state of continuous noise made up of words and sounds, images and signs. A noise which Carson expressed through the chaos of his designs and which in similar terms, the members of Wild Group, the collective from Barcelona, applied to their flyers with a cinematographic sensibility.

Far from the noises of the world, some people have found in clubs an artificial paradise where they can forget that we are all a little older every day and that, fortunately or unfortunately, our childhood years have been left far behind. Nobody is surprised to find young people and not so young people on the dance floor armed with lollipops and wearing tight T-shirts. Some of the flyers of the versatile Sergio Ibañez, aka Cindy Kid, the youngest of the emerging creators, point to this return to the age of innocence. Heroes from comics and cartoons, illustrations from stories and photos taken from the family album give these flyers a unique charm.

Flyers definitely bring us close to the personal fixations of their authors. With the "cyber" aesthetic many insist on the glorification of technology. Fluorescent and metallic colours evoke the artificial intelligence of a world inhabited by machines. A complete futuristic imagination presented, in some cases, with a certain sobriety, and in others, with a notable taste for everything kitsch. The images of how the future was portrayed in the past have been recuperated: stills taken from science fiction films from the 50's and 60's, photos of all sorts of computers, robots and androids. Images from the conquest of space: rockets and unidentified flying objects, extraterrestrials and beings from other planets.

We could continue citing the names of other creators but we would always end up reaching the same place: the planet of the clubs, that stimulates the creativity of graphic artists, photographers, illustrators and all those who make memorable the invitation to live, love and dance.

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