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ALBUM ART Typography IN THE 1970s

The era that changed everything

When I visit one of my local record shops, be it Kops Records on Queen Street West or Sonic Boom on Spadina, I always find myself drawn to the racks of records from the 70s. Names like Gladys Knight, Led Zeppelin, and The Ramones jump off their 12 and 7-inch casings, but not just for the diverse stylings you know that they contain; the way the names are written start to tell their own story. Typography in album art in the 1970's defined the era in multiple ways, creating a visual identity for the decade that spanned multiple faces and moods. What the 70s cemented, having only been a passing idea before, was the idea that typography could, on its own, represent genre and feel. Because of this, graphic design in music would never be the same.

Typing Funky———

The first typographic movement is the one that is most prominently associated with the 1970s and has its origins in the funk, soul and R&B records of the era. This movement included most of the typographic aspects that scream "70s" as soon as they're seen: dramatic ligatures and swashes, tight letter spacing, bulbous letter shapes, bold flourishes and embellishments, and thick drop shadows (Fleck, 2020). A key factor in the recognizability of text from this movement comes from the use of *swashes*. *Swashes* are typographic flourishes added onto text, oftentimes in the form of a grossly exaggerated serif, ascender/descender, or tail. Though they date back as far as 1522 in the work of Ludovico Vicentino degli Arrighi (Dover, 1953), 70s swashes mostly derived from the work of Ed Benguiat at the International Type Corporation in New York City (Schwartz, 2006). Another important detail in 1970s album typography speaks to the reason for text at all; to sell records. For this reason, many albums in the 1970s would go as far as to feature a selection of or the entire album tracklist on the cover in a simple sans-serif. This was so that consumers would be able to connect the album with the song titles that they had heard on the radio (Kumer, 2020).

In many ways, this free-flowing lettering style represented the zeitgeist of the era. The decade immediately followed the "summer of love" in 1967, and represented a new dawn for individualism and unique thought and expression (Caroll, 2000). What is interesting about the 'groovy' 70s font category is that it stood as and has remained mostly a product of its time. Emma Kumer, a graphic designer who has done work for outlets including the Washington Post, compiled research to visualize typographic trends on album covers throughout the years. Unlike type styles like digital or geometric, 'groovy' type peaked massively in the mid-1970s and has barely seen a resurgence since (Kumer, 2020). We can point to this as a potential reason for the text style's ubiquity with the seventies as a whole; it is confined to the era, whereas the sans-serifs seen in 1980s album design or the script of the 1960s has come back many times and in many different ways.

Due to its lack of a unique renaissance, this typographic style has really only been seen since the 1970s in work referencing the 1970s; nostalgic music, movies or literature. Its impact, however, is not to be diminished. Many of the most iconic wordmark logos of all time have emerged from this era, utilizing many of its key features. One artist in particular, Jim Parkinson, used many of the visual aspects associated with the 70s funk/R&B era to create some of the most iconic logos of all time (Middendorp, 2010), including *Esquire* and *Variety*.

KOOL & THE GANG
Spirit of the Boogie (1975)

70s FUNK ALBUM TYPOGRAPHY

1. Dramatic ligatures & Swatches
2. Tight letter spacing & Bulbous letters
3. Tracklist on the album cover
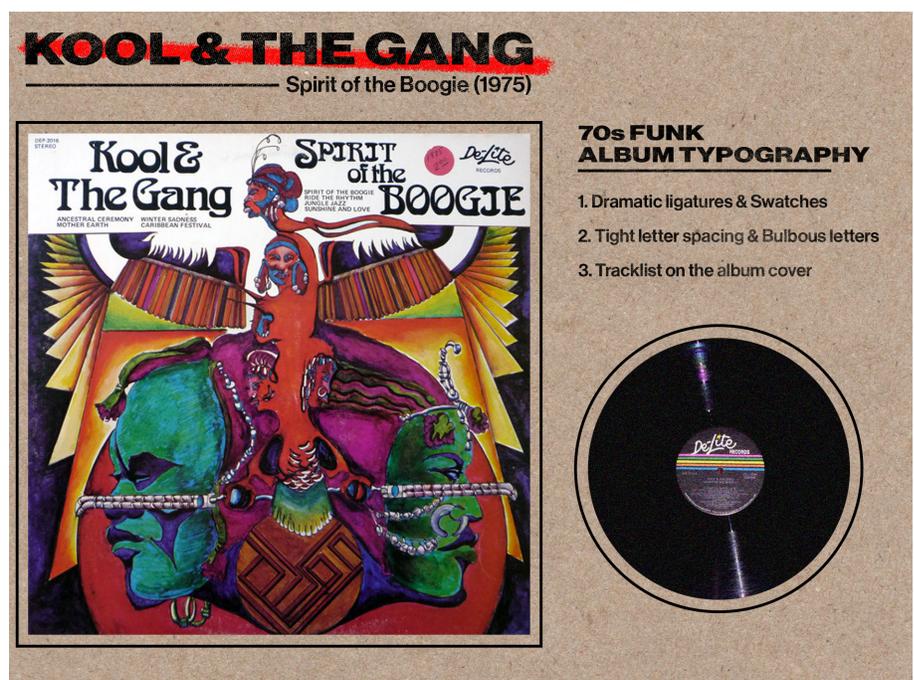
Typing Punky——

Another extremely important innovation in typography came with the emergence of the Punk genre in the mid-1970's. With it came a new style of graphic design that mirrored the principles that Punk stood for; it was loud, unconventional and didn't play by the rules. Unlike the aforementioned Funk/R&B design styles, Punk lacked major label support, but this was also by design. Punk was a forceful departure from the mainstream, rebelling with anger and fury rather than the peace and love approach of the late-60's/early-70's hippies (Moran, 2010).

With this independent, countercultural movement came a need to create appealing and interesting designs on non-existant budgets. Punk artists had no access to complex printers or expensive hand-lettering artists, and were forced to find other methods. Due to this, Punk typography reflects a 'do-it-yourself' ethos that came as a necessity in the early days of the genre (Lekach, 2013). 'Countercultural typography' may seem like a humorous phrase, but that was what early Punk type really was. Punk typography combined type from a variety of sources, including newspapers, advertisements and magazines. These sections of text were then combined in distinctively unplanned ways, usually on a variety of angles. Spacing was inconsistent, as was letter size. (Healy et al., 2019). British artist Jamie Reid, who created the iconic logo for the Sex Pistols, pioneered this new 'ransom' note style of typography. Instead of using a

classic typesetting machine, Reid cut letters out of various pieces of print media and then photographed them, which allowed him to see instant results and try different combinations (Hyndman, 2020).

Part of the magic of punk typography was the element of culture jamming that accompanied it. Punk was a movement that arose with the growing anti-establishment rhetoric in the western world in the 1970s (Avery-Natale, 2016). By taking text directly from the consumerist publications that dominated mainstream media, the punk movement was able to make a critical statement on society at the time. The literal act of ripping apart mainstream media to make it a new thing was a powerful metaphor. As writer Maya Lekach put it, the punks were saying "Take your culture and shove it." (Lekach, 2013).

Punk typography has returned several times, but rarely to much acclaim. The problem is that oftentimes the style is used in ways that directly contradict what Punk culture stood for in the first place. The irony in consumeristic applications of Punk design is painfully obvious, when an advertisement uses all the tropes of the style but remains blatantly capitalist and sanitized (Lekach, 2013). One bright spot is that the use of this style of typography has returned with the punk renaissance that has been seen in hip-hop culture (Hobbs, 2019). Along with the attitude that punk represents, several of the most prominent graphic and typographic styles that defined the punk movement have reemerged in Hip-Hop art in an earnest way.

THE SEX PISTOLS — God Save the Queen (1977)

70s PUNK ALBUM TYPOGRAPHY

1. Use of multiple contrasting fonts
2. Inconsistent spacing
3. 'Cut-and-paste' borders on text
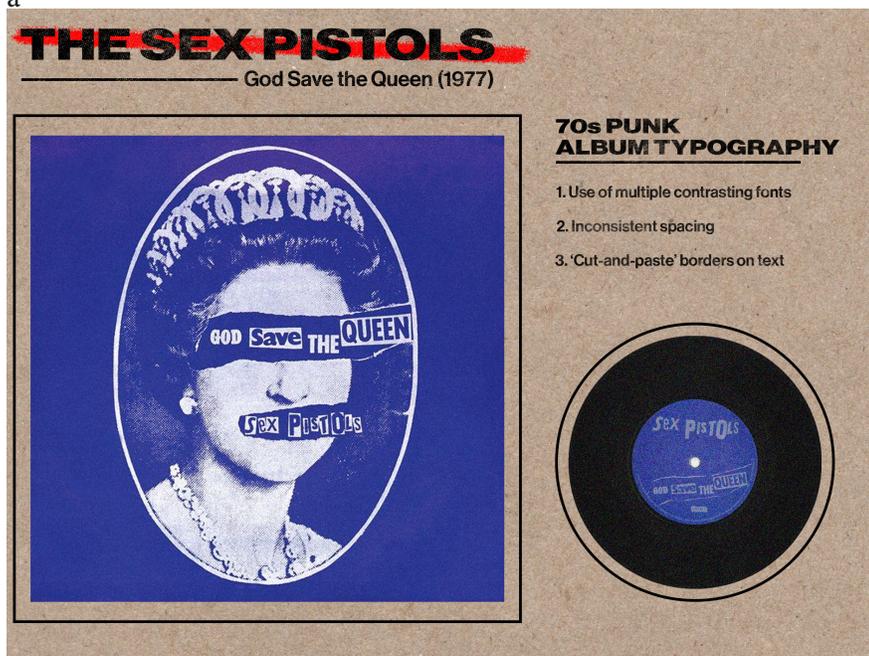
What I love so much about 70s album typography is that it tells a story. In my opinion album art was at its best as a very good piece of promotional print. When I read the bubbling, wavy type on Curtis Mayfield's *Superfly*, or the stenciled, distressed text on The Clash's *Tommy Gun*, I can already hear the smooth synths or the roaring guitars. I know what I'm going to get and I'm excited to get it. Never has this been as true as it was in the 1970s. Until the renaissance of typographic dominance in album art, I'll be waiting. Impatiently. -JH

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