

Creative Design Blog

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40 years of artwork

Graphic Design

Posted by Rachael Steven, 25 October 2013, 16:13



Virgin designers past and present discussed the joys and frustrations of designing music artwork last night, at a talk held as part of the record label's 40th birthday celebrations.

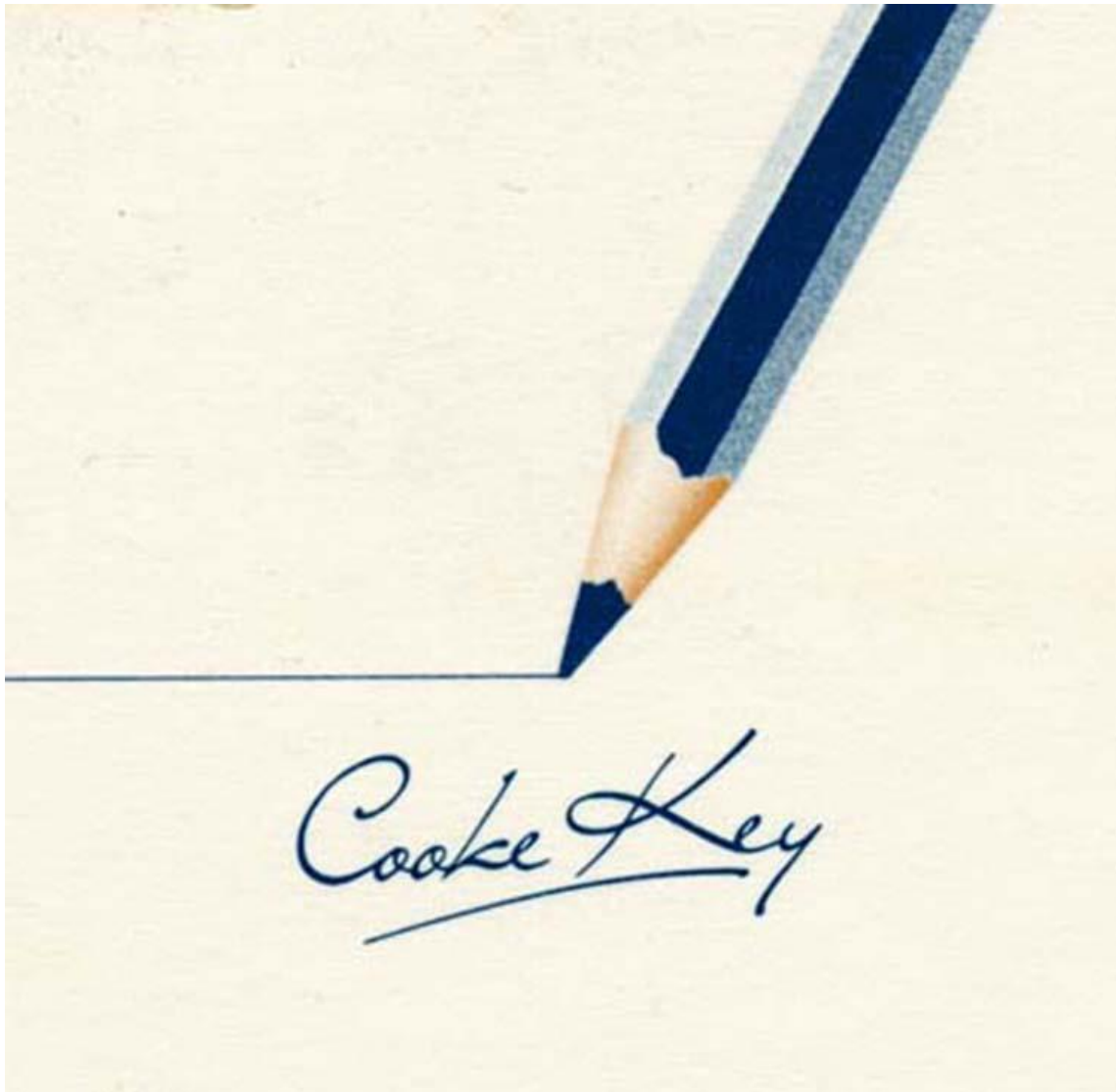
Roger Dean, Brian Cooke, John Varnom, Malcolm Garrett, Tom Hingston and Dan Sanders shared their experiences of designing album artwork and campaigns for artists from the seventies to the present day, including Massive Attack, the Sex

Pistols and Emeli Sande. The talk was held at Victoria House in Bloomsbury, the site of an exhibition showcasing Virgin's most iconic designs (below).



[..... discussion of designing the original Virgin logo edited out]

Brian Cooke also spoke about designing Virgin's logo – this time, the famous 'v' still in use today. It was, as Branson has previously claimed, scrawled on the back of a napkin, but was based on painter Ray Kite's logo for Cooke and Trevor Key's Cooke Key Associates (below), which was Virgin's design agency in the seventies and early eighties. Cooke and Key were paid £2,000 for designing the logo (top) – a grand sum at the time, but loose change compared to its worth today.



Cooke and Key, who died in 1995, worked with Varnom on some of the most iconic Virgin ads and album covers of all time, including the Sex Pistol's Never Mind the Bollocks (based on a concept and design by Jamie Reid), and an advert based on a public indecency charge served to the band by the Met Police, to which Varnom added the Met's official logo and the slogan "We Know Best", causing outrage among the force.

"A lot of our designs got banned," said Varnom. "We always tried to have that effect. Brian and I did a poster once with the phrase, "a little something for you" and copied the corner of a £20 note. Customs wanted to charge us with forgery," he said. When writing copy for Virgin ads, he said he "tried to avoid anything people would expect or think proper...and I did what I thought was funny. Along with Cooke and Key, he said he was left largely to his own devices - "and I exploited that to the full. I'd wrap up the artwork in brown paper, send it off and no-one knew what was in it until we all had a meeting," he said. "We amused ourselves, and Richard."



Virgin Records shop, 1977. Photo: Barry Plummer

Cooke, Key and Varnom's work provoked national outrage and helped cement Virgin's reputation as a shock-inducing, risk-taking, experimental label. Cooke and Key parted ways and stopped working for Virgin in 1981, but 40 years on, their designs remain the most famous and widely celebrated in Virgin's 40-year-history.