

REASONS TO BE CHEERFUL: THE LIFE AND WORK OF BARNEY BUBBLES

BY PAUL GORMAN

Book reviewed by Andy Martin



In 1974, forsaking the wisdom of my art college tutors in favour of long afternoons in the library, I stumbled upon the works of Eduardo Paolozzi, Constructivism, Krazy Kat, and a strange volume by Charles Jenks, *Adhocism – The Case for Improvisation*.

Within a couple of years I noticed a similar admix of ideas appearing in the work of one man, but due to his reluctance to credit his artworks, time would have to pass before the author's identity became known to me. This blend of near-Stalinist reduction, DIY aesthetic and keen sense of F.U.N. became so infectious as to cause an epidemic of impersonation. His name? Barney Bubbles. Now the truth can be told. I'm a Bubbloholic.

Paul Gorman's excellent book *Reasons to Be Cheerful – The Life and Work of Barney Bubbles*, begins with some stunning mid to late 1960s graphic work for Oz and the burgeoning underground scene. His work for the band Hawkwind shows the early 'hippy opulence' giving way to a mix of Teutonic bombast, Art Nouveau and futuristic fantasy, all executed

with finesse and melon twisting packaging concepts. And for me, there lies Barney Bubbles' secret, namely his ability to look backwards and forwards at the same time, whilst always managing to arrive at *The Very Point of Now-ness*.

As it progresses, the book gives us epoch-defining glimpses of a shuddering cultural landscape, clouds of patchouli oil fade and a new world forms, accompanied by the distinct whiff of cheap sulphate. But it is the periods covered by the chapters 1977-78, 1979-81 and 1982-83 that really hold the riches. Barney Bubbles' stylistic breadth, and the proficiency with which he approached his projects, makes you wonder did this guy ever sleep? And unless you've been in a coma for the past 30-odd years you won't fail to recognise the signature pieces, largely for Stiff Records: album covers for *The Damned*; a logo and a range of cheesy wallpaper album covers for Ian Dury and *The Blockheads*; Elvis Costello record sleeves; even the NME logo.

This long awaited volume reconstructs the idea of Barney as a person and an artist. Friends

and acquaintances recall their dealings with the man, sometimes with great poignancy, such as ex-Stiff Records' staffer Susan Spiro recalling Bubbles' ability to see the beauty in everyday objects. There is ample evidence also that alongside his own image-making he was no slouch when it came to art direction, drawing on the talents of some of the most forward thinking photographers of the era, Brian Griffin and Chris Gabrin amongst them. His sharply conceived photographic set-ups captured the *Bright New Tomorrow* of the New Wave, a welcome antidote to the nihilist *No Future* nonsense of early punk.

If there's one small criticism of the book it would be that in the rush to canonisation we may be glossing over the fact that there were others operating at the time, NTA Studios for example, and in the interior design field, people like Tommy Roberts were forcing incongruous ideas and materials into new settings. But what Bubbles did was to show the way ahead to a luckily placed generation who immediately understood and responded to his mix of styles and choice of materials. Many of those

early 'impersonators' (some of whom 'fess up' in the book) went on to define the subsequent cultural period, and all of them (me included) owe this man a huge debt.

This book is a treasure trove for image-makers across all media, and a reminder that the graphic bombs Barney Bubbles dropped are still reverberating. In the words of the late great Ian Dury: there ain't half been some clever bastards.

Reasons To Be Cheerful: The Life and Work of Barney Bubbles by Paul Gorman. Adelita, £24.99

- 1 Cover design for *Reasons to be Cheerful: The life and work of Barney Bubbles*
- 2 Postcard for *Lives* exhibition at the Hayward Gallery. Arts Council Of Great Britain. (210mm x 140mm) – 1979
- 3 *Doremi poster(s)* For sale on Doremi Fasol Latido tour. Hawkwind. (370mm x 470mm) – 1972
- 4 *The Ian Dury Songbook* Book cover. Wise Publications. (300mm x 200mm) – 1979
- 5 Newspaper ad for The Soft Boys tour and single release. Radar Records – 1978
- 6 *Darling Let's Have Another Baby* Back cover of 7" single for Johnny Moped. Chiswick Records – 1978

