

(With grateful thanks to Creative Review)

The 40-year-old Virgin

Virgin Records turns 40 this year. The label which made defying convention its enduring philosophy has now become thoroughly absorbed into the mainstream music business. Its famous founder has long since departed, selling first to EMI which then, in 2012, sold the label on to Universal. But with help from creative studio This is Real Art, Virgin is marking its anniversary by reminding us of the contribution it made not just to music but also to the visual culture of the past four decades. To begin, Daniel Benneworth-Gray interviews one of Virgin's key creative contributor Brian Cooke ...



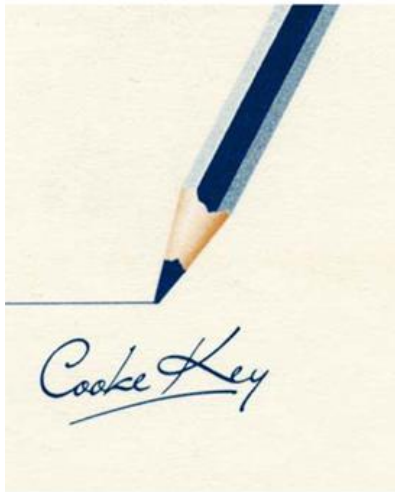
Richard Branson (second left) and staff in a chaotic Virgin Records shop following the release of Never Mind the Bollocks in 1977. Photograph by Barry Plummer.

VIRGIN AT 40: COOKE, KEY, JV

The Knavesmire, a vast wedge of green on the outskirts of York. Every weekend, this is the launch site for a pair of tourist-packed hot air balloons. They inflate, they rise, they serenely bob over the city. Silent and graceful except for the vast word emblazoned on each one, screaming down at all below. Virgin.

Nearby is the studio of Brian Cooke. In the late 70s and early 80s, he and partner Trevor Key were Cooke Key Associates, design agency to the burgeoning Virgin Records. In their time working for the label, the two photographers were responsible for more than 150 album covers and related marketing materials.

With Branson's label celebrating its 40th anniversary this year, Cooke is reflecting upon the agency's work. Something of a hoarder, he's kept everything. In numerous drawers, finished sleeves and posters share space with fragments of the creative process - sketches, test prints and photographic masks. Amongst them, a modest piece of watercolour paper, the original artwork for that logo. In 1978, that ever-airborne mark was just another project.



The Virgin logo was inspired by that of creative studio Cooke Key. Virgin MD Simon Draper saw their logo (far left drawn by Ray Kite) and asked them to do something similar (original negative shown)

"One day we were at Virgin and Simon Draper, Virgin Records' managing director, said we need to settle on a new logo - I think it was for a sampler - and I like yours," recalls Cooke. "We'd just done a new logo for ourselves with Ray Kite, this calligrapher in Covent Garden. So we tried something like that. We specced this idea with Ray, using the V of the Virgin as a tick, like a tick of approval. We wanted it hand-drawn on watercolour paper to get these uneven edges, as that's how we perceived them - not this clean, clinical record business. We chose one, cut it out and I photographed it. We thought it'd be on a few records. They adopted it for the label logo, the corporate style, then the record stores took it up."

Since those humble beginnings, the logo has had quite a life. Branson's tick of approval has found its way onto trains, banks, fizzy pop, aircraft. Few logos have ever achieved such a breadth of use. It's now on a spaceship.

"It is incredible. But it's been copied and recopied, the rough edges have been taken off. The way it's been used has sanitised it. But I'm proud of that logo," Cooke says. "It'd be unusual if you spent a day without seeing it. If you came up with something like that today for all those companies, it'd cost an absolute fortune."

But back then, the pre-sanitised Virgin were a little more down to earth. Shipton-on-Cherwell in Oxfordshire to be precise. This was where Virgin were making a name for themselves with a diverse roster of artists, working out of a stately home simply dubbed The Manor.

"It was the end of the hippy period," says Cooke, "It was all very easy-going, laid back, especially Virgin, who were a very laid back company. Branson was a hippy in a way, at the start. And the people he employed were. But they had to become more business-like."

The Oldfield money

They had to because Virgin's eclecticism was buoyed by one artist, and one album in particular. Cooke doesn't understate its importance. "The truth is, if there hadn't been a Tubular Bells (for which Key, who passed away in 1995, designed the sleeve), there wouldn't be a Virgin. It was good luck or good fortune or good A&R to find that album. They lived for a long time off the proceeds. Quite esoteric, smaller artists were supported by it, like Gong, Ivor Cutler. I'm not saying they weren't valid, but Virgin could afford to persevere with them longer, thanks to the Oldfield money."

Cooke and Key benefited greatly from this Tubular eclecticism, getting to work with artists that suited their different styles. Flicking through an old Virgin catalogue mailer, Cooke points out the sleeves that they'd worked on. "... mine, mine, Trev's, mine, Trev's, Trev's"

Most, it would seem. The Cooke Key look was the Virgin look. Essentially it was two looks - they mostly worked independently in their own particular styles. They'd both met at Hull College of Art in the mid-60s, and by the time they set up the agency a decade later, they'd found their creative voices. A former roadie and band manager for The Mandrakes, Cooke was adept at capturing the live energy of bands, while Key focused more on still life and conceptual imagery. Their disciplines complemented each other, so the partnership made sense.

"It was simple: I did the people, he did the things. There were enough of each, we carried on like that. We were so busy, we didn't get a chance to argue over who shot what. It worked quite well."

A third voice was integral to the work. They worked closely with the man Branson described as "our other genius", John Varnom. Cooke recalls the partnership fondly. "JV had been with the label right from the start. He did all of our copywriting, and we did all the concepts together. We used to go to Pizza Express and have these creative meetings at lunchtime, come up with all the ideas and concepts. JV always came up with the more risqué stuff."

Looking at the artwork they produced, the acts they worked with, the energy between these three as they bounced ideas back and forth over margaritas must have been electric. Cooke smiles at the memory of these sessions.

"It was a really fun time. Just waiting for the next project, the next set of ideas. That's what I liked about it. Virgin were really nice people to work for, and JV was instrumental in that. Looking back, it was a very influential and interesting time - on the edge, pushing boundaries."

Those pushed boundaries are scattered throughout Cooke's archive. Particularly in this one drawer. The drawer with the portrait of Her Royal Highness in it.



Also from Cooke's archive is this print, familiar from the sleeve of the Sex Pistols' single God Save the Queen. This version was used as a bus poster. Photo: Daniel Benneworth-Gray.

"This guy Jamie Reid walked in, sent by Virgin," says Cooke, "He was good at concepts and had bits and pieces, but didn't have the skills to put it down. So we did the Sex Pistols artwork together. We were coming towards the end of Cooke Key, we were all getting a bit iffy about it, but The Sex Pistols kept us going."

Pure punk loveliness

It certainly did. For little over a year, Cooke Key Associates produced a huge quantity of iconic design for the band. As Cooke talks, he pulls out sheet after sheet of pure punk loveliness.

Deliberately crass lettering, obnoxious palettes, the occasional subverted monarch. This is where the distinctive Sex Pistols look was created, on these bits of paper.

It's been mimicked and pilfered and diluted over the years, but at the time it was new and untested. Not that the media furore concerned Cooke. "We never really thought about getting in trouble, we just got on with it. It was more, will Virgin accept it? They were the arbiters, they had to stand by it. Of course, a lot of the time they hardly saw it, or they didn't really have much chance to change anything. Mostly we were up against the press deadlines and they went along with stuff."

Virgin invited and revelled in the media outcry. For the agency, it was just fuel for their creativity. "It was all very sensationalised, and Virgin wanted it to be that way. It all got banned - and that's what sold it. When God Save the Queen was number two, they wouldn't print it on the official charts - you couldn't see it, but it was there. There was a gap. So I'd sneak into a WH Smith, take a photograph of the chart, and use that as part of the marketing. We were responding to stuff like that all the time. I think getting too outrageous was the barrier you were knocking all the time, especially with JV and Jamie. They came up with some ... strong ideas."

Cooke Key Associates had their job to do, and once that look was set, they were left to do it. It's a long way from the perception that everything poured straight out of the band itself. "Draper commissioned us for the jobs. Branson was hardly involved. We very rarely met Malcolm McLaren, if at all. He would never turn up in our studio and tell us what to do. There were influences coming from him, but he was more involved with the film."

Tidying the punk away, Cooke continues to sift through pieces that clearly haven't seen the light of day in some time. Among them, proud memories. "We only ever got one award, best album cover design from Melody Maker, for this," he says, holding up Tangerine Dream's 1976 album *Stratosfear*, pointing out the different images and processes that make up the abstract image.



Cooke Key's artwork for Stratosfear by Tangerine Dream, the only album which the duo won an award for. The slabs were influenced by 2001: A Space Odyssey. See more of the duo's work at briancooke.com & trevorkey.com

Together, Cooke and Key experimented with dark room techniques, pioneering the use of Cibachrome direct reversal colour paper and black silver masks in the creation of composite images. The results are all right there on the Stratosfear sleeve. "That's shot from Cleveland Hills overlooking Middlesbrough; that's an upside down shot from a plane; the flying slabs, they came from 2001. The type isn't good enough. We probably didn't even see that type until it was proofed. We specced the type up on an overlay, sent it to the printers. Today, you'd just adjust it in Photoshop."

Flicking past typically menacing portraits of Sparks ("I got on with them quite well, they were lovely"), he pulls out another pile of masks and bits of fractured image, an elaborate jigsaw of a surreal studio set. All these separate layers with their register punch marks, when pieced together make up the cover of Mike Oldfield's Boxed. This chemical-mechanical approach to creating images is a long way from the digital processes used today, an entirely different craft. No room for undos.

"You had to be more set in your mind about an image. When we did it, it was just something we did. That's how you produced an image. You'd never think it'd evolve into what it is now."

Cooke has no dealings with 'what it is now'. By the early 80s, Virgin Records was unrecognisable from those bohemian days at the Manor. "The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle tells it all really, Malcolm was so right with that. The bands weren't that involved, they were just another product - the accountants taking over changed everything."

The 70s were over. As the hippies bought their suits, and graphic designers usurped photographers as the dominant creative leads on ever-shrinking formats, Cooke and Key called it a day. They parted company in 1981 to pursue other projects.

He still shoots - no photographer ever really retires - but for pleasure, not business. Although he's a staunch convert to digital photography (his favourite camera is the one he carries with him everywhere - his iPhone), he still has reservations about the modern way of doing things. "If someone asked me to design an album cover today, I think I'd find it very hard to do it on a computer. I think there's too much. Too many possibilities. Every tool, everything you'd ever want is right there. Making a decision of which route you're going to go down and what you're going to do and how you're going to do it. Things that used to take hours - it's now just an algorithm, just a click away. And it's never as good."

He tidies everything back into the drawers. An incredible body of work, and memories of a different time. "If I'd known at the time it was going to develop into something so boring, I'd have appreciated it a lot more. It was great. It was never going to end. Nothing's ever going to end, is it? But it always does and it reaches a different conclusion to what you expect." Outside, a logo designed for a few records floats into the sky.

brian.cooke@briancooke.com administrator@trevorkey.com