

David James – in and out of print

Despite working for some of the world's most famous brands, David James has kept a low profile. Patrick Burgoyne meets the Prada art director whose career is about to undergo a major change

By **Patrick Burgoyne** 31/03/2010 *Creative Review*

I've been waiting ten years to write this piece. Ten years since first visiting [David James](#) at his London studio and suggesting an article on his work. He wasn't keen: in fact, James explained to me, he never does press, he doesn't talk publicly about his work, it's a rule of his. He wasn't interested in being a 'celebrity designer' – there would be no fancy monograph (although the idea was discussed with a publisher once) and no conference appearances. His desire for attention was satisfied by his work. Until recently, he didn't even display that work online. James reasoned that, as a kid, he stopped liking a band once they became well-known – they weren't cool anymore. He didn't want that happening to him. And besides, he wasn't that interested in graphic design: it was imagery that really fascinated him.

Like so many others, James found early success through music packaging. He then found himself attracted by, and in demand for, fashion, a move that arguably suppressed his public profile still further. In fashion there is usually room for only one star designer, and it's not the one choosing typefaces.

James is from the Manchester area. He left school at 16 to go to Stockport College, leaving in 1983 to take a job as a

signwriter. A short stint at agency Gillett & Bevan convinced him that advertising wasn't for him and he moved, in pursuit of a girlfriend, to design consultancy McIlroy Coates in Edinburgh. The relationship didn't work out and James decided to try his luck in London where he worked between 1986 and 1987 at The Fine White Line, the design firm set up by ad agency CDP in the 80s, before starting his own studio, aged just 25.

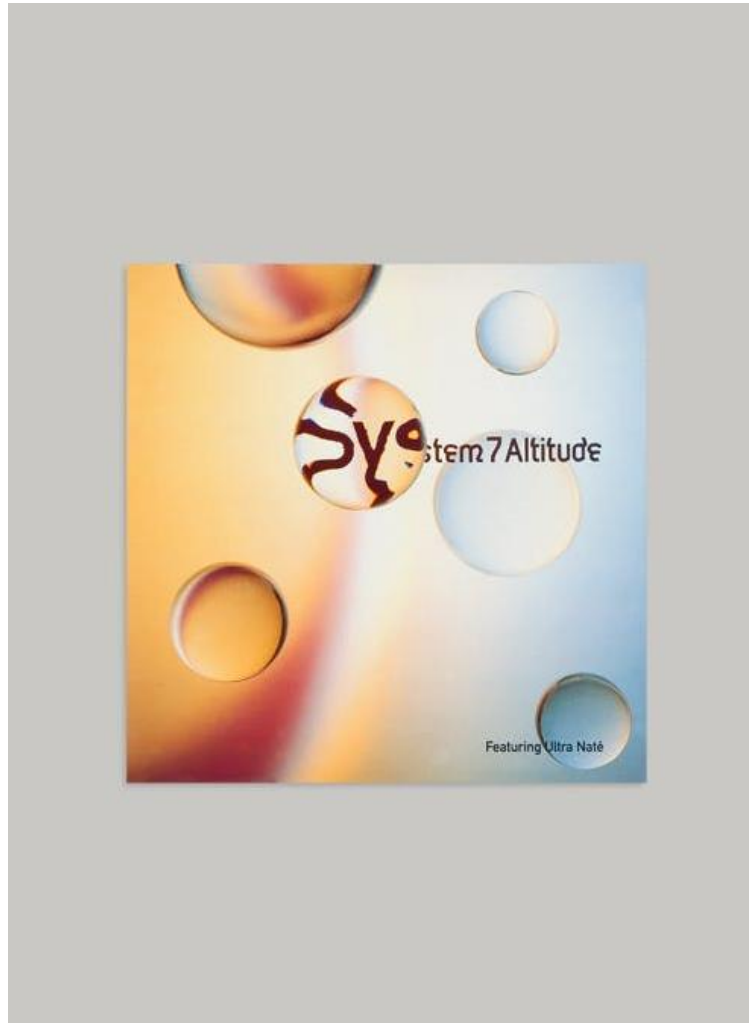
Early work

He has worked for himself ever since. The client list is a familiar one for a designer seeking to retain independence and work in culturally significant areas – fashion brands, record labels and magazine publishers. One of James's first pieces was a catalogue for clothes brand Moto which was screenprinted on a soft plastic material that he noticed was being used on the clothes' labels. Once scrunched up, the material would quickly return to its former shape.

This excitement about materials is something that James has retained in his work for a rather more prominent fashion designer, Miuccia Prada. James has been Prada's art director for the past 14 years, overseeing and devising the brand's advertising and printed communications. For each catwalk show, his studio produces a beautiful invitation which always looks to combine materials in an unexpected way. Usually some kind of extra interaction is required on behalf of the recipient – to pop out a perforated piece of corrugated cardboard in order to reveal an acrylic sheet within, for example, or hold something up to the light in order to read its message. Produced in very short runs for the privileged few, they are exquisite pieces of graphic communication.

Like Peter Saville, James had a fruitful collaborative relationship with the late, great photographer Trevor Key.

James's series of sleeves for dance act System 7 made full use of Key's in-camera expertise to produce painstaking effects on releases such as the 1992 mini-album *Altitude*.



His sleeves, however, are not feted as those of Saville are, but that may have been partly due to the fact that they were designed for dance acts that have never achieved the lasting cultural resonance of, say, Joy Division.

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