

# Inside The Archive Of Trevor Key

## Music Design's Unsung Hero

*From Tubular Bells to the Sex Pistols and New Order, photographer Trevor Key played a major role in not just one important pop culture moment, but three. We take an exclusive peek at the treasures of Key's archive and ask why he doesn't enjoy the reputation he surely deserves*

*By Patrick Burgoyne 06/01/2017 Creative Review*

I'm standing in the kitchen of a house in North London. On the table are piles of transparent paper envelopes, folders, and boxes. Within are some of the most important images ever made for the British record industry: a history of 'pop' in Polaroid.

Open one envelope and out tumbles the original transparency for the sleeve of Mike Oldfield's Tubular Bells. In another, Polaroid tests for New Order's singles from the Technique album. And here, inside a battered cardboard box, the props that I'd first seen artfully arranged across the Sex Pistols' Some Product sleeve in an Ipswich record shop nearly 40 years ago. There's the packaging for the Vicious Burger, the Piss Cola bottle and even the little Punk 'Barbie' who scowls so memorably from behind this visual v-sign to the world and Virgin Records in particular.

There's more – OMD, Can, Derek & Clive, Peter Gabriel, System 7 (for whom he [collaborated with designer David](#)

James), X-Ray Spex. And all the work of one man – the late, great photographer Trevor Key.



Released in 1973, Mike Oldfield's Tubular Bells album was the first from Virgin. Trevor Key designed the sleeve, combining a photograph of a twisted tubular bell with one of a beach in Sussex. Key even did the (wonky) Letraset type on the back cover

Many a career and many a fortune has been built on an involvement with one significant moment in popular culture.

To have been part of the right record, an important film – it's enough to secure a place in the canon. Trevor Key played a major role in not just one important pop culture moment, but three.

After Tubular Bells, Key and ex-college friend [Brian Cooke](#) formed Cooke Key Associates and became the de facto Virgin art department, producing virtually all the sleeves for the label in its early days. Key had been an advertising still life [photographer](#) making the kind of 'impossible pictures' favoured at the time. He was able to put his taste for surrealism and visual problem-solving ability to good use. As Cooke remembered when [interviewed by CR in November 2013](#), "I did the people, he [Key] did the things. It was a very influential and interesting time – on the edge, pushing boundaries."

Boundaries were certainly being pushed once Virgin signed the [Sex Pistols](#) and Cooke, Key and Virgin's John Varnom helped turn Jamie Reid's iconoclasm into what we now think of as the visual language of punk. Led by Reid's ideas, the team produced provocative Pistols promotional material daily, gleefully responding to the latest newspaper-friendly outrages. "We never really thought about getting in trouble, we just got on with it," [Cooke told CR](#). "It was all very sensationalised, and Virgin wanted it to be that way. It all got banned – and that's what sold it."



*Props for the Some Product: Carri on Sex Pistols sleeve, 1979*



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*Designed by Jamie Reid & Trevor Key/Cooke Key Associates*



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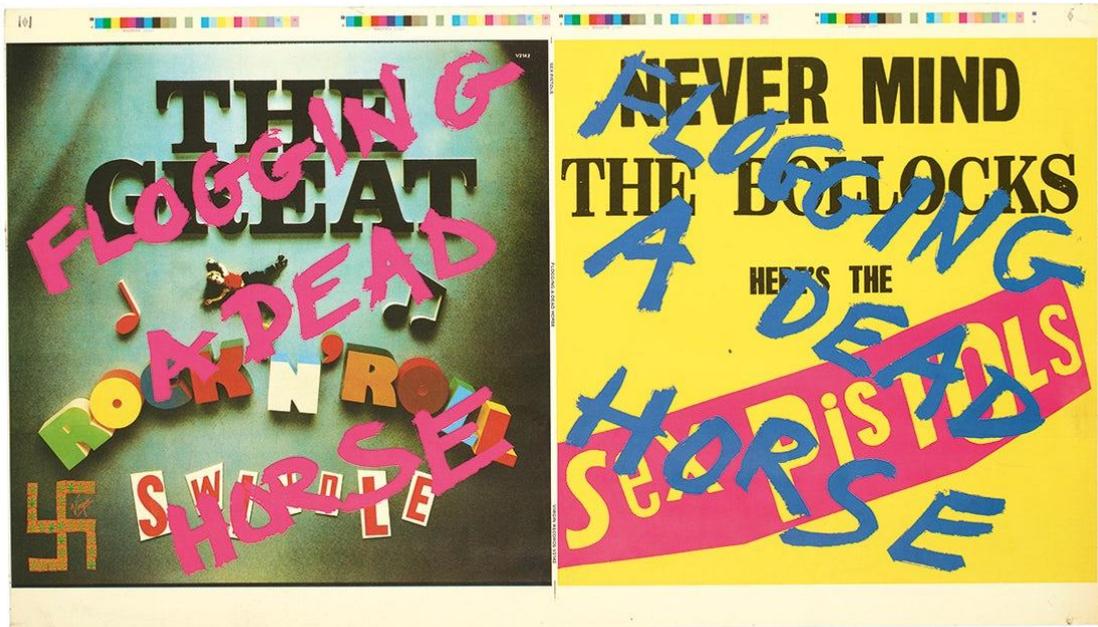
As the Pistols finally self-destructed, a disillusioned Key worked with Reid on those final Pistols albums at a time when the band was virtually at war with its label. Reid and Key made their feelings known in an extraordinary letter, from December 1979, to Danny Baker, then a music journalist. A copy, signed by Reid and Key, is in Key's archive. After explaining the design of Some Product ("a cover which

would actively discourage sales”) the pair go on to rail against “an industry which sees talent as product, and product as money and money as power. ‘Art’ is a swear word in the music industry.”



*Some Product, Carri On Sex Pistols, 1979. Designed by Jamie Reid and Trevor Key*

“The record was described by its producer as being ‘40 minutes of absolute rubbish’ and the problem was how to design a cover that would actively discourage sales and demythologise the Sex Pistols, who by that stage didn’t even exist as a band,” Reid and Key say. “It seemed an unhealthy situation had developed in which the Hero status of the Sex Pistols couldn’t be broken. People would buy anything that had their name on it....The collection of products on the sleeve is an attempt to show that the music industry, like any other, will thoroughly exploit all avenues open to it to make money”



*From Key's archive, an unused proposal for the sleeve of the Sex Pistols' final album, Flogging a Dead Horse, by Jamie Reid and Trevor Key/Cooke Key Associates*

Reid and Key proposed including a swastika – or ‘Stratoswasticastor’ as they called it – on every record sleeve (as seen on an unused proposal for the Pistols’ Flogging a Dead Horse album, shown above). “Its use is to try and show the oppressive nature of the music industry,” they wrote. “That people are fed up with being fed pap to keep them from thinking and acting. That the music industry is set up with the sole single aim of making money.”

When Key met a young in-house designer at DinDisc, a Virgin offshoot, that same year, he was ready for a new challenge.

“I’d never really commissioned a photographer, I didn’t know anything. I was 24 and still finding my way,” remembers Peter Saville. “This man came in who’d seen it all and done it all and understood what a record cover was. Trevor knew the

business inside out and he, generously, took to me and where I was coming from very positively.”

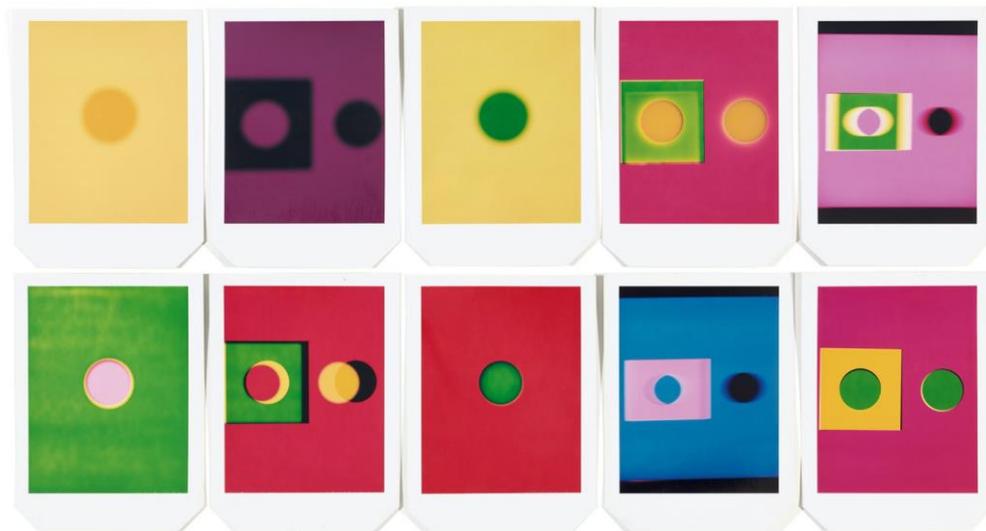
The two formed a partnership that would produce some of the most beautiful, innovative and prescient album sleeves of the 80s. Key was the older of the two and, Saville says, played something of the big brother role. “He was exceptionally tolerant of me,” he says. “I would turn up late, I would change my mind, I would be unreliable and he would reprimand me for it but he never gave up on me. We shared a studio, we virtually lived together. He didn’t have anywhere to go at six o’clock and neither did I, so we’d stay in the studio until nine or ten, working or talking, we’d eat together at least three or four times a week, we were best friends.”



Sleeve for OMD’s Genetic Engineering, created by Key from an assemblage of Perspex objects. Art direction: Peter Saville. Photography: Trevor Key. Designed by Peter Saville Associates, 1983.

Eventually their working relationship ended as Saville became a partner at design firm [Pentagram](#) and later moved to Los Angeles. However Key, it seems, still kept a fraternal eye on him. “When I came back from America I had no money, nothing,” Saville says. “I went to see Trevor and he gave me some money. I said ‘But Trevor you haven’t got any money yourself’. He said ‘It’s within what I’ve put aside for you. When you said you were coming back, I thought you might need something’. When you’re broke, you learn who your friends are.”

This was in 1994: the following year, Key died from a brain tumour, aged 48.



These 1987 Polaroids from Key’s archive show his early experiments in what would become known as the Dichromat process, which Key and Peter Saville employed so memorably on New Order covers for 1987’s *Substance* and 1989’s *Technique*.

I ask Saville what he misses most about Key. “I miss my best friend and I miss the creative act of looking for something

together. In that mid-80s period, I parked the car one night. I was in a highly emotional mood that year, I got that hyper aware feeling you get when you are like that. A leaf went past the windscreen, and because I was looking through the frame of the windscreen I saw it as a picture. And because of the mood I was in this was deeply profound!” Saville laughs. “I went to Trevor and said ‘We’ve got to do a leaf’. So he said, ‘Well, we’d better get the right leaf’. So the next day we went to Windsor Great Park together and we gathered leaves – we took a bin bag, and we scrabbled around filling it with leaves. It was like something from Monty Python. We came back and Trevor went through them and decided it would be perhaps best if we grafted several of them together – there’s your 1970s still life photographer coming out – but I said ‘We don’t need to do that’ and eventually we decided that this one was not bad and it became the True Faith leaf. So that creative ‘looking for something together’ ran the full spectrum from actually looking for a thing to working in the studio, the darkroom, creating something together. I miss that.”



*Louis XIV Dichromat image by Trevor Key and Peter Saville, 1989. Polaroid tests for what would become the sleeve image for New Order single Round & Round.*

Despite the work he did with Saville and his role in music history, there has always been the impression that Key has never got the acclaim he deserves. Some have accused his collaborators of being less than comprehensive when crediting Key's contribution. And in the many, many articles and books written about the history of punk, few even mention Key. He has, at times, literally been written out of history.

This might be the year that starts to be put right. The designer Scott King and Key's partner, stylist Lesley Dilcock, have proposed a show of Key's work as part of [Hull's City of Culture programme](#).

"I'm from Goole near Hull and Trevor was born in Hull," King says. "When I knew Hull was going to be the City of Culture in 2017 I thought 'I hope they do something about Trevor Key'. I didn't know Lesley at the time and I didn't really know Trevor – I'd only spoken to him on the phone. But I knew Toby [McFarlan Pond, Key's ex-assistant] and so I asked him if there was a possibility to do something. It ended in a proposal for a show called Trevor Key's Top 40 – we'd pick his 40 best sleeves and put them in a kind of Woolie's record rack. A simple, lo-fi exhibition that will also become a hub for other activities."

The planned show is the reason I am now rifling through Key's archive with King and McFarlan Pond. The latter's affection for his former boss remains undimmed as does his desire for Key, finally, to take his place among the shapers of popular culture.



*New Order, Technique, 1989. Sleeve design: Peter Saville Associates.  
Photography: Trevor Key and Peter Saville*

A planned book could be another step along that path. “A carefully structured book would be an obvious building block – but there has to be an objective to it,” Saville says.

“Someone’s got to do a book that positions Trevor as a unique influence on popular culture. Yes, it’s about the work and what is said about it but most importantly it’s who says it – who is validating this work? You need a champion whose validation is supported by the market and the types of galleries who would then want to show the work.... There’s a very credible story to frame Trevor as an influence on popular culture. But getting pop culture ratified as collectible or as ‘art’ is not a quick process.”

In their application to the City of Culture for the show, King and Dilcock asked admirers of Key’s work to write testimonials. One came from just the kind of art world figure Saville is referring to – the photographer Wolfgang Tillmans.

**“Conceptual rigour...intelligent groupings and innovative presentations, using record covers as a venue for fine art photography” – Wolfgang Tillmans on Trevor Key**

“The photographs of Trevor Key have been a huge inspiration to me,” Tillmans wrote. “What impressed me most was their playfulness, stemming from a deep curiosity for the marvels of the photographic process. This was expressed with conceptual rigour, through intelligent groupings, pairings and innovative presentations, using record covers as a venue for fine art photography.”

Intelligent, rigorous, innovative and a genuinely important artist: this is how Key’s many friends and his family believe he deserves to be seen, at last.

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[An exhibition of Trevor’s work](#), displayed in a case especially designed by Matthew Darbyshire, and shown as part of Hull UK City of Culture, will open on 20 September 2017 at Brodrick Gallery, School of Art & Design, Queen’s Gardens, Hull