

Interview with Nick Egan – the making of the album cover for *Duck Rock*

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Interview with artist/designer for **Nick Egan** regarding his album cover work for *Duck Rock*, a 1983 release (on Island/Charisma Records) by recording artist **Malcolm McLaren**.



At the intersection of Pop Culture and societal norms, producers of music, art, fashion, etc. are often found working to rock established thought and force those willing to look “outside the box” to consider the alternatives being proposed. In the early-1970s, after attending a number of art schools and finding himself particularly intrigued by the UK’s Situationist movement and their approach to bringing about societal changes, clothing store owner Malcolm McLaren (along with Vivienne Westwood and a close set of talented friends) set out to illustrate – via their designs for fashion, journalism and the arts – what Britain’s youth (and those outside the Establishment) felt about every aspect of society and how it was being managed by those in power at the time. Taking some cues from similar movements in New York and then adding them to their uniquely European reality, they gave birth to a design and musical language that was quickly adopted by many young people in America and Western Europe (and, later, many other developed countries), much to the chagrin of their parents and those hoping to maintain the status quo.

After his successes in the London fashion scene with punk couture boutique SEX and in the music arena with the

New York Dolls, The Sex Pistols and Bow Wow Wow, McLaren sought to drive home the importance of the many types of music available to the musically curious via his own recordings highlighting these multi-cultural sources. Borrowing musical stylings from many countries – Latin America, Africa, the Caribbean Islands and the burgeoning rap and hip-hop scene in the U.S. – McLaren released *Duck Rock* in 1983 to a U.K. audience eager to absorb whatever was new and on the edge. Three of the singles from the album (“Buffalo Gals” and “Double Dutch” in 1983; “World Famous” in 1984) became major chart hits in both the U.K. and the U.S., and the record’s album cover art, which built upon a strong punk aesthetic while integrating strong elements of graffiti art and illustration (along with a decorated boom box, an item used world-wide by young people looking to impress adults with the sheer volume of their music).

Rather than accept the approach to the project – both for the production of the record and its packaging – usually dictated by most record company/musical artist relationships, McLaren chose to assemble a creative/production team that would be on his wavelength and who’d understand the important links between the musical and graphic styles he wanted featured (Malcolm had once said that his introduction to hip-hop came after seeing Afrika Bambaataa walking down the streets of NYC in a Sex Pistols t-shirt!). He was the conductor – the musicians, producers, engineers and designers who signed on for the project were all performers under his direction. The resulting product would have a dramatic effect on all aspects of the music business and, to this day, many performers note the importance of this record in their approach to writing/recording/packaging their own offerings. To provide readers with an understanding of how this all came together, I interviewed the record’s art director – noted designer/director **Nick Egan** – to ask him about collaborating with McLaren on this influential work. As you can imagine, the project presented Egan with a long list of challenges and, in the end, a great deal of opportunity...

Interview with the designer, Nick Egan (interviewed August, 2013)

Mike Goldstein (curator, Albumcoverhalloffame.com) – Nick – pleasure to meet you! There’s a lot to discuss, so let’s get started. First off – how is it that you were first introduced to Malcolm McLaren (as a music impresario, a musician, a personality, etc.)? Had you worked with him before?

Nick Egan – I bumped into him one day in 1980, when I was working with the group Dexy’s Midnight Runners, up at EMI Records. He, of course was the man behind the British Punk scene and was best known for being the manager of the Sex Pistols. At this point, he was manager of the group Bow Wow Wow, who were also on EMI and whose cover I did as a result of this first meeting. He and I struck up an immediate working relationship and friendship and he told me then that album covers were going to be “a thing of the past” and that video was the future. Remember, this was 1981.

What struck me was that Malcolm had no interest in whether you had a degree or diploma in graphic design – he didn’t even care if you had been to Art School. He was more about the ideas you had and if they were compatible with his. You had to understand his way of thinking without being a ‘yes man’ and have an irreverent attitude about pretty much everything. To succeed with him, you had to be able to interpret his way of seeing the entertainment industry and the art world.

My work with him would go on to include all of Bow Wow Wow’s art and early videos, his fashion partnership with Vivienne Westwood ‘World’s End’ and, of course, his solo records *Duck Rock* and, later, *Fans*.

Mike G – In your opinion, what made Malcolm McLaren – the artist and his music – different from other artists in his “category” or of his day?

Nick E – Malcolm never considered himself an “artist” in the traditional sense of the word. He saw himself much more like a sculptor, manipulating many different layers, ideas, sounds, visuals and concepts, or a painter, only instead of paint, he used people to create his color palettes. For example, *Duck Rock* was one of the first “World Music” records, taking various different ethnic musical styles from far-flung places such as Central America to the Zulu tribes of Soweto, South Africa, mixing those with the brand new sounds coming out of the South Bronx – ‘Hip Hop’ and ‘Rap’ music – and combining it all with the traditional “Hillbilly” and square dancing music.

With all of these layers of sounds laid over each other, he created totally unique musical compilations, turning songs such as ‘Buffalo Gals’ into one of the first international Hip Hop records to make the top 10 in Europe and, to this day, has been sampled on more hip hop records than any other. He called it “customization”, using already existing recordings from different musical genres and cutting and pasting them together, finally adding his own lyrics to make songs that stood on their own.

MG – What was the inspiration for that particular image? Did the artist’s music, reputation or performing style provide you with some inspiration as to how to develop the style guidelines for the imagery you’d propose? Did they let you see/hear any of the lyrics/music that was going to be on the record (for inspiration)?

NE – I was involved with Malcolm from the very inception and seed of an idea all the way through recording and mixing. I was his conceptual partner at almost every stage and he would run ideas by me as a concept, rather than as a song or finished record. He really loved the whole idea of how people or certain groups customized themselves, their cars, their clothes, etc. He wanted to carry this into the music, visuals and videos. Again, this was something that was very prevalent in a lot of Third World countries – the idea of taking whatever is at hand and making it become decorative in some way, recycling things before they became fashionable. In most cases, this was done out of necessity and based on availability. For example, the Zulu tribes would use junk metal such as spoons and forks to create a head dress, or bottles, cans or straws to make a skirt. In Central and Latin America, people tended to customize their cars with brightly-colored paint jobs, adding chrome horns, antennas and hub caps as a garish form of status.

In New York, the whole hip-hop ‘B Boy’ look was about spraying words and images onto NYC subway cars, or taking your boom box and spraying colorful graffiti across the speakers, so everything really started to fit into place and didn’t need any guidance from me or Malcolm – we just let it run and went along with it. The graffiti artists of the time were becoming the new pop artists, with Keith Haring and Dondi White two of the most recognized in the hip-hop/graffiti World at the time – so we approached them to collaborate on the illustration for the cover of *Duck Rock*.

MG – I understand that this record featured many songs, but was there a particular track on the album that served as the inspiration of the package art/design?

NE – I would say it had to be ‘Buffalo Gals’ because it represented the new style that was coming out of the South Bronx. It was the song that wasn’t a song, with no verse, chorus or melody. It was just a groove and the ‘scratching’ style that had been created by DJ Kool Herc. This was a way of patching two random tracks together live in an

innovative edit.

MG – How involved was the artist and/or the record label management in the process of deciding what you should produce, and did they provide you with any specific direction?

NE – Malcolm really had no time for the record label except for when bills needed to be paid. Most of the time, they didn't even know where he was! For example, he traveled with producer Trevor Horn into the Zulu township of Soweto which, at that time, was something forbidden by the South African apartheid government. The label had no clue what he was doing, but as long as world-renowned producer Trevor Horn was in the producer's seat, they let it ride. At one point in the project, when the label execs asked for a demo of the music, Malcolm simply handed them a 78RPM disc of Honduran music and told them that this was part of the overall feel of the record. If anyone else would have done it, the label people heads would have exploded but, in England, Malcolm was considered a genius of sorts, especially within the world of popular culture and people didn't really dare ask him for a demo. They knew that, whatever he did, it would be influencing the youth of the world in some way. People would be dancing to it, wearing it, looking at it and debating it for years to come.

Despite that distinction, the one thing Malcolm knew was that the record label would not “get it” and that's why he agreed to have Trevor Horn at the helm – he knew that would keep them at bay. In fact, when it came to reviewing the record he delivered, the first thing they were horrified by was the fact that Malcolm didn't actually sing or play an instrument on any of the tracks. This was something never considered before, unlike today, where DJ's are the new rock stars.

MG – Can you give me an idea of whatever “guidance” – or specific instructions – you provided the other artists and illustrators that created the key parts of your package?

NE – There was no guidance needed, as I said this package kind of evolved naturally, with everything that was happening culturally on the streets at that time becoming part of what was going on on the record. I asked Keith Haring to illustrate the background image and Dondi White to do the *Duck Rock* lettering. I wanted their absolute take on things – it was about them and what was going on at the time – and that was of utmost importance to me and Malcolm. I wanted to document everything as authentically as I could.

MG – How did you choose the talent who would work with you on this effort?

NE – As I said before, it was just a case of who the most influential street artists were at that particular time. Everything was raw and new, there were no prima donnas, we all were looking to bring the culture to a bigger audience outside of the New York area.

MG – So, in addition to coordinating all of the talent, how long did this process take – from start to finished product?

NE – The whole project, from start to finish, took about a year. Malcolm and I were working on a number of other things together – mostly fashion-related – and all the experimenting we did together on those projects would have an influence on the record project as well. While the actual final production process took anywhere from 4 to 6 weeks, it was a great thing that the entire project took as long as it took. It was important for us to be able to absorb

what was going on in the environment, and that meant going to the clubs, seeing the first kids to break dance, listening to the all night radio stations, going to galleries, etc. We weren't just there to "snatch and grab" – we wanted to tell the complete story with Malcolm being inserted somehow into the midst of all of this. In some weird way it worked because Malcolm was this cartoon-like character who never took away from the true artists and performers. He was like a narrator from another land.

MG – Did you consider your efforts to be works of self-expression, or did you take your lead from your client – that is, in this case, Malcolm?

NE – Hmm...that's an interesting question. It was not about anyone single person or image; rather, it was the collective of a lot of new ideas in one place. Things were thrown together randomly in a mad mish-mash of color, asymmetrical, with nothing in particular being the focus – just like the layers of different people writing on a wall over a period of time. At the time, I had expressed to Malcolm my frustrations at the whole "record cover in a square" dilemma. I found it restrictive and limiting, and Malcolm said to me – in that casual way he had of tossing an idea onto the table – "you're taking it too literally. Don't think of it as a square. Instead, think of it as a large wall of which you take the shape of a square and cut one section out and whatever is on that square is the cover, even if my name is hanging off the edge, it doesn't matter. That gives you a much bigger concept, one where people have to try and imagine what the rest of the wall looked like."

How brilliant an answer was that? It didn't matter what was normal, it was much more subversive to go against the rules and create something far more provocative. I wanted it to sum up New York at that time and what better way of evoking that than to go at it from that point of view. Words scrawled onto trains, pictures painted in the subway over billboards, boom boxes painted in bright colors, etc. If anything, this is why the Boom Box becomes the main focus, because it is the medium in which the sound at the time was transported – an instrument that could be taken anywhere, so the party never stopped. The Zulus in South Africa were the most affected by the 'Duck Rocker' as they saw it as some kind of deity to ward off evil spirits. What could be more powerful than that? Everything about the cover had created itself almost magically.

The funny thing was, I actually hated it when I first saw it, because I thought that it looked uncontrollable and I never liked the way the colors came out.

MG – Let's talk about some more general items I'm interested in getting your opinions on. With the electronic delivery of music products growing at a fast pace, are you noticing any more or less enthusiasm on the client's – or artist's – behalf to invest time and money in packaging that stands out?

NE – Absolutely. Sadly, I think that the album cover is a dying art. The thing that made it special was its tactile nature, you could hold it, open it, read it, look at it, touch it and even play it. The owner had a relationship with the artist on a different level than he or she does today. This was a manuscript into the secret world of the recording artist, full of clues and messages. You could interpret things in whichever way you wanted and compare your findings with other friends who also owned the record. That can never be replicated in the digital age – especially, the interaction you have when you physically hold the package.

MG – In your opinion, how does album cover art help us document human history? I believe that, in many ways, iconic album cover art has had a noticeable effect on Pop culture. What's your take on this? Is the imagery and

music providing the direction, or is it reflecting the culture, or ??

NE – I think it definitely has documented a certain part of history, but more than anything it has indelibly put the idea of music and imagery together forever. You can't really listen to *Sgt. Peppers* by The Beatles without thinking of Peter Blake's cover, or *Never Mind The Bollocks...* by The Sex Pistols without thinking of the Day-Glo clash of pink and yellow with the "ransom note" lettering, or *Dark Side of the Moon* by Pink Floyd without contemplating the prism in a black void or Led Zeppelin's first album with the stark imagery of the Hindenburg crashing to Earth in flames or *Warsaw* by Joy Division and its white wireframe mountain range. Each one of those covers evoking a visual mood that compliments the musical style.

MG – Last question – are there any other anecdotes you'd care to share with me regarding this project? Perhaps you could tell me how you first met Keith Haring?

NE – I found Haring through two contacts I'd made in New York – film-maker Michael Holman and gallery owner Tony Shafrazi. Haring had his first one man exhibition at Shafrazi's gallery on Mercer street and was putting on poetry performances and curating art exhibits at places like Club 57 and the Mudd Club, so between what he was doing and the graffiti work Dondi White was doing, getting them to do what I needed them to do was quite a balancing act. Most art directors at the time would have quit in frustration, but I just had the right state of mind to be able to manage talent like this. The timing just had to be right to get anything done, and I ended up having to stay at the Mayflower Hotel on the Park (**Editor's note** – a venerable West-side apartment/hotel, now demolished) for a month, venturing out every day to try and find Keith and Dondi!

Additional Editor's notes – Keith Haring would soon go on to become an international art sensation, while White's work on the "Buffalo Gals" music video would provide many viewers – and aspiring taggers – with their first look at serious graffiti art. The multi-talented Michael Holman would go on to write the screenplay for Julian Schnabel's film *Basquiat*. Holman and Basquiat had been co-founders of the experimental industrial rock band Gray.

About the artist, Nick Egan (bio as featured on the albumcoverhalloffame.com web site) –

Notable album cover credits include – Bow Wow Wow – *Last Of The Mohicans/See Jungle! See Jungle!...*; Bob Dylan – *Biograph*; Ric Ocasek – *This Side Of Paradise*; Iggy Pop – *Blah, Blah, Blah* and *The Complete A&M Recordings*; Psychedelic Furs – *Midnight To Midnight*; INXS – *Kick, X* and *Live Baby Live*; Duran Duran – *Duran Duran (The Wedding Album)*, *Greatest* and *The Singles: 1986-95*; The Brian Setzer Orchestra – *Guitar Slinger*



Samples of Nick Egan's work

(b. July, 1957 in London, England) After attending college at the Watford College of Art and Design in Hertfordshire, UK, (where he earned his DGA degree in 1976), Egan was hired to create a t-shirt design for the 1977 single “Sheena is A Punk Rocker” for The Ramones and cover art for the singles “White Man In Hammersmith Palais” and “Tommy Gun” (from Give ‘Em Enough Rope) for The Clash (both released in 1978).

His work in the music field continued when Nick created his first album cover for the 1980 studio LP titled *Searching For The Young Soul Rebels* for the band Dexy’s Midnight Runners. He then collaborated with former Sex Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren, for whom he designed the album cover used for both Bow Wow Wow’s 1981 LP *See Jungle! See Jungle! Go Join Your Gang, Yeah. City All Over! Go Ape Crazy* and their 1982 EP *Last of The Mohicans*. Loosely based on Édouard Manet’s provocative 1863 painting titled *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe*, Andy Earl’s nude photo of the band’s then 15-year-old lead singer Annabella Lwin also caused quite a stir at the time, particularly after Annabella’s mother contacted Scotland Yard to express her displeasure with the image. As a result, the cover was replaced on the initial UK and US releases. His next project with McLaren – on the cover art for McLaren’s own critically-acclaimed album (which mixed African, Latin American and hip-hop beats) titled *Duck Rock* – resulted in artwork that impressed the “fine art” establishment as well, with the work included in the permanent collection of New York’s Museum of Modern Art. McLaren’s partnership with punk fashion designer Vivienne Westwood also brought Nick work as he created designs for marketing materials and her fashion shows throughout Europe.

Expanding his influence to the U.S., Egan moved from London to New York in 1983, where he became a fixture on the creative scene there and took on design projects for musical acts (Bob Dylan, Ric Ocasek, Iggy Pop and others) book publishers (titles include Bob Dylan’s *Drawn Blank*, *John Lennon: Listen To These Pictures* by photographer Bob Gruen and, more recently, *Punked Up – The Redstar Chronicles* by author Marty Thau), corporate logos (Elias Plays and North American Soccer League, as examples) and fashion, designing the “Sketchbook” label for the first collection by designer Marc Jacobs and creating graphics for Superfine Jeans and 2K Creative. Moving to the Los Angeles area in 1987, Nick then expanded his influence on pop culture by entering the new (at the time) “music video” world, directing now-famous videos for Iggy Pop (“Real Wild Child”), INXS, Oasis, Duran Duran, Sonic

Youth and many others (ultimately directing nearly 100 videos).

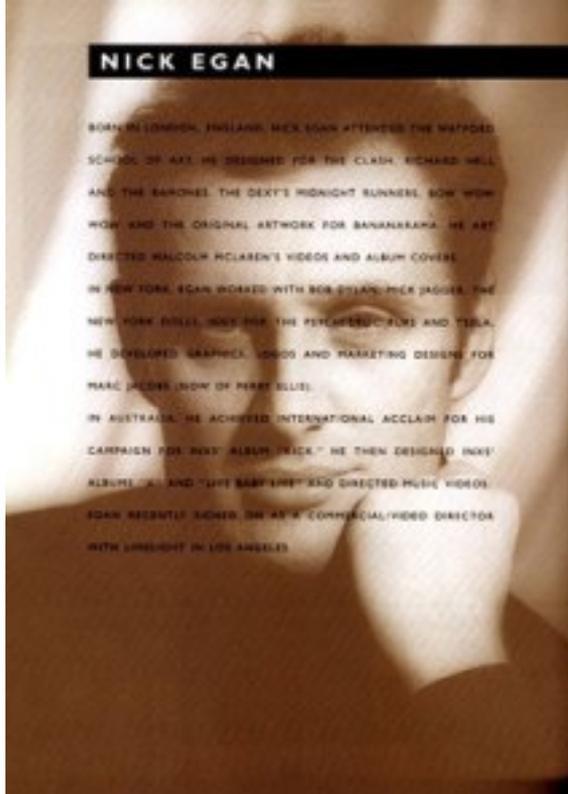


INXS album cover by Nick Egan

Taking his sterling credentials to the commercial video arena, Egan has also produced notable spots for a wide range of advertisers including Coca Cola, Levi's, Micron, Nike, Nintendo, Peak Performance, Sony, Titleist and many others.

To watch a recent Daily Motion "On The Couch" interview with Nick by co-hosts Tamara Conniff and KRCW DJ Jason Kramer about his work within the punk scene, with then-unknown designer Mark Jacobs and within the then-burgeoning music video scene, please visit this link –

http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x10csn3_nick-egan-artist-director-interview_lifestyle



For more information on this artist, please visit his web site at <http://www.nickegan.com>

About this AlbumCoverHallofFame.com interview –

Our ongoing series of interviews will give you, the music and art fan, a look at “the making of” the illustrations, photographs and designs of many of the most-recognized and influential images that have served to package and promote your all-time-favorite recordings.

In each interview feature, we’ll meet the artists, designers and photographers who produced these works of art and learn what motivated them, what processes they used, how they collaborated (or fought) with the musical acts, their management, their labels, etc. – all of the things that influenced the final product you saw then and still see today.

We hope that you enjoy these looks behind the scenes of the music-related art business and that you’ll share your stories with us and fellow fans about what role these works of art – and the music they covered – played in your lives.

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