

Robert Brownjohn  
By Alice Rawsthorn

When the Rolling Stones were preparing to release an album in 1969, Keith Richards asked a friend, Robert Brownjohn, to design the cover. As the title was to be *Automatic Changer*, Brownjohn photographed a surreal assortment of circular objects – a plate, film can, clock face, pizza, tyre and wedding cake – stacked above a vinyl LP as if they were on one of the autochanger mechanisms that enabled old-fashioned record players to play numerous albums without stopping.

On the front, tiny models of the Rolling Stones “perform” on top of the cake, which was elaborately decorated for Brownjohn by Delia Smith, then an obscure young cookery writer. But on the back, chaos erupts. The stack of objects has been vandalized. The record is broken, and littered with cake and pizza debris. All of the mini-musicians have tumbled into the icing, except for Brownjohn’s friend Mr. Richards. The only one left standing, he is still strumming his guitar.

By the time the album came out, the title had been changed to *Let it Bleed*, but Brownjohn’s design was so powerful that the band kept it. No wonder. The Rolling Stones were remarkably enlightened design patrons during the 1960s and 1970s, when they commissioned artwork for albums and singles from artists like Andy Warhol and Robert Frank. Even by their standards, Brownjohn’s design for *Let It Bleed* was a triumph. Like so much of his work, it was a model of design ingenuity: a seemingly simple, yet dazzlingly apt idea, so deftly and wittily executed that it was both striking and memorable.

“Brownjohn couldn’t help but be brilliant,” said Emily King, the design historian and author of the book *Robert Brownjohn: Sex and Typography*. “His omnivorous eye was matched by an ability to express things simply and clearly.”

Talented though he was, Brownjohn’s contemporaries knew him as much for his decadent lifestyle as for his work. Charming and gregarious with a flair for grand gestures, he was haunted by drug addiction. As his friend, the late British graphic designer Alan Fletcher, wrote: “He had real charisma rather than character. You always knew he was about five jumps ahead of whatever you were thinking.”

Born in Newark, New Jersey in 1925, Brownjohn, whose bus driver father died when he was 12, studied art at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, before enrolling at the Institute of Design in Chicago in 1944. There, he became a star student of László Moholy-Nagy, the visionary Bauhäusler who was at the forefront of experiments with moving imagery. After graduating, Brownjohn stayed in Chicago, where he hung out on the South Side jazz scene with Charlie Parker and Billie Holiday, and acquired a heroin habit.

In 1951, he moved to New York, and co-founded a design group with two friends, Ivan Chermayeff and Tom Geismar. As well as working for PepsiCo and the publisher Simon and Schuster, they designed part of the U.S. Pavilion at the 1958 Brussels World Fair. By then, Brownjohn had defined a distinctive graphic language that reflected the influence of European modernism and American pop art, but was

also characterised by idiosyncratic collages of found images and typography, visual puns, vernacular symbolism and hand-drawn details.

Still steeped in the jazz world, Brownjohn befriended Miles Davis, John Coltrane and Stan Getz, and played poker with Steve McQueen. He married Donna Walters in 1955 and when Eliza was born the following year, Davis became her godfather. Yet despite Brownjohn's efforts to kick heroin, his drug use escalated. "If someone says: 'I'm just going out to get cigarettes. I'll be back in 15 minutes,'" and you spend three days fielding telephone calls from his wife, you know there is something wrong," recounted Chermayeff.

In 1960, Brownjohn left New York for London with his family. His design sensibility was perfect for 1960s Britain: sexy, witty and provocative, sometimes shockingly so. A 1963 poster for the "Obsession and Fantasy" exhibition at the Robert Fraser Gallery featured a close-up of a woman's breasts in which her nipples formed the "O"s in "Obsession". His titles for *Goldfinger* and the 1963 Bond film *From Russia With Love* were fun, seductive and thrilling, yet faithful interpretations of Moholy-Nagy's *avant garde* theories. For *Goldfinger*, he projected footage from the movie onto a woman's gold-painted body. A golf ball slides down her cleavage, and Sean Connery's Bond runs over her thighs.

Brownjohn had come to London hoping to overcome his addiction, but failed. In Emily King's book, colleagues recall him arriving hours late for meetings, if at all, and arriving in his office to find him asleep or Anita Pallenberg, Keith Richards' then-girlfriend, slouched in a chair. Once he was arrested for breaking into his doctor's surgery to steal drugs. Another time, the police caught him trying to burgle a pharmacy. A friend met Brownjohn for lunch only to discover that he had invited several dozen people to join them on the way to the restaurant.

Yet he still produced extraordinary work. Both the *Let it Bleed* artwork and a remarkable poster designed to promote the peace movement in which the handwritten letters "P" and "E" are followed by an ace of spades playing card and question mark, were completed less than a year before his death of a heart attack in 1970 a few days before his 45<sup>th</sup> birthday. The peace poster and Brownjohn's designs for the *Goldfinger* title sequence are among the two hundred examples of his work acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in New York from his daughter Eliza in 2011.

There have been plenty of picaresquely dissolute designers since Brownjohn, but few with his talent and élan. Even the darkest stories of his excesses are told with affection for him as a person and admiration for his work. A few years after his arrival in London, Alan Fletcher arranged for him to talk to a group of designers. Brownjohn spoke lucidly but looked fragile and, at times, struggled to stay awake. An architect in the audience asked: "What is graphic design?" And Brownjohn replied: "I am."

*This text is a specially revised version by Alice Rawsthorn of "The Man Who Broke the Record on 'Let It Bleed'" a column written by her on Robert Brownjohn published in the global edition of the New York Times on 11 December 2011.*