



CHECKERED PAST

THE ORAL HISTORY OF 2 TONE

by Marc Spitz, artwork by David Storey

Graphic designer David Storey talks to Marc Spitz about the 2 Tone aesthetic and ska icons of the era.

What sleeves or promotional graphics had you designed before encountering Jerry Dammers and beginning work on the 2 Tone visuals?

While still at art college I was commissioned by Rocket Records to produce artwork for two Elton John tracks: 'Someone Saved My Life Tonight' and 'Island Girl', this work proved to be a stepping stone to a full-time job at Chrysalis Records (2 Tone's parent company). I joined Chrysalis in 1979 just a few months before The Specials were signed to the label.

You describe the Specials as a “breath of fresh air,” in one interview (Q mag I believe).

The late 1970's and 1980s was the golden age of record sleeve design in the UK with people like Storm Thorgerson, Peter Saville, Malcolm Garrett, Barney Bubbles and Neville Brody producing genuine 'artwork' for the 12 inches square sleeve format. But I think Jerry felt that a lot of graphic design was 'art for arts sake' and as such didn't resonate with the ska/punk fusion music he'd invented. His design approach was: bold, direct, 'honest' and devoid of any gratuitous embellishments... which was the antithesis of everything else that was going on at the time and a breath of fresh air to many people.

To what extent did Jerry explain his philosophy or politics when providing input for the band and the label's visual statement? How accurate is it to refer to it as such?

Jerry never intellectualize too much about the 2 Tone visual identity but he had a very strong vision of how everything should look aligned to an obsessive attention to detail. John Sims and I designed hundreds of items under Jerry's creative direction and it was always a slow tortuous process. Having said that We were aware that something momentous was being created and it was exciting to be a part of it.

How deeply rooted in Jerry's passion for integration was the checkerboard motif or was it a happy accident?

Jerry told me that the idea for the black and white check was prompted by some checkered plastic tape on his bicycle! It proved to be the perfect motif for the label's identity as it visually illustrates '2 tones' as well as being a metaphor for the fusion of black and white youth culture.

To what extent did you and John Sims listen to the music? Was it intuitive or were there lots of conversations that contributed to the designs?

The process was nearly always the same: John and I would receive a test pressing of the new record (called a white-label), which we would tend to play until it wore out. More often than

not Jerry would appear in our studio shortly after the white-label and ideas would be discussed and bounced about. Jerry normally had a pretty firm idea of what he wanted but the designs would emerge through several stages of development. Nothing ever went into production without Jerry's prior approval, even the lowliest button badge... he deserves a lot of credit for this as he had to fight very hard to maintain the core values he believed in.

Did “Gangsters” inspire the look of Walt Jabsco the figure who appears on the sleeve? How important was that Mascot to the entire visual/musical package coming together? It's an enduring symbol, certainly.

The 2 Tone man, AKA Walt Jabsco first appeared on the paper bag that Gangsters was sold in and was based on a photo Jerry had of Peter Tosh. Walt epitomized the 'Rude Boy' image and attitude that was such an important component part of the 2 Tone 'lifestyle'. It's possible that Jerry initially envisaged Walt appearing on only the Gangsters packaging but once the second 2 Tone release – 'The Prince' by Madness – appeared sporting the Walt Jabsco figure he was firmly established as the label's mascot and main emblem.

Or “Ghost Town” with its famous skeleton playing the piano graphic. Do you recall the first time you heard that song?

When John Sims and I first got to play the Ghost Town white-label I do remember that the eerie, doom laden sound had a very big impression on us and it was clearly an extraordinary piece of music. The Special's previous release, 'Do Nothing' had appeared with a rather cheesy picture of the band on the cover so Jerry decided that Ghost Town should be packaged with an illustration of some sort. John and I prepared a number of design options based on old photos we'd sourced from books and photo libraries. The skeletons image was a vintage postcard I found and was chosen by Jerry as soon as he saw it.

The "Too Much Pressure" album sleeve is another iconic image. How did that come about?

The Too Much Pressure sleeve was based on a picture we found in a vintage advertising book that John Sims owned. The album cover collage, featuring the crestfallen man, probably looks like it was done in 2 minutes, in reality took several days of minute adjustments and tweaks until Jerry was 100% happy. As usual when the proof came back from the printers we could all see that the extra effort had paid off.

What in your opinion is the quintessential 2 Tone track?

If I think of all the bands on the label and all their music, 'A Message To You Rudy' springs to my mind as the quintessential track.

Was there anything that you wanted to do visually that Dammers put the kibosh on?

Jerry would put the kibosh on any (gratuitous) design embellishments that John and I tried to introduce. At the time it felt a little unfair but I can see now that the strength of the visual identity is its obsessive simplicity and boldness and probably the main reason it has such an endearing impact.

You've spoken about him reacting poorly to a certain cleanliness in design?

Jerry had a jokey mantra that he used to chant

to John and I... "standards must be lowered!" spoken as if he was the chairman of the board. In practice this meant that all our immaculate artwork had to be distressed or roughened up before it received approval by Jerry.

What was it like witnessing the impact that your graphics seemed to have on a large section of British youth in '79, '80 and '81 or so? People were essentially dressing like Jabsco and in skinhead and Mod gear. Did you expect a movement and when it happened, did you feel like some kind of minister or visuals or symbolism? It seems from interviews with the bands that they were sort of surprised by how it all ignited: right band, right climate and certainly the right look, whether fashion or graphics-wise, yes?

It was amazing to walk around London in the early 80s and see so many Rude Boys and Rude Girls wearing our graphics, and there were posters all over London promoting 2 Tone gigs and records. But I remember being particularly staggered seeing photos of a John Paul Gaudier catwalk show – the models were wearing Ray Ban Wayfarers and all the clothes featured our checkered pattern. Up to that point we'd regarded the work as 'anti-design' so it seemed particularly ironic when suddenly the advertising industry too picked up on our style of design and 2 Tone style adverts started to appear everywhere. Unfortunately, when all this was happening we were a bit too busy to really sit back and bask in the reflected glory.

While the music and certainly the images have endured these 30 years or so, the bands themselves (discounting the recent revivals/reunions) burned brightly and out within a few years. "Free Nelson Mandela" being perhaps the last immortal 2 Tone track/sleeve. Can you talk about when you first heard that song, how you came up with the image,

When I played the white-label of the brilliant 'Free Nelson Mandela' for the first time I was knocked out and really thought it was a sound that would herald a new, second wave of Two Tone music. It has everything: a driving sound, a happy mood, danceability but most important of all it delivers an important political message. Jerry had been struggling in the studio for several months before he started working with Elvis Costello on Free Nelson Mandela and this collaboration seemed to give him a new lease of life. The cover proved relatively easy to produce too. Jerry wanted Nelson to look defiant and dynamic, which ruled out prison bar type graphics or images to do with the racist South African regime and once Jerry had found the right photo of Nelson it became a pure typographical exercise for me. Sadly, although 'Free Nelson Mandela' was a big hit, it was the last truly great piece of work to be released on the Two Tone label.

and what perspective you have on the dissolution of the Specials?

The break up of The Specials had its genesis in a tour they did of the States in the early 1980s. It appears it was badly conceived and organized and consequently the band became exhausted, fed up and disillusioned. This experience was compounded by severe artistic differences and personality clashes that boiled to the surface once they'd started recording again in the UK. Nevertheless everyone at the record company were shocked and deeply disappointed when The Specials split. It was a difficult time of factions and recriminations but, as a result of our good relationship with the individuals involved, John and I were able to continue working for both Jerry and the new break away band – The Fun Boy Three.

Have you been to the reunion shows? Plan on going?

Although I couldn't make any of the recent gigs by the reformed Specials I saw them playing at Glastonbury on TV... they were awesome!!