

Secret Origins?

Way back in 1977, in a damp but fertile farmhouse in darkest Essex, England, I designed this logo for a friend's vitriolic manifesto. Shortly thereafter a band began to form on the farm. A punk band. The logo became the band's uniting banner and even their flag. It appeared on the drummer's base drum, on the records the band began to put out on their own label (which also produced records by other emerging punk bands) and on provocative street stencils. The band was a small group of uniquely talented individuals who at first subsumed their identities into the mix and tried to speak with one united, angry voice. Why were they angry? No Separation of Church and State in the UK, mass unemployment and persecution of the Unions, the Falklands War. There's more, but try just these two words for a start: Margaret Thatcher. Also, it rains a lot.

In 1984 the band broke up. It's shelf life had expired. "Best before 1984" had been a goal. But with the records kept in print and supported by the powerful artwork on the sleeves, the band's music and ideas gathered a world wide following. The logo went with, adding to the bands visibility, it's stencil design making for easy reproduction, as originally intended. The world liked the band and the symbol so much that over the years the symbol has been adopted by fans (OK) and plain ripped off by the fashion industry and others. (Not OK). The fans took the logo to heart and with tattoos, to other vital parts of the body. The original symbol will never die, it seems.

However, I've always been interested in what else might be done with it from a design standpoint. Shortly after the band started I suggested that the snakes break out of their confining circle. Things must have been particularly bad in society that week. That design was never used, but it's in this book. I then made the version with the dove of peace, which was used and is also here, but I always felt the dove was a bit trapped. I think that was probably the point at the time as war had not been abolished. On the opposite page the dove seems to have triumphed over the snakes. Hope springs eternal. It was many years since I discovered the "fork" of the peace symbol staked out between the snakes.

The design does seem amazingly adaptable, I'm still surprised at what surfaces and how well it will fit. Record label, tea pot, coffee pot, swastika. Whoops. Well there have always been comments that the symbol looked a bit "fascistic", so I thought I'd see how far I could push that here. Sure enough, under scrutiny, and using the red "No!" stripe from street signs, the crooked cross gets broken up. The snakes face each other for the first time and one small crack in the center allows the original symbol to spring apart before simplifying, consolidating and imploding. The book ends with a question mark.

Some answers might still be found in the past. Like many obsessions that begin in childhood, my interest in symbols and graphic design goes back to comic books. Most superheroes had their own elemental logos: The Phantom's skull in a triangle; Batman's signal projected onto the clouds; Superman's shield; Green Lantern's source of glowing light: an alien lamp that amplifies its owner's willpower, enabling thoughts to become tangible, animated objects and gravity to be defied. In the grown-up world not many symbols are more powerful or as culturally resonant as the snake and the cross. A recent version of the symbol finally does away with the cross altogether: my logo design for an imaginary Snake Eye Ale. Your very good health! On the three pages following this introduction, you will see the first tracing of the symbol, its first stenciled appearance and a very early badge homemade by the band. Cheers!

- David King San Francisco.

