

Stamping the Beatles: An Interview with Michael Johnson

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Founded in 1992 by Michael Johnson, London-based studio Johnson Banks is giving stodgy philatelists a much-needed jolt. When the Royal Mail wanted to develop postage stamps that would appeal to children, Johnson took inspiration from beloved British toy Fuzzy-Felt and the ubiquitous Mr. Potato Head, and coined the first “interactive” stamps. Although Johnson conceived the idea in the mid-90s, it wasn’t until 2003 that the first “Fun Fruit and Veg” series of stamps finally debuted (they were re-released last year). His most recent *timbre de force* celebrates the Beatles with the kind of panache that stamps rarely achieve, with a playful irreverence that’s true to the Fab Four. In this interview Michael Johnson talks about the process of miniaturizing famed Beatles covers, breaking with philatelic convention, and the trials and tribulations therein.

Heller: The Beatles. Short of designing *Sgt. Pepper*, I can’t think of a better job than to design postage stamps that commemorate the Beatles’ comparatively short, but remarkable lifespan. Was it as exciting as I think it is?

Johnson: Actually it was a labor of love, and for quite some time I was weighed down by the enormity of it. All our first ideas were ponderous and overworked. We started it in mid 2005—that’s a long time to wait for an inch square piece of sticky paper. But now, all of that is forgotten and they are, I’m told, one of the most successful UK stamp designs ever. Blimey.

Heller: I’m sure they are. In the United States, however, one prohibition is that subjects must be dead—for at least 10 years—to be on commemorative stamps. Is there any such concern in England?

Johnson: There is a version of that rule here—only dead people or royalty (of course). However they’ve been relaxing this rule slightly over the last few years, and, let’s face it, half the Beatles are no longer with us. I’ve fell foul of the “dead rule” a couple of times, most notably when I presented photos of a children’s nativity play for a Christmas set—they looked fantastic—and [Royal Mail’s] first question was, “Are the children still alive?” True story.

Heller: Since a stamp is tiny, there were only so many ways to go—use the Beatles’ individual portraits, group portraits, time-lapse portraits, etc. How was the album cover motif determined?

Johnson: Originally we were briefed to explore “memorabilia,” which we duly did on another set that has also been published. But when I started thinking more about the albums, it became more and more obvious that they were so iconic, they could almost do all the work for me.

Heller: How did you decide to compose the covers in such a dynamic, though ad hoc fashion, making it appear that they are just piled willy-nilly on top of one another? I think it’s a small, but huge innovation. But was it a tough sell?

Johnson: Well, the plan was to comp them onto ’60s carpets. Then I watched one of my interns carefully cut out the test shots and it kind of hit me that the albums were the solution—forget the shag-pile.

Heller: Shag carpets—are you serious? Thank heavens you came to your senses.

Johnson: Yes, you’re absolutely right. Sometimes the simplest solutions are literally just staring you in the face. The issue of designing stamps is really that you gaze at designs on your screen, all the time forgetting quite how small they end up. When designing stamps you spend most of your time taking things out, not putting them in.

Heller: And then there’s the issue of the asymmetric perforations. How did you get the powers that be to approve?

Johnson: Well, that was tricky. Having had the lightning bolt, as it were, I rang my client and asked how they would feel about a wiggly set of variable edges on a stamp, and there was a long and rather pregnant pause. They got back to me days later and said it “might” be possible. Luckily enough the stamp committee loved them and was prepared to fight for them through the inevitably tricky stages when we were trying to print millions of tiny stickers with massively complex die-cut edges. Very nasty. I ended up actually designing the perforations myself.

Heller: Designing perforations, say more?

Johnson: Well, I mean designing exactly where the “edge” of the stamps goes, how the little semicircle “bites” work, and what happens when you turn a corner. Normally it’s not an issue—it’s literally done by the printer who distributes 0.9 mm holes along the edges (well, you did ask). Trouble is the first attempt by the printer looked like the mice had chewed all the edges so I had to go clambering up a “perforation design” learning curve. Fun.

I thought they might try and make me standardize the “pile” [of covers], as it were, but I managed to dig in a bit and make sure that each stack is quite different, which adds a lot to it.

The “Fruit and Veg” stamps we did in 2003 were useful, though, because for those we die-cut 70-odd stickers, so some technical precedents were set.

Heller: Would you say the Royal Mail is an “enlightened client?”

Johnson: Er, yes, generally. I guess after the “Fruit and Veg” stamps, and now these, we are building up some good ones. They’ve also done scratch-and-sniff, holographic—you name it, really. I only say “er” because I’d like every month to be as interesting as these, and they’re not. The hard-core philatelists are quite a conservative bunch, to be honest.

Heller: Did the surviving Beatles have any say in the design of the stamp or the selection of the album covers? Indeed, do they even own the covers (I know Michael Jackson owns or owned much of the Lennon/McCartney library)?

Johnson: Apple Corps was seriously involved—not so much with selection, given that we pretty much selected at least four of the most obvious [albums], but more with sign-off of pack design, copy, etc. They are notoriously litigious, so the Royal Mail played it very carefully. [Sleeve designer and artist] Peter Blake won’t even talk about *Sgt. Pepper* anymore because of the hell they put him through. Funnily enough, *Sgt. Pepper* is probably one of the weakest as a stamp because it’s just so detailed. It’s *With the Beatles*, *Help!* and *Abbey Road* that work really well, I think. We kept trying to slot the famous “Butcher cover” [the controversial, ultimately rejected *Yesterday...and Today* cover] into the stack, but they kept taking it out. I, of course, wanted the *White Album* to be one of the main albums, but I lost that battle.

Heller: Were there any controversies associated with either the decision to commemorate the Beatles or the design of the stamps?

Johnson: I think most people might think that the 50th anniversary of John and Paul meeting was a bit tenuous [as a reason], but I think the Royal Mail were just desperate to finally do some Beatles stamps, given that the rest of the world has beaten them to it now for decades. There was even a U.S. “Yellow Submarine” stamp a few years back. If you want a laugh, tap in “Beatles stamps” into Google Images and you’ll see some horrors from around the world.

I was attacked quite a bit for my “Fruit and Veg” stamps, so I was ready for the criticisms this time—but it’s all good this time, to use a bit of U.S. vernacular.

Heller: What do you mean you were attacked quite a bit before?

Johnson: Hard-core philatelists and collectors objected to the fact that the public had been given license to “deface” stamps by sticking stickers all over them. (For an example of philatelyannoyance.com, see “Royal Mail begins decline into trashy stamps” here (<http://www.gbstamps.com/musings.html>)) Deep down I think the collectors resented the fact that each stamp was now, in theory, completely customizable. Stamp collectors are a bit thrown by the concept of 500,000 stamps being unique.

Apparently though, I then discovered that if you had a “Fruit and Veg” set that hadn’t been die-cut (i.e., a mistake), that was immediately worth £1,000!

Heller: I must know, did you get the ultimate perk (at least for me)—did you meet Paul and Ringo? For that I would have done the job for free.

Johnson: To be blunt, no! George Martin’s son? Yes. Trouble is, I don’t like the recent remix album [*Love*, which Giles Martin co-produced] at all so that was a letdown. I know that McCartney and Ringo should have had sign-off, but ultimately the Queen has final sign-off. She likes the Beatles, apparently, so that was an easy sell. Probably fancied them in 1962, I reckon.

Heller: I actually loved the remix album. So, what’s next? The Stones, The Kinks, Pete Best?

Johnson: Personally I’d love to do Led Zeppelin. It’s more likely to be the anniversary of the discovery of a rare breed of mummified insects, knowing the Royal Mail. Actually, we have a whole bunch of ideas, so we pitch them all the time hoping that a new idea will eventually stick.

I once got so annoyed by the “dead rule” as regards the Queen [only members of the British royal family may be depicted on stamps during their lifetime] that I once proposed a whole set of dead queens—you know, sculpted heads of Freddie Mercury, Gianni Versace, Oscar Wilde, etc. Well, I thought it was funny.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA “Designer As Author” at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre* and *Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer, Second Edition* and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).