

The Work of Hipgnosis

‘Walk Away René’

Storm Thorgerson’s out-of-print 1978 book offers the inside scoop on Hipgnosis’ classic album covers

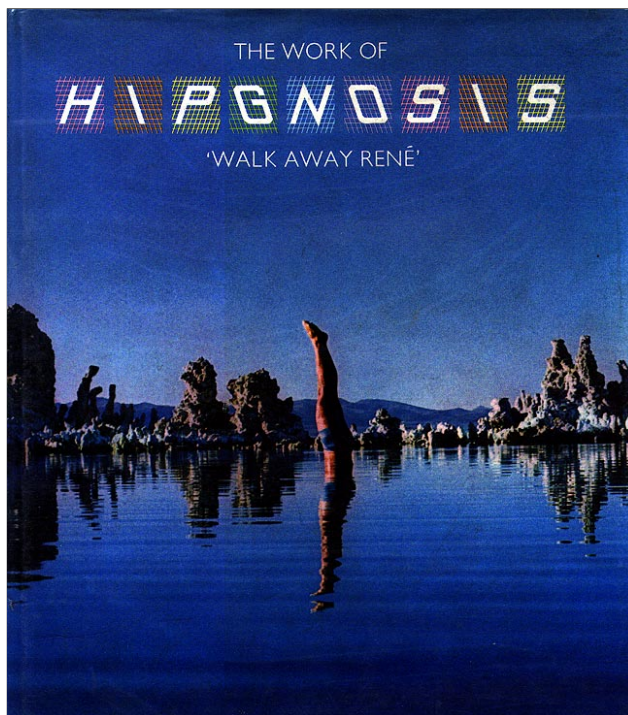
by *Craig Bailey*

From the beginning, Pink Floyd has always strived to go beyond the mere aural. The colored lights and strobes of the band’s early gigs at the UFO club, mecca of the London psychedelic underground in the 1960s, were nearly as much a part of the show as the music. As Floyd progressed to huge stadium shows in the ‘70s, the effects grew proportionally: Giant inflatables, laser lights and Mr. Screen have all remained visual staples of the Pink Floyd concert experience through present day.

From the band’s second album, 1968’s “A Saucerful of Secrets,” and continuing throughout the Floyd’s history with few interruptions, British designer Storm Thorgerson, co-founder of the now-defunct studio Hipgnosis, has provided a visual flare that has helped define the look of Floyd, while engraving a series of unforgettable images on the collective conscience of more than one generation of rock fan.

In his 1978 book “The Work of Hipgnosis ‘Walk Away René’,” Thorgerson tells some of the stories behind the countless covers he and his team created for bands like Floyd, Led Zeppelin, Wings, Genesis, Peter Dinklage, 10cc, and a host of others.

Thorgerson chose to organize the volume categorically, instead of chronologically. Chapters deal with topics like balls (“Venus and Mars,” Wings; “Musical Chairs,” Sammy Hagar; and “Elegy,” The Nice), cosmic (“Houses of the Holy,” Zeppelin; “A Saucerful of Secrets,” Floyd; “Past, Present & Future,” Al Stewart), mandalas (“Five Bridges,” The Nice; “Tales of Mystery and Imagination,” Alan Parsons Project; “Dark Side of the Moon,” Floyd), and sto-



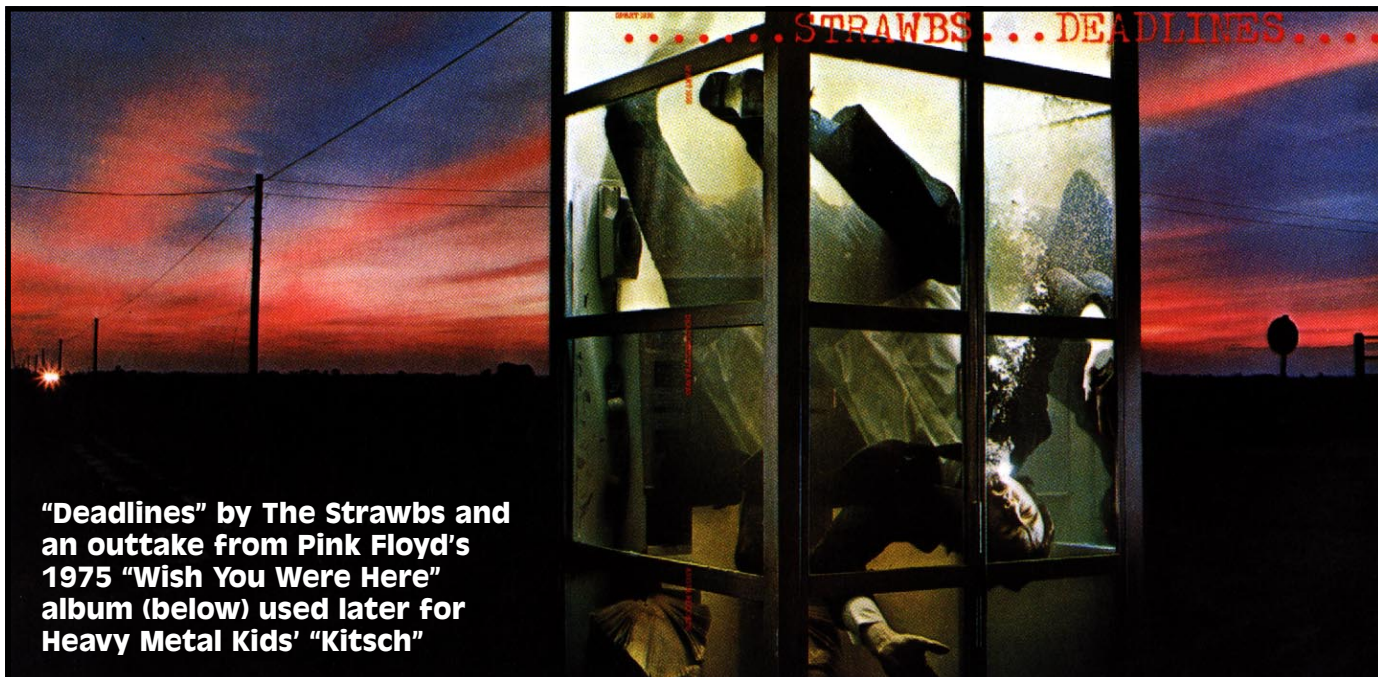
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ries (“Phenomenon,” UFO; “The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway,” Genesis; “Night Man,” Dirty Tricks).

Look for lengthy explanations of process and meaning for 10cc’s “Deceptive Bends,” Zeppelin’s “Presence,” and Floyd’s “Wish You Were Here.” But most fun might be the chapter Thorgerson devotes to projects he’s labeled as “tasteless” or “fiascos,” a chapter that features the making of Floyd’s 1977 “Animals” album, and the infamous flyaway pig incident, front and center.

“The Work of Hipgnosis” is naturally filled with many large, full color photos of the team’s work. The author also does an admirable job of writing the text, though he could occasionally be accused of assuming an excessively high level of previous knowledge of artists, musicians and the like in his readers. A little more background for some of his allusions would be appreciated.

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“Deadlines” by The Strawbs and an outtake from Pink Floyd’s 1975 “Wish You Were Here” album (below) used later for Heavy Metal Kids’ “Kitsch”

the-scenes accounts of the making of many Floyd album covers, there is little here of Pink Floyd that hasn’t been told countless times in other venues, be it other books about the band or the Internet. Still, hearing it from the “horse’s mouth” has a certain added value. By the way, the hard-cover “Shine On” book included with Floyd’s 1992 box set contains some passages taken directly from Thorgerson’s book.

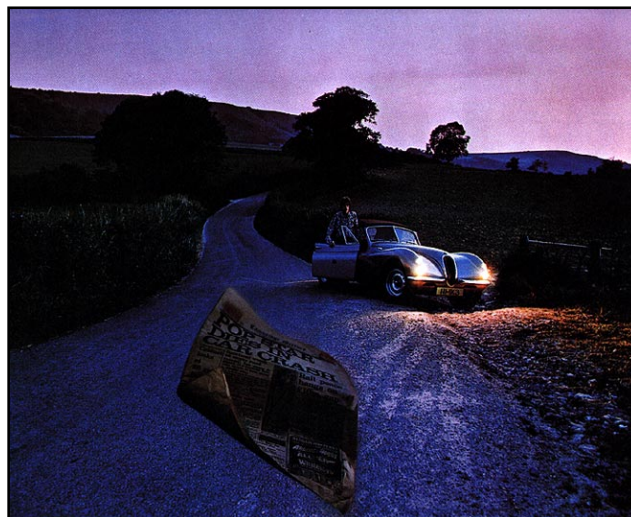
In addition to being a great collection of visuals, some entirely familiar and others that will undoubtedly be excitingly new to many eyes (“To the Hilt,” Golden Earring; “Kitsch,” Heavy Metal Kids, an outtake from the “Wish You Were Here” album; “Deadlines,” Strawbs), the book is an interesting study in the methods of graphic design circa 20 years ago. The rash reaction might be the same as that to vintage photos of Floyd tinkering with recording devices that look like garage sale rejects by today’s standards: How could they have created all that classic material with such rudimentary tools?

Thorgerson describes the processes that he and Hipgnosis followed in making this overwhelming portfolio as being entirely mechanical and chemical: cutting, pasting, bleaching, hand painting and reshooting. The black and whites of the team’s original office and studio on Denmark Street in London’s West End are proof enough that from little things, big things come.

“The premises were absolutely scuzzy and filthy beyond belief,” Thorgerson recalls in a phone interview. “I don’t think we gave it much thought. It was a pretty horrible place in retrospect.”

Worth the search

“The Works of Hipgnosis” has been out of print for some time — surprising since it’s hard to believe that Floyd fans alone wouldn’t have been enough to make the book salable



for years to come. Short of having the good luck to come across the title at a used book store on your own, employing a used/rare book seller to perform a search for it is your best bet in locating a copy for yourself. Many such firms will perform a free search with no obligation. Others charge regardless of their findings or whether you decide to purchase the book. Ask first.

A search performed by a Burlington, Vt., bookseller yielded three copies of the title, ranging in price from \$40 to \$100, including the seller’s commission. The book was issued in hardback and softcover, so ask which version you’re buying before laying down your cash. ●

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