



# THINKING INK WITH PAUL TALBOT

INTERVIEW BY JOJO FURNIVAL



**Every tattoo tells a story, Birmingham tattooist Paul Talbot knows this well. His striking and distinctive 'post-modern' style has earned many devotees world wide. Here he talks to CALM about the rock and roll days that inspired his work and why awards don't mean shit...**

## How did you get into tattooing?

A lot of children's sweets and comic books in the 80s seemed to come with free stick-on tattoos - that must have been the beginning of my fascination. I was also obsessed with Kiss as a kid, Paul Stanley was my hero and he has a small tattoo of a rose on his arm.

I'm from a small market town in the Midlands, so my introduction to tattooing was a small street shop near where I grew up. It was pretty typical of the time; run by bikers, with dog-eared sheets of A4 flash all over the walls and the unmistakable smell of Dettol and stale cigarette smoke.

My best mate was getting a tattoo there and asked me to go along with him, he wanted a design from an album cover and asked me to draw it. I'd always been known as 'the kid that could draw' amongst my friends - I was the one that painted everyone's leather jackets, motorbike helmets and so on. So creating a line drawing was pretty straightforward.

Anyway, when we presented this (not very clean) line drawing, the tattooist asked who'd drawn it. He then asked me to do a few designs (horrible things that looked like bad heavy metal band album covers!) in return for him showing me the basics of tattooing.

## You've been nominated for a Grammy twice, and produced a no.1 hit single - how did that come about?

My band signed a small deal with a British indie label when I was about 17 so I dropped out of college and put the idea of becoming a tattooist to one side. I thought 'fuck it, I'm going to be a rock star!'

So, I hit the road with the band and for the next few years we toured as support to the likes of

Pop Will Eat Itself, Bomb Disneyland, Faith No More and John Moore's Expressway. When I was off the road I made ends meet by working as a sound engineer/producer on recordings for bands like; Black Sabbath, Slade, Napalm Death and eventually a reggae band from Handsworth called Steel Pulse. It was the work that got nominated for a couple of Grammys. Between albums they asked me to join them on the road as their live engineer. So I spent the next few years touring with them primarily in the US and the Caribbean. As for the number one? I'll never tell!

**TATTOOISTS THROUGHOUT THE AGES HAVE DRAWN ART THAT INVOLVED SOME FORM OF SOCIAL COMMENT**

The music and touring ended up being a good decision, as the time away from tattooing that followed took my life in some interesting directions. That time shaped the guy I am and is the biggest influence on my artwork.

## You've been super scathing in the past about awards for art, whatever genre and medium, including tattooing. If it's not recognition, what is it that motivates you?

Art and communication - by any means necessary. In my opinion, one of the things that makes tattooing the most powerful art form around (after rock and roll) is that the iconography is constantly evolving. Tattooists throughout the ages have drawn art that involved some form of social comment based on the era or culture they were living in - whether they were aware of it or not. I believe that's still happening.

In the current zeitgeist there's lots of tattoos of movie, TV, music or comic book icons, rather than the more traditional family, religion and achievement ideas of previous centuries. This fascination could be seen as symptomatic of how 21st century life is affecting the monkey brain. Our faith in gods and religions is fading in the glare of the modern world, the family unit is a thing of the past, parents are so busy trying to achieve something to buy the things no-one needs to fill the void, that



they don't even notice their children growing up - let alone have time to really get involved. We're lost in the HD, LCD, USB, broadband static and searching for anything that connects us to some sense of self. So we're getting our new shiny plastic gods, icons and achievements as tattoos. Something I'm not nearly intelligent enough to explain connects us to tattoos and it's been that way since man created fire. In the decades to come art galleries won't tell us anything about 21st century man. But their tattoos and album covers will.

I try to create images that resonate by using digital illustration, collage and cutup techniques to 'remix' images from all kinds of sources and eras into something new that excites me and (hopefully) my clients. I really want to concentrate on developing the modern graphic style because I think it has a lot to offer the world of tattooing. I hope it's eventually accepted in the same way that black and grey or realism are now. That motivates me to create... and also the idea that one day, if I'm very lucky and try really hard I might just make the perfect tattoo. With all that going on I don't have time to worry about whether or not someone thinks I colour in

better than someone else and wants to give me a door stop to celebrate that fact. It's simply fucking irrelevant!

#### Where do you get inspiration from?

When the music business had chewed on me enough and finally spat me out, I came home to the UK for good, returned to college and then landed a job as a graphic designer. I spent my early teens touring with Pop Will Eat Itself and was lucky enough to meet Ian Anderson from the Designers Republic who designed a large part of the band's identity. I mistakenly thought all bands made their own album covers but after a brief conversation with Pop Will Eat Itself's singer, Clint Mansell, about who Ian was and what he did I discovered that all the cool and exciting stuff I'd seen on flyers, album covers and advertising was done by people called Graphic Designers! I know, duhhh! So that was what I ended up studying. I felt like I'd finally found a place in 'art' for me and it was a hugely exciting time that I have very strong and fond memories of. At the time, designers like Hydro74, My Pet Skeleton, Ralph Steadman, David Carson, Neville Brody, Jamie Reid and The

Designers Republic inspired and motivated me to create my own pieces and style, so whenever I'm feeling like I need an inspiration injection I tend to return to that period to 'pick up the threads' of where my head was then. I find this keeps me connected to my past but allows me to progress.

#### Do you find it easier to deal with your emotions through music and art, or is inflicting eye-watering pain on another human enough of an outlet for you?!

Yeah, art and music have always been the key for me. I take my frustrations and use them as fuel to push myself to be better. It's actually a very positive thing for me and I know that it might sound strange but anger really is an energy and the blues ain't nothing but a good man feeling bad. You just have to find a positive outlet for the negativity. It's a little known fact that I suffer from anxiety and panic attacks, not bad, but I do. In the middle of one - when I feel like I'm going to die, they feel like the end of the world. But, I actually only really suffered until I knew what was happening to me. Once I understood, it seemed like it was easier to get a handle on it and control or avoid the triggers.

I have had them whilst on stage and during tattoo shows but these days they're few and far between because I live healthier. When they do happen, I use them and the abundance of adrenaline to focus rather than freak, and turn the negative into a positive thing. I tell myself that I'm not going to die but the adrenaline is giving me superhuman focus power, so I should be able to tattoo better! It sounds really stupid but - not only does it work - it also calms me down quicker too.

#### If tattooing were banned tomorrow, what would you do instead?

I'd do illegal tattoos. I'm not going anywhere, I built this and it's cost me way more than money so if you want to try and stop me you're gonna need more than a law!

#### If you could, what would you tell your 16-year-old self now?

Hang in there kid, it's going to be a bumpy ride but it'll be worth it xx

Check out more of Paul's work at [paultbt.com](http://paultbt.com) and on Instagram @paultbt