London Calling: The London Issue

Going Underground: Harry Beck and the iconic Tube map

The album cover dates from 1939, when Columbia Records art director Alex Steinweiss decided his label’s offerings might find a wider audience with some added visual appeal. Since the very first Steinweiss design, an album of showtunes by Rogers and Hart, album covers have represented the apotheosis and nadir of graphic design, and have touched all points in between. Last weekend we asked our readers to select the best album covers of all time. In the age of the digital download, the album cover is sadly a lost art – which probably explains why 90 percent of the albums that readers selected come from the 1960s and the 1970s. Here are the Top 5:

   Designer: Peter Blake
   Total reader votes: 1,202

2. Pink Floyd - Dark Side Of The Moon (1973, Harvest records)
   Designer: Hipgnosis
   Total reader votes: 933

   Designer: Robert Fisher
   Total reader votes: 755

   Designer: John Kosh
   Total reader votes: 729

5. The Clash, ‘London Calling’ (1979, CBS Records)
   Designer: Ray Lowry
   Total reader votes: 695
Going Underground

Harry Beck and London's iconic Tube map

By Dan Carrier
The tube map almost never made it out of its creator's notebook. The designer was Harry Beck, a young draughtsman who drew electrical circuits for the Underground. Beck's biographer, Ken Garland, befriended him in the 1950s, and before the designer's death in 1974 he uncovered the story behind the creation of what Beck called "the diagram.

"As a native of a small village in Devon and moving to London to study art, I found the metropolis impossible to navigate," Garland says. "He saw the old map of the railways, it was messy, and tried to make the system seem modern, quick, efficient—and, above all, easier to navigate."

At the time, the maps of the network showed individual lines run by different railway companies. It was geographically correct, but impossible to read. The lines snaked all over the place. The first map, published in 1908, betrays the fact that different operators were competing with each other and could not agree where the Underground ended.

Harry Beck embarked on a lettermaking campaign to take back control of his life's work. It was fruitless. London Underground accepted no argument that the current map was influenced by his work, or that it was an inferior design. When Beck fell ill, his piles of sketches were destined for the dustbin, but Garland stepped in and saved them—recognizing that they were crucial to understanding its development. Among the papers Garland saved was the first pencil sketch of the diagram, now at the V&A Museum.

Garland explains: "Harry went one morning to his local station and there on the wall was a diagram that was not done by him. It was devastating. To add to the insult, he thought it was a crude and ineffective version of his own diagram. It was signed by Harold F Hutchinson, not a designer but head of the publicity department."

According to Garland, Beck had become known in the publicity department for being "difficult" when it came to the diagram, and there were moves to remove his stewardship. Beck embarked on a letter-writing campaign to take back control of his life's work. It was fruitless. London Underground accepted no argument that the current map was influenced by his work, or that it was an inferior or design. When Beck fell ill, his piles of sketches were destined for the dustbin, but Garland stepped in and saved them—recognizing that they were crucial to understanding its development. Among the papers Garland saved was the first pencil sketch of the diagram, now at the V&A Museum.

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helpful suggestions from tube bosses. "For the best part of 30 years, his home was turned over to the map," recalls Garland. "There were sketches all over the place. The front room would often have a massive copy spread out on the floor for Harry to pore over. His wife Nora would find, when making their bed, a pile of scribbled notes under the pillow that Harry had been working on in the middle of the night."

But in 1959, after nearly three decades of working on the diagram, he was unceremoniously dumped from the project. Garland explains: "Harry went one morning to his local station and there on the wall was a diagram that was not done by him. It was devastating. To add to the insult, he thought it was a crude and ineffective version of his own diagram. It was signed by Harold F Hutchison, not a designer but head of the publicity department."

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