

## “WHO KILLED MARTIN HANNETT”

### Investigation 1.

One of the things that drew many people to Factory records and their eclectic output was the ‘look’. That look was created, and defined, by Peter Saville who designed all the early artefacts from the posters to the record sleeves and also various outré ‘objets’.

The look was clean, neo-classical, classy, slightly detached and entirely different from anything else that was happening, in design terms, at the time. After the cut and paste and rip it up and start again and Xerox and splatter gun approach of punk, it was quite a surprise. Peter also became a founding partner of Factory Records with the impresario Tony Wilson and the actor Alan Erasmus. He had been a huge Roxy Music fan, as I had. He had been a student at Manchester Polytechnic in the early 1970s, as I had. A short term girlfriend of mine had been best mates with a long term girlfriend of his.

His is the third name on my list. I assume that he will be difficult, if not impossible, to track down. I have a book about his wonderful work entitled “Designed by Peter Saville”. I phone the publishers of the book. I tell the young lady who answers the phone that I’m writing a biography about Martin Hannett. She obviously has no idea who, or what, I am talking about. I then ask her if she has a contact for Peter Saville. She asks me to hold for a minute. It doesn’t take that long. A few seconds later she gives me a London telephone number for his studio.

I feel excited and slightly nervous. I haven't seen, or spoken, to Peter for nearly twenty five years. I call the London telephone number.

A young male voice answers and informs me that I have got through to Peter Saville Studio. Even the description is evocative after all that time. I imagine clean lines, long tables, silver, drawing boards, pencils neatly stacked, type faces. I envision long legged, clean limbed, models.

“Could I speak to Peter? It's Colin Sharp. I'm writing a book about Martin Hannett.”

I can hear their conversation off line.

The young guy, who I later discover is called Sam, repeats the information to Peter. I recognise Peter's well modulated tones- his voice sounds the same as I remember it.

“Hi. Colin. Peter Saville. I gather you're doing a book about Martin. How can I help?”

I blurt out as much as I can in the hope of hooking him in. I give him my credentials and remind him of the few times we met, and our sort of mutual girlfriends and how much I like the book about him and that my book is going to be published- so that he doesn't think that I'm just another over-enthusiastic fan from the Internet and a subscriber to some Discussion Group or geeky collector. I probably tell him too much, too soon.

He seems to think he remembers me; the girlfriend connection particularly has jogged his memory. After all the two of them did look like sexy sirens from the cover of an early seventies Roxy Music album and the photograph of the two of them in his book seems to pay homage to that.

I explain that I'm coming down to London, to meet with my Literary Agent and my Publisher. I hope this further reassures him as to the seriousness, gravitas and indeed glamour, of my project. I mention a date and a time and he thinks that he'll probably be in London on that day, at that time, unless he has to go to Manchester.

Manchester. MANCHESTER. Manchester.

Manchester, England. Manchester in the 1970s.

Man-chest-er.

I have such a history with the place, so many ambivalent feelings, and so many conflicting emotions. I spent the best of times and the worst of times there. I was a drama student there. I was married there. My first child was born and struggled through his early years there. I made some records there. I developed drug habits there that almost killed me. I met Martin Hannett there.

“Why don't you put all that in an email and send it to Sam. No point in sending it to *me* because I can't open the bloody things.”

I find this almost impossible to believe, but I warm further to the surviving Peter Saville. I recall that it took me over two years before I opened my first email and there was in excess of two thousand waiting for me when I eventually did. None of them were of any real interest.

“Great. Yes, I will. Thanks Peter.”

I am aware that I'm probably overusing his first name; it is a tendency that I have, that and talking too fast, too soon and too much.

He puts his young minion Sam back on the phone who gives me the email address, which is impressively brief and personalised: The email equivalent of a personalised number plate.

I compose a rather gushing electronic letter, which includes the over the top line- “Can you let Peter know I’m sooooo excited at the prospect of seeing him again after all theses (sic) years”. I notice the spelling mistake after I have sent it off, but on reflection I rather like the implied academic subtext of ‘theses’- the plural of thesis, I assume.

I also ask for a number of ‘contact details’ for some of the other names on my list.

I receive a reply a few hours later from Sam, which like Peter’s designs, is brief and minimalist. It simply reads Anthony Wilson- followed by the email address.

I then send an email to Anthony Wilson, ofcourse he will always be Tony to me, but he’s Wilson to you. Again I have no idea what response I might receive. Perhaps a curt “buggar off and leave me alone” or a polite decline. What I do get is a little cryptic, but extremely encouraging and generous, in spirit, message.

“The book on the magician is well overdue; will do everything possible to help”. Wilson.

I note the fantastic, and correct, use of the, much abused, semi colon. I am not disappointed by the signature-Wilson. And I have never before heard of Martin being referred to as the Magician (my capitals), but it suddenly seems entirely appropriate. If it turns out that Wilson gives me nothing further on Hannett, this will suffice. Wilson’s name therefore gets added to my second list, which is a list of people to thank and/or acknowledge.

Cut to the Chase.

Several emails and phone calls later, I find myself, down in London.

This is not long after the Tube bombings, although I seem to be the only person still experiencing paranoia. But then again I have always felt vulnerable on the London Underground, having been attacked on it twice and threatened numerous times. It has always seemed like a Mental Hospital for the Criminally Insane, on wheels, going slowly through tunnels, deep under the earth: Not my idea of a cosy cup of tea.

I have spent an enjoyable and glamorous afternoon meeting my tall, handsome, urbane, American (out of Chicago) Literary Agent Kevin. My agents' offices are just off Carnaby Street, which works for me on so many different levels, having been a teenage hippie boy in the late 1960s and then having seen the depression and commercial cynicism take over the boutiques and discotheques in the early 1970s.

I have also met my editor for the first time at a wonderfully fashionable, literary (I like to assume) Italian bistro somewhere in Soho (where else?). She is a Salford lass- bright, witty, enthusiastic, literate and drop dead gorgeous. She was a habitu e of the Hacienda, Factory Records' Grande Folie.

But more, or less, of that later, or earlier.

Peter Saville Studio is located in a converted warehouse in Central East London, or should that be East Central London or even London-Central East? It's a part of t'Smoke that I am not too familiar with. I like to imagine that once upon a time it was the centre of the Rag Trade and home to Sweat Shops (possibly even Sweet Shops) and I could check it out for historical accuracy, but then what would happen to my imaginings, be they dark or otherwise.

And I do believe, yes Lord I do believe, that without our imaginings, bereft of imagination, we inevitably lose our creative energy and without our creative energy, bereft of our life force; we wither up, we shrivel and even die. This forms part of my thesis (theses?) as to what happened to Martin Hannett. Once he stopped going into the Recording Studio with whatever raggletaggle bunch of musical gypsy-eos; when he stopped picking up and plucking, or thumbing, his bass guitar, or tinkling the electronic ivories; or messing around with switches and machines: then he became prime early grave material. You gotta write, you gotta sing, you gotta paint, you gotta swing, you gotta do something!

I find the right converted Warehouse, once a Sweat Shop always a Sweat Shop. The other names on the doorbell plaque, and plaque it most certainly is, are of Firms which conjure up images of colonial trading, import/export businesses, tea wars, Customs and Excise- I've always wondered what the hell Excise is.

In amongst these reminders of a bygone, got to be bygone, age is the living legend- PETER SAVILLE STUDIO. It is discreet, classy and as post-fucking-modern as you'll ever get.

I am not disappointed. The voice that answers my discreet, classy ring belongs to a young European female of East German extraction: a Berliner. It's too good to be true; too true to be good. Berlin is, obviously, my favourite city in Europe, if not in the entire world. It is the spiritual home of Christopher Isherwood's Sally Bowles and the Kit Kat Klub (not to be confused with the Klu Klux Klan), Adolf and Eva's final romantic days in the Bunker and most importantly where David Bowie recorded "Heroes", quite literally "standing by the wall".

“Colin, come up, Peter is getting dressed.”

She’s a young Marlene Dietrich with an inspired screenwriter doing her dialogue.

In my book- “Designed by Peter Saville” there is a fabulous photograph of the Artist in what looks like a silk dressing gown, very Oscar Wilde, very Peter Saville. He looks, as ever, dishevelled, unshaven, snow white tan and utterly adorable.

The fashionable Fraulein opens the door for me. She is in her mid twenties, I guess, exquisitely skinny, brunette and beautiful, with perfectly symmetrical cheek bones. She’s a twenty first century fox.

It is six O’clock in the evening.

“Yah, Peter is just putting some clothes on. Would you like coffee?”

The studio seems to stretch in all directions. There are, as I had imagined, long tables with drawing boards and design paraphernalia. There are lots of large, cardboard boxes waiting to be sent off- I discover that Peter is having a retrospective and is in the midst of organising it.

“Have you got any tea?”

“Tea? I’m not so sure.”

We are standing in the kitchen area. The whole place is open plan and the most unexpected feature is that at one end of the studio is a bedroom area with a double bed and clothes on racks.

“Oh yeah, we’ve got tea.” She announces.

“Colin? Hi!”

Peter Saville makes a good entrance, not grand, but nicely understated. He is wearing trademark white chinos and a black polo neck. He could have stepped straight out of Antonioni’s “Blow Up”. He has the classic trendy, arty look; every inch an Artist of the highest calibre.

He still looks dishevelled, unshaven, snow white tan and utterly adorable.

He screws his eyes up a little as he examines me, looking for signs of familiarity. He is far too courteous and urbane to say whether he does remember me or not.

“Forgive me a second whilst I finish some things off,” his voice sounds the same.

There is still the slightest (lipstick) trace of the original Cheshire accent but otherwise he has the pleasing tone of the urban Internationalist.

I chat enthusiastically to his gorgeous girlfriend, I’m guessing, about Berlin and Eastern Europe and how it reminds me of England in the late 1970s- all that sudden outburst of creative energy and experimental physical theatre, the DIY ethic and the mimeographed fanzines and the slapdash posters. Most of this is for Peter’s benefit. I’m still trying to establish my credentials with him.

“So, you’re writing a book about Martin Hannett?”

Eventually we sit at his table, which is fastidiously tidy, neat and silvery. I place a rather old-fashioned micro-cassette recorder between us and we shoot some serious breeze. We skim over his recent work, retrospectives and projects. He tells me that he does some consultancy work for Greater Manchester City Council. I, wilfully, misunderstand this to mean that he is now Artistic Director of Manchester, and from now on I tell everyone that is what he is. Manchester would become such a sexy place if he was. I love the idea of a City having an Artistic Director. They should have a producer too.

Some one who looks after the ambient soundscape, someone who provides the pulse and rhythm of the

Metropolis, some one who shapes the cacophony and turns it into an ever mutating symphony. That person, obviously, ideally would have been Martin Hannett.

We chat about the cultural significance of Factory Records and its place in the gestalt. Peter gives me his views of the structure, or lack of structure, of the partnership. He posits the idea that it was organised chaos, that, as is often the case, things were done for pragmatic reasons and subsequently commentators have read all kinds of meaning into the operational codes. We chat idly about the semiotics and semantics, as one does.

Peter has an endearing habit of pausing for considerable lengths of time as he searches for the mot juste, or the exact phrase, or the best image. He refers to himself in the third person as in- “Wilson was there with Erasmus, Gretton and Peter Saville”. He has eloquent hands. We touch on our mutual girlfriends, as it were, and the Roxy-esque photograph of them in his book. We both went to the same *recherché* Club for Heroes style discotheque in the mid-seventies where they played exclusively Roxy and Bowie. I was a Bowie boy, he was a Roxy rake. I am wearing a Joy Division tee shirt- the iconic image that adorns their first album-“Unknown Pleasures”. Peter keeps looking at it: it becomes a framing point of reference for us.

The Berlin beauty makes me another cup of tea.

I decide to home in on Martin.

“How about Martin then?” I venture.

“Martin....I don't think I ever had a single fucking conversation with Martin Hannett in my life!”

But ofcourse: How could it ever have been any other way?

