

POP WILL EAT ITSELF – IN CONVERSATION WITH IAIN A. TAYLOR

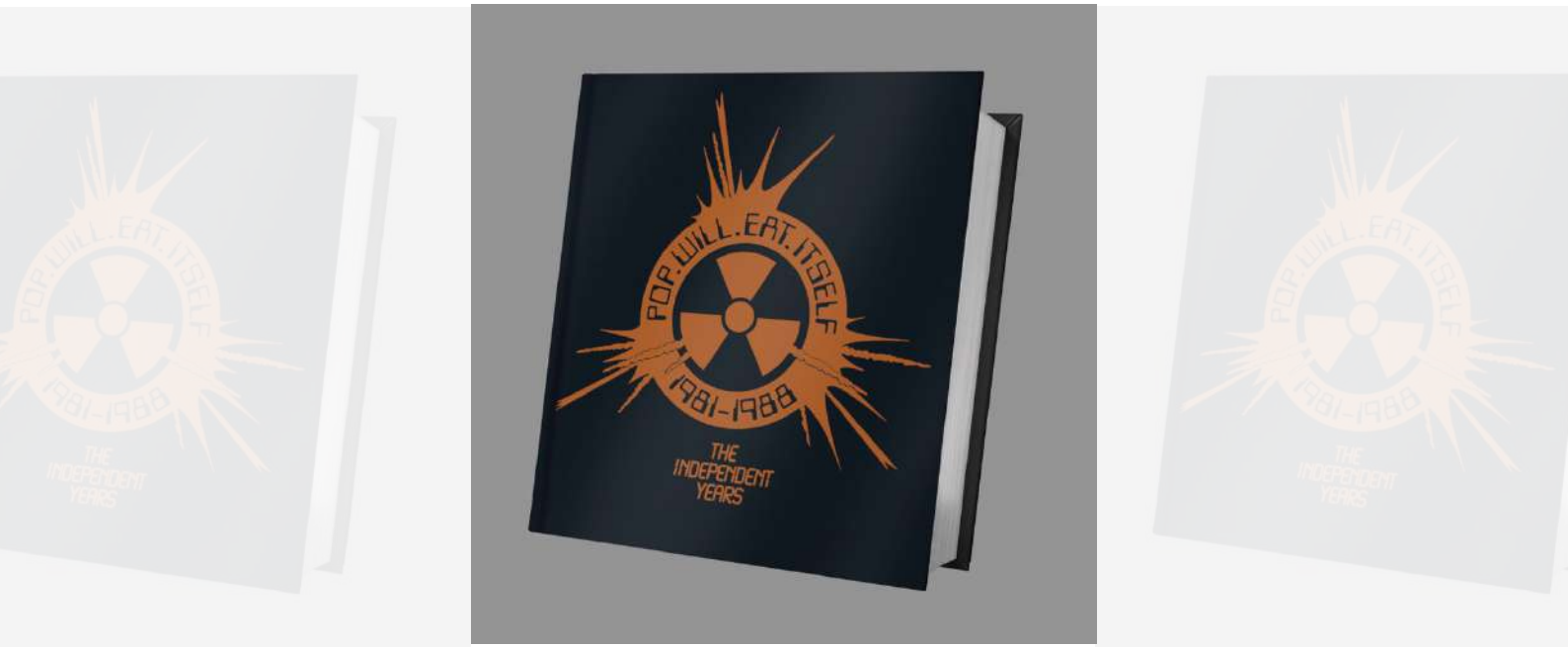
When thinking of the material culture of popular music, few categories of objects (with the exception, perhaps, of musical instruments themselves) can better exemplify pop's materiality than memorabilia. Across the decades, fans of popular music have found their fandom materialised through an expansive miscellany of records, ticket stubs, t-shirts and all kinds of other tokens and trinkets. Even younger, more contemporary pop fans, whose listening experiences are defined and shaped by the digital materiality of phones and interfaces, material traces of pop's ephemera are 'woven through' these digital cultures as 'concrete manifestations' of music fandom (Bennett and Rogers 2015: 29).

With this in mind, it seemed entirely appropriate, if not *necessary*, that the cover for this issue offered a nod for the significance of pop ephemera over the decades. And, as luck would have it, around the time that plans for this issue were coming together, Ian Davies, the Birmingham-based creative force behind the cover images of *Riffs*, was documenting a range of objects and artefacts of memorabilia as part of an ongoing project by Midlands electro-punk pioneers Pop Will Eat Itself (hereafter PWEI). From their inception in the early 1980s, PWEI's releases, tours and other creative outputs have been characterised by a signature design and flair – an aesthetic reflection of the band's genre-twisting sound which blends punk rock, dance and hip-hop styles and samples. With the recent release of *Pop Will Eat Itself - 1981-1988: The Independent Years*, a book which documents this period of the band's existence, including the extensive collections of memorabilia amassed by fans and the band themselves, *Riffs*' Editorial board member, Designer, and Editor for this Special Issue Iain Taylor caught up with Richard Marsh, bass player for the PWEI and proprietor of Birmingham-based analogue audio store RPM Analogue Audio LTD, to talk memorabilia, books, and vintage HiFi gear.

IT: The cover for this issue of *Riffs* features some images, captured by the talented Ian Davies, drawn from an upcoming book project which documents memorabilia and other PWEI artefacts from across the decades. Can you tell us a little bit about that project?

RM: So, a few years ago, a guy called Paul Snell approached us. He wanted to do a book about our [1989] LP *This is the Day... This is the Hour... This is This!* to coincide with the 30th anniversary of its release. I don't know if he realised at the time just how much work it would take, but when it was eventually finished it sold out within an hour of going on sale – it was limited to 100 copies due to licensing issues etc.

We were really impressed with the book and so, when he suggested doing a follow up project to chart the history of the band from its inception in 1986 to the present day and to feature as much fan collected photographs and collected ephemera, we all agreed that it would be a great project and agreed to contribute as much as possible. It soon became apparent that the sheer volume of material would require a three-volume set, and volume one, entitled *Pop Will Eat Itself - 1981-1988: The Independent Years*, was published earlier this year.



Pop Will Eat Itself - 1981-1988: The Independent Years

IT: So, how did you select the objects to be included? Did they come from the group's personal collections, fan collections, or a mixture of both?

RM: From my own perspective, I had quite a large archive of material press cuttings and ephemera, mostly from up in my mom's loft [laughs] and Adam [Mole] from the band also had a lot of archive stuff. Adam also agreed to get more involved by writing a semi-autobiographical narrative and of course there were lots of contributions from fans all over the world who became involved through social media. For example, Ben Kortekaas, who had amassed a collection of over 170 different items of band merchandise, allowed Paul to borrow and photograph for the project. We also approached many of the journalists and photographers who had worked with the band, like as NME writers for example, as well as crew members, promoters, agents, and so on.

IT: Why did now feel like a good time to revisit and document these artefacts?

RM: As I said, the idea came about initially as a way to mark the 30th anniversary of that album, we also embarked on a tour where we performed the album in its entirety for the first time ever! and kind of spiralled from there...

IT: Over the course of your career, PWEI have consistently produced visually and aesthetically distinct merchandise and art-works. Most recently, the limited-edition version of your 2015 *Anti-Nasty League* album came with a whole host of extras, including signed posters, badges, a patch, and a stems disc to allow fans to explore the record in really granular detail. How important has it been to you as a group to create a world of interesting and distinctive objects to accompany your music?

RM: When we started out, we didn't really have any budget for artwork or record sleeves, so we came up with the concept of using a John Bull printing kit [a DIY printing and lettering kit

popular with enthusiastic young amateur designers in the mid 20th century] on plain brown paper bags. We thought that this was quite a strong design statement, but it was also borne out of necessity as much as anything!

Quite early on in the band's career, we developed a very close working relationship with Ian Anderson of The Designers Republic [the iconic Sheffield-based graphic design company famous for their futuristic and anti-establishment designs].

Ian [Anderson] has worked on design for the band ever since, even up to our latest release last year, and his iconoclastic approach, repurposing corporate logos and so on, fitted in perfectly with the cut and paste sampling techniques we were using in our music.



*John Bull Printing Outfit – image by John Bell -
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/healthserviceglasses/>*

- IT: Clearly there's a huge jump from DIY-printing your own merch to working with one of the most iconic names in graphic design! Looking back over your career, how has the importance of merchandise and memorabilia (for you as a group and /or for fans) changed?
- RM: I think the idea that we didn't want to be photographed on our record sleeves but wanted to develop a design style that made our records instantly recognisable has been very important. This also lends itself to great merch, and I really love the way Ian has continually developed and revisited elements of his designs over subsequent releases. There's always a sense of continuity to the work which gives it a real sense of cohesion that we wouldn't have achieved if we had used different people for different albums.
- IT: Do you have a personal favourite piece of PWEI memorabilia or merch? If so, what is it and why?

RM: Personally, I think the [1988] *Def. Con. One* sleeve, the first one I did, was just fantastic. There were so many elements of that sleeve that would inform later designs. It's almost a blueprint for the entire body of work!



Pop Will Eat Itself – Def. Con. 1 – released July 1988

IT: Beyond the memorabilia that you’ve amassed over your career with PWEI, you’ve got a close relationship to a different world of music-related-objects, through your role as the proprietor of RPM Analogue Audio LTD [a store based in Bearwood, Birmingham which specialises in vintage and analogue audio equipment]. Can you tell us a little bit about your relationship with analogue and vintage audio?

RM: I’ve always been interested in sound equipment, studio equipment, vintage synths etc so vintage audio is just a logical extension of that.

The best thing about Bearwood is that, despite being slightly scruffy round the edges (which means that commercial rents are affordable), it hasn’t fully succumbed to the hipster vibe of other Birmingham neighbourhoods like Stirchley. All the fantastic food places are authentic and there are still enough traditional shops left – you know, cobblers, hardware stores, tailors, the model shop, fishing tackle, TV repair shops, that kind of thing – so running a vintage audio store there doesn’t feel too out of place! Of course, we are near to Harborne and Edgbaston [two of Birmingham’s more affluent neighbourhoods] and very close to the motorway and the city centre as well which helps!



RPM Analogue Audio LTD in Bearwood, Birmingham

IT: Why do you think people have become more interested in analogue again over the past decade or so?

RM: Really, I think younger people are looking for a way to connect with music in a way that digital can't offer, while for people my age there is undoubtedly an element of nostalgia. The store definitely has a certainly a type of customer who has paid off their mortgage, kids have left home, maybe they have had a life policy mature or taken a tax-free lump sum from their pension, and for the first time in their life can afford the things they always dreamed of owning when they were younger – you know, that could be vintage HiFi, classic cars, motorbikes, that sort of thing.

Of course, vintage gear sounds great, is fantastic value for money, is built to last (and can actually be serviced/repaired) and the aesthetic appeal is undeniable!

Pop Will Eat Itself - 1981-1988: The Independent Years is available directly from the band's online store www.shopwilleatitself.com