

Coverage

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SHEPARD FAIREY
OBAMA'S FAVOURITE
PAINTER

GEORGIA MAY JAGGER
LONDON'S FAVOURITE
ROCK HEIRESS

ES
Evening S... ine 05/10/2012

LIANNE LA HAVAS
PRINCE'S FAVOURITE
POP STAR

HARRY STYLES
THE COUGARS'
FAVOURITE CRUSH

HE
CANNOT BE
SERIOUS!

OR CAN HE?
SIMON BIRD'S
COMEDY CRISIS



Poster boy: Shepard
Fairey photographed
in his fine art studio
in Los Angeles,
September 2012.
Opposite: Fairey's
Obama 'Hope' poster





SHEPARD FAIREY. ASSOCIATED PRESS



ART FORCE ONE

He's the renegade street artist who helped Obama become president. But having just dodged jail in a million-dollar copyright battle, is Shepard Fairey finally going straight? No chance, says Craig McLean

Portraits by Steve Schofield



Got it covered, from left: CD cover for Led Zeppelin's Mothership; with Drew Barrymore at LA's Museum of Contemporary Art, 2011; CD cover for The Black Eyed Peas' Elephunk; with Sarah Silverman and Russell Brand in LA, 2011; logo for The Rolling Stones' 50th anniversary. Below: 'Envision Peace' mural on Turnpike Lane

Abaking Saturday afternoon in the scrubby Frogtown area of Central Los Angeles. Inside an anonymous industrial unit, up a dusty side street, Barack Obama's favourite artist is holding forth on a variety of subjects. Shepard Fairey, the man behind the iconic Obama 'Hope' poster, is holding a tray of paint. As he paints, he speaks. As he speaks, a light sheen of sweat gathers above his upper lip.

'I did that poster as an outsider, not as a part of the campaign,' Fairey recalls of the image that saw him credited with galvanising the youth vote in favour of Obama in the 2008 American presidential election. 'I was a grass-roots activist artist. I thought that Obama might be that subversive delivery vehicle for progressive ideas who would infiltrate the system and change it from within.'

But if anything was a subversive delivery vehicle, it was the image created by Fairey. Rendered in his signature red, white and blue, it appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine and was stencilled on the pavements. In his note to thank Fairey for the donated image, Obama wrote: 'Your images have a profound effect on people, whether seen in a gallery or on a stop sign. I am privileged to be a part of your artwork.'

It was an astonishing accolade for the unreformed guerrilla graffiti artist, who is friends with Russell Brand, and an inspiration to Banksy, and who has been arrested numerous times for his illicit tagging activities, most recently in Boston on the way to a retrospective of his work at The Institute of Contemporary Art.

Unsurprisingly, Fairey is impassioned and energetic; more surprising is his intense work ethic. He is an artist but he also runs a multimillion-dollar graphic design, art and clothing empire, which employs 28 people. He has previously ascribed his hunger to create to the fact that his Type 1 diabetes condition means 'I'm probably going to die 15 to 20 years before most other people'. The insulin pack he wears 24 hours a day ('except when I'm in the shower') is visible in the front pocket of his faded cords, as are scars around his eyes resulting from diabetes-related vitrectomies.

As a result he always has at least three projects on the go. At the moment there's his upcoming David Bowie-inspired

exhibition *Sound & Vision* at the Stolen Space gallery on Brick Lane, opening to coincide with Frieze. He also designed The Rolling Stones' new 50th anniversary logo and Led Zeppelin's upcoming album cover ('Initially it was gonna be called *Live in London*,' he says of the DVD/CD package that is now called *Celebration Day*, 'and they said maybe I should use some London landmarks. So I've got Westminster Bridge and Big Ben, but I took some liberty with the composition... so Big Ben looks like the needle at the top of The O₂').

Fairey is looking forward to his return to the capital. He was here over the summer at the Olympics-affiliated Pleasure Gardens in East London creating a huge mural – the ten-storey-high piece trumpeted the value of free speech. His last UK exhibition, *Nineteeneightyfouria* (2007), was inspired by his love of George Orwell's book and by his observation that London is bristling with CCTV cameras.

Surveillance, or the avoidance of it, is an artistic preoccupation Fairey shares with his friend Banksy. 'I'm happy for Banksy that he's

able to get a lot of money for his work,' says Fairey. 'And I'm also perfectly happy for the people who've stolen stuff off the wall and sold it for a lot of money. They're no more opportunistic than Banksy for seizing the space in the first place. But I like to see art on the street, so I'd prefer that it stayed around and wasn't cut out with a chainsaw and removed.'

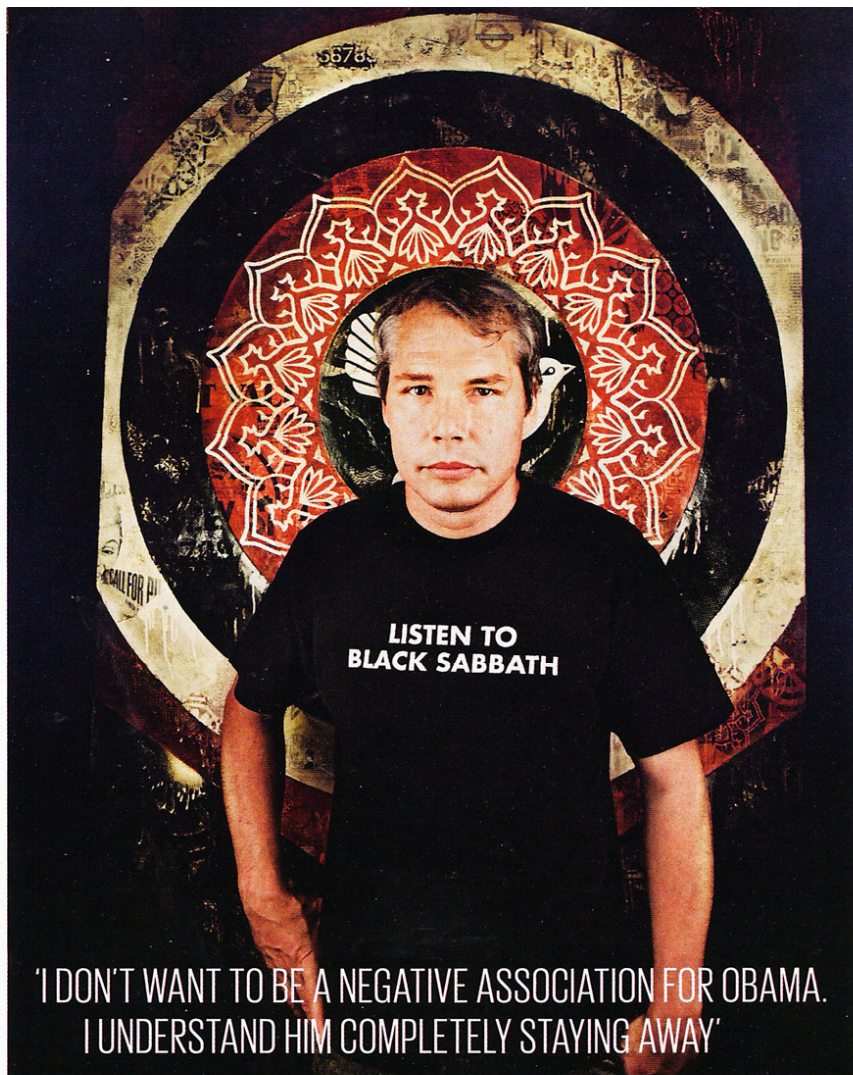
As for his other notorious friend Russell Brand, they first met at an LA charity event, and Brand asked him to design the invitations for his wedding to Katy Perry. Fairey marked the Indian setting for the nuptials by embellishing a photo of the comedian and pop star at the Taj Mahal 'with ornaments and lotuses and stuff. But at the time somebody from either Russell's or Katy's camp was leaking stuff to the tabloids, so they had me make minor changes to every single invitation – 70 of them.' Did they catch the mole? 'No!' he smiles. 'No one leaked it. I spent all that time for nothing. But it was a clever way to try to catch the rat.'

Fairey has subsequently designed book jackets and TV visuals for Brand, and feels their connection is underpinned by a shared philosophy: 'The way you contribute to the wellbeing of your fellow human beings will affect your own wellbeing. With Russell, this is all him fighting against his natural tendency to be "Everyone look at me!" and be very self-centred. And he makes fun of it. He says: "These boots are just a silly possession... but they make me feel so much better about myself." I love that!' he laughs.

Shepard Fairey, 42, was born in Charleston, South Carolina, into a middle-class household (father a doctor, mother an English teacher and former cheerleader). A teenage love of skateboarding, punk rock and graffiti coalesced around an enthusiasm for street art, and Fairey took an illustration course at the prestigious Rhode Island School of Design. In 1989 he began using a bold, blocky, stencilled portrait of WWF wrestler André the Giant (famous for his appearance in *The Princess Bride*) in his illegal tagging campaigns, and the image soon became ubiquitous. In 1995 he added the slogan 'Obey' to the image. It was a simple, perhaps simplistic message. 'I wanted to encourage people to question everything, their obedience to authority,' he said.

Fairey moved to San Diego, keeping





SHEPARD FAIREY

than three years. His troubles began when he used a photograph of the Illinois senator as the basis of his design. It went viral, and became the defining image of the election that swept the young, fresh, black Democrat to power after eight years of Bush Republicanism. But news agency Associated Press pointed out that the photograph was their property, and sued Fairey. In response, Fairey initially claimed he'd used a different photograph. Then he realised that AP was correct. But rather than come clean, Fairey tried to hide his error by deleting computer files and creating new files. His transgression was discovered, and two weeks before our meeting, he had his day in court.

To his credit he's posted a lengthy *mea culpa* on his website. But today he adds that 'what's not widely known' is that the same weekend as his legal battle with AP was kicking off 'I got arrested in Boston and charged with 32 felonies for allegedly tagging'. Fairey's ongoing enthusiasm for the renegade craft of street art has resulted in some 19 arrests – 'and I've been in jail a bunch of times'.

Nonetheless, the Boston entanglement couldn't have come at a worse time. Instead of admitting his 'honest mistake' over which image he'd used, 'I was scared and panicked and just didn't say anything. Then the longer I kept it a secret the more awkward it was to come forward.' He grimaces as he recalls the five months it took him to come clean to his own lawyers. 'I'm not making excuses. It was wrong and I knew it was wrong at the time. But it was the perfect storm of circumstances, and I just lost my shit.'

Did Obama reach out with a message of support? Fairey shakes his head. 'No, no. And a lot of people were like, "Aren't you disappointed in Obama?" But look at the way politics works. I don't want to be a negative association for Obama. I understand him completely staying away from it.'

Fairey dodged a prison term but was ordered to undertake 300 hours of community service, pay a \$25,000 fine to the US government and adhere to two years' probation. This on top of the reported \$1.6 million fine he's already had to pay AP and the commitment to apply his visual skills to images supplied by the agency.

When I bring up his conviction, Fairey inhales before resuming his conversational flow: 'I made a really stupid set of decisions and my big lapse happened to be the most public lapse, when I was under a microscope. I'm a very, very hard-working, honest, open person.'

He adds: 'My art is part of my therapy – trying to do something that I'm excited about visually, but also have it not just be about my own ego. It's hopefully inspiring or provocative, and I raise a lot of money for charities with my art. So I think I am working through how to make my liabilities an asset at the same time.'

You can see why that judge spared him jail, can't you? ES

Sound & Vision is at Stolen Space, E1, from 19 October to 4 November (stolenspace.com)

up his illegal street-art activities while also working on guerrilla marketing, branding and design campaigns. He met his wife Amanda there in 1999. His wooing of her involved late-night, law-flouting poster campaigns on the streets of LA. 'I'd be up a ladder on a billboard, lowering a rope to her and she'd tie a bucket on,' Fairey grins. 'She calls it the riskiest courtship you could ever imagine.'

Amanda now helps run the couple's Studio Number One design agency and they have two daughters, seven-year-old Vivienne (after Westwood) and four-year-old Madeline (after the Paris-dwelling schoolgirl in Ludwig Bemelmans' children's books). The couple moved to LA in 2001, and Fairey rapidly expanded his business and art portfolio, parlaying his illustrative and conceptual skills and his passion for street-level propagandising into a successful business. As the subheading on his obeygiant.com website, has it: 'Manufacturing quality dissent since 1989.'

I first met Fairey four years ago in Denver, when the city was hosting the Democratic National Convention at which Barack Obama was being officially endorsed as the party's presidential candidate. Across town the political razzmatazz was accompanied by parties, gigs and seminars – and in a grungy, studenty

neighbourhood, an art exhibition entitled *Manifest Hope*. It showcased a selection of pro-Obama pop art propaganda, and the whole thing had been galvanised by Fairey's already famous 'Hope' poster. 'Portraiture is something I've always done of my music heroes – Joe Strummer, Bob Marley, Joey Ramone, Henry Rollins,' Fairey told me then. 'My Obama poster is in the tradition of my work, to put people I think are trailblazers on a pedestal.'

The 'Hope' poster may have been the most important poster in the history of US politics, but it has also caused Fairey considerable problems. He was recently found guilty of criminal contempt by a New York court, the final chapter in a legal case that has rumbled on for more

Below: with his wife Amanda, 2012. Right: André the Giant artwork at ICA, Boston

