

Memoire 5

An alternative career.

In the 1960s, it seemed as if every other British pop star (often the talent-challenged) had been to art college. And being torn between the visual and the aural, I attended art college as well, although by that time (1972), I had already made my mind up to pursue a career in music. (My desire to be a pop star lasted luckily only a few months). I had abilities and natural skills across the creative board - a bit of a polymath - but from the age of 15 to 25, it was all confusion as to what to do with it. Only by moving to Australia in 1976 did the penny finally drop, and I could see a way of combining the pieces of the skill puzzle into a *Gesamtkunstwerk* around my principle instrument, the violin.

But first to my abysmal education at a posh school for which I had won my paid attendance by scholarship. Not only was the music tuition shockingly bad, but the art classes were largely non-existent. I had the same teacher for a decade, and in that time I can remember only one or two lessons where he actually turned up and taught me something substantial. Normally, his trick was 'I'm just going to to the printers, boys', code for I'm skiving off to the pub or to put my feet up somewhere. On one hand, I can observe that this lack of pedagogy gave me the wherewithal to become an autodidact, which I have remained throughout a mixed career. On the other hand, what a fucking waste of time was that!

By the time O level exams loomed at the age of 15, the class had been divided into those who were considered bright (they took physics) and those who were considered losers (they took art). What was extraordinary was that the losers always had a 100% pass rate. Bert, the art teacher, may've been a lazy bastard, but he knew how to achieve abundant results and keep his job. As the exam time neared, he got everyone in the class (who had zilch talent for drawing) to learn a picture by tracing over and over again the same image. Once the picture was learnt, he copied it with a strong smelling 'spirit duplicator' and got everyone to learn a colouring regime. (I was given a free hand because I could draw).

Then Bert's stroke of genius. A week before the exam, he made everyone learn 20 different titles with which their mechanical master works might fit. The boy I sat next to in art classes was named Timothy, and he was, shall we say, thick as a brick. He had been struggling with a farmyard scene featuring two pigs, and had through much endeavour been able to achieve a degree of crude likeness. It came to the day of the exam. I found myself sitting next to Timothy again, and as I looked down the list of questions on the exam paper, I realised there was absolutely nothing about farms, animals, rural life, nature, compost, or even meat. I thought to myself he is going to fail. While I illustrated some complicated naval battle scene, Timothy went through his ritual of creating the two pigs. After two hours, the exam was over and I had to find out what question his two pigs had answered? A moment of brilliance. He had confounded the proposition 'Anthony meets Cleopatra: please illustrate' by scrawling on the side of one pig the name 'Anthony' and on the other 'Cleopatra'. He passed.

Hermann Hecht was a refugee from post-war Germany. He taught at Croydon College of Art where I enrolled for an unambitious diploma in design. Still unsure how I was going to make a living at music, the course offered skills in television (to be acquired in their own TV studio, in which I made gothic-tinged movies) and animation (mine were always too fast), as well as graphic design — I thought this might evolve into a career of some sort. But it was Hermann who was the key to unscrambling my brain, some real education.

On the first day (before I'd even met him), we were given the task of designing a logo for a fictional fire brigade. I launched quickly into creating bright red, pointed, aggressive flames and thinking this design business is pretty easy stuff. Behind me stood Hermann, who announced 'That is the most disgusting thing I have ever seen in my entire life!' He walked off, leaving me a destroyed heap. On returning some time later, he sat down and said 'look' as he flicked his cigarette lighter ...revealing to me for the first time that flames are not angular but smooth, not pointed but round, not bright red but a full range of spectrum colour. Hermann became the mentor I never had in music. His approach to design was as a life skill no matter what the subject or task; everything was solvable in a post-Bauhaus method and rigour. Whenever I complained to him that some problem was too complicated, he would sit down, light up a cigarette and explain

simple, logical solutions, one after the other - although by sleight of hand he had me doing all the work. He demanded that there be content based on observation leading to experiential knowledge. I've tried to do that ever since.