

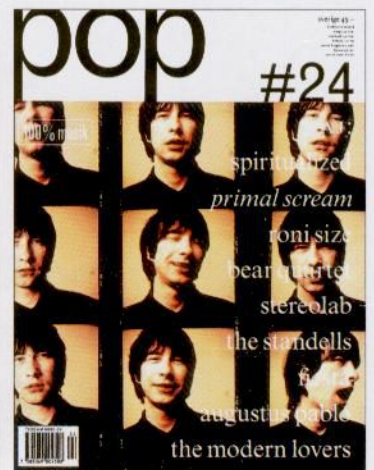
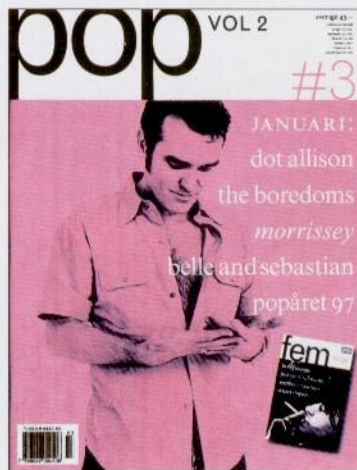
By Nicole O'Neill

Pure Pop

These days, far too many art directors at far too many pop-music magazines seem to emphasize visual innovation and irreverence at the expense of language and readability. You know the scenario: You're at your newsstand, looking for the magazine that will inspire you to blow half your paycheck on a handful of new CDs, but all the contenders are battling in some louder-than-hell graphic design contest. Sometimes you can barely recognize the cover artist beneath swarms of shocking-pink/laserbeam-colored text. And if you can shut out the cover's visual noise, wait till you flip the page. You might come across something like David Carson's notorious *Raygun* spread on crooner Bryan Ferry, published entirely in Zapf Dingbats.

The excess of most pop magazines' trendy, trashy design shortens their shelf life to that of a carton of milk, and the mags go straight into the dustbin instead of the serious collector's archive. Still, as some insightful soul once said, a whisper is the best way to make your point when everyone else is raising his or her voice. And whispering is the highly effective design approach behind a Swedish music magazine called *Pop*.

You don't need to understand Swedish to be struck by the purity of this monthly, designed by art directors Stefania Malmsten and Lars Sundh. (You do need to visit Sweden to buy a copy, but from here you can pull up its Swedish Web site, www.pop.se/nypoppat.html.) A classic, clean typeface (Monotype Times



and Monotype Grotesque, customized by designer Hubert Jocham) suddenly seems very hip here. And the understated, jazzy layout captivates the eye, guiding it smoothly through extensive feature articles and in-depth interviews. *Pop's* design boosts up the photographs so that all the featured artists look like superstars, no matter what their place in the public consciousness.

From its debut in 1992, *Pop* has had as its ambition to "take pop music and pop culture seriously." *Pop* gives no editorial preference to household names over obscure artists—last year, a seven-page story on rock legend John Fogerty ran side by side with a feature on Attica Blues, a British electronic soul orchestra—and a similar philosophy informs its layout. "Lars and I had been checking out the different music magazines that were out there," Malmsten recalls. "We decided to take the opposite route—a cleaner layout that would look modern at the same time. So we picked

our inspiration from Blue Note album covers, *Life's* classic issues, and French magazines like *Les Inrockuptibles* instead."

Smart esthetics are also crucial in getting that elusive, exclusive interview and attracting top talent. Unable to hire photographers on its tight budget, *Pop* resorted to using old images or the record labels' press photos. But by laying colored tone plates over black-and-white images, *Pop* made the pictures its own and created a design trademark. Today, *Pop's* photo budget remains small, but Sweden's top photographers stand in line to work there.

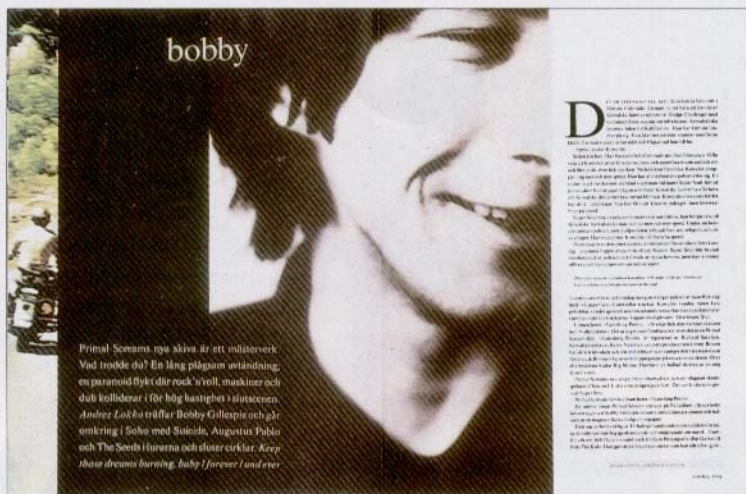
Although *Pop* has more access to original photographs than it did in its early days, it still sticks to a less-is-more cover philosophy: usually a single photo accompanied by a few lines of black or white text, listing the featured artists in roman and the cover subject in italics. Inside spreads are unified by one type family and a basic grid, holding all photography and illustration within the

specified column space. To avoid rigid symmetry, smaller pictures run in squares and rectangles of different sizes, placed onto the grid almost like shapes from a Mondrian painting. This style recalls the Blue Note album covers' generous use of white space and geometric shapes, creating movement and harmony.

Major features in *Pop* often introduce text with full double-spread photographs. Last year, an issue featuring British rock act Primal Scream ran five full-page photos before even starting the text. After five pages of text, another double-spread photo of the band popped up before the story continued for four more pages. (Sixteen pages on a single artist: only outside America.)

But the spacious, modernist layout and the extensive photography has another effect: It makes the magazine very easy to read, despite 8.5-point body copy. And regular departments—pop culture history, album reviews—also create an appetizing overview for the reader.

With remarkably strong form and content, *Pop* demonstrates its refreshing conviction that readers are both willing and able to stick with something longer than a page, puncturing Frank Zappa's wisecrack that rock magazines are made by people who can't write for people who can't read. In Sweden, *Pop* has become a tastemaker: Record labels approach it first with their wares, and many artists hyped by *Pop* later earn lavish praise from other sources. Members of *Pop*'s staff have also launched off-spring projects: Koala, a publishing company; Lollipop, a music festival;



Primal Screamns rög skiva är ett mästerverk. Vad trodde du? En lång plöjgamm utvärldning, en paranoid flykt där rock'n'roll, maskiner och dub kolliderar i för hög hastighet i slutsceen. Anders Lohka träffar Bobby Gillespie och går omkring i Solna med Stinson, Augustus Pablo och The Seeds i furarna och sluter cirklar. Keep those dreams burning, baby! (Jovare! / and ever)



and three TV series steeped in Monty Pythonesque humor.

As for graphic design, the number of magazines, fanzines, and Swedish album covers that haven't borrowed from *Pop*'s style—mostly its type style—can be counted on one hand. And that delights Malmsten. "It's fun that young designers pay respect to the classic principles of typography," she says, "and that they

understand the importance of clarity and readability."

This spring, Malmsten and the *Pop* staff proudly announced the arrival of a new baby: a fashion magazine titled, modestly, *Bibel* ("bible"). "Once again, we have created a magazine that hasn't existed in Sweden before," the editor's letter states. Like Britain's *Wallpaper*, *Bibel* is intended as a contemporary lifestyle monthly

without the horoscopes and diet-related articles found in its older peers. In *Bibel*, pop artists discuss streetwear brands and vintage clothing; a report on hair fashion means a visit to an Afro salon, checking out the latest hip-hop styles. *Bibel*'s articles on food adapt *Wallpaper*'s clinical approach: The featured vegetables and utensils could almost be mistaken for surgical tools, stripped of every juicy, erotic illusion typical of traditional food photography.

Bibel's similarities to *Pop* are, of course, apparent and essential. But the design, so clear and consistent in *Pop*, gets messy and indistinct here. Too many short articles and pictures are squeezed onto the pages, different type styles are used without good reason, and the diffuse sections make the overall impression... confusing. But these are beginners' faults, Malmsten says. "We're on the experimental stage with this one. Since we couldn't make a test issue, *Bibel* will have to grow up in public."

Nicole O'Neill covers music and design for the Swedish newspapers DN and Göteborgs-Posten, and has been the entertainment editor at Hallands-Posten. She lives in New York City.

