

The Creative Universe

Trevor Jackson



Words **Andy Thomas**
Photography **Chris Tang**

It's a bitingly cold February afternoon when I make my way to the East London studio of one of the true underground renaissance men. Trevor Jackson is known as much for his strong opinions as his creative output. For three decades now he has been innovating at the cutting edge of audio and visual culture through his work as a producer, sound designer, art director, graphic designer, filmmaker, label owner, and DJ.

In the '90s, Jackson went by the nom-de-plume of The Underdog. He worked with the kind of cognoscenti-conscious groups known to hardcore record shop diggers, like multi-racial independent UK hip-hop trip The Brotherhood. Jackson's Bite It! label also released similar nuggets from groups like Scientists of Sound and 100% Proof. Jackson's distinctive monochrome design adorned the sleeves of these indie hip-hop LPs. And it's this multidisciplinary aesthetic that has marked him out as a radical DIY pioneer who laid the groundwork for today's exciting creative landscape.

Whether through his own recordings under the name Playgroup or releasing the early music of Four Tet and The Rapture on his cultish Output Recordings label, Jackson has been both a constant musical innovator and industry outsider. As a producer, his abstract electronic sensibilities have seen him remix artists like Massive Attack and UNKLE. At the same time, a career in graphic design that began with raw DIY record sleeves created against the backdrop of London's Acid House scene has led to beautifully abstract innovations like his optical illusion sleeve for Soulwax's *Any Minute Now*.

Always exploring the further reaches of electronic music, his current NTS radio show and compilations like *Metal Dance* for Strut have become essential resources for heads into the more experimental end of electronic music. But Jackson has never been afraid of pop and labels like ZTT continue to be just as much an inspiration to him as Rough Trade and 99 Records. Despite his underground credentials, Jackson has brought inventive creative ideas to a range of brands—from Lexus to Stone Island. Safe to say, he's far from the underdog.

Like fellow cross-disciplinary UK pioneer James Lavelle, in recent years Jackson has moved his art from the street to the gallery with his own solo show called "Nowhere" at the KK gallery in London. In 2014, he created perhaps his most innovative work to date: an exhibition in Paris entitled "Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow, Forever," featuring blown-up abstract images of the well-worn grooves from his vast record collection. When I arrive at the studio, Jackson is immersed in a number of new projects—despite getting off a flight from Australia the day before.

Trevor Jackson was raised in the Jewish neighborhood of Edgware in North London, where one of his first exposures to the intersection of music and fashion was the little-known scene of self-described "Becks."

"It was a subculture that nobody really talks about now," he says. "Everyone would hang out at the tube stations on Saturday night listening to soul and disco wearing their Kickers boots, Fiorucci, Chippie, and Chevignon jeans."

One of the popular hangouts for Becks was a place called Patsy's Parlour. "It was an ice cream parlour and that is where I first played video games," says Jackson. "It was a small place but had about 10 video games and I used to play *Scramble* and *Gorf* all the time."

While Jackson was introduced to disco and jazz funk through his elder brother who was a Beck, Jackson's first musical love was electronic music.

"I was really into Human League, Soft Cell, Kraftwerk and so when electro came out I could hear how the American and European stuff was all connected," he says. "We were really lucky back then as well because the charts were full of all this incredible stuff that was rooted in underground music. I remember seeing ABC on *Multi-Coloured Swapshop* [a children's TV program] on a Saturday morning talking about their two favorite records being Yello's 'Bostich' and Shannon's 'Let The Music Play.'"

Jackson was soon dreaming of escaping his suburban world through the exotic music he was hearing on pirate radio stations.

"I'd listen to Colin Favor and he would play Kiss FM mastermixes from New York," he recalls. "I never wanted to be like the other kids where I grew up and New York was like my fantasy. So many cool things were coming out of there, the music, fashion, graffiti, films, and comic books—all of it really fascinated me."

Magazines like *The Face* and *i-D* became other portals to an exciting new world of style tribes and underground parties. He started going to clubs at age 14, when some older friends took him to Camden Palace. Another club that the teenage Jackson would frequent was Astral Flight at The Embassy Club with DJ Wolf, who would become one of his biggest influences. While Jackson would have his eyes opened by this early exposure to club culture, it was the London warehouse scene that really blew his mind. There, he was exposed to Coldcut, Soul II Soul, Shake N Fingerpop, Family Function, and Mutoid Waste Company, who threw one of his favorite parties under The Westway—a West London overpass—that resembled a post-apocalyptic club night.

“They had people riding in on steam-powered metal dinosaurs like something out of a *Mad Max* movie,” he says. “Then there was another one where you had to climb over this assault course to get in, and then there was Test Department [an industrial group] in one room with a DJ in another playing a go-go record. It was just a mad mix.”

It was a time in the UK when the DIY culture of punk was having aftershocks across the creative landscape. Jackson thinks people were making a real effort in all aspects of culture—from music to art to fashion—and he witnessed a monumental culture jam firsthand. From 1983-1989, he claims he was going out five nights a week, soaking up inspiration from one of the country’s most seminal times in alternative arts.

Jackson’s own style stems from a variety of other inspirations. He originally wanted to be a comic book artist, and hung out with a few guys from *2000 AD*, the seminal British pulp comic anthology that birthed franchises like Judge Dredd and Tank Girl. But when he started working at a record shop at 13, he became obsessed with the works of Peter Saville, Neville Brody, and Keith Breeden. After leaving Barnet College in North London, he took his first job in graphic design with Kunst Art Company, working with photocopiers, Tipp-Ex, and Rotring pens.

“This was all pre-Apple Mac so you really had to experiment,” he says. Taking the cut and paste sample culture of both hip-hop and Art of Noise, from his favorite pop label ZTT, he applied it to his DIY design. “From an early age I didn’t see the difference in sampling music to sampling visuals, but I would never sample or take something just because it looked nice. It had to have a meaning and to have a connection to something. So there was always a purpose to my sampling and that is the same today both with music and design.”

Never short on confidence and in his own words “slightly precocious,” Jackson started to pitch for freelance work. He cobbled together a portfolio and shopped himself to labels that he dug, like Champion Records, sometimes offering to work for free based off his sheer love for the music. Jackson’s designs for

artists like Frankie Bones and Raze saw him become a pioneer of rave culture design. The sleeve that really illustrated Jackson’s immersion in club culture was Todd Terry’s “Yeah Buddy.” Featuring a raver being chased by a policeman and designed to look like video game graphics, the sleeve was deliberately primitive. It was partly due to Jackson’s inability to afford a Mac, working off of a ZX Spectrum and Commodore 64 that gave his work a more homegrown aesthetic. It’s something he feels lent to the lo-fi sensibility of Terry’s music.

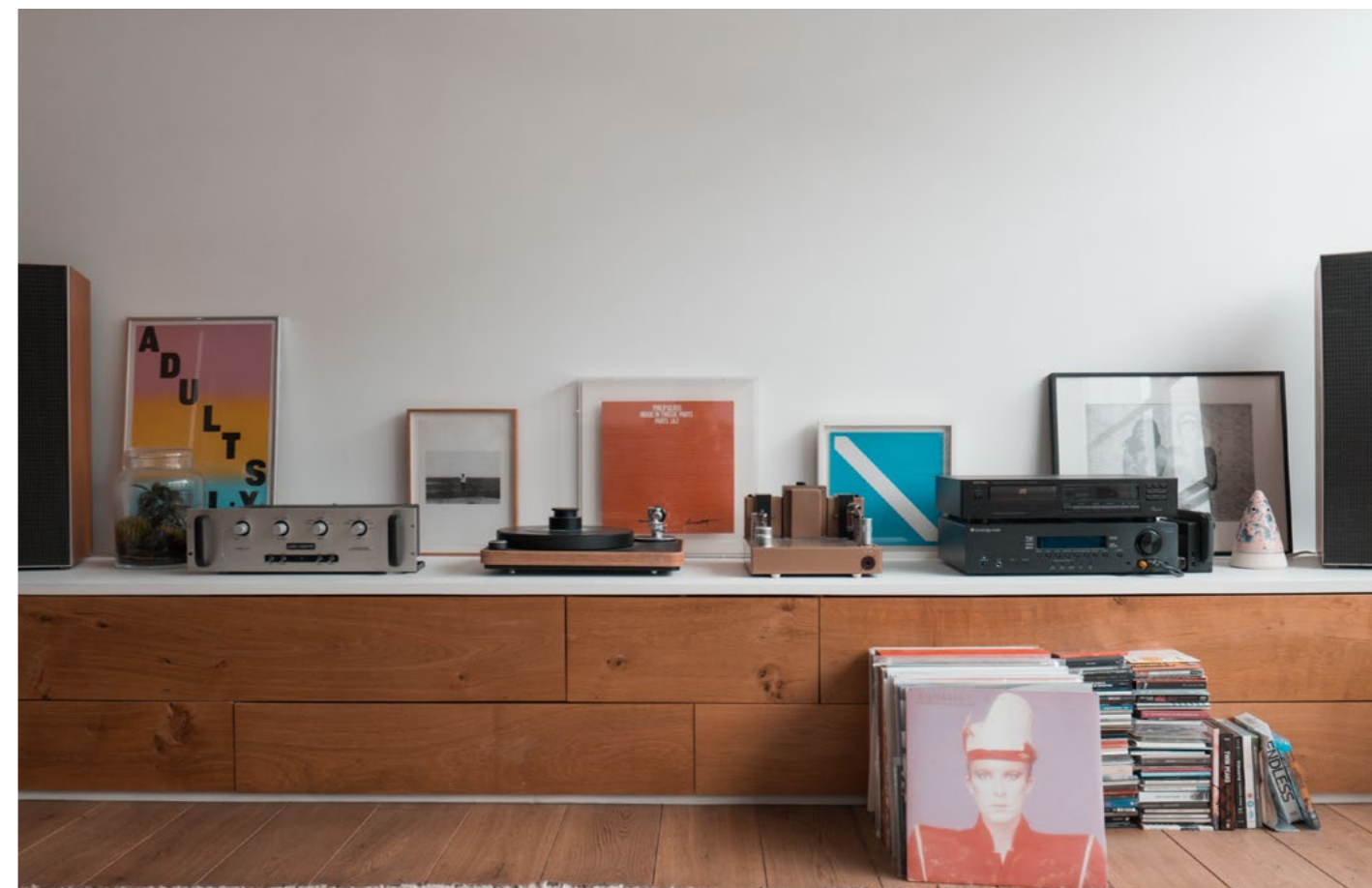
“Although I loved the design of people like Peter Saville I also had a bit of disdain for them as I thought, ‘You’re old mate, what do you know about clubs?’ I was young and I was going to the clubs every night,” he says. “I wanted to create a sleeve that really captured what was happening out there at night. Todd Terry’s records were raw and sounded like early video games, so that became the aesthetic.”

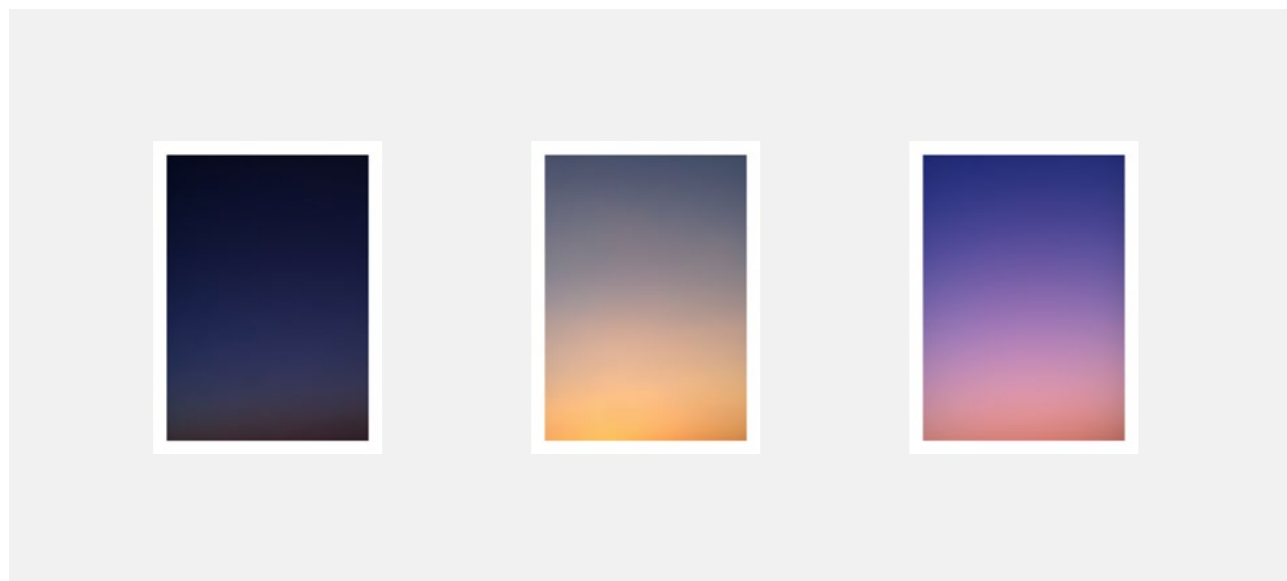
More than 30 years on, Jackson thinks the accessibility of imagery online has made people less adventurous. He gestures to rows of reference books from designers like Paul Rand, Dieter Rams, and Saul Bass. He brags that he can remember each store he bought them from, especially beaming about the rare tomes he had to go to great lengths to track down. It gives them more sentimental value, and explains his disdain for social platforms like Instagram.

“I don’t really use it because I don’t want to just put an image up without any context,” he says. “I think this breeds a culture of people who like things because they look good—they don’t really understand it or know the connections and ethos of what all these people were about.”

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Jackson went on to become an in-demand graphic designer working for labels like Gee Street, creating sleeves for Stereo MCs and Jungle Brothers. By the early ‘90s, Jackson’s success as a designer saw him taking on more commercial projects, many of which felt like a betrayal of his DIY roots. Inspired both by the old school hip-hop he had first fallen in love with and the sound collages of Art and Noise, he began to make music in a similar fashion to his design work.

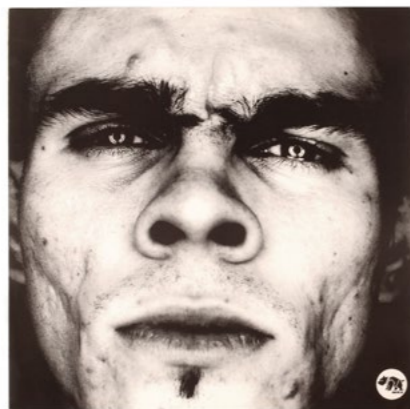




NOWHERE #10 2011
C TYPE PRINT. 36.5 X 52MM

NOWHERE #1 2011
C TYPE PRINT. 36.5 X 52MM

NOWHERE #7 2011
C TYPE PRINT. 36.5 X 52MM



BITE 05. SCIENTISTS OF SOUND - SCIENTISTS OF SOUND E.P. 1992
BITE 06. BROTHERHOOD - WAYZ OF THE WIZE. 1992
BITE 09. SCIENTISTS OF SOUND - BAD BOY SWING. 1995
BITE 04. 100% PROOF - DIFFERENT NEIGHBOURHOOD. 1992
BHOODT2. BROTHERHOOD - ALPHABETICAL RESPONSE. 1995

PHOTOGRAPHY **DONALD CHRISTIE**
ART DIRECTION & DESIGN **TREVOR JACKSON**

The first piece of music equipment he bought was a Commodore sampler, followed by a Roland W30. He used these for a remix competition for Street Sounds, Morgan Khan's UK label known for its compilations of American electro. Having such basic equipment was a great foundation as a music maker when he met a rap crew from the neighborhood—The Brotherhood. Jackson not only produced their first single “Descendants of the Holocaust,” but set up the label Bite It! to release it. That was when he decided to dub himself “The Underdog,” to maintain a sense of anonymity. The first Brotherhood records with The Underdog were recorded at a small studio called Monroe at Barnet with an Akai 950 sampler and an Atari ST. But the records that really made the group's name like *Alphabetical Response* and the subsequent *Elementalz* LP were created at Monroe's second home in Holloway, Islington. It went on to become the de facto home of UK drum and bass, seeing artists like Ed Rush and Optical produce there.

While the early 1990s American hip-hop scene produced pivotal LPs like Nas' *Illmatic* and Dr. Dre's *The Chronic*, many UK hip-hop heads couldn't associate with the gangsta rap that soon predominated. Their response was an indigenous music that discussed real life on the streets at home rather than an imaginary one in Compton. The Brotherhood's immortal lyrics of “One mixed race, one black, one yid, trap you like an arachnid. Power of the pyramid,” from the track “Goin Undaground” pertained to the multiculturalism of the scene Jackson grew up in. The cockney rap of Rodney P and the London Posse and labels like Music of Life had set the tone in the late '80s, and now it was time for groups like The Brotherhood.

“I wanted to make us stand apart from the American scene by sampling different music,” says Jackson. “Everyone was sampling James Brown, Zapp, the Gap Band, and things like that and I sampled the weird European and Japanese electronic music and jazz. So things like Soft Machine, King Crimson, and stuff on the ECM label. It was also because those records were cheaper than the funk and soul records everyone else was sampling.”

Following a mix for Irish/LA hip-hop band House of Pain for XL Records, Jackson went on to become an in-demand producer, with The Underdog name associated with everyone from Massive Attack to Pharcyde. The pressures of running a UK label at the same time became too much, and he closed Bite It! in 1996.

“There was also a lot of fighting going on in the UK hip-hop scene, a lot of tension because there was no money in it and I just had to get out,” he says. “I also grew out of hip-hop when it became all about the bitches, guns, and money.”

Turning his back on hip-hop Jackson decided to set up a label dedicated to the kind of alternative music that had first inspired him, called Output Recordings. After releasing some Underdog instrumental tracks, Output signed Fridge, a post-

rock electronic band from South West London featuring a young Kieran Hebden—later to become Four Tet.

“I really wanted to put out weird records that nobody else wanted to know about,” he says.

Through the monochrome sleeves on Fridge's *Lign* and Four Tet's *Thirtysixtwentyfive*, Jackson created a refined visual identity with echoes of Peter Saville's work for New Order and other Factory groups. Jackson says the change to a minimalist and conceptual aesthetic matched the tone of the music. As well as the electronic experimental music of Fridge and Four Tet, Output would also be one of the first labels in the late '90s to reference the fertile cross-pollination of the post-punk period. Output also released the early singles of LCD Soundsystem and The Rapture, doing much to revive interest in a period of music that had been pretty much forgotten.

“The dance and electronic music community did not care about the early '80s. It was a joke to them,” says Jackson. “Now you get all these dance producers referencing things like Soft Cell's ‘Memorabilia’ as an early techno record, but back then nobody was interested.”

Jackson's record sleeves, like the optical illusion op art design for Belgian band Soulwax's 2004 LP *Any Minute Now*, challenged mainstream design conventions and won him a number of awards, but he was soon disillusioned with the industry and seeking new challenges. Output closed its doors at the end of 2006.

After his withdrawal from music and having become bored with the design world, Jackson turned back to art for creative salvation. One day Jackson was on the beach taking photographs as the sun went down during a holiday in Tel Aviv. As cliché as it sounds, it made him want to rethink his own career, and as the metaphorical sun set on this chapter in his life, he began to imagine his next step. Shortly after his return from Tel Aviv, he was approached by the KK Gallery in Hoxton, East London, who asked him if he wanted to do an exhibition there. Jackson was reassessing his whole creative world—one that had seen him rise from DIY obscurity to become one of the most in-demand graphic designers.

“I was looking back and thinking about what was important to me. And one of those things when I first started working was the idea of positive and negative space. A lot of my early work related to opposites,” Jackson recalls. “And so I started to think about my place in the universe and forces much bigger than me. So that show was based around these ideas of light, color, and the universe.”

A healing experience for Jackson, the art show was called “Nowhere” and featured his photographs of skies and sunsets turned into abstract works of color and light.



“I had been through all these things so it was me taking my visual language back to its purest form of natural light and color,” says Jackson. “Capturing that was really cathartic for me. It was like a cleanse of what had been before so it was stripping things back to a minimalist level. To get myself away from all the sadness and to focus on something beautiful and natural—that was like a spiritual experience. It really was like visual therapy. And it was like a real turning point for me.”

After “Nowhere” came other acclaimed exhibitions, notably one in Paris called “Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow, Forever,” that consisted of abstract magnified images of vinyl grooves and the dirt and clicks that accumulate over time. The inspiration for that exhibit came when Jackson realized he had over 50,000 records in his collection, but hasn’t exactly taken the best care of them.

“There’s dust, grime, beer, my sweat—these records are my journey,” says Jackson. “And every time you play a bit of vinyl you’re wearing out that groove and distorting that object. I found that quite fascinating. So I took those scratched records, many of them that I had played since my youth, and photographed them and found there was a real beauty there.”

That 2014 exhibition got Jackson back into making new music, sampling the very sections of the records he photographed into new tracks, ultimately leading to 2015’s *Format*, a unique album of 12 tracks each released in a separate limited edition physical format (from 7”s to eight tracks) accompanied by a multiscreen installation in a car park in London’s Soho. It was a decidedly analog return that spoke to Jackson’s tendencies to avoid contextless platforms where the intent behind the music can be lost. And whether releasing his *Metal Dance* compilations of EMB/Industrial music or playing “weird” electronic tracks on his NTS radio show, it seems that Jackson has learned how to love music again. It was also an ideal segue into his more commercial work.

BMW, Coca-Cola, and Nike are just a few of the big companies who have looked to Jackson to bring an individual spark to their campaigns. Perhaps his most ambitious commercial campaign was for the Los Angeles launch of the Lexus CT200h, where he created a sound and light performance that had two cars communicating with each other through pulsating light and sub-bass frequencies.

“These jobs can only work if the client understands you. If the client just wants to employ you because they know your name and think you’re cool and they don’t understand your culture and where you come from, then it’s never going to be a good experience,” says Jackson. “Most brands approach me because they like that I don’t compromise. I mean, I’m not the easiest person to work with but I think I can give people the results they want.”

Some of Jackson’s most satisfying commercial design projects have been with fashion brands including Stüssy, for whom he created a line of T-shirts in 2013 with phrases like “Can

You Feel It?” pulled from classic records from his past. It aligns with his own experience growing up on Stüssy—Jackson still has one of their first T-shirts.

“I’ve been really lucky to work with some of the [best] fashion brands in the world. I mean I worked with Stone Island which for me is more than a fashion brand—it’s a fuckin’ foundation,” he says. “I mean I’ve always bought Massimo Osti’s stuff. I was addicted to it, so that was an amazing experience going to the factory and seeing their amazing archive. That was an honor to work for them.”

Growing up in ’80s London under the influence of DIY hip-hop culture and the fashion tribes of the warehouse scene, Jackson recalls a time when individuality was the name of the game.

“I think the problem is that concept of being original and unique is becoming lost,” he says. “Unfortunately I think that world has become very materialistic. It’s very difficult for young people because they are constantly bombarded with aspirational things. I mean when the Nike Jordan came out in ’85 or whenever, I wanted a pair, but most of my aspirations were creative ones.”

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For someone brought up on the DIY Gucci and Louis Vuitton reconstructions of Harlem’s Dapper Dan, Jackson looks on in dismay at the aspirational conformity in today’s hip-hop scene.

“I used to love the way Dapper Dan and people like Biz Markie were wearing all this designer stuff but it was very much about subverting the brands. They were taking things they couldn’t afford, from a culture that wasn’t theirs and they were sticking their fingers up to it,” he says.

Now that artists like Pharrell and Kanye West have become so fully ingrained in the world of high fashion, Jackson feels it detracts from their ability to stand against that very establishment. The same can be said for Dapper Dan’s recent collaboration with Gucci, which includes a capsule collection and the resurrection of his Harlem atelier—now “powered” by official Gucci fabrics. The legitimization of hip-hop in the fashion world has taken away a healthy amount of its authenticity. The braggadocios luxury cosigns once touted by rappers have been replaced by bona fide product placement.

“These people come from a hip-hop culture that is so powerful with roots that resonate across the planet with real meaning and purpose—and they’re going to negate that by wanting to be part of this facile European fashion world,” laments Jackson. “It’s bollocks. But I don’t even know what hip-hop culture is anymore.”

