

Basso Profundo

BY PETER PLAGENS

Saul Bass was the first great artist I was ever a fan of. (Oh sure, I'd heard of Leonardo and Michelangelo, and how could any kid growing up in Los Angeles not have been full-immersion baptized in the art of Walt Disney? In my upbringing, though, Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, et al., were so ubiquitous they constituted more nature than culture.) My father, who'd taken night-school art classes as a young man during the Depression, was a jack-of-all-trades in small advertising agencies, who had an eye for the good stuff in commercial art. He pointed me to great illustrators—I longed to draw covers for *Collier's* or *Argosy*—such as Robert Fawcett and Austin Briggs. The latter was one of the two artists I put down as my favorites on a questionnaire in the first art class I ever took, "Art Appreciation" in my freshman year. The other was Saul Bass, who I discovered on my own by seeing, at age 14, *The Man with the Golden Arm*, the groundbreaking movie about a heroin addict starring Frank Sinatra. The title sequence blew me back in my seat, and I was never quite the same.

Bass's story, told in a gorgeous new book, *Saul Bass: A Life in Film & Design*, by (his daughter) Jennifer Bass and Pat Kirkham (London: Laurence King Publishing, Ltd., 2011. 423 pages. \$75), begins with a familiar template: a precocious son of Jewish immigrant

parents in New York, wins a scholarship, works hard at crappy jobs, is noticed by higher-ups in his vocation, and starts spreading his wings. With Bass (who was born in 1920), the country of parental origin was Russia, the borough the Bronx (where one-third of the largest concentration of Jews in the world lived at the time), the scholarship to the Arts Students League, the vocation commercial art, and the wing-spreading first at Warner Bros. as a layout and paste-up man. "I was in the ass-end of the industry," Bass said, "[but] I was young enough, naive enough, and sufficiently cocky to believe I could elevate movie advertising to the standards set by Man Ray's Rayographs and Jean Cocteau's films and illustrations."[[p8]]

Further emboldened by taking a class in advertising design with Gyorgy Kepes at Brooklyn College, Bass moved to Los Angeles in 1946, where, after doing a wonderful cover for the progressive and prescient L.A. architecture magazine, *Arts & Architecture*, he embarked on what is, to me, his most significant artistic endeavor—posters and title sequences for movies. Bass was still a company employee when he fashioned the campaigns for the gritty Kirk Douglas prizefight picture, *Champion* (1949), and *No Way Out* (1950), about a wounded white crook being treated by a black prison doctor (Sidney Poitier), which had to somehow disguise the fact that a black

actor played a lead. (This was 1950, remember, four years before Brown vs. Board of Education.)

After striking out on his own in 1952, Bass began his comparative Sistine Chapel period: The logos and title sequences for another pioneer African-American-in-the-lead film, *Carmen Jones*, starring Dorothy Dandridge, in 1954 (a flame with an outlined rose in its midst flickering against a dark screen), the emotional noir equivalent of Michelangelo's God-and-man fingertip touch in the unforgettable, doubly bent, black arm of *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955), the cut-apart silhouette corpse for *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959), and the upraised arms reaching for freedom in the form of a rifle for *Exodus* (1960). These shapes and their color combinations, I'd argue, are as visually delicious, and moving (if you've seen the movies or know their stories) as any iconic image by, say, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, Jasper Johns, Lee Bontecou, Ellsworth Kelly, or Romare Bearden.

Alas, beyond the efficient relating of biographical fact, the writing in the book is pretty awful. Part of the problem is that Bass's professional life consists of one triumph after another, and his personal life comprises one long happy marriage to Elaine, who became his design collaborator, and one wonderful daughter who became a well-known graphic designer herself); i.e., there's little drama. The relentless references to first-name-only "Saul" rings more like ad brochure copy than serious tome prose. Some italicized Bass words of wisdom on

the likes of "the process" and "humor in film" are resemble hagiographic quotes from "Ron" in Scientology texts. Moreover, the volume's attempt to render Bass absolutely wholesome creates a few "Yeah, right" moments. One is, "The replacement campaign [for *One, Two, Three*, 1961] used three balloons [instead of a Coke bottle because of threatened legal action] to capture the film's light-heartedness." [[p158]] *One, Two, Three* was a bit of a sex comedy (Arlene Francis delivers the famous "lucky Pierre" punch line from a classic dirty joke) and on the poster for the film the two outside balloons are clearly to be perceived as female breasts.

Fortunately, the visuals in this handsome volume more than do the job at making the case for Saul Bass as—we don't compartmentalize that much anymore, do we?—one of the best artists of the second half of the 20th century. He's Warhol without the cynicism masked as naiveté (or the reverse): a maker of indelibly but elegantly stark images (Andy's Marilyn Monroe, Bass's arm of addiction; Andy's Campbell's soup cans, Bass's double-"U" for United Airlines). Neither's oeuvre is shackled to that connoisseur's fetish, the unique object produced by an inimitable touch of the human hand.

History has been kinder, however, to Warhol. Andy's attitude toward corporate America had the kind of double edge that still keeps smart people up nights wondering about it. He genuinely liked Campbell's soup, Coca-Cola and movie stars, but there's something damning-

with-fulsome-praise in his ghostly embrace of them. Bass, on the other hand, seemed to believe—as most of us no longer do—that the titans of commerce actually had a human, universally caring side that could be made evident to the public through superbly designed logos. (Bass probably made ten, twenty times his film work income by conjuring “corporate identities.”) Besides United Airline’s overlapping orange and blue “U’s,” Dixie Cups’ “Dixie” with the floral X, Alcoa’s arrowhead “A” with the downward-pointing red triangle in its middle, AT&T’s circled bell, and then its striated highlighted globe, and for art lovers in the not-for-profit sector, the Getty Center’s blue square with the letters G-E-T-T-Y trying to escape through all four sides. Here, the book’s words are as precisely on-target as Bass’s design:

“Elegant crisp white letters are beautifully held in balance and space within a blue field. The refinement of the Zen-like design is tempered by the offsetting of letters of differing sizes and the slicing away of edges...The logo refers to the five main departments of the Getty and the contrast of Richard Meier’s white buildings against the blue California sky.”[[p341]]

Bass passed away in 1996. It’s a cliché beyond clichés to say this, but in an age where analog film and physical print no longer rule the designer’s roost, we’ll not likely see Saul Bass’s like again.