



Offset lithograph, collage and relief print banana, used on the debut album of The Velvet Underground & Nico, released in the USA on March 12th 1967.

The original cover had a sticker depicting a bright yellow, slightly rotting banana peel with the instructions PEEL SLOWLY AND SEE. Following the instructions reveals a bright pink inner banana. This is offset by a clear white background which includes a stylized Andy Warhol signature. A special machine was designed to produce these covers and, according to Ronnie Cutrone, Warhol's assistant/artistic director, each sticker was placed by hand on every single album. (Bill DeMain, 2011).

The work represented a number of innovations including being the first interactive album cover and the first to have only the name of the artist/producer depicted on the cover. It became so iconic that it was central to a legal dispute arguing the concepts of trademark versus creative/intellectual ownership.

The choice of the banana is an example of Warhol's genius. In utilising a simple, seemingly random image which he appropriated from a common advertisement of the times, he created a piece of work which has continued to be analysed in terms of its meaning, its relation to the music it represented and its portrayal of the zeitgeist of the time.

The theme of sex permeates through all aspects of this work. According to Reva Wolf (1997) the use of a banana sprung from ongoing discussions with poet Ed Sader which focussed on bananas as unequivocal phallic symbols. The band name comes from the title of a book by Michael Leigh about paraphilic sexual subcultures. The music contains various sexual references to sadomasochism, kink and prostitution. "Peeling" the banana to reveal a bright pink "erect" inner fruit also leaves little room for ambiguity.

Similarly, the Death motif is prevalent, being exemplified by the partly decayed, rotting nature of the outer skin which, in turn, is counterpointed by the bright pink inner fruit. This theme is reinforced by many of the tracks on the album, notably 'Black Angel's Death Song' and 'Heroin'. The flat, almost emotionless rendition of the music, a style influenced by Warhol (Lou Reed, 2011), adds to the overall sense of lifelessness and despair.

Whilst the theme of Celebrity is not a part of the work per se, it is definitely a significant element in the overall creative process. Paul Morrissey, who sold the album to Verve/MGM, claimed that the company signed them only because of the involvement of Nico, a famous German model at the time and Warhol himself. In effect, Warhol gifted his celebrity and his money to the whole project. Additionally, Warhol's establishment of the Factory drew many celebrities including Elvis, Bob Dylan and Donovan, which in turn fostered an atmosphere of creativity and provided Warhol with a great deal of notoriety and social currency.

This was not the only instance in which Warhol used bananas as phallic symbols. In the films "Harlot", "Mario Banana 1 & 2" and others, bananas were utilized in an extremely overt sexual/phallic fashion (Patrick Smith, Warhol: Conversations about the Artist). Similarly, Warhol produced many banana prints independently of this work, a number of which have been sold by Christie's. Billy Name, an archivist at the Factory explains: "Andy had done a series of peeling bananas on white plexiglass and they had nothing to do with the album cover." (cited at [http://www.warholstars.org/andywarhol\\_0112.html](http://www.warholstars.org/andywarhol_0112.html)).

The Banana Cover was just one of 60 album covers that Warhol produced throughout his life. Initially employing the illustrative line technique of his early drawings he created covers for such jazz greats as Thelonius Monk and Count Basie. As he developed his Pop Art silkscreen style Warhol continued to create covers for celebrities such as Paul Anka, John Lennon, The Rolling Stones and Diana Ross.

This particular piece is an archetypical representation of the Pop Art genre, whose emergence in the early 1960s was a reaction to Abstract Expressionism, where artists like Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and other "New York School" members were creating monumental canvases representing the psyche (Stella Paul). Warhol and contemporaries like Roy Lichtenstein and James Rosenquist wanted to create art devoid of emotion and free from human interference. They utilized printmaking techniques, particularly silk-screening, because of its mechanical, mass-produced effect (Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History).

Other artists have created innovative pop art & psychedelic album covers (Peter Blake/Jann Hayworth (Sgt Peppers), Stanley Mouse/Alton Kelley (Grateful Dead) but none have achieved the legendary status and seminal influence of this iconic Warhol masterpiece.

