

## The Graphic Graphic Art of Michael LaBash

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**Publishing date: 05.11.2003 09:23**

In which we tell the story of how Michael LaBash's graphic art became truly graphic.

Vivid, erotic and always tongue-in-cheek, the illustrations and other artwork by San Franciscan wunderkind [Michael LaBash](#) have stirred minds and quite a few bodies for the past two decades, spanning the Bay Area alternative zine scene, celebrated performance artist Frank Moore's print work, and many a website. It's high time for your Underdog to get the low-down on this remarkable artist's life story...



**Michael, please delight our readers with your Potrait of the Artist as a Young Man. I believe your story includes Sydney and San Francisco rather than Dublin?**

I was born in Indianapolis, Indiana in 1958 and apparently, I started drawing at an early age. I remember having my father show me how to draw cars and, one night, I guess I went nuts with the crayons and filled the entire window in my bedroom with drawings of cars. My dad was a chemical engineer for Eli Lilly and got transferred to Sydney, Australia when I was about six years old. My parents divorced when it was time for us to be transferred back to the States. My sister and I stayed in Australia with our mother while my dad went back to the U.S.

I went to a private boys' grammar school and high school. It was like those stuck-up English schools you see in the movies. I spent most of my free time locked in my room doing homework and listening to music. My idea of a good time was listening to LPs and drawing covers for my cassette tapes with my jumbo set of colored markers (40 colors!). My only real exposure to art was LP covers, and I loved them. I particularly loved the art of Roger Dean – he did album covers for Yes, Uriah Heep, Osibisa, Greenslade and more – and bought many a lousy record just to own the cover art. I remember telling people, including my mother, that I wanted to become a commercial artist and design record covers. They would just laugh or shake their head and say “You can't make a living doing that!” At school, art was considered the major for the not-so-smart, it was looked down on. I bought into it all and

thought maybe I'd become an architect.



My other passion was my band. I played guitar, sang and wrote songs. I planned to pursue it full-time after I got back from a planned six-month trip to the US to visit my father when I got out of high school. Well, after the six months passed he said he didn't have enough money to send me back to Australia, but apparently he had enough to pay for a semester of college at Indiana University. I was too gullible and took the bait and ended up in Indiana University for four years – I loved it! I started off as a business major but in my sophomore year I discovered they had a Fine Arts Department with Graphic Design and immediately

switched my major to Fine Arts. A whole new world opened up, and I go into it! I spent hours and hours at the library looking at paintings in books and in the University Art Gallery. I took as many art courses as I could afford.

After college, I spent the summer of 1981 doing an internship at the National Zoo in Washington D.C. and then went back to Australia for a few months to see if I wanted to move back there. I didn't really care for it anymore – I didn't really like what my old friends had become, plus I had a girlfriend from college who had moved to San Francisco, so I moved there to be with her. I didn't really do any art. Just worked 80-hour weeks as a yuppie in highbrow SF design firms. I finally started drawing again in about 1987 after I quit my job to pursue a career in music and started a band and opened a recording studio in Emeryville. I drew all the fliers, made backdrops, painted murals in the studio, etc. It was all kind of cartoonish Keith Haring-influenced stuff.

**Around this time, you first met performance artist Frank Moore. How would you describe your creative relationship with him?**

He's been my teacher, my guide to how life works. Frank has the amazing ability of being able to recognize, develop and put to use fully what people are good at. In 1988, my band – which later became the Counting Crows – was on a fast track to the big time, managed by Bill Graham Presents and on the verge of a record deal with a major label. I wasn't happy, though. The creative family/community that I had wanted to create was really just a bunch of yuppies looking out for fame. Anyway, we were playing at The Oasis in San Francisco, and I saw this girl out in the audience who just jumped into my awareness. It was like a spotlight was on her. I looked for her after the show, and we made plans to get together. It turned out she was a student of Frank's! She showed me some of Frank's writings, and when I read them the floor fell out from under me. Soon after, I went to one of his performances at a small record store in Berkeley and sat there with my jaw hanging as naked body-painted men and women danced and writhed with strobe lights pulsing and Frank wailing away. Needless to say, I'd never seen anything like it. I started working with Frank and quit the band a few weeks later to sing backup vocals for Frank.



When Frank learned I was a graphic designer he set me to work on lots of drawing/painting projects: posters, brochures, backdrops for performances, illustrations for his book, etc. One day while we were sitting around our living room, admiring all my art on the walls, Frank asked me, "When did you realize you could draw?" I looked around the room for a little while and pointed to one of the large complex drawings and said, "I think it was after I finished that one." He was shocked. He assumed because I was a graphic designer that I must be able to draw. It turned out my teachers in college had told me I couldn't draw, my boss at my first design job said I couldn't draw, my best friend in college always just thought my drawings were OK – there was no positive feedback from any significant others so I thought I just couldn't draw. Frank likes to tell this story to art students, and then suggests they quit art school and follow their own vision.

**You established quite a rep thanks in part to your wonderful ink illustrations for alternative zines. How did this particular part of your professional life come about?**

Back in the early 90s when the zine scene was really starting to get going, someone told Frank he should put out a zine. So we started publishing the zine, *The Cherotic (r)Evolutionary*. That introduced us to the whole community of the small press that was flourishing. Everyone traded zines, sent each other their poems and artwork and as a result, my drawings got published in a lot of zines.

**And how has your visual art been extended to the world wide web domain?**

I've been designing all of Frank's websites since 1996, including [www.eroplay.com](http://www.eroplay.com), [www.luver.com](http://www.luver.com) and [www.feisto.com](http://www.feisto.com). I get to create whatever graphics are needed for them. I draw a lot of the stuff by hand, then scan it and run it through Streamline so I can color it in Illustrator.



**What's the role of eroticism in your visual art?**

It was largely a product of my working with Frank Moore. I discovered my "style" when I started working with him in 1988. It was my task to try to communicate visually the experience of Frank's vision. My first exposure to eroticism in art was in college when I was taking an Oriental Art history class. We were studying Indian sculpture, those temples covered with naked guys and busty women. That stuff really turned me on physically instead of intellectually. It seems like it opened up a gate in me to something unexplored. Frank's art explores that place, and as a result so does mine.

**Which other contemporaries do you admire?**

John Seabury, Attaboy and Andrew Goldfarb. What blows my mind is that they are all friends of mine! I was also influenced by the poster art of the 60s, Zap comics, S. Clay Wilson, Horny Biker Sluts

comics and the Quinn-Vigil Faust comic book series.

**Finally, what is at the heart of your art?**

Surrender. When I draw I don't think or plan. I just let the pen do the talking. When I first started drawing like this a lot of what came out was very aboriginal, tribal and abstract but soon bodies started appearing and my work was overrun by all sorts of crazy creatures, most of them generally naked.

**Visit [www.babylabash.com](http://www.babylabash.com) for more LaBash.**

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