

SAUL BASS: FILM TITLE INNOVATOR

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Saul Bass was an American graphic designer, illustrator, animator and filmmaker best

known for his work on film titles. He was born in the Bronx Borough of New York City, New York on May 8, 1920 and died at age 75 on April 25, 1996 of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma ("Bass, Saul (1920-1996).", 1998). His first real job was at the New York office of Warner Bros. in the late 1930's, where he designed advertisements for movies (Friedman, 1989, p. 17). During his lifetime, Bass witnessed World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and Operation Desert Storm. He was alive during the rise and fall of communism, the creation of a Jewish state, and the hippy culture of the sixties. Over the course of his lifetime, Bass witnessed many changes in the world around him and contributed to these changes through his work.

### **Early Life and Schooling (1920-1945)**

Saul Bass began life in 1920 as the son of Ukrainian Jewish émigrés in New York City (Lambirth, 2004, p. 39). According to the New York Times, his father said that "he [Saul] 'drew everything' in sight while growing up in the Bronx" (Thomas, 1996). Bass' friend and colleague, Arnold Schwartzman, mentions that "during high school, the New York designer had the ambition to be a cantor", an ambition that Schwartzman learned about when Bass entertained him by "singing Yiddish lullabies" (Bos, & Bos, 2007, p. 664). At age 15, Bass graduated from high school (Thomas, 1996), and then studied modernism at the Art Students League from 1936 to 1939 with Howard Trafton ("Bass, Saul (1920-1996)," 1998). From 1944 to 1945, he studied at Brooklyn College (Bos, & Bos, 2007, p. 110) with Bauhaus-influenced Gyorgy Kepes, who helped to shape Bass' design ideas (Spectator, 2004, p. 39).

### **Early Career (1936-1945)**

While studying graphic design, Bass freelanced in New York from 1936-1946 (Bos, & Bos, 2007, p. 110). During this time, he apprenticed with Manhattan design firms and also worked for the New York office of Warner Brothers. On his two-hour commutes to work, he read what he wanted, and was able to read the complete works of Sigmund Freud (Glover, 1990, p. 20). In an interview with Bass in *Graphic Design in America*, he discussed how film ads during that time consisted of showing all the ingredients of a film. "You showed .. the dancing girls, the romance, the clinch, the hoopla, some action – whatever it might be" (Friedman, 1989, p. 17). In 1944, Gyorgy Kepes wrote a book entitled, "Language of Vision" which introduced new ideas about art to Bass, who wanted to try these ideas in his work. Since the work he was doing at Warner Bros. required adding all the extra details, and didn't allow reductive work, Bass decided to quit his job and work for an agency that did not work on movie advertising (Friedman, 1989, p. 17).

### **Los Angeles (1946-1954)**

In 1946, Bass decided to move to Los Angeles where he started a firm called Saul Bass and Associates ("Bass, Saul (1920-1996).", 1998). In the late 1940's, he did an ad for the film "Champion" that "was a totally black page with a tiny little halftone and a little scrawl, the whole thing taking up about an inch-and-a-half in the center of the page." The design was "dramatic". After that, he worked with Howard Hughes, but left him because Hughes had "a very boilerplate point of view" (Friedman, 1989, p. 18).

### **Film Titles (1954-1995)**

Bass had the opportunity to develop the advertising campaign for Otto Preminger's film, "Carmen Jones" in 1954. For this film, Bass designed a rose in flames. This project led to another Preminger film, "The Man with the Golden Arm", where Bass used a jagged arm to represent addiction. Preminger then tasked Bass to build titles to match the logo. Bass used a black screen overlaid with white bars cut out of paper that moved in staccato-like movements synched with jazz music until the arm symbol appeared ("Bass, Saul (1920-1996).", 1998). The advertising materials for "The Man with the Golden Arm" were built off the same core design, and according to Bass, "almost everyone hated those ads. They broke all the rules of what a campaign should do, because they only told one thing – they didn't provide the normal stew..." By adding motion to the titles, and reducing the content to metaphors, Bass changed film titles from something that was added to the beginning of the film to something that prepares the viewer for the film. His film titles set the mood of the film and essentially were part of the film, because the "viewer was into the picture" from the first frame (Friedman, 1989, p. 18).

As time progressed, Bass started using live action instead of animation to introduce the story during the title sequence. In "Walk on the Wild Side [1962]", he used film of a black cat and a white cat meeting, fighting, and departing as a metaphor for New Orleans' street life. The film "Big Country [1958]", uses the title sequence as a prologue to the film. Later, in "Grand Prix [1966]", the title sequence shows cars and drivers preparing for the Monte Carlo race in preparation for the first scene that could be considered a scene in itself ("Bass, Saul (1920-1996).", 1998).

For the next thirty years, Bass continued to create titles for films. His filmography includes Vertigo (1958), Anatomy of a Murder (1959), Psycho (1960), Exodus (1960), West Side Story (1961), Goodfellas (1990), Cape Fear (1991), and Casino (1995) ("Bass, Saul (1920-1996).", 1998).

### **Film (1960-1996)**

Bass' work on film titles fostered an interest in filmmaking. He is credited with directing the shower scene in Alfred Hitchcock's "Psycho" and assisted Stanley Kubrick with the final battle in "Spartacus". He eventually directed his own short films, and his short "Why Man Creates" won an Academy Award in 1968. In 1974, Bass made a feature length science fiction film, titled "Phase IV." Throughout the rest of his life, Bass continued to direct short films ("Bass, Saul (1920-1996).", 1998).

### **Graphic Design (1978-1996)**

In 1978, Bass changed the name of his firm to Bass/Yaeger and Associates. Through his companies, he produced logos for AT&T, the Girl Scouts of America, Minolta, Alcoa, Exxon, and United Airlines. Bass also worked on the 1983 U.S. postage stamp commemorating art and industry, the 1984 Olympic posters, and also several Academy award posters. (Bos, & Bos, 2007, p. 110).

### **Conclusion**

Over his lifetime, Saul Bass worked as an illustrator, graphic designer, animator, and a film director. By pioneering motion graphics and the idea of a film's titles being an integral part of a film rather than a place to show all the ingredients of the film, Bass forever changed film titles. Bass also extended this idea to selling the film through its concept rather than by the ingredients that the film is made of. These contributions to our daily lives make Saul Bass one of the most influential graphic artists of the twentieth century.

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