



Be Stiff: The Stiff Records Story

Richard Balls

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Dave Robinson was once a roadie to Jimi Hendrix. He also managed Brinsley Schwarz and was behind their ill-fated publicity stunt when he flew journalists to New York to see their gig at the Fillmore East. By 1974, he was managing the Hope & Anchor pub in Islington. Jake Riviera had been road manager for Chilli Willi And The Red Hot Peppers and later Dr Feelgood. In 1976, this maverick pair were to launch Stiff Records, supposedly on the back of a £400 loan from Lee Brilleaux of the Feelgoods. In fact, they never cashed the check. The genius of Stiff was to take old pub rockers that they knew and turn them into new wave stars. Ian Dury, Elvis Costello and Nick Lowe were all going nowhere until they were signed the label and reinvented. For a while, the major labels didn't know how to respond to Stiff, particularly their brilliant marketing – coloured vinyl, different coloured sleeves for the completest market and their slogans, such as "If It Ain't Stiff, It Ain't Worth a fuck". Riviera left the label in 1977 to form Radar Records and took Costello and Lowe with him. The label signed quirky acts such as Wreckless Eric, Devo, Rachel Sweet, Lene Lovich and more. Many of them were sent on package tours reminiscent of the Larry Parnes' tours in the 1960s. They also launched Stiff America to no little success. Robinson signed Madness and The Pogues to the label before it went bankrupt in 1986. However, it re-launched in 2006 under new management and is still going strong. Richard Balls has interviewed over 50 artists and Stiff staff to tell a story that is long overdue. Shane MacGowan, Lene Lovich, Chas Smash, Wreckless Eric and more tell what it was like to work for the world's most outrageous record label. Tony Judge, who runs the Be Stiff website has provided lots of rare photos along with badges and memorabilia to make this a celebration of a great record label. Balls' other book on the life of Ian Dury sold a hefty 30,000 copies, so he has a following.

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