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The story of **LOS FELIZ**

A typeface designed by

CHRISTIAN SCHWARTZ

Story by

MATT TRAGESSER

CHRISTIAN SCHWARTZ

& RUDY VANDERLANS

Photographs by **MATT TRAGESSER**

MATT: THE STORY OF LOS FELIZ starts with Philip Shtoll's dog. Philip doesn't have the dog anymore and he doesn't live in Los Feliz anymore. He had to give the dog away when he moved to a smaller apartment closer to the beach. He wanted to get his priorities in order, to work less and to surf more, but that's not essential to the story. Let's get back to the dog.

The dog was getting a haircut. This past summer, I was working on a project with Philip that involved photographing some bottles of Coca-Cola, so we stepped out of the office to find some and, since we were going to be out anyway, to pick up his dog from the dog haircut place and take it back to his apartment. The path between the dog haircut place and Philip's apartment happened to cross through a part of Los Feliz that I had never been to before that happened to be home to some amazing typography.

Los Angeles is full of amazing typography; usually on signs, especially on signs that are old, homemade, or damaged. It's not surprising that a lot of the vernacular-inspired type experiments of the past decade originated here. If you want to find some unusual vernacular lettering and make a typeface out of it, the stretch of Santa Monica Boulevard that runs through Los Feliz where Philip and I happened to be driving is a good place to start. The ethnically diverse area consists mainly of small businesses, and, out of necessity, most of the signage is hand-painted. Often, the signs are painted directly on the side of the building. This is the kind of area where you see a tiny building that looks a lot more like a residence than a business, with the words "Hot Chocolate" painted on the side. That's some lady's job, selling hot chocolate from her house.

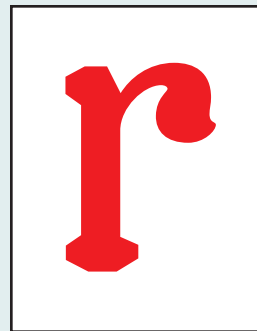
Philip and I picked up the dog and went back to work. A week later, I returned to the area with my girlfriend to take pictures. On this visit, I happened to find a place called **LOS FELIZ AUTO PARTS & SERVICE**. The letters painted on and around this business were fantastic. It was the kind of typography that some people call crude, but it wasn't crude at all. A lot of care was put into each letter. The lettering exhibited several artistic flourishes – the kind that someone who went to design school just wouldn't think of. I thought it would make a good typeface. At the least, I knew it was an interesting typographic puzzle. Take these letter forms and normalize them so that they hang together in text and at the same time, preserve all the odd details that make them interesting. I'm not a very good type designer, but I think Christian Schwartz is, so I took some pictures of **LOS FELIZ AUTO PARTS & SERVICE** and sent them to him in Boston.

CHRISTIAN: I LIVE IN BOSTON, which is a dense, vertical city. It's nothing like Los Angeles. My first experience with Los Angeles was in the fall of 2000, when I went out to visit Matt and his girlfriend for a week. I grew up in the Northeast, so my idea of a city is a tall and organized concentration of people. The chaotic sprawl of Los Angeles is the exact opposite.

I've spent the past 10 years trying to learn the "right" way to draw type. I've been lucky enough to work under some of the most respected type designers in the world; people like Tobias Frere-Jones, Erik Spiekermann, and David Berlow. Before starting work on Los Feliz, I was finally getting confident in my ability to follow the traditional ways of building a typeface. When Matt showed me the **LOS FELIZ AUTO PARTS & SERVICE** sign, I real-

ized it was an excellent time to take everything I've learned and turn it inside out to ask myself "If I didn't know what I was doing, what would I do?," and to forgo tradition in favor of expressiveness. Mismatched stroke endings on the lowercase italics – why not? In short, I wanted to design a typeface that relates to my previous work the way that Los Angeles relates to a city like Boston.

The first step was to keep as many of the fabulous details from the original as possible, resisting the urge to tone them down. The original lowercase r is a good example of this. There's no reason



why it should be detailed the way it is, with the strange little ear added to the ball. I never would have come up with this on my own and it's absolutely perfect. As I continued drawing, I tried to let these inconsistencies serve as the thread that held the whole typeface together. I wanted the different styles of the family to have only casual relationships

to one another, with similar basic structures clothed in different weight and serif treatments.

MATT: AT THIS POINT IN THE STORY, the typeface, now christened "Los Feliz," returned to Los Angeles via e-mail. Christian continued to send working versions my way for the next few months, and in exchange I gave him my feedback. I said things like, "The lowercase g is probably too typographic. Maybe you should try something a little more 'weird,'" or, "I love the capital Q, don't change a thing." We racked up some significant long-distance charges talking about italics.

For literally hundreds of years, people who design typefaces have adhered to certain conventions when creating an italic. For example, when William Caslon designed his italic, he didn't just take the lowercase a from the roman and give it a jaunty slant. Instead, he followed established conventions of creating an italic, changing the two-story a to a one-story a, giving the lowercase f an elongated tail, etc. Christian is familiar with these conventions. The artist who painted the LOS FELIZ AUTO PARTS & SERVICE sign probably isn't.* Yet many of these conventional flourishes appear in the finished typeface. Los Feliz evolved into an experiment in balancing typographic convention with hand-drawn exuberance. Nowhere is this balance more precarious than in the italic. For this reason, I feel that the italic is a good meter for the success or failure of Los Feliz as a typeface, or at least as an answer to a typographic puzzle.



RUDY: MY FRIEND JEFFERY lives in a house on a hill in Silver Lake in Los Angeles, and when you stand on his deck you look out over Los Feliz. “It’s where people like Madonna and Brad Pitt have second or third homes,” he once told me as we were looking out over a lush green area that spread out indefinitely. In Los Angeles everybody knows where the stars live or have lived. It imbues everything with a faint shine of importance. I live in Berkeley. My neighbor’s name is Wavy Gravy. Mr. Gravy is a counterculture figure from the 60s who used to hang out with Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters. Which brings me to Christian’s typeface.

One day my wife Zuzana walked into my room with a number of laser printouts showing a new font called “Los Feliz.” It was sent to her as a PDF file by Christian. I have a soft side for almost anything dealing with Los Angeles, and for design that is just a little left of perfect. Los Feliz filled both those qualifications, so I took an immediate interest. My first impression of these printouts was that these could have been the initial sketches for Cooper Black, a typeface drawn in the 1920s by the American designer Oswald Cooper, except that Cooper moved beyond these sketches with Cooper Black, a typeface that you see all over Los Angeles. Actually, there’s a sign at Griffith’s Observatory that’s set in an ambitiously condensed version of Cooper Black. The sign points to an exit that will lead you out of Griffith’s Park to Vermont Boulevard, which happens to run right into Los Feliz. I know this because recently I was driving around the area looking for the LOS FELIZ AUTO PARTS & SERVICE sign, but couldn’t find it. Christian had told me about the sign and Matt had send me some photographs. But I wanted to see it for myself. I assumed I would find the sign simply by driving up and down Los Feliz Boulevard. I figured a sign like that would stand out in such a ritzy neighborhood. I never did find it because, as Matt later told me upon my return from Los Angeles, the sign is actually on Santa Monica Boulevard, between Madison and Hoover (just east of Vermont). He said, “It’s right next to a bright red building with lots of Shepard Fairey posters on it. If you haven’t been to that particular area before, you may want to bring extra film. There’s a lot of interesting typography.”

Anyway, my friend Jeffery, the one with the deck overlooking Los Feliz, loves the work of Oswald Cooper, particularly the

vernacular qualities in Cooper's work. In the late 80s and early 90s, Jeffery and his colleagues and students at Cal Arts, a design school in Valencia just north of Los Angeles, were instrumental in reviving the vernacular in typeface design. These are the fonts that Matt was referring to earlier in this story. Jeffery's own font, Keedy Sans, is a perfect example of this approach. Los Feliz is a typeface that looks like it should have been released during this time. It would have been a big hit in the early 90s.



Today, as in the 70s, designers again prefer Helvetica and other bland looking sans serif typefaces. These fonts impregnate print work with the veneer of professionalism by looking stylistically detached, which is now very cool. There's also a fondness today for geometric and isometric constructed typefaces that are really difficult to read but look good when you put drop shadows behind them. I have no explanation for this trend.

Los Feliz stands in direct opposition to these trends. When looking at the individual characters of Los Feliz, all you see is irregularities, which point to the struggle of drawing a typeface. You become aware of the little details that make it so difficult to draw perfect letter shapes. But when you look at Los Feliz set in text, these irregularities largely disappear. Obviously this typeface was drawn by someone who knew what he was doing. Christian Schwartz is kind of like my neighbor, Mr. Gravy. He is a prankster. He knows exactly how to subvert notions of correct design by being in complete control while giving the impression he is not.

Los Feliz was too good a typeface to pass up simply because it wasn't designed in 1990. Plus, no matter what you may have

read in this or other design magazines, design is largely driven by style, which is cyclical. We either follow styles or we rebel against them. Designers will tire of Helvetica and its offspring, like they did before, and will go in search of something different, like Los Feliz.

People often ask us how we select the typefaces that we release. It's an indefinable process of personal preferences, professional expertise, chance occurrences and gut response. And sometimes it requires someone like Philip Shtoll to take his dog out for a haircut. The above story is one example of how it works. Los Feliz is the result of such a story.

TH'END

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* Our initial attempts to locate the sign painter resulted in many dead ends. A few months after Los Feliz was released, *Los Angeles* magazine ran a short story on the typeface, and was able to find out that the original letters that inspired the Los Feliz typeface were painted by Cosmo Avila.

DESIGNED BY CHRISTIAN SCHWARTZ



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Los Feliz

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