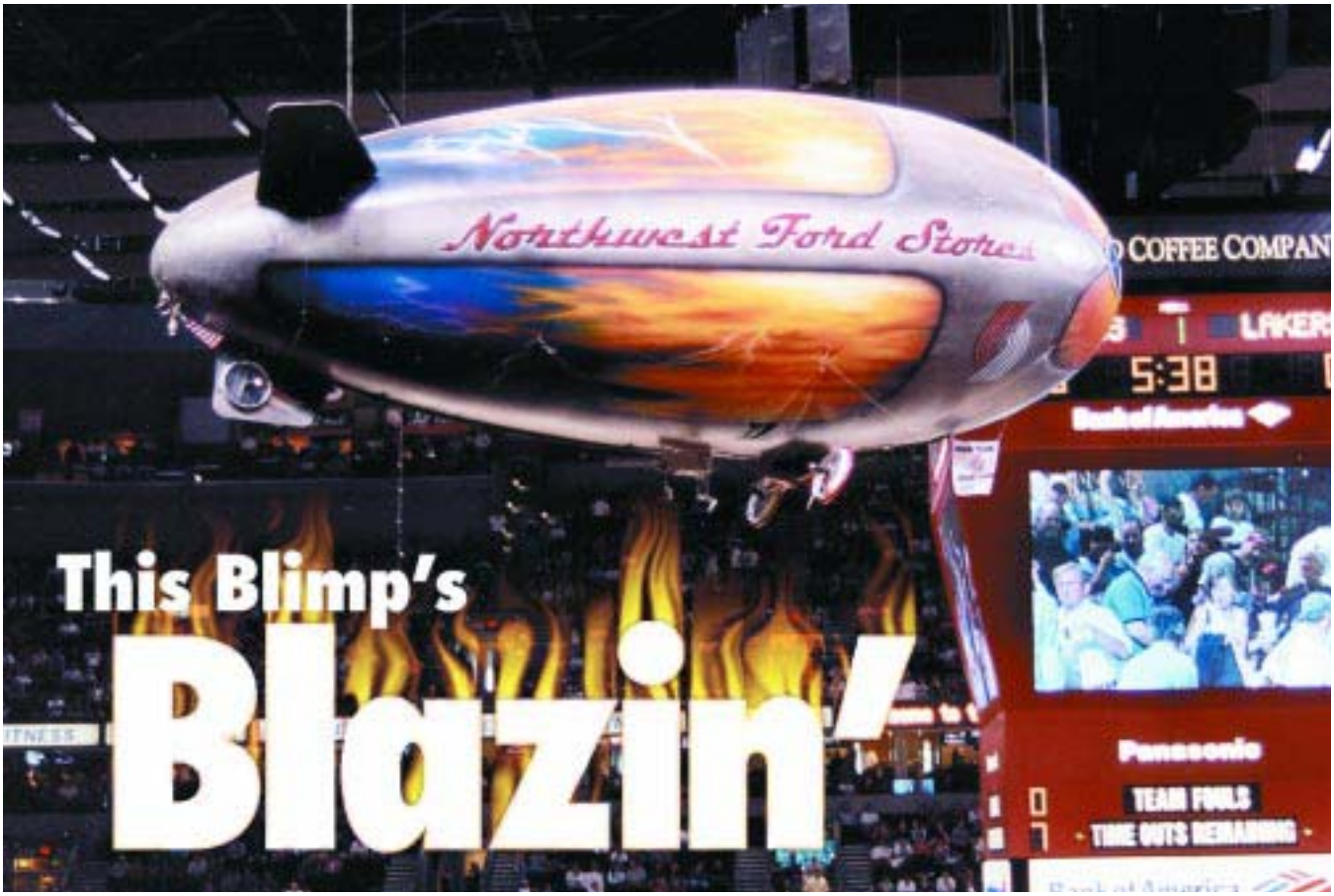
Brett Patterson © Portland Trailblazers 1999



This Blimp's Blazin'

Keith Buckley Designs Fire in the Sky

By Keith Buckley & Joan T. Sherwood

When Keith Buckley designed the graphics to emblazon the Portland Trailblazers blimp, computer imaging guided old-fashioned handcrafting.

What do Jefferson Airplane, the Hell's Angels and the Portland Trailblazers all have in common? The artistic services of Keith Buckley, a.k.a. Zap Graphics of Portland, Oregon, one of a disappearing breed who haven't completely given up handcrafting art the old-fashioned way in the digital age.

Buckley's first public work of art (though uncommissioned) was a mixed-media mural on a residential building in Redwood City, California. He was four when he circled the outer walls of his parents' house with a drawing of a "choo-choo train," rendered in pencil, crayon and chalk and soaring to the height of approximately 3.5 feet. Over the years, the artist's calling would carry him in many different directions.

"Academics," he says, "were my least favorite part of high school, but with the help of an exceptionally interesting art teacher, I kept coming back to her class for the exciting possibilities of what could be learned and created. Next, I mixed a heavy dose of less than perfect behavior with a love of cars and motorcycles."

Soon Buckley was in demand as a highly skilled artisan doing custom painting, pinstriping, lettering and airbrushing. He painted anything and everything, from racecars to boats to buildings to dragsters and motorcycles, even guitars for Jefferson Airplane and the Hell's Angels.

 PEI • NOVEMBER 2000 • X

"I was also producing fiberglass and Bondo sculpted motorcycle tanks containing X-rated sexual fantasy themes," he says. "Hey! It was the '60s, summer of love! Peace and Love."

In his late 20s, Buckley picked up a guitar, assumed the name Dewey Rocket, and spent the next two decades in an assortment of rock'n'roll and blues bands, traveling throughout the Northwest, Canada, and overseas. Working as a full-time musician, he also found time to put himself back in college to study graphic design.

Today, Buckley's successful design and photo studio, Zap Graphics, operates with a trio of high-powered, Ethernet-networked computers—a Macintosh G3 and two UMAX 900s—that combined have 928MB RAM and 40.5GB in hard drive capacity. Work is output on an Epson Stylus Color 3000 printer for a client roster that includes the NBA's Portland Trailblazers.

"I've been involved with projects for the 'Blazers since 1992, creating everything from specialized mailing pieces to magazine illustrations and covers to player pin-up posters, one-of-a-kind collage work for special presentations, concepts for logo designs and, most recently, their 1999-2000 team poster," says Buckley.

In July 1998 the Blazers approached Buckley about a new project in the works. They where purchasing a 10x20-foot, radio-controlled blimp made by Flight Brothers in Yorktowne, Pennsylvania to fly inside the Rose Garden arena.

"They were interested in having me design the paint job for it. I thought, 'Too fun!'"

"There had been a falling-out with the agency that originally was on contract to do the job," Buckley says. "It seems the agency was forcing their ideas on the 'Blazers and they were not very accommodating or willing to change their approach to the blimp project. Needless to say, the 'Blazers were not happy with what they were getting from the agency. Enter Zap Graphics! Ta-da!"

Buckley and Michelle Wolf, his contact with the 'Blazers at the time, had several conversations about the designs already under consideration and what the team was looking for. For one thing, Zap Designs would need to incorporate the Northwest Ford Stores logo, as the company would be leasing the blimp for three years.

"Also, around this time my gray matter was having some real fun with what I would ultimately like to see on the blimp," says Buckley. "The overall concept was to have not just a banner or logo with a little color, which seemed to be the only thing being done with most other arena blimps at the time." Instead, Buckley envisioned the entire blimp covered in a 3-D design.

Then came a creative brief from the 'Blazers outlining the project in much greater detail. "One of my

captions for all images here

favorite parts was the one that read, 'Tone: Cool. Eye-catching. Cutting-edge. Classic . . . needs to last (not get old after one flight.)' That really pressed my Go button."

"There where originally three basic concepts: a hotrod theme, a '34 Ford chopped 2 door coupe with slicks and flames, which I thought would look great stretched around the blimp; a cool little custom racing pickup—Ford of course; and a glowing comet with chrome exhaust and flames."

Basketball season was quickly drawing closer. The cost of comping all three ideas was less than ideal, and the decision-makers didn't want to represent just one style of car. The 'Blazers gave the go-ahead to the glowing comet concept.

"My concerns were mostly with available technologies," says Buckley. "I started doing research on what kinds of applications were out there and what would be the best for this type of 3-D rendering. I was fully intending at this point to model the blimp concept over a 3-D wire frame. I had been talking to several of my designer friends to see how they would approach a project like the blimp and got lots of valuable feedback.

"Wait a minute. I'm a motorcycle painter. Treat this like a giant motorcycle tank! Photoshop has mask[ing tape] layers and the pressure-sensitive Airbrush tool to use with my Wacom tablet. If the guys at Aero Star are really good, we can do this!"

"In researching wire frame modeling and associated software, I found a local studio in Portland that specialized in 3-D animation/modeling. We talked at length about the project and the related costs. My ramping-up to this technology would have been too steep for my budget, and out-sourcing to another studio ultimately proved to be cost prohibitive."

Then came news that made the project even more challenging. Flight Brothers informed Buckley that there was no way at that time to apply images of this size and complexity except by hand.

"Enter the sinking feeling!" Buckley recalls. "I had to rethink this project. I realized computer technology might not be the total solution to this design problem."

So Buckley called Aero Star, the folks in South Dakota who do the direct application of paint on the Flight Brothers blimps. They hadn't done anything quite as involved as Buckley's design, but they were excited about doing job—it would be a fun challenge and a break from painting straight logos. "They assured me that they could reproduce the design with their spray guns."

Then Buckley had a revelation. "Wait a minute. I'm a motorcycle painter. Treat this like a giant motorcycle tank! Photoshop has mask[ing tape] layers and the pressure-sensitive Airbrush tool to use with my Wacom tablet. If the guys at Aero Star are really good, we can do this!"

Project Launch

By this time, Buckley had chosen to work in 2-D and had done several preliminary pencil sketches. He gathered image resources from his extensive in-house photo and CD image library.

"I searched for anything that had the spirit of the blimp—Lightning, (yeah, we've got to have lightning!) Fire (primeval . . . a must!) Space (the final frontier). Where can I find rusted space vehicle parts?"

The next step was to scan the pencil sketches, bring them into Photoshop and start building paths to isolate the different areas of the design.

"I prefer to work in Photoshop at a higher resolution, 300-360 ppi, in the beginning, and then to downsize my files for their intended output. If I know from the beginning that it's going to be a large project, I might start at 266 or 288 ppi to keep file size more manageable. Even my current Web projects all start this way. I think they just end up looking better."

Buckley imported his selections for texture images, including lightning, fire, and space, as individual layers. He used the Layer Interaction options (Hard Light, Screen, and Lighten) extensively to achieve the desired feel of the blimp body parts. Kai's Power Tools (KPT) and plug-ins from Alien Skin Software were Buckley's primary filters.

"The Ford logo started life as an EPS file imported into Photoshop and shaped with KPT and lighting effects," says Buckley. "The rest was approached as if it were a motorcycle tank and I had a roll of masking tape in my hand, using the Airbrush tool and Wacom tablet to give shape and dimension to the blimp panels."

The final Photoshop file comprised 32 layers at 266 ppi resolution and weighed in at 140.5MB.

"I spent some time talking to the folks at Aero Star about the paint job requirements and how best to approach it on their end. My motorcycle experience made this discussion very straightforward. I also learned a lot about the weather and fishing in South Dakota."

Buckley sent a JPG image file to Aero Star and mailed large color texture samples from parts of the blimp for the painters' reference. Buckley output large prints of the side, front and top views of the finished blimp design on his Epson XLPro inkjet printer, and these also served as reference materials. From supplied postscript fonts, Aero Star made vinyl letters and applied them to the side of the blimp. The rest of the design application was accomplished entirely with spray guns and masking tape.

"About halfway through, Aero Star sent me a JPG of the work in progress," recalls Buckley. "This was the infamous season of the NBA lock-out. The final, finished, painted blimp stayed deflated, folded up, and packed away for months in the Rose Garden."

Eventually, the blimp came out of storage and made its debut. "That JPG was the only image anybody had seen of the blimp before its maiden flight. It was nerve-racking."

Buckley's design fulfills all the criteria of that long-ago creative brief: it's cool, eye-catching, cutting edge, classic, and it certainly hasn't grown old after repeated viewing.

"Well the little blimp is still flying, with some slight tail modifications for better navigation," Buckley reports. "When I get a chance to go to a 'Blazers game it gives me great pleasure to see my blimp project flying around the Rose Garden."

The blimp continues to bring joy and entertainment to some 21,300 loyal Trailblazer fans, not to mention having made Buckley something of a hero to the kids in the neighborhood.

"The 'Blazers blimp project was a wonderful blending of my past experiences and current technological skills," says Buckley, proving that technology alone isn't always the perfect solution to present day design problems. ◀

You can visit Keith Buckley's website at *www.zapgraphics.com*.