



Get the latest from Curbed National



Facebook

Email newsletter

Twitter

Like 9.5k

Your email

Follow @Curbed

Meet the 2013 Curbed Young Guns: Max Humphrey

Thursday, August 22, 2013, by Sarah Firshein

Max Humphrey, 34, is the only member of this year's [class of Young Guns](#)



BETSY BURNHAM

BURNHAM DESIGN

CYG

CYG13

INTERIOR DESIGN

INTERIOR DESIGNERS

LOS ANGELES

MAX HUMPHREY

YOUNG GUNS

YOUNG GUNS 2013

YOUNG GUNS FINALISTS

<http://curbed.com/archives/2013/08/14/the-curbed-young-guns-class-of-2013-revealed.php> that ever toured for a couple of years as the bassist in a Los Angeles-based punk band whose sound was [once characterized](#)

<http://articles.latimes.com/2004/dec/30/news/wk-bandsd30> by the *L.A. Times* as "Pulp and the Jam playing a dance party celebrating the British Invasion." Though that article went on to ask, "What's not to adore about the L.A. quartet [the Adored?](#)"

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Adored when the band broke up in 2007, Humphrey decided he didn't want to go back into TV production, which was the very first gig he landed after graduating from Emerson College. "I had just spent a couple of years playing music professionally and I couldn't go back and do anything that I wasn't 100 percent in love with or anything that wasn't creative," he says. "So while I was looking for a new career I was just kind of decorating my apartment because I had nothing to do during the day. I was one of those L.A. people—you see them at coffee shops during the day and you think, *Why isn't that person at work?*"

Months went by, and Humphrey realized he was spending all his time and energy decorating his place. "It just hit me that that could be a career," he recalls. "So I dove into it. I didn't go to school for design, but I started really learning everything I could and reading everything I could about the history of interior design, familiarizing myself with as many designers as I could, especially ones from the '50s and '60s who had connections to Hollywood. You know, like Tony Duquette and those people who crossed over from movie-set design into residential design."

One day, Humphrey applied to an anonymous Craigslist ad seeking a part-time design

assistant. "I wrote in and said, *I don't have any experience and I don't have a resume, but here's what I've been doing, and if you'd just meet with me.*" He was delighted to learn that he had unwittingly applied for a position at **Burnham Design**; he had read about its president and founder, Betsy Burnham, in magazines and on blogs. "She came from a different, nontraditional background, too," Humphrey says. "She worked in the fashion industry and fell into design because she was passionate about it. So she gave me a shot."

In the last seven-or-so years, Humphrey has worked on an estimated 100 projects, and this spring, he was promoted from senior project manager to partner, right beside Burnham herself. "I have to say he's a true design talent," she writes by email. "I feel fortunate not only to know Max (cool guy, super-dry sense of humor, sophisticated taste) but also to have him here at Burnham Design."

Here, Humphrey talks about the link between music and interiors, that proverbial first big break, and what he hopes his impact will be on the industry; do scroll on down to the bottom for a glimpse at some of his portfolio shots.

At this point, are you doing projects pretty much solo?

There's definitely stuff that I take an interest in, things more geared to my style that I would kind of take the lead on, but Betsy and I really collaborate on everything.

What mosts interests you, stylistically?

The more modern stuff we work on, which is coming up more and more. I'm more comfortable with it, as opposed to traditional. Betsy's sort of known as more of a traditional designer. She works in a lot of color and pattern, but we're not known for anything super modern.

You have this really fascinating background in which you've worked in two totally different industries before foraying into decorating. Would you say that being a musician has influenced your design work?

No, actually, as a career it's got nothing to do with what I'm doing now, creatively or professionally. My background in TV production has a lot more to do with it because when I was production coordinating, I was basically managing the flow of information between client and vendor, writing POs [purchase orders] to rent scissor lifts, and you know, coordinating PAs [production assistants] to make copies of scripts to distribute. When I was a project manager at Burnham Design, a lot of stuff falls into that job category. The output is different, but the process is really similar. When we're purchasing a sofa, we're writing POs and managing a lot of information that's going on between vendors and clients.

Right, so you have to call upon the same skill set.

Oh, totally, I felt really prepared. There's so much paperwork involved and organization. To be a good designer, you know, it's like 90 percent business and 10 percent art to be good at it. That 10 percent creativity can't be taught, but to be good at it you've got to be really organized, and so my background in TV production really prepped me.

What would you say is your biggest career milestone so far?

My apartment's about to be published, so that's going to be in *Lonny* in September. As far as my very own thing that's been published: I've worked on a lot of projects that have been published, but I feel like the first thing of a designer that really gets published is their own place.

It's so true, it's the most obvious representation of your work because you actually live in the space.

Right. And you need a portfolio to get clients, and you need clients to have a portfolio. So in terms of milestones, making partner was a big deal, and my place coming out in *Lonny*.

For this place that's going to be published in *Lonny*, was that the place you moved when you moved to L.A.?

Nope, different. I've moved a lot. When you move to L.A., you move. I've probably lived in like 10 different apartments.

And is this the one you're most proud of?

Yeah, totally.

Can you walk me through what it looks like?

Sure, it's in a [Leland Bryant <http://la.curbed.com/tags/leland-bryant>](http://la.curbed.com/tags/leland-bryant) -designed building. He was a '20s and '30s star architect in L.A.; his milestone building was the [Sunset Tower Hotel, <http://la.curbed.com/tags/sunset-tower-hotel>](http://la.curbed.com/tags/sunset-tower-hotel) which is kind of a landmark of Art Deco design. My apartment building was built before that, and I feel like it was sort of his test project before he built the Sunset Tower because a lot of the details are similar. It's in a tall building in West Hollywood and because of the density laws there's nothing around it that tall, so I've got crazy views—180-degree views.

So what's next for you professionally? It sounds like you're really happy at Burnham Design, but are there projects that you haven't worked on yet that you'd like to?

We've got a ton of projects right now, and some of them are more exciting than others. I'm excited to see what happens after my place comes out. Whenever we publish something we start getting phone calls. And we've got this great stack of unpublished projects right now that we're kind of figuring out what to do with. For us, the most exciting project is always the next one. As soon as we get something new, that's what everyone wants to work on. I'm excited to see what happens next. We primarily do residential design—we've done a little bit of commercial stuff, but typically it's a client whose house we designed who will bring us in to do her office space. We've done a couple of them; we did a dermatology office in Beverly Hills and an endodontics office, also in Beverly Hills.

What was that like?

It's the type of thing where we rely so heavily on the architect and the contractor because we do all this residential, and having to make something look like it's a Burnham Design-designed place but work within the realm of commercial design is really challenging. It's fun, but there are so many more limitations.

How do you choose fabrics for an endodontist's office?

It's all commercial stuff. It's got to be durable.

When you see the material selections, do you cringe?

You know, they all use linoleum and that plastic base, but there's tons of options. It's just that I don't know who usually makes these decisions. I don't think designers are usually brought in; it's, like, the builder who picks that stuff. It's not that hard—they have tons of colors.

Switching gears, what's it like for you to be a young person in the industry in L.A.?

I don't necessarily think it's something people should be bragging about, just because I don't think you should necessarily be bragging about your credentials. I feel like I've got so much to learn. You know, the interesting parallel between design and architecture and music is that musicians peak after their first album. Think about the history of music: bands suck after their first or second album. But with architects and designers, their best stuff happens later for a lot of reasons: the projects get bigger, they have more money to work with, they have more experience. I'm looking forward to the projects I have way down the line.

In 40 or 50 years, when you look back on your career, what do you want your legacy in this industry to be?

There's some designers whose career paths I would want to follow more than others.

Like who?

Other than Betsy, Jeffrey Bilhuber is my favorite working designer.

What about Jeffrey is most inspiring?

I've never met him, I don't really know anything about his personal life, which is part of the reason I think I'm so interested in him. His work speaks for itself; he doesn't seem like a person who would end up on a reality show. My favorite designers from the past, like Albert Hadley and Billy Baldwin, I can't imagine in a million years that they would pimp themselves out to TV. Our work as interior designers—we're really a service industry, and the work should speak for itself.

So that's where you want to be: you want to be providing really solid services.

Right. I want to be known as a maker, and I want to be behind the scenes, and I want to have a small group of clients whom I can focus on, and I don't want to be on television. With my favorite designers, it's almost hard to find pictures of their projects. The pictures of Albert Hadley's portfolio: you hang on to each picture so closely because there's so little of it. These designers are so not overexposed.



<http://cdn.cstatic.net/images/gridfs/52122a89f92ea1463b01fbd5/5Jn6kGchkYPPulz8OACDx85dgjU_qNVUPGHfc0qEoY.jpg>



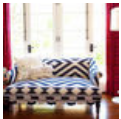
<<http://cdn.cstatic.net/images/gridfs/52122a8cf92ea1463b01fbd5/fHfT50vdDL2irDsUnZZja4GgRqPYQSPi6Nbhb-95x1k.jpg>>



<http://cdn.cstatic.net/images/gridfs/521643a5f92ea10ca1024a4a/IMG_4462.jpg>



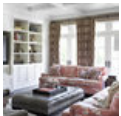
<<http://cdn.cstatic.net/images/gridfs/52164342f92ea16daf016dbb/Screen Shot 2013-08-22 at 9.54.27 AM.png>>



<http://cdn.cstatic.net/images/gridfs/52122a8ef92ea1463b01fbd5/mr_upMp9A6MdrGVozN9s8sYrLFavFpQgOm0iANYBxJU.jpg>



<<http://cdn.cstatic.net/images/gridfs/52164345f92ea14931030d05/Anderson-115.jpg>>



<http://cdn.cstatic.net/images/gridfs/52164348f92ea14931030d0f/bh_9.jpg>



<http://cdn.cstatic.net/images/gridfs/5216434af92ea14931030d19/IMG_0013_web.jpg>



<<http://cdn.cstatic.net/images/gridfs/52122a96f92ea1463b01fc11/G-oPNv2ZWNobWQUYpkCCylyOfjKUtX3rnN1S7-rwCbw.jpg>>



<<http://cdn.cstatic.net/images/gridfs/52122a98f92ea1463b01fc1b/5LJcnqr2kGE6c5vOlQpMe36BWDXZSoGxy87TnZLs06A.jpg>>

Photos courtesy of Max Humphrey

· All Young Guns 2013 coverage <<http://curbed.com/tags/young-guns-2013>> [Curbed National]

· Burnham Design <<http://www.burnhamdesign.com/>> [official site]

2 anonymous comments

568

@guest #2: Well done, very pithy.
His interior designs are perfect for the glossy pages of Pottery Barn.

#3. 08/22/13 05:19 PM

ncrpz2

11 anonymous comments