STEVE JONES AND MARTIN SORGER: COVERING MUSIC: A BRIEF HISTORY AND ANALYSIS OF ALBUM COVER DESIGN

When Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols proclaimed, "if people bought the records for the music, this thing would have died a death long ago" (Dean & Howells, 1982: p. 23), he illustrated the importance and power people place on "the look of music." Using all forms of mass-media exposure, popular music has increasingly relied on visual style to present and sell itself. The visuals of music have been most permanently stored and most widely displayed on the packaging of prerecorded musical products—album covers. While the basic role of music packaging remains the protection of the prerecorded medium, it also functions as a visual mnemonic to the music enclosed and as a marketing tool.

Despite the ubiquity of music packaging, however, little scholarly material has been written that examines the place of its visual design. Although studies of fashion, film, and music video exist, none connects to the packaging of music. With one exception (a book by Kevin Edge, published in 1991) neither are there histories of music packaging. Indeed, "packaging" typically is understood by fans and scholars alike as either derogatory, denoting inauthenticity, or as a totality—the sum of practices involving the visual presentation of an artist and his or her music. It is never understood in purely functional terms (as the means by which the physical products are protected and shipped), or as a form of graphic design, as we will consider it here.

Designers and graphic design are quite literally cut out of the production process in most scholarly treatments of popular music. In *Music in the Market,* Don Cusic devoted about three pages to a discussion of album cover art, the most pages found in any popular music studies text. He noted that "most labels attempt to charge 10 percent of sales against the artist's account to cover this cost (of design)" (1996: p. 45), and he provided a brief discussion of the relationships between artist, image, photography, and graphic design. In the style of the book, Cusic even gave some advice about album cover art, including the recommendation that "An image for the artist should be an

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NOTE: Readers should log on to the World Wide Web and point their browsers to *http://aoir.org/covering/* to find slides of images referred to in the text.

extension of the person" (1996: p. 51). However, he gave design short shrift, noting only that, "In addition to the photos, there is also the question of graphics and colors, involving background as well as clothing" (p. 52). The key question, according to Cusic, was: "How will consumers notice this album in a store full of others [sic] and how well does this cover represent the images of the artist?" (p. 52).

In *The Recording Industry* (1998), Geoffrey Hull made mention of packaging, locating it within record companies' marketing units, although he said little more about it and he did not describe the work of designers or the role graphic design plays in packaging. Likewise Keith Negus, in *Producing Pop* (1992), placed packaging as a process within the larger marketing of artists and music, and made only a slight mention of graphic design, focusing instead on music videos and visual images generally.[1] Even Donald Passman (1997), in what is probably the most influential of all the music business "how-to" books, devoted less than a single page to the topic of album cover art, simply noting that there are several levels of artistic control over it. Overall one gets the sense that graphic design plays the least role among the varied industrial processes associated with popular music.

But packaging does play an important role. The best available (in fact, to our knowledge, the only) text that discusses the history of music packaging and graphic design in any depth is Kevin Edge's *The Art of Selling Songs: Graphics for the Music Business 1690–1990* (1991). Edge's book was written to accompany a 1988 display of the same name at London's Victoria & Albert Museum. Edge devoted a full chapter to the packaging of music on wax cylinders, discs, and CDs.[2] The chapter in which he discussed album covers, however, provided but only a summary of the history of music packaging, and did not focus on popular music.

A book by Eric Kohler, *In the Groove* (1999), provided a rich pictorial history of album cover design in the 1940s and 1950s. It also gave interesting biographical details of some of the designers, but it focused on the designs themselves and only slightly embedded the work in artistic, social, and cultural movements of the day.

In short, despite a great deal of writing about the visual dimensions of popular music, it is clear that most scholars have overlooked analysis of album covers and music packaging. We seek to acknowledge this art as deserving serious scholarly attention. Our goal is not to present a content analysis of album covers, but rather to begin to recover the history of their development as a form of art and commerce, and as an integral part of the production and consumption of popular music.

FORM AND FORMAT

When considering the physical packaging and design associated with prerecorded music as a whole, the album cover serves as an important focal point for a number of reasons. In a purely functional sense, the significant history of prerecorded music packaging has centered around the presentation of record discs, whether 78s, 45s, $33^{1/3}$ LPs, or CDs. The album cover remains the most visible form of music packaging. In addition, LP album covers have not yet lost their cultural status for designers and consumers alike. Visually, the 12-inch square of the album cover has proven a fertile forum for the development of a rich sense of cultural, artistic, and social history. As musician Patti Smith said, "Man, if you want to see where the world's been, just look through some old album covers" (*Record Album Art*, 1978). Singer Tony Bennett said in regard to LPs, "They were large enough to make you feel like you were taking home your very own work of art" (Kohler, 1999, p. 7).

In addition to providing a historical overview of the visual dimension of prerecorded music packaging, we want to ask a central question: What will be the consequences for visual design of changes to music media that are on the horizon? What might we learn from similar transitions in the technologies used to deliver music? If new digital forms, particularly ones that involve the Internet for downloading, become popular means of acquiring music, what might become of the visual elements of music packaging?

We begin by examining the attitudes and expectations of consumers and producers through the history of prerecorded music packaging. This will allow us to arrive at some conclusions as to the future of music packaging and the consequences of new technologies such as the Internet and DVD (and CDs and DAT just before them) for packaging, presentation, and design.

THE HISTORY OF PRERECORDED MUSIC PACKAGING

Turntables and Tombstones

In 1896, Thomas Edison established the National Phonograph Company to sell an assortment of musical selections (chosen by Edison himself) on wax cylinders. Just as new media today need content, Edison needed it to sell his era's new medium, the phonograph. Similarly, in 1901, Emile Berliner and Eldridge E. Johnson formed the Victor Talking Machine Company to sell both flat disc phonographs and the discs themselves. Within a year the sale of discs had made a serious impact on the sales of wax cylinders. Around this time, executives at the Columbia Phonograph Company (initially a furniture company that sold

phonographs) realized the advantages of flat discs and introduced the Columbia disc gramophone. The Edison Speaking Machine Company's dedication to quality sound (the company's slogan was "as loud and clear as the original") made executives there more reluctant to convert to discs, and the company continued to sell cylinders until 1929.

Because of their fragility, the wax cylinders were packaged in rigid cardboard boxes lined with felt. The boxes themselves changed very little in design through the 1920s. Designs were standardized and included slogans about the quality of the product, the company name, and various decorative elements. Each recording was identified by a small sticker on the box and by an inscription on the cylinder's rim. (See Figures 1 and 2, wax cylinders, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

The packaging for discs was less sturdy, as manufacturers placed protection low on their list of priorities (Thorgerson & Dean, 1977: p. 9). The early discs were even shipped and sold sleeveless. By 1910, sleeves had become an industry-wide standard and were available in two basic types. The first were made of packing paper and imprinted with the manufacturer's trademark. The second, more common sleeve was blank with a hole cut out in the center to display the label of the record itself. The labels became quite stylish, printed in two and three colors, one often being silver or gold. Records that used multicolored wax often made up for what sleeves lacked in design. As Kohler noted, it was important to find ways to get a consumer's attention to sell records, because "A store that sold only records was a rarity, as they were typically sold in music or appliance stores along with phonographs and sheet music" (1999: p. 11). Sleeves functioned as decorative frames for the labels but, despite attempts at enhancing their appearance, they often were referred to as "tombstones."[3] (See Figures 3–9, record labels and sleeves, at *http://aoir.org/covering/.*)

Record stores were the first to produce durable sleeves (Thorgerson & Dean, 1977: p. 8). These were made of heavier cardboard and had the store's name printed on them. The first covers to be individualized according to recording medium were classical 78s. Due to the length of classical pieces of music and the relatively short length of discs at the time, multiple discs were used to cover the recordings of whole operas or longer orchestral works. These works generally consisted of three to five discs and, because of the weight of the shellac used to make them, required stronger boxes made of pasteboard. The similarity, in appearance and function, of these boxes to photo albums led to them to become known as albums. The earliest albums used only typography with the name on the front and spine. Later, they incorporated photographs, scenes, and portraits of the composers or performing artists. These two means of packaging, the paper sleeve and the album box, continued until the 1950s.

The first period of positive growth in the treatment of the album cover came with the economic recovery after the Great Depression. Following years of decline, increased sales brought about more aggressive promotions and marketing. The earliest post-Depression covers were not particularly popular. Decca's covers of the late 1930s resembled abstract wallpaper (Schmitz, 1986: p. 88), and RCA Victor used a series format incorporating elaborate paintings with designated spaces for the title, composer, and any other relevant information. By the end of the 1930s, gaudy colors, drawings, and pictures of artists abounded. The images on all of these packages were printed on paper slicks that were pasted onto sleeves. These slicks, originally intended for the album books, were later used on the first 10-inch LP sleeves in the late 1940s (Thorgerson & Dean, 1977: p. 9; see Figures 10–12, post-Depression era Decca covers, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

In 1940, both CBS and Columbia intensified and refined their marketing strategies. Pat Dolan, involved in promotions at CBS in 1940, described their approach:

> Albums should be as bold and dashing as we can make them; they should stand out in dealers' windows screaming for attention, yet always reflecting the spirit of the music inside. Color should be violent and strong. Copy should be pared to a minimum, and each album should reflect the quality of the Columbia name. (Schmitz, 1986: p. 88)

Album cover design during this period developed into a prestigious field and attracted a wide range of designers as well as fine artists.

American covers of this era were dominated by three distinguishable styles. The first were the painterly covers made by RCA. Using traditional imagery on their classical releases, RCA tried to promote a conservative, quality-oriented corporate image. The company incorporated various genres of painting on its covers, alternating from Surreal or Cubist to Romantic. Frank Decker, one of the more productive freelancers used by RCA, attempted to match his cover designs to the music historically (Schmitz, 1986: p. 92; see Figures 13 & 14, RCA–Victor album covers, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

The second direction was toward poster-like covers, used by CBS Columbia and introduced by Alex Steinweiss, whose work incorporated the principles of various European design movements (Schmitz, 1986: p. 94). These covers became the models for other companies, and RCA adopted this style for their

popular and jazz albums when the painterly covers became considered old-fashioned. (See Figures 15–17, Steinweiss/Columbia album covers at *http://aoir.org/covering/* .)

Kohler noted that Steinweiss was, in many ways, responsible for album cover design becoming part of the production process in popular music:

> It was Steinweiss who came up with the idea of specially designed cover art. . . . These new covers were an instant success, and Columbia soon realized that the extra production cost required was well worth it when sales figures of albums with the Steinweiss covers rose dramatically in comparison to those same albums issued earlier with conventional plain covers. The popularity of Steinweiss's work prompted Columbia's marketing department to request cover art for all subsequent releases. (1999: p. 13)

The third style of album cover, used mainly by smaller, independent labels, consisted of a more purely graphic approach (Schmitz, 1986: p. 90). This direction was epitomized by the work of David Stone Martin. Working for Moses Asch, Martin was probably the best-known and most emulated of the designers working for independent labels. He imbued his stylish covers with a sense of social consciousness (Schmitz, 1986: p. 96). Out of his work grew a new image for "colored" or "race" music, as it was then called. Prior to Martin, the images of black musicians, if they were portrayed at all, were stereotyped because their pictures were not regarded as an incentive to sales. More commonly, covers included abstract images and geometric designs. (See Figures 18–21, race records by David Stone Martin, at *http://aoir.org/covering/* .)

Technical limitations restricted the use of photography, which became fashionable with popular music album covers in the late 1940s. But radical changes were emerging in the music industry that eventually altered the nature of record cover design and drove out most of the first generation of designers. As the record companies continued to become aware of the potential impact of the album cover, designers soon had to present proposed design solutions to committees. As the recording artists came to wield more power over visual matters, early designers felt a further loss of control.

One of the major changes that emerged in the mid-1940s was the rise of self-service selection at record stores. Shelves that displayed only the spines of records were replaced by racks that brought customers face to face with covers. Slowly the importance of the cover as a "silent salesman" was noticed by record company executives and marketing personnel. By 1945, nearly every popular record had a designed cover, although only about 15% of classical covers were designed (Schmitz, 1986: p. 90).[4]

The record industry started to change drastically after June 1948, when Columbia introduced the long-playing record (LP). By the summer of 1949, the LP seemed to be the choice of both the public and the industry. Edge (1991) noted that Columbia's LP, with its "delicate surfaces and troublesome static called for the development of a different kind of package" (p. 93), a sleeve within the record jacket. The transition to a form of packaging that entirely hid the record label was complete, and the new LP packaging "gave companies plenty of space to print all kinds of subsidiary copy" (Edge, 1991: p. 93). Labels themselves were henceforth designed largely to carry perfunctory information relevant to copyright and ownership. (Figure 22, Brunswick "standardized" label, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

The 45-rpm record did not die with the LP's rise to prominence, and RCA spent a fortune promoting it as the preferred speed for popular music. The RCA campaign succeeded, and the rest of the industry (including Columbia) adopted the 45 for their popular music catalogs. During the next 10 years, music aimed at the youth market appeared primarily in the form of either 45s or EPs (extended-play discs), while LPs were seen as a more substantial investment for serious jazz and classical collectors. (See Figure 23, 1940s 45-rpm records, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

Until rock music gained a sense of its own relevance in the 1960s (Thorgerson & Dean, 1977: p. 19), jazz inspired the most sophisticated and varied group of covers. The progressive nature of jazz as it developed in the 1950s was reflected in an avant-garde approach to photography, illustration, and typography. Conscious attempts were made to link visuals and music. Jazz covers maintained a sense of integrity and dedication to the music. This was due in part to the fact that much of the jazz being released came from small labels run by individuals with a strong sense of musical history (Thorgerson & Dean, 1977: p. 11). When jazz consumers, whether intellectuals, bohemians, or novices, bought an album, they also bought into a sense of history, style, and culture, as Dick Hebdidge (1979) noted.

Jazz album covers generally have continued to avoid crass visuals. Most indicative of this, according to Storm Thorgerson of the British design group Hipgnosis, is in their treatment of type. Headline-sized names and titles are not simply slapped onto covers; instead there is a feeling of discretion and subtlety on jazz album covers (Dean & Howells, 1982: p. 9). Portraits of jazz musicians are also more straightforward and less superficial or commercial than those of rock musicians. Classical sleeves have not developed an overall sense of style as have jazz covers, although the category is not without fine examples of design, illustration, and photography. (See Figures 24–27, jazz album covers, photography, *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

The first rock-and-roll sleeves were not much different from their jazz counterparts, but how they emerged and how they were marketed represented a tremendous departure from the past.[5] Most rock music in the 1950s was sold on 45s, and rock albums functioned primarily as a means to collect hit singles recorded by successful stars into one package. The marketing of early rock was intrinsically tied to the movies, so imagery for many covers emerged from the movies and movie posters. Widescreen face shots became fixtures on record covers. The best examples of this style are Elvis Presley's albums. (See Figure 28, Elvis and the movies, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

Face shots still dominate the album covers of many genres of music, but in at least one case—that of Champaign, a racially integrated 1980s pop group—record company executives deliberately chose not to show band members' faces. The concern was that to do so would also show the band members' racial mix, making it difficult to position the group as either a middle-of-the-road pop band or an R&B/soul act (Day, 1980; see Figure 29, Champaign, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*).[6]

In the 1960s, with shows like "American Bandstand," television began to replace movies as the showcase for emerging stars. A catch-22 situation affected the packaging of rock in its initial stages. How could the major companies package something so shocking in its sexuality and youthful rebelliousness in a manner acceptable to the social climate of the time? But eventually, the rawness of the rock of the mid-1950s was replaced by the homogenized sounds of Fabian, Frankie Avalon, and Paul Anka, and rock presentation followed suit. "Technicolor retouched grins" (Thorgerson & Dean, 1977: p. 10) rapidly became the formula. Thanks to rock's predominance in the youth market, after the 1950s the design of album covers for other forms of popular music generally took their cue from the graphic design of rock album covers.

As the market for rock music grew, recording artists gained more leverage, and clauses for artistic control began appearing in contracts, including control over packaging. Spearheading the trend were the Beatles. Moreover, groups no longer needed several hit singles before making an album. The rise of the album precipitated the steady decline of the 45. By the mid-1960s the pop record industry consisted primarily of LPs. In 1960, 45s constituted 20% of the total expenditure on records, and this share continued to decline steadily. By 1975, singles accounted for only 8% of the market; and in 1998, vinyl singles accounted for 2.8%, whereas CD singles comprised 29.8%, according to the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA).

During the early and mid-1960s, art school friends of British bands like the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and Pink Floyd began to get involved in album cover design. Young designers who were interested in the music began developing the imagery that is still associated with rock and roll. In London, rock music intermingled with the worlds of fashion and fine arts, and U.K. art schools provided a fertile ground for art and design to mix (Frith & Horne, 1987). The most familiar early examples of fine artists' work on rock covers were the Beatles' *Revolver* in 1966 by Klaus Voorman, and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* in 1967 by Peter Blake and Jann Howarth. (See Figures 30–31, The Beatles, at *http://aoir.org/covering/* .)

The involvement of these artists lent an artistic credibility to the field of rock album cover design. Since then, many renowned artists have been involved with sleeve designs, including Larry Rivers, Jim Dine, Richard Hamilton, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol. (See Figures 32–34, Richard Hamilton and Andy Warhol, at *http://aoir.org/covering/* .)

In the mid-1960s, half of the U.S. population was under 25 and, by 1967—the "Summer of Love"—drugs of all sorts prevailed in youth culture. The first suggestion of psychedelia on an album cover was the Beatles' *Rubber Soul*, released in 1966, with its hallucinatory photo of the band and distorted Art Nouveau-derived lettering (Thorgerson & Dean, 1977: p. 13; see Figure 35, *Rubber Soul*, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*).

At the same time, in San Francisco the thriving live music scene produced a strong sense of community between groups and their audiences. Local groups started turning to their friends to produce posters for concerts. These artists, who began by making posters for dances at the Fillmore and the Avalon Ballroom, attempted to create a unity of visuals and music. Just as musicians investigated and drew upon musical sources around the globe, poster artists experimented with visual possibilities from the world of art. This, of course, was nothing new for cover designers. Posters for the Fillmore in particular drew upon Art Nouveau and were filled with swirling lines, shapes with faces, and figures emerging from the flow of colors and forms. (See Figures 36–37, psychedelia at *http://aoir.org/covering/* .)

In 1967, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* set the standard for experimentation and artistic accomplishment against which subsequent covers would be judged. Among the many firsts established by the cover, it was first to have a designed inner sleeve, first to contain printed lyrics, and the first gate-fold to contain a card with cut-outs. As Walter Everett noted, "Rather than depend on EMI's staid art department, the Beatles took over the cover and, through McCartney's friend Robert Fraser, hired a team of pop designers and photogra-

phers to break new ground" (1999: p. 123). As they had in other areas of popular music in the 1960s, the Beatles broke new ground; henceforth more and more bands gained control of graphic design in the packaging of their music. (See Figure 38, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

Psychedelic covers, with their intricacy and visual pandemonium reminiscent of the music they packaged, were an active part of the overall musical "adventure." The cover and the record together acted as a kind of complete audio-visual experience. It was a matter of "getting into" both the music and the cover, with or without the help of drugs. Legibility often became secondary as bizarre images, twisting forms, and swirling colors produced pulsating, rhythmic effects (Thorgerson & Dean, 1977: p. 13). Photography followed illustration and collage in explorations of new uses and combinations. Enigmatic images replaced the informative and documentary nature of the typical photographic album cover. (See Figures 39–42, examples of psychedelia, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

The psychedelic explosion unleashed a whole new visual vocabulary on the presentation of rock—new treatments of existing techniques as well as altogether new methods. The unexpected combinations of seemingly contradictory subjects first made in psychedelic art later became standards in the way rock was depicted.

The visual excesses of psychedelia later gave way to a more controlled, less confusing approach. Typography treatments became more stable, more geometric shapes replaced organic forms, and Art Deco took over from Art Nouveau as the illustrative style of choice (Thorgerson & Dean, 1977: p. 14). One trend that continued to grow was the importance record companies and bands alike placed on elaborate packages. Album covers incorporated die-cuts, embossing, multiple gate-folds, books, posters, and assorted gimmicky constructions and novelties. One variety included covers shaped after the paraphernalia of rock: speakers, amps, concert tickets, record players, and so on. Slightly more elaborate were single gate-folds, such as those on the Who's *Tommy*. (See Figure 43, gatefold designs, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

Even more fantastic were elaborate covers such as Alice Cooper's *School's Out*, a fold-out school desk complete with underwear; *Led Zeppelin III*, with a movable picture wheel in the front cover; and Warhol's zipper design for *Sticky Fingers* by the Rolling Stones (Thorgerson & Dean, 1977: p. 14; see Figures 44–48, special packaging, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*).[7]

These covers illustrate the continuing importance bands placed on visual design as an integral part of an overall concept and marketing strategy. In the

case of *Sticky Fingers*, the zipper construction brought the printing and assembly cost to 25 cents per cover, 10 cents higher than average. An increase of this sort could be justified for a "supergroup" like the Rolling Stones, and the band thought the concept was important enough to cover the cost with their royalties if the record company would not pay the price tag (Grabois, 1987). Picture discs—in some ways a revisiting of the use of colored wax from very early in the history of phonograph disc pressing—were also commonly issued from the 1970s on, in sleeves with die-cut holes allowing the purchaser to see the image on the record. We will not consider these at length here, as they do not constitute an album "cover" as such.

Fantastic jacket constructions hit their peak in 1973. Shortly thereafter repercussions from the oil crisis forced record companies to cut back. As Thorgerson and Powell noted, "special packaging in the record business is a thorny issue of cost versus return and of effort versus effect" (1999: p. 35). Cost and effort were perceived to be more readily and speedily measured than return and effect, and special packaging waned from the 1970s to the present, with the exception of boxed sets of recordings. Typically high-priced collections, for some boxed sets the higher cost reflected the cost of packaging as much as the cost of the music. (See Figures 49–51, special packaging and boxed sets, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

With the rise in oil costs, the process of pressing albums became more expensive. Contrary to popular belief, the cost increases were not due to a rise in the cost of vinyl but in the cost of the heating oil used to heat the record pressing machines. The major labels stopped pressing all but their own releases at their own plants. The financial consequences were reflected in the $50 million CBS spent on the construction of their own pressing plant (Frith, 1983: p. 139).

The consequences of increased oil costs were felt throughout the record-production process. For example, the process of printing onto paper slicks, dropped by most companies in 1968, was reintroduced to help lower cost. Printing directly onto board assured higher-quality printing, but the storage of unsold or unused paper slicks cost less than storage of the bulkier board.

These changes required record industry art departments and album cover designers to revamp their attitude toward cover design. Directness and simplicity were a result. In the industry it was further believed that a direct visual approach encouraged impulse buying on the part of the consumer (Thorgerson & Dean, 1977: p. 14). Many themes of earlier covers continued (sci-fi, fantasy, mysticism, and so on) but often in formalized, vapid repetition. Some bands developed an individual style for their covers which they repeated through suc-

cessive releases. Sometimes, this took the form of stylized lettering that became similar to a trademark or logo for the band, as in the cases of Yes and Kiss. Such trade-marking or branding was also achieved through the use of interrelated photographic or illustrative techniques, exemplified on the covers of Journey, Fleetwood Mac, Chicago, and Earth, Wind, and Fire albums. (See Figures 52–53, band logos, and Figures 54–55, band logos used in design, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

By the late 1970s, six major U.S. labels (CBS, RCA, WEA, MCA, PolyGram, and Capitol) accounted for over 90% of the record market in sales and volume. The same situation prevailed in Britain before 1976, as six major labels there (EMI, CBS, WEA, RCA, Decca, and PolyGram) controlled two-thirds of the market. Their involvement dominated the realms of signing, manufacturing, and distribution. EMI also was involved with retail sales through ownership of the HMV stores. During the decade, expenditures for these companies soared. Promotional campaigns for big artists, which cost about $50,000 at the beginning of the decade, rose to between $350,000 and $500,000 by the late 1970s (Frith, 1983: p. 115). For musicians, a quality album meant an expensive album. That belief was challenged by the explosion of punk.

Punk to the Present

The punk rock movement began at the end of 1975, hit its peak in mid-1977, and by the end of that year was over. The effects of punk, however, proved more lasting and opened the door for hundreds of bands and scores of small, independent labels.

Punk aesthetics opposed mainstream attitudes in a number of ways. After years of watching the major groups become increasingly self-indulgent and removed from their audiences, punk musicians attempted to turn music back to the audience. Punks denounced multinational record corporations, and dozens of small labels appeared to record and release the new music. For these labels, the music and the musicians were the reasons for the label's existence, not the fulfillment of a profit motive. Punk attempted to formulate its own rules, which often appeared in the pages of hastily assembled fanzines. The first fanzine to appear was called ***Sniffin' Glue*** and was edited by Mark Perry. In ***Sniffin' Glue 3½***, from September 1976, he wrote:

> I don't wanna see the Pistols, The Clash, etc., turned into more AC/DCs and Doctors of Madness. This "new-wave" has got to take in everything including posters, record-covers, stage presentation, the lot! You know they'll be coming soon, all those big companies out to make money on the "new, young bands." Well, they can piss off if

> they're hoping to tidy up the acts for the "great British public." The Pistols will be the first to be signed and I know they'll stay like they are—completely independent. (Perry: p. 1976)

Perry was right in his prediction about the majors' attempts to assimilate and clean up punk, but not before the movement made an important impression of its own in the realm of visual design.

The fashion of punk consisted of bright colors, dyed hair, torn clothing, leather, chains, and safety pins. The covers of punk records followed: Brimming with day-glo colors, torn and shoddy lettering, recycled elements, and shocking images, the covers were designed (or "not designed") with the use of cheap materials. Jamie Reid's art direction for the Sex Pistols (encompassing record covers, t-shirts, posters, and so on) produced some of the best and most lasting examples of punk design. (See Figures 56 & 57, the Sex Pistols, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

Reid founded much of his work on the principles of Situationism, the anarchistic, French art/political movement. Covers for *Never Mind the Bollocks* and the "God Save the Queen" single are prime examples of this Situationist-inspired design, with bold colors; ripped paper; torn out, ransom-note lettering; and provocative imagery (in one banned version of the single, a picture of the Queen had swastika-shaped eyes).

The relationship between British pop music and art schools continued with punk rock, although new parallels and manifestations arose. Much of the shock approach of punk was predated by performance artists such as Gina Pane and Rudolf Schartzkogler and had even deeper roots in Dadaism. As Simon Frith and Howard Horne put it, "punk performances were . . . informed by avant-garde arguments about shock value, multi-media, montage and deconstruction. Artists . . . suddenly found that they could apply their ideas in a pop club setting and get a much more *vital* reaction than they ever got in a gallery" (1987: p. 128). Punk music in turn became an outlet for artists themselves, as in the case of Genesis P Orridge and his subsequent band Throbbing Gristle, which, as he described it, was "dedicated to non-allied political mischief" (McDermott, 1987: pp. 60–61).

Although punk is known primarily as a British phenomenon, its roots lay in the music of American bands like the Ramones, the Stooges, and Richard Hell and the Voidoids. In turn, the British punk movement influenced a similar reaction in the United States, encouraging further innovation. However, punk youth in the United States and Britain differed. The "do-it-yourself," independent labels in the U.S. did not have the same impact as their counterparts in Britain.

This was due in part to the amount of capital needed to access the American market as well as to more restrictive radio programming. In Britain, BBC DJ John Peel continues to present emerging new bands to a national audience. In the United States, no outlet has been available to independent bands on such a national scale.

In both Britain and the United States, the major record companies attempted to absorb punk both musically and visually. As described in the book *Hard Core California*:

> [T]he upper strata of society took the drama and excitement from underground movements in the underside layers and used it to sell products in the middle: examine the new pages of *Vogue* over the past couple of years, the use of punk images in ads for perfume, cola and cars on network TV. (Belsito & Davis, 1983: p. 6)

Similarly, in Britain punk style was absorbed quickly by print media and marketers.

From the remains of punk grew a wealth of new sounds and styles all loosely placed under the vague, overused heading of "New Wave." The hastily assembled look of the first punk covers gave way to an emphasis on design. According to Storm Thorgerson, a number of distinctive styles grew out of punk, some of which recall those of the previous decades but with the infusion of a new visual vocabulary. These included a movement back to constructive covers and the concept of covers as possessions with which the individual "played" while listening to the album. One example of this was *Armed Forces* by Elvis Costello and the Attractions, designed by Barney Bubbles, in which the listener had to lift numerous folds of diverse, colorful imagery to get to the record. Further subverting traditional design were sleeves of 24" by 24", designed to be double the standard LP-size, 12" by 12" cassette holders, and a design for a Gang of Four album that had sandpaper sleeves. (See Figures 58 & 59, Barney Bubbles and Stiff Records, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

In another direction, a more conscious use of empty space produced a look of classicism and simplicity. Peter Saville's covers for Joy Division are prime examples of this, with a clean use of space and geometry; elegant, restrained typefaces; and dramatic, black-and-white photos. (See Figures 60–63, Peter Saville for Joy Division, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

A third direction showed a shift toward a more art-based approach, centered around the use of painterly techniques including woodcuts, paintings, various printing processes, and sculpted objects. Photographs, when they were

used at all, tended to be ephemeral, and images produced by all techniques displayed "more a sense of the fleeting than the clearly seen or permanently fixed" (Thorgerson & Dean, 1977: p. 32; see Figures 64–67, art-based approaches, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*).

In Britain especially, the musical flavor of the week along with its accompanying fashion sense was evident on record covers. Thorgerson noted an "unashamed cobbling together of old '50s styles, bright garish colors, lines and bars from the '30s and the quasi-technical graphics of the computer age" (Thorgerson & Dean, 1977: p. 24). Numerous covers derived their imagery from Russian poster graphics and Chinese propaganda material. The ska label 2-Tone developed a distinctive style of stark black-and-white simplicity for all their releases. Nostalgic graphics and the clothes to match adorned the covers of rockabilly bands. (See Figure 68, a 2-Tone cover, and Figures 69 & 70, 1980s rockabilly, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

Sometimes, the graphics associated with these trends fell into self-mocking vacuity by following a fashion too closely. Assorted sales gimmicks were employed to boost interest. Some examples included different versions of the same cover in different colors, as on *Cool for Cats* by Squeeze, the laser-etched discs of Split Enz's "One Step Ahead" single, the embossed metal tin for PIL's second release (three 12-inch 45-rpm records that barely fit for the vinyl), and the disposable bag designed by Malcolm Garrett for a 1980 album by the Buzzcocks. The cover for XTC's *Go 2* went so far as to mock self-mocking album cover designs by using a type-only approach, deconstructing design and marketing. (See Figure 71, XTC's Go 2, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

With the explosion of the independent labels in the late 1970s came a resurgence in production of the 45 single. The relative cheapness involved in the materials and printing of singles made releasing them an attractive option for budget-minded independent record labels. Singles were and continue to be (even in CD form, and more particularly in the form of MP3 files) appealing for other reasons as well. They still serve as an effective way to promote individual cuts, and the use of 45-rpm 12" records (originally intended for DJs only) assures better sound quality due to wider groove spacing. But because of the relatively unprofitable nature of singles, less money is available for designing and printing. Despite, or perhaps because of this, many 45 single sleeves often seem more spontaneous and playful than expensive album covers.

By the late 1980s, most of the visual excitement of punk and new wave graphics had worn off, and cover designs that once seemed innovative appeared, through endless interpretations, hackneyed and outdated. Fine art continued to be a major source of ideas and images, as shown in such examples as the surre-

alism on Martin Briley's *Fear of the Unknown*, the use of DiStijl on PolyGram's debut for the group Central Line, and Paula Scher's label for Manhattan Records inspired by Mondrian's "Broadway Boogie Woogie."

The debut album by Smash Palace on CBS Records showed the continuation of two other directions: gimmickry and fine artist involvement. This album was released with four different covers, each a photo of a band member taken by photographer Duane Michels. Portraiture continues to be the most prevalent cover solution, and while the Smash Palace album is a competent example of an album cover cliché, most portraits place image above content and concept and suffer because of it. (See Figure 72, a Smash Palace cover, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

FORM & FUNCTION

COVER DESIGN—FORMS AND FUNCTIONS

LPs

The long-playing album cover is the historical cornerstone of prerecorded music packaging. The once-common practice of first conceptualizing and developing LP graphics prior to the graphics for other forms of music presentation (cassette, CD, etc.) reinforced its importance. Ironically, the LP is neither the most profitable nor the biggest seller among all types of prerecorded music. By 1986, according to figures from RIAA, 125.2 million LP units were shipped to retail outlets, resulting in sales of $983 million. By contrast, cassette sales amounted to $2.5 billion, with shipments of 344.5 million units.

The music industry. However, maintains a dedication to the LP (if only through the notion of "albums") and, consequently, to the presentation and production of album covers. The present generation of prerecorded music consumers and record company personnel are still accustomed to the LP's mode of presentation, although the vinyl medium has been supplanted by the CD. And, although technology has changed the nature of the prerecorded market, the vinyl disc is far from obsolete.

Some of the functional parameters of the album cover are easy to establish. According to Bob Defrin, vice president and creative director of graphics at Atlantic Records, "What an album cover does is give an identity—the star or group identity and the corporate identity" (Nesbitt, 1987). A commonplace is that the album cover should say something about the product inside. T. Sutton, of Rough Trade in San Francisco, says that if the cover "looks cheap, it's easy to assume the vinyl is, too. Ditto with silly, pretentious, tacky packaging" (1987).

Sutton's comment echoes Keith Negus's claim that "Different genres of music have become associated with and signify different images, which in turn connote particular attitudes, values and beliefs . . . (and) visual images denote particular sounds" (p. 66). It is important to consider that genres of popular music are not entirely musical but also visual, and that music listeners typically bring with them a good knowledge of visual styles (a knowledge quite possibly broader than their musical knowledge).

Many record companies are concerned with presenting products that are overtly commercial and salable. In the opinion of Carol Bobolts, art director at Atlantic and Elektra Records, nice graphic treatments can be lost when marketability becomes the overriding concern (Bobolts, 1987). Put more bluntly, Ben Ponton, of the group Zoviet France and their distributor Charm, said that packaging is often used to "provide a seduction to potential buyers by making the package as attractive (and often as inoffensive) as possible" (1987).

Indeed, designers themselves often make a distinction between major record labels and independent record labels. In reality, the distinction between major and independent is not clear-cut, as many independent record companies operate on similar lines to the majors with corresponding motivations, signing policies, and so on; many even have some form of joint operating agreement. But, typically, independent labels primarily desire to make otherwise unlikely-to-be-released music—from jazz to experimental rock to folk—available. Debbie Jaffe, of the cassette label Cause and Effect and the bands Viscera and Master/Slave Relationship, noted that the emphasis is on "getting the music out," and her only goal is "to have as many people as possible hear the music" (1987).

By and large, differences between major and independent labels little affect specific design solutions. It must be stressed that there is no exclusivity in the production of good or bad design—both exist throughout the music industry. In many ways major labels and their art departments are subject to more pressures than small labels in the production of packaging visuals. One reason for this, according to Johnny Lee, art director and designer at Elektra/Asylum, is that "as a group's reputation gets bigger, they begin to have more control over the covers, and designers aren't so successful" (Kner, 1982: p. 41). Many of the most creative covers for big labels stem from small groups and first records. One "problem" confronting designers is the musicians' desire to be on the covers of their albums. Bobolts reported that, in her experience, 70% to 80% of all bands want their faces on the cover (Bobolts, 1987). Marketing departments also push for portrait covers. "Major labels are intent on selling the musicians as public figures," noted Vaughan Oliver of 23 Envelope, the in-house designers for 4AD Records, "and as such, package different artists with the same concept, i.e., grinning face packs and posh logo (Oliver, 1987).

There are pitfalls in dealing with such an overused formula, especially when recording artists and marketing both push for it. Such matters must be handled with care and style, but major label art departments do not always find this possible because they often find themselves restricted. For example, gambling on an unknown, less experienced photographer could create disastrous consequences, especially when they are working around time limitations and smaller budgets (for major labels) of $4,000 to $5,000 per cover. In the same respect, an established and more expensive photographer could easily drain a budget of this size. As a result, they often opt for the tried and true, and the results are generally less than stimulating.

For every design "rule" someone sets to ensure better design, such as the need to place type on the upper third of the front cover, a cover exists that flouts the rule and works nevertheless. One such example, although by no means the first or last, is Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here*. The actual album cover, designed by Hipgnosis, contained no indication of the artist at all. To separate the art from the commerce, the album jacket was covered (in retrospect virtually *a la* "Spinal Tap") in black shrink wrap with a sticker indicating the group name. (See Figures 73 & 74, *Wish You Were Here*, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

While all major releases are guaranteed some sort of album cover treatment, independent releases run the gamut from nonpackaging, to photocopies pasted on blank sleeves, to the extreme limits of creativity and expense. As Robin James of Cassette Mythos said, "[M]ajors have less choice about quality—they have to be shiny" (James, 1987).

Generally run on a much smaller scale, most independent labels have only to answer to themselves and are therefore more open to experimentation and risk-taking. But without the quality control, money, and top-flight designers of bigger companies, independents also produce a lot of shabby products. "Joyful amateurism is hip. Music by kids for kids," according to Gary Levermore of Third Mind Records (1987).

Some of the more extravagant releases by independent labels would not be feasible on a major-market scale. The reasons, without even considering marketing concerns, are primarily related to the smaller release numbers and the more flexible time allotted to produce a cover.

In addition those distinctions found between major and independent labels, one also finds distinctions made between covers produced in the United States and those produced in other countries. A qualitative difference exists between domestic and imported album covers, with poorer quality covers originating in the U.S. Specifically, designers mention things such as rarity of "four-

colored inners printed on good quality board" in American albums and the superior typography, better artwork and photo reproductions, and the higher quality and better diversity of paper and board stocks for import covers. As designer Neville Brody commented, "American sleeves . . . tend not to originate ideas" (1987).

The use of different stocks and papers is quite rare in the U.S., especially among major labels. According to Bobolts, companies are more likely to use printed textures than print on different paper stocks. Varnishes are also used differently. Many imported albums incorporate spot varnishes into the design, whereas in the U.S. varnishes are typically applied overall. Some countries singled out by designers for quality design include Britain, Germany, Japan, and France. British design in general is considered more decorative and stylistic than U.S. cover design and concentrates less on the musicians and more on the "textures, atmospheres, and ideas in the music" (Bobolts, 1987).

The more stylistic approach, epitomized by the work of 23 Envelope, is received both positively and negatively. On the negative side Art Black, editor of *Away from the Pulsebeat,* noted that the "drab conceptual covers from England's 4AD and Factory labels (are) all basically interchangeable, insinuating the same about the music inside" (1987). On the other hand, British covers are singled out for their superior handling of typography. In particular, the work of designers Barney Bubbles, Neville Brody (including his art direction of *The Face* magazine), and Malcolm Garrett have helped establish a tradition of innovative type treatments. (See Figures 75–78, 4AD and Factory; Figures 79 & 80, Neville Brody; and Figures 81–83, Malcolm Garrett, at *http://aoir.org/covering/* .)

Cassette Tape

Overall, the elements selected most often by designers as producing good album covers revolve around those in which a personality emerges—a package appropriate only to that band or musician from which something about the recording artists can be grasped and remembered. The opportunities to create such a package have literally shrunk since the 1970s, since the debut of the prerecorded audio tape.

Perhaps the most important recent form of music packaging is the cassette tape box. In the early 1970s, cassette sales competed with those of 8-track tapes; but since the early 1980s, 8-track tapes declined steadily in sales and availability, eventually disappearing altogether, while cassettes became the biggest selling form of prerecorded music. (See Figures 84 & 85, 8-track packaging, at *http://aoir.org/covering/* .)

According to the RIAA, in 1987 cassettes accounted for almost 55% of the total value of prerecorded music sales, but they have since lost market share, falling to 18.2% in 1997 and 14.8% in 1998. That shift in market share most clearly indicates changing patterns in the consumption of prerecorded music, largely due to the introduction of new media formats and development of new technologies for music listening (e.g., some of the cassette's success can be attributed to the introduction of personal cassette players).

Although the continuing near-term future of the cassette is assured, the cassette package has not established itself as an intriguing and sustainable form of visual presentation. The biggest drawback, the size of the cassette box, is one of the reasons for the success of the cassette itself, insofar as it permits easy storage and portability. The size of the cassette box puts constraints on both designer and consumer. For the customer, the main problem is an inability to browse cassettes. The dimensions of the common cassette box are 2¾" x 4¼" x 5/8". In comparison to the 12¼-inch square of the album cover, this is drastically limited space. J-cards, enclosed in the lid of the box, contain all of the graphics and information. The two panels of most importance on a j-card are the spine (measuring 4" x ½") and the face panel (measuring 2½" x 4"). Varying numbers of folds on the j-cards contain song titles and other information, sometimes including lyrics. The number of times a j-card can fold and still fit into the box with the cassette is one of the restrictions faced by the designer. Moreover, many record companies do not feel the need for four-color printing, especially on the insides of the inserts. (See Figure 86, cassette packaging, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

In retail stores, the information visible to the consumer in cassette displays usually consists of that on the spine, although the front panels of limited selections are displayed. In many stores, cassettes are kept behind locked doors to deter theft, further separating the cassette from the customer.[8] The j-cards of most cassettes consist primarily of graphics reworked from those on the LP cover. Some examples merely display a vastly reduced picture of the record cover; although this direction is less widespread than in the 1970s, it still persists. The spine usually contains a perfunctory type treatment of the group name and album title. A combination of all of these factors makes searching through cassette selections, as displayed in stores, an exhausting process.

Various attempts at "improving" the cassette package for in-store convenience have been made. Four-inch by 12-inch boxes containing the plastic cassette boxes were attempted for LP-length cassettes, but discontinued. Experiments with cassette packaging coincided with the introduction of cassette singles and maxi-singles by a number of the major labels in the mid-1980s. This was not the first attempt at releasing cassette singles, but the timing proved more

propitious because of the Walkman. Surveys of the day indicated that more than half of 45 single buyers would not purchase the same music on vinyl if it was made available on cassette (Chin, 1987: p. 49).

Cassette single packaging often consists of a cassette that slips into a 2½" x 4" paper sleeve. The appearance implies disposability and complies with the industry's hope that customers will opt for the LP or CD after 15 to 20 plays (Chin 1987: p. 49). The packaging for cassette maxi-singles is somewhat sturdier, similar to the difference in the packaging of 7" and 12" vinyl singles. The same paper sleeve used for cassette singles is packaged in disposable boxes measuring either 2½" x 12" or 4" x 12". The design on these boxes generally consists of the label name with the music information visible only on the cassette sleeve, or, as in the case of the U2 maxi-single "Where the Streets Have No Name," a full graphic treatment similar to the packaging of the other media (LP, CD, etc.). One problem with this type of package, also used for CDs, is that the box with the major display graphics is meant to be discarded.

While the major labels tended to treat the cassette as a cheap relative of the vinyl LP, many independent labels and artists dealt exclusively with cassette-only releases because of the comparatively low costs involved in production and duplication. Other benefits of the cassette included quality sound, up to 90 minutes of music per cassette, and the ability to keep the whole production process under the supervision of one person. Granted, many of the products at the independent level are not practical for major labels, due to their innovative construction, but they are worth noting for their imagination in redefining cassette presentation.

Most independent cassettes conform to the industry norm of the plastic box, but others incorporate much more elaborate forms of presentation. Some of the most beautiful and intriguing examples came from British-based Touch. Although Touch also released vinyl records, many of their products were available only on cassette. Most of the Touch cassette releases were accompanied by packaging and graphics other than the usual plastic box and j-card. One of the most extravagant was *Magnetic North*. The audio cassette was packaged in a 9" x 11" cardboard envelope, which also included a 108-page magazine printed on five different types of paper and containing information pertaining to some of the groups on the tape as well as assorted artwork and literature. Another Touch release, *Travel*, consisted of a tape inside a PVC pouch with four fold-out poster/maps with comments and stories from various "travelers" of the world and mind. These Touch releases were obviously more conceptual than most current music releases, but they did have a similarity to the elaborate LP packages of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the listener/viewer went through the process of "getting into" the music and the accompanying cover. (See Figure 87, Touch, at *http://aoir.org/covering/* .)

One of the most elaborate cassette packages was *Popular Soviet Songs and Youth Music* by Zoviet France (see the section on LP covers). The process of production and intent was outlined by Ben Ponton:

> Two cassettes, four LP's worth of music in a ceramic box. At least 15 separate stages of manufacture. It took us five months to put this one into production; we knew next to nothing about ceramics and had to teach ourselves slipcasting, glazing, and firing. Among the adornments on the box are feathers we collect from a beach in front of the world's first commercial nuclear reactor at Sellafield in Cumbria. Sellafield is renowned for leaking like a sieve, making the Irish Sea the most radioactive area of sea in the world. Since it's fairly certain that the feathers are contaminated to some extent, this makes us the only non-government agency to successfully export nuclear waste. (Ben Ponton, letter to the author, August 1987; see Figures 88 & 89, Zoviet France covers, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*)

The releases by Touch and Zoviet France—as well as many others from the likes of Silent But Deadly, Citizens for a Non-Linear Future, and ROIR—exhibited an approach that showed a concern with the packaging as more than a medium to further promote the face of an attractive singer. They held the attitude that the packaging should be intrinsically connected to the music on a more substantial level. The fact that much cassette packaging is second rate, in terms of both material and graphic quality, is more acceptable for small labels or individual bands that are operating on shoestring budgets, but the failure of larger labels to adequately present the best products possible sells the consumer short.

Digital Technology

In the summer of 1983, the introduction of the compact disc brought the age of digital sound to the consumer and, with it, the digital future of prerecorded music. The CD not only affected the consumption of music but, like previous advances in audio technology, it necessitated a new form of packaging.

In the main, CD packaging has come to consist of a clear "jewel box" measuring approximately 5" x 5½". Most CDs include a booklet, which fits into the lid of the box. Buyers of the initial CD packages complained that, despite paying much more money, they were not getting graphics and information comparable to those included with an LP (Bobolts, 1987).

As Rob Chapman put it:

> The new technology may come gift-wrapped in its own ideology, it may have given us pristine sound quality, it may have equaled out all imperfections and delivered clarity in abundance, but at the same time it's (sic) has reduced all cover-art to a logo and has shrunk our consumer desires to the size of a bar-code. (1997, p. 6)

The booklets have since improved, even including CD-only artwork, but full-color printing is often limited to the cover, with the insides printed in black, white, and sometimes gray. Many designers have claimed that CD packaging is worse than that of LPs. For example, Thorgerson and Powell noted:

> [T]he design part of a CD is nowhere near as irritating as the physical part. CD jewel boxes are neat in size only; otherwise they are a complete pain—lots of cheap plastic and an alarming tendency to crack or break at the hinges. (1999: p. 34)

Barbara Wojirsch, graphic designer for ECM Records, is said to have reacted strongly against the "antiseptic, plastic 'jewel-box' feel (that) restricts the play of surface textures, of cardboard and paper, the tactile stimulus, the printing intensity, the washes and coatings" (Kemper, 1996: p. 10; see Figure 90, ECM approaches to texture, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*).

The majority of CD retail packaging initially resembled the packaging of cassette maxi-singles, with the CD jewel box placed in a larger, partially empty display box or holder referred to as a "long box." In some cases, the entire space on the CD boxes incorporated a form of the album graphics. (See Figure 91, CD long box, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

However, there were serious problems with this sort of package. These boxes have the same inherent function as other types of product packaging, such as soap or spaghetti, in that the box is disposable. One of the elements particular to the packaging of LPs has been that the package on display at the store is very much part of the purchased product and becomes a permanent possession. The use of these presentation boxes owed more to the attitude of packaging as advertisement than to packaging as product. As an executive at BMG Records put it, "the CD long box . . . was strictly a marketing tool" (Keegan, 1999, p. 19). And what stores gain in width they lose in depth: Since jewel boxes take up a little less than half the width of an LP, but two to three times their depth, it is not likely that stores can stock many more CD titles than LPs. The smaller size also makes it harder to flip through CDs in a store. A Warner Media Services executive lamented the difficulty with which CDs in a jewel case can be perused: "The CD jewel box has virtually eliminated the 'browsability' of the product—where you'd be looking at the graphics that attract you to pick up the package" (Keegan, 1999: p. 19).

Another type of packaging, employed by Vox Prima for a selection of classical music releases, resembled a miniature, CD-sized gate-fold. These packages were sold unfolded and had basically the same amount of display area as the boxed CDs and, because they were constructed out of cardboard, were easy to fold after purchase. These CDs were also priced a few dollars less than jewel box-encased CDs. The graphics on their sleeves were mediocre and did not explore the possibilities of the format, which owed more to LP packaging than the jewel boxed CDs. Touch Records incorporated larger graphics by using multiple folds for the jewel box insert. Many independent labels found creative CD packaging to be a form of expression itself. Variations on the jewel box continue to be developed. CDs themselves have been manufactured using die-cut methods, resulting in discs that resemble the die-cut vinyl picture discs from the 1970s and 1980s. (See Figure 92–95, alternative CD packaging, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

A second form of digital recording entered the marketplace shortly after the CD: digital audio tape, or DAT. Pressure from record labels regarding home taping and loss of revenues held back DAT's potential as a consumer medium (although as a professional medium it continued to find use). (See Figure 96, digital audio tape [DAT], at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

Mini-disc (MD) recorders and players, heavily marketed in the late 1990s, and CD-recordable (CD-R) media signaled a new opportunity for consumer digital recording. Naturally, only the former medium has seen major label releases. In terms of visual design, a number of problems face MD packaging. The size is smaller than the common analog audio tape. This means that, if the package relates similarly in size, even less room exists for graphics. Moreover, changes in packaging often result in nonproportional changes in format size. This leaves two options for revision to the design of back catalog. One is to simply reduce or enlarge existing graphics to accommodate for "leftover" space. The other is to redesign a cover; but to do this adds expense and may make it harder to maintain a consistent image across a single release in multiple formats. For example, as Howard noted in regard to a classical music release, "The shape of the cassette case necessitated a different cropping of the original photo, and a realignment of text" (1997: p. 168). Graphics incorporated into the manufacturing process, however, have allowed for the very shell of the medium to be highly colorful. (See Figures 97 & 98, mini-discs [MDs] at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

The introduction of Digital Versatile Disc (or DVD, sometimes referred to as Digital Video Disc) still seems to largely incorporate CD-style visual design and packaging, perhaps as a way to ease consumers' transition from CD to DVD. A new form of box, the "Snapper," is the first packaging model for DVD. Its format derives from the height of the box used to store VHS video tapes and the

width and depth of a CD jewel case, and "is created out of a wraparound cardboard stock which is held in place by a styrene plastic frame" (Hollman, 1999: p. 41). The height and width provide a greater area for graphic design, although in some ways when it comes to music packaging the Snapper is more similar to the rectangular area of the audio cassette than the square area of both LP and CD packages. DVD-Audio has greatly lagged behind the introduction of DVD-Video. As Hollman noted:

> DVD packaging began its . . . evolutionary process as early as 1995, when the Video Software Dealers Association (VSDA) assembled its DVD Packaging Task Force. The Task Force consisted largely of home video retailers . . . [and] voiced its concerns about how [DVD] should be boxed as compared to the VHS tape standard. (1999: p. 42)

Given that DVD and CD media look virtually identical to the unaided eye, the DVD Packaging Task Force claimed to be "looking for a differential at a retail level, so that the consumer could look at the product and know that it's DVD, not CD. The best way to do that is with a size differential" (Hollman, 1999: p. 42). The vulnerability of the medium itself added to packaging considerations, insofar as a DVD actually consists of multiple discs "sandwiched" together. Consequently, excess force on the disc could cause the pieces to slide or come apart. Excess force from the spindle on which the disc rests in its packaging could have the same detrimental effect. And, of course, a DVD is vulnerable to scratches just like a CD or an LP. The task force met in 1997, and Warner Media Services proposed the Snapper, which was quickly adopted by the task force for being cost-effective, easy to manufacture, and versatile (Hollman, 1999).

Other forms of DVD packaging have been developed, and it is not yet clear which will be most widely adopted for DVD-Audio. On one hand, the installed manufacturing base for DVD-Video packaging may mean the format will be adopted for DVD-Audio. On the other hand, it will then be impossible to easily distinguish between DVD-Audio and DVD-Video from packaging alone, recreating the problem that initially vexed the VSDA task force. (See Figures 99–101, DVD packaging, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

An interesting approach to the CD's digital format was the inclusion of graphics and moving images on CD-interactive (or CD-i) media. The format, however, has not caught on with consumers, and it hovers on the fringes of the prerecorded music market as some bands opt to include graphics and software accessible to consumers who use computers to play CDs. The effort to meld visual images and audio in one format continues with DVD, although it is too early to tell whether it will find acceptance among either artists or consumers. An increasingly common approach is to include software that links to sounds and pictures on an artist's World Wide Web site, as David Bowie did for his

Hours CD. (See Figures 102–104, David Bowie's *Hours* CD, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

Music Online

Don Cusic's question, "How will consumers notice (an) album in a store?" (1996: p. 52) can easily be reconfigured for e-commerce: How will consumers notice music online? As one writer put it, "for an artist accustomed to being treated like royalty, the prospect of getting your name out through the digital grapevine is daunting indeed" (Cavanaugh, 1998: p. 67).

Online, there are no sales clerks, no "store CDs" playing in the background, and no all-around visual displays. In ironic contrast to the widely used phrase "Web browsing," online consumers typically shop quite literally and deliberately for specific recordings and do not browse as they would in record stores (**Jupiter Communications, 1998**). A **Warner Communications** survey from the 1980s provided further evidence for that claim (**1981**). It found that, once inside a record store, the primary activity for 63% of consumers is looking for a specific song or album. Other popular in-store activities included general browsing and looking through the store (53% of consumers), looking at album covers (45%), browsing through a particular type of music (44%), and reading album jackets (43%). Only 5% of consumers reported looking through the import section (imports account for only 2% of all music sold in the United States). The picture of the typical prerecorded music consumer formed by the RIAA's research and the WCI survey is an individual who purchases rock music, is very selective in purchasing, is generally unwilling to gamble except on low-cost items, usually knows what he or she is going to purchase upon entering the store (and will go to another store to find it), yet enjoys spending time in the store looking at record covers and collateral promotions material. (See Figures 105 & 106, WWW, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

But traditional point-of-sale practices go by the wayside online, and with them go traditional music packaging issues. Instead, screen size, resolution, bandwidth, browser type, connection speed, computer display type, HTML, and many other new elements provide the constraints on the visual means by which music is delivered to consumers. It is too soon to know what the consequences, if any, will be of the online distribution of music for music packaging. According to the RIAA, online sales account for just 1.1% of music sales overall. One can imagine all sorts of changes to packaging and design, including the potential for consumers to design their own visual materials to accompany their downloaded music. The issue at hand is not so much whether packaging will change, but how it will change to serve functions other than protecting a physical medium, capturing a buyer's attention, and providing a visual experience to the con-

sumer. Personalization, customization, and the ongoing digitization of music may lead to a situation in which music becomes networked content, as much software is presently. One can imagine that albums may become less finished products and more open to "updating," as software is. But such a practice would call into question the album's status as a work of art, insofar as its aura is connected to its existence as a completed and therefore "intentional" authored work. The album's status is already in jeopardy given the focus of mp3 file traders on single songs.

It should be clear from what Ian Anderson (of Designers Republic) called "remixism" that today's new media may provide "potentially limitless opportunities for abstraction and diffusion, playgrounds for experimentation. . . . Before it is anything more, music and visual art are simply arrangements of sounds and tones and shapes and colors. For the remixer the restructuring of these components creates a greater focus than the whole" (Anderson, 1999). It may create an interesting dilemma for the serious collector, as well, who will need to know at what point to collect, and in what medium.

Moreover, there is much trade between consumers online that entirely cuts out retail businesses, whether bricks-and-mortar or "clicks-and-mortar." In a recent article about music and the Internet it was argued that "the connections and re-connections typically experienced in hearing and listening to music, along with the affective dimensions of that experience, have been reconfigured" (Jones, 2000). One must include in that reconfiguration a coming shift in the visual aspects of popular music. The commercial success of boxed sets of music, special editions, and other forms of special packaging may also provide evidence of a reconfiguration, pointing to ways that popular music consumers may not just be "in it for the music." Whether they will have anything *other* than the music to get into in the future remains to be seen.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the history of the album cover, visual changes have been born, for the most part, from the music itself. For example, fertile periods of cover design in the mid-1960s and late 1970s were inspired and driven by the music of psychedelia and punk. Yet designers have been, and will continue to be, influenced by artistic and social movements, the media, and the technologies of art, printing, music, and industry. Innovation and involvement have often been separated by periods of assimilation and of the rehashing of concepts.

Many of the points that hold true for album covers apply to other forms of

music packaging. With the exception of some independently released cassettes and CDs, the vast majority are inferior in quality and completeness to most LP album covers. Overall, cassette and CD packaging falls far short of LP packaging in diversity and quality of graphic reproduction. The shortcomings of most of these products relate directly to the packaging containers. For the most part, the graphics conceived and produced for LPs are forced into smaller and smaller formats. The possibilities open to CD packaging have not been explored extensively by many independent artists mainly because of the high cost of small-run CD production.

Overall, the space available to designers has increasingly shrunk, to the point that designs for Mini-Disc (MD) releases negotiate a space barely larger than a matchbook, and it may well be that future generations, unaccustomed to LP-size graphics, may not value the graphics and design elements of music packaging. And, without a doubt, the Internet as a medium of music distribution portends enormous potential change to the link (pun intended) between popular music and the visual arts. Since the digital, networked distribution of music does away with a physical product, one of the most important reasons for packaging music—protecting the artifact that "carries" it—is superfluous. Of course, visual design will continue to play an important role—the very use of the Web to make music available means there is a visual dimension to music's presentation and marketing. And consumers will likely store mp3 and other audio files on external storage media and probably create their own designs for packaging. But whether designers will continue to work hand-in-hand with record labels or bands remains to be seen. The Internet is, for many, a very "DIY" medium, and it is too early to know whether visuals will accompany the music that is moved as data.

Regardless of the Internet, we are far from doing away with cassettes, CDs, and vinyl records. Although it is predicted that the market for online music will greatly expand in the next 5 years, one can also predict there will be an expansion of the independent CD and vinyl market as the major labels concentrate on new digital technologies (Qualen, 1985: p. viii). And new formats such as DVD will require new packaging and design. It is difficult to imagine that an industry which at various times in its history has undertaken such extremes in the presentation of its products would be satisfied with ones that, although purportedly better in sound and preferred by customers, are not amenable to design and packaging visually and tactilely. The major companies can either take advantage of the early stages of transition and experiment with new methods of packaging or continue on their present course and stumble into the future, changing only when confronted by a critical situation.

The number of records that actually attain a level of commercial success is surprisingly low. According to Warner Communications, only 17% of all popu-

lar music releases and 6% of classical releases reach the breakeven point (Warner, 1982: p. 45). The majority of music made available to the public is underwritten by the profits of a few enormously successful groups like U2, Britney Spears, Sean "Puffy" Combs, and Madonna.

Given this, how important is an album cover in the sales of either the newest Michael Jackson album or those of a less profitable group? For "superstar" artists such as Michael Jackson and Bruce Springsteen, album covers, good or bad, probably have a negligible effect on sales. Music consumers, for the most part, are highly selective in their purchasing habits and buy music with which they are familiar. Regardless of their quality, the covers for these recording artists must comply with the established image of the music and the performer.

The broader importance and impact of album covers can be seen in the approaches to packaging music (and in some sense musicians). Album covers are an element of a complete package, an essential part in the total experience of purchasing, owning, and listening to music. The early 1970s may have been a peak of creativity, intelligence, and skill. The covers produced by companies such as Pacific Eye and Ear for groups like Alice Cooper, Black Sabbath, and Lou Reed have become classics. Tony Grabois, formerly of Pacific Eye and Ear, reflected that, although their covers were not major factors in the success of the albums, they did have the potential to contribute. In one example, Grabois recalled that the company received several requests for an album (minus the actual record) by Captain Beyond that included a 5" x 7" image made of lenticular plastic on the cover (Grabois,1987). An interesting cover may produce a sale or simply prompt an adventurous consumer to find out more about a group, although only 12% of all sales are unplanned. For a fanatical few, the cover can be everything. "I may buy something purely on the cover," wrote designer Neville Brody, "and throw the record away" (1987).

Fan comments on the effect of covers are commonly along these lines: "if I like the band and the cover is hot, I buy," or "I hate the Cult album soundwise but the inside gatefold is bitchin'." But another important function or an album cover is to bring attention to a specific release, group, or label. Two groups that play a role in promoting albums are music reviewers and radio DJs, and from these sources awareness spreads in print and over the airwaves. How a cover affects a reviewer may be a governing factor in whether an album gets reviewed or not. Byron Coley, editor of the magazine *Forced Exposure*, wrote: "I've been known to write reviews just about the cover, and I've got so many records to go through that a lousy cover can result in an album getting pushed toward the back burner for months" (Coley, 1987). Robin James, who only reviews cassette releases, truthfully admitted that a cover inappropriate to the music could negatively influence his approach to a review. As the music adage goes, "If it

ain't in the grooves, it ain't going to sell." But if the cover produces negative impressions on the people responsible for spreading awareness of the music, it may never get heard. For some record critics and radio programmers, a glance at the cover may be the only input before deciding whether to review or program a record.

It is hard to determine the actual value fans, musicians, artists, and record industry executives place on album cover design, although it is clear they find it of value. For instance, from time to time, copycat album covers appear. Sometimes, the purpose of copying a cover is satire, as in the case of Frank Zappa's comment on the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper* (and the Rutles' subsequent commentary on both); sometimes it is tribute (the Clash's copy of an early Elvis Presley cover); and other times it may have occurred accidentally (as happened with Stone Temple Pilots and Power Lloyd). What is particularly interesting about instances of copycat covers is that one inevitably finds arguments about them spilling into the pages of magazines and fanzines. Thus they give us insight into the degree to which musicians and graphic designers are attentive to and invested in the visual packaging of their music. It is not uncommon to hear performers talk about fashion or about video, film, and TV presentations, but it is only rarely, as in the case of copycat covers, that we get a glimpse into the ways and means by which album covers matter to musicians and artists. The possessiveness shown toward designs, styles, and symbols shows, if nothing else, that musicians care deeply about how their music will look when packaged. (See Figures 107–109, WWW, at *http://aoir.org/covering/*.)

Indeed, as Jane Gaines wrote in *Contested Culture*, "Phonograph records and magnetic tape have to some degree solved the problem of how to fix and package sound" (1991: p. 127). By extension, album cover design is about packaging music (and, to a lesser degree, performers), imparting the type of uniqueness Gaines claimed leads to the commodification and assertion of personhood and property associated with modern copyright law. Without a singular visual element (whether graphic or typographic), would consumers be able to distinguish one record, tape, or CD from another by sight? And if not, what would be the implications for law, for commerce, for fandom, and for the star system?

It should be a goal of future research into the role of graphic design in music packaging to discover what elements of art theory, visual communication, art history, marketing, semiotics, and media studies can add to our understanding. As Rob Chapman noted in an essay on the place of record sleeves in the consumption of music, no matter the changes in media that shrink the space available for graphics, the mere fact of change will evoke nostalgia: "Sentimentality will once more begin to seep through the cracks and we'll go all dewy eyed remembering proper plastic CD cases" (Chapman, 1997: p. 6). What are

the affective dimensions to purchasing, owning, looking at album cover art? As Thorgerson and Powell made clear, sometimes album covers supersede the music: "People . . . remember album covers even when they don't like the music" (1999: p. 9).

The connection of music packaging to that of other products and other media will also provide interesting insight into the consumption of popular music generally. Simply the variety of music, as Thorgerson and Powell noted, means that music is "not like other products," and thus it "stimulates and allows an equally varied and individual world of design" (1999: p. 10). The production of album cover art is equally important for analysis. A significant point made by Thorgerson and Powell is that "album covers don't have to show the actual product," but instead

> can reflect all the feelings and ideas that the product entails. Cover designs depict what the product means, not what it physically is. . . . Sounds obvious, but what a treat for the commercial artist. No beer cans or cornflakes to show, no sneakers or toilet paper. What a pleasure. (p. 10)

But, as with packaging for other products, the album cover art is a jumping-off point for other design related to it, what Thorgerson and Powell called the "allied pieces such as single bags, poster, and press advertising (and of course the proverbial T-shirt). These items require different text and different design, yet are related to the principal image" (1999: p. 65). If album cover art has been overlooked by scholars of popular music, such allied pieces have gone entirely unnoticed.

And it will be instructive to continue to follow the changes in the mediation of popular music from physical product to digital stream and to examine the ways in which visual presentation will change with it. To separate sound and vision in popular music would seem impossible, no matter the technology in question. It will be fascinating to observe and study the shifts in the industry's and fan's interest in the proportion and type of attention paid to each.

As Chapman put it, album covers may "tell us as much about the culture they come from as they do about design values or innovations in technique" (1997: p. 7). We hope our effort will provide a framework from which others can build our collective knowledge of album cover art and of the cultures of production and consumption in which they are embedded.

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ENDNOTES

1. It is worth noting that the marketing of artists and music is itself understudied.
2. Of significant interest but outside the scope of this article are the book's earlier chapters, which discuss, among other things, music books, sheet music, posters, and concert tickets.

3. According to Martina Schmitz (1986), in 1940 Alex Steinweiss, CBS Columbia's first art director, said,

> What they used originally was either brown, gray, or tan paper, and they would stamp in the gold name of the record, and it would just lie in the window of the record store like a tombstone; nothing attractive about it. It had no color, no personality. . . . Sometime around 1935, though, some of these "tombstone" albums, as they came to be called, appeared with cover designs.

4. A study of Górecki's *Third Symphony* by Luke Howard (1997) pointed to the continued importance of such "silent sales":

> When enthusiasm for the *Third Symphony* began to surge in Britain, the marketing director of the HMV retail chain remarked concerning the disc, "It's just a matter of displaying it prominently. The thing's selling itself." The element of display, of not only making sure the music was heard but also ensuring that its cover was seen, contributed to the sales; with this disc in particular the cover design provided many consumers with an easy means to identify what they wanted (p. 164).

   Howard also noted that the cover drew criticism from classical music fans, who considered it too pop-like in appearance.

5. What follows is drawn in broad strokes regarding rock's history for the purposes of illustrating visual, rather than musical, evolution.

6. Ironically, the band managed a top-40 crossover hit with the single "How 'Bout Us?" a feat for which the executives at Columbia Records who chose to not show the band members' faces likely took credit.

7. The zipper on the front of "Sticky Fingers" unfortunately damaged thousands of copies in shipping.

8. Portability is thus a double-edged sword.