

pressing issues- nz cover production

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The first record I ever bought was an **Abba** album – the title eludes me but it was the one with *Dancing Queen*, *Ring Ring* and *Mamma Mia* on it. Took it home, ripped off the plastic, put it on the ‘gramophone’ and danced around the lounge in flared jeans and boob tube while poring over every bit of information on the cover. Friends came over, and they danced around the lounge in flared jeans and boob tubes, and pored over every bit of information on that cover too.

None of us had the slightest interest in the album’s design or manufacture. We wanted to absorb from that bit of ink-coated cardboard, any possible scrap of **Abba**’s glitter and soft-focused 70s glamour. And as long as the record was spinning on the turntable, the image on the cover was a reflection of the selves we dreamed we could be. Though being dark with a busty blonde best friend meant I could only ever be Frida... Sigh!

Record packaging was originally a solution to a storage and longevity problem, evolving into a graphic window through which the audience could get to ‘meet’ the musicians via photographic, illustrative or textual depictions. Further down the track, with the development of Beatlemania-type devotion to bands and musicians, the packaging became a form of visual contract between musician and audience, symbolically sealed by the passing of money over the record shop counter. A pact made around the notion of desire... I buy your music because it allows me, your audience, to also buy into the fantasy of yourselves you have created. The fantasy you have created gives me freedom and/or permission to express, however subliminally, my fantasy of myself.

The space in which these fantasies are constructed bears a peculiar relationship to the seemingly prosaic production processes involved in their manufacture. Music is made and combined with images, creating a package that inscribes identities and desires of musician and audience.

Production processes shape this package.

Huge European and American markets enabled slick high-end production of this packaging. New Zealand’s small population and geographical isolation has always meant a small market, setting unique parameters in terms of production costs. In the 1930s the

New Zealand Government began introducing heavy import restrictions to boost local production. Labels from Europe and the United States pressed the vinyl for New Zealand releases of international musicians in their own plants but, to maximise import quotas, the covers were printed in New Zealand.

Often the vinyl arrived with one printed copy of the cover that would be processed as if it were the original artwork: stripped up into film separations, made into plates and offset printed. Good in theory but the result was a very grainy image. When starting with original art, each of the four constituent colours [cyan, magenta, yellow and black or CMYK] are made into a separate piece of film. The tonal areas are constructed out of small dots, the density of which produces the saturation of colour in any particular area. When film is made of an already offset printed work the dots are exaggerated and the image gets chunky. A great example is the front of the 60s RCA release of **Rodgers and Hammerstein's** *The Sound of Music*, though the vinyl for this was pressed in New Zealand.

Introducing Mr Lee Grant, the first NZ album in this exhibition, is a good example of standard New Zealand record cover production practices for local releases up to the end of the 1970s. The front and back of the cover were produced separately, the front being printed in four colours and coated with a seal or lamination and the back printed in non-laminated black. The two parts were then folded and glued together. The savings from using this method were considerable as the cost of the film, plates and labour necessary for a full colour job could easily reach four times the weekly wage.

During that time print runs were generally kept small and in some cases costs were kept down further by hand folding and gluing covers rather than using expensive machinery. Because the import restrictions were severe local product was used in production where possible. Looking closely it can be seen that the ink on the back of the *Introducing Mr Lee Grant* cover is not true black but rather a gritty dark grey. This may be due to the use of a local cardboard, which was produced with an overly high pumice content. The card was so abrasive that it progressively wore away the surface of the plates during the print process.

The British component of **Sound Design** is a clear illustration that the UK music industry was large enough to support the emergence of 'star' designers who specialised in cover design. Labels like 4AD could employ **Vaughan Oliver** to develop a 'look and feel' to brand their product. There was a certainty that records would move on the shelves. The financial and material parameters of the manufacture of the fantasy were straightforward compared with those that New Zealand labels had to contend with.

John Pitcairn, who designed three or four covers for Flying Nun, worked for the label as production coordinator during the 1990s. He notes that the full-scale pre-computer cost of cover production was around \$2000 while the budget for recording the music itself was often \$1000 tops. Any label not releasing music aimed squarely at the mass market had to encourage musicians to generate their fantasy on a shoestring.

These limitations made for creative approaches not only within the alternative music scene but in other areas as well. The Tauranga Jazz Festival produced small runs of one release annually, the covers of which were hand screenprinted. Early recordings of rugby matches were released with covers that were illustrated with black line art by notable New Zealand cartoonists.

Musicians with a dream to sell on no budget created their own cover art. Flying Nun had "no house style" except "a bit of a mess". Pitcairn recalls bands arriving with a box of photos and some scribbled notes. Or creations such as the **3Ds'** *Hellzapoppin* cover art – a diorama made at home with porridge as one of its ingredients. Appropriation was a problematic source of imagery – it had to be regularly pointed out that there were legal issues involved with 'borrowing' images. The cover of the **Chug** album *Sassafras* which features photos of toadstools is a great example of appropriation gone right. Pitcairn insisted that the band contact the photographer whose images they had taken from a magazine. He was so excited at this use of his photos that he sent them the original transparencies.

No formal layout limitations were placed on the cover

designers. Good luck finding the Flying Nun logo on the **Look Blue Go Purple** album *Bewitched!* Flying Nun attempted at one stage to standardise the positioning and format of label information but gave up after a couple of releases. Each cover is a reflection of the artistic vision of the musicians, illustrated through a kind of low-tech design aesthetic, which was determined in no small way by limited budgets.

As often happens with creativity, necessity breeds its own quirky beauty. The punk aesthetic with its use of appropriation and photocopy, and ethos of free enterprise, was embraced wholeheartedly by New Zealand cover designers who've never fully moved on from it. In the early 1980s musician **Paul Luker** was, by trade, a photolithographer. Outside working hours he made music with friends. By the mid 80s he was producing music on cassettes, recorded on an Arts Council Grant funded porta-studio in a flat in Mt Eden. The label, Industrial Tapes, was formed by a group whose mode of production rested on the belief that there was 'no way but making it ourselves'.

In 1984 Luker released a single entitled *200 Variations*. The vinyl was pressed, through Flying Nun, at the EMI plant which operated in Wellington until 1987 when the easing of import restrictions and the global shift to the CD format meant that the plant was no longer viable. (The pressing machinery is rumoured to have found its way to the bottom of Cook Strait). Luker traveled to Wellington to watch the production of the 200 copies, 50 of which were given to Flying Nun in exchange for the cost of pressing.

The making of the covers for the single was a labour of love driven by a 'fascination with process'. Through his work Luker had access to an offset press and paper offcuts from commercial jobs. The covers were booklets individually made by combining offset printing, lettraset, photocopy, woodcut, screenprint, found materials such as maps, and handmade paper, all held together with staples and double-sided tape. Heavily influenced by fanzine culture he says there was "an urgency about garage publishing" - a need to "dissociate from mainstream and prove it cost nothing". The singles were mostly sold through exhibition at Auckland's RKS Gallery; a

canny marketing strategy considering Luker was later told by a mainstream record shop owner "I'll probably never sell one of your records again 'cos they're fucking upside down!".

Strangely these covers present themselves as one-off kit-set throwaway precious art objects. Lowbrow punkish production aesthetic meets gallery wall, with the complexity of construction belying the carelessness with which they seem to have been created.

Alec Bathgate came to his career as a graphic designer through his enjoyment in designing covers. He was in the early New Zealand punk band the **Enemy** which transformed into **Toy Love**, and as a duo with Chris Knox formed the **Tall Dwarfs**. Both Bathgate and Knox worked on the back of each record cover, but took turns to create the front using mainly one colour pen or pencil drawings. In 1984 Bathgate designed the front cover of *Slugbucket*, hand drawing each colour separation on lunch wrap.

In 1995 Bathgate was asked to design a cover for the **Abba** tribute compilation *Abbasolutely*. Excited by the possibilities of the computer, but unable to use appropriated images or Abba's typography, he recreated the group by scanning Sindy and Paul dolls, lifting just the hairstyles from photos. The stolen hair was photoshopped over the scans and a computer-generated background, making more than a passing reference to the 60s Op Art style seen in the background of the **Mr Lee Grant** album, completed the design.

The heightened colour and surreal lighting on the doll faces combined with a graininess of image suggests an ironic breaking apart of the vaselined lens aesthetic with which **Abba** was so often portrayed. Process limitations must receive some credit for this. Bathgate was aiming for high-resolution slickness of image but was reined in by the capabilities of his computer. Plastic Abba got grunged by Kiwi ingenuity and limitations.

What do these stories say about record cover production processes in New Zealand? These few examples demonstrate

distinctive features: one colour printing; the use of curious materials such as abrasive cardboard, porridge and lunch wrap; a kind of cult of musicians and their friends as designers; unorthodox methods such as appropriation; photocopy, stapling, sticking with double-sided tape; technological limitations; a pleasure in the hand-made; a desire to give some sort of value for no money; and more than a hint of back-handedly giving the big finger to the establishment.

These kinds of processes are still being used by boutique labels like Kog Transmissions and Pink Air/Girl Alliance. Pink Air/Girl Alliance do small runs of 7-inch and 10-inch records, some of which are lathe cut at King Records in Geraldine while others are pressed on vinyl in Nashville, USA. The covers are made by the bands and employ collage and hand drawings which are photocopied or, like the **Lovely Midget** singles, use found materials. Most sales are through a retail clothing outlet and via the internet. Kog CD covers are slicker and use computer-based design, but with an emphasis on using recycled card and creating a CD that minimizes 'evil packaging'. Kog designer **Fiona Jack** prefers to forgo the cheaper jewel CD case for the more tactile digipack. Jack aims to produce covers that will 'feel valuable' and 'last and be loved' and designs with artistic integrity prioritised over financial reward.

So, back to my initial **Abba** story. The pact between musician and audience in that context is pretty obvious: I buy your record; you, the musicians, portray yourselves with the wealth, glamour and fame teenage girls dream of; I get to pretend I'm you. Perhaps if this exhibition was solely of **Kiri Te Kanawa** record covers, or only of covers from the UK, the pact may be similar. But it's not. The reality is that what is on the wall is, for the most part, a fantastic selection of creative solutions to budgetary, technological and material constraints. The pact is: "I buy your record; you, the musicians, portray yourselves doing this really cool thing by yourselves; I get to pretend I can too!"

Many thanks to Alec Bathgate, Alison Dalziel, Alan Holt, Fiona Jack, Paul Luker, John Pitcairn, and Alan Taylor.

