

Smay: It's all in the name

In-demand New York graphics duo, Stan Stanski and Phil Yarnall, who go by the name 'Smay Vision', serve all the major record labels, designing the packaging for many high-profile releases, and their business accretion is going from strength to strength, Larry Jaffee reports



The estate of the rock guitarist Jimi Hendrix has commissioned Smay to design much of its recent archival releases, including this boxed set of unreleased material

Stan Stanski and Phil Yarnall have known each other since 1986 when they first met as college roommates both studying graphic design. They would later become band mates, and business partners. Even before they graduated from the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia, where they were in almost every class together, it was destined that their professional lives would become intertwined. They soon would make their mark as an influential creative/art direction duo provocatively known as Smay Vision, which would go on to work for all of the New York-based major record labels.

Upon graduation from college, Yarnall landed an art department job at PolyGram, but

he wasn't happy about the corporate trappings, while Stanski was working as an art director at Guitar magazine as "a steady gig." They both realised an entrepreneurial life beckoned.

"I decided I was going to leave [PolyGram] completely," remembers Yarnall, who was bolstered by knowing that his former employer was going to feed the fledgling concern with freelance work. "Within the PolyGram umbrella, there were different labels. We'd call one guy, and walk out with a dozen jobs."

Much of the work dealt with initially resizing LP covers for compact disc release. At around this time, they found a mentor in Peter Corriston, a music graphics legend known for his memorable covers for the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin.

Getting assignments

Soon, other labels such as EMI and Sony took notice, and they eventually started doing work for all the major labels on both coasts.

Stanski and Yarnall's work was championed by an executive at the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA). Then a feature article about the duo in an influential graphic arts magazine started getting their name out to potential clients.

Stanski likes to think that the partnership had no problem getting assignments because of the high quality of the work, but perhaps more importantly, "We were easy to work with." By that he means Smay delivered projects on time and within the budget, which are critical issues for clients.

They became the go-to guys for Bill Levenson, the supervising producer of PolyGram's mid-1990s 'Chronicles' series of deluxe back catalogue reissues, which led to two boxed sets for the 1960s legendary bands Cream and the Velvet Underground.

Those well-received packages led them to the Jimi Hendrix estate, which commissioned Smay for designing the packaging for the guitarist's previously unreleased album *First Rays of the New Rising Sun*, which was followed by an ongoing comprehensive reissue programme of the late musician's back catalogue, now controlled by Universal. "One thing led to another, and it kept building and building," notes Stanski.

A few years later Sony became their biggest client, accounting for the bulk of their work. A typical project was Sony getting the rights to the AC/DC catalogue and hiring to repackage the CDs in Digipaks.

PolyGram was acquired by Universal, typical of the consolidation and cost-cutting that has occurred in the Napster age. "We've waded through the ups and downs of the music industry," Yarnall says, noting that subsequently he has diversified out of necessity.

Smay started getting graphic work other than designing CDs, such as programme guides for the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame and the Hendrix Museum, as well as music-related books published by book retailer Barnes &

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Noble. Other projects included design work for The New York Underground Film Festival. "Ninety nine percent of our work is music and entertainment," Yarnall estimates. In February 2005 they branched into art licensing for an apparel line (www.smaylicensing.com).

Yarnall is somewhat bemused by all that they accomplished. "Neither of us had any kind of business background. In 1993, we were still sharing an East Village apartment in Manhattan with several other friends. And there was only

one computer in the place. We hooked up with an accountant, who told us our overhead was way too low." They eventually moved into office space on 5th Avenue and 20th Street "with a great view of the Flat-Iron building."

Even with the office in the fashionable neighbourhood, the partners were reluctant to expand and hire more staff. They were afraid that it would "add stress," having to worry about such matters as making payroll. And there were also creative reasons not to bring outsiders into the fold. "We're control freaks on the art stuff," said Stanski.

Their creative process often involves taking turns "back and forth" to finish a project. The name "Smay" reflects their typically irreverent leanings. Back when they were in art school, dummy press type they used would leave behind non-sensical words, including the prevalent Smay. "It just rolls off the tongue," says Stanski.

But when the partners tried to register the name, and the registrar asked what the word meant, the cheeky duo responded that Smay stood for "Smart Monkeys and Yams," and they were sent to the back of the line. When they came back to the counter the second time, they convinced him that Smay was a graphic design term for printing.

A few years ago, Stanski and Yarnall each started his own family, and moved to Westchester, a suburb north of New York City. After commuting by train, the partners decided that moving the office closer to their homes was a prudent business decision because rent was enormously cheaper and there were considerable tax breaks.

Since so much of the work with clients is done electronically and distributed via pdf, the Smays realised that a New York address wasn't crucial to their success, especially since they've been able to keep their 212 Manhattan phone number forever. The suburban move seems to have paid off in the early going.

"The last five months have been really busy for us," Stanski sums up. ●

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especially in the early days when there were no automated packaging options. "That is why a lot of the early [titles] were limited edition or boxed sets," said Ladwig. "It was never comparable to the jewel box in terms of price."

AGI decided to license the Digipak to other North American packaging suppliers in order to help grow the market. The three key early licensees were Shorewood, Queens Group and Ivy Hill.

"The customer just went to town" with this new music packaging option, said Mankoff, noting all of the possible ways to create a unique version of the Digipak with multiple panels, colored trays and so on. It quickly became the music packaging alternative to the jewel case. At one point, there were over 1,000 variations of the Digipak, Mankoff said.

Today and beyond

Digipak sales are as strong today as ever. Mike Panveno, VP of sales and administration at AGI Media, noted that with the set back in music sales due to downloading, record labels are increasingly turning to specialty packaging to add value to their releases.

Not only is the Digipak still primary the music packaging alternative, but Digipak variations in the same dimensions of the Amaray box have also become key players in the DVD movie and episodic TV markets.

For example, HBO Video has tapped DVD Digipaks for season boxed sets of some of its hot series, including *The Sopranos*, *Sex and the City*, and *Band of Brothers*, which won an

Alex Award. Universal Home Entertainment has used DVD Digipaks for titles such as *Schindler's List* and *Battlestar Galactica*.

While Hollywood's use of Digipaks for movie releases has slowed somewhat due to declining DVD movie sales, and Hollywood's resulting tightening of its packaging budgets, episodic TV continues to be strong. "Multi-disc sets, primarily for episodic TV, that has definitely become one of the sweet spots," said Panveno.

Just how many Digipaks and sister products have been produced over the last 20 years? "In the billions," estimated Markoff. And that number, whatever exactly it is, continues to grow at a strong clip. AGI Media continues to push the envelope in creating variations of Digipaks and DVD Digipaks better suited for today's quickly evolving media packaging market. "What we have tried to do is increase the flow of innovation," said Panveno.

And while AGI Media continues to own the Digipak and DVD Digipak trademarks, the US patent for the Digipak ran out in July. That is already resulting in a flood of Digipak-style packages as competitors are now able to use the patents, although they cannot use AGI Media's trademarked names without a license.

While there is an obvious downside of not owning the market any longer, AGI Media sees an upside as well. More competition will likely help grow the market for Digipak-style packaging. And as the inventor, no one has more experience in making Digipaks efficiently and cost effectively than AGI Media.

As noted earlier, AGI licenses other manufacturers all over the world to make Digipaks. One of those



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companies currently licensed to make Digipaks is New Jersey-based Disc Makers, which both makes and sells Digipaks to its customers. In fact, 15% of Disc Makers' audio packaging revenue comes from Digipaks. Tony van Veen, vice president of sales and marketing for Disc Makers, notes the perception of quality a Digipak offers. "It has got a really nice premium feel to it, which customers and consumers tend to like. It is just a nice, premium presentation."

While the Digipak may still be considered an alternative media package, it is the standard of alternative media solutions.

"Not many packages have taken on an identity like the Digipak," said Mankoff proudly. "Today, it is probably the most successful alternative package of all time." ●