

He may be retro, but he's no hack

David Gorman whetted his appetite for special packaging while working at Rhino, and shared a Grammy Award in the process. Now he's gone one step further by owning his own label.

Debbie Galante Block reports

David Gorman

Record label owner, HackTone Records

Originally hired by Rhino Records to “cook up crazy designs, branding and marketing ideas,” Grammy award winning designer, David Gorman decided to put his attributes and his two passions – design and music – together to create his own record label; not just any record label, but a label that pays close attention to packaging. HackTone Records, started up in Los Angeles, within the past year, does just that.

Along with his partner, Michael Nieves, another Rhino alumni, the label has three CDs to its credit so far. HackTone grew out of Hackmart, a design, marketing and packaging firm that still does work for other labels, including Rhino (which distributes for HackTone) and Sony. “You can make the argument that most mainstream consumers don't care about liner notes or they don't notice the photo on the front cover. You may be right about that. However, what you're missing is the fact that passionate music consumers do care, and they are your base and that's who is out there preaching the gospel for you. That's how to build a brand. When you hit people with something special, they'll talk about it.”

Along with Hugh Brown and Rachel Gutek, Gorman won the 1998 Grammy for Best Boxed or Special Limited Edition Package for Rhino's *Beg, Scream and Shout! The Big Ol' Box of '60s Soul*.

With downloads being such a concern for the music industry these days, Gorman said cutting down on packaging is probably the worst thing to do. Boring packaging makes the decision to download a no-brainer.

Only in the home entertainment realm is the packaging standardised. Toys and cosmetics are packaged differently to try and grasp consumer attention. “Look at books, the closest parallel as an industry. They vary in size almost infinitely. A book shelf is a beautiful thing to look at; all different colors and different sizes. Your eyes bounce around and it's really cool. A rack of CDs is an incredibly ugly thing to look at; a big chunk of plastic.”

What makes HackTone's packaging different is that single CDs are their choice of product for special packaging, not boxed sets. The first CD put out by HackTone was *Heartworn Highways*, a documentary soundtrack. It is historically significant music because it's the first recording from Rodney Crowell and John Hiatt [established songwriters who work independently]. Also included on the CD are Steve Earle, Townes Van Zandt, Guy Clark and David Allan Coe.

“Everybody part of this music scene went on decades later to become significant artists. The film's music has



David Gorman doesn't lament over the 1970s glory days of LP rock; he recreates the cover art down to the smallest details on HackTone's reissued CDs

a whiskey warmth. Whiskey is almost a character in the film. We wanted the packaging to convey that.” Gorman's designers took that jewel case and turned it into a whiskey bottle with a parchment sticker on the outside of the jewel case. Also included is a facsimile tax seal that goes over the bottle of Jack Daniels. “We wanted the tax seal on there so you would have the same sensation when cracking open the CD as you would have cracking open a bottle. We got so many emails about that tax seal, proving it can be a tiny touch in the packaging that makes the difference. The package contextualises the experience for you while just seeing the album on iTunes can never do that.”

Another release from HackTone is David Allan Coe's *Penitentiary Blues*, which he wrote while in prison and recorded six months after he was released. “It's a very raw, rambunctious blues record. Coe's career today is based completely based on that wild outlaw image,” said Gorman. The original LP package that came out in 1970 offered a photo of Coe with die-cut prison bars over it. When HackTone recreated the package they replicated the gatefold and the original front and back cover. Coe had also written a book in the early 1980s called *EX-Convict* which HackTone cut down to 24 pages and issued as a second booklet within the package. “We also asked Coe to write a new intro since it was his first record. He hand wrote something, so we scanned it and included that without retyping or editing.”

Penitentiary Blues CD reissue just like the LP



The next CD from HackTone sometime in early 2007 will be Lewis Taylor's *The Lost Album*. (Taylor's *Stoned* is already available through HackTone.) LP jackets through the 1970s were made from dark cardboard with the artwork on a separate sheet of paper glued on to it. This technique was changed in the early 1980s when they started printing directly on the cardboard. However, through Shorewood Media, Gorman has been dealing with a company in Japan that creates CD size replicas of those jackets. “Thick and substantial, they just feel great.” Gorman wanted the Taylor record to have a 1970s feel.

Gorman sums up his philosophy this way. “Musicians and filmmakers offer art that is precious, but when it comes to actually presenting this beautiful piece of art to the world, many of those people stop caring. They'll be meticulous about the art itself, but then they stick it in a jewel case and throw it out there. It's a strange dichotomy that I hope to play a part in changing.” ●