

Indies retell history through sleeves

Rough Trade and Factory Records set the UK bar in the late 1970s with their memorable cover graphics, reminisces Larry Jaffee

ROUGH TRADE
by Rob Young (Black Dog Publishing UK, 2006, £19.95)

FACTORY RECORDS: THE COMPLETE GRAPHIC ALBUM
by Matthew Robertson (Thames & Hudson, UK, 2006, £29.95)

The post-punk rock movement of the late 1970s ushered in a do-it-yourself work ethic that any garage band could make their own records and find an audience. A number of independent labels grew out of this new sense of creativity — two of the most memorable being Rough Trade and Factory Records, both of which are the subjects of recently published coffee table books.

Both labels offered musicians a departure from the typical rip-off record company contracts by sharing 50% profits with them and reverting ownership of the master recordings back to the musicians, instead of the label — in perpetuity.

The *Rough Trade* book, part of the publisher's Labels Unlimited series, provides an ups and downs history of the label, and is not a packaging/graphics book per se. However, much of the story is told through its bands' sleeves, about a hundred of which are reprinted here in full colour (it started out when vinyl ruled and 45rpm singles were still an art form in itself).

Rough Trade started out as a retail record shop, and eventually expanded into a full-fledged label, management company and distributor of other labels.

The company prided itself on the eclecticism of its artist roster, and in the same way the diverse styles of the music found in the grooves of its releases, the cover art on the LPs and picture sleeves reflect the musicians' visions.

Many of the musicians were fresh out of art school or had art school aspirations, such as The Raincoats's Ana Da Silva, who not only provided vocal, gui-



tars and keyboards to the all-girl band's debut album but also garnered a design credit. The cover featured an illustration of a choir of Asian school children.

Rough Trade's greatest commercial success no doubt was The Smiths, whose lead singer Morrissey meticulously selected stills from vintage British film and television shows for each sleeve, often in collaboration with Rough Trade's in-house art director Jo Slee.

In contrast, the Factory book focuses entirely on the stylish, post-modern cover art found on its releases which reflected the singular vision of its celebrated in-house designer, Peter Saville, and a few of his associates. The 224-page book's introduction explores the label's role in design, and 400 colour illustrations of album sleeves, singles, special editions, flyers, posters, stationery and architectural projects.

Although Rough Trade's Geoff Travis and Factory's Tony Wilson both meant well in their fair treatment of their artists, they both obviously had some shortcomings as businessmen, as evidenced by the eventual bankruptcies of both companies.

Factory often spared no expense on its packaging, which sometimes made absolutely no business sense, exemplified by the die-cut 12-inch sleeve for Blue Order's *Blue Monday* single made to resemble a computer floppy disk. The only problem was that the label would lose money on every unit; the anecdote is brilliantly captured in the Factory-inspired film *24 Hour Party People*. *Uncut* magazine recounted the tale again in a January 2007 article chronicling some of rock's most dubious business dealings. "Decisions were not made on the basis of profitability," Saville is quoted as saying. ●