

Grammy packaging predictable...in a good way

Creativity, even on a tight budget, was key to Grammy packaging success this year, reports Debbie Galante Block

Often accused of being predictable, the 2007 Grammy Awards did not disappoint, which is good news for the packaging industry. Not surprisingly, most of the honored packages were from independent, very creative labels. Many were repeat nominees and in that way, predictable. However, a message has come through loud and clear that packaging is important, and in many cases it doesn't cost a lot of money to create something memorable.

In the Best Recording Package category, The Thievery Corporation's *Versions* (ESL Music) is an example of what it takes to make a winning package on a small budget. Art Director Neil Ashby (co-nominated with Matthew Curry) described the package as a straight up six-panel Digipak which Shorewood Packaging made into an envelope sleeve including a 32-page booklet. Its construction is not complex, but, "we wanted the art to have a lot of substance," he said. "We wanted to pay homage to The Beatles' *Revolver* album. We redrew hundreds of individual pieces of things and then assembled everything in Photoshop. We wanted it to be a graphic novel, a richly illustrated book, but we barely had a dollar-a-unit to spend."

One thing Ashby did to save money was to use opaque paper, allowing for a thick booklet without much paper cost. The booklet was also done in black-and-white with only one other color. "We had to design something that was eye catching enough to use one color," he said.

The front of the package has a purple circle that originally was going to be a sticker. However, to save money, Ashby found a way to print directly on the package. "We did a sculpted, round emboss on the sticker area. So, when you rub your hands over it, and [turn] it to the light, it does give the feel of a sticker. Without doing that, the package would not have had the impact we wanted," he said.

By contrast, the winner in that category, Tool's *10,000 Days* (from Zomba, a Sony label) probably cost about \$5 per unit, opined Ashby. [No one from Zomba was available for comment on the cost.] There is no denying that Tool's *10,000 Days*, designed by Adam Jones, is awe inspiring. It consists of a thick, cardboard-bound booklet partially covered by a flap holding a pair of stereoscopic glasses which can be used to view a series of 3-D images inside. It has been reported that the four individual photos of the band members can be used as pieces of a puzzle.

From the complex to simple is Ani DiFranco's *Reprieve* from Righteous Babe Records. Brian Grunert (co-nominated with DiFranco) said, "We ended up with a relatively custom designed slip case with simple paper." Shorewood created a regular four-panel Digipak that opens top-to-bottom instead of left-to-right. The slip case loads through the top. While the design itself looks simple, the thoughts were deep, Grunert said. "The picture of the tree on the cover of the slipcase is a

re-creation of a tree that survived the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. It was photographed only hours after the bombing. On the cover of the Digipak is an image of what the tree would look like if it was granted a 'reprieve' from its earlier fate."

The printing on the chip board proved to be a bit of the challenge. "We used an 18-point chipboard on the outside, and a 20-to-24-point chipboard on the Digipak. The challenge was in getting the colors to pop when they were offset printed," Grunert said. "By using opaque white underneath the cream color, the picture has a look and feel of glowing in the dark."

The slip case also presented problems because of the construction. When sliding the Digipak in, the tuck flaps on the box would catch the Digipak. "It was this really unruly thing. Shorewood came up with a cool solution. It's a double walled slip case. The flap goes between the walls and it's out of the way of anything being slid into there. It gives the slip case extra rigidity, too, so we could go down to an 18-point board with it," explained Grunert.

"If you want someone to buy it, you have to make it look great." – Hugh Brown

Then, there is Tooth & Nail Records' *The Best Worst-Case Scenario* album from the band Fair, designed by Ryan Clark. Fair is one of the smallest bands on the label; the CD has sold about 7,000 copies. "The band was looking for an outdoorsy vibe," said Clark. "Every photograph was printed with a metallic color first. After the metallic was dry, we put the four colors on top of it. That's what gives each of the images a bit of a haze look. Every song has a page in the booklet, and each page looks similar to the cover. It almost has a Reader's Digest book feel."

Columbia Legacy's *Personal File* is a collection of never before released music from Johnny Cash. The collection was found on the reel-to-reel in his vault at House of Cash Recording Studio. The box is a standard Digipak with a clear plastic sleeve that has a

The Thievery Corporation's *Versions*: a winning package on a small budget





A Life Less Lived: The Gothic Box included a sewn leatherette O-card with lacing and metal grommets

black-and-white photo printed on it. Parts of the photo have been backed up with white ink, so some areas are semi-opaque and some have been left transparent. According to Randall Martin, art director, “there’s sort of a ghostly effect when you slide the plastic sleeve off the Digipak.” Sony used Philadelphia-based Klearfold (a division of AGI) to print the package. “On press, we had to do two or three hits of the white background color in order to get it to be opaque enough, so it turned out to be a four-colour job instead of a two-colour job, as I originally planned,” said Martin.

Legacy had another nomination in the Best Boxed or Limited Edition Package category with Miles Davis’ *The Cellar Door Sessions, 1970* designed by Howard Fritzon, Dan Ichimoto and Seth Rothstein. However, *The Red Hot Chili Peppers’ Stadium Arcadium* box (from Warner Brothers) – designed by the band along with art director, Matt Taylor – was awarded the coveted prize. No one was available to comment on the package directly.

Certainly, the box sets require a bit more investment in time and money. *MediaPack* was able to speak with other nominees in the category, including Lance Ledbetter, president of Dust To Digital. Susan Archie designed the label’s release of Fonotone Records, which was in a cigar box. Fonotone was a record company in the 1950s and ‘60s that was run out of Joe

Bussard’s basement in Frederick, Maryland. It was the last of the 78 rpm labels.

“When we first started talking about the project, we saw Bussard had items stored in cigar boxes,” Ledbetter said. Thus, Archie and co-nominee Henry Owings created the cigar box design. “Beyond that, we had a surplus of photos from Bussard, enough to create a post card set in addition to the booklet. Also, in the cigar box Bussard originally sent to us, there was an old bottle opener, and we found this company online that makes nickel-plated bottle openers. We had one made for the package as well. When putting out music from the past, the packaging almost presents itself like a time machine or a time capsule. When people open it up, you want them to go back in time.”

Then, there is Hugh Brown who is no stranger to Grammy nominations. This year, two of his Rhino creations were nominated: *A Life Less Lived – The Gothic Box* and *One Kiss Can Lead To Another: Girl Group Sounds Lost & Found*.

The Gothic Box, co-created by Brown and Jean Krikorian, was produced by Shorewood. It offered the look and interactive design of a corset for the exterior package. The solution included a sewn leatherette O-card with lacing and metal grommets that slips over the rigid case. The package holds four DVD trays and a flip-out O-card that holds a perfect bound book.

One Kiss Can Lead To Another, manufactured by Ivy Hill, was relatively easy to put together,



Ani DiFranco’s *Reprieve* is simple but meaningful

according to Brown, who was co-nominated with Sheryl Farber and Maria Villar. It’s a hat box, with the CD packages inside made to look like makeup compacts. The booklet looks like a girl’s diary.

How does Brown accomplish the innovation he wants to offer? He comes to the table with a prioritized wish list. “It’s all a negotiation,” he said. “With us, packaging is always important, because 99% of what we put out is available and fairly easy to download for free. So, if you want to get someone to buy it, you have to make it look great. We want someone to buy it and feel like it was worth buying.” ●