

# Saddle Creek package: a Grammy winner in disguise



**Cassadaga may not look like a typical Grammy Award-winning package, but appearances can be deceptive, discovers Debbie Galante Block**

**A** first look at Bright Eyes' *Cassadaga* on Saddle Creek Records may cause someone to question why it won a Grammy Award. On the surface it looks like a grey package with black dots. But look again.

The actual packaging is a straightforward six-panel Digipak with a clear tray. On the shrink wrap there is a large sticker. Unwrap the package and there is nothing other than the handwritten text on the spines and a grey pattern. Then, the user sees the Focal Decoder, a piece of plastic that the user must put over the cover of the CD or LP, and *voila...* hidden imagery all over.

On the CD version, there are five panels of artwork that can be decoded. The only panel with no hidden imagery is the one behind the Digitrays.

"I purposely tried to make that panel not interesting, so that if someone tried to slide the decoder under the Digitrays, they might just see that there was nothing there but stars. I didn't want people ripping the Digitrays off to see what was hidden under there," says Zack Nipper, package designer at Saddle Creek.

The disc itself is two-colour. "We did a spot varnish on the disc, so when you tilt it towards the light the images pop out at you," he says. The booklet is 24 pages. That was printed as 2 over 2 with a spot varnish, so the majority of it is matt with images in gloss. Most of the pages are black and the type is knocked out to a warm grey. The type seems to float off the page in front of the images.



**The Focal Decoder reveals hidden imagery on five of the six panels**

The LP cover is similar, but the difference is the six-panel large folded insert. It has all of the same images and hidden text, but it is combined differently. Obviously, the panels are much bigger and can hold more. The front jacket, back jacket and one large panel have big encoded sections on them. Then, of course, the decoder is a lot bigger and therefore more can be seen at one time. But it is basically the same content.

"As a designer, I like the artist to be involved in package design. It ties the product together better. People are not buying the record for me, they are buying it for Bright Eyes," says Nipper. "They want to listen to the music, but they want to look at the package as something that is connected."

Nipper and Conor Oberst, the band member who wrote most of the songs on the album, have worked together before, so Nipper says they are basically always on the same page.

"While Conor is in the studio, we'll get together and talk about what he is thinking, what the music is going to be like and what the themes

are on the record. He'll usually have some kind of idea of what he wants visually. In this case, he knew that he wanted hidden images, but didn't know exactly how he wanted it presented."

The music themes are spiritual and related to the occult, so Oberst was looking for mystical images. According to Nipper, he wanted pyramids to be featured strongly and he wanted hidden text to be written in different languages. They had to rely on friends and family to translate into different languages, Nipper jokes.

While hidden images are not new, Nipper had to find a way to make those images work the way he envisioned. He went to 3D Images in London. "Their technology takes my artwork and puts it on to a computer program to scramble it," he explains. "It breaks it apart and inserts a bunch of noise into the picture, then the lenticular film recombines and takes out the noise and reassembles the image."

David Burder, who invented the Focal Decoder, came up with this technology 15 years ago, when a soft drinks company using hidden images on its product as part of a game came to him and asked if he could invent something that hides the images, but forces people to buy the product before they can see those winning images. Burder accepted the challenge.

Two ways exist to hide images. One is using a colour reveal. That is when a red film is put over the image. The problem is that if it's part of a contest and the packaging is in a store, anyone can go through all of the packages and find which has the winning messages.

"My Focal Decoder method is different in that you have to physically touch whatever it is that you are trying to decode. Even through shrink packaging it wouldn't work for you, there has to be intimate contact," Burder explains.

The technology is called Focal Decoding because the image has to be in-focus to decode it. The lens is like a magnifying glass and its focus is on the backside. "When you touch the image, it decodes, when you pull the lenticular away it's out of focus and you can no longer find the hidden image," says Burder. Colour decoding only decodes letters and numbers. With Focal Decoding, very fine detail can be decoded, as it is on *Cassadaga*.

Regal in Omaha, Nebraska did the printing work. Sources there told *MediaPack* they did nothing special, that the designer did all of the work but, according to Nipper, Regal does outstanding work, and even won a local printing prize for the album's insert.

"I was worried that once the package was all put together, it wouldn't work. I was so paranoid. But, it went smoothly," says Nipper. The album debuted on the US Billboard charts in the top 10. The design won a Grammy Award for Best Recording Package.

Couldn't be much smoother than that. ●