

Beck Creativity Column: June 2007

HED: ALBUM ART FOR THE IPOD GENERATION

SUBHED: Beck reacquaints fans with the physical CD by arming them with stickers and a blank canvas, then challenging them to design the cover for his newest release.

It would be tough to top the design of Beck's previous album covers. *Odelay* featured an enormous mop-haired dog jumping a hurdle. *Mellow Gold* featured a monstrous skull-headed robot bursting through a sky of ominous red clouds. And who could forget the sexually charged hot pink vinyl pants and suggestive neon light beam on the cover of *Midnite Vultures*?

But the CD packaging for Beck's newest release, *The Information*, is striking only in its understatement. There's no cover art to speak of. Just a subtle grid and a sticker on the jewelbox reading "Beck."

But you knew Beck wouldn't let you down. This *is* the same guy who incorporated puppets—dressed as him and his band members—during his 2006 concert tour. Tucked inside each CD is a sheet of more than 60 stickers, with art created by 20 different artists. There are renderings of Beck himself, stylized versions of the CD's track names, and the trippy artwork you've come to expect from Beck's albums (for instance, a tribal warrior carrying spear in one hand, and a radio in the other). Fans are challenged to respond to the music by creating a totally unique cover using the blank canvas and sticker sheets.

REINTRODUCING THE PHYSICAL CD

With the advent of music downloads, album art has largely become an afterthought. For *The Information*, Beck wanted to create a cover that was relevant for an audience that was growing increasingly ambivalent about album design. Beck hired London's Big Active—an agency that already designed such notable album covers as Snow Patrol's *Eyes Open*, Keane's *Under the Iron Sea* and Garbage's *Bleed Like Me*—to helm this design.

Gerard Saint was Art Director for this album. "This album's design was more a case of re-engaging the fan with the idea of what the experience of a physical album can be," says Saint. "Beck is more than happy to embrace downloads as a way of accessing music, but he wanted to give his audience something more when they buy the complete physical form of the album."

Beck grew up in a family active the arts (his maternal grandfather is Fluxus artist Al Hansen, and mother, Bibbe Hansen is a visual artist). In fact, in 1998, Beck collaborated with his grandfather in a traveling art exhibition entitled "Beck & Al Hansen: Playing With Matches." For Beck—an artist who draws inspiration from graphic design, collage, and video—it was important to engage the user with more than just the music.

"The sticker idea pretty much came together right from the beginning," says Saint. The first thing we discussed with Beck was if the package was even relevant and how we

could give it a context as a physical form. We suggested an idea we had been toying with that threw the whole idea of creating a singular definable image for the release on its head—a do-it-yourself approach using stickers that was more akin to homemade mix tapes and CDs and the like. Beck had been thinking along similar lines and, as it turned out, was a big fan of sticker art.”

THE INFORMATION

This album was the hotly anticipated follow-up to 2004’s *Guero*, and represents three years of work. The enormous work involved in producing this album presented a unique problem. “After spending so long recording *The Information*, Beck didn’t feel like the album could be summed up with one image,” says Saint. “The cover is about participation and as such is a good example of the invisibility of good design.”

Part of meeting this creative challenge was creating a complex package that exploits its media. Beck told *Wired* in September 2006, “I’m something of a traditionalist, so I have a soft spot for a record with just a standard side A and side B,” he said. “But there’s simply more room for information with digital media, and it would be ridiculous not to take advantage of that. It’s sort of like the difference between a wire recording and a piano roll and a cassette tape. They’re different formats, and they inspire different approaches.”

The CD offers a complete product that you can’t get by simply downloading the music online. The album includes not only 15 songs, but a companion DVD that includes videos for each song. The do-it-yourself album cover completes the product. “Our aim was to create a package that would be highly reflective of Beck’s individual and creative approach to his art,” says Saint. “It’s simply about being part of the experience and as a result giving the listener the opportunity to express their own individuality—bringing them closer to what the spirit of Beck is about.”

CREATIVE PROCESS BEHIND THE ALBUM

One of the things that made this project unique was the sheer number of artists who contributed sticker art—20 in all. Participating illustrators included were such impressive names as Michael Gillette, Kam Tang, Mercedes Helnwein, and Jasper Goodall. “This was certainly the most artists we’ve ever commissioned for one project,” says Saint. “The creative process was about the connections that this might create. Maybe we’ve set a world record for artists collaborating on one sleeve. I hope so.”

Predictably, there were few rules associated with the commissioned sticker designs. “We told the artists that the most important factor was that each image would make a good sticker,” says Saint. “In certain cases, we’d be a little bit more specific where we felt we need to explore a specific idea. To really make this work, it was vital that we could be able to create more imagery than we would actually need, so this could later be curated by us and Beck.” They ended up with than 500 images, a number that had to be cut in half.

Curating the sticker sheets proved to be the most involved aspect of the design process. Each CD contained one of four sticker sheets—each one completely different in terms of

images and themes. “The whole point of this project is to allow the ‘design’ appear invisible and to let the idea do its work effectively,” says Saint.

Art Director Mat Maitland and Beck spent weeks editing the images and working with the art in different combinations, “That way, we were able to develop ideas within the sheets themselves where we saw themes arising,” says Saint. “Some might be more playful, others maybe darker in subject matter. It was really important to Beck to get the balance right to reflect the music.”

Creativity is not without cost—literally. The production costs for this CD’s packaging ended up being more than three times the cost of the typical CD. “Beck and his management team were really into the idea of doing the album this way, and it was this belief that really helped see it through to completion,” says Saint. “At the end of the day, it’s the artist who ultimately picks up the packaging costs, so that’s a good indication of Beck’s commitment to wanting to realize the packaging in this way. Beck also likes bringing art into the music world.”

FAN’S RECEPTION

Of course, the best part about inviting your fans to contribute to your album art is seeing what they come up with. The UK label set up a Web site where fans could upload their designs (www.beckgallery.co.uk) and view others. Hundreds of designs have been submitted from all over the world. “We knew that a site like this should exist to give an additional dimension to the interactive experience of the project—especially creating a community that can share their creations with other Beck fans all over the world,” says Saint. “There’s never been an album that’s really invited participation on this scale.”

The concept is actually being extended to other products as well. Beck’s site is selling blank T-shirts with different iron-on sticker packs that fans can use to create their own custom shirt designs. A deluxe version of the album is planned for release in early 2007 that will feature all four sticker sheets. And Big Active has produced a limited edition poster on self-adhesive sticker material featuring many of the images as kiss-cut stickers. The posters are signed by Beck and will be available exclusively from Big Active’s online shop (www.productofgod.net).

When Beck himself set to design his own version of the cover, he used every sticker in the pack. Bad idea. He told *USA Today* that he suggests judicious picks, then tagging cellphones, laptops, and other objects with the leftovers. He reports that his house has reached “the sticker saturation point.”

FUTURE OF MUSIC DESIGN

Beck told *Wired*, “There are so many different dimensions to what a record can be these days. Artists can and should approach making an album as an opportunity to do a series of releases—one that’s visual, one that has alternate versions, and one that’s something that the listener can participate in or arrange and change. It’s time for the album to embrace technology.”

Redefining what you think of when you think of an album is at the heart of *The Information's* creative process. Instead of fighting the evolution of the medium, both Beck and the art directors saw this as an opportunity to create something truly innovative. Beck told *USA Today*, "The next time I make a record, will there still be CD packages? I want to make something while I still can." And while no one knows what the future of album cover design will be, this album is about making something significant for now.

"Design for music product has always been evolving to suit whatever choices are available to fans when they decide to buy music," says Saint. "The difference now is between tangible 'physical' product and 'virtual' product. Both CDs and downloads are essentially delivering the same digital information—so the challenge for record labels aiming to sell physical product in the future will be to define the format in a way that gives it a reason to exist outside the digital content that it carries. I'd like to think that we've really achieved this through design on the new Beck album—the packaging completes the experience."

Lisa Hazen is a Chicago-based Web designer and writer. A Beck fan since *Mellow Gold*, she listened to *The Information* on repeat while writing this article. (And designed a pretty cool cover if she does say so herself.) www.lisahazen.com / lisa@lisahazen.com

CAPTIONS

ALBUM_STICKER_SHEETS.TIF

The art directors commissioned sticker designs from more than 20 different artists. This resulted in more than 500 stickers, a number that had to be whittled down by half. The most involved parts of the design process involved curating the stickers into one of four different distinct sticker sheets. Each CD includes one of the four sheets.

CD_CASE.TIF

CD_CASE_STICKER_SHEET.TIF

The first impression of the cover design for *The Information* is that it is extremely understated. (All that is shown is a grid with a single sticker on the jewel case.) But inside, you find a sheet of more than 60 stickers intended to use to create your own design.

CD_STICKERED MOCKS.TIF

The possibilities for cover designs are literally infinite, when you consider that there are more than 250 stickers in all. Users were encouraged to create designs that reflected their own responses to the music.

TUBE_4_SHEET.TIF

The collage-like design was continued throughout the rest of the marketing materials associated with this album, like this advertisement for London's underground.

BECKGALLERYUK.PNG

One of the best parts about inviting fans to participate in the cover design is seeing what they come up with. The UK label set up a Web site where visitors can upload their

designs, view others, and even rate their favorites. Hundreds of different designs were submitted from all over the world.