Analog and digital, the graphical presentation of audio files

Albert Jongstra 0828402
Rotterdam University
Piet Zwart, Network media
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This research paper examines the development of the graphical presentation for albums and tracks. The difference in cover art between physical records and digital audio files. It is interesting to observe the way of visualizing digital audio files on the internet has a strong relation to the former physical audio formats. This research will include topics covering album art, traditional record shops, internet music labels, record labels and copyright. The key focus will be on album art; how the album art is used to advertise the contents of music products and the way it is being used with digital audio files.

History

The first record shop was established in 1984 at Cardiff, Wales by Henry Spiller. The name of the record shop is Spiller Records and they originally specialized in the sale of phonographs and wax phonographic cylinders. Phonograph cylinders [1] were the earliest medium (c. 1877) for recording and reproducing sound. In 1902 Edison Records launched a line of improved hard wax cylinders marketed as "Edison Gold Moulded Records". The cylinders were sold in carboard tubes and record companies usually had a generic printed label on the outside of the cylinder package. The labels had no indication of the identity of the individual recording inside the package. However they would have a spoken announcement of the song or performance title, recording artist and record company recorded on to the beginning of the recording. When certain songs were sold in large quantities a printed slip became more common.

In 1983 Alex Steinweis was hired by Columbia Records as the first art director. Alex Steinweis is credited inventing the concept of album covers [2] and covert art, replacing plain covers used before. In the late 1940s, record album for all major companies featured their own colorful paper covers in both 10-inch and 12-inch sizes. Some featured reproductions of classic art while others utilized original designs. With the commercial release of the vinyl record in 1948 the creation of artistic album covers continued.

Between the early 1970s and late 1990s the cassette was one of the most common formats of prerecorded music. Cassette is a French word meaning "little box". The mass production of compact audio cassettes began in 1964. The cassette is also being used by independent music labels who released music on cassettes as a cheap and easy way to distribute their product. The packaging of cassette releases is also an aspect of the format. The packaging is a plastic shell with a photocopied card insm ert, some labels made more effort with de design of the packaging. BWCD records released a cassette by Japanese noise artist Aube[3] that came tied to a blue plastic ashtray shaped like a fish. In 2009, Scotch Tapes [4] (from Canada) released one copy of "Reflections" by My Cell Phone is Better Than Your Cell Phone glued into a handheld cassette player making it impossible to listen to any other tape in the tape deck.

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[1] Phonograh cylinder (2009). Wikipedia. Retrieved November 27, 2009, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phonograph_cylinder

[2] Album cover (2009). Wikipedia Retrieved November 27,2009, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Record_cover

[3] Aube (musician) (2009) Wikipedia. Retrieved November 28, 2009, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aube_%28band%29

[4] Scotch Tapes (2007). Retrieved November 28, 2009, http://www.scotchtapes.ca

The compact disc known as a CD is commercially available since 1982. Since the mid 1990s the CD has become the most common form for the physical distribution of a musical product. Packaging formats vary, including the plastic jewel case and the cardboard and plastic combination known as a Digipak. The size of the cover from a CD compared to a vinyl record is less than one 1/4 of the size. The use of a oversized packaging for a CD or a cardboard box with booklet is often used to have more space for the design. The UK based label Volume[5] founded by Rob Deacon packaged each CD release with a CD-sized book of journalism on the artists.

The history of netlabels dates back to the late 1970s and early 1980s. This is when the tracker and demo scenes were starting. The demoscene is a computer subculture that specializes in producing demos, the main goal of a demo is to show off programming, artistic and musical skills. Demo scenes started during the 8-bit era, with personal computers such as the commodore 64. The musical creations made with the tracking software were completely visible for others, including the programming code. The first tracker program was developed by Karsten Obarski[6] for the commodor Amiga called the Ultimate Soundtracker. When digital compressing formats were introduced and the internet spread, demo groups started to form communities, this sharing of digital files and musical compositions had been the start of what we now call netlabels.

Cover Art
Almost every audio recording product from a label comes with a record cover. Cover art is the printed illustration or photograph on the package of vinyl records, CD package, and the image accompanying a digital download of the album or individual tracks. Besides the practicalities of identifying specific records, album covers serve the purpose of advertising the musical contents of the record through, the use of graphic design, photography, or illustration. The cover may include the artist's/band name, track listing, album title and a branding. Sometimes the branding comes in logo form. Other information is usually contained on the rear or interior of the packaging, such as more detailed track listing together with a list of those involved in making the record, band members, engineers and producer. On the spine of the package, the artist, title and reference number are usually repeated so that albums can ben identified while packed on a shelf.

Looking at different netlabels they also make use of covers with digital art to illustrate their releases on their label. Most netlabels and online records shops advertise the audio files with thumbnails that contain digital art. Sometimes the download from a netlabel contains a high resolution jpeg file which contains the cover art. The label Thinner[7] founded by Thomas Jaldemark in 1998 is releasing in digital formats. The releases on the label are presented with the use of text, jpeg thumbnails and animated images. The label GentleJunk co.[8] is a collaborative platform that releases sound and sonic art in digital format. The digital files from the GentleJunk co. label are downloadable at the website archive.org. This website is supporting netlabels by giving them cheap server space for many music files. Some netlabels have hard-copy releases next to the digital formats.

[5] Volume (2004). Discogs, November 26, 2009, http://www.discogs.com/label/Volume

[6] Karsten Obarski (1998). Textfiles, Novemver 26, 2009, http://www.textfiles.com/artscene/music/information/karstenobarski.html

[7] Thinner (2009), netlabel, November 27, 2009, http://www.thinner.cc

[8] GentleJunk Co.(2008) netlabel, November 27, 200, http://gentlejunk.net/audio/

The label Noxgenus recordings[9] releases on vinyl and CD next to digital audio and video releases. On the Noxgenus recordings website the description of the label says:

> We are Noxgenus. We are not a label, a crew, or a production facility. We are a tsource. Our transmissions are rare, exclusive and uncompromised. There is no scene, there is no genre. Wake up...(Noxgenus Recordings, 2009, noxgenus.com)

This short description is a contradiction because Noxgenus recordings has a section on their website that is actually called netlabel.

Next to displaying digital cover art online and on the computer, it is also possible to display the digital images on a portable multimedia player. This is a consumer electronics device that is capable of storing and playing digital media. Cellphones are sometimes also referred as a portable multimedia player because of their playback capabilities. Portable media players can have the option of displaying a digital image of the cover art on a small screen. The user is able to browse trough the digital covers on the screen to select the album of choice. This way of selecting a track or album on the display of an portable media player isn't that different then searching for physical records or CD's.

Special formats
There are record labels and artists that make their physical releases special so that customers will buy their music. The physical record cover can be something different than just a package for the musical format. The artist Mos Def[10] sells his album The Ecstatic as a t-shirt. The cover art is on the front and the track list is on the back of the t-shirt. The album is available for download with the code that's on the t-shirts wash care label. Moldover [11] made the CD into a circuit board, turning the jewel case into a self sufficient sonic hardware. Composer and artist Tristan Perich did a comparable project earlier called 1-bit music[12]. An electronic circuit is assembled inside a CD case with a headphone jack on the side. The device inside plays back 40 minutes of low-fi 1bit electronic music. This is in the lowest possible digital representation of audio.

Identity
The identity of a record label is represented by the selection of artists and bands next to the name, logo and cover art for a label. There is a difference between the identity of commercial record labels and netlabels. People have started up netlabels to make a platform for independent music artists. The main goal behind netlabels is not to sell enough records, but making the music available. This is the opposite compared to the commercialized music industry. A downloadable audio release is available as long as it's online. There is no limited amount of copies compared to most physical releases on record labels. Limited release is a term used to describe the distribution of a musical release that will be produced in limited quantities. This is different from limited edition, because there will be no alternative or second issuing. For a physical audio release there is also the question of the budget that the record label owner has to work with.

[9] Noxgenus Recordings (2009) label, November, 27, http://www.noxgenus.com

[10] Mos Def (2009) myspace, November, 27, 2009, http://www.mosdef.com

[11] Moldover (2009) artist homepage, November, 27, 2009, http://moldover.com

[12] Tristan Perich (2008) 1-bit music, November, 27, 2009, http://www.1bitmusic.com

Digital files are easy to copy using peer-to-peer[13] system , this creates the possibility to share digital audio files with other people. The copy of a digital audio file will look the same as the original downloaded file. With a copy from CD or vinyl it will be harder to get the same result with the copy compared to the original item.

For collectors it is interesting to find releases which are extreme rare or hard to get because of the value and obscurity. When a label releases a few copies in physical format it is interesting for collectors. The English band Radiohead[14] released their album In Rainbows on 10 October 2007 in different formats. First a digital download, followed by a CD release in the last week of 2007. The limited edition version of the In Rainbows album was available for pre-order on a website called inrainbows.com. The band didn't use cover artwork on the digital release of the album, they preferred to hold it back for the physical release. The limited release of the album contains a lyric booklet and additional artwork.

Audio overload
It's hard to keep up with al the new releases from all the netlabels who are available, even if the listener just follows on one or two musical genres. There are blogs and communities who keep track of releases from netlabels within a specific musical genre. These musicblogs are useful if you like the taste of the people who curate and write on the blog. An musicblog or audioblog is a type of blog where the creator makes music files available for download. The no longer forgotten[15] music blog contains uploaded recordings and scanned images from rare music physical music releases. The moderator of the blog writes short stories about the history of each posted record. There are many blogs like this one described, existing on the internet covering different genres and music themes.

Record shops
Next to the traditional record stores there are software based digital media stores. These online media stores offering single tracks and album for sale. The largest legal online music store is the iTunes Store[16] operated by Apple inc. which started on April 28, 2003. The tracks in the iTunes store use digital artwork in the form of thumbnails in the iTune library for the cover art. For displaying and viewing the digit cover art the user needs an iTunes account. Next to the payed services from online media, file sharing also exists which started with Napster[17] created by Shawn Fanning in 1999. The technology behind Napster allowed people to easily share their MP3 files with other participants, bypassing the established market. The original service is shut down by court order, but it was the start of decentralized peer to peer file-distribution programs.

13 Peer-to-peer (2009) Wikipedia, November, 27, 2009, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peer-to-peer

14 Radiohead (2009), Wikipedia, November 27, 2009, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radiohead

15 no longer forgotten music (2009), blogspot, November, 27, 2009, http://433rpm.blogspot.com/

16 iTunes Store(2009) Wikipedia, November 28, 2009, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ITunes_Store

17 Napster (2009), Web archive, November 28, 2009, http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.napster.com/

There are records labels who manage their own distribution offline and online. The independent record label Warp[18] used to distribute their physical records to record stores.

> A Warp PR communiqué from 1994 shows remarkable prescience about the changes in distribution and creation of music that were to follow: "It's not going to be long before an artist can make an album, film, or CD… in his or her own bedroom… advertise the product to hundreds of thousands of people directly via the computer networks, and sell directly to them. This will completely cut out the need for the trek around the usual entertainment companies looking for finance, and could lead to things getting really interesting.". (Bram Gieben, 27 Oct 2009 theskinny.co.uk)

Next to the distribution of physical records by Warp, the label launched their own online digital media store called Bleep in January 2004. In November 2008 the Warp store for physical releases called Warpmart merged with the digital media store Bleep.

Conclusions

The format in which record labels and artists release their recordings has changed looking at the past. Cover art is still important for advertising and identifying music releases. Imagery and information in the context of music should and will go on. The notion of it being cover sleeves is kind of arbitrary. The physical cover is an object and the people will always want to have objects, it can be any graphical form like a three dimensional design which manifests itself as an object. With the change of the technique and format there comes a new challenge. The independent artist and label has a lot of possibilities on the internet to distribute their digital art and recordings. This is a different way of distributing music compared to commercial digital media stores which operate within a corporate climate.

Designers have gained more creative possibilities with digital artwork and special packaging of physical records. Looking at netlabels and digital media stores the cover art is still alive and has roots with the traditional way of displaying records.

> Most people... still cling to what I call the rearview-mirror view of their world. By this I mean to say that because of the invisibility of the environment during the period of its innovation, man is only consiously aware of the environment that has preceded it; in other words, an environment becomes fully visible only when it has been superseded by a new environment; thus we are always one step behind in our view of the world. Because we are benumbed by any new technology-which in turn creates a totally new environment-we tend to make the old environment more visible. (Mcluhan, Marshall 1969)

It points a little to the direction of visual identity locked in the old way of thinking. Only the the size of digital cover art is most of the times smaller in size compared to a vinyl or CD. This is a challenge for the designer, because it is possible to make a design on any size. There are other kinds of imagery and animation that could be downloaded or accessed. The notion of things that people see in the context of music should go on. Actually it can be much more exiting than still images printed on paper. People like things, if they are unique enough to have, they will own it.

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[18] Warp records (2009) record label, November 28, 2009, http://warp.net

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