

You've read what *they* want you to know.
Now, here's the real lowdown:

The Last Picture Disc Story



(They might cost too much, and they might *sound* like Rice Krispies on your stereo, but they sure do *look* nice)

BY HAROLD BRONSON

While more records than ever before are appearing in lively single-hued transparent vinyl instead of their usual black, 1978 may well go down in record merchandising history as The Year of the Picture Disc.

The effect of one, as anyone who's seen even a mediocre sample can testify, is impressive: it looks as if a full-color photograph were pressed into the album's surface. The process actually seals a piece of paper, or "slick," which contains the artwork, into transparent vinyl that is pressed like a regular album. As the turntable spins, Peter Frampton's photo whirls around the spindle.

Picture discs are nothing new. Dating back to a 1914 release of the then-popular "St. Louis Blues," various best-selling artists—Jimmie Rodgers and bandleader Art Mooney among them—had records released in picture disc form. During the tight-money years of the Forties, the practice was considered frivolous. In the Fifties and Sixties, they reappeared chiefly as an advertising tool. In 1970, Warner Bros. Records' British division released what is conceded to be the first rock music pic-disc. A special issue of 20,000 copies of Curved Air's debut album, pressed in Germany, was unique—but failed to generate any Picture Disc Fever.

The current craze for rock-oriented picture discs began slowly, two years ago. James William Guercio, then manager and producer of the rock band Chicago, had formed his own

record label, Caribou, to be distributed by CBS. To kick off the label's first release, Guercio wanted a promotional device that wouldn't be quickly forgotten. The result was the Caribou picture disc, a sampler of the label's acts, issued in October, 1976 to disc jockeys and the like. The pressing was a strictly limited edition of 1,500.

Two of Guercio's partners, Larry Fitzgerald and Mark Hartley, then exited the Caribou organization to form their own management firm (Rufus, Quincy Johnson, Tom Jans, and Quincy Jones are among Fitzgerald-Hartley's current clients). As a sideline, the two contacted Harold Dague, inventor of the process used on the Caribou disc, and holder of certain important patents. Fitzgerald and Hartley arranged, first, to act as salesmen for Dague's picture discs and, later, to buy the firm that manufactures them.

The first major spurt of pic-discs came from Columbia, and was arranged by Fitzgerald and Hartley. The albums were intended as attention-getters, for promotional use only. Fifteen hundred were the average run. But when such highly-special discs were issued by acts who were *already* cult figures—Elvis Costello, Bruce Springsteen and Meat Loaf were among the earliest—a huge demand was formed on the collectors' market. Discs like the aforementioned and Warren Zevon's (a 12" single of "Werewolf of London") were changing hands for prices

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