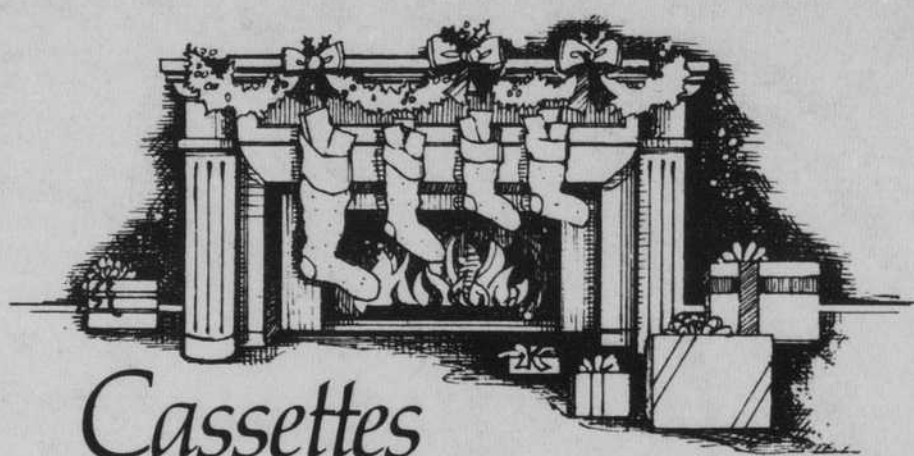




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Ravel: Boléro (with Debussy: La Mer; Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune). Berlin Philharmonic; Karajan cond. 4XS-37438



Picture Discs

(Continued from page 14)

as high as \$100. It didn't take long for record companies to figure that picture discs could become a success through usual commercial channels.

Mushroom Records did fairly well with a 100,000-copy pressing of Heart's *Magazine*. Next, Ode Records sold out of its 25,000 "limited" pressing of the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* soundtrack. But Capitol made the biggest impression of all with its edition of the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Though the company pressed up an impressive 150,000 copies, the records were so scarce that stores were charging inflated prices, and customers gladly paid the difference. A large New York chain sent employees down the street to a competitor, had them purchase *Sgt. Pepper* at \$15.98 list, and then marked them up and resold them in their own store at an even higher price.

Record companies suffer little financial risk in the manufacture of picture discs. No new music is recorded; no new photo sessions have to be staged (the photos are generally enlarged from existing album cover art). Labels hurriedly readied a rash of releases by Linda Ronstadt, Styx, the Brothers Johnson, Rod Stewart, and others. This winter, Arista is issuing a two-record pic-disc version of Barry Manilow's greatest hits for \$25.98 list and is certain to move them all.

Fitzgerald-Hartley, under the trade name of Pic Disk, Inc., presses 75 per cent of the discs, both commercial and promotional, including both the rarest (Charlie's *Lines*: only 650 copies were run) and most popular (*Sgt. Pepper*). The remainder are manufactured by the Alberti company, another Southern California concern.

Detractors of the Fitzgerald-Hartley discs charge that they contain an unsatisfactory amount of surface noise. There is a problem; enough so that F-H discs' sleeves are frequently printed with a low-fidelity warning. Buyers generally purchase a copy of their favorite album in the pic-disc version and in regular, high-fidelity black vinyl, the latter for actual listening.

Alberti's, which include *Rocky Horror*, Blondie's *Parallel Lines*, and Linda Ronstadt's *Living in the U.S.A.*, are thought to be slightly less noisy. Notes Dan Alberti: "We do many things differently [than Fitzgerald-Hartley] but I've no intention of revealing the differences." Mark Hartley says that you can tell one of the differences simply by looking at samples from the two manufacturers: "Ours are thicker. They have a black vinyl core, and tend to warp less." Hartley adds that he suspects a possible breach of patent, and that he is checking Alberti's process "more carefully." In late October, F-H began legal proceedings against Alberti, charging possible copyright infringement.

With list prices for the pic-discs standardized at \$15.98, down to about \$11 at some discounters, *someone* is making a lot of money. While a regular album's average cost for material and printing is about 63¢, a picture disc's is close to double that—\$1.25. The discs, though, are pressed in relatively small numbers (the presses are run by hand, and only a few can be run at a time) and require no advertising or promotional expense. Packaging is usually minimal: in most cases just a die-cut cardboard sleeve and—maybe—a plastic inner liner. In view of the albums' inferior sound quality, the high retail price must be considered an outrage.

Record company spokesmen attempt to justify the high selling price, but they're vague, if not downright inaccurate. Chrysalis' national sales manager, Stan Layton, maintains that his company will only "break even" with a \$14.98 list price on a 50,000 run of Blondie's *Parallel Lines*. Jim Charne, Epic Records' associate director of product management, admits that a healthy profit is his label's main motive in issuing commercial pic-discs by acts including Meat Loaf and Boston. But he, too, tries to defend the high price. "I'm not real sure of all the elements, but the artist royalty rate has to be renegotiated, I think that the discs have to be remastered, and there's much pressing waste because the presence of the paper slick keeps defective pressings from being melted down and recycled."

The records in fact *don't* have to be remastered, and the record companies only pay for those records pressed properly. According to managers and their representatives—Toby Maxis of Blondie; Nola Leone of Shaun Cassidy, and Hartley—it appears that the performer's royalty percentage is the same as with regular recordings, and that album cover photographers do not receive any additional payment for re-use of their work.

Stephen Peeples, a publicist at Capitol, (who have *Abbey Road*; *Band on the Run*; *Dark Side of the Moon*; *Book of Dreams*; and *Stranger in Town* scheduled for pic-disc release) explains: "The way it usually works is that a flat fee is given the artist when the art work or photograph is turned in. The contract includes a provision that the record company can use the artwork on future releases."

Profit seems to take priority over all other aspects of pic-disc manufacture. Rather than search out the original *Sgt. Pepper* artwork, Capitol appears to have settled for a colorful, if grainy, blowup taken from an album cover. Epic's Charne admits that he hadn't even heard of Alberti, let alone checked to see if better pressings than Fitzgerald-Hartley's existed. And Ode's second pressing of 40,000 *Rocky Horror* pic discs is list-priced at \$19.98.

Picture discs are a good idea. Record collectors amass them much as they do picture sleeves from 45s. Others display them in wall frames, where they can hang like posters or awards. And certainly they have investment potential, while *looking* more interesting than Kruger-rands; *sounding* (if sometimes only slightly) better than vintage automobiles; and *costing* rather less than renaissance art.

It's unfortunate, though, that record companies are milking the craze. Overkill has ruined many an otherwise good thing. And with poor sound, unlimited "limited" editions and too-high prices working against them, picture discs' appeal may wane rapidly. So if, for some reason, you find these novelties appealing, here's some advice: procure what you can now, before sales slack and the major labels divert their attention to The Next Big Thing—whatever that may be.

Illustration, previous page: some of the rarer picture discs. Clockwise from top right: Bob Welch, "French Kiss"; Caribou Records sampler; Elvis Costello sampler; Charlie, "Lines"; Warren Zevon, "Werewolf of London" 12" single; Peter Frampton, "I'm In You"; (center) Curved Air, "Air Conditioning."

Author Bronson's first contribution to Ampersand was October's examination of inflated recording budgets. He's an executive of Rhino Records, who will debut their own line of picture discs, with a bargain-basement \$9.98 list price, soon.