

02



03



04



05



**Colours: Extraordinary Records  
Records from the Collections of  
Alessandro Benedetti and Peter Bastine**

**Published by Taschen, price £24.99  
Review by Max Leonard**

A child born today will probably never know what it is to own an album. Recorded music is confusedly marching towards complete physical annihilation, yet vinyl sales are up from their historic low in the 1990s. It is not just a Luddite tendency; even the earliest vinyl recordings can still be played, while CDs a fraction of their age have betrayed their shiny promise of eternal life and deteriorated. Records (and their sleeves) are also good to draw on, the site of countless collaborations between artists, designers and musicians. *Extraordinary Records*, *Colors* magazine's new book published in collaboration with Taschen, is all about the thingness of records, how they signify over and above the sound recordings they contain. Prefaced by Giorgio Moroder and vinyl collector Alessandro Benedetti, the book contains more than 400 records—anything but round and black—from Benedetti's collection. It is divided into six themed chapters showcasing picture discs and monochrome, 'unusual' (including glow in the dark), multicoloured, etched and shaped vinyl. Within, artists from Iron Maiden to Marilyn Monroe and Donna Summer to Styx are ranged side by side in a bewildering, eclectic display of colour.

The accompanying text tells of release dates and labels, and each section gives a fascinating explanation of the manufacturing process, but there is no analysis of the 'why' of the whole enterprise, no clue given to the rationale behind the collection. Are these discs art, or are they merely a commercial ploy? Is there a design impulse at work? Not discernibly. Aside from the careful, often beautiful photography, the book takes a magpie approach and the lack of context can leave the reader all at sea—when faced, for example, with a promotional movie picture disc showing John Goodman as Fred Flintstone. It is easy to slip into a 'so what?' attitude. Who cares if Queen's *A Night at the Opera* is extremely rare in its white vinyl edition, or that only 330 white-vinyl copies of

The critic Walter Pater said that all art aspires to the condition of music; *Extraordinary Records* shows music aspiring to be something else—but what, exactly?

Often, the text promotes the scarcity theory of value. There aren't many of these yellow, jukebox-only 45s of Yellow Submarine with Eleanor Rigby on the B-side, therefore my copy is worth an inflated number of shekels. Yet, even at this point, the book seems to have nagging doubts. One explanatory text reads: "The record labeled (sic) 'Experimental use only RCA' has no title, musician, or year of release printed on it and is presumably a master copy used in the RCA studios. It could be either totally worthless or very valuable." Another claims there are 993 different editions of *Dark Side of the Moon*, while readily admitting there is no way of confirming this number. The book is gloriously equivocal about its passion.

All this goes to show that it is difficult for a non-initiate to understand a fetish—but that it's usually good to try to explain. For instance, there are a couple of vinyl bootlegs of major artists, yet no hint of the derring-do that went into their manufacture—the reel-to-reels smuggled into gigs, the moulds made or the covers clandestinely printed. In other places, however, the book's presentation makes its purpose clear. Monochrome records (the subject of the longest chapter) are, on the one hand, the creations of an identical industrial process, only with one colour of goo poured in at the crucial moment rather than another. On the other hand, the book's Pantone spectrum of records assembled across space, time and genre is beautiful. Delicate greys and silvers, vibrant yellows and reds, bright greens and (yes) deep purples.

Let's be clear: there are a lot of naff records in here. But, aside from some terrible soft-porn images, often (and rather joyously) they are exemplars of anti-design, confirming the 70s and 80s as the decades that taste forgot. The book is heavy on runic imagery and prog rock; there is a preponderance of psychedelic swirls, and intricate drawings of skulls on the heavy metal records. An alien city on a twin-mooned planet adorns

There is a rather off-putting Pink Floyd obsession. Not for nothing does Spinal Tap make an appearance.

However, the prolonged lapses into 80s Eurokitsch pay homage to an easily forgotten, disposable pop culture, and the book is a reminder that the best pop doesn't take itself too seriously. Some of the most successful designs are the Christmas record shaped like one of those cardboard trees you hang from the mirror to eliminate in-car odours, the bright blue Abba disc or one of the several Beatles records. At these points and others, the book's text is warm and humorous. Who would have guessed that Toto is slang for vagina in Nigeria and Sierra Leone (making some kind of mockery of their continent-shaped single, Africa)?

Among the ephemera, there are many indisputable classics. Hipgnosis's work for Pink Floyd; Stéphane Sedanoui's stunning image of Björk juxtaposed with pink-vinyl copies of Post; a Neil Young single, red and triangular, packaged in a meticulously crafted pyramid; a Ramones reissue shaped like a circular saw blade; a Robert Crumb drawing of Robert Johnson, the man who sold his soul to the devil. Even in the work of lesser and unnamed designers there has been careful thought put in to making the record catch the eye and contrast or complement its sleeve.

*Extraordinary Records* is a book without an aesthetic. In many places it is entirely without taste. As long as it's made out of PVC, is gaudy in some way and emits sound when spun on a phonograph, it's in. Yet putting Jerry Lewis next to Bumblebee Unlimited, and an Israeli Eurovision artist next to recordings of Martin Luther King's speeches makes it a curiously egalitarian project. More than that, it is a nostalgic celebration of a lost world of innocence and confidence, when record companies knew what they were selling and an eager audience bought it in their millions.

How do you design an mp3? These vinyls pay testament to the changing style and fads of music in a way that digital never can, and the book is therefore a bittersweet pleasure.