

He often dreams of packaging

Indie artist Robyn Hitchcock's limited-edition package folds out to a working phenakistoscope, conceived by Gamil Design of North Carolina, says Larry Jaffee



Only 1,000 copies of the package are being created

When opened, the package exposes two stands, shaped in Robyn's silhouette, which hold the rod and the components of the scope. Each disc of the deluxe DVD/CD package has unique artwork that creates an animation when placed on this one-of-a-kind phenakistoscope.

Of the relatively low quantity being made, Yep Roc spokesman James Bailey explains: "That was the number we felt the market

Like many singer-songwriters, Robyn Hitchcock needs to supplement his boundless creativity with art forms in addition to music. Not surprisingly, when he's not releasing albums or touring the world entertaining audiences with catchy melodies amid wry observations and bizarre between-song monologues, the 55-year-old sculpts and paints, often in a whimsical, surrealist style, as well as doodling in a cartoon-strip mode.

There's an idiosyncratic Dadaist nature to everything this prolific, constantly working Englishman does, no matter the discipline, as exemplified by the title of a 2007 documentary about his career, *Sex, Food, Death and Insects*, all of which have shown up in lyrics at one time or another.

His official website is aptly titled *The Museum of Robyn Hitchcock*, and is laid out as such, with various galleries, a library, an auditorium, and a sculpture garden.

With such visually rich subject matter, packaging, not surprisingly, always has figured prominently in his enormous catalogue of music, dating back to the mid-1970s with his band The Soft Boys.

Hitchcock's latest release, which came out on 10 November, is *I Often Dream of Trains in New York* (Yep Roc Records), a live DVD/CD performance of the seminal Hitchcock 1984 album filmed at Manhattan's Symphony Space in November 2008.

The limited-edition package, of which only 1,000 are being made and sold only through his label's website, features exclusive cover art in a sleek, tri-fold wallet and includes a kit to make a working phenakistoscope, an early animation device invented in 1832, a predecessor of the zoetrope. The word 'phenakistoscope' comes from Greek roots meaning 'optical deceiver' as it deceives the eye by making still pictures look as though they are moving.

could bear considering we were selling it only through our website, direct to Robyn's fans."

Yep Roc has been Hitchcock's label for the past few years, and it recently released on both sides of the Atlantic two archival boxed sets, *I Wanna Go Backwards* and *Luminous Groove*, which combine to reissue six albums (plus four discs of rarities), which was followed by a new studio album *Goodnight Oslo*, this past February.

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Gamil Design, a Raleigh, North Carolina-based product and graphic firm, proposed the phenakistoscope concept to Hitchcock, who "liked it and felt it could be worked into the packaging," explains Dave Jackson, production manager for Yep Roc and its parent company Redeye Distribution, which is also based in North Carolina.

Specific requests

"For each new album, Robyn is always very specific about what he wants for the project," Jackson notes. "And since he's typically creating an album package that will be released by other labels around the world, he often works with his own designers, and delivers the package, in essence, complete. It varies depending on the project, but typically it's 90% done by the time Robyn sends us the artwork elements – we usually just end up putting the finishing touches on it and preparing it for production. With reissue and archival material, on the other hand, he's already done most of the heavy lifting years ago, but we still get plenty of input from him."

Gamil Design co-owner Aly Khalifa notes: "We looked at a variety of designs with Robyn.

His story was intriguing and he expressed a nostalgic vision of old trains. We were especially inspired by the old footage being released as part of the deluxe set, and so we started looking at nostalgic ways of thinking about moving images. The phenakistoscope seemed to work perfectly with the DVD and CD media.

"We had never thought about a phenakistoscope before," Khalfia continues. "In fact, it took us a week to learn how to pronounce it. This project was really inspired by Robyn's vision of vintage British Railways imagery. He's great to work with.

"A main aim of our design was to keep everything as simple and as uncluttered as possible. We were eventually able to boil the entire package down to the simplest materials possible: paper, wood, and some rubber bands (along with the CDs and DVDs themselves). We manufactured everything locally in North Carolina."

Khalfia notes that Gamil designs all kinds of products but usually works on one music project a year.

From an aesthetic standpoint, Yep Roc encourages Digipaks or other board packaging for all of its artists – but it's ultimately up to the artist. "For Robyn's catalogue reissues, there was a definite intent to mimic the original vinyl releases in our CD packaging, so the LP-style board packaging was an obvious choice," Jackson notes.

On his website, Hitchcock posted some comments this past spring about the international Record Store Day that suggest he's a

friend of packaged media: "Now technology and economics are leading away from physical product, and from the sale of records in record stores. Hopefully some will survive as boutique oases where music lovers can browse and meet not just the music but each other. You can't get everything through the post..."

All that is evident in the new *I Often Dream of Trains in New York*. By late September, 300 of the 500 deluxe \$29.99 releases were already pre-sold, there are no plans for a re-order. A standard \$19.99 list price, sans phenakistoscope, will remain available.

"'Limited edition' for the deluxe version means exactly that – once they're gone, they're gone," promises Jackson.

Once in the early 1990s at a New York gig, Hitchcock offered for sale, along with the usual CDs and t-shirts, an item concertgoers don't usually encounter: a small orange plastic traffic cone with his magic marker drawings on them, each a unique souvenir.

"He still does the cones, by the way," adds Jackson. ●

<http://design.gamil.com>