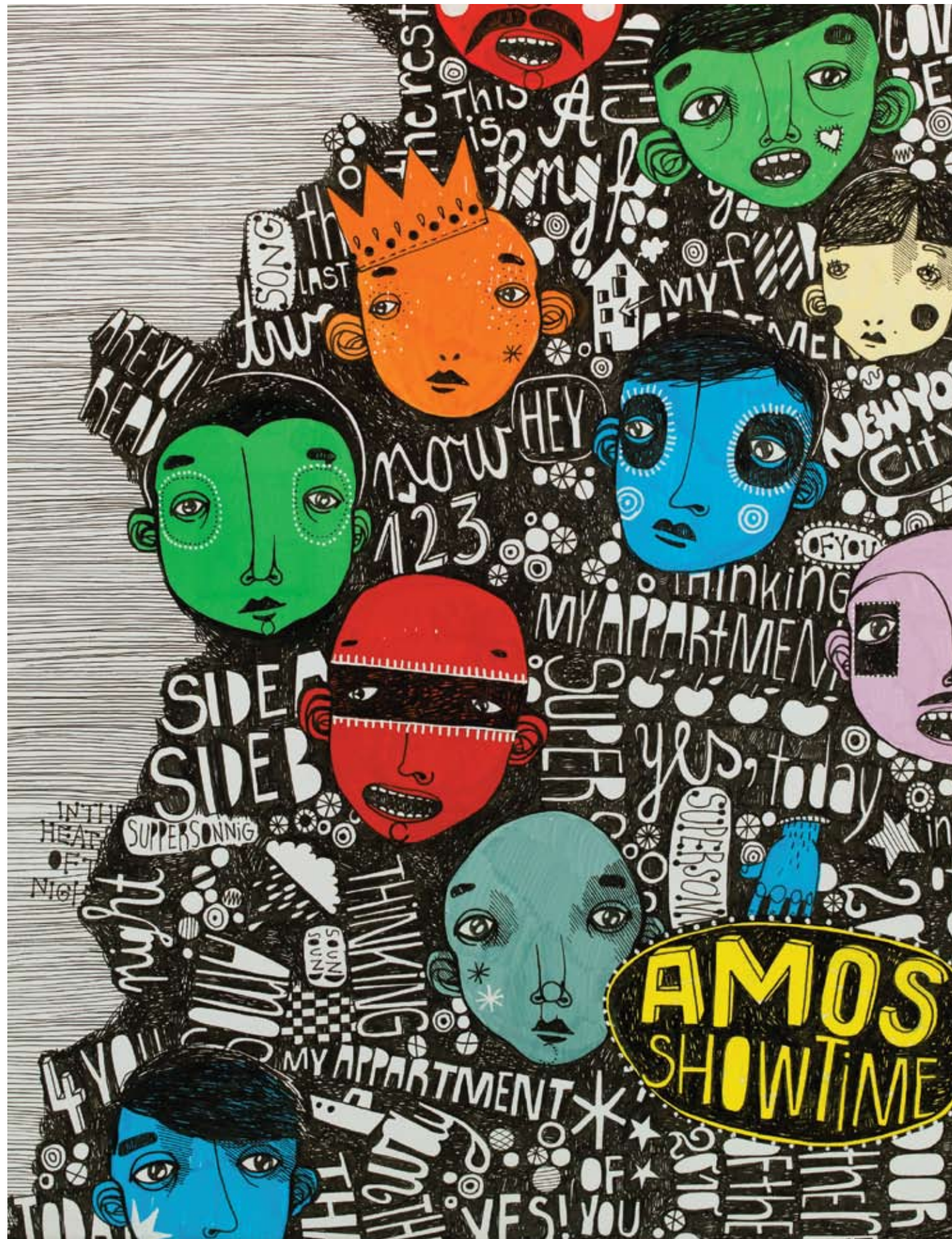
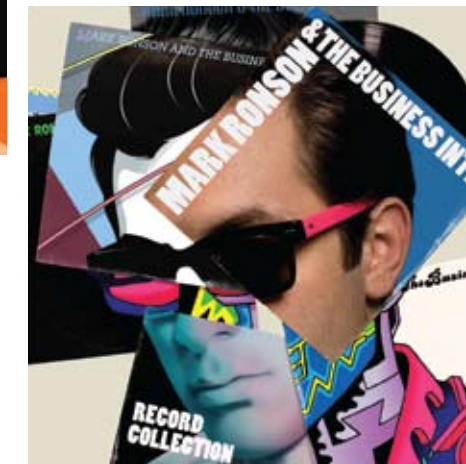
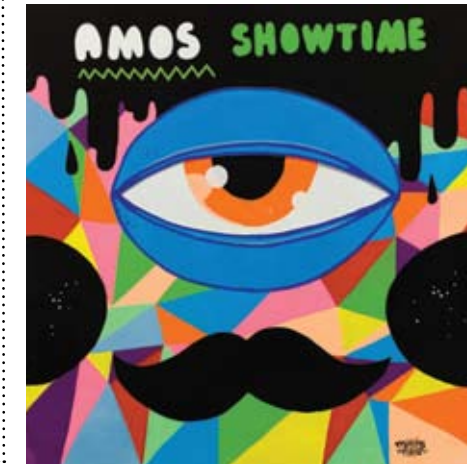


DIGITAL KILLS?



Album design had a rich heritage but, with the dominance of MP3, its decline seemed inevitable. Not so says **Robert Urquhart**, who finds an industry applying unique solutions to the technological challenges it faces.



OPPOSITE:
AMOS Showtime, Eva Krusche
ABOVE LEFT TO RIGHT:
AMOS Showtime, Martin Krusche;
Mark Ronson, Big Active; The Klaxons,
Richard Robinson Art Direction & Design

Much has already been said about the death of album art. A show last year at the University of the Arts in London entitled Spin, The Art of Record Design, invited such debate. Peter Saville, one of the exhibition curators, held a particularly gloomy outlook on its future, saying in an interview for The Independent on Sunday that he believed album art would not survive the downward spiral from vinyl to CD and on to MP3, and that, to summarise current culture, 'It's all been done before anyway.'

Is this prognosis correct? One year on and London based design studio Big Active is celebrating its 20th anniversary and record label, Ninja Tune, is celebrating too with an exhibition of artwork. The question of album art is once more in the mainstream press, this time over a new Klaxons album cover designed by Richard Robinson Art Direction & Design, featuring a cat in an astronaut suit. Upping the ante, a brave move by a German record label franchises out its album design to over 500 designers for one single album; time for a check up.

Big Active formed in 1990 and is best known for its outstanding work in music

packaging. One of the company's most recent campaigns for Mark Ronson was an aptly named album entitled The Record Collection. Ronson is a prime example of the recent breed of music artist; a musical collagist who has the technical ability to isolate and re-sample our recent cultural past to create something new, not avant-garde, but populist and familiar.

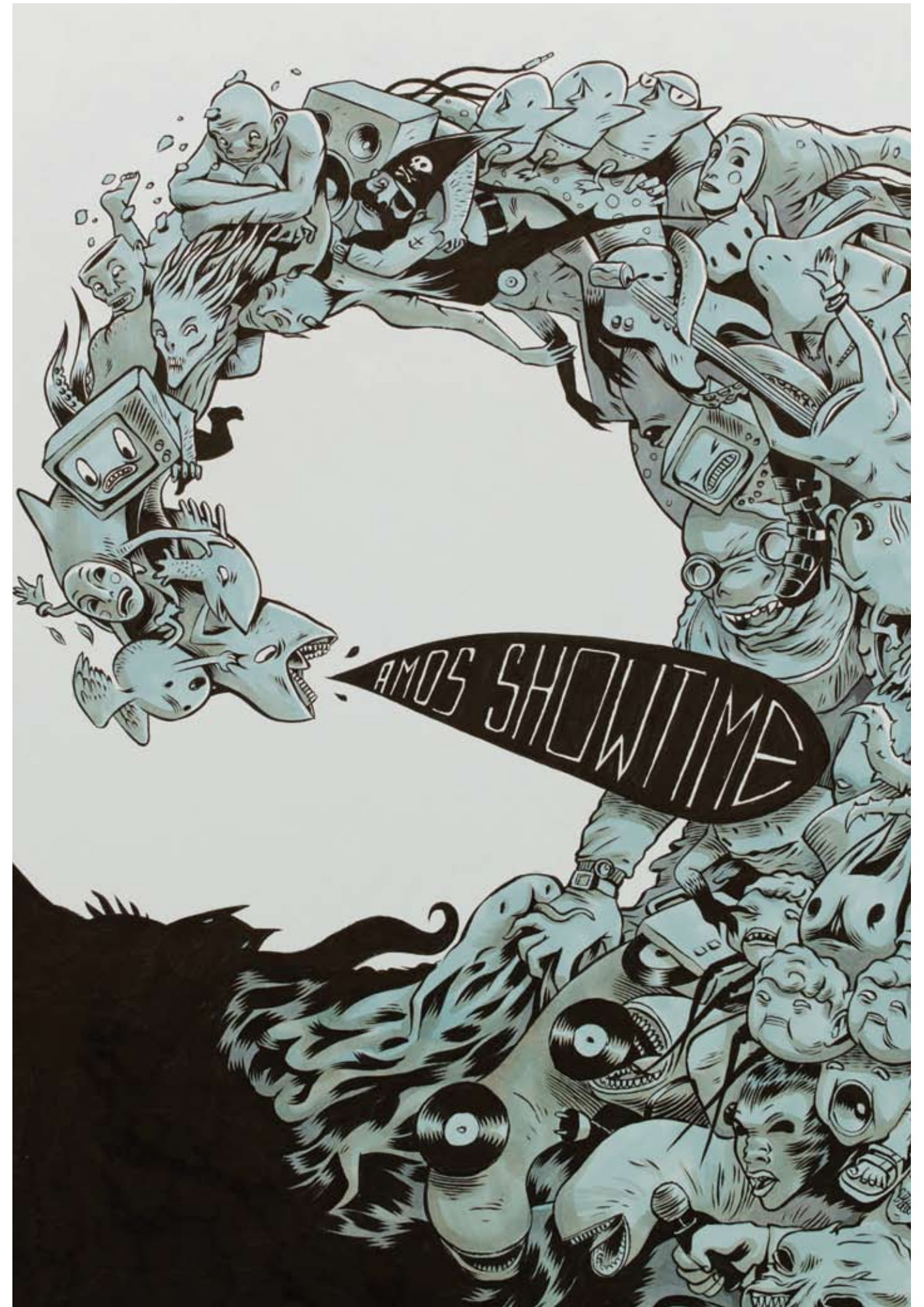
Mat Maitland of Big Active was given the task of producing the sleeve, and decided to play the collector theme to an advantage, commissioning others at Big Active to work on individual elements of the main image that could be issued solo or be recombined in different ways to form collaged images of Mark Ronson.

Gerard Saint, creative director of Big Active, explains: "We particularly liked the interactive iTunes format where the scope of the idea is developed further and animated to really bring it alive. The album itself is released as a CD, 12" Vinyl, iTunes Interactive Format and Collectors 7" boxed set, featuring individual sleeves from the album and housed in an 80's inspired leatherette record carry case." In other words, no shortage of delivery there.

A record label that also began life back in 1990, Ninja Tune, has been under the watchful command of DJ and designer Kevin Foakes (DJ Strictly Kev) for the majority of its existence. Foakes has this to say on how his job has evolved since the digital revolution; "Designers are being restricted in size more than anything, with the miniaturisation of music to iPods, computers and phones. The iPad will bring some of that back hopefully and the current fashion for lavish box sets is, if anything, giving the designer a free reign to go crazy. That won't last forever though. I can see a time where music design breaks down into very basic, minimal shapes and colours, much in the same way that modern producers have been using synth sounds with the mid and top range boosted so they translate well when played through phones. I can see designers adapting to the format like this but it is a shame because we seem to be regressing. Mass market music fidelity is becoming worse in the bid to fit more in and the artwork is becoming smaller."

Size matters. Richard Robinson who worked on The Klaxons' most recent album, Surfing The Void, echoes Foakes concerns and has an equally pragmatic view on

THIS PAGE:
Ninja Tune
OPPOSITE PAGE:
AMOS Showtime, Hannes Pasqualini



modern working practice. "The process still begins the same, you are taken on-board to do the cover. Everything still centres on this, and for me that is still where the thrill is. Its not that I dislike digital, but when your artwork is a few pixels wide it behaves in a completely different way," he says.

If the technical requirements of digital are physically squeezing design then what about the motives behind the design? Ian Anderson of The Designers Republic notes; "the packaging is now more about attracting the consumer before they buy as part of a bigger cross media campaign. A source at Virgin Records once told me that record sleeves were little more than site-specific advertising; now they are marketing tools. It used to be about having something beautiful to keep the music in."

All rise for Amos then, a Munich based graphic designer and 'German rock star' with a penchant for stadium anthems and big ideas, who decided to give over 500 designers worldwide the opportunity to design their own unique cover for his latest album, Showtime. The designers then sold it for what ever they decided

was the right price for their artwork and split the fee 50/50. Genius PR stunt or philanthropic gesture?

Amos has a clear view on the role of visual input in music when he states "Advertising and promotion is part of the creative process, the only choice you have is to go down without anyone noticing or find creative ways of making a difference. I don't like to speak of music as product but looks are pretty important. Design makes a difference and besides, I don't think you can separate the visual from the acoustic."

Gregor Samsa, owner of the Sounds of Subterrania label that released Showtime observes the process from a distance. "The method of downloading is a critical factor. We want to argue critically with existing conditions within the music industry and to create something special at the same time. A mass product becoming a singular art piece, can this project avoid the crisis or is it only the next dead end?" he says.

Whatever the future brings, it's clear that the true protagonists of music packaging will, as they've always been, be the musicians that are sensitive to the visual world. There

is a current trend to assume that the world will be alien in a matter of minutes. Yes, the revolution is now not only televised but uploaded, downloaded, available on MP3 with leatherette vinyl included, but it's still a familiar world made up from order and logical links from a pre-digital landscape.

Concerns with technology leading over creativity are clearly valid; new creative potential can be thwarted by current marketplace trends, even though, arguably, the overall possibilities are more bountiful. Certainly, there is a decidedly retro aspect to all the influences in music packaging at the moment. Visual concerns aside, as with all media, a new form of currency transaction must be established to allow for creative freedom and recompense. No need for the undertakers just yet, even if we are currently basking in the light of former glories. ■

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