
MIZZOU

The magazine of
the Mizzou Alumni Association

[Home](#) » [Winter 2010](#) » [Features](#) » Sound design

Sound design

Matt Taylor reveals the process behind Grammy Award-winning designs

Story by Nancy Moen | Images provided by Matt Taylor

If Matt Taylor was star struck when he began working with recording artists, he's over it.

Designing CD packages for recording stars is

serious business in an industry where everyone wants to be noticed.

Taylor, BFA '99, won a Grammy Award in 2007 for his design of *Stadium Arcadium* - a Red Hot Chili Peppers box set and the rock album of the year. Listen as he recounts his Grammy memories and reveals the process behind his winning designs.

Taylor, BFA '99, won a Grammy Award in 2007 for his design of *Stadium Arcadium* — a Red Hot Chili Peppers box set and the rock album of the year. He followed that achievement with Grammy Award nominations in 2008 for HIM's *Venus Doom* and My Chemical Romance's *The Black Parade*.

It's not as easy as it sounds. Lurking in every contract is the pressure to produce another award-winning package while managing client directives and meeting deadlines for release schedules. Taylor has had as many as four CDs released on the same day.

With coffee fueling his energy, and his favorite music — indie rock or instrumental post rock — rattling the rafters of his studio, Taylor makes an unpredictable process fun. His work has showcased the diverse sounds of Smashing Pumpkins, Brian Setzer, Josh Groban, Michael Bublé, Melissa Etheridge, Ben Harper, Tracy Chapman, Kenny G, Paris Hilton, Frank Sinatra and others.

Recording artists often want to be involved in the design process, and some suggest ideas. The band My Chemical Romance offered a sketch; Red Hot Chili Peppers had a crayon drawing.

More problematic for Taylor are those who say they'll "know it when they see it" about a design. He once created 60 cover ideas for such a client.

An assistant designer and two art interns work with Taylor on eight or nine projects in progress at a time. In 2006, after leaving a position as art director at Warner Bros. Records, Taylor opened his own business, Varnish Studio Inc., in Los Angeles rather than work out of his house. "Having a baby running around isn't conducive to conference calls," he says.

Although the bulk of Taylor's talent is directed toward rock, he has produced package designs for 15 record labels and for recording artists of music ranging from rap, funk, punk and alternative rock to R&B, Christian, soft rock and crossover classical. His designs reflect the music, of course, so adaptability is key.

"I'm very detail oriented," Taylor says. "I like to design everything to the hilt." In his album packages, even the disc labels are faithful to the design concept.

Taylor's designs typically start as conversations with the band or artist, the manager and the label representative on how the music sounds and its meaning. After discussing ideas, Taylor helps direct the album photo shoot, which may include decisions on wardrobe, makeup and hair styling. (He can give a blow-by-blow description of the 90-minute session needed to make Paris Hilton camera ready.) Hear more about his creative process by viewing the slideshow at right.

Thanks to such interactions with photographers, Taylor has parlayed his music-specific work into more traditional forms of graphic design — logos, business cards and brochures. Yet even as personal music players and downloadable tunes change the market for recorded music, Taylor doesn't expect his music-packaging work to disappear anytime soon.




"Cover art is not going away. It's just tiny little pixels now," he says. "People want enticing packaging as collectors' pieces for boxed sets and limited editions. Art and music are tied to each other and will exist somehow, but maybe not in a plastic jewel case."

About the author: Nancy Moen is director of special projects with MU Web Communications.

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Published by MIZZOU magazine, 109 Reynolds Alumni Center, Columbia, MO 65211 | Phone: 573-882-5916 | E-mail: Mizzou@missouri.edu

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Last updated: Feb. 15, 2013