

Picture Sleeves Catching On As Marketing Tool In U.S.

by Leo Sacks

NEW YORK — Picture sleeves and seven-inch EPs, long recognized in the United Kingdom as a marketing tool for breaking new artists, are gaining strong support as a merchandising tool in this country as well, according to a **Cash Box** survey. Following the lead of the domestic division of I.R.S. which is marketed by A&M, and Virgin Records, a growing number of labels have begun to release seven-inch records with picture sleeves as a means of stimulating interest in new product at both radio and retail.

A foremost example of this trend is the recent release of "Play" by Humans on I.R.S. The disc, mastered at 33 1/3 rpm, is packaged in a gatefold sleeve, contains four songs and a 12-page picture booklet, and lists for \$3.49. I.R.S. has released 10 seven-inch singles since the label pacted with A&M in September 1978 for the manufacture and distribution of its product. Normally, its seven-inch singles list for \$2.00 as compared with the average U.S. list price of \$1.49. The higher-price, according to national sales manager Bob Laul, is justified by the extra cost of the picture sleeve and by the fact that its pressings "are considerably better than the average domestic single."

10-Inch Singles

Virgin Records has regularly issued seven-inch records in picture sleeves since it began releasing product through Atlantic Records last summer. The list price for the singles is \$1.49, a price that also applies to the company's 10-inch single product. In late March, Virgin released a new 10-inch single by the Motors, "Love and Loneliness," and is currently making plans to release a new XTC 10-inch single that will feature a fold-out poster and game board.

A number of other companies have also started to issue picture sleeve 45s and

seven-inch LPs with greater regularity. In recent weeks, for example, picture sleeves have appeared on the "Refugee" single by Tom Petty (MCA); "Don't Fall In Love With A Dreamer" by Kenny Rogers and Kim Carnes (UA); Bette Midler's "The Rose" (Atlantic), and Stephanie Mills' "Sweet Sensation" (20th Century-Fox). In addition, Columbia released sleeves for new singles by Bob Dylan ("Slow Train"), Elvis Costello ("I Can't Stand Up For Falling Down"), and Jules and the Polar Bears (an EP containing four previously unreleased tracks).

Imports Paved Way

The groundwork for the acceptance at retail of the domestically-released picture sleeve 45 was paved in large measure by the success of import singles and EPs with picture sleeves, according to label executives contacted by **Cash Box**. "It's been a long, uphill struggle," commented Rick Lawler, general manager of JEM Records, a major rock importer. Outside of the large urban centers, he said, "the degree of acceptance of the import single is growing, albeit slowly, primarily because they have yet to come up with an effective way to merchandise them." Lawler attributed this to the fact that the philosophy behind the single at British and American labels is so "markedly different." In England, he noted, "singles are regarded as an end unto themselves. In this country, however, we view them as a tool to stimulate sales. I can only hope that as we see more of the major U.S. labels issue singles with sleeves, retailers will begin to realize that an effectively merchandised single can move quite nicely."

I.R.S., said Laul, is in the midst of preparing several sales tools to promote its singles product. These include an assortment of posters and a browser box that will have adhesive on the back to encourage

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retailers to use it as a wall display. "Our feeling is that dealers will be more likely to give our records a shot on a wall as opposed to a counter top," he said. "Besides, a lot of consumers who may know our LPs might now be aware of the fact that we also have a picture sleeve series, and the browser bins are one way for us to bring this point home."

European Influence

"Picture bags were facts of life in markets like France and Germany long before they

became popular in the U.K.," declared Virgin Records president Ken Berry. "Then, with the coming of the new wave movement, it became very clear that people in the U.K. were buying these independently-produced singles for the sleeves themselves. And to some degree, that situation exists in this country, since in-store prominence is the name of the game, and what better way is there to make your product visible than with a picture bag?"

"When Virgin opened its offices in New York last July," he continued, "we decided

to make a commitment to releasing picture bags as a matter of course. Not only did we believe in the visibility we could get from a prominently-displayed sleeve at retail, but we were also convinced that radio would give a bit more consideration to those few singles out of the hundreds they receive that were packaged differently from the rest. Of course," he added, "there's always the danger that you won't be able to keep up with the pressing demand for the sleeves, as in the case of the Flying Lizards' single, 'Money.' Our initial runs are pressed in cardboard, but the demand for the record was so great that we reverted to a paper sleeve for about 20,000 copies of the 200,000 units that we sold." The packaging of the record, he concluded, was "essential" to its success.

"The trend among British groups to release singles in an attractively-packaged sleeve really appealed to us," offered Jon Kertzer of Albatross Productions, the Seattle-based firm that manages a local quartet known as The Heats. He said that the group's first release for Hrrr Records, a single called "I Don't Like Her Face" that is generating some national AOR and Top 40 airplay, was released in a picture sleeve because "we were very concerned about issuing a package impressive enough to attract attention from the press, radio, A&R, and retail.

"What we didn't expect was to sell out of our initial pressing of 5,000 copies. The group is fairly well known in the northwest, but dealers in our area have been telling us that even people who have never heard the music of the band were buying the single just for the hand-tinting of the sleeve." For

that alone, he said, the extra investment in the cost of the single "was worth every penny."

"The picture sleeve is worth the added expense only if there's a reason for having it," said Mort Weiner, vice president of marketing and merchandising for 20th Century-Fox Records. "Ideally, it should be viewed as part of an overall project that's tied to the marketing of an LP. If the sleeve pictures an artist that no one has ever heard of, and this is the only marketing step that's going to be taken to support the artist, then the sleeve isn't going to mean a thing."

In issuing the Mills picture sleeve, Weiner said, the plan was two-fold. "Stephanie received a lot of media exposure from *The Wiz*, but there are still people in middle America that don't know what she looks like. Since we shipped the single in advance of the LP, our hope was that the sleeve, which features the record's artwork, would familiarize people with the 12-inch, in effect making the face as recognizable as the name. Also, given the success of her first record, a jockey at a station might be drawn a little more quickly to a record with a sleeve."

At JEM, according to Lawler, "We're fully aware that we're not going to reach the Top 100 singles buyer on the strength of a picture sleeve single if the cut isn't on the radio yet. We eventually hope to reach that audience, but in the interim, our marketing thrust must be geared to the album buyer who has the option of sampling a group first through a single." JEM, he added, has released about eight picture sleeve singles over the past two years on its PVC, Passport and Visa labels.