

Cracking the Case

The 'jewel box' for CD's is user-hostile, a plastic disaster. Can't anybody design a better one?

By OWEN EDWARDS

NOTHING is more annoying than discovering that an elegant design solution isn't. (Well, death and taxes and Robin Leach are more annoying, but never mind.) Having to recognize that something you've considered state-of-the-art is, in fact, far from perfect can be as demoralizing as finding out you've been dazzled by a tenor who was lip-synching.

Such is the case with the ubiquitous "jewel box" container for compact disks. To many music lovers, the clear 5-by-5.5-inch polystyrene box, designed over a decade ago by Phillips (the Dutch electronics firm that helped invent the CD), seemed just the right package for the gemlike beauty of the disk. Stacks of jewel boxes have replaced the sheaves of LP covers that once represented wealth and well-being for record collectors.

But familiarity has brought increasing discontent, if not contempt, a feeling that was not dispelled when the music industry acted last April to drop the wasteful plastic or cardboard long box that had been packaged with the jewel box. The earth may be safer now that almost all CD's are distributed in only the shrink-wrapped jewel boxes, but the basic package still has its problems.

Though somewhat easier to open than, say, a fresh cherrystone clam, the CD box demands a lot more dexterity, and sometimes ingenuity, than classic packages like the Chiclets box or pop-top soda cans. For the clam, at least, there exists the proper tool.

Paula Scher, a partner at Pentagram Design in New York, uses "the teeth method," she said. "First I use my teeth to gnaw through the shrink wrap, then I use them to get the box open."

Clearly, all is not as it should be.

When the outer wrapping is conquered, gripping the box with one hand while pulling open the lid with the other often proves difficult, especially for small hands. For children and older people it can be impossible.

Box and disk can easily be sent flying, and when a jewel box is dropped, Murphy's Law (jelly-side-down section) invariably causes it to land on the hinges, which, being plastic, are inclined to break.

Even if the box is opened without mishap, the trials are not yet over. Arthur had an easier time drawing Excalibur from the stone than some people have prying the compact disk from the plastic rosette that holds it inside the box. And the difficulty of removing and replacing the booklet that comes with a disk — liner notes, as they were known in the LP age — practically eliminates a great source of musical education.

What's left is a container that's a long way from ideal, replicated 250 million times a year for United States sales alone.

To be fair, it is possible to open the box without mishap. And the package does have its defenders. Scott Sanderude is a senior marketing manager in Midland, Mich., for Dow Plastics, which supplies polystyrene to jewel-box makers. He is also the chairman of the trade group Jewelbox Advocates and Manufacturers. "Once you show people how to open the box," he said, "it's no problem."

Mr. Sanderude acknowledged that "we do get complaints that jewel boxes crack or that a hinge breaks." But, he said, "it doesn't happen all that often," and he pointed out that the plastic boxes are replaceable.

Despite the odds against them, alternative packages for CD's have been developed. Some are already in limited use. And one or two are clearly better mousetraps, though none of them solve the problems of shrink-wrapping — now compounded by the maddening dog-bone-shaped, silvery seal that helps to hold the box closed. All are roughly the same size as the standard box.

Four boxes were tested and rated on the 1-to-10 Scale of Elegant Solutions (even allowing it a point for hegemony, the jewel box rates a 5, at best). Herewith, the results:

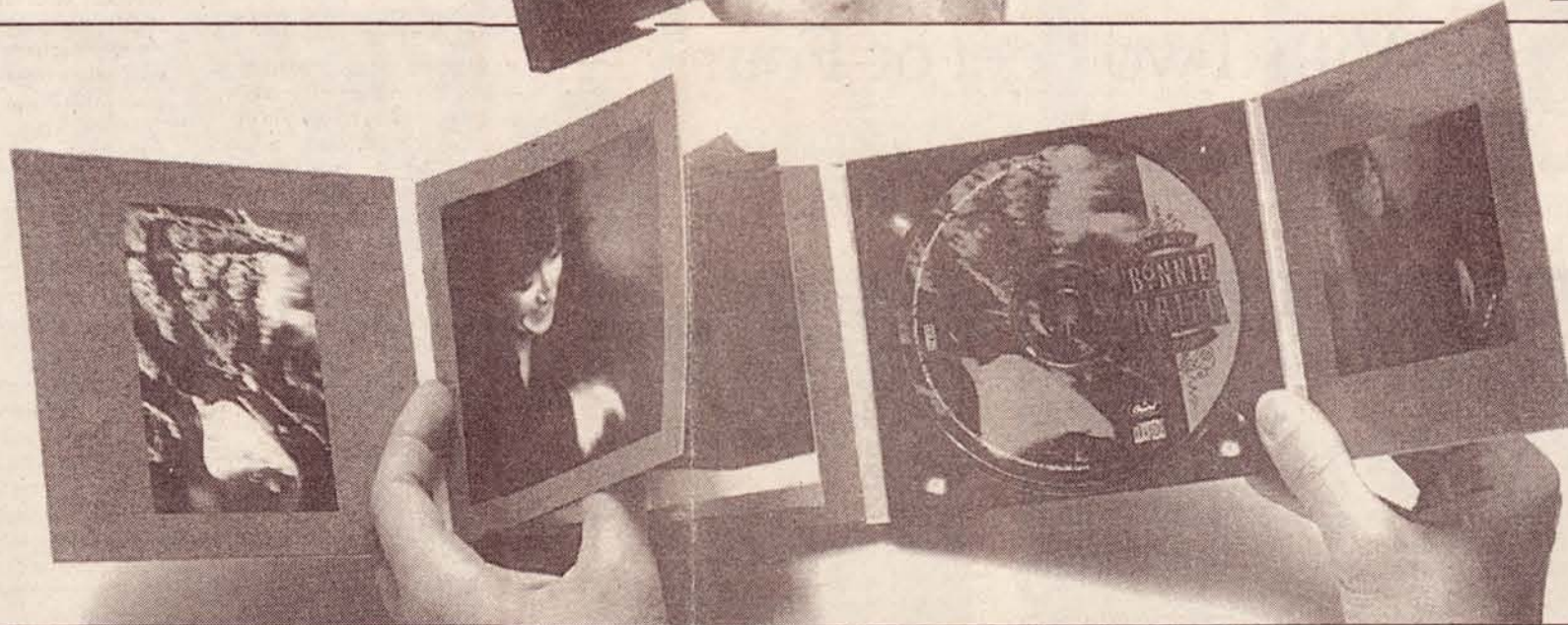
THE ECO PAK, designed in the early 1990's by Ivy Hill, a packaging subsidiary of Time Warner based in New York.

With Darwinian zest, the Eco Pak is spawning variations, like the FXT and the FLP models. Instead of the plastic used in the jewel box, all of these are made of varying numbers of paperboard panels (recycled stuff can be used, the designers say). The tray that holds the CD remains plastic.

The jury is still out on the environmental impact of coated paperboard versus plastic; neither is squeaky clean. But for those who miss the enticing art of LP covers, paper beats plastic every time. Ms. Scher, who

THE ECO PAK

This design replaces some of the plastic used in the standard jewel box with paperboard panels. The tray that holds the CD remains plastic in all models. Opening the Eco-Pak, with its plastic mechanism, can be clumsy, but the FLP model, inset, used mostly for CD singles, uses a simpler and easier snap closer.



THE DIGI-PAK

Touted as eco-friendly, the Digi-Pak uses mostly recycled paperboard and operates with an old-time simplicity that comes closest to the album sleeve. The Digi-Pak has multiple panels folded over one another wallet-style: getting to the disk is easy, but removing it from the standard holder or rosette is awkward.

THE INCH PAK

Doing away with breakable hinges, the Inch-Pack places the disk in a sliding drawer that requires minimum agility to use. When the box is opened, the booklet also slides out. The Inch Pack eliminates the plastic rosette, so that the disk lifts out easily. The packaging for the Inch-Pak will be made almost entirely of polystyrene, the designer says.



THE LASERFILE

This model uses a sliding drawer with a thumb indentation and with a holder that folds downward when halfway out so that the disk can be grasped at the center hole and removed easily. The booklet slides forward to a thumbnail-shaped cutout and can be pulled out smoothly.



Photographs by Naum Kazhdan/The New York Times

spent 10 years as a graphic designer with CBS Records, complains that the jewel box "puts a contraceptive between the album graphics and the buyer."

Will the Eco Pak hold up? Well, paperboard isn't Kevlar, so unless it contains something nobody wants to hear — say, Milli Vanilli's Greatest Hits — the Eco Pak probably isn't an object for the ages.

The plastic opening-and-closing mechanism on the Eco Pak and FXT models is at least as clumsy as what it replaces. And the rosette that holds the disk is still an unsolved irritation in all models. Best is the FLP, with a simple snap closer. Used mostly for CD singles, it seems just the right amount of packaging for the amount of music it contains. Over all, though, the Eco Pak is not much more than a jewel box in sheep's clothing. On the Elegant Solutions meter: **5**.

THE DIGI-PAK, designed by AGI Inc. in Melrose Park, Ill.
Like the Eco Pak, the Digi-Pak is touted as

being eco-friendly and having larger surfaces (recycled paperboard) for graphics. Bonnie Raitt's 1991 "Luck of the Draw" CD, for instance, was held open by plastic runners, displaying the album title and a large picture of Ms. Raitt. But these days, the Digi-Pak is sold with its multiple panels folded over one another wallet-style, and the big visual treatment shrinks considerably.

Honest but plebian, the Digi-Pak is the closest thing to the old-time simplicity of the LP sleeve. Getting to the disk is smooth and uncomplicated, but here, too, removing the disk from the standard rosette is awkward. Basically, the Digi-Pak seems to use more material than the jewel box to do the same thing. On the Elegant Solutions meter: **4**.

THE INCH PAK, designed by David Cowan of Inch Inc. in Brooklyn.

The first time Mr. Cowan, 34, saw a jewel box at a friend's house more than 10 years ago, he couldn't immediately figure out how to open it. "I was completely embarrassed,

since I was supposed to know about packaging design," he recalled. "But it was so awkward to handle that I figured there had to be a better approach."

Mr. Cowan has done away with breakable hinges by placing the disk in a sliding drawer that requires no more agility to use than does a matchbox. The Inch Pack, which is not yet being produced, also eliminates the rosette, so that the disk lifts out with no prying or flexing. When the box is opened, the booklet (on a separate tray) also slides out, extending just far enough to be taken out easily.

This "desk drawer" is so simple and obvious you wonder why it wasn't used in the first place. The answer is probably that the jewel box functions essentially like the box for cassette tapes that was already standard by the time CD's came along.

The Inch Pak will be made almost entirely of polystyrene, Mr. Cowan said, and perhaps some recycled material. He has yet to make a deal with any CD distributor, though he said Atlantic Records had expressed inter-

est. Earlier this year, I.D. magazine gave the Inch Pack an award for packaging design. On the Elegant Solutions meter it rates a **9**.

THE LASERFILE, designed by Arthur Herr of Reynard CVC, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.

Mr. Herr has had somewhat better luck finding a niche for his design, having sold a few hundred thousand boxes in roughly a year, he says, to independent music labels and in the expanding CD-ROM market. It stands to reason that some computer users willing to pay in the hundreds for a multimedia disk containing the entire Encyclopaedia Britannica would just as soon not grapple with a poorly designed box like the kind that holds Paula Abdul albums. In a column in PC Magazine, John C. Dvorak called the Laserfile "simply the best I've ever seen."

Like the Inch Pack, the Laserfile uses a sliding drawer, with the added grace note of a holder that bends downward when halfway out, so that the disk can be grasped at the center hole and easily removed, even by those who are accident prone, arthritic or very young (Raffi take note). The booklet slides forward to a thumbnail-shaped cutout and can be pulled out smoothly.

Mr. Herr, 35, said that he hoped to create a "sort of resonance" between the way the drawer in his box works and the sliding action of most CD players. And he has. For the new generation of players, and car models, that accept disks through a horizontal slot, the Laserfile's bend allows the box to be opened and the disk inserted without touching the wafer. (Don't try this if you're on the car phone.) A thumb indentation on the sliding drawer is a nice touch, too.

Easy to use and appealingly logical, the Laserfile gets the highest rating on the Elegant Solutions scale: **9+**.

Sound good? Better than the standard jewel box? Don't hold your breath.

When the standard box was first produced, it cost about 33 cents, and the price is about half that now. Although designers of alternative packaging say they could match that per-unit price, retrofitting for a new package would cost the big labels millions. And music industry executives say that even though consumer complaints helped move them to get rid of the long box, there hasn't been a significant enough campaign against the jewel box itself.

Paul Smith, the president of distribution for Sony Music, put it this way: "There'd have to be a pretty convincing reason to change. An awful lot of reasons, in fact. But if we found a better mousetrap and could make it work economically, we'd make the change."

Don't look for that to happen before, say, the millennium. Those who claim to make better mousetraps will just have to keep knocking on doors. As Mr. Herr said, "I'm just a boy and his dog and a dream."

Owen Edwards is a design critic and consultant whose most recent book on design is "Elegant Solutions: Quintessential Technology for a User-Friendly World" (Crown, 1989).