

Collectormania!

PORTRAIT OF A DISC PIONEER — HAROLD DAGUE

by Lisa Wheeler

If you ask Jeff Bender how many “post-Vogue” picture discs he has in his collection, he can’t give you a firm number.

“It is hard to say. I have tried to categorize my collection, but it takes so long. My best estimate is somewhere around 500,” said Bender.

But as founder of <http://vinylunderground.com>, one of the premier “modern era” picture-disc resources on the Internet, it’s easy for him to explain why he collects records with pictures engrained in the grooves.

“When I first caught a glimpse of a vinyl recording with the cover art embedded in the surface, it was a temptation that was too hard to resist. I had to have every picture disc I could get my hands on,” said Bender. “The visual imagery of the cover art and the fact that it is also a record makes a picture disc highly desirable.”

“I love Vogue discs, but it’s what I call the ‘newer’ picture and shaped discs — the ones made in the ‘70s and ‘80s — that I prize the most,” said Austin, Texas, collector Dennis Hamilton. “These are a work of art, at least in my eyes.”

Although post-World War II Vogue discs could be considered as some of the first picture discs on the market, the process of layering vinyl with images actually started in the 1920s in Europe (Musika Postkarte Co. of Germany and Trusound of Great Britain were some of the first to produce them). Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, commercial picture-disc designs had nearly become a thing of the past (with the exception of a handful releases, including 1969’s *Hallucinations — Psychedelic Off 2 Underground*, Twen-Metronome KMLP 310). Then a Southern California man began, almost single-handedly, to bring them back. His name was Harold Dague.

“He started out, in the ‘50s making black vinyl records with a company he formed called Collins, Caldwell And Dague,” said Dague’s granddaughter, Brigitte.

“They supplied the ‘biscuits’ for record plants,” added Dague’s son, David.

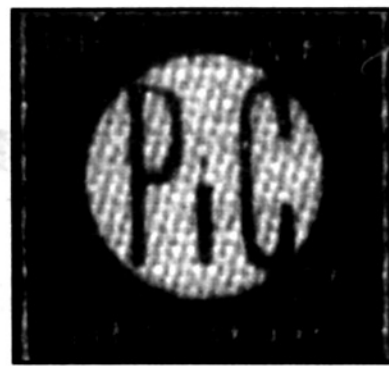
The company’s headquarters was a small shed outside Harold’s Costa Mesa, Calif., home. There, he and partners Bill Collins and Lee Caldwell began experimenting with some of the earliest known post-Vogue examples of picture as well as shaped discs (before Kapp Records released what is believed to be the first shaped disc, in 1971, the hexagon-shaped *Andromeda Strain*).

“He liked to make them for himself. He was experimenting a lot, too, with different designs,” revealed Brigitte. “Some of the earlier ones say ‘test pressing,’ and others say ‘exploded view’ on them. Those are clear with color splashes all over in different designs. He was a professional photographer also and shot a lot of pinups, so he liked to use his photographs for the earlier ones.”

Although the visual aspect of the picture-disc process was going well for Dague, there were other concerns about his experimental method of adding a picture to a record. “He was trying to make the sound quality bet-

ter,” added Brigitte. “I remember him telling me that he had a problem getting the popping and scratching sound out so they could be mass produced. He said they would be used more for promotion and novelty because the sound could never be improved on.”

Despite the setback, he decided to continue the trial-and-error, finally mastering the perfect combination of sight and sound. In 1965, as a branch of his own business, he started Pic



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Disc Company, Inc. As with any up-and-coming corporation, PDC needed a visual identity. Harold asked his son to design a logo.

“We sketched out several different styles and eventually chose the one that is now seen on the records,” said David.

Thanks to a Rolodex® file full of contacts and his previous work manufacturing black vinyl discs with Puccio Records (and the RIP label), it wasn’t long before record companies were commissioning Dague to produce picture discs for their talent rosters.

For Brigitte, growing up with a grandfather who made records for a living was exciting, if not entertaining, for the then grade-schooler.

“He gave me about 75 of his picture discs when I was about 7,” she said.

“I remember I had The Beatles, Elvis [Presley], Mighty Mouse, The Kroft Super Stars, The Police, some disco ones and a bunch of others. I used to spread them out on the floor and run and slide across the room on them. I broke many of them and have no idea what happened to them all.”

Unfortunately Harold never kept track of how many different picture discs he made.

“I would estimate that he made several thousand,” offered David. “I remember one of the more popular ones was one he did for Disney called *Main Street Electrical Parade*.”

In the 1980s, Harold sold the company and the Pic Disc name to Fitzgerald Hartley, who continued to use David’s homemade logo on their own picture discs.

“You do have to look pretty closely at the back of the picture disc to find out whether or not Pic Disc was

involved with it. The logo is pretty small on the back,” said Hamilton. “One that comes to mind immediately, and is one of my favorites, is my *Darkness On The Edge Of Town* disc PAL-35318-1AJ [A-side] and PBL-35318-2AD [B-side]. It was released as a promo, in 1978, and was Bruce Springsteen’s first-ever picture disc.”

After retiring from the record business, Harold took up one of his other interests, photography. He spent several years working with the Union Pacific Railroad as its photographer. He sold or gave away most of his record collection, including the prototypes. Harold died in 2003, at the age of 89.

Upon his death, relatives were surprised to find that he had still stockpiled several of his vinyl designs. Unfortunately, some family members were not as appreciative as Brigitte of her grandfather’s efforts. More than a few discs ended up in the trash, before Brigitte rescued them.

“When he died, I managed to save six of my favorites for myself, that I will keep forever,” she said. “There’s a 1950s pinup, a ‘60s nude hippie girl with a peace sign, a ‘50s or ‘40s Asian lady.”

Regrettably, Harold’s quiet contributions to music make most, including avid picture-disc collectors, unaware of the man who helped revive the design.

“I’m sorry to say, that I’m not familiar with Harold Dague,” said Tim Murphy, who currently owns close to 1,000 shaped discs and operates an extensive online list, www.nightcoaster.com/shapedinfo.htm. I couldn’t find anything about him on the Internet either. Those in the music and record collecting worlds should have been made aware of his passing.”

While his family members have managed to keep a few of the only known copies of the original early Pic Disc designs, it’s their memories they consider priceless.

“One year, for my birthday, he was making Prince’s *Purple Rain* record that had gone platinum,” said Brigitte. “He knew I really like him, so he made an extra one for me and had it framed for my present.”

And as it was foretold that cassette tapes could potentially cause vinyl’s downfall, before he died, Harold was keenly aware of another up-and-coming media threatening LPs.

“I remember when he brought home the first CD. He told me the writing was on the wall for record albums to go the way of the eight-track,” said David. “He told me they were indestructible, and we began to throw it around the room and he hit it hard with a hammer. Nothing happened to it.”

“He produced a product that was unique at that time when record popularity was fading,” continued David. “I am pleased that he has created a product, that due to its uniqueness, has become a collectible item. My dad would have loved it — he loved what he did.”

Do you have any information about Harold Dague? Are there any collectors who have a discography of Pic Disc marked releases? To piece together (and preserve) Dague’s legacy, the family would like to talk to anyone who might be able to fill in the holes. You can send your information directly to me, via my Web site, www.isleofwrite.com. I will pass it along to the family.

Help wanted: Are you a Christmas record collector? Do you find yourself hunting for a “Winter Wonderland” in the middle of July? How big is your collection? I will feature über Christmas record collectors in an upcoming column and would love to include your collection. Contact me at Collectormania@isleofwrite.com.