[illustration] Ed Templeton, www.red-design.co.uk

Following a music design brief

These days, the designer's role doesn't stop at designing the record cover. Red's Ed Templeton explains how the look and feel is carried through to all manner of marketing materials…

Designing record covers is a highly competitive, highly pressured and lowly paid sector of the design industry. On the plus side, it's an area of design where self-expression is encouraged and there is still a bit of glamour attached to it. It might be true to say that it is the nearest a designer gets to the rock 'n' roll lifestyle.

It can, however, seem a very closed world if you're trying to break into it — many companies and individuals being protective of their status within the music design arena and not giving up their secrets easily. The stricter guidelines that record companies now impose on designers commissioned to work on highly commercial projects create more of a challenge to producing great work. So this tutorial aims to pick apart the whole process of designing a commercial

music campaign for a major record label, from brief and pitch process through to the delivery of a broad range of collateral, such as album covers, single covers, point-of-sale items, adverts, merchandise, TV adverts and window displays.

This tutorial focuses on some of the aesthetic rules you need to consider when creating a cover, alongside some of the record company marketing department's requirements and practical retail issues which affect how your cover will look. We take you through a campaign we did last year for Vertigo Records (a subsidiary of Universal Records), for a young band from the West Country called Thirteen Senses. This was the band's debut album, so getting the relationship right between the music, the cover art and the marketing was very important to give them every chance of success. ❯

Expertise provided by Ed Templeton at Red Design. Find our more about this graphic design business and see more of its work at www.red-design.co.uk.

Part 1: **The pitch**

Being briefed, pitching your ideas and winning the job…
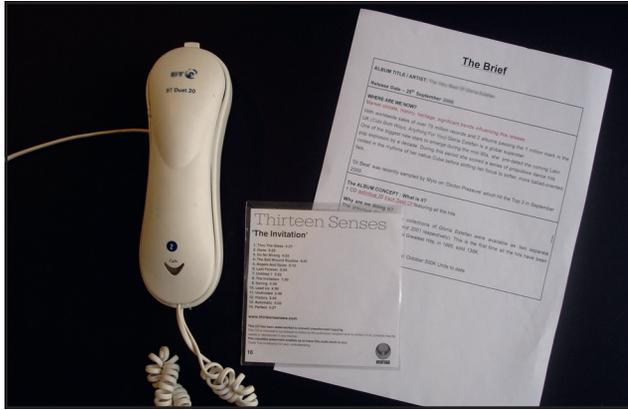
1 Most music design projects involve a pitching process. The record company usually asks three companies to come up with ideas for the campaign artwork and this begins with a brief, which usually constitutes a telephone discussion, an emailed brief outlining the market for the music and a CD of several tracks.
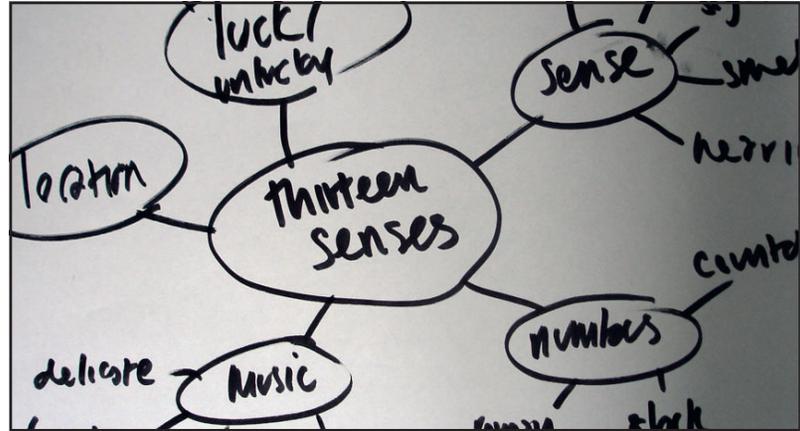
2 When we receive a brief, we have a team meeting to kickstart the project, in which we discuss the brief and listen to the music. This is followed by a brainstorm session where we free associate ideas and themes relating to the music, resulting in mind maps and lists of ideas.

3 A few days later, once we've digested the information that came out of the brainstorm, we meet again to edit our ideas down to three distinct routes which we think will be the most exciting and appropriate for the band. We then do some research to identify influences and reference material for each route.
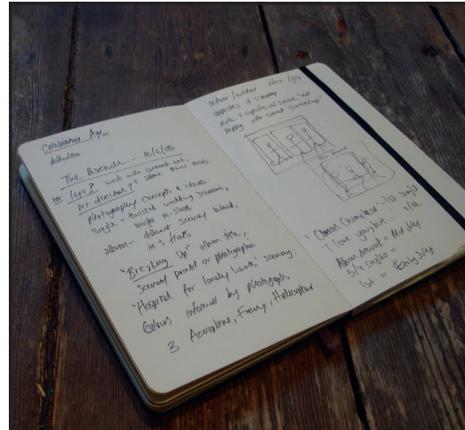
4 Each route is assigned a lead designer who will begin visually exploring that idea. We use the skills we have in-house to create ideas but don't limit ourselves by them. Hence, we source appropriate photographers or illustrators to collaborate with and combine their work with our own logos, designs and illustrations.
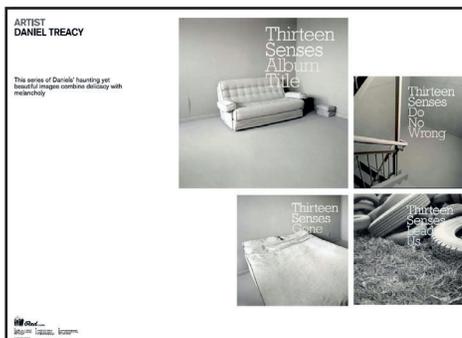
5 We review the ideas a few days before the pitch has to be delivered. Once we've agreed on the final content for each route, we create A3 pitch sheets in Adobe *InDesign*. We do colour run-outs of these pages, mount them on foam board and present them to the product manager.

6 It's always important to congratulate yourself when you do well. The pitch process can be quite demoralising – a lot of time and effort can be spent for no financial reward – so when the product manager calls to say you've been chosen to work the campaign, you should go out and celebrate!
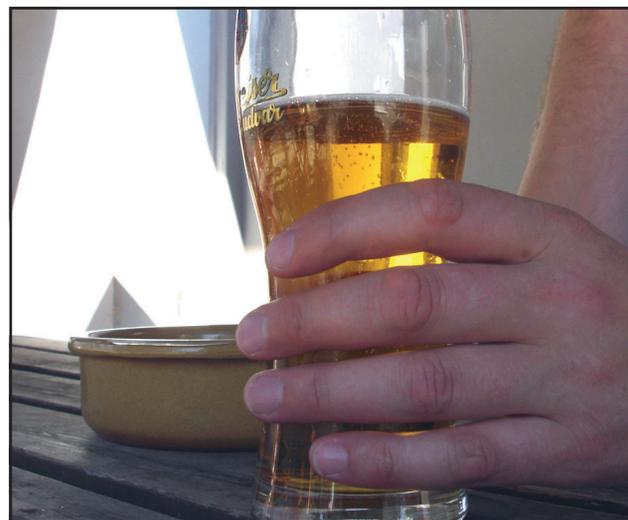
Music Week

This is the music industry's trade paper. If you're set on designing for the music industry, *Music Week* is a really useful resource. As well as publishing weekly charts, it gives you insider tips on who's been signed to which record label and who's who at the labels. The magazine regularly focuses on music design and organises an exhibition of cover design called 'I See Music'.

Part 2: Early developments

Developing the chosen direction until it meets with the record company's approval…
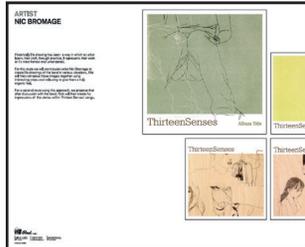
1 Thirteen Senses and the record company choose the pencil illustration route and want to meet up to discuss how this would develop as an artwork campaign. We meet the band at the 100 Club, London, before their gig, to discuss what aspects of the pitch they like and how we might develop the idea.

2 Based on discussions we had with the band, we now have to make this idea unique to this campaign. We develop a few different visual directions using *Photoshop* to comp our illustrations together and then email PDFs of some different directions over to the label and band for feedback.

3 In line with feedback, we fine-tune the illustration style addressing the balance between detail of the portraits and the free-flowing style of the illustrations. We then begin working with the logo and first single title in order to get sign-off on the artwork's look and feel.

Read on…

Julian House & Adrian Shaughnessy produce a great series of music graphics books called *Sampler* (1, 2 & 3) exploring the leftfield experimental fringes of the genre. The work, ranging from the highly commercial through to small self-financed projects, pushes the boundaries of design, packaging and image-making.

Part 3: Illustration and design

Creating a variety of illustrations and designs for singles and an album…
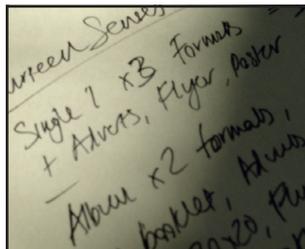
1 We work out what illustrations will be required and how to best use our time. A typical campaign includes four singles each with three formats, an album, plus a 12-page booklet, adverts, posters and other marketing material.

2 We need to do about 20 static illustrations and use the source material to do an animation for a TV advert, so we decide that we need more than one session with the band to get all the necessary material. Over the next few weeks we meet the band in various locations to photograph, film and sketch them.

3 Having compiled and edited our source material, our resident illustrator, Annina, spends time making hundreds of illustrations: portraits of individual band members, the band in various group composition from descriptive to abstract, and many incidental and environmental details.
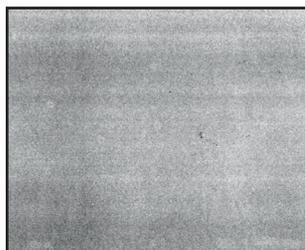
4 As well as the pencil-sketched elements, the illustration includes abstract textured shapes which hint at buildings and objects. These give the images space, depth and drama. We scan and photocopy textured papers and re-photocopy and scan them until the desired effect is achieved.

5 We now need to edit all the elements we've generated, so we mark up drawings and textures that work and begin compiling illustrations in *Photoshop* using the layers to organise the material. We create a range of illustrations focusing on the first single and the album.

6 Next, we begin to work with the illustrations in *QuarkXpress* (the required delivery software for most major labels) using song titles and dummy text to create front covers, back covers and centre label designs. We decide at this point to use a signature colour on each separate release to aid recognition.
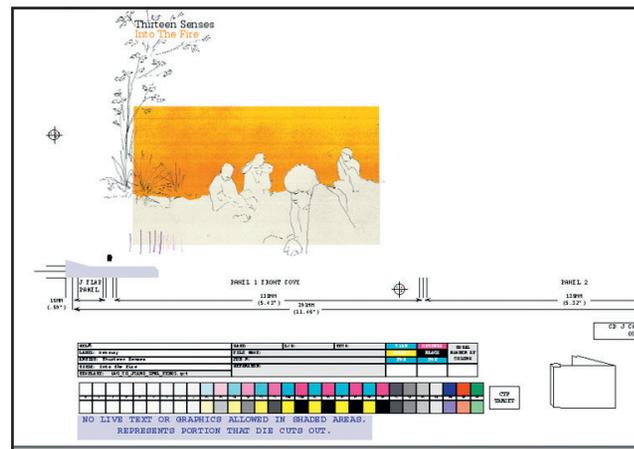
Part 4: Design rules

There are a number of basic rules when it comes to creating covers…

1 It might be useful here to look at some basic rules for designing covers. These differ depending on whether you're dealing with CD or vinyl, single or album and major or independent record company, and whether you follow, unquestioningly, the company's marketing advice! We'll focus here on CD album artwork for a major label.

2 Let's begin with the requirements of the marketing department and retailers. These are unwritten rules which can make the artwork suffer. They prefer the artist and title to be large, legible and at the top, ideally top left so that a price sticker can be placed bottom right.
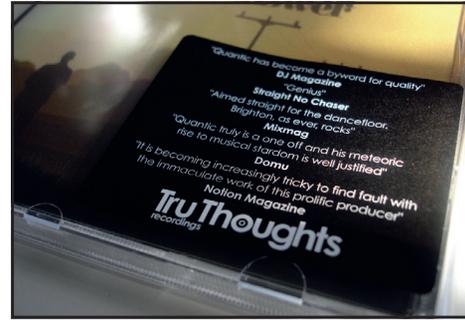
3 Marketing and retail also like to apply the ten-feet test – can the artist's name be read at that distance? They like space for a sticker containing sales notes and press quotes. They like an accessible and flattering photograph of the artist on the cover and they would like it all in a jewel case so that the shops can rack it easily.

4 Aesthetically, we like to keep the rules to a minimum. Try to create a single focal point for mainstream releases. With a canvas of 120x120mm you don't have much room to play with and with one focal point you'll go some way to achieving the ubiquitous brief: "Make it iconic!"

5 The type and image should work symbiotically to create a unified image and the imagery should be evocative of the music. Covers rarely tell the whole story of the album within – that's impossible – but you should try to find ways to echo the music, to hint at what's inside.

6 The final word on aesthetic rules, though, is really that there shouldn't be any rules. Direct communication is not the key in cover design. Album covers can be shocking, subtle, innovative, nostalgic, funny, beautiful or ugly. Intuition is the key skill of the cover designer, so forget the rules.

Part 5: Design and artwork

Creating promotional materials for the single and album artwork…

1 With a release date imminent, we begin by designing promotional formats which are used to send to radio stations and press in order to generate interest. A very subtle embossed card wallet is designed plus an unusual three-inch CD in order to create intrigue and act as a teaser to the campaign proper.
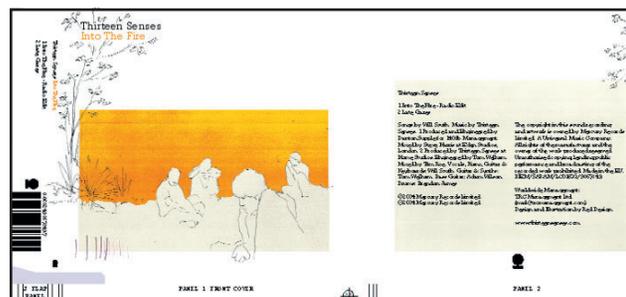
2 The first commercial release is the single. This comes in three formats: two CD J-cards (which are the standard plastic single cases) and a collectors' seven-inch single. We get *QuarkXpress* templates, the text, barcode numbers and logos from the manufacturers and then design the print-ready artwork which we then transfer via ftp to the manufacturers.
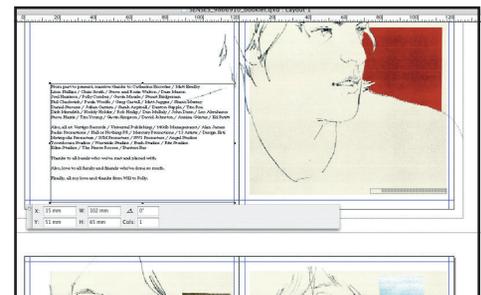
3 Two weeks after the single release comes the album. This is released on two formats: a CD jewel case (the standard plastic album case) and a vinyl LP. The CD comes with a booklet, and more importance is placed on the cover design due to its greater exposure and longevity.

Part 6: Additional design elements

Creating and supplying artwork for all the band's marketing materials…
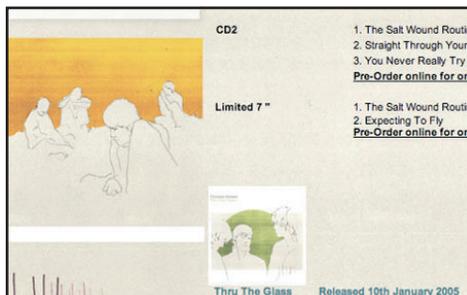
1 Once the artwork elements (images, type, logo, colours) are approved, usually a few weeks before the final artwork is delivered to the printers, we supply them to the band's website programmers. The website is then rapidly developed in order to go live before any of the promo material is sent out.
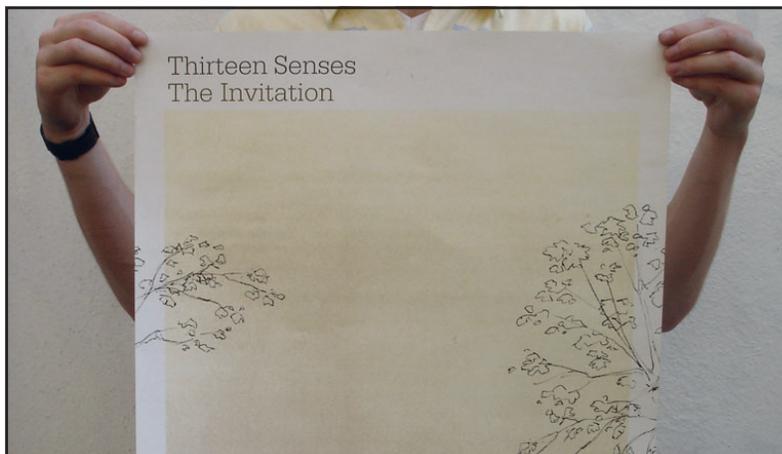
2 Immediately after the single/album artwork we need to design some posters. We usually design 60x40-inch posters, 30x20-inch for fly-posting and a 12x12-inch poster for use in record stores. The focus is slightly different to the cover because the information needs to be read from a distance. Simplicity is the key.

3 Next on our agenda is the design of adverts for a range of publications to alert the public to the release date. We designed around 20 adverts in almost every conceivable proportion for this campaign. The challenge is to keep the integrity of the artwork while working in so many different sizes.

4 The flagship piece of marketing for the album launch is the design of a window display for the Oxford Street HMV, to coincide with the band playing there. We deconstruct the album artwork, placing the type and decorative elements directly on to the window with the main image appearing on a board inside the window to give a 3D effect.

Deadlines

One thing you'll have to get used to when working in design for the music industry is the impossibly tight deadlines. It's not uncommon to have two days to create a full pitch for an artist and sometimes a half day to create single artwork in all three formats! Be prepared for a few late nights…

5 As soon as the line-drawing illustration route was chosen by the band, we were keen to animate it for adverts and/or music videos. In the artwork sessions with the band we made short films of the musicians moving into and out of the poses that we ear-marked for the album cover.

Hipgnosis — star cover designers

Aubrey Powell and Storm Thorgerson designed record sleeves as Hipgnosis from the 1960s through to the 80s for the rock legends of the era, most notably Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd. The high concepts and high production standards of their work — encompassing typography, photography, illustration, retouching and packaging — made such an impact that they, as sleeve designers, rivalled the bands they worked for in terms of public recognition. They were the first real 'star' cover designers.

Additional design elements continued...
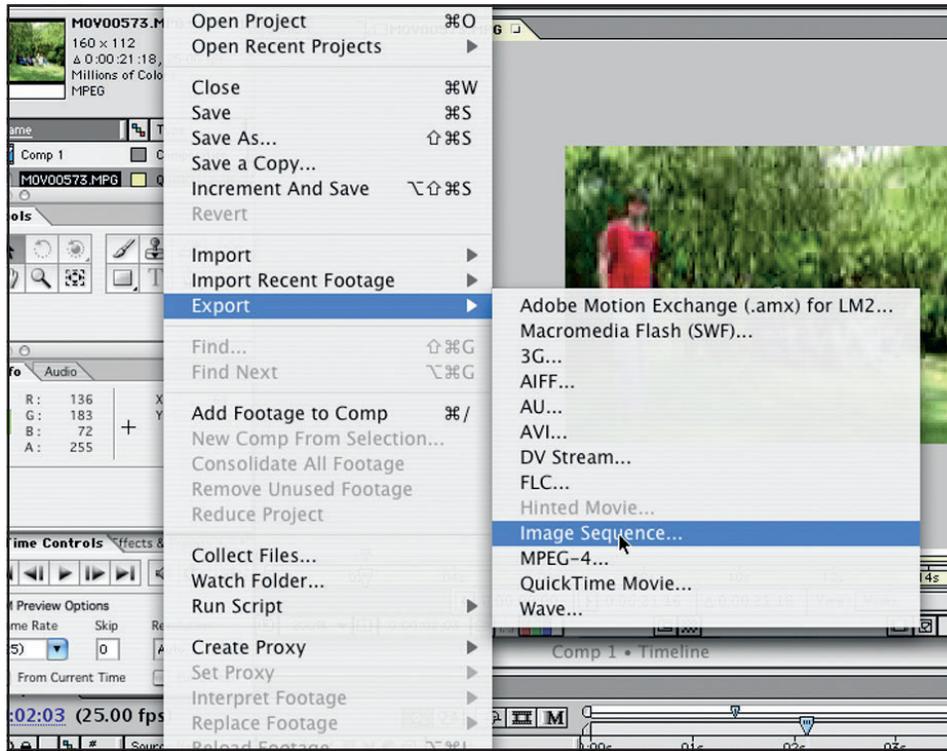
7 In *After Effects* we create a 15-second animation using masks to reveal the hand-drawn elements. This gives the effect of them being drawn onto the screen, while the animation of the band walking is used to bring them into position to complete the final album cover scene.

6 We export the cover MPG clip as a PICT sequence (File>Export>Image Sequence) from *After Effects* and drop the PICT files onto the printer icon in order to print them out. We then trace the frames to create a traditional frame-by-frame animation of the band which we then scan and drop back into sequence in *After Effects*.


8 A range of postcards and flyers is designed to accompany each release. A6 postcards are created to advertise each of the four single releases, and flyers are designed to advertise tours and promote one-off performances.

THIRTEEN SENSES
T-SHIRTS
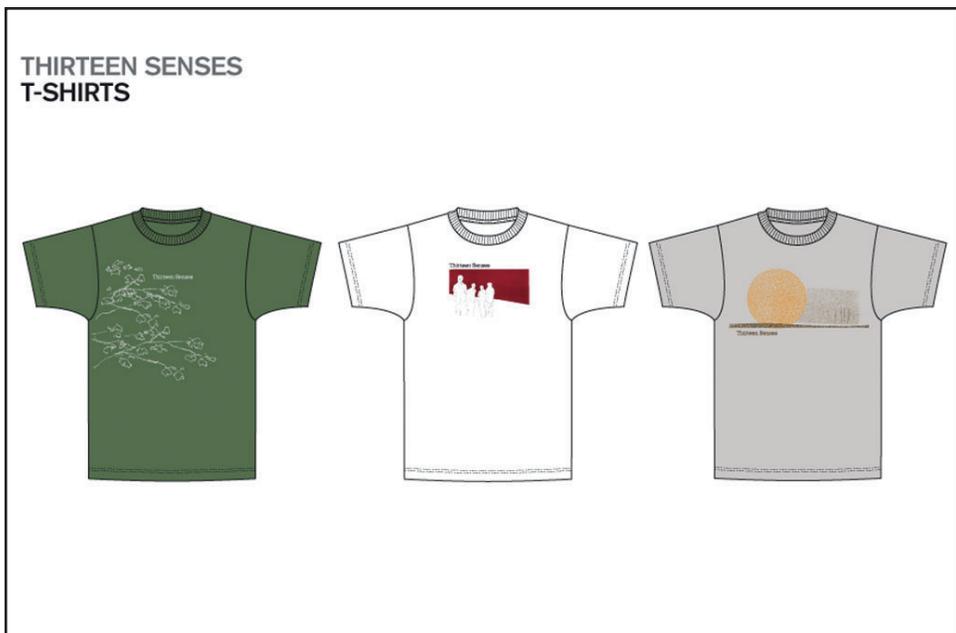
9 The band also commissioned us directly to produce a range of T-shirts for them to sell at their gigs. These designs can be less direct than on their commercial releases. We took abstract elements from our illustrations and brought them to the fore with only subtle references to the band name.

Part 7: **The glamour**

With the project now complete, we keep an eye on the success of it…

1 Having worked closely with a band over a period of months and been to their early gigs, we felt really involved in the success of the album. Checking that the finished copies are okay is the final practical input you have as designer before the CD is sold to the public.
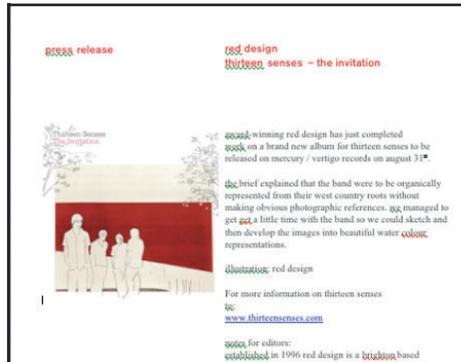
2 If we're happy with the quality of the artwork and proud of the design then we create a press release with a paragraph of text explaining the project and images of the artwork. This will be sent to various magazines in the hope that it'll get featured.

3 Seeing the finished single or album on the racks of the record shop still gives me a thrill, ten years down the line. We check the sales charts in *Music Week* to see how successful the project is… and we always try to make it to the album launch party. **ca-p**

Expert profile: Red Design

The Brighton-based music design powerhouse celebrates its tenth anniversary this year, and its recent work is as good as ever…

Above, from left to right: Red Design work for a forthcoming single by Irish band Director. The photography for this sleeve was taken by Ewan Spencer and was art directed by the team at Red.

New cover for current album by worldbeat act Quantic, designed and illustrated by Annina Gunter at Red.

Featuring photography from David Ellis, the cover for a recent single by The Research pushes all of the right buttons in terms of balance and design.

BACKGROUND:
Established in Brighton in 2006, Red Design has gradually built a reputation as one of the UK's leading graphic design agencies.

Founded by Brighton University graphic-design graduate Ed Templeton after a 12-month period working in-house at Polydor Records, Red's first big break came in 1997 when the company picked up a contract to produce a major-label album campaign for Mercury Records. The following year it put itself further on the design map through producing landmark artwork for Fatboy Slim's *You've Come a Long Way, Baby* – an album which sold in excess of seven million copies worldwide.

Now counting the likes of Mercury, Mute and Vertigo records as clients, Red has diversified into areas outside music including television commercials, corporate and music videos, title sequences and stings for the broadcast industry.

The company has also recently worked with advertising group St Lukes on a highly successful campaign for Clarks shoes and has a number of fashion clients including Liberty and Electra.

MISSION STATEMENT:
"Red is now a multi-disciplined agency working across a range of diverse sectors." Templeton says. "Our integrity and passion for beautiful and effective design is reflected in all of the work we do."

WEBSITE:
www.red-design.co.uk