

BY MATTHEW PORTER



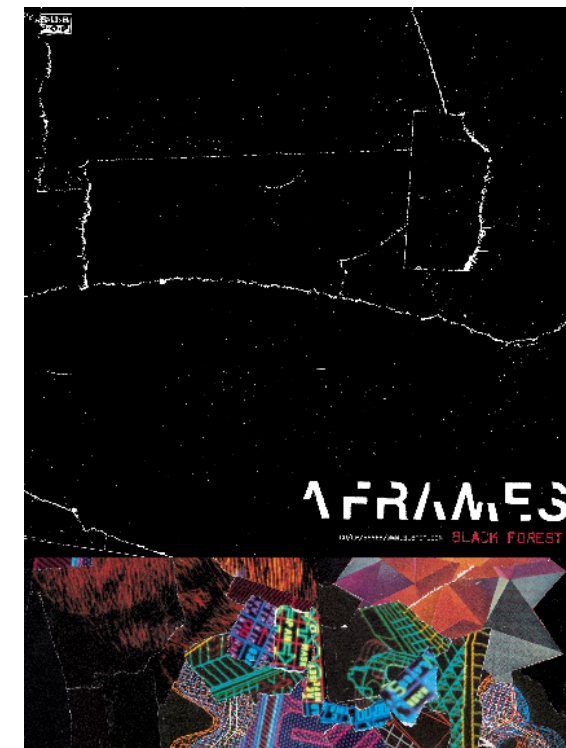
## Sub Pop Records: A TASTE WORTH ACQUIRING

I went to Sub Pop Records in Seattle in June with an idea for a story. Was the digital music market *shrinking* the performance space for graphic design, illustration, and photography? Was there any room left for great album art on a graphic user interface (GUI)? Where would a young Milton Glaser put a young Bob Dylan's psychedelic silhouette today? On a digital dingbat half the size of one's pinky nail?

The notion was dismissed virtually as soon as I posed it to the Sub Pop staff. I learned this in conversations with design director Jeff Kleinsmith, general manager Megan Jasper, and cofounder Jonathan Poneman. "If anything, the digital era has opened up opportunities," says Poneman. "For example, we allow people to sample up to two MP3 downloads from every album release—this has stimulated sales for our artists, not inhibited them."

Sub Pop leaders said digital access was creating new markets. Due to online programming, webzines, and blogs, for example, even more opinion and trend influencers need to be reached. Just because people do not shop at traditional music stores as much as they used to, it does not mean that they have stopped shopping, the Sub Pop staffers reminded me.

"Ask Jeff [Kleinsmith] and Dusty [Summers] in our creative department if their workload has diminished," suggests Jasper. "I don't think they'll say it has."



\* ALL CAPTIONS NARRATED BY JEFF KLEINSMITH.

**SUPERSUCKERS, 1999** THIS IS A TYPICAL ROCK POSTER. "I WORKED IN A STYLE I WAS FAMILIAR WITH FROM MY DAYS OF MAKING PHOTOCOPIED, 11 X 17-INCH TELEPHONE POLE FLYERS. THE STRONG CENTRAL IMAGE AND THE FIELD OF OPEN SPACE IS MORE LIKE WHAT I WAS DOING AT THAT TIME. THE TYPE WAS ALL PAINTSTAKINGLY HAND-DONE WITH A DOVER TYPE, AN X-ACTO BLADE, AND A PHOTOCOPIER. THE IMAGE INSTANTLY REMINDED ME OF THE SUPERSUCKERS WITH THEIR LOVE OF LYNRYD SKYNYRD AND PUNK ROCK." DESIGNER: KLEINSMITH; PRINTER: PATENT PENDING PRESS.

**KINSKI, 2005** "THIS IS ONE OF THE FEW INSTANCES WHERE I THINK THE POSTER ACTUALLY WORKS A LITTLE BETTER THAN THE ALBUM COVER. THE PHOTO LENDS ITSELF TO THIS LARGE HORIZONTAL FORMAT MUCH MORE SO THAN THE SQUARE ALBUM COVER." DESIGNER: DUSTY SUMMERS; PHOTOGRAPHER: MICHAEL LAVINE; PRINTER: WINDWARD.

**A FRAMES, 2005** "USUALLY OUR PROMO POSTERS ARE PRETTY STRAIGHT-FORWARD, BUT THIS RELEASE WAS PRETTY COMPLICATED. THE ALBUM COVER HAD TWO MAIN ELEMENTS: A COLORFUL COLLAGE AND A STARK BLACK SLIPCASE. IT WAS OUR GOAL TO REPRESENT BOTH ITEMS WHILE STILL MAINTAINING A CONSISTENCY TO THE PIECE." DESIGNERS: KLEINSMITH, SUMMERS; PRINTER: WINDWARD.

**SUB POP PARTY, 2001** THIS POSTER WAS DESIGNED FOR THE ANNUAL PARTY AND ROCK SHOW SUB POP DOES TO CELEBRATE ITS ANNIVERSARY. "THIS IS AN HOMAGE TO SAUL BASS, ONE OF MY DESIGN HEROES." DESIGNER: KLEINSMITH; PRINTER: PATENT PENDING PRESS.

#### A ROUND HOLE FOR SQUARE PEGS

My original thesis blown out of water, I searched for a new angle. Talking shop wasn't one of them: What Kleinsmith and his colleagues did not yet know was that I was (and am) a music moron. I don't know jack about their industry. I mean, I like music; I own a lot of music; but really I don't *know* music. Certainly not the groovy or the cutting edge kind of stuff that Sub Pop is known for. These people gave the world Nirvana and Cat Butt. I'm even a little intimidated by those who *do* know music—the hip, not the nerd, knows music, we learn at a young age. My only trenchant music question was about a rumor: "Did you guys, like, really know any famous artists who, like, strangled themselves while having sex and doing coke trying to have the ultimate orgasm? I mean, that's just so cool if you did." Such a prurient and voyeuristic curiosity would expose my musical stupidity and permit me to get inside the story behind the people of Sub Pop, not music legends or backstage gossip.

The next five hours of interviews were among the most enjoyable in my reporting career. The conversations ranged from vinyl to MP3s, from Starbucks to freelance, from flowers to feces. After meeting the various personalities that drove Sub Pop—its publicity, design, copy, talent, retail, and marketing people—one realizes that this was the *only* place where Kurt Cobain and Cat Butt could have been discovered and launched. It's the ultimate round hole for penultimate square pegs.

#### THE YOUNGEST ELDER

Kleinsmith has been directing design at Sub Pop for a dozen years. Having turned 39 recently, he looks toward his 40 birthday ruefully, yet he makes concessions to the years: he eats responsibly, but not neurotically—vegetarian, but not vegan; he states that his "self-medicating" days are long behind him ("My doctor's prescribed plan has worked well for me for more than seven years, and I'm not changing it!"); he says he loves being a husband and father.

Kleinsmith is one of those lucky guys who does what he loves to do all day—design. He's un-self-consciously disheveled—a mass of hair on his head appears recently shampooed. His shirttails are out, hanging over baggy trousers. He dresses in darkish tones, but nothing seems deliberately coordinated. You get the feeling he is still a big kid—at least at heart and out of the closet.

With age and experience come new responsibilities: "I have come to accept," he says, eyes rolling upward slightly, "that I am now being looked upon as an 'elder statesman' in this business. I've had to overcome my fear of speaking in front of big crowds." But mostly, he now finds meaning in life's more fundamental things: spending his free time with his wife, Katie O'Donnell, and his two young girls, Juniper, age 8, and Frances, 4.



"BAND BIOS ARE ALWAYS A FUN CHALLENGE. THEY USUALLY NEED TO BE COMPLETED BEFORE THE ALBUM ARTWORK IS EVEN THOUGHT ABOUT, AND IN SOME CASES DUE EVEN BEFORE WE HEAR ANY OF THE MUSIC, SO THEY END UP BEING A QUICK SNAPSHOT OF HOW WE INTERPRET THE BAND AT THAT PARTICULAR MOMENT—ALMOST A QUICK SKETCH OF A COVER IDEA." ALBUM LEAF AND KELLEY STOLTZ BIOS DESIGNED BY SUMMERS.

“I guess when you approach 40, you get it in your head that you’ve got to make some major changes in your life. I mean, doing the same thing is not supposed to be all right, right? Turning 40 is supposed to be transformational ... But I love it here. I’m not bored. Every band is a new client; new artists offer new points of view ... I love Sub Pop,” Kleinsmith says.



**SONGBOOK OF SONGS, 2005** “THIS IS A SUB POP COMPILATION CD, LOOSELY BASED ON WARNER BROTHERS’ MID-’70S LOSS LEADERS COMPILATIONS. WE TRIED TO KEEP THAT SAME SEMI-DISCONNECTED SUBJECT MATTER THAT WAS FEATURED ON THEIR MANY COVERS.” DESIGNER: SUMMERS; PRINTER: WINDWARD.

But the push toward 40 still nags him. “I guess when you approach 40, you get it in your head that you’ve got to make some major changes in your life. I mean, doing the same thing is not supposed to be all right, right? Turning 40 is supposed to be transformational, right? But I love it here. I’m not bored. Every band is a new client; new artists offer new points of view. I love being a husband, a father. I love being a graphic designer, and I love Sub Pop. The only thing that scares me is growing complacent. When a creative person does that, they are dead.”

#### AN UNLIKELY ASCENT

Jasper would be the longest continuous-run employee at Sub Pop if it were not for one inconvenient truth: After starting with the company in 1989, she got fired. In total, she has served Sub Pop for 17+ years. She now sits atop the company as its general manager, reporting to Jon Poneman, company cofounder. He explains, “Back then, she didn’t have the skill-sets and the attitude to work here, so I fired her.” He was kidding, sort of, but he remained deadpan. There was something more to this story, but the two were coy. They’ve been friends for years. They share many secrets. They are continuity.

On the subject of change, however, both Jasper and Poneman grew more talkative. “I’ve been here since we stored records under Bruce Pavitt’s [the other company cofounder now no longer involved with Sub Pop] bed,” Poneman explains. “During that time, I’ve seen a lot of technological change. You even see it circle back again. For example, in Europe the 7-inch vinyl 45 disc is seeing a revival. But what never changes is that technology always opens the way to new audiences.”

Jasper thinks the main reason for Sub Pop’s longevity comes from its relationships with the artists. “We have never put ourselves or the label name first,” she points out. “That is not our way. It’s about the bands—and the fans. That is the greatest common denominator across our history.”

#### DRY HUMOR, CHEEKY SITE

This exchange explains why it is nearly impossible to find out anything about Sub Pop on its website—which is hilarious. Much of that is due to Chris Jacobs, Sub Pop’s editor in chief, who is responsible for nearly all of the company’s public words. Here is an example of the cheek of Sub Pop’s site:



**KINSKI, 2005** “SOMETIMES ONE OF THE MOST CHALLENGING PARTS OF THE DESIGN IS CHOOSING THE PACKAGING. KINSKI WANTED A CD PACKAGE THAT ECHOED AN OLD GATEFOLD LP, WITH PASTED IN INTERIOR. WE ENDED UP FINDING A MANUFACTURER OF THOSE OLD STYLE GATEFOLD LPS AND HAD THEM CONVERT THEIR TEMPLATE DOWN TO CD SIZE.” DESIGNER: SUMMERS; PHOTOGRAPHER: LAVINE; PRINTER: WINDWARD.

**BAND OF HORSES, 2006** “THE BAND SUPPLIED US WITH A BUNCH OF DIFFERENT PHOTOS AND AN OVERALL FEELING THEY WANTED TO COME ACROSS IN THE PACKAGING. WE BROUGHT ALL THESE DIFFERENT PHOTO ELEMENTS TOGETHER WHILE LETTING THE PACKAGING STILL HAVE A SINGULAR IDENTITY.” DESIGNERS: KLEINSMITH, SUMMERS; PHOTOGRAPHER: CHRISTOPHER WILSON; PRINTER: WINDWARD

**ROGUE WAVE, 2005** “MOST OF OUR BANDS GIVE US RAW MATERIALS AND SOME ART DIRECTION TO WORK WITH. ZACH FROM ROGUE WAVE WAS DIFFERENT. HE TOLD ME ABOUT A VISION HE HAD OF A DICTATOR LORDING OVER A CHESSBOARD WITH HUMANS AS THE CHESS PIECES. I TOOK HIS VISION AND TRIED TO DEVELOP A CHARACTER THAT IS MORE VULNERABLE AND UNSURE, WHILE STILL POWERFUL.” DESIGNER: KLEINSMITH; PRINTER: WOODWARD



Q: I heard that Sub Pop went out of business. Is this true?

A: If we were out of business, why do you think we would be spending all this money keeping a website up and answering your questions?

Q: Is the Nirvana "Love Buzz" single still in print?

A: No.

Q: You must have some "Love Buzz" singles lying around; I'll pay you (insert some grossly large sum here) for it.

A: No.

Q: Well then, someone who works at Sub Pop must have a copy; can I buy it from them?

A: No.

Q: Where is Kurt Cobain buried?

A: He was cremated.

One imagines the questioner, maybe infrequent or imaginary, stoned or drunk with fan love. But the writing reveals a quintessential Sub Pop "brand characteristic"—anonymity and irreverence. They might take their artists seriously, but they don't posit themselves as such. The text also reflects the humor of most of those I met there. That tone, knowing and wry, but not smartass or arrogant, is the voice of Sub Pop—or at least its website.

Marketing director and chief publicist Steve Manning says that the degree of autonomy the Sub Pop staff has is huge. "We hire smart, capable people and let them do their jobs. We offer advice. We care. But we don't get in each other's way. Those who are wired to flourish with such freedom thrive; those who don't, don't."

#### FREEDOM TO SCREW IT UP

The freedom of which Manning spoke is also reflected in how Sub Pop treats new artists. Tony Kiewel is director of A&R, an anachronistic term for Artists and Repertoire that has little to do with that job today. Kiewel's role is to seek out new talent, a great job, for sure, but think of the difficulty of finding talent when the talent's work is not exactly your style or taste. Never mind, says Kiewel: "This is their big moment. Theirs. Not ours. It might be their only album, their testament, their blood, their sweat, and their tears. If they want to call their record *Fuckin' A* (which happened), who am I to say they can't? If they want to make a video of a child bathing in feces (which happened), we've gone along with that, too. Whether or not it's in their ultimate interest, I think it's your job to tell them so, but you never really know."

After viewing the shit-smeared video for Ugly Casanova's song "Things I Don't Remember," I couldn't help but wonder that sometimes artists can make something so brilliant that they drive it off a cliff. Indeed, five minutes of watching a child covered in poop is, well, unique, even charming in a weird way (see it to believe it). But the point is not scatology, it is the fact that Sub Pop allows artistic freedom—even if the idea turns out to be a stinker.

There is an expression used "quite freely" around Sub Pop: "polishing the turd." It essentially means, "When life hands you lemons, make lemonade." No one at the label wants to be quoted using it because it implies some artists' ideas are shitty. But sometimes, of course, they are, and it is hard to dissuade them from using an idea that is not in their interest. Much of the "feces" in the Ugly Casanova video is apple butter. So, in that case, they're actually polishing an apple that just looks like turd.

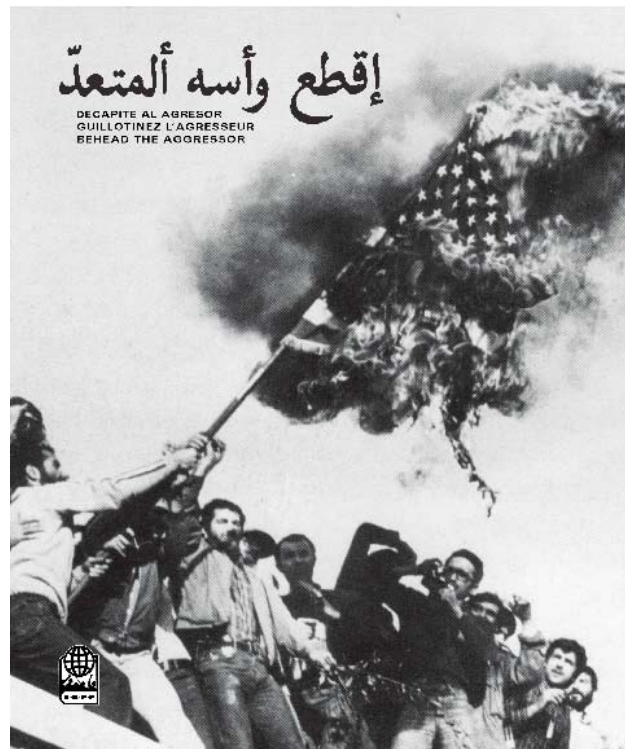
Jacobs explains in an e-mail, "If they want to name their record something we might personally find ill-advised, it's our job to let them know [our opinion]. But, ultimately, the



**AMAZING CROWNS, 1998** "WHEN MARK LANEGAN REJECTED THE IDEA OF A LONE MICROPHONE FOR THE COVER OF HIS LAST SOLO ALBUM I KNEW I WANTED TO DEVELOP IT FOR THE AMAZING CROWNS. LOOSELY ROCKABILLY IN MUSICAL STYLE, I THOUGHT THIS OLD STYLE TYPE AND CAR FOR THE BACK WORKED WELL." DESIGNER: KLEINSMITH; PRINTER: WINDWARD

**ENON 7, 2001** "I DIDN'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT ENON, BUT WHEN I TALKED TO THE MAIN GUY IN THE BAND HE TOLD ME HE WANTED TO INCORPORATE THE BAND PHOTO, BUT IN AN OBSCURE WAY. I MENTIONED THE IDEA OF A STATIC-Y TELEVISION—A DEVICE I HAVE USED BEFORE AND AM QUITE FOND OF—AND HE LIKED IT. THE WHOLE THING HAS A SLIGHT NEW WAVE FEEL ABOUT IT, WHICH FITS THE BAND'S SOUND." DESIGNER: KLEINSMITH; PRINTER: WINDWARD

**HELTER SHELTER BOXED SET, 1995** "THIS STARTED OUT AS AN IDEA TO DRAW ATTENTION TO OUR LONDON OFFICE. THE IDEA WAS TO PUT OUT A SET OF FOUR 7-INCH RECORDS OVER THE COURSE OF A YEAR. THE TRICKY PART WAS THAT THEY WANTED IT TO BE A SET BUT THEY ONLY HAD THE FIRST BAND SIGNED UP, SO I CAME UP WITH A DIECUT CARDBOARD SLEEVE TO HOUSE AN INNER SLEEVE, WHICH WOULD VARY FROM BAND TO BAND. TO SAVE ON MANUFACTURING COSTS WE PRODUCED ALL OF THE OUTER SLEEVES FOR THE WHOLE SET. THE OUTER SLEEVE AND DIAMOND SHAPE WERE CONSISTENT BUT THE INNER ART WAS RADICALLY DIFFERENT IN STYLE AND COLOR. THE VINYL WAS TO MATCH THE SLEEVE COLOR. AT THE END OF THE YEAR, AFTER ALL OF THE SINGLES WERE RELEASED, WE BOXED THEM UP IN A SET AND SOLD THEM AS PART OF A CHARITY PROGRAM FOR THE HOMELESS IN LONDON." DESIGNER: KLEINSMITH; PRINTER: WINDWARD



decision is the artist's and one we are happy to support. What's more, our initial opinions are frequently proved wrong in time. That Ugly Casanova video, for instance, people really seem to love."

Sub Pop gains its reputation by being a place for innovation. It seeks innovation in music and gives new artists the opportunity to sink or swim. But it is a place where honesty and integrity matter more than the God Almighty Dollar—or at least so far as I could tell. Once again, it demonstrates that good work originates from good people and good people attract good work.

#### THE ROSE OF REDEMPTION

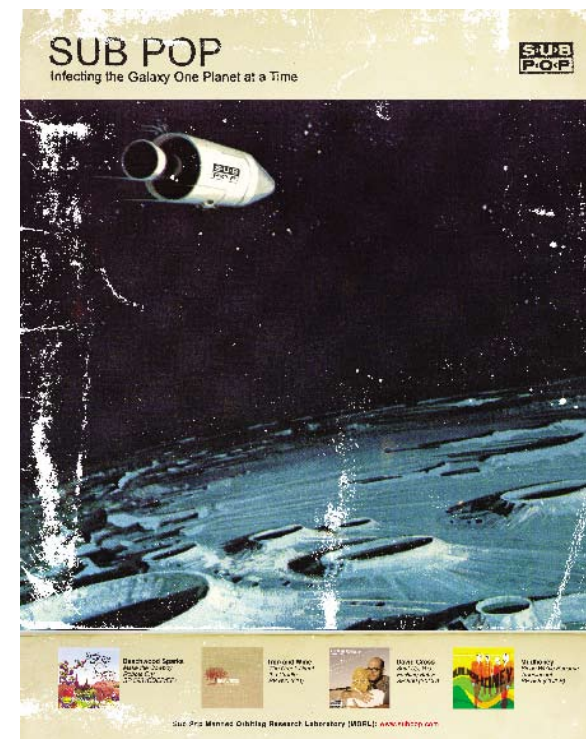
Sub Pop is perfect for people like Kleinsmith: The fact that a man

of his mental firepower (and former habits) could remain at a place is testament to this. It was never easy for him.

In college, Kleinsmith "fucked up" a lot. But before his pot-smoking, underachieving college days, he was the kind of guy who was motivated and excelled. He learned then that it was easy to throw your talent away. Immediately after being placed on academic probation for grades at the University of Oregon, he discovered graphic design. Today, that college experience of "fucking it up"—nearly losing himself and his talents—humbles him. It remains one of his great motivators. It keeps him honest, hungry, determined, and attuned.

The semester after being placed on academic probation, Kleinsmith took some design classes and kicked ass, made high marks and found his calling. Shortly after, he found a garden where he could grow as a professional and as a man. Kleinsmith is not a man in the 12th year of his last job. He's more like a kid in the first year of his dream job. So what if he has to polish a turd now and again? Most people eat them for a living. ■

www.subpop.com



ALL ADS ON THIS SPREAD DESIGNER: KLEINSMITH; CONCEPTS AND COPY: CHRIS JACOBS, MATT OLSEN.

OPPOSITE: BEHEAD THE AGGRESSOR, 1998 "IN 1998, MATT OLSEN, CHRIS JACOBS, AND I HAD COME UP WITH A FAKE REVOLUTIONARY POSTER THEME FOR AN UPCOMING AD CAMPAIGN. WE HAD A BUNCH THAT RAN AS FULL-PAGE ADS, POSTERS, POSTCARDS, T-SHIRTS, ETC., BUT THIS AD RAN IN ONE MAGAZINE, ONE TIME. FOLLOWING ITS RUN THE MAGAZINE RECEIVED A SHIT STORM OF MAIL. THERE IS NO SUB POP LOGO, ONLY A SBPP LOGO WHICH I MADE AS OUR MARK FOR ALL OF THE ADS AND POSTERS, WHICH MADE IT NOT ONLY HARD TO PIN IT ON US BUT GAVE IT AN AIR OF LEGITIMACY."



SPANNING THE GLOBE FOR PROFIT, 2002 THIS IS THE FIRST OF THREE CAMPAIGN ADS. "I WANTED A SORT OF UNITED NATIONS/OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT PROGRAM FEEL TO IT."

ABOVE: INFESTING THE GALAXY ONE PLANET AT A TIME, 2003 "THIS IS THE SECOND IN THE SERIES AND SELF-EXPLANATORY. THE THIRD AND FINAL IN THE SERIES IS CALLED PATIENT ZERO, WHERE WE HAVE THE WHOLE THING GOING HORRIBLY WRONG—MUTANTS, LAB FIRES, DEEP SPACE PANDEMONIUM, CERTAIN IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ENTIRE SOLAR SYSTEM."

WE'VE GOT COMPUTERS, 1997 "THE COPY AND SOME APING OF A MAC WAREHOUSE MAGAZINE PAGE BY JESSE LEDOUX MADE A GREAT VEHICLE TO ADVERTISE OUR RECORDS."