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ILLUSTRATIONS  
BY NOMA BARBER

CREATIVE TEAM  
OF THE FUTURE

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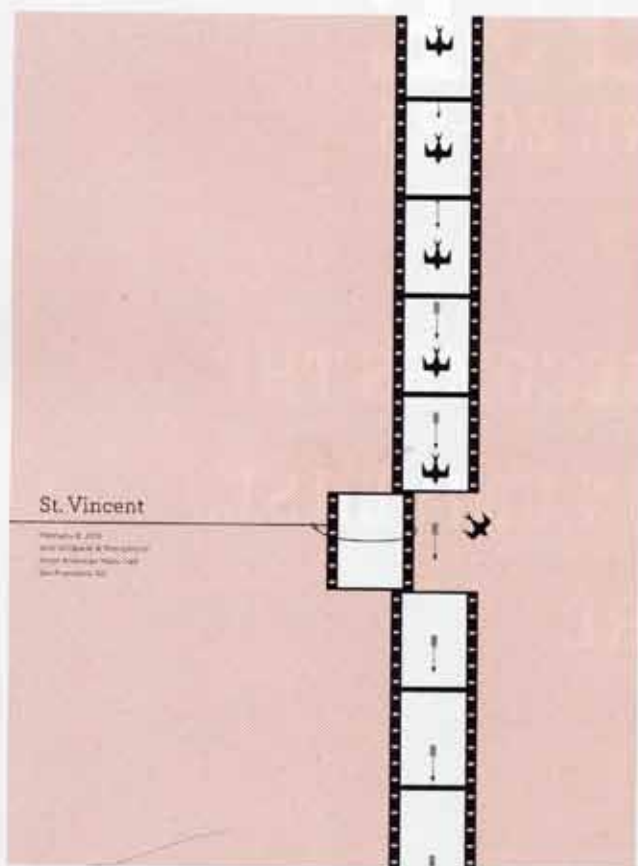
DESIGN TO THE BEAT  
LET MUSIC BE THE INFLUENCE FOR  
YOUR NEXT PROJECT PAGE 114

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## CREATIVITY

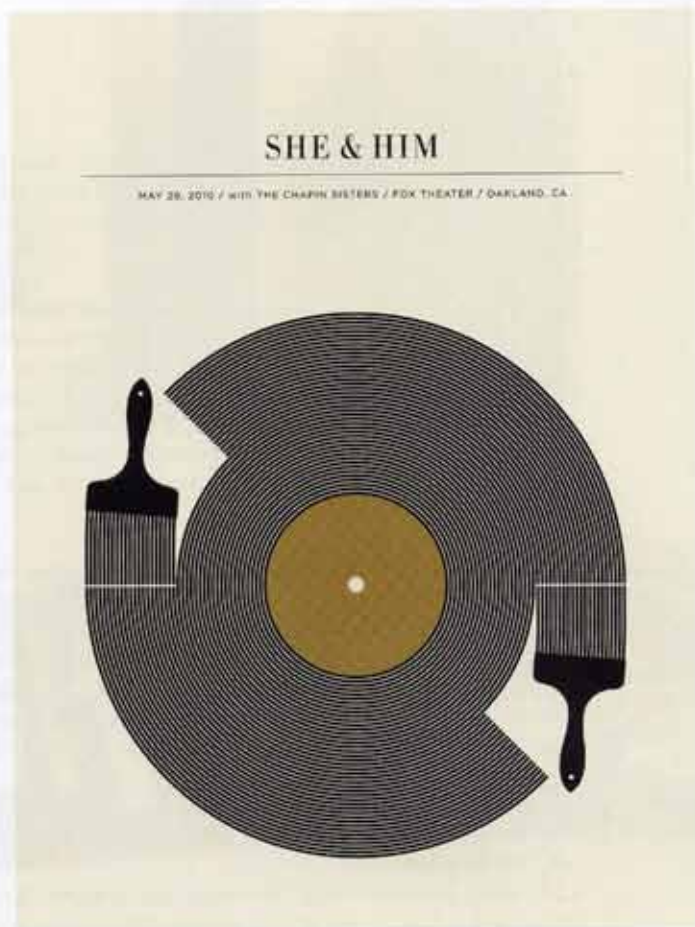
## DESIGNING TO YOUR OWN BEAT

From a paper record player to the best in gig posters, see how designers make their work sing. Plus, find your rhythm and let music inspire your next project.

If aliens from outer space came to Earth seeking to understand graphic design culture, they would no doubt discover an abundance of well-worn earphones and speakers next to some very cool, creative design work. In fact, from design studios to home offices everywhere, the "I-must-work-to-music" obsession is the industry norm.

But are awesome tunes merely the background beat to our mouse movements and pencil sketches? Did the rise of MP3s and fall of album art and CD packaging

lower the volume on music-inspired design projects? Let's all hold up our lighters, pretend we're at a rock concert and chant a resounding, "Heck, no!" On the contrary, it's pushed music-lovin' designers to be ever more creative in finding subtle and not-so-subtle ways of injecting their love for sound into the mix. From ultra-inspired posters and self-promo pieces to interactive paper invites, we've tapped creatives to share how music has helped make their designs sing (and how you can get into the rhythm too).



## CRANKING UP THE CREATIVITY

For renowned poster designer Jason Munn, "Listening to music motivates me to make things." Those things just happen to be rockin' visuals for bands such as Sonic Youth, The Flaming Lips, Built to Spill, Wilco, the Pixies and many other well-known groups. Looking at his clean illustration style with minimal colors and timeless typefaces, you just want to grab this San Francisco Bay Area designer and shake him until he spills his secret. "A lot of my stuff plays on doing unexpected things with the common," Munn explains. For example, in a screenprint for the folk duo "She & Him," Munn depicts the very literal record-making process of the pair Zoëy Deschanel and M. Ward. "Many times, I don't get a lot of direction from the band, so I'm typically narrowing down ideas. In this case, it was two people—primarily songwriters—collaborating and creating something. After a ton of sketching, I ended up with a design that's a little bit odd, but an interesting idea—where the paintbrushes are actually painting or building the record—giving the process a tangible quality," he explains. In another project, Munn nails the quirky personality of the New Zealand duo behind "Flight of the Conchords" with the ovals of a musical note illustrated as cracked eggs. Inside the white shells, funny-looking birds represent-

ing the musicians (one's wearing glasses and the other has a center-parted coif) reveal themselves.

So how exactly does Munn arrive at these damn-wish-I-thought-of-that concepts? In addition to listening to the amazing music (yes, that's part of his job "requirement"), reading the lyrics, researching a band's past visual identity and learning as much as he can about the group, he sketches. "I'll start making notes, writing a lot of things, and then start trying to connect those ideas to imagery." But during the brainstorming stage, Munn avoids technology. "I just can't sit in front of the computer and think," he says. "I work from home, so I'm either sitting in another room or at a coffee shop. Sometimes I can't even be in the same room as the computer because it's so distracting."

From creating mixed tapes and CDs as a kid growing up in Wisconsin and "having as much fun making the artwork as putting the music together," to designing T-shirts and flyers for local venues and friends' bands, Munn has turned his passion into a specialty. "I was just into music and it inspired me to keep trying to make new things," he says. But he humbly adds, "Although I get to design for some of my favorite bands now, this did not happen overnight—I've definitely been at it for awhile!"

## A MUSICAL NICHE

"When the work is a combination of myself and the band, I think that's when it tends to be the most successful," Jason Munn says. To see more of his designs, check out his book "Small Stakes" published by Chronicle Books featuring the designer's first eight years as a music poster artist ([MyDesignShop.com](http://MyDesignShop.com)).

## SOUND ADVICE

So how exactly do you pump up the volume on your own creative projects? A few imaginative designers offer music-inspired exercises to help get you into the rhythm of designing to your own true beat.

- 1 Contact a local band that could benefit from visuals.**  
Reaching out to small venues and music groups helped improve Jason Munn's design confidence when he was starting out, and he has the drool-worthy portfolio to prove it. Kelli Anderson also agrees that making a visual identity, silk screening a poster or designing album art for a band you love is a great idea. She adds, "They'll be super grateful, and it's guaranteed to be an inspiring project."
- 2 Create a suite of work based on a fictional record label or music festival.**  
In a California College of the Arts graphic design class, instructor Eric Heiman assigned this project to his students with the goal of improving their design chops, amping up their conceptual skills and turning abstract ideas into sound form. Heiman believes the project is a fantastic way to "better develop your personal design voice."
- 3 Draw or write a visual list of your thoughts while listening to music.**  
What usually blocks creativity for designer Geoff McFetridge is "the excess of random thoughts and bad ideas that are plugging the pipe." He instructs: "Put on music. Start to draw (make the visual list). When you stop hearing the music, you know you have gone to a certain depth of thought. Stop. Re-focus on really cleaning out the dusty corners. Begin again. Start drawing and this time go deeper. There will be no music, and there will be no thoughts. You will just be drawing. Spend some time down there. Repeat."
- 4 Start a "Mix-Tape Friday" in your design studio.**  
In student/designer Melissa Gruman's MFA design class, each week one designer is charged with coming up with a music theme while everyone else pitches in songs related to the topic. Then the person who chose the theme has a blast designing the cover art for the mix. "I think it's a fun thing to do. It's anything goes and there are no rules," she says.
- 5 Interpret a song through a pattern of shapes and colors.**  
For Kite Anderson, this project was by far the most inspiring she's created to date. "It forced me to take my abstract creative thoughts and put them concretely down on paper," she says. Looking forward, Anderson wants to take it a step further. Her future plans include combining artwork with musical instruments and making the project interactive.



**50 YEARS OF MUSIC**  
Volume Inc. injects humor into the center of the SF Sound poster with a clever nod to the universally accepted devil's horns hand gesture for "This band rules!"

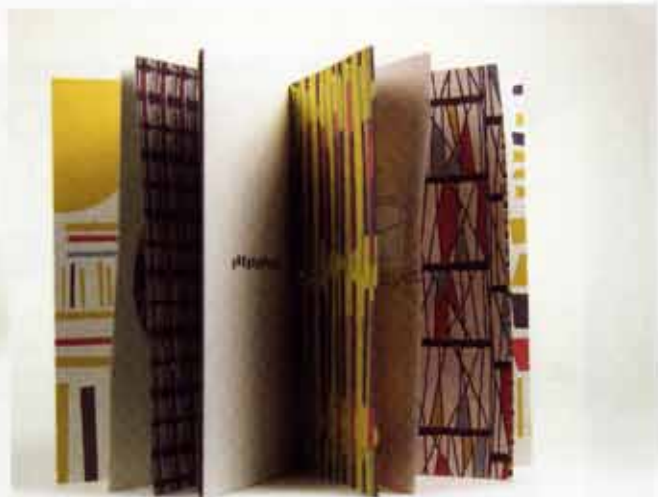


### CUTTING LOOSE WITH DESIGN

Like Munn, music led Eric Heiman, principal and co-founder of San Francisco-based Volume Inc., to graphic design. While studying architecture and DJing at Carnegie Mellon in the late '80s and early '90s, Heiman's college radio station received promos from the British indie record label 4AD. Heiman recalls looking at the amazing cover art by famed designer Vaughan Oliver and thinking, "Screw this architecture stuff, I want to do this."

It's no surprise that in 2009, Heiman and Volume Inc. co-founder Adam Brodsley jumped at the opportunity to visually represent the history of Bay Area music for the San Francisco Panorama—a newspaper-sized publication published by McSweeney's. For the design piece titled "SF Sound: A Partial Survey of the Past 50 Years of Popular and Unpopular Music in the San Francisco Bay Area," the plan from the beginning was to categorize the history of music by genre and chronology. But the challenge lay in figuring out how to express the music theme in an exciting way, yet not impede the viewer's grasp of all the data (we're talking 50 years worth of music).

The designers eventually landed on the idea of creating a visual subwoofer, where the information design simulates rock music blaring from a large speaker.



Helping to make the piece sing, designers Nathan Sharp and Talin Wadsworth worked on capturing that raw energy of listening to loud music. "We tried to match colors to genres, but it was tough to do this in any rational way. We gave punk the harshest, brightest color of the wheel; metal and industrial the more muted and metallic tones. The rest were assigned in relation to these initial three," Heiman explains. And from the studio's massive collection of music-inspired "scrap," they crafted the retro-styled typeface for the "SF Sound" header.

Although the piece originally ran as a full page in the paper, the multidisciplinary design studio retained the creative rights and reprinted the eye-popping print as a 22-by-30-inch poster. For Heiman, who refreshes his creative juices with jam sessions on his electric guitar and drums, music acts a reminder to "try my damndest to infuse the work with some sort of emotional component that engages others, even if nine times out of 10 I fail miserably." It also serves as a cue for him to simply cut loose and let go. "It's that control-freak side of being a designer that too often drains our work of its potential power," he says.

#### THE ART OF THE BEAT

Speaking of music as a catalyst for emotions, color- and pattern-loving designer Kate Thomas crafted a unique self-promotional mailer designed solely from her visual response to a selection of beat-driven genres (think: African, punk, dance, techno, rock, electronic,

etc.). Thomas was inspired to create the promo piece after receiving a thought-provoking comment from her watercolor teacher that "patterns are the drumbeat to the bigger story" and then having the lightbulb idea that "design makes order and rhythm from chaos."

"I don't respond to music by doing fancy typography. I get out my sketchbook and start drawing squares, circles and lines over and over again," Thomas says. That exercise led to the colorfully creative booklet "Art of the Beat," designed entirely from her distinct shapes and patterns, with the words "Boom, boom, boom, clash!" visually beating in the centerfold.

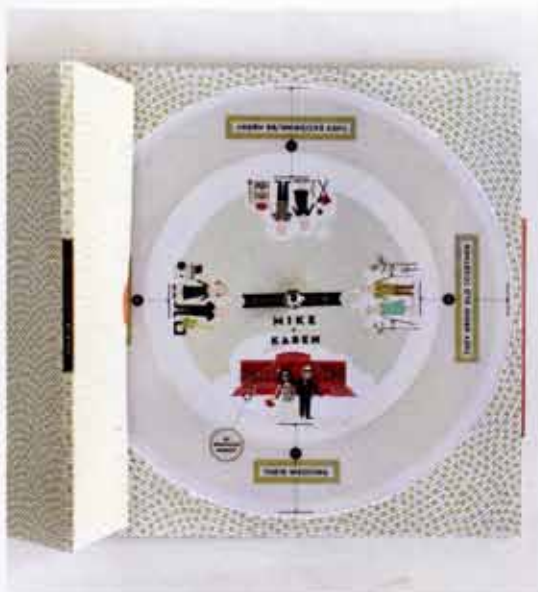
To keep the work as true to her initial gut response as possible, Thomas "set the playlist to repeat anytime I would work on the project. It helped me to keep the work raw and to not over-design the piece," she says. In selecting the color palate, she chose the hues as if they were instruments. "The dark brown color represents the drums. It holds everything down," Thomas explains. "The red is for the string instruments, and the yellow is the cymbals."

When designing the shapes and patterns, Thomas approached the process simply by listening to the music she wished to design. If the lyrics and sounds evoked an honest, organic feel, like that of her favorite singer Patty Griffin, she'd create visuals echoing those qualities and would avoid straight geometric or symmetrical shapes. "There's no one way to interpret a song into a pattern. It just depends on what feels right for you," Thomas says.



#### THE BEAT GOES ON

For her typographic treatment, Kate Thomas sought a 1950s to '60s vintage feel and found inspiration in the album cover designs featured on ProjectThirtyThree.com—a collection of vintage record jackets that pays homage to music through simple shapes and type. "Art of the Beat" also is featured as an Outstanding Achievement winner in the Promotion Design Awards on page 90.



**THE BOND OF MUSIC**  
 Music was the bond that connected designer Kelli Anderson to the couple-to-be. It also ran deep in the duo's own relationship. It was "crucial that the invitation reference the social role of music in bringing people together," the couple says. To see this paper record player in action, check out the video at [HOWdesign.com/HOW-September-2011](http://HOWdesign.com/HOW-September-2011).



## PAPER JAMMIN'

When designer and artist Kelli Anderson's music-loving pals approached her to create an invitation for their wedding, she immediately knew the project would involve music. But rather than designing a traditional two-dimensional "I Do" piece for her rockin' friends, Anderson took it up a notch and started playing with paper. She felt confident that they would all "geek-out over anything that would demonstrate the physicality of music—something that could be touched and played with," she says. Through some masterful paper folding and engineering, Anderson made a paper record player wedding invitation.

Having never constructed anything like this, Anderson channeled her "inner science geek" and experimented with piles of different types of paper, needles, screw posts, felt, cork and adhesive.

The final booklet-style invite is comprised of a cover, two inner pages, a letterpressed band (with instructions and a tear-off RSVP postcard) and a screw post anchoring the flexi disc record in place. When the recipient bends the second page of the booklet back, a tented "arm" forms and the sewing-needle-turned record-stylus is placed in the grooves of the record. As the recipient hand-spins the player at an instructed 45 RPM, the singing couple's aptly titled "Here's the Invitation" song is amplified.

In terms of the design, Anderson worked on keeping the feel of the packaging in tune with the playful music. For colors, she contrasted spring-like hues with black-and-white concentric circle patterns designed in a nod to "the hypnotic spiral of a spinning record." Last, she hand-drew caricatures of the couple in a visual story of their future together, which comes into focus when the clear flexi disc spins.

"Music itself, while intangible, has a huge visual vocabulary to draw upon," Anderson says. "So making it 'tangible' through design is like being able to pick from a smorgasbord of incredible influences and ideas." ■■

Stephanie Orma is a San Francisco-based design writer. When not penning articles on wildly creative folks, she can be found designing books for top-tier publishers in her studio Orma Design & Communications ([www.ormadesign.com](http://www.ormadesign.com)) or creating clever cards and gifts for her product line She's SO Creative ([www.shesocreative.com](http://www.shesocreative.com)).

KELLI ANDERSON BROOKLYN, NY [www.kellianderson.com](http://www.kellianderson.com)

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## »» WEB EXTRA

From ultra-inspired posters and self-promo pieces to interactive paper invites and videos, we've tapped into music-inspired projects. Find more examples, including two more designers who are seriously turning up the volume, in the web extra "Designing to Your Own Beat."

[HOWdesign.com/HOW-September-2011](http://HOWdesign.com/HOW-September-2011)