

this and get it over with."

"The vast majority of the retail sector is going to be disappointed that manufacturers abandoned the effort to find an alternative to the 6x12 that was both environmentally-friendly as well as retailer-friendly," Pam Horovitz, the Executive Vice President of NARM, tells *ICE*. "But we're not going to try to change the decision; we've accepted the fact that it's a *fait accompli* and that at this stage everybody's going to have to go back, look at their stores and decide what exactly they're going to do." In a backhanded way, the RIAA may have been doing stores a favor by decisively ruling in favor of one standard size. "I think retailers were scared that they were going to get five different CD packages," observes Susanna Seirafi of JAM, a pro-jewel box coalition. "It's not going to look good in your store if you have all these different dimensions and sizes."

Now that the 5x5 1/2-inch size standard has been established, the announcement sets the stage for a battle between the plastic jewel box sector—which is already firmly established—and the paperboard manufacturers, most of whom stridently feel they can offer consumers a better, graphically superior CD package with the exact dimensions of the jewel box. Several such packages have already appeared, including **Bonnie Raitt's** *Luck Of The Draw*, **Sting's** *The Soul Cages* and **The Grateful Dead's** *One From The Vaults*. Those releases all had the disadvantage, however, of having to stand tall in store bins and then fold down to jewel box size once the consumer got them home. With the RIAA's announcement, cardboard designers will now be able to concentrate on designing packages that can compete head-to-head with the jewel box. In fact, *Billboard* reports that **The Cure's** new album *The Wish*, when released by Elektra on April 20, will at least partially be shipped in the Eco-Pak, an alternative to the jewel box that uses both cardboard and plastic.

Rob Simonds is a co-founder of the independent Rykodisc label and certainly one of the chief instigators in ridding the industry of the long box. In April of 1989 Simonds wrote an editorial for *Billboard* magazine which called for the elimination of the long box, a bold statement at the time. Shortly thereafter he formed the Ban The Box coalition to back his cause. Few people in the industry are better versed on the subject, so we asked Simonds to share his thoughts on the RIAA's decision.

"In the immediate future, it's a victory for the jewel box," Simonds told *ICE*. "The way the RIAA release was worded, the door is left open for alternative packaging which fits the jewel box size. I think that was essentially done to appease the cardboard manufacturers and leave the door open for them to develop alternative packages. But even if (the switchover) takes until April 1, 1993, that's not enough time for any significant packages outside of digipaks—because they already exist—to be in a position to be used right away. All the manufacturing plants already have packaging machines for jewel boxes, so I'd say it's going to be 98% jewel boxes when it first happens."

The RIAA was forced to act boldly because pressure had mounted steadily in recent months to do away with the wasteful long box as soon as

possible. The list of recording artists alone who threw their weight behind banishing the long box was impressive, and included **Jackson Browne**, **John Hiatt**, **Rosanne Cash**, **David Byrne**, **The Ramones**, **10,000 Maniacs**, **The Indigo Girls**, **Crosby, Stills & Nash**, **U2**, **The Grateful Dead**, **R.E.M.**, **Raffi**, **The B-52's**, **Joe Jackson**, **Everything But The Girl**, **OMD**, **Genesis**, **Phil Collins**, **Suzanne Vega**, **Shawn Colvin**, **The Blue Nile**, **Joan Jett**, **Living Colour**, **Buckwheat Zydeco**, **Julian Lennon**, **Escape Club**, **The Neville Brothers** and **Dire Straits**. "These are all people who signed on as members of Ban The Box in support of eliminating disposable CD packaging," Simonds says. "That's really what got the attention, and frankly, that's what really turned the whole thing around. As soon as the media started to cover it and make an issue of it, the industry was forced to take a more popular position."

Another primary reason for the RIAA's move was that consumers had made it clear that the jewel box is, at least for the time being, their package of choice for CDs. Many were incensed when WEA (Warner/Elektra/Atlantic) tried to force its own alternative, the Eco-Pak, onto the industry a year ago, without conducting thorough consumer surveys first. "No label, and no industry, can just say 'this is the package that we're going to use' without testing it on consumers first," Simonds says. "I know they were surprised that the jewel box was as entrenched in the hearts and minds of consumers as it truly is. It's become associated in the minds of consumers with the CD itself."

Nonetheless, cardboard manufacturers optimistically look to the Japanese market for a reason to believe that paperboard CD containers can survive and even flourish, if done right. "I think we'll see something similar to what took place in Japan," Martin Folkman, a spokesman for the Ivy Hill paperboard firm, tells *ICE*. "And that is a tremendous growth in special packaging and packages other than just plain plastic jewel boxes. Paperboard packages there have grown to 25% of the market. I think the trend over the next few years will be for the more visually-oriented artists—people like **David Byrne**, **Perry Farrell** and **Joni Mitchell**, all of whom are actively involved in creating their own packaging—to opt for a more potentially creative package. So I think this development is a boost for everybody."

One of the problems facing paperboard manufacturers, however, is time. As Simonds pointed out, few plants are presently geared up to make the hundreds of thousands of cardboard packages needed for any major artist's release, whereas the plastic jewel box is already firmly entrenched. "The cardboard people will try to sell the labels on some kind of cardboard package," he observes, "but I think the reality of the situation is that a number of the record industry cardboard packagers are going to have a hard time selling any kind of cardboard package. AGI is about the only cardboard manufacturer that's well-positioned, with the digipak, to have some hope of making actual inroads at this point. The other guys definitely face an uphill battle."

Now that the disposable long box has been eliminated, the environmental aspect will apparently play a lesser role in determining which form of packaging will be more successful.

"I don't think there's an environmental case to be made either way for a cardboard package or a plastic package," Simonds says. "There are some who will say that a cardboard package can use recycled card stock and is therefore more environmentally friendly than a plastic jewel box, which is made from virgin resin—a petroleum product. But if you really dig deeply and look into environmental impact studies, you start to split hairs in terms of the environmental impact."

"The biggest problem with a cardboard package is consumer perception; people think that the jewel box feels more expensive and adds value to the product. The other thing is longevity; you're putting a fairly archival medium (the CD) inside this package than can last many, many years (the jewel box). To put it in a cardboard package, which can get beat up and dog-eared long before the disc that's in it, bothers a lot of people. Although a lot of people bitch about the hinges on a jewel box breaking too easily, if a jewel box breaks, you can easily replace it and the artwork's still intact. If a cardboard box gets beat up, that's the artwork; it's not easily replaced."

Simonds speaks for a lot of consumers in condemning the digipak's wear-and-tear factor. But a lot of digipak supporters point out that their package is no different from LP record jackets which everybody lived happily with for thirty years, and that plastic jewel boxes usually break whenever one is dropped. "I don't think there's a bad guy and a good guy here," Simonds observes. "There have been some really great digipaks done over the years, and the prospect of creative packages made out of cardboard—or any other material—is, to me, exciting. There's the potential of having some really interesting, creative packages out there in the jewel box size. But the jewel box is, after all, the world standard, and it works everywhere else."

That argument has been made frequently by jewel box advocates—that it's the worldwide standard, so why should America be different—but NARM's Horovitz feels that being different is one of the key reasons that the U.S. is such a world leader in retail music sales. "It's important to remember that there's a reason why the American marketplace is so big, aside from just the size of the country," she says. "Part of it, we think, has to do with the fact that merchandising styles in the U.S. have really been in the forefront for a long time. These are the stores that took product out from behind the counter—where it was under lock and key—and stacked it high and deep, letting you hold it and touch it, which encourages impulse buys and multiple purchases. We put video in the stores, neon in the stores, artist appearances in the stores...these are all things that happened first with American retailers. Part of the reason for European merchandising styles is when you're in a centuries-old city, and you've only got a thousand square feet to work with, of course you're not going to have the room to stack 50 copies of the new Peter Gabriel album. You're going to have a little sign that says 'It's Here,' and they'll go in the back room and get it—one at a time. I don't know if you'll have the same kind of excitement when *Use Your Illusion I & II* happen and people flock to the stores, surround the bins in droves and have one in each hand. *That's America.*"