

DESIGNER OF AUDIO CD PACKAGING ENTERS HELL

by Steve Martin

The burning gates of Hell were opened and the designer of CD packaging entered to the Devil's fanfare. "We've been wanting him down here for a long time," The One of Pure Evil said to his infernal minions, "but we decided to wait because he was doing such good work above, wrapping the CDs with cellophane and that sticky tape strip. Ask him to dinner and be sure to invite the computer-manual people too."

The Devil vanished missing the warm display of affection offered the inventor. "Beelzebub himself opened a nasty cut on his finger trying to unwrap a Streisand best-of," whispered an imp. A thick snake nuzzled close, and wrapped itself around the inventor's leg. "He used to be enamored of the remote-control people, with their tiny little buttons jammed together, and their enigmatic abbreviations," the snake said, "but now all he ever talks about is you, you, you. Come on, let's get you ready for dinner. We can talk about your assignment later."

As the snake led the way to the dressing halls of Hell, a yearning, searching look came over his face. "How did you do it?" the snake asked. "You know, invent the packaging? Everyone wants to know."

The inventor, his feet comfortably aflame, and flattered by all the recognition, relaxed into his surroundings. "The original plastic CD 'jewel box' was just too damn easy to get into," he explained. "I mean, if we're going to prevent consumer access, for God's sake, let's prevent it! I wanted a packaging where the consumer would run to the kitchen for a knife so there was a chance to at least slice open his hand."

Is that when you got the idea for shrink-wrap?" said the snake.

"Shrink-wrap was nice for a while. I liked that there was absolutely no place to tear into it with a fingernail, but I knew there was further to go. That's when I hit on cellophane, cellophane with the illusion of an opening strip, where really none exists." That night, at the celebratory dinner held once an aeon to honor new arrivals, the inventor sat to the Devil's right. On his left sat Cerberus, the watchdog of Hades and noted designer of the pineapple. The Devil chatted with the inventor all night long, then requested that he open another bottle of wine, this time with a two-pronged, side-slip corkscrew. The inventor perspired, and an hour later the bottle was uncorked.

At first, no one noticed the muffled disturbance from above, which soon grew into a sustained clamor. Eventually, the entire gathering, looked toward the ceiling, and finally the Devil himself noticed that their attention had shifted. He raised his head.

Hovering in the ether were three angels, each holding an object. The inventor knew clearly what the objects were: the milk carton, the Ziploc bag and the banana, all three perfectly designed packages. He remembered how he used to admire them before he fell into evil. The three angels glided toward the dais. One held the Ziploc bag over the aspiring-bottle people, and bathed them in an otherworldly light. A yellow glow from the banana washed over the hellhound Cerberus, designer of the pineapple, and the milk carton poured its white luminosity on the direction of the CD packager. The Devil stood up abruptly, roared something in Latin while succubae flew out of his mouth, and then angrily excused himself.

After the fiasco, the inventor went back to his room and fiddled with the five remotes it took to operate his VCR. Frustrated, he closed his eyes and contemplated the eternity to come in the bleakness of Hell, and how he would probably never again see a snowflake or a Fudgsicle. But then he thought of the nice meal he'd just had, and his new friends, and decided that snowflakes and Fudgsicles weren't that great anyway. He thought how the upcoming eternity might not be so bad after all. There was a knock at the door, and the snake entered.

"The Devil asked me to give me you your assignment," the snake said. "Sometimes he gets powerful headaches. He wants you to be there to open the aspirin bottle."

"I think I could do that," the inventor replied.

"Just so you know, he likes a fresh aspirin every time, so you'll have to remove the tamper-resistant collar, the child-proof cap, *and* the aluminum sealer," said the snake.

The inventor breathed easily. "No problem."

"Good," the snake said, and turned to go.

Just then a shudder rippled through the inventor's body. "Say"--his voice quavered with nervousness--"who will remove the cotton wad from the inside of the bottle?"

The snake turned slowly, its face contorted into the mask of Beelzebub. Then its voice deepened and transformed itself, as though it were coming from the bowels of Hell:

"Why, *you* will," he said. "HA HA HA HA HA!"

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