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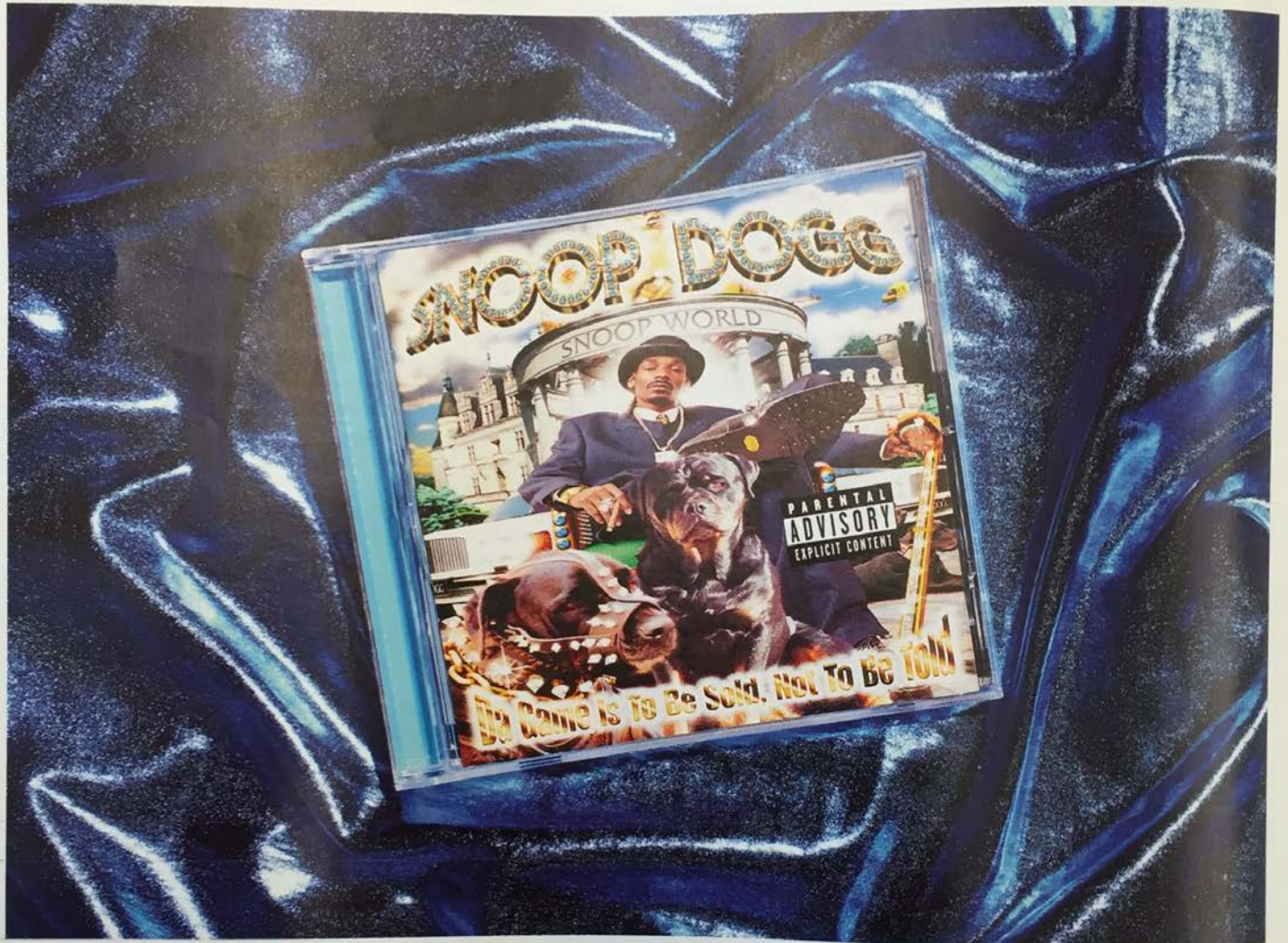
Behind the Cover Gail Bichler, design director: "The cover story follows the case of Amy Albritton, who pleaded guilty to a felony drug charge based on a roadside drug test that gave a false positive. For the cover, we chose to publish the letter sent to Albritton informing her of her wrongful conviction. She received the letter years after she spent weeks in jail and lost her job and her home."

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Pen & Pixel

By Will Stephenson



Snoop Dogg sits cross-legged in a jewel-encrusted throne. His right hand dangles a cigar, while his left clutches a gold cane so ornate that it might have been lifted from the Vatican. He's in the driveway of an unfathomably expensive mansion, flanked by a scrum of pit bulls. It makes quite a first impression, but if you look closely enough, you might notice the artwork's seams — the way the two wings of the house don't match, the way the dogs seem pulled from different photo shoots. But with diamonds

and gemstones this dazzling, why get hung up on the details?

The image is the cover of Snoop's 1998 album, "Da Game Is to Be Sold, Not to Be Told," the L.A. rapper's first with the New Orleans-based No Limit Records. And the mise-en-scène — its flamboyant and farcical qualities, its digitally simulated grace — places us unmistakably in the realm of **Pen & Pixel**, the Houston-based graphic-design firm that prospered from 1992 to 2003 by bringing just this combination of menacing

Pen & Pixel's graphics were once an affront to mainstream taste but slowly became a primary expression of it.

nonchalance and near-utopian affluence to the nation's album covers.

The design firm set the tone for Southern rap's near-complete takeover of the genre — to the point that Snoop would sign with a Louisiana label. It's easy to forget that even within a genre as historically maligned as hip-hop, music made outside the familiar East and West Coast industry hubs had a fugitive, disreputable quality for many years. From the mainstream's perspective, there was a profound otherness to these outsiders, with their strange

accents and manners and slapdash production values. Pen & Pixel served as the visual counterpart to this otherness; its gaudy, dreamlike album covers were like crass, lunatic vision-boards, offering vibrant Photoshop collages of palm trees and pineapples, Hummers and helicopters, skulls and city skylines and diamond-studded goblets. There were nearly always Champagne bottles, lightning bolts and pastel-colored luxury cars, all of it arranged carefully in graveyards or deserts or swamps, on the lawns of palatial estates or on the moon. The fonts tended to be three-dimensional, seemingly cast in gold or other precious metals.

The firm's weird, pixelated decadence conveyed fantasies of kitsch and capitalism taken to their illogical extremes. In the South Georgia town I grew up in, as in scores of other economically depressed cities across the Cotton Belt, large areas of stark poverty encircled and coexisted uneasily with pockets of country-club opulence. This was the disorienting New South that Pen & Pixel seemed to respond to in its own distinctly disorienting way.

What I most admired about the aesthetic was its boundless energy and unpredictability, and the way it let rappers be upfront and extroverted about their desires. The covers also perfectly complemented the music within — onslaughts of bold and abrasive sonic experimentation. Whether for canonical artists (Snoop Dogg, Lil Wayne) or for radically obscure ones, Pen & Pixel covers represented a sort of promise; not a guarantee of quality, exactly, but one of imaginative humor and deliberate, playful surrealism.

The firm was founded by two brothers, Aaron and Shawn Brauch. Aaron had an M.B.A. from Cornell and was a proud lifetime member of Mensa. Shawn was a scuba-diving enthusiast with multiple design degrees. Originally employed by the seminal Texas hip-hop label Rap-A-Lot, the brothers soon found themselves inundated with outside requests. They struck out on their own in 1992, their operation consisting of a computer and a dining-room table, and by 1998 they were reporting gross annual profits of \$3.7 million. They started their own TV show and, as Shawn told *The Los Angeles Times* that year, planned a book of Pen & Pixel artwork, "including a magnifying glass, to see all the detail."

And what detail! Rappers delved into their own psyches and dreamed up

Big Bear's 'Doin Thangs' cover, by the numbers:

Bears in smoking jackets: 4

Bears actually smoking cigars: 3

Fruit and nut platters: 1

Letters dripping honey: 2

scenarios in which they tamed tigers, leveled skyscrapers with laser vision, gaped at alligators or reigned over ruined worlds engulfed in flames. The results may have started out as an affront to mainstream taste, but by the turn of the century they were practically a primary expression of it.

The firm decorated the covers of 750 million albums sold, including 12 platinum and 38 gold records. It might be more accurate

to say that the firm burrowed into the id of mainstream taste, stripping it for parts in a manic cut-and-paste frenzy. Its success was accompanied by the usual hand-wringing: The Brauchs were dismissed as tasteless and grossly materialistic by people who probably danced at their weddings to Barrett Strong's "Money (That's What I Want)."

The Brauch brothers have cited Napster and Sept. 11 as the twin harbingers of Pen & Pixel's demise: Fears of file-sharing and terrorism alike apparently rendered

long-distance flights to Houston to spend large amounts on artwork (which listeners may or may not even see) a hugely optional luxury. In the company's wake, rap-album art has in large part degenerated into a kind of solemn professionalism, a zone overcrowded with nostalgia and self-serious monochromatic portraits. There's less room today for the truly unexpected juxtaposition — no pineapples, pet cheetahs or convertibles riding waves like surfboards. What I miss most about these covers is their tendency to transform real-life injustice into a luminous and liberating absurdism; the world of Pen & Pixel was limited only by artists' imaginations. They shared cigars with grizzly bears, recast themselves as Rambo-like war heroes and constructed still lifes out of Rolex watches and bottles of Moët & Chandon. And we were all allowed to take part, if only from a distance. ♦

Tip By Malia Wollan

How to Toss a Pizza



"Take off any jewelry or watches," says Tony Gemignani, an eight-time winner of the world championship in pizza-dough acrobatics and owner of 16 pizzerias in California and Las Vegas. To avoid snags, your hands should be unadorned, with fingernails cut short. Roll or stretch a softball-size ball of dough (11 to 14 ounces) into a 10-inch circle. Drape it over your hands, and bring them up to your chest like a boxer. Your dominant hand should be palm up, the other in an upward-facing fist. If you're right handed, you'll be rotating the dough in a clockwise spin (counterclockwise for lefties). To wind up for the toss, wheel your palm in the opposite direction of your eventual throw. Unwind, simultaneously pushing up and rotating your palm until the back of your wrist faces you. Release the dough just above your head, and catch

it again at your upper chest atop the knuckles of both fists. Repeat. Try not to catch the dough right in the center, which can weaken the middle, resulting in what Gemignani calls "droopy" pizza slices. Always practice over a clean countertop so you can salvage fumbled catches.

To practice regularly without the mess of flour, consider faux dough. One way to do that consists of cutting towels into two circles 14 to 16 inches in diameter, sewing them together and then wetting them with water. Companies like Throw Dough and ProDough also offer silicone substitutes in various sizes. For optimal tossing texture, alter your recipe to use less water (make it around 60 percent of the flour weight), more salt (2 percent of the flour weight) and higher-protein flour (for its viscous gluten). To increase its durability, refrigerate the dough for 24 hours before tossing. As you whirl your dough toward the ceiling, it will begin to dry out at the periphery. "That's a good thing," Gemignani says; it makes for a crisper crust.

In pizza-tossing contests, competitors often choreograph routines to music — the rhythm helps time their Harlem Globetrotter-like tricks. For the home pizza tosser, music can serve more subtle purposes. "Play some Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, Louis Prima," Gemignani says. "Get that Italian spirit behind you, and then just let go." ♦