FINAL MAJOR PROJECT

Discovering Eastern European Contemporary Folk Music

ALBUM COVERS REDESIGN

Elena Dimitrova

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01 THE ZINE

Project Background

For my final major project, I would like to design an array of alternative album covers in order to promote contemporary Bulgarian music, which remains widely unappreciated both locally and globally.

Young people who feel more in tune with Western culture and values often look down upon Bulgarian popular music, which has gypsy/oriental origins and is famous for its controversial lyrics and sexually explicit visuals. However, the aim of my campaign is to bring awareness to the spectacular range of quality that contemporary Bulgarian music offers outside the pop genre.

I have decided to focus on a genre that can be described as contemporary fusion. Some people call it ethno jazz or prog folk and it all depends on how the artist constructs it, but it usually consists of folk music synthesised with jazz, rock, flamenco or classical elements. It is relatively unknown to younger audiences, partly because it fails to distinguish itself visually from regular folk music, which is usually associated with older age groups and is considered to have no place in the digital world.

Nevertheless, the sub-genres that stem from folk music and use it as a base, overlaying experimental sounds on top, are often quite quirky and fun and would very much intrigue younger audiences.

I believe that the genre suffers from a lack of adequate promotion and a cohesive visual identity. Many of the designs appear outdated and irrelevant by today's standards. In the isolated cases where the visual style captures the essence of the musical pieces, it fails to communicate its appeal to audiences with no prior experience with the genre. Even then, the artwork is outsourced from foreign designers because local designers still struggle to find the proper identity for the genre, which will make it relevant and commercially successful in the modern age.

By redesigning the album covers, I aim to shift consumers' perspectives about this type of music and turn this relic of the past into a cool, vintage, collectable-worthy item that also encourages young Bulgarian people to explore and embrace their cultural identity.

I want to communicate that even though the music has traditional elements in it, it is by no means conservative. While I want to draw some inspiration from already existing covers, I also aim to create something completely radical, unconventional and unexpected of the genre.

initial idea from the zine

fgrd6003 final major project

RESEARCH

ILLUSTRATIONS

HOLIDAY

LETTER DESIGN

PHYSICAL

MAKING

HOLIDAY

CRITICAL

REFLECTION

UNIT REPORT
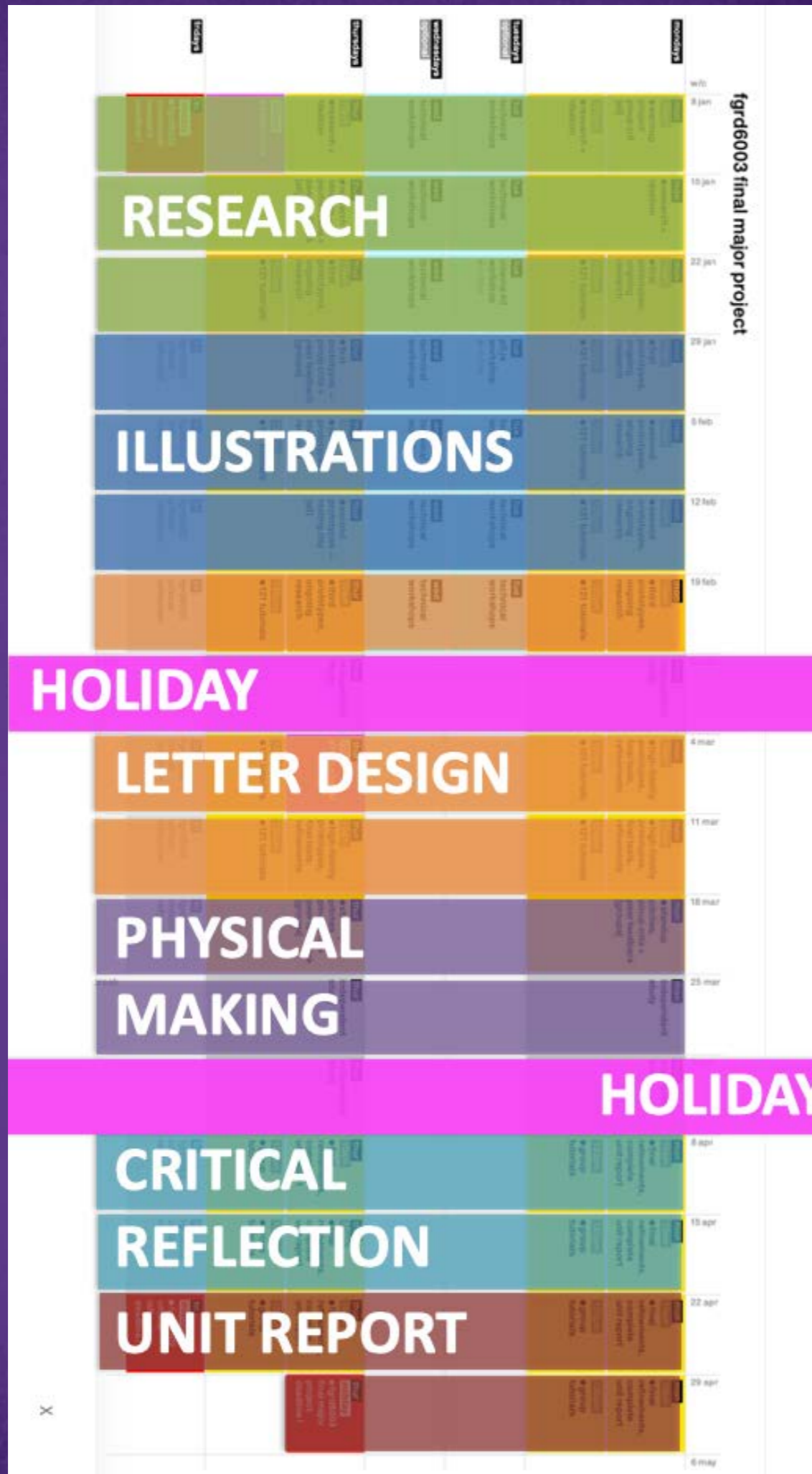
Breakdown

25 - 3: Visual References Research:

Books: Art Sleeves: Album Covers by Artists;

Articles: Typography in Album Art: Power of Words; History of Album Covers; Jazz Album Covers;

Artist focus: Psychedelic Design: Martin Sharp;

Design theory book: I like it what is it?

General search in the library

3-6: General research on Bulgarian graphic design, Bulgarian album covers, observing trends, deciding which elements would be worth keeping in my design and which ones should be avoided.

Folklore Research: Identify the main characters, the individual narratives and relate them to a specific musical piece

6-7 Identify the outlines: Is the campaign going to be based on artists that work in the same genre, but are from different Eastern European countries?

Is it ONLY going to focus on Bulgarian artists, but maybe ones who play different instruments?

08.04 - 12.04: do i want to change anything, add an artist or remove one? can i do something else - expand to something outside of music but it still relates to that? Am I satisfied with my work? User feedback (taking time to ask both people with no prior engagement to the topic and local Bulgarian people;

12.04 - 22.04: make the physical packaging, experiment with printing techniques, textures, materials

22.04-29.04: unit report refinements

Or only on ONE Bulgarian artist : Re-design all of their albums and less known EPs?

NOTE: (i think the latter two would not be as impactful) Can folklore be used as inspiration for character design if I decide to include other Eastern European countries and their music? If not, how to make it cohesive?

07.02-08.02 Finalise on what albums/artists to include; make a HUGE list of what exactly is needed for the entirety of the project and stick to it (how many posters, how many albums, how many stickers) (stuff can be added later)

Is there going to be an artbook? If yes, what are the basics of editorial design?

8.02-8.03 Illustrations:

8.02 identify the STYLE: it going to be like a collage, should I use photography;

Is it going to be more cartoon-y? if YES, is it going to more conventional or abstract/artsy

Plan for textures, colours, shading

Rough sketch; make sure the sketch works across all the albums/artists I want to design for;

9.03 - 12.03 Character design

12.03 - 16. 03 Background elements design

16. 03- 23. 03: Composition refinements

23 - 26 make sure to finish all extra artwork, alternative designs; materials; get everything ready

!! 26.02 - 3.03 (probably holiday)

03.03 - 08.03 work on the social media campaign (NOTE: only change the font when its done)

8.03 - 8.04 font

08.03 - 09.03 - ask Paul for a workshop, basics on typography,

09.03 - 12.03 basic understanding of how to evaluate which typefaces look good and which don't;

12.03- 14. 03 specific research on Cyrillic fonts, how to translate them into an existing font;

14. 03- 25.03 -font

!!! 25. 03 - 01. 04 - holiday

01.04-08.04 - font

Last stage:

Tasks

Mindmap

usability

usability chart

- Physical vinyl record jackets/sleeves for each album (Standard)
- Gatefold jackets:
Opens like a birthday card (or a wallet), and has four printed pages in total (two outside and two inside). The final package is essentially two jackets connected by a spine and as such they can hold 1 record and a printed insert, booklet or poster
- Editorial design: Artbook (to showcase individual illustrations as a form of merchandise.

digital

tangible

+ Social Media marketing campaign
(mainly focused on Instagram and TikTok)

identity

- The aim is to build a strong recognisable brand for this genre, but also be conscious of how this brand can be used in relation to national branding or even international branding campaigns

+ All elements produced in this campaign will have a cohesive and distinguishable visual identity.

opinions

For example, if I were to expand the concept and design covers for various artists from other Eastern European countries from the same genre, can it be used as a way to strengthen the relationship between these countries by promoting the idea of a collective Eastern European cultural identity (showcase the similarities of said cultures)

How the idea expanded

After discussing the project outlines with Anthony, I started thinking of ways to expand that idea and positively impact the world on a bigger scale instead of just fulfilling my initial objective, which was bringing more recognition to the local genre.

However, I wanted to stay true to my original idea. Whatever the development was, I wanted it to come from the music. Music is a huge part of my life, and it has always made me feel connected to my native country and heritage, while many other aspects of its culture did the opposite. Hence, my goal is to convey my emotions through design, start a meaningful conversation, and make it more accessible to others who find it hard to identify with their own cultures.

Therefore, I started to think about who these "others" might be—individuals whose circumstances resonate with mine—and how their situation is similar to mine. The obvious answer is other people from Bulgaria. However, I realised that they may not be the only ones who experience cultural dissonance or alienation. This notion prompted me to consider which cultures I know well enough (due to similar languages, customs, proximity, history, etc.) so I could delve into deeper research for this project. I concluded that exploring the neighbouring countries surrounding Bulgaria would be a good starting point.

I also circled back to my essay from 1st semester, where I studied how the shared experience of growing up in Eastern Europe is presented on social media and how people interact with the content. From my research, I have identified several things:

- On TikTok, a collection of visual imagery and music considered representative of the lifestyle in Eastern European countries exists under the label 'Eastern European core'.

- Growing up has been similar in most Eastern European countries: similar languages, housing situations, infrastructures, school environments, home environments, foods, clothes, customs, books, TV, music, etc.

- People online express a strong feeling of nostalgia and a tendency to romanticise some aspects of the lifestyle despite having more complex feelings about the country's social, economic, and political state.

- Those with a more defined interest in Western culture or more unconventional interests share that despite feeling ostracised from their environment, they still harbour many fond memories, primarily of food, music, and family customs.

My research about the "Eastern European core" trend was inspired by my interest in the nation branding of Eastern European countries and the prospect of developing a unified identity that can reflect the shared experience of my generation. Personally, I believe that people from Eastern European countries share many similarities, which is particularly evident now when communication and information exchange are so easy because of social media. However, obviously, due to political and historical reasons, people have prejudices against each other and sometimes fail to recognise the beauty of acknowledging their likeliness and embracing their differences through collaboration.

However, music transcends any hostility. Specifically, contemporary folk is one of the most powerful bridges connecting Eastern European countries. I decided that instead of focusing solely on Bulgarian artists, it would be better to include an array of Romanian, Serbian, and Macedonian artists who also perform within this genre. They all create and transform music from their respective regions. Still, they have a long history of collaborating or being influenced by each other's countries' folk music. Hence, the notion of cultural exchange and enrichment is an inseparable element of this genre.

Furthermore, it places the project in a broader context, potentially angling it towards becoming more about Eastern European rather than just Bulgarian identity. My artists of choice and their respective albums are:

- Theodosii Spassov - Welkya (Bulgaria)

- Vlatko Stefanovski - Krushevo/ Live in Belgrade (Macedonia)

- Tadic, Stefanovski and Spassov - Treta Majka (Serbia, Macedonia, Bulgaria)

- Andrew Rangell - A Folk Song Runs Through It (USA)

Note: Rangell seems the odd one out, but his album revolves around pieces by famous composers Bartok, Janacek, and Kodaly (Hungary and Romania). These composers transcribed many folk tunes for piano and other media and incorporated the melodic, rhythmic, and textural elements of peasant music into their original music.

02 primary RESEARCH

01 Krushevo / Live in Belgrade

Vlatko Stefanovski was the founder of the Macedonian art-rock group Leb i sol (Bread and salt, the traditional Slavic welcome), which gained international fame and recorded a total of 13 albums before the group was dismissed in the early nineties. In his subsequent solo career, Stefanovski turned more towards etno and jazz. (Sarajevo travel, n.d.)

Named after a little town in Macedonia, 1999's Krushevo reflects the heritage and inventiveness of Vlatko Stefanovski and Miroslav Tadic, two of the region's finest guitarists. Krushevo's bluesy Macedonian folk songs are arranged for two acoustic guitars for a flexible, evocative sound that is emphasized by the album's unique production values. Recorded inside the Makedonium, a monument located in Krushevo, the album has a cavernous, otherworldly sound, unlike many other guitar-based world music albums. Haunting and historically rich, Krushevo's beauty comes from its songs and the talents of Stefanovski and Tadic. (Phares, n.d.)

Tadic states that "Live in Belgrade" is pretty much the same music as Krushevo, but live: "There are several new pieces on the record, but It has a different kind of energy, and the material has matured with us. It's a different take on that music." he adds. (Prasad, 2003) I decided to redesign Live in Belgrade purely due to personal preference for the music. Still, I plan to use some of the visuals for Krushevo as a stepping stone since the cover of Live doesn't offer much in terms of graphic identity. Note: Also, I think the fact that the album contains pretty much all the music from Krushevo, plus some extra tracks, needs to be more emphasised in the design. The title Krushevo is far more captivating and immediately conveys to the consumer the type of music featured in the album.

While it is unclear who designed Krushevo's cover, I found out information about its photography. The recording was made inside the Makedonium Monument in Krushevo, and the cover features a photo of its interior. Another album version shows an inverted image of the alley leading to the same monument. The establishment is dedicated to all the IMARO revolutionaries who participated in the Ilinden uprising, as well as communist Yugoslav partisans of World War II in Yugoslav Macedonia (1941-1944). The memorial complex also houses a series of sculptures named "Breaking the Chains", symbolising freedom won in the liberation wars. There is also an amphitheater decorated with colorful mosaics.

Notes: I would like to somehow translate the aesthetic style of the mosaic and the robustness of the monument's shape into my future design. While I like the typography and inverted effect of the album's second version, there's an issue with excessive text cluttering the cover. Additionally, I don't think the design benefits from having the huge white stripe overlayed on the image.

Another thing that I find funny and would like to incorporate into my design is that "Krushevo" derives from the word "Krusha," which directly translates to pear. I keep thinking about how pears and guitars have similar shapes, and sometimes, pear wood is used in guitar manufacturing.

This album could be considered one of the most poetic because its instrumental music is based on folk songs that already contain rich narratives and feature an array of characters. The vivid visual imagery described in these songs allows for many symbolic interpretations, which can translated into a design, even if the compositions do not feature the original lyrics.

While some songs serve as hopeful love confessions, such as "Ajde dali znaes, pametis Milice," where the protagonist recounts a tender moment shared with a girl named Milica from his youth, affectionately wondering if she recalls it too, others have a slightly melancholic note to them, like Jovano Jovanke, which is dedicated to the singer's true love, Jovana, and ends with the painful realisation that they can never be together because her family won't allow it.

Additionally, some songs depict a dangerous kind of unrequited love, like Proseta se Jovka Kumanovska, where a girl is being followed in the fields by a man who tries to persuade her to change her religion and become his wife. Jovka, however, keeps refusing him, as she is in love with another man.

However, some songs have an incredibly cheerful and humorous tone to them. For example, in Uchi me majko, karaj me, the male protagonist expresses his desperation to win over a woman named Liljana in front of his mother. His mother, eager to help, suggests he build a fountain for the villagers, convinced Liljana will instantly fall in love with him upon seeing it. However, funnily enough, everyone comes and enjoys the fountain, except Liljana.

Many (7 out of 11) of the songs in the album revolve around female-centred narratives. It comprises a collection of love songs, each one offering a distinct set of tangible iconography and colours that evoke certain senses and emotions: dew drops, clover, white linen, blooming roses, fresh basil, colourful fountains with running cold water, fields, and mountain slopes. It truly is a designer's dream!

Do you know, do you remember Milica

Do you know, do you remember Milica
when we were little
when we were little, Milica
when we were in love.

When we were in love, Milica
in my uncle's garden,
in my uncle's garden, Milica
with the colorful flowers.

With the colorful flowers, Milica
there were roses blooming,
there were roses blooming, Milica
and you were sleeping on my lap.

When I kissed you, Milica
your face was churned,
your face was churned, Milica
and you blew fire from your eyes.

Teach me mother, guide me

Hey, teach me mother, guide me
how to win Liljana
Liljana, pretty girl
Liljana, skinny, tall
Liljana, white, red
Liljana, tiny basil
Liljana, her mother's only child.

I teach you my son, I guide you
how to win Liljana's heart
call three hundred masons
make a colorful fountain
direct cold water into it
all the villagers will come
and Liljana's friends, too
and all the dark-haired brides
hopefully Liljana will come.

Stojan listened to his mother
he called three hundred masons
he made a colorful fountain
he directed cold water into it
all the villagers came
and Liljana's friends
and all the dark-haired brides
damn Liljana for not coming.

Jana, Jana, my dearest

- Jana, Jana, my dearest,
my clover blossom covered with dewdrops,
oh, my clover blossom covered with dewdrops.

You pass by, Jana, and leave,
you neither talk to me, nor give me a smile,
oh, you neither talk to me, nor give me a smile.

The artisans ask you, dear Jana,
what you will prepare them for dinner,
oh, what you will prepare them for dinner.

- A bread and cheese pie, master, or a chicken,
this evening, master, a tender lamb,
ah, breast-fed, master, by two mothers.

Jovano, Jovanke

Jovano, Jovanke,
You sit by the Vardar, bleaching your white linen,
Bleaching your white linen, my dear,
Looking at the hills.

Jovano, Jovanke,
I'm waiting for you,
To come to my home,
And you don't come, my dear,
My heart, Jovano.

Jovano, Jovanke,
Your mother, doesn't let you,
(to)come with me, my dear,
My heart, Jovano.

Dafina, red wine

Dafina, red wine,
your boyfriend was asleep.
Your boyfriend was asleep,
on Karakamen mountain.

On Karakamen mountain,
on a slope without water
Along came hajduks
and stole his vest.

They stole his vest
and sold it in a tavern.
They stole his vest
and sold it in a tavern.

Sold it in a tavern,
exchanged it for red wine,
Exchanged it for red wine,
and fine strong rakija.

I don't care if they stole his vest,
as long as my boyfriend is alive.
I don't care if they stole his vest,
as long as my boyfriend is alive.

Jovka Kumanovka took a walk

Jovka Kumanovka took a walk, hey,
up and down, Jovka, through that field, hey,
through that field near Idrizovo.

Jovka lost a necklace, hey,
Jovka lost a necklace, hey,
then came after her Ljatif Aga.

- Do not walk Jovka Kumanovka, hey,
through that field, Jovka Kumanovka, hey,
through that field near Idrizovo.

I'll take you, Jovka, to be my wife, hey,
I'll make you, Jovka, a muslim wife, hey,
a muslim wife of Ljatif's.

I'm not becoming a Turk, Ljatif, I'm not becoming a Greek, hey,
I crave, Ljatif, after another, hey,
I crave after another, Kostadin.

02 Treta Majka

In Macedonian, "Treta Majka" ("Third Mother") is actually a quirky slang expression that means a third attempt or third take. Also, it marks the third album, which is the outcome of a fruitful partnership between the Macedonian guitar virtuoso Vlatko Stefanovski and the Serbian guitar master Miroslav Tadic. There are several tracks with wonderful solos by guest Teodosii Spasov on Bulgarian kaval. He also suggested that the duo cover a traditional Turkish tune "Anadolu oyun havasi" that turned out to be one of the funkiest (and most surprising) tracks on this record with its catchy melodies and unusual twist and turns.

Because of its strategic position within the Balkans region, Macedonia represents a real melting pot of various musical and cultural traditions and heritages that has been brewing for centuries. Firstly, there is a strong influence by the Ottoman Empire that had highly developed classical music within the so-called Maqam system i.e. a modal system. Other influences range from Turkish folk music, as well as the travelling gypsy musicians who moved from India to the West, picking up every style they came across on their journey, while infusing them with their own sensibility and morphing them into their own musical Esperanto.

All of those strands of influence were weaved through the loom of Macedonian history, which, even though full of hardship, tragedy, and struggles, produced a musical tradition which is at the same time sombre, epical, unrelenting, poignant, yet ultimately life-affirming. This is best embodied and echoed in one of its most important features - the odd meters, which are prevalent in Macedonian music as the most popular songs are written in seven, nine, eleven and thirteen beats.

Treta Majka finds these two artists working again with traditional Macedonian music. Even though they have different backgrounds and approaches to guitar playing, their chemistry makes their take on the material unique. Their musical sensibilities have been informed by many different playing styles: classical, flamenco, jazz, and rock, among others, and the music has benefited from that. Compared to Krushevo, the ambience is similar but somewhat less electrifying.

This record displays the full array and versatility of the performers' craft: It shows both the players' ability to blend and to swing soulfully, whether doing a solo, playing in the background or playing in unison. This rich, sombre, wonderful music is played beautifully by musicians, pouring their hearts into it. (Georgievski, 2004).

Don't sell the farm, Koljo

Don't sell the farm, Koljo,
my mother won't give me.
Koljo goes to the taverns and drinks rich wine,
he doesn't go home early to sleep.

What your farm is worth,
Koljo, my face is worth.
Koljo goes to the taverns and drinks rich wine,
he doesn't go home early to sleep.

Don't sell the pen, Koljo,
my mother won't give me.
Koljo goes to the taverns and drinks rich wine,
he doesn't go home early to sleep.

What your pen is worth, Koljo,
my throat is worth.
Koljo goes to the taverns and drinks rich wine,
he doesn't go home early to sleep.

Come on, listen, black-haired Angja

Come on, listen, black-haired Angja,
the tambura playing.
The tambura is playing, black-haired Angja,
saying that you should be a wife of a Turk.

You will be a wife of a Turk, black-haired Angja,
you will sit on the oriel.
You will sit on the oriel, black-haired Angja,
you will count gold coins.

You will count gold coins, black-haired Angja,
you will weave pearls.
You will weave pearls, black-haired Angja,
you will put them on your neck.

Come on, listen, you damned Turk,
I will not be your wife.
I will not be your wife, you damned Turk,
I don't understand Turkish.

From a designer's perspective, this album is all about thirds, symmetry, and their symbolic meaning. Notably, it marks the third collaborative album of the musicians, reflected in the title and the number of participating artists. The thematic significance extends to the chosen instruments and the beats of the songs. Additionally, the collaborating artists originate from three different Eastern European countries: Macedonia, Serbia, and Bulgaria.

In art, "Omne trium perfectum" is a trio of Latin words that conveys a simple overarching philosophy: "Everything that comes in the tree is perfect." Many things in nature come in three: the times of day—morning, midday, and evening—the phases of matter—solid, liquid, gas—and the dimensions—length, width, height. Likewise, art abides by the same principle with the rule of thirds, the three primary colours, and the three-act structure in drama. Moreover, the motif of threes also prevails in storytelling, from literary classics to folklore and mythology: the Three Musketeers, the Fates in Greek mythology, the granting of three wishes by a genie, and the division of the afterlife into hell, purgatory, and heaven. (Dayan, S. 2019)

Similar to the poeticism of Krushevo, some of the folk songs featured as a base in the album are based on oral legends. For example, "Kalesh Andjo" is based on a story about an Ottoman Turkish man singing a serenade to a young Macedonian girl named Angja. He asks her to become his wife and promises her a rich and easy life with lots of gold and pearls, but only if she is willing to change her nationality and religion and become a Muslim wife in his harem. At the end of the song, the girl proudly refuses his offers, saying that she would never become his wife. She would never sacrifice her freedom, nationality and faith for the gifts he offers. According to North Macedonian oral tradition, the song is based on true historical events from the region of Mariovo: After failing to seduce her with his power and fortune, the furious man wanted to abduct her and force her into Islamisation. Refusing to accept this, Kaleš Angja committed suicide by jumping off a cliff.

Similarly, the original folk song "Ne si go prodavaj Koljo Ciflikot" is structured like an appeal from a young girl to a man named Koljo. She is scolding him, asking him not to sell his land and to stop drinking so often because otherwise, her mother won't like him and won't give him her hand in marriage.

There is a rich visual language associated with all of the songs, even if they are not based on concrete legends. They evoke powerful visual images with many symbolic connotations that a designer can develop and implement in the album covers.

Regular folk: Current Design Issues

I am using the following album covers of Bulgarian folk music as an example, but my research shows that the problem is the same across the rest of the Eastern European countries. The album covers all have similar issues: They lack a distinctive and cohesive visual style. The designs appear outdated and do not come off as appealing and relevant by today's standards: Frame within a frame, outdated typefaces, bad colour combinations, and bad photo retouching;

Overall, even though the visual style reflects essential information about the genre (photos/portraits of the artists, musical instruments, folk costumes, landscapes from their area of origin), it fails to communicate its appeal to younger audiences or audiences who have no prior experience with the genre.

However, the disinterest among younger generations may stem not only from the failure of designs to adapt to current trends but also from the perceived irrelevance of folk music in the contemporary world. Folk music is considered outdated, conservative and is often associated with a culture and values many young Bulgarians fail to identify with. And I partly agree that regular folk music can be pretty dull if it fails to introduce new, exciting elements or stand out as an exceptional example within the genre, which only a handful of releases are considered to be.
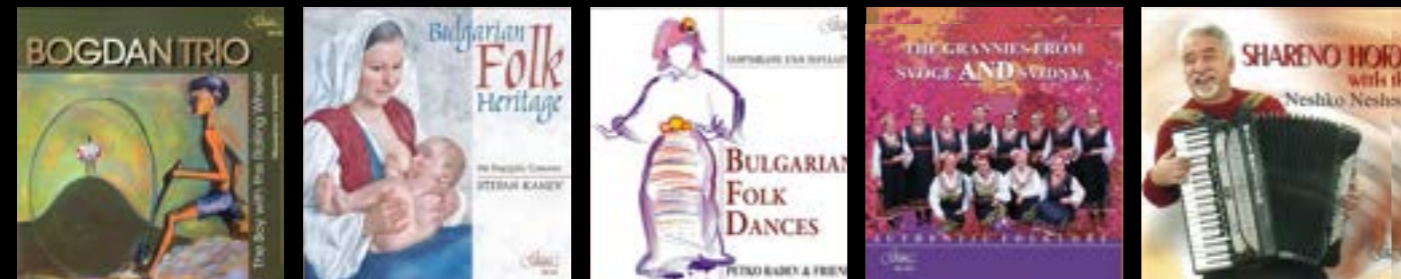
Elevated folk music design

The most elevated and critically acclaimed example of Bulgarian folk music is considered "Le Mystère Des Voix Bulgares", released by UK indie institution 4AD.

In 1951, Filip Kutev was appointed founding director of Bulgaria's State Ensemble for Folk Songs and Dances, tasked by the government with eliminating "anti-socialist" currents in the country's traditional folk culture and turning it into a "progressive" force. Kutev fulfilled his modernising brief imaginatively by blending the signature elements of traditional Bulgarian vocal music – dissonances, quarter tones, drones and asymmetrical rhythms – with arrangements derived in part from the impressionism of Claude Debussy and the twelve-tone innovations of Arnold Schoenberg. The result was unlike anything heard anywhere before, a roots-based music shot through with avant-garde flourishes. Then, a disc with Kutev's recordings, originally released by Swiss musicologists Marcel and Catherine Cellier, ended up becoming a massive best-seller for the British label 4AD in 1986. Watts-Russell calls the album "a highlight of my life, my career." (May, 2017)

Le Mystère Des Voix Bulgares is the sole folk piece that reached such a high level of recognition and became a so-called "global cult phenomenon". Subsequently, it is the only folk piece that enjoyed the privilege of being designed by a foreign designer and received a much more exciting visual identity than its locally released counterparts.

Case study: Oliver Vaughan

When assessing Oliver Vaughan's work, it is easier to find non-graphic design influences embedded in his aesthetic purview: Surrealism, the films of Andrei Tarkovsky; the dark phantasmagorias of the Brothers Quay; Japanese extreme cinema; and the morbid, death-obsessed imagery of photographer Joel-Peter Witkin. Watercolour-brushed barely-human forms, topless flamenco dancers and abstract monkeys, depicted in his signature gothic, surrealist and texture-heavy styles, graced the covers of work from the Pixies, Cocteau Twins, the Breeders and many others. (Long, 2020)

All of these influences can be seen in his work for the record label 4AD. He spent 20 years as the label's in-house designer and art director, and helped founder Ivo Watts-Russell turn the company into a cult label. From the logo to numberless record sleeves, posters and printed artefacts, Oliver's work for 4AD is vast. Yet the idea of him as a production powerhouse is at odds with the meditative and often melancholic nature of his craft. Oliver's work is the equivalent of 'slow cinema'. He was the Ingmar Bergman – or perhaps the David Lynch – of graphic design. His work demands that the viewer meets it halfway, and in this regard it is the antithesis of most graphic design and nearly all advertising. He said: "I try to make images where you don't always get 'the message' straight away. But these things leave a hook in you. Leaving some space for interpretation is important." (Shaughnessy, 2020)

Vaughan certainly isn't telling us what to think about this image, or what to think about The Breeders' music. He leaves it to the viewers to decide. As the design writer Kenneth Fitzgerald has observed: "Oliver is that rare designer whose work speaks to people empathetically, as co-enthusiasts, not as consumers." (Shaughnessy, 2020)

To look at his work is to roam across intricate and abstract textures punctuated with a squiggle or daub of curious detail. They're tactile, except what is felt is less their surfaces than the mood and spirit of their contents. "The music has led each design," Vaughan told Print in 2010. "If it doesn't connect with the music, it's worthless."

From the late '80s, photography would play a big part in Oliver's designs for 4AD, bringing to the fore his almost-romantic fixation on objects. He discusses the re-appropriation and re-contextualization of everyday objects through his art: "I like to elevate the banal through surrealism," he said in 2014. "Mystery and ambiguity are important weapons in a designer's arsenal. I try to make images where you don't always get 'the message' straight away, but these things leave a hook in you." (Chen, 2018)

However, it was never just lemons, toothbrushes, or bits of expensive lace that, in his own term, he was elevating, but also, in turn, the record sleeve, the experience of looking at a record sleeve, and the ownership of a record sleeve. It's an object that, in content, design, and acquisition, always imparts more than a look. "The personal experience is there," as Oliver puts it, "the nerve centre of your history and emotions." (Chen, 2018)

Vaughan for Le Mysterie des Voix Bulgares

The album art for 4AD's reissue of Le Mystere Des Voix Bulgares from 1986 was designed by 23 Envelope. Under this name, Vaughan Oliver (graphic design and typography) and Nigel Grierson (photography) worked together to create the artwork for almost all releases by the British record label until 1987, building up a distinctive visual identity.

The artwork is just as enigmatic and difficult to place in time as the music. The cover design combines Grierson's desaturated photography (a single lady's shoe underwater?) with Vaughan's non-conformist typography.

The two lines are set in two script typefaces, which, from a conventional viewpoint, are neither similar enough to harmonize nor different enough to yield a contrast. They are enclosed by three borders. With their deep shadow, these echo and amplify the dimensionality suggested by the shade on the letters of the second line.

"Voix Bulgares" is set in all caps – featuring several letterforms that don't lend themselves to being used in medial position, like the hooked I or the G with the descender on the baseline – further increasing the disturbing atmosphere.

Oliver Vaughan loved to dig up obscure fonts that no one else used in the 1980s. In fact, both cover typefaces haven't been documented on Fonts In Use before. Atlántida is an outlined and shaded stand-alone italic with a modest slant and deep crotches. It was issued by the Richard Gans foundry in Madrid sometime in the second third of the 20th century. Saltino is a bold unconnected cursive, designed by Karlgeorg Hoefer with a self-made broad nib (the Brause 505) as an extension of his earlier Salto. It was first cast by Klingspor in Offenbach, Germany, in 1954. Neither Saltino nor Atlántida is currently available in digital form. (Hardwig, 2019).

Inner sleeve

What is contemprary folk music and how is it different from regular folk music?

Also known as ethno-jazz or prog folk, the genre can be described as an unusual synthesis of traditional folk, jazz, pop, rock, and classical music. Every artist adds their own unique flavour to the genre, depending on their musical background and instrument of choice.

For instance, Theodosii Spassov developed his unique style by being the first musician to play jazz on kaval - a traditional wooden shepherd flute, while Miroslav Tadić, a guitar player, concentrated on applying classical and flamenco techniques to musical material drawn from diverse sources. Stefanovski's speciality is fusing rock with folk music from North Macedonia. Andrew Rangell has masterfully arranged and played pieces by Kodaly, Bartok and Janacek, whose creative achievements were nourished and stimulated by each composer's deep, lifelong study of indigenous folk music.

While it is true that regular folk music is associated with older age groups and values, the sub-genres that stem from it or use it as a foundation, which they overlay with experimental sounds, are often very quirky and fun and could intrigue younger audiences if given a chance.

My strategy for the cover design is to draw inspiration from legends and folk tales deeply connected to the places where the music originated from. I plan to do this via illustration or a mixed-media approach. Usually, the original tunes that contemporary folk music is based on already have a rich narrative. I aim to identify the themes, symbols, and individual characters from said narrative and implement them in a visual identity.

A good example is the design for Kukagaku Moyo's album Masana Temples because they have successfully implemented Japanese folklore characters (yokai) into the cover. This design is so fitting because it reflects the broad spectrum of the band's musical influences and cultural identity. Their music incorporates elements of classical Indian music, Krautrock, traditional folk, and 70s rock. Most importantly, their music is about freedom of the mind and body and building a bridge between the supernatural and the present. (Light in the Attic, n.d)

The presence of tracks like Nazo Nazo and Amayadori, where the folky vibe is most prominent, justifies the artwork by Thai artist Phannapast Taychamaythakool, which perfectly captures the essence of the music and its roots while still achieving a trendy and hipster look that most Gen Z consumers naturally gravitate towards. Album covers like this have a collectable quality to them, which I aim to translate into my own design.

Attitude

After identifying that the genre's main issue stems from its lack of commercial recognition, marketing strategy is a crucial aspect to consider.

Even Vaughan's designs, though concerned only with conveying the essence of the music piece, assume the potential consumer already has a certain level of knowledge about the artist. However, while highly regarded by music and design enthusiasts, his designs may not always resonate with audiences unfamiliar with the genre or the musician.

"I love it. What is it?" is a marketing principle concerning the intuitive part of design. Designing a product's packaging to immediately capture a consumer's attention, regardless of whether they associate it with a specific genre, prevents them from instantly dismissing it due to preconceived notions associated with said genre.

The redesign campaign's goal is to make people who would not usually engage with folk music because of age or background curious enough to pick it up precisely because it deviates from the typical folk album aesthetic. By subverting expectations, I want to encourage people to give the music a chance and discover it for themselves and, if possible, generate new interest in the genre.

The campaign aims to present contemporary folk music to younger generations as a distinctive part of their heritage, infused with a hipster/vintage aesthetic. In an era where vinyl records are valued not just for their audio qualities but also sought after for display purposes, I aspire to develop a product with striking visuals that merit becoming a collectible in its own right.
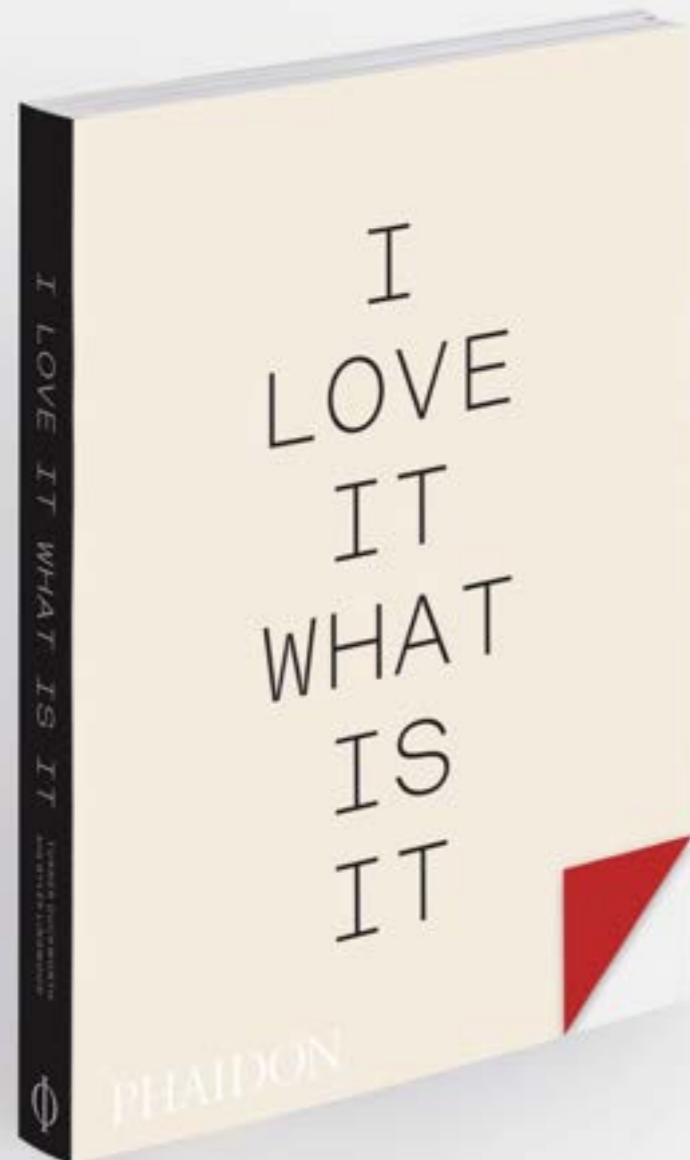
Marketability

Collectors, audiophiles, and music enthusiasts embraced vinyl for its warmth, rich sound and tangible experience. This resurgence brought album cover art back into the spotlight, as vinyl records necessitated larger and more detailed artwork.

Modern vinyl releases often feature elaborate gatefold covers, expanded artwork, and intricate packaging. Artists collaborate with designers, illustrators and photographers to create immersive visual experiences that complement the music. (Blackburn, 2023)

Urban Outfitters, a popular retail chain, has become a major player in the vinyl business, catering to the growing demand for vinyl records among its customers. It's no secret that the fashion and lifestyle retailer caters to a younger demographic, with a focus on fashion, music, and home decor however, in recent years, the company has expanded its vinyl selection, and it has become one of the biggest vinyl retailers in the North America.

One reason why Urban Outfitters has seen great success in the vinyl business is because of its strong brand image that appeals to its target demographic. The company has a unique and distinctive aesthetic that is heavily associated with alternative and indie culture, and its customers are drawn to the company's curated selection of products, including vinyl records. The company's vinyl selection features a variety of genres, including indie, rock, hip-hop, and electronic music, and it also offers exclusive releases and limited-edition pressings.

Despite the success of Urban Outfitters in the vinyl business, there have been criticisms of the company's vinyl selection and pricing. Some critics have argued that it is too focused on mainstream and popular releases and that it lacks depth and variety. Others have argued that the pricing is too high, and that it takes advantage of the growing demand for vinyl records among consumers.

In response to these criticisms, Urban Outfitters has made efforts to improve its vinyl selection and pricing. The company has expanded its selection to include more indie and underground releases, and it has also lowered its vinyl pricing to be more competitive with other retailers. Urban Outfitters has also taken steps to address issues of sustainability in the vinyl industry, such as by using recycled vinyl in its exclusive releases.

Although UO has had their downsides in the vinyl department, they have contributed to the resurgence of vinyl records among music lovers. The company's strong brand image, marketing strategies, and efforts to make the vinyl-buying experience more accessible and convenient have been key factors in its success. (Mastroianni, 2023)

As the vinyl industry continues to evolve, the demand for unique/alternative music in an exciting visual package continues to grow. The research presented in earlier sections indicates that there is definitely a market for the product I am designing and helps me situate it within the brand image of companies that successfully sell similar products and cater to Gen Z consumers. It also helps me consider current criticism towards already existing products and selling practices.
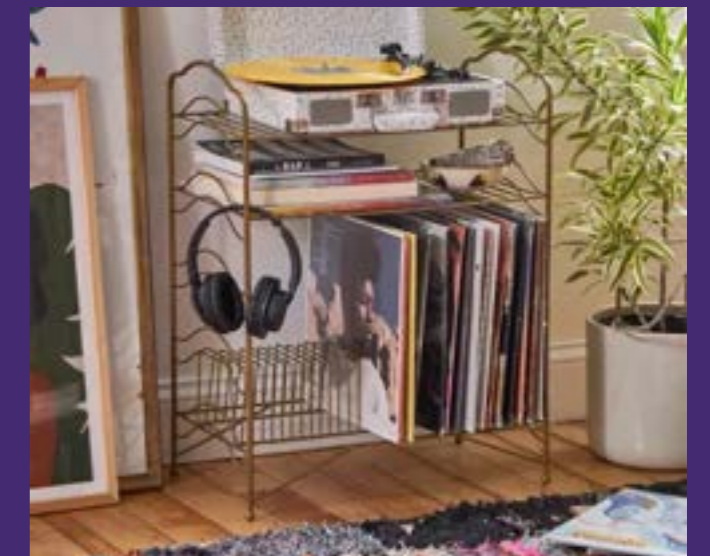
03 Welkya

Theodosii Spassov is a phenomenon in the Bulgarian art of performing who does not fit in the traditional concept of a kaval (wooden shepherd flute)player and musician. In fact, he was the first to have "transferred" the kaval from folk to classical music and jazz, turning it into an instrument capable of expressing a broad range of feelings, moods and images. The pleasure of experiencing Spassov's art is immense for amateurs and professionals. The latter will appreciate the unique synthesis of thematic structure, form, invention, folklore, image and sound.

A legend from the Kyustendil region has it that a poor woman had naughty and always hungry children. She got tired of working for the daily bread, which was never enough for her children; she got tired of being held responsible for their mischief and cursed them. The children failed to find their way back home, and she herself turned into a welkya—a night tawny owl. But then her anger receded, and she kept looking for her children until the present day.

This legend inspired Theodosii Spassov to write his highly impressive piece, Welkya. Through his music, he turned the mythical, the invisible, the impossible, and the unexpected into a reality. Even in the pronouncedly folk pieces, his musical witticisms and jokes surprise and amaze with their rich imagination. He "jumps" from one genre to another and makes everyone involved in this game, both the musicians and listeners. (Gega New, n.d.)

In an interview, he tells this story: "Standing on the river bank, we saw the river burning with the asphalt which the factory was pouring into it, and we saw its waters dragging along dead animals, roots, and waste. Eventually, a huge radio box appeared. When we took it out of the water and got to breaking up the loot, it contained a welkya bone, a light bulb in pieces, a mud-congested bottle, and a priest's stole from the church nearby – all those signs that had predicted the life to come. The bone meant death; the broken bulb, darkness; the grimy bottle, a servitude of spirit; and the priest's stole - a lack of faith. The radio box itself, the bird's deathbed, might well have been a symbol of man's music in those times of nightmares – songs were coming out of his mouth, yet only curses reached our ears." (Theodosii Spassov - Official Web Site, 1994)

As an artist, he draws inspiration from sources that don't necessarily involve music, often observing tangible, visual elements within nature or urban landscapes. Then, he views these observations through a philosophical context, bringing forth an array of symbolism and spirituality, which he then translates into narratives. These narratives serve as the foundation for his musical compositions, offering a unique blend of visual and auditory storytelling.

It makes me think about the relationship between music and storytelling and how they can be translated into visual concepts. I am especially interested in the symbolism in folk legends/songs and how it is expressed in their respective illustrations.

THEODOSII SPASSOV
Kaval

Gega new
GD 141

WELKYA

Note: The second image is of Velka, the Goddess of Sin character in Dark Souls 3.

I find it interesting how this character was depicted and how some of its design elements can be traced back to its mythological origins, whether the developers were aware of the Eastern European version of the legend or had a different source of inspiration.

Case study: Hannah Hoch

While researching symbolism, the practice of assembling otherwise mundane objects in an abstract context, and, most importantly, birds and owls, I discovered the art of Hannah Höch. She was a Berlin-based Dada artist known for her incisively political collage and photomontage works. She appropriated and rearranged camera-made images and text from the mass media to critique the failings of the Weimar German Government. (Hirschl-Orley, n.d)

The Dadaists were self-proclaimed radical thinkers who championed women's rights. Höch's photomontages often confronted gender issues, championing the "New Woman" who was empowered by the vote, sexually emancipated, and financially liberated. (National Museum of Women in the Arts, n.d.)

She always saw herself as an observer, looking in at things from different positions. This ties back to Spassov's creative process of coming up with Welkya and interpreting the broken objects found in the river through a spiritual, artistic prism. Höch, too, had a pantheistic worldview, and her artwork is a constant interpretation of perception and life, which she understood as a continuous moving flow; she was not prepared to accept a hierarchical, anthropocentric view of the world.

What Höch wanted to say was often confusing at first glance because she was permanently changing perspectives and transplanting herself into new positions. Take 'Eule mit Lupe (Owl with Magnifying Glass)', a collage made in the middle of her working life in 1945. Here she's the owl on the cloud peering down on the planet earth. After the Second World War, she was very interested in what happened in space, and the eyes of the owl appear like black holes. These elements recur throughout her work. (Ballantyne-Way, 2022)

Depictions of mythical bird spirits

The legend of Welkya is already rich with visual imagery and symbolism. The focus will obviously be on the woman who turns into an owl and her children. Unfortunately, I could not find any illustrated version of the legend. So, instead, I am focusing on researching how people have depicted female shapeshifting spirits over the years. Also, I am narrowing it down to Slavic/Eastern European folklore and looking at a few isolated cases related to album design.

Conceptually, the closest thing to the legend of Welkya seems to be the Sirin - a mythological creature of Rus' legends, with the head of a beautiful woman and the body of a bird (usually an owl), borrowed from the siren of the Greek mythology. According to folk tales, Alkonost (another female bird spirit) grants healing powers to all fruits on whichever tree she is sitting on. She makes beautiful sounds, and those who hear them forget everything they know and want to hear nothing more ever again.

The image that depicts the Sirin is taken from a 17th-century lubok, which was popular Russian print at the time, characterised by simple graphics and narratives derived from religious stories and popular tales. What interests me in these depictions is the presence of decorative arrangements of fruits, leaves, and flowers that nod to the orchard tale and a visualisation of the creature's singing voice. (Source: WIkipedia)

However, I much prefer Ivan Bilibin's style and the wings-to-body proportions in his illustration of Alkonost. I think finding the right way to stylise and simplify the wings would be key to successfully developing this illustration. Similarly, an illustration from the 17th-century scroll I managed to photograph when visiting The Cult of Beauty exhibition during our university trip is the closest thing to the position in which I imagine the central figure of my design. Additionally, the lasting power of both Biblin's work and the image from the scroll is evident because they seem to share some similarities to the contemporary depiction of Falin - a chimaera monster that appears in the recently popular manga Delicious in Dungeon.

I have also included Viktor Vasnetsov's "Gamayun". Gamayun is a prophetic bird in Russian folklore. It symbolises wisdom and knowledge and lives on an island in the mythical east, close to paradise. She is said to spread divine messages and prophecies, as she knows everything about creation, gods, heroes, and man. Vasnetsov was a Russian artist who specialised in mythological and historical subjects. He is considered a co-founder of Russian folklorist and Romantic Nationalistic painting. I love the colour combination in his paintings and how his subjects seem to be captured mid-singing or swaying on the branch they are sitting on. There is emotional depth in his paintings that no other example manages to convey quite as well.

Kukeri is a Bulgarian tradition that centres around elaborately costumed and masked men who perform traditional rituals to scare away evil spirits. I really wanted to include that in my research avenues because if I decide to take a minimalist approach to the album cover design, I would love to produce just a geometry-shaped image of a Kuker mask. Hence, I have included in my research this specific mask, which appears to be inspired by a bird spirit, evident in its beak-like structure and bird-like eyes.

Another thing I looked into was Wes Wilson's posters that would come to define an electric period of American music advertising. Despite heavily borrowing from 19th-century trends, they still manage to feel fresh and exciting today. For example, Wilson's 1967 poster for the Byrds calls to mind the best peacock illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley, complete with undulating curves and a thick pen-and-ink style line. Wilson and others in his field had a vintage poster playbook that they were sharing with the world in new, innovative ways draped in a curtain of neon. (Lippert, 2020). I love the symmetry, the fluidity of the image, how harmonious it looks alongside the typography, and how some of the shapes overlap with the square frames.
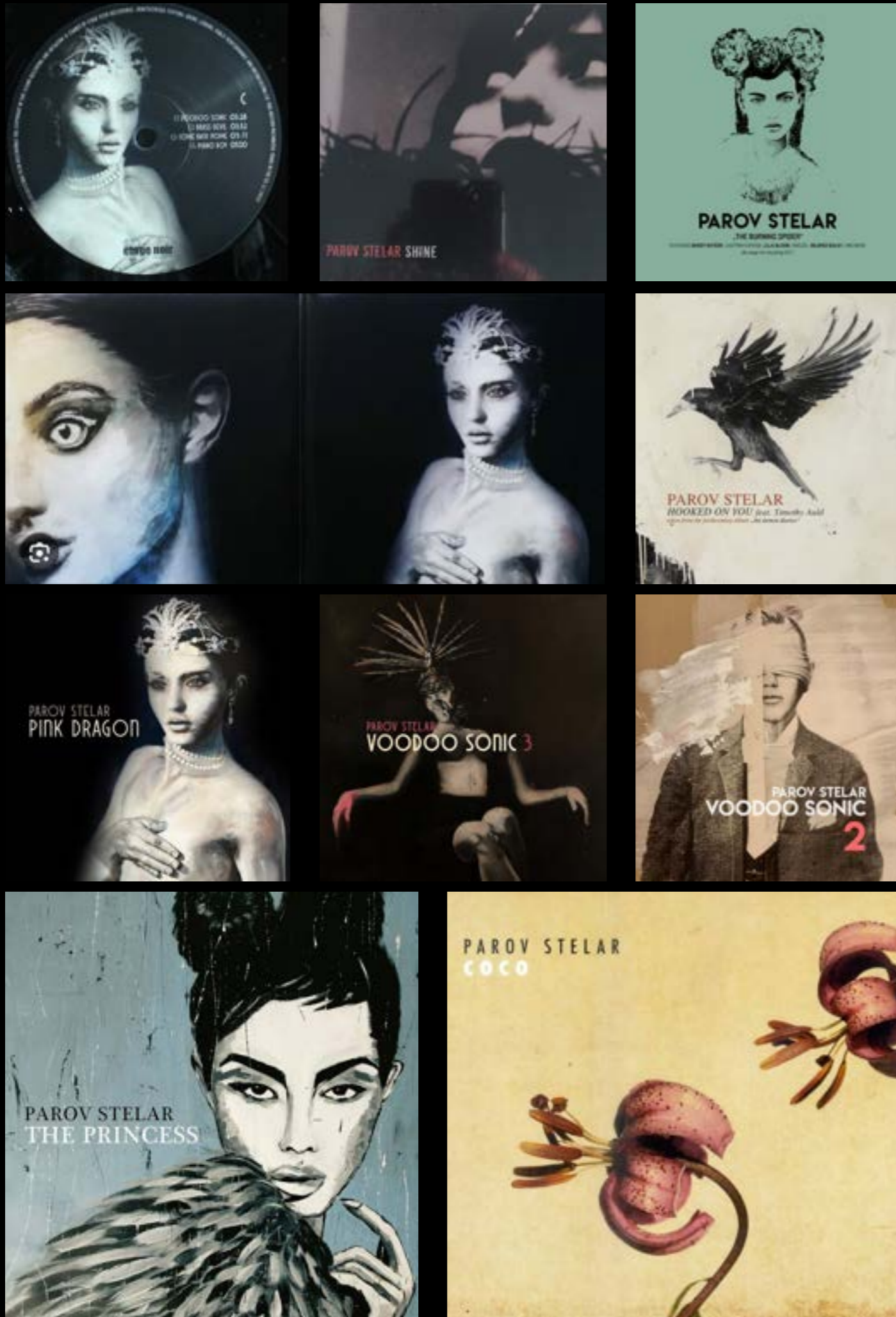
Case study: Parov Stelar

Parov Stelar's style can be described as a mix of electro, jazz, pop, and swing. This unusual mishmash of elements makes his albums so eclectic. There's so much going on in each track that there's probably something in this album for everyone. (Dwek, 2023)

In this regard, it is very similar to the music I am trying to find a visual identity for. The difficulty of designing for such a complex genre/artist that can not be easily categorised comes from the fact that while you have unlimited creative freedom because the genre is not tied to a specific iconography, you risk failing to capture the essence of the music. Another concern a designer would have is achieving cohesiveness throughout an entire collection, where each music piece is so vastly different from the others.

Parov Stelar is an interesting case study because he has a very recognisable and consistent visual identity that persists throughout all of his albums. This is already hard to achieve for one of his multi-genre-encompassing albums and even more so for his entire body of work over the years.

In my opinion, this is because he uses an array of characters almost as a way to personify his musical style. He has created a fleshed-out universe/narrative to accompany his music, filling it with identifiable characters, predominantly female. Each character possesses a distinctive sense of fashion inspired by the roaring 20s, featuring elements such as flapper dresses, intricate headpieces, and pearl jewellery. Feathers, birds, and flowers frequently appear on most of his album covers, with even the brushwork and textures maintaining consistency. In an interview, he states: "Visual art and music go hand in hand for me. Over the past few years, I've created pretty much all of the artwork myself. Some of them are actual paintings that I produce and then turn into artwork for my music." (Wizeruk, 2023).

My study on Parov Stelar indicates that building a narrative around the music and establishing a solid overarching concept is more effective than solely focusing on the individual qualities of the music or the artist.

What is folk art?

Folk art is a broad term that describes a variety of media and techniques. From painting to sculpture, these pieces have defining characteristics that are not based on a style (like line art or hyperrealism) or necessarily influenced by academia. They are often rooted in the traditions of a community and/or culture. The aesthetic of a piece frequently expresses the identity derived from these places rather than that of the individual artist. (Artsper Magazine, 2022)

Legends, myths and folk tales are usually a combination of fact and fantasy. They often include or refer to real people and events. Artists like Ellen Gallagher have used legends in their work to explore and comment on significant and horrific events in history. Bird in Hand reflects Ellen Gallagher's interest in narratives surrounding the slave trade. In several artworks, Gallagher imaginatively explores the Middle Passage, which was the most treacherous part of the slave-trading route between Africa and North America. Bird in Hand shows an underwater scene that seems to refer to the mythical Drexciya or Black Atlantis. This is a fictional underwater world populated by a marine species descended from drowned slaves. The central figure in the painting is a sailor or pirate with a peg-leg. His character is mysterious, but Gallagher suggests that he is an evil presence. (Tate, n.d.)

Another example is artist Paula Rego, who is fascinated by folk tales and fairy tales and often references Portuguese stories and folklore in her work. She also made a series of prints based on stories surrounding the Pendle Witches, as well as a series of paintings based on Portuguese fairy tales. (Tate, n.d.) Similiarly. Inspired by legend and folklore, artist Alan Davie developed a language of symbols, shapes and signs. He used these to create abstract artworks that seem to refer to mysterious and mystical other worlds. (Tate, n.d.)
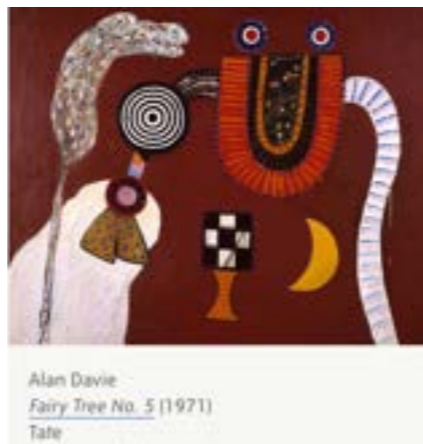
Paula Rego
Him (1996)
Tate
© Paula Rego

Paula Rego
Flood (1996)
Tate

Alan Davie
Fairy Tree No. 5 (1971)
Tate

Ellen Gallagher
Bird in Hand (2006)
Tate
© Ellen Gallagher

Along with the stories from classical mythology, its gods, heroes, and monsters can also be rich sources of inspiration. Francis Bacon took inspiration from Greek mythology for some of the twisted and tortured monster-like forms in his paintings. In Three Figures and Portrait 1975, the bird-like form in the foreground, with its snarling human mouth, has been linked to the Furies – fearsome creatures from Greek mythology. (Tate, n.d.)

Another fascinating case is the Minotaur - a creature with the body of a man and the head and tail of a bull trapped in an endless labyrinth. This enigmatic figure has captivated numerous artists throughout history, each offering unique depictions that add different meanings and context to his existence: from anger and surprise to quiet contemplation and loneliness.

Fairy tales are a form of legend. Although generally written down by somebody (Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm wrote most of the well-known fairy tales), they are often based on traditional stories or folklore. They contain elements of truth and usually a moral message. They also generally have a happy ending.

Artist Joan Jonas is fascinated by myths and legends. Her installation, The Juniper Tree, draws inspiration from the story of the same name by the Brothers Grimm. However, she doesn't exactly depict scenes from it: "There was a continuous voice telling the story of Juniper Tree, and I worked against it. I don't illustrate the stories, but I represent and react to them – find ways to make my own language in relation to the story." Jonas states. (Tate, n.d.)

Every culture has all kinds of myths, legends and folk stories, often part factual and part make-believe. However, some artists have also created their own legends and cast of characters to tell stories, occasionally rooted in something intimate and personal to them or from significant movements/events of their time. (Barnes, 2017) For example, America's most celebrated outsider artist, whose entire body of work is housed in the American Folk Museum - Henry Darger, has constructed an enormous fantastical universe with elaborate mythology populated by many heroic and villainous figures. His series In the Realms of the Unreal tells the tale of war between the Christian kingdom of Abbieannia and the satanic empire of Glandelinia, fought over the issue of child slavery. Darger's style is heavily influenced by popular Catholic culture and iconography of his time, which includes Catholic comic books with detailed, often gory tales of innocent female victims. (Source: Wikipedia)

George Frederic Watts
The Minotaur (1885)

Case study: Marc Chagall

Tate's article on folk art directed me to the artist Marc Chagall, who uses mythology and Russian folklore as the subject for many of his colourful, dreamlike artworks. (Tate, n.d.) Marc Chagall's world is a lyric of fanciful affection for the men and women, the children, the cattle, the pigs and poultry, the chairs and curtains and mugs of flowers in a small and sordid village, transformed by his fancy and still more by his affection into a dream-country where it is simpler to ride on a farmyard fowl than to board an omnibus, where angels drink tea inside bouquets of roses, where blue cows fly over pink moons and lovers walk literally on air, and where anyone, who has a heart, can live as pleasantly without a head as with one. (Tate, 1948)

The circumstances of his life have taken him to Moscow, Paris, and New York. The Eiffel Tower, the circus, skyscrapers, and a hundred other images have entered the "dream country", but they have not driven out the village; they have only made it a shade less credible, a shade more the product of his fancy, a shade less the record of his love. (Tate, 1948)

The years Chagall spent in his native Russia around the time of the Revolution in 1917 and his experiences during the period reinforced the highly personal visual language used in his art. The universal, timeless themes of these early works – including love, suffering, and death – alongside self-portraits and depictions of the circus, music and peasants, recurred and formed the core of his art for the remainder of his long career. (Lenkiewicz, 2013).

Folkloristic influences

At its height, Modernism rested upon a single conviction: to illuminate humankind's brutal truths. Unlike many of his avant-garde peers, Russian-born artist Marc Chagall showcased his creative command by envisioning optimism, empathy, and resolve in his work. (Park West Gallery, 2018).

Chagall employs many techniques characterised by Cubism, Fauvism, Symbolism, and Surrealism—skewed dimension, non-representational colour, transfiguration, and dreamlike imagery, respectively—yet he abides by a unique expression that eludes common classification. (Park West Gallery, 2018).

Meret Meyer, Chagall's granddaughter, said he was deeply influenced by Russian art. "We are pushed to discover links that are suggested without being able to confirm that Chagall was actually inspired by specific iconographies. But, of course, this is an artistic universe, the icons, the lubki (Russian woodblock prints), that all artists from the Russian avant-garde were soaked in the same way. Chagall then used them as vocabulary that he brought along with him and within him as if they were natural extensions of him like the paintbrush, like the colour pallet," Meyer said. (CGTN news, n.d)

An exhibition that focused on his Russian art influences included bird maidens or sirens from Russian mythology and folklore similar to the ones I included in my research on depictions of mythological birds and bird-like spirits. The displays gave visitors a taste of the type of popular illustrations Chagall was exposed to.

In his early work, Chagall focused on 'naïve' folkloristic narratives but later developed a unique style combining fauve, cubist, expressionist and suprematist influences while reflecting his native Jewish Russian culture. He created some of the most poetic and enduring images of the twentieth century. (Lenkiewicz, 2013)

04 A Folk Song Runs Through it

Coincidentally, I found out that one of the albums I plan on redesigning actually uses one of Marc Chagall's artworks as a cover. This was an important milestone, as it shows that Chagall's work is relevant to my research not only because of similar themes and influences but also because someone has made a direct connection between his imagery, rooted in folklore, and the music I aim to redesign.

Released in 2013, Rangel's light, delicate touch on the piano offers a fascinating look at Central European folk-art music just after the turn of the twentieth century. The Hungarian composers Bela Bartok (1881-1945) and Zoltan Kodaly (1882-1967) and the Czech composer Leos Janacek (1854-1928) drew upon the vast folk melodies handed down in their countries for generations. In his contemporary album, A Folk Song Runs Through It, American pianist Andrew Rangell (b. 1948) plays several of these composers' best folk-inspired piano works. (Classical Candor, 2013)

Rangell states: "The creative achievements of Bartók, Janácek, and Kodály were nourished and stimulated by each composer's deep, lifelong study of indigenous folk music. In the works presented here, folk influence comes to the listener's ear in ways ranging from the simple presentation of actual folk songs to the reconstitution and transformation of folk materials to suit more complex structures. But the folk element, even when fully assimilated, is never lost. A folk song runs through it." (Steinway, n.d.)

New Criterion adds: "All of these pieces have something in common: lovability—a lovability that comes from their composers' love for the people's music." (Steinway, n.d.)

Oberlander Group has chosen this exact painting for an album cover because it perfectly illustrates the atmosphere of the music, which was initially performed on basic wooden flutes by shepherds as a form of entertainment while they tended to their herds for extended periods.

Inspired in part by the recent development of Cubism, I and the Village displays Chagall's distinct vocabulary of abstraction, characterised by fantastic colours and folkloric imagery drawn from memories of the artist's Belarus home, a peasant town on the outskirts of Vitebsk. He shows people and animals living side by side, their mutual dependence signified by the line connecting the eyes of a peasant and a goat. For the Hasidim, animals were humanity's link to the universe, and the painting's large circular forms suggest the orbiting sun, moon (in eclipse at the lower left), and earth. Chagall used lyrical colours and disjunctive geometries to render the scene nostalgic and magical. (The Museum of Modern Art, 2019).
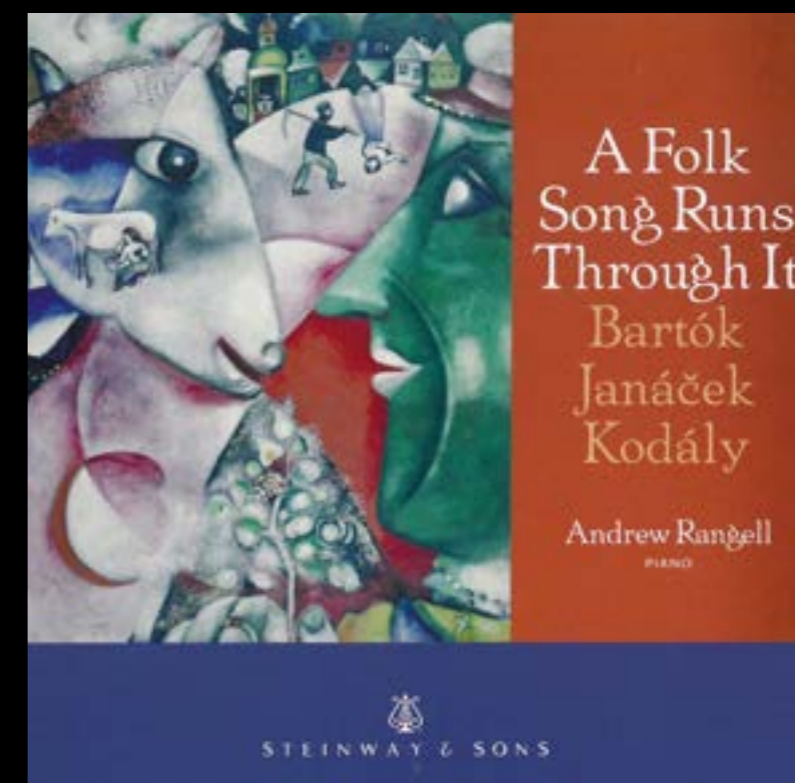
Visual language of Eastern European + Russian Folklore

Whenever I think about folklore-inspired art, the first artist that comes to mind is Ivan Bilibin. (1876–1942) He was one of Russia's foremost visual interpreters of fairy tales and epic legends at the turn of the 20th century. His trademark skills were precision of line, insightful characterisation, and the good humour with which he treated his complex subjects. (York Festival of Ideas, 2018)"Bilibin is the first draughtsman to turn to Old Russian art in search of new motifs and methods. In his artistic vocabulary, he fused academic training, traditional Russian art forms, such as woodblock printing, religious painting and the mystic views of the Orient, which he picked up on his journeys." (Renton, 2005) This statement is interesting because it implies that the practice of illustrating folk tales, often perceived as an integral component of a country's national identity, is, in fact, a mix of different and sometimes even conflicting influences and techniques.

It begs the question of whether folk art, music, and narratives are inherently tied to specific places or if they serve as reflections of broader cultural influences originating from various nations coexisting in close proximity. Therefore, the Eastern European identity I am trying to champion in my campaign needs to highlight the ways in which the cultures are similar to each other rather than focus on their differences.

From a marketing perspective, I am also interested in Bilibin's artwork because, despite its old-fashioned subjects, his style remains captivating to this day. Digital artists have constantly tried to recreate his style and translate it into contemporary narratives. I think it is important to study art styles that deal with subjects similar to the ones I'm trying to depict but have such staying power that they have found their niche online, under one form or another, while still maintaining the interest in their traditional origins.

For example, in 2011, modern artist Kate Baylay, a freelance illustrator based in London, was commissioned to illustrate a book of Russian folk tales. Bilibin's influence is evident in her work, but she masterfully implements shapes and motifs typical of art nouveau. Her work is described as "both dark yet almost deceptively decorative with accurate inspiration from the 'Golden Age' illustrators immediately impressing the viewer." Baylay's signature style also proves applicable in different formats and aesthetics, as demonstrated by her design for the cover of the English psychedelic raga rock band Kula Shaker's 2016 album - K2.0. The band are known for their interest in traditional Indian music, culture, and mysticism, with several of their most famous songs featuring lyrics written in Sanskrit and traditional Indian instruments, such as the sitar, tamboura, and tabla, juxtaposed with guitar-heavy, Western rock instrumentation. (source: Wikipedia) The nature of their music comes through in her character design, typography, and colour scheme, perfectly illustrating the parallels between folk-based music and illustrations and their mutually beneficial relationship in album cover design practice.

To tie back to previous aspects of my research that establish the relevancy of said relationship, I have also examined Wes Wilson's 1967 poster for the Doors—a significant piece of music advertising—from which we can trace back the vintage imagery inspirations. The purple-haired lady, surrounded by organic foliage and hand-drawn patterns, clearly references some of the best work by American posterist Will Bradley. (Lippert, 2020). On the other hand, Bradley's poster is reminiscent of an 1887 bookplate of William G. Crampton while also resembling the intricate detail work seen in Ivan Bilibin's art.

Bulgarian folk tale illustrations

As I was growing up, my parents would read to me this exact volume of Bulgarian folktales assembled by Nikolay Raynov. He was one of the most remarkable Eastern European modernists of the 20th century, who dedicated himself to folklore and aesthetic writings, producing more than 30 volumes of fairytales from all over the world.

I vividly recall finding the cover of this book particularly enticing, yet I was perplexed by the flat art style, the somewhat distorted proportions, and the expressions that looked kind of ugly to me. I had just gotten into Italian cartoons like Winx Club and Japanese anime like YuGiOh, where the proportions, despite being exaggerated, still looked like stylised versions of conventionally attractive faces and bodies, which must have been more appealing to a child.

Nevertheless, this image must have stayed somewhere in the back of my mind for some reason because it resurfaced when I started researching folklore for this project. It turns out the illustration is a 1926 painting called "Gadular" (the musical instrument the man is holding is called "gadulka") by Bulgarian painter Ivan Milev, who is regarded as the founder of the Bulgarian Secession and a representative of Bulgarian Modernism. (source: Wikipedia)

He combined symbolism, Art Nouveau, and expressionism in his work. His visual vocabulary was significantly influenced by artistic movements, which had already been exhausted in Western Europe by the time they were fully adopted in Bulgaria. This is mainly due to the fact that Bulgaria was only proclaimed a sovereign state in 1878 after being liberated from Ottoman occupation, which lasted for five centuries. Therefore, all artistic aspirations after the Liberation were directed towards embracing the developments in the West and stripping Bulgarian art of all Oriental influences. However, while Milev's characteristic decorative style was influenced by the European Secession, it was also related to Bulgarian folk art and icon painting. (Georgieva, 2021).

"Milev is often referred to as the most Bulgarian painter. This, however, raises various concerns about what constitutes national identity and what qualifies a painter as 'national'. Milev's conception of Bulgarian-ness could only be achieved by intertwining Western form and Eastern content. In a sense, the icon painting fulfils its inherent role as an arbitrator, in Milev's case, bridging native and foreign, revealing one through the other. Thus, it would seem, as much as his contemporaries tried to liberate themselves from Bulgaria's oriental past, it was Milev's understanding of this past as inseparable from the contemporary identity of the nation which made his work so unquestionably representative of it."

When I close my eyes and try to imagine a narrative or characters to accompany the music, I visualise his style. The subjects he paints are all very traditional and essential to the concept of national identity, but the colours and decorative style are bold, experimental, and foreign to the local scene. The same idea is at the core of contemporary folk music, which also combines Western genres and indigenous Eastern European tunes. Therefore, it makes sense for Nikolay Raynov, being an artist himself, to choose a Milev painting for a book cover, as it appears to resonate with his own philosophies concerning national identity and a sense of belonging

Such philosophies also shine through his personal style of painting as well: "There are works from the 1930s which illustrate his interest in nature, as well as a specific technique that is emblematic of the artist. He works with lacquer paints on sheets of tin foil. The effect is as if light is streaming from the painting itself," states expert Stanislava Nikolova. "Nikolay Raynov's creative quests here are connected with the magical, with the kingdom of minerals, plants and animals… He has a very original way of looking at flowers, butterflies and birds. He would say he was inspired by the East, that he loved Japanese art. He also has a strong affinity for secession. And it all began with his books – as he worked on the illustrations, he gradually adopted this style. Nikolay Raynov even used to design some of the book covers himself, as is the case with his "Bogomil legends"." (Pavlova, 2014)
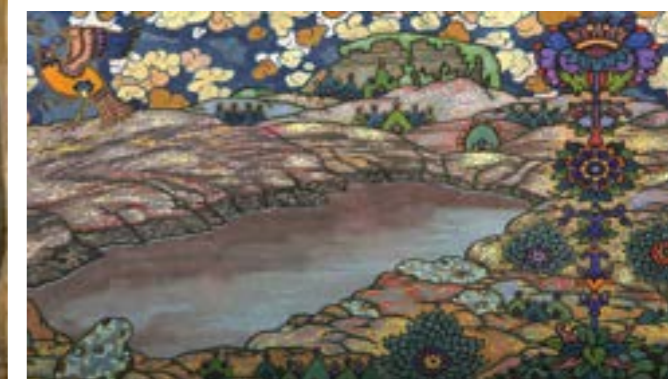
Visual inspiration from other Eastern European collections of folk tales

Case study: Priceless Diamonds

This is another book I was obsessed with as a kid, called "Priceless Diamonds," which contains fairy tales from various authors. This edition I found online is in Russian, but the original I had featured the same illustrations by Ivan Kyosev. (1933-1994) He was one of Bulgaria's most famous artists, influencing several generations of Bulgarian designers. He specialised in book design, typography, and illustration in various genres, including classics, children's literature, poetry, journalism, memoirs, etc. He created numerous memorable images that remain engraved in the minds of readers of all ages. His illustrations demonstrate a remarkable precision of execution, an affinity for detail, attention to the text and a rich imagination. He is also the author of many fonts. (Mutual Art, 2023).

He often condenses the entire literary text into small compositional areas, deftly intertwining iconographic examples and intricate details that immerse us in the era described in the text or playful attributes typical of the time when the folk tales were crafted. This multitude of elements is presented to readers in vibrant colours. (Mutual Art, 2023).

In hindsight, Ivan Kyosev's illustrations remain relevant even today. The density of the imagery containing stylised folk tale characters, various architectural structures, flowers, and everyday objects enhances the complex process of constructing a fictional world. Furthermore, the flatness of the art style, the layering of individual scenes and the thick-lined framing resemble the dense composition seen in numerous contemporary album covers. (see page: Art style)

# Contextual relationships found in unexpected places

As I was combing through album covers to determine the visual direction for my own design, one stood out: Oedipus Apartment Complex's album, "The Blissful Sounds of Miracula," featuring Joseph Stella's painting "The Virgin." (1916)

Oedipus Apartment Complex's music is categorised as "progressive electronic," which focuses on complex melodies, atmospheric soundscapes, and gradual buildups. The term "progressive" is used to describe this new sound, which is seen as a forward-thinking and innovative approach to dance music. (The Pourhouse, 2023) Yet, for their album cover, they chose an artwork from more than 100 years ago, depicting one of the most frequently portrayed subjects in Western art: the Virgin Mary.

I believe their choice could be attributed to Joseph Stella's distinctive style, which verges on the surreal and "was considered a visionary, even among the most progressive artists of his day." Exhibition curator Stephanie Heydt states: "His drawings rival those of the old masters, but he also delighted in experimentation. His style ranged from abstraction to realism to the archaic with such unexpected results." (Gural, 2022) For example, in this particular artwork Stella has given Mary a youthful appearance, with a placid and gentle face. He drew her surrounded with bright and colourful flowers and fruit, symbols of beauty and fertility. Additionally, the composition's highly saturated colours and symmetry lend the work a distinct personality that is at once medieval and modern. (Glennon, 2016) The notion of an image possessing both modern and traditional qualities aligns perfectly with what I aim to incorporate into my design. This line of thinking prompted me to seek an equivalent from my own culture.

For me, Vladimir Dimitrov's paintings have always embodied this sense of duality and timelessness. Often referred to as 'The Master", he is a central figure in the "Native art" movement in Bulgaria. (source: Wikipedia) The obvious parallels between Dimitrov's and Stella's art extend but are not limited to the colour palette, the symbolic use of fruit to represent beauty, and the portrayal of a veiled female figure in traditional attire. However, what is more interesting is how the image is used in relation to the music. When a designer pairs an image with a certain sound, it adopts an entirely new meaning and should be interpreted within a different context. Vladimir Dimitrov created watercolour and oil paintings, often portraits of peasant girls, using intense colours but later revealed a growing interest in decorative elements in his compositions. This quality elevates his art style and makes it applicable in a contemporary setting. Hence, to me, it's logical to draw inspiration from his work when searching for visual representation for a genre which is rooted in traditional sounds (folk) but offers a much more nuanced interpretation by layering jazz and classical music on top.

Of course, if the reference is too obvious, as in the case of Oedipus, where they use the painting itself as a cover, I am concerned that it might excessively emphasise the 'folk/traditional' element, potentially invoking pre-existing associations among general audiences with that particular imagery.
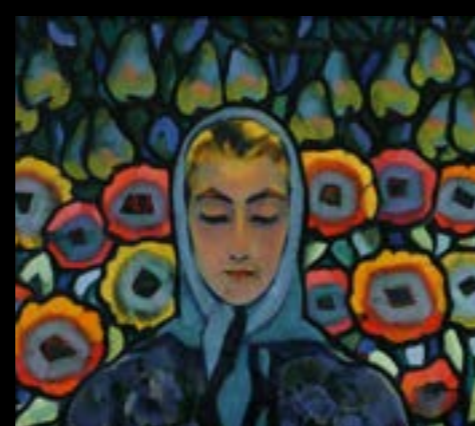
During my research for the FMP, I got into Fear and Hunger, a survival horror RPG set in a dark fantasy world. Although seemingly unrelated to my project, as it was one of the two things occupying my time, it prompted me to draw comparisons between the art of the game and the painting styles I was currently researching. The game is almost entirely developed by one person—Miro Haverinen, who is responsible for character design, overall game mechanics, officially released artwork, in-game animations, and even the title typography. Prior to getting into game development, he worked as a graphic designer and even produced artwork for some album covers, including the design of Finnish artist Prinssi's album EP—05. (Ranarif, 2019) Fear and Hunger blew up this year due to praise and coverage from notable content creators in the gaming community. However, despite being released in 2018, the game previously had a relatively small fanbase in Russia and Eastern Europe, and its presence on social media was virtually non-existent until now. (Super Eyepatch Wolf, 2023)It's understandable why Fear and Hunger was so well-received in these specific regions. Not only does it feature mature content and challenging gameplay, but its particular art style also resonates strongly with audiences there.

To me, the art style shares many similarities with the paintings of Orthodox icons, which are essentially stylised portraits, typically painted in a less realistic and more abstract fashion. This approach makes the depicted saints appear less earthly, representing their strong connection with the divine. (David, 2019) This notion reflects many important themes in the game. Orthodox Christian Iconography played an especially prominent role in the development of fine art in Eastern Europe. For example, in Dimitrov's painting "Angels," while maintaining the characteristic softness and warmth of his style, the arrangement of faces, hands, and hair, along with the closed eyes and the decorative thick lines outlining individual figures, all appear to draw visual inspiration from iconography. This artistic choice aims to convey a divine or angelic quality within his subjects, who were ordinary peasant children.

To tie it back to previous research, I must also discuss Ivan Milev's 1924 portrait of Anna Staynova. The influence of Viennese Secessionist art is evident in the crispness of the outlines, as well as their fluidity. The geometric stylisation accentuates the flatness of the picture plane, the excess of ornamentation, and the vibrant use of colour. (Georgieva, 2021) However, some of these features are also characteristic of Bulgarian Orthodox iconography, and its influence on Milev is particularly noticeable in the positioning of the figure, the elongated hands, and the absence of tonal modelling. (Georgieva, 2021) Similar components can be observed in the title screen for Fear and Hunger—the characters' hand gestures, facing direction and unreadable expressions, the distinctive brushwork, and the flat, two-dimensional composition.

The portrait encapsulates Milev's embrace of his roots and his search for new artistic forms, blending Eastern traditions with Western innovation. (Georgieva, 2021) The art style of Fear and Hunger exudes a similar sense of novelty and uniqueness. I am particularly interested in the idea of incorporating qualities of traditional art forms (like iconography, which is concerned purely with spirituality rather than visual appeal) into a contemporary design while maintaining its marketability.

Modern artists' Engagement with Eastern European folklore

Modern-day digital artists also draw inspiration from native folklore, revitalising traditional and often forgotten motifs into cute, trendy, and marketable digital artwork. Through innovative approaches, they breathe new life into old tales, transforming them into captivating characters that can be featured on merchandise. From small art communities online to indie animation and games, these artists bridge the gap between past and present, ensuring that Eastern European folklore continues to thrive in the digital age and its appeal is not lost to contemporary audiences.
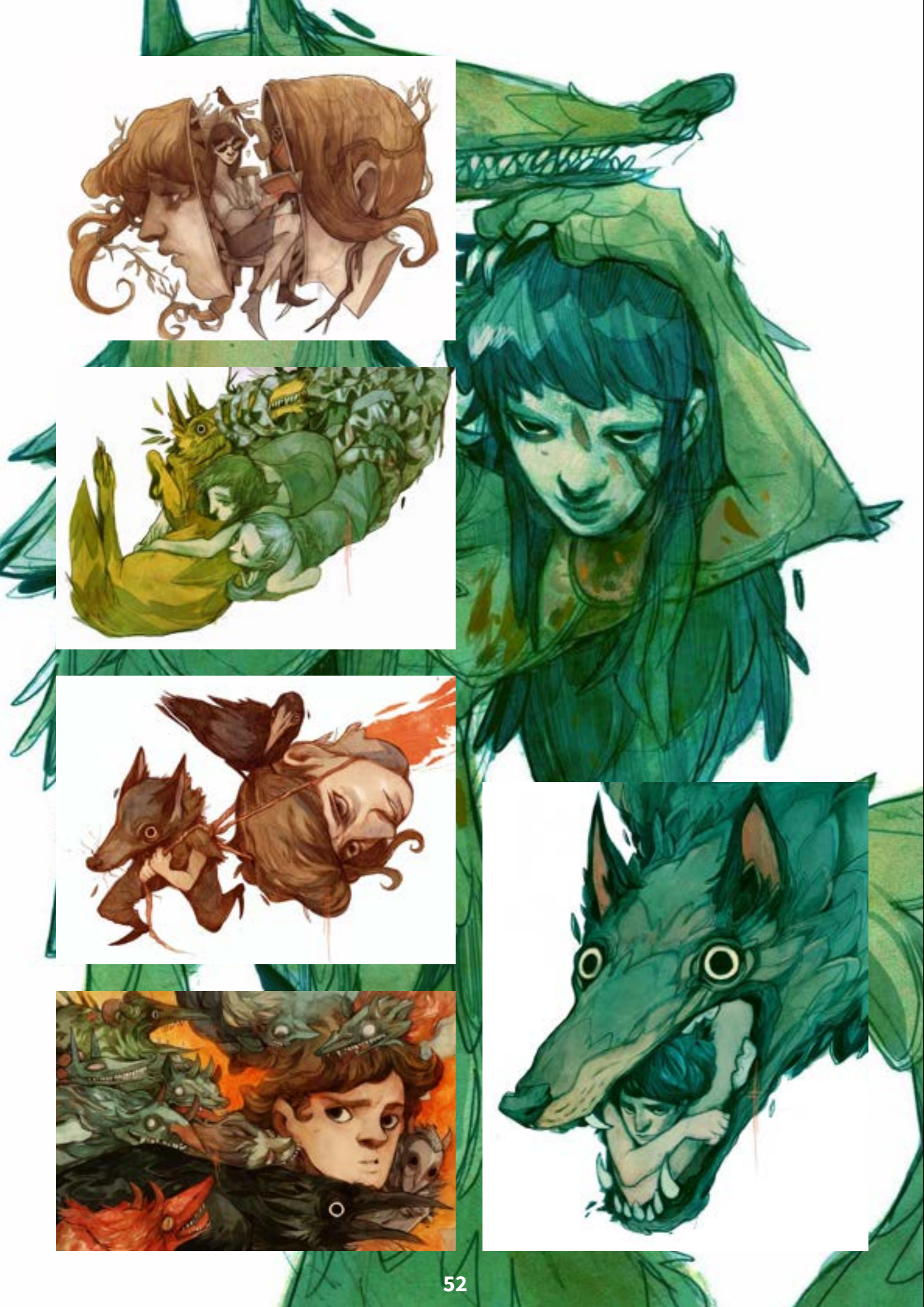
Case study: Diana Naneva

Diana Naneva, a.k.a Functional Neighbor, is a Bulgarian illustrator and a freelance comic book artist. For my research, I am specifically looking into her illustrations for the new edition of Bulgaria's most celebrated children's fantasy novel - Elin Pelin's Yan Bibiyan.

Yan Bibiyan is a mischievous kid who gets mixed up in various shenanigans under the influence of the devil kin, Fyut. Along the way, he encounters devils and wizards, consistently outsmarting them. But his experiences teach him that goodness is what really makes life beautiful and cheerful. (Mubi, n.d) The text is full of fantastic adventures set in a natural environment full of light and colour that allows for symbolic interpretations. This seems to be a perfect match for Naneva, who states in an interview that when illustrating a story, she "relies primarily on the feeling and attitude that the text provokes in her and likes to find hidden symbols and signs in the surroundings." (Hristov, 2019).

As a story, despite being almost a hundred years old, Yan Bibiyan holds its ground to today's standards, mainly due to its dark humour and edgy characters. There is undoubtedly a market for such narratives, especially considering the recent success of Amazon Prime's cartoon Hazbin Hotel, which deals with similar narrative themes and settings. However, what Yan Bibiyan lacks is a visually compelling presentation.

Yan Bibiyan's case ties into my project because Naneva's recognisable and trendy visual style successfully offered an entirely new perspective on the story, helping it gain traction in the digital world among young audiences. The illustrations were showcased on Instagram and Pinterest, as these platforms contain most of her audience, generating new interest in the book. From the vast amount of content originating from the online Eastern European folk art community, she has succeeded in elevating her art into a polished, commercially successful product.

Abstract approach

An alternative approach that could visually embody the sound of the albums I have chosen to redesign is through an abstract utilisation of objects, photographs, and textures within a tightly encapsulated shape. What I like about this approach is that it would allow me to take the same core elements I intend to incorporate in an illustration (f.ex. in the case of Welkya, the elements would be a female figure, flowers, bird wings, and children) and layer them on top of each other. Composing the image that way would make it less obvious what each object is. This approach would convey the inherent ambiguity of the music, adding depth to the visual interpretation. From a technical perspective, I am intrigued to see how individual elements such as flowers and wings can be arranged together to convey symbolic meaning and how the shapes of these objects flow and harmonise with each other. I'm particularly interested in experimenting with contrasts, such as sharp versus soft edges, textured versus smooth surfaces, and other visual juxtapositions, to enhance the overall aesthetic.

Tom Hingston is behind some of the most innovative cover designs and is best known for the art direction on Massive Attack's compilation album - Collected. He and his fellow designer, Robert del Naja, describe their creative process as "taking something that had a lot of different elements to it but ending up with something very symbolic." (Compton, 2022) They also noted that what fascinated them the most was that "you could stand back from it and see a sculptural shape," a quality I aim to explore when creating my own covers. They describe the technique as a "deep collage," wherein they employed photomontage techniques using programs and effects typically used in movies. This allowed them to blend, construct and cut into elements that appear to almost snap together in a three-dimensional space within a flat plane." Naja mentions "an innate need to simplify everything, to break it all down into one thing because to describe it in another way is too complicated and long-winded." (Compton, 2022) This relates to my concerns that an overtly literal approach, such as illustration, may lack subtlety. That's why I am determined to explore this alternative style as well.

At the same time, this sort of design, while definitely experimental, is still well-received, which ties back to my main objective, which is to improve the genre's commercial success. For instance, as part of my research, I have examined the album cover for "Vyara," the second album by Jluch, one of the most acclaimed underground Bulgarian rappers. The album has been an immense success and the cover design didn't go unnoticed as well. He states in an interview that "the album cover features original artwork by his father Svetlozar Stoyanov - Svesto, a Bulgarian painter."(Telbis, 2020) The piece in question is from the 90s and is called Demonic Desire. Jluch states that some people would call it "abstract expressionism, but neither he nor his dad like the term. The genre is "see and imagine it for yourself", he jokingly adds. (Telbis, 2020).

Case study: Elitsa Baramova

Elitsa Baramova is a Bulgarian contemporary painter who creates in different genres and interdisciplinary areas, including graphic design. Her figurative and expressionistic paintings have a very distinctive style. She considers "the idea as the heart of the artifact, and the translation into visual language as a question of choice." (Baramo Art, n.d.) I am looking into her latest collection called The Architect Project because I think there is something inherently musical in the way her artwork is constructed. Which makes sense because "as she was experimenting with different forms of expression at the start of her career, she made a happening with jazz legend Gunter Hampel and produced a related catalogue of paintings inspired by it." (Baramo Art, n.d.)

I am interested in understanding what creates the flow and rhythm of her paintings. Is it the brushwork, the texture, or perhaps the contrast with the plain dark background that gives the impression of the subjects floating and leaping? Similar to Hingston's artwork, despite the abstract nature, one can still discern the individual symbols Baramova refers to as the heart of the artifact.

Puppetmasters Painting

p in the Heart Painting

Relationship between image, sound and texture

The visualisation of sound has long intrigued artists and scientists alike, prompting exploration into sonic waves and sculptures. Through shapes, colours, and primarily textures, such as grain and static, attempts have been made to translate the emotional essence of music. In my project, I aim to experiment with various textures to find one that best captures the tactile sensation of the music. Inspired by albums like Elvin Jones's "Mr. Jones," I am drawn to textures that exude a sense of noise and energy, mirroring the dynamic and complex nature of the music.

Most of my research on visualising sound comes from the book "Sonic Graphics: Seeing Sound," but I also came across an interview explaining the process behind creating a project called "Lexicon of Sound". Creator Anthony Obu, part of the creative agency Flying Object, states that the project made him reconsider how he views the relationship between sound and design: "Sound is an integral part of the human experience. It's one of the five kinds of input we receive that allows us to interact with one another and the world around us. It's pretty much our central mode of communication. We see music as a universal language that we can all understand, and relate to. I find it interesting how so many designers I know, or have met, point toward their love for music as their first taste of design. You often hear stories of their humble beginnings making album artwork or record label identities long before they had ever even heard of the term graphic design – I know I was. Sometimes, I like to think designers are similar to musicians. We care about telling stories, developing a narrative and making something emotive – taking loose elements and turning them into something cohesive." (Odu, 2021)
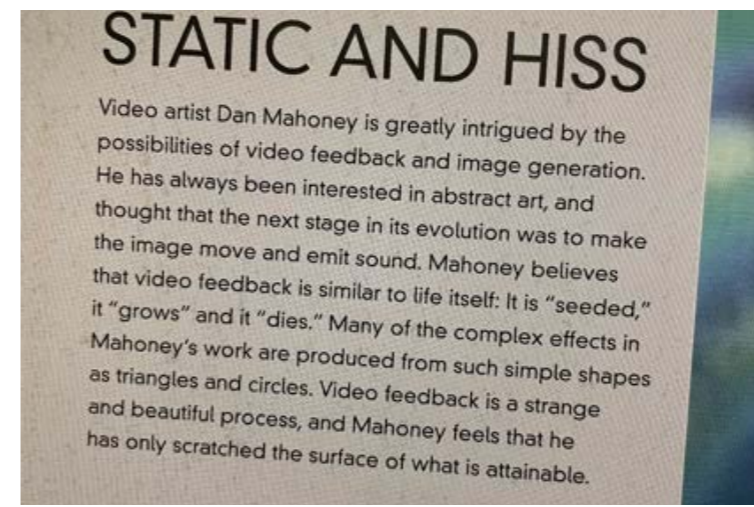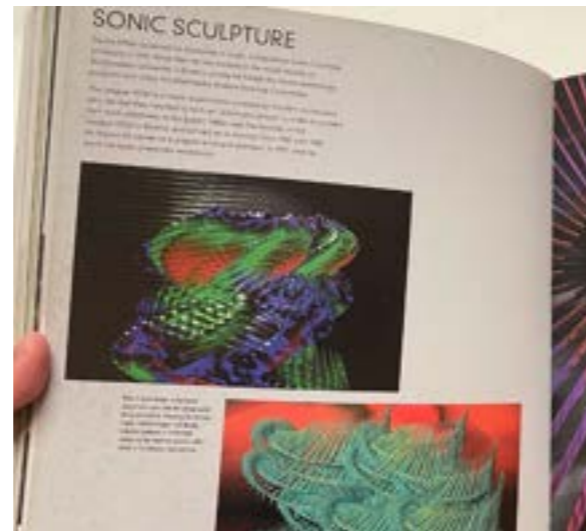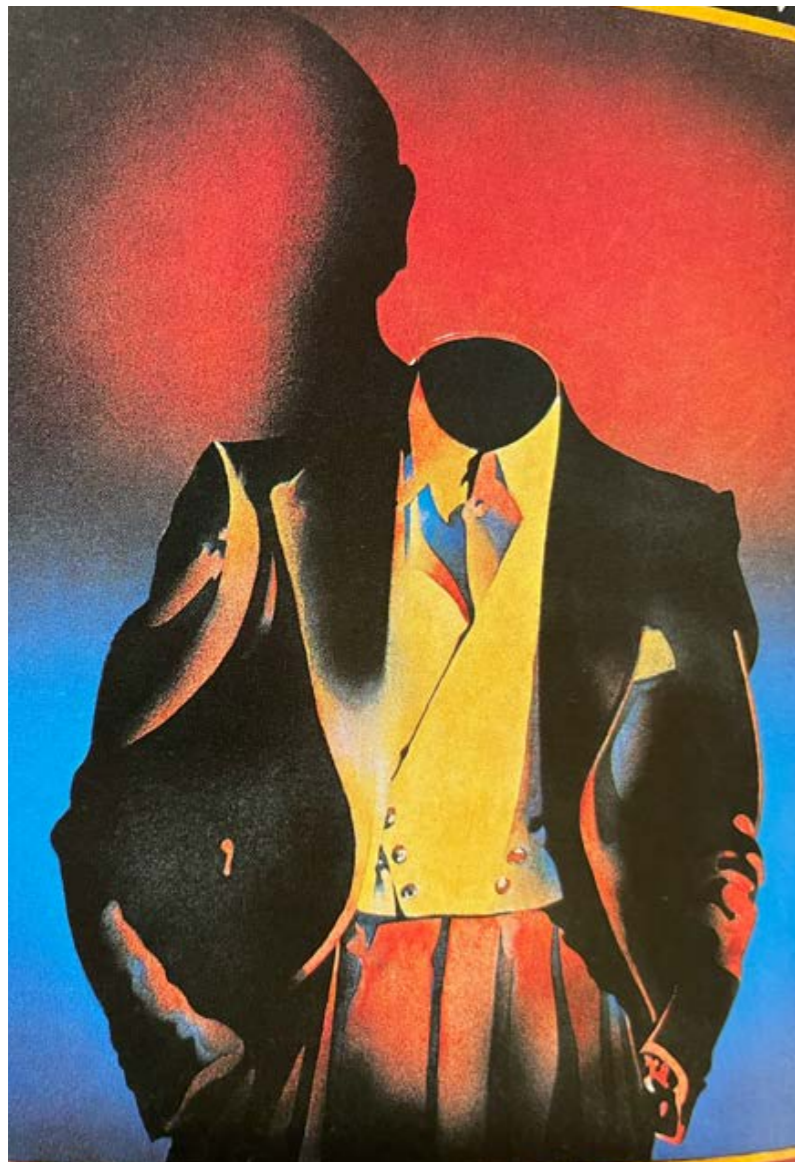
Visual inspiration / isolated cases that I find interesting

# Album covers / Music posters featuring folkstyle illustrations

Colour palette

My design aims to convey that despite the traditional elements in the music, it's far from conservative. While drawing inspiration from existing covers, I also strive to create something radically unconventional and unexpected for the genre.

Exploring psychedelic design—a style characterized by vibrant colours, intricate patterns, and surreal imagery—would lend a distinctive visual language to the album cover. Borrowing a colour palette from psychedelic art, with intense, vivid colours not typically associated with folk music or traditional Bulgarian visual identity—where red, green, and white are common—would communicate that the genre's sound differs from what the user might expect.

Discussing psychedelic design would be incomplete without delving into the work of Martin Sharp. Sharp's designs often feature flowing, organic shapes, intricate detailing, and a kaleidoscopic aesthetic that captures the essence of the psychedelic experience. His work spans across album covers for bands such as Cream and The Jimi Hendrix Experience, in addition to posters for music festivals and theatrical productions. Sharp's psychedelic style not only reflected the spirit of the era but also helped define it, leaving an indelible mark on the world of graphic design and popular culture.

In an interview, Sharp discusses his creative process behind the cover for Cream's Disraeli Gears: "I got hold of a publicity shot and cut it up, along with cut-outs from various books, laid the pieces out and stuck them together as a collage on a 12-inch square. I did some drawing outlines, and then painted all over it with fluorescent inks and paints of the time. I really wanted to capture that warm electric sound of their music in the colours and expression of the cover." (Classic Rock Magazine, 2021).
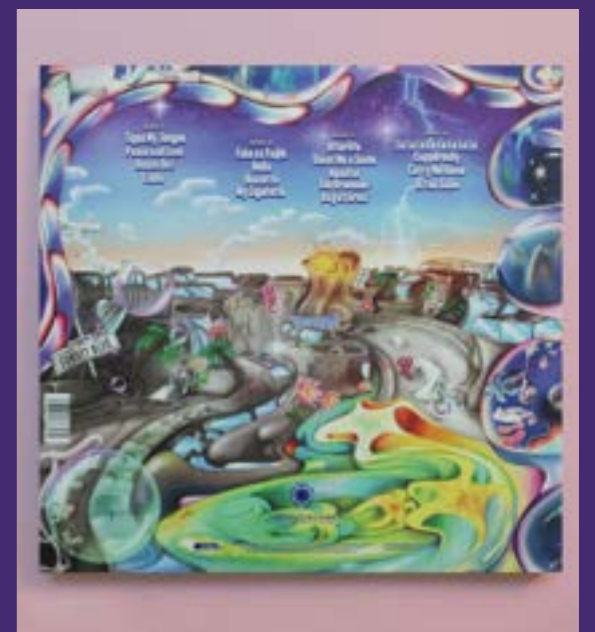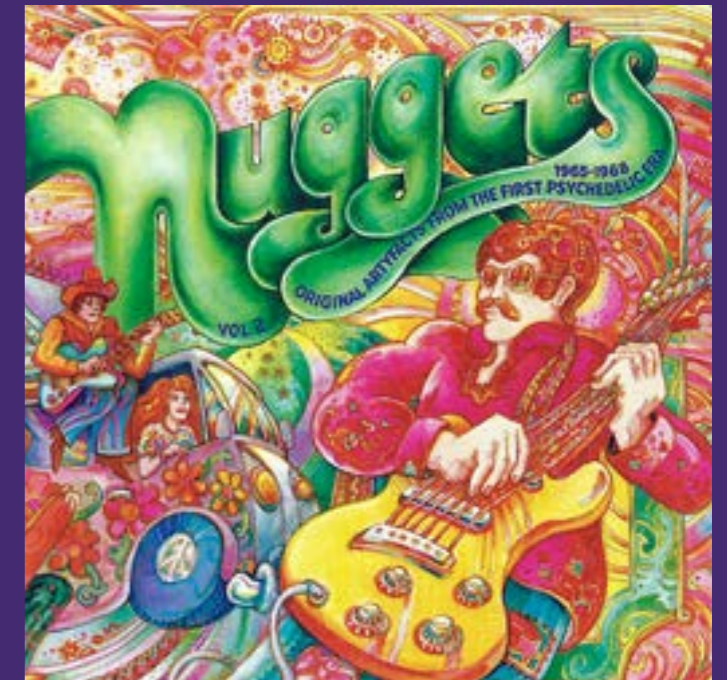
Art style

I want to create a visually crowded, dynamic composition full of many characters and intricate details. The busy artwork will contain a diverse array of elements, including shapes, colours, and textures, which will make it feel lively and energetic and correspond to the music's rhythm and flow.

What I particularly like in the cover for Glass Animals' album Zaba is its ability to tell a story of its own through the characters and their identifying traits — from the heron sporting a gold chain around its neck, the monkey hovering over a flask of boiling liquid, to the sleepy humans gazing in opposite directions. Furthermore, amidst the lush jungle foliage and flowers that dominate the composition, everyday objects like a Rubik's cube, John Lennon's iconic glasses, or an hourglass clock are scattered about, rendering the cover with a surreal ambience.

Micah Lidberg's flat yet densely populated cosmic jungle, overlaid with geometric patterns and planetary constellations, perfectly conveys the feeling of listening to Glass Animal's music. He describes his aesthetic as "bright, happy, and chaotic with a little wink and nod" and loves the "contrasting ideals of combining flat, graphic, simplified forms with the detail and nuance of realism."

Though his illustrations are often teeming with elaborate psychedelic motifs and characters, Lidberg is mindful to always "strive for a sense of clarity and structure." He's inspired by childhood memories - exploring forests or searching for that telltale red-striped shirt in the visual complexity of a "Where's Waldo?" book. It's the kind of album cover that demands a purchase of the vinyl edition just so you can view the intricacy of the artist's work at full scale instead of settling for the paltry thumbnail version in your iTunes library. (Andersen, 2017)

Designed by Oli Sykes' wife, Alissa Salls, the artwork for Bring Me The Horizon's latest album, 'Posthuman: Survival Horror', references and takes inspiration from the Hindu deity Lord Krishna. Directly inspired by a religious painting depicting Krishna enjoying lunch with friends in the forest, Alissa's artwork offers a modern-day, end-of-the-world take on what we find enjoyable in this era of time that often feels post-human.

A closer look at the cover will reveal references to man-made problems we suffer from in the 21st century, including everything from drug abuse, gun violence and tobacco consumption to addictive smartphone use, fascism, meat consumption, and even sugar addiction. As a protest album that's angry about inequality and environmental menace, the artwork rings out with the idea that we as humans have become something that once would not have been considered normal, something unnatural. Still, we have the power to do something about. (Clash Music, 2021).

As part of my research, I have also examined the cover for "The Tale of Elegos" by Of The Trees, designed by Bülent Gültek. What caught my attention was the way the artwork extends beyond the confines of the black square outline, creating the illusion of something unrestricted, an attempt to escape the confines of the ordinary, which is very in tune with the experimental electronic music featured in the album, incorporating bass and downtempo styles.

Another great example is the cover of Little Planet, where people are outlined in what look like single-stroke lines, seamlessly interacting among themselves. They're mismatched and collaged, blurring the lines between the characters. "The characters are the featured artists on the project," Rvdical the Kid explains about the artwork inspired by his love of the vinyl era. "Reiss coloured it in a way that melted into the characters Araba had drawn. When you are collaborating with people, you want to fuse every part of your being to whatever it is that they are bringing to the table," shares the collaborative story behind the album art.

Rvdical is colourblind and judges 'colours' based on how they make him feel. The tones matched exactly what he wanted, but he still felt something was missing: "I inverted the artwork and immediately saw a face staring at me. That was when I knew we were done," he explains. (Kusi, 2021).
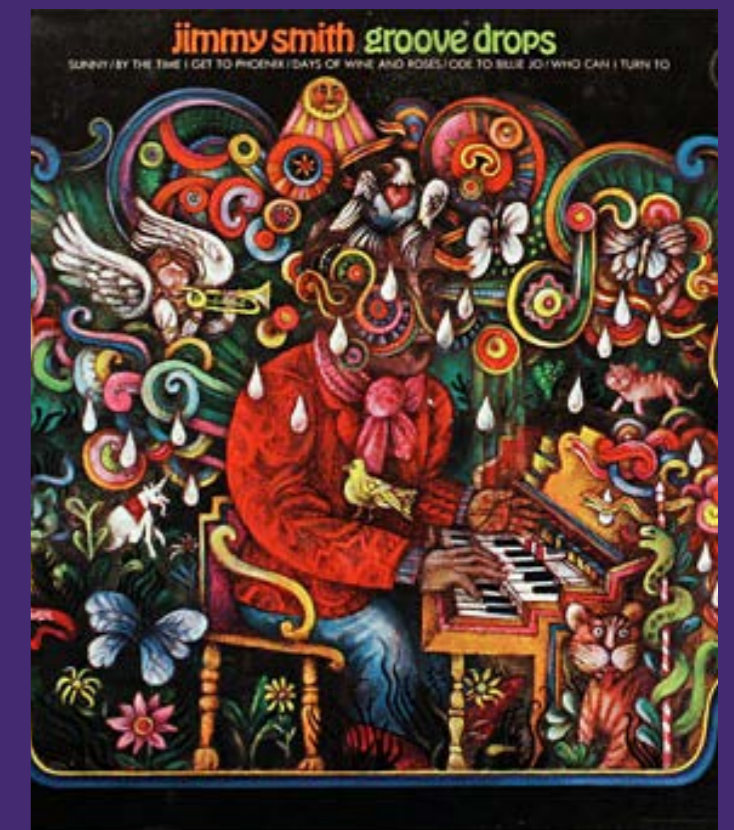
Composition

In terms of composition, the square format of an album cover presents a unique challenge. I have been looking into jazz album covers from the 50s to examine effective strategies to represent some of the music's jazzy aspects. One album cover that particularly resonates with me is "Bizet: Carmen in Jazz" by John Ellis Quartet, with cover artwork by Edel Rodriguez and album design by Kwang Won Kim. (Marlbank, 2024)This cover exemplifies exceptional composition, effectively positioning its character and surrounding elements to complement the square frame. I also love the over-stylised character design, the proportions and the textures.

Another source of inspiration is Alfred Roller's lithograph for the 14th International Art Exhibition in Vienna, crafted in 1902 in the style of the Vienna Secession, an artistic movement I have extensively discussed in my previous stages of research. (Leopold Museum, 2021) I appreciate the colours, the typography, the decorative geometric patterns, and the way the composition fully utilises the space within the image.

I've also included the work of one of my favourite London-based artists, Marija Tiurina, known for her digital paintings that specialise in capturing "the magic of motion." Her illustrations possess an incredible sense of fluidity and languidness, perfectly suited to accompany musical pieces.

She created a watercolour painting specifically for musician and songwriter Scott Siskind's latest album, Old Ghosts, New Homes. She states that it started with creating two cover designs roughly based on Siskind's sketches but decided to go for the one with a circular motion to represent a person's lifetime and the loop of their memories. (Tiurina, 2020).

This case is especially relevant to my project because of the musician's specific cultural background and its influence on the creative process behind Tiurina's design, as disclosed in her blog: "We just keep pushing these Old Ghosts into new homes and pretend they haven't been there before" - the thought of carrying negative things from your past and forcing them to fit into your new life without ever having dealt with them. That lyric and Scott's memories of growing up in a Jewish family that migrated from Eastern Europe to the States a long time ago were the main shaping factors that influenced the theme of the cover." (Tiurina, 2020).

Physical outcome

I plan to create a "collector's bundle" edition, which usually includes a limited edition packaging, gatefold record jackets, additional alternative artwork, posters, prints, photocards or some other type of exclusive merch.

I will be testing what materials would be the best for crafting the physical record jackets, exploring various folding techniques, and experimenting with gatefold designs.

Furthermore, I'm considering the possibility of creating a "picture disc," incorporating additional artwork directly onto the LP itself, enhancing its branding and collectability.
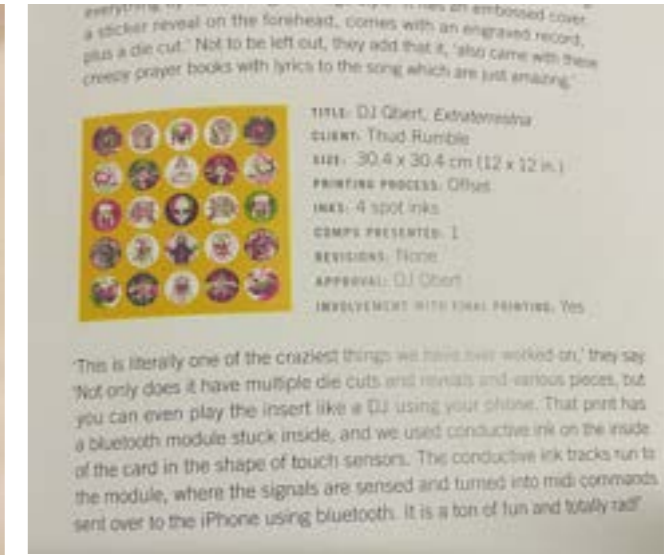
Choosing a typeface

The significance of typography in album art lies in its ability to set the tone and enhance the aesthetic appeal. Typography sets the initial impression of the album. Whether bold, elegant, playful, or mysterious, the choice of fonts immediately communicates what listeners can expect from the music. (Pixaab, 2023)

Graphic designer and journalist Emma Kumer took a look back at the history of album cover typefaces and made some useful observations on the collected data. The most popular typeface category on album art for the past forty years has been sans serif fonts. Serif fonts, in contrast, are less popular than handwritten ones despite hitting a peak in the 90s. Most album covers contained more than one typeface, which allowed me to identify the most common pairings. One of the most popular combinations, with 78 instances, was a serif with a sans serif — what most designers are taught to prefer when pairing typefaces. However, the overwhelming conclusion was that serifs didn't play well with anything else. (Kumer, 2020)
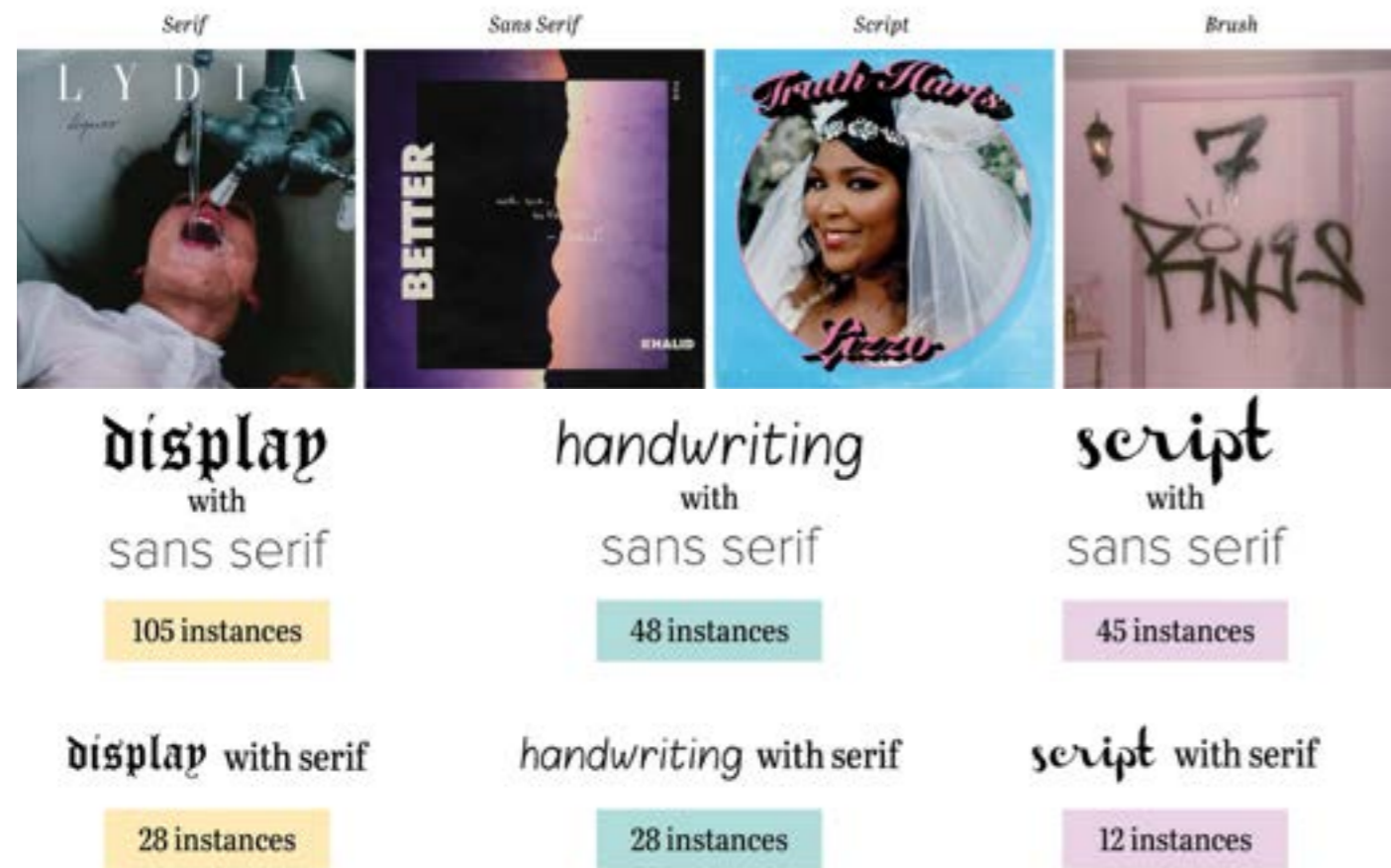
Kumer came up with certain categories to identify each typeface - groovy, medieval, geometric, digital, etc..
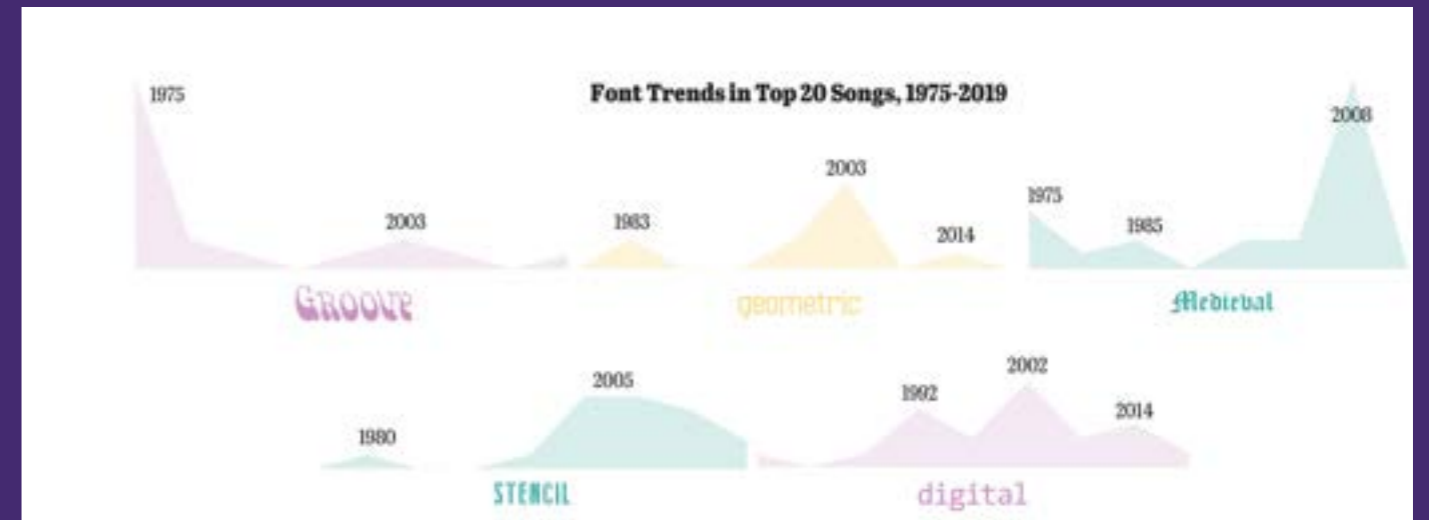
For example, the '70s and early '80s were dominated by "groovy" typography. Unsurprisingly, the artists of the '70s favoured that curvy, smooth typography we now associate with the decade. Some of these groovy typefaces, such as Adobe Caslon Pro, Windsor, Souvenir, and Cooper Black, have surged back into popularity today. The Beach Boys' Pet Sounds used the same font as today's clothing at Brandy Melville. The Eagles's Best of My Love used a typeface known to have inspired the latest redesign of Chobani Yogurt. (Kumer, 2020)

Almost every font from album covers in the '90s makes use of geometric-inspired typefaces reminiscent of computer code or bitmap video games - 1996 marked the boom in instant messaging and gaming consoles like Nintendo 64 and Sony PlayStation. (Kumer, 2020)

The 2000s exploded with medieval-inspired blackletter fonts from artists like Beyonce, The Pussycat Dolls, Sean Paul, Chris Brown, Gwen Stefani, and Akon. The early 2000s are unquestionable proof that the gothic typeface is one of the most universal categories. The 2000s was the first year where the top 20 was disproportionately filled with hip-hop and rap songs. These genres have always gravitated toward blackletter fonts such as Cloister Black, associating their ancient feel with royalty, richness, and power. (Kumer, 2020)

While album covers traditionally position the font on top of the artwork, in the 2010s, designers began experimenting with the use of type within the design. The title for Ariana Grande's Thank U, Next is tattooed across the artist's chest. Another example is Post Malone's beerbongs & bentleys, where the title is superimposed on a CD case. With the information hidden in this way, a person has to work harder to find the title of the album they're listening to. (Kumer, 2020)

However, now, half the album covers don't have text at all. In the digital era of streaming, the role of an album cover is no longer to identify the music but instead to accompany the album as a complementary piece of art. 2019 was the first year in observable history when handwritten fonts outnumbered all other types of fonts — serif and sans serif. But oddly enough, 2019 was also the peak in top 25 songs with no fonts at all. (Kumer, 2020)

Today, more artists are choosing to either handwrite their words or leave them off entirely. The natural progression of the 2010 trend of hiding fonts in artwork resulted in a shift toward eliminating the use of fonts at all — a turn away from technology. (Kumer, 2020)

In a culture ruled by social media and curated public images, there has been an evident push for authenticity. A person's handwriting is incredibly personal; after all, we still consider signatures a form of personal identification. Even if an artist pays someone else to hand-letter their album art, it still projects a general sense of intimacy and realness. In 2020 people no longer glorify the use of computer editing or digital typesetting. Today's audiences seek artists who are uncensored and genuine — and sometimes, that means leaving fonts behind. (Kumer, 2020)

In my design, I aim to bring a handwritten feel into the album title, possibly by drawing on top of the selected typeface and ingraining the design with a sense of authenticity that comes with human imperfection.

Can album cover fonts change how you hear the music?

There is a fantastic article by Austin Mccabe Juhnke, who runs Synaesthetic, a blog exploring the connections between aesthetics and music. In this piece, Juhnke presents the results from recent research on album cover typography and also provides insightful commentary.

The album cover may not be the "main event," so to speak, but it does significantly impact how you perceive and interpret the music. A newly published psychological study tested specifically how the typeface on album covers affects expectations about and perceptions of the music. In particular, the researchers narrowed in on how curvy or angular a typeface was (i.e., its curvilinearity). In the study, they created faux CD album covers with different typefaces to test how it affected listeners' expectations of the music and how it affected their interpretation of the music after they heard it. (Juhnke, 2020)

The authors note that previous studies have suggested that listeners have visual and tactile associations with different kinds of sounds: "Higher-pitched sounds tend to be associated with smaller, more angular shapes whereas lower-pitched sounds are associated with larger, rounder shapes... Harsh timbres (such as the sound of crashing cymbals) corresponded with angular shapes, while softer timbres (such as the sounds of a piano) corresponded with rounder shapes. Curvilinearity is also associated with texture—round shapes are associated with smoothness and angular shapes are associated with roughness. There is also evidence that round shapes are associated with low emotional arousal words and words that invoke feelings of safety… while angular shapes are associated with high arousal words and words that invoke feelings of danger." (Juhnke, 2020)

This study found that the typeface curvilinearity affected what kind of music people expected to hear on the album. According to it, listeners expected to hear music that was "more angular, masculine, fast, rough, happy, evil, violent, exciting, and active when the typeface on the faux CD album cover was angular compared with when it was round. Conversely, participants expected the music to sound more round, feminine, slow, smooth, sad, good, gentle, calm, and passive when the typeface was round than when it was angular." After people actually heard the music, the typeface also had affected how they perceived the sounds they heard. This effect was limited, however. Music that was particularly "angular" overrode the expectation of "roundness" from a curvy font. (Juhnke, 2020)

What seems to fascinate Juhnkee about this study is not so much the question of whether or not it can be "proven" that typeface changes our perception of music. Instead, it is the ways the study highlights how much of the language around visual and sonic aesthetics is shared. All people have some sense of what is meant by a "rough" sound or a "smooth" sound, for instance, even though these are words typically applied to tactile sensations. What does it mean for music to sound "angular" or "curvy"? Even though these are visual descriptors, one can intuit what they mean in terms of musical experience. In fact, it can be difficult to talk about qualities of sound without referencing other sensory experiences. Even the idea of "high" and "low" pitches is a spatial metaphor. (Juhnke, 2020)

Even though people have been taught to think of sensory experience as divided into "five senses," language reveals that it's not so cut and dry. The way people experience music is visual and tactile, even when they think of it as purely sonic. (Juhnke, 2020)

Customising a typeface

After receiving feedback from a tutorial, I decided to look into customising a typeface for the album titles by incorporating characteristic elements from the Bulgarian Cyrillic Alphabet (which is different from the Russian Cyrillic Alphabet) and maybe reviving and refreshing some old typefaces. I have yet to decide which fonts I want to use or which traditional assets may be worth re-purposing. However, I stumbled upon a book on Cyrillic typefaces, published in 1979, that may be a starting point for my experimentation process. I particularly like the decorative ones displayed on pages 59 and 115.

(1971) Design: Boris Angelushev
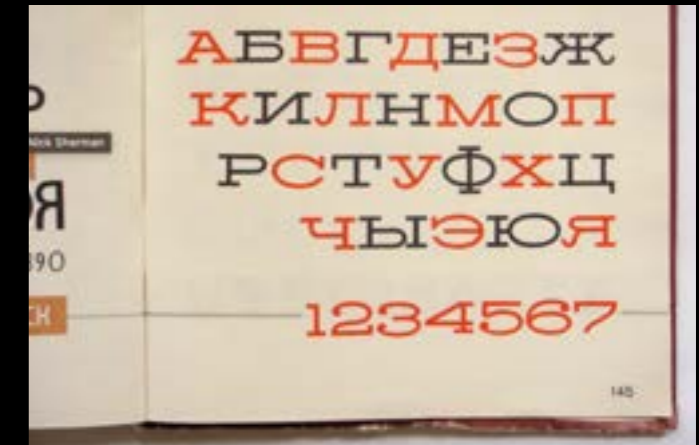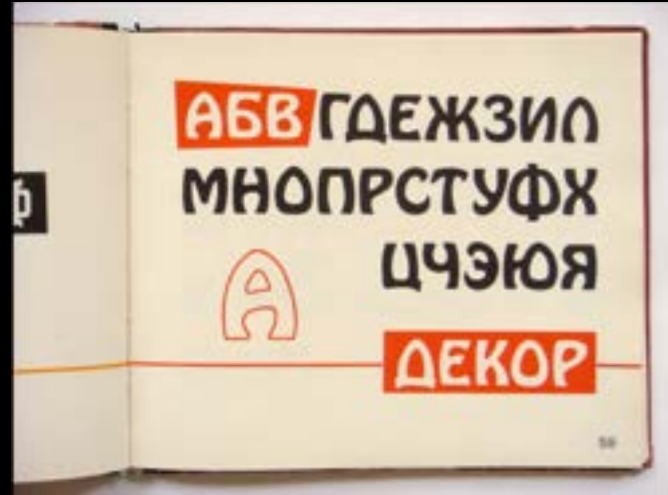
EXPERIMENT 03 IMENT ATION

01 Welkya

First, I started with some very basic conceptual ideas for the project itself: I sketched initial visual references that intuitively came to mind when I listened to the albums back to back, which were later used for the zine and the first project pitches. I also used one of them as a loose aesthetic guideline for the unit report.

Then, after the research stage, I did rough sketches of all the album covers in order to be able to imagine a composition that includes the characters and elements I have already decided on. Those sketches worked across both of my concepts - the illustration and the more abstract style I ended up choosing. I found myself coming back to them constantly as I was developing my designs, especially when experimenting with the compositions.


initial sketches
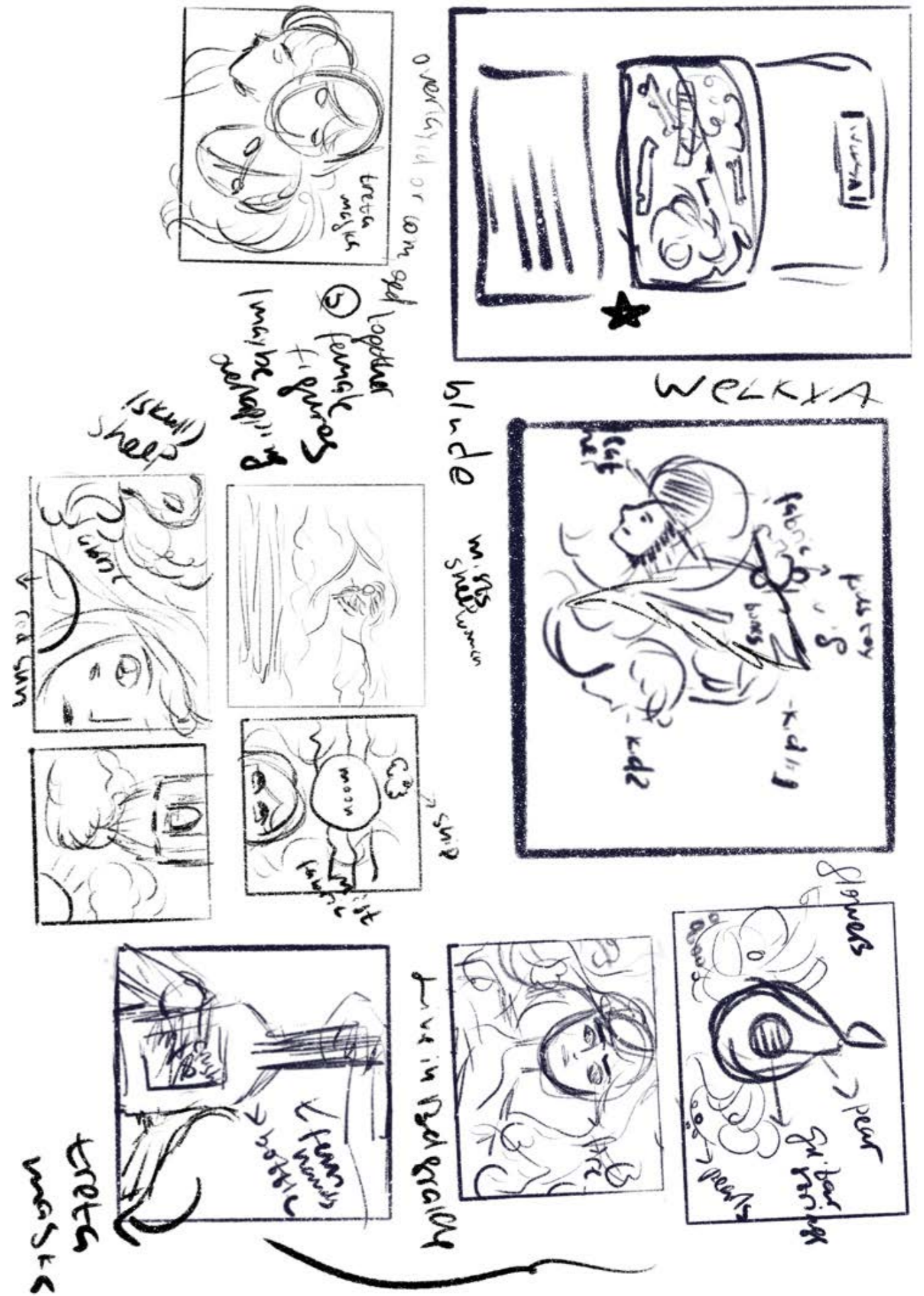
Initial direction: Illustration

My initial idea was to hand draw illustrations on Procreate and add some textures and effects in Photoshop later. However, as I progressed with the idea, I decided that while the artwork looked visually appealing, it did not really reflect the nature of the music.

Also, on a more practical/personal note, I spent too much time tweaking the style and re-doing some elements because I am not as confident with my drawing skills yet. Hence, I was worried that I might be unable to provide high-quality illustrations and do the custom lettering for the four covers on time.

Still, despite spending a lot of time developing something that I did not end up using, I learned a lot from that experience, and I am interested in continuing that concept in my free time and potentially adding it to my portfolio.
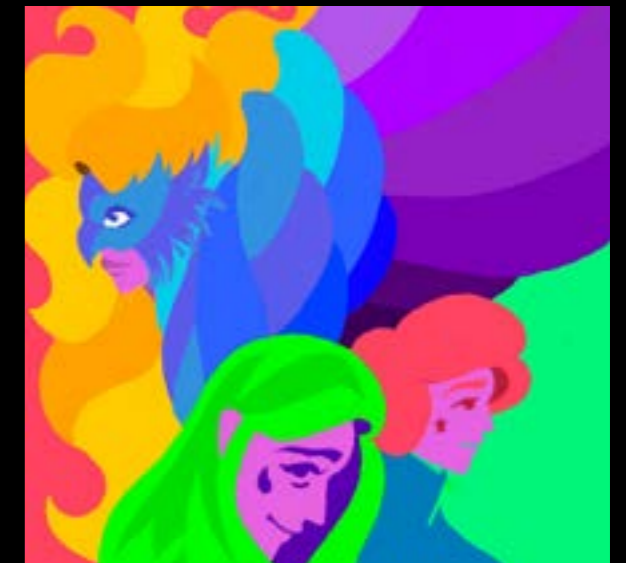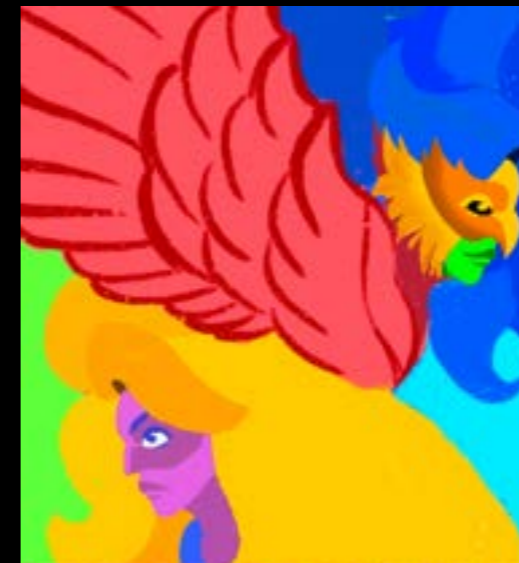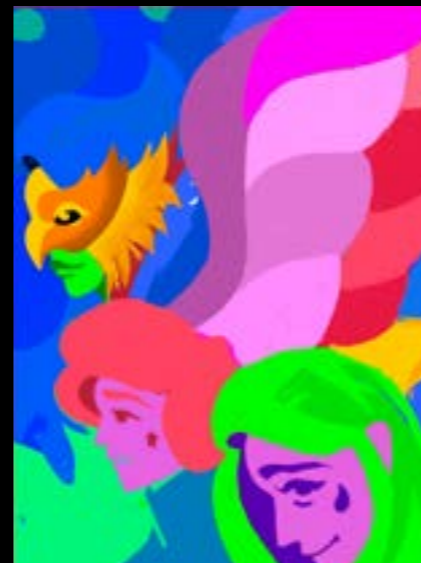
Photographic elements

During the research stage, I collected photos, objects or portraits that could be turned into the characters and the symbols that I had identified as "key" while researching the folk tales/song lyrics. I wanted to include feathers, photos of owls, wings, and pictures of children. Most definitely, I wanted a female silhouette that is either overlaid with the elements or somehow encompasses them within it. An alternative direction was an abstract collage, but I anticipated I would want to end up with something more minimalistic and clean. I also gathered a few fabric photographs to use for textures.

By the end, when I got all my images, I circled back to my inspiration board and singled out two versions of Deftones' album Diamond Eyes as the direction I wanted to take for this cover.

First attempts
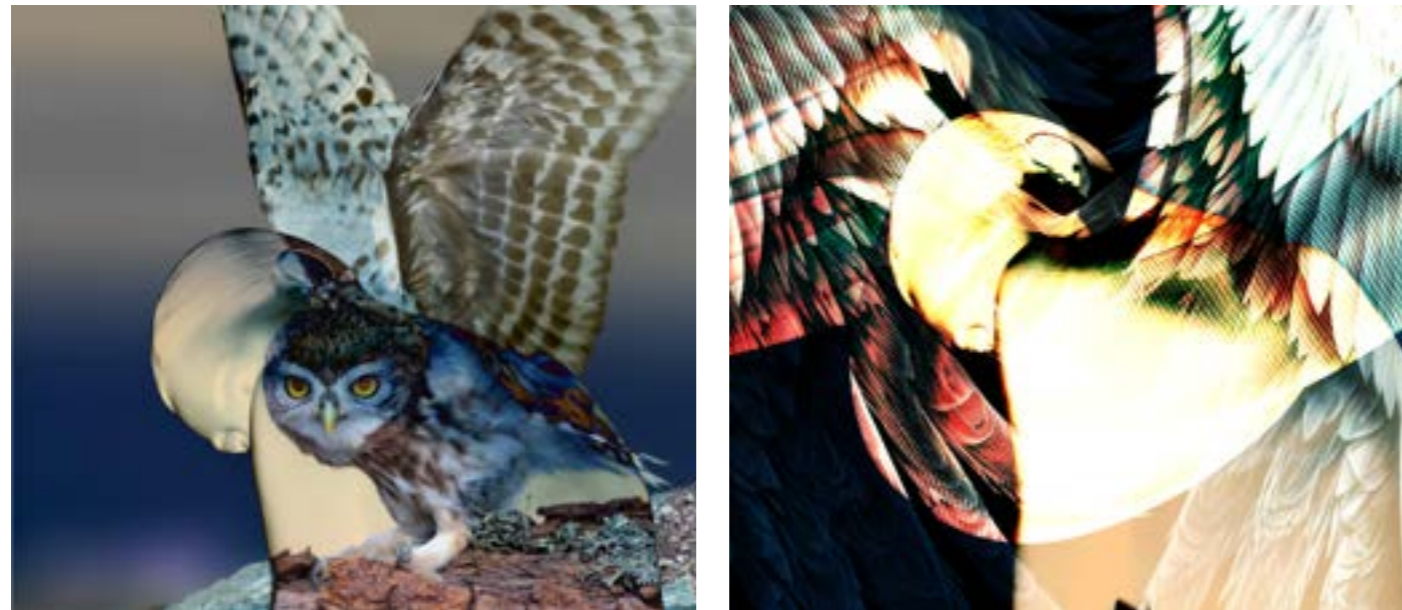
I started putting everything together and figuring out the correct configuration: the positioning, the blending modes, the opacity, how the images were being overlaid on top of each other, the lighting and the colours. Then, I experimented with the negatives: inverting some photos, duplicating them, and trying different blending modes. I also tested how each individual portrait felt and what difference the positioning of the subject made. For example, I tried various backgrounds, some inverted. I tried the collage approach but ended up not liking it. Another failed attempt was the holographic one with the wings. (next page)


For the next stage, I began oversimplifying the composition and discarding many of the initially planned characters and elements, which helped make the designs feel even more elusive, better fitting the concept I was initially trying to achieve.

I spent the last stage adding photos of various fabrics and materials and blending them into the image to create this abstract and surreal feeling of the textures, adding depth and tangibleness to the entire image.
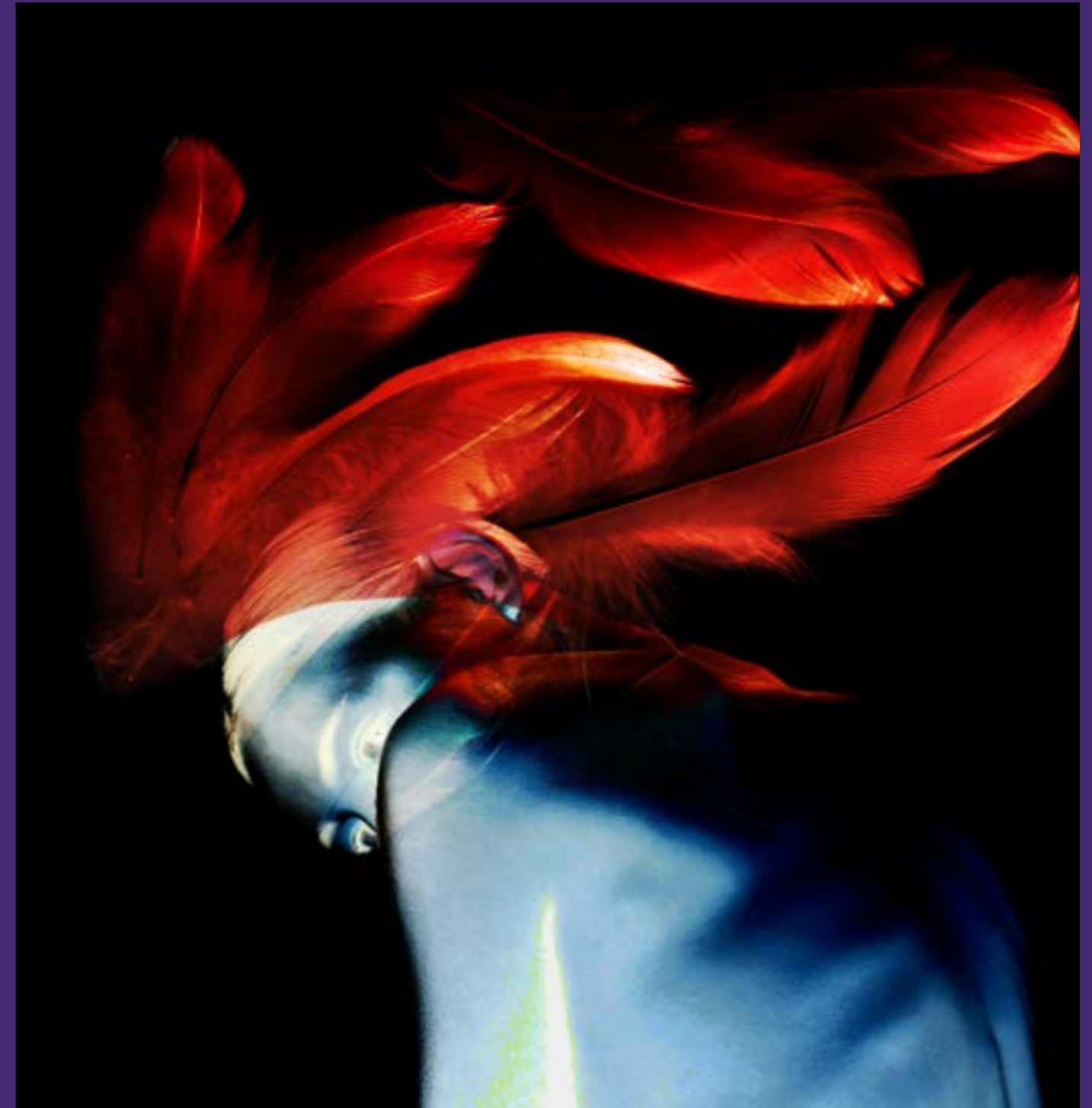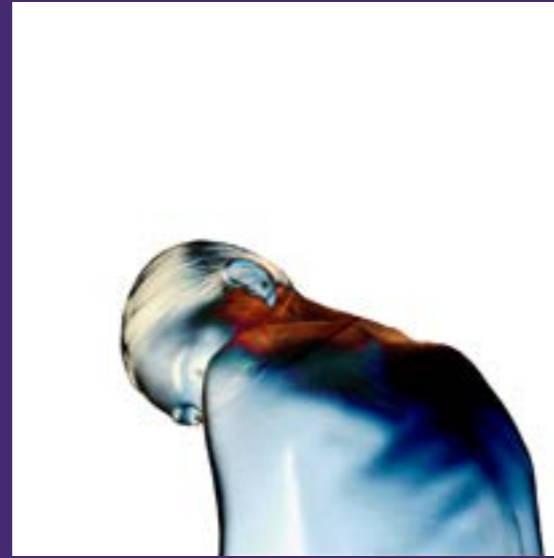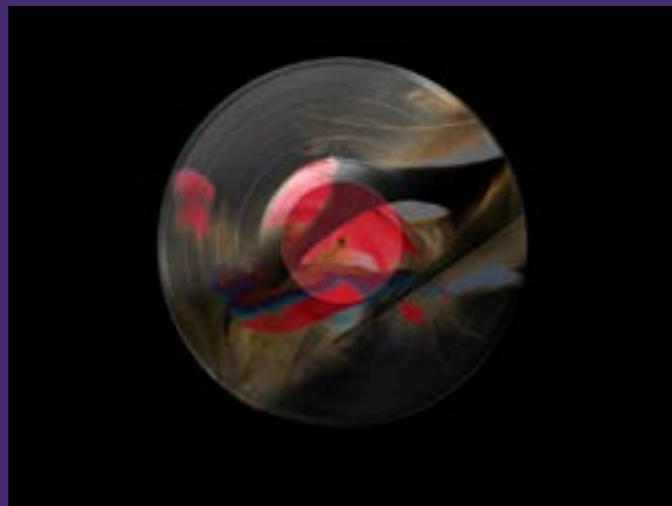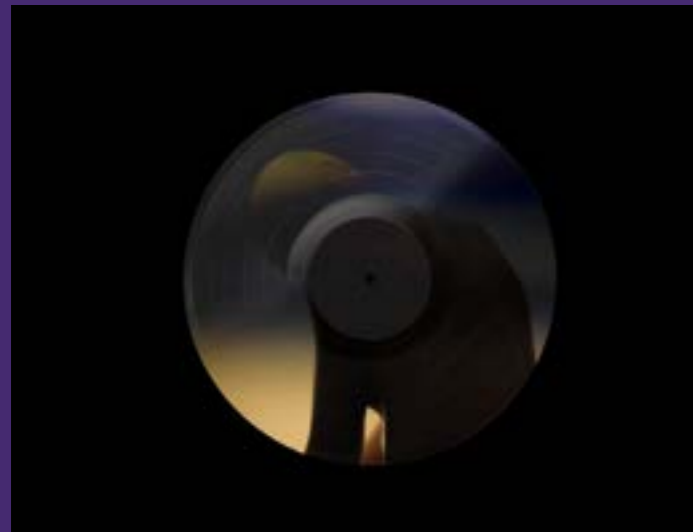
Iterations
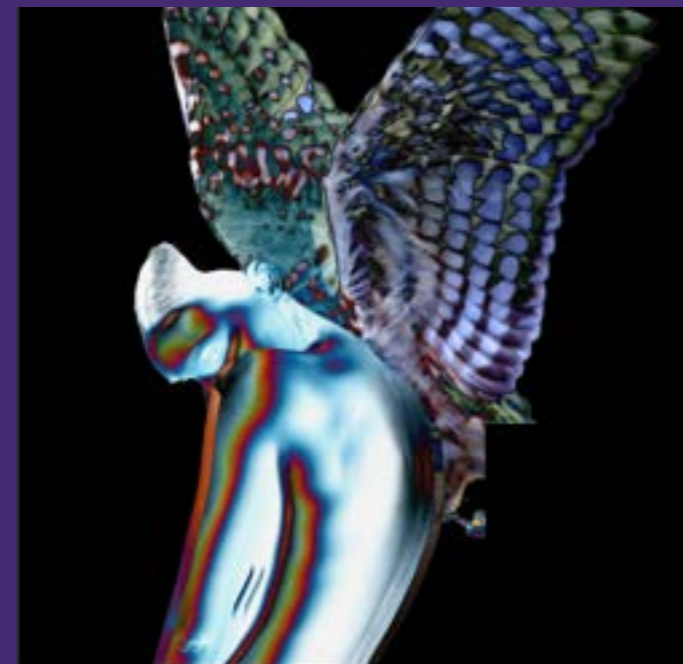
Final outcome

I ended up with the idea of only having my female character in the centre. I overlayed the feathers and some red fabric over the subject and duplicated the layers with different blending modes until I ended up with the X-ray effect I discovered I liked during the many iterations.

In the end, I just tweaked some details in terms of how the elements interacted with each other and ended up with the blue design after carefully considering what exactly I wanted the image to convey.

Prototype

Mockup

The extensive iterations are a mandatory part of my creative process, and I find them extremely beneficial because I end up with a wide range of designs that may not have made the final cut but still can be repurposed, especially because they tie nicely with the concept. For example, I will be using this image on an A5 art card, which will be included as an extra collectable with this special, limited edition of "Welkya."

Also, I found a company online that was willing to press coloured vinyls and even offered the option to do custom images. I tried different versions on the mockups but ended up really liking the concept of using a close-up photo of an eye. I think it works well colour-wise and creates a nice contrast between the minimalistic cover and the eccentric disk.
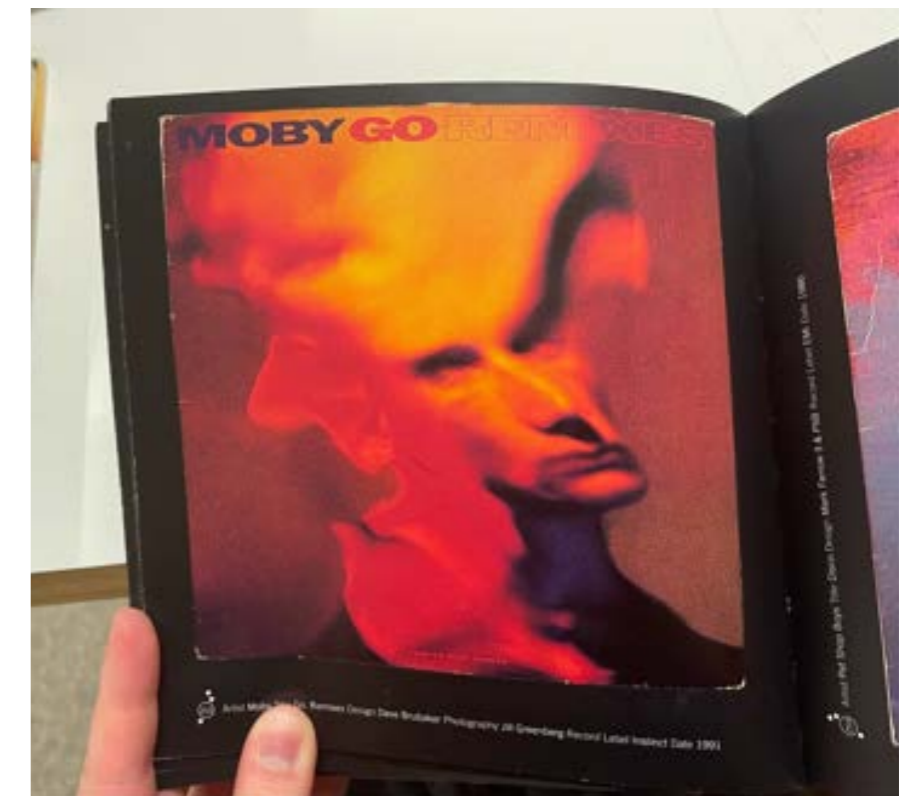
02 Treta Majka
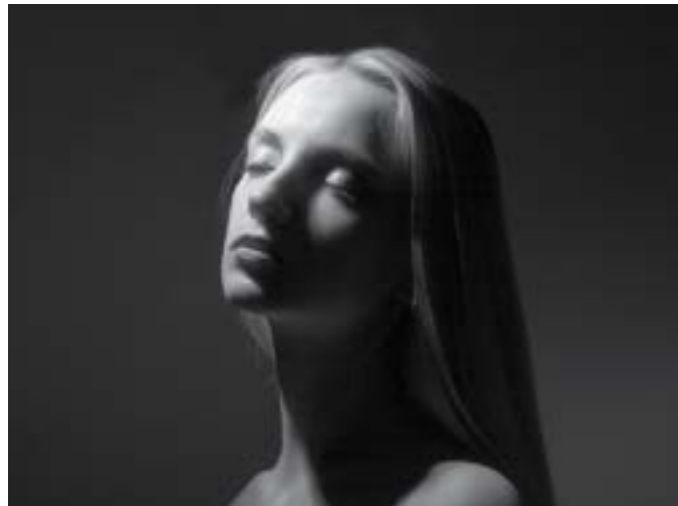
First experiments

For the cover of "Treta Majka," I found three photos in different poses/expressions of the same model and tried combining them to represent the idea of the "perfect thirds."

First, I tried to emulate my approach with "Welkya" in order to remain consistent with the aesthetic: I mostly used blending modes "Exclusion" and "Difference" to invert the image and achieve "a negative" effect. However, since the base photos' backgrounds and lighting differed from those I used for "Welkya," the result was also strikingly different. I tried masking the subjects in various ways and using the brush strokes assets to frame them better, but it just was not working. I attempted to overlay a square over the subject's eyes and invert the rest to keep some detail visible and later added some colour, hoping that it would bring some energy to the images, but both methods failed.

I even revisited some inspiration sources, notably the cover for Mac Miller's "Circles" and Denzel Curry's "Melt My Eyez See Your Future", which became a starting point for the direction I next started exploring.
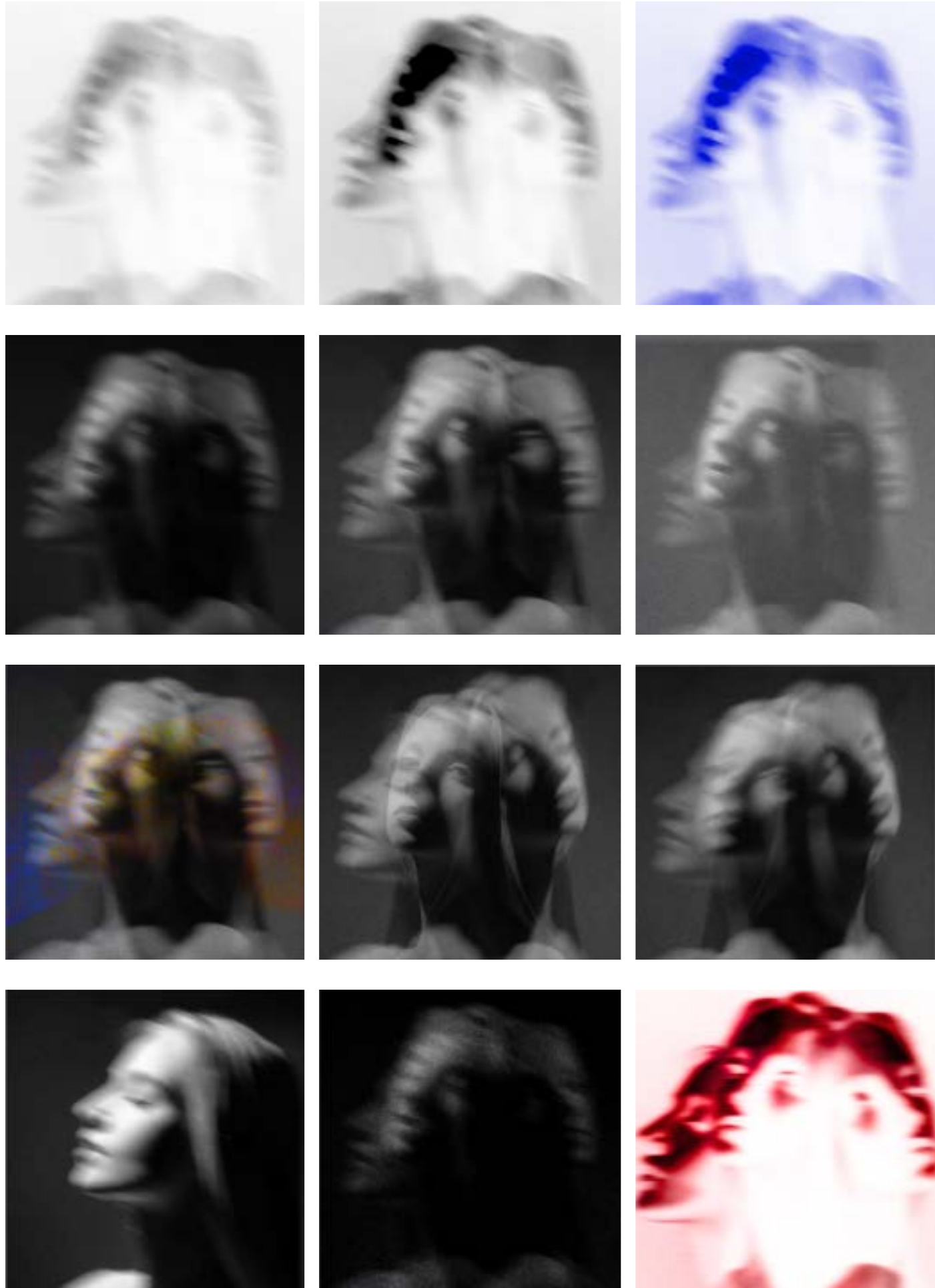

92

93

Attempt at colour

Iterations

Final outcome

My biggest issue was how stiff the composition appeared and how it lacked the musicality and vibrance I associate with any music, but especially the playful tracks in "Treta Majka."

Therefore, in order to liven things up, I used the "motion blur effect" and added grainy textures on top. Finding the ideal composition and determining the correct level of motion blur was a lengthy and somewhat chaotic process. It heavily relied on my intuition to estimate the quality and the vibe of the outcome.

For example, there are not many visible differences from one iteration to another, and it is quite easy to get lost in the numerous versions. I also felt frustrated with my limited options with the blending modes because they became an essential part of my creative process for this project. However, the lack of colour-containing components in the base layers does not allow for much experimentation in the blending modes.

The aim of the process was to optimally portray the figures moving in a specific direction while seamlessly blending with the rest of the faces, thus creating the illusion of motion synchronized with the music.

The grain was also an element I planned to use from the research stage, and I am quite happy with how it turned out to be the missing ingredient for this cover.

Mockup

03 Krushevo

photographic elements

Krushevo is an album with distinctive flamenco influences, and I wanted the cover to convey that. I mixed photos of Macedonian landscapes, such as mountains, villages, and important historical monuments, that I deemed important during the research phase. I chose textures like linen and objects like pears because they seemed in tune with the sentiments expressed in the song's lyrics. At first, I was not too happy with how the album cover was coming together because I couldn't fully control the brightness and the contrast. For example, the eyes were too dark in many of the images. Then, because of the way I was overlaying the images, the colours were getting dulled. If I tried to tweak the colour balance or adjust the hue/saturation, the colours looked artificial and unnaturally added to the composition. Hence, I changed some of the base images, added some new textures, and experimented with different blending modes that created new colour combinations. Then, I had to change the textures because the effect started to look like a print on fabric, which was not the direction I wanted to go in.

Iterations

Experimenting with colour

Textures

The new textures (coloured cellophane duplicated and inverted in different blending modes) resulted in somewhat of a colour explosion, but I much preferred how the eyes and the individual features interacted with the background in these versions.

Nevertheless, I tried to single out the colour red because, in my head, I associated it with flamenco the most. I also wanted to simplify it and make it more compatible with the rest of the covers. However, as I saw the final result, the red designs were somewhat creepy, and they borderline reminded me of rock/metal music. Therefore, I decided to stick with the more colourful designs because they seemed to best convey the upbeat and extravagant nature of the music. Even though Krushevo ended up looking so different from the previous covers, I decided to embrace the differences instead of trying to force it under a unified concept, especially since the music itself is so vastly different. For some, it makes sense to go for a minimalist, melancholic design, while others ask for a more playful/flamboyant design.

I am super happy with the disc design. I used a photo of pear seeds and overlayed it with a coloured cellophane texture to match the cover and emulate the feeling of them being pressed within the vinyl.
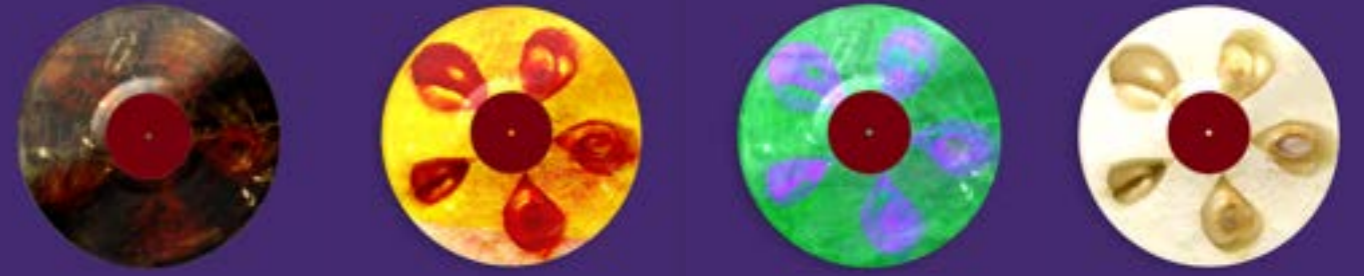
Final outcome and mockup

Disc design

04 A folk song runs through it

For this album, I had a very straightforward concept: I wanted to combine an image of the moon, a portrait of a woman, and a photo of a lamb and figure out the best way these elements blend and correspond with each other. I was inspired by Chagall's paintings and wanted to offer a different retelling of his famous painting "I and the Village," which was also featured on the original cover of "A Folk Song Runs Through It".

In the research stage, I stated that Chagall's unique signature style was said to be influenced by "Cubism, Fauvism, Symbolism, and Surrealism—characterised by skewed dimension, non-representational colour, transfiguration, and dreamlike imagery."(Tate, 1948) Hence, I overlayed many versions of the same elements, using different blending modes like "Colour Dodge' "Exclusion", and "Difference" until I achieved a surrealistic atmosphere, similar to the original painting, but faithful to my style.

Farm animals have always been a huge part of Eastern European folklore since most of the music originated as tunes that shepherds would play while herding their cattle. A sheep is also a central focus in Chagall's painting. However, I needed to find the right balance between surrealistic and creepy since many of my experiments ended up looking rather unfitting for the genre. So, I tried simplifying the image and developed a cleaner, softer version, where the moon was only suggested as an outline.

The idea for the moon came from a sentence I came across during my research, describing the "dream country" from Chagall's paintings as a place "where blue cows fly over pink moons, and lovers walk literally on air, and where anyone who has a heart can live as pleasantly without a head as with one." (Tate, 1948) So, naturally, I wanted to incorporate a pink/red moon in my own design.

photographic elements

First experiments

Iterations
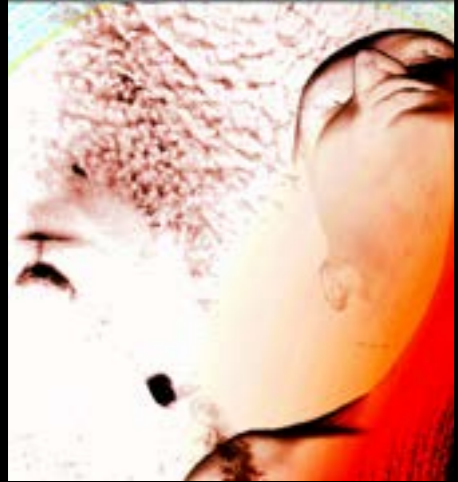
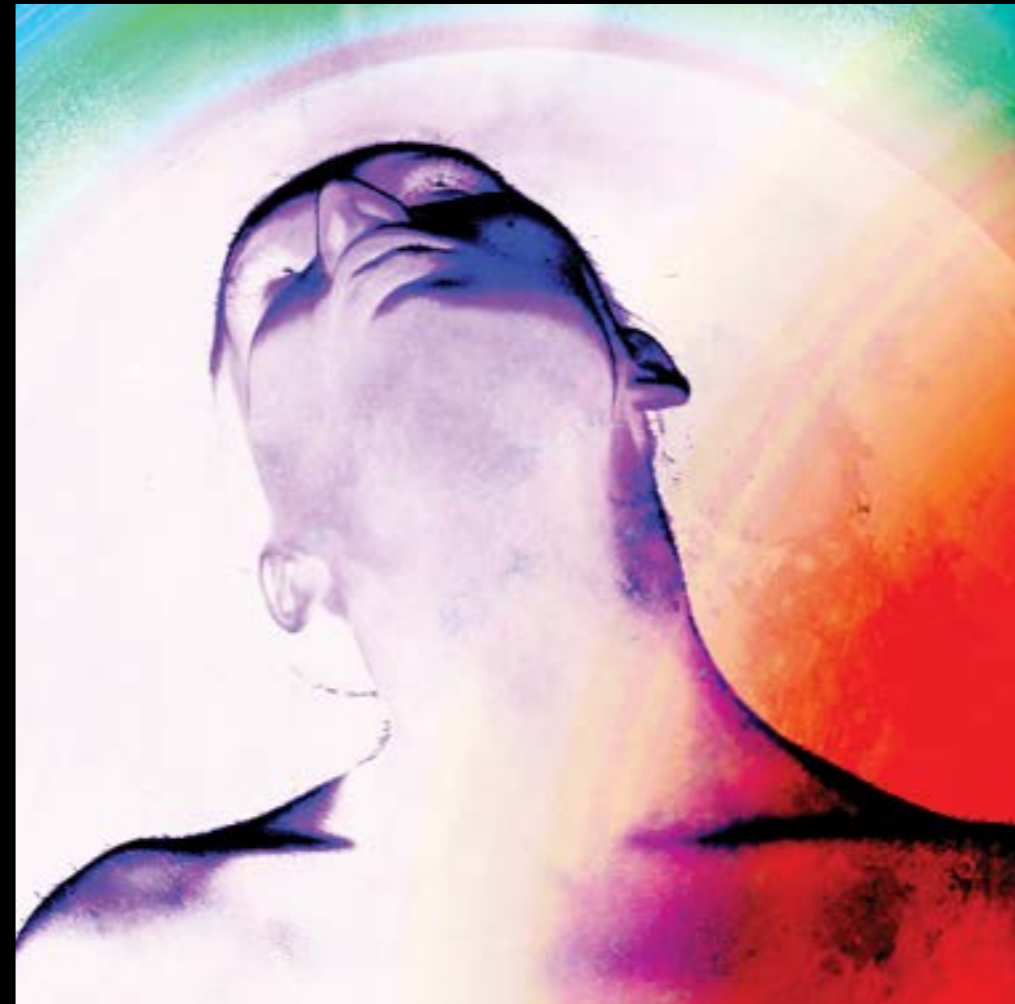Simplifying

Final outcome

I ended up going with something super simple and sleek that may not have encompassed all of my initial ideas, but it represented the vibe of the music best and looked best from a purely aesthetic perspective. I also liked the designs with the lamb, but they were better fitted for a different genre and would have been misleading to the potential listeners.
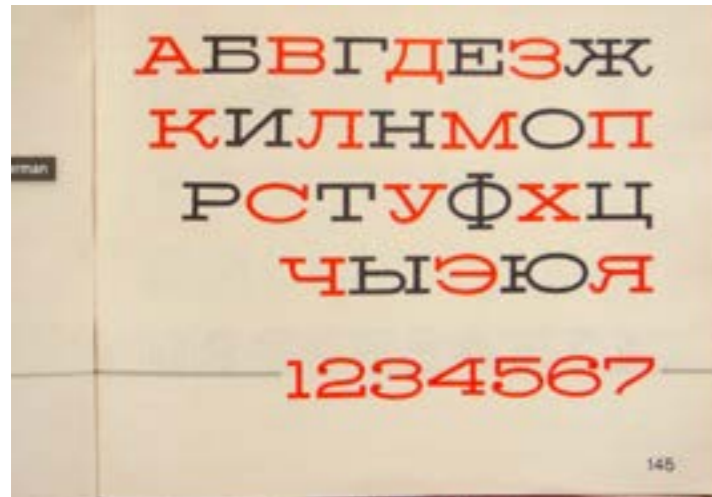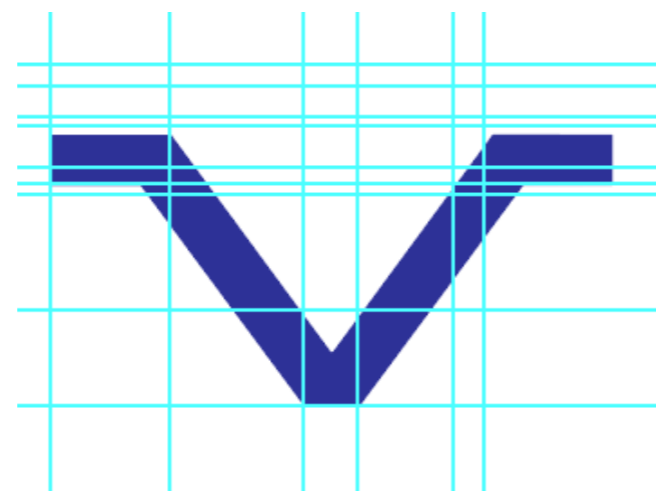

Mockup

Process for custom lettering

I opted to digitise and adapt this unnamed Cyrillic typeface displayed on page 145, as its robustness reminded me of "the geometric-inspired typefaces reminiscent of computer code or bitmap video games that were used in '90s album covers."(Kumer, 2020) Simultaneously, this slab serif instantly evoked memories of the fonts used in many of my old Bulgarian textbooks, creating a dual association with both Eastern and Western European language and culture—an effect I've sought throughout the entire project.

Some letters, such as A, O, E, T, M, and K, are identical in both alphabets, so they only required tracing and adjustments to the width and spacing. Additionally, the Cyrillic letters B and P corresponded with the Latin letters V and R, respectively, simplifying their adaptation. However, for letters like the Latin R, which differ, I employed creative solutions: I utilised a mirrored version of the Cyrillic letter for YA (Я) for the Latin R, and I inverted the Cyrillic letter for G (Г) to create the Latin L. The Cyrillic letter Y served as a basis for creating V, which in turn facilitated the creation of W. I crafted the Latin J, S, D, G, and U from scratch.

Title for Welkya + A folk song runs through it

Title for Treta Majka

Title for Krushevo

WELKYA

KRUSHEVO

TRETA MAJKA

A FOLK SONG
RUNS THROUGH IT

04 OUTCOMES

Miroslav Tadic

Vlatko Stefanovski

GUITAR

KRUSHEVO

A FOLK SONG RUNS THROUGH IT

PIANO

Andrew Rangell

KRUSHEVO

GAJDARSKO ORO

JANO, MOJ

JOVANO JOVANKE

MORE CICO RECE DA ME ZEN

PROSETA SE KIVKA KUMANOVKA

NE PILA GORA N TIKA JA

DAFINO VINO CRVENO

ZLEZI, VIDO

AJDE DA TI ZNAES, PAMETIS MILICE

OJ, OVCARCE

A FOLK SONG RUNS THROUGH IT

Janácek

IN THE MISTS

Bartók

IMPROVISATIONS ON HUNGARIAN PEASANT SONGS, OP. 20 / SZ 74
ROMANIAN FOLKDANCES, SZ 56

Kodály

SEVEN PIECES FOR PIANO, OP. 11

Bartók

SONATA FOR PIANO, SZ 80

WELKYA

Theodosii Spassov

KAVAL

WELKYA

TUM - PA - TA - TA, TAKUN TA-TA

GALENO HORO

RUCHENITSA - RUCHKANITSA

LALITSA

MOMINA MUKA / A MAIDEN'S GRIEF

KRAI SELO NA BAIRITE / BY THE VILLAGE, ON THE HILLS)

UNNAMED

NYAKUDE V RODOPITE / SOMEWHERE IN THE RHODOPES

GRAOVO DANCE

BYAL SAMOLET / A WHITE PLANE

MANIPULATION

BALADA ZA EDNA NADUTA GAIDA / BALLAD ABOUT A PUFFED UP WINDPIPE

WELKYA / NIGHT TAWNY OWL

FRONT

BACK

GUITAR

TRETA MAJKA

Vlatko Stefanovski
Miroslav Tadic
feat Theodosii Spassov

TRETA MAJKA

SANOC SEDEM TRENO

NE SI GO PRODAVAJ KOLJO

MORE SOKOL PIE

ANADOLU OYUN HAVASI

KALESH ANDJO

KASAPSKO ORO

OPA - IHA

KIRAJDZICE, JABANDZICE

EJ TI MOMCE OHRIDJANCE

ELENO MOME

FRONT

BACK

WELKYA

WELKYA

TUN - PA - TA . TAKUN TA-TA
GALENO HORO
RUCHENITSA - RUCHKANITSA
LALITSA
MOMINA MUKA / A MAIDEN'S GRIEF
KRAI SELO NA BAIRITE / BY THE VILLAGE, ON THE HILLS)
UNNAMED
NYAKUDE V RODOPITE / SOMEWHERE IN THE RHODOPES
GRAOVO DANCE
BYAL SAMOLET / A WHITE PLANE
MANIPULATION
BALADA ZA EDNA NADUTA GAIDA / BALLAD ABOUT A PUFFED UP WINDPIPE
WELKYA / NIGHT TAWNY OWL

Theodosii Spassov

WELKYA

Janáček
IN THE MISTS

Bartók
IMPROVISATIONS ON HUNGARIAN PEASANT SONGS, OP. 20 / SZ 74

Kodály
SEVEN PIECES FOR PIANO, OP. 11

Bartók
SONATA FOR PIANO, SZ 80

A FOLK SONG RUNS THROUGH IT

A FOLK SONG RUNS
THROUGH IT

Andrew Rangell

A FOLK SONG RUNS
THROUGH IT

KRUSHEVO

GILGUGOSO OSO
JANO, MORI
JOVANO JOVANKE
MORE GIDO NEGI DA MEZENI
PROSETA SE JOVKA KUMANOVKA
IN PIRI KA GORI NI TKALA
DAFINO VINO CRVENO
LELEYA, YPAD
A DE DALI ZNAES, PAMETISH SELCE
OJ, DEVOJCE

KRUSHEVO

KRUSHEVO

Miroslav Tadic
Vlatko Stefanovski

KRUSHEVO

MAJKA

TRETA

Vlatko Stefanovski
Miroslav Tadic
feat Theodosii Spassov

TRETA MAJKA

MAJKA

TRETA

Vlatko Stefanovski
Miroslav Tadic
feat Theodosii Spassov

TRETA MAJKA

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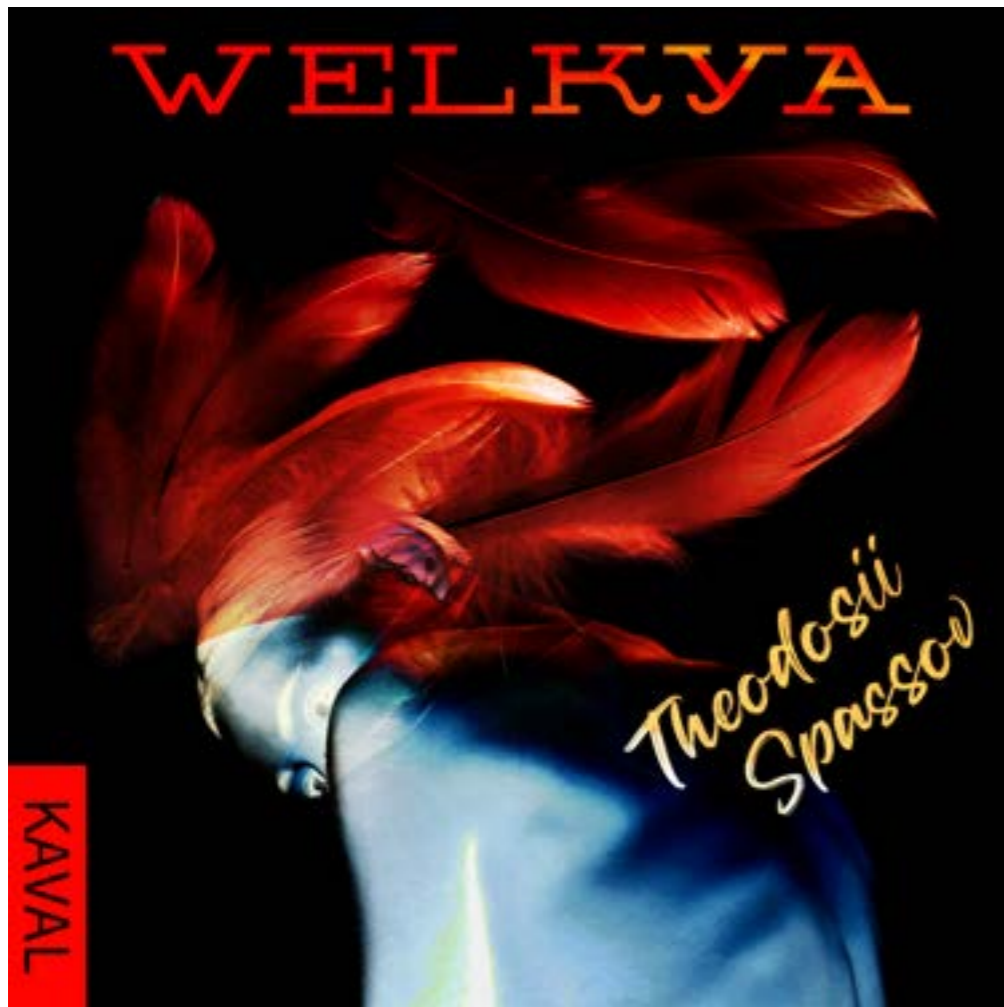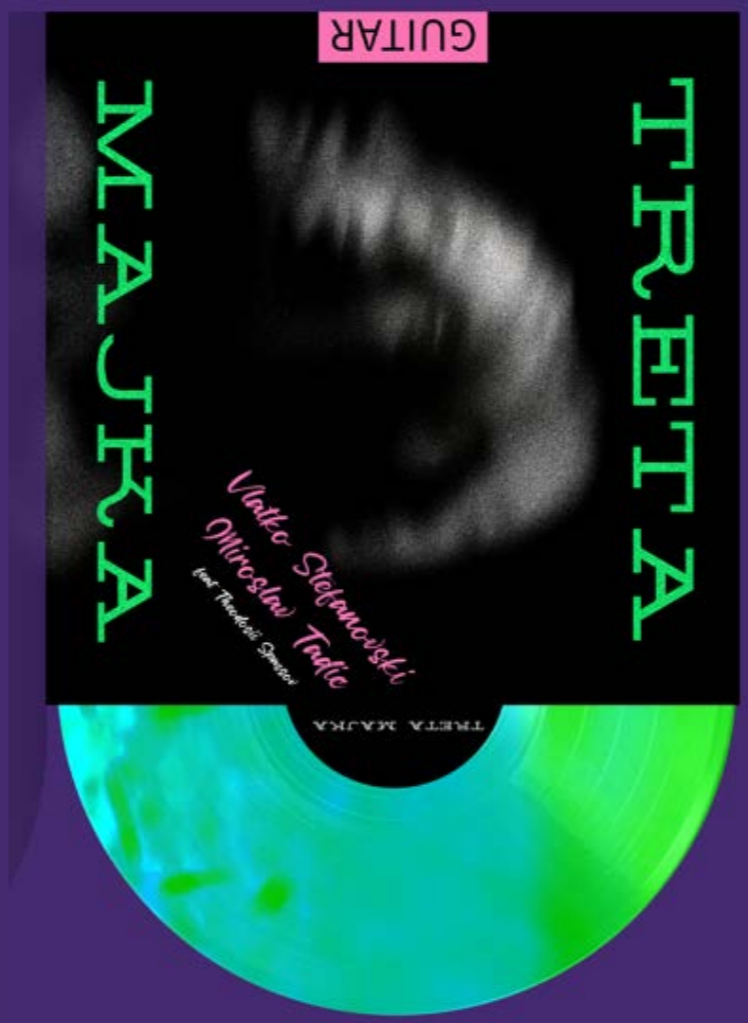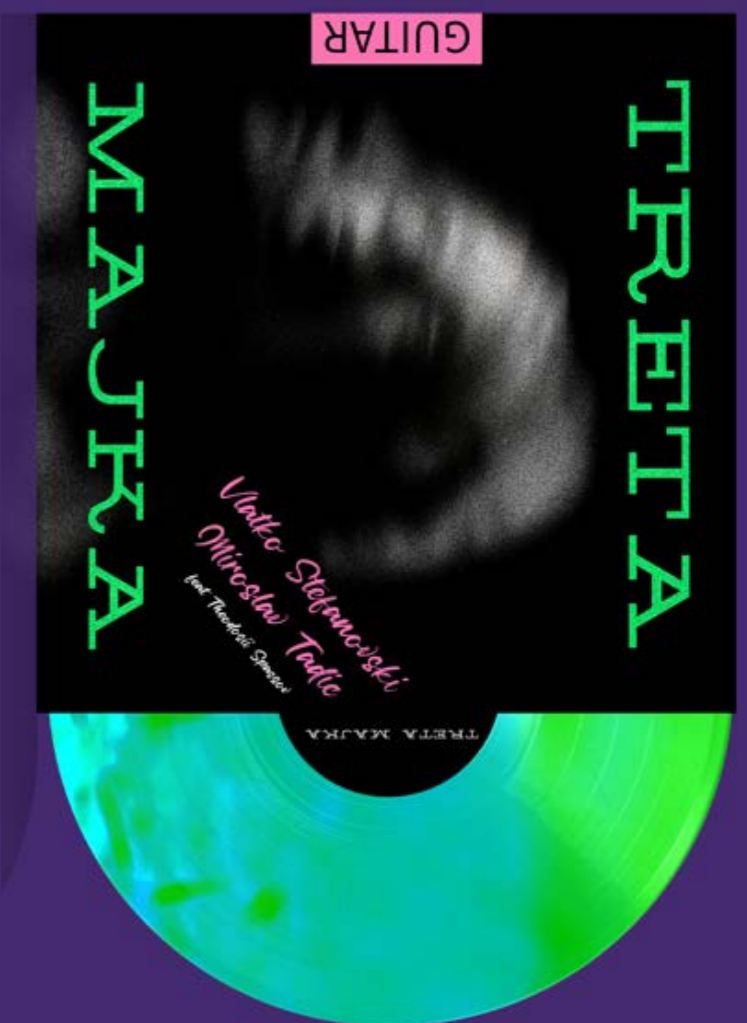1. Chen, M (2018) *Object Permanence: 4AD, Vaughan Oliver & Cocteau Twins.* Proxymusic club [Online]. Available at: https://proxymusic.club/2018/08/24/4ad-vaughan-oliver-cocteau-twins/ [Accessed 1 Apr. 2024].

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