# CASE STUDY

SEGA — SPOTIFY SONIC

PROBLEM

BEGINNINGS

There are days where one thing becomes another, where your best laid plans morph into something more. Such was the case with this social media post for Sega's Sonic the Hedgehog. During one of my stints at an agency, we would create posts for the Blue Blur, often irreverent, more likely silly, sometimes thoughtful and, occasionally, poetic.

What began as a simple idea to create a post around a pun for a band name eventually transformed into an end of the year wrap up. These retrospective wrap-ups have become prolific as I write this, almost every major brand from music services to game companies and more are sending them out to their customers. And thus did my idea for a punny band name change into a topical end of the year wrap as if the Sega characters themselves had their own bands. What would those albums look like? Would they be current, throwback, classics, indie darlings? That was the questions I sought to answer.

Of course the old Aristotle phrase, "The whole is more than the sum of its parts" would very much fit into this change. I would even take an architectural detour and reference Mies Van Der Rohe who would describe the details as what truly defines a space, er building, er digital post. It is in these details that little devils live in their hellscape, waiting to pop out and cause a ruckus as only fiends can. For one must not only design the post, but the albums themselves. So lace up your shoes and lets get running.

"Let's do it to it!" as Sonic would scream! (in the comics, he doesn't say that in the games or tv shows, just so we stay brand consistent).
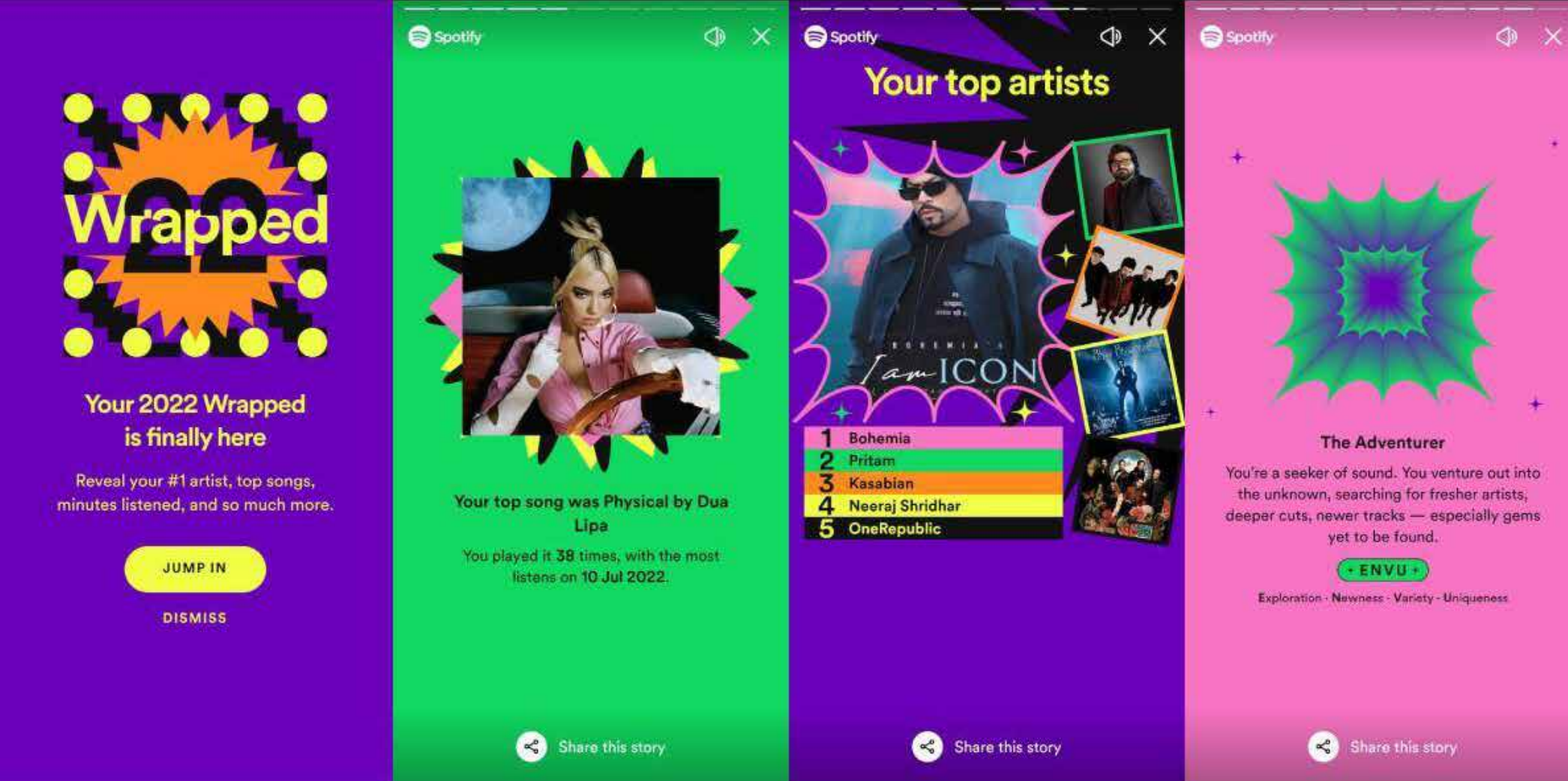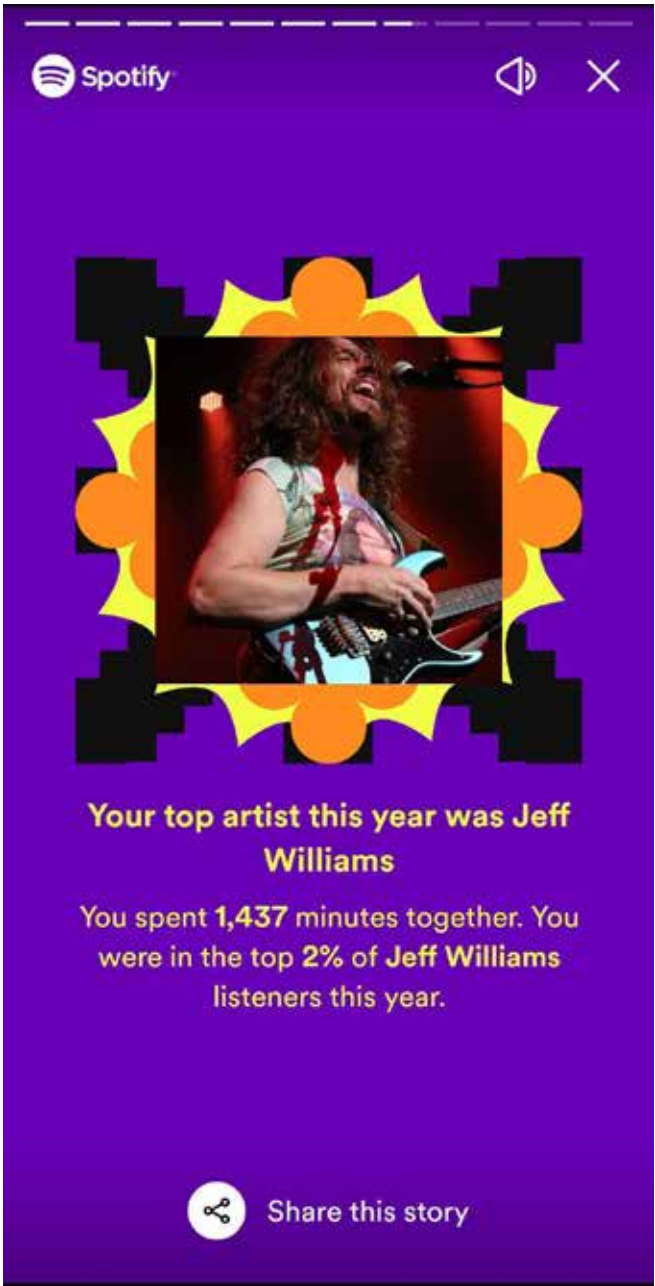
Spotify's 2022 year end wrap up design.

RESEARCH

To start, getting a good look at what Spotify did for year end 2022 wrap ups was the first place to go. And since they'd already rolled those out to the public, I had to be quick to create this post to stay topical and on trend to maximize the number of impressions and responses from our audience. Miss it by a day or two, and the whole thing is kaput.

Once I was able to establish the design aesthetics, I could replicate it no problem, but then the thornier part reared its head: I had to create albums that were puns of bands and included as many inside jokes and references to Sonic and his cavalcade of friends the audience would appreciate, and more importantly, understand.

OBVIOUSLY

There was one place to begin, one band so perfect, so on point, so tuned for this exact scenario that I couldn't not include them. Who are they? I'm sure you've guessed. Clearly it was Black Sabbath.

Not what you expected? Likely cause it wasn't them (but much love to Ozzy and the crew, legends all of them). No, it was Sonic Youth. I mean, it's in the name right there! How could you not!? It's PERFECT.

But who else fills out this roster? When looking back at the year 2022 of our blue blur and hero, several thoughts sprang to mind: 1, Taylor Swift was the most seminal artist of the year, dropping her "Midnights" album that topped almost everyone's album list (not mine, but there's no accounting for taste I suppose). But another huge part of the music scene that year was the happening of the "When We Were Young" festival, a callback to the early aughts and the blistering punk pop that trended over the airwaves. Add into that the reforming of My Chemical Romance, and a pilot reference in Twenty-One Pilots, and you have the beginnings of gold.
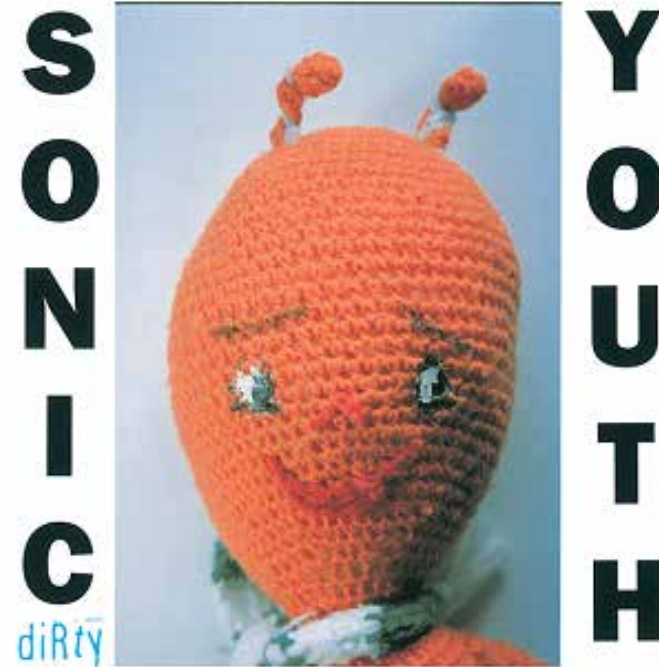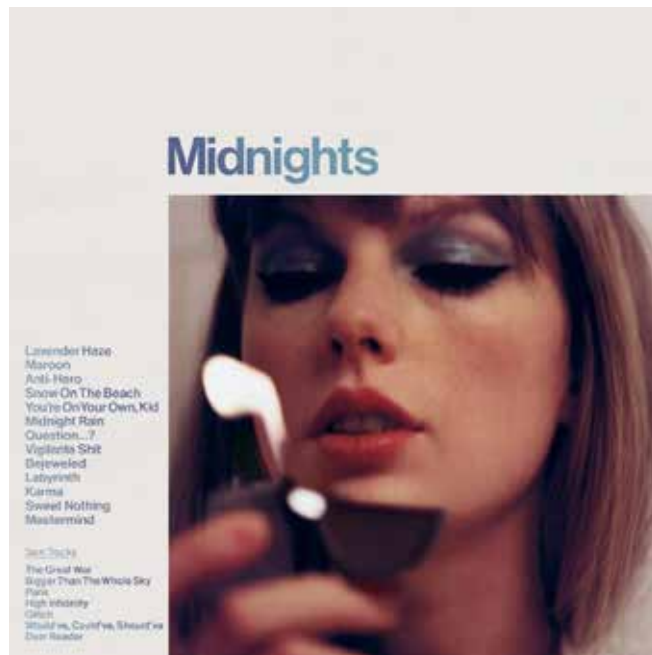
WELL THAT WAS EASY

On face value, making a fake album cover for Sonic Youth with Sonic the Hedgehog was a no brainer. But then comes the trick: which album? Surely "Goo" is in the running, but what about "Hold That Tiger" or "Daydream Nation?" Do I pick something more current like "The Eternal?" No, it had to be "Dirty." That album was striking and one of the best picks for one that stands the test of time.

Converting SY's original cover to a Sonic cover was not too tricky though. Matching type styles and a subtle blue background was simple as well as changing "Dirty" to "Smirky," a play on Sonic's classic smirk. Being a classic indie album though, I felt compelled to use a hand drawn Sonic from a video game animation to play into the lo-fi, garage band feel of the album. Et un, voilá!

The final design for "Sonic" Youth's "Smirky."

YOU THIEF

Hopping on one of the biggest festivals of the 2022 year, "When We Were Young," allowed me a chance to tap into communal nostalgia for this design. Trading the band Paramore's name for "Paramour," its correct spelling allowed a parody, but also casting Rouge the Bat as the main center of this album gave the same female-led feel and given her propensity to steal, there was nothing to being a cat-burglar, er, bat-burglar and stealing an easy name change from the original's "All We Know Is Falling" to "All We Know Is Thieving."

A little theft never hurt no one.

Rouge The Bat, the center of this design.

RESURGENCE

2022 also marked the year My Chemical Romance reunited, played "When We Were Young," and caused sales of black eyeliner to skyrocket. That was The Cure that did that last one, you say? I'll conceede, you're right. But for many, "The Black Parade" by MCR was an album of their youth.

Starting from there, I felt the need to cater to the villainy of Sonic's world, the nefarious Dr. Eggman, know for his hordes of badniks stuffed with innocent woodland creature and incessant building of chemical plants to toxify Sonic's world. A hand drawn play on the "Chemical Plant" level from Sonic 2 made for the logo, while a badnik replaced the skeleton parade marcher. A varying-sized album name with one clever word tweaked finished this ode to villainy off.
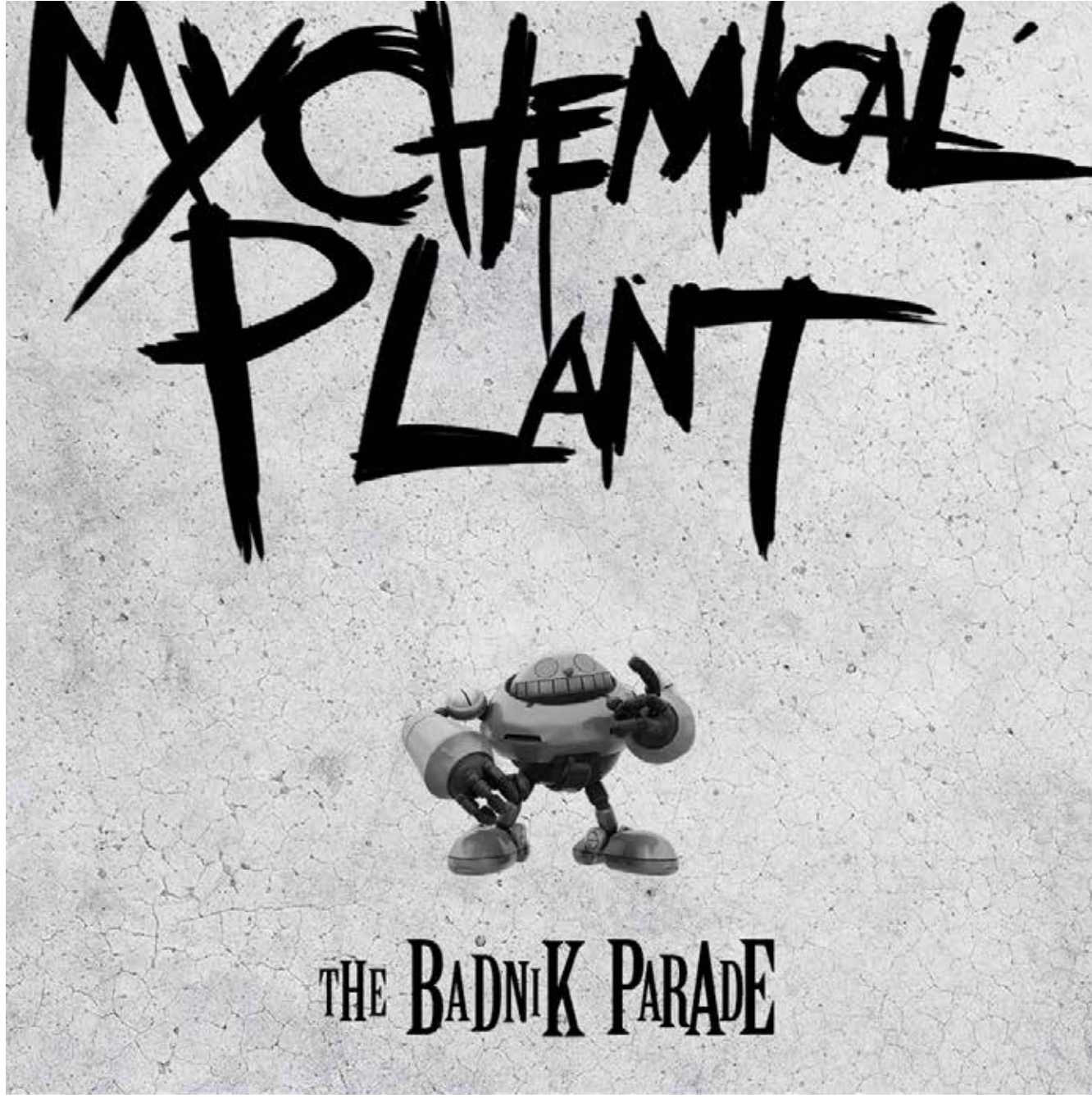
I CARE WHAT YOU THINK

A good pun is hard to resist. Even better if you can work in another classic character from the Sonic franchise. Twenty-One Pilots' album, "Blurryface" may not have come out in 2022, but given that it was the one that brought them mainstream prominence and that their name was a perfect reference to Sonic's best friend Tails and his piloting skills, it was the best choice to be had.

As 2022 was also the 30th anniversary of Sonic 2, a callback to the year of it's release was in order. While I originally titled the album "Furryface," the client asked for a couple changes: make the cover Tails AND Sonic, and change the title. A quick wordsmith to "Smirkyface" and the addition of some blue set this one into approval.

Top: The final album design.
Inset: The original cover design.

A LITTLE LATE

A late entry to the design post, Sonic's "31," a one-uppance to Adele's "30" was done as a replacement for...sigh...Sonic Youth's "Smirky." The client felt it was too questionable since the band's name is Sonic Youth and wanted this album as a replacement. Fair enough, you do what the client asks since it is them using it to represent their brand in the end.

Originally the plan was to call the album "35," a reference to Sonic's 35th anniversary, but it felt funnier to be "31" since Sonic likes to be quippy and one-up things.
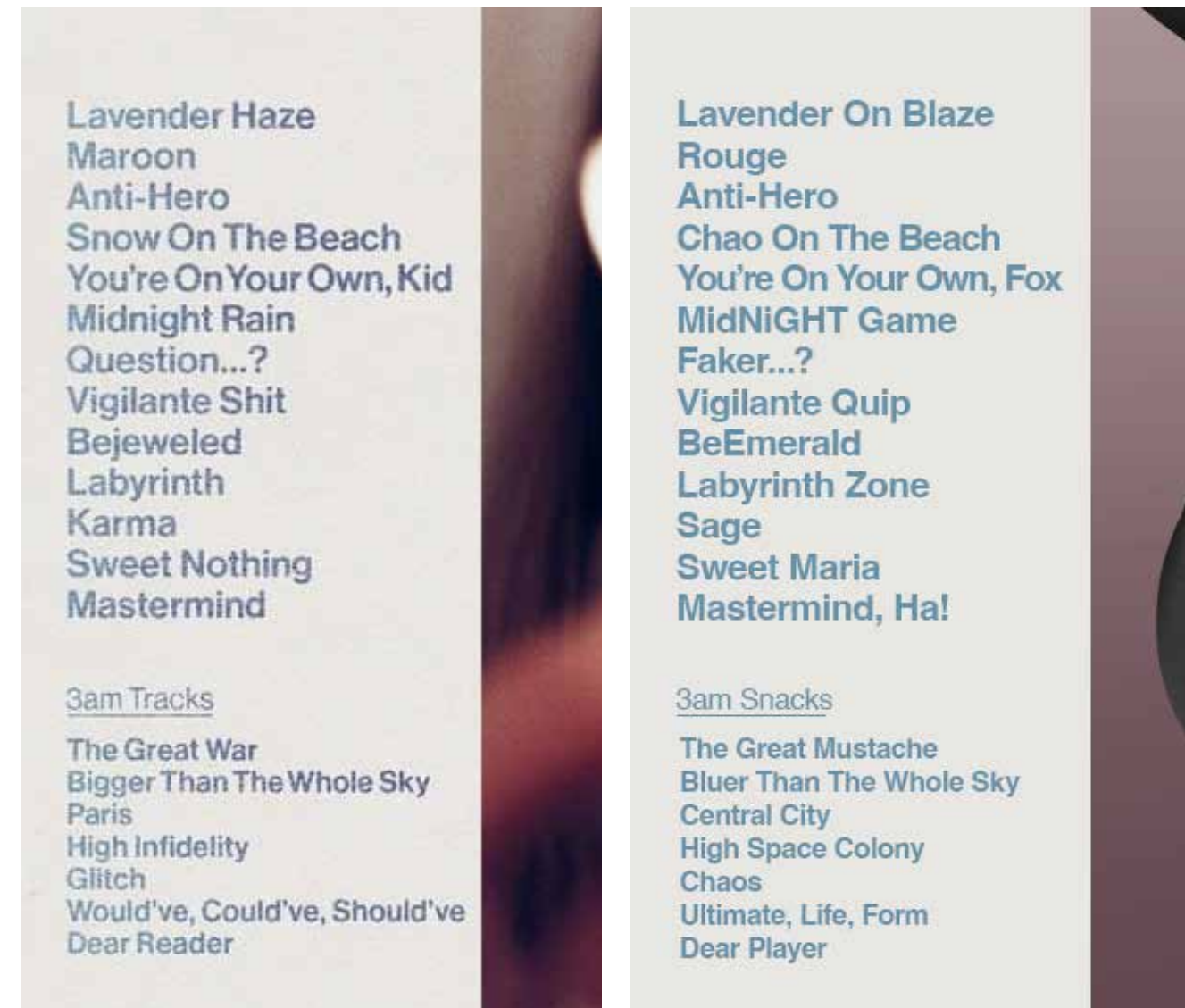

Top: The final album design.
Inset: The original cover design.

HI. IT'S ME. I'M THE PROBLEM, IT'S ME.

Without question Taylor Swift's "Midnights" topped, well, everything in 2022...and 2023...and probably 2024 (the year just started so who knows). Not including it in the pun list would have created outrage at my blasphemy. Calm down, Swiftties, Seanny's got you.

Including Shadow the Hedgehog for this one was an easy call: with his antihero stature and smug likability, he just fit the mold. Opting to go for the deluxe version of "Midnights" to parody, I set about creating puns on every track title, fitting them to Shadow and other Sonic characters as well as phrases in the games (like "You're the faker!) that fans know and love. The title however? A reference to the seminal Sega game, NiGHTS: Into Dreams.

RESPONSE TIME

Given the image size for social media posts, I initially had no idea if the fidelity would even allow people to read the track titles and appreciate the in-jokes I had written.

But oh boy was I wrong. Even with the lowered quality, fans zoomed all the way in and worked through a blur-tastic, heavily-zoomed image to decipher all the titles, posting comment after comment about the list of them.

Though they quickly noticed I didn't change one. How could I when Taylor basically wrote "Anti-Hero" for Shadow?

A side-by-side comparison of T-Swift's track names and the puns I wrote.
Left: Swifty. Right: Shadow

(END OF YEAR) WRAP-UP

Now that the albums had all been done and approved, it was simple to mimck the Spotify look and create our own punny posting. There was little doubt Shadow's album had to take the top spot, with the others following.

The response however, was massive. Upon it's posting, this end of year wrap-up garnered 49,547 likes on Instagram and similar numbers on Facebook and Twitter, which was by no means monstrous, game announcements typically performed the highest, but the response rate grew by 5 percentage points to 16%, one of the biggest interactions with the fans all year. So all in all, a very successful post. Becasue when the fans are talking to you and commenting how much they love the puns, callbacks to some of their favorite albums, and laughing at the fact that one of the biggest antiheroes in the Sonic Universe is now a Swifty? Well, that's a success right there.

So once again, all together!

"Hi. It's me. I'm the problem, it's me."
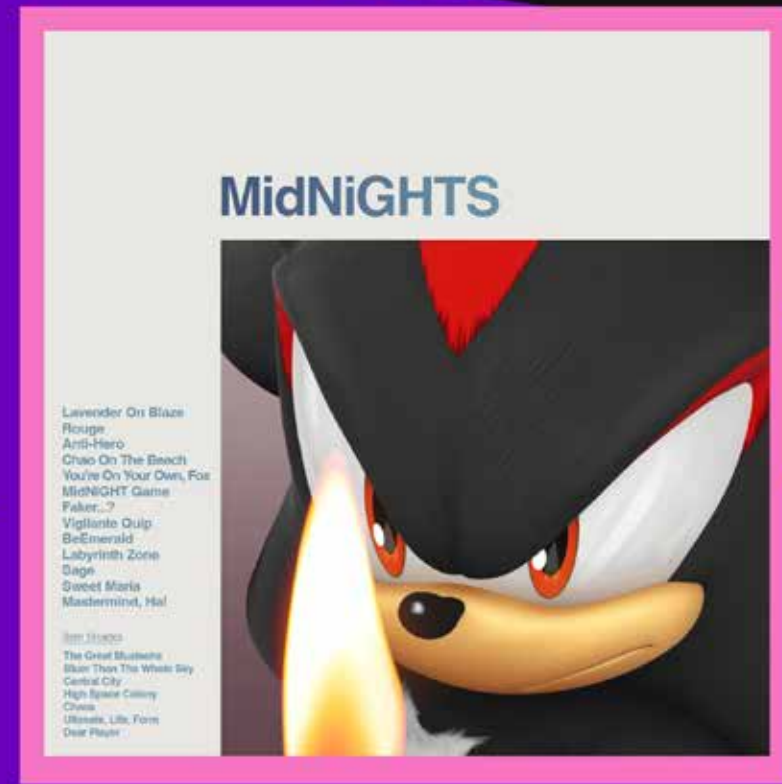
SIDEBAR

While it didn't end up being used, the second image above was done to coincide with the main one for the post. A 2001 reference was included to signify Shadow's year of creation and then a small reference to say that two characters, Shadow and Amy, were the biggest Swifties around was as well. Interestingly, even though this wasn't used, as part of a campaign on Twitter, Sega had the voice actors for those characters sing bits of "Anti-Hero." So it's canon now.

DON'T PLAY WITH MATCHES, KIDS(EVEN IF IT IS FUN)