

Most *La Louisiane* readers haven't met graphic designer Megan Barra, but they're certainly familiar with her work.

The 1981 USL grad has served as the magazine's freelance art director since its inception in 1989. So she's responsible, in large part, for how *La Louisiane* looks.

In late February, Barra headed to Los Angeles to attend the Grammy Awards Ceremony, not as a spectator but as a nominee. Her design for slide guitarist and songwriter Sonny Landreth's CD, "Levee Town," was nominated for a Grammy Award in the "Best Recording Package" category.

Landreth, by the way, attended USL for two years and was featured in the Fall 1992 issue of *La Louisiane*. In 1984, Barra designed the cover of his "Way Down in Louisiana" album.

Barra's too-many-to-count admirers probably weren't surprised that one of her designs was pitted against some of the best art directors in the music business.

She specializes in design related to the arts, music and culture, such as gallery/museum fine arts catalogs and promotional material for musicians and cultural events.

She has won just about every local award possible, including being named "Art Director of the Year" seven times since 1990 by the Acadiana Arts Federation. Her work has been featured in many national publications and she's been the art director for several books, including *100 Years*, a history of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. That volume, produced for the university's Centennial celebration, drew a Silver Award in Council for Advancement and Support of Education regional competition.

Always unassuming, Barra shuns publicity, letting her work speak for her. But she agreed to answer some questions about her Grammy Award nomination for *La Louisiane*.

How were you notified that your work was up for a Grammy?

The record label, Sugar Hill Records, called Sonny and he immediately called me. I was thrilled!

What did you do when you found out about the nomination?

I had a glass of champagne with some friends, received phone calls from friends in the music business around the country that were monitoring the Grammy website for the nominees announcement, and then went back to work.

How did the design for the CD evolve?

The first decision was to hire Jack Spencer, a great, southern fine art photographer, to photograph Sonny. We felt that the tone of his work and the way he captures the sense of a place would be appropriate for a recording package about a place called "Levee Town." The three of us spent a day out shooting around Breaux Bridge, Henderson and Lake Martin. Other photographs came from his book *Native Soil: Jack Spencer*.

The next decision was to use a "Digi Pac" format over the standard plastic jewel box. It opens up to three panels, leaving more printing area for art. I miss the 12-inch album format, which really gave you a canvas to work with. The Digi Pac format also protects the CD better than the plastic covers, which tend to break and crack easily, and it has less of an environmental impact.

Sonny's songs on this recording are very narrative and he wanted the lyrics to read like a small novel, something someone could spend some time with as they listen to the music. So I designed a 28-page pull-out booklet with that in mind.

What do judges look for when they are evaluating CD packaging to narrow applicants to five nominees?

The Best Recording Package category is one of the few categories – others are liner notes, historical, and engineering – nominated by special craft committees, instead of the general Recording Academy membership, which is made up of 13,000 voting members. There are six people from each of 10 chapters nationwide, who are specialists in the field, that serve on these craft committees. In my case, there were designers and photographers on the committee.

I believe that they look for the best entries that reflect the music and sell the product by enticing buyers to pick it up, all in an economical and environmentally conscious way.

What CDs were nominated in your category?

"Amnesiac" by Radiohead; "Reveal" by REM; "Bedlam Ballroom" by the Squirrel Nut Zippers; and "Look Into the Eyeball" by David Byrne.

Design Meets Music



When did you fly to Los Angeles?

The Tuesday before the awards event, which was Wednesday, Feb. 27.

What pre-ceremony parties did you go to? Where were they? What were they like?

There was a nominee reception on the night before the Grammy Awards ceremony, which was held at the California Science Museum. Nominees were honored with medals and photographs there.

It was really interesting to meet and talk with other nominees in various categories. I met a country songwriter nominated for "Country Song of the Year," an arranger up for the "Best Jazz Instrumental" recording; a clarinet player with a polka band up for "Best Polka" recording; and Gillian Welch, Jerry Douglas and other performers from the "O, Brother Where Art Thou" project, which went on to win "Album of the Year."

Describe the non-televised ceremony. Was it the same format that we see on TV? Who presented the awards?

It was presented on the same stage as the televised ceremony by Michael Greene, the president and CEO of the Recording Academy. Musical guest presenters included Yolanda Adams, Steve Vai, Emilio Estefan, David Koz and Jamie O'Neal. They presented 90 awards in 90 minutes, so it went quite fast. Winners were told to keep acceptance speeches to four seconds. But many went ahead and expressed themselves anyway – and they still finished up right on time.

There were a few funny moments. A Gospel group went up to accept an award and thanked all who strive for peace, unity and harmony and one of the members also thanked his wife. The Blind Boys of Alabama took their time congregating on the stage. The audience was anticipating a spiritual response in their acceptance, but the leader of the group thanked the label for "giving us the cash."

How was your work presented? Was it shown on a big screen when the nominees were announced?

Only category names were projected onto the screen, but I was really excited to see the program book included a special pull-out brochure featuring the nominated packages.

What was it like in those moments before the winner was announced for your category?

I don't think I've ever been so nervous.

Did you feel as if you were representing Acadiana, in some way? Did you see your nomination as confirmation that there's a lot of talent in places like south Louisiana, not just the West Coast or New York?

Absolutely. The fact that we were nominated alongside others from the major music markets says that there is some-

thing special about Acadiana that was recognized.

I do feel that there is a "specialness" in our area that comes through in our music, art, photography. I think the CD package for Sonny's music captured that.

Also, the success of the "O, Brother Where Art Thou" soundtrack recording also confirms that really great music comes from places rooted in musical traditions such as the Appalachians and south Louisiana. We hope this will bring our music to more people.

Describe how the sets were changed on stage for musicians who performed live during the Grammy Award ceremony.

It was interesting to witness a major televised production. The show was televised to a potential audience of 2 billion people in 175 countries.

Elaborate sets and choreography were set up and musicians performed alternately from left and right stages. After each performance ended, the entire set was lifted up into the ceiling of the stage area and 30 to 40 people ran onto the stage to prepare it for the next performer.

Did you relax after the winner in your category was announced? Did you start to unwind then or were you still nervous?

When the winner in my category came up and the nominees were announced, I couldn't breathe. When it was announced that Radiohead was the winner, I felt disappointed but I relaxed immediately and enjoyed being there and enjoyed watching the rest of the show.

How many parties did you go to after the televised ceremony was over? Who did you recognize?

I went to the Grammy celebration held at the historic Biltmore Hotel. Bands such as the BarKays from Memphis and Ricky Skaggs and Kentucky Thunder performed in different galleries. One of the most interesting people I met was Knox Philips, son of the legendary Sam Philips of Sun Studios in Memphis. He invited me to a personal tour of Memphis, the recording studio and all of the great music there.

Is anything different after being nominated for a Grammy? Have more people contacted you to design stuff for them?

Well, I have been contacted to do several CD projects on the Sugar Hill Record label. One for Nickel Creek, young rising stars in Bluegrass, and a new blues recording by Sonny Landreth to be released early next year.

What impressed you the most about the entire experience?

Getting to see Ralph Stanley perform "O Death" live—it was one of the special moments of the 44th Grammy Awards.



TRAVIS GAUTHIER