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Front and Center

How to use your computer to make personalized front panels.

> By using a "word processing" approach, you can personalize your next project and have it "stand out from the crowd." Using readily available technology and a little imagination, you will be able to create a distinctive "panel cover" to complement your next creation!

There's always a project brewing on my bench, and as often as not, I'm anxious to "see" what the final appearance will be. This is usually the case long before all the "bugs" are worked out of the design. How many times have you placed a control on the front panel only to find it is in an *impossible location* when it comes time for labeling the front panel? The style and size of control knobs play a big part in where the labels are placed, what size they should be, etc. Wouldn't it be nice to be able to add "special effects" to have your project be more appealing to look at? It is my goal to create projects that not only work as required, but are pleasing to look at.

The outer dimensions of projects today are generally smaller than in days gone by. This size difference can be a problem! The "tape writer" or "rub-on" lettering isn't the correct size, and is often difficult if not impossible to apply. It sometimes just doesn't look good when you're finished. Today's computer technology has given us a way to create front panel "labels" that are easy to create, look great, and can be reproduced either in whole or part for future projects.

My computer uses Microsoft Word 2002© as its word processing software with Microsoft XP Professional. For those of you who are less computer-literate than I (and there aren't many of those around anymore!), you will need to "turn on" the following options if they aren't activated already. Located in the top menu bar, click on "View," then click on "Rulers." This will activate rulers on the top and side of your screen. Next click on "View" again and select *"Standard, and Drawing"* tool bars. The *Standard* toolbar is located at the top of your screen and displays icons such as "print, save ABC, etc." The *Draw* toolbar is at the bottom of the screen and has *"AutoShapes,*
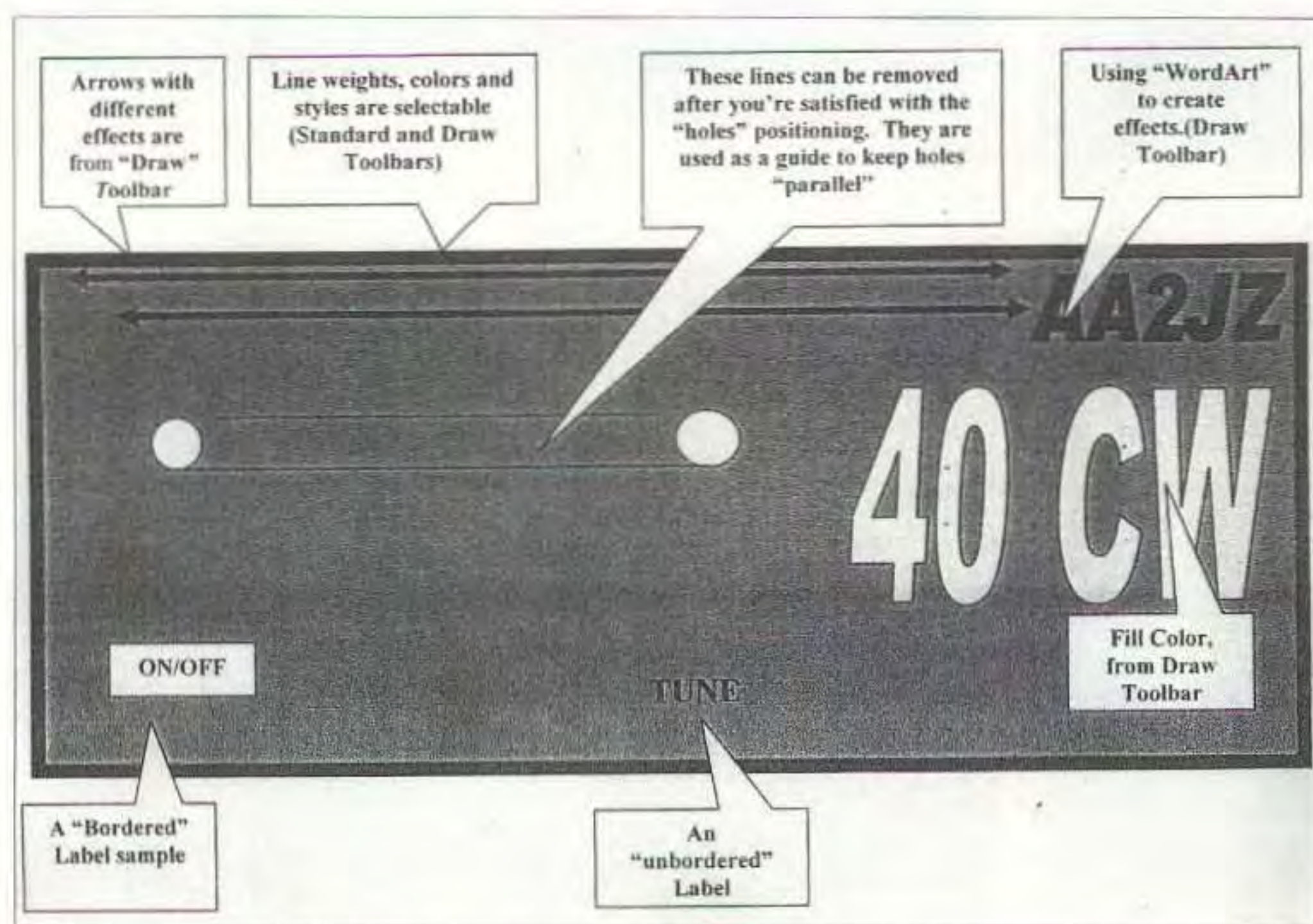

*Fig. 1. Typical Word layout face plate.*

lines, arrows, etc.," located on it. Either of these toolbars can be moved to other locations you may find more convenient. I happen to work with them in these locations.

Begin by measuring the face plate material, make note of the length and width. Don't forget to measure where needed holes are to be drilled. A rough, hand-drawn picture on scrap paper will suffice at this point. Then, on a blank, open "Word" document, create a *"Text Box"* from the *"Draw"* toolbar by clicking on the "page" icon *(a square with lines on it representing a printed page)*. Make the rectangle slightly larger than the measurements of the blank face plate. Use the *Ruler* at the top and side of the screen as a guide. The excess paper will be trimmed away later when the finished print is adhered to the face plate material.

Now the fun begins!

Select the "slanted A" (WordArt) from the *Draw* toolbar, choose the first example in the upper left corner of the menu, set the *type size* to 18, and type your call. When you're done, select OK. The open-faced capital letters should have appeared somewhere on your Word document. It can be moved to your beginning panel by left clicking on the WordArt to bring up the "handles" (little squares) and dragging the WordArt to where you desire it. Those handles allow the work to be stretched, skewed, moved, rotated, etc. If you aren't pleased with what you've added, on the *Standard* toolbar are two curved, pointed arrows. Click on the left one and your last attempt is removed, while clicking on the right one will put it back. Key strokes can be removed or replaced in the order in which they were created, until the file is saved. What you've created should resemble the drawing in **Fig. 1**, with *your* callsign of course!

The *neat* thing about using a Word program to design a front panel face is that none of it is permanent until you want it to be. Go ahead, move things around, try different lines and shapes! The file you create is limited in design only by what you try. Having trouble
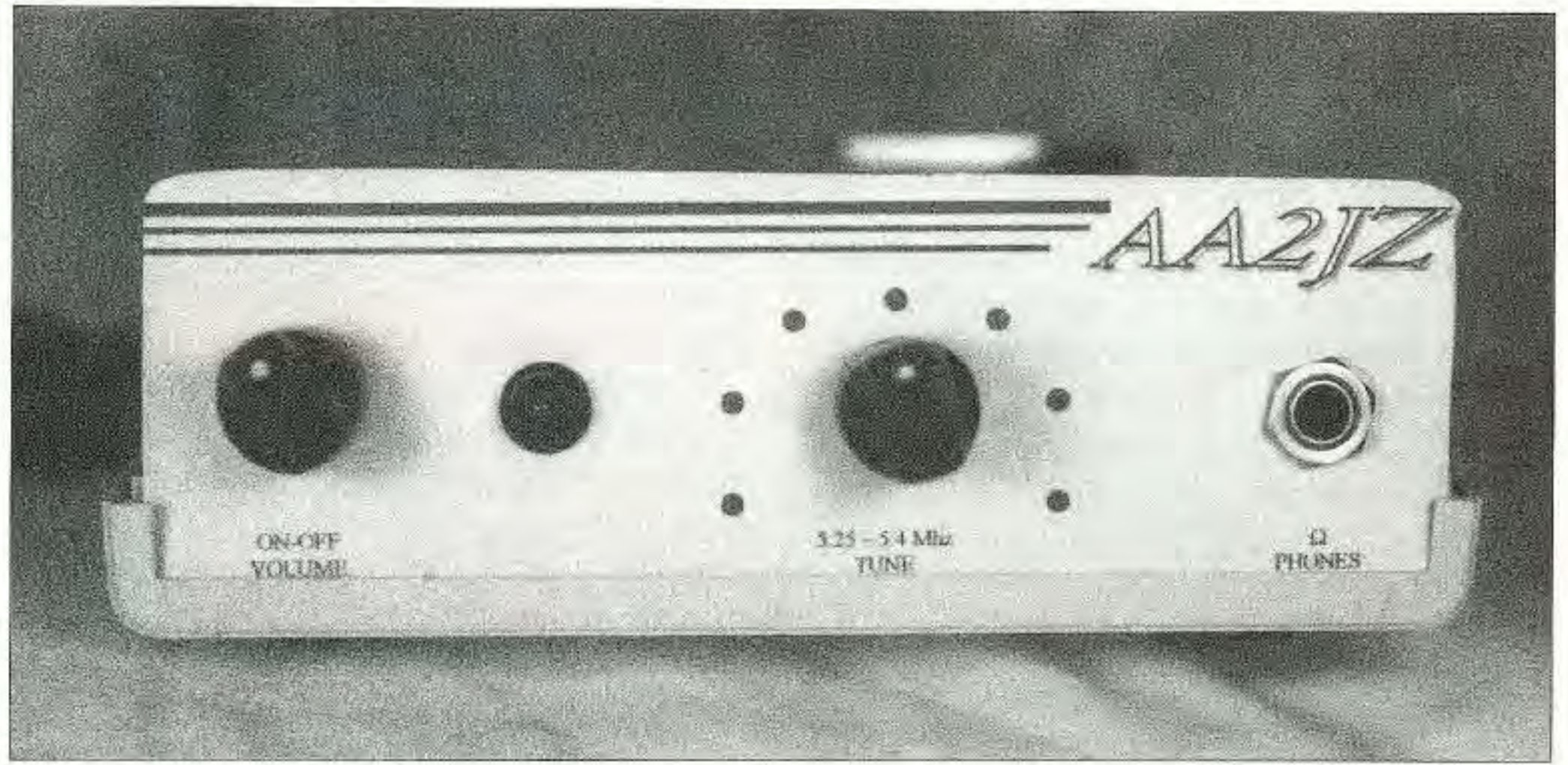
Photo A. *5.25–5.4 MHz receiver project. The case is a "left over" computer item. The word processing approach to faceplate design dresses it up just right.*

making the "holes" for the controls line up? Draw guide lines using the "lines" option from the *Draw* toolbar. They can be deleted later. *Fill color* can be added to different portions of the drawing using the *"spilling paint can"* command from the *Draw toolbar.* Lettering colors can be changed by using the *Font color* command from the *Drawing toolbar.* There are many things that can be controlled from the toolbars: centering the lettering, changing the border line colors, etc. The manual that came with the computer will list them. Unless of course, your computer is like mine and is minus the manual. In this case, you just have to play (design) and try things out!

Let's assume that you've put together

a design you find attractive for your project. Print a copy of your design. Now, while holding it against the blank face plate, make sure that the layout is correct. By this, I mean that the hole locations are where they should be, that the lettering will fall in the proper place. I said to make the overall size of the print slightly larger than the measurements of the blank face plate. I do this to ensure that the design I created will fill the entire length and width of the plate, and that the callsign or other design will have some space at the end and not run off the end of the plate.

Printing the first few tries on plain

Photo B. *The panel slips into slots and the top snaps over it all to keep it together.*

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white paper is less expensive than using colored paper. I use the colored paper for the background. My printer, an inexpensive inkjet type, doesn't "fill" background well, and I like the total color of the colored paper. Having

made a final copy on the chosen colored paper stock, it's time to adhere the print to the face plate. Using contact cement, coat the face plate evenly using a soft brush or foam applicator. Now carefully place the print on the prepared plate. Ensure that the holes line up, the lettering and designs aren't beyond the ends of the plate. It sometimes helps to hold the plate with the paper attached up to the light, to be better able to see where the placement is. Be careful not to have excess cement find its way to the surface of the paper. It will be impossible to remove and will be a "blemish" on your work. Once you're satisfied with the placement of the print, and the cement has had time to cure, use "Krystal-clear" wide transparent adhesive tape *(misspelled, but that's what it says on the roll)* to coat the surface of the panel. Using clear tape provides protection for the paper from absorbing oils from fingers, and a measure of resistance to wear.

Now that the print is adhered to the surface, has a layer of clear tape protecting it, and you're happy with the results, it's time to remove the excess paper from around the borders of the panel. Using a razor knife or single-edged razor blade, trim the excess from the panel. Use the edges of the panel as a guide, being careful to cut only the paper and tape and not your fingers! The edge of the panel provides a solid rest for the blade, enabling it to produce a clean, sharp cut. If you began with ten fingers and have ten remaining, then the operation was a success!

The key to this project is "learning what's already in your word processing program." Panels that are attractive and distinctive and personalize the project you've worked on are easy to create in "Word." **Photos A** and **B** are of a 5.25 MHz to 5.4 MHz receiver project I've been working on. The case of the project was a "left over" computer item. The panel slips into slots and the top snaps over it all to keep it together.

Play a little bit! *(They ... call it playing, but we can call it "designing.")* You've nothing to lose but some time and paper. Who knows, you may even be delighted with the results!   73