

Album Cover Design: Past Influences, Present Struggles & Future Predictions

Album cover design has over 50 years of history, and, despite several format changes (78 to LP to cassette to CD), many things have stayed the same. Cover design projects bring together two artists, the designer and the musician. They offer the opportunity to create a visual to represent a non-visual art. Juliette Wolf, co-publisher of *The Alternative Pick*, a creative talent sourcebook, has this assessment: “I would say that the most passionate of all designers are probably those who work in the music industry. These designers, whose primary clients are the record labels, tend to be incredibly knowledgeable about the music scene, the trends, and have a real understanding about the product that they are helping to sell.”

Throughout the history of album design, there have been cover “auteurs:” those designers or illustrators whose creations have become as famous as the labels or musicians with whom they’ve worked. In the ’50s, there was Reid Miles with Blue Note, Burt Goldblatt with Savoy and Bethlehem, David Stone Martin with Norgan and Verve and William Claxton with Pacific Jazz. In the ’60s and ’70s, art director Gary Burden and photographer Henry Diltz hung out with and designed for California rock greats like Joni Mitchell, CSN, Neil Young, The Eagles and The Doors. Also in the ’70s, was Roger Dean with Yes and Storm Thorgeson with Pink Floyd. In the ’80s and ’90s, there was Peter Saville’s covers for New Wave bands like Joy Division and New Order and Vaughn Oliver’s work for 4AD.

One of the first pioneers in the field, Jim Flora (see sidebar) noted ten years ago, long after he’d left the music industry behind, “People today couldn’t do what we did then. There’s too much history of album covers and how they should be done. And everybody gets an oar in. Those days, almost anything we did got accepted.... No one knew what they were doing.” What is it like to be a cover designer today? Can designers still have a freely creative experience? We asked some designers, in-house and freelancing, working with major labels and with small independents and even two who are both designer and musician, several questions about the past, present and future of album cover design.

How involved are today’s musicians in the design process, and if involved, is this a good thing or a bad thing? Tommy Steele, Vice President of creative services for Capitol, with years of experience and hundreds of covers under his belt, says, “More and more we find [musicians] are very involved and it takes awhile to gain their trust. And when we are really trusted is the time we get to play and discover and invent.” On the other hand, he notes, “Most of them have a ‘friend’ who’s a designer or has a Mac, which always pricks up my ears.”

Jeri Heiden of L.A. studio SMOG, former head at A&M Records and Warner Brothers and designer of over 200 album packages for artists like k. d. lang and Beck, finds it’s best to work with artists who know who they are and what they want to say. “Most of the labels allow the artists the ‘rights to create and/or approve’ the artwork for their covers. Some of the artists take this right more seriously than others. This is a sweeping generalization, but singer/songwriters seem to care the most, followed closely by young rock bands – and young ‘pop star hopefuls’ seem to be mostly concerned with clothing, hair and make-up.” Carla Leighton of Gloo Design in New York puts it another way, “My

experience is that most musicians like to verbally express how they think the album should look, rather than the actual design, to create a certain mood. Other musicians may want to see what you can come up with after listening to their music. One thing they are especially involved with is choosing photographs of themselves to be used on the cover and in the package design. On occasion the musician is too involved in the cover design; this creates a difficult working relationship, and you end up inevitably compromising your design, so it would be up to you to decide whether or not to continue with the project.”

Although the free spirited atmosphere of some genres might make one expect the musician to tell the designer, “Hey man, I do my thing; you do yours,” usually, creating a record cover allows no more artistic freedom than any other part of design. Jason Gnewikow, who has designed covers for his own band The Promise Ring as well as for other bands, says, “Sometimes it allows a designer more freedom because you are dealing with other artistic minds. But in other cases, because the designer is being added to the mix of someone else’s art, the musician may be reluctant to let another person into the creative process.” Josh Brown, founder of Capacitor Design Network, a design studio with a lot of clients in the rave community, says, “‘Freedom’ is somewhere in between a three-way tug of war and a three-legged race between the designer, record label and musician. Depending on the popularity of the musician(s) and the potential size of the release, everybody involved is going to want a piece of the creative pie, so if it’s a success they can say ‘Yeah, I did that!’ So it’s a matter of finding the right balance and keeping everybody happy. Unfortunately, it’s usually the designer whose last on the list of people ‘needing to keep happy.’” Burden, still designing covers today, points out that the musical artist is the most important party in the relationship. “I always attempt to bring the artist into the process of making their album cover art because it is *theirs*....I try to engage the company and make them our allies in realizing a package, but in the end I serve the artist and the music.”

Mark Kingsley of Greenberg Kingsley, a design/illustration partnership in New York that designs covers for labels like Blue Note, Atlantic and Geffen, points out that different genres can yield different designer/musician relationships. “World music tends not to seek the input of the musician. Many times it is because of language and distances. Other times it has to do with the perception in the United States of either the music or country of origin. An American audience will sometimes buy the myth over the reality... .Classical music performers are constantly traveling between performances and are virtually impossible to contact. Many times a label will compensate by scheduling a long, grueling photo shoot and try to squeeze two or three album packages out of it. Since classical music is driven by personality (biographies of the composer, the virtuoso performer, genius conductor, etc.), there is a strong pressure to put the featured musician on the cover. Those factors combine to create a situation where there is not much direct communication. Comments and desires are often filtered through labels, managers, fax machines and time zones. Pop, rock and jazz musicians tend to be very involved; as is everyone else from managers to friends. Pop and rock are marketing-driven genres. Budgets are higher, and along with that, the drama. Spending three weeks on ‘thank you’ is not uncommon.” Partner Karen Greenberg adds, “The level and degree of hand holding varies greatly. Artists at the beginning of their careers tend to need a little more. More seasoned artists have a confidence about themselves and their music.”

When asked if there's a battle between what a musician wants on the cover versus what the marketing department wants, Steele replied, "Quite often I'm seeing that. The more clout an artist has (read that as platinum sales or a powerful manager) the more likely their cover goes through. You'd be amazed at the dialogues taking place though – it's all one big episode of 'Spinal Tap.'" Kingsley adds, "So much work goes into the planning, logistics and budgets of a package. There is so much more face-to-face 'therapy'... It's the musician's image and you're there, trying to push them further than they want to go (sometimes the other way around). There's a lot of behind-the-scenes diplomacy. I've had discussions describing why eyeliner is not such a good idea on a 40+ male bass players, why flat front pants are not 'gay,' and the difference between the fabric on a Calvin Klein jacket versus a J. Crew \$50 special (it lays better). I recently had to go on 'tit check' with an artist who was a new mother and nursing. The situations are priceless and I always come away with an appreciation of the humanity of the musicians we work with. It is a hard life and they have a lot to deal with just so they can do their art."

Asked which albums of the past made him want to try his hand at designing, Steele cites Jimi Hendrix's "Are You Experienced?" and The Rolling Stones' "Let It Bleed." "Great album cover from the past usually started with a great idea followed by a great execution. I wish more artists took advantage of Art with a capital A on their covers and throughout their packages. It is a place to show something, to say something, and few look at it this way." Knowing the history of cover design is helpful when designing today. "I try to know the past in order to reinvent the present."

Other designers have found more direct inspiration from the past. Fritz Klaetke of the Boston-based studio Visual Dialogue has designed several CD packages for Smithsonian Folkways, trying to re-establish an identity for the label that references the look of their great LP covers of the '50s. Gnewikow and Leighton both credit the classic Blue Note covers for inspiring their work. "In retrospect they tend to be more modern than many covers done today. The use of typography and the use of colors is courageous and bold," remarks Leighton.

Like Gnewikow, Jon Bernhardt acted as both musician and designer on the latest CD for his theremin band The Lothars. Reaching into the past, he drew inspiration from Jim Flora's design for "This is Benny Goodman and His Orchestra." "We try to make our artwork reflect the spirit of our music: otherworldly soundscapes that can be beautiful, but also have a sense of humor...It does seem that today's era of retro-everything has trickled into the area of CD cover design. It's pretty easy to use certain styles that will obviously evoke a past era. If you're going to use one of these styles, you had better do it well, or do it with an obvious sense of irony, because you're competing against a large existing body of work."

In the '50s, it was possible for a label and a designer to create a consistent look. Gnewikow believes such relationships are still possible today but only for smaller labels. "I think as far as major labels it's much more difficult to maintain a look because there are just too many records being made and by several, very different artists; the main problem, though, is just quality control. On the other hand, with independent labels, it's much easier because you have fewer artists and it's possible to find a few designers that

can actually handle the entire workload. I think Sub Pop and V23 are great examples of that. They only work with a few different artists and as a result have a reputation for having great looking records.” Kingsley, whose studio has worked closely with Green Linnet Records and their subsidiary Xenophile, setting the visual style and creating logos, agrees. “If a label does develop a look, chances are they are small, have tiny art budgets, and release music within a focused genre or two. They tend not to buy advertising, so their design identity plays a greater role in their marketing.”

In addition to the majors, Heiden and SMOG also work with smaller labels. “We have a relationship with Nonesuch Records, and although they don’t apply a standard ‘look’ to their releases, they do maintain a significant level of design sophistication that sets them apart from their competitors (mainly modern classical). They also utilize a printed O-card on all of their CDs, creating more viewable surface area on the front of the package. The O-card offers ‘added value’ to their releases.”

The O-card is just one of the many surfaces open for design that are possible with the CD format, an advantage over LPs that compensates for the smaller cover dimensions. Comments Leighton, “I enjoy designing for CD because for me it is a more complete package....The booklet which goes on the inside, the back of the jewel box, the image or type that can be placed under the CD in a clear tray, and the CD itself can be its own piece of artwork.” She goes on to add, “I enjoy very much working with digipacks. They allow me to create a design as a three dimensional piece of art and still have a booklet inside. The image can be one long piece of artwork or photograph that wraps around continuously, creating a circular effect.”

In the end, the CD package is not only the musicians’ or the designer’s “baby” – the music lover/consumer is often a lover of the object too. “We really feel like we’re contributing to something totally unique where somebody is going to be paying money for it, taking it home, unwrapping it, opening it, picking it up and studying every nook and cranny of the liner notes, lyrics and artwork as they listen to the music,” says Brown. “Many listeners (speaking from experience) will try to find hints or clues into the music or musicians from the album artwork.” If, as some predict, all music in the future will be purchased online and downloaded, this tactile experience will change, although buying the music without any accompanying graphics is unlikely to work. Klaetke puts it this way, “There is something about the fetishistic pleasure of holding a designed object in one’s hand, and until that experience can be replicated the perceived value of the music will not be the same. When I was very young, I had a Willy Wonka Chocolate Factory kit. Basically you melted down some chocolate bits, poured the chocolate into variously-shaped molds, and wrapped the bars in Willy Wonka labels. All the kids wanted the ‘packaged,’ ‘designed’ chocolate bars – no one wanted the plain chocolate, even though the contents were the same.”

There will be ways to keep the album of the future from being just another plain chocolate. Heiden says, “I don’t see the role of the visual artist being eliminated, just changing and adapting to different media.” Burden is already designing in the new frontier; “Websites are the packaging for music in the future, especially since your images can be downloaded as needed... [This] offers the opportunity to link out to related sites, and the world, while talking in depth, including film and video, about the music. I

hope and feel confident there will always be books and print art to enjoy one-on-one, hands on, but I love the fact that the world keeps on turning and new opportunities to solve problems and create continue to present themselves. Right now I am working on packaging for a Neil Young album that will be a CD, DVD, VHS, DVD-A, vinyl, laser disc, DVD single, CD single and a cassette.”

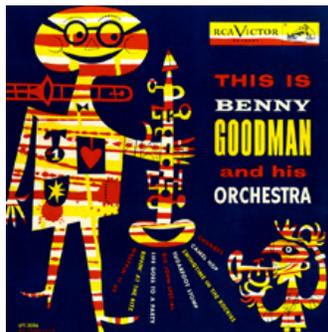
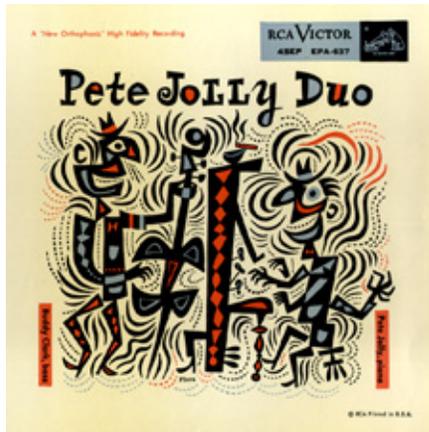
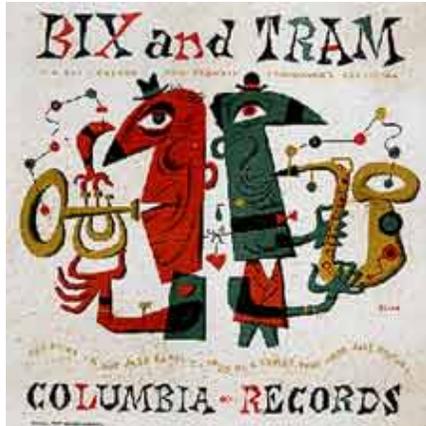
In addition to websites devoted to one musician or band, Brown sees the potential for custom MP3 (or similar format) “player” consoles specific to one band. “In other words, in addition to just being able to download raw music, eventually you will be able to download the equivalent of the contents that would be found in traditional packaging plus more, such as videos and biographies. Those covers in pure digital format could then could include moving picture and animation and possible direct interaction with the band or other fans.”

Kingsley faces this future with equanimity. “If a time does come where all music is delivered over the internet, I suggest taking a zen approach. While the sensuality of opening and poring over every square inch of an album will disappear, so will the environmental impact. Such nostalgia will be the burden of our generation. Keep in mind there are people in college who have *never* put a record on a turntable and gently placed the needle on the first track. They don’t miss the LP. Their children won’t miss the CD. Do you have fond memories of piano rolls?”

[sidebar]

James Flora: An Appreciation

Jim Flora created distinctive album covers in the 1940s for Columbia and in the '50s for RCA Victor – covers that jump out of the record bins with their energetic translation of the excitement and improvisation of twenties jazz, swing and bebop. A generous artist who loved the music and never lost touch with the childlike ability to visually express the fun in every note and tone, his achievements also included many children’s books, artwork for United Productions of America (the creators of Mr. Magoo), illustrations for *Life*, *Look* and *Fortune* magazines and hundreds of wildly imaginative paintings. His work, on view on the web at The Jim Flora Gallery (www.inhi-fi.com/flora/), still inspires artists today. He passed away in 1998 at age 84.



Jon Bernhardt, The Lothars:

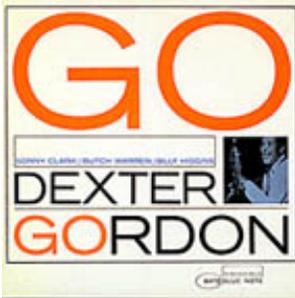


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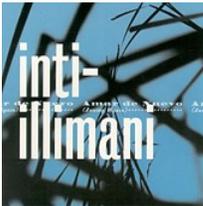
Tommy Steele, Capitol Records: “Most of our campaigns begin with the graphics from the cover and/or the package. Our band Radiohead has broken ranks on their most recent release and I followed much of what was to follow on their website and experimental video blips.”



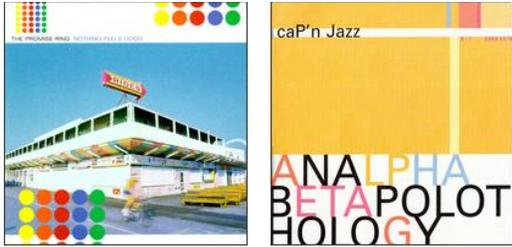
Greenberg Kingsley: For the Blue Note 60th Anniversary logo, Greenberg Kingsley “riffed” on the typography for Dexter Gordon’s “Go.”



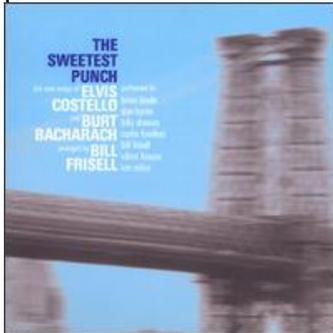
“The Inti-illimani packages are what happens when you package for the American market without resorting to the clichés of Chilean music: pan pipes, serapes, seafood, etc....[W]e are trying to package the sensuality of the music, not the regionality.”



Jason Gnewikow:



Carla Leighton, Gloo Design: “For the Decca album cover designed for Elvis Costello, Burt Bacharach and Bill Frisell, ‘The Sweetest Punch,’ I was influenced by ‘Some Other Stuff’ for artist Grachan Moncur III, designed by Reid Miles in 1964. I chose a photograph of the Brooklyn bridge, blurred it slightly and printed it over a solid light blue color. I chose the Brooklyn bridge to keep a vintage yet modern look similar to the photo by Esmond Edwards for the album ‘All Day Long’ also designed by Reid Miles and the photo on ‘All Mornin’ Long’ also by Esmond Edwards.”



Reid Miles:

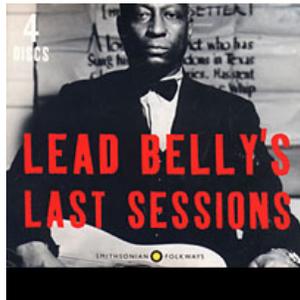
“For the Stanley Jordan cover ‘Live In New York’ designed for Blue Note, I wanted to maintain the feel of the old Blue Note covers of the ’50’s where most of the photographs were duotones or just B&W photos printed over a solid color. I then gave it a modern touch by repeating his name softly in front like smoke in a nightclub.”



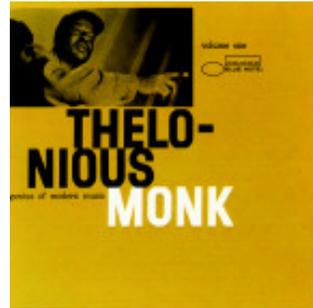
“I did this for the packages I designed for Astor Place Recordings, such as ‘Bleecker Street’ where I asked the photographer Kaysh Shinn, to photograph all four corners of Bleecker and MacDougal Streets in Manhattan and I then created a collage in photoshop that would wrap around a four panel digipack.”



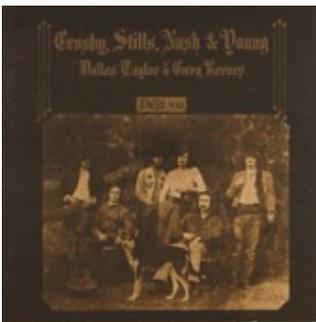
Fritz Klaetke, Visual Dialogue: Finding inspiration in a local bar that has walls covered with old records, Klaetke points to his design for Roosevelt “The Honeydrinker” Sykes as clearly styled after Reid Miles’s design for Thelonious Monk’s “Genius of Modern Music.”



Reid Miles:



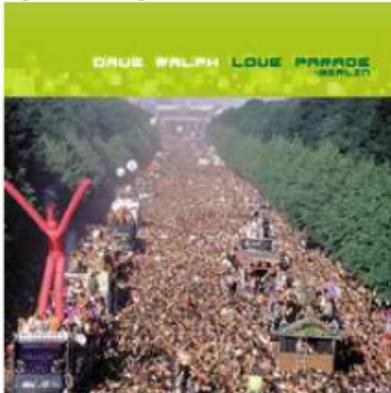
Gary Burden: “CSNY’s “Deja Vu” was my attempt to create a cover that was a tribute to books and particularly hymnals from the civil war period. Textured leather cover, tipped on picture, embossed gold leaf lettering.”



Burden notes that, on a CD, close-ups work better than group photos, since “faces in a wider shot are unrecognizably small....I make more large shapes exploding the edges or

some component that unfolds to become a much larger piece (for example, the poster in Neil Young's "Silver and Gold" opened up to 18"x24")."

Josh Brown, Capacitor Network: Brown worked with a collage of photographs for Dave Ralph's "Love Parade." Love Parade is the world's largest rave, held each summer in Berlin. The label felt that using photos from the event would be a big selling point. Being active in the rave scene helped Brown and partner Jeff Rooney find a solution. "The US kids buying the CD want to feel like they are part of the international rave scene even if they didn't attend the event. We then scrambled to find additional photography by contacting friends of friends in Berlin to no avail. At the last minute (almost literally), a representative at the label was able to track down a photographer in Berlin who had some great images we secured rights to. Also, we ended up making stills from a quicktime movie that was shot at the event and would eventually become part of a multi-media section of the CD packaging. It ended up working out great and we were lucky to have rights to a great crowd shot which now appears on the front cover."



Jeri Heiden, SMOG: Heiden has worked on several projects with veteran photographer Claxton after admiring his earlier jazz covers. “He is a real pleasure to work with and a great talent, still working hard in his seventies.”

