

# His art on the world's sleeves

Alex Steinweiss  
invented the album  
sleeve 60 years ago.  
His story has a  
message for today's  
music industry,  
says John Bungey

It is one of the iconic record sleeves — on a coal-black background a piercing shaft of white light elegantly splits into the colours of the spectrum. This, however, is not Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*. This is Alex Steinweiss's 1942 cover for a recording of Beethoven's Fifth Piano Concerto. Great designers think alike, it's just that Steinweiss thought alike three decades earlier.

This is not the only example of inspirational work by the American who is credited with singlehandedly creating the format, design and graphic "language" of the album cover. A book of his work — *Alex Steinweiss, The Inventor of the Modern Album Cover* — is published next month. Now 92, Steinweiss has designed some 2,500 sleeves.

Through the 1920s and 1930s, 78rpm discs were routinely sold in plain cardboard sleeves. When the 23-year-old Steinweiss became the first art director for Columbia Records in 1939, he convinced a sceptical management that it was worth creating packaging to reflect the beauty of the music. His first sleeve, for a set of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oceanic* — again an idea that has often resurfaced since.

Crucially, buyers liked his work. An early *Eroica* symphony sleeve design was credited with pushing up sales ninefold. Today in the download age, when music travels the internet in invisible bytes shorn of packaging, and music sales are nosediving, there is surely a lesson to be learnt. But more of that later.

Steinweiss had absorbed the ideas of European Modernism and used flat colour and isolated symbolic forms. He believed that musical and cultural symbols would stimulate an audience's interest more than a portrait of the artist. For Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* he placed a piano on a dark blue field illuminated only by a street lamp. His simple, bold cover for the original Broadway cast recording of *South Pacific* in 1949 has been used almost continuously since. (It's claimed that the only graphic design in America to be used for longer is the Coca-Cola bottle.) In a statement of conscience, giant black and white hands on a piano album, *Boogie Woogie*, stood out as a protest in an era when racial segregation was tolerated. He often signed sleeves in his "Steinweiss scrawl", something no other designer has done so prominently.

In 1948, at a routine lunch with a company executive, Steinweiss was astonished when the music coming from the record player did not stop after the regulation five-minute span of a 78 disc. The executive showed him a new-fangled 33rpm micro-groove long-player. Steinweiss went on to invent the paperboard package and design format that would become standard. He continued to design prolifically until he semi-retired in 1973. Steinweiss was thus still at work when psychedelically influenced designers such as Roger Dean and the Hipgnosis team were taking the gatefold sleeve to its multi-leaved zenith during the progressive rock years. Cardboard-hungry behemoths such as the sleeves for Yes's *Tales from Topographic Oceans* and Emerson Lake & Palmer's *Brain Salad Surgery* were, for my generation, much more than record protectors; they were statements of intent for wannabe-hippy grammar school boys. Nothing could appal an elderly housemaster like the sight of Frank Zappa's *Burnt Weeny Sandwich* under the arm.

But by then the power of the sleeve as lifestyle signifier was well understood. A generation earlier the ineffably cool Bauhaus-inspired sleeves created by Reid Miles for the Blue Note jazz label were perfect for the hipster's coffee table. (Even if you didn't quite get what Eric Dolphy was up to).

Indeed, as a general rule, during the heyday of the LP, the quality of the sleeve was a useful indicator of the quality of the music. Thus, you knew Steely Dan's *Can't Buy a Thrill* would be quirky and exciting before you'd clapped ears on it; conversely the tawdry graphics of Led Zeppelin's *Coda* and Pink Floyd's *The Final Cut* flagged up the wilting inspiration within.

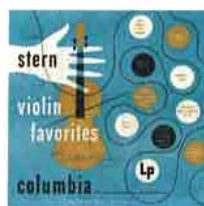
The exception to this rule is the Rolling Stones. The cover of *Their Satanic Majesties Request* from 1967 is an inspired and costly 3-D fantasy and completely surpasses the half-baked musical muddle of what is surely the Stones' weakest album. Perversely, five years later, arguably that group's finest album, *Exile on Main Street*, came out with a muddy, monochrome sleeve featuring slipshod photos of circus freaks. Industry estimates at the time suggested that the cover had reduced sales by 10 per cent.

You don't have to be an old *Mojo*-reading vinyl sniffer to believe that today the absence of fold-out sleeves, lyric sheets and liner notes has changed the consumer's relationship with the music. The shrunken covers on CDs, which emasculated the art of sleeve design in the 1980s, were bad enough. Now no one can love the anonymous bytes on an iPod quite as much as a dog-eared, coffee-mug (and worse) stained vinyl copy of *Blonde on Blonde*.

The good news, however, is that music providers appear to feel the same way. On Wednesday Apple announced plans for the iTunes LP. The aim is to sell album downloads with liner notes, artwork, lyrics and other interactive content devised by the artists themselves. It's primarily aimed at older listeners but the big record labels, who are thinking on the same lines, hope this could be a way of persuading the "MP Free" generation finally to pay up.

For Steinweiss, now living in Florida, it must seem like the world turning full circle. Just as in 1939, when Steinweiss moved the record industry on from monochrome monotony to full colour, so record companies today are relearning that music should be a feast for the eyes as well as the ears.

*Alex Steinweiss, The Inventor of the Modern Album Cover*, is published by Taschen on October 6 at £300. To pre-order it for £270 inc p&p call 0845 2712134 or visit [timesonline.co.uk/booksfirst](http://timesonline.co.uk/booksfirst)



Alex Steinweiss  
created packaging  
to reflect the  
beauty of the music

