

## THE ART OF MUSIC

Seventy years ago the Brooklyn-born graphic design prodigy Alex Steinweiss changed the face of recorded music forever

### TEXT ED WHITE

A baby floats underwater next to a dollar bill; four men stroll across a zebra crossing; thin white lines zigzag across a black background; a beam of light strikes a prism and bursts into a spectrum of colours. Nirvana. The Beatles. Joy Division. Pink Floyd. These images are so iconic, and so completely synonymous with the music they enclosed, as to be inseparable. But it wasn't always so. As strange as it might sound, albums were deathly un-visual until 1939, when a 23-year-old Brooklynite by the name of Alex Steinweiss was hired by Columbia Broadcasting System's William Paley to be the art director for their newly-acquired label, Columbia Records.

By the time he retired in the mid-70s, Steinweiss's groundbreaking innovations in the art, packaging and design of record covers had made him the prototype for the modern graphic designer, with his work adorning shelves in the homes of millions and a pop cultural legacy that more than holds its own when compared with the album art of today. To contextualise the era: records by the mid-1920s were standardised as 78s: heavy, unwieldy slabs of shellac (a kind of resin), giving roughly four to five minutes of music on each side. To enjoy a symphony, listeners had to tediously turn over and replace a lot of 78s, and to house all that pressed resin, companies produced albums,

which were basically binders that contained the set of discs. They looked like photo albums, finished in sombre faux-leather, sometimes with sober, gold-engraved type to identify the artists.

"When I first came to Columbia, the classical music was housed in albums that were practically blank," recalls the now 92-year-old Steinweiss, in a clear, classic Brooklyn accent from his painting studio and home in Sarasota, Florida. "It was ridiculous that beautiful music was in an empty piece of cardboard." Determined to bring to life the music within these "tombstones", the young Steinweiss approached CBS management with a game-changing idea – why not put art on the covers, which would act as publicity and marketing? They initially balked at the cost, as it significantly raised the price of production, but with some persuasion, eventually agreed. However, Steinweiss's ingenuity wasn't limited to that. He also invented the Recortainer – a hinged box that kept dust out, and stored records in a uniform pile that Columbia quickly adopted. Some music historians have pointed out that rival labels such as RCA and Decca had experimented with reproductions of famous paintings on covers, for example, with little success. Steinweiss's innovation was original art. He saw the cover as a conceptual visual statement of the music and used it as a canvas to

reflect that, influenced by the modern art movements sweeping across America from abroad.

Steinweiss's first cover was for popular songwriting team Rodgers and Hart, a compilation called *Smash Song Hits*. For such a paradigm-shifting image it's innocuous enough to the modern eye: a marquee shows the name of the compilation and the artists in black and white, surrounded with an Art Deco-esque series of concentric red circles, echoing the shape of the record. Stylistically, Steinweiss's covers exploded on to the dusty, blank canvases – an eclectic mix of bright, block colour, simplified illustration, bold typographic and geometric shapes, with folk art influences and, later, some kaleidoscopic abstraction.

Gershwin's classic *Rhapsody In Blue* from 1944, for example shows a piano in a pool of light, backed by a silhouetted city skyline, all bold, flat planes and block colour. A rainbow-hued later effort for Stravinsky's *The Firebird* from 1957 looks almost like something Matisse might have envisioned. His trademark curlicue

handwritten font – the Steinweiss Scrawl – appears on a Cole Porter cover from 1948, along with a simple rabbit-in-a-hat motif.

Not even Steinweiss could have predicted how this gamble would pay off. It proved an extraordinary success: one *Newsweek* article of the period cites the sales change on a Steinweiss-designed Beethoven collection as a staggering 800 per cent over a previous, unadorned record. "I took the whole damn thing by storm," remembers Steinweiss with obvious satisfaction. "There were articles in magazines and so forth. The rest is history."

Steinweiss designed every album cover for Columbia from 1939 to 1945, and he was extraordinarily prolific. It's estimated that through his career he designed 2,500 covers, and at the height of his career he claimed to be churning out 50 a month. The

classical and jazz artists whose work he visually imagined are a who's who of musical history, including Billie Holiday, Count Basie, Igor Stravinsky, Cole Porter, Duke Ellington, George Gershwin, Dizzy Gillespie and Leonard Bernstein.

Steven Heller, an art director and visual arts columnist of over 30 years at the *New York Times* and author/editor of over 120 books, calls Steinweiss a "New York journeyman", his eclectic style spanning influences from European poster art, Art Nouveau, Art Deco, Minimalism and later Abstract Expressionism.

Steinweiss's talent as an art director was parsing these groundbreaking artistic movements into the commercial realm and introducing them into pop culture. "With the early stuff, he was consistent with the styles that had not come (to the US), but were in Europe, and then he made something else of them and applied them to a medium that certainly wasn't being applied in Europe," says Heller. "Then when his next abstract stage came, it was within the milieu of American Abstract Expressionism, and he did it in such a way that he transformed it from something that was completely muse-driven and about the aesthetic component, and made it into a functional piece of art."

"He's the grandfather of album art. Without him, I don't know whether (the industry) would have evolved in the same way at all," says Tommy Steele, a Grammy-winning former Columbia Records art director who designed covers for Neil Young, Foo Fighters, Beastie Boys and Nat King Cole, among many others. "Honestly, it was one of those pivotal moments. Conceptually, it made you think how to approach an album, not just decoration-wise. He took this so much further than that. I always compared album art to bringing fine art to the masses. I think he took it in a conceptual direction, and I think that helped shift album covers towards the Pink Floyds and the like. What if everyone had just put a photograph on the cover? That's where it would have ended up."

With almost no peers to contend with, Steinweiss single-handedly created and – as competitors at other labels caught on – typified what some term as the first golden age of album design. Still in his 20s, he became a huge success, renowned throughout the record industry, and his covers became a staple in households across America in the 40s and 50s. He was the only label art director profiled in the most prestigious

design magazine of the day, *AD*. "In his heyday he was a big hero," says Kevin Regan, a triple Grammy Award-winning art director, who worked at Geffen, MCA, and Maverick, designing packages for the likes of Madonna, Beck and Sonic Youth. "There were conferences he attended with Paul Rand (a graphic design icon); he was a heavy hitter."

"It was like a magic carpet, it was a wonderful, wonderful part of my life," reminisces Steinweiss. For a kid growing up in Depression-era Brooklyn, in a family of modest means with a passion for music, it was a dream job. "My father was the biggest lover of music in the family," recalls Steinweiss. "He used to take me to concerts at the Metropolitan Museum as a kid. We would both sit



on the cold marble floor and listen to a beautiful concert. That's the way I graduated into music."

Sparked at a young age, Steinweiss's lifelong passion for music spans classical, romantic and baroque, particularly Mozart, Brahms and Schubert. Although not a huge jazz fan, he loves Louis Armstrong. Later in his career, he started to appreciate early/mid 20th-century symphonic and operatic music, artists such as Renata Tebaldi, Sir Thomas Beecham, Toscanini, Leonard Bernstein and Rudolf Serkin, many of whom he designed covers for and often met. "When I was a kid, I was already thinking of designing covers for music," he says. "It was in my soul. I loved music, and I wanted to spread the beauty of music and make sure that people got a good slice of it."

At 15 years old he enrolled at Brooklyn's Abraham Lincoln High School under the tutelage of art department head Leon Friend, who proved a hugely influential, lifelong mentor. Friend had recently written a book called *Graphic Design* about the then new field (it had been called commercial art until that time), and his course was the catalyst for a

generation of designers who would come to shape American graphic design.

"Leon knew all these, what we would consider now to be modern graphic design icons – Jean Carlu, AM Cassandre – and some of the more avant garde Modernists who came out of Bauhaus," explains Heller, one of the first to unearth Steinweiss's story in the late 80s. "And he basically gave immigrant students the option: they could either become cab drivers, or graphic designers."

Inspired by important Eastern European émigré artists like Lucian Bernhard and Joseph Binder, who Friend introduced him to, Steinweiss immersed himself in learning typography, lettering, design and

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illustration. He then worked as an assistant to Binder after college for three years, but ambitious and impatient to do his own work, he left to freelance briefly, before Columbia beckoned.

Nine years after he joined, a technological leap saw his talents beyond the art directing realm put to the test. "He was there when the LP was introduced by Goddard Lieberson and Peter Goldmark, who invented it," points out Heller. "He was at the crest of that technology. As a designer he was asked to come up with a protective packaging." Steinweiss's ingenious solution was the simple cardboard wrap cover, which became the industry standard for vinyl to this day.

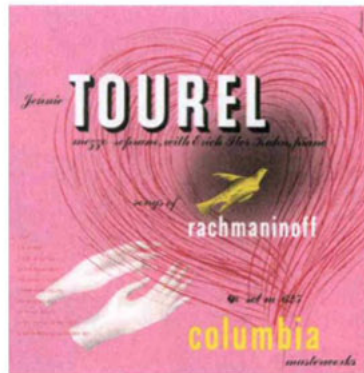
For Paula Scher, co-founder of storied design studio Pentagram, who worked as an art director at Columbia Records in the 70s, it was Steinweiss's uniquely holistic understanding of product, design, art and commerce that made him such an important figure, and the model for generations of art directors to come. "What he was then is what a graphic designer today should be," she says. "Forget the spirit of the object they make – what

the aesthetic is, the period, the style. That's irrelevant. What a real designer does, particularly when they're functioning appropriately, is really shaping what the form is – getting into the organisation with that level of understanding and power and help shaping the form of what a product can be. Raising the expectation of design.”

During the war, Steinweiss was classified as 1A (first in the draft), but like many designers he was asked by the military to create instructional posters and propaganda. His passion for covers remained undiminished however, and he continued to work at Columbia in the evenings. In the mid-40s, Columbia's burgeoning art department expanded, with Steinweiss taking on designers such as Jim Flora (himself now an acclaimed figure). His success saw him freelancing for other labels including RCA, Decca, Everest and London along with designing movie posters and liquor bottles. But by the time the 60s rolled around, his album cover style hadn't really moved on. Photography had become more prevalent too, and he was overtaken by a new generation of designers, retiring from album art in 1974.

Relegated to the footnotes of history, Steinweiss's remarkable story was plucked from obscurity by Heller's writing and latterly the efforts of Regan. As well as organising a big retrospective of his work in 2007 at the Robert Berman Gallery in Los Angeles, late last year Regan and Heller co-authored a comprehensive, coffee table-sized, 422-page retrospective of Steinweiss's oeuvre through Taschen, titled *Alex Steinweiss: Creator of the Modern Album Cover*.

Scher is unequivocal about his



contribution to the record business and popular culture. “When I was a child the first album art I saw was the Steinweiss-designed *South Pacific*. I remembered it my whole life. He invented the industry standard for how music would be packaged, which ended up affecting how subsequent generations really viewed aesthetics. The whole form of the album cover is the most emotionally resonant for people for at least another 25 years. I don't think he's a giant of album cover art. But the effect on the entire culture is absolutely profound.”

Belatedly recognised, the almost umbilical link between music and art that Steinweiss created in society is as strong in him as ever. It literally keeps him alive, he says. When asked when he stopped designing, he pauses. “I don't think I ever stopped designing covers,” he says with a wry laugh. “I'm looking around my studio here at paintings. What I do now is design music. What do they look like? They look exactly like what the composer had in mind. A person can hear the music by looking at the painting.”

Portrait of Alex Steinweiss at Columbia Records Headquarters, Bridgeport, Connecticut, 1939, courtesy of Columbia Records  
 Rodgers & Hart, Columbia Records, 1940; Sergei Rachmaninoff, Columbia Masterworks, 1946; Turandot by Giacomo Puccini, from the *Homage To Music* series, 1981; George Gershwin, *Rhapsody In Blue*, Columbia, 1941; Alex Steinweiss photographed for *Downbeat* magazine at his home studio, 1947, photography by William P. Gottlieb; Cole Porter, *Kostelanetz*, Columbia Records, 1948; all images courtesy of Alex Steinweiss

*Alex Steinweiss: Creator of the Modern Album Cover* is published by Taschen books