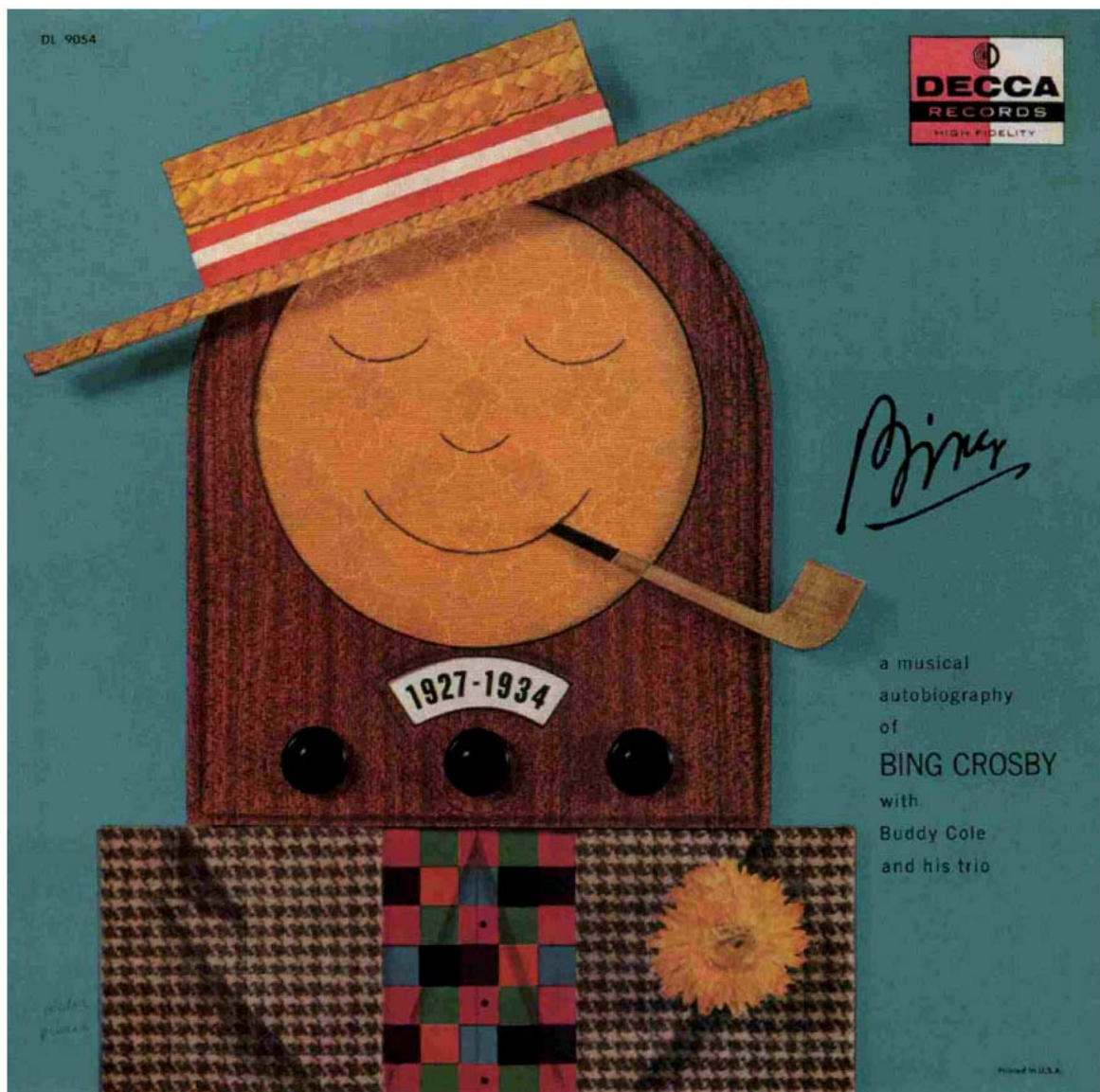


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Photography courtesy of ALEX STEINWEISS

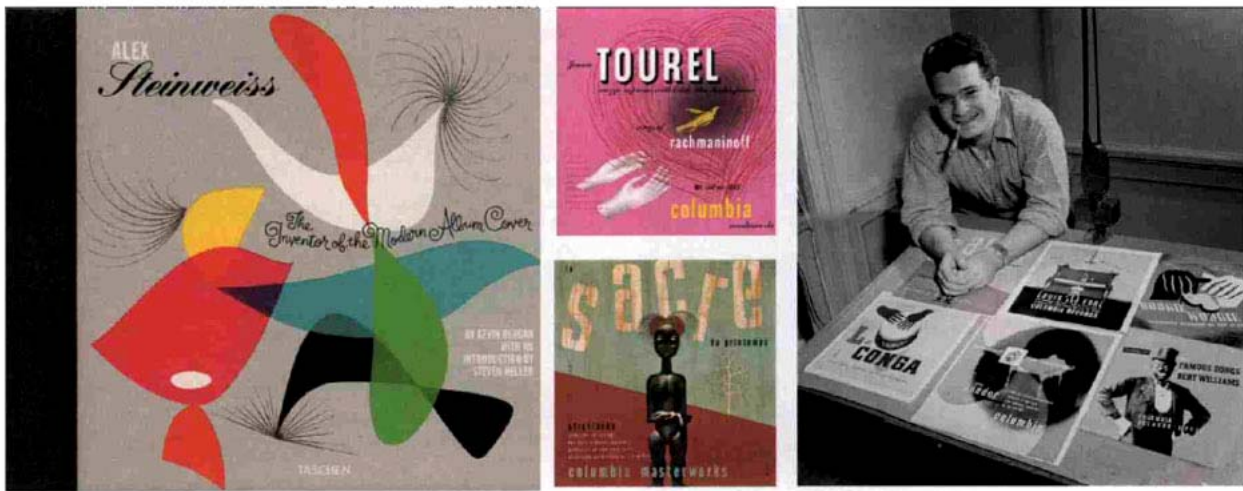


## Off the Record

Flicking thumbs, we sift through thousands of music albums harnessed in our iPods. Colored photographs, whimsical graphics and nifty design layouts burst across the tiny screens, serving as wrapping paper for melodic gifts. But flash back to an era when the music itself had to stand alone on the record store shelves, with only dull, brown

wrapper adorning it. That was the norm until 1940, when a 23-year-old, fresh-minded Columbia Records art director pitched an idea that would revolutionize albums forever.

Brooklyn-born designer Alex Steinweiss presented the fellows at Columbia Records with the concept of replacing boring record packaging with decorative



Opposite page: "Bing: A Musical Autobiography of Bing Crosby, 1927-1934." Decca Gold Label Series, 1961. Clockwise from above: Cover, "Alex Steinweiss: The Inventor of the Modern Album Cover," featuring key art from Bob Sharples and his orchestra, featuring The Sandmen, "Contrasts in Hi-Fi." London Records, ca. 1959. Sergei Rachmaninoff, "Songs of Rachmaninoff," Columbia Masterworks, 1946. Igor Stravinsky, "Le Sacre du Printemps (The Rite of Spring)." Columbia Masterworks, 1944. Alex Steinweiss photographed for "Downbeat Magazine" at his home studio, 1947. Photo by William P. Gottlieb. Rodgers & Hart, "Smash Song Hits." Columbia Records, 1940.

illustrations. The music industry soon ran with the vision and has never looked back. Steinweiss' vibrant advertising ploy increased record sales by more than 800 percent. During a time when technology was in its infancy, Steinweiss crafted his album cover designs by hand, visually expressing the sounds of music. "The artwork that I did was really paintings in miniature," Steinweiss says. Steinweiss produced thousands of such "paintings" on album covers, from Beethoven's concertos to the trumpeted tunes of Louis Armstrong.

Steinweiss' innovation earned him a spot in the Art Directors Club Hall of Fame in 1998, as well as an award that bore his name (the "Alex" is given at the annual Entertainment Packaging Awards). Steinweiss not only crafted artful album covers, but he also dabbled in other forms of packaging—such as whiskey bottle labels and posters for plays, ballets and operas—items that now grace his home in Sarasota. Steinweiss and his family moved to Sarasota in 1974, and he has since designed numerous posters and logos for the Historic Asolo Theater, the Sarasota Ballet of Florida and the Jazz Club of Sarasota. Today, Steinweiss lives a quiet life in a small, Sarasota retirement community. Perched in a withered, orange chair at 92 years old, he is surrounded by memorabilia from his career days. Hanging on the wall are paintings that burst with color—his interpretations of ballets and plays he has seen at Sarasota theaters. Steinweiss is also in the company of his beloved drawing table, which is always available to him if inspiration strikes.

But the memories and friendships he has shared with family could never be expressed on his walls. His daughter, Hazel, gleefully recalls, "Daddy, remember when you told me when you were in Eddie Fisher's home and Liz Taylor walked in with no makeup on? You said that she was just as beautiful without makeup as she was with." And even though Steinweiss had a glamorous life involving many celebrity friendships, it was the bond with his wife, Blanche, that he holds closest to his heart (this year marks the couple's 72nd wedding anniversary). It was Blanche to whom Steinweiss dedicated the recently-published Taschen book about him entitled *Alex Steinweiss: Creator of the Modern Album Cover*. The text—which contains hundreds of pages about Steinweiss' life, career and designs—begins with the inscription: "For my darling wife, Blanche, with great appreciation." His grandson, Jesse White, owner of Sarasota Architectural Salvage, distributes the book for his grandfather—but the 400-plus pages only skim the surface of the incredible life Steinweiss created for himself. Of his 92 years, Steinweiss quietly says, "It's been a great time." —A. BANKO

