

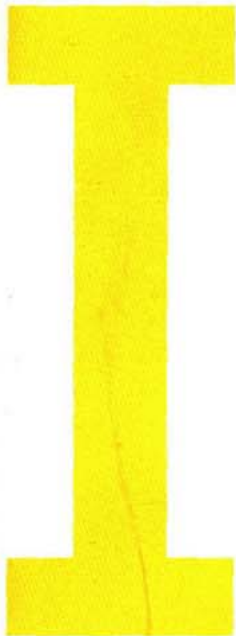
KING OF THE
**album
cover**

BY MARK LAMSTER

**Graphic Designer
Alex Steinweiss
Had An Eye For
Music**



Previous page: For his album cover of Igor Stravinsky's "Le Sacre du Printemps (The Rite of Spring)" in 1944, Steinweiss used bold, indented type and an African figurine



I remember the first time I heard the name Alex Steinweiss. It was more than a decade ago, and I was then working as an editor of books about architecture and design. A friend called — design historian Steven Heller — asking whether I'd be interested in publishing a book about the man who invented the album cover.

It had never occurred to me that anyone had actually invented the album cover. Hadn't they just been there always? As a teen, I'd argued with my friends over our favorites (mine was Sgt. Pepper's, of course) and now these many years later I have a closet full of moldering vinyl records that I occasionally pull out for inspiration or a hit of nostalgia.

The thought that someone sat down and came up with this format seemed almost absurd. But, of course, the best ideas are often those hidden in plain sight and so not long after, I was on the phone again, this time with a charming Florida retiree now well past his eightieth year, reviewing the jacket design for a small

picture book about the man on the other end of the line — Alex Steinweiss. Of course, he had designed the cover.

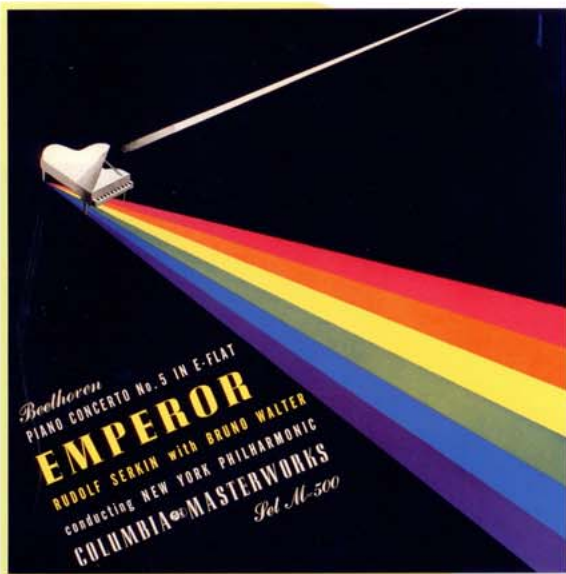
That book came out in 2000, and if it was not a bestseller, at least it captured the imagination of Kevin Reagan, a record-industry art director who found in Steinweiss a hero and took it upon himself to make him "a household name in the design world." The result of that mission is *Alex Steinweiss: Inventor of the Modern Album Cover*, published by TASCHEN Books. Heller, appropriately enough, wrote the introduction to the new book. The definitive new coffee-table monograph gives serious weight—7 pounds on my bathroom scale—to the life of the designer, who passed away in July of 2011 at the age of ninety-four.

EARLY INSPIRATION

The son of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, Steinweiss grew up in relative poverty along the boardwalks of Coney Island. The frenetic visual energy of Coney's amusement parks would, in the coming years, become a staple of his design repertoire, but his first formal instruction in the discipline came from Leon Friend, a pioneering arts teacher at Brooklyn's Abraham Lincoln High School. Today, Lincoln is known as a factory of basketball talent, a perennial city champion famed for the exploits of local NBA heroes Stephon Marbury and Sebastian Telfair. But thanks to Friend's modernist curriculum, it was in the graphic arts that the school's alums found fame and fortune, or what passed for it in the Depression years.

It was in 1940, when he was just twenty-three and working as an art director for CBS records, that Steinweiss had the epiphany that would virtually create an industry. At the time, records were packaged in heavy, unadorned cardboard albums with leatherette bindings and no illustrations, just a bit of indentifying type on the spine. You got these "tombstones" at the hardware or department store where you bought your phonograph, because there was no such thing as a record store.

"This was no way to package beautiful music," writes Steinweiss in one of several reminiscences in the book. "I envisioned colorful posterlike designs that hinted at the music contained in the album."



Beethoven, Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-Flat (Emperor), Columbia, 1942. One of Steinweiss's compositions for Columbia features a black background and distant piano with rainbow waves of color. One of the most popular rock album covers in history, Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*, released more than 30 years later, was influenced by this Steinweiss cover.

The first was for a collection of Rogers and Hart show tunes. He hired a photographer and had the title splashed on the marquee of New York's Imperial Theatre. The picture, enhanced by a clever Steinweiss graphic, was pasted onto the album. And voilà. The accountants weren't happy about the added expense, but they changed their tune when they saw what the illustrations did for the bottom line.

Sales of a recording of Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony, now repackaged in bright red with an abstracted Napoleonic hat, jumped some 800 percent. Now that was heroic. In 1948, when CBS came out with the first LPs, it was Steinweiss again who was first to put art on the jacket.

FAMOUS SCRAWL

From the outset, Steinweiss had an identifiable style. Covers were treated as miniature posters, printed in three or four flat colors, which gave them a strong graphic jolt, like works he had admired as a student. He was no doctrinaire modernist, though. He had a populist's taste for decorative typography, which came through in his borrowings from Art Deco and in his characteristic hand lettering—the "Steinweiss Scrawl"—which looped and twirled across countless covers. "I try, by means of color, form, texture and letterforms, to project the mood of the music," he writes.

He was, in addition, a brilliant illustrator and collagist. He would take his cues from the life of the composer or the subject of the music. For a 1944 recording of Dvorak's *New World Symphony*, he put cartoon Indians on horseback chasing bison across an American prairie. Russian composers would get dancing Cossacks, and the French, high-kicking can-can dancers. City scenes were a standard for anything urbane, especially the work of Gershwin. He could do abstraction, too. Constructions of color and form were inspired by artists such as Joan Miró.

Musicians adored him—the great maestro Leopold Stokowski insisted on Steinweiss covers for all his recordings—as did the public at large, even if they didn't know his name. Coming out of the Depression and into the brutal years of World War II, Steinweiss's optimistic, playful designs struck a perfect chord with those looking to music for diversion from a troubled world. When the national mood lifted, his buoyant aesthetic seemed just as appropriate to a time of postwar abundance.

Steinweiss, for a while, was everywhere. There were covers for CBS, Decca and London. He did classical, jazz and pop. His output was so great that he was forced to take on a pseudonym, *Piedra Blanca*, to cover for his ubiquity. Of course, the high couldn't last forever. The sixties came, and with it a kind of music, rock 'n' roll, that demanded a graphic language of its own — something sharp and angular, even angry. That was not what he did. Sitting in the reception room of a record company in 1972, surrounded by long-haired men in fringed jackets, he knew his time had come. "It was time to call it quits," he recalls.

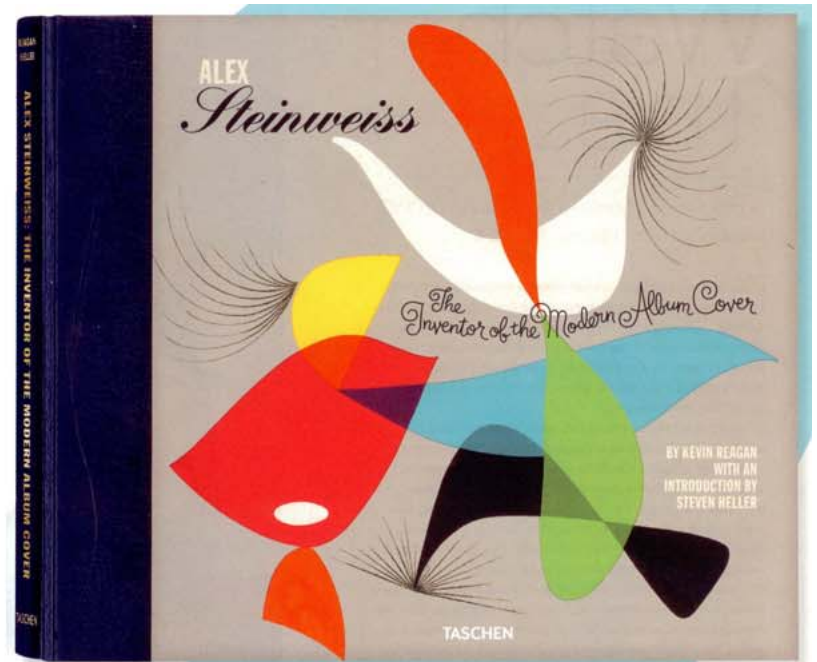
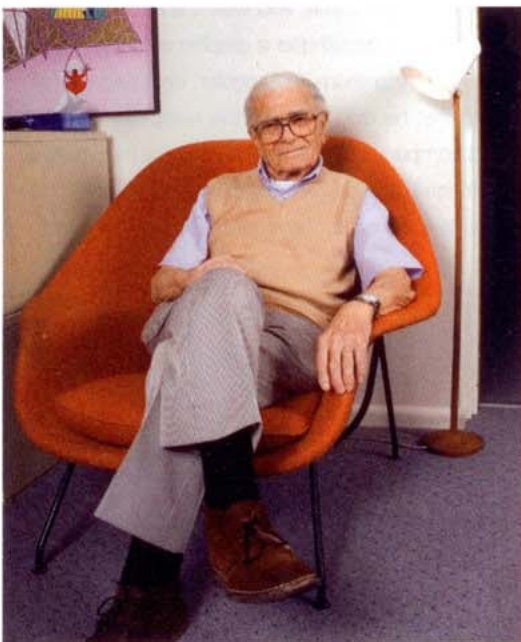
LATER YEARS

In the time honored tradition of retirees, he moved to Florida with his wife, Blanche, his sweetheart since their days strolling the Coney Island boardwalk. That was where I found him, still doing design work for local nonprofits and painting colorful abstract canvases like those that had once graced his covers.

"He revolutionized the way music is visualized," says biographer Kevin Reagan.

That's no small accomplishment, but the future of that legacy is something of an open question. It seemed in doubt when the broad surface of the LP jacket was shrunken down to a compact disc case, and now even that medium has been superannuated.

How do you produce a cover for a digital file that doesn't even exist in physical space? If nothing else, at least we have Reagan's encyclopedic compendium. And of course those closets full of dusty vinyl. Go check. Odds are pretty good you have a Steinweiss cover in there somewhere. Maybe more than a few.



Alex Steinweiss: The Inventor of the Modern Album Cover, 2009.

The extraordinary legacy of Alex Steinweiss lives on in a lavish coffee-table book by Kevin Reagan and Steven Heller, published by Taschen Books. Photographs courtesy of Taschen Books.

Key Dates

- 1917:** Born in Brooklyn, N.Y.
- 1930:** Enters Abraham Lincoln High School where he meets pioneering arts teacher, Leon Friend.
- 1934:** Gets scholarship to Parsons School of Design
- 1940:** Joins Columbia Records as its first art director. He creates his first album cover for a collection of songs by Rodgers and Hart.
- 1945:** No longer a sole designer for Columbia, he begins working with other companies as a freelancer and ushers in the "First Golden Age" of the album cover.
- 1948:** Designs the LP jacket, which becomes the standard for the industry for nearly 50 years. Introduces the "Steinweiss scrawl" on covers.
- 1950:** He adds Decca and London records to his roster.
- 1972:** At the age of 55, leaves the music business because he believes his design ideas are now out of step with the rock era.
- 1974:** Moves from New York to Sarasota, Fla., with his wife, Blanche. Begins "Homage to Music," an open-ended series of paintings directly inspired by the masterpieces of great composers such as Strauss, Stravinsky and Mozart.
- 2011:** Dies in Sarasota, Fla., at the age of 94.