

VINYL COVER ART CELEBRATED IN SIX COFFEE TABLE BOOKS

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Books discussed in this article:

Alex Steinweiss, The Inventor of the Modern Album Cover by Kevin Reagan and Steven Heller (Taschen)

Andy Warhol: The Record Covers 1949-1987 by Paul Maréchal (Prestel)

The Art of the LP: Classic Album Covers 1955-1995 by Johnny Morgan and Ben Wardle (Sterling)

The Record: Contemporary Art and Vinyl, edited by Trevor Schoonmaker (Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University)

Cover Story, Volume Two: Odd, Obscure, and Outrageous Album Art (Waxpoetics)

Five Hundred 45s: A Graphic History of the Seven-Inch Record, by Spencer Drate and Judith Salavetz (Collins Design)

Blame it on Alex Steinweiss. In 1939 he convinced his bosses at Columbia Records to allow him to illustrate what would become the first album cover instead of the “tombstone” burlap covers that housed 78 records. Little did Steinweiss, who will be 93 next March, know that his marquee-adorned Rodgers & Hart album cover, which increased sales for the label by over 800%, would eventually give birth to the modern music packaging industry as we know it today.

Taschen recently published a deluxe \$500 coffee-table book (weighing in at 13.8 lbs.), *Alex Steinweiss, The Inventor of the Modern Album Cover*, celebrating the designer’s fantastic body of work for a who’s who of mid-20th century classical and jazz music. [Ed. Note: Taschen is releasing out a \$69.99 version of the book in March, 2011.] Three-time packaging Grammy winner Kevin Reagan (formerly Madonna’s art director) met Steinweiss at the first “Alex Awards” in 2003, founded by the author of this article. I’ll never forget our dinner that night with Steinweiss, Reagan and the awards emcee, Craig Braun, no packaging slouch himself, despite the three generations of creative geniuses present, trading notes on crazy assistants stealing their ideas and supplies. Reagan made it his mission that night to spend the next six years getting this pricey but entirely worthwhile book published.

Arguably, if it weren’t for Steinweiss before him, Andy Warhol wouldn’t have had the opportunity to design album covers, which he began to do in 1949 at the outset of his commercial career. Warhol is widely known for conceiving the gimmicky *Velvet Underground & Nico* (peel-able, color-form banana, 1966) and Rolling Stones’ *Sticky Fingers* (working zipper, 1971), both of which were stewarded by Braun.

But well before he became a popular artist in the mid-1960s and synonymous with the chic glitterati of New York’s nightlife, Warhol cold-called record labels to offer his services. This book compiles 50 of the covers ranging from early on fairly staid sleeves for jazz, classical and Mexican music collections to the likes of Count Basie—his first celebrity portrait—to the more glamorous aesthete showing up in his disco-era works, such as Diana Ross: airbrushed, colorized photographs that often adorned the covers of his *Interview* magazine. Paul Maréchal does a nice job researching the stories behind the covers, which bear Warhol’s unmistakable imprint. Maréchal explores Warhol’s creative process, his relationship with artists and his fascination with all kinds of music.

The Art of the LP also provides back stories in a few sentences and designer/photographer credits of more than 350 classic album covers, of mostly rock, but including pop, rape, reggae, soul and punk, as well.

Pink Floyd art director Storm Thorgerson and business partner Aubrey Powell’s *100 Best Album Covers*, published in 1999, still sets the mark in terms of insight and sleeve trivia for this type of book, but how can anyone really rank such a subjective list?

The Art of the LP co-authors Johnny Morgan and Ben Wardle differentiate from Thorgerson/Powell’s approach by organizing the images by visual theme: Rock and Roll, Sex, Art, Drugs Ego, Real World, Escape, Politics and Death. I am not sure that the categorizations for each sleeve always work, and can be at times interchangeable, but one can appreciate the desire to organize the covers in some order that makes sense. *The Art of the LP*’s wry observations are

often on target, with such tidbits that The Cars' drummer/art director dated the Vargas-photographed cover model of its album *Candy-O*.

The Record: Contemporary Art and Vinyl is the companion book to a fascinating art exhibition that's closing on Feb. 6 at Duke University in North Carolina, in which artists use vinyl records as their muse. The show moves to the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston April 15 through Sept. 5.

Sure, *The Record* gets a bit esoteric at times, such as the book's cover depicting a sparrow's beak positioned as a needle on a turntable. But the art throughout is imaginative, and the collection also tells the story of recorded music as a business and social force for the past century, as told through a series of essays. Different contributors tackle such topics as the psychology of record collecting, how records are manufactured in Jamaica and Mexico, how records changed music since the days of Caruso in 1907, turntables being at the center of DJ/hip-hop culture. Sure, there is plenty of academic justification for a popular culture guilty pleasure, but this book nails it for anyone who enjoyed lifting a record player's tone-arm and gently placing the needle on an LP or 45. The photography is striking throughout, and global art presented undeniably thought-provoking. In short, *The Record* is a keeper, and a weighty, beautifully designed and written tome to which record lovers will return repeatedly.

Not all album covers are worthy of being hung in a museum, and some are just downright bizarre. *Waxpoetics*, a great Brooklyn, NY-based magazine that spotlights mostly black music, has published several books of album covers, the latest Cover Story Volume Two focusing on found outside of the realm of mundane. The collection lives up to its subtitle of *Odd, Obscure and Outrageous*. I like the emphasis here placed on the self-published, "private pressed LP." But the strange visions of their creators probably are only fully realized after hearing what's contained in the grooves. Most readers probably will leaf quickly with only slight curiosity through these pages, which, by the way, are printed on a matte, washed-out paper stock.

Unlike the other books reviewed here celebrating the rebirth of 12-inch vinyl, *Five Hundred 45s*, focuses on the cover art that adorn 7-inch single records since the 1950s. Spencer Drate and Judith Salavetz painstakingly selected the interestingly juxtaposed sleeves (disclosure: several of my personal records made the final cut). Interspersed are insightful essays from experts about the artifact from a bygone era that enable to quench the musical thirst of kids who didn't have enough money to buy an LP.