

American Jazz Album Covers in the 1950s and 1960s

abstract

During the 1950s and 1960s modern jazz became a widely recognized part of American culture. Its influence spread through recordings, which were promoted with record album covers. Columbia Records was the first label to introduce such covers, which were invented by Alex Steinweiss who joined the label in 1939. In 1954, the company hired S. Neil Fujita, who introduced a new graphic design approach to the covers. By the mid-1950s, a number of labels formed around New York to record jazz artists and they hired their own cover designers. The designers introduced varied visual techniques such as line drawing, photography, and typography. In the 1950s, photography was used as an expressive medium and in the 1960s Reid Miles created strong typography for Blue Note's covers. On the West Coast William Claxton designed covers for several labels that promoted a West Coast sound called "cool jazz." By the late 1960s rock was competing with jazz as a music style and rock album cover art eclipsed the jazz album covers due to bigger art budgets and larger album sales.

The beginning

During the 1950s and 1960s modern jazz became a widely recognized part of American culture. As a musical form, it was radically changed in the 1940s by the bebop experiments of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and other musicians who were playing at clubs in New York. By the 1950s, their music began to reach a wider audience through recordings, which introduced many other musicians to the new style.

Columbia was the first record label to introduce album covers, which were invented by Alex Steinweiss who joined the newly formed label as an art director in 1939. Steinweiss designed several hundred covers before he left in the early 1950s. Columbia was recording both classical and jazz musicians, the latter playing in traditional genres such as Dixieland, boogie-woogie, and swing. Steinweiss designed some of the covers himself but also hired other designers and illustrators. Among them was Robert Jones, who went on to become the art director for RCA Victor in the early 1950s. Jones commissioned the illustrator Jim Flora, whom he had known at Columbia Records, to design covers for RCA Victor's jazz albums. Flora had a frenetic style that was laced with surreal visual humor. This was exemplified by his cover for *Inside Sauter-Finegan* where he depicted the two swing band leaders as joined at the hip, while drawing on a common musical source.

In 1955, Jones hired Andy Warhol to do several covers while Warhol was still active as an illustrator. Warhol's spare drawing of Count Basie was in stark contrast to RCA Victor's caricatures of Fats Waller and Duke Ellington on albums of their music from the early 1940s. As an art director, Jones adopted an eclectic approach, mixing illustrative covers by

Flora and Warhol with compelling photographs of jazz musicians or their instruments. Jones was one of the first art directors if not the first to use photos of jazz musicians on album covers. This was a major shift in cover design from paintings and illustrations intended to interpret the music to photographs that sought to convey a more intensive engagement with it.

New York and Chicago labels

In 1954 Columbia Records hired S. Neil Fujita, perhaps the first Asian-American graphic designer to work in the recording industry as an art director. By 1956, the label had signed major jazz stars – Miles Davis, Dave Brubeck, Charles Mingus, and Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers – and Fujita was charged with finding a visual style that was as strong as their music. He turned to two sources – photography and his own paintings. For the classic Miles Davis album *Round About Midnight*, Fujita chose a photograph of Miles in a meditative pose overlaid with a red gel. This album was Miles' first for Columbia and the cover remains one of the label's strongest. For albums by Charles Mingus and Dave Brubeck, Fujita illustrated the music with his own paintings – playful lyrical abstractions with swirling shapes on different colored fields. Fujita brought a modern design sensibility to album covers, making the typography as important as the visual images in the overall design of a cover.

By the mid-1950s, a number of labels formed around New York to record the jazz artists who were creating the modern bebop style. Charlie Parker, the brilliant alto saxophone player, was key to this new music and he issued recordings on a few different labels. Burt Goldblatt was a young graphic designer who did free-lance work for some of these labels. He employed a distinct drawing style on some covers but also used photographs, both portraits of the musicians as well as street scenes inspired by film noir. The latter were intended to represent a mood, an approach that was picked up by several other art directors within a few years.

Besides the small jazz labels, larger ones were able to record a greater number of artists and also improve the quality of their cover designs. Foremost among them were Clef, Norgran, and Verve, all founded by the jazz impresario Norman Granz. David Stone Martin, a superb draftsman, who was greatly influenced by the artist Ben Shahn, created most covers for Granz's albums. By 1950, Martin had illustrated more than a hundred covers for Granz and other clients. He drew with a loose line that suggested the nervous energy of a jazz solo. Sometimes he incorporated his own hand-drawn title lettering into his compositions, while in other instances the drawings were complemented by typography. Though most of his covers were realistic, Martin sometimes designed more conceptual ones with fragments of musician's images or instruments brought together in a unified composition.

The Granz labels were associated with David Stone Martin's drawings but Prestige and Blue Note were two successful jazz labels that emphasized photographic and typographic covers instead. Bob Weinstock, a young jazz aficionado, started Prestige in 1949. The cover of his first album, which featured the quintets of Lee Konitz and Lennie Tristano, consisted entirely of text, mainly the names of the musicians. Subsequent covers for several years did have photographs of the principal musicians but not good ones. The covers greatly improved when Don Schlitten, then a freelance producer, began to design them around 1954. However, the photographs of the musicians were weak until the label started to work with various freelance photographers.

In 1956 Tom Hannan began to design many of the Prestige covers and for the first time, they achieved a consistent visual identity. As an art director, Hannan followed the direction that S. Neil Fujita had charted at Columbia. He worked with photographs but had a developed sense of typography and balanced the photos with well-placed and appropriately scaled type that resulted in strong compositions. By contrast, however, two of the label's most original covers were paintings for albums by saxophonist Eric Dolphy's quintet, *Outward Bound* and *Out There*. Inspired by the paintings of Salvador Dali and other Surrealist artists, both were done by Richard "Prophet" Jennings, a black artist, journalist, and entertainer, who created a mysterious atmosphere to represent Dolphy's "free jazz" style. Most significant about the covers is that they represented the music according to the musicians' vision rather than management's sense of what would suit the marketplace. The Dolphy covers were also among the earliest examples of designs by black artists to illustrate the music of black musicians.

Don Schlitten also worked for Prestige Records, photographing musicians and creating covers on and off into the 1960s. He produced some memorable designs, particularly for several albums by John Coltrane. Another Prestige art director was Esmond Edwards who joined the label as a photographer but also worked as a producer. Edwards, one of the few African-Americans to photograph or design jazz album covers in the 1950s and 1960s, produced a number of strong covers of which several featured John Coltrane. A 1957 cover, "Coltrane/Prestige" portrayed a seated Coltrane as a serious young musician staring straight ahead at the camera with his saxophone laid down in front of him. Another classic Edwards cover was *Soultrane*, a spare design with a large section of white space and a photograph of Coltrane covered with a blue overlay in the lower left corner. Here the influence was De Stijl rather than the Surrealism. Covers by Edwards and photographers hired by other labels gave an emphasis to the photograph as an interpretive work in its own right rather than as a simple portrait of a musician or group.

Blue Note was established in 1939 and Francis Wolff, an émigré from Germany, joined the label several years later. Wolff had been a commercial photographer in Germany and continued to photograph recording sessions for Blue Note, though he was primarily occupied with the production and business side of the label. Other photographers occasionally worked for Blue Note but it was mainly Wolff's photographs that were used on the album covers. When Blue Note began to release 10 inch vinyl recordings in 1951, Paul Bacon, then a young graphic designer, was an initial cover artist. In 1953, John Hermansader, a former student at the New Bauhaus in Chicago, began to create covers for the label. Having absorbed the experimental ethos of Moholy-Nagy, he developed an original style of enclosing photographs in unusual shapes, which became part of an overall abstract composition of the covers.

In 1955, Blue Note hired Reid Miles as a designer. Until Miles left twelve years later, he created over 500 covers for the label, many of them notable for their innovative use of typography. Miles experimented with different typefaces, some of which had never been used for album covers. For the album entitled *right now! Jackie McLean*, he exploded the letters of a typewriter alphabet. Other experimental typographic covers included Jackie McLean's *Let Freedom Ring* with its vertically extended bold sans serifs, and McLean's, *it's time!*, which consisted almost entirely of exclamation points., For Joe Henderson's *In n' Out*, Miles created a formal composition out of the title letters.

Other jazz labels followed Prestige and Blue Note in producing bebop albums and recordings in the hard bop style that followed it. Riverside Records, founded in 1953, was

originally dedicated to reissuing early jazz recordings but soon established itself as a label that specialized in contemporary jazz. For five years Theolonious Monk had a contract with Riverside and this resulted in one of the labels most memorable covers, The Monk Stamp, which featured a photographic portrait of Monk inside a traditional stamp design. The Riverside art director was Paul Bacon, who had been designing covers for the label since it's beginning and continued to do so until Riverside went bankrupt in 1963. Like the art directors at Prestige and Blue Note, Bacon also featured photographs of the musicians but he often approached the covers in the spirit of a magazine art director, frequently devising unusual photographic setups for the musicians or else surrounding the portrait photographs with colored shapes or typography.

Burt Goldblatt, who had started doing free-lance work for small jazz labels in the 1950s, was the primary designer for Bethlehem Records and like Bacon, he varied his covers between photographs, his own drawings of musicians, and more conceptual designs. Goldblatt also created covers for Emarcy, a jazz subsidiary of Chicago's Mercury Records. That label had no particular house style for its album covers and they were rarely memorable. A few Mercury covers that had a distinct look were created by African-American designer Emmett McBain. He played with typography and color, making use of colored letterforms as graphic elements, and he combined titles with abstract colored shapes.

Atlantic Records was incorporated in 1947 and the label emphasized modern jazz in the early years but was never solely focused on it. Atlantic also lacked a consistent approach to its cover design, working with different art directors including Burt Goldblatt, who was becoming a specialist in the design of jazz album covers. By the mid 1950s, Atlantic had begun to hire some talented young photographers like Marvin Israel, Jay Maisel, William Claxton, and Lee Friedlander. Around 1960, Loring Eutemey, an African-American designer who was working for Push Pin Studios, began to do free-lance covers for the label, several of which achieved a satisfying relation between the images and the typography, particularly, *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation by the Ornette Coleman Double Quartet*, which consisted predominantly of type, complemented by a small abstract painting. Another of Eutemey's covers for a Charlie Mingus album, *Oh Yeah*, was more in the Push Pin style with its mix of old engravings, cut out pictures, and colorful shapes that corresponded to the separate tunes on the album.

A different approach to jazz album covers was taken by CTI, the jazz subsidiary of A & M Records. Sam Antupit, a former art director for *Esquire* as well as a designer for Push Pin Studios, was CTI's art director in the late 1960s. Working with photographer Pete Turner, Antupit created a format that featured Turner's photographs with white space around them. Unlike other labels, however, the covers rarely portrayed jazz musicians. Many were images of nature and wildlife in Africa and South America that were printed in saturated color. Among the most memorable was Antonio Carlos Jobim's *Wave*, which featured a giraffe on an African plain. Other memorable Pete Turner covers for CTI were Wes Montgomery's *A Day in the Life*, which displayed an ashtray full of cigarette butts, and the giant pair of lips for *Soul Flutes: Trust in Me*, with Hubert Laws playing the flute.

West Coast labels

In the late 1940s, a large label on the West Coast was Capitol Records in Los Angeles. Among the jazz groups whom that Capitol recorded was *Stan Kenton Encores* and his Orchestra, a major West Coast ensemble. By 1947 Kenton was exploring new big band

sounds, which he called “progressive jazz,” and Capitol put out two albums whose covers represented the experimental nature of his music. In 1950, *Stan Kenton Encores* was released with a cover that came right out of an Yves Tanguy Surrealist painting and three years later the company brought out *Stan Kenton: New Concepts of Artistry in Rhythm*. It featured a photograph of the bandleader paired with intersecting angular lines intended to convey a sense of mental tension.

Several newer labels, Pacific Jazz Records and Contemporary Records, began to specialize in jazz in the 1950s. At the time, a genre that later came to be called West Coast jazz developed in Los Angeles and San Francisco. It was more relaxed than the high-energy bebop in New York and was sometimes referred to as “cool jazz.” William Claxton, whose photographs for both labels provided a visual counterpart to the West Coast sound helped found Pacific Jazz in 1952 and became the label's art director and principal photographer. Though many of Claxton's photographs recalled those of the New York labels, he also liked to experiment with both techniques and settings. Claxton was known for photographing musicians outside the recording studio, where they were normally featured. For an album *Chet Baker and Crew* he portrayed the trumpet player and his band in casual dress on a sailboat with Baker, one hand on the mast and one on his trumpet, leaning out to sea. As art director Claxton designed a number of covers with paintings by West Coast artists that he chose to visually represent the music. Claxton's photographs also graced the covers of Contemporary Records and among his best-known efforts for this label was the Sonny Rollins album *Way Out West*, where he photographed Rollins standing in a desert landscape, a cowboy outfit and holding his saxophone like a gun.

Conclusion

Much progress was made in album cover design from the 1940s to the 1960s and photography and expressive typography were welcome additions to the paintings and illustrations that art directors originally used. By the late 1960s, album cover designs had become important sales tools and were instrumental in helping customers select albums from record store bins. Covers also began to win prizes in design competitions and gain recognition in design annuals, thus establishing reputations for their designers who were previously unrecognized. The trends that developed in the design of jazz album covers were then adopted and expanded by the labels that specialized in rock music during the 1960s and after. As rock musicians gained more control over their cover designs, these became visually extravagant with occasional add on elements such as the zipper Andy Warhol incorporated into the Rolling Stones *Sticky Fingers* album. Designers continued to create covers for vinyl jazz albums until the labels stopped producing them. Their covers were eclipsed by lavish budgets that recording companies spent on the better selling rock albums. A few labels like Columbia Records had the resources to compete with the rock albums and dedicated larger budgets to their jazz album designs, taking a cue from rock music in the creation of more elaborate designs such as Theolonius Monk's *Underground* and Miles Davis' *Bitches Brew*. However, the time for experimentation had passed and any money spent on jazz cover design had to insure that the album would compete with the rock albums for the customers' interest and pocket book.

