

IN PRINT



SEPT/OCT/NOV 2010
CONTENTS

- Ben Kafka on Craig Robertson's *The Passport in America: The History of a Document*
- *The Anthology of Rap* edited by Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois
- *Richard Yates* by Tao Lin
- City Limits
- *Born Modern: The Life and Design of Alvin Lustig* by Steven Heller and Elaine Lustig Cohen

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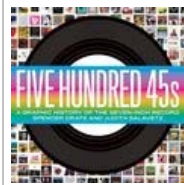
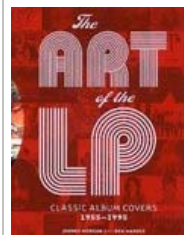
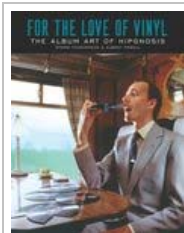
- Dec/Jan 2011
- Sept/Oct/Nov 2010
- June/July/Aug 2010
- Apr/May 2010
- Feb/Mar 2010
- Dec/Jan 2010
- Sept/Oct/Nov 2009
- more past issues

SEPT/OCT/NOV 2010

Sound and Vision

Remembering albums for the look as much as the music

PETER TERZIAN



Maybe for you it was the old man with the bundle of sticks on his back, or the monkey with the halo and the floating numbers, or the two businessmen, one on fire, shaking hands. For me it was the woman on the frozen pond.

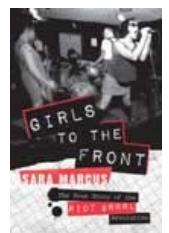
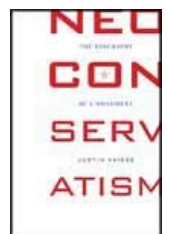
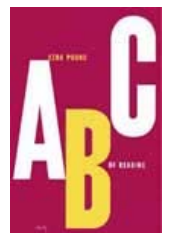
I looked at the cover of Joni Mitchell's *Hejira* a lot when I was sixteen years old—this was in the mid-1980s, a decade after the album came out. It wasn't the portrait of the singer on the front that so fascinated me, although her broad, triangular silhouette is what now comes to mind when I think of the album—has, in fact, become shorthand in my memory for all the music I consumed, the hours spent playing records and studying their sleeves, during that period of developmental listening. *Hejira* was released in 1976; the year before, Patti Smith had assumed a Frank Sinatra stance on the cover of *Horses*, with a man's blazer casually thrown over one shoulder. Mitchell wears a fur coat and beret and some discreet jewelry on *Hejira*, and her long blond hair is swept to one side, but her pose is pure Sinatra as well: one hand in a pocket, a cigarette sticking out from between two fingers. Eyes steady, jaw slightly set, equine nostrils flared. The word *defiance* has been used to describe Smith's expression on *Horses*, but I see softness and wonder there instead. It is in Mitchell's face that I detect a challenge.

Is it too much of a stretch to suggest that rock album art gave generations of suburban adolescents in the 1970s and '80s their first exposure to surrealism and open-ended narrative? The cover of *Hejira* presented the lightly cultured teenager I was then with a visual puzzle that absorbed me in a new way. On the front gatefold, Mitchell's body is double-exposed with an image of a prairie highway; the songs on the album are about travel. I wanted to know, though, about the wintry sepia landscape in the background. The photograph winds around to the back of the sleeve, where an iced-over lake encircled with forest seems to extend without limit. Like the intricate, hobby landscapes glimpsed in the background windows of Memling portraits, this was space I could mentally circumnavigate. A male

figure skater in a flowery one-piece suit and a woman in a wedding dress pose in the center of the pond; far in the distance, on the horizon, is some tiny thing I've never been able to identify, no bigger than a mosquito's wing but with three discernible parts. Possibly people; for some reason, I told myself they were three magi. A song on the album was about marriage and mentioned ice skaters, but it seemed too flattening to view the back cover as a literal interpretation of a lyric. I imagined some deeper, more mysterious interaction between the various figures, but I was happy to let their relationship remain a question mark.

A few years earlier, as a pregay preteen, I had shied away from whatever music my peers liked, assuming (not incorrectly) that it was noisy and frightening, with inappropriate sexual content. But I still had to go to music stores to buy the soft-rock albums I wanted, and once inside I was confronted by regular-rock record jackets (which were often blown up into wall-size promotional posters) that looked like nothing I had seen at the movies or on television or in the moldering art books (Renoir, Currier and Ives) my parents owned. Many appeared to tell a story for which the viewer was required to supply missing elements. I liked show tunes; owing to its title, I briefly wondered whether I might find some on *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* by Genesis. Record covers were usually a reliable advertisement for the musical product, though, and the strange tableau on the sleeve told me that something weird lay inside. In the first of three photos, a man crouches in front of a waterfall and reaches across the frame into the second photo to grasp the hand of . . . his double, sitting in an office chair, his head thrown back in anguish. In the third, an empty white silhouette is centered in a dark Victorian hallway inhabited by forest animals—the same man has stepped out of the picture to stand, hands on hips, watching his counterparts in the first two. It could all mean something, or nothing. Either way, I couldn't get the image out of my head.

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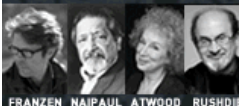
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And what was I to make of, say, the oversize heads of three middle-aged ladies, their hair coiled in buns, wearing identical Easter Island–statue earrings, the eye of one matron staring blankly ahead? (Styx's *Pieces of Eight*.) Or a well-dressed couple in the back of a limousine, the oily-looking man tugging a length of pink chewing gum from the woman's exposed breast as she stares blankly ahead? (Scorpions' *Lovedrive*.) In those days, women on album covers did a lot of staring blankly ahead.

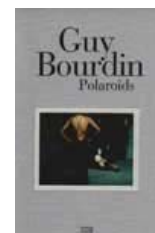
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As it turned out, these three jackets had more in common than I knew. They were created by the legendary design team Hipgnosis, founded in 1968 by Storm Thorgerson and Aubrey Powell, University of Cambridge friends who taught themselves to seamlessly manipulate photographs. As they write in the introduction to their 2008 *For the Love of Vinyl: The Album Art of Hipgnosis*—one of the best of the many books about cover design that have appeared over the past few years—they bowed to the wishes of bands, not record labels. Their artwork was memorable and salable, and the bands understandably kept coming back for more far-outness; Hipgnosis designed eleven covers for Pink Floyd, including *The Dark Side of the Moon*, and five for Led Zeppelin, including *Houses of the Holy*. Thorgerson and Powell ignored such graphic-design traditions as, for example, thinking about fonts; instead, they say, "We were interested in the emotional and/or conceptual side of things and were obsessed with images and the narrative implications of that imagery." You could argue that much of that imagery was drawn from the emotional and/or conceptual lives of hormone-high adolescent boys: breasts, asses, legs, raw meat, a torpedo straddled by a buxom woman, toothpaste coming out of a tube, puddles of white liquid, vomit, orbs, flying saucers, robots attacking or mating with each other. Rock in the '70s was still pretty much an arena for straight male fantasy, though Hipgnosis partner Peter Christopherson snuck in some homoeroticism with his tender photo of a bare-chested young man whittling a stick on the sleeve of Wishbone Ash's *New England*. At any rate, Hipgnosis seized its moment of creative freedom and ran with it, constructing miniature mythologies with a seemingly inexhaustible inventiveness; truly, no two of its covers looked alike.

What came before? Rock album covers of the 1950s and early '60s were largely posed portraits of the musicians responsible for what was on the record. Presumably you had already heard them on the radio or seen them on TV and knew what you were getting. The photograph on the jacket of Elvis Presley's 1956 debut long-player caught him in action, strumming a guitar and shaking his hips; after that most of his jackets framed dreamy but static headshots. You can see a shift occur a decade later, illustrated by a two-page spread in Johnny Morgan and Ben Wardle's new *The Art of the LP: Classic Album Covers 1955–1995*. On the left is *Rubber Soul*, from 1966, with its woody, tilted group photo of the Beatles—the drugs are just beginning to kick in. Opposite is *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, from 1967, with Peter Blake and Jann Haworth's fantasia of cutout celebrities and candy-colored costumes, a full-on trip. Andy Warhol's peel-off banana sleeve for *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, the ironic fake ads for baked beans and deodorant on *The Who Sell Out*, and the murky psychedelic paintings on Love's *Forever Changes* and Cream's *Disraeli Gears* appeared the same year. Chris Salewicz's *The Story of Island Records: Keep on Running* traces the history of a label that excelled at creating kicky, imaginative sleeves during this period: It doesn't get much freakier than the gaping pink mouth (am I gonna fall in?) on King Crimson's *In the Court of the Crimson King*. Even hairy old British folk rock got a makeover—the covers of Nick Drake's *Pink Moon*, with its sad-clown face and umbilical cheese ball, and Richard and Linda Thompson's *I Want to See the Bright Lights Tonight*, its title finger-traced on a foggy mirror like a last wish, have deeply melancholy undertones.

The conceptual games of Hipgnosis and like-minded design groups stretched across the following decade, evolving by the 1980s into the witty and beautiful covers of post-punk. Peter Saville's jacket for New Order's 1983 *Power, Corruption and Lies* reproduces a still life of a basket of roses by the nineteenth-century French artist Fantin-Latour, a lush, classical complement to the rich electronic music inside. A color-based code in the upper right-hand corner spells out the title and band name, decipherable with a key on the back; if you can figure out how it works, please don't hesitate to explain it to me. (Earlier this year, Saville's design was one of ten album covers, including the Clash's *London Calling* and Primal Scream's *Screamadelica*, chosen for commemoration on a set of first-class stamps in the UK. As tradition dictates, Queen Elizabeth's delicate profile resides in an upper corner of each stamp, with the result that she appears to look upon the visual racket a bit sniffily.) At the 4AD label, Vaughan Oliver's design team created misty, enigmatic covers for the misty, enigmatic Cocteau Twins and raunchy ones for the Pixies (boldly naked breasts on *Surfer Rosa*) and the Breeders (some kind of phallic vegetable matter on *Pod*). Even standard musician portraits were transformed into arty, attention-grabbing images. On the jacket of *Living My Life*, the outline of Grace Jones's head is cropped with straight lines and right angles, and a strip of what looks like white tape covers her left eyebrow. A statement about celebrity? fashion? race? No statement at all? On *Three Imaginary Boys*, a lamp, a refrigerator, and a vacuum stand in for the members of the Cure.

Spencer Drate and Judith Salavetz's nifty *Five Hundred 45s: A Graphic History of the Seven-Inch Record* maps a parallel universe where all of the above happened, only slightly askew. With its flimsy, Woolworth's-ready aura, the paper single sleeve was the shaggy kid sibling of the long-player cover; it wasn't going to get the same exposure, so it didn't have to try as hard. Early seven-inches were slapped together with block letters and posed band shots; later, the designs were frequently composed from recycled album art. Punk singles were photocopied messes or gross-





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out comics. But every so often, something beautiful or imaginative snuck in. The illustrations in *Five Hundred 45s* are to scale, one to a page, and the editors liven things up by cleverly pairing sleeves with similar graphic concepts, such as Covers with Airplanes on Them.

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After Michael Jackson died, it became a bit of folk wisdom that the era when everyone in the world could recognize the same pop hit was officially finished. Lady Gaga came along and mooted all that, but the same claim might be more accurately made of pop and rock album covers. Morgan and Wardle's book has a cutoff point of 1995. That date pretty much marks the end—for the culture at large; I exclude collectors and revivalists—of the vinyl record as a cherished artifact, a portable package of music but also a piece of visual art, not unlike a print or a small painting, that you could call your own. The decline may have begun as far back as 1981, with the launch of MTV; before that, if you wanted to see what your favorite musicians looked like, you were pretty much stuck with a record jacket, a few pictures in *Rolling Stone*, maybe an appearance on *American Bandstand*. As celebrity images, both still and moving, proliferated, album art became just one of many ways for bands to convey a visual idea of what their music sounded like.

Inventive covers are still produced by indie and major labels alike. For her last studio album, *Volta*, Björk dressed up in a rainbow-colored outfit shaped like a bird, or maybe a bottle, perhaps a gourd, with big blue feet. Coldplay's *A Rush of Blood to the Head* features a fibrous-looking computer-generated drawing of the lower half of a head. Neither cover is aesthetically appealing, and that's the point—these graphics convey the fact that the music will be nontraditional, maybe even difficult (Coldplay, only slightly). The new Arcade Fire album is available in a whopping eight different sleeves, each with a muted photocollage of a car and some generic suburban houses. Still, it's safe to say that few present-day album covers will ever be as ubiquitous, as talismanic, as those early designs for the Beatles, the Who, and the Rolling Stones. I understand that this has to do with the musical culture splintering into countless styles and tastes and listening habits, rather than the quality of the work. And yet isn't there something singularly beautiful about the jacket of *Hejira*? Doesn't the artwork for *Sgt. Pepper* have qualities that no other cover has been able to repeat?

Meanwhile, as I write this, half of the top twenty albums—or, rather, album-length downloads—on the *Billboard* chart are fronted by photographic portraits of the artists. (Justin Bieber, that means you.) You can't cram much detail onto an iPod screen, but a pretty face is clear enough. We've come full circle, back to the less than memorable portrait covers of the 1950s. The other day, I was talking to an acquaintance who oversees the art department of a major music label. I told him that, as familiar as I was with the look of Lady Gaga—Lady Gaga covered in bubbles, Lady Gaga in the bathtub with manga eyes—I couldn't call to mind the cover of her album *The Fame Monster*. Morgan and Wardle write that "an album provides a record, and frequently an artist, with a visual identity," but the hit songs from *The Fame Monster*, "Telephone" and "Bad Romance," have effortlessly transcended the parcel they came wrapped in. My friend, who designs album art for a living, burst out laughing at my admission. "I don't know why I'm laughing," he said. "I should be crying."

Peter Terzian is the editor of Heavy Rotation: Twenty Writers on the Albums That Changed Their Lives (Harper Perennial, 2009) and the author of a blog called Earworms (peterterzian.wordpress.com).

1 COMMENT CONNECT PERMALINK

snatra.guy
September 23, 2010
1:41 pm

Great article. With the advent of the CD, I mourned the loss of album art. As exciting as it was to pick up a new LP and its new tunes back in the day, it was just as exciting to pore over the album art and the album notes. For hours! And with Hipgnosis you always knew you were going to get something new and cool. I would suggest that one of the reasons (besides sound quality issues) that the LP is making a comeback is a desire to experience album art once again. Lets hope it returns.

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