



WILLIAM F. EISNER MUSEUM OF ADVERTISING & DESIGN

## The Art of the Album Cover Educators Packet

<http://www.eisnermuseum.org/educators/index.shtm>

### CONCEPT:

In 1939, at the age of 23, graphic designer Alex Steinweiss revolutionized the way records were packaged and marketed. He achieved this as the first art director for the recently formed Columbia Records. Steinweiss saw a creative opportunity in the company's packaging for its 78-rpm shellac records. The plain cardboard covers traditionally displayed only the title of the work and the artist. "They were so drab, so unattractive," says Steinweiss, "I convinced the executives to let me design a few." For what he saw as 12-inch by 12-inch canvasses, he envisioned original works of art to project the beauty of the music inside. In 1947 Steinweiss invented a paperboard jacket that both protected the vinyl records from scratches as well as allowed a design to be printed on the cover of the record. His paperboard jacket design became the standard for the industry for nearly 50 years. The modern album cover was born.

As time went on, the album cover developed into a multitude of styles, each identified with a different type of music. The album covers of the 50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s are a good cultural barometer, a glimpse into the social climate of the period. One album generally regarded as a major turning point in the world of album cover design was The Beatles' *Sergeant Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967). Artists like The Beatles gained enough clout to dictate the content of their covers. By the late sixties, covers became more of a visual representation of how musicians viewed their music. In combination with the increased use of posters to decorate interiors, album cover art became some of the most prolifically used and widely recognized images of the past thirty years. A good example of this is the poster created by Milton Glaser in 1967 for Bob Dylan as an insert in his *Greatest Hits Album*.

During the seventies and eighties, musicians' creative control over covers continued. Increasingly the musician's image was created by album art rather than simply portrayed by the album cover. Musicians saw their images as a brand and identified themselves with a chosen look. The album cover art of these groups had to reflect the unique character of their stage identities. Essentially the album cover became a tangible, visual equivalent of the music and performance.

The transition from vinyl record albums to compact discs is described as the demise of the record album. This process occurred over a number of years in the 1980s. Although the art of album covers wasn't eliminated, it was significantly diminished. As a result of

the higher quality of sound and the extended lengths of music on compact discs, vinyl is now nearly obsolete.

Within the past ten years, designers dealt with the compact disc cover in a variety of ways. Some designers included a booklet featuring lyrics or biographical information about the musician in the context of the cover art. Other groups or designers enclosed large fold out images that may not be seen in their entirety in the compact disc case.

## **VOCABULARY**

78

45

331/3

R.P.M. (Revolutions Per Minute)

LP (Long Play)

Vinyl

Record Sleeve

Record Jacket

Steinweiss Scrawl

Shellac

Lithograph

## **CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS**

The following are suggestions for educators to integrate concepts in this exhibition into curricula. The ideas are general and meant to be starting points for teachers.

### **VISUAL ARTS**

With the introduction of the compact disc the album cover shrunk to 14 percent of its former size as a record cover. Find two different sizes of paper—one the size of a compact disc and another the size of a record. Then design two album covers, one on the compact disc size piece of paper and one on the record size. How did the size of the drawings affect how it was created and perceived?

The original album covers that Steinweiss designed were limited to a five color lithographic printing process. This contributed to a unique Steinweiss aesthetic. Draw your own album cover limit yourself to only five colors.

### **MATHEMATICS**

Most LP records have two thirds of the amount of music of the average compact disc. If your favorite compact disc has 18 tracks on it, how many songs will fit on each side of a vinyl LP?

### **CREATIVE WRITING**

Musicians during the Sixties, including Alex Steinweiss, saw album covers as visual representations of the music contained inside. Look at the cover of an album you have never heard before. Then write a short story about what the album says to you. Don't be afraid to associate adjectives that the cover conjures up for you. Then listen to the music and see if it is anything like your story.

### **ART HISTORY (High School Level)**

Before Steinweiss and the invention of the album cover, music and art had an interesting relationship. Famous painter Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) longed to achieve a

method of painting that was non-representational. He compared this to the way music does not attempt to sound like things we see in the real world. Why then should a painting have to look like the real world? Study Kandinsky and the role music played in his development of abstract art.

### **HISTORY**

Prepare a lesson on the Woodstock Music Festival of 1969. Compare the intertwining relationships between music, radical politics and the counter culture. Contrast this with the concurrent role of the "Silent Majority".

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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