Reid Miles:

The Graphic Art of Blue Note Records

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A Jewish German immigrant named Albert Lion started Blue Note Records in 1939 (Cook 10). He wanted simply to capture the sounds of jazz that he liked. In the 30's jazz enjoyed a decade of popular interest that it never quite regained. Its popularity in American culture worked in sync with the monolithic recording companies of the time. The downside to this being that a style in which musical freedom was an essential aspect became a monolithic industry of its own rite. Popular jazz artists were regularly brought into studios to work through innumerable jazz standards, and only occasionally created a hit (2).

Lion's contribution to jazz history stemmed from his unique perspective on the genre. Being raised in Germany, Lion rarely got the chance to listen to this new music that was growing in popularity. He spent much of his young life searching for opportunities to obtain jazz records from America. Contrary to the contemporary attitude, he prized jazz music for its musical freedom and viewed it as a form of high art, rather than entertainment. His first recording session was notably relaxed (perhaps due to the scotch) and an inexperienced Lion essentially allowed the two musicians present to take the lead in the recording (8). Lion would improve his production skills[1] as time went on, but his respect for the art and artist remained constant and was a crucial part of Blue Note's identity moving forward.

Blue Note's own early flyers perhaps sum up this attitude the best:

> Blue Note records are designed simply to serve the uncompromising expression of hot jazz and swing, in general. Any particular style of playing which represents an authentic way of musical feeling is genuine expression. By virtue of its significance in place, time and circumstance, it possesses its own tradition, artistic standards, and audience that keeps it alive. Hot jazz, therefore, is expression and communication, a musical and social manifestation, and Blue Note Records are concerned with identifying its impulse, not its sensational and commercial adornments[2] (12).

Blue Note Records started slowly and frequently traded blows with other labels over artist's contracts, but their dedication to recording talented artists and giving them enough room to explore would

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[1] As well as employ the talented Rudy Van Gelder as a producer, who would go on to be considered one of the greats. That falls outside of this paper's purview, however.

[2] Cook notes that idealism in musical marketing was widespread at this time, so take this with an appropriate amount of skepticism.

inevitably pay off. They recorded sessions with many of the best jazz musicians of any given period. Until roughly the 1950's, Blue Note would produce notable music and distribute it in a method similar to the rest of the industry, which is to say very functionally. Record jackets were "simple variations of typography." (49)

Blue Note adopted the art of album cover design earlier than most, and designed notable album art before this paper's eponymous subject arrived. Three graphic designers of note began paving a path of interestingly designed covers for Blue Note's catalogue, Gil Mellé, John Hermansader, and Paul Bacon. Each made cover art that employed typography and strong design with photography from Frank Wolff (50). While ahead of the curve, in a relative sense, these early covers still had a wild west design sense to them, with wildly inconsistent styles. Blue Note's early designs were a playground for Bauhaus and modern design to be combined with Wolff's photography. Some of these still look impressive and innovative, and others contain the telltale design cliches of the atomic era.

(a) Gil Mellé Quintet with Don Butterfield -
5 Impressions of Color

(b) Urbie Green Septet - *New Faces - New Sounds*

Figure 1: Two covers by Gil Mellé

Contrasted here in figure 1 are two covers designed by Gil Mellé. Both have a similar color scheme, but figure 1b's less restrained approach highlights all the (now) dated design attitudes of the time. Atomic era

modernism certainly has its fans, but I can't help but associate it with greasy diners, naïve futurism, propaganda, and repressive post-war attitudes. The difficulty making out the letter-forms over the striped background aren't doing it any favors either. Figure 1a feels modern, but still contains the stylistic inconsistencies referenced earlier. The text in particular is all over the place in both works, in a style that both seems appropriate to jazz's improvisational nature, but also calls to mind early industrial woodblock printed posters and the later edgy designs of David Carson[3].

The Blue Note catalogue has examples both more egregious and more tasteful, however the crucial point was that Wolff's photography served as the only stylistic constant. It often captured artists in a natural, studio setting with candor and skill, but it then filtered through the taste of the graphic designer using it[4].

In 1955, Wolff hired a man named Reid Miles to design covers for some upcoming 12" records Blue Note was releasing (88). Reid was working at *Esquire* at the time, and ironically preferred classical music to jazz. Despite this, Miles would go on to design some of the most iconic album art of all time in the genre. His first few pieces were fairly straightforward, but his first eye catching piece was a Thelonious Monk album, seen in figure 2.

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[3]Which, in the interests of authenticity, I must confess to find tacky.

[4]It should be noted that despite this criticism, Hermansader and Bacon in particular were both very talented in their own right, and made the beginning contributions to Blue Note's style which Miles went on to develop.
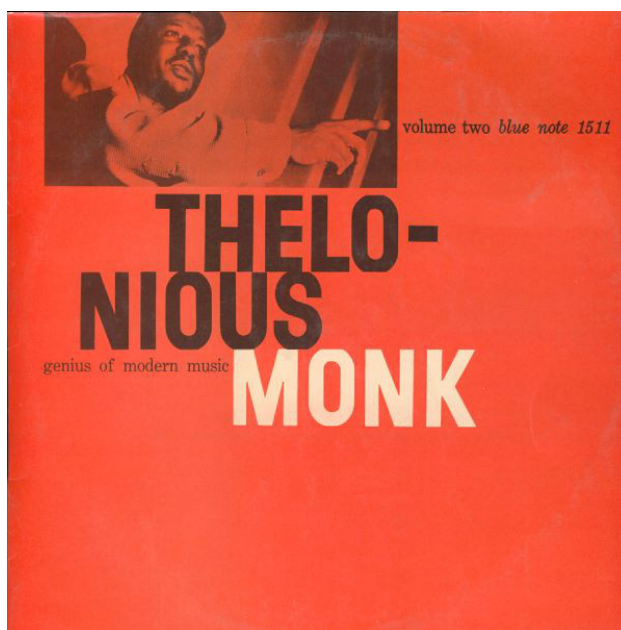
Figure 2: Thelonious Monk - *Genius Of Modern Music Volume 2*

Miles' work was both striking and simple. He uses his text thoughtfully, employing serif typefaces for the smaller text, italics to identify to record's catalog number, and sans-serif for the larger display type. This approach feels almost like a given for those who have studied design in the last half-century, but as evidenced by figure 1, this was not ubiquitous. The splitting and contrasting coloring of the artist's name seems almost playful. The text becomes central to the design, and yet despite that, Miles also begins what will become a hallmark in his work: playing off of Wolff's photography in his own design. In later works, Miles tries this in different ways, but the image of Thelonious Monk pointing to the album's informational text showcases the detail and care that Miles used to create designs that accentuated the talent involved at all levels.

Its hard to codify the exact style of Reid Miles, but to quote Justice Stewart, "I know it when I see it." Miles' album art employed many different typefaces, but there was always an attention to detail and visual connection to the rest of the design. He used many varying color schemes, but subtle accenting and tinting was always preferred to distracting busyness. Sometimes he would show restraint and let Wolff's pictures do the talking, and sometimes he would eschew photography altogether. More than any one technique, Miles' skill lied in his ability to balance each element of the design expertly (Charchar). They

were unquestioningly modern, and despite each album cover's uniqueness, retained a distinct visual style across the label's discography.
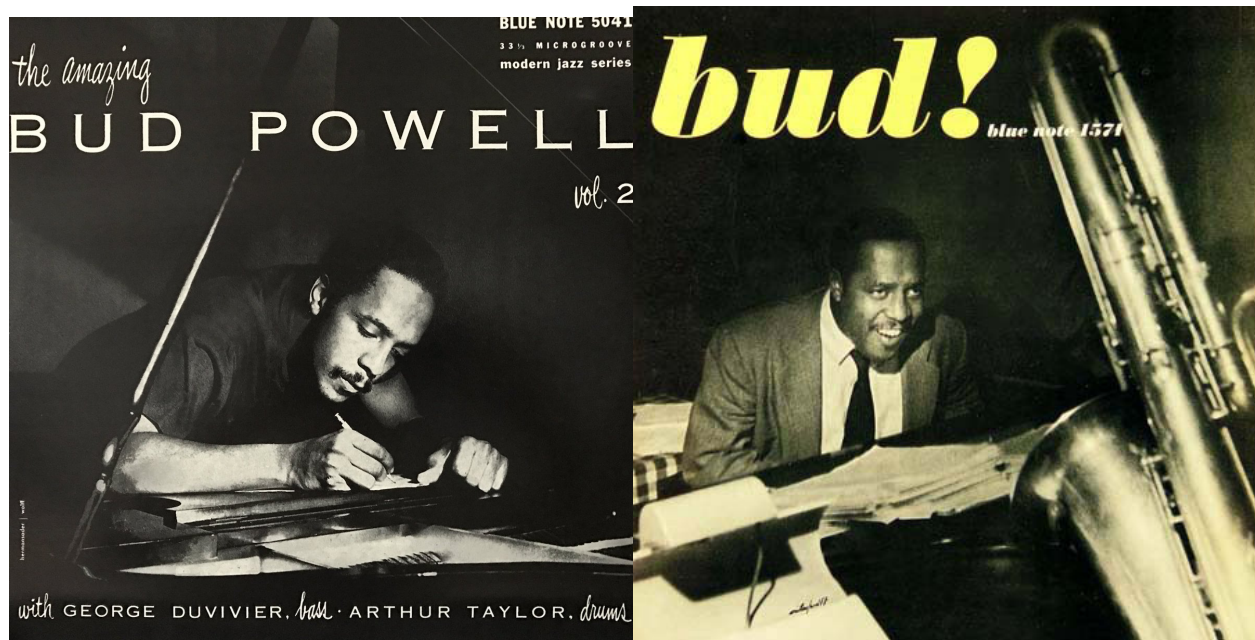
(a) Bud Powell - *The Amazing Bud Powell (Vol. 2)*   (b) Bud Powell - *Bud! The Amazing Bud Powell (Vol. 3)*

Figure 3: Two album covers for Bud Powell, the first designed by Hermansader, the second by Miles.

His artwork for Bud Powell's *Bud!* in figure 3b utilizes minimal, modern aesthetics in its design. The typeface has both modern, geometric serifs on top, giant slab-like vertical strokes contrasted with thin horizontal strokes, and rounded bottoms that lend a sense of modern friendliness. The exclamation point itself is the cherry on top, centered horizontally and rounded to the extreme, as if to say "no room for squares[5]." The use of a single color combined with white text gives a distinctive visual identity to the cover, in one of the simplest ways possible. In this cover, the candid photography of Wolff is the central focus of the design, and Miles obviously decided to use a light touch to preserve its integrity.

When compared to the design by Hermansader for Bud Powell's previous album in figure 3a, the progress is self-evident. Only three years apart, these two albums were nonetheless separated by a quantum leap in design. Hermansader's design still employs the cursive type that was omnipresent in the era[6], combined with a relatively unremarkable typeface relying heavily on the thin, uniform, and geometric

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[5]See figure 4b

[6]To employ that damned type on a jazz record I count as the closest a graphic designer can get to malpractice.

capitals. The most telling difference, however, is the lack of color. Miles didn't always use as much color as he did here, but even his most muted designs would employ color for accenting or at least attempt making up for it through design. Wolff's photography is as intimate as ever, but Hermansader essentially relies upon it to carry the entire design. Cook excellently characterizes this choice as "tak[ing] the line of least resistance" (Cook 88). Both are products of the modern design era, but Miles' shows more refinement, both by removing unnecessary clutter from the design, and by being bold enough to add his own style to the album.

(a) Hank Mobley - *Hank Mobley and His All Stars*   (b) Hank Mobley - *No Room For Squares*

Figure 4: Two of Miles' designs for Hank Mobley

Figure 4a illustrates an excellent contrast in how Miles approached his designs. Despite being one of the only designs Miles made without color, the difference from 3a is still glaring. Busy text is left out, and even without color, the viewer figures out everything they need to know within their first glance. More than that, Miles continues his playful placement of text with the album title prominently shown on the photographed sheet music, not just focusing on Wolff's photography, but actually building off of it.

Figure 4b shows a different design by Miles for Hank Mobley. It uses a light orange tint to contrast with the pink text of the title. The balance of text-to-design leans more towards text than most of the

examples so far, but Miles retains the hallmark elements of his design, playing with the photography[7] and title name by putting it into a square, and using color to indicate hierarchy of the presented information.

Miles also designed many albums without photographic covers. They show how much Miles was capable of when working with a blank canvas.

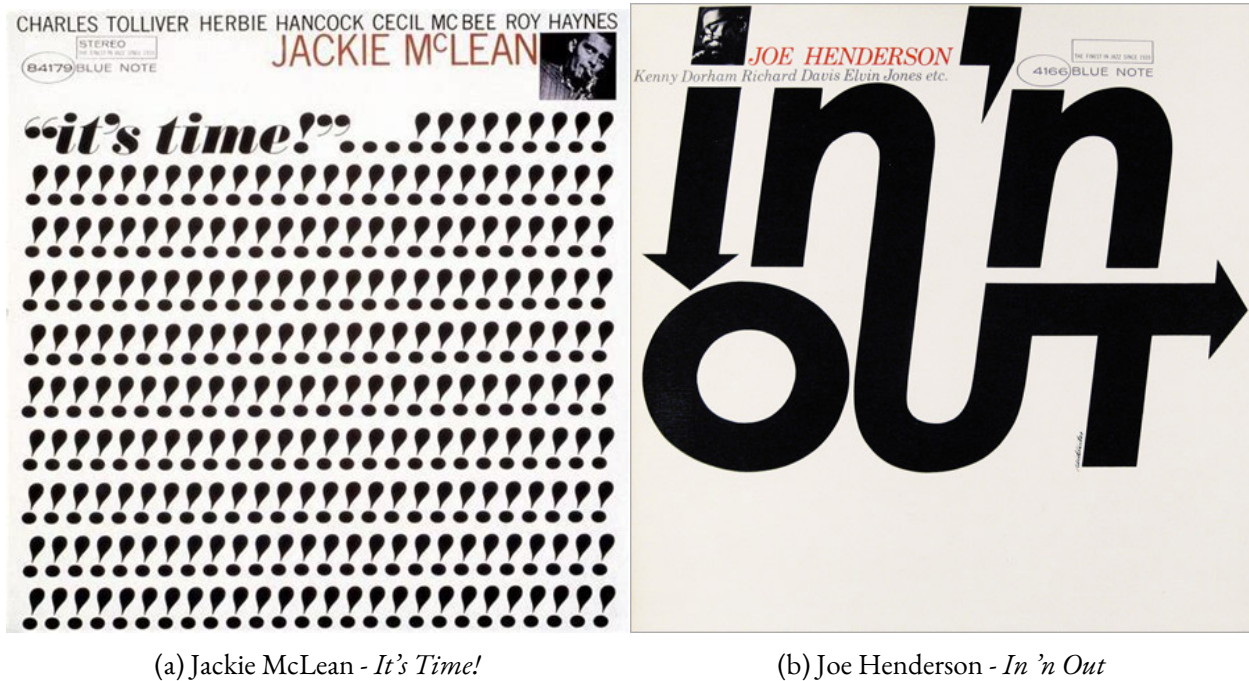(a) Jackie McLean - *It's Time!*   (b) Joe Henderson - *In 'n Out*

Figure 5: Two of Miles' primarily typographic designs

In figure 5, two of Miles' albums are shown, both of which have only a small picture of the artist, in the top corner of the design. The artists' names are highlighted with warm toned type, the supplementary information is displayed in a gray that hierarchically distinguishes it from the main event, and the design itself consists almost entirely of black typography on a light background. Yet despite taking a nearly identical approach towards these albums, the designs are radically different. The blown out repetition of figure 5a's exclamation points (in the same style as figure 3b) mimics the effect of an extended staccato repetition in visual form. As might be expected, the album starts with a trumpet playing at breakneck speed. In contrast, *In 'n Out*'s typography builds off of the theme of its title, using the arrows integrated into the letters to make a design that illustrates the motion implied by the title, and serves as a visual preview of Henderson's more continuous musical style.

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[7] The circle is actually part of the picture, taken at a New York metro station (Caswell).

One of the biggest praises commonly directed towards Miles' design is that he could make an album cover *look* like jazz. It's hard to look at these covers without making synesthetic connections between the design and the content within. His designs could be deceptively simple[8]. The designs often contained a tasteful asymmetry. The letters or words had a lilting, rhythmic layout that reflected the unpredictable yet musically proficient style of jazz.

These are frankly some of my favorite of Miles' catalog. They both have a simple quality to them. Charchar notes that his designs fulfill the timeless critique of modernism that a "kid could do that[9]", but clearly benefit from Miles sense of style[10].

(a) Lee Morgan - *The Sidewinder*   (b) Lee Morgan - *The Rumproller*

Figure 6: Two of Miles' designs for Lee Morgan

To contrast once again, we have figure 6, showing two pieces by Miles for Lee Morgan, *The Sidewinder* and *The Rumproller*. The first was released in 1964, and became Morgan's most acclaimed work. It expertly balanced the hard-bop jazz sound with a danceable sensibility that could appeal to both the seasoned jazz listener and someone unfamiliar. The design seen in figure 6 was very simple, but still had a clear visual style in line with everything seen so far: accented artist name, informational hierarchy, and

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[8]It's all about the text he *doesn't* use

[9]A high compliment of their straightforward design in my opinion

[10]We have a few more years before the kindergartners replace us.

Wolff's photography. The album art again calls the title into mind through the design by grouping everything into one side, leaving roughly a third of the piece as negative space on the bottom. It looks good, but figure 6b's design provides a much more intriguing comparison.

The Sidewinder beat this album in popularity, but ç'est la vie. *The Rumproller* came out in 1966, and sounds like a classic 60's soundtrack. Joe Henderson's funky saxophone performance over Ronnie Mathews' organ-like piano on the first track creates an atmosphere that I would characterize as acid trip elevator music. Miles' design embraces this, and in a move from his earlier 50's work, manages to create an album cover that is somehow both implacably and undeniably psychedelic without giving in to some of the era's tropes that were destined to age like milk[11]. The text is warped beyond recognition, so much so that it's repeated for legibility's sake in the corner. The asymmetry of the initial word, "the," being moved to the right to mirror the name "Lee" somehow visually evokes the idea of a rumproller[12]. On top of all of that, this presents a prime example of how Miles' balanced at least three different visual identities without dropping the ball: his classic style, which at this point was synonymous with Blue Note's own visual identity, a visual callback to *The Sidewinder*, and visually depicting Morgan's embrace of the contemporary, psychedelic sound.

Reid Miles departed Blue Note Records shortly after founder Alfred Lion's own retirement in 1967 (Read). His next job involved creating advertisements mimicking Norman Rockwell for Coca-Cola, and making a substantial million dollars a year. His lasting contribution, however, was the catalog of clean, expertly designed jazz covers showcasing the best modernism has to offer. For those of us interested in graphic design, he shows a design approach that integrated all the disparate elements involved in the making of a jazz record into a cohesive piece of art that represented its subject faithfully, respectfully, distinctly, simply, and above all beautifully. Designers emulated his work across genres, and articulating his influence would require an entirely new paper[13].

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[11]Once again, there are fans of this era's aesthetic, found both in those who lived through it, and in younger generations who wished they did. I am neither.

[12]Whose definition I am in the dark on, but it makes me think of a drummer showing off a flashy polyrhythmic drum roll, tricking the untrained listener into thinking that the band is off beat before recognizing that they are, in fact, playing on a beat which the listener themselves were unaware of.

[13]I didn't even touch on the designer which he occasionally hired to help him in the 50's, a young up-and-comer by the name of Andy Warhol. Suffice it to say, whether consciously realized by the average joe, Reid Miles' influence is vast and labyrinthian.

Works Cited

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