

Title:

Alex Steinweiss - Creator Of Album Cover Art

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Summary:

At age 23, the "Godfather" of album cover art, Alex Steinweiss accepted a job to design promotional materials for Columbia Records. What would happen next would revolutionize the music industry, specifically vinyl records, when he invented the illustrated album cover. A rather obvious, but brilliant, idea was to create a titillating graphic package that would, not only protect the record, but advertise the artist and the music contained therein (prior to this, records were so...

Keywords:

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Article Body:

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"Records used to be relegated to the back of the stores that sold refrigerators and stoves. You'd go to the counter and ask for the title you wanted," recalled Steinweiss. "I needed to shake up the industry, we had to do something like European poster art to draw the attention of the buyer."

And "shake up the industry" is just what Steinweiss did. Starting in 1939 with his first covers, for a collection of Rodgers & Hart's Musical Hits, Columbia executives saw the sales of the illustrated albums skyrocket, including one by more than eight hundred percent. Soon after that 78 rpm albums were adorned with decorated covers and displayed in store windows.

A new medium was born, album cover art became the norm and attracted established artists and inspired many new artists to enter the arena. It allowed the record

company and the artist to promote a visual image and identity with the music.

So who was Alex Steinweiss? Let's explore his life in detail. Steinweiss grew up in Brooklyn's Brighton Beach area and he attended the Abraham Lincoln High School from 1930-1934 and that is where he started his graphic designing career. In a program taught by Leon Friend, Steinweiss and his classmates were known as the "Art Squad," designing school publications, posters and signs. When he was seventeen, Steinweiss' work was showcased in PM Magazine. He received a scholarship to Parsons School of Art and graduated in 1937. His first job was as an assistant to Joseph Binder, a position that lasted almost three years, before receiving a call about a new position at the newly formed Columbia Records. He designed all the covers for Columbia between 1939 and 1945, a period in which he developed and honed the graphic art of album cover design. In the period between 1945 to roughly 1950, he still did cover design for Columbia, but he was not the sole designer. He also began "freelancing" and began designing covers for other record companies.

As a freelance designer with such record labels as RCA, Decca, London and Everest, Steinweiss was considered peerless. Using his own unique format of blending eye-catching illustrations, vivid color schemes and playful typography, Steinweiss created album covers for such musical greats as Louis Armstrong, Bela Bartok, Count Basie, Leonard Bernstein, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, Kate Smith and many others.

His album covers are considered iconic and he designed them as miniature posters with a distinct personality for each cover. His signature font, the "Steinweiss Scrawl," first appeared around 1947 and his style and album cover design is synonymous with the Golden Age of Jazz, Classical and Popular music that was dominated by RCA, Columbia, Decca, Victor and London record labels.

In the 1950's, Steinweiss added photography to his album cover design palette. His use of strange, garnish colors, inventive lighting techniques and numerous visual puns and reference points only added to his unique style of cover design and has made him an icon in the music industry. By his own admission, Steinweiss claims to have designed more than 2,500 album covers.

His later work, from 1960 through around 1973, was working with the Decca and London record labels. It was during this period that he developed die-cut designs and collage. He retired to Sarasota, Florida around 1974 and remains semi-active, having designed at least one book cover and several CD covers as well as having designed liquor bottles, posters, pamphlets and titles for TV shows.

All of us owe a hearty thank you to Alex Steinweiss and his contributions to

album cover art and music. Can you imagine no art work accompanying a vinyl record? I can't, and it is a great thing that Alex Steinweiss couldn't either.