



Alex Steinweiss, centre, with editor Nina Wiener and co-authors Steven Heller and Kevin Reagan. (Photo courtesy TASCHEN.)

# THE COVER AS CANVAS

## Album art and its roots

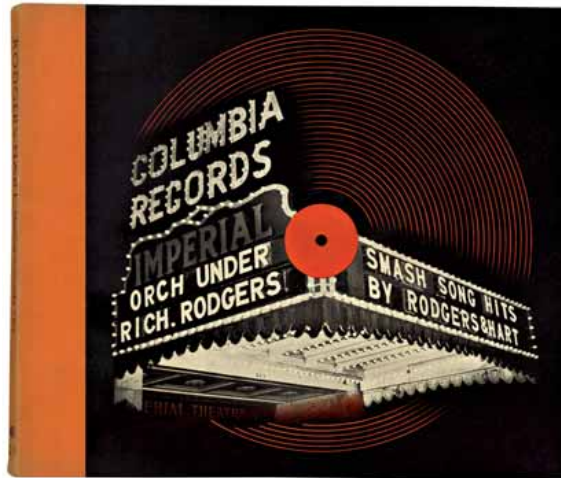
**Alex Steinweiss** may not have been the first to illustrate an album cover but, as **Larry Jaffee** reflects, he was certainly at the forefront of the art.

American artist Alex Steinweiss, who died on July 17 at 94, is widely credited with being 'the father of album graphics' during the second half of the 78-rpm record era and inventor of the LP jacket in 1948. His majestic illustrations adorned more than a thousand covers for the Columbia, Decca, London and Everest labels through the 1960s for a Who's Who of American popular music.

The artist roster includes Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, George and Ira Gershwin, Benny Goodman, Desi Arnaz, Billie Holiday, Paul Robeson, Leonard Bernstein, Dave Brubeck, and Igor Stravinsky, among numerous others. Steinweiss's cover for the 1949 Broadway score of *South Pacific* is still in print on Sony's current CD.

As the tale goes, a few months into his new job at Columbia in Bridgeport, Connecticut, Steinweiss convinced his bosses to let him illustrate a cover rather than have the plain 'tombstone' covers that had been typically used. Sales skyrocketed.

Steinweiss's own tastes were classical, but that didn't stop his first cover for Columbia in April 1940 from being Rodgers & Hart *Smash Song Hits*, for which he had a photograph taken of a



Steinweiss's first cover for Columbia

theatre marquee, which was then superimposed over a graphic rendering of a record's grooves, accentuated in

red. The release date of that album repeatedly has been stated in articles and books as 1939, but in reality that was the year Steinweiss was hired by Columbia as its first art director, initially focused on designing advertisements and other promotional material for the label.

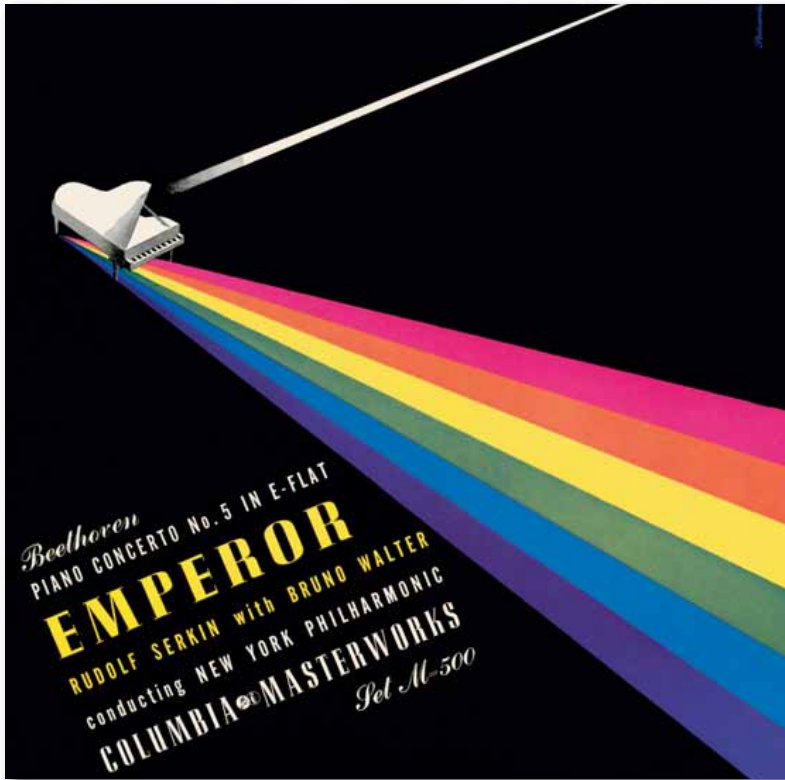
Apparently Steinweiss's anointment as inventor of the modern album cover has been somewhat exaggerated, even though that was how he was described both in his *New York Times* obituary and the title of a massive coffee-table book published last year by Taschen.

Michael Biel, a retired academic who's also an avid 78 collector, gave a convincing presentation last year in New Orleans at the annual convention of the Association for Recorded Sound Collections (ARSC), debunking the notion that Steinweiss alone was the first to put graphics on a record cover. Biel cited more than 100 illustrated covers issued as early as 1909 (*Carmen* by German Grammophon), and Victor, Brunswick and Decca from the late 1920s to late 1930s put them out as a regular practice.

Biel tells *Digital2Disc* he was not trying to dismiss Steinweiss's accomplishments or stature as a great artist. "He just wasn't the first." Biel spent four months researching pre-Steinweiss releases in preparation of his ARSC presentation. "It was so easy finding them," says the academic, who recently retired from Morehead State University in Kentucky. He checked the monthly album release indexes from Decca and Victor against the actual pre-Steinweiss records owned in private collections of fellow 78 record collectors and at the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center.

Graphics guru Steven Heller, who wrote the *Times* obituary (and worked at the newspaper until recently for 33 years as an art director), has championed Steinweiss for several decades. He wrote the essays for the Taschen book and a trade paperback about Steinweiss, *For The Record*, published by Chronicle in 2000. Familiar with Biel's research, Heller stands by his assertion of Steinweiss being the "inventor," though does concede: "Indeed there are illustrated covers prior to Steinweiss, but they are the evolutionary stages leading up to a revolutionary standard – what I call the modern record cover by a brand-name artist. "Steinweiss did what no company or individual did before him. He created the poster cover – a brand that distinguished Columbia from any other record. He created and invented the standard."

Heller, who co-chairs the MFA Designer as Author Department at the School of Visual Arts in New York, asks



This Steinweiss cover is said to have inspired Pink Floyd's Dark Side of the Moon artwork

rhetorically, "If it wasn't Steinweiss, who was the inventor?"

Apparently prior to Steinweiss, artists did not take credit for their covers, and they were fairly anonymous. A script font with Steinweiss's name was placed in a corner of each cover he designed. It's an example of how Steinweiss took pride in his work, which he viewed no differently from a painting. The cover was his canvas. For labels other than Columbia, Steinweiss sometimes used the pseudonym 'Piedra Blanca.'

Confirmation that Columbia and Steinweiss weren't first in terms of illustrated covers is the March 9, 1952 *New York Times* article titled 'Outside The Disk' which stated that "most of the companies acknowledge Victor as pioneer." And then there's the microfilm of the December 25, 1944 *Newsweek* article 'Covers Up' (cited by Heller in the bibliographies for the Taschen and Chronicle books). "Way back in 1926, Victor put out an illustrated Mother's Day release.... Covers continued plain and dull until 1934 when Decca put single-disked nursery rhymes into gayly [sic] drawn paper wraps. But packaging as we know today really began seriously in 1938. At the time, Victor had a display poster which portrayed Brahms walking in the woods near Vienna.

"As an experiment this illustration was put on the album cover of the Decca

cent Victor knew it had something. Decca, in the meantime, had already produced some French folk songs with a colorful blue, white and red checkerboard cover. Some two years later Columbia followed with an illustrated set of Rodgers and Hart musical-comedy hits and a Carlos Chavez album of Mexican music."

The *Newsweek* article goes on to state that cover illustrators for Victor included "such well known commercial artists" as HM Rundell and Fran Decker, as well as Russian Boris Artzybasheff, and notes Steinweiss's "brilliantly executed stylized drawings" for Columbia.

Incidentally, Steinweiss idolized Artzybasheff, one of the many illustrators from the old country who inspired him to know what he was going to do with life when he was getting trained at Abraham Lincoln High School in Brooklyn, after which he won a three-year scholarship to the Parsons School of Design. Steinweiss briefly quit college because he felt he knew everything, and he sought a job with Artzybasheff, who urged him to go back to college. Steinweiss graduated in 1937, and then apprenticed for nearly three years with poster designer Joseph Binder, who had recently emigrated from Vienna. Then the Columbia Records job came up.

Lincoln was a "hotbed" of graphic talent, comments John Berg, an art



Steinweiss was considered, albeit inaccurately, the inventor of the modern album cover



Steinweiss conceived his covers with the music in mind

Cooper Union graduate responsible for such iconic covers as Bruce Springsteen's *Born to Run* and putting a psychedelic Milton Glaser poster in Bob Dylan's *Greatest Hits*. In the mid-1950s Berg started collecting 78s for their picturesque covers even though his turntable only played 33-rpm LPs and 45-rpm singles. He detected a pattern: Steinweiss was responsible for Berg's favourite sleeves.

Berg, now 79 years old and living on the East End of New York's Long Island, remembers specifically buying Beethoven's Fifth Symphony for its Steinweiss cover. "The graphics were so beautiful." Once Berg made it to Columbia in the autumn of 1961, he was surprised that no one there had ever heard of Steinweiss. "He was old news."

Like Berg before him, Grammy-winning Julian Alexander, an art director for rappers Eminem and 50 Cent, among others, also started picking up Steinweiss-drawn 78s for their beauty without knowing who was responsible, and says he thinks he owes his livelihood to Steinweiss.

Setting the bar in terms of cover aesthetics, Steinweiss conceived his covers with the music in mind. And he could be sublimely political, as he was with a 1942 release titled *Boogie Woogie*, with a large black hand and a large white hand leaping over a piano

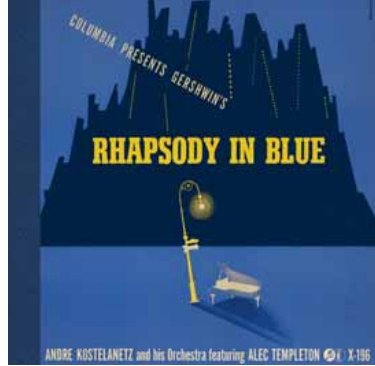
put on the album cover of the Bruno Walter version of the Brahms First Symphony. When sales jumped 40 per

cent, comments John Berg, an art director at Columbia from 1962 to 1985, and no packaging slouch himself, a

talented musician looming over a piano, meanwhile the music inside featured talented musicians of both races, Count



## COVERING CONTENT



Basie and Harry James Trio, among them.

Steinweiss called what he did "painting music". In 1947 he was profiled by American Artist magazine, and explained his work. "An album cover is designed, not only to be a pretty picture or an artist's personal conception of what the music is about, but rather by its simple, direct design and bold use of color. It is regarded at once as a powerful poster as well as an attractive package. No attempt is made to separate the title from the words, the name of the artist, etc. from the design as a whole. The copy or lettering is an integral part of that practice. The design elements are arranged in a simple dynamic style and are chosen for their ability to convey to the onlooker enough about the nature of the music to arouse in him a longing to perhaps listen to one record."

In 1948 Columbia President Ted Wallerstein, who hired Steinweiss in 1939, turned to him to design a packaging system for the then new LP. He came up with the folded cardboard, taped on the top and bottom, which became the industry standard for the following four decades - and still today to some extent considering vinyl's recent renaissance. But as a consultant, Steinweiss was forced to assign his patent rights over to Columbia, which he left in 1954 after a corporate shakeup. He sold his trademark script lettering, the Steinweiss scrawl, to a font company

in the mid-1950s. After pretty much leaving the music business in the 1960s, Steinweiss did graphics for various companies, and concentrated on painting and ceramics.

In a 2001 phone interview, he explained the goal of his covers was to sell the music. He told me how in the 1940s he would observe how people looked through record store bins. Subsequently, he began to put higher up the text listing performer, composer and music.

In 2003 *Medialine* magazine established a media packaging competition, called the 'Alex Awards' in Steinweiss's honour. He was touched by the correlation between what he did more than six decades ago for 78s, and CDs, DVDs and videogames in the 21st century. Although he won numerous graphic arts awards from the likes of the Art Directors Club and AIGA, Steinweiss felt slighted that he never won a Grammy or any kind of recognition from the National Association of Recording Arts & Sciences. At the first 'Alex Awards' in 2003 in Universal City, California, he gladly accepted a Lifetime Achievement Award. It was presented by Kevin Reagan, the packaging conference's keynote, Madonna's former director and winner of best packaging Grammy for three of the previous five years.

Despite the half-century difference in their ages, Alex and Kevin became

kindred spirits. Reagan spent the next six years getting the Taschen monograph published. As a precursor to the book, Reagan also oversaw a Robert Berman Gallery exhibition in January 2007 featuring 50 of Steinweiss's original cover designs, some of which were reproduced as slicks and sold for \$500. Berman says the show was "very well received," and an original Steinweiss painting sold for \$7,000.

Leslie Steinweiss, Alex's son who is in the jewellery business, but composes music as a hobby, says that "at some point we might offer the original album art collection for sale," and he's planning to make an inventory of his father's massive body of work. Music runs in the family: Alex's grandson (and Leslie's son) Homer Steinweiss plays drums with Brooklyn's Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings, who backed up Amy Winehouse on *Back to Black*. **D2D** [www.alexsteinweiss.com](http://www.alexsteinweiss.com) [www.arsc-audio.org/conference/audio2010/index.html](http://www.arsc-audio.org/conference/audio2010/index.html)



Larry Jaffee is a New York based freelance writer who has written about optical media for several years. He has also been published in the *New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, *Billboard*, *Hollywood Reporter*, and *Vibe*, and currently writes about music for *The Audiophile Voice*.



