

long life graphics

by Chris

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“THEY’RE CONVENIENT AND EASY TO HANDLE. With the long-playing record you get what you want to hear, when you want to hear it. Everybody’s familiar with records, too. And you can go anywhere with them because they’re light and don’t take up space.

THEY’RE ATTRACTIVE, INFORMATIVE AND EASY TO STORE. Record albums are never out of place. Because of the aesthetics appeal of the jacket design they’re beautifully at home in any living room or library. They’ve also got important information on the backs – about the artists, about the performances or about the program. And because they’re flat and not bulky, you can store hundreds in a minimum of space and still see every title.”

These notes from a Columbia Records inner sleeve from 1958 emphasize how, even at this early stage in the history of the LP, the aesthetic appeal of record covers were being pushed as a marketable aspect of the format. Truth be told seeing record covers up on a wall is how they were originally displayed in shop windows, in-store displays and throughout the specialist sections of the large department stores where recorded music could be bought. The format’s inherent ‘point-of-sale’ graphic quality was quickly exploited and the fact that the covers’ prime function was to protect a delicate information storage system that when purchased, though not a huge investment in terms of cost, was a form of emotional investment similar to books. We do not buy a book, read it, then throw it away as we might consume a box of chocolates. As protection for its musical contents the record cover could be almost guaranteed to take its place amongst other record covers in people’s homes. It was at its happiest in a collective environment, surrounded by its mates, and once established as a collection the likelihood would be that the covers would be around for some time, surviving in the home environment long after many other examples of packaging graphics have been assigned to the rubbish bin.

The likelihood of the records exhibited here all being in the same

domestic collection is fairly remote. A wide range of genres is covered, and the musical content would test the most catholic of tastes. But seen together (both the New Zealand and United Kingdom collections) as a purely visual experience, the sheer range of design decisions made to create the covers is surprising. To attempt to reveal social patterns, cultural signifiers or profound insights into the contemporary world from what is displayed here would probably be foolish. Lets face it, record covers are not really that important, a small sliver of fetishistic memorabilia from a much bigger cake. That they help sell the music inside the grooves is enough. If they look good even better.

Unlike some examples of graphic design, (packaging, stamps or magazines to name a few) seeing a whole bunch of record covers up on a gallery wall makes a kind of sense. Instead of being compromised by the impact of extensive white space, they actually inhabit this sterile environment gracefully. Size is an obvious strength. The 12-inch by 12-inch format is a comfortable proportion. A walk around any of the major galleries in Europe, or the USA reveals that the 20th century was very much a period of 'big' art. All sorts of assumptions could be made as to why this was so: the impact of the cinema; the proliferation of mass produced advertising material such as posters; and the general feeling in Western culture that 'true' artists needed to make 'big' gestures for them to have any kind of resonance.

It is interesting to note that in places such as the Tate Gallery in London, where collections from the modern period sit alongside early Renaissance, Medieval and other art from periods of our distant past, some of the best-loved, and most affecting works from before 1900 are quite small. That is they are of a 'human scale', developed through a process of design and manufacture carried out within the anatomical limits of the average sized human being. The movements that dictate such scale are the flex of the fingers in relation to the mobility of the wrist, and the subsequent need to move the elbow which in turn may cause an action from the shoulder. Standing gives more reach but one must consider that the figurative tradition of most pre-modern art dictated a very focused attention on 'areas' of the painting rather than the expressive, energetic, and sometimes athletic, demands made on painters working in the 'big' school.

Of course there is a long tradition of large-scale works stretching

right back to Greek and Roman periods. But for all the exquisite frescos and chapel ceilings, a painting such as *The Tempest* by **Giorgione** dazzles us with its enigmatic symbolism and striking design within a space measuring 31 inches by 28 inches, roughly twice the size of an LP cover. Obviously I am not comparing meaning, content or artistic importance of **Giorgione's** masterpiece with, say, the cover of *Dark Side Of The Moon* (though my bet is in a hundred years or so someone will!) but when it comes to interaction of people, real live human beings, engaging with art on gallery walls, size *does* matter. Viewers can relate to something they can imagine on their own living room wall, something which originated from the desk or the easel, encompassed by the defined space available to the artist without ladders, extensions or other engineered solutions. Record covers were designed for such human spaces. They were designed to fit alongside books on the bookshelf, easily transported under the arm or in a case.

Considered all together, looking at this exhibition of record covers, one could make some assumptions about the music business, both here and in the UK. If these covers appeal because of nostalgia value, all well and good. Something of a dirty word now, 'nostalgia', and the creative impulses stirred by it have, in the past, been a force of change, of re-invention. When **Corin Hughes-Stanton** applied the term 'Post Modernism' to an attitude he detected in the bustle of swinging London and its focus on 'Pop' style in an essay called *What Comes After Carnaby Street* (Design magazine 1968), he effectively stripped it of its original meaning (that is, **Nikolas Pevsner's** description of the architecture of **Le Corbusier**), and in its neutralised state it was soon jumped upon by every creative Tom, Dick and Harriet as the ultimate catch all, a spring loaded defence for a million poor design decisions.

Nostalgia was seen as an emotional insecurity, to be addressed furtively in case the style police caught you out. The result, of course, is that we now have a world that agrees on 'Retro' as being a perfectly fine concept, as long as it is liberally slathered in irony. The fact that irony as a security blanket is in fact suffocating our creative industries seems to have escaped most of the decision makers in the art and design worlds. Pop has

eaten itself, but will happily gnaw on the bones as long as the punters supply a little gravy.

But hey! Why am I getting so bothered about any of this if this bunch of record covers means so little within the master plan? The sad, flawed bunch that we are means that along the way, as we engage with the world, other people, ourselves, we end up colliding with 'things' – books, paintings, objects – and they leave their mark. What went into these things is written upon them, stored within them and remains active for periods that can extend far past ours, or anybody's, existence. I would hope that looking at these record covers the viewer would pick up on elements that are still active within their design. Photography that reveals some of the strange routes taken in the name of fashion (the ski sweaters modeled by the **Chicks**, everything ever worn by **Split Enz** ... what were they thinking!); typography that mirrors designers concerns with delivering language in new, sometimes challenging ways; illustrations that give us a glimpse into the visual worlds of the maverick souls mad enough to get involved in an industry that pays poorly and often forces crude compromises as it strives to shift 'product'. For me some of the most interesting sleeves here are the covers that depict Maori and Maori culture. If any of this stuff warrants a thorough academic deconstruction it is this. A fantastic example, and my favourite cover, is *Hakas in Hi-Fi*. Just a lovely piece of unforced design – high impact, yet a deeper reading would start to uncover some interesting conceptual strata. The war chant captured by a then, cutting-edge technology and packaged and presented for whom?

But before the forensics begin let's just enjoy this showcase of wonderful New Zealand, and British, graphic design. Examples of taste, good and bad, fashion, political postures, young people throwing shapes and memories of great music, and hopefully great times.

