

# sound design an introduction

by Nick  
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I fell in love with records about the same time I learned to stand. The romance began the moment I discovered where the magic sounds were coming from that were driving my one-year-old ears wild: the fine black spirals in those shiny circular surfaces.

Records have more or less been my companions ever since, but with the covers that housed the records I have had a relationship almost as romantic. Long before I could read, I learned to identify the discs in my parents' collection by their covers. I knew the musical *Show Boat* for its primitive woodcut of a paddle steamer, **Beethoven's** *Pastoral Symphony* by its distinctive likeness of a sheep and my favourite, the **Josh White** 10-inch with the song *John Henry*, by its abstract arrangement of yellow and brown rectangles and iconic graphic of a long-playing disc.

As I grew older and began to collect records of my own, I came to realise that the covers were more than just an easy way of distinguishing one piece of vinyl from the next. At the most basic level they were an advertisement, a 12 by 12 inch billboard trying to draw attention to itself and away from the thousands of other records in the store. This is surely where the immediacy, the essential loudness of the record cover has its origins.

But they were much more than that. In the days before music videos, they were as close as one normally came to our musical idols. The clothes, the poses, the attitudes were presented here for our endless scrutiny. Sometimes what they offered was more abstract or mysterious. Either way, they were collaborations between musical and visual artists; strong, affecting compositions, at their best a kind of extension of the music itself.

As a teenager I barely had enough money to buy singles, yet I would spend hours in record shops, poring over albums, trying to figure out from a combination of the titles and images, what the music inside might sound like. *Hot Rats?* Weird. Is that picture of an empty swimming pool or a tomb? Why is it all bathed in pink? And is that figure crawling out a man or a woman?

When I was older and only slightly less broke, I would take a punt on a secondhand disc on the basis of the cover alone. I had never heard **Robert Johnson**, and knew the name only vaguely through odd blues songs on **Cream** and **Rolling Stones** records, but with that

mysteriously intense painting of the half-silhouetted figure lost in communion with his guitar, it had to be worth hearing. I was not disappointed.

In the British component of **Sound Design** you will find some of the finest examples of cover art – the kind that answers, enhances and amplifies the music within. In most cases the artists responsible initially drew attention to themselves through their work as album cover designers and have gone on to long and esteemed careers in design.

New Zealand's music industry has always been too small to support such careers. Unlike Britain, we can claim few artists whose reputations have been made primarily on the strength of their cover art. Yet this doesn't mean New Zealand hasn't achieved excellence in this field. Rather, as in many aspects of New Zealand culture, it has involved an element of improvisation and ingenuity.

Sometimes our record covers have been produced anonymously and uncredited by the record companies. Others are the work of well-known cartoonists, illustrators, painters and photographers, frequently employed at mates' rates. Often they have been the work of the bands themselves, in some cases laboriously hand-printed or otherwise personalised.

The New Zealand section of **Sound Design** presents 74 covers, from the late 1950s to 2002 in a range of formats, from the 12-inch LP, to the 7-inch single to the currently favoured 5-inch CD booklet.

This is not a history of New Zealand music. In choosing these covers, the primary criterion was excellence in design. Though many of the albums displayed are musically significant and culturally iconic, it was never the intention to present a comprehensive timeline of Kiwi pop. Discs that might have been landmarks in musical terms were sometimes left out in favour of others whose covers made a stronger statement.

With this in mind, it felt right to present the sleeves not in chronological order but rather to let the different designs speak to each other across decades, fashions, record labels and musical sub-genres.

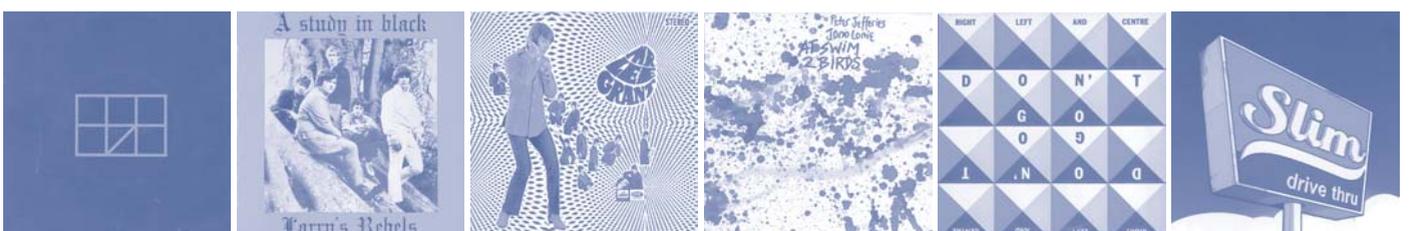
In some places the juxtapositions have been whimsical, at other times they have sought to comment on cultural, musical or technical phenomena. We hope the arrangement is both organised and open enough for viewers to make some of the connections and observations we made in assembling these works, as well as many discoveries of their own.

Curating this collection with the invaluable help of Chris Mousdale and Katy Yiakmis from the New Zealand Design Archive was both a great pleasure and a great challenge. I have tried to give more-or-less equal weight to each of the four or so decades since the LP format arrived in this country. Among other things, I hope this allows viewers to see how different styles, techniques and design elements have been favoured in different periods.

Conversely, I have been struck how similar ideas have recurred throughout the decades, reshaped and reworked to reappear fresh each time, from the coincidental (or is it?) recurrence of the triangular flag motif in covers by the **Chicks**, **Split Enz** and **Right Left and Centre**, to the idea of the four portraits, introduced simply and elegantly on *Introducing Eddie Low* (1970), given a gaudy shot of rock 'n' roll in **DD Smash's** *Cool Bananas* (1982) and absurdly spoofed on Flying Nun's Abba tribute *Abbasolutely* (1995)

In making this selection, I was looking for qualities that reflected an essential New Zealandness, without settling for the overworked 'Kiwiana'. While there are classic sleeves for LPs of rugby test commentaries and accordion orchestras (and what other country in the world could boast albums like these?), I have focused this selection (like its British counterpart) almost wholly on pop music.

Sometimes the New Zealandness was undisguised – the Maori iconography of **Joe Wylie's** design for **Patea Maori Club's** *Poi E*, or the image of Rangitoto in **John Reynolds's** cover for *Songs From the Front Lawn*. Other times I found it in the approach more than the content; in the ingenious do-it-yourself technology of **Family Mallett's** hand-screened sleeve for *Bosch's Bottom*, or **Sally Lonie's** hand-splattered one-offs for **Jono Lonie** and **Peter Jeffries' At Swim Two Birds**.



Another Kiwi idiosyncrasy has been the high number of single and EP (extended play) records, both in 7-inch and 12-inch formats, with illustrated sleeves. The ‘anyone can do it’ ethos of British and American punk inspired an explosion of Kiwi bands in the late 70s/early 80s doing-it-themselves, almost always on independent labels. These bands rarely had the budget to make full-length albums, so maximised their impact by giving their singles and EPs something extra. The back covers of **The Clean’s** *Boodle Boodle Boodle* (1981) and **The Hulamen’s** *Beer and Skittles* (1982) – each designed by members of the group – have been packed to bursting with information and ephemera, as if in a frenzy to add value to the record within.

The greatest shock to the art of the album cover was surely the advent of the compact disc. While the earliest CDs looked somewhat pathetically like shrunken record covers, in the best recent examples one can see how designers have not just adapted to the CD format but adapted the format itself. In her designs for the Kog Transmissions label, **Fiona Jack** has dispensed with the conventional jewel case, using a variety of cards and inks to produce elegant, minimalist packages to match the label’s sleek hi-tech music.

As I have noted, it can be hard to separate the sleeve design from the music within; one could even argue that inseparability of the two is a measure of an album sleeve’s success. Objective as I tried to be, there will inevitably be items in this selection which look that much better to me because the mere sight of them unlocks the memory of a particular guitar lick or favourite lyric. Similarly, there are sleeves here that are undoubtedly better than the records they gave shelter to. Either way, these images have their own songs to sing. Enjoy listening to them.

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