

# THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF THE ALBUM COVER

## MUERTE Y RESURRECCIÓN DE LAS PORTADAS DE DISCOS

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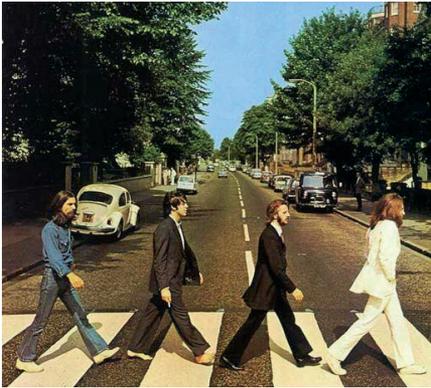
**Abstract:** The recording industry is facing yet another pivotal moment of redefinition. Imagery has been one of its key elements, whether through graphic design, album art design, posters, videos and applications for digital devices. Throughout the more than hundred years of existence, music and images have shared a common space, in an ever-changing and evolving relationship. The main goal of the paper is to present how album cover design has expanded its boundaries far beyond its initial role in the music industry, to trespass now into the textile, decoration and popular culture industries. We also aim to prove the evolution of the album cover and its reinterpretation as objects of popular culture. Therefore, the paper is divided in three acts. We begin explaining the origin, evolution and significance of the discographic design from the outset of the industry. In the following act, we explain the death of the album cover due to the crisis experienced by the industry in the nineties. The final act studies the surprising comeback of the format, yet in another context, possessed with a much more symbolic function. This resurrection is part of the vinyl revival, pushed by elite consumers who are now looking for something else in music, apart from the music itself. As a result, we will witness how record covers have migrated from their original function and are now part of the realm of popular culture. **Keywords:** album cover design, vinyl, music, recording industry.

**Resumen:** La industria musical se encuentra de nuevo en un momento de redefinición. Uno de sus elementos claves ha sido el componente visual de la música a través del diseño gráfico, cubiertas de discos, pósters, vídeos, aplicaciones, etc. A lo largo de los más de cien años de industria, música e imagen han ido de la mano, si bien dicha relación ha ido evolucionando con el tiempo. El objetivo principal es confirmar que el diseño discográfico ha conquistado otros campos más allá de la propia música (el textil, la decoración, la cultura popular), y ha expandido su influencia y significado. También en el presente trabajo se pretende explicar la evolución de las portadas discográficas y su reinterpretación como objetos pertenecientes a la cultura popular. Para lograrlo, el

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artículo se divide en tres actos. En un primero se expone el nacimiento, origen y evolución de las portadas de discos. En un segundo acto se explica la defunción de las portadas de discos en su formato original, dentro de la tremenda crisis sufrida por la industria en los años noventa. El acto final explica la sorprendente resurrección del formato, si bien dentro de otro contexto, con otras funciones más simbólicas que prácticas o comerciales, dentro del resurgimiento del formato vinilo en círculos elitistas de consumidores. Como resultados veremos cómo las portadas de discos han traspasado su función original y se encuentran ahora dentro de un espectro más general de cultura popular. **Palabras clave:** diseño discográfico; vinilo; música; industria musical.

The Beatles' Abbey Road and Sgt. Peppers.



Album covers were born out of the necessity to translate the messages of the music into visual elements. As they evolved from the late 1930s, they reached a high point in the mid 1960s and early 1970s, showcasing the genius of the most talented designers, photographers and artists. At the same time they were fulfilling some elementary functions, such as protection and packaging, they became iconic representations of the music within. Graphic design for the recording industry produced great milestones of the 20th century: Warhol's banana skin for *The Velvet Underground*, The Beatles' Abbey Road or Sgt. Peppers, or Jamie Reid's irreverent take on British monarchy on *God Save the Queen*. It is a discipline that according to author Charlotte Rivers, "has provided us with some of the finest examples of graphic design in history and in turn has launched the careers of some of the greatest, most innovative and influential graphic designers around today" (Rivers, 2003: 8) but that has "ceased to exist" in relation to the size and creativity of the early years (McKnight-Trotz, 1999: 10).

Through the years, however, album covers managed to maintain their magic. Then, the digital world arrived and everything changed. The launch of

the Compact Disc in the early 1980s reduced the artwork from a glorious 12 x 12" to a more modest 4 x 4. Fast forward 20 years, to the start of the 21st Century, and mp3, digital streaming and iTunes have clearly killed the concept of album cover altogether. Were album covers dead? They were obviously not fulfilling its initial functions (representing the music, appealing to the buyer, transmitting information...). There was undoubtedly a degree of design in each new record launching, but its presence was diminishing.

This paper argues that the recent years have seen a resurrection of the album cover, but on a rather different plane. Void of meaning, they have become pop icons, visual milestones, completely detached from their original connection with the music industry. Contrary to other fields of Graphic design, a close look at the history of the album cover will show a lack of established patterns. Instead, the field has seen a complex mixture of influences, trends and styles in its almost sixty years of existence. One can find endless ways to combine the basic design elements (typography, photography, illustrations, and text) plus another endless way to combine the language of design. Perhaps this lack of consistency is due to the original nature of the album cover, the idea that it served as a visual translation of the musical contents. Perhaps this lack of consistency has allowed covers to survive, even in this turbulent times.

### **Act I. Birth and development of the album cover**

Before analyzing in detail the death and resurrection of the album cover, it is necessary to understand that since its first creation in 1939 by Alex Steinweiss<sup>1</sup>, this is a discipline that had a tremendous impact in the world of graphic design, trespassing the boundaries of its initial intentions (Rivers, 2003:8). Record covers had originally been created as a mere physical protection for the disc, and it took a brilliant young designer named Alex Steinweiss working for Columbia records, to introduce the idea of creating a more sophisticated cover for each album, replacing the dull and informative wrapping of the time, called "tombstone cover". Steinweiss' design was to achieve a double goal: to transmit the meaning of the music and to attract new customers. Steinweiss' covers, according to Graphic Design historian Steve Heller, "were eye-catching symbolic representations of jazz, classical or popular

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[01] The early origins of the album cover are usually traced to the sheet cover music illustrations of the late 19th Century, although some scholars trace them a few centuries back. See Nick Edge as an interesting reference with his book *The art of Selling Songs. Graphics for the Music Business. 1690-1990*. Most scholars, however, mark the birth of the album cover with Alex Steinweiss and his work for Columbia records in the early 1940s. His influence is even recognized by the Recording Music Awards with the creation of the "Alex Steinweiss Packaging Entertainment Awards" to reward great graphic design for music products.

music designed in the manner of the modern European advertising posters” (Heller, 1995:10). “Record Sleeves were no longer insignificant, interchangeable bags of protection” comments historian Nick Edge, “used only to promote peripheral products and services. They were now carefully designed and printed signal and index, devices of dedicated imagery and texts” (Edge, 1991:93).

Steinweiss’ invention immediately captivated the audience and help push the industry to an entire new level. As sales grew, so did the catalog of recorded music, thus allowing more designers to enter the field. For instance, when Columbia re-edited Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony in 1948 with a design from Steinweiss, sales increased by 894% (McKnight-Trotz and Steinweiss 2000:10). A second generation of artist would be spearheaded by the likes of Jim Flora, Bob Jones and Jim Amos. These designers established the field, creating pieces “articulated around hand-drawn motifs largely drawing on the traditions of poster book and illustration, and the vocabulary of recent styles of painting” (De Ville, 2003:45). However, this style became rapidly out of fashion with the arrival of fresh new air for the industry.

The 1950s arrived with a new generation of designers, a growing industry that had welcomed competition and a clear need for visual differentiation and experimentation. During this time, artists such as Reid Miles, Saul Bass, Francis Wolff, David Stone Martin, Paul Beacon, and Burt Goldblatt, managed to introduce photography and designs based both on the Bauhaus and the Swiss school of design. Among them, Miles stands out as perhaps one of the greatly underrated designers of all time, the importance of Miles’ work for Blue Note is immense: “Whether cropping the photographs [...] to minimal proportions or finding a funky typeface, Reid Miles made the cover sound like it knew what it lay in store for the listener: an abstract design hinting at innovations, cool strides for cool notes, the symbolic implications of typefaces and tones” (Marsh and Callingham, 1997:7). This decade also saw technological advances that would shape the industry forever: Columbia’s “long-play” record and RCA Victor’s “45 rpm” record. Two new formats had been born: the long, more elaborated and sometimes conceptual album, perfect for jazz style, and the new, short, less expensive record, ideal for single songs, perfectly tailored for a new style of music called Rock and Roll (Drate, 2002:3).

The explosion of Rock and Roll would also bring the industry’s urgent push for standardization and commercialization. As artists became teen idols, album designs became the perfect vehicle to transmit an image usually too conservative and safe, specially designed to please American teenagers in the 1950s and their parents. Of course, this did not play well with all designers, as Jim Flora remembers the pressures from the industry:

“Whenever I did try to sep my distance from them [the recording industry executives], it was when I didn’t want them to tell me what to do. I would tell them: ‘I don’t tell you what songs to record or what group you should have. Why should you tell me what the graphics should say?’” (De Ville, 2003:58).

Inevitably, artists’ popularity and power would grow in the next decade, and its influence on the album cover was tremendous. It mainly meant that the artist now had a say on what the cover would be all about. Well-known artists now could decide the designer and photographer, even do it themselves<sup>2</sup>. The sixties were marked by the British Invasion of 1962, when The Beatles, The Rolling Stones and The Animals, among other British bands, erupted in the United States market. Specially interesting for the field were The Beatles. Clearly aware of the repercussions of the visual power of the cover, they carefully created innovative pieces for their LPs. Graphic design legend Paula Scher, put it bluntly in reference to *Revolver*, *Sgt. Pepper’s* and *The White Album*: “everything anyone ever needed to learn about graphic design was in those three albums” (Scher, 2002:110).

The sixties also brought a myriad of styles and artists, allowing great experimentation. Perhaps the best example was a design studio named *The Family Dog*. The San Francisco-based designers, among them the Spanish-born Víctor Moscoso, experimented with psychedelic illustration and captivated the growing hippie community. Japanese photographer Natsui Takumi, author of an interesting research on album graphic design on the United Kingdom. explains the style with a simple analogy:

“Since the Psychedelic nature was an attack on established academics and authority, the Psychedelic Culture, which, from its nascence had a strong connection with generic and popular music, broadened its horizons to an entire new popular culture in a mixture of art and music” (Takumi, 2001: 27).

The 1970s became a convulsive time for the record industry. The early years witnessed the explosion of live music (tours as we know them today on arenas and stadiums were a rarity in the 1960s, and became very popular in the early 1970s),

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[02] The list of musicians turned to designers is impressive: Joni Mitchell, Mike Oldfield, Bob Dylan, Cindy Lauper, Gary Kemp, David Byrne, Bryan Ferry, Joe Jackson, Morrissey, Pet Shop Boys, Al Kooper, Devo, Freddy Mercury, and Pete Townshend.

the birth of the mega bands and the explosion of marketing. Bands such as Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, Yes or Jethro Tull, gathered an amount of following enough to allow for experimentation. As albums became more conceptual, complex and intriguing, so did the designs. Breaking the norm became the norm. Hence plenty of double covers, stickers, cutouts, tri-folds and other experiments with format. There are plenty of examples of great experimentation with format on album art: Bob Marley's *Catch a Fire*, was shaped to be opened up as a Zippo lighter. Alice Cooper's *School's Out* had a school desk cutout. Led Zeppelin's *In Through the Out Door* had six different editions, one with a different view of the same scene in a nightclub. To make it more interesting, they decided to put the record in a brown paper bag, without any identification (Matsui, 2001:86). As Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin designer and author Storm Thorgerson succinctly explains:

“special packaging in the record business is a thorny issue of cost versus return and of effort versus effect. There is plenty of it to be sure, some of it fun and ingenious, though, conversely, much of it is clearly tacky or simply not worth the effort (to explore repeatedly) nor the money (that is spent on producing it)” (Thorgerson, 1999:35).

However, the industry was to be shook by the brutal 1973 oil crisis, causing an almost immediate withdrawal on grandiose ideas, going back to a much simpler style. The last years of the decade were to be crucial for the album cover field, because Punk made its phenomenal breakthrough aiming to destroy as much establishment as possible. And that included album covers as well. A defiant Johnny Rotten, Sex Pistol's frontman, proclaimed: “If people bought the record for the music, this thing would have died a death long ago” (Dean and Howells, 1982: 23).

Punk designers were decided to rattle the foundations of the industry: the Do-It-Yourself of design. Bright colors, pictures cut from newspapers, typography ripped off from newspapers, a sense of no-design if possible. And perhaps the best example would be Jamie Reid and his production for The Sex Pistols. His visual transgressions were carefully crafted.

“Punk is a potent example of design meshing politics with graphic form. Jamie Reid is recognized as the art director of British Punk at its most extreme [...] Punk occurred immediately before the rise of digital typography and so is not a result of computer-aided design. Instead it asserted the hand-made. Nevertheless, its energy and assault on conventional meaning recharged graphic design and, more broadly, marked a generational shift in

sensibility. It was an important seedbed for design of the next 20 years” (Anysley, 2001: 198).

Reid himself explained that “at the time, we had to produce cheap (no money), fast and effective visuals, so collage was the dominant look; things cut out from papers and magazines – photos and lettering, which was the so-called ‘blackmail punk’ look, which looked great” (Thorgerson and Powell, 1999:107)<sup>3</sup>.

Punk paved the way for a clearly more inquisitive and artistic approach to album covers, “while Punk album cover graphics were defiant, of the torn-paper and blackmail-lettering sort, New Wave covers were more innovative, stylized and sophisticated, often with an element of futurism” (McKnight-Trontz, 2005: 8).

## Act II. Death of the album cover

The 1980s would be marked by two events that would change the face of the industry forever, dramatically affecting the field of sleeve design: the advent of the music video in 1981, the release and popularization of the CD.

When on August 1, 1981, MTV debuted *The Buggles’ Video Killed The Radio Star*, few in the music industry anticipated the profound changes it would face. Although there had been a clear relationship between audiovisuals, both movies and television programs, and music, nothing would be as transforming as MTV. Its success was almost immediate: MTV went from 2.5 million subscribers in 1981 to 9.6 millions just one year later in 1982 (Cave et al, 2004:86). Music videos became the primary visual companion to the music, thus replacing the album cover. Over the decade, designers had to adjust to the new field, a task that would come with costs, as historian Steven Heller explained: “the advent of the music video has inspired graphic designers to further expand the boundaries of appropriate imagery. Just as typography and illustration have been adopted by video directors, kinetic forms have been applied to print graphics” (Heller, 1995:67). But the birth of the MTV, as well as VH1 in the 1980s profoundly affected the industry. Budgets were now devoted to produce music videos instead of album covers, as designer Mike Ross explained: “There aren’t many sleeves that cost the sort of money that used to be spent on, say, those Led Zeppelin sleeves in the past. Those days are well and truly over, and if the money’s available it’s gambled on the video” (De Ville, 2003:161).

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[03] Perhaps the best example of a Punk cover is XTC’s *Go 2*. Over a black background, a white type-setting texts reads: This is a [ALBUM FORMAT] COVER. This writing is the DESIGN upon the [album format] cover. The DESIGN is to help SELL the [album format]. We hope to draw your attention to it and encourage you to pick it up. When you have done that maybe you’ll be persuaded to listen to the music - in this case XTC’s *Go 2* album. Then we want you to BUY it. The

Another event that had a tremendous impact on the album cover was the launching of the Compact Disc. After years of experimentation, Sony and Phillips released the first Compact Disc in Japan in 1982. The US market saw the first commercial release with Billy Joel's 1983 *Glass Houses*. As expected, the new format was an immediate success. Soon the industry launched into a frenetic re-edition of entire catalogs now adapted to the digital format. It took only three years for a band to hit a million CDs sold (Dire Straits' *Brothers in Arms*, 1985). That same year David Bowie became the first artist to have his entire catalog re-edited in digital format. As designer Richard Evans recalls:

“People began to replace their scratchy old albums with new, digitally remixed and digitally remastered CDs. And so ‘the replacement buyer’ market came into being... Established record companies such as EMI, Polygram, RCA, Warner Bros and MCA realized that they were sitting on gold mines. And once they had re-released all their classic back catalogues on CD the public still craved for more” (Thorgerson, 1999:100-101).

Announced as the future of the industry, even though it wouldn't last more than twenty years, the CD was received as apocalyptic bad news among designers. For instance, Stefan Sagmeister: “When CD's first came out I was bitching with the rest of them about how it was terrible for album cover design” (Zapatero, 1998:52). Bill Claxton argues that

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idea being that the more of you that buy this [album format] the more money [record company], the manager Ian Reid and XTC themselves will make. To the aforementioned this is known as PLEASURE. A good cover DESIGN is one that attracts more buyers and gives more pleasure. This writing is trying to pull you in much like an eye-catching picture. It is designed to get you to READ IT. This is called luring the VICTIM, and you are the VICTIM. But if you have a free mind you should STOP READING NOW! because all we are attempting to do is to get you to read on. Yet this is a DOUBLE BIND because if you indeed stop you'll be doing what we tell you, and if you read on you'll be doing what we've wanted all along. And the more you read on the more you're falling for this simple device of telling you exactly how a good commercial design works. They're TRICKS and this is the worst TRICK of all since it's describing the TRICK whilst trying to TRICK you, and if you've read this far then you're TRICKED but you wouldn't have known this unless you'd read this far. At least we're telling you directly instead of seducing you with a beautiful or haunting visual that may never tell you. We're letting you know that you ought to buy this [place album format here] because in essence it's a PRODUCT and PRODUCTS are to be consumed and you are a consumer and this is a good PRODUCT. We could have written the band's name in special lettering so that it stood out and you'd see it before you'd read any of this writing and possibly have bought it anyway. What we are really suggesting is that you are FOOLISH to buy or not buy an album merely as a consequence of the design on its cover. This is a con because if you agree then you'll probably like this writing - which is the cover design - and hence the album inside. But we've just warned you against that. The con is a con. A good cover design could be considered as one that gets you to buy the [album format], but that never actually happens to YOU because YOU know it's just a design for the cover. And this is the [ALBUM FORMAT] COVER.

“The art of the Lp cover, I’m afraid, has pretty much vanished with the arrival of the compact disc product... I long for that big 12” x 12” space, where an exciting visual image could be put that would do justice to the artist on the recording and ‘turn on’ the potential buyer” (De Ville, 2003: 204).

And it would take a few years for designers to embrace this new format and the possibilities:

“Following its introduction in the 80s, while music continues to be released simultaneously in three formats –vinyl, cassette and CD– the reaction of most labels and designers was simply to scale down LP imagery for the smaller format. But as the CD has become the dominant form, designers have started to direct their experimental efforts at the small, hinged piece of plastic packaging, rather than the 12 inch flat record cover” (Rivers, 2003: 32).

Plastic replaced cardboard, and experimentation was still possible, especially due to the new generation of designers coming more from the technology field, rather than the old school fine arts, painting and photography artists. Hence the picture disc, the box, the shaped disc and so on.

New times brought new musical styles, such as *Rap*, *Hip-hop*, *Ska*, *Acid jazz*, *New Age*, *Acid House* (Brewster 2000: 4-19). Common to all these styles is the overwhelming presence of audiovisuals instead of print design. This new culture, aided by the recently launched Macintosh, would push design into another level. Products such as flyers, posters and merchandising that had been around for decades now became a faster, more intuitive way for designers to link images and music.

Then, in the 1990s, the final blow to the album cover took the form of the mp3 format and the development of technology capable of replicating the original master source. Once digital recordings became the standard, the need for visual representation of the music became almost obsolete. Album covers had shrieked from the 12” x 12” of the LP to the more modest 4”x4” of the CD to a minuscule presence on a screen.

The brave new digital world would turn the music industry upside down, primarily because of the lack of preparation<sup>†</sup>. Sales would suffer, and the business model had to be redefined yet again. According to the Recording Industry Association of America, LP sales reached their peak in 1977 with 344 million

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[04] The reader will find a complete chronicle of the industry’s debacle in Steve Knopper’s *Appetite for Self-Destruction: The Spectacular Crash of the Record Industry in the Digital Age*.

copies, CDS reached almost 900 million in 2000, and from then the decline has been steady and continuous, taking the industry back to the levels of the late 1970s.<sup>5</sup>

According to the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI), at the time the digital format exploded, only five companies controlled 75% of the the industry (Universal, Sony BMG, EMI and Warner). Their reaction to the changes was slow and inadequate, and it took them years to understand the profound paradigm shift. Napster and other technology allowed users to copy and duplicate material with the same quality as the original. Piracy was nothing new to the industry, always faced with fears of losing control. In the 1960s there were plenty of pirate radio stations broadcasting music without paying royalties. In the 1970s, cassettes had become technologically advance enough to reproduce and record music, threatening again the status quo of the industry. But until the digital revolution, the distance between the original master and the copy was considerable. A cassette would never sound like the real LP, although as a format was more portable and resistant. Now the industry was bridging that gap between the original and the copy, to the point that the same company responsible for commercializing the CDs, Sony, also introduced the technology to copy music.

But the real trouble for the industry happened in 1993 with the eruption of Napster. Similar to other software, Napster allowed users to exchange music online. Now all the barriers and gatekeepers had been blown away, although the music industry managed to shut down the service in 2000<sup>6</sup>. But by then there was a new consumer behavior in place. Music fans would slowly abandon the record stores, choosing instead the Internet as their source of music. That same year Apple bought a media player called SoundJam MP, renamed it as iTunes and set out to dominate the new music industry. Over the years iTunes has managed to become somewhat the standardized version to buy legal music, although educating consumers on the new habit has proven to be more difficult than expected. This could be explained by the great shift between purchasing music at a perceived high price and having all the music available at your disposal without direct purchasing (the industry has always been dismayed by the popularization of the expression “free download”, since there are plenty of companies benefiting from illegally downloaded music). The music community also took too long to jump on the technology bandwagon. For instance, until 2010, it was impossible to legally purchase any music from The Beatles.

For designers, the new paradigm meant a clear reduction of the physical space for design and music. Now detached from the format, iTunes only allowed

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[05] For plenty of details and information, visit [www.riaa.org](http://www.riaa.org)

[06] <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/12/technology/ebusiness/12NAPS.html?pagewanted=all>

a reduced space on the screen<sup>7</sup>. Gone were the liner notes, no longer necessary, and the possibility of experimenting with the cover. The industry tried to fight back reducing the prices of the CDs, “between 1983 and 1996, the average price of a CD fell more than 40%. Over this same period of time, consumer prices (measured by the Consumer Price Index, CPI) rose nearly 60%” (King, 2002). But this situation also meant a reduction in the overall budgets, affecting entire production departments within the labels. There was a degree of experimentation with protected copies, hidden codes only accessible through payment, additional material online and so forth. British designer Roger Dean voiced the opinion of many when he blamed the strategies (or lack of) used by the labels, who

“were spending a lot of money on packaging and two events in history allowed them to cut back on that. One was a paper shortage in the early seventies, which suddenly meant no gatefolds, but when CDs came out, they could have done them well you could still make it a beautiful packaging, the size wasn't an issue, the issue was the incredibly predatory attitude of record companies. You know: ‘if we can give you less we're gonna give you less’” (Dean, 2004).

Kim Gordon expresses a similar sentiment when she points out that the lack of resources major labels allocated on artwork budgets created a “generic mainstream standard. Often a package will be a single strip of glass paper with color on one side and black and white on the other.” (Gordon, 1997:123). The democratization of design, much due to new technologies, “has always hunted the story of album sleeve design. Regrettably, since the early 1990's, even for supposed ‘cutting edge’ music” (De Ville, 2003:13).

Clearly, a pessimistic view of the future of the album cover was present in the design community at large: “These days, sleeve designers have two options: either surrender to music's increasing reliance on irony and back-reference and design sleeves that nod to other designers; or try that little bit harder” (Harris, 2003). Even legendary designers such as Sir Peter Blake, author of *Sgt. Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band* admitted that “if album art survived from the LP to the CD, but if that becomes obsolete then I guess album art won't exist. I think it would be a big loss” (Gregory, 2008). Peter Saville pointed out the beginning of the end of the sleeve design in the transition between the 1970s and the 1980s, when album covers

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[07] For a detailed list of the technical specifications for album covers on iTunes, please see [https://developer.apple.com/library/ios/qa/qa1686/\\_index.html](https://developer.apple.com/library/ios/qa/qa1686/_index.html)

“Reflected the great cultural and political changes ushered in by the 'greed is good' decade. The naive idealism that had always been a part of the record industry finally died and there was no longer any room for the intuitive approach to sleeve design: it was the era of branding and marketing and records were no longer designed, they were 'packaged'” (Saville, 2003:16).

At the end of the 20th Century, the future of the music industry was as uncertain as ever<sup>8</sup>. In April 2004 there was a symposium organized in Manchester, England, under the title “What’s the Cover Story”. One of the speakers, Adrian Shaughnessy, Creative Director at This Is Real Art and author of three books on the issue, expressed his pessimism: “I think the battle has been lost and for someone who has made their living designing record covers, I regret that, but then there's no use crying over split milk”. Others were as downhearted, but looked for a possible solution. This was the case of The Designers Republic founder Ian Anderson: “I'd be disappointed if record shops disappeared forever as they're something I've held dear for so long, but the new digital age should be embraced whole-heartedly” (Ducker, 2004). Others made ill-fated predictions, such as Chris Murphy, founder of the independent Irish label Fällt:

“It’s a mistake to talk about electronically distributed music as replacing physically distributed music. There are so many things that can’t be achieved on the screen: embossing, die-cutting, creative folding, the look and the feel of different types of paper” (Rivers, 2003: 154).

It would not be fair to ignore those more optimistic opinions. For instance Josh Brown, founder of Capacitor Design Network, specialized in album design for *Rave* music. His perspective his radically different, and astonishingly prophetic, focusing on the positive aspects of Internet downloads:

“in addition to just being able to download raw music, eventually you will be able to download the equivalent of the contents that would be found in traditional packaging plus more, such as videos and biographies. Those covers in pure digital format could then include moving picture and animation and possible direct interaction with the band or other fans” (Grant, 2001:8).

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[08] Although it would take until 2011 to see the first year when digital downloads surpassed physical copies, according to the Nielsen & Billboard's 2012 *Music Industry Report*.

Another well-respected figure in the field, Adrian Shaughnessy coincides when pointing that "if the album cover is to survive it will have to learn to live with the modern media meltdown" (Shaughnessy, 2000:10). Survival also seemed to be in Stefan Sagmeister's mind when he wrote that:

"in a couple of years, [album covers] will seem as outdated as vinyl now: MP3 is here to stay and the combined computer/TV/Music center in every household a real possibility. Widespread downloading of music seems likely, demanding new forms of downloading packaging with completely new possibilities and challenges" (Ginko Press, 2000: 4).

### Act III. Resurrection

The last step in our narrative takes us to the present time, when record covers are experimenting an interesting comeback, certainly with a different mission. The reason for this unexpected situation can be traced in four key facts: the resurrection once again of the industry, the rebirth of vinyl as a market niche for the more dedicated fan, and more importantly, because album covers have crossed the lines and have become pop objects.

As dark as the predictions looked ten years ago, the truth is that the industry is now experiencing an almost comeback from the death. In 2012, revenue for the labels was up to 1998 levels. Digital revenue reached a record \$5.6 billion, downloads are up by 12% (combining albums and singles). Digital album sales experienced an spectacular 17% increase between 2011 and 2012. There is also a steady increase in the number of consumers are now subscribing to legal streaming services and even awareness of legal digital music is as high as 84% in the United States<sup>9</sup>.

Perhaps the most surprising side effect of the slow resurrection of the music industry is the rebirth of vinyl records. This phenomenon, usually referred to as "vinyl revival" started in 2006 and has grasped the collective imagination of a new generation of consumers, the millennial generation, who have managed to make the digital and physical world coexist. Alongside these new hoards of music fans, faithful followers have seen vinyl as a connection to their band of choice.

According to the Nielsen Company & Billboard's 2012 Music Industry Report<sup>10</sup>, in the United States, alone 2012 marked the all-time maximum high of 4.6 million albums sold on vinyl format, a 17% increase from 2011. Digital sales

[09] For a more detailed view of the results, visit IFPI's *Digital Music Report 2013. Engine of a digital world*, available online at <http://www.ifpi.org/content/library/DMR2013.pdf>

[10] <http://es.scribd.com/doc/118975417/THE-NIELSEN-COMPANY-BILLBOARD%E2%80%99S-2012-MUSIC-INDUSTRY-REPORT>

grew by 3.1% and CD sales dropped 12% (from 224 Million in 2011 to 194 in 2012). As interesting as this rebirth is, we need to remember that it is clearly a niche market. Compare the sales in 2012 between digital (1,661 Million) and vinyl (4.6 million).

It is also interesting to note the radical difference between the bestselling artists in digital format and those in vinyl. Of the top 10 of 2012, only Mumford and Sons and Adele managed to be present on both categories: The lists were obviously different. The digital consumer chose more popular artists (Adele, Maroon 5, One Direction), while the vinyl buyer opted for more elaborated choices (Jack White, Alabama Shakes, Bon Iver).

Therefore, in the midst of this renewal of the music industry, a new group of consumers has erupted in the market, creating a new status quo, setting the trends and indicating the future of many leading industries such as the fashion, design and urbanism. This new tribe commonly referred as the “hipsters” has claimed vinyl records as one of the main pop artifacts.

The movement we now refer to as the “hipsters” has been around for decades, dating back to Norman Mailer’s *The White Negro*, published in 1957. In this book, Mailer argues the case for white suburban middle-class youngsters trapped into jazz, rebellion, and defiance. These teenagers reacted against the status quo and the establishment set by their parents creating a counterculture movement that would also be known as the “beat” or “beatnik” generation. As Douglas Haddow writing for *Adbusters* explains:

Ever since the Allies bombed the Axis into submission, Western civilization has had a succession of counter-culture movements that have energetically challenged the status quo. Each successive decade of the post-war era has seen it smash social standards, riot and fight to revolutionize every aspect of music, art, government and civil society (Haddow, 2008).

Such are the ideals of a movement that soon became very tied to visual identity, apart from a particular set of beliefs and traditions well rooted within their community. Hipsters avoid major corporations, have a particular dress code (beards, skinny jeans, plaid shirts) and are identified by their passion for retro objects: Anything from old bicycles to Polaroid instant cameras. The rebirth of the movement in the late 1990s has not gone unnoticed to society. And has gained as many followers as detractors, and a number of analyst who have already predicted the death of the movement. Their political views, skewed to the left, liberal and alternative, have also raised eyebrows in disbelief, as *Huffington Post* journalist Julia Plevin wittily illustrates:

The whole point of hipsters is that they avoid labels and being labeled. However, they all dress the same and act the same and conform in their non-conformity. Doesn't the fact that there is a hipster look go against all hipster beliefs? Hipsters are supposed to hate anything mainstream or trendy (Plevin, 2008).

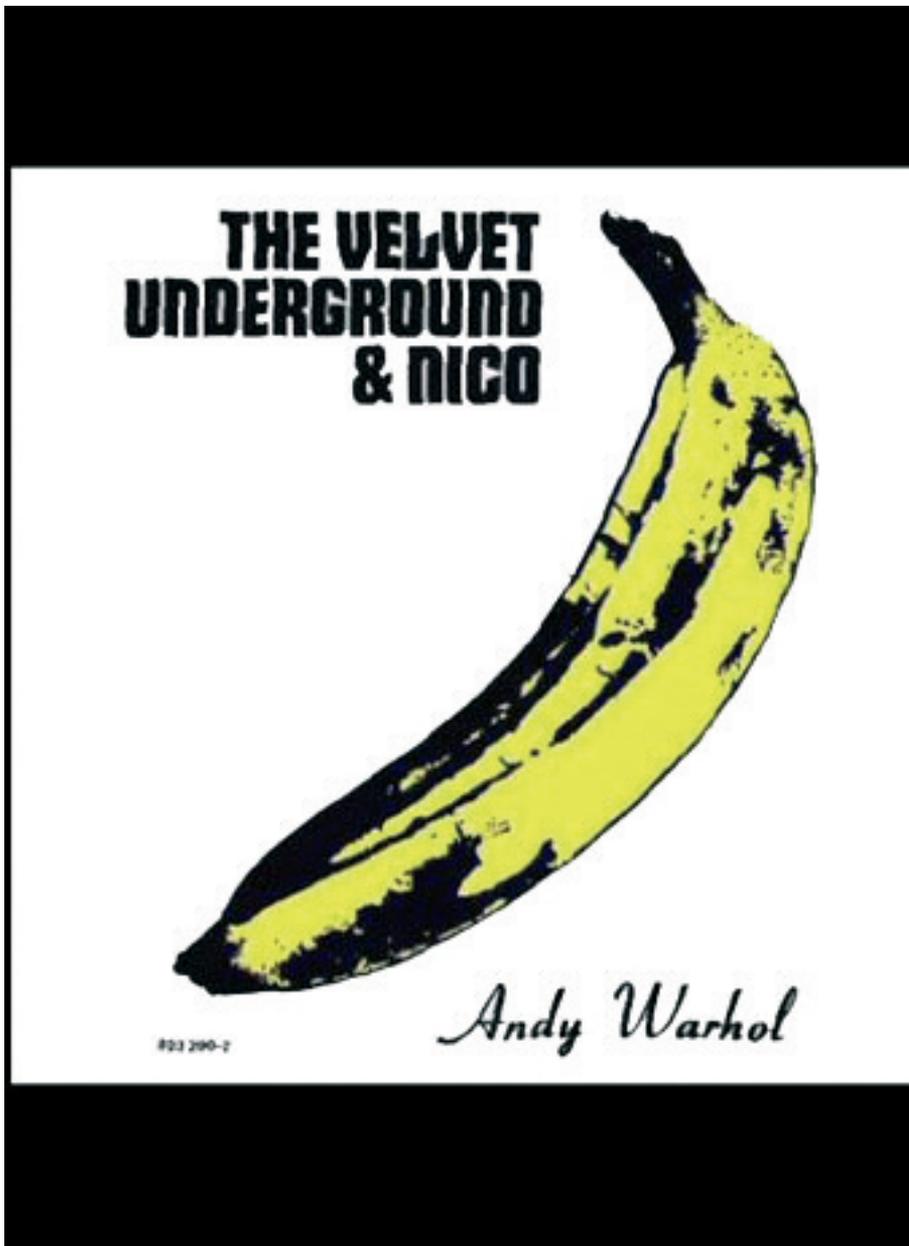
Hipsters are trendsetters, gatekeepers and influential consumers. They are bloggers, Social Media champions and a rather sought-after treasure for brands such as Apple, Converse and Wellington. Their consumption falls into what 19th Century Sociologist Thorstein Veblen described as “conspicuous consumption”, the idea that consumers will spend money on luxury items in order to display power in the public sphere. Consumerism is deeply rooted in this idea, that what we buy determines our place in the establishment of society. In the case of the hipster movement, one could argue that this is valid not only referring to what they buy, but also what they decide not to buy. Because one of the main elements of the hipster movement has been the avoidance of all things mainstream, whether that may be Starbucks coffee, large corporations such as Walmart or franchised fast-food restaurant.

More importantly for our argument, music has always been a central piece of the beatnik and hipster movement. The hipsters focused their musical preference on anything but mainstream music: Jazz, Blues, Underground, Indie and so forth. Music is a common element to this particular subculture, and it is strongly tied to their visual identity. And not only the specific taste of music, and their endless search for novelty when it comes to musical influences, but hipsters brought back a certain style of enjoying music: the old turntable and the vinyl LP. And not just without any argument. As *Forbes* magazine writer Zachary O'Malley recalls: “Vinyl's lasting appeal stems from a heady stew of nostalgia, tangibility and, perhaps most important of all, sound quality that musicians and fans often prefer to any other medium (O'Malley, 2011).

Making a statement about how music should be heard, hipsters began buying vinyl records again. In macroeconomic terms, the percentage in comparison with the global market is still insignificant, just a small 1,6% (Kozinn, 2013), but in terms of sales, we are now looking at a format that sold 4.6 million units in 2012, according to the Recording Industry Association of America. This should be enough as to consider vinyl as a plausible alternative to digital and CD sales for a market niche. Or even a combination, as Mike Jbara, CEO of WEA, Warner's U.S. retail sales and marketing company recalls: “It's easy to assume that people who do vinyl only do vinyl, but the most successful formats in physical retail are the ones that come with a digital download” (O'Brien, 2011).

Album covers have crossed the lines and have become pop objects.





Andy Warhol's "Velvet Underground" cover.

This boost in sales has also revived complementary markets, such as the turntable sales, almost anecdotal in the 1990s, and now reaching 54,000 in 2011, according to the National Association of Music Merchants (White, 2012). The same can be said about the pressing plants, on the verge of extinction and now making a smart comeback. In the US alone, there are four times more pressing plants being utilized by labels to cope with the demand for vinyl records, reaching a total of twelve (Kozinn, 2013).

Initially, the vinyl sales came from old records that were still stored in small record stores, or flea markets or specialized retailers. However, the strength of the hipster movement and their push for vinyl records prompted the recording industry to realize the potential of this market niche. Nowadays, all major labels are not only re-releasing titles from the old catalog in this format, but also the newest records are being offered in vinyl. Even artists as far from the hipsters as Justin Bieber or Lady Gaga. Major retailers such as Amazon have also taken notice of the trend, launching a vinyl category on their website.

Perhaps the most noticeable event created after the resurgence of the vinyl LP is "Record Store Day". Originated in 2007 as an alternative way to promote small record stores and independent labels, it has grown to international proportions. Created much in the fashion of the comic book day, originally it was designed to celebrate the record store subculture, but it has turned into a photo op for main artists, who now schedule special releases on vinyl for the hardcore fan only on Record Store Day. For instance, in 2008 Metallica kicked off the event in a small record store in Mountain View, California, where they signed records and met with 500 fans. Metallica, Jesse Hughes, Joshua Homme, Ozzy Osborne, Iggy Pop and Jack White have been ambassadors for this event. And the investment is paying off; "Indie record stores enjoyed a 26.6% gain in album sales when they moved 528,000 units the week of Record Store Day 2012, while the prior week's sales amounted to 417,000" (Hughes, 2013). Perhaps part of the success of the record store day is the rekindle of an old tradition: sharing music. As Michael Kurtz, co-founder of Record Store Day explains: "It's a more full experience and communal. You typically listen to a record player with other people gathered around... while digital is typically a solitary experience with your headphones" (Poggi, 2013).

The renaissance of the vinyl market has had another interesting effect on the visual imaging of music: it has pushed album covers beyond their original meaning and function, turning them into pop items. Thus, the album cover has moved from a rather practical role of protection to a place in the public sphere where it has become an engraving on a tee shirt, a poster on a student dorm<sup>11</sup>.

[11] For instance, one of the largest poster retailers online, [allposters.com](http://allposters.com) offers 895 Jazz covers and 61 versions of Beatles covers.

Also the textile industry has become a recipient of the album cover artwork, this time in the form of tee shirts and apparel. For instance, **zazzle.com** offers over 2,000 combinations of music related graphics in their products. Online giant **amazon.com** includes 329 products related to album covers, from tee shirts to key chains and posters.

Bands such as Guns and Roses, The Beatles and The Ramones have seen how their image is pushed over the music into the realm of iconography, becoming best selling products without a clear connection with the music. It is doubtful that the teenager who buys a shirt with the logo of the Ramones' first album will have any knowledge of the band or their music. The same could be argued about Andy Warhol's "Velvet Underground" cover, or The Beatles' "Abbey Road". Images of album covers are now part of the popular imaginary related to another time, another place, without the general public being too concerned about the lack of connection with the original meaning.

In a time of digital downloads and online streaming, in yet another crossroad for the music industry, when the future seems to be slowly defining itself, the value of visual communication has survived. Perhaps because the musical experience is a compound of elements, all of them entangled in a sophisticated way. And design is undoubtedly one of those elements. Without visual imagery, whether an album cover, a poster on the wall, a video game or an app for a smart phone, music seems bare, unprotected, incomplete. Perhaps that explains why key players in the industry, such as Ryan Redington, head of Amazon's digital music store, can attest that "in this digital age, you're missing the mark if you are not providing products and services that meet all of your customer's needs" (Poggi, 2013).

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