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### **Visions of Hi-Fi Life in Midcentury Media**

The LP as Pedagogical Object

**Janet L. Borgerson & Jonathan E. Schroeder**



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## **Abstract**

In this project, we consider the contributions of midcentury record albums to the post war imagination and their relevance for contemporary media culture. We have selected illustrative examples from a large, privately owned record album archive, and discuss album cover photography and graphic design, as well as liner notes and music, to illuminate how LPs provided listeners with pedagogical guides for becoming more culturally confident, cosmopolitan, and sophisticated. For example, home entertaining records and travel records often included content dedicated to achieving a “modern” lifestyle, developing good taste, and becoming familiar with new sights and sounds. And, by taking a visual and vinyl approach, we hope to show how minor, even peripheral, objects – often moldering in basements, gathering dust at charity shops, or in more recent times, offered online as campy collectibles on eBay and Discogs – reveal powerful, yet relatively unnoticed, lessons in learning popular culture. To that end, we explore how these records helped to shape the imaginings of modern US identity and global citizenship at midcentury, and paved the way for the contemporary media landscape.

## INTRODUCTION

Record albums from the 1950s and 1960s were only partly about the music. Indeed, while Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley and the Beatles were selling millions of albums, thousands more were released in unheralded categories like mood music, instructional, and travel that never reached the charts. These often overlooked vinyl LPs stood apart from the crooners, pop stars, and rock ‘n’ rollers that dominated the era. As educational theorist Henry Giroux argues, popular culture provides “sites that are often ignored [...] where the struggle over knowledge, power, and authority translates itself into a broader battle over the meaning of pleasure, self-formation, and national identity.”<sup>2</sup> Today, these vintage LPs offer fascinating glimpses into lifestyles, listening habits, and longings at midcentury, and reveal pedagogical dimensions of mass market material culture.<sup>3</sup>

Not just decorated cardboard that protected the vinyl disks within, midcentury record album covers from the 1950s and 1960s served commercial, pedagogical, and rhetorical purposes. Yes, album cover images provided clues to a record’s musical style or sensibility; but these carefully crafted covers, often photographs, also offered visual instruction for achieving aspects of contemporary, and aspirational, lifestyles that included backyard garden parties, adventurous dinners at home, as well as travel to places far away. Some records were explicitly pedagogical, such as those in the “Hear How” series from Carlton Records, which included *Hear How to Have a Perfect Dinner Party*, *Hear How to Improve Your Golf*, and even *Hear How to Achieve Sexual Harmony in Marriage*. Others, like the “Sound Tour” LPs from *Esquire* magazine and Verve Records, provided instruction and guidance about how to visit foreign lands. Many more subtly taught listeners lessons about design, lifestyle, and taste.

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<sup>2</sup> Henry A. Giroux. *Disturbing Pleasures: Learning Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), x. We are indebted to Giroux’s work on pedagogy and popular culture; philosopher Susan Bordo’s analysis of cultural images, and cultural theorist Stuart Hall’s scholarship on representation. See, for example, Susan Bordo, *Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O.J.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), and Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, and Sean Nixon, eds. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Open University Press/Sage, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> See Janet Borgerson and Jonathan Schroeder, *Designed for Hi-Fi Living: The Vinyl LP in Midcentury America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).



Figure 1. Housewife in Kitchen, Victor Keppler, 1939

## 1 The visual culture of vinyl

Pioneering American photographers, before they were well known, helped create visions for what we call the being-at-home genre, their striking depictions appearing in trickled down form on our record album covers. For example, Edward Steichen worked for publishing house Condé Nast in the 1920s, helping to picture, in vibrant color, lifestyles that became more widely accessible some decades later.<sup>4</sup> For example, Victor Keppler's "Housewife in Kitchen"

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<sup>4</sup> Katherine Bussard and Lisa Hostetler, *Color Rush: American Color Photography from Stieglitz to Sherman* (Aperture: Milwaukee Art Museum, 2013), 44-47.

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from 1939 shares a visual aesthetic – and a penchant for bright yellow – that we see in Columbia Records’ “Music for Gracious Living” series albums, such as, *After the Dance* from 1955.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 2. Music for Gracious Living: After the Dance, Columbia Records, 1955

<sup>5</sup> For elaboration, see *ibid.*, 52-63 and 72-76.

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Interestingly, it was an architectural photography studio, Hedrich-Blessing, “associated with documenting the modern architecture movement,”<sup>6</sup> that took on the challenge of depicting the “Music for Gracious Living” covers. In the 1950s, Hedrich-Blessing worked with modernist architects such as Mies van der Rohe and Eero Saarinen, who profoundly influenced prominent midcentury designers, including Charles and Ray Eames, George Nelson, and Harry Bertola. As modernist notions entered into the lives, lifestyles, and landscapes of post war Americans, Hedrich-Blessing became known as a “communicator” of related spaces and ideas, and their conceptualizations leap out, in brilliant hues, from the “Music for Gracious Living” album covers.<sup>7</sup> As historian Greg Castillo observes, “Idealized domestic settings lent physical and emotional immediacy to abstract ideological concepts. The cozy intimacy of the staged household obscured the mechanics of pedagogy.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Pygmalion Karatzas, “Hedrich Blessing Photographers,” Arcspace, October 26, 2015,

<http://www.arcspace.com/the-camera/hedrich-blessing-photographers/>.

<sup>7</sup> See Robert Sobieszek, ed., *The Architectural Photography of Hedrich-Blessing* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1988).

<sup>8</sup> Greg Castillo, *Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xviii.



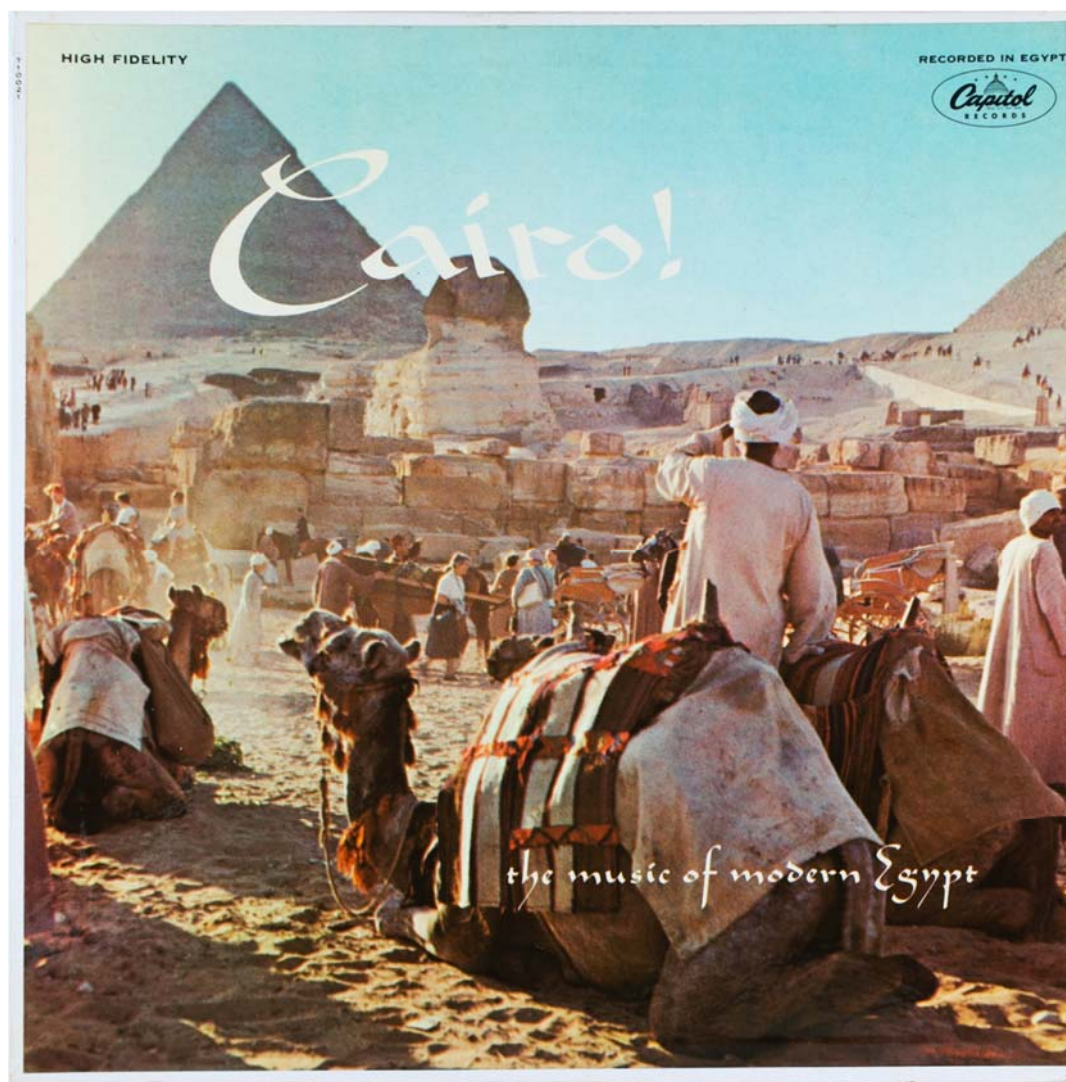


Figure 3. *Cairo! The Music of Modern Egypt*, Capitol Records, 1956

Photographs depicting iconic views of the world away from home had been around for some time when 1950s LPs began to draw upon these visions for a mass American audience. In the mid 1800s, for example, Maxime du Campe's photographic images of the Sphinx and the Egyptian pyramids provided exotic scenes for the armchair traveler that find an echo on *Cairo! The Music of Modern Egypt*, an LP from the "Capitol of the World" series. American modernist photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn's 1905 "View from Notre Dame" features the close up gothic architecture of the cathedral's roof top with Paris stretched out below – a view that influenced how generations of Americans imagined the great French city. And, in 1915, the Lumière brothers' autochrome glass plate images of Switzerland's towering Matterhorn

provided a still recognizable image for anticipating a picturesque trip abroad.<sup>9</sup> Travel agencies relied upon such destination identities in their own promotional materials, such as posters; and album covers imitated them.

In addition to the cover art, the small print that filled an LP's back cover created a story for the recording within. These often pedagogical liner notes produced historical knowledge, not only about the featured music, but also around the related cultural contexts deemed relevant to the listener's enjoyment and education. Indeed, in attempting to make the unfamiliar more palatable and the culturally sophisticated more accessible, album notes often became opportunities to teach record buyers about musical traditions, popular performing artists, and recording technology advances, but also cosmopolitan lifestyle choices, unfamiliar rituals, and foreign lands – all aimed at developing a modern American consumer. For example, the phenomenon of commentary beyond the recording *per se* was particularly common on albums of unfamiliar musical styles like Columbia's *Caribbee: Songs of the Indies* album or Capitol's *Mexico: Its Sounds Its People*. In this way, midcentury record albums played the role of advice column, cultural guide, or travel brochure, as they promoted post war consumer lifestyles and celebrated iconic sights, sounds, and tastes of featured locations. And, travelers, whether actual or armchair, were offered a comforting position from which they might enjoy a sense of belonging, rather than exclusion, in otherwise unfamiliar places and spaces.

Clearly, the music found on these vinyl LPs is only one element of a package designed to introduce midcentury Americans to a host of consumer choices and experiences, helping them engage new situations and destinations, and gain access to the specific pleasures of each. Indeed, in the midcentury era, the LP record emerged as a central information technology and an information distribution format. As media theorist Jacob Smith reminds us: "From the 1940s to the 1970s, the phonograph industry experienced phenomenal growth in sales and cultural influence, producing recordings that were meant to serve a multitude of functions in the American home above and beyond the reproduction of popular music."<sup>10</sup> Smith writes that in the postwar period, "phonograph records frequently provided a 'segment-making' home media alternative to the dominant 'society-making' media of network broadcasting. [...] Records convened audiences around shared interests that were often underrepresented in the broadcast media, making them a powerful vehicle for the formation of group identity during the postwar decades".<sup>11</sup> These LPs were generally aimed at adults, as opposed to teenagers –

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<sup>9</sup> With thanks to Lisa Hostetler, Photography Curator at the George Eastman Museum, for examples from her lecture at Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, New York, October 14, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Jacob Smith, *Spoken Word: Postwar American Phonograph Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 202-203.

who remained the key market for 45 rpm singles.<sup>12</sup> Most were intended to appeal to middle-class audiences,<sup>13</sup> and in some cases to those in various kinds of transition – moving from small town to urban landscapes, from urban apartments to suburban houses, or from single to married lifestyles. Further, the target audience for most albums presented here was probably imagined to be white, but not exclusively, especially given the “away” records’ potential appeal to different domestic ethnic and international audiences.

Vinyl albums included sound, text, and imagery. Indeed, we find that these albums offer a distinctive blending of the aural, visual, and pedagogical. As Norwegian visual theorists Asbjørn Grønstad and Øyvind Vågnes contend, a record album constitutes a unique “composite medium” that although often understood to center around music, “in transmitting that art form, simultaneously engenders a semiotic configuration and an aesthetic experience that is not reducible to music alone.”<sup>14</sup> Nor are the covers merely decorative in their ability to communicate, entertain, and instruct. We examine the cultural work of these albums – as material objects, graphic design icons, as well as sound recordings – at midcentury. Of course, these LPs continue to circulate today as coveted collectibles and treasured artifacts of a golden age of album cover design, valued as retro icons as well as musical soundtracks.<sup>15</sup> One might argue that these LPs supported “training the young for life at the frontiers of consumption,” as cultural theorist Andrew Ross suggested in his work on culture and the Cold War.<sup>16</sup>

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12 Kier Keightley, “Long Play: Adult-oriented Popular Music and the Temporal Logics of the Post-war Sound Recording Industry in the USA,” *Media, Culture & Society* 26, no. 3 (Autumn 2004), 375-391. Rock and jazz LP covers generally constitute the bulk of those deemed worthy of reproduction in books and articles; for analyses of the cultural work of classical albums, see Nicholas Cook, “The Domestic Gesamtkunstwerk, or Record Sleeves and Reception,” in *Composition – Performance – Reception: Studies in the Creative Process in Music*, edited by Wyndham Thomas (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 1998), 105-117; and Evan Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel: Music, Records and Culture from Aristotle to Zappa*, second edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).

13 Dianne Harris, *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 9.

14 Asbjørn Grønstad and Øyvind Vågnes, eds. *Coverscaping: Discovering Album Aesthetics*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2010, 11.

15 See Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward, “Vinyl Record: A Cultural Icon,” *Consumption Markets & Culture* (2016): DOI: 10.1080/10253866.2016.1212709,

and Dianne Harris, “A Tiny Orchestra in the Living Room: High-fidelity Stereo and the Postwar House,” *Places* (April 2015): <https://doi.org/10.22269/150413>, and Tom Perchard, “Mid-century Modern Jazz: Music and Design in the Postwar Home,” *Popular Music* 36 no. 1 (January 2017): 55–74.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Ross, “Containing Culture in the Cold War,” *Cultural Studies* 1 no. 3 (1987), 337.

In the technology department, after Audio Fidelity released the first commercial recordings with stereo sound in March 1958, a “tone-arm race” was on for the highest fidelity sound.<sup>17</sup> Decca offered “Full Frequency Stereophonic Sound,” RCA promoted “Living Stereo,” Columbia presented “360 Sound,” and Mercury chimed in with “Living Presence.”<sup>18</sup> Album notes brimmed with technical information about advances in recording technology, admonishments to use high fidelity needles, and expansive explanations of how stereo worked. Vinyl records required their own technologies and regimes of care and protection, of course, from the retail environment’s plastic “shrink wrap” to home storage methods. Liner notes, aside from detailed descriptions of needle diagnostics, often included tips on vinyl cleaning: dip in warm water with dishwashing detergent; wipe with soft cloth; and dry in dish drainer. Numerous hi-fi and stereo demonstration records from the mid-1950s revealed the wonders of modern technology. Hi-fi living had arrived.

We think aspects of these LPs offer a window into influential imaginings and reveal roots of contemporary US culture. Writing about midcentury design, journalist Dominic Bradbury suggests that “in many respects, the patterns and expectations of American and Western consumers in the midcentury period laid down the template for modern living itself and formed a foundation for our own lifestyles in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”<sup>19</sup> The 1950s and 1960s were decades during which postwar affluence contributed to changing lifestyles. Expanded audiences for interior decorating, home entertaining, and travel abroad enlivened notions of cosmopolitan cachet. As “vinyl archaeologist” Jennifer McKnight-Trontz observes, “In the 1950s, American homes, especially in the new suburbia, became full-service temples with new appliances, television, a state-of-the-art sound system, and the music you wanted anytime you wanted it. A simple LP could put your life in order (such as Columbia’s *Music for Gracious Living* series), help you relax, even make you feel good. Why leave home?”<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, of course, the development of international tourism for a mass US population united the marketing of hi-fi sets, exotic motifs – Afro-Cuban rhythms, Hawaiian honeymoon, Latin dancing – and packaged tours to create a vision of the rest of the world and how to travel through it. As well, consumers saw the marketing of Broadway shows, movies, and soundtracks such as *Flower Drum Song*, *The King and I*, and *South Pacific* that showcased

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<sup>17</sup> Mike Evans, *Vinyl: The Art of Making Records* (New York: Sterling, 2015).

<sup>18</sup> Paul Théberge, Kyle Devine and Tom Everett, “Introduction: Living Stereo.” In *Living Stereo: Histories and Cultures of Multichannel Sound*, edited by Paul Théberge, Kyle Devine, and Tom Everett (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 1-34.

<sup>19</sup> Dominic Bradbury, *Mid-century Modern Complete* (New York: Abrams, 2014), 6.

<sup>20</sup> Jennifer McKnight-Trontz, *Exotiquarium: Album Art from the Space Age* (New York: St. Martins, 1999), 3. See also Rob Chapman, “Introduction,” in *Album Covers from the Vinyl Junkyard* (London: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 1997).

“international” themes. Record labels developed new offerings: In the mid 1960s the respected jazz label Verve Records collaborated with *Esquire* Magazine to release several “sound tour” albums that included gatefold sleeves, color photographs, and “insider” information for the continental connoisseur. Capitol Records producer Dave Dexter’s “Capitol of the World” series featured albums representing at least twenty-five countries, including Egypt, Italy, and Argentina. For historical context, the war in the Pacific was still recent memory when Capitol released *Japanese Sketches* in 1958.

We have recently noted an increased interest in material culture, particularly in the objects that surround us and engage us and make us who we are. As sociologists Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward found in their study of vinyl in the digital age, “What makes tangible objects like vinyl important to humans is that, being relatively unchanged, they give perceptually stable form to our feelings that often get dimmed by the passage of time and changes within ourselves. They lend that feeling of reassuring concreteness to the dreamy quality of our memories.”<sup>21</sup> This certainly rings true regarding the development of consumer goods and consumer culture in the United States, and in the way US citizenship engages with the stuff of the world. Further, the place of the United States in the global economy is being challenged, and surpassed, by China and India and a generalized identity anxiety may be emerging as many people in the United States begin to notice cracks in what had been perceived as normal and enduring, rather than historically situated and contingent. A pressing interest, then, in the building blocks of “our” society, “our” culture and history – and looking to the postwar period – is growing.

## 2 The Album Cover

It might seem obvious that album covers should be square, reflecting practical qualities for flat edged shelf storage and efficient coverage for the circle within, but the square format itself has a graphic design history, and is still seen to be “a symbol of uncompromising modernity.”<sup>22</sup> Alex Steinweiss invented the album cover while working for Columbia Records during the

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<sup>21</sup> Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward, *Vinyl: The Analogue Record in the Digital Age*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 176.

<sup>22</sup> Steven Heller and Veronique Vienne, *100 Ideas that Changed Graphic Design* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2012), 47.



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1940s and 1950s.<sup>23</sup> Steinweiss's innovation provided a package that both protected and promoted LPs as it associated sound recordings with images. As designer Paula Scher remarked: "When you look at your music collection today", for example, the small identifying album icons on iTunes, "you are looking at Alex Steinweiss's big idea."<sup>24</sup>



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<sup>23</sup> Stephen Heller, "Historical Critique: For the Record." *Critique: The Magazine of Graphic Design* 7 (Winter 1998): 36-45. See also Jennifer McKnight-Trontz and Alex Steinweiss, *For the Record: The Life and Work of Alex Steinweiss* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Steven Heller, "Alex Steinweiss, Who Made Album Covers Artful, Dies at 94." *New York Times*, July 20, 2011, A20.

Figure 4. Dinner Music, Columbia Records, c. 1940. (Cover by Alex Steinweiss)

The word album derives from the Latin *albus*, white, and also *albho*, white ghostly apparitions. By definition, an album is a book with blank pages for the insertion and preservation of collections, such as photographs or other keepsakes. Alternatively, an album has been defined as a blank tablet on which records or notices were inscribed, registered, or listed. In the case of ethnographic collections or “ethnic” music, “album” evokes the (white) colonialist potential of a medium that begins as a blank slate and treats the observed exotic native, often dark-skinned, as an object to be reported on and recorded by the outside observer.<sup>25</sup> Recorded music albums are albums within albums. The black vinyl disks are inscribed with a collection of musical pieces held within another album form: two covers containing liner notes (which evolved from concert program notes), illustrations or photographic images and the index of songs, composers, and performers. Record album images are visual and aural: the photographs or designs on the covers collaborate with the music and lyrics inside. Albums, liner notes, and song lyrics instruct and inform through their representations of place, history and culture.

Album cover design quickly emerged as an important arena for graphic design, and soon after, photography. Graphic artists such as Steinweiss and Jim Flora at Columbia, Erik Nitsche at Decca, Reid Miles at Blue Note, as well as Alvin Lustig, Andy Warhol, Ben Shahn, and Bob Cato contributed to the early art of album cover design.<sup>26</sup> Following upon designer S. Neil Fujita’s innovative ideas, photographers such as W. Eugene Smith, William Claxton, Francis Wolff, and Lee Friedlander contributed to the burgeoning genre, as the album cover came to represent a significant forum for design and cultural expression.<sup>27</sup> Examples include Richard Avedon applying his signature style to the cover of Dave Brubeck’s *Jazz: Red Hot and Cool*, contributing a fashion photographer’s eye to a modern musical form by capturing an in-the-club aesthetic. As well, Roy DeCarava, who came to prominence in the 1940s and 1950s photographing jazz musicians and everyday life in Harlem, gives us the lonely blue room on

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<sup>25</sup> Janet L. Borgerson and Jonathan E. Schroeder, “Ethical Issues of Global Marketing: Avoiding Bad Faith in Visual Representation,” *European Journal of Marketing* 36 nos 5/6 (May-June, 2002): 570-594.

<sup>26</sup> See Eric Kohler, *In the Groove: Vintage Record Graphics 1940-1960* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999); Richard Evans, *The Art of the Album Cover* (New York: Chartwell Books, 2010); Jacques Denis and Antoine de Beaupré, *Total Records: Photography and the Art of the Album Cover* (New York: Aperture, 2016); V. Vale and Andrea Juno, *Incredibly Strange Music, Volume 1* (San Francisco: RE/Search, 1993); and Francesco Spampinato and Julius Wiedemann (ed.) *Art Record Covers* (Berlin: Taschen, 2017).

<sup>27</sup> Kevin Reagan, *Alex Steinweiss: The Inventor of the Modern Album Cover* (Cologne: Taschen, 2010). See also Steven Heller, “Waxing Chromatic: An Interview with S. Neil Fujita.” AGIA The Professional Association for Design (blog), Sept 18, 2007, <http://www.aiga.org/waxing-chromatic-an-interview-with-s-neil-fujita/>.

Big Bill Broonzy's *Big Bill's Blues*, from the "Adventures in Sound" series. The energy-evoking cover of West Side Manhattan-based nightclub jazz album, *Jumpin' on the Left Bank*, features a photo by Friedlander, well-known for capturing contemporary life on the street.

For instrumental jazz and classical albums, cover design could provide important cues and clues about the musical style, tone, and overall feeling of an LP.<sup>28</sup> The Blue Note label, in particular, became respected for its vinyl album covers, which often featured striking black and white photographs of its' jazz performers, as they developed a visual identity to match their sound."<sup>29</sup> As Grønsted and Vågnes suggest, "A genre just a little over half a century old, the record cover has always been an indissoluble part of the larger realm of popular culture, often epitomizing vital trends or offering a visual shorthand for the cultural zeitgeist."<sup>30</sup> Thus, in a short period, a new design icon emerged.

Capitol was the first major record company in Los Angeles, and brought a vibrant use of color photography to album cover design. In their celebratory fiftieth anniversary book from 1992, they boasted "Trends were spotted early by discriminating designers and applied to record covers to grab the attention of the consumer as far back as Capitol's history extends. Innovative concepts in photography, illustration and graphic design led potential buyers to judge music by its covers. When drab album art was the norm, Capitol introduced color, graphics and...sex appeal!"<sup>31</sup>

Of course, there are many contexts for considering the relationship between album covers and the recorded music within. Marvin Schwartz, longtime Art Director for Capitol Records (and credited with designing the Grammy award statuette), thought LPs that did *not* feature portraits of the performers led to creativity with album cover design: "Capitol has a policy of allowing the recording artist to approve any photography or art that displays their likeness [...] so it's in the non-likeness areas where the design opportunities occur."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Carissa Kowalski Dougherty, "The Coloring of Jazz: Race and Record Cover Design in American Jazz, 1950 to 1970," *Design Issues* 23, no. 1 (Winter 2007), 48-49.

<sup>29</sup> Benjamin Cawthra, *Blue Notes in Black and White: Photography and Jazz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 9. See also Graham Marsh and Glyn Callingham, *The Cover Art of Blue Note Records: The Collection* (London: Collins & Brown, 2010).

<sup>30</sup> Ashbjørn Grønsted and Øyvind Vågnes, "Introduction," in *Coverscaping: Discovering Album Aesthetics*, Ashbjørn Grønsted and Øyvind Vågnes, eds. (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2010), 12.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Paul Grein, *Capitol Records: Fiftieth Anniversary 1942-1992* (Hollywood, CA: Capitol Records, 1992), 9.

<sup>32</sup> Ted Poyser, "Capitol Album Covers," *CA: The Journal of Commercial Art*, 2 (September, 1960), 43.





Figure 5. *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation*, Ornette Coleman Double Quartet, Atlantic Records, 1960

Other record companies began to reproduce imagery by visual artists, created outside the album design department, for their album covers. Numerous albums from the 1950s and 1960s featured abstract art, which fostered sympathetic connections between visual and musical expression. Modern art seemed especially apt “to illustrate the spontaneity, call-and-response rhythms, and dynamic energy of jazz – avant garde sounds were paired with avant garde

imagery.”<sup>33</sup> For example, Jackson Pollock’s abstract expressionist painting *White Light* appears on the front cover of Ornette Coleman’s LP *Free Jazz* from Atlantic Records. The absence of any image of Coleman himself resonates with our interests in the interaction of the LP and midcentury ideologies: “In replacing his image with one of contemporary art, Atlantic removes jazz from its club environment, and evokes instead the cultural currency of ‘Western art’ forms and modernist aesthetic values.”<sup>34</sup> Much midcentury album design heralded progress, technology, and modernity.<sup>35</sup>

Cultural historian Benjamin Cawthra provides an insightful analysis of the cultural roles of musical imagery: “As LPs served to market the music to fans around the country, and indeed, around the globe, the obscure genre of jazz photography flowered into a full-blown visual culture with its own stylistic variations, its own special photographic conditions, and its own iconic subjects. Many of the most important of these subjects were African American, and as jazz on LP reached wider audiences in the late 1950s, African American musicians were depicted as serious artists at the very time that black American’s demands for equality could no longer be ignored.” In this context, midcentury vinyl LP covers invoked a pedagogical aspect that in some cases supported wider cultural visibility and artistic recognition of African-Americans and other minorities.

### 3 Consumption and Modernism at Midcentury

Record albums, as popular, mundane, and mass culture artifacts in postwar America, were designed to teach US citizens about ideal lifestyles, including family bonds and how to entertain at home, as well as, how to travel the world. So, it wouldn’t be surprising to find that events overseas, after World War II and during the Cold War, influenced what our record albums communicate, especially given our sense that vinyl LPs of the time served as an essential information distribution format. And, indeed, in small and grand ways, from details

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<sup>33</sup> Dougherty, “The Coloring of Jazz,” 49.

<sup>34</sup> Hilary Moore, “Painting Sound, Playing Color: The Multiple Voices of Ornette Coleman’s *Free Jazz* and Jackson Pollock’s *White Light*,” in Asbjørn Grønstad and Øyvind Vågnes (eds.) *Coverscaping: Discovering Album Aesthetics* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2010), 193.

<sup>35</sup> “To provide striking cover art for the company’s five hundred annual releases, Capitol’s art director, Marvin Schwartz, cultivated not only renowned graphic designers like [Saul] Bass but also photographers and illustrators, most notably William Claxton and Robert Guidi.” Jeremy Aynsley, “Graphic Design in California,” in *California Design 1930-1965: Living in a Modern Way*, edited by Wendy Kaplan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press/Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2011), 280.

of kitchen design to voices of the lunar landing, our records express, making subtle arguments for, the superiority of democratic capitalist freedoms in contrast with Soviet life.

Consider the American National Exhibition, held in Moscow in 1959: the trade fair, “designed by George Nelson, was intended to promote the comforts and contentment of a materialistic society as a contrast to the communist regime and lifestyle.”<sup>36</sup> A film, *Glimpses of the USA*, by American design team Charles and Ray Eames, was shown on giant television screens. During the fair, the “rituals of family life were enacted four times a day with a wedding, a honeymoon, the backyard barbecue, and the country-club dance.”<sup>37</sup> In these rituals, one finds notions of romance, love, individual freedoms, and family values, each of which figured in attempts to articulate and visualize aspects of US superiority over the gloomy communist alternative – often portrayed as disregarding aspects of individual attachment, desire, and welfare in favor of political and cultural ideology.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Diane Boucher, *The 1950s American Home* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2013), 59.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>38</sup> See Laura Belmonte, *Selling the American Way: U.S. Propaganda and the Cold War*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008). For further analysis of how such contrasts play out more broadly throughout 500 years of history, see Judith Flanders, *The Making of Home: The 500-Year Story of How Our Houses Became Our Homes* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2014).



Figure 6. "Home economist Anne Anderson demonstrating appliances and features of RCA-Whirlpool 'Miracle Kitchen of the Future,' a display at the American National Exhibition in Moscow." Photograph by Bob Lerner for the *Look* magazine article "What the Russians Will See," March 1959.

These "rituals of family life" that were "enacted four times a day" at the forty-two day Moscow exhibition appear frequently among "Home" LPs: albums from the RCA series "Music for Hi-Fi Living" contain titles focused around a country club dance, as well as, two weddings and a honeymoon scenario. The RCA "Music for Dinner at Home" series includes a barbecue album, and the "Music for Gracious Living" series features a pedagogical guide to backyard barbecuing and bringing guests home for a party *After the Dance*.





Figure 7. *Holiday Abroad in London*, RCA Victor Records, 1958

For example, in 1958, RCA Victor released their “Holiday Abroad” LPs, “recorded in Europe by leading continental orchestras” and featuring “musical trips to cities serviced by Sabena, Belgian World Airlines.” RCA invited dealers “all aboard for high-flying profits,” and promised ads in *Holiday*, the *New York Times*, and the *New Yorker* to promote the series, as well as a “national disk-jockey promotion and contest, featuring 18 overseas trips as prizes.”<sup>39</sup> Each title showcased a different orchestra, with water colors by Pittsburgh-born African-American artist Mozelle Thompson, who designed dozens of covers for RCA, as well as Broadway

<sup>39</sup> Holiday Abroad Promotion [advertisement], *Billboard*, November 10, 1958, 21.

posters and children's books.<sup>40</sup> One of the few African-American artists working for major record labels in the 1950s and 1960s, Thompson produced noteworthy covers for RCA's 1951 version of *Porgy and Bess* and MGM's *The Lonesome Sound of Hank Williams*, as well as the five volume "Black America" spoken word series for Buddha Records.

Historian Lizbeth Cohen has argued that the postwar rise of the "consumer republic" profoundly changed "America's economy, politics, and culture, with major consequences for how Americans made their living, where they dwelled, how they interacted with others, what and how they consumed."<sup>41</sup> In particular, at midcentury, new forms of entertaining, listening, and watching emerged: "The legendary white middle-class family of the 1950s, located in the suburbs, complete with appliances, station wagons, backyard barbecues, and tricycles scattered on the sidewalks, represented something new. It was not, as common wisdom tells us, the last gasp of "traditional" family life with roots deep in the past. Rather, it was the first wholehearted effort to create a home that would fulfill virtually all its members' personal needs through an energized and expressive personal life."<sup>42</sup>

However, the midcentury was also an "age of anxiety."<sup>43</sup> The Cold War suffused contemporary living in the US, and the American home was central to conflicting visions of a good life during a period dominated by dueling superpowers and concerns to "contain" Soviet Communism. As literary theorist Alan Nadel argues, "The story of containment had derived its logic from the rigid major premise that the world was divided into two monolithic camps, one dedicated to promoting the inextricable combination of capitalism, democracy, and (Judeo-Christian) religion, and one seeking to destroy that ideological amalgamation by any means."<sup>44</sup> Consumer goods occupied central roles on both sides of the Cold War propaganda battles. In this way, "the commodity gap took precedence over the missile gap."<sup>45</sup>

In the United States, individuals were understood to have the freedom to make their own lives, in part through their access to a wealth of available resources, including affordable consumer

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<sup>40</sup> Nick Kipper, "An Exhibit Showcases Classic Album Covers by a Forgotten Local Artist," *Pittsburgh City Paper*, October 29, 2014, <http://www.pghcitypaper.com/pittsburgh/an-exhibit-showcases-classic-album-covers-by-a-forgotten-local-artist/Content?oid=1787449>.

<sup>41</sup> Lizbeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 8.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

<sup>43</sup> Andrea Carosso, *Cold War Narratives: American Culture in the 1950s* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2012), 10.

<sup>44</sup> Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 3.

<sup>45</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 156.

goods and services. The “sovereign,” or self-determining, choices they made among these available options marked a key distinction within US-Soviet propaganda battles: “Consumer sovereignty was the most popular Cold War wedge between east and west, one that – unlike the apocalyptic balance of nuclear terror – struck into the heart of everyday life.”<sup>46</sup> Sociologist Don Slater argues that “the eminently modern notion of the social subject as a self-creating, self-defining individual is bound up with self-creation through consumption: it is partly through the use of goods and services that we formulate ourselves as social identities and display these identities.”<sup>47</sup> In the contexts of consumption studies, we recognize the way concepts like *materiality* and *agency* inform how people become who they are, and we think of this project as a case study on the intersections of identity creation and material culture, concentrating on a set of vintage vinyl albums. In this sense, consumption and daily practices in a consumer culture brought the Cold War into the home.

In particular, the kitchen, a paragon of domestic comfort, family togetherness, and modern technology, “became one of the central sites of Cold War rhetoric.”<sup>48</sup> During the infamous “kitchen debate” between US Vice President (and Presidential candidate) Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in 1959, “nuclear proliferation rhetoric moved to the domestic space and to the suburban home, as the two leaders tensely debated the merits of capitalism vs. socialism in front of a world-wide television audience at the inauguration of the American National Exhibition in Moscow.”<sup>49</sup> Historians Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann, wrote about “kitchens as technology and politics” in a book on the Cold War kitchen. They argue that after the world witnessed Nixon and Khrushchev lingering over a display of lemon yellow General Electric appliances, some researchers claimed that regardless of Sputnik successes and other scientific advances, “from then on, technology was to be measured in terms of consumer goods rather than space and nuclear technologies.”<sup>50</sup> For the Soviets, investing in “technological systems” that would serve all citizens, such as buses, trains, housing programs, and childcare centers, stood against U.S. Cold War emphasis on individual,

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<sup>46</sup> Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1997), 35.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 31. See also Janet L. Borgerson, “The Flickering Consumer: New Materialities and Consumer Research,” *Research in Consumer Behavior* 15 (2013), 125-144.

<sup>48</sup> Carosso, *Cold War Narratives*, 56.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>50</sup> Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann, “Kitchens as Technology and Politics: An Introduction.” In *Cold War Kitchen: Americanization, Technology, and European Users*, ed. Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 6. See also Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), Gretchen Simms, “The 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow and the Soviet Artistic Reaction to the Abstract Art,” Doctoral Dissertation, Faculty of Historical and Cultural Studies (University of Vienna, 2007), and Kate A. Baldwin, *The Racial Imaginary of the Cold War Kitchen: From Sokol’niki Park to Chicago’s South Side* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2016).

and individually purchased, consumer goods, such as privately owned cars and suburban homes. Echoes of the related claims to lifestyle superiority can still be heard today, often connected to the same goods and services. We see then the strategic importance of focusing on certain consumer goods, and the contemporary consumer lifestyles these make possible – for example the convenience, comfort, even glamour, of automobile ownership or the updated refrigerator – in midcentury media communications, and also why concerted efforts at communicating these messages might appear in the humble form of the LP record album cover.

A key tenet of Soviet Cold War propaganda maintained that the United States lacked a distinctive or historically developed culture of its own. Indeed, America was castigated as obsessed with trivial (and uncultured) entertainments, consumer choice, and ephemeral distractions – aspects of precisely those elements the United States engaged for Cold War cultural diplomacy and ideological defense. To counter such assertions, the US harnessed key cultural forces of jazz, modern design, and abstract art, holding up each as a symbol of affluence, freedom, and individual expression. To be sure, modernism represented disparate movements within a variety of cultural arenas, tenuously linked together via a sense of rebellion against tradition. During the postwar era, however, “modernism took on new and surprising meanings due to the changing political and cultural environment, eventually being used in support of Western middle-class society.”<sup>51</sup>

Modernism “illuminates both the cold war ideology and the domestic revival as two sides of the same coin: postwar Americans’ intense need to feel liberated from the past and secure in the future.”<sup>52</sup> For example, modern furniture was well-suited to a less formal era, and served to accommodate and display the new television and hi-fi sets that were becoming staples of the midcentury household.<sup>53</sup> For example, George Nelson and Henry Wright’s influential book *Tomorrow’s House*, from 1945, discussed radio-phonographs, record players, speakers, and record storage as essential ingredients.<sup>54</sup> As Elizabeth Armstrong, curator of the noteworthy “Birth of the Cool” exhibit at the Orange County Museum of Art observed in 2008,

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<sup>51</sup> Greg Barnhisel, *Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature, & American Cultural Diplomacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 2. See also Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War* (New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1998), Kristen Matthews, *Reading America: Citizenship, Democracy, and Cold War Literature* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), and Keith M. Murphy, *Swedish Design: An Ethnography* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

<sup>52</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 12.

<sup>53</sup> David Attwood, *Sound Design: Classic Audio & Hi-Fi Design* (London: Octopus, 2002), 25.

<sup>54</sup> George Nelson and Henry Wright, *Tomorrow’s House: How to Plan Your Post-war Home Now* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1945).



“Midcentury modernist architecture and design have been appointed as backdrops for and symbols of a confident urbanity, starring in Hollywood films and fashion shoots and used by high-end advertisers and mass commercial outlets to sell everything from luxury cars, credit cards, and investment services to vodka, sneakers, and blue jeans.”<sup>55</sup> Of course, as we shall see, modernism had been recruited for this and more since its inception. In our attempts to bring vinyl albums into a discussion about midcentury, modernist ideals, we join art historian Maud Levin’s effort to “approach design from the broader field of visual culture criticism.”<sup>56</sup>

Cold War cultural skirmishes have been discussed in the context of art, film, furniture, jazz, magazines, books, radio, and popular exhibitions. Still, few accounts of modernism’s role in Cold War cultural diplomacy, cultural imperialism, pedagogy, and propaganda mention record albums. Yet, when looking closely at midcentury vinyl LPs, an overarching sense of how the Cold War trickled down into popular culture artifacts becomes apparent. Although some albums specifically addressed military power and advanced technology, such as *Air Power* and *X-15 and Other Sounds of Rockets, Missiles, and Jets*, the larger battle over ideological, military, and political supremacy raging between the two super powers encroached upon the design, music, and marketing of mainstream, popular albums as well.

## 4 CONCLUSION

In taking this peek into an analog archive, we explore the pedagogical role of the midcentury vinyl LP in the historical context of Cold War rhetoric and developing contemporary consumer culture. These media artifacts delivered mood music, lifestyle advice, global sounds, and travel tips to midcentury Americans who longed to be modern. Looking back at midcentury record albums today offers compelling visions from a time that brought the ideal home, continental style, and international travel more fully into mainstream US society. Lifestyle LPs that featured attractive images of appliance-filled kitchens; jazz albums adorned with abstract art; and Cuban music, with bright, sensually colored covers, released before Castro all appear as subtle components of the ideological struggles of the era that instructed US consumers on living and listening to the good life.

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<sup>55</sup> Elizabeth Armstrong, “The Square and the Cool: California Art, Design, and Culture at Midcentury” in *Birth of the Cool: California Art, Design, and Culture in Midcentury*, Elizabeth Armstrong, ed. (Newport Beach, CA: Orange County Museum of Art and Prestel, 2007), 56.

<sup>56</sup> Maud Levin, *Clean New World: Culture, Politics, and Graphic Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 6.

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