

The Cover Issue: Exploring the Death of Album Art

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Four men walking across a zebra crossing. A baby, swimming after a dollar bill on a fish hook. A heart-shaped hand-grenade, grasped in a cartoonish, white hand. Although the spheres of visual and musical art have always been connected, it is interesting to realise that throughout the latter part of the 20th century it has been the music industry, rather than the visual arts, which has produced some of our most iconic pieces of modern art. In today's society, where popular music is much more accessible than the 'higher' art forms, it is the cover art of up and coming albums, rather than photographs by Diane Arbus or Monet's *Waterlilies*, that resonates in people's minds. Cover art has developed into much more than a portrait of the artist on a coloured background. A musical album cover has become a means of expressing the ideals, the beliefs, and the heroes of the artists themselves. It is a way of expressing a concept, of furthering the musician's 'aesthetic' or feel, and of commenting on the society of the time. Whether musicians design the cover themselves, or whether it is created for them by an industry professional, the development of cover art is a vital part of any album.

In the early-to-mid 20th century, the only way of purchasing music to listen to was on vinyl records, and their jackets were most commonly adorned by a simple portrait of the artist—occasionally with artistic lighting or an atmospheric backdrop. It was not until the 1960s when, backed by the energy of the counter culture and the ideas of individualism and rebellion, artists finally began to use the twelve inch record jacket to full effect. Album artwork became extravagant and diverse, ranging from intricate, fantastical dioramas, such as those favoured by Santana, to conceptual photographs like the Beatles' 'Abbey Road', to fold out sections and pop-out souvenirs, like the cardboard moustache and epaulets included in the 'Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band' album, to folksy oil paintings, such as Joni Mitchell's works. It was in this era that the full potential of an album cover was recognised—the musicians of the 1960s and '70s began to use their album covers to extend the ideas behind their own, personal music.

The eighties saw more changes, with heavy metal bands such as Metallica beginning to make use of very detailed drawn images, often including blasphemous use of religious icons, which added a 'shock factor' to the work. Many pop musicians returned to traditional photographed album covers, featuring artistic photographs of the artist, for example Michael Jackson's 'Thriller' and the covers of Cyndi Lauper's albums. Bands of the indie persuasion, such as the Smiths, often made use of images of cult figures, or provocative imagery, to cement their 'alternative' status—an example is their 1986 album 'The Queen is Dead' which features Alain Delon from the 1964 film noir, *L'Insoumis*. The nineties saw the end of hair metal, the rise and fall of boy and girl-groups, and the advent of several new genres entering the mainstream, including hip hop and grunge. At the forefront of grunge was the band Nirvana, whose classic album 'Nevermind' has become just as iconic as the elaborate record covers of the '70s.

With the dawn of the digital age, however, many people began to opt for purchasing their music online, and listening to it in digital format, rather than on a physical record. What does this mean for album art? In short, a great deal. When an album cover is only ever viewed on an iPod screen, it loses something—not least the tactile experience of listening to a record. Detail is also lost—the tiny images which have been put there by the artist, so that those few fans 'in the know' will recognise them and their meaning. Some of the most iconic, conceptual album covers have been made up of minute details, the full effect of which is only reachable when the artwork is viewed on a twelve inch vinyl cover—think of the faces of the historical figures

which are collaged onto the jacket of the Beatles' 'Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band'. By losing these details, the album artwork is losing something else—the meanings, concepts, and ideas so carefully woven into it by the artist.

Times have changed. Vinyl records are now little more than novelty pieces, a sign of how alternative and hip an individual is. Cassettes have completely faded into the history books, and even jewel-case CDs appear to be on their way out. The new medium for listening to music is the iPod—it is compact, it has good sound quality, and it looks much cooler than lugging around a walkman. Overall, it is hard to fault the wave of MP3 players that has swept our society—unless you look at it from the point of view of cover art. Think about it—in this age of digitalised music, all you see of an album cover is less than a square inch on an iPod screen. At that scale, you can't see that Paul McCartney was walking across Abbey Road without shoes on. You can't tell that the Nirvana baby was swimming after a dollar bill. You definitely can't identify the faces on the cover of 'Sergeant Pepper's'. These iconic album covers—these cornerstones in the history of the music industry—lose their detail, along with most of their meaning, in this digitalised age.

Album designs are changing with the times—the cover of Green Day's 'American Idiot', another example of iconic album art, shows use of simple designs to continue to express beliefs and issues connected with the musicians. However, can something simple enough to be still recognisable on an iPod screen truly express a concept as well as the classic albums of the '60s and '70s did? Or has the digital dawn spelled the beginning of the end for album art?