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Sound and Vision: Marketing Recorded Music in the Age of Radio

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SOUND AND VISION:
MARKETING RECORDED MUSIC IN THE AGE OF RADIO

by

Daniel Murphy

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ABSTRACT

SOUND AND VISION:
MARKETING RECORDED MUSIC IN THE AGE OF RADIO

by

Daniel Murphy

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2016
Under the Supervision of Professor Richard Popp

In the early 1930s, the popularity of radio and the economic austerity of the Great Depression threatened to make the phonograph record obsolete. However, by the time the United States entered World War II in 1941, records were returning to popularity. This return coincided with the first instances of the appearance of unique cover artwork on record albums. This thesis explores the cultural and industrial factors that converged in the late 1930s to make album artwork viable in ways that it would not have been earlier. This thesis also investigates how RCA Victor and Columbia, two record companies that had been acquired by national radio broadcasters, found increasingly visual ways to market records to potential audiences through magazine advertising, catalogs, and album artwork itself. An investigation of this historical moment provides insights that are relevant to contemporary concerns about the future of the recording industry.

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To Amanda

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAA	Associated American Artists
ARC	American Record Corporation
CBS	Columbia Broadcasting System
FAP	Federal Art Project
LP	Long-playing phonograph record
RCA	Radio Corporation of America
RPM	Revolutions per minute
WPA	Works Progress Administration (After 1939, Work Projects Administration)

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I. Introduction

Listening to music is often a visual experience. Whether a listener selects a song on a digital streaming service or puts a needle to a vinyl record, they find and understand music within a context of images—on screens and on packaging. The recording industry has long contextualized music and other sound media for audiences by pairing it with a range of visual media forms. However, the common manifestations of this relationship are neither inherent nor immutable. One can see them change even today, as the recording industry shifts its focus away from the promotion of physical sound media, with its highly visual packaging, to the promotion of streaming services. These digital spaces are still visual, but in a very different way. The relationship between sound and image persists in new ways that inform how listeners conceive of music itself.

The changing relationship between recorded sound and visual art today can be better understood in the context of earlier developments that shaped the union of sound and vision. In particular, the late 1930s were a time when recorded sound media was reconceived with an eye toward its visual form. In tandem, changing audiences for this music were identified, and the visuality of music provided a key element of appeals to their attention. The companies that dominated the recording industry took inconsistent and tentative steps at first, but their tactics would solidify over a short time, and would define how audiences consumed music for decades to follow. It wasn't until 1936—decades into the practice of marketing sound recordings to consumers—that American record companies began to release albums of records with custom cover artwork. Recorded music had been sold in massive quantities, for nearly fifty years, before record companies consistently applied a unique visual image to each release. Why, then, did visual art begin to become a central part of the consumer product of recorded music when it did?

This thesis examines trends occurring within the recorded music industry during the 1930s that have influenced the form of recorded media for nearly a century. Through a study of the companies that comprised the industry as reflected in trade publications and popular press coverage, combined with a textual analysis of packaging, retail marketing materials and advertising campaigns, I illuminate how album artwork found its expression in the US media ecosystem at this particular moment. In some ways album artwork was simply an example of the increasingly visual packaging that by the 1930s was a part of many consumer products. Unlike most packaging, however, album artwork has been lauded by historians and critics as a unique and enduring art form. Its elevation as such is inextricably linked to ideas about the product it promoted—music. Visual art can never truly encapsulate the experience of sound in the way that other product packaging can describe its contents. Regardless, the application of visual art to a consumer product that itself is seen as art has led to the album cover being treated with a greater degree of reverence than most packaging. Just like the musicians whose performances are captured on the records, many cover designers have become recognized and celebrated as artists thanks to the context of their work.

My investigation of the development of album art as a key component of recorded music will show that this was just one result of significant changes that occurred both within and beyond the industry that produced and sold recorded music to American consumers. I will examine trends in the recording industry from the pre-Depression economy of 1928 through the end of 1941 when the United States' engagement in World War II led to the rationing of raw materials, the repurposing of manufacturing facilities across industries, and a downturn in record production and marketing.¹ I will explore how the emergence of national broadcast network radio (1926-27), and soon after, the upheaval of Great Depression (1929) had lasting impacts on

both the industry that produced recorded music and the publics that consumed it. I will outline how the parent companies of emergent national radio networks (RCA and CBS) reconceived recorded music by acquiring the diminished leaders of the recording industry in the United States (Victor and Columbia, respectively) in their ambition to become vertically and horizontally integrated media companies. Once reinvigorated by these relationships, Victor and Columbia re-emerged as successful producers and marketers of recorded music—but not without significant and sometimes subtle changes to both the way they presented music and the music itself.

Album artwork became ubiquitous during the twentieth century, but it did not first appear as a fully formed concept. The use of unique visual elements on records themselves, intended to catch the consumer's eye and to differentiate individual releases, began to emerge in the US recording industry during the early 1930s. This period witnessed experiments including the first pressing of records using colored materials, the addition of artist images on center paper labels, and the impression of artists' signatures into the record material itself. At the time these experiments were short lived, and seen to have little impact on sales.² However, marketing experiments by Columbia Records in the late 1930s concluded that adding custom artwork to the cover of a bound album of records could significantly increase sales.³ This success was shaped by a number of factors stretching far beyond the visual form of the record itself.

As a tangible, physical component of audio media, album art provided visual definition and context to music, even though music—in many cases, exactly the same music—had been marketed with success in earlier decades without reliance on visual accompaniment. The coupling of music and visual art would later be further standardized by the introduction of the microgroove long-playing (LP) record format in 1948, which significantly increased the durability, sound quality, and storage capacity of records while simultaneously reducing the

overall cost of production. This innovation provided an opportunity to produce more lavish packaging, redesigned to provide stable storage and protection for records that could be played hundreds of times, at a still-profitable retail price point.⁴ It also accelerated a corporate interest in remastering, repackaging, and rereleasing past recordings to take advantage of these improvements.

In the years that preceded the introduction of the LP format, album art began to play a significant role in both the marketing of records and the experience of playback by listeners. This role would only become more central to the concept of the album over subsequent decades, as the emergence of music marketed to teenagers, like swing and later rock and roll, coupled with the increasing popularity of touring and live performance, encouraged listeners to create a conceptual continuity between the visual experiences of social and private listening. Although jukeboxes in bars were a popular venue for the social enjoyment of records, they privileged singles that would rotate out of each machine after a few weeks. Albums, on the other hand, encouraged fans to invoke the live music experience at home and to seek fuller sensory immersion in the ritual of playing records again and again.⁵ The recordings most likely to be released in the more expensive album format were at first classical and operatic music—by necessity at first, because the length of these recordings required multiple records to be packaged together. The higher price and higher prestige of these recordings coincided to define the most lucrative market for recorded music at the time.

Marketing rhetoric of the 1930s sought to define the concept of how to listen—and who *should* listen. This rhetoric often represented a classed, raced, and gendered shift toward the enjoyment of music within home media spaces, from the feminized space of the parlor designed for social entertainment, to the masculinized, individualized "deep listening" experience that

would later find further expression in the hi-fi culture of the 1950s. The bulk of marketing was focused on orchestral recordings of classical music (better served by the album format due to their duration) instead of popular dance recordings (the short and relatively inexpensive singles of their day). This marketing also served to define a canon of compositions and recordings that promoted a definition of the "ideal" music listener—who, not coincidentally, would also be a collector.

By the late 1930s, the recording industry, now an underperforming subsidiary of the broadcasting industry, was already repackaging and reselling its legacy—and doing so by banking on nostalgia. The newly integrated companies were able to devote greater resources to improving the technology of recording music, making electrical recording standard, and using electrical re-mastering to issue higher fidelity, more durable editions of the vast catalogs of master recordings they had acquired. Scholars have argued that from its beginning, recorded music has been inherently nostalgic, designed to invoke fond memories of experiences tethered to sound. The form of records also continued existing trends of modeling sound media after the familiar form of books. Many aspects of the physicality of albums, down to the name itself, were defined to maintain the semiotic function these aspects had served for books. Classical music historian Colin Symes has argued that the visual tropes that quickly solidified in album art and packaging were derived from what audiences would readily recognize as functional elements of books, in a sense serving as “material metonyms” that were able to imbue records with the semiotic weight of literature and the prestige of a well-appointed home library of literary masterworks.⁶ This semantic connection would only become stronger once made explicit through marketing that presented albums in a visual context.

Within the recorded music industry of the 20th century, album art presented a novel way to take advantage of the blank cardboard surfaces of the materials necessary to package and protect the delicate physical media within. However, album artwork has enduring precedents. The visual marketing of music long predates the invention of technology to record and play sound. The tradition of marketing music as a consumer good by pairing visuals to musical compositions can be traced back to the visual art that appeared on the printed covers of sheet music in the mid-19th century. The conceptual combination of visual elements and music in a physical object extends further back through the history of mass production, including notable examples like the printing of theater playbills and librettos for opera performances beginning in the early 17th century.⁷

A convergence of cultural trends beyond the recording industry gave the emergence of album artwork its unique aesthetic language and maximized its impact on consumers. The 1920s and 1930s witnessed the development and standardization of commercial art, graphic design, and typography as disciplines in US universities and art schools. This innovation was inspired by the spread of Modernist art trends that became popular in Europe during and following World War I, including Italian Futurism, Russian Constructivism, De Stijl in the Netherlands, and the Bauhaus in Germany.⁸ During the late 1920s, many European artists, typographers, and scholars of design sought refuge in the United States from the spread of fascism in Europe, finding work in universities and advertising agencies.⁹ American advertising executives also traveled throughout Europe during this period, and upon returning sought to incorporate these new styles and design philosophies into national print advertising campaigns.¹⁰

Improved technology for typography and printing also encouraged the standardization of commercial art forms. The parameters of professional type design were codified in books like

Daniel Berkeley Updike's *Printing Types: Their History, Use and Forms* (1922).¹¹ The academic discipline of commercial art effectively professionalized, industrialized, and masculinized what had in the United States been largely feminized traditions of decorative arts. Decorative traditions were redrawn with the dynamic, mechanized style of Modernism (and in some cases the aesthetic signifiers, if not the philosophies, of fascism). The aesthetic contrast between the covers of sheet music at the turn of the 20th century and early album art designs a few decades later illustrates this shift. As photo magazines like *Life* grew in circulation in the years leading up to World War II, album artwork presented a new opportunity to market music effectively within visually rich national media.¹²

A significant manifestation of these trends emerged as a direct result of the US government's response to the economic woes of the Great Depression. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) and its Federal Art Project (FAP), active from 1935 to 1943, subsidized the production of murals, sculptures, and other public art as a mechanism for economic revitalization and art education. The FAP's work also served as a propagandized representation of the "democratic surround," as Fred Turner has described the use of mass media, museums, and other public spaces to encourage democratic principles and civic involvement, and to discourage the growth of fascist movements across the US.¹³ The FAP is perhaps best remembered today for the tens of thousands of posters it designed for a wide range of uses. At the heart of these uses was the notion that the FAP represented an opportunity, in the words of FAP director Holger Cahill, for "bringing art to the common man."¹⁴ By the end of the 1930s, the high Modernist style favored by FAP poster designers would be familiar across the United States in even the most quotidian contexts—touting tourist attractions, encouraging consumerism, and warning of the dangers of venereal disease. Victoria Grieve has argued that the visual aesthetic and cultural

use of FAP posters represented an important shift to the conception of art as middlebrow culture, in opposition to the Victorian notion that art was a luxury reserved for the wealthy.¹⁵ The growing middle class audience for art, having developed a taste for Modernist European visual style and a knowledge of "art music" through network radio, would prove to be an ideal market for a consumer product that united music and visual art: the album.

The executives of the national radio broadcast corporations sought to capitalize on the attention and dollars of an audience that had grown accustomed to the Modernist visual aesthetic via national advertising and FAP public art. By venturing beyond radio into the production of physical media, these broadcasters were soon able to market products that combined the appeals of radio programming with coordinated and timely visual elements that were not confined to a retail space, but would go home with the consumer. RCA and CBS were among the companies who hired the first generation of graduates from commercial art programs—many of whom had also participated in the FAP. These young artists were tasked with developing innovative ways to incorporate dynamic visual elements into corporate media of various types including advertising, but also internal publications and retail displays. One of those early graduates was Alex Steinweiss. Steinweiss had entered designs in several FAP poster competitions in New York City, while studying at Parsons School of Design. His entries caught the attention of CBS president William S. Paley and Columbia Records president Ted Wallerstein, who in 1938 hired Steinweiss to be the first Art Director of Columbia Records. Historians of both the recording industry and graphic design regularly name Steinweiss as the inventor of the modern album cover, though this claim is complicated by extant examples of custom album art from the years preceding the 1940 release of *Smash Song Hits* by Richard Rogers and Lorenz Hart, which featured Steinweiss' first cover design.¹⁶ The attention paid by design historians to *Smash Song*

Hits and the tenure of Steinweiss as the invention of album art represents a notable gap in scholarship that I seek to illuminate with this project.

The standardized use of album artwork in the recorded music industry was representative of another larger trend at the time—that of the increasing specialization and professionalization of labor. The notion that manufacturing companies should have a dedicated art director arose in tandem with advances in the concept of a recording studio, and the roles of engineer and producer tasked with mastery of the studio space and its capabilities beyond simply knowing where to point a microphone. Early studio engineers, art directors, and holders of a range of other newly conceived professions were positioned to define an enduring set of professional standards for themselves.¹⁷

The physical development of the album as status object was shaped, and in some ways limited, by the retail environment in which consumers bought records. As both chain stores and dedicated music stores grew in prominence during the late 1930s, they instituted standardized systems that would come to define the visual retail context of record sales for decades to come, in effect shaping a record industry with two distinct tiers divided by not just marketing, but also by genres of music. Retail space offered little opportunity for dynamic cover art to catch the eye. Until Columbia's experiments suggested a correlation between album artwork and sales, the visual potential of the record and its packaging were not central to retail marketing or to extant accounts of audience experience. Even so, for decades after album artwork became seen as an effective selling tool, only the privileged classical, jazz and Broadway tier of the market for records would incorporate visual artwork.

These shifts in the content and form of recorded music were accompanied by a shift in the rhetoric of its marketing. If one considers album art as an element within a broad,

conventionalized visual marketing campaign, than it can be understood and analyzed as advertising intended to create the illusion of difference between essentially similar products. I will explore some of the ways that vast national marketing efforts by these integrated media companies sought to sell recorded music to an audience they had already defined for advertisers on their commercial radio networks. Network radio programming prioritized the Progressive rhetoric of uplift and music appreciation that carried over into recorded music, and provided a rationale for pairing both modern and classical visual art with recordings. It also provided a framework to promote the canonization of certain compositions and recordings as essential texts for any music lover, and the collection of these recordings as ideal objects of bourgeois consumption. No amount of radio listening could provide the easy visual shorthand of class ascension represented in the acquisition and display of luxury goods—in this case, a home library of music.

Media scholars and critics are divided on the ways that visibility and physicality impact the listening experience. Jan Butler, evoking the work of Jonathan Gray, categorizes album packaging as a paratext that provides either introductory or *in medias res* context for the music within, and is "both distinct from and intrinsically linked" to the music it represents. Butler privileges artwork created during and following the psychedelic era of the 1960s as distinct and more fully integrated into the creative process than what preceded it. She specifically marks The Beatles' *Revolver* (1966) as the point where deliberate artistic significance superseded marketing function in the visual presentation of the album.¹⁸ Prior to this shift, album artwork functioned primarily to advertise the grouping of recordings within as a singular unit, and to provide commercial context for retail display, rather than to expand the experience or meaning of the musical text itself. The material metonyms of books provided a convenient and familiar context

for the form of the album, its physical positioning in retail and home environments, and its role as signifier of social status.

Other scholars consider the context provided by album art to be at best wasteful, and at worst manipulative and detrimental to the listening experience. Theodor Adorno argued that the medium used to capture and store music defines the aesthetic characteristics of the music itself—a logic he extended to any human creation that becomes an industrial product. When sound is committed to physical media, the form of that media, including but not limited to its visual appearance, can shape ideas about the sound within for listeners before a single note is heard. In doing so, Adorno argued that this act of definition distorts or obscures the nature of the music itself, often shaping it to fit mercantile motives.¹⁹ When album art incorporates familiar imagery and styles that are pre-associated with the conventions of musical genre, it becomes a method of categorizing and conventionalizing initial impressions in a way that can be read by the eye, unlike most forms of sound media. Walter Benjamin warned against the reliance upon conventions in a commercial context, noting that "the conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion."²⁰ For an industrial product, playing to convention minimizes risk, but also has potential to limit the variety of content that is marketed. This is precisely what occurred once recorded music became a product of horizontally integrated media companies.

Chapter Two examines the historical moment when a combination of industrial and cultural changes resulted in the emergence of the album cover as a recognizable form of commercial art. This convergence relied upon a series of concurrent but heretofore unconnected trends: the incorporation of the recording industry into the broadcasting industry, the development of graphic design as a discipline, the governmental intervention in the promotion of

public art, and the increasing definition of professional standards for the recording, production, manufacturing, and marketing of media products. While historians have documented these trends independently to some extent, little work has been done to draw the explicit connections between them that I establish.

The ventures into marketing of physical sound media made by RCA and CBS in the years following the Great Depression were routinely influenced by the unique business traditions of Victor and Columbia, but also presaged media industry trends that have continued throughout the 20th century and into the 21st. The changes they brought to the form and content of recorded music, and the lasting innovations to the model of media production that these changes represent, merit a detailed investigation. I reinforce the historical significance of these trends using publications from both RCA and CBS that provide evidence of the rhetoric with which these companies discussed the details and rationale of their re-entry into the production of physical media. In all, these resources provide a framework to discuss how album artwork and the concept of the album itself were developed and marketed by newly integrated US media corporations—a process that provides an important early example of enduring business strategies employed by today's media industries.

Chapter Three examines how the recording industry took advantage, or failed to take advantage, of the trends explored in Chapter Two. I analyze the changes that occurred during the Depression years within the marketing of how, and more specifically by whom, music should be consumed. Along with limiting the types of music worthy of collection, the image of a record collector and the set of practices that would define this identity also begin to solidify during this period. Through an examination of trade discourse in publications including *Billboard*, *Variety*, *Radio Today*, *Music Trade Review*, and *Talking Machine World*, I explore how the rhetorical

promotion of the record collector as a marketing strategy was linked to a broader cultural concept of economic recovery and consumerism, influenced by a growing middle class appreciation for visual art. An examination of the advertising campaigns conducted by RCA and CBS in the late 1930s and early 1940s in national general interest magazines like *Life* and in newspapers like *The Chicago Defender* illustrates how these themes were realized visually, which sometimes but not always included the use of album artwork. This investigation also exposes a tension in the image of the ideal consumer of the recorded music they produced—especially with regard to how (and whether) records would be marketed to women and people of color. I show how the incorporation of album art, shaped by trends in modern art and advertising, reinforced the reassessment of the music packaged therein as a high culture product tailored to bourgeois accumulation, and the redefinition of the ideal consumer of music.

The promotion of a canon of recorded music that belonged in every home was a central aspect of the advertising strategies that would dominate the subsequent half-century of the recorded music industry. RCA Victor and Columbia conceptualized a canon of "must-have" music through divergent and often inconsistent marketing tactics that drew heavily on the advertising philosophies they had embraced from the earliest days of sound recording, filtered through new corporate interests. During the 1930s, the rhetoric in trade publications and consumer-directed advertising presents a shift toward private "deep" listening and the educational capacity of classical and operatic works over both the social listening of dance music (represented by the popularity of the jukebox), and the enjoyment of other genres of music more likely to be sold within budget lines. Visual elements reinforced this division.

To conclude, I contemporize the findings of the previous chapters by exploring the commonalities between today's recorded music industry and that of the earlier period I've

examined, before the ubiquity of album artwork. I argue that digital audio technology and the industrial shift from music-as-product to music-as-service have rendered album artwork—but not the role of visual marketing—largely obsolete. Instead, I argue that the recording industry has reverted to a focus on advertising and marketing music in ways that are not intrinsically bound to physical media, but are still largely visual. I position the "album era" as representative of a redefinition of recorded music as an integrated media product that relied on visual marketing—both surrounding and built into the music-as-product of the album—that deeply informed the relationship between music and listeners.

II. Recreating the Record: An Industry and its Audience

When artist Alex Steinweiss died in 2011, graphic design historian Steven Heller eulogized him in *The New York Times* as the “Originator of Artistic Album Covers.”²¹ Steinweiss’ body of work, first for Columbia Records and later for its competitors, has been widely celebrated and elevated as art. Colorful coffee-table monographs have documented the history of album artwork and the forms it has taken since 1940. Biographies of a handful of leading album art designers have constructed an insular, celebratory lineage that originates with Steinweiss’ clever application of modern art to a commercial product. However, the first artistic album covers were produced and featured in national advertisements while Steinweiss was still a student at Parsons School of Design and well before Columbia Records underwent the corporate restructuring that led to his hiring in 1939.²²

Little academic research has sought to contextualize the development of album art, and of the album itself as a media format, within the complex convergence of cultural and industrial trends that made these innovations possible. By the mid-1930s an audience emerged that was prepared to acknowledge and embrace the visual artistic potential of recorded sound media. This audience was identified and targeted by an industry that, having reached across the United States through the radio, sought to sell consumer products that could extend their cultural influence beyond the airwaves. By the late 1930s, the largest corporations within broadcasting had developed the tools, venues, and language to envelop recorded sound media in a strongly visual culture. This culture, which would not have been possible earlier, would help to reconceptualize the record and restore its popularity among music lovers.

The fates of the album cover and the concept of the album itself have been inextricably linked from the moment when both were introduced to the public, yet the circumstances that

connect them have not been previously connected in other academic studies. In this chapter, I will examine how changes that took place within the recording industry motivated and funded innovations to the form and presentation of recorded sound media. I will contextualize several industrial alterations that coincided with the shifting status of art and visual culture in the US, shaped in part by ideas imported from Europe by artists and designers seeking political asylum. As the federal government sought to use art to revitalize the economy through projects like the Works Progress Administration (WPA, renamed the Work Projects Administration in 1939) and its subsidiary the Federal Art Project (FAP), the American public watched as the lines between art and advertising began to dissolve. Once consumers regained their financial footing following the Great Depression, many of them shaped their spending around a desire to define and display their personal tastes by the products they chose to purchase and accumulate. More than ever before, these consumer choices were informed by the pervasive use of visual marketing and style both surrounding and incorporated into products.

The corporations that manufactured and distributed recorded music changed profoundly during and immediately following the Great Depression. A combination of industrial and cultural changes resulted in the emergence of the album cover as a recognizable form of commercial visual communication. This cultural and industrial convergence relied upon a series of concurrent but heretofore unconnected trends: the incorporation of the recording industry into the broadcasting industry, the extension of advertising's visual themes into product packaging, the development of graphic design as an academic discipline in the United States, the governmental intervention in the promotion of public art as both industry and as a model of democracy, and the increasing definition of specialized professional occupations within industries that produced and marketed media products. While historians such as Russell Sanjek,²³ Roland Marchand,²⁴

Victoria Grieve,²⁵ and Lynn Spigel²⁶ have documented these trends independently to some extent, existing research has not drawn the explicit connections between them that I will establish in this chapter.

The production and sale of recorded music had been a highly lucrative business through the first two decades of the twentieth century. The rapid spread of radio during the 1920s, however, temporarily obliterated the prosperity of the recording industry. For a one-time investment in a radio set, listeners had access to a seemingly endless stream of free entertainment and culture delivered to their homes. Records, on the other hand, were fragile, and even if treated with care often began to wear and audibly degrade after only a few plays. As a result, record sales fell precipitously over the course of the 1920s in the face of competition from radio. The economic downturn beginning in 1929 exacerbated this trend, as working class audiences with dwindling resources became less likely to buy music, especially when it was available for free through radio. However, some segments of the market fared better than others. While the sale of both high-priced prestige record lines like Victor's Red Seal and mid-range lines of popular and dance music plummeted, sales of hillbilly and race records were less impacted.²⁷ This can be partially explained by the uneven spread of both radio and home electrification. Historian Lerone A. Martin has argued that the predominately working class and/or minority audiences for these styles of music were among the last to have their homes connected to the electrical grid, and thus also less likely to purchase radios that required electricity.²⁸ For them, plugging a radio into a wall socket was not an option. However, records that could be played on a hand-cranked or battery-powered phonograph continued to be available to those without electricity.

From the earliest days of recorded music, some listeners found value or pleasure in accumulating a personal collection of their favorite recordings. The advertising rhetoric of the

major record companies before the 1929 stock market crash did not yet promote the notion of collecting a prescribed canon of music, but a tentative collector ethos began to emerge in trade and specialist publications well before the 1920s. As early as 1898, the trade journal *Phonoscope* acknowledged that “old records [were] in great demand, by enthusiasts who aim to possess valuable collections.”²⁹ However, the records available at that time were wax cylinders with limited playability. The shellac disc records available in subsequent decades only proved marginally more durable. While a tendency to accumulate rare or beloved records has existed as long as recorded sound media, these early iterations were largely impractical. *Talking Machine World* emerged in 1904 as a source of information and advice to record retailers, who were primarily dealers of phonographs, furniture, and later, radio receivers. The size and appearance of these sound playback devices, in addition to the materials used to house them (primarily desirable varieties of wood, carved and finished in contemporary styles) and their placement in the home meant that the devices were considered by many to be a type of furniture. They were often sold alongside furniture in showrooms styled to resemble the parlors and living rooms of prospective buyers. A consumer in the market for a new furniture suite could expect to find a phonograph or radio styled and finished to match any available option. *Talking Machine World* included photos of many such showrooms and extolled the breadth of styles available in playback devices, with a tendency to focus on their physical appearances in addition to their functional merits. Even inexpensive portable players were available in a range of colors, and advertised as such, by the late 1920s.³⁰ The same was true of the generic storage albums sold to organize records in the home.³¹ This emphasis on design and variety in the appearance of playback equipment and accessories signaled an understanding of the importance of appealing to music consumers with style—a move that would find greater realization later in the emergence

of album art.

In the years prior to the 1929 stock market crash, the discourse in the trade press regarding the consumer market for records was often inconsistent in its outlook. In its January 1928 issue, *Radio Broadcast* introduced a regular feature on new record releases, credited to both the popularity of the combination radio-phonograph apparatus and the availability of recordings by many performers whose celebrity was increasing through radio exposure. The April 1928 edition discussed how *Radio Broadcast* reviewers were beginning to accumulate a library of recordings, as they attempted to discern the new releases to which they had “formed a permanent attachment,” ones that “have gone into (their) library” rather than “into the ash can.” The feature provides brief reviews of a wide range of releases, identifying some as “excellent and worth adding to one’s collection.”³² However, the promotion of record collecting was not consistent; the following month’s installment posed the question “What’s new?” with regards to notable record releases, and answered it succinctly with two words: “Not much.” The column did posit, however, that the future success of the record lay in the relatively new concept of pre-constituted packages designed to collect a complete orchestral or operatic work over multiple records—specifically “good looking albums...accompanied by explanatory booklets.”³³ By July 1928 record features had been dropped from *Radio Broadcast* entirely, never to return. By December 1928, radio achieved such an overwhelming status in the *Talking Machine World*’s coverage that the editors announced a change of title to *Talking Machine World and Radio Music Merchant*. This new incarnation of the publication lasted only a year, ceasing publication after the stock market crash in 1929.³⁴

The Fall and Rise of the Recording Industry

The economic depression led to the liquidation of many formerly successful record companies. Victor, once the most successful company in the recording market, was purchased in 1929 by RCA for control of Victor's manufacturing facilities in Camden, New Jersey.³⁵ In 1934, Columbia Records' catalog of master recordings was purchased by the American Record Corporation (ARC), who specialized in producing budget priced reissues of popular recordings by familiar artists of the past. ARC functioned like a holding company by consolidating the catalogs of many smaller labels that succumbed to economic pressures.³⁶ In 1938, RCA rival CBS acquired ARC in order to access its radio transcription facilities and manufacturing equipment.³⁷ In the process, they acquired the Columbia Records' catalog, along with holdings from other consolidated labels that together represented about 20 percent of the entire US market for recorded music at the time.³⁸ The move into manufacturing allowed both RCA and CBS to expand into horizontally integrated media companies. This move further perpetuated the professional rivalry between the Victor and Columbia, both of whom had dominated the US market for recorded music since the turn of the century.

These changes in ownership meant that each company sought to renew efforts to innovate the production and marketing of records in an attempt to reinvigorate sales of recorded music. Focusing on radio audiences, both RCA and CBS framed the purchase of recorded music as an ideal opportunity for "bourgeois accumulation" and a tangible symbol of cultural status.³⁹ However, as I will discuss in Chapter Three, not all recorded music was marketed equally. RCA and CBS capitalized on radio listeners and phonograph holdouts with the use of a two-tiered market for records. In some ways this system already existed. Since at least 1915, budget-priced lines of small 5" to 8" records—consisting largely of hillbilly, race, and dance recordings—were

produced exclusively for mail-order catalogs like Sears-Roebuck and chain stores like Woolworth's.⁴⁰ While both catalog sales and chain store displays possessed the potential for visual marketing, the low price point of these records left no margin for artwork or packaging beyond a generic paper sleeve. Classical and operatic recordings were sold in larger 10" and 12" sizes, sometimes in multi-record albums, and at a significantly higher retail price through dedicated music stores and furniture stores that sold phonographs and radios. These sophisticated showrooms featured listening booths that demonstrated the latest consumer sound technology and provided for in-store record listening. Many of these retailers also devoted their storefront window displays to records, which increasingly favored those willing to produce visually striking marketing materials—a fact that was not lost on record executives and their art directors, who viewed these displays as *de facto* art galleries.⁴¹ The combination of a higher profit margin and an upscale, visual retail space provided greater flexibility to produce and market albums with unique visual elements—and directly influenced which genres of music would be most likely to include these features. The advertising rhetoric of the late 1930s promoted a conservative, traditional concept of collecting “quality” or “permanent” music—largely European classical and operatic music composed before the twentieth century. Both RCA Victor and Columbia heavily favored these musical styles in their national advertising campaigns. Although both companies devoted considerable resources to producing and releasing “popular” genres of music like dance, hillbilly, and race records, and had acquired smaller labels and established budget lines specifically to sell these genres of music, this segment of the record business was rarely represented in their advertising. Instead, both companies aimed their advertising at an audience who not only was willing to spend more money on accumulating records and high-end record players, but also drew on fond recollections of enjoying the same high art classical and operatic

music that had been aggressively marketed by these labels in the 1910s and 1920s.

Nostalgia for pre-radio successes of the recording industry influenced the habits of both listeners and record companies in the 1930s. RCA Victor and Columbia chose to emulate their own previous successes to reinvigorate record sales and to encourage consumers to build home record collections that drew heavily on the companies' own catalogs of recordings from previous decades. While the two company's notions of the music that belonged in these collections were similar, they were not identical. Their tactics also diverged regarding the suggested approach by which consumers should accumulate a personal library of records in their homes. The rhetoric in both trade publications and mass-market advertising presents a shift toward the privileging of private listening for appreciation, specifically to "permanent music," over both the social listening of popular dance music (represented in part by the popularity of the jukebox), and the enjoyment of other, less prestigious genres of music.

RCA and CBS's ventures into the marketing of physical sound media were influenced by the unique business traditions of Victor and Columbia, presaging media industry trends that have continued into the twenty-first century. The corporations brought changes to the form and content of recorded music, which created lasting innovations to the model of media production—both of which merit a detailed investigation. I will reinforce the historical significance of these trends by examining publications from both RCA and CBS that provide evidence of the rhetoric with which these companies discussed the details and rationale of their re-entry into the production of physical media. In all, these resources illuminate how album artwork and the concept of the album itself were developed and marketed by newly integrated US media corporations.

Shifts in Art and Visual Culture: Modernism and the Selling of Style

Graphic design arose as a uniquely twentieth century form, finding definition in tandem with the emergence of the middlebrow consumer as the target market of the advertising industry.

By the end of the 19th century, as Victoria Grieve has observed:

Americans became accustomed to a modernist visual vocabulary that brought fine art to a wider public and elevated consumer goods, whether sleek bathtubs or folk handicrafts, to the status of ‘art.’...Advertising, modern merchandising, and display techniques stimulated middle-class interest, influenced American artists, and blurred the lines between fine and commercial art...as businessmen realized that design mattered to their middle-class customers, they hired artists to improve the appearance of their products and marketing materials.⁴²

Companies also used design to invite middle class consumers to enjoy cultural forms that were once strictly the domain of elites.

The characteristics that have come to define modern graphic design as a break from tradition included a balance of form and function through the combination of the formerly disparate forms and aims of fine art and the bookbinder’s craft. Tradition had dictated that fine art should eschew functionality for pure expression and that a book should prioritize the function of delivering information.⁴³ European modernists of various schools identified the potential in exploring and expanding the visual form of textual information and sought new ways to communicate ideas on the printed page—beyond the signifiers of letters and words themselves. To the modernists, “text could be seen as well as read.”⁴⁴ Graphic design held the potential to direct the eye, stir emotions, and reinforce or emphasize ideas within text but beyond the neutrality of the typeset page that had been standard throughout Europe since the 15th century inventions of movable type and the printing press.

The philosophical goals of many Modernists coincided neatly with the desires of a number of other cultural forces during the 1920s and 1930s. Some state authorities saw great

value in co-opting these dynamic new visual styles to communicate ideas to the public beyond literal words, conscious recognition, or control. Political parties, both established and oppositional, consequently appropriated the style of modernist graphic design as a key element of their competing propaganda campaigns. The timing and location of modernist movements like Futurism and the Bauhaus meant that these styles soon became intertwined with the politics of fascism.⁴⁵ As fascist parties grew in power and influence across Europe, the originators of these and other design movements were faced with the choice either to contribute their skills at the party's behest or flee Europe to evade prison or death.⁴⁶ Many artists and intellectuals across disciplines found their way to the US and sought new venues for their work.

Upon their arrival in the US, artists including Herbert Bayer and Laszlo and Sybil Moholy-Nagy found receptive communities in divergent spheres, including fine art, advertising, and academia, as did theorists like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer.⁴⁷ Creative European minds of all disciplines brought with them modern ideas and practices that sought to reassess or even dismantle tradition. This desire found parallel realization in the development of Critical Theory and the spread of visual arts that embraced deliberate considerations of theory and method, arts that personified "Modernism's dual path of ambiguity and objectivity."⁴⁸ Some émigrés were hired to develop commercial art curricula at institutions that had previously favored fine art over the commercial, catering to students who sought careers in advertising or in-house product design and marketing within companies that manufactured consumer goods. Universities such as Parsons School of Design and the Pratt Institute underwent shifts in mission and identity that established their contemporary forms during this time, thanks to the influence of European Modernist expatriates.

In this American context, commercial art would soon become graphic design. Katharine McCoy has argued that graphic design only fully emerged at this time due to the state of printing technology. Industrial printing had, over the course of several decades, undergone a transformation to specialization, “separating form-giving from the technical production activities of type-setting and printing.”⁴⁹ This increasing division of labor, not historically a concern for most fine artists, favored reproduction-friendly visual styles produced by artists who considered mass production from the beginning of their creative process. The increase in the number of designers and art directors within corporate structures, in many different industries, coincides with the spread of Modernist style and a general sense of visual aesthetics as selling points of products. The technological advances extended beyond the separation of creative and technical labor. These trends also coincide with the spread of highly visual national print media that could present products in vibrant color at a relatively low cost, and radio advertising that could describe the appeals of stylish products, driving consumers to stores to see them for themselves.

Advertisers also saw the potential of Modernist design to achieve their ends through similar means. A number of American advertising executives, including Earnest Elmo Calkins, traveled to the 1925 International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts in Paris, where contemporary examples of European modernist art, signage, posters and packaging were on display. At the time, the idea of packaging and poster design as an art form was obscure enough in the United States that Herbert Hoover, then Secretary of Commerce, had declined an invitation to present an American pavilion at the exposition, “declaring that American manufacturers had little to show for themselves.”⁵⁰ Calkins and his contemporaries returned to the States determined to incorporate these styles into their work. Calkins advocated the notion of “styling” consumer goods to connecting advertising, packaging, and products through consistent

visual trends—in a manner that design historian Steven Heller considers a direct precedent to the idea of “forced obsolescence.”⁵¹ Throughout the latter half of the 1920s, the demands of the advertising industry fueled innovations in magazine printing, as publishers were persuaded to accommodate greater use of color and photographic reproduction. As wider use made these techniques relatively less expensive, advertising agencies were in turn able to sell their clients who manufactured consumer goods on the idea of creating packaging and products that were more visually sophisticated, often designed by the ad agencies themselves. Packaging soon became an extension of print advertising, and a space where style could be applied to even the most mundane consumer goods.

Graphic Design and the Federal Art Project

The inculcation of Modernist design thinking was not limited to industry and advertising in the 1930s, nor was its political use limited to Europe. Design also became a guiding principle of new initiatives launched during this period within the US public sector. As the US reeled from the shock of the Depression, the federal government instituted a series of programs designed both to stimulate the economy and to provide a bulwark against the rhetoric of fascism that was erupting around the world, including within the US. The disparate initiatives under the aegis of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) often sought ways to use modernist aesthetic techniques to communicate progressive, democratic ideals—which included the notion of consumerism as a democratic practice. In 1935, the Roosevelt administration formed the Federal Art Project (FAP) as the art production division of the WPA, to “provide jobs for artists in the short term, educate the public, strengthen national unity, and create a long-term private market for American art.”⁵² Artists and printers within the FAP produced millions of posters featuring

over 35,000 unique designs. The posters were hand painted at first, and later printed using serigraphy (silkscreen) techniques that had been developed for retail signage in New York City department stores.⁵³ When employed on a large scale, these techniques reduced the cost and labor required to print posters. At the same time, the artists designing the posters embraced the inherent limitations of serigraphy as an opportunity to develop a distinct and enduring visual style.

The use of serigraphy both promoted the spread of artwork and defined streamlined aesthetic qualities that could easily be used to express the visual language of modernism. However, it was the additional inclusion of American folk art elements that would create the visual aesthetic associated with the FAP—a style that would deeply inform early trends in album artwork. One of the explicit goals that the FAP inherited from its Progressive roots was a desire to locate, codify, and encourage examples of a “distinctly American cultural tradition.”⁵⁴ The FAP’s visual style employed avant-garde forms in service of nostalgia, and nostalgic forms in service of modernity. It looked at once to the future and the past, and offered both to consumers.

FAP poster art was highly socially prescriptive, and chief among these prescriptions was consumption. The art also promoted the normativity of white, middle class, socially aspirational life, education, and self-improvement as goals, and art appreciation as a means to those ends. The FAP was motivated by the notion that “art should be and could be interwoven with the very stuff and texture of our national life.”⁵⁵ For a middlebrow audience, however, art did not simply represent education and a desire to emulate the privileged. During the Depression years the FAP and WPA updated America’s existing museums, built new museums, and filled both with an ever-widening definition of American art that welcomed middlebrow forms. Art for a middlebrow audience not only avoided the seriousness of high-class art appreciation, but also

actively subverted it through the trappings of cheap entertainment. Through murals and posters in public spaces, the WPA and FAP invited middle class audiences to enjoy museum spaces and art events that once only welcomed the elite. As art became more accessible in both form and exhibition, it provided middle class audiences with an opportunity to disrupt traditional cultural hierarchy with irreverence and style that expressed a sensibility they could call their own.⁵⁶ The posters were both art and advertisements for a philosophy of art as popular self-expression. The posters drew upon the formal 1920s traditions of modern art's use in advertising, in public spaces that often set them alongside advertisements, reinforcing in middle class audiences a familiarity with art as a consumer appeal. Commercial art could provide its own reason for being, promote itself to reach a wider audience, and in turn allowed that logic to be applied to other consumer items in the form of packaging.

The FAP's efforts inculcated the idea of art as a middle-class consumer product that could reach beyond the museum and into the home. The FAP explicitly sought to create a middle class market for art that would both provide education to average Americans in a progressive tradition and create lasting lucrative work for artists, so they could devote themselves to further immersing America in art.⁵⁷ If encouraged properly, the two functions would foster a uniquely American culture and each other in perpetuity. The FAP poster artists were not permitted to sell their government-commissioned work, but a number of private companies saw potential in offering similar for-profit services, hiring FAP artists to create original works or licensing their pre-WPA visual art for limited-run lithographic reproduction. This art could then be sold directly to middle class consumers interested in building an art collection of their own, at prices that were within reach of many who would never before have had access to original art, or even an idea that it was something that could be bought. In national magazines including *Life*, companies like

Associated American Artists (AAA) advertised signed, numbered editions of lithographs by artists who had worked with FAP programs, like Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton. AAA's advertising made the intended appeals of its product explicit: "Realizing that under the old way prices necessarily were kept high...restricting ownership to wealthy collectors...[artists] now are selling direct to you. *Now every cultured person* can own a Genuine Original!...It is quite possible that your small investment will be enhanced correspondingly. This has proved the case many times."⁵⁸ In 1937, AAA sold 70,000 prints at the price of \$5.00, or framed for \$7.00.⁵⁹

Campaigns like that of AAA specifically encouraged the extension of "fine art" to include limited reproductions like lithographic prints and posters. The affordable techniques used were offset by the works' limited editions and the endorsement of the artists themselves. Middle class audiences were assured that even if the print was not a Benton painting, it had passed through his hands and was therefore still a genuine manifestation of his art. Thanks to the FAP and companies like AAA, posters and prints were less likely to be seen as cheap and thus gained status. The techniques of industrial printing and their inherent stylistic limitations would soon connect with record albums in a way that might not have succeeded if album artwork had been attempted earlier. Prior to the FAP's reshaping of the role of art in private life, the use of silkscreened illustrations on records could have been seen as *déclassé*, or something only appropriate for the whimsy of children. After the FAP, silkscreen art elevated these practices. Once album artwork came into use, buying records became another way to collect a form of modern visual art that could be displayed in the home. This art form had the potential to express two kinds of cultural literacy at once, while minimizing the stigma that had previously been associated with mass production. The FAP, building on contemporary trends in advertising, further encouraged the notion of commercial art as a valid, expressive form created through a

collaborative process and not solely by “lone geniuses,” disrupting the dominate notion of art as an elite distillation of individual ingenuity.⁶⁰

The development of parallel concepts of commercial advertising as art and fine art as commodity coincided with record companies’ increasing interest in advancing the same lines of thought among music consumers. The corporate structures of RCA and CBS were applying increasingly specialized divisions of labor to expand the mass production of art, even when the marketing rhetoric that accompanied their products continued to privilege the creative contributions of some stages over others. The modern concept of “design” itself can be seen as a manifestation of the tendencies already in place to elevate musical composers, conductors, and performers, and to locate and preserve the special aura of individual ingenuity and artistic expression within specialized and somewhat automated systems of mass production. Beyond the recording industry, these qualities would provide companies in many industries with novel competitive appeals that could be used to differentiate and promote their products. In the late 1930s, graphic designers and art directors, by then versed in the visual language popularized in the US by the FAP, provided industry with the artistic and technical acumen to graft a modern and uniquely American aesthetic sensibility onto most any product. If, in the case of recorded music, the product itself was already art, this combination proved doubly effective. The use of visual language to attach an emotional subtext to detergent or drain cleaner might seem craven and manipulative to some. Applying the same techniques to music that already evoked an emotional response from audiences possessed an efficient and seductive logic.

Much like the prevailing trends in American advertising and FAP poster art, the recorded music industry of the late 1930s and early 1940s embraced European Modernistic visual ideas—but with some qualifications. Record companies had little interest in a complete break from

tradition, because their interests were strongly tied to the somewhat risk-averse peddling of nostalgia. The FAP's brand of American Modernism, with its infusion of reassuring, familiar folk art elements in a dynamic Modernist context, offered a better aesthetic complement to recorded music—even prestigious classical and operatic recordings that themselves were still largely European—than austere, iconoclastic European Modernism. Many of Columbia's early marketing materials following the CBS acquisition could easily be mistaken for FAP posters. These include posters, in-store displays and direct mailers, many of which were produced and distributed with a Christmas theme to drive holiday sales.⁶¹ The line between FAP poster art and Columbia's sales materials would be further erased during World War II when Alex Steinweiss enlisted in the US Navy and designed training posters and materials as a member of its Training Aids Development Center.⁶²

A parallel of aesthetic (and at times nationalistic) concern can be seen between the FAP's inculcation of American modernist style and musical decisions made by Columbia under CBS ownership. This parallel was not limited to visual art. Columbia, when faced with the enduring dominance of RCA Victor's stable of European composers, conductors, and performers, sought instead to foster new and uniquely American versions of these traditional forms. Columbia invested resources in building the first recording studios in the US that could accommodate an entire orchestra performing at once, and made overtures to sign contracts with rising American talent rather than competing with RCA Victor for established European names.⁶³ This further cemented the logic of packaging such recordings with visual artwork that evoked the by-then familiar FAP aesthetic of new European/American stylistic hybridity and folk-modernism. Columbia's decision to develop a substantially American roster would also prove fortuitous by

the end of the 1930s when World War II interrupted the production of new recordings from many of RCA Victor's European artists.⁶⁴

Re-engineering the Reproduction and Packaging of Sound

The emergence of album artwork was not simply the result of cultural and conceptual changes to how music could be sold as a consumer item. The physical media itself changed during this period, in ways that expanded its abilities to both reproduce sound and contain visual images. A few of the key changes to records succeeded in the market at this specific moment after earlier attempts had failed; the historically specific context provides an explanation. Once the consumers of the pre-WWII years recovered a degree of financial stability, they became more accepting of new products and new state-of-the-art materials that to them signified the burgeoning buying power and cultural influence of the middle class. Even a few years earlier, consumers rejected similar products with skepticism.

Following its acquisition of Victor Records in 1929, RCA began to explore ways that they could improve the form of the record to make it more durable and increase its durational capacity while reducing manufacturing costs. An early initiative at the post-acquisition RCA Victor investigated materials that could provide an alternative to the shellac that had been used since the 1900s, when Emile Berliner's phonograph record overtook Thomas Edison's wax cylinder in popularity. Union Carbide, an innovator in the development of the petrochemical compounds that would come to be known as plastics, introduced a polyvinyl chloride compound called vinylite in 1931. RCA Victor soon attempted to market a record made out of vinylite, which they licensed and renamed Victrolac.⁶⁵ Records made from Victrolac were more flexible and less breakable than the previous shellac used for gramophone records.⁶⁶ While shellac

records were manufactured with an optimal play life of 100-250 plays (numbers often reduced drastically by poor handling, improper storage, and playback with worn needles), Victrolac records (and later, vinyl LPs) were manufactured to provide up to 5000 plays.⁶⁷ They also could withstand the cutting of finer grooves than shellac, and could therefore provide clearer sound reproduction over longer durations of recording. In the early 1930s, Victrolac was a tough sell to a public unfamiliar with plastics. The new records offered no price advantage over shellac. In addition, the new records also required new electric players that could take full advantage of the finer, clearer (but also quieter) sound quality of Victrolac records. Although amplified electric phonograph models had been available since 1925, acoustic models were still largely the norm for consumers. Those who had not been persuaded to go electric in more robust economic times were slow to switch over to expensive, incompatible, and unproven playback devices in 1931. These devices and records, although technically superior, failed to resonate with consumers whose choices were under sway of the Depression-era mood of austerity and caution—and limited by a lack of money.⁶⁸

RCA Victor abandoned its retail marketing of Victrolac within a few months and shifted the focus of the new material and its playback devices to professional uses only, which included the creation of “electrical transcriptions” of NBC radio programs. These transcription discs were produced using the same processes as retail records, but in unfamiliar speeds (16 or 33 revolutions per minute as opposed to the then-standard 78 RPMs) and sizes (generally 16 inches in diameter) that made them compatible only with professional-grade audio equipment, and in turn discouraged a secondary market for the recordings. This application eventually became a standard practice across the radio industry and would later provide an impetus for CBS’ acquisition of Columbia Records. While presented in trade publications and discussed by

executives as an opportunity to unite the Columbia name and tradition within a single company, access to a master catalog and the ability to press musical records for consumers was at first incidental to the goals of radio broadcasting. Instead, historians have suggested that CBS' more immediate motive was the acquisition of facilities and equipment capable of producing electrical transcriptions as an alternate mode of network programming distribution—one that would provide greater flexibility for scheduling, circulation, and retransmission of programs.⁶⁹

It wasn't until immediately before and during World War II that most consumers became familiar with and accepting of the potential uses of plastics. Due to wartime shortages, vinylite became a viable and commonplace substitute for natural rubber.⁷⁰ As diverse industries developed new applications for versatile vinylite, Union Carbide increased production of the material, which reduced the cost of their raw materials to manufacturers.⁷¹ This reduction in cost finally provided record companies with an opportunity to market the combination of lower retail price, improved sound quality, and greater durability as competitive enhancements to their records. When combined with significantly increased capacity, these features would help to popularize the new 33RPM and 45RPM formats introduced to consumers in the late 1940s.⁷²

Competitive Strategies to Visualize Music

The re-emergence of records as a successful consumer product was deeply informed by the tactics employed by leading record companies since the start of the twentieth century that had communicated notions of "permanent music" as art, but had failed to explicitly connect this idea with visual art. Beginning in 1902, Victor had marketed several lines of records at different price points that bore little relation to the cost of producing records. The most expensive were the Red Seal records, prominently featured in Victor's aggressive national marketing. The Red Seal

concept was an audacious way to elevate the status of recorded music—but only a specific, well-defined segment of recorded music. Red Seal records released through the mid-1920s were single sided, offering half the music of double-sided records that were the industry standard by 1908.⁷³ Yet from the line’s introduction these records were priced at \$2.00 [\$48.00 in 2016 dollars]—two to three times the list price of other records at the time. Victor was so protective of the ideological caché of the Red Seal that they attempted to prevent their competitors from using the color red on the labels of their releases.⁷⁴ Accounts from the period indicate that the sale of Red Seal records only ever constituted a small portion of Victor’s business. Instead, Red Seal served an important philosophical function in establishing recorded music as both luxury art item and signifier of cultural status.⁷⁵ Even so, apart from the color of the label, little effort was made to signify that status in a visual manner on records or their packaging. However, the emphasis on color in the naming of the Red Seal series along with Victor’s color coding of purple, black, and blue labels at times to indicate levels of price and prestige, and the introduction of the budget Bluebird label in 1932, all suggest that some awareness of the visual potential of records existed well before it was realized through packaging and album art.

In the mid-1920s, the then-independent Columbia had responded to the prominence of Victor’s Red Seal series with a tactic that countered Victor’s less-is-more approach. The Columbia Fine Art Series of Musical Masterworks, introduced in 1924 and soon shortened in name to Columbia Masterworks, began as a series of eight multi-record packages marketed to capitalize on the potential of the newly introduced electrical recording process. This process had been pioneered by Victor as “orthophonic sound,” but was quickly adopted by its competitors as well.⁷⁶ The album format enabled the inclusion of “complete symphonies and chamber music works” across three to five double-sided records. The albums themselves did not yet feature

custom artwork for different titles, but a November 1924 advertisement announcing the series includes an image of one of the albums and touted, “descriptive material of the records enclosed in each album is on the cover,” which in itself was an innovation. The copy makes evident the notion that physical packaging and visual presentation were seen as features that could add value and marketing potential to records. The Masterworks albums were sold at retail for \$5-\$9 at their 1924 introduction [\$70-125 in 2016 dollars], which offered a slightly better value than Victor’s Red Seal releases, but still put them well out of reach of many consumers.⁷⁷

Over the following years, Columbia would counter RCA Victor’s extravagant marketing with more aggressive pricing. In a 1928 speech, a Columbia sales manager summarized Columbia’s approach to making “quality” music accessible and desirable to the average American:

Our initial task, therefore, was an educational one...we established that good music is not remote from the average mind nor is it forbidding to the average ear...The human nature which throws away trashy books and magazines and reserves good books for the home is the same human nature that enjoys the popular dance music, which it so quickly tires of, and then turns to the Masterworks of music for constant refreshment and permanent beauty...There are millions ready for the appreciation of good music to whom this music has not come—the great army of wage-earners whose standard of living makes them potential users of quality merchandise, whether in music, books, furniture or decoration.⁷⁸

By December 1928, Columbia advertised that the Masterworks series included 90 electrically recorded albums, including “symphonies, concertos, sonatas and chamber music,” with “all works of five or more parts...enclosed in attractive art albums.”⁷⁹ However, this art still consisted of little more than some simple descriptive text, or a small lithographic print glued to the cover of a generic faux-leather-bound album. Advertisements called the Columbia Masterworks catalog “the world’s greatest record library,” but at this point made no further inference about building individual libraries in the homes of listeners.⁸⁰

Following its acquisition by CBS, Columbia Records capitalized on another innovation that would encourage the accumulation of records in a new way: the focus on creating striking, modern packaging and cover art for album releases. Columbia Records president Ted Wallerstein hired twenty-three-year-old Alex Steinweiss to be the art director for the record label, and tasked him to create a unified aesthetic across advertisements, in-store displays, and other marketing materials. Steinweiss, a recent graduate of the newly renamed Parsons School of Design, had gained attention within the New York commercial design community after placing second in a New York City Department of Health poster contest (affiliated with the FAP) to raise awareness about venereal disease.⁸¹ Soon after Steinweiss joined CBS, he convinced Wallerstein to let him design a custom, two-color cover that would be incorporated into the packaging of an upcoming album release. This and subsequent custom art covers soon justified the added expenditure beyond generic packaging.

Over the next decade Steinweiss would incorporate a bold American Modernist poster aesthetic into the hundreds of covers he would design for Columbia, and later for many of its competitors as an independent designer. While many classical releases would benefit from the allure of cover artwork, Columbia's willingness to focus their promotional attention on a broader range of music is apparent in their choice of the first album to receive a custom-designed cover, Rodgers and Hart's *Smash Song Hits* in 1940—a set of recordings that fell squarely within the realm of the popular song. Soon after, an existing album of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* was re-released with an art cover as a test; within six months, the addition of cover art resulted in an 894% increase in sales of the album over the previous six months.⁸² Even after this experiment, custom, full-color album covers represented a significant added cost and were not immediately

employed for all releases. The process was gradual, and Columbia continued to release many Masterworks albums with updated but generic standardized covers as late as 1946.⁸³

While Steinweiss' novel marriage of modernist art, design, and music was an advance in the marketing of recorded music, claims that he is the inventor of the album cover are anachronistic. From as early as 1937 RCA Victor advertisements depicted a range of albums with custom covers featuring photographs and illustrations, though these were representative of a more traditional decorative aesthetic. These ads draw attention to the "specially designed wrappers" that "add to the charm" of the album listening experience. An additional focus is placed on children's albums, where "gay wrappings...offer a hint to the hours of delight which such discs bring to millions of little folks."⁸⁴ The choice of words here suggests that the notion of packaging as a permanent and valued part of a product was yet to be fully articulated; in most contexts "wrappers," even if visually attractive, would be torn open and discarded on first use.

These "wrappers" were the result of changes that had been underway at RCA Victor for several years. Not long after its acquisition of Victor Records, RCA began to set the stage for an increased use of visual art in music packaging—well in advance of the album art that began to emerge in 1936. In 1932, RCA promoted Henry "Skeet" Rundle, who had worked as an in-house advertising artist within the company for two years, to be the first Art Director of RCA Victor. In this new position, Rundle saw an opportunity to expand the function of the print advertisements he was creating for magazines, and the printed displays he was producing for in-store promotions. He began to repurpose them by printing them directly onto the packaging of classical and operatic albums.

Many of the covers produced during Rundle's tenure repurposed art already produced by RCA Victor's advertising department, but some featured Rundle's own original artwork. By

1940 these included a series of covers featuring impressionistic paintings, including a whimsical depiction of Johannes Brahms strolling on a shady forest path as cover art for a recording of Brahms' *Symphony No. 1 in C Minor*.⁸⁵ A 1962 RCA publication reflected on Rundle's painted album art as "a far cry from what had been done up to that time."⁸⁶ While several accounts in the decades that followed his tenure identify Rundle as the individual responsible for the introduction of illustrated album covers, Rundle's name is absent from contemporary histories of both the music industry and graphic design, even those that focus on the convergence of the two in the emergence of album artwork. This oversight may be explained in part by Rundle's move in 1944 from RCA Victor to a position as RCA's manager of "home instrument styling," in which he designed several of RCA's early television models.⁸⁷ His relatively brief time within the RCA Victor division ended years before the LP format helped to standardize the use of album art and broaden its cultural ubiquity. Another contributing factor to Rundle's absence from historical accounts is that the incremental steps he initiated from advertising to album art provide a less exciting narrative than the visually bolder and more modernistic break seen in the work produced at Columbia a few years later. Rundle's death in 1960 also prevented him from involvement in expanding the conceptual role of album art in the subsequent Rock 'n' Roll era. Regardless, Rundle's contributions to the development of album artwork at RCA Victor, and their inspiration to competitors, are worthy of greater exploration and historical credit.

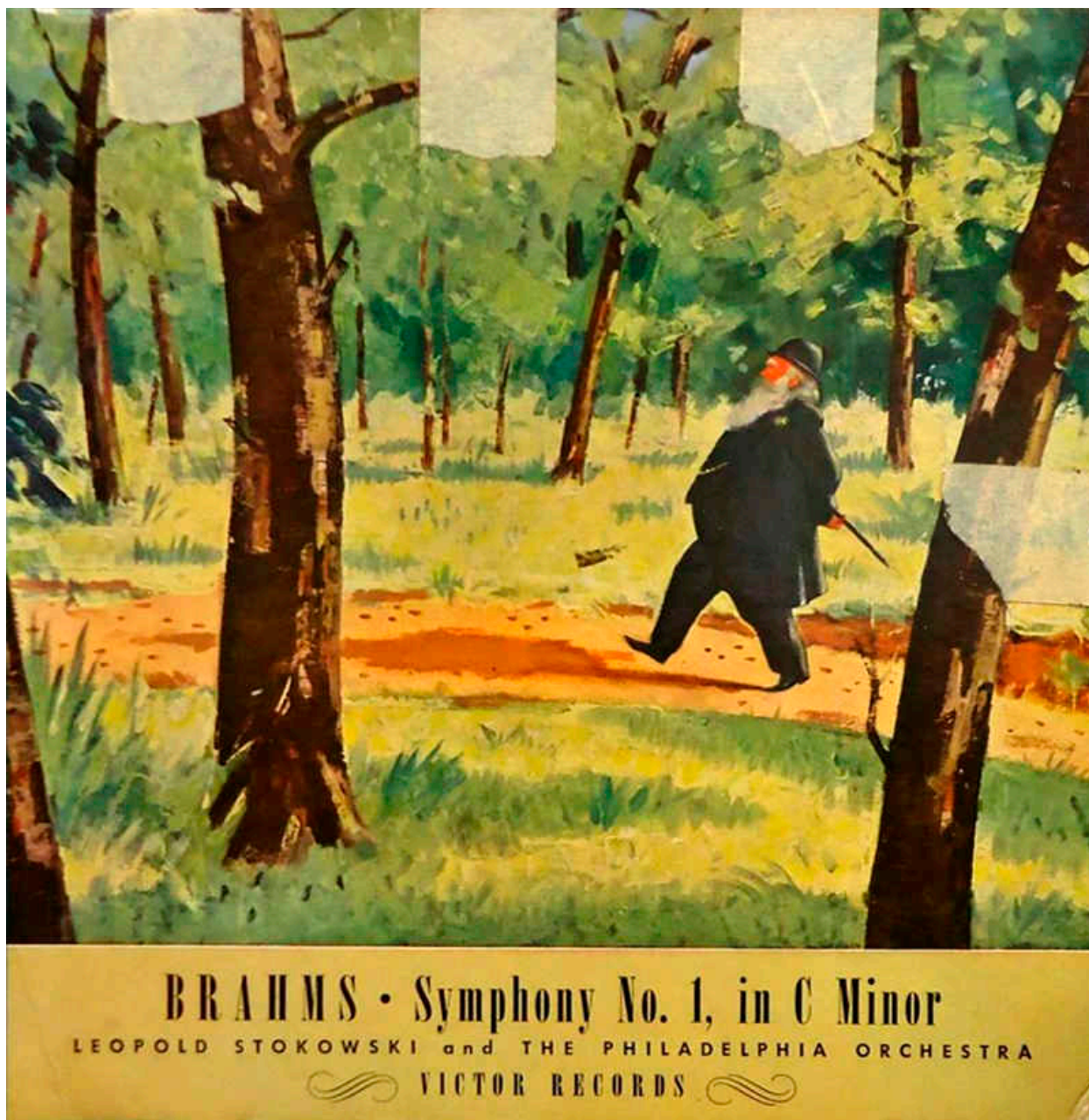


Figure 2.1 Brahms' *Symphony No. 1 in C Minor*, performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra, conducted by Leopold Stokowski, RCA Victor, 1940. Cover art by Henry Rundle.

Another innovation by RCA Victor during this period sought to define the canon of “permanent” music in a highly specific and physical manner. In 1935, with considerable bravado, RCA Victor introduced the Victor Library of Recorded Music. At a retail price of \$950 [\$16,660 in 2016 dollars], the Library consisted of 94 albums containing a total of 461 records.

Each album was bound in canvas and faux leather and embossed with gold accents and text that, aside from a number on the spine, offered no details as to their individual contents. The color-coded albums continued the visual markers of the Red Seal aesthetic, presenting previous Red Seal releases in red albums, and other releases in green or brown albums. The Library came complete with its own custom wooden cabinet designed to complement that year's Victrola models, and specifically advertised as a companion piece to the ornate and high-end RCA D-22 combination radio/phonograph. The Library included a hardcover index volume that provided information about the performers, composers, and recordings, and was necessary to navigate the collection. The Library was heavily marketed, appearing in monthly full-page advertisements in *Life* and other national magazines. Advertisements and trade publications alike touted the panel of experts who had been invited to curate the collection, including conductor and music appreciation pedagogue Walter Damrosch, composer/pianist Sergei Rachmaninoff, and bandleader Paul Whiteman.⁸⁸ The Library was included in dealers' Victrola displays, which were in turn documented and celebrated in trade publications as ideal configurations for home listening.⁸⁹ In RCA Victor's 1935 annual report to shareholders, the company's executives celebrated the Library as "a cultural foundation of music for the home, school and club."⁹⁰

An examination of the index included with the Victor Library delineates exactly the subset of recorded music that RCA Victor felt was essential to market to buyers of "permanent music." Half of the library (47 of 95 albums) consists of symphonic recordings of classical compositions. Twenty albums represent chamber music or solo instrumental performance, separated by instrument, eight of which are solo piano albums. Nineteen albums include vocal selections, primarily opera, with three operas performed in their entirety. While advertisements promoted the breadth of styles represented, most varieties of music on the fringes of

“permanent” music were barely present, including six albums that featured orchestral recordings of contemporary dance music, two albums of religious music, and one album featuring “band music” and marches. Spirituals, and indeed the entirety of African-American music, are represented by two Paul Robeson vocal performances on a single record. The index concludes with a bibliography of 42 suggested titles “for those who want to familiarize themselves further with the subject of music.”⁹¹

At \$950, the Victor Library was hardly a realistic consumer item for even the most ardent lovers of “permanent” music. It is unclear how many Victor Libraries were sold. A 1935 article in *Radio Today* claimed that RCA Victor had received “several hundred advance orders,” and a December 1937 RCA advertisement in *Life* noted that “hundreds of families” had invested in “this priceless library of enjoyment.”⁹² By early 1936, both advertisements for the Victor Library and trade publications include the helpful note that many dealers were offering financing deals for the Library, should the hefty price tag intimidate potential buyers. *Radio Today* observed that this was the first financing plan ever instituted for record merchandise, marking a key step toward the concept of a record collection as an investment with lasting value apart from the player.⁹³ *Radio Today*, while prominently featuring the Library, also underlined the importance of considering “the people who can afford to have flexibility in their musical menus, or the folks to whom various moods are so important that they are willing to pay for equipment to satisfy them. Usually they are the genuinely serious music lovers, not necessarily the people ‘in the money.’” The column goes on to recommend the promotion instead of individual releases that resonate with buyers.⁹⁴ *Radio Today* would also celebrate the substantial increase in record sales in 1936, which it attributed to “a substantial trend toward albums.”⁹⁵ The Victor Library was central to RCA Victor’s effort to promote the concept of personal record collecting, rooted

deeply in the sense of cultural hierarchy that Victor had established decades earlier with its Red Seal series. At the moment, this rhetoric preferred not to let the individual listener decide what belonged in such a collection, however. RCA Victor's philosophy also continued to dictate that music could be given heightened cultural value by an artificially increased monetary value—a conflation that reached its logical conclusion in the Victor Library of Recorded Music, which was itself a physical shrine to the company's canonized notion of its own cultural value.

RCA Victor's advertising rhetoric regarding collecting soon shifted to allow for individual tastes. In October 1937, the copy in one advertisement noted that, “many music lovers build record libraries to suit their tastes. Others buy complete libraries assembled by RCA Victor,” alongside a photo of the Victor Library and a woman in an evening gown perusing one of its albums. Although RCA Victor reused this photograph in multiple advertisements over the following years, by April 1938 it had phased discussion of the Victor Library out of its advertising in favor of the promotion of individual records and albums.⁹⁶ One advertisement claimed instead that, “[l]ibraries of enjoyment are being built by millions of music lovers who find Victor Records suit every mood,” accompanied by a photo of a woman purchasing a record from a dealer whose shop is lined with records on every visible surface.⁹⁷ The shift in advertising rhetoric reinforced the notion that records had the capacity to “add to radio thrills the satisfaction of having the music (listeners) want when they want it,” allowing listeners to “create their own programs to fit the mood of the moment.” The copy also encouraged the educational use of music in the home, where “wise parents are building a foundation for life-long pleasure...by starting musical education during early formative years.”⁹⁸ RCA Victor's advertising made the claim that their records are the only responsible way to build this foundation. *Radio Today* echoed this sentiment, suggesting that if children were listening to Walter Damrosch's *Music*

Appreciation Hour in schools, then the purchase of a phonograph would allow parents to continue this cultural education at home, on demand.⁹⁹

This continued privileging of classical and operatic music, even with a tolerance of some individual tastes, stands in contrast to documented sales of records by RCA Victor during the same period. In October 1936 the company reported that they had sold 1.2 million records in a single month, which represented a 300 percent increase over monthly sales over the prior year. However, the majority of sales were not of the Red Seal titles heavily represented in the Victor Library. During that month, only 25 percent (300,000) of the records sold were Red Seal titles; 58 percent (700,000) of the records came from the Bluebird budget line of popular music, while 33 percent (400,000) were from Victor's mid-range Black Label popular releases. RCA Victor's 1936 Annual Report mentioned a "substantial increase" in the sale of phonograph records over 1935, but attributes this increase to a national tour by the Philadelphia Orchestra and NBC broadcasts of the Metropolitan Opera, with no specific mention of the Library.

RCA Victor's sales continued to increase precipitously. In 1938, the company reported single month sales of over 10 million records. The divide between popular and permanent music shifted even further, however, with only 20 percent of those sales coming from the Red Seal line. The majority of sales continued to be represented by individual records of popular music, not albums. The company attributed this shift in part to the increasing use of jukeboxes. Jukeboxes at the time were a relatively new technology but were quickly becoming ubiquitous, thanks to the increasing popularity of upbeat dance music among young people.¹⁰⁰ While historical accounts vary widely, anywhere from 175,000 to 500,000 jukeboxes were placed in restaurants, taverns and other public spaces across the US by 1938.¹⁰¹ For a fee, jukebox retailers also refilled the machines on a monthly or sometimes weekly basis with new dance records, or sometimes simply

with replacement copies of popular titles as they wore beyond playability. By the late 1930s, sales for use in jukeboxes represented a substantial portion of the recorded music industry, and a promotional opportunity for styles of music not often represented in national advertising. Although these increases in sales were good news for RCA Victor, the proportional decrease in sales of Red Seal records and albums, with their much higher profit margin, undercut the gains to some degree, and provided a logical rationale for the company's exploration of new ways to attract consumers to these releases.

While I have chosen to limit this examination to the years leading up to the US engagement in World War II in 1941, several qualifications of this boundary bear mention. First, the US manufacturing sector felt the impact of the war effort well in advance of December 1941's declaration of war. The Lend-Lease Act, which was enacted in March 1941, initiated increased production of war-support materials in support of Britain's war effort. By September 1941, many national brands, including RCA Victor, acknowledged in their advertising that shifting their facilities and workforces away from the production of their usual products was already resulting in material shortages and product scarcity. It's possible, however, that this rhetoric was an exaggeration intended to drive sales in advance of more substantial scarcity to come should the US enter the war. Design historian Jennifer McKnight-Trontz has argued, somewhat surprisingly, that war production may have indirectly increased the prominence of the visual marketing of records. Appliance stores, which were at the time leading retailers of records, radios, and phonographs, were faced with a relatively greater scarcity of stock in large appliances—specifically those with numerous metal or rubber components—than in other products. This may have led stores to fill sparsely populated display spaces with records, thereby giving them more prominent placement than they previously received in the retail environment.

Even during a period of reduced overall production, records remained relatively more available just as record companies were beginning to realize the visual potential of album artwork.¹⁰²

Further Connections between Music and Visual Style

The relationship between visual media and recorded music manifested itself in a variety of other ways during the late 1930s and early 1940s. These moments further exemplify the connection between sound and visual culture that had been established amongst both industry insiders and consumers. The symbiosis between the film industry and the recording industry was well established by this time, with popular songs that were performed in films also being sold as records, and the two media products used to promote each other in advertisements. Trade journals like *Business Screen* suggested that film projectionists, both professionals and hobbyists, should build a “collector’s library” of specifically Columbia and RCA Victor album releases for use as film accompaniment, drawing a direct connection between visual art and recorded music in public spaces.¹⁰³

In private spaces, record companies began to reinforce the home record collection as a form to be considered visually. Via the trade press, RCA Victor promoted a national contest that asked record collectors to submit photographs of their home record collections, “as stored for normal usage,” for publication and for the chance to win free records.¹⁰⁴ In 1939, the link between visual media and records was further reinforced when Curtis, publisher of *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Ladies’ Home Journal*, entered the record distribution business and began to stock newsstands that carried its magazines with records as well.¹⁰⁵ Records were making their way into retail spaces previously only occupied by visual media. Accordingly, spaces like this would further trends already in use within more traditional retail systems, and would favor

records that capitalized on their potential for visual appeal with colorful and attractive packaging that could hold its own alongside magazine covers.

In the decades to follow, RCA Victor and Columbia openly emphasized the importance of visually stimulating album artwork in promoting music to consumers. In a 1962 issue of RCA's *Electronic Age* magazine, RCA Victor art director Bob Jones discussed in depth his view of the role album covers had come to play:

Album cover art must be primarily in the poster tradition. Artists and photographers are commissioned to interpret and visually sell all of the forms of music. They must translate for the eye and impress upon the consumer the glamour, beauty and excitement of the opera house, Broadway theater, the concert and dance hall, the night club and the motion picture. No industry in the United States offers a wider range of expression and artistic technique... there is evidence that the record buyer's taste is maturing. He demands sophisticated, enlightened art work, and we feel gratified to have more of an opportunity to give this to him on our album covers.¹⁰⁶

These expectations of visual art, and the methods employed to achieve them, can be traced to the historically specific moment in the mid-1930s when the Federal Art Project promoted a specific aesthetic vision (the “poster tradition” mentioned by Jones) to a burgeoning middle-class consumer audience ready to bring the culture and sounds of radio home in a physical form. The next step for the horizontally integrated broadcasters/record companies was the promotion of records to those who they thought would be the most receptive audience. First, these companies had to define the parameters of that audience and devise novel ways to convince them to buy a product that had been given away for free since the 1920s. In Chapter Three I examine the steps they took to achieve these ends.

III. Looking at Music: The Visual Marketing of Records

The Great Depression was radio's moment. The popularity of radio leading up to and during the Depression contributed to the popular notion that records were obsolete, even though some audiences continued to buy them. By the late 1930s, RCA (via its subsidiary NBC) and CBS were delivering a constant stream of programming into homes through their radio networks. A large portion of this programming was music—both classical and operatic music for educational enrichment and appreciation, and popular music for dancing and light entertainment. The slow recovery of the US economy further cemented the appeal of radio as free entertainment beamed directly into American homes. However, the parent companies of the networks, in the process of establishing themselves as integrated media corporations, had both acquired the means to produce and distribute recorded music as well. Even though RCA Victor made considerable investments in improving phonograph and record technology and marketing in the mid-1930s, and were joined in these efforts by Columbia a few years later, both companies had a financial interest in maintaining a rhetorical balance between the promotion of radio and records—albeit an uneven balance that often framed records as subordinate or ancillary to radio. This ability provided them with both an opportunity and a challenge: to market and advertise music as a product their audiences should purchase—a product that these corporations needed to promote as in some ways better than radio.

Advertisements from the period show a tentative willingness to promote some qualities of records that radio could not provide, namely greater control over the listening experience. As I noted in Chapter Two, RCA Victor's advertising in the latter half of the 1930s marketed records as the best way for music lovers to curate an individualized program of music in the home—a privileging of personal taste that the mass nature of network radio could not provide. These

record advertisements also encouraged the use of records to avoid the pervasive advertising of the early days of the radio network broadcasts—a surprising suggestion to include in an advertisement. Another advantage that the record held over radio was its permanence and physicality, which provided a medium for visual style that would soon be more fully realized in the emergence of album artwork. However, artwork on packaging was not the only manifestation of the increasingly sophisticated visual identity of records in the late 1930s. Previously, the 78RPM record had been advertised extensively for decades with little consideration of its physical appearance. In the 1920s advertisers and manufacturers had sought ways to take advantage of enhancements in color lithographic printing and photographic reproduction by attempting to persuade consumers to associate style and appearance with products that had not previously been marketed based on their aesthetic.¹⁰⁷ The introduction of album artwork by both RCA and CBS coincided with print advertising campaigns and catalog publications designed to complement and monetize the cultural presence broadcasters had already asserted through radio.

These attempts to commoditize recorded music can be identified through the burgeoning emphasis on visual design in the pre-World War II years. During this time, both RCA and CBS began to incorporate original visual art into the packaging of records. Although both record companies had printed catalogs and engaged in print advertising since the early years of the twentieth century, examples of these texts from the years preceding US entry into World War II illustrate the moment when album artwork became a key visual element around which an effective marketing campaign could be built. As a result album artwork soon became a necessary competitive expense across the recording industry.

This chapter seeks to identify how RCA and CBS attempted to create new markets for records that at times ran counter to their existing business interests. In the following pages I

examine the print documents that RCA Victor and Columbia produced to appeal to a post-Depression revitalized market for recorded music. I argue that early examples of album packaging with visual artwork, along with print advertising and label catalogs from the same period, demonstrate that the visual aspects of recorded music media became not just a way of advertising a product, but a marketable aspect of the product itself. These appeals were sometimes tentative and contradictory, and reflect an uncertainty as to who would constitute the most enthusiastic audience for records, and how that audience would best be reached. At the heart of the appeals, however, was the consistent suggestion that, while anyone could enjoy the music provided by network radio, consumers needed to exercise style, expertise, and dedication, along with a sizable financial investment, if they sought to turn the right kinds of music into a permanent and visible feature of their well-appointed, modern American home.

In the years leading up to World War II, CBS and RCA began promoting the idea of a canon of “permanent” recorded music that belonged in every home. The rhetoric of the recorded canon was a central aspect of the advertising strategies that would dominate the subsequent half-century of the recorded music industry. The idea that music lovers had an opportunity, or even a responsibility, to collect this canon in their homes was closely related to the increasing visual prominence of records. RCA Victor and Columbia promoted a well-defined canon of permanent music as a desirable and luxurious consumer product through various competitive tactics that drew heavily on advertising philosophies present from the earliest days of sound recording, combined with the economic interests of their respective parent companies, RCA and CBS. Both companies saw the potential for new revenue streams through the sale of this prestigious music. First, they needed to craft and communicate a clear vision of the ideal consumer for this product—a step that that they struggled to take during the pre-war years.

Seeking Customers through Marketing

By the time of the first experiments with album artwork, national advertising agencies already possessed decades of experience in producing sophisticated visual and textual appeals. These appeals often attempted to draw consumers to products through the use of unified visual elements in advertisements and on packaging. As Advertising historian Roland Marchand has noted, highly gendered appeals were common in advertising throughout the 1920s. In addition, the dominant historical narrative has framed the use of sound media in American homes as deeply tied to gender. Because records would primarily be listened to in the home, they had an immediate connection to existing parlor culture, falling squarely within the feminized realm of social entertaining. No late-19th-century parlor was complete without a piano and sheet music. While not exactly a sound storage medium, sheet music was nonetheless a type of recorded music. This trend continued through the emergence of the phonograph in the early 1900s, which was soon subsumed by the cultural dominance of radio. Popular magazine discourse characterized daytime radio as the domain of women, as radio companies attempted to target a vast but vaguely defined feminine audience. Recent radio histories have done much to reevaluate this conception of radio listening and listeners as feminized and passive.¹⁰⁸ However, less scholarship has addressed the continuing consumption of records, particularly by women, during the dominance of radio in the late 1920s and in the Depression years leading up to World War II. Tracing a few important trends in the marketing appeals from the 1920s and early 1930s will lead to a better understanding of the typical reader of national magazines, regardless of gender.

The discussion of the appeals seeking to reach consumers must begin with an analysis of historical trends in the visual design of record advertisements. From the introduction of color lithographic printing at the turn of the 20th century, national advertisers commonly designed

advertisements that incorporated colorful impressionistic art, and paintings in particular, as a way to imbue products with an air of sophistication, gentility, and femininity.¹⁰⁹ By the mid-1920s, however, American advertising agencies largely turned away from these established markers of status and embraced the influence of burgeoning European modernist art and design, as I detailed in Chapter Two. Rather than presenting information in a direct manner, modernistic advertisements used abstract geometric compositions, unresolved visual tension, and unconventional typography to direct the viewer's attention.¹¹⁰ These design features were thought to communicate a sense of futuristic potential that would appeal to a masculine audience, and represented a rejection of traditional or emotional messages that were seen as attractive to women. As innovative as it was, advertising historians like Marchand have conceded that modernistic advertising was likely more popular among advertising executives seeking accolades than it was with audiences.¹¹¹

During the same period, advertisers and manufacturers began to see the potential in marketing even the most mundane consumer products based on their physical appearance. This often manifested itself in products that were made available in a range of colors for the first time, giving customers choices that would appeal to their individual, personal style.¹¹² Style appeals from the 1920s represented women as sophisticated and savvy consumers who were finally empowered to employ their personal aesthetic philosophy by choosing from multiple versions of the products they would buy. This style appeal produced a tension in the way advertisers sought to reach women because, at the same time, these appeals also denigrated women for being ruled by emotion, susceptible to choosing staple goods like toothbrushes and towels based on feelings about their color, and so frivolous that they would buy new versions as popular styles changed.¹¹³ Style-based advertisements were seen as feminine and antithetical to appeals about a

product's functional qualities. The appeal of style was also tied intimately to class; stylishness came at a premium and became an expression of wealth and aspiration. Marketing a product based on its appearance visually marked it as a luxury good.¹¹⁴

Advertising campaigns for recorded music in the pre-war years implicitly evoked race as well as gender, in a way that represented a break from both brands' own marketing traditions. Both Victor and Columbia in their pre-conglomerated forms had advertised in a wide range of national publications, which included campaigns designed to target African-American audiences. African-American listeners represented an important segment of record buyers throughout the 1920s; as discussed in Chapter Two, their consumer habits defied to some extent the trends of attrition brought on by the shift from record buying to radio listening. Throughout the 1910s and 1920s both Victor and Columbia were frequent advertisers in the *Chicago Defender*, a widely read and nationally distributed minority-owned US publication. Both companies continued to advertise records in the *Defender* through the early years of the Great Depression.

Although the slow recovery of the late 1930s and the corporate acquisition of both labels led to renewed and expanded national campaigns, neither company would run advertisements in the *Defender* again after 1931. The absence of advertising for records is especially surprising considering the consistent coverage of popular music in the *Defender* and its frequent endorsements of the inclusiveness of the companies' recording output, often performed by racially diverse ensembles, as a force against racial prejudice.¹¹⁵ In the years that followed World War II, RCA Victor would become a regular advertiser in the new national magazines produced for an African American audience, like *Ebony* and *Jet*, but throughout the pre-war period the advertising priorities of RCA and CBS seem to be directed toward the mostly white, middle-class audience of publications like *Life*, despite the companies' own past practices.

A brief examination of the *Chicago Defender's* advertising during the early Depression years provides insight into the role of visual art in the promotion of records. The advertisements for releases by RCA Victor and Columbia (still an independent company at this point) bear a remarkable uniformity of style, suggesting that the layouts for both companies were likely produced in-house by the production staff of the *Defender*. Advertisements for both labels consistently include simple line illustrations that fall into two basic categories: depictions of the artists (often used repeatedly for different releases) or depictions of a song's subject matter. In either case, these advertisements represent custom artwork produced by (or on behalf of) record companies to promote individual record releases. However, due to conventions of format and cost this artwork was not applied to the records themselves. These advertisements provide an example of the marketing methods at work within record companies in the years just prior to the incorporation of unique visual art in record packaging. This concept was already in use in advertisements—it just waited for a series of factors, as discussed in Chapter Two, that had yet to converge, and would take even longer to be applied to the “race” records promoted in the *Chicago Defender*.

SUGAR BLUES*



*"I loved my sugar man hard as can be—
But the doggone fool turned sour on me?"*

**HEAR THAT HOT
DALLAS STRING BAND
and
COLEY JONES**

★ Record No. 14574-D, 10-inch, 75c

SUGAR BLUES } Vocals and Instrumentals—Dallas String
SHINE } Band with Coley Jones

Columbia Records

Ask your dealer for the latest Race Record Catalog
Columbia Phonograph Company, Inc., New York City

Figure 3.1 Columbia Records advertisement from the *Chicago Defender*, January 17, 1931.

The Emergence of the Album Cover (and the Album)

An analysis of how record companies hoped to reach their market through visual media benefits from an examination of some of the earliest album art itself. Historian Russell Sanjek has identified RCA's 1936 release of the *Bix Beiderbecke Memorial Album* as the first "album." Sanjek defines an album as a collection of discretely composed and recorded musical compositions, rather than multiple segments or movements of a single composition that are spread across multiple records due to the storage limitations of the medium. Columbia's first release to include custom album art, 1940's *Smash Song Hits* by Richard Rogers and Lorenz Hart, fits this definition of an album and was among Columbia's first releases to do so. These two releases confirm the essential role that visual artwork played in constituting the concept of the album. The view of these two releases as the first albums released by RCA Victor and Columbia reflects the inherent boundaries of this established definition, minimizing earlier tentative attempts to incorporate visual elements into music packaging that simply reproduced forms already associated with certain types of music, like the inclusion of replica librettos, the printed programs given to opera attendees to explain and sometimes translate the action occurring in the performance. Instead, these first albums include cover images, layout design, and sometimes liner notes that were unique to the compiled set of recordings. Early examples of album art often consisted of just a custom front cover image, without printed inserts or a custom back cover design. Albums that did include these elements provided additional information to the listener. From a historical perspective, they also illuminate the corporate concept of the ideal consumer for albums by making explicit the appeals of this new format.

Record labels made most of their early tentative attempts to incorporate visual elements into record packaging on classical and operatic recordings, simply by virtue of running times that

required them to be assembled in more sophisticated packaging that could safely contain multiple records. It is therefore significant to note that the first releases by both RCA Victor and Columbia to fit Sanjek's definition of the album were collections of popular songs. However, these examples betray to some degree the characterization of popular music as impermanent; the music they contained was not exactly new. Bix Beiderbecke had been dead for six years at the time of the *Memorial Album's* release, and the album compiled previously released recordings and alternate takes. Rogers and Hart's *Smash Song Hits* album featured new orchestral/vocal recordings of previously released songs from their Broadway musicals, some of which were originally produced as early as 1927 and would have been considered standards of popular song by 1940. Rather than bold innovations of form, these albums used existing techniques in slightly new ways, and represent market tests borne of the strong nostalgic impulse to repackage recordings already proven to be commercially successful. These two albums fit the established narrative of design historians, in that they both employed modernist visual design in their artwork in ways that were novel within the recording industry.

The *Bix Beiderbecke Memorial Album's* packaging featured a solid black embossed design applied to an otherwise solid orange imitation leather cover.¹¹⁶ The type design of the cover strongly evoked European typography and poster design, specifically the styles of the Italian Futurists and Russian Constructivists of the 1920s. It employed an abstract geometric type for key words, and a simpler Art Deco type for the names of the performers. The type was set off by a series of parallel black bars that bled off of all four edges of the cover. The entire design was rotated by approximately 30 degrees counterclockwise, leading the reader's eye upward—



Figure 3.2 *Bix Beiderbecke Memorial Album*, RCA Victor, 1936. Cover artist not credited.

common features of dynamic Modernist design. Some fundamental elements of album artwork, like a printed back cover design or the use of consistent titles throughout packaging and promotional materials, were not yet settled on this release. The cover did not include the name *Bix Beiderbecke Memorial Album*, instead featuring the cumbersome title, “*All Star Album Presenting the Original Pioneers of Swing Dedicated to the Memory of Bix Beiderbecke*,” alongside the names of ten performers who appear on the recordings. However, the cover of the

twelve-page booklet insert featured a modernist design similar to that of the album cover, and referred to the album by its commonly known name.

The cover of *Smash Song Hits* featured a two-color design that evoked the style of FAP poster design realized through a more sophisticated printing method. It combined a black and white photograph of the marquee of New York's Imperial Theater with a series of concentric red circles that evoked the grooves and center label of a record. The lettering on the marquee provided the cover's text: "COLUMBIA RECORDS," "ORCH. UNDER RICH. RODGERS," and "SMASH SONG HITS BY RODGERS&HART." The album's spine was bound in bright red canvas, with the words "ROGERS HART Musical Comedy Hits." Once again, some fundamental elements of album artwork, like the use of a consistent title throughout the packaging, were not yet settled on this release. This album also did not feature a printed back cover design, but glued to the inside of the front cover was a printed sheet that included headshots of the composers, along with brief credits and a song list that are designed to appear as if torn from a theater playbill, all rotated at slight angles. The album here was again referred to as "Musical Comedy Hits." Even with its inconsistencies, the striking design of the package makes evident why it was, and is still, considered to be an important innovation of the form. However, its reliance on references to existing visual tropes of music (here, the marquee and playbill of the theater-going experience) further strengthens the argument that these first art albums were tentative steps made within an uncertain market rather than revolutionary breaks from the past.



Figure 3.3 *Smash Song Hits by Rogers & Hart*, Columbia, 1940. Cover art by Alex Steinweiss.

In contrast to “permanent” music, albums that compiled jazz, show tunes, and other popular musical forms of the 1930s and 1940s relied on artwork to explain why certain recordings were grouped together when they possessed no overarching conceptual unity beyond common composers or performers. Popular music produced in subsequent decades, and rock music of the mid-1960s in particular, would be composed and recorded specifically to take

optimal advantage of the album format, with songs that were composed, recorded, and sequenced as a cycle. This trend emerged only after consumers and producers of music spent several decades internalizing the concept of popular music presented as albums and not just individual songs. In the case of the earliest albums, the rationale of the album concept had to be made explicit, which required some explanation. As evidenced by the liner booklet included with *The Bix Beiderbecke Memorial Album*, the use of visual elements in custom packaging attempted to attract collectors, whose interest was central to the development of the album format. The booklet, penned by Warren Scholl, the secretary of a “hot club” (jazz record collector’s club), explains in great detail the logic of compiling this specific set of recordings into a single album:

“...requests from seasoned collectors and members of newly formed hot clubs have acted as an incentive for preparing the album. Anyone who has ever specialized in collecting “Bix” records will want this set because it includes records *never issued publicly until now*. It was quite common...to make several masters of every number, the orchestra playing its selection several different times...Where straight dance or symphony music was concerned, the two versions of the same selection were practically identical, but in the case of extemporaneous hot music the story was a bit different because stars like “Bix” and Tram [Frank Trumbauer] created *something new* every time they improvised around a given theme...Thus collectors who bought the first records in 1928 and 1930 will be afforded a chance to compare their versions with the new pressings. In a few cases little errors will be noticeable since these records were from second choice masters. The mistakes are slight though...” (emphasis in original).¹¹⁷

Scholl’s essay brings to fore the importance of appealing to collectors during the emergence of the album format. It also acknowledges even at this early stage that RCA Victor was willing to build a release out of admittedly inferior, rejected recordings, believing that their novelty and nostalgic value was strong enough to sell the package. Scholl’s essay also makes clear the importance of jazz and swing music in making the album format a success. The improvisational nature of jazz meant that music could be sold to fans who not only already owned playable copies, if only for the chance to exhibit their expertise by spotting the

differences. In doing so, the listener was given the opportunity to participate in the recording process (while paying handsomely for the privilege). The album format, with its booklet cataloging all of Beiderbecke's recording sessions, also invited the collector/listener to spot the differences in the visual presentation from the original issues. This practice was key to the idea of creating a canon of essential recordings by finding ways to frame the ownership of multiple versions of the same recordings as an appealing aspect of “collecting.” By presenting inferior but idiosyncratic performances in a stylish custom package with modernist type design, photography, and a tastefully designed booklet full of trivia, RCA Victor made the listening process of both new and old records more visible, and encouraged the emergent completist tendencies of the private collector. It also provided an opportunity to “canonize” select examples of popular music, validating them by re-releasing them in a sophisticated form that sat neatly alongside the established “permanent” classics in both retail environments and home collections.

Existing histories of recorded music and album artwork neatly ignore the early commonplace use of album art, and the use of the album format, in the marketing of music for children. As with many consumer items aimed at children, these albums were discussed in advertising and trade publications as being of lower status and value—but they were occasionally discussed. This rhetoric does little to discount the fact that many children’s albums included original illustrations on their covers years before adult genres of music would be compiled into albums that included artwork, or into albums at all. Much like the initial album releases aimed at adults, this earlier inclusion of art feels in some ways like a test to determine the effectiveness of visual art in attracting consumers to purchase albums. The subject matter of children's music, and its intended audience, also provide a logical rationale for the use of colorful, whimsical art in its packaging. This rationale would eventually be expanded and

applied to all styles and categories of recorded sound media, and in the case of the album format, would help define the media itself. The use of art on children's records can also be seen as a reinforcement of the gendered tendencies of style appeals, as I've previously discussed. If women were most likely to be purchasing products for their children and using these products in the home, the colorful artwork on childrens' albums would also be likely to appeal to them as consumers, thanks to the by then commonplace use of visual style on packaging as a selling point for a range of consumer products.

Records in Magazine Advertising

The visual marketing of records in the late 1930s was not limited to new packaging ideas. At the same time that record companies were looking for ways to make some of their products more visual, they were also expanding their efforts to advertise these products in national print media. Their marketing efforts emerged at a fortuitous moment, when the visual style of national print media was changing in ways that would create a more engaging context for highly visual advertising appeals. During the Depression years, many advertisers abandoned the artistic flourishes of the 1920s and earlier in favor of factual advertisements that expressed conscientiousness for consumer wellbeing by presenting products with didactic impartiality and emotional reserve.¹¹⁸ This trend proved complementary to national publications that presented populist, general interest stories in a highly visual manner, and sometimes blurring the line between advertising and editorial content. As the economy recovered and the air of austerity lifted, national advertisers were well positioned to make a range of visual appeals—some innovative, and some inspired by advertising from earlier eras—to bring consumers back to their products.

A consideration of the readers of national magazines during the Depression years will help to illuminate the audience that RCA Victor and Columbia sought for their premium products. *Life* Magazine provides a particularly appropriate example for this study, thanks to its reputation for implementing visual style more extensively than its predecessors and contemporaries.¹¹⁹ *Life* first appeared on newsstands in 1936, as the United States continued its slow recovery from the stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression. *Life* quickly earned a large national readership through its innovative use of striking photography and modernist visual storytelling, which provided a visually rich context in which advertisers could promote their products. By 1941 *Life* celebrated itself as “America's Most Potent Editorial Force, and also logically, the most potent selling force in which a magazine advertiser can invest his dollars.”¹²⁰

In the years that followed *Life*'s debut, both RCA and CBS were in the process of expanding their businesses into the production and sale of recorded media, among other ventures. *Life* provided a venue in which they could advertise records as consumer products in a visual manner. RCA and CBS both sought to sell records to the readers of *Life* through full-page and sometimes multi-page advertisements. However, the appeals represent a vision of consumerism defined by a clear intersection of gender and class, in specific but inconsistent ways. The advertisements communicate conflicting notions—both between and within campaigns—of how and by whom recorded music should be enjoyed. For unique periods within this timeframe, each company ran a consistent, stylistically unified campaign over a series of consecutive months. RCA's “Listen” series of advertisements appeared monthly from August 1937 to May 1939. CBS's “Eric” series of advertisements, so named here for the inclusion of artwork by fashion illustrator Carl Erickson, ran monthly in 1941 from March to December.¹²¹

An analysis of the visual form and textual content of these serial advertisements illustrates how RCA and CBS sought to define the markets for their products, how these concepts differed between the two corporations, and why both chose *Life* as a venue to appeal to their perceived target markets. Some of the advertisements examined fall beyond these spans, but provide important context for the appeals made in these campaigns.

The contemporary concept of record collecting is predominantly framed as a masculine hobby. Historical surveys of record collectors by Evan Eisenberg and Amanda Petrusich have drawn threads through the tradition of collecting based on accounts from primarily (if not exclusively) men.¹²² However, the advertising campaigns of the 1930s and early 1940s often targeted women as ideal record buyers and collectors. This gendered divide is consistent with advertising campaigns for phonographs throughout the 1910s and 1920s that focused primarily on women with the goal of putting a phonograph and later a radio in every parlor.¹²³ The 1941 Columbia Masterworks ads that ran in *Life* exclusively presented women, who were contextualized as consumers of Columbia recordings first and celebrities second. They talk about their favorite releases and often applaud the sound quality of the recordings. The shift in advertising from social listening of records to private collection and appreciation can be seen to represent a key point in the shift from feminized to masculinized appeals, as I noted earlier in this chapter.

Any exploration of the relationship between a business and its clientele through advertising faces some logistical limitations. First, it is difficult to measure or establish a correlation between the advertisements and any effect they might have had on their intended audience. It thus cannot be assumed that these ads successfully persuaded women to purchase more records than they had previously. Without access to these companies' corporate records,

researchers cannot presume to know the business motives that inspired these campaigns—for instance, whether the inclusion of feminized appeals was rooted in a desire to promote records to women over men, or whether Columbia simply sought to develop a wider market that included both women and men, or if it had recognized greater potential for growth among women. However, an investigation of the discourse in *Life* beyond the advertising and in contemporary recording industry trade publications does confirm that women were buying and collecting records at this time. A December 1938 *Life* article reports the results of a survey of retailers on the most popular gifts for men and women of different ages and levels of “fanciness.” Records are cited as one of the most popular gifts for “fanciful women, age 18-30.” The article notes that the records being discussed were available for \$1 or less, which suggests these were popular or dance recordings and not the classical and operatic collections that were more commonly seen in advertisements.¹²⁴ In addition, *Radio Today* published several articles about record clubs created and frequented by women, including a 1936 article about a public listening club in St. Louis, Missouri, and a 1940 article about a Milwaukee, Wisconsin women’s record collecting club, although the tone of the articles suggests that these clubs were more novel than typical.¹²⁵

Time Magazine publisher Henry Luce had produced a newsreel of the magazine, called *The March of Time*, since 1931. Luce saw potential in the persuasive power of images, particularly in both newsreels and photographically rich magazines produced in Germany prior to their suppression by the Nazis.¹²⁶ Luce developed *Life* to bring compelling photography directly into homes, and to emphasize what he considered quintessentially American ideals: “freedom,” “equality of opportunity,” “self-reliance,” and “cooperation.”¹²⁷ *Life*’s circulation by the early 1940s exceeded that of any other mass-circulation magazine in the US, and enjoyed a high “pass-along” average of 14 readers per copy, disproportionately among middle- to upper-

class Americans. Its audience was still much smaller than that of radio or newspapers—media that generally offered access at a lower cost.¹²⁸ *Life's* target audience could afford to spend ten cents for an issue and spend time perusing its pages. The editorial content of *Life* espoused a culture of consumerism that complemented the appeals made by its advertisers.¹²⁹ Media historian James Baughman has argued that many notions of the “appropriate” parameters of modern American middle-class existence, often focused on consumer behavior, were first or most clearly communicated in *Life*. Those notions, however, both targeted and reached an economically privileged minority.¹³⁰

The advertisements that RCA inserted into *Life* do not express a clear idea of the ideal record buyer. One issue of *Life* each month from August 1937 to May 1939 included a paid RCA advertising supplement called “Listen.” This multi-page “Magazine Within A Magazine” combined photography-heavy layouts with editorial-style copy, for an overall aesthetic that was visually similar to the editorial portions of *Life* that surrounded it—a common advertising technique of the period.¹³¹ Most editions of “Listen” provided stories and images that focused on a single facet of RCA’s operations or cultural impact. These included behind-the-scenes accounts from NBC radio studios, advances in research and development of new technologies like television, stories of radio history, and explorations of the unique uses of radio by politicians, farmers, and educators. A few advertisements offered less cohesive editorial themes beyond the promotion of RCA products, including RCA Victor records. All advertisements in the series concluded with a more conventional one-page display advertisement that overtly pitched RCA products discussed in the preceding pages.



Happy the home where music lives—Particularly is this true when the gift of music is made available to children. In more and more homes wise parents are building a foundation for life-long pleasure for children, by starting musical education during early formative years. For this purpose nothing will take the place of phonograph records.

PHONOGRAPH RECORDS CONTINUE COMEBACK

"Yours for keeps" explains why music lovers add to radio thrills the satisfaction of having the music they want when they want it

To round out completely the possibilities of musical enjoyment, music lovers today go further than listening to radio. They create their own programs to fit the mood of the moment. That explains big comeback of records. When you own records the music is "yours for keeps." To choose records of supreme beauty is a simple matter. The greatest symphony orchestras, the greatest singers, the greatest instrumentalists, the greatest dance bands, all make records for Victor. Today, as in the old Victrola days, the world's greatest artists are on Victor Records. This is true whether your interest is in the most elaborate symphonic works or the latest in swing.



Beloved artist sings greatest Christmas song—Above, the late Mrs. Schumann-Heink in one of her rare radio appearances sings "Stille Nacht," the song considered by millions the greatest Christmas music. Thanks to Victor Recording, the lovely voices of this great artist and of all music's immortals are made immortal.



World's greatest music library—Chosen by a jury of 18 distinguished authorities, the Victor Library of Recorded Music contains in one collection of 481 Victor Records the supreme music of the world, performed by the greatest artists. Hundreds of families are investing \$950 in this priceless library of enjoyment.



Children's records add to Yuletide joys—Gay wrappings of special records for children offer a hint to the hours of delight which such discs bring to millions of little folks. By using radio sets as phonographs (see next page), families everywhere are vastly extending the enjoyment of music by young and old. Above are shown a few of the many Victor Records for children.

RECORDS THAT INTERPRET THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT ALL AROUND THE WORLD

Hearts are gladdened by the traditional songs and music of Christmas. Below are listed Victor Records of the Christmas music the world loves best.

- 23479 It Came Upon the Midnight Clear
Oh Come, All Ye Faithful
Homer Hall Glee Club
- 23480 Oh! Little Town of Bethlehem
Silent Night—*Homer Hall Glee Club*
- 7314 Pastoral Symphony (from "The Messiah")—*Leopold Stokowski*
Philadelphia Orchestra
- 33787 While Shepherds Watched
It Came Upon the Midnight Clear
Trinity Choir
- 36188 Christmas Carols—Potpourri
Marek Walter's Orchestra
- 6607 Adeste Fideles
John McCormack—Trinity Choir
- 6723 Stille Nacht
Ermstine Schumann-Heink

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Gifts that keep on giving—Few Christmas gifts can vie with Victor Records in giving lasting enjoyment. Music lovers today buy not one record at a time, but complete symphonies, concertos, operas, in albums such as above. Specially designed wrappings add to the charm of many of these albums. Prices range from \$4.50 up.

Figure 3.4 A page from the RCA "Listen" advertisement in *Life*, December 7, 1937. Includes images of album cover art, and at center, an image of the Victor Library of Recorded Music.

Three of the “Listen” advertisements devoted a majority of their space to marketing RCA Victor records. In several instances, women are depicted beside phonographs or record libraries dressed in evening gowns, as if this were the expected attire for listening to records in the home.¹³² These photographs express an image of records as a luxury product for a sophisticated, wealthy audience. These photos also feature the Victor Library of Recorded Music as discussed in Chapter Two, which would have been well beyond the financial reach of most *Life* readers. In such photos, women appear as objects on display for a male audience rather than as the presumed consumers of the product. In other instances within the “Listen” advertisements, middle-class families are shown gathered around a radio-phonograph, ostensibly enjoying music. These images reinforce a default masculine hierarchy of home media use; in the nuclear family seen in these advertisements, fathers and children (sons more often than daughters) are allowed to hold records and engage directly with hardware, while women watch with admiration.¹³³ However, in representations beyond the nuclear family, the ads present record collecting and listening as appropriate hobbies for young, independent women who enjoy swing music and dancing in the home.¹³⁴ Women are shown purchasing records from record shops or as subscribers to the Victor Record Society.¹³⁵ Another edition promotes a new year’s models of radio-phonographs via a series of eleven photos taken at a trade convention; ten of these feature one to four men huddled around radios, while the only one that includes a woman is the one that also features a prominent display of records. The editorial style of these RCA ads generally neglects to include specific product information like record titles and prices outside of the last page, but it is significant to note that several advertisements include textual and visual examples of young people enjoying and dancing to popular records in the home, and images of children's records, rather than just examples of "permanent music." Also significant is the fact that two of

the three “Listen” advertisements that focus most directly on records appear in December issues of *Life* where, as mentioned, popular records were promoted within editorial features as affordable holiday gifts—particularly for young women.

The final “Listen” advertisement appeared in May 1939, but RCA advertisements continued to appear in *Life* through the remainder of the period examined for this project. These advertisements became simpler and less cohesive from month to month, and tended to focus on a single product—sometimes a small eighth-page, black-and-white advertisement promoting one or two new RCA Victor records, while at other times a full-page color advertisement extolling the features of the latest radio or phonograph models. Even the advertisements that did not specifically promote records still offered both visual representations of record listening, but few of them could be seen to make strongly gendered appeals. Instead, they presented their products in a neutral tone that seemed to target the widest possible audience. However, when compared to the Columbia advertisements that soon followed, that neutral tone suggests the assumption of a default masculine audience.

In this context, RCA’s primary competitor in both radio broadcasting and recorded sound, CBS, also emphasized a connection between records and a gendered audience in advertising for its subsidiary Columbia Records. In the years immediately preceding its purchase by CBS, Columbia did not attempt to compete with RCA Victor’s national dominance in advertising coverage. However, through the late 1930s the leading players in the record business claimed substantial annual increases to their advertising budgets.¹³⁶ By 1940, Columbia ads appeared regularly in both the trade and popular press, as part of what the company promoted as “the biggest, hardest hitting advertising campaign in the industry’s history.”¹³⁷ Columbia’s monthly ads in popular magazines like *Life*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *The Ladies’ Home*

Journal drew a significant contrast from RCA's promotion of the Victor Library a few years earlier. The first few Columbia advertisements that appeared in *Life* were in black and white and showed little consistent visual focus or overtly gendered appeals, instead promoting competitive price reductions and the flexibility of building a collection of its Masterworks releases.¹³⁸

Columbia advertised that the Masterworks albums were available at prices lower even than at the 1924 introduction of the Masterworks series that were intended to “open vast new markets for sales of fine recordings” and “bring superb records within the reach of anybody.”¹³⁹ These advertisements also spoke of new releases as “great additions to your record library.”¹⁴⁰

Beginning in March 1941, a series of monthly full-color Columbia Masterworks advertisements appeared in magazines including *Life*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *The New Yorker*. These advertisements were unified in their visual design and textual appeals, and can be read as specifically constructed to attract female consumers. These advertisements include a series of impressionistic paintings of performers—sometimes Columbia recording artists, but sometimes celebrities with no obvious professional connection to Columbia.¹⁴¹ The ads that feature Columbia artists repurpose illustrations from the album cover art of the artists’ then-current releases. The copy in these ads presents the featured performers themselves as both fans and collectors of Columbia Masterworks albums. The two-page ad from December 1941 mentions that actor and singer Gertrude Lawrence “enjoys Columbia Masterworks Records, collects them with enthusiasm, [and] chooses them as a gracious gift.”¹⁴² This expanded advertisement also features 52 Masterworks albums as suggested Christmas gifts, including color reproductions of the covers of five albums.

Each advertisement in the campaign featured a portrait, painted in a colorful impressionistic style, of a prominent woman who would be familiar to readers of *Life*.¹⁴³ Several

of the subjects were Columbia recording artists like opera singers Lotte Lehman and Lily Pons, but the campaign also featured figures unrelated to Columbia or CBS, including actresses Ginger Rogers and Norma Desmond, and writer Clare Boothe.¹⁴⁴ The latter was a fascinating inclusion who further blurs the ill-defined line between advertising and editorial already noted in *Life*; at the time, occasional *Life* contributor Boothe and *Life* publisher Henry Luce were married, which would have been well known by readers. The advertisements identified the portraits as the work of fashion illustrator Carl Erickson via caption and his recognizable signature, “Eric.” Erickson, a long-time contributor to *Vogue*, created many cover images in a distinctive impressionistic style that evoked the work of Henri Matisse.¹⁴⁵ He would also have been familiar to *Life* readers as the subject of a photo essay on the world of fashion in September 1937.¹⁴⁶ As *Vogue* followed *Life*’s lead in the late 1930s and increasingly used photographs for its covers, Erickson looked beyond the fashion world to portraiture (but also alcohol, which curtailed his career and eventually lead to his death in 1958).¹⁴⁷

Thrilling Highlights from Columbia's Recent Releases

BRUNO WALTER'S AMERICAN RECORD DEBUT—a supreme interpretation of Beethoven's mighty "Eroica" with the Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra of New York.

"The greatest triumph of Bruno Walter's career" . . . "A musical event of the first magnitude!"—such were the comments that greeted Bruno Walter's extraordinary performance of the "Eroica" Symphony during his recent appearances with the Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra of New York.

Now Columbia gives you that same flawless performance with the same great orchestra. Don't fail to hear it soon.
Six 12-inch Records, Set 449..... \$4.50*



WAGNER'S FAMOUS BACCHANALE FROM TAMMÖRSE, Fritz Reiner conducting the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra.

With this superb recording of the glorious "Venusberg" music, Columbia proudly adds another top-ranking American orchestra and conductor to its long list of eminent recording artists.

Fritz Reiner has won world renown for his Wagnerian interpretations, and in this recording Columbia brings you the true Reiner in a breath-taking performance.

A recording that deserves an honored place in any record collection.
Two 12-inch Records, Set X-193..... \$2.50



RICHARD STRAUSS' TONE POEM "EIN HELDENLEBEN" (*A Hero's Life*), Artur Rodziński conducting The Cleveland Orchestra.

A fiery, dynamic recording of Richard Strauss' greatest tone poem.

Its sweeping breadth and brilliance add further evidence that Dr. Rodziński is truly one of the most distinguished living interpreters of modern music. Here is definitely a

"must" for every record library.
Five 12-inch Records, Set 441..... \$3.50*



MOZART'S "AH! FINE! SIGNORI MIE!" AND "MADAMINA" from "Don Giovanni," Salvatore Baccaloni with orchestra conducted by Erich Leinsdorf.

Another exciting debut on Columbia Masterworks.

Salvatore Baccaloni—lauded as the Metropolitan's happiest discovery in years—sings, as only he can, the two great buffo arias from Mozart's "Don Giovanni."

One of the most delightful vocal records of the season . . . superbly sung . . . and superbly recorded.
One 12-inch Record, 71048-D \$1.00

*Available in Automatic Sequence.



Clare Boothe, word author and playwright—an original painting for Columbia Records by Carl Erickson

Clare Boothe PENS THREE

CHARMING COMPLIMENTS TO THE MAKERS OF COLUMBIA MASTERWORKS

FANCY Clare Boothe writing a "rave"! Well, here it is. Without qualifications she says to the new Columbia record company, "I think you're doing a magnificent job!"

"Magnificent—first because you're making such technically fine records. It's almost uncanny the purity of tone, the concert-hall reality of your new Masterworks. There's hardly a whisper of surface noise."

"Magnificent—second because your grand new records are artistically splendid. You have brought together a very brilliant group of artists and orchestras. Leopold Stokowski conducting

The All-American Youth Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, the Minneapolis Symphony, Lotte Lehmann, Dimitri Mitropoulos, and Bruno Walter. An ever-growing list of challenging names—recorded exclusively for you!"

"And magnificent a third time, because you were the first to lower the prices of classical recordings. This shows courage and common sense. Through it you've given people a real incentive to buy records. You've got them interested not just in owning a few good records but in building a fine musical library! Music lovers everywhere are indeed in your debt."

Columbia MASTERWORKS RECORDS

COLUMBIA RECORDING CORPORATION ● A SUBSIDIARY OF COLUMBIA BROADCASTING SYSTEM, INC.



Figure 3.5 Columbia Masterworks advertisement in *Life*, May 12, 1941. Includes Carl Erickson portrait of Clare Boothe.

CBS's advertising in *Life* throughout this period focuses exclusively on the Columbia Masterworks series of classical and operatic recordings. This narrow focus ignores the inexpensive popular records Columbia released, along with those on other labels that had been acquired in CBS' purchase of ARC, like Brunswick, Vocalion, and Okeh. These label lines, consisting primarily of catalog releases of popular and dance songs along with race and hillbilly records, provided a significant portion of Columbia's business, but are completely absent from the "Eric" campaign in favor of Masterworks' more prestigious (and higher-priced) releases. The advertisements marketed these releases as being within the reach of anyone interested thanks to Columbia's aggressive pricing. While the advertisements do mention some single records priced at \$1 [\$16 in 2016 dollars], most of the titles included in the "Eric" advertisements are album sets ranging in price from \$3 to \$8.50 [\$49-\$139 in 2016 dollars]. The class messages built into this focus are clear.

A closer analysis of the copy within the Columbia "Eric" advertisements suggests an attempt to balance typically masculine and feminine appeals. The Erickson paintings created an initial impact that evoked the use in earlier decades of impressionistic art in advertising to attract women. This appeal was accompanied by testimonials from the prominent female celebrities depicted. The advertisements consistently reinforced the good value and low prices of Columbia Records. At the time would have been seen as an appeal to the middle- and upper-class women who, beginning in the mid-1930s, played an increasingly public role in consumer advocacy groups, pressing manufacturers to maintain consistent quality and fairness in pricing.¹⁴⁸ However, throughout the campaign the copy also emphasized in very specific detail technical advances in media engineering and sound quality—an approach that aligns more directly with the era's commonly masculine appeals. In some of the advertisements the appeals of both cost

and technical merit were incorporated into the quoted celebrity testimonials; however, the nearly identical wording of these testimonials throughout the campaign demands considerable suspension of disbelief as to their true source.

The strong emphasis on appeals of style in these advertisements evoked an earlier era. While the overall tone of *Life*'s advertising in 1941 had lightened noticeably from that of 1937, the vibrant, impressionistic portraits used in Columbia's "Eric" campaign were anachronistic outliers alongside advertisements featuring color photographs or illustrations that strove for either realism or cartoonish humor. This return to appeals of the early 1920s was a good fit for the nostalgic attraction inherent in the promotion of classical and operatic music composed decades if not centuries earlier. The advertisements attempted to strike a balance between the timelessness of the recordings, thanks to a focus on classical and operatic music, and the style appeal of collecting the latest, newest recordings and releases of said timeless music. These releases were promoted as more fully realized and satisfying recordings of performances than had been available previously, thanks to updated technology. They were also affordable to a (slightly) wider audience than ever before.

During the same period, Columbia Records ran advertisements in trade publications that relied upon visual appeals that were inconsistent with the "Eric" campaign. These advertisements boasted of Columbia's sales numbers and growing market share through bold, modernistic illustrations.¹⁴⁹ The aesthetic difference between trade and popular press campaigns illustrates Columbia's willingness to target specific audiences with unique appeals. One consistency across both trade and popular advertising, however, is an omission of popular records in favor of the more prestigious and permanent Masterworks.

The shift to a more prominent visual style in Columbia's advertising coincides neatly with the company's integration of visual artwork into its record packaging. This could be read as a concerted effort to inculcate in consumers' minds an association between sound and visual art that their own testing had recently shown to be profitable. After the successful market tests at the beginning of the 1940s, Columbia began to incorporate custom cover artwork as a standard feature on most Masterworks albums.¹⁵⁰ A similar trend occurred during this period across a range of industries, as both advertising agencies and newly appointed in-house art directors sought to persuade manufacturers of consumer goods to incorporate visual elements and style into their product packaging with the promise of added economic value and consumer appeal.¹⁵¹

The 1941 Columbia "Eric" campaign was not alone in employing familiar tropes to attract women and evoke nostalgia. The same tactics were seen around this time in advertisements for other products that had typically been marketed to male consumers, like automobiles. A February 1941 Ford advertisement featured a painting of a young girl, seated on a suitcase next to a waiting Ford sedan, below the headline "This is not 'A Man's World' by a long shot!"¹⁵² The advertisement's copy discussed the influence of women's preferences on the engineering and design processes of Ford's latest models. With the possibility of war looming, women had the potential to become a lucrative consumer market for a range of products that had been more commonly purchased by men.

It is conceivable that the advertisements by both RCA Victor and Columbia intentionally promoted products that were out of reach of many middle-class readers of *Life*. Instead, these advertisements could have been intended to drive middle-class aspiration and a general culture of consumption, while imbuing more accessible products with a whiff of luxury and style. A middle-class consumer might have eventually been able to afford a high-end radio phonograph

or expensive classical albums. In the meantime, they were free to find consumer satisfaction and express personal style by buying RCA's and CBS's less expensive products—which could readily be found in stores, even if not in magazine advertisements.

Regardless of the rationale that inspired it, one possible measure of the success of Columbia's "Eric" campaign can be seen in RCA's emulation of its style. The November 11, 1941 issue of *Life* included an RCA advertisement featuring a painting of "exclusive Victor Record artist Rose Bampton," seated beside a phonograph/radio combination, her head tilted to suggest attentive listening. The advertisement balanced the feminized appeal of the painting with a modernist illustration of the Victrola's "magic brain,"—a masculine robotic conductor with baton in hand and a record player in place of its brain—against exhaustive copy extolling many technical attributes of the featured Victrola model.¹⁵³

Beginning with the December 15, 1941 issue of *Life*, Columbia's advertisements replaced Carl Erickson's paintings with large color photographs.¹⁵⁴ These advertisements made otherwise similar appeals at first, eliciting a testimonial to the quality of Columbia's products from the primary subject of the advertisement, who was often but not always a woman, and repeating the claims of increased sound quality and decreased cost. Throughout 1942 the advertisements alternated between male and female primary subjects, and eventually featured only Columbia Masterworks artists. By the end of 1942, the advertisements focused on exclusively male Columbia artists, and a cursory examination of advertisements through 1943 failed to locate any that feature a woman as the primary subject.

Many historical accounts of the role of visual art in the marketing of recorded music during the Depression and pre-World War II years are themselves strongly gendered. These accounts tend to focus on the "invention" of album artwork by graphic designers as the synthesis

of recorded sound and visual culture. In doing so they valorize the then-emergent, modernistic, and masculinized field of graphic design over other visual cultural traditions that were also prominent at the time. There appears to be no significant discussion of how the impressionistic, nostalgic, and fashion-inspired work of artists like Carl Erickson, often seen as appealing to a female audience, was simultaneously used to market the same albums to the readers of *Life*—in advertisements that rarely featured the modernistic album artwork then coming into use. Furthermore, these accounts do not discuss how images like Erickson's paintings were themselves in some cases used as album artwork, contemporarily to the modernistic, masculinized cover designs that are elevated among graphic design historians today as revolutionary examples of a new, convergent media form. The advertising in *Life*, which reached far more people in the years preceding World War II than the artfully packaged record albums themselves, tells a somewhat different story.

In the 1930s and early 1940s, advertising by RCA Victor and Columbia sought to do more than lure potential consumers via classed and gendered appeals. These ads also sought to create demand for records from consumers by defining new uses for the media—uses that appealed specifically to the contemporary context of media consumption. These advertisements often presented records to consumers as a way to bring the flow of radio under control in the home. They were often marketed as an extension of radio programming. During this time radio was characterized by many as a feminized flow of media, and often denigrated by cultural arbiters. Until television established itself at the heart of America's living rooms, records were similarly denigrated as an inferior cultural product. Once television became the prime target for derision as passive and feminized, a rhetorical space was created for records—and the

modernistic equipment increasingly used to play them—to be redefined within popular discourse as a technological, masculine, and fully legitimate pastime.

Presenting the Record in Catalogs

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the audience of print advertising for recorded music can be identified somewhat clearly through the appeals, both explicit and tacit, featured in the advertisements. The catalogs produced by Columbia and RCA Victor, however, offer a different view of the intended audience that somewhat more complex in nature. RCA Victor and Columbia began to delineate their individual canons of permanent music in a very tangible way with catalog publications aimed at consumers. Catalogs offered much more than a simple listing of available titles—they presented a number of appeals that were often visual, and were sometimes inconsistent with their concurrent advertising campaigns.

While record companies had from their earliest days published catalogs of their offerings for use by dealers, the post-Depression years saw them shift this aim directly to consumers. By 1937 some RCA Victor advertisements in popular magazines included a coupon for a 385-page catalog of its offerings, with “biographical sketches and new portraits of great musicians,” costing ten cents. RCA Victor also offered a monthly subscription-only magazine, the *Victor Record Review*, for \$2.00 a year, or free with the purchase of a new Victrola.¹⁵⁵ Columbia advertised a complete catalog in 1940 for 25 cents, and expanded this publication with a free monthly update of new releases called the *Masterworks Supplement*. By 1942, Columbia claimed that over one million copies of the *Supplement* circulated to consumers each month via retailers and direct mail.¹⁵⁶ Some retailers of records preferred not to rely solely on the offerings from RCA Victor or Columbia to provide catalogs to their customers. The Gramophone Shop in New

York City published an independent catalog for its customers, complete with “smartly written notes” on records available from “more than 3 dozen” record companies.¹⁵⁷ However, the ease of contemporary access to the catalogs created by RCA Victor and Columbia, and the wide distribution of them at the time, provide a valuable opportunity to examine further the visual and textual discourse created for customers by record companies.

Columbia Catalogs

Columbia’s first catalogs following its acquisition by CBS were bound using a relatively expensive “perfect binding” (short signatures of finished pages glued into a rigid spine) rather than “saddle-stitching” (individual sheets folded in half over a rod and stapled together), and were sold to consumers for a higher price than RCA Victor’s catalogs at the time. The printing of annual catalogs and monthly supplements rather than cheaply made but frequently updated catalogs suggests that Columbia intended their catalogs to serve as lasting reference volumes for a somewhat fixed collection of music. This notion is advanced by the eventual removal of pricing information; the 1940 catalogs feature prices throughout, but by 1942 these figures are replaced by a pricing code that refers readers to a separate, loose price list “subject to change without notice.”¹⁵⁸

By October 1940, Columbia's catalogs featured cover artwork by Alex Steinweiss, working in the marketing capacity in which he was originally hired. His artwork is recognizable by its style, but is also prominently signed, as were many of the album covers he created. This tendency for self-promotion allows for easy attribution, and provides an additional explanation for why Steinweiss has been so thoroughly credited as inventor of the album art form. It also strengthens the connection between album art and contemporary trends in commercial visual art

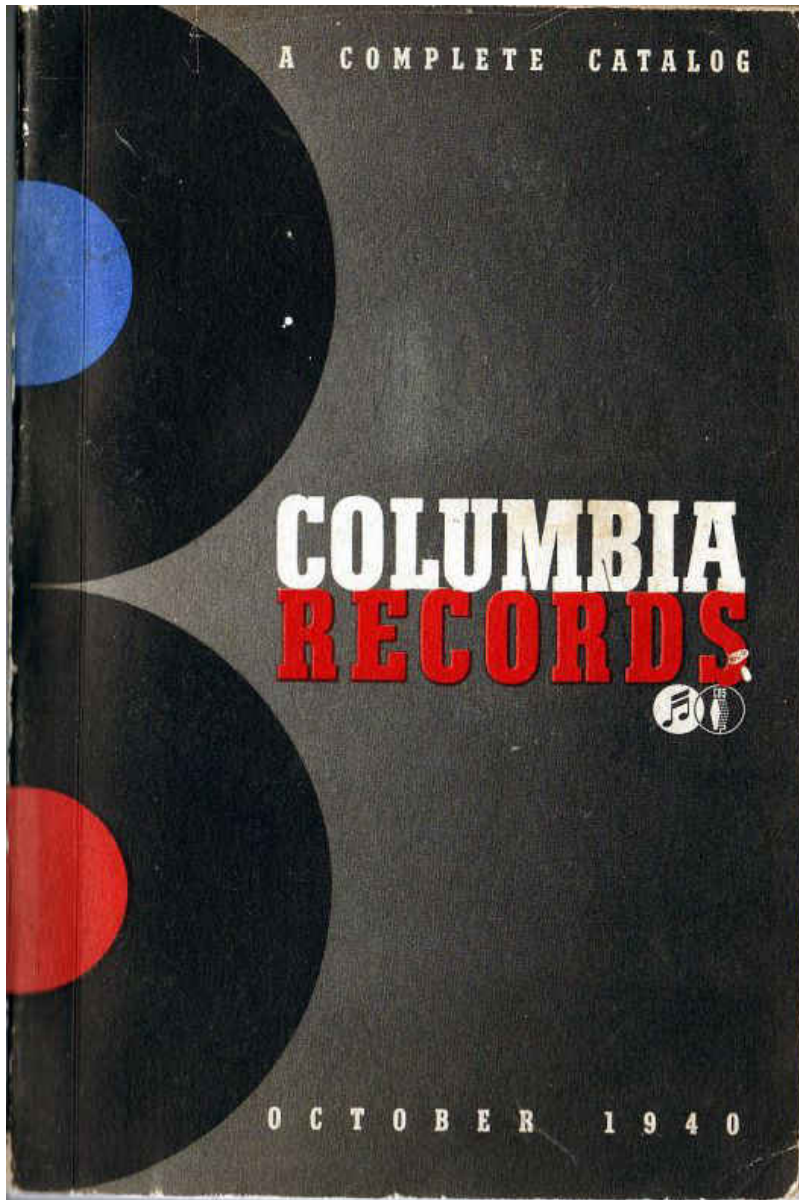


Figure 3.6 1940 Columbia Records catalog cover.

by illustrating that record buyers had the opportunity to express individual taste by collecting the works of not only a specific musical artist, but also a specific visual artist.

However, this connection is not reinforced by the visual content of the Columbia catalog. Although market tests had established the sales potential of album art, no images of album covers appear within the Columbia catalog through the 1942 catalog examined here. The

imagery used within the 1940-1942 catalogs is largely consistent, including only portrait photographs of prominent artists alongside brief biographical sketches within the alphabetical catalog listings. Simple, abstract line illustrations appear on the first and last pages of the catalog, functioning respectively as a title page and an advertisement for replacement needles. These illustrations do little to visualize the music promoted within the catalogs.

Columbia's lengthy catalogs included more than a simple listing of available releases. They also incorporated texts that discussed an ideal role of recorded music for a motivated listening audience—those interested enough in buying records to have purchased a catalog. The 1940 Columbia catalog begins with an introduction that attempts to position sound recording as a revolution in human understanding and history:

With the invention and perfection of the phonograph and phonograph records...the process of reconstructing the sounds of today by generations of the future is taken out of the realm of guess-work...Furthermore, the phonograph, like the radio and the sound movies, has been a leading component in the remarkable democratization of music, which our age has witnessed...the great mass of people are now able to enjoy performances such as only princes could command in other days, at the moment and as often as they please. The performances are likely to be better than anything encountered in the general run of concert-halls or opera houses, or even on the radio.¹⁵⁹

Columbia presents the offerings of the catalog as “almost an entire history of music as we know it, with a wealth and profusion that no course in the history of music could possibly encompass.”¹⁶⁰ These comments evoke nostalgia in the suggestion that the mere names of familiar pieces of music, as listed in a catalog, can stir powerful emotions—and visual images—in the educated listener. In one sentence, the catalog’s introduction affirms a sense of relativism, stresses broadening accessibility, links the idea of visual imagery to music, and makes a clearly gendered appeal to the ideal record buyer:

The number of people to whom names of musical compositions mean specific sets of images (and each one is entitled to his own imagery in music, the most

democratic realm of all) is indeed increasing so rapidly that we are likely to forget that only a few years ago an American male who talked about such things was regarded by his fellows as a little queer.¹⁶¹

Following this statement, the essay details the relationship between records and radio—and in doing so asserts the benefits of record collecting:

There is the important difference of choice between the two media, however. The shelves of your record-case are like the shelves of your book-case in that from each you may choose spiritual nourishment when and as you please...you have only begun to use an album of records after the first playing. The pleasure it can yield seems almost inexhaustible, for the very good reason that music, being an art that exists in time, with a vocabulary and language of its own, discloses its secrets only with intimate acquaintance. And even after you have got to know one of the masterworks of music seemingly as well as you can know it, the thrill of renewing acquaintance always remains.¹⁶²

This passage attempts to present the benefits of records over radio without any direct indictment of radio's perceived shortcomings. The introduction's omissions are curious, but consistent with the rhetoric of Columbia's advertising campaigns. While it is found at the beginning of a complete Columbia catalog that includes both Masterworks titles and popular releases, it only praises the Masterworks as a source of personal, and even spiritual, fulfillment. Columbia chose to include no words promoting or celebrating popular music, even in a catalog half-devoted to selling popular music.

RCA Victor Catalogs

Throughout the 1930s, RCA reinforced the division between permanent and popular music by maintaining separate catalogs for its classical and operatic Victor Red Seal line of music and the more stylistically diverse but lower priced Victor and Bluebird lines of popular music. The Red Seal catalogs were generally produced using higher quality printing and binding, while the popular catalogs were printed on inexpensive newsprint stock. These catalogs largely

adhere to the conventions used by Victor for decades, as also represented in the bound index volume that accompanied the Victor Library of Recorded Music in 1936.

The 1942 RCA Victor/Bluebird popular catalog combined artists from RCA's mid-range and budget lines with relative parity, though in separate sections with Victor appearing at the front of the catalog. The catalog features a simple two-color cover design, with generic spot illustrations of dancing couples, horn players, a record emitting musical notation, and a field of stars. The cover does not attempt to challenge the reader with the trappings of modernism, though its limited-color design is reminiscent of poster art. The last page of the catalog is an advertisement for a range of record accessories. While few album releases are featured in the catalog listings, this advertisement includes an image of a "richly beautiful" but blank-covered "Library Album" designed to store twelve records, and available in either ten- or twelve-inch size at three levels of quality each.¹⁶³

Within the catalog, any distinctions between the music available on the two labels are difficult to identify. With the exception of children's music on Bluebird, the artists on each label seem to be recording similar styles of music, and often even the same compositions. The promoted concept of popular music in the early 1940s was largely synonymous with dance music, and as is noted on every page of the popular catalog, "All dance records are in Fox Trot tempo, unless otherwise indicated."¹⁶⁴ This clumsy description identifies a moment in which attempts were being made to separate jazz from its racial context for consumption by a middle class white audience. Here this trend results in the description of much of the popular music in the catalog as "fox trots" and an emphasis on performances by bandleaders and orchestras. This catalog predates the typical description of jazz-derived styles as "big band" or "swing" music, though several artists use these terms in the titles of their compositions or their ensembles.¹⁶⁵

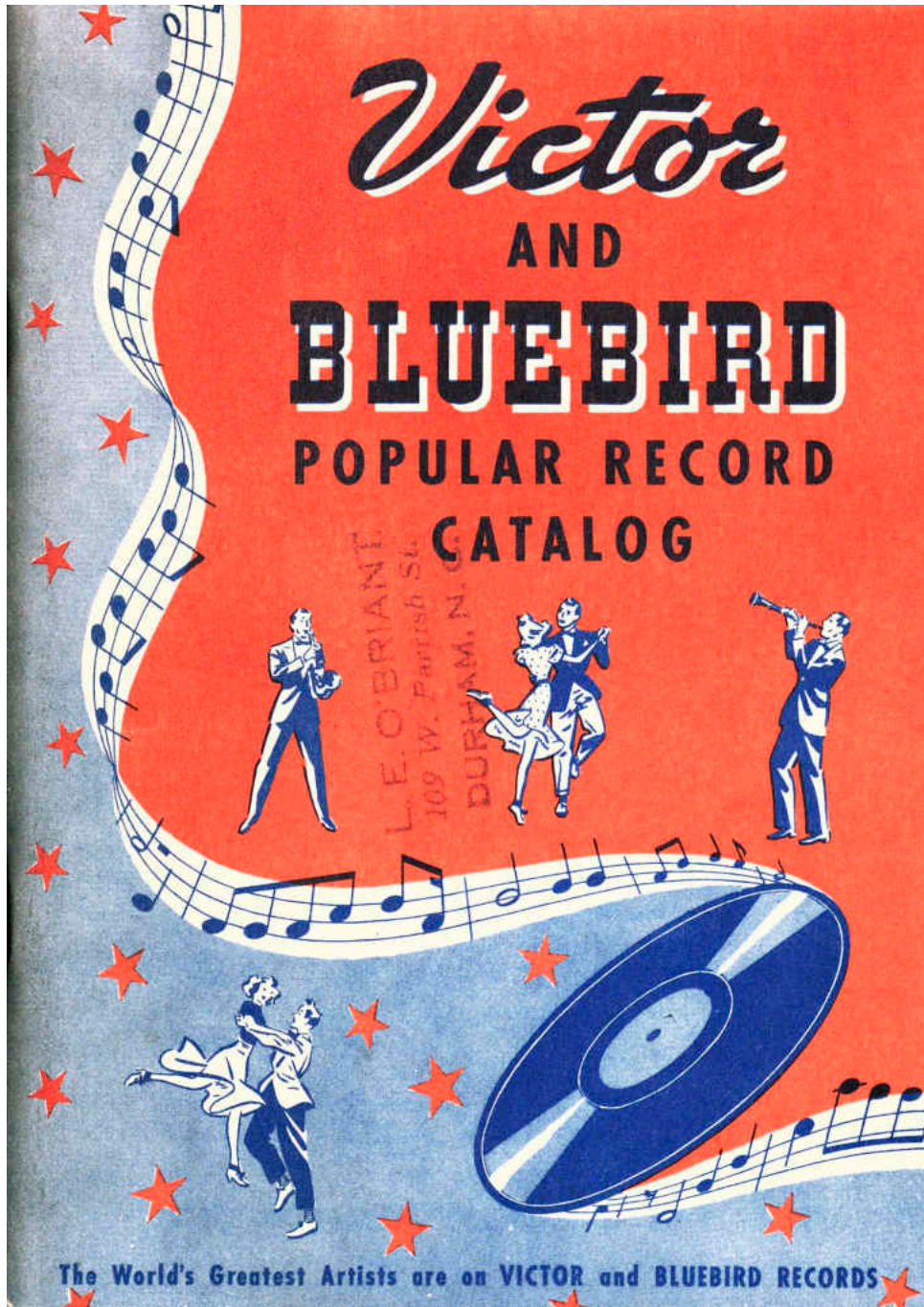


Figure 3.7 Cover of the 1942 RCA Victor and Bluebird Popular catalog.

The word “jazz” is only found in a few song titles in the Bluebird section of the catalog—like “Jazz Me Blues,” which further complicates the genre being promoted—and does not appear in the ensemble names or genre descriptions.¹⁶⁶

The visual, non-textual elements of the catalog are limited, much like Columbia's catalog, to simple portrait photographs of the artists. The portraits in both sections of the catalog represent artists of a range of ethnicities, though the artists of color are clearly identified as band or orchestra leaders, and not solo artists. The aforementioned advertisements in the *Chicago Defender* from a decade earlier encouraged consumers to ask their dealer for a separate catalog of "race records," and though I was unable to obtain an RCA Victor race catalog from this period, the absence of blues or country recordings from the Popular catalog examined here suggests that this division continued into the early 1940s, even as artists of color began to find relatively equal representation as leaders of dance bands.

The conventions of RCA's music catalogs were in flux, like many other aspects of the recording industry at the time. By 1943, Victor combined its Red Seal and popular catalogs into a single 500-page catalog of "permanent music chosen from the vast Victor Red Seal and Victor and Bluebird Popular Record Catalogs."¹⁶⁷ The perfect-bound catalog features a full-color cover with a somewhat romantic painting of musical instruments and a disembodied, white-gloved conductor's hand clutching a baton, all floating atop a verdant nature scene. The classic "His Master's Voice" portrait is included as on nearly all RCA Victor publications, but only as a small inset detail. The back cover and reverse sides of both covers feature a selection of album covers, reproduced in color, as the primary visual elements. The back cover is blank except for a reproduction of the RCA "His Master's Voice" painting. The photographic portraits of artists common in earlier catalogs have been completely replaced by images of album covers. Many covers feature modernist designs that evoke the style of FAP poster art, but some feature art in a more traditional decorative style, while others are simple photographic portraits of the artists or composers with straightforward informative text that doesn't embody the tension and dynamism



Figure 3.8 Cover of the 1943 RCA Victor and Bluebird catalog.

of modernist type design in any sense. The selection of covers here and throughout the pages of the catalog (elsewhere printed in black and white halftone only) show that a wide range of styles were applied to cover art as the art itself was applied to a wide range of music. Each section of the catalog begins with a full-page black and white illustration that visualizes the musical style of

that section, in a manner consistent with the catalog's cover painting. Despite the range of cover designs on display throughout the catalog, the overall aesthetic surrounding them is one of classicist nostalgia—welcoming, and not particularly challenging, which is a logical choice for a document designed to sell products to a wide audience.

The organizational system of the catalog is explained over several pages of “simple rules” that seem anything but simple, but in their detail communicate explicitly the valuation of the music itself.¹⁶⁸ “Old familiar tunes” (hillbilly music), “race” music, and Mexican music are included within the last sections of the catalog, and are presented in premade albums with artwork, which was not the case even a few years earlier. This artwork is reproduced throughout the catalog, in all sections. Between 1942 and 1943, the use of album art in promotion has become completely pervasive, across all genres and styles of music, indicating the extent to which album art and the album form itself had become industry conventions in just a few years. In fact, by this point, the consistent presence of album artwork and the album form make it difficult to distinguish a marketing priority for certain genres through the selective use of these features, as existed in national magazine advertising at the time. However, the sections of the catalog are clearly stratified in a way that communicates the prestige and priority with which various types of music are presented, even as it combines them in a single volume. These divisions also indicate an increasing sophistication in marketing different styles of music within a widening definition of permanence.

An additional important rhetorical theme appears in RCA Victor's catalog by 1943—one that represents a significant shift from the company's marketing from just a few years earlier. The catalog's foreword dismisses the top-down dictation of the canon previously illustrated in the Victor Library, instead reinforcing the consumer's prerogative to choose her or his own canon:

America's own musical favorites serve a cross-section of many tastes, for we are a nation of many interests...record buyers over the years have, in their demand for specific recorded music, made quite clear just what 'Music They Want.'
...Containing all musical categories, this catalog offers to each one the melodies he particularly desires...Here indeed is music for all, in sufficient quantities to keep our world musically happy.¹⁶⁹

Despite the assumed gender of the record buyer, this viewpoint is much closer to that of the Columbia Masterworks advertising from the years preceding it than to much of RCA Victor's own earlier marketing materials, and speaks perhaps to the perceived success of Columbia's re-entry into the market following the CBS acquisition. The 1943 RCA Victor catalog suggests that by that year the company saw album artwork as a valuable selling point—to the motivated audience of a record catalog, if not necessarily to the casual audience targeted by advertisements in national magazines, or to wider audiences not targeted by those advertisements.

No matter what style of music a consumer preferred, RCA Victor offered a thoughtfully compiled and visually stimulating edition that they could buy, and a supportive rhetoric that all tastes deserved to be made permanent. Paired with the pervasive reproduction of album art and the minimized role of RCA Victor's long-standing brand traditions in this catalog, by 1943 any strong divisions in the catalog materials produced by the two companies were minimized. The materials, much like the advertisements and the records themselves, reflect the increasing status of records as a settled, mostly interchangeable commodity produced within an oligopolistic system that benefitted from avoidance of direct, aggressive competition, and only slight suggestions of difference.

Conclusion

The documents examined in this chapter show an industry at a moment of transition, competition, and uncertainty. RCA Victor and Columbia had both taken steps to reinvigorate the market for recorded music that had withered in the face of economic austerity and the dominance of radio. However, the approaches and appeals they chose to make are far from unified. One can observe in these ad campaigns, catalogs, and in the products themselves the gradual identification of an audience that in some ways drew on the past, and in other ways was uniquely of its own moment. This process of identification would be complicated by the cultural upheaval of World War II. After the war, it would resume, the target audience of records gelling more quickly to become the masculine, middle-class audiophile culture of the 1950s as reflected in the popularity of high-fidelity home audio technology. In the years leading up to the war, the horizontally integrated corporations who ran radio networks and marketed records seemed willing to try a much broader range of audiences for their appeals until they found what worked. Along the way they would apply new techniques, in new spaces, to catch the eyes of women, children, and customers of different races with new visual appeals. These appeals, unevenly applied, further reinforced existing class divides within the products they produced. The emergence of the 33RPM LP format in 1948 would level the cost of producing records and reduce the practical limitations that favored the marketing of “permanent music,” over a wider range of styles, but for a time, the promotion of records as a luxury consumer product and status symbol was the primary concern of RCA Victor and Columbia. Visual art helped them to make that appeal as effectively as possible, and in ways their radio broadcasts could not.

IV. Conclusion

A decade before his death in 2011, Alex Steinweiss himself eulogized the art form he helped to create. In the preface to one of several biographies and monographs published about him in the years before his death, he wrote, "I feel it is particularly important to devote a large portion [of this particular biography] to record album design, as this form has ceased to exist. The development of audiocassettes and compact discs radically reduced the area of the product package that can be used for display. This dramatically curtailed the value of the album cover as a sales stimulant."¹⁷⁰

In sounding the death knell for album artwork, Steinweiss was only half right. A number of media and industrial shifts would follow his eulogy—shifts which first would prove out his criticism through increased digital distribution of music and reduction of the visibility of artwork, before complicating it with the unexpected resurgence in the popularity of vinyl records and custom packaging in the years following his death.

The marketing tactics of both RCA Victor and Columbia in the 1930s and 1940s helped to reassert a designated space and function for recorded music in US homes. Throughout the late 1930s, record sales began to recover from the Depression and from the competition of radio, reaching \$44 million by 1939 [\$757 million in 2016 dollars].¹⁷¹ By the time the United States entered World War II, the notion of record collecting had been inculcated in consumers and was widely discussed in trade press in a way it had not been during the pre-Depression era. Both companies would continue to claim massive increases in the popularity of “permanent” music. In 1940, RCA Victor and Columbia respectively claimed 700% and 1000% increases in sales of Red Seal and Masterworks releases, while less significant immediate growth was seen in the sale of popular music.¹⁷² World War II would momentarily slow this growth trend, but the

momentum generated in the late 1930s would eventually resume, thanks to continued competition between RCA and CBS in the development of new formats like the 33RPM long-playing record and the 45RPM seven-inch single. These new formats were accompanied by innovations to packaging that allowed labels to include more sophisticated visual artwork at a lower cost, furthering the integration of visual art into the ways that listeners interacted with recorded music. These formats would also be accompanied by marketing strategies that would continue to define certain types of music as canonical and collectible (those on long-playing records), and others as popular and disposable (those released as singles). The album, now generally condensed to a single record, would continue to be the format more likely to use visual artwork as a selling point and logical framework. Interplay between the two formats would perpetuate the tactics previously employed in the release of the *Bix Beiderbecke Memorial Album* of using a new format to resell the same music; record labels in the 1950s and 1960s routinely released singles by new artists until enough were released and successfully marketed that they could be collected and repackaged as an album that would be likely to find an audience. Only then did the labels add artwork to unify the recordings and to provide fans with an incentive to purchase the same recordings for a second time, in a form deemed more permanent thanks in large part to its appearance.

In recent decades, the very notion of what a record *is* has once again changed significantly. Digital technology has extensively reshaped the recorded music industry and records themselves. Access to new technology, for both producers and consumers, has impacted the industry on many levels. Within the recording industry, technological advances have changed the way music is composed, performed, recorded, and replicated. Digital technology has also drastically altered the ways that consumers acquire and interact with music. A few unforeseen

curves along the path of innovation took a profitable industrial product, separated it from its physical trappings, and made it available to the world for free. Just as in the 1930s, dwindling profits have led to the re-examination of established conventions. To survive, an industry that was once mostly concerned with producing and selling a commodity has shifted its focus to providing a service. However, a rekindled interest in older physical formats like vinyl LPs and cassettes has further complicated the tension over the role that visual art plays in the marketing and conceptualization of music today. This tension is accompanied by uncertainty on many levels within the industry.

The music industry has struggled to remain profitable in recent years, as the emergence of online piracy and streaming services have coincided with precipitous drops in physical sales and overall revenues. Many aspects of the music listening experience have changed as well, including the visual artwork that is designed to accompany albums and singles. Though the primary role of album artwork has been to decorate the packaging that protects media, album artwork has come to serve a larger function in how listeners interact with music. Through changes in industrial practice and media technology, both the audience for album artwork and the artwork itself have diminished in size. Today, even a majority of those who choose to purchase a permanent copy of a recording may never see the visual art elements or physical packaging beyond a thumbnail-sized image embedded within the user interface of a digital media player.

Even so, contemporary record companies are presented with a number of other opportunities to attach a visual aesthetic to the music they release. Within digital retail spaces, visual art retains a key role in categorizing and promoting releases. The user interfaces of social media networks are highly visual; music present in those spaces still depends upon a visual

image to catch the attention of potential listeners. Online video sites like YouTube have made it relatively easy and inexpensive to distribute music to a wide potential audience. As a distribution system for music, online video sites require the inclusion of some visual element, whether that takes the form of a static image, a slickly produced music video, or some sort of half-measure, as seen in the recent trend of the lyric video, often little more than a simple animation or video loop overlaid with the song's lyrics. In addition, many artists have turned to extensive touring to replace the revenue lost to diminishing physical sales and paltry royalties offered by streaming services. The live performance setting offers an additional context for the creation and exhibition of dynamic visuals that move well beyond the realm of packaging and cover art. When captured and translated back into digital spaces by both record companies and fans, these images often take better advantage of the visual nature of online spaces than a static album cover image could.

Listening practices have changed as well. Abundant access, liberation from context, and a "shuffle mentality" reinforced by the user interfaces and algorithmic playlists of streaming services have reduced the need for contextualization and categorization that album art was designed to provide.¹⁷³ The changing modes of audience behavior pose a challenge to attempts within the recording industry to define and discuss the music it produces. When digital distribution—either via direct purchase or subscription-based streaming service—renders physical media and packaging unnecessary, the *raison d'être* of visual art in music is called into question. Some contemporary critics like Alex Ross have celebrated the rise of digital distribution for liberating music from the "fatuous self-definitions and delusions of significance" that the visual shorthand and traditions of album art can reinforce. From this perspective, visual artwork can be seen as an anachronism, equivalent in meaning to the digital addition of "phonograph effects"—the pops and scratches that evoke playback of vinyl records—to new

music, to generate an aura of history and context.¹⁷⁴ Many such arguments against album artwork suggest a thread of elitism that identifies a correct way to enjoy music, and denies the agency of both recording artists and audiences to agree upon a renegotiation of these terms.

The recording industry's reliance on visual art to contribute meaning or context to music, especially with an eye towards examples from the 1960s and 1970s, does not ensure that it still serves a practical function to the recording industry today. According to Butler's argument, the fate of visual art is largely tied to the fate of the album as a significant format for music. That fate is in question within a digital economy. The album, thanks to a relatively high profit margin, has been the primary focus of the music industry since the re-emergence of recorded music sales following the Great Depression and the early years of radio. By the end of the 1960s, 80% of music industry revenue from sales came in the form of albums.¹⁷⁵ However, music industry historian Steve Savage has argued that digital sales or streaming plays of individual songs eliminate the economic function of "grouping" musical pieces into albums, making the convention of the album less attractive to record companies.¹⁷⁶ This can be interpreted as a return to what was once the default in the marketing of music—the primacy of the single. The pre-recording era of sheet music, the early-twentieth-century trade in 78RPM records, and the traditions of radio programming throughout its history have all privileged the promotion of individual songs (sometimes backed with a second song of lesser quality if the medium allowed). The album-oriented rock radio format that emerged at the peak of the album's cultural and industrial significance in the early 1970s was created to promote sales of the album format, but still drew individual tracks for airplay rather than programming entire albums. This convention separated tracks from their context within the album's song cycle and encouraged the continued treatment of certain album songs as "singles."¹⁷⁷

If the digital economy liberates the song from the song cycle in theory and practice, then the contextual function of album art is less useful to both listener and producer. However, album releases are still widely seen as opportunities to launch aggressive marketing campaigns with elements that cannot use sound, like print advertisements and billboards. The same is true of digital media platforms that rely on a visual call-to-action or sharing within an earned audience, where audio content without a visual element is much less likely to be shared.¹⁷⁸ However, these marketing conventions have grown less dependent on the coordinated placement of physical sound media into the market. The most successful and well-promoted artists are creating music that is more visual and less physical than ever before. Artists like Beyoncé have embraced surprise exclusively streaming releases or even releases of “visual albums”—long-form music films—and in turn can defer the release of music on physical media by weeks or months. This effectively allows record companies to test market an album release without the risky expenditure of physical media production.

The overwhelming majority of artists without access to the means to produce “visual albums” or surprise releases are granted access to only some channels of digital distribution; in so they are freed from the upfront costs and limitations of physical media, but also from much of the income it once garnered. If the companies who produce less lucrative music lack the resources to create visual artwork, if the music that is produced no longer relies on visual artwork for a conceptual framework, and if even many engaged consumers no longer see visual artwork, few reasons remain for album art to persist. Yet the systems of music production continue to rationalize its creation. In lean times for the recording industry on all levels, demands to streamline an already lean and less lucrative production model may further decrease the role of album art and the album as were defined in the late 1930s. Those hoping to predict or define

what the recorded music of today should look like would be wise to consider the industrial shifts of the late 1930s—another moment of flux, when album art and the album itself became novel and visible solutions to similar challenges.

Notes

¹ David L. Morton, Jr., *Sound Recording* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 100.

² Russell Sanjek, *Pennies from Heaven: The American Popular Music Business in the Twentieth Century*, updated by David Sanjek (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 123.

³ Kevin Reagan, *Alex Steinweiss: The Inventor of the Modern Album Cover*, introduction by Steven Heller (Köln: Taschen, 2011), 125.

⁴ Kevin Reagan, *Alex Steinweiss*, 127.

⁵ Jan Butler, "Album Art and Posters: The Psychedelic Interplay of Rock Art and Art Rock," in *The Routledge Companion to Music and Visual Culture*, edited by Tim Shephard and Anne Leonard (New York: Routledge, 2013), 180.

⁶ Colin Symes, *Setting the Record Straight: A Material History of Classical Recording* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 90.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁸ D.L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 204.

⁹ Katherine McCoy, "American Graphic Design Expression," in *Graphic Design History*, edited by Steven Heller and Georgette Balance (New York: Allsworth Press, 2001), 5.

¹⁰ Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 312-315.

¹¹ D. L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy*, 200.

¹² Radio Corporation of America, "Listen" (advertisement), *Life* (December 6, 1937), 52.

¹³ Fred Turner, *The Democratic Surround: Multimedia & American Liberalism from World War II to the Psychedelic Sixties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 75.

¹⁴ Victoria Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶ Kevin Reagan, *Alex Steinweiss*, 22-23.

¹⁷ Symes, *Setting the Record Straight*, 93-95.

¹⁸ Butler, "Album Art and Posters," 182.

¹⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, "The Curves of the Needle (1927)," translated by Thomas Y. Levin (*October* 55, Winter 1990), 48-55.

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," translated by Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968), 234.

²¹ Steven Heller, "Alex Steinweiss, Originator of Artistic Album Covers, Dies At 94," *The New York Times* (July 20, 2011), A20.

²² The subtitles of works about Steinweiss suggest this tension, or at least acknowledge a scholarly trend of qualifying the process of invention: the titles progress from hailing him in 2000 as "Inventor of the Album Cover" to remembering him in 2011 as "Inventor of the Modern Album Cover." The latter works fail to explore the pre-modern developments they seem to suggest, which I hope to rectify here to some degree.

²³ Russell Sanjek, *Pennies from Heaven: The American Popular Music Business in the Twentieth Century*, updated by David Sanjek, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996).

²⁴ Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

²⁵ Victoria Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

²⁶ Lynn Spigel. *TV By Design* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

²⁷ Sanjek, *Pennies from Heaven*, 122.

²⁸ Lerone A. Martin, *Preaching on Wax: The Phonograph and the Shaping of Modern African American Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 32.

²⁹ Tim Brooks, "The Artifacts of Recording History: Creators, Users, Losers, Keepers," *Association for Recorded Sound Collections Journal* 11:1 (1979), 18.

³⁰ Lifton Manufacturing Co., "Bellphonic: The Bell Toned Portable" (advertisement), *Talking Machine World* (July 1928), 107.

³¹ "Markets New Record Album," *Talking Machine World* (August 1928), 46.

³² "This Month's New Phonograph Records," *Radio Broadcast* (April 1928), 25-26.

³³ “This Month's New Phonograph Records,” *Radio Broadcast* (May 1928), 25-26.

³⁴ The name “talking machine” for what would later be generically called a phonograph dates to the invention and patent of an early sound recording device by Thomas Edison, who at first only intended it to be used for dictation and voice recording, and not for music.

³⁵ Sanjek, *Pennies from Heaven*, 71.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 139.

³⁹ Evan Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel*, 2nd edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 14.

⁴⁰ Paul Seaton, “Woolworth's First Gramophone Records,” *The Woolworth's Museum*, <http://www.woolworthsmuseum.co.uk/1920s-gramophonerecords.htm>

⁴¹ Symes, *Setting the Record Straight*, 100.

⁴² Grieve, *The Federal Art Project*, 60.

⁴³ Katherine McCoy, “American Graphic Design Expression,” 4.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Steven Heller and Louise Fili, *Euro Deco: Graphic Design Between the Wars* (San Francisco: Chronicle, 2004), 8.

⁴⁶ Steven Heller, “Fortunato Depero: Cheering Up the Universe,” in *Graphic Design History*, 157.

⁴⁷ McCoy, “American Graphic Design Expression,” in *Graphic Design History*, 5.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Steven Heller and Louise Fili, *Euro Deco*, 8.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

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- ⁵² Grieve, *The Federal Art Project*, 85.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 98.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.
- ⁵⁸ Associated American Artists, “Incredible—But True!” (advertisement). *Life Magazine* (February 17, 1941), 3.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁰ Grieve, *The Federal Art Project*, 61.
- ⁶¹ Reagan, *Alex Steinweiss*, 275-280.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 109-112.
- ⁶³ Sanjek, *Pennies from Heaven*, 139.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.
- ⁶⁵ “R.C.A.-Victor Co. Demonstrates New Record That Plays For Thirty Minutes,” *Music Trade Review* (October 1931), 27.
- ⁶⁶ “Union Carbide Sells Vinylite To Radio,” *Wall Street Journal* (October 15, 1931), 1.
- ⁶⁷ Sanjek, *Pennies from Heaven*, 131.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.
- ⁷⁰ Sidney B. Self, “Widest Chemical Frontiers Ahead,” *Barron's National Business and Financial Weekly* (January 11, 1943), 31.
- ⁷¹ Sidney B. Self, “Union Carbide,” *Barron's National Business and Financial Weekly* (July 2, 1951), 11.

⁷² Joe Csida, "Let's Not Get Dizzy on New Record Speeds; They're Here," *Billboard* (January 15, 1949), 13.

⁷³ David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 105-112.

⁷⁴ RCA Victor filed suits against Columbia and Decca in 1940, though the cases languished in US district and appellate courts until 1943. "Victor Sues Col., Decca On Red Seal," *Billboard* (February 27, 1943), 20; "RCA Still Suing for Exclusive on 'Red Seal,'" *Billboard* (June 19, 1943), 21.

⁷⁵ Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 122.

⁷⁶ Morton, *Sound Recording*, 65-66.

⁷⁷ Columbia Phonograph Company, "And Now Columbia Presents..." (advertisement), *Talking Machine World* (November 15, 1924), 34a-b. Columbia Phonograph Company, "Columbia Fine Art Series of Musical Masterworks" (advertisement), *Talking Machine World* (March 15, 1925), 27-30.

⁷⁸ "Market for Quality Records is a Fertile Field for Dealers," *Talking Machine World* (June 1928), 90.

⁷⁹ Columbia Phonograph Company, "Columbia Masterworks" (advertisement), *Talking Machine World* (December 1928), 16.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁸¹ Jennifer McKnight-Trontz and Alex Steinweiss, *For the Record: the Life and Work of Alex Steinweiss, Inventor of the Album Cover*, Introduction by Steven Heller (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000), 21.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 31.

⁸³ Kevin Reagan, *Alex Steinweiss*, 127.

⁸⁴ Radio Corporation of America, "Listen" (advertisement), *Life* (December 6, 1937), 52.

⁸⁵ Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra, *Brahms' Symphony No. 1, in C Minor* (Camden, NJ: RCA Victor, 1940). As mentioned in Jeff Samoray, "A Picture-Perfect Moment," *Colby-Sawyer Magazine* (Spring 2016), 56.

⁸⁶ Stan Walker, "Cover Story," *Electronic Age* 21 no. 3 (Summer 1962), 14.

⁸⁷ "Henry M. Rundle" (obituary), *The New York Times* (March 1, 1960), 33.

⁸⁸ It should be noted that all three were otherwise employed by RCA, with Damrosch broadcasting his *Music Appreciation Hour* on NBC and Rachmaninoff and Whiteman as Victor artists who frequently appeared on NBC programming and whose recordings are featured prominently in the Library.

⁸⁹ “Fixing Up the Store,” *Radio Today* (December 1936), 16.

⁹⁰ Radio Corporation of America, “Corporation Annual Reports to Shareholders, 1920-1950.”

⁹¹ Radio Corporation of America, *Index to Victor Library of Recorded Music*, 1935.

⁹² Radio Corporation of America, “Listen” (advertisement), *Life* (December 1937), 52; “Selling Records,” *Radio Today* (September 1935), 32-34.

⁹³ “Phonograf Combinations,” *Radio Today* (January 1936), 18.

⁹⁴ “Selling ‘Combinations,’” *Radio Today* (March 1936), 18.

⁹⁵ “Record Year,” *Radio Today* (December 1936), 9.

⁹⁶ A smaller and lower-priced version of the Victor Library continued to be marketed in Canada as late as 1941, as seen here:

http://www.radiomuseum.org/r/rca_victor_victor_library_of_recorded_music.html

⁹⁷ Radio Corporation of America, “Listen” (advertisement), *Life* (April 4, 1937), 35-39.

⁹⁸ Radio Corporation of America, “Listen” (advertisement), *Life* (December 6, 1937), 52.

⁹⁹ “Phonograf (sic) Combinations,” *Radio Today* (January 1936), 18.

¹⁰⁰ Sanjek, *Pennies from Heaven*, 127-128.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁰² McKnight-Trontz and Steinweiss, *For the Record*, 46-47.

¹⁰³ “In Your Record Library,” *Business Screen* 2 no. 3 (1941), 33.

¹⁰⁴ “The Record Month,” *Radio Today* (May 1940), 26.

¹⁰⁵ Sanjek, *Pennies from Heaven*, 145.

¹⁰⁶ Stan Walker, “Cover Story,” *Electronic Age* 21 no. 3 (Summer 1962), 12-15.

¹⁰⁷ Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 131.

¹⁰⁸ Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 131-132.

¹⁰⁹ Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 140.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 144-145.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 122-123.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹¹⁵ "Mixed Swing Orchestra Records For Columbia," *The Chicago Defender* (January 27, 1940), p. 20.

¹¹⁶ Release information about the records examined here was largely obtained from Discogs.com, an open-sourced online discography.

¹¹⁷ Warren W. Scholl, "'Bix' Beiderbecke" (essay), 4-5, *Bix Beiderbecke Memorial Album* (Camden, NJ: RCA Victor, 1936).

¹¹⁸ Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 300.

¹¹⁹ *Life* was chosen for this project thanks to its availability. The advertisements and editorial content examined here were accessed via Google Books, which provides fully searchable and easily browsed access to all issues of the magazine during this period. I began my research of *Life* by recording the results of key-word searches for "RCA," "Victor," "Columbia," and "CBS." To ensure that no relevant examples were overlooked and to gain a greater understanding of context, I also examined each issue, page by page, from the magazine's introduction in November 1936 through the end of 1941.
<https://books.google.com/books?id=N0EEAAAAMBAJ>

¹²⁰ Time, Inc. "When Milwaukee's Nearest Neighbor Was Moscow" (advertisement), *Life* (December 15, 1941), 134-135.

¹²¹ Erickson prominently signed his paintings with "Eric," as visible in these advertisements.

¹²² See Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel*, and Amanda Petrusich, *Do Not Sell At Any Price* (New York: Scribner, 2014).

¹²³ Timothy D. Taylor, "Introduction," in *Music, Sound, and Technology in America*, edited by Timothy D. Taylor, Mark Katz, and Tony Grajeda (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 20-21. Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 66-67.

¹²⁴ "A Picture Chart of What Plain and Fancy People Want for Christmas," *Life* (December 5, 1938), 32-33.

¹²⁵ "Selling Records," *Radio Today* (February 1936), 18. "Record Sales Band," *Radio Today* (April 1940), 24.

¹²⁶ Terry Smith, "Life-style Modernity," in *Looking at Life Magazine*, edited by Erika Doss (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 27.

¹²⁷ Erika Doss, "Introduction," in *Looking at Life Magazine*, 12.

¹²⁸ James L. Baughman, "Who Read *Life*?" in *Looking at Life Magazine*, 42-43.

¹²⁹ Doss, "Introduction," 8.

¹³⁰ Baughman, "Who Read *Life*?" 48.

¹³¹ The "Listen" advertisements also predicted the content and visual aesthetic of *Radio Age*, a stand-alone magazine RCA would introduce in 1941, which became *Electronic Age* in 1957. This might explain the company's move to relatively simple display ads. Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 303.

¹³² Radio Corporation of America, "Listen" (advertisement), *Life* (December 7, 1937), 6.

¹³³ Radio Corporation of America, "Listen" (advertisement), *Life* (July 4, 1938), 33.

¹³⁴ Radio Corporation of America, "Listen" (advertisement), *Life* (December 8, 1938), 48.

¹³⁵ Radio Corporation of America, "Listen" (advertisement), *Life* (April 4, 1938), 38.

¹³⁶ "Selling More Discs," *Radio Today* (August 1936), 28.

¹³⁷ Columbia Recording Corporation, "Two Great New Names" (advertisement), *Radio Today* (August 1940), 6-7.

¹³⁸ Columbia Recording Corporation. "Columbia Swings Wide The Portals of Fine Music" (advertisement), *Life* (August 12, 1940), 60-61.

¹³⁹ Columbia Recording Corporation, "Price Revolution" (advertisement), *Life* (September 9, 1940), 47.

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- ¹⁴⁰ Columbia Recording Corporation, “New” (advertisement), *Life* (October 6, 1941), 87.
- ¹⁴¹ “Columbia Launches Big-Scale Promotions,” *Radio Today* (April 1941), 17-21.
- ¹⁴² Columbia Recording Corporation, “For Lasting Pleasure...” (advertisement), *Life* (December 15, 1941), 48-49.
- ¹⁴³ Columbia Recording Corporation, “Lotte Lehman” (advertisement), *Life* (March 24, 1941), 102.
- ¹⁴⁴ Columbia Recording Corporation, “Clare Booth” (advertisement), *Life* (May 12, 1941), 23.
- ¹⁴⁵ Justine Picardie, “Illustrious Stuff: Something Magical Happened Whenever the Great Fashion Illustrators Put Pen and Ink to Paper,” *Stella* (September 9, 2012), 38.
- ¹⁴⁶ “Reporting Paris Styles is a Business,” *Life* (September 6, 1937), 34.
- ¹⁴⁷ “Carl Erickson, 67, Magazine Artist, Illustrator for Vogue for 40 Years Dies,” *The New York Times* (June 17, 1958), 29.
- ¹⁴⁸ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 31-41.
- ¹⁴⁹ Columbia Recording Corporation, “Sales Success Story” (advertisement), *Radio and Television Today* (April 1940), 25.
- ¹⁵⁰ McKnight-Trontz and Steinweiss, *For the Record*, 31.
- ¹⁵¹ Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 130.
- ¹⁵² Ford Motor Company, “This is not ‘A Man’s World’ by a long shot!” (advertisement), *Life* (February 17, 1941), 53.
- ¹⁵³ Radio Corporation of America, “An Amazing New Way To Play Records!” (advertisement), *Life* (November 17, 1941), 26.
- ¹⁵⁴ Columbia Recording Corporation, “For Lasting Pleasure...” (advertisement), *Life* (December 15, 1941), 48-49.
- ¹⁵⁵ Radio Corporation of America, “Public Interest in Records and Victrolas Zooms!” (advertisement), *Radio Today* (September 1938), 36-39.
- ¹⁵⁶ “Warners Set Large-Scale Tieup With Columbia Records On Short,” *Showmen’s Trade Review* (January 3, 1942), 20.

¹⁵⁷ The store chose to spell its name in this atypical manner. “Selling More Discs,” *Radio Today* (August 1936), 28.

¹⁵⁸ This price list is present in the 1942 catalog I examined, inserted between pages. Curiously, it includes pricing for Okeh label titles not present in the catalog itself.

¹⁵⁹ Moses Smith, “Masterworks on Discs,” in *Columbia Records Complete Catalog* (Bridgeport, CT: Columbia Recording Corporation, 1939-1940), iv-v.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, vi.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, vii.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, vii-viii.

¹⁶³ Radio Corporation of America, *Victor and Bluebird Popular Record Catalog* (Camden, NJ: Radio Corporation of America, 1942), 96.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁶⁷ Radio Corporation of America, *The Music America Loves Best* (Camden, NJ: Radio Corporation of America, 1943), i.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, iv-v.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, iii.

¹⁷⁰ Alex Steinweiss, “Preface,” in McKnight-Trontz and Steinweiss, *For the Record*, x.

¹⁷¹ Morton, *Sound Recording*, 98.

¹⁷² “Col., Victor Disk Price Cuts Hypo Sales 100-1,000%,” *Variety* (September 18, 1940), 1.

¹⁷³ Alex Ross, “Listen to This: A Classical Kid Learns to Love Pop—And Wonders Why He Has to Make a Choice,” *The New Yorker* (February 16, 2004), <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/02/16/listen-to-this>

¹⁷⁴ Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound*, 212.

¹⁷⁵ Will Straw, "Characterizing Rock Music Cultures: The Case of Heavy Metal," *Canadian University Music Review/Revue de Musique des Universités Canadiennes* 5 (1984), 108-111.

¹⁷⁶ Steve Savage, *Bytes and Backbeats: Repurposing Music in the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 194.

¹⁷⁷ Straw, "Characterizing Rock Music Cultures," 119.

¹⁷⁸ Stan Alcorn, "Is This Thing On?," *Digg* (January 15, 2014).

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