

Beyond Boundaries: the Craft of Album Cover Art

Album cover art must do for music what the book jacket does for literature: grab your attention, draw you closer and closer until you find yourself picking up the book against your will, turning over its leaves, reading the teasers until your interest is sufficiently piqued that you must have a “look-see.” But album cover art cannot simply capture your attention like an eye-catching billboard; it must also promote the band and interpret the music within. It must set the mood for the viewer and hint at the contents, simultaneously creating and reflecting the image of the musicians and their work. And as if this weren’t a great enough challenge for the graphic artists and photographers called to the task, their designs must also appeal beyond the music’s established borders in the hope of luring potential new listeners in.

Many rise to the challenge but few succeed. Like those in the industry they promote, in the graphic arts there are the one-hit wonders and those with staying power; there are the artists who cross all genres and those who become “stereotyped,” associated with one label or musical style. And like any art, the graphic arts have their stars: those who stand out from their peers, whose work is both evocative and provocative, who are the celebrities of their craft.

These stars and their works are featured in a number of books currently on offer. Three that stand out from the crowd are *Sampler: Contemporary Music Graphics*, *100 Best Album Covers*, and *Visible Music*. *Sampler*, edited by Adrian Shaughnessy, takes a look at some of the stars who create the memorable cover designs of modern music. It features top graphic designers working in the U.S. and Europe, including Peter Saville, Stefan Sagmeister, Carlos Segura, Tomato, Mark Farrow, Vaughan Oliver, and Designers Republic. With a five-star user rating at Amazon.com, *Sampler* comes close to the publisher’s declaration that it’s “the definitive statement on innovative sleeve graphic design from the contemporary music scene—one of the most dynamic arenas of experimental graphic design.” The book also includes designs from “minor visionaries that are actively formulating new visual languages” including the alternative, hip-hop, and techno scenes.

Another favorite among Amazon readers is *100 Best Album Covers* by Storm Thorgerson and Aubrey Powell. Like the title suggests, this book focuses less on the stars than on what editor Thorgerson (legendary designer of all those Pink Floyd albums) considers the cream of the crop. The book covers the last five decades and all genres within “rock” from the Beatles to Nirvana.

And if you think making successful album covers and posters is a tough order to fill, think of what the CD revolution has done to the craft: imagine having less than five square inches within which to capture the public’s imagination. *Visible Music* by Stefan Sagmeister illustrates how top designers have addressed the challenges inherent in the limited space of a CD cover. Sagmeister has collected works he considers to be “distinctive, bold and original.” More than 500 examples are divided into three sections and presented by genre: Techno, House, Soul and Rap; Rock and Popular; World, Jazz and Lounge.

Sampler: Contemporary Music Graphics is published by Universe Publishers (ISBN: 0789302586). *100 Best Album Covers* is by DK Publishing (ISBN: 078944951X), and *Visible Music* is published by Gingko Press (ISBN: 1584230495). All are in print and should be available at your favorite local bookseller or online.