

THE EVOLUTION OF ALBUM ART THROUGH DECADES OF MUSIC

by

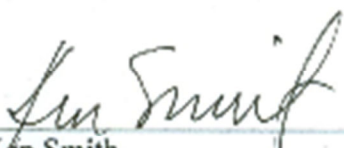


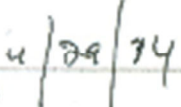
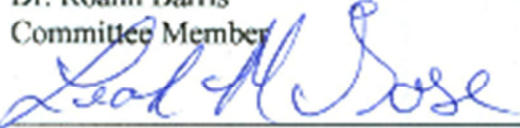
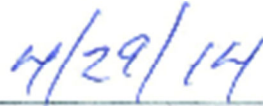

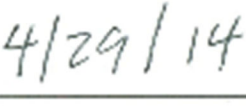
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A thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Art

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Abstract

This thesis examines the evolution of music album cover artwork from the 1950s to the present with my original work complementing the study by using different artistic elements from each decade as inspiration. The research for the study was based on reviewing album artwork books, examining vinyl albums and CDs, and working with and designing album artwork for clients. My analysis highlights the characteristics of album artwork from these decades and similarities and differences across musical genres, as well as how my own artwork incorporates the different album art artistic styles from each decade.

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Introduction

Throughout my life, art and music have been two major passions and influences, making this study a natural endeavor for me. From the eclectic sounds of a jazz band's improvisation to a rock band's power chords, music can stimulate the mind and serve as inspiration for artwork that gives one a visual representation of what the music is all about. This is what album artwork is for: to serve as a visual representation of a musician or band's sound through a single image, however complicated or straightforward it may be. Being able to examine different genres of music and their respective art styles gave me a chance to explore, show, and indulge in two of the things that I am most passionate about.

Shaping a final design that has a convincing use of layout, typography, and color is the ideal goal for any designer, especially one who is designing a visual representation for a style of music. Covering a variety of artistic and musical styles, allowed me to communicate how the presentation of album artwork from different musical genres has changed as music has evolved. Styles have been emulated to show the appearance of the Helvetica styled typeface in the '50s and '60s, and the change in art from the beginning of the psychedelic influence of The Beatles from the late '60s, to a tacky representation of artwork in the 1980's. The trends follow with a recycled and almost indistinguishable lack of creativity of the art styles since the new millennium. For consistency, the most popular styles of music from each decade were chosen, resulting in some overlap of music genres between decades that show trends and departures of different artistic styles as the decades progressed and music changed. Pop and rock were the two main focal music genres covered in each decade.

My process and inspiration for the work will be discussed first, including the steps that I took in researching and designing the 28 finished pieces, four per decade for seven decades. Next, a brief history of the evolution of album art from the predominant musical styles of each decade is presented to provide context. The main focus will be the discussion and analysis of my own artwork, which is split into two chapters covering the '50s to '80s in the first and '90s to present day in the second chapter. Both chapters relate the design influences that I found important and indicate the reasoning that went into my own design decisions. A discussion of the album artwork that I have done and continue to do for musicians follows, including how it helped throughout the development process of pieces for this study. Concluding, I will assess my achievements in this work and indicate my direction for the future.

I. Process and Inspiration

My obsession with music and the artwork started with my older brother. When I was younger, I did not listen to music unless my brother did, so I listened to whatever he listened to. I recall when he would get a new CD, we would often listen and look at the album art together and, after a while, he built a collection of albums that I admired. Since receiving my first two CDs in 1998, the artwork has been as exciting a part of the experience of getting a new album for me as hearing the music itself. From the smell and layout of the booklet once the CD case was opened, to the inside design on the actual CD, everything fascinated me about it. The artwork gave the music a sense of feeling and purpose. If the music was the voice, the art was the clothes that it wore. As I got older, my passion grew as I started purchasing my own CDs and developed my own collection until it was as big as his. As my love for music grew throughout my childhood through the consumption of music and album art, I learned to play guitar and lead to joining a band.

Four years ago, I formed a band with a group of friends, and we needed artwork for our first CD. By this time, I had considerable graphic design experience through school and freelance work, but had never worked on a real album cover. I only spent a few hours working on this initial album design, but this album cover was the first time I had ever really felt connected with a project (Figure 1). I had done work before that I was proud of, but never anything I felt such a strong connection with as I did with this. This one single piece of work is what really started my love for art; it gave me a desire to come back to creating album art. This small project made me realize that this was the type of artwork I most enjoy and want to do.



Figure 1: Atlantic Skyline Album Cover

In addition to personal inspiration, two artists known for their album artwork have served as a source of inspiration for my own work: Roger Dean and Storm Thorgerson. These artists are probably two of the best known and well-respected in album art design. Roger Dean created most of his well-known works in the 1970s and is particularly noted for his fantasy landscapes for rock groups “Yes” and “Asia,” but still continues to design album artwork in his signature fantasy style (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Yes Album Covers

Storm Thorgerson has created some of the most iconic album artwork for some of the most iconic bands, including Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, Muse, and The Mars Volta. He designed one album in particular that is considered by many to be the best album design ever, Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* (Figure 3). Unlike Roger Dean, it seems that Thorgerson adapted his style to change as time progressed.



Figure 3: Pink Floyd and The Mars Volta Album Covers

The task of creating four different album covers across seven decades proved to be a lot easier than I had initially expected, due to my love for creating this type of artwork and the excellent album cover references that I had at my disposal. Printing them at the size of a vinyl record enhanced the visual immersion for the exhibition and should also help to convince the viewer that these pieces of artwork might actually be from the time period that they are representing. I believe the 28 pieces in this show demonstrate a passion for music and art that started at an early age and which continues to drive me to create new work.

II. A History of Album Cover Artwork (1950s – Present)

The 1950s were an interesting and significant time for the development of modern music. The '50s saw the emergence of rock and roll, with the continued success of swing and bebop jazz music styles. With the advent of rock music came the “mug shot” album cover. According to *The Illustrated History of Rock Album Art*, “From the mid-Fifties to the early Sixties...the predominant style in rock album covers was the straightforward mug shot, a simple identification of the group or singer.”¹ While album art for other genres of music, such as jazz, featured heavily illustrated works, the “mug shot” album cover style persisted into the '60s.

While the “mug shot” concept continued into the 1960s, rock album art also began to venture in other directions. The Beatles were a prime example of this new direction in the '60s, in terms of how both music and album art began to change. With *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, The Beatles started to make a departure from traditional pop rock and into more psychedelic music, which included techniques that were more experimental than in the past. Corresponding to this shift towards more experimental music, album art began to become more experimental and eclectic as well. The *Sgt. Pepper's* album cover has become one of the most well-known album covers ever, featuring the band members surrounded by life-sized, cardboard cutouts of various celebrities, the idea for which stemmed from a sketch done by Paul McCartney². This colorful piece led into the '70s and a whole new outlook on what album artwork would look like.

¹ Angie Errigo and Steve Leaning, *The Illustrated History of Rock Album Art* (Octopus Books Limited, London, 1979) 10. Print.

² Olivier Julien, *Sgt. Pepper and the Beatles*, (Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2008) 7-14. Print.

Roger Dean and Storm Thorgerson ruled the 1970s in terms of designing artwork for popular bands. They began to elaborate on what The Beatles did with *Sgt. Pepper's*, designing everything from surreal landscapes to a simple prism reflecting light on a black background. This is when album artwork really began to visually represent the music that bands were creating.

New music began to dominate the '80s, especially the emergence of rap music in which rappers were not only conveying their message through their lyrics but also through their album artwork.

“It’s lightweight and colourful – he’s saying, “Damn right, I am somebody.”³ This is how the beginning of *The Book of Hip Hop Cover Art* begins, citing a rapper’s desire to not only be heard through his music, but also through the artwork that represents his music and his own identity. Other genres of music, like hair metal and synth pop that became popular during the '80s, also took on distinctive album art styles as well. Hair metal became synonymous with dark, yet playful imagery as can be seen in Guns N’ Roses *Appetite For Destruction*, which features the band members’ heads as skulls (Figure 4). On the opposite end of the spectrum, synth pop bands featured heavily illustrated and colorful artwork that reflected the music it was accompanying.

³ Andrew Emery, *The Book of Hip Hop Cover Art* (Octopus Publishing Group, 2004) 7. Print



Figure 4: Guns 'N' Roses's *Appetite for Destruction* (1987)

Grunge defined the 1990s in the continued evolution of rock music. Rock musicians again ventured into a new sound, accompanied by a muted color palette and a “we don’t care” attitude defining the album covers. The 2000s through present-day music and its corresponding album artwork have not really innovated any new defining artistic styles, but have instead continued to draw from artistic ideas from previous decades. The scene is saturated with different types of pop music and rock band clones, and a dip in physical album sales means that the album art for the most part has become less important than it used to be.

III. My Work (1950s – 1980s)

I did all of the artwork and photography that is present in my work for this project, with the exception of a few stock images. The titles of the albums, band names, song names, and record labels are all fictitious, with the exception of one real band that commissioned me to do their album artwork which I included in the finished pieces.

The styles of music that I chose to represent from the 1950s include country, rock, and jazz music. These three genres were some of the most popular from the decade, providing an abundant amount of album artwork for me to review and draw inspiration from so that I could form a cohesive looking set of album covers.

The two jazz covers and one country album that I designed were inspired by albums by jazz pianist Dave Brubeck, cabaret singer and pianist Bobby Short, and singer Maurice Chevalier (Figures 5 and 6).

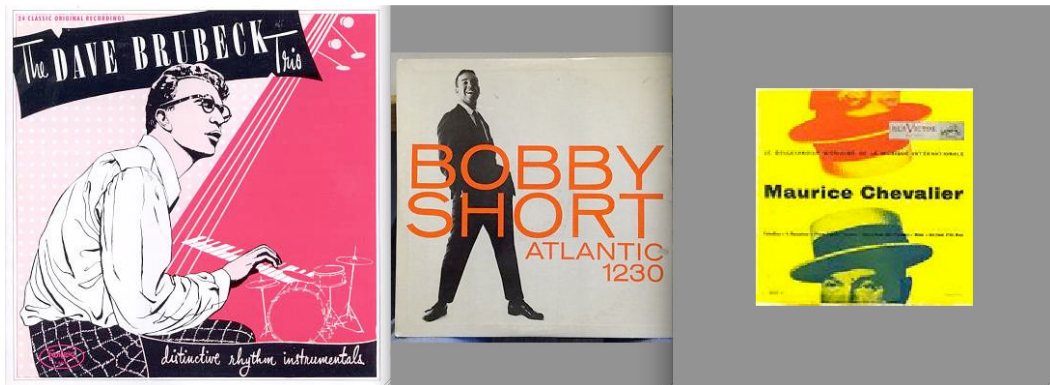


Figure 5: 1950s Album Artwork: Dave Brubeck, Bobby Short, and Maurice Chevalier



Figure 6: Self-Created 1950s-style Album Artwork

The first three covers (Figure 5) are the ones that I used as a starting point, and the second three (Figure 6) are the finished pieces. For the Benny Finster cover, I drew elements from both the Dave Brubeck and Bobby Short albums. I wanted to mimic the posture and color palette from the Bobby Short album, while using the dotted background from the Dave Brubeck record. While the Benny Finster cover focuses on one musician, The Pete Weston Orchestra focuses on a larger jazz orchestra. The mimicry of the colors from the Maurice Chevalier album was included to represent a more fun type of music, more of the swing style of jazz, and the repeating trumpets represent that this album includes more than just one musician. For the Earl Rodgers cover, I examined several country albums but none really included elements that I wanted for this album art. Thus, the Maurice Chevalier album was used again in not only color palette, but also for the repetition elements seen in the use of multiple guitars. Below, the Jimmy Goodson cover was created to represent an early rock album, emulating the “mug shot” style through the simple presentation of a face and a name to sell the record, similar to Buddy Holly’s self-titled record (Figure 7).



Figure 7: 1950s Rock Album Artwork

For the '60s, I decided that I primarily wanted to focus on the album artwork of The Beatles. Three of the album covers I designed for this decade were modeled after Beatles albums, including *Revolver*, *With the Beatles*, and *A Hard Day's Night* (Figure 8), while a fourth cover took cues from the album art of two different albums by The Beach Boys (Figure 9).

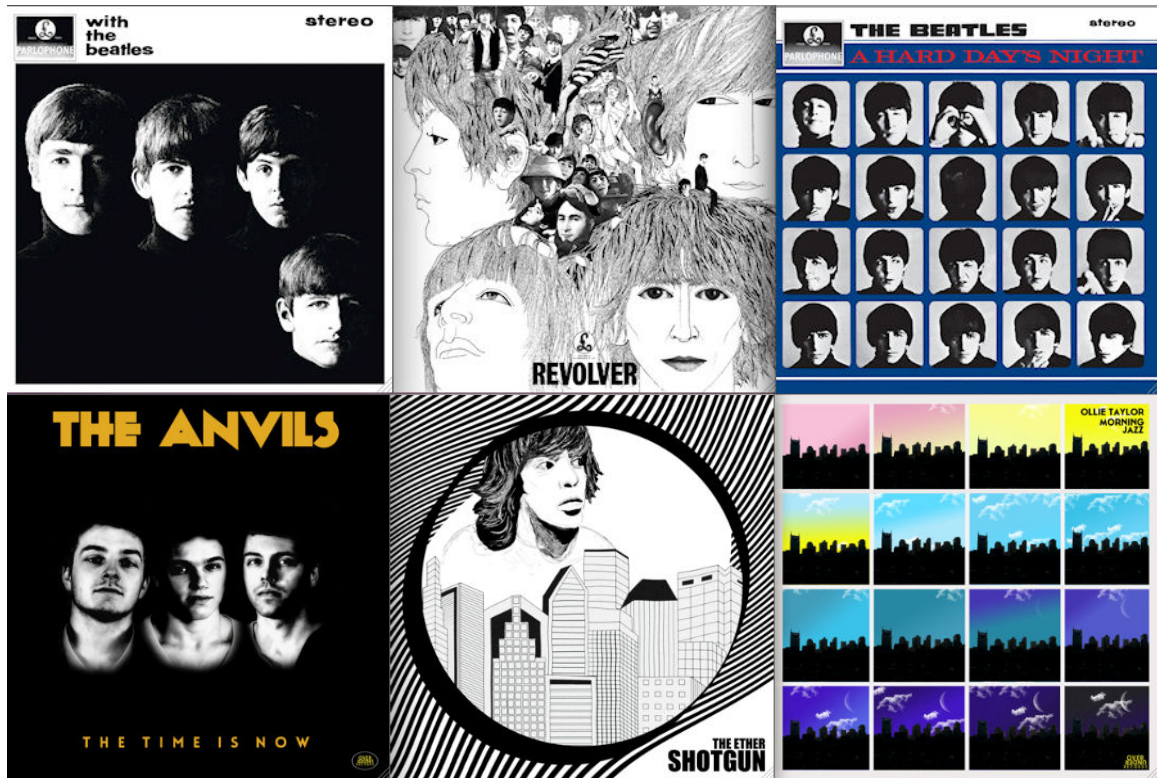


Figure 8: 1960s Album Artwork: Beatles and Beatles-Inspired

Drawing inspiration from the *Revolver* album, I changed the name of the album in my design to *Shotgun*, kept the illustrated feel that *Revolver* has, and kept the typeface similar in both covers. My take on the *With the Beatles* album is a little less apparent, since the type is not as contained in my rendition as it is in the original. However, the photograph was taken in the same way as *With the Beatles* to produce the harsh lighting on the figures and to black out the background. The choice to closely model these two album covers after Beatles albums was done because I wanted someone to look at the album artwork and know exactly where I was drawing my inspiration. My *Morning Jazz* album cover borrowed elements from The Beatles album *A Hard Day's Night*, mainly in the form of the use of the grid. The Beatles cover shows many different faces of the band members as they change from panel to panel, while my jazz album shows the change

from early morning to night, in the changing of the sky, presence of clouds, and lights coming on in the city as each panel gets progressively darker.

The final piece of the series, which is entitled *Northshore* by The Sand Dunes, is a take on a Beach Boys album cover (Figure 9).



Figure 9: 1960s Album Artwork: The Beach Boys and Beach Boys-Inspired

The Beach Boys' *Surfin' Safari* and *All Summer Long* served as inspiration for my album cover design, with most of the focus stemming from *All Summer Long*. I chose to stay away from the grid structure on this album and focus more on a single photograph that I took, and gave it a washed-out look to emulate an older photograph. The similarities are most notable in the typography. I followed *All Summer Long*'s color palette and layout, and attempted to find typography that looked similar.

Experimental and imaginative: this describes the artwork from the 1970s, and is what I tried to be in designing this set of albums (Figure 10). With the exception of the disco-themed album cover, the focus of my pieces for the '70s stayed more in the realm of rock music, as the majority of the more visually interesting album covers originated from this genre during this decade. Unlike other decades, I did not draw as heavily from specific album covers as a guide. Rather, I pulled various artistic elements that I have

seen in art from the decade and combined them into my album covers. In particular, I drew inspiration from elements in the artwork of two main artists: Roger Dean and Storm Thorgerson, the latter having designed some of the most recognized album artwork ever created, for bands including Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd.



Figure 10: 1970s-style Album Artwork

The first album cover, *Night Party*, is a play on types of disco music covers, with the building in the background representing a night out on the town to go to the disco and dance. The funk cover, *The Roots of Funk*, is a take on the many funk bands that performed in the '70s, and also incorporates a Jimi Hendrix-type figure that walked the line between funk and rock music. The Indigo Maze exploding car album cover represents a Pink Floyd or Led Zeppelin-type cover, with a car on fire in a desert under a blue sky. The idea was to play off of the idea of the “out there” and not normal covers that Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd had. The Illusion album cover was the only cover in this set that was directly influenced by another album. In fact, there were two covers that influenced it: The Styx album *The Grand Illusion*, and Strawbs *Burning For You* (Figure 11).



Figure 11: Styx's *The Grand Illusion* (1977) and Strawbs's *Burning For You* (1977)

Both of these albums promote a kind of voyeurism, as well as prompt the question “What exactly am I looking at?” I took the circle idea from the Strawbs album and put it in my design with the addition of two eyes at the top staring at the viewer, and a window with closed shades that would make the viewer want to look out them, like a back-and-forth voyeurism idea.

The ‘80s brought on new and diverse genres of music, three of which I selected to create representative album artwork for: hair metal, hip-hop, and synth pop. The work designed for these genres closely imitates other albums from this time period and provides four diverse covers that are as different musically as they are artistically (Figure

12).



Figure 12: 1980s Album Artwork and Inspiration

For the hair metal band album (Shotgun Silence), I wanted to represent this genre truthfully, including the cliché skull with long metal hair. The Guns N' Roses *Appetite for Destruction* album is one of the most recognizable of the time period, so it seemed only right to model mine after it. For my Shotgun Silence album cover, I downloaded a font that is characteristic of this genre and complements the main skull feature. The font is angular and decorative, and would be common on an album cover like this.

The hip-hop album cover was not modeled after one particular album from the decade, but conceptualized based on a common trend in many hip-hop albums from the '80s: the artist standing, wearing a track suit and fedora. I incorporated a font that has a graffiti-type influence to give it an urban feel.

The two synth pop albums I designed were modeled after Duran Duran's *Rio* and Queen's *Hot Space*. The Riches album cover that I designed utilized the idea of the four

panels from the Queen album. However, instead of using an illustration, I used a photograph and applied an effect to make it look like an illustration. The Talking Heads also used this layout for their album *Remain in Light*, as did The Smiths with their *Meat is Murder* album, though the color palette for my piece was modeled on the Queen album. The idea of The Secrets album cover that I designed was to focus on the mouth, drawing inspiration from the mouth of the woman illustrated on the Duran Duran cover. I thought that it was the most essential piece to the cover because it is kind of an awkward smile that the woman is giving, so I decided to make the eyes and nose absent from my cover and focus only on the mouth as the central element.

From the '50s to '80s, I tried to stay true to the look that would make each album cover believable to the viewer. Artistic styles, textures, and fonts were specifically chosen to represent each cover as period authentic. Many of the covers designed were modeled directly after specific album covers from each decade to create a consistent visual representation.

IV. My Work (1990s - Present)

The decision on a color palette for the set of '90s album covers was an easy decision to make, as the majority of the grunge and rock bands in the '90s used more muted colors for their albums. The intent was to have the album covers exude the grunge feel of much of the music from the time period through the use of the muted color palette, imagery, and textures (Figure 13).

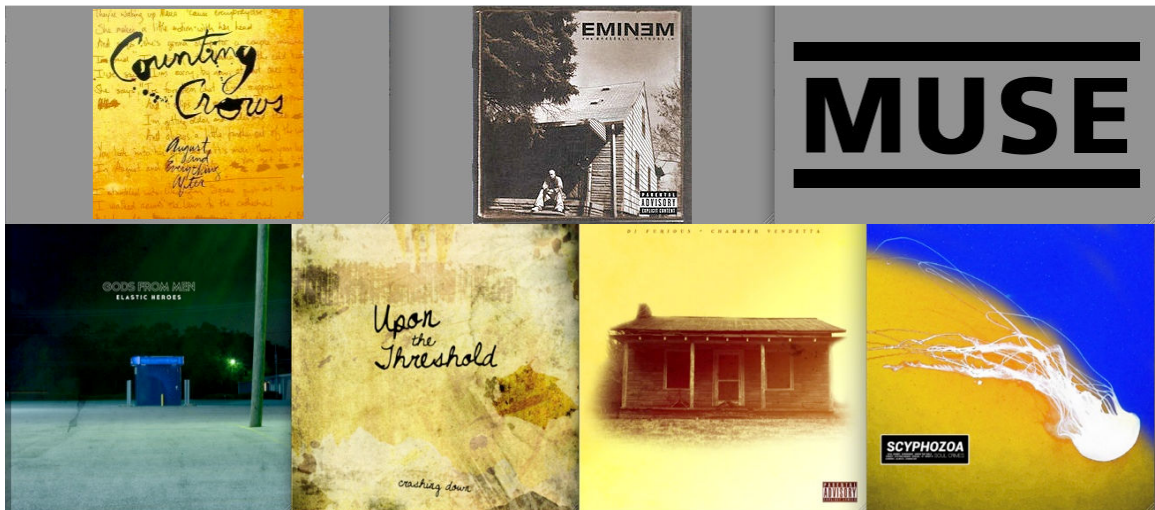


Figure 13: 1990s Album Artwork and Inspiration

The first album cover that was used as a model for one of my designs was the Counting Crows *August and Everything After* album, which struck me because it was hand-written and all in typography. Using this idea, I attempted to recreate this effect in a hand-written album cover with different grunge textures that focused on the typographic elements.

The Muse logo inspired the Scyphozoa album cover. Muse has always had interesting album covers, incorporating the work of Storm Thorgerson, but it was their logo that inspired me to make a simple label with a band name and room for song titles.

The original idea was to make the entire album cover blue, but I decided to change to the majority being a yellow color with texture to give the feeling of an early-to-mid '90s rock band. The color choice for many early-to-mid '90s rock bands included muted yellows, browns, and textures that gave the grunge style its look.

The Eminem *Marshall Mathers LP* cover is an iconic one for him because he has used the cabin image twice, once for this cover, and once for his latest album, which was released in 2013. The cabin image that I used was originally used as a metal band's cover that I created, but I decided to rework and recolor it to give a feeling of a '90s rapper. To give the feeling of this, the cabin was emulated in the way that Eminem's cover was, making the cabin monochromatic, and staying with the same color palette as the other created works from the time period.

The idea behind the Gods From Men name and album cover design was actually taken from the name of a band in the '90s, Primitive Radio Gods and their song *Standing Outside a Broken Phone Booth with Money in My Hand*. I had no preconceived ideas for this album cover, but listening to this song by Primitive Radio Gods made me feel solitary, and the image I had taken of the empty parking lot with the ATM recreated for me the feeling of this song.

The idea for two of the album covers from the 2000 era came from Death Cab for Cutie's album *Transatlanticism*, which features a bird tangled in yarn (Figure 14).

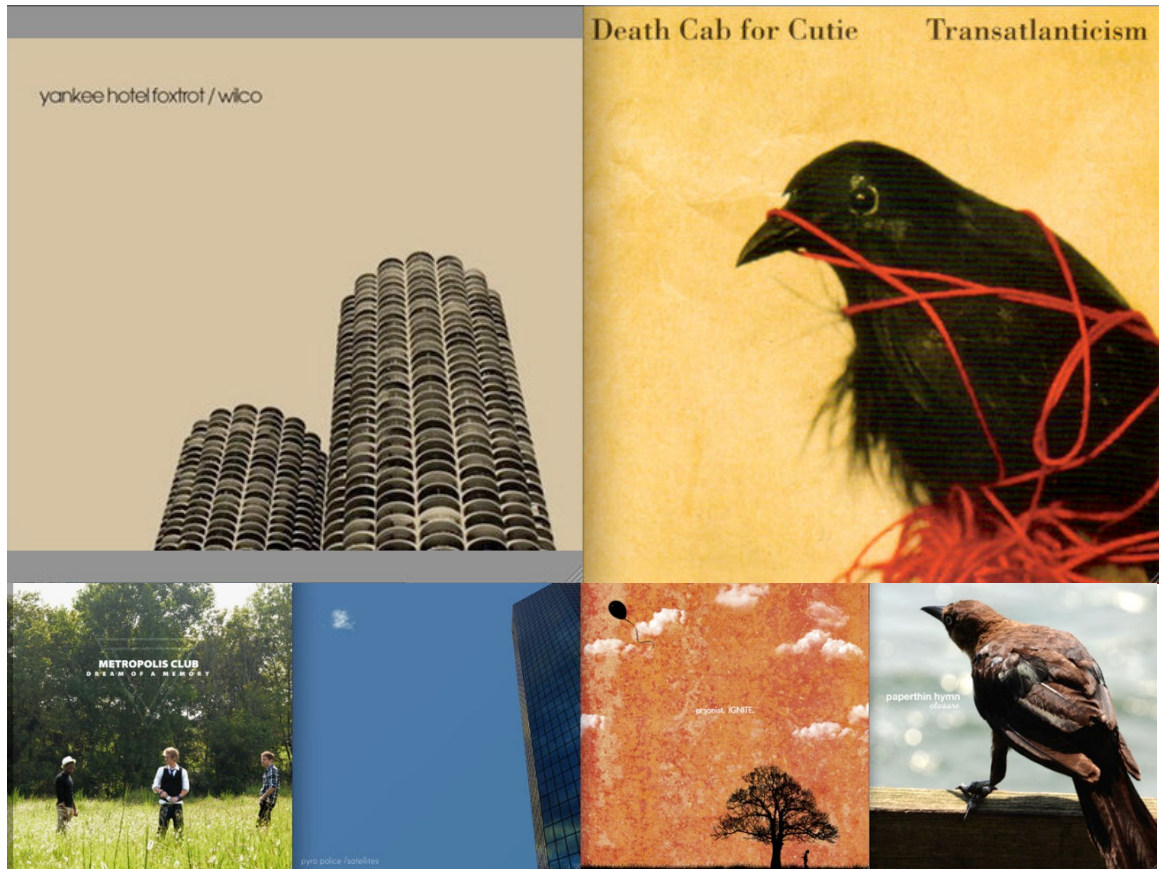


Figure 14: 2000s Album Artwork and Inspiration

The two covers on the right that I designed took elements from Death Cab and split them into two separate images, the bird, and the hand drawn aspects of the Arsonist cover. Like the Death Cab album, I wanted to keep the imagery pretty minimal with the typography quietly placed on each one.

My Pyro Police album cover was modeled after *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* by Wilco. While searching for covers for inspiration from the 2000's, I kept coming back to this one, which I thought was nice in its minimalist nature and single tone of color. This has an effect of making the viewer wonder what they are really looking at. For the Metropolis Club album cover, I wanted to depict a boy band cover which typically

features the band together posed in a variety of situations in front of a backdrop, or in this case a field.

With the explosion of digital sales, many album covers today aren't as elaborate or as inventive as they were in the 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s, when people were buying records, cassette tapes, and CDs to acquire their music. In some cases it seems the designs are reverting back to the '50s with the mug shot style, since people aren't buying physical copies of music anymore, so the attention paid to the artwork has dwindled.



Figure 15: 2010-Present Album Artwork

The last three covers (Figure 15) represent the pop and dance genre that has overtaken music. The Serena Anderson cover was modeled after a number of glitzy pop stars with the use of sex appeal, bright colors, and headshot enticing the viewer. Like the Serena Anderson cover, the Tyler Cassidy cover uses the idea of a pop star in the form of a singer-songwriter. It still uses the appeal of an attractive musician, but colors are monochromatic and focus less on the picture, and more on typography to sell the viewer. The original dance album *Transitions* by Atomic uses similar attributes as real life musician Zedd's album *Clarity* (Figure 16) in terms of color and different shapes with a focus on a central image.



Figure 16: Zedd's *Clarity* (2012)

The first album cover above (Figure 15) is an actual album cover that I designed for a local band, and will be discussed to connect the work that I have done for this study with the work that I currently do for local bands and musicians. For the past few years, I have been creating album covers for bands, which mostly are in the rock/metal genre, but have also ventured into the singer/songwriter realm. Every band wanted something different, which usually fell into the clichéd types of artwork for each different genre of music. For example, one of the metal bands wanted something brash and serious, while one of the experimental rock bands wanted a more spacey/other worldly themed type of artwork.

Two local experimental rock bands that I have worked with to develop album art include, Neither Scene Nor Herd (Figure 15) and NOVA (Figure 17). These two projects helped to remind me why I enjoy the creative process in developing album art. They

were very easy to work with and were passionate about what they wrote in their songs and what imagery represented them, which made me care more for the project.



Figure 17: NOVA's *Devoured by the Earth* (2013)

The NOVA artwork was perhaps made easier because it was a partnered project. Though I did not work directly with the other artist, the project was made easier in that she had painted the outside of the album cover for the band, while I took her idea and designed the logo and inside sleeves, along with the actual CD art.

V. Conclusion

The fact that I had already been designing album artwork before I decided to take on this project made the whole experience much easier for me. Having created this type of artwork in the past, I was familiar with the creative process necessary to develop album artwork. Additionally, I had already spent considerable time looking at album artwork for inspiration, and already had ideas for album covers and stock images I could use.

This project has reminded me why music and art are two of my passions. It has helped to define me as a graphic designer, by helping me find that one thing in art that gives me purpose to design. These designs have helped my judgment for knowing what type of layout and typography a particular piece of work may need, and what I need to do to get to the finished product. Thus, this project has been a success for me. It has provided me with an education in different types of album artwork and trends, which I can use in my own work. It has also strengthened my love and understanding for both art and music. I have already reaped the benefits from this project, by designing twenty-eight pieces of work that would make not only for good portfolio pieces, but possibly future commissioned pieces. I hope that I can look back at this as I go forward and remember how easy it was for me to just start designing an album cover because I loved to do it. I hope that I can make others see the beauty in album design every time that I am hired for a job. I want everyone to see the passion that I put into my artwork, and that they aim to put as much passion into their music. I want it to connect with people and that they are able to understand why I made the choices that I did in my work. The artwork that has been created has provided a summary of different trends, styles, and

genres of music that those styles are based on that have created a cohesive and successful look at the evolving album artwork from the past sixty plus years.

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