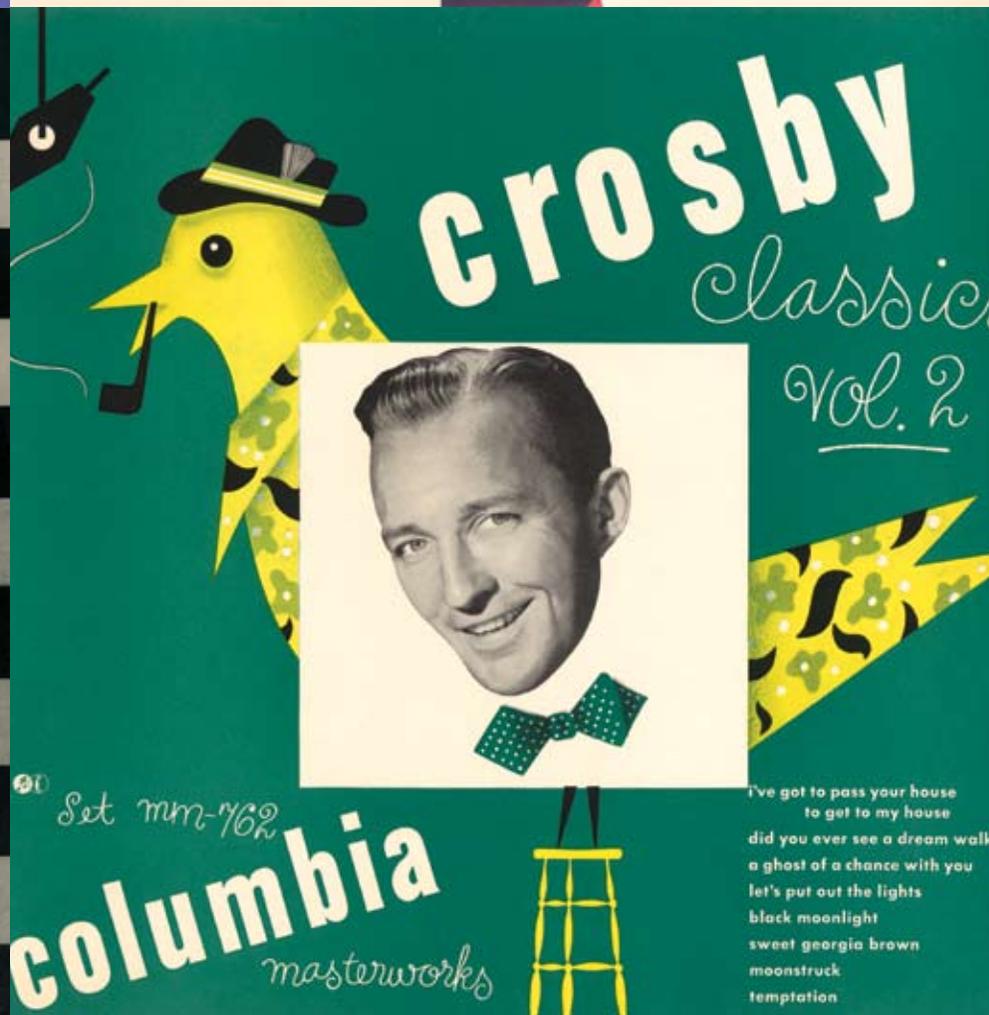
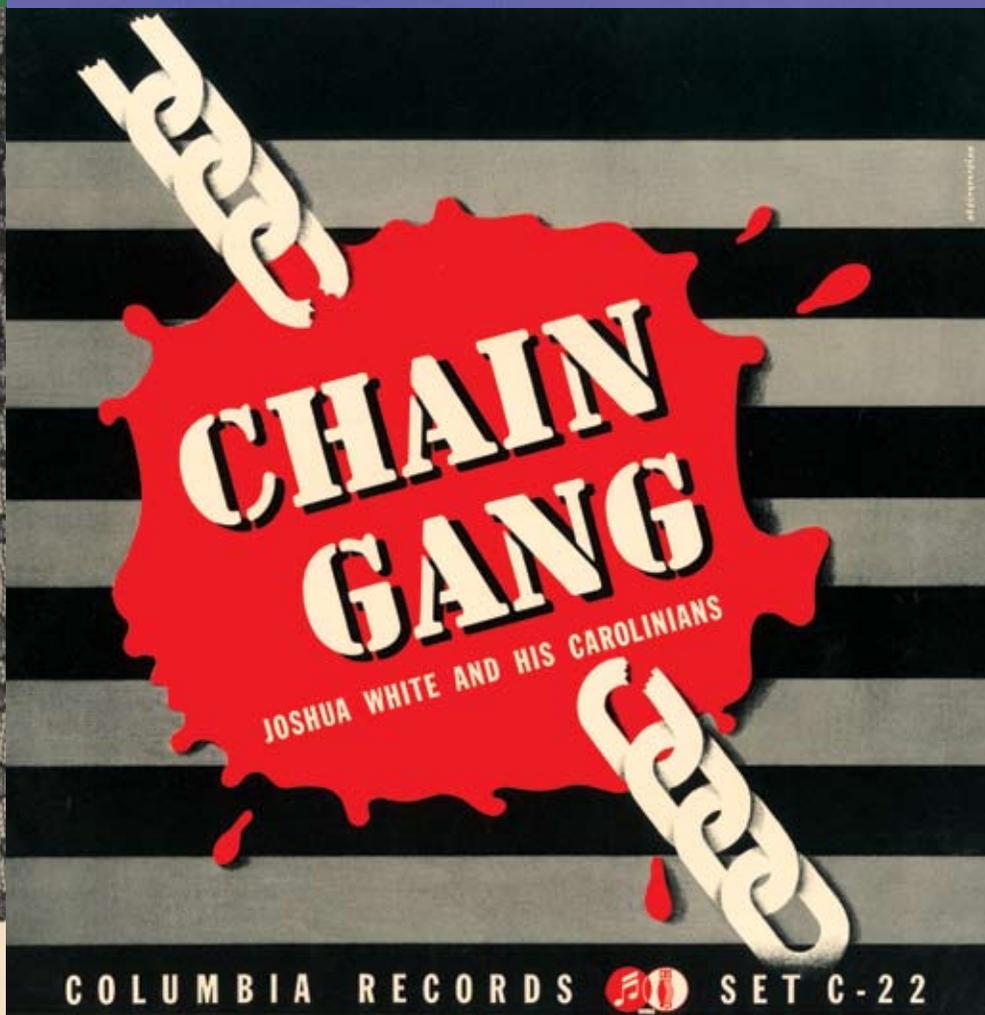
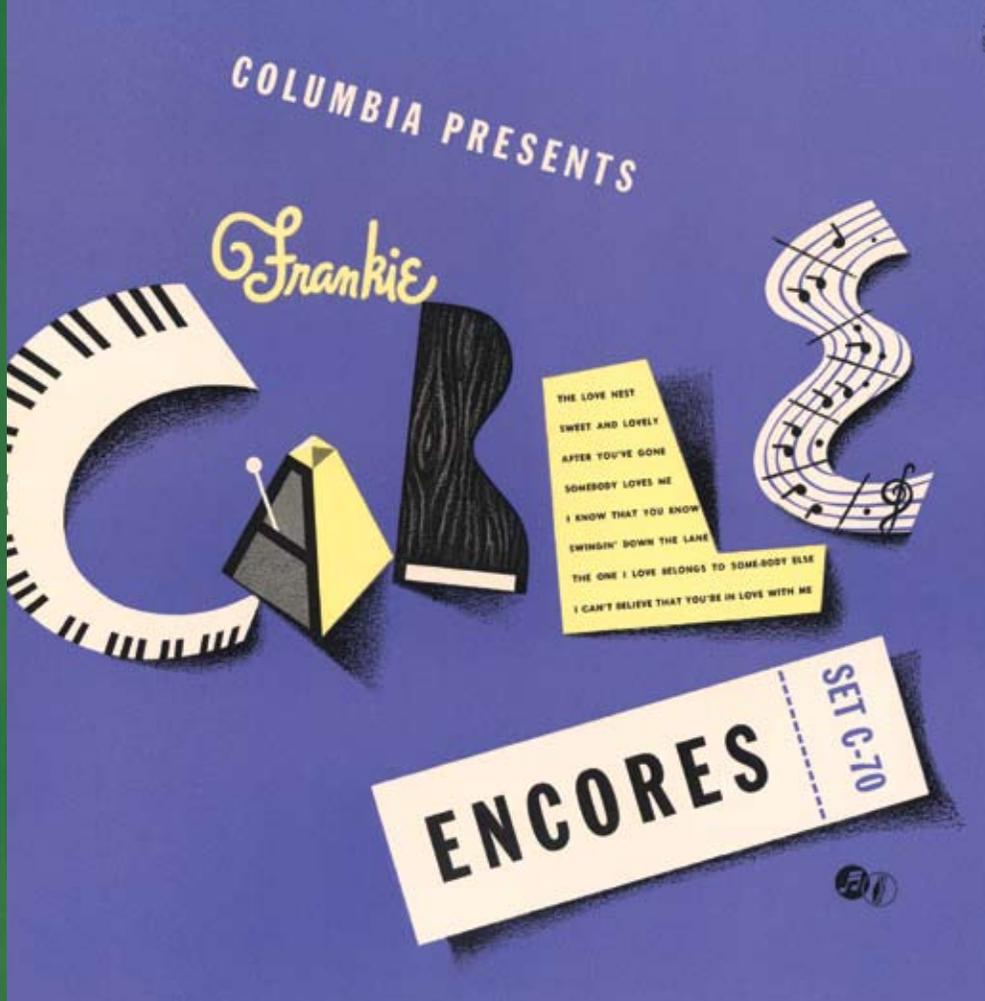


JUXTAPOZ 114

THE GODFATHER OF THE ALBUM COVER GETS HIS RESPECT



ALEX STEINWEISS

TEXT BY GREG ESCALANTE AND NATHAN SPOOR

What artist in the world wouldn't love the opportunity to create custom artwork encasing the big release of a favorite band? However, a paucity of press has focused light on the unjustly overlooked innovator of this art form. Positioned at the right time and place, one man saw a product and sheathed it. Finally, 90-year-old Alex Steinweiss is getting his well-deserved respect. With an

Alex Steinweiss joined the music business when the industry desperately needed him but didn't know it. He gave color and texture to an industry that, at the time, had no intention of enhancing its musical packages. Change occurred when the young insightful Steinweiss was hired, unproven at 23, to be art director for musical conglomerate Columbia Records in 1939.

Originally Steinweiss was hired to design Columbia's advertising materials, which entailed producing the booklets, catalogs, posters, and ads for their already impressive collection of musical output. But being a drone dispensing corporate copy didn't resonate. As he explains, "I was unhappy with the situation existing there. Mostly

with how they were packaging these beautiful symphonies and orchestrations in crappy generic sleeves." His father, Max Steinweiss, had instilled in his son a love for music that would fuel his artistic epiphany. Growing up in a modest Brooklyn neighborhood, the family savored precious time attending symphony and opera. Young Steinweiss understood that those treasured musical experiences weren't being showcased to introduce the lyrical stories within.

In those days the 12-inch, 78-RPM records carried only four or five minutes of music on each side. Sandwiched between thick cardboard sleeves with the artist's name printed on the side like a book, they were dutifully shelved

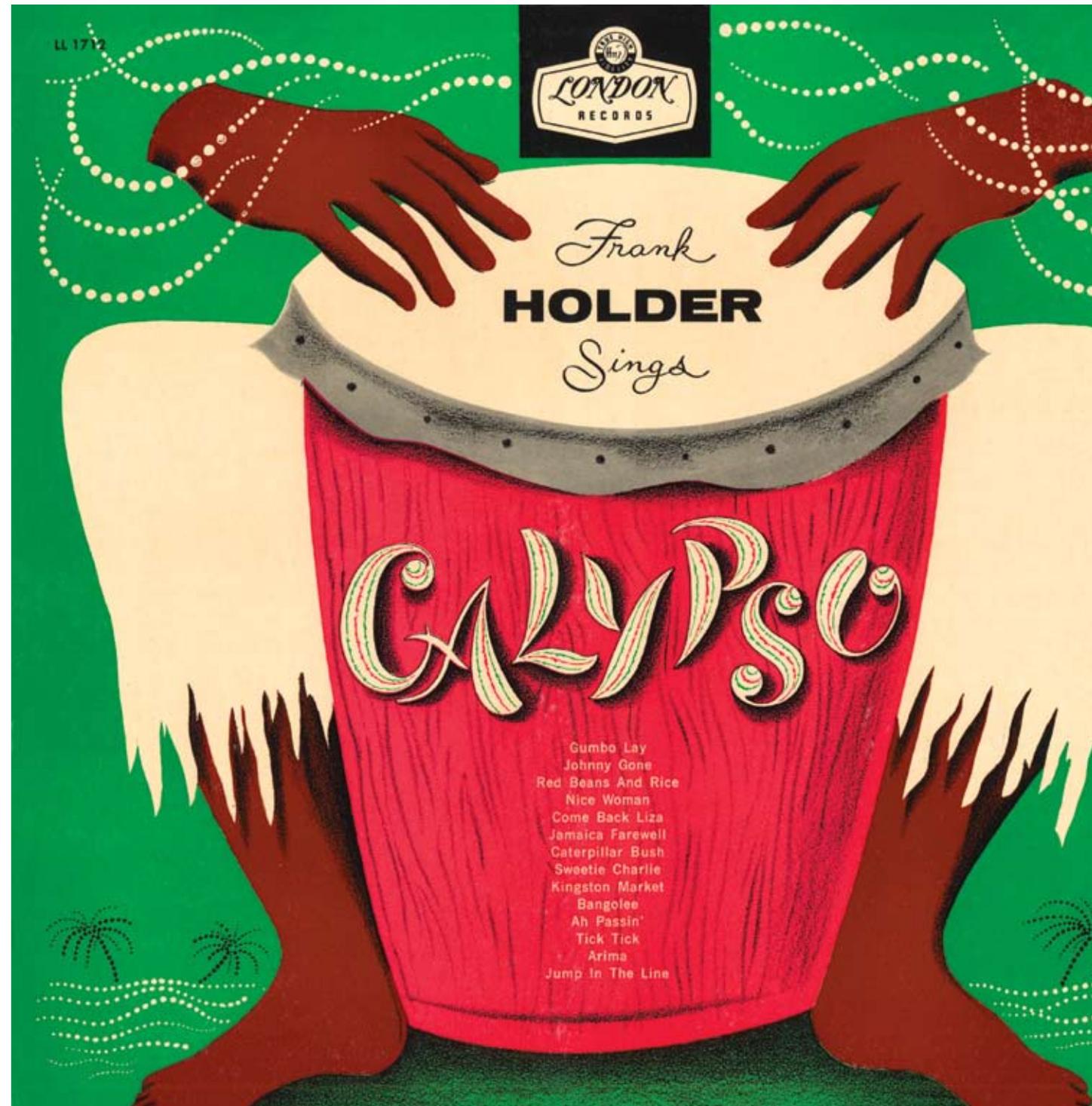
impressive book due from Taschen, as well as a solo show of his works coinciding with a star-studded tribute exhibit at Robert Berman Gallery in Los Angeles, the prolific padre of album covers checks in with Greg Escalante and Nathan Spoor from his home in Sarasota, Florida to discuss a supply that demanded attention.

All artwork courtesy of Alex Steinweiss

as such at the General Electric stores, spines serving as their only identity. With no music stores in existence, the patron of the day would find records and players at GE while paying a bill or purchasing an appliance. The placement wasn't ideal, and the returns equally unimpressive. "They were like tombstones," Steinweiss recalls. "I got busy with management and said that RCA/Victor was the main competition and their work was old hat. I approached them with the idea that it could be more exciting and that it would actually boost sales, despite the increased cost of production." And increase sales it did. CBS president William Paley, who created Columbia, had such belief in his hire that he gave the concept a trial run, despite the fact that they were trying to save money

while building a young record company. Given five records for which to design covers, Steinweiss changed the record industry and the history of packaging forever. His motif for the Rogers and Hart collection resulted in a sales jump of some 894 percent.

As a child, Steinweiss showed an amazing connection with the visual world. The young Depression-era student at Lincoln High School in New York met Leon Friend, a teacher and lifelong mentor known for being co-author of *Graphic Design*, the first comprehensive volume in America on communication art, a book that would define the burgeoning field of graphic arts. Among the many influences Friend introduced this student, the French and German





poster artists attracted Steinweiss.

Friend recruited an elite group of artists from his followers, dubbing them the Art Squad and assigning them responsibility for designing a magazine called *House*, exhibiting work in the school auditorium each week, as well as creating campus signage. A notorious disciplinarian, this pillar of strength might remove a member of the squad who failed to push in his chair. “He loved and cared for us so much that even his own three kids were a little angry with him at times when they felt they didn’t get their dad’s attention,” Steinweiss says. “But we could tell how much we needed his hand on our shoulder and was an example for us.”

Upon graduating, Steinweiss was

accepted to Parson’s School of Design on a one-year scholarship. “Ha! I had such a chip on my shoulder,” Steinweiss muses. “I had studied under Leon Friend and thought I knew everything. After my first year I sent a letter to Boris Artzybasheff and asked for an audience. He was gracious and we met at his luxurious apartment in Greenwich Village, which was just for his work. He had a sunken living room, which I had never seen before, and he quizzed me a bit. I told him how I felt the school was too amateur for a large talent like myself. He went to the kitchen to get a Coca-Cola, and on his return he said to me: ‘Listen, Alex, you can always learn something—even if you think you know the whole thing. What you should do, in my opinion, is go

back to school, accept everything you can there. When you graduate, that’s when you can sprout your wings.’ Then he took me to his studio and showed me some tricks for transferring images from woodblocks. He was such a real gentleman. ‘You go back to school and don’t be such a wise guy. Go see what you can get out of the darn old school without being such a know-it-all. Keep your knowledge quiet.’”

Accordingly, Steinweiss returned to Parsons where they extended his scholarship to the full four-year program and took the teaching courses so adamantly recommended by his mother. Upon graduation, the ever-confident Steinweiss set course to visit the famous German poster artist Lucian

Bernhard’s office on Eighty-Sixth Street, aspiring to set up shop as his designer or assistant. Bernhard referred him to Joseph Binder, a prominent Viennese poster artist. “Binder and I arranged the details of a salary and so on, and the first thing he asks me is if I know how to use an airbrush,” Steinweiss recalls. “So I say, ‘Of course I do!’ In actuality I’d never used an airbrush before—and all his work was based on the airbrush! But I picked it up and figured it right out as we went along.

“I worked with Binder for three years and decided to go it on my own, making a trade agreement with an architect I was friends with for office space, telephones, etc. I kept in touch with the Art Squad alumni, and met one Dr Robert

“THE BRILLIANCE AND FORESIGHT OF ALEX STEINWESS USHERED HIS SEPARATION FROM THE MUSIC INDUSTRY.”

Leslie, a gallery owner and also founder of a typography company called The Composing Room. He had a magazine called *P-M (Production Manager)* and featured some of our work in it. Dr Leslie had heard that William Paley from CBS bought out the American Record Company and moved it to Bridgeport, Connecticut, renaming it Columbia Records. Dr Leslie also heard they needed an art director. He thought that maybe I was too young to be qualified for the job, but said to apply anyway. The advertising manager at Columbia, Patrick Dolen, was apprehensive because of my youth but chose to take a chance on me.”

His first album cover brought a big challenge. Steinweiss assuredly convinced management to consider

the switch from economical but boorish cover designs to a process that would double the cost of productions. By teaching the draftsmen a new way of separating the unique outlines into precise layers of art for the letterpress process in which one printed from engraved plates, he imparted special tricks showing them how to create a desired cover concept. This hands-on technique eventually yielded a trademark style of lettering known today as the Steinweiss Scrawl, which sprung to life in each cover he designed, fashioning approximately 800 during his 25-year career at Columbia.

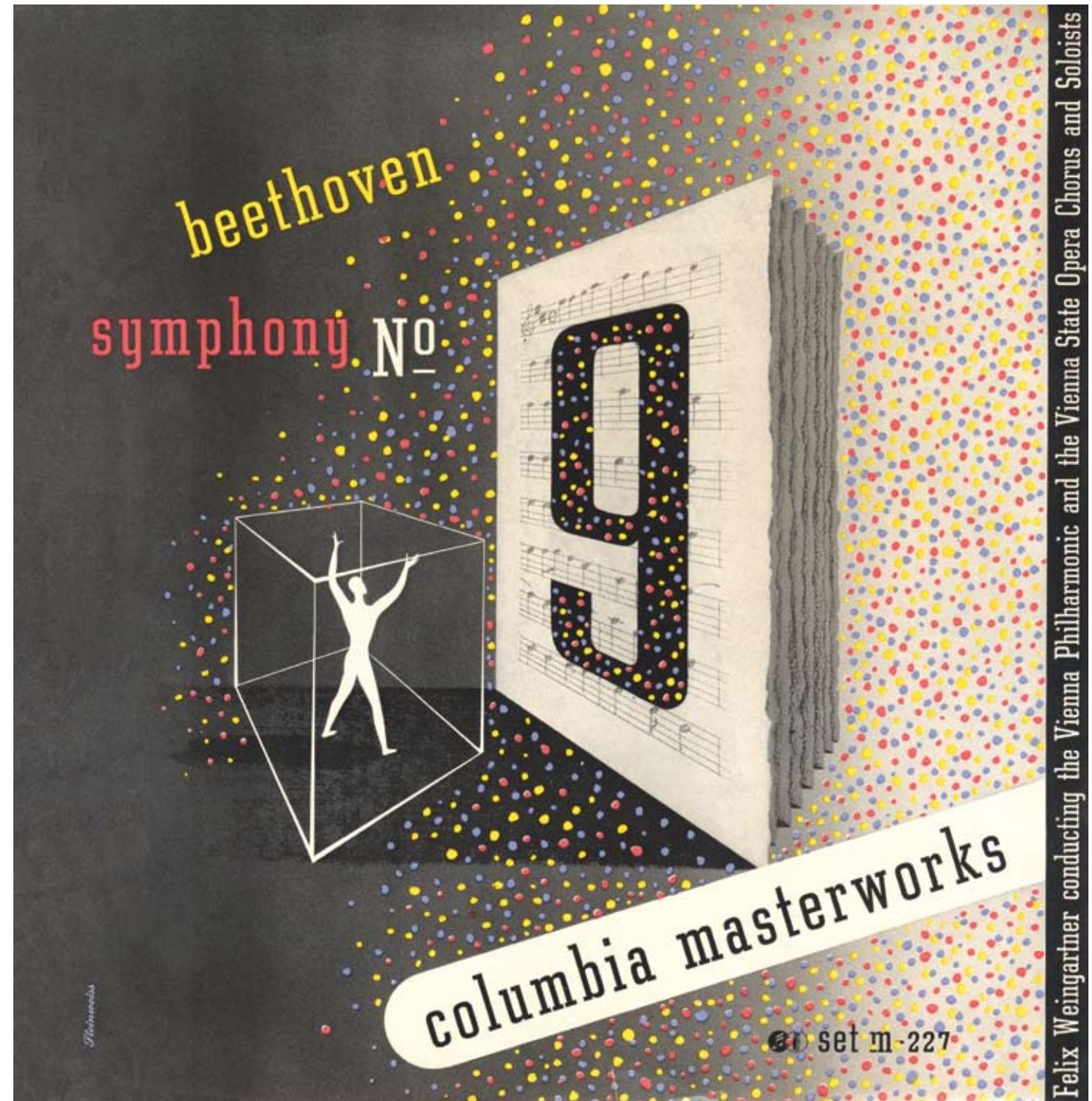
He even had occasion to hire many different designers and artists to work on the projects, including a

newbie named Jim Flora. “Oh yes, I hired Jimmy. When we met he lived in Ohio and was producing a mini-magazine about art. He came to the attention of our boss, Pat Dolen, and visited Bridgeport where we were centered. I told Dolen that I enjoyed his work, since he was so different from mine. All the other artists in the game were trying to copy my style, and he didn’t do that. I felt that it was best for Flora and his particular artistic style to be matched to jazz albums, as his images seemed a perfect fit. Flora’s style was consistent and he was the sweetest guy, with a great talent and a real straight shooter. He is missed.”

With appliance stores functioning as the record shops of the day, the increase in sales thrust the popular

products to the forefront, directly in the large front window installation. And as his work reached prolific proportions, Steinweiss was drafted 1A and asked to serve the cause by creating illustrated poster ad displays for soldiers in the US Navy Training Aids Development Center in NY. After a full day of military duty, he returned home to spend time with his young wife and new child. With a talented cadre of designers, he devoted evenings to imparting his precise design to a steady stream of covers.

During his stint in the Navy, the LP, as in 33-RPM long playing record, was invented, so Steinweiss was selected for another kind of service with the record industry. Since this sound innovation allowed records to hold upwards of 20







minutes of music on either side, one album could now replace the four record sleeve packaging. Packaging was to undergo another metamorphosis, and Steinweiss met the challenge by designing the first LP jacket in 1948. Capitalizing on the latest printing advances, specifically, the full-color offset printing press, he created a cardboard jacket covered with printed-paper. This new printing method, in turn, encouraged the labels to use photographs for their covers so that the companies capitalized by selling just as many records with a single photograph.

The brilliance and foresight of Alex Steinweiss ushered his separation from the music industry; however, the international renown he garnered for his talents lead to

covers and marketing campaigns for years to come with such high profile entities as *Fortune* and *Time* Magazine. Thus, his work and voice still resonate as he continues to work from his Sarasota studio. He is consistently cited as a major influence in the work of designers and art directors, one being three time Grammy award winner Kevin Reagan.

The former senior art director for companies Geffen, MCA, and Maverick, Reagan is best known for his design work on Madonna's *Ray of Light* and the Dixie Chick's *Home* albums, as well as groundbreaking projects featuring Sonic Youth, Guns N' Roses, and Beck. As a keynote speaker at a 2003 conference on CD and DVD packaging, he professed

：“[STEINWEISS] WAS A COMPLETE VISIONARY WHO INFLUENCED A WHOLE GENERATION OF DESIGN.”

surprise at meeting Steinweiss at the event. “To be perfectly honest, I didn’t think he was still alive. I was familiar with his work but knew little about him.” After meeting that day, they hung out together as Reagan toured LA with Steinweiss and his wife Blanche.

“We were both very respectful of each other from the start. We were really like different sides of the coin, but the same coin, no less. I mean here was the man who started the whole thing; the career that I had chose to pursue myself,” Reagan states. “The more I got to know him and his incredible volume of work, the more it triggered a real desire in me to bring him more into the consciousness of today’s designers and artists.”

And a tribute was just what

Reagan sought out. Steinweiss has been rewarded with a gallery retrospective show and a major book deal. “Early this year I approached Taschen with a whole presentation of what I was envisioning, and they ended up giving me a book deal on the spot,” Reagan exults. Indeed, the life’s work of Alex Steinweiss will appear in a volume under the coveted Taschen name in the fall of 2008.

To date, few people have had a chance to see and experience Alex’s work under one roof. The exhibit at Robert Berman Gallery in LA, *Alex Steinweiss: Creator of the Album Cover*, features a choice sampling of Steinweiss’ work including album covers, rare collage assemblages, and several paintings from many stages of Steinweiss’

lengthy and prolific career. Another part of the exhibition will be a tribute featuring 12-inch by 12-inch format art by such names as Raymond Pettibon, Nathan Spoor, CR Stecyk III, and Sandow Birk.

“He was a complete visionary who influenced a whole generation of design,” Reagan explains. “I wanted to do my part in securing his place as one of the truly great American graphic designers. It’s time to pay him a tribute.”

For more information on Alex Steinweiss, contact Alexsteinweiss.com and Robertbermangallery.com.