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Small Axe, Number 9 (Volume 5, Number 1), March 2001, pp. 161-165 (Review)

Published by Duke University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/smx.2001.0012>



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Stir It Up: Reggae Album Cover Art, Chris Morrow. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999.
ISBN 0-8118-2616-3

The album cover has been extensively analysed in recent decades as graphic artists, academics and music fans alike have recognized the importance and vitality of the medium. Recently published books such as *In the Groove* by Eric Kohler and Storm Thorgerson's *Eye of the Storm* are further clear indications that the subject of album graphic aesthetics is still being taken very seriously. The current era of graphic production is a far cry from the 1920s and 1930s when early 78 r.p.m. album sleeves consisted of plain cardboard, with the artist's name and release title on the spine as the only distinguishing features. The first graphic artist who proposed the idea of specialized covers for each release in the 1940s, Alex Steinweiss, was initially opposed by his employer, Columbia Records, as they feared rising production costs. Steinweiss's first album cover for Columbia, issued with a 78 release in 1940, was the industry's first effort in this direction. His work accompanied the debut of the 33 r.p.m. LP in 1948, and the popularity of big bands in particular and popular music in general in the 1940s gradually gave rise to less generic packaging that usually featured some illustration. In the 1950s, when the LP eclipsed the 78 as the dominant recorded format, a marked increase in releases produced a correspondingly larger role for album cover art. Although design concepts remained conservative, increased budgets

eventually led to more frequent use of photography, which itself seemed to encourage more adventurous use of typefaces. The rock era cultural explosions of the 1960s and beyond inevitably altered perspectives, transforming the passive functionality of the cover into a vibrantly organic extension of the music it enveloped.

The old adage suggesting the dangers of judging content by cover appearance is not so readily applicable to album covers since the best works transcend their visual aesthetics by simultaneously conveying intrinsic elements of the music contained within. In general, the album cover is now rarely treated as perfunctory packaging merely presenting the performer in a nonchalant pose. Musicians with serious creative intent often view the cover as a direct representation of their work, a more tangible manifestation of essentially intangible musical concepts. Although, of course, startling exceptions to this intertextual consciousness abound, the album cover has established its own ground within the landscape of popular culture in spite of the often-lamented reduction in visual artistic surface area precipitated by the emergence and subsequent dominance of the compact disc.

Despite the numerous books chronicling the development of the album cover, only a passing glance has been given to the significance of Caribbean examples. Where calypso is concerned in these works, the exoticist excesses of the cultural imperialism of the late 1950s are ridiculed, focusing on American performers such as Harry Belafonte and Robert Mitchum capitalizing on one of the major commercial trends of that era in the recording industry. Those albums featured stereotypically touristic imagery, evoking the promise of sea, sand, sun and sex, which persistently resonate in the current promotional posters of most Caribbean territories. Reggae album covers have been treated far more seriously but always with minimal attention focused on a mere handful of examples from the genre. Chris Morrow's *Stir It Up: Reggae Album Cover Art* attempts to fill this alarming cultural vacuum in the first collection that I have ever seen devoted solely to this field of Caribbean popular music.

Both the foreword and introduction astutely provide both the historical and conceptual contexts necessary for productive decoding of reggae iconography. The foreword, written by Bob Marley's art director Neville Garrick, highlights both his own prolific output in reggae album cover design and the pervasive importance of imagery in reggae culture. Garrick also notes that in many cases inappropriate designs often emerged from metropolitan record companies which rarely involved the performers in the visual representation of their work, although Morrow later points out that this aesthetic disconnection also occurred in Jamaica. Nevertheless, Garrick's

observation indicates a consciousness of cultural distinctiveness in “authentic” reggae album covers that pervades this collection.

Morrow’s introduction further underlines the lack of serious recognition of reggae album cover art which has emerged from the most humble beginnings. He chronicles the movement from unabashed imitation of the attire and poses of American rhythm and blues performers towards more distinctive, culturally powerful symbolism. He notes the transformative impact of Chris Blackwell on reggae album imagery, executed through the rock market sensibilities of Island Records. However, Morrow might well have commented here on the wider intertextual implications of rock’s superimposition upon reggae via Blackwell. It has been well documented that the musical text of Marley’s work was similarly affected by this market focus, with his earliest Island releases featuring material specifically remixed to appeal to the treble orientation of white Western ears. This foregrounding of higher frequencies occurred at the expense of the perennially essential bass, thus raising concerns about commercialization and its erosive impact on authentic cultural representation. Some analysis interrelating successful major label reggae releases with both their cover imagery and the quality of the musical content could have been a fascinating component of this collection.

The covers in *Stir It Up* are grouped under several major themes of the genre, with a particularly insightful chapter addressing the complex world “Behind the Sleeves”. Many of the featured works are extremely rare, particularly since a large number of pre-reggae covers chronicling the visualization of the ska and rocksteady eras are necessarily included. As a historical archive of older imagery that perhaps seems trivial by modern standards, this work proves invaluable. The principal thematic areas addressed include examination of the key sociocultural figures of Haile Selassie and Marcus Garvey, depictions of dreadlocks, religious/biblical invocations, inevitable resonances of Africa in a variety of forms, revolutionary insurrection and/or military oppression, apocalyptic destruction, manifestations of marijuana, images of outlaws and warriors, and images of women both as unabashed sex objects and as temples of beauty and wisdom. For good measure, a selected discography is also included for the perusal of both interested initiates and veteran fans.

Morrow succeeds in covering the dominant visual strands of reggae culture, though sometimes questions might be raised about the manner in which they are presented. Despite the useful thematic structure of the collection as a whole and the contextual notes to each section, the absence of a clear visual chronological framework limits the reader’s ability to clearly identify stylistic continuity or disjunction. Even within discussions of each theme, album covers of different eras are continually

juxtaposed with each other in a manner that is often less than productive. It is also sometimes difficult to determine the rationale behind the sizes of several cover reproductions. Some key covers (*Earth Crisis* by Steel Pulse, Bob Marley's *Natty Dread*) have only a small-scale presence, while others that seem less memorable or captivating are allotted entire pages.

WHAT'S MISSING

Reggae's attainment of mainstream commercial respectability, particularly through Bob Marley's *Legend* album, accompanied by the market for retrospective compact disc compilations, a number of boxed sets have emerged to lend new dimensions to the packaging of reggae. Examples such as the original Marley *Songs of Freedom* set from 1992 (recently re-released in less elaborate fashion) and Peter Tosh's *Honorary Citizen* (Sony) are worthy of consideration here, but no such collections are included. Apart from generally exemplifying major label compilation packaging for reggae, they are also indicative of the results of high-budget aesthetics in this genre.

Few reggae performers have utilized logos to retain a unique sense of identity and continuity from one release to the next. Although logos have been regularly foregrounded in rock, perhaps as an extension of corporate trademarking consciousness – the groups Chicago and Yes being especially noteworthy – the examples of Steel Pulse and Third World logos demand analysis because of the rarity of this stylistic mode in reggae culture and furthermore because of the analytical potentialities provided by the longevity of both outfits and their various associations with major labels. Unfortunately, Morrow does not address this particular area despite the distinctiveness that logos lent to the covers of these two groups.

Byron Lee is one of the few surviving Jamaican artists whose recorded work spans all of the eras from ska to dancehall. While his album covers are included at several points, it seems odd that the visual feature for which his albums have arguably become most notorious – scantily clad voluptuous women – should be entirely absent from this collection.

It would also have been fascinating to see an analysis of reggae releases placed next to the covers of their dub counterparts. Several dub covers are included, but they are either releases without identifiable single artist predecessors or there is no visual reference to any earlier manifestation of the music. A comparative approach would demonstrate the extent to which the instrumental reconstitution so integral to dub is

echoed (both literally and figuratively) in its re-vision on the cover. Examples of artists whose work would facilitate such analysis include Black Uhuru and Mystic Revelers.

Despite the several areas that remain unexplored or underdeveloped in *Stir It Up*, Chris Morrow's collection is nonetheless highly creditable and stimulating, achieving a highly inclusive stylistic summary in an area rarely assessed to such an extent. The album cover has now become a widely contested cultural space, subject to unprecedented textual and intertextual assessment, and the valorization of the medium necessitates compilations such as this. Hopefully, this publication will be enthusiastically received and will lay the foundation for further reggae album cover analysis by both the author and others with a passion for this medium and music.

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