RECORDS, ART AND RACISM: INTRODUCTION TO THE PROTEST GRAPHICS OF THE 70S FREE JAZZ

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This article is a preliminary research proposing us to take a trip through racism and art in the historical context of New York Free Jazz; analysing it will allow us to understand the defining characteristics and activist goals of the art shown in the record covers.
After a brief historical introduction, dealing with the topic of racism and jazz music, the author focuses her interest on a selection of record covers and artists, with the purpose of starting an analysis of the graphics and iconography that defined the music industry of that period.
Music and art is an excuse to study the racial problem that affected artists. We will see how their works evolved in a social-cultural context of segregation and strife for change, experimenting with liberating their artistic process in favour of social commitment.

Key words:
Racism, Harlem renaissance, free jazz, graphic design, record cover.

Throughout history, racism and music have been two concepts closely linked in jazz and blues with musicians who suffered discrimination from the times of slavery up to the hip hop of the 70's, and the political rap of the 90's or even current music.

Did racial marginalisation have an impact on the graphics linked to the music? What mark did it leave on subsequent art? How did the aesthetic development begin to be constructed?

With this article I mean to research racial discrimination and the civil rights conflict of African Americans through the record covers, an approach placed in the historical context going from the 40s to the early 80s. Rewinding towards the beginning we must start with the first jazz record covers. It is in this context that the music industry of the United States dealt with the racial problem with precaution in their promotion methods and commercial tactics, in which the designer played a main role.[1]

There were endless confrontations in the artistic and musical fields and it is paradoxical that those white people who consumed black music, were at the same time promoting racism and segregation laws.[2]

We find a dramatic example of this is the story of Bessie Smith, acclaimed diva of blues in the 20s and 30s, who after an automobile accident bled to death due to racial discrimination in hospitals where they would not assist coloured people.

Many musicians and artists refused to remain impassive before such discriminating happenings, such as the trumpet player Miles Davis, who dared to state, "I do not play music for whites," turning his back on his own audience, symbolically and literally, using music as a tool for expression and liberation.[3]

Numberless examples will remain forever pictured in the graphic design of the times, as well as in advertising and editorial images.

As an example, we approach the case of the American magazine *Down Beat*, the jazz bible of the 30s, that repeatedly excluded African American musicians.

It seems surprising to look at this publication catalogue and verify how the people pictured on their covers were white, when the African American musicians were the unmistakable stars in the hit parades.

Returning to the music market, it is well known that the packaging, the illustration, took on a fundamental role, creating imagery that converted that time in the Golden Age of record covers, from

1
Alex Steinweiss and Neil Fujita, became art directors of Columbia Records in 1939 and 1954 respectively and tried to enhance the graphic personality of the record company applying their own artistic work on the record covers and counting with other independent illustrators, designers and photographers, such as William Claxton, Burt Goldblatt, Richard Avedon, Ben Shahn or Tom Allen; with whom they developed the daring proposals that generated new artistic trends and increased the sale of records up to 800%.
Those proposals, in which the designer, had a fundamental role contributed to the progressive functional evolution of the product, doubling its value with its artistic appeal.
This happened because the consumer no longer bought just a musical work; they also had the incentive of enjoying an artwork as well, which was the container of a musical recording. A new democratisation of art, just as it had already occurred with posters.

2
Between 1876 and 1965 the Jim Crow Laws were passed in the United States. Under the moto "separated but equal" these laws promoted racial segregation in public facilities. They perpetuated many economic, educational and social disadvantages for African Americans and other ethnic groups which were not the whites residents of the United States.

3
In 1971 Miles Davis declared to Jazz Magazine "Not a day passes in which this discrimination does not make me furious, but since I cannot be forever enraged, I use my music to give vent to my rage."

the moment Alex Steinweiss reinvented it in 1940[4]. Thus, I consider it interesting to make a balance of that conjunction created between illustration and the race problem that shook the United States in the decade of the 1940s. It is curious because it was, during those years, paradigm by excellence of the racial problem, one of the periods in the history of modern art in which we find more illustrations of coloured people.

The truth is that African American musicians were protagonists, and it was inevitable not to use them as models when representing their music. The case is that jazz would become the image of this protest and with it its interpreters who, as we can verify, gained visibility through illustration.[5]

We have an extensive portrait archive, with artists of the height of David Stone Martin, Ben Shahn or Andy Warhol who, in a more or less evident manner, used the record covers as a canvas to deal with the topic of social integration.

In the beginning those representations were more documental than protest, but became more radical in the 60s. The activist movement known as Harlem Renaissance began in the New York borough of Harlem, where artists, musicians and writers lived and worked.[6]

It was a period of political and social convulsions. Rosa Parks, the first lady of civil rights, provoked protests headed by Martin Luther King and musicians and artists like Nina Simone proclaimed that the time had come to take to action.[7]

In such a context, local collectives of African American art, such as OBAC (Organization of Black American Culture) or AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists) began to work experimenting and improvising. In South Chicago, these characteristics defined experimental jazz and the graphics that accompanied it. Free jazz was considered a vanguard, and under slogans like Great Black Music or Ancient to Future, its values were transferred to plastic arts in the quest of a "black aesthetic" and "Afro aesthetic", with which to make the African American population visible and defend its place in society.

But, which were its defining features? Where did they come from? Where were they going? Can we speak of a predominant style?

It is interesting to verify how the aesthetics were defined from several creative routes, different artistic influences, ranging from Egyptology, cosmogony or magic realism characteristic of science fiction, defined artistic sub-vanguards such as Afrofuturism whose main representative in graphics was the prolific New York artist Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Basquiat sold out his first exhibition in New York in 1981, however he could not take a taxi in its streets; and this is just an example of the hypocrisy that led him to use his art as a protest cry before that situation.

We find in Basquiat's expressive strokes and doodles many references to African American music; *Stardust* (1983) or *Now is the Time* are examples of this interest in music and the social commitment that it reflected in many of his murals throughout his career.

The artist, who founded a musical group, Gray, in which he played the clarinet and synthesizer, also found on the record cover a showcase for ideological expression, using symbolism that is akin to cave-art to evidence many subliminal messages, or not so subliminal, with which to contribute with his creativity to that fight for change.

Continuing the quest for those aesthetics that meant to give visibility to the African American society, special mention should be made of the work of Matias Klarweinm, an artist that contributed extensively with his collages in the North American record industry and in the racial activism adhered to it.

We verify how protest record covers originated from surrealism and psychedelia. A "fantastic realism", just as the author himself defined it.

His works are idyllic scenes and impossible spaces where figures floated immersed in symbolism and where social integration is evident through the record covers such as *Bitches Brew* (1970), *Live-Evil* (1971) of *White Lightnin'* (1975).

We see bodies together and hands linked. It was in the 70s and in the United States there was still a lot to do, but what is true is that in those records of Miles Davis and other free jazz musicians extended through society with propagandistic images on their covers. Images that were giving visibility to the African American population, going back to its ethnic tradition, giving value to it past and wagering on its promising future.

In that same mystic and surrealistic line, we find the work of Mario Convertino, an Italian illustrator. From the mid 60s he centred on designing record covers leaving us pieces such as Holding Together, done for Oliver Lake in 1976. Muhal Richard Abrahams also recurred to pictorial proposals, a disturbing space in which the arranged elements levitated, invoking a new concept of union and ethnics through his figures and patterns.

A union we also see reflected in the collection *Wildflowers: The New York Loft Jazz Sessions* (1976), in which African American musicians are shown in a poetic oasis in the middle of a great city. All formed part of America and they expressed in this way their space as free and pacific coexistence.

Another relevant aspect was the reiteration of images reflected, in double or triple portraits and visual parallelisms such as it occurs, for instance, in *Soweto* designed by Ron Warwell in 1978 or in the record Black Lightnin' edited by The Sun in 1976.

4
During the 20s and 30s records were sold in paper or cardboard covers with a hole in the center to show the record label with the name of the artist stamped on it.
It was in 1940 when Alex Steinweiss, art director of Columbia Records, decided to change the course of those record covers, designing the cover of Smash Song Hits of Richard Rodgers and the Imperial Orchestra. A project carried out through photography and graphic treatment of the image, with which he achieved a composition that would break all previous moulds and stereotypes. The design supposed the beginning of a new art form and a new way of selling records that changed the course of the musical industry forever, generating an infinite number of graphic possibilities that enriched the identity of the product.

5
Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, Billie Holiday, Count Basie, Charlie Parker, Johnny Hodges, Lionel Hampton, Roy Eldridge, Jimmy Rushing, Illinois Jacquet, Oscar Peterson, Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Bud Powell, Anita O'Day, Sarah Vaughan, Ben Webster, Meade Lux Lewis o Marie Lou Williams were some of the musicians of African American origin who were portrayed on the covers of their records through illustration.

6
Harlem Renaissance (1918 to 1937) was a movement that meant the rebirth of the African American culture, which was evident mainly in the creative arts and become, in turn, the most influential movement in the history of African American literature.
Harlem Renaissance found its means of expression in literature, music, theatre and visual arts and was considered an artistic vanguard. Also it must be pointed out that although its development was not limited to the Harlem district of New York, that was where the greatest concentration of artists and musicians was, and it served as its symbolic capital of the cultural rebirth.

7
Nina Simone wrote *Mississippi Goddam* in 1964; a song inspired on the death of the activist Medgar Ever, and the murder of four girls in the bombing of the Baptist church of Birmingham, Alabama (1963). The song in which the artists forcefully denounces racism, became one of the hymns of the movement for civil rights.

Also for the pianist Dollar Brand it was the record cover made in 1965 by Marte Rollings, a German painter and sculptor acclaimed by the jazz circles for her covers for the Fontana seal.

As we see it, also in *Nefertiti, the Beautiful One Has Come*. *Touching* or *Communication*, the artist used portrait as a space resource to look into the identity of the jazz musician and to refer to the concept of interracial union. Within this symbolism there are indications of the Egyptian tradition and the masks of African origin, and it is that both resources are frequently used in those covers that illustrate the music of change.

The exaltation and glorification of the musician from the circular spotlights or auras was often underlined by the use of Egyptian elements such as inscriptions, crowns or pharaonic attire. Examples of this were the covers that depicted the music of Sun Ra, key exponent of the vanguard values of experimental jazz.

Another common element was the use of African masks, that groups such as Art Ensemble of Chicago took as main elements of their aesthetics.

Muhal Richard Abrams, mentioned above, also resorted to the use of masks in his late album *Song for All* (1997) the same as Jimmy Giuffre with *River Chant* (1975) or the collection Dancing in Your Head that in 1977 Ornette Coleman's free jazz presented.

Finally we verify as a return to the roots, the surreal mysticism and the ethnic iconography were some of the resources the artists used to create new spaces of representation and activism.

The record industry which had already transformed itself at the end of the 1930s using its packaging as a space for artistic creation, gave a new, and much needed, turn through the music and through the image.

Following the same path as the musical evolution, graphic design became more radical in its manner of protesting. Clear messages and poetic colorist images on the covers which aesthetics and message did not pretend to be indifferent to a society that deserved to be changed.

We find that the artist's purpose would be to transmit, with the image, not only the music contained in the record, but also their own ideological message, a positive and hopeful message with which society would achieve equality and intercultural respect in that historic frame so effervescent for music and plastic artists.

The role of the art directors, designers and illustrators that, years before, documented the music through representation of bustling typography and instruments, portrait of interpreters or musical scenes, placed itself at the service of ethics and politics, taking the reins of social commitment.

The artist's ideology was voiced in silence as a premise of the music that the record itself offered, and was captured in a more direct an evident manner, using the cover of the record as its own declaration, through symbolic imagery that is worthy of deciphering.

Once more art served to break barriers, to integrate and make people sensitive, and announce the change through a product whose industry was booming.

The record cover was an ideal media of expression to integrate and transmit messages to society, those designs became authentic banners for social integration.

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