

**After forty five years some of Steinweiss' greatest graphic hits are now being reissued on CD boxes.**

**THE  
INCOMPARABLE  
ALEX  
STEINWEISS**

TEXT BY STEVEN HELLER

Perhaps the only thing worse than seeing your invention become obsolete in your own lifetime, is being edged out of a field that you created. The mini-poster record cover was born, matured, and died before the eyes of its inventor. Alex Steinweiss, who is now 77, retired, and living in Sarasota, Florida, designed the first illustrated record covers in the early 1940s, and in the early 50s invented the paperboard 33 1/3 LP jacket, which was the standard until the introduction of the CD in 1989. In the 1940s Steinweiss' sinuous signature, the Steinweiss Scrawl, was the most ubiquitous lettering on music packages - his covers for jazz, show tunes, classical, and pop recordings hung on record store walls as if in an art gallery. For almost a decade he set his stamp on the look of music, but during the course of his professional life he was both celebrated as an innovator and shunned as old-fashioned.

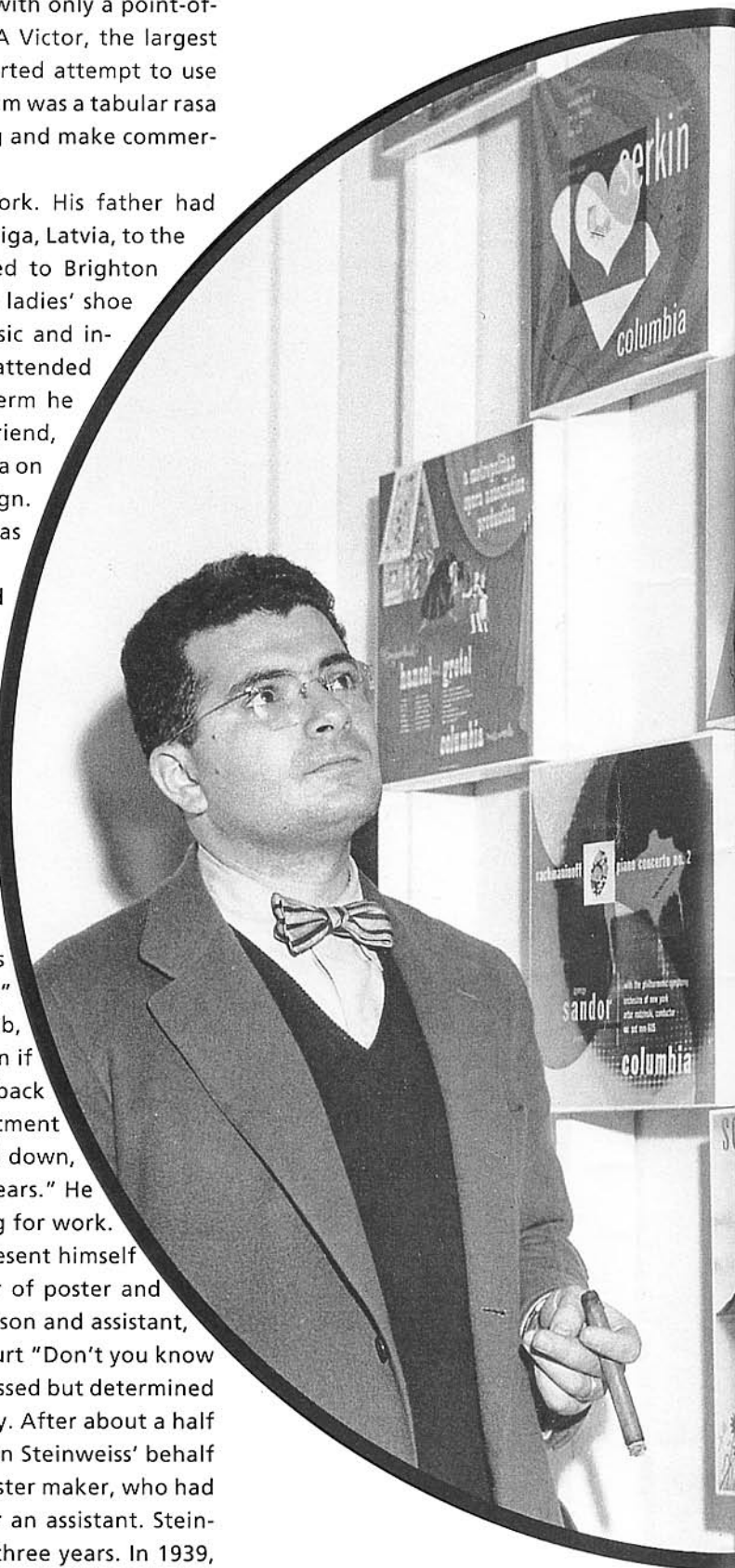
Steinweiss stumbled into an industry without a graphics tradition when he was hired in late 1939 to design promotions and advertising for a young record company in Bridgeport, Connecticut that had been bought by The Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS). Columbia Records was the brainchild of Ted Wallerstein, a former RCA Victor executive, who convinced CBS president William Paley to invest \$80,000 in a record business - the investment was returned in one year. In those days shellac 78 rpm records, which played for four or five minutes per side, were packaged in albums of three or four records in separate sleeves, bound between pasteboard covers referred to in the trade as tombstones because they sat spine out in rows on a display shelf, differentiated only by various color bindings with gold or

silverleaf embossed titles. Dedicated record shops were rare, so albums were often sold in appliance stores near the record players with only a point-of-purchase advertisement to entice customers. Only RCA Victor, the largest American record company, had made even a half-hearted attempt to use literal paintings on its covers. Otherwise the record album was a tabular rasa just waiting for someone like Steinweiss to come along and make commercial art history.

Steinweiss was born in 1917 in Brooklyn, New York. His father had emigrated from Warsaw, Poland, and his mother from Riga, Latvia, to the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and eventually moved to Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, where they worked respectively as a ladies' shoe designer and seamstress. Steinweiss' father loved music and instilled the passion in his son. From 1930 to 1934 he attended Abraham Lincoln High School where in the second term he entered the graphic design program taught by Leon Friend, the co-author of the first comprehensive book in America on Modern visual communication, entitled *Graphic Design*. Steinweiss was enthusiastic about this subject and was good at it.

On the strength of his high school portfolio he earned a year's scholarship to Parsons School of Design in New York, where he was surprisingly not the same model student as he had been at high school. "I was quite cocky then," Steinweiss admitted in an interview. "I was convinced that all I had to do was show my work and I'd get a job even though there was a Depression going on." Before quitting school, however, he wrote to Boris Artzybasheff, one of the most highly regarded book illustrators of the day, offering his services in any menial capacity. Artzybasheff invited him to his apartment in Greenwich Village: "I can still remember its sunken living room surrounded by his original work," recalled Steinweiss. "But instead of offering me a job, Artzybasheff advised me to get along with people (even if I thought I was better than they were) and told me to go back to school. As simple as it sounds, when I left that apartment I was a different person. I went back to school, buckled down, and they even renewed my scholarship for two more years." He graduated from Parsons in 1937 and then went looking for work.

On a whim the 20 year old Steinweiss decided to present himself unannounced to Lucian Bernhard, the German master of poster and type design who had a studio in New York. Bernhard's son and assistant, Karl, greeted a nervous Steinweiss at the door with a curt "Don't you know you're supposed to call for an appointment?!" Embarrassed but determined Steinweiss asked if the master could take a look anyway. After about a half hour Bernhard emerged from his office and said that on Steinweiss' behalf he had called his friend Joseph Binder, the Viennese poster maker, who had recently immigrated to New York and was looking for an assistant. Steinweiss got the job and worked with Binder for almost three years. In 1939, frustrated by not having enough creative work to do, he quit to start his own studio. After six months of doing small jobs he received a call from Dr Robert



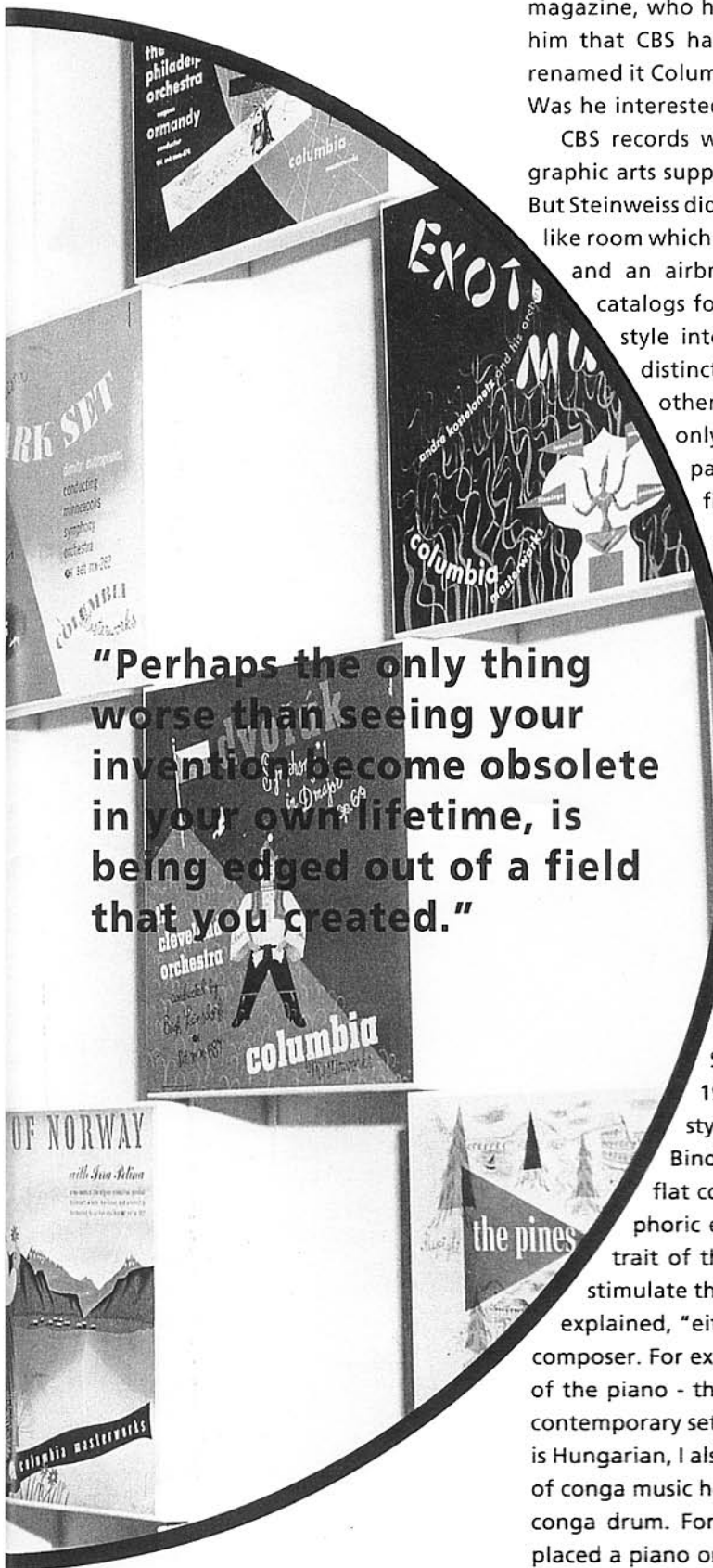
Leslie, the co-founder of New York's Composing Room and editor of PM magazine, who had kept tabs on Steinweiss since high school, informing him that CBS had just bought the former American Gramophone Co., renamed it Columbia Records, and had an art director's position available. Was he interested?

CBS records was headquartered in a gloomy industrial city without graphic arts suppliers, typographers, or designers anywhere within sight. But Steinweiss didn't mind. He was given space in the corner of a huge barn-like room which he called 'the ballroom', with a drawing table, tank of air and an airbrush. He designed promotions, posters, booklets, and catalogs for the classical, pop, and international lines. "I put some style into it", he said, alluding to the difference between his distinctly Modern influences and the virtual non-design of the other record companies. For the first six months he was not only the art director, but the entire art department and paste-up staff, working endless days - sometimes designing fifty pieces in a week.

After a few months on the job he had had enough: the way CBS was selling their records was ridiculous. The plain paper wrappers were unattractive and lacked sales appeal. He told his boss that he wanted to design a few covers and they gave him a chance, despite the fact that manufacturing costs were bound to increase. The very first album was for a Rogers and Hart collection for which he used a rendering of a theater marquee with the album title done in lights. Others followed. Sales of the albums with the Steinweiss covers rocketed. In fact, shortly after the first covers were issued, Newsweek reported that sales of Bruno Walter's Beethoven Eroica symphony had surged to a 895 percent increase over the same release in an unillustrated package. The marketing department soon requested more illustrations.

Steinweiss' covers were designed as mini-posters in the 1930s French and German tradition. Though the graphic style was his own, the lessons he learned as an assistant to Binder stood him in good stead, particularly the application of flat colors and isolated surreal, symbolic forms used for metaphoric effect. Steinweiss believed that rather than show a portrait of the recording artist, musical and cultural symbols would stimulate the audience's interest. "I tried to get into the subject," he explained, "either through the music or the life and times of the artist/composer. For example, with a Bartok piano concerto I took the elements of the piano - the hammers, keys and strings - and composed them in a contemporary setting using appropriate color and rendering. Since Bartok is Hungarian, I also put in the suggestion of a peasant figure." For a record of conga music he abstracted an enlarged pair of hands playing a stylized conga drum. For Gershwin's original recording of Rhapsody in Blue he placed a piano on a dark blue field illuminated only by a street lamp.

The best Steinweiss covers maximized the limited image area by using all the attributes of a large poster: strong central image, eye-catching type



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paul robeson

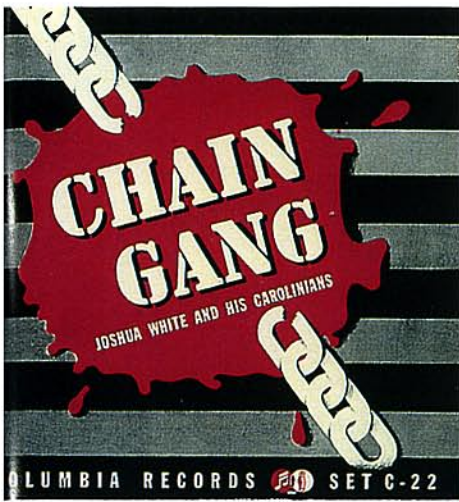


columbia  records

1940

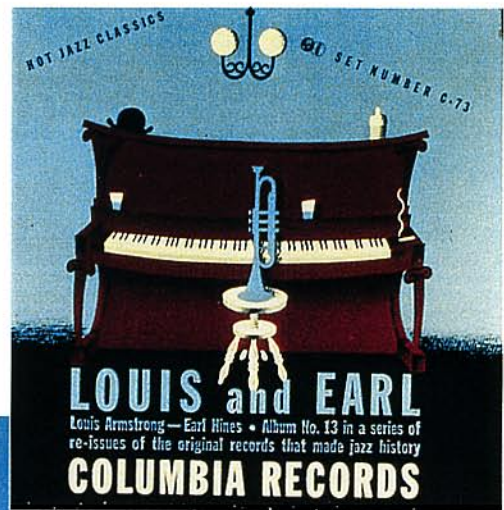
and lettering, and distinctive color combinations. Some albums became famous, such as *Songs of Free Men* by Paul Robeson: a chained hand holding a knife that resonated as a symbol of heroism. Similarly, the gigantic black and white hands on *Boogie Woogie* stood out in an era when racial segregation was tolerated. Other covers were cool interpretations in the European poster tradition, such as the constructivist ethos of the Eddy Duchin album, and the cubist influence in *Le Sacre du Printemps*.

Steinweiss used elegant type, but often selected a contemporary novelty face as an accent. In the cover for *La Bohème*, the circus letter worked well in context, while a similar application for Gyorgy Sandor's recording of



1941

1940

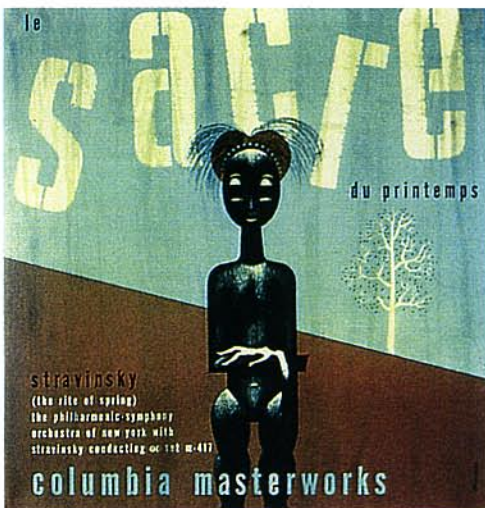


1942

Liszt's Piano Music seems inappropriately grotesque. How Steinweiss' solutions fare decades later is determined by changes in taste and method, but in his day he certainly pushed his creativity, and the limits of record cover design, way beyond convention.

The limitations of working in Bridgeport also significantly influenced Steinweiss' design as far as formal or stylistic considerations were concerned. Without type shops nearby he was pressured by time and financial constraints to hand letter the titles himself, and so developed his own trademark script which was eventually licensed by Photolettering Inc. in the early 1950s. Moreover, the local engravers only worked in black and white - process color was not an option then: "They didn't know what to do with color", quipped Steinweiss about the crafts people and their tedious process. "If you wanted color, you had to give them tight key line drawings, and they would break it up into color. Everything was printed as a solid. But when they made color proofs they didn't even know how to remove the guidelines. I had to teach them to do it all." Temperamental recording artists and composers offered much less trouble! Success had its rewards and many jazz greats and classical maestros gratefully accepted Steinweiss' contributions to increasing their sales. Leopold Stokowski wouldn't have anyone else do his covers. And Steinweiss also received many letters of praise from artists like Eddy Duchin and Reese Stevens for interpreting their work so well.

When the World War Two draft threatened, Steinweiss took a job with the Navy that earned him a deferment for the duration. Friends of his were already working for the U.S. Navy's Training and Development Center in



1943

New York City where materials were produced to teach sailors what they had to know to survive the war. The staff was 90 percent military and the rest civilian. So he left the fulltime job at Columbia to devote himself to designing cautionary displays and posters during the day, while at night he did freelance record work.

With the war over Steinweiss continued to work freelance, and was put on retainer as a consultant to the President of Columbia Records. During one of Steinweiss' routine lunch meetings at Columbia, Wallerstein mysteriously took a disk out of his drawer and went over to the record player. Steinweiss started listening to the music as they talked and recalls that in those days you got into the habit of waiting for the record to change every four or five minutes. But this one didn't change. It played for ten, fifteen, possibly twenty minutes, so I asked "what the hell is this?" And he said, "you're listening to the first pressing of an LP record" (developed by Dr Goldmark for the famed CBS Labs), but "we've got a packaging problem." Apparently they tried using Kraft paper envelopes but owing to the heaviness of the folded paper it left marks on the vinyl microgroove when they were stacked up. "We've got to solve this", he said, "or we're up the creek."

After trial and error Steinweiss developed the LP jacket, which was the easy part, since next he had to find a manufacturer willing to invest around \$250,000 in new equipment. He enlisted his brother-in-law to locate a manufacturer, and admits that the two of them made some money on the deal independent of Columbia. Later on Steinweiss' partner bought out his share. Although Steinweiss held the original patent, according to his contract with Columbia he had to waive all rights to any inventions made while in their employment.

The LP package, a thin board covered with printed paper - color printing on the cover, and black-and-white on the liner - became the standard for the industry (the inside sleeve was invented by someone else). In the beginning it was designed to hold shellac and vinyl records, but shellac was soon dumped. As the years went by the record companies were, however, never completely satisfied because, as Steinweiss said, "it was unglamorous. Though it did the job beautifully and cost peanuts, other designers started to dicker with it to make it more glitzy using die-cuts and other tricks."

Steinweiss' invention was not merely effective protection for LPs, it allowed more artistic variety, which for its inventor was a mixed blessing. More advanced printing encouraged the use of photographs, and conceptual photography was in vogue: Live models were used in sessions with the artist

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for dramatic mood portraits and clever setups. Though Steinweiss preferred the more personal illustrative and typographic approaches, he also art directed and designed photographic shoots for London and Decca records. He worked for most of the major labels during that period, and sometimes changed his style and used a pseudonym so that this work would not be confused with the distinctive personality he gave to Columbia. But by the late fifties the business was in flux. The pop labels wanted to go all photography. "It was the beginning of a lousy time in my life," Steinweiss lamented. Changes occurred that had adverse effects on Steinweiss' practice. At Columbia Ted Wallerstein clashed over policy with William Paley, who bought out his contract, which left Steinweiss' fate in the hands of a new president, Goddard Lieberson. Though Lieberson and

Steinweiss once had a cordial, if not fruitful, working relationship, it soured when he became president. Neil Fujita was hired as art director and decided to bring most of the design work in house. "I did a couple of projects with him that got screwed up", recalls Steinweiss about the beginning of the end. "Later when Bob Cato became art director I couldn't even make a dent. When the handwriting's on the wall, it's silly to resist."

At the age of 55 Steinweiss reluctantly decided to 'bow out' of graphic design. One incident sums up why: "As I was waiting in a record company reception area one day - me in my suit next to all these long-haired guys in fringed jackets - I realized that I was the superannuated one, and it was time to call it quits. The business had changed too much. And unless you were Paul Rand or Will Burtin, it was too much of a race - too demanding on me at that time in my life." Style and fashion had taken a toll, and the

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baton was indeed changing hands.

Why Steinweiss' design career ended had nothing to do with his ability. He could have worked for many more years if the client/artist relationship had not changed. Steinweiss had launched a new field and worked in it for well over twenty years. His covers defined music for a generation. Rock altered the public's perceptions and ushered in new graphic approaches to which Steinweiss could not respond or relate. Although his style evolved between the forties and sixties, it reached a point where it could evolve no further. Today the best of Steinweiss' record work should be judged for the way it revolutionized music packaging, and how it influenced and reflected the styles and trends in the music industry during that curiously adolescent period of American culture. <