National College of Art & Design

Department of Visual Communications

**"The Graphic Design style of Blue Note Records"**

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Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and Design and Complementary Studies in Candidacy for the Degree of B.Des. 1999.

**Contents**

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All album titles are on the Blue Note label unless otherwise stated.

## Introduction

For years I have collected jazz on CD and I have never bought one without some consideration of the cover design. If books are not to be judged by their covers, there are certainly many exceptions to the rule when dealing with classic jazz CDs. By classic I refer to exemplary recordings, generally made before 1970, which are appreciated by music-lovers and music-scholars as being milestones in the history of jazz music. My own record collection contains many visually interesting classics. Consistent quality of appearance is important for me and I believe the whole tactile dimension to a CD enhances the musical experience to an extent. The image and treatment of the cover gives away much about the total effect of the album, the attitudes of the players to their own music and the attitudes of the designers to their music.

As well as study graphic design, I am also involved in music on a semi-professional level. I have been playing guitar for over seven years and I gig regularly, mainly in Dublin, and therefore have a good understanding of jazz harmony and improvisation. From years of listening to jazz records I have come to realise that the best albums and the classic ones tend to have the most appealing covers. A photographer called Hideki Satoh summed this up in an essay he wrote on album cover art:

> *"I firmly believe that albums of masterful performances are generally packaged in suitably splendid jackets. Collectors certainly have clear ideas on good and bad elements for both record jackets and their contents; albums which have a balanced mix, reflecting the merits of both elements, are the most highly valued."*
> *(Mukoda, 1993, p.11)*

The output of the Blue Note label throughout the '50s and '60s is responsible for many of my favourites and more than any other label, it has

produced the most distinctive sound and image combination. Around this time, it was synonymous with producing tight ensemble work, dynamic soloists and driving rhythm sections - qualities that I feel are reflected in their cover designs.

This thesis will attempt to analyse the graphic style that defines Blue Note's 'Golden Age' in the '50s and '60s, and also give an insight into the jazz style to show how compatible the image is with the sound. For my visual reference, there are books available which serve mainly as image libraries for collectors. Since the text in these books gives a brief history of the label and little information on individual covers, I will have to rely largely on my own knowledge of the music, the musicians and there intent on each album.

**Chapter 1**

There are many contributing factors to the original identity of Blue Note and to understand them it is best to start at the beginning and know why the label began. Businessman and jazz enthusiast Alfred Lion originally founded the label in 1939, after emigrating from Germany. He soon formed a partnership with his friend Francis Wolff but business didn't take off until after the war. When the long-play record was introduced in 1948 (a benefit credited to the Columbia label), many companies expanded and a large proportion issued jazz only. Blue Note recorded mainly young musicians whom they believed to be 'up-and-coming' and there was great excitement because everything was so new: a new generation of players; a new era in music; a new company; a new way of recording longer sessions. This attitude - their genuine love of the music - produced a good musical rapport with the players and therefore tremendous creative energy.*(Marsh, 1997, p.4 )*

However, even though their corporate philosophy was so good to begin with, it was designer Reid Miles who Lion and Wolff discovered in New York by chance that gave the label the cutting edge it needed. He had an extremely domineering approach and was completely fixed on how he wanted things to look. After his time with Blue Note he even lost jobs due to arguments over creative control. His approach was a combination of what he liked to do and what he knew how to do, and since he was an avid classical music fan, he depended largely on the rest of the team to describe the mood and intent of each album. These points make Miles look extremely dispassionate about his career and as he put it himself, "I went to art school because of a girl I was going with and because of the GI bill (army recruitment) and it was nice to be close to her and go to an easy art school."*(Marsh, 1997, p.7)* Even if his success was partially by chance, he still produced almost 500 incredibly consistent covers which are a trademark of his style and a testimony to his ability.

## WHAT IS JAZZ?

Before discussing the album covers and the music associated with it, it is important to realise there are many different types of jazz - just as there are many variations in Pop/Rock/Country/Blues/Folk/New World and Classical music.

The great jazz musicians earlier in the century include Count Basie, Benny Goodman, Billie Holiday and Louis Armstrong. Hundreds of jazz orchestras as well as vocalists such as Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra immortalised certain classic jazz songs - especially through radio.

After the war, a new generation of jazz musicians emerged following in the tradition set by Charlie Parker. This style was known as 'Be-bop'. To understand where the name is derived from, listen to any Parker recording such as 'Live at Storyville'. The eighth and sixteenth note lines produced a rhythmic effect which seems to emulate the words.

Artists such as Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Sonny Rollins and Hank Mobley took the style a bit further and so 'Hard-bop' emerged. The compositions were more daring, solos were more developed and shared out (the rhythm section also solo frequently) and the music became more syncopated. The framework over which the soloists improvised was extremely flexible and composers such as Horace Silver began to introduce more exotic rhythms and scales into the compositions. This attracted a wider audience, outside the die-hard swing fans, and marked the beginning of instrumental jazz/pop hits such as Silver's 'Song For My Father' and Hancock's 'Watermelon Man'. Alongside this musical development, recording techniques improved dramatically and the long-play (LP) records required large sleeves, unlike the earlier '78s (records played at 78r.p.m.) which attracted attention to rising stars such as Hancock and Silver. **This is the style we associate with Blue Note.**

Jazz-fusion is another extreme that followed on from hard-bop in the 70's. Musicians such as Chick Corea fused rock with jazz at a time where few people listened to jazz anyway. Many of the composition themes were fantastical and space-aged with titles such as 'Return to Forever' and '500 Miles High'. The group 'Weather Report' with Jaco Pastorious recorded 'Birdland', a pop/fusion classic most people will recognise.

Experimental jazz is something that occurs within the realms of 'contemporary music', as it is known. Modern-day pioneers such as Steve Reich and Philip Glass are known for their minimalist and ambient compositions. It is an extremely ambiguous area because most people are sceptical of people producing music with the aid of power tools and swimming pools (in which they sometimes place their pianos).

All these different modes of jazz co-exist with each other now. People hear the music in different ways and players follow different schools of thought. Basically, jazz can be anything you want it to be because it contains all the progressions, harmonies, time signatures and rhythmic patterns possible in western music.

**Chapter 2**

IMAGE

Just as the Blue Note label had its 'sound', it also had its 'look'. This incorporated a number of different elements including the fashion of the time, literary devices and photography. Just as an improvising jazz musician needs to have a high turn around of melodic and rhythmic ideas, the same is true of designers and this is reflected in Blue Note's rate of production. This chapter explores the overall treatment of the covers which helped create that 'look'.

For a modern-day graphic designer presented with the task of producing printed material with a jazz theme, certain information is required to represent the artist correctly. Firstly, their instrument is important because that is their voice for expressing themselves. Some instruments can be naturally more aggressive than others because of how they are played and

how you phrase melodies on them - a trumpet compared to a guitar, for example. Also the intent of the musician on an album is also important and this should be appropriately represented on the cover in some way. Whatever techniques or graphic devices are used, album covers need to embrace the personality of the artist or group so they are not forgotten. Blue Notes image is unique because it remains constant no matter which artist it is representing. The covers manage to represent the label's personality along side the artist's without obvious compromise. Especially today, some record labels produce album covers which downplay the design to gain some credibility for the company image. Some examples of this are Antonio Forcione's 'Dedicato' (Fig.1) on the Naim label and Sam Yahel's 'Searchin' (Fig.2) on the Naxos label. All releases on Naim have the white box surround and all Naxos CDs incorporate the same typeface with prominent logo placement as a consistency device. Although these are excellent recordings, they appear devoid of personality from the outside - more like cheap compilations you find on airport music stands than something from a vintage collection.

Fig.1

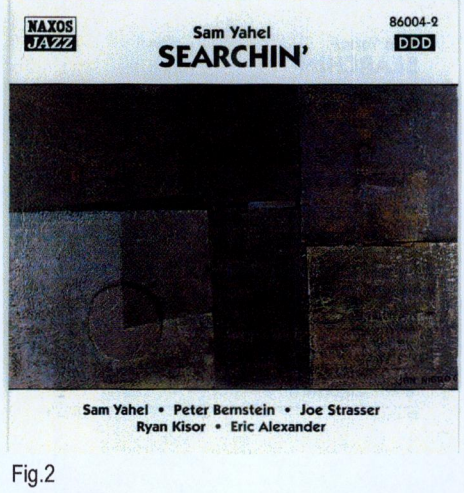


Fig.2

Legendary saxophonist Dexter Gordon once said after a rehearsal, 'You just have to play better for Blue Note' *(Marsh, 1997, p.4)* This is a reaction to

the momentum that Lion, Wolff and Miles built up in the preceding years. Company policy was to record each session and even to pay the musicians for their practice time. Only the very best of these recordings were issued, and they all had a very natural sounding result. This quality control combined with tasteful graphic interpretation of the music gave the label its integrity. Perhaps since Miles's covers were his interpretations of verbal descriptions, this kept him focused and consistent without getting caught up in his own reactions to the music. Also, it is important to remember that unlike today, recording artists then did not have clauses in their contracts guaranteeing the right to control the look of the graphics (most jazz musicians didn't bother getting involved but could help pick photos and edit linear notes if they wished). When we look at many of these covers today, they still looks fresh and hip, yet remain calm and sophisticated. This thesis will attempt to trace back and discover what makes these covers so appealing to a broad range of 'punters', from conservative collectors to trendy club goers.

In the 'fifties, a period known as 'cool jazz' emerged. This era was a reaction to the whole show-band association of jazz in post-war America. Around this time the music became more low-key, residing in the underground clubs and lounges. Obviously this was a time for reflection among the people of America as they recovered from the war and the music suited this atmosphere. Even the titles of tunes, 'Blue In Green,' 'Chelsea Bridge,' 'Hallucinations,' became more abstract and mysterious, moving away from the melancholia of love-struck war time songs, which invariably had the words 'I' 'me' or 'you' in the title (e.g. 'I'm Getting Sentimental Over You,' 'Do Nothing Til You Hear From Me' & 'One For My Baby'). Therefore the first batch of Blue Note covers were fairly subdued and moody, usually tinted with a single flat colour.

A good example of this technique is the album 'Sonny Rollins, Blue Note 1558 Vol.2' (Fig.3). This particular photograph has been re-used so many times on posters, postcards and club flyers that the cover has a classic look about it. Although not everyone knows who Rollins is, this image has become an icon for the jazz saxophonist. There are two colours incorporated into the design: a grayscale photo mixed with an opaque layer of blue ink. This process is known as a duotone and was used extensively, especially by designers for Blue Note. The original reason for its use, as opposed to a full colour process (which would involve four separate printing plates) was for budgetary reasons. Two colours meant two printing plates which meant lower cost. Therefore, this distinctive style was built out of that original restriction. Modern graphic design software packages such as Adobe Photoshop enables you to work in a duotone mode which can replicate this style.

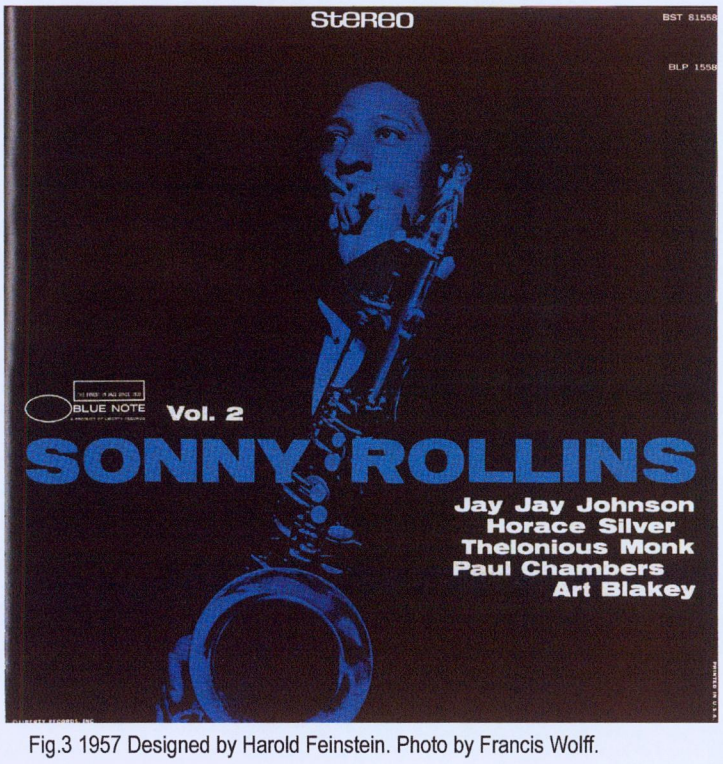
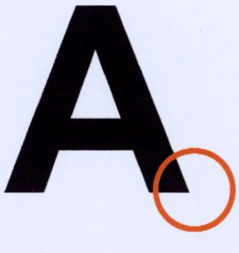


Fig.3 1957 Designed by Harold Feinstein. Photo by Francis Wolff.

The actual design of 'Sonny Rollins Vol 2' is extremely straight-forward. The type forms an 'X' with the narrow image creating a strong integrated design. The integration of type and image is something that most designers strive for, i.e. creating a design that flows naturally but adheres to some integral grid system. Fig.4 shows a basic grid structure that falls over the design of Rollins. The photo has the same density as the title and graphically they read as two separate plains, one horizontal and one diagonal. The band's line-up is aligned horizontally and appears to weave in and out with no vertical stability. However, this is not completely random. The first, third and fifth names are justified to the right while the names of Silver and Chambers are aligned to the left, on a diagonal parallel to the axis of the saxophone. Sometimes, designers invent a grid to base their work on, especially in situations where consistency is required such as in a magazine layout. Feinstein's design is a logical, yet simple solution and it exemplifies a common trait in the Blue Note series: graphically strong designs which, conceptually, do not look contrived or 'overly worked-out'. Aesthetically, this cover is slick, sharp and robust: smooth, flat colour as opposed to textured and rough; blocky type instead of serif faces which can sometimes appear weak or brittle, depending on how thin they are.

Fig.4 Grid system on 'Sonny Rollins Vol.2'


Sans-serif character


Serif character (Fig.5)

This look is extremely appropriate to Rollins's style of playing since he is renowned for his smooth and precise melodic phrasing. Often, jazz educators will recommend their students to transcribe his solos for this reason. One could argue that covers such as 'Sonny Rollins' are overly tight and controlled, lacking the spontaneity of musical improvisation, however, the photos themselves provide the element of surprise since they are often unusually juxtaposed with each other and scaled in interesting ways (such as the 'x' formation of the image and type combination in 'Rollins').


Fig.6 1960 Designed by Reid Miles. Photo by Francis Wolff.

Horace Parlan's 'Movin' & Groovin' (Fig.6) is an excellent example of this since the photo takes up less than 10% of the overall cover space and the image of Parlan himself takes up less than 50% of the photograph. This minimalist approach is intriguing and satisfying from a designer's perspective. The use of flat colour, negative (empty) space and its geometric layout show many characteristics of modernist thinking. Miles' original interest

(and education) in fine art must have encouraged him to draw influence from other modernist painters and designers.

As Miles began working for Blue Note on their eighth release, Lion was busy recruiting new talent - musicians he believed would fit in with the Blue Note policy. The label's first brochure in 1939 stated that policy:

> *"Blue Note Records are designed simply to serve the uncompromising expressions of hot jazz or swing, in general...and Blue Note Records are concerned with identifying its impulse, not its sensational and commercial adornments."(from Blue Note website)*

With the assistance of Rudy Van Gelder, a recording engineer from New Jersey. Van Gelder, Lion began to discover the ideal 'Blue Note sound' he was looking for. This new sound was extremely identifiable and well balanced. Even today, the recordings sound as if they were recorded in a modern studio and mixed digitally. In fact, the sessions were recorded live and usually onto two-track (stereo) analogue tape. This level of perfection is paralleled in the cover designs and both dimensions testify to the quality of the label. Modern-day designers immediately tend to associate jazz with that look and use the imagery as a visual shorthand for everything that is 'jazzy'. However, the covers recall volumes of sound for the music-lover. Often, when I first listen to an album, I end up staring at the cover and reading the inlay a few times. This ritual only takes place with good music, which demands to be listened to, not just heard. So as you listen to the music, the whole aesthetic values of the album - the packaging, printing, design and musical content, become a part of the experience. When an album has a beautiful and memorable cover, this strengthens the audio-visual association. Its strong sound identity helps single out Blue Note covers as something consistently different.

Looking back on the late 1950s and early '60s in America, the time these cover designs were produced, we all know how the jazz and blues culture existed mainly among the African -American population, At the time, there were many rallies and memorable protesters, including Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Also, aside from issues of racism against blacks, there were other political issues such as the Vietnam war in the late 1960s. Since art and music are supposed to be about self-expression and since most jazz musicians were black, obviously there were some serious issues expressed in the thousands of recorded improvisations. While the 'hippies' increased in numbers, listening to folk ballad writers and conveying their message through festivals such as Woodstock, the jazz community existed underground in places like the Bronx and the successful ones such as Miles Davis were often involved in 'benefit' concerts.

Blue Note was good for the black community because it portrayed them in a positive way - creative, stylish and inoffensive. This positivity sometimes makes one forget the political and social problems of the time which were so relevant to the music. However some of the designs and poignant photos do remind you of messages they wanted to convey.

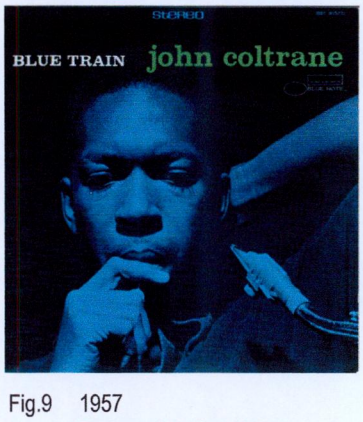



Fig.9 1957
Designed by Reid Miles.
Photo by Francis Wolff.

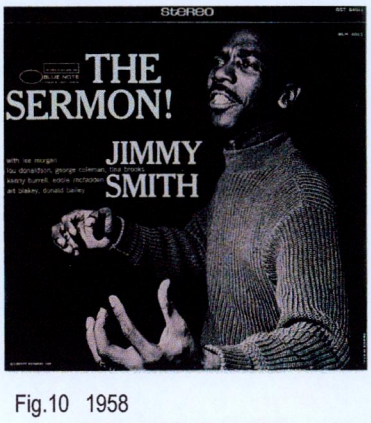



Fig.10 1958
Designed by Reid Miles.
Photo by Francis Wolff.

The photo of Coltrane (Fig.9) is a classic, partially because the album is sometimes hailed a masterpiece but also because it captures his intensity, uneasiness and persistence in searching for new ideas. If you listen to this album you can hear how he constantly twists the melodies around each other - extremely energetic music but not for the feint-hearted. It is also interesting how the key centre in his music constantly shifts as if he is unwilling to stay in the one place. Coltrane was possibly the most uncompromising musician in jazz. This is important when looking at all the cover designs since the Blue Note musicians did not concentrate on creating 'hits' and were all generally uncompromised. Therefore the label needed that strong identity to create continuity between all the different musicians who were pursuing their individuality. When you listen to Coltrane's ballad 'Alabama', this was a reaction to a speech that Martin Luther King gave about four black children who were blown up in a racist attach on a church in 1963. There are many such songs dealing with issues like this but you do have to search for them.

However, it seems that all the artists wanted to explore the depths of their culture to some extent. Many looked into religious and philosophical ideas from Africa and Asia which they felt were more in tune with their musical ambitions. Most people now can still identify classic Brazilian tunes from the '60s such as 'The Girl From Ipenemia' and 'Desafinado' and this Afro/Cuban extension of the jazz repertoire was represented on many Blue Note covers. Many traditional patterns from other cultures were given the Blue Note treatment mainly by Reid Miles. Kenny Dorham's 'Blue Note 1535' (Fig.11) shows Zulu-like drawing of South American origin which are enlarged on the original 12 inch squared format but are still treated in flat colours. 'Basta' by Pete La Roca (Fig12) has a stylised design, reminiscent of patterns from Indian clothing. It is interesting how Miles treats

these wild areas of colour. They are boxed off to fit in with the geometric look but are still given enough breathing space on the cover.


Fig.11 1965 Designed by Reid Miles. Photo by Francis Wolff.

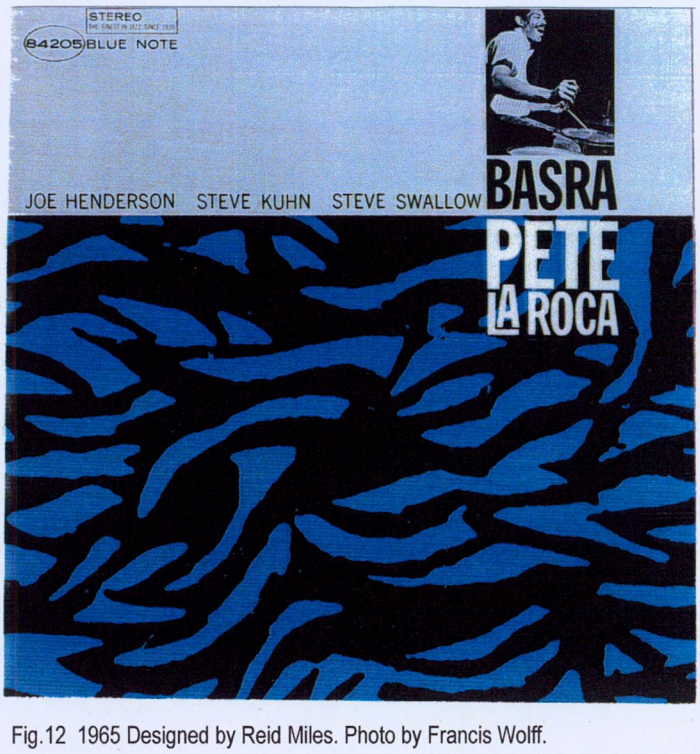



Fig.12 1965 Designed by Reid Miles. Photo by Francis Wolff.


Fig.13 1963 Designed by Reid Miles. Photo by Reid Miles.

'A New Perspective' by Donald Byrd (Fig.13) is a unique album in many ways. The line up includes a choral section with four males and four female voices, which creates a spiritual and deep sound. Byrd's idea for this album came from his background as the son of a Methodist minister. This is a good example of an artist exploring the earlier Negro spiritual idiom as opposed to the gospel/funk styles emerging at the same time. (One of the first Blue Note releases was by Jimmy Smith, the organ player who pioneered the funk sound.) The cover is unusually aerodynamic and slick considering the religious overtone of the album. Byrd is leaning against his Jaguar E-type which has an extremely dark and foreboding quality - especially with that camera angle.

The paradox of spiritual music represented by 'extra-slick' design helps us understand what kind of audience Blue Note was trying to target. The use of the E-type complemented the modern appearance of the cover since the

car itself was a new and futuristic design. The cover, as a result, looked fashionable - reflecting the current way of thinking at that time. Lion, the company founder, wanted the covers to have a strong intellectual appeal for those who wanted to explore the music in depth. On Byrd's record, Duke Pearson created highly sophisticated arrangements for each tune which could also be appreciated on an intellectual level. On the other hand, the covers had to be appealing so they would move off the shelf. That is why the high contrast filters were used combined with the bold coloured lettering to create such dynamic covers as 'A New Perspective'. Personally, I think this cover would appeal to anyone who can appreciate music intelligently or with any sense of style. As it happens, this was an important album because it was was successful across the board, attracting new audiences with its vocal content.

## Chapter 4

TYPE

Type on a Blue Note album cover is as important as the image and sometimes the cover is purely typographic. Often the titles or names of artists would need to be quite large and distinguishable. This is mainly because jazz as a category is so broad, with so many names to consider and choose from. Also, the musicians were young talent, new on the scene and ultimately needed recognition. Although different type styles applied to different players, they couldn't be too distorted or subtle because they needed to be recognisable. Someone who likes rock and pop music would find their choosing of records far easier because of how they are marketed. For example, the Beatles' 'White Album' must have relied on hype and strategic advertising because the name is hardly visible on the cover (embossed white lettering on a flat white background for the original

pressing - see Fig.14). There are some guide books such as 'Jazz On CD' which give you accounts of selected recordings but nobody is telling people directly what to buy.

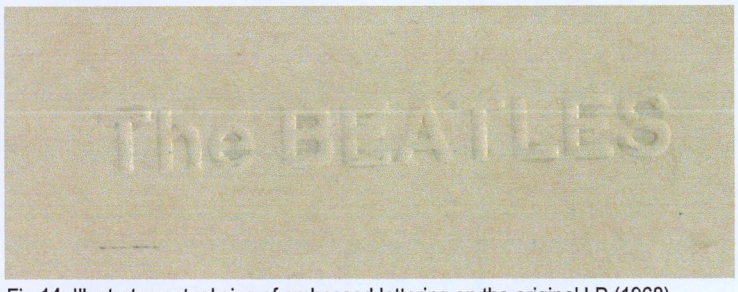



Fig.14 Illustrates actual size of embossed lettering on the original LP (1968)

Designers of Blue Note covers, especially Reid Miles, seemed to have a preference for chunky, geometric sans-serif faces. These type faces (or fonts) were originally designed for specific purposes. Eric Gill created Gill Sans as a heavy font for transport signs. Helvetica (the condensed version which is used extensively on the covers) was designed as a modern book font - one you can read very easily. The typeface is extremely plain and used as a default font on most computers and is said to have a timeless quality. Futura, which is the predominant typeface used on the covers, was created in the modernist environment of the Bauhaus movement.

When looking at the 'Midnight Blue' album (Fig.7, page 16), the magnificent use of scale is clear. Like in Horace Parlan's 'Moovin' and Groovin' (Fig.6, page 13), the photo of Burrell is reduced down giving him a humble presence. This is highly appropriate to the personal nature of this album, since Burrell wanted to capture the feeling and intensity of the Blues (every track on the album is a variation of a blues theme). The colours are toned down, only leaving the artist's name to stand out in high contrast even though the lettering is comparatively small. Again, this shows the consideration to the importance of the musician's identity. As a CD cover (120mm X 121mm) the type is extremely clear and well balanced so that this

dominance must have been enhanced even more on the original 12inch LP version.

Another important stylistic device is the use of flat colour over broad areas. This gave a sleek and modern look to the sleeve and contrasted with the photo which seems to have the only movement and spontaneous activity. One of my favourite covers, typographically, is Dexter Gordon's 'Go'. This has similar design elements to 'Midnight Blue' but it has a totally different feel. It appears that a broad version of Futura or Optima was used with a slightly tightened kerning (the spacing between individual letters). This gives the letters a lot of space to breath while still maintaining even lines of text. The ruling is quite simply and tastefully handled: a series of grey line divisions. Again, the photo, one of Gordon smiling, provides more contrast. Personally, I find the type style sporty and energetic, in compliance with the motivating title 'Go' (which is an obvious pun on Gordon's name).


Fig.15 1962 Designed by Reid Miles. Photo by Francis Wolff.

Those albums which are represented by type alone include Julian 'Cannonball' Adderley's 'Somethin' Else' (Fig.16) and Jackie McLean's 'Right Now' (Fig.17). The latter has a timeless quality - probably because there is only one column of text which is well balanced, geometric and without ornament.

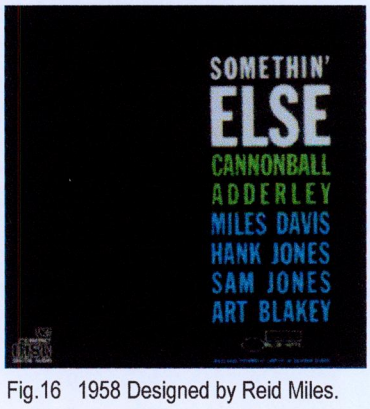


Fig.16 1958 Designed by Reid Miles.

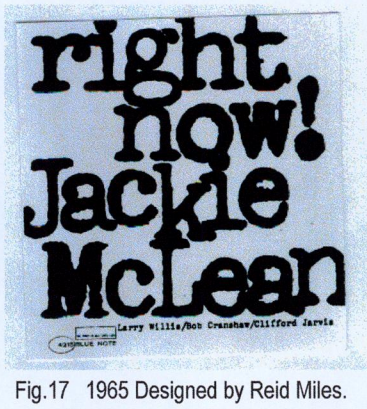


Fig.17 1965 Designed by Reid Miles.

This complements the sound, which is that of a perfectly timeless cool-jazz recording. McLean's look is slightly less relaxed which ties in with his more manic tempos. Another technique which was used extensively and almost exclusively by Blue Note was the chopped letters look. This form of distortion highlighted the vertical or sometimes horizontal dimensions to the lettering. For instance the type on 'Cool Struttin' (Fig.18) looks as if it's hopping or strutting perhaps.

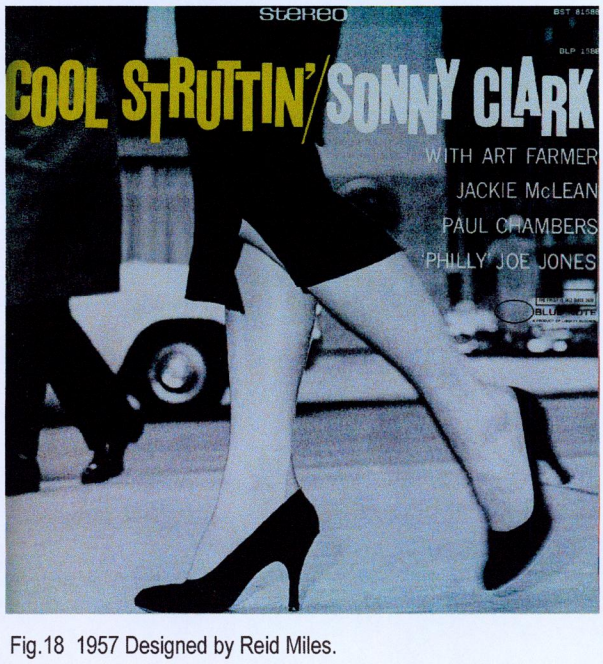


Fig.18 1957 Designed by Reid Miles.

When you listen to this album, the motion in the rhythm section, especially Paul Chambers' walking bass lines, showed how Reid Miles understood the intent of the album when he stylised the type. The music in the album reminds me of busy city life; lunchtime rush in New York, perhaps. The tune 'Lover' has a relaxed 3/4 meter which contrasts with the busy horn section which sounds exactly like many car horns beeping in harmony. The image of the woman's legs in brilliant because you can imagine the hurried 'pitter-patter' of the high heels through the bouncing type.
When someone went to buy Kenny Durham's 'Trumpeta Toccata' in the '60s, they must have been aware of the Brazilian rhythms that epitomised his sound (Durhams ' Blue Bossa ' is one most people will recognise). Miles really understood the intent of the album as his cut lettering has a tribal quality that seems to evoke congas in the tropics. Also the garish colour-scheme has the look of exotic dyes you would expect to find in regions of Brazil.


Fig.18 1964 Designed by Reid Miles. Photo by Francis Wolff.

Other forms of lettering which were used on the LP's on selected occasions included, Miles' own handwriting, rubber stamp effects and typewriter

style. Miles did not mind having loose spontaneous lettering once it had a strong design element which usually meant containing it in some way. The Anthony Williams' album 'Life time' (Fig.19) is a perfect example of this since the title is boxed off in a section of a typical Blue Note format.

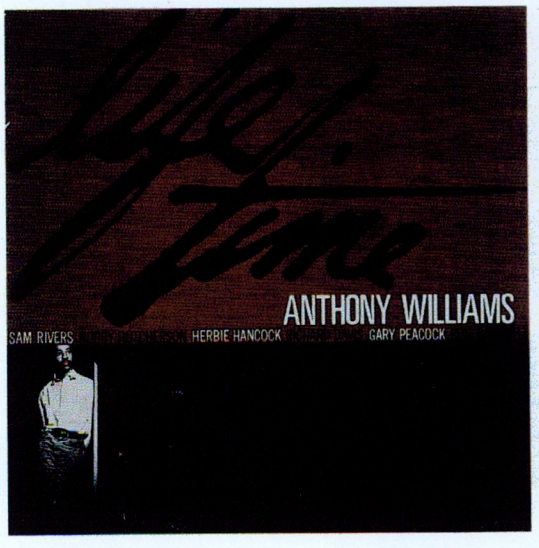



Fig.19 1964 Designed by Reid Miles. Photo by Francis Wolff.

Sometimes the type would be so condensed on a Blue Note cover that it was possible to fit individual photographs inside the letters. Two good examples of this come to mind, Jackie McLean's 'Let Freedom Ring' (Fig.20) and Joe henderson's 'In 'n Out' (Fig.21, next page). This device gives the players a symbiotic sense of importance as the album's title. Also the type-forms provide a natural boundary so that the image does not interfere with the type in any way. This suited another approach Miles sometimes took which involved creating 'type-designs'.


Fig.20 1962 Designed by Reid Miles. Photo by Francis Wolff.


Fig.21 1964 Designed by Reid Miles. Photo by Francis Wolff.

Miles' 'type-designs' involved drawing out type by hand and sculpting it beyond its normal function. The cover design for Joe Henderson's 'In And Out' (Fig.21) shows how the type still remains legible but has the additional concept of the arrows (actually moving in and out of the design) backing it up. This shows Miles' respect for letter forms and the space in-between. Before the digital age where anyone can mock-up a poster and print it out in an instant, designers had to be extremely careful with type because it took so long to set by hand. This design appears particularly modern, as good as anything you would see printed today. Also, it strengthens the argument that non-elaborate type-faces create the classic designs because they do not look dated.

Often from the '70s onwards the word jazz appeared on many covers in large bold colours, with its perimeter stretched out in different directions. Most people are familiar with this sort of image and for some, it is an

immediate association they make with the music. Even so-called designers who destroy covers (not to mention the credibility of the music) with this uninspired lettering use it because it is sometimes their only understanding of what the word means. Unfortunately, they are completely misguided. Jazz is not about being way out and uncontrolled as this insensitive technique seems to suggest. Blue Note typography, in particular, is a lesson to any designer to gain an understanding of the variable intention of jazz music, be it laid back or manic.

## Chapter 5

ILLUSTRATION

Unlike its contemporaries, Blue Note seldom used montage, collage or pastiche. This is when images are juxtaposed by cutting and pasting them. Miles probably felt that if he was going to use illustration he would just do that , without mixing it with other media. There was a wide range of illustrative techniques used but like all Blue Note covers, Miles didn't include too many elements which could clutter the designs.

The most famous illustrations the label used were ink drawings done by Andy Warhol. Obviously the name of a well known celebrity in the context of Blue Note got the company more press at the time. These drawings were not incredibly unique and were not carried out in Warhol's usual Pop style. Stylistically though, Warhol's approach to flat colour (such as his instantly recognisable photo of Marilyn Monroe) suited Miles' design method. The cover of 'The Congregation' (Fig.22, next page) was the best attempt Warhol came up with, although the image looks as if he drew Griffin from his imagination since the saxophone is barely identifiable and the hand positioning is all wrong. Still, the colours are suitably vibrant and

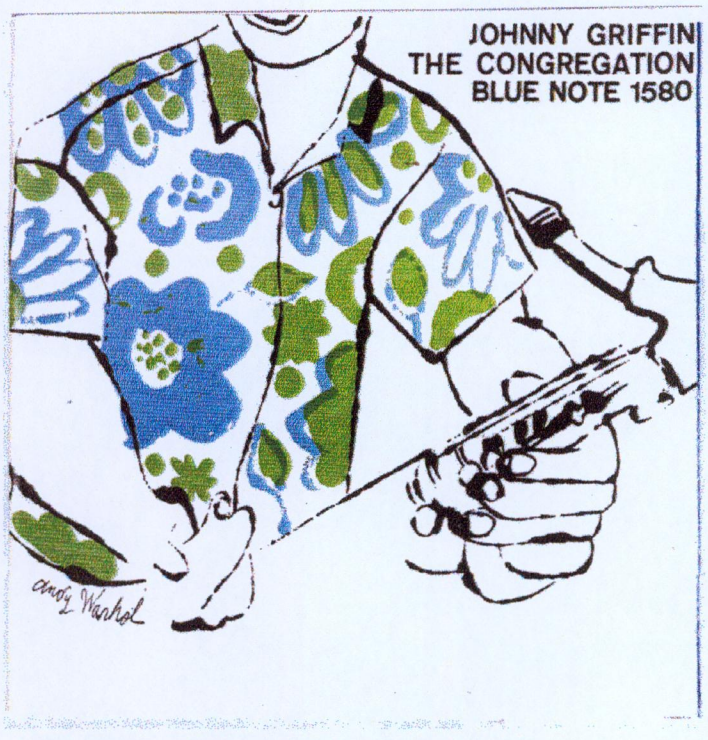



Fig.22 1957 Illustration by Andy Warhol. Design by Reid Miles.

intentional or not, they do work with Griffin's East Coast style which was blues orientated with strong Latin undertones. However, I feel Warhol's drawings looked uncomfortable in the square layout and the type, too, looks awkward. This is unusual for Miles; considering his typographic tendencies. He didn't give up on the type, just tried not to let it compete with the drawing. When considering the Miles/Warhol team in context of Blue Notes entire output, the great body of work that Reid Miles represents stands out with much stronger graphic presence.

Some other artists worked for Blue Note using a similar inky style. Most had a two/three colour combination (again, for budgetary reasons) but the most successful ones were those integrated with a traditional Blue Note layout. The cover for Blue Mitchell's 'Bring it home to me ' (Fig.23, next page) was designed and created by George Wright under the supervision of Reid Miles. I feel this cover was successful because the artist also designed the type to suit the positioning of the drawing. Miles obviously supervised so that the design would not stray from the Blue Note image.

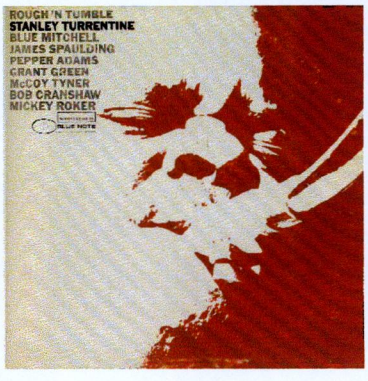

Fig.23 1966 Illustration/Design by George Wright. Art Direction by Reid Miles.

An interesting aspect to Blue Note's choice of illustrations was that they chose drawings which were stylised in an artistic way rather than conceptual or commercially illustrated ones. This tied in with Blue Note representing the musicians as artists and also Reid Miles' appreciation of fine art, architecture, sculpture and industrial design - all of which appear in the covers at some stage.

However ' fine art ' orientated the illustrations were, they were still made to look graphic. Miles himself did a loose line drawing for Lou Donaldson's 'Quartet / Quintet / Sextet 1537' (Fig.24, next page) which was photographed and then inverted by Francis Wolff. This method made the gesture-drawing look like a drawing done with light because it was completely white and based on a continuous line. Also, as it was placed on the cover so that it created a graphic look with a high positive / negative contrast.

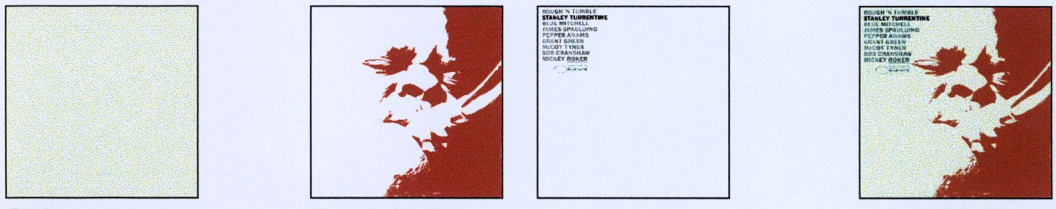

Fig.24 1962
'Quartet / Quintet / Sextet 1537'
Designed by Reid Miles.
Photo by Francis Wolff.

Fig.25 1966
'Rough 'n Tumble'
Design by George Wright.
Photo by Francis Wolff.




Sometimes the photography was used as illustration like in Stanley Turrentine's 'Rough 'n Tumble'. George Wright gave one of Wolff's photos a screen printed look by increasing the contrast to the maximum. This is similar to the effect a photocopier would produce today by decreasing the size of a photo and then by enlarging it again. The photo now has an inky quality to it, similar to the other illustration. One of the reasons these covers look so good at actual size is the method they were printed. For example, the red colour on Stanley Turrentine's album was a pre-mixed ink which was printed at 100 per-cent opacity. This eliminated the process-colour look, where separate printing inks (cyan, magenta, yellow, and black) are overlaid and mixed on the press. The current CD reissues are printed in the four process-colours because there are no longer serious cost factors to worry about. Although graphically the CDs have an impact which equals the original format, most of them are contained within a jewel box and have not got the same feel as the original printed edison. Also today, they sometimes rely on photographing the original covers and reducing them since there is no mechanical way of duplicating the original two/three plates down to CD size. For a true collector, holding an original LP is the difference between seeing a painting 'live' in a gallery and seeing the same painting in a printed book.

Fig.26 Custom colour separation for 'Rough 'n Tumble'



Original paper
(slightly off-white)

Two printing plates are used, one for each custom-coloured ink.

Two plates combine to create the original LP design.

Fig.27 Process colour separation 'Rough 'n Tumble'


Original paper
( bright white)

Four printing plates are used, one for each process colour.

The four plates combine to create the original look.

Fig. 26 shows how the original paper went through the press twice to get the end result. The paper is slightly off-white and creates a natural finish. Fig. 27 shows the modern four colour process system works. The original printed LP would have been photographed and then reduced. Sometimes the new additions appear darker because they reproduce any ageing from the original LP pressing.

## Chapter 6

UNUSUAL TECHNIQUES

From time to time, Miles would break the routine of his design method or produce a series of covers with an underlying theme or format. In Freddie Hubbard's 'Hub Cap' (Fig.28), the photo of Hubbard is cut out roughly in a circle and this shape is also reflected in the area of flat colour above it.


Fig.28 1961 Design by Reid Miles. Photo by Francis Wolff.

The type is squashed in between the two shapes. This design is non conventional for Blue Note because of its non linear layout. The type is well integrated but, unlike 'Midnight Blue' (Fig.7, page 16), there is no basic grid system you can put over it to show how certain vertices and horizontals in the type configuration line up with those in the photograph.

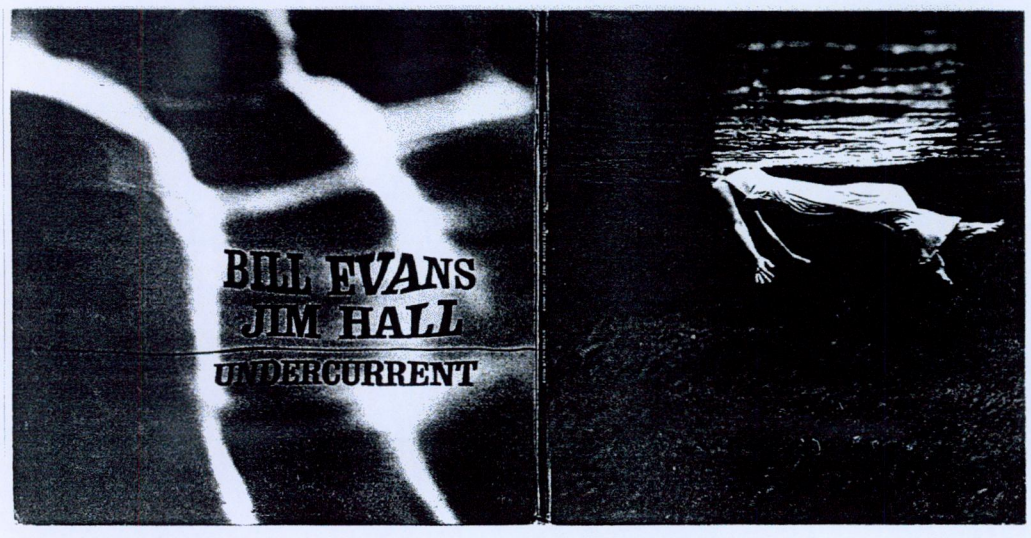



Fig. 29 1962 Original LP design. Photo by Toni Frissell. Typography by The Composing Room.

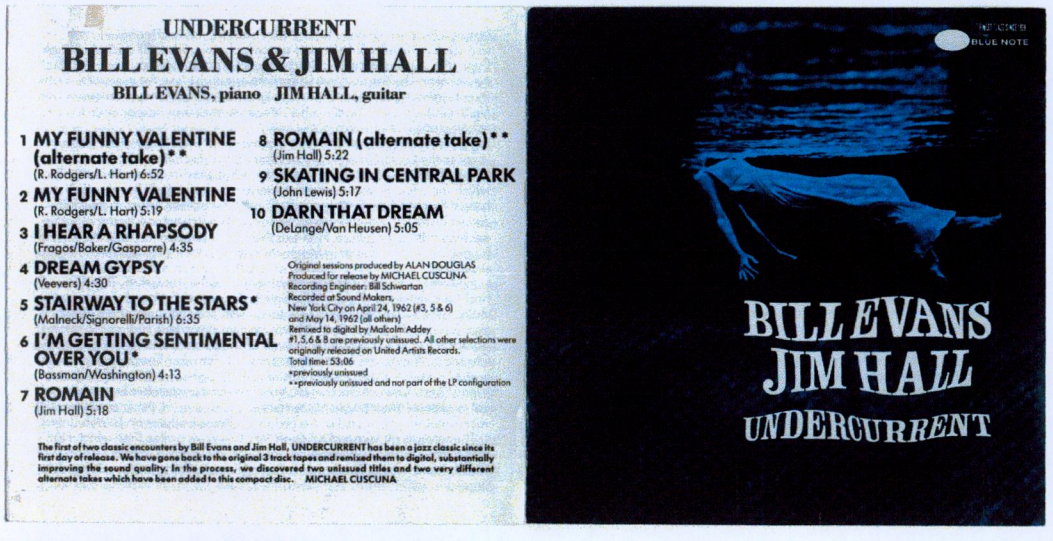



Fig. 30 1988 Current reissue (CD)

Another unusual Blue Note cover is the 1962 'Undercurrent' album by Jim Hall and Bill Evans. In this case, the typography was handled by a separate company called 'The Composing Room'. The type was originally set and printed, then placed below a clear water tank and photographed from above. The ripples in the water caused a natural looking distorted effect on the type. On the recent re-issue on CD, the type is re-drawn on computer and distorted slightly more. The letters are mush sharper than before, eliminating subtleties such as blurred edges. Although the 'polished-up' CD edition looks well, the original 12 inch[2] vinyl format - blurred edges and all - captures the dreamy quality of the music contained within.

**Chapter 7**

PHOTOGRAPHY

One of the strongest aspects to the covers, these photos also stand on their own. The photographers for Blue Note had a personal relationship with the music. Often they would travel on the road with the musicians and on a recording date, there was invariably someone clicking away in the background. Stressing the importance of photography, writer Geoff Dyer said:

> *"Oil Paintings leave even the Battle of Britain or Trafalgar strangely silent. Photography, on the other hand, can be as sensitive to sound as it is to light. Good photographs are there to be listened to as well as looked at; the better the photograph, the more there is to hear."(Dyer, 1996, p. xi)*

Sometimes photos were combined on the covers of Blue Note. For example, Johnny Griffin's 'Blue Note 1559' combines the image of doves flying at night with a photo of the artist. However, the photos were usual very striking by themselves and didn't need to be altered. Almost all the photos Reid Miles incorporated into his design were taken by Francis Wolff, a German photographer and co-founder of the label. His love for the music saw him following the careers of many players from club to club and, therefore, capturing them in their natural environment. When printed the filters Wolff used made the pictures look grainy which contrasted beautifully with with the flat colours in Miles's graphics. Since the scene was dominated by black musicians, this was often used as a design element. Large close-ups of dark individuals contrasted dynamically with the white space around them. Examples of this are Lee Morgan's 'Sidewinder' (Fig.31, next page) and Dexter Gordon's 'Our Man In Paris' (Fig.32, next page). Most of the cover photos are in black and white which seems to convey the simplicity of the sound - the sense of coolness and

timelessness. Even photographs of white musicians such as Kenny Burrell or Chet Baker show the lack of discrimination amongst the Blue Note 'family' since the photos portrayed everyone in a shade of black. Regarding content and subject matter, the photos were often portraits of the players. This helped build up the personality of the label.

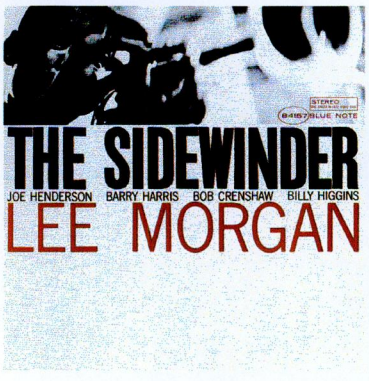
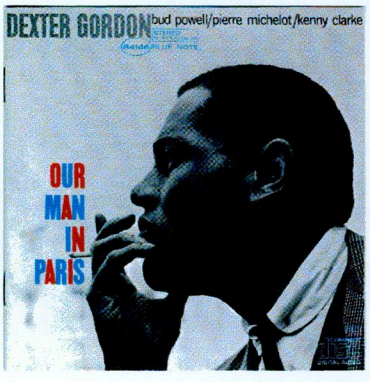



Fig.31 1963
'The Sidewinder'
Designed by Reid Miles.
Photo by Francis Wolff.

Fig.32 1963
'Our Man In Paris'
Designed by Reid Miles.
Photo by Francis Wolff.




Reid Miles also experimented with photography but proffered staged compositions that he could incorporate into his designs. Donald Byrd's 'A New Perspective' (Fig.13, page 21) is an example of this where Miles deliberately sets up a photo to suit the concept of the album.

Many special-effects photographs have also been integrated into the Blue Note style. One than comes to mind instantly is Herbie Hancock's 'Maiden Voyage' (Fig.33). In this there is an abstract representation of a figure in silhouette (we can only presume it's Herbie), sitting in a barely recognisable sailing boat, which also resembles the open lid of a piano. This is a high noise photograph, meaning a high contrast filter has been used to emphasise the grain of the photograph. Again, this is not one of Wolffs photos but one by Miles himself. This abstract use of photography is more experimental than Wolff's usual 'capture the moment' approach. When released this album was clearly far ahead of its time, so perhaps this blurred photo effect was supposed to represent something unique and experimental


Fig.33 1965 Design/Photo by Reid Miles.

within the music.Wolff also did some experimental work including 'Night Dreamer' by Wayne Shorter. Although not quite as sharp or graphic as 'Maiden Voyage', it still manages to convey the dreamlike intent of the album. It is amazing how perfectly executed and printed these photos were considering they were over twenty five years away from digital processing. It is unlikely that we would attempt these effects manually today because it is so difficult to replicate digitally the effort and dedication involved in producing fine photographs like these.