

Print Run

New music books



Designed For Hi-Fi Living: The Vinyl LP In Midcentury America

Janet Borgerson & Jonathan Schroeder
MIT Press Hbk 440 pp

The mid-20th century in America was a period of comfort and prosperity virtually without parallel in the history of the world. For the significant chunk of the country comprising the middle class, disposable income was high, travel was inexpensive, cars and the fuel to run them were abundant, the country was at peace (or close enough to it, after the Second World War), time and labour saving technology promised to abolish the drudgery of work forever and generously funded space travel hinted at the eventual abolition of all frontiers.

While a study of LP covers might seem like an odd document of this period and its manners and mores, mid-century albums are in fact some of the best – and best-preserved – artefacts of the time. For one thing, the explosion in the popularity of hi-fi records was itself a result of the wealth that

was newly sloshing around in the pockets of the country's consumers. More importantly, the LPs themselves depicted and promoted the plentitudinous US middle-class lifestyle of the era.

To appreciate the full sonic spectrum that the records offered demanded state of the art audio equipment, which was within easy reach of most American workers. But above all, as the 150 or so examples in Janet Borgerson and Jonathan Schroeder's *Designed For Hi-Fi Living: The Vinyl LP In Midcentury America* make clear, mid-century American LPs unashamedly coached their owners on how to live their best life by affluent postwar standards.

This was often quite overt. For example, RCA's 12 volume *Music For Hi-Fi Living* series, "in describing a lifestyle evolution from youth to maturity, offered guidance in life's lessons from a teenage dance and young romance to marriage, honeymooning, trips to the city, and destinations abroad for a sophisticated adulthood", providing "a

path for an entire phase of life".

Reading about these albums (and make no mistake, there were loads of them), one gets an impression of the end of a dark age, where an entire generation emerges from their caves into the bright sunshine and urgently needs to be schooled on how to behave in civilised society – in this case, how to entertain guests, throw a cocktail party, organise a barbecue, navigate the minefields of courtship and dating, and, perhaps most importantly, accessorise their lives with the consumer products that make all this possible.

But while the music on most mid-century easy listening records was generally intended merely to provide an appropriate ambient backdrop for modern living, their lavish sleeves (richly reproduced here) made no secret of the lifestyle they were promoting. Like a distorted reflection of a Renaissance painting cataloguing some wealthy burgher's enviable possessions, these album covers depicted the consumer

products that you, as a responsible member of the American middle class, needed to own: rec-room furniture, workshop tools, modern kitchen appliances and dishware, cars, smart clothing and all the other accoutrements of gracious living, as modelled by almost freakishly well groomed and exceedingly happy white people.

At the same time, in a golden age of both colour photography (as seen in American magazines such as *Life*, *Look*, and *Ladies' Home Journal*) and graphic design, the 12 inch square of an LP sleeve provided an exceptional canvas for the work of artists like Reid Miles, Andy Warhol, Saul Bass and Jim Flora. Still, with rare exceptions, there's no mistaking this work for high art.

What it does represent, however, given its popularity at the time, is the art of a silent majority, and like it or not, ignoring it means ignoring one of the cultural and artistic cornerstones of postwar American culture.

Dave Mandl