

ArtReview

Tomás Saraceno
Art Science Life



Kenan Malik on the right to appropriate



Designed for Hi-Fi Living: The Vinyl LP in Midcentury America

by Janet Borgerson and Jonathan Schroeder The MIT Press, £27.95/\$34.95 (hardcover)

A sort of *Billboard* for the cultural-studies set, the book describes, analyses and rates roughly 150 albums from the authors' personal collection (they are partners, both academics). The pair focus on releases where music is more the warm-up than the headliner, with many of the covers reproduced in full-page scale. Dividing their selection into the categories of 'Home' and 'Away', and further classifying it under headings ranging from 'Honeymoon' and 'Let's Have a Dinner Party!' to 'Space', they place the LPs in the context of a developing consumer society and escalating Cold War, two powerful sources of insecurity during the postwar years that the record, as a 'central information technology and an information distribution format', could ease and channel,

not least into diverse group identities (and markets). With *After the Dance* (1955), for example, from Columbia's *Music for Gracious Living* series, a young couple can receive instruction in how to 'spontaneously' continue the evening's celebrations back home with friends: from suggested menus in the liner notes, to a further playlist (courtesy Peter Barclay and His Orchestra). A longer look at the cover, in which couples mill about an open kitchen and dining space, reveals the sort of white goods and decor one could aspire to: a guide to the overwhelming bounty of economic expansion in mid-century America. The records featured in 'Away' serve much the same function in the realm of foreign travel, promoting a lifestyle of sophistication

and luxury for the jet age while soothing a traveller's fears of the unknown through gentle language instruction, street sounds and 'country-appropriate' music.

But these LPs weren't just socialising and marketing tools, the authors state: they act as implicit propaganda for democratic capitalism, demonstrating the superior freedoms of choice and leisure on offer, and rebutting Soviet claims to being the sole superpower with a culture. This is tremendously rich, if not entirely new territory, and the authors have been judicious in their analyses, largely withholding comment on sexual and racial politics, though you can tell they're itching to dive in. Here's hoping they're saving that for their next album. *David Terrien*