How to Teach with the
Classic Album Covers Column of *In Tune*

Explore and Discuss the Way Visual Artwork Frames the Message of Music

BY PAUL IRWIN

A S ITS TITLE SUGGESTS, the monthly column on the last page of *In Tune* — Classic Album Covers — explores the art of the album cover, sometimes comparing or contrasting a classic cover with a contemporary one, or just linking two covers that use imagery connected in some way. And, yes, cover art remains alive and well. Artists and record companies still release music with a representative visual, whether that cover comes in time-honored physical form (via a vinyl LP, a CD or a Blu-ray disc) or is simply a digital image accompanying a download file or stream. Is there a lesson that can be taught by this custom of cover art?

Connections among music, theater, dance and film are essential, broadening creative expression and providing important artistic opportunities. Music is usually an integral aspect of film and dance, and

it can often be a key element of theater. The link between music and visual art is less direct, although there are parallels between the two. Paintings are sometimes described as having tone and rhythm; musicians are said to have a "sonic palette," and frequently use the imagery of color in their lyrics. Yet visual art emits no sound, and music has no apparent visual quality. So, what's the connection?

Music creators frequently discuss a "vision" for their compositions, and the story of a song's lyrics can be illustrated – and sometimes are. But then there's the album cover. How album covers come to be made runs the gamut. These days, most musicians are involved in their album covers, even driving their creation. But down through the decades, many covers have been dictated by the record company as more or less a function of packaging and marketing, their responsibility given over to hired visual artists. Even given that, the history of album artwork is a rich one.

Musicians have often used cover art to underscore the themes of an album; moreover, the covers of albums have served as an opportunity to make statements, to compel emotions and – like the music itself – to evoke a response in the beholder. (Controversial images have gotten more than a few musicians in trouble.) The Classic Album Covers column focuses on artwork that somehow underscores the music, as well as the era and environment of its creation. The conversation about how visual art connects with the music it's meant to represent can get abstract, but that's the fun of it – and its purpose. A loose connection can leave room for imagination and conjecture, a pool from which new ideas can emerge.

The inaugural installment of Classic Album Covers, in the October issue of *In Tune*, discussed the album covers of Andy Warhol, even as it also gave us the chance to talk about the career of the late, great Aretha Franklin. The Pop Art icon's cover portrait of the soul singer for her 1986 album, *Aretha*, was his last before his untimely death at age 58. Prior to that, Warhol created some of the most talked-

about album covers ever for The Velvet Underground and the Rolling Stones. In the 1950s, he illustrated covers for albums by likes of classical star Vladimir Horowitz and jazz figures Thelonious Monk and Kenny Burrell. In their case, Warhol's art provided a visual framework for instrumental music and, by extension, the musicians who created it. How a great artist of the day visualized the music – and how a record company saw fit to present jazz or classical to the public – provides historical context for these albums. In the case of The Velvet Underground or The Stones, their Warhol-created covers presented the music in the way *they* wanted it presented – another important element of context for the 1960s and '70s.

Like a vintage jazz LP's liner notes, or the social-media commentary swirling around a pop album today, the thought that surrounds the music can be noteworthy, even vital. After all, the music exists to make an impact, and the response it elicits is something to consider; cover art is part of the artistic package but also a commentary on the music – and discussing it can broaden our horizons. These sorts of discussions can be especially valuable for developing musicians.

November's Classic Album Covers column featured the famed album cover for Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon*. Its designer said of the imagery, "The refracting glass prism referred to the Pink Floyd light shows," which employed laser light to dazzling effect. "Its outline is triangular, and triangles are symbols of ambition and redolent of pyramids, which are both cosmic

and mad in equal measure – all of these ideas touching on themes in the lyrics." The cover art not only provides context for the songs; it visualizes a thematic construct upon which the entire collection of music is built. After listening to the album, a discussion about how the music relates to the cover art (and vice versa) can be ideal for exploring all sorts of concepts.

The December column explores how the cover of The Clash's *London Calling* album of 1979 paid tribute to Elvis Presley's first full-length LP, released 23 years before. The two covers have very clear design parallels, but they also make perhaps surprisingly comparable statements about cultural and political rebellion embodied in the songs of both albums, underlining the links between two different decades.

The look of music, any music, has always been an element of its impact. Through the ages, the sweep of an orchestra, its members formally dressed and arrayed, has had a certain influence on how an audience receives a performance. It's the same with the stage lights and pyrotechnics of a big rock band, the strut and favored brands of hip-hoppers, the dances and concepts of a pop-music video. Similarly, the album cover is part of what frames the message of the music. This season, *In Tune* is closing each issue with a nod to that creative idea. **T**

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