SO! Reads: Janet Borgerson and Jonathan Schroeder's Designed For Hi Fi Living

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Abstract

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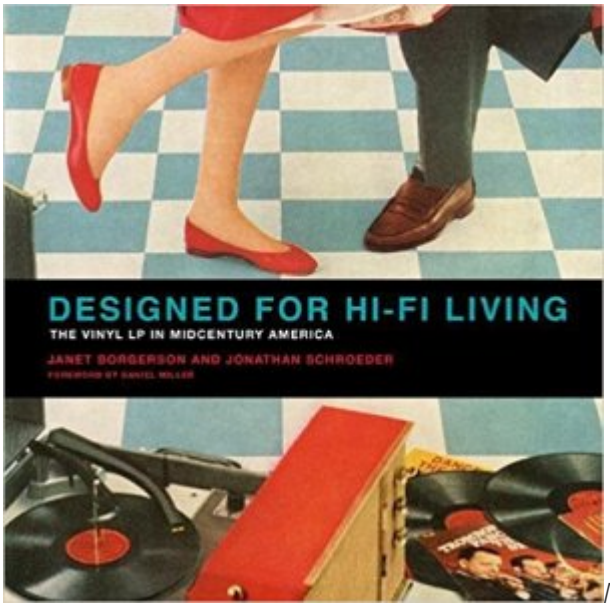
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According to the latest data from Nielson and the RIAA, vinyls are back. The old fashioned form now outsells CDs – but few have remarked on the fact that, unlike CDs and more like good little children, they are meant to be seen and not heard. At Ikea, for example, you can now easily buy frames sized for LP covers, which are clearly intended for the wall, rather than the turntable.

LP covers *are* art, but they also make far more intimate statements about identity, politics, and self-presentation, as you'll immediately realize if you ask yourself which, of your vast collection, you would like to represent you to the general public via the your living room decor. *Designed For Hi Fi Living: the Vinyl LP in Midcentury Americ*a (MIT Press, 2017), by Janet Borgerson and Jonathan Schroeder, takes this idea and runs with it. Beautifully packaged with creamy matte illustrations accompanied by short visual rhetorical analyses, it belongs on the one-of-a-kind coffee tables of the leisured classes, and this is particularly fitting, as its concept is that album covers from the mid-century can tell us a lot about how white middle class Americans wanted to picture themselves.



Music For Hi Fi Living is not about sound, per se, but about the role sound may play, or have played, in the past. As a form of material culture, it's hard to image a better trove from which to uncover the secret life of the white American middle-class. The record covers analyzed here are taken from a single collection, many of them drawn from the 12 Record set on RCA from which the book takes its title, and all of them are bizarrely kitsch.

Divided into two sections called *Home* and *Away* (side one and side two, as it were) the book makes the argument that midcentury lives were envisioned, honed, and practiced through this special form of consumption of pre-packaged ideas of "self" and "Other." Many use strange colors

and unknown fonts, surrounding drab photos of a long-gone world of the 1950s. In them, 'sophisticated' men and women look dowdy and frightened, while beach scenes and urban landscapes alike capture the pasts' unlikeness to the present. On covers like those for *Fiesta Linda*, *Your Musical Trip Around The Island of Hawai'i,* and *Havana Holiday*, the exotic is conveyed through its utter mundanity, while 'home life' (on records like *March Around the Breakfast Table*, and *Songs For An Evening At Home*) is rendered as taking place in entirely private, contained, domestic spaces.

If *Hi Fi* has a flaw, it is its failure to grapple with the implications of race, class and ethnicity that this entire collection exhibits. For example, the "Away" section centers America, and whiteness, as its world view: though no doubt appropriate to this collector's experience of this era, it does seem like the authors could have cast a slightly more critical eye on the way the records situate themselves and their listeners. Too often, as the authors note dispassionately, the discs contain western-influenced pop music, despite having covers that utilized shots of Zulu warriors in traditional dress ("African Zulus!") or Watusi ceremonial dancers ("Kasongo!"). The exclamation points in these titles alone tell a complex and dispiriting tale.

Overall, *Music for Hi-Fi Living* draws a relationship between sight, sound, and music consumption that encourages us to reconsider in our contemporary moment, now that digitized music is streamed directly into our ears. "We can't actually see the music we hear," as Daniel Miller writes in the book's forward. This is undoubtedly true, which is why the visual component of its past incarnations is so important to revisit, although we may also wonder "did we hear what we thought we saw?" One wonders what the parallel version of this book will be, fifty years from now. Spotify playlists won't look half so good.

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Gina Arnold is the editor of the *Oxford Handbook of Punk Rock*, the author of the 33 1/3rd book *Exile In Guyville* (Bloomsbury 2014) and the forthcoming entry in the New American Canon series, *Half a Million Strong; Rock Festivals From Woodstock to Coachella* (University of Iowa Press 2018).

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