

Exhibition Review

Cover To Cover: The Evolution of Western Canadian Album Cover Art and **August Soehn: Forty Years of Television Art.** MEDICINE HAT MUSEUM & ART GALLERY. Medicine Hat, Alberta. As of 30 August 2001, both exhibitions are travelling in Western Canada.

In an ingenious exhibition entitled *Cover To Cover: The Evolution of Western Canadian Album Cover Art* at the Medicine Hat Museum & Art Gallery, City Archivist Brock Silversides,¹ assisted by Registrar Gerry Osmond, take the visitor back to another era of music history. Silversides and Osmond reveal the history of album cover design in Western Canada, by illustrating how record producers tried to stimulate emotions and create reactions in their potential customers through album cover design. The exhibition includes eighty-four album covers from the earliest records of prominent recording artists from the region from 1958 to 1990, arranged in general chronological order. The array of album covers reveals who the current stars were and who the future stars would be, and provides a good sense of popular taste in Western Canada during this time. We learn what hair and clothing styles were in vogue with listeners, what trends in the visual arts were capturing imaginations, and what moods the albums elicited when played. For a period of nearly forty years in the late twentieth century, the standard medium of recorded music throughout the world was the vinyl phonograph record, in either 45 or 33 & 1/3 RPM format. As distinguished from the earlier 78 RPM plastic disc, the vinyl record was compact, durable, and, in the case of the 12" LP, it allowed for longer playing time. For devotees of classical music or opera, full performances could now be heard with minimal interruption. Listeners to the various forms of popular music were also better served, as ten or twelve songs by their favourite performers could now be included on one record.

¹ The Medicine Hat City Archives is part of the Medicine Hat Museum and Art Gallery.

The full development of the vinyl disc coincided with a period of unprecedented prosperity in North America. By the end of the 1950s, most households on the continent had a stack of 45s or 33s which could be played on either a small portable record player or a modern “hi-fi” system.² The history of album production is explained well in the exhibition’s textual panels.

The larger recording companies prospered, and with the onset of improved mass production techniques, smaller regional companies fared well also. This resulted in a greater availability of standard songs by artists and allowed for a greater growth of homegrown talent. Though usually imitative in style, local or regional performers brought a certain pride to their community when their records were displayed in the same music stores that featured international stars. Some of the local talent would go on to great fame. The marketing techniques of the big recording companies were also mimicked by their regional counterparts. This included television ads, public appearances by the performers, and album cover design. Like the dust jacket of a book, the cover of a record was intended to convey the style of the music inside, as well as elicit a variety of feelings and impressions in the listener. This range of emotions and impressions ran the gamut from warmth to urbanity, passion, and even outrage – whatever the producers felt would sell a record. An excellent example of this is the contrast between album covers created for artists Perry Como and Elvis Presley. The cover of “Nice ‘N Easy” RCA Victor LP by Perry Como features the singer reclining in an easy chair, his arms clasped behind his head. At about the same time, Sun Records released the first album of Elvis Presley. Simply entitled “Elvis Presley,” it featured the performer screaming out lyrics, mid-gyration, doubtless, to the chagrin of many Perry Como fans. Album producers were discovering the sales pitch, and were tailoring album cover art to audience.

The industry’s approach of tailoring style to audience for album cover art was not unique to Western Canada and was indeed common to the North American music scene in general. Much of the album cover art was predictable, according to the audience, such as the 1959 album cover for the Western Canadian “Polka King,” Gaby Haas. On it, Gaby is outfitted in Bavarian beer-serving garb, thus imparting a sense of Old World rusticity. This was no doubt intended to sway the many eastern Europeans who had settled in the West. The same can be said for the 1964 cover for a Wilf Carter album. Wilf sits on his horse in full cowboy gear, smiling broadly under a wide Stetson hat, looking every bit the imitation of Gene Autry, despite the album title, “God Bless Our Canada.” As with many album covers from the West, a mountain or prairie backdrop was often featured. Joni Mitchell’s self-portrait on her 1969 “Clouds” album, for example, has a prairie horizon backdrop near her native

² Roland Gelatt’s *The Fabulous Phonograph* (New York, 1977) provides a good history of the LP.

Saskatoon. For k.d. lang, not yet an international star in 1984, her cover includes an image of a young country girl surrounded by barns and wooden fences.

Collectively, the album covers are a study in popular taste as it evolved in Western Canada from the 1950s to the 1990s. Album cover design was a legitimate medium of folk art, albeit one intended almost exclusively for commercial purposes. For simple aficionados of popular culture, the exhibition also reveals just how many internationally recognized musical performers began their careers in this region. In addition to Carter, Mitchell, and lang, Ian & Sylvia Tyson, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Robert Goulet, the Guess Who, Bachman Turner Overdrive, Bryan Adams, and Neil Young are all featured in the early stages of their careers. Many more, like Stu Davis, the Rhythm Pals, Lucille Starr, the Moms & Dads, Humphrey & the Dumptrucks, Gaby Haas, Doug & the Slugs, the Emeralds, Northern Pikes, and Spirit of the West would also claim national fame. Others, such as the Maple Creek Old Time Fiddlers and the Taber Polka Band, were grounded strictly in the West.

The time frame of the *Cover To Cover* exhibition is the same as that of a complementary exhibition in the Laidlaw Gallery of the Medicine Hat Museum & Art Gallery entitled *August Soehn: Forty Years of Television Art*. Soehn (pronounced “sane”) was a graphic artist who joined the Medicine Hat television station, CHAT, in 1961, and became its art director three years later. In this capacity, he was responsible for designing visuals for local programmes and commercial advertisements, as well as show cards for syndicated productions. As a result of his talent, he designed posters and graphics for pennants, mugs, and t-shirts for other commercial ventures. Soehn’s work was displayed everywhere in Medicine Hat throughout the period covered in the exhibition, 1961 to 1997, and chances are, there wasn’t a person in the Medicine Hat area that hadn’t been exposed to some form of his work. All of the formats he worked with are covered in this exhibition.

As with the *Cover to Cover* exhibition, the 110 pieces in the Soehn exhibition are arranged chronologically, providing insight into popular tastes in the community as they evolved over time. Subtlety was not Soehn’s style, as the graphics, particularly the advertisements, were intended to grab the audiences and hold their attention. The purpose of this form of folk art was to sell something. From the clean-cut look of the early 1960s, to the “mod” look of the early 1970s, to the sleek, professional look of the 1980s, all the styles illustrated in the images in this exhibition attest to the fact that Soehn was most likely pandering to popular tastes.

Together, these exhibitions reflect not only the evolution of popular taste in Western Canada during the late twentieth century, they also reflect the changes to acquisition mandates in Canadian archives as they have evolved over time. For this reviewer at least, these exhibitions are a first-ever encounter with overt forms of popular culture: album covers and graphic design. As

the archival profession expands, perhaps more archival repositories will open up their acquisition mandates to include records such as these. Both exhibitions can be booked for future venues, and both have large glossy brochures identifying each exhibition piece. Call 403-502-8585, or e-mail BROSIL@city.medicine_hat.ab.ca.

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