

Designed For Dancing: How Midcentury Records Taught America To Dance

Janet Borgerson & Jonathan Schroeder
MIT Press Hbk 552 pp

Postwar American consumer culture – modernist furniture, cocktail guides, hi-fi fetishism, easy listening LPs – has been mined and analysed to death since its long period of rediscovery in the 1990s. For a time it was nearly impossible to avoid the reissues of space age bachelor pad, exotica and stereo demonstration records, as well as the many book-length treatises on the subject. But among the plethora of socioeconomic studies and coffee table compendiums of 50s and 60s LP covers, in-depth studies of the dance record boom that ran parallel to the easy listening one have been rare or non-existent.

Janet Borgerson and Jonathan Schroeder’s 2017 book *Designed For Hi-Fi Living: The Vinyl LP In Midcentury America* (reviewed in *Wire* 407) was an exhaustive look at how mid-century LP covers offered a newly affluent American middle class

subtle lessons in how to live, dress, furnish their homes and entertain guests. Now Borgerson and Schroeder’s equally comprehensive follow-up, *Designed For Dancing: How Midcentury Records Taught America To Dance*, gives a similar treatment to the subject of the records that, much more overtly, taught these same Americans how to dance: *Let’s Dance The Mambo, How To Pachanga, Arthur Murray’s Music For Dancing, Everybody Likes To Cha Cha Cha!, Let’s Square Dance!*.

In a sense this study provides a missing puzzle piece to the authors’ earlier one, since learning to dance was widely viewed as an essential component of socialisation for young, aspirational suburbanites. Creating “a wonderful life” via dancing, the authors write, “pointed toward an equalising social force and triggered desires to seek out...the needed accoutrements for creating environments and props to support successful participation in mid-century society”.

For new suburbanites who were now inconveniently far from the dance halls

of the big city centres, dance records brought those spaces into their living room, with the additional benefit of allowing them complete control over the music, any night of the week. Since so many of the social-dance crazes of the period – tango, rumba, mambo, cha-cha-cha, hula – had their origins in other cultures, learning them was also a shortcut to a certain kind of sophistication or worldliness. This was not without its problems, however: both de facto and de jure racism in much of the US at the time made various forms of “race mixing” a risky proposition. This was most obvious on TV, where mainstream dance shows excluded Black dancers for years. Sometimes the kinds of obviously sexual movements present in the original dances led to toned down variants in God-fearing 50s America: Apparently moving your knees was a more wholesome alternative to moving your hips.

As in Borgerson and Schroeder’s previous collection, *Designed For Dancing* makes its point largely through the design and semiotics of the LP covers, nearly

300 of them, reproduced in full colour. These feature a wide variety of party scenes, conga drummers, lei-clad hula dancers, lily-white sock-hops and gauzy ballroom-fantasy shots. The authors go so far as to track down the identities of most of the cover designers, illustrators and photographers – not an easy task, though as it turns out some of them were widely respected artists. As a separate thread from the book’s core thesis, Borgerson and Schroeder set out to shoot down the argument that these covers constitute a kind of low art, in large part due to the prevalence of women in bikinis and lingerie on them. This line of reasoning, they note, as well as the privileging of blues, jazz and rock records generally, has led to the exclusion of dance records from consideration in lists of great covers. “Dance albums,” they write, “with their bright colourful graphics, ‘fun’ appearance, and female models often slip under the radar of critical considerations of album cover design.”

Dave Mandl



Dance album covers from the 1950s and 60s



Medicine For A Nightmare: Part Two

David Fylstra & Tom Asselin (Editors)
Medicine For A Nightmare Pbk 144 pp + MC

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced artists to find alternative modes of sociality. While many have relied on digital technologies to extend socialisation into the virtual realm, artist-curators David Fylstra and Tom Asselin have adopted the opposite strategy, doubling down on decidedly analogue modes of contact. Conceived in the months preceding the pandemic and launched in January 2021 with the release of its first volume, their project *Medicine For A Nightmare* seeks to forge connections by gathering works by many artists, writers and musicians into a single publication, accompanied by a cassette compilation. *Medicine For A Nightmare: Part Two* was released in October, continuing this mission with a second paperback volume and cassette set. The book features the work of 61 individuals

and groups, incorporating works of poetry, prose, found snapshots, moody landscape photography, hand drawn comics, intimate paintings and cut-paper collages that respond (albeit in some cases very loosely) to the prompt: “What brings one to see another day?” While this theme seems to suggest that the content will be uplifting, much of it is emotionally weighty, like Andy Xue’s story about a Japanese salaryman who finds going through life to be an “empty ritual” and Janys-Iren Faughn’s excruciating recollection of an obnoxious musician who hassled them about trying to book a show as they fielded a phone call from their mother about their grandmother’s death.

There is an unexpected reverence to Will Stenberg’s “Armadillo Duty”, which follows a man who feels compelled to remove dead armadillos from a desert highway and burn them in a prayerful offering. Shelley Short’s poem *Just After Midnight* provides

a moment of striking insight, while Paul Burke’s memories of learning about yoga and meditation from NPR while in prison are grounded in an unlikely serenity.

Among the book’s most charming visual contributions is Fylstra’s “a place to hide a memory”: a life size scan of dried flowers from some long forgotten occasion which has been pressed between the pages of a book, rippling the paper and staining the pages a honey brown. The names of the authors and artists responsible for these and other works are given only in the table of contents. This allows for streamlined graphic design, however it also forces the reader to choose between constant cross-referencing or letting the individual contributors recede into anonymity.

The accompanying cassette features tracks by 17 different artists, intended to function as a soundtrack as one reads the book. Side A provides a lush and ambient musical journey, which bubbles up from Ian

Paige’s springy grooves and glides through Moss Wand’s delicate synth rivulets, collecting in Benoît Pioulard’s spacious drones before refracting through Lorna Dune’s loping rhythms. The mood shifts somewhat on Kole Galbraith and Sean Waple’s “Cascade Artificiel/Virmalised”, which blends field recordings and digital sounds into an uncanny sonic landscape.

Side B continues an abstract approach, moving from derek muro’s pulsating horn sounds into Power Strip’s atmospheric shapes, then through Mike Tanburo’s infectious exotica before drowning the listener in the warbled choir of Kira McSpice’s “Shadows”. This side ends with another lengthy composition, Bryce Hackford’s “Flower [detail]”, which pairs an inquisitive keyboard melody with the sound of flowing water. Each of these voices is on its own trip, but for these eight minutes, they keep each other company. Emily Pothast