

Vinil. Records and Covers by Artists

The Spanish Context

Victor Nubla

Throughout practically the whole of the 20th century, vinyl records were the most popular and best-quality support for recorded music. Never before had it been possible to store music so exhaustively as to form a first-hand, historic documentary archive such as that available to us now, informing us about musical culture in the last century. Neither could it have been predicted that the covers used to protect these supports would, over the years, acquire the category of art supports in themselves, and that reading record sleeves would provide as much or more information as listening to the content they present. But that is exactly what has occurred. The result of research into vinyl record covers published in Spain from the 1960s to the 1980s provides a vision of history that reveals how little, with certain exceptions, music evolved in our country, and how little reached us from abroad. This state of affairs was caused by the cultural isolation we suffered from, precisely during the decades when half the world was going crazy about a series of completely new developments. Amongst other things, over that period young people became a social class that made its own decisions and had its own purchasing power, and music was becoming what it still is – the main vehicle for generational and inter-generational communication. However, at the same time, our creative microclimate developed organs suited to different functions than those performed in the prosperous, relatively global West.

By establishing certain parallels we quickly realise that in the 1960s, in countries like Germany, Britain or the United States, the critical political attitudes expressed in musical creation can be linked, in the generation of composers involved in exploring electro-acoustic music, to the eruption of free jazz or electrification and the break with its own traditions that rock underwent. In Spain, whilst the regime closed fledgling laboratories researching into electro-acoustic sounds – most of their founders working abroad for the most part – and isolation prevented foreign music from reaching our shores – something that rock and pop, as highly imitative genres, needed in order to exist and become autochthonous later – the critical outlook and the progressive spirit were manifested through singer-songwriters (protest songs), and the covers of their records were often expressly created for them by contemporary artists. This example alone should be sufficient to indicate a significance that visitors to the exhibition can confirm for themselves. We can now go on to consider other highly singular features of the Spanish historic and cultural process: the remarkable importance acquired by the comic book in the 1970s as a vehicle for social and generational expression of radical, critical, underground stances, for rejection of the system; and the move, in the 1980s, of many designers and illustrators into the field of painting. The surprising proliferation of local musicians who have themselves begun to work in the plastic arts is, perhaps, an idiosyncratic feature of the underground environment into which record production has inevitably developed, or a display of Renaissance multi-disciplinary skills, but, whatever the explanation, it has produced a very

interesting collection of record sleeves and constitutes a highly specific characteristic of our local culture.

It would appear that the word “exceptional” is the most recurrent when it comes to explaining artistic creation linked to record production in the years when the state of exception was such a frequent fact of life. Then came video and computer images which, as far as vinyl record covers are concerned, progressed no further than the pixel aesthetic as, by the time the Spanish music industry and market had got up to European levels, the CD arrived. But that is another story...

We should like to note that the contents in this section of the exhibition comes from private collections and is, therefore, neither exhaustive nor imbued with the desire for “completeness”, though we do feel that it provides a suitably broad, eclectic image. The selection criteria in this section are based on the technique or art field to which the author of the cover belongs, and the content is arranged by decade. There are five broad categories:

1) Work by painters or eminently plastic artists

We might say that this is the most “classical” form of cooperation, common to all countries and, in ours, especially interesting in the case of work by singer-songwriters in the 1960s and 70s.

2) Works by illustrators and photographers

Also very important in the pop and progressive music fields during the 60s and 70s. Such pieces provide valuable testimony to the pop aesthetic in Spain.

3) Works by comic book artists

Between the 70s and the 80s, as part of the “movida” movement in Madrid and Barcelona, comics rose to great importance, and many artists sprang from the drawing board to the art gallery during the transition from one decade to another. Fanzine aesthetics also find their place here.

4) Works by designers

We do not mean designers specialising in album sleeves, but others who worked with musicians from time to time, but with particularly relevant results in the 1980s, at a time when Catalan design was also achieving considerable prestige.

5) Works by the musicians themselves

Perhaps as a consequence of certain self-management models that emerged in response to the precarious record production and marketing environment, but also – particularly in Catalonia – as a result of the multi-disciplinary approach characteristic of local creation, a very interesting collection of sleeves designed by the recording artists themselves bears testimony to this unusual phenomenon.

Victor Nubla, 2006

Section co-curated by Victor Nubla in cooperation with Jordi Segura, Joan Ramon Guzmán and Pedro G. Romero.

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