

THE COVER NOT TAKEN: RACE, PROFESSIONALIZATION, AND THE EVOLUTION OF JAZZ ALBUM COVERS, 1948-1969

Jazz album covers of the period when jazz made its most sustained claim to high art status tended to be most successful when they featured abstract art, but the vast majority of jazz records used other kinds of visual, most importantly photography, a decidedly middle-brow art form. This paper solves this puzzle by focusing on the production process of jazz albums in the age of the long-play. Specifically, I examine the role played by the figure of the graphic designer, a new arrival in the world of professions. It was the uneven relationship of power and dependency between the graphic designer and the jazz photographer, another newly emerging figure, that decided against abstract art. The theoretical implication is that the inability of jazz to fully have its claim accepted and enforced had less to do with structural racism than might be imagined. Instead, the outcome was contingent on how the uncertainties introduced by new technologies were resolved by new professional groups in conflicts that were largely between whites.