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The development of record covers and their importance for jazz in Sweden

Project report Bernadotte programme 2018 – Mischa van Kan, PhD

As a recipient of a Bernadotte scholarship jointly funded by the Royal Swedish Academy for Music and the Royal Gustavus Adolphus Academy, I conducted the six-month-project “The development of record covers and their importance for jazz in Sweden” at the Centre for Swedish Folk Music and Jazz Research at Musikverket (Music Development and Heritage Sweden) in Stockholm.

The project was a pilot study that investigated the possibilities of analyzing record covers with the use of Actor Network Theory (ANT). The aim was to analyze the material aspects and characteristics of record covers and thereby analyse how they influenced jazz in Sweden. Thereby, this investigation also functioned as an inventarization of the need for a material turn for the research of music and music cultures in a larger perspective. The use of ANT as a methodological approach was primarily chosen to inventory how a material-semiotic perspective can develop the field and critically engage with the discursive approaches that have been dominant in the last decades.

Within the project I did an inventory of the available empirical material concerning record covers in Sweden. These consisted primarily of record covers themselves, who came from a variety of record companies active in Sweden. Among these, Swedish record company Metronome proved to be a leading actor on the Swedish phonogram market as they were the first to introduce vinyl records in Sweden and to use elaborate record covers for jazz. Other leading record companies proved to be Sonet and Sonora, the latter especially with its issues of albums with 78s. The second main inventory was aimed at the specialized jazz press in Sweden. These magazines proved to be an important source of material were articles from the Swedish jazz press in which records, and as my pilot study showed, even record covers were discussed. I searched these magazines for relevant articles and evaluated record reviews and their engagements with record covers. The inventarization showed that a striking number of reviews engaged with and commented on the record covers. The connections to the music on the record was discussed as well as the aesthetics of the cover art.

Focusing on the period from the late 1940s to the late 1950s – the period in which record companies gradually replaced 78s by vinyl EPs and LPs – the project investigates how the materiality of the medium influenced jazz. Using Actor-Network Theory, I studied how the production and printing techniques influenced the semiotic and material characteristics of the record covers. Subsequently, I analyzed how record covers represent the processes of sound reproduction as a part of jazz. Thereby the project showed how record covers on albums, EPs and LPs changed the understanding of what a jazz record was as well as the understanding of the artistic production of a jazz musician.

The interdisciplinary character of this project greatly benefitted from the collaboration within the Bernadotte programme. The mentorship of members from the KMA and KGAA has been of great importance for the project, but important contributions have also come from the other participating academies, like The Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities (Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien). These mentorships have enabled me to approach the record

cover as a site where music, visual arts and the specific ethnography of jazz come together. Because of the intersection of different expressions of art and culture on the records and the record covers, the results could not have been as significant without the interdisciplinary mentorship within the Bernadotte programme.

The central research question of the project was: How did recording processes become visible on record covers? And following that question: What does that tell us about what a record was perceived to be in this period, and how did this change?

The conclusion of the project can be best summarized by stating that the change from 10-inch shellac records to records made from vinyl changed the perception of what a jazz record was. An important site where these changes became apparent and were negotiated was the record cover. One of the most striking developments connected to the new medium formats that were launched in Sweden in the early 1950s, is that vinyl records started to have record covers that were designed specifically for the individual record. Thereby record covers became regarded as artefacts originating from the artistic activities of jazz musicians.

Though the use of record covers quickly increased in the early 1950s, as did the record production, not all records were sold in record covers. This, however, had not much to do with the actual numbers in which records were sold. Many of the records considered in this project actually sold in small numbers, but still they were packaged in elaborately designed sleeves. In many cases, record covers were designed specifically for particular recordings, though these sometimes were divided into a series, where different volumes shared the same cover design that was printed in different colours. The project showed that in the visual representations on the record covers, recording processes started to become more visible. Here specific parts of recording processes were visualized, primarily from the musician's perspective. Information about sound engineers and the specific dates on which the recording was made started to appear on Metronome's record covers, another element was even more apparent. Microphones were pictured on a great number of record covers and thereby came to be a symbol that visualized and symbolized recording as a specific event and process. Here, the idea of the recording session as an instance of artistic activity becomes apparent.

The presence of microphones on record covers as representing the recording studio has proven to be very important, as it influenced and changed the idea of what a record is. The visual aspects on the covers indicated that the recording process became a more central part of what a record was. By making the recording process visible, and doing so in specific ways, record covers changed the idea of what a record was and thereby also what the main professional activities of jazz musicians were.

At the same time, in the early 1950s, also the actual recording processes changed. Not all recordings were longer produced as direct-to-disc recordings, directly engraved on a flat disc. Instead, record companies started using magnetic tape to record music, which then later, when the recording itself was finished were transferred to records.

In the wider perspective of musicological research, one of the most important results of the project is that record covers can be used to ask what kind of product a record has been considered to be by record companies, critics and music listeners.

The project has been important for the methodological development of Actor Network Theory and material semiotics and specifically its use in the academic field of musicology. The use of Actor Network Theory allowed the project to take both material and symbolic elements into account. Using Actor Network Theory made it possible to conceptualize a record cover both as a material object that is made of paper and that packages a record. At the same time, the cover as packaging evokes

symbolic elements by enveloping a record, but also by the actual visual elements used on the cover. The visual characteristics can then be regarded as engaging in a network where these symbolic elements carry meanings that thereby get associated with the records.

The project also raised several new questions that prove how semiotically rich record covers are as an empirical material but also as an approach to investigate the history of ideas in music as well as analyzing historic practices of the mediation of music. One prominent question concerned what significance record covers had for the rising status of jazz in Sweden in the 1950s and 1960s. Thereby, the project also raised areas for further research that hopefully will inspire more scholars to engage with these kinds of materials. Outside of the Bernadotte programme, the project has been presented at higher seminars of Gothenburg University, Stockholm University and Uppsala University. The project and its result were also presented at a public lecture at the Music and Theatre library in Stockholm and finally on the international conference Rhythm Changes in Graz in April 2019. The project will also result in a peer-reviewed academic article.