

Adventures in Sound: A Grand Tour on Vinyl

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This project explores the contribution of consumer artifacts to the imagination and construction of modern US identity and cosmopolitan, global citizenship. We undertake fieldwork in our living room (Riggins 1994), offering a critical visual and cultural analysis to show how peripheral objects reveal often hidden pedagogical aspects of consumer culture. The intersections of identity and material culture emerge, in this case, via vintage vinyl record albums in a music genre specifically constructed for creating world-aware listeners and prepared adventurers –the travel record. Interestingly, these albums re-circulate today as retro classics, precursors of television adventure travel and exotic food shows, and are collected for their value as windows into bygone eras.

As we have argued [previously](#), record albums occupied a space evoking identity and group membership in many US homes during the 1940s, 50s, 60s as recording technology emerged and developed, bringing sounds, sights and specially designed furniture into the home. Here we examine examples from a large, privately owned LP archive, selecting an illustrative sample from the 1950s and 1960s, the era in which the LP record emerged as a dominant information distribution format and international tourism developed for a mass US population. In this way, the marketing of hi-fi sets, packaged tours, and exotic aesthetics united to create a sense of the good life, which included a vision of the rest of the world and how to travel through it.

In attempting to make the unfamiliar more palatable and the culturally sophisticated more accessible, record albums often became opportunities to inform and influence consumers (e.g., Borgerson and Schroeder 2006). Just as album cover images served a pedagogical function in guiding post-WWII consumers in decorating their homes or hosting a dinner party, travel records – featuring music, pictures, and destination information – helped ready US consumers to take on the world. We build upon consumer culture studies that adopt a historical approach to music and its' ephemera and also draw upon work from popular music history (Morgan and Wardle 2010; Wilentz 2012). Engaging notions of materiality and agency in the constitution of consuming subjects (Borgerson 2005), our research offers compelling visions from a time that brought international travel more fully into modern US consumer culture.

As with many LP album covers, travel records feature compelling photos and graphic design: “for many people, record sleeves have the capacity to trigger memories and convey emotion in the most personal way” (Schoonmaker 2010, p. 168). Further, the phenomenon of commentary

beyond the recording *per se*, in the form of liner notes, was particularly common with music “from far away places” (Borgerson and Schroeder 2003). A typical example is 1958’s “A Visit to Finland” album, featuring “A smörgåsbord of Finnish pops by famous Helsinki artists” designed to guide Americans into the Helsinki music scene of the day.

Although some travel records were slapped together in US studios with little or no connection to cultural or historical context, many in our collection showcase more authentic music of the destination. For example, the respected jazz label Verve Records collaborated with Esquire Magazine to release several “sound tour” albums that included gatefold sleeves, color photographs, and “insider” information for the continental connoisseur.

To celebrate the tenth anniversary of the long playing record, Columbia introduced its “Adventures in Sound” series in 1958. “Adventures in Sound” sought out interesting sites and captured actual performances from around the globe. “Holiday Abroad” albums sponsored by the now defunct Sabena Airlines featured water color paintings by Moyelle Thompson, each cover showing the same youthful couple (sporting a tiny Sabena flight bag) engaged in an iconic touring moment. Vox Records distributed the “Cook’s Tour of” series that included stops in Cuba, France and Italy – and wherever Cook’s Tours promoted travel. “Inspired by the pages of Holiday magazine”, Decca’s travel albums featured Rio, the Alps, Paris, Italy, Vienna, South American, Hawaii, and the West Indies. *Your Musical Holiday in the West Indies* includes Calypso and Steel drum tunes from the likes of Lord Kitchener and the Iron Duke. One apparently well-traveled and dreamily dozing blond woman appears on Fiesta Records *I Remember Germany*, *I Remember England*, as well as, *I Remember Sweden*.

Producer Dave Dexter’s “Capitol of the World” series from Capitol Records featured albums from at least twenty-five countries, including the Belgian Congo, Egypt, Chile, and Argentina. The war in the Pacific was still recent memory when Capitol released *Japan: Its Sound and People*. Four subcategories were designed to bring particular aspects of a country’s music and culture to the listener: “modern song stylists” for “popular tunes of the day presented by the top stars of foreign lands”; “folk songs” for “authentic music of the people, handed down from generation to generation”; “folk dances” for “traditional dance music that captures the living spirit of distant lands”; and “unusual recordings” for “exotic instruments and unique musical groups rarely heard” in the US.

Capitol of the World liner notes link featured artists to the moods and culture of a particular national capitol, and often present parallel texts of English and the country’s language, including Arabic script and Chinese characters. Titles like *Songs of India* (Recorded in Calcutta), *Autumn in Rome*, *Rainy Night in Tokyo*, and *Honeymoon in Rio* provide hours of listening, as well as an introduction to core aesthetic and cultural elements beyond day-to-day US experience and education. As the notes inform us on *An Evening with Najah Salam and Muhammad Salman*, Lebanon’s capitol city Beirut, and its “exotic Arabic music,” friendly people, and nighttime beauty “all combine to create evenings unlike any you could ever spend elsewhere short of the Prophet’s Paradise.”

Three relevant themes emerged from our investigations: 1) consumer “education” about Western lifestyle myths, promoting appreciation and adoption of aesthetic values that accompany cultured lifestyles; 2) international travel – or at least representations of travel – as a site of consumption organized around identity projects and 3) the role of the LP in the historical context of contemporary consumer tastes (Borgerson and Schroeder 2013; Osbourne 2012).

A key insight from our previous work was that the more consumers stayed at home, the more they needed objects, artifacts, and practices that linked them to affiliated people, communities, and environments, that is reference groups, real or imagined, *beyond* the walls, doors and windows of home. Here, we observe a related, but distinct consumer process: in order to venture beyond familiar territory of home lifestyle and mores, popular culture objects, artifacts, and practices were required to usher US consumers into the broader world.

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