



Sound and Vision

The Art Director Who Helped Define a Record Label

Glenn John Arnowitz

In the mid-1970s when I began listening to the jazz artists Keith Jarrett, Jan Garbarek, Ralph Towner and Pat Metheny, as well as the contemporary composers Arvo Part and Steve Reich, I began to take notice. Not only did they possess unique musical voices but they all recorded for the same label, ECM (Editions of Contemporary Music), under the influence of producer and founder Manfred Eicher whose clean, crisp and transparent recordings sounded like nothing else out there at the time. But there was something else that kept me interested. It was the visual style of those album covers that had a very distinctive look—minimalist, exquisitely stark and mysterious images featuring abstract and striking photography with beautiful, austere Jan Tschichold-influenced typography, set in type or etched, scratched or brushed.

As my ECM record collection expanded so did my appreciation for the designer behind the covers—Barbara Wojirsch. Initially trained as a painter (she cites Cy Twombly and Jasper Johns as influences), Wojirsch dabbled in advertising for only a brief period (“I can’t tell people things that aren’t true”) and finally found her home at ECM in the early 1970s. She filled her 12" x 12" cardboard canvases with images that possessed a surreal, cinematic quality. Desolate landscapes and quiet lakes. Full-bleed abstract imagery and expressive dream-like photographs that Wojirsch subtly enhances with a quiet typographic style that she often describes as the “careful use of lettering.”

Not since Reid Miles’ iconic designs for the jazz label Blue Note in the 1960s and 1970s has a record label been so identified with a particular designer. The ECM label continues to produce albums that feature compelling music and evocative cover artwork—sounds and visions that will transport you.

Want to find out more? I recommend the book, “Sleeves of Desire” (Lars Müller Publishers, Badem, 1996)—that presents color reproductions of more than 500 covers and a comprehensive picture essay that provides a detailed look at more than 100 album covers—and “Windfall Light/Der Wind, das Licht” (Lars Müller, 2009) that features ECM covers produced after 1996. Or just visit the ECM site at www.ecmrecords.com for details on the label and its artists.

Glenn John Arnowitz is a musical and visual artist, writer, actor and speaker who is always looking for ways to scratch that insatiable creative itch. bigcow.me looking for ways to scratch that insatiable creative itch. www.bigcow.me