



Reid Miles

In 1956, Blue Note employed Reid Miles, an artist who worked for Esquire magazine. The cover art produced by Miles, often featuring Wolff's photographs of musicians in the studio, was as influential in the world of graphic design as the music within would be in the world of jazz. Under Miles, Blue Note was known for their striking and unusual album cover designs. Miles' graphical design was distinguished by its tinted black and white photographs, creative use of sans-serif typefaces, and restricted color palette (often black and white with a single color), and frequent use of solid rectangular bands of color or white, influenced by the Bauhaus school of design.

Though Miles' work is closely associated with Blue Note, and has earned iconic status and frequent homage, Miles was only a casual jazz fan, according to Richard Cook; Blue Note gave him several copies of each of the many dozens of albums he designed, but Miles gave most to friends or sold them to second-hand record shops. A few mid-fifties album covers featured drawings by an as-yet-little-known Andy Warhol.

Miles ahead

While his designs certainly benefited from a sympathetic label boss and Wolff's superb raw material, Miles added an unquantifiable element to the mix. Like his namesake Miles Davis, his absence was felt as much as his presence. It's not that Blue Note was visually a one-man-band, but Miles was the prodigal soloist. He galvanised the greatness around him to create legend, transforming the constituent parts into genre-redefining symphonies of fantastic form and colour.

Miles's greatest achievement was the harmonious blending of modernism with a distinct personality. His greatest sleeves, such as Dexter Gordon's *Go*, were unashamedly dynamic typographic treatments. For all his compositional flair, Miles also knew when to play hands-off, letting Wolff's expressive photography drive sleeves such as John Coltrane's legendary *Blue Train*. That's why Miles's sleeves fit so well; they visually represent jazz. At once personal and progressive, vernacular and global - reflecting the most human of artforms.

Blue Note was hit hard by the reinvention of jazz in the late 1960s and the label began to drift slowly away from the cutting edge. Dismantling began in 1967 with Lion's retirement. A sale of the label to Liberty Records followed in 1969 and Wolff died in 1971. The new owners were bereft of invention, lacking the passion and the understanding that had informed the founders' success. As the viability of jazz came under the spotlight, Blue Note retreated to the safety of 'straight' jazz, dispensing with Reid Miles in the process. Stripped of its creative heart, the label was dead in the water. Following a series of takeovers, it was strategically phased out under EMI in 1979.

Wu-Tang album covers are amongst some of the most classic in hip hop, but Logan Walters is giving them a run for their money with his Wu-Note Project. Reid Miles was the Art Director for Blue Note from 1956 to 1965 and is responsible for some of the most timeless cover designs to grace any record sleeve.