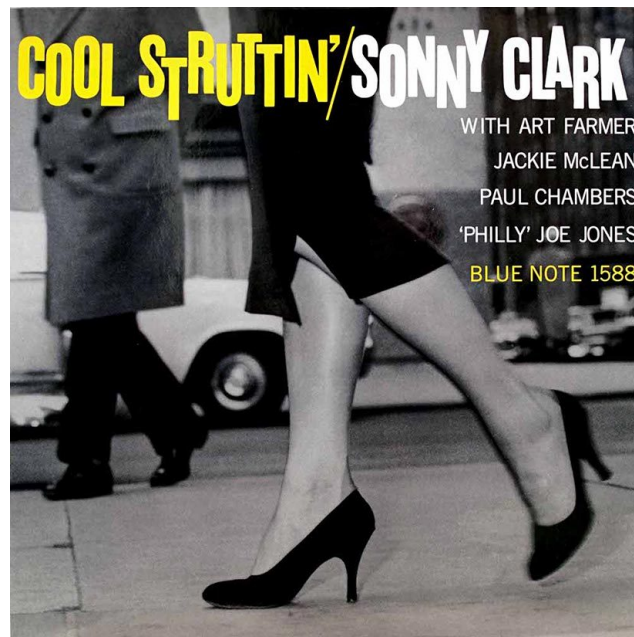


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August 1st, 2026

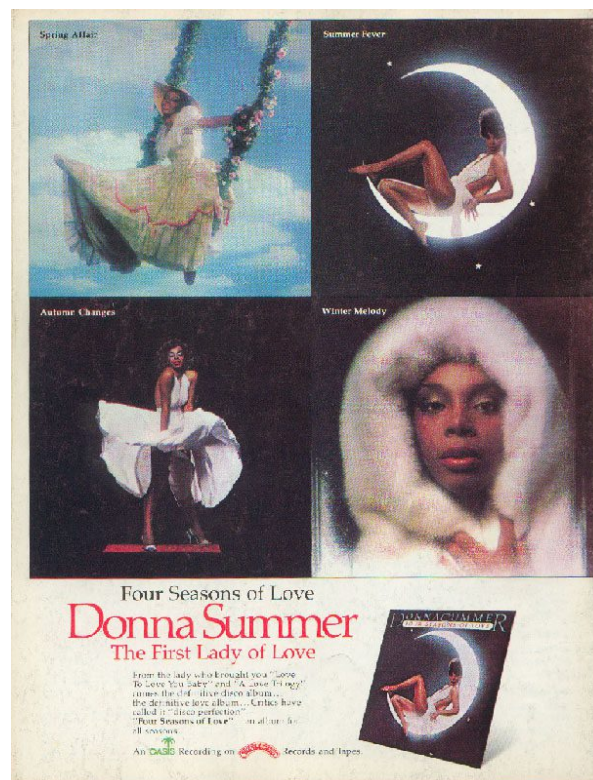


Reid Miles, album cover for Sonny Clark's Cool Struttin', Blue Note Records, 1958

In Reid Miles' album cover for Sonny Clark's *Cool Struttin* made in 1958, became one of the most recognizable images in the history of Jazz design. On the cover, you can see a black and white photograph that is cropped to show a woman's legs mid stride. She is walking on an empty sidewalk with a man's shoes trailing behind her. The title of the album runs across the top in a bold yellow text across the top. The image was shot by Blue Notes co-founder Francis Wolff and Ruth Lion is the woman in the image who was photographed. This cover could have been an anonymous photograph but instead has become a great defining visual statement for jazz culture.

Specifically a subgenre called “hard bop”, this cover can show how the genre is built on restraint, groove, and confidence.

Reid Miles had joined Blue Note in 1955 and designed around 500 album covers for the label. Over time, he developed a visual language through design that came to define modern jazz packaging almost as much as the music inside of it (uDiscover Music). He had paired two toned, black and white images with eccentric typography that favored negative space and atypical cropping. Miles was known to prefer classical music over jazz but analysts have noted that his distance allowed his approach to be pure and accurate (uDiscover Music). Cool Struttin is a great example of his concept. The title itself pairs two contrasting ideas which was a cool detachment but also visible pride. The cover translates this well into one frozen image. Reid Miles didn't just illustrate a jazz record, but instead helped construct a genre's identity through minimalism and control.



Cover art for Donna Summer's Four Seasons of Love, Casablanca Records, 1976

About 18 years later in a whole new space of popular music within American culture Donna Summer released an album. Looking very different, this cover is in full color, she is styled against a warm backdrop and is meant to demonstrate the record's concept which is supposed to be about a love affair told across the four seasons. In each portrait we can see her wearing a different costume that is supposed to represent the four seasons. In the original vinyl packaging it came with a calendar featuring the four looks, showcasing Summers emerging persona as “disco’s first lady of love” (Modern Soul Records). In Miles *Cool Struttin* it doesn't show the performer and uses the anonymous figure to suggest mood, whereas in *Four Seasons of Love* it centers the performer directly. We see this with her costume, lighting, and the performance stage to construct a certain look and more glamorous persona.

I think that the difference reflects more than a change of taste between the two artworks. It exemplifies a genuine shift in what the album design is being asked to sell. When Disco emerged in the early 1970s, it came out of underground dance clubs in New York City that were built and sustained mostly by Black, Latino, and queer communities. These spaces made dance become a space of belonging and expression outside of mainstream culture (Carnegie Hall). *Four Seasons of Love* was produced at the height of disco commercialization. We can see this show through in Summers' album with it being theatrical and highly saturated, idealizing this version of romance. If *Cool Struttin* sold the identity of jazz through reserve, *Four Seasons of Love* sold disco through performance. Both strategies were doing the same underlying work which was giving a genre a visual identity that can compete in the market.

When placing these two covers side by side, they together reveal two different theories on how graphic design can represent a musician and genre. In Reid Miles' design the cover seems to be more concealed suggesting a mood of poise. It keeps with the hard bops representation as serious and almost cerebral music. In Donna Summers' cover it suggests a mood of fantasy and desire, with its vivid color keeping disco's representation as a pure escapist pleasure. Both of these pieces were attempts to translate a specific sound into a look and its design. The contrast between these two pieces was that each genre was not just a category, but also a visual one that had different goals.

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall suggests a useful framework for understanding why visual construction matters. When it comes to cultural representations and signifying practices, Hall argues that meaning is not something that simply exists in the world and gets reflected by images but instead, a representation that actively produces meaning. This happens through the systems, images, and practices a culture uses to make sense of itself (Hall). When thinking of his view an album cover is never neutral for the music inside it. It is always an active participant in defining what music, and the people who made it, are understood to represent. We can view both of these pieces to be significant when it comes to visual systems that did not just package Black musical genius for consumption. But instead, actively shaped how the public was taught to see, and value, that genius in the first place.

Even though Cool Struttin' and Four Seasons of Love may look different. One favors silence and shadow, the other favors color and spectacle. Either way, both covers demonstrate the same underlying truth about graphic design's role in the music industry. Design does not simply decorate a record. It tells the listener, before any sound ever plays, what kind of experience to expect and what kind of artist they are introduced to. With both pieces, we can see how graphic

design became one of the primary tools through which two very different genres, and two very different eras, were made visible, marketable, and unforgettable.

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