Robert Garzillo’s collection of rare album covers is on exhibit at the Fleet Library at RISD. The covers include the work of well-known artists, including album-cover pioneer Alex Steinweiss. At top right, Steinweiss’ cover for the 1940 “Smash Song Hits,” which has the distinction of being his first cover and the first artist-designed cover commissioned by an American label.

**Album covers were just another canvas for artists**

By BILL VAN SICLEN

**JOURNAL ARTS WRITER**

PROVIDENCE — Salvador Dalí did it. So did pop artist Andy Warhol, fashion photographer Richard Avedon and underground comics legend Robert Crumb.

What do these famous — but otherwise disparate — artists have in common? At one time or another, their work graced the covers of commercial record albums.

"Actually, a lot of big-name rock or pop artists and designers have done album covers," says Robert Garzillo, an avid album collector and the organizer of "Jackets Required: 40 Years of Record Album Cover Design," a small but eye-opening exhibit now on display at the Fleet Library at the Rhode Island School of Design. Garzillo, who works as a RISD professor, got the idea for the exhibit after seeing a book on album covers by Tom Van Dyke, a New York art-book publisher. In particular, the book chronicled the work of Alex Steinweiss, a longtime art director for Columbia Records and the man generally credited with creating the very first album cover in the 1940s and early ’50s.

"He’s basically the Elvis of album design," Garzillo says.

**As it happens,** Garzillo owns several Steinweiss-designed albums, including a 1948 recording of Cole Porter songs arranged and conducted by Andre Kostelanetz and a 1965 recording by big-band leader Les Brown. For the Kostelanetz album, Steinweiss designed a cover showing a pared-down band popping out of a top hat — a playful image that would have appealed to both Porter fans and classical music lovers. For Sharpies’ "Contrasts in Hi-Fi," Steinweiss turned to modern art, creating a cover whose abstract shapes evoke the work of artists such as Joan Miro and Alexander Calder.

"The great thing about Steinweiss is his versatility," Garzillo says. "For classical recordings, he might do things one way, while for more contemporary music he might do something very different. He was able to tailor his style to sell the albums while still doing great designs."

Still, Garzillo had to borrow what may be the show’s most important album cover: a 1940 recording of "Smash Song Hits" by the songwriting duo of Richard Rogers and Lorenz Hart. Though not as colorful as some of the show’s other entries, it has the distinction of being both Steinweiss’ first album cover and the first artist-designed cover commissioned by an American record label (in this case Columbia). Before Steinweiss came along, most recordings were sold in plain paper sleeves.

"It may not look like much, but this was considered pretty revolutionary in its day," Garzillo says of the album, which is on loan from friends. "At the time, the conventional wisdom was that great recordings would sell themselves. But Steinweiss showed that great covers also helped."

**In all, the show features about 40 album covers or "jackets," ranging from rock and pop to jazz and classical. Some were designed by artists before they became famous — like the cover for "Blue Light," an early 1960s album featuring jazz guitarist Kenny Burrell. Look closely and you’ll notice that the album’s main cover illustration — a brevity pen and ink drawing of young woman — is by Andy Warhol. At the time, Warhol was known mainly as a commercial illustrator, not an artist."**

Other album covers have become far more famous than the artists who created them. A good example: "Time Out," a 1959 album by the Dave Brubeck Quartet. Featuring songs such as "Take Five" and "Blue Rondo a la Turk," "Time Out" went on to become one of best-selling jazz albums of all time. As a result, most music lovers can identify the album by its cover, which features a suitably "jazzy" abstract design. On the other, even hardcore jazz fans might have a hard time identifying the man who designed the cover: S. Neil Fujita.

Another surprise is how many different kinds of artists have tried their hands at album design.

Saul Bass, for example, is best known as a graphic designer and filmmaker. Yet he also designed several album covers, including one for the soundtrack of "The Man with the Golden Arm," a 1955 film starring Frank Sinatra and directed by Otto Preminger. Then again, Bass also designed the movie’s now-iconic poster, which uses a mix of abstraction and photography to brilliant effect.

New York-based Willard will also recognize the work of some of the magazine’s best known cartoonists, including William Steig and Arnold Roth. Other well-known illustrators-turned-album-designers include Edward Sorel, whose pen and ink drawings adorn a series of classical albums, and Mad Magazine cartoonist Jack Davis, whose caricatures turn up on albums by Spike Jones and The Cowpills.

**Sometimes the pairings of artists and album covers seem genuinely inspired.** Certainly, that’s the case with a group of albums designed by German artist Josef Albers. After all, Albers’ best known series of paintings is called "Homage to the Square," a phrase that applies equally well to the art of album design. The debut album by The Velvet Underground, meanwhile, features a cover design by Andy Warhol — which seems appropriate since the Velvet Underground were essentially the house band at Warhol’s New York studio, the Factory.

On the other hand, there are also some odd pairings. A case in point: an album of easy-listening jazz tunes sung by comedian (and sometime-actor) Jackie Gleason. Titled "Lonesome Echo" and released in 1955, the album features a surrealistic-inspired cover by Spanish artist Salvador Dalí.