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## Cover Art

### *A Reflection on Afrofuturistic Album Covers, Funk Music, and Black American Identity Formation*

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My family's extensive music collection inspired my journey into collecting vinyl records. Earth, Wind & Fire's (EWF) *Gratitude* (1975), Brick's *Good High* (1976), the Brothers Johnson's *Look Out for #1* (1976), and Quincy Jones's *Body Heat* (1974) are cornerstone albums I inherited and used to build my collection, whose current size is north of 1,600 12-inch records. My album collection contains timeless vinyl portals that I use to revisit coming-of-age experiences and early encounters with funk music and its Afrofuturistic album covers.

A period I revisit often is when my father's youngest brother, Steve, lived with us. Our beloved Uncle Steve is known as one of the quietest in the family. Nonetheless, he is also the proverbial uncle who introduced his younger relatives to very cool things, such as spinning vinyl records. Uncle Steve is an affable and tasteful deejay who honed his craft while rocking 1980s house parties. When he moved in, he brought his essentials: matching Chess King outfits, Polo cologne, two turntables, a microphone, a Realistic (Radio-Shack brand) four-channel mixer, a stereo amp/receiver, a towering pair of speakers, and hundreds of twelve-inch records, neatly kept in Peaches Records & Tapes wooden crates. Through my bright adolescent eyes, I saw Uncle Steve's collection of 1980s cultural materials and mall shopping rituals as rites of passage to what I then perceived as Black male adulthood.

The cover art of albums in my uncle's collection made a strong impression on me. I recall many Friday early evenings and Saturday afternoons spent shuffling through his crates full of 1970s and 1980s R&B, funk, and hip-hop records. While he created mixtapes, I listened and perused. In some instances, I was preoccupied with deciphering double entendres I heard in a song's lyrics. Other times, exotic album cover art floated my imagination. I especially enjoyed futuristic renderings of African diasporic culture, now known as Afrofuturistic art. This type of artwork visually represents an intersection of African diasporic themes, twentieth-century technoculture, and futuristic liberation.<sup>1</sup>

1. Dery 1994; Womack 2013.

Encountering these images was empowering. With these covers in hand, I could hold visual images of Black people thriving in alternative realities that were not limited to racial stereotypes then commonly portrayed in movies and television programs.

In the 1970s and 1980s, a wide array of R&B and funk album covers offered extraordinary visuals that present people of African descent in cosmic settings and dress.<sup>2</sup> The cover that stirred my adolescent imagination most, though, was Earth, Wind & Fire's *Raise!* (released by ARC Columbia, 1981). This popular album's front and back features a part futuristic, part ancient Egyptian goddess, masterfully rendered by Japanese illustrator Shusei Nagaoka. The figure on the front is a curvaceous half-stone ancient Egyptian deity, half-metallic extraterrestrial vessel. On the reverse, the deity's features are part cylindrical grid and part feminine face with a metallic-looking headdress, collar, and robe. Her glossy facial complexion is light brown and even-toned; her eyebrows, manicured; and her lips, fleshy. When I look at her now, I interpret this divine figure as an ancient Egyptian android voyager who uses a half-metal, half-stone sarcophagus-like spacecraft to traverse galaxies freely. Looking back, I also realize I simply had a crush on this shapely, cosmic android goddess.

*Raise!* is also a gatefold sleeve, which butterflies open to display another heavenly illustration. At the center of the gatefold's inner face is a hand open over two Earth-like planets. The lower position of these worlds, illuminated by a triangulated orange light beaming from the hand's fingertips, suggests the hand's divine nature. The light radiating from the hand also indicates the illumination of our past and future human existences. This alluring celestial vista, framed by an angled brick structure, has always resonated with me and how I understand this popular funk album as a universal portal that connects with my African diasporic identity. At the core of EWF's music is the kalimba, or African thumb piano, which serves as a cultural lineage.<sup>3</sup> The added arrangement of light beam-sounding synthesizers, airy vocals and strings, pulsating drums, and bright staccato horns completes EWF's distinct sound, which gestures toward ancient and futuristic civilizations.

The EWF albums *All N' All* (1977), *I Am* (1979), and *Powerlight* (1983) feature other Nagaoka-illustrated covers that extend the band's musical messages into a visual plane of color harmony, symbolic expression, and cultural unity with a centered African motif.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, *Raise!* was one of my early encounters with what Ytasha L. Womack has described as Afrofuturism's divine feminine. Mark Dery, who coined the term Afrofuturism in the mid-1990s, worried about Afrofuturism's ability to avoid being captured by white males who already claimed the unreal estate of the future.<sup>5</sup> Responding to Dery's concern, Womack has suggested that the divine feminine of African descent, prominently visible and legible in Afrofuturistic art, is how Afrofuturism is distinguished from white male-controlled futurist and science fiction movements in the past.<sup>6</sup> While *Raise!* does

2. Afrofuturistic Album Covers. (n.d.), <https://afrofuturisticalbumcovers.tumblr.com/>

3. Vincent 1996, 419.

4. Patrin 2015; Vincent 1996.

5. Dery 1994, 180.

6. Womack 2013, 103.

not offer overt political messages through its visuals and music, Nagaoka's illustration subversively centers a futuristic female deity of African descent, a sight rarely seen in 1980s popular culture.

At the time, my family did not engage in explicit debates about cultural material that is now described as Afrofuturistic. But I knew the divine feminine android image of *Raise!* affirmed what my elders often referred to as "the divinity of our African ancestral legacy." These types of Afrocentric cosmic aesthetics, pioneered by the visionary jazz artist Sun Ra in the 1950s and then notably carried forward by funk groups such as EWF and Parliament/Funkadelic, should be understood as invaluable cultural materials that have enabled "self-discovery, identity formation, and transcendence."<sup>7</sup> Funk, the urban-born polyrhythmic music and dance style made popular in the 1970s, is known as a community-bonding agent that is also "deeply rooted in African cosmology—the idea that people are created in harmony with the rhythms of nature and that free expression is tantamount to spiritual and mental health."<sup>8</sup> Fortunately, I grew up in a home where funk music listening was encouraged and embraced as an important part of our Black American identity.

I learned to appreciate this aspect of my culture while observing "grown folks" behaviors performed during family gatherings, often set to a toe-tapping, head-swaying funk and R&B soundtrack. "Let's Groove" is the signature opening track that propelled *Raise!* to its platinum-level, top-five pop chart status in 1981.<sup>9</sup> With android-sounding vocal lines, ascending bass synthesizer drops, and heavy kick drum patterns emphasizing the first beat of each measure, the dance-floor banger "Let's Groove" was a staple at my family's poolside parties. In the backyard of my south Florida home, beats blasted from Uncle Steve's towering speakers while I perched on a corner chair, quietly surveying all the adult banter and wit. I did my best to stay clear of colloquial critiques about my "narrow" backside. Without fail, someone would catch me slinking between the BBQ meat platter and mustard potato salad bowl. "That's right, little Art! I see you over there trying to put some meat on them bones," someone would inevitably exclaim after taking a long pull from a menthol cigarette.

It was all good, though. While they called me out, I paid attention to how they uttered expletives superbly after throwing down a game-winning hand of cards. One of my uncles had a knack of leaning back impressively to catch the last swig of a beer. As we entertained each other, popular funk music provided a unifying groove that bonded our familial community. "Let's Groove" is a song that always takes me back to our pool parties filled with raspy smokers' laughter, juicy adult gossip, spicy hot takes, and folks singing Philip Bailey's "all-right" falsetto part in unison. The *Raise!* album cover is another visual portal that sets my imagination adrift. This album's cover art now teleports me to a pool party at a distant interplanetary settlement of liberated Black people. Two-stepping and finger-snapping, everyone is united by a cosmic funk groove.

7. Wright 2013, 144.

8. Maultsby 2006; Neal 1999; Vincent 1996, 51-52.

9. Earth, Wind & Fire. (n.d.), <https://www.earthwindandfire.com/>

Thanks to these Black American familial experiences, I have grown up to be an unashamed “vinyl junkie.”<sup>10</sup> Spending hours on end index-fingering my way through dusty crates of jazz, R&B, funk, and soul records is one of my favorite pastimes. This social practice of record collecting keeps me connected, in a tactile and aural way, to my family’s legacy and African diasporic ancestry.

Despite ongoing debates about record collecting in the digital age, activities such as crate digging, record spinning, and album art collecting remain significant social practices of casual and devout collectors.<sup>11</sup> As Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodard have noted, “The vinyl record is a perfect example of how a mechanically reproducible product can become an iconic signifier full of references.”<sup>12</sup> Streaming media platforms have now made it easy for me to endlessly explore popular and esoteric funk albums and playlists. Nevertheless, the combined activities of listening to records, perusing covers, and reading text printed on sleeves give me the opportunity to meditate on cultural insights conveyed through an album’s instrumentation, vocalized lyrics, liner notes (if any), and visual art. The experience of grooving through a portal of album cover art while immersing myself in the vibrations that resonate from a vinyl record’s grooves is irreplaceable. ■

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10. Crawford 2013.

11. Hepworth 2011; Mehta 2003; Anderton 2016; Osborne 2019; Shucker 2010; Paz 2015.

12. Bartmanski and Woodward 2015, 22.

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