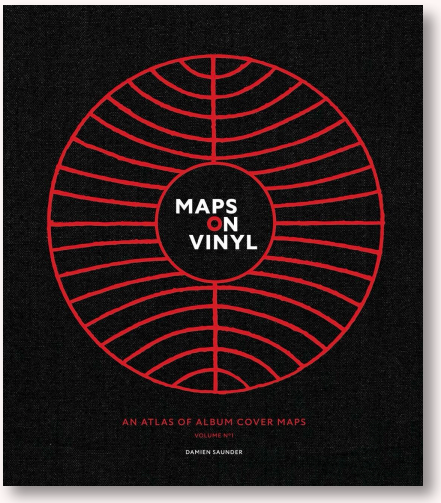
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MAPS ON VINYL: AN ATLAS OF ALBUM COVER MAPS, VOLUME № 1

By Damien Saunder

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Review by: Glenn O. Humphress, Southeast Community College

Have you ever come across an article or book that is so in your wheelhouse that you thought, "why didn't I think to write that?" As a lifelong enthusiast of both the cartographic and vinyl record media forms (the latter to the extent that my first job was working in a record store), *Maps on Vinyl* by Damien Saunder is just such a book for me. I have certainly noticed the use of maps on album covers before, but, alas, the idea of a book on that theme escaped me, so I am pleased that another cartographer who is also a record collector decided to fill that gap. Saunder is an Australian cartographer with a lengthy *curriculum vitae* of high-profile positions, including leading the cartography efforts at Apple and National Geographic, as well as extensive involvement with publishing, speaking, and outreach regarding a variety of cartographic topics, particularly map design. He has also "long been fascinated by the role that maps play in the art of the album cover" (331). *Maps on Vinyl* is clearly a melding of passions.

According to the "Introduction," *Maps on Vinyl* is a collection of over four hundred images of vinyl record jackets, gatefolds, sleeves, inserts, picture disks, and center labels that include some sort of cartographic representation as part of the artwork, including representations of over one hundred identifiable places. The earliest record included is from 1939 and the latest from 2024, with record sizes predominantly consisting of the common 7-inch and 12-inch formats, but also including the rarer 10-inch format. Pages 12 and 13 provide a timeline indicating the number of records per decade that appear in the book, as well as proportional symbols—cleverly designed to look like various sized records—representing the number of times particular geographic locations or geographic themes appear in the book. What stands out on these pages is not the (expected) large number of representations of the United States and Europe, but rather the unexpectedly large number for Africa (thirty-three), which is the only region to get its own chapter, as well as the exceedingly small number (six) for East and Southeast Asia combined, while South Asia does not appear at all. Antarctica, represented by five records, has almost as many as all of Asia. The "Introduction" also provides some interesting discussion about the historical and technological contexts for changes over time in how maps look on records, the roles the maps played by being on the records, and some consideration of the varying public interest in maps during different time periods; this is a welcome inclusion that is well thought out and researched.

Reflecting Saunder's working definition of a map as "an abstracted representation of a real or fictional geographic form in which spatial relationships are of primary relevance" (8), there is no specific common theme to the records that were included, beyond Saunder's statement that the book represents a collection of what he considers "the most unique examples to date" (11). I suppose I could make some protest about what has been left out—several of Jimmy Buffett's records come immediately to mind, as well as specific ones from Chicago, Saga, and the country band Alabama, to name a few—but let's be honest, an

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author must draw the line somewhere and the quantity Saunder chose to include is impressive. Then too, this collection is expressly labeled as volume one, so any records that might seem unfairly omitted may well make it into a subsequent volume. Suffice to say, what is included in this work covers a suitably wide variety of cartographic forms and visualizations.

Following the "Introduction," the substantive portion of *Maps on Vinyl* is divided into eight themed chapters. Every page in these chapters displays at least one cartographically themed example along with information about each. Saunder states that he attempted to track down background information for each by contacting designers, recording artists (the singers, musicians, or bands on the records), record companies, or family members if possible. This diligence results in some interesting stories about the inspirations for some of the designs.

The chapters begin with "C(art)ography," which engages with the contributions of maps to an overall artistic design for the visual material included with records. Examples include a picture of slightly crumpled maps that have been skewered by pitchforks and a painting of a cake that has portions of a world map designed into the icing (I will leave it to the readers to check out what albums are the sources of these). At eighty-four pages, this is the longest chapter (over twice the length of any of the other seven chapters, but one), and it displays the widest range of cartographic representations. As is the case with any visual element included on a record sleeve—packaging that is rarely designed by the singers or musicians themselves—the maps may simply have been designed for graphic purposes, or for some visual pun. The next chapter, "We Built This City," not surprisingly focuses on representations of cities, in whole or part, followed by an "On the Road" chapter that covers representations of travel, touring, and transportation infrastructure, including several examples that incorporate route maps.

The shortest chapter, but, to my mind, the most unique, is "African Beats." This chapter includes the largest number of recording artists from outside of North America and Europe, although not all are from Africa: several Jamaican reggae artists have utilized maps of Africa on their album covers, for example. The next chapter, "Astroworlds," highlights albums that include representations of all or part of Earth as a globe—although there is one example of a map of the night sky—while the following chapter, "Ocean Whispers," includes those that have an ocean-map theme. The "Maps with Attitude" chapter illustrates how maps can be used to help communicate themes such as war, oppression, rebellion, and violence that have been popular with some punk and metal artists. Last, but certainly not least, the chapter "Music from Here" focuses on the use of maps as companions to music that reflects strong national, regional, or local pride. In these cases, there is generally a strong relationship between what is represented on the map and something meaningful to the musical artist, or that is represented by songs on the record.

Maps on Vinyl is a fun excursion through a compilation of cartographic artifacts that have been largely overlooked by professional cartographers until now. I received this book to review at a time when I was teaching a cartography course, so I brought it to class for the students to examine. They were interested in this rather novel use of maps, but generally saw these maps as products of graphic arts rather than cartography. Such a distinction can affect perceptions of the legitimacy of these products as "maps," and this reaction may well point to one reason why cartographers have, in general, so consistently ignored this genre. However, graphic-arts produced maps can have an appeal—as demonstrated by some of my cartography students, who are enthusiastically interested in the maps that are integral to many of the games they play—and academic cartography could benefit from embracing and analyzing the role maps play in the entertainment industry, as Saunder has done here.

Mapmaking is often said to combine both art and science, and with *Maps on Vinyl* Saunder has produced a work that pulls together a selection of high-quality examples that strike a refreshing balance between the two. While admiration for the maps themselves is clearly his primary motivation, he manages, along the way, to place them into the context of the principles and history of cartography, and of the wider framework of the social impact of maps in general. I, myself, think that academic cartography tends to focus too much on the science and not enough on the art, so I welcome works such as this—and, besides wishing *I* had thought of making a book like this first, I am hoping further volumes are forthcoming.