A new exhibit at ICA highlights the creative art of vinyl records

Susan Saccoccia

The primal forms of the circle and square in a vinyl record and an album cover draw artists like catnip, along with the music on the record and its world of memories and emotions, associations that artists can harness like so many ready-mades.

Unlike CDs and MP players, records have heft and presence. Even the covers of many albums are works of art, suggesting the transformative power of the music that ignites when needle strikes groove.

My own collection of albums is small but choice — and each is a landmark of a time in my life. Among my strongest childhood memories are my first records, rare 45-r.p.m. recordings of "The Teddy Bear's Picnic" and "I Wonder As I Wander" that I ceaselessly played on my small turntable — a wonder box.

The absorbing exhibition, "The Record: Contemporary Art and Vinyl," on view through Sept. 5 at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, is a chamber of wonders.

Like the 16th century European precursor of the art museum known as a wonder room, it is a mix of oddities and curiosities that rose up the 1960s. His images and covers conjure social, cultural and personal stories. Browsing with verve, Malick Sidibé's spectacular Even the covers of many albums are works of art, suggesting the transformative power of the music that ignites when needle strikes groove.
A concert of original works by dancers from The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and excerpts from company repertoire in

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Equally well crafted is Peruvian Alice Wagner's "Serie Percusión" (2009). Recreating in fabric and thread five Modernist album covers designed by artists, her hand-made collages celebrate the joy of graphics as well as jazz.

Another spare, geometric riff on album covers is the pair of hand-some, large-scale prints by Dave Muller. The spines of the albums create an image of long, primary color lines but the titles are also vis-

able, conveying the musical tastes of his family.

Album covers become autobiography in the hands of outsider artist "Mingering Mike" of Washington, D.C. At a teen-

ager in 1968, he began a decade-long fantasy career as soul superstar and pro-

ducer by creating more than 50 cartoon-like album covers. Occupying two large vitrines, they humorously cele-

brate Motown and R&B and work in real life too, start-

ing in 1970, when he became a draftee.

Carrie Mae Weems, renowned for stirring works that explore the complexities of race in America, pairs a gold record for civil rights with an imaginary album in "Ode to Affirmative Action" (1989). Photographed on the album cover, Weems casts herself as Dee Dee, a 1960s R&B singer. The album title, "Live At The Copa" refers to the famed New York club that once banned black patrons and performers, and her invented record label, Clarks-

dale Records, is a nod to the Missis-

tippi hometown of many legendary blues singers.

The apparatus of recording and playing LPs is explored in the third gallery, which showcases musician Laurie Anderson’s iconic "Viapho-


    nograph" (1977), her hybrid of a violin and record player.

David McConnell’s diverting "Photomusiphonic Sun" (2008-09) arranges six vintage record players in a semi-circles-like member of a ch a m -


West African raffia mats used for cooking swirled in place of records on the turntables of Fatimah Tuggar’s "Fatu-ine Gramophone" (2010). Born in Nigeria, Tuggar pairs her entertainment center with the recordings of Barmani Choge, an all-female band that sings in the Hausa language and uses kitchen utensils as percus-


ive instruments. If I could take home one work in this show, it would be the witty three-by-three grid of black and white photographs by Cape Town-


born Robin Rhode. Starting with a chalk drawing of a square and a spoon-like tone arm, the ensemble progresses like an animation story-


board to show the steps of setting a record in motion on a turntable — and in the process, creates a visual image of synop-


isation. Mark Soo displays wall-sized 3-

D images of the installation he built to replicate the storied Sun Studio in Memphis as it may have looked in 1954, when Elvis Presley recorded his first single, bluesman Arthur Crudup’s song, “That’s All Right, Mama.” Viewing the scene through the 3-D specs, I had the tantalizing illusion of almost stepping inside the past, a longing that Seattle-based art critic Jen Graves notes in her essay about the work, writing, “The image makes you ache.”

In the show’s fourth gallery, some works contemplate the mysteries, curiosities and ritu-


als associated with experiencing music through record albums.

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Drumming to a different beat

Jacquinn Williams

Cornell Coley and his Afro-Latin ensemble Sugarfoot are performing tonight at Café Tatant in Roxbury. The drummer, singer and arts educator has always felt the pull of the drums and has dedicated his life’s work to them.

He was born in Kingston, Jamaica to Cuban and Jamaican parents. His family immigrated to Boston when he was 4 years old and by the age of 9, Coley was mastering the drums. His love affair with dance however, didn’t happen until he traveled to Ghana as an undergraduate student at Tufts University.

“I was drawn to it,” he explained. “I loved the music. It was my first time visiting and I picked it up right away.” After finishing his bachelor’s degree in English at Tufts, Coley headed to California to study cultural anthropology. He later earned a master’s in education from Cambridge College and has conducted rhythm workshops in different libraries throughout the state for the last 10 years.

In addition to teaching, he wrote the first draft of the arts curriculum framework for the Massachusetts Department of Education in 1994 and uses his talents for art therapy: Coley works as a music arts therapist on a contractual basis with The Healing Arts Alternative: Pathways to Health organization. He’s also conducted successful residencies in the Vermont Veteran’s Home and Tewksbury and Butler Hospitals.

He works with patients suffering from a number of ailments from Alzheimer’s to depression to cancer.

“I’ve always known what I wanted to do,” he said. “I wanted to be involved in arts administration and the arts. I just loved being in the community and being with all kinds of people. Sick people, kids and professionals. Some people can’t handle all those personalities.”

Coley — whose motto is “Have Drums, Will Travel” — plays the drum kit, timbales, congas, bongos, talking drum, berimbau, Brazilian carnival drums and other percussions. He has performed at festivals all over the world, including tours with the “Ulcantino” band in Mexico and with the “Boytiak” group in Indonesia.

He specializes in Afro-Cuban, Afro-Brazilian, Congolese, Ghanaian and rhythm tap and salsa dances.

He has studied with master drum circle facilitator Arthur Hull and with many masters in African Diaspora drums and dance, including CK Ladzekpo (Ghana), Malonga Casquelord (Congo), Conjunto Folclóric (Cuba), Diane Walker (tap), Jose Lorenzo (Afro-Brazilian) and Deraldo Ferreira (Dance). He also anonymously tours with the “Ulcantino” band and some jazz standards.

“Touhani Kimura of Japan displays a centipede is a tone arm). In its own room, her installation ‘Thundersnow Road, North Carolina’ (2010) features six scenes from her travels across North Carolina, each accompanied by an original soundtrack. In the ICA’s media center is the installation ‘Cover to Cover,’ where you can browse albums and sample music. Each of its seven turntables is equipped with a crate of 20 albums curated by a guest artist.

Admission to the JCA is always free to youth up to age 17 and free to all on Thursdays from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m.

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Cornell Coley performs tonight at Café Tatant in Roxbury. (Photo courtesy of David M. Tunick)