

East Meets Wax:
The Cover Art of the Flower Drum Song Album

by Renee Tajima-Peña

I came out almost twenty years ago, when I first confessed it in the pages of *The Village Voice*. But I'd known ever since I was a child: yes, I love *Flower Drum Song*. David Henry Hwang called it his "guilty pleasure." For Asian American baby boomers who came of age with a picket sign in one hand and camera or pen in the other, *Flower Drum Song* became the musical we hated to love.

Album covers can give us an entree into a cultural moment as it was represented in the public's imagination. The original 78s had always been packaged, unadorned, in plain paper. When graphic designer Alex Steinweiss pioneered album cover design in 1939, he set the stage by using cultural symbolism drawn from the music to inform the illustrations. Likewise, *Flower Drum Song* covers may have originated to sell music, but in their iconography they market culture.

Arthur Dong's collection of *Flower Drum Song* albums is one part time-warp, one part camp, and altogether dazzling. At first glance, the cumulative effect is less a snapshot of mid-century Chinese America than the funhouse mirror of chinoiserie delivered by the music industry's publicity machine. A laundry list of exotica is there: the chop suey typeface, lanterns, fans, dragons, the undulating shapes of pagodas rendering Asian as feminine object, even in architecture.

But *Flower Drum Song* was never about the far, Far East. Instead it was an offering of things Chinese, stir-fried in San Francisco and served up as a palatable dish for American consumption. The graphic identity of the covers portrays a Chinatown framed by the city's iconic cable cars and Golden Gate Bridge. The photo on Morris Nanton's jazz take is a Beat vision of Grant Avenue meets North Beach, even if the white hipsters are the only ones facing the camera (LP8). The chop suey ethic of *Flower Drum Song* was more than a celebration of America's ethnic stew (to mix metaphors, not to mention entrees). The Rodgers and Hammerstein enterprise was implicated in the ideology of what media scholar Christina Klein has called "Cold War Orientalism." Even as Chinatown activists were hounded by anti-communist witch hunts and US-China relations was setting into a deep freeze, the Yellow Peril imagery was being supplanted by the Model Minority and the mythology of global interdependence.

Fu Manchus and Charlie Chans still lurked around screenland, but the 1950s also conjured the friendly yellow in *The World of Suzie Wong* and Rodgers and Hammerstein's own musical hits *South Pacific* and *The King and I*. Although Pat Suzuki and James Shigeta spent the war in concentration camps, their ethnicity is all but erased in their public personas. Suzuki is a charmer amidst a red, white, and blue tableau on one cover (LP2), and the epitome

of an Eisenhower-era bobby soxer on another (LP3). On *Scene One*, James Shigeta is fresh scrubbed and veritably apple-cheeked (LP10). The collegiate sweater and the ultimate 50s moniker, "Jimmy," make him the embodiment of Nisei accommodation. He's then morphed into a smoldering crooner on the 1962 LP *James Shigeta* (LP37). The subtitle itself signifies the flip sides of his career and his dilemma: *We Speak the Same Language*. Of romance or nation? While both LPs make prominent mention of Shigeta's military record, in these liner notes "US Marine Corps Staff Sergeant" is the first thing you read, before any mention of his movies or music. It is repeated three times.

Ironically, all of the spin-off albums here feature ethnic Japanese talent. Little over a decade after the rising sun—well, sank—Miyoshi Umeki wears both her *Flower Drum Song* credentials and Japan's resurrection on her kimono sleeve (LP5). The conflation of nationalities has always been an irritant for Asian Americans; witness *Memoirs of a Geisha*. In an interview filmed by Arthur Dong, the writer Amy Tan argues that the fresh memory of Japan's wartime rampage through Asia made the Japanese casting in *Flower Drum Song* all the more offensive. But that's the nature of chop suey. If you can mix ketchup with lo mein and deign to call it a meal, apparently the ingredients are beside the point.

The female form, exoticized and eroticized, dominates the Flower Drum Song iconography. Album covers have always been an equal opportunity exploiter, right up to the booty call on CD covers today. The tawdry sensibility of Andre Kostelanetz's cover photography may have an "Oriental" motif (LP9), but the sultry gaze of the Asian model is almost identical to the blondes and brunettes on his other albums. His orchestrations are mood music as foreplay—the covers aren't so much selling sex as they're selling the hopes of getting some. If the prototypical Kostelanetz man lives in a bachelor pad, the Mastersounds aficionado occupies a higher plane. With its glossy sensuality, typography reminiscent of Saul Bass, and the on-target Chinese translation of "Flower Drum Song," it's one of the most striking of the covers (LP12). Even the liner notes by the legendary jazz critic, Nat Hentoff, transcend the typical hagiography.

Surprisingly, the *Flower Drum Song* stars, female or otherwise, are largely absent from the covers. There is one unnamed actress from the London cast album (LP14); Nancy Kwan appears only on the movie soundtrack in her ubiquitous Fan Tan Fannie get-up (LP1). The real star of these covers is Chinatown itself, most eloquently portrayed by Dong Kingman's watercolor on the Howard Lanin album (LP21). There is something quaint about the placid fantasy of cultural harmony embedded on the cover art—there is no premonition that on the cusp of the 60s, the political landscape underneath Chinatown itself was about to quake.

Yet *Flower Drum Song* has endured. We love the camp of this imagined Chinatown, knowing that it is home, created and sustained by Chinese Americans, memorialized by the novelist C.Y. Lee, painted by Dong Kingman in the film, then repopulated by gorgeous singing and dancing Asian Americans in the dreamscape of Master Wang's palatial digs and Sammy Fong's Celestial Gardens. True, the virginal illegal immigrant Mei Li (Umeki) and nightclub stripper Linda Low (Suzuki on stage, Kwan on film) dangle along the Lotus Blossom-Dragon Lady continuum—an image reproduced on many of the covers. But they were also simply fabulous at a time when being Asian American and female meant being decidedly un-hip and unlovely. That these Asian American artists operated within the racial straitjacket of the time, makes their achievements all the more powerful.

The art theorist Anthony Lee calls this kind of cultural history transgressive and liberating; or as my mother would say, making lemonade out of a lemon. Asian Americans have always managed to carve out a space within the borders of racism and discrimination, to create something of our own. As we return the gaze on these album covers—think back to Dong's Chinatown crowd, relishing that big screen vision of Grant Avenue in the dark. The view from the inside ain't so bad, it just depends on how you look at it.

■
Renee Tajima-Peña is an Academy Award®-nominated filmmaker whose documentaries include *My America... or Honk If You Love Buddha*, *The New Americans*, and *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* She has been a film critic for *The Village Voice* and commentator for NPR, and is currently an Associate Professor in the Social Documentation Program at UC Santa Cruz.