CHAMS RCRDS
Tracing the Musical History of the Arab World

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[CHAMS RCRDS: TRACING THE MUSICAL HISTORY OF THE ARAB WORLD]

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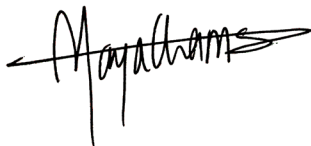
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Chams Rcrds is a re-issue record label that reproduces Arabic music from the 40s–90s in the form of playlists. These playlists are divided into two categories: artist-based and theme-based. This project is composed of two parts; the research aspect, which is related to tracing the musical history of the Arab World; comprising and gathering information about the artists that affected this history but are now not as known or appreciated, and the themes that were heavily tackled in the musical Golden Age. The second part of the project is the design aspect, in which I designed album covers for playlists made of songs I found whilst researching. These album covers also required a research aspect, as they hold information and facts relating to different branches of Arab World history, language and culture in their design.

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Background

Chams Rcrds is a re-issue record label that reproduces Arabic music from the 40s–90s in the form of playlists. These playlists are divided into two categories: artist-based and theme-based.

The idea of my project came to life when I was attending a typography conference in NYC. There, I stumbled upon an exhibition of a curated selection of album covers, all of which were vastly different and illustrative or typographic at their core, as opposed to the over-used photographic approach that is found in most of the album covers we all often gawk over. They're nostalgic, often simply designed, and examples of our first instances of graphic design in the Arab World.

But if we all admire them so much, why was my first idea for a Final Year Project to redesign them?

This goes back to the notion of nostalgia; we, as designers, like these covers because they remind us of a simpler time, a time when we had a clear graphic design identity. At the same time, it is generally a unanimous agreement, or more of a stereotype, that the majority of the designs were not as experimental as those of the West, which is of course due to a lot of historical variables. This led me to believe, at the first stage of the project, that I wanted to go in a direction of redesigning, in order to give the album covers the experimentality I thought they lacked.

Later on, I started thinking about the ways we categorize these album covers to get me to a closer grasp of my design question. I realized that the way we label them is "old". We say that they're «old album covers for old music». This is a problematic categorization, as it allows for the music to become one. As if a similar style in the design of album art makes all Arabic music the same. Then, according to our general way of life and involvement in our culture, automatically deem ourselves as "Arabic music listeners" or say: "no, not for me!".

Chams Rcrds came from here; when I realized that I should start with the music.

Link after link, I stumbled upon an album for Al Kufoof, a Moroccan band. As I dove into their

Discogs page, I found that their covers were in a world of their own. They were "experimental", had about two colors and sometimes illustrations, and most strikingly marginalized the image as a secondary element. That is when I came to an important realization. Not only was I wrong about the similarity of Arabic album art design, I realized I only knew a really small fraction of popularized Arabic music, and I consider myself a fan! I then dove into the music and art of Munsphone, a Sudanese Record label. Discovering these albums made me start looking for music that was an integral aspect of our history but isn't as appreciated or known today. I began exploring the lives of the artists as well, how they came to be, and what they added to the rich music scene of the Arabic Golden age. After periods of long listening, I also realized that a lot of themes and subjects are shared within this vast, whether known or unknown musical archive.

Design Decisions

After figuring out the main aim of my project, which is to revive Arabic music in a new light, and present it to different kinds of audiences so they can enjoy it without any preconceptions, I had to start thinking about the formal aspect of these compilations.

Do I want my covers to represent a specific temporal era? Should my art look «old» to represent the re-produced «old» music? At first, it was hard for me to dissociate, and the image was an integral element of my initial experimentations. And then, another realization came through.

If I'm providing information through the music and the playlists, why not provide information through the album art?

That's when I decided that I wanted my covers to have a form of abstract data visualization integrated in their design, that of course relates to the themes and artists chosen. During my first trials, I was wrongfully representing data that is about the songs in the playlist, not giving the audience any extra layers they can't get from listening to the tracks themselves. After further experimentations, and as you will see in my final record sleeves, I started finding ways in which the data vis on my artist-based covers can be related to a particularity of the artist's life, in addition to his/her connections/relations to other artists. As for the theme-based covers, I decided that that they will offer more general facts related to the history, culture and language of the Arab World.

After I was able to tackle this problem, I realized that I was too stuck on calling the abstract visualizations infographics when they technically weren't. I had already tried to force legends on them and it was challenging considering they weren't meant to be crystal clear and directly deciphered. That's when I decided to keep my information layers as is, appreciating their abstracted nature, and in turn explaining on the inside inlay more about the cover and the meanings of the various symbols/codes used.

Final Designs

For the theme-based playlists, I opted to design 3 different record sleeves for three albums out of a longer list that includes themes such as The Night, العيون السود, Mornings صبحيات,, Winter, Women's Attire (التنورة/الفستان), Masculinity, Memory, Males Addressing Males (إنتَ), and Motherhood. These would be visited at a further stage. As for part of my project deliverables, I designed covers for Sea Songs, The City and Music, and Songs About Travel.

I decided to focus on different aspects of history and culture when it came to the material and elements on my covers. For instance, the words on the Sea Songs cover are all the ways one could say «Sea» in the Arabic language. On the cover of The City and Music, the height of the buildings formed by the Arabic lettering represents how old the cities are in relation to each other, while the circular lights represent the number of years since the city›s independence. This cover poses a political question, since in the visualization, Jerusalem has no lights and thus no independence. As for Songs About Travel, its cover encapsulates data relating to all plane crashes that happened on the premises of Arab world countries through the flight name, location of crash, date, number of survivors, and number of fatalities.

It is important to note that the songs in these playlists are curated in a way that allows the latter to showcase different takes on the same subject. For instance, the sea can represent sadness, patriotism, love, and longing; and this is also explained in the inlays of the covers.

As for the artist-based ones, I also opted to design covers for three different albums; Omar Khorshid (Egypt), Ibtisam Lutfi (Saudi Arabia), and Al Balabel (Sudan) whom i chose from a preliminary list of females and males, solos and bands from all around the Arab World. The list includes artists like Aisha Musa Ahmad, Munira al-Mahdiyya, Sami Hawat, Hamid Zahir, Al Koufouf, and Aziza Jalal.

While choosing the songs that go in these playlists, I focused on the milestones of these artists' lives, who inspired them, and who they collaborated with. I wanted these playlists to go hand in hand with a timeline of their lives, as the tracks are listed in a way that links important life events to music.

Omar Khorshid was a guitarist who accompanied many famous singers, in addition to having several solo albums and film scores. Alas, like many other famous Egyptian stars, Khorshid died young and questionably in a car crash, which most people say was set-up. In the cover art of Omar Khorshid: His Life in Music, as extra information, I decided to include the names of the different Egyptian stars who died tragically, young and controversially (such as Sayed Darwish, Asmahan, Soad Hosni, Dalida, and Mimi Shakeeb). The names are situated on a timeline that shows how young they were when they died, relative to each other, while the way their names are played with typographically hints at the way they died. On the other hand, the cover art for Ibtisam Lutfi: Her Life in Music aims to connect her to similar artists, as she was both blind and the first woman to perform publicly in Saudi Arabia. Her being a woman, she was forced to stop singing at several points of her life, just like many others whom I portrayed on the cover as well. The essence of her lute forms the base of the composition, similarly to the Khorshid record, the latter through guitar strings. Finally, Al Balabel were three sisters (Hadia, Amal, and Hayat Talsam) who formed a band when they were very young. On the album Al Balabel: Their Lives in Music I decided to focus on the aspect of them being 3 female signers and how that affected their fame and sustainability as artists. Graphically, they are represented as 3 different circles. The timeline where these circles are situated on showcases the most important parts of the sisters' lives, including the time they were born, when they started performing, when they were at their peak, when one of them had to go solo, and when they had to stop.

I aimed to keep the essence of the music and the aura of these songs. All my covers are in their core also two colors, taking inspiration from the Moroccan record covers I have mentioned before. They all utilize the kashida in different ways, which indirectly links them together while at the same time allowing them to work separately. I opted for the kashida due to its importance in the history of our graphic design trajectory, its versatility, and the fact that it is particular to the Arabic script.

I also wanted to create a contrast between the cover art and the inside inlays, as the covers give a more abstract and geometric feel, the inside inlays have the pictures that provide historical context. In addition to the pictures, the inlays of the all the covers provide the basic information about the chosen artist or themes while all having a timeline in common, as to associate the chosen music to the artists' lives and different contexts.

Finally, since my aim isn‹t to compete with the record covers that we all admire and value as part of our history, but to bring into light a new product that will be available to a wider audience, all my label‹s applications and its graphical products are bilingual. The main artwork in the covers are predominantly set in Arabic, but when it comes to the main information, inside text, and song titles, Arabic and English are of equal importance.
This system also applies to the various applications of the label, including Instagram posts. This allows for the partial dissociation from the past, and in turn the viewing of the playlists and record covers as separate products without any presumptions about the music or the artists themselves, whether good or bad.

Name and Logo

The name of the label was inspired by the naming of the oldest Lebanese record label, Baidaphone, named after the founder's family name Baida. I had initially thought to add "-phone» to the name as well but realized I would still be leaning towards a nostalgic approach. "Rcrds", on the other hand, brings in the «new» layer.

As for the logo, it takes its inspiration from both sound waves and bar graphs. It aims to be dynamic, always in motion and predominantly Arabic. The Arabic type «Chams» can be separated from the English at times when the English is present elsewhere (like the backs of the covers). The logo can be used both vertically and horizontally depending on where it‹s being applied and the space it is occupying. For example, it is horizontal on the backside of the album covers, while vertical on the LP labels. The kashidas in the logo can also elongate, which allows for more play with the surface they are interacting with, such as on the tote bags.

I also worked on an Instagram page to promote the label (@chamsrcrds), providing information about the artists and themes chosen and showcasing the album covers and music visualizations (logo animations). I also included the merchandise that can be sold through the website. This virtual launch could be successful in times like these, when people are spending more time than ever on social media platforms, and always hoping to discover new (or old) music.

Documentation
Theme-Based Covers

Artist-Based Covers

المدينة \ The City and Music

البحر \ Sea Songs

عمر خورشيد \ Omar Khorshid

سفريات \ Songs About Travel

البلابل \ Al-Balabel
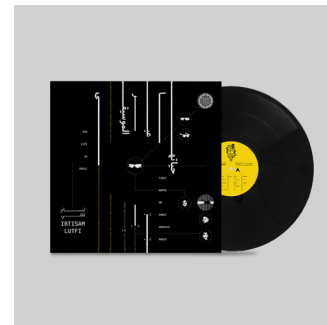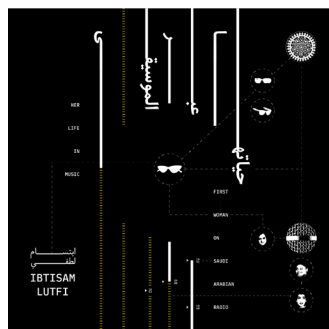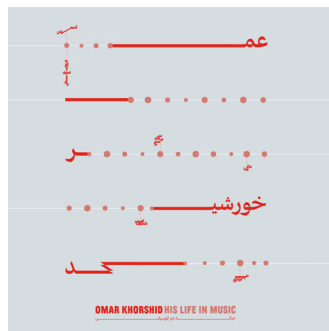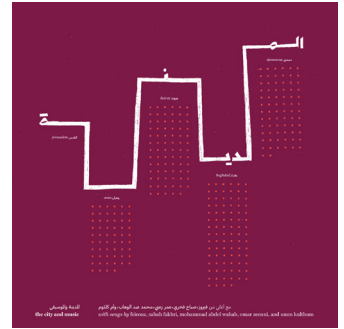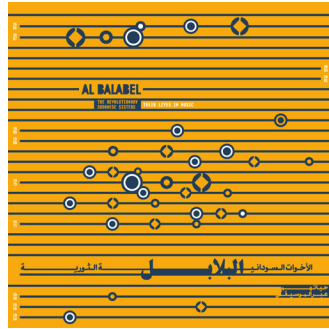

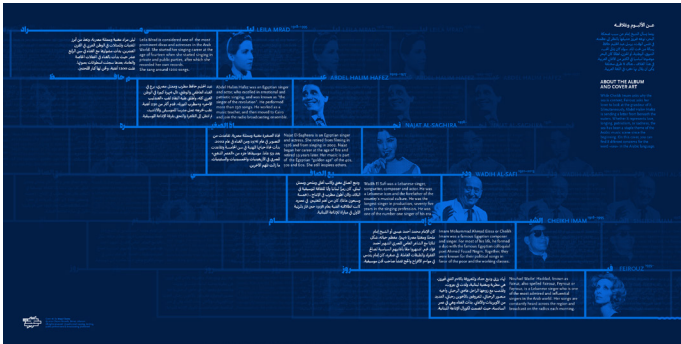ابتسام لطفي \ Ibtisam Lutfi

Tote Bags/T-shirts
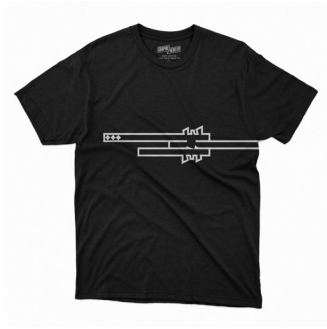
Flat Designs
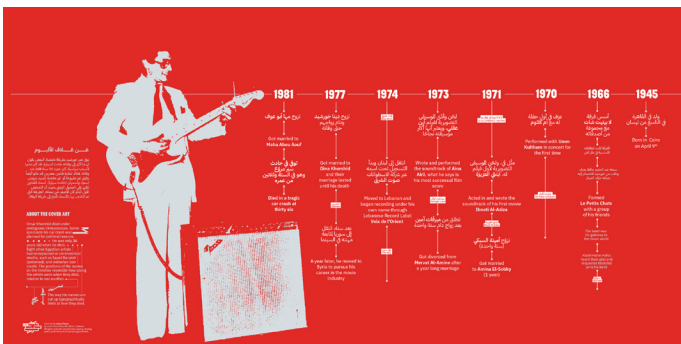Covers/LP Labels
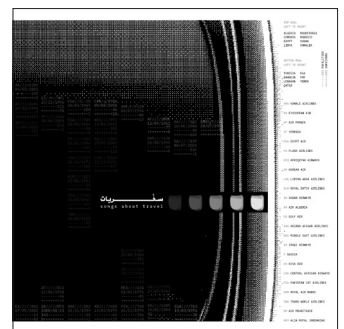
Inside Inlays

السحر \ Sea Songs
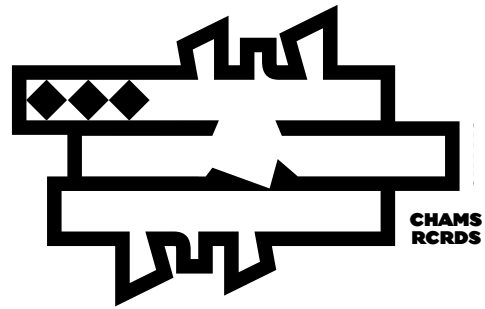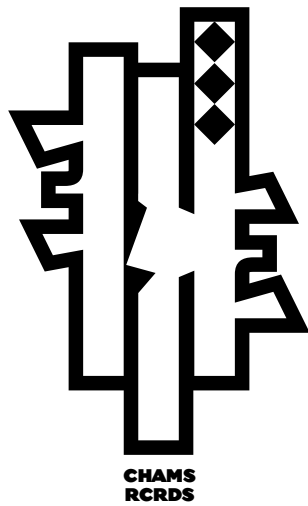

المدينة \ The City and Music

ابتسام لطفي \ Ibtisam Lutfi

عمر خورشيد \ Omar Khorshid

Logo

Instagram Posts

References

Below are some websites that I used to add to my general music knowledge to be able to work on this project.

sowt.com

Ma3azef.com

almasryalyoum.com

raseef22.com

yallafeed.com

stepfeed.com

horytna.net

assawsana.com

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youm7.com

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www.youtube.com/channel/
UColf1L4k9OVGwzuwNkzEOLg

instagram.com/habibifunk

habibifunkrecords.bandcamp.com