

Middle Cyclone: Rhetorical Analysis

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I DON'T PAY MUCH ATTENTION TO ALBUM ART THESE DAYS. Most of my music purchases are downloaded online, with album covers existing merely as small icons on my iPod. However, the cover to Neko Case's latest album, *Middle Cyclone*, made an immediate and lasting impression on me. *It's perfect*, I thought to myself upon first seeing the album cover at the time of its release in March of this year.

The cover — pictured at left — depicts Case wielding a samurai sword while positioned on a bent knee atop a vintage Mercury Cougar. The text on the cover, announcing the album's title and artist, appears hand-scrawled, reckless. A barefoot Case dons a simple black dress, her blaze of windswept hair wrapping around her neck and spilling upon one thigh. Her hand grips the edge of the hood, just above the aggressively-styled — almost human — grille. Case's straight-ahead stare is locked on something in the distance, something not visible to us. This is a woman who's prepared to do battle. Against who or what? We do not know. But we *want* to know.

Is this album cover indeed perfect? Nothing can be perfect, of course, at least not in the highly subjective world of design. But what about this particular work of art caused me to immediately respond so favorably to it, to regard it as a perfect — or at least perfectly appropriate — representation of Neko Case's latest musical effort?

Interviewed by Tavis Smiley, Case had this to say about the *Middle Cyclone* cover. "I really wanted to get my picture taken in a way that made me not hate getting my picture taken, because I never am a fan of it. I always feel really self-conscious. So I thought if I were to make the picture for the cover as though I were an eight-year-old boy making his fantasy album, what would I have?" Her comment makes me wonder if the cover appeals to my inner eight-year-old, if that's why I appreciate it so much. The purpose of this analysis is, in part, to prove that there's much more to its appeal than just that.

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Artist Profile



Photo credit above:
Ralph Barrera

Photo credit at right:
www.nekocase.net



MIDDLE CYCLONE MARKS CASE'S SIXTH STUDIO ALBUM. Though difficult to categorize, her music most often is described as alt-country. She's been compared to such artists as Patsy Cline, Loretta Lynn, and Dolly Parton. Though she's a competent guitarist and pianist, her greatest musical asset is, without question, her voice, a soaring, evocative talent that she deploys with effortless ease and conviction.

Case grew up in a broken family, living in poverty. Her Ukrainian parents divorced when she was a young girl, and she went back and forth between their two homes. Her father struggled with alcohol and drug addiction. Case told Scotsman.com that her father "hated his life. And he reminded us of that every day." Her father died of a heart attack a few years ago. Speaking about him, Case said, "I've been mourning my dad my whole life."

Case dropped out of high school at age 15 and moved in with a friend. "I was a mad kid," she said of this stage of her life. "I was sick of being poor. I was sick of being a girl. I felt completely unimportant, I didn't matter to the world, and I was going to get love any way I could."

She relocated to Vancouver, BC, in 1994 to enroll in college, ultimately earning a bachelor of fine arts degree. Case then moved to Seattle, where she began her music career. In addition to her solo projects, Case has been a member of the alt-pop band The New Pornographers.

Middle Cyclone debuted at No. 3 on the Billboard charts, the first time any of her albums reached the Top 10. Her previous effort, *Fox Confessor Brings the Flood*, garnered much critical praise and experienced respectable sales success.

"It gets harder every single time. Your ability to perceive problems is greater. And your capacity to have ideas explode into a million ideas on you gets greater. You don't want to leave any leads unexplored. You don't want to let things go. It becomes a rather precious exercise."

— Neko Case, asked by *Exclaim!* whether making albums gets easier with experience.

Even as her career has taken off, Case has continued the driftiness that marked her early years. She moved from Seattle to Chicago, then from Chicago to Tucson, and most recently from Tucson to Vermont, where she bought a 100-acre farm and recorded *Middle Cyclone* in a barn.

Previous Album Covers



THE EDWARD GOREY-LIKE COVER OF CASE'S PREVIOUS ALBUM features an illustration of a brunette woman surrounded by attentive foxes. The woman, who has hooved feet like an animal, cradles the head of a woman under her arm. The body-less head has bright red hair — much like Neko's — and one can't help but wonder if this is a representation of the musician herself. The background is that of a black-smudged, starlit sky. The composition of women and foxes is placed upon the image of what appears to be the trunk of a birch tree.

As described — a hooved woman holding a decapitated head while chatting with foxes — the cover sounds captivating and disturbing. However, because the characters are depicted on such a small scale, without any element of the composition standing out, or dominating, the overall effect of the artwork is diminished. Perhaps on a full-size, old-school LP cover, this would not be the case; however, on a CD cover, measuring 5-1/2" by 5", one has to squint just to notice the hooved feet.

Moreover, cartoons often are used, to great effect, to enable viewers to see themselves in the simply drawn figures. Here, though, because the characters are so small, it's difficult to project oneself into their being.

In contrast, the composition of Case's *Furnace Room Lullaby*, her second studio album, is much more affecting. Here we see, on a large scale, a photo of Case collapsed on a concrete floor. Her eyes are open but detached. Her hair is tousled. Her hand appears limp. Is she unconscious? Asleep? Is she even alive? It's a disturbing image, particularly when one takes note of the fact that, at the time, Case called her backup band "Her Boyfriends." Seeing "Neko Case & Her Boyfriends" in all-caps beneath the image, one may wonder if she's the victim of domestic abuse.

Claire Harrison, writing in "Visual Social Semiotics: Understanding How Still Images Make Meaning," asserts that photographs "suggest a reality that is far stronger than that of drawings, illustrations, and paintings." Her point is supported by a comparison of the covers on this page. The illustration depicts a disturbing scene, punctuated by the decapitated head; but because it's an illustration, coupled with its small scale, it lacks the emotional punch and realism of the photograph of Case.

It's worth noting that in these two album covers, Case is depicted as victimized and defeated. On the cover of *Middle Cyclone*, however, she's shown as the triumphant aggressor, as someone who's prepared to take on the world. It suggests a growing confidence on her part.



Album above:
Fox Confessor Brings the Flood

Album at left:
Furnace Room Lullaby

Lyrics



Image above:
Poster for Case's March 3, 2009
concert in San Diego

LIVING UP TO ITS TITLE, FIVE OF THE 15 SONGS ON CASE'S latest album reference either cyclones or tornadoes. In one of the album's most musically, if not necessarily lyrically, accessible songs, "This Tornado Loves You," Case sings of a tornado that leaves behind of path of destruction as it passionately pursues its love interest.

*I carved your name across three counties
And ground it in with bloody hides
Broken necks will line the ditch
Till you "Stop it! Stop it! Stop this madness!"
I want you*

Considering these lyrics while viewing the album's cover, it's natural to view Case herself as a cyclone of sorts, confidently wielding a sword, wreaking havoc as she tracks down someone, or something, her pursuit hyper-powered by a vintage muscle car.

The lyrics on *Middle Cyclone* are emotional and deeply felt, seemingly more open and individualized than on Case's previous efforts. "I was willing to be a little more personal," Case confessed to Scotsman.com. "I realized that it's okay to admit that no matter who your characters are, you're writing about yourself."

"I also realized that since *Fox Confessor*, I'd said a lot that I don't write love songs — I just don't like to do it. But I ended up writing lots of love songs. If you say you don't want to do something, you're going to contradict yourself later. It always happens. They're still not traditional love songs, but they're love songs nonetheless."

— Neko Case, interviewed by *Paste Magazine*

Not to mix metaphors, but it's also easy to regard the album-cover image of Case as animalistic, especially when she sings on one track: "And yes, there are things that I'm still so afraid of / But my courage is roaring like the sound of the sun / 'Cause it's vain about its mane and will reveal them to no one / I'm an animal / You're an animal, too."

Perhaps it's fitting, then, and not entirely coincidental, that Case surfs atop a Mercury Cougar on the album's cover. She's deliberately chosen to present herself as predator-like, with the destructive tendencies and awesome power of a cyclone.

The Objects of Design



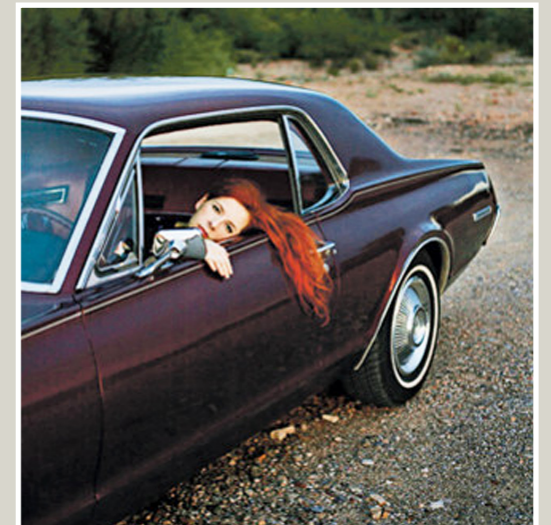
THE *MIDDLE CYCLONE* COVER INVOLVES THREE CAPTIVATING objects: Case, the samurai sword, and the Mercury Cougar. Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen assert that when objects in an image “are connected by a vector, they are represented as *doing* something to or for each other.”

The album cover includes numerous vectors, several of which intersect At one intersection — point A at left — the diagonal vector created by the sword meets the horizontal vector represented by Case’s arm. In the image below — at point B — Case’s other arm, a vertical vector, intersects with the horizontal vector of the car’s hood. As Claire Harrison points out in “How Still Images Make Meaning,” vectors can serve to create action and, in turn, narration. That’s certainly what is accomplished here, with vectors of motion working together to present a highly active composition. I look at the cover and imagine that if I were to take a long blink, I’d open my eyes and Case, sword, and car would have zipped out of sight, leaving behind the scrawled album title and artist’s name.

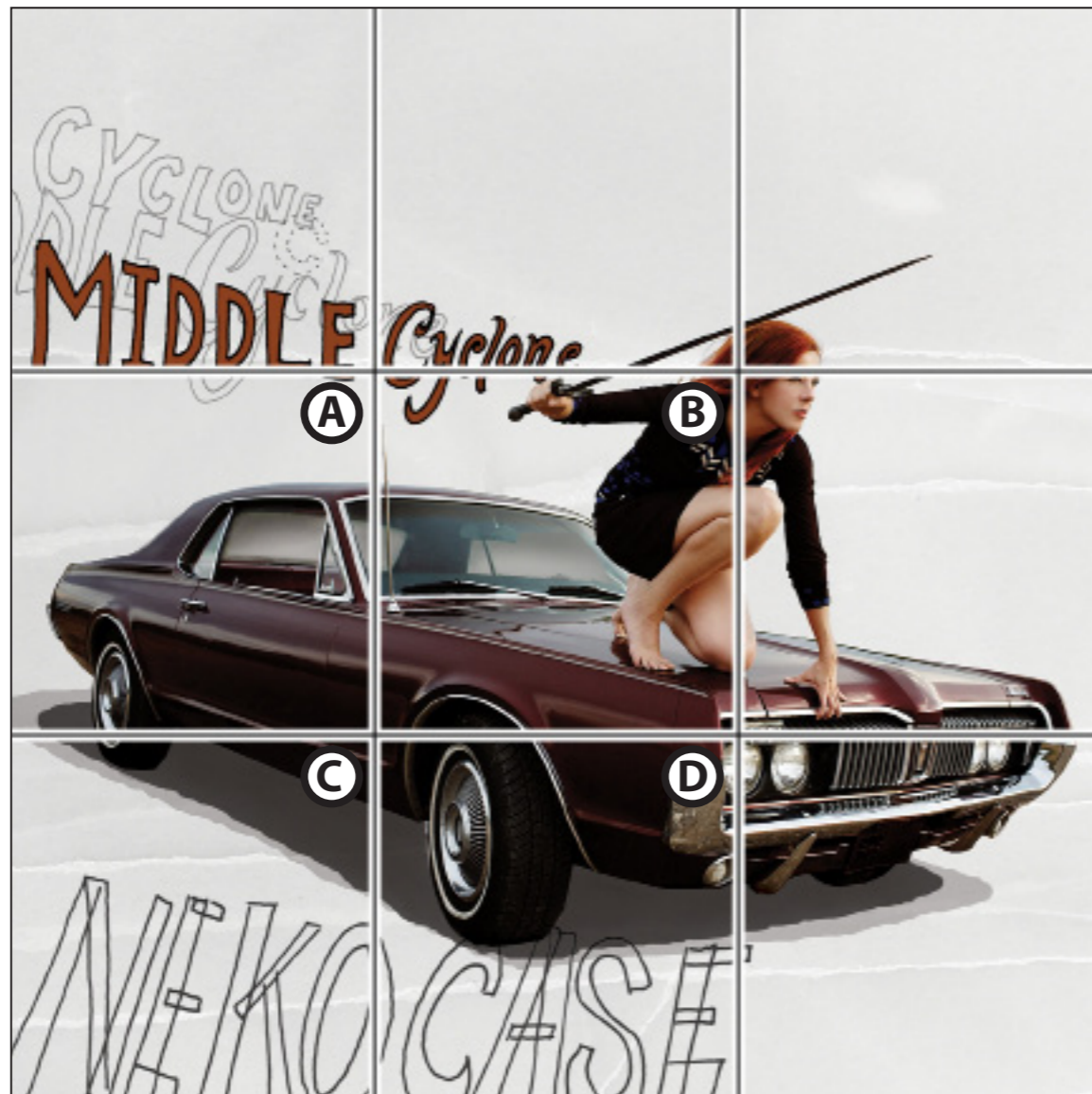
Case’s U.S. recording label is ANTI-. To ensure creative control, she has deliberately chosen to work with small, independent labels. She designed the *Middle Cyclone* cover herself, though Jason Creps receives credit for the photograph of Case. If she were working with a major label, it’s easy to imagine she’d have to relinquish some creative control and would end up with a cover similar to the Starbucks version shown and discussed on page 10.

An interesting aside is that the car pictured on the cover actually belongs to Case, albeit not for long. Interviewed by Cleveland.com, Case said, “I really like cars, but I don’t have time for my car. Later this year, we’re actually going to auction my Cougar off for 826NYC, the Dave Eggers charity.”

The fact that the car belongs to Case makes its representation on the album cover seem more authentic. It’s not pictured simply to appeal to our inner eight-year-old; it’s pictured because it’s meaningful to the artist.



Applying the Rule of Thirds



PHOTOGRAPHERS AND GRAPHIC DESIGNERS OFTEN SPEAK of the “rule of thirds,” which involves using straight lines to divide an image into thirds vertically and horizontally. Important visual elements should, under this theory, be positioned where the lines intersect.

Lines have been placed on the cover image at left to apply the rule of thirds. Note that critical visual elements can be found at each intersection. The album title rests squarely at intersection A. intersection B falls smack dab in the middle of Case’s trademark flaming red hair. The Cougar is centered at intersection C. The car’s prominent headlights sit at intersection D.

Speaking of eyes, Neko’s are positioned just below the high horizontal line, whereas the Cougar’s headlights — which very much resemble eyes — are just below the lower horizontal line. Writing in *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud notes that humans, as a self-centered race, see themselves in everything. To underscore his point, he includes an illustration of a car’s grille. McCloud writes, “We assign identities and emotions where none exist.” It’s easy to visualize the Cougar’s grille as a face. The fact that it’s speeding ahead (why else would Case be gripping the hood for balance?) without a driver makes the car seem even more animated and alive.

Note the prominent white space in the cover’s three right squares as well as the upper-middle square. This white space gives rise to an asymmetry that further enhances the sense of motion and activity in this design. Moreover, it suggests a vast and open environment in which Case and the car are traveling. They’re on an adventure, and we, the viewer/listener, is invited to join in on the journey.

“You should never judge a book by its cover, nor an album by its cover art, I would think, but sometimes what you see on the outside can actually give you a decent indication of what you’re likely to find in the author’s/artist’s material. Such is the case with Neko Case’s latest record, *Middle Cyclone*, the front of which shows Case kneeling on the hood of a muscle car, ready to pounce . . .”

— Chris Nowling, In Review Online

Color

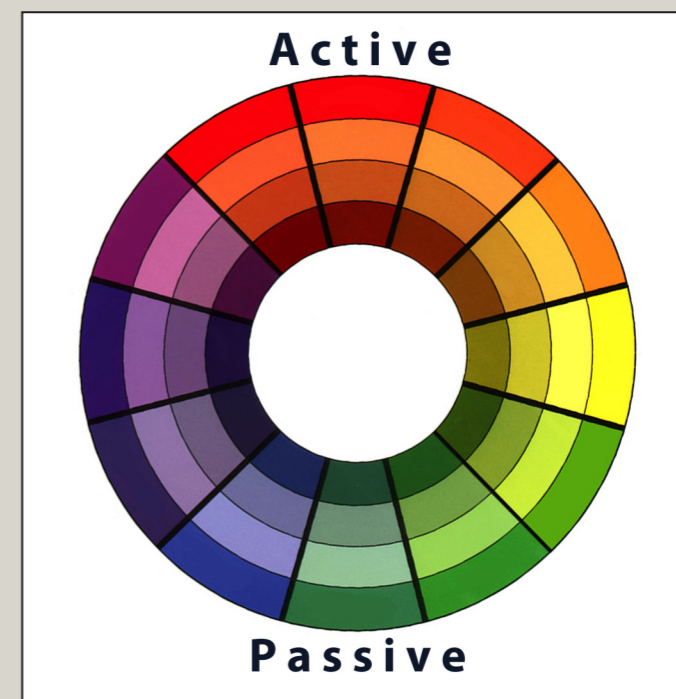


Photo credit:
Dennis Kleiman

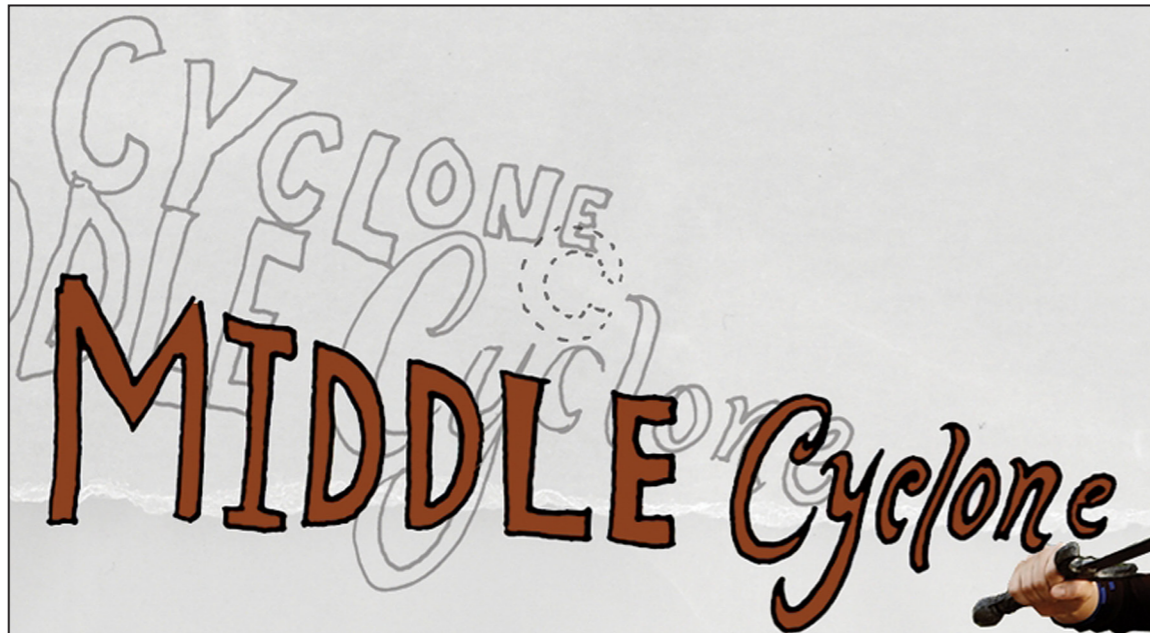
THE ARTIST WASSILA KANDINSKY EXHAUSTIVELY EXPLORED the emotional reactions that viewers have to colors in works of art. Writing in “Decorative Color as a Rhetorical Enhancement on the World Wide Web,” scholars Anne Richards and Carol David describe Kandinsky’s opinion of red, which he claimed represented the “sudden, more violent sense of life.” The reds in the *Middle Cyclone* cover, most notably Case’s hair, support Kandinsky’s view of the color. He also asserted that brown, when coupled with red, can possess an “indescribable beauty.” The red of Case’s hair combined with the ruddy browns in the car do indeed evoke a sense of beauty and passion.

Compare the actual album cover with the image of Case in a pickup truck at left. Here we see Case’s hair, as bright red as ever, but blues and greens dominate the rest of the photo. Kandinsky said of green that it is restful and passive, and that certainly would be an apt description of this image. Case could have chose this photo for *Middle Cyclone* — it resembles the covers of other female alt-country artists — but she clearly wanted to set a more aggressive tone with her cover.

The color wheel below shows that hues of red are visually active whereas hues of green and blue are visually passive. Case chose to employ only active colors on the *Middle Cyclone* cover, and in doing so she further advanced the tone of fiery aggression that’s present in her song lyrics.



Typography



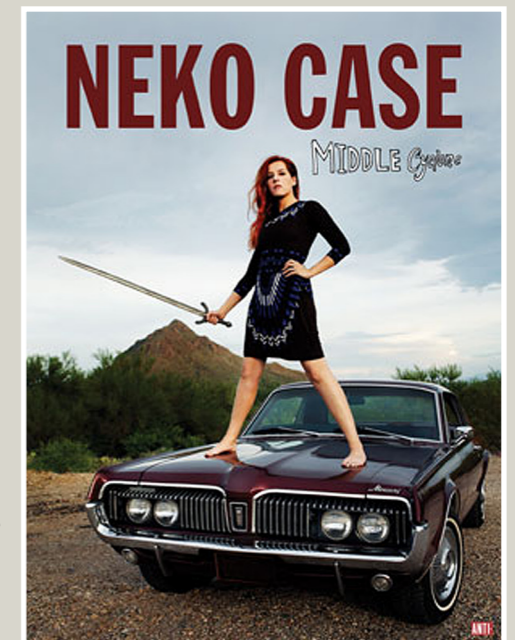
“YOUR CHOICE OF TYPEFACE CAN EITHER UNDERCUT YOUR desired meaning or it can support and extend it,” writes Nadav Savio in his typography tutorial. The choice of typography on the *Middle Cyclone* cover — with the album title and artist’s name appearing hand-scrawled, child-like, chaotic — reflects a soul-laid-bare, at times playfully juvenile, feistiness that Case exhibits on songs such as “People Got a Lotta Nerve,” where she takes on the role of a killer whale and sings, “I’m a man-man-man, man-man-man-eater / And still you’re surprised when I eat you!”

It’s interesting that the album title is filled in with a deep red, sienna-like color that bridges the gap between Case’s red hair and the brownish hues in the car, whereas the artist’s name is merely an outline, rendering it more passive than the album title. Case compensates for this style decision, though, by displaying her name on a larger scale than the other text on the page.

“Let’s talk about that album cover. On the front of *Middle Cyclone*, Neko Case is in full-on battle stance. Squatting on the hood of an old Mercury Cougar and gripping a long sword, the singer-songwriter looks like a cross between a flame-haired chanteuse and a medieval warrior staring down an invading army. Bring it on. She’s ready.”

— James Reed, *The Boston Globe*

The image at right, a poster Case has distributed to promote her album, takes a dramatically different typographical approach. Here, Case’s name is in a clear, bold-red sans-serif font, and the album is a mere outline on a much smaller scale. The emphasis is squarely on the artist, and the album seems secondary. This poster is a marketing tool, and clearly it’s trying to sell Case as the rock-and-roll conqueror. Note that the use of the sans-serif font gives this image a less reckless feel than that of the cover.



Other Covers Within the Genre



Album above:
Children Running Through
Patty Griffin

Album at right:
West
Lucinda Williams



CASE'S *MIDDLE CYCLONE* COVER DIFFERS SHARPLY FROM the album covers of other alt-country artists. The two examples at left — Patty Griffin's *Children Running Through* and Lucinda Williams' *West* — are typical of the genre. These passive images show the musicians motionlessly posing for the camera. There's no sense of action here, and finding a narrative within these two images would require an active imagination and a lot of filling in the blanks.

Griffin's cover shares two elements found in *Middle Cyclone*: a car and a flaming-red mane of hair. That's where the similarities end. Whereas Case's unconventional cover takes design risks and sparkles with creativity, the tired design of *Children Running Through* lacks imagination, with a composition that one would expect of an Olan Mills portrait photographer. There's very little iconic abstraction going on in this image; it's a traditional eyes-on-the-camera photograph with minimal embellishment. Looking at Griffin's ornate black jacket, the grille of the old pickup truck, and the Wyoming-like Western scenery in the background, it comes as no surprise that, with this album, Griffin's label, ATO, attempted to expand her fan base by marketing her more as a pure country singer than an alt-country singer. But the packaging here seems disingenuous and false, with the cover out of sync with Maine-native Griffin's rock-and-roll roots.

Williams' cover does not miss the mark as much as Griffin's. The power lines, seen in silhouette, lead the viewer's sightline to the horizon and, given Williams' stance, suggest reflection and a looking back. The asymmetrical composition of the image, with Williams positioned at far left and a large swath of negative space to her right, provides some visual interest and, in small measure, activates the elements within the design. The cowboy hat, brightly lit in the foreground, occupies a position of visual dominance within this composition of otherwise shadowy imagery. As with Griffin's album, is this an attempt to target country music listeners? Possibly so.

Through their music, Griffin and Williams are tremendous storytellers. And yet their album-cover imagery fails to tell a story. Perhaps because Case does not like being photographed, she was motivated to dig deep and come up with a more fun and inspired cover design.

**"I have a pathological fear of getting my picture taken."
— Neko Case, interviewed by the A.V. Club**

Alternate Starbucks Cover



Patty Griffin and Lucinda Williams certainly are not the only musicians to allow themselves and their music to be packaged in a manner that's out of step with their true identities. Case herself allowed *Middle Cyclone* to be sold in Starbucks stores using an alternate — and far less visually compelling — cover, which can be seen at left.

In this image, Case's red hair again figures prominently. It, along with her stark white skin, visually dominates the composition. Aside from the unique, hand-scripted font, this album cover falls right in line, stylistically, with Griffin's and William's covers, as well as many other covers within the alt-country genre. Where is the animal-like aggression? The spirited playfulness? The action-oriented imagery? It's not here. Instead, we have a sanitized, formulaic composition designed, one might assume, not to put off a single Starbucks customer. She's been Norah Jones-ified, packaged as just another coffeehouse chanteuse. Case's melancholic, porcelain visage seems to be begging, "Can we go ahead and get this over, already?"

Speaking to *Time Out New York* about the *Middle Cyclone* cover, Case brings up the *Star Wars* poster in which Princess Leia cowers near Luke Skywalker, gripping his leg. "She [Leia] was super tough, but why doesn't she get to hold a sword on the fucking poster?" Case asks. "You want to see the ladies be a little tougher, like maybe she gets to have a fucking sword? So maybe that's what I'm doing there. Maybe that's my Princess Leia moment and I'm just like, 'Fuck, finally.'"

Are those comments that one would expect to hear from the fey, innocent-appearing woman pictured at left?

The alternate Starbucks cover is not an aesthetically displeasing image. It is, though, an entirely forgettable and staid one, and — most relevantly for this rhetorical analysis — it's a poor representation of Neko Case, her music, and her lyrics.

"My love I am the speed of sound / I left them motherless,
fatherless / Their souls dangling inside-out from their mouths / But
it's never enough / I want you."

— Neko Case, "This Tornado Loves You"