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Savannah Klein
Grand Valley State University

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Savannah Klein
Doctor Ellenberger
Honors Senior Project
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The Development of the Concept Album

As the world of music has continually evolved and expanded, so has artists' desire for inventive expression. An important tool that has long satisfied this growing need is the concept album. Essentially, the concept album is a group of songs that manifests musical coherence and focuses on one main subject or storyline (Covach 73-74). Although its appearance has been anything but novel in the contemporary music scene, the concept album was not introduced until the 1950s. With influences of Classical and Folk Music, the concept album quickly grew to become a steadfast element of musical culture that has allowed artists to elevate their musical expertise, express their views on societal conditions, and enhance the listening experience of their fans.

It is important to note that before the introduction of the concept album, the recording of musicals, referred to as a cast album, was one of the main uses for the forty-five minutes of capacity on the double-sided LP record. Aside from the cast album, the order of the tracks was of little concern to record companies. Although producers understood the benefits of an overarching tone or attitude throughout the album, few albums varied from the common format of five to six three-minute songs per side of the record (Decker 99-100). Many albums were released to endorse the artist's successful singles, and the B side of an album rarely received any attention or airplay (Letts 11-12). However, it is the expansive capacity and possibility of the LP that paved the way for artists to push the boundaries of the typical album and express their musical talents in ways not allowed by a single track (Decker 99-101).

The Foundation of Concept Albums

Before the inception of the concept album, there were various forms of art that reflected the idea of a cohesive musical and lyrical work that conveys a central theme to the listener. Examples of such art include the medieval *lai*, the song cycle, and the symphonic poem. The medieval *lai* is believed by scholars to have begun during the latter half of the twelfth century as a lengthy poetic work of art. The first known author of the *lai* was Marie de France, who mainly focused on love as the subject of her works. Trouvères and troubadours then added music and altered the *lai* to have a varying length of stanzas, with each stanza containing a different melody. Eventually, Guillaume de Machaut standardized a twelve-stanza format with the last stanza repeating the melody of the introductory stanza. Although not all concept albums reflect the properties of the medieval *lai*, a few concept albums, such as Jethro Tull's *Passion Play* and *Thick as a Brick*, do reflect similar lyrical structures, regardless of whether that was the artists' intent (Smolko and Stone-Mason 28-30).

Within the classical realm, the song cycle and the symphonic poem, also referred to as a tone poem, reflected the early roots of the concept album. The song cycle is a body of songs composed in a specific sequence that implies a narrative or certain consistency. One of the most prominent examples includes Schubert's "Winterreise" (Song Cycle). Furthermore, a symphonic poem is a story from literature or history that has been translated into a classical work. Although Franz Liszt used the term "symphonic poem" for his works, Richard Strauss differentiated his works by referring to them as a "tone poem" (Symphonic Poem). Whether or not artists of concept albums in the twentieth and twenty first century aimed to channel the ideas

of medieval *lais*, song cycles, and tone poems, these early works have helped formed the roots of the concept album we know today.

Early Concept Albums

In the 1950's, the idea of the concept album was finally utilized by Jazz musicians and producers, with the main pioneer being producer Norman Granz. Granz produced *The Astaire Story* in 1953, which was a four-disc set featuring the movie star Fred Astaire beside a band of six musicians—Oscar Peterson, Barney Kessel, Charlie Shavers, Alvin Stroller, Flip Phillips, and Ray Brown. Each disc's overarching theme concerns Astaire's musical career, and each contributed to the album's unified form. Another Jazz singer that followed this cohesive model was Rosemary Clooney. From the late 1950s to the end of her musical career, Clooney released numerous concept albums, which focused on overarching themes rather than specific storylines. Examples of such albums include the 1958 album, *Fancy Meeting You Here*, which was a collection of duets with Bing Crosby about exotic romance. The entire album is unified by various tracks written by Sammy Cahn and Jimmy Van Heusen specifically for the LP, an orchestra conducted by Billy May, and a final track that repeats on each side of the record (Decker 101-106). Although concept albums from this period do not present the typical protagonist and storyline that is often found in their successors, they still manifest a consistent theme that appeals to a higher degree of musical organization and long-form listening.

Concept Albums of Rock and Popular Music

In 1967, the concept album made its way to Pop and Rock music when George Martin produced The Beatles' chart-topping studio album, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Although John Lennon denied that any of his songs were written with the overall theme in mind,

the album still presents itself as a concept album. This is due to the initial track, “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band,” the related track, “With a Little Help from My Friends,” and the eventual reprise of the title track near the end of side B (Covach 74). Other contributing factors include the album cover art, which features the members of The Beatles dressed up as the band’s alter ego of Sgt. Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band, the multitude of positive critical reception that likened the album to masterpieces like Picasso’s *Guernica*, and the inspiration that it provided to other Rock and Roll bands regarding the concept album. Ultimately, the notion of a unified concept that was presented in Sgt. Peppers’ Lonely Hearts Club Band allowed the album to become an elevated work of art, which was unheard of in Pop and Rock music at the time (Crawford 803-807).

Following the path paved by The Beatles and their first work of “art rock”, numerous Classic and Progressive Rock bands of the 60s and 70s released concept albums that showcased higher artistic significance and expression of societal beliefs (Crawford 809). Many of these albums consisted of a protagonist or a narrative, such as the Who’s *Tommy*, Genesis’ *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*, or Pink Floyd’s *The Wall*. Other albums, such as Jethro Tull’s *Thick as a Brick* and *Passion Play*, made heavy use of Classical influences to convey the overarching subject. Ways in which bands employed Classical techniques include referencing Classical themes throughout the lyrics, recording with a symphony orchestra, or incorporating multiple peaks in one song—similar to that of a large-scale Classical work. Some artists went so far as to release their own versions of Classical works, such as Emerson, Lake & Palmer’s reimagining of Modest Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* (Smolko and Stone-Mason 68; Crawford 809).

Furthermore, Folk music played a large part in the production of various concept albums due to the British Folk Revivals that established a musical foundation for bands like Jethro Tull.

This revival also instilled in Rock bands an interest in pastoral and mythical elements that can often be found throughout their lyrics. (Smolko and Stone-Mason 20-22). Additionally, Folk artists like Bob Dylan pioneered the shift of lyrics from communal songs that appealed to the masses to more personal, introspective lyrics that could express individual philosophies and concerns, which was often the basis of conceptual lyrics (Letts 72-73). Ultimately, Folk music provided yet another layer of complexity and creativity that artists could take advantage of to create the elevated concept album.

Due to the complex storylines, classical influences, and folk roots, Rock concept albums were “uncommercial” and not meant to appeal to the average listener. However, many of these experimental bands attained mainstream success, even in the United States, which was more difficult to achieve than in the United Kingdom. Notable examples of this success include Jethro Tull’s *Thick as a Brick*, which spent two weeks at the top of U.S. *Billboard* 200 Album Chart and hit number five on the UK Chart; Pink Floyd’s *The Dark Side of the Moon*, which remained on the *Billboard* 200 Charts for 917 weeks, making it the most charted album in history; and Pink Floyd’s *The Wall* and *Wish You Were Here*, which also reached number one on the U.S. *Billboard* 200 Album Chart (Smolko and Stone-Mason 1-4; Caulfield). These artists’ ability to appeal to the general public while refusing to compromise their artistic integrity led to a heightened form of Rock and Progressive Rock composition, while still allowing the works to remain relevant to the contemporary culture (Crawford 803).

A Progressive Rock Case Study

Unlike earlier jazz concept albums, many Rock and Progressive Rock concept albums provided a deeper and more philosophical narrative. Instead of a simple theme vaguely connecting the tracks, listeners of these albums experience a musical journey consisting of lyrical

explorations, musical references, and complex subject matter. In order to grasp the substantial difference between both types of concept albums, the Genesis' *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* will be analyzed to illustrate just some of the many complexities of a symphonic Rock concept album.

The first track, "The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway," establishes the main character as a Puerto Rican boy named Rael walking through "early morning Manhattan" (Nicholls 131). As he finishes painting his name on the subway walls, and everyone else goes about their day, he is the only one who notices a lamb lying in the street. The lamb causes Rael to become awestruck, and it brings "a stillness to the air." The next track, "Fly on a Windshield," describes a "wall of death" that descends upon Times Square immediately after the appearance of the lamb. The wall temporarily blinds Rael with dust, yet, once again, "no-one seems to care" besides Rael (Genesis). Once Rael is completely encompassed by the wall and "cannot move," the song launches into an instrumental transition to the track, "Broadway Melody of 1974".

Serving as an introduction to the surreal world that Rael has just entered, "Broadway Melody of 1974" describes numerous visions of historical figures, including the racist Ku Klux Klan "serv[ing] hot soul food" and listening to the big band hit "In the Mood." Next, "Cuckoo Cocoon" details Rael's thought process after he finds himself "stuck in some kind of cave" with only the sound of water drops. The fifth track, "In the Cage," is over eight minutes long, consisting of few lyrics and a varying melody and tempo that conveys the anxious state of Rael as he nearly goes mad while stuck in the cave. The song ends with a lighthearted instrumental passage that transitions to the free Rael in "The Grand Parade of Lifeless Packaging" (Genesis).

Unlike the previous tracks, "The Grand Parade of Lifeless Packaging" has a cheerful tone. It begins with a train whistle, indicating that Rael is being guided through a factory by a

“drooping woman” that is trying to sell her products. However, the products are people that are forced to conform, as there is no free will in this factory. Rael recognizes his brother, John, as package number nine and buys him from the woman. In the next track, “Back in N.Y.C.,” Rael seems to be imagining himself back in his hometown. He reflects on his own reputation as a “tough kid” called “Rael Electric Razor.” He discusses all the destruction he is capable of, and claims he needs no “illusion of love and affection” (Genesis). However, throughout the song, Rael contemplates shaving his “fluffy heart” and opening it to love.

Following Rael’s romantic dilemma, the slow track, “Hairless Heart,” indicates that Rael has shaved and freed his heart of its tough fur. After the liberation of Rael’s heart, the upbeat tune “Counting out Time” details Rael’s discovery of female anatomy through his intense study of a book. Rael even claims, “Erogenous zones, I love you!” However, the song ends with Rael’s ignorance shining through when he receives “distress from [his] mistress” even though he is a “red blooded male” that the “book said...could not fail” (Genesis).

In the next scene entitled “Carpet Crawlers,” Rael takes part of a procession that ascends a staircase in hopes of eventually leaving through the wooden door. Once Rael reaches his destination, there are “hundreds of people running around to all the doors.” There are all types of people that are trying to “control the game,” while Rael just needs someone to trust, as he feels extremely alone. Rael is being beckoned by numerous people, including his parents. However, whenever he enters a door, he is returned to his original location, which causes him to realize he must find his own path away from this place (Genesis).

Next, “Lilywhite Lilith” finds Rael still trapped in the chamber of doors. Although she is blind, she leads him away from the chamber to a throne in darkness. Rael then sees “two golden globes” enter the room. In “The Waiting Room,” a flurry of dazzling noises and instruments

demonstrate Rael's confusion as he sits anxiously in his throne after witnessing a "blaze of white light." The sound of glass breaking and rocks crashing reveal that Rael is once again buried in this world. In "Anyway," Rael contemplates how his death will come as he is "quietly buried in stones." He hears a voice exclaim, "So sorry you had to wait. It won't be long...[death] is very rarely late." Finally, in "Here Comes the Supernatural Anesthetist," death appears to visit Rael with a cheerful tone, even claiming that death is "such a fine dancer" (Genesis).

Appearing to have entered another world after his death, Rael walks through a long, beautiful passageway in "The Lamia." He encounters "three vermilion snakes of female face" named the Lamia, which is an allusion to a beautiful Greek monster that killed and devoured its lovers. Although he is initially oblivious to their nibbling and testing of his flesh, the moment they shed his blood, he slays them and feasts on each "snakelike body" (Nicholls 132-135). The song ends in an emotional instrumental that transitions to "Silent Sorry in Empty Boats," a mystical song with only a choir. This track demonstrates Rael's journey to "The Colony of Slippermen" (Genesis).

Upon his arrival, Rael finds bizarre people covered in "slimy lumps" with "twisted limbs." The accompanying melody reflects these oddities through strange sounds and an upbeat tempo. At the colony, the Slipperman claims that "it's the end of [Rael's] tale," unless he and John can face Dokter Dyper. The Slipperman gives Rael a tube containing what is necessary to meet Dokter Dyper, but a raven steals the tube from Rael. Although Rael desires to chase after the raven, John refuses and leaves Rael. Rael, still wishing John would "just show some concern," pursues the tube and sees the raven drop it into a river. During "Ravine," an ominous, high pitched sound echoes as Rael watches the tube float down the river (Genesis).

The twentieth track of the album, titled “The Light Dies Down on Broadway,” is reminiscent of the title track, as Rael finally sees a gate to New York. Just as he attempts to leave this strange world, he hears John screaming in the rapids of the river. Forced to decide between his brother and his home, Rael heads toward the river as the gate to the real world disappears. The unsteady instrumentals and lyrics of “Riding the Scree” reflect Rael’s chaotic attempt to save his brother. Once Rael enters the water in “In the Rapids,” he fights the crashing, cold water and barely escapes to save John. However, once he looks at John’s face, he sees that his brother’s face is actually Rael himself. The final song, “It,” consists of numerous rock references, including Jimi Hendrix’ “Purple Haze,” and Genesis’ 1972 song “Supper’s Ready.” Overall, the track reflects upon Rael’s psychological journey and what it took to leave his cocoon and come of age (Genesis).

Although this is just a surface-level analysis of *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* that does not include all of the lyrical references and musical connections, it is quite clear that a piece of symphonic art Rock is much more involved and philosophical than that of an album simply connected by one general theme. While earlier concept albums may focus on one subject like love, albums like *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* contain a great deal of subjective storylines and intricate beliefs that allow the listener to immerse themselves in the work and interpret it in their own unique way.

Concept Albums of Other Genres

While Jazz, Classic Rock, and Progressive Rock groups had immense success with the idea of the concept album, other genres often struggled to captivate the listener due to its incompatibility with AM radio and requirement for long form listening. One of the main genres that experienced this struggle was Country and Western. Despite the conservative audience and Music Row's reluctance, some Country artists, most of whom were members of the countercultural movement, were able to defy the norm and make use of the concept album. One of the leaders of this movement was Willie Nelson, who left Nashville in 1969 to make music that was set apart from mainstream Country radio. With the help of his manager, Neil Reshen, experimentation with drugs, the study of psychic readings, and his increasing popularity among the hippie youth, Nelson was able to release his first concept album, *Yesterday's Wine*, in 1970. This album was extremely spiritual, and Nelson insisted that it could only fully be appreciated through long-form listening. This resulted in a commercial failure, as only one single reached number sixty-two on the *Billboard* Hot Country Singles Chart (Stimeling 390-397).

In 1974, Nelson once again attempted the concept album in *Phases and Stages*. His goal was to create a unified narrative on each side of the LP, with side A being a wife's voice and side B being her husband's voice. The ongoing divorce between the couple linked both sides of the LP, and Nelson included his own personal sleeve notes to cement it as cohesive work. However, Nelson's label refused to publish the notes and would only release singles, thus diminishing the overarching concept of the album. Not only were Nelson's artistic intentions destroyed, but he also achieved no mainstream success, as none of the singles broke top ten on the *Billboard* Country Charts (Stimeling 398-402).

Nelson's final approach to the concept album was *Red Headed Stranger* in 1975. Instead of writing an entirely new storyline, Nelson selected previously written songs from other artists

that could be combined to create a story. Nelson then used his outlaw persona, musical style, and a description of the intended plot to link the tracks. Finally, Nelson accomplished the balance between long form listening and commercial popularity in Country radio with a chart topping single and critical acclaim from Paul Nelson, who likened Nelson to countercultural icons like Bob Dylan. Nelson's ability to challenge genre norms and promote the concept album not only as an artistic endeavor, but also as a generator of radio singles once again demonstrates the value of the concept album to artists and listeners alike (Stimeling 389-393, 402-406).

Concept Albums Today

As the concept album has become more common throughout the late 20th century, artists in a great deal of genres have tapped into its potential. Not only have artists experimented with new technology on these concept albums, but a constantly changing world has provided a great deal of material for social criticisms and thematic possibilities. One of the most prominent and recent concept albums is Radiohead's 1997 *OK Computer*. This Rock album, which has often been likened to earlier Progressive Rock, uses each track to gradually construct a feeling of technological alienation within the listener. Although band members claim the album is not as cohesive as critics and fans believe, musical scholars like James Doheny continue to compare it to other remarkable concept albums such as Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon* (Letts 28-32).

More recently, another key example of a successful concept album comes from Janelle Monáe, an American singer and rapper who has been no stranger to conceptual works. In 2018, Monáe released her concept album *Dirty Computer*. The narrative follows a dystopian future in which humans are treated like computers, and nonconformance is not tolerated. The principal theme simultaneously tackles contentious issues such as discrimination, violence, and injustice

(Wood). The contemporary use of concept album proves that although it may not be as revolutionary a tool as it was in the 1950s and 1960s, it continues to set artists apart and significantly influence the social and musical atmosphere.

In just over half of a century, the concept album has become a prominent tool that has spanned across genres of musical production. It has allowed artists to elevate their musical composition, and it has given albums a higher purpose through expression of the artists' personal beliefs and criticism of societal values. This has resulted in music of all types achieving the status required in order to be critically recognized. Not only has the concept album been of great benefit to musicians, but it has also allowed for long-form listening, which challenges the audience, thus making their musical experience more meaningful. Despite today's musical culture in which digital streaming of singles is overcoming the purchase of an entire album, the artistic significance of concept albums remains relevant. From Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here* in 1975 to Kendrick Lamar's *good kid, m.A.A.d. city* in 2012, the concept album has continued to demonstrate its ability to immensely impact the social, musical, and artistic environment across numerous genres and generations.

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