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“DADDY, WHAT’S A CONCEPT ALBUM?”

What was the first record you ever bought? Was it a 78 rpm, a 45 rpm, a 33½ LP, a reel-to-reel tape, an eight-track cartridge, a cassette tape, a compact disc, or (fanfare, please!) a file downloaded from the Internet? How you answer this question connects you to a very specific time frame in the evolution of recorded sound in the 20th century.

Men and women have been making music since pre-historic times. Banging a bone on a hollow log was music. Grunting rhythmically while hunting or working in a field was music. Playing with the echo in a cave was music. Of course, the only ones who heard this “music” were those who were making it and others who happened to be within earshot.

Now let’s jump forward a few centuries to a time when more-sophisticated humans took the idea of music to a

whole other level. Songs, melodies, and rudimentary instruments sprang up simultaneously all over the globe. Music began to be recognized as a hobby, a diversion, a way to kill time, entertainment, and, finally, an art unto itself.

Music began to be used for specific practical functions: worshipping, celebrating, mourning, preparing for and waging war, expressing love, soothing children, and simply amusing family, friends, and strangers. And so it went until 1877, when Thomas Alva Edison devised a machine—the phonograph—that actually captured the sounds of voices and music and could play them back over and over again—anytime, anyplace.

That was it! That was the sea change: Music became a unifying social force, not just locally but, eventually, globally, with commonality of message available worldwide at the mere flip of a switch or turn of a dial. What was so different about this new means of disseminating music? As Langdon Winner, a political scientist who studies how technology affects social and political issues, beautifully expressed it in his essay about the 1967 release of the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*:

The closest Western civilization has come to unity since the Congress of Vienna in 1815 was the week the *Sgt. Pepper* album was released. In every city in Europe and America, the stereo systems and radios played [the title song] and everyone listened.

At the time, I happened to be driving across country on Interstate 80. In each city where I stopped . . . the melodies wafted in from some far-off transistor radio or portable hi-fi. It was the most amazing thing I've ever heard. For a brief while, the irreparably fragmented consciousness of the West was reunified, at least in the minds of the young. Every person listened to the record, pondered it, and discussed it with friends. While it is no doubt true that I have little in common with the gas station attendant in Cheyenne, Wyoming, we were able to come together to talk about the meaning of "A Day in the Life" during those few moments in which the oil in my VW was being changed.

That is why the *Sgt. Pepper* album, *Pet Sounds* by the Beach Boys, and *Bookends* by Simon and Garfunkel were and are so important. As we moved into the 20th century, modifications improved upon Edison's rudimentary phonograph. In response to this burgeoning technology, new industries developed to capitalize on all the opportunities it created. Foremost among them were the record companies; RCA Victor, Capitol, Columbia, Decca, Mercury, and MGM led the pack.

Initially, a disc with a single song on only one side was the norm. Then, songs were placed on both sides of the disc. In the days when only 78 rpm recordings were made, some enterprising marketer came up with the idea of

combining several of these discs into a single package called an *album*. Then in 1948, Columbia Records introduced the first 12-inch, 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ rpm, microgroove long-playing album (*LP* for short). This meant that recorded pieces from longer-form performance categories became available on a single disc or a collection of discs. The ways to hear, remember, replay, absorb, and relate to all kinds of musical performances reached new heights of dizzying ecstasy!

Early on, LPs were collections of isolated, unrelated songs by an individual artist, group, band, or orchestra. It didn't take long for someone to figure out that a performer who had achieved a healthy number of mainstream, radio-friendly hit recordings could gather those songs on a single album and call it the performer's *Greatest Hits*. Technically, you could call these best-of collections *concept albums* by default. This formula took off like wildfire and continues in one form or another to this day.

Other early collections of music could also be loosely described as concept albums even if they weren't consciously intended to be. Basically, any album that is unified by a distinctive theme of any kind can be considered conceptual. Early examples include *Dust Bowl Ballads* by Woody Guthrie, from 1940 and *The Lure of the Grand Canyon* by Johnny Cash, from 1961, and, even before he released his masterpiece, *Pet Sounds*, in 1966 (which Paul McCartney has acknowledged was his main inspiration

for *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*), Brian Wilson demonstrated his genius and affinity for the form with at least two early Beach Boys albums that were centered around a specific subject, theme, or mood. *Little Deuce Coupe*, released in 1963, contained a dozen pop songs about America's fascination with car culture, and the *Beach Boys' Party!*, from 1965, attempted to loosen up the formality of a studio recording by re-creating the ambience of a teen or young adult party, complete with ashtrays, drink glasses, and off-key singing by some of the guests.

Some of our more ambitious, talented, and visionary musical artists realized early on that you could do a lot more with a long-playing album than collect random musical selections. The more adventurous among them began to write, design, and organize serious song cycles based on a single theme.

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A CONCEPT ALBUM? WHAT A CONCEPT!

In addition to the albums of concerts, symphonies, greatest hits, and subject-related songs already mentioned, two other progenitors of the concept album in popular music have to be acknowledged. One is a category and the other an individual. The category is Christmas albums, of which there are hundreds, and the individual is Frank

Sinatra, one of the towering figures of 20th-century American popular music.

6 | Sinatra's relationship with rock and roll might best be described as uneasy. Despite his 1957 diatribe declaring rock music to be something performed and consumed by "cretinous goons," Ol' Blue Eyes still deserves credit for his role in the development and popularization of thematically conceptual albums. After his "bobby-soxer idol" status screeched to a halt in the late forties, Sinatra pulled off one of the biggest comebacks in the history of show business. He resurrected his recording career after signing with Capitol Records in 1953 and released a steady stream of artistically, commercially, and critically successful LPs. The distinguishing characteristic of these remarkable recordings was the thematic unity of their content, which showcased every aspect and nuance of the singer's deep reservoir of talent. When Sinatra died in May 1998, *New York Times* critic Stephen Holden wrote of this period:

Only five years earlier, the long-playing record had been introduced, and the longer form encouraged Sinatra, who brought remarkable introspective depth to the interpretation of lyrics, to make cohesive album-length emotional statements . . . Sinatra's Capitol albums were among the first so-called con-

cept albums in the way they explored different adult approaches to love and invoked varied aspects of the singer's personality.

On the lighter, upbeat side were Sinatra's recordings, such as *Come Dance With Me!* (1959) and *Come Fly With Me* (1958), whose titles alone reveal the interweaving subject matter of the song selections. *Songs for Swingin' Lovers!* (1956) and *A Swingin' Affair!* (1957) defined Sinatra's "Rat Pack" image as a fun-loving, jet-setting playboy. But the LP that solidified Sinatra's credentials as a master of the concept-album form was released in the spring of 1955. Called *In the Wee Small Hours*, the songs chronicled the disintegration and dissolution of his marriage to the ravishing American film actress Ava Gardner, particularly "In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning," "Mood Indigo," "Glad to Be Unhappy," "I Get Along Without You Very Well," "When Your Lover Has Gone," and "I'll Never Be the Same." Unlike most of the great rock-era concept LPs, whose songs were written and sung by their primary composers, Sinatra didn't *write* these songs, but he was an interpreter par excellence. Other equally powerful albums that followed in its wake, such as *No One Cares* (1959) and *Frank Sinatra Sings for Only the Lonely* (1958), only reinforced Sinatra's description of himself as a "saloon singer"—the guy who walks into the bar in the literal wee small hours of the morning.

By the mid-1960s, the foundation was firmly in place

for a new generation of artists, composers, and musicians to expand and develop the still-untapped possibilities of the concept album in a rock-and-roll framework. The first wave of young adults raised on this music had matured without preconceptions about its limitations. In fact, quite the opposite was true. The best and brightest of this new breed felt that the opportunities for artistic expression in the medium were limitless. The image of a rock suggests rigidity, but the rock in rock and roll was, in fact, very flexible and adaptable.

Many of the accepted conventions of songwriting and record making were ignored or abandoned by the cutting-edge rock musicians of the mid-1960s. Dumbing it down was replaced by smartening it up. For one brief, shining moment, it appeared that the influence of artistic considerations would outpace that of commerce in the recording industry. There could be blues rock and folk rock and country rock and jazz rock and even classical rock and rock opera. But the powerful one-two-three punch that made the phrase *concept album* an indelible part of the rock lexicon was those three albums released in 1966, 1967, and 1968: *Pet Sounds*, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, and *Bookends*.

We've already mentioned Brian Wilson's early dabbling with thematic recordings, but *Pet Sounds* took everyone (including his bandmates) by surprise. It had the earmarks that one expected from a Beach Boys

album—exquisite, tight vocal harmonies; catchy hooks and choruses; adventurous musical arrangements—but this one had something else as well. It had maturity. It had vulnerability. It had the razor’s-edge wisdom of a tortured genius grappling with life issues of much greater import than surfing, cars, and girls on the beach. Working with lyricist Tony Asher, Brian explored the thin line that separates adolescence from young adulthood with candor, beauty, and wistfulness. The Beatles had begun to prove it, but *Pet Sounds* made it official and undeniable: Rock and roll had grown up and become a very credible form of artistic expression in the 20th century.

There is probably no greater testament to the impact and influence of *Pet Sounds* than the profound effect it had on Wilson’s peers. Countless musicians at the time and right up to this very day point to that album as the one that inspired their own creativity. Of all the honors and accolades bestowed upon *Pet Sounds*, perhaps the greatest and longest-lasting measure of Wilson’s achievement is the magnitude of its influence on one fellow musician in particular who, coincidentally, had been born two days earlier than and a continent away from Wilson in June 1942. That musician was James Paul McCartney, who has been steadfast in his praise of Brian Wilson and *Pet Sounds* and very candid and generous in describing how it influenced and inspired his own group’s next ambitious long-form project—the standard by which all future

rock concept albums would be measured—*Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

It should come as no surprise that Simon and Garfunkel were hot on the heels of the Beatles. Just 10 months after the *Sgt. Pepper* release, they unleashed their own entry in the concept-album sweepstakes. It was called *Bookends*. It had some thematic similarities with *Sgt. Pepper*: “Save the Life of My Child” equals “She’s Leaving Home” or “A Day in the Life”; “At the Zoo” equals “Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite!”; “Old Friends” equals “When I’m Sixty-Four.” There were pronounced differences as well. *Pepper* was psychedelic and colorful. *Bookends* was not; it was black and white and gray. The stark black-and-white Richard Avedon photo that adorns the cover perfectly reflects what awaits you inside.

Bookends is the album on which Paul’s writing and composing talents came to full fruition. All his major themes (youth, alienation, life, love, disillusionment, relationships, old age, and mortality) are represented here in mature, gripping form. It was “the perfect storm” of rock albums—a once-in-a-career convergence of musical, personal, and societal forces that placed Simon and Garfunkel squarely at the center of the cultural zeitgeist of the sixties. *Bookends* came at the height of their musical, personal,

and professional partnership and propelled them in that same year to accomplishments greater than had been achieved by any other duo in the history of popular music (including their own idols, the Everly Brothers).

To this day, everyone talks about how Bob Dylan “went electric,” but with *Bookends*, Simon and Garfunkel went *electrifying*. They elevated the grammar and vocabulary of popular music. They stretched the possibilities of what could be accomplished on a long-playing record. And they reconfigured the emotional, intellectual, and musical limits of rock and roll. In a musical form better known for its primitivism and raw sensuality, these two wrote and sang as if they had brains as well as balls.

And then they *proved* it!