

Fifty Years of the Concept Album in Popular Music: From The Beatles to Beyoncé

Eric Wolfson

New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024

9781501391804

Eva Dieteren

Kingston University

eva.dieteren@kingston.ac.uk

In the realm of popular music, where the 'concept album' has long been a contested and elusive entity, Eric Wolfson's *Fifty Years of the Concept Album in Popular Music: From The Beatles to Beyoncé* (2024) emerges as a significant contribution to ongoing debates among scholars and critics. The book guides readers through the evolution of the concept album, from its nascent emergence in the late 1960s to now, through five eras defined by Wolfson: The Founding Era (1967-9), The Golden Era (1970-4), The Modern Era (1975-89), The Postmodern Era (1990-9) and the New Millennium (2000-16). Widening its scope, the book explores the multifaceted ways in which the 'concept album' has been employed.

Scholarly discussions on the concept album have primarily focused on progressive rock as the genre that has most significantly and extensively shaped its development (Letts 2010; Burns 2016). Wolfson acknowledges the predominance of progressive rock yet offers a more diverse overview of the concept album, analyzing twenty-five albums across a wide variety of genres. Starting with The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) and ending at Beyoncé's *Lemonade* (2012), the book presents an alternative history to the concept album and thus, raises the questions of whose work receives recognition as a concept album and why. These questions, however, are only briefly addressed in the chapter on Janelle Monáe's *The ArchAndroid* (2010) where Wolfson reflects on how concept albums have long been understood as the domain of white, male musicians

and that concept albums created by women and people of color have been undervalued and underrepresented (198).

Rather than starting with a definition of the concept album, the book's introductory chapter endeavors to trace its etymology in music journalism. While noting the significance of The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper*, Wolfson does not solely accept this album as the starting point for discussions on the concept album, listing earlier magazine articles that use the term and categories of predecessors to the 1960s concept album: LP concept, idea album, and album concept. Wolfson arrives at an overarching definition of the concept album as "an album that takes you on a journey by virtue of its unifying mood, theme, narrative, and/or underlying idea" (9). This definition is supported by Wolfson by adding several common traits of concept albums as well as the context in which it later flourished (namely the emergence of psychedelic drug consumption).

The following chapters each present a case study of an individual album. Wolfson unpacks these through analyses of the tracks in chronological order, supported by contextual information derived from interviews, album reviews, and additional paratextual materials, bearing similarity to the *33 1/3* series. Wolfson concludes each chapter by stating the current relevance of the album and its legacy in popular music history. These analyses will greatly benefit music scholars and students examining albums as comprehensive works, highlighting the distinct affordances of the album format compared to individual songs. Additionally, it provides a model for integrating social, political, and cultural contexts into musical analysis. On the one hand, the vast number of case studies considered here form a significant contribution to diversifying discussions on concept albums, though, on the other hand, it results in more surface-level analysis and limited dialogue between the findings in each chapter. Nonetheless, several chapters highlight compelling entanglements, such as the relationship between Afrofuturism and the concept album in the chapters analyzing Jimi Hendrix' *Electric Ladyland* (1968), Parliament's *Motherhip Connection* (1975), and Janelle Monae's *The ArchAndroid*, showing how outer space can be used within concept albums to symbolize Diasporic cultures.

While valuable in and of themselves, the broader significance of these individual case studies could be clarified if the introduction's reflection on the varied historical ideas of the concept album was continued as a thread throughout the monograph. Discrepancies between definitions of the concept album are symptomatic of the term's blurry boundaries, both in academic and non-academic debates. This complexity is addressed well in several chapters, though this is not applied consistently throughout the book. De La Soul's *3 Feet High and Rising* (1989) is defined as a two-tiered concept album due to its use of sampling, but this is not used to describe other albums that make use of sampling. Donna Summer's *Once Upon a Time* (1977) is described as one of the best-organized concept albums, showcasing that there are degrees of 'success' within the album format. However, for the most part, while Wolfson's broad opening definition creates room for questioning the boundaries of definitions of the concept album, the lack of development on his definition as the monograph develops and the lack of reflection on that of other scholars overlooks the format's complex identities.

Recent academic literature has attempted to narrow down these broad definitions by focusing on musical particularities, unification strategies, historical categories, and taxonomies of types of concept albums (Burns 2016; Decker 2013; Letts 2010; Merlini 2021), and, in doing so, raise alternate questions about categorization affects analyses and vice-versa. For example, Elicker, who argues for clearer album categories rather than open definitions (2001: 228), separates rock opera albums from concept albums. While Wolfson includes The Who's rock opera *Tommy* (1969) as a concept album case study, Elicker argues it is not, instead separating rock operas as albums that are more contextually situated and focus on one story. Furthermore, Wolfson separates the music videos of Beyoncé's *Lemonade* from the concept album, whereas scholars such as Burns (2016) argue that music videos and supplementary materials extend understandings of the concept album and thus are not separate elements. Addressing these debates of what a concept album entails would clarify the sociopolitical implications that Wolfson's selection of case studies alludes to: who gets to decide what is labelled a concept album and what is not? Is it academic scholars, music critics, the artist, or the listener? Whilst it is unrealistic to expect any writer or scholar to 'solve' the issue of offering a complete definition of the concept album, an exploration of its instability and uncertainty would have strengthened Wolfson's analysis and his objective of diversifying discussions on the concept album.

In conclusion, *Fifty Years of the Concept Album in Popular Music* serves as a valuable resource for scholars and music enthusiasts interested in concept albums, particularly through its broad selection of case studies. This is a significant contribution to discussions on the topic, which have often focused primarily on progressive rock and albums by white, male musicians. However, its argumentation could have been further strengthened by incorporating academic literature and further reflecting on different ideas of what is and, more importantly, what is not a concept album and why. Wolfson's foresight does encourage a shift in perspective, suggesting that the future of the concept album lies beyond progressive rock, in the vibrant realms of hip-hop, punk, techno, and other unforeseen genres. This insight urges scholars to embrace a more diverse conversation that recognizes the evolving and innovative nature of contemporary concept albums.

References

Bibliography

- Burns, L.A. 2016. 'The concept album as visual—sonic—textual spectacle: The Transmedial storyworld of Coldplay's Mylo Xyloto.' *IASPM journal*, 6(2): 91-116.
- Decker, T. 2013. 'Fancy Meeting You Here: Pioneers of the Concept Album', *Daedalus*, 142 (4): 98–108. doi: https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00233
- Elicker, M. 2001. Concept Albums: Song Cycles in Popular Music. In W. Bernhart, W. Wolf & D. Mosley Eds. *Word and Music Studies : Essays on the Song Cycle and on Defining the Field: Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Word and Music Studies at Ann Arbor Mi 1999*. Amsterdam: Rodopi: 227-

246. 2

Letts, M.T. 2010. *Radiohead and the Resistant Concept Album: How to disappear completely*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Merlini, M. (2021). The Second Death of Concept Albums World-Building and Unification Strategies in the Age of Streaming. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Musicology*, (21): 57-73.