The album cover dates from 1939, when Columbia Records art director Alex Steinweiss decided his label’s offerings might find a wider audience with some added visual appeal. Since the very first Steinweiss design, an album of showtunes by Rogers and Hart, album covers have represented the apotheosis and nadir of graphic design, and have touched all points in between.

Last weekend we asked our readers to select the best album covers of all time. In the age of the digital download, the album cover is sadly a lost art – which probably explains why 90 percent of the albums that readers selected come from the 1960s and the 1970s. Here are the Top 5:

1. The Beatles - Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band
   1967, Apple Records
   Designer: Peter Blake
   Total reader votes: 1,202

   The cover was originally going to show the Beatles playing in a park. That slowly evolved into the final concept, where they stand amidst cardboard cutouts of their heroes. The band originally planned on including Leo Gorcey, Gandy, Jesus Christ and Adolf Hitler. Common sense kicked Hitler off the cover, the still-lingering bitterness of John Lennon’s “bigger than Jesus” comment kicked Jesus off the cover and Gandhi got the boot over concerns that India wouldn’t print the album.

2. Pink Floyd - Dark Side Of The Moon
   1973, Harvest records
   Designer: Hipgnosis
   Total reader votes: 933

   Hipgnosis had designed several of Pink Floyd’s previous albums, with controversial results: the band’s record company had reacted with confusion when faced with the collective’s non-traditional designs that omitted words. Their initial inspiration for Dark Side was a photo of a prism on top of some sheet music. It was black and white, but a color beam was going through it.

3. Nirvana - Nevermind
   1991, Geffen records
   Designer: Robert Fisher
   Total reader votes: 755

   Spencer Elden, the naked baby on the cover, said he feels weird about his bizarre role in history. “It’s kind of creepy that many people have seen me naked,” he said. But what does this cover mean? “Kurt was in intellectual and deep-thinking about his work,” says Fisher. “I must assume that the naked baby symbolized his own innocence, the water represented an alien environment, and the hook and dollar bill his creative life entering into the corporate world of rock music.”

4. The Beatles - Abbey Road
   1969, Apple Records
   Designer: John Kosh
   Total reader votes: 729

   Beatles nuts who believed that Paul McCartney died around 1967 and was replaced by a dopplegänger found a lot to examine on this cover. They saw the picture as a funeral procession: John as the preacher, Ringo as the mourner, George as the gravedigger and Paul as the corpse. Iain Macmillan shot the cover on August 8th, 1969, outside of Abbey Road studios. The shoot involved just six frames and 10 minutes of work. Tourists flock to the spot, and it’s been parodied countless times – sometimes by members of the Beatles themselves.

5. The Clash - London Calling
   1979, CBS Records
   Designer: Ray Lowry
   Total reader votes: 695

   Pennie Smith was snapping photos of the Clash at New York’s Palladium when she captured one of the most iconic images in rock history. Paul Simonon was annoyed by the relatively quiet audience, so he began smashing his bass guitar against the floor. Clash singer Joe Strummer loved the photo, but Smith tried to convince him it was too out of focus for the cover. The pink and green lettering of the design was an intentional echo of Elvis Presley’s 1956 debut album.

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Harry Beck and London’s iconic Tube map

By Dan Carrier

The tube map almost never made it out of its creator’s notebook. The designer was Harry Beck, a young draughtsman who drew electrical circuits for the Underground. Beck’s biographer, Ken Garland, befriended him in the 1950s, and before the designer’s death in 1974 he uncovered the story behind the creation of what Beck called “the diagram.”
“As a native of a small village in Devon and moving to London to study art, I found the metropolis impossible to navigate,” Garland recalls. “I would get on the tube and see Harry's diagram. London suddenly made sense, and so I asked people at the college if they knew who the designer was.”

Garland was told that HC Beck could be found at the London College of Printing, where he taught part-time, and he paid him a visit. They soon became friends.

Beck first drew his diagram in 1931 – a difficult time to be working for the newly established London Transport Passenger Board. With money tight, the board’s employees could be laid off at short notice. Beck, then 29, had been employed as a “temporary” since he first started in 1925. While at work, drawing an electrical circuit diagram, he had an idea: a new map that would raise the profile of the tube and attract much-needed new passengers, and that would make the system seem modern, quick, efficient – and, above all, easier to navigate.

At the time, the maps of the network showed individual lines run by different railway companies. It was geographically correct, but impossible to read. The lines snaked all over the place. The first map, published in 1908, betrayed the fact that different operators were competing with each other and could not agree where the Underground ended.

Beck laid out London's Underground routes as he would a circuit diagram, he had an idea: a new map that would make the system seem modern, quick, efficient – and, above all, easier to navigate. The publicity department realized they had a hit on their hands, he had to fend off “helpful” suggestions from tube bosses. He was constantly seeking to improve its clarity, and when the public liked it, they needed a bright idea to sell the Underground. “Beck's map was the catalyst,” says Garland.

More than a million were in circulation within six months of being commissioned. Wall maps were next. Beck was paid a further five guineas to produce one. But for something that was so recognisable as a piece of “trademark” art, Harry Beck was not, according to Garland, part of the modernist movement that was sweeping through the psyche of painters, sculptors, other designers and filmmakers of the period. “He was not influenced by contemporary art,” says Garland. “He knew little or nothing about it.”

As an idea, a new map that would make the system seem modern, quick, efficient – and, above all, easier to navigate, Harry Beck was good news for the tube. Passenger numbers had levelled off, and they needed a bright idea to sell the Underground. “Beck’s map was the catal”yst,” says Garland. "Harry Beck was good news for the tube. Passenger numbers had levelled off, and they needed a bright idea to sell the Underground. "Beck’s map was the catalyst," says Garland."

Garland continues: “Beck would not take no for an answer. He embarked on a letter-writing campaign to take back control of his life's work. It was fruitless. London Underground accepted no argument that the current map was influenced by his work, or that it was an inferior design. When Beck fell ill, his piles of sketches were destined for the dustbin, but Garland stepped in and saved them – recognising that they were crucial to understanding its development. Among the papers Garland saved was the first pencil sketch of the diagram, now at the V&A Museum. The diagram’s iconoclastic status should not be overlooked, says Garland. “It has touched so many people. The tube diagram is one of the greatest pieces of graphic design produced, instantly recognisable and copied across the world. His contribution to London cannot be easily measured, nor should it be underestimated.”

POSTER PARADE

After World War I, striking modern posters began to transform the stations of London's underground railway system into public art galleries. The posters, now part of an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art, were the crucial face of a pioneering public transport campaign for coherence and efficiency that also included station architecture, train interiors — and Harry Beck’s map.

Beck's dismissal made him suspicious of London Underground. He chose to sell the idea to them as a freelance (for just ten guineas), giving him control over the future integrity of his design. But as work in his old office began to pick up, his former colleagues remembered him: they had appreciated his help in the tube workers’ orchestra and, in 1933, he was back on board and pitching his idea again.

Garland continues: “Beck would not take no for an answer. He went back with a revised copy, and finally they agreed to produce a small print run of 1,000 fold-out versions, put them in central London train stations and ask passengers for comments. One of the publicity team went to Piccadilly Circus and asked staff if anyone had been interested in the diagram. The maps had gone within an hour. Beck had been proved correct, and the publicity department arranged for a print run of 750,000.

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But in 1959, after nearly three decades of working on the diagram, he was unceremoniously dumped from the project. Garland explains: "Harry went one morning to his local station and there on the wall was a diagram that was not done by him. It was devastating. To add to the insult, he thought it was a crude and ineffective version of his own diagram. It was signed by Harold F. Hutchinson, not a designer but head of the publicity department." According to Garland, Beck had become known in the publicity department for being “difficult” when it came to the diagram, and there were moves to remove his stewardship.

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