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The Concept Album Continuum

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The Concept Album Continuum

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I. Introduction

Arguably one of the more elusive topics in music, concept albums continue to defy traditional categorization. As opposed to traditional musical genres and theories that have been in practice for hundreds, if not thousands, of years, the concept album is a relatively new innovation in the sphere of musicology. In generalized terms, the concept album may be considered an alternate version of a ‘traditional’ musical album in which there is an overarching narrative or musical structure that connects each track to the greater whole. The flexibility with which concept albums are approached by artists, as well as the broadness in presentation tactics, establishes the concept album as an ambiguous matter that is difficult to classify in an objective manner. First and foremost, it is important to outline the various definitions of concept albums that exist – each one varying in specificity and depth. For, it is precisely this dissent that has created an inconclusive idea surrounding the requirements of a concept album.

Numerous experts have offered unique definitions of a concept album spanning from the 1960s to today. Quite vaguely, Donald Clarke in the *Penguin Encyclopedia of Popular Music* describes the concept album as “an LP intended to be integrated on a set theme”. Moreover, Ken Scott proposes a similar interpretation when he states, “the term concept album means an album where all of the tracks are ‘in some way’ connected ...I can only guess that a concept album is in the eye/ear of the beholder” (Montgomery, 2002). These generalized definitions unintentionally include countless traditional albums though, in fact, any album that is based loosely on an event or theme but fails to incorporate any other conceptual elements. For that reason, Clarke offers an unhelpful attempt at narrowing the defining parameters of a concept album. On a slightly more detailed note, Roy Shuker in *Key Concepts for Popular Music* notes that “in this form, the album [changes] from a collection of heterogeneous songs into a narrative work with a single theme, in

which individual songs segue into one another” (Montgomery, 2002). In this case, Shuker favorably differentiates between a traditional and concept album and introduces the idea of aural continuity, providing a more thorough understanding of the concept album. However, Shuker’s definition neglects other potentially critical aspects that characterize concept albums, such as shared musical elements in the form of recurring melodies, motifs, rhythmic patterns, key relationships, and/or lyrical connections.

Edward Macan ventures to adjust Shuker’s effort in considering the concept album as “the practice of tying a series of songs together by using both a recurring melodic theme and a program – that is, a unifying idea or concept which is developed in the lyrics of the individual songs...” (Montgomery, 2002). Conversely, Bill Martin warns that “if this term refers to albums that have thematic unity and development throughout, then in reality there are probably fewer concept albums that one might at first think... However, if instead we stretch the definition a bit, to where the album *is* the concept, then it is clear that progressive rock is entirely a music of concept albums...” (Montgomery, 2002). This tactic, known as the “complete album approach”, offers yet another angle of the concept album that is not often considered where “the album rather than the song [becomes] the basic unit of artistic production” (Montgomery, 2002). While meaningful in theory, the complete album approach does not specify any particular parameters of what constitutes a concept album.

It is clear through the exploration of various one-dimensional definitions that a consensus has not yet been reached that encompasses the exhaustive and eclectic nature of the concept album, nor does it appear that one will develop in the near future. Therefore, I am offering an alternative approach to classify the concept album in a multi-dimensional manner that may solve issues of exclusion. Rather than attempting to provide a lengthy and fallible interpretation of the

musical form, I propose that all concept albums be considered as part of a ‘concept album continuum’ that ranges from loose to strict. Those that are to be considered ‘strict’ concept albums should satisfy multiple, if not all, of the continuum criteria that I have determined¹, whereas those that are to be considered ‘loose’ concept albums merely satisfy one or two of the components. Each characteristic, to be explained further, is consistent with concept albums on an individual scale, but the combination of two or more strengthens the conceptual integrity of the album significantly. In other words, the more characteristics that are satisfied by a particular album, the more likely it should be widely accepted as a true concept album.

Under the continuum model, the first and most important characteristic that should be considered is the presence of a strong narrative, storyline, or conceptual foundation. Albums that satisfy this criterion to the greatest extent may also incorporate the use of characters or narration. Although, those that do not contain these elements may still be considered along the continuum, but they must possess other concept album characteristics and the album’s placement would be shifted toward the ‘loose’ side. Furthermore, another identifying characteristic of the concept album is the connection and repetition of musical elements among tracks, including but not limited to: melodies, rhythmic patterns, key relationships, motifs, lyrics, and instrumentation. It is worth noting that albums that omit both a narrative structure or solid conceptual basis, as well as well-connected musical elements may result in a significantly reduced likelihood that those albums may be considered conceptual². In addition to these founding two criterion, other

¹ See Table 1 for an organized visual representation of the various continuum characteristics.

² Examples of albums that fail to include both areas are curations – including ‘topical’ albums such as Christmas/holiday albums, ‘live’ albums, ‘best of’ albums, comedy albums, and ‘fad’ albums like ‘twist’ or ‘surf’ records. In these instances, the connection among tracks is founded upon a basic shared topic but is not related by any other narrative or storyline structure. In these cases, each track is widely considered separate from neighboring tracks, and albums of this kind do not relate musically either (with the exception of potentially lyrical and instrumentation similarities). For this reason, curations should be included as the left-most edge of the concept album continuum under the ‘loose’ range.

recommended characteristics that reinforce a concept album’s credibility and ‘strictness’ include: focused and meaningful intent by the composers³, supportive visual components including related cover art or film, transitions between songs, and consistent songwriters for most, if not all, tracks on the album⁴. The more of these supporting features that are included in a particular album the farther the album will shift toward the ‘strict’ domain, and vice versa. While some aspects may be deemed subjective, the concept album continuum offers a structured and detached view in order to allow for a careful consideration and comparison of musical records.

Characteristic	Satisfied Y/N
<i>Strong</i> narrative, storyline, or conceptual foundation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Character names or narrator • Related narration between songs 	
Well-connected musical elements among tracks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Melody (or Repeated Melody) • Rhythm • Key Relationships • Motifs • Lyrics • Instrumentation 	
Focused and meaningful <i>intent</i> by the composers	
Supportive visual components (ex: graphic novels, films, music videos, etc.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cover art relates to the concept 	
Smooth transitions between one or more tracks	
Most, if not all, tracks on the album are composed by the same songwriter(s)	

Table 1. This table outlines each characteristic of the concept album continuum and includes a column to delineate whether a particular criteria is satisfied in the analysis of an album.

³ This aspect is especially important considering *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* that was written by the Beatles. For an album that is oftentimes considered the quintessential ‘rock concept album’, the Beatles did not actually begin the composition process with the objective to compose a concept album. In David Montgomery’s analysis of the genre he states, “...some of the songs were composed before it occurred to the Beatles to use the motif of *Sgt. Pepper*.” (Montgomery, 2002).

⁴ While this element is not required for *all* tracks, an album’s placement has the potential to be greatly affected if there are no shared songwriters between any of the tracks, or if various tracks were written years apart and by different songwriters. That being said, however, an album’s credibility should be increased if all tracks on the album are written by the same few songwriters, as this increases the likelihood that there was a shared vision during the creative process that resulted in an *intentional* concept album.

II. Historical Background

a. Concept Album Precursors

The ideas that have inspired concept albums are not unique to the long-playing record (LP) and modern eras, in fact, concept albums owe much of their genius to classical composers of the Classical and Romantic periods. Before the invention of modern recording technology, composers utilized live performances, sheet music, and literature, among other things, as part of their creative processes. A popular area of inspiration was poetry – more specifically, pre-written poetic cycles which classical composers set to music in order to arrange song cycles. These poetic cycles consist of a collection of individual poems that are normally written by a single poet, all of which are centered around a “storyline; a central theme or topic such as love or nature; a unifying mood; poetic form or genre” (Youens, 2001). Correspondingly, a song cycle is defined along the same boundaries as “a group of individually complete songs designed as a unit...for solo or ensemble voices with or without instrumental accompaniment”. A defining component of song cycles includes the conceptual coherence, which “may [be derived] from the text...or from musical procedures” (Youens, 2001). Song cycles vary in length, comprised of as few as three songs or of greater than fifty – each one depends on the artistic judgement of the composer. Moreover, classical composers often have selected specific poems from the poetic cycle and may oppose using the entire collection, which, may be argued as a form of nineteenth-century curation. The transformation from poetic to song cycles can be argued as a direct precursor to modern-day concept albums, as both genres share parallel features.

Frauenliebe und Leben

One song cycle that exemplifies the unity of both lyrical and musical elements is Robert Schumann’s 1840 song cycle *Frauenliebe und Leben*, Op. 42 (“A Woman’s Love and Life”).

Borrowed from an 1830 lyrical setting by poet Adelbert von Chamisso, Schumann sets the first eight of nine poems to music⁵. The poetic cycle outlines a chronological narrative in which the female protagonist first meets her lover, subsequently following their journey together through life and marriage until ultimately concluding with his death (Daverio & Sams, 2001). The final poem in Chamisso's original cycle – which Schumann chooses to omit in his musical adaptation – *Traum der eignen Tage* (“Dream of your own days”) is set in the future and is sung to the protagonist's granddaughter. The decision of Schumann to exclude this poem was most certainly a conscious one and reveals how the composer sought to alter the poet's narrative so as to make the work his own. By inserting personal stylistic decisions into the work, Schumann exemplifies the phenomenon where artists borrow source material from pre-existing works and present them in a new form – a practice that is still prevalent today. A modern-day parallel involves the concept of lyricists providing lyrics for artists, with which those musicians create the supportive musical setting. As Barbara Turchin notes in her analysis of Schumann's cycle, “...the majority of critics of Lieder expressed the opinion that it is the poet's duty to create a sequence unified in subject, yet diverse in mood and expression, and so arranged to create a steady intensification of feeling. It is then the composer's duty to follow the poet's lead, to realize in music with equal intensity and diversity the ever-changing expression of the poetic texts”. Through the unification of text and tune, two artists collaborate to construct a complete conceptual masterpiece.

Frauenliebe und Leben is not significant solely because of its poetic narrative. Schumann proves that the musical elements in a song cycle are equally as important as the lyrics in conveying the intended mood, theme, or narrative. Through the deliberate use of key relationships, word painting, and motifs that connect each of the eight songs, Schumann is able

⁵ For a German-to-English translation of the song titles, please refer to Table 2.

to compose a listening experience that reflects, as well as strengthens, the textual foundation provided by Chamisso. Principally, Schumann utilizes key relationships as a form of musical storytelling⁶ – by beginning and ending the cycle in the tonic key, including the final song *Nun hast du mir den ersten Schmerz getan*, the listener achieves a strong sense of closure and contentment⁷.

Additionally, Schumann integrates the use of melodic motifs that intensify the complexity of *Frauenliebe und Leben*. Within the first few measures of the opening song *Seit ich ihn gesehen*, a melodic gesture is presented that “not only reappears in subsequent songs, but also reflects the tonal structure of the opening song itself and, in turn, embodies the tonal structure of the cycle’s first half” (Turchin, 1985). The theme itself is comprised of merely four notes, F-G-F-Bb or 5-6-5-1, yet this simplistic melody sung by a female mezzo soprano appears multiple times throughout the cycle as seen in songs 3, 5, and 7. Using the expertise of Barbara Turchin, this theme may be considered the “head motive” of this cycle which she deems also “[acts] an emblem of the protagonist herself: as her life progresses through Chamisso’s poems, Schumann’s motto assumes various guises”. The inclusion of thematic material that Schumann places strategically throughout *Frauenliebe und Leben* reinforces the composer’s legacy as a creative virtuoso who is able to craft “inner coherence, poetic unity, all bathed in refreshing fantasy”, while also providing substantial evidence to suggest that 19th Century song cycles should be considered examples of classical precursors to the 21st Century concept album (Turchin, 1985).

⁶ For an outline of key relationships and their corresponding songs, please refer to Table 3.

⁷ This final song even contains a coda that is an exact reiteration of the entire strophe of the first song. Schumann creates a cyclical aesthetic by incorporating elements of the first song into the last – a feature that makes the audience feel as though they have begun listening to the song cycle all over again.

Table 2. German-to-English translation of all of the eight song titles in the song cycle *Frauenliebe und Leben* by Robert Schumann (1840)⁸.

Song Title	English Translation
1. 'Seit ich ihn gesehen'	"Since I Saw Him"
2. 'Er, der Herrlichste von allen'	"He, the Noblest of All"
3. 'Ich kann's nicht fassen, nicht glauben'	"I Cannot Grasp it, nor Believe it"
4. 'Du Ring an meinem Finger'	"Thou Ring on my Finger"
5. 'Helft mir, ihr Schwestern'	"Help Me, Sisters"
6. 'Süßer Freund, du blickest mich verwundert an'	"Sweet Friend, You Gaze"
7. 'An meinem Herzen, an meiner Brust'	"At my Heart, at my Breast"
8. 'Nun hast du mir den ersten Schmerz getan'	"Now Thou Hast Given me, for the First Time, Pain"

Table 3. The song cycle *Frauenliebe und Leben* by Robert Schumann is composed in the key of Bb Major. This table outlines the dominant key(s) of each song and notes their relationship to tonic, respectively⁹.

	Name	Key	Relationship to Tonic
1	<i>Seit ich ihn gesehen</i>	Bb Major	I
2	<i>Er, der Herrlichste von allen</i>	Eb Major	IV
3	<i>Ich kann's nicht fassen, nicht glauben</i>	C minor	ii
4	<i>Du Ring an meinem Finger</i>	Eb Major	IV
5	<i>Helft mir, ihr Schwestern</i>	Bb Major	I
6	<i>Süßer Freund, du blickest mich verwundert an</i>	G Major → C Major → G	VI → II → VI
7	<i>An meinem Herzen, an meiner Brust</i>	D Major	III
8	<i>Nun hast du mir den ersten Schmerz getan</i>	D Minor → Bb Major	iii → I

⁸ Lyrical translations were accessed via Ezust, E. (n.d.) *Frauenliebe und -Leben*. *The LiederNet Archive*. Retrieved from http://www.lieder.net/lieder/assemble_texts.html?SongCycleId=70.

⁹ The sheet music for *Frauenliebe und Leben* was accessed via Whistling, F. (n.d.). *Frauenliebe und Leben*. *IMSLP: Petrucci Music Library*. Retrieved from [https://imslp.org/wiki/Frauenliebe_und_-_leben%2C_Op.42_\(Schumann%2C_Robert\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Frauenliebe_und_-_leben%2C_Op.42_(Schumann%2C_Robert)).

Corresponding audio used was accessed via Hielscher, U. & Rubens, S. (2008). Schumann, R.: *Lied Edition – Vol. 5 – Frauenliebe und -leben*, Op. 42. *Naxos Music Library*. Audio Recording Retrieved from <https://merrimack.naxosmusiclibrary.com/catalogue/item.asp?cid=8.557078>.

Pierrot Lunaire

It should be noted that not all song cycles are composed using the same approach yet can be equal in their thematic unity. Over sixty years after *Frauenliebe und Leben* was premiered, Arnold Schoenberg composed the 20th Century song cycle *Pierrot Lunaire* using atonal techniques¹⁰. While more obscure in its compositional nature than Schumann's cycle, *Pierrot Lunaire* incorporates distinct qualities that illustrate an equal musical impact. First written as a series of fifty poems by Belgian writer Albert Giraud in 1884 and then translated to German by Otto Erich Hartleben, Schoenberg was commissioned to compose the 'melodrama' in 1912 by actress-singer Albertine Zehme (Winiarz, 2000). Selecting twenty-one poems from the Giraud's original collection, *Pierrot Lunaire*, translated to "Moonstruck Pierrot", is separated by Schoenberg into three parts of seven poems each¹¹. In Part I, the protagonist Pierrot becomes "intoxicated by the moon, fantasizes about love, sex, and religion." Contrastingly, throughout Part II Pierrot "finds [himself] in a violent nightmare world of plunder and blasphemy." Finally, the cycle concludes with seven songs in Part III where Pierrot "journeys home to Bergamo, haunted by nostalgic thoughts of a fabled past" (Winiarz, 2000). The number seven is not coincidental in the case of *Pierrot Lunaire* – Schoenberg was captivated by numerology and expresses this fascination throughout the entirety of the work. For example, as John Winiarz notes in his analysis:

"The number of songs selected (21) reverses the digits of the opus number (12) and 1912, the year of composition. The numbers three, seven, and thirteen dominate the work. Three authors are involved—Giraud, Hartleben and Schoenberg—and the work's three parts each contain seven poems. The poems, all strict rondeaux, have three verses totaling thirteen lines, with the first line stated three times (with repetitions at lines seven and thirteen). The

¹⁰ In *Pierrot Lunaire*, Schoenberg employs a style of atonal singing known as "Sprechstimme" – a combination of song and speech in which neither take precedent.

¹¹ For a German-to-English translation of the twenty-one poems of *Pierrot Lunaire*, please refer to Ezust, E. (n.d.). *Pierrot Lunaire*. *The LiederNet Archive*. Retrieved from http://www.lieder.net/lieder/assemble_texts.html?SongCycleId=180.

performing ensemble, made up of a conductor, vocalist, and five instrumentalists, totals seven members, and the seven-note Pierrot motif (G#, E, C, D, Bb, C#, G—one note for each letter in Pierrot's name) is omnipresent throughout the music.”

The use of numerology throughout Schoenberg's composition provides a sense of organization and predictability to an otherwise unstructured work. Without the presence of melodic or harmonic repetition in an atonal composition, with the exception of the Pierrot motif, *Pierrot Lunaire* must compensate by creating an impression of form in unconventional ways. For example, structure can be found in various classical forms and techniques applied by Schoenberg; such as fugue (in *Der Mondfleck* or “The Moonspot”), canon, rondo, passacaglia, and free counterpoint (in *Enthauptung* or “Beheading”)¹² (Winiarz, 2000). Furthermore, *Pierrot Lunaire* is structurally unique in that it conceptually multi-dimensional – parts I, II, and III each contain drastically different thematic centers, yet each set of seven songs are all related to their respective themes. Thus, Schoenberg's 1912 cycle may instead be considered three miniature song cycles within one grander work. The employment of classical techniques, numerological patterns, and multiple concepts provide an alternate method of formal structuring that serves as yet another foundation for modern artists to build upon in the 21st Century. It should also be considered that instrumental classical compositions offer essential components as well, particularly the programmatic symphonies of Ludwig van Beethoven and Hector Berlioz¹³.

¹² Alley, J. et. al. (2007). Schoenberg: *Pierrot Lunaire* / Chamber Symphony No. 1 / 4 Orchestral Songs (Schoenberg, Vol. 6). *Naxos Music Library*. Audio Recording Retrieved from <https://merrimack.naxosmusiclibrary.com/catalogue/item.asp?cid=8.557523>.

¹³ For example, Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125 and Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*.

b. The Modern Concept Album

Due to a general lack of consensus on an all-encompassing definition of the term ‘concept album’, it is challenging to determine when the format first came about. One of the earliest known mentions of the idea was presented in the late 1960s in a column released by Jack Holzman of Elektra Records, in which he stated “...the present trend enables the producer of his recordings to take his cues from the successful recording and build an entire LP concept behind it...” (Montgomery, 2002). Moreover, in the year 1968 Holzman proclaimed “...the LP...should no longer be considered as simply an expression of the aural arts, but as an expression of visual merchandising and creativity as well. This totality...should result in the making of each LP as an “event”” (Montgomery, 2002). Clearly, even though the term ‘rock concept album’ was not introduced until years later¹⁴, conceptual developments were transpiring in the music industry at this time regardless of whether an explicit term was invented or used consciously by artists.

These conceptual developments would not have become fully realized without a medium for dissemination – in particular the long-playing record (LP) first introduced by Columbia Records in 1948¹⁵. While I will not investigate the technological history of musical albums or the LP in this paper, it is worth noting that the development of the concept album during the 1960s and beyond would not have been possible without the timely invention of the LP, which allowed for greater music capacity¹⁶ (i.e. longer track lengths as well as full album capacity) on a single record and thus, allowed for musicians to expand upon their artistic narratives. In fact, Frank

¹⁴ It was not until 1978 that Adam White proposed a definition for the term ‘rock concept album’. His definition includes: “*rock concept albums*, namely, a sustaining storyline set to music, which features guest artists and musicians often on loan from other labels, alongside the central performer(s)” (Montgomery, 2002).

¹⁵ See Chapter 3 of “Montgomery, 2002” for an in-depth historical background surrounding the development of the LP and its impact on the music industry.

¹⁶ Other advantages of the LP included: “listeners [had] the cherishable satisfaction of hearing recorded performances without breaks in continuity; they minimized the twin woes of surface scratch and record wear; they alleviated the problem of storage; they provided more music per dollar than had ever been offered before” (Montgomery, 2002).

Sinatra conjectured that “the LP...calls for an entirely new approach to recording – from the artist’s point of view.” William Schafer describes how this new approach “symbolizes the aspirations of the counterculture” in which “the format of the album itself, i.e., the very existence of the long-playing record [made] musical and thematic exploration possible” in the first place (Montgomery, 2002). Therefore, it begs the question of whether albums released before the production of the LP are able to be considered under the umbrella of the concept album, or whether this medium is an instrumental component of their essence. I may argue that while albums before the introduction of the LP could have been *conceived* and *composed* as concept albums and performed live, widespread audience reception would have proven quite difficult and therefore a concept album format would not have been accepted by the record industry until the advent of the LP. Furthermore, the entire conception of the ‘album’ pre-LP and post-LP are entirely distinct, with the former only allowing for a few tracks of three minutes or less each and the latter possessing the ability to contain over forty-five minutes of music¹⁷. Our current understanding of the concept album is founded upon around the structure and capacity of the LP, and for that reason albums produced after 1948 should predominantly be considered.

The fact that concept albums prove difficult to clearly define also poses another challenge: determining the ‘first’ concept album. Many musicologists declare The Beatles *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) as one of the first true ‘rock’ concept albums, while others consider Frank Sinatra’s album *In the Wee Small Hours* (1955) a qualifying record – meanwhile, Woody Guthrie’s *Dust Bowl Ballads* (1940) contains conceptual elements as well. In short, one’s determination of the first concept album is completely dependent on the parameters of their individual definition. This ambiguity is precisely what has necessitated a new approach

¹⁷ The maximum playing time of the 12” disk (LP precursor) was approximately 23 minutes (Montgomery, 2002).

to categorizing concept albums, hence the introduction of the continuum model I am proposing here. Using the framework of the continuum model, a complete reconsideration of what may be considered the ‘first concept album’ must occur.

With the introduction of a continuum framework, the inclination to confine an album to fit within the boundaries of a firm definition or deny certain albums from being considered altogether becomes abolished. Consequently, the quantity of albums that now fall under the concept album umbrella is greatly expanded – including albums that were produced before *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967). A few records that were released pre-*Sgt. Pepper’s* that would now occupy a place upon the continuum model include: Woody Guthrie’s *Dust Bowl Ballads* (1940)¹⁸, Duke Ellington’s *Black, Brown, and Beige* (1943)¹⁹, Woody Guthrie’s *Ballads of Sacco and Vanzetti* (1945-60)²⁰, Nat King Cole’s *Wild is Love* (1960)²¹, and Frank Sinatra’s *In the Wee Small Hours* (1955)²². The scope of the continuum is wider than traditional, oftentimes

¹⁸*Dust Bowl Ballads* was released pre-LP era upon two collections of three 78-rpm records. This album should be considered a modern-era concept album precursor based on the following characteristics: all of the tracks share a thematic core – the Dust Bowl, with elements of economic hardship and American spirit. Additionally, the album is semi-autobiographical with all tracks written by Woody Guthrie himself (with the exception of “Blowin’ Down This Road (I Ain’t Going to Be Treated This Way)” that was written with the help of Lee Hays). See (n.d.). *Dust Bowl Ballads: Woody Guthrie. Smithsonian Folk Ways Recordings*. Retrieved from <https://folkways.si.edu/woody-guthrie/dust-bowl-ballads/american-folk-struggle-protest/music/album/smithsonian>.

¹⁹ Composed in three parts, *Black, Brown, and Beige* is an extended jazz work that recounts a history of American blackness. The 1943 album was released as a 12” 78-rpm album set, and therefore should be classified under a similar category as *Dust Bowl Ballads* as a modern-era concept album precursor (Montgomery, 2002).

²⁰ Commissioned by Moe Asch in 1945, *Ballads of Sacco and Vanzetti* is a set of ballad songs written by Woody Guthrie about the trial, conviction, and execution of infamous Italian-born American robbers Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. Unsatisfied with the progress of the project, Woody Guthrie abandoned the work completely, after which Asch released the album anyway in 1960 (Montgomery, 2002).

²¹ Released in 1960, *Wild Is Love* written by Nat King Cole chronicles a narrator’s attempts at finding love, including his efforts in ‘picking up’ numerous women before he eventually finds love at the conclusion of the album. Connected with narration and containing themes of romance, excitement, and lust, *Wild Is Love* exhibits strong thematic and musical qualities that should categorize it as an early concept album. Where *Sgt. Pepper’s* is widely considered the first ‘rock’ concept album, Nat King Cole’s album may be considered the Jazz equivalent.

²²*In the Wee Small Hours* should be considered, in one form or another, a curation due to the fact that he did not write any songs on this record (with the exception of the final song “This Love of Mine”). The question arises regarding the intent of the numerous songwriters and whether they all shared a collective, deliberate vision during the creation of this album – especially considering that multiple songs were written in the 1930s and 40s. This album should instead be considered a loose concept album that contains shared general themes of loneliness, failed relationships, and night-life.

singular definitions of the concept album which wrongly exclude a number of significant works. Rather, a continuum model allows for a careful consideration and comparison of albums from various styles, decades, and contexts.

III. Concept Album Significance

The impact that concept albums have had on the music industry is immense in scope. The freedom in creative exploration that characterize this thoughtful structure, especially the reimagination of album composition altogether, has challenged former musical norms in more areas than one. Concept albums have created a platform for artists to extend their impact beyond the musical sphere – most notably, by offering commentary regarding political and social events, by compelling record and radio companies to design their business strategies around the concept album rather than vice versa, and by extending the musical experience of the listener to include physical and visual components of musical albums in addition to aural elements. Only in the case of operas, symphonies, and Wagner’s music dramas has a single musical concept caused a transformation of this magnitude, thus, the concept album is in great company.

A popular area of focus for many concept albums has been political and social commentary. A full-album concept provides an ideal format for disseminating an idea that is greater than one or two three-minute singles, and this mode of musical communication has proven to be an effective tool. For instance, many of these thematic albums coincide directly with significant periods or events – such as Woody Guthrie’s *Dust Bowl Ballads* that surrounded a topic infamous for difficult economic and social times, as well as Frank Sinatra’s *In the Wee Small Hours* that was released with depressing themes as an attempted means to capitalize on the

mood of the years following the Korean War²³. In the following decade, the 1960s were plagued by “socially-progressive responses in a time of political upheaval and sweeping societal change” in which “early rock ‘n’ roll and the folk and protest music ... [was] genuine, i.e. ‘authentic’ (even ‘revolutionary’)” (Montgomery, 2002). The term ‘modernism’ encompasses the societal transformation that was occurring during the 1910s and 20s which aimed to break with traditional artistic forms and may be defined musically as “a shifting between traditions and ideas that made listeners aware of the confined conceptual spaces they occupied” (Borders, 2001). While typically applied to the early twentieth-century, the term may also be appropriate for describing the era of the 1960s. One musician, Frank Zappa, utilized concept albums as a medium to “[attack] the entrenched critical and academic establishments whose members distinguished categorically between art and popular music, particularly as regards structural and tonal complexity”, specifically through “parodic *popular* critiques of the mass media, advertising, and the consumer culture that sustained [society]...”²⁴ (Borders, 2001). Yet, beyond challenging society through music, concept albums have stimulated a challenging of *music itself* through music.

Concept albums may be considered ‘extended works’ for their complexity and innovation beyond the norms of traditional albums. Especially in the 1960s and 70s, these continuous advancements in musical culture challenged other artists to simultaneously innovate

²³ The Korean War ended in 1953 and *In the Wee Small Hours* was released in 1955. During this period, soldiers had just recently returned home from war and many families in America had lost their loved ones, thus, an album that included themes of loneliness, lost love, and depression resonated with the American people.

²⁴ For example, some of Zappa and The Mothers of Invention’s earlier works including *Freak Out!* (1966), *Absolutely Free* (1967), and *We’re Only in it for the Money* (1968) all involve modernist themes of challenging consumer norms and mass media. The cover art for *We’re Only in it for the Money* is actually a direct play on The Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* that was released the previous year. In Zappa’s version, the band is dressed in drag with “MOTHERS” spelled out using vegetables and pieces of watermelon toward the bottom of the cover, with a collage of famous and infamous people in the back. *Freak Out!* Is deemed by Borders as “a song cycle with a unifying sociological theme: the Los Angeles scene of the mid-sixties, with its freak counterculture and racial tensions.”

to the point of rejection by their audiences, thus stretching the boundaries of conventional music to an unprecedented extent while raising the standards for musicians alike. The greatest example resides in the plethora of concept albums that can be found in the progressive rock style. ‘Prog Rock’ is characterized by musical and conceptual experimentation that can take on the form of extended song and instrumental solo lengths, obscure or non-traditional instrumentation, and even the invention of a new genre of music known as the ‘Rock Opera’²⁵. While not entirely synonymous with the classical opera, rock operas of the mid-twentieth century proved an awareness of classical styles in mainstream rock groups and initiated an exploration of avant-garde techniques that were concurrently evolving. In addition to the concept of the Opera as a whole being used in the rock style, many progressive rock artists of the 1970s were incorporating smaller operatic elements into their works as well. For instance, the use of overtures was a popular technique in progressive rock concept albums to connect musical elements among songs, mention melodic motifs, and introduce key relationships. One example is the “2112: Overture I” in Rush’s 1976 album *2112*. A further example can be found in the heavy metal style in Dream Theater’s “Overture 1928” from their 1999 album *Metropolis Part 2: Scenes From A Memory*.

Twentieth-century classical avant-garde composers such as John Cage, Philip Glass, and Terry Riley were reconsidering and deconstructing the concept of form – creating the style known as ‘minimalism’²⁶. A confirmation that many rock musicians of the 1960s and 70s were aware of their avant-garde classical counterparts can be seen, as well as heard, directly in The Who’s song “Baba O’Riley” – an ode to both Meher Baba²⁷ and Terry Riley that is founded

²⁵ Bands like The Who’s *Tommy* (1969) that was developed into a film in 1975 depicts a “deaf, dumb, and blind boy [on] a search for spiritual enlightenment” (Rockwell, 2002).

²⁶ Minimalism is characterized by intentionally simplistic melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic elements. Furthermore, minimalism of the 1960s and 70s was seen as “the major antidote to modernism, as represented by ... the indeterminacy of Cage” (Potter, 2014).

²⁷ Meher Baba was an Indian spiritual leader from whom band members of The Who followed and drew inspiration.

upon a minimalist rhythmic structure. Moreover, Frank Zappa exhibited a similar classical awareness. In his song “Brown Shoes Don’t Make It” off of his second studio concept album *Absolutely Free* (1967), Zappa composed “a seven-and-a-half-minute assault on twisted middle-class aspirations that shifts musical ensembles and styles from atonality and *Sprechstimme* to blues-based rock in almost stream of consciousness fashion”, not to mention Zappa’s experimentation with ‘musique concrète’²⁸, yet another classical form (Borders, 2001). The partnership between mainstream musicians and avant-garde classical composers of the 1960s and 70s spawned a collective petri dish through which techniques, concepts, and inspiration could be shared across stylistic boundaries – a phenomenon that continues today²⁹.

A further impact of the concept album on the music industry relates to the physicality of the albums themselves. Concept albums in particular are presented uniquely and quite contrastingly from traditional albums. As mentioned previously, before the advent of the long-playing record, music was released in terms of short singles of around 3-minutes or less. Once technology became available to accommodate a full-length album by today’s standards, many artists simply continued to present music in a likewise fashion, with albums consisting of curations of individual singles that can be played in any sequence. However, concept albums have altered the approach to albums completely – with records meant to be played from beginning to end in their entirety³⁰. In this way, “the ‘concept’ album gave rise to others whose album covers imitated art, albums designed to play from beginning to end without a break

²⁸ Musique concrète is a form of experimental music characterized typically by sounds found in nature, distorted sounds, or tape manipulation.

²⁹ One example of the continuation of this practice can be found in the conceptual works of the progressive bluegrass group Punch Brothers. Their album *The Phosphorescent Blues*, released in 2015, includes two bluegrass adaptations of classical works – “Passepied (Debussy)” and “Prélude (Scriabin)”, respectively.

³⁰ In other words, “in short...the concept album...exemplifies the impact of the long-playing record medium, and all that implies, on both musical style and genre.” (Montgomery, 2002).

(except for that necessitated by turning the record over), and even double and triple albums. For the first time, the album market became more lucrative than the singles market, and therein can be found one of the principal reasons for artistic developments” (Montgomery, 2002).

The advancements prompted by the concept album also affect the listening experience of their audiences, with people opting to purchase full-length albums as opposed to individual singles. This trend required record and radio companies to adapt to the shifting markets and adjust their marketing techniques accordingly in order to capitalize on the increasing popularity of concept albums. No longer were radio singles the core focus of an artist’s output, but rather albums were valued according to their well-roundedness and conceptual ingenuity. A full-album listening experience now challenges audiences to become more engaged in the musical experience, as well, and to consider the relationships among lyrical, musical, emotional, and occasionally visual elements and their connection to the overarching concept of the album. The integration of related visual components such as cover art, corresponding films, and music videos further strengthen a concept album’s credibility as well as separate the format from traditional albums that may only incorporate the first. Participation from a multi-sensory perspective becomes a compelling feature for those seeking a more enlightening musical experience³¹. Due to its exclusive and considerable impact in the areas of social and political culture, business and marketing tactics, and audience involvement, the concept album alone is responsible for altering the entire trajectory of the music industry. As stated by David

³¹ A few examples of such include: the film *Pink Floyd – The Wall* that was released in 1982 by the renowned progressive-rock group, Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*, a 46-minute film released along with her 2016 album, and *The Amory Wars*, a graphic novel series written and released by the heavy metal outfit Coheed and Cambria to accompany their concept album octalogy (to be discussed further in the “Musical Analysis” section). The former serves as the visual component to Pink Floyd’s rock opera that is *The Wall* that was released three years prior in 1979. The film explores the metaphorical barrier that a troubled rocker named Pink must face despite his tendencies to cope through isolation and self-harm, including numerous traumatic and depressive moments that are illustrated throughout the 26 tracks on the album.

Montgomery, “the concept album represents an ignored but significant challenge to many preconceptions regarding the composition, manufacture, distribution, repertoire, and consumption of popular music”.

IV. Musical Analysis

In order to illustrate the framework of the concept album continuum and its applicability, I am offering an analysis of three rock albums that are distinct in their characteristics relating to time period, rock style, and musical elements. Moreover, I hope to demonstrate how this model can be utilized as a form of relative objectivity when analyzing subjective material. The three albums I am examining include: *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) by The Beatles, *Good Apollo, I’m Burning Star IV, Volume One: From Fear Through the Eyes of Madness* (2005) by Coheed and Cambria, and *A Thousand Suns* (2010) by Linkin Park.

Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band (1967)

The Beatles’ eighth studio album is widely considered to be the quintessential rock concept album – a label I would deem as rather overstated. While I do not aim to diminish the album’s cultural, social, and musical significance and influence, for which it is exceedingly worthy, I believe that the popularity and artistic legacy surrounding *Sgt. Pepper’s* has created a clouded view of the album’s true conceptual strength. The premise of the album is founded upon the fantasy of performing as a fictional band for the fictional character named Sergeant Pepper. Aside from this vague framework and the album’s general themes of drug culture and psychedelic experiences, *Sgt. Pepper’s* fails to exhibit a *strong* conceptual foundation that would place it in the ‘strict’ region where it is often defaulted. Under this first characteristic, however,

the sub-category that considers the use of character names or a narrator is satisfied, as The Beatles each take on individual alter egos³².

Where this album lacks is in musical continuity. *Sgt. Pepper's* is characterized by its eclecticism – each track employs unique instrumentation, techniques, and musical styles which does not allow for a sense of connectedness³³. Apart from a reprisal of the opening track in the second-to-last song, the tracks are virtually unrelated musically. This fact could be due in part to multiple reasons. First, producer George Martin “himself took credit for the final order of the tracks on the LP...” meaning The Beatles themselves did not conceive of these songs in an intentional, chronological manner (Montgomery, 2002). Secondly, “...some of the songs were composed before it occurred to The Beatles to use the motif of *Sgt. Pepper*”, further reinforcing the lack of foundation. Finally, it is clear that Martin perceived this album as less of a concept album and instead more of a curation when he stated, “we had such a funny collection of songs, not really related to one another, all disparate numbers” (Montgomery, 2002). Whether The Beatles agreed with this determination when composing the album would require further investigation, however the former two pieces of evidence suggest a general lack of intent among all parties involved.

In term of cover art, there are elements that support a relationship between the music and its visual counterpart. The cover depicts The Beatles dressed up as their fictional alter egos surrounded by fifty-eight icons of popular culture. The sheer variety and number of individuals may be thought of as a reflection of the eclecticism of the music itself, while others may consider

³² For example, Ringo Starr's alter ego is named Billy Shears that appears in the opening track. Shears is introduced by McCartney who acts as the 'master of ceremonies.'

³³ The album incorporates stylistic influences such as vaudeville (a variety of French theatrical entertainment), circus, avant-garde, and Western (Indian) music. Unique instrumentation includes but is not limited to: harmonica, comb and tissue paper, sitar, tambura, and chimes.

it as “a critique of twentieth-century media [in which] they were themselves a subject within that critique” (Montgomery, 2002). The imaginative ambiguity that is *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* is a timeless fascination – one that deserves the praise and recognition of which it is given. However, when viewing this album through a strictly musical analysis lens, the evidence refutes the incredibly high standard that the album has held for so long. Therefore, for the reasons stated above, I would consider *Sgt. Pepper’s* to fit the loose-middle region of the continuum.

Characteristic	Satisfied Y/N
<i>Strong</i> narrative, storyline, or conceptual foundation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Character names or narrator • Related narration between songs 	No Yes No
Well-connected musical elements among tracks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Melody (or Repeated Melody) • Rhythm • Key Relationships • Motifs • Lyrics • Instrumentation 	Yes – Reprise No No No No No
Focused and meaningful <i>intent</i> by the composers	?
Supportive visual components (ex: graphic novels, films, music videos, etc.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cover art relates to the concept 	Yes
Smooth transitions between one or more tracks	No
Most, if not all, tracks on the album are composed by the same songwriter(s)	Yes

***Good Apollo, I’m Burning Star IV, Volume One: From Fear Through the Eyes of Madness* (2005)**

A completely different approach to the concept album can be found in the repertoire of the band Coheed and Cambria, a progressive rock heavy metal group who has been producing a string of related concept albums since their first album release in 2002. In fact, out of the band’s nine studio albums that have been released as of 2018, eight of those follow a single narrative storyline that coincides with the plot of a science-fiction graphic novel series written by the lead

singer Claudio Sanchez, titled *The Amory Wars*. Moreover, the name “Coheed and Cambria” actually stems from the names of the story’s two lead protagonists, husband and wife Coheed and Cambria Kilgannon – an element that further reinforces the band’s loyalty to their conceptual roots. The story itself is quite complex, with some albums acting as sequels, prequels, and even a subseries that branches off the original plot. For the sake of simplicity and conciseness, I am only focusing on the album *Good Apollo, I’m Burning Star IV, Volume One: From Fear Through the Eyes of Madness* which is the third installment out of the total eight. In terms of a plot summary for *The Amory Wars*, Wikipedia offers the most comprehensive version without actually reading the graphic novels themselves. The summary states:

“The Amory Wars is set in Heaven's Fence, a collection of 78 planets held in place by interconnecting beams of energy, known as the Keywork. The first half of the story narrates Coheed Kilgannon and Cambria Kilgannon's struggle against Wilhelm Ryan, the Supreme Tri-Mage (later referred to as the Archmage). The second half of the story focuses on the heroic journey of their son, messianic Claudio Kilgannon. Over the course of the story, Claudio assumes the mantle of The Crowning, foretold savior of Heaven's Fence. In the end, he will face the Archmage, absolute ruler of Heaven's Fence and the one ultimately responsible for the death of Claudio's family.” (Wikipedia)³⁴

The summary of the individual album *Good Apollo, I’m Burning Star IV, Volume One: From Fear Through the Eyes of Madness* is as follows:

“The story of Good Apollo takes a step outside the science-fiction narrative of the first three chapters and examines the life of The Writer, a character who is crafting the lives of the protagonist Claudio and his companions in the form of a fictional story. The album begins to resolve the issues of Claudio Kilgannon's quest to protect the Keywork and sheds more light on the demise of Coheed and his wife Cambria. Also, it expands on the issues of the Monstar virus and Jesse's involvement in the saga (supporting character - member of the rebellion). This album examines the ways in which The Writer’s life and personal demons affect his telling of the Amory Wars narrative” (Wikipedia)³⁵. In other words, according to the band’s website biography, this album is the first half of the third

³⁴ A more comprehensive version of this summary, including the summarization of the various albums can be found at (n.d.). The Amory Wars. *Wikipedia*. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Amory_Wars#The_Bag_On_Line_Adventures.

³⁵ For a more detailed summary of the individual album, please refer to (n.d.). Good Apollo, I’m Burning Star IV, Volume One: From Fear Through the Eyes of Madness. *Wikipedia*. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good_Apollo,_I%27m_Burning_Star_IV,_Volume_One:_From_Fear_Through_the_Eyes_of_Madness.

installment of the band's prog-rock/sci-fi tale of young Claudio Kilgannon - who is out to avenge the deaths of his parents (Coheed and Cambria) and his three siblings – while using the perspective of The Writer.

Thus, as far as narrative structure, Coheed and Cambria's octalogy is arguably the strongest example out of any concept albums in existence to date, and for that reason alone should be considered toward the stricter end of the continuum³⁶. However, the band's 2005 release would not hold up among other notable musically-focused concept albums as a result of its merely decent musical connectivity – the album requires the support of its exhaustive narrative counterpart in order to be distinguished as a concept album saga. The album itself begins with an instrumental track titled “Keeping The Blade”, which consists of an eerily beautiful duel between piano and orchestral strings that intensify in a hypnotizing manner. What follows is a number of stylistically unique tracks, including “Always & Never” that begins with acoustic guitar and vocals yet ends with electronic synthesizer, in the middle of which a child can be indiscernibly heard talking and laughing³⁷. The next track “Welcome Home” is the album's compositional apex that blends edgy heavy metal guitar solos with delicate vocal interludes, all in a progressive rock format. The subsequent track “Ten Speed (Of God's Blood & Burial)” – a rather unique story in which The Writer is having a delusional conversation with his ten-speed bicycle about his unfaithful lover Miss Erica Court – incorporates traditional heavy

³⁶ While the album contains an exceptionally strong narrative storyline and involves recurring characters, the album does not exhibit any spoken narration between tracks, nor do any songs transition smoothly from one to the next. Although, every song on this album is composed by the band members of Coheed and Cambria (and lead singer Claudio Sanchez is a co-writer of the corresponding graphic novel series *The Amory Wars*) which satisfies an important concept album characteristic. It is clear through the co-composition of both music and written content that Coheed and Cambria are quite deliberate in their approach to their music, and for that reason satisfy the continuum characteristic related to ‘focused and meaningful *intent*’. Finally, the album exhibits questionable relevancy, as it simply displays a bold and battered roman numeral ‘IV’ in red coloring atop a plain black background with the full album title positioned above in red font. The roman numeral is most certainly related to the chronology of the story (as this album is the first half of the third and fourth installments), however other albums within the octalogy portray science-fiction illustrations. Therefore, this characteristic is dependent on one's individual examination.

³⁷ A reprisal of this child's talk can be heard in the final track “The Willing Well IV: The Final Cut”, only in this case the words can be easily heard in phrases such as “hello” and “I love you”.

metal instrumentation, as do a majority of the album's songs³⁸, and contains a melody that is modified and repeated in the opening verse and chorus of the next song "Crossing The Frame". This same practice can be identified once more throughout the album when the melody of the track "Apollo I: The Writing Writer" is reprised identically in the second-to-last song "The Willing Well III: Apollo II: The Telling Truth".

The final few tracks of *Good Apollo, I'm Burning Star IV* act as a miniature prog-rock symphony, with a total of four 'movements' closing out Coheed and Cambria's third studio album. Each track of 'The Willing Well' small-scale saga exceeds seven minutes in length and illuminates a sub-plot within the larger narrative storyline. It is during these tracks that musical continuity can be heard *between albums*, specifically in "The Willing Well III: Apollo II: The Telling Truth" where, at approximately 4:46, a reprise of the melody from "Blood Red Summer" from the previous album *In Keeping Secrets of Silent Earth: 3* is performed. Following this reprisal, the line "Jesse | Bad boy | Just come look at what your brother did" is sung by Sanchez – a direct reference to the song "Everything Evil" from Coheed and Cambria's first album *The Second Stage Turbine Blade* that was released in 2002³⁹. In summation, Coheed and Cambria have created a unique conceptual legacy that is unparalleled in narrative complexity. The cooperation between the band's strong narrative foundation (and graphic novel supplement) and reasonable musical continuity – both within and among albums in the octalogy – position *Good*

³⁸ While many of the songs incorporate traditional heavy metal instrumentation as stated, other unique instrumentation includes: mandolin, ukulele, digeridoo, lap steel guitar, sound effects, and electronic synthesizer. The employment of alien-like synthesizer and sound effects can be heard throughout multiple tracks on the album, including "Apollo I: The Writing Writer", "Once Upon Your Dead Body", "The Willing Well I: Fuel for the Feeding End", "The Willing Well II: From Fear Through the Eyes of Madness", and "The Willing Well III: Apollo II: The Telling Truth".

³⁹ This type of multi-work connectivity can also be seen in the classical repertoire of German composer Richard Wagner. Wagner's 'Der Ring des Nibelungen', or The Ring cycle, is a series of four operas linked together by the same storyline in which leitmotifs are employed to unify the works.

Apollo, I'm Burning Star IV: From Fear Through the Eyes of Madness in the strict end of the continuum.

Characteristic	Satisfied Y/N
<i>Strong</i> narrative, storyline, or conceptual foundation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Character names or narrator • Related narration between songs 	Yes Yes No
Well-connected musical elements among tracks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Melody (or Repeated Melody) • Rhythm • Key Relationships • Motifs • Lyrics • Instrumentation 	Yes No No No Yes Yes Yes
Focused and meaningful <i>intent</i> by the composers	Yes
Supportive visual components (ex: graphic novels, films, music videos, etc.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cover art relates to the concept 	Yes – Graphic Novels ?
Smooth transitions between one or more tracks	No
Most, if not all, tracks on the album are composed by the same songwriter(s)	Yes

***A Thousand Suns* (2005)**

Whereas the former two albums have exhibited varying levels in musical continuity and conceptual strength, one album by the band Linkin Park satisfies both to a measurable degree. *A Thousand Suns* was released in 2005 and is the band's fourth studio album. The record centers upon the themes of nuclear warfare and human fears and may be interpreted as an extended metaphor for which 'broken' or oppressed people live in perpetual fear within a nuclear dystopia until they gain the united courage to rise up and rebel against their political and social oppressors. Co-lead vocalist Mike Shinoda claims that the band envisioned the record as a concept album during the initial stages of its development, however Linkin Park modified their approach as the process continued. Nonetheless, *A Thousand Suns*' contains elements of strong

musical continuity as well as the aforementioned solid conceptual foundation that compensate for the composer's questionable intent.

Musically, the tracks of *A Thousand Suns* connect to one another to a greater degree than both *Sgt. Pepper's* and *Good Apollo*. The album reflects the thematic essences of nuclear warfare and human fear in each of its individual tracks, while simultaneously conveying a sense of development that progresses from dystopian chaos to a unified clarity of its fictional society⁴⁰. Furthermore, each song transitions seamlessly from one to the next, oftentimes utilizing the same chord, drone, or key that ended the previous song to begin the following track. When considering the lyrical elements of *A Thousand Suns*, the band has provided their audience with much to examine. The album begins with "The Requiem", a track that is comprised of a slowed melody of "The Catalyst" – the track that contains the title phrase in lyrics that state, "God save us everyone | Will we burn inside the fires of a thousand suns? | God bless us everyone | We're a broken people living under loaded gun"⁴¹. The following track, "The Radiance", contains a speech by J. Robert Oppenheimer who is responsible for researching and designing designed the atomic bomb in 1945 – the scientist appears multiple times throughout the album, including in reference to Japan⁴² as well as to the title phrase itself⁴³. The narration of two other notable individuals can be heard on this album as well, including Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mario

⁴⁰ These themes are directly reflected in the cover art, as well. The album cover for *A Thousand Suns* consists of a sideways, black, and blurry mushroom cloud atop a plain white background – reminiscent of the clouds that inevitably appear after an atomic explosion.

⁴¹ This practice of sharing lyrics between two songs can also be heard in "Burning In The Skies" and "The Fallout" in which the latter reiterates those of the former.

⁴² Hiroshima and Nagasaki are the two Japanese cities that experienced atomic explosions as a result of Oppenheimer's research on the 6th and 9th of August 1945, respectively. The song "Jornada Del Muerto" is written and sung in Japanese.

⁴³ The title, *A Thousand Suns*, is a reference to J. Robert Oppenheimer's 1945 statement describing the atomic bomb "as bright as a thousand suns".

Savio, both of whom describe a growing unrest within society surrounding political injustices that were occurring at the time.

In addition to vocal narration, Linkin Park has also incorporated the use of motifs in multiple forms, the first of which is sound effects – more specifically cricket chirps, explosions, and indiscernible army commands that appear in “Burning In The Skies”, “Empty Spaces”, and “When They Come For Me”. The second form of motif can be heard in the lyrics, for which the permeating phrase throughout the album is “Lift me up, let me go” that can be heard in one form or another in various tracks, including “Jornada Del Muerto”⁴⁴, “Robot Boy”, “Iridescent”, and most importantly “The Catalyst” that acts as an epiphanic moment in the narrative’s development. The album ends with an acoustic ballad, “The Messenger”, that may be interpreted as an anthem of hope for the ‘broken people’ of the dystopian society, as well as for those in our present society today. This concluding track symbolizes the resolution of oppression while also signifying the calm after the storm that occurs once a seemingly insurmountable feat has been overcome. Linkin Park seeks to connect historical realities with fictional narratives in their 2005 record, with the ultimate goal of resonating with their audience in an innovative and creative manner. Through the use of both a connecting concept and compelling musical continuity – as well as the satisfaction of numerous other supporting conceptual characteristics – *A Thousand Suns* should be positioned in the moderately-strict region on the concept album continuum.

Characteristic	Satisfied Y/N
<i>Strong</i> narrative, storyline, or conceptual foundation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Character names or narrator • Related narration between songs 	Yes/No No Yes – Speeches
Well-connected musical elements among tracks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Melody (or Repeated Melody) 	Yes Yes

⁴⁴ The Japanese lyrics “Mochiagete, Tokihanashite” that are continuously repeated throughout this track roughly translate to “Lift me up, let me go”.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rhythm • Key Relationships • Motifs • Lyrics • Instrumentation 	Yes Yes Yes Yes Yes
Focused and meaningful <i>intent</i> by the composers	?
Supportive visual components (ex: graphic novels, films, music videos, etc.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cover art relates to the concept 	Yes Yes
Smooth transitions between one or more tracks	Yes
Most, if not all, tracks on the album are composed by the same songwriter(s)	Yes

V. Conclusions

The concept album has a rich musical history, with roots stemming back as early as the nineteenth century in the song cycles of classical composers like Robert Schumann. As concept albums continue to surface today among various musical styles, it is becoming increasingly important to more accurately define the term in order to fully understand the true significance and impact that the concept album has had on music. With such an extensive collection of diverse definitions and parameters that has been offered from the 1960s until today, it is unsurprising that the concept album continues to evade strict categorization. This lack of uniform comprehension has created a gap in the field of musicology – one that is also caused by an absence of an encyclopedic entry in the Groves Music Online Encyclopedia which acts as the premiere encyclopedic source for musical information. Due to these deficiencies, I am seeking to fill both gaps with the concept album continuum model. This model, ranging from loose to strict, considers two primary characteristics: a narrative foundation and musical continuity – at least one of which should be included in any concept album⁴⁵ – as well as multiple supporting

⁴⁵ It is worth noting that albums that omit both a narrative structure or solid conceptual basis, as well as well-connected musical elements may result in a significantly reduced likelihood that those albums may be considered conceptual.

elements that, when included, strengthen the conceptual integrity of an album⁴⁶. The more characteristics that are satisfied by a particular album, the ‘stricter’ the album is placed along the continuum, and vice versa. This model offers a structured and detached view of the concept album in order to allow for a more careful consideration and comparison of musical albums.

In my analysis, I have exemplified one concept album that possesses neither a strong narrative structure nor musical continuity, one that contains a strict narrative plotline with little musical relation, and one that satisfies both to a measurable degree⁴⁷. The examination of three distinct concept albums, all unique in their historical decade and musical approach, is intended to demonstrate the sheer diversity and creativity with which an album may be composed – precisely one reason why a continuum model that embraces all concept albums within its boundaries is an optimal system for categorizing this musical form. It is my objective that the continuum model is not only used as a tool for classification, but that it also influences future concept album creations. In fact, as a compliment to this thesis I am composing an original concept album to be disseminated in May 2019, which, as part of the early stages of development, is already being influenced by this model. After having outlined the various characteristics that are included in the concept album continuum model, I have found myself considering the strictness of my own elements as they are written and modifying them accordingly, in order to strengthen the theoretical placement of my future complete work. As formerly stated, the concept album continuum model provides an organized framework for analyzing and categorizing a once indefinable form of music. While their complexity and

⁴⁶ These supporting elements include: focused and meaningful intent by the composers, supportive visual components including related cover art or film, transitions between songs, and consistent songwriters for most, if not all, tracks on the album.

⁴⁷ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, *Good Apollo, I’m Burning Star IV, Volume One: From Fear Through the Eyes of Madness*, and *A Thousand Suns*, respectively.

ambiguity have previously been sources of difficulty in traditional classification, it is through this model that concept albums are rightfully praised for their individuality and creativity – a feature of music that should forever be cherished.

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