

15 Incredible Music Albums Depicting a Theme or Story

Shôn Ellerton, February 2, 2021

Here is a list of 15 of some of my all-time favourite albums depicting a complete story or theme.



I was thinking the other day whilst rummaging through a box of very tatty-looking used LPs in the market stalls, what will happen to the ‘story-board’ LPs, those epics featuring gatefold and thick glossy beautifully put-together inserts printed with lyrics spinning a story or a narrative for the listener to follow to? What I was thinking of really is what could possibly replace them?

I look back to those halcyon days of re-discovering my parents’ collection of LPs hailing from the 70s. The Who, Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, and Yes are just a small sample of music my parents were into and as a young boy I was hooked on them. From the many years to come, I discovered an incredible vast universe of music through the recommendations of my friends and families, especially from my younger sister who opened new vistas of music in the weird and wonderful from Loop Guru, Juno Reactor, Coil and Meat Beat Manifesto.

But what about these big epic pieces of music often lovingly rendered on vinyl portraying a story that simply *must* be listened in its entirety? How about that feeling of unravelling a double gatefold LP, putting the record on the turntable, and sitting back whilst reading the story printed on the insert? On the rare occasion, I’ve come across some rather nice posters in the sleeve as well; a bonus only possible with vinyl.

Somehow, the same magic just doesn’t seem to work so well with CDs. Granted, there are, in existence, CDs that come available in those extra-wide

jewel cases big enough to hold a mini booklet; however, given the size, the print is often too small for mortal eyes, even if stretched over multiple pages. As for the plastic jewel cases and the delicate plastic ‘rose’ in the middle that often shatters, this further detracts from the magic.

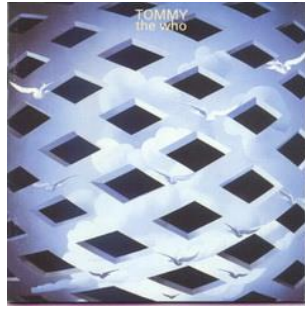
As for electronic media files and streaming media services, the magic is lost completely. If I was given a folder of music media files or a playlist through Spotify from a friend who wanted me to listen to what I call a ‘story-book’ piece of music, it is simply not the same as being handed the LP or CD. They are just a clinical list of tracks on the surface. No artwork to entice you. No story to read. Nothing, unless one takes the time to research it on the Internet and download the story and then print it out. I haven’t come across anyone who has done this.

An example of this genre of music is Pink Floyd’s *The Wall*. When divided into media files, most of the tracks seems quite fragmented and nonsensical if played individually, but when played as a whole and in combination with following the lyrics on the gatefold, it comes to life. The Who’s *Tommy* and *Quadrophenia* are other examples, the original *Quadrophenia* double-LP including a sizable insert resembling a small book.

In a list of fifteen works of art, I recall some of my favourite pieces of music which either depict a complete story, have a related series of interconnected important messages to convey, many of which are social or political, or simply have the need to be listened to as a complete piece uninterrupted. My list of fifteen below includes some of those big, and sometimes indulgent epics of the prog-rock era of the 70s, some works with an important message relating to the social and political issues of the day, atmospheric pieces which are concordant with a specific theme and a few others which do not fit in any of these categories.

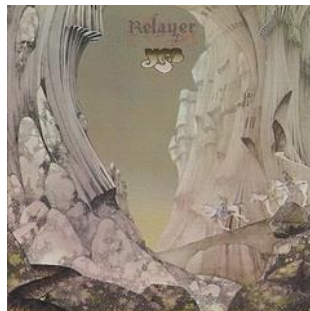
I am keeping the list short and sweet as it would be overly exhaustive to list all my favourites. Having a personal collection of nearly five thousand albums and an endless amount of music available on streaming services, it is no wonder many of us earmark a tiny fraction which we deem as masterpieces. Music is highly subjective, and it gives me pleasure to share my favourites as it is to receive recommendations from others. Most on this list are reasonably well-known and range from classic 70s prog-rock to singer songwriters to pop and electronica. I hope you enjoy my list.

#1. *Tommy* by The Who (1969)



What sets this apart as one of the greatest albums of this genre is its storyline, disturbing and rejuvenating at the same time. The tragic tale of a four-year-old boy, Tommy, who goes deaf and blind through shock when he witnesses a murder, through a mirror, when his mother's boyfriend gets shot by her husband when he unexpectedly returned, the mother having thought he died at war (WWII). It is later revealed that he started to regain his senses through the activity of playing pinball and after many years later, began to regain his senses. The music is classic 70s rock, some of which holds very well on its own, but listening to the complete work is an experience, especially when played very loud, something which The Who was renowned for.

#2. *Relayer* by Yes (1974)



For me, the group, Yes, defines everything what a magnificent progressive rock band should be. Some consider Yes to be a little more on the self-indulgent side of things in terms of both music and lyrical content; however, I see nothing short of utter brilliance. Their lyrics are powerful, poetic, incredibly vivid and lucid to the point of being a near out-of-body experience. As to their works, I could add their earlier masterpiece, *Close to The Edge*, on this list, but having limited myself to adding one per artist on this list, I've chosen the lesser-known *Relayer*, which came out a year after. Many of the album covers of Yes are

extraordinarily beautiful having been designed by Roger Dean, an artist my father used to know in person.

The whole of the first side of *Relayer* is the epic track, *Gates of Delirium*, a grand discourse of the evils of war leading up to a crescendo culminating in a ten-minute bridge of the most insanely brilliant frenzy of angry screaming electric guitars, runaway drums, and constantly changing tempos as if emerging from the depths of Milton's Pandemonium. After the bridge, it all subsides to the most emotive and haunting gentle melody for the remainder of the track spelling out the virtues of peace and harmony. The best electric guitar-playing I've ever heard.

#3. *Radioactivity* by Kraftwerk (1975)



Radioactivity is Kraftwerk's weirdest and, in places, the most sinister of their works in my opinion. Listening to this electronic wonderland of shortwave radio interference signals, garbled news broadcasts from old news radio broadcasts heavily distorted, the incessant in-your-ears sound of a radio star beaconing as a distress signal with a background of slow chanting voices, and robotic electronic 'voices of energy' make this a genuinely creepy album. It feels so 'German' to me insofar that my own late German grandfather was heavily involved with X-ray development, high-voltage electricity and research into heavy water in Sweden during WWII. It evokes such memories of his experiences and his, rather sardonic and grim sense of humour of what can go wrong when science experiments don't go as planned. Oddly enough, the CD version, for some reason, omitted some of the humming background noises which gave the LP version so much atmosphere. Perhaps this was unintentional 'cleaning' up the sound.

#4. *The Myths & Legends of King Arthur & The Knights of The Round Table* by Rick Wakeman (1975)



An album that gave me so much pleasure as a youngster and still does to this day. The LP comes with a beautifully put-together insert with illustrations and lyrics written in gothic font and illuminated letters. The music, a keyboard and synthesizer bonanza accompanied by a classical orchestra and vocals, is incredibly complex and melodic evoking the feeling of battling knights in medieval times, encountering mystical magicians and mourning the death of Arthur after the battle with Mordred, the traitor. The lyrics, alone, gives a very brief, but effective, story of the rise and fall of King Arthur. The mainly instrumental track, *Merlin the Magician*, is the most magnificent one on this album in my opinion, but all of them are exceptional. This could, possibly, be the first album I listened to, played over and over, and adored.

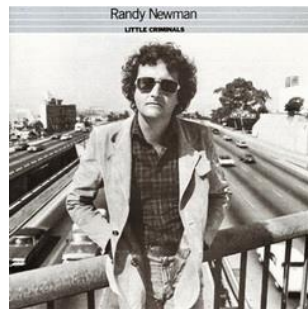
#5. *Songs in The Key of Life* by Stevie Wonder (1976)



This surely has to be the best Stevie Wonder album ever made, if not one of the best albums of all time. This stunning double-album in a gatefold complete with a booklet containing all the lyrics is a musical wonderland conveying the message that love, hope, kindness and integration is the key to making our seemingly increasingly divided world a better place to live in. Miscegenation, racial colour-blindness, hope, salvation, pathos, birth and rejuvenation are key messages to take from this album. Listening to this album now is more than apt

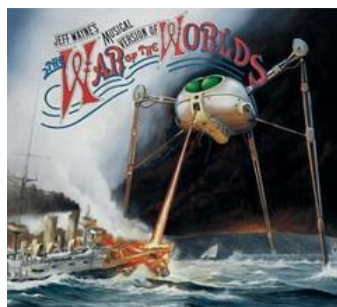
as ever and reminds us that racial hatred and inequalities still exist with us today. Not only does listening to the complete album draw a picture, every track nicely owns up as a single piece. In my opinion, *Pastime Paradise*, notably re-used by Coolio in the 90s, is the most noteworthy. The popular, over-long and over-gooey track, *Isn't She Lovely*, is the one I have to skip over every time, as it just gets on my nerves, but other than that, a nearly perfect album.

#6. *Little Criminals* by Randy Newman (1977)



Randy Newman, a pianist singer songwriter, came out with this little gem of an album with possibly some of the most scathing lyrics of the American social fabric that I've come across. Melodies are simple in form ranging from the pompous and sarcastic, *Sigmund Freud's Impersonation of Albert Einstein in America*, to the incredibly mournful, *In Germany Before the War*, to the downright scathing, *Baltimore*, depicting the homeless in America's cities. Randy sings about escaping the oppressed and dirty cities to the clean airs of the Wild West, the loneliness and decline of the simple farmer, being blinded by religious and patriotic overzealousness and the rich corporate greed swallowing up the unpossessed. *Baltimore* is the haunting gem on this album, a track I've played over and over.

#7. *Musical Version of War of the Worlds* by Jeff Wayne (1978)



I'll say it here and now that, as of writing this, I have never read H.G. Wells *War of the Worlds* nor listened to Orson Welles's infamous radio version which scared half of the Americans during its initial broadcast; however, I was brought up on this wonderful musical rendition of the story featuring Richard Burton as the narrator and Jeff Wayne's masterly orchestration using a combination of modern and classical instruments to bring this timeless classic to life. Many years after re-listening to this over and over, I watched the original 1950s film version and was totally disappointed by it. I was even more disappointed with the more recent Tom Cruise version. The music and narration left so much to the imagination in this musical version to make it one of the all-time greats of this genre. The double gatefold album includes a beautifully illustrated booklet featuring images of Victorian London under attack by the Martians. More recently, Jeff Wayne re-did this timeless classic in music video production during 2012 calling it *War of the Worlds – The New Generation*, featuring Liam Neeson as the narrator. The new version is, in many ways, just as good as the original. As for the music, it is perfection. The melodies are extraordinarily pervasive and likely to permanently etch into the memory cells. Anyone who has listened to this won't forget the creepy *Red Weed* sequence.

#8. *The Pentateuch of the Cosmogony* by Dave Greenslade (1979)



A rare LP to find, this double album, complete in a box with an amazingly well-done illustrated and glossy booklet, is certainly not very well-known. I came across it from a friend of a family who owned the cassette of it and, being thoroughly immersed in Jean-Michel Jarre at the time, was drawn to it. I had to find the original boxed double-LP which I eventually did in a secondhand market in Cardiff. The music follows the storyline of the birth, death and rejuvenation of a future landscape destroyed by greed, pollution and war through, what I can only describe as half-alien, almost mythical, human

creatures in a fantasy world, perhaps that of another planet. The front cover was beautifully designed by Roger Dean, who also did many of the Yes album covers. There are no vocals, but the style and presentation of the music along with the booklet tells the story in all its glory. The sound of the music may not be up to everyone's taste considering the relatively basic and homemade feel of the keyboards and synthesizers, but the content is quite original, melodic and, in places, very catchy.

#9. *Forces of Victory* by Linton Kwesi Johnson (1979)



Linton Kwesi Johnson (aka LKJ), born in Jamaica in 1952, is a dub poet who moved to England in 1963. His material is highly political and activist in nature and this is especially evident in his *Forces of Victory* album. His *Bass Culture* album is probably more well-known, but *Forces of Victory* is a very earthy, almost minimalist, reggae-sounding collection of musical poems with LKJ singing, or rather chanting, material about repression of black people and colonialism. The rhythm is hypnotic, as well as is voice, and when in combination with the deep bass guitar captures something I've never quite heard before in this genre. I was recommended this album by a secondhand vinyl dealer into reggae in Cardiff back in the late 80s, and I just had to buy it. This is an absolute must-have for those who like reggae.

#10. *The Wall* by Pink Floyd (1979)



It would be near-criminal to forget about Pink Floyd's *The Wall*. Much like *Tommy* by The Who, it is a complete story of rebellion, war and justice centred on the growing up of a boy coddled by his mother, the father being killed in war, and his awkward entrance into adulthood, rebelling against all the traditional standards forced on him as a child in school and at home. He becomes a 'muso', turns to drugs, has major problems with women, morphs into an almost Hitlerian-figure of hate drawing masses from his fanfare. It, of course, all goes horribly wrong, when justice is meted out on him for all his wrongdoings. The music, of course, is exceptionally emotive and powerful but really only works when together played as a whole with the exception of the tracks, *Another Brick in the Wall* and *Comfortably Numb*, both essentially overplayed on mainstream radio over the years. The movie version is absolutely well worth watching as well incorporating the same music, with very little dialogue, but with the addition of captivating animation and a stunning performance by Bob Geldof who fits the main character perfectly. It is quite a graphic movie and certainly not fit for the young audience!

#11. *Paradise Theatre* by Styx (1980)



I'm not familiar with the other works of Styx, but their album, *Paradise Theatre*, is a lot of fun and, frankly, just a great listen. It is primarily traditional good 'ole American rock music with some great vocals laced with a bit of a

theme depicting the heydays of the theatre days, perhaps alluding to those years in the late 20s just before the depression, to its decline, an allegory to times we once held with rapture and joy to its state of sadness and decline in later years. A path of memory lane if you will. Despite the melancholic nature of the theme, the music is happy and uplifting and a very involving listen.

#12. *Fans* by Malcolm McLaren (1984)



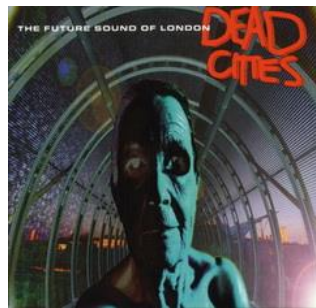
This album always brings a tear to my eyes when I listen to it in parts. Malcolm McLaren, a strange character in his own way, manages to mix modern 80s synth-pop with classic opera pieces like *Carmen* and *Madam Butterfly*. It was not received well with the critics and has, subsequently, almost died into obscurity, but I personally believed this worked wonderfully well. Opera lovers, which I am not, could find this album an aberration. The album should be listened to in its entirety to follow the rather sad tale of an American who marries a Japanese wife, has a baby, abandons her, goes back to America, re-marries another woman, goes back with American wife to Japan, but now afraid to confront his now three-year-old and realises the tragic outcome of his Japanese wife. Quite heart-wrenching. Malcolm McLaren is an acquired taste and his album, *Fans*, will probably ever remain beyond the fringe of popularity with most.

#13. *Nonsuch* by XTC (1992)



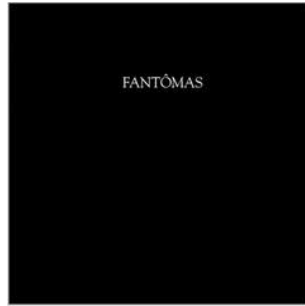
I'm not the biggest XTC fan, but this entire album is just amazing. I have the CD version and I have to say, the quality of the recording, the melodies and the lyrics are just stunning. The lyrics are poignant with messages of anti-war, human stupidity, free speech, racial miscegenation, dirty politics, and the quest for happiness as depicted in its second to last track, *Bungalow*. The lyrics are very sarcastic and scathing. Listen to *The Smartest Monkeys* and you will know what I mean. *Books are Burning* is a track which we should listen to *now*, a reminder that free speech is rapidly disappearing from us by our meddling political and media parties of the day. Every track is strong in its own way and the young artists who were XTC nailed this with perfection.

#14. *Dead Cities* by The Future Sound of London (1996)



The Future Sound of London is one of the most important electronica groups of the 90s sitting right in the heart of the genres of ambient, trance and IDM (Intelligent Dance Music) genres. I consider their album, *Lifeforms*, their most magnificent, but *Dead Cities*, when listened in its entirety depicts the decays of cities and, along with it, human destruction and death. It is, as if, walking around a quiet city at night walking through vandalised sky bridges and under roads through trolley-strewn tunnels. There is an ever-presence of menace through the album. There is no light. No happiness. The title track, *Dead Cities*, is just very ominous with a brooding background melody interspersed by cold clinical sounds. There are tracks with people pleading for help and nobody is there to help them. It is a very dark and depressing sort of an album, but there are little sprigs of beautiful but melancholic melodies which appear out of nowhere as if ghostlike. Incidentally, I think the cover could be one of those sky tunnels in the Canary Wharf area of London, an apt place where the affluent work in the day but the nights bring abandon and loneliness.

#15. *Delirium Cordia* by Fantômas (2003)



The darkest album on this list by far, this is probably more suited to Halloween. This is a Mike Patton piece of work, and for those familiar with Patton's eclectic taste of music, will know what could be coming. This album, to be listened in its entirety is one long track varying from quiet to very loud with an assortment of crazy sounds and musical backdrops depicting the surgeon's theatre. If the thought of that, alone, is not enough to scare, listening to this will certainly add to that. While listening to this, one could be listening to the creepy chantings of someone in the background with simple piano chord sequences and then suddenly morphing into being amidst a horrendously loud windstorm somewhere in the cold regions of Tibet or some other horribly cold place. The CD cover and booklet is completely black with a booklet showing surgeon's pictures during an operation. Yikes!

And that's it for now!

Hope you enjoyed my list! Bye for now!