The 5 best album covers

Going Underground:
Harry Beck and the iconic Tube map

Giacometti at the Tate: After 50 years, the prodigal son returns

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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.

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 intellectual and deep-thinking about his work,” says Fisher.

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, Gandhi, 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.

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

Peter Saville
Abram Games
Olly Moss

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.

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

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.

Here are the Top 5 chosen by our readers as the best album covers of all time:

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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.

Harry laid out London’s Underground routes as he would a circuit board, and took it to the publicity department. He told Garland: “Looking at the old map of the railways, it occurred to me that it might be possible to tidy it up by straightening the lines, experimenting with diagonals and evening out the distances between stations.”

“He was modest,” recalls Garland. “He’d quietly taken the diagram to them and said: ‘You may be interested in this.’ The publicity chiefs replied: “You can’t do it like this – the public will be really confused by the idea, no one will understand it.’

As new routes were added, Beck would tinker with his design. He was constantly seeking to improve its clarity, and when the publicity department realized they had a hit on their hands, they had to fend off “helpful” suggestions from tube workers. “The diagram,” as Beck insisted it was called, was a lifelong obsession. “It has touched so many people. The tube diagram is one of the greatest pieces of graphic design produced, instantly recognizable 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 Hutchison, 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.

Beck 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.

Garland continues: “Beck would not take no for an answer. He was modest,” recalls Garland. “He’d quietly taken the diagram to the publicity department. He told Garland: “It's an idea that I've had, and I want to see it through.” But when Beck fell ill, his piles of sketches were destined for the dustbin, but Garland stepped in and saved them – recognizing 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 iconic 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 recognizable and copied across the world. His contribution to London cannot be easily measured, nor should it be underestimated.”

Harry Beck and the first London Underground map. He designed Underground map in 1933 at first. His work has motivated other countries’ underground transportation such as Japan, United States, Korea, and other Europe countries.