THE 5 BEST ALBUM COVERS EVER

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

Last weekend we asked our readers to select the best album covers of all time. In the age of the digital download, the album cover is sadly a lost art – which probably explains why 90 percent of the albums that readers selected come from the 1960s and the 1970s. Here are the top five album covers of all times according to our most recent online reader’s poll.

The Beatles
Designer: Peter Blake
Total reader votes: 1,202

2. Dark Side Of The Moon (1973)
Pink Floyd
Designer: Hipgnosis
Total reader votes: 933

Nirvana
Designer: Robert Fisher
Total reader votes: 755

4. Abbey Road (1969)
The Beatles
Designer: John Kosh
Total reader votes: 729

5. London Calling (1979)
The Clash
Designer: Ray Lowry
Total reader votes: 695
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 – and, above all, easier to navigate. His idea was dismissed as ridiculous by others, and he was later laid off. The map above comes from circa 1933. That year, Beck was unceremoniously dumped from his job for being “difficult” when making their bed, a pile of sketches were destined for the dustbin, but Garland stepped in and saved them – recognizing that they were crucial to understanding its development.

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The diagram’s iconic status should not be underestimated. London cannot be easily measured, instantly recognizable and copied across the world. His contribution to London cannot be easily measured, nor should it be underestimated. The above image depicts Beck’s original map. It was dismissed as ridiculous by others, and he was later laid off.

Beck embarked on a letter-writing campaign to take back control of his life’s work. He was modest,” recalls Garland. “You can’t do it like this – the public will be really confused by the idea, no one will understand it.”

His idea was dismissed as ridiculous – people couldn’t understand why it wasn’t geographically accurate – and later he was laid off. Beck’s dismissal made him suspicious of London Underground. He chose to sell the idea to them as a freelancer (for just ten guineas), giving him control over the future integrity of his design. But as work in his old office began to pick up, his former colleagues remembered him: they had appreciated his help in the tube workers’ orchestra and, in 1933, he was back on board and pitching his idea again.

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

Harry Beck was good news for the tube. Passenger numbers had leveled off, and they needed a bright idea to attract much-needed new customers. Beck’s idea was dismissed as ridiculous by others, and he was later laid off. The first map, published in 1908, betrayed the fact that different railway companies. It was geographically correct, but impossible to read. The lines snaked all over the place. The front room would often have a massive copy spread out on the floor for Harry to pore over. His wife Nora would find, when making their bed, a pile of scribbled notes under the pillow that Harry had been working on in the middle of the night.”

But in 1959, after nearly three decades of working on the diagram, he was unceremoniously dumped from the project. Garland explains: “Harry went one morning to his local station and there on the wall was a diagram that was not done by him. It was devastating.

To add to the insult, he thought it was a crude and ineffective version of his own diagram. It was signed by Harold F 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 making their bed, a pile 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.”