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

1. The Beatles - Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band
   1967, Apple Records • Designer: Peter Blake • Total reader votes: 1,202
   The cover was originally going to show the Beatles playing in a park. That slowly evolved into the final concept, where they stand amidst cardboard cutouts of their heroes. The band originally planned on including Leo Gorcey, 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. Actor Gorcey requested $400 for his likeness, a decision he probably lived to regret.

2. Pink Floyd - Dark Side Of The Moon
   1973, Harvest records • Designer: Hipgnosis • Total reader votes: 933
   Hipgnosis had designed several of Pink Floyd’s previous albums, with controversial results: the band’s record company had reacted with confusion when faced with the collective’s non-traditional designs that omitted words. Their initial inspiration for Dark Side was a photo of a prism on top of some sheet music. It was black and white, but a color beam was going through it. Hipgnosis presented the prism design along with some others ideas to the band (including a design that featured the Marvel Comics hero the Silver Surfer).

3. Nirvana, ‘Nevermind’
   1993, Geffen records • Designer: Robert Fisher • Total reader votes: 755
   Spencer Elden, the naked baby on the cover, said he feels weird about his bizarre role in history. “It’s kind of creepy that many people have seen me naked,” he said. But what does this cover mean? “Kurt was intellectual and deep thinking about his work,” says Fisher. “I must assume that the naked baby symbolized his own innocence, the water represented an alien environment, and the hook and dollar bill his creative life entering into the corporate world of rock music.”

4. The Beatles, ‘Abbey Road’
   1969, Apple Records • Designer: John Kosh • Total reader votes: 729
   Beatles nuts who believed that Paul McCartney died around 1967 and was replaced by a dopplegänger found a lot to examine on this cover. They saw the picture as a funeral procession: John as the preacher, Ringo as the mourner, George as the gravedigger and Paul as the corpse. Iain Macmillan shot the cover on August 8th, 1969, outside of Abbey Road studios. The shoot involved just six frames and 10 minutes of work. Tourists flock to the spot, and it’s been parodied countless times — sometimes by members of the Beatles themselves.

5. The Clash, ‘London Calling’
   1979, CBS Records • Designer: Ray Lowry • Total reader votes: 695
   Pennie Smith was snapping photos of the Clash at New York’s Palladium when she captured one of the most iconic images in rock history. Paul Simonon was annoyed by the relatively quiet audience, so he began smashing his bass guitar against the floor. Clash singer Joe Strummer loved the photo, but Smith tried to convince him it was too out of focus for the cover. The pink and green lettering of the design was an intentional echo of Elvis Presley’s 1956 debut album.
GOING UNDERGROUND

henry beck and london’s iconic tube map
by dan carrier
The tube map almost never made it out of its creator’s notebook.

The designer was Harry Beck, a young draughtsman who drew electrical circuits for the Underground. Beck’s biographer, Ken Garland, befriended him in the 1930s, 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. “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, he had to fend off ‘helpful’ suggestions from tube bosses.

For the best part of 30 years, his home was turned over to the map, recalls Garland. “There were sketches 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. Hitchison, 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.

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.”