The album cover dates from 1939, when art director Alex Steinweiss decided his label’s offerings might find a wider audience. Since the very first Steinweiss design, an album of show tunes by Rogers and Hart, album covers have represented the apotheosis and nadir of graphic design.

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:

2. **Pink Floyd - Dark Side Of The Moon**
   - 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. Their initial inspiration for *Dark Side* was a photo of a prism on top of some sheet music. It was black and white.

3. **Nirvana, ‘Nevermind’**
   - 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.

4. **The Beatles, ‘Abbey Road’**
   - 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.

5. **The Clash, ‘London Calling’**
   - 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. The pink and green lettering of the design was an intentional echo.

1. **The BEATLES**
   - 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 amid cardboard cutouts of their heroes. The band originally planned on including Lee Harvey, 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.
Harry 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 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.”
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.

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 1901—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 more efficient. His idea was dismissed as ridiculous—people couldn’t understand how it could be done by him. It was devastating. To add to the insult, he thought it was laughable. The public transport campaign for coherence and efficiency that his work represented was 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 that 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. Beck embarked on a letter-writing campaign to take back control of his life’s work. It was fruitless. London Underground accepted no argument.

Harry Beck was good news for the publicity department arranged for a print run of 750,000. When Beck fell ill, his piles of sketches were destined for the dustbin, or design. Beck was called, was a lifelong obsession. Beck 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.’

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 colleague remembered him: they had appreciated his help in the tube workers’ orchestras. In 1953, he was back on board and picking his old ideas 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 realized they had a hit on their hands, so they had to send off “helpful” suggestions from tube bosses.

“Beck was the catalyst,” says 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 often have a massive copy spread on the floor for Harry to pore over. His wife Nora would come 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.”

Harry Beck’s London Underground map has been reproduced as a consumer item more times than can be counted — and often in some unpredictable ways. Here’s a few desirable examples.