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 month, 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:

   Designer: Peter Blake  
   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 including Lee 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 eliminated Jesus 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  
   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 other ideas to the band (including a design that featured the Marvel Comics hero the Silver Surfer).

   Designer: Robert Fisher  
   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.”

   Designer: John Kosh  
   Beatles nuts who believed that Paul McCartney died around 1967 and was replaced by a double-ganger 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 barefooted 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 30 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: Roy Lavery  
   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 out of focus for the cover. The pink and green lettering of the design was an intentional echo of Eliza Presley’s 1956 debut album.
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 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 no idea a new map 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.’”

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 betrayed the fact that he was working for “difficult” when Garland stepped in and saved them sketches were destined for the dustbin, according to Garland, part of the modern movement that was sweeping through designers and filmmakers of the period. The designer was not influenced by contemporary art, “says Garland. “He knew little or nothing about it.”

“The diagram,” as Beck insisted it was called, was a lifelong obsession. 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 cups. 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 betrayed the fact that he was working for “difficult” when Garland stepped in and saved them sketches were destined for the dustbin, according to Garland, part of the modern movement that was sweeping through designers and filmmakers of the period. The designer was not influenced by contemporary art, “says Garland. “He knew little or nothing about it.”

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