

“OK Computer”—Radiohead (1997)

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Essay by Bradley Thomas Osborn* (guest post)



Original album



Radiohead

Setting the music-historical stage for Radiohead’s watershed album “OK Computer” (1997) might begin by situating it within the rise and eventual fall of Alternative Rock, Grunge, and Brit Pop in the early ‘90s, but may as well start with The Beatles’ “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band,” released 30 years earlier. Both artists’ previous work both shaped and were shaped by their respective musical milieu. “Sgt. Pepper” and “OK Computer” are historically significant in that both broke the mold they helped cast, irrevocably changing the course of their respective genres.

Radiohead met at a young age in the exclusive Abingdon Boys School outside of Oxfordshire, England. Their precocious musical talents were fueled by a zealous music teacher named Terrance Gilmore-James. Though they both achieved platinum and triple platinum certifications (respectively), the quintet’s first two albums, “Pablo Honey” (1993) and “The Bends” (1995), were largely derivative riffs on the dominant genres at the time: the jangly Brit Pop of Blur and Oasis mixed with the boyish introspection of Alternative Rock, dusted with a haze of Grunge from across the pond.

Understanding the musical (r)evolution that is “OK Computer” entails understanding how Radiohead thwarts the expectations associated with these genres in three crucial musical parameters: song form, instrumentation, and lyrics. Whereas most rock songs alternate verses and choruses and bring about closure by repeating one of these memorable structures, “OK Computer” eschews recapitulatory certainty in favor of some surprise endings. “Karma Police” begins with two verses and two choruses, but ends by repeating the mantra “for a minute there, I lost myself” with a melody and chords that appear ex nihilo, derived from nothing we’ve heard previously. “Fitter, Happier” evolves without any recapitulation whatsoever in a fully through-composed narrative, something the band would explore on later tracks such as “Treefingers,” “2+2=5,” and “I Will.”

Rock's signature instrumental timbre, the guitar (usually electric and distorted), still rings throughout "OK Computer," but Radiohead pushes the envelope by employing stomp box effects seldom heard in mainstream rock. Sometimes this reaches an event horizon wherein the source instrument is deformed beyond recognition. How many listeners register the crystalline lead at 0:10 in "Subterranean Homesick Alien" as an electric guitar? Groundbreaking effects pedals such as the Mutronix Mutator and Electro-Harmonix HOG (Harmonic Octave Generator) are the gadgets responsible for these instrumental source deformations, but Radiohead's first collaboration with producer Nigel Godrich is the creative source. This relationship, with Godrich acting as a Martinesque "6th Radiohead" would stick for each of the band's future records.

For many listeners, "OK Computer's" most salient break with rock conventions came not from these two musical parameters, but from its lyrical themes. Most rock lyrics are confessional outpourings of romantic love and/or the striving to overcome any obstacles between the protagonist and a lover. Yorke's lyrics on Radiohead's first two albums largely fit this bill. On "OK Computer," however, the lyrics swerve away from rock conventions and into apocalyptic rants about environmental collapse and multi-national corporations. Alex Ross observes that the album's lyrics seem less *lyrical* and more like "fragments of a harsh diary" (Ross 2010, 88). "No Surprises" describes the somnambulant slog of the late capitalist proletariat with the ennui-inducing delivery of "Infinite Jest." Holding down a "job that slowly kills you" and loathing a government that "don't speak for us," the narrator would rather retreat to his "pretty house," "pretty garden," and "a handshake of carbon monoxide" than do anything to affect real change. "Paranoid Android" takes this break with lyrical conventions one step further. The song's three musically distinct sections each deal with distinct lyrical themes. Section A (0:18) begins like King George III, with abrupt shifts between psychosis and threat: "unborn chicken voices in my head"/"when I am king you will be first against the wall." Section B (2:20), marked by an aggressive guitar riff in 7/8 time, pokes mercilessly at consumer culture ("kick and squeal Gucci little piggy"), after which an angelic choir in Section C (3:33) exalts the lord to "rain down" and wash away "the dust and screaming/the yuppies networking."

These breaks with rock's conventions—in form, timbre, and lyrics—are all the more surprising given the six millions copies "OK Computer" has sold worldwide. Balancing experimental compositional technique and commercial success has cemented a unique position for Radiohead, rivaled only by late-period Beatles. Plenty of artists create more experimental music than Radiohead, but they don't sell 29 million albums. Those artists who do sell more albums do so only by exploiting the ear candy that rewards first auditions but folds under critical scrutiny. Radiohead would continue to toe this line with all future albums, perhaps erring a bit too far on the experimental side with "Amnesiac" (2001) and "The King of Limbs" (2011), neither of which broke one million in sales. "In Rainbows" (2007) may be the band's most accessible and commercially viable release, though its trendsetting pay-what-you-want download format followed makes for uncertain sales data. I hear many of these same accessible-yet-interesting qualities on "A Moon Shaped Pool" (2016).

The release of "OKNOTOK" 20 years after "OK Computer" and 50 years after "Sgt. Pepper" speaks to the legacy of this album. A boxed set, which contains remastered versions of all twelve original songs, B-sides, three previously unheard tracks left on the cutting room floor, a

book of artwork, and even a cassette tape featuring outtakes from the original recording sessions, serves as a monument to the broad cultural impact that an album could still have in the twentieth century. The Beatles, Pink Floyd, Radiohead—rock dinosaurs that roamed the earth, the likes of which we'll scarcely see again.

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.