

## Review

***Fifty Years of the Concept Album in Popular Music: From the Beatles to Beyoncé.***  
By Mark Wolfson. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024. 264 pp. ISBN 978-1-5013-9180-4.

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Readers' opinions of Mark Wolfson's *Fifty Years of the Concept Album in Popular Music: From the Beatles to Beyoncé* will depend greatly on their expectations. Those seeking a monograph-length analysis of the concept album form will find this volume disappointing; it simply does not contain a linear, cohesive study of this topic. Instead, it is – and it functions much more successfully as – a collection of stand-alone essays on individual concept albums. Wolfson's album selection here is superb, neither overly catholic nor defiantly anticanonical, with familiar favourites balanced well by several sleeper picks. Still, one cannot overlook some systematic problems here. The author struggles against a rigid and overly restrictive structure (which, one surmises, might have been imposed on him), and its uniform type of analysis 25 times in a row can grow tiresome. Structure, in fact, appears to bear greater importance than consistency of quality, which ranges from low to very high indeed.

Although a glaring factual error on page one did not bode well, 'Introduction: Ramblin' on my Mind' is not merely excellent, it is exemplary. Anyone studying – or merely interested in – the development or function of concept albums should read this introduction. Wolfson looks at the history of the concept album in rock as well as other genres, sketching the development of works he considers precursors to the earliest rock concept albums. He also charts the early history of the term 'concept album' itself. He wisely avoids the trap of trying to define that term beyond supplying a useful working definition: 'For our purposes here, a concept album is an album that takes you on a journey by virtue of its unifying mood, theme, narrative, and/or underlying idea' (p. 9). With the context he provides for this working definition, readers will be able to form their own ideas which may work well beyond this present text. Although some of its narratives may seem overly familiar (and overly pat) for readers who have studied this topic in depth, Wolfson's introduction contains real insight.

The first of five parts, 'The Founding Era (1967–9)', is by far the weakest section of this volume. Although there is no indication that he particularly disliked any of these five albums or found them artistically deficient, one gets the impression that Wolfson simply had no interest in writing about them. Some analysis is still solid, such as the way The Who developed and streamlined their rock opera *Tommy* in concert in the months and years following the album's release, but overall, the argumentation in part one is simply unconvincing. The fourth chapter, 'The One that Rambles on for a Million Miles: *Electric Ladyland*', stands as the low point of this book. Wolfson claims that each of this double album's four sides corresponds to one of the four elements: earth, wind, water and fire. However, the author provides

no indication how side one refers to earth apart from his strained description: 'Hendrix uses his guitar to become a superhuman of the earth, stomping across the land wherever and however he sees fit' (p. 42). Similarly, side two must present wind because the track 'Gypsy Eyes' '... has a distinctly airy feel' (p. 43). With song titles like 'Burning of the Midnight Lamp' and 'Rainy Day, Dream Away', the thematic of the four elements (or at least the elements fire and water) as they appear on this album may indeed be warranted, but Wolfson's argumentation here lacks all credibility.

The rest of this volume is much stronger than the first part. Parts two to five cover 20 albums, from Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On* (1971) to Beyoncé's *Lemonade* (2016). These, in fact, rank as two of the best chapters. In the former, Wolfson adeptly weaves his narrative of the album's recording seamlessly in his standard track-by-track analysis. In the latter, he focuses on the different versions of the album to examine changes in media production and consumption. Chapters on Parliament's *Mothership Connection* (1975) and Brian Wilson's *SMiLE* (2004) also rank among the highlights. The book's conclusion would be more convincing had the argumentation been tighter throughout, but at the end he astutely asks: 'how the concept album will fare as an increasing number of artists and consumers are born farther and farther away from the mainstream physical consumption of music' (p. 222), which will prompt readers to keep an eye open to trends in the concept album in the coming years and decades.

Although frustratingly uneven, Mark Wolfson's *Fifty Years of the Concept Album in Popular Music: From the Beatles to Beyoncé* has much to recommend it. Indeed, its strengths may be numerous enough to prompt readers to seek out Wolfson's 33⅓ series entry on *From Elvis in Memphis*. As a collection of short, discrete essays on individual albums, this present volume is eminently user-friendly; one may easily skip back and forth between chapters according to one's tastes and whims. Still, one may justifiably expect a more scholarly work from a Bloomsbury Academic publication, and this volume does not always deliver that. Scholars and fans alike should peruse a copy of this book for some fine insights into a wide variety of albums and, of course, the introductory chapter, which should be required reading for anyone interested in concept albums.

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