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THE OBLIQUE PERSPECTIVE: MERRY VIRTUAL CHRISTMAS

Digital Music Is Great, But I Miss Album-Cover Art!

By Tom R. Halfhill {12/27/05-02}

Editor's Note: In the early 1990s, *Microprocessor Report* published an occasional column called "The Oblique Perspective," featuring essays on random subjects. We are reviving the tradition for this year-end issue.

One of my Christmas presents in 1968 was the latest record album by a pop group called the Association. I wasn't familiar with the Association and hadn't asked Santa for the record. My mother explained, "We just picked the album with the wildest-looking cover."

And wild it was. It appeared a year after the Beatles released their landmark album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, and LSD-inspired psychedelia was all the rage. The Association's *Birthday* LP was adorned with a psychedelic collage of manipulated photographs, swirling colors, eye-popping graphics, and dazzling type fonts. (All pre-Photoshop, of course.) The actual music on the record wasn't quite so wild—the Association was a six-man vocal group specializing in lush harmonies rarely matched by the scruffy rock bands of the sixties. But the album cover was fashionably cool, and now it's a time capsule of a fascinating period in American history.

I still have the LP and it recently got me to wondering. How can today's music leave behind a similar legacy? Are we sacrificing something worthwhile by distributing music as digital-audio files without visual artwork?

Don't get me wrong. I think digital music distribution is great. Potentially, it allows performing artists to circumvent the obstacles of expensive recording studios, greedy record companies, and corporate chain stores. Anyone can

make their music available directly to the public. Music listeners are crying out for digital distribution, but record

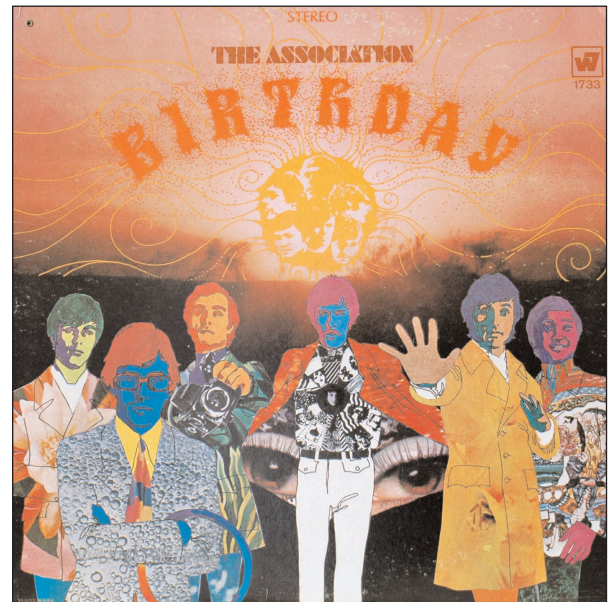


Figure 1. The Association's *Birthday* album, 1968.

companies are evolving more slowly than trilobites—and may face the same prospects of extinction.

It's understandable why listeners want their music in a pure digital format that liberates bits from atoms. Downloading an MP3 file is more convenient than driving to a store (especially if the MP3 file is a free bootleg). Portable MP3 players have enough storage to allow even fanatics to carry their entire music collection in a pocket. Indeed, many young people today don't have the big stereo systems and shelves of vinyl records, cassette tapes, and CDs that baby boomers assembled over the years. Instead, all they need is a PC and an iPod.

Eliminating the physical media and packaging strips the music down to its essence: music. That's what matters most. The physical media were always a pain in the butt, anyway, subject to damage, loss, theft, and obsolescence. However, the album covers were more than mere packaging. We're not talking about a box of Tide. Starting in the mid-1960s, album covers rapidly moved beyond portraits of the musicians and became a vital component of the whole work.

Sgt. Pepper Energizes a New Art Form

Sgt. Pepper was the breakthrough. On its front cover, the daring (and legally entangling) photographic collage of famous people engrossed listeners for hours as they tried to identify every face. On the back cover, *Sgt. Pepper* was reputedly the first record album to display complete song lyrics.

Inside, there was more. The album cover was among the first gatefold designs. It opened like a large book, revealing a double-truck photo of the Beatles in their bright Lonely Hearts Club Band uniforms. Also inside was a sheet of colorful cardboard cut-outs. No wonder rock critics hail



Figure 2. The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, 1967.

Sgt. Pepper as the first “concept album”—a cohesive multimedia artwork with carefully sequenced musical tracks and coordinated visual graphics. The total effect was stunning.

It couldn't be done today. Much of the effect was lost when *Sgt. Pepper* was reissued on CD in June 1987, exactly 20 years after its debut on vinyl. The CD jewel case shrank the generous twelve-inch-square canvas of the album cover into a five-inch-square miniature, too small for the complex collage of famous faces and other details. Likewise, the back cover of the CD jewel case was too small to display the lyrics, so they were moved into a tiny booklet. The effect just wasn't the same.

In an MP3 world, concept albums like *Sgt. Pepper* make even less sense. Apple Computer's iTunes website does offer the option of downloading facsimiles of album covers, but it can't re-create the lavish packaging that became popular after *Sgt. Pepper*. The digitized covers look even worse on the itty-bitty LCDs of portable players, and the tactile experience is completely gone.

In addition, most downloaders don't experience the original album's track sequence, because they buy only the most popular songs, not the whole album. New Beatles fans may never hear the rooster that turns into a guitar during a quick cut near the end of *Sgt. Pepper*. (Actually, due to a long-running legal dispute between Apple Records and Apple Computer, iTunes can't sell any Beatles music yet. Another travesty.)

Start a Rumor: Billie Joe Is Dead

Album art got another boost in 1969 during the infamous Paul-is-dead hoax. A Detroit radio station broadcast a rumor that Beatles bassist Paul McCartney had been dead for years and was replaced by an imposter. Supposedly, the surviving Beatles were planting subtle clues about the deception in their songs and album artwork.

For instance, on the rear cover of *Sgt. Pepper*, a background photo of George Harrison points to a lyric that says “Wednesday morning at 5 o'clock”—allegedly the moment when the real Paul was tragically killed in a car accident. Within days, millions of Beatles fans all over the world were poring over their albums with magnifying glasses and playing the records backward in search of hidden clues. Paul's death turned out to be greatly exaggerated, but it was fun while it lasted.

How will someone pull a similar stunt in the digital age? File-sharing bootleggers won't have any album art to scrutinize, so they'll have to scrounge for more-obscure sources. Imagine millions of Kazaa users running steganography filters on their MP3 files of Green Day's *American Idiot* album, looking for secret messages encoded in the least-significant bits of the digitized waveforms. Was Billie Joe Armstrong assassinated by right-wing operatives who poisoned his eyeliner? Has he been surreptitiously replaced by a look-alike country-western singer from a red state? Don't laugh. Rumors more ridiculous than these spread like wildfire on the Internet every day.

At this point, some readers are probably thinking: OK, so what if digital distribution takes the spice out of *Sgt. Pepper* and makes Eminem a rapper without a wrapper. Who cares? *You* will care, after witnessing the following vision from the Ghost of Christmas Future.

Visualize a Christmas not too many years from now when digital content is king and physical media are obsolete. A teenager receives the following gifts: a music album, a video, a video game, computer software, two passes to a movie, a book, and some money from Grandma. Sounds great. Except none of it can be gift-wrapped, because none of it physically exists. It's all bits in the ether.

The music album, video, video game, computer software, and book are digital files downloaded from Amazon.com. The movie tickets exist only in a computer at the local theater, where the teenager and a friend will be admitted for free after presenting their smart-card IDs. The money from Grandma is a PayPal electronic funds transfer. On Christmas morning, there's nothing for the poor kid to unwrap. Just check your email from Santa, kid. Merry virtual Christmas!

Album Art: The Next Generation

Nobody wants to be a Scrooge, especially an uncool Scrooge, so what's the answer? The most obvious alternative to physical artwork is album art specially designed for PC screens. Video monitors offer an even larger canvas than the 144 square inches of an LP cover, and they can display moving images. Of course, music videos of popular songs already exploit those features. But the puny portable players favored by today's youth are unlikely to grow video screens big enough for artwork larger than postage stamps.

One solution: ultraminiature video projectors. If we can build video cameras into cellphones, it should be possible someday to build video projectors into audio players. At a touch of a button, the player will project music videos, artwork, and liner notes onto the nearest light-colored surface. Eventually, the display might even be a self-standing holographic image.

It won't re-create the tactile experience of a cardboard album cover. And Santa still can't wrap it. But at least *Sgt. Pepper* fans will be able to find Edgar Allen Poe, Marilyn Monroe, Aldous Huxley, Oscar Wilde, Mae West, Tarzan... ♦

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