



Roger Waters and Pink Floyd: The Concept Albums. By Phil Rose. Lanham, MD: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015. 278 pp. ISBN: 9781611477603.

Rogers Waters and Pink Floyd: The Concept Albums represents a welcome and focused effort to examine something the author finds largely missing in popular commercial culture, namely, “prolonged thought” and “conceptual content” (p. xi) as it applies to popular rock music in particular. The book fully investigates this rather elusive phenomenon in the work of the British progressive rock group Pink Floyd, and in particular the work of singer, bass player, songwriter, and conceptualist, Roger Waters. More precisely, *Rogers Waters And Pink Floyd* investigates, in depth, the five concept albums that the band released between 1972 and 1983: *Dark Side of the Moon*, *Wish You Were Here*, *Animals*, *The Wall*, and *The Final Cut*, which was released in response to the Falklands War and represents Waters’ last involvement with the band before leaving under acrimonious circumstances to pursue his solo work. Wisely, Phil Rose, who teaches in the Department of Communication Studies at York University, also follows Waters beyond Pink Floyd into his impressive anti-war conceptual album, *Amused to Death*, which borrows its title (without acknowledgement) from Neil Postman’s (1985) much-cited book.

Some enduring admirers of Pink Floyd will perhaps be disappointed in the precise focus of this text, hoping to see the author’s impressive musical understanding aimed at least somewhat at the band’s previous seven albums, and even the Pink Floyd albums released after Water’s litigious departure from the band. Rose, however, remains true to his title, and from the start the reader encounters an in-depth and assured investigation of the musical dimensions of this remarkable group, from chord changes complete with charts, Dorian modalities, and a word by word interpretative, literary breakdown of nearly every lyric contained within those five albums.

What shows from the beginning, and runs throughout the book, is a willingness to approach these albums with unapologetic seriousness. From RD Laing to Marx, Freud, Melanie Klein, economics, psychology and even object relations theory, the work of Pink Floyd, and of Roger Waters in particular, is subjected to a tone and level of scrutiny that is more commonly reserved for the more canonical works of music and literature. There is perhaps a deliberate and self-conscious impetus to the formal gravity with which these recordings are examined. This is understandable and laudable given that, as the author states in his introduction, “the academic study of rock music has taken a rather long time to emerge from its infancy during the 1970s and 1980s” (p. 1). Rose identifies the principal obstacle facing this emergence as the “resistance that [rock music] faced from academic music departments well into the 1990s; most originally refus[ing] to acknowledge any other types of music but those from the European music tradition as being serious and thus worthy of study” (p. 1). If there was ever a band that incontestably deserved this level of serious and academic scrutiny, Pink Floyd is surely that band.

Loosely, the group can be considered within a larger and a very productive vein of rock music that capably tackled intellectual matters head on, and veered consciously away from the commercial diet of pleasant, inoffensive, and innocuous musical expression that dominated much popular music. Indeed, all the recordings examined here set their sights on fundamental concerns of contemporary existence, particularly existence that has come face to face to with corporate machinations, institutionalized warfare, warfare as entertainment (now increasingly called wartainment), commodification, dehumanization of personal relationships, celebrity culture and a host of other dehumanizing pressures that in this book are defined under a rubric of “anti-life” and “anti-life pressures.” It would not be inaccurate to generalize all of Pink Floyd’s concept albums examined here as protests against anti-life pressures. Indeed the very depth and often ferocious nature of these protests allows the author, without hyperbole, to describe the darkly magisterial 1977 album, *Animals*, as a

critique of the economic and ideological systems within late-twentieth-century liberal democracies [in which] Roger Waters documents his own recognition of superstructure and, like Marx, attempts to illuminate for his listening public its exploitation and oppression. ... [H]is primary concern, however, is to reveal the effects that technocratic capitalist economic relations have on the nature of human beings and the evident divisions that undemocratic structures of power create among us as individuals. (p. 65)

This might seem like a great deal to ask of a rock recording, yet it is a fair and straightforward synopsis of the group’s tenth album. Released in the days of the British punk movement, *Animals* captures, in its ponderous, pretentious, portentous and perfect way, some of the rage of the music of that period. Indeed, after nearly forty years, Waters’ snarling attack on the British censor of music, television, and art, the moral guardian Mary Whitehouse, with its sheer venomous anger, grunting pig samples, and lyrics that are more spat than sung, still sounds a hair-raising outcry against puritanical and sanctimonious do-gooders the world over.

One of the significant values of this book is that it assembles in one volume a substantial and representative anthology of Waters’ lyrics. These lyrics often obey a very unique, unexpected unfolding, with disarming pauses and word choices, sudden shifts in voice and person, shifts that penetrate and destabilize in a way, to say the least, that many rock lyrics do not. Fortunately, the author cites a great number of these lyrics at length, including this one, from the *Animals* album, a lyric that not only shows a certain connection to Ginsberg’s *Howl*, with its repetitive employment of “who” to start the unrhymed litany, but fully displays Waters’ relentless vision of the predicament of contemporary man:

Who was born in a house full of pain.
Who was trained not to spit in the fan.
Who was told what to do by the man.
Who was broken by trained personnel.
Who was fitted with collar and chain.
Who was given a pat on the back.
Who was breaking away from the pack.

Who was only a stranger at home.
Who was ground down in the end.
Who was found dead on the phone.
Who was dragged down by the stone. (p. 74)

These lyrics locate themselves light years away from the pleasant and often predictable domain of much popular music. In fact one can rarely listen to a Waters' song with, or without, Pink Floyd and not be struck by how entirely adult, serious, and penetrating the work is.

In the end, however, what makes the concept albums of Pink Floyd both complex and astonishingly popular is not necessarily the fierce precision and attack consistently demonstrated by Waters as the lyricist and sometimes singer, it is very much the work of the other musicians in the band as well; from the slow, predictable stability of Nick Mason's drums, to the ethereal and often minimal and haunting punctuations of the now-deceased Richard Wright's keyboard playing, and above all of course, the remarkable and definitive guitar work of the still active David Gilmour. This underlines a recurring tension in the book at least for this reader (and fan). It may be possible to write about Marx without writing about Engels, to write of Derrida without de Man. It might even be possible to write of Harold Innis without mentioning McLuhan, but whether one can write about Pink Floyd without writing extensively about David Gilmour is another matter. This is not to say that the book completely shuts out Gilmour's contribution, but rather that the guitar work is very much downplayed, so to speak, in comparison to the textual content of the music and the literary meanings of the songs' semantic content. This is an authorial decision made up front, and fair enough, yet it seems hard to deny that the great concept albums of Pink Floyd to a large extent achieved their enormous artistic and commercial success due to the unforgettable sublime and always pitch-perfect work of its lead guitarist. From the soaring guitar lines that helped make *Dark Side of the Moon* such a musical sensation, from the signature anxiety-ridden notes of the brilliantly claustrophobic *Wish You were Here*, to the defining soaring lines of *The Wall*'s "Comfortably Numb," one of the band's great achievements was to grace several decades of twentieth century rock music with its most recognizable, sublime and entirely memorable electric guitar work. It is this background of unique and celestial sound, always intensely riveting, that helps the often grey, if brilliantly grey, thrust of Waters' lyrics to become enormously palatable, acceptable and effective.

Arguably, a concept album, by any definition, consists not only of conceptually coherent textual narrative, but an aural one as well, an auditory conception that consistently integrates musical themes and motifs and similarities. It would not be accurate to say that this book short-changes that dimension. Indeed it contains a plenitude of examples of how a chord, a single note, a sample, a cymbal percussion recorded backward, influences the emotional and intellectual effects of the song. Finally though, it is Pink Floyd's ability as a musical *collective*, working with, off, and even *against* each other, that has facilitated Roger Waters in becoming something more than a brilliantly angry, even eccentric singer-songwriter in the field of rock music, and made him instead, a central and driving force in a musical collaboration that has achieved its own unique and even legendary status in the history of rock music.

Reference

Postman, Neil. (1985). Amusing ourselves to death: *Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

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