

LISTENING TO CLASSIC ROCK MUSIC

ACHIEVEMENTS IN ALBUM CONTINUITY

The simplest ways to achieve continuity within a song are to keep it in the same key, change keys and later return to the original key, and of course use verses and choruses that respectively have the same chords and melodies. Nearly all pop songs take advantage of one or a combination of these devices.

Establishing continuity at the next level—how songs are organized throughout an album—is something that only some groups have attempted. The most widely used term associated with this approach is called “the concept album”. This means that there is something amongst some or all of the songs that unifies them; a theme, narrative, lyrics, etc. Some albums use each song to tell a part of a story like an opera. Other albums have each song take on a similar theme or topic...other albums use purely music devices to connect the separate tracks.

Two records that are considered “concept” albums are The Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) and Pink Floyd’s *Dark Side Of The Moon* (1973).

Sgt. Pepper...

Apart from the cover art of *Sargent Pepper*, which depicts The Beatles in costume according to the title (in band uniforms), the opening song is *Sargent Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (in the key of G major). As this song finishes, it uses new and overlapping material to transition into the next song while “Billy Shears” (Ringo) is “introduced” to sing *With A Little Help From My Friends*. And thus the two songs are mildly connected.

After that, there is nothing conspicuous linking the nine subsequent album tracks. But the second to last track is a *reprise* of the first track. Here the song begins in the unconnected key of F major, but then it modulates up to G—the original key of the first track. This simple but clever device creates a long-range sense of connection back to the initial track (same music, eventually same key), creating what can be called a “bookend effect”. This *Reprise* version then dissolves (i.e. connects) into the album’s final, coda-style track, *A Day In The Life*, which is also in the key of G major. This might not really cement a continuous concept for the whole album, but it reflects a clear intention of establishing continuity over the course of the record (as well as being connected to the album’s title and cover art).

Dark Side...

Pink Floyd’s *Dark Side Of The Moon* goes further with this approach. For much of the album (which is divided into conveniently-sized tracks), the same themes are used in different formats and keys, as if a single song were being worked through many versions. The theme is in two parts, a primary theme/riff (A) that goes from the minor i to the major IV (reflecting the dorian scale mode), and then a secondary theme (B) that acts like a chorus in comparison.

Of the eight tracks that use music (two are non-musical and feature voices and/or electronic effects), two use the primary theme/riff* (A) and three use the primary theme/riff (A) plus the secondary theme** (B).

Speak To Me: voices and electronic effects

***Breathe*: A theme plus B theme

On The Run: more voices and electronic effects

***Time*: the coda uses the A theme plus the B theme (same as *Breathe*)

**Great Gig In The Sky*: after a slow piano introduction, the A theme is extensively used

Money: no thematic material used

Us And Them: no thematic material used

***Any Colour You Like*: uses the A theme and later the B theme as a transition to the next song

**Brain Damage*: uses a major key version of the A theme; the lyrics refer to “the dark side of the moon”

Eclipse: no thematic material used; the lyrics refer to an “eclipse by the moon”.