

RADIOHEAD



I might be wrong... I could've sworn... I saw a light coming on?..

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Personal introduction

According to general critical and fan consensus, Radiohead have been the greatest artistic unit of both the 1990s *and* the 2000s, a band that has managed to consistently revolutionize and reinvigorate the world of pop culture for almost two decades. According to my own egotistical contrarian opinion, Radiohead are the near-perfect example of everything that is at once exciting *and* infuriating about musical creativity at the turn of the millennium. It might be a misguided opinion and it might not be vindicated by the course of history at all, but at least I have a chance of offering it, instead of simply resorting to the usual predictable gushing.

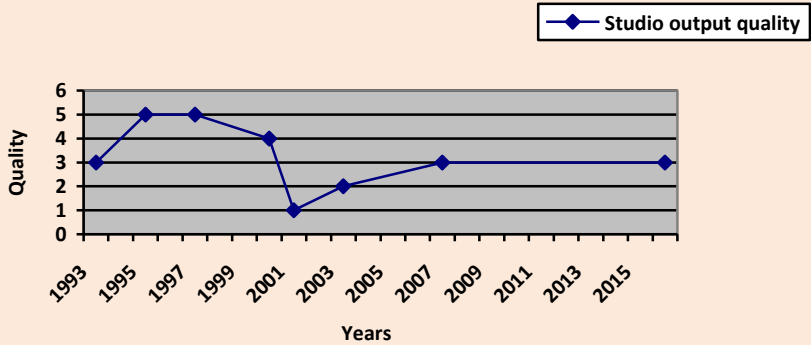
On one hand, the evolution of Radiohead's sound from the grunge-influenced heavy pop-rock structures of **Pablo Honey** to the electronic and avantgarde soundscapes of **Kid A** and everything that followed it largely parallels and reflects — if not actually *causes* — the thinking person's disappointment with stereotypical «rock» and embracement of modern «progressive» values. This is pretty inspiring, and makes Radiohead into the flagship of the artistic movement that brought introspection, melancholy, and, in a way, figurative emasculation back into the mainstream in an age where the Left were (so it seemed at the time) winning the proverbial culture wars, and the boring kick-ass people were either left behind as weathered down Rolling Stone favorites, or conservatively marginalized in a Ted Nugent sort of way.

But as far as I am concerned, the legend of Radiohead has strongly overshadowed their music. Even when they were at what I think was their best, putting out such classics of Nineties' rock as **The Bends** and **OK Computer**, they were but one strong soldier unit in an impressive collective movement of new art-pop warriors, with several acts who could beat them in terms of boldness (think Björk) or raw bleeding-heart emotion (think Portishead). They had the advantage of being a band (collective talent always helps), a male band (women were still getting the wrong end of the stick back in the Nineties), a British band (because everything edgy always comes from the UK, you know), and, yes, a talented band whose lead singer had tons of charisma and whose guitar player could draw his influence equally well from alternative rock *and* modern classical. They captured the *Zeitgeist* by singing about isolation, alienation, and dehumanization in a more intelligent manner than the average acme-riddled teenager, and for a while, they were really great, though I would never unequivocally call them the single best band of the Nineties.

The story of Radiohead in the 21st century is where the controversy truly begins. For many, if not most, Radiohead continue to be the guiding light for music, its shining beacon of hope all the way from revolutionizing the field with **Kid A** in 2000 and up to their latest comeback with **A Moon Shaped Pool**. They have enjoyed consistent commercial and critical success, objectively failing only once (with **The King Of Limbs**) and setting somewhat of a record with their 25-year long career of constant accolades. The perspective that I offer aligns with the minority — those few who believe that the Radiohead bubble has long since lost any connection with musical quality, and rests mainly on two things: the band's uncanny ability to titillate the nerve of the self-pitier, *and* the band's past reputation. After all, **OK Computer** and **Kid A** still remain as pop music's chronologically last set of mind-blowing milestones, and as long as there is nobody around to take Radiohead's place, well, they might as well keep it. Even if they continue releasing album after album of meandering, hookless, energy-devoid, and fairly derivative compositions — yes, brace yourself for many unpleasant words to follow — that are really no better and no worse than

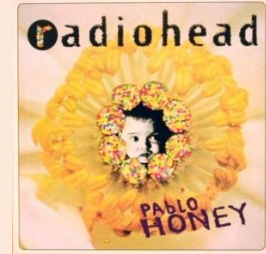
the music of a whole host of their younger contemporaries, whose achievements might not be tremendous but whose only crime is that they are not Radiohead.

In addition to actual Radiohead albums, the review sections below cover much, if not most, of the solo careers of Thom Yorke and Jonny Greenwood — the latter mainly consisting of soundtracks, the main area in which Jonny practices his neoclassical compositional skills before integrating them into Radiohead’s collective band sound. None of these records are essential listening, but they do help get a better understanding of the different stages of the band’s development — and in my own case, they can actually help understand why Radiohead’s newer musical recipes have been so incredibly underwhelming compared to the old ones, even as some of Greenwood’s actual soundtracks have been so efficient in the context of Paul Thomas Anderson’s movies.






PABLO HONEY (1993)

1) You; 2) **Creep**; 3) How Do You?; 4) **Stop Whispering**; 5) Thinking About You; 6) Anyone Can Play Guitar; 7) Ripcord; 8) Vegetable; 9) Prove Yourself; 10) I Can't; 11) **Lurgee**; 12) **Blow Out**.



 [‘Creep’](#)

More info:   

General verdict: *Contrary to malicious rumors, this is solid, accessible, soulful 1990s rock music for all properly sensitive, vulnerable clients of the genre.*

I probably need to get this out of the way at the very start: in my opinion (more accurately, in my heart) **Pablo Honey**, the much-maligned debut of Radiohead, is a better record than *at least* anything that this band has offered the world since **Kid A**. It took the world the smash success and artistic innovation of **The Bends** and **OK Computer** to take more accurate notice of the relative virtues of **Pablo Honey**, but the truth is, no matter how derivative and unimaginative these songs might seem, the classic and unmistakable spirit of Radiohead already permeates them in full — and at this point, the classic spirit of Radiohead is still unencumbered by the fervent idea of «we are Radiohead, the world expects nothing but the best from us» which, as far as I am concerned, may have sharply sabotaged their career in the 21st century.

True, in 1992, Radiohead were «just» a rock band: five college guys, inspired by the Neil Young and Lou Reed school of merging noise with beauty, anger with idealism, and self-pity with self-promotion. Against a background of dozens, if not hundreds, of bands with the same agenda, there was fairly little hope of them registering in any special way on the pop scene radar. In retrospect, we can see how Thom Yorke’s distinctive vocal style already transcended the stereotypical grunge pattern, with additional shades ranging from lyrical to epic; and how Johnny Greenwood’s noisy guitar riffage was already much more inquisitive in general than the monotonous rhythmic buzz expected from the average grunge outfit. Back in 1992-93, though, critics and general listeners alike may have well been excused for failing to note that, what with the market being oversaturated with noisy rock muzak in the wake of Nirvana’s explosion.

The thing is, Radiohead were actually quite *good* at noisy rock muzak. All of these songs, and I do stress, *all* of them are quite well written: all of them are meaningful, catchy, energetic, and generally well-recorded rock songs that reflect the formative, insecure, but tentatively self-asserting nature of a bunch of young college kids as perfectly as, say, **Please Please Me** reflected the formative, brash, life-conquering nature of a bunch of young Liverpool hoodlums. Despite having certain elements in common with grunge, **Pablo Honey** is not about wanting to sound like Cobain or, God forbid, Eddie Vedder: it is about using the musical experience of the underground movement to convey a set of somewhat less harsh, somewhat more refined and romantic, but equally stinging feelings about your own insecure place in the universe.

No matter how much they used to hate it themselves or how much it has been overplayed, ‘Creep’, the visiting card of **Pablo Honey**, still remains a masterpiece. (Ironically, records show that it was not even a big hit in the first place: its popularity was tube-grown from the original small bunch of Radiohead fans). Few songs capture that aching sentiment of being frustrated over your own limitations as compared to some unreachable ideal with so much precision: most, when

they try, simply go on whining about it, but 'Creep' carefully manipulates you into exploding: Greenwood's famous «dead notes» before the explosion are particularly evocative, like some struggling terrorist kicking a malfunctioning detonator in total frustration — and, most importantly, even once the loud distorted guitars kick in, the song never loses its romantic flavor: there is a tenderness in Thom's delivery of the "I'm a creep, I'm a weirdo" lines which is then taken to the next level in the "she's running out again" bridge — look how effortlessly the song flows into it from the chorus, with the rise to falsetto and the clever mix of desperation and admiration. No matter how much Radiohead have progressed since then, 'Creep' already offers us their main agenda in full — pity for the sinner in the here and now, beauty for the Platonic idealist in whatever lies beyond. Everything that comes later is just technical innovations on the same artistic subject.

The worst thing that can be said about the other songs is that they all follow that same agenda, too: every other tune is about how the various imperfections of the protagonist prevent him from getting the girl or getting to Heaven, which, in the grand symbolic scheme of things, is pretty much the same shit. But how is that a problem when each song has its own individual merits? To knock off just a few examples: 'Stop Whispering' has a complex, technically difficult, twisted, but catchy vocal path from verse to chorus — perhaps the closest Yorke has ever come to sounding like Bono, and he does a pretty good job at this; 'Ripcord' puts a fairly generic descending chord pattern to great symbolic use, creating the illusion of crashing down once it is paired with Yorke's constant invocations of the «ripcord» (or, rather, the lack of it) motive; 'Lurgee' somehow manages to impress by having essentially one line stubbornly repeated over and over — but I guess that there is no better way to convince people of how shitty you really feel than by endlessly chanting "I got better, I got better, I got strong" ... and so on.

Also, although in terms of technical mastery and musical complexity **Pablo Honey** has nothing on whatever would follow, it should be pointed out that even in this unexperienced state, these guys are already capable of producing impressive sonic panoramas: in particular, the whirlwind finale of 'Blow Out', closing out the record, is handled quite professionally, creating a terrifying musical vortex into which, as I guess we are supposed to imagine, the protagonist is finally sucked — for better or for worse, nobody can really tell. (I would guess for better: since there are no themes of Hellish retribution on the album, I imagine he is being sucked into Heavenly bliss, where he can finally get a proper chance at being so fuckin' special). Nothing particularly new or mind-blowing about this, but hey, it *works*, and that is far more than I can say about dozens of New Musical Ideas in Radiohead's 21st century catalog.

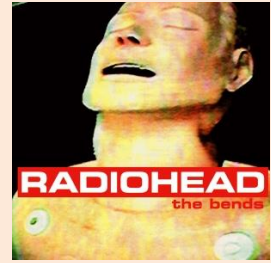
Cutting a potentially long story short, I do not recommend the somewhat typically condescending attitude towards **Pablo Honey** — like the young Beatles, the young Radiohead had a certain subtle special something to offer that can no longer be found on their «mature» albums, and that special something is not necessarily just limited to «more rock, less experimentation». One might scoff at these conventional song structures, limited influences, and vocal hooks rooted in rock and pop rather than Richard D. James and Krzysztof Penderecki, but one cannot deny that songs like 'Creep', 'Lurgee', or 'Blow Out' belong to Radiohead and nobody else — not Blur, not Oasis, not Pearl Jam, not Dinosaur Jr. For 99% of modern indie bands, this kind of quality would probably remain unsurpassed, anyway.

Only Solitaire Album Reviews: Radiohead

On an amusing technical note, acoustic Radiohead at this point sound *very* closely to the way that Neutral Milk Hotel would sound six years later on **In The Aeroplane** — the expanded 2-CD version of **Pablo Honey** throws in their earliest EP, **Drill**, whose ‘Stupid Car’, perhaps with just a slight change in tonality, could be easily added to NMH’s masterpiece and nobody would have noticed. All right, so maybe Thom Yorke has this tearful component in his voice that Mangum generally lacks (Thom seems to take life more seriously in most cases), but the cosmopolitan loose-soulful-rambling vibe is there for sure. He would rarely allow himself to be so upfront and singer-songwriterish in the times to come.

THE BENDS (1995)

1) Planet Telex; 2) The Bends; 3) High And Dry; 4) Fake Plastic Trees; 5) Bones; 6) (Nice Dream); 7) Just; 8) My Iron Lung; 9) Bullet Proof... I Wish I Was; 10) Black Star; 11) Sulk; 12) Street Spirit.



[▶ 'Fake Plastic Trees'](#)

More info: [W](#) [D](#) [S](#)

General verdict: *The best mix of crunch, beauty, and tragedy in Radiohead history.*

The principal tragedy of **The Bends** is that it is a rock album. As we are all supposed to know, Radiohead's greatest achievement in the face of humanity was to transcend the boundaries of a stale, no longer inspired musical genre and take all those who agreed to buy tickets on a magical journey into allegedly uncharted territories. That achievement was heralded with **OK Computer**, generally completed with **Kid A**, and continued to be embroidered with various extra ornaments in the 21st century. In light of this, **The Bends** gets critical respect as «that one album where Radiohead began to carve out their own territory», and people generally like it, but usually still treat it as a formative record, because... well, you know, it's *just* rock music. Perhaps not to the extent of being «only rock'n'roll», but, overall, isn't it boring and close-minded to let yourself be too infatuated with a *rock* album from one of history's greatest trans-rock bands? («Trans-rock» sounds a bit off, but I cannot write «post-rock» because that term has been ordered to apply to GY!BE and Sigur Rós, and Radiohead, apparently, are neither one nor the other).

Assuming, however, that you are allowed to *doubt* that Radiohead have genuinely and completely rewritten musical history as you know it, and to think of Radiohead as merely an artistic unit with noble artistic purposes, there is no other album in the Radiohead catalog that would strike me as being more sincere, adequate, hard-hitting, and pretty much flawless on all fronts than **The Bends**. The technical and melodic means with which they were achieving their goals, at this point, were clearly more limited than even two years later, let alone five: yet somehow, with those limited means, they were able to create a memorable emotional roller coaster — accessible, tasteful, deeply humanistic, each and every note of which still rings true.

Sure, the primary subject of Radiohead's art has always stayed the same: a deeply felt *Welt-schmerz*, a mix of sorrow, pity, and tenderness that would be most appropriate in a post-nuclear world, but can be put to good use even before we start blowing each other to bits. In that respect, there is not a lot of difference between **Pablo Honey** and **In Rainbows**, not to mention anything that lies in between. **The Bends** are, however, different in that the album reflects Radiohead at their most unspoiled — they were not trying to jump over their own heads yet, as they would be doing two years later, and they were not «Radiohead The Great», owing it to the world to deliver a new musical direction with each new album. But, on the other hand, they had clearly progressed since **Pablo Honey**, in each and every respect possible, from lyrics to production to formal stylistic diversity. The result, in my opinion, is a perfect balance between style and substance that only really lasted for this one album.

Yes, **The Bends** consists of songs, rather than small, autonomous, enigmatic sonic universes. But each of these songs is at least efficient, and at best, stunningly efficient. Vulnerability, suffering, inability to cope in a complex and largely irrational world, fear of personal relationships, and

other nice things like that that rise high above, say, Donald Trump's level of understanding, form the basis for all twelve cuts, and in the hands of a creative entity that would be only slightly less talented than Radiohead, this could spell disaster — few things are more awful than having some talentless, but sensitive whiner whine his way through 50 minutes of music, instead of doing the right thing and joining the army or applying for a degree in plumbing. (Not naming any names here, but, on a *totally* unrelated note, give my regards to Conor Oberst when you see him).

Fortunately, the first thirty seconds of 'Planet Telex' are enough to show us that this here will be whining done with *class* and *power*. Space noises for the opening, psycho-echoey Rhodes piano, big trip-hoppy drums, and Colin Greenwood's deep funky bass provide crunch even before the electric guitars kick in. As Thom comes in with the line about how "you can force it but it will not come", you can almost literally hear him grunting and groaning, as if pushing against a brick wall. The entire song is one big ball of unreleasable tension, with each new "everything is broken!" higher and higher than it was, yet the song never gets proper release — at the end, the singer simply gives up, with a few tired "why can't you forget"s conveying the overall futility of the effort. It is one of the best songs ever written about fighting against insurmountable odds, so whenever you find yourself in a rut, remember that Radiohead circa 1995 fully understands your plight. Some people might concentrate too much on the walls of guitar noise and call this little masterpiece «just another grunge song», but it isn't! It's closer to R&B, really — just follow that bassline. With a few space rock trimmings to boot.

I am not going to dissect every single song here — that would take up way too much space — but rather limit myself to a few general points, illustrated by specific material. First and foremost, I do believe that **The Bends** captures Thom Yorke at the peak of his vocal talents: at this point, he knows how to get the best out of his voice without wasting it on risky experiments that do not always pay off. Case in point #1: 'Fake Plastic Trees', possibly the single best song Radiohead ever wrote (though 'Lucky' comes close). Across the verses, Thom sounds subtly sneery and sarcastic, using a nasal, haughty, somewhat condescending tone — in the chorus, it abruptly changes to one of pity and sympathy — then, as the subject surreptitiously changes from social critique *à la* Kinks (remember 'Plastic Man'?) to the protagonist himself (here be a Great Modernist Lyrical Expansive Shift), he concludes the song with the tenderest of falsetto ambiguities: "if I could be who you wanted... all the time" is smoother than Paul McCartney, but you can never understand if he is trying to serenade his "fake plastic love" with this conclusion or to mournfully confess that true happiness with the "fake plastic love" is unattainable... anyway, I might be spewing nonsense here, so let us just hold on to the main point: Thom's verse / chorus contrast, gaining in intensity with each new verse, is a tour de force, and one of the best mixtures of sarcasm and sympathy in the history of vocal pop music.

Another point: sure enough, the «loud vs. quiet» dynamics is a trademark of the grunge genre, but Radiohead know how to exploit that dynamics in a completely different way. So yes, perhaps a song like 'Just' is technically built on the 'Smell Like Teens Spirit' formula: a few suspenseful acoustic chords, a crash-boom-banging loud-as-heck instrumental preview of the chorus, quiet verse, loud chorus, quiet verse, loud chorus... but the loud parts are not just about venting your frustration, they are about taking off and escaping into open space — this is what Greenwood's guitar with its spiralling trills is trying to do from the fifth second on, before, ultimately, triumphantly, it is able to do just that at 3:10 into the song, with that single extended ultrasonic note. Or take '(Nice Dream)' — its quiet part is melancholic dream-pop, and its loud part is an inter-

ruptive nightmare, with the whole ensemble more reminiscent of a Miyazaki movie than a teen hormonal explosion. As for the chaotic ruckus on 'My Iron Lung', that part almost feels parodic to me (in the vein of Blur's 'Song 2') — together with lyrics like "suck, suck your teenage thumb, toilet-trained and dumb", this is an ironic piece, which seems to agree with the general notion that the song was really a reflection on the popularity of 'Creep'.

Finally, there are simply *way* too many great Greenwood guitar moments on this album for me not to count it as his finest hour, too (well, again, closely matched by **OK Computer**). The simple, short, but indie-beautiful solo on 'High And Dry'. The banshee howls in the nightmare part of '(Nice Dream)'. The space launch in 'Just'. The climactic multi-layered solo on 'Sulk'. The haunting, mournful arpeggiated picking on 'Street Spirit', allegedly inspired by R.E.M. but sadder in spirit than any Peter Dinklage melody I am familiar with. Even when formally staying in grunge / alt-rock territory, Greenwood somehow manages to stay consistently interesting (unless I am actually ascribing some of his virtues to Ed O'Brien, but in the end, this really does not matter). Thus, 'Black Star' might be one of the lesser numbers on here, but I like how there are at least four completely different guitar parts here — the folksy jangle in the intro, the tremolo dream-pop guitar ambience in the verse, the grungy goo in the chorus, *and* the little Sixties-style pop flourishes that link the verse to the chorus. Might not seem like much, but the average alt-rock band would never even begin to bother with all this coloring.

And when you look back on it all, really, I am not sure that *emotionally* **The Bends** does not exhaust the full spectrum that Radiohead are capable of. Sure, a lot of the lyrics deal with personal relationships rather than human society as a whole, but has anybody ever truly been interested in *what* Thom Yorke has to say about human society as opposed to *how* he is saying it?... so there is nothing that makes, say, 'Paranoid Android' or 'Karma Police' or 'Idiotheque' inherently superior to 'Fake Plastic Trees', other than additional layers of complexity and formal innovation. Anyway, this review is not here to put blemish on future works by this band: it is here to stress that **The Bends** has twelve songs, and each of them rules, with its own hooks, sub-moods, and production / arrangement peculiarities, so that it is only on a purely conjectural and theoretical level that I could build a case for **The Bends** *not* representing Radiohead at their finest. And personally, I have no need for any such conjectures or theories.



Fans will naturally want to expand their collection with the 2-CD deluxe edition, one that diligently collects most of the B-sides and EP-only tracks from that period: I honestly have not listened to them long enough to form much of an opinion, but on the whole, they strike me as (unsurprisingly) somewhat inferior — still closer to **Pablo Honey** level, and not even nearly as memorable as the best stuff on that album. Stuff like 'Punchdrunk Lovesick Singalong' goes for the same sorrowful-tender effect as 'High And Dry' and 'Fake Plastic Trees', but is not provided with an equally catchy or tear-jerking chorus. On the other hand, 'Maquiladora' fully confirms to the abovementioned standards of guitar greatness.

OK COMPUTER (1997)

1) **Airbag**; 2) **Paranoid Android**; 3) **Subterranean Homesick Alien**; 4) **Exit Music (For A Film)**; 5) Let Down; 6) Karma Police; 7) Fitter Happier; 8) Electioneering; 9) Climbing Up The Walls; 10) **No Surprises**; 11) **Lucky**; 12) The Tourist.



 ['No Surprises'](#)

More info:   

General verdict: *Like, NOT the greatest album of all time. What other general verdict might there be?*

With the release of **The Bends**, Radiohead began to acquire a solid critical reputation as a more heavily intellectual, ambitious, experimental alternative to the dominant Britpop scene — however, their popularity outside of the UK (or Europe, at least) remained limited, and after the success of ‘Creep’ they had not yet been able to return to the big commercial league in the US. Nevertheless, with grunge and Britpop clearing the path and setting the stage for potential new breakthroughs in the art-rockish department, by the second half of the Nineties the world was finally ready to fall under the spell of some new reincarnation of Shakespearian tragedy in a pop album format — something it hadn’t probably done in, what, more than two decades?..

Now, although **OK Computer** is nearly always spoken of as a concept album, with «survival in the modern world» as a basic theme, it was not specifically intended as such; the songs were written over a long time stretch (thus, ‘Lucky’ dates back to 1995, when they recorded it for a special charity album at Brian Eno’s request), cover a whole variety of issues and display so many different influences that the only objectively conceptual thing about it all is the band’s burning desire to experiment and innovate. Said influences stretch all the way from DJ Shadow to Krzysztof Penderecki, making **OK Computer** a true connoisseur’s delight — inevitably, its twisted arrangements and overdubs, unusual chords, and lyrical cross-references have all been analysed in countless reviews and musicological analyses. Any conceptuality beyond that probably remains unintentional — including Yorke’s lyrics, which continue to explore topics of alienation, isolation, desperation, frustration, and other negatively tinged -ations (because that is Thom Yorke for you in an electrified nutshell), in the face of a large, hard-to-understand, ridiculously insecure and complicated universe. But this simply reflects how he was feeling at the time, and is a rather natural lyrical pathway for anybody who wishes to override the limitations of songs about personal relationships (limitations that were still very much active with **The Bends**, although even there it was already obvious that Yorke was simply setting up his imaginary female partners to take out his global misanthropic frustration on them).

It is interesting that the first wave of critical praise often employed the term «progressive», even going as far as to state that Radiohead had done the impossible by reinstating the honor of «progressive rock», buried twenty years before under the rubble of the punk/New Wave explosion. From one point of view, this is a ridiculous misstatement: **OK Computer** has very little in common with Yes or Genesis, since its songs are relatively short (only ‘Paranoid Android’ goes over six minutes and consists of several different sections), relatively free of true instrumental virtuosity, do not take after Bach or Stravinsky, and essentially agree with the modern pop formula. Johnny Greenwood, the musical backbone of the band, inherits his art from Lou Reed and Michael Karoli rather than Robert Fripp; and as dazzlingly complex as the band’s arrangements may be, they hardly outmatch The Cure in their ability to harmonize a myriad of

sound channels. But on the other hand, it is curious that the notion actually managed to spring up: it indicates that **OK Computer** was perceived by many as a record that successfully re-elevated contemporary pop music to impressive artistic heights, such as it had never been able to properly recapture since the days of The Beatles and Pink Floyd. Unfortunately, it also set the predicament: from that time onwards, Radiohead themselves were elevated to such a lofty position that *anything* they would be doing from then on had to match the admiration and respect for **OK Computer** — a killer chore even for a truly great band.

Upon release, the album was a strong, but not exceptional, seller (admit it, for a record that is routinely mentioned as the Greatest Album Of All Time, 5–6 million copies is not *that* much), with critical acceptance vastly overriding commercial performance; however, time has not dulled its impact in the slightest, so, like it or not, **OK Computer** is going to stay emblematic of the late Nineties for quite some time. The expanded 2-CD reissue, released in 2009 largely without the band's knowledge, collects all the B-sides, some outtakes, remixes, and live performances, and will be of interest to the serious latecoming collector (because early coming collectors probably already owned all those tracks).

What exactly has the album introduced to us? Well, first and foremost, **OK Computer** is a delight for the audiophile. Lo-fi tolerance and alt-rock noise are going to hell — from the opening notes of 'Airbag', the entire record is a perfect sonic trip that makes the very best of existing production technologies: a major jump in quality here from **The Bends**, no doubt, directly related to the promotion of Nigel Godrich, formerly the band's recording engineer, to the official status of producer. Listen to the first thirty seconds of 'Subterranean Homesick Alien' and *then* try to believe that the entire record was actually recorded in a converted shed: the way these guitars swoosh and swish around the rhythm section like falling stars and gaseous clouds, you get the impression that all of that must have been captured and bottled in outer space. The unbelievable level of attention to detail on this and other tracks immediately set **OK Computer** apart from most, if not *all*, competition at the time.

And it is not just about alien-style sonic techniques: truly and verily, good guitar music had lived in the underground for so long that I have a hard time remembering when last (prior to 1997) I was able to hear an electric guitar ping with such delicacy as it does during the first seconds of 'No Surprises' (a few seconds later, it is intelligently supported by an equally delicate glockenspiel part). Not just a matter of prettiness, either: guitars, keyboards, and vocals are consistently laid over each other in a way that gives the illusion of multiple dimensions. The best songs on **OK Computer** suck you into a sonic vortex where your spirit is ruthlessly shuttled from one level to another, until you find yourself as helpless, lost, and floating in space as its protagonist. Only The Cure, perhaps, could compete on this front, but Robert Smith's goals were different — he would use his walls and waves of sound to crush you into the blackest desperation. Radiohead are not that cruel. They feed you fear along with a sense of beauty and, occasionally, a thread of optimism.

The sound of **OK Computer** may be defined as cluttered, but all the parts always fall together organically. So, 'Airbag' begins with a powerful guitar riff that almost seems influenced by some classical solo cello suite, then transitions into a looped rhythm section with stop-and-start bass said to be inspired by the style of DJ Shadow (which they allegedly tried to copy but «failed»), while Yorke's singing style here inherits the old quasi-free-form expressivity of Tim Buckley,

and it all somehow fits in: lyrically, the song celebrates life ("In the next world war... I am born again") while at the same time being frighteningly conscious of its incidental nature ("I'm amazed that I survived / An airbag saved my life"), and the deep dark bassline and the quasi-cello guitar riff are here to feed the fear, while the spaced-out high-pitched guitar trills dissipate it in favor of the unexplainable wonder of life. 'Paranoid Android' alternates between one of the most expressive «weepfests» ever recorded (where vocals, guitars, and keyboards all join together in a light-hearted lamentation) and the loudest, angriest melody on the entire album — when Jonny hits hard at 2:42 into the song, this is the album's strongest link to Radiohead's past as an alt-rock band, but it is also a logical transition from one negative psychological state into another. And the gradual build-up on 'Exit Music (For A Film)' (where the «Shakespearian tragedy heights» are taken literally, since the song was written as a musical representation of the *Romeo and Juliet* finale) is handled with meticulous psychological perfection — acoustic guitar first, back vocals next, then the special effects, then the rhythm section, then the screaming climax.

Those who (like myself) have issues with a certain perceived limpness and lifelessness of the Radiohead sound in the **Kid A** and posterior eras need not worry: with all its psychologism and pretension, **OK Computer** can still rock pretty hard, too, be it the crushing funky riff of 'Paranoid Android', or the droney, choppy, «trashy» playing on 'Electioneering'. Most of the time they *don't* want to rock pretty hard, but even then there is a strong rhythmic base that commands your attention — for instance, the metallic percussion sound on 'Climbing Up The Walls' which, together with the industrial synthesizers and Thom's lying-down-and-dying nasal falsetto, gives the song a sense of impending inescapable doom (Peter Gabriel used to like this shit, too). 'Karma Police' also has a strong, decisive stomp to it that somehow supports the idea of "this is what you get when you mess with us" (which, taken on its own, is probably *not* the most convincing line to have ever left Yorke's lips). In short, each song has a strong personality, one way or another, and unless you have a strong aversion towards world-weary, depressed music as a whole, «boredom» as a basic reaction is probably excluded.

If I had to single out one favorite track, though, it would be 'Lucky' — yes, ironically, the very first song written for the project when it was not even a project yet (perhaps not a coincidence, though, what with its being written in the **Bends** period); and for one single, haunting reason — probably *the* single most haunting moment in Thom Yorke's entire career, as he pronounces the line "we are standing on the edge". Just listen to him doing it — have you noticed that the final consonant is left hanging in the air, as if they were *really* standing on the edge, abruptly cutting off into the abyss? Technically, the song was inspired either by the Bosnian conflict, or by the idea of surviving in an air crash, or by both, but to me, it just sounds like the perfect ending to end all endings. I mean, "We are standing on the edge" — you could take this to mean literally *anything*. You could even think of **OK Computer** as the final dot, the culmination, the last breath after which there is really nothing left (and the critics agree — what other album after 1997 has managed to earn a similar reputation?). Or you could take it as a musical symbol of some political / economical / cultural apocalypse. The ferocious guitar solos are certainly quite apocalyptic, and the way they segue into the last of the "we are standing on the edge" bits... It might be a good thing that they preferred to end the record with the relatively harmless, sleepy, creepy-crawly 'Tourist' instead, a song about slowing down and catching your breath in a mad, mad, mad world, or else somebody would have accused them of propagating suicidal tendencies.

A personal confession, however, is now in order: on the whole, I am not in love with **OK Computer** — I have never been in love with **OK Computer** — and at this point, there is reasonably little hope that I ever will. More than that: I consider this album seriously overrated on the whole, and can think of at least several worthy contenders (such as **Dummy** by Portishead or Björk's **Post** and **Homogenic**) that deserve equal praise, but rarely get it. I disagree with people who vote for it as «the best album of all-time», whatever they really mean by it, and I think that it put Radiohead on a logical and inescapable path into artistic decline (which, by itself, is admittedly not an argument against the album as such: sometimes there are chains of sequences that infallibly lead from the highest peak into the deepest ravine, which hardly makes the highest peak less worthy of admiration).

Naturally, we are all entitled to feel or not to feel a spiritual connection to any work of art, and I usually feel a bit sad when finding myself unable to feel a particularly strong one for something that is so highly revered. At the very least, though, it deserves an attempt at an explanation. Why? what's wrong with **OK Computer**, Mr. Cranky Reviewer?

Well, first and simplest, a big problem is Thom Yorke himself. By the time of Radiohead's third album, he had pretty much completed his transition from a «normal» singing style to a highly theatrical, unnatural one, consistently singing in a much higher range than he should be. This makes it seem, on a sheer physiological level, as if the poor guy were stuck in a constant state of histrionic whining — and my senses cannot abide that. I am certainly no enemy to idiosyncratic crazy singing styles, but they all have their redeeming qualities. Like, David Byrne is just as hysterical, but he is outbalancing this by being all humorous and tongue-in-cheek about it. Beth Gibbons sounds like she is ready to die from a broken heart at any minute, but dying from a broken heart is a noble cause and she *totally, convincingly* sounds like it. Björk has her half-fairytale, half-childlike attitude that can be as irritating as it can be endearing, because she sort of makes you believe that she is such a natural pixie.

Yorke, on the other hand — *every* time he raises his voice above a certain pitch, he automatically becomes a naggin' whiner to me, and I instinctively reach out for my big stick to drive the filthy beggar away from the house, maybe set the dogs on the sucker, too. (Crude figure of speech, dammit). Believe me, I am as much of a hater of the proverbial «toxic masculinity» as may be reasonably supported, but even I cannot resist the temptation to grab this guy by the lapels every now and then and tell him to *man the fuck up*. At least if he had stayed more frequently in his quietly contemplative "we are standing on the edge..." mode, that might be a different story; as it is, this is one singing style that I can theoretically respect — after all, he did polish it to perfection, and it is unmistakably his and nobody else's — but instinctively find alienating.

What is even more frustrating, though, is that I do not find nearly as many strong melodies on **OK Computer** as I do on **The Bends**. The *sound* is fabulously great, but the actual musical themes... not so much. A song like 'Let Down', for instance, simply has no discernible melody beyond all the pretty jangle, as far as I am concerned (unsurprisingly, the instrumental track sounds like a lost outtake from some Byrds session — another group with which I sometimes have similar problems). 'Karma Police' with its Neapolitan chord sounds like... well, any basic song with a Neapolitan chord, this one only redeemable through its vocal melody. 'The Tourist', as Greenwood later confessed, was a song specially written in a «lazy» mode, where something "doesn't have to happen every 3 seconds", but I'd be perfectly happy if something happened there

at all, because other than Yorke's frantic invocation for us to slow down (*and* the gorgeous-as-usual production), its melodic base is a fairly common piece of blues-waltz. Even for such a beauty as 'Subterranean Homesick Alien', all I usually remember is how those stars, clouds, and planets were all busy whistling past each other — I never ever remember how its *vocals* went, and vocal melodies are typically among the stronger hooks on this album.

I will not go as far as to say that **OK Computer** is a proverbial example of «style over substance». In a way, its style *is* its substance. The experimentation, the large bag of influences, the mixed atmosphere of fear, confusion, beauty, and awe, it's all there, and it is enough to make for an excellent listening experience. And critics, musicologists, cultural philosophers all over the world will doubtlessly go on having their field days, dissecting every second of the album as if it were the very embodiment of all the basic and advanced features of the human spirit. But if, just for one moment, we agree to switch to cut-the-crap mode, then I would say that «the greatest album of the Nineties», not to mention «one of the greatest albums of all times», in my opinion, would need a little more meat over its bones before you start covering them up with skin. *And* a lead singer who would not find it too boring to sound, a little bit more often, like a normal human being. Yes, everything is subjective, but believe me, with the album's overall tone and message, and my own preference for them, I should have been among the first people to fall madly in dark love with **OK Computer** — the fact that it still has not happened after multiple listens over the course of two decades just *might* mean that there is something not quite right here, and that the «something» is not necessarily limited to just my peculiar perception of it.

Oh well. Whatever my reservations about it may be, **OK Computer** does satisfy one major requirement that is usually implied when talking about «the greatest albums of all time»: it *may* be directly related to the meaning of life (or lack of one), and it does not sound particularly embarrassing when it is being so related. From that point of view, it is, indeed, as much a symbol of the Nineties as Arcade Fire's **Funeral** would later be for the 2000s: it sounds *important*, and when you probe it and pick at it, its importance does not immediately crumble into pieces like a dried-out skeleton. But at the same time, to me it also represents the symbolic inability of the 1990s to fully capture the «primal» impact of stylistically similar universalist musical statements of the 1960s and the 1970s. Perhaps it is just too obtuse and obscure, a record that is much too happy to wallow in the impenetrable symbolism of its lyrics and the complex interweavings of its musical influences to be able to hit you (okay, *me*) right in the guts. Perhaps it could not be any other way — with the days of starry-eyed naiveté and/or straightforwardly expressed frustration passing for great art long behind us and all. It is certainly a *modern* record, and it continues to be modern almost 20 years after its creation — no wonder that it got permanently stuck in «#1 album of all times» position at RateYourMusic, since it is the first (last?) mega-impressive album for the RYM generation that happened to grow up on it rather than the Beatles or Pink Floyd. However, this review is simply unlucky enough to be written by a not very modern reviewer — who also, for that matter, prefers Mozart to Penderecki, and may therefore be incapable of thoroughly assessing the genius of **OK Computer**.

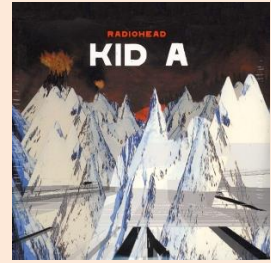
I honestly wish — honestly! — that this record were not as universally revered as it is. To me at least, the hype *hurts* it without helping it — and it certainly hurts the band, who, from then on, could hardly count upon an honest critical review in the official press, since most critics would just be kissing their asses, no matter how progressively weaker the actual records would become. In a last effort, I will distance myself from all the accolades and state that **OK Computer** is a

Only Solitaire Album Reviews: Radiohead




thrilling, moody, adventurous ride on a musically downbound train that may be fairly intense for the artistically sensitive mind, and even psychologically uncomfortable for the easily vulnerable mind. It is not the greatest album of the Nineties (but what is?), not the greatest album ever (but what is?), but it does not need to be the greatest in order to be heard and appreciated for what it is. Let us just intriguingly agree that it is a record made *by* subterranean homesick aliens *for* subterranean homesick aliens, and leave it at that. OK, computer?

KID A (2000)

1) Everything In Its Right Place; 2) Kid A; 3) **The National Anthem**; 4) **How To Disappear Completely (And Never Be Found Again)**; 5) **Treefingers**; 6) Optimistic; 7) In Limbo; 8) **Idioteque**; 9) Morning Bell; 10) Motion Picture Soundtrack.



 ['How To Disappear Completely'](#)

More info:   

General verdict: *An innovative, challenging, yet ultimately unengaging experience. Indifferent respect.*

History repeating itself works just as fine for music as it does for... history. With **OK Computer** gaining the critical status of a **Dark Side Of The Moon** for the Nineties and easily making Radiohead the #1 Band That Matters in the whole wide world, they must have found themselves in the same type of crisis as Floyd in 1974: exhausted from all the hype, yet unavoidably obliged to eventually come up with something comparable in ambition, execution, and impact. Just as **The Bends** was a major creative leap over **Pablo Honey**, and the scope and pretense of **OK Computer**, in its turn, put **The Bends** to shame, so the next album had to represent yet another step forward. But in the year 2000, it was not at all clear whether a huge step forward within the confines of rock music (or traditional genres of music as a whole) was even possible, let alone whether Radiohead had enough genius left to make it.

So, sometime around 1998-99, rumors began to circulate that Thom Yorke pretty much «had it» with rock music, particularly guitar-based rock music, and that even the concept of a clearly defined «melody» as such began to feel alien to him — a clear sign that he *was* looking for an answer well beyond the expectable and predictable, and that the band's (or at least, Yorke's personal) spirit of adventure had not yet run its course. During those years, he claims to have mostly listened to electronic artists like Autechre and Aphex Twin, sensing that it was *them*, with their totally different, but no less meaningful, sounds, rather than anybody else, who truly represented the music of tomorrow; and indeed, Radiohead's movement into the direction of computer software and IDM now seems an inevitable part of their destiny, the only thing they could do at the time in order to avoid the demon of stagnation. Not that they were alone in this enterprise or anything: on the whole, the revival of «raw» guitar rock, spurred on by the grunge movement at the beginning of the decade, was already winding down, and in the 2000s, only the laziest (or the most religiously conscious) bands would resist the temptation of merging their guitar playing with some computer-generated sound loops. Arguably, though, it is **Kid A**, and nothing else, that would become the symbolic flagship of the whole movement.

The album took almost a year and a half to complete (almost twice as much as **OK Computer**), as the band members never set themselves a specific deadline and had quite a few disagreements over particular ideas and directions, as well as a specific problem related to Yorke's temporary writer's block; nevertheless, not only did the band not break up (which *was* a real threat at some time), but they ended up delivering, escaping the creative breakdown trap of such famously exploded projects as **Smile** and **Lifehouse**. Nobody jumped ship in the interim; even Nigel Godrich returned to the producer's seat, although now he had to guide the band through a completely different type of journey. Electronic embellishments, however, were not the only new element in the reformed sound: for one thing, there is also a huge brass section on board (mostly for the purposes of adding an extra dimension to 'The National Anthem'), and then there is the

Orchestra Of St. John's, providing strings for 'How To Disappear Completely'. Talk about the benefits of a bigger budget...

Usually, the farther away we move from the peak years of a musical era, the more difficult it becomes to find an artist who can consistently up the antes and reinvent, redefine, or at least shake himself up, intensely peering with one eye into the deep past and another in the distant future. The rut eventually found Radiohead like it finds everybody, but **Kid A** was like that last extra challenge before you are welcomed to the rank of the true Immortals: «to achieve immortality, you must defeat yourself». In terms of general mood and atmosphere, **Kid A** is easily perceived as a sequel to **OK Computer**, but it still steps all the way out of that album's boundaries, and not *just* by adding electronic patterns: 'National Anthem' shows a strong avantgarde jazz influence, and Yorke's singing style on this album moves ever more in the direction of free-form revolutionaries like Tim Buckley (that is not to say he sounds much like Tim Buckley, which would not have been revolutionary at all; it is more a matter of allowing himself the same ample freedom with vocal modulations that Buckley had wrestled for himself decades ago). In a way, this is the first Radiohead album where lyrics *almost* do not matter (unless you want to spend useless hours trying to decode the Transcendental Meaning of lines like "there are two colours in my head / what is that you tried to say?" or "we've got heads on sticks, you've got ventriloquists"); what matters is the timbre and oscillation pattern of the vocalist, whose primary task is to contribute to the atmosphere.

Although **Kid A** has been called a «difficult album», many times over, I do not find it any more «difficult» than its primary electronic or avantgarde influences. For sure, its songs are more ambiguous than anything Radiohead had ever done before, but essentially it explores the exact same themes — loneliness, alienation, fear, paranoia, disillusionment, all the standard ingredients that Radiohead kept on their shelves since 1993; heck, if it didn't, it probably would not have caught on so easily with the general public. And for all its «progress», it has a number of very firm links with Radiohead's past that greatly assisted the public with catching on. 'The National Anthem', for instance, despite all the infamous «jazz cacophony» created by a swirl of brass overdubs, rides atop a firm, solid, decisive bass groove that sounds not unlike the main riff of 'Paranoid Android'. 'Optimistic' is a clearly guitar-based pop-rocker that would have easily fit on **The Bends** (just throw in a bit of distortion, and you're done); 'In Limbo' has the guitars-and-keyboards-floating-in-space aura of 'Subterranean Homesick Alien'; and even if 'Morning Bell' is completely dependent on a primarily electronic keyboard melody, it still sounds like one of Radiohead's traditionally soulful pleas to the Great God of Mercy. All the more respectable are the many ways in which these traditional elements interact with the novelty stuff — ranging from pure instrumental ambience ('Treefingers') to psychedelic orchestral arrangements ('How To Disappear Completely'). In short, it is a dang *clever* album, regardless of how the listener might feel about it on the proverbial gut level.

Which inevitably brings us to how *this* one particular listener feels about it on the proverbial gut level. Or, rather, how he *does not* feel about it — because, in all honesty, I am so coarse that I do not genuinely feel *anything* about it, and have never been able to (for about 10 years since I first heard it, to make the perspective more clear). From what I have witnessed, there are usually two perspectives on **Kid A**: the 5-star and the 1-star perspective — one of those records where you either get it or you don't, and if you don't, there is no way to help you. My own ears are big fans of the 1-star perspective, suggesting that, for all of its innovative/creative thoroughness, **Kid A** is

easily the most boring and inefficient «great» album ever released, and the fact that it has been symbolically called the greatest album of the 2000s by so many people can only reinforce the bitter irony encased in the equally symbolic question of «where have all the good times gone».

One does not really need to advance far beyond the first track of **Kid A** to form a general perspective on the whole thing. There are people out there who find 'Everything In Its Right Place' the perfect epitome of all the bleakness and desperation that accompanies Radiohead wherever they go. The deep keyboard tone, the repetitiveness, the somnambulant-depressive voice, the whispery overdubs, the electronic crescendos, all working towards that goal...

...alas, divisive opinion coming up: all I manage to hear is a repetitive, deeply annoying whine that *hints* at bleakness and desperation, but never goes for the real thing — working at best on a symbolic level, as if Yorke and his pals were staging a traditional Chinese theater play (which, I must stress, they are not). I mean, I get Michael Stipe, I get Lou Reed, I get Robert Smith, I get Portishead, I even get Radiohead themselves, of the 'Lucky' variety, but *this* sounds tedious and annoying, and Yorke's mantra-like vocalizing eventually becomes a buzzing fly effect that simply shots my nerves (it gets even worse on 'Idioteque', though). Mostly, though, it is a matter of that keyboard melody — I have no idea whatsoever how it could cause even the slightest emotional ripple in anybody. Apparently, it does, leaving me stumped. At best, I can visualize somebody holding his breath for about four minutes and taking a relaxed swim right under the water's surface — a tad psychedelic, but hardly a cathartic experience.

Over the years, I have sincerely and desperately tried to find even *one* song on this album that would properly connect on an emotional level. The closest I ever got was with 'Optimistic', since, as I already said, it is the only song here clearly reminiscent of «old school» Radiohead, when they were content with writing real instrumental and vocal melodies, and it has got some really lovely vocal harmonies that offer a brief respite from the usual Thom Yorke caterwauling. It is still not a masterpiece, though, and it hardly compensates for the complete hollowness of everything else, and I literally mean *everything*. At best, they just sound derivative ('Treefingers', an experiment in turning your guitar into an ambient organ, is listenable but hardly improves upon anything Brian Eno had done — heck, anything *Adrian Belew* had done), and at worst you get 'Idioteque', easily the most irritating song in Radiohead's entire catalog — at least because of my urgent need to physically strangle Mr. Yorke for his, perhaps somewhat authentic, but irredeemingly ugly attempt at impersonating a crazy person announcing the coming of the ice age.

That said, if this was all just a matter of an annoying vocalist... but I do not think **Kid A** would have worked for me as a purely instrumental album, either. Again, for all of its experimentation, I have no idea what it is exactly that should place it in the collective critical mind above all those 1990s masterpieces by the likes of Portishead or Björk. Most of the melodies here revel in minimalism while forgetting that *good* minimalism has to strive to place emotionally meaningful content into minimalistic note sequences — certainly not something the presence of which I could ever suspect in the title track. Test situation: take the minimalistic electronic keyboard melody of 'Everything...' or 'Morning Bell', compare it with, say, the similarly minimalistic (even similarly-toned) electronic keyboard of Portishead's 'Roads', *then* tell me the difference. It is my firm conviction that the boys were *so* deeply entrenched in intellectual experimentalism here that they completely forsook substance for style.

It goes without saying that this whole judgement is a very subjective matter, and that **Kid A** may produce very different effects on people depending on their age, social and cultural background, and, perhaps most importantly, individual listening experiences. But in my personal case, changes in age and listening experience have had no effect whatsoever: from the beginning, I was certain that with **Kid A**, Radiohead completed the process of «losing the way» which was surreptitiously initiated with the still great **OK Computer**, and time, life, and supernatural spirits did nothing to clear me of that conviction, even though God knows I have tried groping for the album's hidden charm every now and then. No dice.


It also goes without saying that this review should not be taken too «prohibitively». Regardless of what this author has to say, **Kid A** has firmly gone down in musical history as an «Important Album», and any music lover / connoisseur needs to hear it at least once, preferably twice or more even if the initial reaction is negative. I am not quite sure of how influential it has been on the subsequent evolution of music (except, naturally, on Radiohead's own future career), but it has certainly been influential on the minds of music theorists and rock critics... and, well, it sold quite a bit, too. (And I am not even mentioning the details of the «leaking on Napster» story, which may have been *the* most influential aspect of the record, indeed).

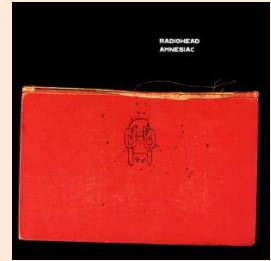
Yet, as of now, I also strongly suspect that the success of **Kid A** is largely due to extra-musical considerations. What would be an objective definition of **Kid A**? «Most significant rock band in the world circa 1997-99, instead of making a carbon copy of its biggest success or commercializing its music for a bigger audience, bravely marches off in an experimental direction with a record that preserves their core values but presents them in a completely new set of musical textures». How could a thing like this not be successful? It simply couldn't. A simple alternative is that **Kid A** is truly musically brilliant, and it takes a different psychological constitution from mine to see it. But I am very wary of those perceptual bifurcations — being picky-picky, any time I have to choose between «brilliance» and «bullshit», I refuse to trust analytical judgements and place my full trust in intuition. In the case of Björk's **Vespertine**, for instance, intuition tells me to rationalize that album's nature as artistic genius. In the case of **Kid A**, intuition demands rationalizing things in the opposite direction. We could write papers and books a-plenty on the symbolic artistic meanings of everything going on here, but attuning your heart to this particular vibe is a different matter altogether.




For that matter, it might be useful to note that, upon release, reviews for **Kid A** were fairly mixed: Radiohead's newly-improved electronic textures displeased and perturbed quite a few of the critics, even if the band's overall reputation at the time was so high that the album still topped the charts both in the UK and in the US. Eventually, even most of the harsh-hearted critics relented, so today **Kid A** is generally regarded as an artistic triumph. In agreement with its reputation, the album has been re-released multiple times in various editions, the most comprehensive of which so far is the Special Edition from 2009 (not that it's a must-have or anything: where Special Editions of earlier albums are valuable because the bonus CDs throw on various B-sides and EPs that are otherwise unavailable, the **Kid A** era yielded no singles or EPs, and so all the bonus tracks there are just various live performances of **Kid A** material).

AMNESIAC (2001)

1) [Packt Like Sardines In A Crushd Tin Box](#); 2) [Pyramid Song](#); 3) [Pulk/Pull Revolving Doors](#); 4) [You And Whose Army?](#); 5) [I Might Be Wrong](#); 6) [Knives Out](#); 7) [Morning Bell](#); 8) [Dollars & Cents](#); 9) [Hunting Bears](#); 10) [Like Spinning Plates](#); 11) [Life In A Glass House](#).

 [‘Knives Out’](#)



More info:   

General verdict: *Inventively excruciating, in a nails-on-smorgasbord sort of way.*

It might not seem fair to pronounce any general judgements on Radiohead’s artistic behavior in the 21st century based on an album that is, essentially, a set of outtakes from the **Kid A** sessions: something that explains both the speed with which it was thrown on the market (one year in between records is not at all typical for Radiohead) and the fact that nobody I know has ever dared to rate it above **Kid A**. Two circumstances, however, still work against the band. One — these songs are by no means «rejects»: in fact, one of the original plans was to release **Kid A** as a double album, but somebody probably dissuaded them from the idea, so as to soften the blow for «rockist» fans just a little bit. Two — in no way does **Amnesiac** ever sound like an auxiliary detour; on the contrary, it ties in very organically and logically as a legitimate album in its own right that paves the way from **Kid A** to **Hail To The Thief** and beyond.

It is also the first Radiohead album that reads as an almost perfect blank to me. Where **OK Computer** was an artistic marvel, only so slightly obscured with faint hints of excesses to come, and where **Kid A** was a confusing mix of good songs, risky production, and art-for-art’s-sake, **Amnesiac** is essentially just a collection of textures and atmospheres. It completes the transition of Radiohead from a band that used to make strong, firm, sharp, soul-pinching musical statements (even **Kid A** still had a few of those) to a band that spends most of its time splashing buckets of musical paint against the wall, then forcing you to sit on the floor and watch that paint dry. Which, I admit, may be a form of therapy for an actual amnesiac, but still gives no excuse for forcing this amnesia on the unhappy listener.

I draw the line at the album’s opening track, ‘Packt Like Sardines In A Crushd Tin Box’ (and the spelling only adds to the indignation — at least be consistent about it and devoice *crushd* to *crusht* if you have just done it for *packt*). Its soft, fragile percussive loops, ultrasoundish keyboards and murmury autotuned vocals probably imply that the protagonist of ‘Everything In Its Right Place’ has been finally stripped of *all* emotionality and sensitivity, and pretty much reduced to a human robot in a low-power state. This is a solid, if not particularly original, concept, but the problem is that they got so carried away by all the stripping and quieting down that they forgot to make the track *exciting*, be it with crude or subtle means. If you listen to it long enough, think about it, read about it, think about it some more, you might come to appreciate its symbolic value; but how could it ever become a feast for the senses if there is nothing to feast on?..

Throw in ‘Pyramid Song’, and you get the second (and pretty much the last) avatar of the album: moody piano + nasal Thom Yorke = pure melancholia without memorable melodies. Think back to ‘Lucky’, when these things were done on an epic scale, with crescendos and climaxes and cliffhangers; ‘Pyramid Song’ tells you that crescendos, climaxes, and cliffhangers are boring clichés that constrain expressivity, and that the *right* way to do this thing is to simply let it flow.

Slowly, smoothly, atmospherically, with minimalistic waves of electronic strings rolling across the rudimentary piano chords. Of course, the piano chords themselves are jazzy, inspired by Charles Mingus' 'Freedom', so it would be sacrilegious to call this music Radiohead's equivalent of «adult contemporary», right? Well, if nobody else is going to come out and do it, I'm ready to take the blow — this is a very dull track, and Thom's «Tristan-is-down-to-his-last-ounce-of-blood» vocal delivery only helps milk curdle faster.

Need one last crippling blow? The same formula is then repeated *in the same way*, with 'Pulk/Pull Revolving Doors' reprising the wimpy percussion loops and autotuned vocal samples of 'Packt', and 'You And Whose Army?' giving us another melted-down ballad, this time one that might have provided Bon Iver with the blueprint for about half of their songs. And yes, none of this would be so horrible if it weren't so *pretentious* — but the idea behind this, see, is that Radiohead continue making High Art, leaving behind the plebs-oriented song structures, melodicy, energy, and focus of their naïve, misguided, silly musical adolescence.

I count exactly *two* songs... — err, excuse me, «art pieces», «songs» is such a lame term for boomer mentality — on the album that have at least a tiny bit of emotional power to them. 'I Might Be Wrong' is just a consolatory bone thrown to rock music lovers, with its twirling bluesy riff (dropped D tuning! hey, that's like Led Zep's 'Moby Dick!'); and 'Knives Out', supposedly inspired by Johnny Marr, has a lovely guitar melody and, for once, a strong croon rather than wimpy whine from Thom — the combination of these factors makes it an obvious standout, and, not surprisingly, this is the only song on the entire record that I could easily envisage on **The Bends** or **OK Computer**.

As the record nears its conclusion, the band toys more and more with all kinds of jazz, a fascination that reaches its climax with 'Life In A Glass House', for which they had enlisted an actual jazz band to make it sound like New Orleanian funeral music (deconstructed, of course; for *constructed* New Orleanian funeral music, you are welcome to come directly to New Orleans). Admittedly, this is at least more novel than their boring electronic diddlings, yet in both cases, the main problem remains the same — Radiohead are simply *not very good* at handling electronic devices, just as they are not very good at showing how they can make the transition from rock to jazz. The only glue that keeps gluing it all together is Yorke's teary depression, and there is only so much teary depression a man can take.

Putting it bluntly, **Amnesiac** is *crap*. In theory, I have nothing against records that try to combine experimental musical textures with drowning in one's own tears in the face of complete helplessness against the evil weight of the world. But when the «experimentation» in question means poking your nose into genres for which you do not really have either the feel or the knack, and when, at the same time, the tears are beginning to reach the level of Alice in Wonderland... like I said, this is where I draw the line. Of course, **Amnesiac** is art: it is analyzable, it is layered, it takes risks and tests out ideas, it even goes further than **Kid A** in breaking up the pop formula, and, hell, it displaced Shaggy's **Hot Shot** from the top spot on the UK charts, so it did at least *something* good in this world. But in terms of fulfilling the greatest function that music, as an art form, is supposed to fulfill — as far as I am concerned, it fails just as miserably at this as Shaggy did, if not more so.


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Technical note: the 2-CD special reissue of **Amnesiac** collects a bunch of B-sides and live versions of **Amnesiac** songs, but excuse me if I do not make any comments on any of these, because this album has come *that* close to making a certified amnesiac out of me.

I MIGHT BE WRONG: LIVE RECORDINGS (2001)

1) The National Anthem; 2) I Might Be Wrong; 3) Morning Bell; 4) Like Spinning Plates;
5) Idioteque; 6) Everything In Its Right Place; 7) Dollars And Cents; 8) True Love Waits.



 [‘The National Anthem \(live\)’](#)

More info:   

General verdict: *Apparently, there IS a big difference between «live recordings» and a «live album».*

As per the Setlist.fm Wiki, Radiohead’s live show held on July 7, 2001 at South Park, Oxford, in addition to all but two tracks included on this live album, also contained the following: ‘Airbag’ (good song), ‘Lucky’ (great song), ‘My Iron Lung’ (pretty good song), ‘Exit Music (For A Film)’ (pathos, pathos, but still pretty good), ‘Knives Out’ (the best song on **Amnesiac** bar none), ‘No Surprises’ (I’m melting), ‘Street Spirit (Fade Out)’ (very touching), ‘Paranoid Android’ (a classic), ‘Fake Plastic Trees’ (aw, beautiful), ‘Karma Police’ (not a favorite, but I do remember how it goes), ‘The Bends’ (alt-rock at its best), and even ‘Creep’ — performed live for the first time since 1998.

Put it all together, crank it up, and who knows? I might even forgive a few bad tunes from **Kid A** and **Amnesiac** thrown in. A solid, representative, well-paced live Radiohead album is nothing to sneer at: everybody knows that the guys can pack plenty of punch anytime. But you see where I am getting at — instead, they opted to release a short, amputated mini-album, almost an EP by modern length standards, that *exclusively* contained material from **Kid A** and **Amnesiac** (along with one new track that we will get around to separately). Not only was this a fairly intentional effrontery to piss off the old conservative fans — an implicit statement that the old stuff is now obsolete — but it also pretty much nullifies the significance of a live album, since the farther they progressed, the less their music was sounding like a band product.

This is not to say that the live performances here do nothing but recreate the studio originals: as the greatest oh-so-not-rock band in the world, Radiohead could not allow themselves the luxury of putting out something completely and utterly redundant. For instance, not being able to recreate the brass pandemonium of ‘The National Anthem’ onstage, they go instead for an electronic pandemonium, in which Greenwood’s use of the *ondes Martenot* is far more clearly visible, and the psychedelic pull of the swirling keyboards is far stronger than the original — at the expense of dropping the nasty jazzy growl. Something like ‘Morning Bell’ in this setting also sounds less clinical and sterile than in its stereo incarnation, with less prominent keyboards and extra guitar work. On the other hand, ‘Everything In Its Right Place’ is extended by about three minutes so that the audiences might be properly bombarded with sped up, slowed down, chewed up, and sprinkled down segments of Thom Yorke’s voice — not much of a «live» performance here, but hopefully enough to make a few ticket buyers go crazy.

I do have to thank them for including ‘Like Spinning Plates’: if you wanted to hear that song done *normally* for once, with actual piano notes and a pretty Thom Yorke vocal performance, this is the version to go for, rather than the gimmickally chopped up electronic debacle on **Amnesiac**. It still remains somewhat shapeless, but at least this time we get healthy, natural shapelessness, instead of «prepared» shapelessness. And the strong, clear, masterfully modulated vocals here are

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just as much of a highlight as the ones on the acoustic ballad 'True Love Waits' that closes the album (one of Radiohead's most famous unreleased songs, written as early as 1995 but having had to wait twenty years for a proper studio take — admittedly, it does sound uncannily similar to Jeff Mangum's acoustic style on **Aeroplane Over The Sea**).

Nevertheless, the flaws of this album clearly outweigh its virtues... scrap that, actually, since the record is so short anyway that it feels silly to talk of any sort of «weight» anyway. As of now, it is merely a reminder of a simple, astounding fact — that there has not, in fact, been even a single major release of a live Radiohead show on audio *or* video. Everything there is is either very short, or very poor quality, or bootlegged, or done in the band's preferred «from-the-basement» format to specially promote one of their albums. It is as if they were afraid that by releasing something like **Radiohead Live At The Royal Albert Hall** they would be sacrificing their integrity as the best oh-so-not-rock-band in the world. Some might call this humbleness, others might see it as vanity. I just find this a bit sorry. In the meantime, if you are a big fan, you probably already have a bunch of live bootlegs and have no need for this; if you are a small fan, what use do you have for a bunch of alternate performances of **Amnesiac** material? well, other than to certify that these songs are still boring, I mean.

HAIL TO THE THIEF (2003)

1) 2 x 2 = 5 (The Lukewarm); 2) Sit Down, Stand Up (Snakes & Ladders); 3) Sail To The Moon (Brush The Cobwebs Out Of The Sky); 4) Backdrifts (Honeymoon Is Over); 5) Go To Sleep (Little Man Being Erased); 6) Where I End And You Begin (The Sky Is Falling In); 7) We Suck Young Blood (Your Time Is Up); 8) The Gloaming (Softly Open Our Mouths In The Cold); 9) There There (The Boney King Of Nowhere); 10) I Will (No Man's Land); 11) A Punchup At A Wedding (No No No No No No No No); 12) Myxomatosis (Judge, Jury & Executioner); 13) Scatterbrain (As Dead As Leaves); 14) A Wolf At The Door (It Girl. Rag Doll).



[▶ 'There There'](#)

More info: [W](#) [Y](#) [G+](#)

General verdict: *No better way to fight The Enemy than weep into your sleeve to a bunch of MOR grooves, eh?*

Some of the readers might suspect that my falling out with Radiohead, rapidly accelerating since **Kid A**, is simply due to an organic «rockist» rejection of electronic textures. But just as it was never a sin for somebody like, say, Pete Townshend to immerse himself in the magic of the synthesizer after years of exclusively playing guitar god, so Radiohead's transition to a new type of sound was never a sin in and out of itself. And if all sorts of pop bands, from Portishead to Broadcast, could organically and emotionally integrate analog and digital, why couldn't Thom Yorke and his bunch of gloomy progressives?

Hail To The Thief is usually discussed in the context of Radiohead taking a wary step back, and reintegrating their dashing achievements with some of the more traditional elements of a rock band, so you might want to make the prediction that my assessment of this «comeback» would be more positive. And at first you'd be right — at the very least, it is certainly an improvement over the killing-me-bluntly, bored-robot-on-pension atmospheres of **Amnesiac**. But... not by much. The miracle has not happened. To use a simple metaphor, **OK Computer** was a balloon full of hot air — **Kid A** was the same balloon, but with a freshly punched hole — **Amnesiac** was the aftermath of the punching — and with **Hail To The Thief**, it kind of sounds as if they are trying to re-inflate the balloon, but forgetting to patch up the hole before doing so.

Like many other records of the same period, **Hail To The Thief** was inspired by the rise of neo-conservatism, Bushism, Iraq war etc. — art tends to thrive in and on hard times. Whether this inspiration truly matters is, however, debatable: Radiohead had been a gloomy, pessimistic team from day one, and it is dubious that their **OK Computer**-era vision of the world could be significantly exacerbated by ongoing events. At the very least, if you listen to all their records in a row outside of historical context, I doubt that **Hail To The Thief** will elicit any kind of "oh, now they are *really* sad and pissed off!" reaction. Actually, I'd even like to forget about this myself, because it is very difficult and unnatural for me to think of Radiohead as a «protest band». The artistic persona of Thom Yorke is not that of a protester — it is that of an anguished weeper, and I would rather have him weep in anguish over global causes than picking local ones.

But fine, let us accept that contemporary events at least gave the band some fresh food for artistic thought, and even pulled them out of a bit of songwriting rut in which they'd found themselves after **Kid A**. How are they cooking that food? Sure, **Hail To The Thief** is a complex, multi-layered record that has a little bit of everything that used to make Radiohead great or at least intriguing. But everything that there is here has already been done before — and better. For all

my reservations about **Kid A / Amnesiac**, the band was pushing forward there, astounding their fans with results that nobody could have foreseen. **Hail To The Thief**, in comparison, clearly marks the waterline where Radiohead slides off the cutting edge.

Not that they had any obligations: after all, you could say the same thing about The Beatles after **Sgt. Pepper**, because, frankly, how much cutting edge is there in the **White Album**? It's just a collection of very good songs, that is all; certainly nowhere near the level of musical innovation seen in contemporary Hendrix, Zappa, or Led Zeppelin releases. And so it was with Radiohead: after a groundbreaking streak extending from **The Bends** to **Kid A**, they could legitimately allow themselves to just relax and write songs the way those songs came into their heads, without giving much of a damn about whether they were still stretching out to new horizons or not. But this also stipulates that the songs have to be... well, you know. And are they?

As we get into the sphere of the personal, I am sorry to say that, once again, not a single one of these tunes does anything for me except being «listenable» and «atmospheric». Soft or hard, light or heavy, sentimental or aggressive, the music on **Hail To The Thief** altogether gives the impression of pale-shadow-afterthoughts to everything that came before it. All the ingredients are there; they simply never come together in a satisfactory manner. Doing a song-by-song run-through would be too painful; I will simply illustrate the feelings (or, rather, lack thereof) on a few select examples, focusing on the album's four singles.

'There There (The Boney King Of Nowhere)' was the first out, probably because of its slightly tribal groove and heavy emphasis on the guitars. Said to be influenced by Can, Siouxsie & The Banshees, and the Pixies, it is a stuttery, heavily syncopated rocker that has neither the precision and ruthlessness of Can, nor the theatricality and aggressive energy of Siouxsie, nor the humor and absurdity of the Pixies. The grumbly, repetitive guitar riff is a poorly adapted companion to Yorke's nasal falsetto (as an example of how such things are done right, take Tom Waits' 'Going Out West' which boasts a slightly similar percussive groove, but where *everything* clicks because all the instruments and vocals are in tune with each other); the vocal part lacks any interesting dynamic shifts (a.k.a. «hooks»); and by the time the song kicks into high gear, with Greenwood letting loose some of his guitar demons in classic **Bends** mode, my lack of interest has become so total that the effort is wasted — too bad, because some of those climactic guitar overdubs kick notariably certified ass.

The second single was a return to acoustic form — 'Go To Sleep', alternating between 4/4 and 6/4 to take the fun out of your toe-tapping, is a bass-heavy neo-folk freakout with a clearly spelled out political message ("we don't want the loonies taking over"). We certainly do not, but instead of putting the loonies to sleep, it nearly succeeds in doing the same thing for me — the guitar melody of the song is repetitive, monotonous, and bluntly refuses to employ any variations or flourishes that would deviate it from the formula; and try as he may, Thom Yorke has spent so much time whining that when the need finally arises to send out a few angry barks, he cannot mobilize the necessary resources for this.

So perhaps the opening number, '2 x 2 = 5 (The Lukewarm)', released as the third single, might remedy the situation? Hardly. Its opening melody is played in a fairly typical picking style for Radiohead (think 'Street Spirit'); midway through, it becomes a heated-up alt-rocker with paranoid overtones, but never *properly* picks up steam because the acoustic basis does not allow

it to, and also because Yorke's "you have not been payin' attention" bit is ugly as hell. Not desperate, not thunderous, not aggressive — at best, you can take it as part of his «mental patient» persona, and I just do not feel that he is as credible in it as he is in his «desperate romantic» guise. 'Lukewarm' is a perfect subtitle for it — lukewarm it is, as is everything else on the album.

'A Punchup At A Wedding' was the fourth (promotional) single, and it is probably the best of the four, but that is not saying much. There is a meaty, blues-based bass / piano groove at the heart of the song, but it does not go anywhere in particular (other than being reinforced with somewhat comically-sounding heavy guitar «grunts» midway through) and, once again, offers nothing by way of vocal hooks other than a few more examples of Thom's familiar falsetto. Worst thing is, there is nothing truly *punchy* about this song. The lyrics sound like they want to tear George W. Bush and his friends a new one — "you had to piss on our parade... hypocrite opportunist, don't infect me with your poison" — but the music has no energy, bite, or venom to it whatsoever. Perhaps if they were willing to go along with this funky spirit, they should have, you know, invited some actual funk session musicians to play on it? Because the song just drags.

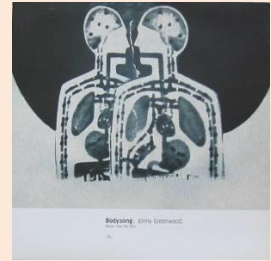
I do believe that is enough for now, because I could probably write up similar impressions for any other song on here. Some have faintly industrial overtones ('Myxomatosis'), some are purely atmospheric ballads ('We Suck Young Blood' — actually, that song has at least some symbolic value, because Thom's terminally-ill delivery emphasizes the ridiculousness of the situation in which the old and obsolete feed on the hopes and futures of the newer generations; still lethargic, though); *all* share such common values as feebly depressed mood, repetitive sonic patterns, lack of vocal hooks, and a feeling of «I've heard this before, and it used to be much better».

It does feel more cohesive and purposeful than **Amnesiac**, and it has a smaller percentage of songs about which I openly wish that they'd never corrupted the fabric of space and time. But a small part of me even secretly wishes that it would be *crazier* than **Amnesiac** — with an album like this, active hatred might even be preferable to bored indifference. Hail to the new Radiohead, the only band in existence endorsing musical sleeping pills as a weapon against The System.




Those who have accepted the endorsement will be sleepily happy to know that the expanded version of **Hail To The Thief** (2009) adds a few B-sides (such as the humorously titled 'Paperbag Writer' — unfortunately, just as comatose as all its better known brethren), as well as the entire **Com Lag** EP from 2004, which includes some remixed and live versions of **Thief** numbers. No separate review will be provided for this entity, for understandable reasons.

JONNY GREENWOOD: BODYSONG (2003)

1) Moon Trills; 2) Moon Mall; 3) Trench; 4) Iron Swallow; 5) Clockwork Tin Soldiers; 6) Convergence; 7) Nudnik Headache; 8) Peartree; 9) Splitter; 10) Bode Radio / Glass Light / Broken; 11) 24 Hour Charleston; 12) Milky Drops From Heaven; 13) Tehellet.



 [‘Moon Trills’](#)

More info:   

General verdict: *A highly diverse and knowledgeable soundtrack, but not exactly a source of major excitement.*

Say you are one of those people who likes Radiohead, or would like to like Radiohead, but happen to think that Thom Yorke is one of the most obnoxious singers on this planet, and how much more cool Radiohead would be if it had a different vocalist, or maybe even no vocalist at all. If so, could this be a remedy — Jonny Greenwood’s body of movie soundtracks, which pretty much works as the substitute for his solo career? After all, Jonny *is* the musical genius behind Radiohead, or so it is typically assumed, and it is clear that he does so many soundtracks not in order to make a quick extra buck or because he has a secret affair with Paul Thomas Anderson, but simply because this gives him a chance to run a few of his ideas past band control without straining any of his relationships with the other members of Radiohead.

Most importantly, the soundtracks actually work on their own. This first try, for instance, was used in the art-doc movie *Body Song*, directed by Simon Pummell and, according to Wikipedia, telling «the story of an archetypal human life using images taken from all around the world and the last 100 years of cinema» — one of those projects that typically commend gushing admiration from Serious Art Lover, venomous cynicism from Bullshit Hound Critic, and utmost indifference from 99.99% of the total population of the planet. I have not seen it, so count me within the 99.99% for now, but I did hear the soundtrack and I confirm that the soundtrack can be listened to, enjoyed, and assimilated without any visual accompaniments — or, rather, you can easily make your own visuals up as you go along.

Or not, actually. If you thought **Kid A** and **Amnesiac** went all the way to derail Radiohead from the tried and true rock band formula, think again: as a solo artist, Jonny Greenwood cares even less for polished structures, rhythm tracks, and firmly established musical themes. Instead, he goes on to honor as many of his witty influences as possible — starting with modern classical idols such as Messiaen and Penderecki, going on to Coltrane and Miles Davis, and ending with all sorts of electronic wizards. To that effect, The Emperor Quartet has been called on to provide chamber backing, some important brass players have been called on to provide jazz backing, and Jonny himself plays a lot of Ondes Martenot to keep us firmly in the digital age.

It’s all cool, and Greenwood’s compositional skills are nothing to laugh about — I have no idea what Messiaen himself would have said about tracks like ‘Tehellet’ or ‘Iron Swallow’, but they have a fairly serious feel, and I have certainly heard plenty of neo-classical pieces that were much more boring, despite being strictly academic. Above everything else, the soundtrack is really and truly startlingly diverse. Its classical pieces can be minimalistic (‘Moon Trills’), neo-romantic (‘Glass Light’), or epic (‘Tehellet’). Its electronic passages may be glitchy (‘Trench’), trip-hoppy (‘Clockwork Tin Soldiers’), or just wobbly-psychedelic (‘Moon Mall’). ‘Milky Drops From Heaven’ is avantgarde jazz that sometimes devolves into murky cacophony. ‘Convergence’ is

four minutes of wild tribal percussion, while '24 Hour Charleston' is banjo-led swamp music peppered with electronic bleeps that make Wilco's **Yankee Hotel Foxtrot** marriages of the past and the future seem like childplay in comparison. Quite literally, this is the work of a single guy who seems wildly pleased about letting completely loose, for the first time in his life — taking the time to cram *all* of his passions into a single package.

However, the main problem with **Bodysong** is not that it is a soundtrack, but that, for all of its endless pool of ideas, it is still underwhelming. Listening to it actually helps me understand why I do not care all that much for post-**Kid A** Radiohead a bit better — Greenwood may be a musical prodigy and a musical wizard, not to mention a brave conqueror of new frontiers, blah blah blah, but he just isn't a musical *genius*, and as far as soundtracks are concerned, his name clearly does not deserve the same pedestal heights as for Ennio Morricone — or even Clint Mansell, to name a more modern personality. Most of these melodies are technically admirable, but I'd be hard pressed to name one which would amount to more than pleasant / respectable / mildly intriguing background music. Whatever moods these pieces are supposed to convey, they do not convey them with sufficient passion — it is more like a quietly percolating kettle.

See 'Moon Trills', the opening piece. It is nicely atmospheric; a quiet, stable, simple piano line as the anchor, and lots of tinkling keyboard starlets, string gusts, and Ondes Martenot whisks whizzing around it. But it is basically just a chunk of ambience, and it never gets the chance to grow into something more significant. I mean, if this were a Steve Reich piece, it would probably go on for 15 minutes instead of 5, and would have ended in some place that would be vastly distant from the beginning — even if we'd never notice that while listening. If this were a Brian Eno piece, it might have been even more stripped down, but the simple piano line would be louder, stronger, and more meaningful and emotional. But this is Jonny Greenwood, and all I can say is... the man gets his job done, and then switches to the next one.

Every other track, be it electronic, classical, jazz, or maniacal tribal percussion, likewise, feels like a job well done and nothing more. For each of these experiments, you can name a dozen people who did something like this earlier *and* better — their saving grace is that few, if any, people did them all at the same time and in one place. Just quickly skimming over the tracks once more doubles my respect for Greenwood — but not my heartfelt admiration for the music that he is producing. All of a sudden, I begin to miss Thom Yorke... and all of a sudden, I begin to suspect that you can *either* write great rock guitar riffs *or* the Turangalila, but that nobody can do both with the same level of naturally coming greatness.

Returning to the movie, there is a quote from Paul Thomas Anderson about it, describing the experience as «a moving, scary and hypnotic potpourri of images». Perhaps that might be true about the visual aspects (I cannot say anything here), but Greenwood's music, as presented here, is quite far from scary, and only tiny bits of the score demand to be described as «moving» or «hypnotic» ('Moon Trills', despite all its shortcomings, is probably the best of those anyway). Classy, yes; intriguing, yes; definitely worth taking into consideration for a Radiohead fan, yes. But like so many pieces of 21st century A-R-T, its overall ambitions seem to overwhelm its eventual accomplishments. Perhaps if the album weren't labeled **Bodysong**, but rather went under a title like **Purification Music For Your Living Room**, the effect would be more adequate.

THOM YORKE: THE ERASER (2006)

1) The Eraser; 2) Analyse; 3) The Clock; 4) **Black Swan**; 5) Skip Divided; 6) Atoms For Peace; 7) **And It Rained All Night**; 8) Harrowdown Hill; 9) Cymbal Rush.



[▶ 'And It Rained All Night'](#)

More info: [W](#) [D](#) [G](#)

General verdict: *A surprisingly poignant - and unexpectedly human-sounding - effort here. Sometimes low-key actually works better than all-out ambition.*

I had not the slightest doubt that Thom Yorke's first solo album, recorded while the band was on temporary hiatus, would suck tremendously — most likely, thought I, it would be just like **Hail To The Thief**, but even more watery and with boring electronics replacing all the potentially cool guitar bits. I mean, *at least* Jonny Greenwood is supposedly this musical genius, influenced by everybody from Penderecki to Pythagoras; but Thom Yorke? He is merely a visionary whiner, and without Greenwood's substance (and occasional crunch), he is simply going to shower you in monotonous electronic tears until you feel like a short-circuited robot.

Imagine, then, my surprise when I discovered that **The Eraser** was... well, not exactly «nothing like that», but still quite far removed from my preconception. It *is* mostly electronic, yes, but it follows a relatively austere minimalistic path: most of the songs are based upon short samples (which makes sense, since Thom is not a great player), overdubbing is kept to a minimum, and vocals are generally mixed higher than on Radiohead records — so that, you know, there'd be no mistake about *whose* solo album this really is... Nigel Godrich's, of course!

Originally, Yorke planned for the record to be completely instrumental, and it may have worked, because some of those minimalistic samples are actually moodier and more memorable than just about anything on **Hail To The Thief**. Eventually he gave in to Nigel's requests and wrote vocal tracks for all of them, turning the album into another thinly disguised sociopolitical protest rant in the process — but it's a good thing he did, because such tracks as 'Atoms For Peace' and 'And It Rained All Night' contain some of his most beautiful singing since **OK Computer**.

The music in general is at the same time more and less avantgardish here than on **Kid A** or **Hail To The Thief**. More, because, working in a bandless format and relying almost exclusively on sampling, Yorke is chained to this barebones approach that sometimes borders on Autechre: the songs are often little more than skeletons, consisting of 3-4-note bass riffs and rudimentarily programmed keyboards. But also less, because these skeletons seem to be a bit more traditional and conservative — made up in a language which clicks much easier with me than the language of **Hail To The Thief**. Take 'And It Rained All Night', for instance: the combination of a small, humming, mildly paranoid, funky bass riff with a cloudy overlay of synthesizers actually *does* create the atmosphere of a never-ending rainy night — and against that background, Yorke's bitter-honey-dripping refrain of "I can see you, but I can never reach you..." sounds all the more desperate. It is, I think, one of the most effective displays of his «claustrophobic» personality.

This does not mean that a return to relatively natural simplicity will necessarily work in all cases. Things like the obsessively looped sample of Jonny Greenwood banging out two chords on a

piano, used by Thom on the title track, might seem haunting to some and annoying to others — at the very least, if they work, they rather work on the same «symbolic» level of interpretation as most of post-**Kid A** Radiohead. But on the other hand, it is so nice to hear Yorke occasionally return to **OK Computer** stylistics — ‘Analyse’ is a tragic ballad with a clear and powerful vocal track, certainly not on the climactic level of ‘Lucky’, but at least sounding like a distress call from a sympathetic, if doomed, human being. And if there were more songs like ‘Black Swan’ (whose guitar-and-drums track is sampled from an old O’Brien / Selway bit recorded in 2000) on **Amnesiac**, my opinion of that record would have jumped up a few points — there is something deeply right in how that quietly noodling dark folk riff combines with Thom’s quietly noodling “this is fucked up, fucked up” dark grumble of a chorus.

Do not get me wrong: I am not intentionally playing contrarian here, and by no means is **The Eraser** some sort of grossly underrated masterpiece that dwarfs Radiohead’s entire 21st century catalog and refuses to be recognized as such by the *hoi polloi* just because they cannot stubbornly accept a Thom Yorke album over a Radiohead album. Substance-wise, it is a minor effort — essentially, just Thom quickly throwing together some lyrical lines over a bunch of samples extracted from Radiohead’s bulging vaults. It is simply that I am glad to have discovered it, because it gives me a bit of insight into my own problems with latter day Radiohead — with **The Eraser** in hand, I am more convinced than ever before that these problems have to do with Radiohead constantly having to prove to the world that they are Radiohead, and as such they have to be completely different from anybody who is not Radiohead.


The Eraser has no such responsibility to itself: despite the complete lack of a band-style atmosphere, this is just a minor effort from Thom Yorke to put on record a bit of Thom Yorke. Notice how, despite all the electronic sounds, there are no sound effects on his voice whatsoever this time around? Well... it actually *works*. Yes, I am not ashamed to state that Thom Yorke sounds better when he is singing in his natural voice than when he is drowned in reverb, digitalized, auto-tuned, spun backwards, or disassembled into a million pieces and put back together again. Surprise, surprise: it actually makes his depressing songs *more* depressing, and his paranoid ramblings *more* paranoid.




In any case: if, for some reason, you have missed out on this record, don’t — it is an absolute must for a Radiohead fan, and a curious curio for those of us who think Radiohead might have gone way over their radioheads after catching the Millennium bug. And I *definitely* prefer it over most of Jonny Greenwood’s soundtracks, which is pretty much the equivalent of saying that, whether I like it or not, Radiohead is still Thom Yorke first and Jonny Greenwood second.

IN RAINBOWS (2007)

1) 15 Step; 2) Bodysnatchers; 3) Nude; 4) Weird Fishes / Arpeggi; 5) All I Need; 6) Faust Arp; 7) Reckoner; 8) House Of Cards; 9) Jigsaw Falling Into Place; 10) Videotape; 11*) Mk 1; 12*) Down Is The New Up; 13*) Go Slowly; 14*) Mk 2; 15*) Last Flowers; 16*) Up On The Ladder; 17*) Bangers + Mash; 18*) 4 Minute Warning.



 ['House Of Cards'](#)

More info:   

General verdict: *The new, improved, adult contemporary look of Radiohead: wake me up when it's over.*

If you are a Radiohead fan and still, for some reason, have been following these reviews even after **Kid A** and **Amnesiac**, then you probably must sense that my personal beef with this band goes significantly beyond a mere issue of liking / not liking something. Whether I like it or not, Radiohead are the quintessential band that took rock music out of the 20th century and readjusted it for the 21st century — throughout the 2000s, we were living in the Radiohead age just as assuredly as we were living in it throughout the second half of the 1990s. (For all I know, we might *still* be living in it, because if not, I have no idea whatsoever in which age we are living in the 2010s anyway). And this, in a way, implies that whoever says «I really don't empathize with the direction that Radiohead's music took after **OK Computer**» is close to saying «I am not that much a fan of rock / pop / whatever music in the 21st century, period». Hyperbolic exaggeration, for sure — not to be taken at face value — but it does make a certain sense; at the very least, I certainly feel that my problems with Radiohead could be easily extrapolated on a *very* large number of bands and artists following in their footsteps, consciously or not.

One might, perhaps, think that at least a part of these problems would go away with the release of **In Rainbows**, the band's first new project after a three-year break — better known to outsiders, perhaps, as the /in/famous «self-release» adventure, when the band decided that they might be strong enough to deal the final blow to the record industry by simply offering their production directly to the fans over the Internet under a pay-what-you-want agreement. (In the process, they pissed off quite a few of their lesser peers who rightly pointed out that only a few select «titans» like Radiohead could afford this kind of marketing). The gesture caused an immense news stir, tons of discussion, generated plenty of publicity, but ultimately had the same influence as The Flaming Lips' decision to change the face of music with **Zaireeka** — i.e., none.

However, as the dust settled, **In Rainbows** seems to have remained in public conscience as the best Radiohead album of the 21st century (since **Kid A**, technically, was still in the 20th). On the average, it got more accolades from critics and casual fans than either of its two predecessors, and typically sits higher than them on various best-of lists. The main reason for this, I think, is that **In Rainbows** goes much easier on the ears — it announces a return to relatively simpler and more traditional values, with a much less cluttered production, fewer weird effects, more easily understandable chord changes, all the while staying true, of course, to the familiar Radiohead spirit of beauty, moping, whining, depression, and alienation. And isn't *that* precisely what this reviewer has been clamoring for all this time?

In a way, yes. But what this reviewer has *never* been asking for is for Radiohead to begin to sound like a professionally registered «adult contemporary» outfit. Every time I come across yet another raving account of the wonderful, heart-tugging melodies at the heart of **In Rainbows**, I

cannot help wondering how the same people would react if an album like this were released by the likes of, say, Sting (who, I insist, *is* perfectly capable of writing at the same level of musical intelligence — which is not necessarily an endorsement). And while this assessment, like any other, does not have the audacity to pretend to «observer-independent objectivity», one objective fact about the album is as follows: over the past decade, I have listened to it at least a couple dozen times, and the *only* song on it that left the vaguest, the faintest, the tiniest imprint in my brain was ‘House Of Cards’ (and see below on the odd reasons behind that).

The songs here do sound slightly more «normal» than before — if you strip them down to the bare melodies, they will be classifiable into relatively typical jazz, folk, and sometimes even good old rock (‘Jigsaw’) patterns. Not a single one of these tracks causes acute mental irritation of the «what the heck am I listening to and why am I wasting my brain cells on this?» kind. For guitar lovers, the news is especially good, because most of the songs are guitar-driven rather than, say, Ondes Martenot-driven; and sometimes, when they had problems coming up with the best possible arrangement, the final decision was to leave it simple and straightforward, as in the case of ‘Videotape’, where they tried lots of stuff but ultimately left just one simple piano line and a draggy percussion sample. But «normal» is not the same as «exciting»: the whole album is so utterly lukewarm and devoid of dynamics that **Kid A** sounds like Motörhead in comparison.

I mean, if I want pleasant ambient sounds, I have Brian Eno. The songs on **In Rainbows** pretend to be songs — they have rising and falling melodies, they have verses and (sometimes) choruses, they have different types of instrumentation, but they have absolutely nothing to lock my attention. Let us just look at the singles for example, shall we? The first one was ‘Jigsaw Falling Into Place’, a somber rocker about the perils and consequences of poorly engineered relationships. It starts out promisingly, at a fast tempo and with a tightly coordinated rhythm section, but it never delivers — Thom’s voice rises slightly and gets a bit angrier, some strings and falsetto harmonies join in, but the band’s idea of an emotional crescendo in the context of a fast pop-rock song is either so far ahead of its time that us poor mortals cannot grasp it, or — more likely — they just haven’t rocked out in such a long time that they forgot all about it. I mean, play this back to back with frickin’ ‘National Anthem’, and this will seem like a severe consequence of acute muscle degeneration in comparison.

‘Nude’ is a little better (perhaps because it was a reject from the **OK Computer** sessions?), but other than Thom’s bitter-honey-dripping voice on the “now that you’ve found it” refrain, there is nothing about the song that even begins to make it feel special: four minutes of pleasantly lulling drift through the atmosphere on a space cab, driven so professionally that safely drifting off to sleep is the easiest thing to do. Compare something like ‘High And Dry’, which had the exact same ingredients of tenderness and sadness, but actually told a cleverly unfolding story as it went on. ‘Nude’, in comparison, is four minutes of floating jello, not even saved by the unusually loud, trip-hoppy, Portishead-ish bassline (wasted — now that I have mentioned Portishead, I feel a desperate urge to throw on ‘Roads’ and remind myself that this kind of music *can* be emotionally devastating when done right).

This was followed by ‘House Of Cards’ which, as I have already mentioned, is the only song that I have vague reminiscences of after so many listens — partially because its guitar intro announces it as some sort of Sheryl Crow-style country rocker, but the subsequent production turns it into something more like a cross between the echoey spiritualism of Peter Gabriel and the echoey

romanticism of Sade. Apparently, the "denial... denial..." chorus turns out to be the single most successful hook of the album — except that, confusedly, it is *the* one moment on the album that sounds the most like classic adult contemporary. I like it — Greenwood's synthesizer waves, strung one upon another in the background, add a cool psychedelic texture to the suspiciously roots-rockish guitar riff. But hundreds of songs that are just as good were written and recorded in 2007; and its single companion, 'Bodysnatchers', another attempt at the long-forgotten art of «rocking out», does not attenuate it positively from any chosen angle, either.

I would guess that Yorke's vocal part on 'Reckoner', the last non-promotional single from the album, could be counted as his single best performance on the album — Yorke's falsetto modulations can melt the heart of the toughest skeptic. But what's with the music? Is that faint, barely audible folkish picking pattern supposed to be the ideal companion for the falsetto just because they match each other in softness of tone? The result is another five-minute lullaby that has no dynamics whatsoever. Deep in my mind, I can picture how the same basic melodic ideas would have been treated in the **Bends** era — the production would be sharper, louder, the hooks better defined, the moods more penetrating...

...anyway, you get the gist. I could make more comments like these on 'Weird Fishes' or 'Videotape' or anything else here — the album features the same stultifying smoothness all over the place. There is an ideological approach that invites you to simply accept this as a given — yes, there are no sharp hooks, yes, everything is very smoothly lubricated, yes, falling asleep to this wisened-up mid-age rejection of jagged angles and unpredictable perks is officially allowed — but even from my personal mid-age wisened-up perspective, I feel like one should either go all the way and simply make records labeled as «Ambient» or «New Age» or «Post-Soft Rock», or try to at least go for a few adrenaline shots every once in a while.

Whatever bad things I may have said — perhaps undeservedly so — about **Amnesiac** or **Hail To The Thief**, at least those albums were *enigmas*. You could hold heated discussions about whether songs like 'Packt Like Sardines' had a right to exist, whether they had any meaning, whether one could be trained to enjoy them from a state of original total reject, etc. The difference with **In Rainbows** is that this is, conversely, quite a simple little record. There's no hidden magic here, no odd secrets to uncover. The fact that many people go head over heels over it is far more baffling to me than whatever people feel about **Kid A**; it even makes me suspect that there *is* such a thing, after all, as the «Radiohead magic» where, if a certain person falls under the charm of one Radiohead song, this unlocks a special corridor in the back of his mind, and then... on the other hand, the same people *did* hate **The King Of Limbs**, which, to my ears — though I am running a little ahead here — is an utterly logical continuation of the direction taken on **In Rainbows**. Meaning that no scientific conclusion is forthcoming here, not at the moment.



For the record, once **In Rainbows** was finally released on CD, there was a special limited «discbox» edition with several additional tracks from the same sessions — and, predictably, this is just 25 extra minutes of the general **In Rainbows** style: no alarms and no surprises. So just let me out of here. This is my final bellyache.

JONNY GREENWOOD: THERE WILL BE BLOOD (2007)

1) Open Spaces; 2) Future Markets; 3) Prospectors Arrive; 4) Eat Him By His Own Light; 5) Henry Plainview; 6) There Will Be Blood; 7) Oil; 8) Proven Lands; 9) HW / Hope Of New Fields; 10) Stranded The Line; 11) Prospectors Quartet.

 ['Johnny Plainview'](#)



More info:   

General verdict: *The notorious 16th century baroque composer Sir Jonathan Greenwood with his latest set of motets... oh, wait a minute.*

I am ashamed to admit that *There Will Be Blood* was the *last* Paul Thomas Anderson movie that I had personally seen at the time this review was written (update: I did manage to add *Phantom Thread* to that list since then), and am also confused to recognize that this was the *first* of several soundtracks that Jonny Greenwood provided for Anderson. To be honest, while I enjoyed the movie (because watching Daniel Day-Lewis is always a delight as long as the script is not completely dreadful), I did not remember much about its music when it was over — largely because, unlike Aimee Mann's songs in *Magnolia*, it was just background film music to me. But the half-hour album that accompanied it, containing all of Greenwood's score but not the Brahms or Arvo Pärt pieces that were also featured in the movie, does not at all sound like «incidental music»: its compositions are lengthy, complex, and wholesome enough to come across as a suite, one that can be enjoyed without even beginning to suspect that there's this unconventionally symbolic movie about a ruthless oil prospector that goes along with it.

Neo-classical suite, that is: for the first time here, Greenwood allows himself to fully indulge in his passion for chamber music and write a set of pieces for classical musicians to perform — in formats ranging from string quartets to piano quintets to small symphonic orchestras. The variety of approach allows me to hear echoes of just about everybody who mattered in classical music in the second half of the 20th century, from Shostakovich to Messiaen to Penderecki to Schnittke to... well, it is silly just to keep dropping names all over the place, especially if the name-dropper is quite far from being a connoisseur of classical oeuvres created in the age of modal jazz, rock'n'roll, and Madonna.

I do not want to jump on the oh-so-easily jumpable «Jonny Greenwood is a rock musician with no academic training, therefore he cannot even begin to approach the greatness of Shostakovich and/or Penderecki on their own turf» wagon; but neither can I claim that the classical music he writes is truly worth your time if you *are* a buff. All I can say, from a thoroughly layman-like perspective, is that modern classical, for me, falls into two categories — music that makes me go to sleep (approximately 85% of what I've heard) and music that occasionally makes me sit up and listen because, bluntly speaking, there is some real *life* in it, rather than just skill. From that crude, simple perspective **There Will Be Blood** dangles somewhere in the middle.

One thing that Jonny clearly did *not* want to do was to make his music sound sleepy and ambient; practically each of these pieces shows a certain dynamic, rises and falls, invests in heavy cello barrages and sharply lyrical violin solos, all the while staying in surprisingly traditional territory. Dissonance is used sparingly; in fact, I believe that most of the record would be quite palatable even to those whose tastes in classical music stop at the border that separates impressionism from


serialism. At the same time, there is clearly a big spiritual influence here from the «apocalyptic», WWII-inspired trend in modern music — check out, for instance, the alarm siren-like strings on ‘Henry Plainview’, not unlike something you’d hear in Penderecki’s *Threnody* — which fits in with the tone of Anderson’s appropriately apocalyptic movie, but most likely, just reflects Jonny’s personal interest in making spooky.




Nothing about the soundtrack strikes me as *particularly* beautiful or fearful, but it is sprinkled with occasionally outstanding moments — the sprinting Wagnerian cellos in ‘Future Markets’, the ravaging string-based bolts of lightning in the title track, the percussive African treatment of strings in ‘Proven Lands’ among them. At the very least, the soundtrack shows more energy than **In Rainbows** (ducks a used copy of the *There Will Be Blood* DVD); as to how well it fits into the modern classical scene, my opinion should not matter — groping blindly in the dark, I’d say that this stuff makes Jonny look no better and no worse than the average moderately talented graduate of the Juilliard composition department, which would either qualify as a compliment or an insult, depending on your general view of the world. I will merely reiterate that the suite works fine on its own, without any obligatory connection to the movie, that I had a bit more fun listening to it than I expected, and that I *think* Jonny would fare better as a symphonic composer than a string quartet one — but then, I do have a hard time getting into string quartets in general.

THE KING OF LIMBS (2011)

1) Bloom; 2) Morning Mr. Magpie; 3) Little By Little; 4) Feral; 5) Lotus Flower; 6) Codex; 7) Give Up The Ghost; 8) Separator; 9*) Supercollider; 10*) The Butcher.



 [‘Give Up The Ghost’](#)

More info:   

General verdict: *I'll have to postpone it until at least three seconds of this album make any imprint on the mush that used to be my brain.*

Yeah, more like **The King Of Limps** (sorry, I guess we all saw that one coming). The first record to ruin Radiohead's up-till-then immaculate reputation with critics and fans alike, it was made over a period of a year and a half — and ended up being a measly 37 minutes long at that. All of a sudden, people found themselves *struggling* to confess to liking the album — particularly people who got paid for writing their impressions of it and who had not, until then, realized that there was a remote possibility of Radiohead releasing something that could not be written about in glowing terms, regardless of whether you liked the album or not.

I have it easy here: as far as my perspective is concerned, **The King Of Limbs** is merely the culmination of a long-term decay process that began around 2000 and took ten years to complete. I do not see any earth-shattering difference between this record and **In Rainbows**, or **Hail To The Thief**, or just about anything Radiohead did since Thom Yorke put on his exosuit and drifted away into a world populated by non-violent, melancholic, pot-smoking AIs. Its eight songs, or, rather, its eight mushily abstract sonic paintings are as inoffensive and listenable as always, and sometimes they are even pretty. Its work with tape loops and interconnected acoustic / electronic textures is marginally creative. Some of the atmospherics work better than others. I kinda like the piano in 'Codex'... sounds like something Peter Gabriel might have done.

The problem is, I have absolutely no idea what to write about these songs: every single one of them is like a total non-entity, just a bunch of melancholic or emotionless sounds strung together, and we'd been through that many times before and it *usually* worked a little better. Critics and fans were disappointed because **The King Of Limbs** offered no development, and they were right; even more seriously, it becomes unclear why exactly should we spend serious attention on *this* album when there's, like, probably fifty thousand indie rock records in 2011 alone that have a similar type of sound. A little folk, a little jazz, a little electronics, a little mope... and there you have it. Not every band has a singer of Thom Yorke's caliber, it is true ('Give Up The Ghost' has some lovely lilting elements to it), but with a little Autotune you can work wonders anyway.

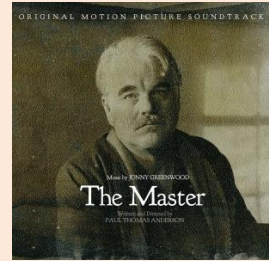
While it is always possible to subject the songs to repeated listens and extract «interesting» bits and pieces, the overall effort is just not worth it. So, for instance, 'Morning Mr. Magpie', an accusatory rant against somebody who has "stolen all the magic, took my melody" (excuses, excuses), has a fussy, restless guitar track (built on playing with delay, I think), but how exactly does this improve on the art of, say, Adrian Belew, who did all this stuff earlier *and* better? The interplay between electric and acoustic and bass guitars on 'Little By Little' recreates the usual Radiohead mix of tenderness and sorrow, but I'd take Morphine over this any day...

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...anyway, this is simply very, very, very boring. If you want it to become even *more* boring, grab the edition that adds the 7-minute long 'Supercollider' as a bonus track — nothing more exciting in this world than seven minutes of the same three-chord electronic loop turning over on a spit (probably the *last* thing you'd expect to associate with a supercollider, but Radiohead have been all about unpredictable associations for a very long time now). But if you want me to go ahead and admit that **King Of Limbs** makes **In Rainbows** as exciting as a Sparks album in comparison, then no, I will not say that. Terminal boredom simply comes in different colors.

JONNY GREENWOOD: THE MASTER (2012)

1) Overtones; 2) Time Hole; 3) Back Beyond; 4*) [Ella Fitzgerald] Get Thee Behind Me Satan; 5) Alethia; 6*) [Madisen Beaty] Don't Sit Under The Apple Tree; 7) Atomic Healer; 8) Able-Bodied Seamen; 9) The Split Saber; 10) Baton Sparks; 11*) [Jo Stafford] No Other Love; 12) His Master's Voice; 13) Application 45 Version I; 14*) [Helen Forrest] Changing Partners; 15) Sweetness Of Freddie.



[▶ 'Able-Bodied Seamen'](#)

More info: [W](#) [M](#) [Y](#)

General verdict: *Another bunch of those quiet neo-classical soundscapes for your (lack of) attention.*

All hail the return of Sire Jehonathan Grenewode, he of the neo-classical persuasion, as he once again flings his talents at the feet of Paul Thomas Anderson, the preeminent movie maker of the turn-of-the-century generation. Unlike *There Will Be Blood*, I have yet to see *The Master*, a movie that allegedly explores the subject of mind control, indoctrination, and submissiveness through the parabolic example of a religious cult story — and, most likely, a respectable performance from the dear departed Philip Seymour Hoffman. But just like the soundtrack to *There Will Be Blood*, the soundtrack to *The Master* can readily stand on its own as a 35-minute suite, once you have filtered out the four tracks that do not belong to Jonny and do not mesh at all well with his music — old vocal jazz standards, three of them borrowed directly from classic diva recordings (Ella Fitzgerald, Jo Stafford, Helen Forrest) and one sung (quite poorly, but bravely) by Madisen Beaty, one of the movie's actresses.

Since this is, once again, a piece of classical music, I guess we can only discuss it in comparison with *There Will Be Blood* — and, frankly speaking, I hear no major differences in approach. If you mixed together tracks from the two albums, you would probably never figure out which tracks belong to which theme. Nevertheless, **The Master** is not an uninspired carbon copy: my overall feelings about the first album («really don't know what to say but it feels very much alive and kicking») more or less apply to the second as well. As before, most of the compositions flow smoothly and gracefully, but every once in a while there is a dynamic leap — 'Able-Bodied Seamen' introduces a powerful, thunderous bassline and wildly cavorting, dissonant cellos and violins; 'Baton Sparks', after a pompous Beethovenesque opening, transforms into a modernist spiralling whirlwind of psychedelic proportions; 'His Master's Voice', after a couple minutes of quiet string and clarinet interplay, suddenly bursts out with an intense violin solo that threatens to channel Mendelssohn's spirit (if you grant it the appropriate permission). These things, rare as they are, keep the suite from degrading into a lullaby.

On the whole, though, I would generalize that the soundtrack is a bit more serene and placating this time around — I guess crazy cult leaders are ultimately deemed less of a threat than ruthless oil dealers — and that this makes it even harder to comment upon individual tracks, especially without having previously honed one's verbal skills on Brahms and Bartók. With a bit more tension throughout, the suite's come-to-terms-with-oneself conclusion ('Sweetness Of Freddie'), ripples upon ripples of strings and horns reaching a mini-peak and slowly fading away, would probably have carried more impact. As it is, it's... prepare yourself... *nice*. It may be even nicer if you think of it as an involuntary requiem to Philip Seymour Hoffman, but that's purely optional, of course. One might speculate whether Jonny's inability (or unwillingness) to create angry, jerky drama with his classical experiments had anything to do with his gradual loss of capability to

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create angry, jerky drama with Radiohead — but that is a question you should rather ask him in person, if you ever get the chance *and* are willing to risk your health over it.

THOM YORKE: TOMORROW'S MODERN BOXES (2014)

1) A Brain In A Bottle; 2) Guess Again!; 3) Interference; 4) The Mother Lode; 5) Truth Ray; 6) There Is No Ice (For My Drink); 7) Pink Section; 8) Nose Grows Some.



 ['A Brain In A Bottle'](#)

More info:   

General verdict: *Electronic sludge that mostly just shuts off brain cells, rather than properly depress them.*

People tend to like the word "tomorrow", and people tend to like the word "modern", so even if the meaning behind the title of Thom Yorke's second album is that the people of today and of tomorrow have traded in their liberties and creativity for «living in boxes» (one possible interpretation), it can still create vaguely positive associations in the minds of people, particularly those people who still think of Radiohead and its frontman in 2014 as being on the cutting edge of modern music, despite the fact that more than twenty years now separate them from the day when 'Creep' first made a bit of a difference.

In reality, though, **Tomorrow's Modern Boxes** is little more than a mere side companion to **The King Of Limbs**, just with all of the band's playing replaced by programmed electronics. And this time around, there is no saving grace in the form of gorgeously lilting vocal melodies that occasionally elevated **The Eraser** to the heights of genuinely-great Radiohead quality; no, this time Yorke makes sure that most of the vocals are delivered in his trademark depressed mumble, while the lyrics are as cryptic as ever, not to mention more and more grammatically twisted ("I'm fighting in the darkness, the one that can't be killed, unless you get behind it" — gee, what's up with the odd pronoun usage?).

I will admit that the man retains and even amplifies all of his artistic integrity — by that time, he'd begun to cultivate a «homeless» visual appearance that goes very well with this musical style — but the problem is that, next to all these songs, 'Everything In Its Right Place' (a) sounds like Beethoven in comparison and (b) begs the question of why all these mood-clones of that track even need to exist. Same boring programmed beats, same dull looped electronic samples, same atmospheric, totally predictable vocal harmonies. Precisely the same sonic symbolism that we had seen on everything that Radiohead had been doing for the previous 14 years. No development whatsoever: every song ends exactly the way it began, completely static throughout. Minimalism without hooks, emotion without motion, numbness without terror, and even the words literally have to be begged to yield associative meaning — like, I am sure that Thom was probably *very* pleased with himself for coming up with the line "when it all becomes too much, *spread your last legs*", but just as sure that he himself would have a hard time understanding what that meant. At least, you know, Bob Dylan used to have a sense of humor about that.

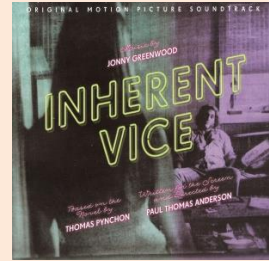
Not for the first time, I find myself at a total loss trying to write specifically about any of these tracks — on the surface, they use different samples, come at different tempos, and explore different sub-styles of electronic music (some are closer to ballads, some to dance tracks), but the emotional core is always precisely the same. Honestly, I have a very hard time understanding how it is at all possible to «accept» this art if you are already well aware of what preceded it. The same sort of problem plagued late-era Cure releases: at some point, after you have spent years

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and years and years slowly and thoroughly dying and decaying and dissolving in pools of tears on your records, you are bound to reach a certain impasse when even some of your biggest fans will have a hard time taking you seriously, because, well, *living* might take a long time, while *dying* is, after all, a short-time event (this is why AC/DC never had that kind of problem). And it certainly does not help that all you can think of by way of finding new ways to musically die and decay is a bunch of boring electronic samples.

JONNY GREENWOOD: INHERENT VICE (2014)

1) Shasta; 2) [Can] Vitamin C; 3) Meeting Crocker Fenway; 4) [The Marketts] Here Comes The Ho-Dads; 5) Spooks; 6) Shasta Fay; 7) [Minnie Riperton] Les Fleur; 8) The Chryskylodon Institute; 9) [Kyu Sakamoto] Sukiyaki; 10) **Adrian Prussia**; 11) [Neil Young] Journey Through The Past; 12) [Les Baxter] Simba; 13) Under The Paving-Stones, The Beach!; 14) The Golden Fang; 15) Amethyst; 16) Shasta Fay Hepworth; 17) [Chuck Jackson] Any Day Now.



[▶ 'Adrian Prussia'](#)

More info: [W](#) [D](#) [S](#)

General verdict: *Too much soundtrack, not enough Jonny - then again, maybe it's not a bad thing...*

Since we are already neck-deep in Jonny Greenwood soundtracks to P. Th. Anderson's movies, I suppose there is no reason to skip the next one in line: this time, to 2014's **Inherent Vice**, another film I have not seen, nor have I read Thomas Pynchon's novel upon which it was based (sorry, just too much culture in this world for poor little me). However, «mention» is the key word here, because this time around, the whole thing does really look like a genuine soundtrack, rather than an instrumental thematic suite that may be enjoyed on its own, independently of the adjacent material — thus precluding the option of a serious review.

Approximately one-third of the album consists of non-Greenwood music used in the movie — a decent and expectedly diverse selection of tracks, for that matter, ranging all the way from Can's officially avantgarde 'Vitamin C' to Minnie Riperton's officially oddball-mainstream 'Les Fleur' to some long-forgotten (Tarantino-approved) pop nuggets from the early Sixties (I have never heard the Marketts' 'Here Comes The Ho-Dads' before, for instance — that's some nifty fine and inventive use of the sax out there!). These at least serve an educational purpose, though, clearly, the album cannot be rated based on them, and their effect can be fairly disruptive if you want to concentrate on Greenwood's compositional genius.

Worse, much of the rest is really and truly incidental music: small minimalistic pieces of ambience that are not worth much outside of the movie. 'Spooks' is just two and a half minutes of lazy mid-Sixties style psychedelic jamming, atmospherically close to the first minute of The Doors' 'The End' or a fairly slack Velvet Underground improv on a mediocre evening — with Joanna Newsom, who has a part in the movie, putting a narrative on top (meaning that fans of her voice are obliged to add the album to their collection); 'Under The Paving-Stones' later returns to the exact same atmosphere. And 'Amethyst' is a fairly typical acoustic folk instrumental with a very Dylanesque harmonica part — you do not really have to be Jonny Greenwood to be able to come up with something like that in 2014.

Basically, this leaves us with three instrumental pieces revolving around the movie's protagonist: 'Shasta', 'Shasta Fay', 'Shasta Fay Hepworth', about 15 minutes worth of pleasant neoclassical chamber music in Jonny's usual neoclassical style; and exactly *one* track that expressly perks up my interest — 'Adrian Prussia', a very interesting mold of classical and electronic music of which I wish there'd be so much more in Jonny's solo catalog. Starting out as a suspenseful, bass-and-cello-based mid-tempo «classical rocker», the track soon gets a fairly harsh, half-psychedelic, half-industrial digital pattern sewn in, with the classical and electronic voices seamlessly merging as a single whole and building up to a small, but elegant crescendo. Hopelessly lost in the befuddling confines of the soundtrack, it's a really auspicious little piece of

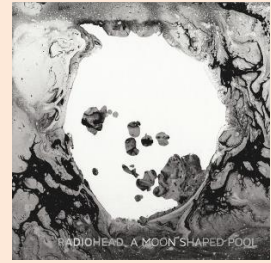
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music that probably deserves to be extracted, dusted off, and extolled as a good example of genre synthesis.




Other than that, I do believe that this is one of the least essential of Jonny's soundtracks — but, ironically, perhaps one of the most easily accessible, what with all those extra good tracks, many of which many of us have never heard before, showcasing a good knowledge of and taste for old forgotten beauties. (The Minnie Riperton piece is ace, too, and Kyu Sakamoto's 'Sukiyaki' is supposed to be one of the most famous Japanese pop pieces of the Sixties, though my personal interest in suave Japanese tenor crooners is fairly small).

A MOON SHAPED POOL (2016)

1) Burn The Witch; 2) Daydreaming; 3) Decks Dark; 4) Desert Island Disk; 5) Full Stop; 6) Glass Eyes; 7) Identikit; 8) The Numbers; 9) Present Tense; 10) Tinker Tailor Soldier Sailor Rich Man Poor Man Beggar Man Thief; 11) True Love Waits; 12*) Ill Wind; 13*) Spectre.



 ['Burn The Witch'](#)

More info:   

General verdict: *Well, at least Radiohead with strings is an improvement over Radiohead with pings.*

With this odd speeding up of time, I am not even sure that most of us realize just how *old* Radiohead were in 2016 — but it has actually been twenty-three years since the release of their first album, meaning that if they were the Beatles, Thom Yorke would already have been shot dead by some irate hater of **King Of Limbs**, and Jonny Greenwood would be producing **Press To Play Another P. T. Anderson Soundtrack**, with somebody like, say, Ed Sheeran playing guest guitar and co-producing where possible. Fortunately, times have changed, and all these guys know better than to embarrass themselves that badly. Amazingly, one thing that has *not* changed is that much of the musical establishment is *still* looking up to them to provide directions, set trends, blow minds, and remind us, the hoi polloi, of reasons why music matters. And not in the same way that, say, Rolling Stone looks up to Bruce Springsteen or U2, either: if you are a man of good taste, you are probably supposed to sneer at Bruce and Bono, but Radiohead still remain a fearful icon, largely beyond reproach.

Truth be told, **A Moon Shaped Pool** was a comeback of sorts, but then again, it probably did not require *that* much of an effort to rebound from the limp lethargy of **King Of Limbs** — all that was needed was a conscious snap: «let's rebound from the limp lethargy of **King Of Limbs**, OK?» The opening guitar and *col legno* string rhythms of 'Burn The Witch' are precisely that kind of snap, marking the most exciting start to a Radiohead album since... okay, never mind. The album in general seems like a very deliberate course correction, and in many spots it aligns itself thematically with **Kid A** and even **OK Computer** rather than anything they did later — not coincidentally, with quite a few of the songs going back to very old ideas, chief among them 'True Love Waits' that we have been hearing live almost for decades now (see **I Might Be Wrong**), but somehow it was not until 2016 that they agreed to have finally found the appropriate studio arrangement for it.

A prominent component of the sound here is the London Contemporary Orchestra, which is no doubt connected to all that extra experience that Greenwood has amassed while working on his soundtracks — a *very* welcome component, I'd add, because at this point Jonny is able to do much more thrilling things with strings than Thom is with electronics. It is the orchestra that makes 'Burn The Witch' really memorable, and adds depth (and sometimes even hooks) to many other songs; although I still have a lurking suspicion that Nigel Godrich (who may have been distracted by the recent death of his father) had much less of a hand in the orchestration than Jonny did, which is a pity — Nigel's work with strings on Beck's **Sea Change** had some of the most inspired and magnificent ideas since Paul Buckmaster, and overall, **A Moon Shaped Pool** loses in comparison. Still, a fresh twist is always welcome.

Then again, 'Burn The Witch' is the best song on the album, and even that one does not cut *very* deep. The subject matter is Radiohead's favorite topic (society's pressure on the individual, the works), but the entire song is essentially one concentrated pull, a tension-raiser, but not a tension-releaser. The menace and terror are subtly hinted at by the relentless string onslaught and by the ironically tender, sly "we know where you live", but I cannot do anything about it if it all sounds like a prelude to something potentially grander, more massive and terrifying... something that never comes. (Ah, weren't things so much different in the good old days of 'Paranoid Android'?). The song still gets its due thumbs up for the cool sonic textures, yet it is also pretty emblematic of the entire album: **A Moon Shaped Pool** almost completely consists of musical foreplay that very rarely, if ever, grows into something more... umm... *fertile*.

For instance, I will be the first to admit that on 'Daydreaming', they almost succeed in inventing a new type of sound — a sort of multi-layered anti-minimalism, where a solitary, minimalistic, sonically «warmed-up» piano line is attenuated by what sounds like miriads of sparkling, scintillating electronic ripples, in an odd way that I cannot directly associate with any of their predecessors. The contrasting string wailings at the end and the funny multi-tracking of real and string-imitated snoring are in themselves an exquisite coda to this sonic painting; and I would dare to assert that there is more pure invention going on in this track than on anything they did for **King Of Limbs** or even **In Rainbows**. But in terms of deep-reaching emotion, the effect is still tepid and fluffy — probably because that main piano melody... well, it sounds like something that even somebody like Harold Budd could have knocked off in his sleep (although, admittedly, Budd's music usually *does* sound like it was written while sleepwalking). Thom is just cooing along about dreamers who never learn and white rooms where the sun comes through, and then, of course, there is some symbolic message you are supposed to catch, but forgive me if I am too lazy to draw up the necessary mental links between "we are just happy to serve you" and the entire history of literary, musical, and philosophical thought in the past hundred years. I am just happy enough to realize that the song does not suck — which is still not enough to turn it into a neo-psychedelic masterpiece.

Rinse now, rinse and repeat for just about every other song in this moon-shaped pool. The *sound*, oh yes, the sound is good — now that they no longer think of themselves as electronic gods, the balance between regular rock instrumentation, electronics, and string arrangements is as perfect as it gets. But the band's ability to raise sonic hell has not returned, and even the most «rocking» songs still sound locked in a test tube — 'Ful Stop' is relatively fast and features a loud, suitably grumbly bassline, but its problem is the same as in 'Burn The Witch': the entire song is one non-stop monotonous ride towards the edge of a cliff, and once you have reached the edge, we fade to black and the credits start rolling in. Gimme some closure, goddammit!

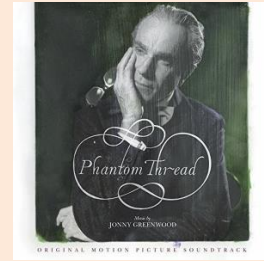
I would be only too happy to see **A Moon Shaped Pool** start up a process of artistic healing; as far as I am concerned, from 2001 and all the way up to 2011 Radiohead were *sick*, and this record is their first in a long, long time that offers glimpses of recovery — should we thank Paul Thomas Anderson for that? — by returning to more lyrical and emotionally accessible territory. However, much of the damage may have been irreparable: Greenwood has forgotten how to rock, Yorke has forgotten how to sing like a human being of flesh and blood, and the band in general has become way too obsessed with having to maintain their towering reputation — a *slave* to its towering reputation, really. At least we have to thank them for finally working out that arrangement for 'True Love Waits' — whose wobbling verse melody, with that wonderful swoon from

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complaint to consolation, is a nice reminder for us that there used to be a time when Thom Yorke knew how to write heart-wrenching vocal hooks.




If you have the deluxe-whatever edition, you also have a chance to hear 'Spectre', Radiohead's ill-fated attempt at delivering a Bond theme song — admittedly, asking Radiohead to write a Bond theme song is a bit like asking an ISIS leader to star in a condom commercial, but still, you gotta appreciate the effort. It is in the same style as the album, with ominous strings all over it, but it is much better suited to a world in which James Bond suffers from acute illness anxiety disorder, listens to Messiaen in between kills, and has all his one-liners quoted from Schopenhauer (like "after your death you will be what you were before your birth!"). Come to think of it, that movie would *still* be tons more exciting than **A Moon Shaped Pool**.

JONNY GREENWOOD: PHANTOM THREAD (2018)



1) Phantom Thread; 2) The Hem; 3) Sandalwood; 4) The Tailor Of Fitzrovia; 5) Alma; 6) Boletus Felleus; 7) Phantom Thread II; 8) Catch Hold; 9) Never Cursed; 10) That's As May Be; 11) Phantom Thread III; 12) I'll Follow Tomorrow; 13) House Of Woodcock; 14) Sandalwood II; 15) Barbara Rose; 16) Endless Superstition; 17) Phantom Thread IV; 18) For The Hungry Boy.

 ['House Of Woodcock'](#)

More info:   

General verdict: *Greenwood's most ambitious raid on classical territory so far, but still hardly a replacement for your Deutsche Grammophon collection.*

Just another Greenwood soundtrack for just another Paul Thomas Anderson movie? Certainly not by the way that the music community at large seems to have responded to it: everywhere you go, **Phantom Thread** is almost unanimously hailed as Jonny's best soundtrack so far (even if he still lost the Oscar to Alexandre Desplat), and is often ranked as one of the best musical achievements of 2018 (not that this would mean much — but worth a mention at least).

And not without reason. First, the album returns to the format of a cohesive musical suite: despite the relative length, all of the music here is Jonny's exclusively, and works perfectly well outside of the context of the movie (which I finally got to see — a good movie, but I actually prefer my Paul Thomas Anderson in grandiose *Magnolia* or *There Will Be Blood* mood than in this secluded chamber format). Second, the musical scope and instrumental textures of the album are extremely diverse: although the format is classical throughout, the music encompasses a variety of styles, from baroque to romantic to impressionist to avantgarde to minimalism, with Greenwood now seemingly, if moderately, competent and qualified in all of them. Third, it may be the best produced and most sonically rewarding album of his career, though that is certainly the most subjective and intuitive opinion of them all.

I would like to add «fourth, the music is just great», but am somehow stopped in my tracks by the realization that none of the themes stuck long enough in my mind or shook me right down to the bottom — however, once again, that is just me. There is clearly a big difference here: Jonny is definitely stretching out and attempting to paint on an epic scale rather than a local one. The title track alone goes through four different variations, starting out as a small chamber orchestra piece, then reprised as a sonata-for-piano-and-violin movement, then getting the full symphonic treatment (brass, timpani, the works), and finally closing out as a solo violin piece — four different aggregation states of the human soul, if you want a pompous metaphor. In the context of the entire history of classical music, 'Phantom Thread' might not be *that* great a theme: once you get through to the solo violin variation, it comes across as a nice tribute to some single movement of a J. S. Bach violin sonata. But in the context of the album, those four states are legit parts of a musical journey taken by... (I guess this is where one is supposed to fall back on the movie, but we *do* want to make Jonny Greenwood's allegedly best album to look like a musically self-contained piece of art, right?).

The piano-based pieces are delicate and exquisite Glass-ian / Budd-ian pastiches, well framed by chamber strings ('The Hem', 'Sandalwood'); or, vice versa, melancholic excursions into string-

based baroque soul with minimalistic piano at the fringes ('Alma'). Explicit dissonance is hit very rarely ('Barbara Rose' is, I think, the most prominent example, with little pizzicato splatterings all around its clumsy bass strut), but there is just enough depth and complexity in the «normal» pieces to avoid sliding down into cheap sentimentality — this is a tasteful stylistic exercise, not a manipulative «Hollywood» orchestral puddle.

Still, yet again I reserve any kind of definitive judgement, because, like most of Jonny's soundtracks, this one, too, feels more like a Greenwood display of humble adoration for the history of classical music up to the late 20th century rather than a meaningful and challenging Greenwood contribution to the history of classical music. This is, I believe, why he saves all of that creativity of his for soundtracks — as an original soundtrack, this type of art is perfectly alright and just about impermeable to serious criticism; were this, however, to be **The Greenwood Oratorio**, Jonny would run some serious risks (though not as serious, perhaps, as Paul McCartney did, because Greenwood has had more training with this sort of thing). And yet, at the same time, you are not *obliged* to look at this as a soundtrack — you can have it either away and get away with it through any loophole you like.