The album isn't dead yet. Just ask your local bookseller.

By James Sullivan  |  February 12, 2006

THE DIGITAL MUSIC AGE hasn't been easy on the old formats. The compact disc has been pronounced terminally ill, the woebegone cassette tape has gone the way of the wax cylinder, and long-playing vinyl survives only in the dank basements of pack rats and the climate-controlled collections of diehard audiophiles. The demise of these media spells more than just reduced clutter: Digital downloading has shifted focus from albums to individual tracks. As well as the Grammy-nominated "The Emancipation of Mimi" no doubt holds together as a cohesive artistic work, it's probably hard even for true Mariah Carey fans to resist downloading just the tracks they hear on the radio. Why spend $11.99 when you can get all the good stuff for $1.98? The days of fetishizing a beloved album seem to be numbered.

Yet even as the idea of the album has come under seige, a movement to preserve it has recently been gaining momentum, and in an unlikely field-book publishing. In the past few years, there have quietly appeared dozens of books treating classic pop, rock, and jazz recordings as objects worthy of continued appreciation. Cambridge-based Da Capo Press helped kick off the trend with "Kind of Blue," a book about the making of the Miles Davis landmark by music journalist and producer Ashley Kahn that was published to critical acclaim in 2000. Since then, Da Capo has issued titles on...
Johnny Cash's "At Folsom Prison" and Pink Floyd's "The Dark Side of the Moon," and is at work on a volume on the Rolling Stones's "Exile on Main Street."

Da Capo doesn't have the genre cornered: Schirmer Trade Books has issued books on albums by Nirvana, the Beatles, David Bowie, and others in its Classic Rock Albums series. And Continuum just announced a forthcoming slate of 21 titles in its robust 33 1/3 series, which would bring the total to 60 volumes by 2008.

David Barkley, who edits 33 1/3, says he often hears the argument that these books have found an audience because fans are growing nostalgic for the LP. "It may well have something to do with the perceived downfall or death of the album," he says.

Each pocket-sized 33 1/3 book is a kind of deluxe liner notes for the obsessed fan, liner notes themselves being part of the collateral damage of digitization. These books give music fanatics an opportunity for deeper appreciation of a cherished work, offering a window on everything from details on transcendent recording sessions to lists of narcotics consumed.

Subjects in the Continuum series range from the obvious-the Beach Boys's "Pet Sounds" and Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the USA"-to the decidedly less so. A new entry on "In the Aeroplane Over the Sea," the second and final album from the short-lived cult band Neutral Milk Hotel, has proved to be one of the best sellers in the set. Many fans consider the idiosyncratic 1998 album a desert-island classic, but even the initiated might admit being confused by all those lyrics about two-headed boys and dissolving dogs. Fans were clearly hungry for some insight into the mindset of bandleader Jeff Mangum and his cohorts. They're finding it here, from tidbits about the group's recording philosophy to accounts of weathered books ("Candide," anything by the absurdist playwright Alfred Jarry) making the rounds among band members.

From the beginning, the Continuum series took some liberties with the accepted Beatles-Stones-Led Zeppelin canon of classic rock. The first 33 1/3 title considered Dusty Springfield's "Dusty in Memphis" (and was written by Warren Zanes, a former member of the roots-rock band the Del Fuegos). Da Capo is also casting a wide net with its series. Ben Schafer, a senior editor who worked on the Johnny Cash and Pink Floyd titles, says that rap and heavy metal are due some attention: "I think someone should really do an AC/DC or a Public Enemy record." By which, of course, he means book.

Barkley says he inaugurated the 33 1/3 series in part because he thought the crowded field of pop criticism and biography was in desperate need of a new angle. Barkley acknowledges the influence of Schirmer's Classic Rock Albums series, which predates 33 1/3. But a big part of his model, he says, came from other disciplines.

As the former editor of Continuum's Contemporaries series, academically oriented readers' guides to modern novels by authors such as Don DeLillo and Ian McEwan, he had worked within a relatively rigid template. The books in that series each included background information on the author, a synopsis of the text, and a survey of reviews and sales figures.

Barkley says he was inspired by the British Film Institute's Film Classics series to break out of templates. Each entry in the BFI
series is a book-length study of a particular film, and the authors are given a long leash to explore their subjects however they see fit. In his consideration of "The Wizard of Oz," for example, Salman Rushdie compares Dorothy's exile to his own.

Following BFI's lead, Barkley looked beyond the world of music journalism for his contributors. Like Zanes, several 33 1/3 authors are musicians themselves: Colin Meloy of the band the Decemberists wrote the tribute to the Replacements's "Let It Be," and Boston-area musicians Joe Pernice and Bill Janovitz have also produced titles, on the Smiths's "Meat Is Murder" and the Stones's "Exile on Main Street," respectively. The writers are urged to let their imaginations go to work. The entry on the Band's "Music from Big Pink" is subtitled "A Novella." Rather than write a straight backgrounder, British music industry veteran John Niven wrote a fictionalized account of the making of the album, as told by a character described as the group's drug dealer.

Many of the books in this growing subgenre, however, use the space to examine and appreciate every nuance of sound and substance of a beloved work. "Looking closely at one particular album encourages the writer to do a very close reading of it, as a text," says Barkley. Others use the albums as launching points for allusive wandering. In his long look at "Dusty in Memphis," Zanes concludes that the album embodies the "sense that love could happen anywhere, with anyone, and, quite possibly, leave without a note or, worse yet, stay a bit too long."

... Yet for all these efforts to hang onto the particular pleasures of losing oneself inside a comprehensive song cycle, the fight to save the album still seems like a losing one. Even on the bookshelf, the individual track is plotting its Oedipal revenge.

Recently, a spate of books extolling the virtues, and plumbing the depths, of individual songs have appeared alongside books about albums. The critic Greil Marcus has dissected Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone" at book length. Dave Marsh wrote about "Louie Louie"; David Margolick, "Strange Fruit." There are books on "White Christmas" and "Amazing Grace."

There are, though, substantive differences between books on album and books on songs. The latter tend to follow a song standard as it travels through the culture, crossing regions and generations and reinterpretations by different artists. Journalist Ted Anthony's forthcoming "Chasing the Rising Sun: The Journey of an American Song" traces the long journey of the traditional lament "House of the Rising Sun" from its origins in 19th-century folk through the British Invasion of the 1960s (when it became a No. 1 smash hit by the Animals) and into the present day, where he finds it in karaoke bars in Bangkok and Beijing.

More so than books about albums, which, whatever their cultural implications, remain bound by the specific time and place of the recording, books about songs tend to offer a kind of microhistory-an offshoot, as it were, of another of the publishing world's recent infatuations.

The success of Mark Kurlansky's books "Salt" and "Cod,"- biographies, essentially, of important commodities-inspired a slew of works in a similar vein-the titles "Spice," "Tobacco," "Zipper," and "Zero" among them. As with these projects, books about single
artworks can provide revelations about the world beyond the thing itself.

Books about traditional songs, such as "Chasing the Rising Sun" or Cecil Brown's "Stagolee Shot Billy," are especially good at teasing out deeper meanings, says Marcus. "You have a song that comes to general notice through a pop hit, and then you find it opens into this cave where there are thousands of burials, people still living in the corners, some people conducting mining operations deep inside. There's infinite complexity."

Anthony canvassed hundreds of versions of "House of the Rising Sun" in his research, but he doesn't consider himself a musicologist. "I'm coming more from an American studies perspective," he says. In his introduction, he writes that he might have found his window into American culture in any number of things—a recipe, an advertising icon. "I like looking at larger issues through the prism of something very small," he says. And songs, as any iPod user knows, take up a lot less space than albums.

**James Sullivan is the author of the forthcoming book "Jeans: A Cultural History of an American Icon" (Gotham).**

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