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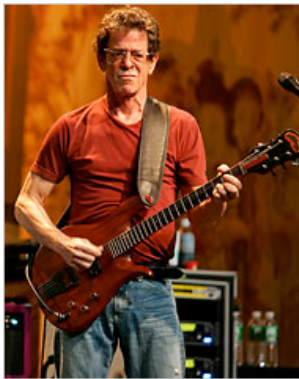
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If You Won't Play the Album, They'll Sing It, From the Top

By ELISABETH VINCENTELLI
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WHEN was the last time you listened to an album without interruption and from beginning to end? No cheating: fiddling with the “program” button on your CD player doesn't count, and no shuffling the track order on your iPod either. Perhaps, then, the occasion was a live show, like when Brian Wilson performed his Beach Boys masterpiece “Pet Sounds” in sequence on his recent tour. Or maybe it was “The Dark Side of the Moon,” which Roger Waters replicated on his 2006 tour? Or could it have been “Reasonable Doubt,” revived live by [Jay-Z](#) in June?

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Richard Perry/The New York Times

Lou Reed performed his album “Berlin,” from 1973, in its entirety for the first time at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn this month.

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Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

Brian Wilson performed every song on the Beach Boys album “Pet Sounds” at the Beacon Theater in November.

And that's not the half of recent opportunities to hear landmark albums performed live. Lou Reed performed “Berlin” in New York this month, for instance, while over in England the likes of Tortoise, the Stooges, Belle and Sebastian, Isis and Low have participated in a series called Don't Look Back, in which bands do just that by revisiting one of their older LPs on stage.

Meanwhile, on XM Satellite Radio's two-year-old series “Then ... Again ... Live,” the likes of Jethro Tull, Mountain and REO Speedwagon have each performed classic albums (in the case of those three, “Aqualung,” “Climbing” and “Hi Infidelity”). Newer albums are aired out as well: Iron Maiden is performing its latest offering, “A Matter of Life and Death,” on its current world tour.

Such shows tend to receive positive critical attention, but the current transformation of the music marketplace suggests that albums are being presented onstage because they're becoming museum-ified relics. As digital downloading changes the way music is consumed, could the album be going live because it's dead?

Maybe the album's dead; but then, maybe it isn't. It's become a commonplace that albums are losing their authority as artistic entities as an increasing number of people buy music song by song via services like iTunes. So playing an album live helps artists regain a modicum of creative control. The experience is like listening to a playlist, but this time (as earlier) it's the musicians and producers themselves who are devising it.

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What's curious is that the same changes in music consumption that are hurting the album are helping to keep it alive. As recorded-music sales decline in a digital era of single-track sales and outright piracy, concert revenues are robust and, while always crucial to the financial health of the typical band or musician, even more important now. Performing an album live, then, is a way to stand out. It's "a way to get people to come in and buy a ticket in a very competitive market," Jethro Tull's front man, Ian Anderson, said.

"It's a cynical commercial ploy on the part not only of concert promoters but also of some of the artists who go along with it," he added, commenting on a tactic he himself could be accused of indulging in.

Ticket sales aside, revisiting a classic can boost sales of the original or a new live version. (Patti Smith, Jethro Tull and Belle and Sebastian have all released their stage reinventions on CD.)

The strategy can certainly backfire. Iron Maiden's decision to play its latest album on tour has not always been well received by fans. A Welsh paper reported that in December "vocalist Bruce Dickinson bouncy-balled magnificently onto the stage, but when, five tracks in, he confirmed they would play the whole album there was a negative reaction; largely silence, even the odd boo."

The impetus to find new ways to freshen up a stage act is so strong that the live-album phenomenon isn't limited to grizzled classic-rock veterans. In the tours that followed its 2003 reunion, for instance, the funk-metal group Primus played "Sailing the Seas of Cheese" (1991) and "Frizzle Fry" (1990) in their entirety. "It was an interesting way of presenting material that for a good portion of our fans held a dear place," said Les Claypool, that band's bassist-singer, underlining the allure of LP recreation for both audience and musicians.

Many of the younger bands invited by Don't Look Back — a series created in 2005 by the ultra-hip British festival All Tomorrow's Parties — come from punk's song-oriented rebellion. For them the impetus seems slightly different, since they already tend to do well enough on the live circuit, and playing an album live does not suddenly vault them into larger venues.

In their case what's at stake is the opportunity for the press and the fans to evaluate (or re-evaluate) a particular album's place in underground-music history. In other words, a Sonic Youth concert is merely a Sonic Youth concert unless, say, it's a performance of "Daydream Nation" as part of Don't Look Back. Then it would be an event prompting reams of ink and quite a few blog entries.

The album contagion has even spread to jazz, primarily a live, improvisational realm where one would assume studio albums aren't such fetishistic objects. Merkin Concert Hall in New York is in the middle of a series called Reissues in which entire jazz records are performed live. Andrew Hill tackled his 1969 recording "Passing Ships" in November and in February Freddie Redd will perform "The Connection," from 1960.

"If you look at the majority of jazz record sales these days, they're either reissues or projects of artists who are no longer living or artists whose ensembles are no longer together as they once were," said the co-curator, Brice Rosenbloom. "So we really wanted to give the audience the opportunity to hear these projects in a live setting."

One of the trickiest aspects of playing an entire album — and one most tantalizing to fans — is that the element of surprise switches from "What are they going to play next?" to "How are they going to play the next song?" The challenge to play album cuts that

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don't usually receive stage exposure can prove daunting.

"There are songs you don't seriously think you're ever going to do live because they're too tricky or you sang them at the top of your vocal range in the studio and you can't match that onstage," Mr. Anderson pointed out. "When you record a bunch of songs on different days and over a period of time, you obey a different set of rules, which aren't necessarily those that would make sense live."

And still bands keep doing it, even though in some cases playing certain albums may painfully remind them of an early peak they'll never top again. This year when Teenage Fanclub performed "Bandwagonesque" from 1991, The Guardian's reviewer noted that after its initial success, the record "became their bête noir — never excelled, referenced in reviews of subsequent albums, and now entombed in aspic as part of the Don't Look Back series."

Some musicians display a notable lack of enthusiasm for the whole idea. Asked about playing "Fun House" live, the Stooges' guitarist Ron Asheton simply answered, "It's just a show." Even Mr. Anderson, no stranger to performing concept albums live ("Thick as a Brick," "A Passion Play"), didn't jump at the opportunity to go through "Aqualung," from 1971, for XM Satellite.

"I somewhat reluctantly agreed to do it," he said. "But once I started thinking about it and was faced with the challenge of playing a few songs I'd never ever played live, it became more appealing." (On the tour that preceded the XM session he performed the live debut of "Slipstream" and sang the rarely played "Up to Me," so he could practice them in front of an audience.)

No doubt ego plays a role in musicians' agreeing to play albums live. It's hard to resist conferring on a collection of tracks a quasi-organic cohesion (and historical importance) that may not have been the original intent.

"It's like a band jumps at the thought that their quickly-thrown-together collection of songs has luckily and rather arbitrarily found depth and meaning," said Stuart Murdoch, front man for Belle and Sebastian, with a touch of self-deprecation.

At the same time the phenomenon does lead to absurd situations, like Cheap Trick replaying "Live at Budokan" live — huh? — or Alice Cooper performing his 1974 "Greatest Hits" on XM. Lee Abrams, XM's chief creative officer (and a pioneer of the album-oriented rock radio format in the 1970s), explained that "a lot of times artists need certain members to be in the band to recreate an older album, and I think the songs on that album were the ones Alice was most comfortable recreating."

Playing a best-of record live does make a case for Alice Cooper's stature in the 1970s, but perversely it's as one of that decade's best singles artists. If buying music continues to become ever more song-based, playing greatest-hits packages live in, say, chronological order may be the only option left to younger acts. [Justin Timberlake](#), are you listening?

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