

Towards a new theoretical framework for the concept album

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Abstract

Concept albums have existed since the introduction of the Long Play (LP), but the exact definition of the concept album is still up for debate. This is evident from the multitude of varying definitions in circulation and the discussion of definitions in recent academic literature. The problems with defining the concept album have as a consequence that it proves difficult to identify concept albums. The aim of this thesis is not to come up with a solution or a conclusive strategy, but rather to assess the theoretical frameworks applied to defining and identifying the concept album and to make suggestions towards a new theoretical framework. I do this by performing a critical literature review, analysing the concept album taxonomy, the paratext and the concept album continuum. I then apply the frameworks to the album *Offerings* by Typhoon to assess their possible uses and flaws. This thesis proposes to view the issues concerning the definition of the concept album as a characteristic rather than a problem, and proposes that future research takes an unified approach to defining and identifying the concept album. By combining the theoretical frameworks in this thesis, a new analytical model could be made to offer a systematical approach to defining and identifying concept albums.

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Introduction

Colombia Records released the first Long Play (LP) in June of 1948 and by doing that, revolutionised the music industry. Todd Decker discusses the implications of the LP and how the new recorded music format created a need for cohesive albums.¹ The LP (or the long player) increased the available playing time of recorded music massively, just as the name would suggest. Its predecessor, the 78, held only six minutes of recorded material while the LP held about forty-five minutes of music divided over two sides. Suddenly the time musicians and their producers could fill was multiplied by more than seven. The most pleasurable LPs were the ones that maintained the listeners interest throughout the entire album, rendering a coherent experience with every single song being logical in relation to the entirety of the album.² The earliest method to fill the newly given time on the LP was to release entire Broadway soundtracks, such as 1965s ‘My fair lady’.³ Decker identifies two other main strategies to create a unified experience on the album. The first strategy Decker mentions is to have musicians and songwriters whom would be unlikely to meet in a live performance use the LP as a sonic meeting place. The first to take this approach was jazz producer Norman Granz, whom paired musical movie star Fred Astaire with a jazz combo associated with the *Jazz at the Philharmonic* in 1953 on the ‘Astaire story’.⁴ The second strategy Decker identifies to create a unified experience on the LP was to have well known singers such as Ella Fitzgerald and Rosemary Clooney perform songs from 1920s, 1930s and 1940s in a more modern style.⁵ These two strategies both had as the main goal to provide a unified experience throughout the album, and thus making these albums the precursor of the concept album.

Although the main outlines of the definition of the concept album are widely accepted, the details remain blurry. The existence of the concept album is based on whether cohesion is intended by the artist, and whether the listener is able to pick up on this. Determining the intent, however, is often a difficult if not impossible task, and often comes down to an educated guess. Another issue is that any listener is capable of creating some kind of meaning when listening to a concept album, or any music to that matter. This threatens the validity of the concept album, as it is doubtful to exist if

¹ Todd Decker, ‘Fancy Meeting You Here: Pioneers of the Concept Album’, *Daedalus* 142, no. 4 (2013): 98-108.

² Decker, ‘Fancy Meeting You Here’, 99-100.

³ Decker, 99.

⁴ Decker, 100-101.

⁵ Decker, 102-103.

any listener is able to build a unified listening experience for themselves when listening to any regular album.

The aim of this thesis is not to solve this problem, but to assess the theoretical frameworks which have been applied in order to define and identify the concept album and to make a suggestion as to which direction new theoretical frameworks should go. This has led me to the following research question:

To which extent can theoretical frameworks be applied to overcome the issues with defining and identifying the concept album?

This research question has been divided into several subquestions, which are as follows: What is the definition of the concept album in academic literature? What are the main issues when defining and identifying the concept album? Which theoretical frameworks have been applied to overcome the issues with defining and identifying the concept album? I will use the information gathered by answering the subquestions to look ahead in my conclusion and make suggestions as to which direction new theoretical frameworks should take.

In this thesis I will mainly focus on analytical approaches important to the concept album. This means I will not be examining any approaches which aim to analyse the music of the concept album, as this analysis is not too different from analysing the music of a regular album. I do not, however, deny the importance of music in conveying meaning or in the concept album. All theoretical frameworks and approaches discussed in this thesis should be seen as in a constant dialogue with music.

For this research I will perform a critical literature review, by analysing academic literature which either focusses on defining and identifying the concept album, or theoretical frameworks which supports common strategies for defining and identifying the concept album. I will first describe the multitude of definitions of the concept album used by academics in academic literature in chapter one, after which I will explain which problems exist with regard to defining and identifying the concept album. In chapter two I will analyse which theoretical frameworks have been used by academics to overcome the problems with regard to defining and identifying the concept album and how they aim to overcome said issues. I will determine the potential uses and drawbacks of said theoretical frameworks by applying them the album *Offerings* by Typhoon. Lastly, I will give a summary and look ahead and propose a unified approach for future theoretical frameworks concerning the definition and identification of concept albums in my conclusion.

1. Defining the concept album

In this chapter I will briefly describe the definitions of the concept album as formulated in academic literature. The overall aim of this chapter is to provide an understanding of the definition of the concept album as stated in academic literature and the issues surrounding defining and identifying the concept album.

1.1 The definitions of the concept album

Let's begin at the beginning, with the previously discussed pioneers of the concept album. Decker does not mention any definition of the concept album, and neither are there explicit sources from that time period defining the term. Using the description by Decker of the early days of the concept album I would say the definition during its earliest existence comes down along the lines of 'an album which creates a unified listening experience for the listener throughout the entire album'. This definition would at the very least capture the aim of the earliest concept albums.

Fast-forward about seventy years and the definition of the concept album is an often discussed topic in academic literature. An analysis of the available academic literature addressing the definition of the concept album shows the core definition of the concept album has changed little over time, although there are many variations. Marianne Tatom Letts states that the term 'concept album' is not well defined, with both music critics and scholars treating the term as self-evident.⁶

Letts gathered the following definitions of the concept album:

- “an LP intended to be integrated on a set theme”
- the “practice of tying a series of songs together by using both a reoccurring melodic theme and a program— that is, a unifying idea or concept which is developed in the lyrics of the individual songs”
- the process of “taking the album itself as the level at which the music, production, cover art, and so on come together as a complete work of art”
- “the texts of a Romantic rock aesthetic . . . [that] proved forerunners of a new social and economic sensibility in rock” (with regard to progressive rock)

⁶ Marianne Tatom Letts, *How to Disappear Completely: Radiohead and the Resistant Concept Album* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 13.

- and, rather vaguely, as simply an “‘extended work’ for rock.”⁷

This wide variety of possible definitions for the concept album suggests that there is no consensus on the definitive definition. One possible explanation for the lack of consensus might be that the vagueness of the definition offers space to scholars to zoom in on the aspects of the concept they deem to be the most important. Bryan Terry acknowledges this, stating, “Due to this lack of clarity, it seems that everyone who writes in some way about concept albums (this paper included) gives a definition that best suits their needs.”⁸ This trend maintains the continual lack of clarity and potentially splinters the academic research even more, as this will result in a wider variety of definitions. On the other hand it can be argued that this is a necessary step and that the discussion defines this field of research.

The ultimate definition Letts adopts is the same definition as that of the song cycle according to *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*:

A group of individually complete songs designed as a unit . . . The coherence regarded as a necessary attribute of song cycles may derive from the text (a single poet; a story line; a central theme or topic such as love or nature; a unifying mood; poetic form or genre, as in a sonnet or ballad cycle) or from musical procedures (tonal schemes; reoccurring motifs, passages or entire songs; formal structures); these features may appear singly or in combination.⁹

This definition is not too different from the one I proposed for the earliest days of the concept album, although it has evolved. The main difference in my eyes is the focus. The first definition focusses on the listener’s reception of unity whilst the latter focusses on the intention of unity on the part of the artist. It is this intention, however, which poses difficulties when identifying the concept album.

⁷ Donald Clarke, Edward Macan, Bill Martin, Paul Stump and William J. Schafer, cited in Letts, *How to Disappear Completely*, 14.

⁸ Bryan Terry, ‘Isaac Hayes’s Soul Concept: Reexamining Hot Buttered Soul as a Pioneering Concept Album’, (Master thesis, CUNY hunter college, 2019), 23. https://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_sas_etds/496

⁹ Youens, cited in Letts, *How to Disappear Completely*, 17.

1.2 The issues when defining and identifying the concept album

It is difficult (if not impossible at times) to pinpoint an artist's intent, which makes it difficult to classify an album as a concept album. Ken Scott commented on this problem, stating that "a concept album is in the eye/ear of the beholder."¹⁰

Letts gives a more elaborate description of the issue:

Beyond any apparent intent on the part of the artist to draw an album together into a coherent whole through its musical or lyrical content, any album is to some extent unified the same way a deejay's playlist is, simply by virtue of its sequence of tracks. A listener intent on listening to an album as a whole instead of in piecemeal three-minute chunks defined by the tracks can always, by being sufficiently clever, turn the running order into a mark of cohesion, constructing her own "concept" in the form of a narrative or at least a consistent theme.¹¹

This description shows that any listener could perceive any album as a concept album. Whilst this might be true, one might wonder if the concept album even exists if any album can be a concept album. Matts Arvidson directly reacts to this very description by Letts by arguing that a definition which only focusses on the reception and excludes all intent on the end of the artist completely loses the very idea of a concept album.¹² Arvidson does not however exclude the importance of the listener in the creation of a coherent listening experience; he states that "the decision is not only in the ears/eyes of the beholder."¹³ This statement points towards an interactive relationship between artist and listener when it comes to defining a concept album, with which I fully agree. A concept album can only be a concept album if there is an intent for cohesion by the artist, but this intent needs to be perceived by the listener. This makes the role of the artist and the listener equally important, although this interaction should begin at the artist.

¹⁰ Letts, 13.

¹¹ Letts, 13.

¹² Mats Arvidson, *An Imaginary Musical Road Movie: Transmedial Semiotic Structures in Brad Mehldau's Concept Album "Highway Rider"* (Lund: Lund Studies in Arts and Cultural Sciences, 2016), 60.

¹³ Arvidson, *An Imaginary Musical Road Movie*, 60.

Bryan Terry takes a different approach, proposing the challenges of the concept album to be a feature rather than a difficulty.¹⁴ This is an interesting take, as this means the strategies artists employ to overcome the challenges of getting your intention for unity across are the things that differentiate the concept album from the concept album. Overcoming the challenge to unify the album is what gives the album its recognizable features.

To summarise this part on defining the concept album; in order for a concept album to be a concept album there needs to be an intent for cohesion by the artist, and this intent needs to be perceived by the listener. This calls for a channel of communication between artist and listener, while in reality this often comes down to guessing on the listener's end. In the following chapter I will research which theoretical frameworks have been applied to overcome the issues with defining and identifying the concept album.

¹⁴ Terry, 'Isaac Hayes's Soul Concept', 28.

2. Which theoretical frameworks have been applied to overcome the issues with defining and identifying the concept album?

2.1 The concept album and its taxonomy

Marianne Tatom Letts has not only written about her thoughts and views on the definition of the concept album, but she has also proposed a taxonomy, which can be found in appendix A.¹⁵ She adopts some classifications from the Grove entry for the song cycle (thematic, narrative and musical unity) and adds a third classification, the resistant concept album. Letts defines the “resistant” concept album as follows: “‘Resistant’ albums are those that stretch the parameters of the traditionally defined concept album [...] while still conveying some kind of concept beyond a single sequence of organised tracks over the course of an album.”¹⁶ Letts adds to this that it is often hard to recognise such concepts without clearly being told through accompanying materials such as packaging or statements by band members.¹⁷ The resistant concept album comes down to the artist using a different approach and strategy than the conventional concept album but still tries to convey some sort of concept, idea or unity. The conventional approach for a concept album would be to include a clear narrative, characters, or a musical or lyrical theme. I will elaborate on this later when I apply Letts’s taxonomy to an album in order to demonstrate its uses and drawbacks.

Letts does not specify why she made the taxonomy, but it is preceded by a description of the ambiguity in the concept album. As taxonomies are often used to classify and organise, it is a logical assumption to state that Letts attempts to better classify and organise the components and strategies of the concept album. Her taxonomy is often cited in other works on the subject, suggesting the taxonomy is widely accepted.

2.2 The taxonomy applied

I will now briefly demonstrate how Letts’s taxonomy can be applied to a concept album in order to identify its uses and drawbacks.

The album I will analyse using the taxonomy is *Offerings* by Typhoon.¹⁸ The first step to take when using the taxonomy to classify a concept album is to determine whether there is a

¹⁵ Marianne Tatom Letts, *How to Disappear Completely: Radiohead and the Resistant Concept Album* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 22.

¹⁶ Letts, *How to disappear completely*, 25.

¹⁷ Letts, 25.

¹⁸ Typhoon, *Offerings*, Roll Call Records, 2018, Spotify.

narrative or a theme present in the album. This is rather difficult in the case of *Offerings*, as both thematic and narrative unity can be found. The taxonomy of Letts does not provide any tools as to how to figure out whether there is a narrative in the album, other than her explanation that there should at least be a protagonist present “who undergoes some kind of trial or life journey.”¹⁹ Kyle Morton, the frontman of Typhoon, has often commented on the album in interviews, FAQs and on their website, where he stated that the album is “from the perspective of a mind losing its memory at precisely the same time the world is wilfully forgetting its history.”²⁰ This statement implies both a character and a plot, which can be found in the album’s lyrics as well. The taxonomy divides the narrative into the categories ‘plot’ and ‘characters’, although both can be present at the same time. Morton’s statement implies that both are present on the album, although the plot is not very easily distinguishable. Letts then makes a distinction between an explicit and an implied plot. The explicit plot can either be timeless or mythical, or be non-chronological and consist of flashbacks or flash-forwards.²¹ The implied plot is, as the name already gives away, less explicit but still rather easily formed by the listener. In the album, the plot is mainly told through not necessarily explicitly related events signifying the decline of the mind of the protagonist. As such, *Offerings* can be classified as the latter. This brings us to the category ‘characters’, which is divided into ‘protagonist’, ‘aspects of one character’s psyche’ and ‘singer as protagonist or actor’. Although Morton does switch between singing about the character in ‘he’ and ‘I’ form, he never seems to act or become the protagonist. It’s rather a way of storytelling than the embodiment of the protagonist, which leads me to believe it can be classified as a the ‘character’ category.

This last part of the analysis is an example of how the taxonomy is great for providing boundaries for classification, but does not provide many tools to determine its classification. *Offerings* might as well be in the ‘singer as a protagonist or actor’ category, but as the category lacks a clear explanation or definition it’s an unnecessarily difficult choice. The taxonomy has not yet solved any issue of identifying or defining the concept album, but rather clarified the discussion and zoomed in on characteristics of the concept album. The next step will be to identify all the possible means of communication, so as to explain how the listener perceives the album’s meaning and which means the artist can deploy to convey meaning. This is not necessarily the aim of a taxonomy, so other theoretical frameworks will need to fill that gap. It does work well to categorise, but could be improved by defining and explaining its categories more clearly.

¹⁹ Letts, *How to disappear completely*, 23.

²⁰ ‘News: Offerings’, Typhoon, accessed June 16, 2021, <https://wearetyphoon.com/news/offerings>.

²¹ Appendix A, 17.

2.3 The concept album and the paratext

A concept album is, as stated before, only a concept album if there is an intent on the part of the artist to create a unified album and the listener is able to identify this intent of cohesion. The artist can use his music and lyrics to convey his meaning and his intention to his listener, but there are more ways to do this. One of these ways is the paratext. I will explain what the paratext is and the relationship between the paratext and meaning in music, after which I will specifically explain its use for the concept album.

In order to identify the relationship between the paratext and meaning in music, we must first define the paratext. The paratext is part of five transtextual relationships, identified by Gérard Genette. Those five are intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, hypertextuality and architextuality.²² In this thesis I will be focussing on the paratext, as this has the most obvious connection with the concept album and has been applied the most by scholars to the concept album. Genette defines the word paratext as the accompanying materials of a book.²³ The paratext is then divided in two parts: the peritext and the epitext.²⁴ The peritexts are those accompanying productions that have a location that can be situated in relation to the location of the text itself.²⁵ Examples of this are the cover, the title, notes in the book or the name of the author. The epitext on the other hand are the messages located outside of the book often with the help of media, such as interviews or conversations.²⁶ Genette states that said productions should be regarded as belonging to the text, as they surround and extend it, in order to present it in the world.²⁷ The paratext can thus be identified as one of the means of communication a book can deploy to convey its meaning.

Although Gérard Genette wrote about the paratext in there context of literature, it can be and has been applied to music. Paulo F. De Castro writes about the musical applications of transtextuality. The musical paratext includes the album title, song titles, the cover, the band name, dedications, programs and more.²⁸

²² Paulo F. De Castro, 'La musique au second degré: on Gérard Genette's Theory of Transtextuality and its musical relevance', in *Music, Analysis, Experience : New Perspectives in Musical Semiotics*, ed. Costantino C. M., Maeder Mark Reybrouck (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2016), 85.

²³ Gérard Genette, 'Introduction', in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin, foreword by Richard Macksey (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1997), p. 1.

²⁴ Genette, 'Introduction', 5.

²⁵ Genette, 4.

²⁶ Genette, 5.

²⁷ Genette, 1.

²⁸ De Castro, 'La musique au second degré', 85.

2.4 The paratext applied

According to Genette, the main goal of the paratext is “to ensure for the text a destiny consistent with the author's purpose.”²⁹ An attentive reader will notice that this goal of the paratext directly tackles the main issue surrounding the concept album. It is, however, not entirely clear as to how the paratext ensures the author's purpose comes across. Although the paratext can obviously help with sending a more unified message to the listener and adds means to convey meaning, it is still up to the listener to interpret the message.

I will demonstrate how the paratext can be applied to the concept album in order identify it, by briefly analysing the album *Offerings*.³⁰ Most importantly, the epitext is able to uncover an artists intention by enabling the artist to communicate his or her intention directly to the listener. Typhoon has done this by doing multiple interviews discussing the album, providing a listening note and more information on their website, and by doing an AMA on reddit, giving listeners the opportunity to ask questions to Morton about the album. This does not only reveal intentions, but uncovers less noticeable means of conveying meaning as well. For example, Morton answered to a listener that the song titles purposefully consist of single words, as he felt that it's a record of attrition and as such he wanted the overall aesthetic to reflect a certain sparseness.³¹ By doing this, the peritextual elements become more explicit. The main aim for the peritext of a concept album should be to extend its unity. In *Offerings*, this is done by most of the peritext referencing lyrics on the album. The word ‘offering’ is often used in lyrics such as “this is not your loss, this is your offering”, while the cover image is described in the lyrics of the song “Remember.”³² Other paratexts, such as some of the song titles, reference works of art and greek myths. “Algernon” references the short story *Flowers for Algernon*, in which a man becomes extremely intelligent after a surgery, only to lose it all as the effects wane.³³ This happens all while the man is being painfully aware of his loss, drawing similarities with the protagonist in *Offerings* being painfully aware of his memory loss.

The paratext offers an important tool to convey meaning, and by analysing the paratext one can examine whether it is an extension to the perceived narrative, theme or concept. If every

²⁹ Genette, ‘conclusion’, 407.

³⁰ Typhoon, *Offerings*, Roll Call Records, 2018, Spotify.

³¹ Kyle Morton, posted on January 23, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/indieheads/comments/7sglu6/kyle_morton_from_typhoon_signing_on_ask_me/.

³² ‘Remember’, Spotify, track 7 on Typhoon, *Offerings*, Roll Call Records, 2018.

³³ ‘Algernon’, Spotify, track 4 on Typhoon, *Offerings*, Roll Call Records, 2018; Daniel Keyes, *Flowers for Algernon*, <https://sdf.org/gj/stories/flowersforalgernon.pdf>.

paratextual element is an extension and applies to the entirety of the album, the album is more likely to be a concept album. Paratextual elements that aren't an extension or convey a completely different meaning will decrease the unity of the album, making it less likely to be a concept album. The major drawback of the paratext is that it still heavily relies on the subjective interpretation of the listener if it can't be connected to explicit statements by the artist. This drawback is increased due to the paratext often being implicit rather than explicit, increasing the risk of a listener deriving his or her own concept, theme or narrative from the epitext for an album not intended to be a concept album.

2.5 The concept album continuum

Paige C. Sorensen takes a different approach with identifying concept albums and proposes a concept album continuum.³⁴ The concept album continuum proposed by Sorensen presents itself as a checklist to be used when determining whether an album is a concept album. An album which meets only one or two of the set criteria would be considered a 'loose' concept album, whilst an album that meets most if not all criteria would be deemed a strict concept album.³⁵

2.6 The concept album continuum applied

I will briefly apply the continuum to the album *Offerings* in order to determine the potential uses and drawbacks of the model. As I have mentioned before, according to the taxonomy of Letts, *Offerings* can be categorized as a narrative concept album. However, the album does not seem to pass the criteria of the concept album continuum. There are no character names, there is no distinct narrator and there is no related narration between songs. The album does satisfy the 'well-connected musical elements among tracks' category, as there are recurring melodies, motifs and lyrics throughout the album. The instrumentation (drums, electric guitar, violin, electric piano etc.) remains largely the same, ensuring a coherent sound. As Morton has explicitly stated the idea and intent behind the album, we can consider the category on intent to be satisfied. The 'supportive visual component category' can be checked off as satisfied as well, as there are music videos for some of the songs, there is a listening note and the cover art relates to the concept.³⁶ There often is a smooth transition between tracks, as some of the sounds and noises at the end of one track continue

³⁴ Paige C. Sorensen, 'The Concept Album Continuum', Merrimack College, *Honors Senior Capstone Projects* 43, 2019, 5. https://scholarworks.merrimack.edu/honors_capstones/43.

³⁵ Sorensen, 'The Concept Album Continuum', 5.

³⁶ 'News: Offerings', Typhoon, accessed June 16, 2021, <https://wearetyphoon.com/news/offerings-out-now>.

in the next. The last category can also be considered as satisfied, as all the tracks on the album are composed by Kyle Morton.³⁷ As *Offerings* meets all but one of the criteria, it would be considered to be a strict concept album.

In theory, this approach acknowledges the ambiguity of the definition while providing clear parameters to analyse a concept album. There are, however, some issues to be found which will need improvement in order for the continuum to be useful. Firstly, Sorensen does not indicate which definition she has chosen to base this continuum on. Secondly, she does not provide any argumentation for her choices for the characteristics of the continuum. This results in a rather arbitrary and unfounded list of characteristics which completely opposes the systematic approach it aims to fuel. As a result, *Offerings* does not satisfy the narrative category, while it does fit in the narrative category in Letts's taxonomy. One of the first things which catches the eye is the complete abandonment of the thematic and resistant concept album in the continuum, even though these are widely regarded to be a possible characteristic of the concept album. This leaves out a lot of the thematic elements in *Offerings* which aid in unifying the album. The list of musical elements seems logical enough, but there is very little attention for the visual components. Although the proposed category of "focused and meaningful intent by the composer" is important, there is yet again no explanation or suggestion as to how said intent should be judged.³⁸ It is also worth noting that Sorensen states the concept album continuum aims to solve issues of exclusion, which I find to be a bit odd.³⁹ Sorensen feels as if there are too many albums not considered to be concept albums as the criteria for the concept album are too strict. If there is one issue the concept album is not facing, it is issues of exclusion. As I have argued before, the analysis of academic literature has shown that scholars often pick a definition of the concept album that best suits their needs. This makes for a very flexible definition which would allow more albums to be considered concept albums. Furthermore, as I have stated before, Letts and Scott have argued that any listener can construct his or her own concept while listening to an album, which implies the concept album rather faces the issue of inclusion as listeners can deem any album to be a concept album.⁴⁰

The continuum does seem to offer a more streamlined and methodological approach to identifying concept albums, despite its flaws. Its aim should not be to solve issues of exclusion, but to offer a systematical approach to analysing the concept album. The list of characteristics needs to

³⁷ 'Discography: Offerings', Typhoon, accessed June 16, 2021, <https://wearetyphoon.com/discography/offerings>.

³⁸ Sorensen, 'The Concept Album Continuum', 6.

³⁹ Sorensen, 4.

⁴⁰ Letts, *How to disappear completely*, 13.

be much more extensive and it needs to be properly argued why and which choices are made, and it should suggest how the presence of these characteristics might be tested. The list of visual components should be a lot more extensive, and more means of communication should be added, such as semiotics. Concept albums can then be categorised as a 'loose' or 'strict' concept album. To improve the continuum even more, concept albums should be classified amongst a scale ranging from one to five. A concept album classified as 'one' would be considered a loose concept album, and a five would be considered strict. The numbers on the scale between one and five would provide the nuanced approach the continuum is aiming for. All in all, the concept album continuum has many solvable drawbacks and offers an interesting systematical approach to identifying the concept album.

Conclusion

There is yet to be a definition of the concept album that does not invoke discussion. The most commonly used definitions come down to “a group of individually complete songs designed as a unit”. The difficulty that follows from this definition is that it’s very difficult to determine if the album is designed as unit. As stated before, a clever listener might be able to identify unity in any album. The aim of this thesis was to assess the theoretical frameworks which have been applied in order to define and identify the concept album and to make a suggestion as to which direction new theoretical frameworks should go. Academics have employed several strategies to better define and identify the concept album and to overcome the inherent issues.

What stands out is that the theoretical frameworks which have been applied to the concept album either try to define the concept album, classify the concept album or try to identify the means of communication of the concept album. There also seems to be a focus on analysing the concept album not solely on its music and lyrics, but also as an intertextual and intermedial object. The logical explanation for this is that, in order to overcome the communicative problems between artist and listener, academics use every possible means of conveying meaning. This is a strategy that makes sense, as an artist with an intention for cohesion and an intention to convey meaning will need to cross the same communicative barrier.

The general aim of a taxonomy is to classify, often done to organise. Although Letts has not given a motivation as to why she felt the need to construct a taxonomy, it feels safe to say that the field of the concept album could use a proper organisation. The taxonomy helps identifying the different types of concept albums and the different strategies to achieve unity. This can then serve as a foundation for future research and future analytical approaches.

One of the theoretical frameworks that would do well implementing the taxonomy of the concept album is the concept album continuum by Sorensen. Although the idea of a concept album continuum fits the ambiguous definition of the concept album and would aid in analysing and identifying concept albums, the execution lacks proper argumentation and fails to include a large part of the research that has been done.

I would propose future research on the subject to take a different approach. It might be that there is no logical solution present because there is not a real problem to find an answer for. Instead of looking at the difficulties when defining and identifying the concept album as a problem or an issue, we might as well look at it as a characteristic of the concept album. It is the overcoming of those difficulties which sets aside the concept album from any other regular album. Bryan Terry has

taken this approach as well, proposing the challenges of the concept album to be a feature rather than a difficulty.⁴¹ Terry uses his proposition to view the concept album as something liberating rather than restricting, with which I agree. It encourages artists to be as creative as possible to convey their unifying narrative, theme or concept. This does not mean that there is no need to keep trying to find new or better ways to identify and define the concept album.

One of the theoretical frameworks discussed in this thesis, the concept album continuum, fits well when accepting an ambiguous definition. It should, however, need to include more of the other research which has been done in the field and be accompanied with proper argumentation. For the continuum to work properly, every possible means of conveying meaning should be included. This entails the different aspects within the taxonomy of Letts and the works on the paratext and intermediality by Genette and Arvidson, but could also include semiotics. The continuum should aim to include every means of communication a concept album can deploy, in order to streamline the discussion of defining and identifying the concept album and to offer a systematical analytical approach for identifying concept albums.

This thesis has only touched upon the most often used theoretical frameworks and strategies, and one of the most innovative ones. In order for the proposed more extensive concept album continuum to work, every theoretical framework on overcoming the ambiguity of the concept album should be gathered and considered. The way academics analyse concept albums is identical to the very avid and fanatical concept album listener, so any theoretical framework encompassing all means of communication in detail will have exposed the concept album to its core. The field that researches an object that aims to be unified should strive for some more unification in its approach itself.

⁴¹ Terry, 'Isaac Hayes's Soul Concept', 28.

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Appendix A

The taxonomy of the concept album by Marianne Tatom Letts.

Table 1.1. Taxonomy of the Concept Album

- I. Narrative (akin to novel, film, stage musical)
 - A. Plot
 - 1. Explicit
 - b. Timeless/mythic (“once upon a time”)
 - b. Flashback/flashforward (non-chronological)
 - 2. Implied
 - a. Constructed by the listener with little effort (causal relationships between events)
 - B. Characters
 - 1. Protagonist
 - a. Sympathetic
 - b. Anti-hero
 - 2. Aspects of one character’s psyche
 - 3. Singer as protagonist or actor (see thematic/lyrical below)

- II. Thematic (collections of songs)
 - A. Music
 - 1. Recurring motives that comment on action
 - 2. Orchestration/instrumentation (strings, winds, electronica)
 - 3. Genres (classical, folk, rock)
 - 4. Broad themes denoted by instruments or motives (brass choir as heroic, acoustic guitar as simple and pure)
 - 5. Key/mode associations (one key or closely related keys; major/minor modes)
 - B. Lyrics
 - 1. Songs on a given topic (death, environmental concerns)
 - 2. Sung by a character but not containing a narrative other than a stage show (emcee/host)
 - 3. May include key/mode associations (sad lyrics over minor music)

- III. Resistant (unified but resists interpretation)
 - A. Non-explicit plot/characters
 - 1. Doesn’t carry through entire album (tenuously linked episodes)
 - 2. Protagonist dies or is completely absent
 - B. Musical discontinuity
 - 1. Musical elements may contribute to dissolution of plot or failure of protagonist
 - C. Unclear “concept”
 - 1. Listener may be responsible for figuring out the concept
 - 2. Artist may deny that any concept is present
 - D. Lyrics
 - 1. Blur the action or intent rather than defining it

Appendix B

The table of the concept album continuum by Paige C. Sorensen.

Characteristic	Satisfied Y/N
<i>Strong</i> narrative, storyline, or conceptual foundation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Character names or narrator • Related narration between songs 	
Well-connected musical elements among tracks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Melody (or Repeated Melody) • Rhythm • Key Relationships • Motifs • Lyrics • Instrumentation 	
Focused and meaningful <i>intent</i> by the composers	
Supportive visual components (ex: graphic novels, films, music videos, etc.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cover art relates to the concept 	
Smooth transitions between one or more tracks	
Most, if not all, tracks on the album are composed by the same songwriter(s)	

Appendix C

The concept album continuum, applied to *Offerings*, by Typhoon.

Characteristic	Satisfied Y/N
<i>Strong</i> narrative, storyline, or conceptual foundation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Character names or narrator • Related narration between songs 	N
Well-connected musical elements among tracks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Melody (or Repeated Melody) • Rhythm • Key relationships • Motifs • Lyrics • Instrumentation 	Y
Focused and meaningful <i>intent</i> by the composers	Y
Supportive visual components (ex: graphic novels, films, music videos, etc.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cover art relates to the concept 	Y
Smooth transition between one or more tracks	Y
Most, if not all, tracks on the album are composed by the same songwriter.	Y