

A New Perspective on the Concept Album: The Governing Tonal Axis in Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here*

Near the middle of the 20th century, many popular musicians began to become fascinated by the idea of unifying an entire album with a central theme. The earliest such explorations of this idea took place in the 1940s and 1950s. Perhaps the best early example of this is Frank Sinatra's 1955 album *In the Wee Small Hours*, comprised of a set of songs tied together by themes of loneliness, depression, and night-life. Projects such as this gave birth to what we know now as the concept album.

The concept album gained a great deal of momentum in the late 1960s, when a number of rock groups began to experiment with different ways to create and maintain a theme around which the albums were arranged. One of the earliest of this wave of concept albums was the Beatles' 1967 album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. The material in *Pepper*, while not necessarily all related, is driven by the eponymous opening track, whose musical and lyrical material return near the end of the album. In the same year, the Moody Blues recorded their album *Days of Future Passed*, the content of which describes a subject's journey through an ordinary day. Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention took a different approach to the concept album in projects such as *We're Only in It for the Money* and *Uncle Meat*, from 1968 and 1969, respectively. The two albums are drawn from material recorded for a larger project initially envisioned by Zappa entitled *No Commercial Potential*, and as such many of the tracks on the two albums share musical and instrumentation ideas.

In the 1970s, rock groups continued to become even more creative in their treatment of the concept album. British band Yes released two important albums at the beginning of the decade, *Fragile* in 1971 and *Close to the Edge* in 1972, which contain tracks that are comprised of a series of "movements," similar to that of a piece of classical music. *Close to the Edge* in

particular is given to this ideal, as the title track takes up one entire side of the album and is divided into four distinct sections. The album *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* by British band Genesis is unique in that it is unified thematically rather than musically. Its story is centered around a character named Rael and the spiritual journey he undertakes over the course of the album.

Also involved with this proliferation of concept albums in the 1970s was British progressive rock band Pink Floyd. While the band had been noted for its psychedelic tendencies, they had also been experimenting with the concept album in projects such as 1970's *Atom Heart Mother* and 1973's *Dark Side of the Moon*. What separated these albums from those of others artists was their sense of unity—while each of course had separate tracks, they seem at the same time to make up a unified whole. This is in part due to relationships of tonics of the tracks to one another on each album. Such an idea is not unprecedented, however. In his article “Beethoven, *Tristan*, and The Beatles,” Robert Gauldin refers to the second side of the Beatles’ 1969 album *Abbey Road* as “one of the first instances of a “rock song cycle.”” Gauldin divides the songs on side two of the album into three groups, arranged by tonics and topical themes of the songs. The first group centers around the tonics A and C and topically convey the beginning of a journey, the second group focuses on the tonic E and concerns itself with a number of character studies, and the third group returns to A and C as tonics while focusing on familial values and the end of the journey started at the beginning of side two. Whether the Beatles intended to hear the exact model Gauldin put forth is of course a matter of some debate, there is no doubt that at least some degree of tonal unity is in play on this side of the album.

The second side of *Abbey Road* perhaps set a precedent for one of the most conspicuous instances of tonal unity in a concept album—that which is heard on Pink Floyd’s 1975 album

Wish You Were Here. The creation of the album took place at an auspicious time during the band's history: they had perhaps reached the peak of their musical creativity, expanding upon the highly inventive nature of their previous project, *Dark Side of the Moon*; and were still at a point when various conflicts did not interfere with the band's cohesion, as the demands of the record label did in their 1977 album *Animals* or vocalist and bassist Roger Waters' ego did in their 1979 album *The Wall*. Thus, the result was a highly popular album which gained instant critical acclaim and that could not press enough copies to fulfill demand for the record. The album consists of only five tracks, ranging in duration from five and a half minutes to over thirteen minutes, and topically functioning primarily as a tribute to Syd Barrett, the band's original guitarist and vocalist, and as a commentary on the evils of the recording industry. Aside from this topical aspect, the basis of the tonal interest as a unifying factor of this concept album comes from the fact that the five tracks only have two tonic pitches: E and G. The use of these two tonics, in addition to their interaction with one another and development of their use over the course of the album, suggests there is a sort of tonal axis at play, with the tonics E and G functioning as its two poles. We will now explore in detail, track-by-track, how exactly this plays out as the album unfolds.

The album's first track, "Shine On You Crazy Diamond, Parts 1-5," is a tribute to Syd Barrett, both in terms of the lyrical content and the sheer length of the track: At thirteen and a half minutes in length, it harkens back to the early days of Pink Floyd's existence in which they had a penchant for playing long songs of an ethereal nature. The track is strongly in G minor, the first pole of the axis, and as the title suggests, is divided into five distinct sections. Notable about the track, however, is that the presence of the G dorian mode increases with the arrival of each section. The track's first section is marked by the heavy presence of keyboardist Rick Wright's

synthesizers. A solo synthesizer plays improvisatory melodies diatonically over a G minor triad pedal. At the 2:11 mark, guitarist David Gilmour takes over the solo duties, and while the pedal chord changes to minor v and iv sonorities, the tonic remains strong throughout, and the guitar does not deviate from diatonic G minor. At moments in this first section, however, a background synthesizer can be heard playing E-naturals, indicating the fleeting presence of G dorian. Part 2 of the track begins at the 3:56 mark, ushered in by the guitar playing a four note motive: B-flat, F, G, and E, signifying sudden new importance of G dorian (example 1, 3:58 ipod). Part 2 grows as the motive repeats and eventually results in the drums entering at the 4:27 mark, giving a meter to the track. Additionally, chords begin to change at this point, notably first to a major IV, or C major, lending further importance to the presence of E-naturals in the texture. Part 3 begins at the 6:28 mark with another synthesizer solo. There are no massive changes to the texture, but the dorian mode has become more salient still with the regular presence of E-naturals in the rhythm guitar line. At the 7:35 mark, the guitar once again takes up the solo line, and E-naturals can be heard in both the lead and rhythm guitar lines at this point. The beginning of part 4 is easily detected by the first entrance of the vocal line at the 8:43 mark. While this section contains significantly more harmonic variety than its predecessors, the particular chord that increases dorian mode salience in part 4 is the E half-diminished chord, first heard in the first chorus over a C pedal at the 9:33 mark (example 2, 9:30 ipod). The chord is heard once again leading up to the cadence before the second verse, and twice more when the entire sequence is repeated. Part 5 begins right at the end of the second chorus with a baritone saxophone solo, at the 11:09 mark. Dorian mode salience has reached its height by this point, with the saxophone solo firmly in G dorian—in fact, the first note played by the saxophone is an E natural. At the 12:01 mark, the baritone saxophone is replaced with an alto saxophone, and the music suddenly shifts into a

triple meter. Unchanged, however, is the presence of G dorian. Throughout part 5, the accompaniment is also rife with E-naturals, as a number of major IV chords can be heard, as well as repetitions of the guitar's initial B-flat-F-G-E motive (example 3, 12:06 ipod).

The significance of the dorian mode salience and the gradual increase of the presence of E-naturals is brought to light somewhat at the beginning of the album's second track, "Welcome to the Machine." The first track segues without pause into "Welcome to the Machine," and after the sounds of time cards being punched and whirring machinery, an E pedal can be heard around the :29 mark. The entire track is strongly in E minor, containing little harmonic variation and being almost entirely diatonic. It would seem as though Pink Floyd spent the entirety of "Shine On You Crazy Diamond, Parts 1-5" building up the importance of E-natural in order to introduce the other pole of the axis, E, by the beginning of "Welcome to the Machine." The dominance of the second pole of the axis continues in the album's third track, "Have a Cigar," which is also strongly in E minor. While the tonic is different this time around, it is noteworthy that "Have a Cigar" contains passages in E dorian. Interestingly, the two tracks share not only a tonic, but also topical themes relating to the evils of the recording industry. "Welcome to the Machine" likens the introduction of talented rock musicians into big record labels as a factory of sorts, with the labels turning the otherwise unique performers into puppets of the industry. "Have a Cigar" takes an even more direct approach to the issue, with the lyrics resembling the cold, unfeeling musings of a record label manager trying to make a new act feel comfortable before he turns them into yet another one of the label's mainstream cash cows.

As with every track on the album, "Have a Cigar" continues without pause, this time into the album's title track, "Wish You Were Here." The energy created by distorted guitars and driving solo lines from the previous track calms significantly here, as we hear a solo acoustic

guitar enter at the :16 mark. The first chord we hear it play its melody over is E minor 7, though this quickly switches to a G major triad in second inversion. The line continues to vacillate between these two chords until it finally cadences in G at the :49 mark (example 4, :16 ipod). The vacillation between the two modally related chords, which occurs several more times over the course of the song, is crucially important to the tonal structure of the album. Despite the many cadences in G major, tonal ambiguity created by the vacillation between the E minor 7 and G 6/4 chords highlights the battle between the two poles of the tonal axis and brings them both into sharp relief simultaneously. The placement of the axis' high point does not seem accidental: it takes place in the middle section of the album, within its title track, on another song paying tribute to Syd Barrett, and after each pole of the axis has already been introduced.

Over the course of the final forty-five seconds of "Wish You Were Here," the sound of blowing wind takes the album into its final track, "Shine On You Crazy Diamond, Parts 6-9." As the title suggests, the track bears similarities to the album's opening track: it is once again in the key of G minor and contains many of the same musical themes. Also like the first track, it is a Syd Barrett tribute and possesses strong dorian tendencies. Unlike the first track, however, the dorian mode salience does not gradually increase, as the importance of the pitch E natural, as introduced by the G dorian mode, has already been established—it now functions merely as a sort of reminder of the axis' existence. Part 6 is in a moderate triple meter, and contains G dorian presence in the solo synthesizer, solo guitar, and accompaniment synthesizer parts. Part 7 begins at the 4:34 mark, and mirrors the harmonic and formal structure of part 4 in the opening track. Only the lyrics have changed—the E half-diminished 7 chord remains, signifying the continued importance of G dorian. The music changes significantly in part 8, which begins at the 5:58 mark. The tempo increases significantly, the music takes on an almost funk-like quality, and E-

naturals pervade the guitar accompaniment throughout, strengthening further the presence of G dorian (example 5, 6:04 ipod). Part 9 begins at the 9:03 mark. The tempo reverts back to a slow triple meter, and a synthesizer solo that lasts to the end of the album is heard. At the 11:19 mark, the music makes its final cadence into G *major*, causing the album to end with a Picardy third. The synthesizer continues to play an unmetered melody in this key until the music fades out, giving a feeling of calm to the end of the album.

As previously mentioned, each one of the songs on the album deals with one of two topical themes: a tribute to Syd Barrett or the evils of the recording industry. Lending extra significance to the presence of these themes, however, is that each set of topical themes corresponds to only one of the two tonics that form the album's tonal axis. "Shine On You Crazy Diamond, Parts 1-5" and "Parts 1-6," the bookends of the album, are both in the key of G minor and both function as Syd Barrett tributes. "Welcome to the Machine" and "Have a Cigar," next to one another in the middle of the album, are both in the key of E minor and both provide commentary on the evils of the recording industry. "Wish You Were Here," the album's title track and situated near the center of the album, is the only track to bring the two poles of the axis together, as mentioned before, and perhaps not coincidentally, articulates the central topical message of the album: a reminiscence of the band's former leader, told in a veiled yet heartfelt way. While it is entirely possible that this may be a coincidence, it seems that the exact correspondence of topical themes to particular tonics is at least somewhat intentional.

The presence of tonal axes in a variety of different types and pieces of music has been discussed by many scholars. One example that stands out has been pointed out by Joseph Straus in Igor Stravinsky's work *Symphony of Psalms*. In Straus' article, "Stravinsky's Tonal Axis," he presents an axis that *Symphony of Psalms* is constructed about which consists of overlapping

major and minor triads, forming a sonority that is equivalent to a major-seventh chord. In this case, the axis is created by way of the vacillation between the major and minor key areas, who share members of the same major-seventh chord. While it is not the aim of this study to promote or oppose Straus' views on *Symphony of Psalms*, it is nonetheless pertinent for reasons of comparison to the axis present in *Wish You Were Here*. While Straus' axis consists of poles created by two separate sonorities, one major and one minor, that reside in the same diatonic set of pitches, the poles of the axis in *Wish You Were Here* are rather two tonics, from which triads are built and thus, keys ascertained. We can then say of *Wish You Were Here* that the third relationship created by the tonics of its songs *is* the axis that unifies the album tonally. Given that the album begins in the key of G minor, we can further infer that the gradual increase of dorian mode salience in "Shine On You Crazy Diamond, Parts 1-5" helps to bring the presence of the axis to light through the growing importance of E natural, which is of course the other pole of the axis.

One of the most popular arguments against tonal unity, or any kind of harmonic complexity in any genre of popular music is simply "did they really mean to do that?" While I cannot speak to whether Pink Floyd truly intended to include a tonal axis as the unifying thread in *Wish You Were Here*, I believe that there is too much evidence of its existence for it to be denied. For those who still have doubts as to whether this level of harmonic arrangement may have been intended by the band, I turn to the direct predecessor of *Wish You Were Here*, the 1973 album *Dark Side of the Moon*. *Dark Side of the Moon*, while not possessing quite as intricate a tonal structure as *Wish You Were Here*, is still tonally unified in a similar way. The first three tracks of the album, seen on the slide, all share the tonic E; the second two tracks share a tonic of B, and the final four tracks all share a tonic of D. Indeed, the three tonics are quite

guitaristic and liable to be chosen by a multitude of rock bands, but the fact that each tonic area is grouped into a set of tracks that share that tonic cannot be ignored.

Many consider *Wish You Were Here* to be, at the very least, among the group's finest albums. Because the group was at a sort of creative and cohesive peak, I tend to agree with this sentiment. The fact that there is definitely some sort of tonal unity in play over the course of the album only serves to further its genius. It is my hope that we can continue to research the music of Pink Floyd to discover still more of these musical gems embedded within the texture of their albums.