
Music in American Life: An Encyclopedia of the Songs, Styles, Stars, and Stories That Shaped Our Culture

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Opening Tracks

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The first song on a record, compact disc, or cassette—the “opening track”—occupies a critical position on an album. If we are unfamiliar with a band, for example, the opening track shapes our initial impressions of its work. If we are familiar with a musical artist but the album is new, then the opening track offers the first clue to whether we will appreciate this release in a similar way to those we already know. If we have listened to the album many times, then the opening track can immediately remind us of those people, places, events, and feelings that we associate with that music.

Simply put, the main function of an opening track is to encourage us to listen to the album. For this reason, the lead single—typically the catchiest song—is often positioned as the opening track. With this strategy, the music consumer receives instant gratification when the album is played for the first time. Opening tracks may draw the listener in via other strategies as well. One particularly common and effective technique is the “slow build.” In this situation, the opening track starts from seeming nothingness; instruments are gradually added (or get louder) in an accumulative process that creates a dramatic entrance to not only the song but also the album overall. A particularly notable instance of a slow build can be found on the U2 (active 1976–present) album *The Joshua Tree* (1987). The first song, “Where the Streets Have No Name,” begins with a timeless, swirling sound that gradually gains momentum; the drums and bass enter only after over a minute has elapsed, and it is not until almost two minutes have passed that the lead vocal finally enters the mix.

In many cases an opening track seems to summarize the album, artist, or style as a whole. Many albums have the same title as the opening track—as if this one song encapsulates the larger work. Consider the song “Black Sabbath,” the first song by Black Sabbath (active 1969–2006) on its first album, *Black Sabbath* (1970). Beginning with an eerie texture of rain and tolling bells followed by a dissonant guitar and bass riff, the song sets a distinctive tone for the songs that follow. But we might also say that this song stands as the opening track to the entire musical output of the band or, more broadly, the entire genre of heavy metal, because this

debut is considered a seminal album in the development of heavy metal. An opening track thus can be seen to open more than just the album itself. In some cases, the lyrics draw our attention to this aspect. The first thing we hear on the 1988 N.W.A. (active 1986–1991, 1999–2000) album *Straight Outta Compton*, for example, are the words, “You are now about to witness the strength of street knowledge.” This was a portentous statement, as the album ultimately helped give birth to West Coast gangsta rap. A more musical type of statement is made on Jaco Pastorius’s (1951–1987) eponymous debut, on which the opening track—a cover of the bebop standard “Donna Lee”—raised the bar for jazz electric bass technique. Similarly,

an opening track may announce a sea change in the style of a single artist. Bob Dylan (1941–), darling of the 1960s acoustic folk revival, shocked his fans by kicking off his 1965 album *Bringing It All Back Home* with an electrified rock song, “Subterranean Homesick Blues.” Of course pioneering songs are not always located at the beginning of an album. “Milestones”—the first song composed by Miles Davis (1926–1991) in his shift to modal jazz—is the fourth of six tracks on the album. But while “Milestones” is not the first track on the album overall, it was the first track on the second side of the original LP release. In this regard, we might consider adopting an expanded notion of an “opening track.” Prior to the advent of the compact disc, albums were released primarily on two-sided media (vinyl or cassette). An album thus conceivably contained two opening tracks (one for each side), each of which had the opportunity to set a mood or make a statement. (Considering that artists sometimes released double albums, we might in some cases imagine four opening tracks on a single work!) Yet even in the modern era of single-sided CDs, we find evidence that albums should be conceptually partitioned into smaller chunks. *Late Registration* (2005) by Kanye West (1977–), for example, includes numerous “skits” interspersed throughout. These skits divide the album into discrete groups of song, and each group can be seen to have its own opening track, so to speak. In a related manner, many albums begin with a short “intro,” which is often something less than a full-fledged song. The first track on the 1987 album *Pop Goes the World* by Men Without Hats (active 1977–1992, 2003, 2010–present), for example, is simply one long buildup to the second track, which is the first real “song” on the album. We might thus consider the intro to be merely a prelude to the true opening track.

It is worth noting that the importance of an opening track is strongly predicated on the album format itself. If songs are not played in the particular sequence found on the original album, then the privileged position of the opening track is lost. In fact, this situation occurs often in modern life. Multi-disc CD players, for example, offer the option to “shuffle” tracks, whereby songs from different artists can be played in a random order. This practice is especially common nowadays with the prevalence of compact digital music players such as the Apple iPod. As listeners move away from album-oriented listening to other, more fractured modes of music consumption, the significance of an opening track may fade. Nonetheless, we should recognize the influential role that opening tracks play in the history of popular music, whether or not we listen to these opening tracks in their natural environments.

See also: [Davis, Miles](#); [Dylan, Bob](#); [Jazz](#); [Metal](#); [Personal Music Devices](#); [Rap and Rappers](#); [Vinyl Records](#); [West, Kanye](#)

Further Reading

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