

Use of acoustic and electric guitars on *OK Computer* and *Hail to the Thief*.

Radiohead has historically (during the 1990s to 2010s) been known as a band known for exploring experimental styles in the heavy alternative soundscape. From the band's initial debut sound in *Pablo Honey*¹ - grungy, derivative alternative rock - to the explorative, atmospheric sounds in *In Rainbows*,² it is clear that the band has undergone major transformations over time. Much of Radiohead's success can be attributed to how the guitar is utilised as a textural and expressive instrument. This is greatly due to the talent of lead guitarist Jonny Greenwood (b. 1971), who, alongside singer Thom Yorke (b. 1968), contributed to two of the most influential records in rock history: *OK Computer*,³ and *Hail to the Thief*.⁴

The 1997 concept album *OK Computer* is regarded by many British and American critics to be one of the greatest and most influential rock albums of all time.⁵ It blended Radiohead's well-established sound from *The Bends*⁶ two years earlier with a picture of alienation arising from the corporate, technological, and political climate of the United Kingdom and the world at the time.⁷ Specifically, Yorke built up unsettling and haunting ideas and sounds to "watch them fall apart"⁸.

Evidence of "building things up" can be seen in the chosen lead single from the record, *Paranoid Android*.⁹ The track begins with a structured, almost robotic acoustic steel stringed guitar riff, complemented by Greenwood's electric guitar licks. In contrast to prior tracks by Radiohead, e.g.: *Fake Plastic Trees*¹⁰, *Paranoid Android* does not use acoustic steel stringed guitars as a simple chordal backing to the rest of the band and vocals. Though the steel string is ubiquitous throughout the entire song, individual segments of this guitar part echo the vocals, or other guitar parts, as illustrated below.

¹ Radiohead. *Pablo Honey*. Recorded March/April 1993. Capitol Records, 1993, Vinyl recording.

² Radiohead. *In Rainbows*. Recorded March 2005. XL Recordings, 2005, CD.

³ Radiohead, *OK Computer*. Radiohead. Recorded July 1996. EMI Records, Ltd., 1996, CD.

⁴ Radiohead. *Hail to the Thief*. Radiohead. Recorded September 2002. Capitol Records, 2003, CD.

⁵ Footman, Tim. *Radiohead: Welcome to the Machine: OK Computer and the Death of the Classic Album*. New Malden: Chrome Dreams, 2007.

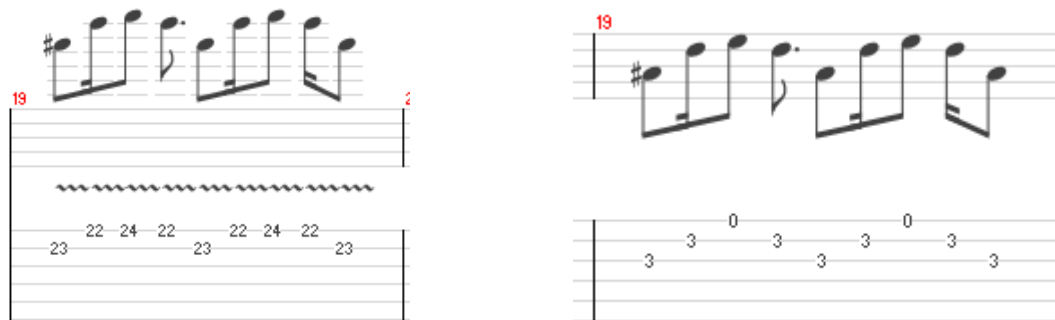
⁶ Radiohead. *The Bends*. Recorded August/September 1994. Capitol Records, 1995, CD.

⁷ Hubbs, N. 'The Imagination of Pop-Rock Criticism'. *Expression in Pop-Rock Music: Critical and Analytical Essays*, ed. Walter Everett. New York: Routledge, 2008. 225

⁸ Yorke, Thom. "Radiohead: An Interview With Thom Yorke." Interview by Phil Sutcliffe. Q, October 1999.

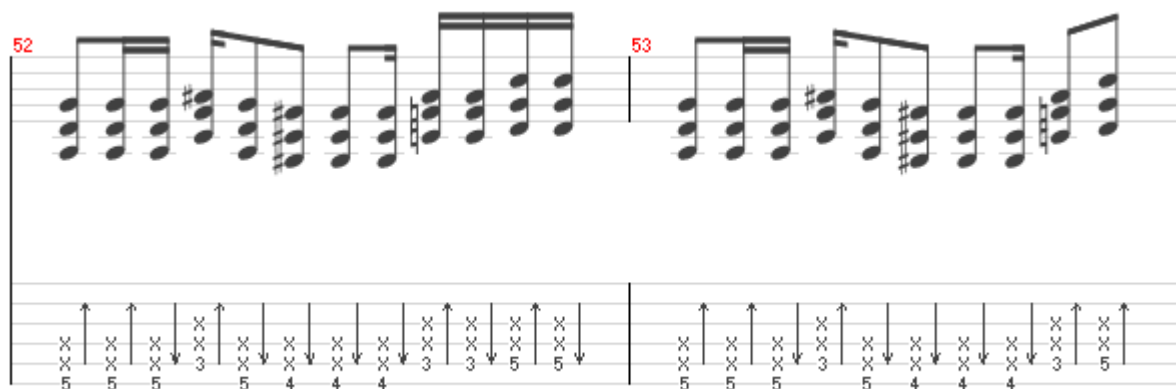
⁹ Radiohead, *OK Computer*, 1997.

¹⁰ Radiohead, *The Bends*, 1994



Ed O'Brien (left), Jonny Greenwood (right)

What is most important about the inclusion of a steel stringed acoustic guitar is how structured and clean the sound is with the percussive and progressive elements of the track. On the recording at 2:11, as the Wurlitzer progressively becomes more aggressive, building up to a long instrumental segment with a solo by Jonny Greenwood. During this entire segment, the guitar remains calm and flowing despite what is happening around it. In stripped-down moments of the song the remaining individual elements reduce to percussion and steel stringed guitar (1:57). The vocal line echoes the guitar melody this time:



Thom Yorke (Guitar 1)

In contrast, Greenwood and Ed O'Brien's (b. 1968) expressive licks and arpeggios on the upper range of the electric guitar add colour to the song, filling the upper register with a haunting, clear, organic sound. Greenwood's guitar sound is particularly noteworthy, with his use of a kill-switch, heavy, dry distortion pedals, delay pedals, and pitch shifting pedals.¹¹ With the use of heavy guitar stabs and extremely affected guitar tone, much more emphasis is placed on sonically what the listener is hearing rather than what is written down, supported by his own opinion on the guitar: "...[Greenwood] sees them as a tool like a typewriter."¹² This mindset is vital for the success of Radiohead's sound and idea, given how much depth Yorke's ideas have. As described by New York

¹¹ *100 Greatest Guitarists*. Rolling Stone. Accessed September 20, 2016.

¹² *Jonny Greenwood Is the Controller: Typewriters & Washing Machines*. Jonny Greenwood Is the Controller: Typewriters & Washing Machines. Accessed September 20, 2016.

Times, Greenwood is "the guy who can take an abstract Thom Yorke notion and... execute it in the real world."¹³

At the end of the album, we can see the deconstruction of the record with *No Surprises* and *The Tourist*.¹⁴ The energy of the "neo-prog" *Paranoid Android* is no longer present in *No Surprises*, accompanied instead by major mode chirpiness and deceptive simplicity.¹⁵ What can be described as "pretty music" has also the underlying themes of "embracing suicide"¹⁶ brought through with the nearly languid, "carefree" movements of the high-register, clean electric guitar and glockenspiel. *The Tourist* pairs very long sustained electric guitar notes (2:02) and wailing vocals to a downtempo waltz-time coda. What was an energetic (albeit harsh) beginning to the record has now degraded and fallen apart with this conclusion. The record ends with a slow deconstruction to just bass and drums, accented by a hand bell as the very last note of the record.

Acoustic and electric guitar styles are important, but play a slightly different role in *Hail to the Thief*¹⁷ in 2003. *Hail to the Thief* is not a guitar-oriented album, instead focusing on the band and returning to more "traditional" guitar roots.¹⁸ Thom Yorke describes the record as "very acoustic"¹⁹ though it incorporates electronic instruments and sounds but far less prominently than previous records.²⁰ There is more than ever an influence of texture and rhythm of the guitar to songs on this record with far fewer solos.

*There There*²¹, one of the lead singles of *Hail to the Thief*, is one of the least electronically-influenced songs on the record. There is the presence of seemingly only two electric guitars playing chords. Greenwood plays a shifting arpeggiated riff in the bridge of the song that grows more and more distorted with the fuzz pedal, leading to the reverb-filled, abrasive but expansive riff at 4:00. With the presence of straight rhythms led by tom-toms and a straight bassline, the massive sound produced during the bridge and coda of the song emphasise the direction of Radiohead as a band - that they are creating new music as a band, using each musician's individual talent to reinforce the idea the band is trying to portray. The same observation can be applied to songs like the closing *A Wolf at the Door*²² that feature very little electronic influence compared to other tracks like *2+2=5*.²³

In conclusion, Radiohead's historical influence on the avenue of alternative and art rock can be attributed much to the work of the guitarists. Radiohead is defined by their ability to use expressive guitar and instrumental sections alongside electronic sounds, both as tools to complement the soundscape and the vision the songwriters had in mind. Radiohead's sound is not accidental, and the construction of sounds with the guitar as more than just a chordal or lead instrument has helped shape

¹³ Pappademas, Alex. *Radiohead's Runaway Guitarist*. The New York Times. 2012. Accessed September 20, 2016.

¹⁴ Radiohead, *OK Computer*, 1997.

¹⁵ Hubbs, N. 'The Imagination', 2008, 132

¹⁶ Hubbs, N. 'The Imagination', 2008, 132

¹⁷ Radiohead, *Hail to the Thief*, 2003

¹⁸ Yorke, Thom. *Hail to the Thief – Interview CD*. Interview by CD, sent to British press. 2003.

¹⁹ *Recording 'Hail to the Thief' in Los Angeles*. Xfm London 2012. Accessed 22 February 2012.

²⁰ Reynolds, Simon, *Walking on Thin Ice*, The Wire, 2001. Accessed 17 March 2007.

²¹ Radiohead, *Hail to the Thief*, 2003

²² Radiohead, *Hail to the Thief*, 2003

²³ Radiohead, *Hail to the Thief*, 2003

the sounds of guitar-based alternative rock groups for years to come. It is for this reason and Radiohead's popularity that such records as *OK Computer* remain relevant for decades. We can only hope that the deconstruction and construction of Radiohead's sound continues, in order for listeners and musicians to further explore what is possible through music with the guitar in the 21st century.

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