

Radiohead in 2007:
Phil Selway, Ed O'Brien,
Jonny Greenwood,
Thom Yorke, and Colin
Greenwood (from left)



Radiohead

ONE OF THE MOST
INNOVATIVE GROUPS OF
THE NINETIES, THEY CONTINUE
TO BUCK MUSICAL TRENDS

BY DAVID FRICKE

In October 2000, a week after Radiohead's fourth album – the cryptic, electronica-soaked *Kid A* – shot to Number One in America upon release, singer Thom Yorke politely dodged a question about the record's improbable success, especially given the English modern-rock band's perversely low-key promotion. They had done no videos and released no singles; they did three tour dates in North America plus a TV appearance on *Saturday Night Live*; and they had just one U.S. interview, on a bench in New York's Central Park in the crisp autumn dusk.

"I'm actually the last person in the band to talk about it," Yorke declared with an impish grin. "I've shut those particular cupboards, the ones concerning the industry. Whereas I used to be really into it. That was the ambitious side of me, wanting to get ours. It's good to know the devil you're dealing with."

But, Yorke went on, after Radiohead finished the grueling year-long tour for their previous album – the 1997 worldwide hit and art-rock landmark *OK Computer* – he became "obsessed" with the high price of rock star life. The singer saw "amazingly talented people being destroyed" by the grind of success and "started questioning whether I even wanted to stay involved, whether it was going to do the same thing to me."

Indeed, Yorke, guitarists Ed O'Brien and Jonny Greenwood, drummer Phil Selway, and Jonny's older brother, bassist Colin Greenwood – friends and bandmates since the mid-eighties, when they were schoolboys in Oxfordshire – walked away from their hard-earned limelight, spending almost eighteen months making a record that wasn't just the weirdest Number One album of the new century. *Kid A* was, in Yorke's estimation, barely rock at all.

"There's a lot of things about rock that are still valid," he conceded that evening in Central Park, "almost shamanic things: delving into drugs for creative reasons, not lifestyle reasons; music as a lifestyle commitment. If that's what someone means by rock, great. But I find it difficult to think of the path we've chosen as 'rock music.'" *Kid A*, Yorke insisted, "is like getting a massive eraser out and starting again."

In fact, that has been Radiohead's way forward at every turn in their music and fortune, across more than three decades, nine studio albums – all but the first, *Pablo Honey*

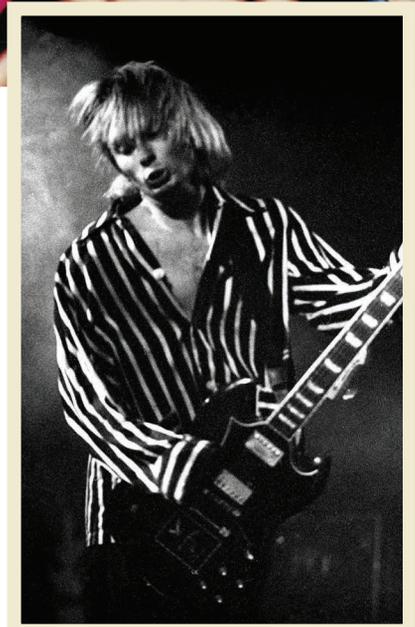
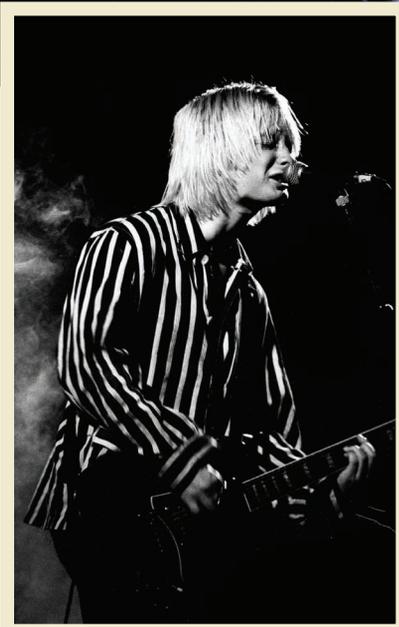
(1993), a Top Five hit in the U.S. or U.K., usually both – and a succession of sold-out arena tours and festival triumphs that have established the 2019 Rock & Roll Hall of Fame inductees as enduring alternative-rock heirs to the Beatles' psychedelic idealism and Pink Floyd's progressive-rock searching. Willfully experimental in their songwriting and exploration of the studio's outer limits, Radiohead are fiercely uncompromising in their protection and presentation of the results. But they are also absolutely commercial in their consistent all-embracing impact: a people's band on record and in performance, propelling Yorke's naked, often brutal lyric honesty with an explosive, universal resonance and an invigorating fear of repetition. As O'Brien once said, Radiohead start every new record by deciding "what we don't want to do next."

Ironically, they were almost a one-hit wonder. Released as Radiohead's first single in the fall of 1992, "Creep" – Yorke's slow burn of self-loathing and blistering wit with a noisy, incandescent chorus – had long faded from view when belated airplay in San Francisco mushroomed across America, then over the Atlantic, pushing the song into *Billboard*'s Top Forty and the British Top Ten. Radiohead reacted to that breakthrough – and the mixed reviews for *Pablo Honey*'s grunge-y distemper – by turning their backs on the mainstream, taking nearly a year to generate the spectral, nuanced balladry and crossfire-guitar dynamics of *The Bends* (1995).

That album, in turn, set the stage for the majestic scale and prophetic alarm of *OK Computer*, a multiplatinum smash that veered from "Paranoid Android," a six-minute mini-opera spiked with guitar freakout, to the electro-pop introspection of "No Surprises" and "Karma Police," Yorke's chilling observations of life in the age of 24-hour surveillance. In the enigmatic turmoil of *Kid A* and its 2001 companion LP, *Amnesiac* (made at the same sessions), Radiohead used loops and programming to new dramatic advantage. Then in 2007, with the end of their major-label deal, Radiohead upset the entire convention of selling records with the digital pay-what-you-will release of *In Rainbows*. In 2011, they extended their textural and beat inventions with the gripping minimalism and laptop-processed grace of *The King of Limbs*, followed by *A Moon Shaped Pool* in 2016. Those albums were so rhythmically complex that Radiohead have since become a sextet on the road with

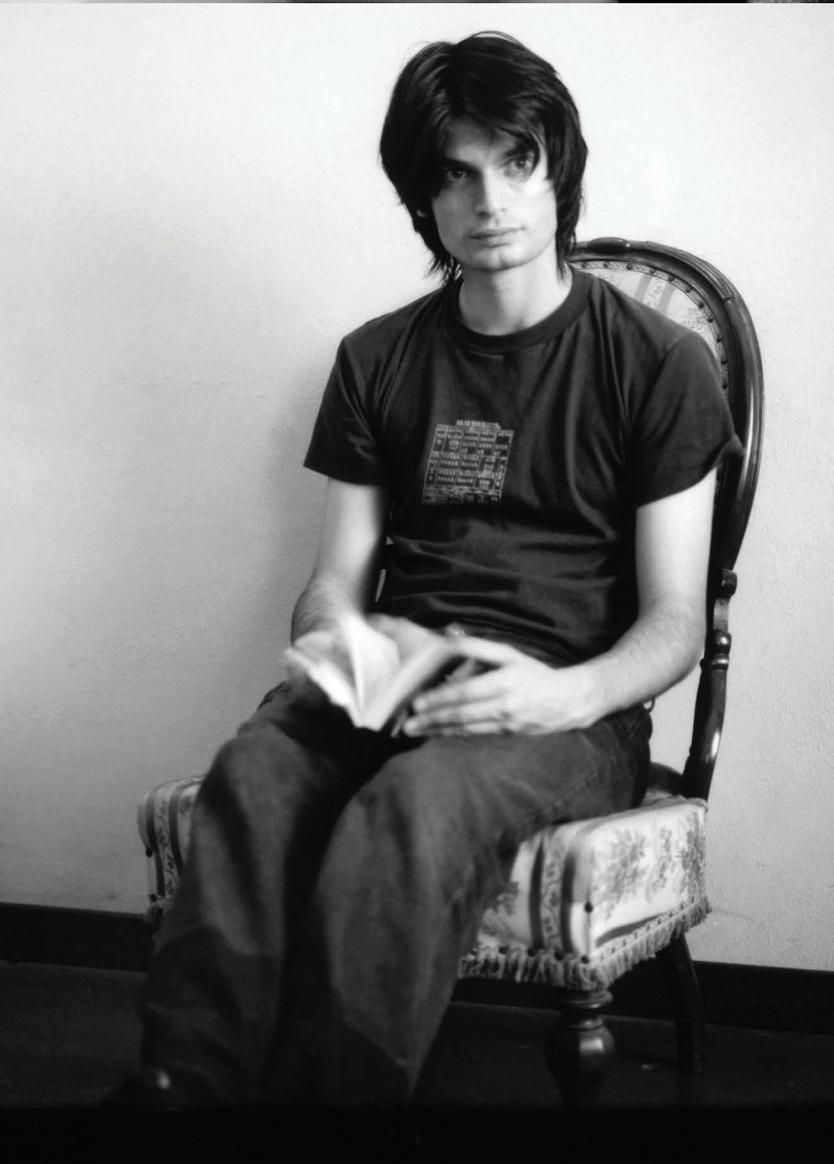


Above: Yorke, Selway, O'Brien, Colin Greenwood, and Jonny Greenwood (clockwise from center), 1992. Below: Yorke, onstage at the Melkweg in Amsterdam, 1993.





Above: In the studio, in 1995.
Below: Jonny Greenwood, c. 1999.



a second drummer, Clive Deamer, who has played with Portishead and Robert Plant.

“What they have done seems to be very clear and smart,” R.E.M. singer Michael Stipe said in 2001, for Radiohead’s first cover story in *Rolling Stone*. “Which is, with the number of hits they’ve had, they are simply staking their claim as their own band, making music they want to make – no one’s lapdogs, whether it’s an audience, a record company, or their peers.

“And fucking kudos for that,” added Stipe, a dedicated fan and a close friend of Yorke’s since their bands toured together in the mid-nineties. “It’s not easy to listen only to yourself and act accordingly.”

Radiohead formed in 1985 as On a Friday in Abingdon-on-Thames, a suburb of Oxford. The five were classmates at Abingdon School – inspired by New Order, Talking Heads, and Yorke’s favorite band, R.E.M – when they made their live debut a year later at the Jericho Tavern in Oxford. Selway, the oldest, was 19; Jonny was not yet 15. The next years were a mix of relentless songwriting, demo tapes, and spells at university with rehearsals convened on weekends and holidays, including one Christmas Eve when, according to Yorke, the band wrote “Creep.” “We were working on songs for some nebulous future reason we had not clearly thought through,” Jonny admitted in 2012.

For a time, in 1991 and early 1992, the band members shared a house in Oxford while word spread out of town. “We would come back from gigs,” Yorke recalled, “and listen to the answering machine. There would be messages from ten A&R men.” By the spring of 1992, On a Friday had a new name derived from “Radio Head,” a song on the Talking Heads’ 1986 album, *True Stories*. They also had a contract with the Beatles’ original label, Parlophone; and a debut EP, *Drill*.

“It wasn’t a bunch of mates” in that Oxford house, O’Brien suggested later, “more like a bunch of co-conspirators. We had this common goal. That’s what it was all about, dreaming it up. All this stuff we have now – there was never any doubt it was going to happen. And it did, because the material world caught up.”

Yorke is widely considered the leader of Radiohead – not just their lyric voice but the member most likely to resist an obvious course, question established strengths, and press

Colin Greenwood, Yorke, Selway, Jonny Greenwood, and O'Brien (from left) ante up in 1993.





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Radiohead remain as independent and determined as they were in those early rehearsals.

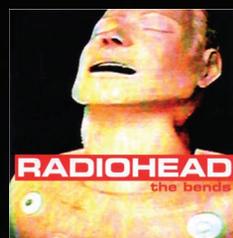
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the others into the unknown. The singer acknowledges his outsize voice in the band's forward march. "I thought chords were boring," he cracked in 2001, looking back at the swerve from *OK Computer* to *Kid A*. "If anyone was playing a straight beat on a snare drum, I was like, 'Fuck this.'" After the group cut an early version of *Kid A*'s "How to Disappear Completely" – a song Yorke wrote about his lowest point of despair on the *OK Computer* tour – he dismissed the take. "That sounds great," Yorke announced, "but it sounds like old Radiohead."

"The first time I met Thom, he was in the drum room at school, drumming," Jonny remembered in the 2001 *Rolling Stone* cover story. "Or rather, I was – and he came in to take over. He told me to play the double bass." When Jonny said

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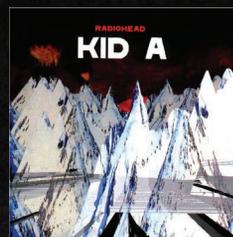
SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



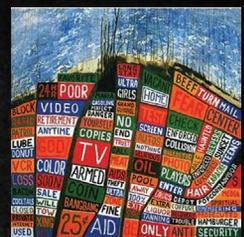
The Bends
1995 (Capitol)



OK Computer
1997 (Capitol)



Kid A
2000 (Capitol)



Hail to the Thief
2003 (Capitol)



In Rainbows
2007 (XL)



A Moon Shaped Pool
2016 (XL)



On Saturday
Night Live, 2015



he didn't know how, Yorke gave him a quick demonstration, then said, "It'll be fine, just attack it." Yorke always had the attitude, Jonny claimed, "that you can just go for it."

"Thom is constantly testing us," O'Brien confirmed in that article. "That's why he's such a great bandleader. He keeps you on your toes." But, the guitarist insisted, "it is a band. I have no doubt that Thom would make amazing music on his own. But we give him the soul." All of the words and music on the group's records are credited collectively to Radiohead.

Even as a solo artist, Yorke is a serial collaborator. He made the first two albums under his own name – *The Eraser* in 2006 and *Tomorrow's Modern Boxes* in 2014 – with Radiohead's longtime producer Nigel Godrich. The latter has also played keyboards in Yorke's occasional band Atoms for Peace, which features Flea, the bassist in Red Hot Chili





Peppers. Selway has made solo albums as well, and O'Brien has been working on one with the British postpunk producer Flood (Nine Inch Nails, Smashing Pumpkins).

Jonny Greenwood is arguably the most visible member of Radiohead, between the band's tours and records. In 1991, three weeks after entering university to study music and psychology, the guitarist dropped out when Radiohead got their record deal. But he was soon arranging the strings in "My Iron Lung," on *The Bends*, then "How to Disappear Completely," on *Kid A*. In 2004, Jonny was named composer-in-residence to the BBC Concert Orchestra, which performed his "Popcorn Superhet Receiver," a piece for strings and electronics, while his soundtrack collaborations with director Paul Thomas Anderson have included the films *There Will Be Blood* (2007) and *Phantom Thread*

(2017), the latter earning Greenwood an Academy Award nomination for Best Original Score.

Halfway through their fourth decade, Radiohead remain as independent and determined as they were in those early rehearsals – and as resistant to the routines and expectations of stardom. "We're very successful at keeping a certain level of sanity," Colin Greenwood said in 2001, then told a story about the band's appearance on *Saturday Night Live* the year before. When the members left the NBC studios after the show, they saw three limousines and a Jeep Cherokee parked in the garage under Rockefeller Center. The whole band got into the Cherokee. "Somebody from the record company said, 'Oh, these limos are for you. Have your pick,'" Colin recalled.

"Fucking typical Radiohead," Yorke said. "We're all still getting into the same car."