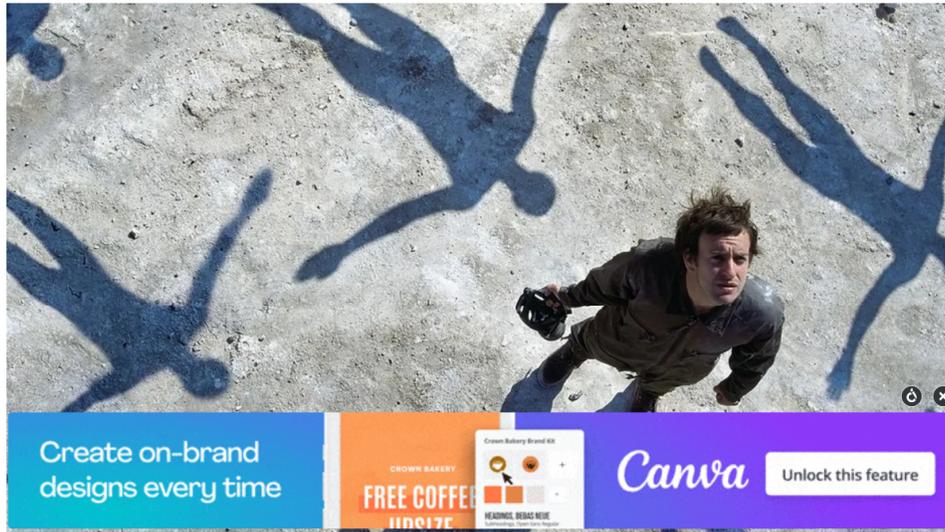


# Muse's Absolution at 20: The making of a prog rock landmark

BY KRIS GRIFFITHS  
7TH SEP 2023 CULTURE

5 MIN READ LISTEN SHARE



**W**ith the release of *Absolution*, Muse finessed a grandiose rock sound that launched them into the stratosphere. We explore this pivotal record as it turns 20

September 21 marks the 20th anniversary of what is widely regarded as Muse's magnum opus: the critical highpoint of their unique rock-opera sound.

They fused hard rock, classical and electronica, from the fuzz-bass groove of "Time is Running Out" to the symphonic blowout of "Butterflies and Hurricanes". It was *Absolution*, their third album, that transformed the Teignmouth trio into a global stadium band.

To mark the anniversary, here are five things you might not know about this landmark work.



## 1. *Absolution* finally broke the band Stateside, with a lead single inspired by Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean"

Not only was *Absolution* Muse's first UK No.1 album, it hit the top spot in France and top tens across Europe, breaking them fully into the mainstream after the more

modest successes of their first two albums, *Showbiz* (1999) and *Origin of Symmetry* (2001).

But more importantly, *Absolution* broke them across the Atlantic, paving the way for their next four albums to all infiltrate the Billboard top 10, establishing them as true global superstars.

What would have made this sweeter for the band was the fact that *Showbiz* didn't register at all on the US chart, while *Origin*'s release had been dropped after a conflict with their Stateside label.

## "We wanted something that sounded like 'Billie Jean'"

Maverick wanted Muse to re-record its lead single "Plug In Baby" and remove the falsetto finale, which the label insisted would encourage radio play—something the band refused to do.

*Absolution*'s eventual success in America was assisted by the single "Time is Running Out", a track where Muse wanted to deviate from the more bombastic sound cultivated on the first two albums.

"We wanted to try something more funky, a little bit more...groovy," explained [bassist](#) Chris Wolstenholme in 2007. "Something that made you want to click your fingers... more influenced by someone like [Michael Jackson](#)."

"We wanted something that sounded like 'Billie Jean!'" Shamone!

## 2. The album's direction was transformed by the Iraq War



Credit: Ben Sutherland from Crystal Palace, London, UK, [CC BY 2.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons

*Absolution* had originally been planned as a concept album around the theme of insanity, [reported NME](#) in 2013, but its premise was then irrevocably altered by the 2003 invasion of Iraq by a multinational force led by the US and UK.

As frontman Bellamy explained at the time to the [Seattle Post-Intelligencer](#): "The biggest [anti-war protests](#) in history were going on outside our studio. It was impossible to ignore, and the direction of our songwriting took a sharp turn in the middle of it all."

Bellamy was diverted onto a darker lyrical path of military and [apocalyptic themes](#),

SPONSORED

which would later snowball on 2009 album *The Resistance*.

Whether intended or not, *Absolution* became almost a concept album on the subject of “things coming to an end”, from opening track “Apocalypse Please” to final tracks “Ruled By Secrecy” and “Thoughts of a Dying Atheist”—all a notable thematic departure from the previous album, which had tracks like “Newborn”, “Bliss” and “Feeling Good”.

### **3. *Absolution* was the highpoint of Matt Bellamy’s channeling of Rachmaninoff**

Like *Origin*, *Absolution* is strongly influenced by classical composers, in particular Samuel Barber and Russian virtuoso Sergei Rachmaninoff, whose signature piano flourishes adorned the main melody of “Space Dementia”.

“I have a deep love for classical music,” Bellamy told *Spin* magazine in 2009. “Chopin or Liszt or Rachmaninoff—those are geniuses. I don’t think ‘genius’ can apply to rock musicians.”

Rachmaninoff’s works were famous for spanning powerful lyricism and piano-sweeping arpeggios, and Bellamy co-opted both on the sole *Absolution* track that strikes a note of optimism and positivity.

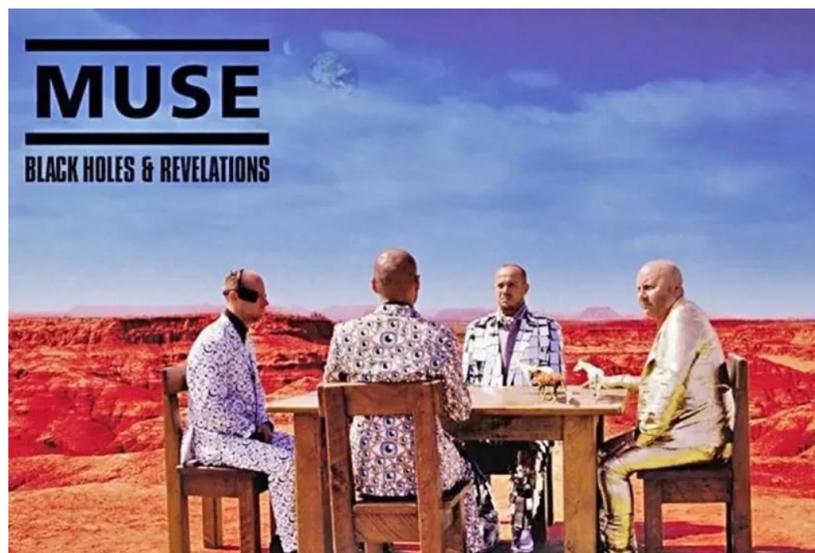
*“Absolution is strongly influenced by classical composers, in particular Samuel Barber and Russian virtuoso Sergei Rachmaninoff”*

“Butterflies and Hurricanes,” explained Bellamy in 2013, is about “accepting that things are all over but it’s going: ‘f\*\*\*ing go for it!...as opposed to just resigning.”

The song is bisected by an extended solo piano movement full of dramatic chord changes and ornate arpeggios that could have been written by the Russian composer himself.

His influence can also be heard on the gentler melody of “Blackout”, which immediately precedes “Butterflies”.

### **4. The meaning of Storm Thorgerson’s surrealist cover art remains a mystery**





After creating the *Absolution* album cover, Storm Thorgerson (of Pink Floyd fame) went on to design 2006's *Black Holes and Revelations*

There's a good reason why *Absolution*'s cover looks like a Pink Floyd one: it's by legendary sleeve designer Storm Thorgerson, who created some of Floyd's most iconic covers, including *Dark Side of the Moon*.

With Muse hitting a conceptual, proggy height with *Absolution*, Thorgerson was the perfect choice for the gig.

The resulting apocalyptic cover art concept of ambiguously falling-or-floating figures recalls René Magritte's *Golconda*. But, as ever with Thorgerson's work, the un-photoshopped image is exactly what the photographer saw, and so its beauty lies also in the wonder of how it was executed.

In his book, *Taken by Storm*, Thorgerson wrote: "In pursuit again of the avowed philosophy of 'doing it for real', we made cut-out shapes from hardboard and fixed them on top of tall poles, took them to a chalkpit near London and photographed them in strong sunlight, thus to cast definite shadows."

It remains a mystery though as to who the flying beings are, or if they are descending, from another planet perhaps, or ascending, like souls during the Rapture. It's enigmatically left open to interpretation.

Thorgerson would go on to cover-design *Absolution*'s follow-up—2006's *Black Holes and Revelations*—cementing himself into Muse's legacy before passing away seven years later.

SPONSORED

## 5. From triumph to tragedy: the high of headlining Glastonbury to a fatal low

Muse rode the wave of *Absolution*'s success all the way to the Pyramid Stage in 2004—the first of three Glastonbury headlining slots, with 2016 seeing them become the first act to headline every night of the festival.

However, that first show-stealing appearance—"the best gig of our lives" declared Bellamy from the stage—was then blighted by a terrible reversal of fortune, as drummer Dom's father Bill, who'd come to see the show, collapsed after the band had exited the stage, and died from a fatal heart attack.

*"His dad got to see him at probably what was the finest moment so far of the*

# band's life"

"It was the biggest feeling of achievement we've ever had after coming offstage," explained Matt to MTV later that year. "It was almost not believable that an hour later [Dom's] dad died.

"I think he was happy that at least his dad got to see him at probably what was the "It was the biggest feeling of achievement we've ever had after coming offstage," explained Matt to MTV later that year. "It was almost not believable that an hour later [Dom's] dad died.

"I think he was happy that at least his dad got to see him at probably what was the finest moment so far of the band's life."

With support from bandmates and family, Dom decided to continue and resume what was their biggest European festival tour to date, including headlining Pinkpop Festival in the Netherlands and Rock am Ring in Germany.

Muse's next single, *Butterflies and Hurricanes*, would fittingly be dedicated to his father.

Keep up with the top stories from *Reader's Digest* by [subscribing](#) to our weekly newsletter

## Up Next



**David Mobley - A Famous entrepreneur and passionate...**

BY READERS DIGEST



**10 Live Aid acts we'll never forget**

BY READERS DIGEST



**The Beyoncé dictionary: From 'Becky' to 'Boy Bye'**

BY READERS DIGEST



**The Three Degrees: Records that changed my life**

BY READER'S DIGEST EDITORS

Don't miss anything: Get the latest stories by email | Magazine subscription from £3

## RD

Launched in 1922, Reader's Digest has built 100 years of trust with a loyal audience and has become the largest circulating magazine

### TOPICS

Health  
Food & Drink  
Lifestyle  
Travel

### COMPANY

About Us  
Contact Us  
Reader's Digest FAQs  
Press Releases

### COMMERCIAL

Reader's Digest Subscription Offer  
Reader's Digest Magazine  
Reader's Digest - Advertise With Us  
Affiliate Program