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## **What makes a band record an epically long pop song? MGMT explains**

Midway through MGMT's second album "Congratulations" comes a 12-minute suite called "Siberian Breaks," described on the cover as "A Pop Surf Opera."

This sweetly tuneful, melancholy, mostly acoustic journey through various settings provides the exclamation point on the "Huh?!" with which certain fans of the young Brooklyn band's earlier electro-dance hits "Electric Feel" and "Kids" greeted the new album's psychedelic pop. But those steeped in rock history understand that although pop-oriented bands tend to make their reputations with catchy, compact songs, they often stake their claims to immortality with the Pop Epic.

This is not to be confused with the Prog Epic (Yes' "Close to the Edge" among others), the Jammy Epic (Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Free Bird," almost any live Grateful Dead track), the Funk Epic ( James Brown's "Get Up I Feel Like Being A Sex Machine") or the Ballad Epic ( Bob Dylan's "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" among others).

We're talking about a grand suite with many shifting scenes, moving parts and bursts of melody. Think Queen's career-defining "Bohemian Rhapsody": almost six minutes in which mournful piano balladry gives way to operatic chanting followed by head-banging rock and a heavenly coda. Could you imagine Led Zeppelin without "Stairway to Heaven"?

MGMT is likely to play "Siberian Breaks" when the band plays its first Chicago

headlining show Friday at the Riviera. Singer/guitarist Andrew VanWyngarden said on the phone earlier this week that the song's sprawl happened more organically than consciously.

"It kind of just kept growing," he said. "We didn't really sit down and think: Let's write a huge multi-part song. We started with a progression for the first verse on guitar, I think, and it just led to another little area and kept going. For whatever reason it ended up being a 12-minute song."

Still, VanWyngarden and MGMT partner Ben Goldwasser are conscious of the tradition that they're updating. VanWyngarden cited the Beach Boys' sublime, haunting "Surf's Up" as an influence as well as the powerhouse medley that comprises side two of the Beatles' "Abbey Road," seen by some as rock's crowning achievement.

He noted that although kids were crowd-surfing to it at a recent Salt Lake City concert, the song has become a lightning rod to those who are down on the new album. "I guess we were a little confused by people being so offended by having a 12-minute song on an album," he said, "and we were thinking about albums in the past that had really long songs, like (the Doors') 'Riders on the Storm' or (Iron Butterfly's) 'In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida' or 'Stairway to Heaven.'"

Another band playing in town this weekend, Procol Harum, is considered a pioneer of the Pop Epic (and Prog Epic) with the 17 1/2-minute "In Held 'Twas in I" from its 1968 album "Shine on Brightly." Procol Harum opens Sunday at Ravinia for Prog Epic masters Jethro Tull ("Thick as a Brick").

Procol Harum wasn't the first to release a song of such length, but "In Held 'Twas in I" broke new ground as a suite separated into distinct movements.

"We were at the forefront of that particular idea," singer/songwriter/keyboardist Gary Brooker said this week from a tour stop in Boston. "I mean, it was very uncommercial; it was a very album-oriented idea, really."

The band's motivation, he added, was simple: "We wanted to do a great work, something that didn't just last four minutes or five or six minutes but went through various phases, started with the start of the universe and then ended in heaven and all that happens in between."

Modesty, after all, is not a trait of the Pop Epic.

"A Quick One, While He's Away," The Who (1966), 9:10. Pete Townshend laid the groundwork for "Tommy" and many a Pop Epic with this sprawling six-part "mini- opera."

"You Set the Scene," Love (1967), 6:56. Singer-songwriter Arthur Lee builds the Capper to his band's the landmark acoustic-orchestral "Forever Changes" album builds from finger-picking introspection to a rousing statement of purpose.

"Stairway to Heaven," Led Zeppelin (1971), 7:55. Always near the top of greatest-rock-song-ever lists, this Zep classic also set the standard for tunes that baffle high school kids on the dance floor.

"Band on the Run," Paul McCartney (1973), 5:10. The Pop Epic's spiritual godfather struck gold with this cinematically sweeping single.

"O My Soul," Big Star (1974), 5:40. One of the great album-openers, a blast of soul-scratching guitars and thrilling hairpin turns.

"Bohemian Rhapsody," Queen (1975), 5:55. Really, this is the craziest-ever top-10 hit, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no?

"Paranoid Android," Radiohead (1997), 6:23. Haunting melancholy interspersed with spastic blasts of rock.

"Jesus of Suburbia," Green Day (2004), 9:08. This Punk-Pop Epic shows Green Day was taking notes as it listened to the Who.

Did we miss your favorite Pop Epic? Please send it plus a line of explanation to

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