



ROCK ON BROADWAY

AFTER DECADES OF HITS AND MISSES, THE ROCK MUSICAL'S TIME COMES AT LAST



BY KATIE DODD

There was no shortage of odd pairings at the 2010 Grammy Awards: Taylor Swift and Stevie Nicks. Mary J. Blige and Andrea Bocelli. Green Day with the cast of a Broadway musical.

Then again, that last one isn't so odd anymore. The musical in question, after all, is *American Idiot*—based on the band's own smash 2004 album of the same name. By the time the show makes its debut on April 20, fully one-third of the musicals playing on Broadway will feature pop or rock scores.

"There are always stylistic trends—Broadway is no different," says Elizabeth Wollman, author of *The Theater Will Rock: A History of the Rock Musical, from Hair to Hedwig*. "The impulse is as soon as there's something out there that works, to use it. But there has to be a good justification for rock."

Practically since the birth of rock 'n' roll, Broadway composers have looked for ways to incorporate the crowd-pleasing style into their shows. Irving Berlin added a Twist dance number to his final show, *Mr. President*, in 1962. And 1960's *Bye Bye Birdie* featured several rock numbers in keeping with its Elvis-inspired tale of a teen pop icon heading off to war.

But the first show to sport a full original score of rock music was 1967's *Hair*, which captured the spirit of the burgeoning hippie

The current rock-friendly climate on Broadway inspired a revival last spring, which has steadily grossed an average of \$1 million a week.

"It was in the stars to a certain extent," says Rado, taking a break from training a new cast that includes former *American Idol* contestants Ace Young and Diana DeGarmo. "I had been waiting for this moment, working on the script. This is just a wonderful moment of forces coming together."

The success of *Hair* sparked something of a rock musical craze. Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar* opened

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Green Day with the *American Idiot* cast

Recording Academy/WireImage/Lester Cohen

movement and its frustration about the Vietnam War and accompanying draft. "We knew that genre of music had never been brought to the stage in this way," says James Rado, who wrote the book and lyrics of *Hair* with Gerome Ragni. "But *Hair* was about the present-day culture, and rock music was one of the most exciting elements of that culture." In his review at the time, famed theater critic Clive Barnes called *Hair* "the first Broadway musical in some time to have the authentic voice of today rather than the day before yesterday."

Composed by Canadian Galt MacDermot, *Hair* was hugely popular. The show moved quickly from Off-Broadway to the big time and was eventually made into a film by director Milos Forman in 1979.



in 1971, inspired a feature film and was revived before the end of the decade; it spawned Top 40 hits in "I Don't Know How to Love Him" and the title song. *The Wiz* broke ground with an all-black cast in its rock 'n' roll retelling of *The Wizard of Oz*, and Michael Jackson and Diana Ross teamed up for the film adaptation.

The 1980s and '90s brought a host of traditionalism, marked by more operatic original shows like *Phantom of the Opera* and *Les Miserables*, and a wave of old-school revivals like *Chicago* and *Cabaret*. Pop kingpin Elton John made his way to Broadway in the late '90s, but brought little of his glam-rock

background with him—his very successful shows, including *The Lion King* and *Billy Elliot*, are studiously traditional.

By the mid-1990s a few rock scores began to break through. The Who's 1968 rock opera *Tommy*, having been adapted as a film during the rock-musicals trend of the mid-'70s, at last made its proper Broadway debut in 1993 to great acclaim. The rock-flavored *Rent* opened in 1996 and went on to play for 12 years, one of the longest-running shows in history.



Hair



Just as the creators of *Hair* did in the 1960s, Stephen Trask sought to capture a fringe culture he was fully immersed in with his 1998 cult off-Broadway hit, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. Trask and star John Cameron Mitchell drew on the inspiration of a punk-rock drag club they frequented in NYC called Squeezebox. The show began

as a character Mitchell developed during the club's open-mic nights, evolved to include original glam-rock-style tunes penned by Trask, and finally became a film after its successful stage run.

But the true resurgence of rock music on Broadway in the 2000s was to come in a different form: "jukebox musicals," so named because they borrow existing pop and rock hits that weren't written for the stage and loosely drape a story around them. Jukebox musicals aren't always popular with critics but they offer something singularly appealing: sing-along potential. "I think that trend capitalized on familiarity," Wollman says. "People who go

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to see jukebox musicals know the music. It's all done very tongue-in-cheek. The audience is encouraged to commune in a nostalgic, rock-concert way."

And Broadway hit on a winning formula. Among Broadway's top-grossing shows in the past decade are *Mamma Mia*, featuring the music of ABBA; *Movin' Out*, a collection of Billy Joel tunes; and *Jersey Boys*, which tells the story of Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons through their music. They're joined by the current hit *Rock of Ages*, a love letter to hair bands featuring hits by Bon Jovi, Journey and Poison, which has grossed a respectable \$26 million and is headed to Australia. Overseas, *We Will Rock You*, a Queen jukebox musical, survived critical pans to become a monster hit, and productions have played from Canada to South Africa to New Zealand.

In their wholehearted embracing of retro appeal, jukebox musicals sidestep the cognitive dissonance that can make creating a rock musical so challenging. Broadway shows—which hinge on a rather quaint notion of characters breaking spontaneously into song and dance—don't always integrate seamlessly with rock, which thrives on aggressive innovation.

"It's really difficult for a lot of shows to remain as professional and polished as musical theatre in this day and age needs to be, and still try to maintain that air of authenticity that the rock world has—that dirty, raw, unrehearsed quality," Wollman says. "Both rock and Broadway are commercialized, but in the rock aesthetic, the impulse is to hide that slickness. But musical theatre audiences are paying lots and lots of money to see something slick and polished."

That's one reason that subject matter often proves key in determining if an original rock musical succeeds. If the setting and characters lend themselves to that rawness, like *Hair*'s Lower East Side hippies, *Rent*'s neo-bohemians or *American Idiot*'s alienated Gen Y-ers, the audience is often more forgiving of the grit.

Perhaps the most successful blending of theater conventions and rock 'n' roll spirit in a recent original musical came with 2006's *Spring Awakening*. Composed by pop singer and songwriter Duncan Sheik ("Barely Breathing"), the show swept the Tony Awards and earned a fiercely loyal following. Based on a 19th-century German play that darkly explores teenage sexuality, *Spring Awakening* features songs with uncharacteristically profane titles like "The Bitch of Living." The combination of edgy subject matter and wholly modern musical style was explosive. "When was the last time you felt a frisson of surprise and excitement at something that happened in a new musical?" gushed the *New York Times*.



Rent



Despite its innovations, *Spring Awakening* nonetheless unconsciously incorporated some of that all-important familiarity that gives jukebox musicals a boost, as many theatergoers likely had heard of its composers.

"Duncan Sheik was a well-known musician—he has street cred," Wollman says. "*Hedwig* was similar, in that Stephen Trask had been on the scene a really long time. When people know what they're going to see, I think that overrides the suspicion."

Another way rock musical writers have navigated the challenge of combining diverse musical styles is in the orchestration, compromising between the tight four- or five-piece bands that dominate

popular rock and the large orchestras that are part of Broadway's draw. *Rent*, *Spring Awakening*, *Hedwig* and *American Idiot* stuck with smaller ensembles—fewer than 10 pieces—and even brought them out of the pit and onstage.

The need for fewer musicians might even be helping to encourage the influx of rock musicals on the scene, as producers look for ways to cut costs on an expensive form of entertainment during a recession. "The orchestra is a big-ticket item, no question, and it seems that producers would rather put their money elsewhere," says



conductor and longtime pit musician Joshua Rosenblum. "It's very telling that there's always a huge fuss in the press and a huge reaction from theatergoers when a show comes along that has a full-sized orchestra. A big orchestra is part of what makes Broadway Broadway, and if orchestras get much smaller, something really valuable will be lost."

But for now, many rock musicals provide something of a middle ground, garnering mass appeal while still preserving artistic integrity by using rock music to tell stories that are best served by its rawness. "Rock brings that emotional pull, it really makes you feel connected with the characters," Wollman says. "It's such a blindly emotional type of music."

When Green Day's *American Idiot* opens in April, insiders will watch closely to see how the latest rock-Broadway collaboration fares. In many ways, the show is a hybrid of the various forms that rock musicals have taken over the years. It's part jukebox musical, with music not composed solely for the stage. But the subject matter, inspired by the post-Sept. 11 generation's frustration and ennui, has much in common with *Hair* and the other original rock musicals that sought to capture their own moment in time.

Fittingly, *American Idiot* most recalls the Who's *Tommy*, the first true collaboration between bona fide rock musicians and Broadway. Both began as a concept album conceived solely by the artists, and naturally blend theatricality with their trademark rock 'n' roll style. Green Day's initial

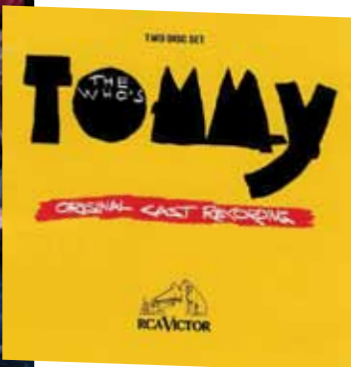
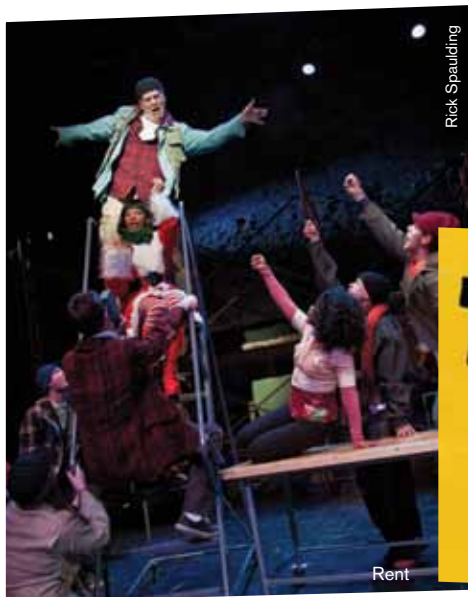
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— Elizabeth Wollman

BROADWAY THE HARD WAY

With rock musicals mounting a successful comeback, it's easy to forget the genre's long history of misfires. Here are some of the most notorious failures.

- Via Galactica*, 1972, one of the first Broadway shows to lose \$1 million
- The Lieutenant*, 1975, a rock opera about the My Lai massacre. Enough said.
- Legs Diamond*, 1988, composed by Peter Allen, closed after two months
- The Capeman*, 1998, composed by Paul Simon, cost \$11 million and flopped
- Lennon*, 2005, the rare jukebox musical failure, closed after six weeks
- High Fidelity*, 2006, a stage adaptation of the movie, ran for only two weeks
- Glory Days*, 2008, an original pop/rock musical, closed after one performance



hope was that, like *Tommy*, *American Idiot* might be turned into a film. But that idea never took off, and instead Michael Mayer, the director of *Spring Awakening*, approached the band about turning it into a stage production.

Any hesitation Green Day frontman Billie Joe Armstrong had vanished when he saw the show come to life. "I looked over at my wife, Adrienne, and she was completely in tears," he said. "For me, the whole thing made me emotional. Look at what my career has come to. [We were] playing dancehalls in Boulder, Colo., 15 years ago,

and now there's this new interpretation into this rock opera musical. It's great."

In the meantime, more and more rockers are flocking to the Great White Way. A musical featuring the songs of Matthew Sweet's 1991 love song cycle, *Girlfriend*, opens in April at Berkeley Repertory Theatre, where *American Idiot* made its debut. And *Spider-Man Turn Off the Dark*, composed by U2's Bono and The Edge, is one of 2010's most anticipated shows.

"I don't think rock musicals will supplant traditional musicals on Broadway," Rosenblum says, "but I think they will continue to be part of the fabric." **M**

VIEW FROM THE PIT



Joshua Rosenblum has been playing keyboards and conducting in Broadway orchestras since 1987. This year, he was inspired to form an ensemble of colleagues, dubbed The Pit Stop Players, to perform outside Broadway in a variety of styles. "You would not believe how regularly audience members trundle down to the pit as I'm finishing conducting the playoff music and say, 'I had

no idea there were people down there!'" he says. "So I hope the group will put the spotlight on the talent in the pit, allowing them to take center stage for a change, and enjoy a more direct experience with the audience." We chatted with Rosenblum about the ups and downs of life as a pit musician.

What kind of musician is best suited to playing in a Broadway orchestra?

You have to be a good colleague. Most Broadway pit musicians are real solo-quality players—in fact, most of them have very active freelance lives outside of the Broadway pit, as I do myself—but they don't have the ego that often goes along with that level of talent. If they do, they don't last long. It's a little like being in the trenches—quite literally! We're there to play together as an ensemble, but we have a responsibility to the singers onstage. So we're serving more masters than usual. A sense of humor is always helpful, because it's live theater and anything can happen. You have to be adaptable, patient, and a solid player, of course. Most players also serve as subs for other players at some point, and subbing requires staying cool under pressure. You don't get a practice run. You can sit next to the regular player as many times as you like to watch what he or she does, and you can come in and practice on the off hours, but you don't

get a rehearsal. You just show up one night, as if it's your gig, and play the show. It takes confidence and focus.

What is a day in the life of a pit musician like?

Broadway generally runs on an eight-show-a-week schedule. Typically, that means evening shows Tuesday through Saturday, with a Wednesday matinee, a Saturday matinee and then either a Sunday matinee or a Monday evening. There's some debate as to which schedule is preferable. Monday off gives you a longer break. If you have Sunday dark, you have fewer hours off, but you have a day off in common with the rest of the world. That's one of the hard things—while most people are playing, you're working. But basically, your days are free during a run. However, if you're the conductor, associate conductor or pianist, you will be called upon to play rehearsals during the week. That's one thing many people don't realize: even a show like *Phantom of the Opera*, which has been running on Broadway for over 20 years, still rehearses all week long. The understudies need to practice, and whenever new cast members join, they have to learn the show.

What's the biggest challenge of the gig?

Boredom. People deal with this in different ways. Our union allows a pit musician to miss 50 percent of the shows in any given week. That means if you choose, you could only play four times a week. Of course, that means you're giving up the pay for those performances to your sub, but the tradeoff is you have the time. People take leaves of absence for other projects, and then there are those who become adept at reading *while* they're playing—actually propping a book or magazine up on the music stand. I think that's when you know it might be time to leave.

What's your most memorable moment in an orchestra?

One night when I was conducting *Miss Saigon*, the helicopter didn't land. At the time, this was *the* big, famous scenic effect on Broadway—and that night it was just ... nothing. The mechanism malfunctioned, and it just never appeared. But the funniest part, which the audience couldn't see, was the percussionist holding up a sign saying "Continental Airlines."