

Introduction

ROCK MUSIC HAS ALWAYS HAD AN UNEASY RELATIONSHIP with the American musical theater. Before the rise of rock 'n' roll in the 1950s, theater composers routinely acknowledged popular idioms—jazz and ragtime, for example—by appropriating them for theatrical purposes shortly after their emergence. Yet, while there have been repeated attempts over the past half-century to unite rock music with musical theater, their sociological, ideological, and aesthetic divergences have made such unions especially tricky.

Although rock 'n' roll was introduced in the United States in the mid-1950s, and became increasingly sophisticated and influential in the following decade, most of those who were then creating American musicals dismissed the new popular style as a noisy, vulgar fad. A few musical theater composers experimented with rock 'n' roll through the 1950s and 1960s, especially once it became clear that the music was not only not going away, but was outselling Tin Pan Alley fare. Nevertheless, it was not until 1967 that *Hair*, the first critically and commercially successful rock musical, opened at Joseph Papp's new Public Theater in the East Village neighborhood of New York City.

When *Hair* transferred from Off Broadway to Broadway in 1968, its phenomenal popularity and impact led some theater critics to proclaim that rock music's influence would revolutionize the musical theater, which by then had begun to decline in popularity among the American people. And indeed, the rock musical has become something of a staple in New York City. Almost every season since *Hair* arrived at the Biltmore, at least a few musicals that borrow heavily from contemporary popular genres have appeared on, Off, or Off-Off-Broadway to wildly varying degrees of commercial and critical success.

Yet despite their constant presence, staged rock musicals remain some-

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what marginal, and their status problematic. In the first place, the business of theater is a risky endeavor, and as is the case with musicals in general, far more staged rock musicals fail than succeed. For every success—like *Hair*, *Rent*, or *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*—there have been countless flops—like *Dude, Via Galactica*, *The House of Leather*, and *The Legend of Johnny Pot*—most of which were openly scorned by theater critics and blithely disregarded by theatergoers. In the second place, while the influence of post-1950s popular music on the American musical theater has been profound, it has also, in many cases, been loudly lamented by theater critics and historians. For example, the now-typical use of electric instruments and amplification systems in the theater are begrudgingly seen as necessary evils that attract wider audiences while simultaneously destroying the purity of the musical as it was during its golden age from the 1930s through the 1950s. In the third, and perhaps most important case, no one seems quite sure of what, exactly, a “rock musical” is.

Definitions and Their Discontents

As Scott Warfield writes in “From *Hair* to *Rent*: Is ‘Rock’ a Four-Letter Word on Broadway?” despite widespread use of the term since its inception in the late 1960s, no formal definition of “rock musical” has ever appeared in print.¹ The term, inadvertently coined by the creative team of *Hair* when they jokingly subtitled their creation *The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical*, has been applied with maddening unpredictability ever since, and thus remains elusive, inconsistent, protean, and contradictory. Many musicals that reveal even trace hints of contemporary popular music influence have been dubbed rock musicals by theater critics and historians, many of whom are unfamiliar with popular music trends to begin with. Conversely, there have been many musicals with scores that borrow a great deal from rock music, but have never been identified as such by their producers or press agents because of a common industry fear that labeling any show a rock musical will significantly limit its potential audience.

The elusiveness of a definition for rock musicals should come as no surprise; the terms *rock*, *’n’ roll*, *rock*, and *pop*, after all, have also proven exasperatingly difficult to define, especially in relationship to one another.

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These terms carry with them not only musical and sociological connotations, but also ideological ones that are at once highly subjective and powerfully entrenched.² Making matters worse is the fact that these terms are often used interchangeably with one another: one critic's rock 'n' roll is another critic's "rock"; one fan's "rock" is another fan's "pop."

Because the term *rock* is so elusive, it follows that the term *rock musical*—as well as offshoots like *rock opera*, *pop musical*, and *pop opera*—is as well. Some of these terms are more easily distinguishable than others. *Rock opera*, for example, is fairly easily differentiated from *rock musical* in that the former tends to refer to dramatic productions that are sung-through, whereas the latter generally refers to dramatic productions that include spoken dialogue. *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which features no spoken dialogue, is thus a rock opera; *Hair*, which features a great deal of spoken dialogue, is a rock musical.

The terms *rock musical* and *pop musical*, however, are harder to define and to distinguish from each other for the same subjective reasons that the terms *rock* and *pop* resist clear-cut definitions. In the half-century since its inception, rock 'n' roll and its offshoots have morphed, mutated, and multiplied, becoming so intermingled along the way that while they may be ideologically separate, they are often stylistically impossible to differentiate. Further, so many of these interrelated forms have found their ways onto the stages of musical theater productions at this point that the term *rock musical* seems impossible to define.

Warfield notes, however, that despite the casual and often contradictory usages of the term *rock musical*, one can identify several staged productions that have been most strongly associated with it; these musicals can be used to pinpoint a few categories that help to clarify the term. Warfield offers four types of shows that are most often labeled rock musicals. The first, "self-identified" rock musicals, includes shows that have been called rock musicals by creators or producers, either in official subtitles (as in *Your Own Thing: A New Rock Musical*) or in ad campaigns. The second category consists of works that were released as concept albums before they were brought to the stage (for example *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *The Who's Tommy*). The third—and by far the largest, most subjective category—is for works that were never called rock musicals by their creators or producers, but which nevertheless revealed enough influence from contemporary popular genres to earn the label in the press, in theater

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histories, or among musical theater aficionados (for example, *Rent*). The final category is for nostalgic musicals that draw primarily from the earliest styles of rock 'n' roll, for example *Grease*, *Little Shop of Horrors*, and the Leiber and Stoller revue *Smokey Joe's Café*. As Warfield acknowledges, these categories must be flexible, since many musicals straddle the boundaries or fit comfortably into more than one, and especially since the term *rock musical* is applied so randomly, and so often.³

Because of the many elusive terms that are regularly applied to musicals in the press, and among industry members and fans—and that thus appear regularly throughout this study—I have taken pains to avoid a number of semantic obstacles. In the following pages, I distinguish *rock 'n' roll*, *popular music*, and *rock* from one another. I use the first term in reference to the rhythm-and-blues-influenced genre of popular music that developed in the mid-1950s and fueled the development of the broader, less easily defined genre *rock* in the mid-1960s. *Popular music*, the broadest of the three terms, is used for more general discussions, or for music that defies more specific descriptors.

The American Musical: History and State of Research

The specific origins of the modern musical—which has roots in comic opera, operetta, music hall, melodrama, minstrelsy, vaudeville, and burlesque—are both confused and contested. What is often cited as the first American musical, *The Black Crook*, opened in New York City in September 1866. This piece, which enjoyed rave reviews and a healthy commercial run, offered “melodrama, romance, comedy, dance, songs, specialty acts, spectacular scenic effects, elaborate costumes, and legs, legs, legs,” but very little in the way of a cohesive narrative.⁴ *The Black Crook* served as a prototype for the American musical as it developed through the very early twentieth century.

For decades after the premiere of *The Black Crook*, musicals were most akin to vaudeville shows: they were vehicles for popular songs and specialty acts, which were subject to change nightly, and which were loosely connected through the thinnest and most ridiculous of plots. During the middle to late 1920s, however, a number of young composers and songwriting teams—including George and Ira Gershwin, Richard Rodgers and

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Lorenz Hart, Vincent Youmans, Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II, Irving Berlin, and Cole Porter—began to create theater pieces that more fully integrated songs and plots.⁵ The American musical matured between the world wars and into the 1950s, when theater composers and lyricists like Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe, Frank Loesser, and Leonard Bernstein moved beyond frivolous boy-meets-girl storylines toward the development of “musical dramas,” in which songs and dance numbers helped define increasingly complex characters and propel newly sophisticated narratives. This “integrated” musical play flourished until the rise of rock ‘n’ roll caused a rift between American popular music and the musical theater.

Despite its rich history, its populist appeal, and its continuous reflection of the changing sociocultural moods of the nation, the American musical has long been ignored as an area for scholarly investigation, possibly because its mainstream appeal makes it seem too musically and dramatically low-brow to interest critics of the so-called high arts, and too conventional to win the affections of culture critics who focus on popular musical forms like jazz and rock.⁶ There is some indication that this may be changing: since the mid-1990s, an increasing number of scholarly studies have begun to appear that suggest a growing interest in the American musical.⁷ Nevertheless, aside from the many articles that appear each season in the popular press, most of the written works on the American musical remain strictly linear histories.⁸

Although rock musicals have been considered in a number of these histories, their treatment is generally superficial, and almost always negative. Most historians tend to cite what they see as the shortcomings of the rock musical. Traditionalists, especially, take particular issue with its reliance on amplification and electric instrumentation, and its resultant loud volumes.⁹

In contrast with the American musical, a great deal of scholarly work has been written about rock music’s sociohistorical development, performance approach, and aesthetics. Unlike the musical theater’s precarious position on the high/low culture continuum, rock music rivals traditional high culture, by “replicating within itself a full hierarchy of tastes from low-brow to high-brow.”¹⁰ The staged rock musical clearly occupies the lowest rung of such a continuum in the eyes of many rock journalists and historians, a few of whom have written about staged rock musicals with the utmost contempt, and a majority of whom simply ignore them entirely.

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Setting the Scene

The backdrop of this study—Broadway, Off Broadway, and Off-Off-Broadway during the second half of the twentieth century—was by no means chosen at random. New York City has been the theater capital of the United States since roughly 1825, when its population surpassed that of the country's former theater capital, Philadelphia. Since the latter part of the nineteenth century, New York's commercial theater district, located on and around Broadway in midtown Manhattan, has been home to the largest collection of professional theaters in the nation.

In the early twentieth century, the city also became home to a number of comparatively small, noncommercial theaters and theater companies that comprised what was then called the little theater movement. In the early 1950s, some of these smaller theaters became known as "Off Broadway" houses.¹¹ As Off Broadway theater became increasingly influential and commercial through the 1950s and early 1960s, the even less commercial, decidedly more experimental Off-Off-Broadway movement was born. Although many people who write about the American theater tend to treat these three realms separately—with, for example, histories of Broadway virtually ignoring Off and Off-Off-Broadway—they are in fact interconnected entities that have exerted a great deal of influence on one another at different times in their histories.

This is particularly the case when it comes to rock musicals. Because rock music was initially—and, some would argue, remains—unwelcome on the Broadway stage, creators of rock musicals have consistently nurtured their shows in the Off and Off-Off-Broadway realms. In a significant number of cases, rock musicals that premiere in smaller theaters are transferred to Broadway houses only after their commercial success justifies such a costly and risky move. In this respect, the rock musical differs markedly from the traditional American musical, which is most firmly rooted in the commercial theater, and which, at least historically, owes relatively little to Off and Off-Off-Broadway.

Hair, the theatrical production whence the term *rock musical* originates, serves as an excellent example of the ways in which the development of the rock musical is connected to all three theatrical realms. *Hair* was written in the mid-1960s—a time when Broadway was suffering economically and artistically—by two former Broadway actors who had become involved in the then-flourishing experimental realm of Off-Off-

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Broadway. The musical was first produced Off Broadway in 1967 as the inaugural production of the Public Theater; its markedly experimental, hugely successful Broadway incarnation was directed in 1968 by the Off-Off-Broadway director Tom O'Horgan.

Hair is not unique in this respect. Other rock musicals—*Rent*, for example—originated Off or Off-Off-Broadway and were later moved to Broadway houses. An equal number—for example, the failed *Dude* (1972) and the interactive *Rocky Horror Show* (2000)—reflected stylistic influences of Off or Off-Off-Broadway, even though these musicals were developed specifically for commercial runs in Broadway houses. Because the staged rock musical was developed in New York City and continues to appear with frequency there, any consideration of its development must necessarily relate back to the city's interconnected theater communities.

On with the Show

This book traces the history of rock's impact on the American musical theater, and identifies the theatrical highs and lows that have resulted from that union, between the mid-1950s and the turn of the century. The book is divided into chapters, in which I discuss particular shows chronologically and in detail. These chapters are interspersed with interludes, which focus on broader issues surrounding rock, the musical theater, and their relationship; because the interludes are more analytical in nature, musicals that are discussed within them are not necessarily presented chronologically. It is my hope that the structure of this book will allow readers interested in a straightforward history to read the chapters and skip the interludes; those interested in both history and interpretation can read chapters and interludes in whatever order they choose.

The first chapter examines early attempts at fusing rock 'n' roll with musical theater fare, a fusion that was more often the result of perceived necessity on the part of theater producers than of composers' interest in or respect for the new popular style. The first interlude examines issues of authenticity as they apply to rock music and, by extension, rock musicals. As rock 'n' roll developed into rock during the 1960s, it began to carry with it an air of imagined authenticity that has led many of its fans to distinguish the music from and hold it in higher esteem than more overtly commercialized and corporate-driven "pop." This perceived authenticity

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is bound up with the belief that despite its strong commercial moorings, rock is a transgressive, rebellious genre of music created and performed by uncompromising, soul-baring artists. Such notions about rock music are considered in this book in light of the fact that musical theater does not rely regularly on immediacy and is so strongly associated with older audiences that it cannot plausibly pose as a rebellious or transgressive art form.

Chapter 2 focuses on *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical*, the first rock musical to have a successful run on a New York stage. The second interlude considers the history of audiences in the Western world, and examines the roles that audiences play in both rock and theater performances. Chapter 3 considers several “fragmented” rock musicals that were staged in the 1970s by producers eager to capitalize on the success of *Hair*. Most of these musicals, which emulated *Hair*’s free-form structure, were dismal failures, both critically and commercially. Their collective inability to win the favor of critics or audiences contributed to a rapid decline in enthusiasm for rock-influenced musicals among theater producers by the middle of the decade. The ways that “fragmented” rock musicals reflected current trends in rock music are exemplified in analyses of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Rainbow*, *Dude*, *Via Galactica*, *Godspell*, *Beatlemania*, and *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band on the Road*. Also in this chapter, the fragmentation—and segregation—of the rock market in the 1960s and early 1970s is discussed in relation to the so-called black musical renaissance in general, and to Melvin van Peebles’s *Ain’t Supposed to Die a Natural Death* in particular. The third interlude considers the rise of the megamusical in the early 1980s, its relationship to the rock musical, and its impact on the economics of theater production into the 1990s. Chapter 4 focuses on the increased reliance on visual spectacle and nostalgia in the 1980s; the musicals *Dreamgirls*, *Little Shop of Horrors*, and *Carrie* are detailed.

Interlude 4 considers the economic changes that have influenced American theater in general, and the Broadway musical in particular, beginning with the demise of the megamusical in the early 1990s. Since this time, rising costs and greater emphasis on the international marketing of entertainment properties have significantly changed the ways that musicals are developed, staged, and marketed. These changes have only accelerated since the mid-1990s, because of the renovation of the Times Square area and the increased presence of entertainment conglomerates

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as theater producers. The increasing “corporatization” of commercial theater in New York has led to the rise of ever more spectacular productions that structurally and stylistically reflect the influence of Andrew Lloyd Webber, and feature musical scores fashioned after middle-of-the-road pop music. Although such ventures prove popular with tourists, they also limit access by independent, original productions to Broadway theaters.

In chapter 5, the fates of several different rock-influenced musicals to open on or Off Broadway during the 1990s are examined, with emphasis on the difficulties that each production had in fusing such wildly divergent performing arts genres as rock and the musical theater. Shows discussed in this chapter include *The Who’s Tommy*, *Rent*, *The Capeman*, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, and *Bright Lights Big City*. The fifth interlude considers the ways that various theater productions borrow from rock concert aesthetics to draw audiences. Finally, chapter 6 examines the state of the musical theater since the turn of the century, with emphasis on revivals of *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *The Rocky Horror Show*, the Off-Off-Broadway “happening” *The Donkey Show*, and the ABBA musical *Mamma Mia!*

I assumed, when I first began researching this topic, that I would be dealing with very few musicals, and that most of my attention would be focused on well-known shows like *Grease*, *Hair*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and *Rent*. I was even concerned, initially, that I would not find enough information to constitute an entire book. I was wrong in my assumptions, of course. Early forays into the topic, in fact, yielded such an overwhelming wealth of information that I developed a new appreciation for the cliché about how rock ’n’ roll is here to stay: once it had been introduced into the American musical theater, rock ’n’ roll simply refused to go away. Rather, its influences on the musical grew exponentially as the twentieth century wore on. So many musicals that have been staged since the mid-1950s reflect at least some influence by the burgeoning popular music style that space and time prohibit exhaustive discussion. In researching, organizing, and writing this project, I tried to include, in as much detail as I could, discussions of as many shows as possible. But, of course, there are many that have been excluded.

In the interest of shedding as much light as possible on a subject that has been virtually ignored until now, I chose not to focus on the compositional attributes of specific songs, but instead to concentrate on broader

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dimensions of the topic. This book is thus a social history, not a book of music analysis. Readers who are primarily interested in close readings of specific rock songs on the one hand, or musical theater numbers on the other, might do well to look at works by, for example, Walter Everett, David Brackett, Richard Middleton, Larry Stempel, Gerald Mast, and Stephen Banfield.¹²

In researching this project, I have interviewed many individuals who are or have been active in New York's professional theater circles, including actors, directors, producers, musicians, administrators, conductors, vocal coaches, press agents, critics, and theater historians. I have also interviewed performers and critics of rock music. Most of these interviews were conducted by telephone or in person. Most were scheduled in advance at the convenience of the interviewee, with the exception of audience members at specific productions, all of whom were approached at random. With the exception of one or two that were conducted via email, all interviews were tape-recorded with the consent of the interviewee and were later transcribed in full.

I also attended numerous musical theater productions, as well as several rock concerts. In almost all cases, field notes were recorded within forty-eight hours of the production in question. Finally, I attended twenty hours of rehearsals and a number of performances of the New York Theatre Workshop's premiere of Paul Scott Goodman's *Bright Lights Big City* in January, February, and March 1999, which greatly aided my understanding of the way a major musical production develops from first read-through to opening night.

My reliance on interviews and participant observation makes my work qualitative, not quantitative, and thus not scientific by any means. Nevertheless, in the five years that I worked on this project, I found that the insights of my informants helped to shed light on the subject in ways that no written source possibly could have. My forays into "the field"—New York City's many commercial and not-for-profit theaters—have also allowed me to gain deeper insights into the tastes and preferences of popular music audiences on the one hand, and musical theatergoers on the other.

This said, I have also gathered a great deal of information from periodicals, scholarly studies, sound recordings, program and liner notes, documentaries, scripts, and critic's reviews. The Billy Rose Theatre Collection at

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the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts houses a veritable treasure of old newspaper clippings, programs, production notes, photographs, and rare recordings, which I spent many hours sifting through. These holdings were particularly helpful in researching musical flops, which, once panned by critics and rejected by theatergoers, tend to slip quietly and sadly out of theaters, and thus fade quickly from public memory.