



ROCK MUSICALS

Elizabeth L. Wollman

During the first half of the twentieth century, the American sheet-music industry, known as Tin Pan Alley, was a dominant force in popular culture. Because the commercial theater industry relied as heavily on sheet music as Tin Pan Alley relied on stage musicals to popularize published songs, Broadway too was far more central to American popular culture than it is today. But the ascent of rock and roll in the 1950s hastened Tin Pan Alley's speedy demise, and put Broadway on the defensive.

Traditionally, Broadway composers such as George Gershwin, Irving Berlin, and Richard Rodgers were quick to borrow the latest popular styles—like ragtime, jazz, and Latin styles—for use in their musicals. But rock and roll was louder and more repetitive, and it wasn't written down like other popular music was. Initially, Broadway chose to ignore rock and roll as a noisy, vulgar fad that would fade away once the teenagers listening to it matured and came to their senses.

Yet rock and roll's popularity and influence only continued to build through the 1950s, while Tin Pan Alley's steadily declined. Broadway's struggles grew too: the audiences for Broadway musicals aged, as the country's

generation gap—and the increasingly powerful youth market—grew, along with charges that the musical was an outdated, increasingly irrelevant art form. Regardless of what its creators thought of rock and roll, Broadway clearly needed to find new ways to appeal to young people.

At least initially, the interest in bringing rock and roll to Broadway was borne of necessity, not due to any respect for the new style. As a result, the earliest rock and roll numbers—in shows like the revue *The Girls Against the Boys* (1959), which featured the middle-aged performers Nancy Walker and Burt Lahr pretending to be teenagers—seemed forced and condescending. But in April 1960, Broadway's first hit musical to feature some rock and roll in its score premiered.

Bye Bye Birdie, with music and lyrics by Charles Strouse and Lee Adams, was a romantic comedy based loosely on Elvis Presley's 1958 induction into the U.S. Army. The musical avoided mean-spirited humor, instead gently mocking rock and roll-crazed teens and their confused, old-fashioned parents alike. The equal-opportunity teasing worked: the show proved popular with audiences of all ages.

Yet *Bye Bye Birdie* spawned no immediate imitations. When it opened, rock and roll was still in its infancy, and was considered too unsophisticated and unvaried to carry an entire musical. Also, theater producers were hesitant to invest in musicals that might alienate Broadway's primary audience: middle-aged adults, most of whom didn't share their children's passion for the new popular style. Rock and roll continued to be featured very rarely, and usually unsuccessfully, on Broadway through the 1960s. It was not until the end of the decade that the first commercially and critically successful musical with a score devoted entirely to contemporary popular music landed on Broadway.

Nurtured in the experimental Off Broadway realm, *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical* was the inaugural production at the Public Theater downtown in 1967 before reopening on Broadway in 1968. *Hair* was written by Gerome Ragni and James Rado, two actors who were drawn to and interested in depicting the hippie lifestyle and ideology. Galt MacDermot, a composer with no theater experience who had only recently moved to New York, wrote the score for the show after he was introduced to Ragni and Rado by a mutual friend.

Featuring twice the songs of a traditional musical and a loose plot about young Claude Bukowski, who can't decide whether to go to Vietnam or burn his draft card and stay with his hippie friends, *Hair* was a critical and commercial smash. While *Hair* proved that rock and roll could, in fact, carry a musical, it is important to note that by the time it reached Broadway, rock and roll had become more varied and sophisticated; an array of styles are woven into *Hair's* score, from the soul-infused "Aquarius," to the Motown-inspired "Black Boys/White Boys," to the free-form jam of "Walking in Space," to the psychedelic "Be-In."

By the late 1960s, rock and theater had begun to influence one another, not only on Broadway and in increasingly theatrical rock concerts, but also on records. After the 1967 release of the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, concept albums—which featured songs that were thematically, stylistically, or narratively unified—became popular. Those concept albums attempting to develop characters and narratives became known as "rock operas." The Who's 1969 double-LP *Tommy* is often cited as the first rock opera, but Broadway showed more initial interest in *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970). A concept album about the last days of Jesus Christ that was written by the young songwriting team of Andrew Lloyd-Webber and Tim Rice, *Superstar* debuted on Broadway in 1971. (*Tommy* wouldn't make it to Broadway until 1993.)

Eager to capitalize on the success of *Hair* and *Superstar*, Broadway hosted a number of rock musicals during the early 1970s, but none was nearly as successful. A string of commercial disappointments convinced theater producers that rock musicals had been a passing fad.

By the close of the decade, Broadway had moved on to something new: "megamusicals." These big, spectacle-laden shows, many of which were imported from the West End in London (and quite a few of which were written by Andrew Lloyd-Webber), dominated Broadway through the 1980s. While some megamusicals—like *Evita* (1979), *Cats* (1982), and *Miss Saigon* (1991)—reflected contemporary pop music in their scores, none of them was as reliant on rock music as was *Hair* or *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

The 1990s saw a return of the Broadway rock musical as composers raised on both rock and roll and musical theater fare began to write scores that reflected a deep understanding of an ever-widening variety of music styles. Jonathan Larson's *Rent* (1996), about East Village squatters, premiered Off Broadway in 1996 before moving to Broadway following his untimely death. The show's success helped reboot an interest in rock musicals. *Rent* was followed by John Cameron Mitchell and Stephen Trask's Off Broadway hit *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, in 1998. Through the early 2000s, enough rock musicals appeared on and off Broadway to prove that this time, they were no passing fad, but a reflection of the influence that rock and roll has had on a new generation of young American composers. Musicals like *Spring Awakening* (2006), *Next to Normal* (2008), *Passing Strange* (2008), *In the Heights* (2008), *Here Lies Love* (2013), and *Natasha, Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812* (2013) have been plentiful on and off Broadway. So have "jukebox musicals" that focus on specific genres or bands, like the ABBA musical *Mamma Mia!* (2001) or the 1980s hair-metal influenced *Rock of Ages* (2009). These shows, and many others, reflect a wide variety of topics, and borrow from contemporary music styles ranging from punk to indie-pop to metal and rap. At this point, not only rock and roll is here to stay. The rock musical is too.

Elizabeth L. Wollman is associate professor of music at Baruch College, CUNY. She is the author of the book The Theatre Will Rock: A History of the Rock Musical from Hair to Hedwig and Hard Times: The Adult Musical in 1970s New York City.