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Musical Theatre

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**Rock Musicals**

Slowly but surely rock musicals are taking over Broadway. Just as musicals slowly began to replace plays years ago as the dominant form of professional theatre, a new change is happening on The Great White Way. The time for campy show tunes and Broadway divas is coming to an end, and is being replaced with electric guitars and hard rocking front men. However, the question that remains to be unanswered is, where and when did this change actually occur?

Many Broadway educated individuals say that the true rock musical didn’t develop until the early 2000’s with the creation of musicals such as *Spring Awakening* and *Rock of Ages.* However, many theatre goers of the younger generation say the origin began back in the mid-90’s with the creation of Jonathan Larson’s *RENT.* There is no definitive answer, but the origin of rock musicals can be traced all the way back to the 1960’s with the introduction of shows like *Hair* and *Bye Bye Birdie*. Although these musicals did not necessarily have the grungy feel that we associate with their modern day counterparts, they were in fact the beginning of the genre. Rock musicals developed alongside the growth of rock music, so the definition of style has changed over the years. When *Hair* came out in the 1960’s, rock music was defined by artists such as *The Beatles* and *Bob Dylan*; artists that in today’s society would be considered more pop/folk than anything else. Songs of this generation were known to reflect the themes of the time period they were written, which allowed for an easier acceptance of changing styles. This is clearly supported by Robert Simonson*,* in his article *Playbill.com picks: The five top rock musicals of all time;* “Songs were less about advancing the plot as expressing themes, moods, politics and flights of fancy. Rock meant anarchy in the late '60s, and *Hair* had its share of that.”

There was no way that a true rock musical could have been successful right away because of the drastic difference between its style and traditional musical theatre. At the same time rock musicals had to blend with the style of classical musical theatre first before they could even come close to having their own identity on the Broadway scene. The same can be said for the way in which rock music attempted to go main stream just a few years prior. One of the pioneers of rock music, the king of rock’n’roll himself; Elvis Presley faced tremendous amounts of controversy from his music and his image. “In the mid 1950’s, Rock and roll was increasingly being attacked and there was growing opposition to its supposedly negative influence on America’s youth. Elvis, being the star that he was, became the target for this outrage.” (History of The Ed Sullivan Show) Although popular among the younger generation, rock’n’roll music in general was almost completely rejected by the older crowd. This both hindered and helped the history of rock musicals because, although the popularity of the music grew, the “older crowd” which includes those who were influential on The Great White Way. It took nearly two decades for rock music to become accepted as a standard part of American culture, paving the rough road to same acceptance and appreciation of rock musicals.

For the next 30 years rock musicals remained the same. They continued to stick with the initial approach of blending rock music with classical musical theatre to create a multi-genre show that became the contemporary style for the time period. Shows such as *Little Shop of Horrors*, *Pippin’*, and *Chess* all expressed hints of rock-edged style in their music but balanced them other numbers that were more traditional. For example*,* the musical number “Feed Me/Git it” from *Little Shop of Horrors* expresses a huge jazz/ rock’n’roll influence both to play upon the dark bluesy feel of the plant, and the inner rock star of Seymour Krelborn. On the other hand another number in the show, “Mushnik and Son”mimics a much more classic musical theatre style closest to *Fiddler on the Roof.* This mix served to be beneficial as it satisfied a more diverse group of theatre goers and kept the push for a more modern style of musical theatre.

During this time period there were a few musicals that said to hell with the mixed style of classical-contemporary theatre and went for an all-out rock approach. These were first triggered by the eruption of the rock opera, one of the most noteworthy being Pete Townsend’s *Tommy*. Based on The Who’s chart topping album, the production was one of the first to bring mainstream rock music to the stage. Although groundbreaking the production focused more the music than the story, preventing it from being called a rock musical. It wasn’t until Andrew Lloyd Webbers, *Jesus Christ Superstar* that the tittle could be validly used. The story was told through 70’s style rock music and followed life of Jesus of Nazareth from the perspective of Judas Iscariot. The shows Broadway debut met some controversy from religious groups and individuals including an editorial writer for the Brethren revival fellowship, who after seeing the show in 1972 wrote, “Superstar is not only inadequate in its presentation of Christ, but it also perverts the men and women who associated with Jesus.” However, this did not hinder any aspect of Webber and Rice’s creation, as the show was a hit. It reached such a level of popularity that one of its musical numbers; “I don’t know how to love him” is continually covered today by many Broadway and main stream vocalists. One would think that the success of this musical would trigger the subsequential success of many more like it within the next few years; this wasn’t the case. Besides a few full on rock musical attempts made by Pete Townsend; including a musical adaption of the rock opera *Tommy,* and *The Iron Man*, it wasn’t until 1996 and the appearance of Jonathan Larson’s *RENT* that Broadway began to change.

*RENT*, far from being the first rock musical, was definitely a turning point in the history of musical theatre. Based on the opera *La Bohème* by Giacomo Puccini, *RENT* kept the same format as its hit predecessor, *Jesus Christ Superstar*; it was a rock opera that contained little to no true spoken dialogue. It was also the first Broadway musical to a step further in rock music than the 70’s style “classic rock” seen before*. RENT* delved into a more intense aspect of rock music; one that is defined by its use of heavy power chord progressions and thick distortion. A huge part of *RENT’s* success was based not only its music but its connection to the social plague of the time HIV/AIDS. The musical addressed the disease in a way no other form of artistry had and made people feel the loss being suffered by millions of people in society, it provoked people listen. This, combined with its fresh style of rock music, and its connection to its creator Jonathan Larson, who tragically passed away the night before the shows Broadway opening made for *RENT* to be an incredible success. Adding to its iconic nature *RENT* was also the first musical to begin what we know today as the Broadway student rush policy. Due to the extremely high demand for tickets and its popularity among the younger generation which did not always have the funds to pay for a Broadway show, a policy was created that satisfied the growing masses. This was a huge step in the history of rock musicals; now composers, producers, and writers could pool their talents and money into these types of musicals knowing they would have a younger audience to back their production.

After *RENT* the world of rock musicals exploded with shows such as *Batboy, Bare, Aida*, and *Tick…Tick…Boom*, being produced within the next two years. Although not all smash hits (except for *Aida*, which was the least rock of all of them), each of these musicals gained a following that continuously attracted new people to the world of musical theatre; both patrons and artists. Something that is often overlooked is the fact that it wasn’t only the demand of the public that influenced the change of musical theatre, but the availability of a new vocal style of incoming actors. The “rock twang or grunge” started to become common place for many musical theatre actors. One of the first notable stars being Adam Pascal; star of *RENT, Aida,* and eventually *Memphis.* The same can be said for his *RENT* and *Aida* co-star Idina Menzel, who eventually created the role of Elphaba in the smash hit *Wicked*. Both of these actors, among many others blazed the trail for many upcoming stars. One of these people being John Gallagher Jr. who exploded onto the stage in 2006 in one of Broadways most successful rock musicals *Spring Awakening*.

Based on the classically written German play *Springs Awakening* by Frank Wedekind, the musical was one of the first to feature folk- rock music as well a classic, dark storyline that danced on the verge of what was appropriate to be on a Broadway stage. Despite its controversial material the show was a hit, running for just over 3 years and premiering stars Lea Michele, Jonathan Groff, and as previously mentioned John Gallagher Jr.

Piggybacking on the success of *Spring Awakening, Rock of Ages* became the first juke box musical to become a Broadway hit featuring the music of rock artists from the 1980’s. The musical was such a hit that it was made into to a feature length film in 2012 featuring all the same music and making only slight adjustments to the story line. Although looked upon by many theatre goers as “not real musicals”, jukebox musicals have provided another gateway for rock music to make its way onto Broadway, by utilizing the success of the songs on the rock charts years prior. This was the case in 2010, with the Broadway rock musical that according to The *New York Times*, did “all but burn up the stage”; *American Idiot*.

Featuring the music of the famous punk rock band Green Day, *American Idiot* was headed for success from its conception. With the latter addition of *Spring Awakening* director*,* Michael Mayer, and leading actor John Gallagher Jr, American Idiot quickly became extremely popular among young audiences. The show “captures with a piercing intensity that moment in life when everything seems possible, and nothing seems worth doing”, said the *New York Times.* Keeping with the style of the aforementioned rock operas, the show was an hour and a half of constant music. Although it didn’t enjoy the success of a 3 year run like *Spring Awakening, American Idiot,* radically changed the barriers of both music and dance on Broadway. The intensity of the music was new to the professional stage and demanded that the style of dance reflect its strength. Due to this fact, *American Idiot* became the first musical to feature dance that was rich with foot stomping and head banging. However, the musical didn’t step completely out of the style of traditional musical theatre dance as it contained a select few numbers, such as “Extraordinary Girl”, that had roots in ballet and jazz. *American Idiot* was the first to bring both classical and rock contemporary styles of dance together creating a brand new unique style of its own.

Within the next few years many musicals would follow in the footsteps of these ground breakers, the most successful being *Next to Normal, Memphis, and Spiderman: Turn off the Dark.* Each of these had its own brand success with *Next to Normal* and *Memphis* both having been nominated, and *Memphis* winning the Tony for Best Musical. However, the only musical since to utilize the same brand of intense punk rock music as *American Idiot* has been the Public Theatre’s hit, *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*. Although not a hit on Broadway, the musical was extremely popular Off-Broadway and once again pushed the barriers of musical theatre. The biggest success for *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* was its ability to prove to audiences and critics that a rock musical could also have a successful book; that the music didn’t need to stand alone, but could blend in with an intricate script.

Since their origin in the 1960’s rock musicals have come a long way in their intricacy and their social acceptance. From a blended existence in musicals such as *Little Shop of Horrors* to a full on rock concert in *American Idiot* rock musicals have changed the appearance of Broadway. They have attracted not only a new group of patrons to Broadway Musicals, but also a new group of voices. They can be accredited with the implementation of Student Rush shows which now allow anyone to see a show for an affordable price. Slowly rock musicals are becoming more and more popular and taking over the Broadway seen. They have revolutionized both styles of music and dance and expanded what we know as theatre today.

