

# “Hair” (Original Broadway Cast Album) (1968)

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Essay by Scott Miller (guest post)\*



*Original Broadway cast of “Hair”*

On February 2, 1962, the moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn all aligned in the constellation Aquarius. All seven of these heavenly bodies had not come together for 2,500 years. Many people believed it was the dawning of a new age, the age of Aquarius, symbolizing a pooling of everyone's creativity, an age of communalism.

The musical “Hair” criticizes and satirizes racism, discrimination, war, violence, pollution, sexual repression, and other societal evils. It is a psychedelic musical (in the true sense of the word), perhaps the only one ever on Broadway. The show is made up of a barrage of images, often very surrealistic, often overwhelming, coming at the audience fast and furious, not always following logically; but when taken together, those images form a powerful, unified, and ultimately comprehensible whole. At its best, the show can cause the kind of euphoria in its audience that one usually associates with psychedelic drugs. “Hair” shocks the audience, still today, by challenging what they believe, by showing how absurd, how offensive, how nonsensical, and in some cases, how dangerous are the behavior and language that society calls “normal.” And the show asks some penetrating questions: Why did we send American soldiers halfway around the world to Vietnam to kill strangers when there was no direct threat to our country? Why can't we talk openly about sex? Why are certain words “dirty” and other words that mean the same thing acceptable? Why are there so many offensive words for black people but hardly any for white people? Why are so many straight people interested in what gay people do in private? If the Constitution guarantees free speech, why can't we burn the flag? Is it right to protest and refuse to follow laws which are unjust?

LeRoi Jones, black social activist and writer, wrote in the 1960s, “God has been replaced, as he has all over the West, with respectability and air conditioning.” And “Hair” reflects that view of American society in the 1960s. It exposes the dark underbelly of organized religion as it satirizes its hypocrisies. In the song “Donna,” it's unclear whether Berger is singing about

looking for a girl named Donna or, in fact, looking for the Virgin Mary, the Madonna. The song starts with a slight variation on “once upon a time” and the last line of the song actually replaces the words “my Donna” with “Madonna.” Could Berger be talking about *the* Madonna, the “sixteen-year-old” Virgin Mary? Could this song be about his search for true spirituality as symbolized by Mary, his inability to find that spirituality in the hypocrisy and institutionalization of organized religion? And could that “disfigured” spirituality be represented by the “tattooed” Donna? After all, the song catalogs all his attempts to find spirituality in India, in South America, and through psychedelic drugs in San Francisco. In the second part of the song, when he calls Donna psychedelic, perhaps he’s telling us he found the Virgin Mary--and God--through psychedelic, mind-expanding drugs, and it was only through the drugs that he could “evolve” into a more spiritual being.

Just a few minutes after “Donna,” the tribe performs the song “Sodomy,” a mock religious hymn cataloguing sex acts that organized religion condemns: fellatio, cunnilingus, pederasty, and masturbation. It satirizes religion’s preoccupation with sex, “unspeakable” acts that nonetheless fill the Bible (making it as R-rated as “Hair” itself). Before the song, Woof poses as a priest and says, “This is the body and blood of Jesus Christ. And I am going to eat you. I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.” In one short speech, he pokes fun at the solemnity of priests and religious rituals, the cannibalistic implications of communion, and the all too blatant exceptions to the Constitutional separation of church and state in America. He sings “Sodomy,” concluding with a reference to the Kama Sutra, an ancient text which celebrates sex rather than denigrating and trying to control it.

The song “Ain’t Got No” also makes two religious references. The song is a list of things the hippies “ain’t got” with responses shouted out by the tribe. When the soloist sings that he has no faith, the tribe shouts out “Catholic,” suggesting that the Catholics have lost their faith, have lost touch with God in the morass of man-made ritual that defines the church (already satirized in “Sodomy”). At the end of the song, when the soloist sings that he has no God, the tribe shouts “Good!” But we learn throughout the show the tribe is in fact very spiritual so perhaps this reference means only that it’s a good thing to lose God *as defined by modern religions*, a false God, a God loaded up with man’s baggage and distanced from real spirituality and faith. But “Hair” doesn’t limit itself to Christian spirituality. The mantra chanted before the song “Don’t Put it Down” (“om mane padme hum”) is a scared Buddhist mantra to Avalokiteswara, the Buddhist Savior and Protector.

In 1967, 20,000 people gathered in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco for the world’s first “Human Be-In.” (The term “Be-In” became very popular and was later parodied as the title of the TV show “Laugh-In.”) Earlier that same year, Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones told one interviewer that things were changing, that the world “was about to enter the age of Aquarius. There is a young revolution in thought and manner about to take place.” By 1968, high school teachers were teaching Bob Dylan’s lyrics as poetry in English classes and psychedelic artists like Peter Max were designing mainstream advertisements.

The reason the creators of “Hair” gave their musical its title was that long hair was the hippies’ flag--their “freak flag,” they called it--their symbol not only of rebellion but also of new

possibilities, a symbol of the rejection of discrimination and restrictive gender roles (a philosophy celebrated in the song “My Conviction”). It symbolized equality between men and women. Nudity was also a big part of the hippie culture, both as a rejection of the sexual repression of their parents and also as a statement about naturalism, spirituality, honesty, openness, freedom. The naked body was beautiful, something to be celebrated and appreciated, not scorned and hidden. They saw their bodies and their sexuality as gifts, not as “dirty” things.

Ritual was central to “Hair” because of its roots in experimental theatre but also because of its spiritual roots. The show’s opening number, “Aquarius,” is a ritual summoning of the tribe, a formal calling together of the members of this group of hippies. In the original Broadway production, when the song began, the hippies were out in the audience mingling with audience members. They froze and then began moving to the stage in slow motion, coming together on stage forming a large circle, a potent symbol of life that would be used throughout the show. Ritual is used in many moments in the show, in the mock Catholic mass of “Sodomy,” in the Be-In, the passing of the joints before the trip, in the marching and chanting that happen throughout the show.

Another area the experimental theatre movement was exploring was the idea of words as sounds, as percussion, divorced from literal meaning, something Gertrude Stein had played with earlier in the century. In songs like “Ain’t Got No Grass,” “Three-Five-Zero-Zero,” and “The Bed,” words come at the audience like a freight train, so fast, so quirky that no audience could ever catch or comprehend it all. But the purpose of these lyrics isn’t to be comprehended; they are to be experienced (re-experienced?) as abstract sounds. Towards the end of “Ain’t Got No Grass,” the lyric deconstructs itself into a list of words and phrases based on the sound “pop.” The words don’t make logical sense; they have become percussion. They are no longer meaningful words; they are now just sounds. “Hair” was the first impressionist Broadway musical, in which lyrics, dialogue, plot, and character were often implied, suggested, abstract. Just as the impressionist painters created only the impression of form and structure, left to be interpreted and synthesized by the eye and mind, “Hair” did the same thing with the art of theatre.

Throughout the show, the writer sprinkles periodic references that make Claude into a Christ figure. Like Christ, Claude is sent to his death by the government. Like Christ, Claude suffers through enormous confusion and conflict over what to do--Claude throughout Act I and specifically in “Where Do I Go,” Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. Just as Claude’s parents disapprove of him and his lifestyle, there is evidence in the Bible that Jesus’ mother and brothers thought he was out of his mind and an embarrassment to the family. And just as the New Testament focuses on Jesus Christ, the second half of “Hair” shifts its focus almost exclusively to Claude and the story of his death and (metaphorical) resurrection.

“Hair’s” songs also address racism, maybe the most American of all issues. In the song “Colored Spade,” Hud lists every offensive, racist label and stereotype ever thrown at him, to show how horrible, how ridiculous, how offensive they are, how much they make us squirm. He confronts the audience with words and phrases and stereotypes they may have actually used (or allowed others to use) and he claims them for his own. When we hear them all together, when we realize how many more labels there are for blacks than for whites, they become ridiculous. They lose their power.

At the beginning of Act II, there are two songs, “Black Boys” and “White Boys,” that make a powerful statement without the audience even noticing. It’s surprising enough (especially in 1968) for women to objectify men the way men have been objectifying women for centuries, but it’s even more surprising to be doing it across race lines. Three white woman sing about how much they love black men, and then three black women sing about how much they love white men. The songs are funny, seemingly harmless entertainments. But there were states in the 1960s where inter-racial marriage was still illegal.

In Act II, the extended trip scene begins with the song “Walking in Space,” most of which describes the sensations of being high, but there are a few references to the war here. Once the song is ended, everything else in the trip is triggered by Claude’s fear of going to war. The first images are of young men, Claude among them, jumping out of a helicopter into the jungles of Vietnam. When Claude lands, he sees two American soldiers chasing a Vietnamese peasant. He turns around and sees George Washington and his troops, retreating from an attack by Indians. The next image is of Ulysses S. Grant assembling his troops, which include Abraham Lincoln, John Wilkes Booth, Calvin Coolidge, Rhett Butler and Scarlett O’Hara, and General Custer, all symbols of war in Claude’s mixed-up, drugged-out mind. Also among Grant’s troops is Aretha Franklin, a wonderful non-sequitur that might represent Claude’s knowledge that the draft is racist--or it might just be the kind of random image a drugged out mind conjures. Grant’s troops dance a minuet for a bit and then are attacked by African witch doctors (probably a reference to Hud, who is referred to as the boogey man in Act I), and the witch doctors kill everyone but Lincoln. Hud becomes LeRoi Jones, the black social activist, writer, and publisher, and he confronts Lincoln (played by a black woman, by the way), threatening to harpoon him/her, making fun of the black separatists of the 60s who refused to allow whites to participate in the Civil Rights movement. Lincoln calms Hud/Jones down and proceeds to deliver a crazy, soulful Gettysburg Address and the confrontational satirical song “Abie Baby,” in which Happy Slaves praise Lincoln.

The trip continues as the killing of war comes to the forefront of Claude’s mind. A succession of comic stereotypes murder each other--first monks, who are killed by Catholic nuns, who are killed by astronauts, who are killed by Chinese, who are killed by guerillas, who are killed by a native American. This sequence is played three times, forward and backward, as the trip spins out of control. The action continues as Claude’s parents appear with a drill sergeant who have a conversation with a suit Claude has left behind, the only thing that remains after Claude is killed in war. The tribe begins playing children’s games which escalate until they all end up murdering each other.

The song “Three-Five-Zero-Zero” begins and the tribe becomes the walking dead, advancing on the audience, accusing them of complicity in the horror of war. By the end of the song, everyone has died again, in agonizing, slow deaths.

Jim Rado has said that “Three-Five-Zero-Zero” was inspired by an Alan Ginsberg’s poem. “Wichita Vortex Sutra,” written in February 1966, contains almost all the poem’s freaky, violent, surrealistic images in the song, often quoted word-for-word. In the poem, General Maxwell Taylor proudly reports to the press that 3,500 of the enemy were killed in one month. He repeats

the number, digit by digit, for effect: “Three-Five-Zero-Zero.” In addition to the many other images from the poem that found their way into the song, Ginsberg also refers to 256 Vietcong killed and 31 captured, which became 256 *captured* in the song lyric. Though the song starts out somber and intense, spilling out Ginsberg’s images of death and dying, it turns midway into a manic dance number, an absurdist celebration of killing that echoes Maxwell’s glee at reporting the enemy casualties, commenting on the Happy Face that the US government tried to put on the ever diminishing returns of the war in Vietnam. While our soldiers (and theirs) kept dying, Washington tried to whip up World War II-style support for the war among Americans. But we had seen the war on our TV screens this time, and we weren’t celebrating.

As the trip scene winds down, two tribe members have watched all this violence from a platform above the fray and they sing “What a Piece of Work is Man,” a monologue from “Hamlet,” an ironic tribute to the majesty and nobility of mankind, sung as the two singers walk through the battlefield of murdered bodies. A short section of “Three-Five-Zero-Zero” returns and the trip ends.

The finale, “The Flesh Fails,” summarizes the themes of the show, particularly the insanity of war and our consumerist culture, obsessed with comfort as people are being murdered in southeast Asia. We pass each other on the street, bundled up in our designer clothes, created and purchased specifically to display our level of wealth and success, too busy to stop and connect to each other, too busy to help the homeless lying on the street, too preoccupied with our superficial lives, our appointments, our scramble to accumulate possessions (a theme to which “Hair’s” descendent “Rent” would return). The song tells us that somewhere inside, buried beneath all this, hidden deep down, there is greatness in the human race, that we have such potential but that we have failed.

We have failed by succumbing to comfort, to the demands of the flesh, instead of aiming for something higher. Claude comes forward, now dead, killed in Vietnam, invisible to the tribe--just as returning Vietnam vets were “invisible” in American culture--and as he reprises his theme song, “Manchester England,” the tribe sings in counterpoint “Eyes Look Your Last,” a musical setting of a speech from “Romeo and Juliet.” The words are Romeo’s, after he finds Juliet’s (apparently) dead body, and just before he takes his own life. The last line of this section, “the rest is silence,” is Hamlet’s last line before dying at the end of “Hamlet.” We are killing ourselves, the tribe is telling us. After another verse of “The Flesh Fails” the show finishes with “Let the Sun Shine In.”

But “Let the Sun Shine In” is not the happy song most people think it is. It’s a call to action. The tribe is begging us to change things, to stop the killing, the hatred, the discrimination, the destruction of our world. They are saying that we are in a time of darkness (as described in detail by “The Flesh Fails,” “Easy to Be Hard,” and other songs), that it is now time to let the sun shine in and change things. It’s significant that the lyric doesn’t say that the sun is already shining and everything is going to be fine. It says we have to take action, we have to *let* the sun shine on the darkness around us, and the implication is unmistakable--if we don’t let the sun shine, it will be the end of us.

*Scott Miller is the founder and artistic director of New Line Theatre in St. Louis, and the author of seven books about the American musical theatre, including “Let the Sun Shine In: The Genius of Hair” (2003); “Strike Up the Band: A New History of Musical Theatre” (2007); “Literally Anything Goes” (2018); “Sex, Drugs, Rock & Roll, and Musicals” (2011); and “Rebels with Applause” (2001).*

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