

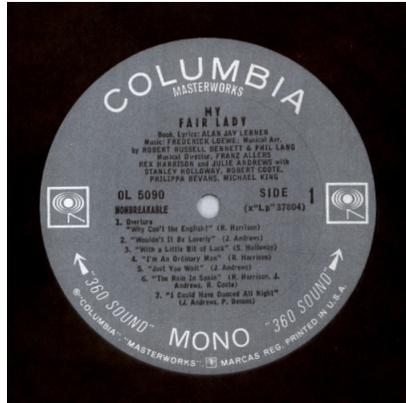
# “My Fair Lady” (Original cast recording) (1956)

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Essay by Arianne Quinn (guest post)\*



Original album



Original label



Julie Andrews

This musical reworking of George Bernard Shaw’s “Pygmalion” (1913) starred Julie Andrews as Cockney flower Eliza Doolittle, Rex Harrison as the recalcitrant Professor Henry Higgins, and British music hall performer Stanley Holloway in the role of Eliza’s Welsh father, Alfred. The musical propelled Andrews and Harrison to American stardom, and quickly became the most successful production on the Broadway stage; a distinction previously held by Rodgers and Hammerstein for their works including “Oklahoma!” (1943) and “South Pacific” (1949). The combination of the work’s unapologetic Britishness, Cinderella story line, and elegant aesthetic propelled it to easy success. Moss Hart staged the production, Cecil Beaton designed costumes, Oliver Smith the scenic design, Hanya Holm the choreography, and Feder provided the lightning. “Chicago Daily Tribune” critic Claudia Cassidy noted: “... ‘My Fair Lady’ has been one of those fantastic shows whose appeal goes far beyond any sensible calculations.” Despite the illustrious cast and production team, the production’s success nevertheless came as a shock to the Theatre Guild, who produced the work. The show cost \$401,000 a week and repaid the investment of its backers within 32 weeks. At the time Robert Coote, who played the role of Colonel Hugh Pickering, departed, the production was turning a profit of \$50,000 per week, with the Bernard Shaw estate making \$5,000.<sup>1</sup>

As surprising as the success of the work, which outpaced all previous records with \$50,000 in profits per week, and a rate of return for the investors of 32 weeks, the majority of the work’s popularity was due to its cast album. For much of middle America, the original cast album was the primary point of consumption for the Broadway musical, opening a new window into the world of Broadway for the American middleclass.

If a musical achieved any measure of success, lasting more than a week, it was recorded by the complete cast and orchestra in a New York recording studio. Often the musical selections were chosen based on what was popular with critics and audiences, and what could also fit onto both

<sup>1</sup>Robert Coote. “I’m Saying Farewell to *My Fair Lady*.” *Maclean's* 70, no. 13 (Jun 22, 1957), pg. 20.

sides of the standard LP, which at the time could hold approximately 20 songs.<sup>2</sup> The cast album was a major selling commodity for Columbia records, which produced the recording for “South Pacific,” which sold 980,000 copies in 1947. “My Fair Lady” quickly eclipsed this record, becoming the highest grossing cast album ever recorded, and spending 15 weeks in the #1 “Billboard” spot; a record which would not be surpassed for another nine years.<sup>3</sup>

“My Fair Lady” ran for 2,281 performances in London, eclipsing the Broadway run. Both the publicity boon for the London production and the introduction of new stereo technology fueled the creation of a decidedly different cast album. Scholar Dominic McHugh notes that the London production was so successful that Columbia Records decided to record the British version with all four of the original principals.<sup>4</sup> The cast album itself was intended to recreate the experience of the show, as McHugh argues: “...the album was prepared based on providing the best aural experience for the listener, rather than simply recording what was heard in the theatre.”<sup>5</sup> Critic Richard Coe noted the cast album’s significance for audience members who not only lived outside Broadway and the West End but who were unlikely to score a ticket because of the high demand. He argued: “An unprecedented first printing of 100,000 has been made of this single-record album, a half-million sales are in sight at 4.98 per. I expect it’ll be the 1960s before the Lerner-Lowe [*sic*] musical of Shaw’s ‘Pygmalion’ arrives in Washington, so the record’s worth buying if only to keep in the social swim.”<sup>6</sup> Critics recalled the drive from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s “Oklahoma!” (1943) and “South Pacific” (1949), both of which transformed the cast album from an event of happenstance to a blockbuster commercial tactic. This tactic was a success for the production team of “My Fair Lady,” as audiences around the world snapped up albums at a record pace. The “Ft. Lauderdale Daily News” and “Evening Sentinel” called it, “A delicious cross-section of the heady world of the Broadway musical comedy, with accent on the current hit ‘My Fair Lady,’ is included in RCA Victor’s new orthonophonic high fidelity recording, ‘Melachrino on Broadway’...”<sup>7</sup> This tactic was a success for the production team of “My Fair Lady,” as audiences around the world snapped up albums at a record pace.

The process of recording the original US cast album was in itself complex, and involved more than 14 hours with the entire cast, chorus, orchestra, and Lerner and Loewe in a single recording studio as Frank Allers conducted and made changes on the spot. “New York Times” critic Murray Sohumach recalled:

In a hectic environment suited to Liza Doolittle from piercing “*ah-ah-ah-ow-ow-ow-oo*” deep “Garn,” George Bernard Shaw’s “Pygmalion” went into its weirdest and noisiest

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<sup>2</sup> Steve Metcalf, LA Times-Washington Post Service. "Broadway Cast Albums Get New Sound: [CITY Edition]." *Florida Times Union*, Jul 17, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Terry Teachout. "The Rise and Fall of the Original-Cast Album." *Commentary* 132, no. 2 (09, 2011): 71-73.

<sup>4</sup> Dominic McHugh, *Loverly: The Life and Times of My Fair Lady*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 177.

<sup>5</sup> Dominic McHugh, *Loverly: The Life and Times of My Fair Lady*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 173.

<sup>6</sup> Richard L. Coe. "Until a Ticket Comes Along." *The Washington Post and Times Herald (1954-1959)*, Apr 10, 1956

<sup>7</sup> Anonymous, “My Fair Lady.” February 17, 1957 (Page 49 of 116)." *Ft. Lauderdale Daily News and Evening Sentinel (1925-1958)*, Feb 17, 1957.

transformation last Sunday at a church converted to record business... While cigarette ashes made the floor powdery and tea and coffee seemed to come off an assembly line, Julie Andrews, Rex Harrison, Stanley Holloway and company sang, whispered, shouted and capered on the microphone trail to produce 15 songs that will almost certainly lead to Shaw's introduction to America's jukeboxes.<sup>8</sup>

A rare window into the process of the cast album, he also highlighted the studio, where people walked in stocking feet (to not make noise), the sudden changes in orchestrations, and the private mics given to instrumental soloists. The process of recording--and the publicity surrounding it--speak to the significance of the cast album for audiences and demonstrates the commercial reach of Broadway in the 1950s. Although the typical run of a successful production now spans several decades (for example, in the case of a work like "The Phantom of the Opera"), "My Fair Lady's" unprecedented run played a pivotal role in the production, dissemination, and consumption of the Broadway musical.

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\*The views expressed in the essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.

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<sup>8</sup> Murray Sohumach. "Musical at Work: *My Fair Lady*." Columbia Records. *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Apr 01, 1956.

