

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

Added to the National Registry: 2007

Essay by Cary O'Dell



*Original album*



*Original label*



*Julie Andrews*

It has been called a “miraculous musical” and “one of the best musicals of the century.” Of course any work that combines the collective talents of Julie Andrews, Rex Harrison, Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe is probably destined for success. But “My Fair Lady’s” long-lasting love, enchantment and charm--captured first on stage and then on vinyl--was truly the stuff of theatrical and recording magic.

As no doubt most already know, “My Fair Lady” was based on the play “Pygmalion” by George Bernard Shaw. It told the story of a proper English gentleman who attempts to transform a scruffy, Cockney girl into a proper “lady.” The original play premiered in Vienna in 1913 and in America a year later. A film version, starring Leslie Howard and Wendy Hiller, was produced in 1938.

Broadway empassarios Lerner and Loewe (who had previously collaborated on “Brigadoon” in 1947) began toying with the idea of turning “Pygmalion” into a musical around 1950. Taking their title from the nursery rhyme “London Bridge is Falling Down,” the score, according to one opinion, “scatters patter songs, ballads and cheerful choruses around in lavish fashion.” It included such soon-to-be standards as “I Could Have Danced All Night,” “On the Street Where You Live,” “I’ve Grown Accustomed to Her Face,” “The Rain in Spain,” and “Just You Wait.”

Cast in the lead of the musical, as Dr. Henry Higgins, was legendary leading man Rex Harrison. Opposite him, as Eliza Doolittle, was a young (age 21) Julie Andrews, who just a season before had been a sensation in Broadway’s “The Boyfriend.” Rounding out the cast was Stanley Holloway and Cathleen Nesbitt.

The show opened on Broadway on March 15, 1956 and was an immediate smash. Reviews were love letters to all involved; “Wonderfully entertaining and extraordinarily welcomed ... meritorious in every department,” said “The New Yorker.” The show would run for a then unprecedented 2,717 performances before closing on September 29, 1962.

Ten days after their triumphant opening, the cast convened on a Sunday, at a converted church on East 30<sup>th</sup> Street in New York, for a 14-hour recording session to create their original cast show album. Done for Columbia, the original recording came in a sleeve decorated with the great Al Hirschfeld’s caricature for the show—it portrayed Eliza as a slumped marionette, her strings operated by Dr. Higgins, who was also depicted as a puppet, his own strings being activated from the heavens by George Bernard Shaw. The original album cost \$5 retail. Once released on the Columbia label, the album would become the best-selling LP for both 1957 and 1958, outdistancing works by the likes of Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra, Miles Davis and Patti Page.

In his biography of Julie Andrews, author Richard Stirling praises the results of this marathon recording session: “Never was the fluidity of Julie’s voice, the brightness of her diction, heard in higher definition: raging like wildfire through ‘Show Me,’ floating over ‘I Could Have Danced All Night,’ exulting in ‘The Rain in Spain,’ in which she, Rex Harrison and Robert Cooke performed extempore footwork as they sang.”

Even Harrison’s noted “talk-singing” couldn’t dampen the effervescence of the score’s delightful tunes (he had up until this time hardly sung professionally at all).

However, at the time of “My Fair Lady’s” 1956 cast recording, Columbia was only producing monaural recordings. Hence, when stereo became the sonic norm, Columbia reconvened the original cast in 1959, in London where the production had relocated in 1958, for a second recording, this one to be done in stereo. Today, Broadway fans and vinyl-o-philers love to compare and debate the two recordings arguing either for the fresh rawness of the original ‘56 version or for the enhanced ‘59 recording which features a slightly more musical Rex Harrison.

Though the consensus of most consumers is that the ‘56 recording is the preferred (and is the one that was added to the National Registry in 2007), in her autobiography, “Home,” Julie Andrews seems to prefer “take two,” “I think Rex, Stanley and I give better performances on the second album. I had settled into my role, I knew what I was doing.”

In 1964, “My Fair Lady” came to the big screen in a beautifully made, highly successful film treatment directed by George Cukor. Though Rex Harrison would repeat his stage success, the role of Eliza Doolittle went to Audrey Hepburn. (Hepburn’s singing would be dubbed by popular film “ghost” singer Marni Nixon.) Hepburn got the role because she was considered a bigger name than Andrews was at the time. However, Andrews’s starring role in Disney’s “Mary Poppins,” ironically also in 1964, would fully change that. The film version of “My Fair Lady” would go on to win eight Academy Awards including Best Picture and Best Actor honors for Rex Harrison. (Andrews won the Oscar for Best Actress that year too... for her role in “Poppins.”)

Despite the high-profile and artistic quality of “My Fair Lady’s” film soundtrack, not to mention the various “original cast albums” of subsequent Broadway revivals (in 1976, 1981, and 1993, so far), the initial 1956 recording of “My Fair Lady’s” remains the standard against which all later versions and remakes are measured. Mono or not, it perfectly captures this perfect theatrical experience in all its English refinement and Cockney charm, in all its musical magic and comedic inventiveness. As Eliza Doolittle herself might say, “lovely.”

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