

“Oklahoma!” (Original cast recording) (1943)

Added to the National Registry: 2003

Essay by Cary O'Dell



Rodgers and Hammerstein



Original album



The musical's original cast

The musical “Oklahoma!” opened on Broadway for the first time on March 31, 1943. It was the first major collaboration between tunesmiths Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II and was a smash hit, running for over 2,000 performances. “Oklahoma!” would later go on to tour the US, be exported all over the world, be revived on Broadway numerous times, and be made into a hit 1955 movie. The musical’s original 1943 cast recording was named to the National Registry in 2003.

At the time of the album’s production and release, there was not yet anything known as an “original cast album.” Though certain songs from famous musicals had often been recorded and released by the leading vocalists of the day, the act of recording a musical’s entire original cast with a full orchestra and full orchestration, and with the show’s original conductor, had never been done before, at least not in America. Decca records founder Jack Kapp would change that when he gathered up all of “Oklahoma’s” principals, chorus and orchestra and put them into a studio to record this multi-record set.

Transferring a Broadway show to one-dimensional vinyl, at first, seemed like a fool-hearty enterprise, especially in terms of a show like “Oklahoma!” First, Agnes De Mille’s landmark choreography obviously could not be replicated. Secondly, “Oklahoma!” was one of the first musicals to have its songs be integral plot devices, not just pleasant asides. Without recording every line of dialogue in the show, even if the songs made sense, some of their power and importance would no doubt be lost.

Luckily, the soon-to-be-classic tunes from “Oklahoma!” were more than able to stand on their own. After all, what other production, from any Broadway season, can boast so many modern standards: “Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin’,” “Surrey with the Fringe On Top,” “People Will Say We’re in Love,” “Kansas City” and, of course, the title tune, “Oklahoma!” (“where the wind comes sweepin’ down the plain!”). And few shows consisted of such a gifted cast containing so many future stage legends. They included: Alfred Drake (whose amazing baritone literally set the stage with the opening number “Oh, What a Beautiful Morning”), as well as Joan Roberts, Howard Da Silva, and Celeste Holm.

The motives behind Kapp’s initiative to record the musical’s music are open to speculation. Did he have hopes of founding a new genre/category of music, one with potentially ample monetary value? Or was he simply a fan of the show, hopeful of spreading its score far beyond the avenue of Broadway? It is notable that in a donation of some of Kapp’s papers, currently housed at the

Library of Congress, the only framed album in the collection is of the original “Oklahoma!” box set. (Inscribed on it, on a small brass plate, “To Jack, This 500,001st Album, February 2, 1946.”)

The appeal of “Oklahoma!,” on stage or on record, is as vast as the prairie it celebrates in song. The story is charmingly simple—basically a love story, only a little more complicated than boy meets girl. And the music is thrilling, appealing, accessible, even hummable. Though tunes from Broadway shows frequently worked their way into the popular arena by being excised from their larger works and covered by non-stage performers, the mass production and distribution of “Oklahoma!” meant that this collective of songs, by two great writers, could be exposed to a wider audience than ever before. Perhaps this exposure was never more felt than in the actual state of Oklahoma, who, in 1953, adopted the Rodgers and Hammerstein title tune as their official state song.

Though the original cast recording “Oklahoma!” record set—complete with color cover and program notes, innovative at the time--consisted of a weighty six 78rpm records (necessary before the advent of long-playing 33 1/3 records), it was not possible (nor probably cost effective) to include all the show’s songs, hence, this set was noted as “Selections from The Theatre Guild Musical Play.” Nevertheless, this first installment (released December 2, 1943) proved so popular with music buyers—it even ranked on “Billboard’s” best sellers *singles* chart—that the musicians and performers were reconvened later by Decca for a second installment that was released on January 3, 1945. It was during this latter session that the numbers “It’s a Scandal! It’s an Outrage!” was set down and leading man Alfred Drake recorded “Lonely Room” though, on stage, it was always performed by Howard Da Silva as Jud Fry. (DaSilva’s forceful delivery of it as opposed to Drake’s softer interpretation being a popular theory as to why the switch was made.)

One of America’s most often re-staged and revived shows, every New York production of “Oklahoma!” has brought with it its own cast album. Obviously as well, the well-loved 1955 film soundtrack, with Shirley Jones and Gordon MacRae, has never been out of print.

And yet, as always, there is something to be said for the original. This inaugural recording of the classic musical has more than stood the test of time. Indeed, it has never been out of print either and has continually been reissued on changing formats--from 78 to album to CD and beyond. The original’s sonic quality can easily stand up against later casts as well, a considerable feat considering the now antiquated technology it was recorded under. After all, there was no Auto-Tune or Pro-Tools in 1943.

As noted above, largely due to the success of the “Oklahoma!” record set, original Broadway cast albums have since become the norm. Today even stage “flops” seldom close without their scores being set down by their original performers thus allowing future generations to experience Broadway’s legacy long after the final curtains have come down.

Cary O’Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books “June Cleaver Was a Feminist!” (2014) and “Women Pioneers in Television” (1997). He also served as assistant editor of “The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2009) and “The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2010).