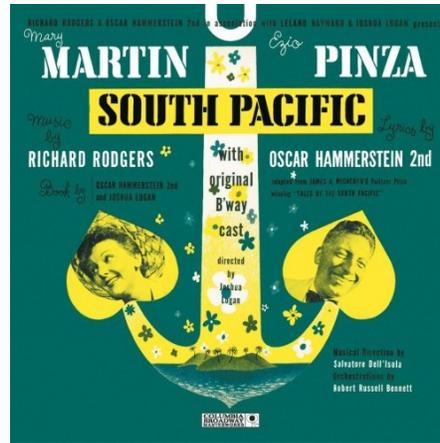


“South Pacific” (Original Cast Recording) (1949)

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Essay by Laurence Maslon (guest post)*



Original album

Towards the end of February 1949, 18 record producers and A&R (“Artists and Repertory”) men conveyed themselves to composer Richard Rodgers’s capacious apartment in eager anticipation. Rodgers had teamed up with the legend who had been his music publisher for almost a quarter-century, Max Dreyfus, to preview songs from his new musical with Oscar Hammerstein II: an adaptation of James Michener’s collection short stories, “Tales of the South Pacific.” Every major record label and producer wanted to get their hands on the songs from the new show, titled “South Pacific.” Since the premiere of “Oklahoma!” in the spring of 1943, and the unprecedented success of the original cast album of the show, issued as a set of six 78 rpm discs as well hit versions of songs from the show by Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra and others, the songs of Rodgers and Hammerstein had been pure gold for the recording industry.

The songs in the next two offerings by Rodgers and Hammerstein—“Carousel” and “Allegro”—also yielded a wide variety of commercial hit recordings for the pop charts. The original cast albums of both shows, however, did not quite live up to “Oklahoma!’s” potential; “Carousel” did well enough for Decca, but the album of “Allegro” was a disappointment to RCA, especially as the company had invested a substantial sum for the exclusive recording rights. Still, this was a time when songs from Broadway musicals would be routinely peeled off for popular recordings in advance of their New York openings; Perry Como’s versions of “So Far” and “A Fella Needs a Girl” (recorded on the A and B sides of an RCA 78 disk) was successful enough to mitigate the less-than-enthusiastic sales of the cast album set of six disks (or the show itself for that matter). By the time Rodgers and Dreyfus promoted the new score to “South Pacific,” however, something more exciting than a fat package of 78s had entered the scene: the long-playing record. Seven months earlier, in June of 1948, engineers at Columbia Records had created a not-easily-breakable, 12-inch microgroove disk made of “vinylite”: it could play up to 22 ½ minutes of continuous music when placed on a phonograph that revolved at 33 and 1/3 revolutions per minute.

It was, indeed, a revolution. The LP format was a savior for devotees of classical music, but it also admirably served the needs of show music aficionados everywhere; there was something about a seamless 22 ½ minutes of, say, peerless Cole Porter music that felt right, or at least preferable to the massive album sets of theater music before the LP era. It was, in fact, Cole Porter music that made Columbia Records the premiere company for the burgeoning market for Broadway musicals on long-playing records; its original cast album of “Kiss Me, Kate” (recorded and released in 1949) sold over 100,000 copies in its first month, making it the biggest-seller in Columbia’s history up to that time.

“Kiss Me, Kate” was climbing the charts when Rodgers and Dreyfus made their inevitable choice: Columbia would get the rights to “South Pacific.” Perhaps even more advantageously, the album would be recorded by Columbia’s most skilled producer, its vice-president, Goddard Lieberson. Lieberson had overseen the re-packaging of Columbia’s 78-rpm recording of “Finian’s Rainbow” as an LP and had bought the recording rights to “Kiss Me, Kate” before it went into production, but now he would be firmly hand’s-on with “South Pacific,” which he saw as an incomparable opportunity to induce consumers to embrace the new LP technology.

Anticipation of the new score ran high. Rodgers and Dreyfus made the songs available to all the major labels—even before “South Pacific” went into rehearsal. Frank Sinatra and Perry Como would each record “Some Enchanting Evening” and “Bali Ha’i” on single 78 releases (on Columbia and RCA, respectively). Decca enlisted Bing Crosby, Ella Fitzgerald and Danny Kaye for an album set of six songs and Capitol deployed their A-listers—Margaret Whiting, Peggy Lee, Gordon MacRae—for another album set. During the first week of April, the same week that Mary Martin was opening as Nellie Forbush in “South Pacific” at the Majestic Theater on 44th Street, Peggy Lee was recording songs from the score at Capitol’s studio in Los Angeles—which meant that Lee would be the first professional singer to record “I’m Gonna Wash That Man Right Outta My Hair.”

Although these album sets and singles would hit the market before the original cast album, they only heightened interest in the authentic representation of the show itself, with its original stars. The cast album would pose some challenges. Ezio Pinza, the well-known basso from the world of opera, was teamed opposite Mary Martin, the Broadway stage’s most piquant soubrette. Pinza’s contract read that he would be obliged to sing no more than fifteen minutes per night; Martin had requested that she not be forced to sing any duets with Pinza, for fear he would blow her out of the water. (Indeed, this led to one of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s most ingenious and beautiful pieces, “Twin Soliloquies.”)

Lieberson also knew that he had a unique chance to use the long-playing technology to tell a story, rather than simply string six songs together, flip the record, and then string another six songs. Unlike any other producer of previous cast albums (a job description less than a decade old), Lieberson took it upon himself to recast important elements of the stage musical for the home listener. He faced a particular challenge with the finale to

“South Pacific.” To conclude an evening full of drama, discrimination, and death, Hammerstein and Joshua Logan created a very subtle ending in contrast:

NELLIE comes back to consciousness enough to realize that EMILE must be hungry. She leans over and hands him the large bowl of soup with an air of “nothing’s-too-good-for-the-boss!” Then she passes him the soup ladle! But he doesn’t use it. Instead, he thrusts his hand forward. NELLIE clasps it. Looking into each other’s eyes, they hold this position as the curtain falls.

It worked beautifully in the theater, but how could record listeners possibly grasp the subtlety of that ending? Lieberson went in the other direction, drafting in a section from the first act—where Mary Martin and Ezio Pinza essentially pledge their troth to one another (as a well as a brief reprise of Pinza’s forte coda of “Some Enchanted Evening”)—to use as a finale for the recording. To reproduce Lieberson’s version in the theater would be absurd (and no doubt thousands of folks who knew only the Columbia Records version were puzzled to see what happened at the end of an actual production, subsequently), but as a listening experience, it worked beautifully.

The cast album to “South Pacific” (released on both long-playing and 78 formats) would reach number one by midsummer of 1949 and stay on the charts at number one almost through the end of 1950—a total of 63 weeks, the longest run of its time, and an astounding achievement unmatched for a decade.

“Some Enchanted Evening” became one of the most successful songs in history; seven different versions made the charts in 1949, the most successful being Perry Como’s rendition on RCA. Even Ezio Pinza had a recording (lifted from the cast album and backed by “This Nearly Was Mine”) on Columbia that charted, granting him the distinction of being one of the few performers in a Broadway musical to have their original rendition become a popular single.

It was a lucky confluence of pop culture that put two highly intelligent musicals in Columbia’s path at the same time. “Only Columbia Brings You . . . Ezio Pinza and Mary Martin in ‘South Pacific’ . . . Complete on a *Single* Long-Playing Recording,” ran one advertisement, “Hot on the heels of ‘Kiss Me, Kate’—don’t get caught in the stampede to the stores.” Only 11 months after Columbia’s introduction of the LP format—which was conceived mostly to benefit classical music buffs, “Variety” reported on the one-two punch of Columbia’s show albums: “Ironically enough, two pop items, the LP albums of “Kiss Me, Kate” and “South Pacific,” have done more to focus the attention of record buyers on the 33 1/3 rpm platters than all of the longhair material Columbia has marketed via the development.... It is estimated that 35% of the overall sales of both scores are LP versions.”

The cast album of “South Pacific” would do more to bring the LP format into living rooms across America than any other release, and its tidal wave of popularity lifted Goddard Lieberson into the role of the most admired and accomplished producer of original cast albums. He would—after an absence of a decade—partner again with Rodgers and Hammerstein on immensely successful recordings of the television

“Cinderella,” and the cast albums of “Flower Drum Song” and “The Sound of Music.”

One other major collaboration, however, exceeded Lieberon’s grasp. Despite intense lobbying on Columbia’s behalf, Rodgers and Hammerstein gave the rights to the movie soundtrack of “South Pacific” to RCA Victor. It was a huge disappointment to Lieberon, but to his credit, he took this slight with equanimity; however, this was not a slight slight; the soundtrack to “South Pacific” was the most popular album of 1958 and, buoyed by a stereo release in 1959, the soundtrack spent an astonishing 31 weeks at number one—the most for any album since the original cast album of “South Pacific.”

This nearly was mine, indeed.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.