

“The Wiz” (Original Cast Album) (1975)

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Essay by Josiah Howard (guest post)*



Original cast, “The Wiz”

Among the 1970s most popular African American musicals—“Ain’t Misbehavin’,” “Pippin,” “Your Arms Too Short to Box With God”—“The Wiz,” an abbreviated, slangy appropriation of the cherished American cinematic masterpiece “The Wonderful Wizard of Oz” (the 1900 book by L. Frank Baum) and “The Wizard of Oz” (the 1939 Warner Bros. film adaption), remains one of the most referenced African American appropriations: both a stellar collection of upbeat, soulful and thoroughly inspiring show tunes, and a collective creative endeavor that acknowledged the transitional time in which it was fashioned.

It’s probably fair to say that L. Frank Baum never dreamed that his pleasing, fantasy, redemption-and-discovery children’s tale would be re-imagined as an African American theatrical production. The story of young Dorothy Gale, her journey to a faraway place “over the rainbow,” and her deep connection with three unusual new friends: the Scarecrow (who needs a brain so that he can “think”), the Cowardly Lion (who needs courage so that he can “be a lion”), and the Tin Man (who needs a heart so that he can “feel”), made a profound and lasting impression on popular culture.

So did “The Wiz.” A look at the songs as they appear on the original Atlantic Records cast recording (the musical featured 27 songs; the cast recording 16) offers a step-by-step course in how to skirt copyright laws, bypass property holders, and create a radically updated homage: a new work that, though inspired by something that came before, was distinct and original.

“The Wizard of Oz’s” spectacular soundtrack was the template for “The Wiz.” A collection of tunes brought to vivid life by the great Judy Garland, each and every tune from the film was tapped for sentiment, reconfigured, and made ethnic. “The Wiz,” it was decided, would present the exact same narrative, but on different terms. “We’re Off To See The Wizard” became “Ease On Down The Road”; “If I Were King of the Forest” (the Cowardly Lion’s lament), became “I’m A Mean ‘Ole Lion” and “Be a Lion”; “If I Only Had a Heart” (the Tin Man’s desire)

became “Slide Some Oil to Me”; “If I Only Had A Brain” (the Scarecrow’s wish), became “I Was Born On The Day Before Yesterday”; and “The Wizard of Oz’s” crown jewel, “Somewhere Over The Rainbow,” indisputably one of American cinema’s most extraordinary musical moments, became “Home”: a showcase for a captivating new, markedly diminutive singer (4’8), named Stephanie Mills.

“The Feeling We Once Had” is the song that lights “The Wiz’s” fuse. It’s a soulful, downbeat confessional in which a mother apologizes to her daughter for not always being her best. “Tornado” follows. It’s a whirlwind of nature sounds and dramatic music; “Tornado’s” orchestral arrangement is punctuated by an infectious wah-wah guitar and background vocals and its “Gonna get ‘ya!” brought to mind Isaac Hayes seminal “Theme From ‘Shaft’” (a number one Pop hit a few years earlier). Atlantic Records released “Tornado” as a six minute, 35 second “Disco Single.” The song became a hit on both the charts and in discotheques.

Other songs on the soundtrack expressed their sentiment through melancholy. “He’s The Wizard” was an explanation song that informed the audience about The Wiz, himself; a “magic man” in possession of special powers. “Soon As I Get Home” revealed Dorothy’s inner life and longings as well as her new understanding of what really matters: love. And “I Was Born on the Day Before Yesterday” (the Scarecrow’s lament) makes clear that Dorothy’s peculiar new friends--the stuffed (but empty) Scarecrow, the fur ball-laden Cowardly Lion, and the squeaky Tin Man--have all become trusted companions.

“Ease On Down The Road,” the seventh song on “The Wiz’s” soundtrack, is the musical’s signature tune: a high spirited affirmation, a jive jingle that spoke about difficult times and the “road” through them. Released as a single, the song became a Top 40 Pop hit (performed by the identical-sounding Consumer Rapport). A deft, modern, funky reinterpretation of “The Wizard of Oz’s” ear wormy “Follow The Yellow Brick Road” and “We’re Off To See The Wizard,” “Ease On Down The Road” delivered: “The Wiz” really was a new and aware musical.

*Come on and ease on down, ease on down the road
Come on and ease on down, ease on down the road
Don’t you carry nothin’ that might be a load
Come on and ease on down, ease on down the road*

“Slide Some Oil to Me,” was a fresh take on what was needed for the rickety, rusty, soon to literally unhinge, Tin Man to maintain. “I’m a Mean ‘Ole Lion” was the Cowardly Lion’s lie: he wasn’t mean at all—and he lacked courage. And “Be A Lion,” Dorothy’s pep talk/response to “I’m A Mean ‘Ole Lion,” reminds us of the power of advocacy.

“So You Wanted to See the Wizard” reveals the Wiz and his purported magical powers. Lesson learned: you can’t always believe what you see and hear. “What Would I Do If I Could Feel” is the Tin Man’s plaintive desire; and “Don’t Nobody Bring Me No Bad News,” a crowd-pleasing cautionary tale, is a comically delivered segue to “Rejoice,” “The Wiz’s” jubilee: an all singing-all dancing ceremony marking evil witch Evillene’s demise.

“The Wiz’s” closing three songs bring the hopes, dreams and lessons learned by our protagonists; Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man and the Cowardly Lion, full circle. “Y’All Got It!” allows the Wiz to reassess and begin a new journey. As he puts it, “I packed up my clothes and I packed up my power.” “If You Believe” remind us to have faith: not in someone else, but in one’s self.

“Home” is “The Wiz’s” final musical number. Both a clarion call and an unabashed self-realization anthem, the song, like “Ease On Down The Road,” remains one of “The Wiz’s” major pop culture contributions. Covered by everyone from Barbra Streisand to Diana Ross (Whitney Houston chose it as her very first live TV performance), the lyrics speak to what the book, film, musical and soundtrack album aspires to impart: the value of self-discovery and self-love.

*When I think of home, I think of a place
Where there’s love overflowing
I wish I was home, I wish I was back there
With the things I been knowing*

Without question “The Wiz” helped make 1975 a memorable year. It was the year of “Jaws,” the year that Elton John became the very first recording artist in history to have an album debut at No. 1 on the “Billboard” album charts—“Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy”—and the year that the Vietnam War finally came to an end.

“The Wiz” opened at Broadway’s Majestic Theater on January 5, 1975. The 1,645-seat house wasn’t always packed. Some thought the idea of a black take on a white classic seemed like a gimmick: a trick designed to make a quick buck. Others thought the project lacked originality. Still others pointed out an unspoken truth: African Americans—the musical’s core audience--were not known to be Broadway’s major patrons. Regardless, the “super soul musical” persevered. Following a few weeks of half-empty houses, pay cuts were instituted, an additional bank loan was secured, and “The Wiz” team continued: “standing room only” was just a few steps away.

“The Wiz” played at the Majestic for two and a half years and on May 25, 1977, moved to the Broadway Theater—where it thrilled audiences for another year and a half before closing on January 28, 1979. All in all, “The Wiz” played 1,672 performances.

And it made a lasting impression. At the Tony Awards ceremony held on April 20, 1975, “The Wiz” won—take a breath--seven awards! The coveted Best Musical prize put it in the record books. That stellar citation was followed by prizes for Best Original Score (Charlie Smalls); Best Direction of a Musical (Geoffrey Holder); Best Choreography (George Faison); Best Costume Design (Geoffrey Holder); Best Performance by a Featured Actress in a Musical (Dee Dee Bridgewater as Glinda); and Best Performance by a Featured Actor in a Musical (Ted Ross as the Cowardly Lion).

Today, the magic of “The Wiz” continues. Although a big budget film adaption by Universal Pictures and Motown Productions was a resounding flop (even though it showcased Diana Ross, Michael Jackson, Richard Pryor and Lena Horne), domestic and international “Wiz” touring companies continued to keep the music and the message alive. In 1984, revivals at New York City’s Lunt-Fontanne Theater and London’s Lyric Hammersmith Theater brought the musical to a whole new generation. So did a 2015 40th anniversary performance at New York’s

Summerstage. And on December 3, 2015, NBC-TV broadcast “The Wiz Live!,” a special event that had been previewed at the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade and then was broadcast live across America.

Daring and modern, flashy and catchy, new and old, “The Wiz” through its inspirational lyrics and dynamic vocal performances—Stephanie Mills went on to win a Grammy Award for Best R&B Vocal Performance Female for “Never Knew Love Like This Before”—united the top-drawer talent of the day in a spectacular production that uplifted audiences and paved the way for other all-black cast musicals (“Dreamgirls” opened 24 months later).

Almost 50 years have passed since “The Wiz” wowed audiences on Broadway and “The Wiz” soundtrack album wowed audiences at home. A magical musical work with a behind-the-scenes staff that included the great Luther Vandross (who wrote the musical’s “Everybody Rejoice”), “The Wiz” continues to inspire. It’s a magnificent musical with a message.

Josiah Howard is the author of four popular books including “Donna Summer: Her Life & Music” and “Blaxploitation Cinema: The Essential Reference Guide.” His many writing credits include articles for “The New York Times,” “Reader’s Digest” and “The Village Voice.” Currently he is a senior contributor at The Grindhouse Cinema Database and Furious Cinema. Visit his website: <http://www.josiahhoward.com/>

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