

# “West Side Story” (Original cast recording) (1957)

Added to the National Registry: 2008

Essay by Cary O'Dell



Original album



Original label



Stephen Sondheim

Considering the degree of extraordinary talent involved—Arthur Laurents (book), Leonard Bernstein (music), Stephen Sondheim (lyrics), and Jerome Robbins (choreography)—it is perhaps not surprising that such a remarkable, landmark show (and recording) would be created. But even taking into account those individuals, “West Side Story” is still a startling work of original art.

The original idea for “West Side Story” dates back to 1949 when Jerome Robbins conceived of a musical update of “Romeo & Juliet.” Originally set on the New York’s East Side, and conceived as a societal war between Jews and Gentiles, “West Side Story” eventually morphed into a tale of two street gangs, the mostly Puerto Rican gang, the Sharks vs. a group of young, working class white, the Jets. As in Shakespeare’s story, a forbidden love between a boy from the Jets and a girl whose brother is a Shark sets up the story that is fated to end in tragedy.

As a Broadway musical, “West Side Story” broke new ground in many ways. First, it dared to take on a timely and serious subject matter—the violence of New York youth gangs were then a daily part of Big Apple newspapers—something musical shows normally steered clear of. Secondly, it is arguably the New York stage’s first *rock* musical. The production included urgent, frenzied ethnocentric dances. Its music (especially in the numbers “America” and “The Rumble”), though orchestrated, was strong, pulsing and driving, a far cry from the lighter fare then much more common on Broadway. Finally, it introduced to the theater world Stephen Sondheim, then a young, struggling lyricist. His lyrics for “West Side Story” (to music by Leonard Bernstein) was his first major work and heralded the arrival of a major new theatrical force. Until the emergence of Andrew Lloyd Webber decades later, Sondheim, as composer and lyricist, would dominate the musical theatre for years to come with hit shows like “Gypsy,” “Company,” “Follies,” “Sweeney Todd,” “Sunday in the Park with George,” and “Into the Woods,” among others.

After tryouts in Philadelphia and Washington, DC, “West Side Story” opened in New York City on September 26, 1957. Its original cast included Carol Lawrence, Larry Kert, Chita Rivera and Art Smith. The show was a smash and ran for over 700 performances. John Chapman of the “New York Daily News” called it “a bold new kind of musical—a juke-box Manhattan opera...a perfect production.”

Three days after the show opened, the cast was convened to record its original cast show album. The album was released on September 15, 1958 on the Columbia label. It would later reach number six on the Billboard pop chart. Its cover photo of Lawrence and Kert running down 56<sup>th</sup>

Street in New York has gone on to be the most often reutilized image from “West Side Story”; it has even been duplicated, for publicity, by later productions.

Though the high-energy, borderline dangerous dances staged by Jerome Robbins could not be replicated on record, the music, songs and performances of the talented cast were captured in tact—from the anticipatory excitement of “Something’s Coming,” to the plaintive longing of “Maria,” the rousing back-and-forth of “America,” the swagger of “Cool,” the quiet heartbreak of “I Have a Love,” to the climatic “Somewhere.” All in all, they create a diverse aural landscape, an urgent, nearly desperate, portrait of working class America that Broadway would not see again until the debut of “Rent” in 1996.

Though all of “West Side’s” songs have endured and been endlessly, lovingly covered (from the kids on “Glee” doing them to Marianne Faithfull’s delicate version of “I Have a Love” in 1967), perhaps no song has become more revered than “Somewhere.” It has been recorded and performed by the likes of Renee Fleming, Celine Dion, Tom Waits, Karen Akers, Jennifer Hudson, Julie Andrews, the Pet Shop Boys, Phil Collins, Il Divo, Josh Groban, Charlotte Church, and Barbra Streisand, among others. In time, it has even transcended its origins as it has evolved to become a beloved, universal anthem of optimism and hope; there are people who have never heard of “West Side Story” but know “Somewhere.”

Since its inaugural staging in 1957, “West Side Story” has been revived—and re-recorded—many times. Along with a 1958 London production, there have been Broadway revivals in 1980 and 2009. There have also been innumerable road companies and regional productions. Of course, there was also the big screen version. The movie of “West Side Story” came out in 1961. Few of the show’s original stars were used in the film and the movie’s two main stars, Natalie Wood and Richard Beymer, had their singing dubbed by Marni Nixon and Jimmy Bryant, respectively. Yet, despite the big screen switch, both the film and the soundtrack were hits; the latter spent 54 weeks at #1 on the Billboard chart.

Regardless of the numerous remakes and revivals of “West Side Story,” there remains both a raw newness and innocent vitality about this, the first version of the show ever to be committed to disc. Since the original show has, of course, long since closed, and its creators and performers have long since gone on to other milestones, this recording, today, is the only document we now have of this unique combustion of talent, this singular theatrical experience and moment in American (musical) history.

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