My Cultural Landscape

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MONDAY, JULY 15, 2019

Gotta Dance!

For much of the current decade Taylor Mac has been focused on creating and performing his magnum opus, A 24-Decade History of Popular Music. A fascinating combination of musicology, historical research, and performance art that includes 246 songs culled from 240 years of our nation's past, it has taught audiences how social trends, politics, migration, slavery, and religion are woven into the American tapestry through its music.

Major contributions to the Great American Songbook have been made by Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Cy Coleman, and Frank Loesser. A growing genre of jukebox musicals has allowed audiences to savor the work of songwriters such as Buddy Holly (1989's The Buddy Holly Story), Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller (1996's Smokey Joe's Cafe), ABBA (1999's Mamma Mia!), and Billy Joel (2002's Movin' Out).

Popular musical revues featuring songs by Black composers have included 1978's Ain't Misbehavin' (focusing on the music of Fats Waller), Eubie! (devoted to the music of Eubie Blake), and 1981's Sophisticated Ladies (which showcased the music of Duke Ellington). Other revues have featured songs written by Jerry Herman (1985's Jerry's Girls and 2003's Showtune) and Stephen Sondheim (1976's Side By Side By Sondheim, 1980's Marry Me A Little, 1993's Putting It Together, and 2010's Sondheim on Sondheim).

Popular singers from Bing Crosby, Tony Bennett, and Nat King Cole to Barbra Streisand, Aretha Franklin, and Cher have evolved into cult legends while legions of devoted fans (such as the Bobby Soxers who screamed for Frank Sinatra, and Lady Gaga's "little monsters") have made history in their own right. Though radio helped transform many songs emanating from Tin Pan Alley, Motown, and Nashville into major hits, the impact of film and television went a long way toward creating such dance crazes as the Carioca (1933), Conga (1941), Bunny Hop (1952), Frug (1964), Hustle (1972), Lambada (1983), Macarena (1992), Twerking (2001), and Gangnam Style (2012). **GEORGE HEYMONT**



(Photoshop by: Ken Howard)

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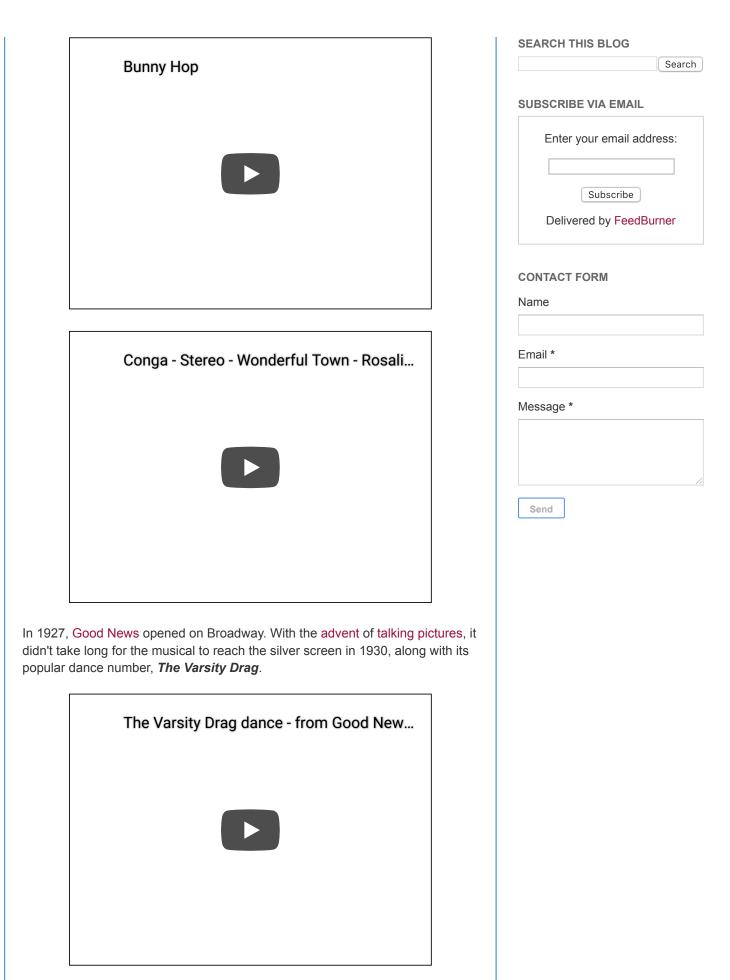
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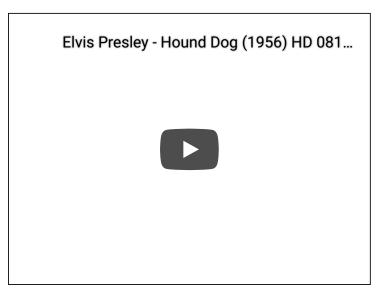


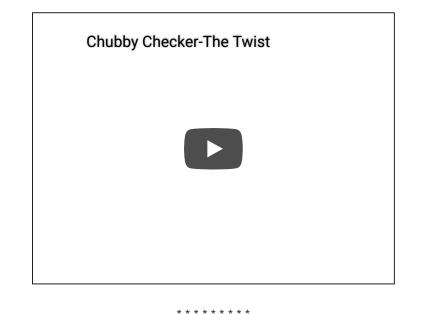
Sandy Wilson's musical, The Boy Friend, was also set in the Roaring Twenties.

First seen in London in 1953, the show received its American premiere in 1954 with a young Julie Andrews starring as Polly. In 1971, Ken Russell directed the film version, in which Tommy Tune and Antonia Ellis led the cast in "Won't You Charleston With Me?"

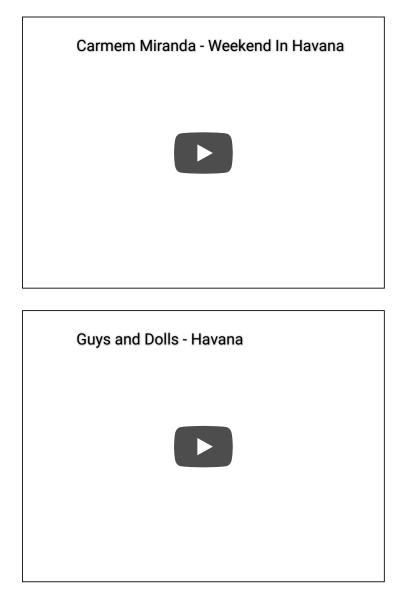


Variety programs on television like The Ed Sullivan Show and Dick Clark's American Bandstand had a profound impact on popular music. It's amazing to look back through a historical lens at early clips of Elvis Presley and Chubby Checker and wonder what was deemed to be so scandalous about their performances.

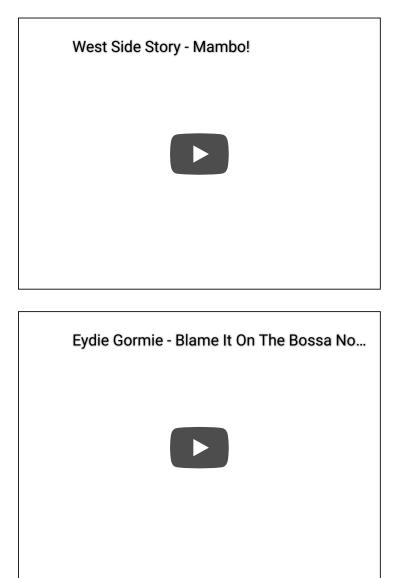




During the Prohibition years, Havana, Cuba was a popular destination for weekend getaways. Whether having its praises sung by Carmen Miranda in 1941's Weekend in Havana or serving as a plot point in in 1950's Guys and Dolls, Havana was a destination where rum went hand in hand with romance.



The mambo craze that gripped Americans between 1946 and 1964 (when The Beatles touched down on American soil) is now mostly forgotten. Much of this is due to the Cuban Revolution led by Fidel Castro, who took over the Cuban government from Fulgencio Batista in January of 1959. Although mambo is still popular in ballroom dance circles (and was celebrated in 1992's film, The Mambo Kings), it's hard to imagine the thrill that coursed through the Winter Garden Theatre on the opening night of West Side Story when Leonard Bernstein's music erupted during "The Dance at the Gym." In 1963, when Eydie Gormé introduced her biggest hit song, "Blame it On The Bossa Nova," America was about to experience a huge change in pop music.



The Mamboniks is a delicious documentary by Lex Gillespie which will receive its Bay area premiere at the 2019 San Francisco Jewish Film Festival. Primarily focused on the way Cuban music swept through New York's Jewish community after World War II, the film concentrates on an overtly nostalgic group of aging Jews who fell head over heels for the mambo and, whether or not they were dancing at the Palladium Ballroom, lived and breathed Latin rhythms (which were occasionally laced with familiar strains of Klezmer music).



A reunion of Mamboniks at Shelby's Kitchen & Deli

Gillespie's film traces the rise in mambo's popularity from its birth in Cuba during the 1940s to its peak popularity among New York's Jews in the 1950s (at a time when Havana was a major tourist getaway, America was still racially segregated, and anti-Semitism was fairly common). However, the music of Tito Puente and Celia Cruz was so infectious that Jews, Blacks, Puerto Ricans and many others eagerly shared their enthusiasm on the dance floor. The mambo eventually became more popular than the rhumba and was later incorporated into salsa dancing.



Then and Now: "Mambo Judie" Friend



Then and Now: Marvin "Marvano" Jaye



Then and Now: Rhea Anides

Much of the joy one derives from watching *The Mamboniks* is triggered by some wonderful archival footage of Jews dancing the mambo at weddings and dance clubs as well as some filmed segments from within Havana's famous Club Tropicana. Add in the personal memories shared by the documentary's "stars" of a time when mambo was "Hot! Hot! Hot!" and it's impossible not to keep smiling throughout the film.



Poster art for The Mamboniks

Watching Marvin "Marvano" Jaye become overwhelmed with joy as he rides in Havana's vintage cars and walks along the Malecón for the first time since he visited Cuba in 1959 is like watching a genial grandfather find his bliss. Whether listening to Vince Livelli (who dropped out of Brooklyn College in 1940 to teach dancing in Cuba) reminisce about the good old days or hearing a "nice girl from Brooklyn" like Marilyn "Buttons" Winters describe how she ended up in the premiere dance team of Marilyn & Millie, it's impossible to resist their undiminished passion for the mambo and the music which fills so much of the film's soundtrack.



Marvin "Rey Mambo" Baumel and his wife performing

Though *The Mamboniks* is currently touring the film festival circuit, once it is released, this is a documentary you won't want to miss. Here's the trailer:



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If the 1950s and 1960s were marked by racial discrimination, blatant sexism, income inequality, anti-Semitism, and political violence, today's headlines don't seem to be much different. Where can one turn to find the same kind of unbounded joy and zest for living seen in *Mamboniks*? The answer is simple: Hairspray, The Musical.



Cassie Grilley (Tracy Turnblad) and Sarah Sloan (Velma Von Tussle) in a scene from *Hairspray* (Photo by: Ben Krantz Studio)

Based on the 1988 John Waters film that starred Divine and Ricki Lake, the screen-to-stage adaptation of Hairspray features a book by Mark O'Donnell and Thomas Meehan, music by Mark Shaiman, and lyrics by Shaiman and Scott Wittman. On August 15, 2002, when the new musical premiered on Broadway, the cast was headed by Marissa Janet Winokur, Harvey Fierstein, Matthew Morrison, and Dick Latessa.



Cassie Grilley (Tracy) and Scott DiLorenzo (Edna Turnblad)

Since then, the show has won eight Tony Awards, nine Drama Desk Awards, four Olivier Awards, and delighted millions with its numerous touring and international productions. In 2007, it was released as a movie musical (starring Nikki Blonsky, John Travolta, Christopher Walken, and Queen Latifah) and has since been performed at sea aboard the MS Oasis of the Seas and MS Symphony of the Seas. On December 7, 2016, NBC broadcast Hairspray Live! Frequently staged by regional and community theatre companies (as well as numerous high schools), *Hairspray* does exceptionally well at the box office, sends people home happy and (like many performances of *Mamma Mia!*) often has audiences dancing in the aisles during curtain calls.



Kamren Mahaney as Link Larkin in *Hairspray* (Photo by: Ben Krantz Studio)

Bay Area Musicals is finishing its fourth season with a wildly exuberant production of *Hairspray* at the Victoria Theatre that has been directed and choreographed by the company's founder and artistic director, Matthew McCoy, with solid musical direction by Jon Gallo. With scenery designed by Lynn Grant, costumes by Brooke Jennings, and lighting by Eric Johnson, the production's only fault is sound designer Anton Hedman's overamplification which often makes it difficult to hear the lyrics.



Elizabeth Jones as Motormouth Maybelle in *Hairspray* (Photo by: Ben Krantz Studio)

Otherwise, BAM's production offers local audiences a welcome opportunity to wallow in nostalgia for that part of the 1960s that idolized big hair, rock 'n' roll, and rebellious youth who were more than ready to challenge authority.



Melissa Momboisse as Penny Pingleton in *Hairspray* (Photo by: Ben Krantz Studio)

I was fascinated by how well chosen and directed BAM's cast for *Hairspray* proved to be. As its leading men, Kamren Mahaney certainly delivered the

goods as Link Larkin with Dave Abrams easily bringing down the house with "Run and Tell That" (the big number for Motormouth Maybelle's son, Seaweed J. Stubbs). Villainous adults included Bonnie Lafer as the severely repressed Prudy Pingleton and Sarah Sloan as the evil Velma Von Tussle.



Cassie Grilley (Tracy Turnblad) and Kamren Mahaney (Link Larkin) in a scene from *Hairspray* (Photo by: Ben Krantz Studio)

Scott Taylor-Cole's Corny Collins bore a striking resemblance to Broadway.com's Editor-in-Chief, Paul Wontorek while Melissa Momboisse's needy and nerdy portrayal of Penny Pingleton was desperately endearing. In smaller roles, Lauren Meyer's characterization of the spoiled Amber Von Tussle reeked of white privilege while, as Little Inez, Kennedy Williams revealed an appealing young talent who demands attention.

The "adults" in the show included Elizabeth Jones (giving one of the sexiest portrayals of Motormouth Maybelle I've ever seen) and Kim Larsen, who got easy laughs as the school principal, Harriman F. Spritzer, and Mr. Pinky. Scott DiLorenzo's embodiment of Edna Turnblad was a huge (yet soft and surprisingly sympathetic) presence, with Paul Plain as her doting husband, Wilbur.



Scott DiLorenzo and Paul Plain as Edna and Wilbur Turnblad in a scene from *Hairspray* (Photo by: Ben Krantz Studio)

From the moment she opened her eyes to sing "Good Morning, Baltimore," Cassie Grilley's Tracy Turnblad had the audience eating out of her hands. Plump, proud, and bursting with energy, Grilley's performance was pure

dynamite (made even funnier in the scenes where she lusted after Kamren Mahaney's Link Larkin).



Cassie Grilley as Tracy Turnblad in *Hairspray* (Photo by: Ben Krantz Studio)

Marc Shaiman's score is a treasure chest of fun, especially such numbers as "Mama, I'm A Big Girl Now," "Welcome To The 60's," "Timeless to Me," and "You Can't Stop The Beat." McCoy's ebullient choreography was delivered with an overabundance of energy by the chorus, with special kudos going to Carlos Carillo and April Deutschle (Detention Kids), Ronald James (Fender), Stephen Kanaski (Brad), and Peli Naomi Woods (Dynamite).

Performances of *Hairspray* continue through August 11 at the Victoria Theatre (click here for tickets).

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Posted by geoheymont at <u>10:45 AM</u>

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