

My Cultural Landscape

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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



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Bunny Hop



Conga - Stereo - Wonderful Town - Rosali...



In 1927, **Good News** opened on Broadway. With the **advent** of **talking pictures**, it didn't take long for the musical to reach the silver screen in 1930, along with its popular dance number, ***The Varsity Drag***.

The Varsity Drag dance - from Good New...



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

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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?"

Won't You Charleston With Me - The Boyfr...



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.

Elvis Presley - Hound Dog (1956) HD 081...



Chubby Checker-The Twist



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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.

Carmem Miranda - Weekend In Havana



Guys and Dolls - Havana



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.

West Side Story - Mambo!



Eydie Gormie - Blame It On The Bossa No...



The Mambo 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:



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)

in a scene from *Hairspray* (Photo by: Ben Krantz Studio)

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 Mombosse'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 Deutsche](#) (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).

Posted by geoheymont at [10:45 AM](#)



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