

Stephen Sondheim, the Broadway composer behind *A Little Night Music* and *Sweeney Todd*, in 1990.

BOOKS

## Broadway Baby

BY CHIP BROWN

STEPHEN SONDHEIM: *ART ISN'T EASY*

by Daniel Okrent

It's hard not to glance at the list of biographies in the Yale University Press's Jewish Lives series and think that you'd have had a much better chance of amounting to something if you'd been born Jewish, or at least had converted at an early age. Now

adding to an imposing lineup that includes Baruch Spinoza, Karl Marx, Franz Kafka, Sigmund Freud, and Albert Einstein, as well as artistic luminaries ranging from Leonard Bernstein to Mark Rothko, the publisher has anointed Stephen Sondheim. Daniel Okrent's superb new biography, *Stephen Sondheim: Art Isn't Easy*, is a tightly written, emotionally perceptive, and often exhilarating study of a Broadway giant who, if measured by his gifts for irony, ambivalence, harmonic complexity, lyric beauty, peerless wit, breadth of subjects, and psychological acuity, is hands down the greatest Broadway-musical composer of the last 50 years, if not of all time.

Unsurprisingly, there's no shortage of articles, books, and videos devoted to the career during which Sondheim wrote the music and lyrics for 18 musicals, the lyrics for four others, and more than 500 songs. He won every major award, including eight Tonys, eight Grammys, an Oscar, and the Pulitzer Prize. After his death, in 2021, his memorial service was held in a Broadway theater named for him.

As Okrent follows Sondheim's story from his precocious start writing just the lyrics for *West Side Story* and *Gypsy* through his double-duty prime as the composer-lyricist of a decade's worth of masterpieces beginning with *Company* in 1970, the biography inevitably covers ground well plowed. Okrent acknowledges his debt to the full-length 1998 biography by Meryle Secrest, who donated her 50 hours of taped interviews with Sondheim to Yale's Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library. But *Art Isn't Easy* is also full of Okrent's own discerning insights and reflections born not just of midnight oil burned in the archives but fresh interviews with 30 of Sondheim's friends and former colleagues. His book also benefits from the release of the 1982 Columbia Oral History Program interviews with Sondheim, which were made available after the composer's death.

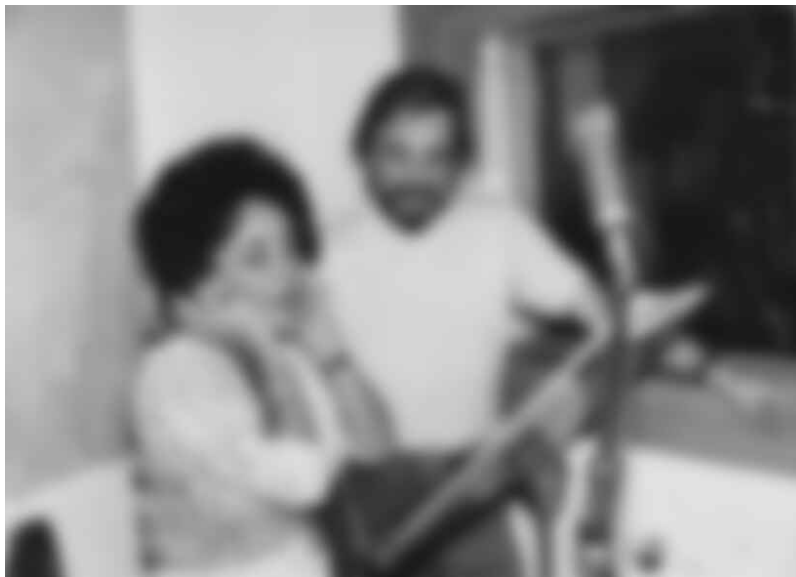


Sondheim and Leonard Bernstein in 1973.

Ambivalence in all its complexity, its sorry-grateful contradictions, was the leitmotif of Sondheim's life. He was a secular Jew. A gay man at odds with his sexuality. A supremely gifted lyricist who hated writing lyrics. An only-child child of divorce who, in classic form, found family in theater people. To his regret, Sondheim never had children, though he did mentor hundreds of young musical-theater artists. He was a satiric rhapsodist who said, "I write love songs in which the characters lie to themselves." He confessed that he himself had never been in love until he was 60, and for all he seemed to know about the bittersweet vicissitudes of marriage, he did not find his way into one until four years before his death, with a man 50 years his junior. He embodied the paradox of an artist who somehow puts everything and nothing of himself into his work, a composer who achieved profound personal expression behind the masks of his characters. He described himself as "a playwright who writes with song."

Okrent succinctly recaps the well-known details of Sondheim's personal and professional lives, but it's probably beyond the power of any writer to solve the conundrum of how someone who hated his mother as intensely as Sondheim did—so much so that he skipped her funeral—could render such exquisite tenderness in songs about mothers and sons. Okrent explores the oft-repeated tale of a letter in which Sondheim's mother, Foxy, waiting in the hospital to have a pacemaker installed, informed her sole child: "The only regret I have in life is giving you birth."

Despite calling his mother a “monster,” Sondheim supported her financially and continued to see her, mindful perhaps that she had set the course of his life. It was her decision, in the wake of her divorce from Herbert Sondheim when “Stevie” was 10, to buy a small property in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, near the Highland Farm home of Oscar Hammerstein II. There, Sondheim found not only a surrogate family but the apprenticeship with the legendary lyricist of *Showboat*, *Carousel*, and *Oklahoma!* that would destine him for an even greater place in the Broadway pantheon. Hammerstein taught Sondheim how to fit words to music and how to drive the narrative with song, a distinction from an earlier era when musicals stopped the plot to let the players sing. As Sondheim once remarked, “If Oscar had been a geologist, I would have become a geologist.”



Actress Elizabeth Taylor and Sondheim recording the music for the film adaptation of *A Little Night Music* in 1976.

One of the great pleasures of the book is Okrent’s magpie eye for glittering details, social scraps like the fact that Princess Margaret once asked Sondheim to make her a martini, and the time Lin-Manuel Miranda told him about an ice-cream truck in Queens that was playing one of the composer’s best-known songs, “Send in the Clowns.” Fed up after three days of listening to him play the same four bars of “The Ladies Who Lunch” over and over again, his neighbor Katharine Hepburn marched barefoot through the snow to his Manhattan town house to tell him to shut up.

Sondheim and Foxy once collaborated on an unpublished board game called Stardom, though one of Sondheim's instruction cards read, "Foxy likes you, lose a turn."

Okrent does not shrink from the darker details, including Sondheim's procrastination, his alcoholism, his outbursts of anxiety-fueled rage, and something that remains tantalizingly unclear—the hobgoblin of revenge in his psyche, which apparently made the writing of *Sweeney Todd*, a musical about the demon barber of Fleet Street who is revenge incarnate, a relatively blissful time.

When *Passion* closed in 1995, Broadway never saw another new Sondheim show. His later years were characteristically happy-sad. The power of his art had waned. By his own admission, he wasted nearly a decade on the musical *Road Show*, which underwent many rounds of revisions, workshops, changing titles, and different directors before ultimately premiering Off Broadway in 2008 to little success. His last show, *Here We Are*, premiered posthumously Off Broadway in 2023. But that period of creative decline was marked by a succession of anniversary concerts, various tributes and honors, and revival productions. He produced two fantastic books, *Finishing the Hat* and *Look, I Made a Hat*, which served as autobiographies of a sort, detailing his songwriting process. And he finally found the personal happiness that had eluded him most of his life when, in 2017, he married Jeff Romley, a young ultra-marathoner who had nothing to do with the theater.

Okrent notes that by the end of Sondheim's life, his long years of alienation seemed cured. It's a satisfying final chapter for a man who had forever suffered from being "so very betwixt and between." Before he shuffled off to wherever Spinoza, Freud, and Einstein have gone, he was not entirely without regrets. In a conversation the writer Anna Quindlen recounted at his funeral, Sondheim said that he really was sorry never to have had a family. But he then brightened, as if there'd never been a half-empty glass so full. "I suppose if I'd had one," he said, "I wouldn't have had anything to write about."

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