

STEPHEN SONDHEIM

Stephen Sondheim

Titan of American Musicals

Meet the Creator of
famous shows such as
West Side Story, *Into The
Woods*, *Sweeney Todd*,
Merrily We Roll Along,
and *More*

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Prize, 8 Tony Awards,
8 Grammy's, an
Academy Award and
the Presidential Medal
of Freedom.

*"Theatres Most
Revered and Influential
Composer-Lyricist
of the 20th century"*

- The New York Times

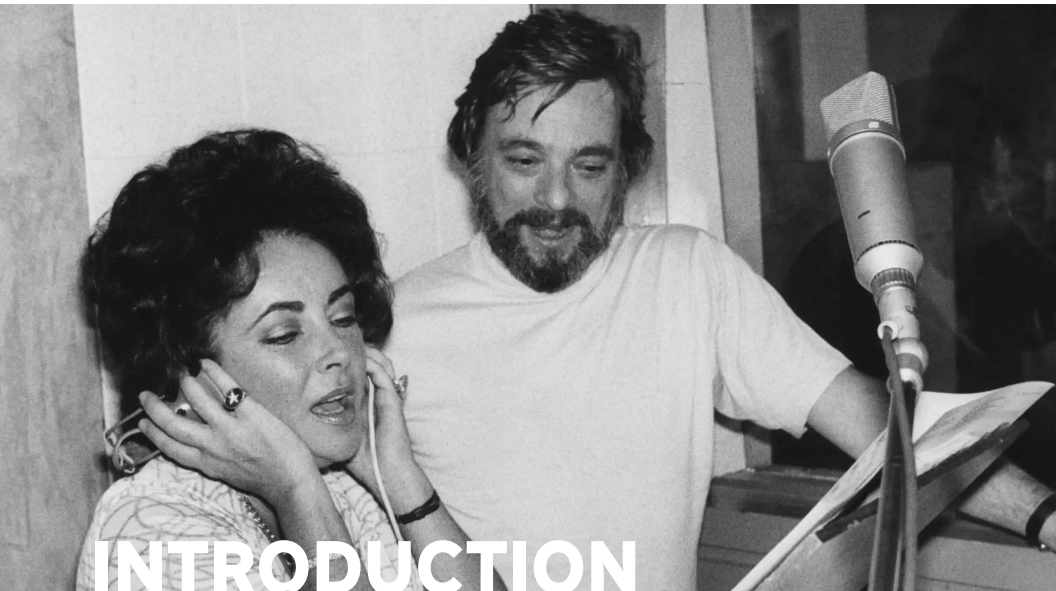




STEPHEN SONDHEIM

A WIKIPEDIA BIOGRAPHY

**EDITING AND LAYOUT
LINDSAY NEECE**



INTRODUCTION & EDUCATION

New York City, Sondheim attended the Ethical Culture Fieldston School. He spent several summers at Camp Androscoggin.⁷ His mother Stephen Joshua Sondheim (1930–2021) was an American composer and lyricist. Regarded as one of the most important figures in 20th-century musical theater, he is credited with reinventing the American musical.¹ With his frequent collaborators Harold Prince and James Lapine, Sondheim's Broadway musicals tackled unexpected themes that ranged beyond the genre's traditional subjects, while addressing darker elements of the human experience.^{2,3} His music and lyrics are tinged with complexity, sophistication, and ambivalence about various aspects of life.^{4,5} Sondheim's interest in musical theater began at a young age, and he was mentored by Oscar Hammerstein II. He began his career by writing the lyrics for *West Side Story* (1957) and *Gypsy* (1959). He transitioned to writing both music and lyrics for the theater,

with his best-known works including *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962), *Company* (1970), *Follies* (1971), *A Little Night Music* (1973), *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (1979), *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981), *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984), and *Into the Woods* (1987). Sondheim's numerous awards and nominations include eight Tony Awards, an Academy Award, eight Grammy Awards, an Olivier Award, and the Pulitzer Prize. He also was awarded the Kennedy Center Honor in 1993 and a Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2015.⁶ A theater is named after him both on Broadway and in the West End of London. Film adaptations of his works include *West Side Story* (1961), *Gypsy* (1962), *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1966), *A Little Night Music* (1977), *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (2007), *Into the Woods* (2014), and *West Side Story* (2021).

Sondheim was born on March 22, 1930, into a Jewish family in New York City, the son of Etta Janet ("Foxy"; née Fox; 1897–1992) and Herbert Sondheim (1895–1966). His paternal grandparents, Isaac and Rosa, were German Jews, and his maternal grandparents, Joseph and Bessie, were Lithuanian Jews from Vilnius.⁷ His father manufactured dresses designed by his mother. The composer grew up on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and, after his parents divorced, on a farm near Doylestown, Pennsylvania. The only child of affluent parents living in the San Remo at 145 Central Park West, he was described in Meryle Secrest's biography *Stephen Sondheim: A Life* as an isolated, emotionally neglected child. When he lived in sent him to New York Military Academy in 1940.⁸ From 1942 to 1947, he attended George School, a private Quaker preparatory school in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, where he wrote his first musical, *By George*, in 1946.^{8,9}

From 1946 to 1950, Sondheim attended Williams College. He graduated magna cum laude and received the Hubbard Hutchinson Prize, a two-year fellowship to study music.⁸ Sondheim traced his interest in theater to *Very Warm for May*, a Broadway musical he saw when he was nine. "The curtain went up and revealed a piano", Sondheim recalled. "A butler took a duster and brushed it up, tinkling the keys. I thought that was thrilling."¹⁰ Sondheim detested his mother,¹¹ who was said to be psychologically abusive¹² and to have projected her anger from her failed marriage onto her son.¹³ "When my father left her, she substituted me for him. And she used me the way she used him, to come on to and to berate, beat up on, you see. What she did for five years was treat me like dirt, but come on to me at the same time."¹⁴ She once wrote him a letter saying that the only regret she ever had was giving birth to him.¹⁵ When she died in 1992, Sondheim did not attend her funeral. He had been estranged from her for nearly 20 years.^{11,16} When Sondheim was about ten years old (around the time of his parents' divorce), he formed a close friendship with James Hammerstein, son of lyricist and playwright Oscar Hammerstein II, who were neighbors in Bucks County.

The elder Hammerstein became Sondheim's surrogate father, influencing him profoundly and developing his love of musical theater. Sondheim met Hal Prince, who later directed many of his shows, at the opening of *South Pacific*, Hammerstein's musical with Richard Rodgers. The comic musical Sondheim wrote at George School, *By George*, was a success among his peers and buoyed his self-esteem. When he asked Hammerstein to evaluate it as though he had no knowledge of its author, he said it was the worst thing he had ever seen: "But if you want to know why it's terrible, I'll tell you." They spent the rest of the day going over the musical, and Sondheim later said, "In that afternoon I learned more about songwriting and the musical theater than most people learn in a lifetime."¹⁷ Hammerstein died of stomach cancer on August 23, 1960, aged 65.^{21,22} Sondheim later recalled that Hammerstein had given him a portrait of himself. Sondheim asked him to inscribe it, and said later of the request that it was "weird...it's like asking your father to inscribe something." Reading the inscription ("For Stevie, My Friend and Teacher") choked up the composer, who said, "That describes Oscar better than anything I could say."²³

Sondheim began attending Williams College, a liberal arts college in Williamstown, Massachusetts, whose theater program attracted him.²⁴ His first teacher there was Robert Barrow: "Everybody hated him because he was very dry, and I thought he was wonderful because he was very dry. And Barrow made me realize that all my romantic views of art were nonsense. I had always thought an angel came down and sat on your shoulder and whispered in your ear "dah-dah-dah-DUM." It never occurred to me that art was something worked out. And suddenly it was skies opening up. As soon as you find out what a leading tone is, you think, Oh my God. What a diatonic scale is—Oh my God! The logic of it. And, of course, what that meant to me was: Well, I can do that. Because you just don't know. You think it's a talent, you think you're born with this thing. What I've found out and what I believed is that everybody is talented. It's just that some

people get it developed and some don't." The composer told Meryle Secrest: "I just wanted to study composition, theory, and harmony without the attendant musicology that comes in graduate school. But I knew I wanted to write for the theater, so I wanted someone who did not disdain theater music."²² Barrow suggested that Sondheim study with Milton Babbitt, whom Sondheim called "a frustrated show composer" with whom he formed "a perfect combination".²⁵

When they met, Babbitt was working on a musical for Mary Martin based on the myth of Helen of Troy. The two met once a week in New York City for four hours. (At the time, Babbitt was teaching at Princeton University.) According to Sondheim, they spent the first hour dissecting Rodgers and Hart or George Gershwin or studying Babbitt's favorites (Buddy DeSylva, Lew Brown, and Ray Henderson). They then proceeded to other forms of music (such as Mozart's Jupiter Symphony), critiquing them the same way.²⁶ Fascinated by mathematics, Babbitt and Sondheim studied songs by a variety of composers (especially Jerome Kern). Sondheim told Secrest that Kern had the ability "to develop a single motif through tiny variations into a long and never boring line and his maximum development of the minimum of material". He said of Babbitt, "I am his maverick, his one student who went into the popular arts with all his serious artillery".²⁵ At Williams, Sondheim wrote a musical adaption of *Beggar on Horseback* (a 1924 play by George S. Kaufman and Marc Connelly, with Kaufman's permission) that had three performances.²⁷ A member of the Beta Theta Pi fraternity,²⁸ he graduated magna cum laude in 1950.²⁹ "A few painful years of struggle" followed, when Sondheim auditioned songs, lived

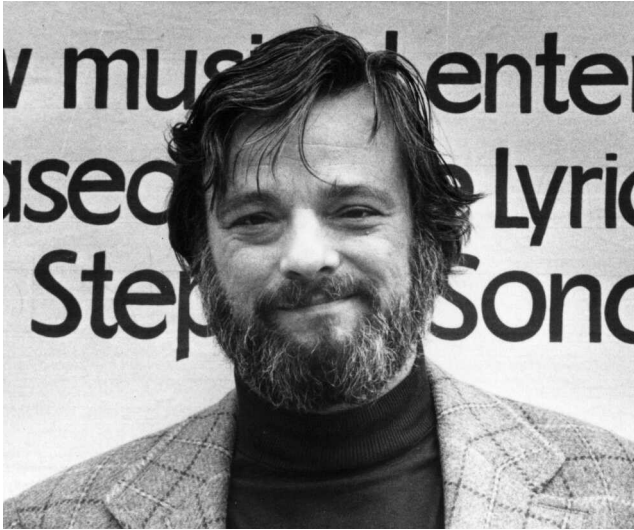
in his father's dining room to save money, and spent time in Hollywood writing for the television series *Topper*.¹⁰ He devoured 1940s and 1950s films, and called cinema his "basic language";¹¹ his film knowledge got him through The \$64,000 Question contestant tryouts. Sondheim disliked movie musicals, favoring classic dramas such as *Citizen Kane*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *A Matter of Life and Death*: "Studio directors like Michael Curtiz and Raoul Walsh ... were heroes of mine. They went from movie to movie to movie, and every third movie was good and every fifth movie was great. There wasn't any cultural pressure to make art".³⁰

At age 22, Sondheim had finished the four shows Hammerstein requested. Screenwriters Julius and Philip Epstein's *Front Porch in Flatbush*, unproduced at the time, was being shopped around by designer and producer Lemuel Ayers. Ayers approached Frank Loesser and another composer; both turned him down. Ayers and Sondheim met as ushers at a wedding, and Ayers commissioned Sondheim for three songs for the show; Julius Epstein flew in from California and hired Sondheim, who worked with him in California for four or five months. After eight auditions for backers, half the money needed was raised. The show, retitled *Saturday Night*, was intended to open during the 1954–55 Broadway season, but Ayers died of leukemia in his early forties. The production rights transferred to his widow, Shirley, and due to her inexperience the show did not continue as planned;⁴ it opened off-Broadway in 2000. Sondheim later said, "I don't have any emotional reaction to *Saturday Night* at all—except fondness. It's not bad stuff for a 23-year-old. There are some things that embarrass me so much in the lyrics—the missed accents, the obvious jokes. But I decided, leave it. It's my baby pictures. You don't touch up a baby picture—you're a baby!"¹¹



*"I'm interested in the theater because I'm interested in communication with audiences," [...] "Otherwise I would be in concert music. I'd be in another kind of profession. I love the theater as much as music, and the whole idea of getting across to an audience and making them laugh, making them cry – just making them feel – is paramount to me."*²³⁸

– Stephen Sondheim, NPR Interview

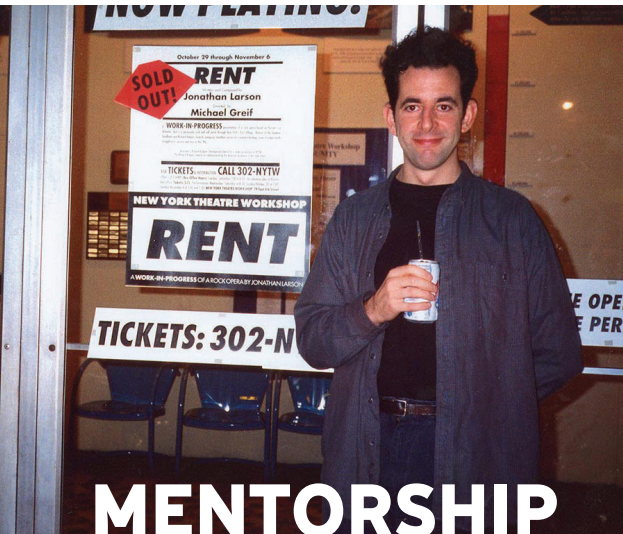


STYLES & THEMES



Sondheim is known for complex polyphony in his vocals, such as the five minor characters who make up a Greek chorus in 1973's *A Little Night Music*. He used angular harmonies and intricate melodies. His musical influences were varied; although he said that he "loves Bach", his favorite musical period was from Brahms to Stravinsky.²³⁴ According to Sondheim, when he asked Milton Babbitt if he could study atonality, Babbitt replied: "You haven't exhausted tonal resources for yourself yet, so I'm not going to teach you atonal!"²³² Music critic Anthony Tommasini wrote that Sondheim's work, "while hewing to a tonal musical language, activated harmonies and folded elements of jazz and Impressionist styles in his own distinctive, exhilarating voice."²³³ Raymond-Jean Frontain writes that thematically, Sondheim's musicals occupy a paradoxical place in gay culture, describing him as a gay creative artist who never created an explicitly gay character, but nevertheless attained gay cult status. Frontain continues: He incarnates the paradox of a highly intellectualized gay perspective that prizes ambivalence, undercuts traditional American progressivism, and rejects the musical's historically idealistic

view of sex, romance, and the family; but that at the same time eschews camp, deconstructs the diva, and is apparently oblivious to AIDS, the post-Stonewall struggle for civil equality, and other socio-political issues that concern most gay men of his generation.²³⁵ Luca Prono described Sondheim's work as rejecting the traditional image of the Western world typically presented in Broadway productions, and instead depicting it as "predatory and alienating". His works have acquired a cult following with queer audiences, and his songs have been adopted as life scores for successive generations of gays, and have often had a primary role in AIDS fundraising events.²³⁶ "Somewhere" from *West Side Story* was informally adopted as a gay anthem before the start of the gay liberation movement, but Sondheim rejected that reading, saying, "If you think that's a gay song, then all songs about getting away from the realities of life are gay songs."²³⁷ Matt Zoller Seitz characterized Sondheim's work for its bravery to express the truth, in all its complexity: "compassionately but without sugarcoating anything," devoid of the "easy reassurances and neat resolutions" typically demanded in the marketplace.²³⁹



Jonathan Larson (1960–1995)

MENTORSHIP & COLLABORATION

Sondheim was an avid fan of puzzles and games. He is credited with introducing cryptic crosswords, a British invention, to American audiences through a series of cryptic crossword puzzles he created for New York magazine in 1968 and 1969.¹³³ Sondheim was “legendary” in theater circles for “concocting puzzles, scavenger hunts and murder-mystery games”,¹¹⁰ inspiring the central character of Anthony Shaffer’s 1970 play *Sleuth*.¹³⁴ Sondheim’s love of puzzles and mysteries is evident in *The Last of Sheila*, an intricate whodunit written with longtime friend Anthony Perkins. The 1973 film, directed by Herbert Ross, featured Dyan Cannon, Joan Hackett, Raquel Welch, James Mason, James Coburn, Ian McShane, and Richard Benjamin.¹³⁵ Sondheim also wrote occasional music for film: most notably, he contributed five songs to Warren Beatty’s 1990 film *Dick Tracy*, including the ballad “Sooner or Later (I Always Get My Man)”, sung in the film by Madonna, which won the Academy Award for Best Original Song. He also contributed to *Reds* (both to the score,

and with the song “Goodbye for Now”), *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* (“The Madam’s Song”, later recorded as “I Never Do Anything Twice”), *Stavisky* (writing the score), and *The Birdcage* (“Little Dream”, and the eventually cut “It Takes All Kinds”). Sondheim collaborated with Company librettist George Furth to write the play *Getting Away with Murder* in 1996; the Broadway production closed after 31 previews and only 17 performances.¹³⁷ In 2003, he was invited to serve as guest curator for the Telluride Film Festival.³⁰

After he was mentored by Hammerstein,¹⁷ Sondheim returned the favor, saying that he loved “passing on what Oscar passed on to me”.²³ In an interview with Sondheim for *The Legacy Project*, composer-lyricist Adam Guettel (son of Mary Rodgers and grandson of Richard Rodgers) recalled how as a 14-year-old boy he showed Sondheim his work. Guettel was “crestfallen” since he had come in “sort of all puffed up thinking [he] would be rained with compliments and things”, which was not the case since



Andrew Garfield as Jonathan Larson in *Tick Tick... Boom!* (2021, Netflix)

Sondheim had some “very direct things to say”. Later, Sondheim wrote and apologized to Guettel for being “not very encouraging” when he was actually trying to be “constructive”.¹³⁸

Sondheim also mentored a fledgling Jonathan Larson, attending Larson’s workshop for his *Superbia* (originally an adaptation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*). In Larson’s musical *Tick, Tick... Boom!*, the phone message is played in which Sondheim apologizes for leaving early, says he wants to meet him and is impressed with his work. After Larson’s death, Sondheim called him one of the few composers “attempting to blend contemporary pop music with theater music, which doesn’t work very well; he was on his way to finding a real synthesis. A good deal of pop music has interesting lyrics, but they are not theater lyrics”. A musical-theater composer “must have a sense of what is theatrical, of how you use music to tell a story, as opposed to writing a song. Jonathan understood that instinctively.”¹³⁹

Around 2008, Sondheim approached Lin-Manuel Miranda to work with him translating *West Side Story* lyrics into Spanish for an upcoming Broadway revival.^{140,141} Miranda then approached Sondheim with his new project *Hamilton*, then called *The Hamilton Mixtape*, which Sondheim gave notes on.^{141,142} Sondheim was originally wary of the project, saying he was “worried that an evening of rap might get monotonous”. But he believed Miranda’s attention to, and respect for, good rhyming made it work.¹⁴² Sondheim provided a voice cameo for the 2021 film adaptation of *Tick, Tick... Boom!*, directed by Miranda, for the scene in which a fictionalized version of himself leaves a phone message. Sondheim worked on a revised text of the message and voiced it himself after Bradley Whitford, who portrays him, was unavailable to rerecord the line.¹⁴³

In November 2015, Sondheim was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Barack Obama in a ceremony at the White House.^{b,184,185}



HONORS & AWARDS

Sondheim received an Academy Award, eight Tony Awards, and eight Grammy Awards. He also received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Sunday in the Park with George* (1985, shared with James Lapine) and was honored with the Kennedy Center Honors, Lifetime Achievement (1993).¹⁰ He received the Hutchinson Prize for Music Composition (1950) and was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1983). He was also awarded the Golden Plate Award of the American Academy of Achievement presented by Awards Council member James Earl Jones (2005),^{175,176} the Algur H. Meadows Award from Southern Methodist University (1994),¹⁷⁷ a Special Laurence Olivier Award (2011) "in recognition of his contribution to London theatre",^{178,179} and a Critics' Circle Theatre Award (2012), which according to drama section chair Mark Shenton "is effectively a lifetime achievement award."¹⁸⁰ He became a member of the American Theater Hall of Fame (2014).¹⁸¹ In 2013, Sondheim was

awarded The Edward MacDowell Medal by The MacDowell Colony for outstanding contributions to American culture.¹⁸² Sondheim founded Young Playwrights Inc. in 1981 to introduce young people to writing for the theater, and was the organization's executive vice-president.¹⁸⁶

The Stephen Sondheim Center for the Performing Arts, at the Fairfield Arts and Convention Center in Fairfield, Iowa, opened in December 2007 with performances by Len Cariou, Liz Callaway, and Richard Kind, all of whom had participated in Sondheim musicals.^{187,188} The Stephen Sondheim Society was established in 1993 to provide information about his work, with its Sondheim – the Magazine provided to its membership. The society maintains a database, organizes productions, meetings, outings, and other events, and assists with publicity. Its annual Student Performer of the Year Competition awards a £1,000 prize to one of

twelve musical-theatre students from UK drama schools and universities. At Sondheim's request, an additional prize is offered for a new song by a young composer. Judged by George Stiles and Anthony Drewe, each contestant performs a Sondheim song and a new song.^{189,190,191} Signature Theatre in Arlington County, Virginia established its Sondheim Award, which includes a \$5,000 donation to a nonprofit organization of the recipient's choice, "as a tribute to America's most influential contemporary musical theatre composer". The first award, to Sondheim, was presented at an April 27, 2009, benefit with performances by Bernadette Peters, Michael Cerveris, Will Gartshore, and Eleasha Gamble.^{199,200,201} The 2010 recipient was Angela Lansbury, with Peters and Catherine Zeta-Jones hosting the April benefit.²⁰² The 2011 honoree was Bernadette Peters.²⁰³ Other recipients were Patti LuPone in 2012,²⁰⁴ Hal Prince in 2013, Jonathan Tunick in 2014,²⁰⁵ and James Lapine in 2015.²⁰⁶ The 2016 awardee was John Weidman²⁰⁷ and the 2017 awardee was Cameron Mackintosh.²⁰⁸

Henry Miller's Theatre, on West 43rd Street in New York City, was renamed the Stephen Sondheim Theatre on September 15, 2010, for the composer's 80th birthday. In attendance were Nathan Lane, Patti LuPone, and John Weidman. Sondheim said in response to the honor, "I'm deeply embarrassed. Thrilled, but deeply embarrassed. I've always hated my last name. It just doesn't sing. I mean, it's not Belasco. And it's not Rodgers and it's not Simon. And it's not Wilson. It just doesn't sing. It sings better than Schoenfeld and Jacobs. But it just doesn't sing". Lane said, "We love our corporate sponsors and we love their money, but there's something sacred about naming a theatre, and there's something about this that is right and just".²⁰⁹ In 2010, The Daily Telegraph wrote that Sondheim was "almost certainly" the only living composer with a quarterly journal published in his name.⁹ The Sondheim Review, founded in 1994, chronicled and promoted his work. It ceased publication in 2016.²¹⁰ Several benefits and concerts were performed to celebrate Sondheim's 80th birthday in 2010. Among them were the New York

Philharmonic's March 15 and 16 Sondheim: The Birthday Concert at Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall, hosted by David Hyde Pierce. The concert included Sondheim's music, performed by some of the original performers. Lonny Price directed, and Paul Gemignani conducted; performers included Laura Benanti, Matt Cavenaugh, Michael Cerveris, Victoria Clark, Jenn Colella, Jason Danieley, Alexander Gemignani, Joanna Gleason, Nathan Gunn, George Hearn, Patti LuPone, Marin Mazzie, Audra McDonald, John McMartin, Donna Murphy, Karen Olivo, Laura Osnes, Mandy Patinkin, Bernadette Peters, Bobby Steggert, Elaine Stritch, Jim Walton, Chip Zien, and the 2009 Broadway revival cast of *West Side Story*. A ballet was performed by Blaine Hoven and María Noel Riccetto to Sondheim's score for *Reds*, and Jonathan Tunick paid tribute to his longtime collaborator.^{214,215} The concert was broadcast on PBS's Great Performances show in November,²¹⁶ and its DVD was released on November 16. Sondheim 80, a Roundabout Theatre Company benefit, was held on March 22. The evening included a performance of Sondheim on Sondheim, dinner and a show at the New York Sheraton. "A very personal star-studded musical tribute" featured new songs by contemporary musical-theater writers. The composers (who sang their own songs) included Tom Kitt and Brian Yorkey, Michael John LaChiusa, Andrew Lippa, Robert Lopez and Kristen Anderson-Lopez, Lin-Manuel Miranda (accompanied by Rita Moreno), Duncan Sheik, and Jeanine Tesori and David Lindsay-Abaire. Bernadette Peters performed a song that had been cut from a Sondheim show.^{217,218}

An April 26 New York City Center birthday celebration and concert to benefit Young Playwrights, among others, featured (in order of appearance) Michael Cerveris, Alexander Gemignani, Donna Murphy, Debra Monk, Joanna Gleason, Maria Friedman, Mark Jacoby, Len Cariou, BD Wong, Claybourne Elder, Alexander Hanson, Catherine Zeta-Jones, Raúl Esparza, Sutton Foster, Nathan Lane, Michele Pawk, the original cast of *Into the Woods*, Kim Crosby, Chip Zien, Danielle Ferland, and Ben Wright,

Angela Lansbury, and Jim Walton. The concert, directed by John Doyle, was co-hosted by Mia Farrow; greetings from Sheila Hancock, Julia McKenzie, Milton Babbitt, Judi Dench, and Glynis Johns were read. After Catherine Zeta-Jones performed "Send in the Clowns", Julie Andrews sang part of "Not a Day Goes By" in a recorded greeting. Patti LuPone, Barbara Cook, Bernadette Peters, Tom Aldredge, and Victor Garber were originally scheduled to perform, but did not appear.^{219,220} On July 31 BBC Proms concert celebrated Sondheim's 80th birthday at the Royal Albert Hall. The concert featured songs from many of his musicals, including "Send in the Clowns" sung by Judi Dench (reprising her role as Desirée in the 1995 production of *A Little Night Music*), and performances by Bryn Terfel and Maria Friedman. On November 19 the New York Pops, led by Steven Reineke, performed at Carnegie Hall for the composer's 80th birthday. Kate Baldwin, Aaron Lazar, Christiane Noll, Paul Betz, Renee Rakelle, Marilyn Maye (singing "I'm Still Here"), and Alexander Gemignani appeared, and songs included "I Remember",

"Another Hundred People", "Children Will Listen", and "Getting Married Today". Sondheim took the stage during an encore of his song, "Old Friends".^{223,224} To honor Sondheim's 90th birthday, The New York Times published a special nine-page Theater supplement on March 15, 2020, featuring comments by "Critics, Performers and Fans on the Bard of Broadway."²²⁵ Due to theater closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Broadway revival of *Company* set to open on March 22, 2020, Sondheim's 90th birthday, was delayed.²²⁶ But the virtual concert *Take Me to the World: A Sondheim 90th Birthday Celebration* was livestreamed on the Broadway.com YouTube channel on April 26. Participants in the event included Lin-Manuel Miranda, Steven Spielberg, Meryl Streep, Nathan Lane, Mandy Patinkin, Victor Garber, Bernadette Peters, Patti LuPone, Neil Patrick Harris, Jake Gyllenhaal, Christine Baranski, Sutton Foster, Josh Groban, Ben Platt, Brandon Uranowitz, Katrina Lenk, Kelli O'Hara, Jason Alexander, Brian Stokes Mitchell, Beanie

Feldstein, Audra McDonald, Laura Benanti, and Raúl Esparza.^{227,228,229} After New York City theaters reopened in 2021, Sondheim attended revivals of two of his musicals: the opening night of *Assassins* at the Classic Stage Company on November 14, and the first post-shutdown preview of *Company* at the Jacobs Theatre on November 15.^{36,230} In 2022, Cameron Mackintosh presented Stephen Sondheim's *Old Friends*, a two-hour concert tribute to the late Sondheim. The concert happened in the West End in May and aired on BBC Two in December. Performers at the event included Helena Bonham Carter, Rob Brydon, Petula Clark, Judi Dench, Damian Lewis, Julia McKenzie, Bernadette Peters, and Imelda Staunton. Highlights included Dench singing "Send in the Clowns", Peters singing "Children Will Listen", and Staunton's "Everything's Coming Up Roses". Mackintosh revived the tribute for a limited run at the Gielgud Theatre beginning previews on September 16, 2023, with a planned closing on January 6, 2024.²³¹



1930

Sondheim was often described as introverted and solitary. In an interview with Frank Rich, he said: *"The outsider feeling—somebody who people want to both kiss and kill—occurred quite early in my life". Sondheim jokingly told the New York Times in 1966: "I've never found anybody I could work with as quickly as myself, or with less argument", although he described himself as "naturally a collaborative animal".*²⁴⁰ Sondheim came out as gay at the age of 40.^{11,241} He rarely discussed his personal life, though he said in 2013 that he had not been in love before he turned 60, when he entered into a roughly eight-year relationship with dramatist Peter Jones.^{242,243} Sondheim married Jeffrey Scott Romley, a digital technologist, in 2017; they lived in Manhattan and Roxbury, Connecticut.²⁴⁰ In 2010–2011, Sondheim published, in two volumes, his autobiography, *Finishing the Hat: Collected Lyrics (1954–1981) with Attendant Comments, Principles, Heresies, Grudges, Whines and Anecdotes*²⁴⁴ and *Look, I Made a Hat: Collected Lyrics (1981–2011) with Attendant Comments, Amplifications, Dogmas, Harangues, Digressions, Anecdotes and Miscellany*.²⁴⁵ The memoir included Sondheim's lyrical declaration of principle, stating that four principles underpinned "everything I've ever written" These

PERSONAL LIFE & DEATH

2021

were: "Content Dictates Form, Less is More, God is in the Details – all in the service of Clarity."²⁴⁰ In *Six* by Sondheim, James Lapine's 2013 documentary film about the creative process, Sondheim revealed that he liked to write his music lying down and would occasionally have a cocktail to help him write.²⁴⁶ Sondheim died of cardiovascular disease at his home in Roxbury, Connecticut, on November 26, 2021, at age 91.³⁶ Collaborator and friend Jeremy Sams said Sondheim "died in the arms of his husband Jeff".²⁴⁷ On November 29, theatres across the West End of London dimmed their lights for two minutes to mark Sondheim's passing. Broadway theaters similarly dimmed their marquee lights for one minute on December 8.^{248,249} It is estimated that Sondheim's estate, including the rights to his work, was valued at around \$75 million, the entirety of which was placed in trust. In his will, he named F. Richard Pappas and a second unnamed individual as the executors. Beneficiaries included his husband, Jeff; his frequent collaborator James Lapine; former lover Peter Jones; former assistant Steven Clar; designer Peter Wooster; gardener Rob Girard; the Smithsonian Institution; the Library of Congress; and the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.²⁵⁰

STEPHEN SONDHEIM

A CAREER IN THEATRE



WEST SIDE STORY

Burt Shevelove invited Sondheim to a party where Sondheim arrived before him but knew no one else well. He saw a familiar face, Arthur Laurents, who had seen one of the auditions of *Saturday Night*, and they began talking. Laurents told him he was working on a musical version of *Romeo and Juliet* with Leonard Bernstein, but they needed a lyricist; Betty Comden and Adolph Green, who were supposed to write the lyrics, were under contract in Hollywood. He said that although he was not a big fan of Sondheim's music, he enjoyed the lyrics from *Saturday Night* and he could audition for Bernstein. The next day, Sondheim met and played for Bernstein, who said he would let him know. Sondheim wanted to write music and lyrics; he consulted with Hammerstein, who said, as Sondheim related in a 2008 New York Times video interview, "Look, you have a chance to work with very gifted

professionals on a show that sounds interesting, and you could always write your own music eventually. My advice would be to take the job."⁴

West Side Story, directed by Jerome Robbins, opened in 1957 and ran for 732 performances. Sondheim expressed dissatisfaction with his lyrics, saying they did not always fit the characters and were sometimes too consciously poetic. Initially Bernstein was also credited as a co-writer of the lyrics, but he later offered Sondheim solo credit, as Sondheim had essentially done all of them. The New York Times review of the show did not mention the lyrics.³¹ Sondheim described the division of the royalties, saying that Bernstein received 3% and he received 1%. Bernstein suggested evening the percentage at 2% each, but Sondheim refused because he was satisfied with just getting the credit. Sondheim later said

he wished "someone stuffed a handkerchief in my mouth because it would have been nice to get that extra percentage". After *West Side Story* opened, Shevelove lamented the lack of "lowbrow comedy" on Broadway and mentioned a possible musical based on Plautus's Roman comedies. Sondheim was interested in the idea and called a friend, Larry Gelbart, to co-write the script. The show went through a number of drafts, and was interrupted briefly by Sondheim's next project.³² *West Side Story* was nominated for six Tony awards, and won for Best Choreography and Best Scene Design.



GYPSY

In 1959, Laurents and Robbins approached Sondheim for a musical version of Gypsy Rose Lee's memoir after Irving Berlin and Cole Porter turned it down. Sondheim agreed, but Ethel Merman – cast as Mama Rose – had just finished *Happy Hunting* with an unknown composer (Harold Karr) and lyricist (Matt Dubey). Although Sondheim wanted to write the music and lyrics, Merman refused to let another first-time composer write for her and demanded that Jule Styne write the music.³³ Sondheim, concerned that writing lyrics again would pigeonhole him as a lyricist, called his mentor for advice. Hammerstein told him he should take the job, because writing a vehicle for a star would be a good learning experience. Sondheim agreed; *Gypsy* opened on May 21, 1959, and ran for 702 performances.⁴ *Gypsy* was nominated for 8 Tony awards and won a Grammy for Best Musical Theatre Album.



The first Broadway production for which Sondheim wrote the music and lyrics was *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, which opened in 1962 and ran for 964 performances.³⁴ The book, based on farces by Plautus, was by Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart. The show won six Tony Awards (including Best Musical)³⁵ and had the longest Broadway run of any show for which Sondheim wrote both music and lyrics.³⁶

Sondheim had participated in three straight hits, but his next show—1964's *Anyone Can Whistle* was a nine performance bomb (although it introduced Angela Lansbury to musical theater). He then decided to work only when he could write both music and lyrics.³⁷ Sondheim asked author and playwright James Goldman to join him as bookwriter for a new musical inspired by a gathering of former Ziegfeld Follies showgirls: initially titled *The Girls Upstairs*, it became *Follies*.³⁹



ANYONE CAN WHISTLE





Sondheim devoted himself solely to writing both music and lyrics for the theater—and in 1970, he began a collaboration with director Harold Prince resulting in a body of work that is considered one of the high water marks of musical theater history, with critic Howard Kissel writing that the duo had set “Broadway’s highest standards”.^{45,46}

The first Sondheim show with Prince as director was 1970’s *Company*. A show about a single man and his married friends, *Company* (with a book by George Furth) lacked a straightforward plot, instead centering on themes such as marriage and the difficulty of making an emotional connection with another person. It opened on April 26, 1970, at the Alvin Theatre, running for 705 performances after seven previews, and won Tony Awards for Best Musical, Best Music, and Best Lyrics.⁴⁷ The original cast included Dean

Jones, Elaine Stritch, and Charles Kimbrough. Popular songs include “*Company*”, “*The Little Things You Do Together*”, “*Sorry-Grateful*”, “*You Could Drive a Person Crazy*”, “*Another Hundred People*”, “*Getting Married Today*”, “*Side by Side*”, “*The Ladies Who Lunch*”, and “*Being Alive*”.

Walter Kerr of *The New York Times* praised the production, the performances, and the score, writing, “Sondheim has never written a more sophisticated, more pertinent, or—this is the surprising thing in the circumstances—more melodious score”.⁴⁸ Documentary filmmaker D. A. Pennebaker captured the making of the original cast recording shortly after the show opened on Broadway in his 1970 film *Original Cast Album: Company*.^{49,50} Stritch, Sondheim, and producer Thomas Z. Shepard are featured prominently. *Company* was revived on Broadway in 1995,

2006, and 2020/2021 (the last revival began previews in March 2020, but shut down before resuming in November 2021 due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic; in this revival, the main character was a woman, Bobbie, portrayed by Katrina Lenk).⁴⁷ The 2006 and 2021 productions won the Tony Award for Best Revival of a Musical.

FOLLIES

Follies (1971), with a book by James Goldman, opened on April 4, 1971, at the Winter Garden Theatre and ran for 522 performances after 12 previews.⁵¹ The plot centers on a reunion, in a crumbling Broadway theater scheduled for demolition, of performers in Weismann's Follies (a musical revue, based on the Ziegfeld Follies, that played in that theater between the world wars). The production also featured choreography and co-direction by Michael Bennett, who later created A Chorus Line. The original production starred Dorothy Collins, John McMartin, Alexis Smith, and Gene Nelson. It included the songs "I'm Still Here", "Could I Leave You?", and "Losing My Mind". The production earned 11 Tony Award nominations, including Best Musical. It won 7 Tony Awards, including Best Original Score. The show was revived on Broadway in 2001 and 2011.^{52,53}





A Little Night Music (1973), based on Ingmar Bergman's *Smiles of a Summer Night* and with a score primarily in waltz time, was among Sondheim's greatest commercial successes. Time magazine called it his "most brilliant accomplishment to date".⁵⁴ The original cast included Glynis Johns, Len Cariou, Hermione Gingold, and Judy Kahan. The show opened on Broadway at the Shubert Theatre on February 25, 1973, and ran for 601 performances and 12 previews.⁵⁵ Clive Barnes of The New York Times wrote, "A Little Night Music is soft on the ears, easy on the eyes, and pleasant on the mind. It is less than brash, but more than brassy, and it should give a lot of pleasure. It is the

A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC

remembrance of a few things past, and all to the sound of a waltz and the understanding smile of a memory. Good God!—[an] adult musical!"⁵⁶ The production earned 12 Tony Award nominations and won 6 awards, including Best Musical and Best Original Score. "Send in the Clowns", a song from the musical, was a hit for Judy Collins and became Sondheim's best-known song. It has since been covered by Frank Sinatra, Barbra Streisand, and Judi Dench. The production was adapted to screen in the 1977 film of the same name starring Elizabeth Taylor, Dianna Rigg, Len Cariou, and Hermione Gingold. It was revived on Broadway in 2009 in a production starring Catherine Zeta-Jones and Angela Lansbury.⁵⁷

can be endlessly inventive. There is a hugely amusing recitation of the attributes given by the different professions—priest, lawyer, and so on—to the pies they contribute to. At other times the lyrics have a black, piercing poetry to them.”⁶⁶ Lansbury’s performance was captured alongside George Hearn in the Los Angeles production, which was filmed and shown on PBS as part of Masterpiece Theatre. It later earned five Primetime Emmy Award nominations. It has been revived on Broadway in 1989, 2005, and 2023. The 2023 production starred Josh Groban, Annaleigh Ashford, Jordan Fisher, and Gaten Matarazzo. A film adaptation was made in 2007 directed by Tim Burton and starring Johnny Depp, Helena Bonham Carter, and Alan Rickman.

SWEENEY TODD

Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street (1979), with a score by Sondheim and a book by Hugh Wheeler, is based on Christopher Bond’s 1973 stage play derived from the Victorian original.^{61,62,63,64,65} The original production starred Angela Lansbury, Len Cariou, Victor Garber, and Edmund Lyndeck. Popular songs from the musical include “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd”, “The Worst Pies in London”, “Pretty Women”, “A Little Priest”, “Not While I’m Around”, “By the Sea”, and “Johanna”. The production earned 9 Tony Award nominations and won 8 awards, including Best Musical, Best Original Score, Best Actress, and Best Actor. Richard Eder of The New York Times wrote: “Mr. Sondheim’s lyrics





Merrily We Roll Along (1981), with a book by George Furth, is one of Sondheim's most traditional scores; songs from the musical were recorded by Frank Sinatra and Carly Simon. According to Sondheim's music director Paul Gemignani, "Part of Steve's ability is this extraordinary versatility". The show was not the success their previous collaborations had been: after a chaotic series of preview performances, it opened to widely negative reviews, and closed after a run of less than two weeks. Due to the high quality of Sondheim's score, the show has been repeatedly revised and produced in the ensuing years. Martin Gottfried wrote, "Sondheim had set out to write traditional songs ... But [despite] that there is nothing ordinary about the music."⁶⁷ Sondheim later said: "Did

I feel betrayed? I'm not sure I would put it like that. What did surprise me was the feeling around the Broadway community—if you can call it that, though I guess I will for lack of a better word—that they wanted Hal and me to fail."⁶⁸

Sondheim and Furth continued to revise the show in subsequent years. An acclaimed feature documentary on the show and its aftermath, *Best Worst Thing That Ever Could Have Happened*, directed by Merrily cast member Lonny Price, and produced by Bruce David Klein, Kitt Lavoie, and Ted Schillinger, premiered at the New York Film Festival on November 18, 2016. A film adaptation of *Merrily We Roll Along*, directed by Richard Linklater, began production in 2019 and is planned to continue for the next two decades

to allow the actors to age in real time.⁶⁹ An off-Broadway revival starring Jonathan Groff, Daniel Radcliffe, and Lindsay Mendez ran from November 2022 to January 2023 at the New York Theatre Workshop; it moved to Broadway in fall 2023. *Merrily* won 2024 Tony Awards for Best Revival of a Musical, Best Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role in a Musical (Jonathan Groff), Best Performance by an Actor in a Featured Role in a Musical (Daniel Radcliffe), and Best Orchestrations (Jonathan Tunick).⁶⁹ Merrily's failure greatly affected Sondheim; he was ready to quit theater and do movies, create video games or write mysteries: "I wanted to find something to satisfy myself that does not involve Broadway and dealing with all those people who hate me and hate Hal."⁷⁰

Sondheim decided “that there are better places to start a show” and found a new collaborator in James Lapine after he saw Lapine’s *Twelve Dreams* off-Broadway in 1981: “I was discouraged, and I don’t know what would have happened if I hadn’t discovered *Twelve Dreams* at the Public Theatre”;⁴⁴ Lapine has a taste “for the avant-garde and for visually oriented theater in particular”. Their first collaboration was *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984), with Sondheim’s music evoking Georges Seurat’s pointillism. Sondheim and Lapine won the 1985 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for the play,⁷² and it was revived on Broadway in 2008, and again in a limited run in 2017.^{73,74}

SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE



INTO THE WOODS

They collaborated on *Into the Woods* (1987), a musical based on several Brothers Grimm fairy tales. Although Sondheim has been called the first composer to bring rap music to Broadway (with the Witch in the opening number of *Into the Woods*), he attributed the first rap in theater to Meredith Willson's "Rock Island" from *The Music Man* (1957).²⁶ *Into the Woods* was revived on Broadway in 2002²⁵ and at the St. James Theatre in 2022.





Assassins opened off-Broadway at Playwrights Horizons on December 18, 1990, with a book by John Weidman. The show explored, in revue form, a group of historical figures who tried (with varying success) to assassinate the President of the United States. The musical closed on February 16, 1991, after 73 performances. The Los Angeles Times reported the show "has been sold out since previews began, reflecting the strong appeal of Sondheim's work among the theater crowd."⁷⁷ In his review for The New York Times, Frank Rich wrote, "Assassins will have to fire with sharper aim and fewer blanks if it is to shoot to kill."^{78,79} Assassins was eventually staged on Broadway in 2004.⁸⁰ Saturday Night was shelved until its 1997 production at London's Bridewell Theatre. The next year, its score was recorded; a revised version, with two new songs, ran off-Broadway at Second Stage Theatre in 2000 and at London's Jermyn Street Theatre in 2009.⁸¹

Sondheim and Weidman reunited during the late 1990s for Wise Guys, a musical comedy based on the lives of colorful businessmen Addison and Wilson Mizner. A Broadway production starring Nathan Lane and Victor Garber, directed by Sam Mendes, and planned for spring 2000,⁸² was delayed. Renamed Bounce in 2003, the show premiered at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago and the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., in a production directed by Harold Prince, his first collaboration with Sondheim since 1981.⁸³ Poor reviews prevented Bounce from reaching Broadway, but a revised version opened off-Broadway as Road Show at the Public Theater on October 28, 2008. Directed by John Doyle, it closed December 28, 2008.^{84,85,86} The production won the 2009 Obie Award for Music and Lyrics⁸⁷ and the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Lyrics.⁸⁸

PASSION

Sondheim's and Lapine's last collaboration on a musical was the rhapsodic Passion (1994), adapted from Ettore Scola's Italian film *Passione D'Amore*. With a run of 280 performances, Passion was the shortest-running show to win a Tony Award for Best Musical.⁷⁶



Asked about writing new work, Sondheim replied in 2006: "No ... It's age. It's a diminution of energy and the worry that there are no new ideas. It's also an increasing lack of confidence. I'm not the only one. I've checked with other people. People expect more of you and you're aware of it and you shouldn't be."⁸⁹ In December 2007, he said that in addition to continuing work on *Bounce*, he was "nibbling at a couple of things with John Weidman and James Lapine."⁹⁰ Lapine prepared the multimedia production *iSondheim: a Musical Revue*, which was scheduled to open in April 2009 at the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta; it was canceled due to "difficulties encountered by the commercial producers attached to the project

SONDHEIM ON SONDHEIM

... in raising the necessary funds".^{91,92,93} Later revised as *Sondheim on Sondheim*, the revue was produced at Studio 54 by the Roundabout Theatre Company; previews began on March 19, 2010, and ran from April 22 to June 13. The revue's cast included Barbara Cook, Vanessa L. Williams, Tom Wopat, Norm Lewis, and Leslie Kritzer.⁹⁴ In 2013, Lapine directed the HBO feature-length documentary *Six by Sondheim*, which he executive produced with former New York Times theater critic Frank Rich, a longtime champion of Sondheim's work.⁹⁵ Sondheim himself acts and sings in the documentary as Joe, the cynical theater producer in the song "Opening Doors".⁹⁶



HERE WE ARE

Sondheim began collaborating with David Ives in 2014 on a musical based on the Luis Buñuel films *The Exterminating Angel* and *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, initially slated for previews at the Public Theater in 2017.¹⁰¹ That date was cast into doubt after an August 2016 reading for the musical had only the first act finished.¹⁰² A November 2016 workshop included Matthew Morrison, Shuler Hensley, Heidi Blickenstaff, Sierra Boggess, Gabriel Ebert, Sarah Stiles, Michael Cerveris, and Jennifer Simard.¹⁰³ After media outlets mistakenly reported that the show had the working title Buñuel, Sondheim said that

it still lacked a title in 2017.¹⁰⁴ The Public Theatre denied reports that the show would be part of its 2019–20 season, but hoped to produce the musical “when it is ready”.¹⁰⁵ Development reportedly ceased for a time,¹⁰⁶ but resumed for a September 2021 reading of the show, then called *Square One*.¹⁰⁷ Nathan Lane and Bernadette Peters were involved in a reading of this new work,¹⁰⁸ and Sondheim discussed adapting the Buñuel films in the final interview before his death.¹⁰⁹ A posthumous production of the collaboration, directed by Joe Mantello, premiered at The Shed in September 2023 as *Here We Are*.¹¹⁰



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Stephen Sondheim

