

WHY MERMAN MATTERS

By Klea Blackhurst

Until recently, whenever I was asked the proverbial “who influenced you most as a singer,” I could never arrive at an elemental response. The question always caught me by surprise, so I’d furrow my brow and start to name singers I truly enjoy and deeply respect: Ella Fitzgerald, Rosemary Clooney, Freddie Mercury, Donny Osmond. But as the opportunities for this question began increasing, I knew I needed to define what felt indefinable. I was ready to pinpoint who was instrumental in actually forming my view of a song; my love of certain sounds. “Why doesn’t the answer just pop into my head? Why don’t I know this,” I thought. Then it came to me. I realized I couldn’t point to the singer because it wasn’t the singer - it was the song.

My mother’s collection of Broadway Original Cast Albums was a sort of magical soundtrack to my childhood, played in every room of the house on one of those plastic portable phonographs with three speeds and one tiny speaker. That, simply, is the music I’ve loved the longest; those are the songs that influenced my tiny view of the world. By the second grade, I knew every lyric to Half A Sixpence and I Do! I Do! But my personal favorite had a gal on the cover in a buckskin dress with a squirrel rifle and really red lips. Her huge voice reminded me of my mother’s and I loved her long before I knew she had a name other than Annie Oakley.

At ten, I was cast in a production of The King and I, starring John Cullum and Patricia Kies, and I was finally able to step into that world where songs actually came to life. There, I began to experience the balance and beauty of musical theatre structure for the first time. How music could move a story. I learned the differences between starring roles, romantic leads, comic leads, character roles, the ballads, uptempos, and specialty numbers. But the BIGGEST discovery was that not all women sounded like my mom and Annie Oakley. A defining realization as I was finding my own voice on the stage: There were sopranos and I was not one.

The summer after seventh grade I was paid \$35 a week to babysit Wally Nelson and his sisters. On Fridays, the money and I went straight to the mall, where I faithfully added to my own budding Broadway collection. I then spent the entire week listening to the new show, memorizing it, going to the library to dig up anything I could find about it. Sometime that summer I bought Gypsy... and the world has never been the same. Suddenly, there was Annie

Oakley coming out of nowhere to knock the wind out of me as Mama Rose. Suddenly, I saw the scope of what was possible, and I knew if I was going to make theatre and singing my life, there was someone I needed to know more about - Ethel Merman.

Once I was old enough to realize the full impact of her talents on the Broadway stage, I kept her close to my heart and championed everything about her. According to people who were there, it is apparently impossible to describe the relationship she had with her audience. They say a good comparison doesn't remotely exist. She is famous for being heard in the last row of the balcony at a time when there was no amplification. Songwriters adored writing for her and worshipped her ability to deliver their lyrics with beautiful phrasing, stunning style, and a wicked sense of comedy. Her lack of stage fright and unwavering professionalism are legendary. She was dazzling and gutsy, raising the bar to a new level for actresses and songwriters alike. Broadway became her home. She lived to perform for her audience and they would virtually crackle with excitement when she stepped onto the stage.

As Merman sang in Anything Goes, times have changed. The songs, the sounds, and the stars are very different now than they were in 1930, when she burst onto the scene in Girl Crazy. But her unabashed, larger-than-life style and brassy voice are constantly memorialized in various ways, from drag parodies to cabaret themes to cocktail party quips. She's an icon on many levels, and they are all tributes in and of themselves.

Eventually, I was compelled to construct an homage of my own, working with the conviction that it is critical to remember not just what she looked like or sounded like, but what she inspired in those who were propelling theatre and music forward at the time. The roles written for her are brilliant and classic. The list of songs associated with her name is astounding – enough to fill several evenings. I finally made my song decisions and opened Everything the Traffic Will Allow in early 2001. A whole new world opened up for me. I finally felt like I was in Show Business!

Given all this, how could I answer anything other than “Ethel Merman” when asked who influenced me most? She embodies the music, the legend, and the style that I was practically weaned on; and that I long to express as a performer

Merman used to say on talk shows, “Broadway's been very good to me, but I like to think I've been very good to Broadway.” Well, Merman's been very good to me and I like to think I've been

very good to Merman. Of course she doesn't need me and yet here I am, hopelessly devoted. Always have been and suppose I always will.