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# JukeBox Musicals

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JUKEBOX MUSICALS

by

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Bachelor of Arts  
Gustavus Adolphus College, 2011

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## ABSTRACT

This masters thesis explores the jukebox musical as an art form and includes the script and next steps for a solo show about the work of Joni Mitchell.

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# CHAPTER 1

## THE PROLIFERATION AND SUCCESS OF

### JUKEBOX MUSICALS

A jukebox musical is defined as "a stage or film musical that uses previously released popular songs as its musical score" (Cash). Songs which are linked together by a period or specific artist are "contextualized into a dramatic plot" and put on stage creating a musical genre that spans the the full scope of financial success and critical praise (Cash). Although jukebox musicals have been performed since the 1970s, the international popularity of *Mamma Mia!* release in the late 1990s marked what the BBC referred to as "the birth of a genre" (Lindrea). Which is not to overlook the success of *Buddy Holly Story* which ran on the West End from 1989-2003, showing that juke-box musicals have "achieved success for years" (Cash).

Since the release of *Mamma Mia!* popularity of the jukebox musical has only expanded. In fact, in 2010 the Tony Award for Best Musical nominees were all jukebox musicals except for *Memphis* (Kaye). This style of production has become so popular that the "number of productions [and] running dates proves this genre has usurped the traditional musical that dominated the Broadway stage from the 1950s through the 1990s" (Adamson, 119).

I've found a number of the projects I've worked on over the last five years fall in the genre of jukebox musical; *Keep on the Sunny Side* and *Ring of Fire* chronicle the the Carter family and Johnny Cash respectively. *Crazy for You* is a compilation of Gershwin songs set to a story. I've also seen many jukebox musicals including *The Buddy Holly Story* at Broadway Palm in Florida, *Beautiful* at the Stephen Sondheim theatre in New York, and *The Doyle and Debbie Show* at Milwaukee Rep, and *The Marvelous Wonderettes* at Barter Theatre in Virginia. Currently on Broadway are *On Your Feet* and *Waitress* featuring the music of Gloria Estefan and Sara Bareilles respectively. Other jukebox successes include *Million Dollar Quartet*, *Rock of Ages*, *Jersey Boys*, *American Idiot*, and *Woody Guthrie's American Song*.

Producer Ken Davenport differentiates between what he calls a bio-musical, or musicals that track an artist's story and jukebox musicals such as *Mamma Mia!* "Lennon is dependent upon that music... *Mamma Mia!* (with a different title), on the other hand, could have been attempted with Lawrence Welk music" (Davenport). Tom Millward of London Theatre Co., however, considers bio-musical a subcategory of the genre; the bio-musical follows the life of an artist, opposed to a tribute musical which is concert style, and finally an original such as *Mamma Mia!* which adds a book to prefab songs (Millward).

I'm interested in creating original work of this genre based on the life of Joni Mitchell and want to understand the commercial and artistic factors that contribute to the success of a production in this genre. This paper will analyze the proliferation of this musical genre including the economic factors and the artistic qualities that make a

jukebox musical successful. Using research on the wide scope of this genre in addition to personal interviews with producer Doug Nuttelman, playwright Dr. Douglas Pote, and collaborator Erin Parker who have all worked worked in the genre of jukebox musicals, I hope to draw conclusions about what makes plays in this genre successful.

Financially, the viability of the jukebox musical is a point of contention. Traditionally musicals are box-office life support that allow straight plays and new works to be explored. A critique of the jukebox musical, however, is that it takes economic opportunity from artists who are creating new musicals and funnels more money to the artists who have already made millions on their songs (Katz).

On the other hand, they can be surefire money makers, "a no-brainer for investor-fans of the music being served up" (Kaye). "The idea of putting on a show where the audience already knows the score walking in seems... financially sound" (Katz).

After all, *Mamma Mia!* sold out in London, New York and Japan and the creators became millionaires (Lindrea). Parroting its stage success, the movie version of *Mamma Mia!* released in 2008 grossed two billion dollars at the theatre box office globally and was the "fastest selling DVD ever [selling] 1.7 million copies in its first day" (Andrews).

Producer Doug Nuttelman, who selected *Ring of Fire* for the 2015 season at Great Plains Theatre in Kansas says, "less time [is] needed to market the production because of the name(s) attached to the music" (Nuttelman).

Despite the success of jukebox musicals in defining a new genre, several have proved to be flops. *Lennon*, based on John Lennon ran only 6 weeks and *Good Vibrations* based on the Beach Boys ran only 3 months (Lindrea). As Shenton of The Stage points

out, jukebox is "not a magic formula for successful musicals" (Lindrea). For example, Shenton points out that *Good Vibrations*, *Lennon* and *All Shook Up*, an Elvis review set to the story of William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* lost thirty million dollars collectively (Lindrea). Jukebox musicals are a "hit-and-miss game with no golden rules" (Millward).

Noel Katz of the blog Onstage writes, "to understand what's so awful about jukebox musicals, we have to talk about what makes great musicals great" (Katz). Shenton of "The Stage" attributes the success of *Mamma Mia!* to it being a "great feel-good show in its own right" (Lindrea). Katz cites great musicals such as *Fiddler on the Roof* having collaborators in the same room. The opposite of having this in-room collaboration would be to altogether "eliminate composer and the lyricist" from the creative process having "someone who's never written a musical before" write a script with prefab songs (Katz). The Telegraph reporter Amanda Andrews poses the questions, why would someone go see a "cover of a band that is still touring?" (Andrews). On the other hand when a group no longer exists, there is a special draw to hear the music live (Millward).

The primary concern with these jukebox musicals is the artistic quality that is lost in the prefab nature. Strong musicals have songs that "grow organically out of the scenes and each line sounds natural coming out of the character that says them" (Katz). This criticism paints jukebox musical as a throwback to an older style of musical theatre. The idea that songs should advance the plot of a musical didn't become popular until the 1940s when the infamous duo Rodgers and Hammerstein created their first musical, *Oklahoma*. According to Dr. Brown at Lipscomb University in Nashville, *Oklahoma's* script, often referred to as "the book," has priority and all other elements exist only to

further the dramatic needs of the book" (Brown). Katz calls the "retrofitting" of famous music into a dramatic plot "ineffective" saying that the "songs are being jerry-rigged to fit new characters" (Katz). This may be why New York Times critic Ben Brantley refers to the jukebox musical as an "unimaginative but ever-expanding genre... the prefab musical that takes its score from Top 40 hits of the past" (Lindrea).

Capitalizing on the artists styles to bring the music to life is a key component of the successful jukebox musical. After all, the piece of theater will inevitably be something different than the artist themselves created, thus expanding the work and making it artistically new while still presenting best-loved songs and stories. Erin Parker, who was in the first National Tour of *Ring of Fire* says in addition to many changes in the book during the collaboration "they did a lot of rewrites and new arrangements for the tour, and a lot of the arrangements were done specifically for our voices, styles, etc" (Parker).

The important element of collaboration referenced by Parker and Katz was prevalent in the creation of *Keep on the Sunny Side* as well. Dr. Douglas Pote, a physician and playwright who has written three jukebox musicals that have been produced at the Barter Theatre says his plays "generate from [his] interest in music and musical history" (Pote). Pote usually would listen to the music, read about an artist and move on to someone else, but the Carter family, the topic of his play *Keep on the Sunny Side* stuck with him (Pote). One day when Pote was seeing a show at Barter Theatre he asked Artistic Director Rick Rose, "Did you ever think about doing a play on the Carter

family?" He went home, wrote an outline and four scenes, and submitted it to the Barter. It was the first ever play read at Applachain Festival of Plays and Playwrights (Pote).

On the topic of jukebox musicals, Pote says the "primary reason for writing any of these plays is the music" (Pote). He, like many who create and produce jukebox musicals wanted to to bring the music to a broader audience" (Pote). According to Nuttelman, producing a jukebox musical "is appealing because you have material that has already been accessed by people and presenting it for potentially wider appeal" (Nuttelman). With music like the Carter family, there is a strange sound which may not hook people if you mention their name or play the music for them, but "in the play [the audience is] captive for two hours" (Pote). Harkening back to Parker's comments, the creativity of a new group breathing life into the classic favorites can make the music even more appealing to a contemporary audience. "Even though the songs are true to the spirit of the Carter family, they're much more accessible" (Pote).

The story doesn't have to be great, but it does have to come from the music. Jukebox musicals' success is "due to the longevity and fan base... not due to the dramatic tensions of an enticing plot" (Millward). Pote says "I never thought... this is a story the world needs to know ... we were just very fortunate... to discover an extremely powerful story. That was happenstance" (Pote). "Writing plays using existing music is something I've paid attention to and a lot of these flop... you have to start with the music" (Pote). Pote discovered that when you can fit the right song into the play, "not just lyrically, but emotionally- it is synergistic, powerful" (Pote).

Pote acknowledges that most people think of musicals as "interrupting the flow for another song and dance. " He says of *Mamma Mia!*, "a lot of the songs fit the moment" to which he attributes the strength of the musical (Pote). Of his musicals' own success, Pote says, "no one has ever said to me 'these songs just feel like they're stuck in there' " (Pote).

Allowing the script to blossom organically from the songs and in turn allowing those songs to flow naturally from the dialogue in the script is crucial to a successful jukebox musical. Engaging collaborators is fundamental to the creative process. Finally, allowing the music to speak to a new audience by adapting it and making it alive for the performers working with the material not only honors the artist whose songs are being used but also makes a play elegant its own right.

## CHAPTER 2

### JONI, A SOLO PERFORMANCE

*Lights fade, the sound of applause.*

*Applause fade, strumming is heard in the dark. A pool of light comes up on Joni holding an autoharp.*

*Joni begins to play Both Sides Now*

JONI:

Roses and flocks of angel hair

And ice cream castles in the air

And feather canyons everywhere

I've looked at clouds that way

But now they only block the sun

They rain and snow on everyone

So many things I would have done

But clouds got in my way

I've looked at clouds from both sides now

From up and down and still somehow

It's cloud's illusions I recall

I really don't know clouds at all

Moons and Junes and ferries wheels

The dizzy dancing way you feel

As every fairy tale comes real

I've looked at love that way

But now it's just another show

You leave 'em laughing when you go

And if you care, don't let them know

No, Don't give yourself away

I've looked at love from both sides now

From give and take and still somehow

It's love's illusions I recall

I really don't know love at all

Tears and fears and feeling proud,

To say "I love you" right out loud

Dreams and schemes and circus crowds

I've looked at life that way

But now old friend are acting strange

They shake their heads, they say I've changed

Something is lost, and something's gained

In living every day.

I've looked at life from both sides now

From win and lose and still somehow

It's life's illusions I recall

I really don't know life at all

I've looked at life from both sides now

From win and lose and still somehow

It's life's illusions I recall

I really don't know life at all

*Applause are heard.*

*Joni set autoharp on piano. Applause fade as she sits at piano. Clears throat, smiles at audience, and begins to play Woodstock*

JONI:

Well, I came upon a child of God

He was walking along the road

And I asked him, where are you going

This he told me

I'm going down to Yasgur's Farm

Gonna join in a rock and roll band

Gonna camp out on the land, I'm gonna set my soul free

We are stardust, billion year old carbon

We are golden,

And we've got to get ourselves back to the garden

Well, then can I walk beside you?

I have come here to lose the smog,

And I feel to be a cog in somethin' turning

Well maybe it's just the time of year

And maybe it's the time of man

I don't know who I am

But life is for learning

We are stardust, billion year old carbon

We are golden,

And we've got to get ourselves back to the garden

By the time we got to Woodstock

We were half a million strong

And everywhere was song and celebration

And I dreamed I saw a bomber

Riding shotgun in the sky,

And turning into butterflies

Above our nation

We are stardust, billion year old carbon

We are golden, caught in the Devil's bargain  
And we've got to get ourselves back to the garden

Oooo,

oooo,

ooooo

*A moment of silence before applause are heard. They fade.*

JONI:

*(spoken)* This is a song about seasons, about circles, about growing old, and growing young. It's called the circle game.

*She begins to play Circle Game on piano, singing a cappella she stands and circles to pick up guitar, sits on stool and plays, as she sings:*

JONI:

Yesterday a child came out to wander  
Caught a dragonfly inside a jar  
Fearful when the sky was full of thunder  
And tearful at the falling of a star  
And the seasons they go round and round  
And the painted ponies go up and down

We're captive on the carousel of time  
We can't return we can only look behind  
From where we came  
And go round and round and round  
In the circle game  
Then the child moved ten times round the seasons  
Skated over ten clear frozen streams  
Words like, when you're older, must appease him  
And promises of someday make his dreams  
And the seasons they go round and round  
And the painted ponies go up and down  
We're captive on the carousel of time  
We can't return we can only look behind  
From where we came  
And go round and round and round  
In the circle game

Sixteen springs and sixteen summers gone now  
Cartwheels turn to car wheels through the town  
And they tell him,  
Take your time, it won't be long now  
Till you drag your feet to slow the circles down

And the seasons they go round and round

And the painted ponies go up and down

We're captive on the carousel of time

We can't return we can only look behind

From where we came

And go round and round and round

In the circle game

So the years spin by and now the boy is twenty

Though his dreams have lost some grandeur coming true

There'll be new dreams, maybe better dreams and plenty

Before the last revolving year is through

And the seasons they go round and round

And the painted ponies go up and down

We're captive on the carousel of time

We can't return, we can only look behind

From where we came

And go round and round and round

In the circle game

And go round and round and round

In the circle game

*As the final chords are being played, the sound of applause rises and stage fades to black.*

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*Both Sides Now, Woodstock, and The Circle Game*

Song and Lyrics by Joni Mitchell

## CHAPTER 3

### MOVING FORWARD

It was an incredible privilege to perform work so personal to me onstage. In the words of Robyn Hunt, it is important that we are generative as artists. I am the "reader" for my friend, the playwright Seth Kaltwasser, and attempting to write for the stage has deepened my appreciation for the editing process and the delicate yet muscular work of playwrights. Moving forward, Joni can be turned into a full length jukebox musical in the style of 'Beautiful, The Carol King Musical.' Working as an actor devising the script, I would hand off the writing of dialogue to a more deft playwright and collaborate on the structure and storytelling. A piece performed by several actors with songs interwoven into the story telling with a concert-like sequence of songs at the end would be dynamic onstage and allow even more people to hear the work of Joni Mitchell. I would also like to write a funny piece, totally different from this first project and fictional with new characters and made up scenarios. This process has been liberating and while I entered the writing process wanting my solo show to have an audience to speak to because I didn't like the device of heads moving back and forth, I now see that this can be executed cleanly and add a delightful quality to a solo show. Having seen the work of a solo show

transferred into a multi-person play from a past MFA actor I've found I prefer the solo show format and the dynamic creativity that comes from working around what is seemingly a limitation.

Generating written content in the semester leading up to performing the solo show was a brave endeavor for me. I hope to continue the liberating act of generating content for the stage.

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