

The New York Times

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, please [click here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#) »



July 14, 2002

THEATER

THEATER; Hard Times for Cast Albums, to Broadway's Regret

By BARRY SINGER

IF a musical opens in New York and no record company records it, does it still make a sound?

That is the question increasingly confronting the creators of musical theater. With the record business reeling from corporate consolidation and the general economic downturn, producing cast albums has become more of an extravagance than ever. The devotion of a niche audience is no longer enough to justify losses, and predictably the major labels are cutting back.

Last winter, the record company BMG downsized its RCA Victor cast album division to the point of oblivion, relegating its senior vice president for shows and soundtracks, Bill Rosenfield, to a consulting job.

Talk to executives at most major labels and the refrain is the same: "Selectivity." Meaning simply: "We will be recording less."

"The nurturing of young composers and their shows by big recording companies is no longer going to happen," Mr. Rosenfield said in a recent interview. "What they're telling us is they only want hits."

Not that the major labels have ever been interested in anything else. The list of musicals not recorded since the dawn of original-cast albums is one of fascinating failures, including last season's critically dismissed Lincoln Center Theater production of "Thou Shalt Not," with a score by the pop-jazz crossover artist Harry Connick Jr. When Mr. Connick's record company, Sony, passed on preserving "Thou Shalt Not," the composer was so put out, he recorded the show at his own expense. His self-produced CD has gone on sale at Amazon.com.

Several people knowledgeable about the unsuccessful musical "Sweet Smell of Success" last season, who spoke on the condition that they not be identified, said that Sony had tried to extricate itself from a signed commitment to record the show after the reviews during a pre-Broadway run in Chicago were negative. In the end, Sony chose not to exercise its contractual escape clause and a cast album was released. Peter Gelb, the president of Sony

Classical, declined a request for an interview, as did Marty Bell, one of the show's producers.

Recording musicals has always been a labor of love. Though "Oklahoma!" and "My Fair Lady" sold staggeringly well at first and continue to earn handsomely today, the numbers for recording an average musical have never added up.

"It is very difficult to record a new Broadway show for under \$300,000 and, quite frankly, it can be much more than that," said Denis McNamara, senior vice president for Decca/Decca Broadway, part of the Universal Classics group. "You really have to sell in excess of 150,000 units to see a profit. Our 'Mamma Mia!' -- Universal is also one of the show's producers -- is the most successful cast recording since 'Rent,' which tells you something about the reality of original-cast albums. 'Mamma Mia!' will be a gold record" -- selling 500,000 copies or more -- "by the end of the summer. And it's not just the cast album. 'Abba Gold' on our Polydor label has actually sold more during the same period."

"Mamma Mia!" is also another example of ledger sheets legislating against Broadway cast albums. The CD referred to by Mr. McNamara is the London cast recording. Despite the show's substantial Broadway box office, there are no immediate plans to record the Broadway cast because Decca does not want to dilute the public's Abba appetite with a competing disc.

Recent sales figures for original-cast albums say it all. "The Phantom of the Opera" is king, with more than 15 million units sold. (This is also the London cast recording; no Broadway cast album was recorded.) "Rent" follows far behind, at 2 million plus. After almost five years, "The Lion King" has sold in excess of 800,000, which seems impressive until that figure is compared with the movie's soundtrack sales of more than 16 million.

Surprisingly, "The Producers" has sold only 200,000 copies so far, after Sony paid a king's ransom to record it. (Sony executives would not comment on how much they paid, but estimates from other record company executives range as high as \$500,000.) Though 200,000 copies sold is a respectable number, it pales by comparison with the 340,000 that "Mama Mia!" has sold. Abba's music transcends Broadway theater, while "The Producers" does not.

Mr. Rosenfield understands the math. "Record companies will continue to overpay for hit Broadway shows," he said, "even as they phase out the rest, because overpaying is what the real record business is all about."

Is there a better way?

Sh-K-Boom Records (pronounced Shikaboom) is a two-year-old independent label that recently released its first original-cast album, "The Last Five Years." The musical, with its cast of two, closed quickly Off Broadway this year, even though it possessed what many people in the theater business considered the most original score of the season -- by the young Tony

Award-winning composer Jason Robert Brown.

"The Last Five Years" is the sort of worthy new musical that Mr. Rosenfield said he would have recorded at RCA. Instead, as a co-producer, he shared the project with Sh-K-Boom's 35-year-old founder, Kurt Deutsch, whose wife, Sherie René Scott, was a star of the show.

Mr. Deutsch, an actor who created Sh-K-Boom to produce and market his wife's first solo CD, soon realized that the label could satisfy a potentially lucrative demand. "There are a lot of Broadway stars who don't want to make show tune records," Mr. Deutsch said. "They want to bridge the gap between rock 'n' roll and theater without being pigeonholed. Major labels would never give these guys the time of day because they believe that you cannot be associated with Broadway if you're going to do a mainstream, crossover record. They think Broadway is corny, even cheesy, and appeals to older audiences. And you know what? They're right in a lot of ways. But there is this whole new generation of artists who are cool and are appealing to a much younger audience. I figured if I branched out, I could build a community of young fans, composers and stars."

The cost-management problems involved in recording a cast album, however, surprised Mr. Deutsch. "You have to pay to re-use everything," he said. "You have to re-license the orchestrations, you have to repay the music copyist, the press agent -- they're unionized too -- the company manager. The biggest obstacle, though, is Actors' Equity, which has this rule requiring each actor in a show, plus the stage manager, to be paid a week's salary for every eight hours in the studio. That's why all musicals are recorded in one desperate day."

Norbert Leo Butz delivered a Tony-nominated performance in Mr. Connick's "Thou Shalt Not" before starring opposite Ms. Scott in "The Last Five Years." "It's funny that I did two original musicals, one small and one enormous, and only the small one made it officially to CD," Mr. Butz said. "But it's an ephemeral process."

Other independent labels that continue to record new musicals include Original Cast Records, Jay Records, Fynsworth Alley -- a new enterprise for a familiar figure on the show music scene, Bruce Kimmel, formerly of Varèse Sarabande Records -- and the 26-year veteran DRG Records, which released last season's most electrifying cast album, "Elaine Stritch at Liberty."

Robert Hurwitz, the president of Nonesuch Records (part of the Warner Music Group, a division of AOL Time Warner), records original-cast albums with a selectivity that makes even the scaled back majors seem profligate. In addition to recording last September's concert revival of "Dreamgirls," Mr. Hurwitz has limited himself to cast album relationships with two composers: Stephen Sondheim (the latest Nonesuch album is "Into the Woods") and his heir apparent, the widely admired Adam Guettel.

"Classical recordings and Broadway records are getting more expensive to make," Mr. Hurwitz

said, "while the audiences that purchase these records are getting smaller. So it should not be surprising that companies are becoming more restrictive."

Mr. McNamara, at Decca, concurred ruefully: "There are easier ways to have a hit. Boy, for that million dollars spent recording and marketing one show, you could make an awful lot of pop records."

Mr. Deutsch believes producers could make money if they retained the rights to their cast albums and simply hired a record company to produce them. "Most producers don't understand how record labels work," he said.

Rocco Landesman, president of Jujamcyn Theaters and the lead producer of "The Producers," acknowledges this. "Of course we don't understand the record business," he said. "We're theater producers. Unfortunately, original-cast albums have never made producers any money. Their sole value is as P.R."

That's the point, said Mr. Deutsch. "They need that album to market their show, and they don't want to pay for making it. Well, they should. If you're going to raise \$12 million for a Broadway musical, what's another \$300,000 for the record? The reason Sony has an entertainment division to begin with is so they can sell their electronics. Why shouldn't Broadway producers do the same thing for their product?"

Mr. Landesman conceded that the question was a good one. "It's something we should look at," he said. But for the moment, all that is clear to those up and down the musical theater food chain -- producers, composers, performers and especially recording company executives -- is that a new age for original-cast albums must be dawning because the golden age is definitely gone.

Photos: Norbert Leo Butz and Sherie René Scott record the album for "The Last Five Years." An original cast album is a way for the future to listen to the past. (Bruce Glikas)(pg. 5); Stephen Sondheim and Vanessa Williams during the recording of "Into the Woods," one of the few shows to have an album made. (Joan Marcus)(pg. 23)