

UNSUNG SONDHEIM



VSD-5433

Though it is perhaps tempting to characterize the sixteen wonderfully obscure, even arcane selections on this very welcome compilation as a trove of Stephen Sondheim "trunk songs," that impulse must be resisted. "Trunk songs," Sondheim has said, "mean nothing to me; they are songs written but not used for one show that are stored and perhaps later dropped into another show, often with the aid of a shoehorn." As Sondheim hastens to point out: "I don't do that."

What Stephen Sondheim does do, and has been doing for nearly forty years now (sobering thought), is compose songs brilliantly tailored for specific dramatic situations, songs as theatrically eloquent as they are musically inspired. It has become almost fashionable in these latter years of Sondheim's ascendance as an acknowledged titan of musical theater to mine his past for gem-like matter meriting rediscovery; the more and less minor early works, the various aborted projects (of which there have been relatively few), the less than successful Broadway outings (of which there have been at least a few), and especially the privately held pile of never-to-be-used-again songs cut from both the hits and the near-misses throughout Sondheim's singular career. That this prospecting must be perceived as an altogether noble exercise and a subject for ironic Sondheimesque bemusement, simultaneously, seems about right. In the end, of course, any Stephen Sondheim song, including and especially the 16 astutely chosen songs on this disc, may be welcomed and savored independently and unquestioningly for what they are: great stuff. And yet, to appreciate them fully as Sondheim intended, it is especially revealing to consider these songs within the reflected dramatic moments that originally gave them voice.

(1-4) **Saturday Night** (1955) was Stephen Sondheim's professional Broadway debut ... almost. The show, an adaptation of **Front Porch in Brooklyn**, a play by Julius J. and Philip G. Epstein, the twin brother Academy Award-winning screenwriting team responsible for, among other things, the timeless corny screenplay of **Casablanca**, rose up hopefully for a brief span of eight well-received backer's auditions around town during the early months of 1955, before the untimely death of its 40 year-old producer, the celebrated Broadway set designer Lemuel Ayers, buried **Saturday Night** for good in August of that year.

(1) The plot revolved around a compulsively pipe-dreaming, twenty-ish Wall Street stock runner and a gang of his pals in Flatbush in 1929. "SATURDAY NIGHT" was the evening's opening number, the scene: the porch of the hero's house, the local hangout for the four friends lounging there as the curtain came up, tinkling at a piano, strumming a ukulele, reading a newspaper, kibitzing. Nice boys - all of them without a date on a Saturday night.

(2) "LOVE'S A BOND" emerges from the hero's all-consuming dream to crack high society by crashing Saturday night dances at the Waldorf and the Plaza. Standing just outside the velvet rope in his white tie and tails, the young climber makes the acquaintance of the ingenue, dancing with her to the

echoing strains of this tongue-in-cheek paean to love and money, crooned by a Rudy Vallee-esque bandleader.

(3) "ALL FOR YOU" would have been the show's second act ballad, a majestic Richard Rodgers-derived declaration sung by a love-struck ingenue to the hero who was by now in trouble with the law and sorely in need of an encouraging word.

(4) Meanwhile, out on the town in Brooklyn on a big date arranged jointly through an older neighborhood buddy's wife, the boys haggle over the dinner check, ignoring their dates who wait impatiently downstage, kicking around the movie they have all just seen. The most worldly of the girls at age 26, the older married matchmaker, offers them each the real lowdown on life "IN THE MOVIES."

(5) The title for "WHAT CAN YOU LOSE?", one of five songs Sondheim contributed to Warren Beatty's vivid 1989 film rendering of the Dick Tracy comic strip, was suggested, Sondheim says, by Beatty himself from a line of dialogue delivered by Mandy Patinkin's character, "Eighty-Eight Keys," in a preceding scene. While another song from the score, "Sooner or Later," ultimately won the Academy Award for Sondheim (his first), "WHAT CAN YOU LOSE?" is in many ways the more substantial tune, richly bittersweet, and unexpectedly moving as sung in the film by the marvelously unlikely team of Patinkin and Madonna.

(6) In the wake of his initial collaborations with Stephen Sondheim, as librettist on **West Side Story** (1957) and **Gypsy** (1959), Arthur Laurents wrote the play **Invitation to a March** (1960), set on the eve of a wedding outside two Long Island beach houses: one occupied by the young bride, her bourgeois mother, and their houseguests - the groom and his rich parents; the other, home to a free-spirited woman and her devoted young son, product of the woman's long-ago affair with the groom's father. When this son meets that bride, illicit love flares. When that father meets this mother, illicit love is recalled. At length, when this mother meets both bride's and groom's mothers respectively, liberation confronts respectability and the play climaxes. **Invitation to a March** opened October 29, 1960 at the Music Box Theatre with a cast that included Celeste Holm (replacing Shelley Winters who'd been fired out of town), Eileen Heckart and an impossibly youthful Jane Fonda. Sondheim's pre-recorded incidental music was originally scored for four instruments.

(7) Early in 1965, after reading and admiring a play called **They Might Be Giants** by James Goldman, brother of William, Stephen Sondheim approached the author to ask if he might like to do a musical. Goldman informed Sondheim that he'd been mulling a play about reunions and produced a newspaper clipping that dealt with a club for former Ziegfeld Follies girls and their recent reunion.

Sondheim and Goldman began work almost immediately on a show they soon titled **The Girls Upstairs**, with Sondheim adding "THAT OLD PIANO ROLL" to the score sometime in 1967. The song, sung by the husband of one of the former Follies girls after a fight at the reunion they're attending, is his

attempt to pacify her with fond reminiscences. The wife will have none of it, though, and when she refuses to join her husband as he dances around the room with a broom, Astaire-style, the song grows angrier and angrier, finally climaxing with the broom heaved through a window.

The production course traveled by **The Girls Upstairs** proved wildly circuitous. Six years following its original conception, the show, now re-titled **Follies**, at last reached out-of-town previews in Boston. The scene setting up "THAT OLD PIANO ROLL" was long gone from the script, as was the song itself, and the show's choreographer Michael Bennett, in restaging **Follies'** opening number with underscored entrance music for each character, now was scavenging for that purpose cut tunes from the original **Girls Upstairs** score. Thus in Boston the melody, at least, for "THAT OLD PIANO ROLL" received its reprieve, restored as an entrance motif for the character of Buddy. As for the version of the song heard here, Sondheim concedes that it mutes most of the song's anger as well as the once brutal ending. "It simply couldn't be sung that way," he insists, "except in the original context."

(8) The mother of a Sondheim schoolfriend, a woman by the name of Elaine Carrington (inventor of the soap opera, according to the composer), commissioned "THEY ASKED ME WHY I BELIEVE IN YOU," from the young composer (then 26) for a half-hour television script she'd written called **I Believe In You**; this in 1956. Sondheim can today recall nothing about the script (though he did receive co-writing credit on the project) except that it seemed to be mostly about cooking and that it never got made.

(9) Sondheim contributed "NO, MARY ANN" to a never-produced screenplay adapted by his friend William Goldman from Goldman's own novel, **The Thing of It Is** (1969), about a composer who, after writing a hit Broadway show, takes his wife on a second honeymoon to try and save their failing marriage. Each place the couple goes, though, they are confronted by "NO, MARY ANN," the show's hit song, which is literally playing everywhere - in England outside Buckingham Palace, in Venice, sung by gondoliers. "It's supposed to be like 'Hello, Dolly,'" says Sondheim. "The big hit song from the big hit show that you can't get away from."

(10) "The year before **Barefoot in the Park**," remembers Sondheim, "this would be 1962, Lew Allen and Mike Nichols wanted to do a show out in Huntington, New Jersey based on Jules Feiffer's work. Jules had written a one-act play called **Crawling Arnold** and they also had a print of his animated cartoon **Monroe** and a monologue called **George's Moon** which he'd written, and this cartoon novella that Nichols thought would make a mini-musical, called **Passionella**, about a female chimney sweep who wanted to be a movie star. I wrote the opening number for him, "TRULY CONTENT," and some fragments after that and some incidental music for **George's Moon**. Dorothy Loudon played **Passionella**. It was Mike's directing debut, and the thing never came to New York - it was never intended to. Four years later, though, Mike redid **Passionella** on Broadway with Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick, as one of three

one-act musicals that made up their show, **The Apple Tree**."

(11) Composed for a currently "on-hold" movie musical titled **Singing Out Loud** that Sondheim has completed with screenwriter William Goldman for producer/director Rob Reiner, "WATER UNDER THE BRIDGE" is sung in a recording studio by a woman performing for the movie soundtrack (**Singing Out Loud** is a movie about making a movie). As conceived, the number is actually a trio, with the singer and the song's composer (in the control booth) both singing their thoughts in counterpoint to the actual song, but only the main body of the number, the song the composer wrote, is presented here. "It's in a contemporary pop style," Sondheim says. "The script has a pop songwriter called in to write some pop songs for the movie. That's why I wrote it that way."

(12) Arthur Laurents' play **The Enclave** opened at Theater Four in the East Village on November 15, 1973. Its rather radically progressive plotline (for the time) centered on a Manhattan mews that a close-knit group of friends plan to renovate and inhabit as their own private little island in the city. When one of their number announces his intention to come out of the closet and live openly among them with his homosexual lover, the group fragments and the utopian dream dies. Sondheim's incidental music, all of it pre-recorded, consisted of a carefully written-out piano line punctuated by Paul Gemignani, Sondheim's musical director of choice and a former percussionist, improvising on a variety of "peculiar" percussion instruments.

(13) "THERE'S ALWAYS A WOMAN" was written as an "11 o'clock number" for Lee Remick and Angela Lansbury in **Anyone Can Whistle**, Sondheim and Laurents' legendary nine performance Broadway cult fiasco about relative sanity and creative nonconformity in the just-dawning 1960's. The point of the number was that both Lansbury and Remick were dressed throughout the song as Lansbury's character, the venal Mayoress (yes), with each of them finally pointing at the other and ordering the police: "Shoot to kill." The police, however, cannot tell who is who or which is which - the basic theme of the show. The song was cut in Philadelphia for reasons that even Sondheim can no longer specifically recall.

(14) "THE TWO OF YOU" is the earliest Sondheim work on this album; Sondheim wrote the song in 1952 on a whim for the **Kukla, Fran and Ollie** show, which he admired very much. "I sent it, they rejected it," Sondheim remembers. "Burr Tilstrom, the show's creator, never even knew of it; his executive producer sent it back without even listening to the song. I finally gave 'THE TWO OF YOU' to Burr, though. When he did **Side by Side by Sondheim** in Chicago in 1978, he sang it with the spot very tight and Kukla on his arm and then, I think for the first time in his career, the spot came up and you saw his arm inside the puppet. He'd never revealed the puppets as puppets before. It was very moving."

(15) **MULTITUDES OF AMYS** was the first of four finale numbers that Sondheim composed for his groundbreaking musical **Company** (1970), with each of the later discarded attempts ("Happily Ever After" and "Marry Me A Little") far better known today through other retrospective Sondheim

projects than this, the initial effort. In **Company**'s original incarnation the fundamental story line was different. Amy did not marry Paul at the end of the first act, she refused him. Toward the end of the second act, then, Bobby decided that he would ask Amy to marry *him*. With all five couples onstage in their various apartments, he made a tour of the five apartment areas, taking some prop, one telling item from each space, essentially collecting the best of each couple, on the way convincing himself through this song that he was in fact in love with Amy. Arriving at last in Amy's kitchen, Bobby proposed and was rejected with one of **Company**'s most quotable lines: "Robert, you've gotta marry *somebody*, not *somebody*."

(16) According to Stephen Sondheim, Warren Beatty revealed two things to him rather late in the game, after Sondheim had sweated quite a bit trying to create a score for Beatty's 1981 film, **Reds**, that satisfied the seemingly unsatisfiable writer/producer/director/star. First, Beatty announced his intention to use prominently in the movie "The Internationale" - one of his favorite tunes, and one of Sondheim's *least* favorite. More subtly, Beatty shared with Sondheim his hatred for pictures where underscoring tells audiences what to feel, leading Sondheim to finally conclude that Beatty did not in fact want a score at all for his film but rather a theme song, a love theme. Beatty, according to Sondheim, blushed and acknowledged that this was probably true.

So Sondheim wrote one. He made a piano recording of it on a pocket tape recorder and gave the cassette to Beatty with the stricture that Beatty not play the crudely performed tape for anyone. Shortly thereafter, Beatty called Sondheim to say he'd played the tape for Barry Diller, then head of Paramount Pictures, and that Diller had loved it. Sondheim chided Beatty and reminded him again to stop playing the tape. A few days later, Beatty called, this time sounding worried. The tune ("GOODBYE FOR NOW") was slated to appear as an instrumental at various points throughout the film, most pointedly following a painful scene in which Beatty, as John Reed, leaves for the last time his lover Louise Bryant, played by Diane Keaton, to return to Russia and the revolution. Beatty's exit refrain in the scene was the line: "I'll be back by Christmas." "I played the tape for some of the guys in the office," Beatty was now saying to Sondheim. Sondheim groaned. "You know the song, 'I'll Be Home For Christmas'?" Beatty asked. Sondheim said he truly didn't. "Well some of the guys in the office think your song is 'I'll Be Home For Christmas.' " "Warren," Sondheim said, "I want you to listen to this tune carefully. And then I want you to listen to 'The Internationale' carefully. This tune is not 'I'll Be Home For Christmas,' it's 'The Internationale.' I took 'The Internationale' and reharmonized it. "And you know what?" Sondheim now adds bemusedly, "It's my favorite song on this record."

— Barry Singer