

Duncan Wheeler

# The Rock Musical: From Creation to Curation (2015–2020)

In a post-#Me-Too/Black Lives Matter landscape, the gender- and race-politics of the Golden Age of rock have increasingly come under interrogation. Hip-hop challenging rock's long-standing hegemony constitutes a sociological as well as a musical shift, with a production such as Andrew Lloyd Webber's *School of Rock* (2015) perhaps seeming hopelessly old-fashioned in comparison with Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* from the same year. This article's close and contextualized readings of four post-*Hamilton* jukebox rock musicals debate two principal issues. First, the extent to which the jukebox musical is fit for purpose: creative enough to repurpose rock's cultural patrimony for an enriching night in the theatre. Second, how and why the curation practices of the rock musical reproduce or challenge the intersectional vectors of gendered and racial oppression, which render the genre problematic.

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ROCK WAS ONCE the future, or so it seemed for music executives as well as millions of young people across the globe during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>1</sup> As Scott Warfield notes: 'By the time the first wave of baby-boomers began approaching retirement at the end of the twentieth century, rock music had become the soundtrack of America.'<sup>2</sup> The iconoclastically titled 'Rock is Dead', the third single from Marilyn Manson's 1998 album *Mechanical Animals*, might, from our twenty-first-century present, be heard as a prophecy. Manson, the self-proclaimed 'God of Fuck', has been accused of sexual misconduct, his management and lawyers doing their best to keep his text exchanges with Johnny Depp out of the domestic abuse court trial of the actor best known for the role of Jack Sparrow, inspired primarily by the persona of guitarist Keith Richards. In a post-#Me-Too/Black Lives Matter landscape, the Rolling Stones have quietly dropped their signature tune 'Brown Sugar' from their set-list, aware that 'rocking

references to slavery and sexuality could do permanent damage to the b(r)and'.<sup>3</sup>

In an ostensibly comic scene in the film *Yesterday* (Danny Boyle, 2019) – whose basic conceit is a freak blackout causing everyone apart from a British male Asian character to lose any memory of Coca-Cola and the Beatles – a Black marketing guru warns that 'The White Album' has diversity issues. The humour resides in observing the anachronistic attempt to impose today's values on the past, yet there has been a real concerted effort to whitewash the racism of rock's history. The Freddie Mercury biopic *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Bryan Singer and Dexter Fletcher, 2018) not only carefully excises any mention of Queen's decision to perform lucrative concerts in Sun City during South Africa's apartheid, but also promotes rock's universalist agenda by incorporating more Black faces into the reconstruction of the legendary 1985 Live Aid performance at Wembley than can be seen in the original television broadcast. When MTV was established in 1981, the executives of the

landmark music cable television channel were cautious about including videos by Black artists due to their fear of offending mainstream (white) audiences. It was not until veteran rock band Aerosmith teamed up with Run-DMC for 'Walk this Way' in 1986 that the nascent genre of hip-hop had a crossover video hit.

In the twenty-first century, hip-hop challenging rock's long-standing hegemony constitutes a sociological as well as a musical shift. According to the Nielsen report, rap and hip-hop led musical consumption (24.5 per cent) for the first time in 2017, ousting rock (20.8 per cent) from the prime position.<sup>4</sup> Before going on to become the biggest-selling cast recording of all time, *Hamilton* peaked at number two on the album charts both sides of the Atlantic, and was the first musical in history to top the US rap charts. The brainchild of Latinx New York born Lin-Manuel Miranda, the 'musical about the "ten dollar founding father without a father"'<sup>5</sup> had one of the largest pre-opening ticket sales figures (over 200,000) in the history of Broadway.<sup>6</sup> It 'hit the political sweet spot in American popular culture',<sup>7</sup> winning eleven Tony Awards, a Grammy, and a Pulitzer Prize. With young Black, Latinx, and Asian actors portraying nearly all of the white characters, the 'genius of *Hamilton* lies in its ability to offer both those who have long owned the narrative and those who have been excluded from it a place in America's foundational story'.<sup>8</sup>

If the Golden Age of rock has, to a significant extent, been rendered anachronistic in the present day, how might we deal with the artistic legacy of the genre given its rootedness in values often best left in the past? (A multitude of distinct and overlapping sub-genres, such as glam, heavy, progressive, and so on, can be brought under the broad banner of the Golden Age of rock.) This article seeks to sketch a response to this question in relation to the jukebox musical, a theatrical genre that caught the popular imagination with *Mamma Mia!*, a 1999 female-driven re-imagining of Abba's greatest hits which became, 'without hyperbole, the most successful musical in the world'.<sup>9</sup> At a time when rock's founding fathers have passed away, retired from active service, or been laid out

to pasture with lucrative Las Vegas residencies, the exploitation of their back catalogues lends itself to being cited as evidence that rock music and musicals are running low on fresh ideas.

No jukebox musical has had the social or commercial impact of *Hamilton*. Miranda's production is, however, such an exceptional success that it constitutes an unfair point of comparison by which to judge other cultural products. What I seek to offer instead are close and contextualized readings of the four post-*Hamilton* rock musicals staged in London and New York to have drawn on the songbooks of rock artists (David Bowie, Bob Dylan, Meat Loaf, and Tina Turner) whose lifetime record sales exceed eighty million units. My critical readings are designed to debate two principal issues. First, to what extent is the jukebox musical fit for purpose, creative enough to repurpose rock's cultural patrimony for an enriching night in the theatre? Second, how and why do the curation practices of the rock musical reproduce or challenge the intersectional vectors of gendered and racial oppression, which render the genre problematic?

### Rock's Founding Fathers: Race, Space, and Gender

The ostensible universalism of the rock canon is reliant on both the appropriation and denial of Black experience. *Girl from the North Country*, a new Depression-era play by Conor McPherson incorporating songs by Bob Dylan, and *Tina*, an atypical biographical jukebox musical, simultaneously retain and challenge the gender- and race-prejudices underlying the founding myths of the rock canon. Although very different propositions in many respects, these two musicals, both of which premiered in London, provide an opportunity to survey the opportunities popular song once offered for staging the 'American Negro' experience, as well as to interrogate critically the extent to which the enunciative space afforded to Black voices remains circumscribed in the present day.

McPherson had first been approached in 2013 by Jeff Rosen, Dylan's long-time manager, to ask if the dramatist might be interested in constructing a play around one of the great

twentieth-century songbooks; McPherson had taken Broadway and London by storm aged twenty-five with *The Weir*, set in his native Ireland, which won the Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Play of 1997–98. He claimed that he was not initially convinced by the brief, but that walking around his own hometown of Dublin made him think he might be able to do justice to the idea and the music if he were to focus on the milieu into which Dylan was born. Dylan and his representatives enthusiastically embraced this idea, giving the dramatist carte blanche to use any of his songs and in whatever way he wished. *Girl from the North Country* opened at London's Old Vic in 2017, eight months after Dylan received the Nobel Prize for Literature – institutional validation for Sir Christopher Ricks's earlier claim that the singer-songwriter was the greatest living user of the English language.<sup>10</sup>

*Girl from the North Country* has more in common with *I'm Not There* (Todd Haynes, 2007), a cubist cinematic biopic, than an earlier circus-set greatest hits Dylan dance musical directed and choreographed by Twyla Tharp, which bombed in Broadway after being dubbed a 'spectacle of torture' by the *New York Times*.<sup>11</sup> Haynes playfully unpacked the myriad personas the singer-songwriter had occupied, alongside the multiple palimpsests of influence and half-truths that have fed into the Dylan myth. Concealing his real surname and Jewish origins, the young man, who adopted the name of a Welsh poet, had been born in Duluth, Minnesota, in 1941. Aged six, his family moved a few hours down the railroads to Hibbing, a small town to which the young Zimmerman never acclimatized. As a teenager, he went in search of the bright lights, heading back to Duluth or hitching further afield to St Paul – where many Black people lived at a time when they were largely unwelcome in the 95 per cent plus white neighbouring city of Minneapolis<sup>12</sup> – to listen to rhythm and blues.<sup>13</sup>

In an interview with UK teen magazine *Jackie* from 1965, Dylan lists among his likes: 'Negro blues . . . Those guys know what it's all about.'<sup>14</sup> In the first and currently sole instalment of his contracted multi-volume memoirs, he refers to the culture of the 1950s as being 'like a judge in his last days on the

bench. It was about to go.'<sup>15</sup> His role in spearheading a new (counter-)cultural revolution led to his being hailed as the voice of a generation (a title he always rejected). This was ironic, given his attachment to the past:

The madly complicated modern world was something I took little interest in. It had no relevancy, no weight. I wasn't seduced by it. What was swinging, topical, and up to date for me was stuff like the *Titanic* sinking, the Galveston flood, John Henry driving steel, John Hardy shooting a man on the West Virginia line.<sup>16</sup>

Drawn to Depression-era fantasy, the young Dylan's mind, in the words of biographer Clinton Heylin, 'acted like a one-man tape recorder'.<sup>17</sup> This underpinned his carefully crafted on- and-off-stage personae: 'he just careens off into a life he never had, gerrymandered from scraps he had read and heard, but never experienced.'<sup>18</sup>

Set in a rundown guest house in Duluth around Thanksgiving 1934, *Girl from the North Country* was not biographical. It did, however, offer a correlative to Dylan's musical and lyrical landscape, located at the crossroads of the past and future in a town through which strangers and freight constantly passed. In Dylan's words: 'There was no place you could go in my hometown without at least some part of the day having to stop at intersections and wait for the long trains to pass.'<sup>19</sup> Hank Williams was Dylan's first musical hero.<sup>20</sup> His country classic '(I Heard) That Lonesome Whistle' was a formative influence to which intertextual references can still be detected in 'Duquesne Whistle'. That 2012 Dylan rail-themed track was the most recent composition to feature in *Girl from the North Country*. According to McPherson, 'By setting it before Bob was born, we could cut it loose from all the associations with him and the Sixties. This gives it a feeling of the Nativity: that when Bob entered the world, everything changed.'<sup>21</sup> The play's title was derived from a song from Dylan's second album, but many of his most iconic recordings were eschewed in favour of his much derided gospel period from the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The evangelical period was Dylan's most controversial reinvention, dismissed as a

betrayal of personal and political ideals. At a concert in Connecticut, the singer delivered a sermon about San Francisco, homosexuality, and iniquity; an audience member in the front row of a later date in the Californian hotspot held up a sign that read: 'Jesus loves your old songs'.<sup>22</sup>

Without the pressure usually attendant on jukebox musicals to incorporate all of the greatest hits, McPherson was free to choose the lyrics and music that best fitted his slice of Americana. The owner of the rundown guest house, Nick, is on the brink of losing his property to the bank. He and his wife are also battling with her mental health problems, their boozing aspiring writer son unable to find a job, and the pregnancy of their adopted Black daughter. Nick plans to marry her off to a comfortably-off elderly cobbler, whilst hoping to escape his own sinking ship by running off with his mistress, a soon-to-be-wealthy widow.

Added to this dysfunctional family set-up are two new guests: a Black boxer and ex-convict, together with a bible salesman and preacher with a sketchy past. In the words of Martin Morrow, 'Just as Dylan's music filches from earlier blues, folk, and gospel tunes, McPherson's play affectionately doffs its hat to early-twentieth-century American writers, from John Steinbeck and Eugene O'Neill to Thornton Wilder.'<sup>23</sup> Hence, for example, a braggart guest has a mentally disabled son – with clear echoes of Lennie Small from *Of Mice and Men* – who, unaware of his own strength, may have killed a man. The performance style, as well as the visual and verbal iconography, was far more closely aligned with the Young Vic's 2019 production of *Death of a Salesman* than with any jukebox musical playing in the West End or on Broadway. In this re-imagining of Arthur Miller's classic, directors Marianne Elliott and Miranda Cromwell rendered Willie Loman and his family as middle-class Black characters from Brooklyn.

Both productions undercut potentially naturalistic settings through heightened language and imagery: the characters in *Girl from the North Country*, for instance, perform songs to the audience rather than to each other. The four-piece acoustic band, complemented by

various cast-members not only singing but also playing traditional instruments, resulted in 'I Want You' sounding closer to the cover version of Bruce Springsteen and the E-Street Band that was performed live in the 1970s than the original 1966 Dylan recording. More generally, the musical style echoed the hootenanny ambience of Dylan's 1975–76 *Rolling Thunder Revue* – the subject of a 2019 Netflix documentary by Martin Scorsese – which, coinciding with the breakdown of his marriage to Sara Dylan, the mother of his children, stopped off at relatively small theatre-size venues across the USA, with musicians hopping on and off for a ride. McPherson employed three titles – 'Is Your Love in Vain', 'Señor (Tales of Yankee Power)', and 'True Love Tends to Forget' – from Dylan's first post-*Rolling Thunder* studio album, the critically panned *Street-Legal* (1978), whose ramshackle production let the songs down.

'Señor (Tales of Yankee Power)', 'a song of religious politics, a judgement hymn',<sup>24</sup> was an early harbinger of Dylan's gospel period, and a shift from secular to sacred music inspired by his religious conversion and relationships with two of his backing singers: 'Divorced from his wife, and separated from his children by the fact he was on the road for a whole year, he took comfort in the strong personalities and clearly defined culture of his African-American, Christian girlfriends.'<sup>25</sup> Carole Dennis, the future second Mrs Dylan, had impeccable musical credentials. Born in 1954, her mother, who had sung with Ray Charles, raised her in the gospel tradition. Carole was on tour with Burt Bacharach when she received an offer to perform with Dylan, a singer she had not heard of.<sup>26</sup> Alongside a 2017 live release from the period, which suggests that this may have been Dylan's most musically literate touring band, the resurrection of 'Slow Train' and 'What Can I Do for You?' from the studio albums of the period are musical highlights of the *Girl from the North Country* cast recording which, retrospectively, serve to vindicate his most maligned period, when many fans lost faith. Whilst many jukebox musicals falter because songs take precedent over story, *Girl from the North Country* reversed this hierarchy, reassessing the Dylan canon in the process. The video of Sheila Atim

performing ‘Tight Connection to my Heart (Has Anybody Seen my Love?)’ – the lead single from Dylan’s least loved album, *Empire Burlesque* (1985) – improves on the original, whose charms were concealed behind the gloss of the production and arrangement typical of the time, and has received over 400,000 YouTube views.<sup>27</sup>

The production, perhaps unwittingly, also revealed another side of Bob Dylan by showcasing his reactionary tendencies. One of the reasons the 1930s setting worked so well was that the words of an unreconstructed chauvinist – Dylan was reportedly physically and psychologically abusive to his first wife<sup>28</sup> – are not rendered anachronistic. Take, for example, the lyrics to a deep cut from the *Infidels* album, ‘Sweetheart Like You’ (1983): ‘You know a woman like you should be at home, that’s where you belong / Taking care of somebody nice . . .’ The protagonists of history and politics are, in Dylan’s universe, almost invariably male.

His iconic social commentary songs often show the same disregard for historical fact as his autobiographical statements. ‘Hurricane’ was written alongside songwriter and theatre director Jacques Levy who, according to a pithy biographical note from 1977 by playwright Sam Shepard, ‘blitzed off-off-Broadway some years back with his head-on Brechtian style’.<sup>29</sup> ‘Hurricane’ describes the miscarriage of justice suffered by Rubin Carter, a US-Canadian middleweight boxer convicted with insufficient evidence for murder. A masterclass in narrative compression, the lyrics give voice to structural and social violence, but images such as that of Carter being ‘like Buddha in a ten-foot cell’ sentimentalize the plight of a troubled man, eschewing references to any of the crimes for which he was rightly convicted as a young man or his treatment of his wife.

‘Hurricane’ constituted the sole obvious example in *Girl from the North Country* of a particular song taking precedence over the narrative. The character of Joe Scott, a Black boxer on the run, is largely a cipher whose personality is made to measure for this showcase tune. In Ethan Mordden’s definition, the musical form can be defined as ‘an enacted

story bearing some relationship with our daily life and “lifted” by song that *belongs* to the story’.<sup>30</sup> Arinzé Cane, the actor who played Scott in the original production, says that the boxing song was one of only two songs from the show with which he was already familiar as a result of its inclusion in *Hurricane* (Norman Jewison, 1999), a blockbuster biopic starring Denzel Washington:

I was blown away by it. Over the years, every now and then, I’d go back and listen to that song. I knew of the emotions behind it, so in the workshop when Conor said, ‘Give it a try,’ I was able to throw myself at it, and I had quite a lot of fun.<sup>31</sup>

Biographical recreations of boxing lives had frequent recourse to the romanticism and circumscription of radical action that aroused James Baldwin’s suspicions in relation to popular song: ‘It is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because a productive sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story.’<sup>32</sup> In the Depression era, boxing for Black men often was, to borrow a phrase from Randy Roberts, ‘a sort of male prostitution, an activity for the very desperate’.<sup>33</sup> Yet victories by Black boxers from Jack Johnson onwards still upset the white status quo. After touring Europe as part of a US State Department-funded production of the George Gershwin musical *Porgy and Bess*,<sup>34</sup> Maya Angelou noted: ‘Somehow, the music fashioned by men and women out of an anguish they could describe only in dirges was to be a passport for me and their other descendants into far and strange lands and long unsure futures.’<sup>35</sup>

While Carter languished in jail, heavyweight Muhammad Ali challenged Cold War assumptions, embodied by George Foreman, that America was an exceptional beacon of freedom, regardless of race: ‘Ali’s victory over a flag-waving, silent Foreman vindicated black and white 1960s political and cultural dissent’.<sup>36</sup> Ali and Dylan first met at a *Hurricane* benefit concert at Madison Square Garden. According to Sam Shepard’s eye-witness account:

There’s a definite taste of black-white tension going on backstage . . . Nothing weird or violent, just these two totally different streams of musical

culture swimming by each other without mixing. Almost as though there were two different concerts to be given on the same bill, having nothing in common. . . . Ali's been trying to trump up support for Carter for quite a while. Before Dylan even. But it took Dylan to get this whole thing together.<sup>37</sup>

Black musicians and audiences pioneered rock'n'roll, but were replaced by white faces in the wake of the so-called British invasion of the US, comprising groups such as the Beatles, the Kinks, and the Rolling Stones.

The inclusion of Tina Turner as one of only a handful of non-white artists for Live Aid was proof and consolidation of her new-found superstar status as a solo artist. *Tina: The Tina Turner Musical*, which premiered in London's West End in April 2018, begins with the theatrical Tina preparing to go on stage in Rio in 1988 for a real-life televised outdoor concert, which broke all previous attendance records for live music. Twenty-first-century British audiences were instructed not to dance, or sing along, with the promise there would be time for that later. The musical biopic was marketed as the near octogenarian Turner's retirement from public life. Developed by Dutch company Stage Entertainment, the book was prepared by Katori Hall, an African American playwright from Tennessee, best known for her drama about Martin Luther King, *The Mountaintop* (2011). Phyllida Lloyd, whose versatile biography includes *Mamma Mia!*, a trilogy of all-female Shakespeare tragedies for the Donmar Warehouse, and Wagner's Ring cycle, as well as a film biopic of Margaret Thatcher, was hired to direct. Although she had experience with the Abba musical, this was a different proposition: whilst the former affectionately mocked the artificiality of the genre, *Tina* was a drama that needed to take seriously what David H. Lewis characterizes as the perennial challenge: 'how to wed music and story with seamless persuasion and force every beat of the way'.<sup>38</sup>

Lloyd claimed to be 'irresistibly drawn to stories of women's struggles overcoming insuperable odds', and the biography of Tina Turner has 'got to be one of the greatest of

those stories in the twentieth century'.<sup>39</sup> Raised in poverty in the racist rural southern states and deserted by her mother, the woman born Anna Mae Bullock found stardom alongside future husband Ike Turner, who beat her viciously throughout their sixteen-year marriage. Leaving the family home with virtually nothing, she staged one of rock's most unlikely comebacks in her early forties to become the first female solo artist to fill stadiums. As a profile for the *New Yorker* surmised, 'even given all the innovation found in her records, the triumph is located in her life; her status as a feminist hero is stubbornly extra-musical'.<sup>40</sup>

The film *What's Love Got to Do with It* (Brian Gibson, 1993), based on the autobiography *I, Tina*, cemented her reputation as the 'patron saint of battered women', to borrow a phrase from Memuna Forna.<sup>41</sup> In her critical appraisal of the biopic, bell hooks asked of the film: 'Why is it that her success is less interesting than the period of her life when she's a victim?'<sup>42</sup> While replicating some of the key incidents from the film and autobiography (such as being told off for singing too loudly in church as a child and the reproduction of Ike's Los Angeles condominium replete with psychedelic aquarium), *Tina* expanded the temporal and thematic remit by taking her life-story up to the time of the record-breaking Brazilian concert, and employing songs to develop the narrative rather than in strict chronological order. Hence, for example, Turner addressed her performance to Ike of 'Better Be Good to Me', a song from the 1984 comeback album *Private Dancer*, in marriage scenes set two decades previously. No attempt was made to shoehorn all her hits into the show (notable exclusions included 'Steamy Windows', 'Typical Male' and 'Goldeneye'), avoiding tactics that could reduce gravitas, although the inclusion of the formulaic 'Don't Turn Around', a throwaway B-side (that would later give Aswad a UK number one success) was puzzling.

In a concert-length production of over two hours, lead actress Adrienne Warren performed twenty-three songs and barely left

the stage. The visual focus was largely on her. For a multi-million-pound West End musical, the stage design was fairly understated, using simple backdrops and props lowered on to the stage to change scenes and indicate period and place without disrupting the action. Lloyd described Warren, an ex-choirgirl who had performed in the Motown musical *Dream-girls*, as ‘the ultimate fusion. A rock musician to her core, with all the discipline and training of a Broadway actress.’<sup>43</sup>

Tina had superlative diction and sophisticated breathing techniques, which rendered the lyrics of her songs in both studio and live versions unusually clear for the rock idiom. This was particularly impressive given her signature dance routines, making Tina a key influence for show(wo)men rockers with a penchant for storytelling (Rod Stewart being, perhaps, the most obvious example). Musicals are typically more attuned to lyrics than rock concerts, but Warren, by mastering Tina’s craft, delivered a performance in which the songs did not have to be adapted too much to maintain the narrative flow.

*Tina* thereby evaded the problematic no (wo)man’s land that has so often resulted from ‘the desire of producers to exploit the popularity of rock, while simultaneously suppressing its rebellious spirit and most extreme sounds’.<sup>44</sup> As pop musician and cultural historian Bob Stanley laconically remarks of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Jesus Christ Superstar*, a transatlantic phenomenon first staged in 1971: ‘ultimately, it was still closer to *Pirates of Penzance* amateur dramatics than to actual rock music.’<sup>45</sup> On seeing an early version of the belated official theatrical premiere of *The Who’s Tommy* in 1993 (Turner had appeared in the 1975 film version), the band’s lead singer Roger Daltrey reputedly complained that ‘Tommy’s got no balls’.<sup>46</sup> As Elizabeth L. Wollman notes, ‘in order to preserve their voices, actors in the musical could rarely exhibit the raw vocal power that makes singers like Roger Daltrey so distinctive’.<sup>47</sup>

The electric charge of Turner’s live performances never relied on the physical or psychological effects of drugs and alcohol. Much like the HBO documentary film *Tina* (Dan Lindsay, 2021), the musical emphasized the

discipline and physical labour underpinning Turner’s performances, from her debut recording of ‘A Fool in Love’ to performing ‘I Want to Take you Higher’ on stage, not to mention the multiple takes required by the producer Phil Spector for ‘River Deep, Mountain High’. Warren, whose participation was so central that syndicating *Tina* on a mass *Mamma Mia!* scale would, almost inevitably, result in diminished returns,<sup>48</sup> prepared diligently for the fight and dance scenes, boxing with a personal trainer.

If Lloyd and Hall foregrounded Tina’s stealth, it was symptomatic of how Ike’s vulnerability was highlighted: he was allocated the most feminized and desperate of songs – ‘Be Tender with Me Baby’, from Tina’s 1989 *Foreign Affair* album, and the Ike and Tina duet ‘It’s Gonna Work out Fine’. In his first role in a musical, the Ghana-born actor Kobna Holdbrook-Smith – last seen on the London stage as Laertes to Benedict Cumberbatch’s Hamlet at the Barbican – offered a sensitive portrayal of Ike, filled with nuance, embodying violence and vulnerability in equal measure. (Casting director Pippa Ailion had remembered him from an unsuccessful audition for *The Lion King*.)

As a child, Ike witnessed his father suffer a slow and painful death after receiving a beating for sleeping with a white woman. Ike was cheated of the rights and credit for recording ‘Rocket 88’, arguably the first rock’n’roll record. On returning to Mississippi in the musical, Ike is harassed by rednecks. A repeat victim of racial prejudice, he is depicted as having a pathological fear of rejection. In the real-life Tina’s diagnosis, even her stage name was a means by which he exercised control: ‘With those two words [‘Tina Turner’], I became Ike’s property.’<sup>49</sup> The musical’s explanation for why Tina stays is her children, but a turning point occurs when their son is caught between them in a physical altercation. In this sequence, a montage of Tina performing her signature hit ‘Proud Mary’ and spousal abuse builds to a climax before the relative calm of a performance of the more contemplative ‘I Don’t Wanna Fight’, a song commissioned for the 1993 film biopic.

*What's Love Got to Do with It* broke new ground as regards the cinematic depiction of domestic violence.<sup>50</sup> The film may have focused on Tina's victimhood as opposed to her victorious period, but producers and audiences were primarily interested in her years of suffering because of her renaissance. If she hadn't scored number one hits and won Grammy awards, Ike's reputation would likely have survived largely intact, as have those of other musical abusers from the period. As Stuart Cosgrove has documented, James Brown sexually and physically abused Tammi Terrell after she joined his revue aged fifteen: 'Tammi's mother found a kimono soaked in blood in her daughter's suitcase; she had been sexually assaulted by Brown, who'd reportedly ruptured her vagina with an umbrella.'<sup>51</sup>

Tina and other female musicians found themselves caught in what Maya Angelou refers to as 'the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate, and Black lack of power'.<sup>52</sup> The documentary *Whitney: Can I Be Me* (Nick Broomfield, 2017) features harrowing home video footage of Bobby Brown and Whitney Houston playfully impersonating Ike and Tina from *What's Love Got to Do with It*, which needs to be seen against the backdrop of the physical and psychological violence that was a constant in their own marriage. More generally, bell hooks was alarmed by the reaction to the cinematic biopic:

You know all these black people – particularly black men – have been saying to me, 'Ike couldn't have treated her that bad.' Why don't they say, 'Isn't it tragic that he did treat her so bad.' This just gets to show you how we, as black people in this country, remain sexist in our thinking of men and women.<sup>53</sup>

A quarter of a century later, *Tina* offered a more nuanced view of identity politics to show how race and gender can render individuals such as Ike both victims and perpetrators. There is some remarkably brave content for a mainstream commercial production. An executive from Capitol Records who initially passed the future ten-plus-million-selling *Private Dancer* album rationalizes his decision on stage by saying he did not want to

sign 'no forty-year-old n——'. Such overt prejudice aside, the musical, like Turner's public statements, suggests that her salvation came from Europe alongside the patronage of white collaborators.

Given his documented lifetime of abusing women, culminating with incarceration for murdering an ex-lover, the narrative of Phil Spector paving the way for Tina's rebirth is unsettling. 'River Deep, Mountain High' may have flopped in the USA – 'too Black for the pop stations, and too pop for the Black stations', according to Tina<sup>54</sup> – but it was a smash in the UK.<sup>55</sup> It then led to an invitation for Tina and Ike to open for the Rolling Stones. Mick Jagger's dancing would never be the same again after witnessing and imitating the greatest legs in show business on a nightly basis. He also began an affair with one of Ike and Tina's backing singers, P. P. Arnold.

Having escaped an abusive marriage, Arnold claims that Ike raped her and that Tina could be complicit in his abuse of his employees, laughing as she witnessed him chasing his backing singers with his penis exposed.<sup>56</sup> Arnold's journey in many respects anticipates that of Tina on a more modest scale. She stayed on in the UK with the patronage and support of Jagger and the Stones. It was, she claims, 'as far from life on the road with Ike Turner as one could travel'.<sup>57</sup> Gender and racial oppression was not as overt as it was back home, but it remained an underlying presence in London's swinging cultural scene. The unreliability of memory, and the exploitation of salacious details as a means to boost sales and media coverage, can render celebrity autobiographies as gratuitous and unreliable historical artefacts. Beyond the individual incidents noted, Arnold's autobiography nevertheless chimed with broader socio-historical patterns and hierarchies within and beyond the music industry.

On falling pregnant with Jagger's child, the singer of the Rolling Stones arranged for Arnold to have an abortion and showed concern, but not to the extent of cancelling his holiday with his more stable partner, the singer Marianne Faithful. The former Ikette began a sexual relationship with a young Rod Stewart (who would go on to cover her



first big hit, 'The First Cut is the Deepest'), but was disappointed to discover that he seemed embarrassed for people to know that he was sleeping with a Black woman. Arnold reluctantly cut a song written by Barry Gibb from the Bee Gees titled 'Picaninny' and was cast in the 1970 rock musical *Catch My Soul*, loosely based on Shakespeare's *Othello*, in which, following in the footsteps of Laurence Olivier, Jack Good blacked up to play the lead role. If Arnold's entry into the white Anglo music business was full of trade-offs and disappointments, Tina's triumphant post-Ike career was not devoid of sacrifice and injustice. Although she has received greater recognition than Ike, Tina's artistic contribution to the history of rock'n'roll, for all her platinum discs, has not always been given full credit.

Following an interval, the *Tina* musical prepared the terrain for one of rock's great comebacks – living proof that (*pace* F. Scott Fitzgerald) there can be 'second acts' in American lives. Legally prohibited from performing Ike and Tina hits, Tina has a powerhouse Las Vegas show featuring such set pieces as 'Disco Inferno', but is trapped in cabaret purgatory, not having played New York for years. An escape route arrives in the guise of Roger Davies, an ambitious young Australian manager who, true to the historical record, combines convincing Olivia Newton-John to record 'Physical' with relaunching Tina's career. Lloyd had fun with recreating the early 1980s styles of the London of her youth, when Turner paired up with electronic producers Heaven 17 to record a cover of Al Green's 'Let's Stay Together', a major transatlantic hit.

From this point on, the show reverts to the feel-good factor for which many invest in tickets for a West End show. Comic mileage is made from Tina's manager Roger Davies's repeated attempts to convince her that 'What's Love Got to Do with It' – a song already turned down by Cliff Richard – could be a hit, and that 'I Can't Stand the Rain' was a fitting song to record in London. The record company remained non-plussed by the record until some of the company saw her live at the New York Ritzy, where, crucially, David Bowie and the Rolling Stones' Keith Richards were in the audience for what Tina terms her 'Cinderella moment'.<sup>58</sup> Over the

course of the decade, she gained a more secure foothold in the rock establishment than any other Black or female artist in history. Indicative of not wanting to be defined by her race or gender was her turning down a lead role in Steven Spielberg's film adaptation of *The Color Purple* (1985) in favour of co-starring alongside Mel Gibson in *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (George Miller and George Ogilvie, 1985).

In public statements, the now Buddhist solo superstar envisaged this as a personal as well as a professional liberation:

To me, a lot of rhythm-and-blues songs are depressing. They are, because it's a culture you're writing about and a way of life. Rock and roll is white, basically, 'cause white people haven't had much of a problem so they write about much lighter things and funnier things.<sup>59</sup>

Little Richard, whose signature hits 'Tutti Frutti' and 'Good Golly, Miss Molly' undermine Tina's reductive taxonomy, was not impressed: 'Tina got what she wanted, but she lost what she had . . . She can't even talk no more, with her English accent. I have nothing against her, but don't forget where you come from, cos you may have to go back there again.'<sup>60</sup> Ike concurred: 'She ain't got nothing for Black people. She don't like them. She's just forgotten where she comes from, man.'<sup>61</sup>

Shortly before the end of *Tina*, she meets record company employee Erwin Bach, with whom she had her first major post-divorce relationship. In real life, they stuck together, marrying in 2013. The German, thirteen years her junior, is seen as the antithesis of Ike, whom she had been forced to marry in a whorehouse in Tijuana: 'Well, if that wedding was a nightmare, the day I became Mrs Erwin Bach was going to be a dream. No, a fairy tale, complete with a princess, a prince, and a castle!'<sup>62</sup> She and Davies's control over the musical is intimated by the fact that aspects of her biography which paint Tina in a less flattering light have been carefully excised. No mention is made of an often problematic relationship with her own children, her leaving her loyal long-term manager in the late 1970s, or a South African tour organized under apartheid.

The musical comes full circle, ending with Turner, in love, going on stage in 1988 to deliver the concert for which the audience saw her preparing in the opening scene. The landmark stadium concert was created in miniature on the London stage with faithful costumes, albeit replicated with an anachronistic mini-set-list comprising 'Proud Mary', 'Nutbush City Limits', and 'The Best' (not recorded until 1989). The production delivered on its early promise, with audiences rising to their feet to become part of the show.

In Tina's concerts, such band members as the muscular, scantily clad Sicilian American saxophonist Tim Cappello were an integral part of the show. By contrast, the band was hidden from view for most of the musical, although they did appear on stage for the curtain call and encore. The majority were white musicians with the air of tribute band members, but the saxophonist granted a keynote solo during 'The Best' was a large Black woman. As Dan Dinero notes, the cliché of having a big Black lady for a big musical number in the curtain call of New York musicals has been critiqued as a tool to 'marginalize Black women, assigning them a limited role on the Broadway stage. The excessive nature of these songs places them on the fringes of the Broadway musical, thereby reaffirming Broadway's existence as the Great *White* Way.'<sup>63</sup> In this case, the dynamic was altered as the female saxophonist was not the token Black woman on the stage, and she had been no more invisible throughout the production than her fellow musicians. Nonetheless, the musical never sought to question the ethos or ethics underlying Tina's remarkable renaissance, as articulated by Maureen Mahon: 'She understood that to succeed in the field of rock, she had to connect with a sound and scene that by the early 1980s had eschewed visible blackness, while continuing to rely on Black musical sound.'<sup>64</sup>

### **Youth and (Im)Mortality: Musical Temporalities and Artistic Hierarchies**

Both Tina Turner and Bob Dylan have survived into their ninth decades. She lives in retirement close to Lake Zurich as a Swiss

citizen, whilst it took Covid-19 for Dylan to pause his Never Ending Tour, which had begun in 1988. The cast of rock's living legends is, however, diminishing. David Bowie (1947–2016), Jim Steinman (1947–2021), and Meat Loaf (1947–2022) all died shortly after premiering musicals. The projects *Bat Out of Hell* and *Lazarus* were disparate propositions, but, for all their differences, Bowie and Steinman were united by avant-garde theatrical leanings and an ability to write unusual pop songs that embody specific eras whilst standing the test of time.

From the perspective of the digital present, these recently deceased icons function as avatars for nostalgia directed towards a time when rock was at its creative peak and meant so much to so many people. A critic from the *London Review of Books* observed of the artist formerly known as Ziggy Stardust: 'No matter what your feelings about David Bowie and his work – whether you like all of it, or only love bits of it, or are determined to collect every last thing – it was impossible for his death . . . not to feel like some kind of marker.'<sup>65</sup> The singer's last public appearance took place on the opening night of *Lazarus* at the New York Theatre Workshop on 7 December 2015. When the actors assembled on 11 Jan 2016 to record the cast album, they were informed that the project's chief architect had died the previous day of liver cancer.<sup>66</sup>

Bowie's musical career was inextricably linked with theatre from the outset, and it had been his long-held ambition to stage a musical. Before he became extremely successful in 1968, he drafted *Ernie Johnson*, a rock opera about a man throwing a suicide party. He starred in Lindsay Kemp's mime piece *Pierrot in Turquoise*, which was filmed in 1970. The otherworldly theatrical quality of the Ziggy Stardust persona transformed the young man born David Jones in Brixton into a cultural phenomenon, superstar, and teen icon. The *Diamond Dogs* tour was a theatrical spectacle and homage to George Orwell's 1984. Filmmaker Nicolas Roeg was struck by watching the 1975 *Cracked Actor* BBC documentary, which followed a cocaine-addled Bowie across the US on the *Diamond Dogs* tour. He decided to take a risk and cast the singer in

the lead role of Thomas Jerome Newton, a humanoid android trying to go home, for the 1976 film adaptation of Walter Tevis's 1963 novel *The Man Who Fell to Earth*.

In 1980, one of pop's best-looking faces made his Broadway debut in a well-received turn as the tragically deformed Victorian protagonist in *The Elephant Man*, a play by Bernard Pomerance. Shortly afterwards, he starred in the BBC production of Brecht's *Baal*, directed by Alan Clarke. As Dene October rightly observes of the cinematic adaptation of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*: 'Bowie's stardom promotes an intriguing intertextuality as a visual spectacle, significantly enriching the semiotic thickness of Roeg's non-linear narrative through an extraordinary mirroring between star and character.'<sup>67</sup>

The programme to the 2016 London run of *Lazarus* included a copy of a scribbled message: "'I'm not a human being at all" (Thomas Jerome Newton). (Ssshhh! (David Bowie))'.<sup>68</sup> This message was reputedly inscribed in a copy of Tevis's text, whose rights Bowie had recently bought, and then sent to friend and theatre producer Robert Fox in 2005. The recipient heard no more until 2013, when Bowie called to say he would like to develop a theatre sequel to the film. In Denis Flannery's apt summation: '[this resulted in] a stage adaptation (with music by Bowie) of the screenplay for that film's imaginary sequel, an adaptation whose staging, as specified in Bowie and Walsh's text, required that the theatre take on the sensory dimensions of going to – being in – the cinema.'<sup>69</sup>

In an initial meeting in London, Bowie asked who were the best active dramatists. Fox suggested Irish playwright Enda Walsh. Walsh's track record of rendering theatrical experiences full of confusion and dysfunction had been proven in his 1996 play *Disco Pigs* and the 2011 musical version of *Once*.<sup>70</sup> Bowie selected around sixty songs from his extensive back-catalogue, from which Walsh was given a free rein to construct the play.

Over the autumn of 2014 Bowie and Walsh together shaped the *Lazarus* story, while Fox was kept abreast of developments by email. After seeing Ivo van Hove's production of Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* at the

Young Vic, an enthused Fox wrote to Bowie, suggesting they had found their director.<sup>71</sup> The Dutch director was, it turned out, a life-long Bowie fan, having travelled as a teenager to New York to see him in *The Elephant Man*. His desire to do a Bowie project had found an earlier outlet in his Dutch-language production of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (1991–92) for Toneelgroep Amsterdam, which premiered in 2008 and has remained part of the company's repertoire ever since. As Flannery observes: 'David Bowie provides every note of music and every recorded sound. There are no "sound effects" as commonly understood, and practised'.<sup>72</sup>

For van Hove's return to the Bowie songbook with *Lazarus*, Michael C. Hall was cast as Newton. This well-respected Shakespearean actor was widely known for his television role in *Dexter*, whilst his musical credits included the master of ceremonies in *Cabaret* and the lead-role in the rock musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (which Bowie had liked so much that he became a producer for the Los Angeles production).<sup>73</sup> While the character in the Roeg film was actively looking to escape back home, Hall's Newton remained nostalgic but had, for the most part, resigned himself to knocking back gin in his New York apartment. A vast array of characters come in and out of focus in *Lazarus* – an assistant in an unhappy marriage, for example, and a serial killer on the rampage – but Newton struggles to make connections. A young woman, the play's most kindly character, promises to take him home, but seems to be no more than a figment of his imagination.

The production's final stages came together quickly in 2015. Despite his deteriorating health, Bowie attended workshops and previews as the team fine-tuned the piece. The 1980 hit 'Ashes to Ashes' was, for example, dropped at the last minute.<sup>74</sup> The show's production costs of one million dollars were quickly recouped: tickets sold out faster than for any other show in the history of the New York Theatre Workshop, including for the AIDS-themed rock musical *Rent*, which had premiered there before becoming a global phenomenon, with international

productions including a Dutch-language version directed by van Hove.<sup>75</sup> A recording of *Lazarus*'s title track, with a haunting video released just prior to Bowie's death, became his first top forty US hit since 1987's 'Never Let Me Down'.

It has become axiomatic to the point of becoming a cliché to refer to Bowie curating his own death. Maximizing his assets for optimum artistic value and exposure while maintaining a veil of mystery, preserving dignity, and guarding privacy from the media had been personal and professional trademarks throughout Bowie's career. His final albums required no special pleading to be considered a return to form. *Lazarus*, however, received a more mixed critical reception. Alexis Soloski, in a generous four-out-of-five-star review for the *Guardian*, described it as an 'unapologetically weird' avant-garde jukebox musical that 'should be a terrible show', but whose creative team's talent and dedication meant 'that it's nearly impossible not to be persuaded and baffled and at least a little thrilled'.<sup>76</sup>

In a different register, a critic from the tabloid *Daily Mail* arrived at a not dissimilar conclusion when discussing the live stream: 'Let's not pretend to be surprised that the David Bowie musical *Lazarus* is a teeny bit pretentious.' The reviewer is perplexed by 'our spaceman on the sauce' who is 'visited by hallucinations of angels and demons, while a swivel-eyed psychotic killer, who's loose on the streets of Manhattan, draws ever closer'. Nevertheless, he concludes that, 'although I didn't absolutely love it, I'm absolutely glad I saw it'.<sup>77</sup> Ludovic Hunter-Tilney from the *Financial Times* was less sympathetic: 'There is a lot of shouting, the infallible sign of a staging that has lost control of itself. A streak of sentimentality winds through the bloodshed and breakdowns'.<sup>78</sup> The critic of a subsequent production staged in Australia was even more direct in a one-star review which featured 'big mistake' in the title: 'Whether you view the work as a deathbed hallucination, a story of recovery from addiction, or as some sort of abstruse negative theology – complete with exploding disco-balls – this still isn't good art'.<sup>79</sup>

The response of the stylishly attired audience on the night I saw the production in a pop-up 960-capacity theatre in London's King's Cross was respectful, not ebullient. (The possibility of staging *Lazarus* at the National Theatre was raised early in the production process, but went silent amidst publicity that made a point of how the work's producers had turned down lucrative offers from the West End.)<sup>80</sup> The nearly two-hour performance (with no interval) in a space with uncomfortable seats and poor sightlines was something of an endurance test for the non-converted not invested in obsessing over the motifs in the play about alienation or the extra-terrestrial avant-garde that obsessed Bowie. Isolated scenes of high tension with their own internal dramatic arc aside (for example, being in a club, or a murder), reading the novel shortly beforehand did not allow me to be any less confused than many reviewers about what was going on.

For those attendees whose seats afforded a clear view, the visuals were a highlight. The live band had not been placed in an orchestra pit but behind a glass wall incorporated in a modernist New York apartment. This setting was a state of mind as much as a physical space. An on-stage record-player with various classic vinyl records stacked next to it was a deft meta-touch, although oddly the song played did not come from the *Heroes* album, which was placed on the deck. Bowie's vinyl had been similarly played on the stage in van Hove's production of *Angels in America*, which featured more of Bowie's signature hits than *Lazarus*. The refusal to shoehorn the most iconic songs into the production meant that the soundtrack for this unconventional jukebox musical resembled Bowie's set-lists of his concerts after 1990's Sound+Vision tour (in which he retired the greatest hits format), combining crowd favourites with deep cuts.

*Lazarus* adopted an ambivalent attitude to the musical style of delivery. 'Life on Mars', one of Bowie's biggest hits, was a logical choice for inclusion, given both the play's otherworldly theme and the quasi music-hall style of the original. Another classic from the early Ziggy Stardust period, 'Changes', was as close as *Lazarus* came to a traditional musical

moment, accompanied by the visual image of a female character flailing across the stage. Bowie was reportedly concerned that having 'Heroes' as a finale might be a 'bit too show-bizzy' – this being his anthem of lovers divided by the Berlin War and which had perhaps become his best-loved song.<sup>81</sup> Performed initially as a subdued duet, three teenage-girl characters then joined in. The rendition hovered on the brink of exploding into an arena-style finale, but the pleasures of a crowd-pleasing climax were deliberately withheld.

The London production was filmed for posterity with eight cameras, a similar number to those used for the National Theatre live broadcasts. According to Fox, he spoke to Bowie's management and they agreed to wait five years after his death to guarantee the posthumous screening would be event theatre.<sup>82</sup> Much as with the recording of a 2000 headline show at the Glastonbury Festival, which Bowie's team refused permission to broadcast in full at the time on the BBC, but released in its entirety on CD, DVD, and digital download in 2020, the strategy worked on the (correct) assumption that the star's posthumous standing would only increase in stature.

The success of the Netflix adaptation of another Tevis novel, *The Queen's Gambit*, was an unexpected asset when *Lazarus* was streamed live in January 2021 for three nights, beginning on what would have been Bowie's seventy-fourth birthday and ending on the fifth anniversary of his death. More fundamentally, as Dominic Cavendish noted in his review of the live-stream for the *Daily Telegraph*: 'It might be argued that our lockdown lives – with attendant pandemic-stroked brushes with death – have further added piquancy to Newton's predicament as he shuffles around an imprisoning pad, reaching for the liquor.'<sup>83</sup>

From beyond the grave, Bowie's uncanny ability to anticipate the global zeitgeist and articulate isolation, to make his admirers feel less disconnected and more human, still resonates. *Lazarus* was an intriguing yet ultimately failed experiment, but this conclusion does not undermine Bowie's artistic legacy – quite

the opposite, in fact. What is most celebrated in his trajectory is his willingness to take calculated risks and, ignoring his wilderness period, which Bowie himself later rejected as his 'Phil Collins years' in the mid-to-late 1980s, the reluctance to play it safe. His return to the realm of cultural relevance was pre-empted and prompted by artistic promiscuity. Joining the editorial broad of *Modern Painters*, he interviewed artists ranging from Balthus to Tracey Emin, and re-invented himself as an elder statesman, just as the Young British Artists were advertising London in the global art scene.<sup>84</sup> At the height of Britpop, Alexander McQueen designed a Union Jack jacket for the cover and accompanying tour for *Earthling* (1997), a fifty-year-old's respectable stab at drum-and-bass.

To quote Mark Fisher, 'It was through the mutations of popular music that many of those of us who grew up in the 1960s, '70s and '80s learned to measure the passage of cultural time. But faced with twenty-first-century music, it is the very sense of future shock which has disappeared.'<sup>85</sup> Although films such as *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996) and *Velvet Goldmine* (Todd Haynes, 1998) cast a nostalgic glance back to the songs of David Bowie (and Iggy Pop), and the 1970s as a decade in which music was life-changing, it was still possible to see legends in concert at non-exorbitant prices.

New musical subcultures also continued to emerge. As Paul Morley said of the V&A exhibition (its first foray into popular music, followed by shows dedicated to Pink Floyd and Kylie Minogue) that had charted his life's work: 'He was anticipating that this was the beginning of a way someone like David Bowie could continue touring the world as a living entity even after he had died.'<sup>86</sup> With the arrival of new gatekeepers and social mores, the canonization of rock (whether in museums, through inclusion in university syllabuses, or the trend for classic albums to be performed in their entirety) constituted a belated recognition that the best popular music was more than ephemeral, inconsequential fluff, alongside the elegiac realization that the Golden Age of one of the major cultural forces of the last century now belonged to the past.

Jim Steinman and Meat Loaf had to wait until they were both in their seventies and suffering from serious health problems for the musical *Bat Out of Hell* to become a reality: it had first been envisaged in the early 1970s. By definition, most jukebox musicals are subsequent to, and reliant upon, the songbook of a popular recording artist. However, *Bat Out of Hell* might be seen as the most premature cast album of all time. Steinman has gone on record as claiming, 'I only got into rock'n'roll because I was doing plays in college and I thought that I wouldn't want to see a play if it didn't have any music.'<sup>87</sup> Most of the songs from *Bat Out of Hell* have their origins in *The Dream Machine*, a senior project Steinman undertook when an undergraduate at Amherst College, based on J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*.<sup>88</sup>

Word got to Joseph Papp, the founder of New York's Public Theatre, whose Broadway transfers included rock musical *Hair*, as well as 'Shakespeare in the Park'. Papp, a non-graduate who taught at Yale, was a great popularizer of the arts whose 'taste in theatre was like his taste in music: wide-ranging, ungoverned by schooling, extremely personal'.<sup>89</sup> He sent an employee, lawyer David Sonenberg, to Amherst to see what the students' work was like. Sonenberg claims he was blown away by a nascent production featuring *Peter Pan*, *Wendy*, and *Hook* alongside test-tube babies, which he recalls as being 'violent, sexually deranged, fabulous'.<sup>90</sup>

Papp wanted to option the piece, so Sonenberg got in touch with Great Ormond Street Hospital in London, to whom Barrie had bequeathed the rights to his work, to request permission for a professional production. Their reply was that they had already lost track of the plot on page 2 (of a 142-page playscript) with the arrival of some scantily clad killer nuns.<sup>91</sup> Early promoter Zelda Fichandler tried to drum up interest with the somewhat implausible claim that 'Peter Brook had a series of meetings with Jim in Stratford while he was directing *Midsummer Night's Dream* and wanted to take a year out to direct it but became involved with the Institute of Theatrical Research in Paris'.<sup>92</sup> Overtures were made to try and get David Bowie

involved.<sup>93</sup> Steinman's play was workshopped in 1974 and 1975, reworked as *Neverland*, and briefly staged for an invited audience in Washington.<sup>94</sup>

With no prospect of a professional production, Steinman opted to repurpose the project, employing the songs from the musical as the basis for an album. Meat Loaf, who was part of Papp's orbit, first met Steinman when auditioning for the latter's 1973 off-Broadway play *More Than You Deserve*. The singer, originally from Texas, was not yet famous, but had appeared in touring productions of *Hair* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

Featuring lyrics and music written by Jim Steinman, *Bat Out of Hell* was turned down by most major record companies but went on to become one of the top five selling albums of all time, establishing Meat Loaf and the Neverland Express – a hybrid of Bruce Springsteen's E-Street Band and J. M. Barrie – as a major concert draw. A label on the front cover of Steinman's debut solo album, 1981's *Bad for Good*, credited it to the creator of Meat Loaf. This was tit for tat. In his autobiography, Meat Loaf claims that Steinman 'wanted his name up there; he wanted to be as much the focal point as I was, and I understood that. We had done it together. But the realities of the music business went against it . . . and that was probably the beginning of our ambivalent relationship'.<sup>95</sup> Meat Loaf's biggest hits were by Steinman, who had found no finer vehicle for his epic melding of Little Richard and Wagner. After the commercial failure of Steinman's second solo project, *Pandora's Box*, and with Meat Loaf now playing clubs, the odd couple opted to reunite for *Bat Out of Hell II: Back into Hell* (1993).

Relying heavily on songs recorded previously on Steinman's under-performing records, it was a global smash with both the album and lead single, 'I'd Do Anything for Love (But I Won't Do That)', shooting to number one around the world. Meat Loaf nevertheless expressed bitterness that Steinman continued to gift songs, which he had initially designed for him, to other artists. High-profile examples include Celine Dion's 'It's All Coming Back to Me Now' and Boyzone's 'No Matter What' (from the Steinman-Lloyd Webber

musical *Whistle Down the Wind*). In 1995, Steinman registered *Bat Out of Hell* as a trademark, and his management took legal action against Meat Loaf in 2006 for releasing a third *Bat* album without the songwriter's direct input. The case was settled out of court with the understanding that Steinman and Sonenberg were now free to develop a musical project as they wished. Although the names from Barrie's source text (the rights for which had now expired) were changed, the script – which began to take on more concrete form in 2012 after veteran rock promoter Michael Cohl came on board – was not drastically different to the original book from the 1970s. Meat Loaf was granted an associate producer credit and took on promotional duties (causing some confusion that he might appear on stage) that his old sparring partner was too ill to commit to, but the production was clearly advertised as Jim Steinman's *Bat Out of Hell* rather than a jukebox musical with the songs of a recording artist.

Having managed Steinman for forty-five years, executive producer Sonenberg was fully aware that he was not always the easiest collaborator.<sup>96</sup> Sonenberg's sister Janet, a scholar and practitioner who helped establish the Theatre Programme at MIT in Boston, suggested that a colleague in the department, Jay Scheib, who was known for his critically acclaimed experimental and operatic works, had the personal and professional qualities to be a potential 'Steinman whisperer'. After an initial meeting, Scheib heard nothing more of the venture or his potential involvement, but re-instigated contact with Sonenberg following discussions with the German National Theatre over a potential operatic project, for which he thought *Bat Out of Hell* might fit the bill. He was flown to New York for discussions, and although the German project went nowhere, the re-encounter led to him being hired for *Bat Out of Hell*.

Workshops began in 2015 in New York with the reclusive Steinman participating via Skype on Scheib's iPad. The musical had already been booked for Manchester (UK) and Toronto (Canada) when Scheib entered into conversations with Cressida Pollock, the then Artistic Director of English

National Opera (ENO), about staging a performance of *Dido and Aeneas*. He ended up proposing *Bat Out of Hell* as a substitute. Although not an ENO production, the company rented out their London space, the Coliseum, where *Bat Out of Hell* officially premiered after a preview run at the Manchester Opera House. It is easy to be cynical about the transactional exchange of symbolic for economic capital: the rights-holders of a multi-platinum songbook (the Gloria Estefan musical was later also staged in the Coliseum) buying their way into a financially beleaguered prestige venue. Scheib maintained, however, that there was an aesthetic as well as financial rationale, in that *Bat Out of Hell: The Musical* was 'the perfect extension of *Tristan and Isolde* and other classical productions'.<sup>97</sup>

In the *Financial Times* review, Ian Shuttleworth wrote:

Steinman has long been the Wagner of rock'n'roll and now at last he presents his *Ring* in the way it always cried out to be seen, in a proper opera house and everything. Such is his way with his material that it already, right out of the box, feels like a classic.<sup>98</sup>

Quentin Letts from the *Daily Mail* was less impressed by 'a bonkers, black-clad, doom-laden night of Wagnerian schlock': 'The audience of balding 60-somethings in open-toed sandals enjoyed it more than I did.'<sup>99</sup> The review headline – 'it's so noisy I spilled my beer' – still provided good copy for advertising.

The musical incorporated all of the songs from the original *Bat Out of Hell* album, most from the sequel, a couple of the Steinman-penned songs from the final instalment, as well as 'Dead Ringer for Love', a song he wrote for Meat Loaf to perform as a duet with Cher. For the Steinman scholar, there were a plethora of treats: the presence of Meat Loaf's trademark red handkerchief on the stage; the homage to the bar-room video in 'Dead Ringer for Love'; some lines slipped into the dialogue from 'A Kiss Is a Terrible Thing to Waste', a song from *Whistle Down the Wind*, which Steinman let Meat Loaf record before anyone else.

The action kicked off with the Chuck Berry-esque 'All Revved Up with No Place to Go' and the spoken-word 'Wasted Youth', about a violent teenage boy whose parents were too old to understand rock'n'roll. Set in a futuristic city in 2100, the technology was cutting edge (cameras were placed on props and actors, which fed into giant screens), but the first half was rather dialogue-heavy, given the flimsy nature of the plot (Strat falls in love with Raven, the eighteen-year-old daughter of Falco, a malevolent property magnate; Strat and his gang of street urchins were frozen at the age of eighteen after some form of chemical warfare). *Variety* magazine mocked the off-Broadway production for having 'more awkward choreography than *Footloose* performed by a pack of drunken hippos'.<sup>100</sup> Watching in London, I myself often had the sensation of being trapped in a Zumba class on the set of *Mad Max*.

*Bat Out of Hell's* winning the *London Evening Standard* 'Best Musical' award is attributable to the strength of the songs, its performances, and impressive set pieces. An early climax arrived as Falco attempted to rekindle his sex-life with his drunken wife Sloane in 'Paradise by the Dashboard Light', which looks back to the passion of courtship from the perspective of disillusioned marriage, much in the manner of Stephen Sondheim's *Follies*. The performance of that song culminated in a Cadillac tipping off the stage and into the audience. The final song before the interval was 'Bat Out of Hell'. Complete with an exploding bike that makes Raven believe Strat has died, the iconic song in this position provided a sure-fire strategy for securing a standing ovation before spectators took a toilet break or topped up their beers.

As an opener to the second half, *Bat III's* 'In the Land of the Pig, the Butcher is King' made more sense within the whirlwind of sensory overload than it had on record. The performance of 'It's All Coming Back to Me Now' echoed the Michael Bay-directed video for 'I'd Do Anything for Love'. The latter was the final number (a reprise of 'Bat Out of Hell' aside), honouring the theatrical tradition of love as a panacea, whilst also showcasing

the cast's collective talents, with different couples singing to each other.

In comparison to the classical operatic canon, the score was straightforward; the conductor's frenetic activity was often directed more towards the audience than the orchestra. Steinman's signature songs are more challenging for vocalists. A lack of technical training, alongside a punishing touring schedule, quickly had a detrimental effect on Meat Loaf. The only extant professional recording from the original *Bat Out of Hell* tour suggests the performance was sustained by the singer's enthusiasm and excess, but that he often struggled to hit notes or even stay in tune. In the commercially lean years of the 1980s, his voice began to recover and he was a powerhouse in concert until around 2000. *Bat Out of Hell* was far more adept at camouflaging any limitations than the latter-day Meat Loaf. When, not long before his death, the veteran star joined the cast on the stage, he was the weakest link, as unofficial online footage attests.

Combining physical energy with vocal technique, Andrew Polec, on board since the initial workshops, was an outstanding lead as Strat. The weight of the production did not fall on him to the extent that it had on Adrienne Warren in *Tina*, with a high level of performance across the board.<sup>101</sup> Scheib insisted on the operatic custom of limiting consecutive performances by hiring multiple actors, as opposed to forcing the cast to adopt the punishing schedules typical of the West End and Broadway. Heavier songs that rocked harder than anything usually associated with West End musicals were carefully elided: only an excerpt of 'All Revved Up' was performed live, whilst a recorded version of *Bat II* showpiece 'Life is a Lemon and I Want my Money Back' was played through an on-stage radio.

Beyond the obvious big-hitters, some lesser-known songs were given a new lease of life. The pathos of 'It Just Won't Quit', a reflection on depression from *Bat II* never performed in concert by Meat Loaf, encapsulated how much the human drama was as expertly conjured up in the songs as it was absent from the plot. Much to Steinman's chagrin, the song was excised later in the run as the creative



team felt that an excess of ballads in the first half created a lull.

A private and sensitive recluse, Steinman's biography and behaviour were in many respects the antithesis of the heteronormativity championed in 1950s high schools or through the culture of rock'n'roll. Yet he seemingly had no compunction about collaborating in 1997 with disgraced filmmaker Roman Polanski (for the statutory rape of a thirteen-year-old) on *Dance of the Vampires*, the musical remake of a film featuring aged men preying on young women. Nearly two decades Meat Loaf's junior, Patti Russo was hired for the *Bat II* tour, but was unceremoniously replaced by twenty-three-year-old Aspen Miller for the *Bat III* concerts in which Meat Loaf continued to put his tongue down his partner's throat during 'Paradise by the Dashboard Light'. Meanwhile, the refrain of being barely seventeen and barely dressed was clearly more applicable to the female newcomer than the sexagenarian male superstar.

Todd Rundgren, the producer of the original *Bat Out of Hell*, reckons the album meant more internationally in England, Austria, and Germany, which 'all have this sort of romantic view of the United States in the 1950s'.<sup>102</sup> Completely out of sync with punk rock and disco in the late 1970s, the *Bat Out of Hell* album yearned, much like the musical *Grease*, for a 1950s teenage experience, which never existed outside of the imagination. It is a paean to adolescent fantasies composed by a man who never learned to drive and seemingly had no romantic or sexual partners in his lifetime. In the musical, Falco appears to harbour incestuous feelings towards his daughter, climbing into her bed and not wanting her to leave her room, in which a poster for Steinman's *Bad for Good* album is pinned on the wall. Eighteen-year-old Raven fears what will happen to her love when Strat stays the same age and she becomes 'really old, like thirty-eight'. Aged thirty-three, Steinman said to the BBC:

*Peter Pan's* always been about my favourite story, and I've always looked at it from the perspective that it's a great rock'n'roll myth because it's about – when you get right down to it – it's about a gang of

lost boys who never grow up, who are going to be young forever and that's about as perfect an image for rock'n'roll as I can think of.<sup>103</sup>

As Peter Hollindale notes of Barrie's texts: 'The books are scattered with examples of real or threatened breaches of contract between adult and child.'<sup>104</sup> Whilst Meat Loaf and Steinman were recording *Bat Out of Hell II*, and rumours began to circulate around Michael Jackson's activities with underage children in his Neverland mansion, Portuguese artist Paula Rego illustrated a new edition of *Peter Pan* in 1992 that brought to the fore the text's paedophile subtext, exposing, in the words of John McEwen, 'the dire emotional conflicts at the heart of this "terrible masterpiece" with her usual acuity and disdain of sentimentality'.<sup>105</sup>

The temptation to apply obvious psychoanalytic readings to *Bat Out of Hell* needs, however, to be tempered by the reality that the primary demographic in the UK for a repertoire of songs once described by Steinman as 'erections of the heart' are women aged over sixty-five.<sup>106</sup> Feedback from preview audiences of the musical led to greater weight being given to female characters than in Steinman's original concept, and, with hindsight, Sonenberg thinks it would have been better for marketing purposes to have titled the musical 'Anything for Love'. Market research and hard data were particularly important for a musical that had a ready-made fan-base (but not in all territories) and a potential crossover appeal to more high-brow theatre audiences, even if the album and the singer that it made famous lacked the cultural distinction and global brand recognition of other multi-platinum rock performers.<sup>107</sup>

*Bat Out of Hell* performed respectably in New York off-Broadway but nothing on the scale of the London run, where a successful run at the Coliseum was followed by a transfer to the Dominion theatre, at which the Queen musical, *We Will Rock You*, played for many years. A UK theatre tour had additional poignancy with the death of Meat Loaf on 20 January 2022. Coronavirus permitting, an Australian arena tour of the production is in

the works. Special singalong nights – with lyrics projected on giant screens – were programmed in London, partly as a tactic to avoid spectators (too) keen to join in from disrupting the regular performances.<sup>108</sup> The intention is to strip dialogue right back for the arena production.

That Scheib has voiced his interest in restaging the work as if it were an opera, without dialogue, is corroborating evidence that the drama of the songs was superior to that of the musical's dialogue, as well as providing posthumous recognition of Steinman's oeuvre by at least some guardians of what has traditionally been referred to as high culture.<sup>109</sup> With a grandiosity befitting a Meat Loaf hit, Simon Price has predicted a future in which the 'rock and roll canon will be viewed as a body of work that is almost public domain, to be revived and performed for all eternity, much like the plays of Shakespeare or the novels of Dickens'.<sup>110</sup>

## Conclusion

Rock, like Shakespeare, is not dead. It is, however, less ubiquitous than during times past. Musicians like Dylan and Bowie are perennial fixtures at the gates of the cultural citadel and their position has been consolidated in recent years. The belated recognition of more fringe figures such as Steinman is indicative of the rising cultural capital of rock music. Celebratory narratives should, however, be tempered with a recognition that this has coincided with the genre's socio-cultural significance being in (terminal?) abeyance, and the validity of canonical values being questioned across artistic fields.

Giles Terera had just been offered the role of Aaron the Moor for a production of *Titus Andronicus* in Stratford when he was invited to audition as Aaron Burr in the London production of *Hamilton*. The RSC did not feel able to wait for a decision, and the actor rejected a firm offer to fulfil a lifetime ambition to play the Shakespearean role for the mere possibility of being cast as the American Aaron.<sup>111</sup> *Hamilton* exists in a league of its own, and marks a changing of the guard, but it does not automatically render everything that

came before it obsolete.<sup>112</sup> Reminiscing about his formative influences growing up in a Puerto Rican family in New York, Lin-Manuel Miranda has referred to *Phantom of the Opera* alongside *Cats* and *Les Misérables* as the 'Holy Trinity' of musicals.

With a multicultural cast, Andrew Lloyd Webber's 2015 stage adaptation of the film *School of Rock* (Richard Linklater, 2003) won the Olivier Award for best musical in London and seven Tony Awards in New York, including for best musical and best score. The central narrative conceit of both film and musical is a substitute teacher, who seeks 'to indoctrinate his students in the gospel according to Led Zeppelin and the Ramones'.<sup>113</sup> The unusual pedagogue comes across as an irresponsible layabout, but there is method to his madness: rock develops the pupils' self-esteem and melts the icy facade of an emotionally distant female teacher. Lloyd Webber had not premiered a production on Broadway since *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and *School of Rock* was the first of his musicals staged on the world's most famous theatrical thoroughfare to go into profit since *Phantom of the Opera*.<sup>114</sup>

As with any form of heritage culture in which dead white men are disproportionately well represented, rock music justifiably invites suspicion. The romantic(ized) discourse of *School of Rock*, which assumes the genre's emancipatory potential in different times and places (irrespective of age, gender, race, or sexual orientation) is problematic at best. *Blinded by the Light* (Gurinder Chadha, 2019), a cinematic adaptation of Sarfraz Manzoor's autobiographical memoir of his experience as a second-generation Pakistani immigrant who discovers Bruce Springsteen against the backdrop of racism and family pressures in Thatcher's Britain,<sup>115</sup> has, for example, been criticized in the *Guardian* for celebrating 'the power of classic, white-guy rock'. The (white-guy) journalist Steve Rose goes on to say: 'It should go without saying that these classic rockers and their music are meaningful and valuable to billions, but that's the problem: it is being said. Again and again.'<sup>116</sup> A counter-argument might run that, if the founding fathers and Shakespeare can be repurposed for diverse audiences, might

something similar not be attempted for rock music?

The genre exercising less of a monopoly over the popular musical landscape can be construed as an overdue democratization of cultural habits, as well as an invitation to curate its legacy with newfound political and theatrical literacy. Irrespective of their aesthetic and ethical shortcomings, the jukebox musicals analyzed in this article bode well for the future. As well as offering audiences enjoyable nights at the theatre, they carry out important labour as we embark on a transition from the innovation and resonance of rock's imperial age to a more reflective period with growing awareness of the challenges involved in curating one of the great artistic patrimonies of the second half of the last century.

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113. Stephen Holden, 'Film Review; A Substitute Teacher Puts a Spin on the 3 R's (Rock, Roll, and Rebellion)', *New York Times*, 3 October 2003, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/03/movies/film-review-substitute-teacher-puts-spin-3-r-s-rock-roll-rebellion.html>>.
114. Andrew Lloyd Webber, *Unmasked: A Memoir* (London: Harper Collins, 2018), p. 484.
115. The autobiographical protagonist finds salvation in Springsteen's music despite the fact that, aged sixteen,

all he knew about the Boss was that 'he had sung "Born in the USA" and Asian boys from Luton had no business listening to his music': Sarfraz Manzoor, *Greetings from Bury Park: Race, Religion, and Rock'n'Roll* (London, Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 89.

116. Steve Rose, 'We will classic rock you: when will the white guitarist conveyor belt end?', *Guardian*, 29 July 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/jul/29/we-will-classic-rock-you-when-will-the-white-guitarist-conveyor-belt-end>>.