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Stew: Professor of Punk Rock and Musical Theater

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Abstract

Stew (born Mark Stewart) is a punk rocker and musical theater writer and performer. This profile combines new interviews of Stew with an analysis of his Tony Award-winning musical *Passing Strange*, which was recently revived in the West End, to illuminate how his rock music-inspired persona influences his approach to creating musicals.

Keywords: musical theater; persona creation; punk rock; Stew Stewart

Late in the second act of *Passing Strange*, his Tony Award-winning semi-autobiographical musical, Stew (born Mark Stewart) is a bit sweaty.¹ He has been rocking guitar and the role of Narrator throughout the show. Black suit. Blood-red shirt over his heavy-set frame. Thick-rimmed glasses pushed up on his forehead. Bald Black pate glinting under the stage lights. He holds the microphone like a stand-up comedian. He says that he invited one of his friends, a pretzel vendor, to a preview. “Five or sixteen beers” later, his friend tells him that “the kid in your play is looking for something in *life*... that can only be found... in art.”² Over a gentle, hypnotic, acoustic guitar vamp, he replies, “Damn, pretzel man. Yer a heavy motherfucker.”

This blend of profundity and humor is typical of *Passing Strange* and of Stew himself. He told me that he loves “playing irreverently, with race. I don’t like taking it seriously in my work because we already know this is a serious topic.”³ Like its tone, the content and form of *Passing Strange* live midway between extremes. As Brandon Woolf wrote in *Theater Journal*, Stew and the musical are somewhere “between Black and white, between music and theater, between the US and Europe, between past and present.”⁴ He exists somewhere between life and art in *Passing Strange*, for which he wrote the books and lyrics, co-wrote the music with Heidi Rodewald, based the characters of Youth and Narrator on himself, and played the part of Narrator while leading the band.

¹ See *Passing Strange* (40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks, 2009), <https://tubitv.com/movies/680559/passing-strange>.

² Stewart 2009.

³ Stew Stewart, Interview with the Author, November 1, 2023.

⁴ Woolf 2010.

Fifteen years after the Broadway production of *Passing Strange* at the Belasco Theater, Stew is now Professor of the Practice of Musical Theater at Harvard University, bridging another gap from punk rock musical theater troubadour to academic. As he was preparing for the 2024 West End production of the show, I wanted to know how he created something so intellectual, yet hilarious; so emotional, yet fun; so public, yet personal.

I. Artistic influences and early success

Stew was born Mark Stewart in Los Angeles in 1961. The 60s were a time of racial unrest in L.A., with the 1965 Watts Riots erupting in response to segregationist housing policies and an increasingly militarized police force. While dealing with casual racism represented in *Passing Strange* by “those L.A. ladies in their Mercedes who lock their doors if you just sneeze,” Stew learned from his elementary school teachers about an alternative path in Europe for Black artists like James Baldwin and Dexter Gordon. “She was like, ‘These artists went to Paris and were able to walk down the street and not feel strange or different or weird,’” he told me. “And that appealed to all of us as early as elementary school.”

Stew’s childhood in L.A. planted the seeds for his cheeky style of humor. Growing up in a Black and Jewish neighborhood, he heard “the most irreverent, awful jokes from my Jewish friends.” These cross-cultural exchanges left “the Black kids all stunned because we didn’t have any slavery jokes like that.” This also informed Stew’s approach to American culture in general: “As much as people these days want to be like, ‘Oh, this is Black and we all have to stay in our little compartments,’ American culture doesn’t work like that. We’re always grabbing from each other. And I think that’s how it should be.”

His music tastes reflect this emphasis on drawing from many sources of inspiration. Stew joined R&B and punk rock bands in his teens, which also gained him his moniker. He explains Stew as “a name that was given to me” by “cool people in quotations” when he started playing in bands, that he later made his professional name to distinguish himself from the indie rocker Mark Stewart from Bristol, England.

From L.A., he journeyed east to New York City in 1982 when he was 21, spending a year playing with avant-garde rock bands. In 1983, he departed the US for Europe, where he eventually settled in West Berlin, making art living in squatted houses in the bohemian neighborhood Kreuzberg. When I asked Stew about the details of his time in Europe, he told me that he was “gonna have to get back to [me] on the actual timeline.” It is fitting that someone who seeks to mythologize their life might want to let some details stay obscure.

Stew returned to the US in response to growing racism in Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall and his mother’s health worsening. Back in L.A., he released his band’s first recording in 1995 under the label “The Negro Problem.” Their second album came out in 1999, with Heidi Rodewald, a former member of punk rock group Wednesday Week, joining the band. Both albums were critically acclaimed, and Stew stepped out and released four solo albums between 2000 and 2004. This recognition led to New York’s Public Theater approaching him and Rodewald to develop a theatrical stage piece. *Passing Strange* was born.

II. *Passing Strange*

The show had a lengthy pre-Broadway life in workshops at the Sundance Institute and Berkeley Repertory Theater, and an Off-Broadway run at the Public Theater in 2007. It

opened on Broadway in February 2008 to enthusiastic reviews as a New York Times Critic's Pick.⁵ Enter Stew and his rock band from stage right in the Belasco. The show begins with a squealing electric guitar riff over a swung bass line, and Stew wails the fourth wall-breaking prologue: "Now, you don't know me, and I don't know you. So, let's cut to the chase, the name is Stew."⁶ Already the usual formalities of musical theater are dispensed with, the creator of the show and writer of the words brought onstage as actor and musician. This is not the usual musical theater fare. This is something different.

The show follows the broad contours of his own life. He gives in to his mother's attempts to bring him along to church, where the wailing organ and choir awaken his musicality. When he joins the youth choir, he befriends the flamboyant choir director and minister's son, Mr. Franklin, who, like his real-life elementary school teachers, inspires him to follow in the footsteps of Black expatriate artists while they smoke pot in his VW Bug. In this exquisite musical sequence, Mr. Franklin delivers flowing monologs on "Black folks passing for Black folks"⁷ and the interpretation of Bach fugues when "your mind can't grasp the music's math and your heartbeat has no clue... And it just is and is and is and is so much that whether you get it or not – it's got," which is also a handy guide to interpreting the densely-packed book and score of *Passing Strange*.⁸ This segues to a mantra-based section of the song in which, in response to his discovery of a world beyond L.A., "Everything's all right" gets repeated until you cannot help but think it might be true.

The choir becomes too corny for Youth, and his friends flake from their punk rock band, so he journeys to Amsterdam and Berlin, where he adopts a "ghetto warrior persona." While he is in Europe, his mother has been calling, checking in on him, asking him to come home. She passes away before he returns, which makes him realize that his focus on art has been myopic and self-centered. But only through art – through *Passing Strange* itself – can she come back to life every night.

III. Stew on identity and authenticity

Rock music's preoccupation with authenticity and tradition of writing for oneself makes it difficult to blend with musical theater.⁹ In *Passing Strange*, Stew accesses something much closer to rock authenticity than other musicals do by appearing on stage as a larger-than-life version of himself. Accordingly, the usual language of musical theater fails to describe what Stew does onstage. Instead, we need the lexicon of punk rock: creating a persona in the way that Poly Styrene, Bono, or Adele has. Beyoncé told the *Mirror* that "I have someone else that takes over when it's time for me to work and when I'm onstage."¹⁰ She calls this persona Sasha Fierce, and it is in this tradition that we need to understand how Stew performs. As he puts it, "I'm not an actor. That's just me pulling this aspect of the songwriter world into theater." Stew also argues that the songwriting world is more theatrical than it lets on. For artists from Elton John to David Bowie, Eminem to Childish Gambino, "from heavy metal to folk, to rap, the song is our stage. The song is our place of drama."

⁵ Isherwood 2008.

⁶ Stewart, *Passing Strange*, 1.

⁷ For additional context on the show's relationship to Blackness, see Glover (2024) and Wald (2010).

⁸ Stewart, 23.

⁹ Wollman 2006.

¹⁰ Smith 2022.

Stew's work has spawned a legacy of interrogating processes of personality formation through musical theater. Michael R. Jackson took inspiration from *Passing Strange* when he wrote *A Strange Loop*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2020 and the Tony Award for Best Musical in 2022.¹¹ A “big, Black, and queer-ass American Broadway show,” *A Strange Loop* chronicles Usher's struggle with his family and coming into these identities while making art. The central conceit of the show is that it itself is the musical that Usher is writing, which is about himself writing a musical, which is about himself writing a musical, ad infinitum. The cast consists of Usher and six of his thoughts which morph into a variety of real and conceptual characters – his parents, his “daily self-loathing.” This ingenious self-referential structure draws attention to the less crystallized self-reference already present in *Passing Strange*. As Stew mythologizes his past, he lays the groundwork for his future. *Passing Strange* and *A Strange Loop* assert that it is the stories we tell ourselves, like Stew's search for “the real,” and the personas we consciously and unconsciously build, that define us as people.

This concept of creating a character – of passing for something you are not, or something you hope to become – is embedded in the structure of the plot of *Passing Strange*, in Stew straddling the divide between multitudinous worlds, in the all-Black cast portraying characters of different races. But the play transcends its specificity to Stew's experience because we are all in the process of performing, all the time. “Every day I build a mask,” Stew sings, and so do we.¹² We are always performing race, gender, class, politics, morality. But Stew, often found at the boundaries of these affiliations, elevates this performance to the level of art. In chronicling his artistic journey, he creates a myth that both illuminates and obscures the process by which he matured and wrote the piece itself. He believes being an artist means partaking in an ongoing conversation, in his case rooted in James Baldwin, Beyoncé, and Mel Brooks, advancing that conversation by a step as with *Passing Strange*, and seeing the next generation push the envelope another inch forward because of his efforts.

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¹¹ Orr 2022.

¹² Stewart, *Passing Strange*, 94.

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