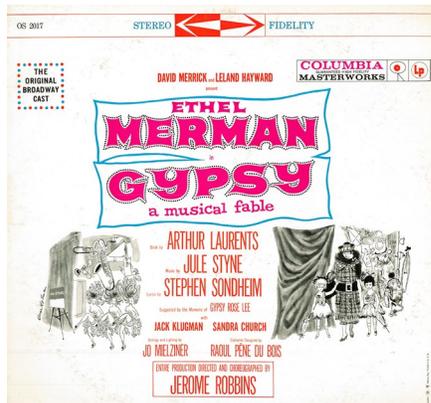


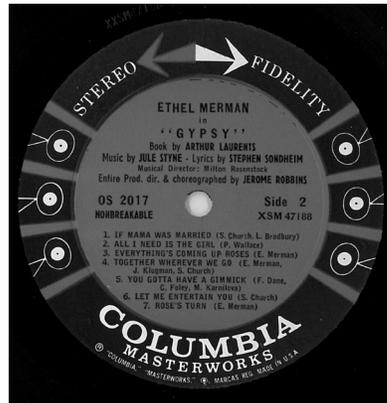
“Gypsy” (Original Cast Recording) (1959)

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Essay by Caryl Flinn (guest post)*



Original album artwork



Original label



Ethel Merman

“The Mother of All Musicals”: The Original Cast Recording of “Gypsy”

The best story about the “Gypsy” LP (1959) comes not from the original cast recording, but from gossip that Ethel Merman--the original “Mama Rose” on Broadway, and furious that the film role had gone to Rosalind Russell--had procured a copy of Russell’s singing demo for Warner Bros in which, well....she proved to be no Ethel Merman. Merman, the story goes, would bring the recording out at private gatherings.

Three decades before “Gypsy,” a young Ethel Merman (née Zimmerman) was a stenographer by day and singer by night. She achieved overnight fame singing “I Got Rhythm” in the Gershwins’ “Girl Crazy” at the Alvin Theatre when she held a high C note (on the “I...”) for so long that some critics compared it to swimming multiple lengths of an Olympic pool without coming up for air. Known for her booming, brassy voice (and a personality to match), Merman began her career at a time when theatres were without amplification systems and, like Mama Rose herself, when vaudeville was on the wane.

Merman’s rise to become arguably Broadway’s biggest star was rapid; she did shows by the Gershwins, Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, Stephen Sondheim and Jule Styne. “There’s No Business Like Show Business,” from Berlin’s 1946 “Annie Get Your Gun,” would prove to be her signature tune and anthem, one that drag queens to this day emulate, exaggerating La Merm’s late-life vibrato.

By the time of “Gypsy,” her 14th show, Merman was still in solid vocal form, but that’s not what made audiences eager to hear her. Worlds beyond legendary and, with a terrible show just behind her (and a disintegrating marriage after several years away from the boards), Merman and her public were buoyed by hopes of a big return to form. “Gypsy” also gave the star a chance to show some off some acting chops, being less a musical comedy than a dramatic “musical fable,” as its tag line read. Its line-up of talent was impressive, with two fresh off of the success of “West Side Story”: book by Arthur Laurents, music by Jule Styne, who composed with Merman in mind, and lyrics by a young Stephen Sondheim, who not only did not want to write with a star in mind but had to be convinced by mentor Oscar Hammerstein to take the job in the first place. (He was eager to move on to doing his own shows.)

“Gypsy” is based on the “creative memoir” of stripper Gypsy Rose Lee and tells the story of Mama Rose, an effectively single “stage mother” of two daughters, Louise--the favorite--and June, whom she pushes into vaudeville acts well past its heyday. A few men come into Rose’s

life--chief among them, Herbie, played by the non-singing Jack Klugman (best known to Americans as Oscar in TV's "The Odd Couple") but do not, nor cannot, remain permanent fixtures. The girls age out of their numbers and start yearning for their own lives; Louise elopes and Rose ultimately leaves to become a successful stripper, Gypsy Rose Lee, leaving Mama Rose on her own.

The original cast recording of "the mother of all musicals" would be the first stereo LP of Merman's career. It was released by CBS's Columbia label, which dominated the genre during the 1950s--its most popular decade--thanks to the creative and entrepreneurial leadership of Goddard Lieberson, trained as a composer at the Eastman School of Music. "Gypsy" boasts a roster of memorable pieces. From Mama Rose: "Some People," "You'll Never Get Away From Me," and "Together Wherever We Go" and, by others, "Let Me Entertain You" "You Gotta Have a Gimmick" and the delightfully closeted "All I Need is the Girl." The closing number of Act I, after Louise has left the family act and crashed Rose's hopes is Styne/Sondheim's equivalent of Berlin's morale-boosting "There's No Business Like Show Business": "Everything's Coming Up Roses."

The 11:00 number, of course, is "Rose's Turn," which has become the standard, the desideratum, for making or breaking Broadway divas much as Mozart's "The Night Queen" has for light opera or Brünnhilde's Immolation has for more dramatic fare. The number makes sizeable dramatic demands, moving from pity through hurt, sarcasm and anger, to a performative, defeated acceptance. There are moments of stammering, repeated or forgotten lines, music cutting out, significant modulations, rises and falls in vocal register, and lines delivered in whispers or in snarls. While it's clear that Rose is in--or close to--a breakdown at this point, no shortage of critics have labelled her, with a dollop of misogyny, delusional to the point of psychosis.

The song took other risks. With no consistent melody or stable rhythmic pattern, there was nothing catchy about it, and it even ends on a discordant chord. Concluding a show without a hummable tune for audiences to carry as they leave the theatre was unusual--other dramatic musicals that lacked the rousing culminations of musical comedies often utilized heart-rending reprises: "West Side Story"'s "Somewhere" or "Carousel's" "You'll Never Walk Alone." Curiously, "Rose's Turn" carries out both functions, although its emotional weight is borne solely by the character; in other words, audiences may appreciate the role (or the star performing it), but it's not a personage who encourages heartfelt identification. The piece also features what can only be described as scraps of musical reprises--starting, for instance, with music that would do a stripper proud, several measures of "Some People" appear soon after and, later, Rose screams, "Take that, Mr. Goldstone!" In this number, it's as if *everything*, even the reprise of a more conventional show, rested on Ethel Merman's shoulders.

Merman could take it, and her performance of "Rose's Turn" stands tall today, up against other Broadway titans who've since taken on the role: Tyne Daly, Angela Lansbury, Patti LuPone, Bernadette Peters, and others. The original cast recording won the Grammy Award for Best Original Cast Recording in 1959. For "Gypsy"'s 40th anniversary, the LP was re-mastered as a CD (Sony) with four bonus tracks, and either bypassing or amending changes Lieberson had made to the original session tapes. Then, there was a 50th anniversary edition released in 2009, also by Sony, with other new features, among them, a brief interview with Jule Styne from 1990 and one from Gypsy Rose Lee from 1959.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.