



## Sound Advice

Assassins, Susan Egan, Ann Hampton Calloway, *I Sing*, *Weird & Wonderful*

By Jonathan Frank

I have always thought that Assassins, Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman's stark look at America's underbelly as viewed through the warped viewpoints of various Presidential assassins, works far better than it has any right too. First of all, the show is more revue than linear in nature, as its songs and scenes are episodic versus telling a story with any sort of arc. It is also highly repetitious in thematic detail, as the same story is essentially told over and over again (individual is dissatisfied with life in some manner and comes to the conclusion that the only way to redress his or her wrongs is to kill the living embodiment of the United States of America: its President). Indeed, the show's basic theme, namely that the assassins' actions, while traumatic and dramatic, have no lasting effect (which is debatable, as the deaths of Garfield and Kennedy in particular had strong repercussions on American policy and direction), is stated repeatedly from the first 'assassin' number, "The Ballad of Booth," to the penultimate number, "Something Just Broke," in which everyday Americans react to Kennedy's assassination. Also, the show's focus is fractured by having a 'good angel/bad angel' relationship between the Balladeer (Neil Patrick Harris) and the Proprietor (Marc Kudisch), who take turns telling the story without any rhyme or reason (having John Wilkes Booth, Tony winner Michael Cerveris, pop up every now and then to instigate events on his own only adds to the diffusion of focus).



Also, there is nothing in the show that has not been done before by Sondheim, and better at that. Follies did a much better job, for instance, at using musical pastiches to enhance the score and demark the characters than Assassins does, with its mix of everything from Sousa marches (the comical "How I Saved Roosevelt," which guarantees that you will never view a 4th of July parade without quoting the song's deliciously warped lyrics), mountain folk music ("The Ballad of Booth" and "The Ballad of Czolgosz"), barbershop quartets ("The Gun Song"), and even a fusion of The Carpenters and Donna Summers ("Unworthy Of Your Love," a tender love ballad made chilling by having its performers, Alexander Gemignani as John Hinckley, Jr. and Mary Catherine Garrison as Squeaky Fromme, singing it to the objects of their obsession, Jodie Foster and Charles Manson, respectively). Sweeney Todd did a much better job of humanizing a homicidal maniac. And Pacific Overtures more strongly depicts a historical event and its repercussions on society. That said, it is amazing how powerful Assassins is, even when divorced by visuals or the majority of its book scenes, as evidenced by its most recent

recording, the original Broadway cast album of the recently closed Roundabout Theatre Company's production.

The album does a remarkable job in preserving this year's Tony winner for Best Revival, and in many ways it surpasses the original 1991 Off-Broadway cast recording. Snippets of spoken book scenes preface more of the numbers, thus providing a greater understanding of the triggers that set off the assassins. Also included on the disc is Sam Byck's (Mario Cantone) second monologue, thus preserving at least a portion of a part that is almost entirely spoken. The album also provides the first recording of "Something Just Broke," written for the London production of *Assassins* that was directed by Sam Mendes at the Donmar Warehouse.

Michael Starobin, who won a Tony this year for his orchestrations, has done a remarkable job fleshing out his original 1991 arrangements by adding several character defining instrumental 'grace-notes' into the piece, such as Italian folk music licks into "How I Saved Roosevelt" and a wonkily dissonant Cakewalk undertone to "The Ballad of Guiteau." While the Broadway cast is, as a whole, not as vocally strong as those on the Off-Broadway recording, as the latter cast included Patrick Cassidy, Victor Garber, Annie Golden, Terrence Mann and Debra Monk, there are quite a few standouts on this disc, including Marc Kudisch's creepy portrayal of the Proprietor, Neil Patrick Harris' effective (and sometimes tongue-in-cheek) rendition of the Balladeer, Michael Cerveris' impassioned performance of Booth (which is even more incredible on disc than on stage, which in this case is saying a lot) and my personal favorite, Becky Ann Baker's off-kilter portrayal of would-be assassin of President Ford, Sara Jane Moore. Denis O'Hare, who was at times too over-the-top on stage with his portrayal of Charles Guiteau, is much more effective on disc (his manic giggling on "The Gun Song" is one of the most riveting moments on the album, in fact).

Even with its disregard for historical accuracy (not to mention temporal possibility) and a lack of insight into what makes these men and women tick (not to mention explode), *Assassins* is a powerful look at a group of people who have confused the right to pursue happiness with that of obtaining it. Given recent world events in general and the tragedy of 9/11 in particular, the reminder that these two statements are not interchangeable is timely indeed.



Susan Egan, most recently seen on Broadway in the titular role of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, has recently released her second solo album (available now at [LMLMusic.com](http://LMLMusic.com) and September 7 in stores). Entitled *Coffee House*, the CD is an eclectic mix of songs culled from a variety of genres: in short, exactly what one would find at a proto-typical Village coffee bar. Many of the songs are folk/pop numbers from the '60s and '70s, such as Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides Now" (turned into an joyous anthem of life by Egan and arranger/producer Christopher McGovern), Cat Stevens' "Oh Very Young" (beautifully and tenderly sung), Karla Bonoff's "French Waltz" and Janis Ian's "Roses" (performed as a stirring duet with Terrence Mann).

The album also contains five premier recordings, all of which are worthy of future attention. In addition to providing arrangements and keyboards for the album, McGovern contributed a true New York City love song to the album, a tender number on missed

opportunities entitled "Across 9th Avenue." Egan, who provided the voice for Meg in Disney's Hercules, shines on a number cut from the film, "I Can't Believe My Heart," which is a textbook example of a song being better than any actually appearing in the final film, but cut for stylistic reasons. "Oh, How I Loved You," a new number by Marcy Heisler and Zina Goldrich (whose anthem to baristas, "Taylor, The Latte Boy" is also perfectly realized by Egan, one of the few performers to infuse the song with the over-the-top excitement of blossoming love - or lust), is a beautiful song of loss that will reduce anyone going through a break-up to a blob of emotional Jell-O. Two other premier recordings, "There Are No Words" (by David Evans and Faye Greenburg) and "Sing Me A Happy Song (Georgia Stitt) are destined to break out of the 'coffee house' and enter the cabaret repertoire quickly.

The album, like all coffee house performance nights, even contains an oddball number that is not quite aligned with the reality of the rest of the 'world,' in this case a cover of Kate Bush's "Wuthering Heights" that is a bit jarring in its fragmentation (while I applaud anyone for dipping into the Kate Bush oeuvre, as I feel she is woefully undiscovered by cabaret and vocal artists, I can not help but feel that one of her more linear storytelling numbers, such as "Babooshka," "The Man With The Child In His Eyes" or given world events, "Army Dreamers" might have been a better choice). Overall, however, this is an incredibly strong and delightful album that ranks as one of this year's "must-have" gems.



Equally strong is Ann Hampton Callaway's latest album, *Slow* [available August 24]. Callaway's voice gets warmer with every passing year, and her skills at lyrical interpretation continue to improve at the same time. With one notable exception, the songs on *Slow* represent Callaway at her vocal (and oftentimes songwriting) best as the album is a remarkable collection of well-known standards (a heart-melting rendition of "You Belong To Me" and a delicate "Never Let Me Go" which rank among the most romantic recordings of either number), familiar pop songs (a sensual "Will You Love Me Tomorrow?" that is made all the more powerful by Callaway's pulled back, tentative approach and arrangement, and a delightfully jazzy duet version of "Moondance" sung by Ann and her sister, Liz), Brazilian numbers (an incredible version of "Love Dance" that incorporates traces of other love songs in its arrangement by Ted Rosenthal and Callaway, and a remarkable version of "Someone to Light Up My Life"), and numbers written by Callaway herself, including a rendition of "I Dreamed Of You" (a setting of an instrumental song by *Secret Garden* that was commissioned by Barbara Streisand to commemorate her wedding to James Brolin) that far outshines Streisand's sterile recording. The only flaw on this album is a new number by Callaway and Carole King, "Tonight You're All Mine," that does not match the rest of the album in tone, being too jarringly R&B, or in its lyrical intelligence.



more than a little risqué (and, indeed, would be quite at home in *Jerry Springer The Opera*), the treatment comes across more as mild Musical Hall titillation than anything else.

There are some numbers worth looking into by performers looking for comic material (especially "I Love To Sing," which provides a laundry list of examples as to why said person should not do so in public) but overall the album is neither weird nor wonderful enough.