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## Playlist of Your Dreams

The music of rock's greatest generation, long absent from the theater, is finding new life on stage

By Richard Zoglin

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Laura Nyro, just 19 and wearing a black gown with an angel's wing on her shoulder, got booed off the stage at the 1967 Monterey Pop Festival. That may help explain why, for the rest of her career, this rock innovator shied away from the limelight, writing songs that others turned into hits (*Stoned Soul Picnic* for the 5<sup>th</sup> Dimension; *And When I Die* for Blood, Sweat and Tears; *Stoney End* for Barbra Streisand). The crowd at that landmark Monterey festival was more into high-energy rockers like Janis Joplin, for whom performing was as intoxicating as the heroin that eventually killed her, in 1970, at age 27.

Both Joplin and Nyro (who died of cancer in 1997) are back together onstage, after a fashion — each being celebrated in a new off-Broadway show. In *Eli's Comin'* five performers (including golden-voiced Broadway vet Judy Kuhn) wend their way through a bookless compendium of 20 of Nyro's best-known songs. Though assembled into a very loose narrative (young girl arrives in New York City; by the end she's sharing confessions with what looks like a therapy group), the show works best 'marvelously' as a showcase for Nyro's idiosyncratic and influential music, a lush, emotionally vivid, rhythmically complex mixture of folk, rock, gospel and jazz.

*Love, Janis* is a more ambitious but less satisfying show, in which well-amplified renditions of Joplin's hits (*Piece of My Heart*, *Me and Bobby McGee*) are interspersed with excerpts from letters to her parents. It's overlong and a bit overblown: so great was Joplin's talent that it takes two performers (one sings; the other does most of the talking) to encompass her. Make that three: because of the role's "vocal demands," two performers alternate nights as the singing Janis.

So is this theater, or a classic-rock FM station? The hits of the '60s and '70s have lately become as ubiquitous on the legit stage as the endlessly recycled standards of Gershwin, Porter and Kern. In addition to Nyro and Joplin, Jim Morrison and his life and music were the subject of another recent off-Broadway show. The '70s hits of the Swedish rock band Abba make up the score for *Mamma Mia!*— a hit in London that's due on Broadway this fall. A new Beatles musical, *All You Need Is Love*, is about to open in London, and a show with music by the '70s band Queen is in the works. Fittingly, New York City's critically acclaimed Encores! series, which mounts concert versions of "classic" American musicals, earlier this month crossed the great divide— rediscovering the rock musical *Hair*.

There is belated justice in all this activity. The Advent of rock was the reason Broadway show music got shunted to the fringes of the pop-culture world. A whole generation of talented rock composers steered clear of the theater, at least, the sort of theater where the band is in the pit, not on the stage, and the audience applauds politely from its seats.

From *Beattlemania* to *Saturday Night Fever*, producers have looked for ways of bringing the music of rock's classic period to theater audiences. It's a smart commercial move: at their best, these shows can lure both the young (more apt to visit the theater if it disguises itself as a rock concert) and the getting-old (baby boomers who love any opportunity to revisit the playlist of their youth).

The creators of these shows, of course, don't 'fess up to anything as crass as pandering to nostalgia. "Janis Joplin's music sells better now than it did 20 or 30 years ago," says Jennifer Dumas, producer of *Love, Janis*. Diane Paulus had never heard Laura Nyro's music before she was asked to direct *Eli's Comin'*, and she argues that this new breed of musicals fits perfectly in the theater's participatory tradition. "If you can bring music into the theater that the audience already has a connection to, you're just increasing the power of what the theater event can be," she says.

You can increase the box office too. Benny Andersson and Bjorn Ulvaeus, of Abba, had a Broadway failure despite their great score for the rock musical *Chess* in the mid-'80s. But *Mamma Mia!*— essentially a greatest-hits album adorning a fluffy story about a girl searching for her real dad— had been breaking attendance records in London, Toronto and Los Angeles. Which means that more than just Abba fans are singing along with *Dancing Queen*.