

**This interview with  
STEPHEN SONDHEIM  
was conducted by the Library of Congress  
on February 6, 2017**



**Library of Congress:** When the cast show albums of each of these three shows—“West Side Story,” “Gypsy,” and “Sweeney Todd”—was done, were you in the studio? Is being in the studio during the sessions something you insist on? Do you enjoy it? What do you see as your role during that time?

Stephen Sondheim: Yes, I was in the studio for each of these shows being recorded; I’ve done that for all of my shows.

It’s not about insisting; it’s part of the job. If you’re going to sign your name to something, you want to be sure that it’s as good as it can be.

But, no, I don’t enjoy it, the studio recordings. The time limits are so great. It costs so much to record a show and there isn’t much market for them [so] you have to get the entire show done in one day, unless it’s a very long score like “Sweeney Todd,” which we did in 2 days.

It’s different making show recordings as opposed to recording pop albums—those can take many days or even months to record, and it allows them to refine and experiment, etc., etc. For a cast album, you don’t have that luxury. It’s not that you use the first take but it is virtually the first take—you never have a second chance, you don’t have the time to refine anything.

My role during the recording is primarily to see that the notes are correct, that the singers have energy and that they are interpreting the songs in a way that will make sense to the listener. That is the important thing with a cast album, you have to remember that the audience has nothing to look at so you have to convey everything through the sound. That often entails having to sing at a faster speed and play at a faster speed than they do in the theater. Because the listener—having nothing to look at—is more impatient. So you will find that, generally, cast albums are faster than the performance.

**LOC: In the transfer of the show from stage to recording studio for the makings of the cast show albums, did the arrangements of any of the songs/numbers change? Did any other alterations have to take place?**

SS: Most of the cast recordings—at least the ones I’ve been involved in—have been augmented in the orchestrations. This is not to say so much new arrangements—that’s almost never done, in my experience—but expanded arrangements, usually involving the string sections. Broadway pit orchestras have very small string sections and so the orchestrator will expand the orchestration for a recording.

Sometimes you do alter numbers because there are dialogue passages that you want to cut before recording. You don’t want listeners to have to put up with a lot of dialogue when they are only interested in hearing the songs.

The record producer (the first one I worked with was Goddard Lieberson and after that Tom Shepard and then Tommy Krasker), they are always prepared for just such purposes. They make the cuts and the adjustments to the dialogue and transitions in advance, remembering that this is being done for a recording. It is usually the record producer’s responsibility but I have worked with producers from time to time as I’m sure other composers have done in order to make the record smooth and seamless.

**LOC: When you created the lyrics for “West Side Story” you were pretty new, did you still play that sort of role with the recording of it? Did you have input?**

SS: Yes, I had some. Leonard Bernstein was not around for the recording of “West Side Story,” so I was responsible for it; Goddard Lieberson was the producer. He ran the session and I was the creative input.

**LOC: Can you describe to me your preferred method of collaboration—do you prefer to be, say, in a room or within earshot with your collaborators or do you prefer to be off on your own, working alone?**

SS: When I’m writing songs, I prefer to be alone, of course. Since I write my own lyrics and music, there’s no point in being in the room with a collaborator.

When we are planning a show, of course, I work with the librettist all the time. And we are always in the room together... though, in the case of “West Side Story,” when Leonard Bernstein was writing the music and I was writing the lyrics, I’d say we were together one out of three days and then on the phone with each other two days. He liked to work in a room with me and I preferred to work alone, so we compromised.

**LOC: For “Sweeney Todd,” did you have any hesitation in taking on such dark subject matter?**

SS: No, I had no hesitation. “Sweeney Todd” is not dark, it’s a melodrama. I had no hesitation and I don’t know why I would.

**LOC: When casting a new show, do you find it better to hire the better singer or the better actor for a part?**

SS: I generally prefer actors who can sing rather than a singer who can act. You want someone to do both, of course, but if I have to lean on one element, I would lean more towards the acting

because I'm much more concerned with telling the story than I am with the enjoyment of the singing, which is one of the reasons that I don't enjoy opera. In opera, the acting and the storytelling is often subordinate to the singers and their skills. People who love opera love the human voice more than the story being told, I don't.

**LOC: So many of the songs from these musicals have gone on into the popular lexicon via a variety of cover versions--"Somewhere," "Everything's Coming Up Roses," and "Send in the Clowns," being perhaps the most often recorded. Do any of these versions stand out to you and, if so, why?**

SS: No, I don't have any favorite versions. My favorites are always the originals.