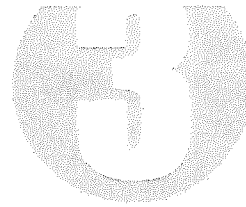


From:

Rock the Audition

By Sheri Sanders



Picking a Rock Song

How do I pick a rock song? I don't listen to the radio. I grew up singing show tunes!" That's what I hear every time someone steps foot in my office for the first time.

Guess what? Looking for music can be an absolute *blast* once you figure out how to do it. But before we get into discussing *anything* about the type of songs you need to pick, you first have to be clear on what rock musicals *are*. When you've got a grasp on this, you can go on to identify the essence of the rock musicals that are being produced. That makes picking a bunch of really hot rock songs perfectly suited for your auditions *super easy*.

What Is a Rock Musical?

I can't tell you how many people are confused about which shows on Broadway are actually rock musicals. They ask, "Is *Jersey Boys* a rock musical? And what about *Billy Elliot*?"

For the love of God, *yes!*

The term "rock musical" is a sweeping generalization applied to musicals that cannot be considered classical or legit. But in fact, productions in the rock category include all of the following types of music:

- ▶ 1950s and 1960s Motown and rock and roll
- ▶ 1970s rock/folk
- ▶ Mid-1970s to mid-'80s disco
- ▶ 1980s pop and rock
- ▶ Contemporary rock (1990s to the present)
- ▶ Contemporary pop (1990s to the present)
- ▶ Blues
- ▶ Country
- ▶ Gospel
- ▶ Rhythm and blues (R&B)
- ▶ Folk

A Brief Chronology of Pop/Rock Musicals

Take a peek at this chronological list of rock musicals drawn from the Broadway and Off-Broadway scenes since *Bye Bye Birdie* opened in 1960. Notice the asterisk placed next to certain shows. That asterisk indicates that although a show was written in one era, its story takes place in another. The important thing for you to know about a show when you are picking a song to audition with is the *era in which the story takes place*.

Bye Bye Birdie (1960)
Hair (1968)
Promises, Promises (1968)
The Me Nobody Knows (1970)
Jesus Christ Superstar (1971)
Godspell (1971)
Grease (1972)*
The Wiz (1975)
The Rocky Horror Show (1975)
Dreamgirls (1981)*
Starlight Express (1984)
Song and Dance (1985)
Chess (1988)
Starmites (1989)
Tommy (1992)*
Rent (1996)
Zombie Prom (1996)*
The Lion King (1997)
Hedwig and the Angry Inch (1998)
Fame (1998)*
Footloose (1999)*
Saturday Night Fever (1999)*
The Civil War (1999)
Aida (2000)
The Full Monty (2000)
Mamma Mia! (2000)
Bat Boy (2001)
We Will Rock You (2002)
Hairspray (2002)*
Zanna, Don't! (2002)
Taboo (2002)*
Bare (2004)
Altar Boyz (2005)
All Shook Up (2005)*
The Color Purple (2005)*
Jersey Boys (2006)*
The Wedding Singer (2006)*
Legally Blonde (2007)
Spring Awakening (2007)
Xanadu (2007)*
Shrek (2008)
Billy Elliot (2008)

Passing Strange (2008)
Rock of Ages (2009)*
Memphis (2009)*
Next to Normal (2009)
American Idiot (2010)
Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson (2010)
Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown (2010)
Spiderman (2010)
Bring It On (2011)
Priscilla (2011)

That's a lot of rock musicals. If you were to audition for any of these shows today, not only would you *have* to sing a rock song, you would need about four or five *different* songs to cover their different styles!

The First Step in Picking the Right Song for an Audition

To find great songs for your audition book, I want you to first take a look at the *casting breakdowns*. Before holding auditions, the casting office, along with the creative team, sends out details about the show and roles that have not yet been cast so that talent agents can submit their clients for these roles. These breakdowns are also posted on the Actors' Equity website (ActorsEquity.org) and on Backstage.com, which is open to folks who don't have theatrical representation...yet.

Most important is that breakdowns also suggest the type of song that the casting team would like to hear actors sing. A breakdown for *Hair*, for example, might read: "Bring in a 1970s rock song." A breakdown for *Rock of Ages* might read, "Bring in a 1980s rock ballad." Even though they are simple, such instructions are valuable in pointing you in the right direction.

Casting directors sometimes won't refer to an era at all in the breakdown. They'll just say, "Bring in a pop/rock song." In cases like this, it's up to *you* to research the show and figure out what *kind* of pop/rock musical it is. You have to do your best to get your hands on the specifics you need because creative teams have a tendency to generalize.

To be fair, they are busy. They don't have time to talk you through all the details. They're putting on a show!

Is It Pop or Rock?

When casting directors ask you for a “pop/rock” song, don’t you find that confusing? Pop and rock are very different from each other; although, in truth, many of your favorite tunes are likely to fall into both categories. Want to know the difference?

Pop: Pop means popular culture. This type of song has a catchy melody and satisfies many different music appetites. When it is written, the songwriter intends for it to become a hit on the radio so people will want to buy the album or track. Such a song usually has danceable beats that make it irresistible. That’s the source of its mass appeal.

Rock: Rock musicians are less interested in creating “hits” and more interested in creating songs that are authentic expressions of their emotions and their musicianship. The authenticity of the sound is based in electric guitar, a heavy bass sound, and drums. Rock is divided into subcultures like classic, indie (meaning the band is self-producing or “independent” of a record label), alternative, and punk.

Once you have identified the era in which the story takes place, you then need to determine if the music in the score is pop or rock.

Finding Great Songs That Fit the Genre and Era

When you understand the era and you know the difference between pop and rock, the next step will be to look at all the great singers whose songs would be perfect to audition with. For the most part, popular songs from mainstream singers in a given era will fit a show written about that era. For example, Janis Joplin, who sang in the late 1960s, wrote songs that are perfect for auditions for *Hair*. Whitney Houston’s up-tempo numbers from the 1980s are suitable when auditioning for *Mamma Mia*. The tunes of Fall Out Boy, an emo-rock band from the mid-2000s, are great to sing if you’re trying to get a role in *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* or *American Idiot*.

Just like some shows are written in one era but capture the feel of another, there are also songs written in one era that capture the feel of another.

The Feel of It

I sat in on the EPAs for the musical *Memphis*. Although the breakdown said only that the casting directors wanted actors to prepare “a pop/rock song,” for *Memphis* auditions they specifically needed to hear blues, Motown, and rock and roll from the ’50s. You see, the show, which won four Tony Awards in 2010, including Best Musical, “is about a white radio DJ who wants to change the world and a black club

singer who is ready for her big break.”¹ You want to know something really cool? The score was written by David Bryan, the keyboardist from the band Bon Jovi—a contemporary rock musician.

So many different kinds of songs worked in the auditions. I heard people audition with tunes from the 1950s popularized by Otis Redding, Aretha Franklin, Martha and the Vandellas, Jackie Wilson, Sam Cooke, and Stevie Wonder. But I also heard successful auditions from actors singing the songs of Fats Waller, a jazz legend in the ’20s and ’30s, and Whitney Houston, the queen of ’80s pop . . . Those two eras are entirely different than the era in which *Memphis* is set. But their music fit the production like a glove because the songs of Waller and Houston could be *performed* like ’50s or ’60s tunes.

We heard one actor treat a Bon Jovi song like an old blues ballad. Another actor brought in “Gimme the Ball,” a legit tune from the Broadway musical *A Chorus Line*. His audition was successful because he treated it like a ’50s Motown tune. Then an actor brought in the pop song “Hey Ya” from the hip-hop group Outkast. His performance was amazing! If you’ve ever watched the Outkast video of “Hey Ya,” it looks as if they are a ’50s band making a guest appearance on a TV variety show like *The Corny Collins Show* in *Hairspray*. He was clearly inspired by the video. All these brilliant and intuitive performers chose these songs and handled their performances like they were people living in the ’50s. As a result, their headshots and résumés got put in the casting directors’ “yes” pile. By the way, there are actually *two* yes piles. If a performer is amazing, but not right for the show, they got put into the second yes pile, which is the “yes, you’re *great* and I want to see you for a different project” pile.

What didn’t work that day at the auditions was when I could tell that actors had seen the instruction “bring in a pop/rock song” on the breakdown, and didn’t think to ask, “What era does the show take place in?” Consequently they gave a contemporary pop/rock performance as opposed to one inspired by the ’50s. It happened a lot that day. In the end, the “no” pile was much bigger than the “yes” pile because of it.

What I am saying here, my child, is that songs don’t have to be from the same era in which the show was written, however they do need to be performed *as if they were*.

What your audition song needs to do is to capture the *essence* of the show. What do I mean by the word “essence”? The way something feels. Get used to this word. I’m going to use it a lot. The music and sentiment of your song need to *feel* like the show. Your performance also needs to *feel* like the show.

There are so many wonderful places to look for music. Places you would never ever think to look.

All right. *The next few sections of this chapter are going to rock your world.* We are going to take a quick look at the eras in which all sorts of beautiful shows deliciously fall, and where to find songs that would be great specifically when auditioning for these shows. To the creative teams of any shows I do not mention, I really want to say thank you. Your contribution to the theater world is awesome. Please do not let this be a reflection of your success.

Rock Music of the 1950s and 1960s

The breakdown for an audition for one of the following shows *should* say: "Bring in a '50s or '60s pop or rock song." This genre of rock musical requires you to sing a Motown or rock and roll song, as it dramatically covers the mid-'50s to the mid-'60s.

All Shook Up
Baby It's You!
Beehive
The Buddy Holly Story
Cry Baby
Dreamgirls
Forever Plaid
Grease
Hairspray
Jersey Boys
Leader of the Pack
Little Shop of Horrors
The Marvelous Wonderettes
Memphis
Million Dollar Quartet
Promises, Promises
Shout
Smokey Joe's Café

When I was telling a class that *The Little Shop of Horrors* was a '50s musical, a female student challenged me, "Yeah, but Sheri, the show was produced Off-Broadway in 1982 and Audrey's music is composed by Alan Menken, which means it is much more 'musical-theater-y' than typical early '60s rock."

My response to that was, "Yes, darling. But in its essence the entire piece is a doo wop musical; therefore you need to find a great girl's song off the radio from the doo wop or early Motown era that has a great storyline so that you can create a character like Audrey for your audition."

Make sense? Again, *your song needs to capture the essence of the show.* Although Alan Menken is a contemporary pop musical theater writer and Marc Shaiman, the composer of *Hairspray* and *Catch Me If You Can*, is a contemporary pop composer, lyricist, and arranger (he was Bette Midler's musical director for several projects), both men wrote shows that were reminiscent of the late '50s to the early '60s.

There are tons of great places to look for music that covers this era, which boasts a diverse palette of rock and roll, Motown, rhythm and blues, and doo wop. To me, a phenomenal place to look for flawless audition songs is within the song lists of the best-loved songwriters of this particular time period.

Along with the brilliance of Burt Bacharach and the other Brill Building artists I mentioned in Chapter 1, don't forget to look up the writing team of Holland-Dozier-Holland, made up of Lamont Dozier and the brothers Brian Holland and Eddie Holland Jr., as these guys were major hitmakers in the 1960s. Together they composed over 200 songs, including some of the biggest soul hits ever written, songs like "Baby Love," "Stop in the Name of Love," "Nowhere to Run," and "Where Did Our Love Go?"

Many contemporary pop writers from the last thirty years absolutely love the sound of the '50s and '60s. You can hear the influence of these decades in their songs. These artists are also fantastic resources for songs that communicate the essence of this era. To find audition pieces, you need to look up the work of these artists.

Billy Joel
The Go-Go's
The B-52's
The Stray Cats
Adam Ant
Jeff Beck (*Rock 'n' Roll Party Honoring Les Paul*)
Huey Lewis and the News
Amy Winehouse (a hot sloppy mess in her personal life, her album *Back to Black* is absolute Motown perfection)
Bruno Mars
John Legend
Prince (old James Brown kinda soul)

Any of these songwriters will guarantee that you will find an unbelievable audition song for a 1950s or 1960s rock musical in their body of work.

Rock Music of the 1970s

The breakdown for an audition for one of the following shows *should* say: "Bring in a '70s rock or folk song." Your song selection therefore

show or a tune written anytime between 1965 and 1975, give or take a year here and there.

Godspell
Hair
Hedwig and the Angry Inch
Jesus Christ Superstar
The Me Nobody Knows
The Rocky Horror Show
Tommy
Two Gentlemen of Verona
We Will Rock You

For the Broadway revival of *Godspell*, casting directors from Telsey and Company were asking for either a pop song or a contemporary musical theater song in the style of Stephen Schwartz. Given this instruction, this is where you would intuit that the pop sound the producers want to hear doesn't come from an artist like Christina Aguilera, Whitney Houston, or Justin Timberlake. If you look at Schwartz' show *Pippin*, you'll find "Corner of the Sky," a perfect representation of both the feel of the '70s and of Schwartz's musical style. This era asks for the raw, poetic nature of an authentic 1970s rock tune. The songs of so many great artists, especially those whose music is timeless, would be perfect.

What do I mean when I call an artist "timeless"? These geniuses have created literally *decades* of brilliant music that could be sung for auditions in many different eras and genres. You could sing an Aretha Franklin song for shows set in the '50s, '60s, and '70s, in the style of blues, or R&B, or contemporary rock. You can sing her music for just about anything because her canon spans so many decades and styles. It is also because the honesty with which she communicates her music doesn't have era-specific musical references in it. This principle holds true for all timeless artists. Artists in this category include:

Stevie Wonder
Aretha Franklin
Michael Jackson
Elton John (collaborating with lyricist Bernie Taupin)
Joe Cocker
Tina Turner
Aerosmith
The Beatles
Heart

Would you like to look up a *really* great songwriter from this era? She's a songwriter you need to know about because she is one of the greatest that has ever lived. Although she didn't necessarily write *for* other singers, her music is so dynamic and extraordinary that it was recorded during this era by Barbra Streisand; Three Dog Night; the Fifth Dimension; Blood, Sweat and Tears; Linda Ronstadt; Peter, Paul and Mary; and Thelma Houston. You can hear her influence when listening to singers who loved her, stars like Elton John, Joni Mitchell, Kate Bush, Elvis Costello, Rickie Lee Jones, and Carole King (herself one of the greatest songwriters of all time). Their music was directly inspired by her ability to fuse doo wop, rock, soul, jazz, folk, and blues. They'll tell you so.

Her name is Laura Nyro.

You may find the depth of Nyro's influence on our musical theater writers intriguing. In a biography of Nyro, *Soul Picnic* by Michele Kort, a photograph is printed showing Nyro and Stephen Sondheim hanging out together in Sondheim's apartment listening to music. He was such a fan of Nyro's song "Stoned Soul Picnic" that, according to Kort, "Sondheim said that, in its complexity, economy, and spontaneity, it summed up for him what music was all about."² And if you look carefully at the vocal selections of the musical *Godspell*, in the upper left-hand corner of the sheet music for "O Bless the Lord," the suggestion for how to style this gorgeous song is "à la Laura Nyro." She will change your life, I promise you.

Disco Music of the Mid-'70s to the Mid-'80s

The breakdown for an audition for one of the following shows would say: "Bring in a disco song."

Mamma Mia!
Priscilla, Queen of the Desert
Saturday Night Fever
Sister Act
The Wiz
Xanadu

There is no mistaking a disco tune from any other. A disco tune will evoke what all these shows are looking for, energy that makes your audience want to get up and boogie down! Olivia Newton-John was a big influence on the disco era, starring in the 1980 film *Xanadu* (which took place at a roller disco), as well as singing on most of the soundtrack. Donna Summer, who earned the title of the Queen of Disco, was influential during this period too, as was Barry White, whose deep, deep, luscious voice drew the ladies onto the dance floor.

I can Barry White's tunes from the disco era "baby making music" because they are seeeeee-xy!

If you want to look at the work of some of the best disco songwriters, look to the songs of Paul Jabara ("The Main Event," "No More Tears," "Enough Is Enough," "Last Dance"); John Farrar ("Magic," "Have You Never Been Mellow," "A Little More Love"); and Barry Gibb ("Jive Talking," "Boogie Nights," "How Deep Is Your Love," "You Should Be Dancing"), who, along with his brothers Robin and Maurice, formed the group the Bee Gees. Not only did the Bee Gees write and sing almost the entire soundtrack to the hit movie *Saturday Night Fever*, but apparently over 2,500 artists have recorded their songs.³ And finally Gamble and Huff, whose Philadelphia soul sound gave us great disco tunes ("The Love I Lost," "Bad Luck," and "Love Train").

Pop and Rock Music of the '80s (the Entire Decade)

The breakdown you would receive for this audition would say: "Bring in a 1980s pop/rock song." Shows in this category include:

Fame
Footloose
Rock of Ages
Taboo
The Wedding Singer

Eighties pop and '80s rock are very different creatures. Eighties rock is Whitesnake and Def Leppard. Eighties pop is Whitney Houston, Cyndi Lauper, and Boy George. It is really good to know that these two extremes exist—the dark and the light. For great audition material, however, there are also tons of artists and groups, among them Journey, Foreigner, Pat Benatar, Heart, and Taylor Dayne, whose music falls in the territory right between the extremes. You can sing their songs for either pop or rock musicals auditions.

To research '80s songs, you need to look at the songwriters of this era, not just at the singers. Casting director Dave Clemmons has great taste in music. He feels that: "Most of the time, singer/songwriters write music for the quirkiness of their own voice, whereas people who are songwriters only, as opposed to singer/songwriters, write songs that are intended for vocally dynamic singers to sing."⁴ Some of the songwriters I'm talking about are Carole Bayer Sager, Diane Warren, Jim Steinman, David Foster, Billy Steinberg, and Richard Marx, one of our favorite singer/songwriters who also wrote for other artists. Collaborators Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil, who began writing songs in the '50s, were still writing hits in the '80s! Who sang their

songs in the '80s? The Pointer Sisters, James Ingram, Jeffrey Osborne, Peabo Bryson, and Chaka Khan did, to name a few. Look up all these amazing writers. The possibilities are endless.

I can't go another moment without talking about the '80s "yacht rock" phenomenon. This is for you in particular, boys. There was an actual video series in the 1990s that honored the soft rock writers of the '80s, emulating the gentleness of men and the way they bonded (picture yuppies out for a sail together). The list of who wrote and sang music in this genre is legendary: Kenny Loggins, Michael McDonald, Christopher Cross, Steely Dan, Hall and Oates, and Toto. Really, this music is incredible for auditions. For me, most of the singers from this era sang a perfect blend of pop and rock.

Contemporary Pop and Rock Music (Mid-1990s to the Present)

It is unfortunate that contemporary musical theater professionals tend to clump the last twenty years of rock music into one category. The breakdown for an audition for a contemporary production would ask you: "Bring in a contemporary pop/rock song," without drawing the same distinctions between pop and rock that I do. However, I encourage you to go further than the breakdown and embrace the distinctions. It's going to make it easier for you to make a jammin' selection that impresses.

Contemporary Rock Musicals

As a performer I have been fortunate to have appeared in a bunch of great rock musicals. I got the call to audition for a great rock musical called *Caligula* (based on the movie), and I had a hellacious cold. I mean, my voice was trashed—and I tend not to go to auditions when I'm sick. From experience I have found that the only emotion the casting director gets from me in my performance when I'm feeling ill is worry. But I went in this case because I knew everyone on the creative team, and I knew they would "hear" that I was under the weather. Well, let me tell you I went for it. I gave it everything I had, and I used the rawness in my voice to create a gritty, earthy rock sound. When I finished the song, they all said, "Oh my god, Sheri you sound amazing!" It was because my voice sounded so gritty and raw that day that I was able to give them exactly the sound they wanted.

Cindi Rush, the casting director who hired me for *Caligula*, says, "Rock is dirty, and messy, and edgy . . . your jeans aren't clean. It's the ache in the music that makes it rock. This ache is why rock stars are up all night; because it's so bad, there's not enough scotch in the world to

... The rock is showing us brokenness. The rock sound is earthy and grounded . . . People haven't showered in five days. It's down and it's dirty; it's to the floor."⁵

The following shows can be considered contemporary rock musicals:

American Idiot
Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson
High Fidelity
Passing Strange
Rent
Rooms
Spiderman

What the creative teams are looking for when casting these shows is an authentic, emotionally raw sound. That rawness is present in so many different voices. Guys, if you are auditioning for *American Idiot*, remember that you can find the raw sound in everything from Nirvana to Pearl Jam, to the Clash and Chris Daughtry. Also, you have *got* to listen to Jeff Buckley. His *Grace* album is outrageous. And his music is right for so many different styles of rock musicals. There was a musical created with his music and Shakespeare's text called *The Last Goodbye*, which was done at Williamstown Theatre Festival in 2010. That's how great he was. Now, girls, if you look at some of the grittiest and most dynamic rock singers from this era, their works can be traced back to one woman, who both wrote and produced for them. Who is this quintessential songwriter for our time? The unbelievable Linda Perry of *4 Non Blondes*. She also happens to be an incredible singer.

Look her up, darling. She's going to blow your mind.

Contemporary Pop Musicals

Pop musical theater auditions are where a lot of musical performers decide to sing a song from *The Wedding Singer*. No thank you, as that's the wrong era. But there are artists whose songs are awesome for an audition for a contemporary pop musical, including Britney Spears, Katy Perry, Lady Gaga, Justin Timberlake, Bruno Mars, and Beyoncé. An amazingly dynamic songwriter from our present era is Ryan Tedder, the former front man for OneRepublic. You won't believe the collection of pop singers he has written for, collaborated with, or produced: Hilary Duff, Leona Lewis, Jordin Sparks, and Beyoncé.

Of pop musicals, Cindi Rush says, "Pop has a lighter, more playful feel to it than rock. It doesn't necessarily have the 'middle of the night desperate need' that rock has, but it does have its own intensity. It's a younger, more untarnished intensity. Vocally it's a prettier sound, a

cleaner sound. The focus is more on having a clean 'produced' feel, so the gritty edge doesn't exist."⁶

The shows that would fall into the contemporary pop genre include:

Altar Boyz
Bring It On
Brooklyn
In the Heights
Legally Blonde

Like '80s pop/rock music, contemporary pop/rock requires understanding the *extremes* of dark and light emotional expression. There is also a middle ground of rock songs that are fun and pop songs that have pain in them. When you are picking a song to audition with, you may be able to pull one from an artist whose music falls "right down the middle." Gwen Stefani of No Doubt is a pop artist who rocks. So are Pink, Christina Aguilera, Kelly Clarkson, Maroon 5, and Gavin DeGraw. Timeless talents like Phil Collins, Billy Joel, and Elton John are pop artists with a rock sound. Look at U2 and Sting. They are amazing sources of songs to sing.

Where Pop and Rock Blend in Contemporary Musicals

Casting directors sometimes will ask for "pop/rock songs" for musicals like:

Aida
Bare
Bat Boy
Billy Elliot
The Full Monty
Next to Normal (a crossover as it includes pop, rock, folk, and rock and roll)

Often, the creative teams of shows that fall in the zone between pop music and rock music love songs that also fall in between. Pop songs that are perfect in an audition for a pop musical can be just dreadful for *American Idiot* or *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*. And rock songs that are perfect in an audition for a rock musical can be inappropriate for *Legally Blonde* or *In the Heights*. But many songs are hybrids of dark and light.

Spring Awakening, which is most definitely a rock musical, is also poetic. This leaves it open for your audition song to be a hybrid. It's not a pop/rock hybrid; it's really a folk/rock hybrid. During the auditions for the original production of *Spring Awakening*, the casting directors asked for songs by the Beatles, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, and Simon

and Gamble, because these artists are known to be exceptionally poetic. If you audition for *Spring Awakening* at some date in the future, remember that you could sing a song from one of these great artists, or you could sing a song from a contemporary songwriter/poet. I call these artists “the fairies.” Singers like Tori Amos, Kate Bush, Bjork, Regina Spektor, Ingrid Michaelson, Sara Bareilles, and Rufus Wainwright are ethereal: they have a mystical quality about them but are not without exceptional storytelling ability. Both Tori Amos and Regina Spektor, in fact, are writing musicals of their own. This is where the light enters the darkness of rock.

There you have it: the different genres of rock musicals. Of course, our discussion of styles is not complete yet, because many tunes you would choose to sing for rock musical auditions are infused with other influences that are neither pop nor rock. Let’s take a look at these styles for a moment.

Blues, Country, Gospel, R&B, and Folk

Styles outside of rock and pop are a tricky subject. The musical theater community clumps all of them into one category since not a lot of shows are *specifically* blues, gospel, country, R&B, or folk. This gross generalizing hurts me deep inside, as these musical genres are vastly different from one another and deserve our respect and understanding. Few producers of musicals would ask you to do a song in any of these four genres. But it is imperative that you study these styles. For although there aren’t a lot of gospel, blues, folk, and country musicals, their influence is in *everything*. They flavor all of our music. Let me share what I can with you about their history . . .

Blues

Blues music was born in the Mississippi Delta after the Civil War, which may be why, by its very nature, it has a melancholy and sadness to it. Some of the great blues influences are Duke Ellington, Bessie Smith, Muddy Waters, B. B. King, John Lee Hooker, Johnny Winter, Stevie Ray Vaughn, Billie Holiday, Blues Traveler, Keb’ Mo’, Kenny Wayne Shepherd, Johnny Lang, and Adele. *Smokey Joe’s Café*, *It Ain’t Nothin’ but the Blues*, and *Million Dollar Quartet* all give you the blues.

Country

Country music was cultivated in 1910 by Appalachian fiddle players. Really it is a blend of big band music, blues, Dixieland music, and jazz with different subcategories, like honky tonk, western, rockabilly, bluegrass, and the Nashville sound. Some great country influences are

Johnny Cash, Dolly Parton, Patsy Cline, Willie Nelson, John Denver, Garth Brooks, Billy Ray Cyrus, Alison Krauss, Reba McEntire, and the Dixie Chicks. Musicals like *The Robber Bridegroom*, *Pump Boys and the Dinettes*, and *Ring of Fire* ask for country music for their auditions.

Gospel

Gospel music’s roots can be traced back to the eighteenth century and slavery in America. The traditional hymns that were slow in tempo and solemn in mood became spirituals, chants, call-and-repeats, shouts, and anthems. Gospel became a way that enslaved people communicated with God and one another in a language that was exclusively theirs.

I have the great honor of being a member of a gospel choir called Broadway Inspirational Voices. Michael McElroy, one of the greatest musical theater performers of our time, who is also a great teacher, created the gospel choir, and writes and arranges music. Michael says, “You have to understand gospel was a music born out of a people who had nothing but their music to get them through, and because of this there is blood in every note.”⁷

Some of the great leaders in gospel music are Mahalia Jackson, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Clara Ward, Shirley Caesar, the Edwin Hawkins Singers, Kirk Franklin, Daryl Coley, CeCe Winans, and Mary, Mary. You would do well to consider singing one of their songs if you are prepping an audition for *Leap of Faith*, *The Color Purple*, or *All Shook Up*.

Rhythm and Blues (R&B)

R&B is more of a marketing term than a specific musical genre. It has taken on several meanings since the early ’40s. The term was initially used by record companies to describe music marketed to urban African Americans. The rock-beat style of jazz was its most defining characteristic, even as it morphed through the years into funk, soul, hip-hop, disco, Motown, pop, and the countless subgenres that these styles created. To this day, it has remained a blanket term for unclassifiable music that would otherwise be confusing to describe. “Hip-soul with gospel influences and disco-funk beats,” for instance, is much more approachable when simply referred to as “R&B.”

Who are some of the R&B singers you need to know about? You should familiarize yourself with Fats Domino, Chuck Berry, Della Reese, Sam Cooke, Michael Jackson, Prince, Patti LaBelle, Marvin Gaye, Aretha Franklin, and Teena Marie. As far as shows go, *In the Heights* and *Dreamgirls*, though vastly different, both have an R&B essence to them.

Folk

In 1961, folk music was an alternative to the Brill Building–Phil Spector–teen pop world embraced by socially active college students in the peace and civil rights movements. Folk themes include war, work, civil rights, economic hardship, and love. Folk lyrics are often satirical. Musicians in the folk tradition include Woody Guthrie; Joni Mitchell; Simon and Garfunkel; the Mamas and the Papas; Pete Seeger; Joan Baez; Bob Dylan; Peter, Paul and Mary; Harry Chapin; Shawn Colvin; Damien Rice; and Ani DiFranco. Folk-inspired musicals are *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, *Floyd Collins*, and *Spring Awakening*.

Have a listen to the wonderful performers who sing all five of these alternative styles. They are just a few examples of the influences you can hear in any of the pop/rock genres and eras we've explored thus far.

Rock musicals, like people, come in all shapes and sizes. Next, let's check out the different ways they are conceived.

Pop/Rock Musicals Written by Famous Pop/Rock Artists

Aida, *The Lion King*, and *Billy Elliot* were composed by Elton John. *Tarzan*, by Phil Collins. The music for *Spring Awakening* was written by Duncan Sheik. Paul Simon wrote the music for *The Capeman*. *Dance of the Vampires* was co-written by Jim Steinman, who wrote songs for Meatloaf, Bonnie Tyler, Barry Manilow, Air Supply, and Celine Dion. Following in the footsteps of Burt Bacharach, these celebrated artists transported themselves from the recording studio into the theater. The reason why they found a home on the Broadway stage is that it is in a singer/songwriter's nature to express his feelings in a dramatic manner. And that's what theater does. The combination therefore makes perfect sense. For the most part, these artists' music is accessible to everyone. Their songs are not extreme like the rock songs in *American Idiot*, which are emotionally reckless in tone; and they're definitely not like *Rock of Ages*, which makes fun of the silliness of a bygone era.

For auditions for *Aida*, the producers asked actors to prepare a song that was not period specific, and that had a pop/rock sound that was, well, pop (meaning a sound that anyone could listen to, which would not be exclusive to any age or community). They wanted to hear something accessible, like the music of Elton John, Billy Joel, or even Bono (who wrote *Spiderman*)—undeniably

brilliant, yet complex pop artists who write songs that are simple in sentiment.

When you audition for this type of show, you're neither interpreting poetry, nor banging your head like a rock star. This would be a good opportunity to look at each of these artists' body of work. It will give you a clear understanding that these kind of songs are fantastic to sing for *lots* of auditions for musicals written by pop writers.

Jukebox Musicals

The term "jukebox musical" means a musical created using songs from a songwriter's already existing canon and creating a story around these songs. Examples of jukebox musicals (and the artists they feature) are:

All Shook Up (Elvis Presley)
The Buddy Holly Story (Buddy Holly)
Good Vibrations (the Beach Boys)
Jersey Boys (Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons)
Lennon (John Lennon)
Love, Janis (Janis Joplin)
Mamma Mia! (Abba)
Movin' Out (Billy Joel)
Smokey Joe's Café (Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller)
The Times They Are A-Changin' (Bob Dylan)
We Will Rock You (Queen)
The Last Goodbye (Jeff Buckley)

When auditioning for these musicals, you need to sing either a song from the featured artist (but preferably not a song from the show, unless they ask—and they'll usually ask you for that for the callback) or a song that is in the same style as the show.

Some jukebox musicals incorporate songs from many different artists, because they intend to celebrate an era. *Rock of Ages*, for instance, celebrates 1980s rock culture. *Priscilla*, *Queen of the Desert* celebrates the disco era. *Shout*, *Million Dollar Quartet*, *Beehive*, *Leader of the Pack*, and *Forever Plaid* celebrate the '50s and '60s. Because they are era specific, you need only to look at the essence of the era to make a song selection.

Concept Albums

The concept album came about because there was a switch in the format of recorded music in the late '50s and '60s. Music lovers went from buying single songs recorded by their favorite artists as "forty-fives," (small vinyl discs that made forty-five revolutions per minute on a turntable), to buying full-size long-playing vinyl discs, or LPs, (which

Today these are known as record albums. When the opportunity to play many songs in a row arose, it allowed writers to explore creating a dramatic arc. Two bands that succeeded in making an album with a story built into it were Pink Floyd (*The Wall* and *Dark Side of the Moon*) and the Who (*Quadrophenia* and *Tommy*). These albums told dramatic stories through song.

An album of this nature has great potential to be dramatized onstage; however, it is a rare occurrence for one to find its way there. The only successful concept productions I am aware of are *Tommy* and *American Idiot*, (which was the first punk rock opera ever to make it to the Broadway stage).

Although Andrew Lloyd Webber is a musical theater writer, *Jesus Christ Superstar* could be considered a concept album. It had one of the greatest scores of all time, but the stage production doesn't translate as well as singing along to the album with your friends. I'm not entirely sure why it doesn't translate onstage, but I prefer to listen to the record (yes, I have a record player!) because it leaves so much to my imagination. That way I get to act out *all* the characters with my friends.

Sheri's Six Special Rules of Rock

Don't let this worry you, sweet pea. I promise that everything I am teaching will make sense in the end. The only reason I am creating "special" rules is that there really are no hard and fast rules to picking rock songs for an audition. Rock musicals are very new to the musical theater community, which is already over eighty years old. So these are my six loving suggestions.

Rule #1: Never Sing a Rock Song from a Rock Musical. Singing a rock musical number for a pop/rock audition is a big no-no. People holding rock auditions really don't like it. They would rather have a song from the radio.

I know, I know. Earlier on I said that an actor did a memorable audition when he sang "Gimme the Ball" from *A Chorus Line*, and now I'm telling you not to sing a song from a musical. Let me explain the contradiction. When the breakdown asks for a rock song, this should not mean you sing one from a rock musical. Why? Because you can't do with a song from a rock musical what the guy who sang "Gimme the Ball" did. He was able to transform a musical theater song to fit the '50s because it already hinted at the essence of old school R&B. It just is not possible to transform a song like "Take Me or Leave Me" from *Rent*, or "Good Morning Baltimore"

from *Hairspray*, or something from *Mamma Mia* into another essence. They aren't as pliable. "Gimme the Ball" had rhythm, but it wasn't locked into a certain style.

I really believe that guy doesn't normally sing "Gimme the Ball" for his rock auditions. I am *certain* that's not his rock musical audition song. Songs that already exist in a musical were written to do what musical theater songs do. They're meant to move the plot forward. So the storytelling in rock songs is just plain different, and frankly what people would prefer to see.

Rule #2: Never Sing a Contemporary Pop Musical Theater Song. Another really big no-no is bringing a song from a legit contemporary musical to a pop/rock musical audition. There are outstanding pop musical theater writers, people such as Joe Iconis, Lowdermilk and Kerrigan, Pasek and Paul, and Ryan Scott Oliver. I love them all. I think Jason Robert Brown and Andrew Lippa are rock stars. For a contemporary musical theater audition, their music is a flawless choice. But you cannot bring these songs in for rock musicals because they come from musical theater storytellers. These songwriters are geniuses working in a different genre. They may want *you* to bring in a pop/rock song to audition for *them* personally, but they're musical theater folks, not top ten hitmakers.

Rule #3: Know Your Songwriter. If you walked into an audition room where I was behind the table and you said, "I'm singing 'Killing Me Softly' by Lauryn Hill," I would decide you were a dum-dum, because I know that Roberta Flack wrote and sang this song originally and Lauryn Hill covered it. This is information you know if you looked at the sheet music or researched the song on the internet.

When you go to an audition, know who wrote your song, know who sang it, and know who covered it. Not everyone sings music they wrote themselves. People often have songs written for them. It is impressive, cool, and professional to know the correct details. One time, a girl came and sang for me, saying, "Hi! I'm singing 'Let It Be' from the movie *Across the Universe*." She literally had to pick me up off the floor. Granted she was not born yet when this famous song was written, but it really was a terrible sign of ignorance not to know the name of the most famous and popular songwriters of the twentieth century, John Lennon and Paul McCartney, who were half of the Beatles. I went online to find the sheet music for the song "Maybe This Time," and instead of saying "from the show *Cabaret*," the sheet music says "from *Glee*." *Glee* is a brilliant show; however, it may unfortunately be the culprit in situations like this!

rule #4: Avoid Overdone Songs Like the Plague. It's impressive if you have chosen a good song. It's also important to be aware of which good songs are overdone in auditions—and to avoid them.

For example, let's look at "Alone" by Heart. When an actor comes in with this song, the people seated behind the table in the audition room think the following types of things (I know because they've told me so):

I hear the intro and the "gate" goes down. I don't care about your voice because you are totally unconscious. The twenty-five girls standing in front of you sang "Alone." You know this because you hear it a million times at every single rock EPA you go to, but clearly you do not care that we are sick of hearing it, and you haven't searched the tremendous canon of music Heart has written for a different song that has just as broad a range, but has a better, cooler story in it, one that doesn't make me want to vomit. Instead, you've chosen to pick this song, and you are thinking, "Oh good, now I have my 'rock song.'" I don't have to worry about this anymore."

One rock song does not cover all the different eras and genres.
Raaaarrrrrr!

The fact is that if you sing a grossly overdone song and you are *amazing*, then yes, they'll get over how much they hate the song. You have to be so amazing that your talent, vocal prowess, emotional connection, and storytelling richness transcend the song itself. Are you *that* amazing? If you aren't (or even if you are), why *not* have them say, "Wow, *great* song," because they rarely hear it *and* they loved your rendition.

Under no circumstances will you sing any of the following songs. Don't you dare! And for that matter, I want you guys to practice, interpret, and stage the songs I will offer as examples for teaching purposes in this book. Do *not* use them as your audition songs. Remember, *bazillions* of other actors will be reading this book and thinking they are having the same bright idea as you... and this handful of gems I use in the preceding chapters will become more overdone than this list will ever be!

"Alone" by Heart
"Somebody to Love" by Queen
"Total Eclipse of the Heart" by Bonnie Tyler
"Holding Out for a Hero" by Bonnie Tyler
"Open Arms" by Journey
"Tell Him" by the Exciters
"I'm with You" by Avril Lavigne
"Son of a Preacherman" by Dusty Springfield

"Gravity" by Sara Bareilles
"It's My Party" by Lesley Gore
"Heartbreaker" by Pat Benatar
"Let's Hear It for the Boy," by Deniece Williams
"Make You Feel My Love," covered by Adele, written by Bob Dylan
"Since I Don't Have You" by the Skyliners
"Where the Boys Are" by Connie Francis
"You Oughta Know" by Alanis Morissette
"I Don't Wanna Be" by Gavin DeGraw
"Stand by Me" by Ben E. King
"River" by Joni Mitchell

Now, this is my opinion. It is not what the casting directors have told me; it's something I stand by. Some casting directors agree with me. Others honestly don't care what song you pick. This advice is solely based on my experience of sitting in on numerous auditions and watching actor after actor choose these same songs out of lack of interest in exploring the other possibilities.

Why not choose to have the door *totally* open?

Rule # 5: Choose a Song That Most People Would Know. Make it easy for the creative team by doing a song that could bring back memories for them. If you sing a song that most people know, but perhaps haven't heard in a long while, they think, "Oh, I love that song! I haven't heard it in so long." They notice you and thank you with a callback for your exquisite rendition of a song they recognize and like. They'll be really open to you.

What if you really want badly to do a song they might not know? I love giving out lesser-known songs by Pink. Or if you wrote a song you want to sing and accompany yourself on the guitar? This is fine to do if the unfamiliar song meets two qualifications:

1. It is appropriate for the genre.
2. It is musically and lyrically clear and *simple*. If the song you do is complex or crazy in any way and the people behind the table don't know it, their first response will be, "What is this?" Then they've got a hard story to follow to respond to, and then they have to follow the melody and respond to that—and they don't even really know if you are singing the song *well*, because they don't know it.

In this case, you and your ability are the *last* thing they notice and respond to, which is a risk that I don't advocate when there are so many well-known songs available.

Rule #6: Remember That Anger Is Not an Emotion. For rock musical auditions, I've noticed that a lot of girls choose to sing angry songs, ones that are mean and have a lot of screaming in them. Now, I'm not saying you shouldn't sing anything painful. You absolutely should.

But no one wants your nastiness.

There is room in your music to offer listeners a dynamic emotional ride without melting their faces off with the sound of your screaming rage.

When Carmel Dean, the musical director of *American Idiot*, sat together with me behind the audition table at an Equity chorus call, I asked her what she believes people think the essence of the music in *American Idiot* is. Carmel commented,

People oftentimes see the description “rock musical” and think they need to come in with a loud, fast, and furious song, which they then proceed to scream their way through for everyone on the audition panel. What they forget is that they are still auditioning for a theater piece and there is a necessity to show emotional range—not just anger. I’m most impressed with people who come in with a traditional (or nontraditional) rock song and have a dramatic take on it. To me this is far more important than showing how high and loud they can belt.⁸

Always remember that your goal as a performer is for people to see who you are. That should come across underlying every song you sing and every line you speak.

I love Alanis Morissette. She is a revolutionary. When her early albums were produced, she broke through because she got women to confess their fury about the pain they feel when they are treated like shit. She is angry. She was so upset at Dave Coulier (that guy from *Full House*) for doing her wrong that she wrote *Jagged Little Pill*. The whole album is about him! A lot of girls come in and sing Alanis Morissette for obvious reasons. She is a leader in the contemporary rock movement. Her music is badass, and her voice, amazing.

Listen to “You Oughta Know.”

You have a chance to share yourself with people in an audition. Do you want people to believe you’re angry? I hope not.

Let’s use my favorite contemporary rock artist of all time, Pink, as a contrasting example. She is an emotionally dynamic, exciting, thrilling, intelligent, and downright slammin’ singer and songwriter. Now listen to “Nobody Knows.”

Which song is the tastier of the two, Alanis or Pink?

Pink! Why? Because she is emotional, fun, earthy, raw, playful, dark, light, sensitive, vulnerable, wild, funny . . . and what I would call unbelievably dynamic.

Okay, now that the special rules are set, I’m ready to show you

how to find a good song that takes the elements of story, character, and relationships into consideration.

The Importance of Context

Your casting breakdown, the same one that tells you the genre of song to prepare for the audition, also includes information about the character for which you are auditioning and small details about the plot of the show. Clearly, you need to do research when picking your song to make sure it shows off relevant facets of your personality. You would do this for your legit musical theater audition, wouldn’t you? You would do it for a nonmusical audition, too, right? Right! I know you understand that this element makes a difference in your performance. That’s why you succeed when you do. Right? Right!

So make the difference here. Do the research. If the soundtrack or the libretto of the musical exists, please look at it and listen to it—*all of it*. Don’t just learn the song of the character for which you think you are right. Learn the character’s relationship to everyone else in the show. Learn the story of the show. This is going to help your performance immensely. It will put the character you create in the “context” of the show.

If it’s a new show, one where there’s no music and no libretto to look at, investigate other avenues of information. Is it based on a movie? If so, watch the movie. Does the movie have a soundtrack? Listen to it.

If the score is written by a popular artist, listen to the artist’s music. Learn about his or her voice.

Is there a website for the show? Look it up.

Has anyone on the creative team written other shows? For example, if you were auditioning for the first production of *Bring It On*, you would discover there was no music to listen to, as it is based on a nonmusical film. But you would know that the score was being written by Tom Kitt, who also wrote the Pulitzer Prize-winning show *Next to Normal* and *High Fidelity*, and orchestrated *American Idiot*. You know it’s Lin-Manuel Miranda writing the music as well; he won a Tony Award for *In the Heights*. Look these creators up, and study the way they make music. You’ll find, based on the past projects of these two men, that the music will be multidimensional with exciting beats and rhythm. After reviewing these things, you could safely assume that the show was going to be a contemporary high-energy pop musical. After all this, you’d then ask: what artists do you know whose music sounds like that? Or you

and get great tunes from there.

Learn the creative team's point of view as best as you possibly can.

And do you want to know what will be *really* helpful—as in change-your-whole-life helpful? Go to the era or genre in which the show takes place. But how, you ask? Oh . . . I don't know . . . how about using the Internet? Everything you need to know is there for you.

Everything!

Google the era, my darling. The information is at your fingertips. Here are some keywords and search phrases that can get you good results when you're looking for a song.

- ▶ One-hit wonders of...[type in the era]
- ▶ The greatest rock hits of the...[type in the era]
- ▶ Disco hit songs
- ▶ Women who rock
- ▶ Pop stars of the...[type in the era]

Instead of singing "Alone" by Heart, looking up the search phrase: "Heart greatest hits." These beautiful sisters of rock have been writing big, juicy hits for forty years. When you use different keywords, the search engines bring you lots of different videos, pictures, and songs that will make picking a tune so much easier.

This is my favorite idea: go to Pandora Radio (Pandora.com). Do you know Pandora? It is an Internet radio station that only plays the music an individual listener wants to hear. So you can create a personal radio station on your desktop computer or laptop featuring the music of an artist from every era who has had a top ten hit. Make yourself a Janis Joplin station. Make a Martha and the Vandellas station. Make a Whitney Houston Station and a Regina Spektor station. Then Pandora will play these artists' music and the music of other, similar artists. In this way, you have the opportunity to learn about singers you've never heard before, and listen to a million great songs. It's incredible.

VP Boyle is an acting teacher based in New York City who has spent some time as a casting director. In his opinion, an essential thing for you to think about while picking a tune for yourself is this:

Everyone gets hung up on voice parts and high notes and forgets to think about the casting job at hand. A sparkly Disney-esque mix better shouldn't sing boozy Janis Joplin. It doesn't make sense from a casting standpoint. The difference between James Blunt, the Barenaked Ladies, Justin Timberlake, and Steve Perry from Journey is huge. They are all pop or rock tenors, but their vocal style and sound is completely

different. All of their music could be fantastic options when auditioning for a rock musical—if they make sense on you. Only you know who you are. Be that person when you walk in the room and make sure that you are singing something that you can pull off with an authentic sound and emotional/physical/psychological landscape. If not, it all feels really weird and everyone in the room gets uncomfortable. We should feel energized by your performance and authenticity is the best thing you can consider when choosing your material. Not high notes or vocal ranges.⁹

Know your voice well enough to pick a great song for yourself.

If you notice you like an artist and they've had a few hits, buy their album! There is nothing like listening to a whole album. Joni Mitchell's *Blue*. Meatloaf's *Bat Out of Hell*. Christina Aguilera's *Stripped*. Laura Nyro's *Eli and the 13th Confession*. George Michael's *Listen Without Prejudice*. Led Zeppelin's *Mothership*. Carole King's *Tapestry*. The Police's *Synchronicity*. There are thousands upon thousands of albums to which you could listen. (I know, they're on CDs and MP3s now. Still, I want to call them albums.) You'd be learning how one singular human being expresses many feelings.

Do it now. You will grow so much.

How else could you find the right rock song? Well, try gender bending. Boys can sing girls' songs and girls can sing boys' songs. After all, Steve Perry is really an alto, not a tenor.

Where can you get the sheet music to these songs? There are tons of places online. Here's a short list of ones that I like:

- ▶ Musicnotes.com (In this site you can transpose music into your key. But please be careful to make sure the sheet music is an easy read for a pianist. Sometimes when it transposes notes, it puts it in a weird key. Check it out with a professional piano player before you bring it to an audition.)
- ▶ Sheetmusicdirect.com
- ▶ Sheetmusicplus.com
- ▶ FreehandMusic.com
- ▶ ColonyMusic.com
- ▶ Musicdispatch.com
- ▶ Hollywoodsheetmusic.com

Authenticity

Why is it so important to take this much care when choosing a song? In a word: authenticity. Don't you like people who are real? Aren't you repelled by people who bullshit you, or who don't seem to care? You

to casting directors and creative teams.

Think about how valuable you will be when you show up at an audition and give a performance as your authentic self that is also authentic to the genre. Again, the creative team will think, "Wow, this kid gets it! He understands the genre. He did the homework. He cares. He cares about this show. He cares about his experience—and our experience. Call him back."

Next, a lesson in the art of telling really *short* stories!