

## < Stephen Sondheim: Examining His Lyrics And Life

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TERRY GROSS, HOST:

This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross. Stephen Sondheim's musical, "Merrily We Roll Along," ran for only 16 performances after opening on Broadway in 1981. So, for fans of the show like me, a revival is cause for celebration. The show is currently being performed for a two-week run as part of the Encore! series "Great American Musicals in Concert" at New York City Center.

We're going to listen back to excerpts of two interviews from 2010, in which Sondheim talked about that show and his songwriting process. "Merrily We Roll Along" is about three good friends, two young songwriters and a fiction writer, who are eager to make their mark. The story shows how they change over the course of 25 years. One character, composer Franklin Shepard, heads in a commercial direction, which ruins the friendships and turns him cynical and self-centered.

The story is told chronologically in reverse, so it starts with bitterness and ends with the idealism of youth. The best-known songs from the show are "Old Friends," "Not A Day Goes By," and "Good Thing Going."

Stephen Sondheim, welcome back to FRESH AIR. You say that people assume that a lot of your songs are really autobiographical, but they're not, with the exception of "Opening Doors," from your 1981 show "Merrily We Roll Along." And I saw a revival of this show a few years ago. It didn't last long, sadly, on Broadway, but I saw a revival by the York Theater Company.

STEPHEN SONDHEIM: Yeah.

GROSS: It was wonderful. I loved the show, and I loved the songs from the show. So I want to play "Opening Doors," and then I want to talk a little bit about it.

SONDHEIM: OK.

GROSS: And do you want to describe where the song fits into the story?

SONDHEIM: The idea of the show was to go - as the listeners may not know - go backwards in time from a very successful group of 40-year-olds or 45-year-olds and take them back to their very youthful days before they compromise their principles. It goes backwards in time. It's based on a George Kaufman, Moss, Hart play.

The song takes place over a period of two years in the lives of the three leading players. Two of them are songwriters, a lyricist and a composer, and their best friend is a woman who is, a young woman who is a budding novelist. And it's the three of them trying to break into, well, the two guys into show business, and she's trying to finish writing a book.

GROSS: So this song is at the point where they're kind of hoping to become real, you know, a real...

SONDHEIM: That's right. Yeah. They're...

GROSS: ...composer, a real lyricist and a real novelist.

SONDHEIM: They're opening doors. They're knocking on doors. They're knocking on doors.

GROSS: They're opening doors. And we're going to hear this sung by, in the original cast recording, sung by Jim Walton, Lonny Price and the part of the producer, who interjects in the middle here, will be sung by Jason Alexander, who played George on "Seinfeld."

SONDHEIM: Right.

GROSS: So here we go, from Stephen Sondheim's "Merrily We Roll Along."

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "OPENING DOORS")

(SOUNDBITE OF TYPING)

JIM WALTON: (As Franklin Shepard) (Singing) Bum-bum da-da-da-da-da. Bum-bum-bum, bum-bum, bum-bum.

(As Franklin Shepard) How's it coming?

LONNY PRICE: (As Charley) Good. You?

WALTON: (As Franklin) (Singing) Good.

PRICE: (As Charley) (Singing) One minute.

(SOUNDBITE OF TELEPHONE)

WALTON: (As Franklin) (Unintelligible), Mary...

PRICE: (As Charley) Say hello.

ANN MORRISON: (As Mary) I think I got a job.

WALTON: (As Franklin) Where? What's that?

MORRISON: (As Mary) Thank you. Writing captions.

WALTON: (As Franklin) What about the book? Did you give the publisher the book? Good.

MORRISON: (As Mary) No.

WALTON: (As Franklin) Mary.

PRICE: (As Charley) I finished.

WALTON: (As Franklin) Let me call you back.

PRICE: (As Charley) This is just a draft.

WALTON: (As Franklin) Right.

PRICE: (As Charley) Probably it stinks.

WALTON: (As Franklin) Right.

PRICE: (As Charley) I haven't had the time to do a polish.

WALTON: (As Franklin) Will you sing?

PRICE: (As Franklin) Right. (Singing) Who wants to live in New York? Who wants the worry, the

noise, the dirt, the heat? Who wants the garbage cans clanging in the street? Suddenly I do.

(As Franklin) They're always popping their cork - I hate that line - the cops, the cabbies, the salesgirls up at Saks, you gotta have a real taste for maniacs. Suddenly I do.

JASON ALEXANDER: (As Joe) (Singing) That's great. That's swell. The other stuff as well. It isn't every day I hear a score this strong, but fellas, if I may, there's only one thing wrong:

(As Joe) (Singing) There's not a tune you can hum. There's not a tune you go bum-bum-bum-di-dum. You need a tune to go bum-bum-bum-di-dum. Give me a melody.

(As Joe) (Singing) Why can't you throw 'em a crumb? What's wrong with letting 'em tap their toes a bit? I'll let you know when Stravinsky has a hit. Give me some melody.

(As Joe) (Singing) Oh sure, I know, it's not that kind of show, but can't you have a score That's sort of in-between? Look, play a little more, I'll show you what I mean:

PRICE: (As Charley) (Singing) Who wants to live in New York? I always hated the dirt, the heat, the noise. But ever since I met you, I...

ALEXANDER: (As Joe) (Singing) Listen, boys, maybe it's me, but that's just not a hum-umam-umam-umamable melody. Write more, work hard, leave your name with the girl. Less avant-garde, leave your name with the girl. Just write a plain old melodee-dee-dee-dee-dee - dee-dee-dee-dee-dee-dee...

GROSS: That's "Opening Doors" from "Merrily We Roll Along" by my guest, Stephen Sondheim, who said this is his really autobiographical song. So is the part autobiographical where the producer complains that it's not a song you can hum, give me a melody?

SONDHEIM: Oh, sure.

(SOUNDBITE OF LAUGHTER)

SONDHEIM: Oh sure, oh sure, oh sure, sure. But it's autobiographical in the general sense. It's, you know, first of all, I didn't have a collaborator. I mean, it's not specifically autobiographical.

I wrote my own lyrics and my own music, and the girl is merely an amalgam of people like, particularly I was very close to Mary Rogers, Dick Rogers' daughter. She became a composer, as well as a novelist, as a matter of fact, and of course, Hal Prince, who was a producer and then eventually a director.

And we were all very close to each other. It's not specifically based on us, but it's on the ambience of our lives and the speed and the excitement and the disappointment and the triumph, et cetera.

The whole business of hummability, of course, has to do with familiarity. If you hear a tune enough times, you'll hum it. You know, you can - first time I heard the Berg violin concerto I thought, what is this noise? And the third time I heard it, I thought, oh, that's interesting. And the fifth time I heard it, I was humming along with it.

And I remember being at the intermission of "A Little Night Music" when it first came out and hearing somebody say oh, that "Weekend in the Country," that's such a catchy tune. Well, you know, very few people accuse me of writing catchy tunes, and of course it was a catchy tune. She just heard 11 choruses of it, and so of course she could hum it.

GROSS: Now, the producer sings: I'll let you know when Stravinsky has a hit, he's saying sarcastically.

SONDHEIM: Mm-hmm.

GROSS: Now, you studied with the avant-garde composer Milton Babbitt.

SONDHEIM: Mm-hmm.

GROSS: When you studied with him, was your ambition Broadway, or was it more...

SONDHEIM: Oh, no, I always wanted to write songs. Well, he's a songwriter manque. I wanted to learn compositional technique, and that's what I learned from him.

But we would spend - we had four-hour sessions once a week, and we would spend the first hour analyzing songs by, oh, Jerome Kern or by de Sylva, Brown, and Henderson, the classic songs of the American theater and American movies.

And we spent an hour, you know, on, you know, songs, and then three hours on Beethoven and Bach. And it was all about essentially compositional analysis. But no, I only wanted to write songs. I didn't want to write concert music.

GROSS: Can you give me an example of an insight you got from Babbitt studying, say, a Jerome Kern song?

SONDHEIM: One of the things we analyzed in detail, one of the songs, was "All the Things You Are," which has a remarkable harmonic structure in it, which among other things consists of the fact that the tonic chord isn't played until the end of the song, and it goes from a circle of fifths and then breaks the circle of fifths with a tritone, which echoes itself not only in the melody but also in the bass and defines both the key that the song is written in and the key to which it's going, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

I've actually reproduced that hour-long analysis he gave me to students I had at Oxford when I taught at Oxford. And it's lodged in my mind because it is a way of approaching, when you are trying to hold a song together, how you hold it together harmonically and still make it fresh. Kern was a master at that.

GROSS: My guest is Stephen Sondheim. We'll hear more after a break. This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GROSS: The 1981 Stephen Sondheim musical "Merrily We Roll Along" is being revived for a two-week run by the Encore! series "Great American Musicals in Concert" at New York City Center.

We're listening back to excerpts of two interviews with Sondheim, in which he talked about that show and his songwriting process. Let's hear another song from the show. This is "Good Thing Going." Now this is the finished version of the song we heard excerpted earlier within the song "Opening Doors," when two characters perform their song for a Broadway producer who rejected it as not hummable. We'll hear Adam Heller and Malcolm Getz, who starred in the 1994 revival of "Merrily" by the York Theatre Company.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "GOOD THING GOING")

ADAM HELLER: (As Charley Kringas) (Singing) It started out like a song. We started quiet and slow, with no surprise. And then one morning I woke to realize we had a good thing going. It's not that nothing went wrong. Some angry moments, of course, but just a few, and only moments, no more. Because we knew we had this good thing going.

(As Charley Kringas) (Singing) And if I wanted too much. Was that such a mistake at the time? You never wanted enough - all right, tough, I don't make that a crime.

GROSS: Let's get to this idea of opening doors. What were some of the first doors you knocked

on before actually getting to Broadway and writing lyrics for "West Side Story"?

SONDHEIM: Well, I played for an awful lot of people. I remember once playing for a guy named Cy Feuer, who was one of the producers of "Guys and Dolls." He had also been a musician and was head of the music department at Universal. And I remember he criticized me for having too many B-flats in a melody. I remember he said that. And I thought, gee whiz, what is he talking about?

(SOUNDBITE OF LAUGHTER)

SONDHEIM: I mean, you know, he wanted to show me that he knew a lot about music, is what it was. And he might have been right, but I don't think he was. And I played for a number of producers and directors and generally was dismissed. It was, you know, I snuck in through "West Side Story" where, you know, they were the big guys there, Leonard Bernstein and Arthur Laurents and Jerry Robbins. So it was their problem to get the show and believe me, it was not an easy show to get on.

GROSS: Did you learn anything working with Bernstein and watching him work?

SONDHEIM: Oh, sure. A great deal. Yes. Mainly I learned something about courage. I learned – Lenny was never afraid to make big mistakes. He was never afraid to fall off the top rung of the ladder and I learned by implication that the worst thing you can do is fall off a low rung. If you're going to make a mistake, make a huge one.

GROSS: But you've talked about George Gershwin and Harold Arlen as great influences on you and they were both very influenced by jazz. Did you listen to much jazz or pop when you were in your formative years?

SONDHEIM: Nope. Nope, I didn't and I'm not very influenced by jazz. First of all, the whole idea of jazz is improvisation and instrumentalists and because I'm only a piano player and have never played in a band (technical difficulty) feeling for that. Also, I think by nature I'm too conservative. I'm just – I only improvise at the piano when I'm writing a song but I never improvise for anybody else or in front of anybody else or at a party or anything like that.

And I don't think I would be good at it. I'm much too constrained. It's partly my training. My first music teacher who was a professor at Williams College was a very, very kind of Mary Poppins kind of teacher with, you know, he laid down the rules. And that appealed to me a lot, the idea of rules of how you write music that say what music consists of.

That it's not just sitting and waiting for an inspiration but that you take a melodic idea that you have that might be an inspiration but then you develop it and you work with it and work it out. You don't just fiddle around at the piano to do it. And that appealed to me a lot but that's very conscious composition and that's also what I studied with Milton Babbitt.

And that is reverse of jazz. In fact, it's always struck me so odd that Milton, who is so knowledgeable about composition and composes according to a set of rules, some of which he makes up himself, is also such a jazz fan. I can never put those two things together. At any rate, no, I was not influenced by jazz. I was influenced by Gershwin's and Kerns and Arlen's songs and particularly by their use of harmony.

GROSS: There's a beautiful song in "Merrily" that's sung twice and I'm thinking of "Not A Day Goes By" and both versions – each version has a different meaning because one's at the beginning of a love affair and the other is during a divorce.

SONDHEIM: Right.

GROSS: Can you talk about writing that song with two different meanings in mind?

SONDHEIM: Well, I wrote the whole score knowing that it was going to go backwards in time and I thought what does that imply? Well, it implies that something that you and I sing today 20 years from now will have a different meaning to both of us. It doesn't have to be that we get divorced. Maybe it'll be memories of something, but everything that happens at a given time in your life has echoes and resonances afterwards. What I would call, like, reprises, really, of thoughts, of moments in your life that happen in different contexts.

So I thought if I'm going to write the show that goes backwards in time, we'll start with the reprises. That is to say, start with the variation on the theme and then go back to the theme. And that's what happens here. It happens with a lot of other songs in the show, too.

But this one very specifically with the lyric because it applies to two very distinct and distinctly defined situations – one a divorce and one when they got married. So you're taking two high spots of their lives, their marriage and their divorce.

GROSS: So we'll hear both versions of "Not A Day Goes By" from the 1994 York Theater revival.

SONDHEIM: That's the way to illustrate it.

GROSS: Yeah.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "NOT A DAY GOES BY")

ANNE BOBBY: (As Beth) (Singing) Not a day goes by, not a single day but you're somewhere a part of my life and it looks like you'll stay. As the days go by I keep thinking when does it end. Where's the day I'll have started forgetting? But I just go on thinking and sweating and cursing and crying and turning and reaching and waking and dying and no, not a day goes by, not a blessed day, but you're still somehow part of my life.

(As Beth) (Singing) And you won't go away. So there's hell to pay. And until I die, I'll die day after day after day after day after day after day after day till the days go by. Till the days go by. Till the days go by.

AMY RYDER: (As Mary) (Singing) Not a day goes by, not a single day, but you're somewhere a part of my life and it looks like you'll stay.

MALCOLM GETS: (As Frank) (Singing) As the days go by. I keep thinking when does it end.

RYDER: (as Mary) (Singing) That it can't get much better much longer but it only gets better and stronger and deeper and nearer...

MALCOLM GETS AND AMY RYDER: (As Mary and Frank) (Singing) ...and simpler and freer and richer and clearer and now not a day goes by.

BOBBY: (As Beth) (Singing) Not a blessed day but you somewhere come into my life and you don't go away.

MALCOM GETS AND AMY RYDER: (Singing) And I have to say if you do I'll die. I want day after day till the days go by. Till the days go by.

BOBBY: (Singing) Till the days go by.

GROSS: That's "Not A Day Goes By" from the 1994 York Theater Company revival of Stephen Sondheim's "Merrily We Roll Along." We heard Anne Bobby, Malcolm Gets, and Amy Ryder. Our guest is Stephen Sondheim.

Now, another question about your formative years. You went to a Quaker school but you also

went to the New York Military Academy.

SONDHEIM: Yeah, that was earlier.

GROSS: I can't imagine you being a cadet. I know that there was also an emphasis in athletics at the school. I went on the website and it said all cadets must participate in sports throughout the year. So what was it like for you to be...

SONDHEIM: Well, first of all, I went when I was 10 years old.

GROSS: Oh, OK.

(SOUNDBITE OF LAUGHTER)

SONDHEIM: At 10 and 11 years old, only those two years. So, yeah, I think you may have the wrong picture. I mean, it was also because my parents had just divorced and military school was always considered a place to send kids of divorced parents. A lot of my classmates were kids of divorced parents. And it was a lifesaver but your life becomes chaotic suddenly when your parents split up and military school is bringing order to chaos.

You have to be at a certain place at a certain time, you have to polish the buttons on the uniform, you have to parade here, you have to take orders there, and it was wonderful. There's a sense of structure and I think psychologically it must've saved my life.

GROSS: You know, that actually really fits into what you were talking about, about wanting rules and structure in music.

SONDHEIM: Mm-hmm. Yep. Order out of chaos, order out of chaos. That's why I like crossword puzzles. Order out of chaos.

GROSS: Right, right, right.

SONDHEIM: I think that's what art's about anyway. I think that's why people make art.

GROSS: To create order...

SONDHEIM: Out of chaos.

GROSS: ...in a world that's chaotic.

(SOUNDBITE OF LAUGHTER)

SONDHEIM: The world has always been chaotic. Life is unpredictable. There is no form and making forms gives you solidity. I think that's why people paint paintings and take photographs and write music and tell stories that have beginnings, middles, and ends, even when the middle is at the beginning and the beginning is at the end.

GROSS: Stephen Sondheim recorded in 2010. His 1981 musical "Merrily We Roll Along" ends its two-week revival Sunday presented by the series "Encore's Great American Musicals in Concert at New York City Center." This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GROSS: Let's get back to an interview I recorded with Stephen Sondheim in 2010. Can we talk a little bit about your process of songwriting? When you're writing at the piano are you recording what you're playing or are you just like...

SONDHEIM: Never.

GROSS: No taping it?

SONDHEIM: No, no. No, no. Just notating.

GROSS: Mm-hmm.

SONDHEIM: No tape. The process of putting something down on paper is very important, I think, and keeping the stuff alive in your head just – you have to make – even if you're just improvising you have to make little decisions just to put it down on paper.

You can improvise a phrase and as you're putting it down and play it again, you may think, wait a minute, that A-flat, no, doesn't sound right. And you change things as you go along, even though you're just sketching. It's precisely what an artist does when he – a painter does or somebody who draws, when he sketches.

When you look at, you know, the sketchpads of anybody, you know, Michelangelo or Leonardo and see how they experiment with, you know, a horse's head or a hand or something like that. That's precisely the analogy. You're putting, you know, a finger on the – or a hand on the music paper before you try to work out a whole body.

GROSS: Now, when you're working with rhyme what's your process for figuring out options for rhyming words?

SONDHEIM: Oh, well, you use a rhyming dictionary is what you do. And the important thing is to get the thought first, to know what you want to say. And then how you want to phrase what you want to say, and then as the music develops, you'll start to improvise a rhyme scheme or to sense a rhyme scheme.

And then if you're, you know, you say, all right. I've got this line that ends with day and I want to say she loves him. So how will I? And then you go through the rhyming dictionary and rhyming dictionaries are useful for rhymes like day. They're not useful for trick rhymes. Those you just think up, you know.

But there are so many rhymes for day and you want something that will somehow encompass or pinpoint what you want to say - there's a rhyme right there - about this situation. And I use a particular rhyming dictionary called the Clement Wood, which the advantage of which is that all the rhymes are listed vertically instead of horizontally.

So your eye sweeps up and down the page until a word catches it. The problem, for me anyway, with rhyming dictionaries that list things horizontally is that your eye tends, because you start to get impatient, to skip over the words. But when your eye goes up and down a page you don't skip over as much.

And then suddenly a word will pop out and, you know, bay. And you'll say, oh, yes, of course. Well, of course, they're on Biscayne Bay. Maybe that'll be useful. So you write that bay is a useful rhyme. And you make a list of rhymes that are in some relevant to what you're trying to say and then you use them.

GROSS: The more you write, do you feel like you've used up rhymes?

SONDHEIM: Oh, yeah.

GROSS: Like you can't use a rhyme you've already used? A choice, a certain...

SONDHEIM: Well, that's certainly – that, now, that's certainly true of any kind of trick or...

GROSS: Give me an example of the kind of trick rhyme you're talking about.

SONDHEIM: Oh, goodness. I don't now. Soul stirring and bolstering in "Follies," you know. You

use that once, you don't use it again. Lottie dottie and nobody. You don't use that more than once. Or if you do, you're a fool. And I probably have used them more than once but I don't think so.

(SOUNDBITE OF LAUGHTER)

SONDHEIM: So that's what I mean. Whereas, yeah, of course you're always going to end up rhyming day and may and say over and over and over again, you know, from song to song, show to show, because they're useful and they're words that have many meanings and many connotations. So that...

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