

## CAN'T STOP THE BEAT

*Scoring with rock and roll and hip-hop.*

BY JOHN LAHR

Rock and roll first hit the airwaves in the mid-fifties, and it didn't take long for its creators to understand their ability to corrupt an audience with pleasure. "They're really rockin' in Boston/In Pittsburgh, P.A./Deep in the heart of Texas/And 'round Frisco Bay," Chuck Berry boasted in "Sweet Little Sixteen." The thrill of the new sound—the way it made our hearts race and ruffled the feathers of authority—is almost impossible to describe now. Rock captured and broadcast our rogue adolescent energy. It was galvanizing. When the ululating falsetto of Little Richard's "Good Golly Miss Molly" first played through the radio of the family Chevy, as we were driving back from a fishing trip in Canada, my father had to stop the car; he laughed until he cried. When Elvis made his mass-media debut on "The Ed Sullivan Show"—his notorious gyrations filmed only from the waist up—I fell off the family chaise longue with delight. The "doo-doo-wah"s and the "shoo-dooten-shoo-be-dah"s may have sounded like nonsense, but they spoke to the buoyant and vague horizons of our dreams. We were post-war middle-class white kids living in the slipstream of the greatest per-capita rise in income in the history of Western civilization; we were "teen-agers"—a term, coined in 1941, that was in common usage a decade later—a new, recognizable franchise. We had money, mobility, and problems all our own. Rock and roll was pitched directly to us and to our dawning sense of our own power: *A-wop-bop-a-loo-bop, a-wop-bam-boom!*

"Bye Bye Birdie" (now at the Henry

Miller, under the acrylic direction and choreography of Robert Longbottom), premièred in 1960, in a production that I saw. In 1957, "West Side Story" had introduced the musical to the reckless dark side of teen-age life; "Bye Bye Birdie," set in Sweet Apple, Ohio, where the citizens apparently dress mostly in chartreuse, mauve, orange, periwinkle,



Nolan Gerard Funk is a lug with looks in "Bye Bye Birdie."

and turquoise, was a walk on the bright side. In its celebration of fifties America, the musical was slyly nostalgic for an innocence already lost. It deftly appealed to and mocked American credulity, both satirizing and cashing in on the thrall of rock and roll and of Elvis in particular: like the singer, it shook things up. The legendary Kenneth Tynan was so

ravished by the musical's élan that he quite forgot his British reserve and, in these pages, pronounced its "affectionate freshness" something "seldom encountered since Rodgers collaborated with Mr. Hart on 'Babes in Arms.'" (The sole dissenting voice, the *Times*' Brooks Atkinson—"Neither fish, fowl nor good musical comedy," he wrote—retired a couple of months later.) Fifty years on, "Bye Bye Birdie" is still as light, frothy, and irresistible as an egg cream.

The plot revolves around Kim MacAfee, the recently pinned fifteen-year-old president of the fan club for the pop idol Conrad Birdie. She has been chosen by his record company—as a promotional ploy for his song "One Last Kiss"—to be the last person he kisses, on "The Ed Sullivan Show," before being inducted into the Army. Conrad (the excellent Nolan Gerard Funk) turns out to be a lug with looks. The musical asks the existential question: Will Kim stay true to her boyfriend and the ideal of monogamy, or will she fall for this pouting, pompadoured package of pulsating pelvic power and descend into a life of cigarettes and moral turpitude?

What's startling about this production of "Bye Bye Birdie" is not how much the times and the styles have changed since 1960—that's blood under the bridge—but how much the skill set for musicals has declined as the number of shows staged has decreased. The actors here are bright, but they don't know how to shine. Something ingenious and luxuriant—a certain sparkle and frivolity—has gone out of the culture and out of them. The actors involved in the on-again, off-again adult romance, for instance—John Stamos as Albert Peterson, Conrad's manager, and Gina Gershon as his Latina secretary, Rose Alvarez—have no whiff of humor about them and therefore no amperage. (Dick Van Dyke and Chita Rivera originated the roles.) In the absence of idiosyncrasy or chemistry, Stamos and Gershon have only Charles Strouse's fetching melodies and

Lee Adams's cute lyrics to lift them up over the footlights. They make it work; they just don't make it memorable.

At least you can't accuse Jayne Houdyshell, who plays Mrs. Mae Peterson, Albert's fur-coated, manipulative mother, of being unmemorable. Houdyshell is a capacious woman, whose size may stem, in part, from the fact that her character is laden, in Michael Stewart's book, with every castrating-Jewish-mother stereotype known to man. The imperious Houdyshell looks like one of those double-chinned, double-wide dowagers from a Helen Hokinson cartoon; her comic silhouette trumps cliché. The ghost of another droll figure hovers over the show: Paul Lynde, who appeared as Kim's father in 1960. Mr. MacAfee is played here, in a broad, silly-walk version, by Bill Irwin. Torso tilted forward and legs akimbo, Irwin does his patented rooster strut around the stage. He sometimes seems to be appearing in his own play. As a comedian, Irwin never does it for me—he's too self-conscious; you can see him working—but the audience loves him. At the first-act finale, dressed as Abraham Lincoln, with an oversized stovepipe hat creeping down his face, he tries to upstage his daughter on "The Ed Sullivan Show." It's a moment of genuine and inspired slapstick.

The likable, wry score of "Bye Bye Birdie" is, finally, what remains evergreen: an anthem to an optimism that our uneasy society can hardly remember. The show has its share of lame lyrics ("Hand in hand we'll mosey/Me and little Rosie/We will be so cozy"), but most of the songs, like the well-staged "Baby, Talk to Me," a lonely lament that turns into a quartet, lay haunting claim to feelings that time doesn't change: "Talk to me/Baby, won't you talk to me?/I don't care what you say,/Baby, talk to me." Those who weren't born when "Bye Bye Birdie" was first performed won't recognize a world without cell phones and cynicism, and won't register some of the popular references of the day. No matter: they'll know a good time when they see it.

"Life's a ball if only you know it," Conrad sings. Traditional Broadway musicals (written primarily by middle-class white men) captured the twentieth century's sense of anticipation. The con-

temporary hip-hop sound captures the twenty-first century's sense of desperation. Full of ferocity and exploit, hip-hop is the rumble of the dispossessed world that the Broadway musical left out of its song.

"Watch me be an artist who was born ready-made," Lemon Andersen, a thirty-four-year-old half-Latino poet, performer, and actor, raps in his one-man show "County of Kings: The Beautiful Struggle" (at the Public, developed and directed by Elise Thoron). "Watch me take my lemons/and make the best goddam lemonade." In compelling and well-performed iambics, whose artfulness somehow takes the hurt out of the horror, Andersen evokes and enacts the barbarous Brooklyn of his youth: Millie, his loving mother and an addict who died of AIDS; Lily, his fifteen-year-old Dominican doll; Mookie, his crack-dealing cohort; his gun-toting days; his prison time. He paints a vivid word picture of the underclass and of his redemption from it. His discovery of books and of language, at a late age, was his way out.

Hip-hop revels in its own maimed self-sufficiency, its refusal to suffer. Andersen snaps off his rhymes like jabs: "Cocaine mixed with baking soda/The new payola"; "Millie's in the hospital/Chado's in jail/Medicaid covers medicine/but it don't post bail." Inevitably, for someone who has unexpectedly found a voice and a way to be heard, Andersen's idiom spills out in torrents. It reminded me of the Watts Towers, in Los Angeles—an edifice of scraps, but all the more extraordinary for its defiant accomplishment. Although Andersen's humor and his courage insure that he never wears out his welcome, the two-hour celebration of his survival would have more clout if it were shorter. He holds our attention so confidently partly because, when she was alive, he held his mother's. He keeps the memory of her with him and recounts it at the beginning and at the end of the show. He recalls the excitement of being watched by her at the age of ten, as he glided and shimmied on the dance floor. "I could hear her pitch perfect in the background yelling/'That's my boy!'" Andersen says. He's older now, but he's still someone to watch. ♦