

Barbra Streisand and Film Musical Stardom in the Early 1970s

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“What do you do after giving perhaps the best musical comedy performance in the history of movies?” (Quite the hyperbolic statement and one which I investigate here...)¹

Hollywood experienced a great deal of change during the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the seventies. In the midst of industry upheaval, which included economic struggles and changing policies, new filmmakers reevaluated and challenged genre conventions prevalent since the 1930s and forties. Once among the most common and popular of Hollywood genres, the film musical represented the “Old Guard” in many ways. Therefore, the film musical as a genre, along with its stars, necessarily adjusted to the new scene. This paper focuses on Barbra Streisand, considering how she came to represent expanded possibilities for singing actors in her transition from a film musical star to an “actress-that-sings” in the first five years of her film career.

I begin this paper with a brief look at Streisand’s first film in the role that launched her into stardom: her portrayal of comedienne Fanny Brice in the 1968 musical film adaptation *Funny Girl*. I then turn to how her early 1970s films capitalize on her star persona. My paper considers the ways in which the 1972 screwball comedy *What’s Up Doc?* and 1973 romantic drama *The Way We Were* take advantage of Streisand’s talent as a singer, effectively attaching her unique voice to the films. In this way, Streisand successfully navigated a difficult and transitional time for film musical actors. The early career of Barbra Streisand, therefore, provides a representative example of what it means to be a singing actor in Hollywood after the so-called golden age of movie musicals.

Streisand’s Stardom

In an over forty-year film career, Barbra Streisand has starred in just nineteen films – only six of which are musicals. Yet a key part of her star persona – along with her overt Jewishness – remains wrapped up in the film musical genre. As Pamela Robertson Wojcik observes, her extensive recording career – around sixty albums, many of which focus on Tin Pan Alley standards – certainly plays a role. Wojcik further contends that

the reason we consider Streisand a musical star, and not just a star who dabbles in musicals, may ultimately have to do with the status of her musicals as star vehicles. In other words, we consider Streisand as a musical star because Streisand as a star without

¹Steve Vineberg, “The Way She Is: Barbra Streisand’s Career,” *The Threepenny Review*, No. 31 (Autumn, 1987), 13.

the musical is unthinkable – her star image is formed through and in the musical – and because her star persona produces a unique variant of the musical genre.²

As I argue in this paper, certain of her non-musical films in the early 1970s used this star image, and in fact, perpetuate it. And it was Streisand's very first film that set up this image and catapulted her into stardom.

Funny Girl

Coming three years after the phenomenal success of *The Sound of Music* (1965), William Wyler's 1968 film adaptation of the Broadway show *Funny Girl* represents an attempt to recreate the popular roadshow format of the earlier film. With an event-style exhibition, these films seek to create a theatrical experience similar to seeing a play or musical onstage. *Funny Girl* chronicles vaudeville and Broadway comedienne Fanny Brice's rise to fame and romance with her first husband Nick Arnstein. It proved that musicals could still be a hit as the top-grossing film of its year, making \$58,500,000. Although it should be noted that it did not run for as long or gross as much as *The Sound of Music*. Yet Roger Ebert called *Funny Girl* the "ultimate example of the roadshow musical gone overboard. It is over-produced, over-photographed and over-long."³ Ebert and others critics, however, praised Streisand's stellar performance.

By the time she appeared in the film adaptation of *Funny Girl*, Barbra Streisand was already becoming a well-known singer with a humorous – if "kooky" – persona. Throughout the sixties, she released several albums, had television appearances and specials, as well as a few prominent stage roles. However, her performance as comedienne Fanny Brice turned her into a star. Streisand originated the role on Broadway in 1964 to great success. The film adaptation brought her widespread critical acclaim and popularity, making her the highest-paid actress in Hollywood. While the real Fanny Brice might best be described as a very funny comedian who sang, *Funny Girl* frames Streisand's character as an incredibly talented singer who is funny.

Although, as Stacy Wolf has pointed out, it subverts the typical heteronormative narrative conventions of musical comedy (e.g. it ends in divorce), *Funny Girl* is, first and foremost, a musical.⁴ The film version not only contains several of Brice's own well-known songs, including "Second-Hand Rose" and "My Man," but original songs by Jule Styne, including "People" and the showstopper "Don't Rain on My Parade." In every song, but especially Styne's songs, Streisand's unique and powerful voice takes center stage. Indeed, the aforementioned original songs – among the film's most famous – are not comedy songs. Styne's songwriting uses Streisand's ability to move smoothly from soft crooning to a powerful belt to great effect. The film successfully combines her developing persona as a singular, naturally talented singer and funny performer, harnessing these aspects to make her a film musical star. From the outset, Streisand displayed what David Kaufman identifies as the "dualism of her aesthetic: both shlemiel and diva, self-consciously unattractive and glamorously chic, Brooklyn Jewish-whiny and the most beautiful voice in the world – moving from one extreme to the other at will."⁵ Indeed, this early persona has remained with Streisand throughout her long and varied career.

²Pamela Robertson Wojcik, "The Streisand Musical" in *The Sound of Musicals*, edited by Steven Cohan (London: BFI, 2010), 129.

³Roger Ebert, "Funny Girl," *Chicago Sun-Times*, Oct. 18, 1968.

⁴Stacy Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 173-202.

⁵David E. Kaufman, *Jewhooning the Sixties* (Lebanon, US: Brandeis, 2012), 163.

After her film debut in the hugely successful *Funny Girl*, Streisand's next two films were also Hollywood adaptations of Broadway musicals. The big-budget *Hello Dolly!* (1969) came first, followed by *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever* (1970). Although neither film came anywhere near the critical or popular success of *Funny Girl*, both of these film musicals continue to develop Streisand's particularly musical – here used to refer to the genre – stardom. With her first three films, Streisand seemed to be following a well-trod path of musical stardom: one that had become common during the Hollywood studio era and followed by singing and dancing stars such as Judy Garland, Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire, and many others. And yet, despite the incredible popularity of *Funny Girl*, Streisand's film musical debut came at a time that critics and scholars commonly consider as the waning of the once ubiquitous genre. Thus, Streisand switched gears after *On a Clear Day*.

Early 1970s Non-Musicals

In the early 1970s, Streisand appeared in straight comedic or dramatic roles. This was not an uncommon move for Hollywood's singing stars. Doris Day, for instance, had a somewhat similar career trajectory. Several of these films, however, take advantage of her film musical stardom in specific ways, including *What's Up Doc?* and *The Way We Were*.

The 1972 screwball comedy *What Up, Doc?*, in particular, meaningfully plays on Streisand's film musical stardom. Peter Bogdanovich, known for *The Last Picture Show* (1971), directed. The film was a significant box office success, grossing \$66 million; the film made a ton of money as it had a budget of only \$4 million. *What's Up Doc?* engages in the genre blurring and reinvention touted by advocates of the so-called New Hollywood style. And one of the genres that Bogdanovich references is, of course, the musical. Although Streisand rarely sings during the course of the film, the moments when her voice is heard present powerful associations with her persona and musical comedy conventions. The most sustained singing in *What's Up Doc?* occurs during the opening and ending credits. Barbra Streisand's off-screen voice sings the well-known Cole Porter tune "You're the Top." Streisand's unaccompanied soft singing of the verse from Porter's tune is the first sound that the audience hears. As the song moves forward, the style here is all Streisand, moving from a croon to emotional belt. And the lead actress singing at the beginning of the film alludes to musicals before other Hollywood genres can be referenced. It harkens back to a time, namely the 1930s and forties, when filmmakers commonly used Tin Pan Alley tunes. It also sets up an expectation that ultimately will not be fulfilled; the film contains very little music and even less singing.

Within the actual diegesis of the film, Streisand sings Herman Hupfeld's popular tune "As Time Goes By," suggesting both romantic songs in musicals and the 1942 film *Casablanca*. Streisand's character begins an impromptu performance of the song laying across the top of a piano. This scene represents a (sexy) musical moment in which straight-laced musicologist Howard Bannister, played by Ryan O'Neal, falls for Streisand's kooky character, Judy.⁶ Again, this scene is the only time that Streisand sings onscreen yet it represents a significant moment in the narrative through the development of the burgeoning romantic couple. She seduces him with her voice.

The film ends with a reprise of "You're the Top" during the final credits. In this version, Ryan O'Neal joins Streisand in a duet. The song now consists of them trying to come up with reasons why the other member of the couple is "the top" and juxtaposes Streisand's strong, clear voice with O'Neal's weak half-talk-singing. By this point, it becomes clear that their love story –

⁶N.B. The film very much plays off of Streisand's persona as a kook but not her overt Jewishness as much.

such as it is – is actually being told through song. Despite the relative dearth of singing in the film, a progression occurs from Streisand’s solo singing in the credits to her seductive solo with O’Neal accompanying, and finally, their duet. With this progression, the film utilizes Streisand’s voice and her status as a particularly musical film star to sell the love story between this incongruous pair.

While Sydney Pollack’s 1973 romantic drama *The Way We Were* does not reference the conventions of the musical in the same way that Bogdanovich’s *What’s Up Doc?* does, Streisand’s musical persona still plays a role in the film. As the title song suggests, *The Way We Were* uses the concept of time and memory fluidly. The film opens with a scene in Katie Morosky’s (Streisand’s character’s) present. When she encounters her college crush Hubble Gardiner (played by Robert Redford), Streisand’s non-diegetic humming of “The Way We Were” ties the song to Katie’s inner thoughts. Due to the nature of her stardom – namely as a film musical actress – the audience knows they are hearing Streisand’s voice well before her name appears as the performer in the credits. The film fades into a flashback of their college days and the opening credits – all accompanied by Streisand singing the title song. Similarly, the song reappears for the ending credits. The camera zooms out on Katie handing out political flyers, Streisand’s non-diegetic voice enters, and a freeze-frame indicates the end of the film as the cast credits appear onscreen. The way the filmmakers present this song ties it to the film’s narrative and even Streisand’s character despite the fact that Katie Morosky shows no musical ability. *The Way We Were* is not a musical yet the filmmakers still take advantage of their leading actress’s well-known singing abilities and attach her voice explicitly to the film.

Once again, Streisand’s voice is used effectively, particularly in terms of commercial potential. The film did well at the box office, grossing nearly \$50 million, and the soundtrack did even better. Marvin Hamlisch won an Academy Award for Best Original Dramatic Score and Best Original Song as well as a Grammy Award for Song of the Year. The soundtrack album hit #20 on the Billboard 200, and “The Way We Were” became Barbra Streisand’s first #1 hit single. In this way, *The Way We Were* capitalizes on Streisand’s status as a singer and an actress.

After gaining a relative amount of success through television and recordings, Barbra Streisand became a musical star with her debut in the film *Funny Girl*. As she transitioned from a film musical actress to starring in straight comedies and dramas, her particularly musical stardom continued. Unlike musical stars in decades past, Streisand’s career began after the heyday of the American film musical. While examples of the genre were (and are) still being made and have enjoyed a certain amount of popularity, the Hollywood of the 1960s and 1970s went through major changes that impacted singing actors in the industry. As the case of Barbra Streisand shows, however, musical stardom could be harnessed in a meaningful way and provide increased options for singing actors.

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