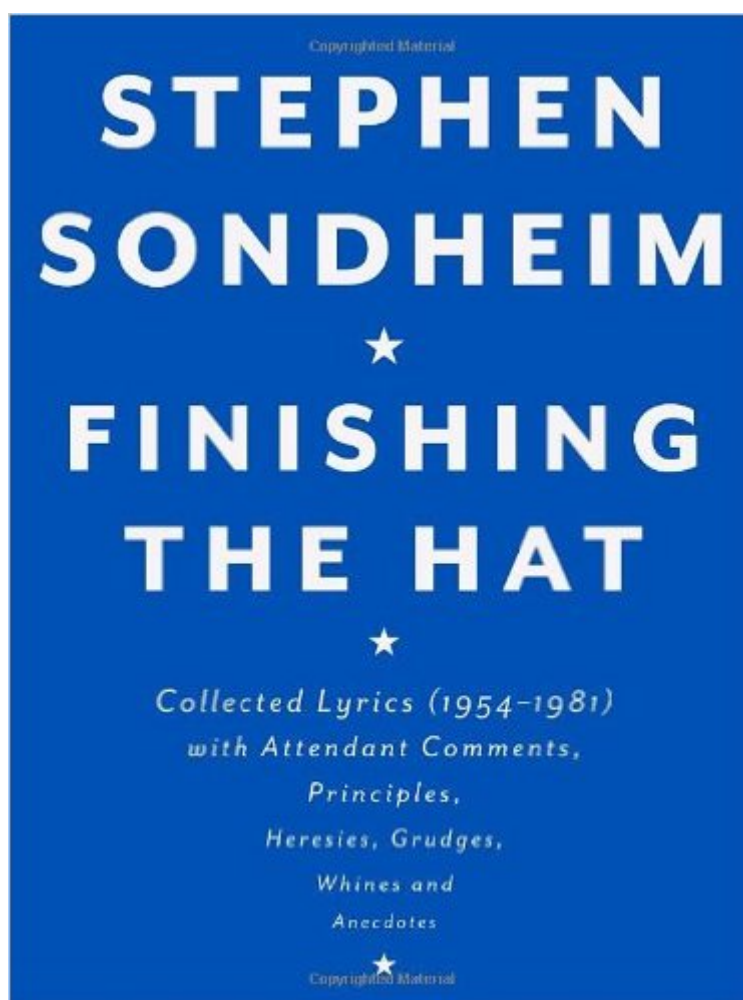


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Finishing The Hat: Collected Lyrics (1954-1981) With Attendant Comments, Principles, Heresies, Grudges, Whines And Anecdotes



Synopsis

Stephen Sondheim has won seven Tonys, an Academy Award, seven Grammys, a Pulitzer Prize and the Kennedy Center Honors. His career has spanned more than half a century, his lyrics have become synonymous with musical theater and popular culture, and in *Finishing the Hat*—titled after perhaps his most autobiographical song, from *Sunday in the Park with George*—Sondheim has not only collected his lyrics for the first time, he is giving readers a rare personal look into his life as well as his remarkable productions. Along with the lyrics for all of his musicals from 1954 to 1981—including *West Side Story*, *Company*, *Follies*, *A Little Night Music* and *Sweeney Todd*—Sondheim treats us to never-before-published songs from each show, songs that were cut or discarded before seeing the light of day. He discusses his relationship with his mentor, Oscar Hammerstein II, and his collaborations with extraordinary talents such as Leonard Bernstein, Arthur Laurents, Ethel Merman, Richard Rodgers, Angela Lansbury, Harold Prince and a panoply of others. The anecdotes—filled with history, pointed observations and intimate details—transport us back to a time when theater was a major pillar of American culture. Best of all, Sondheim appraises his work and dissects his lyrics, as well as those of others, offering unparalleled insights into songwriting that will be studied by fans and aspiring songwriters for years to come. Accompanying Sondheim's sparkling writing are behind-the-scenes photographs from each production, along with handwritten music and lyrics from the songwriter's personal collection. Penetrating and surprising, poignant, funny and sometimes provocative, *Finishing the Hat* is not only an informative look at the art and craft of lyric writing, it is a history of the theater that belongs on the same literary shelf as Moss Hart's *Act One* and Arthur Miller's *Timebends*. It is also a book that will leave you humming the final bars of *Merrily We Roll Along*, while eagerly anticipating the next volume, which begins with the opening lines of *Sunday in the Park with George*.

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Customer Reviews

If you are lucky, you will discover artists whose work speaks to you in a very profound way. For me, it's the paintings of Henri Matisse, the novels of John Irving, the musicals of Stephen Sondheim. I'm an unabashed fan. Mr. Sondheim's new coffee table book, *Finishing the Hat: Collected Lyrics (1954-1981) with Attendant Comments, Principles, Heresies, Grudges, Whines, and Anecdotes*, is a gift to us all. Before you even start reading the text, flip through it and you'll see that this is a gorgeous book. It is chock full of photographs--more than 200--many of them full page blowups. There are pictures and artwork from the productions, candid photos from Mr. Sondheim's personal collection, and images of his hand-written notes, lyrics, and sheet music. This book is richly and beautifully illustrated. The only small disappointment is that all images are black and white, but it is truly a minor complaint. Once you've feasted your eyes, dive into the text. Almost immediately, you'll see that Mr. Sondheim has written his book with the care and precision with which he writes his songs. There's a slight formality to the tone (with the laying down of copious rules along the way), but at the same time, it's a very candid look at his work, his collaborators, his predecessors, and his life. For musicians or composers, there is much substantive information on his process. And for theater buffs like me, this book is a treasure! Mr. Sondheim's contributions are the apotheosis of musical theater. The shows recounted are theatrical history. Sadly, I'm too young to have seen the original productions of any of these 13 shows, but now I've heard about the drama behind the scenes of *Merrily We Roll Along* straight from the horse's mouth.

FINISHING THE HAT is a coffee-table sized, 2010 volume by Stephen Sondheim based around the lyrics to his plays, from his first professional work in 1954 (*SATURDAY NIGHT*) to 1981 and *MERRILY WE ROLL ALONG*. It is much more than that, including, as Sondheim says, "Attendant Comments, Principles, Heresies, Grudges, Whines and Anecdotes." He wasn't kidding. Comments, including gestation of these musicals and why some numbers were cut. Principles, based on his troika "Content Dictates Form, Less is More, God is In the Details, all in the service of Clarity," stated in the Preface and elucidated throughout this book. Heresies, such as the occasional need to fit lyrics to the singer rather than the other way around. Grudges--a few, such as the critic who

mis-heard one of his couplets and accused him of misogyny. "Whines" might better be called "war stories," as witness the unhappy composer when a show's producers interfere at the last minute. Anecdotes are rife and fun, such as how Hermione Gingold talked herself into a role as Madame Armfeldt in *A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC*. Along the way, Sondheim gives his take on celebrated Broadway composers of the Interwar period such as Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, Harold Arlen and Lorenz Hart: how they inspired his songs, offered models for pastiche (never "parody"!) tunes and lyrics in shows like *FOLLIES*, occasionally serving as object models whose worst words to avoid. (About internal rhyming, of which he is a master, Sondheim is especially astute at pinpointing just where the masters went wrong.

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