



Season at 54 Below, Offers Musical Comfort Food to Converts and Longtime Fans

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'Sondheim Unplugged: The Final Season'

54 Below

Through June 2026

This past Sunday marked the first show of what has been announced as the final season of 54 Below's long-running "Sondheim Unplugged"; host Rob Maitner described it as

“the beginning of the end,” and quoted Frank Rich’s famous line, “To be a Sondheim fan is to have one’s heart broken at regular intervals.”

The 75-minute revue began rather on-the-nose with “Opening Doors.” This song from Act II of the 1981 “Merrily We Roll Along” raises a question: What does Stephen Sondheim have in common with “South Park”? Famously, the adult-oriented animated series with the most profanity on television addressed its critics early on by offering a show within a show, a fictional TV program even more littered with foul language and scatological humor.

Likewise, throughout the 1970s, Sondheim was routinely chastised by the old guard of Broadway and the American songbook, who found his music un-melodic and virtually tuneless. Then, in 1981, he gave us “Merrily We Roll Along” — by far his most *meta* project — in which the lead character is a composer of musical theater.

Franklin Shepard is not necessarily based on Sondheim himself, but when the character presents his work to a possible producer, the latter responds: “There’s only one thing wrong: / 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!”

That was the way many of us felt at the time. During my teenage years I was too much of an old school conservative to appreciate Sondheim’s work. It wasn’t until some years later that all of those quirky melodies and thinky lyrics began to resonate with me; all of those tales of alienated, self-involved New Yorkers gradually started to make sense.

My young self would be shocked that my increasingly aging self has come to regard the works of Stephen Sondheim as musical comfort food, no less than those of Cole Porter or Duke Ellington. For 15 years — including all 13 since 54 Below opened in 2012 — the regularly running “Sondheim Unplugged” has been feeding said comfort food to the Sondheim faithful, both longtime believers and more recent converts.

I attended and covered the first show, created and hosted by Phil Geoffrey Bond. More recently, “Sondheim Unplugged” also gave birth to a Grammy-nominated series of three double CDs of artists and songs featured in the run, also produced by Mr. Bond.

Mr. Bond’s idea was a good one not least because there’s a rich variety of work to choose from; Stephen Sondheim wrote no less than 21 full-length works of musical theater, nearly all of which feature extra and “bonus” songs. By comparison, Jerry Herman (1931-2019), a word-and-music man of comparable talent and vintage, wrote seven shows that made it to Broadway.

In the post-pandemic period following Sondheim’s death in 2021, the appetite for his work was apparently insatiable; in one random month in 2023, roughly one out of three events presented at 54 Below was Sondheim-centric.

The mania has perhaps subsided since then, but Sondheim’s music sounds as amazing as ever. The September program commenced with roughly 35 minutes of prime material from “Merrily,” which were highlighted by Jim Walton, the original Franklin Shepard, now singing the part of the producer, Joe Josephson. Mr. Walton was a high point in everything he sang, especially when he sat down at the piano and

accompanied himself on “Growing Up,” a song not in the original production but added during one of the revivals. If Mr. Walton hasn’t yet done a one-man show yet at 54, then I can’t imagine what he’s waiting for.

“Merrily” is a textbook definition of the word bittersweet, whereas Sondheim’s “Company” is essentially upbeat but with many profound moments. The transition between the two shows was signaled by a vocal quintet, Marquee Five, consisting of Vanessa Parvin, Mick Bleyer, Julie Reyburn, Adam West Hemming, and Sierra Rein. They performed an exquisitely arranged and sung mashup of “Old Friend” and “Side by Side by Side.”



Marquee Five: Vanessa Parvin, Mick Bleyer, Julie Reyburn, Adam West Hemming, and Sierra Rein.

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Conversely, Sondheim’s “Assassins” is one of the most disturbing works ever created for the theater; it’s richly textured and moving, though hardly in a way that could be called uplifting. Jacob Hoffman sang “The Ballad of Czolgosz” in a way that thoroughly explored the sinister underbelly of the American dream, made all the more visceral somehow in 54’s upscale trappings, with much of the audience casually sipping martinis. In an age of political violence and almost hourly mass shootings, it’s no pleasure to report that this 1990 polemic of a show sadly seems more relevant than ever.

Other high points included Jennifer Sánchez, with “Not a Day Goes By,” followed by Jon-Michael Reese with “Franklin Shepard, Inc.,” and, later, Lucia Spina, who also directed, with “Ladies Who Lunch.” The climax was Mr. Hoffman, offering a remarkable one-man rendition of “Officer Krupke” that rivals even Mark Nadler’s version of “Cell Block Tango” from “Chicago.” The host and occasional singer, Rob Maitner, and the musical director, John Fischer, are also indispensable.

“Sondheim Unplugged” is set to run for five more Sundays between now and June, the next being right before Thanksgiving on November 23. There was another line in “Opening Doors,” as sung by Mr. Walton as Joe Josephson, that gave me pause: “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!” It occurred to me that lately I’ve been walking around humming “The Firebird.”
