



THE GIRL AT THE PIANO

The new Broadway musical
Beautiful recalls Carole King's life
in the 1960s' pop music factory

By: David Barbour

If you are of a pop music lover of a certain age, one of the great cultural touchstones is Carole King's *Tapestry*. A deeply affecting blend of soulful ballads, tough-minded breakup songs, and warm affirmations of friends and lovers, this 1971 album remains one of the all-time best sellers at more than 25 million copies to date. *Tapestry* was seminal in more ways than one, as it kicked off a decade devoted to women singer-songwriters such as Carly Simon, Melissa Manchester, and Joni Mitchell.

In many ways, however, the famously reclusive King is one of the least understood stars of her era. Even today, many may not know that the frizzy-haired, denim-wearing earth mother of *Tapestry* was preceded by a teenaged wunderkind from Brooklyn who thrived in the pop music factory of the 1960s, churning out one hit after another for the boy and girl groups of the pre-Beatles era. Now the story of King's early years—years marked by public success and private misfortune—has been made into the Broadway musical, *Beautiful*, which opened at the Stephen

Sondheim Theatre in January.

As King recounts in her memoir, *A Natural Woman*, she was only 17 and a freshman at Queens College when she walked into the office of music publisher Don Kirshner and started selling songs. She soon got together with the lyricist Gerry Goffin, with whom she created an astonishing parade of pop classics, among them "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow," "The Loco-Motion," "One Fine Day," "Up on the Roof," and "I'm Into Something Good."

King married Goffin while still in her teens, and they proceeded to have two daughters. The couple seemed to have it all, including a close friendship with another romantically linked team of songwriters, Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil. But the marriage was troubled from the start, and as the '60s wore on, the couple drifted, a problem aggravated by Goffin's apparent bipolar condition and his need to take part in the sexual and pharmaceutical experiments of the era. By the end of the decade, they were divorced, and King, who had always resisted performing, was living in California, writing the songs that would become *Tapestry*.

A bio-musical in the tradition of *Jersey Boys* and



The set's back wall is a tapestry of soundproofing materials. "It functions as our cyc, but it is very textured," McLane says.

Motown, Beautiful draws on King's extensive catalog of hits to provide the soundtrack to the story of her up and down (and up) life. However, *Beautiful* is relatively intimately scaled, as befits the story of a self-effacing talent who became a star almost by accident. In some ways, it is more like a play with music. Douglas McGrath's book contains only half a dozen characters, and Marc Bruni's staging is light on the production numbers. And thanks to the presence of Jessie Mueller, a big talent who has finally gotten the star-making role she has long deserved, the focus of *Beautiful* remains on Carole Klein, the songwriting prodigy who became Carole King, the mature artist.

Building the music factory

In Derek McLane's scenic design, *Beautiful* is dominated by a two-level set depicting Don Kirshner's company at 1650 Broadway, just across the street from the Brill Building, another epicenter of early-'60s pop. This design concept is a response to the show's singular nature, McLane says. "There are many little scenes in the show; there's a great deal of music but no big production numbers. The biggest numbers are the '1650 Broadway Medley,' seen at the beginning, and a little bit of 'Pleasant Valley Sunday,' but there are no big numbers where everyone dances. The show is small in that regard."

Also, McLane says, "The other big consideration was the fact that so much of the show takes place in recording studios, offices, and practice rooms. One challenge was how to make places like that, which are potentially mundane-looking, feel more open and poetic." At first glance, the set looks like a manufacturing center. McLane says this is intentional: "There's a line in the show early on when Carole, trying to persuade her mother to let her go to Times Square, says, 'Mom, it's just like a factory where they make songs.' I wondered how to do that. It is very different from a factory where they make pajamas, which I've done [a reference to the 2006 Broadway revival of *The Pajama Game*, which he designed], but it is a factory. Don Kirshner just wants to create product. His genius was to get artists to create quickly and regularly; part of the first act shows him training Carole, Gerry, Barry Mann, and Cynthia Weil to write continuously and efficiently. What does a factory where they make songs look like?"

Thus, the set is a rabbit warren of little rooms—each of them filled with musical instruments, recording equipment, microphones, signs announcing "On Air," and more—backed by a collage of acoustical materials of the sort that one finds in recording studios. McLane's research revealed that many of these locations "had interesting details but also lots of plain sheetrock walls. I decided to remove all the walls and cull the interesting details from the various offices and recording studios we looked at, to distill and condense them and make patterns. It's meant to be a somewhat chaotic place. It's dense, richly textured, and

filled with idiosyncrasies. It also reflects the crowdedness of Midtown Manhattan and places like the Brill Building. The back wall is a riff on soundproofing materials. I chose four of them, enlarged them, and made a tapestry of soundproofing materials. It functions as our cyc, but it is very textured."

This design is also a response to the show's construction, especially in the first act, which moves back and forth between 1650 Broadway and the songs being performed. "You start with the number as it is being written and then move to a more orchestrated version performed by The Shirelles or The Drifters," McLane says. "When Barry and Cynthia write 'Walking in the Rain,' it functions like a song in a book musical." He adds that to deal with these transitions, he strove to create an environment that "was a 3-D cyc around the entire space. Between the set's internally lit portals, the gear in the rooms, and the soundproofing materials on the back wall, Peter [Kaczorowski, the lighting designer] could light it with a strong single-color look, yet the set wouldn't look bland."

When the action moves into the performance numbers, they are defined by a variety of horizontal and vertical boxes that fly into place. "We call them the *American Bandstand* panels," McLane says, evoking the popular television show of the period. "They are there to give us a lift out of the nicotine-stained Brill Building atmosphere into musical land. They're made of Mylar glitter fabric with a grid of incandescent bulbs in them and LEDs on the outside so we can change colors."

When the action moves to other locations—the Klein household in Brooklyn, a recording studio, a ski resort—they are fairly minimally conceived, a small arrangement of furniture backed by sliders. The latter "are made of various shades of fabric inspired by the speaker grille cloth of the hi-fis of the period [with tiny downlights built into them]," McLane says. "Again, there are so many short scenes, and I needed a quick way to differentiate theme. There's Carole's office and Don's office; it has to be clear that they are different places, but there is no time for fully fleshed-out designs." One strategy involves the use of an upright piano, which appears in a number of scenes; facing in one direction, it signifies Carole and Jerry's office; flipped to face the other direction, it becomes Barry and Cynthia's office. (A grand piano is used for the show's framing device, set at King's Carnegie Hall concert.)

One scene that gets a more elaborate representation is set in Carole and Jerry's suburban home in New Jersey, which features windows containing lightboxes that show the surrounding neighborhood. McLane says he felt the scene needed this treatment since "it is where his life starts to fall apart," as Goffin, feeling trapped by familial responsibilities and creatively stifled at a moment when pop music is undergoing profound changes, rebels against his marriage to Carole.



The Shirelles perform "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow." The beaded curtain behind the singers was supplied by iWeiss; the company also provided the production's serge masking.

Throughout the project, McLane says he was constantly looking for "economies of means for each scene. It has evolved a lot since I started designing it, through the San Francisco tryout and into previews. It wasn't always clear to me that each location in the script as I first I read it would be there when it eventually opened. Marc Bruni and I agreed we should have a design that was as flexible as possible." Scenery was built by PRG Scenic Technologies and Show Motion with show control by PRG's Stage Command System.

Spotlights and worklights

As should be clear by now, Peter Kaczorowski worked very closely with McLane on the design of *Beautiful*, and his subtle, detailed approach is closer to the lighting design of a play than a musical. He says he took his inspiration from *Beautiful*'s star: "Jessie is so authentic, so sincere, as is the rest of the company, so I responded to them in that way. It has a classy, emotionally rich feeling that you often find a little bit more in plays than in musicals."

Such an approach has its costs, however. "It now looks

simple; there's an ease to the design, but it took a long time to get there," Kaczorowski says, noting the preponderance of units built into the set. "It took weeks to compose and sort out what was going on in every scene. But in the end, it was worth the effort."

The integration of lighting and scenery begins with the proscenium, which changes color throughout, thanks to the use of a five-color LED tape, in this case, Philips Color Kinetics iColor Flex SL nodes, 1,200 of which are used throughout the set. "It's not just RGB, so there's a lot of variety and a lot of punch, and we got a lot done in a very shallow space," Kaczorowski notes. LED tape was mandated because of the lack of room inside the proscenium. "It's 5" from the reflective surface to the backing board," says the designer, adding that he and his team worked to get a smooth, even wash without any gaps.

Then, speaking of the factory set, with its many little rooms, Kaczorowski says, "Each cubicle was designed like a working office in the song factory, complete with lots of practical sources but also supported by theatrical fixtures.



The Drifters on stage. Many of the show's performance numbers feature backdrops reminiscent of those seen in the TV variety shows of the 1960s.

We wanted to make it look like a place where people could actually work. So it was a long process of making all the elements integrated and not distracting." In many ways, the design is very much about transitions. "The idea is that the office world and family world and performance world all overlap. Often, for a minute or two, we're living in two worlds, as one is going away and the other becomes complete." Also flown between the two upstage office platforms are theatrical fixtures, silver PAR bars, which can be seen most prominently in the Carnegie Hall scenes.

Speaking of the *American Bandstand* panels, mentioned above by McLane, Kaczorowski says, "Basically, they're thin panels with a perimeter of the same LED tape used in the proscenium light boxes, with metal edges that hide the tape and give the pieces a crisp edge. Then on the face of the boards are G16 bulbs, which are clear and round. They have tons of circuitry to allow for

many varied chases. The material that Derek applied is almost like mirrored confetti—it's curly and ribbony and has a great texture, but it is also very reflective. And I pointed a lot of light at them, using moving fixtures with shutters to change the field color as the bulbs and the LED tape changed, too."

With lighting like this, timing is everything, but, Kaczorowski adds, "The show is almost totally automated, which makes for glossy, silky scene changes. I can count on those pieces arriving the same way every single time, which allowed me to make transition cues that are layered and specific."

Kaczorowski's automated package includes four PRG Best Boys, 15 Martin Professional MAC 2000 Profiles, 22 Mac 2000 Performances, and eight Mac 2000 Washes. The Best Boys are used in tandem with two Lycian 1293 followspots to keep the focus on the principals. The rest of the rig includes 52 Philips Color Kinetics ColorBurst Compacts, 33 Color Kinetics ColorBlast 12 TRXs, seven Chroma-Q Color Force 72s, approximately 420 ETC Source Fours in various models and degree sizes, nine PAR 64 ParBars, 32 Strand Mizar Fresnels, approximately 30 MR16 striplights in different sizes, 15 MR15 birdies, 15 mini-tens, 80 Wybron Coloram color changers, and seven City Theatrical DMX snow machines.

Control is via an ETC Eos console, which comes with the theatre operated by Roundabout Theatre Company. (*Beautiful* is

a commercial production not allied with Roundabout.) "It's an older version of the Eos, without the new software, and with the LEDs in the portal and floor and trough, we are maxing it out," says Kaczorowski. "There is maybe 3% left on the console. Josh Weitzman, who is also the house electrician, programmed the moving lights, and show electrician Ron Martin programmed the conventionals." Other pieces of the control puzzle include ETC Sensor dimmer racks, City Theatrical Show DMX wireless dimmers, and Event Systems Dim-12 and MiniDim-4 DimINATORS.

Girl groups and natural women

For a musical that traffics in the highly processed pop sound of the '60s, *Beautiful* does a remarkable job of retaining the primacy of the human voice; this is especially good news since Mueller has achieved a remarkable

simulation of King's vocal delivery that goes beyond mere imitation. Brian Ronan, *Beautiful's* sound designer says, "I tried to emulate the sounds of that transitional decade in pop music, but I didn't adhere too closely to the abundance of treatment that was popular at the beginning of Ms. King's career. I didn't want to mask the vocal work that Jessie brings to her live performance."

He adds, candidly, "It took me all of the San Francisco tryout to find the voice of the show," going beyond the sound of *Tapestry* to capture the irresistible qualities of King's earlier work. "I did get to pay homage to the period

in one portion of the show when her first hit, 'It Might As Well Rain Until September,' plays back through a transistor radio. I used a TC Electronic M4000 to process Jessie's voice to swim in reverb the way Ms. King's does on the recording." The cue was later changed to Bobby Vee's voice, who in real life released the song as part of an album after her initial demo.

Typically, Ronan mixes and matches brands when composing his loudspeaker system, and that's the case here. "I've got Meyer Sound CQ-1 [wide coverage mains] on the proscenium with L-Acoustics dv-DOSC [arena and



The *American Bandstand* panels are made of Mylar glitter fabric with a grid of incandescent bulbs inside and LEDs outside.



Derek McLane's rendering of the Klein household in Brooklyn where King lives with her mother at the beginning of the show.



The hit factory set is a rabbit warren of rooms filled with musical instruments, recording equipment, microphones, and "On Air" signs.

stadium line sources] for down fill, and d&b audiotechnik E3s for front fill. We have [Meyer Sound] UPJuniors [which are very compact] as orchestra fills on the extreme sides and EAW JF60s for the box seats. There are more CQ-1s in the mezzanine and more JF60s for the rear of the house and mezzanine fills."

"In the end, you feel her triumph, and it becomes our own triumph because you've been on that sincere journey with her." — Kaczorowski

Providing on-stage foldback for the company is a pair of d&b E3s hanging off the apron plus four Meyer Sound UPM-1Ps on each side of the stage in the wings, with Meyer MM-4s [which are also extremely compact] built into the second level of the factory set.

Ronan says he worked hard to keep the performers' mics invisible, and he has been largely successful in this. "I like it when you can get a big sound and the audience isn't aware of where it's coming from," he says. "The show's creators wanted a pop sound, so the question was, should we go with boom mics, which would allow for higher volume, be very visible, and, in my mind, pull focus

from Douglas McGrath's book? I wanted to make it more natural-looking and in-period." Because the show covers a decade, Mueller and the rest of cast go through plenty of costume and wig changes—the costumes are by Alejo Vietti, and the wig and hair designs are by Charles G. LaPointe—and, Ronan says, "The mics become as much a part of the quick change as the costumes. We could have added a sound guy off stage, but the intricate choreography of a quick change coupled with limited space doesn't allow for extra bodies. That's why our friends in wardrobe and hair get a gift from me on opening night. Good sound requires collaboration from all the departments." Most of the cast members are wearing Sennheiser MKE1s with additional DPA 4061s for actors of color because, Ronan says, "They come in light cocoa and black, and they look better on dark skin."

In certain scenes, the script requires King to sing into wired vocal mics while playing. One is used during an impromptu performance at The Bottom Line and the other is used at her 1971 Carnegie Hall concert. Both are period-style props wired with a Sennheiser MKE 2 mic.

The 12-member band is located in the theatre's pit. Again, alluding to the changes the design underwent, Ronan says, "I made the mistake of coming into the show with my *Tapestry* ears, but in San Francisco, I realized I

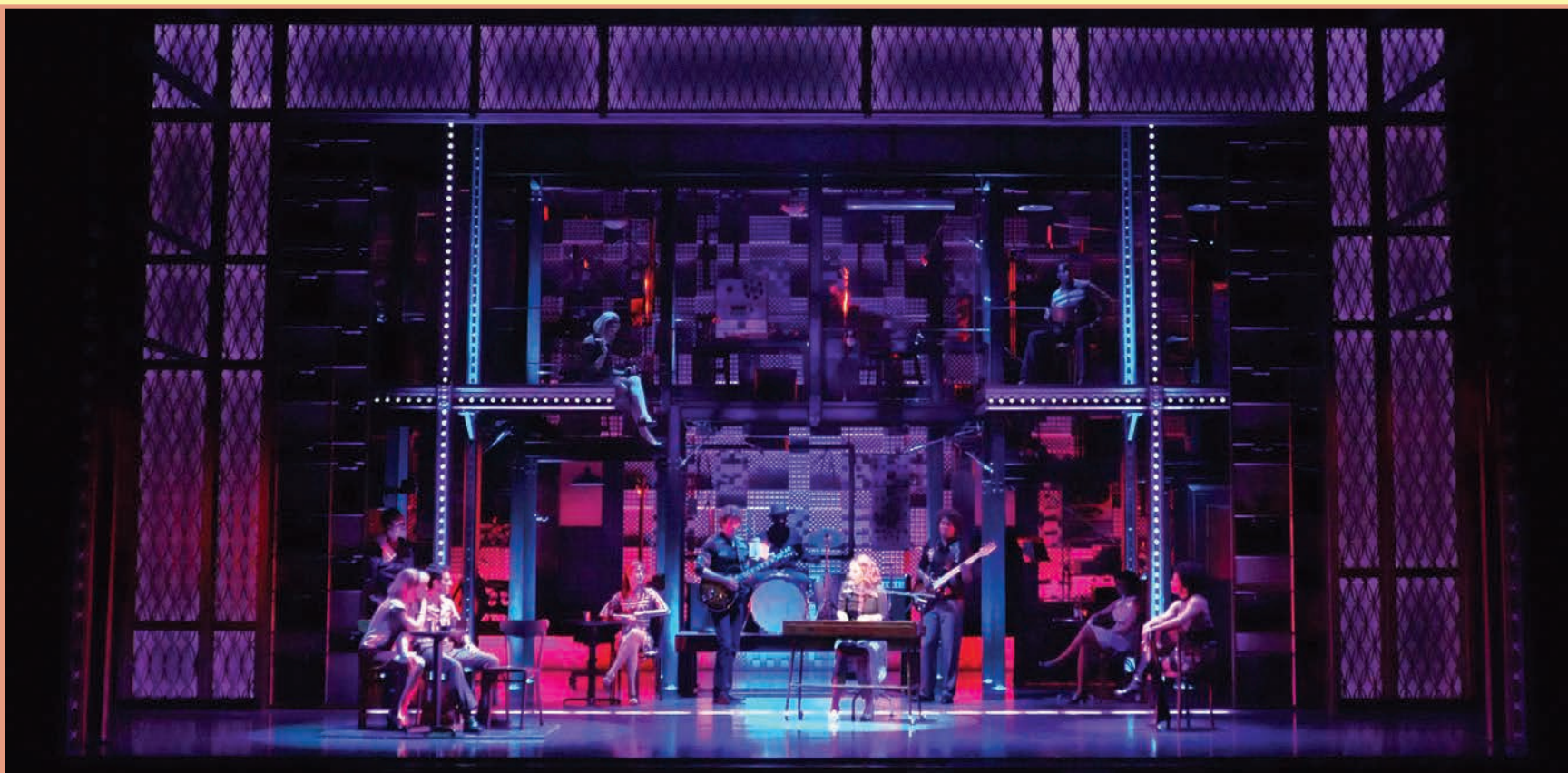
had to add more isolation in the pit to mix the rock songs. In New York, the set hangs over the pit. We have the reeds downstage of the show's deck, but everything else, including drums and percussion, fits below the deck's overhang, allowing for further isolation and mixability." The musicians are on an Aviom personal monitor mixing system linked to a DiGiCo SD10 submixer, which is linked via Optocore fiber to the Digico SD7T at the front of house. "The SD10 has an Aviom card and busses to the pit's Aviom system directly," he adds.

For numbers performed in the home and office scenes, Ronan goes with a more natural, more raw vocal performance with no processing. He adds, "It was a lot of work to make it seem like Carole is playing the piano. The conductor plays for her; he has a little camera overhead and a pan, zoom, tilt control on his right that zooms in on her hands, allowing him to follow her. There's also a silent patch on his keyboard that sends the sound through a wireless speaker hidden within the pianos." He adds that Mueller "has really learned how to sell it, leaving the audience to experience Carole King at the piano."

Additional personnel on *Beautiful* include Erica Hemminger (associate scenic designer); John Viesta (associate lighting designer); Cody Spencer (associate sound designer); Fred Gallo (production carpenter); Erik

Hansen (head carpenter); Geoffrey Vaughn (advance flyman); Nick Partin (advance electrician); Michael "Fodder" Carrico (advance sound); Scott "Gus" Poitras (deck automation); Randall Zaibek and James Fedigan (production electricians); Louis Igoe (sound engineer); Michael Pillipski (production propmaster); John H. Paul III (head propmaster); Shoko Kambara and Aimee Dombo (assistant scenic designers); Gina Scherr (assistant lighting designer); Jack Anderson (assistant carpenter); Adam Blood (assistant electrician/lead followspot operator); Diego Irizarry (assistant propmaster); and Nick Borisjuk (assistant sound engineer).

Everyone agrees that *Beautiful* was a different sort of experience. "For me, the overriding satisfaction is that it's not like a typical musical design," Kaczorowski says. "Sure, it has some glitzy production aspects, but it also celebrates the very small, emotionally rich moments with just one or two people on stage. It's a great pull between excitement and simple, small, poignant visuals. The lighting helps to tell the story. In the end, you feel her triumph, and it becomes our own triumph because you've been on that sincere journey with her." The same is equally true of scenery and sound; everyone has worked to add honest emotion to the story of the girl at the piano and her turbulent early years. 🎵



The proscenium changes color throughout the show, using the five-color Philips Color Kinetics iColor Flex SL nodes.