

A Child of Broadway and Hip-Hop

Lin-Manuel Miranda followed his first loves to stage stardom.

By MICHAEL PAULSON

His parents own hundreds of Broadway cast albums; his mother blasted “Came-lot” in the car and his father is obsessed with “The Unsinkable Molly Brown.”

His school bus driver had a passion for rap, drilling him in lyrics by Boogie Down Productions, Geto Boys and the Sugarhill Gang.

In the Venn diagram of contemporary music, hip-hop and musical theater have little overlap, but that is the space in which Lin-Manuel Miranda lives, the space that birthed the new hit musical, “Hamilton,” which opened last week to some of the strongest reviews in years.

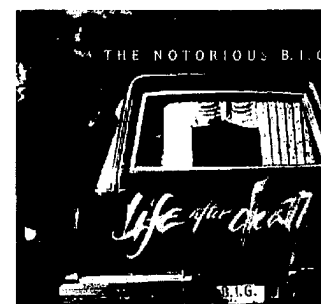
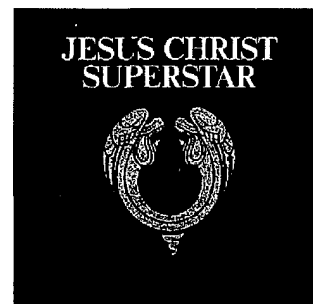
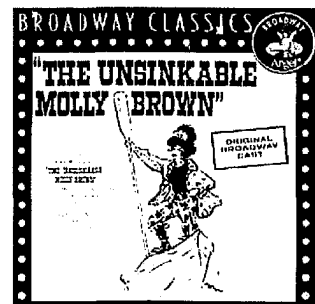
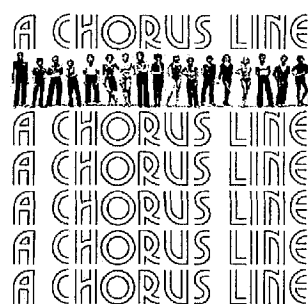
The story of “Hamilton,” as is now well known, was inspired by a best-selling biography, “Alexander Hamilton,” written by the historian Ron Chernow. But the music of “Hamilton” is a product of Mr. Miranda’s own polyglot palate, shaped by the listening habits of his family and his friends, and the sounds of his neighborhood and his generation.

“Here’s the thing that I’ve observed about Lin Miranda,” said Oskar Eustis, the artistic director of the Public Theater, where “Hamilton” had an Off Broadway run. “He deeply loves musical theater and Broadway, and has since he was a child, and he deeply loves hip-hop and pop music as a whole, and has since he was a child.” He added, “His ability to work in both of those forms is inseparable from the fact that he loves both forms — he’s not being a tourist when he visits one or the other, but he’s deeply embedded in both of them.”

So there Mr. Miranda was at Joe’s Pub one night early this summer, improvising hip-hop lyrics using words shouted out by



SARA KRUIWICZ/THE NEW YORK TIMES



audiences at a gig featuring his group, Freestyle Love Supreme. But there he is, too, often on Twitter and occasionally outside the Richard Rodgers Theater, parrying questions from fans with lyrics from “Rent,” “Jesus Christ Superstar,” “A Chorus Line” and “West Side Story,” all of which he has memorized.

The 35-year-old son of Puerto Rican parents, raised in a heavily Hispanic neighborhood of northern Manhattan and educated at a public school for gifted children on the Upper East Side, Mr. Miranda is an exuberant fanboy who happily tweets mash-ups of lyrics from Drake and “The Little Mermaid,” knowing that almost no one will get the joke.

He recognized early that hip-hop and show tunes, even with their different sounds and audiences, share an emphasis on storytelling — both musical styles are animated by lyrics that advance narrative, and that understanding shaped “Hamilton,” which he conceived, wrote the music and lyrics for, and stars in.

Latin music was big in the Miranda home, in Inwood, and in Puerto Rico, where Mr. Miranda spent his summers. But rap and hip-hop were woven into his childhood as well.

“It was the music that was on the rise,” he said. He remembers, in the 1980s, his sister’s taking him to see “Beat Street,” an early film about hip-hop. Soon he was listening to the Fat Boys, the Beastie Boys, Eric B. & Rakim.

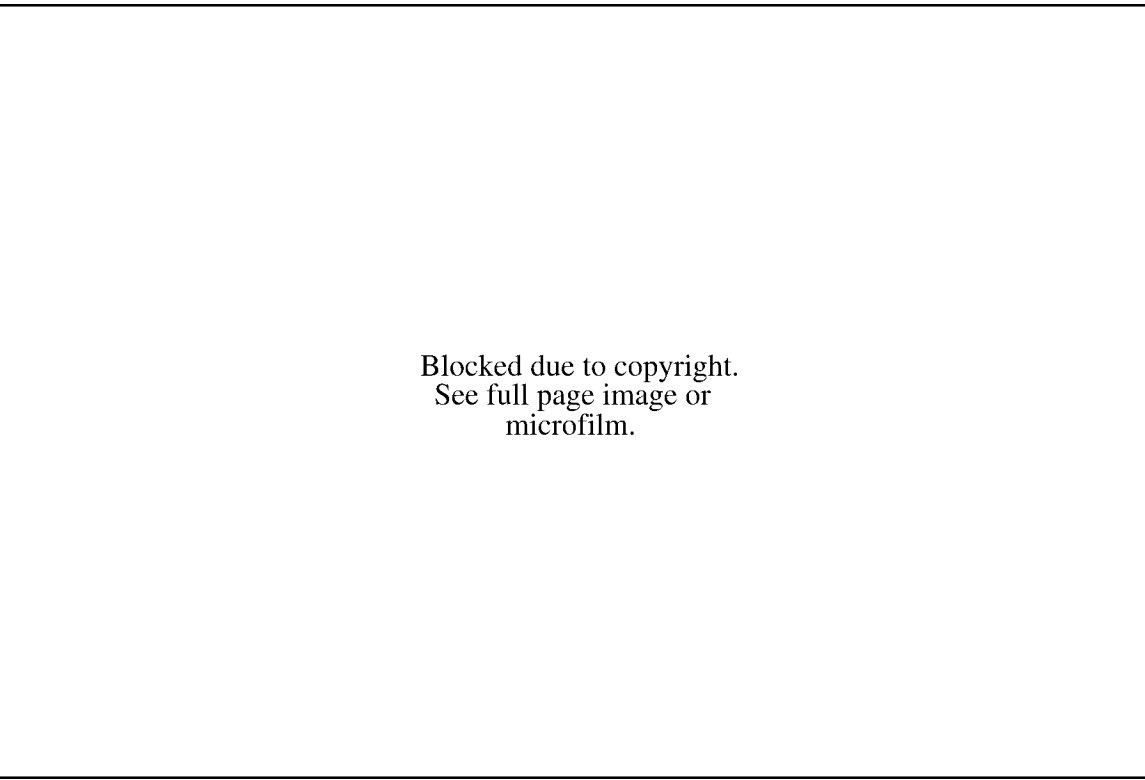
And then there was that bus driver, Billy Baker Jr., who shuttled children from Inwood to Hunter College Elementary School, and en route taught them lyrics; Mr. Miranda can still sing an a cappella version of “Beef,” an anti-meat-eating song by Boogie Down Productions.

Mr. Miranda is also steeped in musical theater, a passion that began with his father, the political consultant Luis A. Miranda Jr., who for a time sold LPs in Puerto Rico, and now has hundreds of cast recordings and huge piles of Playbills. (“I don’t collect them, but I find it disrespectful to throw them out,” he said.)

The Mirandas could rarely afford to take their children to Broadway, but cast recordings were always available. “The only shows I saw as a kid were that holy trinity: ‘Les Miz,’ ‘Cats,’ ‘Phantom,’” Lin-Manuel Miranda said. Yet he repeatedly listened to “Jesus Christ Superstar” and “Man of La Mancha,” as well as to movie musicals, like “The Sound of Music” and especially “The Unsinkable Molly Brown,” which his father loves so much that last year he flew to Denver to see a new staging. (“I don’t understand how anybody can live without having seen ‘The Unsinkable Molly Brown,’” the elder Mr. Miranda said.)

Lin-Manuel Miranda took his future wife on an early date to the orchestra pit at “Wicked.” At their wedding, he led the bridal party and groomsmen in a flash-mob version of “To Life” from “Fiddler on the Roof.” He sings lyrics from “Newsies” backstage at “Hamilton.” And his 9-month-old son is named Sebastian, which he liked for several reasons, including that it is the name of the crab in “The Little Mermaid.”

Mr. Miranda is now friendly with writers he idolizes, even as they vary in style. “We’re all a bunch of unicorns,” he said. “I couldn’t possibly write ‘Next to Normal,’ but God, I can weep and watch ‘Next to



Normal’ five times.”

As a high school student, he met Stephen Sondheim when the composer-lyricist spoke at Hunter; now Mr. Miranda sends him unfinished work for feedback. And he is particularly close with John Kander, the 88-year-old composer who collaborated with Fred Ebb on works including “Cabaret” and “Chicago.”

Mr. Kander introduced himself to Mr. Miranda after seeing the Off Broadway run of his earlier musical, “In the Heights,” and now the two regularly have lunch; Mr. Kander refers to Mr. Miranda as “boy genius,” and Mr. Miranda to Mr. Kander as “The Source.”

“Innovators are usually synthesizers — they synthesize everything they know and add their own personal talents, and out comes something new,” Mr. Kander said. “What Lin is is a refreshing and healthy contemporary synthesist of everything he’s known before.”

Mr. Miranda’s interests remain eclectic. One day, asked about his musical tastes during an interview, he pulled out his iPhone and hit shuffle — the first songs to come up were by Macy Gray, Jay Z and Faith Evans, and XTC, tracks from “Bright Lights, Big City” and “Merrily We Roll Along,” an early cut of a song from “Hamilton,” and music from the South Pacific (the region, not the show), which he is exploring while pondering future projects.

He said he periodically listens to music the same way, while riding the train or walking the dog. “More often than not, I’ll put on shuffle, and that’s like the message the universe wants to send me that day,” he explained.

He has a gift for memorizing lyrics. One afternoon, in the orchestra pit at “Hamilton,” when the musical “Fun Home” came up in conversation, he spontaneously began to belt out “Ring of Keys,” a show-

Lin-Manuel Miranda, top, watching a performance of his hit musical “Hamilton” from the orchestra pit, and above, at 7, at a recital at his music teacher Suzzan Craig’s apartment in 1987. His childhood musical influences were wide-ranging. Right, Mr. Miranda, center, as Alexander Hamilton in “Hamilton” at the Richard Rodgers Theater.

An exuberant fanboy whose passions in music informed his storytelling.



SARA KRUIWICZ/THE NEW YORK TIMES

stopper sung by an 11-year-old actress.

“One of my first favorite books was ‘The 12 Days of Christmas,’ and I would just go up to people and say, ‘I can sing ‘The 12 Days of Christmas,’ and I would make them sit through me reciting it, and I’d go all the way, each time,” he said. “I’ve always hooked into lyrics.”

Mr. Miranda took to performing at an early age. “I remember his first piano concert — he had to be like 7 — and people applauded, so he played a second song, and people applauded, and I remember his eyes popping up, and he said, ‘I know another one,’” his father said. “After the fourth round, the teacher gently pushed him off the piano so other kids could play.”

By sixth grade, he was performing in musicals. His school produced 20-minute

versions of six shows in one performance. He sang backup to Addaperle in “The Wiz,” and played a cowhand in “Oklahoma!,” a son in “Fiddler,” Bernardo in “West Side Story,” Captain Hook in “Peter Pan,” and Conrad Birdie in “Bye Bye Birdie.”

“My abuela made my gold-lamé jacket,” he added, “and every girl in the grade had to pretend to be in love with me, and I went, ‘Well, this is the best thing that’s ever happened to me.’”

In high school, he was cast as the Pirate King in “The Pirates of Penzance,” and then as Judas in “Godspell.” He was hooked. He assistant-directed a production of “A Chorus Line” (his girlfriend was the director) and then directed “West Side Story” (his father was accent consultant for the non-Hispanic kids playing Sharks). And he started writing musicals — a 15-minute Freudian dream called “Nightmare in D Major,” followed by a short piece about an unchaperoned party called “Seven Minutes in Heaven.”

His musical language was largely rock, inspired by “Rent,” which a girlfriend had taken him to see on his 17th birthday, and which he described as “a revelation — that you could write about now, and you could have musicals that really felt contemporary.”

He enrolled at Wesleyan University, intending to study film and theater, but film gradually fell by the wayside. He was cast

as Jesus in “Jesus Christ Superstar,” staged a campus version of “Seven Minutes in Heaven,” and wrote a draft of “In the Heights,” which used Latin music and hip-hop to tell a story about Hispanics in Washington Heights.

One week after he graduated, he met with a fellow Wesleyan alum, Thomas Kail, who had read the script and listened to a recording of “In the Heights” and thought it had promise; six years later that show won the Tony for best new musical.

Mr. Miranda acted in film and on television and worked on several less successful musicals — a bilingual adaptation of “West Side Story” and a stage version of the cheerleading movie “Bring It On” — while beginning work on “Hamilton.” He said he

CONTINUED ON PAGE 7

A Child of Broadway and Hip-Hop

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

saw in the Treasury secretary's difficult childhood echoes of Jay Z, Eminem and Biggie Smalls. "I recognized the arc of a hip-hop narrative in Hamilton's life," he said.

And, he said, he also thought hip-hop was the perfect musical style for describing the American Revolution, because it is "the language of youth and energy and of rebellion."

"There's been lots of theater that uses hip-hop in it, but more often than not it's used as a joke — isn't it hilarious that these characters are rapping," he said. "I treat it as a musical form, and a musical form that allows you to pack in a ton of lyric."

Alex Lacamoire, the orchestrator and musical director of "Hamilton," said Mr. Miranda was especially fond of '90s hip-hop, "because that's what he grew up with, and he loves anything that's syncopated and rhythmic." Frequent collaborators, the two can go on at length about the difference between the pure rhymes of musical theater, the assonance and internal rhyming of hip-hop, and the virtues of each.

Hip-hop is used heavily in "Hamilton" — the title character raps in wordy, dense sentences, but some other characters have different sounds: Thomas Jefferson, for example, has songs inspired by Gil Scott-Heron and Lambert, Hendricks & Ross, positioning him in an earlier generation than the other characters.

"He goes from a hard-driving rap song to a pop ballad to an R&B number to a Pythonesque Beatles pastiche, and he even throws in a few witty references to the Great American Songbook for good measure," said Weird Al Yankovic, the Grammy-winning parodist, whom Mr. Miranda credits with opening his eyes to the idea that any musical genre can be exploited for storytelling purposes.

Mr. Yankovic now considers himself a friend and potential collaborator with Mr. Miranda, and he went to see "Hamilton" at the Public, as did the recording artists



SARA KRULWICZ/THE NEW YORK TIMES



TODD HEISLER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Lin-Manuel Miranda, above, second from left, in his musical "In the Heights," with, from left, Eliseo Roman, Andrea Burns and Janet Dacal. Left, Mr. Miranda's shoes at a "Hamilton" ticket lottery on its Broadway opening night.

Sara Bareilles, Rubén Blades, Black Thought, Busta Rhymes, Jon Bon Jovi, David Byrne, Cher, Judy Collins, Josh Groban, Madonna, Jason Mraz, Q-Tip, Questlove, RZA, Regina Spektor, Swizz Beatz — and Paul McCartney.

"For decades there has been a disparity between the kind of music that one hears on the Broadway stage and the kind that one hears on the radio or in the clubs," Mr. Yankovic said. "By working with a more contemporary musical palette, Lin-Manuel is erasing that line in a major way."