

20 Movie Musicals with Columbia Connections

Since the early days of sound cinema, Columbia writers, composers, performers, and filmmakers have contributed to musicals on screen. Here are twenty of the most memorable.

By

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Maurice Chevalier and Jeanette MacDonald in *Love Me Tonight*.
(Paramount Pictures / IMDb)

Love Me Tonight

Prolific composer-lyricist duo Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart first joined forces at Columbia, where Rodgers was a College student and Hart had just dropped out of the Journalism School. After writing the musical *Fly with Me* for the 1920 Columbia Varsity Show, along with Oscar Hammerstein 1916CC, Rodgers and Hart went on to have a decades-long partnership resulting in dozens of stage musicals and multiple songs that are considered classics of the Great American Songbook.

Although a number of Rodgers and Hart stage productions were adapted into films, most omitted the original music. *Love Me Tonight* is a notable exception: the 1932 film about a romance between a Parisian tailor and a princess featured several original songs, including “[Isn't It Romantic?](#),” later recorded by singers like Ella Fitzgerald and Tony Bennett.



Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire in *Top Hat*. (RKO Pictures / IMDb)

Top Hat

Columbia engineering student Mark Sandrich fell into the film business by chance when, while visiting a friend on a Hollywood set and assisting the director with a difficult shot, he was offered a studio job. Sandrich ditched his engineering studies

and became an accomplished director himself, best known for making musical comedies starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. His popular 1935 film *Top Hat*, which features famous dance numbers and the Irving Berlin song “[Cheek to Cheek](#),” is among the most memorable.



Paul Robeson in *Show Boat*. (Universal Pictures / IMDb)

Show Boat

Show Boat, the 1927 Broadway musical with music by Jerome Kern and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein 1916CC, is better known for its 1951 film, but the 1936 version is notable for featuring members of the stage cast. Paul Robeson 1923LAW, the Columbia-educated lawyer and performer who had starred in the show’s West End premiere and 1932 Broadway run, reprised his role as Joe, a stevedore who sings the bass-baritone ballad “[Ol’ Man River](#).”



Frank Sinatra, Marlon Brando, Jean Simmons, and Vivian Blaine in *Guys and Dolls*. (© Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc. All Rights Reserved / IMDb)

Guys and Dolls

Having directed a string of successful dramas like *A Letter to Three Wives* and *All About Eve*, Hollywood veteran Joseph Mankiewicz '28CC turned his attention to the musical-comedy genre. *Guys and Dolls*, a 1955 adaptation of the 1950 Broadway show, follows a pair of gamblers played by [Frank Sinatra](#) and [Marlon Brando](#) whose bets on romance reap huge rewards.



Shirley Jones and Gordon MacRae in *Oklahoma!* (Magna Theatre Corporation / IMDb)

Oklahoma!

By the early 1940s, Lorenz Hart was suffering from the effects of severe alcoholism (he died in 1943), and Richard Rodgers needed a new collaborator. Having previously worked together on the 1920 Columbia Varsity Show, Rodgers teamed up with lyricist Oscar Hammerstein 1916CC. Their debut 1943 production, *Oklahoma!*, set on the [Oklahoma](#) prairie as the territory was entering statehood, is among the first musicals to incorporate song and dance numbers that advance plot and character development. The show was made into a 1955 film starring [Shirley Jones](#) and [Gordon MacRae](#), with a screenplay cowritten by William Ludwig '32CC, '34LAW.



Shirley Jones (center) in *Carousel*. (20th Century Fox / IMDb)

Carousel

A year after starring together in *Oklahoma*, Shirley Jones and Gordon MacRae reunited for the 1956 film of Rodgers and Hammerstein's second production, *Carousel*. The musical, set in a Maine fishing town, is known (and controversial) for its dark themes of domestic abuse and redemption, in addition to famous songs like "If I Loved You" and "You'll Never Walk Alone." Rodgers would note in his autobiography that *Carousel* was his favorite work: "Oscar never wrote more meaningful or more moving lyrics, and to me, my score is more satisfying than any I've ever written."



Yul Brynner and Deborah Kerr in *The King and I*. (20th Century Fox)

The King and I

The 1950s — the golden age of the Technicolor musical — continued to be a fruitful decade for Rodgers and Hammerstein adaptations. *The King and I*, the lavish 1956 period piece based on the 1951 Broadway show, stars Deborah Kerr as a British schoolteacher who travels to Bangkok to tutor the [multiple children](#) of Siamese King Mongkut, played by Yul Brynner.



Rita Hayworth, Frank Sinatra, and Kim Novak in *Pal Joey*. (Essex Productions / George Sidney Productions / Columbia Pictures / IMDb)

Pal Joey

Although the partnership of Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart had ended years before, *Pal Joey*, released in 1957, is widely considered their most successful and enduring film adaptation. Inspired by the 1940 stage musical of the same name, the movie, which stars Frank Sinatra as a philandering nightclub crooner, incorporates popular songs originally written for other Rodgers and Hart musicals, including “[The Lady is a Tramp](#)” and “[I Didn’t Know What Time It Was.](#)”



Magna Theatre Corporation / 20th Century Fox / IMDb

South Pacific

South Pacific, the 1958 World War II musical film set in the Pacific islands, took production off the Hollywood sound stage and onto Hawaii beaches. The film, adapted from Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1949 show, is also noteworthy for featuring the song "[Some Enchanted Evening](#)" and for depicting interracial relationships between white characters and native Polynesians.



Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*. (© 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment. All rights reserved / IMDb)

The Sound of Music

The Hollywood reign of Rodgers and Hammerstein reached its apotheosis in 1965 with *The Sound of Music*, based on their 1959 stage musical. Featuring an [iconic performance](#) by Julie Andrews, the musical, about an ex-nun who gets a job as a governess for the wealthy von Trapp family at the dawn of Austria's Nazi invasion, won the Academy Award for Best Picture and remains one of the most financially successful films of all time.



Chaim Topol and Norma Crane in *Fiddler on the Roof*. (© 1971 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc. All Rights Reserved / IMDb)

Fiddler on the Roof

Bronx native Joseph Stein '39SW worked for several years as a psychiatric social worker after graduating from Columbia. He eventually became a full-time comedy writer, working on a number of Broadway shows as well as the TV variety series *Your Show of Shows* with Woody Allen and Mel Brooks. But it was in writing the book for *Fiddler on the Roof*, the 1964 tragicomedy set in a Jewish village during the pogroms, that Stein experienced his biggest success. The musical was adapted into a popular 1971 film starring [Chaim Topol](#) from the Broadway cast.



Liza Minnelli in *Cabaret*. (© 1972 Allied Artists-ABC Pictures / IMDb)

Cabaret

The musical genre continued on a more serious path in the 1960s and 70s with productions like *Cabaret*, the 1966 show set in a [Berlin nightclub](#) at the start of Hitler's rise. Composer John Kander '54GSAS, who got a master's degree in music from Columbia, wrote the music with lyricist Fred Ebb, who also attended the University. *Cabaret* was made into an Oscar-winning 1972 film by director and choreographer Bob Fosse.



Liza Minnelli and Robert De Niro in *New York, New York*. (© Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc. All Rights Reserved / IMDb)

New York, New York

After the success of *Cabaret* and other projects, John Kander '54GSAS and Fred Ebb were hired to write songs for the 1977 musical film *New York, New York*, including the [titular tune](#) made famous by Frank Sinatra. The movie, directed by Martin Scorsese and produced by Robert Chartoff '68LAW, stars Robert De Niro as a nightclub saxophone player and Liza Minnelli as a singer. A box-office flop, the movie sent Scorsese into an addiction-fueled depression before his creative comeback with *Raging Bull* in 1980.



Members of Sha Na Na in *Grease*. (© 1978 - Paramount Pictures / IMDb)

Grease

Originally founded as a campus singing group called the Columbia Kingsmen, doo-wop revival act Sha Na Na broke onto the scene performing at Woodstock in 1969. A decade later, members of the ensemble appeared in the 1978 teen musical film *Grease* as Johnny Casino and the Gamblers, performing songs from the original Broadway show like “[Those Magic Changes](#)” and “[Born to Hand Jive](#),” as well as Elvis Presley covers like “Hound Dog” and “Blue Moon.”



Treat Williams in *Hair*. (CIP Filmproduktion GmbH / Tribe Entertainment Group / United Artists / IMDb)

Hair

Shortly after his appointment as co-chair of Columbia's film program, Czech filmmaker Miloš Forman, who had recently directed the mega-hit *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, released *Hair*. Based on the Broadway show, the 1979 movie follows a midwestern Vietnam War draftee who befriends a band of hippies in Central Park, and features the popular song "[Aquarius](#)."



Brandy in *Cinderella*. (Walt Disney Television / IMDb)

Cinderella

The only musical by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein 1916CC written for television, *Cinderella* premiered in 1957 with Julie Andrews as the title character, followed by a 1965 release starring Lesley Ann Warren. The 1997 Disney version, which stars pop singer Brandy as Cinderella and [Whitney Houston](#) as the Fairy Godmother, introduced the made-for-TV musical to the millennial generation.



Catherine Zeta-Jones (center) in *Chicago*. (© 2002 - Miramax / IMDb)

Chicago

Released in 2002, *Chicago*, a musical about women on trial for murder, brought the [razzle dazzle](#) of Fosse, Kander, and Ebb to the twenty-first century. Former Columbia philosophy major Bill Condon '76CC wrote the screenplay, adapting the original 1975 Broadway songs by John Kander '54GSAS and Fred Ebb, and the book by Ebb and Bob Fosse, for film. *Chicago* was a theatrical hit and scored numerous honors, including a Best Picture Oscar.



From left: Jennifer Hudson, Eddie Murphy, Anika Noni Rose, and Beyoncé in *Dreamgirls*. (DreamWorks Pictures / Paramount Pictures / IMDb)

Dreamgirls

Bill Condon '76CC followed his success with *Chicago* as the writer and director of *Dreamgirls*. Based on the 1981 musical by composer and former Columbia student Henry Krieger, the 2006 movie tells the story of the Dreams, a fictional Motown girl group inspired by the Supremes. Beyoncé, Jamie Foxx, Eddie Murphy, and *American Idol* contestant Jennifer Hudson make up a [star-studded cast](#) of familiar 2000s-era faces.



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Frozen

Ever since the 1937 premiere of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Disney has upheld its dominance in the animated musical genre. The media giant reached new commercial heights in 2013 with *Frozen*, which grossed over \$1.3 billion at the box office and introduced the song “[Let It Go](#)” to the world. Written and co-directed by Jennifer Lee '05SOA, the family-friendly fantasy is loosely based on the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale “The Snow Queen” and tells the story of a princess who goes in search of her lost sister in an icy wonderland.



Ariana DeBose (center) in *West Side Story*. (Niko Tavernise - © 2020 Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation)

West Side Story

Undaunted by the iconic legacy of the 1961 masterpiece (which features a shot of the [Columbia campus](#) in the opening montage), director Steven Spielberg teamed up with playwright and screenwriter Tony Kushner '78CC to create a new *West Side Story* for the [modern era](#). While paying homage to its predecessor, the 2021 version made numerous updates, including the creation of a role for Rita Moreno from the 1961 cast, integration of more Spanish dialogue for the Puerto Rican characters, and a more complicated backstory for lead-man Tony.

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