

arts
education
njpac



**klea
blackhurst**

**the david g. berger
master class series**

about klea blackhurst

Born and raised in Salt Lake City, UT, Klea Blackhurst is an American actress, singer, dancer and comedian with an impressive Broadway career. In high school, Blackhurst's passion for playing the trumpet was deterred when she was cast as the titular role in *Mame*, "I discovered I could sing and sing and sing forever. I just kept singing," she explained during an interview with *Broadway Box*. Blackhurst takes comedic inspiration from Paula Laurence and is best known for her award-winning Ethel Merman tribute *Everything the Traffic will Allow*, which debuted in NYC in 2001. The tribute won an award presented by TalkinBroadway.com as one of the top 10 show albums of 2002. More recently, Blackhurst appeared in the off-Broadway comedy *Party Face*, starred as Hazel in *Chicago* during the world premiere at Drury Lane, played Dolly Levi in the 50th anniversary production of *Hello, Dolly!* at the Goodspeed Opera House and played Miss Lemon in the world premiere of *The Nutty Professor* in Nashville.

In addition to musical theater, Blackhurst has made a name for herself in the jazz community, where she discovers ways to incorporate her musical theater repertoire with jazz aesthetics. Her tribute to the Broadway career of composer Vernon Duke at the Café Carlyle serves as a popular example of this fusion. This was once performed at Birdland with a subsequent sold-out engagement at Joe's Pub at The Public Theater, where she performed *Dreaming of a Song: The Music of Hoagy Carmichael*. This tribute came to life in the fall of 2007 with collaboration from Billy Strich. After its debut, a live performance of *Dreaming of a Song: The Music of Hoagy Carmichael* received a Backstage Bistro Award and was followed up by a studio recording in the following year.

Blackhurst has performed with symphony orchestras and in theatrical productions across the country and abroad, including the London Palladium presentation of Jerry Herman's *Broadway* with Angela Lansbury, the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra tribute to Marvin Hamlisch, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, 15 Mabel Mercer Foundation Cabaret Conventions, New York's Town Hall, Jazz at Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, New York's 92nd Street Y Lyrics & Lyricists, The Chicago Humanities Festival and as Ado Annie in the BBC Proms concert of *Oklahoma!* in London's Royal Albert Hall.

Klea's successes are not limited to her stage career. On television she has appeared in Ryan Murphy's *Pose* and *The Knick* on Showtime. She spent two seasons

as former prosecutor Shelby Cross on the IFC Channel comedy series *Onion News Network*. She's appeared on *Law and Order: SVU*, spent a week on *Sesame Street* and was a musical guest on *The Rosie O'Donnell Show*.

accolades

"The Ethel Merman Playbill Project: Why Merman Matters" by Klea Blackhurst

Until recently, whenever I was asked the proverbial "who influenced you most as a singer" question, I could never arrive at an elemental response. The question always caught me by surprise, so I'd furrow my brow and start to name singers I truly enjoy and deeply respect: Ella Fitzgerald, Rosemary Clooney, Freddie Mercury and Donny Osmond. But as the opportunities for this question began increasing, I knew I needed to define what felt indefinable. I was ready to pinpoint who was instrumental in actually forming my view of a song; my love of certain sounds. "Why doesn't the answer just pop into my head? Why don't I know this?" I thought. Then it came to me. I realized I couldn't point to the singer because it wasn't the singer — it was the song.

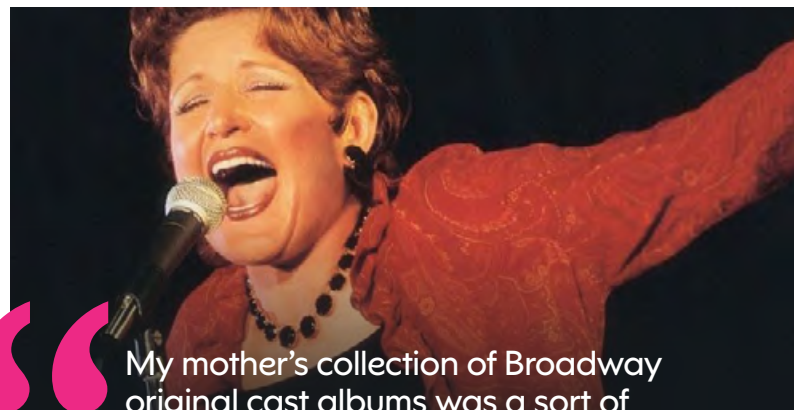
My mother's collection of Broadway original cast albums was a sort of magical soundtrack to my childhood — played in every room of the house on one of those plastic portable phonographs with three speeds and one tiny speaker. That, simply, is the music I've loved the longest; those are the songs that influenced my tiny view of the world. By the second grade, I knew every lyric to "Half a Sixpence" and "I Do! I Do!" But my personal favorite had a gal on the cover in a buckskin dress with a squirrel rifle and really red lips. Her huge voice reminded me of my mother's and I loved her long before I knew she had a name other than Annie Oakley. At 10, I was cast in a production of *The King and I*, starring John Cullum and Patricia Kies, and I was finally able to step into that world where songs actually came to life. There, I began to experience the balance and beauty of musical theater structure for the first time. How music could move a story. I learned the differences between starring roles, romantic leads, comic leads, character roles, the ballads, up-tempo and specialty numbers. But the biggest discovery was that not all women sounded like my mom and Annie Oakley.

A defining realization as I was finding my own voice on the stage: There were sopranos and I was not one. The summer after seventh grade I was paid \$35 a week to babysit Wally Nelson and his sisters. On Fridays, the money and I went straight to the mall, where I faithfully added to my own budding Broadway collection. I then spent the entire week listening to the new show, memorizing it, going to the library to dig up anything I could find about it. Sometime that summer I bought *Gypsy* ... and the world has never been the same. Suddenly, there was Annie Oakley coming out of nowhere to knock the wind out of me as Mama Rose. Suddenly, I saw the scope of what was possible, and I knew if I was going to make theater and singing my life, there was someone I needed to know more about — Ethel Merman.

Once I was old enough to realize the full impact of her talents on the Broadway stage, I kept her close to my heart and championed everything about her. According to people who were there, it is apparently impossible to describe the relationship she had with her audience. They say a good comparison doesn't remotely exist. She is famous for being heard in the last row of the balcony at a time when there was no amplification. Songwriters adored writing for her and worshipped her ability to deliver their lyrics with beautiful phrasing, stunning style, and a wicked sense of comedy. Her lack of stage fright and unwavering professionalism are legendary. She was dazzling and gutsy, raising the bar to a new level for actresses and songwriters alike. Broadway became her home. She lived to perform for her audience and they would virtually crackle with excitement when she stepped onto the stage. As Merman sang in *Anything Goes*, times have changed. The songs, the sounds and the stars are very different now than they were in 1930, when she burst onto the scene in *Girl Crazy*. But her unabashed, larger-than-life style and brassy voice are constantly memorialized in various ways, from drag parodies to cabaret themes to cocktail party quips. She's an icon on many levels, and they are all tributes in and of themselves.

Eventually, I was compelled to construct an homage of my own, working with the conviction that it is critical to remember not just what she looked like or sounded like, but what she inspired in those who were propelling theatre and music forward at the time. The roles written for her are brilliant and classic. The list of songs associated with her name is astounding — enough to fill several evenings. I finally made my song decisions and opened *Everything the Traffic Will Allow* in early 2001. A whole new world opened up for me. I finally felt like I was in show business!

Given all this, how could I answer anything other than “Ethel Merman” when asked who influenced me most? She embodies the music, the legend and the style that I was practically weaned on; and that I long to express as a performer Merman used to say on talk shows, “Broadway’s been very good to me, but I like to think I’ve been very good to Broadway.” Well, Merman’s been very good to me and I like to think I’ve been very good to Merman. Of course, she doesn’t need me and yet here I am, hopelessly devoted. Always have been and suppose I always will be.



“My mother’s collection of Broadway original cast albums was a sort of magical soundtrack to my childhood — played in every room of the house on one of those plastic portable phonographs with three speeds and one tiny speaker. **That, simply, is the music I’ve loved the longest; those are the songs that influenced my tiny view of the world.**”

— Klea Blackhurst

seed questions to consider

1. In what ways can childhood memories shape one’s career path, especially in the arts?
2. What are some unique ways that artists have paid homage to the theater arts of the past?
3. What can we do to support an aspiring artist to stay motivated during the audition process?

vocabulary

Back of House

The part of a theater behind the proscenium, or behind the stage setting

Belting

A singing technique common in theatrical performance where performers demonstrate a powerful, loud chest voice

Cabaret

Entertainment held in a nightclub or restaurant while the audience eats or drinks at tables

Curtain Call

The appearance of the actors at the end of a performance to accept the applause of the audience

Downstage

The area of a theatrical stage closest to the audience

Dress Rehearsal

The rehearsals typically held the week performances are to begin, during which all costumes and props are used

Off Book

An actor or cast member who has memorized their lines; a date in the production calendar when all cast members should no longer need their script

Thespian

Synonym for actor. Derived from the name of Thespis, a Greek tragic poet from the sixth century B.C.E., who is said to have first introduced an actor into dramatic presentations

Understudy

A performer, typically cast in the ensemble or a minor role, who is responsible for learning, rehearsing and possibly covering a larger role if something happens to a lead performer

Upstage

The area of a theatrical stage furthest away from the audience

resources

Websites

Klea Blackhurst
kleablackhurst.com

Wikipedia | Klea Blackhurst
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Klea_Blackhurst

BWW | *SO NOW YOU KNOW* with Klea Blackhurst
broadwayworld.com/cabaret/article/BWW-Interview-SO-NOW-YOU-KNOW-with-Klea-Blackhurst-20200509

Chelsea Community News | *Klea, We Need Ya: Longtime 'Merman' Who Won Over Herman Set to Fete Him, in Song*
chelseacommunitynews.com/2021/10/20/klea-we-need-ya-longtime-merman-who-won-over-herman-set-to-fete-him-in-song/

The New York Time | *Cabaret Review; Proving That There's No Business Like Ethel Merman*
nytimes.com/2001/06/06/arts/cabaret-review-proving-that-there-s-no-business-like-ethel-merman.html

Broadway Box | *Klea Blackhurst Takes On Seven Questions About Party Face, The Future of Hazel, & What It's Like to Be In an All-Female Work Space*
broadwaybox.com/daily-scoop/seven-questions-with-party-face-star-klea-blackhurst/

Photos

Hello, Dolly!
kleablackhurst.com/dolly-photos

Videos

Some People with Klea Blackhurst
youtube.com/watch?v=prbAeFnLyX0

Klea Blackhurst - Blow Gabriel Blow, 2002 MAC Awards
youtube.com/watch?v=9EOPDzljJFU

Klea Blackhurst - Millennium Stage, November 17, 2013
youtube.com/watch?v=gQX0lblvOTs

An Interview with Broadway Actress and Singer Klea Blackhurst
youtube.com/watch?v=Dpb3PQXw9MM&t=483s

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the arts in your school

In-School Residencies: NJPAC teaching artists come right to your school to teach the performing arts to your students. Our super-flexible in-person residencies are designed to meet your needs and you'll have a dedicated program manager to help you every step of the way. It's the perfect program to keep your students creating, connecting and expressing themselves through the magic of the arts.

Professional Development: Calling all educators! Expand your teaching skills, deepen your curriculum and give yourself a creative boost in NJPAC's forward-thinking professional development workshops. Our virtual PD programs are for teachers all the way from pre-K to high school and include hip hop, dance, storytelling, theater, music and more. Not only will you learn something... you'll also have fun and be inspired.

For more information or to schedule an appointment, please email our education sales team at artseducation@njpac.org. Or visit njpac.org/education

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study the arts at njpac

Saturday Programs: NJPAC's Saturday programs are geared towards students at every level — from those who dream of starring on Broadway to those who are still learning their scales. Students work with professional artists to build technique and develop their own creative style in hip hop, jazz, theater, musical theater and symphonic band.

Summer Programs: Want to begin to explore the arts? Or immerse yourself in the study of one genre? Then join us at NJPAC next summer in one of seven programs that spark the creativity in every child through the study of music, dance and theater.