

Pop



CHRISTOPHER LEE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

A New Stage for a Song Machine

The hitmaker Max Martin now has a Broadway show.

By JOE COSCARELLI

Once, not long ago, the Swedish songwriter and producer Max Martin met someone who had never heard one of his hits.

To be fair, this is a common misapprehension. Millions of people around the world might mistakenly believe that they are unfamiliar with Martin's music, given his relative anonymity after so many years of hiding deep within the pop music machine.

But assuming that those people have, at any point over the last three decades, come into contact with some of the biggest songs by the Backstreet Boys, Britney Spears, Bon Jovi, Celine Dion, 'N Sync, Pink, Kelly Clarkson, Katy Perry, Kesha, Taylor Swift, Ariana Grande, Adele, Justin Timberlake or the Weeknd — whether via cassette or CD, iTunes single or Spotify stream, taxi-ride radio or drugstore speakers — almost all of them would be very wrong.

"It's embarrassing for me to say, but I didn't know who Max Martin was," said Lorna Courtney, the 24-year-old star of "& Juliet," a new Broadway musical that relies on more than 30 smash singles produced, written or co-written by Martin. "Then I looked him up and I was like, 'Oh my God, this man is, like, famous.' I couldn't believe how big his catalog was."

Still, there somehow remain a few outliers. When one woman about his age approached Martin, 51, after a pre-Broadway performance of "& Juliet" to offer positive feedback on the songs, she amused him by admitting that she didn't recognize even one — not "Since U Been Gone," not "... Baby One More Time," not "Teenage Dream," Martin recalled recently.

"That makes me super happy," he said sincerely, employing his typical mix of Nordic humility and music-business savvy.

For one, it meant that Martin's world domination via verse and chorus was not quite complete: There were still more ears to reach. But more important for him at the moment, it meant that "& Juliet" was working on its own terms, not relying entirely on familiarity and nostalgia.

Martin needed this challenge. After "basically having the same job for 30 years," he said, and routinely doing it more effectively than almost anyone ever, he had finally gotten a little bit bored. In a series of rare interviews this fall, as he prepped "& Juliet" for its Broadway debut on Thursday at the Stephen Sondheim Theater, he said the "fear of doing something that could fail" — with his name on the line, for once front and center — had become a necessary thrill.

The show — a playful, pop-feminist retelling of Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" in which Juliet lives on — is also Martin's first real legacy play. The musical and accompanying cast album, which Martin oversaw, provide the rare way, outside of a streaming playlist or Wikipedia entry, to present his broad oeuvre as a discreet whole, linking artists from across genres and decades via their one common denominator: a unique, aging Swede with no taste for the spotlight.

Of course Martin denies that this was the intent. "Not at all," he said. "It's not like building a statue."

But, he added, "so be it, if it functions on that level."

IT HAS, AFTER ALL, been much too easy for the average person to take Max Martin for

granted. Adhering to the Scandinavian principle of Jantelagen, an allergy to self-aggrandizement, the producer rarely makes public appearances and, before "& Juliet," had agreed to be profiled just once in the English-language press, way back in 2001.

"I'd rather not do this," he said plainly while sitting for this article, after only agreeing to be interviewed alongside the show's music supervisor, Bill Sherman. "I've always been scared of fame. I've seen it up close. And I don't think it's healthy."

Yet Martin's impact on mainstream music cannot be overstated. Beginning with his work in Stockholm on the multiplatinum teen pop of the late 1990s and early 2000s, he has been one of the primary architects of the sound of the modern Top 40. Martin has proved equally influential in his methods of assembly, pushing producers and songwriters around the world toward the Swedish model of broad collaboration, optimization, reliability and populism.

With 25 No. 1 hits on the Billboard Hot 100 as a writer or co-writer, Martin trails only his heroes Paul McCartney (32) and John Lennon (26). Statues outside of every Top 40 radio station, most major record labels and the pop star mansions of Malibu would make perfect sense.

No taste for the spotlight, but still trying to reach new ears with his music.

"It's staggering when you see it all together," said Barry Weiss, a friend and veteran record executive who is also a producer of "& Juliet." "You can legitimately say Max has had a 20- or 25-year fertile period as a writer. The Beatles were what, eight years?"

Simon Cowell of "American Idol," another longtime friend who has also benefited as a record executive from Martin's work, noted that unlike, say, Motown or the Brill Building sound — some of the only hit factories comparable to Martin's Swedish cohort — "we actually haven't come up with a name for what Max has done."

"He has to be up there in the Top 3 — and I'm including Lennon and McCartney here — songwriters of all time," Cowell added.

Katy Perry, with whom Martin shares nine No. 1s, called Martin "the legend, the myth, the icon," and also a "lovable golden retriever."

"He's the most humble producer I know, but also the most confident in his choices," Perry added, noting that Martin has remained a hands-on editor long past when he needed to and a critic who offers, "yes, and ..." advice.

"He doesn't just come in every once in a while with a latte and say, 'Hey, do this,' and then walk out," she said. "He's literally comping the vocal, comping syllables sometimes."

In person, Martin still resembles the hair metal singer he once was.

Though he has a rich man's tan and sheen, he carries himself less like a reclusive genius than a regular guy who just happens to dress like a rock star or live in Los Angeles (which Martin sometimes does), with long, well-treated hair, plentiful rings, bracelets and necklaces and an ever-present tin of snus tobacco that he pops discreetly.

Prono to puns, imperfect analogies and mostly accurate attempts at American idioms, Martin is the sun in every room where people know who he is. Collaborators, employees and acquaintances jockey for his ap-

proval, even as they seem genuinely at ease in the presence of a master and only sometimes laugh too loudly at his many dad jokes.

BORN KARL MARTIN SANDBERG in Stenhamra, a tiny suburb of Stockholm, to a teacher and a policeman, Martin has long credited Sweden's public music-education programs with his ultimate vocation. While learning the French horn, drums and keys, Martin took to the Kiss and Def Leppard cassettes of his older brother, but maintained a secret soft spot for the '80s pop of the Bangles and Depeche Mode. There were, he admitted, "very childish rock star dreams in the beginning."

In 1993, Martin's cheesy band, It's Alive, signed with a short-lived label called Cheiron that also ran a studio in Stockholm. There, Martin met the Swedish D.J. who would become his mentor, a man known as Dennis Pop. He was not a musician in the traditional sense but began developing a system in which songs were written more like television shows, the journalist John Seabrook wrote in his 2015 book, "The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory."

Combining beat-driven club music with big '80s choruses like "Beat It" and "Livin' on a Prayer," Seabrook explained — and the innate influence of Swedish folk songs, hymns and lullabies, in addition to the long shadow of Abba's local pop perfection — Dennis Pop trained Martin among his stable of budding writers, who sought to create hits for international artists.

As a writer and producer, he was a natural, soon realizing that his general preferences — the things he found most pleasing to the ear — were just "in tune with the universal code," Martin said, adding: "Once I ended up in the chair behind the desk, that's when I was really like, 'Oh, this is what I'm supposed to do.' A lot of people seem to have a similar taste to me."

Because his vantage was distant and his English imperfect, Martin's songs tended to emphasize feeling over content. "Not growing up here, you hear music differently," he explained. "There was a big part of my life where I didn't even understand what they were saying, so phonetics are super important to me — how things sound." (Wonky lyrics — Maxisms — are a staple of Martin's catalog, dating back to awkward lines like Robyn singing, "You're the one that I ever needed/Show me love and what it's all about" in 1997.)

Max Martin, above, has been one of the primary architects of the sound of the modern Top 40. Now Martin has a Broadway musical, "& Juliet," starring Lorna Courtney, below, that relies on music he has written or produced for others over the past three decades.



SARA KRULWICH/THE NEW YORK TIMES

The singer Pink, who has worked with Martin for more than 15 years, called him "a closet punk rocker," who is "very unique in how he can break you down and pull you apart and then put you back together in exactly the right syncopation, down to the second. He knows how to take your mess and make it feel good in people's bodies."

STRIPPED OF THEIR EXTERNAL trappings for "& Juliet," Martin's compositions stand out not only for their existing theatricality and melodic sophistication but also for themes that are just vague enough to be broadly applicable, and therefore loved by everyone.

Retrofitted into a plot by the writer David West Read ("Schitt's Creek"), the malleable music works for a nonbinary character (Spears's "I'm Not a Girl, Not Yet a Woman"); a late-in-life romance (Perry's "Teenage Dream"); and a meta-layer featuring the relationship travails of Shakespeare and his wife, Anne Hathaway (Dion's "That's the Way It Is").

Upon agreeing to pursue the idea of a musical, Martin had never actually seen one other than "Mamma Mia!" In the decade-plus of development for "& Juliet," he has only added "Hamilton" to that list. But Martin's outsider status in this world, after so many years of being the nearly infallible insider in his, has proved freeing, allowing him to both ask embarrassing questions and also focus on the finer points.

Still, he remains a man of exacting taste. Sherman, the music supervisor, recalled Martin's earliest mantra for the show: "If it's not perfect, it goes in the trash." The producer's harshest critique was that something sounded "like a college thesis project."

"Whenever Max goes 'eh,' that means it's not good at all, and you should fix it immediately," Sherman said. But following a recent dress rehearsal in front of an audience of friends and family, Martin's only note was that "there was one tambourine that was a little loud."

As he eases deeper into his 50s, Martin, who eschews all social media, knows that he is increasingly "on borrowed time" in the youth-obsessed world of pop music.

"I look at trends this way," he said. "If you're in a dark alley, and there's a shady person across the street, keep an eye on them. But you don't necessarily follow them home." He swears he won't start feeling competitive about catching McCartney's 32 chart toppers unless he reaches 31. "Then I would be like, 'Might as well, I guess.'"

But with the musical, Martin is also now in line to receive more direct praise than he ever has. "Sometimes I question, like, 'OK, what do I do?' I make three minutes of sound. What's the point?" he said. "But these people who actually are in the know about who's behind it, they come up to me, and they tell me all these stories about what these songs have meant to them in their life. That's been really powerful — the most rewarding and kind of mind blowing thing that I never expected."

Yet he will only accept the attention to a point. At the first official preview performance of "& Juliet" last month, when Martin was summoned onstage to take a bow, he gamely soaked up the applause for all of 10 seconds before moving to address the crowd.

Instead of detailing his own journey to that moment, Martin urged the 15 actors making their Broadway debut that night to the front, and in a seamless maneuver that almost looked rehearsed, slipped behind the row of performers and walked straight back into the wings.