

# THEATERMANIA

FOR THEATER EVERYWHERE

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## Peter Filichia's **DIARY**

### We'd Like to Thank You, Time-Life Records

All right, I know you won't believe me, but the album of the year is *Annie: The 30th Anniversary Production* on Time-Life Records.

I understand. You're still not going to buy it. For one thing, you've been skeptical of an album that doesn't even get its date right. Given that *Annie* opened on April 21, 1977, this should be labeled "the 31st anniversary recording" – and the folks at Time-Life should have had their launch party at Baskin-Robbins.

No, actually, this is the 30th anniversary production, as the CD booklet and spine proclaims. It just that Time-Life took longer than anticipated to release it. It's quite worth the wait.

I know, I know. A truly sophisticated musical theater enthusiast feels he can't like *Annie*. Too sentimental. Too commercial. Oh, let's get down to brass tacks: Too successful. If *Annie* had closed in a weekend, we'd all be saying to our friends, "Listen, you've just got to hear this fabulous score on this bootleg tape." But a show that finished in 1983 as the sixth-longest running musical in Broadway history isn't one we can champion anymore; it doesn't need us for that. Even many who went wild for it in that blackout-filled, heat-waved, Son-of-Sam 1977 soon fell out of love with it.

Musical theater aficionados aren't the only ones who tired of *Annie*. Even in *Annie 2: Miss Hannigan's Revenge* (more about that show later), when someone in the White House sang "Tomorrow," President Roosevelt demanded a cease-and-desist. When the singer rebutted by saying "But I thought that was your favorite song," Roosevelt unapologetically responded, "It was – but now I'm sick of it."

Martin Charnin, who wrote the lyric for that song, and all the others in *Annie* --and conceived and directed the original production, too – was in the 1980's writing a revue for Nancy Walker that was to be called *Back on the Town*. It never got on, but I still recall Charnin at a backers' audition singing one of its songs, which included the lyric, "If you want to clear a room, just sing 'Tomorrow.'"

I'm sure that tomorrow will mark for many the 30th anniversary of the last time they played the original cast album. Still, *Annie's* been pretty hard to escape. Anyone who's has a daughter, granddaughter, or niece in the last three decades has probably run into the show, whether it's because he's taken that girl to a Broadway, regional, stock, or amateur production – or because he's had to attend a production in which the lass was on-stage.

But this 30th/31st anniversary album – even better than the original cast album (and certainly the soundtrack) -- demonstrates why *Annie* was such a strong show. As I said recently at a tribute to composer Charles Strouse at the Paley Center, *Annie* was really a miracle because we all went in expecting a comic strip spoof, and we weren't prepared to become so emotionally involved with a little girl who would not be deterred from the mission of finding her parents. Bookwriter Thomas Meehan also found the perfect tone in telling of a previously aloof man who came alive because of her. That story is better told on this CD, simply because a CD can hold more than could LPs, cassettes and 8-tracks of the original. This one weighs in at 64.17 vs. 43.30 of the original.

I can hear you now: "Now you'll *never* get me to buy it, because what I want out of life is *less* rather than more of *Annie*." Go ahead, make all the wisecracks you can think of, and then give a listen. First comes a lush-sounding overture, courtesy of the Istropolis Philharmonic Orchestra of Bratislava, Slovakia, where many recordings are outsourced to save money. This brings no happiness to Local 802 – the musicians' union – but such an album probably wouldn't have been economically feasible without going overseas. Happily enough, at least six 802'ers -- including drummer Cubby O'Brien (a baby-boomer icon from his days on *The Mickey Mouse Club*) – got a paycheck for sweetening the sounds once the tracks has been delivered home. And the overture has been sweetened, partly because "Easy Street" is now part of the overture and because "Tomorrow" has been re-orchestrated to stress strings. (There's a lush entr'acte, too.)

On “Maybe,” Marissa O’Donnell turns in the strongest performance as Annie that I’ve heard since Andrea McArdle. (And remember, when you’re a theater critic for a New Jersey newspaper, you see a *lot* of Annies.) This, though, would be as good a time as any to inform that there’s a good deal of dialogue on the recording, and this song offers the not-so-necessary litany of “Good night” from each orphan to Annie.

But the introductory dialogue on “It’s the Hard-Knock Life” is especially welcome. Here’s where Miss Hannigan demands of the orphans that “You’ll stay up till this dump shines like the top of the Chrysler Building” – which explains, unlike the cast album, why Molly says it later. And given that “It’s the Hard-Knock Life” is a melody with which most fall in love at first hear, it’s nice to have that reprise with additional lyrics, even if it’s only 41 seconds worth. “Tomorrow” includes the endearing scene where Lieutenant Ward challenges Annie to prove that Sandy belongs to her by calling him over. Again, this O’Donnell kid does a splendid job with the classic.

Conrad John Shuck, who’s played Oliver Warbucks for decades, is here to reprise his role. By now, you’d think he’d know enough to pronounce “you’re” as “yure” and not “yore,” so that it rhymes with “pure.” But he’s otherwise fine. That’s especially true on “N.Y.C.” which has a couple of extra minutes of dance music – and wonderful ones they are. (Monica L. Patton does lay it on too thick as the Star-to-Be, though.)

Alene Robertson, no stranger to Miss Hannigan via many productions, is sound of mind, body, and voice in “Little Girls” – where she gets to add a “Shut Upppp!” to quarreling orphans. She’s snarlingly funny on “Easy Street,” too, in a cut that includes all the dialogue outlining her plot with Rooster and Lily to murder Annie. (And they say *Annie* is an escapist, fairy tale musical. How many others suggest a little girl is going to have her throat slit?)

But the most important addition on the entire album, one to which I was looking forward the second I realized this would be an expanded disc, was in “You Won’t Be an Orphan for Long.” Finally, we hear how much Warbucks has come to love Annie, when he vows to put his feelings for her aside in order to give her what she most wants: Her parents. Hence, Charnin’s most important and spot-on lyrics: “What a thing to occur; finding them, losing her.” They make us fall in love with him, too.

Onto Act Two, and “You’re Never Fully Dressed without a Smile.” Given that this song starts in the radio, we’re introduced to the full cast of the *Oxydent Hour of Smiles*, and get to hear singer Bert Healy via the perfectly-in-period voice of Christopher Vettel. What we also get is the sequence where Bert taps toes. Those who don’t know Annie – and who could that be? – wouldn’t from a CD get the joke that Bert isn’t tapping, but a sound-man with a pair of shoes is. But maybe there’s someone out there who’s going to be fooled just as much as the radio audience of 1934 was.

You may know “We’ve Got Annie” from the film version (if you lasted that long with it). Here it’s sung in counterpoint with the title song we’ve always known. During “A New Deal for Christmas,” there are a few extra measures, too – but more to the point, there’s Annie’s exclaiming, “Sandy!” It may remind you that there’s no logical reason why that dog is brought in in a box; after all, Annie met Sandy and lost him long before she met Daddy Warbucks. We’ve never heard her mention Sandy to him, and yet there he is. And yet, does anybody care about logic at that heart-warming moment when Sandy pokes his head out of the big ribboned box?

But wait! I’m not through. After you’re finished listening to *Annie*, move on to *Annie 2: Miss Hannigan’s Revenge* -- the *second* disc of the set. Told you I’d bring it up again. And I will – on Friday.

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