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The 13 Best Broadway Songs About Getting Older

With this weekend's Tony Awards, some show tunes on the joys and challenges of aging

By [John Stark](#) June 10, 2016

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(With the Tony Awards this weekend, Next Avenue is republishing this 2013 article.)

At age 66, Andrea Martin's Tony-winning performance in *Pippin* is an inspiration for all boomers. The highlight of this circus-inspired Broadway revival is her rendition of "No Time At All," a feel-good motivational song about living every moment of your life before it's too late.

Martin, known for stealing scenes (who can forget her as Aunt Voula in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding?*) has redefined the role of Charlemagne's mother, Berthe, Pippin's grandmother. She doesn't play her sitting in a wheelchair or using a cane. Hardly. Martin executes derring-do circus acts, like swinging from a trapeze, which causes audiences to applaud, gasp and even give her a mid-show standing "o." "I am the age the character is singing about," Martin recently told *The Wall Street Journal*, "and in the 40 years since the show first ran, 66 has changed."

Martin's performance got me to thinking about other show tunes that are sung by mature characters (though not from a trapeze). There's a lot of them, which says good things about the theater and diversity. Here, in alphabetical order, are the 13 best Broadway songs about getting older. Curtain up!

Before the Parade Passes By, Hello, Dolly! (Jerry Herman)

Matchmaker Dolly Levi, after a period of mourning her late husband, Ephraim, decides it's time to get "some life back into my life." She sings her spirited, take-

charge message standing alone in the center of the stage. Today, however, she'd be signing up for an Internet dating site with the rest of us singles. ([Click here to see Carol Channing perform the song at the Tony Awards.](#))

Hello Young Lovers, *The King and I* (Rodgers and Hammerstein)

There comes a time in life, usually post-40, when the sight of young couples in love strikes us. We can be envious of them or irked at the passing of time. Or we can take the higher road and wish them the joy we once knew at discovering first love, which is just what Anna, the governess hired by the King of Siam, does: "Don't cry because I'm alone," she sings. "All of my memories are happy tonight, I've had a love of my own like yours, I've had a love of my own." ([Click here to see Rebecca Luker perform the song in concert.](#))

I Am What I Am, *La Cage Aux Folles* (Jerry Herman)

This adrenalin-pumping number belongs to the drag queen, Albin. It's about his refusing to apologize for his lifestyle. Over time the song has become a rousing anthem for anyone wishing to embrace his or her individuality. "Life's not worth a damn, 'til you can say, 'Hey world, I am what I am.'" That's every midlifers stance. If not, it should be one's goal. ([Click here to see George Hearn perform the song at the Tony Awards.](#))

I'm Glad I'm Not Young Anymore, *Gigi* (Lerner & Loewe)

The musical *Gigi* started as a movie before eventually going to Broadway. But it's the film version everyone knows. Maurice Chevalier, upon observing his nephew's stressful love life, sings this appreciative ode to low testosterone: "How lovely to sit here in the shade, with none of the woes of man and maid, I'm glad I'm not young anymore." Of course, that was in pre-Viagra, "La Belle Epoque" France. ([Click here to see Maurice Chevalier perform the song in the movie.](#))

I'm Still Here, *Follies* (Stephen Sondheim)

The song, as dramatic as any Verdi aria, is sung by an aging movie queen named Carlotta who's had more than her share of triumphs and tragedies. Anyone who makes it past 50 knows the depth of her pain and pleasure. "Good times and bum times, I've seen them all and my dear, I'm still here." I know the feeling. That goes for every boomer, scars included. ([Click here to see Dolores Gray perform the song.](#))

No One Is Alone, *Into the Woods* (Stephen Sondheim)

Every lyric of this haunting ballad imparts wisdom that comes only with age. It's a complicated riddle of themes, from honoring your parents' mistakes to realizing that people aren't always what they seem: "Witches can be right, giants can be good." It's about loss ("Sometimes people leave you, halfway through the wood"), but ultimately hope. "Hard to see the light now, just don't let it go, things will come out right now, we can make it so. Someone is on your side. No one is alone." Comforting words. ([Click here to see Bernadette Peters perform the song at a concert in London.](#))

No Time At All, *Pippin* (Stephen Schwartz)

The composer was just 22 when he wrote this wise song that always stops the show, no matter who performs it, be it Irene Ryan, who originated the role of Berthe in 1972, Martha Raye (don't laugh, the hammy comic was an underrated jazz singer) or Andrea Martin. Berthe sings it to her grandson to let him know that age isn't about to stop her. She invites the audience to sing along: "Oh, it's time to start livin', time to take a little from this world we're given, time to take time, cause spring will turn to fall, in just no time at all." In one verse, she sings, "I believe if I refuse to grow old, I can stay young until I die." Now that's a boomer mantra worth framing. ([Click here to see Martha Raye perform the song in the show.](#))

Old Friends, *Merrily We Roll Along* (Stephen Sondheim)

Anyone who's older knows how difficult it is to make new friends, mainly because they don't share our history. They weren't around for the first few acts. Sondheim's song perfectly captures the relief and joy that comes from seeing a familiar face — not having to explain the who, what, where, why and hows of your life. It's all good and will only get better. I love this lyric: "Time goes by, everything else keeps changing, you and I we get continued next week." ([Click here to see George Hearn and Carol Burnett perform the song in the Broadway production of *Putting It Together*.](#))

Once Upon a Time, *All American* (Lee Adams/Charles Strouse)

Set on a Southern college campus, this 1962 musical flopped, even with a book by Mel Brooks. But all the great crooners, starting with Tony Bennett, have recorded this poignant ballad about a spring love affair. I was privileged to hear the legendary [Mabel Mercer](#) perform it. "Once upon a time, the world was sweeter than we knew, everything was ours, how happy we were then, but somehow once upon a time never comes again." But the memories do, and they get headier with age. ([See Larry Kert](#)

[perform the song at the Tony Awards.](#))

Send in the Clowns, *A Little Night Music* (Stephen Sondheim)

You'd think a song that's been sung as much as this one would have lost its relevance. But the obtuse, bittersweet lyrics keep providing new shades of depth as you get older. It's about finally growing up and knowing what it is you really wanted, then stepping back to realize maybe it's too late. But as the song's last lyric hints, "Well, maybe next year." ([Click here to see Judi Dench perform the song.](#))

September Song, *Knickerbocker Holiday* (Maxwell Anderson, Kurt Weill)

This pop standard is from a 1938 musical linking the New Deal to fascism — probably not FDR's favorite musical. *September Song*, written for Walter Huston (Anjelica's grandfather), is about the need for shorter courtships after a certain age. "When the autumn weather turns the leaves to flame, one hasn't got time for the waiting game." Justin Bieber probably won't be recording this anytime soon. ([Click here to see Sarah Vaughan and Wynton Marsalis perform the song with the Boston Pops.](#))

Sunrise, Sunset, *Fiddler on the Roof* (Sheldon Harnick, Jerry Bock)

Two parents at their daughter's wedding pose the musical questions: "When did she grow to be a beauty? When did he get to be so tall? Wasn't it yesterday that they were small?" To sing this song you have to be closer to the sunset than the sunrise. It's performed or played at every wedding, yet never fails to bring, as the repeating lyric says, "happiness and tears." ([Click here to see it sung in the Stratford Festival's 2013 production.](#))

There Is Beauty in the Bellow of the Blast, *The Mikado* (Gilbert & Sullivan)

True, *The Mikado* is an operetta, not a Broadway musical. And it's British. But it's performed on Broadway from time to time and was transformed into the swing-infused musical *Hot Mikado*. Toward the end of the operetta this giddy duet is performed between the elderly characters, Katisha, a ballsy grand dame, and Ko-Ko, the Lord High Executioner of the fictional Japanese province of Titipu. Realizing they were meant for each other in their golden years, they sing one delicious lyric after another. My favorite patter: "Are you old enough to marry, do you think? Won't you wait until you're 80 in the shade? There's a fascination frantic in a ruin that's romantic, do you think you are sufficiently decayed? ... To the matter that you

mention, I have given some attention, and I think I am sufficiently decayed." ([Click here to see Groucho and Melinda Marx perform the song.](#))

I'd love to see how Andrea Martin would perform the role of Katisha. On a trampoline while preparing sushi, no doubt.



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