

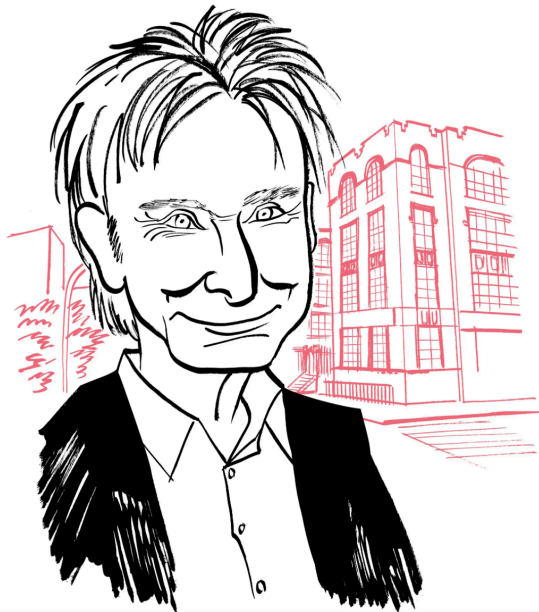
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Barry Manilow Digs New York

By: Sarah Larson



To mark the opening of “Harmony,” his musical about the Weimar-era sextet the Comedian Harmonists, the singer went back home to Williamsburg and poked around.

In his youth, Barry Manilow lived on a street called Broadway in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and though he’s lived in Palm Springs for decades, he’s always considered himself a New Yorker. (“The city rhythms all undo me / So sue me!” he sings in “I Dig New York,” on his 2017 album, “This Is My Town.”) This month, his musical “Harmony,” co-written with Bruce Sussman, opens at the Barrymore—on the other Broadway. On a recent rainy Tuesday, Manilow took a spin around the old neighborhood, peering at the strange and the familiar from the back of an S.U.V.

“We didn’t know we were poor,” Manilow, a youthful-looking eighty, said. He wore a black coat, spoke in a quiet, raspy voice, and took occasional drags from a vape pen. He waved it toward a young Orthodox woman who was opening the front door of a bustling prewar building where his family had lived. “The Mayflower—that’s where I hung out most of the time.” (He released “Here at the Mayflower,” an album imagining the lives of the building’s residents, in 2001.) He lived in an apartment with his grandparents and his divorced mother. As his 1983 memoir, “Sweet Life,” begins, he’s a shy

eleven-year-old glumly returning from the orthodontist, passing Sal’s Shoe Repair and Kleiner’s Grocery and despairing about his braces. At home, his grandmother comforts him, saying, “Hello tatteleh, have some milk and cookies and then you’ll practice your accordion.” He didn’t mind the accordion: “I wasn’t bad at it, and I learned to read music.” Then his mother remarried, to a music enthusiast. “He changed my life,” Manilow said. “We moved to the Keap Street apartment, and he threw out the accordion and got me a spinet piano. Everything changed.” He addressed the chauffeur: “Mark, take us to Keap Street.”

Mark drove to Keap Street and stopped in front of a small tenement. “The family that owned the building—to get to the top floor, you would go through their living room,” Manilow said. “See that air-conditioner on the very top window? There’s my old room. It was an old closet. So I was in the closet for all those years.” (Manilow married his longtime partner and business manager, Garry Kief, in 2014; they have been together since 1978.) Manilow mastered the spinet, then taught himself arranging: “Arranging is the thing that I love—taking the song, slipping out a facet, finding a different facet.” Mark drove by a Satmar girls’ school, the former Eastern District High School. “This is my old high school,” Manilow said. Any memories? “Horror,” he said. “Nothing but terror. I did have good friends. And I was part of the band—first clarinet. Can you imagine the second clarinet? I wasn’t very good. But I kept getting better and better at the piano.” He went on to the New York College of Music, jingle writing (“Like a Good Neighbor,” “Stuck on Band-Aid”), and pop megastardom (“Mandy,” “Copacabana”), which has endured.

“This has been the biggest year of my career, I think,” he said. “They did a tribute to me at Carnegie Hall—wonderful Broadway singers, the New York Pops.” That was in May. “Then five nights at Radio City, sold out.” In September, in Las Vegas, he was given the key to the Strip after breaking Elvis Presley’s record for most performances at the International Theatre (six hundred and thirty-seven). “Now ‘Harmony.’”

“Harmony” tells the story of the Comedian Harmonists, a real-life Weimar-era vocal sextet in Berlin, whose fizzy performances of close-harmonizing comedic songs (“Der Onkel Bumba aus Kalumba Tanzt Nur Rumba,” “Mein Kleiner Grüner Kaktus”) made them an international sensation. “They were the Manhattan Transfer of their day,” Manilow said. “But they were the Marx Brothers, too—slapstick comics who did complicated harmonies. The Nazis destroyed everything they had done, because three of them were Jews.” (The group dispersed before the war; all six

survived.) Harry Frommermann, the founder, “was the arranger. He came up with some of the most inventive part-writing and ideas. So Harry’s the guy that I connect with the most.” Composing the score, “I was in heaven.” In the Comedian Harmonists’ repertoire, “every song was a different style of music, and I love that. All of *my* albums have different styles of music—there’s either a big-band cut or a novelty cut or big ballads or little jazz songs—and the same thing with this musical.”

Sussman and Manilow wrote an early version of “Harmony” in 1997. Regional productions followed; a big one fell through; time passed. Last year, the National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene, at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, in Manhattan, mounted this new production, directed and choreographed by Warren Carlyle. “I mean, can you think of a more perfect place?” Manilow said. It has transferred intact. “Bruce and I never gave up on this show. We just wanted people to remember these people. We didn’t want them to disappear. These six geniuses.”

He’d thought about popping over to Carnegie Hall, where his grandfather started Manilow’s first standing ovation in 1971, and where a key scene in “Harmony” takes place, but pivoted toward lunch: “Mark, take us to Peter Luger.” Any final local observations? “No,” he said, laughing. “Get me out of here!”

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