

PALACE THEATER

SHOW INTEL

Season 2025–2026 | Issue 6: Meredith Willson's *The Music Man*

MEREDITH WILLSON'S THE MUSIC MAN



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ABOUT THE SHOW

There's trouble in River City when a fast-talking salesman gets his heart stolen by the town librarian.

Meredith Willson's *The Music Man*, follows fast-talking traveling salesman Harold Hill, as he cons the people of River City, Iowa into buying instruments and uniforms for a boys' band that he vows to organize — this, despite the fact that he doesn't know a trombone from a treble clef.

His plans are foiled when he falls for Marian Paroo, the librarian and music teacher, who hopes to transform him into a respectable citizen.

The Music Man is a family-friendly story to be shared with every generation.

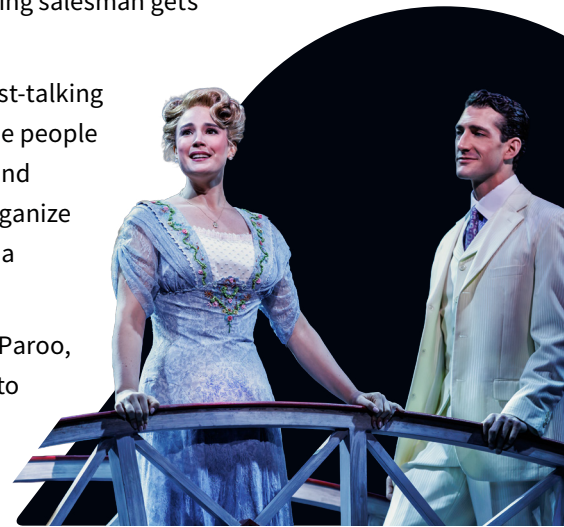


Photo by Marshall Meadows

FUN FACTS!

- *The Music Man* opened on Broadway in 1957, and won 6 Tony Awards, including Best Musical (beating *West Side Story* in a tie-breaking second round of voting). It also won the first ever Grammy for Best Original Cast Album.
- The 1962 film version earned 6 Academy Award nominations and won for Best Musical Adaptation.
- The show's timeless popularity has led to Broadway revivals in 1980, 2000, and 2022, and a 2003 TV adaptation.
- River City, Iowa, where the show takes place, is inspired by Meredith Willson's hometown Mason City, Iowa; many of the characters in the show are based on people he knew there.
- "Till There Was You" is the most covered song from the show. The Beatles performed their version for Queen Elizabeth II in 1963, sang it on their first appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1964.
- Many Disney parks use songs from the show (such as "76 Trombones" and "Wells Fargo Wagon") to help set the mood for early 20th century America "Main Street, USA."



Photo by Peggy Strata

MEREDITH WILLSON (1902–1984)

Born in Mason City, Iowa, in 1902, Robert Meredith Willson took to music at an early age, learning the flute and piccolo while dreaming of playing in a big band. After attending the Julliard School (then called the Institute of Musical Art) in New York City, he toured with John Phillip Sousa's band and played with the New York Philharmonic under Arturo Toscanini.

In the 1930s, he shifted to working in radio in California, which led him to composing numerous film scores. He received two Academy Award nominations for his compositions for *The Great Dictator* (1940) and *The Little Foxes* (1941). He served in the army during World War II, after which

he became the music director for NBC's radio and TV networks.

In the 1950s, he began working on a musical, originally titled *The Silver Triangle*, for which he wrote more than 30 drafts and over 40 songs before settling on the final draft and title. *The Music Man* opened on Broadway in 1957 and was produced as a film in 1962. Both were received with critical acclaim and commercial success.

In addition to *The Music Man*, Willson wrote three other musicals (including *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* in 1960). He also composed two symphonies and over 400 songs, including the holiday

classic, "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas" (1951). He was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1982 and posthumously received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1987.



Lush ballads, rousing marches, and barbershop harmonies abound throughout the show. But in Meredith Willson's carefully constructed world of River City, nothing is out of place.

Its musical roots come from styles that were popular in the turn of the (20th) century American heartland: ragtime, barbershop, soft-shoe, Tin Pan Alley ballads, as well as band marches and classical music.

Willson's musical skill comes to the fore as he juxtaposes different styles and plays with audience expectations.

Instead of a big opening song and dance number, he sets the stage with patter song for the salesmen ("Rock Island"), their chatter mirroring the sound of a train journey. He later incorporates patter/rap into "Ya Got Trouble," as Harold Hill tries to convince the townspeople of the need for a boys' band. Marian Paroo's lilting ballad "Good Night My Someone" pairs perfectly with Harold Hill's jaunty "Seventy-Six Trombones" – they are in fact the same melody played in different rhythms. Willson layers the barbershop quartet over the local ladies'

gossip ("Pick-a-Little, Talk-a-Little" and "Goodnight Ladies"), and uses music to underline the differences between characters, such as the steady Marian and the smooth Harold, in "Marian the Librarian." And the often covered "Till There Was You" connects Marian and Harold with their own feelings, as well as each other.

Much of the show's music was considered groundbreaking in 1957, and this rich score, heartfelt songs, and witty rapid-fire lyrics still hold up in 2026!



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