



Culture

Hamilton Nation

**IT CONQUERED BROADWAY.
NEXT STOP, THE WORLD**

BY ELIZA BERMAN

ON A WARM JULY AFTERNOON, RON CHAN and Cat Farris stood on a sandy Oregon beach to exchange wedding vows. She wore a crown of eucalyptus leaves, while he sported sunglasses and a well-groomed faux-hawk. “I don’t have a dollar to my name/ An acre of land, a troop to command, a dollop of fame,” she sang. He rapped in return: “There’s a million things I haven’t done, and I want to do them with you.” Both were riffing on the words of Alexander Hamilton—or at least the version of him invented by Lin-Manuel Miranda for the musical *Hamilton*, which they had never seen.

Eight-year-old Juliet Forrest wore a colonial-style dress to her recent *Hamilton*-themed birthday party in Pittsburgh. Her friends wore tricorn hats, and one, Jenna Parker, came dressed as King George. There was a water-balloon “duel” and the signing of a “Kids’ Constitution.” In lieu of gifts, guests brought \$10 bills—the Hamilton, baby—for a children’s charity co-founded by Hamilton’s wife Eliza in 1806.

Having already set sales and awards benchmarks for a Broadway show—\$111 million in ticket sales in just over 13 months, 16 Tony Award nominations (and 11 wins), a Pulitzer Prize for Drama—*Hamilton* has leaped off the stage and become a full-blown cultural phenomenon. In addition to inspiring nuptials and second-grade parties, its songs fuel grueling SoulCycle sessions in Manhattan, its characters are rendered in thousands of pieces of fan art on Tumblr, and its well-researched lyrics are used in history classes for grade schoolers and high schoolers across the nation. More than a year into its Broadway run, the musical shows no sign of

Juliet Forrest (in blue dress) celebrates her eighth birthday with a Hamilton party. Her friend Jenna Parker (in crown) came as King George

flagging, with tickets sold out into 2017.

It's a rare example of theater penetrating deeply into mainstream culture. "Hamilton Trash"—as some high school fans call themselves—spread the gospel by referencing the show in elaborate senior-prom proposals and college-admission essays. In the adult world, *Hamilton* turned up in WikiLeaks Democratic National Committee emails, Hillary Clinton's nomination speech and Sarah Jessica Parker's Met Gala outfit. Not to mention the Treasury Department's decision to keep Hamilton on the \$10 bill after promising the spot to a woman. (Post-uproar, Harriet Tubman will appear on the \$20 bill.)

A second production will open on Oct. 19 in Chicago, its first six months of shows selling faster than you can say "Federalist papers." A touring production plans to launch in March in San Francisco before hitting nearly 20 other U.S. cities, and the show will go global next fall when another offshoot is set to open on London's West End. "I've been doing this job for over 20 years, and there's never been another show remotely comparable in terms of advance excitement, demand, tickets, general enthusiasm," says Chicago *Tribune* chief theater critic Chris Jones. "When tickets went on sale here, it was front page of our paper. Frankly, it's just nuts—unfathomable almost."

How does a bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a Scotsman, dropped in the middle of a forgotten/ Spot in the Caribbean by Providence, impoverished, in squalor/ Grow up to be a hero and a scholar?

So begins the opening song of *Hamilton*, which tells the story of the creator of the American financial system through a genre-bending blend of rap, R&B, boogie-woogie and traditional show-tune fare. A similar question could be asked of the musical: How did a chapter of U.S. history you more than likely slept through become a pop-culture phenomenon to rival *Star Wars*?

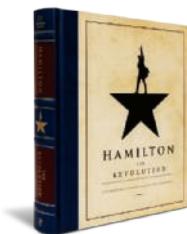
The answer isn't fully revealed in a compilation of the show's successes, though they are legion. Since opening off-Broadway in February 2015 and transitioning to Broadway six months later, *Hamilton* has had the highest first-year gross of any show of the past 15 years, including *The Book of Mormon* and *The Producers*. Its interwoven tales of love (Alex-

HAMILTON HYPE

The musical has inspired a host of offshoots, products and even namesakes



HANDMADE COSTUMES At this year's Comic-Con, fans of the show turned up in full regalia. Some had spent weeks tailoring their garb.



HAMILTON: THE REVOLUTION

The show's companion book has been in the top 20 of the hardcover nonfiction list since its April release.



ALEXANDER CAMELTON Chicago's Lincoln Park Zoo named one of its newest residents, a 4-month-old Bactrian camel, after the Founding Father.

ander and Eliza), sisterly devotion (Eliza and Angelica) and rivalry (Alexander and Aaron Burr) consistently sell out all 1,321 of the theater's seats, with a thriving secondary market where tickets can exceed \$1,000 a pop. Even with most of the original cast now departed, sales remain brisk.

In October 2015, the cast recording debuted at No. 12 on the *Billboard* charts—the highest starting position for a Broadway show in 50 years—and in November it became the first to top the rap charts. Fans supplement the music with *Hamilton: The Revolution*, a \$50 hardcover book that includes the annotated libretto, behind-the-scenes photos and the musical's origin

story. It's been on the *New York Times* hardcover nonfiction best-seller list since its April release, alongside its paperback cousin *Alexander Hamilton*, the decade-old, 800-page Ron Chernow biography that inspired the show.

A FEW ANECDOTAL observations about the *Hamilton*-obsessed: They're on a first-name basis with cast members, even though they've likely never met. Upon hearing that I share his beloved wife's name, they sing it back to me, lingering on the swooning middle syllable a touch longer, as the ensemble does in the show's closing number. Many listen to the cast recording daily. Some Twitter-stalk its stars and use the voices of Phillipa Soo (Eliza Schuyler Hamilton) and Renée Elise Goldsberry (Angelica Schuyler) as their ringtones. More than once, they have described levitating out of their seats during the show.

Newlyweds and professional illustrators Chan and Farris, 33 and 35, respectively, meet several of these criteria. She got hooked first; he required convincing. "I think this probably happens to everyone when they first hear the pitch for *Hamilton*, because it's a very goofy pitch," Chan says. "It sounds like it would be lame, like, 'Oh, let's show these kids how cool history can be!'" But on a road trip to the Vancouver Comic Arts Festival in May, Chan was trapped in a car full of fans. After a 12-hour round trip—and at least four complete listens—he came around: "The story is fantastically told, the music is really great. Lin is a huge hip-hop nerd, and it's not just trying to be hip."

Then Chan was struck by an idea: Farris might just melt right into the Pacific if he rapped his vows Miranda-style. Turns out she was planning the exact same thing. In "Helpless," a bubbly, Beyoncé-inspired tune about love at first sight, Hamilton begins rapping about his devotion to Eliza: "All I have's my honor, a tolerance for pain/ A couple of college credits and my top-notch brain." Farris personalized the lines: "All I have's my honor/ Modest web-comic fame/ A single sleepy greyhound/ And my top-notch mane." She vowed to be what Eliza was to Alexander: "Best of wives, best of women."

With the exception of shows like *Rent* or *The Book of Mormon*, Broadway musicals can seem far removed from

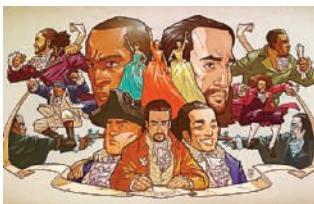
COSTUMES: COURTESY OF JON YORK; CAMEL: CHRIS BUJALBA—LINCOLN PARK ZOO

current events and culture. But steeped in hip-hop, Miranda bridged that gap and pushed boundaries further. He cast people of color to play white historical figures, stressed women's contributions to the founding of America and reminded us that many urgent issues of Hamilton's time, like immigration, remain so today.

Hamilton is also the first musical to leverage the full potential of social media. Miranda and the cast actively engage with fans on Twitter and Instagram, and they recruited the biggest influencers a show could hope for. President Obama has seen it twice and invited Miranda to the White House. He and Michelle Obama introduced the company's televised performance at the Tonys in June. Beyoncé told Jonathan Groff, who played King George, that she's going to steal his moves. And rappers such as Common, Busta Rhymes and Talib Kweli have given it a hip-hop seal of approval in interviews.

EVEN WHEN the lights dim on *Hamilton*, its core ideas will live on in schools. For teachers of history and social studies, *Hamilton* is manna from the curriculum gods, and the show has officially partnered with the nonprofit Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History and others to send students from select disadvantaged high schools to see the musical at a drastically reduced price, and develop accompanying study materials. "Finally, a medium to talk about history that is interesting to people under 18," says Brian Collier, a member of the graduate faculty at the University of Notre Dame's Institute for Educational Initiatives. In a teaching-methods course this summer, he had master's-degree candidates develop lesson plans using the musical—which he sees, in the best sense of the term, as a "gateway drug"—to teach academic skills.

Brendan Bell, a Collier student who teaches U.S. history, government and economics at Cristo Rey High School in Sacramento, sees the songs as the draw. "One thing that really speaks to my students is music, especially hip-hop," he says. "They're very perceptive to the messages within lyrics. They already bring up societal and institutional issues about peace, racism and civil rights, so I anticipate that they'll react [to *Hamilton*] with a lot of energy." This fall, Bell will teach his classes a *Hamilton*-themed lesson



FAN ART A *Hamilton*-inspired work by Ron Chan. This one hangs backstage at Broadway's Richard Rodgers Theatre.



CHILDREN OF THE REVOLUTION A onesie with the *Hamilton* refrain "Young, scrappy and hungry" is among the merchandise that fans have created.



AWARD-SHOW TRIBUTE At the BET Awards in June, co-hosts Tracee Ellis Ross and Anthony Anderson opened the show with a *Hamilton* parody.

asking two central questions: "What is the American Dream?" and "What is the immigrant experience like across our history?" "Many of their families come from Mexico," Bell explains. "Just being able to relate the experience then to the experience now, how people perceive immigrants and the opportunities they have in public life—it's very empowering."

Deynika Joree attended a performance of *Hamilton* in April as part of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's educational program. For Joree, whose parents emigrated from Guyana, *Hamilton* was a revelation. "When I first heard about the show, I expected all these white actors and actresses, but when I started to realize the entire cast is completely diverse, people

from all different backgrounds—brown, black, Hispanic—I was just like, "This is good," says the senior at Thomas A. Edison Career and Technical Education High School in Queens. "Lin said that the reason he did that is to show America as it is now, and that was a really big thing for me."

JULIET FORREST, the 8-year-old birthday girl, was still coming off her *Frozen* obsession when her mother played "Helpless" while they drove to church. "For the next three or four car trips it was, 'Mom, could you put on "Helpless?"'" says Christine Forrest. "From then on she just wanted to hear more, and at this point that's all we listen to anymore." The Forrests were fortunate to see the show during Miranda's final week of performances in July. They traveled to New York City on a whim and nabbed tickets outside the theater minutes after the curtain rose. Juliet recalls the excitement: "My knee was hurt that day, but when my dad told us to run in, I sprinted to get inside!" (She concedes that it was tough to sit still for all two hours and 30 minutes.)

On the family's next trip to New York, they'll make a pilgrimage to Eliza's grave at Trinity Church in lower Manhattan. (Alexander is also buried there, but for Juliet, Eliza is the main attraction.) Most gratifying to her teacher parents, they'll continue the conversations they've begun about immigration and what it's like to arrive in America with nothing but a dream.

Hamilton has more records to break and more hearts to win over. But whether it runs on Broadway and beyond for another five years or 20 is beside the point. Hamilton himself died before age 50, and the musical isn't really about him, at its core. It's about a kid from a Puerto Rican family who grew up in New York City and went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. And now it's also about an 8-year-old Disneyphile in Pittsburgh, a couple of comic-book artists in the Pacific Northwest and a handful of teenagers at a technical high school about as far from Broadway as you can get in the same city.

"Coming up as a kid from Queens, I'm a girl and I'm brown, so in our heads we're like, We're never going to get out. We're never going to do anything big," Joree says. "But maybe there's a chance that we could go out and do bigger things." □

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF RON CHAN; COURTESY OF MONI BLACKWELL; NEMIN WINTER—GETTY IMAGES FOR BET