

ON GLEE



Lucas Mann

Two spotlights kiss the dark stage. One shines on a tall, broad-shouldered, Wonderbread kid. He strides forward in a cherry red t-shirt and the light envelops his beautifully boring face. Voices chorus behind him and a piano plays lush notes. Someone begins to shred on electric guitar. His leading lady glides forward in the same red t-shirt, pulled taught across young, optimistic breasts. The music swells from somewhere—the wings I suppose—and they lock eyes with the sense of gravity that only teenagers can muster. Never breaking his gaze, the dude begins to sing.

Just a small town girl. Living in a lonely world.

They smile, extend their hands to one another, and singing on, melt back into a chorus of red shirts. Black girl in a red shirt, Asian girl in a red shirt, gay kid in a red shirt, wheelchair kid in a red shirt—they harmonize flawlessly. They project out into the spotlights, not one seemingly bothered by the fact that the auditorium they're pouring their hearts into is empty. They are one in song—tokens all, but tokens with glorious pipes.

Collectively, they hit the low refrain.

It goes on and on and on and on—

I am standing now and I'm not sure how it happened. The book that I'm supposed to be reading has fallen to the floor. Rain has started outside and it's slipping through the open window, soaking the old carpet, but I don't care. In torn boxers and an undershirt, I have risen to sing. I hold the last note, my fists balled at my side—muscles tense, energy irrepressible. I am alone in a living room that is not yet fully furnished in an apartment that smelled like piss when I arrived and still smells like piss, no matter which fragrance of Lysol I spray or surface I scrub. In this moment I am singing along to my Walmart television and I am preposterously, uncomplicatedly full of *Glee*.



I swear I'm not this person. I proudly align myself with shows like *Mad Men*—shows that don't require defending, shows that affirm my impeccable tastes. But something happens to me over the course of an episode of *Glee*. An eerie calm. After ten minutes or so, I stop harrumphing at implausible turns in the plot, I stop pointing at the screen and saying *Come on!* to the empty room. I am pacified, wiggling my toes like a child as I wait for each new song, plunging with no self-consciousness into every melody.

It's the times like this, when the songs have all ended and I've quickly flipped to MSNBC, that thoughts come back, embarrassed thoughts like, *What the hell just happened?* I need some sort of explanation for my burgeoning, passionate relationship with a musical TV show. I have been sad lately—fairly broke and in a new place, giving into a quarter-life crisis and the prospect of a jobless future. And now add to that picture a weekly date with FOX to watch a bunch of unknowns rehash the Top 40. While it is tempting to locate *Glee* on a pretty hefty list of things I do and am ashamed of, there must be something deeper going on.



Broadway is booming right now, I read.

“It sounds like the title of a feel good musical fantasy,” said a *Variety* article from late July. “But amid the harshest economic climate since the Depression, denizens of the Rialto are quietly eyeing the prospect of cracking \$1 billion at the [box office] next season.”

The 2008-2009 Broadway season was the most prolific since the winter of 1982. Charlotte St. Martin, Executive Director of the Broadway League (and what else could she be with such a name?), proclaimed that, “It’s been an inspiring season! As we have proven, if you put on a great show, people will come—even in the midst of an economic downturn. Research has shown that theatre provides an escape from everyday life and especially during these tough times, we have given the audiences a reason to see a show.”

One reason stands out. Of the eighteen brand new productions last season, ten were musicals. And there were four additional musical revivals, as producers seemed tireless in their rush to get some catchy songs on the stage. Now there’s *Hair*, *West Side Story*, even a *Bye Bye Birdie* with John Stamos at the helm (one does not cast John Stamos unless one is in a serious hurry). Worse, they’re making musicals out of anything that made money elsewhere: *Billy Elliot*, *Shrek*, *The Addams Family* (imagine, Wednesday Addams singing). For the grandchildren bribed to hang out with Nana, there will be a rock opera based on the visionary storytelling of Green Day.

I think of a quote that I read once in a history class: “During the Depression, when the spirit of the people is lower than at any other time, it is a splendid thing that for just fifteen cents an American can go to a movie and look at the smiling face of a baby and forget his troubles.”

FDR said that and I read it first during an economic boom, when the notion of truly low spirits, of pop culture as penicillin, was nearly inconceivable. But it has always been easy to love the resolute shimmer of the films of the early 30s, the wacky romantic comedies, the slick gangster flicks. Most of all, I realize, we can locate Roosevelt's words in the musical—fifteen cents worth of catchy tunes and giddy dance numbers. *42nd Street*. *The Gold Diggers of 1933*. *The Gay Divorce*, which, judging by the title alone, is overdue for a sassy remake. *The Wizard of Fucking Oz*. Escapist classics.



Is that the line I've placed myself in, the line with the sad plebes waiting for the numbness of escape? When my grandmother saved up her nickels to go see *42nd Street*, I'm pretty sure she wouldn't have self-identified as escaping. If somebody would have stopped her on Second Avenue and said, "Esther, you're escaping," she would have waved her palm at them and said, "Feh, a lot you know, big shot. I'm going to the pictures." The truth is that my grandmother loved to sing. She sang through the thirties, shoving her salesgirl wages into an old mattress. She sang through World War II, she sang as she obsessively cleaned, she sang through Vietnam. She sang after screaming at my father, telling him he was stubborn like a mule. She sang while her husband was driving his cab through Brooklyn and while he was at the track spending his earnings.

I cannot remember any of her songs, so I ask my father to sing one. Over the phone, he attempts to copy some of the melodies: *da da DA dada*. He is tone deaf.

"Dad," I interrupt. "Dad!"

"Wah? Oh yeah, so I guess I don't have it down exactly."

But there is a video of the whole family together: I'm just an infant and it's my grandmother's 80th birthday and we're at

Windows on the World, high up in the World Trade Center. My grandmother stands in front of a crowd of thirty relatives, all in various stages of late eighties shoulder pads, all screeching in thick Brooklyn accents for “Aunt Esthuh” to *give us a song!* With the New York skyline hidden behind her, it is like a hallucination straight out of a Woody Allen film. The camera focuses on her tiny, wrinkled face, the skin hanging low off her cheeks as she smiles, a rather uncommon facial expression for her. She’s enveloped in a dark frock, but begins to sway like a girl and sing:

Please, Mama, buy me a baby. One that looks just like you.

I’m sure nobody even remembers the Yiddish theater production or obscure 1930s musical review her song comes from, though she recalls it in an instant, every lilt of the melody, and croaks it out of hoarse, tired lungs, still managing to be on key.

Near the very end of her life, my grandmother lived alone in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, mostly because her husband was dead and she generally misanthropic. Her favorite thing was a prime time soap opera about a Northern Californian pastor and his loving family. When we moved her to a home and she spent her days indignant, still she watched. I don’t believe the story entertained her; she distrusted all gentiles and most open displays of affection. It was the theme song she loved—the easy, treacly melody, its acoustic guitar and string arrangement and its dumb, innocuous words. When I visited, we would sing it together.

7th Heaven. When I see their happy faces smiling back at me.

7th Heaven. I know there’s no greater feeling than the love of family.

And then she would smile and shrug and suspiciously eyed the Jamaican nurse as he emptied her catheter bag.



I'm surprised at how vividly I remember the feeling—warm, perfectly at ease, even while stuck in a drab nursing home that always smelled of borscht. It is a feeling of contentment, I realize, that was replicated in early 2009, a decade after my grandmother's death, during that winter when half the banks I'd ever heard of had been put on life support. I was working at a poorly-funded, poorly-run homeless outreach program in New York. Each day, I turned twenty minute tasks into full afternoons, emailing exaggerated pleas for money, like: "If you become a member of our unique job-placement program, not only will you be an even stronger pillar of your community, you will be standing up to fight homelessness in a moment of crisis." I wrote this to some Ralph Lauren marketing executive whose business card had made its way to my hands. Then I stared at my computer screen and decided that "crisis" was too desperate. Time for a cigarette break.

I sat at Travis's old desk. Travis was the sincere guy who trained me and was fired for lack of productivity. He was soon followed by Bruce, the sixty-year old man who had furious, whispered phone conversations with his ex-wife in the office kitchen. He left his apartment in the Bronx at six every morning to make it to work and was fired minutes before heading out for his weekly indulgence of single malt scotch and a cigar. Desperate for self-preservation, I began to work overtime, cold-calling people in the dark, empty office, listening only to my wheezing breath and strangers' irritated responses of, "I'm gonna be homeless if I start giving money to kids who call me during dinner."

We still-employed of the office grew close: we shared our complaints, our Tex Mex takeout, and our music. Often, on

Tuesdays, when the weeks seemed longest, we'd crowd around Debbie's computer and watch Youtube clips. Debbie loved music and loved loving things. She loved God and she sang alto in the Harlem Baptist Choir for three decades. Her children had all moved out of the house, which is why she enjoyed feeding me Twizzlers and reaching her chubby hands up to rub my hair. We'd marvel at crooning babies, and videos of pets set to Whitney Houston songs. Mostly, though, we watched Susan Boyle, the British reality TV sensation with the hideous countenance and the angel's voice.

We watched Susan knowing full well, I believe, that she was destined to be a tragic figure. We listened to the perfectly inoffensive songs she chose, the epic noises she made. Debbie would shake her head, say this was her favorite moment of the week. Meghan would lean over Debbie's shoulder and tear up a little. Meghan was lost and not meant for New York City. She sat at the desk behind me, slowly forgetting the days when she was on the honor roll at Smith College and the whole world was going to open up for her. (Tuesdays with Susan, though, everything was lovely.) Next to her, Brad, the pretty boy failed actor working a straight job to support a new baby, cried too, but pretended it was allergies.

"Ay, I needed that," said Gwen, who was still arguing to get her daughter's preexisting conditions covered by our insurance package.

I made fun of the office to my friends, painting a sad tableau of delusional people just to get laughs at a bar. But this was a defensive, dishonest retelling. I, too, needed Tuesday afternoons. I, too, waited for the moments when the orchestra welled from fuzzy speakers, and Susan opened her crooked mouth to sing.



Now, with no job and no community of Boyle-ites, I turn to *Glee*—the newest brainchild of Ryan Murphy, the guy who created *Nip/Tuck*. Apparently, he loved glee club as a nerdy boy and wanted to share that passion with the world. Each of the shows characters are so blatantly underdeveloped, distilled down so much that I focus only on the sounds they make. I cannot believe that they were ever meant to be seen as more than a collection of types, sizes, colors; each could almost exist without a name.

In one of my favorite scenes, the one where the gang dresses up in sincere adult, black and white outfits to sing the Avril Lavigne ballad “Keep Holding On,” the leading lady begins the song, as usual. She is adorable and Semitic, with deep, yearning watery eyes. She is a perfect mixture of Molly Ringwald and Bette Midler—she spends each morning singing into a virginal pink hairbrush and dreaming of some combination of stardom and love.

Next, the leading lady looks to the blonde cheerleader who is, well, just that, a perfect Hollywood Blonde Cheerleader—starched cheer uniform, plucked brows and an aura of pure bitch. Recently, though, her world has been rocked by the most dramatic event possible in a high school sitcom: teen pregnancy. So, with her dimples and her haughty pride and her frigid Nordic good looks, she stands among the others and bravely sings through tears, even though she, I, and everyone else can see that the next few years hold nothing good for her. The two white-girl rivals, the blonde-brunette paradigm, exchange a soulful glance at one another, knowing that they aren't friends but will support each other as any two harmonizers should.

From there I extend my gaze outward to the voluptuous black girl who has an amazing voice but usually sings back-up. Hers is the pain of being black at a predominantly white, middle-America school. To make things worse, she wants to find love and it doesn't seem like that plotline will be made available to

her, given the fact that she is not a size zero and this is television. Often during musical rehearsals she is forced to spit out lines like, “We need to put some *chocolate* on this one.” But the wildly problematic, stifling norms of the show’s world fade for a few minutes as she steps forward with the group and belts *keep holding’ on ‘cause you know we’ll make it through. Just stand strong, ‘cause you know I’m here for you.*

And then, on opposite ends of the stage, enter the gay kid and the wheelchair kid, each who lend understanding humor to the show, far too subtly bringing to light the stupid insensitivity of the characters around them. They too have talent. The wheelchair kid deftly, almost impossibly, spins himself through each piece of choreograph. The gay kid, cocking his head with his chin angled toward the ceiling, regal, with a curious smile on his face, nails an unembarrassed soprano.

These are thin, stereotypical characters, rendered only to fill up the most Benetton notion of diversity. I know this just like I know Susan Boyle was held up as a freak, a sad monster for us to point at. But their voices, the glory of their voices. Alone, I watch the cast of dusty teen archetypes put on one hell of a show and I silently cry.



This is all so embarrassing. Privileging a song over a decent plot? Overlooking the kind of reductive presentation of difference best suited for a John Hughes movie just because it all leads to a chorus that’s so damn good? Aligning my tastes with the mobs that flock off New Jersey tour buses to see a Sunday matinee of *Ragtime*? I snatch open my computer and read about *Glee*, trying to find out what the world must think of me.

“It’s the latest iteration of that eternally uplifting ‘Let’s Put on a Show’ genre,” *The Boston Globe* asserts. “And if you’re a

fan of *Fame*, *Hairspray* or *High School Musical*, this scripted dramedic take on glee club is totally for you.”

I read that *Glee* slips nicely into the reality appeal etched in our culture by the ultimate escape, *American Idol*, “a competition that has stirred the self-confidence and ambition of every teenager who warbles in the shower or gets a standing ovation at Karaoke Night,” as the *New York Times* puts it. Ah, I see. I am the same as those fans tuning in to see Paula Abdul slur to some ordinary schlub that he is beautiful. Really, super, awesome, magical, beautiful.

I check the blogs, attempting to Google my way towards some sort of punishment. I want to be scolded by the snobbiest members of the online community. To my dismay, it is hard to find good reprimands; all across the internet culture vultures are throwing up their hands. They’re apologizing for their love of *Glee* or, far worse, they’re backpedalling with quick-draw explanations of how they can watch it and still keep their edge.

“Believe me, I am not a pushover for this kind of thing,” squeals a critic at *The Daily Beast*. “I would rather eat nails than see any production of *Gypsy*. If I enjoyed *Glee*, it must really have something for everyone.”

I nod. Ditto, ditto. I feel that angst.

Writing about an October episode, the sassy folks at Gawker.com explained that the show, “...went for some really genuine emotion. I’m still crying just thinking about it,” before ending the post with an almost sulky, “Fucking *Glee*”.

And *The New York Observer* online, perhaps the snarkiest of the blogging 20-somethings, the unfazed kuffiya-wearing Brooklytes I once wanted to be, squirm as they admit the same: “*Glee* [sic] isn’t about to replace oxygen, but it’s quite possibly the most fun we’ve had watching television in months. And, really, what’s wrong with that?” They throw the question out there, sincerely asking the Internet, waiting for anonymous comments to reaffirm their illness. Could snark be slowly dying?

Is *Glee* smothering it with a downy soft, glittering pink pillow?

It's liberating, really. If the hipster Williamsburg elite are being forced to (gasp) look for full time work, get rejected, and plot moves toward law school or Mom's basement, then what glib force is left to scorn emotion and romanticize grit in popular culture? A little bit of sappy harmony is looking pretty good right now. It is painful to feel predictable for those like me, whose most prized possessions are opinions, but it is unavoidable in the face of *Glee*.

In my head, I edit the image of me guiltily singing along with *Glee* alone. It is a split screen now—I have company, pretentious compatriots—who are also succumbing to the high school opus. And in each of our apartments, under Dali prints and *Pulp Fiction* posters, laptops momentarily closed, we sing.



Of course, as the bloggers give their reluctant props, my guilty pleasure is already becoming a bona fide juggernaut. Not only am I far from unique, I must come to terms with the fact that there's already a name for my kind: I am a *Gleek*. It is the largest club I've ever joined.

The show has been pulling in 8.6 million weekly viewers. And then—hooray for the modern age!—those of us Gleeks with short attention spans but an insatiable desire for three and a half minute slices of bliss can buy the music separately. In mid-October, *Glee* songs had reached 1.5 million downloads. The most industrious Gleeks have taken to Youtube, hollering support for the little musical sitcom that could with each pirated song.

In every adorable scene set on that auditorium stage, there is the cynical reality of big business hiding behind the curtain. While my leading man tries to juggle his singing and his football and his Xbox playing—every bit the relatable American boy—Fox

and Columbia Records and iTunes and Hulu.com are building a pyramid of profit. It is no accident, I realize, that there are so many places for me to turn to quench my pop lust. Before any episode is aired, I get an official taste of what to expect, via thirty-second aperitifs of song.

“There’s a tremendous amount of coordination that’s gone into trying to keep this incredibly rabid audience satisfied from a marketing perspective, while also protecting the flagship, which is the show itself.” 20th Century Fox television chair, Dana Walden, admitted this in mid October.

But my will to be critical, to work myself into a frenzy over the idea of these companies treating me like a golden guinea pig, is fading. A few weeks after *Newsweek* prints Walden’s comments, the morning after an excellent Episode 9, I sheepishly use my mother’s iTunes account to buy every track from the show that has been released.



In the morning hours, I go to FOX.com for “Video Extras!” I am the perfect malleable cultural citizen, not happy, really, but still smiling ear to ear at the sneak peak I’m fed of wheelchair kid unironically belting out “Lean on Me.” On the website I read fellow Gleeks sounding off on past episodes, all of us really and truly encouraged by the monstrous corporate network invitation to “Share Your Voice”. We can weigh-in on what we want to see in future episodes, the songs we can’t live without—a simple pleasure, but a real one.

One frequent commenter, Solsearcher, suggests “Seasons of Love” from *Rent*, and while that is clichéd, *oh my God it would sound good coming out of the mouths of all my favorite characters.*

My usual routine in these moments is to cover my tracks and click out of any tab on my Internet browser that might contain

evidence of my obsession. But I'm holding my ground now and, dammit, we Gleeks will not be shamed. Okay, so the musical underdog that resonates so deeply for us is in fact a giant and I am merely one of over 2.5 million faceless young people clicking and buying. And while I watch these pretend high schoolers sing, loving the drama of their melancholy existence, "*Glee: The Music, Vol. 1*" has ascended to #4 on the Billboard album charts, and FOX can count on an army of viewers every Wednesday night.

Like in 1933, when my grandmother and countless others helped *42nd Street* save Warner Bros. from bankruptcy, the songs of *Glee* are being credited with throwing a bubble-gum lifeline to the floundering music industry. FOX sent major record labels a copy of the first episode a month before it aired and, prior to the beginning of my love affair with teen rejects singing Journey, Columbia honchos saw the formula and salivated at its profitable stink. They made a deal in the Spring of 2009 and by that July, with FOX only airing one teaser pilot, there was already a super-catchy Gold single that 500,000 18-34 year olds immediately downloaded onto their iPods.

Glen Brunman, a soundtrack consultant, which is apparently a real job at Columbia, was eager to speak out about the *Glee* project. "We are hopefully going to make history together," he said with smug satisfaction and, while I'm tempted to hate him and his cocksure wealth, I totally agree.



With my cynical walls collapsed, I am free to gush, to form thoughts and write words that still make me gag somewhere in my subconscious, to build toward a *Glee*-loving crescendo.

These executives have conjured up something both familiar and innovative, I think, a new breed of escape. They've given me a weekly replication of that attainable, odd joy that managed to

shine through in my grandmother's puke-green nursing home cafeteria and a drafty, miserable office and yet I return each week not expecting to see any portrayal of a fantasy world kinder than my own. I'm watching a show about modern day Ohio, for Christ's sake. It is a world where educators get no respect, where college dreams are given up on, where high schoolers are and always will be viciously homophobic, consistently racist, and just plain cruel. It is a Midwestern town that looks no different than any you will find off of a random exit on Interstate 80, where the recession looms over the lives of each and every cartoonish character. Instead of seeing redemptive fantasy, I see myself in the claustrophobia of the bored classrooms and underfunded hallways.

More importantly, partly because it's a sitcom, I'm not expecting to see anything be resolved or anything to get better. In the world of *Glee*, Daddy Warbucks cannot come in and adopt you out of your misery. Me and my 8.6 million Gleek brethren turn up our noses at the lie of happy endings.

Instead, I find solace only in the songs. The characters remain stagnant, their lives bleak, but I can watch them blush with ecstasy when their afternoon gets an injection of Beyonce and I can understand that feeling. Even as I read of the voracious institution that is *Glee*, even as I acknowledge that in some lair Rupert Murdoch is counting his gold, I still cling to the pretend underdog characters and the desperately passionate songs they give me. We Gleeks are purchasing the smallest ideal. We sing for the moment of singing.

Sing with the stereotypes on the television, sing with Columbia records and FOX as they profit off us, sing with the bloggers as they wrestle their own cynicism. Sing with me grandma!

Don't stop believing!