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## ONOMATOPOEIA: SOUNDS LIKE NEW YORK Episode: Broadway's B-Side

**LUCY GRINDON:** Alex Barylski is not impressed when I start telling him my favorite Broadway musicals. Not until I mention *Wonderful Town*. That gets him talking, and then he starts quizzing me!

**Barylski:** Wait, before you say you know every song, I'll make you sing "Conga!"

**Grindon:** I know it! I literally know it—What do you think of the USA, NRA, TVA? What do you think of our Mother's Day? What do you think about... CONGA!

**LG:** Alex is always asking people their favorite musicals. He sees it as part of his job. He plays piano at Marie's Crisis Café. It's a singalong bar in the West Village, where they only do showtunes. It's a New York institution. Most of the musicians and servers, not to mention some of the customers, have spent their entire lives trying to make careers in show business. But that's not Alex's story.

### THEME MUSIC

**LG:** I'm Lucy Grindon, and this is Onomatopoeia, a podcast about the people and places of New York City. In this episode, how does a classical-pianist-turned-lawyer end up behind the piano at Marie's Crisis?

Alex is in his late 40s. He's slim, with short hair, and a perpetually mischievous face. He grew up in Sarasota, Florida. He always loved music as a kid.

**AB:** My mother was born in Russia, and her mother, my Babushka, you know, had grown up in an atmosphere of classical music. So it was just kind of assumed that I would play the piano.

**LG:** He loved musicals, too. His first favorite was *Fiddler on the Roof*, then *A Little Night Music*, by Stephen Sondheim, and then a show called *The Golden Apple*.

But even though he loved musicals, he never planned on making a living in the theater. He went to Harvard as an undergrad, where he originally planned to study economics. Then he switched to classical piano. After college, he still wasn't sure what he wanted to do.

**AB:** When I was growing up, everyone always just told me that I seemed like a New Yorker. So I was like, okay, I'll be a New Yorker.

**LG:** When he got to New York, he first worked at a talent agency for classical musicians. Then he got a job as a paralegal at a law firm.

**AB:** Like a lot of people who don't know what to do, you know, in college, I ended up going to law school.

**LG:** He went to Harvard Law School, graduated in 2001, and then went back to New York to be a business lawyer.

It was shortly after he returned to the city that he discovered Marie's.

**AB:** We walked down the stairs. And I will always remember the show they were playing. It was *Company*.

**LG:** He became a regular over the next decade, and then he started playing there, almost by accident.

**AB:** One of the old piano players, Jim Allen, God rest his soul, would occasionally let me fill in for him when he was taking a bathroom break or a drink break.

**LG:** Now, he's been playing there for almost a decade. He runs the show on Mondays and Thursdays, and his regulars come to see him every week. One of those regulars is Carlos Knauth.

**LG:** So, are you here every Monday?

**KNAUTH:** Every Monday for many many years.

**LG:** And, how come Mondays?

**KNAUTH:** 'Cause Alex is really great, he really sets people up for success, and he knows your favorite musical before you open your mouth.

**LG:** Brooke Perkins also works at Marie's. She's one of the hosts. She says Alex has a special reputation.

**Perkins:** Alex is not as loud and ostentatious as some of the other piano players. He really is who he is, which is very different and very genuine, which also, you know, brings a warmth to the room as well.

**LG:** He even has a nickname!

**Perkins:** He's "Alex B-Side" because he goes deep into the uh... whatever the score is, and pulls out the songs that are not the low-hanging fruit. He goes in and plays stuff that doesn't always get played.

**LG:** I mention the nickname to Alex.

**LG:** She told me that they call you Alex B-Side

**AB:** You know what? I've never heard that, but I get it. If you had a pile of sheet music that encompasses all the music, I know, it would be like, it would reach from here to like, you know, the Empire State Building.

**LG:** I can't help myself—I want to quiz him like he quizzed me. I ask Alex if he knows the most obscure musical I can think of. It's called *Goldilocks*. It ran on Broadway for just a few months between 1958 and 1959.

**LG:** Do you know the musical *Goldilocks*?

**AB:** Oh, the musical *Goldilocks*, with music by Leroy Anderson and lyrics by Walter and Jean Kerr and Jean Ford? No, Joan Ford! Excuse me. Starring Elaine Stritch? Yes, the pussyfoot, yes, we all know and love Goldilocks.

**LG:** If you're not a musical theater fan, you'll just have to take my word for it: We *don't* all know and love *Goldilocks*. It's not a show a lot of people have heard of. And usually, at Marie's, people request the same favorites over and over again.

**AB:** Some days I fantasize about putting up a sign behind the piano that says, "Do not request you know, 'Seasons of Love,' 'Suddenly, Seymour,' 'The Cellblock Tango.'" The question is, like, is obscurity in itself a virtue? No, a song should either be good or bad. It shouldn't matter if it's obscure or not. But you know, if you're a collector, and you have a collectors brain, then yeah, you just want to seek out obscure things.

**LG:** Someone requests the musical *The Secret Garden*. It's not a very popular one, and Alex is delighted. He gets to the end of the song, and the woman who requested it is apologizing for requesting something nobody knows. Alex isn't having it.

**WOMAN:** I apologize for choosing a musical that literally 3 people know.

**AB:** All it takes is for two of us to know it!

**LG:** Alex asks if anyone knows another song from *The Secret Garden*

**AB:** Do we have two guys who can do "Lily's Eyes"?

**MAN IN CROWD:** Boo!

**AB:** Carlos? Nathaniel?

**LG:** The response is tepid. But that's ok. Alex has got plenty up his sleeve. And, as he said, obscurity is not necessarily a virtue. He starts up a crowd favorite.

**MUSIC:** I feel pretty, oh so pretty! I feel pretty and witty and bright!

**LG:** So why does Alex still come here twice a week, after a decade, to play songs for people to sing?

**AB:** It really does take you away from the ordinary world. And puts you in touch with parts of your psyche that we don't even really have labels for. We can put a label on the way humans feel about each other, but to put a label on a harmonic progression, or the way one chord leans against another chord? No, we don't really have the vocabulary for that.

**LG:** Alex is not a singer himself. He says so. But he's willing to lead the singing when he needs to. He leads at the beginning of "I Feel Pretty," but by the end, everyone has joined in.

Not everyone knows all the words to every song, and not everyone has a "pretty" singing voice, but here, everyone gets to make music.

**MUSIC:** End of "I Feel Pretty"

**LG:** This episode of Onomatopoeia was created by me, Lucy Grindon. Onomatopoeia is a production of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. Joanne Faryon is our executive producer and professor. Original theme music by Lee Feldman. Our graphic was created by Sunny Bean. Special thanks to Columbia Digital Librarian Michelle Wilson.

**THEME MUSIC**