

# For all its flaws, 'Jesus Christ Superstar' has been a hit for nearly 50 years

When *Jesus Christ Superstar* launched in 1970 – first with the concept album followed by the Broadway rock opera that opened in 1971, a production in London's west end that would play for more than eight years and finally the 1973 movie – who knew it was the start of a phenomenon that still resonates almost half a century later.

Certainly it couldn't have been Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, who wrote the music and lyrics, respectively, when they were in their early 20s. They took quite a leap when they envisioned telling the story of Jesus' betrayal and crucifixion through the eyes of Judas.

They were told, Lloyd Webber has recalled, that it was "the worst idea in history" when they first broached the idea of mounting a theatrical production in the late 1960s.

Admittedly, the rock opera was not to everyone's taste, often tagged as sacrilegious for its unconventional telling of the Passion.

From its earliest days, when Lloyd Webber and Rice couldn't find anyone who would produce it as a stage show, to the worldwide smash hit on stage and screen that it would become, spawning hit singles like the title track, "Superstar", "I Don't Know How to Love Him" and "What's the Buzz," it's been quite a ride.

The show has taken on a life of its own since Lloyd Webber and Rice's early vision. In 1980, the first national tour of the show began in the United States, lasting four years. Various productions and national tours have ensued, including a revival of *Superstar* on Broadway in 2000.

Ontario's Stratford Festival has even played host to *Superstar*, drawing sold-out crowds during the 2011 season which led to it making its way to Broadway in 2012.

It was even remounted for a live performance on NBC in April 2018, starring John Legend as Jesus and Alice Cooper as Herod, which attracted almost 10 million viewers. And this fall, it will be back on tour, playing in more than 50 markets throughout North America.

And of course, the Norman Jewison-directed film is a staple on the cable channels each year around Easter.

To this day, Ted Neeley – who first played Christ’s understudy in the Broadway version of *Jesus Christ Superstar* and would play the lead role in the film – continues to make a career out of his iconic role. The 75-year-old actor/singer is currently on the road with *Superstar*, taking it to Europe for a three-month tour which wraps up in Spain in June.

Is it the music that has made it a favourite, at Easter and beyond, year in and year out? Is it the message, which has stayed mostly true to the biblical story? A combination of the two? Or a longing for the whole peace and love message that was the engine driving a whole generation?



**Sister Helena Burns**

Sister Helena Burns believes it’s a combination of all of the above. Burns is a Toronto-based member of the Daughters of St. Paul and a movie reviewer for The Catholic Channel on Sirius XM satellite radio. She has master’s degree in Media Literacy Education and studied screenwriting at UCLA.

“The music was so well-crafted and the sentiments, theology was solid,” said Burns, who calls herself a big fan of *Superstar* and *Godspell*, another Easter story that made it to stage and screen around the same time.

“Maybe there’s a few little boo-boos, but on the whole? Awesome and inspiring to me as a Christian. I grew up singing those songs.”

The era in which it originated, especially, can’t be overlooked. It was a time of “Jesus freaks in the streets,” said Burns in an e-mail. It was a time of “young Christians with long hair who like rock’n’roll and (*Superstar*) really spoke to them.”

The whole hippie sensibility in the mid-1960s America infused the times and

spawned a counterculture that spread throughout the world.

Hippie fashion and values heavily influenced the era, probably nowhere more than in music, film and the arts, giving birth to projects like *Superstar* with its unique blending of rock music with modern dance in retelling the story of Easter.

“If you don’t like this era’s music and style, you’re never going to like *Jesus Christ Superstar*,” said Burns.

Future generations have attached themselves to it as well, she said. The kids of the 1970s and ’80s, she believes, were too close to the era and were busy creating their own sensibilities, but it took on a new life in the ’90s.

“Our young people, ever since the ’90s, have been appreciative of this era as well,” she said.

That said, Burns said we need to be careful not to “over-associate” Jesus with hippie culture with its long hair, sandals, robes and loose-fitting clothes.

“It just so happens that hippies adopted sartorial and coiffure fashions of 2,000 years ago, not vice-versa,” she said.

In the early ’70s, when there was a real divide between youth and their elders, it might come as a surprise what the response of clergy was to the whole *Superstar* scene.

A check of *The Catholic Register* archives came up with a number of positive responses to the album and the theatrical version. One story soon after the album was released told of clergy endorsing the album “enthusiastically on the grounds that it at least expresses Christ’s life and message to many who might not otherwise know of them – in terms they can understand.”

And while Rev. W.P. Fitzgerald, director of religious education with Edmonton Catholic Schools, said in 1971 it “is not approved for use in religion classes,” he admitted that “There are many good things about it.”

Other films have tried to tell the story of Christ’s passion, with success, but the staying power of *Superstar* is just not there. Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* was a certified blockbuster in 2004 – and like Lloyd Webber and Rice, Gibson had trouble selling it to the major studios and eventually financed it himself – and Gibson is said to be making a sequel. But it isn’t a film you will see on your TV screen every Easter without fail, and it won’t be gracing Broadway anytime soon.

Not all versions have topped the must-see lists of critics. NBC’s *Jesus Christ Superstar Live* got mixed reviews. *Variety*’s Maureen Ryan said “its philosophy could be summed up in one word, ‘excess,’ ” though she went on to say it was “intensely earnest, often

endearingly so.”

Burns said the production “really didn’t ‘have it.’ ”

“There was no sense of Jesus as God or supernatural faith or giving JC the benefit of the doubt that He may be God,” said Burns. “It was just a lot of noise and lights and spectacle.”

As for its staying power, perhaps we should turn to Neeley, who has forged a half-century career out of playing Christ. He thinks he knows why the the whole *Superstar* phenomenon has continued to draw crowds.

In a 2009 interview with Catholic News Service, Neeley said it’s a “magnificent show” and he constantly learns from people in the audience about their relationship with Christ.

“Many people tell me they’ve discovered their spirituality through seeing this film or seeing this show,” or have gotten “an element they didn’t seem to understand in church.”