



ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

Britney to Backstreet Boys: How Max Martin's biggest hits became the soundtrack for the musical '& Juliet'



Los Angeles, CA - August 13: Rachel Simone Webb, who stars as Juliet in the musical “& Juliet” at the Ahmanson, poses for a portrait in her dressing room before she gets ready for her show on Wednesday, Aug. 13, 2025 in Los Angeles, CA. (Jason Armond/Los Angeles Times)

**By Jessica Gelt**

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He's one of the biggest name in show business — and it's possible you've never heard of him. At 54, Swedish songwriter and record producer Max Martin has written more No. 1

singles than any artist, aside from Paul McCartney. He counts Taylor Swift, Britney Spears, Katy Perry, Ariana Grande and the Weeknd among his collaborators, but he's so low-key and humble that he refers to his music career as his "day job."

That would make musical theater Martin's passion project. Specifically the creation of a jukebox musical called "& Juliet," which strings together some of his biggest hits in service of an uproarious, feel-good plot that reimagines the heroine of Shakespeare's famous teenage tragedy as her own woman — one who doesn't decide to stab herself in the heart when her main squeeze drinks poison.

Success was important to the show, mainly because Martin wanted to do right by his A-list collaborators, all of whom gladly agreed to allow their songs to be included in the score. Featuring a libretto by playwright and TV writer David West Read, choreography by Jennifer Weber and nearly 30 hits by Martin, the stakes felt very high going in.



Max Martin made his entire music catalog available for "& Juliet." (Jenny Anderson)

“I have written a lot of these songs with other people, so I felt a huge responsibility towards the artists and the co-writers, that this needed to be something really extraordinary,” Martin said.

Martin had recently flown in from Japan, just in time to catch “& Juliet’s” L.A. premiere on Friday at the Ahmanson Theatre. It felt like a homecoming for the show because many of its most memorable songs were recorded in L.A.

Thanks to earworms including Katy Perry’s “I Kissed a Girl,” Backstreet Boys’ “I Want It That Way” and Justin Timberlake’s “Can’t Stop the Feeling!,” “& Juliet” has a proven track record. It has survived and thrived for almost seven years, scoring nine Olivier nominations — and three wins — during its initial run on London’s West End; and earning nine Tony Award nominations during its 2022 Broadway debut. It recouped its cost last year and is the only show from the 2022-23 Broadway season that is still playing.



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In the risky world of musical development, where nearly 80% of Broadway producers fail to get back their investments, this is considered a major win.

Martin was unassuming as he and Read broke down how the project came to life in a conversation that highlighted Martin’s deep commitment to the musical and his desire to share the limelight with every single actor, producer, creator and crew member who helped bring it to life along the way.

Martin’s wife, Jenny, came up with the concept of a musical featuring Martin’s catalog.

“And I was like, ‘Sure, how hard can it be?’” he said with a wry smile. “We were very naive going in.”

A few years passed during which time they took some meetings and spitballed ideas. Nothing stuck until 2013 when they had a four-hour dinner with producers Theresa Steele Page and Tim Headington. Page was an executive at a music management company and Headington had produced films that included “Argo” and “World War Z.”



“This busy man spent hours of his time hanging out with us in the rehearsal room, giving us his original ideas for some of these songs and telling us some of the meanings behind them,” Rachel Simone Webb said of Max Martin. (Matthew Murphy)

The pair had decided to try their hand at a jukebox musical, Headington explained in an interview, and when they put together a list of songs they wanted to include, they realized almost the entire list had been written or co-written by Martin. Page set up a meeting with Martin’s manager, Martin Dodd, who initially told them there was no way

Martin's music could be licensed for a musical — that changed after their dinner at the Peninsula hotel in Hollywood.

“Max was so generous. He said, ‘Hey, you can have my catalog. You can change words if you want. You can change context, but let’s make this great,” said Headington. “So now we have the best pop musical catalog in the world and we’ve got no story.”

Page got to work looking for a writer, a process that involved many dead-ends and far too many pitches about, “a local coming out of Louisiana and now she’s a star,” Page said. “Or it was a complete retelling of ‘NSync or Backstreet Boys, and we said we do not want anything that’s close to what we worked on, because we’re still friends with all those guys and we want to have that separation.”

Enter Read. The young writer was about to get a gig on the hit comedy “Schitt’s Creek,” for which he went on to win an Emmy. He was recovering from a concussion and had been advised by doctors to stay in a dark room so he could heal, Page recalled. During that time he listened to Martin’s catalog on repeat and ultimately presented the completely left-field concept for “& Juliet.”



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Page called Headington immediately and said, “We found it.”

Then they flew Read to L.A. to pitch Martin in his studio, and Martin agreed. From the beginning it was crucial to Martin that the story stood on its own — without the music.

“We didn’t want to shoehorn the songs into the story,” he said, nodding in appreciation at Read. “I don’t understand how you did it, David. How you made it feel as if these songs originated from the story.”

Read said the best part for him was being given free reign to use whatever music he saw fit from Martin's catalog without any demands about how he did it.

"There are some of Max's most famous songs," he said, noting that there was no way he wasn't going to use Spears' chart-topper "... Baby One More Time." "But then there are also these lesser-known, but still incredible songs, and part of what works is that balance."



Rachel Simone Webb and Mateus Leite Cardoso in the North American Tour of "& Juliet." (Matthew Murphy)

Martin invested himself and his time wholly in the endeavor from the jump, including collaborating on the orchestrations.

"This busy man spent hours of his time hanging out with us in the rehearsal room, giving us his original ideas for some of these songs and telling us some of the meanings behind them," said Rachel Simone Webb, who plays Juliet in the North American tour

and served as an understudy for the same role in the 2022 Toronto production. “And every time he started speaking, it was dead silent in the room, so that we could listen and just understand his mind and glean ideas from this icon in the rehearsal room.”

Webb said she has heard people call Martin the “Shakespeare” of pop music.

Webb also sang the part of one of Romeo’s exes for the official cast recording and recalled that Martin was there giving notes and collaborating with the cast.

Martin even recorded one album with the British cast and another with the American cast, Read said.

“Max treated this like his new album,” he said. “And for the cast to be in the studio with him and have the experience that so many of these world-famous artists have had, that was incredible and that was a surprise to all of us.”

Will Martin write another musical from scratch now that he’s established himself in the theater world? He smiles demurely. Not just yet. He’s still got his day job.

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