

Jukebox Musicals: The Art of Creating the Hybrid Genre

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In this article, Gill explores the art of creating a hybrid genre, using the example of the jukebox musical. Drawing on her own experience, Gill breaks down the different sub-genres that make up this hybrid, and she shares her thought process in trying to create her very own jukebox musical, explaining the necessary understanding of characteristics and conventions that goes into producing this unique genre.

Have you ever just been so excited about something you have to tell everyone about it? That’s how I felt after I left my theatre class one day. We were talking about musicals, but I wasn’t paying that much attention until I heard the words “jukebox musical.” My ears immediately tuned in. I enjoy watching musicals and plays, but I have never heard of a jukebox musical before. We watched a short example on YouTube, and I loved it. After taking ENG 101, I knew that musicals and plays were genres; each is a composition that results from similar yet different literate practices. But what about this new composition? Are jukebox musicals a genre too?

After watching the video in class, I wanted to email my English professor to ask her if she believed it was its own genre. Here is what I wrote to her:

“Hey! I’m sorry its so late, but I have been meaning to send this email all day! So I am in a theatre class, and today we were talking about jukebox musicals and we stumbled across this video on youtube, and it immediately made me think of our class! It made me wonder whether or not this is its own genre, or if music videos count as genre, and I thought I would share it with you! Here is the link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7r7mGAxWB04>.”

After my English professor watched the video, she responded and explained that it is in fact a form of genre. She was excited to see me connect what I learned in class to outside sources.

Where It Began

The jukebox musical that inspired my further investigation into this genre is called *Cinderoncé*. That's catchy, isn't it? *Cinderoncé* told the story of "Cinderella," but with a twist. The video used only Beyoncé's songs. I have always had a fascination with musicals and plays. But when I watched this video, I loved it because it was something I had never seen before. The idea of making a video using all songs to tell a story just amazes me. I wanted to produce one myself. It was so creative; I wanted to show that I could be that creative. The problem with wanting to produce a text in this genre is that I knew I would never actually follow through. I have a problem with getting ideas and then quitting halfway through. Lucky for me, creating an example of a genre that interested us was our first project for ENG 101. I knew if it were for a grade, I would have the initiative to follow through and produce a jukebox musical. But my first step to trying to produce a jukebox musical was to research it. I had to find out what it really is before I could make one myself.

What Is It?

Through research I found that a jukebox musical is a stage or film musical that uses pre-existing popular songs as its musical score. The songs are then usually contextualized into a dramatic plot or story line. For example, the jukebox musical I saw in class was created by Todrick Hall. But in looking at more examples, I discovered that a jukebox musical does not always have the music by one artist. For example, as I was looking at the *Cinderoncé* video, I noticed another one called *The Wizard of Ahhh's*. It is the story of *The Wizard of Oz* but with popular songs from the year 2013. Jukebox musicals can vary in length, but *Cinderoncé* is 3-4 minutes and *The Wizard of Ahhh's* is 6-7 minutes. But the famous *Mamma Mia!* is also considered a jukebox musical.

I wanted to know more, so I started to study this genre by considering a strategy called the Four C's of genre research, i.e. characteristics, conventions, context, and culture. This was a technique my ENG 101 teacher discussed, and it seemed like it would work in this case. Characteristics are specific features or qualities that belong to a genre. The conventions are the usual way things are done. Context is the creative situation and the surrounding situations in which a genre is produced. But this is different than content, which are things

like what the genre is typically about. And let's not forget the culture: the genre's place within a larger social space, because all texts are produced in a unique location and moment in time. Those are just four components that affect a genre, but genre is not simply a category or type. It is a set of dynamic social actions. Dynamic—that is a fun word. It means constantly changing, and so genre is not always going to be the same every time we see it. But we can try to pin it down for the moment by its characteristics and conventions. Thus, in answer to my question, yes a jukebox musical is, in fact, a genre. The cool thing about a jukebox musical is that it is also a hybrid, or a mixture of different genres that go together.

The Dynamic Hybrid

Throughout my research, I watched Todrick Hall's *Cinderoncé* and *The Wizard of Ahhh's* to look for particular characteristics and conventions. Specifically, I wanted to know how the change in lyrics flowed. The more I explored this and other hybrid genres, I found that they frequently use multimodalities. The jukebox musical uses alphabetic, aural, and visual approaches. By this I mean that it is alphabetic because there is a script, it is aural because there is sound, and it is visual because it can either be a music video or on a stage. The genre consists of a standard music, a script, and a production. The script is an important factor within this genre. It helps create what the musical is about, and to make a script for a jukebox musical, you must figure out what story you want (content). The script helps so the actors know what to do and when to sing, and it also helps to map out how you would like it to be acted out (and that's a characteristic of the genre). The music is used to help better understand the story, and it helps the story flow and keep the audience's attention (a typical convention of the genre). Music can make or break a musical. It has to be catchy, not too slow, but not too fast to where you cannot understand the words. Another of the big conventions of the jukebox musical is that in order for it to be a jukebox and not just a musical, the songs need to be pre-existing. In *Cinderoncé*, Todrick Hall took Beyoncé's songs to help explain the story of "Cinderella."

In addition to the content, characteristics, and conventions of jukebox musicals, I also looked at how they are produced and discovered—there are many ways. You can create a musical video and distribute it on YouTube or other types of social media. You can perform it live on a stage or in a film or movie. Regardless of which way of production you choose to do, you must have the appropriate tools. But context affects the tools you need as well. For example, tools to make the production include props, actors, and costumes. If you choose to make a film or a short music video, you will also need a video

camera or recorder. A stage production requires different tools—first of all, a stage or venue to perform. But in that situation, financial considerations and accessibility also play a role. On the other hand, if you have performance limitations, more songs, and a longer plot, a film may be the best option for you. However, the tools for a stage production and video differ, and thus affect the activity or reception of the text. To create a music video, the time frame is on average 3-3.5 minutes in length. In the case of *Cinderoncé*, Hall had to make it flow with the story but also with the video. The actors had to follow the songs and the words to create the fairytale that is “Cinderella.”

Hall’s choices were based on his context, and he chose to produce a music video. To distribute the product, he used a tool through a social media website named YouTube.

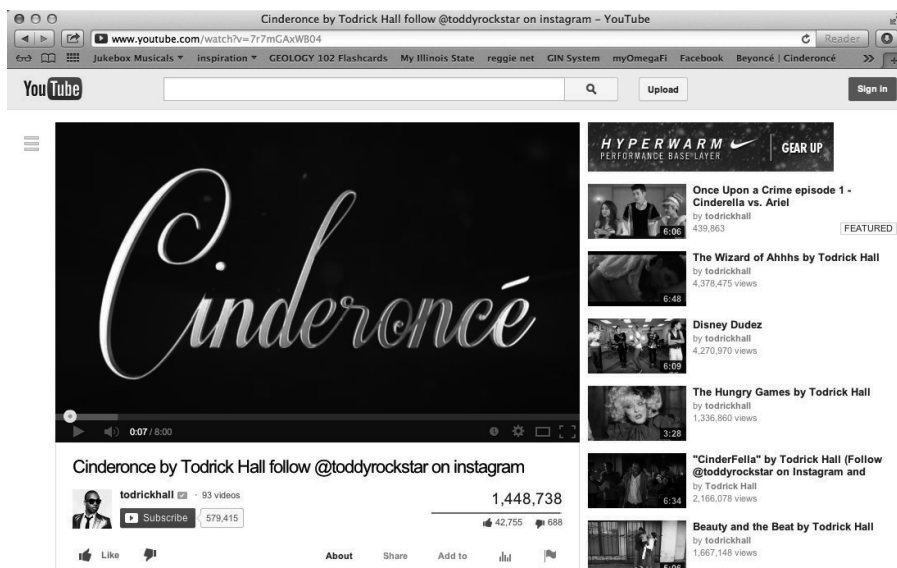


Figure 1: *Cinderoncé* Distributed on YouTube and found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7r7mGAxWB04>

Figure 1 shows the video and how many views it has had. Once a video is on YouTube, anyone with Internet access can receive it. When producing a video, you need to think about the distribution as well. You must know your tools and any restrictions. YouTube used to only allow videos a maximum time of fifteen minutes, unless you are partnered with YouTube. This was something that Todrick Hall had to look at. The length of the production will limit you to how you may distribute it. Based on where and how you distribute, it will affect the reception you get back. And that is all part of context.

In this case, Beyoncé herself found Todrick Hall’s video on YouTube. She posted the video on her official website.

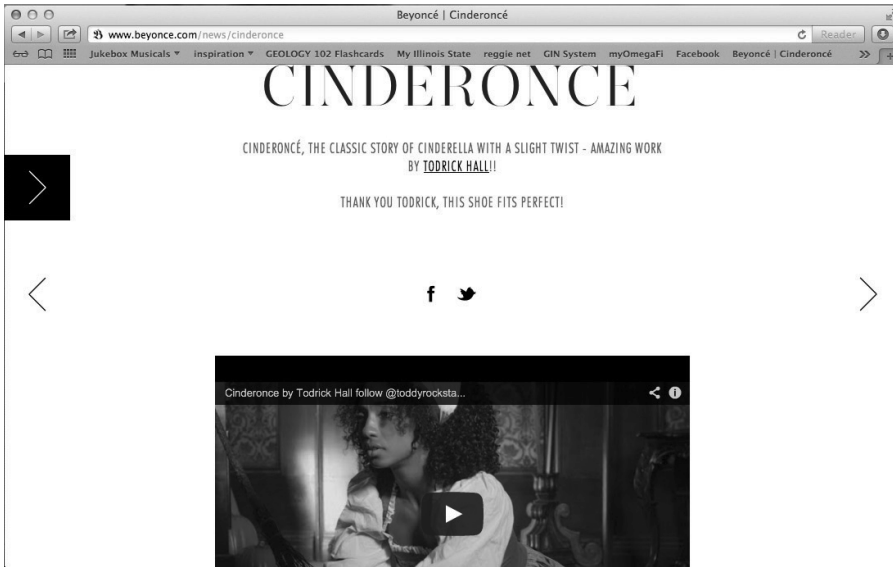


Figure 2: Cideroncé Distributed on Beyoncé's Official Website

This is where production, distribution, and reception matter. Todrick Hall had the technology to produce the video. He also had the tools to distribute it. After distribution, that's where reception comes in. Since Todrick Hall put his production on YouTube, Beyoncé saw the video and, shown in the image above, she posted it on her official website. This is also known as activity. If people look at Beyoncé's website and see Hall's video distributed there, it might give him more job opportunities. Beyoncé can help get his name out there in the world.

My Production

So after I had spent time researching jukebox musicals, I used what I learned to begin my own production. To start off any project, you need an idea. My idea was to use a personal narrative I wrote for class as the basis for my content. The personal narrative I wrote was about the time my boyfriend broke up with me. It was out of the blue, and I did not understand until I found out he broke up with me for my best friend. Ouch, I know. No matter how long the dating process is, breakups are hard. There are always those thoughts in the back of your mind. *Was it my fault? What could I have done differently? Was it obvious? Why am I so stupid?* As you can imagine, these were a few of the questions that went through my mind after my breakup. My goal was to create a jukebox musical about my thought process after a breakup. I wanted to show all the different thoughts that ran through my mind afterwards. To create my idea, I needed to figure out how to integrate what

I learned about the characteristics, conventions, and context of the jukebox musical. I also needed to decide how many artists I would use and whom, and what songs I wanted. Then I had to write my script and figure out what type of distribution and production I would use and also think about how these factors would affect all of my other choices.

Music: Creating Content

The more I thought about how many artists I wanted for the musical, the more I realized there are numerous options to choose from, so I decided to just go with one artist. I just had to decide who would be the perfect fit for my tragic love story. It was a pretty easy decision on which artist I would use. I chose Taylor Swift because she is known to write songs about breakups. I know she is not the only artist out there with a tragic break up song, but throughout the years, she has been known to write songs after every breakup in her own life, and I felt as though her songs would be able to create my story with the appropriate emotion and words. Now that the easy part was done, I had to go through and look at all of her lyrics to find songs that would help the story flow and make sense.

The first song I used was “Better Than Revenge.” It begins with the lyric, *“The story starts when it was hot and it was summer and I had it all / I had him right there where I wanted him / She came along, got him alone and let’s hear the applause / She took him faster than you could say ‘sabotage.’”* I chose to start with this song because it helps create a visual on when the plot, relationship, and story is taking place. It also shows that there was “another” girl involved.

After “Better Than Revenge,” I chose to use the song “I Knew You Were Trouble.” Part of the song I used goes *“And now I see. He was long gone when he met me. And I realize the joke is on me, yeah! I knew you were trouble when you walked in. So shame on me now.”* This song was perfect because it expresses the thought of regret. It indicates the feeling of knowing it wasn’t going to work out but instead deciding to try it anyway.

When deciding the songs to choose, you also have to think about the order you want them in. As I was listening to Taylor Swift’s song, “Better Than Revenge,” I was able to visualize my story. It was summer when my boyfriend and I broke up. I decided that “I Knew You Were Trouble” should go before “The Story of Us” because I was showing my thought process after the breakup. In my case, my ex-boyfriend had a previous past of being rude and, to put it lightly, not a good boyfriend, but I took the chance instead. I wanted to show that when my friend “stole” my boyfriend, I already “knew

he was trouble” (both part of the lyrics); I should have known all along it wouldn’t have worked out. I followed “I Knew You Were Trouble” with “The Story of Us.” The lyrics are, *“I used to think one day we’d tell the story of us, how we met and the sparks flew instantly / People would say, ‘They’re the lucky ones.’ / I used to know my place was a spot next to you, now I’m searching the room for an empty seat.”* The song shows the thought of “what if” and the “what could have been.”

After “The Story of Us,” I used “Everything Has Changed,” and “Sparks Fly.” Both of these songs are about the happier times of the relationship, or the flashbacks. And finally I ended with “You’re Not Sorry.” One set of lyrics was particularly useful: *“But all this time I was wasting, hoping you would come around. I’ve been giving out chances every time. And all you do is let me down. And it’s taken me this long. Baby but I figured you out. And you’re thinking we’ll be fine again, but not this time around.”* This shows the realization that nothing you say can take it back. It is also the beginning of acceptance, which was an important part of the content I wanted to portray.

Script: Choices About Characteristics

Creating the script was easy, but I wanted to write it up in a way that would make it easy for my actors to demonstrate the characteristics of a jukebox musical that I wanted. I typed up all of the song lyrics I was going to use for each song and put each song on a different page. When I typed them up I put the page into two columns. One column had the typed lyrics along with that song I chose. The other side had the instructions of where the scene was taking place and what character would be doing what. Here is an example of the first scene with the song “Better Than Revenge”:

<p>Scene 1 Better Than Revenge – The story starts when it was hot and it was summer and... I had it all, I had him right there where I wanted him She came along, got him alone and let’s hear the applause She took him faster than you could say “sabotage” I never saw it coming, wouldn’t have suspected it I underestimated just who I was dealing with She had to know the pain was beating on me like a drum She underestimated just who she was stealing from</p>	<p><i>[Scene– summer hangout spot/Sonic tables] (Crowded with people) --Starts with showing girl #1 sitting next to boy #1 and laughing -Girl #1 starts singing and as (She came along....) girl #2 walks up and takes boy #1 by arms and pulls to another table.</i></p>
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Figure 3: “Better Than Revenge”

My directions for the script were very vague, because at first I did not know exactly how I wanted the scenes to go. The more I thought about it, the more detail I added to the script. You can see the difference in the rewritten script for “Better Than Revenge”:

<p>Scene 1 Better Than Revenge – The story starts when it was hot and it was summer and... I had it all, I had him right there where I wanted him She came along, got him alone and let’s hear the applause She took him faster than you could say “sabotage” I never saw it coming, wouldn’t have suspected it I underestimated just who I was dealing with She had to know the pain was beating on me like a drum She underestimated just who she was stealing from</p>	<p><i>[Scene- Sonic tables]</i> <i>(Crowded with people)</i> --Starts with showing girl #1 sitting next to boy #1 and laughing at table #1. --Girl #1 starts singing and as (She came along...) girl #2 walks up, says hi to Girl #1 and Boy #1 and takes Boy #1 by arms and walks to car. --Girl #1 finish singing song --Girl #2 and Boy #1 drive away at (She underestimated...)</p>
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Figure 4: “Better Than Revenge” - Reprise

I still did not put too many details in the script because I want my actors to feel their own emotion through the production. Writing down every detail would take away from the emotion that is within them. Again, I was thinking about context (how the script was going to be used) and conventions (emotion was a key element in the examples I looked at) in making these decisions.

Music Video: Considering Context

I hoped to produce my jukebox musical in music video form like the example I saw in class. At first I decided this because I did not have a lot of songs, and it would be short. But after I completed the script and the songs, I realized I did not have a video camera to record and make the video. Yes, I could have performed the musical live once I realized I could not record it, but I also did not have actors to play the parts. Without the actors, there is no musical.

I had to get creative and think of new ways to produce it that would fit the tools I had access to and the context of my production. I did not realize how dependent the text, in this case the music video, was on the production elements, which altered my conceptualization of the genre. Instead I typed it

out in a script to make it kind of like the behind-the-scenes part of the whole thing. At the time, I wasn't able to complete my production, but I would take the next step if I needed to continue with it.

Another important idea I learned is that the audience definitely has a lot of influence on whether or not a jukebox musical will make it. The purpose of this genre is to entertain people and keep them wanting more. But it is not just entertainment, but enrichment too. Watching the jukebox musicals helps connect and relate your life to the story. The creator wants viewers to want to show their friends like I did. The goal is to make viewers love it and keep watching it over and over again. I watched *Cinderoncé* over and over again because it was something new. I had never seen something like that done before. The purpose is to have that wow factor that sticks in the mind. If the text doesn't engage effectively with the characteristics, conventions, and context of the genre, then the audience might not like the production, and it will get shut down, or it won't last. If the audience really likes it, there would be a possibility that it would go big, like Broadway! It all comes down to how you can navigate the expectations and purpose of the genre.

Although the process of investigating this genre was not always fun and easy, it was still a meaningful experience. I enjoyed being able to explore a genre that I was not used to. But I realized it was more complicated than it seemed . . . I had too much to do and not enough time to do it. The easy part was figuring out what songs worked towards my narrative, and who the artist I chose was going to be. But the context of production made it more difficult, and at times, I wanted to give up. It was a lot of work, but I am glad I stuck with it. I am proud with what I got done, but I am not done quite yet. Even though the project is finished, I hope to eventually produce the video for myself. It will be quite the project, but now that I have the tools to continue figuring out the genre, I know I can do it. Researching and learning about the genre is half the hard work, and that is done now.

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