

Music Notes



John Cameron Mitchell, who wrote and was the original star of off-Broadway's "Hedwig and the Angry Inch," has spread his talents to a CD and a movie based on the musical.

By MICHAEL GILTZ

WHILE fans of stage musicals can buy CDs for countless shows, such as "Footloose" (Q Records), or even get an early sample of the songs from Frank Wildhorn's next show, "The Civil War" (Atlantic Records), striding alongside them — in stiletto heels — is the cast album for "Hedwig and the Angry Inch" (Atlantic Records).

One year after its off-Broadway debut, this critically acclaimed show about an East German transsexual singer living in a Kansas trailer park is getting more attention than ever.

"It was a slow, carefully platformed campaign," John Cameron Mitchell, the show's author and original star, joked the day his CD hit record store shelves. "Actually, we couldn't get any press at the beginning, because it's such a weird project."

Weird, but powerful. The terrific songs — written by Stephen Trask of the group Cheater, and performed on stage by a rock 'n' roll band instead of the customary decorous pit musicians — are loud, glamish, memorable and worthy of the comparisons that have been made to the tunes of David Bowie and Lou Reed. (Both Reed and Bowie, as well as Madonna, have seen the show.)

Atlantic Records admits that it's trying to downplay the "Hedwig" theater connection in favor of presenting it — more marketably — as a rock album. In fact, in addition to having had Mitchell and the band tape a few appearances on MTV, the CD's cover has the words "Original Cast Recording" in type so

Transex hit transforms into a CD and a movie



The "Hedwig and the Angry Inch" CD — performed by songwriter Stephen Trask (left), Mitchell and Trask's group Cheater — has glammed onto record charts as a rock album.

small, you need a microscope to read them.

Most important, Atlantic spent a lot of time and money to have the album re-

corded properly, booking five weeks in the studio rather than the standard one- or two-day session that even the biggest Broadway shows are given.

But that rare luxury didn't make the recording any less stressful for Mitchell, who taped his vocals at the tail-end of his yearlong stint starring as Hedwig.

"I was exhausted from the show and I tried to do one of the songs, 'Sugar Daddy,' but I didn't have it in me," says the 35-year-old performer, who also performed in the original casts of Broadway's "The Secret Garden" and off-Broadway's "Hello Again." He adds that the stress of making an album and being exhausted forced him to stop singing.

"I couldn't hit the notes," he says. The producer "sat next to me while I cried for a minute, and we all agreed I should sing something that would snap me out of it. So I thought of 'Tear Me Down' — another song — and I did a take of it and burst into tears again. From then on, I was in a groove."

Mitchell is now working on a film version of the show for New Line Cinema, and he may or may not direct it. Despite the potential of having hit singles from the CD and achieving more fame from a big-screen version of "Hedwig," he acknowledges that it was a little-screen, WB network sitcom called "Party Girl" that made it all possible.

"It was kind of shocking when the show was canceled," he says of the lame and unlamented '96 series in which he co-starred. "I was in New York on my way back from a break when they said, 'Don't come back — we're on hiatus,' which is the kiss of death."

"But I'd saved money from the TV show so I could live, and I went right into working on 'Hedwig.' In a way," he laughs, "'Party Girl' paid for this show, so I will always be grateful to television."