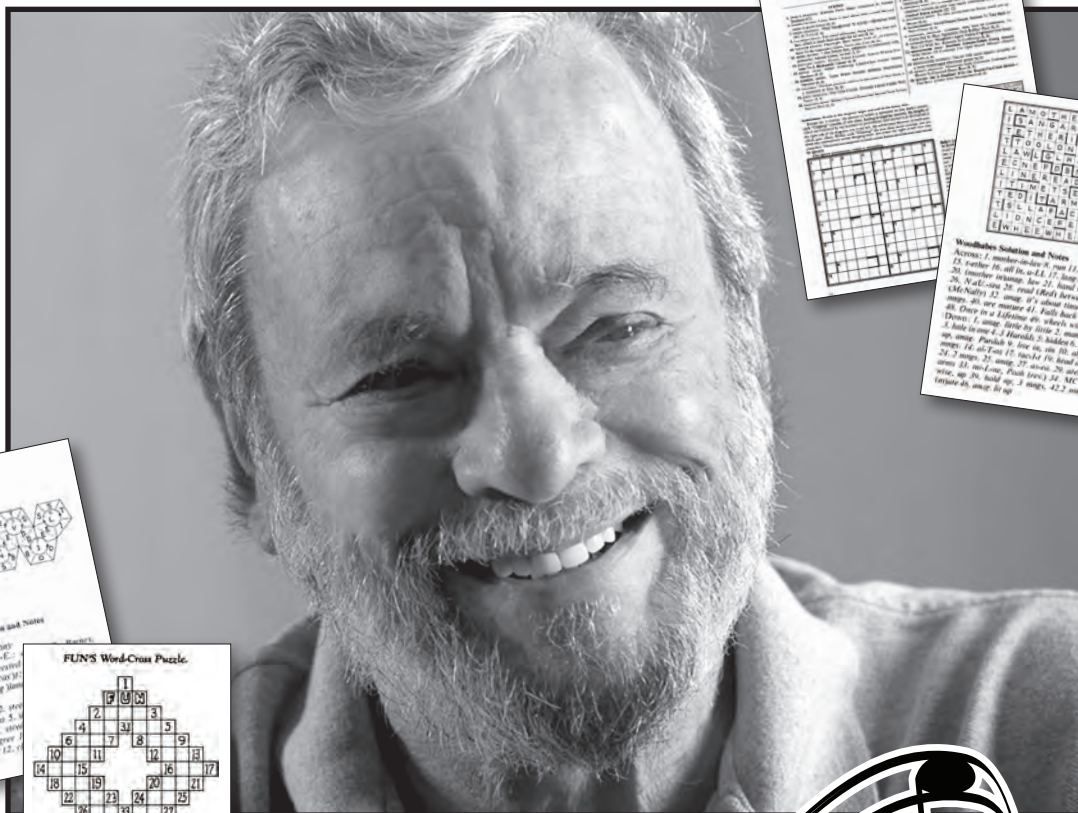
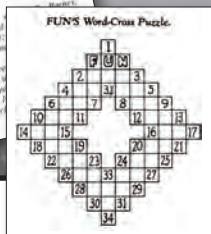


# "Call Me Steve"



BY ANDREW PARR



**I** admire people who are deeply intelligent and effortlessly articulate. Heck, I hope to be one of them someday. Until then, I keep my pocket dictionary handy for times I find myself in conversation with one of these folks. Take, for example, my recent chat with Stephen Sondheim. Widely hailed as the most influential Broadway songwriter of the 20th century, Mr. Sondheim is the prodigy who penned renowned musicals including *Sweeney Todd*, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *Into the Woods*, and the lyrics to *West Side Story*. If you have ever heard a composition—or conversation—involving Stephen Sondheim, you would likely agree that he is as intelligent and articulate as they come.

It has been a while since we caught up with Mr. Sondheim. Longtime readers of *GAMES* may recall Dick Schaap's article from January 1983 ("You Can Walk Out of This Magazine Humming His Games"), in which Schaap gave us a glimpse behind the curtain at Mr. Sondheim's passions for puzzle construction and collecting vintage games.

When I unexpectedly found myself in the same social circles as Mr. Sondheim in the summer of 2020, I requested an interview to catch up on his puzzling pastimes. A few weeks later, Mr. Sondheim called me from his home in Connecticut where he was healthy, safe, and isolating. "Call me Steve," he began, setting the tone of the conversation. No longer did I feel like a star-struck fan speaking with a Broadway legend; we were simply two puzzle enthusiasts sharing stories—but I still wasn't about to let my dictionary out of reach.

Mr. Sondheim started by revealing that he is part of an elite group of *GAMES* readers. He has been reading since the debut of the magazine and hasn't missed an issue up to present day. "I still get them, and I do one or two puzzles," he said, "but I rarely do crossword puzzles anymore. I spent so much time making them, I get easily bored doing them, unless they have novel and interesting gimmicks."

Mr. Sondheim was referring to the dozens of cryptic crossword puzzles he wrote for *New York* magazine from 1968 to 1969. "I take virtually full credit for introducing cryptics to the United States," Mr. Sondheim stated. He went on to educate me about the timeline of cryptic crosswords on this continent and the British publications that inspired his work. "Brits are brought up on cryptic puzzles," he explained. "Some of the tabloids have Everyman puzzles, but British puzzles are cryptic. I first became aware of them in my 20s. *The London Times*, all the major papers, their puzzles are cryptic, and that's how Brits are brought up on them."

**Noun:** Everyman puzzles

1. A British term referring to standard (non-cryptic) crossword puzzles

Mr. Sondheim explained that in the mid-20th century, cryptic crosswords were infrequently published in the United States because they didn't have the same popularity as they did overseas. "The only American cryptic puzzle I had ever done before being exposed to British puzzles was Frank Lewis's weekly puzzle in *The Nation*," Mr. Sondheim said. "But *The Nation* didn't have that big a circulation, and cryptic puzzles were not that well known. There was occasionally a puzzle in the *New York Times*, when I was a teen, maybe once every three or four weeks."

In the 1950s, Mr. Sondheim got his first taste of British cryptics. "The first British paper I was exposed to was the *Sunday Observer*," he recalled. "All the puzzle makers for the papers had their own code names, and when I was in my 20s, the *Observer's* puzzle setter was known as Ximenes. He was an influential puzzle maker throughout the 20th century."

**Noun:** Ximenes

1. Grand Inquisitor in the Spanish Inquisition
2. Code name of Derrick Macnutt, puzzle setter for the *Sunday Observer* from 1939 to 1971

After learning the techniques used in solving American puzzles and getting practice with the *Observer* puzzles, Mr. Sondheim moved on to a bigger challenge. "After I had done the *Observer* for a while, I became aware of a British publication called *The Listener*, which was more difficult," he said. "I was weaned on *Listener* puzzles. They were the puzzle maker's puzzle, really esoteric and quite extraordinary. Of all the publications, *The Listener* had the most elegant, complicated, devious, interesting puzzles. It was a weekly publication, and I collected all their puzzles. They came in handy when I took the job with *New York* magazine."

**Noun:** *The Listener*

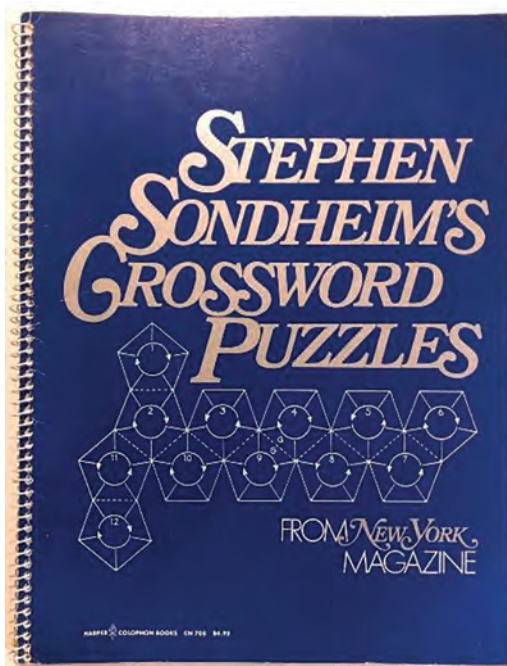
1. A weekly magazine established in 1929 by the BBC. Following the closure of the magazine, *The Listener* cryptic crossword, regarded as the most difficult in any weekly publication, continued to be published in *The Times* newspaper.

Mr. Sondheim continued: "Many of my puzzles were based on gimmicks from *Listener* puzzles."



I still remember some of those puzzles vividly because they were so intricate and imaginative and I used some of those ideas, but I always gave thanks to the puzzle maker's nom de plume."

One reason Mr. Sondheim's *New York* magazine puzzles appealed to the masses is because he made them accessible to the masses. "I wrote out a set of rules on how to solve cryptic puzzles," he said, "and then I supplied a weekly puzzle. As a result, people got to know cryptic puzzles in this country, and magazines and papers started to make cryptic puzzles in addition to ordinary ones."



Many cryptic puzzle connoisseurs rank Mr. Sondheim's puzzles alongside the work of our finest contemporary constructors. In 1980, his collection of puzzles was published as *Stephen Sondheim's Crossword Puzzles from New York Magazine*. Before you search Amazon to buy this book, be aware that copies are rare, and if you happen to find one for sale, you will likely pay dearly for it. Collectors of all stripes dream about their white whale—for cryptic crossword enthusiasts, including myself, this book is our elusive white whale.

**Noun:** white whale

1. a symbolic character in *Moby-Dick*;
2. a rare piece pursued by a collector that they have little chance of obtaining

Mr. Sondheim whooped in disbelief when I told him that his book has been privately sold for upward of \$3,000. "Some of the puzzles have really interesting and original ideas," he responded. "Another reason it's so valuable and hard to find is because it's a paperback. People don't put them in their library shelves and they just disintegrate."

About 10 years ago, a handful of his puzzles were posted on a fan's website—and promptly taken down due to copyright infringement. As far as Mr. Sondheim knows, his puzzles aren't available anywhere on the internet today. With the slim odds of me ever seeing a Sondheim cryptic puzzle, I wanted to ask more about his cluing style, and particularly, if he felt the clues he wrote are as fresh and relevant today as they were over 50 years ago. "Are you asking me? Do I look at them again?" he joked. "Yes, I believe they'd hold up. I don't think I ever wrote a clue with a contemporary reference. I don't like clues that involve specific cultural things."

I asked Mr. Sondheim if he had any intentions to write cryptic crosswords again. He felt that, unless he had a meaningful purpose, puzzle construction wouldn't be at the top of his to-do list. "It was fun and I'm good at it, and I like it, but for what purpose? I only did the magazine puzzles as a favor to one of the founders of the magazine, Clay Felker. One of his best friends was a friend of mine, Gloria Steinem, and he asked her to ask me to write a puzzle page for the first issue."

In the immediate years after he wrote for *New York* magazine, Mr. Sondheim turned his creative efforts to three new shows (*Company*, *Follies*, and *A Little Night Music*). While too busy to design full puzzles, Mr. Sondheim's interest in writing cryptic puzzles persisted. He found a suitable outlet in one of his original sources of interest in the London *Sunday Observer*. "Ximenes once stated that he wanted to introduce the solver to unusual words. I'd say 30 percent of the answers to his clues were words that most of us had never heard of before," said Mr. Sondheim. "That's what was fun because you would solve a clue, and think, 'Well, it can't be a word called withershins, and you'd look in the dictionary, and there was a word called withershins!'"

**Adv:** withershins

1. (Scot.) in the contrary direction—to the left, contrary to the course of the sun, in the wrong way

Because of contests woven into Ximenes' puzzles, Mr. Sondheim continued writing cryptic clues. "You'd solve the cryptic crossword normally, but

there would be one clue that was not a cryptic clue," he said. "The clue would be, 'Big African animal' or some such. And then you would supply a cryptic clue, and he would judge all the entries. There would be first prize, second prize, third prize, and honorable mention. I never got past honorable mention, but I did get honorable mention."

At 90 years of age, Mr. Sondheim has accumulated a number of stories about the puzzling world, and he shared a few of these amusing anecdotes with me. First, he explained how fans of Ximenes regularly held dinner parties to celebrate milestone publications of his work. When Ximenes wrote his 1000th puzzle, he was honored at a dinner at the Café Royal in London. "A good friend, Burt Shevelove, told me about this dinner and invited me over for it," Sondheim said. "Burt had gotten the tickets, supposedly, but there was a mix-up, and there was no ticket for me. I said I had come all the way from America, and they said, 'Maybe we can find you a seat.' Each seat was numbered, and since I didn't have a ticket, they brought in an extra seat, numbered 00. They squeezed me into the corner of the room."

"Ximenes got up and made an acceptance speech," Mr. Sondheim continued. "During it, he said, 'Over the years, I've had many distinguished solvers, and tonight we have a visitor from America, the man who wrote the music to *West Side Story*, Stephen Sondheim.' A round of applause started but soon died away, and I yelled to the entire room, 'LYRICS, NOT MUSIC!'"

**Noun:** Burt Shevelove

1. American writer of musical theater; co-author of the book for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*

"When Burt lived in New York City, he and I would meet occasionally on the day when *The Saturday Review of Literature* came out with a Double-Croctic. We would each pick up a copy and go to Burt's apartment. We'd open the magazine and sit there and solve the puzzle in our heads and see who got there first. There'd be an hour of silence, while he sat in one chair, I in another, no pencils allowed."

Mr. Sondheim also shared a quick story about the benefit of setting your own work schedule. "Lenny liked puzzles a lot, and he didn't know about *The Listener* cryptics. When we were writing *West Side Story*, I introduced him to them. When I found an interesting one, I'd bring it down to his apartment, and instead of working, we'd spend the day solving it."

**Noun:** "Lenny"

1. Leonard Bernstein, American conductor, composer, and ambassador of classical music to the 20th-century audience

Our conversation moved to his collection of antique games, some of which were pictured in the 1983 GAMES article. Unfortunately, Mr. Sondheim had some terrible news to share: "I used to collect games but then my house burned down, and a lot of my games got destroyed. I had a library of books of games, many of them dating back to the 16th century. They went up in smoke. They were rare and elegant and would be hard to replace. But my big passion was transformation decks. They began in Germany around 1810, but many decks were made by many people over the 19th century. A lot of them were used for advertising, and there were a lot of political packs. I had a really wonderful collection, framed and hung on my walls, and because of the fire, that hallway disappeared entirely."



A CARD FROM A TRANSFORMATION DECK

**Noun:** transformation deck

1. A deck of playing cards where the pips of each card are incorporated into a picture

Shifting to a more positive topic, we discussed his current puzzle collection, which mainly consists of wooden puzzle boxes, including the intricate and highly sought-after Lotus Box by Kagen Sound (pictured on the next page). We talked about the thrill of acquiring rare pieces. We expressed our admiration for each others' collections. (We shared photos via email prior to our conversation.) I also introduced him to a few of my favorite online puzzle auction websites, like Haubrich Puzzle Auction, Puzzle Paradise, and Cubic Dissection. In retrospect, this might have been a bad move on my part as a bidder, considering how Mr. Sondheim and I have similar tastes in puzzles.

Mr. Sondheim also has a very impressive collection of Japanese puzzle boxes from the Karakuri Creation





THE LOTUS BOX BY KAGEN SOUND

Group. "I don't remember the first one I got," he said. "I must have seen an ad for it someplace, and then I got their catalog and started to buy stuff. But now, by the time I get their catalog, the ones that I really want to buy are already sold

out. Still, I'm happy enough with my collection."

Karakuri puzzle boxes are crafted with very precise tolerances and thusly, they hide their secrets very well. I asked Mr. Sondheim if he has solved all the puzzles in his collection, but to him, that's not the point. "They look great, and they're satisfying even if I have to be told how to do them. I have absolutely no three-dimensional imagination at all," he admitted. "The puzzles I am good at are numbers and words—crossword puzzles and math puzzles. I just love the objects. I love fiddling with them. I can almost never open them without looking at the solution sheet. But I don't really care, and that includes the Turing Chest."

The Turing Chest that Mr. Sondheim referred to is a puzzle chest crafted by Nicholas Phillips, Ph.D., of Affine Creations—the very puzzle that connected me with Mr. Sondheim. Only six copies of the chest were made; we each own one.

"I love it, but I haven't taken it apart. I couldn't even figure out the first move. Dr. Phillips sent a solution book, and I looked at the first page, but I don't want to cheat. I've done the first move and haven't gone beyond that. I swear each day I'm going to tackle it, but I just have too much else to do. The fun of this is the look of it and how it's going to work."

I shared with Mr. Sondheim my belief that not knowing a solution often creates a greater appreciation for a designer who can build such a devious puzzle mechanism. "That's the point," he em-



TURING CHEST BY DR. NICHOLAS PHILLIPS

phatically agreed. "It's the craftsman part of it that I love."



MR. SONDEHEIM'S COLLECTION OF PUZZLE BOXES

As an escape room enthusiast, I couldn't end my conversation with Mr. Sondheim without asking if he had partaken in this contemporary obsession. His answer came as no surprise. "I was one of the first people I know to do one," he replied. "We got a group of six people together and we did three separate escape rooms in New York and one in Connecticut. Everyone says, 'Come on, let's do another one,' but I just don't have the time and of course now with the virus, it's impossible. Whoever had that idea of escape rooms, it's just a terrific idea. The fun of the escape room is being with a group of people, saying 'Push on the wall! Try that thing over there!'"

With almost an hour of conversation behind us, I thanked Mr. Sondheim for his time, and we agreed to continue sharing pictures anytime we acquired new pieces for our collections. The following week, I was retelling the highlights of the conversation to the musical theater teachers at my school. While they couldn't believe I didn't steer the discussion toward music, they correctly noted that I would always remember this as a special moment in my life. And it's true—Mr. Sondheim graciously gave up a part of his busy Saturday to have a chat with a puzzle enthusiast he had met only a few weeks earlier.

But Mr. Sondheim's generosity didn't end with our conversation. When I arrived home from work a few weeks after our phone call, there was a package waiting for me in my mailbox. I opened it, and my jaw hit the floor. Mr. Sondheim sent me my white whale. Pocket dictionary, you are officially retired. I now have a new favorite book.

Thanks for everything, Steve. ■