

**This interview with
TOM LEHRER
was conducted by the Library of Congress on
July 22, 2015.**



Tom Lehrer

LOC: Thank you for talking to me about “Songs by Tom Lehrer.”

And I thank you for your interest. I’m amazed that this ancient recording is still around. God bless the copy right laws! [Laughs].

LOC: You are a very good pianist and I think people often overlook that. Did you study as a child?

I started at around age eight. Many families had some sort of piano in those days, and many kids “took,” whether they liked it or not. I took classical music lessons, and I practiced dutifully, but as soon as I was done with the assigned pieces, I would try to pick out popular songs on my own. My mother, bless her, saw that and found me a “popular” piano teacher, which was much harder to find in those days.

LOC: When did you start writing your own songs?

In think *in utero*. I started making parodies of songs when I was very young. It was much later that I began writing my own. The earliest song on the record is “Fight Fiercely, Harvard,” which I wrote when I was 17 and at Harvard. I had the good sense not to include most of the early songs on the record.

LOC: When did you decide to record some of your songs?

I’d been singing these songs around Harvard and at parties since the early ‘50’s. I got tired of doing that, and the LP had become economically feasible to record and ship. Other performers had put out their own LPs independent of record companies, and I decided to try that.

At that time—1953—there were only two recording studios listed in the Boston Yellow Pages. I went to both of them. One was rude and condescending, and the other was friendly and encouraging, even though, of course, they had no idea what I was planning to record. So I went with the second one.

For \$15, I got an hour of studio time, including the use of one microphone and their piano. I would record a song and, if I liked the playback, we went on to the next one. If not, we'd just record it again over the first take. No splicing, no editing. By the end of the hour, I had the 12 songs in order, totaling 22 minutes. That does seem short, but most comedy songs are too long.

A friend drew the cover—cheap to print because it involved only red and black with no overlap—and I wrote the liner notes for the jacket. A local printer assembled the jackets, and RCA's custom-department pressed the records.

I figured that with sales to my friends and relatives and local audiences I could sell 400 copies and break even, so that's what I ordered. I then ordered more, investing the profits, and eventually began making a net profit. Initially, I sold them around Harvard and in Cambridge record stores. Some newspapers and magazines, such as the "San Francisco Chronicle" and "The Saturday Review," ran reviews and even gave the address where copies could be ordered. At first, they were mailed from my home—my address was printed on the early jackets—but eventually I got a post office box address.

I wanted to find some stores in New York that would carry them. So I went to Liberty Music Shop, which specialized in records by people like Beatrice Lillie and Alec Templeton. They promised to put a note in every mail order from the New York City area saying that additional copies could be purchased at the Liberty Music Shop. And, sure enough, they started placing larger and larger orders. When I went back a few months later, there was a stack of my records on the counter.

Then distributors got interested. I had an office in Boston by that time and a few people to handle the orders. There was never any advertising, except when an individual store took out an ad on their own. No personal appearances or record signings and almost no airplay. I like to say that is spread like herpes, not Ebola.

LOC: Were you surprised by the success of the LP?

Flabbergasted is a better word. Even my friends originally said, "We think the songs are funny, but the public won't." And I don't think the "public" did like it—it was more like a cult. From the addresses of the mail orders, I could see where they were mostly university zip codes. Evidently, I wasn't alone, although certainly not aligned with the majority. Of course, I supported Adlai Stevenson and actually thought that he might defeat Eisenhower! Imagine that!

LOC: How do you explain the longevity of the recording?

I can't explain it. The fact that it has been available for over 60 years is astonishing—first as a 10" LP, then as a 12". Years later, Rhino put it out on a CD, the same recording I made in 1953, though they might have improved it a bit technologically. And now the tracks are even on iTunes and YouTube! And one of the tracks ["The Old Dope Peddler"] was recently sampled on a rap record, by 2 Chainz.

One of the reasons for its appeal is that it's simple: just piano and voice. Most records are "produced" by someone, but I didn't even know what a record producer was. That may be one of the reasons that children like it, even if they don't understand it. I heard that Joan Baez—whom I've never met—was asked in an interview if she sang lullabies to her baby. She said that doesn't work, but she sings "The Old Dope Peddler" to him and he goes right to sleep.