

“It’s a Small World”—The Disneyland Boys Choir (1964)

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Essay by Aaron Goldberg (guest essay)*



A postcard from the Fair

When one thinks of highly accomplished and successful musical collaborations, many names come to mind: Lennon and McCartney, the Gershwin brothers, and Rodgers and Hammerstein, to name a few. Over the decades such duos have had a tremendous impact on music. Despite selling hundreds of millions of albums and dominating radio airwaves, however, none of these distinguished partnerships hold the honor of masterminding the most played song in history. That honor stems from a collaboration between two very unlikely participants: the Walt Disney Company and PepsiCo.

It all started back in August of 1959 when a group of New York citizens and businessmen formed a nonprofit corporation to explore the creation of a world's fair. By 1960, President Eisenhower was involved in the process and chose New York as the site for the international exposition, which would take place in 1964-1965.

Later that year, Robert Moses was appointed the president of the New York World's Fair. As New York City's parks commissioner, Moses wielded an enormous amount of political power. He was also the head of nearly a dozen other city agencies, and he greenlighted 35 highways, 12 bridges, numerous tunnels, the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, and Shea Stadium, in case you're keeping track.

With Moses at the helm, the direction and plan for the fair took shape. There were five major exhibition areas, encompassing some 150 separate pavilions, featuring industrial, transportation, and amusement exhibits from an international, national, and state perspective.

The two themes of the fair were “Peace through Understanding” and “Man’s Achievements in an Expanding Universe.” When it came to the achievements of a man during the early-to-mid-20th century, Robert Moses knew Walt Disney was the pinnacle and he convinced him to join the project. After securing the Michelangelo marble masterpiece “Pietà” for display in the fair's Vatican pavilion, Moses remarked, “The stars of my show are Michelangelo and Walt Disney.”

Initially, Disney's starring role at the fair was to design and develop three pavilions. Ford Motors, General Electric, and the State of Illinois were on his design docket. At the last minute, he agreed to develop a fourth pavilion. This one was for the Pepsi-Cola Company (later named PepsiCo), who was partnering with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) on a salute to all the world's children.

Pepsi was at a stalemate with the design and vision for their exhibit--both before and after Disney came aboard. It wasn't until another Hollywood icon, Joan Crawford, stepped up and nudged the project along. Crawford was married to Alfred Steele, who was the CEO of Pepsi-Cola until he passed away in 1959. After Steele's death, Crawford was still actively involved with the Pepsi corporation as a board member. When she learned of the stalled World's Fair project, she was adamant that the project move along, and move along quickly with Disney at the helm. And so it did.

The Disney design team created "the happiest cruise that ever sailed," a playful boat ride that cruised past audio-animatronic children--little mechanical robot actors programmed to sing and gesture--representing the countries of the world, wearing their native garb and singing their respective national anthems. This theme captured UNICEF's mission of honoring children and their various cultures while promoting harmony and peace on earth.

Whether a theme park attraction, a television program, or a cartoon short, music has always been an influential and omnipresent component in nearly all Disney projects. Disney songs have become mainstays in the American lexicon, ingrained in our culture--and sometimes even temporarily ingrained in our brains, but more on that in a bit.

Starting in the 1960s, many of the Disney studio's notable and beloved songs came from the minds of the uber-talented songwriting duo, the Sherman Brothers, who Walt Disney affectionately called "the boys." The boys, Robert and Richard Sherman, had music in their blood. Their father, Al, had been a Tin Pan Alley songwriter who wrote hundreds of songs. He was also behind many of the legendary tunes entertainer Eddie Cantor made famous. Even earlier, during the 19th century, the Sherman Brothers' grandfather, Samuel, was a violinist and composer in the royal court of Franz Joseph I, the emperor of Austria, and king of Hungary.

With this pedigree, it should be no surprise that the upstart brothers, while still in their early 20s, wrote a song for Gene Autry, "Gold Can Buy You Anything But Love," which he recorded and featured daily on his radio show. By 1958, the songwriting duo penned their first top-ten song, "Tall Paul," which was covered by Disney's Mouseketeer Annette Funicello. Not long after, in 1960, they were behind the hit "You're Sixteen," which was performed by Johnny Burnette and later covered by Ringo Starr, in 1973. During this time, the brothers continued to write songs for Funicello, including several other top-ten hits, including "Pineapple Princess." Their success with Funicello caught the attention of Walt Disney, and by 1960, the boys were employed as full-time songwriters for Disney's studio.

In July of 1963, Disney brought the brothers into the fold of the Pepsi-UNICEF project. Richard and Robert had already penned two songs for the upcoming New York World's Fair: "Get the Feel of the Wheel of a Ford" for the Ford pavilion (though the song didn't make it into the

exhibit) and “There’s a Great Big Beautiful Tomorrow” for the General Electric pavilion. Roughly eight months before the fair’s opening day, the boys were tasked with tackling the music for what Disney loosely called “The Children of the World.”

As mentioned, Disney's initial concept was for a boat ride past hundreds of audio-animatronic children representing their countries and singing their national anthems. The concept was a homerun, but the slew of anthems playing proved disastrous. This hodgepodge of songs sounded like a cacophony. As it was, the musical component of the ride would need a total rework.

So, one afternoon Walt summoned “the boys” to Stage A, the orchestra stage (which, in 2018, was renamed the Sherman Brothers Stage), on the Disney studio lot so they could see and hear a mock-up of “The Children of the World” ride. After letting the music play for a few minutes, Disney shut it down. He turned to the boys and said, “You're gonna write a song that's a rondolet.” What he had in mind was a song that repeated lyrics and could be sung in a round, like “Row, Row, Row Your Boat.”

But the boys knew what he really needed. A “counterpoint” would work best for what Disney wanted to accomplish. This type of song allowed the chorus to be playing in one room of the ride and the verse in the next, letting the two melodic lines mesh as the boat sailed through the attraction.

Next, Disney advised the brothers to “write a song that shows children as the hope of the future. But don't be preachy.” Given that framework, the boys developed a theme and an idea for their song. The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Bay of Pigs were fresh in everyone's mind, so the brothers wanted the song to be an anthem for universal peace and understanding. With that, they wrote a ballad, an uptempo, and a moderate-paced version of the same song.

When Disney met with the boys to hear what they came up with, the brothers played “It’s a Small World (After All),” the moderate tempo version. After listening, Disney turned to the boys and said, “That'll work.” At the Disney studio this was notoriously known as high praise--behind his employee's backs, Disney was effusively complimentary, but not usually to their faces.

With the Sherman Brothers’ involvement, Disney got his song, along with a new name for the attraction at the Pepsi-UNICEF pavilion, as the title of their song “stuck” and sounded less cumbersome than “The Children of the World.”

The studio got to work recording and producing the song. A chorus of amateur children from ages eight to 12 were brought to the Disney lot to sing in English. Seeking authenticity, Southern California was scoured for children with British accents to sing the song as well. The studio was unsuccessful, so the British segment was recorded in England. The song was then sent to participating countries so their distinct versions could be locally recorded in countries including Italy, Mexico, Japan, and Sweden.

By late January 1964, the finishing touches were put on “It’s a Small World (After All).” The song arrangement for each geographic region featured in the exhibit was earmarked at roughly 48 seconds. Even with the distinct regional and locale differences and styles tied to the song, the

counterpoint style of the chorus and verse makes for a catchy, repetitive pattern. As anyone who has ever heard the song knows, this pattern and the repetitive lyrics are easily absorbed into your brain and may even get stuck in your head for minutes, if not hours. This is known as an “earworm”: a few bars of music that harmonize and/or synchronize and go round and round until they are all you hear long after the song stops playing.

On April 22, 1964, the opening day of the New York World's Fair, the public was introduced to Disney's earworm. If you weren't lucky enough to visit the fair in person, viewers at home got a sneak peek of (and listen to!) “It's a Small World” on May 17, 1964, when “Disneyland Goes to the World's Fair” was broadcast on television via “Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color” program.

While the Pepsi-UNICEF “It's a Small World” pavilion was an incredible success at the fair--over ten million tickets were sold for the attraction, at a cost of 60 cents for kids and 95 cents for adults, with proceeds going to UNICEF--the same could not be said for the 1964 New York World's Fair itself. The fair lost an enormous amount of money. It was unable to pay its investors, and a slew of lawsuits and disputes ensued. Within months of closing, most of the pavilions were destroyed, except for the ones Disney had created.

Walt knew that his pavilions would be successful and could live on at his theme park after the fair's finale. Richard Sherman's son, Gregg, shared a story illustrating Walt's confidence in “It's a Small World”:

Walt had driven my dad and uncle to WED Enterprises [now Disney Imagineering], a short distance from his studio, so they could see and hear how their new song was being implemented into the boat ride. At that time, they were not aware of any plans to use the exhibit beyond its stay at the New York World's Fair in 1964, so on the ride back to the studio, my Uncle Bob, who was in the front seat alongside Walt, said he and my dad were interested in donating any profits from the sale of the song to UNICEF, its sponsor. Walt SLAMMED ON THE BRAKES and emphatically said, “You never give up the rights to that song. It will put your grandchildren through college!” Dumbfounded, they fell silent as Walt pulled back on the road. Maybe six months later, Walt was giving a tour of the studio to some bankers and as my dad and uncle passed by, as if it were the same conversation, Walt said, “I'm putting that boat ride with your song in the park” and kept walking away. That song has indeed continued to fund my two boys' educations.

“It's a Small World” opened at Disneyland, in California, on May 28, 1966. It opened in Walt Disney World, in Florida, on October 1, 1971. Next came its opening at Tokyo Disneyland on April 15, 1983; Disneyland Paris, on April 12, 1992; and finally Hong Kong Disneyland on April 28, 2008.

The British Empire of old was often referred to as “the empire on which the sun never sets.” It appears as though today, something similar can be said for the Sherman Brothers' song “It's a Small World (After All).” With the song playing on a continuous loop for, give or take, 12 to 14

hours a day, seven days a week, at five locations around the world, for decades upon decades, it is without a doubt the most played and translated song of all time. Estimates have the song as publicly being played over 50 million times.

What started as a “prayer for peace,” according to Richard Sherman, for a quick stint at a World’s Fair, has taken on a life of its own. In many respects, so have the careers of Richard and Robert Sherman. The boys have written some of the most beloved and recognizable songs in film history, most notably perhaps with their work on “Mary Poppins.” Penning more than 200 songs for 27 films and two dozen television productions to their credit, the Sherman Brothers also contributed some legendary music for many Disney theme park attractions, aside from “It’s a Small World.”

The Sherman Brothers’ careers have spanned over 50 years and include a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, a National Medal of Arts from the United States government, induction into the Songwriters Hall of Fame, two Grammy Awards, two Academy Awards (out of nine nominations), and 23 gold and platinum albums. With the induction of “It’s a Small World (After All)” into the National Recording Registry from the Library of Congress, in 2022, the boys’ work continues to resonate and touch the hearts of millions of children and adults around the world who still hope and pray for peace nearly 60 years after the song was written.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.