

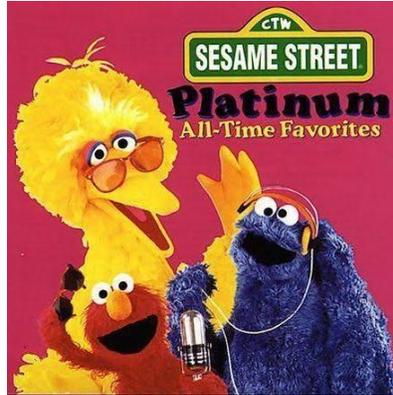
“Sesame Street: Platinum All-Time Favorites” (1995)

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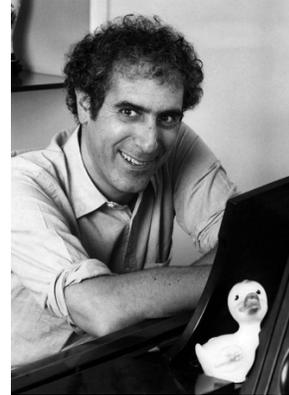
Essay by Kathryn A. Ostrofsky (guest post)*



Joe Raposo



Original album cover



Jeff Moss

“Sesame Street,” which premiered in 1969 and is still producing new episodes 50 years later, is one of the most recognizable and beloved programs in the history of television. Its meticulously-researched curriculum and its memorable puppet characters have long been acknowledged to have been important factors both in “Sesame Street’s” popularity and in its contributions to American culture, but its music has been just as critical. As a musical comedy-variety show, “Sesame Street” has broadcast thousands of songs and released over one hundred albums, along with scores of singles and book-and-audio sets. Catchy melodies attracted preschoolers’ attention, repetitious song structures served as teaching tools, and professional performances rendered the children’s program entertaining for adults who controlled the dial. Meanwhile, releasing albums extended “Sesame Street’s” lessons beyond the broadcast hour and helped fund continued production of the show.

“Sesame Street” reached nearly every American preschooler for decades, cutting across lines of ethnicity, region, and social class. Thus, although “Sesame Street” is rarely mentioned in lists of popular music, it is probable that more Americans can sing “C is for Cookie” than know most of the chart-topping hits of bygone years. The “Platinum All-Time Favorites” album is a compilation of recordings from “Sesame Street’s” first 25 years, released in 1995 by Sony Wonder on cassette and CD. It represents “Sesame Street’s” prolific output of broadcasts and recordings, which served as a common cultural experience for generations of American audiences. As a good “best of” album should, “Platinum All-Time Favorites” captures several elements that have made “Sesame Street’s” music successful. It represents the collaboration of multiple composers and performers, a variety of classic and contemporary musical styles, and the combination of playful and meaningful messages that have defined the program for decades.

The creators of the Children’s Television Workshop (CTW), the non-profit organization founded to produce “Sesame Street,” built the program on the premise that it had to be as entertaining as the commercial programming audiences expected. One way to achieve that was to hire musicians with experience in commercial entertainment and allow them much creative latitude. Most of the songs on this album were the works of Joe Raposo or Jeff Moss, the program’s two

most prolific composers, whose friendly rivalry spurred them each to write better than the other. Classically trained Raposo had studied with famed composer Nadia Boulanger, conducted Broadway and off-Broadway shows, and provided music for New York's Channel 5 Metromedia television station, before becoming "Sesame Street's" first music director. Moss became "Sesame Street's" first head writer after writing and composing for "Captain Kangaroo."

Through both his compositions and arrangements, Raposo forged a style for "Sesame Street" that combined contemporary bluesy, funky rock with throwbacks to 1920s vaudeville, Spike Jones-type novelties, and Tin Pan Alley. To play this eclectic blend, Raposo assembled a seven-piece house band of studio musicians with impressive backgrounds in jazz, Broadway, and television (several came from the house band of "The Tonight Show"). Notably, bassist Bob Cranshaw, best known for his 50 years with jazz saxophonist Sonny Rollins, simultaneously put in 40 years with "Sesame Street." "Sesame Street's" iconic musical style meshed perfectly with its repertory troupe of puppet performers who recorded many of the vocals. When CTW contracted Jim Henson to create and perform puppet characters specifically for "Sesame Street," his Muppet company was known for mixing the aesthetics of hip counterculture with those of vaudeville slapstick and one-liners.

The result was that "Sesame Street" kept up with the latest musical trends at the same time as it introduced generations of young people to America's cultural heritage. On "Platinum Hits," the "vo-vo-vo-de-o" refrain of Ernie's ode to his "Rubber Ducky" and the muted trumpet on Bert's hopelessly square "Doin' the Pigeon" dance, kept syncopated 1920s styles dynamic 50 years after the height of their popularity. More concrete references to the nation's performing arts traditions abound in "Sesame Street's" recordings, too. On this album, the voice of Herry Monster, a character who sings a verse of "Fuzzy and Blue," is modeled after Jimmy Durante, while "Happy Tapping with Elmo" is a direct homage to "Puttin' on the Ritz." The latter was composed by humorist Christopher Cerf, who, during his 30 years with CTW pioneered "Sesame Street's" technique of song parodies and produced several of its original cast albums, including "Platinum Hits." In addition to drawing inspiration from classic genres, "Sesame Street" consistently incorporated contemporary styles, often through parodies of popular hits. Here, the 1980s Brazilian dance craze "lambada" is transformed into a song about counting sheep, "The Lambada."

The lyrics of "Sesame Street's" songs have also conveyed many topics, ranging from the academic lessons that made the program famous to the social messages that made several of its songs rise to the level of American songbook standards. No "Sesame Street" album (or episode) would be complete without the number or letter lessons, like "C is for Cookie" demonstrating the hard 'C' sound. In promotional materials and reports to funders, CTW often emphasized such concrete lessons because their effectiveness could be easily measured, but the program also addressed antipoverty, racial tolerance, cooperation, and community. Puppeteer Caroll Spinney's two characters have been powerful vehicles for such messages: Big Bird's mistakes (like failing to recognize the alphabet in "ABC-DEF-GHI") help bolster children's confidence in their own knowledge and inquisitiveness, while Oscar demonstrates the legitimacy of disagreeing or having different tastes and opinions than others (for instance, "I Love Trash"). Representing the on-screen cast in this album, classically trained vocalist Bob McGrath, first known nationally for his weekly televised solos on "Sing Along with Mitch," carried much of

“Sesame Street’s” musical content as its resident music teacher for over 45 years. His character’s signature song, “People In Your Neighborhood” stems pedagogically from the trend in 1930s and ’40s progressive education and nonfiction children’s literature focusing on the “here and now,” in this case the trades and professions that the adults in a preschooler’s life might perform.

While the direct impact of the lessons may have been difficult to track, there is no question that these messages became some of “Sesame Street’s” most powerful lessons--not least because the songs they inspired did not immediately come across as didactic or child-oriented, but instead spoke the truths that any enduring ballad or anthem conveys to listeners of all ages. For instance, “Put Down the Duckie” is about the difficult choices involved in dedicating oneself to a challenge, while “I Don’t Want to Live on the Moon” is an eloquent appreciation of home, friendship, and belonging.

A few of the songs included on the “Platinum” album sold well in their original incarnations. Six came from the program’s debut album, “The Sesame Street Record,” produced for Columbia Records by Tom Shepard, famed for his ability to capture the essence of Broadway shows through the sound-only medium of original cast recordings. That album quickly went gold and won the 1970 Grammy Award for Best Recording for Children. “Rubber Duckie,” the single from the album, reached #11 on the “Billboard” charts in October of that year. Other songs entered popular consciousness through cover versions. “Sing,” released by “Sesame Street” in 1971, reached #3 on the charts when the Carpenters covered it in 1973. “Bein’ Green,” written about the difficulty of feeling too uninteresting and not standing out, was covered in the early 1970s by Frank Sinatra, Van Morrison and Buddy Rich. The singer’s final acceptance of himself and his color also caught the attention of Ray Charles, who turned it into a Black pride anthem on his 1975 album, “Renaissance.” While “Sing” and “Bein’ Green” have firmly entered the ranks of American songbook standards, the selection of songs on the “Platinum Hits” album demonstrates that many other “Sesame Street” songs are of equally high quality that have reached millions of people and made an indelible mark on American musical culture. As Joe Raposo once said, when he composed for “Sesame Street,” he “suddenly became conscious of this almost unbelievable extra responsibility that my music has in teaching all kinds of children all kinds of things, and moreover, providing them with perhaps the one most shared musical experience in the country.”

Kathryn A. Ostrofsky is a cultural historian at Angelo State University whose work explores the intersection of public broadcasting history, sound studies, and the cultural politics of minority representation in media. Her scholarship on “Sesame Street” has been published in the “Journal of Popular Music Studies” and in “Music in Comedy Television” (Routledge 2017), and is forthcoming in “The Soundtrack Album” (Routledge).

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.