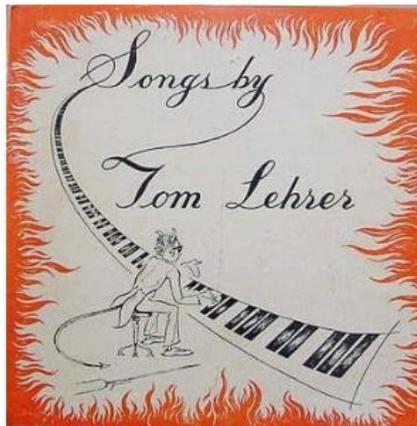


“Songs by Tom Lehrer” —Tom Lehrer (1953)

Added to the National Registry: 2004

Essay by Ronald L. Smith (guest post)



Original album art



Tom Lehrer, c. 1953

Today, “do it yourself” albums are common and easy for musicians. Computer programs have made it possible for singers to write, record and upload songs in a few hours, theoretically reaching thousands via streaming radio, iTunes and social media.

Back in 1953, Tom Lehrer did the seemingly impossible...he self-pressed an album of his comic songs, and managed to dispose of the entire first printing (400 copies). “I’d been singing these songs (at college events and in local clubs) and I assumed they had no commercial value so I just custom-recorded. I looked up in the Yellow Pages and I did it...the total recording cost was \$15, and that was for piano, studio, tape, editing, everything. I wasn’t trying to break into the market, it was just something to have around as a souvenir.”

He printed another 400. He reprinted. His notoriety grew. He even had an imitator (Jack Eljan) cover his songs on an indie New York label (without permission). The album, “Songs by Tom Lehrer” was eventually re-recorded and released by Reprise...and it would never go out of print!

For this feat alone, Lehrer has a place in history.

The other singular factor...was that he pioneered “sick” comedy on disc.

Typical for a college man, Lehrer’s motivation for writing “tasteless” songs was pure iconoclasm. Give him a form of music...the tango, the folk ballad, the country tune...and he’d happily devastate it. With Chas Addams’s cartoons popular in “The New Yorker,” Cole (“I get no kick from cocaine”) Porter’s arch sophistication greatly admired, and the campus crowd appreciating the new world of uncensored literature...it was still a shock when Lehrer offered up his alarming lyrics.

The love song “I Hold Your Hand in Mine” was about a severed hand. “Be Prepared” urged Boy Scouts to pimp their sisters. “My Home Town” gleefully recalled a collection of idiots, perverts and the store owner named Dan: “He was swell. He killed his mother-in-law and ground her up real well. And sprinkled just a bit over each banana split.”

Typical of a college kid, Lehrer found cheeky fun in lampooning classics. Browning may have been poetic in urging “grow old with me,” but Lehrer’s version was shockingly different. In “When You Are Old and Grey,” he sang: “Your teeth will start to go, dear, your waist will start to spread. In 20 years or so, dear, I’ll wish that you were dead.”

Lehrer, a keen music student, could imitate all trite forms of pop music, creating often very catchy copies of waltzes and marches. Then came the contrast of the macabre words. "Poisoning the Pigeons in the Park" was on "More of Tom Lehrer" released in 1959.

With two albums full of hideously amusing songs, Lehrer was in demand for concerts. The same material on "Songs" and "More Songs" was released, in live concert versions, as "Tom Lehrer Revisited" and "An Evening Wasted," which showed of Lehrer's skill at comically diffident song introductions.

As all the "sick comics" were discovering, iconoclastic comedy wasn't exactly appreciated by all critics or venues. Although not sexual or political, Lehrer ran into trouble here and there. In Australia, "Be Prepared" and a few other songs were banned. "I thought that democracy here was ruled by the majority," he said. "Nothing like this has ever happened to me before. I have sung these songs before many well-known Americans and also before members of the British royal family."

Fortunately times were changing, and Lehrer's satiric songs were welcomed on David Frost's "That Was the Week That Was" show. In 1965, he issued his third and last album of original material, "That Was The Year That Was," it featured a controversial jab at religious ritual, "The Vatican Rag." That one had a happy line, "Bow your knees with great respect, and... genuflect! Genuflect! Genuflect!"

After a tour of Sweden, Denmark and East Germany in 1967, Lehrer safely tucked himself into Academia, primarily working as a math professor. He later presided over music courses, but rarely performed a new song, much less a full concert.

Always a private man, never putting his photo on his albums, Lehrer was able to maintain a pleasant lifestyle for himself, with only a few of his scholarly students even aware of his cult standing as a "sick" comic whose albums were still steady sellers. He was somewhat amused that if a student came up to him for an autograph, it was because they heard that he wrote "Silent E" and a few other cheery tunes for PBS's 1970's companion show to "Sesame Street," "The Electric Company."

Much has been made of Lehrer's disappearance from show biz, but the man simply wasn't interested in performing comic songs over and over in nightclubs, and after parodying every genre of the day, he had no interest in taking on disco, punk or rap. He also found that in getting older, most every topic for comedy had "shades of gray." In the 60's, war was bad, organized religion silly, and songs about murder fun. Now, he was hesitant to write one-sided comic songs, and songs showing both sides of an issue wouldn't be funny at all.

Audiences laughed at the vicariously evil song "Smut" (on the "That Was The Year That Was" album) but Tom told me, "It's hard to take a position [now]. The audience would be split. I couldn't write 'Smut' today--there's a dichotomy within the liberal consensus of feminism vs. pornography. I'm for feminism and I'm for pornography. What can I do? To be funny you have to be shocking a little, and it's hard to be shocking now. People don't have a common body of knowledge anymore--cultural literacy--whatever you want to call it."

One of the reasons even the mild Weird Al Yankovic began to record fewer song parodies is that a fractioned audience had no idea what the original songs were...as people who liked rap didn't listen to pop, and pop fans didn't listen to arena rock or heavy metal.

But back in the day, Lehrer could cheerfully parody genres everyone knew, and even sing about the joys of porn: "When correctly viewed, everything is lewd! I could tell you things about

Peter Pan...and the Wizard of Oz is a dirty old man!" The song also had a typical rhyme-play from Lehrer: "Give me smut and nothing but. A dirty novel I can't shut. If it's uncut. And unsubt-le."

In many cases, Lehrer wrote definitive statements. His song "Pollution," acknowledging a Gershwin lyric, says it all: "Fish gotta swim and birds gotta fly--but they won't last long if they try."

"You can't be funny if you're angry," Mr. Lehrer told me. "That was one of the problems that let Lenny Bruce down, and then Mort Sahl when he got on the Warren Report. When you start getting angry then it's not funny anymore. You've got to be detached and view it with a real sense of perspective to find it funny. That's the problem."

In 2000, the box set "The Remains of Tom Lehrer" was issued, a compendium of both familiar and rare cuts...and a new one song that became an instant classic: "(I'm Spending) Hanukkah in Santa Monica." It was Lehrer with no axe to grind, just a puckish desire to come up with a seasonal song in a very empty category. How many good novelty songs about Hanukkah have there been since "Dreidel, Dreidel"? His offering naturally included typical Lehrer near-rhymes: "I'm spending Shavuoth in East St. Louis...."

Ronald L. Smith is the author of "Who's Who in Comedy," "Stars of Stand-Up," "Cosby," "Carson," "Comedy on Record," "Laughter at 78rpm" and other comedy biographies and reference works.

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