

Tom Lehrer, satirical singer-songwriter of the 1960s, is dead at 97

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Tom Lehrer, the American singer-songwriter who became well known for his biting and satirical songs on social and political topics in the 1960s, died at the age of 97 last month at his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Lehrer was a precocious student who graduated from Harvard with a bachelor's degree in mathematics at the age of 18, and went on to get his master's degree only a year later. At the same time, the New York City-born Lehrer was also a pianist and a lover of musical theater and popular song, and had begun to write his own songs as a teenager. While teaching at Harvard and MIT and continuing his work towards a Ph. D. (he never completed his dissertation), he often performed his songs for his friends. This led to the recording of an album in 1953. Its sales grew by word of mouth. Helped by a few features about him in the press, the sales of Lehrer's first album reached the astonishing level of about half-a-million within a few years.

Lehrer's early work showed the influence of Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, both in its lighthearted tone as well as its musical character. A good example of this is "The Elements" from 1959, one of Lehrer's songs that has retained its popularity. It lists all of the chemical elements, using humor and wordplay. It not only takes after Gilbert and Sullivan, but is set to Sullivan's own music—"I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major General," from *The Pirates of Penzance*, which had been written 80 years earlier.

The success of Tom Lehrer through the 1950s and especially the 1960s reflected the changing social climate in that period in the US as well as in Europe. Postwar prosperity had increased living standards, but the Cold War and McCarthyism had provoked fears of nuclear war, along with opposition to political repression and conservatism. At the same time a new

generation was discovering a bohemian night life in places like Boston, New York and San Francisco.

The time was ripe for the kind of dark, semi-jaundiced humor that suffused many of Lehrer's songs, like "Poisoning Pigeons in the Park" and "The Old Dope Peddler." His work had something about it that was reminiscent of *Mad Magazine*, the satirical humor publication that was launched in 1952 and reached the height of its popularity over those same decades.

Lehrer's songs turned towards political and social subjects just as the political struggles and crises of the 1960s emerged. This was the period of the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba (1961), the Cuban missile crisis (1962) and the assassination of John F. Kennedy (1963). Stanley Kubrick's *Doctor Strangelove* captured some of the madness and danger posed by American imperialism in its self-appointed role as world policeman. Some of Lehrer's most well-known songs during this period dealt—always in a deceptively lighthearted way, and with music that is jarringly but also cleverly out of place alongside the words—with the topic of US militarism and the danger of war.

These include "Send the Marines," dating from 1965, the year of the US intervention in the Dominican Republic, as well as the escalation of the war in Vietnam. This one perhaps deserves to be reproduced in full:

When someone makes a move
Of which we don't approve
Who is it that always intervenes?
U.N. and O.A.S.
They have their place, I guess
But first—send the Marines!

We'll send them all we've got,
John Wayne and Randolph Scott
Remember those exciting fighting scenes?

To the shores of Tripoli
But not to Mississippi
What do we do? We send the Marines!

For might makes right
And till they've seen the light
They've got to be protected
All their rights respected
Till somebody we like can be elected.

Members of the Corps
All hate the thought of war
They'd rather kill them off by peaceful means
Stop calling it aggression,
Ooh, we hate that expression!

We only want the world to know
That we support the status quo
They love us everywhere we go
So when in doubt
Send the Marines!

Also noteworthy is "So Long Mom: A Song for World War III," dating as well from 1965. But this was not a brand new theme for Lehrer. "We'll All Go Together When We Go" was written in 1958, excerpted below:

... And we will all go together when we go.
What a comforting fact that is to know.
Universal bereavement,
An inspiring achievement,
Yes, we all will go together when we go...

Oh, we will all fry together when we fry.
We'll be french fried potatoes by and by.
There will be no more misery,
When the world is our rotisserie,
Yes, we all will fry together when we fry.

All of these songs, as clever and original as they often were, reflected a kind of mordant pessimism, if not cynicism. They were meant to provoke laughter and dissatisfaction, but they also suggested that not much could be done to change the situation.

Lehrer's popularity, especially among students, foreshadowed the middle class campus radicalism that dominated much of the anti-Vietnam War protest movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. After several tours to Britain, Canada and Australia, as well as touring dates in the US, Lehrer stopped performing in 1967, however, and stopped writing soon after. Performing on only a few occasions over the next few

decades, he returned to teaching full time, both mathematics as well as musical theater history, at the University of California at Santa Cruz. His singing career had been neither long nor prolific—he once calculated that he had performed 109 shows and wrote 37 songs.

Lehrer's music acquired a kind of cult status and never disappeared. A new generation was exposed to his songs by "Tomfoolery," a revue that originated in London in 1980 and subsequently traveled to New York and other cities. The singer, who had no family, announced several years ago that he was relinquishing all rights to his songs and lyrics. They are all freely available at tomlehrersongs.com.

There is no doubt that Lehrer's songs struck a chord, and there were occasions when he ran into opposition, as when the BBC banned most of the songs on a just-released album in the 1960s. But for the most part Lehrer's sarcasm was tolerated, especially since it was usually couched in somewhat jaded terms.

The issues Lehrer sang about have not only not disappeared—they are more explosive than ever. But events such as the ongoing genocide in Gaza do not lend themselves to the kind of amusing treatment dispensed by Tom Lehrer. As Lehrer himself explained many years ago, "Political satire became obsolete when Henry Kissinger was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize." This is a comment that takes on special meaning at a time when Donald Trump demands almost every day that he be nominated for and awarded the same honor.

In a sense, Lehrer's passing is a reminder—although none should be necessary—that the days of protest and middle class radicalism are long gone. Today, musicians like Roger Waters, Macklemore, Kneecap and Jesse Welles take a different approach, a far more serious one, as they oppose the crimes of the decaying capitalist system. Satire certainly has its place, and American conditions at present provide ample opportunity for almost endless derision, but the times call for a more devastating satire and for a movement that can put an end to the atrocities it describes.



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