

What Makes Songs Popular

Not genius, not inspiration—but maybe it's love

By OSCAR HAMMERSTEIN 2nd

WHEN I WAS a small boy it was thought that the people who wrote the songs of the land were men and women of unusual talents. The wedding of words and music was a mystic thing defying penetration by the layman. One was "inspired" to write a song, or one was not. This theory was, of course, erroneous. Today, it is thought that practically anyone can write a song. This theory is as erroneous as the earlier one.

Why do so many try? Why is my mailbox jammed daily with songs from school children, businessmen, housewives who "don't want their husbands to know," college students, farmers, doctors, civil servants, and inmates of mental institutions? Obviously they would like to make quick and easy fortunes. And their hopes are based on the deceptive simplicity of popular songs.

A very capable taxi driver hears a tune that has reached the "Hit Parade." The idea of the lyric is not new. Dinah Shore is in love

with some fellow who has gone away and she misses him something awful. A capable taxi driver should certainly be able to think up something as good as that. The words are of one and two syllables. You don't need a college education to handle them. The rhymes are nothing fancy either.

The capable taxi driver knows a capable shipping clerk who can pick out anything on the piano—anything at all. He's dashed off a few melodies of his own, too, and the capable taxi driver is darned if they aren't just as good as that stuff you hear on the radio. No reason why he and his friend shouldn't get together some Sunday and bat one out. Look at what one of those hit songs can make! Not only that, but it might be sold to Hollywood. It might be put in a Betty Grable picture and the capable taxi driver might meet Betty Grable! Not bad, huh? . . . "Why-in-hell-don'tcha look where y'goin'?" asks a passing truck driver, and it's a good question to

Lyrics in the borders are from the author's songs

demand of an amateur songwriter.

The big difference between an amateur and a professional is that the amateur hopes and the professional works. The amateur starts hoping too soon and stops working too soon. There is another interesting difference. Most amateur songwriters' hopes are centered on making big money quickly. They don't love songs for their own sake—as all good professionals do.

What makes popular songs popular? When I write a new song, or hear a new song by someone else, I cannot, with any degree of certainty, predict or measure its probable success. I have met no publisher, performing artist, producer, or record manufacturer who can do this. These experts can, of course, make closer guesses than most people, but they are only guesses. The music business constantly passes up winners and backs losers. The gauging of popular values in any one song, then, is a difficult and tricky thing. However, there are certain basic stand-

ards that are useful in criticism as well as in the creation of songs.

I can be more articulate about the lyrics of a song than about the music. I am not a musician. I have—as all of us have in varying degrees—a feeling for melody. A tune pleases or it doesn't. I believe popular airs must be simple and strong in structure. Originality of composition is an attractive but not an essential asset. Strength and simplicity are. A broad, sweeping line of melody, easy to sing and easy to listen to, is the objective of a popular composer. To achieve this without being *too* simple, *too* unoriginal, requires skill and talent. How this is achieved I don't know. I know something about metrical pattern and I have a sense of musical structure, but

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OL' MAN RIVER, DAT OL' MAN RIVER, HE MUST KNOW SUMPIN' BUT DON'T SAY NOTHIN',

I cannot string together any series of notes that sounds even fairly attractive.

It seems to me that the most important element in a lyric is subject matter. A song had better be about something fundamental—which is why so many songs are about love. Everyone is interested in the fulfillment or frustration of love. People are also interested in hope: Happy days are in store; blue skies are coming when the clouds disappear. They are interested in yearning for home, a mythical little white house on a green lawn, full of peace and freedom from care. They are interested in children and mothers and patriotism.

They are not interested in sophisticated characters or their eccentric foibles. They are not interested in strictly local allusions, or in things or people they don't know well and who are not a part of their lives and personal experiences. That is why so many clever musicians and Park Avenue poets who slay their audiences in a drawing room win no audience at all on the radio.

Here is an example—an extreme one, I will admit—of the triumph of good subject matter over style and learning. About sixty years ago there was a very popular song which went like this:

*While strolling through the park
one day,*

In the merry month of May

I was taken by surprise

By a pair of roguish eyes

*In a moment my poor heart was
stole away.*

This is not very good verse. But what a pleasant experience it refers to! Who wouldn't like to be strolling through the park in the merry month of May and be surprised by a pair of roguish eyes? And who wouldn't be pleased at the idea of having his heart stolen? This is the stuff of which good songs are made. Literature and rhetoric are beside the point.

After subject matter comes skill, craftsmanship, technique, or whatever you want to call it. It consists of bearing in mind that people listen to songs with relaxed minds. They do not study songs. All the work must be done by the writers and singers. The listeners do nothing but sit back and let the song work on them. If they miss a line, the song loses them for good. There is no going back to relisten, as the reader of a book may reread. A refrain must keep a constant grip on the hearer. The lyric must advance the story with each line, or at any rate, stay directly on its story. No tangents, no parentheses. The words must be clear in meaning and clear in sound.

THE SKY WAS BLUE, AND HIGH ABOVE

THE MOON WAS NEW, AND SO WAS

HE JUST KEEPS ROLLIN' HE KEEPS ON ROLLIN' ALONG. 

The most beautiful poetry is useless to a song if it falls phonetically short of effortless singing and effortless listening.

Here is my favorite example of good lyric writing: "All alone by the telephone." Simple words. A child of eight might have thought of them. You might have thought of them. But you didn't. Irving Berlin did. They are the first line of a refrain, five words which establish that someone is not only alone but lonely—and anxious and heartbroken. You don't sit by a telephone all by yourself unless you are desperately hoping that it will ring. Browning has written better poetry; Wagner has written better music; no one has written a better first line for a popular song.

Young people who would like to write popular songs tend to stress the banality of the current crop. Banality is always present in any group of current hits, but it would be profitable for young writers to analyze these songs and

learn what qualities enable them to survive their banality. Song writing is a highly specialized craft, mastered by only a few, because only a few respect it enough really to work at it.

The average youngster merely emulates the banality he disdains without supporting it with a careful technical job. He dashes off a song. A professional toils and sweats and polishes and doesn't submit his work to anyone until he has done everything that he can think of to make his song good. And then he loves it. He really loves it. His taste is frequently bad but his intentions are always good. Now and then his intentions coincide with the public's desire and he has a hit.

He never knows exactly how he did it. But he thinks he knows. At that moment he thinks he knows more than Shakespeare, Dante, Mme. Curie, Sherlock Holmes, or even Perry Como. He has become a professional songwriter. — 10 —

LET MY HEART AWAIT—
...S— ME DREAM ALL DAY

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Footnote

HITS OF THE PAST DECADE

No authoritative list of the "most popular" songs of all time has yet been compiled. In the music trade, sales figures are as sacrosanct as the secrets of statecraft. But as a rule-of-thumb index, the weekly selections of radio's "Hit Parade" are probably as accurate as any. Here are the songs that have, since 1937, ranked among the "first ten" for more than 20 weeks: *People Will Say We're In Love* (30 weeks), *White Christmas, I'll Be Seeing You, You'll Never Know* (24 each), *Paper Doll* (23), *They Say It's Wonderful, Maria Elena* (22 each), *As Time Goes By* (21). The following songs lead in the number of times each has ranked No. 1: *I Hear a Rhapsody, White Christmas, I'll Be Seeing You* (10 times each), *You'll Never Know, My Heart Tells Me, Don't Fence Me In* (9 each).

KNOW CAN NEVER BE TRUE

VE. THIS EAGER HEART OF MINE WAS SINGING: LOVER, WHERE CAN YOU BE?