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*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

# Tom Lehrer, master satirist of Cold War era, dies at 97

In song, he brilliantly skewered clichés about romance, patriotism and small-town life.



By Nicole Arthur

Tom Lehrer, a social and political satirist who amassed a devoted following in the 1950s and 1960s for routines featuring blithely subversive musical numbers such as “So Long Mom (A Song for World War III),” “National Brotherhood Week” and “The Vatican Rag,” died on Saturday at his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He was 97.

His death was confirmed by his friend, David Herder, who said that the cause was unknown.

Mr. Lehrer — an Ivy League mathematics teacher who spent his early academic career on the periphery of show business — created a repertoire of songs that subverted saccharine clichés about romance, patriotism and small-town life when they weren’t skewering the Catholic Church, the Boy Scouts of America or the U.S. Army.

Once characterized as “a Charles Addams of the keyboard,” after the dark-humored illustrator, Mr. Lehrer perfected the musical bait-and-switch, pairing genteel, almost prissy tunes with lyrics that were gruesome, risqué or irreverent. “All the world seems in tune/ On a spring afternoon/ When we’re poisoning pigeons in the park,” he warbled to the one-two-three of a tinkling waltz titled “Poisoning Pigeons in the Park.”

Sentimentality was Mr. Lehrer’s favorite musical target. Other songs were gleefully sacrilegious — “The Vatican Rag,” his most controversial composition, was a tuneful take on the impact of Vatican II reforms on Catholic ritual.

*Get in line in that processional*

*Step into that small confessional*

*There, the guy who’s got religion’ll*

*Tell you if your sin’s original*

His astute social commentary, verbal dexterity and often academic subject matter differentiated him from mere novelty acts.

His song “National Brotherhood Week” was a send-up of platitudes about racial conciliation during bloody civil rights encounters and famously envisioned Black singer and civil rights activist Lena Horne and segregationist Alabama sheriff James Clark dancing cheek to cheek. He concludes of such feel-good efforts:

*It's only for a week, so have no fear*

*Be grateful that it doesn't last all year*

Mr. Lehrer was not the only social satirist of the post-World War II period — Stan Freberg and Mort Sahl were contemporaries, and it was the heyday of Mad magazine — but he is the only one still widely known.

Many of his topics, among them the military-industrial complex, the threat of nuclear Armageddon, xenophobia and environmental catastrophe, still resonate with pointed lyrics about moral ambiguity and ethical compromise. His ballad “Wernher von Braun,” focused on the Nazi Germany missile scientist who later worked for NASA: “Once the rockets are up, who cares where they come down?/‘That’s not my department,’ says Wernher von Braun.”

All four of the LPs that Mr. Lehrer made in the 1950s and 1960s are still in print, with one, 1964’s “That Was the Year That Was,” earning a gold record a remarkable 31 years after its release.

“It has spread not like Ebola, but like herpes,” Mr. Lehrer liked to say of his renown. “So slowly.”

One of Mr. Lehrer’s biggest promoters over the years was the disc jockey Barry Hansen, better known as Dr. Demento, who called the songwriter “the most brilliant song satirist ever recorded.” (Mr. Lehrer holds the dubious distinction of being the second-most-requested artist on Dr. Demento’s radio show, the first being another avowed Lehrer fan, “Weird Al” Yankovic.)

Thomas Andrew Lehrer was born April 9, 1928, in Manhattan, where his father was a necktie manufacturer. He described himself as “Jewish by ancestry — more to do with the delicatessen than the synagogue.”

He began studying classical piano at 7 but soon abandoned it in favor of learning the popular songs of the day. He frequently credited his parents with introducing him to musical theater as a child.

He grew up with Tin Pan Alley classics, Gilbert and Sullivan, and Rodgers and Hammerstein. His most-cited musical influence was entertainer Danny Kaye, whose delivery in “Tchaikovsky” — a rhyming list of 50 Russian composers recited at breakneck speed — he quickly learned to imitate.

After graduating from the Loomis Chaffee prep school in Connecticut, Mr. Lehrer was admitted to Harvard University in 1943 at age 14. He had written his admissions essay in rhyming verse.

He studied mathematics, completing a bachelor’s degree in 1946 and a master’s degree the following year. As an undergraduate, he wrote the college fight song send-up “Fight Fiercely, Harvard” (“Albeit they possess the might/ Nonetheless we have the will”) that remained a staple of the university’s football games for decades.

In 1950, he began singing his humorous songs at university parties and functions. Three years later, having realized with some surprise that he had accumulated enough material to make a record, he paid \$15 for an hour of studio time and recorded the dozen tunes that comprise “Songs by Tom Lehrer” in one sitting.

He had 400 copies pressed, which he sold on the Harvard campus for \$3 each. Mr. Lehrer had taken care to make only as many copies as he thought he could sell without losing money, but he soon began to get mail orders from across the country. The record — whose alternately prurient and macabre lyrics precluded radio airplay in the United States — gained momentum by word of mouth. He made his first nightclub appearance — at the Blue Angel in New York — the same year.

In 1953, while studying for a PhD in mathematics at Harvard, Mr. Lehrer recorded another batch of songs.

It’s easy to imagine why Mr. Lehrer, at once brainy and naughty, appealed to collegiate audiences — he once rhymed “philately” and “Lady Chatterley” — but harder to imagine the shock value that his lyrics, be they sacrilegious, suggestive or just plain perverse, must have had at the time.

As Mr. Lehrer told The Washington Post in 1982, “I was often accused of bad taste in the ’50s and ’60s, but the songs which prompted that accusation seem positively genial today.”

He was a peculiarly 1950s figure — a well-mannered iconoclast, the antiestablishment figure operating within the establishment. Lean and bespectacled in a suit and tie, Mr. Lehrer was his own straight man; much of his music’s appeal lay in the deadpan introductions that accompanied his jocose delivery.

The professorial mien evinced at Mr. Lehrer’s performances was no put-on. He demonstrably loved academia: He began teaching mathematics when he was still a teenager and continued to do so after he (mostly) walked away from show business in 1960.

In addition to teaching at Harvard, Wellesley College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology — at one point concurrently — he spent 16 years pursuing a PhD that he never completed, and remained a familiar campus figure even during his brief stint in the limelight.

Sometimes the pedagogue and the songwriter collided, as in “New Math,” “Lobachevsky” or “The Elements” (in which Mr. Lehrer recites every element in the Periodic Table to the tune of Gilbert and Sullivan’s “I am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General”).

Mr. Lehrer’s nonacademic jobs were few but colorful — and proved to be excellent songwriting fodder. In the summer of 1952, he worked at Los Alamos for the Atomic Energy Commission, and he was employed as a theoretical physicist for Baird Atomic the following year. Rather than wait to be drafted, he enlisted in the Army (inspiration for his tune “It Makes a Fellow Proud to be a Soldier”) and worked for the National Security Agency from 1955 to 1957.

In the years that followed his military service, Mr. Lehrer undertook a series of concert performances, recording his second album — twice — in 1959. “More of Tom Lehrer” was recorded in a studio, while “An Evening Wasted With Tom Lehrer” featured the same songs recorded live.

Afterward, he abruptly abandoned show business and once again took up his doctoral studies. Mr. Lehrer was famously ambivalent about performing, and many factors influenced his decision to quit: He eschewed the “anonymous affection” offered by audiences and took a cynical view of his function as an entertainer. “I wasn’t preaching to the converted,” he frequently said, “I was titillating the converted.”

Mr. Lehrer became nearly as famous for stepping out of the spotlight as he had been during his brief period in it. “I’ve always considered him the J.D. Salinger of demented music,” Yankovic once said, referring to the recluse author of “The Catcher in the Rye.”

Yet Mr. Lehrer’s songwriting skills remained in demand. In 1964, he was hired to write topical tunes for the short-lived NBC program “That Was the Week That Was.” He did not perform on the show, whose regulars included David Frost, Buck Henry and Alan Alda; his songs were sung on the air by folk singer Nancy Ames.

Mr. Lehrer complained that the show’s producers took out all the best lines and replaced them with “something vapid,” so the following year he performed them himself on his third and final album, “That Was the Year That Was.”

Many of his most trenchant songs hail from this period: “The Folk Song Army,” “Send the Marines” and “National Brotherhood Week.”

Mr. Lehrer’s career took an unpredictable turn in 1970, when his Harvard friend Joe Raposo tapped him to write 10 songs for the Children’s Television Workshop show “The Electric Company.” Today the best-known of these is “Silent E” (Who can turn a cub into a cube?/ Who can turn a tub into a tube?).

He said afterward that his authorship of “Silent E” was the only one of his achievements that truly impressed his college students.

Around this time, Mr. Lehrer — who never married and ascribed the fact to his short attention span — began to divide his time between Cambridge and Santa Cruz, California, where he joined the University of California at Santa Cruz faculty.

He spent January through June in California, teaching, among other things, mathematics to liberal arts students, a class he jokingly referred to as “Math for Tenors.” He also taught a popular workshop in the history of musical theater.

He evaded the limelight until 1980, when theater impresario Cameron Mackintosh (later of “Cats” fame) mounted “Tomfoolery,” a four-person musical revue of Mr. Lehrer’s compositions, in London. The production, a modest success that was later performed in New York, occasioned a burst of “Where Is He Now?” press coverage — a burst that was repeated in 2000, when Rhino Entertainment released a comprehensive three-disc box set of Mr. Lehrer’s works wryly titled “The Remains of Tom Lehrer.”

Mr. Lehrer’s reflections on his own career were mostly limited to denying that he’d had one.

“Thirty-seven songs in 20 years is hardly what I’d call a career,” he quipped. He did wax philosophical on the subject at least once.

Writing in the liner notes to the 1997 compilation “Songs & More Songs by Tom Lehrer,” he said, “If, after hearing my songs, just one human being is inspired to say something nasty to a friend, or perhaps to strike a loved one, it will all have been worth the while.”

*Sophia Nguyen contributed to this report.*

## **CORRECTION**

An earlier version of this article stated that Lehrer worked for the National Security Administration from 1955 to 1957. In fact, he worked for the National Security Agency. The article has been updated.

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