

He Would Have Thought of Something Funny to Say Here:

The Life and Comedy of Tom Lehrer

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# 1 Introduction

In 1967, the heart of the Cold War, a lanky Russian Jewish mathematician from the United States sat at a piano in front of a large audience in Copenhagen, singing a satire about mutually assured destruction and nuclear holocaust, that was televised to viewers around the world.<sup>[2]</sup> Should we be *that* surprised? Let's figure it out!

After a review of his life, we will show why Tom Lehrer's satiric and critical comedy style is as expected, considering the sociological progression of Jewish comedians in the United States.

## 2 Biographical Overview

### 2.1 Adolescence

Tom Lehrer was born into a secular Russian Jewish family in the Upper East Side of Manhattan on April 9, 1928. The time between World War 1 and World War 2 was tense for Jews in America.<sup>[8]</sup> This tension could very well explain why a Jewish family would decide to give their son a name like Tom that could blend more easily into the gentile population, instead of a more identifiably Jewish name, like, Lehrer's grandfather Abraham who was born in Russia in 1859 and immigrated to the United States before he had his son (Tom's father) Moses in 1989.<sup>[3]</sup>

Lehrer began studying classical piano as an eight year old. After showing his parents a preference for popular music, he was allowed to switch instructors. Lehrer says in an *American Scholar* article, "Having a popular music teacher worked out very well for me. I began writing tunes when I was seven or eight. But I was in college when I began writing parodies of popular songs."<sup>[7]</sup> Lehrer graduated from the Loomis Chaffee School in Windsor, Connecticut.<sup>[4]</sup> Not much

more is known about his childhood. As Jeff Morris says in a magazine article biography of Lehrer, “It’s entirely possible that he slept his way from 1928 to 1944.”<sup>[1]</sup>

In 1944, Lehrer left New York City and moved to Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he earned a bachelor’s degree in mathematics.<sup>[5]</sup> As a student, Lehrer began to parody songs and write others for the entertainment of his friends, including “Fight Fiercely, Harvard” in 1945.<sup>[4]</sup> He wrote “The Subway Song” on his first subway ride from Cambridge into Boston, realizing that the subway stop labels made the funny exclamation “HCKCPW!”<sup>[1]</sup> As a joking reference to a prominent scientific journal of the time (*The Physical Review*), Lehrer compiled these songs into what he named *The Physical Revue*.<sup>[4]</sup> Also included were parodies “A Liter and a Gram” (“A Bushel and a Peck”), “The Derivative Song” (“There’ll Be Some Changes Made”), and “The Elements” (“The Major-General’s Song” from Gilbert and Sullivan’s *The Pirates Of Penzance*).<sup>[1]</sup> After graduation, he performed this collection of academic satires on campus in January of 1951 and again in May of 1952, as well as at various student gatherings and around the college town area.<sup>[5]</sup>

The draft for World War 2 reduced college populations, allowing younger students to attend; Lehrer was only eighteen when he finished his undergraduate studies<sup>[7]</sup> in just three years,<sup>[5]</sup> in 1946.<sup>[1]</sup> He earned his MA the next year in 1947<sup>[1][7]</sup> and stayed in Cambridge as a graduate student until 1953.<sup>[1]</sup>

The word spread about a “depraved individual” singing funny songs and Lehrer was encouraged to put out an album, so on January 23, 1953, Lehrer spent \$15 for some studio time and recorded his first ten-inch LP, *Songs by Tom Lehrer*.<sup>[1]</sup> He initially bought 400 copies,<sup>[5]</sup> self-published the album, and sold it around campus and by mail order. All 400 copies were quickly sold out and spread around the country just in time for the holiday season (“like herpes,” Lehrer

joked). Over 350,000 copies sold soon after.<sup>[5]</sup> He attempted to interest RCA, Decca, and Capitol labels but was denied by each.<sup>[1]</sup>

## 2.2 Maturity

Lehrer entered the doctoral program at Harvard and (variably) remained there for the next sixteen years, juggling teaching jobs at MIT, Harvard, and Wellesley.<sup>[7]</sup> In order to avoid the draft, he worked for Baird Atomic in Cambridge for about a year<sup>[1]</sup> and the Atomic Energy Commission's nuclear laboratory in Los Alamos.<sup>[7]</sup> However, in January of 1955, he was inducted into the Army and served for two years.<sup>[1]</sup>

After an honorable discharge, Lehrer occasionally performed at night clubs and other venues around Cambridge and on some tours to big cities. His performances were often attacked by critics, producing some wonderful quotations for the back of future albums! When asked about the negative ratings in the news, Lehrer responded: “The concert sells out, the audience loves it, so who cares what the paper says? I enjoyed the bad reviews; they didn't have any effect on my morale.”<sup>[1]</sup>

By March 1959, he had built up enough material to record two of his performances in the Harvard's Sanders Theater, which became the album, *An Evening Wasted with Tom Lehrer*. Simultaneously, the songs were released in the studio-recorded album, *More of Tom Lehrer* (without an audience at RCA). A 1960 tour to England, Germany, and Australia followed. As a result Decca records in England, used recordings done at MIT the previous year (abandoning the low-quality recordings done abroad) to release a tour album, *Tom Lehrer Revisited*.<sup>[1]</sup>

Quite unexpectedly, Australian audiences did not respond positively to the dark humor that

Lehrer brought to the stage, prompting him to leave the limelight and return to teaching. In 1964 he was pulled back to show-business to be a writer for an NBC news satire called *That Was the Week That Was* (TW3 for short), which quickly went under.<sup>[5]</sup> Lehrer recorded nine songs from TW3 and five new ones, and the Warner/Reprise label produced a new album, *That Was the Year That Was*. Tired of maintaining the albums from his past, he made the label agree to re-release his previous albums with much the applause edited out. Warner/Reprise was dissatisfied with the sound quality of some of the original recordings, and asked Lehrer to re-record some of the material in stereo. Looking back, he regrets some of the changes he made to the songs to “bring them up to date.”<sup>[1]</sup>

With the exception of his contributions to the 1972 PBS children’s TV show “The Electric Company,” the musical “Tomfoolery” in 1980, and a few performances and short tours here and there, Lehrer’s performing career dwindled off, and he focused on teaching two subjects at UC Santa Cruz in California: “The American Musical” and “The Nature of Math.” He still found time to write, and in 1960 won a Gold Record award for TW3.<sup>[1]</sup> In 2000, Rhino Records released a lifetime compilation album, *The Remains of Tom Lehrer*.<sup>[5]</sup>

## **2.3 Senility**

For a while, Lehrer split his time between summers in Massachusetts and winters in California. Now, he is sometimes seen hanging around the UC Santa Cruz theater department trying to figure out what the end of this sentence should be.

### 3 Lehrer's Comedy Is Jewish

The ironic bit is that his wonderfully dark comedy is not perceivably Jewish, and that is exactly what makes it Jewish.

The further past the Holocaust we get, the more we see Jews (in particular Jewish comedians) transition from hiding who they are in order to stay safe to being prideful in their Jewish personhood. As this generation of Jews becomes more assimilated into the gentile population, lines of ethnicity fade, and while pride is still relevant, there is no longer a need for reclaiming social identity like there is when an angry German dog enthusiast and failed painter/mustache model dictator kills six million of your friends. Instead, the newly assimilated Jewish generation now has an interesting position between worlds. W.E.B. Du Bois argued that such minority groups must look at the world through two lenses, the one of the dominant social group and the one of the minority collective. This dual lens lends itself to the enhancement of socio-critical comedy, for the best social critic comedians are those who can look at the world in an interestingly different way. This perspective explains the substantial rise of social commentary among Jewish comedians. Since Tom Lehrer was still an undergraduate when he released his first album, it is not surprising that he jumped on the social criticism train early.

#### 3.1 *Songs by Tom Lehrer*

It is clear from the artwork on the front cover and Lehrer's message on the back of *Songs by Tom Lehrer* (see Figure 1), that he wished to portray himself as a troublemaker: when the dark-glasses-wearing blind devil plays an infinite piano in a circle of fire and he tells you that he is "depraved," you believe him. While the songs in the collection are meant to shed a nasty light onto artifacts

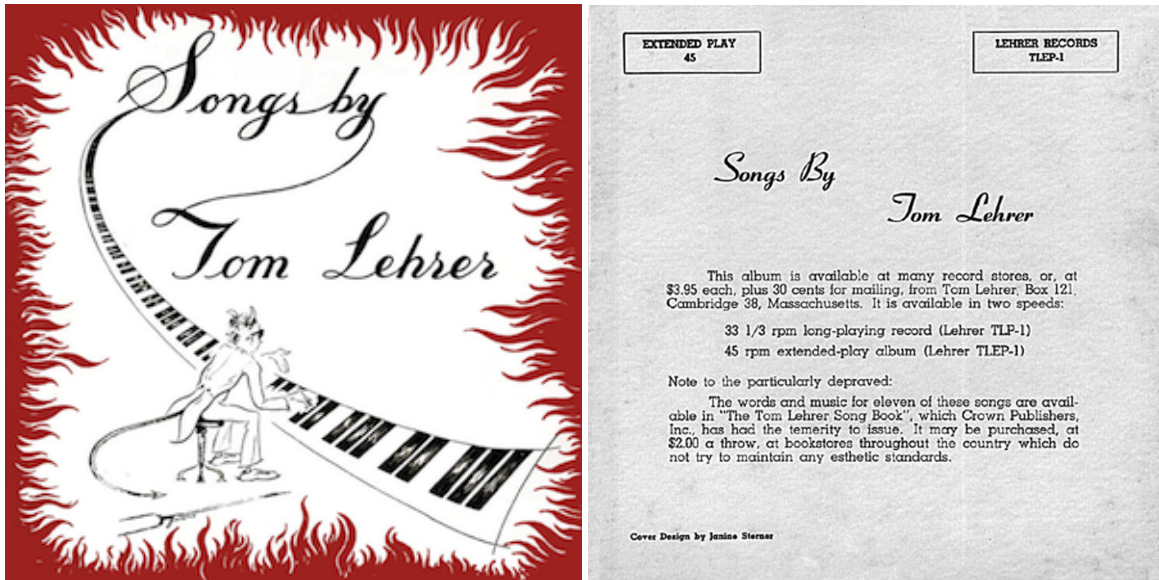


Figure 1: *Songs by Tom Lehrer* front and back covers

of Americana, they also speak to a college student who is trying to make other college students laugh. Interestingly, considering that in these songs Lehrer is giving his *view* of society, portraying himself as a blind mythic figure lends to the notion that he is ‘all knowing.’

The most famous song on this album is “Fight Fiercly, Harvard,” where Lehrer pokes fun at the violent style of fight song while mocking Harvard’s civility. He jokes in an introduction that there ought to be a fight song more “gentile.” Lehrer sings “We shall invite the whole team up for tea” and “Come on, chaps, fight for Harvard’s glorious name // Won’t it be peachy if we win the game? // (oh, goody!) // Let’s try not to injure them, but // Fight, fight, fight!” He also lets his inner mathematician show when he tells the team to “Hurl that spheroid<sup>1</sup> down the field.”<sup>[10]</sup> Another worthy mention from this album is “I Wanna Go Back to Dixie,” where Lehrer makes lots of clever southern references and great rhymes while ironically explaining why he “really [is] a-fixin’ // To

<sup>1</sup>*Spheroid* is the mathematical term for an imperfect sphere. An American football would classify as a prolate spheroid. Yeah, I have an inner mathematician too.

go home and start a-mixin' // Down below that Mason-Dixon line.”<sup>[9]</sup>

In “My Hometown,” Lehrer paints a disturbing picture of seemingly pleasant suburbia. He iterates through “just plain folks” and unmask them for who they really are: the pretty little girl next door that grows up to be a prostitute, the mild-mannered cannibal druggist on the corner, the porn-peddling and unhygienic math teacher, and the list goes on. He capitalizes on corruption and the gross underbelly of the monster of society while wrapping the most taboo subjects in subtle euphemisms. An interesting pair that he chose to point out were ‘his’ Sunday school teacher and “Kindly Parson Brown.” In the original 1948 recording, he sings “That fellow was no fool // Who taught our Sunday School // And neither was our kindly Parson Brown // I guess I’d better leave this line out just be on the safe side // In my home town,” the implication being that the two are hypocritical gay lovers.<sup>[9]</sup> However, in a later recording he said that same censored line but in Yiddish! It is very possible that this change was due to a greater comfort later in life to let his Jewish background show. While he was first writing the song, consciously or subconsciously, he slips in a reference to Christianity: he most certainly did not go to Sunday School as a child.

### **3.2 *More of Tom Lehrer***

In the 1959 album, *More of Tom Lehrer*, we see a new mixing of social influences.

First, we begin to see a little more Jewish pride humor, most notably, “Poisoning Pigeons in the Park.” At first, the song is calm and genteel, singing of a sweet afternoon in the park. Quickly, though, Lehrer starts describing the way he likes to kill pigeons, and without much thought, singing along to a quirky song about killing a seemingly nasty animal is easy. Since some other songs on the album are making fun of various non-temporal subjects, such as “Oedipus Rex,” and others are



just plain clever and not offensive at all, such as “The Elements,” at first it seems as though this song is also just silly. However, much like the Mormon missionaries in the *Book of Mormon* song “Hasa Diga Eebowai,” get a shock when they learn the meaning of what they had been lulled into singing, we too are stunned when Lehrer drops the line “except for the few that we take home to experiment,” and we realize that by singing along, we have been playing the part of Nazis in the Holocaust. . . oh, boy. Lehrer forces this discomfort on his audience and sheds some light on how easy it is to joke about killing something when you see it as, say, a dirty “East European species of cockroach.”<sup>[12]</sup>

“It Makes a Fellow Proud to Be a Soldier” shows Lehrer’s disdain and critique for the United States Military, of which he was forced to become a member. Lehrer set the song up as an offering to the Army that was looking for a new song. In it, he ironically describes all of the people that the ‘great selection system’ allowed into service. By doing so, he is sending the message that he was not fit for service either.

What is most remarkable about *More of Tom Lehrer* is the new style of social criticism we see. The Cold War created a very conservative political climate: an anti-communist witchhunt swept through the nation, resulting in a majority of cookie-cutter conservatives. As occurs with any large majority culture, a liberal counterculture began to develop, and Tom Lehrer is never one to shy away from a good counterculture!<sup>[4]</sup> The songs in this album show Lehrer pushing against the social norms and laying social taboos wide open for the masses, subverting ideas of political correctness. In “In Old Mexico,” he tells the story (with a stressed accent) of a trip to Guadalajara and a bullfight he saw. A big punchline comes when he sings “At last, the matador did what we wanted him to // He raised his sword and his aim was true // In that moment of truth, I suddenly knew // That someone had stolen my wallet,” and as the song is ending, Lehrer refers to Mexico as

“the land of the wetback,” a phrase that by today’s liberal standards is highly frowned upon.<sup>[11]</sup> But for Lehrer, this stretching and playing with social boundaries was a force against the cookie-cutter masses.

### **3.3 *That Was the Year That Was***

By 1965, the rest of the Jewish comedians were also stretching their social critic legs, but if we thought Lehrer was criticizing society before, the *TW3* album shows that we had no idea of the clever and caustic insights Lehrer could have when he let loose. Another big change in this new album came with the directness that Lehrer used in his comedy. Compared to the subtle euphemisms in *Songs by Tom Lehrer*, and the shock valued and hidden jabs in *More of Tom Lehrer*, this album put it all right out there and was not at all subtle with exactly what subjects it is going after. These songs are from the perspective of an insider of the group that is being made fun of. In addition there is a tone of meaning to connect with the audience, as opposed to shocking them; so of course, some songs poke fun at things that no one could take offense to and are just fun to listen to.

In the song “New Math,” Lehrer explains that the “important thing” in the new approach to teaching mathematics to children “is to understand what you’re doing rather than to get the right answer.”<sup>[13]</sup> “Pollution” very clearly makes fun of the pollution in the United States just as “National Brotherhood Week” makes fun of fake American notions of brotherhood and comradeship, and “The Vatican Rag” makes fun of Catholicism. Of course, the Cold War was capitalized on, being featured in “MLF Lullaby,” “Send the Marines,” “So Long, Mom,” and “Who’s Next?”<sup>[13]</sup>

## 4 Moving Past It All

All good things must come to an end, and so does the list of Tom Lehrer's songs of social criticism. In the late '60s, more complex issues such as abortion and affirmative action arose, which complicated the liberal consensus and made it gradually disappear. As Lehrer said, "It's impossible to write a funny song when you can see both sides." Lehrer affirms that his songs were no longer meaningful to people: "What I was doing then as a songwriter was not 'raising consciousness,' or even preaching to the converted, but only titillating them." He never set out to be a political leader, and when he was no longer able to make the situation funny, he quietly receded.<sup>[7]</sup> The people who were critical of the establishment didn't need more convincing (and even if they would listen, there was no longer one narrative) and the people not critical weren't going to be convinced by a 'silly' song.

The wrinkly Tom Lehrer that posts videos about funny math songs on YouTube is a melding of two eras. The songs that he plays now are like (if they aren't exactly) the ones from *The Physical Revue* that got him started as an undergraduate.<sup>[14]</sup> He has found a small niche online community that can understand and appreciate the jokes about mathematics. In one video, he talks about taking Algebra as a grad student, which was later called "modern Algebra." He says that he thinks they offer "post-modern Algebra now, too."<sup>[14]</sup> This academic material is surrounded with little bits of clever social commentary but no longer the pointed and clearly articulated attacks that adorn his famous Copenhagen performance. Instead, Lehrer has gone back to being an outsider looking in at society, offering light and funny commentary on a world that seems to have passed him by.

## 5 Conclusion

In a final view, Tom Lehrer's career can be encapsulated by the many ironic dualities he fits. He is a secular Jew who thinks "all religion is stupid."<sup>[7]</sup> In the aspect of presentation, he is the image of social grace. He always wears a nice suit while he tells you the way we are all going to die or the tale of some person doing something terrible to someone else. Lehrer plays the classical music inspired by musical theater on a Steinway, but speaks words that could be written in a bathroom stall. He squeezes a pre-WW2 Jewish agent of chaos into the body of a meek post-WW2 comedian. After all these years of popularity, even after amassing a huge cult following, he has still never put his picture on an album. He could have been trying to hide his Jewish background or he may have been sharing the somewhat common trait among mathematicians to be ironically modest with their work: after all, he can't take credit for just saying what needed to be said.

It is for humanity to enjoy.

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I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in all of my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "P. Linn".