

# HOW TO WRITE A SONG HIT

BY DORON K. ANTRIM

NEITHER age nor experience is a specific against the itch to write popular songs. Over 21,000 are copyrighted yearly in the United States, most of them in manuscript, 9000 achieve publication, only a bare 100 emerge as hits. And hits are the only kind today that mean money in the till. Consistent hit writers are about as rare as Babe Ruths in baseball. Of the 1400 who write music for a living in the United States, only 130 write hits. Batting average of the repeaters is around five hits a year, thirteen is a high and one will keep you in the running.

Upon its top flight artists ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers) confers its blessing and an average of \$20,000 a year each for performing rights. This select group includes men like Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, Sigmund Romberg, Irving Caesar, Harry Warren, Gordon and Revel. Other writer members of ASCAP are graded down to Class Four and paid accordingly. To the ASCAP ante is added a three-cent

royalty on sheet sales, one cent on records and around \$1500 a week if the writer works on contract for picture companies.

The small coterie of men who set the song styles follow a curious calling. Campus curricula offer no preparation for it. It is neither a business nor a profession since there are no office hours. Work, if you call it that, is done as the spirit moves — at home, in a hotel room, on the beach, the golf course — and most often in the deep of night. A seeming sinecure, it is really a full-time job calling for highly specialized skills. Money it offers, but not fame. Names mean almost nothing in song writing. A song may be sung around the world but no one will clamor for the writer's autograph or even know who he is. The performers get all the applause.

It's a strange world they live in, the song scribes, grouped together in little colonies in New York and Beverly Hills; a world of hope, fear and fantasy. They hope they will write another hit and fear they will not. The Alley is dotted with the

markers of those who wrote one hit and never repeated, or who suddenly lost the magic touch after a run of hits. They traffic in budding romance but are mostly past it themselves, most of them being men beyond forty. They live in a dream world, peopled with the lovelorn, set with all the trappings of moons, mountains and wishing-wells. They write the nation's songs and according to the adage, have the edge on those who write its laws.

While the run-of-the-mill songs we sing are pretty light in texture, some of them are packed with dynamite. In the former category witness *The Three Little Fishes* and in the latter *Over There*, to which General Pershing assigned some of the credit for winning the last war. Otherwise these songs may glorify a nation, state or city, deify motherhood, sanctify the home, or incite to suicide as did *Blue Sunday*. But they never get very far from the language of adolescence: boy meets, loves, leaves, yearns for girl.

Other writing is usually a solo job. Song writing requires two specialists — a words and a melody man, or lyricist and composer, to be more pedantic. A gag man often makes it three. When they were a going concern, De Sylva, Brown and Henderson hung up a record in

batting averages that has not been touched since. As many as ten have collaborated on a single song, but that one got only eight performances in 1938. The eternal problem in songdom is one of match-making; the daddy of a loose lyric must find a suitable soul mate for his brain child. To facilitate the search, the matchmakers find it expedient to live within hailing distance of each other. In a pinch there is always the telephone to fall back on. From his home in Great Neck, New York, Oscar Hammerstein II reads his lyrics to Jerry Kern in Hollywood. Kern hums back his tune as the toll bill mounts, and a song usually results. To the majority, however, personal contact is essential. "Listen to this" is the plaint of the little man hunched over the piano as he picks out his latest inspiration. The "other half" may find that it just matches one of his lyrics, or it may leave him cold. The quest is endless. Cliff Friend toted a tune around for ten years before Dave Franklin heard him play it and found it tailor-made for one of his stock lyrics. The result was *When My Dream Boat Comes Home*.

A lyric is not poetry although it rhymes in spots. Its lines are likely to be irregular in length and meter. Without a tune for support, it is

meaningless. In writing it the lyricist must get a new slant on that age-old sentiment, say it in the vernacular and with a punch. Thus Johnny Mercer poses the theme, "You must have been a beautiful baby," expands slightly on that, and then clinches with, "For baby, look at you now." The lyricist spends harried days and nights finding new ways to say, "you're wonderful," "I love you," "you're beautiful." If you think it's easy, try it sometime.

The popular composer has equally prescribed limits: only thirty-two bars in a chorus, which is all that counts in a song. Having contrived a tune, he always has the lurking fear that it belongs to someone else. All aglow, Hoagy Carmichael played a piece to his publisher. "That's great," said the publisher, "but it's not yours." Hoagy had unconsciously absorbed a song he had heard over the air. A composer once wrote an involved fugue and was shocked speechless when shown another almost identical note for note. The fear of copyright suits hangs like a Damocles sword over the composer's head.

Only a few of the tunesters have studied music seriously. Irving Berlin never had a piano lesson in his life, never studied harmony, theory or counterpoint. He be-

lieves that such knowledge would only make him conscious of rules and cramp the creative impulse. Most of the others hold the same view.

## II

The common characteristic of popular composers seems to be an insatiable yen to toy with tonal combinations on the piano. While playing for gushing groups of people at parties, George Gershwin used to get some of his best ideas. Absent-mindedly, Rudolf Friml walked out on a dinner party to go to his piano. He stayed the rest of the evening and completed the music to an entire show. Friml improvises with such ease he has a special piano which records as he plays. The simplest way to solve the *duo partes* problem of song writing is to write both words and music yourself, but few can do it. Irving Berlin is such a one-man team, and it has helped him maintain a good lead in the craft for thirty years.

Berlin's methods of work are all his own. He scorns to make preliminary notes on bill heads, bed sheets or notebook as reminders. All ideas are filtered through the fine mesh of his mind and into oblivion unless they happen to catch

in the sieve. If an idea persists, *i.e.*, he can't forget it, he will lock himself in his room for the night and give a good imitation of a caged creature in the zoo. He will pace the room, leaf through magazines, try a few bars on his transposing piano, perhaps pick at random a book from his library of 15,000 volumes. All the time his mind searches for the one word, the one tune to match it. If the word comes and the fates are kind, he calls his secretary next morning and dictates a lyric; his arranger takes down the melody. If the resulting product does not satisfy him completely, it goes to the "morgue" of his rejected melodies.

All of which indicates a complete absence of schools and rules for song writing. In strange and unaccustomed ways the song hits have their being. They may spring to life anywhere, in a few minutes or in a years-long process of incubation. The words may come first, the music first, or both may grow together. Getting started is mainly a matter of getting an idea that can be embodied in a title. Take the word "blue," which is considered in the best song-writing circles as the most beautiful and romantic word in the English language. ASCAP lists 268 songs called *Blue Eyes*, and over a thousand mention

eyes of that color. Not only do the eyes have it in this tint, but a profusion of other things: skies, heavens and moons, bonnets and even horses. Songwise, America has a perfect passion for blue.

Once a good title is obtained, the rest is mere routine. There may be some minor difficulties such as finding the right word that rhymes, but the boys never look for it in a rhyming dictionary. They just go into a trance. Cole Porter had not spoken to any of his associates all day and just when they were beginning to think that someone had given him umbrage, his face brightened and he broke the silence with, "In my pet pelleted gown." That one cost him more effort than most. "Your fabulous face" and other neat phrases generally come to him with ease.

Amateurs crash in every now and then. A hasty scrawl called *Swanee River Moon* came through the mails to Feist one day, was accepted by return mail, published and became a hit. Edward B. Claypool got a contract back the first time he sent out *Raggin' the Scale*. *Prisoner's Song* came from a prison cell. The main difficulty among amateurs is to find tunes for their lyrics, there being more lyric writers than tunesters. Anyone can write a tune, says lyricist Lorenz

Hart; all you need to do is to take a telephone number, substitute notes for numbers and you have a theme. Or take a "non-cop," meaning a number on which the copyright has expired, and add words. This has become quite the thing in Tin Pan Alley. Witness such numbers as *A Tisket, A Tasket, London Bridge, The Mulberry Bush, My Reverie, Our Love*.

But publication is still a hurdle for amateurs, especially if they depend on the mails, since most publishers return manuscripts unopened. They fear that the mere act of looking over a song may get them into plagiarism suits. The publishers advise amateur song writers to get photostatic copies of their songs made and have local or visiting band leaders introduce them on the air. Songs have come to the attention of publishers in this way and been published.

It is also well, say the publishers, to evade the lures of song sharks who have built up a lucrative busi-

ness baiting gullible amateurs. Posing as representatives of publishing firms and radio stations, these "services" request that manuscripts be submitted to them. The usual technique is to see promise in the lyrics, however crude, and to offer publication with a music setting — for a fee. The promises are generally performed and the writer sees himself in print for \$50 or \$75. Which may feed his vanity but not his pocket-book.

An ambitious youth once asked Irving Caesar what it takes to become a hit writer. "One hundred songs on the shelf which are better forgotten," spoke up the champion of safety songs for children. "You'll write that number because you can't help yourself, which will prove that you have the song-writing phobia. Then you'll come to New York and circulate with the 'crowd' of singers, band leaders, publishers, for song writing is difficult by remote control. After that, you're in, and heaven help you."



## LOCAL POLITICS: MENACE TO DEFENSE

BY PAUL W. SHAFER, M.C.

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THE United States is building up an admirable defense — for protection against Indian uprisings and for the satisfaction of assorted local pressure groups. We have no scientifically planned defense program in realistic relation to possible needs in a tempestuous world. Our program, so far as it can be thus dignified, is one of pouring out billions of dollars at haphazard, on the wishful theory that when an emergency arises these billions may, by some happy chance, have been aimed in the right direction. Effective defense has been frustrated for generations by extravagance and blundering.

We have scores of army posts that are not only useless but would be a positive detriment in the event of a war. We are building, and have in recent months built, naval ships that cannot be sent on a mission in rough waters, because they would be blown over by a heavy breeze. We are handicapping the development of our air forces by split authority and by constant bicker-

ing between the services. Somewhere someone in the government may have a comprehensive and cohesive plan for a sound defense program, based upon analysis of what we must defend and against whom. But if such a program exists, it has been carefully concealed from Congress.

In this article I want to limit myself largely to one aspect of the costly and dangerous situation: the aspect of politics, pork and patronage as barriers to intelligent national defense expenditure. It used to be said that the tariff was a "local issue" because every locality wanted protection for its own products and free trade for the products of other localities. The same is true of our national defense. If there is one problem which should be solved in a thoroughly national spirit, this is it. Yet both the army and navy have become local issues in the most pork-barrelish style.

Recently a Congressional committee, representing the Military Affairs Committees of the Senate