

MAKING A HIT*

BY COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY'S
OFFICE OF RADIO RESEARCH

THE business ideal of the popular music industry is, of course, to create a "hit." A song is a hit when it sells 50,000 copies of sheet-music. It is estimated that not more than fifteen songs reach sales of 100,000 copies each year, and rarely do more than five climb to 300,000. Although sales of records have increased 500 per cent since 1932 (the low year of that industry), few songs sell 150,000, and a run-of-the-mill hit only 50,000 to 75,000.

The average life of a hit is about twelve weeks. Spectacular novelties like *The Music Goes Round and Round* or "rhythm" numbers like *Flat-Foot Floogie*, enjoy an extensive though short-lived run of six to eight weeks. Less sensational material, such as hit waltzes and ballads, may last from ten to twenty weeks.

Twenty years ago, before radio became the principal medium of exploitation, "Good Sellers" sold 500,000 sheet-music copies and about the same number of records. Today they run to 75,000 in sheet-music and 50,000 in records. "Smash Hits" once sold as many as 1,500,000 copies and 1,500,000 records, now no more than 300,000 copies and 150,000 records.

Twenty years ago songs were "plugged" by vaudeville entertainers, singers and traveling bands for several months *before* they became hits. Today songs are introduced, exploited and "played to death" all within a corresponding period of a few months. Then one would hear less than three performances of a hit in a week, now a hit comes on three to six times daily. In the past a publisher could expect a song to live from one to two years; now he knows it will fade after three to five months.

The general effect of radio upon popular songs may be summarized as follows. The length of a song's life has been materially shortened although the extent of its popularity (by number of listeners) has been greatly increased. In absolute terms, i. e., the number of people who hear and may remember a song at all, "popularity" is increased by intensive

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radio plugging. In relative terms the opposite is true: the life cycle of a song is briefer, its sheet sales have materially decreased, and it is probably less known *as an individual tune* than the pre-radio hit.

A SONG IS BORN

To understand how most songs are made, the process should be viewed as a practical, down-to-earth business, run according to a given pattern based upon past successes.

With few exceptions (the most notable being perhaps those of Cole Porter), popular songs are written by at least two collaborators: the lyricist and the melodist. Frequently there are more – the inventor of the title, the man who writes down the music, the harmonizer and others. This division of labor is not due to actual rationalization of production, but rather to certain deficiencies, as of the half-amateur who has an idea but cannot write and harmonize it, and again of many even “trained” musicians who are incapable of scoring.

For at least half of all songs written, the melody is set down before the words. Many outstanding hits of recent years, such as *My Reverie*, *Once in a While*, *Beer Barrel Polka*, *Sunrise Serenade* and *Deep Purple* were originally conceived as melodies, some having been purely instrumental pieces. (A tentative explanation may be offered. Instrumental melodies are less limited in invention; further, they may employ large intervals usually regarded as “unsingable” in vocal music. This scope of invention sometimes accounts for fresher and more characteristic tunes which can be better remembered and are afterwards vocally adapted *for that very reason*.)

When a lyricist “happens on an idea” or a phrase which he believes is the foundation of a song, he may give it at once to the collaborating melodist. On the other hand he may turn out a partially completed lyric or even the lyric in its entirety. (Of course, he prefers to write a song without having to follow a “cold tune,” which makes him feel “cramped.”) The composer then starts to build up a melodic structure around the idea. This is done in two ways, usually by “picking out” a theme on the piano to suit the title or important line, or by humming or whistling a phrase.

It is important to incorporate the title “on the nose,” i. e., in the opening line of the chorus, the theory being that only the first lines of most songs will ever become known. If this is not feasible it will be used in the second, third, or fourth line. Publishers consider it essential for the name to be heard at least three times in the development of a lyric; with many fundamentally similar tunes on the market a song must advertise itself. Lyricists

are therefore constantly on the alert for catchy new slang or colloquialisms, such as *What's New*, *Jeepers Creepers*, *Thanks a Million*.

PUBLISHER'S AUDITION

A hit-possibility submitted to any of the fourteen Big Publishers (altogether there are about sixty firms in the popular music business) will get an audition by the officers of the firm, usually an executive and his two managers, "Professional" and "General." As judges they estimate the material according to certain fixed canons of business.

These fundamentals are: (1) that the melody be in thirty-two bars – no more, no less; (2) that the line be "simple and easy to sing and play" *i.e.* an octave range of not more than nine notes and not more than three flats or sharps, and (3) that the lyrics be "romantic," "original," and/or "tell an appealing story."

While publishers are as a rule receptive to "original" lyrics, they are cold to melodic deviations. Only top-ranking composers can "get away with" songs that do not conform to standardized requirements. However, a publisher may also be afraid to refuse something that, if taken by another firm, might develop into a "terrific" number. So – just as in the field of industrial patents – a song will be accepted, in some cases even draw an advance royalty, then "put on the shelf." Or, as an alternative, it may be printed but not "worked on." Whatever happens, it has been kept from a possible rival.

To the "industry" – specifically the publishers, band leaders, vocalists, recording executives and radio program managers – the names of song writers are very important. A considerable part of any success can be traced, indirectly, to the prestige and reputation of the composers and authors. Outside the industry – that is, to the "average buyer of sheet music" – the names of writers mean little. The top-ranking musical-comedy men, Kern, Porter, Rodgers and Hart, Berlin, are well known to the so-called "sophisticated New Yorkers." But the central market of the country's music-buying is in the Mid-Western belt, around Chicago, St. Louis, Kansas City, Cleveland. That public is not interested in authorship; it tends to accept songs merely as radio products.

Publishers frequently say of a new work: "It's not commercial." This means of course that it does not conform to the commodity-standards of Tin Pan Alley. If a song has what might be called literary or poetic qualities it will almost certainly be refused. The most skillful popular songs are the production numbers of Porter, Rodgers and Hart, Harbach, Kern.

But the general radio-conditioned public prefers obvious pieces with simple melodies and commonplace lyrics. Thus a maudlin, bathetic ballad such as *There's a Gold-Mine in the Sky* will far outsell an entire musical comedy score of unusual numbers by Porter.

When a publisher feels that a song definitely has hit potentialities but is unwilling to trust his own judgment, he may consult band leaders and other performers for their reactions. Robert Bruce and Abner Silver in their book *How Publishers Drive Song Writers Crazy*, quote a classic trade rejection: "Here's your song back. *Lombardo doesn't like it.*"

THE PLUGGER

So far, the principal figures in the process of making a hit have been the song writers and publishing executives. Now we come to the plugger, chief protagonist in the struggle to get a song across to the public. Despite the increasing standardization of hit production, it is still necessary to employ old-fashioned commercial salesmanship since there is always a larger supply of songs than can be used as hits. Pluggers are the instrument of surviving competition. There are now reputed to be more than four-hundred in the industry; leading publishers employ three to seven men each and pay them from \$75 to \$250 a week, plus some \$25 to \$100 for expenses.

The plugger is a hardy individual, indefatigable, insistent and relentless, who leads a hectic, largely nocturnal existence. His sole mission in life is to persuade, wheedle, cajole, and implore band leaders and singers to "do" the songs his firm is "working on." Every tune on his list must be pushed — whether it is a "natural" (i.e. a possible hit) or a "dog" (i.e. doomed to die). He sleeps by day, grabs a bite of breakfast at noon, then pores over program schedules and makes his plans to "line-up" star bands and performers on the major hook-ups for important network "shots." Comes evening and into the restaurants, night clubs and hotels he goes, to buttonhole band leaders and begin his "spiel." Although he has about twenty "contacts" to make each night, this "spiel" is invariably a standard model of high pressure technic and violent enthusiasm, and, usually, a literal repetition of his last sales talk.

So it is that during a period of from three to six weeks a song comes to enjoy a certain amount of "popularity," which means it may receive from fifteen to forty radio performances a week. Orchestra leaders and singers agree that the normal first reaction of the audience to almost any song is negative. It must be heard several times before it "catches on." If a sufficient number of performers can be inveigled into playing it, it will receive

ten or twenty treasured "shots"—network broadcasts from New York stations, and thus it "makes the Sheet."

THE "SHEET"

The "Sheet" (not to be confused with sheet-music) is the all important score of "radio plugs" within a specific period, published weekly in trade papers like *Variety* and *The Billboard*. The "Sheet" is to the song plugger what the ticker tape is to the Wall Street speculator and the *Daily Racing Form* to the bookie. The business of "making the Sheet" has an almost exact parallel in the competition of salesmen for life insurance companies. Those agencies keep a scoreboard and award point ratings to salesmen for each policy sold, a sort of sports contest that spurs them on to struggle for higher positions. A similar procedure is used for the pluggers. Note the sporting phraseology, the warm encouragement and genial approbation shown in the *New York Enquirer* (which gives special coverage to Tin Pan Alley business), in reporting the accomplishments of pluggers who have "boosted" their songs into the top-spots.

LEADER'S CHOICE

But what determines the choice of songs by the orchestra leaders and the singers? They themselves maintain that they do not "accept songs automatically," but audition every piece and use their own judgment. However this claim need not be accepted at face value. One of the most important factors influencing a performer is the assurance of the publisher that the song will in all probability be pushed into a top position on the "Sheet." Few leaders, according to Artie Shaw (in the *Saturday Evening Post*, December 2, 1939) play a new song solely because they think it's good. They play it only when a publisher assures them it will be the firm's Number 1 tune, *the tune the publisher is going to work on and put money behind*. They take no chance of introducing a song and then having it "die on them."

In addition, every dance band leader wants to be known as the "introducer" of successful songs, as an outstanding "hit-maker." He may refuse to use a number unless his picture is on the cover of the sheet-music with the tag-line "Introduced and Featured by" A song sometimes appears with the photographs of as many as twenty leaders on the cover in succession, a different man's picture being substituted after a certain number of copies have been printed.

Thus a new song is formally introduced to the nation at large. Meanwhile the publisher anxiously scans sales of sheet copies to determine audi-

ence reaction and to formulate plans for all-important "drive week."

DRIVE WEEK

This is a week of the most intense plugging, the climax of the whole exploitation campaign. Before it begins, the plugger must have prevailed upon the maximum number of leaders and singers to cooperate in pushing the song to the top, which means playing it as often as possible over WABC, WEAf, WJZ and the affiliated networks. If he succeeds, drive week ends with the song in the Number 1 position, or at least among the leaders, having received perhaps as many as fifty-five "shots" on the *Variety* lists.

Drive week enables the publisher to decide how the song "is going over." The performances are not an end in themselves, but a means of advertising. The song has now reached what might be considered its largest audience. Unless sheet sales show a favorable reaction, the campaign for that particular song is over, and the publisher goes to work on another tune. There is usually a "follow-up" of from two to five weeks immediately after, during which the pluggers still keep it played, though not as frequently as before. If by then sales figures show no definite rise, it is abandoned as a "dog" and soon disappears from the air.

Since the "Sheet" exercises such tremendous influence over the entire popular music industry, let us analyze the structure of this remarkable song-scoreboard.

Thirty-three songs attained exalted first place on the plug lists during the fifty-two weeks of the year 1938. It might be assumed that public preference shifted from one to the other with incredible speed. But it is obvious, from the drive-week analysis, that both "popularity" and shift in taste are highly synthetic.

About two-thirds of the songs which are hits over the radio also appear as leaders on other indices — such as sheet-sales, orchestra requests, and so on. As a rule the sheet-sale curve follows radio plugging at a distance of about two weeks. Radio popularity, which is subject to the pressure of the publishers and the policy of the networks has a shorter cycle. Usually, after a song has disappeared from the "Sheet" it lingers for some weeks on the display counters of the music stores.

Plugging does of course largely determine the "popularity" of any song. Indeed a song which is not plugged has practically no chance of becoming popular. But there is still the possibility that a song which is plugged will not become popular either. This happens rarely but when

it does it indicates that the taste of the public, pre-determined though it is, has not yet been completely expropriated.

In an interesting article in *The Billboard* (December 31, 1938), Jack Mills, one of the Big Publishers, singles out the "Sheet" as the greatest evil retarding the music industry. Elsewhere in the trade press (*Variety*, January 24, 1940) the relation of the lucrative agency-sponsored radio programs to plug lists is thus commented upon: "As for the commercial programs overseered by ad agency men, the reporters still depend on how they stand on the most played list. If it isn't among the first ten or fifteen, the agency producer 'no wants'."

THE BUILD-UP

Artificial build-up applies not only to plugging in the literal sense of repetition. It is also used in high-pressure announcements, in the manner of presenting programs, writers, performers. Songs are introduced to the radio audience as "the latest smash hit," "one of Tin Pan Alley's most outstanding contributions," to command a favorable reaction, in advance, by prestige appeal.

To illustrate, let us take the song *Day In - Day Out* by Johnny Mercer and Rube Bloom, two "consistent" writers with a number of past successes to their credit. It was printed in 1939 by B.V.C., one of the Big Publishers, and introduced over WABC on the Camel Caravan program, August 22, 1939, 9:30 P.M. E.S.T., with Bob Crosby's orchestra, Helen Ward and Johnny Mercer, as follows:

CROSBY: Yes sir! Where else in the country can you get this *sensational* two-for-one. Our lovely singer, Helen Ward, and in the same package, a brand new song with words by *our versatile verser, Johnny Mercer.*

CUSTOMER IN THE DIXIELAND MUSIC SHOP:
Sounds *swell* to me.

CROSBY: It's a Dixieland Music Shop *Exclusive*, because it's *the first performance on the air.*

CUSTOMER: That Johnny Mercer certainly keeps busy. Just give him a pad and pencil, and the first thing you know Johnny comes out with a lyric like *Jeepers Creepers* or *You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby.*

CROSBY: That's right, and *Cuckoo in the Clock, Could Be* and *And the Angels Sing.*

CUSTOMER: That's a *lot of hits for any man in one year.*

CROSBY: It sure is, and *we know you're all going to sing, dance and whistle the new one into another winner.* So here it comes, *words by Johnny Mercer*, music by Rube Bloom, sung by Helen Ward, and Johnny calls it *Day In - Day Out.*

As predicted, the song *Day In -- Day Out* was "sung, danced and whistled into another winner," by October 21, 1939 when it became the Number 1 song on the Hit Parade. On October 24, 1939 it was again featured on the Camel Caravan, over WABC.

CROSBY: Not long ago we gave a new song its first demonstration, and I remember I said to Johnny Mercer, who wrote the words, "John T.," I said, "*That is a lallapalooza of a lyric, that,*" I said, "*will be the nation's number one hit before Hallowe'en,*" end quote. And sure enough it is, with music by Rube Bloom and *words by Johnny Mercer.*

The new song now bears a close resemblance to a best-seller on the book market. From the prestige standpoint it is advantageous to know, and very often to like, The Most Popular Song In The Country. Those who heard its debut were made to feel that they were "in on" an important event. They now have a "personal interest" in following its career. When it becomes the country's Most Popular Song they can say, "I heard that the first time it was played on the radio."

The device of the whole plugging mechanism is contrived to lead the public step by step to submissive acceptance of songs. While the songs are hammered into its ears, the prestige build-up insists that this repetition is due to the inherent qualities of the song and the performance rather than the will to sell it. This interplay of repetition and recommendation tends of course to eliminate "independent taste" as a determining factor in public reaction.

Roughly speaking, the methods of distribution used in the popular music business are largely borrowed from those of any industry producing consumer goods which do not strictly belong to the necessities of life. The promotion and distribution of popular songs is not left to chance nor to the spontaneous success or failure of the material offered in the market. What makes the process so similar to the industrial one is its "*system,*" all of whose parts are directed towards one end: the forcing of the material upon the customer. This system is now at the stage where the exploitation of songs may be said to have become largely automatic.