

Tom Lehrer, Musical Satirist With a Dark Streak, Dies at 97

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Richard Severo and Peter Keepnews

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Tom Lehrer performing in 1967. His songwriting output was modest, but it was darkly memorable, with songs like “The Vatican Rag” and “Poisoning Pigeons in the Park.”

Credit...Lehrer family

Tom Lehrer, the Harvard-trained mathematician whose wickedly iconoclastic songs made him a favorite satirist in the 1950s and '60s on college campuses and in all the Greenwich Villages of the country, died on Saturday at his home in Cambridge, Mass. He was 97.

His death was confirmed by David Herder, a friend.

Mr. Lehrer's lyrics were nimble, sometimes salacious and almost always sardonic, sung to music that tended to be maddeningly cheerful. Accompanying himself on piano, he performed in nightclubs, in concert and on records that his admirers purchased, originally by mail order only, in the hundreds of thousands.

But his entertainment career ultimately took a back seat to academia. In his heart he never quit his day job; he just took a few sabbaticals.

He stopped performing in 1960 after only a few years, resumed briefly in 1965 and then stopped for good in 1967. His music was ultimately just a momentary detour in an academic career that included teaching posts at Harvard, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of California, and even a stint with the Atomic Energy Commission.

As popular as his songs were, Mr. Lehrer never felt entirely comfortable performing them. "I don't feel the need for anonymous affection," he told *The New York Times* in 2000. "If they buy my records, I love that. But I don't think I need people in the dark applauding."

Mr. Lehrer's songwriting output was modest, but it was darkly memorable. In the tasteless world he evoked, a seemingly harmless geezer turned out to be "The Old Dope Peddler" and spring was the time for "Poisoning Pigeons in the Park."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhuMLpdn0jY>

In "The Masochism Tango," which the sheet music instructed should be played "painstakingly," he warbled, "You can raise welts/Like nobody else." In "Be Prepared," his "Boy Scout marching song," he admonished, "Don't solicit for your sister, that's not nice/Unless you get a good percentage of her price."

Thomas Andrew Lehrer was born in Manhattan on April 9, 1928, one of two sons of James Lehrer, a successful tie manufacturer, and Anna (Waller) Lehrer. Young Tom was precocious, but his precocity had its limits. He took piano lessons from an early age, but balked at learning classical music and insisted on switching to a teacher who emphasized the Broadway show tunes he loved.

He also developed a fondness for Gilbert and Sullivan; one of his early songs, "The Elements," was a list of the chemical elements set to the tune of "I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General" from "The Pirates of Penzance." (Years later "The Elements" would be performed by the young scientist played by Jim Parsons on the hit sitcom "The Big Bang Theory.")

After graduating early from the Loomis Chaffee School in Connecticut, Mr. Lehrer went to Harvard, where he majored in mathematics and received his bachelor's degree in 1946, at 18. He earned a master's from Harvard the next year and then pursued

doctoral studies there and at Columbia University. (He continued his studies on and off for many years, but he never completed his Ph.D. thesis.)

While at Harvard, Mr. Lehrer began to write songs for his own amusement and that of his fellow students. He told his friends that the songs simply came to him and that he wrote them down in just about the time it took him to brush his teeth, but they quickly found an audience on campus. One of his earliest efforts, written in 1945, was a parody of football songs called “Fight Fiercely, Harvard,” in which he exhorted:

Fight, fight, fight!
Demonstrate to them our skill.
Albeit they possess the might,
Nonetheless we have the will.
How we shall celebrate our victory?
We shall invite the whole team up for tea!

In 1952, as he looked forward to becoming a researcher for the Atomic Energy Commission in Los Alamos, N.M., he wrote “The Wild West Is Where I Want to Be,” whose lyrics suggested that he was not to have a fruitful career in atomic research: “Mid the yuccas and the thistles/I’ll watch the guided missiles/While the old F.B.I. watches me.”

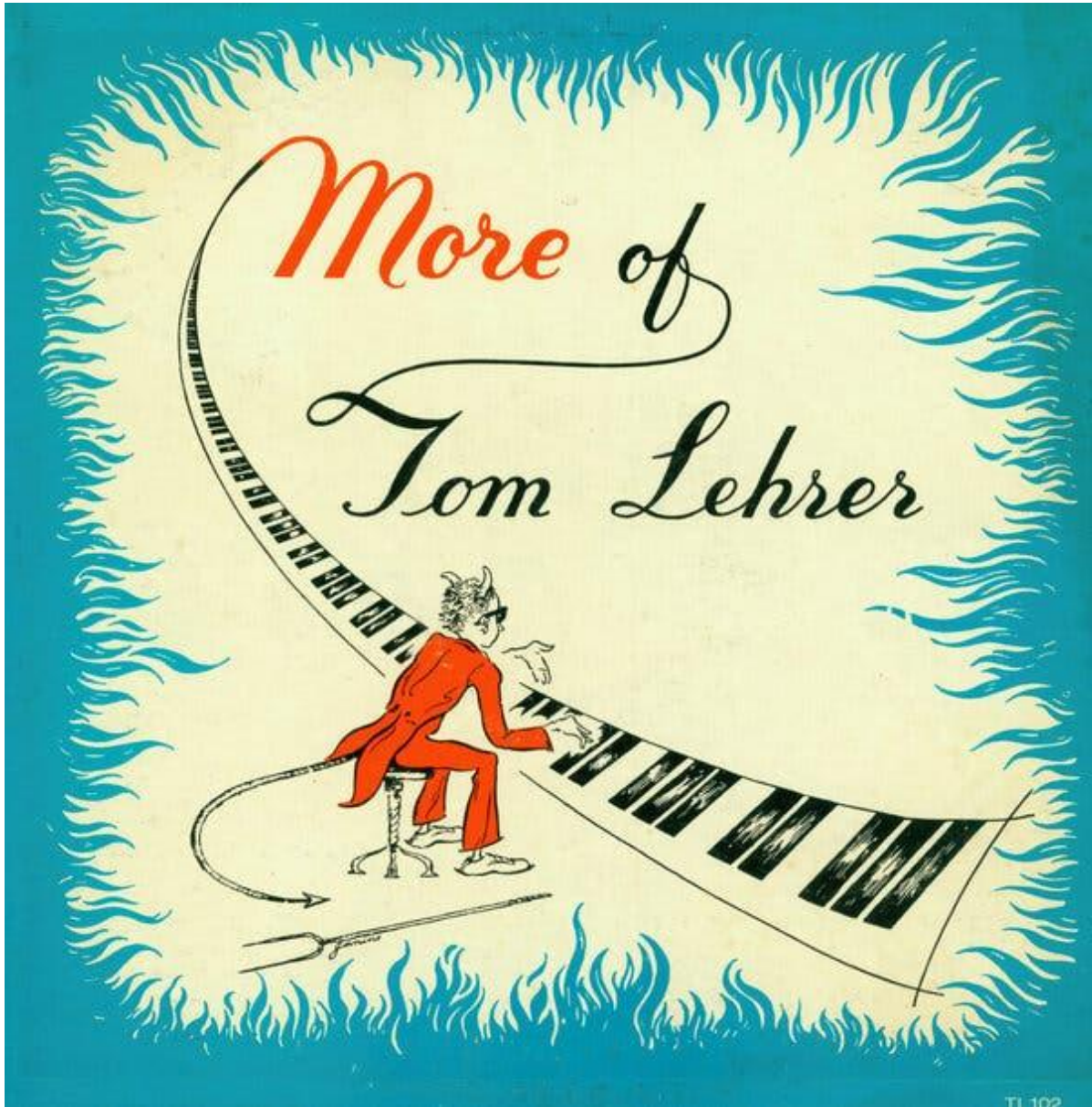
By that time Mr. Lehrer had begun performing his songs in Cambridge, Mass. He did not want to abandon research and teaching, but he saw the possibility of combining the contemplative life with an entertainment career.

In 1953, encouraged by friends, he produced an album. To his surprise, “Songs by Tom Lehrer,” cut and pressed in an initial run of 400 copies, was a hit. Sold through the mail and initially promoted almost entirely by word of mouth, it ultimately sold an estimated half-million copies.

The cover contained a drawing of Mr. Lehrer seated at the piano, with horns coming out of his head and a devil’s tail emerging from his formal attire. (His follow-up album, “More of Tom Lehrer,” used the same image.) The 11 songs lived up to that image, among them “My Home Town” (where the “just plain folks” included the pyromaniacal son of the mayor and the math teacher who sells dirty pictures to children after school) and the necrophiliac ballad “I Hold Your Hand in Mine.”

The record’s success led to nightclub engagements in New York, Boston, San Francisco and Los Angeles. His performing career was interrupted by a two-year Army hitch; when he returned to civilian life in 1957 he hit the road again, giving concerts in Canada and overseas as well as in the United States.

In 1959, in an unusual move, he simultaneously released a new studio album, “More of Tom Lehrer,” and a live album, “An Evening Wasted With Tom Lehrer,” which contained concert versions of the same songs. (He later also rerecorded the songs from his first album in concert.) But after another year of touring, he stopped performing and returned to the Harvard faculty.



The studio album "More of Tom Lehrer" was released in 1959, alongside a live album, "An Evening Wasted With Tom Lehrer."
Credit...The Jeff Roth Collection

In 1964 and 1965 he wrote several songs for “That Was the Week That Was,” the short-lived satirical NBC television series. He did not appear on the show, but he did return to the road for a while, recording his new songs at the hungry i in San Francisco for the 1965 album “That Was the Year That Was” — not a do-it-yourself effort this time, but released on Reprise, a subsidiary of Warner Bros. Records.

His new numbers, in which he focused on political and social issues, included “A Song for World War III” (“So long, Mom/I’m off to drop the bomb”), which was sung on “That Was the Week That Was” by Steve Allen, and “Wernher von Braun,” about the German scientist who designed weapons for the Nazis and later worked for NASA: “‘Once the rockets are up, who cares where they come down?/That’s not my department,’ says Wernher von Braun.”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pvhYqeGp_Do

The album also contained what may have been the most controversial song Mr. Lehrer ever wrote: “The Vatican Rag,” his response to the Second Vatican Council’s attempt to, in his words, “make the church more commercial.” The lyrics begin:

*First you get down on your knees,
Fiddle with your rosaries,
Bow your head with great respect
And genuflect! Genuflect! Genuflect!*

The song was condemned by clergymen and school administrators. When Channel 13, the New York public television station, played it as part of a fund-raising drive, the station received hundreds of calls and letters of protest.

Mr. Lehrer gave up performing again after a concert in Copenhagen in September 1967. This time he stuck to his decision. The rest was almost, but not quite, silence.

His last sustained burst of songwriting came in 1971, when he contributed “Silent E” and other educational ditties to the PBS children’s series “The Electric Company.” The next year he performed at a rally for the presidential campaign of Senator George S. McGovern. But there were no more nightclub or concert performances, and no more albums.

By 1981 he had fallen so far off the cultural radar that, he told The Harvard Crimson, some people thought he was dead. (“I was hoping the rumors would cut down on the junk mail,” he said.)

A new generation was introduced to the Lehrer songbook in 1980 when the British impresario Cameron Mackintosh presented “Tomfoolery,” a revue of his songs, in London. The show was a hit there and was later produced in New York, Washington, Dublin and elsewhere.

With characteristic self-deprecation, Mr. Lehrer attributed the show’s success to a shortage of new songwriters. “It was inevitable,” he said, “that someone would peer into the almost empty barrel and notice me down there.”

When “Tomfoolery” played at the Village Gate in New York in 1981, Mr. Lehrer explained to The Times why he had stopped writing. “The Vietnam War is what



Mr. Lehrer at his home in Santa Cruz, Calif., in 2000. As popular as his songs were, Mr. Lehrer never felt entirely comfortable performing them. “If they buy my records, I love that,” he once said. “But I don’t think I need people in the dark applauding.”

Credit...Paul Sakuma/Associated Press

changed it,” he said. “Everybody got earnest. My purpose was to make people laugh and not applaud. If the audience applauds, they’re just showing they agree with me.” On another occasion he famously offered another explanation: “Political satire became obsolete when Henry Kissinger was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.”

In October 2020, Mr. Lehrer announced on his website that “all the lyrics on this website, whether published or unpublished, copyrighted or uncopyrighted, may be downloaded and used in any manner whatsoever, without requiring any further permission from me or any payment to me or to anyone else” — in other words, that he was relinquishing the rights to all his songs, except for the melodies of those few that used his words but someone else’s music.

He expanded on, and formalized, this announcement two years later, stating among other things that “permission is hereby granted to anyone to set any of these lyrics to their own music, or to set any of this music to their own lyrics, and to publish or perform their parodies or distortions of these songs without payment or fear of legal action.” Adding that he planned to shut down his website “in the not too distant future,” he concluded: “In short, I no longer retain any rights to any of my songs. So help yourselves, and don’t send me any money.” (His website, and the notice, were still online at his death.)

It was a highly unusual move, Abby North, the chief executive of a music rights management company, told the public radio show “Marketplace,” because for many songwriters, royalties “have been sustaining multiple families for multiple generations.”

Mr. Lehrer divided his time for many years between Cambridge, where he taught at both Harvard and M.I.T., and Santa Cruz, where he taught courses on mathematics and musical theater at the University of California from 1972 to 2001.

When a fan once asked Mr. Lehrer if he had ever married or had children, he replied, “Not guilty on both counts.” He leaves no immediate survivors.

Reflecting on his bicoastal life in a 1981 interview for *Newsday*, he said he planned to keep his Massachusetts home “until my brain turns completely to Jell-O, at which time I will of course move to California full time.”

Richard Severo, a New York Times reporter from 1968 to 2006, died in 2023. Alex Traub contributed reporting.

The Ted K Archive

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[<nytimes.com/2025/07/27/arts/music/tom-lehrer-dead.html>](https://nytimes.com/2025/07/27/arts/music/tom-lehrer-dead.html)

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Lead Dark Verse, Dies.

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