

Writing Humorous Songs

Cerian Cantwr

I. Introduction

- A. Do a class on humor in song? Oy!
 - 1. I don't know how. Does anyone?
 - 2. Ask 5 different bards, get 50 different answers maybe more.
 - 3. There is no one right way to do it.
- B. Humor is a very personal thing.
 - 1. Style is largely a matter of individual philosophy and mood of the time.
 - 2. Different things are funny to different people. Know your audience.
 - 3. Do no harm. If you're going to write a praise song, make sure the subject won't be made unhappy by it.
 - 4. How thick is that trowel? Humor can be applied with a rapier, sledge, or and tool in between. Reactions will be different depending on just how heavy-handed you are.
- C. What is Funny?
 - 1. Lots of attempts to explain this; from serious scholars, to playwrights, to androids on Star Trek. Ultimately no one knows.
 - 2. Words with a 'K' (actually a hard 'C') are funny.
 - 3. Pain is funny.
 - 4. Don't **try** to be funny. You'll probably be trying too hard and wind up forcing things.

II. The Humors of Comedy.

- A. Low Comedy. Very broad stuff, usually physical humor. **[Der Fuehrer's Face]**
- B. The Sumo High-Dive. Mixing two things that have no business being together. **[The Vatican Rag]**
- C. Nose Tweaking. Poke fun at a well known figure or institution. **[John Birch Society]**
- D. Glad It's Not Me. Watching something rotten happen to somebody else. **[Hello Muddah, Hello Fadduh]**
- E. Bait & Switch. Unexpectedly yanking that one vital can from the base of the tower, and having it all come tumbling down. **[The Hunting Song]**
- F. Familiar, but Off Kilter. A well known song delivered in an unexpected style. **[Black Velvet Doo Wop]**
- G. Word Play. Puns, malapropos, mis-stressed syllables, and mispronounced words. **[The Gnu Song]**
- H. Bawdy Song. Double entendre and indirection; the humor comes from the verbal tension of not saying what you're saying. **[Watkin's Ale]**
- I. Unexplainable. Sometimes there is no explanation of why something is funny – it just is. The humor is all in your mind. **[John & Marsha]**
- J. Jack Benny's seven principles: the joke, exaggeration, ridicule, ignorance, surprise, the pun, and the comic situation.¹

¹ Mary Livingston Benny, Hilliard Marks, & Marcia Borie, Jack Benny (Doubleday 1978), pg 65

III. Humor Meets Song Writing.

- A. All Standard Rules Apply. The criteria for what makes a good song don't change, they get added to. In addition to poetry, form, meter, meaning, and singability; you can add 'Is it funny'.
- B. Have Something to Say. Even telling a joke needs to have a point to it. You need to have an idea behind your song that you can talk about for a few minutes.
- C. The 2 Line Rule. Often times you'll get hit with an idea for a funny bit. It may give you two very funny opening lines, but that's all. **[Schticks of One]** A song needs to have more meat to it.
- D. It Doesn't Have to Be Funny. Humor can be used in a song that's not meant to be funny. A funny line or two can serve to heighten whatever other emotions you're working with. **[Dry Your Eyes My Gypsy]**
- E. Have a Sounding Board. What's funny inside your head may not play so well elsewhere. An outside set of ears may hear things yours don't.

IV. Specific Comedic Forms.

- A. Parody. A re-writing of another tune that pokes fun at the original. You usually need a strong piece for the source material of a good parody. **[An Ill Wind]**
- B. Satire. Often to a preexisting tune, but not always. Usually has more bite than a parody. Often contains social or political commentary. Not necessarily intended to be humorous. **[Lincoln Park Pirates]** The line between satire and parody can get very blurry.

V. Discography.

A. Example Sources.

1. Der Fuehrer's Face: Spike Jones, The Spike Jones Anthology
2. The Vatican Rag: Tom Lehrer, That Was the Year That Was
3. John Birch Society: The Chad Mitchell Trio, Best of the Chad Mitchell Trio
4. Hello Muddah, Hello Fadduh: Allan Sherman, Best of Allan Sherman
5. The Hunting Song: Tom Lehrer, An Evening Wasted with Tom Lehrer
6. Black Velvet Doo Wop: Sheer Pandemonium, Sheer Pandemonium
7. The Gnu Song: Michael Flanders & Donald Swann, At the Drop of a Hat
8. Watkin's Ale (Anonymous): The Baltimore Consort, Watkin's Ale
9. John & Marsha: Stan Freberg, Stan Freberg
10. Schticks of One: Allan Sherman, Best of Allan Sherman
11. An Ill Wind: Michael Flanders & Donald Swann, At the Drop of Another Hat
12. Lincoln Park Pirates: Steve Goodman, Somebody Else's Troubles

B. Other Recommended Recordings.

1. Stan Freberg, Stan Freberg Presents the United States of America
2. Stan Freberg, Tip of the Freberg
3. Michael Flanders & Donald Swann, The Bestiary of Flanders & Swann
4. Tom Lehrer, Tom Lehrer Revisited
5. Tom Lehrer, Songs and More Songs
6. Anna Russell, The Anna Russell Album
7. Allan Sherman, My Son the Celebrity (LP)
8. Allan Sherman, My Son the Folk Singer (LP)
9. Allan Sherman, My Son the Nut (LP)