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## Tom Lehrer, Song Satirist And Mathematician, Dies At 97

Longtime friend David Herder said Lehrer died Saturday at his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Gillian Flaccus, July 27, 2025



Obit-Lehrer via Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Tom Lehrer, the popular and erudite song satirist who lampooned marriage, politics, racism and the Cold War, then largely abandoned his music career to return to teaching math at Harvard and other universities, has died. He was 97. Longtime friend David Herder said Lehrer died Saturday at his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He did not specify a cause of death.

Lehrer had remained on the math faculty of the University of California at Santa Cruz well into his late 70s. In 2020, he even turned away from his own copyright, granting the public permission to use his lyrics in any format without any fee in return.

A Harvard prodigy (he had earned a math degree from the institution at age 18), Lehrer soon turned his very sharp mind to old traditions and current events. His songs included “Poisoning Pigeons in the Park,” “The Old Dope Peddler” (set to a tune reminiscent of “The Old Lamplighter”), “Be Prepared” (in which he mocked the Boy Scouts) and “The Vatican Rag,” in which Lehrer, an atheist, poked at the rites and ceremonies of the Roman Catholic Church. (Sample lyrics: “Get down on your knees, fiddle with your rosaries. Bow your head with great respect, and genuflect, genuflect, genuflect.”)

Accompanying himself on piano, he performed the songs in a colorful style reminiscent of such musical heroes as Gilbert and Sullivan and Stephen Sondheim, the latter a lifelong friend. Lehrer was often likened to such contemporaries as Allen Sherman and Stan Freberg for his comic riffs on culture and politics and he was cited by Randy Newman and “Weird Al” Jankovic among others as an influence.

He mocked the forms of music he didn't like (modern folk songs, rock 'n' roll and modern jazz), laughed at the threat of nuclear annihilation and denounced discrimination. But he attacked in such an erudite, even polite, manner that almost no one objected. "Tom Lehrer is the most brilliant song satirist ever recorded," musicologist Barry Hansen once said. Hansen co-produced the 2000 boxed set of Lehrer's songs, "The Remains of Tom Lehrer," and had featured Lehrer's music for decades on his syndicated "Dr. Demento" radio show.

Lehrer's body of work was actually quite small, amounting to about three dozen songs. "When I got a funny idea for a song, I wrote it. And if I didn't, I didn't," Lehrer told The Associated Press in 2000 during a rare interview. "I wasn't like a real writer who would sit down and put a piece of paper in the typewriter. And when I quit writing, I just quit. ... It wasn't like I had writer's block."

He'd gotten into performing accidentally when he began to compose songs in the early 1950s to amuse his friends. Soon he was performing them at coffeehouses around Cambridge, Massachusetts, while he remained at Harvard to teach and obtain a master's degree in math. He cut his first record in 1953, "Songs by Tom Lehrer," which included "I Wanna Go Back to Dixie," lampooning the attitudes of the Old South, and the "Fight Fiercely, Harvard," suggesting how a prissy Harvard blueblood might sing a football fight song. After a two-year stint in the Army, Lehrer began to perform concerts of his material in venues around the world. In 1959, he released another LP called "More of Tom Lehrer" and a live recording called "An Evening Wasted with Tom Lehrer," nominated for a Grammy for best comedy performance (musical) in 1960.

But around the same time, he largely quit touring and returned to teaching math, though he did some writing and performing on the side. Lehrer said he was never comfortable appearing in public. "I enjoyed it up to a point," he told The AP in 2000. "But to me, going out and performing the concert every night when it was all available on record would be like a novelist going out and reading his novel every night."

He did produce a political satire song each week for the 1964 television show "That Was the Week That Was," a groundbreaking topical comedy show that anticipated "Saturday Night Live" a decade later. He released the songs the following year in an album titled "That Was the Year That Was." The material included "Who's Next?" that ponders which government will be the next to get the nuclear bomb ... perhaps Alabama? (He didn't need to tell his listeners that it was a bastion of segregation at the time.) "Pollution" takes a look at the then-new concept that perhaps rivers and lakes should be cleaned up.

He also wrote songs for the 1970s educational children's show "The Electric Company." He told AP in 2000 that hearing from people who had benefited from them gave him far more satisfaction than praise for any of his satirical works. His songs were revived in the 1980 musical revue "Tomfoolery" and he made a rare public appearance in London in 1998 at a celebration honoring that musical's producer, Cameron Mackintosh.

Lehrer was born in 1928, in New York City, the son of a successful necktie designer. He recalled an idyllic childhood on Manhattan's Upper West Side that included attending Broadway shows with his family and walking through Central Park day or night. After skipping two grades in school, he entered Harvard at 15 and, after receiving his master's degree, he spent several years unsuccessfully pursuing a doctorate. "I spent many, many years satisfying all the requirements, as many years as possible, and I started on the thesis," he once said. "But I just wanted to be a grad student, it's a wonderful life. That's what I wanted to be, and unfortunately, you can't be a Ph.D. and a grad student at the same time." He began to teach part-time at Santa Cruz in the 1970s, mainly to escape the harsh New England winters. From time to time, he acknowledged, a student would enroll in one of his classes based on knowledge of his songs. "But it's a real math class," he said at the time. "I don't do any funny theorems. So those people go away pretty quickly."