

## Paper Mache for 8-1-25 by David Read

It seems like each week we learn of the passing of noteworthy people who for one reason or another became part of the national consciousness. I sometimes recognize the names and on other occasions do not. However, one passing of note this past week really did resonate with me having spent a lifetime enjoying his satirical songs. Tom Lehrer was an American musician, satirist, and mathematician whose sharp wit and dark humor made him one of the most distinctive voices in 20th-century music. He was born April 9, 1928, in New York City. A Harvard-educated mathematician, he began writing and performing satirical songs in the 1950s, developing a cult following for his clever lyrics, biting irony, and ability to lampoon politics, social issues, and human folly with piano accompaniment and a disarmingly cheerful tone.

Lehrer's early recordings, such as *Songs by Tom Lehrer* (1953), were self-produced and sold by mail order, yet they circulated widely, especially among college students. His popularity grew as he began performing live and appearing on television and radio. I don't think that Lehrer won any Grammys, but you likely have heard some of his greatest hits, notably songs like "Poisoning Pigeons in the Park," "The Vatican Rag," and "The Elements" which showcased his facility with wordplay, satire, and melody. He often targeted institutions like the military, religion, and government bureaucracy, anticipating the irreverent humor of future generations.

In the 1960s, Lehrer reached a broader audience through the PBS television show *That Was the Week That Was*, where he composed topical songs about current events, including civil rights, nuclear proliferation, and educational reform. His 1965 album *That Was the Year That Was* became one of his most enduring works. Songs like "Wernher von Braun" and "So Long, Mom, I'm Off to Drop the Bomb (A Song for World War III)" captured the anxiety and absurdity of the Cold War era with a sardonic edge that few others dared to voice. Despite his growing fame, Lehrer largely stepped away from public performance by the late 1960s, expressing disillusionment with the changing political climate. He returned to academia, teaching mathematics at MIT and UC Santa Cruz, where he also taught musical theater.

Tom Lehrer's legacy rests on his ability to combine intellectual sophistication with biting humor. His songs remain widely quoted and studied, and he is often cited as an influence on later satirists such as "Weird Al" Yankovic and Randy Newman. Lehrer's approach to satire—playful, literate, and unapologetically subversive—helped expand the boundaries of what could be discussed in popular music. His music matters today because it remains a sharp, witty, and fearless form of social and political satire that still resonates in our polarized and media-saturated world. Lehrer's songs tackled controversial issues—nuclear war, racism, education, government hypocrisy—with humor, irony, and intellect. His satirical style, often cloaked in catchy melodies and precise rhymes, invites listeners to laugh while also reflecting deeply on moral absurdities and societal contradictions. Songs like "Pollution," "Who's Next," and "The Vatican Rag" feel remarkably current in their themes, demonstrating how many of the same political, environmental, and institutional concerns persist today. Moreover, Lehrer's willingness to challenge authority, question dogma, and speak uncomfortable truths without relying on cruelty or partisanship sets an important example. In an era of outrage and digital echo chambers, his work reminds us of the power of wit over vitriol, and intellect over insult. Tom Lehrer's voice, though quiet now, continues to echo with wit, wisdom, and a fearless love of the absurd. His music endures not just as nostalgia, but as a model for how humor can illuminate truth.