

## Session 4: Tin Pan Alley and the Commodification of Culture History of Popular Music; Prof. Jenkins

- I. History of Music Publishing
  - a. Piano/Organ craze of late 19<sup>th</sup> century—Booker T Washington quote. The piano was a “needed” part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century parlor for the middle class (it demonstrated sophistication and played into the belief that one’s attainments demonstrated worth beyond one’s financial holdings) and piano manufacturers produced cheap pianos for the newly invigorated market.
  - b. Prior to Civil War, music publishing was integrated into piano sales. Also the publishers were dispersed across the country (not centered in NYC as in the late 19<sup>th</sup>). Individual songs had little commercial value. It was the overall group that made the money. Stephen Foster was the exception in that he was able to make a living (sort of—see below) in publishing music. Also before the Copyright Act of 1891, publishers could simply pilfer foreign songs and pay nobody!!
- II. Stephen Foster (1826-1864)
  - a. Sometimes called “The Father of American Music,” he wrote numerous successful minstrel and parlor songs (over 200 in total). These include such hits as “Oh! Susanna,” “Camptown Races,” “My Old Kentucky Home,” and “Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair.”
  - b. Worked for a while with the Christy Minstrels and he wrote some of his best-known works for them.
  - c. He hoped to transform minstrel music: “to build up taste among refined people by making words suitable to their taste, instead of the trashy and really offensive words which belong to some songs of that order.”
  - d. Tried to make his living as a professional independent songwriter but this was not really possible at that time (but would soon change). He died in penury in the Bowery.
  - e. In part, he was a victim of his own success. His style was so recognizable, it became easy to copy it and because of the lack of stringent copyright laws at the time, many publishers just put his work out without paying him at all. Still he was wildly popular. He sold 100,000 copies of “Old Folks at Home” in 1851 alone!
  - f. Even publishers who had legitimate right to his songs ripped him off by today’s standards. In 1847 he sold “Oh! Susanna” for \$100 outright and never got any royalties on a tune that made thousands of dollars.
- III. Tin Pan Alley
  - a. 1883: 11-year old Jay Witmark won an arithmetic competition and for a prize was able to choose among a printing press, a bike, a tool chest, and a baseball uniform. His eldest brother, Isidore (14), convinced him to get the press. Along with Julius (13) they started making New Year’s cards and then business cards in their Hell’s Kitchen home, W. 40<sup>th</sup> Street. By 1885, they had a small business out of the home with a steam printing press that they convinced their father to help them buy (**Whitmark Bros.**). 1886: Began publishing sheet music and had some real success with “President Cleveland’s Wedding March,” written by Isidore. Soon sheet music was their main concern.
  - b. Music Publishing Industry started around NY’s Union Square and then moved to 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> between Fifth and Sixth Avenues. Here worked people such as Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, and Jerome Kern. The name refers to the banging of songwriters on the pianos in the studios.
  - c. With the rise of vaudeville in the 1880s, publishers began making money by supplying the shows with new tunes.

- d. November 1, 1894 in Cincinnati: founding of *Billboard* magazine—originally a trade paper for the bill posting (advertising) industry. It carried news of outdoor amusements and soon included minstrel shows and other musical events. It begins publishing music charts with the rise of the jukebox industry in the 1930s.

IV. The Song Industry

- a. The song industry emerged with the **publisher** at the top but then with a **staff arranger** to set the tune for different forces and occasions—**professional copies**. Then the **songwriters**—increasingly formulaic, copycat (the title of the utmost importance—some firms had writers who **JUST** produced titles).
- b. Then the **PLUGGERS!!** Stage One: “Trying it on the dog”: Print five thousand or more copies of a “professional” edition on cheap pulpy paper without artwork. Stage Two: local performers. Stage Three: trade copies on better paper with artwork. Now the real plugging begins. Stage Four: sell at reduced rate to test reaction. Sellers now had inducement to sell (greater profit). Stage Five: advertisements in trade publications and free distribution to professional singers. Stage Six: pluggers go out to stores, to ball games, racetracks, prizefights, public parks, Ivy League dances, riverboats, elevated trains, political rallies. They got audiences to participate with “chorus slips” that were distributed.
- c. Typical day: 10AM publishing house to get music and chorus slips. Wait for assigned times at various department stores and perform. Bribe salesgirls to push your songs with gifts of perfume, etc. 7-10PM plugging in theater, nickelodeons, and movie houses. Performed during intermission along with “song Slides” hand-colored photographic slides depicting the narrative of the song. Tried to reach about 10 movie houses and thus five thousand people in a night. Then the pluggers would plant boosters in the vaudeville crowds to “request” their songs.

V. Charles K. Harris (1867-1930)

- a. Was in Milwaukee in an office with a sign “Banjoist and Song Writer: Songs, Written to Order.” Before his “**After the Ball,**” most songs were at best regional hits. His took the entire country by storm. In 1892 it sold over 2 million copies of sheet music! It eventually sold well over 5 million copies, making it the best seller of all time (with respect to sheet music).
- b. Its popularity rested, in part, on *aggressive distribution*: “A new song must be sung, played, hummed, and drummed into the ears of the public, not in one city alone, but in every city, town, and village, before it ever becomes popular.”
- c. From his autobiography. “The real start at popularizing a song is to sell it to the performers. If it strikes their fancy, they will surely sing it for the public. Common sense tells one that the bigger the reputation and ability of the performer whose assistance the author and composer enlists, the more chances of its success in catching the public’s favor.”
- d. Thus Harris enlisted James Aldrich Libbey (perhaps the most successful traveling singer of the era) along with May Irwin (on Broadway) and Dick Jose (on the West Coast), and Helen Mora (in vaudeville).
- e. The song gained an even greater reputation in 1893 Columbian World Exposition in Chicago when performed by Sousa.