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MUSIC & ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY
EDUCATORS ASSOCIATION

Journal of the
Music & Entertainment Industry
Educators Association

Volume 18, Number 1
(2018)

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“Guided by Commercial Motives”: Selling Songwriting

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<https://doi.org/10.25101/18.1>

Abstract

Beginning in the early 1900s, authors working within the American music publishing industry wrote how-to books about popular songwriting for aspiring tunesmiths. On one level, these texts are simply the by-products of successful songwriters taking advantage of their celebrity. But while these instructional books are self-aggrandizing promotional tools, they also continue the tradition of musicians writing compositional manuals for his or her students. The utilitarian purpose of these how-to manuals adds to their historical importance. Examining these sources provides an avenue of inquiry into three related areas: how pioneering Tin Pan Alley writers such as Charles K. Harris and others wrote and thought about songwriting; the ancillary business practices of the music publishing industry; and the origins of popular music’s cultural dominance in the twentieth century. Ultimately, examining these how-to books provides a unique opportunity to view Tin Pan Alley from the perspective of music industry insiders.

Keywords: Tin Pan Alley, music publishing, popular song, Charles K. Harris, Irving Berlin, how-to, songwriting

In 1914 Irving Berlin wrote lyrics for a work he titled, “The Popular Song.” In the first verse Berlin cleverly addressed the ephemeral quality of popular song: “Born to live for a short space of time”—the dichotomy between highbrow and lowbrow culture: “Hated by highbrows who call it a crime; Loved by the masses who buy it”—and the business of songwriting: “Publisher pleading with all of their might with some performer to try it.”¹ Berlin mused during the second stanza that popular song composers were soon forgotten once his or her tune faded from memory, while names such as Chopin, Verdi, Beethoven, and Liszt have become immortal. Berlin also compared popular song to the evanescent quality of a rose—a

thing of momentary beauty that is quickly forgotten. And while Berlin conceded that the names of the European musical masters would outlast the composers of popular song, 1914 was still the early days of the American music industry.²

Berlin's lyrics expressed his sentiment regarding the early twentieth-century love affair between the American public and popular song. These two stanzas also encapsulate a multiplicity of issues that surround the study of popular music. Many authors have written about the early-twentieth-century business of songwriting, and addressed the formulaic practices of Tin Pan Alley that sought to minimize risk and maximize profits in order to sell to the largest possible market.³ But beginning in the early 1900s, individuals working within the American music publishing industry wrote how-to books about popular songwriting for aspiring tune-smiths. These manuals have been viewed by some as an extension of the "calculated conservatism" of Tin Pan Alley.⁴ On one level, these how-to manuals are simply the by-products of successful songwriters or industry insiders cashing in on their cultural capital. But while these instructional books are self-aggrandizing promotional tools, they also continued the tradition of musicians writing compositional manuals for their students—a practice that extends far into the past. The utilitarian purpose of these how-to manuals adds to their historical importance. These sources provide an avenue of inquiry into how legendary Tin Pan Alley writers such as Charles K. Harris and others thought about songwriting, the ancillary business practices connected with the music publishing industry, and the origins of popular music's cultural dominance in the twentieth century.

Examining several how-to-write-song manuals published between 1906 and 1945 brings the relationship of the popular song composer to their craft into tighter focus. The book titles often included the phrase "popular song" or "hit song" in an effort to attract attention to the potential financial rewards. Highlighting the organization of these "how-to" books reveals the emphasis the authors placed on the business of songwriting. This essay also surveys the ways in which various authors address the compositional process and the language used to express their musical ideas, while closely scrutinizing the instructions on how to compose melodies. This mode of analysis offers insights into how three composers—Charles K. Harris, E.M. Wickes, and Robert Bruce—model the practical creation of a popular song. Additionally, each author, in his own way, addresses the tensions between what Harris called the "great American 'unmusical' public [and]

the more highly cultivated musical class.”⁵ Ultimately, these how-to books provide a unique opportunity to view Tin Pan Alley from the perspective of music industry insiders.

“Guided By Commercial Motives”

In 1904 economist Thorstein Veblen wrote, “The vital point of production is the vendibility of the output, its convertibility into money values, not its serviceability for the needs of mankind.”⁶ Tin Pan Alley built the practice of producing a steady stream of popular songs on this principle. Tin Pan Alley is used here to represent the industry as well as the songwriting style, particularly the AABA song form, that dominated American popular song from roughly 1890 through the 1940s. What separates the Tin Pan Alley era from previous eras of music making, specifically music celebrated by “highbrows,” is the critical distinction that selling a song was the key motivation of all those involved in the songwriting process. Instead of expressing human emotion, Tin Pan Alley was concerned with manipulating human emotion in the interests of selling music.⁷ Practically speaking, writers and publishers working within Tin Pan Alley measured success purely in terms of sheet music sales.

By the early 1900s, Tin Pan Alley publishers viewed songs as products and sheet music was readily available at a variety of stores. Music publisher Charles K. Harris blithely remarked in 1906:

Only a few years ago a sheet music counter in a department store was unheard of. Today in the largest dry goods emporiums and department stores in New York, down to the smallest in every city in the United States, can be found a music counter where all the popular songs of the day are on sale.⁸

The sale of sheet music became ubiquitous; the public could buy the latest hit almost anywhere. In 1910, the *New York Times* profiled the business of songwriting in an article titled, “How Popular Song Factories Manufacture a Hit.” “The consumption of songs by the masses in America is as constant as their consumption of shoes, and the demand is similarly met by factory output,” the unknown author exclaimed.⁹ Writing in 1916, composer and music publisher Harry Von Tilzer posited, “[The songwriter’s] work has become a commodity with cash value, and in order to augment the value

he must subordinate his own personal tastes to those of the music-buying public.”¹⁰ Both views, one by an outside observer and the other by a Tin Pan Alley insider, present similar views of the business of music: a song was just another mass-produced, commercially available specialty product, and public demand dictated product development.

The authors of the how-to books primarily organized their texts with an eye towards the business of selling music. Charles K. Harris composed “After the Ball” circa 1892, which was the first popular song to sell hundreds of thousands of copies, ultimately becoming the first national hit.¹¹ By the time Harris wrote *How To Write a Popular Song* in 1906, the oldest source examined here, he was an enormously successful songwriter and publisher. The Harris text includes eight chapters: three related to songwriting; four related to publishing the song; and an extensive rhyming dictionary, the longest chapter of the book (see Table 1).

Chapter	Title
1	Lyric Writing
2	The Musical Setting or Melody
3	The Accompaniment
4	Finishing Touches Previous to Publication
5	Printing and Publishing Your Own Composition
6	Presenting Manuscript to a Publisher – Selling Outright
7	Hints and Don'ts
8	Dictionary of Rhymes

Table 1. Harris, *How to Write a Popular Song* (1906), table of contents.

Writing a decade after Harris, E.M. Wickes remarked in his 1916 publication *Writing the Popular Song*, “The consistent producers of hits are men who eliminate personal likes and dislikes and judge a song as a tea merchant would value a chest of tea for marketing purposes.”¹² Wickes’ comment echoes the 1910 *New York Times* article as well as those by Von Tilzer. Keeping with his capitalist approach to songwriting, Wickes bluntly proclaimed: “From the very conception of the song-idea the lyricist¹³ and composer are guided by commercial motives.”¹⁴ Like Harris before him, Wickes was a salesman who peddled songs. The Wickes how-to text

is greatly expanded when compared to the Harris source: Wickes devotes half of the twenty-six chapters to the business of music (see Table 2).

By the 1930s for authors of these how-to manuals, the business of selling the song became equivalent to the craft of writing the song. And in the case of Robert Bruce, the writing of these manuals became a cot-

Chapter	Title
1	The Popular Song
2	Various Types of Songs Analyzed
3	Song-Lyrics and Magazine Verse Contrasted
4	Titles
5	Themes
6	Themes To Be Avoided
7	Timeliness
8	Lyric Construction: Length and Transition
9	Lyric Construction: Meter, Rhythm, and Rhyme
10	Lyric Construction: The Story Element
11	Lyric Construction: Punch
12	Lyric Construction: The Chorus
13	Lyric Construction: Diction
14	Lyric Construction: Point of View
15	Melody Construction
16	Collaboration
17	Song Hits and Song-Cycles
18	Manuscripts and Markets
19	Scarcity of Women Songwriters
20	The Staff Writer and the Freelance
21	Popular Song Publishers
22	The Evolution of a Manuscript
23	Publishing Your Own Songs
24	The Song Shark
25	Colored Slides and Motion Pictures
26	High-Class Publishers

Table 2. Wickes, *Writing the Popular Song* (1916), table of contents.

tage industry. Bruce, a former ASCAP employee, editor of the magazine *Melody*, and Vice President of The Songmart, wrote or co-wrote several how-to books: *So You Want to Write a Song* (1935); *How to Write Popular Songs* (1939), co-authored with Sigmund Spaeth, the famous “tune detective”; *How to Write and Sell a Song Hit* (1939), co-written with Abner Silver, and *How to Write a Hit Song and Sell It* (1945).¹⁵ Each of these sources have much in common, but this essay will focus on *How to Write a Hit Song and Sell It*. Like Harris and Wickes before him, Bruce placed the business of music near the center of his text. In his chapter “Publishing for Profit,” Bruce explicitly states:

It is sometimes difficult to realize that music, despite its nebulous distinction as “one of the arts,” is actually regarded as a commodity and is bought, exploited, distributed and sold much the same way as other commodities including soap, food, cosmetics, cigarettes and automobiles...It is important for the new songwriter to understand the purpose and function of the different components of the music industry.¹⁶

To help his reader understand the so-called different components of the music industry, Bruce presented comprehensive and practical music publishing information. He included nearly thirty pages of appendices that contained a copy of a standard royalty contract, directories of music publishers, radio stations, record companies, and transcription companies. There was also a three-page essay describing the copyright law and a list of hit songs from 1936 through 1944 (see Table 3).¹⁷

These texts targeted amateur musicians and were advertised accordingly. The Home Correspondence School published *Writing the Popular Song* by Wickes. The school advertised in magazines such as *The Atlantic* and *Harpers* and promoted a catalog containing over one hundred course offerings. The Spaeth and Bruce 1939 book, *How To Write Popular Songs*, was a correspondence course that included homework exercises to be sent in to receive commentary. A 1946 ad in *Billboard* for *How to Write a Hit Song and Sell It* states, “Here is the one book that tells you how to write a song and what to do about it after you have written the song . . . HOW TO SELL IT!”¹⁸ Considering the practical purpose of these texts, these how-to manuals represent the beginnings of music industry education.

Chapter	Title
1	Writing the Song
2	The Completed Song
3	Protecting Your Song
4	Publishing for Profit
5	The Hit-Makers
6	Marketing Your Song
7	Summary

Table 3. Bruce, *How to Write a Hit Song and Sell It* (1945), table of contents.

“What Kind of Song Shall I Write to Achieve Fame and Success?” – Harris

As many music educators know, teaching a student to write a melody is a difficult task. Learning how to write a melody is a nearly impossible challenge with only a book as one’s teacher. Harris’ chapter, “The Musical Setting or Melody,” relies mainly on prose to explain the process of melodic construction.¹⁹ After four pages of anecdotes and general commentary Harris recommends, “A few hints as to some of the prevalent causes that lead the inexperienced into the paths of disappointment and disaster...”²⁰ While Harris does not mention any supposition of previous musical knowledge—it may be argued that he did not expect any—his first comments addressing the writing of a melody make use of what he refers to as technical language.²¹ Harris cautions against using “awkward ‘intervals’,” and the use of consecutive “higher tones, such as the d’s and e’s and occasional f’s.”²² Harris asks the reader to sing over the four examples in hopes that he or she will discover that the lower melody of each pair is much easier to sing. Perhaps it did not occur to Harris that the amateur songwriter using his text might not have the ability to read and perform music at sight.²³ Harris nevertheless concludes, “the simpler [melody has] the better chance of real popularity.”²⁴

Wickes uses no music notation for his chapter “Melody Construction.” Throughout the book, he makes frequent references to popular song titles and lyrics in order to clarify his point for the reader. This is a clever pedagogical device, but only effective if the reader is familiar with the songs that Wickes references. Wickes offers concrete, albeit gendered, advice for the burgeoning songwriter: “The girl of ordinary playing ability

prefers a simple bass...the majority of performers cannot do justice to a song that goes beyond an octave in range.”²⁵ Similar to the advice of Harris, Wickes cautions against melodies that “jump back and forth” which produces a “weird collection of notes.”²⁶ Instead, Wickes suggests that the composer should “try to build by easy stages.” Wickes calls this technique a “re-vamp,” and offers ten examples that primarily rely on song titles. Based on the examples, a “re-vamp” is a melody that uses chromatic neighbor tones: for example, D-E^b-D.

Both Harris and Wickes proffer slightly differing views on melody construction. Harris’ advice that lasting popular melodies rely on smooth melodic contours still rings true. That Wickes would suggest popular melodies incorporate chromaticism is curious considering those types of melodies are harder to sing, especially for amateurs.

How to Write a Hit Song and Sell It presents the most thorough explanation of how to compose a melody. Bruce assumes his audience to have at least a reading knowledge of music.²⁷ He makes frequent use of musical examples and song titles to support his explanations and does not avoid the use of “terms and phrases peculiar to the music industry.” In describing melody, Bruce states:

We might think of melody as an organization of tones played in a logical and pleasing progression. Melody is not static. It must move, and in moving, it must proceed to a logical and expected conclusion...If we should interrupt this movement at any point, our ears will tell us that the progression is incomplete, or, in other words, that we have reached an incomplete cadence. If we now continue the progression to the “C” at either end of the scale, we find that our cadence is complete, and that our melody has reached a satisfactory and logical conclusion.²⁸

Bruce then uses “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” to demonstrate his point. “Although the motion of the progression shuttles back and forth,” Bruce concludes, “the direction is still towards the key-note or its octave equivalent.”²⁹ The key difference between the lessons taught by Harris and Wickes and the lessons provided by Bruce is that the former relies primarily on anecdotal evidence whereas Bruce’s instructions are grounded in examples distilled from Western European musical traditions.³⁰

“Hated by Highbrows”

Irving Berlin’s 1914 lyric addressed above expressed an early-twentieth-century view of popular song: “Hated by highbrows who call it a crime; Loved by the masses who buy it.” Pop music has been at the center of various culture wars for quite some time, and the writings of Harris, Wickes, and Bruce directly and indirectly participated in that discourse. Harris comments on the highbrow culture versus lowbrow culture debate in his introduction while speaking about those who listen to and embrace popular song:

The word “popular,” as used in this treatise in reference to songs, has been employed to expressly designate the various classes of songs which are written, published and sung, whistled and hummed by the great American “un-musical” public, as distinguished from the more highly cultivated musical class which often decries and scoffs at the tantalizing and ear-haunting melodies that are heard from ocean to ocean in every shape and form.

Harris goes on to justify the importance of popular songs by pointing out their commercial value and broad appeal:

Argument in favor of their merit is undoubtedly proved beyond question by their enormous sale; and many a sad and weary heart has been made glad by the strains of these “popular” songs.³¹

For Harris, an industrial-age music publisher, the salability of a song more than demonstrated its cultural worth. “One does not have to be a finished musician to be able to write popular tunes,” writes Wickes in his chapter “Melody Construction.”³² Although Wickes never articulates the precise meaning of “finished musician,” he likely uses the phrase in reference to someone with conservatory training. Regardless, Wickes’ contempt for the “finished musician” is very clear: “The finished musician who tries to write popular music by note rarely makes a success of it. His music is too stiff and foreign to the ear of the masses, though it is technically correct—and in the latter fact he appears to find a great deal of pleasure.”³³ The finished musician is likely someone who received European training, as the

use of the term foreign may allude to. Wickes concludes his argument by asserting the finished musician “would rather starve and turn out musical gems than live in opulence and create ‘rot’.”³⁴ Bruce enters the dialogue via his remarks on musical training:

In fact, a thorough training in harmony and counterpoint is more apt to be harmful, for it tends to make the songwriter lean too heavily upon his accompaniment when he is writing his melody line. Some of the most successful songwriters have only a cursory knowledge of music and the majority of them are only mediocre performers.³⁵

Like Wickes before him, Bruce reminds the readers that they should embrace their lack of musical knowledge and training as a positive attribute. All three authors made their living from working in the popular music publishing industry, so it is no surprise that each of them would champion popular song over music written and performed for “the more highly cultivated musical class.”

By 1941, Bruce, or at least his published work, was already part of the larger culture wars surrounding popular music. Theodor Adorno, a German philosopher and social critic, references *How to Write and Sell a Song Hit*, the 1939 text by Abner Silver and Bruce, in “On Popular Music,” an essay where the author outlines what he calls the “two spheres of music” as “serious” (non-standardized) and “popular” (standardized) music.³⁶ In a lengthy footnote, Adorno castigates Silver and Bruce, who he refers to as part of the “current literature on popular music,” for their apparent misunderstanding of the difference between a “standard song” and a standardized popular song. One of Adorno’s overarching criticisms was the “industrialization” of popular music, which Silver and Bruce’s work (as well as Harris’ and Wickes’) was a part of. A book that attempted to teach the public how to write popular songs would have been anathema to Adorno. The public rebuke of Silver and Bruce, however, provides some indication of the popularity of *How to Write and Sell a Song Hit* if Adorno selected this work over others to demonstrate his point. Adorno’s attack on Silver and Bruce has also memorialized the two author-composers long after much of their music has faded from popular memory. Years after “On Popular Music” first appeared, authors noted the similarities between the way Silver and Bruce wrote about melodic construction and how Arnold

Schoenberg, a significant influence on Adorno's own thinking, addressed the same topic.³⁷ Hated by highbrows, indeed.

Wickes' commentary about the "finished musician" reveals an interesting tension. By 1916, the year Wickes published his text, outsider observers of the music industry, as represented by the *New York Times* article, viewed Tin Pan Alley as a "songwriting factory." This factory was populated by a select group of people who went to work every day to write quantities of popular songs, sold for public consumption. Yet Wickes celebrated the musically illiterate and looked down upon those with more advanced musical training. That many successful Tin Pan Alley songwriters had limited musical training is now well known. In 1916, that may have not been the case, especially to commentators writing for the *New York Times* and other sources that criticized the music publishing industry. In his text, Wickes, perhaps, was trying to equate the Tin Pan Alley songwriter to the "unmusical public," to use Harris' term. If the successful songwriter who writes the how-to book is no different than the reader, then the reader, too, can be a successful songwriter. Bruce states as much in 1939, "In the songwriting business a professional is anyone who succeeds in getting a song published. So, working backward on our problem, we arrive at the conclusion that the only difference between an amateur and a professional is one song."³⁸ Essentially, Harris, Wickes, and Bruce present Tin Pan Alley and the business of songwriting as inclusive and open to anyone, which sharply contrasted to the *New York Times* article that equated the earnings of successful songwriters to those of bank presidents. This inclusive view might seem ironic considering Harris' and Bruce's association with ASCAP and the PROs history of exclusivity towards certain types of (popular) music.

"The Song Builders"

Articles about popular songwriting and Tin Pan Alley also appeared in a variety of periodicals. These pieces ranged from those that mocked the formulaic popular songwriting practices to those that presented views provided by Tin Pan Alley practitioners. These stories represent the dual nature of fascination: the astonishment with the public interest in popular songs, and the allure of the business of popular music for the authors or editors wishing to share the attraction with his or her readers. While these articles are not exactly the same as the how-to texts, they offer similar advice and insights into both the world of music publishing and the craft

of popular songwriting. The authors of these articles also used their platforms to weigh in on the “value” of popular song, further stoking the fires of the culture wars. In 1910, Arthur Somers Roche began “The Gentle Art of Song-writing” for *Harper’s Weekly* by stating, “The blame for the existence of the popular song lies with the people who buy it.”³⁹ (A sentiment that Berlin utilized in “The Popular Song.”) Roche then tells a comedic, fictitious story that makes copious use of the vernacular to recount a hit songwriter writing a tune at the request of his publisher (“I wanna noo [new] song,” the publisher asks). “...[I]f there be any readers who now feel sufficiently shameless and sufficiently feeble-minded to write a popular song,” Roche remarks, “let them go ahead and do it. But first let them learn something about the business end of song-writing.” Although Roche does not overtly state his disdain for popular song and those who write them, the astute reader would have been able to read between the lines. George F. Byrne wrote “Songs that Sell” for the January 1916 issue of *The Green Book Magazine*.⁴⁰ “Just what makes a so-called popular song succeed—if it is one out of the ten that does?” Byrne queries. “Melody? Perhaps fifty per cent, but almost worthless sans catchy lyrics.” Catchy lyrics, according to Byrne, are hard to identify. “Only the public knows” what makes a popular song succeed Byrne quips.⁴¹ For the remainder of the article Byrne provides lyric excerpts from recent and past hits as he attempts to solve the problem of “How do you know when you have a popular song?” “But I can’t answer,” Byrne concludes, “and I don’t believe anyone else can... Only the semi-annual statement can tell you that.”⁴² Song popularity, in Byrne’s estimation, was measured exclusively in terms of sales.

Writing a few months later for *The Green Book Magazine*, Irving Berlin posited, “It’s the love-element that sells the song. It comes before everything else in popular music.”⁴³ As far as Berlin is concerned, love is a commodity when it comes to songwriting. And by that, Berlin makes it clear to the reader that songs based on love are the songs that sell. Berlin’s article also offers a glimpse inside the world of song publishing. After Berlin briefly explains the unseen costs of music publishing such as song plugging, advertising, and expenses related to rent and staffing, he states: “Under present conditions a publisher loses money on a song unless he sells more than three hundred thousand copies. (I mean, by this, a song he has advertised and ‘plugged’—one he is betting on as a success.) He must sell between five hundred thousand and six hundred thousand copies to make a fair profit.”⁴⁴ Because of what Berlin calls his “knowledge of the

game,” he provides for the reader a perspective that other authors writing on the same subject cannot. And since Berlin was one of the best known popular songwriters at the time, his comments were likely taken as definitive. Berlin finally cautions against the beginner songwriter entering into “the trickiest game in the world” for several reasons, including because, “not *living* song-writing, [the amateur] is not in the proper atmosphere” (original emphasis).⁴⁵

On October 14, 1922, *The Saturday Evening Post* published, “The Song Builders,” a lengthy article written by “One of Them” that also offered a view inside Tin Pan Alley.⁴⁶ The author immediately warns the budding songsmith at the outset of the article about the songwriting game:

There is a trick in song writing, just as in laying bricks. Unless you get it you will not write a successful one. What is more unfortunate, the chances are you will never get that trick unless you are around where the trick is being done. A person must live in the atmosphere of the song business and be in constant touch to pick up ideas and make them workable. That is why the outsider has so little chance of success; why he or she is so easily swindled.⁴⁷

Similar to Berlin’s advice, this article reminds the reader that you need to know the (business) rules of songwriting before entering the game. While the article begins by cautioning the reader, the author is also critical about the place of the popular songwriter within the musical universe: “Personally I have never been able to consider a song writer a composer. Real composers are finished musicians who create new thoughts in music, mostly instrumental music. I am talking about what we know as popular songs. Some of our very best song writers know nothing about technical music.”⁴⁸ It is possible that “One of Them” was responding to views about “finished musicians” expressed by Wickes in his 1916 text; the similarity in language between the two sources is uncanny. The authors of these articles, with the exception of Berlin, made their readers clearly aware of the lack of “technical” training by those who write popular songs. In contrast, authors who wrote how-to books for songwriters used and expanded upon the idea that anyone, regardless of musical training, can write songs.

21st-Century “How-to” Sources

Harris, Wickes, Berlin, and Bruce worked during what has been called the “Golden Age of American Song,” and their attitudes towards songwriting were consistent with that era. Since that time, the song publishing industry has expanded well beyond its Tin Pan Alley origins, and the publication of how-to books has continued. While print sources still exist, the early-twentieth-century how-to guide morphed into twenty-first-century websites that use algorithms to help predict a songs success. The now-defunct Hit Song Science website was a patented, “on-line service... for independent/unsigned musicians and songwriters interested in immediate feedback on the quality and hit potential of their music.”⁴⁹ Hit Song Science did not offer tutorials on melody writing. Instead, the website allowed users to upload their recordings while algorithms allegedly predicted a song’s potential. uPlaya, the website that provided the service, boldly stated on its home page, “Democratize the Music Industry,” a sentiment that parallels, at least in spirit, those expressed over a century ago by Harris and Wickes (see Figures 1 and 2).⁵⁰ Two sources geared towards the music industry professional include MasterWriter and Hit Songs Deconstructed. MasterWriter, a web-based resource, claims to be “The most powerful suite of songwriting tools ever assembled in one program.”⁵¹ “Hit Songs Deconstructed,” another internet source, “provides cutting-edge tools to understand today’s mainstream music scene at the compositional level.”⁵² This subscription-based service sends out reports that detail recent past trends common to hit songs. Both of these sources literally build upon the foundations established by Harris, Wickes, Bruce and many others, while



Figure 1. Screenshot of uPlaya website (photo by author).

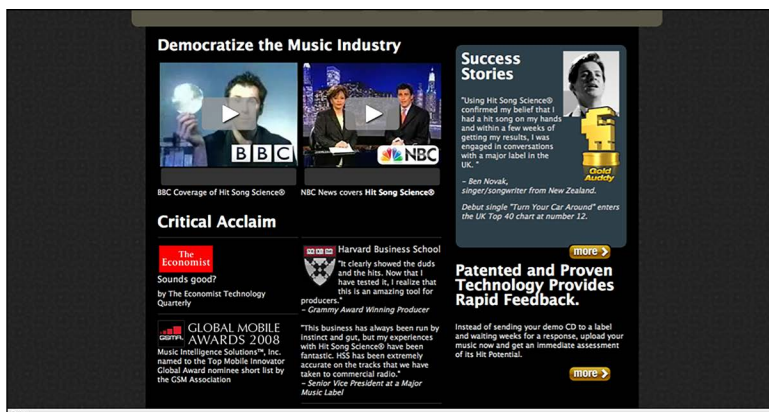


Figure 2. “Democratize the Music Industry,” Screenshot of uPlaya website (photo by author).

trying to help music creators “stay ahead of the curve in a fast-changing musical landscape.”⁵³

Conclusion

These how-to manuals and articles act as lenses to view the early days of popular songwriting and the music business. Analysis of these sources also exposes the intersection of the music publishing industry and amateur music making. With the exception of Bruce, these texts are neither “how-to” guides nor manuals in the instruction of songwriting. None of the sources definitively answers the question of how a song becomes popular. It is quite possible that Harris, Wickes, and Bruce (and Berlin) could write a popular hit but were unable to communicate to others how to do it. Of course, public response, the one factor that no songwriter can predict, still ultimately determines what is and isn’t a hit. The effect that these texts had on the actual creation of music may be unknowable, but that does not make the study of their content any less intriguing. Much of the instruction presented by Harris, Wickes, and Bruce exhibit many parallels with today’s formulaic songs created by production teams. These authors provide commentary from a music industry insider’s perspective that offers an alternate view on popular songwriting, the business of music making, and the clash between the “highly cultivated musical class” and “the great American ‘unmusical’ public.”

In 1906, Charles K. Harris remarked, “Always look to the selling qualities of the song,” which in his opinion included, “an original idea,

a catchy title, a haunting melody, clean words, good grammar...and last but not least, a good publisher.”⁵⁴ While musical styles and genres have greatly expanded since 1906 and the public has learned to tolerate explicit lyrics, the remaining “selling qualities of the song” formerly posited by Harris have certainly endured.

Endnotes

1. Irving Berlin, Robert Kimball, and Linda Emmet, *The Complete Lyrics of Irving Berlin* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 2000), 93. The song was unpublished and was registered for copyright on April 18, 1962. The lyrics for “The Popular Song” appeared in “‘Love Interest’ As a Commodity,” an April 1916 article written by Berlin, published in *The Green Book Magazine*. The magazine is available online: <https://books.google.com/books?id=U2YhAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA695&lpg=PA695&dq=Born+just+to+live+for+a+short+space+of+time,+Often+without+reason+or+rhyme+irving+berlin&source=bl&ots=zMzs2N9NCm&sig=KX4n187lnIE0egZ1SU09H1N2NEs&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjY8oPb38TbAhXixlkKHYPD64Q6AEIKzAA#v=onepage&q=Born%20just%20to%20live%20for%20a%20short%20space%20of%20time%2C%20Often%20without%20reason%20or%20rhyme%20irving%20berlin&f=false>. (accessed June 9, 2018.)
2. I would like to thank Catherine Hughes for reading and commenting on an early draft of this article, as well as Diane Steinhaus at the Music Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, for providing information about one of my sources. The anonymous reviewers for this journal also offered me valuable feedback. Finally, I would like to thank the Ramapo College of New Jersey Office of Grants and Sponsored Funding for providing financial support to attend the MEIEA 2018 Summit, where I presented an earlier version of this article.
3. Charles Hamm, *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983); Russell Sanjek, *From Print to Plastic: Publishing and Promoting America’s Popular Music (1900-1980)* (Brooklyn, New York: Institute for Studies in American Music, 1983); David A. Jasen, *Tin Pan Alley: The Composers, the Songs, the Performers, and their Times: The Golden Age of American Popular Music from 1886 to 1956* (New York: D.I. Fine, 1988); Russell Sanjek, *American Popular Music and Its Business: The First Four Hundred Years, Vol. 1: The Beginning to 1790* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Russell Sanjek, *American Popular Music and Its Business: The First Four Hundred Years, Vol. 2: 1790-1909* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press,

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4. Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 48.
 5. Charles K. Harris, *How to Write a Popular Song* (New York: Charles K. Harris, 1906), 10. The Harris text is available online at https://openlibrary.org/works/OL7872576W/How_to_write_a_popular_song.
 6. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of Business Enterprise* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904), 51.
 7. Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 22.
 8. Harris, *How to Write a Popular Song*, 7.
 9. "How Popular Song Factories Manufacture a Hit," *New York Times*, September 18, 1910.
 10. E.M. Wickes, *Writing the Popular Song* (Springfield, Mass.: The Home Correspondence School, 1916), xv-xvi. Von Tilzer, who penned the introduction to Wickes' text, also wrote "The Bird in the Gilded Cage." The Wickes text is available online at: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.ml1qbk;view=2up;seq=16>.
 11. Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 28.
 12. Wickes, *Writing the Popular Song*, 144-145.
 13. Wickes uses the word lyricist in the original text. Lyrist also describes a lyric poet, which is perhaps how Wickes used the word.
 14. Wickes, *Writing the Popular Song*, 100.
 15. Robert Bruce, *How to Write a Hit Song and Sell It* (New York: Lexington Press, 1945). At this point, I have not found any information regarding the sales and distribution for this source or the other two books discussed here. Lexington Press appears to be a vanity press.
 16. Bruce, *How to Write a Hit Song and Sell It*, 110.
 17. Bruce, *How to Write a Hit Song and Sell It*, 173-202.
 18. *Billboard*, December 22, 1945, 24. Available via Google Books: <https://books.google.com/books?id=phgEAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PP1&pg=PT23#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

19. Harris begins his book with “Lyric Writing: Different Style of Songs.” In the first chapter Harris classifies songs into ten categories: the home or mother song, the descriptive or sensational song, waltz, the coon song, the march song, the comic song, the production song, the popular love ballad, high class ballads, and sacred songs. The third chapter of his book addresses musical form as applied to the ten song categories. See Harris, *How to Write a Popular Song*, 26.
20. *Ibid.*, 23.
21. In his introduction Harris states that, “Technical and foreign terms have been avoided as far as possible, and wherever it has been necessary to make use of them an explanation in plain English follows,” 10.
22. Harris, *How to Write a Popular Song*, 22.
23. See Harris, *How to Write a Popular Song*, 10, 18.
24. *Ibid.*, 24.
25. Wickes, *Writing the Popular Song*, 100.
26. *Ibid.*, 100.
27. Bruce, *How to Write a Hit Song and Sell It*, xi.
28. *Ibid.*, 25-26.
29. *Ibid.*, 26.
30. Bruce’s explanation of melody is remarkably similar to that of the nineteenth-century German music theorist Adolf Bernhard Marx. Writing in 1837, Marx characterized “the first concepts of composition...[as]...the distinctions between the *moments of rest and motion* in the scale, i.e., the *tonic* on the one hand, and the *remaining tones* on the other [original emphasis].” See A.B. Marx, *Musical Form in the Age of Beethoven: Selected Writings on Theory and Method*, ed. and trans. Scott Burnham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 45.
31. Harris, *How to Write the Popular Song*, 10.
32. Wickes, *Writing the Popular Song*, 97-99.
33. *Ibid.*, 98-99.
34. *Ibid.* 99.
35. Bruce, *How to Write the Popular Song*, xi.
36. Theodor Adorno, “On Popular Music,” *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* (New York: Institute of Social Research, 1941),

- IX, 17-48. The essay is available online, see: http://www.icce.rug.nl/~soundscapes/DATABASES/SWA/On_popular_music_1.shtml.
37. Matthew Brown, *Debussy Redux: The Impact of His Music on Popular Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 27-29.
 38. Bruce, *How to Write and Sell a Song Hit*, 3
 39. Arthur Somers Roche, "The Gentle Art of Song-writing," *Harper's Weekly*, January 1, 1910, 31.
 40. George F. Byrne, "Songs that Sell," *The Green Book Magazine*, January 1916, 62.
 41. Byrne, "Songs that Sell," 62.
 42. *Ibid.*, 64.
 43. Irving Berlin, "'Love-Interest' As a Commodity," *The Green Book Magazine*, April 1916, 695-698.
 44. *Ibid.*, 698.
 45. *Ibid.*, 698.
 46. "The Song Builders," *Saturday Evening Post*, October 14, 1922, 26-27, 85-86. "One of Them" was later revealed as Theodore F. Morse of Leo Feist, Inc., a well-known songwriter working for a prominent song publisher.
 47. "The Song Builders," 26.
 48. *Ibid.*, 26.
 49. http://uplaya.com/about_hss/hssfaq, accessed March 15, 2011.
 50. http://uplaya.com/about_hss/hssfaq, accessed March 15, 2011.
 51. <http://masterwriter.com/songwriters/>, accessed June 1, 2018
 52. <https://www.hitsongsdeconstructed.com/>, accessed June 1, 2018.
 53. *Ibid.*
 54. Harris, *How to Write a Popular Song*, 15-16.

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Music & Entertainment Industry Educators Association
1900 Belmont Boulevard
Nashville, TN 37212 U.S.A.
www.meiea.org

The *MEIEA Journal* (ISSN: 1559-7334)
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