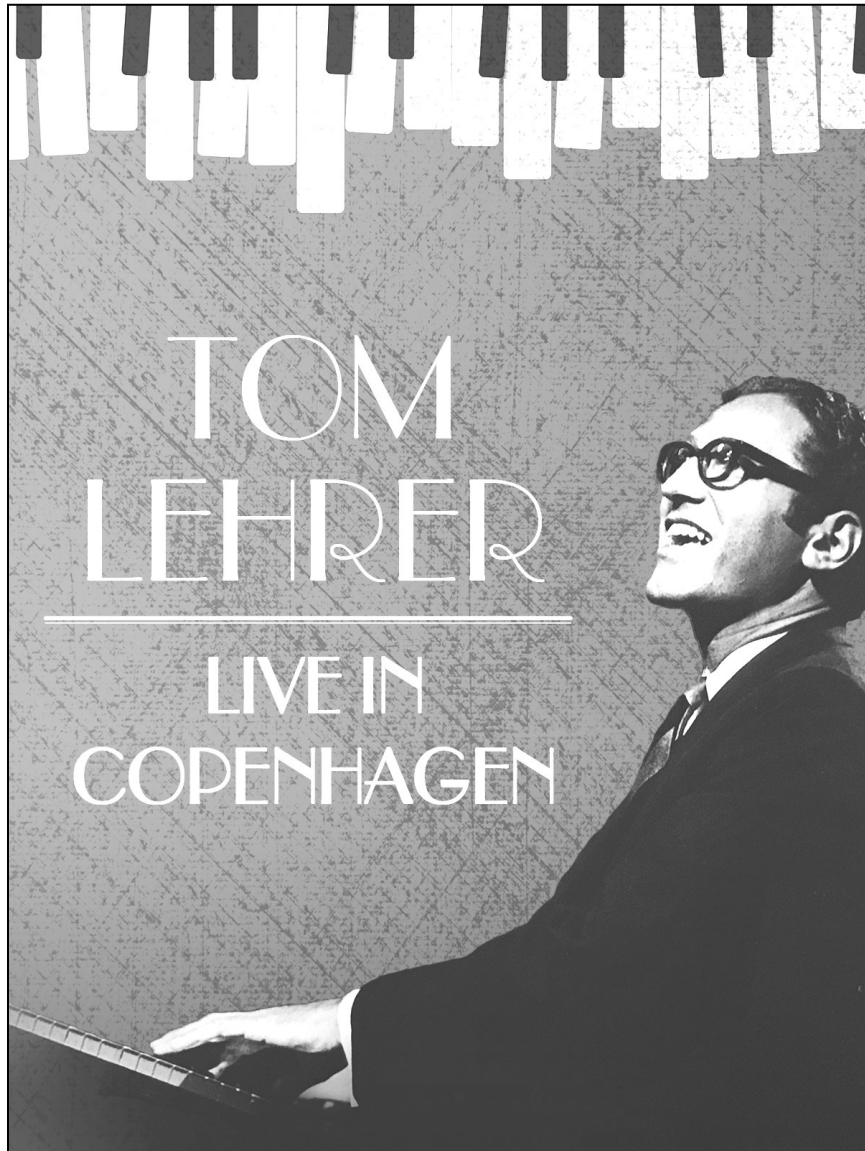


Comedy in Song



7. Satire in Song

October 29, 2025

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THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SATIRE IN SONG dates basically to the first half of the Twentieth Century, when audiences needed ways of dealing with the aftermath of two World Wars. Market conditions and censorship over the past 75 years have created a shifting relationship between real-life conditions and public performance. Just occasionally, a songwriter has tackled a topical concern head-on, but more frequently the angle has been oblique, working through parody or whimsy.

This class is arranged in four sections, by geography and/or period: Continental Europe, mid-century Britain, America at the end of the century, and Britain again from a similar time to the present. While the focus is on standalone cabaret songs both relevant and funny, there are exceptions: a few songs from stage works or films, some examples of political engagement that are deadly serious, a few songs that have no social purpose other than to have fun and, near the end, one song by a featured group that is neither satirical nor comic, but all too painfully real. *rb.*

A. Out of the Ruins

Writer-director **Bertolt Brecht** found the ideal format for his socialist critique of Weimar Germany in the shows he wrote with **Kurt Weill**, beginning with *The Threepenny Opera* (1927).

Brecht/Weill: *Die Dreigroschenoper*, "Futility of Human Aspiration"
(sung by Brecht himself)

Brecht/Weill: *Die Dreigroschenoper*, "Cannon Song" (film 1989;
Raul Julia and Bill Nighy)

In the aftermath of World War II, Belgian singer/songwriter **Jacques Brel** wrote mainly bittersweet songs about human relationships, but the few numbers that address political issues directly are powerful indeed.

Brel: *Jaurès* (1977)

Brel: *Les bourgeois* (1961)

Brel: *Vesoul* (1968), cover by Pomplamoose, 2022

B. Something to Do with Spring

Between the Wars, **Noël Coward** enjoyed West End fame as a prolific playwright, matinee idol, and wit. In later years, he reemerged as a cabaret performer, cashing in on the mildly subversive nature of his earlier songs.

Coward: *Mad Dogs and Englishmen* (1931); Cary Grant, 1939

Coward: *Mad Dogs and Englishmen* (1931); Noël Coward, 1955

Coward: *Bad Times Are Just Around the Corner* (1953)

Coward: *End of the News* (1945), cover by Michael Law, 2021

Coward: "What will happen to the tots?" (1955)

Audiences flocked to the shows of **Michael Flanders** and **Donald Swann** for their comic songs, many of which were about animals. But their rarer excursions into topical subjects could be surprisingly incisive.

Flanders/Swann: *Anthem of Patriotic Prejudice* (1963)

Flanders/Swann: *All Gall* (1956)

Flanders/Swann: *The Gnu* (1956)

C. The American Essence

The various American protest songs of the sixties and seventies had little room for humor. Comedians like the Smothers Brothers who tried to tackle political subjects found their shows cancelled. Mathematician-songwriter **Tom Lehrer** and (rather later) singer "**Weird Al**" **Yankovic**, developed oblique, but always funny, ways of responding to the times.

Paul Simon: *American Tune* (1972)

Tom Lehrer: *Wernher von Braun* (1965)

Tom Lehrer: *Irish Ballad* (1950)

Tom Lehrer: *Vatican Rag* (1965)

Al Yankovic: *Amish Paradise* (Coolio parody, 1996)

Al Yankovic: *White and Nerdy* (Chamillionaire parody, 2006)

Al Yankovic: *Party in the CIA* (Miley Cyrus parody, 2011)

D. Bright Side, Dark Side

From 1969 onwards, on television, stage, and film, the surreal comedy of **Monty Python's Flying Circus** found means of tackling controversial subjects in distorted-mirror views of the chaos in society around them.

Monty Python: "Look on the bright side of life," from *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979)

Monty Python: "Every sperm is sacred," from *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life* (1983)

Monty Python: *Lumberjack Song* (1969)

Founded by Dilly Keane in 1983, the all-female group **Fascinating Aïda** has been unafraid to address normally taboo subjects (such as the cancer of one of their members or increasing age of another), or to express them in the uncensored language of their times.

Fascinating Aïda: "Down with the kids" (2012)

Fascinating Aïda: "I watched two people"

Fascinating Aïda: "So sorry, Scotland" (2016)

Adèle **Anderson** (1952–, *British singer-songwriter*), Bertolt **Brecht** (1898–1956, *German playwright*), Jacques **Brel** (1929–78, *Belgian singer-songwriter*), Noël **Coward** (1899–1973, *British playwright, actor, and composer*), Michael **Flanders** (1922–75, *British singer-songwriter*), Dillie **Keane** (1952–, *British singer-songwriter*), Tom **Lehrer** (1928–2025, *American singer-songwriter and mathematician*), Paul **Simon** (1941–, *American singer-songwriter*), Donald **Swann** (1923–94, *British composer*), Kurt **Weill** (1900–50, *German composer*), "Weird Al" **Yankovic** (1959–, *American singer-songwriter*)

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