

# HOW POPULAR SONG FACTORIES MANUFACTURE A HIT

## The Original Score Is Sometimes Hardly Recognizable After the Tinkering Is Completed--Luck a Big Factor in the Business.



Victor Herbert



Charles K. Harris

In fact, they need this natural mental pabulum so badly that the dose cannot be too sickly or maudlin for their taste. The songs which catch their fancy most readily are stories of love, with a strain of sadness in them and a plaintive touch in the melody. With these vie in popularity the comic songs that meet their hearts' demand for laughter, and the songs which depict the everyday incidents of their lives in such a manner as to show the underlying human interest.

And the people pay well for their musical diversion. The favorite song writers of the present generation enjoy incomes equal to those of bank presidents. Several of them net \$10,000 a year and more, but it is a precarious income. The composition of popular songs, whether it be the words or the music, seems to be largely a matter of knack. The ability is often suddenly exhibited and as often suddenly passes away. In many cases the first production has been a success. In not a few the writer or composer has never been able to do anything good afterward.

Sometimes after three or four successes he loses the knack and, perhaps, never again excites popular approval. Or there may be intervals of long, lean years between the seasons of terrapin and champagne which mark the hits. The song writer generally lives up to his income when it is high and, as a consequence, experiences painful periods of reluctant economy.

The production of popular songs has grown to enormous proportions in the past twenty years. The aggregate sales may exceed 30,000,000 copies during a season in which several successes are launched.

The avenues for distribution are numerous. Aside from the ordinary stationery and book stores, large quantities are sold by the department houses, and the publishers receive extensive orders by mail.

In New York there are a number of places devoted exclusively to the sale of popular songs and music. The ten-cent music stores on Broadway that keep a singer pounding out the latest hits on a piano from noon till far into the night sell thousands of copies daily. It was to answer the demands of such places that the scenic cover, with its added appeal to sentiment, came into vogue.

The idea of picturing the song story was carried a step further when the scheme of employing a set of lantern slides as an auxiliary was devised. The sale of slides is no small part of a popular music publisher's business.

The business of popular song publishers is decidedly speculative. From \$500 to \$10,000 apiece is paid for songs, but neither publisher, writer, nor audience can tell with any degree of certainty whether or not a new production will be a success.

The sale of a song for which no one at the outset entertains great expectations may run into a million copies in the year. "In the Good Old Summertime" lay for months in a safe before it was launched, and the manner in which it took was a surprise to every one concerned.

On the other hand, a song which gives every promise of success may hang fire hopelessly and never receive recognition, or in the midst of apparent failure it may suddenly spring into unexpected popularity owing to some helping event, or the original rendering of some singer. "Break the News to Mother" was written in 1897, and created little attention

a dozen pianos may be accompanying as many voices at the same time, and occasionally a banjo or mandolin joins in the musical medley. There is the stock room, where hundreds of thousands of printed copies are piled up on partitioned shelves. There is the slide department, with its stacks of boxes, and

He is stiff in his terms, demands a certain kind of nature cover and a certain singer to introduce his song. The publisher dare not deny him, but he knows that he is taking a big chance of the next attempt proving a failure. As often as not, it does and the third fall flatters still. Then the man of one hit joins the ranks of the humble pleasers and is glad to get a production printed on any terms. He goes on writing things that won't go off, hoping some day to make another hit, and now and again he does. It is a remarkable fact that a large number of men seem to have just one good melody, or one good lyric, in them, and no more. Another peculiar thing about popular songs is that, while there is a distinctly effeminate quality in the majority of them, it is very seldom from a woman. Furthermore, the masculine point of view predominates in the sentimental as well as the comic songs, but nevertheless women are by far the largest purchasers of them.

In fact, a song that should fall to appeal to the female element of the middle and lower classes could not possibly be a success. The mystery of that appeal no mere man can fathom. Look around you

Almost the only approach to popular ballads were a few well-worn war songs and plantation ditties. But two or three American song writers were trying to get a hearing with the kind of appeal to the people which in England, where the music halls afforded a ready avenue for reaching the masses, had been successfully made for many years.

American publishers were not at all receptive to the new idea. There was handsome profit in editions of five or ten thousand at \$2 a copy, and they little suspected the bonanza to be found in catering to the multitude. When the author of "After the Ball" offered the production to publishers twenty-seven years ago he could not find one willing to take it in the original form. They recognized unusual merit in the song, but wanted to transform the lyric to the three-and-four type, and to elaborate the music. Charles K. Harris, who was the author of the song, refused to make any change in the song, and ultimately published it himself. It was an immediate and tremendous success, and became the foundation of one of the largest popular music publishing houses in the country, which has a little red imp chasing a football for its trademark.

To one who has never tried it would seem to be an easy matter to write a popular song and no great achievement to get it to taking music. The greatest hits do not display any considerable degree of literary or musical ability. The words are generally inane and the construction not infrequently ungrammatical. The music is often such a simple tune as a child might conceive. But many talented writers and composers have failed utterly in the attempt to produce one or the other of the component parts of a popular song. Others—some of whose photographs are shown here—have caught the secret.

Popular songs may be roughly divided into sentimental and comic—there are subdivisions in which fall novelty songs, waltz songs, character songs, and so on. Whether a song be sentimental or comic, it should tell a simple story, or deal with a simple incident of every-day life that will go home to the average American, who, according to the census, is John Smith, the mechanic, earning \$18 a week. The melody should be equally simple, something that can be caught and retained by the average ear—say nine. John Smith's on the third or fourth repetition. Any attempt at elaboration in words or music is bound to be ruinous.

The title should tell the story in three words—"After the Ball," "Alone in the

City," "Love by Telephone." The stimulant the peg on which the two verses of the lyric are hung the better.

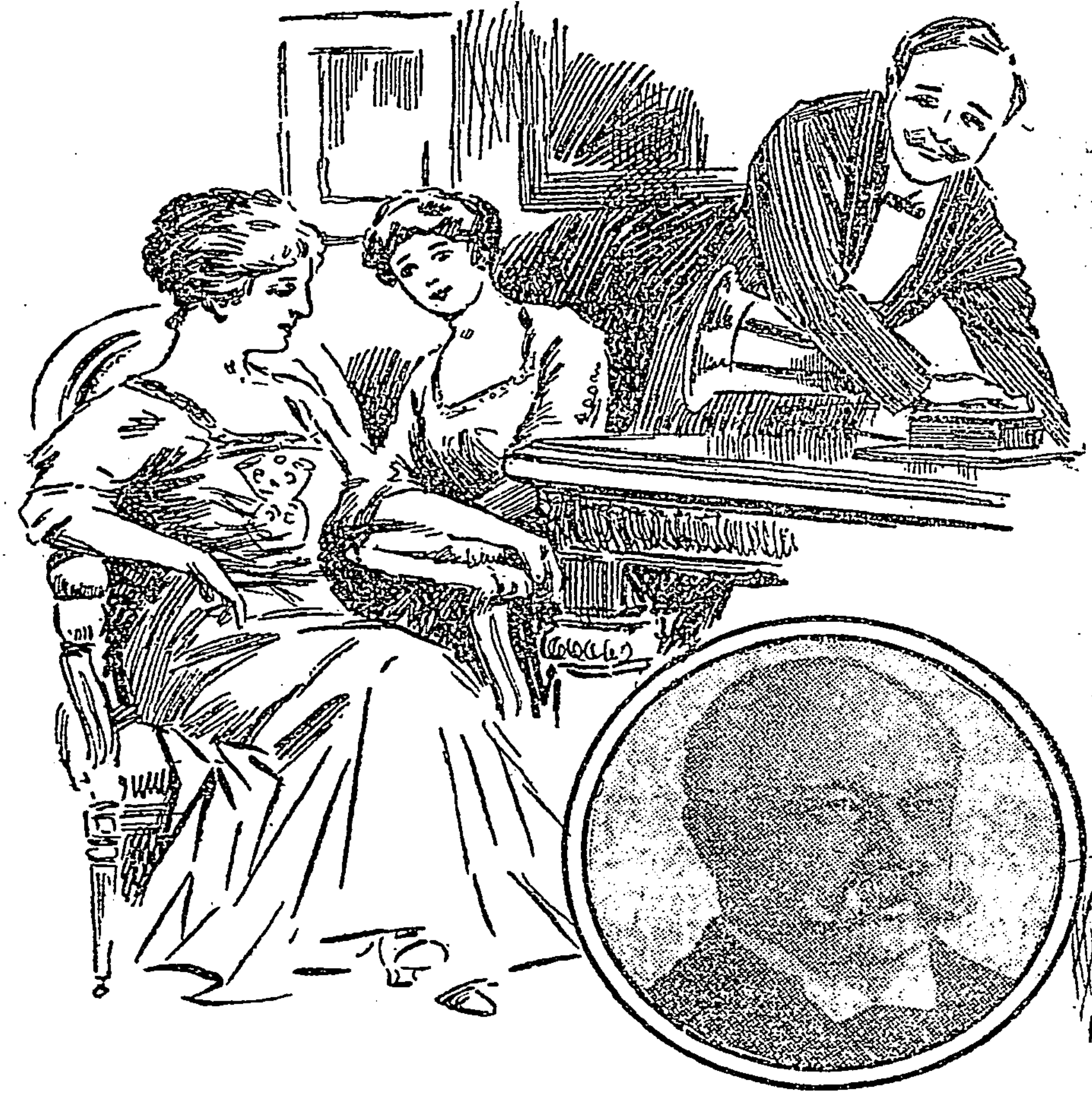
Love is, of course, the basic motive in 99 per cent. of sentimental songs. Some of the most successful of these have been suggested by a trivial incident or happy-hazard phrase, and the story conceived on the instant. The best results are produced under these conditions and when the writer works off his lyric while the inspiration is strong upon him. Spontaneously, even though accompanied by crudity, is the life of a popular song. Studied effort kills it. It is not to be supposed, however, that a writer ever dashes off a complete set of verses. He may come very near to it in the first hour of effort and spend three weeks groping for a single word.

A successful song writer has the faculty of seeing the element of human interest in the life about him. He never has to hunt for themes. He finds them on every hand. The author of "If I Should Meet You"—and, by the way, a quarter of a century ago it would have been "If I Should Meet Thee"—was closing his eyes against a sudden storm when he noticed a young woman hurrying across Broadway with bent head at the moment that a man came out of a hotel and started to cross the street in the opposite direction. They ran into each other, looked up, and started back in evident amazed recognition. The song writer imagined a chance meeting of erstwhile lovers after years of separation. He fancied the gush of sudden emotion and the quickening of long dormant sentiment. There was the theme of a song story ready made to his hand.

Two little children, a girl and a boy, were building sand piles. The girl had raised one to a height of which she was delightedly proud when her companion in a spirit of mischievousness kicked it down and ran off a little way to laughingly watch the effect of his devilment. But when he saw his little playmate sobbing in distress he came back and kissed the smiles into her face again.

The whole incident occupied less than five minutes, and before he left the bench from which he witnessed it a song writer had outlined "Kiss and Let's Make Up." A chance expression has more than once furnished the theme for a hit. Two men—a writer of lyrics and a composer of song music—met casually in a barber's shop one midsummer morning. "My wife's gone to the country," remarked one. "Hooray! Hooray!" exclaimed the other. In a flash the possibilities struck both of them. They went off and constructed the song.

That afternoon it was tried over at a publisher's. The same evening of the same day it was sung in several Broadway cafes and caught the audiences at once. The publisher printed an edition in hot haste. Carts carrying pianos were sent out on the streets with singers announcing to the sympathetic multitude the interesting and suggestive fact that their wives had gone to the country. In less than ten days all New York was whistling the tune, and it had reached



Julian Edwards

tion before the outbreak of the Spanish-American war.

"I Have Rings on My Fingers" was published more than eight years ago in England, but never created any particular enthusiasm. A popular vaudeville singer introduced it to American audiences last winter. It immediately "caught," and for several months was the best seller in the cheap music stores.

A considerable number of our street songs come from the other side, but we send over many more successes than we receive. The English people have developed a strong liking for American

the business office, where the ultimate product, still in the form of notes, is handled.

Few songs reach the publisher in a finished condition. The original lyric is usually altered more or less and sometimes the original song is not recognizable in its ultimate form. "Two Lovely Black Eyes" was first submitted as a sentimental ditty, but immediately struck the publisher as affording greater scope for humorous treatment.



Maurice Levi



Will R. Anderson



Manuel Klein

popular songs. The productions of our composers usually have choruses that are easily picked up and go with a swing. These are essential characteristics with an English music hall audience, which is always ready to "join in, all together." A popular music publisher's place is a veritable factory. There are rooms where composers are submitting their productions to the critical judgment of the manager; other rooms where vaudeville singers are trying new songs. Half

It seldom happens that the music as presented by the composer is altogether acceptable. Sometimes he has nothing more than a rather crude melody to offer, which his inability to write music has prevented him from committing to paper. It may be "good stuff," as far as it goes, and in that case it is taken down as the composer hums or whistles it and sent back to the department where the music is doctored and the scores arranged. Here it is worked into shape by technical musicians with the aid of the originator, to whom fresh inspiration is apt to come in the course of development.

Writers and composers with established

in a music hall when a supposedly funny song story is being rendered, dealing with the betrayal of a wife's trust. The most appreciative members of the audience are women. They, again, are the most commiserate when the singer, in plaintive numbers, unfolds a similar tale, sentimentally treated.

In America the popular song is of comparatively recent introduction. Its prototype was a composition with monotonous refrain and elaborate setting, which could only be rendered by a trained voice after laborious practice. It was seldom heard outside of drawing rooms, where it was sung with due ceremony and technical precision by prim young maidens in



Karl L. Hoschna

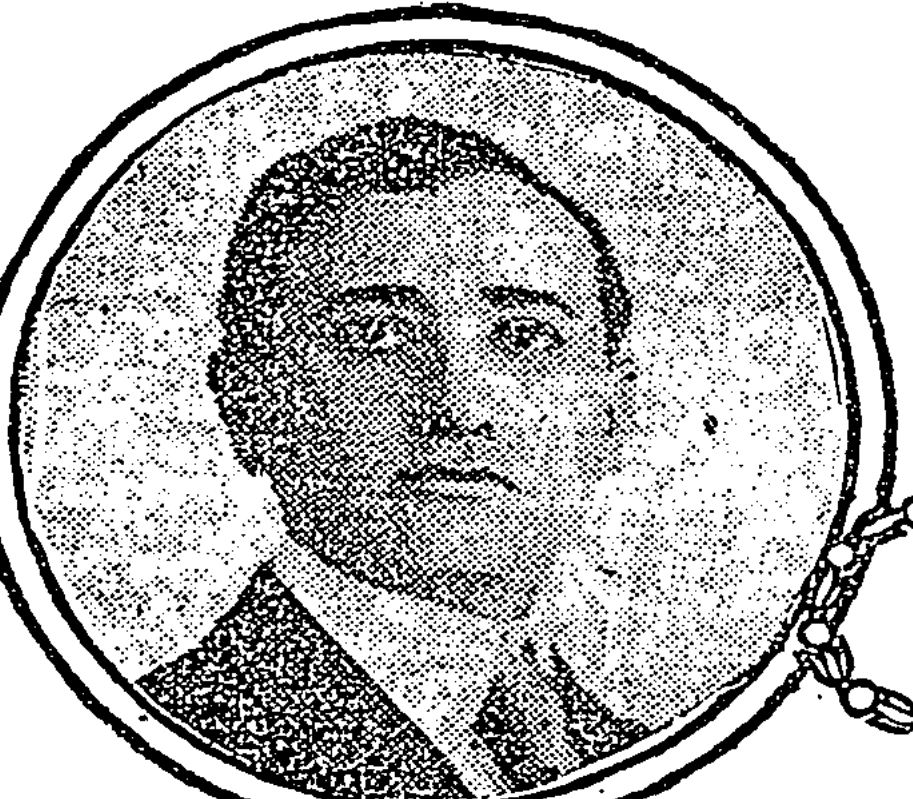
San Francisco in a month, which is half the time a success usually takes to travel across the continent.

This was an instance of popularity born in the street. The vaudeville stage is the most common medium of introduction to the public. As with a leading part in a play, a great deal depends upon the interpretation, and a song that falls flat under the treatment of one singer may be a pronounced success in the hands of another.



Ernest R. Ball

Louis Weslyn



James Brockman



Robert Fitzgibbon

reputations object to liberties being taken with their productions and will hardly ever brook the least suggestion of change. The man who has made a recent hit is a difficult person to deal with. He is filled with the idea that the whole country has its ear cocked to hear from him again. He must have things precisely his way.

fresh white gowns and dapper swains in swallowtails. The only part of it that ever impressed the unfamiliar ear was the insistent refrain, which always ran something after this fashion: "Evangeline, where vendest thou? Where vendest thou, Evangeline—where vendest thou—where vendest thou—vendest thou—vendest thou—t-h-o-u!"

The song always left you in doubt and wonderment. You never learned where fair Evangeline vendest, nor why she vendest; nor, indeed, any single fact of interest or consequence regarding her.

That sort of song could never have become popular. You couldn't expect the messenger boy and the shoppgirl to take a very keen interest in Evangeline's vendings when they led to nowhere. The masses need something more direct—something with a more human appeal. One of the chief secrets of popular song writing is to tell a simple story and to tell it completely.

At that time no attempt was made to cater to the musical tastes of the people. It was not supposed that they had any.