

Children's music (encyclopedia article). A revised version of this piece will appear in *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 2nd ed., edited by Charles Hiroshi Garrett (New York: Oxford University Press)

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This entry covers the history of commercial music recordings produced and marketed to children. Throughout its history, the children's music industry can be characterized by a tension between goals of education and entertainment, with record companies, parents, and educators playing important roles as gatekeepers and curators of "appropriate" music for children. From the beginning, commercial music for children has been notable for its integration with visual, narrative, and material media in toys, books, film, and later television shows and multimedia.

The early recording industry marketed directly to children with products including musical toys, dolls, and toy phonographs such as the Bing-Wolf Company's "Pigmyphone," for which various labels produced 5–7-inch recordings of nursery rhymes. Music recordings for children expanded in parallel with the children's book publishing industry, and many elaborately packaged children's book series were paired with miniature discs that included musical accompaniment, narration, and sound effects complimenting the stories and illustrations. These recordings used mostly male classically trained singers and textual material from Mother Goose nursery rhymes.

Whereas such miniature recordings were sold as simple entertainment for children, major record labels also offered extensive lines of educational recordings, marketed to schools and intended to be played by teachers in music classrooms. Francis Elliot Clark, a music educator who directed Victor's Educational Department beginning in 1911, was a key figure in bringing the phonograph to wide use in emerging "music appreciation" lessons, which sought to cultivate discernment and taste in schoolchildren's listening. Victor's educational recordings were almost entirely sung by operatically trained sopranos (Clark's view was that only female voices should be used on recordings for young children), and included Mother Goose and other children's songs, classical repertoire, and dramatic readings. Major advertising campaigns promoted Victor's educational recordings, printed teaching materials, and a phonograph model designed specifically for schools.

In 1934 the new label Decca offered recordings of children's songs by hillbilly and country singer Frank Luther on ten-inch discs exclusively, presenting children's music for the first time in the more serious larger format, a distinct move away from the "novelty" miniature discs packaged with toys or books. Luther's "folk" singing style also represented a significant shift toward a sound that would come to characterize much children's music, and away from the classically trained singers in previous educational and entertainment offerings for children. In 1937, with the success of its first feature-length animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, Walt Disney Productions established itself and its model of carefully crafted music combined with visually appealing animation as a key figure in the children's music industry through the 1970s.

After the Second World War the children's recording industry expanded along with the overall market for children's toys and consumer products. By 1948 "kidisks" represented 10 to 20 percent of total record sales in the U.S. In addition to traditional children's songs in the public domain, material for children's music after this era was increasingly varied and original, with

many tie-ins to Disney films, popular shows like *Howdy Doody* and *Tom & Jerry*, and performances by popular celebrities including Gene Kelly, Ginger Rogers, and James Stewart.

Though the industry was dominated by major labels, independent record labels also expanded into the children's music market during this period. Most notable is Young People's Records (YPR), founded in 1946, which drew on the folk music revival to present an alternative to the slick commercial offerings of the big labels, instead presenting children's music as simple, interactive, sing-along/play-along, folk-influenced, and politically left (or at least anti-consumerist), with prominent folk-revivalist Tom Glazer the label's star act. By contrast with the growing commercial offerings, the music of YPR was intended to be educational, but more participatory and child-oriented than the top-down approach of the major label music education departments that followed Francis Clark's philosophy. With its emphasis on a non-commercial folk style, educational enrichment, and direct marketing with a subscription "record club," YPR and the mid-century folk music revival created an influential "grassroots" model for children's music that successfully bypassed the existing, opposing models of school-based educational music and crassly commercial popular entertainment.

Other folk revival musicians, including Peter, Paul, and Mary, Tom Paxton, and Pete Seeger recorded songs for children as well. From the mid-1970s to the early 1990s, Canadian folksinger Raffi, using the folk-revival model of simple sing-along songs with sometimes mildly political (usually environmentalist) content, gained unprecedented popularity and visibility as a children's artist, despite refusing to advertise or market directly to children and declining commercial endorsements and media tie-ins.

In 1969 the influential public television show *Sesame Street*, which launched in 1969, brought television to the center of the children's music industry, and with its emphasis high-quality music for children framed as both educational and "fun" has been a major influence on the development of musical "edutainment"—followed later by shows for small children like *Barney* in the 1990s, as well as DVDs from educational media lines such as Disney's *Baby Einstein* and musical act the Wiggles in the 2000s. In addition to *Sesame Street*, the expansion of cable in the 1970s opened up space for networks wholly devoted to children's entertainment, especially Nickelodeon and the Disney Channel, which would later become important forces in children's music.

Disney returned as a prominent force in children's music with *The Little Mermaid* (1989), which was followed by a string of successful musical animated films, many of which won Academy Awards for their music. Less visibly, but perhaps as notable, was the launch of Radio Disney in 1996, an FM radio station programmed with music from young popular recordings artists as well as child-friendly "oldies" and novelty songs. Disney continued to expand its popular music products, with several record labels that cross-marketed content from the Disney Channel. In 2006 the soundtrack to the Disney Channel TV movie *High School Musical* was the top-selling album in any category, and the soundtrack to the sitcom *Hannah Montana* (whose star Miley Cyrus continued a successful recording career under her own name) was a top-ten selling album. Disney continued to develop new talent and market children's popular music using TV shows, DVD and record sales, and national tours. Other brands have emerged to pursue the children's market, including Kidz Bop, which rerecords and repackages top-forty pop songs moderately scrubbed of explicit content with choruses of children singing along to provide children "safe" access to mainstream popular music, and Rockabye Baby!, which records instrumental lullaby versions of pop and rock songs.

In addition to the huge success of tween pop artists, adult artists including critically respected figures such as Natalie Merchant and They Might Be Giants, increasingly produce new material for children, and independent artists such as Dan Zanes and Laurie Berkner have had long-term success applying the “grassroots” model of YPR and Raffi.

Suggested readings

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