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Appreciation Runs Deep for Jingle Man

For Tom Merriman, the Key to Good Jingles Remains 'That Human Quality'

BY KEN DEUTSCH

Some heroes are described as “unsung.” This one is “sung,” and by that I mean immortalized in perhaps tens of thousands of radio jingles he wrote that are still heard all over the world.

JINGLETIME

His name is Tom Merriman, and he is widely credited with starting the ID jingle business in Dallas.

LISTEN TO THE MUSIC

Over the last 60 years, Merriman worked with many of the greats during his pre-jingle career. These included band leaders Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, Warner Bros. cartoon voice specialist Mel Blanc and many other recording artists.

Tom Merriman's career in Dallas started in 1952 when future Radio Hall of Famer Gordon McLendon hired him as the musical arranger for his Liberty Network live band. Not surprisingly, Merriman used many of the talented people he met through this gig on various jingle projects. He even sang jingles himself in the early days, in a rich “legit” baritone voice. (“I’m Otto, the Orkin Man” is one example.)

Working at, and sometimes owning, ID companies such as Commercial Recording Corp., PFO Ullman and TM Productions, he helped shape the sound of every radio format through his musical call letter identifications, production libraries and commercial jingles.

His portfolio includes everything from three-second shotgun jingles to lush, orchestral long-form scores for corporate clients. His music is also heard in rides and attractions at many amusement parks, and the MGM Grand Hotel in Las Vegas. Turn on anything and you’ll hear Tom Merriman.



Jackie and Tom Merriman

PEOPLE YOU KNOW

Radio archivist Bill Schenold interviewed Merriman and allowed me to quote parts of it in “The Jingle Book,” which was published in 2003.

“I learned music on my own,” Merriman told Schenold. “I learned the technical side of transposition and all the things you have to know as a music writer. But it seems that there is something that has to be within you, native to your own abilities.

“I guess it’s something like an artist — he doesn’t go to school to learn to draw. He probably started drawing when he was a kid. It was that way with me. I started writing arrangements for bands when I was 12 or 13 years old. And I really learned by doing it. Then I went to the University of Indiana and got my bachelor’s degree. I studied composition and counterpoint and all the things you do as a serious composer.”

Later, Merriman did post-graduate work at Julliard School in New York.

“I learned a lot of legitimate techniques,” he said. “But with serious music or pop,

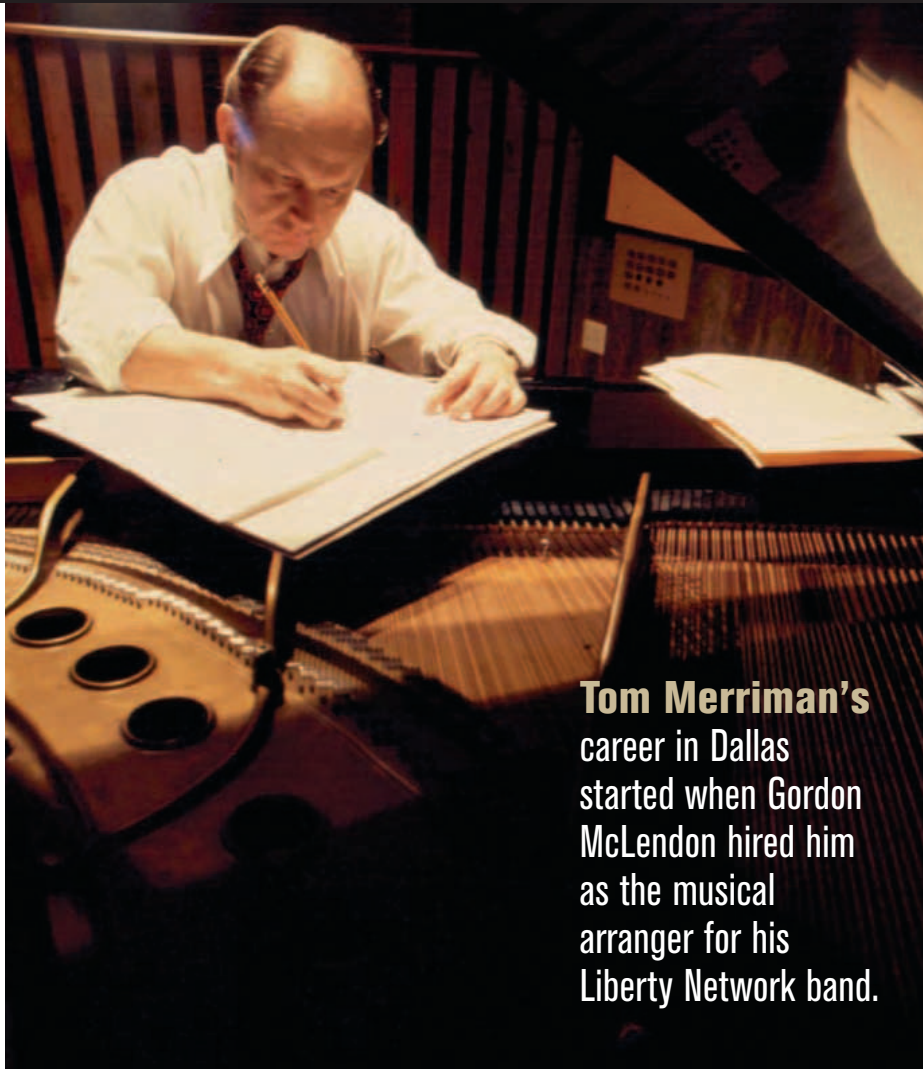
there are many common tenets that apply, natural basic laws and the things that are part of your experience.”

His early influences were the big bands of Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey and Benny Goodman. That is why Merriman’s jingles have a fullness of sound not shared by many composers today.

Merriman described his music’s essential ingredient. “Jingles must retain that human quality,” he said. “Some of these things that I hear seem to get so mechanical-sounding that I think they turn off the listeners, to some extent. You have to keep the humanity and the warmth of a radio station alive.”

GOOD FEELINGS

When Merriman, now in his 80s, was feted at a tribute dinner late last year, more than 150 musicians, arrangers, engineers and business associates came to Dallas for the sold-out event at Brookhaven Country Club. Guests flew in from England, Los Angeles and points in between. Many of those people got their start in the industry



Tom Merriman's career in Dallas started when Gordon McLendon hired him as the musical arranger for his Liberty Network band.

An image from 'The Tom Merriman Tribute DVD.'

because of Merriman.

A two-hour DVD of that tribute event is now available (\$20 including the souvenir booklet, via www.tommerrimantribute.com/site/).

Among the attendees that night was this humble Radio World scribe.

The ceremony was hosted by Dallas radio legend Ron Chapman, who lightheartedly recapped Merriman's career using archival video and audio, some of which dated to the 1940s. The dinner was assembled by several alumni of TM Productions, now known as TM Studios, a company Merriman co-founded in the late 1960s.

Ken Justiss, former executive vice president of operations for that company, produced the tribute show.

Merriman occasionally "borrowed" musical styles from whatever composers were popular at the time. In fact, Burt Bacharach contributed a personalized video clip to the tribute, teasing Tom that the lat-

ter could expect a process server to knock at his door any day. Other celebs like Pat Boone provided video shout-outs. Janie Fricke, twice Country Music Association female vocalist of the year, was one of many singers who got her start toiling in the jingle fields; she was in attendance at the tribute dinner, as were many other veteran singers and players.

Merriman is known for his ability to compose quickly, and when needed, hand-write musical scores on a plane on the way to Los Angeles for a recording session only hours away. Several friends recalled that he

would often still be writing jingles as musicians were walking in the door to record.

His long-time partner at TM Productions, Jim Long, said Merriman gave him "the opportunity of a lifetime."

Jon Wolfert, president of JAM Creative Productions and PAMS Productions Inc., at one point in the 1970s played "David" to TM Productions' "Goliath" in the early days of his own jingle company.

"To use a horrible '60s term, we were the 'jingle freaks' and we were enamored, mesmerized by the work that was coming out of Dallas from all the different studios, but in no small part, the work you were doing," he told Merriman at the dinner. "And that's the reason why I'm still making these jingles, because I was attracted to it by listening to all this great stuff during all those years."

As Wolfert's business grew and as Merriman left TM to work freelance, Wolfert pondered hiring the "grand old man" to write a few jingles for JAM.

"I remember being kind of star-struck, as I still am today," said Wolfert. "I talked to Jackie (Merriman's wife and also a long-time jingle singer). I said, 'Jackie, y'know, it's just these little jingles that we do; and this is Tom Merriman!' And Jackie said, 'Jon, he likes to work! Call him!' And I'm glad that I did because every single time we've collaborated, it's been nothing but the best."

At the conclusion of the tribute, Merriman was presented with a colorful, larger-than-life jukebox, retrofitted to play CDs. On the more than 100 custom-recorded discs were the best of Merriman's jingles and instrumental scores from his long career.

When Tom Merriman was approached about holding an event like this, he said, "I don't think I deserve all this." Jackie Merriman replied, "Well, evidently a whole lot of people think you do."

All the sub-heads in this article are names of jingle packages released by TM Productions.

Ken Deutsch is a former jingle producer who went to jingle school by studying the arrangements of Tom Merriman.

MORE ON MERRIMAN

TM Studios: www.tmstudios.com

Merriman: www.tommerrimantribute.com

Jingle Books: www.danoday.com/jinglebook/ebook.cgi and www.jingles.org