

TV * THEMES

of the '70s



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19. Theme from Charlie's Angels
20. Long Lonesome Highway

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It has been called everything from the "vast wasteland" to the "boob tube," but there is no denying the fact that in the 50-odd years since its inception as a commercial medium, the electronic box known as television has had an immeasurably profound impact on our society and culture. Given, then, just how much TV has affected and influenced all of us—and given just how deeply the memories of our favorite shows are embedded in our consciousness—it is rather surprising to learn that, over the years, only a handful of TV theme songs have become bona fide hit records. In fact, up until the 1970s, just one—Bill Hayes' 1955 recording of *The Ballad of Davy Crockett*—had ever made it to the very top of the *Billboard* charts.

That makes the accomplishments of Steve Barri all the more amazing. During the 1960s, Barri, along with his partner, P.F. Sloan, had written and produced numerous hits for performers such as the Turtles, Herman's Hermits, the Grass Roots and Barry McGuire. In 1975, when Barri's young son asked for the record of the theme song from his favorite TV program, *S.W.A.T.*, an action-adventure show starring Steve Forrest as the leader of a big-city Special Weapons and Tactics police

squad, Barri, upon learning that no recording of the song was available, took matters into his own hands and produced one himself. Using a group of studio musicians that he dubbed Rhythm Heritage, Barri's dance-oriented treatment of the **Theme from S.W.A.T.**—siren and all—shot to No. 1 in the winter of '76.

Barri was not through, either. Just a few months after the success of the *S.W.A.T.* record, Rhythm Heritage had a top-20 hit with **Baretta's Theme (Keep Your Eye on the Sparrow)**. Then the busy Barri produced yet another chart-topping TV theme with a song written and performed by one of his old '60s contemporaries, ex-Lovin' Spoonful leader John Sebastian. The creators of a series about a Brooklyn, New York, native returning to teach at his old high school liked Sebastian's theme, **Welcome Back**, so much they added the song's title to the name of the show. So it was that "Kotter," starring Gabriel Kaplan, and featuring young "Sweathog" John Travolta, became *Welcome Back, Kotter*—and Sebastian had his first No. 1 hit since the Spoonful's 1966 classic, *Summer in the City*.

Speaking of classics, there is no doubt




that *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* remains one of the all-time greats in situation comedy history. And when it started its seven-year run in the fall of 1970, the theme song that accompanied Mary's toss of her hat on that Minneapolis street corner was performed by a country-rock songwriter who was involved in plenty of musical history himself, Sonny Curtis. Back in the mid-'50s, Curtis played lead guitar in legendary rock 'n' roller Buddy Holly's band, and in the 1960s, his songs *Walk Right Back* (recorded by the Everly Brothers) and *I Fought the Law* (by the Bobby Fuller Four) were huge hits. And even though **Love Is All Around** was never a top-40 single, it is still known by heart by millions of devoted fans of Mary, Ted, Lou and the rest of the wacky gang at WJM-TV.

There certainly was a wacky gang at 704 Houser Street in the Corona section of Queens, New York—the home of Archie Bunker, wife Edith, daughter Gloria and son-in-law Meathead, er, Mike. Like another Norman Lear-produced series, *Sanford and Son* (whose theme song was composed by the multi-talented Quincy Jones), *All in the Family* was based on a hit British TV show. But with its pointed, topical and often outrageous humor, *All in the*

Family was unlike any American sitcom that had come before it. And it was also one of the few TV shows ever to feature its own fictional characters performing the theme song. (We won't count Fleegle, Bingo, Drooper and Snorky—the live-action animals who performed The Banana Splits' theme **The Tra-La-La Song**—but we will point out that Bill Cosby released **Hikky Burr Part 1**, the theme from the short-lived Bill Cosby Show of the early '70s, under his own name.)

Sung by Carroll O'Connor and Jean Stapleton in their Archie and Edith voices, the nostalgic **Those Were the Days** made it into the top 50 as a single in 1972. (For those who could never figure it out, the next-to-last line of the song is "Gee, our old LaSalle ran great.") Of course, *All in the Family* ran so great that it successfully spun off several other hit sitcoms, including *Maude* and *The Jeffersons*. And the latter's gospel-style theme song, **Movin' On Up**, featured the vocal talents of Ja'net DuBois, a cast member of a spin-off of a spin-off of *All in the Family*: *Good Times*, a show about cousin Maude's maid Florida Evans and her family.

While we're on the subject of spin-offs, you can consider yourself a true TV trivia



buff if you already knew that *Happy Days* (the retro-geared comedy that starred former child actor Ron "Opie" Howard of *The Andy Griffith Show*, and featured Henry Winkler as the greasy-haired, leather-jacketed, motorcycle-riding '50s rebel Arthur "Fonzie" Fonzarelli) was actually a spin-off of a skit titled "Love and the Happy Days" from a 1972 episode of *Love, American Style* (whose chipper theme, also called **Love, American Style**, was rendered by those ever-chipper real-life Partridge Family role models, the Cowsills). And if you knew that Truett and Jerry were the first names of Pratt and McClain, the duo who had a top-10 hit with the **Happy Days** theme—or, for that matter, that Cyndi Grecco was the gal who sang **Making Our Dreams Come True**, the theme from the *Happy Days* spin-off *Laverne & Shirley*—well, you've probably got too much time on your hands.

You can also give yourself a pat on the back if you know the name of the only cast member of *M*A*S*H* who appeared in the original 1970 movie as well as the long-running TV series—both of which featured the haunting

Song from M*A*S*H, although only the movie used the black-humored lyrics. We'll let you mull over that trivia question until the end of these notes.

Someone else with plenty of time on his hands was Jim Bronson, who toiled around the country in search of adventure on the short-lived but memorable dramatic series *Then Came Bronson*. Michael Parks, who played the alienated lost youth, recorded an album during the show's run, and while **Long Lonesome Highway** was not the program's theme, he did perform the song on the show enough times to help it become a top-20 hit in 1970. Like Pratt and McClain and Cyndi Grecco, Parks was a one-hit wonder—as was actor David Naughton, whose recording



of the theme **Makin' It** became a top-5 hit months *after* the sitcom it was written for was already canceled and off the air.

TV music maestro Joe Harnell, composer of the **Theme from the Incredible Hulk**, had also been a one-hit wonder before concentrating on TV themes. Back in 1963, Harnell hit the top 20 with a swaying, bossa nova version of *Fly Me to the Moon*—and the moon was where anyone who tangled with that not-so-jolly green giant the Hulk was likely to end up!

Of course, any discussion of TV themes must include the former and current theme song kings, Henry Mancini and Mike Post. Mancini, composer of such hit '60s themes

as *Peter Gunn* and *Mr. Lucky*, was still writing and conducting TV themes in the 1970s, including the **Theme from Charlie's Angels** and the **Theme from Battlestar Galactica**. As for Post, **The Rockford Files**, theme from the James Garner show about a private eye everyone loved to take advantage of, was the first of this prolific composer's many TV hits, which have included *Theme from Greatest American Hero (Believe It or Not)* and, most notably, *The Theme from Hill Street Blues*.

Even when they don't make the pop charts, TV theme songs have a way of staying lodged forever in our memory banks. So, repeat after me: "Here's the story, of a man named Brady..." See what I mean?

—Billy Altman

Answer to trivia question: Gary Burghoff, who played Corporal "Radar" O'Reilly



DISCOGRAPHY

- 1. Theme from The Brady Bunch** The Brady Bunch • *Music and lyrics by Sherwood Schwartz and Frank DeVol. Addax Music. ASCAP. MCA 10764 (1993).* © 1993 MCA Records, Inc. *Did not chart.*
- 2. The Tra-La-La Song (One Banana, Two Banana)** The Banana Splits • *Music and lyrics by Richard Bigler and Mark Barkhan. Anihambar Music Company/Unichappell Music, Inc. BMI. Decca 32429 (1969). Courtesy of Hanna-Barbera Productions, Inc. No. 96**
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- 14. Hickey Burr, Part 1** Bill Cosby • *Music and lyrics by Bill Cosby and Quincy Jones. Warner-Tamerlane Publ. Corp. BMI. Uni 55184 (1970).* *Did not chart.*



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