

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

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The history of producing and marketing commercial music recordings to children 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, in television shows and multimedia.

From 1905 through the 1920s, 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-to-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 delivering Mother Goose nursery rhymes.

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 felt 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. Victor launched major advertising campaigns to promote 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 earlier classically trained voices. 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 industry watchers suggested that “kidisks” represented as much 10 to 20 percent of total record sales in the United States. Children's music after this era became increasingly varied and original, including not only traditional children's songs in the public domain but also material with 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.

Independent record labels also expanded into the children's music market during this period. Most notable was 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; their children's music was 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. YPR's music 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 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 commercially successful and educationally enriching children's music that bypassed the existing, opposed models of stodgy 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 same 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.

The influential public television show *Sesame Street*, which launched in 1969, brought together television and children's music. Emphasizing high quality, educational, and "fun" music for children, the show has shaped the development of musical "edutainment"—including later shows for small children like *Barney* in the 1990s as well as educational DVDs such as Disney's *Baby Einstein* series. The expansion of cable television in the 1970s offered space for networks wholly devoted to children's entertainment, especially the Disney Channel.

Disney also became more prominent in children's music with a string of commercially and critically successful animated musical films, starting with *The Little Mermaid* (1989). Less visibly at first, but perhaps as notable, Disney began to aggressively cultivate the increasingly influential "tween" demographic with the launch of Radio Disney in 1996, an FM station programmed with music from young mainstream recording artists as well as child-friendly "oldies" and novelty songs—responding to preadolescent consumers' growing independence, interest in popular music, and rejection of music marked as "childish." Disney reached out further to tweens with several record labels that cross-marketed content from the Disney Channel. In 2006 the soundtrack to their 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) hit the top ten. Disney continued to market children's popular music by developing new talent featured in their TV shows, DVD and record sales, and national tours.

Other brands and genres have recently emerged to pursue the children's market. Kidz Bop 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, while Rockabye Baby! releases instrumental lullaby versions of pop and rock songs. In addition to the huge success of tween pop artists, formerly adult-oriented artists, including critically respected figures such as Natalie Merchant and They Might Be Giants, have begun to produce original material for children. Independent artists such as Dan Zanes and Laurie Berkner—whose appearance, songwriting, and recording styles are recognizably linked to "indie rock"—have achieved long-term success applying the "grassroots" model of YPR and Raffi.

While sugary “childish” acts like *Barney* and commercially popular acts like Miley Cyrus alike have been subject to widespread derision and critical rejection by adults, in many cases these emerging niche approaches to children’s music appeal directly to parents and other gatekeepers with familiar, adult-friendly artists, genres, repertoires.

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