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Ray Evans, Lyricist of Hit Songs From Movies, Dies at 92

By RICHARD SEVERO

Ray Evans, a pop lyricist who teamed up with the composer and lyricist [Jay Livingston](#) to write three Academy Award-winning songs and one of Nat King Cole's best-known classics, as well as the Christmas standard "Silver Bells," died on Thursday in Los Angeles. He was 92.

Jim Steinblatt, a spokesman for the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers, announced the death.

In their heyday, in the 1940s and '50s, the team of Evans and Livingston was much in demand in Hollywood, turning out songs for film after film that often became big jukebox hits. The team was formed after Mr. Evans met Mr. Livingston at the [University of Pennsylvania](#), survived separation during the war years and enjoyed decades of success until the emergence of rock 'n' roll.

Evans and Livingston received their first best-song Oscar for "Buttons and Bows," a bouncy tune from the 1948 comedy-western "The Paleface." It was introduced by [Bob Hope](#), playing the timid dentist "Painless" Peter Potter, who sang it to [Jane Russell](#). Dinah Shore had a hit record with it, and the song spent 19 weeks on the "Hit Parade" radio program.

"Mona Lisa" was written in 1950 for a forgettable [Alan Ladd](#) film called "Captain Carey, U.S.A." In the movie, the song is used to send a signal to Italian partisans during World War II. Originally, it was called "Prima Donna," but Mr. Evans's wife, Wyn, preferred "Mona Lisa." The songwriting team agreed.

Before the release of the film, Mr. Livingston and Mr. Evans went to see Nat King Cole to interest him in recording it. That day, Mr. Cole's baby daughter Natalie was making such a fuss that Mr. Cole had trouble hearing it, but agreed to record it, even though he was not sure a song about a da Vinci painting was commercially promising. Capitol Records had so little faith in the song that it was put on the B side of a single, paired with something called "The Greatest Inventor of Them All."

It became one of Cole's greatest and most enduring hits, and Mr. Evans was especially pleased when Natalie Cole revived it on a hit record of her own.

"Que Sera, Sera (Whatever Will Be, Will Be)," which won a third Oscar for the team, was sung by [Doris Day](#) in "The Man Who Knew Too Much" (1956), [Alfred Hitchcock](#)'s remake of his own 1934 film. A little improbably, Ms. Day belts it out to signal to her kidnapped child that she and her husband ([James Stewart](#)) have come to the rescue.

Ms. Day's recording was a hit, and it, too, survived in other recordings and even a television commercial.

Other Livingston-Evans movie songs were nominated for Oscars, among them "The Cat and the Canary," from "Why Girls Leave Home" (1945); "Tammy," from "Tammy and the Bachelor" (1957), which became a best-selling record for [Debbie Reynolds](#); "Almost in Your Arms," from "Houseboat" (1958); and "Dear Heart," from the 1964 movie of the same name, starring [Glenn Ford](#) and [Geraldine Page](#). Andy Williams had a hit with "Dear Heart," singing the Livingston-Evans lyrics to music by [Henry Mancini](#).

Mr. Livingston and Mr. Evans also wrote the lyrics for a 1947 tune that Victor Young adapted from a Hungarian folk song to serve as the theme for the movie "Golden Earrings." Sung in the movie by the basso Murvyn Vye, it became a hit record by [Peggy Lee](#).

"To Each His Own" was a big hit in 1946 for several performers: Eddy Howard, the Ink Spots, [Tony Martin](#), Freddie Martin

and the Modernaires. Perhaps the team's biggest commercial success was a Christmas song they first called "Tinkle Bell" until Lynne Livingston, Jay's wife, objected to the title. The song became "Silver Bells," and it was first sung by Bob Hope in "The Lemon Drop Kid" (1951). "Silver Bells" is one of the most popular Christmas songs ever written, selling millions of records.

Mr. Evans and Mr. Livingston were both small-town guys, Mr. Livingston from McDonald, Pa., and Mr. Evans from Salamanca, in the middle of a Seneca Indian reservation in western New York.

Mr. Evans was born there on Feb. 4, 1915, the son of Philip Evans and Frances Lipsitz Evans. The elder Evans was a scrap dealer from Latvia. Neither parent was musical.

Ray Evans learned to play clarinet and saxophone in high school and organized a dance band there, which he said "wasn't very good."

While he was at the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania, he met Mr. Livingston, who was studying journalism at the university and was the organizer of a dance band. Mr. Evans tried out for the band and made it, and the two became partners for more than 60 years.

After graduation, they moved to New York to try their hand at Tin Pan Alley songwriting. They had a hit with "G'Bye Now" in 1941, but World War II intervened, and Mr. Livingston was inducted into the Army. Mr. Evans took a bookkeeping job at an aircraft plant on Long Island.

In 1944, they reunited and, after some work in New York, including writing special material for the comedy team of Olsen and Johnson, they attracted the attention of [Johnny Mercer](#), who liked their work and opened doors for them in Hollywood.

In the years that followed, they wrote 600 to 700 songs, of which 300 were published. They also contributed songs to more than 80 movies, including "My Favorite Brunette" (1947); "Whispering Smith" (1948); "Sorrowful Jones" (1949); "Fancy Pants" (1950); "Here Comes the Groom" (1951); "Aaron Slick From Punkin Crick" (1952); "That's My Boy" (1951); "Lucy Gallant" (1955); "Istanbul" (1957); "The James Dean Story" (1957); "This Happy Feeling" (1958); and "Wait Until Dark" (1967).

For some of these films they worked with the great names in movie music, like Percy Faith, [Max Steiner](#), Neal Hefti, [David Rose](#), Jimmy McHugh, [Franz Waxman](#) and [Sammy Cahn](#).

The team tried the theater without much success and found little demand in Hollywood for their kind of music once rock arrived. In later years the pair turned their attention to television and wrote the theme music for long-running series like "Bonanza" and "Mr. Ed." Mr. Livingston died in 2001.

Mr. Evans, who had no children and is survived by his sister, Doris Feinberg of Salamanca, was a self-deprecating fellow who liked to call himself a "sounding board" for his partner. But he was much honored in Salamanca, which renamed its movie house the Ray Evans Seneca Theater.

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