

Who Killed the Jingle? How a Unique American Art Form Disappeared. By Steve Karmen. Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 2005. 184 p. \$33.95 ISBN 0-634-06656-0

Not many people would presume to label the jingle a “unique American art form,” but Steve Karmen does. His book details what it was like to be a jingle composer during the glory years of that profession. In particular, it tells the story of Karmen’s own career in advertising, describing the good and the bad, and then finally how the industry left the jingle behind.

The first half of the book concentrates on how Karmen views his role as a “little guy” or an independent contractor. His self-portrayal as an extremely ambitious, proud family man, who was essentially self-taught as a musician, is central to the book. Each and every anecdote emphasizes the theme, to the point it becomes tiresome at times. Karmen went to practically any lengths to find work, and he says it is a necessary attribute for anyone who wants to be in commercial music. Indeed, his first jobs were writing scores for pornographic movies. He moved on from there, but Karmen is fond of reminding the reader of his humble roots. And it needs to be said that Karmen did exceptionally well for himself. Many of the most recognizable jingles in TV history were written by him (“When You Say Bud, You’ve Said It All,” “Hershey Is the Great American Chocolate Bar,” “Weekends Were Made For Michelob,” “Trust the Midas Touch,” etc.). These accomplishments probably warrant giving himself a few pats on the back

One of the chapters deals with his relationship with Budweiser Beer. Beginning with the stumbling blocks he

overcame to win the account, it details the great many years he spent with the company and provides some insight into how these kinds of professional relationships work. By the end of the chapter, the reader understands one of the most important life lessons Karmen has to share, based on a quote by Alan J. Tindell: “You can love your wife, you can love your kids, you can love your country, and you can love your dog. But never love a company. Because no matter how much or how long you love it, it’ll never love you back.”

The rest of the first half deals with some of the industry’s darker aspects, such as composers finagling their way to greater profits during the course of recording a jingle. Of course, they were not the only ones on the take. Karmen shows how people at all levels exploited loopholes in order to line their pockets. Not everyone in commercial music was (or is) crooked, but shady practices were widespread enough to be considered common. Karmen suggests it was a pivotal factor that contributed to the downfall of the jingle.

In the second half, Karmen describes his legal battle with the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers over the rights of jingle composers to accrue residuals (i.e., ongoing income) from a composition. (There were discrepancies between the rights of pop music composers and jingle composers in this area that resulted in litigation.) For Karmen, it became a twenty-year journey that eclipsed all the other legal entanglements of his long career, although some of these are also

discussed. All of this makes for worthwhile reading on the topic of copyright and fair use in the US.

Karmen also addresses the issue of digital technology in the commercial studio. The rise of the “one-man synth band” caused advertising agencies to positively drool over the money-saving possibilities. After all, machines didn’t demand to be paid for overtime or ask for coffee breaks. Would consumers even notice if a drum machine was being used instead of a drummer? The answer, as we now know all too well, was a resounding “No.”

Finally, the book describes the music advertising business of today. Basically, Karmen views it as a marketing arm of pop music. Why hire a jingle composer when you can have Britney Spears endorse your product with her latest single? It’s a win/win situation for both parties. This is the reality of the

business, and it makes Karmen very happy to be out of it.

Despite his tendency for self-aggrandizing, Karmen does have a wealth of experience. *Who Killed the Jingle?* isn’t so much about how to write a jingle as it is about how to survive as a musician. It gives anecdotal advice on how to obtain and protect copyright, rehearse a band in the studio, and deal with people involved with recording. It also gives a detailed account of how the business is run both yesterday and today. The focus is American, but very few people involved in the entertainment industry anywhere can escape the gravitational pull of America. I would recommend the book be purchased by libraries or anyone with an interest in commercial music.

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