

History Comes Alive!

Tales From the City Archives



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ON THE RADIO
Some *History Comes Alive!* columns can be heard on
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Images courtesy the L.A. Archives

Every once in a while, a columnist or blogger will ask why Los Angeles doesn't have an official City song such as the ones claimed by New York City or San Francisco. Do yourself a favor and go to the Central Library downtown and check out the exhibit, *Songs in the Key of L.A.* You'll find examples of many songs that take their inspiration from all over the City. There are so many, in fact, that trying to define L.A. with a single unifying voice has proven to be an exercise in futility.

But there was an effort to find an official City song starting in 1965 at the request of then-Mayor Sam Yorty. The Municipal Arts Department became the collection center for a total of 729 entries in the forms of sheet music, lyric sheets and audiocassettes submitted by professional and would-be songwriters.

Ten years after the search began, four finalists were chosen – one called *Angeltown* was composed by the songwriting team of Jay Livingston and Ray Evans. They also wrote the Christmas standard "Silver Bells" and the Nat King Cole classic "Mona Lisa." The tapes were played to a separate committee before being forwarded to Mayor Tom Bradley.

The mayor forwarded the recordings to the full City Council for their review with the following caveat: "The unanimous recommendation of the Municipal Arts Commission was that no official designation be adopted for any song at this time... they suggested that we follow the pattern of other cities and adopt a song only after it receives popular acclaim."

The City Council addressed the matter at its meeting on May 1, 1975. The council failed to agree either to move to an official vote or even to send the matter back to the committee. After four failed attempts, the City Clerk was instructed

to place all the materials in the archive. Although the lyric sheets of the four finalists survive, the audiocassettes have not been found to date.

A new chapter in the story for a City song began on an L.A. morning radio show in 1980. The Ken and Bob Show, with Ken Minyard and Bob Arthur, was broadcast on KABC. A clipping from the *Los Angeles Times* written by columnist Steve Harvey credited Minyard for asking for song entries after he had received a "nearly indecipherable tape of a song about Los Angeles that he entitled 'I Left My Liver in the L.A. River.'" Supposedly, 1,200 submissions were forwarded to the Municipal Arts successor, Cultural Affairs, over the next several years.

Meanwhile, there was a concert held at the John Anson Ford Theatre in Hollywood on Sept. 13, 1981, organized by KABC, bringing together 21 entries chosen from all the submissions received at the radio station. The *Times'* Steve Harvey observed, with tongue firmly planted in cheek, that none of the 350 people in attendance had brought tape recorders for such a historic event.

The following month, the City Council session of Oct. 14 featured a recording written by arranger/composer Johnny Mann accompanied with live vocals by Mr. Mann himself in the Council chambers. The song, *Los Angeles, Our City by the Sea*, was referred to the Cultural Arts Committee for consideration. Once again, there was no action. More time passed.

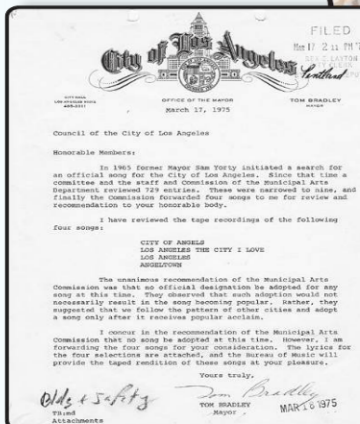
With little fanfare, an album titled *Trouble in Paradise* was released by Warner Bros. Music in January 1983. One of singer/songwriter Randy Newman's tracks was a tongue-in-cheek homage to the Los Angeles region with lyrics including "Everybody's very happy - cuz the sun is

Singing L.A.'s Praises

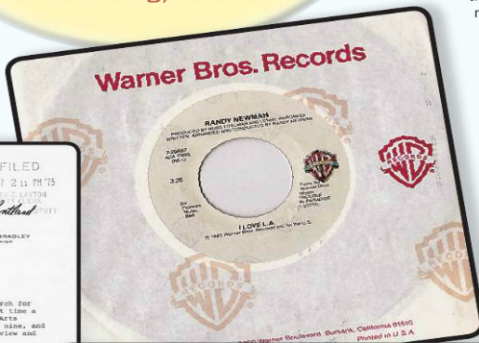
Here's the story of how Randy Newman's *I Love L.A.* came to be our official song, sort of.

roots support of *I Love L.A.* included some of the deejays who had overlooked the song the year before and were now playing it more often as listener requests increased. The official music video was also being seen on MTV with greater frequency. By the time of the opening ceremony, a Nike shoe ad featuring several athletes with *I Love L.A.* as its soundtrack was airing to a billion-plus people around the world. Even after the Olympics closed Aug. 12, the song continued to be heard, and a groundswell of support took shape to make it the official song for Los Angeles. Radio stations KRLA, KMG, KRTH and KIIS openly supported the idea, while KIQQ asked listeners to send postcards that would be turned over to the Council. PBS station KCET used the song as its signoff. Can anyone remember what a signoff for a television station was or how many of the radio stations mentioned are still in business?

A *Los Angeles Times* article by Dennis McDougal appeared Aug. 25 that reinforced the idea that a song popular with the citizens had the best chance to be acceptable as an anthem. A Cultural Affairs liaison was quoted as saying, "We're waiting for a song that will really sweep the public... something that someday will be a golden oldie." The article also mentioned that San Francisco had officially declared not one but two songs earlier that year: Tony Bennett's *I Left My Heart in San Francisco* was named the city ballad, and San Francisco – a tune from a 1930s Jeanette MacDonald movie of the same name – as the city song.



Concluding a 1975 contest, a letter from then-Mayor Tom Bradley declares that no song was good enough to become the official L.A. song.



Top: An original 45-rpm record of Randy Newman's *I Love L.A.*
Right: In 1984, Randy Newman (second from right) is presented a City resolution that "sort of" made *I Love L.A.* the City's official theme song by (from left) then-City Controller James Hahn, then-Councilman Gilbert Lindsay, unknown, Newman, and then-Council President "Big" John Ferraro.

shinin' all the time – Look's like another perfect day – I love L.A." *I Love L.A.* had a minor following but didn't crack the Billboard 100. 1983 was also the year for Michael Jackson's *Thriller* album, which laid waste to any competition with endless airplay and the ever-present music videos on MTV. *Trouble in Paradise* went dormant.

The coming of the 1984 Olympic Games to Los Angeles involved the greatest feat of planning and organizing the City had ever undertaken. The events leading up to the opening of the games at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum on July 28 involved many everyday citizens being good hosts to a worldwide audience. By far, the torch relay through various communities was probably the greatest spectator sport the City had ever witnessed. A few people paid for the privilege of carrying the torch, but many more acted as supporters, boosters and cheerleaders.

Some of those boosters were playing Newman's tune in advance of the torchbearers going through their parts of town. The attendant crowds chanted the call and response of "We love it," mile after mile along the route. The grass-

The L.A. City Council did finally take action – sort of. A resolution passed and was presented to Randy Newman Sept. 14, 1984 in City Hall. The document reads, in part: "Whereas, perhaps more than any other musical endeavor, Randy Newman's *I Love L.A.* has come closest to uniting the people of Los Angeles behind an official City song... [we] thank him for finally putting to music that phrase near and dear to us all, *I Love L.A.*" But the final official recognition was not made. It remains so today.

But I will go on the proverbial limb and argue that it is official – based on the findings of the original search committee in their final analysis in 1975. I still hear it at Dodger Stadium, their radio broadcasts and other places 30 years after the torch procession to the Coliseum. I hope to be proven correct the next time the Olympic Games come to L.A. (are you listening Mr. Mayor?) and the chants of "We love it" will remove any doubt at last. But that's my two cents' worth.