

Phoney Tunes

When the Bell System began installing pushbutton phones a few years ago, it had great expectations. The new phones would enable users to make faster connections than the old dial variety. What Ma Bell did not anticipate, however, was that the pushbutton phone would become America's newest musical instrument.

The phone qualifies for that title because each of its buttons, when pushed, produces a different musical tone. Simply by punching 33363213, for example, a telephoner can play a respectable rendition of *Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head*. Tapping out 1199009 will produce *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, and 0005 8883 calls forth the first bars of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*. With some practice, and the use of staccato and legato on the appropriate notes, even more sophisticated tunes are possible: *When the Saints Go Marching In* and *Around the World* are two often played examples.

"Phoney tunes," as they are called, seem to have originated in the Detroit area about five months ago when Kenneth Ascher, 20, a pre-med student at Eastern Michigan University, called WXYZ Disc Jockey Dick Purtan and said: "Listen to this." Since then, Purtan says, "people have been going crazy, calling up to play *Old Folks at Home*, *Happy Birthday* and everything else." One Detroit lawyer is being driven to distraction, Purtan says, because his phone number corresponds to the hallowed "shave and a haircut, two bits" refrain.

Student Ascher, meanwhile, seems to be solidifying his position as the nation's No. 1 phoney tunesmith; he is currently working on a pushbutton adaptation of *Rubber Duckie*. Phone musicians have learned not to begin pushing out a tune as soon as they lift the receiver. If the first number they punch is 0, for example, they will automatically get the operator. Even worse, the tune they select might well complete an expensive call to London or Paris. Experienced players usually place a local call to a friend and tap out new melodies to him only after the connection has been made. Otherwise, the explosive spread of the fad seems to be limited only by two factors: 1) the relatively small number of pushbutton phones in service and 2) the lack of * and # buttons (necessary for *Happy Birthday* and certain other tunes) on some models.

Michigan Bell has mixed feelings about the fad. Any increase in calls means an increase in revenues, but a company spokesman has reservations. "As with any electronic device, you create problems by misusing your phone. We really think a phone is for communication, not a replacement for the piano or violin." That argument apparently fails to impress the phone musicians, least of all Student Ascher. "Have you heard?" he says. "They're coming out with a 16-button phone. Imagine, four more notes."

PHONE TONES

TIME Chart by J. Donovan

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