



party lines

Telephone Music Service

PIONEERED STREAMING MUSIC SERVICES IN PITTSBURGH BARS LONG BEFORE THE DAYS OF THE INTERNET.

BY
ZACK FURNESS



YEARS BEFORE anyone dreamed up the Internet, owned smartphones or casually used phrases such as “music platform,” Pittsburgh’s Telephone Music Service pioneered one of the first successful streaming music services in the country.

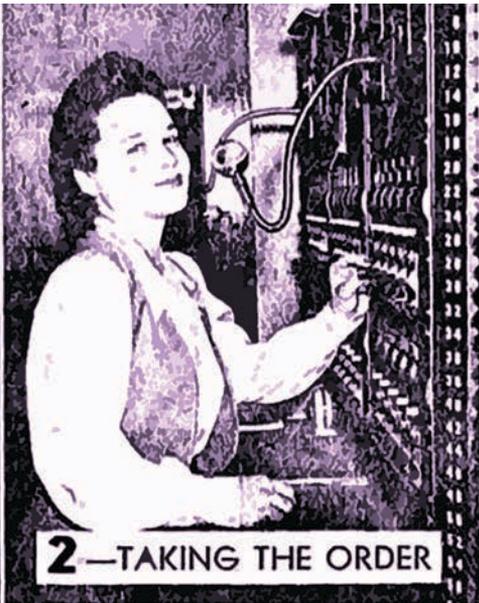
The service, which dates back decades, operated a network of jukeboxes scattered throughout bars in the city, all of which were connected to a central studio by telephone lines. You’d stick your money into the machine, pick up a phone attached to the side, and request your songs from one of the operators on the other end. Then, presto! Your selections would come blaring out through the jukebox.

While this may seem like ancient analog history, it was a functional predecessor of every Internet-based service that millions now use to stream audio content on demand.

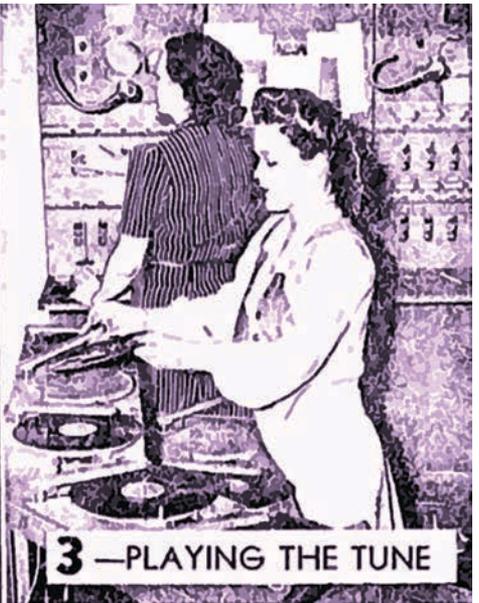
Dotti White may not be familiar with some of these digital brand names or their ubiquitous applications, but, as owner of Telephone Music Service, she was the last person to operate the business they now echo.



1—ORDERING A TUNE



2—TAKING THE ORDER



3—PLAYING THE TUNE



ream interpretation has long been a fascination of White's, and it's how she met Telephone Music Service's previous owner, Helen Reutzel, in the late 1970s. White was a medical secretary at Children's Hospital and invited Reutzel to speak on dream interpretation at an event she organized. Soon after, she sought out Reutzel's lectures and classes on dream analysis and the two developed a strong friendship. "She even introduced me to my second husband," White says.

Reutzel spent most of her time holed up inside an old double-brick building delivering song requests to the public through a beloved retro jukebox system that hadn't existed anywhere else in the country for decades. It had become the most unlikely business in the world — a sort of personalized DJ system for the patrons of around a dozen bars in Pittsburgh, all of whom could solicit requests from a catalogue of more than 100,000 records. After inheriting Telephone Music Service from her father, William Purse, who had owned for decades until his death in 1975, Reutzel had been running the business with little help. So White started lending her friend a hand when she could.

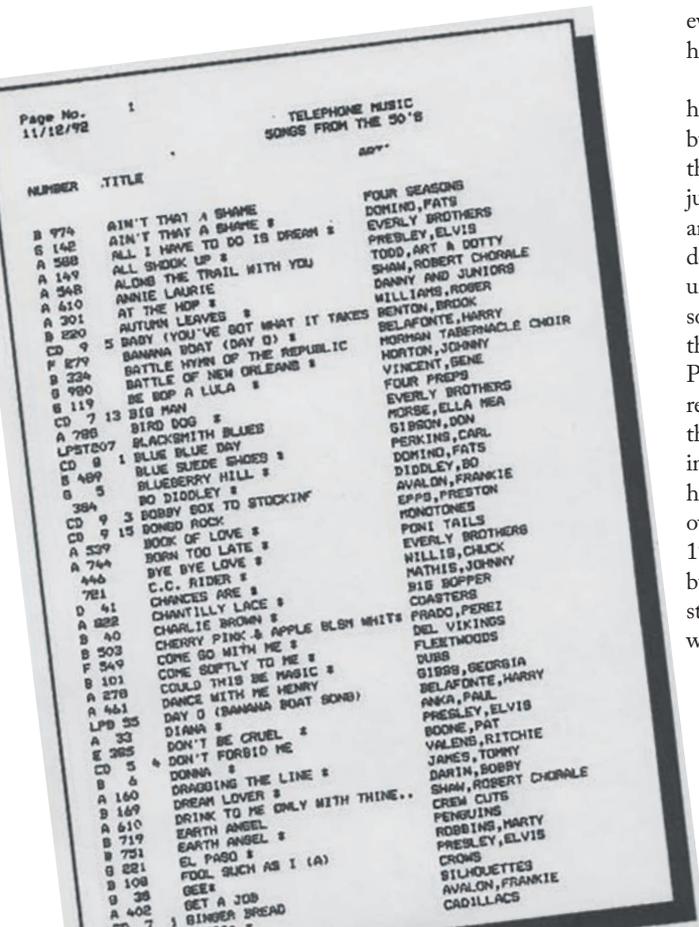
By the late-'80s, White says that Reutzel was "only hanging onto the business at that point because it was her dad's," and she decided she was "just going to close the door, turn the key, and walk away from it."

White knew "you couldn't make any money on it," but she'd grown attached to the idea of it and in 1988 decided to take over from Reutzel to continue its legacy.

A MURKY HISTORY

The exact origin of Telephone Music Service is difficult to pin down, in part because Reutzel told a few different versions of the story over the years. In some, her dad designed or owned the original system in 1929, which at its height purportedly consisted of 120 establishments across multiple states. What seems more plausible, based on her and White's shared recollection, is that Purse bought the business in 1946, at a time when there were around two dozen bars in Pittsburgh subscribing to the service. It's also tough to know who designed and built the system, or when it began, because by that time there were already a number of different versions of "telephone line music systems" throughout the country.

The practice of transmitting music over phone lines is almost as old as the phone itself. The Théâtrophone debuted at the 1881 International



Dotti White took over the Telephone Music Service in 1988.

Exposition of Electricity in Paris and became a functional subscription service available in the city by 1890. The company that later became Muzak (famous for its “elevator music”) pioneered modern wired music systems in the U.S. by the end of the 1930s, the same period that coin-operated jukeboxes became more prevalent through mass production.

Women’s labor was unquestionably the driving force of Telephone Music Service and is also what gave it its distinct character. Much of that grunt work was hidden from the public and done by women who were only known to callers by their first names — a practice meant to protect their anonymity (like their undisclosed location) and to also create a bit of fantasy for their callers.

In 1942, a woman named Penny McGough started to spin records for Pittsburgh’s Telephone Music Service on the city’s North Side at 509 Emlin Way. McGough played requests six nights a week (9 p.m. to 2 a.m.) for the 35 years she worked there, and both her first name and voice are what most people in the city came to associate with the jukebox service. McGough, it seems, is the entire reason that Bill Purse purchased the business in the first place. Bill’s Tavern, the bar he owned and operated, sat directly in front of Telephone Music Service at 510 E. Ohio St., and buying the business behind his bar apparently gave him and his new girlfriend Penny a private place to themselves. “It was their hideaway love nest,” as White puts it, with a chuckle. Purse never manned the

turntables at Telephone Music Service; he kept the system’s infrastructure up and running with McGough over the years and maintained the jukeboxes around the city — reportedly riding to each location by bus, with his toolbox in hand.

YES, THEY TAKE REQUESTS

There were only six bars left as subscribers when

White took over in 1988. She didn’t have a technical background, and some of the secrets of the trade disappeared along the way with Purse, Reutzel, McGough and a woman remembered only as Jean, who retired in the early 1980s after more than 25 years on the job. Nevertheless, with help from an assistant named Don Kim (who she

jokingly describes as “nuttier than a fruitcake ... he just came with the place”), White ultimately learned about the ins and outs of the specialized mechanical system, as well as “positive and negative wires, Ohm’s Law, and how to keep records spinning with spit, masking tape or a straight pin.” She also started to learn much more about music. “I



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**a Quota for This
ies Already 20
Cent Raised**

or Events Scheduled

**Bond Buyer Part
Of Fighting Front**

**By Gen. C. H. Hodges
Commanding General of the First Army**

War Planes at Airport

ive

Tastes Vary With Drinks Music's Charms Are Questioned



Playing "platters" for unseen music fans is Penny's job.

**Special Service Operator Finds Requests
Not Always in Line With Soothing Savage Breast**

The sage who said that "music hath charms to soothe the savage breast" should have a little talk with Penny Lawrence of the Telephone Music Service of Pittsburgh.

A petite, blue-eyed blonde, Penny is one of three girls whose voices you hear when you request a number on one of the firm's telephone phonographs which are distributed in various bars and dining rooms throughout the city.

"Soothe the savage breast? That's what you think!" exclaimed Penny. "You should hear some of the elbow-benders."

"Most people start out for an evening's drinking start out with a 'bang,'" she continued. "They want 'Roll Out the Barrel' or 'Cow-Cow-Boogie' or anything else that's loud and merry. Then as they become progressively 'tight,' they either get very sentimental, often

to the point of a 'crying jag' or they get nasty."

Returning war veterans like songs they have picked up from the Germans such as "Lili Marlene" and "Mein Blonder Matrose" (The Blond Sailor), while sailors eat up "Bell Bottom Trousers" and "Anchors A-Weigh."

Bing Crosby Big Favorite

On holidays, the platter-turners are swamped with special requests. "St. Patrick's Day always drove us nuts," said Penny. "The day before V-E Day, everyone wanted patriotic songs. We played them all except The Star Spangled Banner and we have to skip that one because it always starts fights. Someone is always too drunk or too lazy to stand up and the brawl is on."

Girls, without exception like Bing Crosby numbers. One girl starts with Bing on the first two

or three drinks, works up to Chopin and Brahms and finally soba couple of hookers and finally soba into the phone for "Rock of Ages." This last request, however, Penny refuses because "it just isn't right to play religious music in bars."

Often the girls in the studios get requests from harassed bartenders to "play something politics and loud—they're looking like a fight in here and it looks like a fight coming on." Invariably they reach for "I'll Be Glad When You're Dead You Rascal You," which is plenty loud.

In the collection of 3,000 records in the studio every language except Chinese is represented, and almost any request can be filled. "The only ones which stump me are the old-timers who get feeling mellow and request 'In the Baggage Coach Ahead' or 'The Little Rosewood Casket.' They've got them there," concluded Penny.

mean, Pink Floyd?! I knew nothing about them until Telephone Music," she says with a laugh.

By the 1990s, Telephone Music had amassed a library of more than 200,000 selections, all of which were fastidiously documented in the studio, with portions of their catalogue printed in thick binders that hung from their jukeboxes. "You had to be real organized," White says. "The filing system was like the one they used to use in the libraries. It was very efficient. I mean, 20 seconds and we could find a song. And nothing was computerized."

At one point they could play requests from 78s, 33s and 45s on any one of the six turntables they monitored, as well as CDs and tapes. "We could play them all," White proudly states of a collection that would've filled dozens of standard jukeboxes at that time. Like her predecessors, she was constantly adding to the collection too.

"I was always buying music. Because if someone called and requested something we didn't have, it just broke my heart. It crushed me. It really did. I used to go to Stedford's Records, house sales, flea markets. And I usually found the one they were requesting ... but it took some time," she says.

The eclectic nature of their massive library was one of the most attractive things to customers, who often sought out music from their youth. White says that "Blueberry Hill," from Fats

Domino, was requested often," and Bob Seger's "Old Time Rock and Roll" was one of the most popular songs. A few minutes later, she smiles and remembers that it was labeled "H5" on the rack in the studio. In the midst of reminiscing, White fondly recalls that the gay bar they serviced "just loved the show tunes we had" and their collection of Irish music was especially prized on St. Patrick's Day — their busiest day of the year when, "the bars would be just hopping with people after the parade."

Other records served specific functions on a more regular basis, such as those played on Friday nights at Brandy's,

**"I GIVE THEM *yesterday*,
TODAY AND *TOMORROW*
FOR A QUARTER."**

Right: Automatic Hostess equipment in the Manitowoc Wired Music Studio, 1948. Below: Rock-Ola Mystic Music Jukebox with Telephone Operator.

a tavern Downtown that had a big U-shaped bar in the middle. “They called it choir nights on Friday nights — they’d request music and the people on either side of the bar would try to out-sing each other,” she says.

With such an amazing archive of music at their disposal — something that wouldn’t be matched until the arrival of digital jukeboxes 20 years later — it’s hard to see why Telephone Music Service couldn’t get more customers. But times changed. Even the most routine issues with the phone lines required assistance from “young whippersnappers,” as White calls them, who were often baffled by the old system or questioned her judgment. The lines themselves had also become expensive. “When Bell broke up, it cost \$2,000 to get an installation, but before that it was like \$250. Some people were reluctant to get a system put in because it cost so much to them up front,” she explains.

On top of that, she says she was always going to court with the city, which was trying to force them into purchasing expensive permits — about \$2,000 a piece — for each of their jukeboxes, which, according to White, were technically exempt from the rule that applied to physical jukebox permits.

Even with help from her two assistants, White was overwhelmed by the mid-’90s. She was not only working every night at Telephone Music but also working her regular full-time job at Children’s Hospital.

“I would get home from work, eat my dinner, change my clothes, and go to Telephone Music from 8 p.m. until 2 a.m., Monday through Friday. And then [I was] there on the weekends too. My parents would come over and my dad would watch television while my mom would go pick out the records after I wrote down the requests. And my son Rick worked with me on the weekends. He just loved Telephone Music,” she says.

THE DAY THE MUSIC DIED

Ultimately, it couldn’t last. The business gradually lost its clientele and weathered a fire and a break-in that vandalized both the second floor studio and first floor jukebox storage room. Beyond that, they were running a shoestring operation in a run-down building, with no heat, in front of what



had long become a nuisance bar in the neighborhood. That bar, which was then called Jewel’s (later Rebel’s), was the very same place once owned by Bill Purse. It was Telephone Music’s final customer before White finally closed down the service around 1997 or 1998; she’s not sure exactly when.

In the time since it played its last waltz, Telephone Music Service has largely disappeared from public memory. It’s easy to be nostalgic for such a quirky vestige of “old Pittsburgh” since the end of Telephone Music Service coincided with a broader transformation of the city that saw the disappear-

ance of so many of its beloved places, practices and characters. The building and its contents are now long gone, as is the entire jukebox infrastructure and the geography of bars that used to be connected to it, with the exception of Max’s Allegheny Tavern on the North Side. And of all the people

who once worked at the service, Dotti White is one of the few still alive. But the story of Telephone Music Service is about more than nostalgia. It speaks to the profound ways that music has shaped our lives for millennia, whether it’s performed in person, cast over the airwaves, dispersed online or beamed into loud bars filled with strangers and friends alike. “I still dream about the place — about the music, about the bar in front, and the building being torn down,” White says.

She doesn’t seem sad about it, though. Just grateful. “I’d remember I offer a service where I help people enjoy life and forget something for a while. I help them having plain old fashioned fun singing. I give them yesterday, today and tomorrow for a quarter,” she wrote back in 1994, just a few years before packing it all in. Years later, it’s a beautiful description of a job that Dotti White will likely be the last person to ever hold. **6**

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