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Robert Sherman

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Robert B. Sherman (AP Photo,File)

LONDON (AP) - Robert B. Sherman, one half of the prolific, award-winning pair of brothers who penned instantly memorable songs for "Mary Poppins," "The Jungle Book" and "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang" - as well as the most-played tune on Earth, "It's a Small World (After All)" - has died. He was 86.

Sherman's agent, Stella Richards, said Tuesday that Sherman died peacefully in London on Monday.

Sherman, together with his brother Richard, won two Academy Awards for Walt Disney's 1964 smash "Mary Poppins" - best score and best song, "Chim Chim Cher-ee." They also picked up a Grammy for best movie or TV score.

Their hundreds of credits as joint lyricist and composer also include the films "Winnie the Pooh," "The Slipper and the Rose," "Snoopy Come Home," "Charlotte's Web" and "The Magic of Lassie." Their Broadway musicals included 1974's "Over Here!" and stagings of "Mary Poppins" and "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang" in the mid-2000s.

Son Jeffrey Sherman wrote on Facebook that his father "wanted to bring happiness to the world and, unquestionably, he succeeded."

"His love and his prayers, his philosophy and his poetry will live on forever," his son wrote. "Forever his songs and his genius will bring hope, joy and love to this small, small world.

The brothers' awards include 23 gold and platinum albums and a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. They became the only Americans ever to win First Prize at the Moscow Film Festival for "Tom Sawyer" in 1973 and were inducted into the Songwriters' Hall of Fame in 2005.

President George W. Bush awarded them the National Medal of Arts in 2008, commended for music that "has helped bring joy to millions."

"Something good happens when we sit down together and work," Richard Sherman told The Associated Press in a 2005 joint interview. "We've been doing it all our lives.



Practically since college we've been working together."

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Alan Menken, composer of scores for Disney films including "The Little Mermaid," "Beauty and the Beast" and "Aladdin," said the Sherman brothers' legacy "goes far beyond the craft of songwriting."

"There is a magic in their songs and in the films and musicals they breathed life into," he said.

Most of the songs the Shermans wrote - in addition to being catchy and playful - work on multiple levels for different ages, something they learned from Disney.

"He once told us, early on in our career, 'Don't insult the kid - don't write down to the kid. And don't write just for the adult.' So we write for grandpa and the 4-year-old - and everyone in between - and all see it on a different level," Richard Sherman said.

The Shermans began a decade-long partnership with Disney during the 1960s after having written hit pop songs like "Tall Paul" for ex-Mouseketeer Annette Funicello and "You're Sixteen," later recorded by Ringo Starr.

They wrote over 150 songs at Disney, including the soundtracks for such films as "The Sword and the Stone," "The Parent Trap," "Bedknobs and Broomsticks," "The Jungle Book," "The Aristocrats" and "The Tigger Movie."

The two credited their father, composer Al Sherman, with challenging them to write songs and for their love of wordsmithing. His legacy of songs includes "You Gotta Be a Football Hero," "(What Do We Do On a) Dew-Dew-Dewy Day" and "On the Beach at Bali-Bali." His sons went on to popularize the terms "fantasmagorical" and "supercalifragilisticexpialidocious."

The Shermans teased songs out of each other, brainstorming titles and then trying to top each other with improvements. "Being brothers, we sort of short-cut each other," Richard Sherman said. "We can almost look at each other and know, 'Hey, you're onto something, kiddo.'"

Most of their songs were written quickly, but others took longer. The pair spent two weeks trying to nail down a snappy title for a song sung by the nanny in "Mary Poppins." They considered, and then nixed, "An Apple a Day" and "A Stitch in Time."

"Nothing was coming," Robert Sherman recalled. Then one day his then-8-year-old son came home from school. "I said, 'How was school?' He said, 'Great. We got the (polio) vaccine today.' I said, 'Oh, did it hurt?' He said, 'No, they just stuck medicine on a lump of sugar.' I went, 'Ohhhh! That was it!'"

"He came in the next day all glassy-eyed," Richard Sherman recalled. The final lyric would become world famous when it emerged from the lips of Julie Andrews: "A

spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down."

Another of their songs - "It's a Small World (After All)" - has become one of the most translated and performed songs on the planet. It plays on a continual, multilingual loop every few minutes at Disney theme parks across the world - a fact that Disney employees are only too well aware.

"We've driven teenagers crazy in every language," quipped Robert Sherman.

Away from the piano, the two raised families and pursued their own interests, yet still lived close to each other in Beverly Hills and continued working well into their 70s. When "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang" came to Broadway in 2005, they added new lyrics and four new songs.

One of the new songs was "Teamwork." The Shermans were sitting with "Chitty" producers and adaptors trying to pitch ideas for a new tune. Someone in the room said they'd nail it as long as they all worked as a team.

"I thought, 'Teamwork would make a dream work,'" Richard Sherman recalled. His brother shot him a look. "He looks at me and says, 'Has that been written down?' I said, 'I don't think so.' He says, 'That's our song!' It was like - bang. We built on that."

The first draft of the song was written in 30 minutes.

Though they were estranged for a number of years, the brothers largely avoided sibling rivalry. When asked about that, Richard Sherman was philosophical, touching and jokey all at the same time - much like the trunkful of songs he wrote with his brother.

"We're human. We have frailties and weaknesses. But we love each other very much, respect each other," he said. "I'm happy that he's a successful guy. That makes me a successful guy."

Sherman was based for the last decade of his life in London, where he wrote new songs for stage revivals of "Mary Poppins" and "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang."

JILL LAWLESS, Associated Press

Kennedy reported from New York.

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