

Gerbil Furniture

In the early nineties I lived for a short time in Greensboro, North Carolina and worked with musician Barry Webb as a studio assistant at Traxion Studios, part of the William Babcock Agency. It was a weird job because it not only included the normal studio work and equipment maintenance, but I also had to write jingles. A lot of jingles.

I conservatively wrote and recorded nearly a hundred advertising themes in the year I was there. 95% of them went nowhere, but occasionally one would 'hit'. One such case was the Hanes jingle - older folks might remember "*Wait 'til we get our Hanes on you*" which played for years.

Unfortunately, since I was an employee, I never saw any of the substantial royalties that little number earned over the years – it probably would've paid for my college education.



My boss, William Babcock, was a character so outrageous I could write a book about him. Accurately described as a 'crazy old man' Bill was constantly coming up with ideas, scams and ploys to make a buck or two. His best trick was to go to get the attendee list from some 'association' meeting, say the 'Independent Sporting Goods Association', and prepare for their next trade show in a big way.

Specifically, he would have us prewrite some jingles for the conference, then we'd customize these jingles with the individual sporting goods stores from all over the country. For example:

"Twice as nice, for half the price, Generic Sporting Goods, 2 for 1 Sale!"

"Twice as nice, for half the price, New York Sporting Goods, 2 for 1 Sale!"

"Twice as nice, for half the price, Feldman's Sporting Goods, 2 for 1 Sale!"

As eye-rolling and vapid as these ditties could be, they sold like hotcakes, despite the cheese factor. We made them as best we could, with professional singers, mostly live instruments and outstanding musicians. 'Mom & Pop' shops all over America could have a big budget custom jingle for local radio they never would have been able to afford otherwise.

So Barry and I were very busy, as sometimes there were forty or fifty variations on one theme to be done over a weekend. Those that didn't sell we just trashed, but nearly HALF of them ended up on the air!

After one particularly demanding week, I was asked to write a song for the Gerber Furniture Company of Mesa, Arizona. Gerber had passed on our generic jingle, but changed their mind a month later - long after we trashed their demo. The new radio ad was to be customized with some new voiceover as well as the music – and they paid extra for rush service. My job was to get this out over the weekend for Monday's Next-Day FedEx so that the campaign could start on Wednesday morning.

The deadline was so tight that I was instructed to send the reel-to-reels and carts straight to the Phoenix radio station, which was unusual. This added pressure annoyed me, because what I really wanted to do was go home, not work all weekend. When I brought in the singers on Sunday afternoon, I remember being a bit grumpy and distracted, but they're great people and their joy cheered me up.

Still, I can't for the life of me figure out how I made the biggest mistake of my career. Somehow, I read 'Gerbil' Furniture rather than 'Gerber' Furniture on the work order. I thought it was a funny name, but not unbelievable, so I preceded to record three-part harmonies of 'Gerbil Furniture' for the start and end of the radio ad. The singers giggled a bit too, but soon it was just another jingle.

Later, as I was mixing, I thought it sounded fine but perhaps it was missing something...something fun. I got a bit creative and found a 'dolphin chatter' sample from a sound effects library we kept at the studio. I sped it up so it sounded cute, like little hyper chipmunk – and I included this funny sound into the commercial for laughs. Once I was done mastering to tape, I labelled them and put it in the FedEx box down the street on the way home, mission accomplished.

By lunchtime next Wednesday I had moved on and totally forgot about 'Gerbil Furniture', but the fine people of Mesa, Arizona were now hearing regular commercials for discount rodent furnishings every half hour during their morning commute. It wasn't long before the station's own morning show picked up on this and began to make fun of the advertisement...on the air!

I knew this was a reality because a week later a cassette tape from KISS-FM's 'Morning Rush' dated August 9th, 1990 arrived - which I still have somewhere. I was played this tape in the main studio with Barry as I was being fired, which was completely justified because we were also being sued for defamation.

I should have been upset, or angry, or just embarrassed but candidly when Bill played that tape, I found myself cracking up in the most inappropriate way.

On the recording, the DJs had a tongue-in-cheek discussion about pricing, as none had ever bought dollhouse furniture for vermin before. They questioned whether the freight arrived in a toy moving van or a full-sized vehicle, noting the low labour costs since an entire shipment could be unloaded by a child in about five minutes. And what happened to all the tiny cardboard shipping boxes – can they be recycled?

It was all very hilarious to them, and the crew kept on it throughout the morning. Eventually the announcers started encouraging the public to call-in with the predictable satirical results.

People wondered aloud whether the furniture was edible, or if the bedding was cedar or oak. They discussed if Scotch Guard would work on an eight-inch sectional, or if an extended warranty against nibbling was really worth it.

As the sun grew higher, amused Phoenix housewives chimed in with their take on the matter. They described vivid scenes of tea-toddling gerbils, in tiny leather armchairs before matchbook fireplaces. Others envisioned a miniature living room suite from the Stuart Little collection, with little upholstered couches, wee thimble end tables and carpet swatches for flooring. You get the idea.

As you can imagine, this created a special hell for the Gerber's. Pranksters immediately called the family store with inane questions about adding habitrail tube extensions or lab-rat mazes for the kids. Teenagers peppered the shop with crank calls that were often just chipmunk chatters or Mickey Mouse imitations followed by explosions of adolescent laughter.

Mr. Babcock struggled not to laugh during all this, but a few smiles leaked through and I knew he saw the humour in it. Still, he took my key as nicely as he could and walked me to the door with a handshake and a thank you. Finally I was off the hamster wheel! It was fine, I was done with Greensboro and totally burned out anyway, so it was an uplifting way to lose a job.

Ultimately the lawsuit was dropped and later I found out from Barry that the Gerber's (despite everything) were still a customer! Seems any publicity is good publicity in retail, and my chattering sound effect became the basis of Gerber's advertising campaign in the nineties. The new tag-line 'not Gerbil but GERBER Furniture - on University Drive in Mesa!' was used for years and longtime residents still recognize the jingle. My legacy lives on!