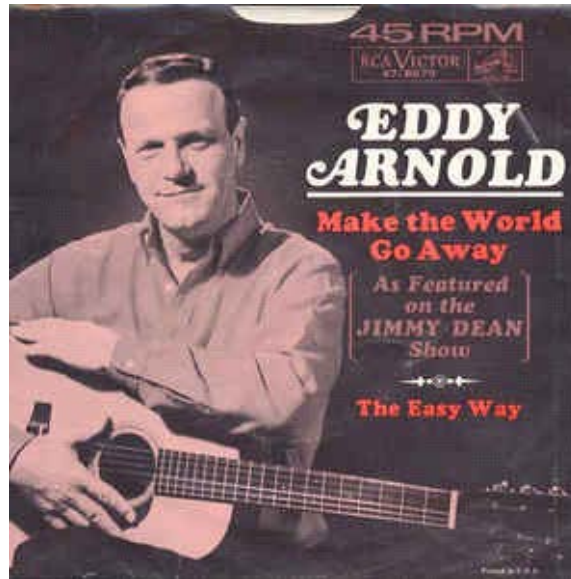


“Make the World Go Away”--Eddy Arnold (1965)

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Essay by Michael Streissguth (guest post)*



45rpm sleeve

“Make the World Go Away” by country music star Eddy Arnold epitomized the velvety Nashville Sound popular in the 1960s and rejuvenated the flagging career of Arnold, who ranks among the top sellers in the history of recorded music. The pop-country classic, released on RCA Records, was composed by Hank Cochran, one of Nashville’s major songwriters, who is responsible for Patsy Cline’s “She’s Got You” and “I Fall to Pieces,” among many other classic hits.

By the time Arnold recorded “Make the World Go Away” on June 25, 1965, the country music industry’s ardent embrace of pop music sounds was at least ten years old. Responding to the commercial threat of rock and roll music, RCA producer Chet Atkins and his counterpart at Decca, Owen Bradley, welcomed crooning background vocals, string accompaniment and other adornments in order to expand the audience for Nashville-based musicians. The phenomenon became known as the “Nashville Sound,” and, among recording artists, Patsy Cline and Jim Reeves were its standard bearers.

Ironically, Arnold was a pioneer of the Nashville Sound, amassing an enormous following in the late 1940s thanks to a crooning vocal style that contrasted beautifully with the rustic band behind him. He dominated the charts early in his career with romantic hits such as “Molly Darling,” “Anytime,” and “Bouquet of Roses.” By the mid-1950s, the so-called “Tennessee Plowboy” had re-centered his career from Nashville to New York where he donned a sport coat and tie and dropped the steel guitar and fiddle in his band in favor of big orchestral accompaniment. Despite a few smart hits, he was back in the Nashville studios by the early 1960s, recording the occasional country hit--many of them very good--and contemplating retirement.

If anybody had achieved Arnold's dream of using the country platform to achieve pop success, it was Jim Reeves whose pop-country hits "Four Walls" and "He'll Have to Go" highlighted his intimate vocals. With nary a twang in earshot, he was at the forefront of country artists at RCA. But Reeves died tragically in an airplane crash outside Nashville on July 31, 1964.

Unexpectedly, the disrupted molecules of Reeves' career re-coalesced around Arnold's. The native of west Tennessee hired his late colleague's musical arranger, Bill Walker, who had recently arrived from Australia and would become a key figure in the Nashville studios. In addition, Atkins, always a little in awe of Arnold, focused new energy on RCA's old hit maker.

Some of Atkins' new energy came at the insistence of Arnold's new manager Jerry Purcell. A rough character straight out of a Jimmy Cagney film, Purcell had been a lineman on Fordham University's football team in the 1930s and served prison time in the 1950s for stealing from the firefighters' union in New York City. People in the Nashville music industry thought he'd killed a man, but that was a misperception that nonetheless served him well in dealings with record labels.

One more element that bonded Reeves' and Arnold's careers was "Make the World Go Away" itself. Reeves recorded it on July 2, 1964, in his final sessions for RCA. When Arnold picked it up less than a year later, the song was like a scuffed football around Nashville. Though still air-tight.

Cochran, then a staff writer for Pamper Music, had written the reflection on lost love and yearning in 1963 after seeing a movie that inspired him. Within days of completing it, another Nashville publisher handed the song to blue-eyed soul singer Timi Yuro, whose melodramatic version hit the pop charts. Then country crooner Ray Price took his turn. "He put it out with all the strings, just like hers, and sung it the way she sang it," Cochran told author Michael Kosser, "It was like a number two hit for him."

Around the time of the posthumous release of Reeves' "Make the World Go Away" in March of 1965--it was an album cut--Arnold was climbing the country charts with "What's He Doing in My World." The easy-listening ballad inspired Arnold and Atkins to assemble an album called "My World," which, naturally, would include Cochran's hit. "I had already heard Jim Reeves and Ray Price and a girl [Yuro] sing almost a rock version of it," said Arnold:

So I said to Chet, "That might fit this album." So I checked to see how many records the girl had sold. Say she had sold half million records or a million records, I wouldn't attempt it, but she had sold, about two years before, 50,000 records. That's all she sold. I said, "That don't bother me if that's what she sold." I did "Make the World Go Away" and we were in the studio...and we started listening to the playbacks, and we all looked at one another and said, "That sounds like a single record."

The recording soared to number one and climbed high on the pop charts as well, setting up Arnold as the top country-politan singer in the industry and kicking off a string of hits--many of which contained "world" in the title--that lasted through the 1960s. In the wake of "Make the World Go Away," Arnold appeared on virtually every variety show on national television and

played gilded stages such as Carnegie Hall, often with a symphony orchestra. Finally, Arnold had achieved his dream of musical success with a purely pop-oriented presentation. The Tennessee Plowboy persona of the 1940s was almost never spoken of again by the performer who was now apt to greet his concert audiences in a tuxedo.

In the end, “Make the World Go Away” proved to be a unique example of the Nashville Sound. Nuanced in a way that Yuro’s and Price’s had not been, it showcased the newly-arrived conductor Bill Walker whose spare arrangement tamed the often-overwrought pop embellishments in the Nashville studio world, making way for Arnold’s superb bass-baritone--chiseled by more than 25 years of professional singing.

Michael Streissguth is the author of nine books about music and culture, including “Eddy Arnold: Pioneer of the Nashville Sound.” He also directs documentary films, including the award-winning “Nighthawks on the Blue Highway.”

*The opinions expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.