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Why Tax Day Makes Mr. Zelin Want to Sing

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CPAs Find Inspiration In 1040s and Sarbanes; An April 15 Concert

By SHELLY BANJO

A couple months ago, Steven Zelin quit his job as a corporate accountant to make music about one of life's most dreaded chores: tax preparation.

"Tax deductible," sings Mr. Zelin to the tune of Nat King Cole's "Unforgettable."



Steven Zelin

"That's what you are: Tax deductible. Just like my car, like a gift to local charity, you give my 1040 clarity . . ."

To hear the rest, visit New York's James A. Farley Post Office Tuesday night. There, Mr. Zelin—the self-proclaimed "Singing CPA"—will serenade those waiting in line to mail their tax returns before the midnight deadline.

Music is breaking out across the tax landscape. In a bid for younger customers, H&R Block has a new Web site that uses songs, video and an island on Second Life, a highly popular online community. The fictional host of the site is Truman Greene, a tax lover who writes songs and makes videos. "I'm gonna spit rhymes like a calculator, and spread the Block like cream cheese on a bagel," he says on the site, Digits.hrblock.com.

Last year, Intuit's TurboTax promoted a Tax Rap contest via YouTube, hosted by rapper Vanilla Ice and awarding the person with the best tax video a \$25,000 prize. "Like baggy pants and far-out hairdos . . . you can definitely rap about taxes," says Mr. Ice, otherwise known as Rob Van Winkle. (Said TurboTax on its Web site: "Just because we're experts in tax code doesn't mean we can't bust mad flow.")

At Murphy & Scarletti's Pasta, Grill &

Bar in Farmington, Conn., a rock band called "The Accounting Crows" performs at the end of tax season. All its members are accountants, bar one who is the director of public affairs at the Connecticut Society of Certified Public Accountants. According to the band's Web site, "They rock, they roll, they audit, they do taxes, and they'll even play your next party, business function, wedding, bar mitzvah or IRS audit."

Songs protesting taxes go back at least to the American Revolution, when British-imposed tax laws prompted songwriter John Dickinson to compose "The Liberty Song" in 1768. Modern equivalents include the Beatles' "Taxman" and Johnny Cash's "After Taxes."

But accountants count on tax season for the bulk of their business, so their growing use of music harkens back to a different kind of tax tune: Irving Berlin's "I Paid My Income Tax Today." Needing to finance America's involvement in World War II, Congress lowered the qualifying threshold of people required to pay income tax. Afraid the middle class wouldn't comply, the federal government commissioned Mr. Berlin to write a song linking tax payments to patriotism. Radio stations across the country played his 1942 lyrics: "You see those bombers in the sky. Rockefeller helped to build them. So did I. I paid my income tax today."

The Joke Formula

Perhaps no accountant is more committed to putting tax preparation to music than the 32-year-old Mr. Zelin. A former accountant at PricewaterhouseCoopers, J.P. Morgan Chase & Co. and most recently Societe Generale SA, Mr. Zelin quit his job in February to pursue music. To pay the bills, he continues to serve about 50 clients in private practice.

He composes music in the manner of a compulsive bookkeeper. To track his progress toward a goal of 30 new songs this year, he maintains a spreadsheet that tracks each song according to its percentage of completion, topic (auditing, taxes, accounting) and whether or not a joke accompanies the song. Using feedback from live performances, he created a formula to gauge the success of a joke: CAPJ (calculated audience perception of joke) = ROD (rating of delivery of joke at the show) x ARS (audience reaction at the show). To date, Mr. Zelin has completed 65 songs and 172 jokes, and released three CDs. His song titles include "Dear IRS" and "If You Don't Like Paying Taxes."

Last July, audit-software maker Approva Corp. hired Mr. Zelin to write a song to

commemorate the fifth anniversary of the Sarbanes-Oxley financial-reporting law. Approva's Web site offered a video of Mr. Zelin performing the resulting composition: "Happy Birthday to Sarbanes-Oxley. Now that we've strengthened our controls, thanks to Sarbanes-Oxley. Sarbanes-Oxley, our favorite law, we're singing happy 5th birthday to Sarbanes-Oxley. Thank you very much for preventing fraud . . ."

Not everyone found the song amusing. "This was not that funny. . . . You definitely need to be an accountant/auditor," wrote one visitor to the site. Another, signed David S., called Mr. Zelin's song a "disgusting" endorsement of "the worst piece of legislation to hit the economic community since the founding of the Federal Reserve."

CPA Stereotype

His fellow accountants say Mr. Zelin proves they aren't just a bunch of pencil pushers. "There's a stereotype that CPAs are boring and don't have a life," says Barbara Marino, president-elect of the New York State Society of CPAs Manhattan-Bronx Chapter. "But when people hear Steven they realize that's not always true."

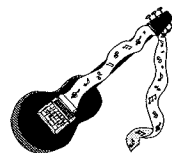
Mr. Zelin wins praise even from professional musicians such as New Yorker Randy Burns. The "Elvis of audits," Mr. Burns says of Mr. Zelin.

Mr. Zelin has performed at the New York State Society of CPAs' annual conference, the Service Corps of Retired Executives meetings and the Business Professionals of America's National Leadership conference. Smith Barney brought him to perform at a financial-planning seminar this month.

On stage, Mr. Zelin wears a suit and tie and plays a guitar beside an oversized calculator he uses as a prop. He specializes in parodies, such as one that turns "Ghostbusters" into "Tax Busters": "If there's something strange on your tax return, who you gonna call? Tax Busters."

His performance Tuesday night outside the post office in New York will be unpaid. Yet it will be his fourth annual appearance there, replete with a permit from the city, and he says he feels compelled to do it.

"I'm the singing CPA," he says. "It's my job to make tax day fun."



Steven Zelin
The Singing CPA

For more information, contact Steven Zelin at (877) DEAR IRS (877-332-7477) or www.theSingingCPA.com