

The Role of the “Negro” and “Blues Spirituality” in Jewish-American Performance
and Theatre in Early 20th Century America

Research Proposal and Annotated Bibliography

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Scholars such have attempted to explain why when given a choice between looking up to “high”/ruling culture or looking down to an oppressed sub-culture, many influential turn of the century American first and second generation Jewish artists often opted to identify with the Afro-American underclass. Numerous theories have been put forth, but an overlooked dimension is a trend inherited from European romantic art in which writers and composers incorporated story-lines that identified with underclass culture, and incorporated folk as well as exotic influences in their music, which in some cases allowed them to reflect upon their culture and society from a safe distance. In looking to Afro-American influences, the question arises whether the argument holds true that early 20th century Jewish artists were able to resolve questions of identity while creatively benefiting from the presence of a vast wealth of ideas. This paper finds some truths as well as weaknesses in this argument.

The Question of Jewish Identity in the New World

European Jews coming to America at the turn of the century were already byproducts of movements that were turning away from Orthodox Rabbinic Judaism, and considering the role of modernism and secular identity in communal life. Entering America, in fact, these Jews settled in culturally vibrant communities with their own distinct Jewish-American ghetto culture. Henceforth, these Jews were faced with a crisis challenging them to consolidate Jewish identity within the context of a melting pot society that included a conflicting mix of opportunity and discrimination. This matter was further complicated due to a racist ideology in which Jews were viewed as a third race, not white and Aryan, but still above Afro-Americans. This view would change

considerably by the mid-20th century when by the 1930's Jews would be perceived as a pillar of a "Judeo-Christian" society, making assimilation into a growing Middle Class culture less problematic. Prior to this, the adaptation of identity was not so simple. Jews, for example, had to choose between coming "white" Americans, or staying true to tradition, while remaining a sub caste of their own. As a result, some scholars have argued that the plight of the "negro" held symbolic significance, as the Negro was born in America, but was precluded from fitting in, and as a result, destined to second-class citizenship. Jews, in turn, had to decide their role in society, being afforded the option of adopting a mask, which similar to blackface could be put on and taken off, or existing in the comfort of a distinct Yiddish-American ghetto subculture.¹

Theoretical framework/Literature Review

Robert Ezra Park's concept of the Marginal Man is a person who is part of one culture, but is exposed to another, and through a process of personal decision-making borrows and chooses between both cultures, while helping to forge a new one. (Park, 1928) Adopting this theory, the process of Jewish assimilation can be seen as a series of choices made by numerous individuals.

But what exactly were these choices?

In my literature review, three helpful perspectives were found:

Most (2013), Alexander (2001) and Gerard (1998).

¹ By the turn of the 20th century, American Jews of European and American, but through a lens in which everything was translated to Yiddish, and characters were recast as Jews facing distinctly

Most discusses the roles of liberalism, Calvinism and “blues spirituality” in the shaping of Jewish identity. Alexander and Gerard discuss role of the choosing between high and low culture in the process of assimilation, while Gerard arguing that American culture is built on elements of high as well as low culture.

Between Calvinism and Blues Spirituality

In *Theatrical Liberalism: Jews and Popular Entertainment in America*, Most (2013) argues the presence of two types of Protestant culture in America: one Calvinistic the other Liberal, and furthermore, that Protestant Liberalism, unlike Calvinism embraced the existence of two spheres, a public one (which was secular) and a private one, which was religious. In contrast, Calvinism, similar to older Rabbinic Judaism, was built on a single religious identity, in which the secular world was a distraction. Most argues that the contrast between the public and private manifested itself in Liberal Theatre, in which Jewish symbolism and themes were adapted to stories, often reflected by themes where characters had to make choices between tradition and personal ambition.² She also notes a third influence, described by Jeffrey Stout³ as “Blues Spirituality” which was similar to “theatrical liberalism”, but more ethereal. Samson Raphaelson, the author of *The Jazz Singer* in fact, specifically argued that Jews who adopted the popular Jazz culture were not leaving their faith, but adopting a new form of expressing it (Most, Pg. 40).⁴ As will be seen in Gerard’s argument

² According to Most, this is most directly reflected in the “backstage musical”, a theatrical/cinematic genre in which characters have to choose between virtue and family and the sinful and enticing life of the theatre.

³ Stout, Jeffrey. *Democracy and Tradition*. Princeton University Press. 2004

⁴ In contrast, in response to accusations that Gershwin’s compositions were a form of gimmicky lowbrow entertainment, Gershwin, in line with Dvorak, Copland, Debussy and

below, this is also an excellent example of Jews looking up (in this case to the sacred), while looking down (to the visceral and popular) at the same time.

High vs. Low Culture

The issue of choosing between high and low culture is discussed in Alexander's *Jazz Age Jews* (2001). In essence, Alexander argues that "as Jews moved up they identified down." Gerard (1998); however, observes that prestige in American society comes from both above and below. He points out that in adopting values of the upper class, beyond merely making a living, the goal of living well becomes paramount. Style replaces substance and forbidden emotions and taboo activities replace accepted morality. The process by which many Jewish Americans synthesized these mores and the "psychology of identity" is discussed using a "case study" approach in Alexander's *Jazz Age Jews*,⁵ but it has a glaring weakness: At the outset of his argument Alexander acknowledges that the blackness embraced by Jolson, Berlin and others was an imagined or "manufactured" blackness built on minstrelsy (known in the vernacular of the era as "playing the coon.") In essence, these particular Jews were building upon an inherently white cultural tradition. It would be a few more years before influential Jews are seen adopting the "enlightened liberalism" of figures such as Benny Goodman (who learned from and worked closely with Afro-American musicians), or Oscar

others, argued that Jazz, Blues and Spiritual influences in his music represented a new form of all American music. (Hyland, 2003 p.69)

⁵ In turn, the Yiddish-Socialist political undertones Jewish Multiculturalism are discussed in Katz's *All Together Different: Yiddish Socialists, Garment Workers, and the Labor Roots of Multiculturalism* (Katz, 2012)

Hammerstein, who made no secret of his liberalism or politics, even in his works.⁶

Thesis/Argument

The works cited above present a helpful picture in analyzing the role of Afro-American culture in Jewish art and the shaping of Jewish identity; however, missing from the discussion is an important variable: The Jazz Age Jews were also children of a Western Classical cultural influence, and late Romantic music itself had been “looking down” to embrace new influences. This included the melodramatic “verismo” movement in Italian opera, in which the characters were ordinary people facing dramatic (often tragic) life struggles. Also popular in the Western high art tradition was the coexistence of exoticism and nationalism in which story lines took place in exotic cultures, borrowed from exotic music themes, but shed light on contemporary political situations at a safe distance, and in doing so established distinct national music and theatrical traditions. Jewish composers, playwrights and musicians adapted this trend, tapping into an Afro-American influence that was exotic yet indigenous, reinventing it new more socially acceptable American art forms, incorporating popular musical trends, a new form of operetta (the musical) as well as melodrama. This phenomena can be understood not only by understanding the relationship between prominent Jewish composers and their European mentors, but also by understanding the

⁶ For a clear example, I would suggest listening to “You’ve Got To Be Taught To Hate” from *South Pacific* (1949) I would also reference: “*The Mike Wallace Interview/Oscar Hammerstein II (3/15/58)*,” Harry Ransom Center, , accessed March 01, 2017, http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/multimedia/video/2008/wallace/hammerstein_oscar_t.html.

social significance of the book musicals from Kern's *Showboat*⁷, the production which helped shape the modern musical idiom, to Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. Likewise, it should be pointed out that the direct relationship between many influential Jewish (as well as white) Jazz composers and Afro-American Jazz musicians was debatable. For one, as has already been noted, Jolson as well as *The Jazz Singer* (which was inspired by his life story) was not really a Jazz singer, he was a minstrel singer. Furthermore, "Jazz" itself was not merely a style of music, but part of a vogue legacy stemming from minstrelsy, racial novelty music and ragtime, forms of music considerably divorced from their Afro-American origins.⁸ On the other hand, in discussing the role of Spirituals in *Showboat*, Decker points out that Spirituals were in enormous vogue in Manhattan at the time of the production, and notes the AABA form of many of the spiritual numbers in the show, implying the use of popular songwriting mechanisms. (p.27) In addition, a listen to the full score of the stage production reveals that the production itself was not merely a palette for Jazz and Ragtime, but a wide variety of operatic styles (including Wagnerian leitmotifs), also fused with American marches and waltzes appropriate to the era the story takes place. In contrast, *Porgy and Bess* is clearly a vehicle for what Gershwin terms a type of

⁷ *Showboat* (1927), based on a novel by Edna Ferber, tells the racially and politically charged story of a white performer who succeeds at the expense of a mulatto performer whose career comes to an end upon revelation of her racial identity. The production itself redefined the roles of blacks and black music in a modern theatrical production, and set many conventions of the modern Broadway musical. (Decker, 2013) Shapiro (2002) argues, "As a child in Ottumwa, Iowa, Edna Ferber was taunted for being Jewish; as a young woman eager to launch her career as a journalist, she was told that the Chicago Tribune did not hire women reporters. Despite her experience of anti-semitism and sexism, she idealized America, creating in her novels an American myth where strong women and downtrodden men of any race prevail."

⁸ This argument, for one is strongly made in William G. Hyland's, *George Gershwin: A New Biography* (Hyland, 2003) in chapters citing Gershwin's Jazz influences as well as his classical training.

folk music translated in operatic style, and similar to Puccini's *Madam Butterfly* uses the convenience of melodrama to tell a powerful tale, and cultural exoticism to experiment with new melodies, yet nonetheless lacks cultural accuracy.⁹

In conclusion, the negro meant many things to the first generation Jew. He was an alliance, a symbol and an influence. As Gerard argued, American culture is born of both the high and the low. As bourgeoisie minded composers were looking up and using the symbol of the negro to embody a unique type of "Americanism" that transcended the shtetl in their music, working class artists were indeed forming alliances with their fellow workers leading to the birth of a new American/Jewish-American multi-cultural experience (Black, 2016). It would not be until the World War II when these relationships would manifest themselves as an across the board substantive socio-political alliance. (Jones, 2003)

⁹ It should also be also noted that the use of folk melodies were a common precedent in 18th and 19th century Russian opera.

Annotated Bibliography

Alexander, Michael. *Jazz Age Jews*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Alexander argues that as Jews attained success in American society, they looked down to marginalized peoples and rebelled against American, even Jewish culture. A study of how Jews understood their Jewishness in the face of exile and anti-Semitism in America. Relevant to this paper is the case study of Al Jolson and blackness in the imagination of Jewish entertainers in this era. (Chapters 12-17)

Black, Cheryl and Jonathan Shandell. *Experiments in democracy: interracial and cross-cultural exchange in American Theatre, 1912-1945*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016.

Black discusses cross cultural collaboration and socialization on stage, behind the scenes and among audiences in the early 20th century. Despite racial segregation and social divide, she demonstrates how performance was used to bridge cultures and bring people together. Contains a discussion of Zangwill's *The Melting Pot*, written by a Jewish American the process of assimilation is seen as a surrendering of identity in exchange for a new Democratic American identity.

Brundage, W. Fitzhugh, ed. *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011

A collection of essays by scholars from a wide variety of backgrounds discussing the roles of black performers, entrepreneurs and consumers in American culture during the early twentieth century, in particular, related to the formation of black identity both in their own eyes, and those of how they were perceived by others.

Decker, Todd. *Show Boat: Performing Race in an American Musical*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

A history of the making of various productions of *Show Boat*, a musical by a Jewish writer and production team, which controversially dealt with race and racism in America. Helpful in examining the role of the Afro-American in Jewish art, and whether the presence of blacks, spirituals and Jazz in these productions was an extension of minstrelsy, or a bold political statement.

Gerard, Charley. *Jazz in Black and White: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Jazz Community*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998.

Provides an examination of the role of racial identity in Jazz. The book addresses topics of class and racial identity and how they impacted the view of artists throughout the history of the music. The chapter "*Prestige from Below*" discusses the appeal of finding musical influences from lower classes as well as the common man, arguing that it is an essential element aspect of American music. p.103 also includes a specific discussion on "*Jews and the Black Mystique*."

Hyland, William. *George Gershwin: A New Biography*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003.

Hyland discusses George Gershwin's role in applying popular music to classical forms, analyzing Gershwin's classical training and influences and the roll of Jazz in his music, as well as his overall contribution to American music. A helpful discussion raises the issue as to whether Gershwin appropriated Afro-American music and adapted it to the European idiom. Clearly, a product of the East Side, direct studies with or influences by Afro-American players are questioned and Gershwin is quoted as viewing Jazz as distinctly American, but not necessarily black. (p.69)

Jones, John Bush. *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theater*. Hanover: Brandeis University Press, published by University Press of New England, 2003.

A social history of American musical theatre. Contains a discussion of the role of the Jewish producer/director Lew Leslie in the development of black musicals and reviews and his relationship with black talent and producers. (loc.1831)

Katz, Daniel. *All Together Different: Yiddish Socialists, Garment Workers, and the Labor Roots of Multiculturalism*. New York: New York University Press, 2011.

Provides an important look at the multi-cultural interactions between Yiddish Socialists and the alliances formed with black workers. (p.109-119) Katz demonstrates how the Jewish socialist and labor movements were self-conscious about the importance of

other ethnic cultures as members of a multiethnic and interracial movement.

Most, Andrea. *Theatrical Liberalism: Jews and Popular Entertainment in America*. New York: New York University Press, 2013.

Most argues that American Jews used theatre to navigate their role in modernity, negotiating a position for themselves alongside Calvinism and liberal protestant society by creating new secular symbolism. Very useful theoretical perspective when examining the problem of Jewish Minstrelsy from Jolson to Gershwin and the (at times problematic) reimagining of the negro in Jewish art. (See Alexander, 2001)

Nahshon, Edna. *New York's Yiddish Theater: from the Bowery to Broadway*. New York: Columbia University Press in association with the Museum of the City of New York, 2016.

A helpful overview of the Jewish roots of the Broadway musical, particularly useful in analyzing the cultural roots of the Broadway musical, a medium that also evolved from minstrelsy while incorporating modern Afro-American influences. Contributes to the discussion as to whether Broadway is an extension of Jewish multi-culturalism or Jewish assimilationism.

Park, Robert Ezra. *Human Migration and the Marginal Man*. Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, College Division, 1928.

Park's concept of the Marginal Man provides a helpful theoretical framework in understanding the process of migration and assimilation.

Shapiro, Ann R. 2002. "Edna Ferber, Jewish American Feminist." *Shofar* no. 2: 52. *RAMBI*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 26, 2017).

Shapiro (2002) argues that as a child in Ottumwa, Iowa, Edna Ferber, the author of *Showboat* was taunted for being Jewish, then as a young woman eager to launch her journalistic career was told that the Chicago Tribune did not hire women reporters. Despite her experience with anti-Semitism and sexism, she created novels in which strong women and downtrodden men of many backgrounds could attain the American dream.

