PARODY, SATIRE, AND JEWISH MUSICAL COMEDY

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Introduction

On a Wednesday evening in late 2010, I walked into the third grade classroom at Hebrew Tabernacle religious school. It was Hanukkah time, and I had prepared a plethora of classic seasonal songs to teach. It soon became clear that the students had only one song that they were interested in singing; in fact, their excitement for this song was overwhelming. It far exceeded anything I had witnessed before; even perennial favorites like Debbie Friedman's "I am a Latke" paled compared to the demand for this particular song. Unprepared as I was, I understood their excitement, as many of my own friends had shared this song with me via social media and word of mouth. The song was "Candlelight", a Hanukkah-themed parody of a pop hit by Taio Cruz called "Dynamite". The group responsible was the Maccabeats, a group of Yeshiva University students who became internet sensations, even making it to NBC's Today Show.

Jewish parody songs are not a rarity in our culture. In fact, Hanukkah has already been a popular topic for musical comedy in Adam Sandler's "Hanukkah Song", which was a mainstream hit in the mid-1990s. With the recent success of the Maccabeats came some interesting questions: What is it about these parody songs that makes them so popular? Why is musical comedy a part of American Jewish culture? Are these songs merely a novelty, or do they carry a deeper message about Jewish identity and our own self awareness?

In truth, the trend of parody and satire in Jewish music is an old tradition, stretching back hundreds of years and deeply ingrained in the fabric of Jewish culture.

Parody and satire in Jewish music is an essential component in understanding the way Jew have conceived of their identities over time. It is a means for Jews to create a unique kind of social commentary, one which combines music and text to make a statement about who Jews think they are, their internal dynamics as a community, and their relationship with the surrounding culture. While our Jewish identity and cultural mores evolve in every generation, the method of dealing with those changes remains strikingly similar. Across generations, humor and music used in tandem were a means to get at the underlying conflicts facing the Jewish community of the day.

In the following the chapters, we will turn our focus to three eras of Jewish history. First, we will look to Europe and the world of Yiddish song to understand the way Jews used music for humor and social commentary. We will focus on Yiddish folksongs as well as the work of Eliakum Zunser, a prominent poet and composer of satirical music. These musical examples not only give us a snapshot of an element of Jewish life, but offer critique as well. Second, we will turn to America following the influx of Eastern European Jews in the late 19th and early 20th century. We will look at the way American culture and new musical styles and trends effected Jewish identity and musical comedic output. The music of Sholom Secunda and Irving Berlin will showcase two contrasting aspects of Jewish musical comedy: music intended only for Jews and musical intended for all. Finally, we will discuss two artists from the mid 20th century who created Jewish musical parodies: Mickey Katz and Allan Sherman. Their songs portray a changing Jewish world in the post-war era, and use comedy to delve into the duality of American Jewish identity.

By juxtaposing musical elements, by integrating English and Yiddish, by utilizing Jewish cultural allusions as well as European/American ones, Jewish parodies and satirical songs became more than just another form of entertainment or means for nostalgia. This music of the past can still speak to us as Jews of a different generation, as a representation of the layering of Jewishness and Americanness we still consider today. By extension, the parody songs we encounter today are fun to take in, but also continue to make a statement about where Jews are in relationship to each other and to American culture at large.

Chapter One : “Parody and Satire in European Folksongs and Musical Traditions”

The Jews of Europe, throughout their history, had a rich musical tradition, both religious and secular. Their cultural life was inherently bilingual, with Hebrew reserved as the language of prayer and scholarly Rabbinic writings, and Yiddish as the language of everyday life. Music was an integral part of Jewish religious and domestic life, and Yiddish music had a long history in these European Jewish communities. The earliest known records of Yiddish folksongs date as far back as 14th century Germany. Over the course of 200 years this tradition of folk music spread across Europe, including Slavic nations where many European Jews eventually migrated. These songs were written on a wide range of themes: from *Zmires* (songs for the Shabbat table), lullabies, love songs, holiday songs, religious songs, and riddle songs.[1]

Preceding the modern era, the function of Hebrew and Yiddish was very music divided. There were very few original works of music or literature in Yiddish and most were directed to the marginalized members of society, namely, women and uneducated men. However, as Jews in various communities around the world have done, Yiddish-speaking Jews began to borrow songs, poems, and theatrical works from the surrounding (at the time, German) culture. Traveling musicians would perform translations of these works that, according to Ruth Rubin in her book, *Voices of a People*, “provoked new categories of songs never before current in the Jewish community; dances and love songs,

[1] Chana Mlotek, *YIVO Encyclopedia of the Jews of Eastern Europe* (Yale University Press, 2008), s.v. "Folk Songs," accessed January 3, 2012, http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Folk_Songs.

satirical and nonsense songs, historical and popular songs, and even a kind of secular religious songs."[2] Each of these categories are aspects of the secular Yiddish culture formalized in the 19th century in Eastern Europe, and laid the groundwork for Yiddish musical parody and satire in America.

The life of Jews in Eastern Europe was undeniably difficult because it was punctuated by times of suffering and occasional violence. Yet within this struggle, and likely as a result of it, the Jews of this region also developed a rich tradition of humor and satire. Thus, one of the great hallmarks of Jewish humor developed, teetering on the edge between sorrow and mockery, between melancholy and bitter laughter. It is a pattern found in Yiddish literature, poetry, and by extension, music. It is not to say that Eastern European life was dominated by suffering, but that humor and satire was an important outlet to cope with the difficult times Jews faced, from the mundane to the tragic. This results in a nuanced and complex understanding of dark humor which must be understood within its cultural context. Dark humor can be defined as humor that turns a dangerous or tragic situation into a subject for comedy. For example, many of these seemingly serious texts would be set to a festive melody, creating a juxtaposition that in it satirized the topic at hand.[3] Therein lies the difficulty for many modern artists and scholars to, essentially, "get the joke" within many Yiddish folksongs.

Beyond the mechanics of the Yiddish language, there is also a cultural language that plays perhaps a more important role in the development of this form of Jewish parody and satire. Like any community, the Jews of Eastern Europe had a language of

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[2] Ruth Rubin, *Voices of a People: The Story of Yiddish Folksong* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), 22.

[3] Rubin, 159.

shared religious rituals, folk customs, values, food, and the economic and social parameters of daily life. These cultural markers permeated Yiddish art of all genres, and this kind of cultural knowledge was essential to understand the full richness of Yiddish literature, poetry, and music.

The folksongs created in Eastern Europe, especially the Pale of Settlement, reflect the desire to entertain as well as highlight specific aspects of society for commentary and mockery. According to Ruth Rubin, this form of satire was an attempt to "point a finger of mockery at those personages in the Pale who were often responsible for some of the ills and problems."[4] As a result, these songs fell in a few distinct categories reflecting the social issues for Jews of the era. Many of these categories became staples of Jewish comedy throughout the 20th century, when they were built upon and adapted to fit the specifics of Jewish life of the period. By couching these issues in a musical milieu, Jews were able to express their frustrations and honest opinions that they might have otherwise stifled. These songs followed the model of the great Yiddish writers Sholom Aleichem, Solomon Moiseyevich Abramovich (Mendele Mocher Seforim), and I.L. Peretz, who used satire and humor to play with the listener's expectations. It allowed them the freedom to critique the powerful without alienating the audience.[5] What applied to literature applied even more so to music, which provides a powerful layer of subtext beyond words. Furthermore, songs were a non-written medium; meaning they could reach a wider Yiddish speaking audience regardless of literacy and access to books.

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[4] *Ibid*.

[5] Ken Frieden, *Classic Yiddish Fiction: Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 3.

In truth, humorous folksongs ran the gamut from lighthearted tunes about daily life in the *shtetl*, and the various archetypical characters and situations in the Jewish world, to biting critique of the economic and political limitations Jews faced in Czarist Russia and across Eastern Europe. Many of archetypes were related to music in some way, or had a musical language that would be recognizable to the average Jew. In the next sections, we will look at three topics Yiddish folksongs drew upon for satire and parody: Hasidim, family and marriage, and politics and society.

Hasidim

The Hasidic movement emerged during the 17th century in Europe as a group centered around the teachings of the scholar and mystic known as the Ba'al Shem Tov, who was active in the 18th century. His wisdom was spread by his disciples throughout the region of Galicia, now southern Poland and Ukraine. Unlike the customs of traditional Rabbinic Judaism, Hasidim focus instead on exuberant worship of God in prayer, dance, and song. Groups of Hasidim were organized around a Rebbe, whom they also considered capable of performing supernatural acts. Musically, Hasidim were known for their *nigunim*, many melodies intoned with accompanying syllables. Rather than purely nonsensical sounds, it was believed that these syllables along with their specific melody were mystically powerful and a means of *devekut*, or connecting with God. Opposing the influence of Hasidim were the *Misnagdim*, or "opponents" who saw this

movement as a dangerous replacement of the importance of Jewish law and the study of Torah with mysticism, magic, and ecstatic prayer. [6]

The divide between the *Misnagdim* and the Hasidim was a major development in Eastern European society. It sparked reactions from both groups. The Hasidim created their own modifications to *halakah* in order to separate themselves from the rest of the community, and the *Misnagdim* railed against Hasidic practices and teachings that defied Rabbinic texts. It was a divide not only based on religious philosophy, but geography and economics as well. The Hasidic movement was centered mainly in the region of Galicia, what are today parts of Ukraine and Poland. They were generally poorer and less educated than the *Misnagdim*. By contrast, the center for the *Misnagdim* was Lithuania, particularly the city of Vilna where their leader resided. [7]

As many satirical songs played off of the social issues of the day, Hasidim became both revered and satirized in folksongs. One of the most well known examples is the folksong "*Der Rebbe Elyemelech*". This song highlights the boisterous, often drunken, revelry typical of Hasidic gatherings. The melody begins slowly, and plays on the rhyme between different objects, such as *tfiln* (phylacteries) and *briln* (eyeglasses) and *kitl* (robe) with *hitl* (hat). In both cases, a ritual object is rhymed with an everyday object. The refrains are Yiddish tongue-twisters, describing and mimicking the playing of the musicians. Many songs that deal with the Hasidim utilize sound parodies, from the musicians in "*Der Rebbe Elyemelech*" to the sounds of the Hasidic *niggunim*.

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[6] Herman Rosenthal and S.M. Dubrow, *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1906), s.v. "Hasidism," http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/7317-hasidim-hasidism.

[7] *Ibid*.

In another example, "*Tsvey Briv Tsum Lyader Rebn*", or "Two Letters to the Rabbi of Liady" the text portrays a faithful Hasid writing to his Rebbe about this life.[8] Unlike "*Der Rebbe Elymelech*", the lyrics of this song are in the first person, and thus the humor comes out of the seriousness of character and the subsequent absurdity of his ideas. This can make it difficult to distinguish whether the intent of the song is to be sincere or mocking towards the Hasidim. However, the music and arrangement of the texts creates a humorous tone to mock the two extremes that Hasid writes about. The song opens with the Hasid's address to the Rebbe. Each phrase is punctuated, literally, by the words "*a pintele*":

V'meystyetshku lyadinyu, a pintele.	To the little town of Liady - a period.
Mogilyovskoy gubernyu, a pintele.	In the little province of Mogilev - a period.
Dukhovnomu rabinu, Sheyersonu, a pintele.	To our holy Rabbi Schneerson - a period.[9]

The Yiddish in these three phrases is humorous, making broad references to the Galician region where Hasidim were centered. There are contextual references to place names such as Liady and Mogilev. In addition, there are dialect references such as the use of Slavic words over any Germanic synonyms, especially including the diminutive "nyu".

In each of these phrases, the set goes to the repetition of the word "*a pintele*", suggesting the deliberateness (and perhaps, the simplistic mind) of the writer. The melody aids in this set up. For example, in the first line, the melody goes up to the fifth on the word "*lyadinyu*", then drops back down to a simple tonic to third motif. The rhythm is more clipped to give the feeling of punctuation. The next phrase extends to the octave

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[8] "Tzvey Briv Tsum Lyader Rebn," in *Songs of Generations: New Pearls of Yiddish Song,* ed. Eleanor G. Mlotek and Joseph Mlotek, (New York, NY:Workmen's Circle, 1997), 179.

[9] *Ibid*.

and is more elaborate, yet returns to the same motif. Finally, the last phrase, which is the longest of the three, again returns to the same motif. The text of this A section returns twice more: in the middle and the end of the song in those two instances it has a more rhythmic, dance-like melody. This reflects not only the change in mood between the two letters, but also emphasizes the complete faith the Hasid places in the Rebbe to fix his problems.

The first letter the Hasid writes is a litany of troubles, punctuated here by the syllables ay-ay-ay:

hinei zay visn, du heyliker rebenyu,	Oh know herewith, O great rabbi,
az di parnose iz bay mir nisht azoy ay-ay-ay	that my income is not so ay-ay-ay
un mayn vayb iz bekav-habries oykh nisht azoy ay-ay-ay	nor my wife's health is so ay-ay-ay
un du bist dokh der groyser ay-ay-ay	and you, after all, are the great ay-ay-ay!
tu helf zhe mir!	So, help me!"[10]

Rather than lay out exactly what the trouble is, we are left to infer the meaning in the "ay-ay-ay". Melodically, the music reflects the conversational nature of the text, with a repeating pattern in small range of five notes. Each builds on the last culminating in the line referencing the greatness of the Rebbe, which is the most important thing according to the Hasid. In the second stanza, the Hasid's fate has completely reversed, although the lyrics and music are virtually identical:

hinei zay visn, du heyliker rebenyu,	Oh know herewith, O great rabbi,
az di parnose iz bay mir shoyn ay-ay-ay	that my income is now ay-ay-ay
un mayn vayb iz bekav-habries oykh shoyn ay-ay-ay	and my wife's health is also ay-ay-ay
bistu dokh take der groyser ay-ay-ay	you, after all, are the great ay-ay-ay!
tu dank ich dir!	So, I thank you!" [11]

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] *Ibid.*

The humor in this song is twofold. First, the song is told from the perspective of a Hasid who attributes his situation entirely to the workings of the Rebbe. The character is sincere, yet the arrangement of the text and the music set his words up for mockery. There is also parody involved as well, with the “ay-ay-ay”s modeling the Hasidic *nigun*. In the Hasidic world, the belief was that the syllables of a *nigun* carried great spiritual weight. In this song however, the same syllables are used to describe three totally different things, and either mean bad or good news. It leaves the listener with the impression that these syllables can have any meaning, and thus are somewhat meaningless as well.

Family and Marriage

The Hasidic movement was ripe for satire and parody, and was an example of something that mattered to Jews and was used for mockery. Another example in this vein were the social changes faced by influence of modern social mores and the divide it created between Jews of different generations. In more traditional Jewish society, marriages were arranged by parents with the help of a *shadkhn*, or matchmaker. Indeed, there are many Yiddish folksongs dedicated to hoping for a finding a good *shiddukh* (match). As Jews began to immerse themselves in European culture by means of urbanization, education, employment, and mixing with non Jews more freely, so followed differing notions and values, in particular, surrounding love and relationships.

The folk song “*Nokhemke, Mayn Zun*” is a humorous means of commenting on this generation shift and the conflict it created between parents and children. The song

itself is a parody of another Yiddish folksong, "*Meyerke, Mayn Zun*", a well know song famously arranged by the classical composer Maurice Ravel. The original song consists of a conversation between father and son, where the father quizzes his son on some of the essential questions of life. The father asks in Yiddish, and the son dutifully answers with quotes from Hebrew scripture:

- *Meyerke, mayn zun, tsi veystu ver du bist?*	- Meyerke, my son, do you know who you are?
- *Hineni he'ani mima'as, tatenyu.*	- "Here I am, impoverished of deeds", Father.
- *Meyerke, mayn zun, tsi veystu far vemen du shteyst?*	- Meyerke, my son, do you know before whom you stand?
- *lifnei melech mal'chei ham'lachim, tatenyu*	- "Before the King of Kings", Father.[12]

In the parody "*Nokhemke, Mayn Zun*", the conversation between father and son is over his choice of bride. The song begins innocently with the father asking: "*vos bistu azoy troyerik, Nokhemke mayn zun*?", "Why are you so sad, my son?" Over the course of the song the son reveals that he loves a girl with no standing and no dowry. The father remarks that he does not approve the match, and the son replies "*Me fregt bay dir keyn deyes, nit, tatenyu*", No one asked your opinion, father. Finally, the truth is revealed, in the last line of the song:

- *Ven zhe iz di khasene, zunenyu?*	- When is the wedding, my son?
- *Ikh vel shikn nokh dir dos eynikl, tatenyu.*	- I'll send your grandson to tell you, father.[13]

Musically, the song follows a modified strophic formula, with the phrase "*Nokhemke, mayn zuhn*" acting as a refrain between each set of interchanges between father and son.

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[12] "Meyerke, Mayn Zun" in *Anthology of Yiddish Folksongs*, vol. 2 eds. Aharon Vinkovetzky, Abba Kovner, and Sinai Leichter, (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1984), 73.

[13] "Nokhemke, Mayn Zun" in *Pearls of Yiddish Song: Favorite Folk, Art and Theatre Songs*, eds. Eleanor G. Mlotek and Joseph Mlotek, (New York, NY: Workmen's Circle, 1988), 161.

The melody for the dialogue section between the two characters is characterized by a motif of stepwise oscillation that repeats in sequence. However, the father's dialogue is much more straightforward and parlando, contrasting with the more lyrical, arpeggiated melody for the son. In this way, the melody embodies the distinct voices of each character. It is similar in feel to "*Tsvey Briv Tsum Lyader Rebn*"; speech-like rhythms, a small melodic range, and repeating motifs combine as the listener is privy to a sincere conversation arranged satirically.

Politics and Society

In the 19th century, the Jewish community dealt with many political forces both internal and external. In Czarist Russia, they endured a shifting relationship between with the government, as well as the population. In particular, the reign of Czar Nicholas I from 1825 to 1855 brought a series of oppressive laws that greatly affected Eastern European Jewry. Prior to this period Jews were forced to live in the Pale of Settlement, an area encompassing parts of modern-day Lithuania, Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine. Under Nicolas I, a series of laws were enacted intending to further isolate, and eventually diminish, the Jewish population. It included a mandatory conscription and re-education program. Young boys would be taken from their families, sent to training centers, and eventually forced into a 25-year military conscription. Most never saw their loved ones again and were known as Cantonists. Each Jewish community was expected to provide a

quota themselves, often resulting in kidnapping and bribery. Eventually, this policy was repealed by Czar Alexander II, along with many other policies oppressive to the Jews.[14]

The folksong "*Vi Azoy Lebt Der Keyser*" or "How the Czar Lives" satirizes the life and excesses of the wealthy, which were beyond virtually all Jews of the time. Ruth Rubin describes the song that "naively attempts to fathom the very peak of affluence enjoyed by the mighty Czar."[15] Indeed, the song is told from the perspective of a narrator, describing how the Czar completes mundane tasks in an extremely militaristic way. The narrator acts as a proxy for the audience, asking the wise men about the daily life of the Czar. The first section, which is repeated three times, draws out the set up of the question with repetition and superfluous formality. This allows the audiences expectations to grow and makes the comedic timing of the song more acute. For example, the second verse goes as follows:

Rabosay, rabosay! Khakhomim on a breg!	
K'vel aiykj fregn, k'vel aykh fregn!	My friends, my friends! Wise men all.
- Nu, freg zhe, freg zhe freg!	I will ask you, I will ask you!
- Entfert ale oyf main shayle:	- Nu, ask, ask!
Vi azoy est der keyser bulbes?	- Answer my question:
	How does the Czar eat potatoes?
Me nemt a fesele puter,	
Un me shtelt avek dem keyser	You build a barrel of butter
oyf der anderer zayt,	and load a cannon of potatoes.
un a rote soldatn, mit hermatn	Then soldiers shoot potatoes
shisn di bulbels durkh der puter	through the butter right into the Czar's
dem keyser glaykh in moyl arayn...	mouth.[16]

The answer the wise men give is absurdly militaristic; essentially, that everything the

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[14] "*Encyclopedia Judaica* (1906), s.v. "Russia," accessed January 6, 2012, http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12943-russia.

[15] Rubin, 161.

[16] "Vi Azoy Lebt Der Keyser" in *Anthology of Yiddish Folksongs*, vol. 3 eds. Aharon Vinkovetzky, Abba Kovner, and Sinai Leichter, (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1985), 46.

Czar does is carried out by soldiers in an absurd, over the top, manner. The music of the second section is extremely parlando, at once conveying the text and heightening the excitement as the picture unfolds. The series of short repeated notes also emphasizes the militaristic actions described in the lyrics. In the final verse, the wise men describe how the Czar sleeps at night:

Me shit on a fuln kheyder mit federn,	You fill his room with feathers
Un me khmalet ahin arayn dem keyser,	and toss the Czar inside.
un dray polk soldatn	And three regiments of soldiers
shteyen a gantse nakht un shrayen:	Stand all night and shout:
Sha! Sha! Sha!	Hush! Hush! Hush!

At the end of this verse, the music cuts out completely, as the singer yells out "*sha*!". This moment punctuates the whole song, and is a startling and over-the-top climax to the whole narrative.

Again, the dialogue formula is similar to both "*Tsvey Briv Tsum Lyader Rebn*" and "*Nokhemke, Mayn Zun*". Rather than a story that is narrated to the audience, these songs instead allow the listener to be an third-party observer. Furthermore, the use of a dialogue between two parties, with textual and musical contrast to emphasize the different characterization, is common to these songs. The use of parlando singing and simple, stepwise melodic motion is overwhelming common and hearkens back to other Jewish musical traditions, such as synagogue chant. The technique allows the music to best serve the meaning of the text. In the first two folksongs, the characters are sincere in their thoughts and actions. In "*Vi Azoy Lebt Der Keyser*", the sincerity of the wise men is ambiguous, as well as whether the intent is pure mockery, or perhaps more malicious. By using humorous absurdity and other comedic techniques in both the content and the

structure of the music, the underlying truths can come through sub-textually. This use of subtext is central to the nature of satire itself, and these folksongs convey powerful messages about these social issues through this medium.

The People's Bard - Eliakum Zunser

When examining origins of Yiddish musical satire, it is impossible not to consider the *badkhn*. The *badkhn* was a performer hired to sing and entertain at weddings and holildays such as Purim and Chanukkah. Many of these *badkhonim* were skilled musicians and poets who would compose or improvise entertainment for the community. These compositions ranged from the humorously clownish to pieces with important moral and social messages. *Badkhonim* were found in Jewish communities large and small, across all areas of Eastern Europe, and, like *klezmorim* and other entertainers, were considered on the margins of Jewish society. [17]

Traditionally, the *badkhn* played a significant role at weddings, creating compositions for the *bedeken*, or veiling ceremony, for the moments preceding the ceremony itself, and for the dancing and announcement of gifts which followed. The compositions were often compilations of many scriptural and musical sources, combining Hebrew prayers and *piyutim* (liturgical poems) with quotations from Yiddish literature and poetry. His role was not only to entertain and add to the festivities of the day, but also

[17] Jean Baumgarten, *YIVO Encyclopedia of Eastern Europe*, s.v. "Badkhonim," accessed January 14, 2012, http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Badkhonim.

to give advice to the bride and groom and even fashion poignant and touching songs and stories. [18]

Wedding entertainers existed as far back as the Talmudic period[19] and throughout Jewish history have been part of the fabric of Jewish society. However, in the 19th century, the role of the *badkhn* began to change. Coinciding with the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment) and the rise of secular Yiddish culture, the music and poetry of the *badkhn* began to expand beyond simply the wedding jester. The works of popular *badkhonim* were published in pamphlets that were shared across the Yiddish speaking world. In addition, the themes of the *badkhn's* work began to change. Social critique, retelling of current or historical events, and even mockery of sacred texts became associated with the *badkhn* and changed the nature of their music and their purpose within this society.[20] These themes became a strong undercurrent in Yiddish musical comedy in the 20th century, as an extension of the already self-reflective, self-referential humor of Yiddish folksongs and literature.

One of the most important and influential *bakhonim* was Eliakum Zunser. In his introduction to *Selected Songs of Eliakum Zunser*, Abraham Cahan writes of the artist: "Eliakum Zunser is one of the immortals in the history of Yiddish life. His marvelous gifts and enormous popularity, his original art and the unique character of the sway he held over the Jewish masses have secured for him a conspicuous place in the Pantheon of

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[18] *Ibid*.

[19] BT Gitin 7a, Ta'anit 22a

[20] Baumgarten.

our popular literature."[21] Sol Liptzin, in his biography of Zunser, notes that he was "affectionately known as the people's bard."[22]Zunser was a prolific poet and musician whose music broadened the scope of what a *badkhn* could accomplish. He works were enjoyed by the masses of the Yiddish speaking world during his lifetime and beyond.

Zunser was born in 1836 and raised near the city of Vilna, perhaps the most important city for Jewish culture in the 19th century, and a center for the *Haskalah* movement during that era. While Zunser was raised with a traditional Jewish education, in his youth he was also exposed to the ideas of the *Haskalah,* along secular philosophy and modern Hebrew literature. In particular, he read the work of Naphtali Herz (Hartwig) Wessely, whose epic poem "*Shire Tifereth"* inspired Zunser's own poetry and songwriting.[23] Like Wessely and other *Maskilim,* he believed that the philosophy and reasoning of the Enlightenment easily complemented the world of Torah Judaism. These ideas of faith combined with reason were reflected in Zunser's work, and contributed to his keen observation of Jewish society, sometimes bitter and sometimes poignant. Zunser was also influenced by the emergence of Yiddish literature taking place during this time, and, according to Liptzin, was one of the first artists to write in Yiddish, predating even Mendele Mokher Sforim, one of the founders of modern Yiddish literature.[24]

Zunser witnessed first-hand the force of Jewish oppression under Czar Nicholas I, which undoubtedly shaped his career and the philosophy highlighted in his music. The

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[21] Abraham Cahan, "Eliakum Zunser," introduction to *Selected Songs of Eliakum Zunser* (New York: Zunser Publishing Company, 1928), 2.

[22] Sol Liptzin, *Eliakum Zunser: Poet of His People* (New York: Behrman House, 1950), 15.

[23] *Ibid*., 33.

[24] *Ibid*., 39.

trauma of this time was acute, indeed, Zunser's own younger brother Akiva was "drafted" into the Cantonist army at a young age.[25] Zunser's piece "*Die Izborshtchik*" is a masterful satire of the effects of Czar Alexander's decree to end forced conscription. The *Izborshtchiki* were the local tax collectors responsible for filling the quota of Jews to become Cantontists. Lipztin writes that the inspiration for this song came when Zunser was working as a *badkhn* during a wedding in Vilna. During the reception, the bridegroom was snatched by the *Izborshtchik* and Cossack guards. Zunser wrote the song the following year and it became one of his most popular of the time.[26]

The song is told from the perspective of these tax collectors, who mourn the new "*g'zireh*" , or decree. The express their bitterness over the new system that abandons recruitment, where their authority "*oif nofeshes un oif matbeieh*", over souls and coin alike, is gone.[27] Their lament is, of course, a satire of those tax collectors and deputies whose authority was eliminated by the Czar's decree. The poem, of which a portion was set to music, exists in nine stanzas. Each stanza concludes with a refrain by the politicians, who also mourn the loss of their authority. The melody is more of a recitative, very simple with a small vocal range, and remaining in the Ahavah Rabbah mode throughout. It is striking in its simplicity and plaintive quality, creating an almost disturbing contrast with the grotesqueness of the lyrics.

This poem and song showcases how Zunser's work exemplifies the constant balance between despair and mockery inherent in Jewish humor. The Jews affected by the

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[25] *Ibid*., 49.

[26] *Ibid*., 142.

[27] Selected Songs of Eliakum Zunser, 212.

mandatory conscription, although relieved that it was repealed, nevertheless harbored a great deal of anger, resentment, and bitterness. Zunser voiced those emotions through satire, allowing the piece to become a rallying cry for the Jews who were now free to express themselves publicly.[28] In his later years, Zunser eventually moved to the United States, and became celebrated figure in Yiddish poetry, critically and popularly. In the announcement of Zunser's death, the New York Times estimated his funeral would attract 25,000-30,000 people, all yearning to pay respects to "the people's poet and the man who laid the foundation of modern Yiddish poetry."[29]

In these selected folksongs, and in the work of Eliakum Zunser, we see music that is used for clever social commentary. These songs allowed Jewish to reflect on their own identity, their society, and cope with the issues of the day. Through relatively simple melodies and comedic techniques, they convey layers of profound meaning. The use of satire and parody set an powerful example for later generations of Jews musician-comedians, who would utilize these techniques in the face of their own changing world.

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[28] Liptzin, 142.

[29] *The New York Times*, "Yiddish Bard Dies, Thousands Mourn," September 23, 1913.

Chapter Two: “The Evolution of Jewish Comedy and Novelty Songs in America”

From its origins in Europe, Jewish musical comedy eventually migrated to America, where the genre flourished and developed new richness. Prior to the late 19th century, most American Jews were of central European descent, part of a wave of Jewish immigration from German-speaking lands that picked up steam in the 1840s. Beginning around 1880, however, large numbers of Eastern European Jewish immigrants entered the United States. They were driven by harsh legal restrictions and a series of pogroms - bouts of violence aimed at Jewish communities - which occurred during the period. They were also spurred on by the promise of economic opportunities, and a chance for a freer and more prosperous life in America. By the 1920s, over 2 million Jews had emigrated from Russia, Romania, and Austria-Hungary; many settling in immigrant centers like Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland, and especially New York. [30]

Yiddish arts flourished in these communities: literature, poetry, music, theater, and later films and recordings. New York, where nearly half of American Jewry resided, became a hub for the Yiddish cultural flourishing that began in Europe.[31] The Yiddish theater in particular was an extremely popular art form in America in the early part of the 20th century. Yiddish theater has its origins deep in the history of Jewish culture, in the

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[30] Gerald Sorin, *A Time for Building: The Third Migration, 1880-1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 1-11.

[31] Jonathan Golden and Jonathan Sarna, "The American Jewish Experience in the Twentieth Century: Antisemitism and Assimilation," National Humanities Center, under "Divining America: Religion in American History," accessed January 24, 2012, http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/twenty/tkeyinfo/jewishexp.htm.

purimshpil, or Purim play. Traditionally on Purim, the story of the holiday would be acted out in front of the community, often with music and comedic antics. Often they would branch out further to include Biblical parables and even secular stories borrowed from the wider European culture, yet transformed into a Jewish context.[32] One could say that the very beginnings of Yiddish parody and satire can also be found in the tradition of the *purimshpil*. For example, Nahma Sandrow writes about Purim plays where the story would be greatly altered, often with the appearance of stock characters, much like the ones found in Italian *comedia dell'arte*.[33] The story is distorted for the sake of comedy and often spoke to the social issues and mores of the day, much as Purim spiels do today.

It was not until Yiddish became acknowledged as a language worthy of artistic expression in the 19th century that Yiddish theater truly arose. In 1876, Avrom Goldfaden (1840-1908), known as the father of Yiddish theater, founded the first professional Yiddish theater in Jassy, Rumania.[34] His goal was to bring Yiddish theater out of the world of folk tradition and into the modern era, much the same way Yiddish writers strove to do with their work. By the late 1800s, there were Yiddish theaters is nearly every major city in Eastern Europe with a sizable Jewish population. This eventually led to New York's Lower East Side, which saw a boom in Yiddish theatrical output by the 1920s. Yiddish theater drew not only from the *purimshpil* tradition, but also from other Jewish entertainments: the *badkhn* (wedding minstrel), the *letz* (jester), the *klezmer* (band-musician) and even *hazzanut* (cantorial chant). Together, these musical traditions

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[32] Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 6.

[33] *Ibid*., 11-12

[34] *Ibid*., 41

were reshaped into a modern form of Yiddish minstrelry spurred on by Goldfaden and other Yiddish theater composers.[35]

There were plays spanning many levels of drama, from translations of Shakespeare and popular German and Russian plays, to the *shund* theater broadly aimed at the masses. Nahma Sandrow writes: "*Shund* is the sort of art that most cultures and most people like best...It's art for the masses. It's neither the string quartet nor the piously preserved folk song, but the commercial, mass-produced jukebox song."[36] These were plays that dealt with daily life, with exaggerated characters, jokes and puns, and a certain degree of vulgarity. Yet these shows were extremely popular with the masses. Many of these shows included music, written by artists such as Joseph Rumshinsky (1881-1956), Alexander Olshanetsky (1892-1946), and Sholom Secunda (1894-1974). However, the centrality of the music to the plays themselves was typically marginal. Instead, the music would often be a *kuplet*, a comedic song featuring tongue-twisting, often alliterative lyrics that have a tangential connection to the plot of the show. The performers stepping out the plot of the play would become more like vaudevillians, creating bawdy musical numbers to entertain the audience.[37]

Composers in the Yiddish theater world created songs in a wide variety of genres: from the dramatic to the romantic and the comical as well. As the mass immigration took hold, the image of America as *di goldene medineh* (the golden land) became a popular topic on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to the songs of courtship, community life,

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[35] Irene Heskes, *Passport to Jewish Music* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 195.

[36] Sandrow, 110.

[37] *Ibid*., 126-127.

and history common to Yiddish music, new topics emerged. As Irene Heskes enumerates, these included “songs of poverty, pogroms, and communal displacements...songs of migration, resettlement and adjustment.”[38] These were treated in a serious way, but also in a comedic way as a means of coping with this incredible cultural shift. Comedy was part of their repertoire, but certainly not the only part, and those humorous songs were indeed influenced by the larger milieu of the Yiddish theater.

Take for example, the song “Just My Luck” by Sholom Secunda. Secunda is remembered as one of the preeminent composers of Yiddish theater music. Born in Ukraine, Secunda gained an reputation as a prodigy singing *hazzanut* (synagogue chant). In 1907, he immigrated with his family to New York where he began composing Yiddish songs and eventually attended the Institute for Musical Art (now The Julliard School). Throughout his career he composed Yiddish theater and art songs, as well as his own Yiddish operettas and stage shows.[39]

The music, the language, and the content in “Just My Luck” exemplify many of the cultural changes and identity shifts this first-generation of Americans faced. The song tells the story of a man who wants to get ahead easy and ends up worse off than when he started. He dreams about getting into a bus accident so he can sue the bus company - and when the bus overturns he is the only one not injured. He is seduced by his beautiful neighbor - only to find out her husband is a prize fighter. The song repeatedly comes back to this refrain:

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[38] Heskes, 194.

[39] Neil W. Levin, "Sholom Secunda," Milken Archive of Jewish Music, under "People," accessed February 7, 2012, http://www.milkenarchive.org/people/view/all/499/Secunda,+Sholom.

Just my luck, Just my luck	-
mir is nit bashert a bisl glik	I am not worthy of a little luck
Just my luck, Just my luck	-
Vi ikh gei iz mir shlimazldik	As I walked out, such a shlimazl (loser)[40]

This story is very unlike the satirical and humorous songs from Europe that we've previously examined. It is not a dialogue or a letter song, instead, the narrator speaks directly to the audience, imploring them to identify with his troubles. It is self-referential, referencing the ethnic stereotypes of the Jew fixated on money and hapless with women. The audience may not have necessarily seen themselves, but seen a familiar portrayal of a certain archetypal Jew, in this case, the *shlimazl*, the perpetual fool.

These kinds of ethnic categorizations were popularized with the emergence of a popular American entertainment, vaudeville. The vaudeville circuit was a network of theaters where a wide range of traveling acts could be featured including music, dance, theatrics, and comedy. Many acts used ethnic characters for comedic purposes, emphasizing and exaggerating ethnic stereotypes for laughs. This encompassed not only Jews, but other ethnicities such as Italian, Irish, and African-American.[41] Some of the most popular Jewish comedians and performers were active on the vaudeville stage, such as Al Jolson, Fanny Brice, and Sophie Tucker. The characterization and circumstances in "Just My Luck" are influenced by the paradigm of vaudeville. However, the song is intended not for a mainstream audience, but for an entirely Jewish audience of "insiders". "Just My Luck", in its ownership of these identity markers, also says something universal

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[40] Sholom Secunda, *Just My Luck* (New York: Metro Music, 1950)

[41] Frank Cullen, Florence Hackman, and Donald McNeilly, *Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xv-xviii.

about Jewish life at the time. Its central message is about the struggle to get ahead in America and the trials of fate, expressed in a way that mocks the whole endeavor.

Linguistically, this song also showcases a developing trend in Jewish comedy: the use of English. In general, Yiddish theater in America, although extremely popular in its time, faced an undeniable problem from the outset. As more Jews assimilated and had their own, American-born children, cultural tastes became more Americanized and English overtook Yiddish as the dominant language for American Jews. Thus, a popular trope was the interplay between Yiddish and English language, reflecting the natural method of switch between languages found in everyday speech. In Secunda's song, the English in the refrain is what defines the entire theme of the song. In addition, the verses are peppered with English words like "cash", "proposition" and "prize fighter"; words that directly reflect a certain American sensibility. For example, in the second verse, the narrator describes the proposition his beautiful neighbor makes toward him. In the middle of a sentence he exclaims: "the dinner vas (was) okay, what can I do?"[42] This switch is timed for comedic effect: it draws attention to the phrase itself and references the character's actions. He is leaving the comfort of his language and also the traditional values and expectations of the past, and taking a risk in a daring, very American way. When the audience hears this phrase in heavy Yiddish accent, however, they are reminded also of the outsider nature of Jews in American culture.

In his article on the language of Jewish cabaret, Neil Jacob describes a phenomenon known as "code-switching". A performer deviates from his/her matrix

[42] Secunda, Just My Luck.

language in either a situational or metaphorical context. Situational code switching gives the listener information about the context of a narrative. Metaphorical code switching is used to "add an editorial comment, provide a 'spin', or otherwise express an attitude about the utterance or the situation."[43] In "Just my Luck", Secunda uses English words not only to mimic the nature mixture of Yiddish and English, but also to emphasize the important words in the song and drive the lyrics forward. The mixture of Yiddish and English and the act of code switching for comedic effect became one of the hallmarks of American Jewish musical comedy for years to come. Tracing this linguistic blend helps to get a sense of the way Jews reflected on their American identity.

Musically, "Just My Luck" uses a strophic format similar to other story-telling songs, the verses being more rubato compared with a more metered refrain. Harmonically, the song begins in minor as the narrator sets the scene. When he comes up with his scheme, as in the first verse, the music changes to the relative major:

Ch'vell a bisl zikh tzushlogn	[the bus overturned] and I was injured
Ch'vell di company farklogn	I will sue the bus company and get,
Fuftsik toizind cash krig ikh aleyn	maybe, $50,000 cash![44]

However, in the line directly preceding the refrain, and the scheme goes wrong, the melody switches to the Ukrainian Dorian mode. It not only reflects the turn of the text, but that resurgence of Jewishness associated with his failed plan. In addition, in the English refrain of "Just My Luck", the accompaniment becomes more syncopated in the incorporation of a dotted eight-sixteenth rhythmic pattern. This syncopation shows an

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[43] Neil G. Jacobs and Marvin Herzog, ""A Code of Many Colors: Deciphering the Language of Jewish Cabaret"," in *Evidence of Yiddish Documented in European Societies* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2008), 139-140.

[44] Secunda, Just My Luck.

influence from American musical sounds, which at the time included African-American minstrel songs, vaudeville, and Tin Pan Alley.

In fact, most comedy and novelty songs from this period reflect the innovations and new sounds found in 20th century America, such as Tin Pan Alley. Tin Pan Alley was originally a moniker given to a group of musicians, lyricists, and music publishers centered in New York City, and later encompassed the entire American sheet music industry. It emerged around the turn of the 20th century as a new means to create and disseminate for theater, vaudeville, and later recordings and films. In essence, Tin Pan Alley marked the beginning of "pop" music and reflected the trends going on in theater and vaudeville in the music it produced. [45] Especially between 1890 and 1920, this music was defined by the ragtime sound; a mixture between European harmony and African rhythmic patterns and syncopation. [46]

Jewish artists and lyricists, such as George and Ira Gershwin, Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein, and Jerome Kern, dominated the Tin Pan Alley scene. In his book "The Jews On Tin Pan Alley" Kenneth Kanter remarked: "Jews wrote the songs, Jews sang the songs, and Jews made sure that the songs were circulated to every corner of the country." Thus, even though these songs were intended for a wide audience, they often included comedic Jewish content and themes. Some of the best examples of these Jewish novelty songs come from the work of Irving Berlin, one of the most popular and well-known Tin Pan Alley composers. Over the course of his career, Berlin wrote countless hit

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[45] David A. Jasen, *Tin Pan Alley: An Encyclopedia of the Golden Age of American Song* (New York: Routledge, 2003), x-xii.

[46] Kenneth Aaron. Kanter, *The Jews on Tin Pan Alley: The Jewish Contribution to American Popular Music, 1830-1940* (Cincinnati, OH: Ktav Pub. House, 1982), 23.

songs and composed for Broadway and films. Many of these songs went on to be staples of the American songbook, particularly his odes to Christmas (“White Christmas”), and patriotism (“God Bless America”).[47]

In Berlin’s early career, from 1909 to 1913, he also wrote many Jewish novelty songs for the “Hebrew” acts on the vaudeville stage. In many of these songs, Berlin uses linguistic and musical references to hint at Jewishness without making any overt statements. In Berlin’s first Jewish novelty song “Sadie Salome”, for example, the title character and her boyfriend Moses argue over her job performing in a burlesque act. The dialogue in the song is not overtly Jewish, nor does it reference any particular Jewish stereotypes. However, dialect markers like the characters names (Sadie and Moses), rhyming “dresses” with “glasses”, and using syllables like “oy, oy, oy” all hint at the Jewishness of the characters in the song. In addition, each verse begins in a minor key, alluding to Jewish music without direct quotation.[48] Another example is one of Berlin’s last Jewish-themed songs, “Cohen Owes Me 97 Dollars”. The first verse tells the story of Old Man Rosenthal, a dying man who seeks to deliver his last wish to his son. The music leads to the punch line, which is that Rosenthal wants his son to collect on all his debts so he can die happy. In the second verse we hear that Rosenthal has made a dramatic recovery, thanks to his newfound wealth. [49]

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[47] *Ibid*., ix.

[48] Charles Hamm, *Irving Berlin: Songs from the Melting Pot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 40.

[49] Irving Berlin, “Cohen Owes Me 97 Dollars.” in *Irving Berlin’s Lower East Side Songbook* (New York: Hal Leonard, 1995)

The music is in the typical Tin Pan Alley style: syncopated rhythms, chromatic harmonies, and a meandering melody line. Nothing in the music, except perhaps the predominance of the minor key, makes any explicit Jewish references. In addition, the text has no dialect markers or phrases indicating a Yiddish accent. Yet, the character's name, not to mention all of the other businessmen (Cohen, Rosenstein, and Levi) point undoubtedly toward Jewishness. In addition, the stereotype of the Jew being obsessed with money even on his death bed, serves as the fundamental comedic element of the song.

The Yiddish and English language music worlds created Jewish musical comedy simultaneously. The reference points and ethnic markers are often similar, such as the money-related themes of Secunda's "Just My Luck" and Berlin's " Cohen Owes Me 97 Dollars". The difference lay in their intended audience, whether limited to Jews only or for a mainstream American audience. This dichotomy was unique to the American experience, where many artists worked in both spheres of influence. It also showcases the way in which American musical trends influenced Jewish musical comedy, as well as the influence of Jewish artists and topics on American popular music.

In a time when ethnic humor was popular in America, the humorous songs of Eastern European Jewish immigrants added Jewishness into the melting pot of vaudeville comedy and Tin Pan Alley songs. They also drew from these same sources, blending them with Jewish musical tropes and characters to create songs that commented on American Jewish society and Jewish stereotypes. This era established a paradigm for

Jewish musical comedy in America and laid the groundwork for 20th century Jewish parodists and comedians to confront the two sides to Jewish-American identity.

Chapter Three: “The Jewish Parody Songs of Mickey Katz and Allan Sherman”

The generation that thrived on Yiddish theater, films, and radio gave way to a new generation of American-born Jews. Herbert Gans wrote an article in 1953 during the height of second generation American Jewish culture. At the time, he described the second generation as “the restless children of the unassuming east-European immigrants who have with amazing speed moved up in the American middle-class society their parents never entered.” [50] This was a transitional generation, tied to the Yiddish culture surrounding them, while also creating and safeguarding a place in American society at large. Many of this generation grew up in both worlds. Many grew up in neighborhoods where Yiddish was prevalent, surrounded by the immigrant cultural of their parents’ generation. They also grew up surrounded by people of varying ethnicities, and with the growth of radio and television, were very much attuned to American entertainment. The hallmark of this generation was their attempt to reconcile Jewishness with Americanness, ethnicity with assimilation.

There continued to be a place for Jewish musical comedy, and just as in the past, these artists reflected on and presented the issues facing the Jews of the day via the powerful medium of music. The artists writing humorous songs utilized similar comedic language and continued the trend of the linguistic contrast between Yiddish and English. Musically, there was a notable shift midcentury from original song writing to song

[50]Herbert J. Gans, "The "Yinglish" Music of Mickey Katz," *American Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (Autumn 1953): 215.

parodies. In many of the original songs examined earlier, the music's influence on the pure comedic value of a song runs a range, from no influence at all to perhaps a few songs where the music adds to the humor itself. In song parody, however, the juxtaposition of the music with the text is a central aspect of the humor. The musical source material comes with the baggage of its original context and often, original lyrics. When fitted with new lyrics, there are new elements at play, the first being the relationship between the new text and the context of the original melody. For example, instead of a song about love or patriotism, the song becomes an ode to food or an arguing couple. There is also a relationship between the lyrics of the parody and the lyrics of the original song. Here, language can be played for humor with changes in syntax, and other allusions to the unique Yiddish-English dialect.

To understand this time period, its relationship to the past, and its influence on Jewish comedy today, one can focus on two artists: Mickey Katz (1909-1985) and Allan Sherman (1924-1973). Each were famous and prolific in their time, creating some of the most popular Jewish song parodies in America. They were part of a group of entertainers who were beloved in the "borscht belt", the group of resorts in the Catskill mountains where great numbers New England and New York area Jews vacationed in the 1950s and 1960s. Jews moved in the region for farming in the 19th century, and over the years began building small bungalow colonies. In the 1920s, New York Jews searching for an escape from the overcrowding on the Lower East Side came to boarding houses organized by Jewish labor movements.[51] In the post-war era resort hotels overshadowed

[51] Phil Brown, *Catskill Culture: A Mountain Rat's Memories of the Great Jewish Resort Area* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), pg. 23-27.

these farms, boarding houses, and bungalow colonies for middle class Jews to vacation.

The 50s and 60s were the heyday of these resorts, where popular Jewish singers, comedians, and entertainers would perform. The borscht belt represents not only a place and time, but also an identity, where Yiddish and English were interchangeable, klezmer mixed with tango, jazz, and rock and roll, and the hallmarks of Jewish food were, invariably, plentiful. The borscht belt also represents a sort of golden age of ethnic Judaism in America. Yiddish as the Jewish language of cultural expression was being replaced with Yiddish as the language of Jewish nostalgia. Both have a place in the comedic world of Yinglish music, and both are significant indicators of the status of Jewish identity and self-reference at the time.[52]

Mickey Katz

In his autobiography, Mickey Katz vividly describes his early life and here we find the seeds of what later became his comedic material. He was born Meyer Myron Katz to Menachem and Johanna (Herzberg) Katz in Cleveland, Ohio. Katz had a surprisingly middle class upbringing "not a tenement row area like New York's Lower East Side"[53]. His youth was sadly marred by tragedy: following the death of his older sister, his mother suffered a breakdown and had to be sent to a sanitarium for several years. Like Eliakum Zunser, Katz's traumatic experiences in his early life may have fueled his desire to express himself through music. It is not difficult to see this pattern in

[52] Ibid.

[53] Mickey Katz and Hannibal Coons, *Papa, Play for Me: The Hilarious, Heartwarming Autobiography of Comedian and Bandleader Mickey Katz* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), pg. 12.

the lives of many Jewish comedians. Although he does not state this in his book explicitly, it is likely Katz used humor to escape his troubled past. He also recalls growing up and listening to the different accents and cultures of the various ethnic groups around him: Jewish, Italian, Greek, and others. These early memories became part of the source material for his act later on in his career, and set the stage for his comedic portrayal of ethnic Jewishness.

In his introduction to Katz's autobiography, the scholar Josh Kun remarks that "Katz documents numerous incidents when his Yinglish parodies came up against the assimilationist forces of whiteness."[54] Kun's comment reflects on the role of ethnicity in Katz's work as a microcosm of Jewish identity in general at this time. Jews, like members of other ethnic groups, struggled with a culture that expected a "melting pot" mentality: that people would not only assimilate into American culture but, at the same time, give up the markers of their ethnicity, their "difference".

In his article, "The Yiddish Are Coming: Mickey Katz, Anti-Semitism, and the Sound of Jewish Difference", Kun delves further into the relationship between Katz's parodies and Jewish ethnicity. Indeed Katz not only faced resistance from radio stations, but also the very population he sought to entertain. The 1950s were a time when many Jews struggled to distance themselves from the racialization pushed on them in the earlier part of the century. Rather than be seen as another non-white ethnic group, Jews sought to enter the white American mainstream, to prove that they were "no different from anyone

[54] Ibid., xxiv.

else on the suburban block."[55] The humor in Katz's music, in contrast, hinged precisely on those musical, linguistic, and gastronomic differences that defined Jewish ethnicity. They were "the melting-pot gone awry, the melting-pot in which nothing melted. Everything just floated, audaciously, to the surface."[56]

Throughout Katz's early career his performances, naturally interweaved musical numbers with comedy bits. However, these two portions remained largely separate as part of a larger variety act; it was not until later that he combined music and comedy together to create something truly unique.[57] Mickey Katz began performing Yiddish-English parodies for radio as a sideline when he was still teenager. These first "Yinglish" parodies were of bedtime stories such as "Yoshke and the Beanstalk". Eventually, these stories were published as an illustrated book for kids. Katz writes: "From then on I was always part musician and part comedian."[58] He also got the idea to do a Yiddish parody record in the late 1940s, after joking around in a recording session for Spike Jones, for whom he worked at the time. Katz had already written one such parody, which would go on to become one of his most famous numbers, "Home Ofen Range." He had also heard some parodies before, such as the Barton Brothers who released the famous "Joe and Paul" number about two men who ran a clothing store on the Lower East Side. "I suddenly saw the possibilities of writing and recording English-Yiddish parodies of all the current crop

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[55] Josh Kun, ""The Yiddish Are Coming: Mickey Katz, Antic-Semitism, and the Sound of Jewish Difference"" *American Jewish History* 87, no. 4 (December 1999): pg. 345.

[56] Ibid., 351

[57] Katz and Coons, 89

[58] Ibid., 88

of hit tunes..."[59] As a result, Katz decided to release "Home Ofen Range" as a single with "Yiddish Square Dance" on the B-side.

Katz's music is perhaps the best example of what scholars have called "Yinglish" entertainment, which centers on a hybrid of Yiddish and English. Gans describes Yinglish as: "American Yiddish consisting only of the most widely known phrases and words. As such it is comprehensible even to the younger Jews who do not understand Yiddish, and can achieve a comic effect largely because of the incongruity between American material and a more or less Yiddish language." [60] There was indeed a precedent for what Jacobs would call "code-switching", shifting from Yiddish to English as a comedic effect, in the work of Benny Bell, Sholom Secunda, and many other artists from the earlier part of the 20th century. This involves a change of the matrix-language: the language which provides the grammatical frame for a text. [61] Yiddish songs which adopt English words abound. Yet what sets Mickey Katz apart is that the ratio of Yiddish to English represents a turning point in the use of both languages. In other words, where English was the language to give comedic color, now Yiddish becomes the "joke", an almost complete role reversal. Neil Jacobs. refers to this use of Yiddish language for its inherent humor as "ludic" Yiddish. It becomes more prevalent as artists like Mickey Katz made the switch to English as their matrix language. [62]

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[59] Ibid., 89

[60] Gans, 213

[61] Jacobs, 140

[62] Ibid., 141-142

“Home Ofen Range” is a prime example of the musical and linguistic techniques Mickey Katz used in his comedy. On the most basic level there is the choice of “Home on the Range” as the source material for parody. In his article “The Yiddish are Coming”, Josh Kun reflects:

> No matter the strategy, though, all parody remains a form of criticism. “To parody a song is to criticize it,” Portelli writes, “but also to recognize its power. At the least, it is an acknowledgment of its popularity.” Indeed, the only qualification Katz adhered to when choosing which songs he would appropriate and neutralize was popularity, the extent to which the song could safely be called a “nation's favorite.”[63]

“Home on the Range” is a song that glorifies the ideal stereotype of the American West, as the original lyrics would portray: “Oh give me a home/Where the buffalo roam/And the deer and the antelope play. Where seldom is heard/A discouraging word/And the skies are not cloudy all day.” The subtext of this song is the realization of the American dream, a dream that 1950s Jews strove for at the expense of their “Jewishness.” Katz, in his musical arrangement and the absurdity of his lyrics, mocks this situation and makes his own statement: that Jews trying to be the ultimate Americans is an absurd proposition.

There are three music elements to “Home Ofen Range” that are significant. The first is Katz’s use of changing timbre in his singing over the course of the song. His exaggerated, hyper-nasal singing style is a common feature in many of his songs. It is perhaps a representation of the qualities of a stereotypical Jew: weak, rude, or effeminate. In this song, Katz uses another voice as well, what we can call his “Cowboy” voice. It is, no less deliberately, deeper and darker; representing an exaggeration of the Old West ideal. The second musical element is Katz’s changing inflection through the song. When

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[63] Kun, “The Yiddish are Coming,” 364

he is singing in English, but using the “Jewish” voice, Katz adds in the stereotypical vowel and consonant changes associated with Yiddish. “Joker” and “poker” become “joyker” and “poyker”. When using the “cowboy” voice, Katz only uses Yiddish inflection on certain words. For example, in the line “*beymer*, *blumen*, and vumen [women]”, the typical w to v shift of a Yiddish speaker comes through. The final musical element is the instrumental component of the song. Specific instruments and melodies are used at certain times in the piece, and this is also a reflection of the shift and juxtaposition between the “Jewish” and the “Cowboy” motifs.

Here is a breakdown of these vocal and musical changes throughout the piece. The song begins with an a cappella spoken introduction in Yiddish, with western words such as “corral” and “cattle” punctuating the text. Even before the music begins, Katz is setting up the “Jewish” versus “Cowboy” dialogue he continues throughout the song. At the end of his introduction he goes into his "Cowboy" voice, and this sets up the opening musical component, a western-style rhythmic pattern on piano accented by the woodblock, a typical mimicry of horses hooves found in cowboy songs. By the beginning of the first verse, the matrix language continues to be Yiddish, and Katz’s “Jewish” voice is emphasized. The piano is replaced by simple rolled guitar chords, which is a subtler allusion to Western songs.

When the refrain comes in, Katz switches mainly into English, but the phrase “Home Ofen Range” stands out in its similarity to the actual English words “home on the range”. In a way, the message of the whole song is conveyed in those three words: that Jews are not quite home in the American milieu, that something is a little off, so to speak.

In, the previous verse, although the language and singing style are decidedly “Jewish”, the content is “cowboy”:

Oy gib mir a heym, mit a vaybele sheyn	Oh give me a home, with a beautiful wife
Ver der shepsn und di tsigelakh loyfen	Where the sheep and the goats run around
Oy gib mir a hoys, mit gisinten cowboys	Oh give me a house, with healthy cowboys
Und a couple hundert kettle tsu farkeyfen	And a couple of hundred cattle to sell[64]

In the chorus, the desires radically change: “*Heym, heym afn range*/please drive in and bring plenty of change.”[65] The absurdity of the verse, juxtaposing a western ballad with “Jewish” vocals and text, is further heightened as the text shifts to poker-playing and money. Even in the idealized Old West, the Jew cannot resist the opportunity to make a little money.

In the next section of the song, Katz continues with a spoken section beginning in Yiddish and switching to English halfway through. His vocal technique, unlike the previous sections, becomes pure “cowboy”: lower and deeper with more open vowels. However, on significant words he changes his vocal abruptly to his “Jewish” sound. For example, in the line "*beymer*, *blumen*, and vumen" Katz goes into the "Jewish" voice right on the word women. It turns a line that could evoke romance into something a bit more sexualized, and a bit more lecherous. Katz also uses phrases like “honey child” which evoke the South, specifically African American culture. He later plays with this phrase with variations, substituting Jewish delicacies in an absurd way: “honey *kneydl*, honey *lekach*, honey knish.” In both of these instances, Katz is substitution the romance of the western song with either sex or food.

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[64] Mickey Katz, "Home Ofen Range," in *Mish Mosh*, Mickey Katz, Capitol Records, 1957, vinyl recording.

[65] Ibid.

Meanwhile, this section notes the return of the piano/woodblock instrumentation. In addition, the song's melody is played on the trumpet throughout this spoken section, with a slower tempo and the use of a trumpet mute. These musical elements continue to evoke that typical "cowboy" sound. At around 1:44, however, the music changes dramatically. Katz sets up a joke about killing a mountain lion, making a pun on the Yiddish idiom *altekaker*, meaning "old fart": "You don't know what it is a mountain lion?/A mountain lion is an alter cougar!" Right after that, there a instrumental break where the trumpet plays the melody brightly, at a much faster tempo, and with the support of a prominent rhythmic section on drum set. The sound is much more reminiscent of Jewish wedding music than a cowboy songs. Katz then riffs on the melody in a pseudo-Chassidic style, and the song ends unexpectedly with a trumpet riff in the klezmer style; the harmony switches to minor, the trumpet embellishes the melody, then hands the melody to the clarinet to finish the song with a final flourish.

In these last few seconds of music, Katz fuses the melody of "Home on the Range" with the Jewish music style, and in doing so makes a profound statement. He is proclaiming the true home of the Jew in the cowboy world, without trying to put on the trappings of the "cowboy" musical and textual language. He is unapologetic about celebrating, as Kun would put it, Jewish difference. "Home Ofen Range" begins with the premise that a Jew trying to pass as a cowboy is hilarious and absurd. Yet it ends with a joyous recognition of Jewishness and, while still funny in its absurdity, also declares a sense of ownership over both sides of that identity.

The success of that first single led Katz to create Yiddish imitations of many other popular songs of the time. These include other cowboy songs like “Borscht Riders in the Sky” and “Duvid Crockett.” His work also included parodies of hits from jazz (“Come on a My Hoiz”), latin music (“Gehakhte Mambo”), psuedo-Italian ballads (“That’s a Morris”). These three genres share a commonality, they each represent a different American ethnic group whose music was popularized during the 1950s. Katz infused Jewishness into these songs, not only through parody, but through intentional musical fusion as well. “Gehakhte Mambo”, for example, opens with the instrumentation and rhythm of a latin dance song, featuring horns and cowbell. By 0:17, however, the harmony has changed from major to Ukrainian Dorian, an unmistakably Jewish mode.[66] Another example is the song “Yiddish Mule Train” which incorporates *shofar* sounds into the western musical idiom of the song.[67]

Mickey Katz was a somewhat controversial figure in the world of Jewish musical comedy. For some, he was the father of the modern Jewish parody song, beloved and respected as both a talented musician and comedian. Yet there are those who found his music at best low-brow, cheap humor, and at worst even insulting. One scholar of Jewish music anecdotally remarks that the music of Mickey Katz was not even allowed in his house through his childhood.[68] This controversy is a direct reflection of the challenge to assimilation inherent in his songs, the way that “they show the ambivalence Jews have

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[66] Mickey Katz, "Gehakhte Mambo," in *Mish Mosh*, Mickey Katz, Capitol Records, 1957, vinyl recording.

[67] Gans, 217

[68] Bob Friedman, interview with the author, November 18th, 2011.

towards their Jewishness."[69] In a time of changing attitudes toward Jewish ethnicity and in the midst of upward social mobility, Jews had varying degrees of insecurity regarding those cultural markers that set them apart. Indeed, Mickey Katz encouraged his audience to do more than merely accept their Jewishness, but have the wherewithal to laugh at it as well. It required a level of self-awareness and self-assuredness that was provocative and popular at the same time.

Allan Sherman

In his profile of Allan Sherman created for NPR's "All Things Considered", reporter Jesse Green remarked:

> I remember listening to those first three albums, it was My Son The Folk Singer, My Son The Celebrity, My Son the Nut, with a combination of pride and intense embarrassment. Here was this guy, basically, he might as well been wearing a giant yamaka, and he was out there using Yiddish and telling the embarrassing stories that we all knew about our parents and grandparents and becoming incredibly popular for it.[70]

The combination of pride and embarrassment so aptly describes the effect of Allan Sherman's work: a prolific artist who specialized in parody, and brought his brand of Jewish humor to the masses in the 1950s and 1960s with great success and acclaim.

Sherman was born Allan Copelon in Chicago, Illinois to Percy Copelon and Rose Sherman. He came from a musical family and even had a background in the comedic musical tradition. His great uncle was a violinist and, although he was not financially

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[69] Gans, 218

[70] Jesse Green, writer, "Allan Sherman: Beyond 'Hello Muddah, Hello Fadduh'" in *All Things Considered*, transcript, National Public Radio, March 14, 2006, http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=5279983.

successful, he was revered in his family. His grandfather had worked as a wedding minstrel back in Russia.[71] He recalls how there was always music in his home. Sherman began to learn the violin at age five, but was not very good. “There was always a piano, but I never stayed put in one place long enough to learn how to play the piano.”[72] Although music was always there in his life, Sherman first discovered his talent for writing in grade school. He describes the first poem he wrote which got him attention:“I think that I shall never see/A billboard lovely as a tree./In fact unless the billboards fall/ I’ll never see a tree at all”[73] Obviously a play on the famous poem by Ogden Nash, Sherman explained that he thought all people did this, and thus began his literary career as a “plagiarist”.

In reality, Sherman did not start out in the music-making business, but rather as a television producer. He developed and produced the popular game show “I’ve Got a Secret”, which aired in the 1950s and 1960s.[74] While his career in television continued, he continued to dabble in writing musical parodies: drawing inspiration from his everyday life and performing them informally for friends. By the early 1960s, however, Sherman struggled financially and was looking for an new creative avenue. By this time, he had written parodies of Broadway shows such as “My Fair Lady”. To release an

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[71] Allan Sherman, *A Gift of Laughter; the Autobiography of Allan Sherman.* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1965), pg. 27.

[72] Ibid., 21

[73] Ibid., 48

[74] Schwartz, D., S. Ryan, and F. Wostbrock, *The Encyclopedia of Television Game Shows*. (New York: Zoetrope, 1987), pg 1014.

album, Sherman opted to use folksongs since they were in the public domain and therefore not subject to copyright laws. [75]

Sherman's first album "My Son, the Folk Singer" was released in 1962 and quickly became a crossover hit, selling not only amongst Jews but audiences all over the country. It was a surprise success that defied the expectation that Sherman's comedy would only appeal to certain urban populations like New York and Miami. Mark Cohen explains that the popularity of this album, as well as Sherman's subsequent releases "proved that the American Jewish experience could serve as an exemplar of national trends." In other words, the ethnic flavor of Sherman's work along with his form of "comic journalism", brought Jewish musical comedy to the American masses.[76]

Like Mickey Katz and other music parodists, Sherman parodied well-known melodies. However, where Katz often chose popular contemporary hits, Sherman opted more for folk songs and American classics from the past, such as: "The Ballad of Harry Lewis" (The Battle Hymn of the Republic), Al and Yetta (Alouette), and Sarah Jackman (Frere Jacques).[77] He also ventured heavily into the world of Broadway show-tunes, composing entire parody musicals such as "My Fair Sadie" (My Fair Lady) and South Passaic (South Pacific). In his article "My Fair Sadie: Allan Sherman and a Paradox of American Jewish Culture", Mark Cohen points out that these Broadway musicals were already infused with Jewish themes, written and composed by Jews and consumed by an

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[75] Sherman, A Gift of Laughter, 244-245.

[76] Mark Cohen, "Hello Muddah, Hello Fadduh, Hello Grandkids of My Original Fans: The Enduring Appeal of Singer Songwriter Allan Sherman," *The Jewish Daily Forward* (New York, NY), October 22, 2010, http://www.forward.com/articles/132050/.

[77] Allen Sherman, "Shake Hands with Your Uncle Max," in *My Son, the Folk Singer*, Warner Bros. Records, 1962, vinyl recording.

audience largely made up of Jews. “Once Sherman got his hands on these works, there was no need for ingenious interpretation. He made the Jewish connection explicitly.”[78]

Sherman employed many different comedic techniques. One example is in “Shake Hands with your Uncle Max” from his debut album “My Son, the Folk Singer.” In it, the main character arrives home from his work as a traveling salesman. The first section of the song is sung in a very speech-like way, with a choir singing in the background. In addition, in contrast to Mickey Katz’s often over-the-top vocal quality, Allan Sherman employs an opposing strategy. He delivers lines directly with little emphasis, a deadpan seriousness that creates a humorous contrast to the lyrics of the song. As the main character pulls up to the house, his mother comes out to introduce the other members of the family:

> Meet Merowitz, Berowitz, Handelman, Schandelman
> Sperber and Gerber and Steiner and Stone
> Boskowitz, Lubowitz, Aaronson, Baronson,
> Kleinman and Feinman and Freidman and Cohen
>
> Smallowitz, Wallowitz, Tidelbaum, Mandelbaum
> Levin, Levinsky, Levine and Levi
> Brumburger, Schlumburger, Minkus and Pinkus
> And Stein with an “e-i” and Styne with a “y”.[79]

In “Shake Hands with Your Uncle Max”, the list of surnames is the major indicator of Jewishness, which Sherman rattles off as a sort of tongue twister. Neil Jacobs refers to this technique as a “name rap”, “the rapid-fire recitation of names on a list” that he deems

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[78] Mark Cohen, "My Fair Sadie: Allan Sherman and a Paradox of American Jewish Culture," *American Jewish History* 93, no. 1 (March 2007): pg. 52.

[79] Sherman, Shake Hands with Your Uncle Max

a critical component of Jewish comedic music.[80] He cites examples from Jewish cabaret dating back to the 1930s, where lists of Jewish surnames were used humorously. Furthermore, the technique is not limited to surnames, but the very nature of rapid fire lists symbolizes Jewishness, according to Jacobs. He uses the example of Tom Lehrer's song "The Elements", where Lehrer raps elements of the periodic table.[81] The message "Shake Hands With Your Uncle Max", ultimately, comes at the last line of the song: "We'll all be here when you get back/to wish you welcome home."[82] Meaning, however far Jews might stray from their roots, those markers of Jewish ethnicity would be waiting for them when they returned.

In contrast, Sherman's biggest hit single "Hello Muddah, Hello Faddah" exemplifies the subtlety of the Jewish references often found in his music. The song is a parody complaining about the attending summer camp, an activity common to many Jewish youth. The main character laments about hardships and perils of the outdoors. Calling the parents "Muddah" and "Faddah" and lines such as: Now I don't want this should scare ya/But my bunkmate has malaria." hint at a Jewish, New York accent without being overt.[83] The music for this song comes from Amilcare Ponchielli's "Dance of the Hours", a piece known for its use in ballet routines. The delicate nature of the music and the string orchestration contrast with the blunt and sometimes disturbing events described by the main character. In the middle section, which becomes more

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[80] Jacobs, 123

[81] Ibid., 125

[82] Sherman, Shake Hands with Your Uncle Max

[83] Allan Sherman, "Hello Muddah, Hello Fadduh," in *My Son, The Nut*, Warner Bros. Records, 1963, vinyl recording.

dramatic musically, the character whines: “Take me home, oh Muddah, Fadduh,/ Take me home, I hate Granada,/ Don't leave me out here in the forest, where/ I might get eaten by a bear.”[84] As Mark Cohen comments, “Sherman's parody is not only Jewish in its subject matter, it is Jewish in the technique of its humor, which like much Jewish comedy produces laughs by exposing the tender, airy, and sentimental to the rough, earthy, and practical.” In other words, the genius of Allan Sherman was to take sentimental tunes and infuse them with Jewish vulgarity, in the classic sense of the word.

The Jewish undertones are an integral part of the comedy in this song, yet its success in the mainstream music world is a significant indicator of Allan Sherman’s universal appeal. “Hello Muddah, Hello Faddah” spent two weeks at number two on Billboard Magazine’s Top 100 charts in 1963,[85] won Sherman a Grammy for Best Comedy Performance in 1964, and later inspired a children’s book and a musical revue. Mark Cohen comments that Sherman’s songs spoke to all Americans who faced similar issues in the post-war era: “Sherman’s songs about suburbs, status, television and children record the moment when Americans first suffered the pains of their new affluence. The latter brought blessings, but also isolation, anxiety and boredom.”[86] In this way, Allan Sherman’s music tapped into American culture while also incorporating elements of Jewish identity. Where Mickey Katz spoke to an audience of only Jews,

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[84] Ibid.

[85] Joel Whitburn, *Joel Whitburn Presents the Billboard Hot 100 Charts: The Sixties.* (Menonomee Falls, WI: Record Research, 1990)

[86] Cohen, Hello Muddah, Hello Fadduh, Hello Grandkids of My Original Fans

Allan Sherman used the same medium of parody to speak to Jews as well as non-Jewish Americans.

The differences between Mickey Katz and Allan Sherman are analogous to those between Sholom Secunda and Irving Berlin. In both cases, the two sets of artists shared similar musical influences, and utilized similar conventions of language and themes to convey Jewish ethnicity. Katz's work is a continuation of the world of Yiddish music and Secunda's music. Both blended Jewish musical traditions with contemporary styles, and both offered a mixture of Yiddish and English in their music for comedic effect. Allan Sherman's music is inspired by the tradition of Irving Berlin and his contemporaries in Tin Pan Alley. Both Berlin and Sherman gained fame outside of the Jewish world and immersed themselves in the popular American music of the era. Both tended to use subtler references to Jewishness, including surnames and phrases in dialect, over the use of Yiddish itself. The duality of the American Jewish identity as insiders and outsiders in American society is reflected in these two contrasting sets of artists.

However, Katz and Sherman also symbolized an evolution of the Jewish musical comedy genre in their use of parody. Parody allowed Katz and Sherman to use music as subtext in relationship to the text. It also allowed them to contrast Americanness with Jewishness in a way that celebrated aspects of Jewish ethnicity. Their music reached a generation of American Jews searching to balance their American and Jewish identities. With music and humor combined, Mickey Katz and Allan Sherman identified this duality, commented on it, laughed at it, and in doing so, inspired legions of Jewish parodists to do the same.

Conclusion

In January 2008, David Kaufmann wrote an essay for the The Jewish Daily Forward entitled “The Parody’s Over: Wither Our Era’s Mickey Katz or Allan Sherman?” In it, the author laments not only the loss of parody as prominent outlet of American comedy, but particularly the Jewish parody. He sees the heyday of Jewish parody as overt rendering of the assimilation that was already silently taking place in American Jewry. He writes:

> In the end, classic Jewish-American parody — whether it’s Katz or Sherman, Mel Brooks or Woody Allen — is the flip side of assimilation. Both parody and assimilation come down to mimicry: Assimilation is mimicry that dares not speak its name. Parody is mimicry that not only admits what it is but also makes a virtue of doing it badly.[87]

As the process of assimilation took place over the following decades, it the tension surrounding it decreased. Therefore, the need for these kinds of parodies, according to Kaufmann, was lost. He sees no place for the kind of secular Yiddishkeit that formed the basis for Katz and Sherman’s songs.[88] Indeed, Kaufmann raises two interesting issues. Is there a place for Jewish parodies and, in a broader sense, Jewish musical comedy in today’s American Jewish culture? In addition, can today’s generation of Jews still connect to the music of Katz and Sherman and find value in it?

So much of this music, both that of Katz and to lesser degree that of Sherman, along with that of many other parodists and Jewish comics of the 50s and 60s has been

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[87] David Kaufmann, "The Parody’s Over: Whither Our Era's Mickey Katz or Allan Sherman?," *The Jewish Daily Forward*, January 8, 2008, under "Arts and Culture," accessed January 15, 2012, http://www.forward.com/articles/12418/.

[88] *Ibid*.

relegated to the world of “kitsch” in our modern estimation of Jewish cultural output. The jokes are broad, the music is dated, and the Yiddish phrases are unintelligible, either purely in terms of our loss of Yiddish comprehension or more subtly in terms of grasping the underlying context of the comedy. Furthermore, the issues that Katz and Sherman mocked are not necessarily the relevant issues facing Jews today. Mark Cohen, who has written about Allan Sherman in the past, discussed this issue in a recent blog post. He believes the disconnect between Sherman and Jews under forty lies in an insight by the writer Herbert Gans, that “Sherman’s songs ‘are not satire, and they lack the biting political and social commentary that intellectuals call for.’”[89] Instead, they are simply light-hearted mockery.

However, I think that there is a place for the music of Katz, Sherman, and other musician comedians from the past. It may be true that modern Jews do not see themselves and their reality reflected in this music. However, we can resonate with the tropes and techniques of Jewish humor in general, and these are a fundamental part all of these songs. Self-deprecation, dark humor, references to food and drink, and especially the use of parody can still translate to a modern audience. To put it bluntly: Funny is funny, and you do not have to get all the jokes as long as you get the most fundamental jokes, the jokes that are universal or timeless. Furthermore, if we understand this music in the context of American Jewish society, we can still access that humor today. Furthermore, the concept of Jewish difference, although it is subtler today, is still a relevant issue. I felt drawn to these artists for the comedy inherent in their music: the timing of jokes, the

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[89] Mark Cohen, "Why Allan Sherman Is Not Cool among Hip Younger Jews — an Early Diagnosis," *Stumbling Into Jews* (web log), March 10, 2010, http://stumblingintojews.com/why-allan-sherman-is-not-cool-among-hip-younger-jews-an-early-diagnosis/.

references to Jewish food, the Yiddish dialect. They paint a humorous picture of the past, something that Jews of the present can still understand and laugh at.

I also think that there is still room for new Jewish musical comedy in our world today. As long as Jews continue to be funny, and continue to be observant and self-reflective, Jewish song parodies and humorous songs will continue to exist. And they do exist: there are new Jewish comedy songs being written by amateurs and professionals alike. Not only that, but the rise of social media and video sharing sites like YouTube allows these songs and videos to reach a virtually unlimited audience. YouTube in particular allows for an additional element of humor in the form of visual media accompanying the music. By tracing the history the Jewish musical comedy, we can understand the power this music has to showcase our Jewish self-image. With this knowledge, it is still possible to continue this tradition of using music and text to get laughs and tell the ongoing story of American Jewish life.

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