

Al Jolson singing Mammy in *The Jazz Singer*. Courtesy of www.jolson.org

# JEW S AND BLACK MUSIC

## A DIFFICULT RELATIONSHIP

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In 1995, Rabbi Michael Lerner, editor of *Tikkun* magazine, together with the African-American philosopher Cornell West published a book entitled *Jews and Blacks: Let the Healing Begin*. The title says much about the woeful relations between blacks and Jews (in the USA at least). In recent decades, Jews and blacks have been separated by a cavernous social distance, living in different areas and inhabiting different social classes. Whereas Jews appear to represent the possibilities of post-war assimilation and a comfortable accommodation with western culture, blacks appear to represent the discomforts of racism and alienation. Jews and blacks not only live separate lives; they are suspicious of each other's way of being a minority.

But there is an alternative narrative of Jewish-black relations that tells a story of much closer, although still problematic, relations. In the sphere of popular music, the destinies of Jews and blacks have been much more closely intertwined.

Marginal groups, denied the possibility of cultural expression through 'official' channels, have traditionally looked to the field of popular culture to make their mark. As far back as the 19th century, black American musicians were hugely popular as 'minstrels' in a highly racist society. When Jews began arriving in large numbers in America from Eastern Europe in the late 19th century, they also looked to the entertainment business to

make their fortunes and find a degree of acceptance in a hostile world.

But whereas the music associated with black musicians was and remains irrevocably associated with their 'blackness', Jewish musicians on the whole made every effort to avoid drawing attention to their Jewishness, changing their names and, with some important exceptions, largely avoiding any kind of Jewish repertoire. So there is something odd about the Jewish presence in popular music: Jews have been ubiquitous, yet references to Jewishness and to Judaism have been rare.

That is not to say that the Jewishness of Jewish songwriters, performers and impresarios was and is of no consequence to their work. On the contrary, it is crucial to understanding the work of many key Jewish figures in the entertainment industry. Yet Jewishness is expressed covertly and indirectly and one of these indirect ways through which Jewishness has been expressed is through Jews' use of and relationship to black cultural forms.

Take the example of 'blackface' performance, which is the use of make-up by white artists to imitate blackness. Although Jews didn't invent blackface, by the early 20th century, Jews had become its principal exponents. Such significant figures as Edie Cantor, Sophie Tucker and – most famously of all – Al Jolson, all started off as blackface performers.

Today blackface appears to us as grotesquely racist. The figure of the simple-minded, sentimental but ultimately loveable 'coon', munching watermelon and waxing lyrical about 'swanee', 'dixie' and 'mammy', is not merely dated but offensive. As a result the work of contemporary cultural historians has been required to tease out some of the complexities of the art form. What such work has shown is that the Jewish use of blackface was not a result of simple racism but something much more complex.

In the early 20th century, Jews were in a much less comfortable social position than they are today. Facing racism and poverty, they nonetheless fought hard to gain upward mobility through the social system. Yet even as they did so, many felt ambivalent about their increasing social status and in particular about the assimilation and compromises required of them. The idea of the 'melting pot' – so treasured by many Jews – also brought with it a loss of Jewish identity. Most strikingly, it required that Jews become seen as, and identify as 'white', since 'whiteness' conferred the only route to status in a society in which marginality and blackness was despised.

The historian Michael Alexander explains that 'as Jews moved up they identified down'. They retained an attraction for the perhaps more 'truthful' world from which they had come – the world of the despised, 'low' other. To retain this

attraction when Jews were moving up the social scale and striving for respectability created a quandary that blackface helped to solve. By donning the trappings of blackness, Jews could participate in the jazz age whilst still retaining the benefits of Jewish upward mobility.

So although blackface drew on a grotesque travesty of 'actual' black culture, it was less a manifestation of Jewish racism than of the desire of some Jews for a more 'authentic' form of

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existence. This helps us to understand the famous final scene in Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer* a little better. When Jolson sings with such feeling for his 'Mammy' he is at once, as a successful jazz singer, proclaiming the unbridgeable distance to his roots (symbolized by the mother figure) and at the same time, through taking on the mask of blackness, showing that part of him will always remain as the marginal Jewish outsider.

Blackface is only the most extreme case depicting Jewish attraction towards and repulsion from both black and white society. At times, Jewish use of black culture and black music has revealed an uncomfortable tendency to appropriate and exploit. Take George Gershwin, whose works such as 'Rhapsody in Blue' and of course 'Porgy and Bess' are celebrated as triumphs of the jazz age. Gershwin has been revered for his ear for black music and his diligent research amongst blacks themselves. So perfect does Gershwin's work appear as a distillation of all that is great in black music, that it virtually dispenses with the need for black composers at all. Indeed, in the context of the 1930s, Gershwin and other Jewish masters of black music, neatly solved a tricky problem for whites – black music was attractive but blacks themselves were not. Whilst Gershwin himself was immensely sympathetic to black culture and whilst his music is still revered by many African-Americans, his success did nothing to help the low status of black composers in the music industry.

This is then the irony: that however much Jews have opposed racism, for much of the 20th century Jews occupied a position in American culture – not so marginal to suffer overmuch from racism, yet marginal enough to provide useful cultural 'middle men' to those who truly were on the

margins. This helped to perpetuate the low status of African-Americans even as it popularised black music.

In his book *Rock n Roll Jews*, Michael Billig argues that Jews played a crucial role in the creation of rock n roll by acting as cultural intermediaries between the black and white worlds. Jews only had a limited involvement in rock and roll as performers, but in the 1950s and 1960s they were heavily involved as writers, producers and impresarios: figures such as

Allan Freed (the DJ who coined the term 'rock and roll'), Leiber and Stoller (who wrote Elvis Presley's *Hound Dog*) and the legendary producer Phil Spector. Such figures grew up in modest circumstances at a time when Jews lived near black areas and where there was a relatively consistent level of social interaction between Jews and blacks. Their ability to 'pass' as white made being successful in the music and entertainment industries easier than such success was for blacks.

By the 1960s and 1970s, Jews' social position had changed and most of the community had taken on all the privileges of middle class white society. The flight out of black inner city areas meant that Jews had much less contact with blacks. At the same time, the civil rights and black power movements had led to a growing confidence and self-assertion in the black community. No longer willing to trust their cultural future to white or Jewish intermediaries, black writers, producers and entrepreneurs took on growing importance – this was the era of Motown and James Brown. Jews no longer had any need or ability to express themselves through re-workings of black music and black performers were less and less reluctant to let themselves be appropriated in this way.

Jews have remained in large numbers in the entertainment industry, still more likely to be writers, producers and impresarios rather than performers. But it has become less and less easy to identify a distinctly Jewish contribution to the content of popular music and popular culture. Rapidly assimilating but still nonetheless marginal Jews in the jazz age and beyond had looked to black music and black culture as a way of expressing their ambivalence and excitement about

becoming Americans. Jews bought up in the comfortable 1970s and beyond, whilst they inherited the drive to make it in the entertainment industries, were much less driven to express themselves in a distinctive way. It is as though once Jews lost the desire and ability to express themselves through their relationship to black culture, they lost their ability to express themselves in a distinctive way at all in popular music.

At the start of the 21st century Jews find themselves – for all their success and ubiquity in the entertainment industries – almost culturally invisible in musical terms. This invisibility is all the more striking when compared to the vibrancy of black music. It also contrasts significantly with the Jews' significant contribution to literature, theatre, cinema and 'non-popular' musics. But there are signs that this situation may be changing. A growing number of artists are mixing traditional Jewish musics with other popular styles. In the UK for example, Oi Va Voi serve up an intoxicating brew of Klezmer and dance music. There are even Jewish rap and hip hop acts, such as Hip Hop Hoodios, that are trying – if a little uncertainly – to create a more substantial Jewish engagement with black music than has been attempted in the past. The current upsurge in interest in Jewish culture is motivated by a desire to express Jewishness in a distinctive way. Perhaps the time has come for Jews to come out from behind the scenes and emerge as musicians and performers in their own right. Perhaps in the 20th century, musical relations between Jews and blacks will become relations between equals.

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