

# The Song is Not the Same: Jews and American Popular Music

The Jewish Role in American Life

An Annual Review

Volume 8

## WHEN MOSE WITH HIS NOSE LEADS THE BAND

MARCH  
SONG

WORDS BY  
BERT FITZGIBBON  
AND  
JACK DRISLANE

MUSIC BY THEODORE  
MORSE



COMPOSERS OF  
BLUE BELL

KEEP A LITTLE COSEY CORNER  
IN YOUR HEART FOR ME JUST A LITTLE ROCKING CHAIR  
AND YOU

**F. B. Haviland**  
PUBLISHING COMPANY  
NEW ZEALAND BUILDING  
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Bruce Zuckerman, Editor  
Josh Kun, Guest Editor  
Lisa Ansell, Associate Editor

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### ***Volume 8***

Bruce Zuckerman, *Editor*

Josh Kun, *Guest Editor*

Lisa Ansell, *Associate Editor*

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Jewish Role in American Life

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## Foreword

This volume continues a practice that has proven highly successful in producing the two previous *Annual Reviews*, namely, inviting an outstanding cultural critic and scholar to guest-edit a collection of essays that focuses on his/her area of expertise. In particular, we have used these volumes to explore aspects of the Jewish role in American life that at first glance may seem all too familiar but which we have tried to illuminate from a perspective that throws such well-known topics into a different kind of relief. In this instance, the topic is once again ostensibly well-traveled ground: Jews and their relationship to American popular music. But we knew we could count on our guest editor for Volume 8, Josh Kun, Associate Professor of Communication in the Annenberg School of Communication & Journalism at the University of Southern California, to look at this topic with a different sort of attitude than we might conventionally expect.

Kun has built a career out of looking at the cultural aspects of the Jewish role in American music in an offbeat fashion, especially in his role as one of the founders of the Idelsohn Society for Musical Preservation, an organization that has led the way in finding and saving from obscurity essential and utterly fascinating musical voices of note that have a Jewish dimension. He signals his intentions for this *Annual Review* from the outset with the title he has chosen for it: “The Song is not the Same.” This title, at least for me, immediately triggers a kind of musical counter-memory that starts to play in my mind and I am time-warped back to the 60s where I imagine I can see lead singer Levi Stubbs rocking back and forth, while being backed by the other three Four Tops, as he croons the “hook” from a classic Motown oldie: “It’s the same old song, but with a different meaning since you’ve been gone.”

This song, of course, evokes the enduring memory of a lost love, triggered every time the singer recalls how a “melody keeps haunting me, reminding me how in love we used to be.” Times may have changed, lovers may have parted—thereby endowing the melody and lyrics with a different, sadly sentimental meaning—but the song is still the same: it’s just everything else that has changed. So likewise we seem to feel about Jews and their contributions to American popular music, as it arose and flourished in the twentieth century.



We recall Berlin, the Gershwins, and the other icons of Tin Pan Alley with affection, remembering the same old songs, heard in recordings and seen in films that still flicker across our TV and computer screens from a time gone by. Granted, times may have changed, as our ears have become attuned to different and ever proliferating genres of music, but somewhere back there we know we can still find an enduring body of popular melodies and lyrics that Jews have contributed to the American songbook. We know these songs; they are our songs, the same ones we've always known.

Or are they? Kun's aim as editor of this *Annual Review* is to play a contrapuntal theme against our musical expectations. You think back and believe you hear the same old song? Listen again. The song is not the same. There is a far greater complexity to those harmonies that shape our memories. When you tune your ear to take in the subtleties, you find a much more enriched and enriching texture to the Jewish role in American popular music. While one can hardly hope to encompass all aspects of this concern in a single volume, Kun has brought together here an eclectic group of essays that run the gamut of Jewish popular music but which all speak to a common theme, how much more there is to learn about a subject we thought was all so familiar—how much the song is not the same as we thought it was or think it ought to be.

One aspect of particular note emphasized herein speaks to this latter point—sometimes people want the song to be the same—especially when they are confronted by a new sound that they feel is simply too shrill. Thus Peter LaChapelle considers how none other than Henry Ford reacted to jazz and the Jazz Age, noting how the perceived threat of this “alien” music fed his anti-Semitism while fostering his desire to maintain and promote more traditional genres from the previous century through what was termed “old-time music.” This theme also is a focus of Jeff Janeczko's consideration of an avant-garde extension of klezmer music both in terms of those who wished to break out and hybridize this genre of music-making with other genres, those who celebrated this innovation and those who resisted such post-klezmer music as inimical to taste and tradition.

Other essays in this collection look at aspects of Jewish-American popular music that surprise us, in particular, Jonathan Pollack's exploration of the way Jewish/Yiddish colloquialisms found their way into scat and other forms of jazz singing done by black performers. Jody Rosen's survey of “Jewface” images on songsheets of the early twentieth century (one of which serves as the cover image for this *Annual Review*) seem almost shocking in the casual fashion they project Jewish stereotypes that could be just as easily at home in

the most virulent, Nazi anti-Jewish propaganda. Josh Kun celebrates the raw humor of such singing comediennes as Belle Barth and Pearl Williams, who in their late-night cabaret shows staked out a distinctly Jewish territory of raunch and thereby paved the way for both female and male humorists, who continue to push beyond the edges of what is conventionally called good taste. Finally two essays focus on particular personalities and the impact of their music from a Jewish perspective. Thus, David Kaufman takes a close look at the real and imagined Jewish aspects of Bob Dylan's songs while Gayle Wald reminisces on how Michael Jackson shaped an impressionable tween-girl's image of a pop-in in a distinctly Jewish manner.

Since this volume is all about music, it only makes sense that we give our readers an opportunity to hear and see aspects of this subject matter that are less easily placed in print. So, as is signaled by editorial notes in this volume, we have established a website where our readers can go to listen to relevant musical clips featured in Janeczko's survey of post-klezmer music and have also placed full color versions of the cover sheets featured in Rosen's study of Jew-face images.

As was similarly the case for last year's volume of the *Annual Review*, this volume developed out of a grant from the Casden Institute given to Josh Kun so he could explore in a more systematic manner the ways in which Jewish slang and jargon found their way into the music sung and performed by black musicians primarily during the Jazz Age. This initial research proved so rewarding that it seemed a natural extension of this project to expand the realm of inquiry so that it evolved into this wide-ranging study of Jews and American popular music that constitute this collection of essays. One of the particular pleasures of my role as Myron and Marion Director of the Casden Institute is the opportunity this has afforded me to work with a series of creative guest-editors over an extended period of time. Working with Josh Kun on Volume 8 of the *Annual Review* has proven to be no exception, and I want to take this occasion to thank him for the fine job he has done in making this volume possible.

Lisa Ansell, Associate Director of the Casden Institute has had quite a busy year—especially because she has been occupied by the bringing of her son, Gabriel Hayim Schneider, into the world. First-time mothers are supposed to be overwhelmed by all the added chores and responsibilities, but Lisa must be some kind of super-mom, since she has still managed to keep the Casden Institute on a steady course and done the essential editorial work she needed to do as Associate Editor of this volume. This has also been a difficult and demanding year for my colleague Dr. Marilyn J. Lundberg who has

nonetheless done all that needs to be done as Production Editor for this *Annual Review* without missing a dotted “i” or crossed “t.” Howard Gillman, Dean of the College of Letters, Arts & Sciences and Susan Wilcox, Associate Dean for College Advancement continue to give the Casden Institute their unreserved support and enthusiasm, so essential to our ongoing success.

Of the many supporters of the Casden Institute, Ruth Ziegler, Carmen Warschaw, Mark and Sam Tarica, and—of course—Alan Casden always take pride of place. Their attentiveness to our needs and aspirations has always played a vital role in our growth.

This is a very exciting time of transition for our home institution, the University of Southern California. The year has witnessed the appointment and inauguration of C. L. Max Nikias as President of USC and Elizabeth Garrett as Provost. They have begun their terms of office by projecting an ambitious vision for our future that makes all of us feel lucky to be here at such a momentous time of opportunity. All of us at the Casden Institute send Max and Beth our warmest congratulations and look forward with enthusiasm to their leadership of USC. As they begin to chart the course for our future, it seems, entirely appropriate on the occasion of their respective appointments, to dedicate this volume in their honor.

Bruce Zuckerman, *Myron and Marian Casden Director*

# Dreaming of Michael Jackson: Notes on Jewish Listening

*Gayle Wald*

**I**t would seem counterintuitive to title a piece on Jewish listening “Dreaming of Michael Jackson.” After all, when Jackson died in June 2009, he was remembered for many things: his remarkable career, his magnificent talent, his penchant for bodily self-invention, his role as a groundbreaking African-American musician, and the spectacle of a complex and difficult life lived in public—for many things, in other words, but *not* for his relation to Jewish listeners or to something we might deign to call “Jewish listening practices.” Even the post-mortem media gawking that focused on Jackson’s sometimes contradictory relationship to Judaism or Jewish people—his close relationship with “Rabbi to the Stars” Shmuley Boteach; the controversy surrounding the lyrics of his 1995 song “They Don’t Care about Us”; his apparent attraction to the mystical tradition of Kabbalah—did not connect the late performer to Jewish listeners, let alone listeners who might hear Michael Jackson “Jewishly.”

In my own experience, however, Michael Jackson figures prominently, not just as an idol of my youth but also as a popular musician through whom I negotiated Jewish American identity in the 1970s. For me, “Michael Jackson” (in quotes, because I am referring not merely to the performer but to his performances and his persona: in short, to a range of significations that cluster around the artist’s name) provided a canvas upon which I came subsequently to write and rewrite my sense of a Jewish self.

It goes without saying that I did not think any of this when I was a third grader listening to Jackson Five records. In fact, I didn’t think any of this at all

until Michael Jackson died, and I was prompted, like everyone else, to contemplate *my* Michael Jackson. (Clearly, the cultural imperative to think about Michael Jackson in highly personal terms says something about the ways audiences have been taught to engage with pop music stars at the level of identity.) *My* Michael, I realized, was certainly not the relatively recent Michael Jackson of *Bad* (1987), *Dangerous* (1991), or *HIStory* (1995), and it wasn't even the Michael of *Off the Wall* (1979), however much I love that album. Rather, *my* Michael was the boy in the Jackson Five with the ethereally great voice, sweetly radiant face, and diaphanous Afro. He was the teenybopper pop-idol Michael, the indisputable leader of his older brothers, the one looking out of a pin-up photo of a 1972 *Tiger Beat*, reclining, perhaps a tad self-consciously and therefore all the more charmingly, on a patch of grass in front of a rhododendron bush, wearing striped slacks and a striped button-down shirt artfully parted at the hem to provide a peek of a wide brown grommet belt—a hint of grown-up sexuality (see <http://www.nowpublic.com/culture/michael-jackson-pinup-tiger-beat-1972>).

Given Michael's outfit and hairdo, it's relatively easy to locate the *Tiger Beat* photograph in time, as belonging to the 1970s. It's much harder, however, to locate it in space. Perhaps that patch of browning grass, with the rhododendron bush behind it, was the photographer's backyard? Perhaps Michael was posing in the Jacksons' own backyard? Perhaps the patch of grass beneath him is outside Motown Studios, at the time recently relocated from Detroit to Los Angeles?

What strikes me in retrospect is that the setting in which Michael was pictured could have just as easily been *my* backyard. I was born in Northeast Philadelphia, and in 1972, when I was in second grade, my family (my father and mother, my younger sister) moved to the Philadelphia suburbs. Geographically, this meant moving five or six miles north and a bit west. Architecturally, it meant moving from a brick duplex with cement front steps to what my parents meaningfully referred to as a "stand-alone" house: a four-bedroom Colonial set on a half-acre of property in a brand new subdivision called Wheatfield West. The agrarian metaphor—perhaps a reference to the fields that were home to flocks of pheasants before the bulldozers moved in—was apt, albeit in an unintentionally funny way, since socially speaking, moving to Wheatfield West meant moving from a predominantly Jewish urban neighborhood, within easy driving distance of my small extended family, to what some in my parents' extended circle of Jewish friends considered a non-Jewish wilderness. When we moved, I went from being one of several Jewish kids in

class to being the only Jewish kid, from one who could trade her matzoh at lunchtime to one who, in the interest of diversity, had to give a presentation on the Passover story at Easter time. Occasionally at recess, the tough kids would throw pennies at me and once or twice, expressions of anti-Semitism on our street took a rather more violent and alarming turn; but these were for the most part isolated incidents, written off as the mindless pranks of bad kids.

In fact, the larger neighborhood, Ambler, Pennsylvania, was in the early and mid-1970s a multicultural hodgepodge, home, especially around Wheatfield West, to Irish and Italian Americans, whose large Catholic families could comfortably spread out in new housing developments. Although “space” meant different things to us, all of our families ostensibly shared the American dream of claiming it. So the girls, with whom I would have studied the 1972 Michael pin-up from *Tiger Beat* (I don’t recall any boys being so interested), were white girls—newly suburban, middle-class white *ethnic* girls. Together and alone, we not only listened and danced to the Jackson Five, but debated which one was cutest and which one we would marry when we grew up. In my memory, matrimonial fantasy was a common fan-practice, a creative way that girls like us, as avid consumers of pop music and pop spectacle, worked out our incipient desires (always heterosexual, always consummated in marriage) even as we worked out status and hierarchy within our own group (the alpha-girls got their first-choice boys; the others took the boys that were left). Of the brothers in the Jackson Five, Michael was hands-down our favorite; Tito, Jermaine, and the others were not as cute, and in any case were too old to fulfill our fantasies. It was Michael, the youngest brother, who possessed, at least in his star persona, the right combination of purity and sexuality, actual and symbolic youth. He was funky and innocent, sure but shy, inexperienced and yet able to sing with authentic emotion about unrequited love. We hadn’t yet gone through breakups, let alone “gone out” with boys, but Michael helped us imagine and rehearse these experiences. Such rehearsals were, in turn, fully in line with a conventional trajectory of middle-class Jewish girlhood, in which it was assumed we would date, and then marry, Jewish men before going on to produce Jewish families and reproduce “the Jewish people.”

In short, we consumed Jackson Five and Michael Jackson music in ways that our parents and capitalism alike deemed both acceptable and appropriate: by reading fanzines, listening to records, and animatedly discussing our likes and dislikes. Our suburban bedrooms, carpeted sanctuaries, seemed to have been designed expressly for such privatized, domesticated expressions of desire. Dreaming about Michael Jackson, we acted according to the terms

of a familiar gendered vocabulary of preadolescent heterosexual eroticism (crushes, dreams of marriage, etc.). Ostensibly, nothing we were doing in those bedrooms conflicted with the expectations governing nice Jewish girls.

Yet in listening to Michael Jackson, we also projected ourselves into futures that our parents would not have recognized and of which they would have almost certainly disapproved. Even as our consumption *practices* conformed to expectation, that is to say, our listening and dreaming abetted points of contact with, and crossover into, forbidden territory. In particular the fantasy of marrying Michael Jackson, which sometimes took the form of imagining that *Michael* would choose one of *us* (from among all the other girls!), took shape in a world in which such sexual and marital unions—had they been real—would have been social anathema. Whispered rumors of parents who sat *shiva* for sons and daughters who married non-Jews, in flagrant acts of refusal to conform to prescribed narratives of Jewish adulthood, were also part of our domestic soundscape in those years. With grandparents living among us who had survived pogroms and the Holocaust, and whose spoken English still bore the sonic imprint of these places of Jewish persecution and genocide, and with the melody and lyrics of “Hatikvah” sounding in our collective Jewish American unconscious, “intermarriage” (the word itself was vaguely obscene, like “intercourse”) loomed as a profound offense, not merely to the family but to the community and to history—indeed, to the lost Six Million.

Michael Jackson and his brothers represented a racialized version of such transgression within this economy of exogamy-as-violent-betrayal; they were Black before they were Gentiles, *schwartzes* before they were *goyim*. (I don’t think we knew that the Jacksons were Seventh-Day Adventists, and in any case the distinctions among non-Catholic Christians were at best hazy to us.) Our dreams about Michael were thus racially integrated even as we were part of the upwardly mobile demographic of those who left Philadelphia after 1968, thereby helping to create the predominantly brown and black “inner city.” Symbolically, these dreams reflected our parents’ support of Civil Rights even as they ventured decidedly beyond the limits of their liberalism.

Another boy-band features in my memory of these years, and that is, of course, the Osmonds. The brothers from Ogden, Utah, with their toothy smiles and shaggy dos, had a massive hit in January 1971 with “One Bad Apple,” a song that explicitly used the resources of the famous Muscle Shoals Sound Studio Rhythm Section to make Osmonds sound a little blacker and a little funkier—in effect, a lot more like the Jackson Five. At the time, it was not uncommon for listeners to hear “One Bad Apple” on the radio and think it was a

Jackson Five song, but of course such mistakes were precisely the point. Unlike the Jacksons, who like the rest of the Motown acts of the era walked a narrow tightrope when it came to the embodiment of pop sensibilities, with the genre's connotations of innocent and healthy sexuality, the Osmonds laid relatively easy claim to the monikers "wholesome" and "all-American." Indeed, by means of what George Lipsitz has called "the possessive investment in whiteness," the boys from Utah, unlike the boys from Gary, were able to appropriate the sonic signatures of "black" music without relinquishing their claim upon racial normativity (Lipsitz).

As a girl, I would not have described the difference between these boy-bands in such terms, and yet I listened to the Osmonds in the context of my own social (dis)location. "One Bad Apple" was undeniably a great pop single, but the Osmonds did not appeal to me with the same power of the Jackson Five. In and of itself, there is nothing remarkable about this; I was certainly not alone in judging the brothers from Ogden, Utah as inferior in their singing and dancing to the brothers from Gary, Indiana. But their Mormonism—an important part of their sexually modulated public image—gave my ambivalent regard for them an additional dimension that concerned even as it interpolated me as a *Jewish* girl. That is, the Osmonds' self-representation as Mormons was for me slightly threatening (in my naïveté I didn't imagine that Mormons liked Jews), and their squeaky cleanness struck me as, well, a bit too *Aryan*. They were, in a phrase, *too white* for me as a Jewish girl, even as their whiteness was precisely how they communicated their availability for my pre-adolescent pop fantasies.

Although I can only gesture toward it in these few pages, there is an immensely complicated story to be told here—about Jewish-American assimilationist desires, Jewish-American articulations of racial discourse in the United States, gendered narratives of Jewish-American success, and racialized expressions of gendered desire. The story of *my* Michael Jackson is significant, in other words, not for what it says about *me*, but for what it might tell us about the relation of popular music to the negotiation of gendered Jewish middle-class identities in the 1970s. In closing, then, I want to use it to enumerate four principles for the future study of Jewish listening.

First, my story about dreaming of Michael Jackson from a carpeted bedroom in Wheatfield West circa 1972 implies that *negotiations of Jewishness, and hence theorizations of Jewish listening as a cultural practice through which Jewish identities are calibrated and recalibrated, may be independent of any consideration of Jewish performers or Jewish music.* Although I grew up hearing music



I identified as Jewish—from the choir in my large and prosperous Reform congregation to the Israeli and Hebrew folk songs I encountered in Jewish youth groups and summer camp to the Neil Diamond records that rendered my aunt weak-kneed or to the Alan Sherman comedy LPs that made my father double over with laughter—this story about Michael Jackson is not a story about the ostensible discovery or affirmation of a Jewish self in Jewish sounds, or sounds that are marked or marketed as Jewish. It may well be that sonically speaking, Jewish identities in the post-World War II era of Jewish-American economic advancement and cultural assimilation are primarily negotiated outside the realm of Jewish music per se. This does not make the listeners or the listening practices any less Jewish, but it does mean that we need to be attuned to possibilities of Jewish listening and Jewish sonic self-fashioning staged in ostensibly non-Jewish contexts.

Indeed—and this is the second possibility—*sonic negotiations of Jewish-American identity are necessarily shaped by discourses of Jewish racialization and Jewish otherness in the United States*. The example of Michael Jackson and the Jackson Five introduces the idea that as late twentieth-century American Jews left urban Jewish enclaves such as Philadelphia for the suburbs (sometimes but not always coded as the gentile suburbs), sonic negotiations of Jewish identity were increasingly staged through musical performers or performances that could somehow embody lost urban spaces and urban identities. Perhaps, that is to say, listening to Michael Jackson was for American girls of my age and circumstance a means of negotiating—once again, through the figure of blackness—our explicitly articulated status as ethnic others, once we moved out of the city's Jewish enclaves, which were themselves undergoing rapid transformation.

This is not to say that such fantasies, which exemplify the potential of desire to flout social expectations and norms, necessarily served a transgressive function. *In other words, even if Jews remain outsiders to discourses of normative race, gender, and nationality, there is nothing inherently destabilizing to the social order in listening self-consciously through Jewish ears*. For some of us, dreaming of Michael Jackson was a conventional exercise, a means of imaginatively letting off “steam” to enable an ultimate embrace of social norms. For others, especially those with an incipient desire to break out from social norms, such culturally sanctioned, “appropriately” gendered, heterosexual fan-practices were a means of challenging the racial/ethnic boundaries that we were supposed to occupy. That is, listening and fandom (done mostly in the manner of “good girls”) enabled some of us to tolerate the fixed

social, cultural, and geographic spaces, within which we were discovering and creating ourselves. In this sense, dreaming of Michael was not only fun, but it was vital to our survival.

This is also the message of the 1987 film *Dirty Dancing*, in which the young, upper-middle-class Jewish female protagonist explores and expresses her desire to distance herself from Jewishness-as-assimilation-and-gendered-containment through an erotic link to a man who represents ethnic and class difference. In a context in which the protagonist has limited outlets for such expression, music and dance are represented as conduits for the creation of explicitly Jewish alternatives to what in her world is normative Jewishness. The film strongly suggests that her boundary-crossing desires, while ambiguously “resolved” within the context of the film, will in the future translate into explicit political investments in social justice. Through music and dance, a Jewish leftist heroine is born.

The example of *Dirty Dancing* brings me to my last point, which is that *Jewish listening is always gendered, and that inquiry into modes of listening “Jewishly” may provide us with key insights into the identity-formation of (Jewish) girls and women*, those subjects who have traditionally been marginalized in studies of (Jewish) popular music. As important as it is for us to study Jewish performers and performance practices, it may only be by expanding our field of inquiry to include Jewish *listening* and *listening practices* that we can fully come to grips with the experiences of Jewish girls and women, who traditionally have had fewer opportunities, and less enticement, to take up positions of prominence within popular music.

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