From Shtetl to Stardom

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Jews’ outsized contribution to American entertainment precedes their rise to prominence in the Hollywood movie studios. Spurred by their mass migration from Eastern Europe and Russia in the late 1800s, just as mass culture was emerging, immigrant and second-generation Jewish business owners, producers, and artists had already established themselves at the forefront of live theater and popular music by the time motion pictures caught on in the first decade of the twentieth century. Not until the paradigm shift in film production from the East Coast to Los Angeles in the 1910s, however, and cinema’s ascendance from lowbrow fare to cultural phenomenon and big business, did Jewish “control” of Hollywood become an open secret.

Once the “Jewish question” was broached, the movie moguls (the term “moguls” itself of antisemitic origin) reacted defensively, diverting attention from their newly mounted catbird seat while also making concessions to it. The avoidance included altering stereotypical Jewish stars’ names and appearances and eschewing, especially with the spike of American antisemitism in the 1930s, Jewish characters and themes; the concessions included appointing non-Jews to head in-house public relations and content-policing agencies. The insecurity and defensiveness extended to organized Jewry, which from painful past experience, reasoned that flaunting Hollywood’s Jewishness, behind or on the screen, much less griping about antisemitic attitudes towards the industry or Jews in general, would only make matters worse. Even with their overall increased entry into the US mainstream after World War II and the lessons of the Holocaust, Jews inside and outside Hollywood continued to downplay Jewish industry influence, which now extended to the new medium of television as well.
In the wake of the identity politics movements of the 1960s and ’70s, which Jews joined with renewed vigor after Israel’s victory in the 1967 Six-Day War, Jewish intellectuals began to tip-toe toward open acknowledgment of their co-religionists’ seminal place in popular culture. A few journal articles in the mid-1970s, by Howard Suber on Jewish characters in television, and by Tom Tugend on the early Hollywood moguls, were the first short-form pieces to crack the code of silence. They were followed a decade later by the first full-length books on the subject: Sarah Blacher Cohen’s anthology From Hester Street to Hollywood: The Jewish-American Stage and Screen (1983), Patricia Erens’ The Jew in American Cinema (1984), and Lester D. Friedman’s The Jew in American Film (1987). All these early “exposés,” however (except for Tugend’s four-page article), focused on Jewish representation on screen, leaving fuzzy the elephant in the room: the astonishing number of Jews (given their mere two percent of the US population) behind the scenes, creatively and most crucially, in ownership and executive positions. With the publication in 1989 of Neal Gabler’s An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood, the genie was finally out of the bottle—a refreshing end to the taboo for many Jews, renewed cause for alarm for others.

After all, here was a Jew unabashedly admitting, and documenting, what the anti-Semites had claimed all along. Moreover, in ascribing “imperial” designs to Hollywood’s Founding Fathers and crediting them with peddling an American Dream of their own concoction, Gabler seemed to be playing into the Jew-haters’ conspiracy-mongering hands. What he was actually doing, of course, was beating the bigots at their own game. Following the lead of identity political groups that had begun strategically turning pejorative labels into badges of honor—gay, black, even eventually Heeb—Gabler was owning, and proudly proclaiming, the profound imprint Jews, via Hollywood, had made on American society.

Dissension in Jewish ranks remained, however. In 1993, David Desser and Lester Friedman followed Gabler’s opus with an exploration of contemporary American Jewish directors. In a survey of over 170 presumed Jewish filmmakers (a remarkable number in itself), several of those contacted deemed the project “divisive because it separated Jews from the rest of American society.” One accused the authors of providing “great ammunition for anti-Semites,” and a particularly annoyed respondent “expressed hope that he would not have to look forward to studies of American-Jewish physicists, harpists, pizza-makers, bookies, and pederasts” (34, 35).

The grousing of Hollywood insiders notwithstanding, the tide had clearly turned in Gabler’s favor in the public discourse and cultural practice. Steven
Carr picked up where *An Empire of Their Own* left off in his 1994 doctoral dissertation (published in book form in 2001): *The Hollywood Question: America and the Belief in Jewish Control of Motion Pictures before 1941*. Jewish Forward editor J. J. Goldberg, in *Jewish Power: Inside the American Jewish Establishment* (1996), upped the ante by confronting the corollary question of Jewish influence in US society as a whole. By the new millennium, Jews were “coming out” all over the place, and with barely a fuss. New waves of Jewish-inflected film, literature, and art were heralded; a major klezmer revival was underway; “bagels had become as commonplace as pizza, kabbalah as cool as crystals”; and over forty episodic TV programs with explicitly identified Jewish main characters hit the airwaves in the 1990s (compared to less than ten in the previous forty years), including the most popular and defining series of the decade, *Seinfeld* (1989–98) (Brook, *You Should See Yourself* 1).

Despite or because of the “New Jew” phenomenon, all was still not well in the New Hollywood (or New Babylon, depending on your viewpoint). With the subsidence of the old “Hollywood question,” a new one, now posed by Jews themselves, arose. The double-edged sword of assimilation, exacerbated by intermarriage, had long troubled traditionally minded Jews. As rapidly rising national intermarriage rates approached the fifty percent “threshold of no return” in 2000, according to the National Jewish Population Survey, some hard-liners went so far as to deem the ubiquitous depiction of interfaith romance and marriage in US films and TV shows as not only a reflection of, but contributor to, a “Silent Holocaust” (Brook, *Something Ain’t Kosher Here* 126).³

For Jews of all stripes, while it was certainly welcome to “see yourself” more frequently and multi-dimensionally portrayed on screens large and small, the “tenuous, largely inferred, and increasingly ‘virtual’ nature of Jewish” representation also could be viewed as both reflecting and reinforcing a similar trend in American society (Brook, *Something Ain’t Kosher Here* 1). With little sign of a reversal of the trend as the 2000s progressed, the dilemma became: now that Jews had been fully absorbed into the American mainstream, now that a Jewish presidential candidate had less to worry about than a Mormon, “now that we’re like everybody else,” as Jonathan and Judith Pearl asked already in 1999, “who are we?” (Pearl and Pearl 231).

This neo-Hollywood question, among others, is what *From Shtetl to Stardom* explores. And while the exploration is not unique—as the various Works Cited sections attest—the book’s methodology arguably is. Rather than take a primarily historical, theoretical, biographical, or insider approach, as
have most other studies of Jews and entertainment, ours combines these differing approaches in overlapping and innovative ways.

The historical torch is carried by two essays: Vincent Brook’s “Still an Empire of Their Own: How Jews Remain atop a Reinvented Hollywood,” and Lawrence Baron and Joel Rosenberg’s “The Ben Urwand Controversy: Exploring the Hollywood-Hitler relationship.” Brook’s piece, as the title’s nod to Gabler’s ur-text indicates, examines the historical legacy and contemporary nature of power relations in Hollywood. Taking into account radical transformations in the studio system, the burgeoning influence of talent agencies, and the recent corporate ascendancy of a handful of multi-media giants, the essay frames its discussion around recurring external charges and insider jokes about the fact and fallacy of Jewish industry control.

The Baron/Rosenberg chapter intersects with history on multiple levels. The two essays reproduce, in manuscript form, the authors’ oral panel presentations at the Western Jewish Studies Conference in Tucson, Arizona, in spring 2014. The panel was structured as a debate on a highly controversial book by Ben Urwand, published the year before, which took a stridently revisionist view of the Hollywood moguls’ relations with Nazi Germany. Another, more sober study of the subject by Thomas Doherty, fortuitously published a few months before Urwand’s, offered a lively foil for the controversy, and the panel discussion. A coda by Brook, on information uncovered by scholars Laura Rosenzweig and Steven Ross subsequent to Urwand’s and Doherty’s publications, adds a twist both to the past events and to the brouhaha ignited by Urwand’s book.

Four essays offer case studies of noted Jewish performers, films, and TV shows. Taking the most theoretical approach of the book’s essays, Joshua Louis Moss’s “‘The Woman Thing and the Jew Thing’: Transgression, Transcomedy, and Subversive Jewishness in Transparent” applies diaspora theory derived from Franz Fanon and Hamid Naficy and what Moss terms “transcomedy” to probe how Jewishness functions in Jill Soloway’s groundbreaking dramedy on a father’s late-life coming out as a transgender woman to his three adult children. Soloway herself has provided support for Moss’s approach by having stressed the centrality of Jewishness to the show and emphasizing the critical importance of the Jewish diaspora to the show’s explorations of gender fluidity.

Shaina Hammerman’s “Dirty Jews: Amy Schumer and Other Vulgar Jewesses” highlights Amy Schumer, Lena Dunham, Sarah Silverman and other current Jewish female comedians to argue “that performing Jewishness in contemporary America requires a kind of transgendering.” Viewed in the
context of an earlier cohort of so-called “unkosher comediennes” (Sophie Tucker, Belle Barthes, Totie Fields, Joan Rivers, and Bette Midler, among others), the postfeminist Jewish comics, Hammerman argues, continue to struggle with “a sexist system that compares them only to other women and continues to assert that women cannot possibly be as funny as men (or in the same way).”

Jeffrey Shandler’s “‘If Jewish People Wrote All the Songs’: The Anti-Folklore of Allan Sherman” similarly blends history and theory in resurrecting and re-examining the work of one-time television writer Allan Sherman, a song-writer and recording artist in the 1960s, highly popular for a series of folk-song parodies, most famously “Hello Muddah, Hello Faddah.” Shandler posits that beyond satirizing hit folk songs of the day and by association the folk song craze writ large, Sherman’s spoofs and performance mode (his live-recorded albums benefit from intimate audience response and parody other singers’ audience interactions as well as their songs) “are revealing artifacts of middle-class American Jews at the time” while also raising “provocative questions about what might constitute ‘original’ American Jewish folkways.”

Howard Rodman’s “Eastern European Fatalism in Minnesota: The Mournful Destinies of A Serious Man” reviews the Coen brothers’ most autobiographical and Jewish 2009 film as a partial corrective to what Rodman calls Jews’ overall relegation to a “sub-staple” in American cinema. Exceptions duly noted, Rodman decries the generally tenuous or stereotypical nature of Jewish media representation. He applauds A Serious Man for purveying a multi-dimensional Jewishness and “a Judaism older, less kind, . . . and far more compelling” than has been the rule among Jewish writers and directors, whose characters, when they’re recognizably Jewish at all, tend to vacillate between “the secular dyad of schlubby guy/greedy gal.”

The book’s final portion takes a more personal tack, offering three “hands-on,” insider angles on Jews and Hollywood. David Isaacs’ “Comedy and Corned Beef: The Genesis of the Sitcom Writing Room” is part memoir in its guided tour down the memory lane of Isaacs’ forty years as one of the “Shtetl Jews” who pioneered television comedy. Beyond his blow-by-blow description of the wild and zany and, yes, often un-PC tenor of the Sitcom Room—“Civility and political correctness are checked out at the door”—he also offers pearls of comedic wisdom about today’s more diverse (read: less exclusively Jewish) makeup of comedy writers who continue to foster the “irreverence and a touch of anarchy” of the best comedy writing.

Ross Melnick’s interview with Laemmle Theatre owners Bob and Greg Laemmle, “The Faemmle Business: Laemmle Theatres, Los Angeles, and the
Movie-Going Experience,” places the current owners of one of LA’s last remaining art house/indie theater complexes in the context of their theaters’ founding father, Max Laemmle, and his partner-brother Kurt. German Jewish immigrants lured to the US by their cousin, legendary Universal Studios’ founder Carl Laemmle, Max and Kurt started the business in the 1930s and pioneered the city’s art house scene in the 1950s. Bob and Greg have carried on the Laemmle legacy, maintaining the theaters’ family-run business structure and dedication to foreign and independent cinema.

Michael Renov’s dialogue with Matthew Weiner, “Reinventing the 1960s: The Jews of Mad Men,” explores the ways in which Weiner’s award-winning television series recreated the style, psyche, and ethos of the 1960s while more subtly framing the possibilities and limitations of Jews within the hierarchical world of the New York ad agency. Given the spotlight on the series’ high-flying, ever-so-gentile central characters, most notably Don Draper, Weiner’s claims for the significance of the Jewish outsider—notably Rachel Menken, the attractive female client, but also the psychologist consultant, the insult comic, and the second generation Holocaust survivor copywriter—may surprise. Mad Men demonstrates that television writing, like its more pedigreed literary forebears, is capable of unfolding sagas, developing complex characters, and narrating nuanced histories that reward second viewings—viewings from which a (Jewish) subtext may emerge as central.

The eclectic mix of topics and approaches found in From Shtetl to Stardom: Jews and Hollywood more than upholds the old saw, “Two Jews, three opinions.” By blazing new trails and opening up avenues of further exploration, the book also offers a uniquely multifaceted, multi-mediated, and up-to-the-minute account of the remarkable role Jews have played, over the centuries and ongoing, in American popular culture.
Notes

1. Presbyterian deacon and Postmaster General Will Hays was picked in 1922 to head the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), now the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA); and a Catholic insider, Joe Breen, was chosen in 1934 to direct the Production Code Administration (PCA), an arm of the MPPDA. The PCA, disbanded in 1966 and replaced in 1968 by the Classification and Ratings Administration (CARA), was never headed by a Jew. The MPAA would not see a Jew at the top until Congressman Dan Glickman replaced Jack Valenti in 2004, though Glickman’s replacement in 2011 was another non-Jew, former senator Christopher Dodd.

2. Desser and Friedman’s sole reliance on Jewish-sounding last names in their survey’s selection process naturally led to a mismatch in a few of the one hundred or so directors who responded out of the 170-plus who were contacted (34). The overall number was likely balanced, however, by Jewish filmmakers with non-Jewish-sounding surnames who were left out of the selection process.

3. By 2013, according to the Pew Research Center, the Jewish intermarriage rate of fifty-eight percent had left the “no return” threshold far behind.
Works Cited


