Doing Business in America
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CHAPTER 5

The Roots of Jewish Concentration in the American Popular Music Business, 1890–1945

by Jonathan Karp

That Jews have played a conspicuous role in the creation of American popular music will come as no surprise. The Jewish tunesmiths of Tin Pan Alley in the 1910s, of Broadway popular song in succeeding decades, and even of many of the hits of the early rock ‘n’ roll era—as epitomized by the “Brill Building” phenomenon—have been widely heralded (Melnick; Most; Emerson; Sidran). To a lesser extent, too, the Jewish role in the business side of American popular music has been explored, particularly in the post-World War II era. This chapter, however, aims to map the key routes through which Jews came to music business prominence in an earlier period—essentially the first half of the twentieth century—and argues that tracing these “roots” is essential to understanding how Jews would later help organize the American popular music industry as something approaching an ethnic business niche.

The American popular music business evolved in the interstices of the entertainment, arts and media industries and cannot be adequately understood separately from them. Music was performed on the stage, in radio studios, and on the screen. Sheet music publishing companies were scooped up during the 1920s by major Hollywood movie studios. Musicians were booked in all these venues and media by booking agents, while record companies had strong ties to radio stations, movie production companies and even television stations.
Thus, coherently assessing the role of Jews in music simultaneously requires the delicate tightrope act of both situating the music business in and abstracting it from this wider context.

Equally challenging is the effort to highlight the role of Jews in a field where they represented at best a highly disproportionate ethnic element—only sometimes the dominant one—that constantly interacted with non-Jews without a consistently clear ethnic division of labor. One might even question the value of such an undertaking. Was the music business culturally “Jewish”? Was there a singular or clear Jewish agenda at work? And finally, what if anything constituted the Jewishness of its participants beyond the mere fact of ethnic origins? These questions are themselves understandably problematic and threaten to provide fodder for hoary anti-Semitic tropes. Nevertheless, if we wish to understand some of the important ways in which Jews operated within the world of American business and economy we need to address and refine questions like these. Patterns of group behavior require explanation, perhaps especially in domains where business and culture are so tightly intertwined.

The goal of this essay is to trace the broad historical contours of Jewish involvement in the business side of American popular music from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, seeking to highlight certain demographic and functional patterns that characterized much of this activity even as it took disparate forms. While the history of Jews in the popular music industry is by no means synonymous with that of the industries themselves, looking at Jews’ roles provides valuable insight into how entertainment capitalism offered a powerful vehicle for ethnic subgroups to Americanize and at the same time put their particular stamp on the character of American business and culture. Other ethnic groups, it is true, made signal contributions to American entertainment, above all African Americans. As popular entertainment pioneers, the Irish were perhaps preeminent in the second half of the nineteenth century, from the blackface minstrel Dan Rice to the vaudeville giant George M. Cohan. German immigrants too were prominent, particularly in the early evolution of popular music publishing. But what distinguished the Jews from these and others was their combined contribution to both the performance and business wings of popular entertainment, including music. It is precisely this duality—and the fruitful interplay between the two—which makes the Jewish role stand out.

The roots of Jewish participation in the popular music industry lie in the nineteenth-century settlement patterns of European Jewish immigrants. While Jews are often viewed stereotypically as a quintessential urban population,
many of the Jews who migrated to the United States between 1830 and 1880 settled in medium-sized and small towns across the Midwest, in California, and to a limited extent in the American South. These “small-town Jews” typically created retail businesses and established commercial networks that would eventually prove crucial to Jewish involvement in the entertainment industries (Morawska; Weissbach). Jewish mass settlement in New York City and other major centers (Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and San Francisco, especially) in the last two decades of the nineteenth and the first two of the twentieth centuries set up a dynamic between hubs and hinterlands that would prove vital to Jewish penetration into popular entertainment businesses, one that still remains little understood. Jewish general stores and dry goods shops, evolving out of earlier peddling activity, placed Jewish small businessmen in a position to shift readily into theater ownership, sheet music publishing, and later the sale and distribution of musical recordings (records). More impressionistically, the “insider-outsider” status of American Jews, their familiarity with local cultures while remaining self-consciously distinct—and their commercial dependency on reading and anticipating local consumer tastes—must have served them well when it came to marketing entertainment. Similarly, Jewish involvement in brokering and adapting black musical styles gave them a leg up in an industry which became increasingly if intermittently linked to the merchandizing of African American genres over the course of the twentieth century (J. P. Melnick; Karp, “Of Maestros and Minstrels”; idem., “Blacks, Jews”; idem., “Brokering a Rock ‘n’ Roll International”).

But the story of Jewish entrance into American popular music really begins with the field of theater ownership and management. Jews appear increasingly prominent as local theater managers in the medium-sized cities of upstate New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio and regions further west by the 1870s and 1880s. By the turn of the century we find Jews remarkably conspicuous in the two principal types of evolving American theatrical entertainment: vaudeville and “legitimate” theater. Vaudeville was the culmination of an extended process in the development of nineteenth-century American entertainment genres. It was the inheritor of such genres as the minstrel show, the concert saloon, the circus museum (à la P. T. Barnum), the burlesque show, and variety, which the producers of vaudeville aspired to regiment and make respectable for more middle-class audiences, including women, and thereby convert into a mass entertainment commodity. At the same time, a realignment was taking place in the structure of the field of legitimate theater, as the “stock company”
(a group of actors contracted to perform a repertoire of plays over the course of a season at a single theater), which had dominated American theater during the first half of the century, gave way by the 1870s to the “combination system,” a traveling troupe, usually put together in New York or San Francisco, that toured a region of the country performing a single play. Both developments came about as part of a rationalization of entertainment. They lent themselves to the consolidation and centralization of bookings and therefore to the creation of not just regional (and eventually national) theatrical circuits but of chains of theaters under the control of single owners or partnerships.³

This rationalization occurred first in the domain of “legitimate” (as opposed to vaudeville or variety) theater, under the auspices of a small group of theater owners known as the American Theatrical Syndicate. Of the six partners—Abraham Erlanger, Marc Klaw, Charles Frohman, Al Hayman, Samuel Nixon and Fred Zimmerman—four were Jews (Erlanger, Frohman, Hayman, and Nixon). Erlanger, who became the Syndicate’s dominant figure, represented a type that we will meet repeatedly in this account, the mogul drawn into the entertainment field largely by chance, or rather as a serendipitous consequence of entrepreneurial enterprise rather than through a clear affinity for the arts. Born in 1860, Abraham Lincoln Erlanger was the son of German-speaking Jewish immigrants who first settled in Albany (where Abraham was born) but soon moved to Cleveland. He received little in the way of education, as a youth working at various jobs, including delivering coal and serving as an errand boy in a dry goods shop, before finding employment in the cloak room and opera glass stand at the Cleveland Academy of Music. Impressing employers with his intelligence and industry, he was later kept on as business manager when the Academy was acquired by the Republican politician Mark Hanna. As his New York Times obituary describes, “Backed by Hanna’s millions, young Erlanger inaugurated a new era in Cleveland theatrical affairs. Within less than a month Hanna placed him in absolute control” (“A. L. Erlanger Dies after Long Illness”).

In fact, Erlanger’s rise was not so sudden; it was preceded by years as an “advance man,” drumming up local interest in towns throughout the Midwest by publicizing the arrival of a theater company a week or two in advance of the show, duties which Erlanger performed with ingenuity and meticulous attention to detail. It was in this capacity that he met a counterpart, the Kentuckian Marc Klaw, who had extensive legal knowledge and would become his most important partner. Their time on the road managing tours made them realize that the most urgent need was for a regularization of the booking process. For
example, the same traveling troupe performing a given play might be booked into two venues on the same date; or actors might find themselves stranded on the road with no means home. Company tours were inadequately planned, transportation was haphazard, and local theater managers were forced to travel to New York during each summer at considerable expense to arrange bookings for their venues. In 1894 Klaw and Erlanger purchased Taylor’s Theatrical Agency in New York and searched for their competitive advantage by addressing these and similar problems. As their reputation spread, they were approached by Al Hayman, owner of a chain of theaters in the Midwest and West, with the proposal to establish a national booking syndicate that would unite various regional chains under a single booking policy. Born Raphael Hayman in Wheeling, West Virginia, as a young man he had come under the influence of Michael B. Leavitt, a pioneering American theater impresario based in San Francisco and New York who mentored many Jews into the theatrical business during the late nineteenth century, not least of all David Belasco and Leavitt’s distant relative and fellow Silesian immigrant William Morris (born Zelman Moses). Indeed, Leavitt claimed to have originated the concept of the national booking system which came to Klaw and Erlanger via his disciple Hayman. Of the other future Syndicate members, Nixon and Zimmerman had formed their partnership in Philadelphia in the 1860s. Born in Fort Wayne, Indiana in 1848 as Samuel Nidlinger, Nixon had Americanized his name when he moved from his father’s clothing business into theater management, while Zimmerman had been an advance man like Klaw and Erlanger. In typical pattern the pair shifted between leasing or (where possible) buying theaters and booking tours. Of the founders of the Syndicate only Charles Frohman (b. 1856 in Sandusky, Ohio) had been principally a theatrical producer rather than a booker or advance man, although he also moved into theater ownership.

In fact, the key to the syndicate’s success was not theater chain ownership but rather control of the booking function within the “combination” chain. The model the Syndicate established, which would be followed again and again in the history of the American popular entertainment industry, was to try to create monopoly control over acts, productions, and talent. Owning numbers of theaters vastly simplified this process but wasn’t its essence. If a local theater manager could only import a given play or act by utilizing the services of the Syndicate and paying the required fees, then the organization effectively exerted control. And, to ensure this outcome, ruthless tactics were employed where necessary: the Syndicate, for instance, did not hesitate to blacklist managers and performers who bucked their system, even building—
or sometimes merely threatening to build—a new theater in a given locale, thus pressuring an uncooperative owner or manager to accept its terms or risk going out of business.

The emergence of the Syndicate reflects the growing salience of Jews in the entertainment business and compounded it. This is not to say that the Syndicate’s Jewish majority promoted a policy of ethnic group advancement; the only agenda its members pursued was one of monopolistic domination and enrichment. Yet the efforts of the Syndicate inspired competition and compounded Jewish prominence in the entertainment business, as exemplified by Syracuse’s Shubert brothers. The Shuberts had been part of the Syndicate, even as they plotted to subvert it. In doing so they had the backing of other Jewish theater magnates: Marcus Heiman in upstate New York, Julius Cahn and Abram Spitz in New England, and Moses Reis in Pennsylvania-Ohio. All started off under the Syndicate’s umbrella and—through varying means—came to challenge it (Variety; New York Times, 9 April 1910; on Reis, see Leeson 387, 404; New York Times, 25 Oct. 1937).

In the realm of vaudeville, a similar situation emerged. It is tempting to suggest that Jews were typically aligned with the innovators or the new guard challenging the old. The reality is that Jews were heavily represented among both new and old. The Syndicate’s model was self-consciously followed in vaudeville by two of the most powerful monopolists in the history of American popular entertainment: Benjamin Franklin Keith and Edward Franklin Albee, both New Englanders, one Catholic and the other Protestant, but each emerging out of the circus world shaped by P. T. Barnum and his successors. Keith and Albee weren’t really partners—Albee was Keith’s employee—but they constituted a team of likeminded business magnates who strived with single-minded determination to control all of the vaudeville circuits east of the Mississippi and beyond. Starting with Keith’s New York Dime Museum on Boston’s Washington Street in 1883, Keith had become the dominant force in all of American vaudeville by 1905 at the latest. Two years later he and Albee established the United Booking Offices of America (UBO), which created package—that is entire multi-part vaudeville—shows that, emanating from Keith and Albee’s New York command and control center, moved through various regions of the country like blood through the body’s arteries. Any theater that refused their terms (including the full set of acts, the booking fees and commissions) would be blacklisted. The pair relentlessly set out to ruin—or at least subordinate—all rivals, that is, independent booking agencies like William Morris (Wertheim). The “Vaudeville Wars” often seemed to pit
these puritan Midases against the Jewish upstarts who repeatedly sought to topple them: Morris, the Shuberts, Marcus Loew, Variety magazine’s founder and editor Sime Silverman—even Abraham Erlanger himself. But the reality is that the Keith-Albee empire included many prominent Jews; not just former subordinates like Julius Cahn but also their own junior partners who created a parallel monopoly booking system west of the Mississippi.

The Orpheum circuit was controlled by the team of Morris Meyerfeld, a Westphalia-born Jewish liquor distributor who bailed out and inherited a failing San Francisco theater chain, and Martin Beck, whose family had emigrated from Slovakia and settled in Chicago where Meyerfeld employed him to run the Orpheum’s booking office in 1898. Beck later married Meyerfeld’s niece, Louise Heims. The Orpheum circuit extended from California through the western states, even penetrating the American South, though eventually headquartered in Chicago. While Keith and Albee had sometimes butted heads with the Orpheum, by 1907 the two pairs joined forces to create the Combine, a national syndicate every bit as extensive and powerful as the one Erlanger and Hayman had created in legitimate theater a decade earlier. In fact, Keith’s fortress proved far more impregnable than Erlanger’s, enduring well past Keith’s death in 1914 and nearly to the end of Albee’s life in 1930. Whereas the Shuberts overtook the syndicate by the onset of World War I, Keith and Albee outlived the partnership of Meyerfeld and Beck, whose Western Vaudeville Managers Association (WVMA) was eventually taken over by Marcus Heiman, later a lieutenant in the vast Shubert empire (Vaudeville News). 

While there was frequent overlap between the legitimate and vaudeville domains, as seen in the case of Heiman, the popular entertainment landscape became further complicated by the advent of new media, motion pictures and radio. From the earliest days of the Combine film shorts had been employed as filler or novelty items between live acts. But as motion pictures moved beyond the nickelodeon storefronts, they dictated the creation of new venues for their display—often converted vaudeville houses and theaters. Even before the advent of talkies—in fact, especially before their emergence—silent picture houses needed live music, both as entertainment prior to the projection and as the soundtrack to it. Movie theater chains established by Jewish entrepreneurs like William Fox and Marcus Loew in New York and Los Angeles, Jacob Fabian in New Jersey, and Abraham Joseph Balaban in Chicago thereby became venues for the performance of live music. But whereas Albee saw movies merely as a component of vaudeville, exhibitors like Fox, Loew and Balaban recognized them as the main event. Thus, by the 1920s, with vaudeville on the wane, the Shuberts
firmly in control of legitimate theater, and movie houses springing up across the nation, Jewish businessmen were now exercising increasing preeminence in a wide range of entertainment venues.

With the loosening of the Keith-Albee stronghold, independent booking agencies like William Morris finally came into their own, representing not only actors and comedians but also singers and musicians performing in live theater, nightclubs, and, after 1927's *The Jazz Singer*, in Hollywood talkies and musicals as well. Indeed, the late 1920s and 1930s was also the period when Hollywood studios began to purchase entire Tin Pan Alley sheet music publishing houses. In this sense, too, however innovative, Hollywood was also the inheritor of a body of preceding entertainment industries in which Jews had become prominent. This included the sheet music publishing business, which since the 1880s had been headquartered near New York's Union Square, known as the Rialto. While there existed a demand from the general public for sheet music to popular songs (elementary musical literacy being more widespread then than now), the songs became popular largely through performance in variety and vaudeville theaters (and after 1910 increasingly in Broadway shows). For this reason, the music publishing business tended to creep uptown along the path of the slowly migrating theater district, reaching 28th Street west of Broadway by 1890 (See generally, Suisman; still valuable is Goldberg; Fricke 270, 296–300).

By the late nineteenth century, music publishing was on the verge of a major commercial breakthrough. Much of the sheet music sold to that point consisted of imports of European classical or light classical and quasi-operatic ballads. Prior to 1886, when the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works mandated copyright protections, pirating foreign creations was a relatively simple matter. The gradual enforcement of copyrights proved a powerful impetus to the growth of a “native” American commercial sheet music industry. This new premium on popular songwriting coincided with the large-scale immigration of Jews to New York, but as with the case of theater and vaudeville, the focus on New York City can be misleading. Charles Kassell Harris, one of the founders of the modern American popular music business, was one of ten children born to a Jewish fur merchant who moved his family from Poughkeepsie, New York to Saginaw, Michigan and eventually to Cleveland. Harris's sentimental ballad “After the Ball” ushered in the sheet music revolution, selling an unheard of five million copies after it was performed by John Phillips Sousa at the 1893 World Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Harris was truly a Tin Pan Alley tunesmith, even before he shifted operations to New York City in 1895, custom producing songs to the customer’s order, and
publishing and marketing them himself, even designing the sheet music covers (Harris, *After the Ball*).

Theater and vaudeville impresarios were rarely without any personal experience of the stage; even Sam Shubert and Abe Erlanger made brief childhood forays “treading the boards.” Similarly, music publishers as often as not themselves dabbled in songwriting, an activity for which no technical musical knowledge was required, or even necessarily much in the way of talent. Harris certainly possessed an abundance of the latter, but the point is that music publishing was a business in which the practitioner could also be the entrepreneur and the producer could be the broker as well. Harry Von Tilzer, born Aaron Gumbinsky in Detroit, was the eldest of five children. His father opened a shoe store when the family moved to Indianapolis (and shortened the name to Gumm), the room above which was rented to a theatrical company. Aaron—now Harry—traveled with circuses, vaudeville companies, and medicine shows before settling in New York as a songwriter. He and his lyricist partner, Andrew B. Sterling, wrote numerous numbers for vaudeville performers though few were published before their 1898 breakthrough hit, “My Old New Hampshire Home,” which brought him into partnership with the music publisher Maurice Shapiro (a firm Shapiro had opened with his brother-in-law, Louis, a New York City realtor). Tilzer’s 1900 “A Bird in a Gilded Cage” (in this case with lyrics by Arthur J. Lamb) fully justified Shapiro’s offer, selling two million copies, the year’s top seller (*Shapiro Bernstein*). In 1902, Von Tilzer broke away from Shapiro-Bernstein to form his own publishing company, the Harry Von Tilzer Musical Publishing Company, whose success lasted into the 1920s. Like many of the most skilled and savvy Tin Pan Alley composers, Von Tilzer was highly attuned to marketing and salesmanship. While Charles Harris designed his own attractive sheet music covers, Von Tilzer sought the services of the finest commercial artists available, particularly Gene Buck (also a song lyricist). Von Tilzer also “plugged” his songs by performing them in
music halls, restaurants, and sheet music stores. With his vaudeville and theater connections he had little difficulty persuading performers to “interpolate” his songs into their acts, a standard practice that often entailed payoffs of one or another kind (the prototype of later radio disc jockey “payola”). Indeed, the traffic between publishers and performers ran in both directions, placing their products in a performer’s or show’s repertoire while also hunting out freshly performed material for their own copyrights.

Just as in theatrical bookings, in music publishing profit was rooted in control of the product, in this case copyright. With pirating rampant and royalties haphazard, music publishers sought to secure the kinds of protections that theater and vaudeville had won through strict if informal control of the booking process. The Copyright Act of 1909, the first major revision of eighteenth-century American copyright statute (relevant provisions of the Berne Convention had only been applied piecemeal to earlier law), proved crucial to this effort. It provided for 28-year copyright protection for all published works with attached notice of copyright. It also applied copyright protections to mechanical reproductions (initially piano rolls but later record and film recordings) which had not been included in previous statutes. Aligned with this, the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP), founded in 1914, in effect required and collected royalties for the performance of published music (Sanjek 7–19).

While Jewish music composers and publishers had not been the drivers of these two developments, they were among the leading beneficiaries, given the remarkable numerical increase in Jews on Tin Pan Alley. Music historian Edward Pessen, after examining the membership records of ASCAP, concluded that Jews wrote the music to around 50% of the three hundred “great” and three hundred “good” songs of the 1920s and 1930s (determined by their success and general aesthetic merit) and to a whopping 75% of the lyrics (Pessen 184–85). Something similar can be said of the sheet music publishers after 1910. Although some scholars have argued that Jews never comprised a majority of the owners, managers, and executives of Tin Pan Alley publishing, they unquestionably dominated the field, controlling the great proportion of large firms. M. Witmark and Sons; Shapiro-Bernstein; Marks and Stern; Leo Feist; Snyder and Waterhouse (later Snyder, Waterhouse, and Berlin); T. B. Harms (by 1900 controlled by Max Dreyfus); Chas. K. Harris; Harry Von Tilzer; and Jerome Remick were the most important in this period.

It is a widespread misimpression that Tin Pan Alley, that is, the music publishing industry, went into rapid decline by the late 1920s, with the advent
of such media as 78 rpm recordings, radio, and talking pictures. But exactly to the contrary, in the long run, these new technologies proved an enormous boon to music publishing and gave it several new leases on life. First, as noted, during the 1920s and early 1930s several Hollywood studios purchased some of the principal Tin Pan Alley firms (or rather, their copyrights and song catalogues), capturing control of ASCAP along the way. After the success of The Jazz Singer (1927), not only did Warner Bros.’ profits multiply, but the company became newly attractive for massive Wall Street investment. Suddenly cash rich, Warner Bros. determined to invest in music publishing firms, including M. Witmark, T. B. Harms, and Dreyfus (Chappell-Harms). Not to be outdone, MGM purchased Robbins Music Corp., and Paramount acquired Spier-Coslow. Now, instead of paying royalties the studios were earning them; hence their focus on the grand movie musicals of the 1930s (Messinger 20–24). But even if ownership of some of the classic Tin Pan Alley publishers now resided in Hollywood (or rather still New York, where the studios’ business headquarters were located), the transition was a boon to sheet music sales, since movies could promote songs to millions as no mere vaudeville act could.

In the wake of the complex struggles over performance rights and royalties that took place during the early 1940s—struggles waged at various times between ASCAP, film studios, national radio broadcast stations, the musicians’ unions, the record companies, and even the wartime US government—the great songbook catalogues of the Tin Pan Alley houses proved suddenly inaccessible to radio broadcasters, through bans or exorbitant costs. To fill the gap, some broadcasters and film companies began to turn to music that wasn’t covered by ASCAP rules, namely, more vernacular forms of popular music, such as “race music” (rhythm and blues) and hillbilly (country) music. Broadcasters’ Music International (BMI) was formed in 1940 as a parallel performance rights organization that would collect royalties on types of music that had been ignored or excluded from ASCAP. While this did not result in an initial explosion in the mainstream popularity of indigenous, hitherto marginalized music, by the mid-1950s it helped bring about a full-scale revolution in American popular music (Garofalo 113–17; Sanjek 32–42; Karp, “Jews and the Business of Race Music”). This transformation has been understood mostly in terms of recorded music popularized through radio and juke boxes, but music publishers also benefited enormously, including the old Tin Pan Alley houses that defied ASCAP and went over to BMI, like E. B. Marks and Max Dreyfus. They were soon joined by a host of new music publishing concerns—Jean and Julian Aberbach, Howard Richmond, and Freddy and Miriam Bienstock. Many of
them Jewish emigres from interwar Europe, these figures were not only attuned to the new sounds emanating from Memphis and Nashville in the 1950s, but also recognized the profit-making potential of holding publishing copyrights on hit records.⁸

If music publishing provides one pillar of the foundational period of Jewish prominence in the popular entertainment and the music industry, booking and talent agencies is surely another. First in prestige, if not in profits, was the William Morris Agency, whose roots go back to the vaudeville wars of the early twentieth century and whose fortunes fluctuated wildly, with the agency surviving several near-death experiences before finally shifting to a steady upward trajectory by the 1920s, and whose personnel remained consistently, overwhelmingly ethnically Jewish, at least through the 1960s. It would be simpler to pick out the non-Jews than the other way around, and while ostensibly the agency eschewed hiring the relatives of its agents, in practice it was populated by brothers, in-laws, nephews, fathers and sons. The founder’s only child, Bill, Jr., was nominally the successor, in truth William Morris’s surrogate son, Abe Lastfogel, guided the agency through its most prosperous decades.⁹ The WMA’s roots lay in vaudeville, which certainly included musicians, but especially singers or singing actor-comedians like Al Jolson, Harry Lauder, Sophie Tucker, Fannie Brice, Eddie Cantor, and Georgie Jessel. As vaudeville fragmented, never quite disappearing but morphing into radio (Burns and Allen, Amos and Andy), movie comedy (e.g., the Marx Brothers), and later television (Milton Berle, Sid Caesar, Rowan & Martin’s Laugh-In), Lastfogel smoothly navigated the transition (Rose).

Only a part of the WMA’s sprawling business focused on popular music per se, including a handful of prominent African American jazz musicians: Count Basie, Cab Calaway, and Duke Ellington. The Agency handled Frank Sinatra and even Elvis Presley too, but principally in their dealings with the movie rather than the recording industry. Instead, it was WMA’s alter ego, the dark-suited agents of the Music Corporation of America (MCA) that would thoroughly dominate musician bookings throughout the United States from the late 1920s through the 1940s, when it shifted its focus to Hollywood and soon to TV. Its founder, Jules Stein, was born in South Bend, Indiana in 1896, the son of Lithuanian immigrants, his father a peddler who eventually opened a dry goods store. This stereotypical tale of American Jewish upward mobility took an odd turn when Jules, pursuing post-graduate education at the University of Chicago, and even a degree in ophthalmology from the University of Vienna, jettisoned his medical career to start a band booking business. In fact, this
remarkable young man was also a skilled musician but above all an avid and ruthless businessman who had begun booking activities as a sideline while still in high school. When he established MCA in 1924, just as the Jazz Age band craze was sweeping the nation, he quickly turned to the head of the Chicago local of the American Federation of Musicians (AFM), James Caesar Petrillo, to negotiate a waiver for MCA acts allowing them to tour outside their home territories. It was the beginning of a long and mutually profitable relationship not just with Petrillo but with other tough Italian and Jewish Chicagoans associated with the mob “Outfit.” Stein employed the monopolistic booking tactics of Abe Erlanger and Edward Albee, backed by union and mob muscle, combined with meticulous planning and reconnoitering, to create regional and national touring circuits that effectively transformed the nature of live musical performance in America. MCA had a formidable presence not just in bookings but in nightclub ownership and liquor supply (in these fields clearly in partnership with the mob) as well as in sheet music publishing. In the 1930s Stein had also helped develop the concept of the entertainment “package,” supplying not just band bookings but entire shows—production, promotion, sponsorships, etc.—to theaters and hotel ballrooms as well as to radio broadcast networks. By the 1940s the company had become so dominant and ubiquitous it was labeled “the octopus” in a famous Saturday Evening Post exposé (Wittels). But if MCA's intimidating image and monopolistic modus operandi were the antithesis of William Morris's projection of paternal solicitude (“our small act of today is our big act of tomorrow”), its personnel were no less thoroughly Semitic.

The same was true of the several smaller agencies that specialized in black musical bookings from the 1920s through the Second World War. This was clearly a niche field compared with the capacious reach of WMA and MCA. But it was likewise a field dominated by Jews, most outstandingly in this period Irving Mills and Joe Glaser. Mills (born Hyman Minsky in 1895) was the son of a hat maker from Odessa who settled in New York's Lower East Side. A competent and perceptive musician, he became a song plugger for Tin Pan Alley publisher Leo Feist's Philadelphia operation and with his brother Jack (Jacob) formed Mills Music, Inc. in 1919. This was the period of jazz's inception in northern cities; in fact, Mills was among a small group of whites and northern blacks to early glean the significance and promise of the new music. His principal association was with Duke Ellington (before the Duke left for William Morris in the late 1930s). Mills' management of Ellington was highly intrusive, at times definitely exploitative, and his role remains controversial today among Ellington biographers. But there is no doubt that the Duke himself
regarded Mills not just as a business manager and agent, but as a legitimate creative and even musical force, helping to shape the orchestra’s repertoire and forge Ellington’s public image as a sophisticated black musical artist, rather than a primitive force, as black musicians tended to be depicted at the time. As Ellington recalled in *Music is My Mistress*, written long after he had broken with his former manager, “Irving Mills came to me one day with an original idea. He was always reaching toward a higher plateau for our music” (82). In fact, Mills’s contribution was probably less musical than professional, meaning that his ambition to continuously augment Ellington’s artistic stature helped drive the composer to greater heights.

Ellington was singular among Mills’s clients (as well as in the history of American music) but he wasn’t uniquely the object of Mills’s ambition to win respectability for black musicians in the 1930s. In a 1931 story, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a black newspaper, lauded Mills’s “effort to build high class attractions with colored talent which hitherto has not developed because of the mishandling or a lack of proper opportunity” (quoted in Cohen 86). Glaser, it would appear, was entirely different. He was born in Chicago and like Jules Stein was reputed to have cultivated lifelong connections with the mob. Not a doctor like Stein but the son of a prominent physician, Glaser took on the persona of a ruffian, insinuating himself with the very mobsters whose social company Stein increasingly took pains to avoid. While MCA had very little to do with black acts, Stein’s monopolizing tendencies caused him to form a subsidiary for black musicians, Consolidated Booking, headed by Glaser. Glaser had already demonstrated an affinity for the world of black music and sports, becoming the manager of Louis Armstrong almost from the moment of his initial arrival in Chicago from New Orleans, and of black and white boxers as well. When in the face of an antitrust suit Stein was forced to sell Consolidated, Glaser shifted to New York and created his own Associated Booking in 1931 (*New York Times*, 8 June 1969). He managed Ella Fitzgerald, Billy Holiday and many other luminaries, but his lifelong relationship with Armstrong proved extraordinarily intense, at once fatherly and oedipal, dictated by love, opportunism, and an inescapable reliance on the mob.12

The labors of Mills and Glaser as Jewish managers and booking agents specializing in black music were matched by the prominent role played by Jewish owners and managers of venues presenting black entertainment. This was notably the case in New York, although parallels can be found in other cities throughout the Northeast, Midwest and West. Of the major black music venues in pre-World War II Harlem, the Alhambra (owned by Milton
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Gosdorfer) and the Savoy ballrooms (founded and owned by Moe Gale) were Jewish owned, as was the Apollo Theater on 125th St. (initially owned by Sidney S. Cohen and later by Frank Schiffman), the Lafayette Theater at 132nd St. (owned by Schiffman after 1923), and Connie's Inn on 131st St. (owned by Connie and George Immerman), an important showcase for early black jazz that rivalled the more famous Cotton Club (which itself, although owned by the Irish mobster Ownie Madden, was managed by the Jewish Herman Stark). The Roseland Ballroom on W. 51st St., established in 1924 by Louis J. Brecker, presented both black and white jazz big bands (it was among the first showcases for the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra, which pioneered Big Band swing), although like the Cotton Club and Connie's Inn, the Roseland admitted only whites as patrons. Rather more liberal were the many nightclubs on or near 52nd St. during the 1940s, a true jazz mecca and veritable birthplace for the new style of Be-Bop. A majority of these clubs were Jewish-owned or managed, including Birdland, Kelly's Stable, the Hickory House, and the Royal Roost. Of a different character altogether was the Sheridan Square nightclub Café Society opened by the leftist activist and former New Jersey shoe salesman Barney Josephson. Dubbed “the right place for the wrong people,” Josephson actively sought out black patrons and showcased black artists with a distinctly protest message (Billie Holiday debuted the anti-lynching song “Strange Fruit” there).

The disparate backgrounds and ideological orientations of these Jewish impresarios were matched by those of the founders of the “little labels” that first emerged in the early 1940s and that would provide the seedbeds for the post-war blossoming of Rhythm and Blues and later Rock ‘n’ Roll. These included labels like King in Cincinnati, Savoy in Newark, Apollo, Old Time, and Atlantic in New York, Chess in Chicago, King in Cincinnati, and Specialty, Aladdin, and Modern in Los Angeles, as well as many others of lesser stature and duration. While some of the Jewish label founders had musical backgrounds, more typical was their previous business experience in such fields as liquor and cigarette distribution, used furniture, small manufacturing and retail sales. Only a handful, like Milt Gabler, Norman Granz, and Moe Asch were committed leftists and black music aficionados, along the lines of Barney Josephson, but many, like Chicago’s famous Chess brothers and Specialty Records founder Art Rupe in Los Angeles, were simply restless and hungry young businessmen and women in search of an angle (Karp, “Jews and the Business of Race Music”).
largely shaping their own programming to suit community and niche markets). It also reflects an older factor, one emphasized at the start of this chapter: the diffusion of Jews in a wide range of major American cities as well as smaller hinterland communities continued to afford them—even by the middle of the twentieth century—a distinct ethnic business advantage. What distinguished indie (independent) record labels from so-called major ones was the former’s need to patch together their own distribution networks—a crucial condition for success. These networks were comprised of local retailers, and while they have not yet been adequately studied, the preponderance of Jews among the lists of indie distributors suggests that local Jewish-owned retail shops (many of which sold small appliances and vinyl records) and their supply networks comprised the vertebrae of these distribution systems (see Broven Appendix B).

Typically, the story of the indie labels is usually told as one of spontaneous generation, without links to the vast body of prior entertainment and music business activity that has been sketched here. But clearly if we focus on patterns of function rather than specific media, on the effort to consolidate, modernize, refine and mass produce, we see that the revolution in popular music which made it a billion dollar business by the 1960s is firmly rooted in earlier practices and tendencies, ones in which Jews, often from unrelated family business backgrounds and centered in far flung regions of the United States, played a conspicuous and influential role.
Notes

1. Robert Cherry is currently completing a book that explores the comparison between Irish and Jews in American entertainment in great detail.

2. On peddlers, see Diner, Roads Taken. Diner points out that while Jewish women often peddled in Old World Europe, they rarely did so in America (73). Throughout this examination we encounter few businesswomen. That doesn’t mean they didn’t exist, but more likely that their contributions remained hidden behind those of their husbands, fathers, and brothers. It is only in the post-World War II era that we find independent Jewish businesswomen prominently operating as small-label record entrepreneurs and occasionally as agents and managers.

3. The classic work is Bernheim, The Business of the Theate. See also Leavitt, Fifty Years in Theatrical Management.

4. “I may mention here that Klaw and Erlanger began purely and simply as a booking agency, and later on Al Hayman, who had been connected with me, and observed the policy which I had originated, of forming theatrical circuits for the West and noted its success, went to Klaw and Erlanger and gave them the idea, which they seized upon” (Leavitt 266). On Hayman’s Jewish business affiliations in San Francisco, and the antisemitism sometimes leveled against them, see Rosenbaum (80).

5. Like the Shuberts, Heiman hailed from Syracuse, NY and got his entrée into show business distributing programs in a local Shubert theater. Astonishingly, the Jewish movie theater mogul Sam Katz (later of the partnership Balaban and Katz) was also a Syracuse native. See Provol (32).

6. The burgeoning film industry recognized the vital importance of live music, as attested, for instance, by a conference of film exhibitors held at the De Witt Clinton Hall in New York City on 23 Jan. 1921. Keynoted by Samuel “Roxy” Rothafel, the German-born Jewish immigrant movie palace entrepreneur and impresario, who, like so many of those surveyed here, was reared in the hinterlands (Stillwater, Minnesota), the entire conference was devoted to the uses of live music in film presentation. The program is published in Motion Picture News. New York Times, 18 Aug. 1970. On Rothafel, see R. Melnick.

7. Close to half of the forty-six publishers listed as ASCAP members in December, 1923 were Jewish owned or co-owned. See the Exhibitors Trade Review.

8. Jewish music business emigres and refugees from interwar Continental Europe didn’t just come to the US but to Britain too, where they helped broker the importation of 1950s American Rock ’n’ Roll to the UK and in the following decade the first “British Invasion.” On this story see Karp, “Brokering a Rock ’n’ Roll International; Biszick-Lockwood.

9. This conspicuously male orientation belies the fact that Lastfogel’s wife, the vaudevillean Frances Arms, consulted in almost every important decision her husband made in guiding WMA to success.
10. There is no full-scale biography of Stein. A biographical portrait of him can be found in Pye’s *Moguls* 15–74, and the two major biographies of his disciple and successor, Lew Wasserman, provide abundant material on Stein. McDougal, esp. 9–44, and Bruck, esp. 3–89.

11. Bruck (27–44), is especially strong in detailing Stein’s (invariably denied) ties with the underworld.

12. For a powerful, thinly fictionalized depiction by an Armstrong biographer, see the play by Teachout, *Satchmo at the Waldorf*.

13. Of the twenty-one most important midtown jazz clubs, fourteen were Jewish-owned or managed.

14. As we have seen throughout, family ties proved crucial to the expansion of Jewish business networks. Roseland Ballroom owner Louis J. Brecker (Philadelphian son of an Austrian Jewish immigrant) was the brother-in-law of Isadore “Jay” Faggen, co-owner of the Savoy Ballroom (with Moe Gale), the Roseland’s hipper uptown cousin. Faggen also owned and managed black dance ballrooms in Brooklyn and Chicago. A remarkable nine of the major jazz clubs on or just off 52nd St. were owned by members of a single extended family.
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