Foreword

Published by

Song Is Not the Same: Jews and American Popular Music.
Purdue University Press, 2011.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/103253.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/103253
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 comediennees 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-icon 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. Lundeberg 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*