Song Is Not the Same

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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
Gayle Wald

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 cleaness 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.
Works Cited