“Cohen Owes Me Ninety-Seven Dollars”:
Images of Jews from the
Jewish Sheet-Music Trade

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In 1899, the M. Witmark & Sons Company, one of New York’s leading popular song firms, published a number called “Oh, Such A Business.” The song told the story of a tightfisted Jewish pawnshop owner; its lyrics were composed in a malaprop-heavy parody of Yiddish speech. It was, in other words, a “Jewface” number—a comic dialect song, written for the variety stage’s singing-and-shticking specialists in “Hebrew impersonation.”

Was “Oh, Such A Business” a hit? We can’t be sure. The prolific vocal duo of Arthur Collins and Byron G. Harlan recorded the song in a 1901 Victor Records session, but the disc was never commercially released. No mentions of the song surface in the trade press of the period. Today, “Oh, Such A Business” survives less as a song, and more as an objet d’art: the three-page sheet-music folio that rolled off of the Witmark & Sons presses, with striking cover illustration framing an inset photo of the vaudevillian Joe Welch in full Jewface regalia (Fig. 1’).

Song-sheets are the ur-pop musical artifacts. They are remnants of a lost musical age, the period before the rise of radio and the emergence of the 78 rpm disc followed eventually by the LP, when singing stars stalked the vaudeville boards and audiences experienced popular music first and foremost as a participatory activity, belting out the latest Tin Pan Alley offerings.

* Color versions of the figures can be viewed at http://casdeninstitute.usc.edu/annual.
around the parlor-room piano. For historians of Jewish dialect music, which reached a pinnacle of popularity between the years 1900–1920, song-sheets are the primary documents. Although perhaps a few dozen wax-cylinder and 78 recordings of the songs exist, the bulk of the Jewface repertoire was never recorded and survives today solely as notes on sheet-music staves. But musical notation is not the only language in which the song-sheets speak. Jewface sheet-music covers carry crucial history lessons, bring the song’s themes into vivid focus, and preserve the long-forgotten composers and performers who turned Jewish-dialect ditties into Progressive Era pop hits. Gazing at the bright, garish sheet-music cover illustrations, we can sharpen how we hear these century-old songs all the clearer.

American song publishers have always used eye-catching designs to sell sheet music. In the first half of the nineteenth century, song-sheet art was largely text-based—titles splashed across covers in ornamental fonts—but after the Civil War, advances in lithography brought black-and-white illustrations to sheet music. By the turn of the twentieth century, new photographic printing techniques and the development of offset presses made elaborate color illustration ubiquitous among commercial publishers. Whether peddling snappy ragtime songs or sentimental ballads, Tin Pan Alley’s song factories delivered their product in seductive packages: graphically arresting, boldly colorful, unmistakably moderne.

Judged by contemporary standards, Jewface song-sheet covers strike us, first and foremost, as bizarre. Indeed, to a modern sensibility, Jewish dialect songs are offensive: apparent relics of an earlier pop culture era’s taste for coarse ethnic and racial caricature. But Jewface music often reached consumers in elegant packages—beneath art nouveau and proto-Deco sheet-music covers that bore little or no relation to the content of the songs themselves.

Songs like “Jake, Jake (The Yiddisha Ball Player)” (Fig. 2), “At that Yiddish Society Ball” (Fig. 3), “Under the Matzos Tree” (Fig. 4), and “Under the Hebrew Moon” (Fig. 5) are broad farces, with lyrics that trade in anti-Semitic imagery and tunes that move through stereotypically “Jewish” intervals over dolorous minor keys. But the sheet-music covers are purely decorative—graceful swoops and swags reminiscent of Viennese Secessionist design. The cover for “Cohen Owes Me Ninety-Seven Dollars” (Fig. 6), Irving Berlin’s famous farce about a miserly shmatte or rag salesman, features a stylized window topped by floral garlands, a tableau that offers no hint of the song’s romping ethnic comedy. These juxtapositions seem odd, but they tell us something important about the contemporary understanding of Jewface genre. In 2010, a song like
“Cohen Owes Me Ninety-Seven Dollars” seems exotic and somewhat offensive, but in 1915 it was mainstream pop and would have been seen by no one—least of all Jews—as occasion for angry responses from the Anti-Defamation League (had the ADL existed). Such a song was so normative that the Waterson, Berlin & Snyder Company saw no need to signal its novelty status, but rather simply packaged it with a generically “pretty” cover.

Sometimes publishers were less coy about advertising their products’ Jewishness. “Rosenbaum” (Fig. 7) places an impish Jewish toy soldier against a dichromatic field of red and blue. There are images of embodied Jewish ethnicity that verge on Shturmer-style caricature (so-named after the infamous Nazi newspaper that specialized in this type of anti-Semitic imagery): the grotesquely hook-nosed Jewish John Philip Sousa of “When Mose with His Nose Leads the Band” (Fig. 8), and the blackface Jew on the cover of “Jerusalem Rag” (Fig. 9), a reminder that, in the first decades of the century, Jews were still categorized as non-white in the United States Census. The song-sheets for “Oh, Such A Business” (Fig. 1) and “Get A Girl with Lots of Money, Abie” (Fig. 10), feature photographs of Hebrew comedians in the stereotypical garb of their trade: tattered black overcoats, scraggly fake beards, derby caps pulled down tight across the ears.

These song-sheets remind us that Jewish men were almost always the protagonists of Jewface songs, and the butt of their own jokes. The stock-character in Hebrew comedy was “Abie Cohen”—a Jewish refraction of that blackface staple, Sambo. He was an old world Jew, bumbling through the polyglot new world metropolis, mangling the English language, misapprehending American customs, failing spectacularly in romance, punctuating his pratfalls with the stereotypical despairing cries of “oy!”

We still know this Abie-stereotype quite well. He has never really gone away, although perhaps today we would associate him more quickly with other names. Nonetheless, this schlemiel, who has been a staple of popular culture up through Woody Allen, Larry David and Ben Stiller, first penetrated American consciousness in songs like “Oh, Such A Business.” Jewface songs often wring broad comedy from the schlemiel-archetype, showing the failures of Jewish men to play heroic American roles: baseball player (“Jake, Jake”), boxer (“There Never Was a White Hope Whose Christian Name Was Cohen” [Fig. 11]), cowboy (“Yonkle, the Cow Boy Jew” [Fig. 12]; “I’m A Yiddish Cowboy” [Fig. 13]), Indian chief (“Big Chief Dynamite” [Fig. 14]). The World War I-era “Yankee Doodle Abie” tells the story of a cowardly Jewish soldier who hides behind the ammunition wagon counting his money while the battles rages.
The sheet-music cover depicts a Jew in a doughboy uniform, with diamonds spilling out of his rifle (not illustrated).

Lyrics that focus on Jewish money-grubbing serve as the perennial punchline of Jewface songs (Figs. 15, 16). The song-sheet for Irving Berlin’s “Business is Business, Rosey Cohen” (Fig. 17) makes the theme plain, setting its cover photograph between giant art nouveau dollar signs. Some sheet-music covers draw on the nineteenth-century European traditions of anti-Semitic caricature: note the gleaming diamond broaches on the covers of “Big Chief Dynamite” (Fig. 14), “Kleiner Kohen” (Fig. 18), and “Oi Yoi Yoi” (Fig. 19). But in most of the songs, the Jews are depicted as having much humbler origin. They are ghetto strivers, obsessed with petty business matters, which, invariably, they confuse with matters of the heart. “That’s Yiddisha Love” (Fig. 20) sums up the comic conflation of finance and romance: “If she’s honest and frank/And has money in the bank/Oi, o!/That’s Yiddisha love.”

However, Yiddisha love really doesn’t stand a chance in the American melting pot. Abie implores his woman to stay with him, but loses her to the lures of modernity and assimilation—to gentile suitors, and to that powerfully sensual, democratizing force, American popular culture, as in Berlin’s 1909 hit “Sadie Salome, Go Home” (not illustrated), about a Jewish girl who runs away from her boyfriend to become a star on the burlesque stage. Song-sheet cover art drives the point home, portraying the Jewish female as a sleek post-ethnic “new woman” (Fig. 21). And while Jewish women move fluidly across ethnic lines—even giving birth to “Irisher, Yiddisher boys” (“Moysha Machree [They’re Proud of Their Irisher, Yiddisher Boy]”; Fig. 22)—Jewish men invariably flop. As a 1910 song puts it: “It’s tough when Izzy Rosenstein loves Genevieve Malone” (Fig. 23).

Of course, Jews were hardly the only group lampooned on Tin Pan Alley. But among the wide variety of turn-of-the-century ethnic and racial dialect music, Jewface songs represent a special case. In its business and creative spheres, the popular song trade was dominated by Jews, and Jewface music was, accordingly, largely a Jewish enterprise: songs by, of, and for Jews.

The sheet-music covers tell the story: nearly every song was either composed by a Jew, or published by a Jewish-owned song firm, or both. Study the cover photos, and you find that songs were introduced by some of the most celebrated Jewish vaudevillians: Sophie Tucker (not illustrated), Al Jolson (not illustrated), Fanny Brice (Fig. 24), Eddie Cantor (not illustrated), to name only the most prominent. Jews have always loved Jewish jokes—and these songs told plenty of them. Sometimes the in-jokes were right there on the sheet-music.
On the song-sheet for one of the earliest published Jewish dialect numbers, “Dot Beautiful Hebrew Girl” (Fig. 25), the title arcs over a single Hebrew word כשר, “kosher,” in bold point red lettering—a big wink at the Jewish audience. Here, as elsewhere, you can tell the song is the genuine article by its cover.

Of course, “kosher” signifies different things to different audiences. One of the notable things about the Jewface images we find on these song-sheets (not to mention in their lyrics and music) is how they show the willingness of Jewish entertainers, writers, artists and publishers to sell Jewish clichés to the general public and thereby reinforce the popular assumptions of how Jews ought to be seen. Jews might be sensitive to the mockery and satire that lurk just under the surface of these images, but to the popular sensibilities of those who mostly bought these song-sheets, none of these subtleties would have been so manifest. Indeed, virtually the same image-types could be adopted by the Nazis and other purveyors of anti-Semitic propaganda, without a hint of irony, as genuine depictions of Jews—no joking!

To be sure, Jewish songwriters and their fellow travelers on Tin Pan Alley hardly confined themselves to the popularization of Jewish stereotypes. They were just as ready to create and promote blackface music with all the stereotypical mammies and Swanees that went with it. Likewise, they were just as quick to sentimentalize a “White Christmas” (perhaps even with the double-entendre intended) just like the one their Christian audiences used to know. Perhaps the point to be made about all this is that the bright lines we might tend to draw between virulent prejudice and ironic, even innocent, stereotype were hardly so clear at the beginning of the twentieth century. If, when viewed from the perspective of the twenty-first century, the depictions on these song-sheets may seem at best politically incorrect and at worse a self-inflicted wound by Jews on Jews, it is useful to recall that a century or so ago it tweren’t necessarily so.
Fig. 1: “Oh, Such a Business”

Fig. 2: “Jake, Jake (The Yiddisha Ball Player)”
Fig. 3: “At That Yiddish Society Ball”

Fig. 4: “Under the Matzos Tree”
Fig. 5: “Under the Hebrew Moon”

Fig. 6: “Cohen Owes Me Ninety Seven Dollars”
“Cohen Owes Me Ninety-Seven Dollars”

Fig. 7: “Rosenbaum”

Fig. 8: “When Mose with His Nose Leads the Band”
Fig. 9: “Jerusalem Rag”

Fig. 10: “Get a Girl with Lots of Money Abie”
“Cohen Owes Me Ninety-Seven Dollars”

Fig. 11: “There Never Was a White Hope Whose Christian Name was Cohen”

Fig. 12: “Yonkle the Cow-Boy Jew”
Fig. 13: “I’m a Yiddish Cowboy”

Fig. 14: “Big Chief Dynamite”
Fig. 15: “Never Mind the Family Tree, Look at the Business Plant”

Fig. 16: “D-O-U-G-H (Oi, Oi, That’s a Business Proposition)”
Fig. 17: “Business is Business Rosey Cohen”

Fig. 18: “Kleiner Kohen”
Fig. 19: “Oi, Yoi, Yoi, Yoi (A Hebrew Love Song)”

Fig. 20: “That’s Yiddisha Love”
Fig. 21: “Nat’an! Nat’an! Tell Me for What Are You Waitin’, Nat’an?”

Fig. 22: “Moysha Machree (They’re Proud of Their Irisher, Yiddisher Boy)”
Fig. 23: “It's Tough When Izzy Rosenstein Loves Genevieve Malone

Fig. 24: Fanny Brice on the cover of “Fol de Rol Dol Doi”
Fig. 25: "Dot Beautiful Hebrew Girl"
Works Cited

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