“Ovoutie Slanguage is Absolutely Kosher”: Yiddish in Scat-Singing, Jazz Jargon, and Black Music

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I’m hinky-dink, a solid sender
A very good friend to Mrs. Bender
Bender, schmender, a bee gezindt!
I’m the cat that’s in the know. (Nemo and Mills)

Dan [Burley]’s jive parodies of famous pieces like “The Night Before Christmas” and other poems will remind some readers of the parodies done by Milt Gross in his series “Nize Boy” in the old World many years ago. Gross’ language was English as it was handled with the twist of Yiddish dialect, and it stemmed from the imperfect speech of recent Yiddish immigrants . . . (Conrad)

Being “in the know” has always been an essential element of any slang language, especially within African-American culture. Slang has always been used to identify members of an in-group, and often further serves to hide secret knowledge from outsiders. Scholars who have studied the development of Black-English have paid particular attention to slang, since this patois arose during slavery as a way of concealing one’s true thoughts and intentions. In addition to drawing upon European languages such as English, French, and Spanish, Black-English has incorporated words from the languages of West Africa, such as “cool,” meaning
“fast” in Mandingo, or “hip” from the Wolof “hepi” or “hipi,” meaning “to see” or “to open one’s eyes” (Major 111, 234).

The growth of American cities in the early twentieth century, and the resulting urbanization of American culture, brought African-Americans into contact with newly-arrived immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. In particular, in neighborhoods from Harlem, to Chicago’s West Side, to Boyle Heights in Los Angeles, Blacks and immigrant Jews established personal and economic relationships. As Jews learned about American culture through their Black neighbors, so did Blacks learn about American-Jewish culture as it developed in these and other neighborhoods. Along with the sounds of the Yiddish language, Jewish foods became part of the urban landscape. The popularity of delicatessens among entertainers in New York, Los Angeles, and elsewhere ensured that millions of Americans, without personal connections to pastrami, matzo ball soup, and corned-beef sandwiches, would hear about them through their being so often featured in entertainment news.¹

Scat-singing, jazz jargon, and Black music also incorporated Yiddish words and phrases as the sounds of “hipness”—a vocal code that would be known to musicians and their hangers-on but not to the uninitiated. Yiddish sounds appeared in Black music of this era because of their novelty and their association with Jews, who, to Blacks familiar with Jews as club owners, managers, agents, attorneys, and fans, represented success and power. Other scholars have dealt with the image of Jews among the Black intelligentsia (Lewis 543–64) but slang and song, with their potential for multiple, slippery meanings, have not drawn the same attention. Nonetheless, a considerable body of jazz recordings that used included Yiddish words during the late 1930s and 1940s demonstrates how Yiddish served as a form of “jive” among Black musicians in this period. Like other forms of slang, Yiddish was employed as a secret code, for those “in the know” to deploy in the presence of unknowing “squares.” The use of Yiddish in the music of Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, and Slim Gaillard, in particular, delineates the multiple images of Jews in Black communities during the 1930s. Yiddish presented new and exciting sounds and words to blend with the existing mélange of Black slang. Yiddish was also the “cash language” (Christensen 36–40) in many Black communities, due to the preponderance of Jewish merchants there. Blacks who sang in Yiddish, as part of a broader “hip” jargon, could thus demonstrate their aspiration to Jewish prosperity while mocking Jewish speech. Black musicians who employed Yiddish in their lyrics and scat-singing brought a humorous double-edge to their take on the popular
culture of two out-groups in American society by emphasizing their points of connection as well as their emerging rivalries.

The aim of this essay is to take a closer look at Yiddish lyrics in music by Black musicians as both parody and tribute to the multiple expressions of Jewish-Black relations in the interwar and World War II years. Within the entertainment business, scholars like Michael Paul Rogin, Jeffrey Melnick, and Michael Alexander have provided important background on Jewish entertainers’ use of stage Black dialect in vaudeville, Tin Pan Alley, and early Hollywood films. Eric Goldstein has tackled the broader issue of Jewish racial identity, and contrasted Jews and Blacks and similar-yet-different “others” in the interwar years. Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, Hasia Diner, Joe Trotter, and Winston McDowell have discussed Jewish-Black relations in the business world of this era. What I’m calling “ovoutie slanguage” in mid-century American music has its roots in these other forms of popular entertainment plus the broader contexts of “whiteness,” “blackness,” and business (Rogin; Melnick; Alexander 131–83; Goldstein; Greenberg; Diner, In The Almost Promised Land). And, as is so often the case, any story of American popular music in the twentieth century must begin with Louis Armstrong.

LOUIS ARMSTRONG: JEWISH CONNECTIONS AND POSSIBLE INSPIRATIONS

Louis Armstrong (1901–1971) is widely acclaimed as the first superstar of jazz. From the earliest days of jazz recording, in the 1920s, Armstrong’s records were recognized as masterworks. In 1926, Armstrong recorded one of the first sides to feature what was called “oofin’” and what later became known as “scatting.” Armstrong allegedly dropped the lyric sheet for a song called “Heebie Jeebies” and sang nonsense syllables to fill the space. The song became a hit (Bergreen 266–67; Edwards 627–36).

Although the phrase “heebie jeebies” would seem to indicate some connection to actual Hebrews, the term’s origin appears to be a Barney Google comic strip from 1923. Nonetheless, in a later conversation with his friend and Queens neighbor Phoebe Jacobs, Armstrong claimed that his approach to scat singing was an effort to imitate what he called, “the Jews rockin’,” or praying, in the storefront synagogues of his native New Orleans (Berggreen 266–67; Edwards 627–36).
For that matter, Armstrong also enjoyed close relations with individual Jews, Jewish families, and Jewish institutions throughout his life. As a child, Armstrong had an early job with the scrap-collecting Karnofsky family in New Orleans. In his autobiographical writings, Armstrong credits the Karnofsky family with helping him buy his first horn, feeding him when he was out late peddling with them, and singing the Irving Berlin tune, “Russian Lullaby,” which he remembered fondly years later. Once Armstrong had become a star, he hired Jewish managers Mezz Mezzrow (who also supplied him with marijuana) and Joe Glazer. Armstrong lived in the integrated neighborhood of Corona, Queens, and while recuperating at Beth Israel Hospital near the end of his life, wrote tributes to the Jewish doctor who had saved his life, as well as the aforementioned Jews he had been happy to work with. Armstrong, a man who watched what he ate, praised matzos as a healthful food that he always kept on hand at home (Armstrong 3–36; Mezzrow and Wolfe 244–46).

JEWS EMULATING BLACKS: MINSTRELSY AND POPULAR MUSIC
Recent scholarship has devoted a great deal of time to examining the image of Blacks in Jewish culture. Jewish songwriters, like Irving Berlin, and performers, like Sophie Tucker, incorporated rhythms from ragtime and other Black influences into the popular music they created in the 1910s and 1920s. In his study of this era, Jeffrey Melnick describes music as one of “the languages of Black-Jewish relations” (Melnick 1–15). Specifically, the career of Al Jolson, in particular his film The Jazz Singer, has been the focus of much critical work. The basic argument describes how Blackness and blackface minstrelsy represented “Americanness” to first- and second-generation American Jews; so aspiring Jewish entertainers learned the conventions of minstrelsy and blackface more generally (see Rogin; Alexander 133–79; Goldstein 74–82).

Jolson’s most famous starring role, as Jakie Rabinowitz/Jack Robin in The Jazz Singer (1927) is a perfect illustration of this idea. Rabinowitz, the protagonist, is descended from a long line of cantors, but loves the jazz world and secretly performs as “Jack Robin,” a singer in blackface. In Blackface, White Noise, the most thorough examination of this topic, Michael Paul Rogin writes that in The Jazz Singer, “blackface as American national culture Americanized the son of the immigrant Jew” (6). Although his father disowns his son for his
career choice, when the elder Cantor Rabinowitz is on his deathbed, too sick to chant the Kol Nidre prayer that begins the Yom Kippur service, Jakie abandons an opening-night performance to chant Kol Nidre at his father’s synagogue.

BLACKS EMULATING JEWS: ENTREPRENEURSHIP, DIASPORIC UNITY, AND CIVIL RIGHTS

At the same time that Louis Armstrong popularized the heebie-jeebies and George Gershwin and Al Jolson embodied Black-Jewish connections in musical composition and performance, there existed a broader undercurrent of voices who emulated Jews and Jewish history in Black communities. Black leaders, from Booker T. Washington, who held up Jewish entrepreneurship as a model for Blacks to follow, to W. E. B. DuBois, who saw the Zionist movement at the time of the Balfour Declaration as a model for a pan-African movement, urged their followers to adapt Jewish ideas for the purposes of Black advancement (Melnick 10; Williams 356). Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association often used Zionist imagery to describe Garvey’s plan for reuniting the African diaspora in a new African kingdom. Garvey and his followers also sought to emulate Jewish economic self-sufficiency and, like Zionists, he desired to reunite peoples of African descent in their historic homeland. As Garvey put it, “Our obsession is like that of the Jews. They are working for Palestine. We are working for Africa” (Garvey 10, quoted in Williams 357; UCLA). On a different aspect of Black society, leaders of the NAACP sought out Jewish support for their cause, and looked to Jewish defense organizations for examples of how to wage their legal battles (Lewis 543–64). Howard University Dean Kelly Miller used the term “Black Sanhedrin” for a meeting of Black leaders in 1924 (Lewis 563).

Black emulation of the Zionist movement, Jewish solidarity, and the financial success of some Jews was not without its darker flipside, however. Garvey’s description of his movement in Zionist terms was overshadowed by his venomous allegations against Jewish members of the jury that convicted him, as well as by a more general rising pro-Fascist sympathy during the 1930s. Conversations between Black activists and Jewish patrons of the NAACP and Urban League often proved awkward, with Black leaders feeling patronized by comparisons of their experiences to those of Israelites in ancient Egypt (UCLA; Lewis).
Tensions between Blacks and Jews came to a head in 1935. That year, a race riot pitted Black residents of Harlem against Jewish shop-owners. Rumors of a Puerto Rican teenager being assaulted over the theft of a penknife exploded into a conflict that exposed deep fissures between Blacks and Jews in Harlem. Although Harlem had had a sizeable Jewish community in the early twentieth century, as Blacks moved into the neighborhood in the 1920s, Jews began to move out to the Bronx and Brooklyn. Jewish “white flight” from Harlem was not complete, though; many Jewish business owners kept their stores in Harlem even if they lived in a different borough or suburb. To Jewish entrepreneurs, this decision was, to a great extent, an example of Jewish tolerance and embrace of their Black customers; in an age when chain-stores rarely opened in Black neighborhoods, Jewish merchants remained in Black neighborhoods, extending credit and respect to their customers (Gurock 146–51; Greenberg 3–6).

Many Black residents of Harlem saw Jewish merchants in a different light. Rather than family businesses that catered to a Black clientele, Blacks in Harlem saw stores that charged premium prices for discount goods. Furthermore, relatively few Blacks in Harlem worked in Jewish-owned stores, which prompted a “Don't Buy Where You Can't Work” campaign from local activists the year before the riots broke out. The Harlem riots of 1935 represented a major rift between Blacks and Jews, two groups that had had a strong identification with each other, and that prompted strong associations in popular culture, from the blackface careers and well-known Jewish identities of Al Jolson, Fanny Brice, Eddie Cantor, and Sophie Tucker, to the “Jewish jazz” reviled by Henry Ford and others (Greenberg 114–39; Melnick 108–14).

“BAY MIR BISTU SHEYN”
Mirroring the complex interplay between Blacks and Jews, a 1937 live performance set these tensions to music and paved the way for a series of songs with Yiddish lyrics sung by Black performers. Johnny Macklin and George MacLean, a Black song-and-dance team who performed under the name “Johnnie and George,” performed a Yiddish song at Grossinger’s resort in the Catskills, and at the Yacht Club, a club featuring Jewish entertainers like Henny Youngman, Jerry Lester, and Frances Faye, located on New York’s 52nd Street. Titled “Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn” in its original formulation, and originally
backing a big production number in a Yiddish musical, the song, as performed by Macklin and MacLean, represented both a hilarious juxtaposition of Black performance in Yiddish—when tensions between Blacks and Jews had been running high—as well as a reminder of the connections between these two groups. From a Black perspective, the song is especially mysterious: is it a further emulation of Jewish culture, or some sort of mockery, akin to Jewish performers who sang in blackface? It is still unclear how Johnnie and George came to perform Shalom Secunda's song “Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn,” from his 1932 musical *Men Ken Lebn Nor Men Lost Nisht* (literally: *You Could Live but They Don’t Let You*; its producers translated it as “I Would if I Could”). However they came across it, their performance turned lots of heads, and the song took off. Clearly, the public was ready for Black entertainers singing in Yiddish.

**CANTOR CAB CALLOWAY?**
The set of mixed reactions to Jewish culture also found its way into other jazz records of the 1930s. In the early years of that decade, Calloway’s performances, especially of his biggest hit, “Minnie the Moocher,” were said to be based on cantorial singing. Cab Calloway actually starred in 1936 with Al Jolson in *The Singing Kid*. Calloway had other connections to Jewish figures in the entertainment business, including some of his songwriters. By the late 1930s, Jewish songwriters had provided Calloway with several Yiddish-inflected songs that became part of his repertoire. His song “A Bee Gezindt,” written by Henry Nemo, uses Yiddish to demonstrate that the singer is “the cat who’s in the know,” a mission entirely in line with Calloway’s “hipster” image that he cultivated throughout the 1930s. Calloway followed “A Bee Gezint” with “Utt-Da-Zay,” Buck Ram and Irving Mills’ composition that covers an actual Yiddish song, “Ot azoy neyt a shnayder,” in which Calloway keeps the subject of the original song, but completely inverts its message (Calloway and Rollins 110–11).

The original dates from the 1880s, when factories and the twelve-hour workday made it harder for tailors to earn a living. “Ot azoy . . . ” contains the refrain, “Ot azoy neyt a shnayder/ Ot azoy neyt er doch,” which translates to “This is how the tailor stitches/ This is how he really sews.” The chorus is intended ironically, though; the song goes on to describe how the tailor does all his work for very little money, and eventually his hard work, long hours,
and chronic poverty lead him to, “fardint kadokhes, nit kayn broyt (earn a fever, not any bread)” (Rubin 86–87). This sad, sarcastic tale of a tailor’s label undergoes a radical change in Calloway’s treatment:

“Utt da zay,” sings the tailor,  
As he fashions pretty clothes;  
“Utt da zay,” sings the tailor,  
As he sews, sews, sews.  
He’s as busy as a bee,  
Making lovely finery,  
Things my baby loves to wear  
When I take her to the fair.  
“Utt da zay,” sings the tailor; all it means is “That’s the way.”  
When I buy the things he made her, says the tailor, “Utt da zay.”

In Calloway’s version, the subject of the song is not the producer (the tailor), but the customer. Rather than focusing on the rigors of the tailor’s work day, “Utt-Da-Zay” looks at the tailor’s output—beautiful clothes that the singer buys for his “baby.” The song symbolizes how the Jewish socialist movement, centered in tailors’ unions (and often led by one-time tailors) had faded away and become replaced by the magic of American consumerism. Given the original song’s use of physical illness as an example of the tailor’s suffering, one could say that “consumption” had been replaced by “consuming.”

In 1940, Calloway recorded a tribute of sorts to violinist Yehudi Menuhin. Titled “Who’s Yehoodi,” the song had its origins on a Bob Hope radio show, where Menuhin was scheduled to make a guest appearance as part of his tour of the United States. Hope sidekick Jerry Colonna, forgetting a line, ad-libbed, “Who’s Yehudi?” and got big laughs from the studio audience. On that show, and later, the phrase “who’s Yehudi” became a catch-phrase to fill space; eventually, the word “Yehudi” came to mean “the man who wasn’t there.”

Of course, in actual Hebrew, “Yehudi” translates to “Jew.” Although “who’s Yehoodi” was understood as a joke in this era, the phrase has a set of odd associations, and would have had these even at this time. As anti-Semitism became more prevalent, and more respectable, in Europe and the United States, Jews went to greater lengths to change their names, obtain plastic surgery, and undertake other measures to avoid being seen as “Yehudim.” So, a song with lyrics that run,

G-man Hoover’s getting moody  
Got his men on double duty
Trying to find out—
Who’s Yehoodi!

could stand in for a bunch of Jewish anxieties about not being able to “pass” in American society at a tense time. A “soundie” (a short 16-millimeter film played on special jukeboxes; a precursor to music video) of the Kay Kyser version of the song, featured a stage-Jew character, with black hat, fake beard, and open prayer book, leering at Lane Truesdale, the singer with Kyser’s band. Clearly, although Colonna’s original joke had no direct connection with anything Jewish beyond Menuhin’s first name, subsequent interpreters saw a clear connection. Although Cab Calloway employed cantorial vocalizations on some of his earlier hits, none of those appear in his rendition of “Who’s Yehoodi?”

SLIM GAILLARD: YIDDISH AND THE POLYLINGUAL SOUND OF CITIES

Slim Gaillard, a contemporary of Calloway’s, had a deliberately obscure background that leaves his interest in Yiddish lyrics hard to trace. Gaillard’s place of birth has been claimed as Santa Clara, Cuba, Detroit, Michigan, and Pensacola, Florida. He was said to speak multiple languages—at different times, the list included Greek, Arabic, Hebrew, Portuguese, Turkish, Bulgarian, Spanish, Chinese, Italian, Finnish, and “Syrian.” He claimed to have been left on the Greek island of Crete by his father, a worker on a cruise ship. He claimed to have been a driver for Detroit’s Purple Gang of Jewish bootleggers. He claimed to have been a professional shoemaker. At various times during his career, he went into long periods of inactivity because he joined the Army, or the Air Force, or entered the ministry, or bought a chicken farm, or began composing symphonic music, or ran a motel, or bought an apple orchard. Given all the random information that he gave to a credulous press, is it any wonder that he worked bits of Yiddish (and Spanish, and Arabic) into his songs?

Gaillard’s first “Yiddish” song did not actually contain Yiddish. With bassist Slam Stewart, he released a song entitled, “Vol Vist du Gaily Star.” Although this song is built on the chord progressions of “Yosl, Yosl,” a popular Yiddish tune from 1922, and the lyrics were mistaken for Yiddish, the phrasing is mostly fake-Spanish and gibberish. The words that close each verse (“laam baylo”), according to Gaillard, were allegedly “the voodoo god of chance,” and
the whole song was based on a “prayer” uttered by numbers-players in Harlem (Doudna 6; Sapoznik 139). Perhaps this mistake inspired Gaillard to cover the most famous Yiddish song of that era, yet adding another distinctive twist to it:

Bei mir bist du spaghetti  
Bei mir bist du beef stew  
Bei mir bist du pork chops  
With plenty gravy.  
Bei mir bist du mashed potatoes  
Bei mir bist du scrambled eggs  
Bei mir bist du toast  
With French fries too.  
I could say “gefilte fish”  
But I’ll take some orange stew  
Bring me some ice cream pie  
With plenty dough good  
Baked potato pie.

Gaillard’s rendition of “Bei Mir Bistu Shayn,” which an unknown announcer introduces as “the Hungarian version . . . strictly from Hungary,” takes the different words for expressing love and substitutes words related to food, including Jewish foods and imaginary foods (orange stew) with American standards like pork chops.

The concept seemed to click. After his version of “Bei Mir,” two of Gaillard’s best-known “Yiddish” songs focused entirely on the musical qualities of Jewish foods: “Matzo Balls” and “Dunkin’ Bagel.” Both really just consist of iconic Jewish foods sung to a basic jump-blues progression:

Ah, well, ah, matzo balls  
Gefilte fish  
Best old dish I ever, ever had  
Now matzo balls  
And gefilte fish  
Makes you order up a extra dish.  
Matzo balls  
Gefilte fish  
Really, really, really very fine  
Now you put a little horseradish on it  
And make it very mellow  
Because it really knocks you right on out.
The verse of “Dunkin’ Bagel” features a call-and-response from Gaillard’s bassist, “Bam” Brown:

Dunkin’ bagel
Dunkin’ bagel
Dunkin’ bagel
Splash! In the coffee.
Matzo balls (matzo balls a-reenny)
Gefilte fish (gefilte fish o-voottie)
Pickled herring (pickled herring voottie)
Lox-a-rooney (lox-a-rooney)

Several aspects of the relationship between Black and Jewish culture are highlighted in these songs. The whole Jewish content is food itself, without any of the contexts in which those foods are eaten. The foods in “Matzo Balls” are all customarily eaten on Passover, but the song just lists the items and does not mention what time of year the foods might be eaten. Gaillard’s songs also juxtapose foods that are not commonly eaten together; matzo balls are not served with horseradish, and bagels are not dunked in coffee like donuts.

In addition to the names of foods, Gaillard built songs around the names of other Yiddish words and phrases. His song, “Drei Six Cents” is probably an approximation of “draysik cents,” Yiddish for “thirty cents.” Like “Matzo Balls’ and “Dunkin’ Bagel,” “Drei Six Cents” references foods, but this time as a starting point for scatting. In the song’s verse, Gaillard and Brown sing:

Shish kebab (shish kebab shishke voottie)
Lox a reeney (lox a vootie now oh-ho-wow)
Shish kebab (shish kebab wowie a-bo)
Pickled herring (pickle herring pickle picky a one a skimoutie)

Gaillard would have likely heard peddlers calling that sum out, as they sold vegetables, bakery goods, and bought scrap paper and metals. One of Gaillard’s later songs, “Mishugana Mambo,” is a straightforward song about how to do the dance in the title; although “meshuganner” is Yiddish for “crazy,” that word is the only Yiddish in the lyric. Perhaps Gaillard was aware of postwar American Jews’ great love for mambos and other Latin dances (Kun 50–68).

After World War II, Gaillard moved to Los Angeles, where he became the leader of one of the regular house bands at Billy Berg’s nightclub. Berg, a Jew who had grown up in Harlem, wanted to start a Hollywood nightclub that would feature Black musicians playing to an integrated crowd. Aside from the
clubs along Central Avenue, then the heart of Black Los Angeles, black performers were shut out of the city's nightlife, as patrons and often as performers. Berg's associate in this venture, promoter Norman Granz, wanted to use jazz as a force for integration as Café Society had done in Manhattan. Gaillard's biggest fame, then, came in an environment that was hoping to bring audiences together as Gaillard's music brought different languages together (DeVeaux 386–89, 396–98).

In 1947, Gaillard and the other members of his trio, bassist Bam Brown and drummer Scatman Crothers, teamed up with director/producer Jack Rieger to make a short film, “O’Voutie O’Rooney,” released by Astor Pictures, a low-budget film company that made films targeted to theaters in Black neighborhoods. Like his better-known contemporary, Edgar Ulmer, Rieger had directed Yiddish-language films and all-Black-cast films in the 1930s and 1940s. The film presents a Gaillard performance at Billy Berg’s nightclub in Los Angeles, where the Gaillard trio plays six songs, including “Dunkin’ Bagel.” Title cards announce each song as it begins. The card that precedes “Dunkin’ Bagel” reads, “Ovoutie Slanguage is Absolutely Kosher,” reaffirming the song’s tie to Jewishness for those viewers too unhip to know for themselves.

A final entry in the Jewish food swing sweepstakes was Cab Calloway’s recording of “Everybody Eats When They Come to My House,” recorded in 1947. Calloway’s song, like Frank Sinatra’s recording of Lewis Allan and Earl Robinson’s “The House I Live In,” two years prior, used “house” as a metaphor for an integrated, peaceful, postwar United States. In Calloway’s song, bagels, knishes, and latkes share the table with chili con carne, cacciatore, and pancakes. Among the guests are “Irvy, Fagel, Nishe, and Macky.” Jewish foods, by the start of the postwar era, had become part of the American table, thanks in part to hipsters like Calloway and Gaillard.

For their efforts to bring Yiddishisms into jazz, Calloway and Gaillard won fans in American Jewish communities. Even though the end of the big-band era prompted Calloway to cut back his touring and perform in musical comedies, he still managed to thrill Jewish audiences in the Catskills well into the 1950s. Gaillard had fans in the New York chapter of the Shomrim Society, a fraternal group of Jewish policemen. After a private performance, the group awarded Gaillard an honorary gold star, which he tried to use to talk his way out of paying multiple delinquent parking tickets. The badge, of course, invested Gaillard with no actual police power, but the Shomrim Society’s awarding it to him shows that Jewish audiences appreciated his contributions (“Slim Gaillard Loses Police Badge—Fined”).
CONCLUSIONS
From the beginning of scat-singing on record through the early 1950s, Yiddish words and references in jazz have served as aural reminders of the modern city. If words from many languages help us define “high-modernism” in literature and poetry, perhaps Yiddish and other languages in scat-singing and jive talk represent a kind of “low-modernism”—a modernism of the streets, in which people acknowledge, vocalize, and celebrate the sounds of Los Angeles and New York. Yiddish, the fading mother tongue of “rootless cosmopolitan” American Jews in mid-century America, nonetheless served as an emblem of all that was urban and modern.

Other scholars have drawn the links between Jewishness and Blackness at this time, and described how Jewish entertainers often “blacked up” by imitating Black speech patterns and wearing burnt-cork makeup. For Jewish entertainers, blackness signified Americanness, at the same time that mocking Blacks signified whiteness. Black entertainers like Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, and Slim Gaillard demonstrated, in the songs and performances documented here, that using Yiddish established the performer as someone who was hip to information that not everyone knew. Like Yehudi, the mysterious “man who wasn’t there,” deploying Yiddish allowed the singer a kind of backstage access beyond what the ordinary jazz fan or musician could have. By deploying Yiddish in their songs, singers could demonstrate that they could speak the “cash language” of the music-business milieu, and thus “pass” for Jewish in an aural sense. Yiddish brought some Black musicians closer to their managers and audiences.

The use of Yiddish and other languages by Black singers in the 1940s prefigures the multilingual quality of hip-hop and other popular music influenced by hip-hop. Shortly before his death in 1991, Slim Gaillard made a guest appearance on a song by Toronto rappers Dream Warriors. One of the most popular songs of 2009, Black Eyed Peas’ “I’ve Got a Feeling,” features the phrases “mazel tov” and “l’chaim” as part of its tribute to having fun. The descendants of ovoutie slanguage are still kosher, at least in the sense of the Jewish-influenced, kosher-style nature of the contemporary music business and American culture more generally. And their use of Yiddish and Hebrew is not about the cross-cultural connections of the 1930s but certainly more about the Jewishness of the music biz, right? Or at least, the mainstreaming of Jewish phrases through the entertainment industry?
Notes

1. For Harlem, see Gurock 146–56; Greenberg 116–27. For the history of delicates-sens, see Moore and Gebler 192–212; Joselit 201–14; Diner, *Hungering for America* 200–04.

2. An important conference volume for understanding Black-Jewish relations is Franklin et al. Trotter and McDowell, both in this volume, are especially relevant.

3. Most sources for this story lack full names for the two singer/dancers; they are identified as Macklin and MacLean in Yates 20. *Life* 31 Jan. 1938: 39, is devoted to the history of the then-current pop hit, “Bei Mir Bist Du Shon.” The *Life* account mentions that Johnnie and George learned the song from Jennie Grossinger, performed the song at the Yacht Club, and that Jewish songwriters Sammy Cahn and Saul Chaplin saw this performance. This primary source contrasts with the standard retelling of the story, described in Chaplin 35–38. For more, including the song’s greatest popularity as sung by the Andrews Sisters, see Sapoznik 134–37.

4. It was their main source of fame among Black audiences for years after they debuted it; see also “McClean And Mack [sic] In Hot Spot In East”; “Baby Face Macklin and Geo. MacLean Triumph.”

5. For a representative sample, see Doudna 6; “Slim Gaillard, Trio to Begin at Johnny Brown’s”; Herndon 26; Kilgallen 20; “Slim Gaillard to Blue Note Nov. 27”; Voce 20–21; “Slim Gaillard, 74.”

6. For more on Café Society, see Josephson with Trilling-Josephson; for segregation in Los Angeles at this time, see Himes.

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“Slim Gaillard to Blue Note Nov. 27.” *Chicago Defender* 30 Nov. 1957: 18.


