Song Is Not the Same

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“If I Embarrass You, Tell Your Friends”:
The Musical Comedy of
Belle Barth and Pearl Williams

Josh Kun

She must shine in ev'ry detail / like a ring you're buying retail/
be a standard size that fits a standard dress. (Merrill and Styne, “If A
Girl Isn’t Pretty”)

Somebody sent me a book of songs and on the first page was [singing]
“She’ll be comin’ round the mountain when she comes, she’ll be drivin’
six white horses when she comes.” Sounds like a freaky broad to me.
(Barth, Bell Barth at Las Vegas)

I got no talent. I got nuts, big balls, get used to me. (Williams, A Trip
Around The World)

1

. A TRIP AROUND THE WORLD IS NOT A CRUISE

There is little that is known for sure about the night in 1961 when
Pearl Williams took the stage at The Cabaret nightclub in Miami
Beach. It was most likely a Friday or Saturday; it was sometime well after mid-
night when it was safe to play blue to a packed room of clinking glasses, ciga-
rette smoke, and perfume, brought south from the Bergdorf’s counter; and
most everybody sitting on the barstools and nestled elbow-to-elbow in the
puckered leather booths were American Jews enjoying a night on the town—
some of them on vacation from colder climates up North, others seasonal
snowbirds on temporary leave from far-away winters. Pearl Williams squeezed the body that her Russian immigrant parents most definitely would have called zaftig into a brocade, red evening gown sprinkled with costume diamonds; fastened her gold bracelets around her wrists; slid her gold hoop earrings into her ears; penciled on her arcing black eyebrows; did last one shpritz of hair spray over her black coif; wrapped her round shoulders inside an auburn mink; and then grabbed the microphone:

Pearl: Good morning Mr. Gray. Good morning Mrs. Gray. Oh, I like my new name. Don't get used to it girlie, we're checking out of this motel in two hours.

[Band plays opening jazz fanfare.]

Announcer: Miss Pearl Williams!

Pearl: Thank you. You mishuganah, it's me in person. I wish my mother was here. You know my mother, dear, Belle Barth, and she is a mother honey! What we two could do to this joint. We could make a garage outta this. She and I are going on television, would you believe this? We're doing The Tonight Show. We really are, don't get hysterical. We're gonna blow the whole network. She'll take one end and I'll take the other end. We'll bring back radio, what are you worried about?

Voice in the audience: What about Patsy Abbott?

Pearl: What Patsy Abbott? She's not in our class; what are you crazy? Where she belong with us? She's a nice girl.

The show would be the first that Williams—who was forty-seven years old at the time—would ever record, two full long-playing sides of live material that the raunchy Los Angeles party label Laff Records would release later that year as A Trip Around The World Is Not A Cruise, allowing this one time Brooklyn secretary who cut her chops opening for Louis Prima to join a foul-mouthed roster that also included Richard Pryor, LaWanda Page, Red Foxx, George Carlin, Booty Greene, Buzzy Greene, Shecky Greene, and the black ventriloquist act Richard & Willie (best not remembered for their 1976 collaboration with Pryor on the comedy album Richard Pryor Meets Richard and Willie and the Symbionese Liberation Army). As it was Williams' first release, her opening minutes worked hard to establish her shtick as another bawdy
broad telling jokes and singing songs at the piano in between drags on her “Jewish cigarettes with the gefilte tips.” Williams’ people were cheating husbands, their mistresses, and their prude wives; she could be a corny rim-shot comic, a cheeky piano belter, and a Yiddish nostalgia machine, but she could also be a bullish aggressor—any woman who walked out of her show was called a “whore”; women who talked during the show got, “Shut your hole and let mine make a little money.” If men talked back to her, she threatened to choke them to the death with her thighs or sit on their face until they suffocated. Her medium was the club stage and the adults-only “party record” LP, not the domesticated family-friendly living rooms of television’s suburbs.

No matter how many times she claimed to blow the network she never did appear on *The Tonight Show*. She used Yiddish as a punch line and her audience, old enough to know something about the rowdy aisles of the Yiddish theater and the vaudeville hall, was constantly talking back. That same night at The Cabaret she reprised a bit of “Joe and Paul,” an old Yiddish radio jingle for a Brooklyn clothing store that was turned into a dirty parody—the first million-selling Yiddish party record—by The Barton Brothers in 1949 (“Joe and Paul, Parts 1 & 2”). “You know, some Jewish words sound terrible,” Williams told the audience, “and they are perfectly clean. Like, [sings and plays piano] Joe and Paul, so *fukn nign*. That means pleasure, joy, happiness, in Jewish. It’s the only chance I get.”

As a big Jewish girl with a big Jewish mouth, Williams was also quick to establish her place among her trash-talking contemporaries. She wanted the audience to know that she knew she wasn’t alone. There was, for example, the queen of double-entendre, Ruth Wallis, who started as a novelty songstress performing songs like “Boobs,” “Drill ’Em All,” “He’d Rather Be A Girl,” and “It’s A Scream How Levine Does The Rhumba” with fully orchestrated big bands and ended up doing records with titles like *Here’s Looking Up Your Hatch*. And there was the much younger pianist and comic Rusty Warren putting her *Knockers Up!* and singing *Songs for Sinners*; but as Warren herself has pointed out, she avoided anything explicitly Jewish and found her biggest audiences in the mid-West. “I didn’t do anything ethnic,” she has said. “I wanted to talk about sex, and being Jewish had nothing to do with it” (Interview).

Also playing Jewish audiences was Patsy Abbott, the former Goldie Schwartz who dabbled in sexual innuendo in clubs in Miami Beach and Vegas and on LPs like *Suck Up You’re Behind* and *Have I Had You Before?*, but who was also wholesome enough to star on Broadway in Mickey Katz’s cute 1950s Yinglish revue *Borscht Capades*, and as a result was too much of a nice girl for
Williams’ taste. In 1947, Abbott was already heralded by Billboard as “a heftyish lass with a big pair of pipes” whose material was “mostly pops” (“Nightclub Reviews”).

Perhaps the most successful of all the bawdy broads of the 1950s and 1960s was Totie Fields, who might have been roughly the same size as Williams, but she was also too nice of a girl. Fields, who got her start as a tummler (= emcee) in Boston strip clubs, rarely did material that was sexually explicit; she stopped at her body and its weight, just safe enough to make her a regular on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, where she appeared over twenty times throughout the 1960s. There was nothing “nice girl,” or as Fields liked to joke about herself “adoooorable,” about Williams, which is in large part why she never appeared on a single TV talk show. TV was where decency reigned and Williams was an architect of the indecent. Or as she liked to say, “If it’s long enough, hard enough, in far enough, it’s in decent.”

But Williams started her Miami Beach show with a nod to the woman who is probably best known of all the bawdy broads of the 1950s and 1960s, her “mother,” Belle Barth, who was only three years older than Williams but had helped blaze the trail that made Williams’ career possible. By the time Williams records *A Trip Around the World is Not a Cruise*, Barth—who grew up in East Harlem as Annabelle Salzman—was already notorious as not just the dirtiest “freaky broad” around, but as possibly the dirtiest comic, period. Lenny Bruce, who became synonymous with sick and dirty humor, opened for Barth early in his career and is rumored to have complained that while everyone was talking about how dirty and sick he was, it was really Barth who was the sickest of them all. Barth, who Walter Winchell dubbed the “Hildegard of the Underworld,” was a self-awarded MD, “a maven on dreck,” an expert on excrement, and as a result, was arrested and fined on lewdness charges in 1953, and was sued numerous times, including a million dollar lawsuit by two schoolteachers (the claim: Barth’s routine damaged their mental and sexual health). No surprise that she was banned from radio and TV. Like Williams and Abbott, she cut her chops in the Sour Cream Sierras of the Borscht Belt vacation hotel circuit, but eventually found a home in the 1950s and 1960s in what can be labeled “the Dreck Circuit,” the chair and banquette stuffed nightclubs and cabarets (where as Barth liked to joke, the bar was often the stage). From Las Vegas to NY to Miami Beach, these clubs were a home-away-from-home for Barth and Williams: The Roundtable, The Thunderbird, Nero’s Lounge, Harry’s American Showroom, The Red Room, Joe’s Lounge for Lovers, The Sans Souci. Barth
recorded nine albums over the course of five husbands, and all of them were recorded live at various clubs on the Dreck Circuit.²

The crew of freaky broads may not have reached the commercial peaks of their mainstream male contemporaries (Jack Benny, Milton Berle, Mort Sahl, Shelley Berman), but they certainly enjoyed relatively successful careers. Barth reputedly sold over two million albums and even once played Carnegie Hall. Williams allegedly sold over a million, took home an average salary of $7,500 per week, and enjoyed an eighteen-year run as the main attraction at the Place Pigalle. “I don’t mean to be vulgar,” Barth quipped in one of her LP titles, “but it’s profitable.” In fact, when she wasn’t vulgar, she wasn’t as profitable (I Don’t Mean To Be Vulgar). In a 1961 live review of one of her shows at the Roundtable, Billboard worried that a cleaned-up act would mean lower sales:

Belle Barth is a curious anomaly in the disk business. She has sold close to 300,000 records on the After-Hour label but has yet to appear on any best-selling record chart. Her material is blue, and in many towns district attorneys or vice squads have raided her act or kept her records out of stores, or removed them from under the counter. This may be the reason why in her first New York appearance in 10 years . . . she is playing it so Snow-Whiteish . . . that she hasn’t any act all. . . . Someone has pulled her claws. . . . You could bring your 13-year-old daughter and not worry about Belle making her blush. . . . Belle, where is thy sting? (Rolondtz)

What was the nature and draw of Barth’s comic sting? Who were these non-Snow-Whiteish women, these middle-aged comic “Jewesses” with a mike in one hand and a drink in the other, and why have their contributions to post-WWII popular culture and Jewish American entertainment gone so unheralded? Perhaps one reason is that Barth and Williams challenged available genre expectations. They were neither fully comics nor fully singers. As women who talked and joked openly about sex, who made their weight and size central parts of their routines, and who portrayed themselves as unassimilated Jews still connected to their immigrant pasts, they challenged the accepted expectations of Jewish female civility. They were neither the stereotypical “Jewish wife” nor were they the “Jewish mother,” let alone “the Jewish-American princess.” They were, to borrow Kathleen Rowe’s helpful framework, “unruly women,” working-class architects of the piano bar grotesque and yet also the acknowledged queens of the cabaret carnivalesque, who translated the classic comic grotesque realism of “the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and reproductive organs” into the domestic lexicons and relationship dramas of
post-Word War II Jewish life (Rowe; Bakhtin 21). “Have I got big baytzim?” Williams asked her audience at The Cabaret (referring to her breasts as balls). “The knish (her vagina), that I’ll never see.” Or as Barth said of a former husband, “I divorced him because he was indifferent—I didn’t know which way to turn.”

Nancy Walker and Zita A. Dresner have suggested that it was male stand-up comics like Lenny Bruce who moved comedy away from the safe and antiseptic “domestic humor”—housewives, suburbia, kids, in-laws—that dominated American comedy of the 1950s, but it was actually female comics like Barth and Williams who were breaking open these comic molds of domesticity and replacing them with new models of Jewish female performance, all done under the radar of mass cultural visibility (Walker and Dresner). It was something Bruce himself was even aware of, claiming in his autobiography How To Talk Dirty and Influence People to have learned all of his dirtiness, all of his appetite for sexual humor and commentary, not from any male father figures but from his neighbor Mrs. Janesky, a middle-aged widow who was friends with his mother and who always had talcum powder caked between her breasts. It was Mrs. Janesky who was a trove of “erotic folklore,” a spout of “hoary hornisms,” who taught a young Lenny what a bidet was (How to Talk Dirty 1).

In 1959, Time magazine ran a feature article on “The Sickniks,” a new school of “sick” comics who “joked about father and Freud, about mother and masochism, about sister and sadism. . . . They attacked motherhood, childhood, adulthood, and parenthood” (“Nightclubs: The Sickniks”). Yet it was a profile of an all-male crew of comics—including Sahl, Bruce, and Jonathan Winters—whose “social criticism laced with cyanide” was a “symptom of the 20th century’s own sickness.” Barth and Williams (or any other woman, for that matter) went unmentioned, even though they were practicing their own brand of sickness—perhaps too heavy on the vulgar, too light on the cerebral for Time—that was offering an explicitly gendered after-hours social criticism of Jewish life and identity. Jews were having sex but not talking about it. “Square broads” were being cheated on by Jewish husbands with a rolodex of prostitutes, the same Jewish husbands who only talk to their wives during sex “if there’s a telephone handy” (Williams, Bagels and Lox). It’s a brand of comedy that contemporary comics like Joan Rivers and Sarah Silverman are as clearly the inheritors of, as Barth and Williams were of the legacy left by early 20th century greats like Fanny Brice, Belle Baker, and Sophie Tucker. Together their work points us toward a deeper, more nuanced understanding of what Barry Sanders might call a “subversive history” of Jewish-American laughter,
only here the rebel fools and clever clowns are women, and it’s their jokes and their songs—and their laughter—that are doing the humiliating.

2. LISTENING FOR GENDER, LISTENING FOR RACE
It might seem surprising to find Barth and Williams included in a volume dedicated to Jews and popular music. Yet their comedy was based in piano-driven songs and comic ditties as much as sit-down joke telling, which makes their recorded output equally crucial to what Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker have called “listening for gender,” a theoretical and critical invitation they apply to jazz but that works equally well here (208). What does it mean to “listen for gender” in the history of Jewish-American musical performance? Both Barth and Williams began their careers as singers, not comics, and neither performed without piano-players by their side. In the case of Barth, her most frequent piano accompanist was Margie Sherwin, who was often a featured part of her live act as both a protagonist and the butt of many of her jokes. Barth claimed to have been the first singer to popularize Russ Morgan’s 1944 song “You’re Nobody ’til Somebody Loves You” and both women filled their live routines with snippets of songs, be it Williams’ renditions of “Hava Nagila,” “Great Balls of Fire,” and “Joe and Paul,” or Barth’s takes on “Won’t You Come Home Bill Bailey,” “Birth of the Blues,” and “Hello, Dolly.” Of the latter she said, “My words don’t sound like this,” before adding her own line to the song: “Take her empty laps fellas.” On her album Belle Barth at Las Vegas: The Fabulous 5AM Show, she does a full performance of Gene Austin and Roy Bergerè’s 1924 vaudeville staple “How Come You Do Me Like You Do” (delivered in a boogie-woogie barrelhouse growl with winking emphasis on the words “come” and “do”), as well as musical impressions of George Jessel, Al Jolson, and Sophie Tucker.

It is perhaps Tucker—the celebrated Russian-Jewish immigrant singing star and self-declared “Last of the Red Hot Mamas,” who was not afraid of comic detours and who famously pushed the limits of female sexuality, sexual discourse, and corpulent Jewish female body politics throughout the first six decades of the twentieth century—who comes the closest to being the most obvious aesthetic forbearer of both Barth and Williams. Her song “Nobody Loves a Fat Girl But Oh How a Fat Girl Could Love” was an early precursor of much of Barth and Williams’s material, and as early as 1911’s “That Last Soul
Kiss,” she pushed sex past innuendo: “Sip the honey divine, for a long time/One, two, and three/Now, longer/Four, five, and six/Still longer, honey/Seven, eight, nine/Oh, oh, babe.” Tucker is the unofficial “unkosher” godmother of the women Sarah Blacher Cohen has described as “brazen offenders of the faith,” singers and comics who broke with prescriptions of modesty and kosher cleanliness and expectations of how Jewish women should sound—that is if they should make a sound at all (in the Talmud, “a woman’s voice is a sexual enticement,” and is therefore something that, like the woman’s body, is dangerous and disruptive when not controlled) (Cohen 105). Barth and Williams had voices like Tucker: big, brassy, deep, loud, and thanks to too many cigarettes, gruff and gravelly. If “the Jew’s voice” was a marker of racial difference for Jewish men in the Gentile imaginary, the Jewish woman’s voice also became a marker of gendered difference as Jewish men imagined them. In this respect, Tucker was one of the first successful twentieth century entertainers to use the Jewish female voice as a transgressive tool (Gilman). As Barth and Williams would do in her wake, Tucker sang about and celebrated her weight (“I Don’t Want To Get Thin”), her sexual prowess (“There’s more shmaltz to sizzle when I turn the heat on”), and on songs like “Mister Segal, Make It Legal,” spoke openly about extramarital affairs and sexual promiscuity.

Tucker began her career in burlesque and vaudeville, alongside a cadre of fellow Jewish women singers and comics—Fanny Brice, Rhoda Bernard, Anna Held, Nora Bayes, Belle Baker, among them—who were likewise re-scripting the rules of performing in regard to race, ethnicity, and gender on the American popular stage. These women belonged to the tribe of “rank ladies” that M. Alison Kiebler has written about, women who helped vaudeville disrupt “19th century doctrines of domesticity, passivity, and passionlessness” (12–13). Vaudeville stages, in the midst of blurring hierarchies of class and taste, gave voice to a crew of “wild women” who operated beyond the bounds of accepted ideals of feminine behavior and beauty by expressing their sexual desires, mocking male authority, bragging about being divorced from their husbands, or celebrating themselves as fat, dark-skinned or “too mannish” (Kiebler 14). Jewish women in vaudeville added ethnic otherness and immigrant ghetto pasts to this equation of wildness. One critic called Belle Baker “a raven-haired, big-eyed, Jewish ‘Momma’, who used to sell lemonade at a penny a drink in New York’s Delancey Street” (Merwin 31).

This performance tradition perhaps received its best unofficial anthem in Fanny Brice’s 1909 performance of the Irving Berlin number “Sadie Salome, Go Home,” which she sang in a thick, put-on Yiddish accent. Written in the
spirit of the racy turn-of-the-century Salome dance craze (inspired by Oscar Wilde’s 1893 play), the song introduced the world to Sadie Cohen who wants to make it on the stage as a Salome dancer, much to the chagrin of her husband Mose:

Sadie Cohen left her happy home/ To become an actress lady/ On the stage she soon became the rage/ As the only real Salomy baby/ When she came to town, her sweetheart Mose/ Brought for her around a pretty rose/ But he got an awful fright/ When his Sadie came to sight/ He stood up and yelled with all his might:/ Don’t do that dance, I tell you Sadie/ That’s not a bus’ness for a lady!/ Most ev’rybody knows/ That I’m your loving Mose/ Oy, Oy, Oy, Oy/ Where is your clothes?

In previous work, I have attempted to outline a tradition of Jewish performance and masquerade (or better, a history of Jewish performance as masquerade) through the vaudeville type of “Abie Cohen,” a Jewish mask that Jewish performers have taken on and off throughout twentieth century entertainment (“‘Abie the Fishman’”). But it wasn’t just the Abie Cohens who were negotiating Jewishness through the popular arts, it was the Sadie Cohens as well—the Sadie Cohens who brought their Yiddish accents and Lower East Side mannerisms into vaudeville and burlesque houses, leaving their husbands behind while seeking stardom on the stage as exotic-Semitic Salomes. When Brice sang “Sadie Salome,” she said it was a tribute to all the women she knew growing up. “I saw Loscha of the Coney Island popcorn counter and Marta of the Cheeses at Brodskey’s Delicatessen,” she said. “And the Sadie’s and ‘the Rachels and the Birdies with the turnover heels at the Second Avenue dance halls. They all wielded together and came out staggering true to type in one big authentic outline” (Merwin 33). Barth and Williams are direct descendents of this Sadie Cohen lineage, working-class women born in the same kinds of neighborhoods as Brice, though they were, proudly and defiantly, not the Salome type. Proof that Tucker was not the last of the red-hot mammas, they were latter-day Sadie Cohens who wanted to be on stage as Sadie Cohen. They divorced their fair share of Moses and in middle age were not about to give up the freedoms of the nightclub.

By inserting Barth and Williams into the historical record of Jewish American music, my hope is to also highlight their participation in what I’ve written about previously as “the audio-racial imagination”—the extent to which racial and ethnic meanings are embedded in sonic and musical performance—or what Ron Radano and Philip V. Bohlman have similarly explored as music’s
role in the “racial imagination” of modernity. As they put it, “The imagination of race not only informs perceptions of musical practice but is at once constituted within and projected into the social through sound” (Kun, *Audiotopia*; Radano and Bohlman 5). The musical comedy of Barth and Williams converts the social contexts of post-World War II Jewish life—lingering notions of Jewish difference and otherness, the continuing pull of assimilation and the desire for invisibility into American whiteness—into a very particular set of sounds that merge the aesthetics of Yiddish theater, vaudeville, and burlesque with those of African-American blues and cabaret culture.

In some sense, Barth and Williams had more in common with blues singers like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith and Black “chitlin’ circuit” comics like Moms Mabley than they did with any other of their Jewish contemporaries. Their singing styles borrowed heavily from early twentieth century African-American blues shouters and barrelhouse singers, while they both were also fluent in the stylistic vocabularies of the Jewish blackface songbook of plantation lullabies (both could easily slip into hyperbolic minstrel dialects). Daphne Brooks has rightly criticized the racialized “masculinism” in rock music criticism that devotes extensive attention to the investments of white male artists into the innovations of black male artists, while ignoring similar patterns among white and black women, “at the expense of producing more nuanced, heterogeneous tales of racial and gender collaboration and identification in popular music culture” (Brooks 55). Barth worked closely for a time with veteran black jazz trumpeter Cootie Williams, who served as her musical director, and often joked that she was once a member of the well-known black group, the Clara Ward Singers. Barth’s resonance within black comic and musical aesthetics was so much a part of her persona that when a play about Barth’s life debuted last year in Chicago, she was played by an African-American actress.4

As was always the case throughout the twentieth century, blackness was a way for Jews to negotiate their relationship to whiteness (which Barth clearly understood when she would sing “I Wish I Was in Dixie” in Yiddish or “The Birth of the Blues” in mock Al Jolson plantation vocalese). Pamela Brown Lavitt has argued that “coon shouting” was an effective mode of performance for many early twentieth century Jewish American women singers who instead of outwardly performing as Jews, could perform through the masks of black cultural types; and similarly, Kiebler has argued that vaudeville women used racial dialect comedy and blackface singing as a kind of “comic license” to adopt “uninhibited physical styles” (the black Mammy was often a favorite mask for large Jewish women who could not be “themselves” without it)
“If I Embarrass You, Tell Your Friends”

(Lavitt; Kiebler 112). Tucker is again the classic example here. In an oft-cited passage from her autobiography, she recounts having to black up in order to be seen and being told by the promoter at the 125th Street Theater that she was “too big and ugly” to perform without blackface: “The crowd out front will razz her. Better get some cork and black her up” (Some of These Days 33). While Barth and Williams were not blackface singers—in fact, they were more like Jolson’s Jewish mother in the Jazz Singer (assuming she had walked out on the family, looking for a new husband) than his fantasy black Mammy—they did carry on the tradition of “unruly” Jewish women, portraying both black stereotypes and actual black cultural aesthetics. They performed what Maria Damon has called “Yidditude” in her work on Lenny Bruce, Mezz Mezzrow, and other male Jewish figures who used blackness as a home for alternative Jewishness, “a perceived opportunity for self-regeneration for Jews as creative non-participants in mainstream culture.” For Bruce, she writes, “the jazz world offered a model of masculinity for Jewish men that enabled difference without weakness.” I would further suggest that in the 50s and 60s, Barth and Williams were engaging with black culture and black comic aesthetics alongside their Borscht Belt training in order to enable their own difference to be perceived without weakness (Damon 167).

Off the Record

The careers of Barth and Williams—as well as those of Abbott and Warren—have been virtually erased from most histories of Jewish entertainment and popular culture. As Paula E. Hyman, Joyce Antler, Riv-Ellen Prell, and Miriam Peskowitz have all pointed out, the “master narrative” of modern Jewish identity has been one rooted in the experience of Jewish men and in an accepted masculinism that has gone unmarked and too infrequently analyzed as the source of Jewish history’s “engendering.” Barth and Williams tackled that masculinism and called attention to just how “engendered” Jewish history has been through their embrace of the vulgar, their celebration of a Jewish femininity based on dreck, and a reluctance to give Jewish men too much credit in the bed or in the boardroom. If the “Jewess” already represents “womanhood gone awry,” as Carol Okman has written, a counter-figure to idealized American femininity, then Barth and Williams only add to the representational “gender trouble” that Jewish-American stage women pose by being awry gone awry—loud-mouthed and brash Jewesses eager to flaunt their Jewishness and their
mockery of feminine gentility. Amy-Jill Levine has drawn a distinction between “the Jewess” and “the Jewish woman,” the latter being domesticated and socially safe, the former historically a transgressive figure that represents a sexual threat—from the New Testament up through the films of Woody Allen—who is both more and less than “woman” and more and less than “Jew.” For Levine, this makes the Jewess an “ideal sign for conveying cultural anxieties” and, I would add, an ideal target for marginalization in dominant histories of cultural production and performance.

The entire era of Jewish female performance they represent (the transition from early twentieth century vaudeville and 1930s and 1940s Catskills performance to the glory days of stand-up in the 1970s) and the entire tradition of Jewish female performance they embody (one that stretches from saucy vaudevillians and burlesque queens up through Barbra Streisand and Sarah Silverman) has been left as a barely acknowledged footnote in many leading histories of American and Jewish comedy. Even a recent documentary on Jewish women comedians, 2007’s *Making Trouble: Three Generations of Funny Jewish Women*, skipped over them entirely, never even mentioning them as forerunners and trailblazers for better-known comics like Rivers and Silverman. While some of Wallis’s material has been compiled on a greatest hits CD by her family, not a single LP by Barth, Williams, or Abbott has been made available in any digital format, a circumstance which, if not remedied, will virtually guarantee their gradual erasure from the living, historical record.

The songs and comedy of Barth and Williams fit squarely in the tradition of “klezmerical” creativity and innovation that Jonathan Freedman has argued is a driving force behind modern Jewish-American culture. For Freedman, there are three principal ways in which Jewish artists, intellectuals, and entertainers in the twentieth century have responded to their various social constructions and representation in American life: they contest images created by others, they internalize images created by others, and they project those images created by others onto others. In pursuing one or all of these routes, Jews have transformed “the ways in which Americans imagined otherness itself . . . the specific contours that other Others took in the unfolding ethnoracial drama of the 20th century U.S” (6). Barth and Williams certainly engaged all three of these strategies and their comic songs and after-hours one-liners can be read as parody-performances of otherness, stage shows that turned the othering of the Jew and the othering of the Jewish woman into an othering of America writ large. Like their 1950s contemporary Mickey Katz, they refracted America’s othering of the Jew into a Jewish othering of America. “Oh give me
a home, where the buffalo roam,” Barth liked to sing, “And I’ll give you a home full of pishartz” (My Next Story Is A Little Risque). The double move here is important. On the one hand, there is a playful Jewish refusal of the mythic Western frontier that is so central to the shaping of Anglo-American identity and patriotic citizenship and on the other there is a playful refusal of gendered Jewish domestic norms, with Barth defying the expectations of the traditional balabusta, the good Jewish home-maker who runs a good, clean household. Like Roy Rogers and Gene Autry, like Cary Grant and Myrna Loy, Barth also has a home on the range, only hers is Jewish and it’s full of piss. This is just one example of how in the space of their LPs and in the space of their nightclubs, the dominant values, mores and customs of middle-class American citizenship—and the lengths to which so many upwardly mobile Jews would go to pursue them—were lampooned rather than celebrated. Once you took a seat at the foot of their stages, the world of images and representations you belonged to and the drama of ethno-racial otherness you were laughing along with, was one that Barth and Williams were controlling and staging themselves.

So much of that laughter was about public shame—comedy as embarrassment. The affective power of Barth and Williams came not only in their explicit embrace of sexual discourse but also in their use of jokes and songs as weapons of public shaming (after all, Barth called her first album If I Embarrass You Tell Your Friends). For Barth, there was power in embarrassment, in revealing that sex was not just about silence or speech, but also about an entire psychology of affect and identity, one that she could pass on to women in her audience. “Write it down, honey,” she’d tell women at her shows after delivering a good put-down or piece of sexual advice. “I’ll wait.” It makes their work an important addition to the history that Donald Weber has charted as “the genealogy of Jewish affect,” a genealogy he uses to measure the extent to which Jewish life in America is always haunted by ethnic and racial ghosts of the past and has always entailed negotiation with civility (4–5). Revelations about sex and desire, of course, were always linked to revelations about ethnicity and race, about Jews laughing about other Jews, laughing about themselves as Jews. Their shows were musical comedy as a kind of public bio-politics—routines that were all in some way about “coming out,” something that could be done more easily in the safe shadows of an after-hours club. In this environment they could depict themselves and the women in their audience as open Jews who could also be desirous (and desired) women.

While Rusty Warren made the expression of sexual desire and agency the crux of her routines, most notably in her hit song “Bounce Your Boobies,”
and frequently told interviewers that she existed because she was saying things about sex that women were afraid to talk about, Barth and Williams took it further, or in Warren's own words, they were “vile” and “they always went for the gut” (Interview). For them the point was not simply to talk about sex or say the unsaid, but to re-think sex through affect and shame, through embarrassment and disgust. It was precisely this kind of thinking that was being pursued in the mid-1950s by the psychologist and personality theorist Silvan Tomkins in his four volume work *Affect Imagery Consciousness*. In their recuperation of his work for postmodernist and queer theory, Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank write that for Tompkins—and I would add for Barth and Williams—“sexuality is no longer an on off matter whose two possibilities are labeled express or repress . . . its link to attention, to motivation, to action, occurs only through coassembly with an affect system described as encompassing several more, and more qualitatively different possibilities, than on/off” (Sedgwick and Frank 504). Weber’s work on Jewish affect and Tomkins’ work on shame are crystallized in the work of Barth and Williams, who use comedy and music to explore the coassemblies of Jewishness, affect, and shame, a performative system that is as much about personality drives as it is about ethnic and cultural identity formations.

3. JEWISHNESS AT 5 A.M.
Unlike so many of their contemporaries in mid-century Jewish entertainment, who made various negotiations with the assimilationist demands of mainstream television, radio, and popular music, Barth and Williams engaged in constant “antic-Semitism.” That is, they made their Jewishness and their connections to Yiddish and immigrant pasts central parts of their routines. Much like the musical parodies of Mickey Katz that transformed the pop charts of the 1950s into a Yinglish wonderland of Jewish misadventures, their LPs and live performances are models of “out” Jewish performance, or what David Marc has dubbed “Jewing-out” (36). I see Barth and Williams in alliance with a definition of Jewishness that Joseph Litvak, inspired by Hanna Arendt’s writings on parvenus and pariahs, has described as “a signifier for the pleasure of the pariah amid the deadly seriousness of nations and races: the comic pleasure of relinquishing or refusing the dubious privilege of national and racial dignity and belonging, by ‘losing oneself in identification with the Other’” (31). In his
work on testimonies before the House Un-American Activities Committee, Litvak identifies sycophancy as an unfortunate tradition of mid-century Jewish performance: the stool-pigeon, the informer, as the model of how Jews become upstanding citizens. “Hollywood’s purge of Jewish communists, and its parade of Jewish informers,” he writes, “taught every Jew in America how to become a model citizen, the cooperative witness. Starting with the blacklist, and continuing to this day, the Jewish-controlled media in the United States stage nothing less than the Jew’s disappearance: the Jew’s disappearance, that is, into just another American” (224). And yet at the very moment that Jerome Robbins named names and at the very moment that Marjorie Morningstar, on the page in 1955 and the big screen in 1958, was America’s greatest proof that nice Jewish girls could become nice American girls, Barth and Williams were refusing sycophancy, refusing disappearance. Barth told the women in her audience “there are only two words you need to know in the Yiddish language: gelt and shmuck. If a man doesn’t have any, he is” and Williams called herself a “lusty mammele” before closing her show with straight renditions of “Hava Nagila,” “Sholem Aleichem,” and “Dayenu.”

For Barth and Williams, the nightclub was not just the site for their performance of Jewishness, it was the performance itself, the space that made their music and comedy possible. Nowhere else could a Jewish woman in her forties and fifties insult upwardly mobile Jewish men, joke about her piano being older than her vagina (“this box is older than mine” Barth would say while dusting off the piano), sing about the virtues of douching with Sprite over 7-Up, and generally claim the club as a safe space for frank and explicit female sexual discourse that she controlled and managed. Barth and Williams had axes to grind with both men and women—the men who held them down, the women who let them, the men who pretended not to cheat, the women who pretended to be prudes, the pathetic men with all the power, the pathetic women who hadn’t realized that it was they who actually had the power—and the clubs were the only places they could have their say. The lounges and ballrooms of The Catskills—so crucial to the evolution of twentieth century Jewish entertainment and creativity—was ultimately too family-oriented to play completely blue; and while Milton Berle and Sid Caesar were able to get in a few off-color Yiddishims here and there, TV and radio were ultimately training grounds for mass cultural morality and suburban domesticity. Broadcast media were not a venue where Barth could joke, “You show me an Italian who isn’t talented and I’ll show you a Jewish broad who hasn’t got a diamond”; or for Williams to
answer the question “Who’s the father?” with “How do I know? You think I got eyes in the back of my head?”

The after-hours club as a site of feminist dreck-performance was crucial as a space for “unruly women” like Barth and Williams. In Kathleen Rowe’s definition, the “unruly woman” is “an ambivalent figure of female outrageousness and transgression with roots in the narrative forms of comedy and the social practices of carnival” (30). Unlike the femme fatale or the madonna, the unruly woman traffics in the grotesque and the excessively parodistic and is happy to offend anyone in her path. They are not permitted a “proper place,” either due to an excessive body, excessive speech, excessive self-mockery, excessive sexuality, or above all, due to an association with the “dirt” of bodily life. Yet the after hours night club became the place for women not in their proper place; improper places for improper women that became the stages for the performance of unruliness, where their laughter and their bodies and their sharp tongues were the star of the show, offering up, in Rowe’s words, “new ways of thinking about visibility as power” (30). While most of the clubs were owned by men, Barth eventually bought her own, Belle’s Pub, in the lobby of the Coronet Hotel in Miami Beach. Patsy Abbott did the same, opening Patsy’s Place just down the road. Belle’s Pub became not just Barth’s home base, a guarantee of her control over her own material and her own profits, but a place where she could manipulate the crowd at will. Most famously, she installed microphones in the men’s bathrooms so while male audience members left her show to use the toilet, their private business was made public in the club.

While the Jewish after-hours club circuit had its roots in the Jewish world—vaudeville, the Yiddish theater, the Catskills—it also had much in common with various club circuits in African-American history: the hush-harbors, places where black could retreat to conduct their own forms of religion on antebellum plantations, the “chitlin’ circuit” of black performance venues that prospered during the first half of the twentieth century, the buffet flat parties of the Harlem Renaissance where big and bawdy blues singers like Bessie Smith provided the soundtracks to private “AC/DC” worlds of poly-sexual freedom and “deep sea diving,” and the inter-racial brothels and speakeasies that Kevin Mumford has written about as “interzones,” spaces of vice that became vital spaces of cultural imagination and sexual, racial performance. Similarly, late night piano bars like New York’s The Roundtable (where Barth recorded My Next Story Is A Little Risque in 1961) became the secret chambers of female Jewish performance, essential cultural laboratories, at a time when, as Leslie Fiedler famously quipped, Zion had become Main Street, and Jews were
among the most visible protagonists of American pop culture. *Fiddler on the Roof* was a national hit on Broadway, Saul Bellow and Philip Roth were on the best-sellers list, *Exodus* won an Oscar, and, as a result, there were limits to the types of Jewishness that could be marketed and sold. Barth and Williams were a tough fit for the era of philo-Semitism, Old World *shtetl* nostalgia and Jewish heroism; their acts made jokes about Tevye's daughters as town sluts, they went to Israel to listen to groups called The Fourskins, and when they joked about knishes, it was their own, not the ones that Alexander Portnoy practiced on.

In terms of musical comedy, they were also a far cry from the middle-class normativity that Allan Sherman so frequently parodied throughout much of his best-selling recorded output in the 1960s. Marc Cohen has convincingly argued that Sherman's parodies of Broadway songs “exposed the ethnic nak edness of Broadway’s Jewish creators, expelled them from the eden of pure Americanness, and led them back into the exile of Jewishness” (54). While this may be true, many of his songs' leading protagonists, especially the women, were plucked straight from the limiting middle-class dramas of suburban life. Sherman’s Zelda might have run off with the money and the tailor, but Yetta was happy right next to Al watching TV: “Al n Yetta couldn’t have it betta/ Their TV set has remote control/ So they both can stay in bed/ With Frankenstein and Mr. Ed.” Barth and Williams made fun of the Als who came to their shows and they were themselves more like Zelda than a TV-addicted Yetta. You can bet that, if Barth and Williams were in bed, they weren’t watching *Mr. Ed*. The inherent celebration of Jewish upward mobility in Sherman’s music was mocked in the routines of Barth and Williams who instead reveled in an embrace of downward mobility, exploiting the pleasures and fears of not making it in America. The dreck circuit was not where sex happened, but it was where sex was talked about, where sex was freed from the ascendant middle-class mores of post-World War II suburbia and allowed to get vulgar again, and in doing so, through the laughter and jokes and songs of the piano bar grotesque, it re-ethnicized, even re-racialized, these women as other than white—too Jewish, too black.

That Barth and Williams sang songs and told jokes full of sexually suggestive, often explicit, content as divorced women with no children, flew in the face of dominant notions and representations of Jewish women as domestic goddesses who maintained the order and civility of middle-class suburban life. As Giovanna Del Negro, one of the few scholars to write about their legacy, has argued, Barth and Williams not only aired the dirty laundry of Jewish gender politics in public, but by releasing their live shows on LPs that could be played
back on living room hi-fi stereos in New Rochelle, they “pierced the boundaries of ethnic privacy by bringing the decidedly public setting of stand-up comedy performance into the living room” and thereby “created a semi-public context of performance in the heart of the domestic sphere” (188). In that sense, Barth and Williams might be seen as the black sheep antitheses of Molly Goldberg, the iconic Jewish mother made famous by Gertrude Berg on radio, television, and on LP from the 1930s through the 1960s. If Molly was the “delibinized Jewish mother,” to use Roberta Mock’s phrase, who protected and ran the assimilating nuclear family, then Barth and Williams were familial threats, vulgar interlopers who refused the norms of post-World War II domestic order and American civility (101). If Berg was, in the words of Donald Weber, “the symbol of the emerging Jewish middle-class,” then Barth and Williams represented a turning-back to the working-class repressed; they were thus living reminders of Jewish blue-collar, immigrant pasts. Berg wouldn’t have been caught dead at a Barth or Williams show, where “the sober sociology of suburban Jewish life” was put on comic trial every night (Weber 143).

Paula E. Hyman has shown how historically Jewish women have been used as tools of Jewish acculturation, in particular behavior, etiquette, and comportment as “central markers of the successful adaptation of Jews to bourgeois culture” (155). In their roles as homemakers, mothers, and wives, Jewish women kept the domestic order through performances of “bourgeois prescriptions of appropriate female behavior”; and as such, they were key participants in Jewish assimilation into the mores of mainstream civility. When Jewish male anxiety over assimilation reached a fever pitch, the stereotypes of the Jewish American princess and the Jewish Mother took over, which as Roberta Mock and Riv-Ellen Prell have argued, were projections of male fear of failed acculturation and civility. George Segal tried to kill his Jewish mother in the 1970 film Where’s Poppa and Mel Brooks suggested that all Jewish mothers secretly wanted to sleep with their sons when he appeared on The David Susskind Show (“How to be a Jewish Son”). Enough people bought Dan Greenburg’s manual on Jewish male suffering, How To Be a Jewish Mother, that it became the top non-fiction book of 1965, and in 1969 Philip Roth created in Portnoy’s Complaint a whole novel around a son’s complaint about his sexual neuroses that all lead back to his mother. By calling themselves “mothers” on two separate LPs, Battle of the Mothers and Return of The Mothers, Barth and Williams were clearly referencing these portrayals but they were also turning them on their heads—they were mothers without children who turned the idea of being
powerful, castrating monsters into a new comic subjectivities of empowerment.

Their routines are remarkable for just how far outside they were of these tropes and contexts that have become synonymous with American Jewish entertainment. And yet their anomalous characteristics only serve to remind us of the representational strangleholds of Jewish femininity in the US, a history of policed behaviors, policed language, and policed bodies, both from within the doctrines and codes of Judaism and Jewish culture, and within the rules of an America that all too often exercised its anti-Semitism on the bodies of Jewish women—from the Jewish American Princess in the 1960s and 1970s (after all, a man actually used the “Jewish Princess defense” in court as a rationale for murdering his wife [Frondorf]) or the teens and ’20s when working class immigrant Jewish girls on the lower east side were either meant to be the demure, sexless, and quiet vessels of assimilation or were turned into the vulgar, humiliating scapegoats that made male assimilation possible. “The old women are hags; the young, houris,” Jacob Riis famously wrote of the women of “Jewtown” in 1890’s *How The Other Half Lives*, “Wives and mothers at sixteen, at thirty they are old.”

Barth and Williams made careers out of parodying and rejecting both of these options. In many ways, their mix of piano-bar song and shtick echoed back to the “ghetto girls,” as Prell has dubbed them, of the early twentieth century Jewish press, those uncouth working-class Jewish girls whose alleged loud voices, bodily vulgarities, and sexual and stylistic excesses made them impossible—even dangerous—ingredients in the American melting pot and thereby sources of shame for fellow Jews eager to move up the social ladder of American taste and culture. Instead of rejecting the ghetto girl, Barth and Williams resurrected her in order to celebrate her, flaunting their excesses, flaunting their differences, and finding their strength and pleasure in just how far they were from the mannered and genteel aspirations of vanilla middle-class Jewishness (Prell 21–57).

4. MRS. STRAKOSH WAS WRONG

In 1964, just three years after Pearl Williams made her recording debut and the same year that Belle Barth released *Live at Las Vegas*, Barbra Streisand starred as Fanny Brice on Broadway. As I have alluded to above, Brice’s story was a key
part of the story of Barth and Williams, but where they liked to shame others as part of their act, Brice liked to shame herself to please others—playing up what Stacy Wolf has called “her difference from other women” (253). Her relentless self-ridicule over her big nose, her Semitic face, and her bad looks, guaranteed her a kind of mainstream success in the Ziegfield Follies that would never become part of Barth and Williams’ plans. In a sense, they were less Fanny and more Mrs. Strakosh, one of the portly, older Jewish women who always hangs around the saloon run by Fanny’s mother. In the film version of *Funny Girl*, Mrs. Strakosh was played by Mae Questel, who was also the voice of two characters on extreme ends of female representation: the cartoon vamp, not only Betty Boop but also Mrs. Portnoy, the vengeful fictitious Jewish mother of Philip Roth’s Alexander Portnoy. On the cover of the 1969 album *Mrs. Portnoy’s Retort (A Mother Strikes Back)*, she brings castration fears to life as she cuts through a round of salami with glee. Mrs. Strakosh is part of the film’s first musical number, “If A Girl Isn’t Pretty,” in which she and the other women tell Fanny to give up her stage dreams because she isn’t pretty enough, that to be on stage you have to be something for men to look at and with her looks and her nose, she had no shot. Fanny of course proved them wrong, and so did Belle Barth and Pearl Williams, but in a different way. Mrs. Strakosh was wrong. The choice for girls who aren’t pretty—for Jewish girls with Jewish noses, for Jewish women who are forty or fifty, not thirty or twenty, who speak with accents and use Yiddish—the choice was not between being a housewife or a Broadway star, between expressing Jewishness and repressing Jewishness, between expressing sexuality and repressing sexuality. There was a third way, the way of the risque and the grotesque, the way of the nightclub and the piano lounge, where freaky Jewish broads could stop trying to be red white and blue American stars and just play it blue—telling the truth, hurling insults, and laughing at the world in front of a room full of strangers until five in the morning.
Notes

1. For a sampling of Wallis’s songs, see Ruth Wallis, Boobs: Ruth Wallis’ Greatest Hits.
2. Barth recordings include: The Book of Knowledge; I Don’t Mean to be Vulgar, but it’s Profitable; If I Embarrass You Tell Your Friends; In Person; My Next Story Is a Little Risque; Wild, Wild, Wild, Wild World!
3. For an excellent introduction to Tucker’s recordings, see the recently released Sophie Tucker, Origins of the Red Hot Mama 1910–1922. Tucker recorded up through the 1950s, including her 1956 LP Bigger and Better Than Ever.
5. Both Barth and Williams were also long rumored to be lesbians and bi-sexual and both made frequent allusions in their acts to having sex with women. Regardless of their off-stage lives, on-stage they were certainly “queer” Jewish women in that their acts were constantly de-naturalizing heterosexuality, critiquing the assumed superiority of the nuclear family, and gleefully referencing and advocating a host of sexual desires and acts that go beyond the bounds of sanctioned straight behavior. “Did I ask you if you’re sitting with your wife?” Barth asked an audience member on her At Las Vegas album. “She’s great, I balled her before you did. In fact, I’m gonna be on the Dyke Van Dick show.”
6. Barth and Williams figure marginally, or not at all, in the following: Nachman; Berger; Epstein; Adams; Unterbrink; Horowitz; and Collier and Becket.
7. I thank Gayle Wald for this insight.
8. Dan Greenburg’s book How To Be A Jewish Mother became an LP of the same title featuring The Goldbergs star Gertrude Berg as “the Jewish mother.”


———. *I Don't Mean To Be Vulgar, But It's Profitable.* Surprise, 1961.

———. *If I Embarrass You Tell Your Friends.* After Hours, 1960.


———. *Belle Barth at Las Vegas.* 1964.


———. Personal interview. 18 Jan. 2009.


