The Bad Girls of Jewish Comedy: Gender, Class, Assimilation, and Whiteness in Postwar America

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In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the bawdy humor of Belle Barth, Pearl Williams, and Patsy Abbott, a trio of working-class Jewish stand-up comics, enjoyed enormous popularity in the United States. Today largely forgotten or dismissed, they released bestselling LPs known at the time as “party records,” which, though intended for respectable, middle-class consumers, were often sold under the counter and banned from radio airplay. With their earthy, old-world sensibility and strategic use of Yiddish, these middle-aged performers railed against societal mores that told them to be quiet, well behaved, and sexually passive. During the period in which these comics flourished, many working-class Jews experienced upward mobility and suburbanization, acceptance as racial whites, and substantial pressures to assimilate into mainstream American culture. This essay explores the ways these comics placed Jewish identity and highly sexual subject matter at the center of their humor and, in so doing, negotiated issues of gender, Jewish ethnicity, class, and whiteness in the 1950s.

In their heyday, the albums that these comics recorded proved enormously popular with American audiences across the country. Belle Barth, who released eleven LPs with sexually suggestive titles such as *If I Embarrass You, Tell Your Friends; I Don’t Mean to Be Vulgar, But It’s Profitable* and *This Next Story Is a Little Risqué* reportedly sold two million records in her career, while Pearl Williams, who released seven albums including *A Trip around the World Is Not a Cruise, Bagels and Lox,* and *Pearl Williams Goes All the Way,* sold over a million copies—or even more, given the recording companies’ habit of undercounting sales in order to avoid paying taxes and sharing profits with artists.¹ The least prolific of the cohort, Patsy Abbott, recorded only two albums, *Suck Up, Your Behind* and *Have I Had You Before.*² By the conservative estimates of critic Michael Bronski, “the three performers may have released . . . more than five million records.”³ At the peak of their careers, these comedienne’s played to sold-out crowds in the nation’s top venues. Barth headlined at Carnegie Hall, Caesar’s Palace, and El Morocco and owned her own club, named Belle Barth’s Pub. Williams, who commanded a $7,500 weekly salary, regularly
performed at luxury hotels and swanky clubs like the Fontainebleau, Maxine’s, the Hotel Windsor, Chez Paris, and Place Pigalle. After a successful run as a comedic singer on the stage and in the club circuit around the country, in 1958 Abbott opened her own establishment, Patsy’s Place.

The trio performed regularly across the United States and Canada during the first decades of their careers, but audiences in the 1960s associated them most closely with Miami, and their success in this city was directly tied to the social transformations of Jewish American life that occurred after World War II. During this period, over 100,000 Jews migrated to Miami, which they jokingly dubbed the “Southern Borscht Belt”; many more went there for their holidays. In Florida’s tourism capital, the trio found lucrative work catering to vacationing Jewish suburbanites, retired Jewish snowbirds, and transplanted second- and third-generation Jews who nostalgically longed for the homes that they had left behind.

It was not only their nightclub performances that linked the trio to these social transformations; the emerging genre of the party album did so as well. After the war, an increasing number of returning Jewish servicemen with specialized skills in technical fields or management moved to the suburbs. Transmitting the sounds, images, and narratives of the older, working-class Jewish culture directly into the new suburban living rooms, the party albums that many of these recently married ex-soldiers enjoyed offered fresh representations of Jewishness and American life. The listeners were far away from the ethnic enclaves of their childhood, and many found in these albums a way of feeling connected to their old community. Played in the home but during social situations that were not fully private, these albums encouraged their audiences to think about the cultural transitions between the ethnic and the mainstream, the urban and the suburban, the public and the private. Thus, on the nightclub stage or the living room stereo, the humor of Barth, Williams, and Abbott addressed conflicting attitudes about gender, sex, intergroup relations, and the politics of whiteness and ethnic integration in post–World War II American society.

BELLE BARTH

Although not as widely recognized as other female comics of her era, Barth had an enormous influence on the stand-up comics who followed her. According to Linda Martin and Kerry Seagrave, she was the “first to use the format of short jokes, as opposed to the monologues of [Beatrice] Herford and [Ruth] Draper.” Born Annabelle Salzman in New York City in 1911, Barth, who took her first husband’s name, started her career doing imitations of “Al Jolson,
George Jessel, and ‘devastatingly funny take-offs’ of strippers Lili St. Cyr and Gypsy Rose Lee.” She grew progressively raunchier from the 1930s onward, doing more and more risqué songs and X-rated material. Called the female Lenny Bruce, even though she preceded him, Barth periodically battled the obscenity laws in court. Banned from radio and television, she spent most of her career performing in nightclubs and hotels, until her death in 1971.

In many ways the bawdy and irreverent Barth emulated the style and attitude of the female vaudeville performers she had seen at the B. F. Keith Theater while growing up in East Harlem during the 1920s. Dubbed the “Hildegard of the Underworld” and the “Doyenne of the Dirty Ditty,” Barth played the piano and sang in a gravelly voice. Mixing the red-hot mama style of performers like Sophie Tucker with that of more demure entertainers like Carol Channing, she often punctuated her sexually explicit jokes with a child-like manner of speech reminiscent of Betty Boop. Barth’s live LPs featured scatological and sexual jokes and covered topics like hemorrhoids, rectal exams, baby’s feces, douching, masturbation, and intercourse. Excerpts from her party album _I Don’t Mean to Be Vulgar, But It’s Profitable_ give an idea of the style and content of her comedy. Describing the mayhem that ensues when a kosher chicken is snuck into the movies, Barth said:

There was a woman, she was so kosher that she didn’t trust the cook in the kitchen. She sent her husband to a poultry market to bring her a live chicken. She wanted to kill it herself. On the way to the kitchen, he puts it under his arm, then he wanted to go to the movies, so he stuck it in his pants. You know, the chicken had to breathe. Two women sat next to him. One nudged the other, she said, “Sadie, what’s doing?” Sadie, referring to the bulge in his pants says, “What are you so nervous. You’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all.” The other says, “But this one is eating my potato chips.”

In another joke from the same LP, an unfortunate hunting accident turns even more absurd by the medical advice given to the victim.

Here is a story about two men who went hunting. One was [a] little cross-eyed hunter. Shotgun went off, hit the guy in the _citriolle_—it’s Italian for cucumber. He had nine holes in it. He ran to the doctor. The doctor got scared and says, “I think I’ll send you to Schwartz.” The guy says, “Who’s Schwartz, a specialist?” Doctor says, “No, he’s a piccolo player, who’ll show you how to finger it.”

In material such as this, Barth transgressed the boundaries of female decorum, performing the kind of absurd, sexual gags usually reserved for male comics, and Jewish identity is introduced with a light and skilled touch. In the chicken joke, Jewish dietary laws provided the impetus that set the comic situation in motion. Likewise, Barth allowed the hunter joke to subtly reference the ten-
sions surrounding ethnic upward mobility by making Schwartz, who bore an iconically Jewish name, appear to have the high status profession of a medical specialist, when in fact he was a lowly musician.

Although Barth filled her comedic repertoire with absurdly sexual or scatological jokes, such as the line about the precocious child who complains about having to “share a breast with a cigar smoker,” she interspersed her bawdy routines with material that directly confronted issues of discrimination and assimilation. In *I Don’t Mean to Be Vulgar, But It’s Profitable*, she said:

[This is a story] about the Jewish man who wanted to check into the Kennelberry [Kennelworth] Hotel in Miami Beach, and the clerk says, “It’s restricted.” The guy says, [with Yiddish accent] “Who’s a Jew?” “If you’re not a Jew, you wouldn’t mind answering three questions,” the guy says. “Fire away.” [The clerk] said, “Who was our Lord?” He says, “Jesus Christ.” “Where was He born?” “In a stable.” “Why was he born in a stable?” He says, “Because a rat bastard like you wouldn’t rent him a room.”

Barth then continued, “Think if I get a nose job, I can work in the Kennelworth?” On the album, the nightclub’s live audience applauded aggressively at the remark and one fan replied, “Touché.” Barth added, “You know what kills me, the rich Jews never know what I’m talking about [with that joke]. Yeah, you want to hear that, go to Miami Beach. ‘Very wealthy,’ she [a rich Jew, with a Yiddish accent] says. ‘I’m very sorry, I don’t know what you’re talking [about].’ I says, ‘Where did you get the accent?’ She [the rich Jew] says, ‘I travel.’”

Here, Barth relayed an unambiguous commentary on the cultural amnesia to which some upwardly mobile Jews had succumbed: even as she attacked the antisemitism of the day, she skewered those wealthy Jews who eagerly abandoned their immigrant past. In this bit, she develops a wealthy Jewish character who has tried to obscure her working-class roots. Her accent, this woman claims, does not come from something as lowly as immigration, long a mark of marginalization for diasporized Jews, but from the archetypical form of leisure-class activity, tourism.

PEARL WILLIAMS

The daughter of a Russian immigrant tailor, Pearl Williams (née Pearl Wolfe) was born in 1914 in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. A former legal stenographer, she developed into an aggressive, zaftig, husky-voiced, piano-playing comic with a penchant for double entendres and naughty stories. According to *Miami Herald* reporter Andres S. Viglucci, the twenty-three-year-old Williams, who at the time had aspirations of becoming a lawyer, unexpectedly got
a very different big break in 1938 during her lunch hour, when she played piano for her friend’s singing audition. The agent was apparently so taken with her musical talent that he hired her on the spot, and “that same night she went on stage at the Famous Door, on 53rd Street, opposite Louis Prima’s Band.” Although she had no intention of going into show business, the $50 weekly salary paid her to perform was almost three times higher than what she earned as a legal secretary. Williams, who came from a poor family, found the lucrative pay too attractive to turn down.

Williams eventually graduated from performing at Maxine’s in the Bronx to headlining at the Aladdin and the Castaway Hotel in Las Vegas, as well as in numerous clubs in Detroit, Chicago, Toronto, and Montreal. After regularly doing winter gigs in Miami, Williams eventually bought a home in North Beach Miami; there, she spent the last eighteen years of her career as the main attraction performing to houses packed with busloads of Jewish retirees from nearby condos. After forty-six years of nonstop entertainment, Williams finally retired at age seventy, and she died in 1991 following a battle with heart disease.

Williams’s repertoire of jokes ran the gamut from tame to risqué to sexually explicit, and in many of her albums, mild one-liners existed directly alongside X-rated material. Like Barth, Williams broached topics not permitted on television: breasts, pubic hair, ejaculation, douches, knish [vagina], shlong [penis], and cunnilingus. Deftly appropriating and inverting the canonical wife joke genre so common among male Catskill comics of the period, Williams often made the man the butt of her humor. In A Trip around the World Is Not a Cruise, she nonchalantly said, “There’s a woman ironing her brassiere, and her husband says, ‘What the hell are you ironing that for. You don’t have anything to put in it.’ The wife replies, ‘I iron your shorts, don’t I?’”

At her raunchiest, Williams could compete with any male comedian: in Second Trip around the World, she says, “Did you hear about the broad who walked into a hardware store to buy a hinge and the clerk says, ‘Madame, would you like a screw for this hinge,’ and she says, ‘No, but I’d blow you for the toaster up there.’” In her album A Trip around the World Is Not a Cruise, she joked, “Tonight I think I’ll go home and douche with Crest. It will reduce my cavity by forty percent.” Touting the sexual prowess of French-Canadian men in Bagels and Lox, she said, “Are[nt] those French-Canadian men gorgeous? They’re the only guys who know what your belly is for. That’s where they leave their gum on the way down. Oh that’s nothing, then they put ice in your knish; they eat you on the rocks.”

In performance, Williams typically underscored her punch lines with brief piano interludes and hummed recognizable tunes, such as “Hava Nag-
ila.” Her racier anecdotes, however, were ironically demarcated by demure sighs and a nasal, almost innocent laugh. Indeed, her ironic sentimentality and melodramatic interpretations of standard Jewish popular songs, obscene puns, and energetic musical interludes capitalized richly on her “hyphenated” Jewish American identity and the broad humor of the 1930s Yiddish theater and Borscht Belt tumblers [social directors]. Her comedic toolkit contained a number of “definition” jokes (“Definition of indecent? If it’s long enough, hard enough, far enough, then it’s in decent”) and sexually suggestive rhymes (“[sings] By the sea, by the sea [C-]U-N-T”).

Williams filled her comic narratives with frustrated Jewish characters who would speak with thick accents and joyfully mete out their own brand of social justice. One bit in Second Trip around the World begins with a Jewish character who makes a long-distance phone call:

All of sudden, in the middle of his conversation—he’s talkin’ about a half a minute—he’s cut off. [Yiddish accent] “Hello operator, give me back the party.” She says, “I’m sorry sir, you’ll have to make the call over again.” [He says], “Operator, I’m entitled to three minutes. I was only talkin’ half a minute. Give me back the party.” She says, “I’m sorry, sir, you’ll have to make the call all over again.” He says, “Operator, what do you want for my life? . . . I got no money, I’m broke, give me back the party.” She says, “I’m sorry, sir, you’ll have to make the call over again.” He says, “Operator, you know what, take the telephone and shove it you know where,” and he hangs up.

Later, two large men from the phone company arrive and tell him that they will take away his phone if he does not call and apologize to the operator. He makes the call, saying:

“Give me Operator 28. Hello operator, remember me? Two days ago I insulted you. I told you, take the telephone.” And she says, “Yeah.” He says, “Well get ready. They’re bringin’ it to you.”

For middle-aged Jews in the 1950s, this comic narrative of working-class resistance would resonate with the well-known “Cohen” albums, a hugely popular series of comedy records released by Joe Hayman in the 1910s and 1920s. In Williams’s routine, the Jew’s frustration is transformed into retribution, and the shame of accented English becomes an auditory icon of toughness and guile.

Gentile oppressors often took the form of belligerent Texans in Williams’s stories, and these aptly illustrate the aggressive style of comedy with which the cohort became associated. In one story from Second Trip around the World, an exhausted Jewish traveling salesman is lucky enough to get the last room in a hotel. Shortly thereafter, a large Texan man bullies him into giving up the
room. As the Jew leaves the hotel lobby, he swears that he will get his vengeance. The next day, the Texan wakes up with a big heavy load on his chest. He takes a look. There’s a manhole [cover] on his chest. He starts laughing and says, “Ah the little Jew wanted to get even with me.” Gets up out of bed, picks up the manhole cover, walks up over to the window of the twenty-second floor, flings it out of the window. He’s walking back to the bed, laughing. He gets back to the bed. There’s a big note waiting for him on the bed. It says, “And now, you big bastard, you have fifteen seconds to untie the cord that’s attached to your beardzal [testicles].”

As she did with the “Operator 28” narrative, Williams drew on well-known comic stereotypes to symbolically invert the power relations of American society. Here, the hulking Texan stands for the arrogance of mainstream white America, and the marginalized figure of the scrawny Jew uses cunning to outwit and emasculate him.

**PATSY ABBOTT**

Raised in the Bronx, Patsy Abbott, née Goldie Schwartz, was born in 1921 and started her career as a vocalist with the Teddy King Orchestra. Journalist Gail Meadows reports that Abbott credited her training to the time she spent at the Catskills resorts, where entertainers presented fresh shows every night. Early in her career, she “sang popular songs to tourists, gamblers, and mobsters” at the Paddock Club in New York, and she performed for the military with the USO during the war. [15] Although her costarring role in the hit musical *The Borscht Capades* made her the hit of Broadway in 1951, a series of illnesses abruptly cut short her rise to stardom. While she recuperated in Miami, she started doing one-woman shows at resort hotels, and eventually she decided to purchase her own nightclub, which she named Patsy’s Place and which she ran from 1958 to 1965. After suffering two strokes, Abbott finally retired from show business, but she continued to work locally as a theatrical coach. In 1988, “she wowed the crowds again with [the show] ‘The Golden Girls of Music and Comedy’ . . . which became the longest, continuously running musical revue in South Florida’s history.” [16] She died at the Miami Jewish Home and Hospital in 2001, days before she was to stage a show with fellow residents.

Both *Have I Had You Before* and *Suck Up, Your Behind* captured the comedienne’s ear for dialects, impromptu flair for a salty line, and gusto for singing lighthearted, lusty musical numbers. In her stage act, Abbott warmly dispensed philosophical wisdoms in a faux high-class voice and showed off her sparkling evening gowns. She would frequently ask young married couples
embarrassing questions. In her first party album, recorded live at Patsy's Place, she asked a bride, “How long have you been married?” The woman replied, “A week.” “May I ask you a personal question?” Abbott then asked, “Is it nice?” and, when the woman answered, “Yes,” Abbott asked, “What do you have to compare it to?”

Her jokes dealt with married couples lacking in sexual excitement, with the limitations imposed by Jewish holidays, with infidelity, with birth control. She discusses marital boredom in *Have I Had You Before*, “There’s a couple married for fifteen years. . . . Wedded boredom—but you know, bored or not you got to make hay. Comes time to make hay, and they’re in bed, one hour. Nothing happens. Finally she looks at him and says, ‘What happened, you can’t think of anybody either?’”

Commenting on Jewish strictures on marriage in *Have I Had You Before*, Abbott said:

In [the] Jewish religion, you can’t get married when you want to, right? See, you just go through the holiday. They got you by the holidays. Now they just go through *Tishabov*. That holiday you can’t get married. And you can’t go swimming. It’s ridiculous that you can’t get married, and you can’t get wet. It is. Then you have a holiday like *Pesach* and *Shavues* where you can’t get married, and you can’t have any music played. And you can’t get married without an organ. And if you’re not Jewish, darling, it’s Lent, right, and you can’t get married. You gotta borrow somebody else’s. That’s why they got you by the holiday.

Insinuating the topic of sex into a discussion of religious holiday practices was indeed quite taboo, and Abbott’s elegant demeanor and highbrow accent made the candid treatment of earthy bodily pleasures particularly amusing.

Abbott’s routines conjured up a plethora of recognizable Jewish characters, ones who uttered malapropisms or told cautionary tales about counting their blessings, even in times of economic hardship. The following story from *Suck Up, Your Behind* calls to mind the Jewish stock character of the kvetch, or complainer:

People are complaining with two loaves of bread under one arm. I hear a man goes to temple every single day, and he’s praying to God, and he says [in a Yiddish accent], “God, I’m here every day. Every day, I’m here. I know you by your first name. God. Got no second name. Every day, I’m here. I want you to know I don’t have a job, and my children starving, and my vife is sick. But I don’t mind, mind you. I don’t mind, mind you. But why you see Feldman down the street who doesn’t go to temple, don’t go to church. He’s gotta a mansion, with a Cadillac, with a Jaguar, [stuttering] hees vife with minks, with
chinchillas. Why he got? Why I ain’t got? Why? Why? Why should he have when I ain’t got? Why? Tell me why!” All of sudden there is bolt of lighting and the voice out of the blue says, “‘Cause your nudging me. That means you bug me, man.”

Like many of the trio’s stories, this joke follows the long tradition of what folklorists refer to as “dialect jokes.” Just as such humor may reflect immigrant anxiety about language use and social exclusion, it may also allow third- and fourth-generation ethnics to emphasize their own social mobility and distance themselves from those of the older generation who were less assimilated.

The joke quoted is a particularly striking example of the genre; inverting the traditional stigma associated with the Yiddish-accented kvetch, the joke sets the heavily accented speaker as a traditional loser, only to reveal that the English of God himself is peppered with hip Yiddishisms.

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In the smoke-filled nightclubs of the late, late show, Barth, Williams, and Abbott spoke candidly about sex, cursed in Yiddish, and openly criticized what they saw as the hypocritical values of bourgeois culture. These tough women with working-class roots not only condemned the oppressive gender ideologies of the 1950s but also highlighted the growing tensions that existed both within the Jewish community and between Jews and non-Jews. The trio’s bawdy party records offered the consumers of suburban America an opportunity to enjoy the exciting, uncensored atmosphere of the nightclub while safely ensconced in the privacy of their own living rooms. The recordings represented an alternative to mainstream forms of entertainment, which seldom acknowledged the existence of conflicting attitudes toward gender, sex, and intergroup relations or touched on the politics of ethnic integration. In some ways, these comics can be seen as enacting their ethnic difference for a mass market and helping to make Jewishness more assimilable for non-Jews. But at this transitional moment when Jews found themselves accepted in the American mainstream, these performances of esoteric knowledge also served to reaffirm ethnic boundaries. They cautioned Jews to resist the tide of cultural assimilation and not to fall victim to a false sense of security.

During the period after World War II, Jews saw both upward class mobility and a redefinition of the nature of their identity as white ethnics. As Mathew Frye Jacobson has shown, Jews and southern Europeans were, over time, increasingly seen by mainstream Americans as racial whites marked by a distinctive, nonmainstream ethnicity or religion, rather than as a racial group “less white” than Americans of English descent yet “more white” than African Americans, Native Americans, or Asian Americans. This shift was directly
tied to changes in large-scale American institutions. Before the outbreak of World War II, Franklin Roosevelt’s notion of inclusive nationalism allowed Jews to begin to gain admittance into the public sector and government, and the growing antisemitism of the period led Jews to question race-based definitions of Jewish character. With the reduction of restrictive admission policies in universities and increased entrance into merit- and exam-based professions such as teaching, medicine, and law, Jews entered the middle class in ever greater numbers.

As Karen Brodkin Sacks observes, the “whitening” of Jews continued after World War II; for example, federal assistance programs offered returning Jewish veterans cheap home mortgages, and the GI Bill allowed them to pursue higher education and thus to develop expertise in specialized occupations from which they had been barred and which were in great demand after the war. Although these government programs may seem to speak to issues of class rather than of race and ethnicity, the pervasive discrimination of the day guaranteed the linkage of these forms of identity. African Americans continued to experience exclusion in housing, education, and employment, while such barriers began to fall for Jews. As a result, Jews saw new opportunities for upward mobility that were unavailable to other nonwhite groups, and with this upward mobility came a new sociopolitical climate, reinforcing the definition of Jews as an ethnic rather than a racial group.

Although the comics did not often explicitly discuss race in their routines, we would be projecting contemporary notions of race onto 1950s America if we understood the intergroup politics of the trio’s humor strictly in terms of class and ethnicity. In a period in which notions of race were being contested, the trio and their audience, I suggest, were negotiating whiteness whenever ethnicity and class were on the table.

This is not to say, of course, that class was not the focus of much of their humor. Quick to refresh the memories of successful Jews keen on forgetting the harshness of their working-class immigrant past, Patsy Abbott commonly used “You don’t remember?” as a coda to her jokes. Here is an example from her second album, *Suck Up, Your Behind*:

You pick up the paper, you want to throw up. It’s better [in] the old days. We took the paper, and we put it on the kitchen floor. Remember? Remember when we had wall-to-wall papers? You don’t remember the good old days? You had nothing to eat. Go ahead, remember. The only good thing about the good old days is a bad memory. We used to have a toilet. We used to have a toilet in the hall. Remember the toilet in the hall . . . ? You don’t remember? You was always rich? . . . There’s a man that had a toilet in the hall for years, and he vowed
himself that someday he’d make enough money to have a bathroom in the house. Today he’s a millionaire in Miami Beach. Got three toilets in the house. *Ken nisht geyt.* [To one particular audience member:] That means he can’t have a B.M. He can’t go to the bathroom. I’m explaining, honey. If you listen to me, darling, I’ll explain everything. But if he’s [to another audience member:] busy explaining to you, then you won’t hear me explaining either. Understand? Thank you.

Here, Abbott acerbically reminds Jews that, as Eric L. Goldstein has phrased this, “despite the social and [economic] benefits whiteness has conferred upon them, [they will never] feel the kind of freedom whiteness is *supposed* to offer—the freedom to be utterly unselfconscious about one’s cultural or ethnic background.”

> We know from the recordings that other European ethnics attended performances by the trio, and in many ways the women’s anti-assimilationist message could be viewed as a kind of protomulticulturalism for those who had recently crossed the color line, such as Italian Americans.

Although some second- and third-generation Jewish Americans may have nostalgically identified with the world that these comedienes evoked, many of the non-Jews in the audiences saw Jews as exotic. Jewish women represented a female cultural “other” whose more assertive displays of identity could flourish only in the marginalized atmosphere of after-hours nightclub and underground record labels—even as their male Jewish counterparts tamed their routines and capitalized on their gender privilege to gain greater access to radio, television, and film. In the face of an increasingly sanitized media to which Jewish entertainers were allowed entrance only at the expense of attenuating expressions of their ethnic identity, the adult-oriented party records helped to fill a cultural gap by providing an arena for the expression of an ethnically assertive counterdiscourse. By tapping into an underserved consumer need, the trio helped labels such as Chess, Laff, Surprise, Riot, Roulette, and After Hours carve out a profitable market niche. In so doing, they inadvertently became what Joel Foreman would call “agents of cultural subversion,” and they paved the way for the production and dissemination of cheap media products that deviated from the norm.

Although many Jewish women of childbearing age in the postwar period sought to fulfill themselves through domesticity and grappled with what the Jewish feminist author Betty Friedan would call the “problem that has no name,” lingering antisemitism and the growing vilification of Jewish women as materialistic, guilt-inducing status seekers colored their experience. In such an era of ethnic social exclusion and female scapegoating, these brassy women comics offered Jews a respite from the puritanical values of their middle-class suburban neighbors, whose attitudes told them to suppress their
Jewishness and their desire to be anything other than a housewife. Instead, these loud-mouthed, nonconformist comics did not shy from being “too Jewish.” Even though they challenged the religious tenets of Jewish female refinement and cleanliness—*edelkeit* and *kashrut*—their unorthodox career choices reflected other Jewish traditions of female outspokenness, such as the more egalitarian gender values of East European society, which “reinforced the acceptance of female participation in the world of work and politics.”

These aging “ghetto girls” turned “vulgar, garish, uncultivated . . . plebian ways” into emblems of honor. And their racial ambiguity gave them the license to tackle forbidden subjects. As Ruth Frankenberg’s work on whiteness reveals, although Jewish women are either relegated to the borders of whiteness or marked as racial “others,” they are never viewed as “constitutive of the cultural norm.” Interestingly, their African American counterpart Moms Mabley, a wise-cracking grandmother who lusted after young men, also enjoyed a huge following. Unlike the trio, Mabley made, at the height of the civil rights movement, a successful transition to television, appearing on afternoon and evening slots on the *Merv Griffin Show*, the *Smothers Brothers Show*, and the *Flip Wilson Show*, as well as in a series of specials hosted by well-known celebrities such as Harry Belafonte.

With humor that was more assertive in its politics and franker in its subject matter, the trio had little chance to attain the mainstream success that Mabley enjoyed. The rather unconventional, though affable, role of the grandmother that Mabley embraced on stage was far less threatening to American television viewers than the trio’s aggressively bawdy humor.

But finally, in an era when mainstream stereotypes represented Jewish women as greedy consumers who dominated their husbands and sons, why did this trio of outspoken women hold such appeal? If the Jewish men of the period feared the emasculating power of Jewish wives and mothers, nevertheless many frequented these shows by women who embodied many of the qualities that they resented. In a time when many Jews enjoyed unprecedented financial success but limited social acceptance, jokes at the expense of non-Jews, a core theme in these comics’ repertoire, provided an outlet for the frustrations that male as well as female Jews faced. And, more generally, although the routines about impotence or philandering might deflate the male ego, these comics were motivated less by any desire to castrate men than by the pleasure of “shock[ing] the audience with their naughty Jewish girl” act. Further, these comedienes mocked both Jewish men and Jewish women; male discomfort brought on by the penis jokes was quickly mitigated by the jokes
about women’s sexual dalliances, cavernous knishes threatening to swallow up men, and nouveau riche Jewish wives trying to hide their ethnicity behind expensive minks. In these scenarios, both men and women were ridiculed, and everyone took their lumps.

The women’s negotiation of gender, ethnicity, and class intertwined with their role as transgressive, trickster-like figures. Delivering their humor in the nightclub, a site associated with adult indiscretion, with shows as late as midnight or even four in the morning, targeted to audiences enjoying their annual Miami vacation, the women’s performances took place in liminal spaces that encouraged both transgression and the kind of candid cultural reflexivity that would not have been appropriate in mainstream venues. Further, by reflexively commenting on their own performances with phrases such as “I know I’m weird,” the comics marked themselves, too, as liminal. The scatological references further served to frame their performances as boundary breaking. This helped to prepare the crowd for the outrageous transgressions of gender and sexuality and the occasionally painful reflections on ethnicity and class referenced by their jokes.

Unruly “red hot mamas,” the trio flagrantly embodied the carnivalesque, and in the erotically charged atmosphere of the nightclub they championed the principles of chaos, disorder, and excess, both orally and visually. Confronting the conservative gender ideology of the post–World War II era, they pronounced their refusal to hide at home. They used features of their identities that had been repressed—features such as flagrant ethnic Jewishness and women’s sexuality—as weapons to mock social norms. These lusty, fleshy, obviously menopausal women with sequined dresses and painted-on eyebrows flaunted their girth to mitigate the threat of their jokes. While mainstream 1950s magazines depicted a world of normative sexual relations and bourgeois family life, the emergence of Playboy (first published in 1953) and the release of the Kinsey Reports (in 1948 and 1953) complicated the public discourse about gender and sexuality.32 Thus, far from sleek-looking classical beauties, these outrageously blue, sexually frank performers obviously touched a nerve with many middle-class audiences who longed to escape the unquestioned blandness of their white-collar existence and the climate of cultural conformity.

Relegated to the liminal space of the late, late show, Belle Barth, the self-described “maven on drek,” and her cohort offered many slumming middle-class patrons an opportunity to enjoy the rowdiness of “lower-class leisure” without discernible damages to their reputation.33 Like the abject bodily functions from which polite society averts its gaze, Jews in the white suburbs of America of the 1950s had to hide their working-class roots and sanitize their
ethnicity and difference. Given this context, the trio’s scatological humor, no less than their working-class dialects or omnipresent Yiddishisms, served as a metaphor for the return of the ethnic and working-class culture that assimilating Jews had repressed. Like the joke tellsers that Simon Bronner discusses in his work on anal humor in Pennsylvania Dutch culture, these comics engage in “act[s] of verbal aggression, [symbolically] hurling ‘shit,’ at the establishment that ‘looks down’ upon them like dirt.”

By denuding sex of its seriousness and placing a uniquely female perspective on the subject matter, these brash comics ultimately challenged the male-centered visions of female sexuality that dominated vaudeville, burlesque, and the Borscht Belt. The trio replaced the “badgering mother-in-laws, homely naggers, ball and chain wives, or dumb bombshells” that dominated male comedians’ routines with strong-minded, willful women always ready to offset their opponent with a cheeky remark. Rather than playing the hapless victims of a male comic’s jokes, the trio cast themselves as the instigators of humor and mayhem.

In their topsy-turvy world, annoying men are taunted by menacingly large mammary glands or those all-consuming knishes. Here, indeed, exaggerated female body parts (oversized breasts, buttocks, and vaginas) conspired to ridicule men and render them powerless. By playing on male fears about women’s sexuality and by drawing on comedic devices historically used by male comics to demean women, these comediennes strategically employed the tools of their male-dominated trade to highlight the asymmetries that existed between the sexes. In the work of these talented performers, allusions to orifices and overabundant attributes associated with the feminine form become a source of strength, rather than embarrassment, and terms that had been used to objectify and silence women’s sexual enjoyment served to destabilize the power and privilege exerted by men on the public stage and in the wider patriarchal culture.

The performances of Barth, Williams, and Abbott offer powerful insights not only into Jewish identity but also into class, assimilation, and whiteness. Even as these women highlighted the very real and suppressed cultural differences of Jews in the postwar years, their over-the-top acts also uncovered the constructedness of ethnic and racial identities. In other words, the women’s humor focused on the tensions between being a Jew, with all the distance from mainstream American culture that this implied, and playing the Jew, being white and playing white, being middle class and playing middle class. Certainly, the trio did not perform any type of realistic Jewish identity that they would have embraced off stage: they would not have agreed that Jews were
or should be hypersexual, loud, and crude. To the contrary, these women’s parodies of working-class ethnic identity mirrored the everyday, sometimes strained performances of whiteness that they saw enacted by certain upwardly mobile Jews in the affluent, assimilated suburbs. The trio saw with great insight the constructedness of proper, middle-class white identity for Jews and non-Jews alike.

Projecting their voices into the living room, the trio reminded the new Jewish suburbanites where they had been and brought to light the parts of their audience’s lives that audience members found difficult to express to their neighbors. These comics carried the tensions of Jewish private life into the marginalized public space of the late, late night comedy stage and then returned that public discourse to the domestic realm of the living room stereo, where it could be safely acknowledged. To be sure, their routines were sympathetic to the pressures that Jews faced in the ethnic and class environment of the era. Even as their humor unmasked the constructedness of whiteness and Jewishness, they warmly recognized the social dilemmas that their audiences faced. Seen in this light, their live and recorded performance of ethnic working-class identity highlighted the everyday performance of whiteness that Jews, though no more than white Anglo-Saxon Protestants themselves, engaged.

Acknowledgments

The data for this project come almost exclusively from newspaper articles and writings that I found at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, the Museum of Television and Radio in New York City, and the Historical Museum of Southern Florida. I would like to thank Harris M. Berger, Simon Bronner, and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett for their insightful remarks on earlier drafts of this text.

All albums cited in this article were recorded between the late 1950s and the late 1960s: Belle Barth, If I Embarrass You, Tell Your Friends, After Hours Records LAH 69; I Don’t Mean to Be Vulgar, But It’s Profitable, Surprise 169; and This Next Story Is a Little Risqué, After Hours Records LAH 69. Pearl Williams, A Trip around the World Is Not a Cruise, After Hours Records LAH 70.192; Bagels and Lox, LAFF 127; and Pearl Williams Goes All the Way, Riot Records R309. For more on record company practices, see Ronald L. Smith, Comedy on Record: The Complete Critical Discography (New York: Garland, 1998).
NOTES

2 Patsy Abbott, Suck Up, Your Behind, Abbott LP 1000; and Have I Had You Before, Chess LP 1450.
7 Ibid.
8 Although Barth, Williams, and Abbott owe a great deal to the sexually assertive, self-mocking “red-hot mama” persona that Jewish entertainer Sophie Tucker made famous in the early 1900s, Tucker’s song lyrics and banter, though suggestive, were neither overtly blue nor as sexually aggressive as the trio’s. Although the “red-hot mamas,” too, played independent-minded, feisty older women with voluptuous bodies and healthy sexual appetites and although they used Yiddishisms for comedic effect, the trio were considerably more graphic. The trio also helped contribute to and build upon the Borscht Belt tradition most often linked with Jewish male comics of the Catskills, comedy that was characterized by insults, fast-paced one-liners, and amusing anecdotes about deeply flawed whiners and losers who would persevere, despite various forms of victimization, self-inflicted or externally imposed. Even though these comics are not associated with the hip, new, rebellious, antiestablishment stand-up comedy that emerged in the intimate clubs of New York, Chicago, and San Francisco in the early 1960s, they did in many ways pave the way for it.
10 Viglucci, “Pearl Leaves Her Setting.”
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.; Valbrun, “Pearl Williams.”
13 Pearl Williams, Second Trip around the World, Surprise Records 75.
14 Both examples are from A Trip around the World Is Not a Cruise.
16 Meadows, “Patsy Abbott.”
17 Particularly relevant here is a passage from Pearl Williams’s album Pearl Williams at Las Vegas: “She’s Doin’ What Comes Naturally” (Riot R303), in which the comic engages in a dialogue with Barth, who is in the audience, and a member of the crowd. Describing the damage that the comic and “her mother” Barth could unleash upon the conservative broadcast television of their day, Williams sarcastically howls, “We’re doing
the *Tonight Show*. We really are, honey. Don’t get hysterical. We’re going on television. We’re gonna blow the entire network. She’ll take one end, I’ll take the other end. We’ll bring back radio.” When an audience member brings up Patsy Abbott, Williams dismisses Abbott as merely a “nice girl.” The mere fact that she needed to do so, though, shows how these three were linked in the public imagination.

18 Although such dialect jokes were often seen as insulting to immigrant Jews, as Dan Ben-Amos points out in his 1973 article on “The ‘Myth’ of Jewish Humor” (*Western Folklore* 81: 129–30), “the fact that Jews tell jokes about each other demonstrates not so much [Jews’ alleged] self-hatred as perhaps the internal segmentation of their society.” He writes, “The recurrent themes of these anecdotes are indicative of areas of tensions within the Jewish society itself, rather than the relations with outside groups.”


28 Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans*, 23.


30 A variety of scholars have examined depictions of Jewish women in post–World War II America as greedy, guilt inducing, domineering, and sexually aggressive. See, for example, Roberta Mock, “Female Jewish Comedian,” *New Theater Quarterly* 58 (1999):


36 In *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), Henry Bial explores how Jewish performers manage their ethnic identity by referencing a set of aural and visual cues, cues that are “double coded” (intended to be read differently by audiences of differing ethnic backgrounds). In such a situation, Jewishness is not a question of ethnic or religious affiliations, but a set of behaviors, gestures, and manners that are acted out for viewers who can or cannot, respectively, attend to messages expressing esoteric or exoteric knowledge.