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Jewface. Reboot Stereophonic RSR 006, 2006.

In the millennial era that spawned the website *Jewhoo*, the magazine *Heeb*, and the phenomenon of Borat Sagdiyev, a compact disc titled *Jewface* created by self-described “disaffected Jews”¹ who hear the call of their ancestors in crackly 78s of century-old Tin Pan Alley songs like “My Yiddisha Mammy” should come as no surprise. The CD’s fifteen songs date from the first quarter of the twentieth century, a peak period (or low ebb, depending on your perspective) in American popular entertainment’s trafficking in Jewish, Irish, Italian, German, Chinese, and African American portrayal. The individual songs do not all come as news: a few of them, such as “Cohen Owes Me Ninety Seven Dollars” and “Becky Is Back in the Ballet,” have appeared on other historical recording compilations, but *Jewface* gives them new force as a group whose Jewishness stands in the foreground. We hear them now as the stereotypes—the scheming, argumentative, tightfisted, gold-coveting, mother-loving, suit-tailoring, oy-shouting, parabola-nosed, augmented-second singing stereotypes—have been repossessed and renovated as hip twenty-first century counterculture. It represents a bold and fraught effort whose initial success may be measured by an admiring feature in the *New York Times* Sunday “Style” section and a grade-A ranking, along with new CDs by the likes of Beck and Tom Waits, on rock critic Robert Christgau’s online *Consumer Guide*.²

If the stereotypes nevertheless cause nausea or dizziness please do not use this product, but, as the album’s title suggests, its in-your-face spirit is very much to the point. Presented as the opposite of Jewish self-hatred, the CD’s embracing and flaunting of taboo images and subjects—like the pig on the cover of *Heeb*’s recent food issue—aim to be liberating and empowering, especially when compiler Jody Rosen claims in his liner notes that one of the songs, “When Mose with His Nose Leads the Band” (Example 1 shows the refrain), appears to be the source for the six-note melodic incipit that launches the refrain of our nation’s most sacred secular hymn.



Example 1. Refrain of “When Mose with His Nose Leads the Band,” words by Bert Fitzgibbon and Jack Drislane, music by Theodore Morse (New York: F. B. Haviland Publishing Co., 1906).

¹ Producer Josh Kun, quoted in Alex Williams, “Love ‘Springtime for Hitler’? Then Here’s the CD for You,” *New York Times*, 29 October 2006.

² Robert Christgau, *Consumer Guide*, <http://www.robertchristgau.com/cg.php>.

Rosen's observation that young Irving Berlin made "a habit of interpolating bits of half-remembered songs into his own numbers" reinforces what Charles Hamm has already shown in his edition of Berlin's early songs, whose critical notes include many citations of "quoted material" from a remarkable variety of sources.³ And, although the liner notes do not mention it, the first six pitches of another *Jewface* tune also bear a striking similarity to a later Berlin hit. The verse of "That's Yiddisha Love" (shown in Example 2)—with its minor-mode perfect-fifth leap and scalar continuation—prefigures "Blue Skies."



Example 2. Opening of "That's Yiddisha Love," words and music by James Brockman (New York: M. Witmark & Sons, 1910).

Are these just remarkable coincidences? Are they echoes from subconscious memory? Or might they be in-jokes that nobody gets anymore?

We will never know, but the producers of *Jewface* intend it not just to be mined for nuggets of Tin Pan Alley's Golden Age or to be exhibited as a historical oddity in a musical museum, but to be enjoyed—"something you might actually want to throw on at a party," according to the mission statement for their record company, Reboot Stereophonic.

Perhaps that's why the first track is about a party. "Pittsburgh, Pa." (1920) envisions a lively gathering of people invited only because their name ends in "-berg." Even Abie Cohen—a stock character who pops in and out of *Jewface* material like a minstrel brother of Sambo⁴—may not be admitted for lacking the proper syllable in his surname, and his presence causes a big fight. The song features a common musical trajectory in Tin Pan Alley's Jewish vocabulary. The refrain's main phrase features unmistakably Jewish musical clichés, with an upward leap of a fifth and a prominent sharp fourth, shown in Example 3, from the 1919 sheet music:



Example 3. Refrain of "Pittsburgh, Pa.," by Harry Ruby, Joe Burns, and Murray Kissen (New York, 1919).

Yet its prevailing Yiddishkeit ultimately yields to a sprightly and raglike, that is to say *assimilated*, final phrase. The singer, Monroe Silver, splits the song down the middle and inserts a comic monologue, a surprisingly regular occurrence in the era's recordings that remind us of the vaudevillian roots of the material, which in

³ *Irving Berlin: Early Songs, 1907–1914*, ed. Charles Hamm, Music of the United States of America 2, Recent Researches in American Music 20 (Madison: A-R Editions, 1994).

⁴ Always one to pick up on a trend, Irving Berlin adopts Abie Cohen as the protagonist in such songs as "The Yiddisha Professor" (1912) and "In My Harem" (1913).

this case forms a tour de force of an extended pun on “gold” as a reason to celebrate, as a common name, and as a thing of value to covet. Although a transcription cannot capture the fascinating nuances of pacing and inflection in Silver’s delivery, it nevertheless reveals a slice of Jewish comedy whose descendants would include Lenny Bruce and Larry David:

Oh, listen people, I forgot to tell you it was a golden anniversary. Steinberg bought the gold watch and tried to sell it to the host. Greenberg said he couldn’t come without bringing something in gold, so he brought his friend Goldberg. Mrs. Lindberg brought a goldenrod. Mr. Hamburg brought a bowl of goldfish. Mr. Ginsburg went up to the hostess and said, “Here is a little present for you that will be very useful.” And he handed her a box of Gold Dust . . . powder. Mr. and Mrs. Weissberg, who gave the golden anniversary party, was [*sic*] not married fifty years. They were only married five years—but they needed the gold.

Transcending unsavory ethnic particularity, marriage is a subject that a remarkable number of songs develop, with special emphasis on what Rosen identifies in the liner notes as the “intermarriage fantasy”—a phenomenon that would echo in the sentimental comedy *Abie’s Irish Rose*, which ran for a then-record five-plus years on Broadway in the 1920s, and in *West Side Story*, whose original “East Side” conception posited a Jewish-Italian mix. *Jewface* gives us samples of the widespread Jewish-Irish encounter in such numbers as “Marry a Yiddisher Boy” (1911) and “That’s Yiddisha Love” (1910), a song (with its “Blue Skies” adumbration) about a young Jewish man named Moritz who wants to marry a girl named Maggie. His mother protests that “Maggie’s not a Yiddisha name,” and his father gets mad and delivers the practical and decidedly unromantic advice that comprises the chorus:

First you find a lady that is smart in the head,
Then you ask her pa how much you get when you wed.
Never mind the good looks or the fancy pompadoodles,
See that she can cook and make gefilta fish and noodles.
Ask her if she’ll help you when the business goes bad,
If she’ll take in washing, scrub the floor, not get mad.
If she’s honest and frank and has money in the bank,
Oi, oi, that’s a Yiddisha love.

“That’s Yiddisha Love,” words and music by James Brockman (New York: M. Witmark & Sons, 1910).

In the second verse, Moritz learns that his Irish girl spends too much money, flirts with other men, and runs off with an Irish lad, so he repeats his father’s advice in the second chorus. (The quotation, drawn from digitized sheet music available online,⁵ inspires my only quibble with the liner notes: they focus chiefly, and interestingly, on performers but lack the sometimes inaudible lyrics for the songs, all but one of which stand in the public domain.)

“I’m a Yiddish Cowboy” (1908) puts a different twist on the intermarriage fantasy. In it, an unlikely “cowboy” named Levi seeks the hand of a “blue-blood

⁵ Indiana University Lilly Library’s DeVincent Collection, <http://www.lettrs.indiana.edu/cgi/b/bib/bib-idx?c=devincent>.

Indian maiden,” who in turn convinces her father, the chief, to let her marry him.⁶ The musical arrangement delivers a sonic arsenal of ethnic and Old West clichés: tom-tom, horse galloping, whoops, grunts, and the omnipresent “oy.”

In a podcast interview conducted soon after the release of *Jewface*, Jody Rosen stressed the contemporary counterparts of such “fish-out-of-water” nebbishes as Levi in the screen personas of Woody Allen, Larry David, and Ben Stiller.⁷ Indeed, an episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* showed Larry David on his deathbed (prematurely, as it turned out) reminding his agent of a \$5,000 debt—a remarkable echo, aptly adjusted for inflation, of Irving Berlin’s Old Man Rosenthal singing “Cohen Owes Me Ninety Seven Dollars.” Berlin does not give the delinquent Cohen a first name, but you could probably guess it.

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Ken Nordine, *You’re Getting Better: The Word Jazz Dot Masters*. Hip-O-Select, Geffen B0005171-02 (2 CDs), 2005.

Reissue collections address their buyers with a dignified, curatorial rhetoric. *The Charlie Parker Dial Masters*, *The Judy Garland Decca Masters*, *The Machito Columbia Masters*—the titles assume a certain form: the imperious definite article, the name of the artist, the recording company, and, at the end, that masterful word, *masters*. Though this only means that the recordings are reissued from the company’s master tapes, a CD with such a title is gravid with implication. What you are holding in your hands is the authorized, authoritative collection of the great artist’s works, the works that have held up for all these years, the works that now, after a long and distinguished career, are assembled in a virtual gallery and laid out before you in an era-defining retrospective exhibition.

Then what are we to make of Hip-O-Select’s Ken Nordine reissue, *You’re Getting Better: The Word Jazz Dot Masters*? Nordine is a hipster’s hipster, a cult figure whose records are treasured by connoisseurs of pop culture esoterica. But he did not define his era, and it did not define him. He is a performing artist of indeterminate medium, all but unknown to the general public and not well-known among musicians either. Most of his career has been in television and radio, where he lent his dark, agile bass voice to numberless commercials. One of the pleasures of discovering his word jazz recordings is the moment of recognition: “Hey, it’s the Taster’s Choice guy!” Jazz,

⁶ For more on the Jewish-Indian encounter on the American musical stage, see Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

⁷ Jody Rosen, podcast interview by Sara Ivry, *Minstrel Show*, 13 November 2006, <http://www.nextbook.org/cultural/feature.html?id=455>.