A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song

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American Jewish History, Volume 87, Number 2&3, June and September 1999, pp. 243-245 (Review)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/ajh.1999.0015

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Jeffrey Melnick’s *A Right to Sing the Blues* is a relentlessly argued volume that seeks to expose the “myth” that Jews in the pre-1940s popular music business had a natural affinity for interpreting and producing Black music. Instead, Melnick sets forth the thesis that Jews like Irving Berlin and George Gershwin skillfully manipulated their own racial identity to maximize their marketability as purveyors of popular song, elbowing out “real” Black Americans in the process. The primary techniques that musical Jews used to perform this artistic transmogrification was to “sacralize” jazz music by dousing it with a superficial cantorial style and to shroud themselves in Jewish spiritual melancholy. In this way these Jews gave the savvy (but false) impression that the liturgical music of the Jewish past led them to write and perform adaptations of similarly pathos-ridden Black popular music. “As with later attempts to interpret the presence of Jews in the civil rights movement as the natural yield of Jewish prophetic tradition, the process of sacralization in popular music operated from the assumption that Jewishness had immense characterological significance even for the most secular Jews” (p. 169). The worst part about this whole charade, according to Melnick, was that it hid the financial opportunism that really powered the drive of Jews toward Black musical forms. “The religious overtones of this expressive mode deflected notice from the profit-making interest of the secular Jew in the music business and from the loss of piety of contemporary Jews” (p. 175).

Melnick is a keen interpreter of popular culture, but he relies mostly on rumor and innuendo to bolster serious charges of Jewish exploitation. Without any hard analysis of record company data or discussion of the economic plight of performing artists during the period under discussion, Melnick reiterates and extrapolates from a string of unverified charges: that the Jewish Witmark Brothers stole an original melody from Ernie Hogan, giving it the degrading title “All Coons Look Alike to Me”; that Isidore Witmark refused to publish the works of Will Marion Cook after Cook demanded a recalculation of his royalty statement from the 1898 musical *Clorindy*, which Witmark produced; that “rumor had it that Fats Waller once sold a song to Irving Berlin for $25” (p. 34); that Irving Berlin stole the melody for “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” from Scott Joplin; and that Irving Berlin kept “a little colored boy” in his closet, who wrote many of his songs. In the case of Berlin, Melnick applies a
lethal dose of postmodern interpretation. In a 1916 article, Berlin responded to the rumor of the “little colored boy” by saying “If they could produce the negro and he had another hit like ‘Alexander’ in his system, I would choke it out of him and give him twenty thousand dollars in the bargain” (p. 117). For Melnick, though, whether the phantom “little colored boy” ever really existed is less important than the rumor’s symbolic “truth.” “Whatever his [Berlin’s] personal relationship to this postulated ghostwriter . . . the central message of this anecdote is that Jews were unfairly exploiting African Americans and their music” (p. 118).

When it comes to American Jews, this book, as with the bulk of the “whiteness” scholarship it is a part of, veers wide of the mark. Whiteness scholarship seeks to demonstrate that the mobility of European immigrant groups resulted primarily from the putative benefits of achieving white racial status, a status unavailable to Blacks. According to Melnick, the sacralization of jazz by Jews “did not highlight intergroup contact—for good or bad—but instead effaced African Americans [and] contributed to the rising status of Jews as they became white ethnics” (pp. 188-189). But focusing on the uniformity of white privilege and Black deprivation requires that any exceptions to the rule be ignored or underemphasized. And American Jews, in their attraction to Black cultural forms, in their vocal empathy for Blacks, and in their well-documented political alliance with them, have been exceptional. In short, by interpreting the peculiar interaction of Jews and Blacks as nothing but typical white exploitation and Black victimization, whiteness scholars fail to capture one of the most interesting and revealing things about American Jews in the twentieth century.

To make his argument that “by denying African American artists the fruits of their labor in urban spaces, Jews had come to function as oppressors” (p. 151), therefore, Melnick is forced to downplay the abundant evidence that Jewish involvement in popular music may have benefitted Blacks. The Black writer James Weldon Johnson, for one, welcomed Jewish involvement in the entertainment industry as a way to achieve Black acceptance and equality. Eminent scholars of culture like Ann Douglas, Gerald Early, and Gary Giddins point out that the kind of cultural “larceny” Melnick accuses the Jews of flowed in both directions, with Gershwin and other Jewish composers providing abundant creative material for Black musicians. No lesser luminaries than Miles Davis, Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, and Nina Simone have recorded the songs from *Porgy and Bess*. As Albert Murray wrote in his landmark book *Stomping the Blues*, “the endless list of outstanding blues-idiom compositions derive from the songs of Jerome Kern, Irving
But Melnick will have none of this. “It is clear,” he writes, “that poaching was widespread and mainly benefited those already in positions of cultural power. In the world of Tin Pan Alley this was usually, but not always, Jews.” (p. 56)

What about the fact that George Gershwin helped Fats Waller land an important job with CBS, or that Artie Shaw gave Billie Holiday a job with his band in 1937, or that Benny Goodman’s was the first racially integrated big band, or that Harold Arlen wrote much of the music that made Cab Calloway a star at the Cotton Club? Melnick is equally dismissive. “African American musicians operated in a musical world in which they felt unable to protect the fruits of their labor-especially from the Jewish composers and publishers of Tin Pan Alley” (p. 56).

Ultimately, by insisting that white exploitation, rather than Black/Jewish cultural affinity, is the most salient fact of Black/Jewish musical interaction Melnick misses an opportunity to address the most important questions stemming from Jewish involvement in Black cultural production: if Jews were drawn to Black music merely for social and economic advance, why weren’t other immigrant groups similarly drawn? Why, as Stephen Whitfield writes in his book In Search of American Jewish Culture, did Jews, more than any other group of whites, feel “most intensely the magnetic pull of Black culture?” Why was no other “phenotypically Caucasian minority . . . so willing to construct out of its own historic rejection and humiliation a bridge to the African American experience?” While opportunities for exploiting Blacks undoubtedly existed, why was it the Jews who seized upon Black music as the vehicle for becoming white? And why was it they, to paraphrase Whitfield again, who believed that the way to secure a place at the top of the racial hierarchy was to pretend to be at the bottom? These, it seems to me, are the fascinating questions raised by the cultural interaction of Blacks and Jews. Those seeking to discover the workings of white racism through the portal of Blacks and Jews will inevitably come up short.

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2. Stephen Whitfield, In Search of American Jewish Culture (Hanover, NH, 1999), pp. 142-43.