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Coffee with the Cantor Jewish Influence on Secular Society

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Jewish Influence on American Music

From JNS.org

Jewish influences on 20th-century American music

By Robert Gluck/JNS.org

Discuss these names—Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Jerome Kern, Benny Goodman—with author/musician Ben Sidran, and you will understand how being Jewish, the Jews' hunger to fit in, and their ease at doing so helped shape both the core of their identity and many of America's greatest songs.

"Jews in America were able to access a popular imagination because they were, in some ways, experts at being outsiders wanting to be accepted. They had a long tradition of this. A lot of people have speculated that this kind of alienation is a key component to the Jewish identity, and without it, the Jewish identity might well be in jeopardy," Sidran, author of "There Was A Fire: Jews, Music and the American Dream," tells *JNS.org*.

Experts cite Irving Berlin, born Israel Baline in Russia in 1888 before being raised on New York City's Lower East Side, as the first major Jewish songwriter to influence the American songbook. Berlin rejuvenated music from the bottom up, according to Sidran.

"An important part of the story is the connection of the Jewish tradition to the popular tradition," Sidran says. "The initial connection was with the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment period of 18-19th century Europe), the popular Yiddish writers in the Pale of Settlement, and how important it was. The Jewish community recognized early on the importance of having the liturgical, spiritual and historical information translated into Yiddish, into the popular language, not just in Hebrew, so that it became a synthesis between the higher aspirations of a culture and the everyday life of the culture. This is one of the things that continues today."

Berlin published his first song, "Marie from Sunny Italy," in 1907 and in 1911 had his first major international hit, "Alexander's Ragtime Band," which sparked an international dance craze in places as far away as his native Russia. Known for writing music and lyrics in the American vernacular (uncomplicated, simple, and direct), Berlin's aim was to reach the heart of the average American, who he saw as the real soul of the country.

During his 60-year career, Berlin wrote an estimated 1,500 songs, as well as the scores for 19 Broadway shows and 18 Hollywood films. "There's No Business like Show Business" and "White Christmas" are among his most famous songs, and his work has been sung and recorded by such renowned artists as Frank Sinatra, Barbra Streisand, Billie Holiday, and Ella Fitzgerald.



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“Only 19 years old, just five years after moving out of the family apartment and onto the streets, Irving Berlin became not just a legitimate American songwriter, but a role model for many future songwriters,” Sidran says. “A man who could neither read nor write music, but who spoke the people’s English.”

Berlin’s father was a cantor, and according to Laurence Bergreen, author of “As Thousands Cheer: The Life of Irving Berlin,” it was singing in synagogue with his father that gave Berlin his musical background. Bergreen notes that Jerome Kern said that Berlin “had no place in American music, he *was* American music.”

“I take that to mean that [Berlin] wrote on so many themes, personal and patriotic, and in so many styles--Jewish, Irish, Italian, romantic, patriotic, Russian, [and] ragtime--that his words and music were deeply imbued in all of American popular music,” Bergreen tells *JNS.org*.

Bergreen says Berlin, like other immigrant songwriters, especially Jewish and Irish, became an adept copycat.

“He could sound like almost any ethnic group you could name,” Bergreen says. “That is revealing of his immigrant origins, and his artistically fruitful search for a musical and a personal identity in the New World. When you compare and contrast his original name, Israel Baline, with the name he took as an adult, Irving Berlin, a transformation but not a disguise, you can see in capsule form how he grew into the artist and icon he became. But throughout his life, he thought of himself, and his friends knew him as, ‘Izzy Baline.’”

Composer George Gershwin called Berlin “the greatest songwriter that has ever lived.” Gershwin himself, according to Sidran, was a “gifted musician who wanted to be part of the Jewish composers in the transitional period, and even considered composing for the Yiddish theater.”

Born Jacob Gershovitz in Brooklyn in 1898, Gershwin began playing piano at age 12. He grew up in nearly 30 different apartments, from Harlem to Coney Island. At age 15, he quit school to work as a professional musician.

Gershwin’s compositions spanned both popular and classical genres, and his most popular melodies are widely known. Among his best-known works are the orchestral compositions “Rhapsody in Blue,” “An American in Paris,” and the opera “Porgy and Bess.” Berlin and Gershwin would pave the way for many other Jewish musical greats, including Jerome Kern, Benny Goodman, and Bob Dylan.

Kern, a composer of musical theater, wrote 700 songs used in more than 100 stage works, including the songs from the hit musical “Show Boat.” He collaborated with other Jewish artists—Oscar Hammerstein II, Ira Gershwin, and E.Y. Harburg.

“‘Show Boat’ was the jewel in the crown of many Jewish composers interested in writing the American opera,” Sidran says.

Born in Chicago, the ninth of 12 children of poor Jewish immigrants from the Russian empire, Benny Goodman became a strong clarinetist at an early age and started playing professionally in bands.



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“Goodman looked like an accountant, but he was America’s first rock star because he could swing,” Sidran says. “His popular songs helped create the dance craze.”

Goodman is remembered for his August 21, 1935 gig at the Palomar Ballroom in Los Angeles, where fans, primed by radio airplay of his tunes to hear him in person, broke into wild applause. News reports spread word of the enthusiastic dancing and exciting new music. The “Jitterbug” appeared as a new dance craze, and radio broadcasts carried the band’s performances across the nation.

Two decades later, a famed song that was written by Jews would inspire Bob Dylan’s career.

“Bob grew up listening to his transistor radio and once said it was Elvis Presley singing ‘Hound Dog’ in 1956 that made him want to be a performer,” Sidran says. “He said it was the performance and it didn’t matter who wrote the song. But of course the song wasn’t just there. It was written by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, a couple of Jewish kids carrying on the tradition that went back to Gershwin and Berlin, constructing songs out of the raw cultural materials at hand.”

What is behind Jewish success in making songs? A major factor is what Sidran calls “contextualizing.”

“If you go back into the basic Jewish tradition, the Jews are more interested in the question than the answer,” he says. “This constant questioning is a way of contextualizing, not only the information you’re seeking, but the Jewish life. It’s how you live your life. If you read Torah, Jews are constantly arguing with God and they’re not getting an answer. They’re getting a discussion of which they’re a part. This is a core example of contextualizing. Things are connected. In particular reading the Talmud, the ongoing discussion is so important.”

From sfweekly.com

Exploring the Jewish influence on black American music

By Ezra Gale

Wednesday, Aug 25 2010

You might be forgiven for thinking that the history of black–Jewish relations in the United State was one of tension, suspicion, and hostility. For years, the only headlines to include blacks and Jews in the same sentence were ones that screamed mutual mistrust, such as the Crown Heights riot of 1991 and the inflammatory rhetoric of the Nation of Islam's Louis Farrakhan. And yet the truth of that history is more complicated than those examples might suggest. Black spirituals like "Go Down, Moses" compared slavery to the Jews' Biblical bondage in Egypt; coalitions of black and Jewish leaders founded the NAACP and the National Urban League; Jewish civil rights protesters and attorneys flooded the South for freedom marches in the '50s and '60s, while prominent rabbis marched arm in arm with Martin Luther King Jr.



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That complex, intertwined relationship has been mirrored in pop music. The involvement of Jewish Americans in African-American music has been well documented (perhaps too much so), from Tin Pan Alley through jazz and rock to hip-hop. The flipside of black artists exploring Jewish musical culture has been less discussed, but a new exhibit at the Contemporary Jewish Museum aims to change that. "Black Sabbath: The Secret Musical History of Black-Jewish Relations" shines a revealing light on this relationship. Presented by the Idelsohn Society for Musical Preservation, a self-described group of "record-collecting dumpster divers" who aim to reexamine Jewish-American history by showcasing sometimes long-forgotten music, the exhibit makes a fascinating display of the influence of Jewish and Yiddish culture on black popular music of the 20th century.

"There's been an infinite amount of ink that's been dedicated to the involvement of American Jews in black music," society co-founder and music writer Josh Kun says. "So in retelling this story, we thought it would be more useful to look at the other side."

That other side was sparked by the discovery of an extraordinary 7-inch record from 1958 of balladeer and make-out music king Johnny Mathis singing "Kol Nidre," the prayer traditionally intoned at the beginning of Yom Kippur. "Why was Mathis, at the height of his career, recording synagogue songs?" Kun asks.

The society's search soon yielded an avalanche of gems. They found a home recording of Billie Holiday singing the ballad "My Yiddishe Momme"; Marlena Shaw's 1969 version of "Where Can I Go?," which reimagines the post-Holocaust song as fuzzed-out civil-rights funk; and an epic medley by the Temptations and the Supremes of songs from Fiddler on the Roof.

An accompanying CD will be released Sept. 14 featuring 15 of the tracks from the exhibit, including performances by Aretha Franklin ("Swanee"), Cannonball Adderley ("Sabbath Prayer"), and Nina Simone ("Eretz Zavot Chalav"). The exhibition will tell far more than the CD allows ("We could have released a four-volume set, easy," Kun says). Interactive apps will guide visitors through different themes, such as the role of Yiddish in 1930s jazz and blues, or the intriguing frequency with which black artists in the 1950s sang about Israel.

It's a stirring collection, enough to make you wonder if by looking back at the past, the exhibition aims to foster a more hopeful new chapter in the often-fraught history of black-Jewish relations. Kun is optimistic, although he's quick to point out that the exhibition is meant to be more than just a political statement: "I think that through music we can have the kinds of conversations that are sometimes too tricky or too painful to have."



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Billboard Top 30 Jewish Musicians

Christmas classics may vastly out-number Hanukkah hits, but there's been no shortage of Jewish artists that have topped the Billboard charts over the years. With Hanukkah, the Jewish festival of lights, beginning on the evening of Wednesday, November 27, now is the perfect time to celebrate the Jewish musicians who have made the biggest impact on the Hot 100 over the decades. We've gathered the Tribe's biggest Billboard stars on our top 30 countdown.

The ranking is based on actual performance on the weekly Billboard Hot 100 since the chart launched in August 1958. Songs are ranked based on an inverse point system, with weeks at No. 1 earning the greatest value and weeks at No. 100 earning the least. Prior to the Hot 100's implementation in 1991 of enhanced radio and sales information from Nielsen BDS and Nielsen SoundScan, songs had shorter reigns at No. 1 and shorter chart lives. To ensure equitable representation of the biggest hits from the past 55 years, earlier time frames were each weighted to account for the difference between turnover rates from those decades and the turnover rates that have occurred since the advent of Nielsen Music data.

30. David Guetta

The French DJ, whose Moroccan father is Jewish, helped EDM make a mainstream crossover with hit productions such as the Black Eyed Peas' 2009 track "I Gotta Feeling" and his own smash "Turn Me On," which features Nicki Minaj. **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hits:** "Turn Me On" (No. 4, peak date: Feb. 4, 2012); "Without You" feat. Usher (No. 4, peak date: Nov. 26, 2011)

29. Lenny Kravitz

Kravitz, whose dad is Jewish and mom is Christian, fired up a vintage rock sound that earned multiplatinum status on albums such as 1993's "Are You Gonna Go My Way" and 1998's "Five." **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hit:** "It Ain't Over 'Til It's Over" (No. 2, peak date: Aug. 24, 1991)

28. KISS

Both Gene Simmons and Paul Stanley of the larger-than-life hard-rock act are Jewish. The group exploded after 1975 live set "Alive!," bringing songs such as "Rock and Roll All Nite" -- and the band's ever-present glam-rock makeup -- to an audience of millions. "Beth" brought Kiss to the top 10 of the Hot 100 in 1976; "Forever," which peaked at No. 8, returned them to the top 10 club in 1990. **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hit:** "Beth" (No. 7, peak

27. Donald Fagen (Steely Dan)

Co-founded by Fagen, Steely Dan stands as of the '70s' most enigmatic groups. The band



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infused their sharp, sometimes sarcastic rock with jazz chops and studio perfectionism on albums such as key 1975 set "Katy Lied." **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hit:** "Rikki Don't Lose That Number" (No.

26. Mark Knopfler (Dire Straits)

Knopfler and Dire Straits hit the top 10 of the Hot 100 with 1979's "Sultans of Swing" but the MTV-era brought the rockers their biggest hit, "Money For Nothing," which name-checks the music channel and features backing vocals by Sting. **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hit:** "Money For Nothing" (No. 1 for 3 weeks, peak date: Sept. 21, 1985)

25. Bob Dylan

Few artists have carried more influence or been more provocative in the rock era than Dylan, born Robert Zimmerman, whose '60s protest songs gave way to an electric epiphany and later, a gospel period as 1979's "Slow Train Coming" marked his conversion to Christianity. **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hits:** "Like A Rolling Stone" (No. 2, peak date: Sept. 4, 1965); "Rainy Day Women #12 & #35" (No. 2, peak date: May 21, 1966)

24. The J. Geils Band

A live juggernaut, the hard-touring group (of which four members are Jewish) drew upon soul, blues and rock throughout the '70s. The band's 1981 album "Freeze-Frame," spawned two singles that reached the top five of the Hot 100: the title song and "Centerfold." **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hit:** "Centerfold" (No. 1 for 6 weeks, peak date: Feb. 6, 1982)

23. Eric Carmen

After '70s power-pop beginnings with the Raspberries (and a Hot 100 No. 2 solo hit with "All By Myself"), the rocker wrote hits for the "Footloose" and "Dirty Dancing" soundtracks, hitting the top five with his own "Hungry Eyes" in 1988. **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hit:** "All By Myself" (No. 2, peak date: March 6, 1976)

22. Lesley Gore

The '60s singer was a successful solo voice during the girl-group era with songs such as "It's My Party" and 1964's "You Don't Own Me" -- an influence on decades of independent women to come. **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hit:** "It's My Party" (No. 1 for 2 weeks, peak date: June 1, 1963)

21. Carole King

The prolific songwriter rose to fame notching hits for Aretha Franklin, the Crystals and other '60s



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stars, and she proved her solo chops with 1971's big-selling "Tapestry" and the smash "It's Too Late / I Feel The Earth Move." **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hit:** "It's Too Late / I Feel The Earth Move" (No. 1 for 5 weeks, peak date: June 19, 1971)

20. Bette Midler

The Divine Miss M showcased her many talents on stage and screen. Her biggest hit encompassed both talents: 1989's "Wind Beneath My Wings," which reached No. 1, was from the film "Beaches," in which the singer also co-starred. **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hit:** "Wind Beneath My Wings" (No. 1, peak date: June 10, 1989)

19. David Lee Roth (Van Halen)

Exuberant frontman David Lee Roth singing atop Eddie Van Halen's Olympic-level guitar solos helped the hard-rock act dominate the late '70s/early '80s rock scene, earning a No. 1 hit with "Jump" in 1984. **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hit:** "Jump" (No. 1, peak date: Feb. 25, 1984)

18. Chris Stein (Blondie)

New York punk/new wave rockers Blondie wouldn't have been Blondie without both Debbie Harry AND guitarist Chris Stein. From 1979 to 1981, the group scored a whopping four Hot 100 No. 1s including "Heart of Glass," "Call Me," "The Tide Is High," and "Rapture." **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hit:** "Call Me" (No. 1 for 6 weeks, peak date: April 19, 1980)

17. Drake

The "Nothing Was The Same" MC, whose mom is Jewish, celebrated his heritage alongside Young Money label boss Lil Wayne in the Bar Mitzvah-themed video for "HYFR" last year. His biggest Hot 100 celebration so far has been his featured spot on Rihanna's No. 1 hit "What's My Name?" **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hit:** "What's My Name?" Rihanna feat. Drake (No. 1, peak date: Nov. 20, 2010)

16. Susanna Hoffs (Bangles)

Led by singer-guitarist Susanna Hoffs, the all-female band became synonymous with the '80s thank to songs such as "Manic Monday" and "Walk Like an Egyptian." **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hit:** "Walk Like An Egyptian" (No. 1 for 4 weeks, peak date: Dec. 20, 1986)

15. Herb Alpert

The band leader reached the top 10 with The Tijuana Brass in the early '60s, but he rose to No. 1 with a memorable version of Burt Bacharach and Hal David's "This Guy's In Love With You" in 1968 and again with "Rise" in 1979. **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hit:** "This Guy's In Love With



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You" (No. 1 for 4 weeks, peak date: June 22, 1968)

14. Carly Simon

With "You're So Vain," the '70s singer/songwriter posed a pop culture question that's yet to be answered -- who is the song about? -- and scored a huge No. 1 hit in a decade where she also notched several other Hot 100 top 10s. **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hit:** "You're So Vain" (No. 1 for 3 weeks, peak date: Jan. 6, 1973)

13. Paul Simon

Paul Simon has been such a force in popular music, he's earned a spots on this list both as a member of Simon & Garfunkel and for his own rich solo career. His reached the Hot 100 top 10 for songs such as "Mother and Child Reunion" and "Kodachrome," but the singer/songwriter's top solo hit came in 1976 with the No. 1 song "50 Ways To Leave Your Lover." **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hit:** "50 Ways To Leave Your Lover" (No. 1 for 3 weeks, peak date: Feb. 7, 1976)

12. Taylor Dayne

With debut album "Tell It To My Heart," the dance-pop singer went double platinum and landed a handful of top 10 hits, including a No. 7 showing in 1988 with the synth-powered title track. She rose the highest, however, two years later with the ballad "Love Will Lead You Back," which hit the top. **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hit:** "Love Will Lead You Back" (No. 1, peak date: April 7, 1990)

11. Helen Reddy

The '60s and '70s singer-actress had 14 top 40 hits, with chart-toppers such as "Delta Dawn," "Angie Baby" and "I Am Woman." **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hits:** "I Am Woman" (No. 1, peak date: Dec. 9, 1972); "Delta Dawn" (No. 1, peak date: Sept. 15, 1973); "Angie Baby" (No. 1, peak date: Dec. 28, 1974)

10. Simon & Garfunkel

Thanks to "The Sounds of Silence," the New York duo comprised of Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel became known as perceptive, golden-voiced icons of the '60s folk movement (and earned two weeks at No. 1 on the Hot 100 in 1966 with the song while they were at it). **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hit:** "Bridge Over Troubled Water" (No. 1 for 6 weeks, peak date: Feb. 28, 1970)

9. Michael Bolton



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The "Time, Love and Tenderness" singer took adult contemporary to a new level when his 1990 song "How Am I Supposed To Live Without You" and his 1991 cover of "When a Man Loves a Woman," which both became Hot 100 No. 1 hits. **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hit:** "How Am I Supposed To Live Without You" (No. 1 for 3 weeks, peak date: Jan. 20, 1990)

8. Adam Levine (Maroon 5)

Since early hits such as 2002's "This Love," the pop-rockers have made climbing the charts routine, with the band's success extending to frontman Adam Levine's role as a coach on "The Voice." **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hit:** "One More Night" (No. 1 for 9 weeks, peak date: Sept. 29, 2012)

7. Neil Sedaka

The singer and composer's songs landed him his first "American Bandstand" appearance in 1958, with '60s hit "Breaking Up Is Hard to Do" covered by everyone from the Partridge Family to the Four Seasons. **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hit:** "Bad Blood" (No. 1 for 3 weeks, peak date: Oct. 11, 1975)

6. Paula Abdul

The award-winning choreographer and "Straight Up" singer, who was a regular on the Hot 100 in the late '80s and early '90s, found her next burst of fame as Simon Cowell's foil at the judge's table on the game-changing "American Idol." **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hit:** "Rush Rush" (No. 1 for 5 weeks, peak date: June 15, 1991)

5. Barry Manilow

The "I Write the Songs" singer had his beloved brand of pop immortalized on the stage and screen in the musical "Copacabana." **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hits:** "Mandy" (No. 1, peak date: Jan. 18, 1975); "I Write The Songs" (No. 1, peak date: Jan. 17, 1976); "Looks Like We Made It" (No. 1, peak date: July 23, 1977)

4. P!nk

The "Get the Party Started" singer has become one of the decade's biggest, boldest pop divas, offering sass in hits including "So What" and "Blow Me (One Last Kiss)." Her biggest hit (so far) came as a huge collab with fellow singers Christina Aguilera, Mya, and Lil Kim on a 2001 cover of "Lady Marmalade." **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hit:** "Lady Marmalade" w/ Christina Aguilera, Lil Kim, Mya (No. 1 for 5 weeks, peak date: June 2, 2001)



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3. Barbra Streisand

With a career spanning film, Broadway and music, the "Funny Girl" star has released No. 1 albums on the Billboard 200 across decades -- and picked up Oscars and Grammys along the way. **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hits:** "The Way We Were" (No. 1 for 3 weeks, peak date: Feb. 2, 1974); "Woman In Love" (No. 1 for 3 weeks, peak date: Oct. 25, 1980); "Evergreen (Love Theme From 'A Star Is Born') (No. 1 for 3 weeks, peak date: March 5, 1977)

2. Neil Diamond

Penning the Monkees' "I'm a Believer" made him a songwriting star, but solo hits such as "Sweet Caroline" and "Song Sung Blue" made him a music legend in his own right. **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hit:** "You Don't Bring Me Flowers" w/ Barbra Streisand (No. 1 for 2 weeks, peak date: Dec. 2, 1978)

1. Billy Joel

The "Piano Man" and Rock and Roll Hall of Famer boasts seven Hot 100 top five hits -- spanning decades -- including a trio of No. 1s: "We Didn't Start The Fire," "It's Still Rock And Roll To Me" and "Tell Her About It." **Highest Charting Hot 100 Hits:** "It's Still Rock and Roll To Me" (No. 1 for 2 weeks, peak date: July 19, 1980); "We Didn't Start The Fire" (No. 1 for 2 weeks, peak date: Dec. 9, 1989)