



Yiddish American Music: “Camp” or For Real?

There’s a new Barry Sisters CD out, thrilling news considering that they haven’t recorded an album in three decades. The Sisters represented an elusive but magical moment in American Jewish culture, one they shared with pioneers of Yiddish American music including Moyshe Oysher, Dave Tarras, the Musiker brothers and Mickey Katz. What they had in common was their ability to assimilate the best of American popular music into a Yiddish aesthetic and create something deeply rooted yet new, exciting, and American.

Sadly, the best work of many of these artists was unappreciated or underappreciated in their own time. *Tanz!* (“Dance!”), a collaboration between Dave Tarras, his son-in-law Sammy Musiker, and Sammy’s brother Ray Musiker, was a commercial flop when it was released in 1956, despite being recognized today as one of the peak moments in American klezmer history. Mickey Katz was unable to move past his reputation as a comedian, even when he recorded an entire album of new instrumentals, and today, most of his recordings are unavailable. Much of Moyshe Oysher’s catalog is also either out of print or available only in terrible, bargain-basement releases.

The new Barry Sisters CD, however, is a lavishly produced reissue of *Our Way*, their last studio album, recorded in 1973. It features Yiddish

translations of American pop hits of the day, done by the legendary Yiddish actor Herman Yablokoff. Barry Sisters + Herman Yablokoff + new Yiddish songs. How could I not love it?

Our Way was issued by a relatively new label called Stereophonic, a project of Reboot — that is, a project of the very deep pockets of the Bronfman Foundation. Reboot also publishes books and a magazine called *Guilt and Pleasure*, all beautifully executed, with a sense of mission and responsibility to the Jewish community. As they write on the liner notes to *Our Way*: “This is music that forces listeners to ask themselves anew, who am I, what have I inherited, and what am I going to do about it?”

Since 2005, Stereophonic has reissued five albums, including Irving Fields’ *Bagels and Bongos* (Jewish Latin fusion), *Jewface* (a compilation of Jewish-themed vaudeville songs), and *God is a Moog* (an unclassifiable experiment in Jewish music composed for the Moog synthesizer). How do they choose what is important and complex enough to spark the kind of cultural conversations they’re aiming for? “We will do [it],” they declare, “with no museum stuffiness. This is music that you might actually want to throw on at a party . . . stuff you . . . will definitely not find on any Jewish music compilation your Hebrew school teacher gave you to get in touch with your roots. . . . Our approach is new school, secular (but we hear the spirit when it calls), multicultural, progressive, irreverent, obsessive, self-deprecating and urban.”

The roots of this exactly hip sensibility go deeper than the recent wave of Jewish hipsterism (*Heeb* magazine, the Hebrew Hammer, JDub). Stereophonic is digging back to a cultural moment when critics argued for an alternative to the traditional dichotomy of high/low culture and literal/symbolic interpretation. A new sensibility about art was legitimized, one that valued surface over content and looked beyond the traditional relationship between performer and intent when relating to a work of art. The most famous theorist of this position was Susan Sontag in her 1964 *Notes on Camp*. What Sontag called “camp” is alive and well today (as a mode of cultural en-

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agement, it never went away), though few use the word any more.

Sontag wrote of the “duplicity” of camp, that is, the straight, public meaning of an artwork and the private experience of it as “zany.” The work could be presented to the masses with a “straight” face without being described as camp; indeed, announcing a thing’s campiness would dissipate the glamour of the connoisseur’s appreciation.

A glance at the Stereophonic catalog tells us that we’re in camp territory, where the theatrical and the exaggerated are privileged above all. The liner notes for Stereophonic’s reissues speak in terms of their seriousness and unique historical meaning. The covers, however, tease us with 1970s cheesiness and promises of the previously forbidden. *Our Way*, for example, features an extraordinary booklet that includes a reproduction of the original album cover: the Sisters posing in front of a shiny gray floral wallpaper, clad in leisure suits and cream-colored pumps. For Jews of a certain generation and geographic orientation (having grown up Jewish on Long Island in the 1980s, I can attest to this), this is instantly recognizable as the worst of the 1970s aesthetic. On the flip side, the Sisters stand clad, like Yiddish superheroes, in floor-length suede capes — provided, we’re told, by Norjean Furs of Manhasset, Long Island, of course. A publicity photo features the Sisters swimming in a sea of fur, like Sontag’s icon of camp, the “woman in a dress made of three million feathers.”

Yet according to Stereophonic, *Our Way* was reissued for Important Reasons: “If adapting Jewish music to the rhythms and contours of the American pop landscape can be considered one of the dominant aesthetics of early 20th-century popular music, then the Barry Sisters ought to be considered crucial bi-cultural pioneers” along the lines of Irving Berlin and George Gershwin. The Sisters “didn’t turn America Jewish, they made Jewish sound more American . . . *Our Way* is . . . the only Barry Sisters album that seems to reverse this tactic. This is an album of (mostly) giddy Jewish hi-jacks of American culture . . .”

There’s no question that the Sisters should be considered crucial bi-cultural pioneers. But the

rest of the Stereophonic justification just rings hollow. The analogy between the Sisters and song writers like Berlin and Gershwin doesn’t work. Although some argue strongly for finding an essential Jewishness in the work of Gershwin and Berlin, if there is one to be found (and I am skeptical) it is nothing like the unerringly rooted, unmistakably Jewish work of the Sisters. As I mentioned above, in order to understand the Sisters’ position in American Jewish culture you have to look at their peers like Moyshe Oysher and Dave Tarras.

Stereophonic thus locates the ultimate “importance” of *Our Way* in how it *differs* from the rest of the Sisters’ bi-cultural oeuvre. *Our Way*, they say, strikes back at the American cultural hegemony in an almost aggressive way: The Sisters are taking what clearly isn’t theirs (“Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head,” “My Way”) and making it Jewish, *their way*.

Is this really so special? The Barry Sisters were not the first to translate American classics into Yiddish. Seymour Rexite, for example, made his reputation as a crooner of show tunes and standards in Yiddish. And compared to the Sisters at the height of their artistic powers, *Our Way* is just okay. It’s not a bad album, but it’s missing something of the panache of their earlier hits.

Meanwhile, the Stereophonic producers are silent as to what might legitimately be claimed as an important achievement of *Our Way* — the translations. Yablokoff was a giant of Yiddish theater, and one might think that the way he rendered these *über*-American texts into Yiddish would be of interest. The intended consumer of *Our Way*, however, is given no idea of what, if anything, Yablokoff has done with “Tea for Two” and “Mame.”

Jeffrey Shandler, in *Adventures in Yiddishland*, describes how Moishe Olgin’s 1919 translation of *Call of the Wild* into Yiddish wasn’t valued just for its content, but for what it proved: that Yiddish, as Olgin wrote, could depict the wild and the natural as well as any other world language. Shandler calls this the “symbolic value” of a translation into Yiddish.

Symbolic value is certainly what Stereophonic is arguing for when they talk about *Our Way* as

a “hi-jack.” According to their reasoning, *Our Way* shows that Yiddish can “do American” as well as any other language, in the process turning the American into something Jewish. *Our Way*, they say, is “a utopian dream,” what Jewish music would sound like if “Yiddish hadn’t become the language of refrigerator magnets and Jewish joke punch lines . . .” But this is disingenuous, at the least. What’s so great about American *shlock* sung in Yiddish? If the target audience doesn’t even know what the words mean, how you can convincingly argue for the work’s extraordinary value? Rather than being a “utopian dream” of an imaginary Yiddish future, the real value of *Our Way* for Stereophonic, I believe, lies in the creation of a new, American Yiddish that anyone can understand: Who, after all, doesn’t know at least some words to “Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head?” It’s easy to imagine a non-Yiddish speaker hearing the Sisters and momentarily feeling fluent in a previously unknown language. That fluency, of course, is an illusion.

I have noted an anti-klezmer backlash among a certain kind of Jewish hipster — the kind who can’t stand the wail and whine of the Jewish clarinet. Where I hear a hot klezmer lick, the squeamish hipster hears Woody Allen screaming his pathetic lungs out. A good example is Paul Lester, music writer for the *Jewish Chronicle* of London. In a now infamous 2009 column called “Turn Off the Klezmer, Turn on the Ramones,” Lester cried: “I hate Jewish music, but I love Jews who make music. . . . [F]or me, the best Jewish music — or rather, the best music by Jews . . . is somehow a response to the times in which it was made. . . . [I]f there is a ‘Jewish voice,’ it is not to be heard in klezmer, maybe because it is being drowned out by all those clarinets, violins and accordions.” Ouch.

For Paul Lester, “Jewish music” means only faux traditional klezmer played by losers who don’t know anything about punk. What he really wants is the Jewish sensibility: “urbane, witty, sharp, smart, savvy, often satirical and thoroughly contemporary.” But if he knew anything about klezmer or Yiddish music, he would know that

it can be and has been all of these things. There is no Jewish past that wasn’t complicated and hybrid, and there is no such thing as monolithic “Jewish” culture.

Similarly, Roger Bennett, a Stereophonic co-founder, has told the *New York Times* that when it comes to music “that word ‘Jewish’ can be pejorative . . . We’re interested in expanding that word’s meaning in ways that are complicated, eclectic, hybrid.” When Roger Bennett contrasts “Jewish” with “complicated, eclectic and hybrid,” he repeats Lester’s mistake of essentializing the Jewish past in an unproductive, regressive way.

But there is another way of relating to this complicated, rich heritage, one that doesn’t resort to the detached hipster’s “camp” aesthetic. For example, Living Traditions founder and director Henry Sapoznik has produced three reissues for the Sony Legacy label: *Abe Schwartz: Klezmer King* (2002), *From Avenue A to the Great White Way* (2002), and *Tanz!* (2005).

The briefest of comparisons between the reissues of *Our Way* and *Tanz!* shows that you don’t need the knowing camp ‘wink’ to find a reason to go back to the Jewish past. The value of *Our Way*, like all camp, is ultimately contingent upon experiencing it within American pop culture, as an oddity of unexpected juxtapositions, no Jewish literacy necessary. Sapoznik, however, locates the importance of *Tanz!* in its content and influence. Writes Sapoznik: “[T]hese arrangements are fueled by a unity of overall construction that gives *Tanz!* a thematic coherence years ahead of its time. It is arguably the greatest klezmer record ever issued.”

As the Yiddish scholar and critic David Roskies writes, the search for a usable Jewish past is ever more ‘contrapuntal,’ with each group advancing its own agenda, and its own set of memories, at the expense of another. With its many projects, Stereophonic is making a very serious, and very well funded, claim on the Jewish past. To what end is this vision being realized and what will it mean for other interpretations of our cultural heritage? **JC**