

FASHIONING JEWISHNESS IN A BLACK AND WHITE WORLD

Eric Goldstein

Jewish web surfers looking for a band for a wedding or bar mitzvah may be surprised (and possibly delighted) to find “Hip Hop and Rap” and “Reggae and World Beat” listed among the major varieties of Jewish music on the

website of the Jewish Arts Regional Touring Service (J-ARTS), a booking agency for Jewish music groups.

Clicking on these categories reveals a wide array of performers specializing in these genres, acts that

range from the Israeli-born hip-hop artist Yoni Ben-Yehuda (known as “Sneakas”) to Rabbi Mikael Zerbib, whose album *Mussareggae* blends the Jamaican music style with Jewish ethics. Similar offerings include the Original Jewish Gangstas, who use “Pro-Tools, condensor mics, pre-amplifiers, and their own lyrical creativity to combine the wisdom of Judaism with the bump of hip-hop.”

The acts on J-ARTS provide a small taste of how many young Jews in the United States today are creating a Jewish culture that draws heavily on African American and, in the case of reggae, Afro-Caribbean styles of expression. Although this trend is being pursued by many types of Jews, it owes much of its current vogue to the lively subculture known as the “Jewish hipster” movement and its unofficial

organ, *Heeb* magazine. Since its debut in 2002, *Heeb* has often linked Jews with blacks as part of its overall campaign to demonstrate that Jewishness can be “cool,” a

point often made with *Heeb*’s special brand of over-the-top comedy. The magazine’s very first cover, for example, featured black hands placing a round piece of *shmurah* matzoh on a turntable, a theme echoed in a long-running satirical advertisement in which an

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African American man proclaims a piece of Streit’s matzoh to be “a big ass cracker!” Another *Heeb* feature was the “Nell Carter Memorial Page,” honoring the Presbyterian-born diva who converted to Judaism. The writeup on Carter expressed glee that Jews have “lucked out in getting some of the best black celebrities as converts.”

The trend so apparent in *Heeb* soon appeared in other quarters as well. In 2003, writer-director Jonathan Kesselman presented the first “Jewxploitation film,” the *Hebrew Hammer*, which used similar comic hyperbole to explicitly link Jews and African Americans. Drawing on the popular blaxploitation genre of the 1970s, the film followed the adventures of a tough Jewish action hero who speaks with “a mix of Black Panther argot and Yiddish” and “struts through the ‘hood”

instilling Jewish pride in its youth.” The music industry, as suggested above, has become perhaps the most active arena in which young Jews link themselves with black culture. The most famous example is Matisyahu (né Matthew Paul Miller), the Chabad/Lubavitch devotee who was named top reggae artist of 2006 by *Billboard* magazine.

What can we make of these examples of a contemporary Jewish culture that draws heavily on black influences? In all of these cases, it is apparent that the use of black images and style allow young Jews to link themselves to what they

perceive as the assertiveness and independence of African Americans. Despite contemporary society’s claim to be a “multicultural” one, the black-white divide is still a powerful enough construct to make

African Americans the most powerful symbol of difference in American society. As a result, they are an attractive touchstone for Jews who have become frustrated with the constraints placed on them by their membership in the white mainstream.

Those familiar with American Jewish history will not be totally surprised at the way in which young Jews today are borrowing from African Americans, since Jews have had a long and intimate relationship with black culture. In the 1920s and 1930s, Al Jolson, Sophie Tucker and other Jewish performers were well known for their blackface routines, which lampooned blacks but also contained elements of tribute and identification. Irving Berlin drew on black culture in composing songs like “Alexander’s Rag Time Band,” as did George

Gershwin in writing his opera, *Porgy and Bess*. As memoirs of the interwar years record, Jewish youth frequently listened to “race records” and invited black musicians to perform at their dances. Some made excursions to Harlem and other black neighborhoods in the urban north to seek out nightclubs and dance halls and sometimes romantic liaisons.

What, then, separates the contemporary Jewish appropriation of black culture from these earlier examples? First and foremost, prewar Jews who experimented with black culture did so under a very different set of social circumstances. Not yet fully vested as a part of the white mainstream, Jews before 1945 were often described, and described themselves, as members of a distinct “race.” Although this did not necessarily mean that they were seen as non-white, it did mean that they occupied an uncertain place in America’s racial constellation. Their

ability to move in sectors of white society while remaining distinct in many ways unnerved the white, non-Jewish public, who derived a sense of stability and security from seeing their society as neatly divided into black and white. As their puzzlement about Jews reached a

fever pitch in the interwar years, the climate placed significant pressure on Jews to downplay characteristics that could be interpreted as “racial” and to conform to the behaviors and mores of white society.

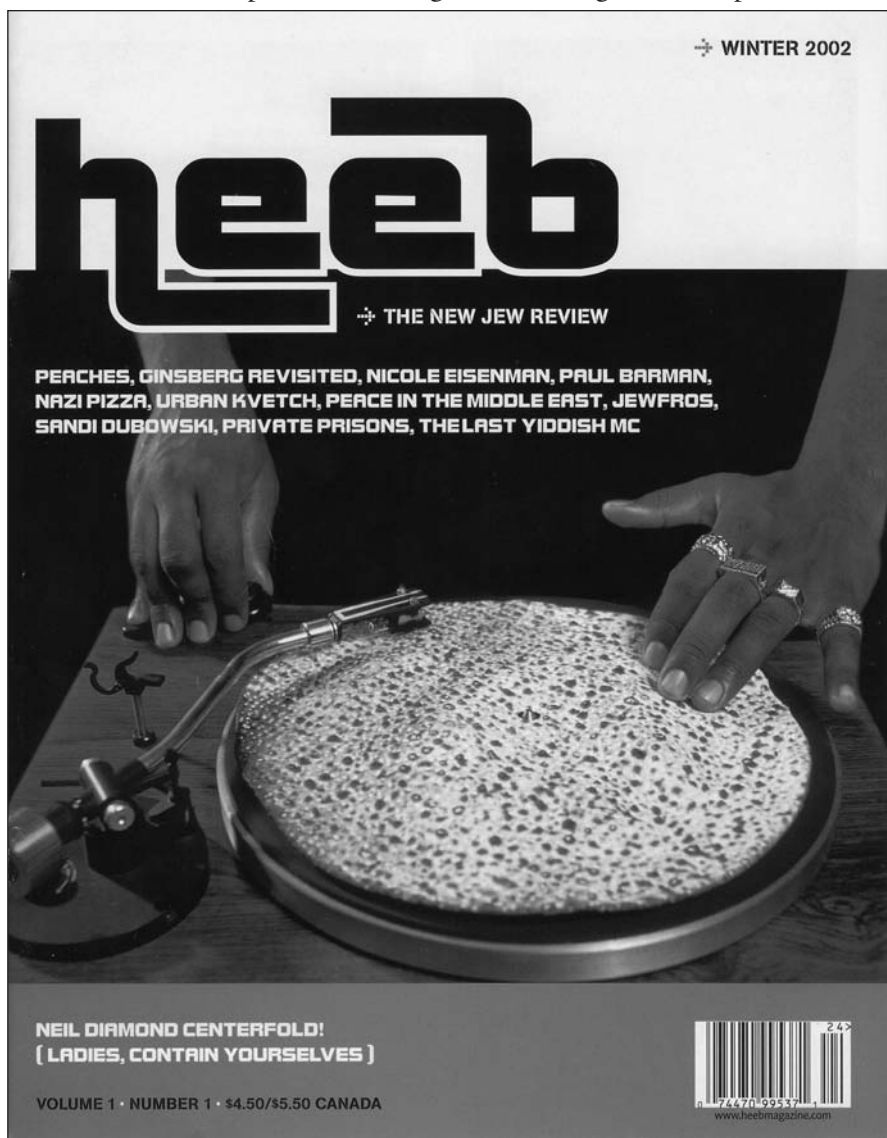
In this context, Jews who bristled under the pressures of acculturation often found black culture to be a welcome escape valve. It could provide a surrogate for feelings of

on blackface, providing a mask that obscured his difference to the white world, which saw him simply as a white man lampooning blacks. Berlin’s early music seems to have expressed a cultural connection to African Americans, even as he obscured his debt to black culture in his public statements, underscoring that he and other Jewish popular songwriters were “of pure white blood.” Jewish youth

“slumming” in Harlem or on Chicago’s south side similarly found that they could temporarily transgress the mores of white society and then safely return to its confines. In short, while Jews of this period may have privately looked upon blacks as figures of longing, their excursions into black culture were intended only as temporary and guarded diversions from their ongoing pursuit of acceptance in white society.

The Jews today who are incorporating African American

culture into their own cultural repertoires are motivated by a much different set of circumstances, which have also led to some important substantive differences in the results. After World War II, questions about Jewish racial status finally receded and Jews experienced



Cover of *Heeb* 1:1 (Winter 2002). Photo credit: Seth Kushner.

difference that they were not comfortable expressing publicly, one that they could access in ways that did not threaten—and often even enhanced—their status as white. In *The Jazz Singer*, Jolson’s character, Jack Robin, was able to get in touch with his Jewish heritage by putting

new opportunities for integration into the white mainstream. Although Jews continued in many ways to think of themselves in racial terms, they rarely voiced these feelings publicly as they took advantage of new opportunities for inclusion. After 1965, however, two major shifts began to occur in American Jewish identity. First, a growing acceptance of difference in American culture lessened the pressure on Jews to downplay their distinctiveness. Second, the emergence of Black Power movements and civil rights legislation that identified minority status with peoples of color made many Jews uneasy with how they were now defined as part of the white power structure, a designation that cut against their own “outsider” consciousness. Ironically, having begun to achieve the privileged status they had long sought, they now felt troubled by the threatened loss of their group distinctiveness.

Not surprisingly, the 1970s saw some early traces of the Jewish cultural borrowing from African Americans evident today. Activists

for the Soviet Jewry movement often imported slogans from the civil rights movement and some young Jews donned “Jewfros” in imitation of their black counterparts. The fact that Jewish integration has continued to reach unprecedented levels in recent years helps explain the intensifying appeal of African American culture, which gives contemporary Jews a powerful tool for asserting their difference. Unlike the flirtations of Jews with black culture in the 1920s and 1930s, today’s Jewish interest in hip-hop, reggae, African American-Jewish celebrities and black cultural style is part of a broader assertion of Jewish particularity. *Heeb’s* borrowings from black culture appear alongside articles outing television’s “crypto-Jews” and celebrating the “crazy curls, shapely schnozzes, and hefty hips” of “the Jewess.” Jewish hipsters may listen to Hasidic reggae, but they also wear the “Yo Semite” t-shirts manufactured by the San Francisco-based Jewish Fashion Conspiracy. In other words, young Jews today who are appropriating black culture do not use it as a cover for their own distinctiveness while publicly

seeking to fit in. Instead, they try to use the cultural cache enjoyed by blackness to argue that Jewishness is similarly “cool” and different.

The one thing that does unite the young Jews of today and those of the prewar period is the way in which they have to navigate the power of America’s black-white divide, a system into which they do not neatly fit. In the 1920s and 1930s, Jews who had to downplay their Jewishness in order to be accepted as “white” found black culture to be one of the few outlets that could relieve—if only temporarily—the pressures of acculturation. Today, Jews who desperately *want* to be recognized and legitimized as different find they also have to turn to black culture in order to invest Jewishness with the heft needed to be taken seriously in a “multicultural” world.

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Contribute to the New Syllabi Directory on the AJS Website

The Resources section of the AJS website now includes a directory of Syllabi in all fields of Jewish studies. The site already has more than fifty syllabi on Jewish history, literature and culture, philosophy, and more. Members are invited to contribute to the directory by emailing syllabi in MS-Word or pdf format to the AJS office at ajs@ajs.cjh.org.

The screenshot shows the AJS website interface. On the left is a vertical navigation menu with links: Home, About Us, Membership, Conferences, Publications, Positions Listing, NEW Resources, Advertise & Exhibit, Giving Opportunities, and Contact Us. The main content area features a header with the AJS logo and the text 'ASSOCIATION FOR JEWISH STUDIES'. Below the header are three images: a menorah, a scroll, and a historical scene. The main text area contains several news items:

- About the AJS**: Founded in 1969, the Association for Jewish Studies (AJS) is a learned society and professional organization that seeks to promote, maintain, and improve teaching and research in Jewish Studies at colleges, universities, and other institutions of higher learning. As a constituent organization of the American Council of Learned Societies, it represents the field in the larger arena of the academic study of the humanities and social sciences in the United States. With 1500 members, the AJS provides an intellectual forum for university faculty, graduate students, independent scholars, and museum and related professionals. [More...](#)
- WHAT'S NEW AT THE AJS:**
 - Cahnman Publication Subvention Grants**: A new program to support the publication of first books by AJS members. [More...](#)
 - AJS 39th Annual Conference**: December 14-18, 2007, Sheraton Centre, Toronto, Ontario. Deadline for Submissions: **May 1, 2007**. Now Available Online: Call for Papers, General Information, Visiting Toronto, Sessions Seeking Participants.