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**“The Tin Pan-tithesis of melody”: A Socio-Musical History of
Eastern European Jews in New York 1880-1920**

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Abstract

Influxes of Eastern European Jewish people immigrating to the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries motivated by poor economic and social conditions in their home countries and the appeal of economic opportunity in the U.S. settled in New York City. This event and decades of its aftermath are reflected in American popular music of the era. Tin Pan Alley, consisting primarily of Jewish composers and songwriters, became a metonym for the popular music industry in the U.S. The lyrical and melodic content of songs that came out of this reflect the Jewish-American national duality and Black influences that established perennial standards in American popular music and American popular culture as a whole.

Melodic and lyrical qualities from the Tin Pan Alley cannon and Eastern European music reflect the advent of Eastern European Jewish mass migration to New York City from 1880 to 1920. During the era, around 2 million Eastern European Jews entered the United States. This influx was the result of antisemitism and poor economic and political conditions in Europe, and employment opportunities in US working-class city districts. In *The Routledge History of the Holocaust*, William Brustein describes how antisemitic environments in Eastern Europe “consisted of four principal strains — religious, racial, economic, and political.” Religious antisemitism centered around Christian mythology portraying the Jewish people as villainous antichrist murderers and perpetrators of barbarous violence. This trope was created by Catholics living alongside Jews who refused to convert and was introduced in some form to virtually every denomination that came out of the Protestant Reformation. Wilhelm Marr, a German journalist, largely defined and popularized in writing the classification of Jews as a race and the fear-instilling notion they were subhuman in terms of reality and superhuman in terms of the power they held. This came to mutually reinforce antisemitic economic theory which accused Jews of controlling the means of production and engaging in unethical commerce and trade. This lent itself to scapegoating economic and political collapse in Eastern Europe resulting from a culmination of events (e.g. the Franco-Prussian War, purchases from WWI, the adoption of the gold standard in early 1870s Germany, etc.) Religious, racial, and economic antisemitism ultimately served political antisemitism: the belief that Jewish people throughout the diaspora were conspiring to achieve global domination through leftism (socialism, labor movements, and the Bolshevik cause). The result of antisemitism in Eastern Europe was extreme alienation and

violence towards Jewish people (e.g. pogroms in South-Western Imperial Russia).¹ Meanwhile, the U.S. experienced unprecedented economic growth caused by circumstances like market expansion (i.e. the Alaska purchase of 1867 and foreign commerce) and the Second Industrial Revolution. The arrival of influxes of immigrants to America's attractive economy led to vast urbanization.

A large number of Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants settled in the Lower East Side, Manhattan. The public reception to Jewish immigrants in the U.S. was largely positive, especially in comparison to that of other immigrant groups and the treatment Jews received in Eastern Europe. This is evidenced in stereotypical caricature cartoon depictions of immigrants at the time, which display and establish a clear hierarchy of immigrant ethnicity, at the top of which were Jews. Deborah Varat, in her article "Their New Jerusalem Representations of Jewish Immigrants in the American Popular Press 1880–1903," analyzes how these visual representations "aligned with political rhetoric, literature, newspaper editorials, and financial opportunity."² Jewish immigrants, who were poor, embodied distinctively foreign cultural characteristics, and weren't quick to assimilate, would have been easy targets for mockery in American popular media. The exaggerated physical features drawn to represent Jews in these cartoons appear pejorative to the contemporary eye but, at the time, served merely to make characters discernibly Jewish. American gentile attitudes towards Jewish immigrants at the time appear, rather, in the content of these cartoons, in which Jews were shown behaving with American ideals of civility and decency. There were of course outliers. Grotesque and shockingly offensive cartoons resembling the posters of antisemitic propaganda campaigns in Europe showed up in a few papers. But most anti-Jewish-Immigrant sentiment in the U.S. was born of a general fear of foreigners prompted by the unanticipated masses of immigrants whose arrival instilled uncertainty of the state of the country in many.

The arrival of Synagogue-going Jews to New York,³ the center of commercial entertainment in the United States, transformed American popular music, especially Broadway

¹ "EUROPEAN ANTISEMITISM BEFORE THE HOLOCAUST AND THE ROOTS OF NAZISM." In *The Routledge History of the Holocaust*, 38–49. Routledge, 2011.

² Varat, Deborah. "'Their New Jerusalem': Representations of Jewish Immigrants in the American Popular Press, 1880–1903." *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 20, no. 2 (2021): 277.

³ I consistently refer to New York City as "New York" throughout this paper.

Jazz.⁴ Popular tunes from the era incorporated melodies from traditional Jewish liturgical modes (Ahavah Rabbah, Magein Avot, Adonai Malach, and variations). Manhattan’s West 28th Street, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, hosted the most successful songwriters and publishers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the American music industry, most of whom were Jewish. This location was called “Tin Pan Alley” likely because the cacophony of pianos played by sheet music sales promoters, “song-pluggers” colloquially, resembled the clanging of tin pans striking each other. As its songwriters gained fame, people used the name to refer to the American popular music industry as a whole.⁵

Tin Pan Alley music, in addition to bridging ethnic gaps, transcended socioeconomic divisions. Vocal and instrumental performances of these songs took place in various urban spaces in addition to venues designated for this form of entertainment (i.e. concert halls). Samuel E. Backer, in his article, “The Best Songs Came from the Gutters: Tin Pan Alley and the Birth of Manhattan Mass Culture,” describes the intentional and strategic marketing tactic behind this practice: “the firms of Tin Pan Alley were defined by the urban context in which they operated. Pushed to reach the broadest possible audience by economic necessity, publishers sought out potential customers throughout the city, incorporating a host of new social and ethnic groups.”⁶ Thus, pluggers acquired an intricate understanding of the urban social landscape, constantly scouting out venues and performing at beer halls, saloons, cheap bars in the Bowery district, gardens, galas, back alley resorts, athletic clubs, etc.⁷ New York essentially hosted a variety of test audiences with which to trial and error Tin Pan Alley songs, which were then adapted according to public reception and commercial standards. Cole Porter, a prolific gentile Tin Pan Alley songwriter who disclosed that his formula for writing hit songs was to “write Jewish tunes,”⁸ commented on the societal rejection of overtly Jewish melodies in the lyrics of his song *It’s De-Lovely*:

“This verse I’ve started seems to me

⁴ Broadway Jazz is the application of traditional jazz music styles to expressive choreography and storytelling. Broadway Jazz pieces are typically seen in Broadway musicals.

⁵ Rothstein, Robert A. “The Polish Tin Pan Alley, a Jewish Street.” *Polin* 32 (2020): 147–63.

⁶ Backer, Samuel E. “‘The Best Songs Came from the Gutters’: Tin Pan Alley and the Birth of Manhattan Mass Culture.” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 22, no. 4 (2023): 384–405.

⁷ Constantly playing the same songs until people became familiar with them proved successful for their popularization within the city and this method was later employed by radio broadcasts (see the mere exposure effect).

⁸ McBrien, William. *Cole Porter: A Biography*. First edition. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998.

The 'Tin Pan-tithesis' of melody
 So, to spare you all the pain
 We'll skip the darn thing and sing the refrain"⁹

Although anti-immigration sentiments accompanied by xenophobia and antisemitism were present in New York, most were oblivious to or willfully ignorant of Jews' significant contribution to the entertainment industry at the time, rather than being upset about it. Many of these songs' inherent Jewish qualities were overlooked or accepted when performed by American pop stars and famous actors.¹⁰ But people recognized and appreciated Jewish melodies and oftentimes used "jazzy" as a code word to avoid attribution. In Richard Rodgers' song *Manhattan*, there's a lyric that goes:

"The city's clamour can never spoil
 The dreams of a boy and goil"¹¹

Rodgers was a Queens-born Jew. But due to New York gentiles adopting and, to a degree, appropriating the linguistic mannerisms of the Yiddish-speaking Jews in the Lower East Side, subtle nods like these to Jewish culture were passed off as references to the city as a whole.

The phenomenon Tin Pan Alley music was undergoing at the time was what Edward W. Said calls "The transgressive element in music" in his book *Musical Elaborations*. That being "its nomadic ability to attach itself to, and become a part of, social formations, to vary its articulations and rhetoric depending on the occasion as well as the audience."¹² Tin Pan Alley songs were well received by the prototypical American when they were branded as American media. In Manhattan, they were accurately perceived as products of Jewish tradition among certain crowds, especially the network of young working-class Italian and German Americans in the Bowery establishments. Otherwise, most praise for Jewish Tin Pan Alley songwriters by popular music consumers maintained that accomplished descendants of Eastern European Ashkenazi immigrants were to be celebrated as Americans. Many Jewish Tin Pan Alley composers themselves were second-generation immigrants who naturally began identifying more with U.S. culture. But growing up in synagogues and having first-generation parents coming

⁹ Porter Cole, *It's De-Lovely*, (New York, 1936).

¹⁰ Noteworthy exceptions include yiddish theater and a few Jewish entertainers such as Al Jolson and Sophie Tucker.

¹¹ Rodgers Richard, *Manhattan*, (New York, 1925).

¹² Said, Edward W. *Musical Elaborations*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991, pg. 70.

from places with strong aural traditions, they absorbed the melodies of Hebrew cantillations and klezmer through osmosis and, as a result, inadvertently wrote distinctively Jewish music.¹³

This cognitive dissonance demonstrates an inevitable symptom of the immigrant story: national duality. This is reflected in the mixture of major and minor modes with chromaticism in Tin Pan Alley music. For example, in Irving Berlin's (arguably the most famous Jewish Tin Pan Alley songwriter) song *Blue Skies*,¹⁴ the song remains in a pentatonic G major scale until the bridge when an E flat (si in Solfège) appears, giving the section a minor inflection.

42

— Nev-er saw the sun shin-ing so bright, Nev-er saw things

On top of mode mixing, the quality that distinguishes Jewish Tin Pan Alley songs from preceding music is the correlation between melodic modes and lyrical content. A common practice in Western and Central European music is associating melancholy lyrical themes with minor keys and happy with major ones. Although cultural conditioning plays a role in causing people to experience certain emotions in connection with melodic patterns, these biases aren't psychologically predetermined.¹⁵ Thus, different cultures around the world develop unique systems of emotional expression in music. Tin Pan Alley music retained the Eastern European Jewish melodic tradition which generally lacks an emotional dichotomy for major and minor

¹³ Miller, Philip E. "Funny, It Doesn't Sound Jewish: How Yiddish Songs and Synagogue Melodies Influenced Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, and Hollywood." *Musica Judaica*. American Society for Jewish Music, 2005.

¹⁴ Berlin Irving, *Blue Skies*, (New York: Irving Berlin, Inc., 1926).

¹⁵ Lahdelma, Imre, George Athanasopoulos, and Tuomas Eerola. "Sweetness Is in the Ear of the Beholder: Chord Preference across United Kingdom and Pakistani Listeners." *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1502, no. 1 (2021): 72–84.

modes. This is demonstrated in Cole Porter's¹⁶ song *I Love Paris*.¹⁷ The lyrics maintain a consistent tone as it switches between C minor (Aeolian) and major (Ionian).

The image shows a musical score for the song "I Love Paris" by Cole Porter. It consists of two systems of music. The first system is for the lyrics "I love Par - is in the sum - mer, when it siz - zles." and includes a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The second system is for the lyrics "I love Par - is ev - 'ry mo - ment," and also includes a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked "Sostenuto (jubilantly)".

Moreover, most Tin Pan Alley songs' lyrics pertained to general and universal themes (e.g. Berlin's *It's A Lovely Day Today*, George and Ira Gershwin's *Summertime*, Kern's *All The Things You Are*, etc.) to pander to the widest possible audience and avoid ethnic connotations.

The task of identifying the presence of American commercial genres in Eastern European Jewish music as a product of this mass migration is elusive. Each diasporic Jewish population center in Eastern Europe contained a distinct musical tradition. In Eastern Europe, these were defined by the convergence of Hebrew prayer melodies, the national music of host countries, and surrounding influences such as Eastern Mediterranean modes.¹⁸ The same pitch interval considered a melodic anomaly when appearing in one Eastern European country's Jewish folk music tradition might be considered a regularity when appearing in another's. One must be extremely familiar with the manifold Eastern European Jewish melodic structures when discerning American influences on Jewish music in Eastern Europe. However, it is

¹⁶ It's worth noting once more that Porter wasn't Jewish, but admitted to writing his songs by putting words to Jewish tunes. Eastern European Jewish music escaped its existence as an ethnic identity and became more of an ethnic affiliation drawn upon by Tin Pan Alley artists across the board.

¹⁷ Porter Cole, *I Love Paris*, (New York, 1953).

¹⁸ For example, Polish Klezmer was influenced by Hasidic melodies and liturgy whereas Russian Jewish music was more influenced by Yiddish and Russian folk and cantorial music.

comparatively easy to discern American influences on Jewish Eastern European music in New York because for one; the conflux of Jewish immigrants of different nationalities caused a distinct and ubiquitously-uniform set of melodic modes to emerge among New York Jews as a form of cultural homogeneity, and 2; the influence of culturally (as opposed to geographically) Eastern European Jewish music on American music and vice versa are one and the same. Music, like language, is ever-changing, and the fusion of any two genres is, in and of itself, a mutual transformation. Tin Pan Alley was as much a metamorphosis of American popular music as it was a change in Jewish Eastern European music. Furthermore, the ethnocultural nature of Judaism allows for secular beliefs and traditions to flourish in Jewish communities. For Ashkenazi immigrants, the act of engaging in secular forms of acculturation in the U.S. wasn't mutually exclusive with retaining Jewish identity. The contributions of White gentiles and Black Americans to Tin Pan Alley music simply became part of the Jewish music tradition in New York. For example, klezmer jazz ensembles led by violinists, clarinetists, and flutists emerged in New York (e.g. Dave Terras Orchestra).¹⁹

In the history of Jazz and American popular music, Jewish and Black musical practices are inextricable from each other. Although the history of the Black contribution to American popular music would require an extensive essay of its own to be properly discussed, there are parallels and interactions necessary to identify. Black internal migrants who had moved to the northern U.S. during the Great Migration experienced gratitude for the region in comparison to the hostility they faced in the South resembling the Jewish experience of the U.S. after living under the conditions in Eastern Europe. In his article "Social Influences on Jazz Style: Chicago, 1920-30," Chadwick Hansen discusses how despite Black people in the North having some sense of nostalgia for back home in the South following the Great Migration, "Their South was a land of fear and hatred, dirt and disease, malnutrition, degradation and violence."²⁰ Black music in the American South was New Orleans Jazz and Delta Blues preceding the Great Migration. These were folk traditions involving an emphasis on learning by ear (or call and response) and improvisation (melodically and lyrically). Later, post-Great-Migration Black Jazz

¹⁹ Weiss, Howard D., Linda. Ronstadt, Dave. Terras, Fatima. Kuinova, and Isabella. Ibragimova. *The Spirit Travels : Immigrant Music in America*. New York, NY: Cinema Guild, 1992.

²⁰ Hansen, Chadwick. "Social Influences on Jazz Style: Chicago, 1920-30." *American Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (1960): 493–507.

musicians in the North were pressured to conform to American standards in the industry. Music literacy was associated with intelligence at the time so accomplished Black musicians were oftentimes instructed by directors to have sheet music in front of them to appear as though they were referencing notation. Jewish musicians similarly excelled in improvisation and musical memory but were pushed to learn sheet music. Both groups alike were forced to arrange Jazz compositions in orchestral formats. Whereas Jewish musical influences had mostly to do with melodic and lyrical content, Black influences additionally had to do with rhythmic structure. Transformations in Jazz and American popular music came also from the cultural exchanges that took place when Jewish and Black musicians collaborated in performance settings. Jazz And American popular music fused Jewish, Black, and White American musical concepts.

The cultural presence and work ethic of Eastern European Jewish immigrants in New York 1880-1920 are reflected by lyrical and melodic qualities in Tin Pan Alley music and the previously unheard-of success of its songwriters. One of the most revealing measurements of cross-cultural synthesis in American music is the analysis of improvisational jazz solos. Talented jazz musicians are constantly learning, performing, and listening to the music of their predecessors and contemporaries. Improvisational formats in jazz (e.g. bebop) are opportunities for musicians to create a new sound comprising a combination of musical influences in their lives. They essentially illustrate the melodic character of an era. In a 1960 scat solo in the song *How High The Moon*, Ella Fitzgerald quoted fifty songs in approximately five minutes.²¹ Although parts of her scat solos were collages of non-Tin-Pan Alley music post-1920s (e.g. The Beatles), Fitzgerald recorded and performed Tin Pan Alley composers' songbooks several times in her career. For this reason, her scatting is woven with unmistakably Eastern European Jewish melodic sequences. Louis Armstrong once told Cab Calloway his famous scat singing style was derived from davening, or as he put it, "from the Jews 'rockin.'"²² Herb Snitzer, a photographer of jazz musicians, captured Armstrong wearing a Star of David necklace in 1960. It was gifted to

²¹ Mohamed, Suraya. 2019. "How Ella Fitzgerald Turned Forgotten Lyrics into One of Her Best Performances Ever." NPR, September 6, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/04/757560624/how-ella-fitzgerald-turned-forgotten-lyrics-into-one-of-her-best-performances-ever>.

²² Bergreen, Laurence. *Louis Armstrong : An Extravagant Life*. 1st ed. New York: Broadway Books, 1997.

him in his early life by the Karnovskys, a Lithuanian Jewish family who took care of him as a young child. He wore it his entire life.²³

The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and the Immigration Act of 1924 limited the number of immigrants admitted to the U.S. As myriads of Eastern European Jewish musician immigrants were prevented from joining the diasporic community in New York, the contributions of those from decades prior defined Americans' conception of "Jewish music." Cole Porter's mimicking of Jewish music in songwriting marks a key development in early twentieth-century Jewish-American transnationalism: After a period of U.S. commercial music being imitations of American popular music by Jewish songwriters, songs began to come about as imitations of Eastern European Jewish music by American songwriters. Characteristics of American and Jewish music were repeatedly combined to make songs in the pop industry to the extent that the fusion of the two eventually became synonymous with American popular music altogether. In this way, Tin Pan Alley continued to dominate the American music industry through the first half of the twentieth century.

From the shofar, a musical ram's horn blown to celebrate certain Jewish holidays, to trope, the melodic chanting of the Torah notated by diacritics in Masoretic text, Judaism is a musical religion. At that time, melody and verse were so culturally ingrained that musical ability was taken for granted by the many Ashkenazi immigrants who didn't consider themselves musicians. At the lowest level of musical ability, an Eastern European Jew of the early twentieth century could, at the very least, come up with a catchy ditty. And the American popular music industry desired just that; songs of thematic simplicity "whose diction feels so natural...they seem to flow straight out of the rhythms and inflections of everyday speech."²⁴ Impoverished immigrant groups can earn adequate wages and societal acceptance by supplementing an undersupply of something the host country wants. Immigrants brought up in the orthodox Eastern European Jewish context had acquired a supply of profound musical understanding which, when applied to the composition of songs in the U.S., fulfilled the American demand for influential musical media and a canonical national soundtrack. The outcome was the *Great American Songbook*.²⁵ It was also economic stability and public appreciation for numerous

²³ Snitzer, Herb. *Glorious Days and Nights a Jazz Memoir*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011.

²⁴ Holden, Stephen. 1987. "Pop View; Irving Berlin's American Landscape." *The New York Times*, May 10, 1987.

²⁵ Hyman, Dick. "The great American songbook." England: MusicMasters, 2009.

Jewish immigrants and their descendants. Even the majority of those who refused to verbally acknowledge the Jewishness of American popular music *embodied* an appreciation for Jewish culture by enjoying and listening to the records and radio stations of Tin Pan Alley. Its success spoke for itself. This music was consumed throughout the nation for decades on end; permeating the daily lives of millions of people who listened to and performed these songs. Tin Pan Alley thereby established itself as a part of the American, Jewish, and Jewish-American psyche.

Tin Pan Alley has proven to be a perennial genre. The lyrical formula for these tunes, broad, catchy, and memorable, has since been the most common framework with which popular artists write songs. In a 2014 *Vox* magazine article “The Town That Put the Pop in Music; From Tin Pan Alley to Hollis, Queens, the Brill Building to Bushwick, Electric Lady Studios to Lady Gaga, a 100-year sampling of New York sounds,” the author describes parallels between the cultural identity of Tin Pan Alley and that of music today: “Tin Pan Alley's music was brash, gaudy, up-to-date, and unembarrassed about the taint of the marketplace.”²⁶ Its massive success created the current model for the general commercialization of music; production, distribution, and marketing. Even with radio broadcasts becoming an obsolete form of music consumption, playing songs repeatedly to promote them through familiarity is used now by advertisers who plug famous musical artists by putting their faces on popular consumer products, hiring them for movie soundtracks, etc. From R&B to country, the same chord progressions and melodic hooks thought up a century ago by Jews in New York give themselves to all kinds of musical expression. The origin of Tin Pan Alley as the product of cross-cultural interaction has helped to facilitate the practice of musical fusion. In the article “The Beatles, the Brill Building, and the Persistence of Tin Pan Alley in the Age of Rock,” Timothy E. Scheurer, describes how melodic approaches by Brill Building²⁷ artists in the later half of the twenty-first century made “a conscientious attempt to reconcile the styles of early rock and R&B and Tin Pan Alley.”²⁸ Several songs people tend to think of as gentile-American-esque are, on the contrary, Tin Pan Alley. Irving Berlin's *White Christmas* and *God Bless America* have been covered countless

²⁶ Rosen, Jody. *The Town That Put the Pop in Music; From Tin Pan Alley to Hollis, Queens, the Brill Building to Bushwick, Electric Lady Studios to Lady Gaga, a 100-Year Sampling of New York Sounds*. New York (1968). New York: Vox Media, LLC, 2014.

²⁷ The Brill Building was host to music studios and offices home to some of the most popular chart toppers of the late twenty-first century.

²⁸ Scheurer, Timothy E. “The Beatles, the Brill Building, and the Persistence of Tin Pan Alley in the Age of Rock.” *Popular Music and Society* 20, no. 4 (1996) 92.

times by all sorts of people through the decades. When you look up God Bless America, it says it was written by Kate Smith in 1938, LeAnn Rimes in 1997, Sandi Patty in 2004, Anthem Lights in 2020, etc. Tin Pan Alley is perhaps the most culturally enduring event in the history of American music.

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