I, Kimberly Gelbwasser, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts in Voice.

It is entitled:
"To Be an American": How Irving Berlin Assimilated Jewishness and Blackness in his Early Songs

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“To Be an American”:
How Irving Berlin Assimilated Jewishness and Blackness in his Early Songs

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Abstract

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, millions of immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe as well as the Mediterranean countries arrived in the United States. New York City, in particular, became a hub where various nationalities coexisted and intermingled. Adding to the immigrant population were massive waves of former slaves migrating from the South. In this radically multicultural environment, Irving Berlin, a Jewish-Russian immigrant, became a songwriter.

The cultural interaction that had the most profound effect upon Berlin’s early songwriting from 1907 to 1914 was that between his own Jewish population and the African-American population in New York City. In his early songs, Berlin highlights both Jewish and African-American stereotypical identities.

Examining stereotypical ethnic markers in Berlin’s early songs reveals how he first revised and then traded his old Jewish identity for a new American identity as the “King of Ragtime.” This document presents two case studies that explore how Berlin not only incorporated stereotypical musical and textual markers of “blackness” within two of his individual Jewish novelty songs, but also converted them later to genres termed “coon” and “ragtime,” which were associated with African Americans. This document also studies how visual and aural markers serve to reinforce or contradict ethnic identity as defined musically and textually by Berlin.
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Chapter 1
“To Be an American”

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, millions of immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe as well as the Mediterranean countries arrived in the United States. New York City, in particular, became a “city of immigrants,” where various nationalities coexisted and intermingled. Adding to this “multi-ethnic New York” were massive waves of former slaves migrating from the South. In this radically multicultural environment, Irving Berlin, a Jewish-Russian immigrant, became a songwriter.

The cultural interaction that had the most profound effect upon Berlin’s early songwriting from 1907 to 1914 was that between his own Jewish population and the African-American population in New York City. In his early songs, Berlin not only highlighted his Jewish identity in a stereotypical way but also, widely incorporated stereotypical markers of African-American identity, since styles and genres associated with “blackness,” such as ragtime, were perceived to be characteristically American. As Samuel Ornitz wrote in his contemporary novel, Haunch Paunch and Jowl, “Ragtime has the whole country jogging. . . . The negroes had given America

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3 Ibid., 11.


5 Hamm, Music in the New World, 373.
its music.” By associating his songs with blackness then, Berlin was catering to the “common denominator of taste” and striving to be American. Simply incorporating such superficial ethnic markers as vaguely syncopated rhythms, the word “ragtime” in the text, or an African-American protagonist, signified to the public that not only was “something Black” going on in Berlin’s songs but also, something American.

Examining stereotypical ethnic markers in Berlin’s early songs reveals how he traded his old identity of the “Jew in traditional garb” for a new identity as the “King of Ragtime,” dressed in “American cloth.” This document presents two case studies that explore how Berlin not only incorporated stereotypical musical and textual markers of blackness within two of his individual Jewish novelty songs, but also converted them later to genres termed “coon” and “ragtime,” which were associated with African Americans. This document also takes into

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8 Melnick, A Right to Sing the Blues, 43.


11 Gottlieb, Funny, It Doesn’t Sound Jewish, 108.

12 On the use of the term “coon” see Lynn Abott and Doug Seroff, Ragged But Right: Black Traveling Shows, “Coon Songs,” and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 3-4. “The word ‘coon’ is an archaic invective that last lost currency; nevertheless, it is powerfully redolent of turn-of-the-century American racism. . . . [I]t remains highly offensive, and we take no pleasure in its repeated usage. However, it is impossible to investigate black popular entertainment of the ragtime era without directly confronting coon songs.”
consideration how visual and aural markers serve to reinforce or contradict ethnic identity as defined musically and textually by Berlin.

The first case study begins by identifying Jewish and African-American markers within the 1909 Jewish ragtime novelty song, “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle, Play Some Ragtime.” It then explores how Berlin transformed this song into the 1911 coon and ragtime song, “Ragtime Violin!” The second case study follows the same format, first identifying Jewish and African-American markers within the 1910 Jewish novelty song, “That Kazzatsky Dance” and then exploring its transformation to the 1911 coon and ragtime hit, “Alexander’s Ragtime Band.”

“To Be an American”

Upon arriving in New York from Russia on September 14, 1893, Irving Berlin, then only five years old, observed that he and his family were noticeably different from Americans. Later in adulthood, Berlin recounted how on the ferry ride from the Immigration Bureau to Manhattan, “We spoke only Yiddish and were conspicuous for our ‘jew clothes.’”13 Indeed, the immigrants arriving from Central and Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean “differed more radically from the older [American] population in physical appearance, language, religion, and cultural background than had earlier immigrants from northwestern Europe.”14

Resentment brewed amongst the older population of Americans against these new “aliens” arriving in the country. In 1904 writer Henry James wrote, “There is no claim to


14 Hamm, Irving Berlin: Early Songs, xx.
brotherhood with aliens in the first grossness of their alienism.”  

Meanwhile, members of Congress began pursuing increasing restrictions on immigration that culminated in the Immigration Act of 1921 bringing “a virtual halt to immigration from Central Europe and the Mediterranean.”  

And so, on some level, Berlin was already aware at age five that “if his family members were to survive, they would have to adopt American ways, and not just in matters of dress and language; to cling to the old would consign them to external exile.”  

At an early age then, Irving Berlin’s lifelong struggle “to invent and revise his identity” began.  

Irving Berlin received his formal education as to what it meant to be American in “the streets.”  A “runaway boy” who left his family’s impoverished apartment on Cherry Street by age fourteen to make a living on his own, “[Berlin] was at home on the streets, that marginal land between his own culture and the culture of his new society.”  

Berlin’s early experiences amidst the “polyglot hubbub of the curbs and doorsteps” of Bowery saloons, overcrowded lodging houses, and vaudeville houses, allowed the songwriter to escape his “traditional familial and authoritarian culture.”  

For Berlin and his fellow young immigrants, “to be an American, dress

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17 Bergreen, *As Thousands Cheer*, 5.

18 Ibid., 10.

19 Ibid., 17.


22 Erenberg, *Steppin’ Out*, 74.
like an American, look like an American, and even, if only in fantasy, talk like an American became a collective goal. . . .”23

In the early years of the twentieth century, what it meant “to be an American” was in a state of transition from the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant flavor of the Victorian era to the multicultural flavor of the Tin Pan Alley era.24 During the Tin Pan Alley era, approximately 1890 to 1950,25 songwriters frequently drew upon African-American styles and genres in their songs. “Even after having been recast by Tin Pan Alley songwriters, the cakewalk, the so-called coon song, ragtime, and syncopated dance music still represented a new, brash, dynamic sensibility that Americans in increasing numbers and from different classes found refreshing and exciting.”26 To Irving Berlin, this “new, brash, dynamic sensibility” was what it meant to be an American and the songwriter would have “unprecedented success in marketing his version of ‘Black’ music as ‘American’ music.”27

One could argue that Berlin’s early songs translate “blackface conventions into nonvisual form.”28 The question then follows, “[W]hy should [a] member of one pariah group hide his


25 “Tin Pan Alley” earned its nickname from the sounds of cheap upright pianos wafting into the streets from publishers’ salesrooms located for a time in a stretch of Twenty-Eighth Street between Fifth Avenue and Broadway. The term later came to be applied to the popular song industry itself and the style of music written by songwriters of the era.


27 Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues*, 44.

28 Ibid., 40. Melnick refers to Robert Dawidoff’s assertion in his manuscript, “The Kind of Person You Have to Sound Like in Order to Sing ‘Alexander’s Ragtime Band.’”
identity under the mask of another?”

Michael Rogin writes, “Blackface is the instrument that transfers identities from immigrant Jew to American.” Just as blackface performer, Al Jolson, “escape[d] his Old World identity through blackface,” gaining “heightened authenticity and American acceptance,” so did Berlin escape his immigrant identity through nonvisual blackface. And so, by aligning his early songs with blackness, Berlin positioned himself at the forefront of America’s “emerging identity” as it pulled away from its European origins.

Countless romanticized portrayals of ragtime as “indigenous American music” persisted in the early twentieth century, propagated both by Berlin’s contemporaries as well as Berlin himself. Having little to do with the definition of classic ragtime that would develop during the ragtime revival in the 1950s, ragtime in the early twentieth century referred to songs “in a vaguely ‘Negro’ style” which to period audiences, included coon songs and syncopated dance music. Calling ragtime “a necessary element of American life,” Berlin reflected, “[T]he new age demanded new music for new action. . . . The country speeded up.” Of this speedy


30 Ibid., 95.

31 Ibid., 79.

32 Ibid., 118.


34 Bergreen, *As Thousands Cheer*, 60.

35 Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues*, 43.

36 Irving Berlin, quoted in Bergreen, *As Thousands Cheer*, 60.

American pace, contemporary critic, Hiram K. Moderwell wrote, “As you walk up and down the streets of an American city you feel in its jerk and rattle a personality different from that of any European capital. . . . No European music can or possibly could express this American personality. Ragtime I believe does express it. It is to-day the one true American music.”

Similarly, songwriter Harry Von Tilzer wrote in Variety magazine,

[Ragtime] is the distinctive American treatment of a song in general. It reflects the spirit of the American people, their extraordinary activity, restlessness, initiative, joyousness and capacity for work, and for play. . . . [A]s America remains the land of the brave and the free and the busy, particularly the busy, so long shall we have “ragtime.”

Naturally, Berlin chose to align his early songs with this uniquely American genre in order to become an American. Knowing that any song with ties to blackness would be perceived as ragtime, and thus American, Berlin wrote “black” songs which Hamm groups into two categories: “ragtime and other dance songs” and “coon songs.” An understanding of genre and generic labels is essential to understanding how Berlin positioned himself at the center of American popular music.

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39 Harry Von Tilzer, Variety, December 23, 1912, quoted in Hamm, Irving Berlin, 90.

40 Berlin would have publically denied his ties to blackness. In fact, Berlin took great offense to a rumor that a black man really wrote his ragtime songs. (See Bergreen, As Thousands Cheer, 77.) However, Berlin would have likely denied his ties to Jewishness as well. Gottlieb writes, “It is plausible that as a child [Berlin] saw Yiddish shows. . . . Heredity, environment, personal disposition all entered into the development of his psyche. Berlin undoubtedly would have vehemently denied all this.” (Gottlieb, Funny, It Doesn’t Sound Jewish, 165.) Ironically, for a composer who incorporated countless stereotypical labels in his songs, Berlin embraced few labels for his music. “American” is likely the only label of which he would have approved. Berlin’s undeniable association with blackness was merely a means to earning the title of “American.”
**Genre**

In Tin Pan Alley, popular songs were a commodity to be sold for mass consumption. Catering to the public, or “the market,”\(^1\) music publishers assigned songs simple generic labels so that consumers would know precisely what stereotype they were buying. For example, in 1908 the music publisher, Remick, “offered songs for sale under the following labels: ballad, cowboy song, novelty Irish comic, coon song, Indian love song, waltz song, topical song, sentimental ballad, march song, and march ballad.”\(^2\) The generic label was merely one component of a sort of “generic contract” set up between producers and consumers of popular song.

Jeffrey Kallberg defines the terms of this generic contract, writing,

> The composer agrees to use some of the conventions, patterns, and gestures of a genre and the listener consents to interpret some aspects of the piece in a way conditioned by the genre. The contract may be signaled to the listener in a number of ways; title, meter, tempo and characteristic opening gestures are some of the common means.\(^3\)

This document’s case studies explore how Berlin signaled generic contracts to listeners through superficial markers of Jewishness and blackness in his early songs. According to Charles Hamm’s taxonomy of Berlin’s early songs as it appears in the critical, three-volume edition published in the series *Music of the United States* (MUSA), markers of Jewishness appear in Berlin’s ethnic novelty songs portraying Jewish protagonists, which Hamm calls “Jewish novelty

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\(^2\) Ibid.

songs.” Markers of blackness are found in Berlin’s ethnic novelty songs portraying African-American protagonists, called “coon songs” as well as in “ragtime and other dance songs.”

Hamm’s taxonomy of Berlin’s early songs is a “consensus and consolidation” of earlier genre classifications by E.M. Wickes, Isaac Goldberg, and Berlin himself. Hamm organizes Berlin’s songs into four groups—ballads, novelty songs, ragtime and other dance songs, and show songs. The criteria for Hamm’s classification is based not only on the “style and structure” of the music and lyrics but also the “identity of the song’s protagonist; the intended performance venue; and ideology, defined as the relationship of a song’s expressive content to dominant social practice.” Deriving meaning from his taxonomy, Hamm concludes that “Berlin treated song genres and subgenres flexibly, often introducing elements of one into another for comic or dramatic effect and sometimes writing songs that almost defy classification.” For example, “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” is classified as a ragtime song, coon song, and show song, because of its title, black protagonist, and performance in a stage production. The concept of genre flexibility is pertinent to this document, as it explores how Jewish and African-American markers intersect in Berlin’s Jewish novelty songs, coon songs, and ragtime songs. Before exploring the interplay between Jewish and African-American markers, one must first understand the genres to which these markers belong.

45 Ibid.
46 Ibid., xlix.
47 Ibid., xxix.
I. Novelty Songs

The texts of novelty songs, also called “character songs,” feature protagonists in comic or melodramatic situations. These songs were written for performance in vaudeville, “a grotesque microcosm of American society, where, in almost ritual form, the major subcultures were held up to public view as ridiculous effigies.” The subgenres of Berlin’s novelty songs are diverse and include ethnic novelty songs, urban novelty songs, music novelty songs, and miscellaneous and topical novelty songs. This document focuses specifically on the ethnic novelty subgenre, “Jewish” and “coon.”

a. Ethnic Novelty Songs

Berlin’s ethnic novelty songs feature protagonists drawn from multi-ethnic New York City. To Berlin’s vaudevillian working-class audiences, a protagonist’s name, dialect, and speech pattern could reveal his/her ethnicity, as could certain melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic patterns stereotypically associated with the character’s ethnicity. While these ethnic portrayals are oftentimes crude, Irving Howe notes that “to be noticed, even if through the cruel lens of parody, meant to be accepted. . . .”

1. Jewish Novelty Songs

Berlin’s Jewish protagonists conform to the stereotypes of their ethnicity. They have names like Abie Cohen and Becky Rosenstein and are overly preoccupied with money. Many of

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48 Ibid., xxxiv.


them speak with Yiddish dialects and exclaim “Oi oi oi” no matter whether they are pleased or distressed. Berlin underlines this Jewish identity melodically, harmonically, and rhythmically, by drawing upon the traditional music with which he was familiar. Berlin attributed his musicianship to singing in synagogue with his cantor father on the High Holy Days, saying, “I suppose it was singing in shul that gave me my musical background. . . . It was in my blood.”

Derived from music of the shtetl, Jewish weddings, and Yiddish theater, the Jewish markers in Berlin’s songs include plodding rhythms, little syncopation, augmented seconds, and the minor mode.

2. Coon Songs

Berlin’s African-American protagonists have names such as Alexander, Ephrahem, or Eliza and have stereotypically black ways of speaking. They address people as “honey” or “baby,” and leave off the final “g” in words like “coming,” and say “gwine” instead of “going.”

The music itself may reflect styles and genres associated with African Americans such as ragtime and syncopated dance music. While the coon song sprang from the minstrel tradition, Berlin was especially adept at defusing minstrelsy’s most offensive elements. In the minstrel tradition, black protagonists are portrayed as “violent, dishonest, lazy, cowardly, and prone to superstition and sexual promiscuity,” however in Berlin’s coon songs, African-American

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52 Irving Berlin, quoted in Bergreen, As Thousands Cheer, 12.


54 Hamm, Irving Berlin: Early Songs, xxxvii.

55 Melnick, A Right to Sing the Blues, 45.

56 Joyner, “The Ragtime Controversy,” 244.
protagonists are oftentimes respected, talented musicians as in “Alexander’s Ragtime Band.”

After all, Berlin’s black protagonists could offer the world “native American music”\(^{57}\) like ragtime, for which there was “an insatiable appetite.”\(^{58}\)

II. Ragtime Song and Other Dance Songs

Today, classic ragtime is understood as “a musical composition for the piano comprising three or four sections containing sixteen measures each of which combines a syncopated melody accompanied by an even, steady duple rhythm.”\(^{59}\) While a few of Berlin’s ragtime songs do share characteristics of classic ragtime (choruses in the subdominant of the original key, syncopated rhythmic patterns), most of Berlin’s ragtime songs have musical features of ragtime as it was understood in the early twentieth century.

The contemporary perception of ragtime was exceedingly vague. Edward Berlin writes that ragtime song came to refer to “virtually any Negro dialect song with medium to lively tempo, or a syncopated rhythm.”\(^{60}\) Indeed, contemporary writer, E.M. Wickes wrote that “for some time after the introduction of ragtime, only songs having to do with the negro were looked upon as being ragtime numbers,”\(^{61}\) and that “everything that carries the jerky meter, or an

\(^{57}\) Bergreen, *As Thousands Cheer*, 67.


irregular meter that possesses a pleasing lilt, is called ‘ragtime.’” Most of Berlin’s early ragtime songs do have black protagonists, overlapping with the genre of coon song, however, even when the protagonists were not African American, a “jerky” style or simply the word “ragtime” in the text prompted period audiences to interpret the songs as being associated with black identity.

According to Hamm’s classification, a ragtime song either has the word “ragtime” in the title or makes mention of ragtime in the text, regardless of the protagonist’s race. Highlighting the kinder elements of the African-American stereotype, ragtime songs emphasize “rhythm, jollity, a nonstop syncopated party.” An “intriguing song and dance style,” ragtime spurred “ordinary folk from many walks of life and countries of origin . . . to become shaking Jezebels, leaping up onto tables and calling for more ragtime and faster.”

**Beyond the Sheet Music**

While the sheet music is the “main material legacy of the period,” one cannot overlook the role of illustration and performance in transmitting ethnic identity. As it is unclear as to how much input Berlin had in these arenas, in the hands of illustrators and performers, the ethnic identity portrayed musically and textually by Berlin was reinforced, concealed, or changed. For

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62 Ibid.


example, while Fanny Brice reinforced Jewish identity by performing “Sadie Salome (Go Home)” with a pronounced Yiddish accent, the cover artist concealed ethnicity by illustrating a female protagonist devoid of stereotypically Jewish features.\textsuperscript{68} While Berlin portrayed the protagonist of “Ragtime Violin!” as African American, the cover artist illustrated a “European”\textsuperscript{69} man. While Arthur Collins and Byron Harlan reinforced African-American identity by employing “broad ‘Negro’ accents” in their performance of “When that Midnight Choo Choo leaves for Alabam,”\textsuperscript{70} Fred Astaire and Judy Garland’s performance of the same song in \textit{Easter Parade} lacks this marker of black identity.\textsuperscript{70} With so many people involved in the production of these songs, it is no wonder that diverse renderings of ethnic identities ensued. However, one should not view these various interpretations of ethnic identity as “mistakes.” Portraying diverse races and nationalities in performance and illustration was a way to invite all races and ethnicities to join in the fun.

\textit{Chapter 2: “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle, Play Some Ragtime” and “Ragtime Violin!”}

Chapter 2 explores how Berlin sought to revise his Jewish identity by first incorporating markers of blackness into his 1909 Jewish novelty song, “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle, Play Some Ragtime” and then transforming it two years later into the entirely black, coon and ragtime song, “Ragtime Violin!” The case study begins by identifying ethnic markers within the Jewish-black hybrid, “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle.” Berlin aligns the song with Jewishness by incorporating a


\textsuperscript{69} Slobin, \textit{Tenement Songs}, 176.

\textsuperscript{70} Hamm, “Genre, performance, and ideology in the early songs of Irving Berlin,” 375.
minor verse and Jewish protagonists whose identities are reinforced by the large-nosed fiddler of an accompanying song-slide as well as singer Fanny Brice’s Yiddish dialect and Albert Whelan’s interpolated text. However, Berlin’s incorporation of a major-key chorus and the words “ragtime” and “choc’late baby” point to blackness, so as to partially “mask” Berlin’s immigrant identity on his way to becoming an American. With “Ragtime Violin!,” Berlin goes completely “blackface” with entirely major-key syncopated music, an African-American protagonist, and “black” dialect. Sigmund Spaeth calls “Ragtime Violin!” a “more successful[l]” version of “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle,” since the world clamored for “the sights and sounds of ‘pretend’ blackness.”

Chapter 3: “That Kazzatsky Dance” and “Alexander’s Ragtime Band”

Chapter 3 presents a second case study that explores how Berlin incorporated markers of blackness into his 1910 Jewish novelty song, “That Kazzatsky Dance,” and then transformed it one year later into a coon and ragtime song, “Alexander’s Ragtime Band.” The case study begins by identifying ethnic markers within the Jewish-black hybrid, “That Kazzatsky Dance.” Aligning the song with Jewishness, Berlin features the minor key, Jewish protagonists, Yiddish dialect, and references to the Russian folk dance of his heritage, the kazatsky. Aligning the song with blackness, Berlin textually portrays the kazatsky as if it were a “Yiddisha Rag” as opposed to a traditional dance, reinforcing black identity with a major-key syncopated chorus. However, it

71 Melnick, A Right to Sing the Blues, 41.

72 Today, the widely accepted transliteration from Yiddish to English is “Yiddishe,” however, during Berlin’s early songwriting years, “Yiddisha” was common. For more information on transliteration, see YIVO Institute for Jewish Research at www.yivoinstitute.org
was not until Berlin converted “That Kazzastky Dance” to the entirely black “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” that the composer achieved international fame. Berlin’s “Alexander” incorporates rhythms reminiscent of “cakewalk” syncopations, black protagonists, and black dialect reinforced in period recordings by Collins & Harlan and Billy Murray. Furthermore, the “Alexander” pictured on the cover of the sheet music has a curious resemblance to Irving Berlin. Indeed, Berlin was immensely successful in passing himself off as the “ragged-meter man” of the song. Hailed as “the one and only King of Ragtime,” Berlin had the world believing that he’d “written every single ragtime song ever dreamed up.”

*Berlin’s Early Years*

While approximately two hundred songs written between 1907 and 1914 still exist, few other documents remain from Berlin’s early songwriting period. In fact, within the extensive Irving Berlin Collection housed at the Library of Congress, little can be found on Irving Berlin’s early years. Indeed, “The reality of Berlin’s early years faded.” The songs that remain serve as important documents, as they portray the multicultural society in which Berlin lived. Later in Berlin’s career, “as the climate of the country changed and social differences became more problematic,” Berlin’s song style became more generic, obscuring ethnic identity. In fact, after

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73 Hamm, *Irving Berlin: Songs from the Melting Pot*, 104.

74 Whitcomb, *Irving Berlin and Ragtime America*, 75.

75 Hamm, “Irving Berlin’s Early Songs as Biographical Documents,” 15.

76 Ibid., 27.
1911, few of Berlin’s ragtime songs specifically imply a black protagonist and Berlin began preferring the word “syncopation” instead of “ragtime” in reference to his songs.\textsuperscript{77}

By this point in time, Berlin had already achieved his assimilation into American culture. Berlin accomplished this not by jumping into a “Melting-Pot”\textsuperscript{78} in which diverse ethnicities fused together to produce a generic American, but rather through associating his music with African Americans who “seemed the most distinctively American people.”\textsuperscript{79} The following two case studies will explore African-American association in four of Berlin’s early songs, leading songwriter Jerome Kern to later proclaim, “Irving Berlin has no place in American music: he \textit{is} American music.”\textsuperscript{80}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{77} Hamm, \textit{Irving Berlin: Early Songs}, xlii.
\textsuperscript{79} Rogin, \textit{Blackface, White Noise}, 100.
\end{flushright}
Chapter 2

“Yiddle, On Your Fiddle, Play Some Ragtime” and “Ragtime Violin!”

This chapter begins by identifying markers of Jewishness and blackness in the music, text, illustrations, and recordings associated with the 1909 “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle, Play Some Ragtime.” The case study then explores how Berlin traded “Yiddle’s” Jewish markers for black markers in the 1911 “Ragtime Violin!”

Markers of Jewishness in “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle, Play Some Ragtime”

Setting up a “Yiddish ambience” in “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle, Play Some Ragtime”

Berlin incorporates two quotations in the introduction: one from the Yiddish song “Der rebe hot geheysn freylekh zayn” and the other from what would later become the Israeli national anthem, “Hatikvah.”

“Der rebe hot geheysn freylekh zayn” or “The Rabbi Has Bidden Us to be Merry” is a popular Yiddish folksong attributed to Abraham Goldfadn, the “father” of Yiddish theater, created in the 1870s. Growing up in the midst of the Yiddish theater district in New York City, Berlin periodically attended Yiddish shows, the “entertainment outlet of the day.”

Yiddish theater thrived in New York City where popular culture “played a significant role in giving the

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3 Gottlieb, *Funny, It Doesn’t Sound Jewish*, 165.
immigrants a sense of identity, both in terms of where they came from and where they were headed. Indeed, Berlin’s incorporation of the Yiddish tune represents where the composer was coming from, while Berlin’s incorporation of “ragtime” in the song’s refrain, represents where the composer was headed.

By opening “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle” with a quotation from Goldfadn’s minor-mode folksong featuring an augmented second, Berlin establishes musical markers of Jewishness at the very outset. (Ex. 1-1)

Goldfadn achieves the augmented second in measure three by incorporating what Jewish folk musicians call a *frigish* or *freygish* phrase. Earning its name from its resemblance to the Phrygian church mode in which a semitone interval exists between the first and second notes of a melody, the *frigish* melody-type additionally contains an augmented second between the second and third pitches. (Ex. 1-2)

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Goldfadn was most likely referring to this frigish melody-type when he said, “I limited myself to preserving a particular Jewish folk music, characterized by a certain Phrygian mode, and this approach was crowned by great success.”5 This melody-type, also known as Ahava raba after the Sabbath prayer,6 appears nowhere else in the novelty song besides the introduction. In the introduction Berlin was apparently interested in setting up a “generic contract”7 between himself and his audience. Featuring the frigish marker, Berlin was signaling his choice of genre, the Jewish novelty song. Once the generic contract was formed between Berlin and his audience in the introduction, it was no longer necessary for Berlin to incorporate the frigish melody-type. The audience was already conditioned to interpret the novelty song as Jewish.8


6 Gottlieb, Funny, It Doesn’t Sound Jewish, 141.


8 While Berlin wrote his own melodies and lyrics, he collaborated with “musical secretaries” who helped him to “harmonize, arrange, and notate the material.” One cannot know with certainty whether Berlin himself wrote the piano introduction, however, it is known that Berlin was extremely involved in the piano arrangements. “He would, for example, request constant changes of harmonization until his arranger seized upon the accompaniment that Berlin felt was ‘correct’ for his melodies.” (David Carson Berry, “Dynamic Introductions: The Affective Role of Melodic Ascent and Other Linear Devices in Selected Song Verses of Irving Berlin,” Intégral 13 (1999 [publ. 2001]): 2-3.
The irony is that many Jewish chants do not contain these *frigish* intervals at all. While this melody-type was oftentimes perceived to be “Jewish property” exclusively stemming from Eastern Jewish chant, the fact is that the intervals pervaded much of Eastern Europe’s music and were not “ethnic-specific.” This reality, however, was of no importance to Berlin or his audiences. These intervals, tending “to crop up at certain times when a nationalistic *yidishkayt* (‘Jewishness’) feeling is demanded,” were readily accepted as uniquely Jewish.

Berlin’s quotation of “Hatikvah,” is another strategically placed marker of Jewishness. Sung at the Sixth World Zionist Congress in 1903, “Hatikvah” was quickly incorporated by Berlin into his 1909 Jewish novelty song. The minor melody of the anthem appears in the introductory vamp section of “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle,” foreshadowing the minor verse of the novelty song. (Ex. 1-3)

Ex. 1-3 “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle” Vamp (Gottlieb, *Funny, It Doesn’t Sound Jewish*)

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10 Ibid., 184.

11 Ibid., 189.
While the “Hatikvah” is hopeful, expressing the aspirations for a sovereign Jewish homeland, to American listeners, its minor melody is a marker of “melancholy”\(^\text{12}\) portraying the stereotypical “poor sorrowing Jew.”\(^\text{13}\) Slobin asserts, “It is no accident that the American national anthem is in the major mode: for Western European and American ears, the major is affirmative, and the minor mode negative.”\(^\text{14}\) And so, Berlin’s minor-mode introduction and verse reveals Berlin-the-immigrant-Jew with “generations of wailing cantors”\(^\text{15}\) “in his blood.” Berlin-the-happy-American makes his first appearance in the major-mode “ragtime” refrain of the Jewish novelty song.

Underscoring the musical markers of Jewishness established in the introduction, the lyrics of the verse present the song’s protagonists, identified as Jewish by their stereotypical names: “Yiddle” the fiddler, and his admiring “Sadie.” Originally a nickname for the Hebrew name “Sarah,” the name “Sadie” also appears in Berlin’s first Jewish novelty song of 1909, “Sadie Salome (Go Home).” Sadie Salome, having strayed from her “happy home” (a traditional Jewish home, no doubt), is discovered by her boyfriend, Mose, as she is doing a striptease in a variety show. “Oy, oy, oy, oy where is your clothes” Mose shouts at the stage. Sadie returns in Berlin’s second Jewish novelty song to make an untraditional request. Sadie pleads in Yiddish phrasing, \(^\text{16}\) “If you’ll maybe play for Sadie, some more ragtime [emphasis added].”


\(^{14}\) Slobin, *Tenement Songs*, 183.

\(^{15}\) Woollcott, *The Story of Irving Berlin*, 86.

The name “Yiddle” is unique to this Jewish novelty song, unlike Berlin’s stereotypical Eastern-European Jew “Abie,” who appears throughout Berlin’s Jewish novelty songs. “Yiddle,” derives from the oftentimes pejorative, “Yid,” a slang name for a Jewish person. This was a fitting name at a time when “‘political correctness’ was a yet-to-be-heard-from term”\(^\text{17}\) and an African American was a “coon” and an Italian person a “wop.”\(^\text{18}\) While prejudicial, “blatant offensiveness probably was not intended to be more than ‘anything for a laugh.’”\(^\text{19}\) Perhaps this is what Berlin intended when he used the name “Yiddle” to create a playful triple rhyme, “Yiddle in the middle of your fiddle.”\(^\text{20}\)

Berlin’s use of the word “fiddle” instead of “violin” gives the song a sort of “ethnic flavoring,”\(^\text{21}\) in that it points to the immigrant folk musician, “gypsy”\(^\text{22}\) even, as opposed to the classical virtuoso. “Basic to a sense of tradition in Jewish culture,”\(^\text{23}\) the fiddle was the instrument of the klezmorim, or folk musicians who lived on the outskirts of society in Eastern Europe. Yiddle with his fiddle is portrayed as one of these klezmorim whose music was “felt to penetrate to the soul of the occasion at weddings.”\(^\text{24}\) Transplanted to America, Yiddle does not play “weepingly in the Jewish manner, with power, with an outcry from deep in the heart, from

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\(^{17}\) Gottlieb, *Funny, It Doesn’t Sound Jewish*, 25.

\(^{18}\) Berlin used the term “wop” in such songs as the 1910 “Sweet Marie, Make-a Rag-a-Time Dance Wid Me,” the 1911 “Dat’s-A My Gal,” the 1912 “My Sweet Italian Man,” and the 1914 “Hey Wop.”

\(^{19}\) Gottlieb, *Funny, It Doesn’t Sound Jewish*, 25.


\(^{22}\) Slobin, *Tenement Songs*, 16.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 175.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 82.
the soul.” Instead, at this Jewish wedding Yiddle plays upbeat ragtime. This will be explored later, as a marker of blackness.

Studying the text for markers of Jewishness, one might suggest that Sadie and Yiddle are “the embodiment of the immigrant Everyman and not of a particular ethnic group.” Sadie and Yiddle do not exhibit many of the “fixed traits that history or legend had assigned [the Jew]” such as preoccupation with money and social status. Furthermore, Hamm notes that Yiddle’s “lack of table etiquette” when Sadie hears him drinking soup is not ethnic specific, for Berlin makes similar references in several of his Italian novelty songs. Regardless, Berlin’s choice of proper names and references to the wedding fiddler signals the composer’s intention to create “the effect” of Jewishness. However, the full effect of Jewishness can only be achieved through the synergy of text with music, performance, and illustration. As popular music scholar David Brackett writes, “To analyze lyrics means not to abstract them from their context.” Analyzing the lyrics within their context, Hamm concludes that the song is indeed, a Jewish novelty song. The fact that Hamm also categorizes the song as a ragtime song will be studied later.

29 Ibid., 277.
31 Ibid., 78.
While Hamm and Furia regret that there are no period recordings of “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle” “to help clarify the contemporary meaning of the song,”\(^{32}\) Gottlieb notes that a recording was indeed made in England in January 1912 by Albert Whelan. Gottlieb does not however, study Whelan’s performance in order to clarify the meaning of the song. Upon close listening, the author maintains that Sadie and Yiddle are not “the embodiment of the immigrant Everyman,” rather, they are specifically Jewish.

Not only does Whelan sing with a mock Yiddish accent, pronouncing “stop” as “shtop” and “wedding” as “vedding,” but he also tacks on a repeat of the refrain after the second ending to which he adds his own “Jewish” lyrics. Not uncommon in period performances,

singers not only make use of whatever dialect is already written into the text, but also draw on stereotypical ethnic pronunciation and speech patterns for the entire lyric; they may also interpolate exclamations, phrases and even entire sections of dialogue supposedly characteristic of the protagonist’s ethnicity.\(^{33}\)

Adding the “fixed [Jewish] traits” that Hamm found lacking, Whelan sings, “Yiddle, when you play your fiddle honey I forget about my money and my diamonds [emphasis added].” While these are not Berlin’s words, the composer incorporates the same textual markers in other Jewish novelty songs. In Berlin’s 1910 “Yiddisha Eyes” Benny Bloom takes a look at Jenny Golden Dollars’ bankbook with eyes that “shone so bright, with an Israel light; Eyes that could tell a diamond in the night.” The “sharp-witted”\(^{34}\) Jewish business men, both named Abie, make their appearances in the 1911 “Business Is Business” and the 1913 “Abie Sings an Irish Song.”

\(^{32}\) Hamm, Irving Berlin: Songs from the Melting Pot, 41.

\(^{33}\) Hamm, Irving Berlin: Early Songs, xlvii.

\(^{34}\) Hamm, Irving Berlin: Songs from the Melting Pot, 43.
In the 1913 unpublished lyric, “Yiddisha Wedding,” Jakie Bloom sends the groom, Abie Rosenstein, a telegram that states, “I wish you happiness for ages, make heavy wages.” Abie Cohen of the 1912 “Yiddisha Professor” wears a diamond on his hand, “and just to see that gent, makes you think of seven percent,” while Abie Cohn of the 1911 “Yiddisha Nightingale” promises his fiancée a home “that’s made of marble,” because he doesn’t “care for expenses.”

Whelan also adds a line referencing sweet potato and ginger snaps, most likely to evoke images of traditional Jewish cooking. In a yodel-like fashion, Whelan’s voice cracks throughout much of the song, no doubt for comic effect. One curious feature of the recording is Whelan’s rolled r’s, oftentimes a feature of “cultured” pronunciation in high-class ballads. Most likely an affect from the British music hall where Whelan performed, it seems out of place in a Yiddish accent, especially when compared to Fanny Brice’s performance of the song in the 1936 film, The Great Ziegfield. Brice’s trademark Yiddish accent, first used in her performance of “Sadie Salome” (as suggested by Berlin), serves to reinforce “Yiddle’s” genre as a Jewish novelty song.

On her Jewish self-caricature Brice said,

I never did a Jewish song that would offend the race because it depended on the race for laughs. In anything Jewish I ever did, I wasn’t standing apart, making fun of the race. I was the race. . . . It is the same with any race. . . . It is okay for one Irishman to call another Irishman anything, any kind of name. But if you are not an Irishman, keep the mouth shut.  

As Whelan was not Jewish, Brice might have argued as some rabbis did—that Jewish impersonation “ridicules the modern Hebrew and holds him up to the twinge of laughter.”

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35 Hamm, Irving Berlin: Early Songs, xlviii.
37 Variety, December 10, 1910, 23, quoted in Hamm, Irving Berlin, 43.
Overall, however, the stereotyping of Jews was received as “innocent fun for people to laugh at.”\textsuperscript{38} (Appendix)

Searching for visual markers of Jewishness, one may look to the illustrated song slides\textsuperscript{39} used to promote “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle,” as well as the sheet music cover. “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle” was likely the first Jewish novelty song to be performed along with a set of illustrated song slides.\textsuperscript{40} Prewritten scenarios determined which lines of lyrics were to be photographed, the models posing against a black curtain. Berlin, however, had a specific locale in mind for the photo shoot. Slide maker Edward Van Altena recounted that “Berlin insisted that photography of the dance scenes be shot in the ballroom of a hotel that was popular with the Jewish community for receptions, etc.” Berlin’s insistence on this specific location shows his intention that “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle” be visually recognizable as Jewish. The photography session ended in failure, however, due to difficult lighting and Berlin’s demanding friends as the models. Issuing an ultimatum, the slide makers insisted that the photography be done in their own studio using professional models, or “not at all.” And so on their terms, the slide makers used a non-Jewish male-model with a nose built up with putty to represent the Jewish Yiddle.\textsuperscript{41} (Ex. 1-4)

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 44.

\textsuperscript{39} Illustrated song slides were the “humble beginnings of what ultimately became Music Television (MTV).” The slides were a kind of “live song promotion requiring a pianist (known as the ‘professor,’ denoting a musician who could read music or a self-conferred title), a projectionist, and a vocalist.” (Gottlieb, \textit{Funny, It Doesn’t Sound Jewish}, 110-111.)

\textsuperscript{40} Gottlieb, \textit{Funny, It Doesn’t Sound Jewish}, 108.

\textsuperscript{41} John W. Ripley to Jack Gottlieb, ca. 1975 in Gottlieb, \textit{Funny, It Doesn’t Sound Jewish}, 108.
While the song slide’s “long-nosed Jew[...]”\textsuperscript{42} is a stereotypical portrayal, ethnic identity is obscured on the sheet music cover. E. Pfeiffer’s illustration presents a faceless Yiddle with disembodied hands playing the fiddle. With the exception of the light-colored skin of the fiddler’s hands, the illustration provides no clues as to the ethnic identity of the protagonist. (Ex. 1-5)

Ex. 1-4 No.10 in a set of fifteen illustrated song slides for Berlin’s “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle”

\textsuperscript{42} Gottlieb, \textit{Funny, It Doesn’t Sound Jewish}, 25.
This ethnic ambiguity was the norm for covers of Berlin’s Jewish novelty songs. Unlike the covers of many of Berlin’s “coon” and “wop” songs, Berlin’s Jewish novelties avoid stereotypical renderings of their protagonists.\(^{43}\) As it is unclear as to how much input Berlin had into the visual representation of his songs, one cannot know if this avoidance was Berlin’s own choice or if it was that of the illustrator and/or publisher.

There could be many explanations for why the fiddler’s ethnicity was obscured. Perhaps it was due to some opposition arising to the stereotyping of Jews in vaudeville.\(^{44}\) Perhaps in

\(^{43}\) Hamm, *Irving Berlin: Songs from the Melting Pot*, 43.

\(^{44}\) Ibid.
avoiding ethnicity the song “wasn’t shackled but could race free throughout the new electric world.” Or perhaps the anonymous hands were intended to stand for the Jewish “group as a whole.” The cover’s vague ethnicity allows for a multitude of interpretations.

However, the ethnic ambiguity did not prevent the song from being perceived as specifically Jewish. This becomes clear when Pfeiffer’s illustration is compared to J. Keller’s cover illustration of “25 Jewish Songs for Violin: Containing the Most Popular and Classical Jewish Selections,” published in 1910, just one year after “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle.” (Ex. 1-6)

By drawing a nearly identical image to “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle,” Keller makes a close association between the song about a Jewish fiddler and the anthology of Jewish songs for fiddle. Perhaps this was a case of “early twentieth-century subliminal advertising.” The main difference between the two covers is that the music notes in Keller’s illustration are confined to paper, while the notes in Pfeiffer’s illustration seem to have danced right off the page, no doubt to the music of ragtime.

Without markers of Jewish identity on the cover, Pfeiffer’s illustration prepares listeners to be able to perceive Yiddle as having an alternate, African-American identity as Sadie’s “choc’late baby.”

46 Slobin, Tenement Songs, 175.
47 The cover in Yiddish translates to, “Yiddishe Lieder for Fiddle.”
48 Gottlieb, Funny, It Doesn’t Sound Jewish, 109.
Markers of Blackness in “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle Play Some Ragtime”

Sadie calls Yiddle her “choc’late baby” because he plays ragtime, a genre associated in the popular consciousness with African Americans.\(^\text{49}\) Since Yiddle is Jewish, “the point of the song becomes the attempted appropriation of black music and dance by another of America’s ‘alien’ groups, to comic effect.”\(^\text{50}\) Indeed, the idea of a klezmer playing ragtime at a traditional Jewish wedding instead of the frigish “Hava Nagila” was meant to evoke humor.

\(^{49}\) Hamm, *Irving Berlin: Songs from the Melting Pot*, 81.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 86.
Hamm classifies “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle” as a ragtime song in addition to a Jewish novelty song, because the word “ragtime” appears in the title and lyrics. One of Berlin’s many “self-labeling ragtime songs,”51 “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle” features that “daring buzzword” upon which Berlin relied to sell his songs.52 By strategically placing the word “ragtime” in the title, Berlin was setting up expectations for a ragtime song. Frith writes, “The importance of all popular genres is that they set up expectations, and disappointment is likely, both when they are not met and when they are met all too predictably.”53 Berlin fulfilled expectations by producing what was perceived to be a ragtime song while maintaining unpredictability by mixing markers of blackness with markers of Jewishness.

Believed to possess a “higher volume of libido than any competing cultural productions,”54 African-American music such as ragtime sends Berlin’s protagonists into “states of trance, frenzy, and barely-concealed sexual excitement.”55 However, instead of the “lusty”56 black woman of the coon song tradition, it is instead “a Sadie”57 who becomes aroused by ragtime music. Sadie’s breathless plea, “Get busy, I’m dizzy, I’m feeling two years young. . . . Yiddle, don’t you stop, if you do, I’ll drop, for I just can’t make my eyes shut up,” conveys the

51 Ibid., 81.
56 Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues*, 111.
overt sexuality stereotypically associated not with Jewishness, but with black music and black people. Expressing a popular contemporary concern, writer Walter Winston Kenilworth worried that through ragtime, America would fall “prey to the collective soul of the negro” since among African Americans “sexual restraint is almost unknown and the widest latitude of moral uncertainty is conceded.”

This perception of racy ragtime and blackness is represented visually in Pfeiffer’s cover illustration of “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle” in which the music notes are dancing every which way, uncontained by sheet music, to the major-key, “jerky” music of ragtime. Reminiscent of the “fantasies and mythologies constructed around . . . black people,” the musical notes could “represent the personification of the untrammeled id—intrinsically wild . . . ‘untamed’ in every sense of the word.” The music notes in the background of the tenth song slide accompanying “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle” also appear “untamed,” spiraling around Yiddle and his fiddle (see Ex. 1-4).

Musically, Berlin associates “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle” with blackness by composing the chorus in the style of major-key ragtime. By employing a minor-major format in which the minor verse portrays Berlin the Jew while the major chorus portrays Berlin the American, Berlin was at once protecting his “humble beginnings and Jewish origins” and “reinventing himself.” Gottlieb notes that this minor-major format is nonexistent in Yiddish theater music where the


59 E.M. Wickes, Writing the Popular Song (Springfield, Mass: Home Correspondence School, 1916), 33.

60 Frith, Performing Rites, 129.

61 Gottlieb, Funny, It Doesn’t Sound Jewish, 161.
majority of the songs are exclusively in minor.\textsuperscript{62} Appearing primarily in Jewish novelty songs of the period, the format accentuates “the tension between ethnic immigrant tradition and modern America.”\textsuperscript{63} Gottlieb writes, “While this format had been old-hat for European composers, it was little known to America until new-hat songs about Jews rode in on waves of immigration.”\textsuperscript{64}

Due to its \textit{moderato} tempo (found in virtually every song by Berlin in 4/4 meter),\textsuperscript{65} “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle” was perceived by audiences to be a ragtime song. However, studying period recordings in addition to the sheet music is essential, since varying tempos and altered rhythms were a part of the flexible performance practice of the period. (Appendix)

In Brice’s performance of “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle” the notated rhythms serve as mere suggestions as Brice alters note values in pursuit of the “pleasing lilt”\textsuperscript{66} that was indicative of ragtime. For example, Brice changes the quarter notes on “Yid-” “mid-” and “fid-” to eighth notes, giving the chorus a syncopated feel. While Brice’s upbeat performance could be perceived as ragtime and thus associated with blackness, Whelan’s slower, more plodding rendition is a marker of Jewishness.\textsuperscript{67} It is curious to note however, that Whelan’s performance excludes the introduction containing the two Jewish quotations. Beginning instead at the vamp, the song’s lack of introductory Jewish markers delays the set-up of the generic contract discussed earlier.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[62] Ibid., 107.
\item[63] Furia, \textit{Irving Berlin}, 36.
\item[64] Gottlieb, \textit{Funny, It Doesn’t Sound Jewish}, 107.
\item[65] Hamm, \textit{Irving Berlin: Early Songs}, xlvii.
\item[66] Wickes, \textit{Writing the Popular Song}, 33.
\end{footnotes}
The connection between “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle” and “Ragtime Violin!” was briefly touched upon by Sigmund Spaeth when he wrote that “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle” was “an idea which [Berlin] repeated more successfully two years later in ‘Ragtime Violin!’” Mark Slobin also made a connection between the two songs when he wrote, “‘The Ragtime Violin’ is musically and culturally in the same vein as Berlin’s ‘Yiddle on Your Fiddle, Play Some Ragtime;’ the latter is a more ethnically explicit number urging the de-ethnicization of the fiddler, written by a successfully acculturated Jewish immigrant musician.” While these two songs are indeed “in the same vein,” Berlin was not trying to erase the fiddler’s ethnicity in “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle,” rather he was merely attempting to associate Yiddle’s Jewish identity with blackness. Furthermore, Berlin was not already acculturated by 1909. “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle” was only Berlin’s second Jewish novelty song and the first ragtime song that he wrote without collaboration. This song was an early attempt by the immigrant composer at developing a musical formula for “Jewish assimilation through black association.” Two years later, one can observe how Berlin’s acculturation was well underway as he traded markers of Jewish identity from “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle” for entirely African-American markers in “Ragtime Violin!”

“Ragtime Violin!,” both a ragtime song for its textual references to ragtime and a coon song for its black protagonists, is Berlin’s African-American version of “Yiddle, On Your

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69 Slobin, *Tenement Songs*, 176.

Fiddle, Play Some Ragtime.” Dressing up “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle” in a “different guise[,"71
Berlin replaces his Jewish protagonists with black ones. Instead of Yiddle on his fiddle there is
“Mister Brown” on the violin. Instead of an aroused Sadie, there’s an equally charged “Anna
Lize” crying, “Hurry up with your violin, Make it sooner, don’t you stop to tune ‘er.” (Just as
Sadie makes multiple appearances in Berlin’s Jewish novelty songs, Anna Lize reappears in the
1913 coon song, “Anna ‘Liza’s Wedding Day,” to serve once again as the stereotypical black
female protagonist.) Completing the textual transformation from Jewish to black, Berlin
exchanges “Yiddle in the middle of your fiddle play some ragtime,” for the awfully similar “Fid,
fid, fid, fiddle the middle of your ragtime violin,” and adds the word “lawdy” in stereotypical
black dialect to serve as a clear marker of blackness.

In their 1912 “Ragtime Violin!” recordings, Arthur Collins, Maurice Burkhart, and the
Premier Quartette pronounce “lawdy” as it is written, however, they do not assume exaggerated
“black” accents or interpolate stereotypically black dialogue as Collins and Harlan did in their
recordings of “That Mesmerizing Mendelssohn Tune” and “When the Midnight Choo-Choo
Leaves for Alabam’.” The performances of “Ragtime Violin!” therefore identify with blackness
but “neutralize”72 the image so that ragtime is “no longer restricted to Negroes and
plantations.”73 This was Berlin’s intention as he planted just enough markers of blackness to
associate his music with ragtime but not so many that it was bound to its “rustic rural heritage.”74

71 Bergreen, As Thousands Cheer, 118.
72 Richard Gambino, Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of the Italian-Americans, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Guernica
Editions, 2000), 366.
73 Whitcomb, Irving Berlin and Ragtime America, 70.
74 Ibid.
Fashioning blackness and ragtime for “modern times” in “Ragtime Violin!,” Berlin takes the fiddling “out of the plantation,” where it was associated with “supposedly happy slaves,” and instead places it in the context of a “fancy ball.”

Musically, Berlin replaces the plodding Jewish-inflected minor verses of “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle” with a syncopated ragtime style in a major tonality. Spaeth writes that “Ragtime Violin,” “a natural sequel to Yiddle, On Your Fiddle … is actually full of good syncopation.” Seeming somewhat surprised since actual syncopation was not a requirement for a song to be perceived as ragtime, Spaeth was referring to recurring accents on weak beats, as in measure thirteen on the word “moan.” (Ex. 1-7)

Making a connection to instrumental ragtime in which the trio is usually in the subdominant, Berlin begins “Ragtime Violin!” in the key of D major, modulating to G major for the chorus. Three of Berlin’s earlier songs, “Wild Cherries,” “Grizzly Bear,” and “Oh, That Beautiful Rag” also contain choruses in the subdominant, derived from the trios of the instrumental rags from which the songs were converted.

The visual representation of “Ragtime Violin!” contradicts Berlin’s textual and musical portrayal of the African American Mr. Brown. Of the illustrated musician on the cover, Slobin writes,

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75 Ibid., 135.
76 Ibid.
77 Hamm, Irving Berlin: Early Songs, xxxvii.
79 Hamm, Irving Berlin: Songs from the Melting Pot, 104.
Far from being the stereotyped ragtime fiddler, he is clearly European, with the long, delicate hands of the dreamy, artistic ethnic musician often portrayed in American popular culture. He looks more like the sensual, erotic village fiddler Stempenyu, who poured the soul of the group into his playing, than like the cardboard minstrel-show character ‘Mr. Brown’ of Berlin’s song.\(^{80}\)

Slobin compares the musician on the cover to Stempenyu, a klezmer in Shalom Aleichem’s early novel by the same name. Indeed, the European fiddler of “Ragtime Violin!” bears an uncanny resemblance to the large nosed male-model in the song slides of “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle.” (Ex. 1-8)


As to why E. Pfeiffer, the same illustrator of the faceless fiddler on the cover of “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle” disregarded the African-American race of the protagonist of “Ragtime Violin!” Whitcomb might suggest, “Ragtime was going white-face. . . . There were still to be found funny darkies peppering the rag songs but these characters were being replaced by the regular city folk, the ones who ought to have known better.”\(^{81}\)

\(^{80}\) Slobin, Tenement Songs, 176.

\(^{81}\) Whitcomb, Irving Berlin and Ragtime America, 70.
And so, Berlin’s assimilation was well underway. Hiding the Jewishness of “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle,” behind the “blackface” of “Ragtime Violin!” Berlin and his music could go “white-face,” thereby gaining acceptance into mainstream America.

Ex. 1-8 Cover of “Ragtime Violin!” (Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music at the Sheridan Libraries of The Johns Hopkins University)
Chapter 3

“That Kazzatsky Dance” and “Alexander’s Ragtime Band”

A kind of “Russo-American crossover,”1 Berlin’s 1910 “That Kazzatsky Dance” contains both markers of Jewishness and blackness. Looking to his past in search of his identity, Berlin recalls the Russian folk dance, the kazatsky/kazatska.2 However, looking forward to the American he wished to become, Berlin also adopted an “American sensibility,”3 treating the kazatsky as if it were a ragtime dance. One year later, Berlin would complete his American transformation with entirely black markers in “Alexander’s Ragtime Band.”

Markers of Jewishness in “That Kazzatsky Dance”

The text of “That Kazzatsky Dance” reveals markers of Jewishness as the female protagonist urges “Abie,” the generic Eastern-European Jew, to come and hear the Jewish “Cohen’s” band. Appearing in many of Berlin’s Jewish novelty songs, “Cohen” sends the newlyweds dishes in “Yiddisha Wedding,” is the last name of Rosie in “Business is Business” and Abie in “Yiddisha Professor,” and appears with slight variation as “Cohn” in “Yiddisha Nightingale.” “Cohen” is also the protagonist of the single Jewish novelty song that Berlin wrote after 1914 entitled, “Cohen Owes Me $97.” Later embarrassed by this stereotypical Jewish portrayal, Berlin wrote to Groucho Marx in 1956, “Frankly, there are some songs I would be

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2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.
tempted to pay you not to do. For instance, ‘Cohen Owes Me $97’ would not be taken in the same spirit it was when I wrote it for Belle Baker... many years ago.”

Without a proper name to indicate ethnicity, the female protagonist’s identity remains ambiguous. Looking to the sheet music cover for hints of ethnicity proves fruitless since “even though the young woman on the cover of ‘That Kazzatsky Dance’ could be Jewish, her appearance is in no way exaggerated or even remotely offensive.” (Ex. 3-1) Like the heroine depicted by Pfeiffer on the cover of the 1909 “Sadie Salome,” the attractive dark-haired woman illustrated by DeTakacs on the cover of “That Kazzatsky Dance” does not exhibit features that would have been perceived as stereotypically Jewish.

Ex. 3-1 Cover of “That Kazzatsky Dance” (Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music at the Sheridan Libraries of The Johns Hopkins University)

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Unfortunately, the only period recording of this piece is a brief, purely instrumental hint of the song entitled “That Koslovsky Dance” as part of the 1911 “Medley of Ted Snyder Hits.” Without the presence of voice in the recording to transmit text and dialect, Jewish identity is further obscured.

It is not until the female protagonist proclaims in “Irish-Jewish juxtaposition,”6 “I love my ham and cabbage, kid, But Oi, that Yiddisher, Oi that Kazzatsky dance” that she is revealed as Jewish. While the female protagonist could be Irish since she enjoys the traditional Irish dish of ham and cabbage, her repeated cries of “Oi” point to Jewishness as does her Jewish date, Abie. (If she were in fact Irish, her relationship with the Jewish Abie may have been perceived as controversial, which was the theme in the play and film of the 1920s, “Abie’s Irish Rose.”) In “That Kazzatsky Dance” the protagonist’s predilection for Irish food is likely a result of the multicultural society in which she lives, rather than an indication of her ethnicity. “Jewish-Irish misalliance(s)” were common in songs of the period, both by Berlin, as in “Abie Sings an Irish Song,” and other composers, as in “My Yiddisha Colleen” (Madden & Edwards, 1911) and “Yiddisha Luck and Irisha Love” (Bryan & Fischer, 1911).7 Of this misalliance, Gottlieb asks, “Why Irish and not other nationalities? Italians were too close for comfort (Mediterranean origins, minor-key songs, swarthy complexions); Germans, too connected to the Yiddish language; little direct experience between Jews and the French, Scandanavians, etc. The Irish were the happy medium. . . .”8

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6 Gottlieb, Funny, It Doesn’t Sound Jewish, 104.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
With the start of the vamp in D minor, anticipating the beginning of the verse, Berlin establishes the song’s first musical Jewish marker. While the verse briefly modulates to the relative major key, the minor key quickly returns after four measures and remains through the end of the verse “And we’ll do that Yiddisher dance/While they play that Yiddisha tune.” As expected, the song modulates to F major for the ragtime chorus, however, an unexpected dissonance within serves as a reminder of the song’s Jewish identity. In his critical commentary, Hamm notes that the D falling on the third note of measures 26 and 34 in the vocal line and the right hand of the piano accompaniment “is probably an intentional dissonance to invoke ‘ethnic sound.’” Inserting this dissonance into the ragtime chorus to accompany the words “sense” and “trance” of the phrases “It makes me lose my sense” and “I’m going in a trance,” helps to highlight the Jewish female protagonist’s state of delirium. (Ex. 3-2)

Markers of Blackness in “That Kazzatsky Dance”

Hamm categorizes “That Kazzatsky Dance” not only as a Jewish novelty song but also, as “ragtime and other dance.” While the song contains no textual references to ragtime, it nevertheless belongs to the same generic category as songs that allude to African-American inspired ragtime. Indeed, it was the syncopated music of ragtime that kicked off a craze for


10 One could argue that Hamm makes too much of this “intentional dissonance.” Indeed, there is a clash between the vi chord outlined in the melody and the I chord in the harmony with the root-fifth oscillating bass. Whatever the reason for why the arranger decided to keep the I chord in m. 26 while the melody outlines a vi chord, Hamm’s “ethnic” claim overlooks the fact that the melodic pattern is a common one, and that someone besides Berlin wrote the piano accompaniment.
dancing that Whitcomb terms “Dancemania.” Whitcomb writes, “In Dancing America the ragtime spirit told the choreography to go to the dogs.” And so, in the “ragtime spirit” reminiscent of that experienced by Sadie and Anna Lize, the female protagonist in “That Kazzatsky Dance” pleads to join in the Russian dance traditionally choreographed for a solo male dancer.


12 Ibid., 145.
Unlike the piano introduction to “Yiddle, On Your Fiddle” in which Jewish identity is established through Yiddish quotations and the frigish mode, the piano introduction to “That Kazzatsky Dance” is drawn from the end of the major-key syncopated chorus, obscuring Jewish identity. Berlin’s choice to open “That Kazzatsky Dance” with music from the end of the major-key chorus as opposed to the beginning of the Jewish-inflected minor verse indicates that the composer was interested in setting up expectations for a ragtime song.

Rhythmically, the chorus is in a generally syncopated style that emphasizes the second half of the downbeat in the repeated motif that first appears on the words, “Oi, that Kazzatsky dance.” (Ex. 3-3)


Replacing an “Oi” with a rest on the downbeat two measures from the end of the piece, Berlin gives the song one final rhythmic kick. (Ex. 3-4)
While the song contains no textual references to ragtime, the song’s likely precursor, “The Yiddisha Rag,” attributed to Joseph H. McKeon, Harry M. Piano, and W. Raymond Walker, calls “the Kazatsky” a “Rag” in both the title and text. The 1909 “Yiddisha Rag” features Slavic protagonists, “Toplitzky” and “Rifky” doing “the Kazatsky . . . the Yiddisha Rag.” Erenberg writes, “In its spirit and rhythm, rag, when combined with the dance, provided the pep that men and women sought in their music.”\footnote{Lewis A. Erenberg, *Steppin’ Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 152.} And so, with the fever of ragtime-inspired “Dancemania . . . that embraced wriggling, hobbling, wobbling, shivering, quivering,”\footnote{Whitcomb, *Irving Berlin and Ragtime America*, 144.} “The
Yiddisha Rag” exhorts, “Wiggle and jiggle when you feel that strain, Ev’ryone hollers: ‘Please play it again.’”

Berlin collector Vince Motto, as well as William Simon, former editor of Reader’s Digest Songbooks, believed that “Harry M. Piano” was a nom de plume for Berlin, which means that he may have been a coauthor of “The Yiddisha Rag.” While no evidence exists of Berlin’s involvement with the song and a letter from Walker to private collector, James Fuld, refers to Harry Piano as a real person, the speculation surrounding the pseudonym leads the author to question whether Berlin was simply borrowing from his collaboration on “The Yiddisha Rag” to create “That Kazzatsky Dance,” one year later. For example, “That is a dandy rag, That is the candy rag,” of “The Yiddisha Rag” becomes “it’s dandy, dandy, Kiss me Kid, I’m candy [emphasis added]” in “That Kazzatsky Dance” and “Oh, oh that Yiddisha Rag” becomes “Oi that Yiddisher . . . Oi, that Kazzatsky dance.” The textual connections between “The Yiddisha Rag” and “That Kazzatsky Dance” help to solidify the latter song’s generic label not only as a Jewish novelty song but as a ragtime song as well.

With a sexual energy typically inspired by ragtime, the protagonist refers to herself with an African-American “code word[]” saying, “Come and give your baby [emphasis added] just one glance” as she invites Abie to “make some spooning with a silver spoon.” Reinforcing the idea that the protagonist is “going crazy like a loon,” Berlin incorporates antithesis, or what he

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15 Hamm, Irving Berlin: Early Songs, x and Gottlieb, Funny, It Doesn’t Sound Jewish, 143.

16 Hamm, Irving Berlin: Early Songs, x.

17 Hamm, Irving Berlin: Songs from the Melting Pot, 70.
called “opposite images,” in the text. The protagonist pleads, “Abie hurry up, take your time. . . I want to dance fast, please go slow. . . Darling run away, better stay. . . I hate you, love you so.” While this stylistic feature was used to different effects throughout Berlin’s songwriting career, in the context of this song, it serves to highlight the protagonist’s “state of comical near-hysteria.” Berlin even extends the typical sixteen-bar chorus to eighteen bars, allowing the protagonist to cry one last time, “That Yiddisher, Oi, that Kazzatsky dance.”

Aiming to capture the attention of ragtime America which sought after “all that was up-to-date and peppy,” DeTakacs incorporated bold colors and an art nouveau design on the cover of “That Kazzatsky Dance” (much like Pfeiffer would do a year later on the cover of “Ragtime Violin!”). Without specific markers of Jewishness, the illustration for “That Kazzatsky Dance” could appeal to an “Americanized ethnic audience” who favored ragtime over “old ethnic standbys.” The same applies to the cover of “The Yiddisha Rag” which has nothing “Yiddisha” about it. Revealing only the legs of the dancers, cover artist, Etherington, portrays Toplitzky and Rifky performing the kazatsky as if it were a “coon- liberated ragtime dance in which everybody and his wife could take part and no special dance clothing had to be worn.” (Ex. 3-5)

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19 Hamm, Irving Berlin: Songs from the Melting Pot, 85.

20 Whitcomb, Irving Berlin and Ragtime America, 70.


22 Whitcomb, Irving Berlin and Ragtime America, 79.
If the kazatsky were performed according to tradition and not as a ragtime dance, the “wife” would not be taking part at all, let alone wearing a skirt and heels that would not permit her to squat and kick as the choreography demands. However, it is clear that little tradition is being preserved in this Yiddisha rag, in which Toplitzky and Rifky are dancing side by side in an upright, instead of squatting, position. The fact that this cover could easily serve as the cover for “That Kazzatsky Dance,” featuring the breathless female protagonist and her partner Abie, further helps to solidify the connection between the two songs.

“That Kazzatsky Dance” → “Alexander’s Ragtime Band”

Drawing a connection between “That Kazzatsky Dance” and “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” Hamm writes of the latter, “Although there’s no exact precedent in Berlin’s earlier songs
for this ‘come-and-hear-the-band’ gesture, he came close to it in ‘That Kazzatsky Dance.’”

Indeed, the “invitation to ‘come,’ to join in, and ‘hear’ the singer and his song” in the 1911 “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” is reminiscent of the 1910 Kazzatsky-protagonist’s plea to come and “hear” Cohen and his band. However, while both songs are a “clarion-call summons . . . to come take part in some twentieth-century fun,” it was the African-American “Alexander” who succeeded in rallying “every receptive auditor within shouting distance,” and not the Jewish “Cohen.” Trading markers of Jewish identity from “That Kazzatsky Dance” for entirely African-American markers one year later in “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” Berlin strategically aligned “Alexander” with blackness, thereby “tapping into the mood of the era.”

Berlin performed both “That Kazzatsky Dance” and “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” in September 1911 at Hammerstein’s vaudeville house, as part of a set that also included “‘That Mysterious Rag,’ ‘Ephraim Played Upon The Piano,’ ‘Marie, Marie’ (possibly ‘Sweet Marie, Make-a Rag-a-Time Dance Wid Me’), and the otherwise unknown ‘Don’t Wait Until Your Father Comes Home.’” By programming “That Kazzatsky Dance” with “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” Berlin was not only drawing a connection between the Jewish novelty song and its wildly popular African-American successor, but also with the other songs in the set, having to do with blackness and/or ragtime. In fact, Berlin would later credit two of the songs from this set,

23 Hamm, Irving Berlin: Songs from the Melting Pot, 103.


25 Whitcomb, Irving Berlin and Ragtime America, 76.

26 Berlin, Stereo Review, quoted in Hamm, Irving Berlin, 103.

27 Whitcomb, Irving Berlin and Ragtime America, 75.

28 Hamm, Irving Berlin: Songs from the Melting Pot, 129.
“Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” and “That Mysterious Rag,” (in addition to “Ragtime Violin!”) with having “started the ragtime mania in America.”29 There is no doubt that with these early songs, Berlin was intentionally positioning himself as ragtime’s “foremost interpreter.”30

“Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” both a coon song for its African-American protagonists and a ragtime song for its numerous references to ragtime in both the title and text, is the African-American version of “That Kazzatsky Dance.” Instead of the Jewish “Cohen” leading the band, it is “Alexander,” a definitively African-American “ragged-meter man,” who leads the specifically “ragtime” band. Instead of inviting the Jewish “Abie” to hear the band, the protagonist in “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” addresses his/her companion in stereotypical black dialect with African-American “code words,” “Oh, ma honey,” and “honey lamb.” Replacing all Yiddish “Ois,” with stereotypical black speech and dialect, the protagonist goes on to ask, “Ain’t you goin’/comin,’” dropping the final “g’s.”

While Hamm disagrees with Bergreen’s assertion that the text of “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” is “the kind of old-fashioned ‘coon’ lyric that came easily to [Berlin],”31 Whitcomb suggests that the words do bear “traces of minstrelsy.”32 Calling the clarinet a “colored pet,” Berlin refers to the same musical instrument that serves as a “transparent sexual symbol” in his 1910 coon song “Alexander And His Clarinet.”33 In this song, Alexander Adams “played and

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32 Whitcomb, Irving Berlin and Ragtime America, 75.

33 Hamm, Irving Berlin: Songs from the Melting Pot, 71.
played like sin” upon his clarinet inside Eliza’s home, conveying a theme of overt sexuality that “carried over from nineteenth-century minstrelsy into the ‘coon’ song.”

“Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” however, is not a coon song that perpetuates this “retrograde” theme from the minstrel tradition. The clarinet in Alexander’s ragtime band is actually a musical instrument that is being played and “the fiddle with notes that screeches” is associated with Alexander’s “grandstand,” not the “Old Plantation.” Hamm maintains that Alexander’s band “isn’t the object of humor or condescension,” rather that “It is, quite simply, ‘the best band in the land.’” In fact, Hamm points to nine songs written between 1910 and 1914, including “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” and “Ragtime Violin!,” “in which the music of black performers is treated with . . . enthusiasm and professional respect and with . . . a complete absence of racial stereotyping and ‘comical’ demeaning.” However, to claim that “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” is completely absent of racial stereotyping is frankly, incorrect. Berlin intentionally maintains “a level of ‘racialness’” that largely contributed to the song’s commercial success. Berlin merely transformed “the sights and sounds of minstrelsy into a usable modern musical grammar.”

34 Ibid.

35 Melnick, A Right to Sing the Blues, 45.

36 Hamm, Irving Berlin: Songs from the Melting Pot, 79.

37 Ibid., 80.

38 Ibid.

39 Melnick, A Right to Sing the Blues, 45.

40 Ibid.
While the lyrics clearly point to African-American identity, the cover illustration by John Frew is less definitive in portraying Alexander’s identity. With his back to the audience, Alexander’s race is obscured. (Ex. 3-6) Bergreen notes that the members of the band appear to be white and that Alexander himself looks as if he had been “reborn” as a “white bandleader.”41 Whitcomb agrees, writing that the cover-art “depicted Alexander’s band as white-face.”42 Hamm, however, writes “even though at first glance the sheet music cover of the song seems to picture a white band, a closer look reveals that the group seems to be racially integrated.”43 Hamm observes, “The faces of three musicians—the violinist third from right, another one (the shape of whose head suggests negroid features) just under the conductor’s left arm, and, most interesting, the ‘leader man’ himself—are hatched, making their skin appear darker than that of the other members of the band.”44

A third interpretation, and a popular contemporary belief, was that Alexander looked like Irving Berlin, himself.45 On October 8, 1911, the Telegraph featured a story with a headline that read, “Wherein You Meet Irving Berlin, the Leader of ‘Alexander’s Ragtime Band.’”46 Indeed, Alexander’s physique and hair style resembles those of Berlin,47 as can been seen when compared to a contemporary photo of the composer. (Ex. 3-7)

41 Bergreen, As Thousands Cheer, 60.
42 Whitcomb, Irving Berlin and Ragtime America, 75.
43 Hamm, Irving Berlin: Songs from the Melting Pot, 110.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid., 112.
46 Ibid., 110.
47 Ibid., 112.
Ex. 3-6 Cover of “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” (Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music at the Sheridan Libraries of The Johns Hopkins University)

Ex. 3-7 Irving Berlin circa 1914.
While one cannot say with certainty whether Berlin had any input into the design of this physical resemblance between himself and Alexander, Hamm contends that Berlin did create black protagonists in his songs with whom he identified closely. Ephrahem, for instance, from the 1911 “Ephrahem Played Upon The Piano,” is a talented black pianist, musically untrained like Berlin, who “would appear to be nothing less than an alter ego for Berlin.”\(^{48}\) Perhaps because of this connection, Berlin sang this song whenever he performed in public during 1911 and 1912, including it in the very set at Hammerstein’s that also featured “That Kazzatsky Dance” and “Alexander’s Ragtime Band.”\(^{49}\) Ephrahem appears as a musician in numerous other songs by Berlin, as does the black pianist, “Mose.” Drawing upon his personal life, Berlin named “Mose” after his father “Moses.” Berlin named “Ephrahem” after his own birth name, “Israel,” as “Ephraim” is sometimes used as a synonym for “Israel.”\(^{50}\) While it is impossible to know if the leader man on the cover is, in fact, meant to portray Berlin himself, “At some level, the Alexanders and Ephrahams and Moses in Berlin’s songs of this period are extensions of the songwriter’s own ego.”\(^{51}\)

While countless scholars insist that “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” is not ragtime at all, rather, that it is a song \textit{about} ragtime or a march at best, the song does have musical features of ragtime.\(^{52}\) Structurally, the chorus in the subdominant key of F major is derived from the trio of


\(^{49}\) Hamm, \textit{Irving Berlin: Songs from the Melting Pot}, 80.

\(^{50}\) Hamm, “\textit{Irving Berlin’s Early Songs as Biographical Documents},” 22.

\(^{51}\) Hamm, \textit{Irving Berlin: Songs from the Melting Pot}, 110.

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 104.
instrumental rags, as previously observed in “Ragtime Violin!.” Furthermore, the lengthy thirty-two measure chorus is derived from the typical sixteen-measure strains that are meant to be repeated in piano rags, in addition to marches, waltzes, and other dances.\footnote{Ibid.}

Rhythmically, the song does contain “repeated, if simplistic, references to rhythmic patterns associated with ragtime.”\footnote{Ibid.} Spaeth concedes that the verse contains “some ragtime” on the words “O ma honey”\footnote{Sigmund Spaeth, \textit{A History of Popular Music in America} (New York: Random House, 1948), 377.} which accompanies a repeated musical motif that begins on the off-beat.\footnote{Philip Furia, \textit{Irving Berlin: A Life in Song} (New York: Schirmer Books, 1998), 42.} (Ex. 3-8)

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The chorus rhythmically references ragtime on the words “Come on and hear” with a “short-long-short pattern suggesting the ‘cakewalk’ figure common to proto-ragtime pieces of the 1880s and 1890s.”\footnote{Hamm, \textit{Irving Berlin: Songs from the Melting Pot}, 104.} (Ex. 3-9)

In contrast to the verse, Spaeth calls the chorus “practically virginal” in respect to ragtime rhythms, but manages to find two instances revealing a “touch of syncopation.” He identifies the first instance on the word “just” in measure 35 and the second on the word “ragtime” in measure 50 as part of a musical quote of Stephen Foster’s “Old Folks At Home.” (Ex. 3-10) (Spaeth is inclined not to give Berlin credit for this second syncopation, as it is originally Foster’s).

Berlin’s textual and musical references to Foster’s 1851 “Old Folks At Home,” better known as “Swanee River,” is an example of Berlin’s attempt to modernize the minstrel tradition. “Swanee River,” a song about an African-American man’s longing for “de old plantation,” combines “the blackface mask with the tradition of home songs.” However, Berlin updates minstrelsy in “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” by suggesting that you listen to Alexander’s band if you want to hear “the ‘Swanee River’ played in ragtime.” Berlin quotes nine notes from Foster’s “Swanee River” to accompany the words “the ‘Swanee River’ played in ragtime,”


60 Melnick, A Right to Sing the Blues, 40.
setting the last three words to the same four notes that Foster set the words “Swanee ribber” in his own song.\(^{61}\) (Ex. 3-11)


\(^{61}\) Ibid.
Looking beyond the notated sheet music to the period performances of the song, one gains insight into what was perceived to be ragtime in 1911. Hamm notes,

One must keep in mind that the contemporary notion of what constituted ragtime music had nothing to do with the structural, melodic and rhythmic features observable in the notated form of a composition, as came to be the case during the Ragtime Revival and later, but depended on audience perception of a piece at the moment of performance.\(^\text{62}\)

Recordings of “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” by the duo Arthur Collins and Byron G. Harlan as well as Billy Murray reveal how contemporary performers projected ragtime through stereotypical black dialect and an overall ragtime “spirit.”\(^\text{63}\) (Appendix)

While Whitcomb claims that most performances of “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” depict the band as “white-face,”\(^\text{64}\) both interpretations by Collins and Harlan and Murray incorporate a “pseudo-black dialect”\(^\text{65}\) that was typical of coon-song performances. The singers not only observe the stereotypical dialect notated in the lyrics, but also add an additional “black” feature, exchanging “th” for “d,” converting such words as “the” to “de” and “that” to “dat.” The exchange is more pronounced in the Collins and Harlan recording in which the performers also take the liberty of transforming the song for solo voice into a version for two voices. The double version allows for dialogue between the voices, drumming up excitement—an important feature of a contemporary ragtime song. In response to Collins’s plea, “Come on and hear,” Harlan eagerly responds with “I’d like to hear!” and “Oh yes my dear!” and in response to “Come on


\(^\text{63}\) Ibid., 106.

\(^\text{64}\) Whitcomb, *Irving Berlin and Ragtime America*, 75.

along,” Harlan cries, “I’m goin’ along!” This double version magnifies the “exultant” nature of the song which was partly responsible for its phenomenal success.\(^{66}\)

Billy Murray’s recording for solo voice, slightly less exciting in a slower, more plodding tempo, provides other aural clues as to what was accepted as ragtime. For example, the accompanying orchestra “sounds like a scaled-down Sousa band playing a ragtime or cakewalk piece, complete with piccolo obbligato and trombone phrase-ending runs.”\(^{67}\) In understanding “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” as a piece of ragtime, it is important to remember that in the early twentieth century, many pieces written for marching or concert bands like those of John Philip Sousa and Arthur Pryor, were also considered to be ragtime.\(^{68}\)

Easily overlooked, Murray inserts the word “funny” into the lyric, “that [funny] man who’s the leader of the band.” Melnick might suggest that Murray is “pointing at the pretensions of a Black man as the basis for a joke,”\(^ {69}\) which would fall in line with the minstrel tradition. Indeed, even the black protagonist’s name, “Alexander,” was “supposedly a comically grand name for a black man to possess,”\(^ {70}\) and tended to trigger laughter from audiences.\(^ {71}\)

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\(^{67}\) Hamm, *Irving Berlin: Songs from the Melting Pot*, 106.

\(^{68}\) Ibid.

\(^{69}\) Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues*, 43.

\(^{70}\) Bergreen, *As Thousands Cheer*, 19.

\(^{71}\) Kanter, *The Jews on Tin Pan Alley*, 115.
Conclusion

One cannot know with certainty whether Berlin intended Alexander to be the subject of laughter or admiration. Berlin’s depiction of African Americans in his early coon and ragtime songs “was anything but monolithic.”\(^{72}\) Regardless of Berlin’s intentions, illustrators’ artwork, and performers’ portrayals, Alexander was black and “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” was a piece of ragtime music\(^{73}\) and it was this blackness that secured Berlin’s place in American society.

After 1912 Berlin rarely depicted definitively black protagonists in his songs and markers of blackness became “more integrated into an increasingly generic musical language.” However, “what continued to fascinate [Berlin] was the notion of the minstrel show as a dramatic form in which performers speak from behind the mask of blackface.” In fact, as late as 1942, Berlin wrote minstrel songs to be performed in blackface in his musical, *This Is The Army*\(^{74}\).

The author suggests that Berlin’s ongoing fascination with minstrelsy was founded in the nonvisual blackface mask from behind which the composer spoke with great success in his early songs. Berlin’s blackface mask was essential to revising his Jewish identity and achieving his “metamorphosis from immigrant to quintessential American.”\(^{75}\)

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\(^{72}\) Hamm, *Irving Berlin: Songs from the Melting Pot*, 100.

\(^{73}\) Ibid., 106.

\(^{74}\) Ibid., 100.

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