

BLACK SABBATH

THE SECRET MUSICAL HISTORY
OF BLACK-JEWISH RELATIONS

If someone besides a Black ever sings the real gut bucket blues, it'll be a Jew. We both know what it's like to be someone else's footstool.

— RAY CHARLES
BEVERLY HILLS LODGE OF B'NAI BRITH, 1976

* * *

They don't do anything for you unless you're White or Jewish.

— MILES DAVIS
ON COLUMBIA RECORDS

* * *

All of us old-fashioned Negroes are Jews.

— RALPH ELLISON

* * *

They that carried us away captive required of us a song.

— PSALM 137



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A FEW WORDS from THE IDELSOHN SOCIETY

The Idelsohn Society was started by four record collecting dumpster divers who sought vinyl gold amidst the nooks and crannies of thrift shops and flea markets across the country. So it makes sense that once the Society was established, we made the collection and preservation of lost vinyl one of the core components of our mission. To our delight over the past few years battered boxes stuffed with albums and singles, freshly liberated from basements and attics, have flooded in to us from all points. We dust off every one of them and give them a spin, reveling in the lost stories and fading histories seeping from the cut grooves.

A single recent find birthed the idea behind this entire collection. A 7" version of "Kol Nidre" by Johnny Mathis, backed by the Percy Faith Orchestra. *That* Johnny Mathis. Best known for his romance-inducing, back-seat drive-in make-out music—the man who became one of the most prolific American singers of all time, recording over 130 albums, selling over 180 million recordings worldwide, cracking the Billboard charts over 60 times, and inventing the Greatest Hits album concept along the way. The second we heard his belting version of "Kol Nidre," the Aramaic prayer traditionally intoned at the beginning of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, we were alerted to a new dimension to his magic. We simply had to know more.

We soon discovered that the single was a European release from his 1958 album, *Good Night, Sweet Lord*, a long player which featured such devotional classics as "The Rosary" and not one, but two, versions of "Ave Maria." The Hebrew poem, "Eli, Eli" and Yiddish favorite, "Where Can I Go?" also sneak on, but it is Mathis' "Kol Nidre" which blew us away. The prayer itself consists of the thrice-repetition of a single verse, with emotion increasing every time. Mathis' rendition is simply majestic. By the end of the track, his signature sobbing sound, so seductive on hits such as "Chances Are" and "Gina," reduces even the hardest of listeners to tears.

When we dried our eyes after first play, we were struck by the realization that our interest surpassed the singular beauty of the song itself. What captivated us were the spiral of questions the record posed about process. How and why, at the height of popularity, would an African-American legend take the time to master Aramaic, Hebrew and Yiddish, and record tracks in those languages on a major label release?

We knew Mathis had a knack for languages, crooning popular songs designed to put you in the mood for love in Italian, French and Spanish throughout his career. But even in our eyes, recording comparatively obscure tunes about the renunciation of vows on the Day of Atonement is about as opposite to a romance language figuratively and symbolically as there can be. Obsessed, and not to be denied, we reached out to Mr. Mathis in the course of creating this disc and he was generous to indulge our line of questioning and shed light on the history to the recording.



Mathis was 23 when the record was cut. The original concept was to create an album that would sell well over Christmas, a festival which was important to Mathis' mother, who he intended to honor. The two gentlemen who oversaw the recording in studio were Percy Faith, the great bandleader, and composer, and Mitch Miller, the influential producer, whom Mathis remembers as "kind of a taskmaster." Both were Jewish, as were the majority of the musicians in the band. Over the course of the session they encouraged Mathis to add some Jewish tracks into the mix. He needed little encouragement. "When I was growing up in San Francisco, as a teenager, I would visit Temple with some of my Jewish friends and I loved to listen to the Cantors. They helped me learn these songs long before I recorded them." These formative experiences were reinforced by his exposure to the music of great performers Robert Merrill and Richard Tucker (born Moishe Miller and Rubin Ticker).

Mathis was a quick study thanks to the secret art of transliteration—having



one of the band members write out the Hebrew sounds in English. All that was needed was the opportunity to master the fundamentals of the melody. Mathis remembers achieving this in a clever yet unorthodox fashion. “I needed to hear a recording. The one that I heard that stuck with me was recorded by Perry Como (on *I Believe* in 1953) who I’m sure was very Italian.”

When Mathis listens to the track today, he hears “the realization of a very young man beginning a career with the inspiration and guidance of the wonderful Percy Faith.” When we play the record, it speaks a challenge—to reconstruct the complex, yet sensational sounding secret history of Black-Jewish relations and, as per the mission of the Idelsohn Society, hold it out in the light of the day to trigger a conversation about identity, community, meaning, and history, through sound. Come join us in discussing these issues at:

www.idelsohnsociety.com/blacksabbath.

Musically yours,

The Idelsohn Society:

Roger Bennett

Courtney Holt

David Katznelson

Josh Kun

BLACK SABBATH by JOSH KUN

In 1979, the legendary 1920s blues queen Alberta Hunter made a rare appearance on *The Dick Cavett Show*. Hunter was 84 years old and in the midst of a remarkable career comeback. She showcased some of her best-known blues songs— “My Castle’s Rockin,” “Down Hearted Blues,” “A Good Man Is Hard To Find”— and then launched into “Ich Hib Dich Tzufil Lieb,” a once popular Yiddish theater love song written by Alexander Olshanetsky and Chaim Towber in 1934.

Though the song is perhaps best known in its English-language incarnation, “I Love You Much Too Much” (adapted by Don Raye and turned into a hit for the Andrews Sisters), Hunter sings it in its original Yiddish. “This is a song I learned when I was in Jerusalem,” she tells Cavett. “I am going to sing it in Yiddish.” But just when we think Hunter’s Yiddish blues might spark a riff on Black-Jewish solidarity,



her conversation with Cavett turns to Sophie Tucker, the white Jewish blues queen who once sent her Black maid to ask Hunter if Tucker could borrow one of her songs. Hunter refused. “Sophie, as good as she was, would never sing the blues like a Negro,” Tucker says. “And that’s not boasting. You see Sophie Tucker hasn’t suffered like we’ve suffered.”

Hunter goes so far as to connect Tucker—who began her career wearing blackface, had her biggest hit with “Some of These Days,” written by Black songsmith Shelton Brooks, and



Harold Arlen.

in Hunter's words "came nearer singing like a colored woman than the rest of them"—to a larger tradition of white Jewish theft of Black musical creativity. She also suggests that "Stormy Weather," the Cotton Club classic written by Jewish songwriters Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler for Black jazz and blues singer Ethel Waters, was actually written by Black composer Lukie Johnson. "They used to steal our lives," Hunter says, "So many songs were written by colored people but we had no out. We didn't know what to do to protect our material at that time."



The musical history of Black-Jewish relations is not unlike the social and political history of Black-Jewish relations: complicated, messy, and full of forking paths. Both Blacks and Jews were cast as outsiders in the drama of American freedom, the Diaspora offspring of refugees, exiles, and slaves. For James Baldwin, the "suffering Jew" and the "suffering slave" were cut from the same cloth of New World oppression, "people that walked in darkness" whose struggle in America was to move toward the light of social justice. Blacks found inspiration in the Jewish story of Exodus and a model of leadership in Moses delivering his people from Egypt

to the Promised Land. The Old Testament demand “Let my people go” became a civil rights demand on the National Mall. Jews were instrumental in the formation of both the NAACP and the National Urban League, organized with Blacks on the Communist left in the thirties, and watched Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel march arm in arm with Martin Luther King Jr. in front of a national audience. Yet both before the birth of Israel in 1948 (when Blacks could identify with scattered Jews fighting for the safety of a homeland) and after the Six Day War of 1967 (when Blacks could see Jews as colonizers more than fellow victims), the relationship between Blacks and Jews had been equally defined by strains and conflicts, by Jewish racism and Black anti-Semitism, by mistrust as much as partnership. There was brotherhood and suspicion, alliances and feuds, or in the words of historian Eric Sundquist, “imitation and revulsion, kinship and alienation.”

You can hear all of this played out in 20th century American popular music, which is hard to imagine without all the social and political push and pull between Black and Jewish artists, without all the kinship and without all the alienation, without all the imitation and without all the mutual understanding, appreciation, and solidarity. The first recorded collaboration between a Jewish songwriter and a Black songwriter dates back to 1903, when Albert Von Tilzer and Cecil Mack (the pseudonym of R.C. McPherson, founder of one of the first Black-run music publishing companies) teamed up to write “Teasing.” The rest is oft-told history. So much of Tin Pan Alley and early Broadway was the product of Jewish songwriters and publishers transforming Black spirituals, blues, and jazz into the Great American Songbook, the very songs that would become the foundations for so much jazz improvisation (John Coltrane’s reconstruction of “My Favorite Things,” Kenny



Dorham’s take on “Ol’ Man River,” Art Blakely’s version of “Come Rain or Come Shine,” Sunny Murray’s overturning of “Over the Rainbow.”). Frank Sinatra used to introduce his rendition of the *Showboat* anthem “Ol’ Man River” by dedicating it to “Sammy Davis’ people,” but it was never clear which “people” he meant: the Blacks that the song was about or the Jews who wrote it? Or try to imagine the evolution of rock and roll and modern R&B without Brill Building songwriters penning classics for Black artists, without the cross-racial imaginations of Doc Pomus, Carol King, Elle Greenwich, Jerry Ragovoy, Jerry Leiber, Burt Bacharach, and Mike Stoller and labels like Florence Greenberg’s Scepter Records, Syd Nathan’s King Records, Leonard and Phil Chess’ Chess Records, and the A&R vision of Jerry Wexler at Atlantic.



Just look at how this tangled web of influence shows up in one song, the Jewish-to-Black-to-Jewish-to-Lutheran saga of “Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen.” Originally a Sholom Secunda Yiddish theater tune, “Bei Mir” was then picked up by the Black vaudeville duo Johnny and George who heard the song while performing in the Jewish leisure resorts of The Catskills. They sang it in Yiddish on stage at the Apollo Theater in Harlem where it was heard by Jewish songwriter Sammy Cahn who then transformed into an English-language hit for The Andrew Sisters. Or there’s the famous Cab Calloway story of how Louis Armstrong once told him that Armstrong’s heralded scat singing on “Heebie Jeebies” was inspired by the sound of Jewish *davening*. Which could be why when Harold Arlen’s father, a practicing cantor, first heard Armstrong’s music, he wondered how Armstrong’s jazz got so Jewish: “Where did he get it?” he asked his blues-obsessed son, who Ethel Waters once called the “Negro-est white man she had ever known.”

Arlen’s father was known to have incorporated his son’s songs, namely “Over the Rainbow” and “Come Rain or Come Shine” into his Sabbath services. He was echoing a claim not uncommon in the 20s—Blacks might be “America’s Jews,” but Jews were the original Negroes, Jews the first and truest blues and jazzmen. It’s a sentiment also at the heart of Samson Ralphaeson’s short story “The Day of Atone-ment” which grew into the 1927 film *The Jazz Singer* where the immigrant Jew

corks up so he can sing “My Mammy” and “Kol Nidre” on the same night. The Jewish trumpeter Sonny Berman picked up on the thread two decades later on a 1946 album of straight-ahead jazz that he called *Beautiful Jewish Music*. The liner notes kept the competition alive: “Jewish cantors and gypsies sound more like it than anything from Africa.”



But what if we start this story elsewhere? What if instead of rehearsing the well-documented tales of Jewish investment in Black music—from Jews in blackface to Jews writing for Blacks on the Cotton Club stage, from Ziggy Elman using Big Band swing to transform klezmer into jazz to Benny Goodman, Norman Granz, and Artie Shaw radically refusing to obey the jazz color line, from Mezz Mezzrow and Herbie Mann re-inventing themselves in jazz identities to the Jewish producer of the Blackbird revues Lew Leslie and Jewish owners of influential clubs like Café Society and the Village Vanguard—what about exploring the Black investment in Jewish music? Paul Robeson, no stranger to either repertoire, put it this way: “If it

has been true that the Jewish people, like so many other national groups for whom I have sung, have warmly understood and loved the songs of my people, it has also been true that Negro audiences have been moved by the songs of the Jewish people.”

Take the song “Eli Eli,” based on King David’s lament in the 22nd Psalm, which after being a hit for Al Jolson and cantorial superstar Yosele Rosenblatt, became a staple for left-leaning progressives like Robeson and a must-cover for Black artists like Duke Ellington and Ethel Waters. The Black performer Reb Tuviah, an early fixture on the Yiddish stage, once said that “Eli Eli” “conveyed more deeply and more movingly the Jewish martyrdom, the Jewish cry and plea to God, than could have ever been imagined.” So many Black singers covered the song during the early part of the century that it was part of a lampoon of Jewish music in a 1920 cartoon on the pages of the Yiddish newspaper *Forverts*: a Jewish cantor sings *Aida* and a Black man belts “Eli, Eli.” The caption read, “An upside down world.” Or was it? For Waters, the song spoke to a history of shared suffering. “It tells the tragic history of the Jews as much as one song can,” she said, “and that history of their age-old grief and despair is so similar to that of my own people that I felt I was telling the story of my own race too.” Then again, she also copped to having a good marketing strategy: “Jewish people in every town seemed to love the idea of me singing their song. They crowded the theaters to hear it, and they would tell one another: “The *schwarze* sings ‘Eili, Eili! The *schwarze*!’”

We might be familiar with some of the Black-singing-Jewish headlines—Robeson belting “Kaddish,” “Chasidic Chant,” “Go Down, Moses,” and a song of the Warsaw ghetto, Harry Belafonte singing “Hava Nagila” live at Carnegie Hall in 1959, The Drifters and The Ronettes singing Jewish versions of Black life—but plenty of flickering subplots and minor characters still lurk.



Herbie Mann & Charles Mingus.

Charlie Shavers was a veteran of Dizzy Gillespie's band who also blasted through an "Independence Hora." Willie Bryant called himself The King of Harlem and in 1935 he name-checked "oy yoy yoy" Mr. Goldberg on "Chimes at the Meeting" (when the band breaks into a klezmer run complete with "Mazel Tov" shouts, he wonders aloud, "Hey, what kind of band is this?"). The R&B group The Ravens might have covered "Ol' Man River" but they also declared they could use a little "Mahzel." Nat King Cole once said he sang "Nature Boy" as a tribute to his Jewish fans (the song, based on a Yiddish melody, was written by pop mystic Eden Ahbez, a Brooklyn Jew who re-invented himself beneath the Hollywood sign). In 1953, vibraphone king Lionel Hampton composed his "King David Suite" as a tribute to the new Israeli state and a decade later revealed that among *The Many Sides of Hamp* was his affinity for the Israeli songbook: he sang "Hava Nagila" in Hebrew and vamped behind Israeli singer Regina Ben-Amittay on "Exodus" and "Song of the Negev." The hook for Parliament's 1978 funk classic "Flash Light" even got some help from synagogue chanting at a New Jersey bar mitzvah (we can thank young Aaron Myron for the song's *da-da-da-dee-da-da-da*). And Al Jolson may be best known for his mimicry of Black culture, but in 1961, Jackie Wilson recorded *You Ain't Heard Nothin' Yet*, a glowing homage to the singer Wilson called "the one man I admire most in this business."

You can explore these lost moments on our website, www.idelsohnsociety.com/blacksabbath, but we invite you to begin here. *Black Sabbath* is an attempt to showcase this other story of Black-Jewish musical encounter, a secret history of the many Black responses to Jewish music, life, and culture.

THE RECORDINGS

BILLIE HOLIDAY, "MY YIDDISHE MOMME," 1956

Written by Jack Yellen and Lew Pollack

CAB CALLOWAY, "UTT DA ZAY," 1939

Written by Buck Ram and Irving Mills

JOHNNY HARTMAN, "THAT OLD BLACK MAGIC," 1966

Written by Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer

LIBBY HOLMAN WITH JOSH WHITE, "BABY, BABY," 1942

Written by Rainer Limpinsel and Christopher Heimer

ALBERTA HUNTER, "ICH HOB DICH TZUFIL LIEBA," 1982

Written by Alexander Olshanetzky and Chaim Towber

EARTHA KITT, "SHOLEM," 1959

(Traditional)

MARLENA SHAW, "WHERE CAN I GO?," 1969

Written by Sigmunt Berland, Leo Fuld, and Sonny Miller

JIMMY SCOTT, "EXODUS," 1969

Written by Ernest Gold and Charles E. Boone

CANNONBALL ADDERLEY, "SABBATH PRAYER," 1964

Written by Sheldon Harnick and Jerry Bock

ARETHA FRANKLIN, "SWANEE," 1966

Written by George Gershwin and Irving Caesar

LENA HORNE, "NOW!," 1963

Written by Jule Styne, Betty Comden, and Adolph Green

SLIM GAILLARD QUARTET, "DUNKIN' BAGEL," 1945

Written by Slim Gaillard

NINA SIMONE, "ERETZ ZAVAT CHALAV," 1963

Written by Eliyahu Gamliel

THE TEMPTATIONS, "FIDDLER ON THE ROOF MEDLEY," 1969

Written by Sheldon Harnick and Jerry Bock

JOHNNY MATHIS, "KOL NIDRE," 1958

(Traditional)

1 ★ BILLIE HOLIDAY, "MY YIDDISHE MOMME," 1956



Holiday was no stranger to jazz and blues standards penned by Jewish songwriters. She left her indelible vocal mark on "I Loves You, Porgy," "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man," "All of Me," and countless others, including her signature ballad "Strange Fruit," one of the 20th century's most searing and ruthless indictments of racial violence, penned by Bronx Jew Abel Meerpol in response to the lynching of two Black men in the South. The

Lower East Side tenement tearjerker "My Yiddishe Momme," however, was never on heavy rotation in Holiday's repertoire. Written in English and Yiddish in 1925 by Polish-Jewish immigrant Jack Yellen (with music composed by Lew Pollack), the nostalgia-soaked song was first given to Yiddish-English comedian Willie Howard but was made famous by Sophie Tucker, who emoted all over it on a split 78: side A in English, side B in Yiddish. Holiday sings it here on a private recording made in 1956, when she was visiting the New York home of clarinetist Tony Scott and trying everything to get his baby to speak into a microphone. Accompanied only by sparse piano, she sang a few standards, including another Tucker hit "Some of These Days," and then launched into this abridged, but unforgettable version of "My Yiddishe Momme." Holiday drains the maudlin from Tucker's version, and rides it like a wave of ache until it becomes a torchy blues strained with sadness. Midway through, she gets the baby to speak.



2 ★ CAB CALLOWAY, "UTT DA ZAY," 1939

Amongst pre-WWII Black entertainers, Cab Calloway was probably the best-known Afro-Yiddishist. He mixed his own hepcat jive tongue-twisting with a constant flow of swinging Yiddishisms on songs like "Tzotskele" ("My Darling"), "Who's Yehoodie?" (a goof on Jewish violinist Yehudi Menuhin), "Everybody Eats When They Come To My House" ("Have an hors'doeuvrey Irvy," Calloway offered his Jewish guests), "A Bee Gezindt" (where he shrugged "As Long As You're Healthy" alongside Dizzy Gillespie), and "Nain Nain" (which opens with Calloway riffing on "My Yiddishe Momme").



Listen closely to Calloway's most famous song, "Minnie the Moocher"—the first #1 U.S. hit by a Black artist—and in between all the "hi-de-hi-de-hi-de-ho"s you can hear him throw in a little "oy, yoy, yoy." Rack it up to Calloway's close friendship with his Odessa-born Jewish manager Irving Mills who exposed Calloway to both Yiddish and the rhythms of Jewish prayer. In 1936, Calloway even showed up alongside Al Jolson in the Warner Brothers feature film *The Singing Kid*, where the two perform the Harold Arlen-Yip Harburg number "I Love To Sing-A," with Calloway trading cantorial scats with a whiteface Jolson.



Three years later, Calloway further spoofs cantorial pyrotechnics to open "Utt Da Zay," perhaps his most complete experiment with Yiddish jive, which Mills wrote with fellow Jewish songwriter Buck Ram (who would go on to fame as the chief songwriter for The Platters). Mills adapted

“Utt Da Zay” from the Yiddish folk ode to the drudgery of being an Eastern European tailor, “Ot azoy neyt a shnayder,” and Calloway fills it with big band swing and hipster vocal flights. Where the original declared, “This is how the tailor stitches/ This is how he sews so well!” (*Ot azoy neyt a shnayder/Ot azoy neyt a gut!*), Calloway’s rendition finds the tailor “as busy as a bee/ making lovely finery/ that my baby loves to wear/ when I take her to the fair.” By song’s end, Calloway completely leaves the original Yiddish lament behind for his own Talmudic line of questioning: “Oh, do you dig, dig, dig? Do you chop, chop, chop? Are you hep to this jive that I’m laying to you?”

3 ★ JOHNNY HARTMAN, “THAT OLD BLACK MAGIC,” 1966

When Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer wrote this quick-tongued dance number in 1942 for the WWII Paramount musical *Star Spangled Rhythm*, Arlen was convinced the song’s power lie in Mercer’s words, not in his own spiraling melody. “The words sustain your interest,” he said, “Without the lyric the song would just be another long song.” Which is precisely what makes Hartman’s buttery baritone version of the oft-covered song—which he recorded for his ABC-Paramount LP *I Love Everybody*, so singular and so funny: he doesn’t just mess with Arlen’s melody, he messes with Mercer’s words. Singing in front of a crack Los Angeles orchestra arranged by the esteemed Oliver Nelson, Hartman interrupts “That Old Black Magic” with a quick bit of the popular calypso crossover “Matilda” and then throws in verses from “Di Grine Kuzine,” a fiery immigrant labor lament that was a staple of the early Yiddish-American songbook.



By the time Hartman tackled “Kuzine,” Benny Goodman and Peggy Lee had already turned the song into a polished English-language swing romance “My Green Cousin” (not surprisingly, the song’s angry closing line, “To hell with Columbus’ paradise!,” was lost in pop translation), but Hartman stuck to the Yiddish. Though admittedly his motive seemed to be less about immigrant protest and more about one-upping Sammy Davis Jr., who had recently converted to Judaism after crashing his car in the California desert and who had been named B’nai Brith’s “Man of the Year” in 1965. “What are you laughing at?” Hartman asks before bringing “Black Magic” home, “Sammy Davis don’t even know that song yet.”

4 ★ LIBBY HOLMAN WITH JOSE WHITE, “BABY, BABY,” 1942



Jose White was already a nationally acclaimed blues and gospel singer-guitarist by the time he took a folk turn in the 40s and became a Greenwich Village regular. It was then that he began performing alongside Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, Burl Ives, and others on the CBS radio series *Back Where I Come From* (written by Alan Lomax and directed by a pre-*Rebel Without a Cause* Nicholas Ray) and was soon sought out by the scandal scarred singer Libby Holman, who paid White to teach her how to sing the blues. Holman, born Elizabeth Holzman, had been a pioneering torch singer in the 20s who often drew comparisons to Black blues queens like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey on songs like “Moanin’ Blue” and “Am I Blue?” After her millionaire husband turned up dead, Holman—the prime suspect, but never

convicted—inherited a fortune and used some of it to finance her collaboration with White and her training in folk-blues singing (she also used it to hire Billie Holiday to play her son's sixth birthday party). She claimed she was “not trying to copy the Negroes,” but “just taking their feeling.” The two eventually recorded a three-78rpm disc set for Decca, *Blues Til Dawn*, which included “Baby, Baby” and other blues songs that became regulars in White’s repertoire. The two had a recurring gig in the Balinese Room of Boston’s Hotel Somerset, where White was not allowed to stay. The hotel also maintained a segregated nightclub so he was forbidden from socializing in the same room where he performed. “Take down the American flag,” Holman picketed in front of the hotel, “Put up a German swastika.”

5 ★ ALBERTA HUNTER, “ICH HOB DICH TZUFIL LIEBA,” 1982

Hunter’s intimate and stunning take on the 30s Olshanetsky and Towber love song appeared on the third album of her comeback, *The Glory of Alberta Hunter*, primarily a collection of gospel and blues songs she recorded when she was 87 years old (she died two years later). Accompanied only by bass and piano, Hunter performs the song almost entirely in its original Yiddish, including only the first two verses from the English adaptation by Don Raye: *I love you much too much/ I’ve known it from the start/ But yet my love is such /I can’t control my heart/ I love you much too much/ I ask myself what for/And darling when we touch/ I love you more.* After a century full of versions by artists as varied as Dean Martin, Santana, Dick Haymes, The Andrews Sisters, The Barry Sisters, and Jan Peerce, it’s Hunter’s rendition that’s the gold standard, the most unforgettable of all.



6 ★ EARTHA KITT, “SHOLEM,” 1959



It’s well known that Eartha Kitt was a deft polyglot schooled in at least nine languages, from Spanish to Turkish to Yiddish (her dazzling interpretation of “Rumania, Rumania” on her 1965 *In Person at the Plaza* album should not be missed.) But she rarely meshed them all together in a single musical Babel like she did on “Sholem,” her fifties version of “Shalom Aleichem,” that all-time #1 favorite on the Shabbat Hot 100 List. For observant Jews, it’s a must-sing when you get home from Shabbat services (“Peace Be Upon You”), and as a tune it dates back to the Kabbalists, first showing up on the page in 17th century Prague. But the chorus is also a common on-the-street greeting and Kitt mines both here, even throwing in a bit of “Hava Nagila” for good measure. Which makes her “Sholem” not really a cover of “Shalom Aleichem” at all, but more like a mash-up: part old-school hymn, part street dictionary, part Jewish greatest hits, and part “Introduction to the Greetings of the Globe.” Kitt drops by France, Turkey, Italy, German, Spain, the American mid-west (“how-dee-do?”), and finally “the old, old Middle East.” After debuting as a single (*Billboard* said it “should grab spins”) the track appeared on *The Fabulous Eartha Kitt*, Kitt’s first album for the Kapp label, after she had already been a Katharine Dunham dancer, a Victor/RCA recording artist, and an actress who could play Helen of Troy and, later, Catwoman. It was joined in proto world music style by “Shango,” “Tierra Va Tembla,” “Jambo Hippopotami” and another Hebrew staple

“Ki M’Tzion.” Maurice Levine conducted the orchestra and on the album’s back cover photo, the woman whose not-in-my-name anti-war statements made Lady Bird Johnson cry at a White House luncheon, is cradling a sleek black cat.

7 ★ MARLENA SHAW, “WHERE CAN I GO?,” 1969



In the late 40s, Yiddish song king Leo Fuld heard a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto singing “Vu Ahin Zol Ikh Geyn?” in a Paris nightclub. Fuld translated the song’s mournful but defiant post-Holocaust desire for a “precious promised land” into English and recorded it for Decca. But when the song took hold in the U.S. (Fuld sang it on *The Milton Berle Show* and *The Perry Como Show*), it also resonated as a Black civil rights anthem, its questions—*Tell me, where can I go? There’s no place I can see, Where to go, where to go? Every door is closed to me*—resonant with Black struggles for racial justice. As Fuld quickly learned, “Where Can I Go?” was not a just a Jewish question, but a Black one, reviving age-old connections between Blacks and Jews as brothers and sisters in exile

and Diaspora. “Black is beautiful,” he wrote in his autobiography, “Jewish is Manischewitz wine.” Ray Charles recorded it in the high impact year of 1963, the same year that witnessed the murder of Medgar Evers, the March on Washington, and the bombing of the 16th street Baptist church in Birmingham, when Black Americans were questioning—with perhaps greater force than ever before—their security in the failed promised land. “No more wanderin’ for me,” the song went, “For at last I am free.” Jazz and soul singer Marlena Shaw brought the song back into circulation six years later on her politically riled up second album for Cadet (the jazz imprint of Chess Records), melting it down into a pool of biting, slow fuzzed-out funk. She completes the song’s journey from the Warsaw Ghetto to the Black ghettos of the

U.S. and firmly embeds it in the Black civil rights songbook, singing it alongside “Woman of the Ghetto,” “I Wish I Knew (How It Would Feel To Be Free),” “California Soul,” and “Liberation Conversation.”

8 ★ JIMMY SCOTT, “EXODUS,” 1969

Ernest Gold fled Vienna in 1938 and began making his mark as a film composer in Hollywood in the mid-forties. In 1960, he wrote the Oscar-winning theme to *Exodus*, Otto Preminger’s chest-thumping film about the founding of the State of Israel. That’s about where the song’s Jewish-centrism ended. It was covered by everyone from Edith Piaf and Count Basie to Ferrante & Teicher, Chet Atkins, and Ray Barretto (who made it a *watusi* right around the time he showed up on the *Mazel Tov Mis Amigos* album), and its lyrics were written by none other than Pat Boone, a Southern church elder and the great-great-grandson of Daniel. “This land is mine,” Boone wrote, “God gave this land to me.” The words became easily adapted to different social and political histories, be it the environmentalist movement (the land is *ours* to care for) or in the case of Korean crooner Jon Yune, who sang it on his seventies *Ose Shalom* album and who still uses it to close his live shows, the Japanese occupation of Korea. The song took on particular meaning among many African-American musicians—Ray Charles, Lionel Hampton—who could see their own history mirrored in the Jewish struggle for a homeland and often saw the birth of Israel as a victory for the oppressed. This 1969 version of the song by Jimmy Scott turns the original’s heroic pride into a fragile blues dirge as holy as it is haunting. Originally recorded for Ray Charles’ Tangerine label, “Exodus” features Scott’s unmistakable vocals alongside Ron Carter on bass and Junior Mance on piano.



The eight year Broadway run of *Fiddler on the Roof* not only helped thrust fantasies of Eastern European *shtetl* life—singing milkmen, matchmakers, dreams of being a rich man, the importance of tradition—into American pop consciousness, but turned the show's music into a must-cover songbook for just about everyone with a record deal. That Jerry Bock's music and Sheldon Harnick's lyrics were based in tales of 19th century life in Tsarist Russia



didn't stop Puerto Rican percussionist Joe Quijano from recording *Fiddler on the Roof Goes Latin* and it didn't stop a host of Black artists from leaving their mark on the *Fiddler* legacy—Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, Ramsey Lewis, Wes Armstrong, and Johnny Hartman all recorded *Fiddler* songs. As did jazz saxophone legend Cannonball Adderley who re-imagined the whole *Fiddler* opus as measured, but swinging jazz instrumentals on *Cannonball Adderley's Fiddler on the Roof*. Featuring Adderley joined by saxophonist Charles Lloyd, pianist Joe Zawinul, bassist Sam Jones, drummer Louis Hayes, and Nat Adderley on cornet, the album was produced by David Axelrod, a Capitol mainstay in the 60s who grew up Jewish in South Central Los Angeles immersed in Black music (in 1968, Axelrod did "Kol Nidre" as a funk song on *Release of an Oath*, the album he wrote for The Electric Prunes). "Sabbath Prayer" comes from *Fiddler's* first act but in Adderley's hands it transcends plot and narrative. Instead of re-creating Tevye's prayers for his daughters, Adderley's sextet gives us longing and loss as lush, droning universals.



"Swanee" will probably always be remembered as a blackface song, if not *the* blackface song, eternally synonymous with urban New York Jews turning fantasies of the Black South into American pop hits from under the smoky, alchemical veil of burnt cork. Written in 1919 by George Gershwin and Irving Caesar, the song became the signature number of Al Jolson, who sang it in his Winter Garden show *Sinbad*, then recorded it for Columbia (it spent nine weeks at #1 and sold over two million copies), and then performed it in three separate Hollywood musicals. "Some people think George and I were Southerners because we wrote 'Swanee,'" Caesar once said. "But it's just a case of imagination. We never saw the Swanee River. We had never been south of 14th street when we wrote 'Swanee.' After the song became a hit, we took a trip down south and took a look at the Swanee River—very romantic muddy little river, very nice. Nothing against it but it's a good thing we wrote the song first and used our imagination." Aretha Franklin was born into the South that Caesar and Gershwin imagined, and on her 1966 album for the same record label that made Jolson's "Swanee" a national smash, she turns the song inside out. Her re-working of Kern and Hammerstein's "Ol' Man River"—another urban Jewish imagining of Black Southern life—on the same album pulls a similar cultural flip with great success, but with "Swanee" she doesn't so much interpret the song as take it over and make it wholly her own. You can feel Franklin wrestling with the racial legacies of American pop, and you can hear her really enjoying the fight.



II ★ LENA HORNE, "Now!," 1963



When Lena Horne went to Israel in 1952, the young nation was in the midst of independence fever and Horne was taken by what she called "history-in-the-making in a brand-new country." She visited kibbutzes and a camp for Yemenite children, where she saw "terribly oppressed people of color, people just emerging from the kind of bondage Negroes have been struggling so long to emerge from." Nearly a decade later, in the midst of U.S. civil rights upheavals, Horne decided it was the right time for her to leave

RCA Victor and start singing more overtly political songs. In her words, "How can I go on singing about a penthouse way up in the sky when, with housing restrictions the way they are now, I would not be allowed to rent that place? I can't get up in a nightclub in a thousand-dollar dress and start singing 'Let My People Go'... I never had the right. I didn't choose it to be that way but it was the illusion that Hollywood gave me."

In response to her call for more socially engaged material, Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg wrote her "Silent Spring," which was based on Rachel Carson's influential book on pesticides and pollution, but which they extended into a civil rights commentary in light of the events of 1963. Broadway vets Adolph Green, Betty Comden, and Jule Styne also wrote her "Now!," an incisive rant against civil rights abuses that Styne composed to the otherwise joyous tune of "Hava Nagila." Horne performed "Now!" at a pair of benefit concerts at Carnegie Hall (she co-headlined with Frank

Sinatra and sent her proceeds to the Gandhi Society for Human Rights) and then went into the studio with conductor Ray Ellis to cut it as a single. *Variety* wrote that she sang of “new worlds to come.” She wanted to share profits from the song with the NAACP and the Congress of Racial Equality but its radical lyrics kept it off the radio and “Now!” never had the impact Horne had hoped for. She included it on the *Here’s Lena Now* album for 20th Century Fox, alongside her takes on Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind” and Arlen and Harburg’s *Bloomer Girl* call for equality, “The Eagle and Me” (Horne sang it on Broadway in the 40s: “free as the sun is free/ that’s how it’s got to be”). “Now!” did not entirely fade from view, though. It soon found the ears of Santiago Álvarez, an experimental Cuban filmmaker who used the song as the score to his own “Now,” a landmark 1965 newsreel collage of Black civil rights struggles that is considered a classic of Cuban cinema.

12 ★ SLIM GAILLARD QUARTET, “DUNKIN’ BAGEL,” 1945



If Cab Calloway was the king of Afro-Yiddish hybrids, then Slim Gaillard was the unpredictable court jester, a self-styled linguist and word magician who sang in a language he called “Vout,” or “Vout-O-Reenie,” or sometimes “Floogie.” Calloway published *The Hepster’s Dictionary*; Gaillard published *The Vout-O-Reenie Diction-*

ary. It’s hard to pinpoint Vout’s idiomatic sources—Spanish? Arabic? Jive? German? Japanese?— but scraps of Yiddish seem to have been favorite Gaillard building blocks. The Yiddish shouts of a street vendor frame “Drei Six Cents,” mambo is turned Yiddish crazy on “Meshuganah Mambo,” matzoh balls and gefilte fish form the mantra of “Matzoh Balls,” and there might be Yiddish in the loose scatting that flows throughout Gaillard and Slam Stewart’s version of “Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen,” which we are told is “their ‘Hungarian version’-strictly from Hungary.” A singer, guitarist, and tap-dancer, Gaillard was from Detroit where, legend has it, he ran bootleg booze for the local Jewish mob the Purple Gang, before he headed into vaudeville. After success in New York as part of the duo Slim & Slam (look for them in the 1941 film *Hellzapoppin* alongside Martha Raye and The Three Stooges’ Shemp Howard), Gaillard came west to Los Angeles where he was a regular at Billy Berg’s legendary mixed-race Hollywood nightclub. He formed a quartet with pianist Dodo Mar-marosa, bassist Bam Brown, and drummer Zutty Singleton, and recorded a few sides for Eddie Lagunas’ label Bee-Bee. Among them was “Dunkin’ Bagel,” perhaps Gaillard’s most hypnotic Yiddish-Vout meditation on the pleasures of Jewish food.

13 ★ NINA SIMONE, “ERETZ ZAVAT CHALAV” 1963



Nina Simone recorded her cover of this Israeli folk favorite, a hand-clapping ode to “a land flowing with milk and honey,” over a decade before embarking on her first tour of Israel in the late 70s. On her El Al flight to Tel Aviv, Simone fell asleep only to wake up to a line of excited Israelis standing in the plane’s aisle eager to meet her. When the plane landed, The High Priestess of Soul was greeted at the airport by the mayor of Tel Aviv. “They said they had been waiting for me to come for ten years,” she later wrote in her autobiography. “The newspapers were full of the news of my arrival.” When Simone returned to the States, she claimed that her visit put her back in touch with herself and with God, and put her career back on track. Neither

Simone nor her biographers talk much about her choice of “Eretz Zavat Chalav,” which she sang live at Carnegie Hall in 1963, a performance included a year later on the *Folksy Nina* album she put together for Colpix. It’s hard not to hear it against the backdrop of 1963’s bloodied dreams of social justice and not to imagine Simone transposing one promised land for another, a Black land of milk and honey that will bring another exodus home. Some mystery has also shrouded the song’s own history in Israel. Often mistaken for an ancient folk song, “Eretz” is based on Biblical verses but was written for a kibbutz celebration by Israeli folk composer and dancer Eliahu Gamliel in the early 1950s (it was a big national hit for Israeli singer Yaffa Yarkoni in 1955). “I thought of the people of Israel standing before the land after 40 years in the desert awaiting the spies to tell them about the land of milk and honey,” Gamliel once explained, “And I imagined them ecstatic, signing very passionately ‘Eretz Zavat Chalav v’Devash,’ and the music kind of wrote itself.”

14 ★ THE TEMPTATIONS, “FIDDLER ON THE ROOF MEDLEY,” 1969

The Motown album this medley appeared on, *On Broadway*, is probably most remembered for being the last recorded appearance Diana Ross would make as a member of The Supremes, but it ought to also be known for these extraordinary nine minutes from The Temptations. *On Broadway* was the soundtrack to the NBC television special *G.I.T. On Broadway*, a musical revue of Broadway favorites done by both Diana Ross and the Supremes and The Temptations. There was no way they couldn’t include songs from *Fiddler*, one of the biggest Broadway stories of the 1960s, but who could have predicted the treatment they would get from Dennis Edwards, Eddie Kendricks, Paul Williams, Melvin Franklin, and Otis Williams, all dressed in matching gold tunics. They invert “If I Were A Rich Man” so it starts as a conga punctuated gospel reverie—“Lord who made the lion and the lamb,” Kendricks sweetly croons, “You decreed I should be what I am”—and then let it erupt into a beat-snapped funk sprint. “Sunrise, Sunset” slows things back down before “Matchmaker, Matchmaker,” done here with quick-stepping jazzy swing, speeds them right back up. It ends up being a testament to both the range of The Temptations and the flexibility of *Fiddler*, one more piece of proof that these songs of shtetl nostalgia had already become American pop standards with room for everybody.



15 ★ JOHNNY MATHIS, “KOL NIDRE,” 1958

By the time Johnny Mathis released his fourth album on Columbia, 1958’s *Good Night, Dear Lord*, he was already an established and beloved voice in easy-listening American pop. “Chances Are,” “Wonderful! Wonderful!,” and “It’s Not For Me To Say,” had all gone gold, and another hit, “Misty,” was just around the corner. All of which makes *Good Night, Dear Lord* such a special listen, a full album of lush spiritual and religious classics arranged by the lord of lush Percy Faith and re-interpreted



by one of the most polished voices of the 20th century at the top of his game. Of the Jewish-themed songs Mathis picks, there's "Eli Eli" and "Where Can I Go?" but it's his rendition of the High Holidays chestnut "Kol Nidre"—the dry ancient oath turned melismatic Yom Kippur prayer service show-stopper—that is the album's artistic zenith. Singing in the original Aramaic, Mathis faces up to the song's intense emotional weight—it's the wailing operatic evening blues that lets the Day of Atonement begin—and instead of getting distracted with jazz and pop flourishes, attacks it like a cantor who knows the Germanic melody lines by heart, solemnly reaching low before soaring high, readying the congregation for a wrenching day of repentance and soon enough, a new beginning. Like Samson Raphaelson said when he first witnessed Al Jolson on stage, "My God, this isn't a jazz singer, this is a Cantor!" In Mathis' version, you can hear the entire history of Blacks and Jews in America come rushing forth in the swell of his voice: the Old Testament stories reborn as Black spirituals, the longings for promised lands of justice, the many vows, oaths, and dreams to fulfill in the new years, and the new worlds, that are still yet to come.

LET'S SAY THERE'S A BODY by HILTON ALS

Let's say there's a body. And blood flows through it. The blood in that body—it's been tainted by insensitivity. But why? That's the "how" of this story. Let's say that body takes a trip to Berlin. Let's say that body goes to a club in Berlin. Let's follow that body as it moves through that club in Berlin, colored lights and manufactured fog swirling around the body we're following, and the other bodies in the club, all with three a.m. eyes, and the sour breath of expectation. Let's look at some of those other bodies through the eyes of the body we're following. What do we see? Nothing. Because the body we're following won't look at other bodies as he's been looked at: as something to be described, categorized, reviled, fetishized. Let's say about our body—the body we're following—let's say that it's Black. And then let us say that it's male. And then let us say that this Black male body—now amidst other bodies unlike his own—tries to forget his body, a continual target, as he dances it into what he calls the field of unknowing. What he means by the field of unknowing: a green or colorless lea where no one will define him, or further define their various prejudices, by looking at or talking at or spitting in the direction of his body. He closes his eyes. The music is a propulsive drift, encouraging the body we've been watching to float past its own form, its own suit, and to be "nothing," to be "nowhere." But that's shattered when a Black American now living in Berlin—he's one of two djs at the club, and dresses in drag—screams into the microphone: "Teddy Pendergrass, Teddy Pendergrass!" It can only be him—the body we've been following—that the Black queens just as much as it is by whites because of his maleness, his blackness, is targeted by Black queens just as it is by whites because of what the body we've been following represents, or symbolizes: something that's gone wrong in the body and mind of the person who is viewing him. Several people laugh; being in on the joke is a comfort. But now the body we've been following stops his dance; he's too self-conscious; the world is watching; his body is no longer his—to lose as he pleases—

because people are watching him, and people can claim you through looking; eyes crawling over your body, and sometimes voices follow those eyes, thereby italicizing the viewer's twisted myopia, a voice saying to the body we've been following—the music's ruined now, he's too in someone else's idea of his body to dance, the hurt he feels empties him out, empties the music out—saying out of its white body: Have you ever seen the film, *Requiem for a Dream*? You remind me of the Black guy in that film. Perhaps the white body with words coming out of that hole in the middle of its face thought it was OK to say what he said because of the joke the Black queen thought she'd made, who can say? It's enough to say that both queens—one Black, one white—felt what *they* had to say was worth saying, regardless of what the body we've been following might actually feel about the world, let alone himself.

Let's say there's a body. Let's say that body has a soul. Let's say the blood of that body is tainted by the spittle of presumption, sprayed from the mouths of those who sprayed their presumption—their privilege—down other, similarly colored throats, Billie Holiday's throat, say. As she sang, she often looked down, from the stage, at all those bodies that despised some aspect of her corporeal self—her femaleness, her skin color—and to such a degree once that she once said, to a white bandleader: Oh, man, I wish I could just leave this whole ofay world. And the bandleader took her literally for a moment, saying, about the memory: I thought she was going to kill herself! Sure, in a sense, Billie Holiday did kill herself. But how to explain to her friend—to anyone—all the little murders that happened against her person because she as a body with a soul, and that when you sprayed your spittle down her throat and said she was this kind of beast, or some kind of projection, as she entertained you, she still had no recourse but to



open her throat to the truth, it was her nature, but she had to blunt it all to survive her true self, even, her vulnerability in relation to herself and others, and her cruelty to others as well, it was all part of her immense gift, and the chemically fuelled narratives she engineered so brilliantly, narratives she got to star in without you, that spittler on souls, its so sick to be this kind of body, in America. Given all that, how remarkable is it, then, that this kind of body—Billie Holiday’s body and other bodies, too—always trying *not* to be attempts not to be invulnerable, in the end, to connect to others, to remain artists, which means to imagine and sometimes empathize with others who are not yourself, the better to make art out of this condition: the human condition.

So, as I live inside my breathing body, this body that moves through Berlin and elsewhere, I understand what Billie Holiday meant to achieve in “My Yiddishe Mama,” a song written by Jack Yellen and Lew Pollack, two white Jewish men who had no relationship to Billie Holiday’s throat and body, but she made a relationship to them through her masterful interpretation of their perennial classic: by becoming the voice of universal longing by letting Jewish sentiment rest in, and run through, the blood that filled her Black soul, her Black body.



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The Idelsohn Society for Musical Preservation is an all volunteer-run organization. We are a core team from the music industry and academia who passionately believe Jewish history is best told by the music we have loved and lost. In order to incite a new conversation about the present, we must begin by listening anew to the past.

We do this in a number of ways: by re-releasing lost Jewish classic albums and the stories behind them; building a digitally-based archive of the music and the artists who created it in order to preserve their legacy for future generations; curating museum exhibits that showcase the stories behind the music; and creating concert showcases which bring our 80 and 90 year old performers back on stage to be re-appreciated by the young audiences they deserve. All of this work is driven by the passion and energies of our volunteer supporters and donors across the country who share the belief that music creates conversations otherwise impossible in daily life.

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The Idelsohn Society is helmed by Courtney Holt, David Katznelson, Josh Kun, and Roger Bennett, associate produced by Dana Ferine, and supported by the thousands of individuals who have mailed in their vinyl records to our archive via www.idelsounds.com.

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Produced by The Idelsohn Society:

Roger Bennett, Courtney Holt, David Katznelson, Josh Kun

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In compiling *Black Sabbath*, we relied on the following resources, which we also recommend for further reading, research, and reflection:

Gerald Bordman, *Jerome Kern: His Life and Music*
Thomas Brothers, ed., *Louis Armstrong, in His Own Words: Selected Writings*
Ken Emerson, *Always Magic In The Air: The Bomp and Brilliance of the Brill Building Era*
Leo Fuld, *Refugee: Leo Fuld, The King of Yiddish Music*
James Gavin, *Stormy Weather: The Life of Lena Horne*
Isaac Goldberg, *Tin Pan Alley: A Chronicle of American Popular Music*
Jack Gottlieb, *Funny It Doesn't Sound Jewish: How Yiddish Songs and Synagogue Melodies Influenced Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, and Hollywood*
Alex Halberstadt, *Lonely Avenue: The Unlikely Life & Times of Doc Pomus*
Edward Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Happy With The Blues*
Jonathan D. Karp, "Performing Black-Jewish Symbiosis: The "Hassidic Chant" of Paul Robeson"
Eartha Kitt, *I'm Still Here*
David Lehman, *A Fine Romance: Jewish Songwriters, American Songs*
David Margolick, *Strange Fruit*
Jeffrey Melnick, *The Right To Sing The Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song*
Harold Meyerson and Ernie Harburg, *Who Put The Rainbow in The Wizard of Oz?*
Jonathan Z.S. Pollack, "Who's Yehoodi?"
Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Immigrant Jews and the Hollywood Melting Pot*
Nina Simone, *I Put a Spell on You: The Autobiography of Nina Simone*
Eric J. Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America*
Sophie Tucker, *Some of These Days: The Autobiography of Sophie Tucker*
Max Wilk, *They're Playing Our Song*
Elijah Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues*

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