

# SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

Journal of the Southern Jewish Historical Society

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2012

Volume 15



# Southern Jewish History

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For authors' guidelines, queries, and all editorial matters, write to the Editor, *Southern Jewish History*, 2517 Hartford Dr., Ellenwood, GA 30294; e-mail: Markkbauman@aol.com. For journal subscriptions and advertising, write Rachel Heimovics Braun, managing editor, 954 Stonewood Lane, Maitland, FL 32751; or e-mail: journal@jewishsouth.org; or visit [www.jewishsouth.org](http://www.jewishsouth.org). For membership and general information about the Southern Jewish Historical Society, write to PO Box 71601, Marietta, GA 30007-1601 or visit [www.jewishsouth.org](http://www.jewishsouth.org)

Articles appearing in *Southern Jewish History* are abstracted and/or indexed in *Historical Abstracts*, *America: History and Life*, *Index to Jewish Periodicals*, *Journal of American History*, *Journal of Southern History*, *RAMBI-National Library of Israel*, and the *Berman Jewish Policy Archive* ([www.bjpa.org](http://www.bjpa.org)).

*Southern Jewish History* acknowledges with deep appreciation grants from the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation, New York, and the Gale Foundation, Beaumont, Texas.

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ISSN 1521-4206

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Between the Borscht Belt and the Bible Belt:  
Crafting Southern Jewishness  
Through Chutzpah and Humor

by

Jarrold Tanny\*

While traveling across the United States, Borat Sagdiyev, a dimwitted reporter from the former Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan, makes a brief stop in Birmingham, Alabama, to learn all about fine dining in the South. After a private lesson with Kathie B. Martin, an “etiquette coach,” Borat is invited to the Magnolia Mansion Dining Society. Although Borat fumbles his way through dinner making a number of gaffes and inappropriate remarks, his refined companions do not rebuke him for his lack of familiarity with southern decorum. “The cultural differences are vast and I think that he is a delightful man,” insists the female dinner host while Borat is in the restroom, “and it wouldn’t take very much time for him to really become Americanized.” Seconds later Borat is standing before her, carrying a plastic bag containing his feces. Yet the shocked guests retain the requisite propriety of high society, and the host accompanies Borat back to the bathroom to demonstrate the proper protocol for using an American toilet. She does not lose her poise even after Borat asks with apparent naïveté, whether “the host cleans the anus of the other?” After this lesson in etiquette they return to the table. Harmony is restored with the alien’s primitive customs being ascribed to his disconcerting yet not insurmountable cultural backwardness.

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\* The author may be contacted at [tannyj@uncw.edu](mailto:tannyj@uncw.edu)

But the congenial soirée descends into disaster when Borat's guest arrives, a black prostitute named Lanelle. Dinner is immediately pronounced to be over and the host escorts Borat and Lanelle to the front door. When he asks if Lanelle can stay for dessert, the host finally loses her composure and declares: "Absolutely not, and neither can you!" Meanwhile a voice in the background can be heard shouting, "The sheriff is on his way, the police are coming." Borat and Lanelle are rudely ejected from the Magnolia Mansion Dining Society, located on Secession Drive, in twenty-first-century Birmingham.<sup>1</sup>

*Sacha Baron Cohen as the irrepressible Borat, 2006.*

*(Source: Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan, directed by Larry Charles [2006].)*

This scene is from the 2006 hit movie *Borat*, which stars the British comic Sacha Baron Cohen as a Kazakh reporter who is studying American society and culture in order to help transform his backward Central Asian country into a modern westernized nation. Although Cohen is Jewish his character is not, and there is nothing explicitly Jewish about this scene or the rest of the film, aside from a few passing incidents and a handful of remarks by the unabashedly antisemitic Borat. Yet Borat's engagement with the Magnolia Mansion Dining Society falls within the tradition of Jewish humor, even if its setting and characters suggest otherwise. Cohen, in fact, is following in the footsteps of Harry Golden, Mickey Katz, Woody Allen, and Kinky Friedman, who have all used the South as a backdrop for their subversive Jewish comedy since the 1950s. An analysis of their humor sheds light on American Jewry's encounter with the South within the larger historical context of the Jews as a people in exile. From it, we also gain a deeper understanding of the evolution and characteristics of Jewish humor, which first emerged in nineteenth-century eastern Europe, but only reached its mature stage in post-World War II America. Jewish humor's encounter with Dixie is a window into modern Jewish culture.

*The American Jew and the Mythic South*

Even the most casual observer is probably aware that the South is neither the birthplace nor the typical site of American Jewish humor. When one thinks of Jewish humor in America, New York always comes to mind, the archetypal Jewish metropolis, where millions of immigrants transplanted the culture of the eastern European shtetl and refashioned it to suit their new environment.<sup>2</sup> Through vaudeville, the Yiddish theater, and early radio, Jewish entertainers flooded the burgeoning mass culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From New York, Jewish humor radiated outwards in America, following the Jews wherever they went: to the Catskill Mountains in Upstate New York—the so-called Borscht Belt—where many prominent Jewish comedians got their start performing their shtick for vacationing New Yorkers; to Los Angeles where Jewish businessmen and

entertainers created Hollywood, leaving an indelible Jewish imprint on the motion picture industry and television; and to southern Florida where a populous enclave of Jewish senior citizens, seemingly out of place in the American South, still relish the culture of their formative years, the Yiddish-inflected comedy, music, theater, and film of New York, the Catskills, and Hollywood.<sup>3</sup>

To encounter Jewish humor against the backdrop of Dixie, one needs to look for it. This largely stems from the fact that the South has played a marginal role in American Jewish consciousness, and the very idea of a “Jewish South” seems improbable to many outside of the region. One scholar insists, “American popular culture keeps forgetting about southern Jewishness.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, two other prominent historians of southern Jewry maintain that “Jews who live in regions of the country with larger Jewish communities . . . wonder: ‘Who could believe Jews actually live in the South? . . . If they really were Jewish, they wouldn’t live there.’”<sup>5</sup> And it is not just in the realm of popular consciousness: in his introduction to *Dixie Diaspora*, a five hundred page anthology of southern Jewish history published in 2006, Mark K. Bauman writes that “southern Jewish history remains an exotic aside to many, and its study is more peripheral than integrated.”<sup>6</sup>

Perception of course does not always reflect the historical record, and even a cursory examination of American Jewish history reveals the many significant Jews who were at home in the South, the major role they played in the nation’s past, and the numerous Jewish “firsts” that took place below the Mason-Dixon Line.<sup>7</sup> But southern Jewish communities, as Stephen J. Whitfield points out, have historically been small, lacking “the urban density that has enabled Jewish life to flourish” in cities like New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles.<sup>8</sup> If one excludes Florida there are today only 257,000 Jews in the South—4.2 percent of America’s Jewish population, and a mere one-half of 1 percent of the South’s population, with the Jews disproportionately inhabiting major metropolises, such as Atlanta.<sup>9</sup> For many Americans, Jewishness is synonymous with New York, and



Dixie's demographic history may explain in part this discursive disconnect between the Jews and the South.

The Jewish absence from the mental landscape of the South is humorously depicted in a 1997 episode of Fox Network's cartoon series *King of the Hill*, a show about a community of rednecks in small-town Texas.<sup>10</sup> In this episode, the main character, Hank, learns that his divorced mother is dating a Jewish man, Gary Kasner. Unsure of what to make of him, Hank discusses their relationship with his culturally insular neighbors, Dale, Bill, and Boomhauer:

DALE. Kasner, is that German?

HANK. It's Jewish.

*(A moment of contemplative silence passes.)*

DALE. So, he's Jewish.

HANK. Yeah, Dale, he's Jewish.

DALE. There's nothing wrong with that in and of itself.

BILL. Is he funny?

HANK. Well, he doesn't seem too funny.

BILL. Seinfeld's funny.

HANK. Seinfeld's funnier than Gary.

...

BILL. Whoopi Goldberg's funny.

HANK. You know the man won't even eat steak. Now what's that about? Hell, my boss has a bypass surgery every year and he eats all the damn steak he wants.

BILL. Oh that's not the reason Gary doesn't eat steak, Hank, it's 'cause the cow is sacred to his people.

DALE. Nope, you're thinking of the Hindus. The pig is sacred to the Jews.

BILL. I wouldn't, myself, never join a religion that restricted my diet. See, I don't want to get into heaven that way.

Hank and his friends seem to have never encountered a Jew before, with Jerry Seinfeld and nonsensical theology being their sole points of reference. Kasner's foreignness is underscored by his Yiddish accent and inflected speech ("You want I should come

*Scene from King of the Hill.*

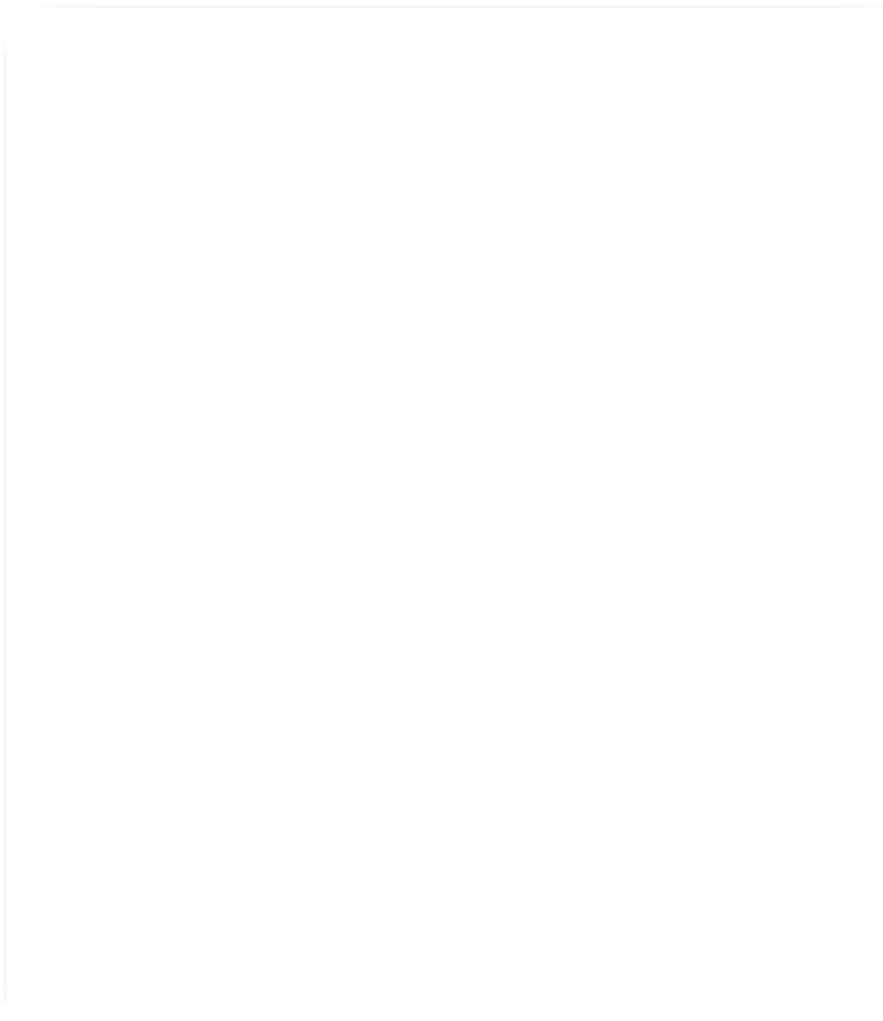
*Hank, on the right, tells about his mother's new boyfriend.*

*Other characters are, left to right, Boomhauer, Dale, and Bill.*

*(Photo source: King of the Hill, "The Unbearable Blindness of Laying," episode no. 23, December 21, 1997, Fox Network.)*

over there?"). He is an alien, an unknown quantity that may or may not fit into the weltanschauung of small town Texans.<sup>11</sup>

*King of the Hill* finds humor in the collision between Jew and southerner, a theme that has repeatedly surfaced in American popular culture, but often with different results. In a 1997 piece (also situated in Texas) in the satirical newspaper *The Onion*, we learn how Holocaust commemoration transpires in the Lone Star State. The month-long series of events, which are not exactly the model of solemnity one would expect, include a "Holocaust Hoedown," a barbecue, and a daily double-bill showing of *Schindler's List* and John Wayne's *True Grit*. Presiding over the opening ceremony is Rabbi Leonard "Too Tall" Sussman. In the photo, two Hasidic Jews are shown



*From The Onion, February 12, 1997.  
(Courtesy of The Onion. Reprinted with permission.  
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manning the grill, one of whom is wearing an apron that reads "Never Again, Pardner."<sup>12</sup>

The humor in *The Onion's* piece is of course rooted in the blending of Texan ritual with Jewish suffering, and the absurd recasting of Jew as southern cowboy. But ironically the hybridization of Jew and Texan results in a Jewish community that is more committed to its history than the Jews of New York or even Israel, where Holocaust commemoration officially transpires one day per year on *Yom ha-Shoah*. In Texas, the tragedy is observed for an entire month replete with public spectacle, as the "Main Street parade featuring red, white, and blue Texas blossoms spelling out 'Don't Mess With The Jews'" would suggest.<sup>13</sup> The eternally victimized Jew is toughened up through his injection into the rugged landscape of the quintessential southern frontier, without detriment to his Jewishness.

Such encounters however predate *The Onion* and *King of the Hill* by over four decades, and were a hallmark of Mickey Katz's music. Katz made an entire career out of singing Jewish parodies of popular songs, mixing Yiddish slang, broken English, and Jewish stereotypes. He produced most of his recordings between 1947 and 1957, during an era of tremendous growth in American Jewish culture invigorated by postwar affluence, the creation of Israel, and the dissipation of antisemitism.<sup>14</sup> Katz delighted in satirizing the schlemielesque Jew, by placing his characters in improbable settings, and his repertoire included several songs set in the American South: "Mississippi Shmootz" (to the tune of "Mississippi Mud"); "Roiselle from Texas" (to the tune of "The Yellow Rose of Texas"), whose female protagonist is "known in every shtetl throughout the old Panhandle" and is a descendant of the great "Andrew Jackson Cohen"; and "Feudin' and Fussin' Mit Mine Cousin," filled with his gun-toting *mishpachah* "in the hills of West Virginny."<sup>15</sup> A talented musician, Katz succeeds in making his songs Jewish not only through language and plot, but also by seamlessly overlaying klezmer flourishes onto American popular tunes that otherwise bear no connection to Jewish music and culture.

*Mickey Katz and two of his 78 rpm labels.  
(Images of "Dvoid Crockett" and "Mississippi Shmootz"  
courtesy of the Judaica Sound Archives, Florida Atlantic  
University, Boca Raton, <http://faujsa.fau.edu>.)*

Katz's most famous song is undoubtedly "Duvid Crockett" (to the tune of the "Ballad of Davy Crockett"), in which he transforms the Tennessee-born American frontiersman into a Jew, or rather a New York Jew into an American frontiersman.<sup>16</sup> Duvid Crockett leaves his native Lower East Side, the "wilds of Delancey Street, home of gefilte fish and kosher meat," to become a cowboy, making his way through the Deep South and then out West. Katz narrates Duvid's journey through classic Jewish dialect humor:

He went down south, looking for a *meydl*  
 Met a little *tsatskale* called Daisy Freidel  
 From near and far, they came to the *chippie*  
 Elected him president of the B'nei Mississippi  
 Mazel tov Duvid Crockett  
 Ah mazel tov *der mame un der alter* Crockett  
 Mazel tov Duvid Crockett, King of Delancey Street

As with the Holocaust memorial in Texas, the song's blending of Jewish and southern evokes laughter. The resulting dissonant cultural hybridizations (Daisy Freidel, B'nei Mississippi) suggest the Jew can become a southerner, but their comical incongruity underscores the alien origins of the southern Jew.

Such examples find humor in an imagined binary opposition between Jew and Dixie. Although the origins of this disjuncture can be explained in part by the historically sparse settlement of Jews in the South, of greater significance are the stereotypes that have historically governed depictions of the South and the Jews. Jewish humor below the Mason-Dixon Line almost always unfolds against the backdrop of what may be called the "mythic South," a set of popular images that geographically and temporally flattens Dixie, simplifying reality through distortion and exaggeration.<sup>17</sup> The dominant tropes embedded in the imagined South include: endemic racism, from the advent of slavery through Jim Crow to the informal exclusionary practices of the post-civil rights era; white supremacy embodied in the Ku Klux Klan; a rural landscape characterized by swamps, cotton and tobacco plantations, alligators, possums, and other critters; slow-witted rednecks and hillbillies who fear outsiders, distill moon-

shine, and speak with a drawl; the sanctification of the traditions of antebellum America and the Confederacy; aristocratic pretensions and gentility that mask the violence and xenophobia lurking below the surface; and perhaps, most significantly for our purposes, evangelical Christianity and the tendency to view everything through a biblical lens.<sup>18</sup>

It need not bear repeating that these stereotypes are a gross exaggeration of past and present. They collapse time, homogenize human diversity, and conflate regional variation, with swamps, deserts, mountains, plantations, and possums coexisting from Texas to Virginia. But representations of the South were not born in a vacuum, and they have not remained static over time. In the decades before World War II, for instance, the songwriters of New York's Tin Pan Alley—many of whom were Jewish—evoked a South that was “irenic, unthreatening, feminized, immutable, an organic society,” according to Whitfield. It was a way for immigrants and their progeny to imagine a land of nostalgia and harmony far removed from the Old World oppression of their past and the industrial urban squalor of their present.<sup>19</sup> Hollywood offered up a no less idyllic version of Dixie, with *Gone with the Wind* being its statement of epic proportions.<sup>20</sup> The hegemonic depiction of the South looked very different in the 1930s from what it would later become.

The reconstruction of the mythic South began during the civil rights era, when the battle over segregation gripped the nation and was brought into the American home through the proliferation of television.<sup>21</sup> To be sure, representations of Dixie's backwardness, racial violence, and swamps did not emerge out of thin air; what was new was their discursive primacy.<sup>22</sup> Derision—ranging from ridicule to condemnation—replaced the romantic images of earlier times, with Tom Lehrer's satirical song “I Wanna Go Back to Dixie” being an early example:

I wanna go back to Dixie  
 I wanna be a Dixie pixie  
 And eat corn-pone 'til it's comin' outa my ears  
 I wanna talk with southern gentlemen

And put my white sheet on again  
I ain't seen one good lynchin' in years  
The land of the boll weevil  
Where the laws are medieval  
Is callin' me to come and nevermore roam  
I wanna go back to the southland  
That "y'all" and "shet-ma-mouth" land  
Be it ever so decadent  
There's no place like home<sup>23</sup>

*Tom Lehrer, 1960.*

*(Photo Source: Wikipedia.org.)*

A "Media-Made Dixie," to quote Jack Temple Kirby, continued to feed the American imagination, but it evolved in conjunction with a changing America. Films such as *In The Heat of the Night* (1967) and *Deliverance* (1972), television series like *The Dukes of Hazzard* (on CBS, 1979–1985), and popular rock songs like



Neil Young's "Southern Man" (1970) ensured that rural backwardness, racism, violence, and rednecks would be Dixieland's visual and linguistic signposts.<sup>24</sup> As John Shelton Reed puts it: "The South has often served America as a whipping boy and bad example, a moral cesspool and a national disgrace, but it has not always been seen that way."<sup>25</sup> It was against the backdrop of post-World War II America's stereotyped South that Jewish humorists found a new and promising outlet.

And it was a promising outlet, in part, because prevalent Jewish stereotypes stood in sharp contrast to southern ones. Where the southerner is slow-witted and lazy, the Jew is an anxious intellectual. The southerner thrives outdoors in a rural setting, whereas the Jew is at home in the city, incapable of baiting a hook or loading a shotgun. The Jew symbolizes capitalism, trade, and the professions, and is by definition middle class. The South, conversely, remains an agrarian backwater, divided into an aristocratic elite and a destitute collective of hillbillies, rednecks, and black sharecroppers; the middle class and hence the Jew are missing from Dixie's topography. And if the South represents archaic rigid social stratification rooted in white gentile privilege, the Jew is modernity's parvenu, the ethnic upstart who has crossed the political, social, and cultural boundaries that had held him back for centuries. The Jew *is* modernity, and if modernity in the American context is New York, then the mythic South is its antithesis.<sup>26</sup>

*Jewish Humor: From the Shtetl to the Golden Land*

There is an important relationship between Jewish stereotypes, antisemitism, and Jewish humor; their genealogies are long and intertwined. But their gestation has nothing to do with the American South. Accordingly, to better understand how and why the mythic South came to serve as a milieu for the wit of Harry Golden, Kinky Friedman, Sacha Baron Cohen, and others, we need to briefly explore the origins and maturation of Jewish humor.

Jewish humor is unique in many respects, largely due to the context in which it developed. Most scholars agree that modern

Jewish humor emerged during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the Yiddish-speaking shtetls of Eastern Europe, during a time of intellectual ferment and cultural change within the Jewish community, when various ideologies arose and challenged Jewish tradition.<sup>27</sup> Movements such as the *Haskalah* transformed the Jewish perspective on their place within the surrounding world, inducing many to question their seemingly precarious existence amid a sea of hostile Christians. "Jewish humor," writes Sarah Blacher Cohen, was "born out of the vast discrepancy between what was to be the 'chosen people's' glorious destiny" of eternal election and their desperate reality of juridical segregation, destitution, and impeded upward mobility in Russia's Pale of Settlement.<sup>28</sup> Divine chosenness seemed to imply abandonment on earth, or more precisely special selection for punishment and suffering. It was as if the Jews were "the butt of a cruel joke," chosen by God for pogroms and poverty rather than the kingdom of the righteous.<sup>29</sup> As modernization engendered religious reform and secularization, attention was called to the absurdity of traditional Judaism's conception of exile.

What gives diasporic Jewish humor its distinctive flavor is the use of ironic self-deprecation to underscore this incongruity between Jewish misery in an antisemitic world and a lingering hope for a glorious future as God's chosen. This tension between the ideal of chosenness and the expected sufferings of a people in exile is at the root of kvetching. Whether satisfied, dissatisfied, jubilant, or angry the kvetch is inevitably the Jewish response. "Judaism is defined by exile," as Michael Wex puts it, and "if we stop kvetching, how will we know that life isn't supposed to be like this? If we don't keep kvetching we'll forget who we really are."<sup>30</sup> The diaspora Jew cannot express fulfillment, for to do so is to forget that he is in exile. His kvetch is his declaration of an unattainable entitlement, rooted in Jewish theology but denied by history with an ironic vengeance.<sup>31</sup>

In the secular context of modernity, Jewish comics routinely deploy this dialectic of entitlement and suffering to produce laughter. But the unabashed kvetchy self-denigration for which Jewish humor is famous masks its subversive undercurrent, a

sophisticated linguistic practice that also derives from traditional Judaism.<sup>32</sup> This is a legacy of the Talmud, which governed Jewish social and religious life for nearly fifteen centuries. The Talmud is structured around argument and debate, infamous for what appears to be endless discussions and meandering digressions. Jewish folklore and anecdotes are replete with what has been called “Talmudic logic” and “Talmudic hairsplitting,” a tendency toward over-analysis, flawed logic, and circular reasoning.<sup>33</sup> Yet the comical Jew often exploits Talmudic logic to achieve subversive ends, and this explains why Jewish tricksters and swindlers are depicted as masters of the art of linguistic manipulation.<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, the linguistic foundations of Judaic tradition can be a means of empowerment, a technique to escape the expected boundaries and suffering of exile. This legacy of pre-modern normative Judaism has found its way into twentieth-century Jewish humor.

Jewish humor’s distinctiveness is thus rooted in the amalgamation of three key ingredients: the sense of entitlement of a divinely chosen nation; the self-denigration of a hapless people abandoned to their suffering in exile; and the dexterous use of linguistic manipulation stemming from a religion whose texts and daily practices were built around ritualized argument. These theologically grounded attributes of pre-modern Judaism survived cultural modernization and became the blueprint of Jewish wit, a rhetorical strategy that is palpable even when explicit references to Judaism are omitted. Its evolution can be traced over the course of a century, from Sholem Aleichem through the Marx Brothers through Mel Brooks to *Seinfeld*. A brand of humor that first emerged in the eastern European shtetl came to maturity in twentieth-century America.

Although Jewish humor originated in eastern Europe it evolved on a somewhat different trajectory in America because of the latter’s distinct social, political, and racial context.<sup>35</sup> In Europe the Jews were marked as inveterate outsiders, Christ-killers, and commercial exploiters, stereotypes that medieval Christendom bequeathed to the modern world.<sup>36</sup> But in America the status of the Jews has been far more ambiguous. On the one hand, they

carry their old world legacy of religious heresy in an overwhelmingly white Christian country. On the other hand, they were viewed as the people of the Bible, and America has historically been defined as a nation of immigrants, a land of promise for outsiders to prosper in freedom. Despite periods of hardship and sporadic outbursts of antisemitism, the American Jew did not have to surmount ghetto walls and centuries of legal exclusion—the common lot of his European ancestors and his African American neighbors. The ascription of race has thus transpired differently in America from Europe, and this has had a significant impact on the reception, mobility, and identity of the Jews whose place on the “color line” has been far from evident.<sup>37</sup>

In an immigrant society historically based on white Christian privilege and black oppression, the “whiteness” of the Jews has been contingent on time and place. The Naturalization Act of 1790 granted citizenship to “free white persons,” an expansive category that included all the peoples of Europe regardless of their status in their former lands.<sup>38</sup> Although this seemed to place the Jews firmly on the white side of the color line (and legally it did), the question of racial identity was far from resolved. The very meaning of race was contested and changed over time; it “was at once biological and cultural, inherited and acquired,” according to David R. Roediger.<sup>39</sup> America’s rapidly changing demography further challenged any neat divisions between black and white due to the mass migration of Irish, Italians, Poles, Jews, and other southern and eastern Europeans between the 1840s and the 1920s.<sup>40</sup> These “other” (non-Nordic) Europeans were now a conspicuous presence, and, in the eyes of the growing nativist movement, they were seen as racially alien to America’s purported Anglo-Saxon character. They were “conditionally white” or “inbetweens [*sic*]” who needed to prove themselves worthy of belonging to what would later be called, authoritatively, the Caucasian race.<sup>41</sup> Before World War II, insists Eric Goldstein, “Jews were a racial conundrum, a group that could not be clearly pinned down according to prevailing categories.”<sup>42</sup>

The aftermath of World War II proved to be a turning point for Jewish identity in America. Nazi genocide delegitimized

European racial stratification and the non-Nordic peoples were now accepted as Caucasians.<sup>43</sup> "Jews became white folks," as Karen Brodtkin argues, and along with this status came greater social mobility and a withering away of antisemitic sentiment.<sup>44</sup> Since World War II the Jews have enjoyed greater acceptance than ever before, but the Holocaust has scarred Jewish consciousness, and a sense of global vulnerability persists.<sup>45</sup> Postwar Jewish identity in America reflects this duality: an unprecedented sense of confidence and belonging that is tinged by a collective memory of exile.

What this duality has meant, in practice, is that American Jewry remains sensitized to racism and other forms of unjustly ascribed difference and leery of the intentions of evangelical Christians. Some scholars have argued that this explains the continued commitment of many American Jews to liberalism, the welfare state, and civil rights, even after having secured their own safety and middle class comforts.<sup>46</sup> It also explains why Jewish humor has flourished in America. The postwar American Jew can express Jewishness in public in any form he or she wishes, and can do so from within American culture facilitated by the disproportionate role Jews have played and continue to play in entertainment.<sup>47</sup> But the enduring memory of alienation and suffering has tempted Jewish comics to use humor in order to subvert the dominant values of white Christian America. Paradoxically, the condition of exile that has governed Jewish humor since it first emerged in the shtetls of eastern Europe has been fortified by American Jewish success. A ticket of admission to whiteness has proved to be a license for ironic rebellion.

*The Jewish Kvetch Unleashed in Dixie*

Post-World War II Jewish humorists have differed significantly from the previous generation of entertainers who had muted their Jewish identities in public, engaging in what Irving Howe has called "de-Semitization" and what others have called "whitening."<sup>48</sup> Whether motivated by a desire to prove their Americanness, to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, or to avoid antisemitism, the upshot was the limited presence of identi-

fiable Jews in the popular culture of the 1930s particularly in film.<sup>49</sup> But the post-World War II assault against white Christian privilege—the civil rights movement, rock ‘n’ roll, the beat generation—coupled with an emerging ethos of ethnic pluralism meant that Jewish entertainers no longer felt constrained in how they exhibited their Jewishness in public. The previous era had produced the Marx Brothers and Jack Benny, caustic wits who sparingly alluded to their heritage, and Molly Goldberg (Gertrude Berg), who underscored her Jewish identity but exemplified a lighthearted American pluralistic sensibility. Although these and other Jewish entertainers continued to flourish after the war, during the golden age of television, they were now joined by Lenny Bruce, Jackie Mason, and Joan Rivers, the embodiment of a revolution in Jewish comedy. More than anyone else, Lenny Bruce condemned racism, poverty, religion, sexual morality, antisemitism, and all forms of hypocrisy while underscoring his own Jewish background.<sup>50</sup> His iconoclastic attack was linguistically driven and, in his own words, his speech was colored by “the jargon of the hipster, the argot of the underworld, and Yiddish,” implying that the use of the Jewish vernacular was not merely a tool to deliver his satire but an act of rebellion in and of itself: it polluted and subverted acceptable public discourse and symbolized the demolition of hereditary social privilege.<sup>51</sup> Lenny Bruce, Woody Allen, writers like Philip Roth, and the legions of Jewish humorists who have followed them have deployed their Jewishness as a marker of difference, and they have used it to profess their entitlement—and the entitlement of others—to a piece of America.

With America increasingly gripped by civil rights, the Jim Crow South was a logical target for comedians, particularly for those of Jewish descent whose cultural baggage included an inherited sense of persecution. Indeed the whiteness of the Jew in Dixie was rendered even more complex than elsewhere in America because of institutionalized biracialism, evangelical Christianity, and the low Jewish population density. Eli Evans, who grew up in North Carolina, aptly sums up the conflicting forces that positioned the Jew below the Mason-Dixon Line:

The Jews were, first of all, white, or at least men who could pass for white. But they would always be outsiders, for somewhere in the roots of populism and fundamentalism lurked a foreboding distrust of the foreigner, anyone who was not a Southerner and not Christian and therefore alien to the sameness all around.<sup>52</sup>

Such a sweeping statement is of course open to debate, and the southerner's acceptance of the Jew was undoubtedly determined by a multitude of other factors, including time, place, and the individuals in question. But it does reflect the conception of Dixie used by Jewish humorists, an encounter between stereotypes voiced through the idiom of Jewish wit and irony, whose postwar renaissance coincided with the national condemnation of a South mythologized for its repression and backwardness.

The ambiguous place of the Jew (and hence the extent of his whiteness) in the South surfaces in humor involving the Ku Klux Klan, a movement whose complex history is often simplified and then deployed to represent the totality of southern racism. Although the twentieth-century incarnations of the Klan considered the Jews to be an alien presence, they were not the primary target, and, instead of fear, humor seems to have been a common Jewish response.<sup>53</sup> That irony could be found amid the revulsion of white supremacy is revealed in the memoirs of Soupy Sales, a renowned entertainer who specialized in children's television shows. Born in 1926 in Franklinton, North Carolina, where his parents had settled after World War I to open a dry goods store, Sales describes the racism and segregation he witnessed as a child, including a lynching. According to Sales,

It was a time when the Ku Klux Klan was a dominant and deadly force in the South. Fortunately, they never bothered us—probably because my father was the one who sold them their sheets. They even invited him to join the Klan, but for obvious reasons he turned them down.<sup>54</sup>

One may assume that being Jewish kept his father, Irving Supman, out of the Klan, but Sales does not elaborate. Evans makes a similar observation in his history of southern Jewry:

Rarely were Jews harassed personally by the Klan, but the rough talk and the secrecy frightened the immigrants with fresh

memories of the pogroms in Russia. Some made the adjustment rather casually: "I used to sell'em the sheets," said an old man in Alabama, "and Sam the tailor made them into robes. Let me tell you we had a good business going."<sup>55</sup>

*Soupy Sales, Lunch With Soupy, 1960.*  
(Photo source: *Wikipedia.org.*)

The southern Jew could thus adapt to his new environment, finding humor in his unexpected entrepreneurial nook in a society that was ideologically divided into black and white.<sup>56</sup>

Even with the upsurge in antisemitism and temple bombings in the South during the civil rights era, humor and irony still had their place in imagined encounters between the Jew and the color line.<sup>57</sup> In a comedy routine from the mid-1960s, Woody Allen describes a near-death experience he had in the Deep South:

I was down South once, and I was invited to a costume party . . . and I figure, what the hell, it's Halloween, I'll go as a ghost. I take a sheet off the bed and I throw it over my head, and I go to the party. And you have to get the picture, I'm walking down the street in a deep southern town, I have a white sheet over my head, and a car pulls up and three guys with white sheets say "Get in." So I figure there's guys going to the party, as ghosts, and I get into the car, and I see we're not going to the party, and I tell them. And they say



"well, we have to go pick up the Grand Dragon." All of a sudden it hits me, down South, white sheets, the Grand Dragon, I put two and two together. I figure there's a guy going to the party dressed as a dragon. All of a sudden a big guy enters the car, and I'm sitting there between four Klansmen, four big-armed men, and the door's locked, and I'm petrified, I'm trying to pass desperately, y'know, I'm saying "y'all" and "grits," you know, I must have said "grits" fifty times. They ask me a question, and I say "oh, grits, grits." . . . And they drive me to an empty field, and I gave myself away, 'cause they asked for donations, and everybody there gave cash. When it came to me, I said "I pledge fifty dollars." They knew immediately. They took my hood off and threw a rope around my neck, and they decided to hang me. . . . And I spoke to them, and I was really eloquent: I said "Fellas, this country can't survive, unless we love one another regardless of race, creed, or color." And they were so moved by my words, not only did they cut me down and let me go, but that night I sold them two thousand dollars worth of Israel Bonds.<sup>58</sup>

Allen, who would become an emblematic New York Jew in the 1970s, offers an absurd narrative of how a hapless Jew can get entrapped in the racist world of the mythic South. Yet through his use of stereotype, Allen reveals a great deal about American Jewish identity. For one, the southerner and the Jew are peripheral to each other's consciousness, and even when they cross paths their mutual ignorance persists: Allen does not understand the implications of donning a white sheet in Dixie, while the Klansmen have no reason to take him for anything other than white until he slips up and betrays a classic Jewish stereotype — cheapness. He can no longer pass for white and must suffer the fate of one who has racially defiled nativist America. But through eloquence, chutzpah, and entrepreneurialism (which are also Jewish stereotypes), he works out a deal with his tormentors, one that is mutually beneficial to them and to Israel. The Jew can carve out a space for himself in the South, but a cloud of uncertainty always hovers over him in this unfamiliar environment.

In such examples the Jew's ambiguity is defined against the backdrop of Dixie's biracial ideology, even though its eternal victim, the African American, remains unmentioned. Yet the black man's implied presence is critical, for it underscores the situational contingency of the Jew's inclusion. Understanding what it means to be an outsider who can pass for an insider, Jewish humorists have used their wit to attack segregation and the persistence of southern racism in the post-World War II era. And nobody did so with greater frequency and diligence than Harry Golden.

Born in 1902 in a Galician shtetl in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Harry Golden, né Herschel Goldhirsch, came to New York with his family before his third birthday.<sup>59</sup> If his childhood and youth on the Lower East Side resembled that of the typical eastern European Jewish immigrant, his decision to settle in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1941 broke with convention. The following year he launched a tabloid, the *Carolina Israelite*, which, in the words of Whitfield, "was a remarkable solo act, a bold effort to liberate its southern white readers from the inertia of tradition."<sup>60</sup> Golden used his newspaper to attack segregation and all

forms of bigotry, including antisemitism, while simultaneously expressing his commitment to the Jewish people, the South, and universal human rights. He was atypical, insofar as his identity stemmed from three distinct vantage points: an inherited collective memory of life in the shtetl; a childhood spent immersed in the Jewish culture of New York; and transplantation as a northern intellectual living in the South just as the horrors of the Holocaust were becoming known and the Jim Crow era raised its violent specter.<sup>61</sup>

Golden's most famous piece is undoubtedly "The Vertical Negro Plan," published in 1956, after many southern states resisted implementing desegregation. Golden pointed out that segregation existed only when southerners sat down: the white man seemed to have no issue with standing up alongside the black man—in line at the grocery store and in the banks for instance. Golden proposed a "logical" solution: the removal of each and every seat from Dixie—from the buses, the schools, and the lunch counters. Racial integration would become the norm, since the "vertical Negro" already mixed freely with the vertical white man.<sup>62</sup>

Posterity has canonized "The Vertical Negro Plan" as Golden's quintessential polemic against segregation. But he made many other proposals.<sup>63</sup> His "White Baby Plan" called for the creation of rent-a-white-baby cooperatives (and then factories to manufacture white dolls) so black women could enter white-only movie theaters, from which they were barred unless accompanying a Caucasian child in their care.<sup>64</sup> His "Turban Plan," illustrated how racial boundaries could be transcended through clothing, citing the case of a "Negro reporter who . . . visited a half-dozen Southern cities wearing a turban" where he was taken for an exotic foreigner and thus "received in fancy hotels on a basis of fellowship with leading citizens."<sup>65</sup> Producing millions of turbans for black men and saris for black women would end segregation and revive the faltering southern textile industry.

If such proposals negated segregation through minor adjustments to everyday life, others demonstrated the utter impracticality of Jim Crow. In "The Negro Maid and Protocol,"

Golden revealed the complexities involved in driving with black domestics. Tradition dictated that a black maid must sit in the front seat, since "the back seat of the car is reserved for guests and friends of the family." But it was not so simple, Golden argued:

[It] doesn't look exactly right to be seated next to a Negro girl. The problem is solved by putting all the children in the car when the driver leaves in the morning. . . . But what if there are no children? A family cannot be expected to propagate simply to drive the domestic to work. And what if instead of one domestic, there are two? This is a real problem: three people can't sit in the front or that's real integration. And if the two domestics sit in the back, then . . . [the white] driver looks like a chauffeur.<sup>66</sup>

Segregation could also complicate a homogenously white milieu. In "We Are Color-Happy," Golden described how the child of a newly arrived family in Dunn, North Carolina, was chased out of school because "she looks like a Negro." The principal advised the parents to keep the child at home until the hysterical residents could be convinced she merely had a dark complexion. But the logic behind color-coding society, Golden insisted, necessitated a more comprehensive solution:

[The] school boards should make provision for separate classes for those children who have been tanned by the sun as well as special classes for those who are naturally dark. We will have the peaches-and-cream-complexion in one room, the ruddy in another, the milk-white in still a third and the swarthy in a fourth. This means more work for teachers as well as a whole new battery of color experts to determine the exact skin shade, and we will move children from room to room as the color changes with the seasons. Families might also have to be separated.<sup>67</sup>

And it was not just families that were affected, as Golden realized upon visiting a pet cemetery in Georgia where "a black dog owned by a white man was somewhat curiously buried in the white-dog section; a white-dog owned by a Negro was even more curiously buried in the colored-dog section."<sup>68</sup> Dixie's division by color was eternal and universal, transcending time, space, and species.

*Harry Golden in front of his home/office, Charlotte, North Carolina.  
The historical marker, from the early 1970s, commemorates his achievements.  
(Courtesy of Special Collections, Atkins Library, UNC–Charlotte.)*

In the tradition of the Talmudic sages who had scrutinized the minutia of Judaic law, dissecting every possible scenario and seeming contradiction, Harry Golden exhaustively deconstructed segregation by taking its fundamental premises to their illogical conclusions. But the rabbis of yesteryear had engaged in such mental gymnastics to prove the immutability and perfection of *Halacha*, whereas Golden employed the dialectics of his ancestors to expose the entrenched color line of Dixie as archaic and defective. Through a traditional Jewish practice, Golden debated, deflated, and linguistically decimated Jim Crow, a tenacious but crumbling adversary.

Although Golden did not mention his own Jewishness in these pieces he was willing to deploy Judaism (and by implication the ghost of antisemitism) as a rhetorical strategy to undermine bigotry. Golden offered his "Plan for White Citizens" to solve the dilemma of church integration, which was opposed by various white citizens' councils in the South. His proposal was straightforward: the obstinate defenders of segregation should simply convert to Judaism en masse. That racial boundaries would be preserved, Golden was certain:

There is little likelihood of any appreciable number of Negroes ever going to shul. Every day when the sun goes down you'll have yourself a nice compact community. You'll never have to worry about Negroes again, and you'll even have yourselves your own country clubs, swimming pools, rummage sales, and book reviews.<sup>69</sup>

The more ludicrous his proposals, the more insight they offer into the constellation of race relations in the Jim Crow South. By throwing the Jews into the mix, Golden problematized the conception of the South as a biracial society. Would a southern white Christian converting to Judaism cease to be white? Would a synagogue filled with "Semitic" Jews and gentile-converts but no African Americans be a white institution? While such implied questions seem absurd on the surface, they suggest that race and religion were complex categories that often intersected in problematic ways. The meaning of "black," "white," "Christian," and "Jew" (and the boundaries between them) were not immanent, but contingent on their social and political contexts.<sup>70</sup>

Golden's ironic subversion of social convention from the margins is a common tactic in Jewish humor, which is why Borat's encounter with the Magnolia Mansion Dining Society can be viewed through a Jewish lens. Borat is an alien element of uncertain origins testing the limits of southern gentility, and he is ultimately accepted despite his overwhelming lack of etiquette, despite bringing his feces to the dinner table. But he is accepted because he can pass for white, or rather, because he can "learn the ways of whiteness," as Karen Brodtkin describes the process by which Jews became Caucasians in the 1950s.<sup>71</sup> As *Borat* takes place

in post-9/11 America, the Other of uncertain origin is no longer the Jew, but the Muslim, or rather the peoples of the Middle East and Central Asia whose foreignness is usually seen as a matter of culture rather than biology.<sup>72</sup> Invited as a special guest to a rodeo in Salem, Virginia, Borat, clad in a cowboy outfit prominently bearing stars and stripes, gets some “sensible” advice on integration from Bobby Rowe, the general manager:

Of course every picture that we get back from the terrorists or anything else, the Muslims, they look like you, black hair and a black moustache. Shave that dadgum moustache off, so you’re not so conspicuous, so you look like maybe an Italian or something’. . . . This thing gets over with and when we win it and kick the butts over there and all of them son of a butts hangin’ from the gallows, by that time you will have proven yourself and they’ll understand and you’ll be accepted.<sup>73</sup>

As an eager white in the making, Borat is granted conditional acceptance, and he is invited to open the rodeo by singing the American national anthem, a way for him to prove his worthiness for inclusion. But as soon as he is welcomed Borat pushes the boundaries of tolerance too far. At the rodeo he proceeds to mock America’s sacred canon by singing his invented version of Kazakhstan’s national anthem to the tune of the *Star Spangled Banner*. He is booed offstage and removed from the premises. In Atlanta, Borat ironically crosses the color line after meeting some African Americans on Martin Luther King, Jr., Boulevard in a rough neighborhood. They have a pleasant encounter and his new friends teach him how to dress and talk like a black man. But trouble ensues when Borat walks up to the reception in an upscale hotel and in his new blackened persona asks for a room:

What’s up with it, Vanilla Face? Me and my homie Azamat just parked our slab outside. We’re looking for somewhere to post up our black asses for the night. So, uh, bang bang, skeet skeet, nigga. We just a couple of pimps, no hoes.<sup>74</sup>

Borat is told to leave immediately with security threatening to call the cops. He has defiled racial purity through language corruption. He can pass for white until he takes on the guise of the Other, the African American. Much like his removal from the

Magnolia Mansion Dining Society, his conditional whiteness is revoked after he challenges the color line of the mythic South. Through trickery and linguistic manipulation Borat inveigles his way in, only to flagrantly subvert the ineffaceable social conventions of Dixie.<sup>75</sup>

*Haunted by Jesus, Our Landsman*

The comical Jew's sardonic exploitation of the mythic South is multifaceted, and the legacy of racial ambiguity is only part of the picture. Dixie is stereotyped as the Bible Belt, a land of Christian fundamentalism, often juxtaposed to its antithesis, New York, a multiethnic land of theological pluralism and, far worse, atheism. Religion, as we have seen, often fed into racial discourse in America and the two are not easily disentangled. But the historically unique relationship between Judaism and Christianity shaped Jewish self-consciousness and the ascription of otherness onto the Jews by Christians, long before the birth of our modern conception of race. The Jews of medieval Europe were branded as deicides, the slayers of the Lord Jesus, an act for which every Jew, past, present, and future, was culpable. At moments of heightened tensions, the Jews were accused of Host desecration, ritual murder, sorcery, well poisoning, and a litany of other blasphemous transgressions.<sup>76</sup> But the emergence of Protestantism engendered a gradual shift in the attitude toward the Jews.<sup>77</sup> Certain denominations embraced philosemitism, a desire to understand the Jews as the people of the Old Testament, carriers of traditions and sacred knowledge tied to the origins of Christianity. By the mid-twentieth century some evangelical Christian groups particularly in the American South came to believe that the Jews will play an integral role in the Second Coming, that the Children of Israel's return to Zion will precipitate the end of time. Kindness rather than violence toward Jews will hasten the reign of Christ.<sup>78</sup>

But antisemitism and philosemitism are two sides of the same coin. Philosemitism does not imply the elimination of Christian antisemitism's *raison d'être*, for they are both rooted in an obsession with the Jew as scriptural object, uniquely tied to divine revelation. Both phenomena are instances of what Zygmunt Bau-



man calls "allosemitism . . . the practice of setting the Jews apart as people radically different from all others, needing separate concepts to describe and comprehend them and special treatment in all or most social intercourse."<sup>79</sup> The Jews are the original Israel who forfeited their chosenness upon their rejection of Jesus, but as the progenitors of their divinely elected successors (and the Jewish messiah their Christian successors deified), the Jews are by definition a singular theological artifact, whether condemned, admired, or subject to intense curiosity. The normalization of the Jew is impossible in a world governed by Christian theology.

In the mythic South, Christian theology reigns supreme. Harry Golden describes the philosemitism of the Bible Belt, imagining the warm welcome and awe that awaited the lone Jewish peddlers who ventured into rural Dixie of yesteryear:

In small towns and rural communities where probably no one had ever seen a Jew before, the peddler was the "living witness" of biblical truth, and many people were particularly anxious to have him as a lodger for the night. The peddler himself may not have been aware of it, but for these Fundamentalist Protestants he bore identity with Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the Second Coming.<sup>80</sup>

Scripture is eternal in Dixie, and it continued to guide its inhabitants well into the twentieth century, often with humorous results. With obvious delight Golden relates the following incident:

On the occasion of Israel's first anniversary in 1949, Governor Olin Johnston of South Carolina stood before a Jewish audience and quoted from Ezekiel how God gave the Holy Land to the Jews. Lowering his voice, the governor said, "Of course, now that Israel has become a state, I shall be sorry to see many of my friends leaving South Carolina."<sup>81</sup>

The Jew was welcome in the South, but the end of exile meant he could now go home, for the southern Protestant viewed the Jew through a biblical lens, as the biblical past was very much the present. Accordingly, the Jews in the South remained ambivalent about the Christians, suspecting that at best they do not understand the Jews and at worst their kindly overtures were

dictated by ulterior motives. As a youngster, Evans was warned to "be especially careful of the *goyim*. . . . Converting a Jew is a special blessing for them."<sup>82</sup> And indeed, Evans was uniquely chosen among the chosen people of Durham, North Carolina, which he discovered when his father was elected mayor in 1951:

Once he was elected, I became the target of a number of conversion efforts by several oddballs in town who firmly believed that I was the key to the Second Coming; converting the son of a prominent Jew, I suppose might pull out the linch pin of the Jewish community and cause all the Jews to tumble into the cauldron of Christianity.<sup>83</sup>

Similarly, Golden described how Christians tried to theologically entrap him through the universal language of music, when he was standing among a crowd on a street corner listening to a Salvation Army band playing "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." Golden explained how the conductor waved his baton directly at him, trying to goad him into singing a solo. "I had two alternatives," Golden wrote, "I could run away, but I am no coward; or I could sing along with him, which I did. . . . I had to sing several verses before I found the opportunity to make a graceful exit."<sup>84</sup> But Golden was an eminent public figure in Charlotte, and a rumor quickly circulated that the owner of the *Carolina Israelite* had "joined, repented, that now I was a Salvationist, and it spread from Richmond, Virginia, to Augusta, Georgia. I had reached 'Blessed Assurance.'"<sup>85</sup>

Driven by such stereotypes in an era of security, humor transforms past horror into modern irony. On *King of the Hill*, while still trying to come to terms with his mother's relationship, Hank inadvertently witnesses her having sexual intercourse with her Jewish boyfriend on the dining room table. Hank is so shocked by the incident that he instantaneously goes blind. While it may be devastating for any man to catch his mother in the act, there is an obvious subtext rooted in history, racism, and theology: at one point the camera zooms in on his mother's crucifix intermingling with her boyfriend's *chai*, worn as a pendant around his neck. In *King of the Hill's* Texas, copulation with the Jewish Other can lead to disability, a stereotype that echoes

medieval antisemitism, nineteenth-century European scientific racism, Nazi ideology, and, in the case of the South, anti-miscegenation laws segregating white from black.<sup>86</sup> In the post-World War II era, Jewish humorists have taken this pseudoscientific canard and have deployed it in their material.<sup>87</sup> They are able to do so because of their unprecedented acceptance, security, and cultural prominence. But they choose to do so because the memory of Christian antisemitism is an effective device for crafting subversive humor.

The Jewish subversion of Christianity can best be seen in the use and misuse of Christianity's most potent symbol, Jesus Christ, a cultural trope that has become a hallmark of America's most famous postwar Jewish comics, including Lenny Bruce, Joan Rivers, Larry David, and Sarah Silverman. In this area, Harry Golden was also a pioneer. In 1947 Golden was asked to review a book before the congregation of the Christ Episcopal Church of Charlotte. According to his memoirs, Golden stood up at the pulpit and stated:

Before I review this book, I have a secret to tell you folks. If Jesus put Charlotte on His itinerary for the Second Coming, I would be His contact man. This is not blasphemy. In the first place, I am a cousin. In the second place, He would need an interpreter, for He probably doesn't speak this "you-all" business. In the third place, He would want a trained reporter. He would want to know what the hell are Episcopalians.<sup>88</sup>

Jewish intellectuals had in fact been reclaiming Jesus as one of their own since the eighteenth-century *Haskalah*. Forward-looking Jewish theologians, writers, and artists had been invoking Jesus as the prototypical progressive rabbi, as a Jewish revolutionary fighting Roman tyranny, and as a symbol of Jewish suffering.<sup>89</sup> But deploying Jesus in a frivolous manner before a Christian audience was something new. And it would occur with greater frequency from the 1960s onwards and with much greater irreverence (or depending on one's perspective, blasphemy), most notoriously articulated by Lenny Bruce, who declared: "Not only did we kill him, but we're gonna kill him again when he comes back."<sup>90</sup> Golden's conjuring of Jesus as his bewildered cousin is a far cry from Bruce's celebratory mocking of deicide. Nevertheless,

Golden was engaging in an act of appropriation that trivialized Christian theology and ridiculed southern discourse, by claiming his—the Jew’s—right of ownership to the Christian messiah.<sup>91</sup> Through Jesus, the Jewish comic declares his entitlement for inclusion in a world that denied him entry; his chosenness had been unjustly revoked.

One southern Jewish entertainer who has relished invoking Jesus under a cloud of blasphemy is Kinky Friedman, a satirical country music performer, prolific mystery writer, and failed gubernatorial candidate from Texas.<sup>92</sup> Brazen and politically incorrect at every opportunity, Friedman (or “The Kinkster” as he calls himself) boasts how in 1973, his band Kinky Friedman and the Texas Jewboys “received death threats in Nacogdoches, got bomb threats in New York, and required a police escort to escape radical feminists at the University of Buffalo.”<sup>93</sup> Much of Friedman’s brash cowboy demeanor resonates with the American frontier and the Old West more than Dixie. But his focus on evangelical Christianity and racial segregation places him squarely in the mythic south. No topic is off limits in his music, and much like Lenny Bruce, Friedman smashes the boundaries of respectability through the linguistic pollution of sacred space, with Jesus, Christian fundamentalism, and Jewish identity taking center stage.

In the song “Men’s Room in L.A.,” for instance, Friedman runs into trouble in a public bathroom when he discovers there is no toilet paper, only a discarded picture of Jesus. Facing a dilemma of biblical proportions, Friedman engages in some soul searching:

I said, “Lord, what would you do,  
If you were me and I was you,  
Take a chance, save your pants or your soul?”<sup>94</sup>

Sure enough, Jesus Christ (with Ringo Starr supplying the vocals) responds to Kinky’s supplication, with some sound advice and an entreaty of his own:

Kinky, it’s Jesus here, you know that I ain’t no square.  
Well, I’ve got these pictures of me,  
I mean statues, you know they’re everywhere.

Well, I may seem I come from Liverpool,  
 And then on the other hand I may come from France,  
 But if you don't get off that toilet, well I'm just gonna have to  
 dance.<sup>95</sup>

Although it is tempting to dismiss this song as little more than toilet humor with gratuitously vulgar blasphemy, "Men's Room in L.A." actually contains a level of sophistication that must be understood through the prism of Jewish collective memory and Christian antisemitism. During the middle ages Jews were often charged with (and punished for) defiling sacred Christian objects, such as desecrating the Eucharist and urinating on crucifixes, allegedly for the diabolical purpose of reenacting the execution of Jesus.<sup>96</sup> Friedman conjures up the memory of his ancestors' persecution and turns it on its head, by reframing ostensible blasphemy as mere pragmatism. Jesus's response suggests that he, too, is somewhat puzzled by his deification and the profusion of Christian iconography bearing his likeness, when in reality he shares the same mundane concerns as a Texas Jew stuck in a bathroom without toilet paper.

Kinky Friedman's appropriation of Jesus is quite explicit in many of his writings and it is often accomplished with a Jewish twist. In a 2005 memoir he contends that his escapades merely reflect a yearning to follow in the deified Jew's footsteps:

Like Jesus, I was either cursed or blessed by being born a Jew. Impressed by Jesus at an early age, I made it a point never to get married in my adult life, never to have a home, and never to have a job. Instead, I spent much of the time traveling about the countryside with a long-haired band of men, irritating many people. Also, like Jesus, I was a big believer in resurrection. I've had to resurrect my career on at least three or four occasions.<sup>97</sup>

In avowing that he "was born in a manger, died in the saddle, and came back as a horny toad," Kinky is putting forth his own gospel, rewriting scripture from the perspective of a messianic Texan outlaw, but one who sees himself as "a Judeo-Christian with Jesus and Moses in my heart—two good Jewish boys who got in trouble with the government."<sup>98</sup>

*Kinky Friedman at Southern Methodist University, Dallas,  
October 5, 2006.*

*(Photo source: Wikipedia.org.)*

But Jewish humor's blasphemous appropriation of Jesus implies neither his rejection nor the negation of Christianity. To be sure, it is an act of theological exploitation that empowers the Jew in public at the expense of Christian orthodoxy. It allows him to triumph over the inherited memory of Judaic suffering through the contortion of stereotype and the desecration of the sacred. But it is also a recognition that Jews and Christians are eternally conjoined through a shared history. The Jew is inscribing himself into the South's social landscape on his own terms; in the name of the downtrodden he is demanding inclusion in Dixie.

Humor allows the Jew and hence Jewish culture to become core elements in the mythic South even if their presence seems incongruous. With surreal hyperbole, Harry Golden describes the establishment and immense popularity of Charlotte's lone Jewish delicatessen:

The restaurant is below a main cross-town artery called Church Street, and so it happened that this Church Street began to look like the Red Sea with wave after wave of Israelites crossing over every day for stuffed cabbage with raisin sauce, pumpernickel bread, chicken-in-the-pot, and boiled beef flanken. . . . And so at noon each day as the church chimes in this greatest of all citadels of American Protestantism peel out, "We're Marching to Zion, Beautiful Zion . . ." the Jews (and many Gentiles) keep pouring across Church Street to Izzy and Jack who are already slicing the hot pastrami.<sup>99</sup>

Jewish cuisine is the key to a cross-cultural encounter in a land where religion otherwise segregates, a point Golden underscores through his use of biblical imagery to describe the pursuit of stuffed cabbage and deli meat.

The insertion of the Jew into Dixie does not obliterate Christianity, just the hegemony of its inequitable exclusionary practices and its historic conceptualization of the Jew through scripture and folklore. And exclusion can ironically work to the detriment of the southern Christian, as suggested by the denouement of *King of the Hill*. Hank is ultimately cured of his blindness when he attends a Christian revivalist meeting, but it is his mother's Jewish boyfriend who brings him, not his family or friends. Jesus can heal but the Jew plays a fundamental role as an intermediary; he is vital to this process, and, by extension, his presence in the South is necessary.

To a greater extent than anyone else, Kinky Friedman has deployed humor to wrestle with the place of the Jew in the mythic South. His music of the 1970s and his autobiographical writings of the twenty-first century are unified across time through an irreverence that disguises his musings over serious issues: politics, racism and segregation, Christian fundamentalism, and Jewish alienation. He stakes his claim on Texas as a Jew in the very first song of his first album, *Sold American*, released in 1973, with a track titled, "We Reserve the Right to Refuse Service to You." In the following year he released what is undoubtedly his most notorious song, "They Ain't Makin' Jews Like Jesus Anymore." Both songs are profound statements about the southern Jew's identity and his ambiguous place below the Mason-Dixon Line.<sup>100</sup>

The track title “We Reserve the Right to Refuse Service to You” triggers images of Jim Crow segregation, but the man denied admission in the song is in fact Jewish:

While traveling through the Lone Star State,  
 I lost my lunch before I ate.  
 It happened in a pull-ahead café, Yahoo!  
 I felt my bones begin to crunch,  
 I saw my name on the businessman’s lunch,  
 And the neck who owned the place stepped up to say:  
 “Hey buddy, are you blind?  
 Say, partner, can’t you read the sign?  
 We reserve the right to refuse service to you,  
 Take your business back to Walgreens,  
 Have you tried your local zoo?  
 You smell just like a communist,  
 You come on through just like a Jew,  
 We reserve the right to refuse service to you.”

Having been ejected from what is supposed to be (in 1973 at least) a racially, religiously, and politically neutral space, the narrator heads over to the local temple to be among his people. But his reception is no less hostile:

Well, I walked on in to my House of God,  
 Congregation on the nod,  
 Just chosen folks are doing their weekly thing.  
 Hear, O Israel, yes indeed,  
 My book was backwards, couldn’t read,  
 But I got a good rise when I heard that Rabbi sing,  
*“Boruch atoh Adonoi,*  
 What the hell you doin’ back there boy?  
 We reserve the right to refuse services to you,  
 Your friends are all on welfare,  
 You call yourself a Jew?”



Much like his exclusion from the surrounding nativist society, the narrator is banished from Judaism because he fails to meet the community's expectations of propriety and piety, despite his yearning for inclusion in both these worlds. Not even death brings him comfort:

Well it's just my luck that God's a Texan,  
 One big sonbitchin Anglo-Saxon,  
 Some crazy kind of tall Norwegian bore.

...

"We reserve the right to refuse service to you,  
 Take your business back to Walgreens,  
 Have you tried your local zoo?  
 Our quota's filled for this year,  
 On singing Texas Jews,  
 We reserve the right to refuse service to you."

The narrator will presumably spend eternity in limbo for having the audacity (or given the context, the chutzpah) to carve out his own hybrid, and thus renegade, identity as Texan and Jew.

"We Reserve the Right to Refuse Service to You" is a sophisticated commentary on the ambiguous place of the Jew in the mythic South. Much as American Jews in an earlier era were often typecast as outsiders of uncertain origins, the narrator's whiteness is put under the microscope. His exclusion is not a product of skin color, but of cultural attributes ("You come on through just like a Jew"), seditious politics ("You smell just like a communist"), and, in the case of the hereafter, a quota system based on behavior ("singing Texas Jews"). What this implies is a system of conditional whiteness; inclusion is something to be earned. But the song's title is a deliberate reference to Jim Crow and the black man's racial (i.e. biological) exclusion. Friedman is thus problematizing the Jew's place on the color line through the unmentioned African American.

The song goes even further in its acerbic social commentary with its description of Jewish practices in the South. On the one hand, the narrator's account of the synagogue service implies that

Judaism has struck deep roots and has flourished in a land of religious tolerance. The rabbi's seamless transition from Judaic prayer to Texan street lingo ("*Boruch atoh Adonoi*, What the hell you doin' back there boy?") indicates that the Jew can become a southerner if he meets the demands of a conformist society. But Kinky Friedman and his self-described itinerant "long-haired band of men" have failed to live up to the expectations of society's gatekeepers, Jewish or otherwise.

Friedman's subsequent song, "They Ain't Makin' Jews Like Jesus Anymore," ends on a much happier note. On the surface it fits the mold of outlaw country music, replete with foul language, drinking, and a bar brawl. But it is the Jew who emerges triumphant after coming to blows with a racist, antisemitic redneck. Looking to pick a fight, the redneck turns to the Jew and declares:

They oughta send you back to Russia, boy, or New York City  
one,  
You just want to doodle a Christian girl and you killed God's on-  
ly son.

Despite its brevity, this particular stanza is packed with a litany of anti-Jewish stereotypes: deicide, sexual defilement, and contempt for New York as an un-American enclave of eastern European refuse.

The shadow of Jim Crow also hangs over the racially ambiguous Jew, as revealed by the redneck's subsequent diatribe:

You know, you don't look Jewish . . . near as I could figger,  
I had you lamped for a slightly anemic, well-dressed country  
nigger.

But this is the New South in the New World, where the ghosts of Jewish persecution are merely that—ghosts; a new era has dawned and the disparaged Jew will fight back:

Well, I hits him with everything I had right square between the  
eyes.

I says, "I'm gonna gitcha, you son of a bitch ya, for spoutin' that  
pack of lies."

. . .

You could hear that honky holler as he hit that hardwood floor,  
 Lord, they sho' ain't makin' Jews like Jesus anymore!

Having proved himself, the tough Jew leisurely strolls out of the bar, immersed in the cheers of the adulating patrons.

At its most basic "They Ain't Makin' Jews Like Jesus Anymore" demolishes the Jewish stereotype of cowardice and passivity, commonly found in antisemitic literature and in Jewish writings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>101</sup> The Jew can transform himself into what on the surface seems to be his antithesis, a rough-and-tumble Texan cowboy. But the song, as its title suggests, also appropriates Jesus for the Jews, only to turn around and disavow him for his obsolescence:

No, they ain't makin' Jews like Jesus anymore,  
 We don't turn the other cheek the way we done before.

The Christian messiah is a Jew and a flawed one at that. Jesus is branded as the essence of Jewish timidity, the progenitor of a martyrdom extending through the Crusades, the Russian pogroms, and the Holocaust. In claiming the right to use Jesus as he sees fit, Kinky Friedman empowers the Jew; he undermines the racism of the mythic South and negates Jewish stereotype, but he does so by exploiting the language and symbols of his erstwhile Christian oppressors.

*Rewriting Dixie through Jewish Chutzpah and Humor*

Jewish humor's encounter with Dixie is at once powerful and alluring because it is multi-faceted and unified by a common set of cultural tropes drawn from stereotype, representation, collective memory, and history. To be sure, the Jewish humorists examined here have not been driven by the same agenda: Mickey Katz wanted to entertain Jewish audiences through his Yiddish-inflected Borscht Belt shtick; Harry Golden's writings reveal a deep and serious commitment to civil rights; Kinky Friedman seeks to shock, amuse, and unmask hypocrisy through blasphemy and scandalous language; Sacha Baron Cohen seeks to shock and amuse while keeping his agenda a mystery. What they share in common is their use of Jewishness as a discursive strategy that

includes access to a rich arsenal of content and technique, which they have deployed against a southern backdrop to produce laughter.

For Friedman, Golden, Katz, Cohen, and others, Jewish humor is an instrument through which they can claim America as their own. They use humor to express their entitlement to belong by paradoxically drawing attention to the collective memory of Jewish persecution and alienation as the abandoned chosen people. They do so by manipulating language, by twisting logic, by co-opting the discourse of Dixie and then subverting it through the injection of Jewishness. As a land haunted by Jesus and the ghost of segregation, the mythic south has served as an ideal backdrop for the production of Jewish humor. It is a window into the way the Jews have negotiated their identity in the modern world, after centuries of marking themselves, and being marked by others, as a people in exile.

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## NOTES

Previous versions of this article were presented by the author at the 2011 Southern Jewish Historical Society Conference in Columbia, SC (October 2011); the Tenth Annual University of North Carolina Wilmington College Day (November 2011); and at the University Club of Montreal, Canada (February 2012).

<sup>1</sup> *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, directed by Larry Charles (2006).

<sup>2</sup> Between 1920 and 1960 the Jews were the largest ethno-religious community in New York, and by the end of this period they numbered 2.1 million (27 percent of the total population). See Eli Lederhendler, "New York City, The Jews, and 'The Urban Experience,'" in *People of the City: Jews and the Urban Challenge*, ed. Ezra Mendelsohn (New York, 1999), 54–55. On eastern European Jews in New York, see Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (New York, 1976); Deborah Dash Moore, *At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews* (New York, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> On Hollywood, see Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York, 1988); Patricia Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema* (Bloomington, 1984). On

the Catskills, see Lawrence J. Epstein, *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America* (New York, 2001), chap. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Eliza R. L. McGraw, *Two Covenants: Representations of Southern Jewishness* (Baton Rouge, 2005), 166.

<sup>5</sup> Marcie Cohen Ferris and Mark I. Greenberg, "Introduction: Jewish Roots in Southern Soil," in *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil: A New History*, ed. Marcie Cohen Ferris and Mark I. Greenberg (Waltham, MA, 2006), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Mark K. Bauman, "Introduction: An Anthology of Southern Jewish History," in *Dixie Diaspora: An Anthology of Southern Jewish History*, ed. Mark K. Bauman (Tuscaloosa, 2006), 1. Bryan Edward Stone argues that historians of American Jewry have traditionally examined the American Jewish experience as the experience of New York Jews. See Bryan Edward Stone, *The Chosen Folks: Jews on the Frontiers of Texas* (Austin, TX, 2010), 8.

<sup>7</sup> See Gary P. Zola, "Why Study Southern Jewish History?" *Southern Jewish History* 1 (1998): 1–21.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen J. Whitfield, "The Braided Identity of Southern Jewry," in *Dixie Diaspora*, ed. Bauman, 427.

<sup>9</sup> Ferris and Greenberg, "Introduction," 17. Ferris and Greenberg draw their data from the 2002 edition of the *American Jewish Year Book*.

<sup>10</sup> Texas is a frontier state that can be understood as southern, western, or southwestern, depending on the context. See Stone, *Chosen Folks*, 15 and chap. 4. Indeed, many of Texas's stereotypical attributes—cowboys, the open range, audacity—suggest the Old West rather than the South. But from the perspective of Jewish humor, as will become clear in this essay, representations of Texas sufficiently overlap with those of Dixie to warrant its inclusion. This is particularly true with Kinky Friedman who portrays himself as a Texan Jew surrounded by Christian fundamentalism and the ghost of Jim Crow.

<sup>11</sup> *King of the Hill*, "The Unbearable Blindness of Laying," episode no. 23, December 21, 1997, Fox Network. Carl Reiner, who has made a pivotal contribution to the development of Jewish humor in America, provides Gary Kasner's voice.

<sup>12</sup> "Jewish Texans Commemorate Holocaust . . . Texas-Style!," *The Onion* (February 12, 1997), accessed December 1, 2011, <http://www.theonion.com/articles/jewish-texans-commemorate-holocaust-texasstyle,1663/>. [Editor's note: SJH was unable to secure the rights to reproduce the photo that accompanied the article.] Stone points out that having a barbecue to commemorate the Holocaust is the supreme example of poor taste, as it evokes the ovens and crematoria of the Nazi extermination camps. Stone, *Chosen Folks*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> "Jewish Texans Commemorate Holocaust . . . Texas-Style!"

<sup>14</sup> On Mickey Katz's music, see his autobiography, *Papa, Play for Me: The Hilarious, Heartwarming Autobiography of Comedian and Bandleader Mickey Katz*, as told to Hannibal Coons, with an Introduction by Joel Grey (New York, 1977). See also Josh Kun, "The Yiddish Are Coming: Mickey Katz, Antic-Semitism [sic], and the Sound of Jewish Difference," *American Jewish History* 87 (December 1999): 343–374; Donald Weber, "Taking Jewish American Popular Culture Seriously: The Yinglish Worlds of Gertrude Berg, Milton

Berle, and Mickey Katz," *Jewish Social Studies* 5 (Fall 1998–Winter 1999): 124–153. The growth of Jewish culture and the dissipation of antisemitism in post-World War II America is discussed below.

<sup>15</sup> Most of Katz's recordings are collected and available on the Internet through the Florida Atlanta University Judaica Sound Archive, accessed August 1, 2012, <http://faujsa.fau.edu>, and the Dartmouth Jewish Sound Archive, accessed December 1, 2011, <http://djsa.dartmouth.edu/>.

<sup>16</sup> On Duvid Crockett, see Katz, *Papa, Play for Me*, 131; Kun, "The Yiddish Are Coming," 371–372.

<sup>17</sup> Scholars from many disciplines have produced a large body of literature on representations of the South. They have demonstrated that the dominant images of Dixie have varied across time and media, including fiction, film, television, and music, although certain underlying themes have persisted. See, for instance, Jack Temple Kirby, *Media-Made Dixie* (Baton Rouge, 1978); Karl G. Heider, ed., *Images of the South: Constructing a Regional Culture on Film and Video* (Athens, GA, 1993); Edward D. C. Campbell, Jr., *The Celluloid South* (Knoxville, TN, 1981); Karen L. Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill, 2011); Allison Graham, *Framing the South: Hollywood, Television, and Race during the Civil Rights Struggle* (Baltimore, 2001); John Shelton Reed, *Minding the South* (Columbia, SC, 2003); Marsha G. McGee, "Prime Time Dixie: Television's View of a 'Simple' South," *Journal of American Culture* 6 (Fall 1983): 100–109.

<sup>18</sup> See especially Ethelyn G. Orso, "Paradise Lost: Louisiana as a Microcosm of the South in Fictional and Documentary Films," in *Images of the South*, ed. Heider, 17–22; Kirby, *Media-Made Dixie*, chap. 5; Graham, *Framing the South*; McGee, "Prime Time Dixie."

<sup>19</sup> Stephen J. Whitfield, "Is it True What They Sing about Dixie," *Southern Cultures* 8 (Summer 2002), 15. See also Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie*, chap. 1; Kenneth Aaron Kanter, *The Jews of Tin Pan Alley* (New York, 1982).

<sup>20</sup> See especially Campbell, *Celluloid South*, chaps. 3–4.

<sup>21</sup> Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie*, 164–166; Whitfield, "Is it True What They Sing about Dixie," 23–26.

<sup>22</sup> As Jack Temple Kirby points out, "In the second half of the nineteenth century the pervasive image of the American South was negative. . . . The South was brutal and backward, un-American." See Kirby, *Media-Made Dixie*, 1. Perhaps the most notoriously disdainful portrayal of the South is H. L. Mencken's, "The Sahara of the Bozart," originally published in 1917. Mencken describes the South as a formerly great civilization that has descended into "Baptist and Methodist barbarism . . . [because] the vast hemorrhage of the Civil War half exterminated and wholly paralyzed the old aristocracy, and so left the land to the harsh mercies of the poor white trash, now its masters." H. L. Mencken, "The Sahara of the Bozart," in *The American Scene: A Reader*, ed. Huntington Cairns (New York, 1965), 158, 161.

<sup>23</sup> Tom Lehrer performs "I Wanna Go Back to Dixie" on Lehrer's first album, *Songs by Tom Lehrer* recorded January 22, 1953, Lehrer Records TLP-1, 33 $\frac{1}{3}$  rpm. Born into and

raised in a New York Jewish family, Lehrer should be regarded as an important link in the genealogy of Jewish performers of satirical music, which includes Mickey Katz, Allan Sherman, and Kinky Friedman. Lehrer's music is considerably more subversive than that of his contemporaries, Katz and Sherman, with irreverent songs like "The Vatican Rag" placing him in the blasphemous company of Lenny Bruce and, more recently, Sarah Silverman. However there is nothing explicitly Jewish in either his melodies or his lyrics. See Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (New York, 2003), 123–150; Tom Lehrer, *Too Many Songs by Tom Lehrer with Not Enough Drawings by Ronald Searle* (New York, 1981); Tom Lehrer, *Tomfoolery: The Words and Music of Tom Lehrer* (New York, 1986).

<sup>24</sup> "Southern Man" by Neil Young, appeared on Neil Young's album *After the Gold Rush*, released August 1970, Reprise Records RS 6383, 33 $\frac{1}{3}$  rpm.

<sup>25</sup> Reed, *Minding the South*, 197.

<sup>26</sup> The comedian Lenny Bruce famously quipped, "If you live in New York or any other big city, you are Jewish. It doesn't matter even if you're Catholic; if you live in New York, you're Jewish." Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People: An Autobiography by Lenny Bruce* (New York, 1992), 5. John Shelton Reed maintains that southerners have "taken a dim view of New York for serving as the great reception center and repository for foreign immigration. . . . And what many of us really dislike about Northerners, and thus loathe in spades about New Yorkers, is their view of Southerners as yokels—if not as *Deliverance*-style Neanderthals." See Reed, *Minding the South*, 245. Other scholars insist that southerners have held a more ambiguous attitude toward New York. See, for instance, Leonard Rogoff, "Harry Golden, New Yorker: I ♥ NC," *Southern Jewish History* 11 (2008): 41–64. Rogoff describes very ambiguous reactions to New York. On the relationship between Jews and modernity, see Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton, 2004).

<sup>27</sup> Emanuel S. Goldsmith, "Sholom Aleichem's Humor of Affirmation and Survival," in *Semites and Stereotypes: Characteristics of Jewish Humor*, ed. Avner Ziv and Anat Zajdman (Westport, CT, 1993), 13–14; Avner Ziv, "Psycho-Social Aspects of Jewish Humor in Israel and in the Diaspora," in *Jewish Humor*, ed. Avner Ziv (Tel Aviv, 1986), 40–55; Sarah Blacher Cohen, "Introduction: The Varieties of Jewish Humor," in *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor*, ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen (Bloomington, IN, 1987), 1–15. See also Jarrod Tanny, *City of Rogues and Schnorrers: Russia's Jews and the Myth of Old Odessa* (Bloomington, IN, 2011), 13–17.

<sup>28</sup> Cohen, "Introduction," 1.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Michael Wex, *Born to Kvetch: Yiddish Language and Culture in all its Moods* (New York, 2005), 6.

<sup>31</sup> Given that Jewish humor emerged in the diaspora and is linked to the concept of exile, humor in Israel—the Jewish state built upon the ideology of "the negation of the diaspora"—has evolved on a different trajectory. See Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say about the Jews* (New York, 1992), chap. 8.

<sup>32</sup> Self-deprecation is considered to be one of the defining elements of Jewish humor. Freud was probably the first to have pointed this out, in 1905, writing that "I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character" as the Jews. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relations to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York, 1960), 133.

<sup>33</sup> On Jewish logic and Talmudic hairsplitting, see Telushkin, *Jewish Humor*, chap. 2; Theodor Reik, *Jewish Wit* (New York, 1962), 115–119; Wex, *Born to Kvetch*, 12–13; Arthur Asa Berger, *The Genius of the Jewish Joke* (Northdale, NJ, 1997), 72; Simcha Weinstein, *Shtick Shift: Jewish Humor in the 21st Century* (Fort Lee, NJ, 2008), 88–89.

<sup>34</sup> The exemplary tricksters in traditional Yiddish folklore are the *shadchen* and the *schnorrer*. Both characters use linguistic manipulation and seemingly flawed logic to ensnare their hapless victims into elaborate schemes. See Nathan Ausubel, ed., *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore: Stories, Traditions, Legends, Humor, Wisdom and Folk Songs of the Jewish People* (New York, 1948), 267–286, 413–420; Israel Zangwill, *The King of the Schnorrers* (Hamden, CT, 1953). On the *schnorrer* in Soviet Jewish culture, see Tanny, *City of Rogues and Schnorrers*, chap. 3. The most famous trickster in Jewish folklore is Hershele Ostropolyer, a real eighteenth-century Jew who lived in Ukraine. See Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, 304–319; M. Stern, *Hershele Ostropoler un Motke Khab"d: zeyere anekdoten, vitsen, stsenes un shtukes nay-bearbeytet* [translation: "Hershele Ostropolyer and Motke Khabad: Their Jokes, Tricks, Vignettes and Sketches, newly revised," trans. David S. Braun.] (New York, 1900).

<sup>35</sup> There are countless studies on Jewish humor, both academic and popular, as well as hundreds of collections of Jewish jokes. Most of these works devote the bulk of their attention to Jewish humor in America. By far the most cited is William Novak and Moshe Waldoks, *The Big Book of Jewish Humor* (New York, 1981). For a detailed overview of Jewish comics in twentieth-century America, see Epstein, *Haunted Smile*. Stephen J. Whitfield has published two insightful essays that open up new avenues for research: "The Distinctiveness of American Jewish Humor," *Modern Judaism* 6 (October 1986): 245–260; and "Towards an Appreciation of American Jewish Humor," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 4 (March 2005): 33–48. But a definitive study on Jewish humor in America that is at once historical, analytical, and comprehensive has yet to be written.

<sup>36</sup> See, for instance, Robert Chazan, *Medieval Stereotypes and Modern Antisemitism* (Berkeley, CA, 1997); Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* (Cleveland, 1961); Bernard Glassman, *Anti-Semitic Stereotypes Without Jews: Images of the Jews in England, 1290–1700* (Detroit, 1975); R. Po-Chia Hsia, "The Usurious Jew: Economic Structure and Religious Representations in an Anti-Semitic Discourse," in *In and Out of the Ghetto: Jewish-Gentile Relations in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany*, ed. R. Po-Chia Hsia and Hartmut Lehmann (Cambridge, UK, 1995).

<sup>37</sup> There is a rich historiography on the "whiteness" of non-Anglo-Saxon European immigrants in America—the Irish, the Jews, the Poles, the Italians, and others. On the Jews specifically, see Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks: And What That Says about Race*



in America (New Brunswick, NJ, 1998); Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley, CA, 1996); Leonard Rogoff, "Is the Jew White? The Racial Place of the Southern Jew," in *Dixie Diaspora*, ed. Bauman, 390–426; Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, 2006). On the whiteness of Jewish immigrants in the context of other racially ambiguous immigrants, see Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA, 1998); David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York, 2005). For a critique of the whiteness historiography as it pertains to Jews, see Andrew R. Heinze, "Is It 'Cos I's Black?" *Jews and the Whiteness Problem* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2007); Seth Forman, *Blacks in the Jewish Mind* (New York, 1998), 3–17.

<sup>38</sup> Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 40.

<sup>39</sup> Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, 35.

<sup>40</sup> From the 1880s until the imposition of immigration quotas in the early 1920s, approximately twenty-three million Europeans, mostly from the south and east of the continent, came to the United States. Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*, 27.

<sup>41</sup> Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, 12, 37. According to Matthew Frye Jacobson, it was only in the mid-twentieth century that the term "Caucasian" became the authoritative inclusive category used to designate the racially ambiguous white peoples of Europe, such as the Celts, Jews, and Italians. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 94.

<sup>42</sup> Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 1.

<sup>43</sup> Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, 136; Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 95–96; Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*, 141–142; Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*, 265; Leonard Dinnerstein, "Anti-Semitism Exposed and Attacked, 1945–1950," *American Jewish History* 71 (September 1981): 139–149.

<sup>45</sup> Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*, 140. According to one study conducted among Jews in the 1990s, 75 percent of respondents believed that antisemitism remained a significant problem in the United States. Stephen J. Whitfield, *In Search of American Jewish Culture* (Hanover, NH, 1999), 234. Such perceptions belie the incontestable evidence of Jewish acceptance, inclusion, and success in America. But the Jewish sense of vulnerability is a product of memory and the global context of Jewish identity, with the Holocaust, the persecution of Soviet Jewry, and vociferous hostility toward Israel shaping American Jewish consciousness. On the Holocaust, see Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American life* (New York, 1999); Hasia R. Diner, *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945–1962* (New York, 2009). Gary Tobin's *Jewish Perceptions of Antisemitism* (New York, 1988) is a detailed sociological analysis of how and why American Jews continued to be wary of antisemitism in the late twentieth century. Completed in the 1980s, his study is useful for the historian because it captures a snapshot of beliefs before the liberation of Soviet Jewry, the burgeoning of post-Intifada anti-Zionism, and the national consecration of Holocaust memory in the 1990s.

<sup>46</sup> Forman, *Blacks*, 9–10, 30–33; Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century* (Princeton, 2006), 250–252. See also Hasia R. Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915–1935* (Westport, CT, 1977).

<sup>47</sup> Whitfield, *In Search of American Jewish Culture*, 51–52, 60; Erens, *Jew in American Cinema*, 199. In 1979 *Time* estimated that 80 percent of professional comics in America were Jewish, even though Jews only constituted 3 percent of the population. Epstein, *Haunted Smile*, x.

<sup>48</sup> Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 567–568. In *Blackface, White Noise*, Michael Rogin argues that Jewish entertainers donned blackface—a popular form of entertainment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—as a means of demonstrating their whiteness. By engaging in this white cultural practice, Jewish entertainers reinforced the color line, negated their own ambiguity, and claimed the right for inclusion and mobility in the dominant Anglo-Saxon society. Rogin’s provocative thesis has not gone unchallenged. See in particular Heinze, “Is It ‘Cos I’s Black?”; Stephen J. Whitfield, “Black Like Us,” *Jewish History* 22 (2008): 353–371. On Jewish comics in the pre-World War II era, see Epstein, *Haunted Smile*, chaps. 2–4.

<sup>49</sup> Although there were numerous films with Jewish themes in the 1920s, the quantity declined significantly by the mid-1930s, a trend that lasted until the late 1950s. See Erens, *Jew in American Cinema*, 135–139, 198–199; Epstein, *Haunted Smile*, 98.

<sup>50</sup> On Lenny Bruce, see Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 389–435; Epstein, *Haunted Smile*, chap. 7; Albert Goldman and Lawrence Schiller, *Ladies and Gentlemen – Lenny Bruce!!* (New York, 1974).

<sup>51</sup> Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty*, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Eli Evans, *The Provincials: A Personal History of the Jews in The South*, rev. ed. (New York, 1997), 38.

<sup>53</sup> Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters*, 212; Stone, *Chosen Folks*, chap. 5.

<sup>54</sup> Soupy Sales, *Soupy Sez! My Zany Life and Times* (New York, 2001), 15.

<sup>55</sup> Evans, *Provincials*, 219.

<sup>56</sup> That humor is often drawn from reality is revealed in Stone’s history of the Jews in Texas. According to Stone, when “the Klan first marched in Houston in 1921, they wore robes and hoods bought from a Jewish manufacturer.” Stone, *Chosen Folks*, 130.

<sup>57</sup> On the resurgence of antisemitism in the South during the late 1950s, see Clive Webb, *Fight Against Fear: Southern Jews and Black Civil Rights* (Athens, GA, 2001), chap. 3.

<sup>58</sup> Woody Allen, *Standup Comic, 1964–1968* (Rhino, CA, 1999).

<sup>59</sup> Stephen J. Whitfield, “The ‘Golden’ Era of Civil Rights: Consequences of *The Carolina Israelite*,” *Southern Cultures* 14 (Fall 2008), 30; Harry Golden, *The Right Time: An Autobiography by Harry Golden* (New York, 1969), 19–20.

<sup>60</sup> Whitfield, “‘Golden’ Era of Civil Rights,” 29.

<sup>61</sup> For an analysis of Harry Golden’s multi-faceted identity, see Rogoff, “Harry Golden: I ♥ NC.”

<sup>62</sup> Harry Golden, "The Vertical Negro Plan," in *Only in America* (Cleveland, 1958), 121–123.

<sup>63</sup> For a summary of Golden's plans, see Clarence W. Thomas, *The Serious Humor of Harry Golden* (Lanham, MD, 1997), 25–34.

<sup>64</sup> Harry Golden, "How to Solve the Segregation Problem: The White Baby Plan," *Carolina Israelite*, March/April, 1957.

<sup>65</sup> Harry Golden, "Solve 'Race' Problem and Revive Textiles," *Carolina Israelite*, August, 1958; Harry Golden, "The Turban Plan," in *You're Entitled* (Cleveland, 1962), 200–202.

<sup>66</sup> Harry Golden, "The Negro Maid and Protocol," *Carolina Israelite*, January/February, 1960.

<sup>67</sup> Harry Golden, "We Are Color-Happy," *Carolina Israelite*, September/October, 1960.

<sup>68</sup> Harry Golden, "Cemetery Segregation," in *So Long as You're Healthy (Abee Gezundt)* (New York, 1970), 151–152.

<sup>69</sup> Harry Golden, "A Plan for White Citizens," in *Only in America*, 139.

<sup>70</sup> In another piece Golden describes southern Christianity's seemingly paradoxical approach to the Jew: on the one hand Golden was receiving numerous pamphlets urging him to convert; on the other hand he was not allowed to join the Downtown Luncheon Club because he was Jewish. "If they don't want me for one hour at the Luncheon Club," Golden wrote with ironic bemusement, "why should they seek my companionship in heaven through all eternity?" Golden, "The Downtown Luncheon Club is More Exclusive than Heaven," in *Only in America*, 151.

<sup>71</sup> Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*, 10.

<sup>72</sup> On the place of Arabs, Muslims, and Middle Easterners in American racial discourse, see John Tehranian, *Whitewashed: America's Middle Eastern Minority* (New York, 2009); Nathaniel Deutch, *Inventing America's 'Worst Family': Eugenics, Islam, and the Rise and Fall of the Tribe of Ishmael* (Berkeley, CA, 2009); Andrew Shyrock, "The Moral Analogies of Race: Arab American Identity, Color Politics, and the Limits of Racialized Citizenship"; Sawsan Abdulrahim "'Whiteness' and the Arab immigrant Experience." Both essays can be found in *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*, ed. Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber (Syracuse, NY, 2008).

<sup>73</sup> *Borat*. The rodeo incident was authentic insofar as the management and the audience were led to believe that an immigrant from the former Soviet Union was performing for them in order to learn about America. Nobody was informed that a British comedian was pulling a stunt for a satirical film. Laurence Hammack, "Rodeo in Salem gets unexpected song rendition," *Roanoke Times*, Online, January 9, 2005, accessed December 1, 2011, <http://www.roanoke.com/news/roanoke/16655.html>. Sacha Baron Cohen's appearance in Salem is curious, given that Virginia is not the archetypal setting for a rodeo. A state on the American frontier, such as Texas, would have been a more obvious venue. Cohen may have simply shot the scene in Virginia because Imperial Rodeo Productions' appearance in Salem coincided with his filming schedule. This could also be another instance of geo-

graphically flattening the mythic South through stereotype — portraying Dixie as a culturally homogenous region from Richmond to El Paso.

<sup>74</sup> *Borat*.

<sup>75</sup> Although Sacha Baron Cohen is British, his interest in the American South predates the production of *Borat*. According to Clive Webb, who was a friend of Cohen's at Cambridge University, "Sacha wrote his final-year undergraduate dissertation on black-Jewish relations. He set out to disprove the notion of a grand alliance between the two peoples and did a substantial amount of primary source research, including a visit to the States where he worked in archives and interviewed several activists including Mississippi veteran Robert Moses." Clive Webb, e-mail communication with author, November 3, 2011.

<sup>76</sup> Trachtenberg, *Devil and the Jews*, chaps. 4, 7, 8, 9, 10.

<sup>77</sup> Todd M. Endelman, *The Jews of Britain, 1656–2000* (Berkeley, CA, 2002), 19–27; David S. Katz, *Philo-Semitism and the Readmission of the Jews to England, 1603–1655* (Oxford, UK, 1982), especially chap. 3; William D. Rubinstein and Hillary L. Rubinstein, *Philo-Semitism: Admiration and Support in the English Speaking World for Jews, 1840–1939* (New York, 1999).

<sup>78</sup> Eliza R. L. McGraw, "'How To Win the Jews for Christ': Southern Jewishness and the Southern Baptist Convention," in *Dixie Diaspora*, ed. Mark K. Bauman, 452–465; McGraw, *Two Covenants*, 93–97; Yaakov Ariel, "Evangelical Christians, Biblical Literalism, and Philo-Semitism in Our Times," in *Philo-Semitism in History*, ed. Jonathan Karp and Adam Sutcliffe (New York, 2011).

<sup>79</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, "Allosemitism: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern," in *Modernity, Culture and 'the Jew'*, ed. Bryan Cheyette and Laura Marcus (Stanford, CA, 1998), 143.

<sup>80</sup> Harry Golden, *Our Southern Landsmen* (New York, 1974), 158–159.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>82</sup> Evans, *Provincials*, 121.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>84</sup> Harry Golden, "Singing with the Salvation Army," in *The Best of Harry Golden* (Cleveland, 1967), 201–202.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>86</sup> On miscegenation and scientific racism, see Judy Scales-Trent, "Racial Purity Laws in the United States and Nazi Germany: The Targeting Process," *Human Rights Quarterly* 23 (May 2001): 259–307; John P. Jackson, Jr., and Nadine M. Weidman, "The Origins of Scientific Racism," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 50 (Winter 2005–2006): 66–79. Although the term miscegenation was rarely used regarding American Jewry, eugenics and racial degeneration figured prominently in the debates that resulted in the immigration legislation of 1924, whose restrictions were primarily directed at southern and eastern Europeans. Kenneth M. Ludmerer, "Genetics, Eugenics, and the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 46 (1972): 59–81.

<sup>87</sup> In Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, originally published in 1969, the neurotic Jewish narrator lives in perpetual fear of contracting various diseases, including blindness, for

consorting with gentile women. Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (New York, 1994), 165–168, 180.

<sup>88</sup> Golden, *Right Time*, 279.

<sup>89</sup> Matthew Hoffman, *From Rebel to Rabbi: Reclaiming Jesus and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Stanford, CA, 2007).

<sup>90</sup> Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty*, 155.

<sup>91</sup> It should also be stressed that Golden was speaking in the South in a Protestant church in 1947, whereas Bruce presented his blasphemous comedy more than a decade later in seedy nightclubs and strip joints. Taking the historical context into account, it could be argued that Golden's use of Jesus was the greater act of subversion.

<sup>92</sup> For a more detailed biography of Kinky Friedman and his place in the history of Texan Jewry, see Bryan Edward Stone, "'Ride 'Em, Jewboy': Kinky Friedman and the Texas Mystique," *Southern Jewish History* 1 (1998): 23–42.

<sup>93</sup> Kinky Friedman, *Texas Hold 'Em: How I Was Born in a Manger, Died in the Saddle, and Came Back as a Horny Toad* (New York, 2005), 22.

<sup>94</sup> Kinky Friedman and Ringo Starr perform "Men's Room, L.A.," on Kinky Friedman's album *Lasso from El Paso*, recorded 1976, Epic, CBS PE34304, BL34304, 33 $\frac{1}{3}$  rpm.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> Trachtenberg, *Devil and the Jews*, chap. 9. Some scholars have argued that Jews in medieval Europe did periodically urinate on crosses, reenact the Passion on Purim by using the crucifixion of Jesus as a substitute for the execution of Haman, and may have put pictures of Jesus and Mary in their own latrines as a symbolic act of defilement. See Elliott Horowitz, *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence* (Princeton, 2006), 160–173; Ivan G. Marcus, "A Jewish-Christian Symbiosis: The Culture of Early Ashkenaz," in *Cultures of the Jews*, ed. David Biale (New York, 2002), 484.

<sup>97</sup> Friedman, *Texas Hold 'Em*, xix.

<sup>98</sup> Kinky Friedman, *Cowboy Logic: The Wit and Wisdom of Kinky Friedman (and Some of His Friends)* (New York, 2006), 102.

<sup>99</sup> Harry Golden, "Boiled Beef Flanken Comes to Charlotte," in *Only in America*, 112–113.

<sup>100</sup> Kinky Friedman performs "We Reserve The Right To Refuse Service To You," on Friedman's album *Sold American*, recorded 1973, Vanguard, VSD79333, 33 $\frac{1}{3}$  rpm; Kinky Friedman performs "They Ain't Makin' Jews Like Jesus Anymore," on the album *Kinky Friedman*, recorded 1974, ABC Dunhill ABCD-829, 33 $\frac{1}{3}$  rpm.

<sup>101</sup> For a discussion of the stereotype of the Jew as cowardly, sickly, and effeminate, see John Efron, *Medicine and the German Jews* (New Haven, 2001), chap. 4; Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York, 1991); Peter Y. Medding, ed., *Jews and Violence: Images, Ideologies, and Realities* (Oxford, UK, 2002); Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, chap. 7.