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Kosher Country: Success and Survival on Nashville's Music Row

by

Stacy Harris

During the last few years, Nashville's country music industry has been mourning a larger number of its citizens than usual. These losses included two, Norma Gerson ("makeup artist to the stars") and Rainbow Room owner/erstwhile "Hee Haw" bit-player David "Skull" Schulman ("the mayor of Printers' Alley"), that underscore the little-known range and diversity of roles Jews have played in Nashville and country-music history.

According to Karen B. Fine, Nashville's Jewish music industry population numbers "about 60 or 70."¹ Few would characterize this minority as a vocal one. Indeed, when *Life* staff writer Charles Hirshberg wrote about the relationship between Jews and country music in the *Forward*, he titled the article "Nashville's Jewish Newcomers Assert Themselves (Softly)."² Likening the reluctance of Jewish country-music industry participants to medieval Marranos who, Hirshberg believed, kept "their Jewishness private to protect their livelihoods," Hirshberg's observations of five years ago seem equally as dire in 1999.³

There would well be a justification for this. Country music's heritage is rooted in traditions of a Protestant-Christian America. Six years ago, this author wrote, "Most country artists have recorded at least one album of sacred songs; indeed it is almost expected."⁴

Nonetheless change may be imminent. With many more new artists and a younger listener base, this expectation no longer exists. While it still looks good for a country singer to have a press kit containing biographical information noting that the subject's earliest memories are of "hymns or more fervent gospel songs" and of his/her own performances in church, whether true or not, such references are increasingly less mandatory.

As country music continues to be infused with younger artists who reflect the multicultural nature of America's melting pot, they will sing songs reflecting their own experience. To the extent that these lyrics have religious application, the Christ-driven lyrics of earlier times give way to songs of more universal, spiritual themes. While you still can hear it sung on the Grand Ole Opry, mostly by older, evangelical artists who haven't had a hit in years, Christian country music is no longer played on country-formatted stations. Gospel music is now largely confined to "Contemporary Christian" formatted stations.

This article will explore these contrapuntal themes: the seemingly wide scale acceptance of Jews in Nashville country music and their substantial contributions to the genre, and the pervasive insensitivity if not outright anti-Semitism which confronts the participants. In so doing, this becomes a case study of how popular culture reflects as well as illuminates the broader themes of southern and American Jewish history.

A corollary to these themes emerges from a tentative comparison. While Nashville boasts a burgeoning Black Country Music Association (and emerging from the BCMA, the Minority Country Music Association), there has never been even a hint of interest expressed in establishing a Jewish Country Music Association. As a counterpoint, Music City was not ready for a 1970s song Tom T. Hall wrote, recorded, but never released called "I Was Born in a One Nigger Town."⁵ While Hall's lyrics satirically and scatologically reference stereotypes associated with African American males, the song's theme is unmistakably one of racial tolerance. Significantly, record companies that will not release a country song with the word "Nigger" in its title, realizing the epithet is both offensive and polarizing, do not hesitate about

releasing—and radio does not think twice about playing—a recording of Kinky Friedman and his Texas Jewboys called “Ride ‘em Jewboy.” These seemingly trivial illustrations suggest both important similarities and differences between the groups and their relation to the majority culture. Jews are relatively more tolerated and accepted than African Americans, and, partly because of this, they also have a greater desire to be accepted into the mainstream.

Given the level of Jewish involvement, a Jewish Classical Music Association may have been in order, however, during the early 1920s. Ninety-two year-old Nashville Jewish community matriarch Elizabeth Jacobs recalls that at that time, she, Dr. Bernard Weinstein, Eva Garfinkle, and Maurice Loveman were among radio performers who played their music for free from WSM Radio’s downtown studio. That studio became one of the Grand Ole Opry’s early homes.⁶ That so many Jews were involved then and now is somewhat amazing in that even today Nashville’s total Jewish population numbers only 6,000.⁷

Nashville itself really burgeoned as Music City beginning about 1950 when WSM Radio announcer David Cobb first dubbed Nashville “Music City, USA.” Music Row or Record Row, the nicknames are interchangeable, refers to Nashville’s music district and home to most of the record companies, talent agencies, recording studios, music trade associations, and music publishers that have called the area home since the late 1950s or early 1960s.

The industry might have flourished sooner. In 1931 Jewish songwriters including Irving Berlin and Jerome Kern established the New York City-based American Guild of Authors and Composers (AGAC). Later the guild expanded its headquarters to include Los Angeles, and by the 1930s, according to veteran country songwriter John D. Loudermilk, “tried to come to Nashville but, because they were Jews, couldn’t get in down here.”⁸

That left it to Loudermilk to establish the Songwriters Guild of America in Nashville. The SGA, which began as the Songwriters Protection Association, in the words of its mission statement, “protects your rights by providing you with the best songwriter’s

contact in the business . . . A Guild contract contains many benefits which may not be part of the so-called 'standard' songwriter's agreement."⁹

Jews have been actively involved in the country music business for over five decades. For example, Hill & Range, the New York music publishing company established in 1944 by Austrian-born Holocaust refugees Joachim Jean Aberbach and his brother, Julian, published most of the songs that became country hits from 1945 to 1955.¹⁰ Yet the anti-Semitic climate of Nashville's music industry that Loudermilk encountered during the early 1970s, when he and others tried to establish the Guild, was a factor in the inability to establish the SGA until 1983.

Not much had changed a decade later when the New York-based William Morris Agency (which now has a Nashville office) locked horns with Music Row's Buddy Lee Agency over the right to book Garth Brooks.¹¹ As Helen Farmer, at that time the Country Music Association's director of programs and special projects, told Hirshberg, the Nashville agents' feelings boiled over to the extent that their hostility "immediately reflected their stereotypes about New York Jews."¹² Farmer explained that those who did not know she was Jewish felt free to make remarks to her along the lines of "Hitler had the right idea" and "You think this is bad, you just wait. They all want the money and the stakes are sky high. We're gonna be inundated."¹³

Skull Schulman's protégé, a Jew from Pennsylvania named Sidney Kaminsky, sang in Printers' Alley. Downtown Nashville's nightclub district, the Alley was the center of Nashville's printing industry, circa 1915, when the area was home to ten printers and thirteen publishers. In 1970 the saloon singer wrote one of the earliest books about Music Row personalities.¹⁴ Kaminsky's parents were from Russia and Poland. They departed before the Holocaust, but most of their family members perished. Kaminsky even became a TNN program host, as he established himself as one of Nashville's best-known radio (WSM, WLAC, WKDA, and, now, WAMB) and TV (channels 2 and 4) personalities.¹⁵ But not before he changed his name to the non-ethnic Teddy Bart.¹⁶

It has never been easy being both Jewish and associated with the country-music community. When Bill Monroe hired a Milburn, New Jersey, fiddler to work with him, perhaps Gene Lowinger bit his tongue when Monroe singled out Lowinger in introductions of Monroe's Bluegrass Boys as "the only Jewish bluegrass cowboy in the country."¹⁷ As the undisputed "Father of Bluegrass Music," Monroe certainly knew that just as traditional country music requires a steel guitar, without a fiddle there is no bluegrass music.

Gene Lowinger wasn't country music's only early Jewish fiddler. Maurice Blumen, known variously as "Mutt" or "Ripplin' Ruben," appeared with bands on the Grand Ole Opry from 1945 to 1952.¹⁸ Blumen, who turned eighty in April 1999, played with the Opry's Cousin Wilbur and His Tennessee Mountaineers. He played first fiddle with Howard "Howdy" Forrester, jammed backstage at the Opry with Roy Acuff and worked tent shows with Bill Monroe, Rod Brasfield, and comediennes Sarie and Sallie.¹⁹ Equally unceremoniously, during the late 1950s, Eric Weissberg, Ralph Rinzler, and Bob Yellin became members of The Greenbriar Boys, while John Cohen joined The New Lost City Ramblers.²⁰

If a Jew with an identifiably Jewish name was lucky enough to first ascend to a position of power outside of Nashville, as Paul Cohen did, that person would be grudgingly accepted, if never quite welcome, around what became Music Row. That is because power begot respect in Nashville music circles even before the formation of Record Row. When record producer/record company executive Cohen came from New York to WSM Radio's Studio B in 1945, he helped develop the careers of Kitty Wells, Patsy Cline, Webb Pierce, Brenda Lee, Bobby Helms, and others.²¹

With those credentials the Country Music Association could not justify denying Cohen membership in the Country Music Foundation's Hall of Fame. While most individuals are usually inducted during their lifetimes, the CMA waited a full six years following Cohen's 1970 death before granting him that honor.²²

If you want to be a Grand Ole Opry star, being multitalented and not advertising your Jewishness appears to be a good idea. It

certainly worked for Lew Childre. A singing comedian, buck dancer, and yodeler, Childre, who became an Opry member in 1945, also played Hawaiian guitar, trumpet, and trombone.²³

It is possible that the Alabama-born one-man-band's ethnic background was not known to his Opry bosses, given the experience of the country trio, Tompall and the Glaser Brothers some fifteen years later.

Nebraskan Catholics Tompall (née Thomas Paul), Chuck and Jim Glaser first appeared as guests on the Grand Ole Opry in 1960. While they became Opry members in 1962, Jim Glaser confirms that acceptance came only after the suspicion that the brothers with the Jewish-sounding surname were Jews proved spurious.²⁴

So how much have things changed since 1962? Richard Friedman and his band were not afforded the honor of appearing on the Grand Ole Opry's final performance at the Ryman Auditorium on March 15, 1974. But Kinky Friedman secured an invitation to appear on the Ryman stage with his Texas Jewboys on Reverend Jimmie Snow's post-Opry WSM Radio "Grand Ole Gospel Time" broadcast where, in ironic fashion, Friedman erroneously proclaimed himself to be the "first full-blooded Jew" to appear on the Ryman stage as he proceeded to announce his supposed conversion to Christianity.²⁵

When Charles Hirshberg broached the subject of Jews as country-music performers, he mentioned country songwriter Tom Meltzer, front man for a band known as the Five Chinese Brothers. Meltzer and his band could not interest Music Row despite their regional (New York) popularity and the glowing reviews they received from *Rolling Stone*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *Billboard*. Though Meltzer landed a publishing deal with "a major music publisher," he could not get his songs cut in Nashville.²⁶

Another Jewish songwriter Hirshberg mentions, Victoria Shaw, has fared much better. Shaw, whose number one compositions for Garth Brooks, Doug Stone, and John Michael Montgomery secured her a recording contract with Warner/Reprise following one chart record on an independent label.

Nonetheless, her Warner/Reprise debut, *In Full View*, and a self-titled album failed to make *Billboard's* country album chart. Shaw left Warner/Reprise in 1997 and two years later launched her own record label, Taffeta Records.

Although influential and recognized Shaw has failed to emerge as "country music's next superstar" as Hirshberg surmised she might in 1994. A Garth Brooks protégé, she remains in the spotlight. Brooks' co-writer on "A Friend to Me,"²⁷ (featured on Brooks' *Sevens* CD), Shaw also has co-written "Love is a Gift"²⁸ with Olivia Newton-John and Earl Rose. Newton-John recorded the song, "This Is Our Moment,"²⁹ which is featured on *As The World Turns* and on TV's Soap Opera Awards. Shaw received Emmy nominations for the last two songs and won a Daytime Emmy for Best Original Song ("This is Our Moment") in May 1999. Shaw recently made a cameo appearance on *The Guiding Light* and executive-produced "One Heart At a Time," a single featuring the voices of Brooks, Newton-John, Michael McDonald, Neal McCoy, Faith Hill, Billy Dean, and Bryan White, with proceeds earmarked for the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation.³⁰ She has written the title track for Trisha Yearwood's album, *Where Your Road Leads*,³¹ and a song on Ty Herndon's *Big Hopes* CD.³²

Superstardom has also eluded two Jewish Grammy winners: Asleep at the Wheel's tattooed lead singer, Ray Benson (née Ray Benson Siefert)³³ and ace banjoist, Béla Fleck, late of New Grass Revival.³⁴ While not everyone achieves superstar status and these performers have obtained substantial success there may be another reason for their failure to reach the pinnacle. Country fans, who bestow their approval on those who are most open about their personal lives often including their spiritual beliefs, have received guarded responses from these Jewish favorites.

Shaw disputes both the premise that country fans care about entertainers' spiritual beliefs and that her responses are guarded.³⁵ Yet, Shaw told Hirshberg that when country music magazines do "roundup" stories (e.g., asking several country stars about their favorite Christmas memories as the basis for a holiday story), she responds with "my favorite *holiday* memory," without mentioning Christmas or Hanukkah: "If I make a big deal about

being Jewish, then I'm liable to become a novelty . . . It wouldn't be good for me, or the Jewish [community]."³⁶

Rabbi Bruce Adler, spiritual leader for Hamilton Ohio's Beth Israel Synagogue, a Conservative congregation in metropolitan Cincinnati, represents still another phenomenon. A fiddler whose "kosher kountry" songs have been recorded and performed by bluegrass, folk, and gospel groups throughout America, Adler believes that he is "the only rabbi in the United States, probably in any country, who does Jewish bluegrass," giving rise to his being dubbed "The Bluegrass Rabbi."³⁷

Rabbi Adler's unique form of musical expression is derived from the definition of "kosher" as meaning "fit or acceptable. My music is positive and clean and has similarities to Christian country but, since I'm Jewish, that wouldn't really be an accurate description. I've heard some people refer to it as Jewish gospel. As a rabbi, my songs are kosher—they express reverence for God, commitment to Torah and the need for responsible moral living."³⁸

Admittedly Adler's albums (*Walk Humbly With Thy G-d, If It Be Thy Will, I Choose Torah* and *Eternally Hopeful*) are not the type of material taking *Billboard's* country chart by storm.³⁹ Consider these lyrics from the title song of Adler's *I Choose Torah* CD:

Torah means all that's good and that's true.
It's doing all you know God wants you to do.
It's making sure our people lives tomorrow too.⁴⁰

Of course, depending on the evolution of the Americana format, the near future might bring more than limited market appeal for not only Adler's music, but for that of the Nashville duo Eighteen, modern Jewish rockers Mason Cooper and Dan Nichols who mix Torah with a rock beat. Nichols is a former cantorial soloist at Congregation Micah, one of Nashville's two Reform congregations. The liner notes to Eighteen's CD *Life* state, "Some of the songs on this album are directly inspired by Jewish liturgy. Others come from our perspectives and experiences living as Jews in a modern world. . . . L'Chaim! Mason and Dan." Among the

special thanks are those given to “our Rabbis, Cantors, and thanks go to our Jewish educators who have inspired us to express our spirituality in new and creative ways.” Two of the eleven songs on the CD have Hebrew titles and are recorded in Hebrew with English translations. Other songs use spiritual and/or biblical themes as do the following from “Babel,”

A tower went up
 And you knocked us down
 For letting our heads
 get too far off the ground

Paradise lost, reality found
 Arrogance tossed in a sea of sound
 We all babble on, babble on

These lyrics illustrate the potential for Jewish country.⁴¹

Country listeners – northerners among them – gravitate more toward songs of heritage such as the country group Alabama’s 1980 hit, “My Home’s In Alabama” with its lyrical references to pride in speaking “Southern English,” southern nativity and southern breeding.⁴² Signs of Jewish kinship within the country music community are subtler. One low-key example of such bonding occurred, according to Asylum Records President Evelyn Shriver, when the late Academy of Country Music (ACM) board member, Bill Boyd, teased industry friends, ranging from attorney Joel Katz to Asylum Records’ vice-president, A & R (artist and repertoire), Susan Nadler, by giving them gifts of custom-made ball caps bearing the initials JIC, for Jews in Country.⁴³ Such acronyms rooted in inside jokes underscore the glaring absence of Jewish visibility in country music culture and point to a time when Jews and Nashville’s country music community did not mix.

Although versions of the story differ, many of Nashville’s Jewish old-timers tell a tale that dates back to the 1940s – after the Ryman Auditorium became the Grand Ole Opry’s home in September 1943 and before 1948 when Sherith Israel moved away

from what is now the Central Parking lot next to the Ryman. Although the accounts may be apocryphal, they reflect the Jewish community's perception of the general lack of awareness and knowledge of Jews and Judaism among non-Jews living in the Nashville country music environment.

In one version of the story, in 1946, when the solemn Jewish Day of Atonement fell on the Jewish Sabbath, the late Saturday afternoon service also coincided with the lining up of ticket buyers awaiting a Grand Ole Opry performance at dusk.

A variation of this tale characterizes an Opry fan as being inebriated and staying for the entire service before realizing his error. Other versions suggest that there was a group of Opry ticket holders who mistook the Orthodox Sherith Israel for the Opry and innocently brought food and soft drinks into the sanctuary — some were supposedly throwing peanuts in the air and catching them in their mouths — to the amazement of the fasting congregants. The visitors then were invited in but were asked to leave their treats behind as the males among them were given yarmulkes with which to cover their heads.⁴⁴

A man dressed in overalls sauntered into the Sherith Israel sanctuary and took a seat beside Gerald Peiser and the other male congregants. While most of the other men present were dressed in their Sabbath best, it only became apparent to Peiser and the others that perhaps the stranger did not belong among them when he reached for one of the nearby spittoons and availed himself of it. This just was not done during the solemn Jewish observance that is marked by an all-day fast. Still nothing was said to the stranger who stayed for a few minutes of the service until he realized he was not attending an Opry performance.⁴⁵

At that point, according to Peiser, Sherith Israel's Cantor Aaron Abramson approached the newcomer, welcomed him and asked what he thought of the service.⁴⁶

The bewildered response?

"It was very nice, but I was expecting Roy Acuff!"⁴⁷

Because the Opry had yet to become a tourist attraction, its audience during the immediate post-war years was largely the backwoods variety. Before the advent of concession stands put

a stop to the practice, it was not unusual for Opry fans to bring picnic baskets from home as they began to gather either around the Grand Ole Opry or, if they mistook the building for that of the Opry, at Sherith Israel. Mistaking one edifice for another was understandable when one considers that the structure of Sherith Israel's facade was architecturally similar to that of the Mother Church of Country Music, and the two buildings shared a wall.

Today Jewish music in Nashville extends beyond such houses of worship. The Jewish Community Center is among more well-known Music City venues presenting songwriters' nights. According to event coordinator/adult contemporary rock songwriter Mark Wiederman, who bills himself as Mark Aaron James,⁴⁸ such Jewish songwriters as Jerry Holland ("Friends," recorded by John Michael Montgomery),⁴⁹ John Michaels ("Check, Please," recorded by Paul Jefferson),⁵⁰ and Steve Seskin ("Don't Laugh At Me," recorded by Mark Wills; "I Think About You," recorded by Collin Raye)⁵¹ have performed at the JCC writers' nights, although gentile writers participate as well.

The contemporary history of Nashville's Jews who have made names for themselves in country music includes not only songwriters Michael Kossler, Pam Belford, Sam Lorber, Stacy Beyler, Dennis Scott, Andie Jennings, Karen Taylor-Good, but also, to name a few, record producers Richard Landis, Steve Fishell, Cliff Goldmacher, publicist Ronna Rubin, booking agents like Rod Essig, record company executives Neal Spielberg, Tracy Gershon, Dan Einstein, Wayne Halper, music video directors such as Steve Goldmann, artist managers David Skepner, Gary Falcon, and the "world-famous" Bluebird Cafe night club operator, Amy Kurland, who gave Garth Brooks one of his earliest opportunities to perform in Nashville. Nashville boasts present-day and former Jewish entertainment journalists Rick Bolsom, David Ross, Nancy Sweid, Brad Schmitt, the late Bruce Honick, author Barry McCloud, and photographer Alan Mayor. Music City is also home to a Jewish CMA executive, senior director of international and new business development, Jeff Green; NARAS' senior executive direction, Nashville Operations, Nancy

Shapiro; and nationally-known medical examiner, Dr. Bruce Levy.⁵²

These are Jews who identify themselves in varying degrees as Jewish. All are of Jewish background. Some indicate they are non-practicing. Others who are probably Jewish (in that they have Jewish surnames or have been identified by others as being Jewish) were unavailable for comment.

This begs another question: if a sizable number of Music Row's Jews regard being publicly identified as Jewish as the equivalent of being "outed," then how common is Victoria Shaw's experience of not having experienced anti-Semitism?⁵³ Is Shaw unaware that Dolly Parton abandoned plans to create and star in a TV series on a country-turned-gospel singer because, as Parton explained to *Vogue* readers, "everybody's afraid to touch anything that's religious because most of the people out here [in Hollywood] are Jewish, and it's a frightening thing for them to promote Christianity."⁵⁴

Then again, there are varying degrees of what could be termed anti-Semitism. Mel Tillis spoke to this author for a *Country Song Roundup* interview about Walter Wager, the ghostwriter for his then-upcoming autobiography. Tillis complained that "Walter is Jewish and he wrote it with a certain New York way of talkin.' And I'm having to edit it again and write it the way that I would say things."⁵⁵

Not long thereafter one of Faron Young's longtime associates apologized for Young's inability to do a promised interview, explaining that "Faron's involved in a divorce, you know. His wife has hired some Jew lawyer." In fact, Hilda Young's attorney was not Jewish.⁵⁶

Another man, writing his country-music autobiography, deleted a reference to his supposedly unprejudiced father's routine use of the expression "Jew you down." The author omitted the remarks, but only after his literary agent, the William Morris Agency's Mel Berger, advised him that the phrase is an ethnic slur.⁵⁷ The vulgarity of that expression was brought home to this author when a Grand Ole Opry star's spouse, who had been known for twenty-five years to the author as a wonderful person,

used the phrase matter-of-factly twice within a five minute period.⁵⁸ Another Opry star, on learning that this author was Jewish, stated that he was brought up to believe that Jews had horns. He said he was very surprised to learn, on meeting a Jew for the first time, that this was not the case.⁵⁹ Then in all seriousness he asked if "Jews still practice blood sacrifices."⁶⁰ In another incident a singer/songwriter's office manager asked me if American Jews celebrate Thanksgiving!⁶¹ Several years ago, a Gospel Music Association official, addressing a crowd including this author, said matter-of-factly that Jews were only in the music business for the money.⁶²

Institutional anti-Semitism was noted in 1993 when, after having seen a rehearsal for the Opryland theme park stage production of "Easter in Song and Story," the disgusted viewer told Sally Levine of the Nashville chapter of the American Jewish Committee that she "had never seen anything so anti-Semitic in her life."⁶³ Levine and Ruth Tanner, then executive director of the Jewish Federation of Nashville, attended the final 1993 performance prepared to take notes.⁶⁴

When the women approached Bob Whittaker, then Opryland Production's Vice President and General Manager, with what Levine called a "good record of exactly what was said and why it was offensive," they received no response.⁶⁵ Levine and Tanner, acting on the endorsement of the Jewish Federation Board and its Community Relations Committee, built a twenty-six member interfaith coalition. Convened by Walter Harrelson, Dean Emeritus of Vanderbilt University's Divinity School, the group attended the final 1994 performance with notebooks in hand.⁶⁶

The consensus of opinion was that "Easter in Song and Story" was theologically inaccurate. It stereotyped Jews, depicted Jews as solely responsible for Jesus' death, and trivialized what Christians regard as a major historical event.⁶⁷ Reflecting on "the poor quality of the performance and the poor theology," Harrelson said the group "began to think it was not just the Jewish community that should be offended, but we in the Christian community should be offended. It told us how much more work we have to do to educate people. . ."⁶⁸

A letter signed by sixteen coalition members that protested several aspects of the 1994 production was sent to Whittaker. Whittaker finally met with the group in July 1994 and considered suggestions regarding ways offensive references could be eliminated without incurring additional costs.⁶⁹ The coalition wanted more. It was not until December 1994 that Opryland decided there would be no 1995 production of "Easter in Song and Story," while simultaneously refusing to offer assurances that the production would not resume at a later date.⁷⁰

The Nashville Network was similarly unresponsive to objections voiced by Judith Saks and this author to an anti-Semitic "joke" singer/songwriter Ray Stevens told on the September 28, 1998, edition of TNN's "Prime Time Country."⁷¹ Even the not-for-profit, cultural and educational Country Music Foundation, publisher of the *Journal of Country Music*, failed to understand the importance of Jewish participation in the genre. Although the journal takes great interest in the contributions and history of African Americans and, to a lesser extent, other ethnic minorities in country music highlighting such contributions in the pages of the JCM and in album releases on its own imprint, JCM editor Paul Kingsbury, while admitting he had not read it, declined to consider publishing an earlier version of this article, dismissing Jews' roles in country music as being "as significant as those of left-handers in country music."⁷² When this author indicated that she would not embarrass Kingsbury by quoting him, the JCM editor urged that she "go ahead. I don't mind."⁷³

While Nashville's music community has a long way to go in terms of sensitivity and awareness, there are signs of progress. The Country Music Association no longer holds its award shows on Jewish holidays, thanks in large measure to a calendar of Jewish observances developed by the Jewish Federation of Nashville and circulated on Music Row and throughout the school system. Another positive sign appeared when researching this article for names of those Jews who might otherwise not come to mind, colleagues often stated "I'll have to stop and think," or as one Grand Ole Opry staffer put it: "You know, people are just people to me. I don't think about them in those (differentiating) terms."⁷⁴

 NOTES

¹ Fine, Karen B. "They're Playing. . . (Writing. . . Singing. . . Producing) Our Songs," *The Observer*, 65, No. 13 (July 17, 1998), 14. This periodical is a bimonthly Jewish publication. According to Will Beasley, Director, Music Business Development for the Nashville Chamber of Commerce, the population of Davidson County, which includes Nashville and portions of suburbs where many in Nashville's music industry make their homes, is 530,000. Others in the music community live in nearby Brentwood, (divided by the county line separating Davidson and Williamson counties), Franklin (in Williamson County) and Hendersonville (in Sumner County).

² Hirshberg, "Nashville's Jewish Newcomers Assert Themselves (Softly)," *Forward* 99, 985 No. 30, (July 22, 1994), 9-10.

³ *Ibid.*, 9

⁴ Stacy Harris, *The Best of Country: The Essential CD Guide* (London, San Francisco, 1993), 16.

⁵ Nick Tosches, *Country: The Twisted Roots of Rock 'n Roll* (New York, 1996), 217.

⁶ Elizabeth Jacobs interview, conducted by Stacy Harris, September 1997.

⁷ *American Jewish Yearbook* 98 (New York, 1998), 182.

⁸ John D. Loudermilk interview, conducted by Stacy Harris, May 14, 1996.

⁹ Songwriters Guild Association brochure.

¹⁰ Ronnie Pugh, "Hill & Range Songs, Inc.," Paul Kingsbury, et al, *The Encyclopedia of Country Music: The Ultimate Guide to the Music* (New York, 1998), 241.

¹¹ Hirshberg, *Forward*, 9-10.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Inside Music City, U.S.A.* (Nashville, 1970)

¹⁵ Teddy Bart interview, conducted by Stacy Harris, January 1998.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Harris, *The Best of Country: The Essential CD Guide*.

¹⁸ Maurice Blumen interview, conducted by Stacy Harris, September 14, 1998.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Hirshberg, *Forward*, 10.

²¹ Ronnie Pugh, "Paul Cohen," Kingsbury and contributing writers, *The Encyclopedia of Country Music*, 102.

²² Paul Cohen was president of the CMA three years before he died. The Country Music Foundation's encyclopedia indicates that when Cohen died, Music Row's offices closed in "an unprecedented gesture." However, of the twenty-five Country Music Hall of Fame inductees preceding Cohen, only one alive at the time of the first inductions was inducted posthumously. That individual, Jim Denny, the Grand Ole Opry manager who, following Elvis Presley's single Opry appearance, advised his fellow future Country Music Hall-of-Famer to "go back to driving your truck," was a controversial figure. Not only did he misjudge Presley's appeal, but he also had a perceived conflict of interest. The powerful Opry manager also headed the Grand Ole Opry Artists Service Bureau (booking agency) from

the late 1940s until he was fired from that position on September 24, 1956. Denny is blamed for the defection of many of the Opry's most popular artists.

²³ Charles Wolfe, "Lew Childre," Barry McCloud et al, *Definitive Country: The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Country Music and Its Performers* (New York, 1995), 155.

²⁴ Jim Glaser interview, conducted by Stacy Harris, December 3, 1996.

²⁵ Ryman Opry show and post-Ryman show broadcast, March 15, 1974.

²⁶ Hirshberg, *Forward*, 10.

²⁷ Victoria Shaw and Garth Brooks, "A Friend to Me," *Sevens* (Minka Music/Maverick Music/WB Music Corp./Major Bob Music Co., Inc./No Fences Music, 1997).

²⁸ Victoria Shaw, Earl Rose, and Olivia Newton-John, "Love is a Gift," *Back With a Heart* (VLS Music, Inc., Amadeus Music Co. and Zargon Music, 1997).

²⁹ Victoria Shaw, Earl Rose, and Olivia Newton-John, "This is Our Moment," (VLS Music, Inc., Amadeus Music Co. and Zargon Music, 1997).

³⁰ Victoria Shaw, "One Heart at a Time," *One Heart at a Time* (VLS Music, 1998).

³¹ Victoria Shaw and Desmond Child, "Where Your Road Leads," *Where Your Road Leads* (BMG Songs, Inc./Manor House Music, 1995).

³² Victoria Shaw and Gary Burr, "Big Time Dreamers," *Big Hopes* (VLS Music/Gary Burr Music Inc./ MCA Music Publishing, 1998)

³³ Hirshberg, *Forward*, 9-10. The spelling of Seifert's name was questioned when his manager indicated that it is correctly spelled "Siefert." (Jeff Currier telephone conversation with the author, August 11, 1999.)

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 10. In the course of his August 10, 1999, interview with the author, during an Internet chat at <<http://www.wkm.com>>, Fleck stated his feelings on being Jewish as follows "Stacy, my mother is Jewish, and therefore I have a lot of that influence. However I was not raised with the religious side of it, so I don't claim to be anything in particular."

³⁵ Victoria Shaw interview, conducted by Stacy Harris, February 12, 1998.

³⁶ Hirshberg, *Forward*, 10. During her February 12, 1998, interview with this author, Shaw indicated that Hirshberg misquoted her generally and specifically with reference to "the Jewish people." The singer/songwriter feels the quote attributed to her by Hirshberg appears presumptuous and that she most likely referred to "the Jewish community."

Shaw's mother, Carole, now an active member of Nashville's Jewish Community Center and the JCC's Cultural Arts Committee, once recorded for Capitol Records as did Garth Brooks' late mother, Colleen.

³⁷ Bluegrass and the Bimah, <<http://w3.one.net/~bruad/blueandbim.html>>.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Rabbis Bruce and Donna Adler, "I Choose Torah," *I Choose Torah*, (Maplestaff Music, 1995).

⁴¹ Dan Nichols and Mason Cooper, "Babel," (Wafflegood Music and Mister Mason Music/Ken Ten Pub., Inc., 1996.)

⁴² Randy Owen and Teddy Gentry, "My Home's in Alabama," *My Home's in Alabama*, (Maypop Music, a division of Wildcountry, Inc.) 1980. Although substantial Jewish involvement in country music is easily documented, after extensive research, one has to conclude that few if any songs (those of Rabbis Bruce Adler and Donna Adler, and Kinky Friedman are exceptions) mention or embody Jewish themes.

⁴³ Evelyn Shriver interview, conducted by Stacy Harris, January 29, 1998.

⁴⁴ Interviews with Rabbi Zalman Posner, spiritual leader of Nashville's Sherith Israel, Ahron Lucas, Maxie Biener and Ernest Freudenthal, conducted by Stacy Harris, February 1998.

⁴⁵ Gerald Peiser interview, conducted by Stacy Harris, January 1998.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Mark Wiederman interview, conducted by Stacy Harris, February 1998.

⁴⁹ Jerry Holland, "Friends," Greatest Hits (Mike Curb Music/That's A Smash Publishing, 1996).

⁵⁰ Jon Michaels and Paul Jefferson, "Check Please," Paul Jefferson (Check Please, Publishing/Irving Music, Inc./Mick James Music/Will Bacon Music, 1996).

⁵¹ Steve Seskin and Allen Shamblin, "Don't Laugh At Me," Wish You Were Here (Sony/ATV Tunes LLC/David Aaron Music/Built on Rock, 1998). Steve Seskin and Don Schlitz, "I Think About You," Direct Hits and I Think About You (Sony/ATV Tunes/New Hayes Music/New Dawn Songs, 1996).

⁵² Most Jews who have played a part in Nashville's country music scene, like Dr. Levy, are fairly new to Music City. A New Yorker, Levy, who was featured on the February 19, 1999, edition of ABC Television's 20/20 regarding his initial refusal to autopsy Tammy Wynette, told this writer during a February 25, 1999, interview that, as of that date, he had lived in Nashville "less than two years." Levy eventually did the autopsy.

⁵³ Shaw interview.

⁵⁴ Vogue, January 1994, "Dolly Parton Apologizes To ADL For Anti-Semitic Comments," (Anti-Defamation League news release) and Stewart Ain, "Dolly Makes Nice," *New York Jewish Week*, February 25, 1994. When Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League wrote Parton pointing out that "there is no evidence of any Jewish hostility toward Christian themes in films," Parton replied, in part, by indicating that "I sincerely apologize for my statement."

⁵⁵ Stacy Harris, "Mel Tillis: You Don't Hurry Your Life," Country Song Roundup, October 1984, 12.

⁵⁶ Faron Young's associate interview, conducted by Stacy Harris, circa 1980.

⁵⁷ Author's book signing, Davis-Kidd Booksellers, Nashville, Tennessee, June 29, 1993.

⁵⁸ Grand Ole Opry star's husband and manager interview, conducted by Stacy Harris, circa 1997.

⁵⁹ Grand Ole Opry star interview, conducted by Stacy Harris, circa 1983.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Office manager interview, conducted by Stacy Harris, November 1995.

⁶² Former GMA official addressing monthly meeting of the Nashville-based National Entertainment Journalists Association (NEJA) circa 1978.

⁶³ Judith A. Saks, "Coalition Pleased with End to Opryland Easter Program," *The Observer*, 61, No. 23

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Whittaker was later promoted to the position of President of the Grand Ole Opry Group, where his responsibilities included managing the Grand Ole Opry prior to his retirement in 1998. Under Whittaker's aegis the Opry began to feature an increased number of

guest appearances by gospel music artists. Among these were a gospel bluegrass family act, The Isaacs. The quintet includes a husband and wife, their son, two daughters, and the daughters' husbands. The extended musical family's matriarch, Lily Fishman Isaacs, was born in a French army camp in Germany; the daughter of Jewish Holocaust survivors, Lily Fishman Isaacs has converted to Christianity. Deborah Evans-Price, "The Isaacs' Have A New Album Of Bluegrass-Gospel on the Horizon," *Billboard*, 110, No. 44 (October 31, 1998), 31.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid. Production never resumed and became a moot issue when the Opryland theme park closed in 1998.

⁷¹ Ironically, Stevens, whose 1970 recording of "Everything Is Beautiful (In Its Own Way)" espoused brotherhood, found humor in "joking" to program host/Christian music singer Gary Chapman that Stevens' presumably gentile friend wanted to become a "Jewish lawyer, because (Jews) make a lot of money and they can buy things wholesale." Chapman did not indicate any discomfort with Stevens' humor.

⁷² Paul Kingsbury interview, conducted by Stacy Harris, November 13, 1998. Interview with Christina Fernandez, assistant to Country Music Foundation Director Kyle Young on March 4, 1999.

⁷³ Kingsbury interview.

⁷⁴ Grand Ole Opry staff member interview, conducted by Stacy Harris, September 14, 1998.