

A Jewish Contribution to Rap Music

By Sam Yolen  
MA Project  
Academy for Jewish Religion  
Ordination Class of 2018

## **Table of Contents**

**Dedication - 3**

**Author's Note and Bias - 3**

**Introduction - 4**

**Part One – Biblical History - 6**

- Instruments and Sound
- What Connects Rap to The Bible?
- Psalms as an Example: Poetic Song, Finding a Beat

**Part Two – History from 1880s to 1970s - 11**

- The Birth of American Popular Music: Partnership between Jews and Blacks
- New Technologies, No Barriers to Entry - Compositions with Ragtime Piano
- Blacks and Blues and Jews All Over - The Roaring 20s, the Jazz Age, the Great Depression
- The Great Depression and the Radio
- Experiences of World War 2 and the Holocaust
- The Ossification of Class, Music and Politics of the 1950-70s

**Part Three – Modern Rap and Hip Hop - 36**

- When did Rap Start? The 1970s.
- Rap and Hip Hop as a Force of Good
- Rap Goes Commercial - Jewish Influence
- Gangsta Rap and Runaway Profit: the Undermining of Identity

**Part Four: Jewish Rappers - 51**

- Where do they fit in?
- The Jewish Conclusion: More Questions than Answers

**Part Five: Autobiography and Raps - 59**

- Spiritual Autobiography
- Annotated Prayer Raps

**Works Cited - 87**

**Appendix - Jew on Jew Rap Battle Transcript: Wiseguy Vs XQZ - 93**

## Dedication

I have been on the receiving end of an immense amount of love and support while writing this thesis. I hope that my work contributes to the appreciations of others. Thank you, Rabbi Jill Hammer, Trisha Arlin, Rabbi Jeff Hoffman, and Rabbi Eddie Schecter. Thank you to those associated with the Academy for Jewish Religion for whom my inspiration is linked. And thank you to my parents. I finally wrote a (mostly) research paper.

## Author's Note and Bias

Research papers have always intimidated me. Before embarking on this one, the longest paper I had written was a fourteen page marketing strategy of a Cuisinart slow cooker. It was my hope that the Academy would accept a collection of poems performed as prayer raps. This vision was dashed by the seminary's affinity for footnotes and scholarly sources. As a compromise to my seminary and myself, I wrote both a research paper and a collection of annotated prayer raps.

I did not intend to write an account on race relations. The poetic gift of rapping is something that I have used on social occasions, and I feel pride in seeing other Jews perform as rap artists. I did not think much of the appropriation of Black artists until I did research on the history of rap music. After such research, I felt uncomfortable ignoring the issue of appropriation. My research has shown me how racism has prevented some ethnicities from music performance opportunities that others have received. This is very much related to the historical role Jews have had in contemporary American music.

In any event, I am sensitive to my own journey and do not feel comfortable using terms, metaphors, or reference points that stand outside my own experience. This includes swear words and promoting beliefs that would make me inauthentic to my own personal history and research. After cultivating sensitivity to the racial circumstances that positioned Jews as interpreters of Black music, I am stating here: This is not a joint statement on the Black Jewish narrative, only one person's opinion on Jews in the rap industry.

A major criticism of Black/Jewish dialog is that Jews speak, often unwarranted, for Blacks and other non-White people. While I put a lot of diffuse material together into a narrative, I encourage the reader to do their own research, to judge individuals as individuals, and to empathize with the stranger. Music is a very contagious substance, and it's often unclear whom influenced who, in style, in tastes, and in regards to business acumen. Please be reluctant to extend one character's behavior on the whole expression of a people.

I have chosen to capitalize the words Black and White in regard to skin color. If those terms appear in a quote, I leave them as they were, punctuated by their original author. Swear words are edited to preserve the academic integrity of the paper, despite how they appear in rap lyrics. Citations follow the Chicago APA style. "One who cites a source brings redemption to the world" Avot 6:6.

## Introduction: Jewish participation in American Hip Hop

One cannot follow rap and hip-hop billboards without an awareness of some Jewish presence. In this predominantly African-American music genre, recent Jewish chart-toppers such as Drake, Mac Miller, Matisyahu, Lil' Dicky, and The Beastie Boys (beginning in the 80s), are more than mere prodigious anomalies. These Jewish rappers are genuine contributors to the ever developing and commercializing art form known as "rap" or "hip hop." The Beastie Boys crossed from Punk Rock (known originally as "graffiti rock") to create the first rap album to go platinum. From performing artists to music industry managers themselves, there is a decided mark of Jewish influence on hip hop culture.<sup>1</sup>

The public reception of rap music depends on a track's perceived legitimacy which hinges on the artist's own struggle for authenticity. "White" suburban Jews are often suspected of falsifying their place in the rap game. This is primarily attributed to rap music being associated, beginning around the mid to late 1970s, with its originators who were poor inner city people of color. Modern American Jews, now mostly accepted as "White," clearly do not belong to this demographic. Despite this lack of perceived legitimacy, often called street credibility, each year finds more Jewish success stories on the Rap/Hip Hop billboards.

In the late 1990s it was sensational to have a White rapper, Eminem, as the uncontested best-selling hip hop artist, a first for the industry. It was even more astonishing to see Drake's 2010 album "Thank Me Later," released as the #1 on the Billboard 200 rankings, since Drake is a professed Jew. Drake is the son of a Black father and a Jewish mother, and while he is careful not to define himself exclusively in religious terms, he still doesn't shy away from his identity.<sup>2</sup> Rap music is intimately linked to the expression of one's personal identity, and personal truth is critical for one's legitimacy in hip hop expression and any subsequent commercial success within the community.

Jews and their reconciliation of "Jewishness" within a parent culture is a common immigrant story. No matter the era, the rebellious child determined to explore a new form of expression while retaining their born identity is a familiar Jewish myth.<sup>3</sup> From the Eastern European Third Wave of immigrants to New York City in the 1880s to the 1920s, popular American culture has captivated the soul of a people who longed to be accepted in the mainstream, and yet refused to give up their heritage. Although rap music's began in the late 1970s, the Jewish contribution to performing hip hop should be viewed as a continuous platform by which Jewish artists have always found new venues and methods to reinvent themselves and express the yearnings of

---

<sup>1</sup> The terms "Rap" and "Hip-Hop" are used interchangeably over the course of this paper, as they share the same billboard category, though "Hip Hop" is a more expansive art form that includes B-boy (breakdancing) MCing, DJing, and graffiti art. *That's the Joint: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, second ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 29.

<sup>2</sup> One of Drake's music videos "HYFR," is filmed as his re-Bar Mitzvah. I would cite the lyrics, but there are no relevant Jewish quotes. In this case, the Bimah and the Jewish religion itself is used as a prop.

<sup>3</sup> Al Jolson's role in "The Wedding Singer," the story of a cantor's son who runs away to sing jazz in nightclubs could be seen as a cultural myth and a precursor to stories about Jews in the rap industry.

their soul.<sup>4</sup> The Jewish contributions to popular music include ragtime blues, jazz, rock and roll, and the main focus of this research, rap.

The often tenuous relationship between Blacks and Jews is a focal point in the development of American “rap,” or “hip hop” music. While American rap music is a collaboration of many ethnic contributors, it is primarily acknowledged as a Black art form.<sup>5 6</sup> A quick online search of Jews in rap music will yield Zionist conspiracy theories in the form of long standing anti-Semitic fears between Blacks and Jews in the music industry; that “White” Jews are taking advantage of Blacks. There are also many YouTube videos about Rappers bragging that they avoided prison time through their Jewish lawyer.<sup>7</sup> Though “Whiteness” is seen as inauthentic in hip hop culture, and thus challenges Judaism’s place in America’s mainstream rap, these claims negate a critical and historic Jewish role as “middleman” between cultures. Each culture has its own baggage, and while successful Jewish rappers are keen on respecting and (mostly) avoiding appropriation, their role is a natural adaptation to being an intermediary. Thus, Jewish rappers have developed ways to shield or accentuate their identity in order to achieve success in spite of these commonly divisive ethnic fears.<sup>8</sup>

This thesis will be split into five parts. Part One will describe Jewish music in biblical times, showing a biblical precedent to the importance of meter and composition in rhythm and rhyme. Part Two will trace the American music scene beginning in the 1880s to the 1970s, demonstrating the fractious nature of Jews as a political group, the splintering of Black Jewish relationships, and the continuous promise of shared economic prospects in the music industry. Part Three describes the conditions surrounding the birth of rap music itself, the Jewish role in commercializing rap, and the anti-establishment tendencies of “gangsta rap.” “Gangsta rap” both lends “legitimacy” to the art form and has the capacity to alienate Jewish people from their

---

<sup>4</sup> “Although the hip-hop culture and rap music emerged in the United States as a subculture and musical genre dominated by African American and Latino minority groups, Jewish artists, producers, and executives have played a significant role in the hip-hop industry since its commercial breakthrough in the early 1980s.”

Sina A. Nitzsche and Walter Grußzweig, *Hip-hop in Europe: Cultural Identities and Transnational Flows* (Zürich: LIT, 2013), 389.

<sup>5</sup> “Rap is a highly appropriative music, borrowing inventively from myriad sources in the creation of new sonic forms.”

*That’s the Joint*, 43.

<sup>6</sup> “As we have seen, Rap is the postmodern version of an African American vernacular tradition that stretches back to chants, Toasts, and trickster tales.”

Bradley and DuBois, *The Anthology*, xxiii.

<sup>7</sup> “References to the Jewish religion and culture can be found occasionally in mainstream rap music. However, they are by and large limited to stereotyped images and often reveal anti-Semitic tendencies within the hip-hop culture.”

Nitzsche and Grußzweig, *Hip-hop in Europe*, 389.

<sup>8</sup> Lil Dicky has a song reclaiming the Jewish derogatory word, “Kike,” as Black people have done for the N-word. His music video for “All K,” opens with the text, “The N-word is the most commonly uttered word in hip hop, but he cannot say it. In a rap landscape littered with hardened criminals, hyper masculinity, and irrational swagger, a mild mannered Jewish boy can struggle for acceptance.” This video’s opening line acknowledges the double standard of ethnic slurs in rap, and questions the politics of identity.

Lil Dicky, *All K (Official Video)*, Self Released, 2013.

traditional role in music production. Part Four is an analysis of contemporary Jewish rappers with particular interest to their representation of authenticity and self-defined identity. Part Five describes my own journey in performing rap and the subsequent potential I have found to use rap music as a way to bridge cultures in modern prayer. I have included my own prayer raps as well.

## Part One: Biblical History

The Jewish music tradition extends well into biblical times, with the Hebrew Bible being the primary source of knowledge regarding ancient Israel's music. The first biblical reference to music is in Genesis 4:21, and states that Jubal was the "father of all such as handle the 'kinnor' and 'uggav'" (translated as the "harp and the organ" or "pipe").<sup>9</sup> This establishes music as something that, according to medieval commentators, is shared across all Abrahamic faiths. The purpose of music in the Hebrew Bible is multifaceted; it is ritualistic, magical, ecstatic, therapeutic, official, military, prophetic, political and more. Transcendence via music as a way to unite people to action is key in the religious experience of both contemporary and biblical music.

Some notable examples of the Bible's use of music are:

- The first collective action taken by the Israelite people upon their freedom from Pharaoh is to break into song and dance, led by Miriam's timbrel playing at the Sea of Reeds (Exodus 15:20). This is an example of spontaneous music used in celebration as that song and rhythm are incorporated into dance.<sup>10</sup>
- The spirit of prophecy rests on King Saul (1 Sam. 10:5-6) as prophets are playing instruments. This is an example of the prophetic power of music giving Saul insight into divine matters. Here the theological message is one with the musical delivery.
- King Saul uses drums to celebrate after his victory over the Philistines (1 Sam. 18:7). This describes singing and dancing after a military success.
- King David dances in joyful ecstatic praise of God before the Ark of the Covenant (2 Sam. 6), another example of the importance of rhythm in music and ecstatic praise illustrating and enhancing a personal theological relationship.
- King David brings the Holy Ark to Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 15:28), "Thus all Israel brought up the ark of the Covenant of the Lord with shouting, and with sound of the shofar, and with trumpets and with cymbals." This is not an individual experience, but here the whole people are together relating to God through ritual, music and movement.

---

<sup>9</sup> Amnon Shiloah, *Jewish Musical Traditions*, ed. Raphael Patai, Jewish Folklore and Anthropology Series (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 39.

<sup>10</sup> Dancing is critical in the importance of modern hip hop music - the reason why a song will be popular in a club is often due to its movement. The merging of music and dance through percussion is emphasized in hip hop as a genre (through breakdancing, see section 3). While the Bible did not preconfigure modern dance, it does show instances of cooperative movement in music and ritual, often in ecstasy.

- In Psalm 150, traditionally ascribed to King David, there is a description of a service praising God with horns, harps, timbrels, pipes, loud sounding cymbals, and clanging cymbals. This arrangement of musical technology is incorporated into worship, which would most likely have been accompanied by dancing.

## Instruments and Biblical Sound

There are some sixteen different names for musical instruments in the Hebrew Bible, from drums to pipes to horns etc.<sup>11</sup> To understand about what musical instruments would be used, and how they would they sound, one would need to compare the biblical accounts to rabbinic sources and archaeological evidence of other ancient societies such as Egypt, Greece, and Mesopotamia. Clues, such as coins found from the Bar Kokhba mint (132-135 c.e.) bear trumpets and lyres, make it possible to compare musical instruments found along the Mediterranean Basin.

The three main kinds of biblical instruments are a) string b) wind and c) percussion. “Their music is still to-day, as it was in the past, largely rhythmical, rather than melodious and harmonious. No one can deny that they had melody; but rhythm played a more prominent part than melody or harmony. Their love for strong accentuation and rhythm is exemplified in ancient Hebrew Poetry, which was accentual; while the poetry of the Greeks, in contrast, was quantitative.”<sup>12 13</sup>

The similarities between biblical noise and modern rap music are noted here not to show that one style invariably led to the other, but instead to demonstrate the importance of certain elements of rhythm and tone in music altogether. The sounds of modern hip-hop are not derived from Biblical music, there are almost two thousand years of diasporic influence and technological innovation between the eras, but by acknowledging certain similarities we can show how these expressions share a common thread in society.

## What Connects Rap to the Bible?

Poetry found in the Bible is hard to discern since it can be read orally in more than one way or in a way we do not necessarily know how to read. Because rap, can be read to a certain meter and it can employ ambiguous metaphors, the poetic nature of rap is similarly elusive. There is a legitimate difficulty in determining if a Bible section is a song, or a poem, or both. If we settle on

---

<sup>11</sup> While these names represent different musical instruments, there is no universal understanding on exactly what types of instruments these reference, “some scholars interpret “kinor” and “uggav” as metaphors for two families of instruments: the chordophones and aerophones.” The word for drum can apply to any sized percussion drum in biblical times. Shiloah, *Jewish Musical*, 39.

<sup>12</sup> Sol Baruch Finesinger, “Musical Instruments in OT,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 3 (1926): 4, accessed August 28, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23502521>.

<sup>13</sup> The description of biblical music here is consistent with modern raps, where the rhythm of spoken word follows a beat rather than a harmony, as described later, this is called a rapper’s “flow.”

the assumption that poetry performed with instruments is a song, then rap and the poetry in The Bible have many similarities, albeit with key differences.

The major difference between rap and standard poetic forms comes from rap's African heritage of chants, toast, and trickster tales. These specific poetic devices often rest on the personal experience, using words like "me" or "I," were never codified and can be altered indefinitely. Thematic similarities are found in both diasporic cultures, (e.g. biblical trickster tales: how Laban tricked Jacob, how Jacob tricked Laban, and how Jacob tricked Esau).

The differences between the Bible and contemporary rap are in the performance of the art itself.<sup>14</sup> We will never know how the poem was performed in the Bible, if it was indeed a song or not, and it is up to us to how to deliver them. With rap music, it is also up to the performer to bridge the gap between poem and song. "Every rap song is a poem waiting to be performed. Written or freestyled, rap has a poetic structure that can be reproduced, a deliberate form an MC creates for each rhyme that differentiates it, if only in small ways, from every rhyme ever conceived."<sup>15</sup> There is no unified consensus on the difference between poetry and rap, yet some major ones are: the way a person performs the lines of the poem in real time (conforming to the beat), the commercial viability of the rap song itself, and the significance of music employed behind the words.<sup>16</sup> The Bible is not usually performed in a rap, though groups like "The Bible Players," "Bible Raps," and "The Beat Midrash," indeed turn it into one.<sup>17</sup> If one is fluent enough in Hebrew, they can create appropriate vowel and consonant stresses to rap the Torah; there are even sections of Bible that lend themselves more easily to this performance art form.<sup>18</sup> The stories that are easiest to apply this performance aspect to are categorized as "oral stories." These oral stories are older than the majority of the Bible text, and simple linguistic keys direct how to perform their oral readings.

---

<sup>14</sup> Thematic deviations are easier to discern. Two such African themes that stand culturally apart from normative Judaism are: the theme of one's sexual prowess (found in "Boasts," which stands against rabbinic injunctions warning of sexuality and "haughtiness"), and the tradition of rap battles, which is a verbal competition in African culture (a form of confrontation that stand against Jewish values such as avoiding embarrassing another person, and "Klal Yisrael," the unity of Jews). While both Judaism and African folk culture is patriarchal, the description of masculinity in these diasporic cultures are expressed in very different ways.

<sup>15</sup> Bradley and DuBois, *The Anthology*, xi.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, some raps use samples of well-known songs which contribute to their popularity. Some songs are easy to dance to (and contain words that rhyme with the bass beat rather than the rhyme scheme of the poetic lines themselves). Some songs are politically charged in ways that give them popularity beyond their musical appeal. There is a trend in rap music today to sing some lines, which further confuses the boundary between rap songs and rhythm & blues style music.

<sup>17</sup> I have performed a Torah portion in rap form for another student's cantorial practicum. It was possible by first creatively translating a section of three sentences into English, and second by stressing and pausing at appropriate breaks in the rhythm. I would caution the performer in portraying Torah in this way, as it is a personal interpretation and beyond the "pshat" of the text, sometimes even the Masoretic punctuation.

<sup>18</sup> This type of performance would also be challenged by the denomination of Judaism the audience is; if one were to use music to perform the Bible as a rap, it may be considered profane by certain branches of Judaism.



Slam poetry is not affixed to a beat and a meter. Commercial rap, however, is something that people must be able to move to, as it has its origins in breakdancing (see later section in essay). Thus, by depending on a consistent beat and verbal “flow,” the major difference between rap and The Bible is in how a rap conforms to a designated pace, whereas The Bible can be applied incongruously to flow based on the certain passages, not continuously. “Rather than resembling the dominant contemporary form of free verse... rap bears a stronger affinity to some of poetry’s oldest forms, such as the strong stress meter of Beowulf and the ballad stanzas of the bardic past. As in metrical verse, the length of rap’s lines are governed by established rhythms - in rap’s case, the rhythm of the beat itself.” This means that the drum is quite possibly the most important instrument to the rapper, and it is therefore clear that the multiple names of the drum found in the Bible are no coincidence and critical for connecting rap to a biblical precedent. The problems we encounter determining the type of music in The Bible are the same issues we have with assessing the quality of rap music itself; the boundaries between poetry and music are extraordinarily thin. Appropriately enough, in Hebrew, the word “shir” means both poem and song. Using the biblical Psalms, an accepted poetic form, we can analyze more specific similarities between poetry and song.

### **Psalms as an Example: Poetic Song, Finding a Beat**

The Psalms are organized more so on the basic convention of semantic parallelism (specific verbal constructions used repeatedly and successively) rather than phonetic and syntactic elements in the system.<sup>19</sup> That is not to say that alliteration, rhythm, rhyme, meter, and other musical devices are not found in the Psalms, or the Hebrew Bible itself, however they are often secondary to the theological outlook of the poem, the focus being the emphasis of the psalmist.<sup>20</sup> The journey of the psalmist is usually a thematic and ethical message that leads the psalmist to be saved, redeemed, or assisted by divine intervention. These mythological messages help the Psalms stay relevant regardless of the time period one reads it in, aesthetic performance of the piece aside. Similar soulful yearnings are found in contemporary musical art.<sup>21</sup>

A parallel structure was used in the composition of the Psalms. “Vast possibilities for a wealth of variation and poetic adaptability were thus opened up, even though Ancient Near Eastern poetry did not have at its disposal every imaginable, extravagant kind of creativity for free and easy use.”<sup>22</sup> Further, while “A number of scholars deny the presence of metrics within the OT

---

<sup>19</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (n.p.: Basic Books, inc., Publishers, 1985), ix.

<sup>20</sup> An example of meter sensitivity can be found in “oral stories” passed down before the codification of the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>21</sup> Ethical messages are common in rap music, early rap was even known as “conscious rap,” which sought to elevate life above the circumstance of the harsh street. A famous example of a spiritual rap: In 2005, Kanye West was nominated for a Grammy for, “Jesus Walks,” off his album “The College Dropout,” describing how Jesus walks with the sinner and saint alike. This song was recorded with a gospel choir, with a capella noises. In the video, West is a preacher in a Baptist church. West was nominated for “Best Gospel Artist” in the 2005 BET awards.

<sup>22</sup> Hans-Joachim Kraus, “Commentaries,” in *Psalms 1-59: A Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988), 33.

altogether. Others again, while considering it possible that there were once in ancient times metrical laws, dismiss the possibility of reconstructing them.”<sup>23</sup> Even if we could understand the meter used in biblical poetry, the pronunciation of the actual vowels has shifted and been recast, affecting the possibility of our perceived meter on the Psalms.<sup>24</sup> The themes of redemption, survival, love and longing are more important to connecting to our modern American style of rap music than an ill-fated in-depth analysis of the rhythmic flow of biblical poetry.

Dancing, is a movement that requires rhythm, poetically found in matching meter with words. Research has shown that there is poetic meter in ancient Egyptian and Akkadian verses, which has opened up research in finding the meter within biblical psalms. The two main theories are that Biblical Psalms use either an A) “Alternating system that is based on trochaic and iambic (disyllabic) feet”, or a B) “accenting system...consists of quaternary measures that carry an anapestic accent.”<sup>25</sup>

For the purposes of this paper, with a focus on American popular music, the research done by the above Wissenschaft scholars is enough to prove that the Biblical authors were aware of meter, though they subserved it to the theological message of their psalm.<sup>26</sup> The Psalms may be songs set to music and beat, and yet due to the difficulty in resurrecting their performance, they may not exactly apply to popular rap music outside obvious thematic tones.<sup>27</sup> Regardless, these examples show that from the cradle of civilization, religious cognizance included rhyme, meter, alliteration, and oral stress as elements crucial to poetic form.

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 34.

<sup>24</sup> Ironically, because of differences in word pronunciation, slang, and the use of ethnic phrases in hip hop, there is no consensus to rhyming words between rappers of different regions. This means that when reading a rap from a British rapper, or from a rapper in the American South, each rap may appear to be less uniform than when read in the rap’s native tongue. This is especially the case if one is unfamiliar with the normative stress of the regional area. There is a similarity between the Bible’s shifting pronunciation and the territorial and regional differences of rap. Once an oral story is punctuated and codified, it can lose its necessary regional and metrical emphasis to be perceived as song.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 34-35

<sup>26</sup> This suspension of meter to produce a message (in the Psalms, a theological one) is sometimes common in modern rap music, where the tempo breaks and the flow is interrupted to give the rap artist the ability to speak to the listener, unencumbered by the beat. This is similar to breaking the 3rd wall in cinematography, where the protagonist gets to address the audience. In rap music, to be able to suspend the beat requires a particular fluency with musical equipment such as recording and looping devices.

<sup>27</sup> Often lines from popular psalms become repurposed as rap lyrics or refrains. Two popular examples are as follows: the #1 biggest US *Billboard* selling single of 1995 was “Gangsta’s Paradise,” by rap artist Coolio. Beginning with Psalm 23:4, “As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...” it diverges to talk about life on the streets. Another artist known for her activism, Lauryn Hill (a successful single artist and member of the Haitian group “Fugees” - short for refugees) has lyrics off her album “The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill,” song title “Final Hour.” “And I remain calm reading the 73rd psalm, ‘cause with all this going on I got the world in my palm.” These messages convey a sincere sense of hope in God despite turmoil amidst their personal journey - a very common theme in all music, rap and the Psalms notwithstanding.

## Part Two: History of 1880s to the 1970s

### The Birth of American Popular Music: An Outsiders' Partnership between Jews and Blacks

Between 1880 and 1920 more than two million Jews from the countries of Eastern Europe immigrated to the United States.<sup>28</sup> These Jews were struggling to “synthesize the ideals and values of their familiar Jewish religious culture with the demands and enticements of the modern secular world.”<sup>29</sup> Unlike the predominantly German immigrants before them, who had ascended to their own socioeconomic class within America and had been considered full German citizens at the time of their immigration, it was these new Jews from the Pale of Settlement who were not accepted as citizens upon their departure from the Pale, and yet were already habituated to viewing themselves as a distinctly other class while inhabiting their “mother country.”<sup>30</sup> A full 25 percent of these new American immigrants were children under the age of fourteen, and 43 percent were women.<sup>31</sup> The Third Wave of immigration produced mainly young families seeking to build an identity and a new life for themselves. These immigrants dwelled in the city tenement slums in the vicinity of Black neighborhoods, and brought with them religious customs and rituals from their mostly Ashkenazic Jewish tradition.

Poetically and musically, the wanderings of Jews in diaspora had created unique opportunities for them as cultural middlemen, “Existing outside the regular feudal and estate categories, but not isolated from them, their [the Jews] very presence in Christendom was partly a consequence the roles they played as economic mediators between the different sectors of the non-Jewish society.”<sup>32</sup> <sup>33</sup> This function as mediators between different classes and estates, religious groups, ethnicities, and classes helped give Jewish composers a leg up in the music business.<sup>34</sup> By being exposed to more sources, and sharing a history of education and literacy, Jews could capitalize on their consumption and recreation of art; they were trained to appropriate music to their liturgy.<sup>35</sup> Under the Russian czars, there was a law that a Jew could

---

<sup>28</sup> Gerald Sorin, *A Time for Building: The Third Migration*, second ed. (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1992), 1.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* page 1.

<sup>30</sup> The Pale of Settlement was a large portion of Eastern Europe set aside by Russian czars to keep Jews apart from the general population, often allowing them to be victims to attacks such as pogroms instigated by urban mobs. These Jews were considered foreigners, and their own ethnic class of people: Jew.

<sup>31</sup> Sorin, *A Time*, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jonathan Karp, eds., *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 58.

<sup>33</sup> The function of cultural middleman is even evident in one of the treasures of the Cairo Geniza, a notation of Gregorian chant in the form of a song about Moses, written by an Italian convert to Judaism in the 1100s.

Mark S. Glickman, *Sacred Treasure - the Cairo Geniza: The Amazing Discoveries of Forgotten Jewish History in an Egyptian Synagogue Attic* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2011), 168.

<sup>34</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Karp, *The Art of Being*, 58.

<sup>35</sup> “Many cherished memories are built upon earlier songs, including the familiar settings of the Hanukkah prayer Maoz Tzur... This practice also demonstrates the powerful force of the Hebrew language in transforming a recognizably secular melody into a liturgical song.”

not live in Moscow unless he or she was a performing musician (ostensibly to entertain the rich).<sup>36</sup> As a tangible example of the power of “contrafacta,” (the appropriation of a tune for a liturgical purpose) Ashkenazi Jews brought German drinking melodies into their sacred prayers, and the same would be true of Russian folk tunes and American popular music in New York City.<sup>37</sup> Inversely, liturgical music could become popular musical hits as jazz and showtunes.

When Jews had finally arrived on the foreign shores of America, they didn’t hesitate to remake it into their home. The Yiddish theater was an example of the marriage between the secular American and the religious Jewish world. By producing a unique form of cultural synthesis, (i.e. Shakespeare in Yiddish, ragtime and swing) a new era of Jewish minstrels redefined popular music in America. “By 1918 the city (New York City) boasted twenty Yiddish theaters, which, in a single year - before the inroads of movies - attracted two million patrons to over a thousand performances.”<sup>38</sup> The melismatic sliding around a note, central to African American blues and jazz singing, is a central feature in Jewish cantorial singing.<sup>39</sup> It was this cultural fusion that birthed the popular vaudeville acts associated with the turn of the century, and into the roaring 1920s.<sup>40</sup>

Blacks during this time period also experienced a profound migration, “Before the dawn of the 20th century, 90 percent of all blacks lived in the American South. Between 1910 and 1920, the

---

Jonathan L. Friedmann, *Social Functions of Synagogue Song: A Durkheimian Approach* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 53.

<sup>36</sup> Ben Sidran, *There Was a Fire: Jews, Music and the American Dream*, third ed. (n.p.: Nardis Books, 2015), 20.

<sup>37</sup> “Just as many operatic melodies found their way into synagogue music, so were many elements of the latter carried into the Jewish theatre. [One such artist] Goldfaden... derived his themes from various Jewish folklore sources, from Ukrainian and Rumanian songs, from operas by Verdi and Halevi, and quite extensively, from liturgical chants by Shestopal, Naumburg, and others. Goldfaden, who died in New York in 1908, was in a sense a diamond in the rough, a natively gifted but unschooled musician. But what he did is true of the Jewish theatre as a whole.”

Jacob Frumkin, Gregor Aronson, and Alexis Goldenweiser, eds., *Russian Jewry (1860-1917)*, trans. Mirra Ginsburg (South Brunswick, NJ: Thomas Yoseloff, 1966), 312.

<sup>38</sup> Gerald Sorin, *A Time for Building: The Third Migration*, second ed. (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1992), 99.

<sup>39</sup> President Henry Ford was quoted on the subject of Jewish Jazz, “The mush, slush, the sly suggestion, the abandoned sensuousness of sliding notes are of Jewish origin.”

Eric J. Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 184.

<sup>40</sup> This type of music would work up a reputation as being a form of sexualized immigrant music. Brothels would often hire pianists to play ragtime and swing music, popularizing the myth that Jewish and Black immigrants shared in promoting ragtime and swing, “Jazz and ragtime, as many people understood them, owed their existence to the sordid environment of the brothel.” “The other social space which encouraged ideas about race mixing was the dance hall.” “One reason why ragtime, Jazz, and blues came to hold so much cultural energy in the early decades of the twentieth century is that they could incorporate these images of mixture.” “African Americans and Jews were not only objects of this discourse; the musical world provided a space where African Americans and Jews could speak to, and about, each other. Jews in the music business in particular, drew connections between themselves and African Americans in order to create a narrative about ethnic origins of the music which then became operational as a national mythology.”

Jeffrey Paul Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 21, 25.

first large wave of modern migration by southern blacks had begun. Those ten years saw Detroit's black population increase 600 percent, Cleveland's blacks grow by 300 percent, Chicago's by 150 percent, and the black population of New York, Philadelphia, and Cincinnati double."<sup>41</sup> Black itinerant workers, in pursuit of economic and legal equality, were looked at sympathetically by successful Jews who had achieved commercial success and status. An obvious Black-Jewish relationship was highlighted by the heavily Jewish presence founding the NAACP in 1909.<sup>42</sup> It was the promise of these advancement opportunities that bonded Blacks and Jews together in society, and would in later eras, politically separate them.<sup>43</sup> For Jews who remembered the Pogroms in Russia, the American lynch mob looked eerily similar; The Yiddish Forward wrote in 1917, "The same soil, the same people." Thus, the cultural otherness of the early 20th century was a mutually shared experience in urban areas by Blacks, Jews, and all immigrants. This identity reconciliation became a central focus of New York City's musical art at the turn of the century.

Despite the similarities, there were key differences in the Jewish and Black symbolic understanding of the American promise. Jews were not captured and brought to America as slaves centuries earlier, but had scrounged and saved up to make the passage of immigration; this was a choice made as free men, albeit dirt poor free men. Jews came to America with a cultural heritage of scholarship, often with a trade and literacy. The Jewish oral tradition of the diaspora was preserved in text form to be studied and taken wherever itinerant Jews went in the diaspora, even to America, while the African oral tradition never made that codification, and slavery and displacement ruptured their oral culture. Jews inherited a German American history of institution building. German Jews had previously paved the way for the Eastern European immigrants, building an infrastructure to absorb new waves, despite looking down upon them.<sup>44</sup> For new Jewish American citizens, there was a promoted survival strategy buttressed by family and faith based support systems. They did not experience the big gaping hole in the community infrastructure caused by American institutional and systemic racism.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Maurianne Adams and John Bracey, eds., *Strangers and Neighbors: Relations between Blacks and Jews in the United States* (n.p.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid 457.

<sup>43</sup> Sears Roebuck's first Jewish president and professed "friend of the Negro," Julius Rosenwald, gave \$63 million to causes that included Blacks, he was quoted as saying to a colored YMCA "I belong to a race that has suffered," and to a white YMCA, "I won't give a cent unless you will include in it the building of a Colored Men's YMCA." Rosenwald also agreed to eat any losses from the Black and White allies coalition movie, "The Birth of a Race," an antidote to D.W. Griffith's post-Civil War Reconstruction movie, "The Birth of a Nation." *ibid.* p.458

<sup>44</sup> In the realm of performance arts, German Jewish Broadway titans like Rodgers and Hammerstein, represent gateways into theater. While authentically American, and religiously secular, Rodgers (1902-1979) grew up going to a sleep-a-way camp where he was paid to write and present a musical production every Sunday night. "With all the added connotations that 'camp' has acquired over the years, Camp Paradox could serve as the title of a Broadway show about a bunch of young Jewish geniuses who wanted to recreate themselves, but wound up recreating American culture in the process." David Lehman, *Jewish Encounters*, ed. Jonathan Rosen, Nextbook (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 2009), 125.

<sup>45</sup> From the Jewish standpoint, there is a dual motivation for the Jewish Black coalition: Are Jews motivated to support African Americans because it cements their own race position as more "White?" or do Jews support African Americans out of an authentic sense of guilt and empathy, emanating from a

There was a significant cultural similarity in language and humor. The Jewish common language was Yiddish, a language built on dualities, dichotomies, irony, double entendres, and street humor. This type of dialect has similar qualities to the emergent properties that came out of America's Black communities.<sup>46</sup> Yiddish humor is rooted in Jewish literature as far back as the Talmud and the Hebrew Bible. During the European ghetto existence, Yiddish writers combined irony and sarcasm to infuse life's difficulties with humor. These sarcastic communication devices share characteristics relating to being victimized, whether in the American South or throughout the diasporic history of the Jewish people, however Blacks and Jews are distinctly different in the nature of their oppression and thus the linguistic similarities are just that, similarities; their experiences cannot be equated. As an example, there is a famous *vitz* or Yiddish philosophical witticism about a lion that was loose in the streets of the ghetto. When an elderly Jew walks out of his store to inquire about the chaos in the street, he is told "There's a lion!" The elder promptly responds, "Well, is it good for the Jews or bad for the Jews?"<sup>47</sup> This is the particularity of a minority culture: assessing events in the framework of one's own people and tribe, often inverting society's general good and welfare for the group's own particular good and welfare. There are similar "trickster tales" within Black culture where personal good is inverted and stands against societal good (i.e. when something is 'bad' it's really 'good'), yet the threat of the lion in the ghetto is inquired for the Jewish people alone, as each culture repurposes their own characters for their own benefit.<sup>48</sup> Thus, as we shall see throughout American history, often Blacks and Jews are aligned, in class, in art, in politics, and in ethics,

---

shared persecuted past? This question of dual motivation can undermine the perceived loyalty of one group to the other, emphasizing the role of gatekeeper. When this assumption of motivation is read back into history, it can overtly manipulate an individual or a group's legacy. When generalized to a whole people, it can make all Jews look selfish. "While leading African Americans seemed most interested in achieving basic civil rights gains through cultural productions, Jews looked into culture as a vehicle to enter the privileged domain of whiteness, American style. We might mark off the two approaches through a shorthand: African Americans hoped their cultural contributions would convince white America that they were *people* who entertained, while Jews hoped their contributions would remind white America that they were *entertaining* people."

Melnick, *A Right*, 31.

<sup>46</sup> Sidran, *There Was a Fire*, 19

<sup>47</sup> Hutchins Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto: Studies of the Jewish Quarter of New York* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1966), xv.

<sup>48</sup> This inversion is known to elevate counter-culture characters to positions of preeminence in both Jewish and Black culture. In Judaism, the figure of the 1920s prohibition gangster is nostalgically venerated in books like Rich Cohen's "Tough Jews." Chutzpah, and sometimes even violence, is remembered fondly, despite it being at odds with traditional yeshivish culture. A specific example of this counter-culture inversion is found in Black culture as the "baadman." In the 1960s, the "baadman" is repurposed and applied to the burgeoning sexuality of the era to produce the figure of the "pimp." This "pimp" figure is idealized in contemporary rap culture as masculine. "The *pimp*, not just any baadman, became an emblematic figure of the period, elevated to the status of hero and invoked by Hollywood as well as in the writings of Black Nationalist militants like H. Rap Brown, Eldridge Cleaver, Bobby Seale, and Huey P. Newton. Aside from film and popular literature, the pimp appeared in a proliferation of sensationalist autobiographies, scholarly ethnographies, and 'urban folklore,' collections of incarcerated hustlers."

William Eric Perkins, *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 141.

and often Blacks and Jews are separated by major distinctions - in class, in politics, and in skin color being the most obvious.

This is where the sensitivities and judgments of the modern era need to be temporarily suspended, as “Jews did not invent a wholly new place for themselves in American popular culture but instead made their first major incursion into the market as blackface performers.”<sup>49</sup> Al Jolson, Irving Berlin, Sophie Tucker, Eddie Cantor. These were the great Yiddish performers that felt drawn to the commercial opportunity of theater, and to the soulful expression of Black culture, that they donned makeup and adapted African American music. “On one hand, Jews wanted to be Americans totally. On the other hand, they also needed to be ‘other’ in order to exist as Jews. By identifying with blacks, they were able to accomplish both: Jews were guaranteed to be connected to the true American outsider experience. And by identifying with black America, Jews were guaranteed their ‘otherness’ because of the simple fact they could never *be* black.”<sup>50 51</sup>

The real sense of perpetual loss that American Blacks experienced in the abduction and subsequent enslavement from their mother country Africa was not the same erstwhile tale of “golden opportunity,” that American Jews fantasized about. For Jews who were arriving in America, free advancement classes taught in Yiddish, like the Educational Alliance programs, actualized the hope of assimilation and acceptance as an achievable and realistic goal. Jewish skin color was mostly pale. Thus to Jews, New York City was a modern shtetl and an idealized haven. For Blacks torn from their roots by slavery, New York City (and all northern manufacturing cities) was a mere refuge from the American South, a magnet of commercial opportunity, nothing more. The seeds of societal mistrust were sown deep in the African American psyche, and the goal of assimilation was thought to be illegitimate and impossible for them, as they would always remain Black. However harsh this reality, economic success seemed to be possible and that has always been a bond between Jews and Blacks. Despite these key differences between Jewish and Black people (and all immigrants), the real musical melting pot of the American industrial city was found in the clubs.

### **New Technologies, No Barriers to Entry - Compositions with Ragtime Piano**

---

<sup>49</sup> Melnick, *A Right*, 37.

<sup>50</sup> Sidran, *There Was a Fire*, 19.

<sup>51</sup> There is a term in race relations called “gatekeeper,” whereby an individual acts as a filter to what is accessible to mainstream commercial opportunity. Jews, by being the non-White “middleman” position in the music industry, also inherited the role of “gatekeeper.” How much of the Jewish role as “middleman” between White and Black culture was motivated by empathy, and how much of the Jewish role was appropriation? “What is striking is that in the years just before 1920, when both black and white Tin Pan Alley composers engaged in similar fusion experiments, only the Jewish songwriters appeared to get the credit - or the blame. Part of the reason lies in the fact that Jewish songwriters, as participants in a Jewish ‘ethnic’ business whose bread and butter lay in its appeal to the American mainstream, possessed their own paradoxical self-interest in both promoting and suppressing the black origins of the popular music they were fashioning.” These are the questions deeply related to the individual artist, manager, and circumstance of the performer. In many ways, Black Jewish relations is connected to how well Jews as individuals are perceived in their capacity as “gatekeeper,” en masse. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Karp, eds., *The Art of Being*, 63.

Theater was a shared experience for all the newcomers. The piano was the tool par excellence to bring Jewish and Black compositions into the American mainstream, and that music was ragtime. Blues had been around since the Civil War, using a twelve bar structure made up of four bar increments, repeated and answered, to tell a story. It was not the high classical form of music associated with church prayer. This musical storytelling could be similar in message to the psalms of The Bible (redemption and prayer), but blues is less praising and more kvetching. Ragtime was slowed down and sped up and, in that way, was similar to the emphasis in show tunes, “‘Ragging’ a song generally meant taking liberties with the rhythm, injecting anticipation and forward motion by focusing on the upbeats rather than downbeats (also known as syncopation), while at the same time arpeggiating the chords and reweaving the melody throughout.”<sup>52</sup> This is consistent with the beauty of Middle Eastern music, “Improvisation based on certain set principles is a most important characteristic of Near Eastern music and ability to improvise is one of the measures of a player’s talent. Such improvisation demands a high degree of proficiency, accomplished technique, lively imagination, creative ability, and respect for the artistic standards of the performer’s social milieu and its musical traditions.”<sup>53</sup> It was also true that the minor scale and the blues pentatonic scale shared the same musical notes, just with a different emphasis. Both blues and ragtime found their home in the Yiddish theaters, parodying immigrant identities from all backgrounds. This art form was taken to Vaudeville, often performed in blackface, and always with a piano.<sup>54</sup>

“The popularity of ragtime coincided with the growing availability of pianos.”<sup>55</sup> Unlike established industries, with barriers to entry and stifling copyrights preventing immigrant newcomers, technological advancements that had been mass produced at the turn of the century created many business opportunities for Jewish immigrants. What the sewing machine did for fashion, the piano did for music: it was an instrument that could be purchased with a credit line, paid off over time, and there was no anti-Semitism to keep Jews out. Jews, trained in cantorial music, were uniquely adept at breaking into the new popular music market, “Many of the Jews participating in the production of popular music were sons of cantors.”<sup>56</sup> Since most music production houses specialized in Christian prayer music, an entirely different music mode than Black America’s ragtime and swing dancehall music, Jews stepped in to produce the sheet music to capitalize on the American need to dance. It was as if the mass movements of former

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid p. 36

<sup>53</sup> Shiloah, *Jewish Musical*, 18.

<sup>54</sup> “Stage minstrelsy did not only lead to the creation of metaphors connecting African Americans and Jews. It also served, for a time, as a switchboard connecting a loose network of Jewish businesspeople and artists. [Al] Jolson stands as a peerless example of the support Jews in various branches of the entertainment industry could offer one another. Jolson’s key career breaks relied equally on his popular representations of Blackness and the backing and promotion he received from Jewish theater owners, managers, and so on - not to mention the songs written for him by Jewish songwriters.” Melnick, *A Right*, 38.

<sup>55</sup> Sidran, *There Was a Fire*, 37

<sup>56</sup> “Al Jolson, along with the composers Harold Arlen and Irving Berlin, were all the sons of ‘cantors,’ although the fathers reached quite different levels of success in their profession. Some American Jewish folklore holds that Eddie Cantor’s father served in this role also, a claim which is difficult to substantiate.” Melnick 169 - 70.



slaves from the American South and shtetl immigrants from Eastern Europe coalesced into a hip shaking, butt moving, all-American style of dance that emphasized New York City's very own street dialect. It was none other than Irving Berlin who played this style of vaudeville music to the masses with his hit song, "Alexander's Ragtime Band," and the Shubert Brothers who would bring it to theaters across the country.<sup>57 58</sup>

There is a recurrent question that will appear in every era of American popular music: what is cultural appropriation? To many people, Berlin capitalized on an art form that the Jewish culture feels a sincere kinship with but for which it is not solely responsible. Irving Berlin used slang and rhythm from Black speech, created his own Yiddish American words, and played within rules of street talk that he did not create himself.<sup>59</sup> In light of the Talmudic saying, "whenever something is repeated in the name of the person who originally said it, redemption is brought into the world," were the great Yiddish performers stealing? The answer to that question depends on one's perspective. A satisfying answer that respects both sides is found in placing this experience in historical context: "It is important to remember that this was during a transitional period when black culture was both suspect and diffuse: it was only a few years since the disaster of Reconstruction, wherein African Americans in the South were victimized by Jim Crow laws, and only a few years prior to the formation of the great black neighborhoods like Harlem, and the possibility of a black 'renaissance.'"<sup>60</sup> To capitalize on music, immigrant music, there needed to be more than just a piano in a salon, there needed to be a stage, distribution channels, and more. In the immature music economy, immigrant performance in blackface can be understood as a necessary step in funding the arts.

A profound beauty of the Jewish religious tradition, as has been shown, is to move people while bringing together. After only two generations of freedom, with most Black Americans musically illiterate, the Jewish middleman copyrighted and mass-produced blues, ragtime, and swing music, as they had learned from being intermediaries in the "old country." This effort generated popular music culture and described New York City as an American melting pot. Jews mediated "blackness" into profitability, a risky, new, and uncharted place. Their productions were

---

<sup>57</sup> "The Jewish musical figure most responsible for the translation of blackface from stage performance into song was Irving Berlin; Berlin's most important early hit was "Alexander's Ragtime Band" (1911). Melnick, *A Right*, 42.

<sup>58</sup> Early in the twentieth century Jewish and Black musicians fought over claims of appropriation: "... the black composer Scott Joplin had already written two ragtime operas... Berlin may have even heard parts of the latter when his and Joplin's publishers shared offices in the same New York building... Joplin apparently believed Berlin had lifted the melody for 'Alexander's Ragtime Band' from *Treemonisha's* 'A Real Slow Rag,' an accusation Berlin vigorously dismissed." Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Karp, eds., *The Art of Being*, 63.

<sup>59</sup> As a testament to the cultural melting pot of the time period, during World War Two, the African American poetic narrative, "A Harlem Jive Spiel," was a popular one. The title incorporates a Yiddish word, "Spiel," with the "Harlem." Similar to Yiddish and Black humor, it inverts the term "baadness," to convey "goodness," with the author bragging about his sexual prowess.

Fernando Orejuela, *Rap and Hip Hop Culture* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 48-49

<sup>60</sup> Sidran, *There Was a Fire*, 49

adaptations of Black culture, and not exclusively authentic Black art.<sup>61</sup> Just as the Bible describes Miriam leading the mixed multitudes to dance after crossing the shores of the Sea of Reeds, people like Irving Berlin wrote “God Bless America,” and “Cheek to Cheek,” for the same contemporary purpose. These immigrant Jews longed to synthesize cultural tunes into authentic liturgy where the heart can express itself, and vice versa, putting their Judaism outright or discreetly in popular music culture. At its best, Jewish appropriation was a step in funding the arts of African Americans who had no venue to do so yet. As the original Jazz Singer author said, “Jazz is prayer.”<sup>62</sup> At this moment in history, Jews and Blacks were more or less aligned in their goals for economic prosperity, and a rising tide did raise all ships.<sup>63</sup>

### **Blacks and Blues and Jews All Over - The Roaring 20s, the Jazz Age, the Great Depression**

By the year 1920, Harlem was the largest Black ghetto in the country and a respite for the Black migrants who had escaped the Jim Crow south to search for better economic prospects in New York City. Black women found work as domestics in middle class White homes.<sup>64</sup> If factory work was unavailable, Black men took custodial work. Harlem wasn't just the home to Blacks, but to many groups of immigrants who held onto the ideals of American education, where hard work could overcome race discrimination and systemic poverty. Some of these Harlem denizens quickly formed gangs when they could not find promising livelihoods. For performers, segregation put Black performers at a severe disadvantage and there were better opportunities

---

<sup>61</sup> There are instances of authentic Black culture, such as rare artists who controlled their music production, “Two African Americans, Porter Grainger and Bob Ricketts, did run Rainbow Music, a song publishing concern, but even this business was in a subsidiary relationship with Irving Berlin’s publishing house.”

Melnick, *A Right*, 35.

<sup>62</sup> “Samson Raphaelson, author of the story ‘The Day of Atonement,’ on which the movie [The Jazz Singer] was based, insisted that ‘jazz is prayer’ and that the America that packed cabarets, musical revues, and dance halls was ‘praying with a fervor as intense as that of America which goes sedately to church and synagogue.’” The Jazz Singer movie is the story of Jack Robin (played by Al Jolson), whose father is a cantor, and who runs away on Kol Nidre to sing in blackface, in a jazz club. Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 226.

<sup>63</sup> This theme of appropriation will be returned to in every era, and is always specific to the artists and managers who represent them. All people have the capacity to be manipulative and ill-intentioned, this is a fact regardless of race. This is a power dynamic especially true in our current contemporary music economy, which is a mature market, with less individual bargaining opportunity. In the modern music industry, where funding for successful artists needs to come alongside publicity, management, copyright laws, and other white collar associate overhead fees, I believe the theme of appropriation does not comport to race lines, rather through case by case partnerships between artists and managers. The disproportionate amount of Jews in the music industry is a reality that can often carry anti-Semitic overtones, as working in the music industry is a very visible position that can reveal personal bias. Again, personal bias and racism should not be extended from one example to an entire group of people, despite generalizations that are commonly made in the rap music industry.

<sup>64</sup> Dan Charnas, *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop* (New York, NY: New American Library, 2010), 7.

for White performers if they were in blackface. Of course, there was always the option for black market employment.<sup>65</sup>

When the United States outlawed alcohol in 1920, it gift wrapped a multi-million dollar industry to scrappy immigrants.<sup>66</sup> Many of these opportunists had been desensitized to violence from witnessing pogroms in the old country (Jews), or experiencing the Mafia (Italians), or escaping the mobs of the American South (Blacks). For impoverished Harlem, the illegal lottery trade was one of the biggest employers of Blacks, and responsible for a perpetual influx of capital. This Black owned business was taken over by Dutch Schultz, a Jewish gangster born Authur Flegenheimer from Harlem, who had worked for gambling and bootlegging kingpin Arnold Rothstein, as the muscle riding on Rothstein's whiskey delivery trucks. “[Dutch] Schultz asked for a meeting with the black gangsters who ran numbers to a meeting... When they came in, Dutch set his forty-five on a desk and said, ‘I’m your partner now.’”<sup>67</sup> This type of arrangement between Black, Jewish and Italian gangs was also the basis for speakeasy management; the Cotton Club, the Savoy Ballroom, The Apollo Theater; all these jazz and swing ballrooms were owned by Jews.<sup>68</sup> <sup>69</sup> It should be noted that these institutions were legally owned by Jews, not

---

<sup>65</sup> White people had more disposable income, so the market for White performers drove much of the musical opportunities in the history of American popular music. The Jewish mediation of “Blackness” can be looked at as a search for the most profitable audiences to perform for, and should not be looked at as an outright Jewish manipulation of Black image and identity.

<sup>66</sup> The growth of black market opportunities, and the social acceptability of ethnic gangs who exploit them, changes with each era, location, ethnicity, and venture. Drug selling gangsta rappers and prohibition era jazz musicians are not so different. Alcohol is the main drug that gangsters in the 1920s peddled, something tame (and somewhat acceptable) when compared to crack, cocaine, PCP, and other narcotics that gangsta rappers reference in the 80s and in later decades. In the same way that 1920s speakeasy music defines the roaring twenties, giving social legitimacy to an illicit trade, the drug trade of the contemporary ghetto is legitimized by gangsta rappers such as Ice Cube, Tupac, Biggie, Snoop Dogg, and more. Ice Cube draws “parallels between legitimate corporate struggles for power and the crack economy,” further “By ‘reversing’ dominant discourses legitimating entrepreneurship, hostile takeovers, and a global corporate culture more concerned with profits than committed to a national community, [Ice] Cube and other gansta rappers hold up the illicit economy as a mirror of American capitalism...” There are economic differences between the 1920s prohibition gangster and the 1980s crack cocaine gangsta - there are also major differences in the nature of the drug, “His [Ice Cube’s] implication is clear, for this particular enterprise leads to death, destruction, and violence rather than to accumulation and development.” This destruction of community through crack addiction is different than alcoholism in its social acceptance and impact. Thus, there is a social precedent for rap music in the gangster birth of jazz, however the nature of risk in the particular drug (alcohol vs crack cocaine) produces a different status of social acceptability, a different ethnic gang mentality, and speaks to a different era of American history. William Eric Perkins, *Droppin’ Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 129-30.

<sup>67</sup> Rich Cohen, *Tough Jews: Fathers, Sons, and Gangster Dreams* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1998), 161.

<sup>68</sup> Sidran, *There Was a Fire*, 65

<sup>69</sup> Harlem would forever be in Black consciousness; as for the significant amount of clubs owned in Harlem, such as the Apollo, “... Harlem has long been both a real and imaginary core of African American cultural identification. It is a cultural crossroads, and urban space in which the cross-pollination of black cultural practices from various regions of the black diaspora (or, on a more localized scale, various city burroughs) transpires... In short, Harlem has symbolic value: 125th Street and the Apollo Theatre are similarly imbued with symbolic authority as familiar markers of black cultural tradition and affirmative cultural identity.” Thus, when Russell Simmons, the “godfather of rap,” would choose to open his studio in

violently take over as Dutch Schultz had done with the lottery trade. Still, these institutions often also relied on gangs for security during illegal activities such as drinking and gambling.<sup>70</sup>

There was a loose partnership between gangs; none could be too overzealous, none could turn on the other for threat of an all-out race war, and none could cooperate with the FBI. These rules set up a paradigm of cooperation between the various gangs that operated the speakeasies and provided the growing immigrant class with a night out of drinking and mixed dancing. This illegal American dream supplied the immigrant owners with a steady stream of cash. The most popular dancing music was Black music, blues and jazz, which was different than the ragtime sheet music that had been played in family living rooms. "Unlike Western classical music, which is about precision, repetition, and notation, there is no way to experience the impact of Black music without actually being there, either in person or virtually, through the media."<sup>71 72</sup> When chasing the middle class consumer, it was Mamie Smith's song "Crazy Blues," released in 1920, that sold a record of over 75,000 copies in Harlem in one month.<sup>73</sup> Between 1920 and 1930, when more than a hundred thousand Whites left Harlem, more than a hundred thousand Blacks arrived.<sup>74</sup> It was in the jazz clubs that social life happened, and for the

---

Harlem in the 1980s, "These factors facilitate the elevation of Simmons as a legendary figure, locating him within a continuum of black cultural leadership that has traditionally emanated from Harlem and the upper boroughs of New York City." Forman, Murray. "The Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop," *Growing an Industry*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown Connecticut (2002) p. 120

<sup>70</sup> To further illustrate the complex gang-nightclub relationship, "For every actively partisan Jewish club owner or artist manager who showed honest concern for an African American performer, we can find an equally corrupt and exploitative one. For instance, the gangster Arnold Rothstein backed a show featuring Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles in 1927, and became a good friend and supporter of Fats Waller in the process. By contrast, we find Dutch Schultz, who as a backer of the 1929 cabaret revue *Hot Chocolates*, menaced Waller's songwriting partner Andy Razaf... Schultz became convinced the show lacked something and 'asked' Razaf to write a comic song about a 'colored girl' complaining about how tough it is to be colored. Razaf protested...Schultz reached for his gun... Razaf came up with '(What Did I Do To Be So) Black and Blue,' which has endured as a song of racial protest." Melnick, *A Right*, 36.

<sup>71</sup> Sidran, *There Was a Fire*, 63.

<sup>72</sup> The unique quality of Black music needing "to be heard" as a live performance contributes substantially to the dangerous character of Black music in subsequent eras. For instance, when hip-hop music is born of the street, from block parties to rap battles, it should be understood as a product of its environment. When this type of music is recorded, codified, and transported outside its original audience, it is no longer colloquial but a commercial representation of reality. Politically and emotionally charged rap songs, which include curses, gang violence, and the n-word, are decontextualized from anecdotal personal narratives and misunderstood "as a real description of daily life in the ghetto." Thus, rap music shares the need to be heard live or else its character becomes overtly threatening. Jazz is similar; when heard from a CD, or when heard in a live venue, jazz can convey threatening emotions if taken out of its environment. Unlike rap however, Jazz is wordless, and less verbally aggressive. The idea that music can be universal prayer is more consistent when music is ambiguous and wordless.

Perkins, *Droppin' Science*, Chapter Five

<sup>73</sup> Mamie Smith was a young Black singer who had worked the vaudeville circuit for years, her pianist (also Black) was a professed Jew and a cantor in a Harlem synagogue named Willie the Lion. The price for the sheet music was one dollar a copy - nearly a full day of pay for most workers.

Sidran, *There Was a Fire*, 63.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 63.

first time ever, Blacks had discovered their own musical commercial market, replete with live music venues, beyond the demarcations of one race.<sup>75</sup>

When it came to practical economic advancement in the 1920s, the Jewish people had the great institutions set up before them by German Jewish Immigrants, with the goal of assimilation. Similarly, the Black migration had politicians, professionals and intellectuals, called by W.E.B. DuBois, "The Talented Tenth," a nucleus of free Blacks that had descended from tiny colonial populations and fugitive slaves concentrated in Boston, Brooklyn, Philadelphia, and Providence, Rhode Island. "Just as established Jewish leaders were separated from the post 1880s migrants by geographic provenance, religion, culture, and wealth, so, too were the northern African American leaders of a radically different mold from the folk of the Great Migration."<sup>76</sup> In the same way that Jewish leaders tried to resettle the massive immigration of Jews out west, so too did "The Talented Tenth," yet it didn't amount to much. The search for a homeland, both in its Jewish form of Zionism, and Black form (mourning the loss of Africa) was looked at by assimilated Jewish German Americans and educated northern Black citizens as a step backwards, threatening the accepted professional status, and established citizenship of the longtime Black and Jewish city inhabitants. That didn't stop these movements from entering both "The Yiddish Theater," and art in The Harlem Renaissance, though funding for this type of art was less successful as it was ethnically divisive and polemical.<sup>77</sup>

Jazz was ground zero for cultural synthesis. The Jewish contribution to jazz music in this era is best summed up by the characters who championed the versatility of the music, articulating the dual identity of being "ethnic" and being "American," and finding profits in White audiences. Jazz, with improvisational notes sliding between scales and competition with other instruments in balance, represents a perfect combination between the nusach of the Eastern European minor scale with the soulful bluesy pentatonic scale. 'In 1931, Howard Cowell, the composer who was Gershwin's music teacher, defined jazz as 'Negro minstrel music as interpreted by Tin-

---

<sup>75</sup> "The Harlem stride pianist Willie the Lion Smith, for one, insisted that his own mixture of blood (Jewish, Spanish, Mohawk Indian, French, and African) explained his ability to excel at so many musical forms - including - 'cantoring.'... Smith's looseness in defining the boundaries of Hebrew and Yiddish (or 'Jewish,' as he and many others often termed it) inserts both into a public sphere which removes from them, respectively, sacred character and historical specificity. The effect is to eliminate 'chosenness' as a key category for understanding Jewishness, and to make the boundaries between Jews and others to be more porous than previously understood."

Melnick, *A Right*, 66-67.

<sup>76</sup> Maurianne Adams and John Bracey, eds., *Strangers and Neighbors: Relations between Blacks and Jews in the United States* (n.p.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 335.

<sup>77</sup> In the 1980s, in the absence of "sustained institutional forms and coherent leadership," Black teens would again gravitate towards pro-Black ideologies conflating "race and nation." Rap artists would be keen on using African Nationalist language as a way to unite Blacks, whether through Malcolm X, W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King Jr, Jesse Jackson, Louis Farrakhan, and Marcus Garvey. Unlike rhetoric in the 1920s, by the 1980s rap music was developing in a 'hood culture of disenfranchisement and disestablishment, and these militant pro-Black ideologies would speak to their inner city environment. Zionism would continue to stay popular and polemical for Jews in America until after World War Two and the foundation of the modern state of Israel.

Quote from: Forman, Murray. "The Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop," *Welcome to the City*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown Connecticut (2002) p. 63

Pan-Alley New Yorkers of Hebrew origin.”<sup>78</sup> It is the experience of a dual identity, Jewish and Black, that birthed a new American religion. Improvised in real time, jazz became a true mystical experience, and even a way of life to some of its adherents. Just as a Jew would experience shuckling during a prayer service, so too the similar vibe in the dark jazz club had its own shufflers.<sup>79</sup>

George Gershwin, a talented German Jewish pianist who made Jazz into prayer for the nation, could perform at more venues because he looked White, was often criticized for his appropriation of Black idioms, “Gershwin continually searched out all types of African American music, from the innovative Harlem stride players to the religious music of Gullahs on the South ‘Carolina Sea Islands.”<sup>80</sup> Further, “It took a lot of chutzpah to represent operatically the lives of poor southern Blacks in the fictional Catfish row, in Charleston, South Carolina,” but that’s what he did.<sup>81</sup> From 1932 to 1935, Gershwin moved to a small island off the coast of South Carolina to write *Porgy and Bess*. He attended Black prayer meetings at a local church, and participated in the call and response soulful drumming that would imbue his synthetic Jazz with Black gospel spiritual music.<sup>82</sup> Gershwin was known as an activist, and for performances he “insisted on using black performers exclusively.”<sup>83</sup> Though critically acclaimed now, *Porgy and Bess* was a commercial failure and closed in the fall of 1935 after only 124 performances.<sup>84</sup>

Similarly, Mezz Mezzrow, born to an upper-middle class Jewish family on Chicago’s Northwest Side, viewed his American Jewishness as Black, and even married a Black woman.<sup>85</sup> While Mezz never reached the preeminence of Gershwin in his performance, he became the most famous marijuana dealer to the Harlem jazz artists of the 30s including Louis Armstrong, “There had been a few pot dealers in the history of Harlem before Mezzrow... but Mezzrow was

---

<sup>78</sup> David Lehman, *Jewish Encounters*, ed. Jonathan Rosen, Nextbook (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 2009), 191.

<sup>79</sup> The Black jazz musician somehow connected to a Jewish immigrant is so common a story that even Louis Armstrong can serve as an example. Louis Armstrong was selling discarded potatoes when the Karnofskys, a Jewish Lithuanian immigrant family, hired him to help selling wares off their wagon. They travelled “Storyville,” a red-light district of New Orleans, when Morris Karnofsky advanced Louis five dollars to buy a b-flat cornet. Armstrong would later tell his friend Cab Calloway he got swing music “from the Jews rockin,” or from the family dinners and davening he shared with the Karnofskys before he could even learn to play jazz in public venues.

Sidran, *There Was a Fire*, 56, 83.

<sup>80</sup> Melnick, *The Right to*, 54-55.

<sup>81</sup> Lehman, *Jewish Encounters*, 159.

<sup>82</sup> *Porgy and Bess* was made possible because of cultural and class based similarities over ethnic ones, “Todd Duncan, the college educated African American who first delivered Gershwin’s *Porgy* to the world, was essentially of the same economic class as the composer, and therefore the two were able to forge a close personal relationship, with Gershwin insisting that Duncan was more Jewish than he and Duncan countering that Gershwin was more Negro than he. Culture - a parallel aesthetic, understanding and worldview - made this bonding possible.” Further “So while race and class have always been linked in America - where money is power - race is ultimately about class. That is, class trumps race when and where people from diverse backgrounds come together.”

Sidran, *There Was a Fire*, 101.

<sup>83</sup> Lehman, *Jewish Encounters*, 195.

<sup>84</sup> Sidran, *There Was a Fire*, 97.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.* 65.

certainly its most famous, and his marijuana certainly had the most cultural impact.”<sup>86</sup> Mezz even made it into Jazz music, in the song “If You’re a Viper,” recorded by Rosetta Howard, “Dreamed about a reefer five foot long, the mighty Mezz but not as strong.”<sup>87</sup> Refer became a cheap and easy way to lose one’s cares for a night in Harlem, especially as the Great Depression intensified. Mezz is quoted, “I did become a kind of link between the races there, my education was completed on The Stroll, and I became a Negro.”<sup>88</sup>

Right around the dawn of scat singing, nestled between speakeasies and illegal bootlegging operations, it was the prohibition gangs that provided the platform for immigrants and Black singers to experiment with music. The booming twenties meant that anything that could be danced to was monopolized by anyone who could make you dance, Black or Jew, Italian or Irish. The growing economy and the booze trade empowered immigrants to experiment with all forms of music. Jews who had arrived as first generation immigrants were giving birth to themselves as fully Jewish “American” citizens, ones who took even more liberties with musical expression.

With more and more Jews flooding into the performing sector, the very cultural identity of America was recreated with a Jewish flavor. “What is perhaps most impressive about this achievement is that it allowed these Jews and their fans to revise the race concepts which had done (and would again do) so much to oppress other Jews. The rhetoric around these successful Jews in music made it more possible to imagine that their success owed much to their Jewishness. In short, it represented a move to alter the valence of Jewishness in the cultural arena.”<sup>89</sup> Secular Jews made mainstream religious holidays more commercial, as noted by Philip Roth, who, in *Operation Shylock* (1993) calls Irving Berlin “the greatest diasporist of all time,” for “de-Christing” holidays with songs like “White Christmas,” and “Easter Parade.”<sup>90</sup> Jews also continued to don blackface, “Black became a mask for Jewish expressiveness, with one woe speaking through the voice of another... Blacking their faces seems to have enabled the Jewish performers to reach a position of spontaneity and assertiveness in the declaration of their Jewish selves.”<sup>91</sup> Jewish success in Tin Pan Alley and in Hollywood, in publishing and on Broadway was exemplary proof of the power of art and entertainment to alter ethnic images.

---

<sup>86</sup> “Marijuana was hitting Harlem at a crucial moment in its history. Along with jazz, it became part of the experience of the first generation of African Americans to come of age in New York after the Great Dispersal had transformed Harlem from a small middle-class neighborhood with housing designed for sixty thousand into a black city-within-a-city of three hundred thousand.” Martin Torgoff, *Bop Apocalypse: Jazz, Race, the Beats, and Drugs* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2016), 31-32.

<sup>87</sup> Mezzrow’s biography, which was published in 1946, would be hailed by Allen Ginsberg and the Beatnik generation as a revelation. An instance of Jews, this time poets, bridging the culture between Blacks and Whites.

ibid. p. 143.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. 35.

<sup>89</sup> Melnick, *A Right*, 62.

<sup>90</sup> Lehman, *Jewish Encounters*, 169.

<sup>91</sup> Adams and Bracey, *Strangers and Neighbors*, 329.

This Jewish cultural mediation and rebranding was not a possible strategy for Blacks. When the Harlem Renaissance began at the end of the 1920s, its success met a different reception. Owing itself to the donations of the “Talented Tenth,” and philanthropists (many of whom were Jewish), The Harlem Renaissance actually created a “lost generation,” “a generation skipping movement, diverting to its ranks men and women who, in the natural course of events, would have devoted their exclusive teaching, lawyering, doctoring, fixing teeth, and burying.”<sup>92</sup> “The fact that so many successful Jewish talents used modified Afro-American materials... was not lost on Harlem Renaissance enthusiasts.... Unlike their Jewish models, however, the Afro-American leaders tended to minimize or to ignore the grimy aspects of migrant Jewish business success as a basic condition for the perpetuation of collective achievement. Hence the Harlem Renaissance literally took place in a rented space - in a Harlem they did not own.”<sup>93</sup> <sup>94</sup> Jews weren’t just involved in the arts, they were in the garment district, the legal field, the medical field, dry goods and more. Then, at the end of the Roaring Twenties, the stock market collapsed and great depression hit some people harder than others.

### The Great Depression and the Radio

The stock market crash of 1929 is when the Great Depression is acknowledged to have begun. West Coast broadcasting corporations bought up Tin Pan Alley and they didn’t foster the same sense of comradeship that the immigrant experience thrived on. The melting pot of the industrial Northeast of the previous decades was replaced by the stratified West Coast class hierarchy. Still, by 1936, three of the “Big Eight,” studios were owned by Jews.<sup>95</sup> While the Harlem renaissance began to fade into the past, the seat of show business extended from New York to Chicago and on to Hollywood, and many of the great Jewish vaudeville performers made the jump westward. People like Eddie Cantor and George Gershwin moved to Hollywood in the 1930s. There was never a talent drain of New York City performers, as the technologies that perpetuated the musical reimagining of self-continued to be developed, unabated, and broadcast out of popular clubs. Yet there were less overt minority-centric themes during the depression years. New York’s speakeasies converted themselves into big band jazz ballrooms, Jewish musicians like Mezz, Willie “The Lion” Smith, Artie Shaw, and other preeminent jazz

---

<sup>92</sup> *ibid.* 344.

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.* 345.

<sup>94</sup> This Jewish model for re-envisioning oneself to be a business success and working to own one’s own domain would be acknowledged by contemporary rap artists desiring to be businessmen. Jay-Z’s biography “Empire State of Mind,” describes his journey from selling crack on the street to having ownership in his own company, even being mentored by Lyor Cohen, an industry mogul. Promoting a similar Black image, rappers such as Nas, in a track called “Carry on Tradition,” (on his album “Hip Hop is Dead” released in 2006 at #1 on Billboard’s top 200 chart), rhymes “Hip hop’s been dead, we the reason it died. Wasn’t Sylvia’s fault or the MCs skills are lost. It’s because we can’t see ourselves as the boss. Deep-rooted through slavery. Self-hatred. The Jewish stick together, friends in high places. We on some low level sh\*t. We don’t want n----s to ever win.” Just as the Harlem renaissance took place in a Harlem that Blacks didn’t own, a modern critique of the rap industry is that rap music is unevenly profiting a corporate structure owned by non-Blacks.

Zack O’Malley Greenburg, *Empire State of Mind: How Jay Z Went from Street Corner to Corner Office* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2011), 88.

<sup>95</sup> Feingold, *A Time*, 130, 31.



artists who identified with Black culture found each other and their sounds while travelling through these big cities. It was the 1930s that jazz began to be accepted as authentic American music, which opened the door for lighter skinned performers to play in highly reputable venues, even if their contemporaries performing Yiddish shtick had become less popular.

The parody of identity and musical self-mockery, these were some of the vaudeville themes that could no longer be recreated after the boom of 1920s as New York City nightlife had dulled and money became tight. The tense Depression, with its poverty and Hoovervilles, created a rise in nationalist sentiment both at home and abroad. Jews were terrified of Hitler's Germany, and Blacks were facing deteriorating economic conditions and rising racism.<sup>96</sup> The national sentiment brought about anti-immigration and anti-foreigner rhetoric. While the extensive broadcasting capabilities of technologies like radio and early television exposed specific Yiddish characters to the overall public, the somber mood made "foreigners" less sellable. Jewish success stories still came from big band and jazz, as well as the management and the writing sector more so than the vaudeville limelight. "By the mid-1930s, Jules Stein and Chicago's MCA agency controlled as many as 80 percent of the country's most popular bands and booked virtually all of the big-band venues." The connection bore much fruit through former gang partnerships, like Stein's friend, Al Capone and his mob, who spread jukeboxes, and with them, Black music.<sup>97 98</sup>

With prohibition officially over in 1933, the era of the jazz speakeasies had closed. Musically, it was the age of the big band. The slowish beat of jazz sped up, literally and figuratively. They were no longer hiding underground but now flourishing in restaurants and legitimate clubs. If every era has a few musicians that define the zeitgeist, Benny Goodman was the one to bring this performance to audiences everywhere. And he did it with the help of the radio. "Radio was the great equalizer; you couldn't see what color the musicians were, so race became even less

---

<sup>96</sup> Politically the depression sometimes forced an alliance between Jews and Blacks in the form of communist and anarchist labor parties. The depression also caused increased competition for jobs and hostility over price gouging strategies in the slums. While the Holocaust encroaching on the Jews in Europe would be acknowledged by Blacks early on (as a self-interested, precautionary precedent). Despite this acknowledgement, there was an increase in Black anti-Semitism and even riots in Jewish neighborhoods, "Black street-orators, many of them former Garveyites, pointed out that the refugees [German/Polish Jewish Holocaust refugees] would soon be better off than the people of the ghetto." Feingold, *A Time*, 255.

<sup>97</sup> The Jewish Italian mob connection extended into the management of the jazz artists themselves, even into the 1940s and beyond. An example: Joe Glaser was a famous manager of Lady Decca, Louis Armstrong, and more. Born from Russian Jewish immigrants, he got his start by managing Al Capone's illicit businesses. After Glaser became intimate with Lady Decca (who suffered from heroin addiction), he eventually turned her over to the Federal Bureau of Narcotics when she couldn't get clean. While every relationship unique, Lady Decca and Joe Glaser represent a relationship of both manipulation and support, which can serve as an especially complicated template of music industry management of artists. Aspirational, supportive, undermining, and self-sabotaging, these artist/manager relationships remind us to judge each person individually and avoid making race based generalizations. Torgoff, *Bop Apocalypse*, 149-51.

<sup>98</sup> Benny Goodman was also one of the first musicians to hire Black instrumentalists in a non-segregated band, no longer just in recorded studios. This race integration in the music industry preconfigured sports integration. Baseball was desegregated in 1947 with the first Brooklyn Dodger's player Jackie Robinson. Sidran, *There Was a Fire*, 121

significant to the listening audience. Radio created a magical public place where everybody was having fun together and the ‘theater of the mind’ was expanding nightly.”<sup>99</sup> In 1935, an estimated 23 million homes had a radio, with a total audience of 91 million people; this was known as the “Golden Age of Radio.” This technology was a refuge from the harsh reality of The Great Depression. As with the piano before, radio and television had fewer formal barriers to entry for immigrants, so Jews disproportionately entered these commercial markets.

Economically and socially, this was an era of continued Jewish achievements. The Jewish people entered the American mainstream, more capable than other ethnicities to ride out the Great Depression. “Jewish immigrants... were not like other immigrants who came to America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries... For centuries in Europe they had been forbidden to own land, so they had clustered in cities and towns, taking up urban trades and professions. Seventy percent of the eastern European Jews who came through Ellis Island in the thirty years or so before the First World War had some kind of occupational skill.”<sup>100</sup> While the Yiddish press and theater were declining from their heyday, it was a sign of assimilation rather than of commercial failure, and there were no shortage of Jewish role models to venerate. By 1930 the majority of the Jewish work force had become white collar.”<sup>101</sup> Internationally, Jewish athletes gained prominence from boxing and baseball to fencing and swimming, even winning Olympic medals.<sup>102</sup> The achievements of Jewish college graduates were lauded by their families and used by detractors to fuel anti-Semitic rhetoric, quotas, and fear mongering that had been growing both domestically and abroad.<sup>103</sup>

For commercial Jews, the goal was to buy the building that you worked in as a security (an investment that paid off handsomely after World War 2).<sup>104</sup> Jews employed other Jews, making inroads in new enterprises and keeping their family units invested in personal, professional, and religious life. During the Great Depression, Blacks comprised an overwhelming percentage of unemployed, while Jews recorded less unemployment than the average for all workers.<sup>105</sup> “Such resulted from historical legacies which channeled Blacks and Jews into disparate economic directions: ultimately most Blacks endured an American nightmare; many Jews endured an American dream.”<sup>106</sup>

It was in this era that religious education developed into school style teaching organizations. Religious denominations were forced to have platforms on the Zionist question, Hitler, and their role overall in American society. This collective religious self-awareness, matched with business

---

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. p. 114

<sup>100</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (New York, NY: Little, Brown, and Company, 2008), 142.

<sup>101</sup> Feingold, *A Time*, 145.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. p. 60, 68

<sup>103</sup> Quotas would reoccur to be threatening to Jews in the 1960s and 1970s, this time their application would be to secure Blacks a place in college universities. This issue would divide the Jewish people for or against affirmative action.

<sup>104</sup> Feingold, *A Time*, 60, 68.

<sup>105</sup> Adams and Brace, *Strangers and Neighbors*, 387.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. 387.

aptitude and second generation entitlement, shaped many organizations to feel less intimately tied to the Black American experience than to the overseas plight of Jews in Europe and the resettling in Palestine. It was in this era that the partnership between Jews and Blacks became commercially strained. Blacks were still working in factory jobs (if at all) while Jews avoided manual labor, and moved into the management and service industry. “Black musicians, whose pay scales and work opportunities both declined during the great depression, continued to rely on Jewish club owners, agents, and middlemen.”<sup>107</sup>

There were of course Jewish allies to Black discrimination, but the splintering of the ethnic loyalty in the 1930s redirected attention and fundraising schemes to one’s own tribe more than the American “help thy neighbor” mentality. To Jews, their neighbors were overseas, en route to the slaughterhouse. For Blacks, their neighbors were segregated and lynched in the American South, and denied humanity in cities elsewhere. The critical Black-Jewish partnerships, found in the music business (both in management and performance), never disappeared though it didn’t have a traditionally religious zeal to it; Jazz, blues, and swing music requires a loosening of the ego, and a shedding of one’s particularity to make the sound flow. This meant that most Jews active in the musical partnership between Jews and Blacks were appreciating humanistic Judaism over the particularity of religion, and still receiving a paycheck to make their partnership worthwhile. These secular Jews felt kinship with their location more so than their coreligionists, a departure from the great wave of immigration beginning in the 1880s. Barney Josephson, the son of a Jewish immigrant from Latvia, opened the famous Cafe Society in the Greenwich Village, the first non-gang affiliated jazz nightclub to welcome customers of all races in mixed dancing (he was able to borrow money from his siblings to finance the club). Black singer Billie Holiday, along with Jews, Abe Meeropol and Milt Gabler, wrote “Strange Fruit,” a wildly popular hit that spoke of lynching and racism of the American South.<sup>108</sup> This profitable synthesis was the continued musical heartbeat of America, yet beyond the isolated success stories of the music industry, discrimination and segregation, especially in the South, prevented Blacks from the business success that Jews achieved.

### **Experiences of World War 2 and the Holocaust**

In the early 1940s, New York City was the uncontested Jewish capital of the world. If America was to help save Jews overseas, it was through the pressure from New York businessmen, politicians, and performers. The melting pot of America appeared as separated fiefdoms of industry aligned with ethnically political goals rather than a united populace with a coordinated political objective. Every different party had its own perspective on how to best stop fascism, and there was even a strong American German bund which supported Hitler outright. Just as

---

<sup>107</sup> Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters: Black - Jewish Relations in the American Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 59.

<sup>108</sup> Written by Meeropol, a Harvard educated high school teacher in New York City, the song contained lyrics like “Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze, strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees,” this song is used throughout the history of the Civil Rights movement, even dubbed in a background of a contemporary rap music song. Eventually Meeropol would become even more controversial by adopting the children of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. Sidran, *There Was a Fire*, 131-32.

the Billboard charts were separated by ethnic divisions, so too politics were goal oriented, particular to class, often confined to ethnic lines. The competing voices in America meant that protectionism was possibly the only thing the ruling class could agree upon. Music can always be used as an escape (especially in this time period), and the music industry did not want to validate the disunity of the political agenda between Blacks and Jews. The looming war created a mood of alienation that seeped into music and culture, sometimes by the sheer lack of acknowledgement that the Holocaust itself was happening, or that performers were indeed Jewish.<sup>109</sup> There was less profit to be made in politicizing movies or music, so polemical art was generally avoided.

New York City Jews were brought up to avoid color, since it only dampened their ascension up the economic ladder. Success, Blacks could not avoid the systematic racism and lack of integration in the work force, so tensions grew. While Jews overall favored integration, the onset of the Holocaust reminded them that they could never fully assimilate. For Blacks, skin color was enough of a reminder. There was no unanimity in the Jewish political grappling of Holocaust strategies. The militant Zionists alienated the reform assimilates, the despair of the immigrant generation put pressure on the second generation American Jews. Some of the proposed militaristic Zionist plans, to save Jews at the literal expense of the American people caused a significant rift between Jews and Blacks. Jews also stood to lose proportionally more than other classes from a war, as they were primarily involved with luxury goods. Luxury goods were profitable during the Great Depression, as they catered to the wealthiest of society and were recession proof, yet a real full-scale war effort depleted all classes, the middle class and the wealthiest, thus World War Two was unpopular as it would threaten Jew's economic position.<sup>110</sup>

Just as Jews had a complicated view of Blacks at this time, so too, Blacks had a complicated view of Jews in this time, "Black-Jewish views of one another emanated from their ghetto interaction and minority status, which promoted mixed reactions. By 1943, Blacks viewed Jews ambivalently, seeing some as oppressors and others as philanthropists."<sup>111</sup> There was a perpetual battle over who suffered worse: Jews in Germany, or Blacks in America. The top down political support for Jewish causes abroad was upsetting for Blacks, who saw their own people persecuted in the very districts of politicians who bemoaned fascist Germany. There was an implicit promise of full-fledged integration into American society by the Blacks who supported Jewish refugees abroad, similar to how Jews, who spoke out against lynching in the Yiddish press a generation earlier, longed for authentic American acceptance. Old wounds, such as the Jewish contributions to the Confederacy, and slavery, were brought to the fore to exacerbate ethnic rifts in the city. There was always the harsh reality that race, in the form of skin color, would never be overlooked. These issues would only grow worse when the dust of the Holocaust settled. Jews were clearly at a different socio-economic level than Blacks, and thus

---

<sup>109</sup> When Germany boycotted Jewish films, rather than eat commercial losses for the sake of identity, Jews changed their names in the credits. This deceptive strategy allowed Jews to blend into American White culture relatively seamlessly, an option Blacks did not have.

<sup>110</sup> Adams and Bracey, *Strangers and Neighbors*, 335.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid* p. 387

their politics were not aligned. There were, however, always exceptional relationships to verify a deep and committed Black Jewish partnership.<sup>112</sup>

The music industry experienced a profound shift as well, “The demise of the big bands can be traced to the military draft, which reduced the pool of musicians dramatically. And the dancing audience too was gradually being thinned out as most of the boys went overseas to fight and many of the girls went to work in the factories to pick up the slack.”<sup>113</sup> The musical preference shifted from big bands to individual vocalists, aided by a yearlong musician strike in 1942-1943. People like Frank Sinatra and Billie Holiday (performing songs from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s “Oklahoma!”) became the sound of the decade. While jazz music continued to remain popular, the harsh reality of being black in America lent some of the best jazz musicians to experiment with drugs. “As reefer was associated with swing, heroin marked the transition from swing to bop,”<sup>114</sup> “Jazz historian James Lincoln Collier estimates that as many as 75 percent of jazz musicians used heroin during the forties and fifties.”<sup>115</sup> Thus, the war on drugs by later political administrations, and the incarceration rate of Blacks and minorities, has its seeds in the Black disenfranchisement of the industrial boom that America experienced during the post-war years and thereafter.<sup>116</sup> This era proved to some that a rising tide did not raise all boats. Recreational drug use helped Black artists deal with the feeling of being commercially left behind and segregated, yet created another problem, addiction and prison. Malcolm X, in his autobiography, would later describe this as the Black man being “narcotized” to the White man’s

---

<sup>112</sup> An example would be “...the case of Benjamin Bernstein, who changed his name to Ben Burns (1913-2000) and helped to edit and write for such publications as the Negro Digest and the Chicago Defender. In 1945 he became the founding editor of *Ebony*, widely regarded as the black counterpart to *Life* Magazine. The owner of *Ebony*, John Johnson, often told Burns that he was ‘not a real white man’; and black staffers concurred. When visitors came to the editorial offices, they sometimes asked Burns whether he was white or black. He replied: ‘I’m neither - I’m Jewish.’ Whitfield, “Black like,” 360.

<sup>113</sup> Sidran, *There Was a Fire*, 136.

<sup>114</sup> Torgoff, *Bop Apocalypse*, 131

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.* p. 171

<sup>116</sup> “Since the arrival of heroin in 1946-47, Harlem had found itself in the crosshairs, at a nexus where powerful forces of crime, policy, politics, race, and culture all intersected with the phenomena of drug use and addiction, with dire results... Peddling drugs quickly became a vocation in Harlem during the 1950s. The whole pathology of Harlem began with youngsters who were never really bad boys... motivated by the need for heroin and the spirit of entrepreneurship... As heroin seized hold of Harlem and spread to other cities and more and more people found themselves desperately in need of help, policies were put into place represented the most severe federal drug laws and penalties in American history.” Torgoff, *Bop Apocalypse*, 322-23

America.<sup>117</sup> Even the famous Mezz was arrested at the World's Fair in 1940, and served three years in prison for possession of marijuana.<sup>118</sup>

This period also experienced another profound shift in race relations between Jews and Blacks. "Jews in America were not securely fastened into their current identity as 'white' ethnics until after World War II."<sup>119</sup> Jews could serve alongside other Whites in the military but Blacks were segregated. This impacted Jews with an experience of being profoundly "other," as a minority in White America, yet still being accepted in White America.<sup>120</sup> This hypersensitivity to race relations forced Jews to confront their role as either silent facilitators of systemic racism, or be the outspoken champions of equality. This was not always a desirable role for a Jewish soldier to play, though a role that some Jews would inherit in the Civil Rights era. During the war, Southern Jews were confronted with their own racism, and some were even forced to change their attitudes upon seeing the valor of all military personnel.<sup>121</sup> The organizations that were founded by Jews decades before the war fought to combat anti-Semitism by publicizing stories of valor about Jewish soldiers who defied the anti-Semitic rhetoric popular at the time. This type of organizational support would be lent to Civil Rights activists nearly twenty years later.

Musically, the Jews who contributed most to this era capitalized on the fame of individual vocalists and the adeptness of Jewish business acumen in jumpstarting small time recording studios. Technology, paired with business savviness, provided the opportunity for descendants of Jewish immigrants to continuously ascend the social and economic ladder. The affordability of the mass produced piano and the technology of the television, radio, and recording studios were innovations that enterprising individuals could capitalize on. The "mom and pop" recording studios of the age were virtually all founded by Jews, as they had access to capital through their family business partnerships and they continued to have a working relationship with the new

---

<sup>117</sup> A similar idea is found in Viktor Frankl's "Man's Search for Meaning," "In fact, the drug scene is one aspect of a more general mass phenomenon, namely the feeling of meaninglessness resulting from a frustration of our existential needs which in turn has become a universal phenomenon in our industrial societies... And I could show that this neurosis really originated in a twofold erroneous identification: being jobless was equated with being useless, and being useless was equated with having a meaningless life."

Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2006), 140-41.

<sup>118</sup> In an earlier account of a different drug arrest of Mezz for marijuana, when being sentenced to Riker's Island he asked to be assigned with the Black prisoners. "Curiously enough, the Selective Service System agreed... even his draft card identified him as a Negro."

Whitfield, "Black like," 361

<sup>119</sup> Melnick, *A Right*, 62.

<sup>120</sup> There was an "H" on a Jewish person's dog tag, "The Hebrew dog tag divided Jews from non-Jews as well as from Jews who declined to be labeled as such. At the same time, the H reminded Jews wearing it that they were "am Yisrael" (the people of Israel) and emphasized their common bonds across denomination, class, and ideology. It united them in a collective identity joining religious and secular Jews in one category for the military's convenience and religious observance."

Deborah Dash Moore, *GI Jews* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 74.

<sup>121</sup> Some instances even have southern Jews meeting dark skinned Jews of sephardic and mizrahi origin, perplexed at the skin color of their own brethren. Regardless, it was the military that proved to be a big melting pot for Jews and other ethnicities.

Ibid. 111.

“rhythm and blues,” Black artists.<sup>122</sup> This new style transcended the segregated music charts in post war America, pairing individual vocalists with jazz, boogie woogie, blues, and swing, to get The Greatest Generation dancing again after the horrors of war.

### **The Ossification of Class, Music and Politics of the 1950-70s**

Jews were in relationship with World War Two primarily as “The Holocaust,” while Blacks knew World War Two, as “World War Two.” Jews remembered “the ghetto” as the walled off city boundary in Europe that they had escaped from, while to Blacks, “the ghetto” was the modern urban area below the poverty line.<sup>123</sup> In the era after World War Two, Blacks would be redlined from buying properties or moving out of inner-city slums but Jews would not. The Jewish role of cultural mediator would turn bitter, “Nineteen fifty-four was the year when *Brown v. Board of Education* proved that Jewish and African American lawyers could work together with enormous success, but it was also the year of Elvis Presley’s arrival on the scene, one sign that in the postwar world Jews would be eclipsed by other white people who had different routes to Black sounds.”<sup>124</sup> The particularity of religious identity for Jews existing as an international people, now with the modern state of Israel, would never fully be absorbed into the Black perception of all-American authenticity.

For the most part, the turn-of-century Russian immigrants who became American Jews did not leave America for the fledgling state of Israel (only a few Orthodox Jews would leave America for a more religious life in Israel), yet Jews still held a deep loyalty to Israel, choosing instead to live in America since they were prosperous and comfortable. Whether secular or religious, American Jews were committed to financially supporting Israel. With the movement of Jewish residency from the city to the suburbs, Jews chose to identify as a regional class-based community. Jews affiliated with synagogue day schools and paid membership dues, they continued to support Israel and they remembered the Holocaust. Jews placed class and culture above the religious aspects of tradition, such as adherence to *halakha*. Post-war suburban Jews exercised their identity through “choosing” to spend their money in ways that benefitted them. The Jewish religion was thus transformed into an insider/outsider suburban cultural experience that was generally unwelcoming to non-Jewish Americans, and Judaism would recede into

---

<sup>122</sup> Two prime example of music companies: Alfred Green of National Records was an ex-con in the toilet seat business who realized the same plastic injection molding process could be used to make cheap plastic 78 rpm records. Atlantic Records was founded by Herb Abrahamson, who took a \$10,000 loan from his dentist and partnered with the son of the Turkish ambassador to the United States. These examples marry funding with ingenuity to mass produce popular music. Sidran, *There Was a Fire*, 137-39.

<sup>123</sup> It wasn’t until 1985 that the term “ghetto,” and “poverty neighborhood,” was defined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development through a study. “For the purposes of their research, the ghetto was defined as ‘an area in which the overall census tract poverty rate is greater than 40 percent. We define the ghetto poor as those poor, or of any race or ethnic group, who live in such high-poverty census tracts.’”

Murray Forman, *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*, Music/Culture (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 55.

<sup>124</sup> Melnick, *A Right*, 203.

being totally foreign to the inner-city locations, like Harlem, where Jews once lived in as immigrants.

Blacks, meanwhile, continued to have inner-city experiences with Jews, but the class distinction was a grievous reminder of what being White skinned could do for the economic mobility for a people. "...in places like Mississippi and Alabama, the core problem that faced Black people was the irrational, implacable hatred of white people towards them. In New York, by contrast... it was poverty, not hate, that was the problem."<sup>125</sup> When Louis Brandeis remarked that to be a Zionist and an American was reconcilable, the state of Israel had not yet been formed, Jews were immigrants viewed as non-White, concentrated in the major industrial cities, and shared the same relative economic status of Blacks. Now that Israel was a reality, and Jewish commercial success realized, Blacks had few political similarities with Jews and voiced that dissonance. "In 1959, for example, the New York branch of the NAACP undertook to pressure Harlem liquor wholesalers - most of them Jewish - to give Black liquor salesmen a greater share of their business."<sup>126</sup> A large battleground for this type of race pressuring was in the city school districts, where Jewish teachers served Black majority neighborhoods. Famously, the Ocean-Hill-Brownsville school district firing of Jewish teachers during the 1960s was deemed "anti-Semitic," by the Teacher Union's president, a Jew. The fired teachers were reinstated and "won" against Black activists. The Ocean-Hill-Brownsville school board was forced to disband, the Black superintendent was forced to resign, and race relations in the city would never be the same.<sup>127</sup>

The Black militants who incorporated violence in their struggle for equality can be seen as emulating the means that Zionist Jews took to secure their own state of Israel. If Black militancy was threatening to America, or to Jewish Americans, it proved to Blacks that Jews had indeed been accepted into the mainstream as White middle class citizens and abused their role of "gatekeeper." In short, during the years after the Holocaust, Jewish status took on another meaning, through class association and through a diaspora-by-choice identity that no longer paralleled the Black American experience at all. Animosity ensued. The "White privilege" Jews enjoyed, and the "Black anti-Semitism" that grew at this time, was a direct result of disproportionate economic progress and subsequent class segregation; "Jews' satisfaction with their success and the system that made it possible, could not easily coexist beside African American frustrations that the promise of America continued to be denied them. Many African

---

<sup>125</sup> Eli Lederhendler, *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity, 1950-1970*, ed. Henry L. Feingold (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 127.

<sup>126</sup> Ultimately this set in motion a wave of organized institutional pressure to empower Blacks often at odds with city-dwelling Jews.

Ibid. p. 136.

<sup>127</sup> Another academic polemic, the college practice of "affirmative action," had been used in previous decades to exclude Jews from college. It was now being used to promote Blacks, over other potential students. The issue of Black inclusion as "affirmative action" intensely divided Jews.

Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters*, 237.

Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 222.

Adams and Brace, *Strangers and Neighbors*, 586.



Americans rejected old partners... inevitably those rejections offended and angered Jews. Each group felt betrayed by the other.”<sup>128</sup>

Musically, the era of the 40s into the 60s was one that was especially exploitative of the time. It was a period of indie records, with low margins of profit, where artists were never paid royalties, and where “what often appears to be raced-based is in the end reduced to issues of class: Black exploitation by Jews was a fact, but so was Black exploitation by Blacks and Jewish exploitation by Jews; that is, in the ‘hustle,’ everybody was looking for the main chance.”<sup>129</sup> This era is exemplified by the Beatnik writers like Alan Ginsberg who treated jazz as a religion to itself, and found White audiences for Black music. As Dizzy Gillespie would notice, “without the White college audiences, bebop (a high point of creative Black expression) couldn’t have survived into the 1950s.”<sup>130</sup> This musical part of jazz, blues, and swing continued through the Civil Rights era, highlighting the distinctly different roles that Jews playing in the inner-city life of Blacks, and in the national political theater of Civil Rights activism.

The Jewish community itself was transitioning into a cultural and symbolic way of life, not through religious ritual, but through identification with social justice, with key events in history, and with organizations to which members paid dues. The most personal historical event which had begun to be talked about was “never forgetting” the Holocaust (and making sure that all Americans would “never forget” the Holocaust despite Jews being less than 3 percent of the population). For Blacks, “No doubt comparisons between slavery and the Holocaust have been prompted in part by jealousy - or simply painful awareness - of the undeniable fact that Jewish suffering is publically acknowledged and memorialized in ways that Black suffering is not. But acknowledgement and commemoration may come at a price... wherein catastrophic suffering, the survival of genocide, would be their [Jews] only source of moral authority.”<sup>131</sup>

These identity distinctions (relating to Israel, relating to the Holocaust, relating to Jewish community centers) don’t follow neatly to “American Judaism” as a whole, since the suburban expansion exacerbated the denominational separateness, and since subsequent generations from the first wave of immigrants felt differently on these issues. Even still, these identity distinctions further separated Jews from the culture of the African Americans who had been their neighbors in the city slums. Despite Jews continuing to claim they were still victims, even to Black anti-Semitism, the economic status they enjoyed made it appear benign. Blacks had a unified experience of discrimination and poverty, especially in New York City confined to the urban ghetto. Each race riot or political scandal drove democratic liberal Jews out of New York City to the suburbs, where qualities of otherness and religious particularity would be preserved. With these tensions, the rise of the Jewish Republican right wing began to gain traction with more insular Jewish sects, associating with a type of “Reaganomics” that Black communities would be severely averse to, as they would be left out and denied public necessities.

---

<sup>128</sup>Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters*, 205.

<sup>129</sup> Sidran, *There Was a Fire*, 142.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. 145.

<sup>131</sup> Adams and Brace, *Strangers and Neighbors*, 437.

“The most severe challenge to the Jews’ perception of themselves as liberals concerned civil rights,” as Jewish participations in Civil Rights “stemmed from a combination of benevolence and self-interest.” Yet, despite “About half of the white civil rights attorneys in the South in the 1960s were Jews. More than half of the freedom riders in the 1960s were Jews, and nearly two-thirds of the white volunteers involved in the Freedom Summer in 1964 were Jews.”<sup>132</sup> This volunteerism was met with Black suspicion, as Malcolm X was criticizing Zionism at the same time that Jews were volunteering to aid desegregation campaigns.<sup>133</sup> The donations that Jews used to justify their alignment with Blacks was perceived as flat since they no longer shared their class struggle, and despite positive Jewish references from Dr. Martin Luther King, New York City Jews and Blacks were rarely on the same side of the inner-city political arguments. Even Heschel, who famously walked alongside Martin Luther King Jr during the Civil Rights March, viewed Judaism’s commitment to desegregation as “grossly inadequate.”<sup>134</sup> Biblically, just as Isaac was the favored son of Abraham (according to Christianity and Judaism), Ishmael was the son cast away; similarly, this period was met with a resurgence of the Black National Party identifying with the Nation of Islam.<sup>135</sup>

American music continued to be a Jewish Black partnership of economic success, and thusly the music industry continued to produce some of the most memorable friendships. Blue Note Records out of New York City, Chess Records out of Chicago, and Verve out of Los Angeles.<sup>136</sup> The basic model was Jewish managers, publicists, and lawyers, and Black musicians, although there were Jewish and White musicians as well. It is surprising that the growing Black anti-Semitism only sometimes seeped into the newly-charged music scene.<sup>137</sup> This may be due to the close working relationships of the artists and managers and the opportunities for shared profit. The characters of the players in the indie music business sometimes created an atmosphere of partnership, where individuals were manipulative or benevolent on their own

---

<sup>132</sup> Edward S. Shapiro, *American Jewry since World War II*, second printing ed., The Jewish People in America (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1992), 223.

<sup>133</sup> Chang, *Can’t Stop*, 222.

<sup>134</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism*, 311.

<sup>135</sup> “Black Power’s propensity simultaneously to depict blacks as figurative Jews and to condemn real Jews was perhaps most apparent in demands for reparations. In a proposition that followed naturally from its vision of the black ghetto as a colony, a wartime Jewish ghetto, or a concentration camp, and otherwise threatening a revolution, the 1966 platform of the Black Panther Party demanded government compensation for the ‘slaughter of over fifty million black people.’” Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land*, 339.

<sup>136</sup> These are few of many labels that specialized in making Black music accessible to all commercial markets. Technology and a shift in musical preference gave Jewish entrepreneurs an opportunity to capitalize on new artists and sounds. Some view this as appropriation, others view it as a necessary step in profitability, it can be both. These labels were disproportionately founded by Jews, one or two generations removed from immigration, which eventually merged with larger companies to grow and shift, absorbing and acquiring the modern music genres of today into their portfolio.

<sup>137</sup> Exceptions would be found in Black Power panel discussions, often held in jazz clubs. “In the winter of 1965 LeRoi Jones, Archie Shepp, Larry Rivers, and Jonas Mekas participated in a panel discussion about Black Power at the Village Vanguard, New York’s famed jazz club... A Jewish audience member pleaded with the African American panelists to say what a Jew could do for Black Power. LeRoi Jones responded very simply: ‘Die Baby. All you can do for me is die.’” Melnick, *A Right*, 1,15.

accord, and were not divided by a race line. This was the time of the first White rock n' roll bands, people like Elvis, and Bill Haley and The Comets, which split musical tastes over age groups and over ethnic lines.<sup>138</sup> The effect of this music in American culture looked like the theme of the Broadway musical, "Hairspray," where cultural values were rapidly changing based on the popularity of music, outside the confines of rigid institutions, still resistant to change.

The new style of music was Rock n' Roll, and later, Funk and R&B, all abetted by the proliferation of the electric guitar. Chicago became a powerful seat for blues music, and between the 1940s and 50s as the city's black population increased by 77 percent, from 278,000 to 492,000, "it was plugged in and raw from the cotton fields Mississippi to the slaughterhouses of Chicago."<sup>139</sup> No longer needing to hide behind a veneer of civility, music could articulate gritty messages disenfranchisement as not seen before. It was the maturation of partnerships between Jews and Blacks that made music promotion political, albeit motivated by profit.<sup>140</sup> Divorced from the reality of the street life that birthed the cooperation between races, largely separated by class, Jews continued to fill their role as cultural middlemen between the artists they represented and the markets that their musical products were profitable in. Indie labels, pioneers in the jazz age, had transitioned themselves into the Motown and funk age quite naturally. The possibility of shared financial success continued to be enough to bridge the Jewish and Black gap in this era.<sup>141</sup>

---

<sup>138</sup> In contemporary rap literature Elvis is used as a mythic example of White appropriation of Black music. "I'm the worst thing since Elvis Presley, to do Black music so selfishly..." Eminem "Without Me" (2002). "Same thing my n---a Elvis did with Rock n' Roll, Justin Timberlake, Eminem, and Macklemore..." J. Cole "Fire Squad" (2014). "I said Elvis Presley aint got no soul, Chuck Berry is rock and roll" Mos Def "Rock and Roll" (1999). "Elvis was a hero to most, but he never meant sh\*t to me you see, straight up racist that sucker was, simple and plain..." Chuck D. Public Enemy "Fight the Power," (1989).

<sup>139</sup> Sidran, *There Was a Fire*, 149.

<sup>140</sup> One example can be found in Rock and Roll hall-of-famer, Syd Nathan. "Syd Nathan was an old-school music-business entrepreneur who launched the careers of James Brown, Hank Ballard and other R&B greats on his King Records label and it's affiliates... In the process of working with black R&B and white country artists, Nathan helped effect a cross-pollination of the two worlds, thereby helping lay the groundwork for the musical hybrid known as rock and roll... As Brown told writer Gerri Hirshey decades later, 'I would be telling a lie if I said I would be a world star without the help of men like Mr. Nathan. He was the first one willing to take a chance on me.'"

"Syd Nathan," Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, <https://www.rockhall.com/inductees/syd-nathan>.

<sup>141</sup> Reverend Al Sharpton even began his career as a promoter for James Brown, employed by Spring Records owner Roy and Jules Rifkind, who founded the label in NYC in 1969. The Rifkinds were known to have booked Barbara Streisand and Elvis in their first Vegas shows, ostensibly through mob connections. Rev. Sharpton helped to keep Black Muslims from harassing his employers. The entire Rifkind family, brothers, fathers and sons, would all be in the music industry, and eventually would represent the rap group, the Wu-Tang Clan. Jules, as head of promotion for MGM Records, was known for presciently hiring Black executives.

Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 30, 441-42.

## Part Three: Modern Rap and Hip Hop

### When did Rap Start? The 1970s.

When finding the birth moment for rap music, there is virtually no consensus. The rock and funk songs that were pioneered in the 1960s and 1970s by artists like James Brown, Marvin Gaye, and Jimmy Castor Bunch, all appear to have qualities similar to rap, yet there are key stylistic differences found in contemporary rap music, most notably in the poetic delivery of the rapper, the repetitive nature of the beat in the song itself, the technology used in production, and the “serious” political content of the rap.<sup>142</sup> This was also a stylistic generational shift; “Put quite simply, rap was for the youth; the earlier jazz, soul, and R&B remained more firmly sedimented as adult music, although classic R&B, funk, and soul tracks culled from parental record collections and used bins have impressive longevity thanks to hip-hop’s resuscitation and appropriation of these catalog materials.”<sup>143</sup> What is universally agreed upon by rap scholars is that in the 1970s, there was a blend of inner-city artistic styles that culminated in a distinct sound known as hip hop. “In New York, the gradual dissemination of rap, graffiti and breakdancing as the cornerstones of hip-hop culture involved the transgression of distinct social spaces that had historically been shaped by segregated cultural practices and were established well before rapping DJs ever picked up a microphone.”<sup>144</sup> The practices that each had their own history were Graffiti Art, B-boying/Breakdancing, MC-ing, and DJ-ing (disc jockeying).

It’s important to note: these styles did not originate in a vacuum, but were the byproduct of specific actions that ruptured the inner-city life of established and immigrant families in Harlem and the Bronx. In 1929, German Jewish building magnate Robert Moses designed a master plan to connect the surrounding suburbs of New York City with Manhattan.<sup>145</sup> This rezoning effort created modern urban tenements with few public spaces, parks, and amenities, while allowing workers from the suburbs to commute to Manhattan via bypass bottleneck roadways. It wasn’t until the 1950s and 1960s that this construction project became actualized. During this

---

<sup>142</sup> As we have seen before with the advent and accessibility of technologies like the piano, the radio, and the television, often innovative technology is the precursor to music profitability. In the case of rap music, the technology pioneered was a rudimentary turntable. Originating in the “cement jungle” of inner city Bronx, often jerry-rigged through outdoor streetlamps and other vacant electrical outlets, the key to hip-hop and rap music was two turntables, a mixer, speakers, and a microphone. The earliest rappers created their own systems, usually by connecting a turntable to a mixer for a continuous stream of music to be played through the speaker. The microphone allowed the MC to perform verbal art over the repeating beats, hence the MC spoke and the DJ switched the records. This functioned as a primitive looper, which could play for the entire duration of a “block party” as one record can be easily be replaced with another, and the scratching and mixing could be incorporated into the other art forms performed. The infamous New York City blackout of 1977 allowed for much of this equipment to be stolen, and thus, after the blackout, rap and hip-hop turntables spread like wildfire through the inner-city.

Richard Mook and Gerald Rulon-Maxwell, *Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, third ed. (Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 2007), 40-57.

Sidran, *There Was a Fire*, 278-283.

<sup>143</sup> Forman, *The 'Hood*, 86.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid. 75.

<sup>145</sup> Chang, *Can’t Stop*, 11.

time, more than 60,000 Bronx residents were displaced.<sup>146</sup> For Jews, the nationwide race riots of 1967 was a final lynchpin in their exodus to the suburbs (known as the Long Hot Summer of 1967). Thus, during the years preceding the culmination of Civil Rights movement in the Sixties, the city atmosphere was described as: “New York City itself became a verbal, and at times a literal battleground between blacks and Jews... In many cases, ethnicity seemed to have taken over from ideology: in fact, ethnicity had become the dominant ideology.”<sup>147</sup> <sup>148</sup> The fomenting pressures of being neighbors, as well as strangers, had reached a boiling point. Skin color and economic class had severed the partnership between Jews and Blacks, and when the massive “Urban Renewal,” programs of the 50s and 60s began, Jews moved out into suburbs, leaving Hispanic immigrants, Blacks, and some impoverished Whites in the modern ghetto projects of New York City.<sup>149</sup>

In tracing the history of the components of hip hop, it can be seen that each of the four artistic styles mentioned above, has its own legacy, and often, its own ethnic past. It wasn’t until the rupture of New York City dwellers living in the 50s into the 1970s that these styles coalesced into the modern hip hop form we know today as “rap.” Further, it wasn’t until the 1970s that this style became marketable enough to become a commodity. The diasporic origin of hip hop is a modern miracle; by fusing disparate ethnic art forms into a commercially viable product, the inner-city slums produced a gritty, All American, immigrant-fueled multi-billion dollar business, the likes of which has changed the world.

**Graffiti Art** - Graffiti was first used in the 1950s by street gangs to mark territorial boundaries, enhance self-promotion, and create group identity. In the 1960’s in the South Bronx, gang signs marked the territory of rival gangs, often warning others not to trespass. Gangs were of all races, “Most of these gangs were predominantly Puerto Rican. East of the Bronx River, the Black Spades consolidated youths of the mostly African American communities. Further east, and north across Fordham Road, in the last white communities in the Bronx, gangs like the Arthur Avenue Boys, Golden Guineas, War Pigs and the Grateful Dead were foot soldiers for

---

<sup>146</sup> Often the case with massive construction projects: the 1929 plan for a “tower-in-a-park,” urban renewal project to create a highway system around NYC wasn’t begun until the booming years of the 1950s and 1960s. The formerly Jewish, Irish and Italian middle class who lived in these areas moved into sprawling suburbs, and the Bronx itself lost 600,000 manufacturing jobs. The subsequent departure of middle class groups from the inner city to suburban residence meant a loss of tax revenue for public services.

Ibid. p. 11-13.

<sup>147</sup> Lederhendler, *New York*, 139.

<sup>148</sup> Famous Jewish and Black writers, such as Bernard Malamud’s 1971 novel, “*The Tenants*,” articulate the failure of Jews and Blacks to come together and find a common urban landscape.

<sup>149</sup> This displacement, though specific to New York City, is critical in understanding rap music as, “Before the rise of West Coast gangsta rappers, New York City’s MCs were the uncontested trendsetters in rap music. Not only did the most famous rap artists hail from the city, but New York was also the center of production for managers, record labels and recording studios. Although few might have thought of it in such terms at the time, the national sound of rap music in the early to mid-1980s was actually a regional one. Virtually everything in rap, including the music’s sound, slang, and sense of fashion, came from New York.”

Loren Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Songs* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 91.

angry wiseguys who spent their days cursing the imminent loss of their neighborhood.”<sup>150</sup> Often signaling competing races, graffiti was not exclusive to one people or culture. While graffiti has roots in ancient times, it was also used in World War Two: the famous epithet “Kilroy was here,” was used to denote to allied soldiers that someone had braved the space and survived enough to “tag” the location. Graffiti only became commercially recognized in the late 1970s. By that time, more than just a denotation of gang space, graffiti became a life affirming symbolic form of expression that inner-city practitioners created on the walls of property they did not own. In the 1980s this style became mainstream, and was documented by videographers. Artists eventually sold their pieces to established galleries, turning this art into a business.<sup>151</sup> Hip hop and punk style music was initially called “Graffiti Rock,” before being recognized as “hip hop.”

**B-boying/Breakdancing** - Breakdancing is a dance form that began in the South Bronx although it is said to have a grounding in African folk traditions. Dancers move as if they are gymnasts, spinning and freezing during musical interludes, often competing on teams. It is similar to “capoeira,” which is a Brazilian martial art form that fluctuates between dance and combat, between theater and sport. “Capoeira is a fight-like dance or a dance-like fight created by enslaved Africans in Brazil.”<sup>152</sup> Tap dancing has its own roots in earlier immigrants, from Irish, Scottish, and English settlers to America. African American tap dancing has its own form of “combat,” whereby individual dancers try to “one up” each other, as seen by the Nicholas Brothers, in movies like “Stormy Weather,” (1943).<sup>153</sup> There is also the “jitterbug” dance, which was a ballroom influenced movement from the era of jazz and the big bands. James Brown’s dance moves are most notable in coordinating inchoate b-boy dance moves into a fluid rhythm, which is one of the main reasons that James Brown is regarded as a predecessor of the hip hop movement, both musically (in content and sound) and through dance. Often these dances were used by gangs, in “dance-offs,” which had the potential to de-escalate turf wars, similar to the Broadway show “West Side Story.”

**DJ-ing and MC-ing** - The word MC means, “Master of Ceremonies,” and the word DJ means “Disc Jockey.” These terms are attributed to be the person announcing the event and addressing the audience, as well as the person changing the record and setting the playlist. While originally separate roles, these two coalesced into one when technology improved to allow fluid record changes with simultaneous microphone use. The history of this oral form of art

---

<sup>150</sup> Chang, *Can't Stop*, 43.

<sup>151</sup> One such artist, a modern day Mezz (i.e. ditching his conventional path for artistic expression in a foreign culture), was named ZYPHER, “a Jewish kid from the Upper East Side who cut classes to hang out,” he describes the scene, “You get out of school, fuckin’ get your little bag of reefer, going to the park, meeting up with your homeboys, kids from Brooklyn, the Bronx... It was extremely mixed, like a freak scene of young kids. Some of the kids were really from wealthy families and then some were like more down and out, some were homeless. But it was really cool because that scene went on for, I’d say, the better half of a decade... The cops had a total hands-off policy. There was fucking clouds of pot smoke. It looked like the parking lot of a Grateful Dead concert. Imagine that every day, seven days a week.” While this story takes place in our modern era, it could easily have described a Harlem jazz speakeasy in the 1920s.

*That's the Joint*, 26-27.

<sup>152</sup> Fernando Orejuela, *Rap and Hip Hop Culture* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 24.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.* 27.

has roots in forms of African poetry known as “toasting,” “boasting,” and “playing the dozens,” or “signifying.”<sup>154</sup> It is influenced by “scat singing,” and oral “storytelling” genres of immigrants and became wildly popular in the 1950s on Black radio stations. When radio hosts would announce the news, personal anecdotes, and opinions between songs, they would incorporate rhyme schemes and often speak poetically. The popularity of Black radio stations, specifically Frankie Crocker on Harlem’s WWRL, helped to channel this art form into mainstream culture, “Many White kids who had never met a person of color in their lives found their way to these stations with a simple twist of the dial.”<sup>155</sup> <sup>156</sup> White radio station hosts followed the trend. Alan Freed, a Jew from Cleveland who played classical music on WJW, changed his handle to “Moondog,” and began playing “Rock and Roll,” the new name for Black music known as “rhythm and blues.”<sup>157</sup>

### Rap and Hip Hop as a Force of Good

Few politicians in the 1970s articulated the struggles of Black America by championing inner-city causes such as affordable housing, better public education, realistic drug regulation and police alternatives to incarceration.<sup>158</sup> Crack cocaine and other narcotics had marginal impact

---

<sup>154</sup> 1) “Toasting” is the poetic exaggeration of an event or person, performed in rhyming couplets or prose, this poetic style often celebrates a “baadman” who succeeds amidst an unjust society. 2) “Boasting” is the African American narrative form similar to “Toasting,” yet about one’s own personal attributes for the purpose of sexuality, surprise, humor, shock, and to amplify reality. 3) “Playing the Dozens,” or “Signifying,” is the art form of ritual verbal dueling, often combining the above two poetic forms into a one-upper contest between two people, until someone “Loses their cool.” This last form is similar to “Your momma” jokes that people would trade with each other. Ibid. 46-51.

<sup>155</sup> Chang, *Can’t Stop*, 10.

<sup>156</sup> “Frankie... was often trailed by his improbable sidekick, Juggy Gayles - born George Resnick, a Jewish promoter in his sixties who was widely recognized as Crocker’s ‘bagman.’” Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 80-81.

<sup>157</sup> This is another example of technology creating a market opportunity for Jews, as being cultural mediators in the form of a radio host. Jews were paid more than African American radio hosts to represent Black art, such as the rebranding of “rhythm and blues,” into “rock and roll.” Modern sensitivities asks us if this was a necessary step in the dissemination of Black culture into popular culture, or if this was appropriation by ethnicity, or class? At this particular time in history, what should a music industry “gatekeeper” look like?

<sup>158</sup> Many aspects of gang culture, as well as the rise of the Nation of Islam movement, is found in jail culture. The Muslim Brotherhood has extensive prison outreach programs, and coping strategies used for prison life could easily be converted into gang culture inside or outside prison walls. Even fashion, such as the baggy loose fitting pants rappers wore, were stylistic of prison uniforms which prohibited belts for inmates.

Tayannah Lee McQuillar, *When Rap Music Had a Conscience: The Artists, Organizations, and Historic Events That Inspired and Influenced the 'Golden Age' of Hip-Hop from 1987 to 1996* (New York, NY: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2007), 129-131.

Nikko Koppel, "Are Your Jeans Sagging? Go Directly to Jail." *The New York Times*, August 30, 2007, Fashion & Style, accessed November 10, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/30/fashion/30baggy.html>.

on White communities, despite their roiling of Black neighborhoods.<sup>159</sup> The proliferation of “trickle-down economics,” the Democratic outsourcing of jobs overseas, and the Republican right-wing failure to extend public services to its poorest inner-city dwellers led to the glorification of gang culture, a resurgence of the militaristic “Black Power” movement, and also (positively), to social clubs designed to encourage constructive forms of competition.<sup>160</sup> These were cultural means that Blacks used to articulate their struggles that were not yet commercialized or accepted into the mainstream, “The conscious rappers provided the only forum where young Black people could express how they felt about the topic of the day. Before conscious rap and now that it is rarely heard, young Black people were absent from any meaningful discourse in relation to contemporary issues.”<sup>161</sup>

As for business that existed in the ghetto, many of the value generating ones left for the suburbs, leaving only liquor shops, pawn shops, fast food restaurants and generally non-community oriented businesses.<sup>162</sup> With the lack of value generating enterprises, the social mood of the urban ghetto became insufferable. “The decline of strong, progressive leadership and its byproduct, ‘progressive politics,’ along with a deepening economic debilitation among urban minority populations, contributed to a profound sense of social and cultural drift and widespread nihilism that have, over the years, gradually taken root among many black and Latino youths.”<sup>163</sup> An important similarity between the ghettos of World War Two and modern American inner-city ghettos is that there were, and are, very few opportunities to escape out of them. In the ghetto, mere existence itself is a form of resistance. This sense of futility is ideal for gang recruitment, yet through the expression of graffiti, block parties, breakdancing, and hip hop culture, there was still some form of a constructive outlet.<sup>164</sup> “It is not at all insignificant that the dominant historical narratives pertaining to the emergence of hip-hop identify a transition from gang-oriented affiliations (formed around their protection of turf) to music and break-dance

---

<sup>159</sup> “A thriving crack industry, which by now employed a growing number of young blacks (especially males), fed a swelling epidemic of crack addiction and an accompanying increase in crime and violence affecting urban black communities across the country.”

Marcus Reeves, *Somebody Scream: Rap Music's Rise to Prominence in the Aftershock of Black Power* (New York, NY: Faber and Faber, 2008), 68.

<sup>160</sup> Orejuela, *Rap and Hip Hop Culture*, 13.

<sup>161</sup> McQuillar, *When Rap Music*, 67.

<sup>162</sup> This is related to the middle class itself leaving for the suburbs, regardless of ethnicity, this was a class movement out of the ghetto to the suburbs in search of better public amenities and safer neighborhoods. As a consequence, even Black middle class business owners took their businesses with them.

M.K. Asante, Jr., *It's Bigger than Hip Hop: The Rise of the Post-Hip-Hop Generation* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2008), 45.

<sup>163</sup> Forman, *The 'Hood*, 70.

<sup>164</sup> Of course, selling drugs was also a viable job for many young Blacks. The ambition and determination that rappers had while selling drugs in the streets helped them create popular lyrical content that often glorified the masculine gangster mentality. Rappers such as T.I. Snoop Dogg, Tupac, Biggie, 50 Cent, and many more began their career selling on the streets before turning to music. Sometimes, in cases such as the Black Mafia Family, drug money would be washed into promoting and producing hip hop artists as a form of legitimizing proceeds from the illicit drug trade. Regardless, in subsequent interviews and books, rappers often talk about the destructive impact of drugs on their hometown communities, and warn of the dangers involved with “hustling.”

Mara Shalhoup, *BMF: The Rise and Fall of Big Meech and the Black Mafia Family* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2010).



affiliations that maintained and in some cases intensified the important structuring systems of territoriality.”<sup>165</sup> Herein lies a commercial clash brought to the fore (beginning in the late 80s): while early rap music defies the very oppressive nature of the ghetto, the profitability of “gangsta rap” to White audiences became a driver in determining the content of rap music. Rap, as any commercialized musical form, has the capacity to glorify the wrong behavior, which it did by emphasizing the negative aspects of the ghetto, such as gang life, drugs, misogynistic relationships, and threadbare consumerism.<sup>166</sup> While rap may have begun as a positive outlet, the ongoing commercial aspect of it contains a mixed legacy.

### Rap Goes Commercial - Jewish Influence

Despite the incredible capacity for hip hop to allay gang turf wars, it wasn’t commercial enough to be sold en masse to markets. The profitability of hip hop, like ragtime and jazz before it, needed a cultural middleman to absorb the risks involved with promotion, distribution, management, and research to find the appropriate markets to exploit.<sup>167</sup> Unlike previous times however, the established music industry had been largely stratified into clear corporate channels that needed to be adeptly navigated. Fortunately for enterprising individuals, the established music production houses missed the growing popularity of hip hop. It was again Jewish and Black relationships between entrepreneurs that were responsible for merging economic muscle with rap artistic talent from the ground up, partnering to lend credit and credibility to emerging musical artists. In New York City, Cory Robbins and Steve Plotnicki (“a Jewish guy who worked at a local record distributor”) opened Profile Records in May of 1981 by borrowing money from their parents. They succeeded during the attenuated collapse of the disco music era to produce early rap music like “Genius Rap,” by Mr. Magic.<sup>168</sup> Tom Silverman, the half Italian half Jewish founder of Tommy Boy Records, produced Afrika Bambaataa and the Jazzy Five’s hit known as “Jazzy Sensation,” in 1981, selling 35,000 copies.<sup>169</sup><sup>170</sup> These early rap albums were mainly built on the heels of the fading disco industry, a stylistic merger of smooth talking radio DJs and dance music, but the next wave of artists would be recognizable as a distinctly rap, incorporating the four elements of rap noted above in music videos and through a publicized lifestyle.

---

<sup>165</sup> Forman, *The 'Hood*, 70.

<sup>166</sup> Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk about When We Talk about Hip Hop and Why It Matters* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2008), 14-15.

<sup>167</sup> “Hip hop, like nearly all black musical forms that preceded it, began as a commercially marginal music that was subjected to segregated treatment and underfunding. It was characterized by smaller production and promotion budgets along with the assumption that the rap audience would be a youthful segment of African Americans - an already proportionately small consumer market - and an even smaller percentage of whites and other ethnic groups.”

Ibid. 14-15.

<sup>168</sup> Silverman would later found Tommy Boy Music, another profitable hip hop label. Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 75-78.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid. p. 75-78

<sup>170</sup> Afrika Bambaataa was part of the African American South Bronx gang known as the Black Spades. By preaching “positive creativity, vision, and healing through hip hop’s four elements,” he “transformed the Black Spades into the Zulu Nation and turned his party people on to Black Nationalism.” Orejuela, *Rap and Hip Hop Culture*, 131.

By the mid to late 1980s, rap would go mainstream with the brilliance of artists and financiers like Russell Simmons and Rick Rubin. “Russell was a Black executive able to bridge Black and white tastes like no one since Berry Gordy. He hired [Bill] Adler. Rick was a Jewish music producer who understood how profoundly Herc, Bam, and Flash’s insights could reshape all of pop music.”<sup>171</sup> “The world, of course, came to know Russell Simmons as cofounder and CEO of Def Jam Records, becoming the godfather of the rap music industry, marketing hardcore rap music to the streets as well as to white America.”<sup>172</sup> <sup>173</sup> Yet Russell Simmons was prime for being a cultural mediator in a way that jazz age Jews had been over a half-century before; in his early childhood, “Simmons did not go to one of the local African American schools. His parents insisted he attend an integrated school with better academic standards. In an interview with Cedric Muhammad, Simmons explained what this meant: ‘... I was bussed to a Jewish school and I didn’t know why the WASPs would chase me into this one particular area of projects... and I didn’t know why this one group of White people were chasing me and this other group were protecting me. But it was because I was a Jewish co-op. So I have a relationship with them.’”<sup>174</sup> “Simmons can be regarded as a contemporary embodiment of W.E.B. Du Bois’s ‘double consciousness,’ which is frequently cited as a fundamental concept underlying the construction of the African American identity”<sup>175</sup> This concept of a dual consciousness is also one that is frequently found in a Jewish identity, respectively secular/diasporic and religious/ethnic.<sup>176</sup>

While Russell Simmons was the biggest producer of hip hop in New York City in the early 1980s (and still today), he would meet his co-producer at a television set entitled “Graffiti Rock,” Rick Rubin. Rick, having been exposed to Black music as a Jewish kid growing up on Long Island, lived in a NYU dorm as a student (1981-1984), a mere two blocks from the New York City’s punk and hip hop scene.<sup>177</sup> With the financial backing of his parents, and new electronic

---

<sup>171</sup> Bill Adler was Jewish music analyst and publicist in the industry, responsible for the research that would determine the marketing for the fledgling rap music industry, influencing the rise of Gangsta Rap. Chang, *Can’t Stop*, 245.

<sup>172</sup> Reeves, *Somebody Scream*, 68.

<sup>173</sup> Def Jam is critical in understanding rap’s influence in modern American music. “The artists, entrepreneurs, and executives who succeeded had one thing in common: the vision of hip-hop as a culture without boundaries,” and by 2010 “The former Def Jam crew now ran at least a quarter of the American music business.”

Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 630-631.

<sup>174</sup> Jon Stratton, “The Beastie Boys: Jews in Whiteface,” *Popular Music*, 3rd ser., 27, no. 3 (October 2008): 413-432, accessed March 14, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40212400>.

<sup>175</sup> Forman, *The Hood*, 121.

<sup>176</sup> A similar story is found with regards to radio stations spreading rap music to the West Coast. In one example, Keith Naftaly became the assistant director of San Francisco radio station KMEL in 1984, and was promoted to director of programming in 1987. KMEL, a “Whites only” rock and roll station, benefitted from Naftaly including pop, hip hop, and dance music in its rotation. Naftaly was a Jewish kid who, though classically trained in piano, had an affinity for hip hop. As a result of his school’s bus desegregation, Naftaly grew up attending a majority Black school in Hunters Point.

Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 301-324.

<sup>177</sup> A focus of this research is the application of the “middleman” place between White and Black culture. Often Jews in this “middleman” category are reduced to a mere “White” person role, which removes their

instruments (like the Roland TR-808 drum machine he borrowed from Beastie Boy Adam Horovitz), Rick began recording his own beats, and founded “Def Jam Recordings” out of his dorm room with Russell Simmons in 1984.<sup>178</sup> The goal for these entrepreneurs was less about making records, and more about making records sell. Eventually they would build their hip hop brand into a multi-billion dollar business, spanning production, tours, clothing, and much more. In the globalized world of asset management, and through mergers and acquisitions in the following decades, no part of the music industry would be untouched by Simmons and Rubin’s Def Jam records.

As with many musical periods before, the artists who were instrumental to the commercial success of the rap and hip hop industry were blessed with connections, technology, and access.<sup>179</sup> <sup>180</sup> LL Cool J, Run DMC, The Beastie Boys, Jazzy Jay; these early rap stars were

---

nuanced character and makes them appear as less authentic. In regards to the Beastie Boys: “The Beasties develop personas that presaged the nihilism later perfected by gangsta rappers as well as the ‘crazy white guy’ position subsequently elaborated by Eminem.” In regards to Rick Rubin, founder of Def Jam: “Rubin is thus encoded as a *hip white explorer* who, like Simmons, bridged the culture gap between white and black spaces and between white and black cultural and aesthetic sensibilities. Together, Simmons and Rubin embody rap’s expansive tendency; they represent the extent to which the genre had conceptually, if not altogether commercially, transcended the borders of the ghetto neighborhoods in the Bronx and Brooklyn, extending into suburban and nonurban spaces and middle-class realms.” My point here is that while Rubin and the Beasties may be able to reach the wealthy suburbs that were previously inaccessible to rap artists, it is more than just their persona as a “crazy white guy” or a “hip white explorer.” Rubin and the Beasties are prototypical Jews looking to reinvent themselves in modernity, operating as a cultural mediator and facilitating the commercializing of an art form, hip hop. They are performing a role nearly as old as their religion itself. They are adapting a form of art they feel a kinship with, and continuing to pave the way for Black artists to represent themselves to more profitable White markets.

Bradley and DuBois, *The Anthology*, 131.

Forman, *The 'Hood*, 125.

<sup>178</sup> Rick Rubin’s parents contributed \$5,000 to help start the company, with the caveat that if it failed, he would go to law school.

Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 138-139.

<sup>179</sup> Even Lyor Cohen, the Israeli born president of Warner (2004-2012) and current Google Youtube’s “Head of Music,” had his start through Def Jam by managing Run-DMC’s European tour.

Opportunistically, when no one in the Rush management had a passport, Lyor stepped in and saved the logistics of the tour (on more than one occasion he showcased his loyalty to the artists and management). Building a reputation as straightforward and business-oriented, he became Russell Simmon’s partner and a mentor to young talent (such as Jay Z). Cohen’s acumen would turn rap into the multi-billion dollar business it is today by brokering deals with clothing companies, fashion, and other promotions - a first for the hip hop industry. Essentially Cohen is a businessman and artist manager who took rap from a music genre outside the mainstream to the corporate seat of power, bridging ethnic rifts by focusing on business terms and the profit motive over divisive politics.

Ibid 163,183-187.

<sup>180</sup> Lyor Cohen’s Israeli mystique and persona would be the source of many rappers attention, both outright and obliquely. The street influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Black affinity for Palestine, the lack of shared cohabitation spaces that Jews and Blacks politically and geographically occupy, and the disproportionate amount of Jews working in the music business makes Cohen’s Israeli/American nationality suspect to many rappers. Mos Def (a successful rapper, actor, and activist), in his 2004 album “The New Danger,” released a song entitled “The Rape Over,” about African Americans being exploited. The first lines of the rap, “Listen, old white men is runnin’ this rap sh\*t, corporate forces is runnin’ this rap sh\*t, some tall Israeli is runnin’ this rap sh\*t, we poke our asses for a chance to cash in...” TI’s song “Act

close enough to the nucleus of New York City to benefit from the entrepreneurial skills of people like Simmons and Rubin, who booked and recorded rap artists in a way that established music production houses were too slow to capitalize on. MTV wouldn't publicize Black music videos such as Run DMC's raps (until they reached major success covering Aerosmith's "Walk this Way" in 1986), ostensibly because the established hierarchy of MTV had been affected by the music segregation of the 1960s. The big six major recording studios had been too slow to recognize rap as a youth movement, writing it off as a passing fad. In 1985, a year after its founding in Rubin's dorm room, Def Jam would inspire a major motion picture and would land a multimillion-dollar production deal with Columbia Records.<sup>181</sup>

In terms of corporate management, there was almost no difference between the musical upstarts built around managers and artists in eras previous and these early rap artists. Technology and the acceptance of Black managers made these partnerships more up to date with modern sensitivities, yet the musical partnership remains similar, including the ways in which the Jewish and Black community had historically bridged cultural differences through the profit motive. While there was no culture of racism in Def Jam, "the collaboration between them [Russell Simmons and Rick Rubin] reverses the presumed order of things, as the Jewish Rubin acted as musical producer while Simmons was the prime business person."<sup>182</sup> Since Simmons was so well known in the hip hop world (and represented hard core rap artists like Public Enemy), when Jewish acts like the Beastie Boys arrived in stretch limos to shows at "The Apollo," nobody doubted their credibility.<sup>183</sup> Ultimately the Beastie Boys, feeling abused by their management, left Def Jam and continued a successful music career in rock and roll, with less emphasis on rap music in their sound.

---

1 TIP" from his 2007 album "TI vs TIP" actually features Cohen's voice demanding "respect" and warning TI about wasting his money. Lupe Fiasco, an artist whose 2006 debut album "Lupe Fiasco's Food and Liquor," received three Grammy nominations, recorded a song entitled N.E.R.D. in 2016 with lyrics, "Artists getting robbed for their publishing, by dirty Jewish execs that think his alms for the covenant." After an online debate between a Jewish MC accusing Lupe of being anti-Semitic, he tweeted: "I get the hint God. Yo Lupe fans it's been fun and I hope you've had fun. I'm officially not releasing anymore music. Albums cancelled." followed by another tweet, "Getting beat up for telling the truth is not how I plan on spending the rest of my life."

JTA and TOI Staff, "Rapper to Quit Music after Tweetstorm Defense of 'Dirty Jewish Execs' Lyrics," The Times of Israel, last modified December 15, 2016, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/rapper-lupe-fiasco-to-quit-music-after-tweetstorm-defense-of-dirty-jewish-exec-lyrics/>.

<sup>181</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 138-139.

<sup>182</sup> Uri Dorchin, *Fight for Your Right to Participate: Jewish American Rappers*, ed. Amalia Ran and Moshe Morad (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 155.

<sup>183</sup> The Beasties, as White rap performers, would have their identity tested in numerous situations. At a rap concert at the Apollo in 1986, when opening for LL Cool J, and Run-DMC, they were warned by Russell Simmons not to use the n-word. Towards the end of their set, they called the audience the n-word and "got off the stage as fast as possible," thus, "When the Beasties started calling the Apollo audience 'n----rs', that audience saw white men abusing them - which Simmons must have foreseen when he attempted to get the Beasties not to use the word." This experience, among others, highlights a key racial element in rap music, whereby Black artists are able to identify with the Black American experience in a way people with White skinned people cannot, even formally non-White Jews. Beyond using the n-word, Black rappers are viewed as more credible sources of street testimony by merit of skin color and implied racial baggage than White people. Stratton, "The Beastie," 421-422.

For Jews already within the recording industry, some, like Bob Krasnow at Warner Brothers Records, were known as experts in Black music. Krasnow, son of Russian Jewish immigrants had signed the likes of George Benson, Chaka Khan, Funkadelic, and Bootsy Collins. In 1983 he was chair of Elektra Records, and in 1984 he signed the likes of mainstream pop and funk artists Grandmaster Flash, and Busta Rhymes.<sup>184</sup> Another Jewish figure, Jerry Heller had grown up in the Black section of Cleveland in the 1950s, as a promoter representing artists like Elton John, Pink Floyd, Marvin Gaye, and Van Morrison. In 1987, he started representing “Niggaz with Attitude,” bringing rap talent from the East Coast to the West Coast and jump starting gangsta rap in the inner-cities of California.<sup>185</sup> “Jerry Heller’s rock-and-roll heart was electrified by NWA; he understood the mainstream potential of Black rebellion. And he was especially fond of Eric Wright for whom he developed a kind of paternal affection.”<sup>186</sup> These artist and manager relationships would become strained as specific rappers became virulently anti-Semitic, sometimes viewing Whites and Jews as nearly identical, and playing into Jewish stereotypes.<sup>187</sup>

---

<sup>184</sup> Krasnow also hired Dante Ross who signed De La Soul and Public Enemy among others. Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 363-368.

<sup>185</sup> Jerry Heller is portrayed by Paul Giamatti in the 2015 film “Straight Outta Compton,” which shows him in a mixed way, but ultimately as a shady manager and main contributor to NWA’s split. Heller, who passed away from a heart attack the year after the movie opened, is remembered by the members of NWA inconsistently. Eazy E was recognized by Heller as the group’s owner, and crafted legal terms unfavorable to Ice Cube and Dr. Dre. There were no legal disputes, yet NWA’s royalties and other advances were low for the high grossing rappers, leading Ice Cube and Dre to be angry with their management (Ice Cube, Dr. Dre, and Eazy E’s widow were producers of the movie, “Straight Outta Compton”). Heller, though insisting he never stole anything, was the focus of Ice Cube’s diss song “No Vaseline,” in which he rhymes, “Cause you’re getting f---ed out your green by a white boy with no vaseline.” Eazy-E’s daughter, in recent support of Heller, called him a “father” figure (Eazy E died of aids in 1995), and while Ice Cube continues to call Heller a shady character (in a radio interview said he would not shed a tear or celebrate for Heller’s funeral). There is no doubt that Heller helped turn NWA into the international rap stars they came to be. Heller’s lawyer, Mickey Shapiro, said “Straight Outta Compton’s” movie’s portrayal of him caused Heller undue stress and contributed to his heart attack. This is a famous modern example of how messy the Black Jewish relationship in music can be. It would be wrong to draw anti-Semitic generalizations from this example, yet the message board on the “comments” section of the below articles are full of them.

Ben Westoff, “Did Jerry Heller Actually Cheat N.W.A.?” *Forbes*, September 7, 2016, Media & Entertainment, accessed November 10, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/benwesthoff/2016/09/07/jerry-heller-nwa/#4ec59f0b5176>.

“Jerry Heller Died Listening to N.W.A.’S Eazy-E,” *TMZ*, September 7, 2016, accessed November 10, 2017, <http://www.tMZ.com/2016/09/07/jerry-heller-n-w-a-played-songs-dead/>.

J’na Jefferson, “Ice Cube, O’Shea Jackson Jr. And Eazy-E’s Daughter Comment On Jerry Heller’s Death,” *Vibe*, September 6, 2016, accessed November 10, 2017, <https://www.vibe.com/2016/09/ice-cube-eb-wright-discuss-jerry-heller-death/>.

Latifah Muhammad, “Jerry Heller’s Lawyer Claims ‘Straight Outta Compton’ Contributed To His Death,” *Vibe*, September 4, 2016, [Page #], accessed November 10, 2017, <https://www.vibe.com/2016/09/jerry-heller-straight-outta-compton-death/>.

<sup>186</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 221.

<sup>187</sup> This is a concerns the rift between the suburban world (where Jews and Whites predominantly exist), and the world of the inner-city (where rappers predominantly exist). Unlike previous periods in history, whereby the Civil Rights Movement somewhat demonstrated Jewish solidarity with Blacks, and where living quarters may have been less class segregated (albeit with ethnic tensions), by the 1980s the relationship between Jews and Blacks had become geographically segregated by class, broken, and estranged. The lack of a national voice to articulate the daily struggle of America’s ghettos opened a door

Heavily influenced by the inner-city projects, two “gangsta” rap groups that alienated their management were NWA with Jerry Heller from the West Coast, and Public Enemy with Rick Rubin, Lyor Cohen, and Bill Adler from New York.

Like George Gershwin or Elvis before, it was only a matter of time before a White rap artist would outsell Black rap artists by the sheer commercial appeal of skin color. “‘The fact that the Beastie Boys were a white group was kind of a big deal,’ said Rick Rubin. ‘If a fourteen-year-old white girl in, oh, Alabama had brought home a Run-DMC album in those days - you know, looking at these black guys as rock’n’roll guys or sex symbols - it would not really have been OK. Whereas, as stupid and disgusting as Beastie Boys might have been, that was OK because they were white. I think when they played Beastie Boys on MTV, then it made it easier for MTV to play Run-DMC.’”<sup>188</sup> <sup>189</sup> While the commercial success of the Beastie Boy’s is an undeniable fact, it’s important to note their lack of emphasis on their religion. Despite Adam Horowitz being the son of famous Jewish playwright Israel Horowitz, there was no firm connection to Judaism in The Beastie Boys.<sup>190</sup> At this point in rap history, to the band whose most successful single was called, “(You Gotta) Fight for Your Right (to Party),” rap music was just about making money and having fun.<sup>191</sup>

### **Gangsta Rap and Runaway Profit: the Undermining of Identity**

Ironically, one of the most commercially successful branches of rap music is “gangsta rap,” that is rap that promotes anti-establishment in the form of gang, drug, and criminal culture. By relying on the harsh reality of the street, specific to the location of the rapper’s city, the legitimacy of an artist’s ghetto identity is perceived as authentic. This became a main driver in

---

for gangsta rappers to exploit. Public Enemy, one of the first gangsta rap groups (a trio that Rolling Stones called #44 on its 100 most influential artists in 2004), alienated their Jewish management (Rick Rubin, Bill Adler, and Lyor Cohen) by espousing Black Nationalistic messages and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. This sentiment was popularized by politically charged current events such as Jesse Jackson meeting with Farrakhan, and calling New York City “hymietown,” subsequently losing his bid for the presidential election. Black criticism of the state of Israel and events like the Crown Heights Riots threatened Jews in New York City. While Jews preserved a working relationship to Blacks in the music industry, anti-Semitism grew in Black inner-city communities with some rappers, like Professor Griff of NWA, hyperbolically mythologizing it. As with eras before, these anti-Semitic perspectives are solely the individuals, and cannot be extended to all people they represent. Professor Griff even issued an apology after visiting the Holocaust Museum.

<sup>188</sup> Sidran, *There Was a Fire*, 285.

<sup>189</sup> Rick Rubin was the DJ to the Beastie Boys, and would produce “License to Ill” in 1986, the first rap album to be #1 on the Billboard 200 chart. Rolling Stone Magazine, which previously avoided the genre of hip hop, published a review entitled “Three idiots make a masterpiece.” Spin magazine (a Rolling Stone type of rag for the “new generation”) put the Beastie Boys on the cover - the first time a rap group would receive front page status. The Beastie Boys would eventually sue Rick Rubin and Russell Simmons for royalty disputes, break away from their company, and create their own record label. They would make four more albums to go multi-platinum.

Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 165-172.

Cheryl L. Keyes, *Music in American Life* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 81.

<sup>190</sup> Sidran, *There Was a Fire*, 285.

<sup>191</sup> One of their most well-known songs, “(You Gotta) Fight for Your Right (to Party),” reached #7 on the *Billboard Hot 100*, off their 1986 album “Licensed to Ill”

producing rap albums to White suburban consumers that, in the late 1980s and well into the 1990s, drove rap music to be both mainstream and commercial.<sup>192</sup> Unlike Harlem's history of being a melting pot of immigrant ethnicities holding different races together in a shared goal of economic advancement, the violent gansta rap which has influenced hip hop music significantly today comes from the more ghettoized West Coast.<sup>193</sup> "Ice-T distinguishes New York and Los Angeles hip-hop scenes thus: 'Hip-hop started in N.Y. They had graffiti artists, breakdancers, we [L.A.] didn't have any of that, we had gangs.'"<sup>194</sup> The poorest of the city of L.A. suffered a similar fate as the displaced Bronx in New York, "The generation that came of age in the 1980s during the Reagan-Bush era were products of devastating structural changes in the urban economy that date back to the late 1960s. While the city as a whole experienced unprecedented growth, the communities of Watts and Compton faced increased economic displacement, factory foreclosures, and an unprecedented deepening of poverty... Developers and city and county government helped the process along by infusing massive capital into suburbanization while simultaneously cutting back expenditures for parks, recreation, and affordable housing in inner city communities."<sup>195</sup> There are major similarities between East Coast and West Coast inner-city Black diasporas, from lack of communal spaces to institutional disenfranchisement, yet the major difference was the West Coast explosion of crack cocaine and gang activity. When these harsh ghetto realities were paired with the traditional African ethnic identity of celebrating the "baadman," it created an inverted culture whereby crime, gang violence, misogyny and debasement is often celebrated, even legitimate. This is similar to the jazz age of prohibition, albeit crack cocaine is a much less socially acceptable substance than alcohol, and the identity of the crack cocaine "gangsta" and bootlegging "gangster" is separated by era and culture, though both heavily influenced by immigrants.

Of course while gangsta rap is an incredibly successful genre (out of many genres) of hip hop music, it highlights that the profit motive stands starkly against the Jewish spiritual one. As Jews in the music industry, we should ask ourselves the famous question, "Is this good for the Jews?" The empowerment of "thug" culture for revenue stands in direct contradiction to Rabbinic Judaism's affinity for the soft-spoken scholar, the intellectual over the strongman, and the propensity to adhere to the law of the land. However, since there are few commercial means to escape the ghetto, and since drugs and rap music act as means to elevate life in the inner city where disenfranchisement exists, a gangsta rapper who sells records instead of selling drugs

---

<sup>192</sup> Gangsta rap has its appeal on the account of appearing authentic to consumers foreign to the ghetto, "Despite the fact that hip-hop musical, clothing, and linguistic styles vary from one locale to another, one concept that is commonly invoked is authenticity. In fact, authenticity has been invoked by hip-hop fans and artists throughout the 1990s, spoken in terms of being 'true,' 'real,' or 'keepin' it real'...hip-hop artists and fans found themselves in a contradictory situation that other subcultural groups confronted with widespread acceptance previously faced: being 'inside' a mainstream culture they had, in part, defined themselves as being against. By selling millions of albums to White teens and appearing on MTV, hip-hop artists (and their fans) have had to struggle to maintain 'pure' identity." Here are some of the ways that this conundrum is satisfied: playing up one's proximity to the street, staying true to oneself (not following mass trends), being masculine or "hard," identifying with a racial minority, being underground (not selling one's music to an established studio).

*That's the Joint*, 165-77.

<sup>193</sup> Perkins, *Droppin' Science*, 122.

<sup>194</sup> Keyes, *Music in American*, 89.

<sup>195</sup> Perkins, *Droppin' Science*, 122.

can be used to prove that a person can indeed rise above their circumstances. The answer of the question, “is this good for the Jews,” is individualistic: for individuals in the music industry, yes this is good - it allows businesses to grow, and workers to be paid. For those who live out on the streets, this music culture may not be good, as it exploits the struggles of daily life in the inner-city, often without giving back to the community. There is no clear ethical or religious stance on Jewish commercial support for gangsta rap, and the issue serves to illustrate the perplexing relationship individual Jews have to rap music and gangsta culture.

For a contemporary example of this extraordinarily complex Jewish Black partnership, take famous gangsta rapper Tupac Shakur. Tupac’s mother, Afeni Shakur, was jailed with other members of the Black Panthers Party in 1969 for conspiring to bomb department stores, a police station, and railroad facilities. Known as the ‘Panther 21,’ when they could not make their own bail conductor Leonard Bernstein and his wife, “hosted a fund-raiser, inviting dozens of influential arts and media figures, including Barbara Walters, to their Park Avenue apartment. They raised the money, but the gathering was widely mocked...”<sup>196</sup> After prison, “As his mother [Afeni Shakur] struggled with drug addiction, she moved her son to the Bay Area, where he balanced his vibrant intellectual life with growing attraction to the ‘thug life,’ embracing the polarities in his growing repertoire of rhymes. Leila Steinberg - a local community activist, poetry instructor, and hip-hop promoter- looked after the young Shakur, and introduced him to Atron Gregory, the manager of one of the most successful hip-hop acts from the Bay, Digital Underground.” While traditional religion played no active part in these relationships, a sense of obligation and humanistic duty is acknowledged. Leila “worked relentlessly to help him [Tupac] launch his hip-hop career, networking and helping to spread his music, but when he started gaining success she refused to accept much money from him, which she attributed to her ‘guilt for my privilege and my whiteness.’”<sup>197</sup> Tupac’s success brings to the fore the “gateway” partnership Jews have had with Blacks in the music industry. What is the meaning of this motivation? Is this benevolence to gain access to “White America?” is this a deeply encoded empathic message to love the stranger amongst you?

This gangsta strand of rap music split the Black community in a way that pitted the profitability of the “thug” lifestyle against Civil Rights values pioneered twenty years earlier.<sup>198</sup> Often this split is over class, “In fact, ‘Nigga’ is frequently employed to distinguish urban black working class males from the black bourgeoisie and African Americans in positions of institutional authority.”<sup>199</sup> Of the many preeminent cases of elders suing youths, when OutKast released a song called “Rosa Parks,” (1998) with the chorus “Ah ha hush that fuss, everybody move to the back of the bus, do you want to bump and slump with us, we the type of people make the club get crunk,” “Rosa Parks, the matriarch of the Civil Rights Movement, took Big Boi (Antwan Patton) and Andre 3000 (Andre Benjamin) to court.”<sup>200</sup> As much as rap music had started as a way to

---

<sup>196</sup> Ben Westhoff, *Original Gangstas: Tupac Shakur, Dr. Dre, Eazy-E, Ice Cube, and the Birth of West Coast Rap* (New York, NY: Hachette Books, 2016), 179.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid. 182.

<sup>198</sup> This could also be loosely paralleled to the upper class German Jewish Americans who looked down upon Eastern European yiddish-only speaking immigrants. Just as Jews engaged in prohibition era bootlegging and jazz would have offended their elders, gangsta rap culture had a similar effect, internally splitting ethnic groups.

<sup>199</sup> Perkins, *Droppin’ Science*, 137.

<sup>200</sup> Another feature of this generational split was over the n-word. The elder generation fought hard to make sure it would never be used, while the younger one used it colloquially. Asante, *It’s Bigger*, 228-29.



elevate the life of the impoverished inner city, gangsta rap had been seduced by the profit seeking motive, elevating racial stereotypes and, sometimes, revising history in a dangerous way to make itself more commercial. While historically the profit motive has bridged the Jewish and Black community through music, now it appears to be splitting them by promoting messages that are racially insensitive. This does not mean gangsta rap is a misrepresentation of ghetto reality. For some the gangsta lifestyle may be reality (though embellished), but since this is not the exclusive ghetto reality, this message can be seen as dangerous for the music industry to unilaterally publicize.

Gangsta rap is thus highly political, as it straddles two main theories about the “culture of poverty” that affect the ghetto. The two main theories are found in the conservative view that “persistent poverty is a result of the behavior of the poor, the product of some cultural deficiency,” and the progressive view that “Black culture itself was a necessary adaptation to racism and poverty, a set of coping mechanisms that grew out of the struggle for material and psychic survival.”<sup>201</sup> These assumptions represent a political split among the American Jewish people, as there is no unified Jewish consensus regarding the “culture of poverty.” The decision to use taxes to support inner city communities continues to be politically polemical. Regardless of the politics, the individual “thug” has the potential to exploit or uplift the conditions of the ghetto, “Much like the gangsta rap that produced lyrical themes that existed on a continuum with reality rap on one end and exploitative sensationalism on the other, the ‘thug’ has the potential to represent the thug-entrepreneur works with the illegal economies available in order to lead a better life and the thug activist *who raises awareness of the social injustices on behalf of the community.*”<sup>202</sup>

While gangsta rappers as individuals may have been escaping the ghetto through their craft, they may be doing so by exploiting the very cultural fabric that remains in the ghetto. Or they may be neglecting the very communities they come from, leaving the inner city as a festering political tinderboxes. This type of anti-establishment music can leave communities with a mixed legacy, not with messages of peace and hope that spirituality strives to affirm, or as conscious rap first began in the streets of Harlem and the Bronx. Here I suggest that the commercial role of the rap artist’s manager should be extended to the realm of the ethical; the manager should be wary of producing sensationalist music for the point of record sales alone, or the manager should find creative ways to redirect album sales into the communities that are desperate for public amenities.

Noted rap scholar, Tricia Rose writes in “Hip Hop Wars,” “Mainstream white America, black youth, black moguls (existing and aspiring), and big mass-media corporations together created hip hop’s tragic trinity, the black gansta, pimp, and ho - the cash cow that drove the big mainstream crossover for hip hop. Unless we deal with this part of the equation and see the dynamic as both new and very old - unless we acknowledge that racialized and sexualized fantasies and the money they generate for corporate mass media helped elevate this trinity in

---

<sup>201</sup> Mook and Rulon-Maxwell, *Rap Music*, 210-11.

<sup>202</sup> Orejuela, *Rap and Hip Hop Culture*, 137-38.

hip hop - we'll be back here in no time, to a different black beat." While acknowledging that these stereotypes are profitable for the music industry as a whole, and recognizing that specific artists escape the ghetto through articulating them, they don't do much to change the culture of the 'hood in a positive way.<sup>203</sup> <sup>204</sup> In this light, Gangsta rap unintentionally plays the same role as the blaxploitation films of the 1970s, pitting the actual residents of the ghetto against the commercialization of Black poverty. If the profit motive has the capacity to bridge the gap between Blacks and Jews, then the ethics of rap music must be called into question.

---

<sup>203</sup> It's particularly telling that the 1990s gangsta rap rivalry between East Coast and West Coast rappers culminated in the murder of the two most influential rappers of the era, "Notorious B.I.G." or "Biggie" (born Christopher Wallace) and Tupac Shakur. While these figures are peripheral to the Jewish community, often race relations are reconciled based on individual experiences within a community. Tupac, mentioned above, had a mentor in activist Leila Steinberg. Biggie's Jamaican mother, Voletta Wallace, was a long-time preschool teacher at Congregation Beth Elohim in Park Slope, Brooklyn. In 1986, a 14 year old Biggie, then known as Christopher Wallace, was also a summer camp counselor at Beth Elohim, known for his laid back demeanor and his gift of working with children.

Molly Tolsky, "Notorious B.I.G. Worked at a Brooklyn Synagogue as a Teen," *Jewniverse*, March 15, 2017, accessed November 10, 2017, [https://www.thejewniverse.com/2017/notorious-b-i-g-worked-at-a-brooklyn-synagogue-as-a-teen/?utm\\_content=buffer38130&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=kvellerfacebook&utm\\_campaign=buffer](https://www.thejewniverse.com/2017/notorious-b-i-g-worked-at-a-brooklyn-synagogue-as-a-teen/?utm_content=buffer38130&utm_medium=social&utm_source=kvellerfacebook&utm_campaign=buffer).

<sup>204</sup> Gangsta rappers create an increased security risk in their management by engaging in the drug trade and promoting violence. As the gang mentality requires someone to retaliate for being "dissed," the frequency of rappers being targeted for drive-by shootings is much higher than other artists. The leverage that music companies use to allay gang wars is evident in the separation of music labels under parent companies, and how managers negotiate terms through legal channels, rather than through gang violence. This type of management uses the profit motive to incentivize peaceful negotiation, albeit detracting from perceived street legitimacy. "Even a high-profile 'beef' such as the one between rappers The Game and 50 Cent looks somewhat tamer when one considers that The Game, whose music is distributed by Geffen, and 50 Cent, whose music is distributed by Interscope, are both included under the Universal Music Group parent company."

Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 18.

## Part Four: Jewish Rappers

### Where do they fit in?

Not all rappers are commercialized gangsta rappers, and many use their talent to uplift and preach positive messages. Some rappers begin with a street message and, after commercial success, reform their message to appeal more broadly (without losing their credibility). Each artist is unique and verbal talent, or commercial success, is not directly related to one's ethical stance. While some rappers do articulate their claim of authenticity in terms of proximity to street life, or by skin color (with associated baggage), others choose different ways to claim legitimacy. Since rap is anecdotal and uses personal experiences, when it comes to being a successful rapper, the question of authenticity is of supreme importance. This is a difficult question for Jews, as Jews often have a hybrid identity of more than one nationality, as well as identifying as and/or with minorities (despite being currently accepted as mainstream White). Since rap is primarily a Black art form, a failure to signify legitimacy in negotiating one's own identity (and skin color) would signal inauthenticity, mainly in the form of appropriation; this can be unacceptable - even offensive, to one's audiences.

An example of an identity failure is multi-platinum White rapper Vanilla Ice: since "one of the ways in which authenticity has been constructed in the discourse of American hip hop is around race and economic class." Vanilla Ice lied about his background when he claimed that he could identify with Black America because he himself had experienced a poverty stricken lifestyle.<sup>205</sup> His song, "Ice Ice Baby" was found to be the appropriated chant of a Black fraternity Alpha Phi Alpha, and despite Vanilla Ice's claims of being tutored by "hardcore rappers," his upbringing was sheltered in suburbia.<sup>206</sup> "The failure of Vanilla Ice's 'imitative' strategy had a chilling effect on the prospects facing other white rappers who hoped to broker a major record deal. From Vanilla Ice's fall to Eminem's successful debut at the end of the next decade, no new white rap acts were able to establish themselves in this genre."<sup>207</sup> <sup>208</sup> After the Beastie Boys, Vanilla Ice, and Eminem, very few White rappers emerged in the music charts. In negotiating race, the Beasties parodied their Whiteness, appearing more as beer guzzling frat boys than hardened gangsters. Alternatively, "Eminem has been seen as more authentic because of his willingness to wear his race on his sleeve... in being up front about his whiteness, Eminem has been seen

---

<sup>205</sup> Kahf, Usama "Arabic Hip-Hop: Claims of Authenticity and Identity of a New Genre." *That's the Joint*, 121.

<sup>206</sup> Keyes, *Music in American*, 107.

<sup>207</sup> Kajikawa, *Sounding Race*, 124.

<sup>208</sup> Vanilla Ice didn't just lose credibility through his lies, he was physically threatened and strong-armed into selling the publishing rights of "Ice Ice Baby" to Mario "Chocolate" Johnson, a client being managed by the notorious Suge Knight. Suge Knight was known to intimidate and escalate violence between rap labels (even implicated in both Biggie and Tupac's murder, as Tupac was represented by "Death Row Records, Knight's label - inconclusive evidence). Knight extorted this deal from Vanilla Ice as well as many others in his career managing rap artists. Knight has been in and out of jail, while continuing to work in the music industry, and is a reminder of the harsh street influence of hip hop. Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 286, 287, 401, 402, 420-422, 475, 496-497, 520, 528, 553-556.

as more 'real' by his audience."<sup>209</sup> "Hot Karl," or Jensen Karp, in his autobiography "Kanye West Owes Me \$300," describes how his suburban Jewish identity led him to rap, and how he was ultimately signed on a major label to be a benchwarmer for Eminem; there was already one White guy on the roster and he was too similar to Eminem to be commercially viable.<sup>210</sup>

Jews are hybrids; they are not part of one single cultural identity and despite sharing a religious faith (often times with intense divergences of practice), there is not one geographic location that American Jews come from. While they are often lumped into "White" America, there are nuances in Judaism that separate Jews from the rap mainstream. "Due to the diaspora of the people of Jewish descent and therefore embedded into a global system of Jewish traditional and popular music in Yiddish, Hebrew, and English, the Jewish hip-hop community is highly dispersed and consists of a transnational network of artists."<sup>211</sup> Thus, not only can American Jewish rappers be entirely inconsistent with their depiction of Judaism, but their target audiences are substantially related to their depiction of their identity - which can also be entirely inconsistent (even international, as their diaspora is located internationally). Questions that will determine how a Jewish rapper represents oneself are as follows: Is the rapper a first generation immigrant? Does the rapper live in the city? Or in the suburbs? Does the rapper have parents who work in white collar jobs? Is the family somehow connected to the Holocaust? To Ladino culture? To Yiddishkeit? To Israel? Is the family secular or humanistic or adhere to a specific denomination of Judaism? Does the family or individual follow Halacha? What is the role of God in the rapper's life? These questions will determine the legitimacy of the rapper to the audience and will dictate the venue in which that performer can be successful. Ironically, since rap is easily appropriated to diasporic culture, and since Jewish diasporic culture is so vast (the Jewish audience is international), Jewish rappers are impeachable by both theological and regional factors.<sup>212</sup> Some rappers, such as Lil Dicky, who has received immense mainstream success, have the capacity to alienate spiritually sensitive Jews with his depiction of Judaism, as solely a cultural religion of commerciality.<sup>213</sup>

---

<sup>209</sup> *That's the Joint*, 214.

<sup>210</sup> Jensen Karp, *Kanye West Owes Me \$300: And Other True Stories from a White Rapper Who Almost Made It Big* (New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 2016).

<sup>211</sup> Sina A. Nitzsche and Walter Grußzweig, *Hip-hop in Europe: Cultural Identities and Transnational Flows* (Zürich: LIT, 2013), 385.

<sup>212</sup> "The notion of the authentic is intimately linked to an essentialist understanding of culture: An individual is supposed to have only one cultural identity, and only in this culture, he or she can be truly authentic. Accordingly, it is impossible to be authentic in two cultures at once. In a globalizing world, this assumption becomes increasingly problematic; this is especially true for a transnational community like the Jewish." *Ibid.* 393.

<sup>213</sup> One of the Hebrew "High School" classes I teach is on Jewish rappers. While rappers who commercialize their depiction their faith usually receive better mainstream market opportunities, they are often times are insensitive to the symbolic meaning of Judaism. An example: Lil Dicky, in his rendition of "Jewish Flow," rap battles Hitler. While he shows off the bravado of a modern rapper, his lewd material has nothing to do with the Holocaust. Anyone with an emotional connection to the Holocaust (including the classes I have taught) will feel betrayed by his portrayal of his "Jewish Flow." Less religiously sensitive Jews may find his raps humorous, entertaining, and even harmless. Again, when asking "Is this good for the Jews?" the answer is entirely individualistic.

This type of character impeachment of rappers identity is showcased in a NoCoast viral video of two Jewish rappers in a live rap battle.<sup>214</sup> Modeled after the African verbal art of “playing the dozens” or “signifying,” the rappers use rhyming disses to have the other person “lose their cool.” Given rap’s propensity to appeal to an essentialist understanding of culture, the identity differences of the rappers are emphasized to discredit their persona. Since this rap battle is “Jew on Jew,” the obvious result is a degenerative representation of Jewish values, and a subsequent embarrassment for the religion. Although both rappers are talented, they bankrupt traditional Jewish values by verbal attacking each other in rhymes, holding almost nothing sacred. With three two minute rounds, one minute per each artist, XQZ and Wiseguy battle. The themes of their disses are well in line with Jewish stereotypes, regional geographic stereotypes, and traditional African influenced stereotypes. Here are some: being cheap, Jewish physical distinctions (having a big nose, being unathletic, being short), regional style differences (being from the Midwest vs from the city), being hard (propensity to use violence and threats), being gay (“faggot” used in a derogatory way), one’s own sexual prowess (penis size, sleeping with the other’s family members), and (most interestingly) the rapper’s proximity to legitimate Jewish practice and sensitivities. It is obvious from the video that Wiseguy, who at the end of the video gives a “shout out” to the Chabad Organization, has more of a respect for what he views as normative Judaism. On an ethical level, Wiseguy begins his rhymes with acknowledging the value of “Klal Yisrael,” asking why Jews would battle against one another. Wiseguy gets offended when XQZ says he will “gas chamber him,” using references to Anne Frank and Auschwitz. Wiseguy questions if XQZ even knows that the Holocaust happened, and mentions that XQZ’s fraternity is an “unkosher” sausagefest (implying gay relationships), and that XQZ should talk to a rabbi. At the end of the battle it’s revealed that the event took place on a Friday night, in a setting bereft of religious symbolism. Like many rap battles, there is no clear winner, though XQZ is the local rapper and draws louder cheers. See the appendix for a transcript of the rap.

The commercial success of mainstream Jewish rappers, and the small-time ethnic success of Jewish rappers are separate categories that do not overlap often. A clear example is with the group the “Bible Players,” “Bible Raps,” and “The Beat Midrash,” who use Torah raps and improv to engage Hebrew schools and Jewish summer camps and schools across America, yet would not be well received in the commercial realm of hip hop. These groups are too particular in their focus to appeal to audiences outside of the Jewish educational circuit, yet their function is ideal for Jewish youth organizations.<sup>215</sup> This is contrasted to the explicit raps of Lil Dicky,

---

<sup>214</sup> “No Coast Raps is one of the leaders for hip-hop events and entertainment throughout the Midwest. Specializing in rap battles, concerts, open mics, and more from our divisions across the Twin Cities , Missouri, and the Chicagoland area.” from website (<http://www.nocoastraps.com/>) Link to the actual rap battle: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBIbDmIOLGI>

<sup>215</sup> “Due to its cultural relevance to today’s youth, hip-hop is a powerful tool that can be used to teach everything from English to algebra and even Jewish concepts... Bible Raps has created an intensive curriculum that will allow camp staff to create a Torah Rap Factory, giving campers the opportunity to evaluate and study the Torah in a new light... Bible Raps already has 4 different camps with a talented counselor ready to be trained to be ‘Rap Rebbes.’”

Matt Bar and Brent Osborne, “Click Here! Hashem’s My DJ: Summer Camp Piloting Rapping-Rebbe/Beat-Midrash Program,” *Jewish Philanthropy*, November 1, 2017, [Page #], accessed November

whose talent and commercial success is evident, but whose language and message makes him a highly suspect Jewish role model.<sup>216</sup> Thus the nuances of ethnic identity leads Jewish rappers to claim authenticity in three distinct different ways, often most related to their upbringing and target market: 1) rapping as an outright parody of Jewish identity, 2) rapping with a sincere Jewish identity emphasized within traditional hip-hop and rap cultural expression, and 3) rapping with an identity not easily defined as Jewish rap.<sup>217</sup> In the rap battle mentioned above, XQZ would fall primarily in category three, while Wiseguy would fall under character two. Lil Dicky would be somewhere between 1 and 2, as he comically emphasizes his Judaism, though it is packaged in traditional rap and hip-hop culture expressions. These three ways to claim authenticity are not mutually exclusive, they are merely ways to negotiate identity.<sup>218</sup>

These representations of authenticity can change over time as one's spiritual journey evolves. "A young musician named Mathew Miller experimented with LSD with the band Phish on its visit to Israel, eventually found his way to Hasidic Orthodox Judaism, and burst onto the pop music charts with wildly popular sets blending reggae music with devotional Jewish words and themes."<sup>219</sup> Mathew Miller picked up the Hebrew name Matisyahu while studying in yeshiva, claiming his parents had forgotten his Hebrew name. A decade after becoming a Hasidic icon, his secular and religious fans split when he appeared clean shaven and without a yarmulke. In an interview he gave for the magazine *Noisey*, Matisyahu described his "abandoning his post as an orthodox leader," "Judaism is a practice. You can fall in and out of it very easily just like you can fall in or out of a diet. Ideologically I feel a lot different in terms of my relationship to the

---

10, 2017, <http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/hashems-my-dj-summer-camp-piloting-rapping-rebbebeat-midrash-program/>.

<sup>216</sup> In Lil' Dicky's rap video "Professional Rapper," (Off of his first studio album "Professional Rapper" released 2015) he explains his upbringing and why he wants to perform rap through a conversation with legendary gangsta rapper Snoop Dogg. The themes Lil Dicky references are directly in line with what compelled Jews to perform in Vaudeville, jazz, blues, and other Black music forms through the entire last century. In "Professional Rapper," Snoop Dogg asks Lil Dicky: "How you pay to get the rap sh\*t started?" and Lil Dicky Responds: "Man, my Bar Mitzvah money, but don't diss me buddy, I wasn't one of them younguns up on the block who had nothing to lose, I must've wanted this a lot, I had something to choose." Snoop Dogg then asks: "What makes you want to do rap?" Lil Dicky answers: "Oh my god, it's the best, b\*tches let me draw up on their breasts, literally I can reinvent myself, I get a forum to project myself, It's never boring, every morning I wake up and try to best myself, I never got to be suppressed or stealthy to express myself, It's kinda healthy." Then Snoop Dogg warns Lil Dicky about being a "lil b\*tch," saying "If you wanna do this, then you won't get far acting like a little b\*tch," Lil Dicky counters, stating the target market he will appeal to: "Nah, that's my niche! Don't get offended by this, but that's the market y'all missed. That's the target I'll hit, and that's the heart of my pitch. I wanna do this whole thing different." The video continues with a focus on the profit motive bonding Lil Dicky and Snoop Dogg. Though it is a brilliant video, the truth is Lil Dicky isn't really doing anything different - he's just honestly commercializing his Jewish identity for rap credibility, a necessary step in developing authenticity in performing a Black music form. At the end of the video he agrees to get a blowjob from Snoop Dogg's secretary, somehow symbolically cementing his acceptance into Snoop Dogg's rap fraternity.

<sup>217</sup> Dorchin, *Fight for Your*, 155-56.

<sup>218</sup> This identity negotiation is necessary in a live music performance, where performers need to adapt to environments and circumstances beyond the recording studio.

<sup>219</sup> Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Reimagining Jewishness*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 192.

rules and all that. In terms of the practice, I move in and out of it like I do everything else.”<sup>220</sup> Matisyahu’s brand of music is heavily influenced by Caribbean reggae, and while he still preaches Jewish spirituality, he has definitely stepped back from the dogmatic Chabad practices he once embraced.

The concept of “dual consciousness” or a hybrid identity is so important to the Black Jewish experience that Drake, a Black Jewish rapper (whose first studio album, “Thank Me Later,” debuted at #1 on the Billboard 200), obliquely referenced it as his inspiration for the title of his first mixtape, “So Far Gone.” “Drake said the title is intentionally open to multiple interpretations, but that it slyly references how he uses his outsider status to his advantage.”<sup>221</sup> Further, “Drake is an anomaly because he actively promotes his Jewish faith. Despite Jewish talk show host Jimmy Kimmel once suggesting that Drake could harm his career by publicly embracing his Jewish and Canadian identity, Drake seemed to emphasize these traits that separate him from the pack.”<sup>222</sup> <sup>223</sup> Drake is thus unique in the many ways he represents himself, not by borrowing legitimacy from the gangsta culture that has been so commercially successful in rap’s history, but by celebrating his differences. He is defined as an underdog to the gangsta culture that had become so mainstream, both accepted in the Black community because of his skin color and separate from it because of his experiences as a Black Jew. The most relevant departure from normative rap culture is in how Drake expresses his masculinity. While the usual swagger of a rapper is to be boastful about one’s sexual prowess, Drake is notoriously soft spoken, being very reticent to share details of the relationships he’s had with women. This comports with the “classic example of self-feminization of the Jewish male,” a model which “deviates sharply from the model of manhood expected from a rapper.”<sup>224</sup> Despite drawing criticism from established gangsta rappers, Drake is incredibly successful in representing his own authenticity to the broad commercial audiences he tries to reach.

With all of these semi-successful, and very successful Jews engaged in the business of rap music, there are naturally high profile “beefs” that arise regarding the authenticity of one’s Jewish identity. In early 2011, when asked if Drake or TMZ creator Harvey Levin was a better Jew, “said Drake, ‘I don’t know. I’m one of the best Jews to ever do it. Ever in life.’”<sup>225</sup> A week after Drake’s TMZ outburst hit the blogosphere, Matisyahu reacted to Drake’s declaration with criticism. “He happens to be Jewish, just like Bob Dylan happens to be Jewish, just like anyone happens to be Jewish. What I’m doing is really tapping into my roots and trying to blend with

---

<sup>220</sup> Jonathan Peltz, “The Trials and Tribulations of Matisyahu,” *Noisey*, December 2, 2014, accessed November 10, 2017, [https://noisey.vice.com/en\\_us/article/64ygpp/matisyahinterview](https://noisey.vice.com/en_us/article/64ygpp/matisyahinterview).

<sup>221</sup> Dalton Higgins, *Far From Over: The Music and Life of Drake, the Unofficial Story* (Toronto, Ontario: ECW Press, 2012), 73.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.* 89.

<sup>223</sup> While Drake’s doesn’t shy away from talking about his Jewish identity, he doesn’t use it to define himself. Despite being credited with “promoting” his Jewish faith, his interviews and videos show otherwise. “Drake’s Jewishness is strategically placed by the rapper either as a side aspect that should not interrupt the underdog narrative, or as a detail that strengthens the story even more.” Dorchin, *Fight for Your*, 165.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.* 166.

<sup>225</sup> Higgins, *Far From*, 90.

mainstream society and culture. So his being Jewish is just a byproduct, really. He's not representing that."<sup>226</sup> That retaliation prompted a 20-year old Jewish rapper by the name of Mac Miller to promote himself as "the coolest Jewish rapper," suggesting that Drake and he collaborate on a Hanukkah song.<sup>227</sup> Drake responded via twitter, "Haaaaaa... sh\*t like this can only be settled in Tel Aviv. Birthright sound clash."<sup>228</sup>

These territorial clashes are centered around moments when traditional religious values meet hip hop values. There is no clear winner when Jews fight and, since not all Jewish rappers are cut from the same religious cloth and some happen to be from mixed families outside normative Judaism, these arguments are directionless. Despite few Jewish rap artists being visible, yet unofficial, ambassadors to the Jewish religion, there is no body of responsum dictating proper Jewish self-representation in rap music. While the ethics of Judaism refuse most of the posturing of rap culture, few commercially successful Jewish rappers are invested enough to care.<sup>229</sup> If a Jewish rapper has a sincere religious identity, they may choose to perform within the boundaries of faith. This might include: avoiding concerts on Shabbat, refusing to use certain swear words, giving 10 percent of their proceeds to tzedakah, and more.<sup>230</sup> Since these artists are, by and large, American, their form of Judaism would be reconcilable within the parameters of their denomination.

### **The Jewish Conclusion: More Questions than Answers**

By examining the different ways Jews represent themselves in rap music we can ascertain that there is no unified consensus as to what establishes a successful rapper from a failed one. While there are ways of negotiating identity, no rule is held hard and fast. Jewish rappers mirror the fragmentation of the modern Jewish world, replete with all the problems of capitalism. The type of spiritual responsibility that would prevent an artist from shameless self-promotion, over-zealous partying, and indulging in commercializing the religion may detract from the mainstream success of the rapper. While talent and honesty in artistic self-representation are indeed critical

---

<sup>226</sup> Dorchin, *Fight for Your*, 164.

<sup>227</sup> In another example of technology disrupting markets, Mac Miller rose to preeminence through releasing tracks on the internet. His first album, an indie record based in Pittsburg, "Blue Slide Park" debuted at #1 on US Billboard 200, and has since launched his successful music career. Without the backing of an established music production house, Mac exemplifies what the technology of the internet and a personal computer can do for an unsigned rap artist.

<sup>228</sup> Higgins, Dalton, "Far From Over: The Music and Life of Drake," *So Far Gone* ECW Press (2012) p. 91

<sup>229</sup> Rap music, especially mainstream gangsta rap music, is predicated on the notion of "not giving a f-ck," naturally this iconoclastic perspective seeps into Jewish religious and ethical practices.

<sup>230</sup> Two Orthodox modern rap artists with a policy on Jewish spirituality are Sammy K, the Yeshiva University business student from Atlanta Georgia, and e-PHRYME, or Eden Pearlstein, a "Brooklyn based emcee Author and Educator with deep roots in the west coast underground." Sammy K wants to be recognized as the "first well known orthodox Jewish rapper," and received his parents blessing to rap only after promising not to use curse words. e-PHRYME collaborates with artist such as Shir Yaakov and Basya Schechter to produce Jewish prayer music.

Eden Pearlstein, "About," ePHRYME, accessed November 10, 2017, <http://www.eprhyme.com/about/>.  
Patrice Worthy, "Kosher Rapper Sammy K Full of Surprises," *Atlanta Jewish Times*, August 2, 2017, Arts & Culture, accessed November 10, 2017, <http://atlantajewishtimes.timesofisrael.com/kosher-rapper-sammy-k-full-of-surprises/>.



elements to achieving success, beyond those two factors, the acceptability of the rap artist is to be decided by the audience and the market alone. This applies to Jews, Blacks, Whites, and all minorities. These are very individualistic tastes. Naturally, if a Jewish rapper decides to rap in Yiddish, the available audience would be smaller than if the rapper chose English, yet the localized success of the artist could still exist.

It is only when an artist, tries to sell another person's sound as their own into the commercial mainstream, that we approach the legitimate question of appropriation. That action changes music from an adaptation of a piece to a robbery. When the revenue of music sales are not shared equally amongst the participants of a music form, appropriation becomes a realistic source of discontent for communities engaged in music production. When looking at the impoverishment of America's modern day ghettos, and the multi-billion dollar hip hop industry, it is easy to claim cultural appropriation as an explanation to the disparate conditions of these communities, both of which contribute to hip hop. Yet there are real historic and cultural reasons for Jews and Blacks to have shared the music production of the last century, and rap music is an extension of those trends, not the epicenter of White appropriation. The desire for rappers to be businessmen, as evinced by the many rappers who became businessmen (such as Jay Z who owns Rocafella records), is a lesson that can be traced back to the era of the Harlem Renaissance. America is still a place where institutions try to protect the legality of artistic content, and with the continuing maturation of the music industry, including the commercialization of rap music, artists should be wary of the legalistic piece of the music industry which deserves compensation. Hip hop has become mainstream, and with it, the capitalistic spirit and gangsta mentality has solved some problems and generated others.

From the early days of the Great Migration of Blacks and the Eastern European Immigration of Jews to today, the profit motive has a history of bridging ethnic tensions. Even when localized political goals created rifts, the music industry held on to profitable relationships. While the role of technology has continued to disrupt markets and allowed for non-White innovators to create a foothold in the music industry, the perception of skin color and "identity" has changed from what it once was. Just as White skin was beneficial to playing live music in the 1930s, Black skin and gangsta was important to performing rap in the 1990s. In a capitalistic environment, cultural preferences of consumers have always driven artists to look and behave in a certain way, sometimes for better, many times for worse, but always for the purpose of perceived authenticity.

While Jews have been disproportionately involved with the "overhead" of the music industry (the management, publicity, and legal oversight of performers), Jews have still fought to be recognized as rappers. From their shared history in the music industry to the predominantly suburban environment most Jewish rappers come from today, Jews and Blacks occupy a historic place in American ethnic relationships. Just as the Jewish religion itself is complicated and multifaceted, the majority of Jewish representation in rap music is complicated and multifaceted. Often written off as anti-Semitic tropes, the Jewish rappers themselves reveal a complex and nuanced identity that mirrors the modern religious and capitalistic landscape.

When rap is used for religious purposes, if there is no money involved, and if the intention of the artist is authentic to their own story and understanding of liturgy, it shouldn't look like "appropriation." Spirituality cannot be bought, and personal ethics should not be sold. The nature of early rap music was an authentic art form because it took disparate arts and ethnicities, and succeeded in diffusing tense inner-city situations. At its core, the Jewish religion aspires to do the same - to promote peace. Rap within the Jewish religion can be authentic as it has the potential to merge the ethical good with righteous action in a compelling form of art. If it doesn't seek to make money for some at the expense of others, rap music can be a venue to uplift all. Conscious rap was one of the first channels to generate public awareness of establishment practices that were racist, yet through the commercial offshoots, specifically gangsta rap, that message was transformed. After nearly a century of musical cooperation between Jews, Blacks, and really all Americans, rap has the unique potential to be repurposed as multi-faith prayer.<sup>231</sup>

---

<sup>231</sup> This is a phenomenon that is already happening in major ways. In May 2017, Logic released his third studio album, "Everybody," which debuted at No. 1 on *Billboard's* Top 200. A track off the album is, "1-800-273-8255" the phone number of the suicide prevention hotline. In the wake of a devastating hurricane, Lin Manuel, writer of the Broadway show "Hamilton," released "Almost like Praying," a song featuring Jennifer Lopez, Marc Anthony, Camila Cabello, Gloria Estefan, Fat Joe, Luis Fonsi, John Leguizamo and Rita Moreno, among many others. All proceeds from downloads and streaming go to The Hispanic Federation's disaster relief fund." On BET Eminem released a freestyle rap essentially calling for President Trump's impeachment.

Bethonie Butler, "The Story behind Logic's Powerful Suicide Prevention Anthem '1-800-273-8255'," *The Washington Post*, Arts and Entertainment, accessed November 14, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2017/08/28/the-story-behind-logics-powerful-suicide-prevention-anthem-1-800-273-8255/?utm\\_term=.f76a2d804582](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2017/08/28/the-story-behind-logics-powerful-suicide-prevention-anthem-1-800-273-8255/?utm_term=.f76a2d804582).

The Associated Press, "Lin-Manuel: Puerto Rican Efforts Making up for Slow Start," *WTOP*, November 13, 2017, National News, [Page #], accessed November 14, 2017, <https://wtop.com/national/2017/11/lin-manuel-puerto-rican-efforts-making-up-for-slow-start/>.

## Part Five: Autobiography and Raps

I didn't grow up in a diverse neighborhood, nor did I have experiences beyond the homogenous White public school district I matriculated in. I grew up in Fairfield County, Connecticut, a place with both the highest SAT scores and the highest teenage alcohol abuse rates in the nation. This is a place where families give their kids "allowances" for expensive video games and lots of children get new cars when they turn 16. In this wealthy area, many people are snobs. My family moved from one town in Fairfield County to another of when I was 9 because "the people treated my father better in Ridgefield than in Greenwich." Ridgefield was a more polite, more suburban and more country, farther from the city and with no train stations. It also was more "White," and my spiritual autobiography begins with my parent's move, which has impacted me in some very profound ways.

Ridgefield is a sleepy Connecticut town, where most people leave their door unlocked, and say "hi" to strangers. In elementary school I was given the name, "Sam Nye the Sinus Guy," because there was a mold problem with the school's annex building and my Jewish nose had no way to deal with the pollen on humid days. While there were a significant amount of Jews in Greenwich, there weren't many in Ridgefield. I constantly had to explain Jewish holidays like Hanukkah and Yom Kippur to my peers, who didn't understand why I would eat sandwiches on "Jew bread," during Passover. Maybe I felt left out because of being Jewish, maybe I enjoyed being different, probably both.

By the time I was in Middle School (2000) rap music was well into the mainstream, and my friends downloaded and listened to the likes of Eminem, 50 Cent, Jay Z and whoever else Z-100 would play on the radio. A number of students dyed their hair blonde in imitation of Eminem and he pretty much proved to me that skin color didn't matter in being a rapper. My homogeneous White peers repeated his lyrics ad nauseum.<sup>232</sup> The fifth grade class president rapped his campaign speech on the overhead speakers for morning announcements, and won the class presidency by a landslide. Yet there were almost no Black students in the community.<sup>233</sup> Since rap was so popular, teachers would sometimes let school projects be turned in that way, accepting assignments that were rapped. On the Ridge, no one was questioning how "hard" you were, because things were not perceived as "hard." We existed in a sheltered suburban landscape. If anyone did challenge another person for appropriating rap music as an art form, it was because that person was acting too "ghetto," and not staying true to their White bred suburban existence. Anyone could rap, but only if they didn't pretend to be something they

---

<sup>232</sup> There was a joke about racial inversion in the 21st century: What do you call a bunch of White people chasing a Black person? The PGA tour (Tiger Woods was the best golfer at the time). What do you call a bunch of Black guys chasing a White person? The rap industry (Eminem was the best rapper at the time).

<sup>233</sup> By the time I was in high school, there was a program called the ABC program, or "A Better Chance" program. Seven kids from the inner-city would be given housing and food for the duration of the academic year as a way to help them achieve academic success, and for the purposes of our schools "diversity." This program was sponsored by a local charity, and Ridgefield's public school district was highly desirable for the program, as it is rated one of the top public schools in the state of Connecticut. These seven kids were pretty much the only Black kids in the school, and not all of them would make it to the end of the school year without violating the conditions of the strict ABC program.

weren't. Street gangs or excessive drugs didn't appear in the mythology around Ridgefield, though I doubt I would have recognized it if they did. With the influence of the surrounding community's wealth, life was tame. The only thing I struggled with was feeling loved.

I've read that it's common for middle children to feel unloved, or not looked after enough, or to feel neglected for reasons that may not actually relate to the reality of family life. I am a middle child, smack in the middle of three brothers, and despite my parents reassuring me of their love, it never felt like it was enough. My siblings turned out to be excellent test takers - going into all of the advanced classes. I had ADD and ADHD. My parents didn't believe in medication for things like ADD or ADHD, and year after year they scheduled appointments for me with therapists, old Jewish guys who talked about life like some kind of secular rabbis. I hated school, I hated Hebrew School, I hated summer camp and I hated therapy, too. I felt like I was being made to suffer because I couldn't focus on school.

I also had major issues with my parent's barometer of success. I was diametrically opposed to their vision of achievement. The biggest fights I had with my parents were when they forced me to go to Hebrew School. My Dad would find me watching TV in the basement, he would turn off the cartoons and say "Good guys win, bad guys lose, and you're going to Hebrew School." I would lose it, running around screaming, "You can't make me go!" and "You're unfair." My parents would reply, "That's what Jews do."

Between Hebrew School, the therapy sessions, math and academic clubs, and instrument practices, (all enforced by my parents) - I had no time to play video games or watch the shows that I felt like "normal kids" would do. While all my friends spent summer vacation at a beach house, or locally at the boys and girls club or a skateboarding club, my brothers and I were sent to Jewish sleep-away camp. "That's what Jews do," my mom would say, "Jews go to camp." So despite sharing the same color of skin as 98% of my grade, while living in whitebread Ridgefield CT, I felt like an outsider. There were only a few Jews in the grade, and the tagline, "That's what Jews do," or alternatively, "Jews don't do that!" was thrown at me with serious contempt, coercing me into fulfilling whatever activity my parents wanted. Ridgefielders may have all shared White skin, but the Jewish self-inflicted cultural separation was our choice. . It was a weird combination. We ate Chinese food on Christmas, and ham and cheese matzo sandwiches on Passover, and my parents assured me "That's what Jews do."

At my family's summer camp, Camp Modin, (where my mom and grandma went to and ironically the place where I act as Judaic director now), my bunk would listen to the most "gangsta" rap we could find: Mos Def, Biggie, Tupac, Eminem, NWA, Wu-Tang Clan, really anything with a parental warning sticker on it. Did it have highly profane and anti-establishment messages? Great! We would blast it from our boom boxes. In this way, we testosterone-driven boys validated our own masculinity by identifying with a foreign culture we saw as innately cool. Bonus value: the music's message was guaranteed to shock our parents. (Regardless of skin color or faith, upsetting one's parents is universally cool.) It was common for a camper to rap at talent show. Our rap fascination eventually progressed to where our bunk counselor would settle camper's disputes by having us rap battle each other. After losing my first rap battle I got

into a fist fight. (I still wonder about my competitor, Naom. Does he still rap? Would he like to rematch?) Is it embarrassing that these homogenous experiences are my rap “cred?” Looking back on it, the music we unwittingly consumed were the same over-sexualized and over-hyped corporate productions of gangsta rap that were exploiting the ghetto.

In high school, my parents would give me and my siblings a curfew of 9 o'clock during the weekdays, and 10 o'clock during weeknights, unless we were participating in an academic or extracurricular group. In order to have a social life, I became active in the Reform Jewish youth group, BBYO, out of the town's only synagogue, Temple Shearith Israel. My brothers and I were permitted to go to young teen BBYO dances; dark and sweaty rooms where it was always a jarring experience to be dancing to hip-hop at a synagogue, to hear bleeped out swear words at a bar mitzvah, women being called “bitches” from a speaker on the pulpit. But that was my childhood, and that's how rap continued to be a critical part of the collective Jewish experience in suburbia; as dance music.

With all these activities taking place inside the synagogue, I picked up the most crucial value of Jewish living; that “Jews have to do the right thing.” This value was reinforced by my parents, who would scold us when finding out we behaved poorly - “Jews don't do that!” “That's a shonda!” When I cheated on an exam once, feeling too anxious over potentially receiving a mediocre score, my parents actually cried telling me “Jews don't cheat.” and “What an embarrassment.” The family guilt around failing to achieve, and failing to be ethical, was enormous. These were the two most important guidelines to my young life.

This ethical version of God is highly consistent with Judaism, often called ethical monotheism, which merges the “right” and the “God” in philosophy. My family's version of Reform Judaism also viewed ethics as not necessarily synagogue attendance or rote performance of ritual, but through good deeds. To us, the definition of mitzvah was not a biblical or rabbinic commandment, but an act in service of the betterment of humanity. My parents would always give to Israel, yet they never visited. They would volunteer time and money to charity, yet never for an exclusively Jewish one. My parents would invite their teacher friends to our family's holidays and often we Jews were outnumbered by our White Christian neighbors. In BBYO, the events I helped plan were on the theme of Tikkun Olam, or “Fixing the World,” and this won our chapter some modest awards. That looked good on a resume and it made me feel good too. I was doing the “right thing,” being a Jew and sticking up for the downtrodden, not confined to one race or religion alone.

I finished my last year of summer camp and chose not to return as an apprentice, the only one of my family in generations to make that decision. I wanted the opportunity to break free of my parents' grasp. Instead of safe summer camp, I decided to raise money for a cancer fundraiser by bicycling across America. It was a program whereby churches would let you camp in their backyard while cycling the 3800 miles coast to coast, California to Virginia, approximately 70 miles a day. My parents were shocked and insisted, “It's dangerous,” they protested. Eventually, they gave in and even supplied me gear, a bicycle, tent and sleeping bag. Even with their support, it still felt as if this charity excursion wasn't as important as the test scores they

hoped I would receive in school. They were upset that I had taken honors classes rather than AP classes. They were upset with the time commitment necessary to train for a coast to coast biking trip. The therapist I was seeing, a Jewish man from our synagogue (who would, years later, hire me as a bar mitzvah tutor for his son) asked my father, "Your son is in all honors classes, he's bicycling across the country for cancer! Are you disappointed in him?" And my dad's response, "Well... imagine if he was really trying." I was really trying, I just didn't view success the same way he did. I was being a Jew and doing "the right thing," but it wasn't the right thing for my parents.

A poignant theme of Judaism is fathers relating to sons. Abraham and Isaac. Isaac and Jacob. Jacob and his many children. Even Al Jolson in the *Jazz Singer*. My father comes from a line of fathers that were (in one way or another) disappointed with their sons. When my grandfather died, and my father inherited the family tobacco business, that cycle changed. My father chose to sell the company and focus on his kid's education, he chose to move his family to the suburbs, to fresher air and to better public education possibilities. He wanted my siblings and I to be raised among polite people, among homogenous White people, yet not clouded with the pretentiousness of private school. He wanted us to strive to "do the right thing," as he had done with his life. No longer would our family be associated with selling tobacco, he wanted to be a public school teacher. And when he tried this in Greenwich, the snobs there treated him poorly, so we moved to Ridgefield, where he could have a vanity license plate that read, "Mr Math," and be the proud role model a secular Jewish father could be. Religion, as ethics, validated his decision, my grandfather may not have approved, or maybe he would have, I'll never know.

During my long bicycle trip, I felt like a real minority (a Jew in the Bible belt!) although nobody knew because of my White skin. I was hit by a truck and had a near death experience. At the end of the two harrowing months out on the road, I could feel myself transitioning to adulthood. I was pedaling 10 hours a day, listening to the same hardened street rappers that I did at summer camp and in middle school. The grit and determination I learned that summer proved to me that I had what it takes to succeed in the world. And that world, because of the decisions of my parents, was the very nice white-picketed fence community of Ridgefield CT. I used the education my parents invested in me to major in finance and economics. Why? Because the highest paying salaries out of business school were in finance and economics, and that's what all the rappers talk about, "makin' money," "hustlin'," "stackin' that cheddar." I may not have been exposed to the street life of the hardened thugs I listened to, but I appropriated their message to my own surroundings. My secular Jewish academic hustle required an intensity that I found in the music of Black and White rappers. The merger of my family's two foundational beliefs: ethics with religion, and success with money, produced a funnel cannon of intensity that I embraced.

I made a commitment to myself: to earn the most money I could, to be independently wealthy so I could be a teacher, or whatever the heck I wanted to be, just like my dad. I threw myself into the college lifestyle. I joined an intense business fraternity, and took any extra classes so I could to further my chance of being rich. In my spare time, I baby sat, worked at a pharmacy, and wrote my own poems and raps. I never tried to be anything I was not - my raps were the authentic self-expressions of a Jewish 18-year old suburban, insecure, nerdy, ambitious,

business student. I wrote one rap on the fraternity I was in, another on Yankee Doodle (the revolutionary war soldier who lived around Danbury), and another one for a girl I liked. Never did I view my poetry as a legitimate, money-making career, it was just something I enjoyed. After hearing when I read a poem to a group of frat guys, one of the Jewish brothers took me out to an open mike club. Without him, I would not have publicly read my poems. It was an amazing experience, and when I tried to tell my parents, it may have been my imagination to see them roll their eyes.

Meanwhile, when I could take a non-business elective, I would choose a class on Judaism, or poetry. On Fridays I went to the local Temple and after Kiddush I hung out at my fraternity's mixers. I volunteered to be the sober driver for the parties. I wanted to be in the most exciting rooms but I didn't want to do anything that my future children could be disappointed in me for. I avoided all the hard drugs and really bad decisions you sometimes hear coming from fraternities. As someone who has always been interested in talking about deep things, I stayed in classrooms after hours with the professors, arguing about the philosophy behind economics and cultivating connections so I could get the next "internship," or "job opportunity," that came my way. I was learning finance in the wake of the "Housing Bubble Crisis," or "The Great Recession," and although I was too young to understand exactly what that meant, it didn't take me long to figure it out. Three years into the business school program, I had a revelation, and subsequently withdrew from school.

My revelation? There is no change between the reckless lending practices before and after the economic bubble of 2007. Worse, the risk involved with the past thirty years of globalization and the financialization of the economy had literally robbed savers. Class war in America is real, and the poorest people are most vulnerable. If you owned any assets (houses, stocks, gold), your wealth was being inflated. If you didn't own assets (and were living paycheck by paycheck - or on government programs), you were being skinned alive. Our post-industrial economy is standing at the precipice of the largest financial crisis that has ever been measured, and it doesn't matter if you live in the suburbs or the inner-city, if you're White or Black, there is major "systemic risk," in the whole system. We are living through an experimental debt-fueled bull market created by monetary policy-makers, and no American community stands alone in facing that seismic shift. Amidst my new understanding of finance and economics, I began asking the dreaded questions like: "How can we have exponential monetary growth on a finite planet?" and "Will our population be able to stabilize before we destroy our planet Earth?" My vision of being wealthy became instantly hollow. After withdrawing from school, I finished up my college degree as a commuter student while working on a farm, directionless and depressed.

My soul searching has always been connected to Judaism. I never stopped going to synagogue, and even naively believed that if I prayed hard enough, crisis could be averted. As I researched the math behind our "Great Recession," I frequently came across accusations of Jewish conspiracies. Whether it was general statements regarding Jews working in money-lending, or outright claims of a Zionist world takeover, Jews in finance have a bad reputation. Yet I was a Jew in finance! And having just realized how broken the economic system is, I felt that I had to warn people! Surely if people understood, if people knew how fragile the economy was, they

would stop “business as usual.” Surely, people would choose to deal with the problem head on. Surely, a conscientious Jew who reads, “In God We Trust,” on the Federal Reserve Dollar, would stop using a broken currency system. If “Jews do the right thing,” and our economic system is ignoring climate change and creating class segregation, we would try to fix it. Right? We wouldn’t let ourselves become a grimy dystopian novel? Right?

Well apparently, currently, no. That revelation I had six years ago still haunts me today in rabbinical school, where I use every breath I have to pray for our planet’s salvation. The dismal ecological reality, the manipulated economic numbers, the future I hope to give to my kids one day is all in jeopardy as we continue to live in an age determined by ill-informed policy. We can only avoid these consequences for so long. The reality of climate change and money printing are catching up to us. There is an inevitability to our ocean’s sea waters rising. There is an inevitability of mass migration from the coast to areas with arable land and freshwater. While the rap industry has a famous saying, “don’t hate the player, hate the game,” we are now at a pivotal moment where we need to “change the game,” in order to keep our players. A lack of serious policy reform doesn’t just further impoverish the Black inner-city, it destabilizes the very framework of our nation.

In the same way that my parents tried to give me a sheltered life, a life that I rebelled against, I want to do that for the future generation. I want to protect them from the famine and plagues that will become a reality in our climate altered future. Yet I can only try and twist God’s arm to perform miracles so much. It takes a huge amount of awareness to avoid the ecological catastrophe that we are heading in. That’s where rap music comes in.

Historically the American Jewish and Black existence has unified when economic conditions favor cooperation, when there is both Black and White skin in the game. Those conditions are met today. It doesn’t matter if you’re a city dweller or a suburbanite, unless we create a full scale cultural revolution, we will be living in a postindustrial ghetto of the 21st century. The question of appropriation, which impacts my authenticity and legitimacy as a White Jewish rapper, is acknowledged here. To date, I have no musical contracts, and I use my poetry for prayer and to create awareness about a postindustrial collapse.

Many rap artists have been vocal critics of institutional policies, especially politicized ones that are class based. Earlier this year on BET, Eminem released a freestyle rap calling for President Trump’s impeachment. With the unsustainability of economic policy, and the Jewish belief in an ethical God, we are all part of the same global community. Rap as an art form should be used to push for societal change. In the same way that prayers operate to motivate people to do the “right thing,” I hope that is exactly what my raps will do.

### **Selected and Annotated Prayer Raps**

Below you will find a range of poetry I have performed as rap in my seminary. Some are politically charged and serious, others are whimsical and erudite. Some I’ve used as prayers, others are interpretations of text. Performing in seminary, the most common feedback I received



was, “rap is spoken too fast, and it is too hard to follow what you’re saying.” I compare this to the Pirkei Avot teaching, “The world was created by ten utterances.” This comes to explain that God was verbose as a way to reward the righteous. Similarly, poetry doesn’t need to be followed or understood in a static way. Sometimes rap music benefits from being elusive and verbose, too quick to be heard and taken seriously.

**Ecology Rap** - Each year my seminary chooses a topic to explore in a seminary retreat. In the year of the Shemithah, (the 50th year of a cycle where the land is supposed to remain unharvested), the Academy for Jewish Religion held a retreat themed for environmental awareness. I wrote this rap emphasizing the irrationality of being a wasteful human living with acute environmental awareness. The chorus and chord progression are taken from the song “Where is My Mind?” by The Pixies, so this is known as a “mash-up”.

Am I sick like a salamander?  
 Too rife with candor?  
 I’m a quick-witted man who demands an answer<sup>234</sup>  
 Did I stammer?  
 I hold the light from my own candle<sup>235</sup>  
 The glamour that’s emboldened’s from the core and not the mantle  
 I don’t pander to an idol king some call him Alexander<sup>236</sup>  
 I stand for the branch of planting that Hashem himself did plant forth<sup>237</sup>  
 An example?  
 Am I here present just to ramble?  
 As we amble to a future where the climate’s left in shambles?  
 So commander, don’t stake it all upon a gamble where your style won’t be cramped by the  
 growing chance of cancer  
 It’s standard,  
 You felt like, pamper yourself, right?  
 Tamper with the things that only shorten the shelf life?<sup>238</sup>  
 Advance in delight of progress in spite of an eerie creepy suspicion that awakens in the night.<sup>239</sup>

Chorus:  
 With your feet in the air and your head on the ground  
 Try this trick, spin it  
 Your head will collapse  
 But there’s nothing in it

---

<sup>234</sup> This rap is set up like a theological interrogation. What can God say about the impact of climate change?

<sup>235</sup> It is crucial to bring light into the world, no matter how dark.

<sup>236</sup> This reference is to Hellenism during the Greek influence of Judaea, when Jews turned away from monotheism. A core tenet of Judaism is belief in one God above all people.

<sup>237</sup> The Pirkei Avot begins with God describing Israel as “a branch of my planting.”

<sup>238</sup> “Shelf life” is juxtaposed with “cancer” to show the connection between what we eat and how it affects us.

<sup>239</sup> What is real progress? Surely you have doubts on if our society is “progressing.”

Go and ask yourself, where is my mind?  
Where is my mind? Where is my mind? Where is my mind?

I hold the generation gap,<sup>240</sup>  
Y'know the harshest of the wastelands,  
With the softest of the hands,  
That may soon command reparations<sup>241</sup>  
And for ransom, our stance um...  
More ill-advised in action,  
But can't the pulpit hear the screaming of the chants that mark reaction?  
Let the handsome youth all dance to medicated satisfaction<sup>242</sup>  
Let the future trundle onwards in dedication of distraction  
Our violent vulture culture's overstayed our time protraction,<sup>243</sup>  
Blast the door off of their hinges else we'll all just ask what happens<sup>244</sup>

Because I see, intense, social pressure in friends,  
It's like we're all under water  
It's like we suffer the bends  
And I can pretend that this life is no good,  
But why should I try?  
If it's my right to prove?<sup>245</sup>  
Or abuse what I got, when it's all coming in hot,  
If you don't know what it is yet-  
You should know what it's not,  
But oops I forgot to reply and hit send  
I'm afraid of my inbox, I'm bucking the trend<sup>246</sup>  
I'll mend what I might, defend all my rights,  
Commend all my friends, because I found the spot light.

---

<sup>240</sup> The generation gap is the approximate age range from 18 to 40 which rarely shows up to religious functions. There is a lopsided representation of a synagogue community without this age demographic, something I struggle with. Considering the prayers and rituals are designed around ethics, and that ethics can change over time, this age deficiency is palpably felt when talking about climate awareness.

<sup>241</sup> This is a political remark. As millennials and younger voting blocs look for legislation that caters to their issues, the responsibility of a broken economy falls disproportionately on older generations. Will younger voters exercise their power by demanding more institutionalized support? Will they abolish student debt? Will climate change related pressures force this age dissonance to the fore?

<sup>242</sup> This is specifically in reference to the opioid crisis.

<sup>243</sup> Our culture is predatory in nature, from advertisements to economics, people are being taken advantage of without their consent.

<sup>244</sup> Between our media's inability to maintain a coherent political narrative, and the rising tensions around the world, the likelihood of a catastrophic event is high.

<sup>245</sup> These lines flirt with the futility of life, and how it can sometimes feel too much. Teen suicide is a major issue, and I hope that anyone contemplating dark thoughts can find the desire to remain alive throughout the worst of them and seek professional help.

<sup>246</sup> Sometimes ignoring digital media is healthy for processing difficult emotions.

With your feet in the air and your head on the ground  
 Try this trick, spin it  
 Your head will collapse  
 But there's nothing in it  
 Go and ask yourself, where is my mind?  
 Where is my mind? Where is my mind? Where is my mind?

Sit tight and oblige me of some planetary hospice  
 A collective revelation soon to wash up on the populace<sup>247</sup>  
 Calm it let the oceans acid melt down your resistance  
 So a dying conscious planet could at least procure some witness<sup>248</sup>  
 If you believe this  
 It's cause you've seen it  
 Through a thousand different stories  
 As if you were right near it  
 Like ever known a summer without a thing called Global Warming  
 I don't.<sup>249</sup>  
 What a bummer that the science is so alarming.  
 And visions always seem more clear-cut down through the forest.  
 Let me point out species who've invaded here by tourist.<sup>250</sup>

So stop the charades, hold the parade,  
 Be so keenly aware, we stand on a knife's blade  
 And I know it's a phase, that obscene is the rage  
 I do like umbrellas, y'know it pours when it rains  
 And the displaced will misbehave as coastlines give way,<sup>251</sup>  
 Is all just too futile? Is it too soon to say?  
 Nobody's counting my age, I'm bound from cradle to grave  
 To pray for the crown – the crown of knowing your ways<sup>252</sup>  
 And found it I may  
 Don't frown in dismay  
 Just repeat with great care,

---

<sup>247</sup> In other time periods, messianic political groups were legitimate forces in history. I am curious if our era will see specific "End of Times" political groups talking about "climate change" as if it was a form of planetary hospice.

<sup>248</sup> Bearing witness is the most honorable thing one can do in a tragedy, as evinced by many a Holocaust survivor.

<sup>249</sup> Here's e a simple articulation of the generation gap in regards to climate change: if you can only remember the "warmest" summers on record - you believe climate change is a reality that needs immediate attention. If the majority of summers you remember are not the "warmest" on record, you may not feel climate change is a pressing issue.

<sup>250</sup> Climate change also comprises invasive species which can outcompete local species, rapidly altering ecosystems.

<sup>251</sup> An obvious result of climate change is coastal migration inland.

<sup>252</sup> Wisdom, the crown of Torah, these are the possessions of the righteous.

The sunken sound that it makes:

With your feet in the air and your head on the ground  
 Try this trick, spin it  
 Your head will collapse  
 But there's nothing in it  
 Go and ask yourself, where is my mind?  
 Where is my mind? Where is my mind? Where is my mind?

**Rabbi Lullabye** - I wrote this rap with the intention to perform prayer at Open Mike clubs. It is almost 10 minutes long when recorded with a beat on a looping pedal. It's more of a sermon than a rap song, and references my Universalist approach to spirituality, my fear for the future and the role of the religious person in orienting philosophy around these harrowing concepts. The chorus is from a lullaby, and the song itself is transforming the concept of martyrdom into a language that younger adults can hear.

Chorus: lullabye, bye bye bye bye bye, lullabye, bye bye bye  
 Hush my child don't you cry, rabbi gonna rap you lullabye  
 Hush my child don't shed no tear, rabbi gonna take away your fear

My souls so deep it's tearing holes in this fabric called reality  
 Has to be sad to see, I'm last to leave  
 empathy's my masterpiece<sup>253</sup>  
 My body holds my soul down begging it go naturally, rather than go casually<sup>254</sup>

Ooh. I'm living proof, a life of White privilege can produce blues  
 Not what I been through, what we'll lose  
 When plagues a humane way to retain who populates  
 Our world's gone insane and I choose not to cooperate<sup>255</sup>

Why God sentence sentients to this era? To feel failure?  
 A player hater could play it safer with a better savior  
 I'm wasting away waiting for compassion, creator  
 I'm asking, why you old fashion? I be bypassing'

---

<sup>253</sup> The human's ability to imagine the pain of another is one of the most redeeming quality we have.

<sup>254</sup> Right away I talk about suicide. This is to emphasize the dialectic concept of being a suicide or a martyr, more specifically, is there a difference between the two? I don't know if this question can be answered, or if it has many valid answers. Regardless, I believe that existential crises ask us to clarify our belief on the soul, and what it takes for it to reject the body.

<sup>255</sup> I recognize that my singing "the blues" comes from an awareness of future loss, and not an experience of previous loss. This leads me to question how this loss will happen, will it be a clean and tidy plague? Will our world go "insane" rationalizing the loss?

My life lessons of a suspended adolescence<sup>256</sup>  
 In words phrases prayers I condense it  
 Not to mention said it once in service now I'll say it twice  
 I'm making my real fans in the afterlife<sup>257</sup>

And with this verbal hemorrhage what do I tell the kids?  
 Above else not to fear, the whole world's a bridge?  
 Blow the lid off, no right today to say this stuff politely  
 The long term survival of our species is unlikely.<sup>258</sup>

Tell me what would Jesus do? Cuz as a Jew  
 I think about Abraham through prophets, tell me about Mohammed too<sup>259</sup>  
 Is this what God commanded, is this what God commanded?  
 Not to panic rearranging deck chairs on the SS Titanic

Scientists have to a policy: to do no harm  
 But rabbis get to twist God's arm, I'm ringing alarms<sup>260</sup>  
 From the top the rap game: hey hey hey b'nei mitzvah-  
 I'm about to cut it - like a circumcision.

#### Chorus Lullabye

I got a strange fixation with place in my brain  
 Where I ruminate to create space from pain - cuz I'm deranged<sup>261</sup>  
 Aspirations so high I got like altitude sickness  
 Cosmic karma calling on ya: state your name and business

I'm known as an instigator, alone, a ringleader

---

<sup>256</sup> Extended adolescence is the term I apply to myself, but can apply to other millennials as well. For me to be in college and seminary for so long I had to ignore other adult responsibilities such as trying to move out of my parents' house.

<sup>257</sup> Judaism, like other religions, has many mythologies about the afterlife. The roles of prayer and acts of divine service are often to allow us to enter this mythological place of heaven. I say things in the hope that younger Jews will find merit in their actions by consciously invoking their understanding of heaven. By publically stating my intention, I can serve as an example.

<sup>258</sup> Any smart child will look at a graph of human population and ask the Malthusian question of "How does this end?" This is no longer the query of a single precocious child, but a common feature of the tech-savvy generation Z.

<sup>259</sup> Many religions have concepts of the afterlife which impel us to act in certain ways. I invite interfaith dialogue around this subject.

<sup>260</sup> "Twisting God's arm" is an anthropomorphic device I use in order to put a religious directive to a political concept. This is opposite to the scientific "do no harm," policy when visiting ecosystems for research purposes.

<sup>261</sup> The messianic idea, the "end of times" concept and the idea of "heaven" can placate someone suffering from grief or loss. By acknowledging that these concepts may also be merely places in someone's brain and chemistry, these extreme ideas don't betray one's intellect.

A man of action, an action figure, go! Go figure <sup>262</sup>  
 Reconsider what I said, don't leave that pot on simmer  
 It don't go off with a bang, with a whimper<sup>263</sup>

And now this hunger is personified, like man I'm gonna die  
 We've arrived: evolve or perish, but only you decide <sup>264</sup>  
 Irrational hope from a rational dope on a slippery slope  
 I swallowed up the antidote; an endless bid for growth,<sup>265</sup>

We're at a pond so many black swans,<sup>266</sup>  
 I could wave a wand while I wander pondering on, too far gone,  
 I wonder about this song? If I'm way way way off...  
 The future's so surreal, can I put it on pause?<sup>267</sup>

I'm a pigeon, boys, not a dirty dove  
 All these birds of peace deserve a little love  
 Give this one hug, God put me up for ridicule, I'm atypical  
 My lovin's unconditional, I believe in fiction still<sup>268</sup>

Codex, codices, I book it in my odysseys,  
 Penitential rap soliloquies, those who follow me  
 Watch your step trolling around the downtown  
 Tripped and slipped on the moral high ground, what I found? <sup>269</sup>

Come on God, I'm shot, since working round the clock  
 Hamster wheel on lock, plus I got that writer's block  
 You forgot, I gave you everything I got.  
 I mean what - You still submit to me it's not?

---

<sup>262</sup> My temperament is to embrace conflict, while my intensity can alienate people from action.

<sup>263</sup> The future can end with an abrupt conflict, or with a slow decline. There is no telling exactly how a society grapples with its own humanity.

<sup>264</sup> Our creative drive is linked with expressing a message of awareness. Do we evolve our concepts of the "afterlife" or "heaven" to orchestrate our species sustainability? Do we accept death and concede our society as beyond repair?

<sup>265</sup> Is hope already irrational? The "endless bid for growth," is the recognition that the Earth is a finite system, and that it cannot support exponential returns on monetary investment without being unsustainable.

<sup>266</sup> "Black swan" is the term for a highly unlikely statistical event. This is usually the term for extreme weather probabilities, wars, natural disasters, and other largely underestimated risks.

<sup>267</sup> Considering the large systemic risks of the future, it is very appealing to try and forget it. This can be done through drugs, mystic experiences, and other temporary distractions.

<sup>268</sup> I would never claim to be the "messiah," however I believe we should all be on lookout for the right mixture of ideas to push for social and political change. If that opportunity comes in the form of the "messianic concept" we all have the obligation to put our weight behind it. That is why "I believe in fiction still."

<sup>269</sup> Most of the morality I preach was discovered unintentionally, and has the unintended side-effect of tripping you up if you think about it too hard.

(chorus)

I be in and out of focus like an ouroborus,<sup>270</sup>  
 In and out of rhythm an anachronism  
 I be caught between chutzpah and humility, it's silly to me,  
 Go through this stuff willfully, I'll mend the fence until I bleed<sup>271</sup>

Multitalented, I don't balance well  
 Sense of self is damaged, No bars hold me in its cell  
 I'm escaping definitions with healthy skepticism  
 Breaking necks next next next up outta prison<sup>272</sup>

Almost accepted in mensa but got dementia  
 I forgot what I wanted to send ya, that book I wanted to lend ya  
 Something about planning, always planning, planning world domination,  
 Just not this one, the world to come, Kabbalah's world post-creation<sup>273</sup>

I did it all for the children, God willing  
 All for their laughter, what I'm after  
 Priests pastors, rappers form a task force of actors  
 As a last resort, alter that course, before the stuff hits the fan worse we abort<sup>274</sup>

Playing hopscotch on hot rocks, on a lava river, drinking malt scotch  
 With a melted watch, at a loss for a polyspot and it's true cost <sup>275</sup>  
 Talking nonsense to those who only reach in terms of dollars  
 Money don't talk louder than me when I hollar

It should be obvious, from my sloppiness, I'm a novice yet,  
 I'm spitting up rap consciousness, my concepts is my honesty  
 Nothing like up-ending rejecting your own childhood  
 Millennials are lazy, son you best go chop that firewood

---

<sup>270</sup> An ouroborus is a mythical creature in the form of a snake eating its own tail. It signifies the universality of time.

<sup>271</sup> In kabbalah there is a practice of "tzim-tzum" where one expands or contracts their ego based on the needs of the situation. This line, "between chutzpah and humility" recognizes the difficulty in negotiating the divine plan in practical application. "Mending the fence" is a term given to prophets when they stand as intercessors between God and the people Israel.

<sup>272</sup> I recognize the utility of eschatology and refuse to be characterized by any one belief structure.

<sup>273</sup> "Planning world domination" is playing on an anti-Semitic trope, here I neutralize it by talking about O'lam HaBa.

<sup>274</sup> All spiritual leaders have an obligation to the next generation to articulate these environmental, political, and religious concerns. The concept of God depends on their pulpit.

<sup>275</sup> There's a certain amount of misunderstanding that I anticipate my listeners will have. I'm sure that some age groups especially will think much of my work is gibberish.

Oh man am I'm tired, pulled an all nighter  
 Jet set to the light with a fire igniter as my ball point pen writer, I'm a fighter  
 Don't know why I said it, i'm not pathetic, i don't regret it  
 I gotta dump this somewhere where someone else can redirect it<sup>276</sup>

Chorus Lullabye

**How Many People Lay Their Souls Bare?** - This was the first rap I wrote with the intention to use as a High Holiday prayer. During the holiday of Rosh Hashanah, or Yom Kippur, we ask to be written in the book of life. Our theology and liturgy express that acts of divine service temper God's judgment, and cause us to be written in the "Book of Life," for the year to come. The final line of the poem, "Let my learning lead to action as it should," is repeated to showcase the individual's journey from questioning God's judgment, to praying that it will positively impact the world.

How many people can lay their souls bare?  
 I don't care  
 If it gives meaning to most prayers.  
 It's unfair that we can't fail in truth;  
 Else what's the use?  
 In sharing God's words too.<sup>277</sup>

So be careful,  
 'Till your stare fills up blank paper,  
 Ask up to the good Lord;  
 What do we wait for?  
 Mankind's favors?  
 Your saving grace?  
 Is our day's labor what you lay to waste?<sup>278</sup>

I still pale in comparison  
 Awful embarrassment,  
 From my rage to break through your garrison.<sup>279</sup>  
 Oh Lord, the games you play,  
 Won't you let me win?

---

<sup>276</sup> I believe that people can carry other people's energies. When it comes to working with the groups I do, I often find myself charged up from hearing their concerns. Performing this rap at open mikes helps me discharge those feelings by publicly articulating them.

<sup>277</sup> Unless we place our authentic emotions in the prayers for repentance, they are effectively useless.

<sup>278</sup> Even when we are authentic, what good does it do? Will God save humankind regardless of our sin? Will our actions warrant our salvation?

<sup>279</sup> Knowledge of our imperfections, especially when compared to God's expectations of us, brings us embarrassment. Sometimes we feel like storming the gates of heaven ourselves.



Intransigence I sin,  
And your gates of prayer have locked me in.<sup>280</sup>

I supplicate you save our fate with straight up common sense,  
Not a forfeiture of recompense,  
These are services you rendered up in dissidence,<sup>281</sup>  
I'm convinced  
That since  
You exist,  
And insist  
It's your wish  
That in this - world, we progress beautifully,  
It's absurd that you would cruise so neutrally.<sup>282</sup>

Yet you've shut me out your firmament  
I've learned of it,  
Hurts to still behold your bold encouragement  
I'm certain if my purpose is concurrent with your word I'll live  
All I can give  
Is my nervous wit wrapping up a tourniquet concerning it

Oh Lord, all this stuff is new to me.  
All that you imbue to me,  
Rarely do I ask you - stop marooning me.  
And self-scrutiny leads me to fear what you'll do to me.  
But stale prayer is mutiny; this one is impunity.<sup>283</sup>

All that time I spent in the wringer,  
You didn't lift a finger,  
Let my sitting sins malingering  
'Till I tarry on, singing swan songs until dawn,  
Wondering all along where do I belong.

Am I a darshan, or darn wrong?<sup>284</sup>

---

<sup>280</sup> The circumstances of my actions catch me in prayer. Do I "win" by not sinning? Or by repenting after I sin inadvertently?

<sup>281</sup> The means of our salvation should be obvious. If God were to withhold the reward of peace in this world, would he encourage dissidence as a form of "service"?

<sup>282</sup> The age old question of suffering: How could a perfect God exist in an imperfect world?

<sup>283</sup> There's a risk in speaking honestly to God. Maybe one's own framework for understanding the world is so deviant that it may upset God. Maybe it would upset other theologians who believe God is universally good.

<sup>284</sup> A darshan is someone who finds poetic meaning in a story, often called a "midrash" in Jewish text. Here posits the question of what is acceptable for poetic license, and what may be too far from the original meaning to have value.

Come on, I'm pretty torn,  
 Caught between this world and a place far beyond,  
 But I eddy on, error on- I'm conscious  
 This life accounts for loving-kindness<sup>285</sup>

And this I promise,  
 Cause to swear would be dishonest,  
 But what's another Jewish rapper getting tarnished?  
 What's another free fall prayer without a harness?  
 We can't fail in this dare to light the darkness.  
 This part's the hardest.

Because God, I am  
 Falling into your hands,  
 Not on mortals I depend,  
 Not on mortals I will stand<sup>286</sup>  
 I can achieve good,  
 I can be understood  
 Let my learning lead to action, as it should.  
 I said  
 Let my learning lead to action, as it should.

**Pray Again Rap** - This is another rap that I designed for use as a substitute during a service, without instruments. It is more of a slam poem. It details my personal journey, from insecurity about prayer to recognizing that one of the highest aspirations of Judaism is to “save a life,” or “Pikuach haNefesh.” The role of a rabbi often requires an awareness as to how to represent Judaism. In this prayer rap, I reference how I use God and Judaism to deepen my commitment to my modern orientation.

When I first went to pray again  
 Don't know what I said  
 Thought I'd be getting by like speaking to an old friend,  
 To make amends,  
 To make pretend,  
 To deepen up my stake in the hand of fate God lends:<sup>287</sup>  
 Amen. Brother, sela.  
 But what I uncovered

---

<sup>285</sup> The idea of heaven is placed here to illustrate how it's choice to believe in “loving-kindness”

<sup>286</sup> This idea of being in “God's hand,” is found in the Tachanun prayers during Shacharit and Mincha. It is the hope that while people may not be able to forgive entirely, God will consistently accept the supplications of all sinners.

<sup>287</sup> The anxiety of talking to God is a prayer in itself!

Was a crooked mirror staring back, puzzled<sup>288</sup>

So confuzzled

So I tussled like

Wrestling all day and night

But hustling your faith is not my type.<sup>289</sup>

And God be like,<sup>290</sup>

“Shmu, you’re my special guy,

And you’re so specialized,

Rapping up the Torah on the side, that’s called Hebrew pride

So what if economics lied?

At least you tried

And the Jewish hope rests on worlds gone bye,

You keep doing fine.”<sup>291</sup>

Yeah, but know what I healed from?

Scars can you feel them

Traumatized by all those wars you never hear of,

I never knew, to

Ditch the snicker and the attitude,

For being rude,

Sins begetting sins into the multitudes<sup>292</sup>

And “Nu?” though it sounds great,

Great that God would vouchsafe,<sup>293</sup>

Have me flirt with danger

Still believing it’s our first date<sup>294</sup>

It’s a state of terror with the Torah and the terra

Since been severed from divine by scribal errors.<sup>295</sup>

---

<sup>288</sup> A major revelation I have in prayer is how crooked I can be, and how I aspire to be righteous.

<sup>289</sup> “Hustling a faith” is tantamount to selling an afterlife. The idea of heaven, found in most religions, is often an attractive concept to bring up to a potential convert. I am severely averse to proselytizing so my purpose in bringing this up is for clarity in my own spiritual journey of discovery.

<sup>290</sup> Sometimes, while deep in prayer, I believe God speaks to me. This is one of the things he or she would say.

<sup>291</sup> In spite of all my personal trepidation regarding the future, despair is a wasted emotion. I must continue on.

<sup>292</sup> This section is my not-so-casual awareness of the sins that I have committed before I cared about spirituality.

<sup>293</sup> The nature of God is one of insecurity, as we will never be able to prove the existence of God. Anyone who can “vouchsafe” for God is potentially a liar.

<sup>294</sup> My flirting with danger was in the idolatrous belief of commercialism. Specifically informed by my years in business school (believing that “an invisible hand” will solve the ills of society), I could recognize the discrepancy between belief and action and rejected the danger involved with mindless consumption.

<sup>295</sup> Our “state of terror” regards the irreconcilability of The Bible’s laws with the laws of the “terra,” or the “earth” Here I suggest that “scribal error” is what has distorted the meaning of biblical laws,

Yet I never quit from blessing sh\*t and choking on philosophy  
 It still bothers me  
 That our best option couldn't possibly  
 Be stopping short of  
 Seeing the  
 Destruction of our century<sup>296</sup>  
 It's that obscene; a carcass of consumption fueled by gasoline  
 It's the average daily diet if you know what I mean  
 Sugar caffeine as the American dream

And the worst-case scenario is  
 There we don't want to go  
 Bear with me as I hold  
 Steady in the free flow - to let go  
 Of the nonsense when the consequence is covenant,  
 May this be more obvious than false market confidence?<sup>297</sup>

Ever since they pulled my wisdom teeth I beseech  
 To speak my mind and grope what's out of reach  
 But now I teach  
 That each and every day  
 Another chance that it could blow away<sup>298</sup>  
 And I care enough to know what to say  
 When I pray  
 Say your name  
 I hope to stay away from rainy days  
 Save my shame

I be the Rabbi rapping, how's about that?  
 Who else be holding down this side of the cul-de-sac?<sup>299</sup>  
 Who else be out caulking cracked vessels and that's a fact.<sup>300</sup>  
 Timeless kindness, don't make me take it back.

---

<sup>296</sup> The destruction of our century is the term I apply for the worst case scenario involving our industrialized civilization.

<sup>297</sup> Between "market confidence," and the Jewish "covenant," both terms here represent fictions. Which one is more plausible: Will God fulfil his/her promise to the Nation of Israel? Or will God continue to let humankind believe in stocks at all-time highs?

<sup>298</sup> Among the realization that everything is temporary, my only hope is that we can live as lighthearted as possible, without shame.

<sup>299</sup> There should be no surprise that my home is in the suburbs.

<sup>300</sup> The idea of fixing vessels stems from kabbalah. People must heal to be receptacles of God's love. It is through the healing of broken vessels that we can repair the world and bring about the Messianic Age of peace. The universalist corollary of this myth is the "Age of Leisure," found in economics.

And kiddies be like, Shmu where'd you get your rhymes  
 King Solomon's mines, Bronze Age scrolls that oxidized  
 And homies be like, Yo Shmu how much you bench?  
 After every meal to let them know that I'm a menstch!<sup>301</sup>

And Rebbes be like, Shmu is this peshat or derash?  
 And I be like "well we have to take into account the defensibility of the text on the continuum of  
 peshat and derash and that's a really technical conversation actually. Can we have it not in a  
 rap song?"<sup>302</sup>

What did you think the end of industrial civilization looks like?  
 A television program entitled  
 And who had the foresight?  
 We have that  
 Matter of fact  
 More than a crack  
 Witness the business edifice crumble as it snaps

A cave man looks to the sky,  
 Asks himself why,  
 Why have we globalized?<sup>303</sup>  
 And that same man relearns to rhyme  
 Breaks down and cries  
 Cries to be recognized  
 Well to the cold world waiting on doves I lay to rest  
 We be souls deeper than the flood of Gilgamesh<sup>304</sup>

And if you don't stop for nothing than you ain't doing your best  
 Call it what you want, it's still Pikuah HaNefesh<sup>305</sup>

---

<sup>301</sup> Different audiences require a different method of exegesis. Here I parody my own identity by citing King Solomon for the students, and "benching" for my peers. To "bench" means to "pray" after meals in Jewish custom, the double meaning is intentional.

<sup>302</sup> This section is a break in the rhythm of the song. For rabbis and scholars interested in technical answers, rap is a burdensome way to receive information.

<sup>303</sup> The impact of globalization will have implications beyond our current generation. Through giant corporations and economies of scale, we have traded in some of our most precious natural resources for objects to "own." We have mispriced the risk of pollution, and have altered the planet's weather. All of these impacts beg us to ask the question: was it worth it? Will the generation one-hundred years from now agree? (A cave man could be considered a luddite).

<sup>304</sup> Gilgamesh is the creation story of a flood which differs from the story of Noah. In the story of Noah, the onus of Noah's redemption is ethical. By being "deeper" than Gilgamesh, I question what values we will attribute to the coming collapse.

<sup>305</sup> There's no way to conclusively know if someone's deeds will impact the world for the better. However, in light of the intensity of the time we live in (the interconnectivity of technology and the reality of fanaticism), if one person can listen to another, and treats the other with kindness and respect, it's very possible that they may save that person's life.

**In an age** - I wrote this rap with the intention of giving wisdom to the younger generation. I delivered it during one of my summer camp services, no instruments. Some of the content here is not appropriate for conversation with campers, yet it can be spoken about poetically. I feel that Judaism has helped me to deal with the irrationality of the 21st century, and that religious systems in general give people a way to heal and function when they could not. This rap sums up my own journey in that belief.

Ok attention please,  
 I got something here worth mentioning  
 My modus opperendi  
 Don't comply with indirection<sup>306</sup>  
 In defense in crediting in in insecurities  
 In reckless imperfections that I carried as a kid in the crib of my childhood nursery<sup>307</sup>

And this thought occurred to me,  
 On the shadow of a watch list,<sup>308</sup>  
 I'm worried since I'm learning -  
 Only God can stop the plot twist<sup>309</sup>

Currently, personally, the belief that's still hurting me:  
 If God don't act mercifully  
 That's called spirit burglary<sup>310</sup>

I'm chewing on intangibles  
 With my mandibles<sup>311</sup>  
 God laughs at my plans but I still handle them

Manning up the hardened truth department  
 Begs your pardon  
 Our escapade calls for desperate days, warden!<sup>312</sup>

Lord Almighty, don't you spite me -  
 Allegations made I put them all behind me.<sup>313</sup>

---

<sup>306</sup> I do not waste my time with frivolities, I like to cut straight to the heart of the matter.

<sup>307</sup> My desire to be direct stands contrary to my upbringing, where I would be self conscious about making waves.

<sup>308</sup> "Shadow of a watch list," who really knows where the most important information we are exposed to comes from?

<sup>309</sup> Ultimate faith in God.

<sup>310</sup> If God doesn't come to save us, has the concept of spirituality been stolen by God (the burglar)?

<sup>311</sup> I'm trying to speak about the ineffable, God is intangible.

<sup>312</sup> God is a warden, if we view ourselves as prisoners to a dilemma.

<sup>313</sup> This is the belief that I can overcome all the charges against me through faith and perseverance.

Not playing the blaming game –  
 Imma done saying nothing  
 Insensitivity training – Imma fronting.<sup>314</sup>

And Lord you know the bottom,  
 When I've only seen the top  
 You know it all comes down,  
 In shock and awe in awful shock

Fools say what they know  
 Sages know what they say<sup>315</sup>  
 And caught in between,  
 E'ry day Imma pray

So hot dog diggity,  
 Come on God on high – are you kidding me?  
 Your commission fees shouldn't be  
 In inconsistencies;<sup>316</sup>  
 I need strength in conviction please!  
 'cuz I'm naïve.

So what if rap's my parlor trick,  
 I'll harbor it  
 It's the best shot I got to disarm the kids<sup>317</sup>

The fix is in distinguishing, in intentions  
 My mission's in the future, in indiscretions<sup>318</sup>  
 In suspicion in derision in my own confusion,  
 I fight against convention, at best I'm overshooting.<sup>319</sup>

That's why I straddle the divide and cry<sup>320</sup>  
 Not gonna lie  
 Knowing it's in earnest when I tried and still denied

---

<sup>314</sup> Even insensitivity training I will overcome.

<sup>315</sup> This is an old yiddish quote, "A sage knows what he says, a fool says what he knows."

<sup>316</sup> How does God pay those who love him/her? By remaining elusive.

<sup>317</sup> I am fully aware that the method I use to activate kids, the method of rap music, is a parlor trick. My raps are the vehicle that positive religious messages can go in, to impact the community I work with. Kids need to be "disarmed," because youth culture is violent.

<sup>318</sup> To do my work as a rabbi, I need to be able to see other people's motivations and advocate for when they need help in the future. Many people are beyond counsel until they need a reaffirmation of a big truth.

<sup>319</sup> Through all my best efforts, it may feel like it's too much.

<sup>320</sup> The divide here is the age divide, or the gap between tradition and modern that my role as rabbi mediates.

That you knew  
 That I'd be chasing cheese for the revenue<sup>321</sup>  
 Bridging the old world and new  
 Cause I'm the Shmu<sup>322</sup>

When demands standstill  
 And my stance is careful  
 When all's fair in love and war, But warfare kills –  
 When swords beat ploughshares as mankind's will;  
 When I still care, its bull.  
 God chill.<sup>323</sup>

I ain't holding no regrets– I'm just emotional  
 I'm rattled with devotion while I hold this microphone  
 But I'm sociable,  
 And the mood is nonnegotiable,  
 Reluctantly I am informed that all our fate's foreclosable<sup>324</sup>

Here's my statement;  
 I don't mean to make waves but  
 When the faith hits the pavement; you grow straight up  
 Don't venerate much  
 You can never take it easy when your instinct plays it rough<sup>325</sup>

Enigmas wrapped in riddles trapped in puzzles; they're the worst  
 But religion orders history from a place of just deserts<sup>326</sup>  
 And I'd rather spit spoken word as the bubble bursts  
 Then play fiddle on a shtetle roof cursed  
 Observe; in an age when you gonna see microbursts,  
 I'm that rabbi who called y'all first.<sup>327</sup>  
 In an age where you might not get what you deserve,  
 Try your best to not get hurt.<sup>328</sup>

---

<sup>321</sup> I still have to make a living, even though I should be dedicating myself more to advocacy.

<sup>322</sup> Shmuel is my Hebrew name, though I often go by Shmu

<sup>323</sup> When the situation becomes too dire, and the world's terrors become too much, I ask God to "chill."

<sup>324</sup> This is my description of the experience of potential loss and the feelings that so often paralyzes us.

<sup>325</sup> These are the brief lessons I've learned from being theologically stretched out.

<sup>326</sup> No matter what happens, you can expect Judaism to put an ethical message on to a crisis. Just like the destruction of the Second Temple.

<sup>327</sup> A microburst is a passive aggressive tendency of confrontation. These can be racially or ethnically charged.

<sup>328</sup> Sometimes the best we can hope for is to live a life insulated from unnecessary pain.



**My God, My God, Redemption Rap** - This was a song that I consciously modeled after a church spiritual. I incorporate a double chest beat at the end of every line and I sing this without instruments. I have performed this as a prayer during services, and at open mikes. The opening chorus, related to the 22nd psalm, “My God, my God” sets the tenor of the song, which is a plea for Jews to think about modern existentialist threats in the terms of religious language.

(Chorus)

My God, My God,  
You've gotta help me out  
You've gotta bring redemption  
I shall not doubt

My God, My God,  
Get me outta here  
Your kingdom cometh  
I shall not fear

Coming at you live from the American Diaspora – I'll rap for ya  
I'm Shmu, the trail masterful redactor – of prayer  
Ask for prose if you dare,  
A disaster goes to show that faith's not going anywhere<sup>329</sup>

Jewish continuity is prayer fluency<sup>330</sup>  
Eerie that I'd dive into something that is new to me  
It used to be, because, who I was, was usually God truancy  
But duty free love, above shalsheteing<sup>331</sup>

(Chorus)

Put away your siddur cause you're in for premonition  
Kabbalatician on a mission<sup>332</sup>  
Redeem the sparks and do your part to further mend the schism  
Just to keep the rhythm<sup>333</sup>  
The surgeon to your heart makes a spiritual incision  
With wisdom that's God given

---

<sup>329</sup> Disasters and crises are great opportunities for people to invest their energy in religious or spiritual systems. When traditional means of raising self-esteem do not work, prayer, meditation, group classes, and social justice programs are an important way to keep faith relevant in times of distress.

<sup>330</sup> Prayers must be spoken in Hebrew, thus transmitting intimate knowledge of God through liturgy.

<sup>331</sup> Shalsheteing is a kabbalistic term describing how energy flows down from higher sources to lower ones. The transmission of energy from the highest three sephirot to the lower seven activates an individual's potential through love of God.

<sup>332</sup> Prayer is important, and so is action. A Kabbalatician is someone who practices kabala.

<sup>333</sup> Redeeming the sparks is another kabbalistic term. By finding and redeeming all of God's lost sparks among our physical world, we can warrant the messianic age of redemption.

Parts and parceled words of mine comprise this vision  
It's the hope our souls make fission<sup>334</sup>

So from Yavneh to the Netherlands – **America**  
Calling Jews from all foreign lands – **Diaspora**  
Halt the futures foul weather plans – **Stand on up**  
We'll walk together sagely holding hands – a chance for us  
To raise our voices up and louder – It's up to us  
To show Hashem what are mouths for  
It's not such an easy thing to be a soundboard  
But the devil in the details does implore ya<sup>335</sup>

Demand as much for your goals that you're currently furthering, plumbing the  
depths of uncertainty<sup>336</sup>  
Command the touch of your soul, the desire to behold, in earnest-y, a bridge to  
eternity<sup>337</sup>  
Withstand the clutch of the cold; in the world that we're told is sicker than milk  
that is curdling  
Perchance the rush gushing flow is the sense of who knows,  
Succumbing to the mess that's convergence-ing - emergency

Cause who's here seen a crisis?  
Rather do you think that ISIS knows what nice is?  
And that's why you shouldn't roll the dice with  
A lifeless market hand that sets the resource price list.<sup>338</sup>

Cause who's here troubled sleeping?  
Tumbled into a pit that's a deepening?  
I mean, if you're not feeling like a hostage yet- process it  
Grieving in the office like a faucet with no regrets<sup>339</sup>

Cause who's here gonna fight this?

---

<sup>334</sup> The "hope our souls make fission," is a term I reserve for a "heaven" in the most universalist terms. I, of course, have no more authority over what heaven looks like, yet I can imagine that our souls meld in that place.

<sup>335</sup> The "devil in the details" is a reference to the most popular way people lie, by speaking in terms that are convoluted and overwhelming, when the reality is simple. During the 2007 Housing Bubble Crisis, this type of explanation was used to justify bad monetary policies. Even now, political bills are much longer than necessary, accordingly designed to obfuscate the nature of the legislation. Mainstream media does a diligent job of ignoring the truly important details of the legislation which will impact citizens most.

<sup>336</sup> Maintaining healthy goals while allaying reasonable doubt.

<sup>337</sup> A bridge to eternity is the hope of the "messianic" peace.

<sup>338</sup> Despite our best intentions, we may still warrant a serious crisis. Having an "invisible market hand," is no sure way to peace.

<sup>339</sup> The subconscious self will grapple with these difficult feelings of condemnation. Sometimes they may prevent you from going to sleep, other times they will catch you off guard around the office.

For those who be deceived when the time hits?<sup>340</sup>  
 The sound of breaking porcelain is torturing your thoughts within,  
 It started since your brain's been softening - Unconvinced

That that can't affect how I see me?<sup>341</sup>  
 While our brothers' keepers condescendingly take a seat.  
 I won't say it discreetly,  
 In a world of no leaders – you should strive to be, stand with me

I fix my courage and I bring it  
 Cause if I didn't who would sing this<sup>342</sup>  
 It's kismet in the way we're doing business, to witness  
 The tower of babel before the shift hits – it fits

Moshe ended Torah with a single tear, and I feel,  
 I could do the same to keep it real  
 The notion of wisdom starts in God-fear, it's quite clear,  
 Who would choose rabbi as career?<sup>343</sup>

Moshe ended Torah with a single tear, and I feel,  
 I could do the same to keep it real  
 The notion of wisdom starts in God fear, it's quite clear,  
 Who would choose rabbi as career?

(Chorus)  
 My God, My God,  
 You've gotta help me out  
 You've gotta bring redemption  
 I shall not doubt

My God, My God,  
 Way outta here  
 Your Kingdom cometh  
 I shall not fear

---

<sup>340</sup> If we are to believe that we are our brother's keeper, then we must respect the honor of another as dearly as our own self. This is true even during a crisis.

<sup>341</sup> Some people will fight to preserve how they view themselves, refusing to acknowledge information that will confront their identity.

<sup>342</sup> It's inherently unpopular to wrap one's theological orientation around the drive for redemption, yet that is the focus of this song. The bravery I attribute to myself here is social exclusion as the price for speaking my mind.

<sup>343</sup> People are drawn to the rabbinate for many reasons. For me, the call to speak truth compelled me to define current issues in religious terms. If used properly, the "fear of God" can be a traditional tool that helps people repent. Through my years at seminary, I have found that it helps me. I never anticipated it would help motivate others, or that I would use it so frequently as a Jewish professional.

So let this prayer enter your main brain,  
 The sound of shame, you're not insane  
 Resist the urge to run away from change  
 It's the reason why I came<sup>344</sup>

There's not really a plan from here  
 The fear's part charm is insincere  
 It's only cause I hold the world so dear  
 To call klal Yisrael, do ya hear? <sup>345</sup>

So from Yavneh to the Netherlands – **America**  
 Calling Jews from all foreign lands – **Diaspora**  
 Halt the futures foul weather plans – **Stand on up**  
 We'll walk together sagely holding hands – A chance for us  
 To raise our voices up and louder – It's up to us  
 To show Hashem what are mouths for  
 It's not such an easy thing to be a soundboard  
 But the devil in the details does implore ya

I mean who puts the soul in the soldier  
 I mean im tirtzu ain zo aggadah<sup>346</sup>  
 I mean no one should've had to told ya  
 Responsas come from under a, struggler,<sup>347</sup>  
 Summon a Korbonfire in our building<sup>348</sup>  
 That the Torah water's only fueling  
 A sacrifice to be consuming – who's in?  
 To fight a battle not worth losing (Chorus)

**Olam HaBa Rap** - This rap was written for a class entitled, "Jewish Views of the Afterlife," and has never been performed outside of a class reading. I am aware at how the concept of heaven impels us to act in certain ways, and chose to refocus our attention on the present rather than the unknowable "world to come."

---

<sup>344</sup> Running away from difficult revelations often has the inverse effect on spiritual growth. I embraced these controversial topics long after they had infiltrated my subconscious.

<sup>345</sup> While it's important to acknowledge the reality of crisis, I do not have specific plans addressing environmental or political risk. I only hope to raise awareness about these issues so the right leaders can also come forward with their solutions. If we can empower people with a belief in God and practical solutions, maybe we can succeed in adapting our culture to the 21st century.

<sup>346</sup> "If you can dream it, it is no fable," is the quote David Ben Gurion gave to the modern state of Israel. Here I repurpose this quote to speak about a future hope of peace.

<sup>347</sup> Responsas are a body of literature dealing with Halacha, or religious law. I am hopeful that Halacha can amend itself to modern questions of sustainability.

<sup>348</sup> A Korban is a sacrifice given to the Temple in biblical times. Here I combine "korban" with "bonfire."

We talk big game in our main prayers of repentance  
 Balls to balls deep breaking floodgates of heaven  
 But if you get stuck in the muck by the entrance  
 Do you believe deeds are your best intervention?<sup>349</sup>

I'm wearing camo blasting out random truth - Every word of it  
 Charged me like a lightning bolt, I know that you heard of it  
 Frozen like a garden gnome, you're doing something wrong  
 If you're getting on to gehinom, I won't go along<sup>350</sup>

Oops, you've stumbled on my character flaw,  
 A childlike sense of wonderment kinda just says it all<sup>351</sup>  
 But sink or swim - or grow gills  
 Since I dove in headfirst  
 And i'm swimming underwater till I reach the underworld<sup>352</sup>

If this third eye calcified - Lord on high  
 I'd fall on my face to hear the earth beneath me sigh  
 It's just that I, I just  
 Rupture at the seams to receive these premonitions  
 Olam ha-zeh, Ola, ha-ba, who can reveal heaven's dimensions?

In particular? Am I fictional?<sup>353</sup>  
 I lie awake at night so filled with contradiction.  
 Believe in what I do, what I knew, what i'm going through  
 Attention God, I'm dead and gone, clean up aisle Shmu.

I'm stinking up the airwaves, with my prayer face  
 Debatably to raise the dead, but God's been waylaid<sup>354</sup>  
 I'm reluctant to admit the place of Sheol still escapes me- <sup>355</sup>  
 How do rabbis speak of this, if not creatively?

Hold it while I blurt out this Third Temple tempo <sup>356</sup>  
 Reserved for class, cause here you get yourself free samples<sup>357</sup>

---

<sup>349</sup> An individual's deeds are known to provide testimony for the person entering heaven.

<sup>350</sup> Gehinom is the Jewish concept of hell.

<sup>351</sup> My character flaw is the childlike wonder that I cultivate to stay invested in the world at large.

<sup>352</sup> Despite my desire to ignore the implications of the concept of heaven, I "dove in head first."

<sup>353</sup> Philosophically, I will never know if I exist. I will never know if I am a fiction.

<sup>354</sup> The resurrection of the dead is a core tenet in traditional Jewish thought.

<sup>355</sup> Sheol is the place in the Bible where souls go after a person dies.

<sup>356</sup> The "Third Temple" is code for messianic age, whereby the "Third Temple" will be built. I don't actually believe it needs to be built as a condition for the messianic age.

<sup>357</sup> You don't get free samples of heaven.

As we meditate on heaven with the precision of a scalpel  
 In a future where we become yahrzeit candles

So I'm blinking like a crazed man spouting out false prophecy.  
 Messianic dreamers, imma rage there ain't no stopping me  
 Hit me with your concept of god, can you go bigger?  
 Stop me if you're feeling triggered.<sup>358</sup>

In the hornet's nest, in the tiger's den,  
 In the no-win situations, where no one is friends<sup>359</sup>  
 If you call it as you see it, and fear not the grim reaper,  
 Can you stop him fishing souls if you become your brother's keeper?

I can't face another movie with a post-apocalyptic topic,  
 Cuz the future bums me out, so God Forbid I try to stop it  
 But mystics and rationalists in my brain must coexist  
 Conceptually, this G-d be like, "rabbi, stop and frisk"<sup>360</sup>

If I come off as a friar preaching death, the equalizer  
 While we try to get to heaven, if not higher<sup>361</sup>  
 If the metaphysical zone's blown way outta proportion,  
 Eschatology whiz we ride with four horsemen<sup>362</sup>

We're all gonna die, God, some faster than others  
 I came to this life to party, so don't you preach at me brothers  
 We'll get peace soon when the sky burns the land.  
 We'll be running for messiah until then

---

<sup>358</sup> Talking about death can be emotional for someone, and can "trigger" them.

<sup>359</sup> These situations are hell-ish enough realities for me to try and avoid them.

<sup>360</sup> Any reformatting of the concept of heaven will necessitate a corresponding change in behavior. When this happens abruptly, it may feel like a theological "stop and frisk."

<sup>361</sup> "If not higher" is a famous story of a rabbi who ascended to heaven (if not higher) every Yom Kippur. He didn't actually go to heaven, but was found out to be delivering wood to the home of an old, poor, woman.

<sup>362</sup> The four horsemen is a term borrowed from The New Testament about the end of times.

### Works Cited

- Adams, Maurianne, and John Brace, eds. *Strangers and Neighbors: Relations between Blacks and Jews in the United States*. N.p.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999.
- Alter, Robert. *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. N.p.: Basic Books, inc., Publishers, 1985.
- Asante, M.K., Jr. *It's Bigger than Hip Hop: The Rise of the Post-Hip-Hop Generation*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2008.
- The Associated Press. "Lin-Manuel: Puerto Rican Efforts Making up for Slow Start." *WTOP*, November 13, 2017, National News. Accessed November 14, 2017. <https://wtop.com/national/2017/11/lin-manuel-puerto-rican-efforts-making-up-for-slow-start/>.
- Bar, Matt, and Brent Osborne. "Click Here! Hashem's My DJ: Summer Camp Piloting Rapping-Rebbe/Beat-Midrash Program." *Jewish Philanthropy*, November 1, 2017. Accessed November 10, 2017. <http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/hashems-my-dj-summer-camp-piloting-rapping-rebbebeat-midrash-program/>.
- Bradley, Adam. *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*. New York, NY: BasicCivitas, 2009.
- Bradley, Adam, and Andrew DuBois, eds. *The Anthology of Rap*. By Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Chuck D, and Common. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010.
- Butler, Bethonie. "The Story behind Logic's Powerful Suicide Prevention Anthem '1-800-273-8255'." *The Washington Post*, Arts and Entertainment. Accessed November 14, 2017. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2017/08/28/the-story-behind-logics-powerful-suicide-prevention-anthem-1-800-273-8255/?utm\\_term=.f76a2d804582](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2017/08/28/the-story-behind-logics-powerful-suicide-prevention-anthem-1-800-273-8255/?utm_term=.f76a2d804582).
- Chang, Jeff. *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2005.
- Charnas, Dan. *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop*. New York, NY: New American Library, 2010.
- Cohen, Rich. *Tough Jews: Fathers, Sons, and Gangster Dreams*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1998.
- Dicky, Lil. *All K (Official Video)*. Self Released, 2013.
- Dorchin, Uri. *Fight for Your Right to Participate: Jewish American Rappers*. Edited by Amalia Ran and Moshe Morad. Leiden: Brill, 2016.

- Edwards, Paul. *How to Rap: The Art and Science of the Hip-Hop MC*. Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, 2009.
- Feingold, Henry L., ed. *A Time for Healing: American Jewry since World War II*. Second ed. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1992.
- . *A Time for Searching: Entering the Mainstream*. Second ed. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1992.
- Finesinger, Sol Baruch. "Musical Instruments in OT." *Hebrew Union College Annual* 3 (1926): 21-76. Accessed August 28, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23502521>.
- Fishman, Sylvia Barack. *Reimagining Jewishness*. Edited by Jack Wertheimer. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011.
- Forman, Murray. *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*. Music/Culture. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002.
- Frankl, Viktor E. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2006.
- Friedmann, Jonathan L. *Social Functions of Synagogue Song: A Durkheimian Approach*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012.
- Frumkin, Jacob, Gregor Aronson, and Alexis Goldenweiser, eds. *Russian Jewry (1860-1917)*. Translated by Mirra Ginsburg. South Brunswick, NJ: Thomas Yoseloff, 1966.
- Gladwell, Malcolm. *Outliers: The Story of Success*. New York, NY: Little, Brown, and Company, 2008.
- Glickman, Mark S. *Sacred Treasure - the Cairo Geniza: The Amazing Discoveries of Forgotten Jewish History in an Egyptian Synagogue Attic*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2011.
- Greenberg, Cheryl Lynn. *Troubling the Waters: Black - Jewish Relations in the American Century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Greenburg, Zack O'Malley. *Empire State of Mind: How Jay Z Went from Street Corner to Corner Office*. New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2011.
- Hapgood, Hutchins. *The Spirit of the Ghetto: Studies of the Jewish Quarter of New York*. New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1966.



- Higgins, Dalton. *Far From Over: The Music and Life of Drake, the Unofficial Story*. Toronto, Ontario: ECW Press, 2012.
- Jefferson, J'na. "Ice Cube, O'Shea Jackson Jr. And Eazy-E's Daughter Comment On Jerry Heller's Death." *Vibe*, September 6, 2016. Accessed November 10, 2017. <https://www.vibe.com/2016/09/ice-cube-eb-wright-discuss-jerry-heller-death/>.
- "Jerry Heller Died Listening to N.W.A.'S Eazy-E." *TMZ*, September 7, 2016. Accessed November 10, 2017. <http://www.tMZ.com/2016/09/07/jerry-heller-n-w-a-played-songs-dead/>.
- JTA, and TOI Staff. "Rapper to Quit Music after Tweetstorm Defense of 'Dirty Jewish Execs' Lyrics." *The Times of Israel*. Last modified December 15, 2016. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/rapper-lupe-fiasco-to-quit-music-after-tweetstorm-defense-of-dirty-jewish-execs-lyrics/>.
- Kajikawa, Loren. *Sounding Race in Rap Songs*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015.
- Karp, Jensen. *Kanye West Owes Me \$300: And Other True Stories from a White Rapper Who Almost Made It Big*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 2016.
- Keyes, Cheryl L. *Music in American Life*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara, and Jonathan Karp, eds. *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.
- Koppel, Nikko. "Are Your Jeans Sagging? Go Directly to Jail." *The New York Times*, August 30, 2007, Fashion & Style. Accessed November 10, 2017. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/30/fashion/30baggy.html>.
- Kraus, Hans-Joachim. "Commentaries." In *Psalms 1-59: A Commentary*, 1-559. Translated by Hilton C. Oswald. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988.
- Lederhendler, Eli. *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity, 1950-1970*. Edited by Henry L. Feingold. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001.
- Lehman, David. *Jewish Encounters*. Edited by Jonathan Rosen. Nextbook. New York, NY: Schocken Books, 2009.
- McQuillar, Tayannah Lee. *When Rap Music Had a Conscience: The Artists, Organizations, and Historic Events That Inspired and Influenced the 'Golden Age' of Hip-Hop from 1987 to 1996*. New York, NY: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2007.

- Melnick, Jeffrey Paul. *A Right to Sing the Blues*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Mook, Richard, and Gerald Rulon-Maxwell. *Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*. Third ed. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 2007.
- Moore, Deborah Dash. *GI Jews*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Muhammad, Latifah. "Jerry Heller's Lawyer Claims 'Straight Outta Compton' Contributed To His Death." *Vibe*, September 4, 2016. Accessed November 10, 2017. <https://www.vibe.com/2016/09/jerry-heller-straight-outta-compton-death/>.
- Nitzsche, Sina A., and Walter Gru?nzweig. *Hip-hop in Europe: Cultural Identities and Transnational Flows*. Zu?rich: LIT, 2013.
- Orejuela, Fernando. *Rap and Hip Hop Culture*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Pearlstein, Eden. "About." ePHRYME. Accessed November 10, 2017. <http://www.eprhyme.com/about/>.
- Peltz, Jonathan. "The Trials and Tribulations of Matisyahu." *Noisey*, December 2, 2014. Accessed November 10, 2017. [https://noisey.vice.com/en\\_us/article/64ygpp/matisyahinterview](https://noisey.vice.com/en_us/article/64ygpp/matisyahinterview).
- Perkins, William Eric. *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996.
- Perry, Imani. *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*. 4th Printing ed. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Reeves, Marcus. *Somebody Scream: Rap Music's Rise to Prominence in the Aftershock of Black Power*. New York, NY: Faber and Faber, 2008.
- Rose, Tricia. *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk about When We Talk about Hip Hop and Why It Matters*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2008.
- Sarna, Jonathan D. *American Judaism: A History*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004.
- Schmidt, Patrick. "What We Hear Is Meaning Too: Deconstruction, Dialog, and Music." *Indiana University Press Philosophy of Music Education Review* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 3-24. Accessed March 14, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/philmusieducrevi.20.1.3>.

- Shalhoup, Mara. *BMF: The Rise and Fall of Big Meech and the Black Mafia Family*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2010.
- Shapiro, Edward S. *American Jewry since World War II*. Second Printing ed. The Jewish People in America. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1992.
- Shiloah, Amnon. *Jewish Musical Traditions*. Edited by Raphael Patai. Jewish Folklore and Anthropology Series. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1992.
- Sidran, Ben. *There Was a Fire: Jews, Music and the American Dream*. Third ed. N.p.: Nardis Books, 2015.
- Sorin, Gerald. *A Time for Building: The Third Migration*. Second ed. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1992.
- Stratton, Jon. "The Beastie Boys: Jews in Whiteface." *Popular Music*, 3rd ser., 27, no. 3 (October 2008): 413-32. Accessed March 14, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40212400>.
- Summit, Jeffrey A. *The Lord's Song in a Strange Land*. Edited by Mark Slobin. American Musicspheres. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Sundquist, Eric J. *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005.
- "Syd Nathan." Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. <https://www.rockhall.com/inductees/syd-nathan>.
- That's the Joint: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*. Edited by Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal. Second ed. New York, NY: Routledge, 2012.
- Tolsky, Molly. "Notorious B.I.G. Worked at a Brooklyn Synagogue as a Teen." *Jewniverse*, March 15, 2017. Accessed November 10, 2017. [https://www.thejewniverse.com/2017/notorious-b-i-g-worked-at-a-brooklyn-synagogue-as-a-teen/?utm\\_content=buffer38130&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=kvellerfacebook&utm\\_campaign=bufe](https://www.thejewniverse.com/2017/notorious-b-i-g-worked-at-a-brooklyn-synagogue-as-a-teen/?utm_content=buffer38130&utm_medium=social&utm_source=kvellerfacebook&utm_campaign=bufe).
- Torgoff, Martin. *Bop Apocalypse: Jazz, Race, the Beats, and Drugs*. Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2016.
- . *Can't Find My Way Home: America in the Great Stoned Age, 1945-2000*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2004.

Westhoff, Ben. *Original Gangstas: Tupac Shakur, Dr. Dre, Eazy-E, Ice Cube, and the Birth of West Coast Rap*. New York, NY: Hachette Books, 2016.

Westoff, Ben. "Did Jerry Heller Actually Cheat N.W.A.?" *Forbes*, September 7, 2016, Media & Entertainment. Accessed November 10, 2017.  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/benwesthoff/2016/09/07/jerry-heller-nwa/#4ec59f0b5176>.

Whitfield, Stephen J. "Black like Us." *Jewish History* 22, no. 4 (2008): 353-71. Accessed March 14, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40345560>.

Worthy, Patrice. "Kosher Rapper Sammy K Full of Surprises." *Atlanta Jewish Times*, August 2, 2017, Arts & Culture. Accessed November 10, 2017.  
<http://atlantajewishtimes.timesofisrael.com/kosher-rapper-sammy-k-full-of-surprises/>.

## Appendix - Jew on Jew Rap Battle: Wiseguy Vs XQZ

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBIbDmIOLGI>

XQZ:

See No coast always got me facing the same guy twice, oh wait you're wise guy, I just thought  
ice nine fixed his eye sight

Let's get it started

This weapon I got I broke into my synagogue to take it  
Picture a giant piece of metal get it ripped apart and shaven  
Razor sharp edges

I'm a Jew, you'd think a little part was Asian

Decapitate this Yiddish mark with a ninja star of David

Yeah goodbye crank shit

Disconnect guys dome

Watch his head fly

To the west side to the next time zone

He's been out the game,

But battle raps become a sport the Midwest has mastered

So I force you to head back a few steps till your styles up to the central standard

Now, ups a scary word for a Keebler elf

It ain't the best when you can't reach the shelf

It doesn't sound like all that helium you breathin' helps

Heres exactly what I mean Eugene,

See these are the kind of rapper I hate dog

The kind who think that sound of preaching on helium will easily make their career magically  
take off

Enough of that. Enough of that.

Who wants to hear a guido with a Jew-fro?

You look like you'd be more comfortable at that fucking goon show at the blue note

Dude bro, you're not in a frat pact, why do you sound more like a frat guy than me?

Last time I battled I became this league champ rightfully

This snack sized rabbi got smashed by a franchise and voted against in a f-cking landslide and  
three

So I'm thinking, so I'm thinking f-ck that

Mediocre battler making a comeback

Why don't you go hit up chuck black and see if he's interested in a grudge match?

Wiseguy:

This is a corny way to get some views

I feel a bit misused

Cause we could've teamed up for the two on twos

But what did you gon' do?

Have to fuck it up and make it Jew on Jew

Cool this won't be too hard

Well just talk about who drives the newer car  
 Or who has more ice in their Jewish star  
 No - yo he takes his girl out on a date and only offers her a water  
 He's does that magic trick where it looks like he's breaking off a quarter  
 Not so you impress her  
 Not so you can court her  
 So this money hoarder pays for exactly what he ordered  
 Yo if this ain't for the championship than I got winner  
 I show up to your Shabbat dinner  
 Grab your hot sister throw my cock in her  
 Your mom whisper in my ear "What am I chopped liver?"  
 ... So I f-ck her.  
 See ... A lot of mother f-ckers probably mad that I'm back  
 I took some time off chilling with two japs on my lap  
 One had slanted eyes, the other drove a fancy ride  
 So I hit it krav-maga, samurai, or both if I can't decide  
 Close one eye, all you'll see is your nose from the side  
 Don't lie, that diving board is so high you can't do a nose dive and tell me that you won't die  
 See I make this shit look effortless  
 And if the crowd don't mess with this  
 Were in missu there is no Jews  
 They might not get the references  
 Let the games begin  
 I know you play to win  
 Picture Steve huddled up with all his crazy friends  
 Everybody yelling as they wave their hands  
 With three dollars in the pot as the dreidel spin  
 Yo Yo You're such a chai roller  
 We were supposed to bet but instead your pockets went bipolar  
 You f-ck a couple bucks ain't nothing to cry over  
 You're only in a frat so you can have guys over  
 Whatever but I don't know if your rabbi told ya  
 But having you a sausage fest is not kosher

XQZ

It's been awhile since they crowned X the town's best  
 His last battle he got raped in the dirty south so bad he needed Valtrex  
 You welcome the south yes  
 He who couldn't fathom the answer is different so I contacted the most savage cat in the Atlanta  
 division and asked his opinion  
 And nestle was like "I said his chest was flat like as a dang screen and a plasma HD, hand him  
 a plate of a sandwich and baked beans he ain't had him a hamburger without yakkin' it back up  
 since 18,"

Heard you was stacking, when he stepped on the scale the actual weight reads no more than  
 140 like a maximum length tweet  
 For Valentine's Day a (masquerade) name means we'll have managers at the man-eaters  
 recapping a rape scene  
 Last week on campus Saturday late evening I was feeling like crashing 'cause I ain't eat  
 Hit up wise guys pizza when I got hammered and blaze trees  
 So when I put wise guy in a box it's exactly the same thing  
 The awkwardness was countless  
 He said nothing but race jokes in Atlanta  
 And wow got everybody in the crowd pissed  
 Doesn't matter 'cause Fran had this f-ggot bodied in three rounds quick  
 It was so painful to see I was just watching it like Auschwitz (awwww-shvitz)  
 So I got some mad racist shit  
 I'll show up on Passover shit on your fam's Seder dish and lamb shank your ribs  
 If I was certain I would've never let this fag take the win  
 If he ain't backing down, he can't jab straight, this cat's paper thin  
 Since December I've had traps laid at cafe berlin  
 I will have phrase, frat haze, and gas chamber him  
 Since he won't eat his ticket I fly back straight to your wag safe or damn castrate your friend and  
 Lock you in the exact same black basement Anne Frank was in  
 Let's go

Wiseguy:

Ay - Yo I'm sorry but excuse me  
 What the f-ck is Excuse-Z  
 Imma tell you what his professor told me  
 It's a set of variables that  
 Represent a geek  
 You one of them kids that ask me to free  
 So I kill it  
 But then you try to rap after me  
 Which is so f-cking awkward it's embarrassing to see  
 So I try to play it off by slowly backing up and peace  
 Every time I see you're stuttering and stumbling on  
 I even went to Stumbleupon  
 Guess whose battles I stumbled upon? - Yours!  
 Of course  
 Come on Steven, even your name is forced  
 And how are you a chosen one? When you never got picked for sports  
 But you did play football! Varch city Jews!  
 But you quit to go battle, yo a\*\*hole,  
 What position you play? Nose tackle?  
 Would a redneck quarterback calling out the plays like Jew 42, set kike!  
 Yo see I can tell a joke and take a joke,

But if you say one word about the holocaust  
 Imma start popping glocks  
 Put you in a tzedakah box  
 And say easy  
 'Cause it's easy to pass you this beating is past due  
 And I bet you think its mad cool that Drake is half Jew - Damn  
 F-ck around no more f-cking - killa  
 You stand up with me and we gonna sit shiva  
 And it'll be a mitzvah  
 Look you don' wanna take it further with me I'm on a murdering spree  
 Ending the life of RJ Burder with no cheese  
 And I got one last suggestion  
 When this battle hits the internet  
 Send Daniel Tosh a twitter mention  
 And beg him for a web redemption

XQZ

Every time I'm watching you shit on GT on the monitor of my PC  
 Those potholes on that long nose u call nostrils are still in 3d - that's coming from me by the way  
 Now I heard last night at the bar some meth head was offering you free drinks 'cause he was  
 tripping and thought you and madness were Mario and Luigi  
 How do you get laid when you have the face voice and odor of a sewer rat?  
 Your crew's way perfect, you nerd virgins named yourself a computer rap  
 I think dudes like that are why girls didn't like going to Jewish frats  
 Thank god for the handsome talent and big cock having kikes that that drew them - splat  
 Battle raps now that's a death wish  
 Snap your neck with any random reference  
 This cat was blessed with the rabid presence of Adam Sandler as an adolescent  
 And that's pathetic but let's switch it to assassin methods  
 Coming to your mansion and tie you in the back of the Mercedes that your daddy rented  
 Children's locks cinder blocks laying on the gas and exit  
 Now your family's Benz is crashing then a glass of Manischewitz  
 That ain't a fine wine - blindside  
 Bye bye to consciousness  
 F-ck a doctor for this pussy's gonna need a wise gynecologist  
 Could your top five lines be bright iron style man  
 Past your prime guy  
 Getting out shined by a guy who ain't been on prime time  
 But the bright side you've been middle tier in there so long it must be a life time accomplishment  
 You are softer than the yarmulkes and talis you put on  
 Your career is like the conflict in the Gaza Strip it's gone a bit too long  
 I might not be quite as dominant as Solomon or console  
 When it comes to Jewish peddlers I'll gotta to win the bronze  
 So listen Hanukah the don



No one believes street talk when it's coming from a clean mouth  
 You're so frail when you beat box you end up with a chest fracture and some teeth loss  
 I hope when you get back to Orlando  
 Walt Disney's Nazi \*ss starts to defrost  
 Watch his ewok get chopped and start bleeding all his weak sauce  
 Your funeral will be the biggest party in my frat house, we will dance the hora and drink shots  
 And it will be open casket so we can use your nose as a ring toss – f\*ggot

Wiseguy:

I must be one hell of a businessman  
 Either that or you're my biggest fan  
 'Cause he put me on a plane, picked me in rental van  
 And I haven't been relevant since prime time began  
 So why we doing promo  
 We should be battling for dough though  
 You got home field you got the most votes  
 We're doing this on nose coast  
 Yo - I've probably overdosed on nose jokes but who's to stop me?  
 That nose is so huge it's proly in the illuminati  
 Yo you was in the movie called circumcise me, but didn't have an inch to waste  
 Soon as the doctor pulled the scissors from his waist  
 He started snipping on that ding up on your face  
 Frat bros - do not pass out at his place  
 'Cause those little Dixie's drawers on you cannot be erased and they're actually traced  
 Yo - That's why he's blanking out when he rapping  
 Y'all even ask him  
 Dog you proly forgot the holocaust even happened  
 And if me and you were alive back then  
 I would remain victorious in inglorious bastard  
 Escaping from the camps fighting off the fascists  
 You would proly be writing diaries of sadness  
 Hiding in the attic, crying like a f\*ggot  
 I bet mommy calls you a mansion, bubby calls you a boychic  
 But they caught you wearing a dress you're not a man you're a boy chick  
 See when this guy was young they try to play got your nose but he'd always run  
 Thought it was kinda dumb  
 Unless you had Andre the giant's thumb  
 Yo your sister was on jeopardy - Yo your parents do not give a f-ck if you want to battle  
 But it must be pitch black though, y'know always living in Lindsay's shadow  
 Yo im gonna end this off on top of the dome, cause I'm Chabad to the bone, it's Friday night  
 sundown, this guy is gone, Shabbat shalom mother f-ckers.