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Irving Berlin: the Immigrant Who Embodied America

God bless America! There's no business like show business! I'm dreaming of a white Christmas! Oh, how I hate to get up in the morning! Chances are that at least one of those phrases immediately brought to mind a particular, iconic tune. Those and many, many others are the creation of Mr. Irving Berlin. Berlin was a songwriter, a performer, and an immigrant, which allowed him to fully embrace the melting pot of America. He subtly pushed the boundaries of conventional popular music through witty and suggestive lyrics and music inspired by a variety of cultures. Irving Berlin came to this country with nothing, but over the course of his prolific songwriting career proved to be the very soul and definition of American music.

Irving Berlin was born Israel Baline in Mohilev, Russia in 1888 (Bergreen 5, 10). In 1893, at the age of five, he, along with his mother, father, and five brothers and sisters, immigrated to the United States of America on the SS Rhynland (Bergreen 3-5). Israel's father, Moses, gave his occupation as a "kosher butcher" when asked at Ellis Island, but in reality was a professional cantor (Bergreen 4, 10). As a cantor, he sang in religious services for Orthodox Jews (Bergreen 10). Moses and his father had both been cantors, and it was expected that Israel, nicknamed Izzy, would do the same (Bergreen 10). Moses taught Izzy to sing in the choir, and he attended Hebrew school in preparation for his bar mitzvah (Sears 10).

Izzy and his family only spoke Yiddish when they arrived in America on September 13th, 1893 (Bergreen 3, 5). In order to survive, he had to learn English. Assimilating was the easiest

way to succeed in America, and those who failed to do so were doomed to poverty and isolation (Bergreen 6). Therefore, learning English became Izzy Baline's first means of personal reinvention (Schiff 109-110). At an early age, he established an understanding of language that did not confine its definition or its use to a set of fixed rules (Schiff 109-110).

In learning English, Izzy had to pay close attention to the way the people around him formed their words and sentences, which gave him a greater understanding of and appreciation for the art of language (Schiff 110). In contrast to his learning English through simple immersion, he was intentionally taught how to read, write, and speak Hebrew (Schiff 110). Hebrew school is taught syllabically, using nonsensical vowel exercises before moving onto actual words: bah, baw, bet, bu, bi, boo (Schiff 110). In this way, students create sounds without attaching them to meaning, which likely contributed to Berlin's innovative use of interlinguistic puns and internal rhymes (Schiff 110). Berlin invented the "ragged" rhyme, which combined fractured English sounds with the syncopation of ragtime (Schiff 110).

Izzy learned Hebrew in school, and English on the streets. He helped his family by hawking the *Evening Journal* on the street (Bergreen 11). His father died when he was 8, and the family struggled more and more without his support (Woolf 85). At age 14, he left home, believing that would be best for his family (Bergreen 14). He spent two years living on the streets, sleeping in ten-cent lodging or on park benches (Bergreen 15). He made a living busking, singing popular songs of the day, and eventually he started writing his own parodies of those songs (Hamm, "Genre, Performance, and Ideology" 147). His songwriting experience began there, among the working class, so he understood early on how to appeal to the blue collar individual (Hamm, "Genre, Performance, and Ideology" 147). Often, this included parodies that

made fun of the privileged classes, a theme he would make use of later in his career (Hamm, "Genre, Performance, and Ideology" 147).

In 1902, Izzy got his first break (Bergreen 17-18). He was cast in the chorus of a musical called *The Show Girl* (Bergreen 17-18). Unfortunately, he was let go when the show moved from out of town tryouts to Birmingham, New York (Bergreen 17-18). However, he was hired shortly thereafter by Harry Von Tilzer, a prolific songwriter of the day, as a boomer: someone who pretended to be a paying customer and encouraged the audience to enjoy the performance more (Bergreen 19).

After his boomer gig, Izzy found employment working with a blind singer referred to as Blind Sol (Bergreen 20-21). Blind Sol needed assistance moving from establishment to establishment, and Izzy served as a guide (Bergreen 20-21). In doing so, Izzy got the opportunity to observe and learn from the pianists that accompanied Blind Sol (Bergreen 20-21).

In 1904, Izzy Baline was hired at the Pelham Cafe, more commonly referred to as "Nigger Mike's" (although Mike was a Russian Jew) (Bergreen 21). He waited tables and performed for $7 a week, staying at work from 8 PM to 6 AM, taking in as much as $7 passing around the hat on an exceptionally good night (Sears 13). He played popular songs, including a lot of George M. Cohan, as well as blues parodies he devised from Irish ballads in Broadway shows (Sears 13; Bergreen 22). He had more success with his more risqué parodies than with his more formal attempts (Bergreen 28). After a year at the cafe, Izzy got his first taste of fame performing for Prince Louis of Battenberg when he visited the establishment (Bergreen 25).

Izzy Baline published his first song, "Marie from Sunny Italy," in 1907, when it was bought for 75 cents by Joseph W. Stern, only 37 of which he actually received because he had written it with a partner (Bergreen 27). While this was a very small sum, even in comparison to

his weekly wages, it represented a turning point in his career. It was especially significant because the name printed on the sheet music was not Izzy Baline, the name of the young Russian Jew immigrant, but I. Berlin: Irving Berlin, a man of esteem with no particular cultural identity, who could represent anyone from anywhere, depending on what suited him and what the market demanded (Bergreen 46).

Not long after, Berlin was fired from the Pelham Cafe for falling asleep behind the bar (Sears 13). He was hired to work in Jimmy Kelly's restaurant on 14th Street in 1908, and worked as an entertainer for about a year (Bergreen 30; Sears 14). That year, he had his first real hit with "She Was a Dear Little Girl" in the show *The Boys and Betty* starring Marie Cahill (Bergreen 31). However, in 1909, it was "Sadie Salome, Go Home" that earned Berlin a job with Waterson & Snyder as a salaried staff lyricist in Tin Pan Alley (Bergreen 25). It was quickly succeeded by "My Wife's Gone to the Country (Hurrah– Hurrah)," and he surpassed himself again with "That Mesmerizing Mendelssohn Tune" (Bergreen 44-46).

Berlin understood how to write songs that appealed to the general public. The easiest way to achieve this was by modeling his work after songs that the public already liked (Hamm, *Irving Berlin* 10). He utilized familiar musical and textual materials to ingratiate his work to the people (Hamm, *Irving Berlin* 10). Berlin said that "the real originality in song writing consists in the construction of the song rather than in the actual melodic base" (Hamm, *Irving Berlin* 10). The definition of "popular" implies the necessity of the content to be acceptable to the community as a whole, and Berlin knew how to toe the line between playing it safe and pushing the envelope (Hamm, *Irving Berlin* 11). In one of his biggest hits ever, "Alexander's Ragtime Band," Berlin's composition was suggestive of ragtime, a riskier musical choice, without actually fully

embracing the style (Bergreen 60). Rather, it was a march, and only used one phrase of actual syncopation (Bergreen 60).

Berlin wrote his early songs from the perspective of a particular protagonist (Hamm, "Genre, Performance, and Ideology" 145). The protaganist was established through the music and lyrics, and then the performance could either emphasize or contradict that identity (Hamm, "Genre, Performance, and Ideology" 145). In his early work, the protaginist is often a member of the privileged class who engages in socially unacceptable behavior, such as "drinking, smoking, gambling, adultery, pre-marital sex and other acts contrary to the dominant public morality of the day" (Hamm, "Genre, Performance, and Ideology" 147). Prior to Berlin, songs about socially unacceptable behavior were discussed in one of two contexts; they were either about privileged people being punished for their actions or about the humor or tragedy of the actions of lower class people (Hamm, "Genre, Performance, and Ideology" 147). Berlin introduced humorous songs about the misactions of the privileged class (Hamm, "Genre, Performance, and Ideology" 147-148).

His somewhat subtly risque content did not go unnoticed. 'Morally upright' Americans criticized him in both religious and political contexts, and went so far as to have his more suggestive material banned in Boston (Hamm, "Genre, Performance, and Ideology" 148). Yet there were some who felt his songs didn't go far enough, and complained that Berlin kept things just a little too safe (Schiff 112). He knew how to say squarely in the middle, appealing to the widest public possible.

Berlin's suggestive, comedic content occasionally included references to classical literature; interestingly, this was done only in songs with a low class, ethnic protagonist (Hamm, "Genre, Performance, and Ideology" 146). This trope appealed to the working class, who

recognized a mockery of the elite class through parody by a protagonist who didn't really know what they were talking about (Hamm, "Genre, Performance, and Ideology" 146). "That Mesmerizing Mendelssohn" is one of these songs, as it uses a black protagonist to appropriate the classical Mendelssohn song "Spring Song" (Hamm, "Genre, Performance, and Ideology" 146).

Irving Berlin's work is deeply entangled with appropriations of different cultures, African American culture in particular. Like the use of march in place of ragtime in "Alexander's Ragtime Band," Berlin adapted African American musical styles in popular music to show the influence of the culture without fully embracing it, making it more accessible to a wider public (Magee 130). Songs with African American protagonists were instantly recognized as "coon songs," and the audience could easily determine the intended race of the protagonist by analyzing the name, the dialect, the prescence or absence of syncopated rhythms (that were typically associated with African Americans), and finally the performance (Hamm, "Genre, Performance, and Ideology" 145). Berlin's 1912 tune "When the Midnight Choo Choo Leaves for Alabama" reads as a stereotypical coon soong, with a black protagonist longing to return to his home in the south, where they 'belonged' (Hamm, "Genre, Performance, and Ideology" 146). However, the song is just generic enough that, performed correctly, it can take on a much more innocent meaning; Fred Astaire and Judy Garland performed it together in the 1948 film *Easter Parade* (Hamm, "Genre, Performance, and Ideology" 146). Berlin's work includes protagonists of many ethnicities and makes use of many stereotypes. "Jews are all named Mose and Sadie and think only about money. Italians talk-a like dis. Blacks strut their stuff and roll their eyes, singing of dear ol' Dixie" (Schiff 109). However, with minor alterations to the performance, those songs can be completely generic, and many are still performed today (Schiff 109).

His use of stereotypes should not be misconstrued as an indication of personal bias or racism. Berlin's songs rarely, if ever, had anything to do with his personal convinctions or feelings; rather, they reflected the expectation of the market at the time (Bergreen 55). Berlin spoke candidly about his songwriting process as one that did not draw inspiration from his life or thoughts, but as a shrewd business decision making process based on what kind of songs he determined were in demand and what there was a scarcity of (Woolf 85). Berlin recognized the emotional power of his music, but acted as a PR man, even in his songwriting: "Alexander's Ragtime Band" can easily be seen as an advertisement for itself, using lines such as "come on and hear" (Schiff 112; Woolf 80).

Berlin understood what the American public wanted, and catered to their demands unapologtically. In 1942, he premiered his show *This Is The Army*, an all-soldier revue in support of the military efforts of World War II (Schmeling 30). The show was hailed as an overwhelming success, artistically and commercially (Schmeling 30). It played to standing room three times a day for 113 performances, toured for five months, became the highest grossing film of 1943, earned Berlin the 1942-43 Best Play award from the New York Drama Critics Circle, and raised over $9,000,000 for the Army Emergency Relief Fund (Schmeling 30). The show was successful largely in part because it was not only good entertainment, but was good for the country in a time where the public felt its essence– democracy– and traditions were being threatened as never before (Schmeling 35-41). It was praised for its distinction as a truly American work, one that focused on pride in the identity of the country and on positive views of the American military rather than demonizing the enemy (Schmeling 36). Berlin was the only composer to write shows in support of the military during both world wars, much less perform alongside the army men (Sears 4).

Berlin was an army man himself, although there have been conflicting reports about exactly how he came to be one in the first place. Kaskowitz asserted the notion that "it was a desire to serve his adopted country during World War 1 that impelled the 30-year-old Berlin, already a successful songwriter, to be naturalized as a citizen in February 1918" (Kaskowitz). This was certainly the branding that was advertised to the American public. However, the more commonly accepted version of the tale among historians is that Berlin became a citizen in February 1918 and was drafted a few short months later (Magee 69). He was stationed at Camp Upton in Yaphank, Long Island, but didn't do well with the army routine, the early morning reveilles in particular (Magee 69). It inspired him to write "Oh! How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning" (Magee 69). He turned his situation into an opportunity and convinced his commanding officers to let him serve the military by writing a Broadway musical for and by army men (Magee 69). He was promoted to sargeant and created the musical *Yip Yip Yaphank*, featuring "Oh! How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning" (Magee 69).

"God Bless America" was created to be the finale of *Yip Yip Yaphank*, but it was deemed too somber to end the show (Coleman). Instead, it laid dormant until 1938, when singer Kate Smith needed a patriotic song to sing for Armistice Day (now Veteran's Day) and commissioned Irving Berlin to provide it for her (Coleman). It became one of his most successful songs of all time, and certainly one of the most enduring, although it has had a tumultuous history.

In the 1940s, "God Bless America" was sung by anti-Communist protesters, striking laborers, and civil rights activists (Kaskowitz). It was sung by African-American children at school segregation protests (Kaskowitz). In 1963, it was sung by participants in Martin Luther King Jr.'s march on Detroit (Kaskowitz). It then became a kind of right-wing, white supremacist

anthem until the events of September 11th, 2001, when it was reclaimed as a song to unify the nation (Kaskowitz).

While the song's initial reception was positive overall, it inspired xenophobic and anti-Semitic comments aimed at Berlin, "a Jew who dared to ask God to bless America" (Kaskowitz). In 1940, the Ku Klux Klan and the pro-Nazi German American Bund staged a joint rally calling for a boycott of the song based on Berlin's identity as a Jew and an immigrant (Kaskowitz). A week after that, the Bund published an article mockingly entitled "G-A-W-D Bless A-M-E-R-I-K-E-R!" that described the original song as a reflection of "attitude of the refugee horde" (Kaskowitz). Even the left was not innocent of undue criticism. Woody Guthrie intially published "This Land is Your Land" as an angry protest against the complacency he saw in Berlin's lyrics; the song was initially entitled "God Blessed America For Me," and the lyrics were later changed (Kaskowitz).

Even as the song has returned to its purpose as a unifying anthem, it retains its xenophobic edge. After a performance by Marc Anthony at the 2013 Major League Baseball All-Star Game, he received hateful comments based on his perceived foreignness (despite being born in the US) claiming that he had no right to the sentiment of the tune (Kaskowitz). However, on the whole, the song is regarded as an inclusive anthem of patriotism.

Berlin purported that "God Bless America" was a success because of its universal appeal (Woolf 80). Many believed he had a different kind of appreciation of and love for his country because of his identity as an immigrant. Sears claimed that "no twentieth-century popular songwriter wore his patriotism so openly and proudly" (Sears 3). Berlin was not shy about his love for the US, once saying "America has been good to me. I'm very proud and grateful to live in a country where it's possible to do what you like to do" (Sears 15). His daughter, Mary Ellin

Barrett, later wrote that "it was the land he loved. It was his home sweet home. He, the immigrant who had made good, was saying thank you" (Kaskowitz).

Irving Berlin certainly gave back to the country that he loved through the ways he altered American music and history. Music helps us understand the evolution of our national history, especially in regards to songs like "God Bless America" (Schiff 109). He himself spoke of the idea that "popular songs of a country give a true picture of its history" (Woolf 80).

Berlin introduced new concepts in both language and music. He invented the "ragged rhyme," which combined fractured English sounds with the syncopation of ragtime, and his fusion of Yiddish rap and African American ragtime led to the emergence of a new kind of national song literature (Schiff 110). Although "Alexander's Ragtime Band" was not truly ragtime, and was written after the height of its popularity, it transformed the genre into a definition of American identity (Schiff 110).

In more tangible terms, Irving Berlin was responsible for the first and only completely integrated unit in the military in World War II (Schmeling 38-39). As a soldier in World War I, he had seen how the military broke down ethnic barriers, and he provided a more fully realized version of that opportunity through the unit he requested for *This Is the Army* (Schmeling 38-39).

In 1940, Berlin established the God Bless America Fund (Coleman). The fund donates royalties from "God Bless America," as well as several other Berlin songs, to the Girl Scouts' and Boy Scouts' Greater New York councils (Coleman). Each council has received over $2.5 million since 2001 (Coleman). Those who help run the councils emphasize the importance of these donations to help children join the organization who would not otherwise be able to: immigrants, first generation children, and those living in poverty (Coleman).

To some extent, Berlin's time as an immigrant in the United States mirrored the present day. When the National Origins Act of 1924 severely limited immigration, Berlin wrote an unusually serious comic song for Fanny Brice entitled "Don't Send Me Back to Petrograd," in which a Russian immigrant pleads to remain "in the land of the free" (Magee 142). It is difficult to imagine what America would be like had Berlin and his family tried to immigrate here in the present time, when laws are even more stringent. Had they applied for asylum, it is entirely within reason to assume they never would have been allowed to move to and live in the United States together, and America would have lost a vital piece of its development and history. America is what it is today due in part to the extraordinary career of an immigrant. Were he not an immigrant, he would not have the mastery of language he posessed, the ability to appreciate and harness the beauty of the melting pot in his music, and his appreciation and love for his adopted home.

Berlin said he first heard the phrase "God Bless America" from his mother, who frequently spoke the words with what he described as "exaltation," even in the hardest of times (Kaskowitz). My babci– my great grandmother– immigrated to the United States in 1939, one year after Berlin released "God Bless America." My final memory of her is of her singing that song, almost in tears at the emotion it was able to stir in her even 72 years later. America was built on immigrants, and Irving Berlin gave them a voice. He was a shining example of what is possible when we value different cultures, new ideas, and the spirit of the American Dream. Jerome Kern was correct when he declared that "Irving Berlin has no place in American music. He is American music."

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