

## Book Review

James Kaplan, *Irving Berlin: New York Genius*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019.

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If you want a bog-standard show-biz biography of Irving Berlin – chattily written, without enthusiasm for challenging any of the myths, giving its hero the benefit of the doubt in awkward situations (of which there are many), not showing much in the way of original research, and full of phrases (such as “in all likelihood”, “perhaps he would have noted” and others) that give rise to authorial rambling and invention – this is maybe the book for you.

Berlin died in 1989 at the age of 101. A ‘biography’ of sorts by his friend Alexander Woolcott, a version effectively authorized by Berlin himself, had appeared during his earliest phase of fame in 1925, but Berlin steadfastly refused to cooperate with others who wished to write about him (except for interviews on his own terms), and, obsessed with copyrights, refused permissions to third parties even to cite a few words from his lyrics. As a result, the schmaltzy legends planted via Woolcott and Berlin came to be accepted as facts: that his father was a *chazan*, that Berlin’s earliest memory was of the family house burning down in a pogrom, the exciting adventures of the boy Berlin in the New York streets and docks, his early encounter of a Christmas tree at the dwelling of the Irish O’Hara family; and not a few of these have seeped through to Kaplan’s account, or have even been expanded by him. The father, whose only verified occupations are known to be butcher and painter, is here shown as “during the High Holy Days, leading a choir in a Lower East Side Temple. Oh, and he took along his youngest son who could also sing a little” (4). No source or reference is given for any of this, any more than for Kaplan’s speculation about the photograph of Berlin allegedly aged 13, of which no copy is shown or location given, but which nevertheless opens the first chapter (absence of citation for some statements regrettably continues throughout the book. The photo can be found online, but without any explanation of source or dating).

With the exception of a brave account of Berlin and ragtime in the early years by Ian Whitcomb (1987), still one of the most musically literate surveys, and a journalistic rehash of the legends by Michael Freedland (1974) the songwriter’s major biographies had to wait for his death. Laurence Bergreen’s weighty (indeed ponderous) *As Thousands Cheer* (1990), researched in detail and on the back of many frank interviews with Berlin’s associates, was first off the block. The understandably more indulgent, but compellingly written memoir by Berlin’s daughter Mary Ellin Barrett followed in 1994. Kaplan offers little if anything of substance to add to these in biographical detail.

All of these writers, and virtually all of those between Barrett and Kaplan, have taken as a given Berlin’s permanent place in the pantheon of American song, if not song in general. It’s now 30 years since Berlin’s death, and 70 years since his last significant songs were

written. I (like Kaplan and Bergreen) am 70 years old and grew up with Berlin's songs on the radio. But a little research on my own part, asking friends and acquaintances around the world (120 responses) which of Berlin's melodies they knew from a dozen titles, showed a sharply diminishing recognition the younger the respondent. The only song that scored 100% was, inevitably, "White Christmas" – and, more significantly, it was the only melody identified at all by Generation Z, that of my grandchildren.

This is an issue which Kaplan does not investigate, and indeed blandly sidesteps, in his enthusiasm for his subject. At his outset, three pages of his preface are given to an exordium of the words and performance of one of Berlin's more mediocre works, "Oh, how that German Could Love" in Berlin's own 1909 recording (xiii-xv). The performance, which Kaplan finds "thrilling", is certainly competent for its sort of standard ethnic comedy number, and Berlin's reedy voice is recognizable thanks to his later successes. The words, which to Kaplan are "freshness incarnate: conversational, superbly visual, borderline bawdy", are frankly no more so than in dozens of songs by Berlin's contemporaries, and are in fact notable for an ongoing weakness of Berlin throughout his career, the substitution of rhyme or assonance for clarity or intelligibility – "She called me her honey, her angel, her money", "She spoke like a speaker, and oh what a speech, like no other speaker could speak". This latter phrase Kaplan singles out as "modernism on the hoof: startlingly formal innovation smuggled into a seemingly banal idiom" (xv). What the twenty-one-year-old Berlin would have said to all this may give rise to amusing reflection.

A better starting point might have been the 1913 "Abie Sings an Irish Song". For a start, it represents two of the four genres (Jewish, Irish, Italian, and 'coon', the demeaning white take on assumed black music tastes) on which all of Berlin's early works centred. More importantly, however, it summarizes the strategy which would take Berlin to the top. Abie runs a clothing store; failing to attract customers, he buys a sheaf of Irish songs and –

When an Irishman looks in the window  
 Abie sings an Irish song  
 When a suit of clothes he sells  
 He turns around and yells  
 "By Killarney's lakes and dells"  
 Any time an Irishman comes in to pick a bone  
 If he looks at Abie and hollers in an angry tone  
 "I would like to wrestle with a Levi or a Cohn"  
 Abie sings an Irish song.

This is an astonishingly accurate self-portrait, as Berlin himself might have acknowledged. And it goes I think to the heart of what became Berlin's true genius and of what was Jewish – or at least 'Jew-ish' – about Berlin's life and achievements.

Berlin transcended Abie by realizing that the future was not in these ethnic ditties but in the production of inclusively American songs – songs whose appeal could extend across the many components of American society. As scholars including Charles Hamm have noted, his first huge hit "Alexander's Rag-Time Band" (1911) broke the mould – the "exhortation to anyone and everyone to come and listen to a band has no precedent" (Hamm 1996, 66); in

Berlin's own words to a journalist 75 years later, the opening words were an invitation to come, join in, and listen. And although, despite its jaunty rhythm, it owes little to rag-time, it allies itself not with the European styles of first-generation immigrants, but with a home-grown style that the next generations can claim as their own. Abie gained just Irish clients - Izzie Berlin was selling to America as a whole, regardless of origin or religion. Indeed, such was its success that it became itself the locus classicus of rag-time style in conventional wisdom, superseding the "true" rag-time of Scott Joplin and his ilk.

As Robert Greenberg has pointed out, Berlin's works "don't generally exhibit the slick, jazz-inspired veneer of Gershwin's and Rodgers (and Hart's) songs; or the sophisticated, urban shtick of Porter's and Kern's songs; or the compositional virtuosity of any of the above" (Greenberg 2020). I would add that neither do any of them tap any deep interpersonal passion or emotion. "I" may be dreaming, "you" may have a nice bonnet, God may bless America, but individuals generally walk placidly down the middle of avenue of human experience within the limits sanctified by mid-twentieth century middle USA. Philip Roth, in his *Operation Shylock*, points out how Berlin completely neutralized both his own cultural background and that of the society he was selling to: "The two holidays that celebrate the divinity of Christ – and what does Irving Berlin brilliantly do? He de-Christ them both!... Easter turns into a fashion show and Christmas into a holiday about snow" (Roth 1994, 157).

What meets people's expectations without risking their sympathy has a good chance of selling well. With the rise in America of the consuming classes, film, and the radio, middlemen in music with a passion for selling like Berlin could also prosper.

Berlin's two great marketing coups in organizing army shows in the two world wars are striking testimonies to his skill in this arena. And today we interpret these according to our contemporary prejudices; Berlin scores points from his biographers for having insisted that black soldiers were included in the teams for second of these shows, but some are more reluctant to point out that these were segregated throughout their secondment, and also during performances. Kaplan rightly points out the argument between Berlin and his director Ezra Stone which led to a blackface number being reluctantly dropped from the stage show (206); he does not mention that this number was restored to the 1943 film of the show (and today of course that number is normally cut when the film is shown), or discuss the row between Stone and Berlin about the show's rewritten finale, and its aggressive (almost sadistic) lyrics.

Kaplan also seeks to gloss over the way in which Berlin got Stone fired from the show on the ground that there were already too many Jews involved in it. We are told that the Jewish moguls of Hollywood promoted a 'white-picket-fence' for their fear of White Christian America (216), but that hardly excuses Berlin – who incidentally showed no sign of identifying with Jewish causes at any point in his career.

In fact, in exactly what ways was Berlin 'Jewish' (apart from accident of birth)? The Jewish Lives series at Yale University Press, of which Kaplan's book is part, is conceived as a set of "individual volumes [which] illuminate the imprint of Jewish figures upon [inter alia] ... cultural and economic life and the arts and sciences ... deeply informed books that explore the range and depth of the Jewish experience...." Kaplan, no more than others of Berlin's

biographers, does not give us much of a feel for Berlin as a “Jewish figure”. The religion clearly meant little or nothing to him; we have no evidence that he ever in his life even stepped inside a synagogue. He married a Catholic and brought up his children in a blandly Christian tradition. A clear hint is that virtually all his close business associates and friends, throughout his career, were also ethnic (if not religious) Jews. A book in such a series might be reasonably expected to enlarge on or discuss this - Kaplan avoids the challenge, which still awaits proper exploration.

## References

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