Bagels, Bongos, and Yiddishe Mambos, or The Other History of Jews in America

Josh Kun
University of California at Riverside

"Bagels, Bongos, and Yiddishe Mambos" focuses on Jewish-Latin recordings of the 40s–60s. Arguing that standard models of understanding Jews and race are inadequate in thinking about the mid-century Jewish-Latin interchange, this essay suggests that Jews were drawn to Latin music neither to demonstrate their whiteness, nor to pretend to be Latin, but rather to find new ways of being Jewish.

Make your ear like a funnel . . .
-Rabbi Yohanan, Babylonian Talmud

Abre cuto guiri mambo
-Arsenio Rodriguez, from the Congo saying "open your ear and listen to what I'm going to tell you"

Intro: Sha Sha, Cha Cha Cha

In his 1958 collection *Only in America*, South Carolina writer and humorist Harry Golden summed up "The History of the Jews in America" in 8 brief lines:

Shofar ♦ An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies
I remember a folk song on the East Side, "Sha sha der Rebbe gayt" ("Quiet, quiet, the rabbi is coming")

Sha sha der rebbe gayt
Sha sha der rebbe gayt

And sometime ago I watched the folks dance the "cha cha" in a Jewish country club in a Southern city and I heard them keeping time with the music, "Cha cha, do-se-do, cha cha."

The history of the Jews in America: "from Sha sha to Cha cha."1

For Golden, the history of American Jews is a history of change and transformation registered in sound, from a Yiddish folk song on New York's Lower East Side to an Afro-Cuban cha cha cha in a country club in the South. It is a history measured by the distance between two ears, one from the Babylonian Talmud, the other from Africa via Cuba and Puerto Rico. This musical story contains other stories—how greenhorn immigrants become upwardly mobile socialites, how Jews move out of immigrant urban ghettos, how secular Jewishness competes with religion (trading rabbi for bandleader) as the dominant register of American Jewish life, how Jewish-American culture is a document of adaptability, shape-shifting, and performative hybridity.

And all because of a cha cha cha.

While Golden published his anecdotal riff on revisionist history under the influence of the Latin Craze of the 1950s—when it was hard for anyone, Jews or otherwise—to not re-think the world in mambo time, his observation does indeed hold larger possibilities for charting alternative genealogies of Jewish-American history. The relationship Golden poses between Jewish culture and Latino/a culture (albeit with a do-se-do in between), and the import he places on that relationship as a window into larger histories, is a rarity when it comes to studies of Jewish inter-culturalism. I want to take Golden's humorous footnote seriously and use it as a way into a more expansive discussion of Jewish-Latino/a musical interchange in the U.S., one that could extend from legacies of Sephardic Ladino music up through New York-Puerto Rican percussionist Joe Quijano's Fiddler on the Roof Goes Latin and New York-Jewish pianist Larry "El Judío Maravilloso" Harlow (the marvelous Jew) selling out the Monte Casino in Bayamon, Puerto Rico.2

---


2See for example the Anthony Coleman Trio's 1995 recording Sephardic Tinge (Tzadik) and Orchestra Harlow's El Exigente (Fania).
If we believe Golden that the history of the Jews in America is not assimilation into whiteness through nose jobs and name changes or assimilation into whiteness through engagements with African-American culture and politics, but is actually the move from Sha Sha to Cha Cha, then how might our understanding of American Jews change? What new modes of Jewish cultural performance might we be left with? I am interested in how Golden's brief historical revision might provide a window into Susannah Heschel's urging of a critical Jewish multiculturalism and her notion of developing Jewish Studies as a "counterhistory." Musical interactions between Latinos/as and Jews, not to mention the musical cultures of Latino/a Jews themselves, offer a vital, underexamined U.S. chapter in Heschel's vision of "a multivocal Jewish history that includes the geographic, gender, and class distribution of Jewish experience." 

More specifically, I am interested in using Golden's formulation to focus on the question of race as it pertains to Jewish-American identity. In recent years, the racial identity, or lack thereof, of the American Jew has become a central line of inquiry in Jewish cultural studies. Scholars such as Sander Gilman, Ann Pellegrini, and Matthew Frye Jacobson have all tracked the racialization and alienization of the Jew in both Europe and the U.S. through sexualized, antisemitic conflagrations of race and gender, with Pellegrini making the crucial intervention that in some periods "Jewishness — more precisely the Jewishness of Jewish men — became as much a category of gender as of race." 

Karen Brodkin and David Biale have amplified these considerations by focusing on the importance of the post World War II period in the U.S. when Jews went from being threatening to being fully assimilation-ready white ethnics. In sum, whether it be 19th century Europe or late


20th century America, it is the whiteness of the Jew that is always in question. For Jews, whiteness was (and I would argue, still is) never a given; it is always a status to be granted or denied, but never a status that could be inherently, rightfully, owned.6

What most recent scholars of Jewish identity seem to agree on, then, is that the race of the Jew—be it the Jew's whiteness or the Jew's otherness—is characterized by what Daniel Itzkovitz has described as its "definitional instability." On the one hand, there is the racial Jew of Henry Ford (the unhygienic mongrel whose biological filth can even ruin baseball) and the Jew of the 1924 Immigration Act (the unhygienic mongrel who ruins America), and on the other more contemporary hand, there is the ethnic Jew of the television series The O.C. (the bagel-shmearing Cohens whose cultural difference does not interfere with power, wealth, and social acceptance) and the film Meet The Fockers (the Yiddish-shpritzing duo off Hoffman and Streisand whose cultural difference just makes them cute, kooky, and harmless). "The important point," Itzkovitz argues, "seems to be that the Jew, by virtue of the unconventional Jewish relation to race, nation, and culture, occupies a position of fundamental instability that could be mobilized to various, and particular, effects."7

Beyond Blacks and Jews

This unstable position has never been a lonely one for American Jews. In the drama of American race, Jews are nearly always joined by African-American co-stars. The questionable racial status of "Jew" is nearly always configured in relation to the never-in-question racial status of "black." European and American antisemitism has reinforced this coupling by making the Jewish connection to blackness the defiled base of the Jew's racialization. As Pellegrini has pointed out with regard to 19th-century antisemitism, "Jewish difference was charted across a geography of race. 'Black' Africa was one region to which the 'racial' difference of the Jew was frequently traced back. The putative blackness of the Jew was a sign of racial mixing and so, racial degeneration."8 In 20th century America, when Jewishness is discussed in terms of race and ethnicity, it is likewise blackness that is most frequently invoked as either a complementary force or an oppositional foil, which has helped guarantee "black-Jewish

---

6The most extreme piece of recent evidence of this is Mel Gibson's 2004 film The Passion of the Christ, which seems intent on reminding us of the Jew's racial otherness.
8Pellegrini, "Whiteface Performance," in Jews and Other Differences, p. 111.
relations" as the primary register through which discussions of Jewish ethnoro-

cial identity are most commonly filtered.

Jewish liberalism and political progressivism are typically defined by Jew-

ish involvement (or lack thereof) with African-American social and political

justice, such as Jewish opposition of racial discrimination and Jewish involve-

ment in the NAACP and the black civil rights movement.9

The relationship also dominates studies of race and ethnicity in Jewish-

American popular culture. Be it the complexities of Al Jolson's blackface, the

cross-identifications of Mezz Mezzrow's jazz, the Jewishness of Mailer's white

negro, or the Beastie Boys' hip hop, the black-Jewish musical coupling is so

familiar and expected as to be nearly overdetermined. "Some kind of special

relationship has linked African Americans and Jews," Jeffrey Melnick has re-

cently written in his expansive study of blacks and Jews in American popular

music, "which implies a type of Jewish exceptionalism to African-Americans." In

arguing that race, class, and gender complexities get buried beneath the

reductions of "Black-Jewish relations," Melnick focuses on "how Jewish musi-

cians, with fluctuating levels of confidence, learn to use their access as Jews to

African Americans and Black music as evidence of their racial health—that is,

their whiteness."10

Let be me clear: I am not taking issue with this continual return to black-

Jewish critical inquiry. On the contrary, the social alliances and conflicts be-

tween the two groups has, without a doubt, been a primary force in the forma-

tion of 20th-century American culture and the advancement of social justice.

Yet, I do want to take issue with the fact that this continual return to the

black-Jewish coupling—for all of its historical import and political urgency—

perpetuates the mythical black-white dyad of American life. By allowing our

vision to be limited by the previous directives of the antisemitic imagination

and only seeing "black" when we seek to understand Jewish racial identity, we

reinforce the idea that the American racial order is only about the hierarchica

---

9See, as just three examples among many, Hasia Diner, In the Almost Promised Land:
American Jews and Blacks 1915–1935 (Westport: Greenwood, 1977); Paul Berman ed.,
Blacks and Jews: Alliances and Arguments (New York: Delacorte, 1994); and Murray
Friedman, What Went Wrong?: The Creation and Collapse of the Black-Jewish Alliance (New
York: Free Press, 1993). African-Americans are also central, if not foundational, characters
in Marc Dollinger's important history of Jewish liberalism, Quest for Inclusion: Jews and

10Jeffrey Melnick, A Right To Sing The Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American
interplay between black and white. Indeed, the Jew’s shifting and often ambivalent relationship to race begs to be considered alongside other minoritized groups who experience similarly shifting and ambivalent racial relationships.

Golden’s invocation of the quiet of the Jewish Sha Sha becoming the music of the Latino Cha Cha suggests at least one place to start: the relationship between Latinos and American Jews. Indeed, in the introduction to their anthology *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel already allude to the ethno-racial ambivalences shared by the two groups. They write,

One might argue that the Americanization of immigrants has involved a historical process of enlarging the definition of “whiteness” to include groups like the Jews who were initially considered “non-white.” Yet a contrary process has been obtained for Hispanics, who, despite their European origins, came increasingly to be considered “colored.” The shifting meaning of these terms suggests how historically constructed they are in American culture and how central racial categories have been in creating the fault lines of American society.11

George Sanchez has also explored these very contradictions in relationship to the East Los Angeles neighborhood of Boyle Heights, which for much of the early part of the 20th century was known for its mixed majority Mexican-Jewish population (along with considerable Japanese-Americans as well). The de-racializing of Jews after World War II led to a change in what Sanchez calls the city’s “geography of difference,” which in keeping with the national tendency, no longer included Jews as part of the city’s non-White population. Mexicans, on the other hand, were racialized further and continued to be subject to civic discrimination and unequal economic practices. Sanchez is most interested in those Jews who decided not to leave Boyle Heights after the war and the Jews who decided to move there, both in defiance of the city’s social engineering of racial segregation. “Fighting the literal geographic movement of Jews into white America,” he writes, “they collaborated with leaders from the growing Mexican American population and from smaller ethnic communities on the Eastside to leave a legacy of political interracialism, commitment to civil rights, and a radical multiculturalism in Boyle Heights, despite the growing conservative climate of the 1950s.”12

---

11Biale, Galinsky, Heschel, *Insider/Outsider*, p. 2

Like Sanchez, I am interested in what the relationship between Jews and Latinos reveals about both the uneven construction and deployment of racial difference, as well as the possibilities that exist for coalitional affiliation and inter-cultural alliance where both Jews and Latinos/as actively work—through culture, through politics—to transcend and ultimately re-imagine their racial designations. So in this spirit, let us return to Golden's 1958 revelation that the Jewish Sha Sha had become the Latino Cha Cha and as a result, a new way of doing Jewish history had arrived. Golden's statement came at the tail end of the mambo craze of the 1950s, a period that beyond signaling the mass popularity of Afro-Cuban mambo (and other styles such as rumba and cha cha cha) was also marked by mass participation of American Jews. The 50s mambo explosion had grown out of the wake of the rumba craze of the 1930s which was initially sparked by the release of Don Justo Azpiazu and his Havana Casino Orchestra's peanut vendor ode, "El Manisero." As early as 1932, George Gershwin—who is typically cited as a pioneering architect of black-Jewish musical exchange—spent three weeks in Havana and came back with his rumba-riffing Cuban Overture.\textsuperscript{13}

From the 30s on, numerous Jewish musicians recorded tributes to the Jewish love of Latino music (from Ruth Wallis' "It's A Scream How Levine Does the Mambo" on her Rumba Party album to the Barton Brothers' "Mambo Moish" and The Irving Fields Trio's Bagels and Bongos), many radio DJs actively involved in the dissemination of mambo and the promotion of Latino musicians to Latino and non-Latino audiences alike were Jewish (Symphony Sid, Dick "Ricardo" Sugar, Art "Pancho" Raymond), and more than a few Jewish musicians managed to become mainstays of the scene (Alfredo "Mendez" Mendelsohn in the thirties, Al "Alfredito" Levy in the fifties, Larry "El judío Maravilloso" Harlow in the sixties). When Jewish entrepreneur Maxwell Hyman's famed ballroom and "Home of the Mambo" The Palladium adopted its "all-Latin" policy in 1949, Jewish fans of Latino/a music—soon re-named in Yiddish as "mamboniks"—had a place to go to listen and dance (especially on

\textsuperscript{13}For detailed histories of these periods, see John Storm Roberts' indispensable The Latin Tinge: The Impact of Latin American Music on the United States (Tivoli, NY: Original Music, 1985).
Wednesday nights when “Killer Joe” Piro gave dance lessons to Jews and Italians).\(^{14}\)

Because of the close proximity of Jews and Latino/as in places like East Harlem, local Jewish businessmen for whom Latin music was a daily soundtrack became some of the first to capitalize on its growing popularity and some of the key players in promoting and supporting the careers of Latin musicians. One of the earliest to get involved was Sidney Siegel, whose Casa Siegel general store in East Harlem was soon parlayed into Seeco Records, a label he dedicated to “the finest in Latin-American recordings.” Seeco built consumer bases in both New York and in Cuba and Puerto Rico (at times even boasting 75% of their sales on the islands), and in 1954 they released the first Latin recording ever on a 12-inch LP. The 40s and 50s also saw the birth of two other crucial early Latin labels, Alegre Records and Tico Records. Al Santiago, owner of Manhattan’s CASALEGRE record store founded Alegre Records in 1955 with the financial support of Jewish businessman Ben Perlman (the owner of the store next to Santiago’s, Grossman’s Clothes). Tico was the joint venture of Art Raymond, the Latin radio star, and George Goldner, the ragman turned music man with a Puerto Rican wife. Their first major hit, Tito Puente’s “Albaniquito,” featured the legendary likes of Maria Bauza, Mongo Santamaria, and Vicentico Valdes.

The Jewish-Latin craze’s most sacred laboratories, however, were in upstate New York, in the Jewish resort hotels of the Catskills mountains. The Catskills were, as one guest typically recalls, “a Mecca for Latin music.”\(^{15}\) Leading Latino musicians like Alberto Socarras and Jose Curbelo played Grossinger’s as early as 1944. Cuban Latin jazz pioneers Mario Bauza and Machito had both played The Concord, another popular Catskills hotel, by 1947. Machito released his own testament to Latino-Jewish vacation intermingling on Kiamset Lake, Vacation at the Concord, which came complete with photos of Concord golf pro Jimmy Demaret and swimming director Buster Crabbs and Machito’s own resort specific mambo, “Mambo la Concorde” (written with Bauza and Rene Hernandez). Indeed, Latino/a musicians were prominent fixtures on the Catskills so-called Borscht Belt touring circuit, so much so

---


that they were thought of as part of the Catskills scene, honorary Jews without whom the Catskills would not have been the Catskills. So when La Playa Sextette recorded their *Discotheque Latino* album for Seeco Records—"a compact library of only Latin-American dance tempos"—it only made sense to include "The Catskill Cha-Cha" next to "Brazil" and "La Cumparsita."

Puerto Rican pianist and bandleader Johnny Conquet took the Latin-Jewish Catskills the farthest, however, with 1958's *Raisins and Almonds Cha Cha Cha and Merengues*. Unlike the Machito album, which was a recording of live resort performances dominated by Latin standards of the day, Conquet's album was a studio recording marketed as a live Catskills show in the "Cha Cha Chateau" of the make-believe "Merengue Manor" resort. The album's liner notes were printed as a Catskills hotel newsletter (in the style of Grossinger's daily "tattler") called the "Nosherei News". The word "Jewish" is never actually used anywhere on the album, but it is clear that Conquet and RCA were hoping to appeal to Jewish and Latino/a audiences at once. On the one hand, Conquet performs a mostly Jewish-based musical repertoire—"Freilach Merengue," "Sher Cha Cha," "Matzoh Ball Merengue," and merengue version of "Roumania, Roumania"—that announces his Latinization of Yiddish songs and klezmer rhythms that would be instantly familiar to Jewish listeners.

On the other hand, Conquet also provides a glossary for those "who want to be with it when you land in cha cha territory" ("cha cha territory" being the Catskills, Conquet winks, as much as The Palladium) that translates the album's Yiddish phrases into English. The liner notes are likewise addressed to non-Catskills audiences who might wonder why Jewish folk songs would ever be re-imagined as Latin dance tunes:

> From the snow-capped heads at Miami Beach to the sun-tanned backs at the Catskills, people are dancing and the cha cha is king. . . . So there's no surprise in hearing these wonderful folk songs and dances turned into mambo, merengue, and cha cha. A dardel by any other name dances just as good. Even a white-haired bubba with twinkling eyes will take a swirl at a familiar freilach dressed up in a Latin beat. And in this day and age, even a kurtsatzki becomes a mambo in the right hands.  

Conquet's "Cha Cha Chateau" was a reference to the Latin dance parties regularly held at most Catskill hotels in the fifties. Most had their own version of "Mambo Night," complete with their own mambo dance instructors and

---


*Shofar* ♦ An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies
resident mambo dance teams. "The mid 50s into the 60s, that was the best time. It was mambo time," veteran Catskills comic Mal Lawrence remembers, "People got all dressed up. Women wore elegant dresses, beautiful gowns; men wore suits and ties. A lot of the male performers, and guests too, wore the Machito shirts: big blousy things, with white cuffs sticking out of the suit jacket."17

As some of these examples suggest, exchanges between Jews and Latino/as were not uni-directional. Jews may have been fans of Latin music, played in Latin bands, and helped promote and sell Latin music, but Latino/as were quick to answer back. Pupi Campo covered the Barton Brothers’ Yiddish radio goof “Joe & Paul” in 1948 and then recorded “Mambonick,” a tribute to mambo-identified Jews everywhere (mambonik being Yiddish for a mambo fan). Joe Quijano, the Puerto Rican percussionist who once boasted, "Yo soy el son cubano" (I am the Cuban son), did Fiddler on the Roof Goes Latin. Eddie Cano recorded "Hava Nagilah Pachanga," Machito chimed in with "Israeli Sha Sha," Perez Prado made the twist go mambo and Jewish with "The Twist of Hava Nageelah," and Al Gomez & His Orchestra did a straight-up Yiddish rumba "Shen Vi Di L’Vone." As late as 1973, Sabu Martinez paid tribute to Martin Cohen, the founder of the country’s leading Latino musical instrument company Latin Percussion, with “Martin Cohen Loves Latin Percussion” an instrumental that opened his Afro Temple album.

One of the more interesting contributions to this inter-cultural musical conversation came in the mid-50s when Ray Barretto, Willie Rodriguez, and Charlie Palmieri teamed up with John Cali, Doc Cheatham, and Clark Terry to form Juan Calle and His Latin Lantzmen, an alleged Latin-Jewish supergroup that, on an album they called Mazel Tov, Mis Amigos, tore "Hava Nagila" up as a cha cha cha and made "Die Greene Koseene" do the merengue. (The Latin Lantzmen were prosthetic Jews in the way that the contemporary band Marc Ribot y Los Cubanos Postizos—a band of New York City Jews, blacks, and Latinos who play Latin music through downtown avant-jazz ears—are prosthetic Cubans, except that the Lantzmen pretended not to be postizo and Ribot flaunts Cuban postizismo as an aesthetic stance.)

The reasons for these mutual allegiances and affinities—the answer to the "Why Jews? Why Latin music?" question—have been attributed to forces both historically musicological and immediately sociological. Many have attributed them to the ghost of genetic memory, where 20th century Jews can still

---

17 Frommer and Frommer, Catskills, p. 133.
hear some of Latin music’s roots in the Arabic cultures of North Africa which once shared stylistic connections to the music of 15th-century Sephardic Jews (and their eventual dispersal into a global diaspora of Catholic conversos). It’s a version of the “they come from the same place” argument—a Jewish Andalusian past helps a Jewish American present recognize Afro-Latin musical forms as familiar.

Jazz trumpet player Steve Bernstein, whose 1999 album, Diaspora Soul, bridged R&B, New Orleans jazz, Yiddish music, klezmer, and Latin rhythms, has offered an alternative geography of influence and recognition that ends with the Jewish hora as a distant cousin of the Afro-Cuban clave:

This led me to thinking not just about a New Orleans sound, but rather the Gulf Coast sound, encompassing Texas and Cuba—and the last part of the Gulf Coast was Miami. And who retired to Miami? The most popular Cuban export of the ’50s was the cha-cha . . . Who loves a cha-cha more than the Jews? And the final piece of the grail—the hora bass pattern—one, two-and, and-four-and—is the first half of the clave, the heart of Afro-Cuban music.

Tico Records’ Art Raymond, who started his career as a radio DJ playing Latin music and ended it playing Jewish music on his “Sunday Simcha” show, has simplified the musical connection even further and made it all about minor keys. “A lot of it [Latin music] was written in a minor key, as is a lot of Jewish music,” Raymond told music critic Mark Schwartz, “and I had a love for Jewish music since I was a young kid. It sounded almost like Jewish music, many of the songs. And then the rhythm attracted me.”

Schwartz has himself suggested that the true roots of Latino-Jewish affiliation can be found in East Harlem, which before becoming a Spanish Harlem full of Puerto Ricans was, in the first three decades of the 20th century, a Yiddish Harlem full of immigrant Jews on the run from Russian pogroms (in 1910, he notes, 41% of all new immigrants in New York were Russian Jews). Once the 1917 Jones Act opened up U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans, immigrants from the island relocated to New York, with the majority ending up in Jewish East Harlem. Once the 1924 immigration act closed U.S. borders to Jewish immigrants and before East Harlem fully became Spanish Harlem

---

18 Ned Sublette explores these histories in rich detail in Cuba and Its Music: From The First Drums to the Mambo (Chicago, Chicago Review Press, 2004).
before World War II, Jews and Puerto Ricans quickly found themselves living side by side.

The case of East Harlem would be repeated in other New York neighborhoods where Jews suddenly found themselves living alongside Cubans and Puerto Ricans, and as a result, often listening to the very same music on ethnic specialty radio stations where Yiddish radio shows would share the frequency with Latin radio shows. As Village Gate owner Art D'Lugoff told Vernon Boggs in 1989,

I grew up in a Jewish neighborhood … and we grew up on it [Latin music]. We grew up with that music in the 30s and 40s. That's the music. When you went to singles dances, you found at the Concord or Grossinger's or whatever those clubs were there, that was on the menu. . . . There was musical recognition and a close relationship with Jews. Certainly in my case—I certainly related to it. . . . I danced it then, I danced it now. Automatically, I get out on the dance floor and do a—you know, do a cha cha and a mambo. It's true.\(^\text{21}\)

These Jewish recollections should not cover up, however, the extent to which the Jewish and Puerto Rican encounter in New York was often fraught with typical urban ethnic tensions between economically and racially stratified groups. In her account of Puerto Rican musical development in New York, Ruth Glasser emphasizes the inter-ethnic conflict that accompanied Puerto Rican immigration into Jewish and Italian neighborhoods, resulting in battles over urban space, employment, and business opportunity (not to mention the kind of insults often brought on by this new demographic intimacy, where pioneering 1920s Puerto Rican record store owner Victoria Hernandez can earn the nickname “La Judia” for her less than generous financial practices). Before World War II, Jews and Puerto Ricans in Harlem lived and worked side by side, in both conflict (the Harlem Riots of 1926 set off between Jewish and Puerto Rican shopkeepers) and coalition (Jewish and Puerto Rican cooperation in New York labor movements).\(^\text{22}\)

Throughout this period, Jews still occupied a higher rung in the American racial order, allowing them greater access to jobs and business mobility and allowing them far greater freedom to negotiate their ethnic and racial identity. The story of the Sha Sha becoming Cha Cha is, after all, a story of Jewish choice—Jews who went Latin went because they wanted to, because they

\(^{21}\) Boggs, *Salsiology*, p. 172.

could. For New York Jews on the road to a mid-century whiteness, embracing Latino/a musical culture was a means, one based on relative privilege, of not fully assimilating and "trading up," of stalling, confronting, and struggling with their transition into an unstable Americanness.

Yet as Naomi Seidman reminds us, "Political and ethnic drag is a luxury unavailable to all ethnicities in America." Puerto Ricans worked with Jews, played for Jews, and at times recorded Jewish music, but with different stakes and investments. Instead of, to paraphrase Seidman, soliciting other faces to see their own, Latinos/as in New York participated in the Jewish-Latino cultural economy because, in large part, it was a cultural economy open to them and based on their music: it meant gigs, salaries, and recording dates.\textsuperscript{23} The cultural stakes were different as well. For Puerto Ricans in New York, "Latin" music was not a music of otherness, but a central part of community-building, cultural identity formulation, and social emancipation within the urban multiculture (a means, in Juan Flores' echo of Rafael Cortijo, of both defining the "people" and describing "the people"). As such, it also served as a conduit to transnational conversation (between New York, Cuba, and Puerto Rico), and as a means of struggle against marginalization within American society.\textsuperscript{24}

\textbf{Bongos and Bagels, or Going Latin to go Jewish and Not Go White}

The role of the Jew in Latin music forces a new model for understanding Jewish racialization, one that does not cohere with the four most available narratives of black-Jewish musical interaction. First, Jews engage black music and black culture through appropriation and masquerade in order to perform themselves as white. This is Michael Roin's Al Jolson model, whereby Jolson,


\textsuperscript{24} Juan Flores, \textit{From Bomba to Hip Hop} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 22. For an excellent discussion of gender and Puerto Rican musical culture, see Frances Aparicio, \textit{Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures} (Middletown: University Press of New England, 1998). I should emphasize that I am in no way trying to suggest that Latino/a music in New York was isolationist or strictly inward-looking. On the contrary, mambo and later salsa were musics born of and constituted by racial and ethnic crossings. As Lise Waxer has written of salsa, "The music's own interracial heritage was mirrored by the strong inter-ethnic participation that marked the New York scene, with Jewish and African-American musicians performing in several bands" (Lise Waxer, ed., \textit{Situating Salsa: Global Markets and Local Meanings in Latin Popular Music} [New York: Routledge, 2002], p. 4).
the Jew whose whiteness is in question, dons blackface as Jack Robin in the film The Jazz Singer as a way of distancing himself from the very blackness he mimics. "Jack Robin plays a person of color instead of being confused by one," Rogin argues, "By painting himself black, he washes himself white."25

Second, Jews engage black music and black culture to be hip, to abandon the squareness of their own culture for the alleged coolness of blackness—Norman Mailer’s “white negro” re-cast as the “Jewish negro” who wants to be down. This oft-told tale has been newly revived by John Leland, who counts the relationship between blacks and Jews as central to America’s understanding of hipness.26 Linked to this Jewish interest in black coolness (after all, part of the very notion of American Jewishness is that Jews have always needed “others” to be cool), is the third route of black-Jewish interplay, the Jew who engages black music and black culture to actually identify as black. Mezz Mezzrow is the classic example here, the Jewish jazzman who distanced himself from his Russian Jewish roots and allied himself with African-Americans, going so far as to think himself black, "a colored guy . . . Race, Negro."27 The reasons given for such an identification often lead to the fourth route: blacks and Jews are partners in disenfranchisement who can bond over histories of oppression. Irving Howe, Michael Alexander, and Leland have all offered versions of this argument, with Howe famously explaining away Jewish blackface as “one woe speaking through the voice of another.”28

What do we do with Jews who instead of taking the more traveled route through black music and black culture, ally themselves instead with Latino/as and Latino/a music and culture? The case of the Jewish Latin Craze of the 1950s introduces us to Jews who participate in Latin music not for any of the above reasons. Because Latino/as have never served as gateways to “authentic” American culture in the same way African-Americans have, mamboniks, Jewish musicians in Latin bands, and Jewish promoters of Latin music did not go


28 Irving Howe, World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the Eastern European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made (New York: Bantam, 1976), p. 553. Leland describes it as “a story of outsiders . . . an alliance of the pariah” in Hip, p. 204. For the most perplexing extension of this argument, see Michael Alexander, Jazz Age Jews (Princeton University Press, 2003).
Latin to go white and, for the most part, did not go Latin to pass as Latino/a. Jews went Latin to avoid being fully white and avoid being traditionally and exclusively Jewish; Latin music offered Jews the opportunity to remain ethnically unique from the American monoculture without having to risk performing themselves as singularly Jewish. This is where Golden is helpful—the Sha Sha gives way to the Cha Cha—because for some Jews in the fifties, Yiddish music was too Jewish while Latin music was not-Jewish, but also not-American. Latin music was outsider music, but it wasn’t their outsider music, which made it a perfectly comfortable place to be, allowing Jews to be inside and outside at once. Jews in the fifties were, as Biale has written, “doubly marginal: marginal to the majority culture, but also marginal among minorities,” and Latin music was the perfect mediating soundtrack for this transition from otherness to whiteness.29

These moves were particular to the 1950s, a post World War II, post Holocaust period in which Jews who were once seen as racial aliens were now re-cast as white ethnics ready for safe assimilation into American national culture. As a combined result of lingering fears of antisemitic targeting and a desire for incorporation into the white world that was now accepting them, music, film, and theater in the 1950s were markedly devoid of outward performances of Jewishness. For Jews who did not want to sing along with either “Sha Sha” or Percy Faith, Latin music was an appealing third option, one that refused assimilation as much as it refused in-group tribalism.

Like Sanchez’s Boyle Heights Jews, many Jews in Latin music were rejecting a total recuperation into whiteness while refusing to perform their Jewishness in traditional ways. Latin music offered a way to not be fully American, but to also not be traditionally Jewish. In some respects, then, mamboniks could be considered similar to “Jazz-Jews and Jewish Negros” like Mezzrow and Lenny Bruce in the sense that they too wanted some identity options outside the container of Jewishness, yet they also wanted to be, as Maria Damon has put it, “creative nonparticipants in mainstream culture.”30 Damon has suggested that for some American Jews who were “enamored” of African-American culture both before and after World War II, the goal was neither assimilation into whiteness nor passing into blackness, but resistance itself, the discovery of “the resources for resisting absorption into a dominant culture they found stultifying, hierarchic, unjust, unaesthetic, and un-Jewish.”31

---

29 Biale, Insider/Outsider, p. 27.
While I do not believe that mamboniks were wholly oppositional figures who were actively resisting racial domination and coerced American homogeneity (and therefore not engaged with the "political drag" that Seidman writes about), I do think that they found in Latin music what Bruce et al. found in black culture—a way to be more Jewish and less white without having to be fully either. After all, when African-American, Italian-American, and Latino musicians formed Juan Calle and His Latin Lantzmen to record Latin versions of Yiddish songs, the point was not the erasure of Jewishness in black and Latino styles, but the performance of Jewishness itself, a Jewishness that sounded different—"Papirossen" as a mambro, "Beltz, Mein Shtetele Beltz" as a pachanga—from the American mainstream and different from itself.

Hence we can meet someone named Bernardito Mandelbaum in Oscar Hijuelos' 1989 novel The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love. Mandelbaum is a Latino-identified "Jewish kid from Brooklyn" who learns Spanish from immigrant Cuban mambo musician Cesar Castillo. In return, Mandelbaum teaches Castillo Yiddish. "They'd trade words," Hijuelos writes, "schlep (dope), schmuck (fool), schnook (ignoramus), schlemiel (wastrel, fool), for bobo (dope), vago (lazy lout), maricon (fairy), and pendejo (ball-busting predatory lout)."32 It is a two-way street of exchange—Yiddish for Spanish, Spanish for Yiddish—with Latino/a musical culture as the ground of dialogue and friendship between a Mandelbaum and a Castillo.

Like Hijuelos' Mandelbaum—a Jew who goes Latin in order to be Jewish differently—Philip Roth's Herbie Bratasky in 1977's The Professor of Desire is a "Jewish Cugar" who plays conga and does impersonations at Kepesh's Hungarian Royale hotel in the Catskills. Instead of being a cantor, Bratasky chooses to be a draft-dodging conguero who "sells linoleum for an uncle during the day and plays with a Latin American combo on weekends."33 Mandelbaum and Bratasky are archetypal mamboniks, Jews who perform their Jewishness, and not their whiteness, through Latino musical idioms. By "going Latin," they "go Jewish" while not "going white."

These fictional characters were composites drawn from what was actually happening in the music world itself. On Irving Fields' landmark Bagels and Bongos and More Bagels and Bongos albums, the pianist and arranger reimagines Yiddish songs within Cuban and Puerto Rican stylistic frames. These may be kitschy collections aimed at a mambonik market and helmed by a Jew who

according to the album’s liner notes is known for “his eminent mastery of Latin American music,” but the songs are nearly always pulled from Jewish popular tradition. When he transforms “Hava Nagilah” into “Havannah Negila,” the instantly recognizable Jewish standard is not silenced, but re-sounded. The music on Bagels and Bongos uses Latin music as an idiom of Jewish expression, a new language of a hybridized, ethnically flexible Jewish identity. In this sense, then, Latin music was not melting pot music for Jews the way jazz had been in the earlier part of the century. It didn’t smelt them down into Americans, ridding them of their accents and foreignness and putting American flags in their hands, but returned them to themselves changed—not white Americans yet not the same Jews either.

Such performances trouble the dichotomies of Jewish identity that tend to typify accounts of cultural practice across the Jewish diaspora. In their analysis of “the diasporic genius of Jewishness” or what they alternately dub “diasporic power,” Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin sketch out a crucial divide within contemporary debates over the meaning and function of diaspora in Jewish life. One approach to diaspora “focuses on the anamnestic powers of diaspora, creating ties through memory,” while another focuses “on the liberatory powers of diaspora as release from monolithic attachment.” Jews involved with Latin music in the 40s and 50s enacted a diasporic performance that did not choose one of these approaches over the other, but sustained them both, achieving something akin to what Irving Howe once called (with reference to Jewish-American writers) “tradition as discontinuity.” Mamboniks engaged tradition by changing it, and engaged Jewish memory while refusing monolithic attachment to a stable, shared notion of Jewishness. By playing and listening to Latin music—especially, but not exclusively, Latin versions of Yiddish songs—Jews were simultaneously tied to collective memory and freed from the rules and constraints of a pre-ordained identity.

One of the 50s’ more well-known Latinized Jews demonstrates this well: Channa Cohen, the star of Eli Basso’s 1952 klezmer-mambo hit for The Barry

---

34 This song should not be confused with “Havana Nagila” by contemporary Latino-Jewish hip hop group Hip Hop Hoodios.
35 I explore this notion in greater detail in my Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Also see Rogen’s read of jazz’s melting pot in Blackface, White Noise, pp. 136–142.
37 Howe, World of Our Fathers, p. 581.
Sisters, “Channa From Havanna.” After a 10-day cruise to Havana away from her husband whom she’s left back in Miami, Channa comes back a Cubaphile. Now all she wants to do is dance mambo and cha cha cha. Now she calls her bubele “Bubalu.” Her newfound love of Cuban music convinces Channa she doesn’t need her husband and she falls for a Latino man, though not a Cuban, a Mexican (or “Meksikaner” as the Barry Sisters sing in Yiddish). Yet just when Channa thinks she has left her life as Channa Cohen of Miami behind, Basse and the Barry Sisters—who sing in both English and Yiddish, with only bits of Spanish—pull a typical Jewish Latin Craze trick. It turns out the Meksikaner is actually named Sam Shapiro, another Jew who went Latin to find himself. Not to mention that all the while, the song’s Latin shuffle is continually interrupted by a blaring old-school Eastern European klezmer freelach that fades in and out, but never goes away. Just like her new Mexican man, Channa’s new Cuban identity is still partly a Jewish one.

**Outro: Tito & Irving**

I want to conclude this provisional musical counterhistory back in the Catskills, with a final example that further exemplifies the extent to which Jewish-Latino interaction could result in dialogic exchanges in sound that did not (always) replicate more familiar models of one-way entertainment traffic where racialized minorities perform for white ethnic Jews who are both paying audience members and behind the scenes managers or music industry machers. Particularly, I want to focus on one performance of Latino-Jewish musical dialogue that took place in 1959, when legendary Puerto Rican band leader and timbale master Tito Puente headlined the grand ballroom at Grossinger’s Hotel, the Catskills’ flagship getaway destination. It was not the first time Puente and “His World Famous Orchestra,” had played for the vacationing Jewish masses at Grossinger’s, but it was the first time one of his Sullivan County Catskills sessions was recorded and soon after released, by his label RCA, as a full-length album, *Cha Cha With Tito Puente at Grossinger’s.*

Puente was so aware of Jewish Latinophilia that he included “Miami Beach Rumba” and “Manana, Nicaragua” on his set list that night—two Latin-based jazz compositions written by Irving Fields. Puente playing Fields was one of Latino-Jewish circuitry’s greatest bi-lateral moments: when Puente played for the Jews, he played a Jew playing Latin.

Fields’ most famous composition, “Miami Beach Rumba,” began as a waltz, his own take-off on French staple “Autumn Leaves.” But in 1946, when Fields performed his “Autumn Leaves” at the Versailles Hotel in Miami Beach for a mostly Jewish audience, their demand for his Latin-inspired piano compositions forced a mid-song transformation of “Autumn Leaves” into a rumba,
which he soon re-named "Miami Beach Rumba" with bi-lingual Spanish and English lyrics from Johnnie Camacho and Albert Gamse. That Puente would perform the song at Grossinger's was no surprise—it was Puente who arranged it into a hit single for Cugat when Cugat recorded it in 1947.

The lyrics to "Miami Beach Rumba" suggested that the Jewish-Latino environs of Miami Beach were more rumba territory than Cuba itself:

I started out to go to Cuba, soon I was at Miami Beach/ There, not so very far from Cuba, Oh what a rumba they teach!/ Palm trees are whispering "Yo Te Quiero" what could I do but stay awhile. I met a Cuban caballero, we danced in true Latin style/ So I never got to Cuba, but I got all its atmosphere/ Why even Yuba and his tuba, they played a night right here/ I'll save Havana for manana, meanwhile I have it in my reach/ I found the charm of all Havana in the rumba at Miami Beach!

For Jewish mamboniks, Fields' music put Cuba and Puerto Rico in reach, replacing the actual islands themselves with the "atmosphere" of Miami Beach. The song's female protagonist is yet another example of a how the Jewish-Latin craze performed the Jew's inside-outside status within the American racial order. Her love of rumba does not take her to Cuba, but leads her right back to Miami Beach; her love of rumba does not lead her from Jewishness, but leads her back, anew, to Jewishness.

So maybe Golden only got it half-right. The Sha Sha was not displaced by the Cha Cha, it was re-imagined by it. The Cha Cha was the new Sha Sha, the sound of Jews performing themselves through someone else's music, a new way of keeping time with the shifting geographies of Jewish-American identity.38

---

38 Special thanks are due to Mark Schwartz, whose work on Jewish-Latino music has greatly informed my own, and to David Roman, who first asked me to present these ideas at the 2001 American Studies Association annual meeting. I am also grateful to Alexandra Vazquez and issue editor Daniel Irzkovitz for their invaluable critiques and suggestions.