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# Cantors and Classic Rock

## A Musical Revival

*Ariel Tichnor*

**N**ineteen sixty-nine was an exciting year for music in America: sex, drugs, and rock and roll set the Woodstock stage aflame, the Rolling Stones invaded American airwaves with songs about Honky Tonk Women, and Yosselle Rosenblatt rocked the album covers of records that spun thousand-year old Jewish liturgical tunes. Yosselle Rosenblatt was no British rock god or free-loving, free-drugging counterculture crooner who topped billboard charts in the 1960s. Decades earlier, he had been a giant in the Golden Age of the cantorial music craze that rocked American shores from the early twentieth century to the early 1930s.

Rosenblatt was just one of the many Eastern European cantors featured in the Greater Recording Company's "Great Cantor Series." Released in the late 1960s and early 1970s, this expansive collection featured the surviving recordings of internationally renowned Jewish cantors who achieved superstar status during the Golden Age a half a century earlier. No evidence remains of who bought these records, but the music genre suggests that the revival of traditional Orthodox communities in the late 1960s provided an ample market for this traditional Jewish music. The timely release of these records reflects the resurgence of the Orthodox Jewish community in America that began in the 1960s. This revival, like the Great Cantor Series, sought to preserve Jewish

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tradition distinct from the surrounding American culture.

Between 1969 and 1972, the Greater Recording Studio released shelves of digitally re-mastered recordings of deceased cantors who sang ancient liturgical texts in Eastern European style. This list included Pinchos Borenstein, Mordechai Hershman, Moshe Koussevitzky, Zavel Kwartin, Moishe Oysher, Pierre Pinchik, Gershon Sirota, Samuel Vigoda, Leibele Waldman, and Yoselle Rosenblatt.<sup>1</sup> Coming from Eastern European descent, and rising to international prominence during the large wave of Eastern European Jewish immigration to America in the early twentieth century, these cantors acted as bridges between the Old and New world; they connected Eastern European and newly-arrived American Jews by singing Jewish liturgy to a familiar Eastern European melody.<sup>2</sup>

The base of this bridge was built in nineteenth century Jewish villages in Eastern Europe where cantorial masters and schools first grew and thrived. The great cantors were all born in Jewish Eastern European villages. They started on the cantorial path as young boys when established cantors recognized their talents in small Russo-Polish villages and trained them in synagogue choirs. When these cantors came of age they established themselves at synagogues in major Eastern European cities such as Warsaw, Vilna, Vienna, Budapest, Odessa, and St. Petersburg. It wasn't uncommon for cantors to move from one city to another every few years, where their talented voices drew crowds and increased their popularity.

The talent and popularity of these cantors might have stayed within the synagogue communities had it not been for two important factors that paved the path to international stardom: the advent of the recording industry and the expressive nature of the cantor. Once the recording industry took off, cantors began distributing records of their liturgical chants throughout Europe to earn extra money. The cantorial records quickly became a success, likening ancient liturgy to opera, a favorite form of entertainment for the cosmopolitan Jewish bourgeoisie.<sup>3</sup> As circulating records increased the fame of cantors,

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gentiles and Jews alike flocked to hear the opera-inspired liturgical melodies of the cantors during their tours in Europe. Rosenblatt's melodic voice was frequently compared to that of the celebrated opera singer Enrico Caruso<sup>4</sup> and suggests, therefore, that the *hazzan's* music was expressive and innovative, always in tune with the beat of the surrounding secular culture.<sup>5</sup> This quality is similarly notable in Modern Orthodox music, which borrows beats from mainstream music. The currently popular Matisyahu, for example, uses reggae rap to express ancient spiritual views and the now deceased, but still popular Shlomo Carlebach infused his liturgical lyrics with a classic rock edge.

Cantorial music crossed the Atlantic Ocean to America with the influx of Jewish emigrants from Eastern Europe. These newly-arrived Americans bought the cantorial discs as fast as the record companies could produce them.<sup>6</sup> The cantors soon followed their records to America. Some only visited on concert tours, while others decided to make a new home in America, settling in New York's Orthodox communities, which closely resembled the cultural traditions of their old European villages.<sup>7</sup>

Once in America, the careers of these cantors reflected the assimilation of Ashkenazi Jews into mainstream American life and foreshadowed the decline of Orthodoxy among Eastern European American Jews in the 1940s and 1950s. The economic success of second-generation American Jews prompted a huge migration from urban Orthodox communities into affluent middle and upper class suburbs, the symbol of the American Dream of "success, prestige, money, power, and security" and successful assimilation into American life.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, Jewish suburbanites replaced traditional Orthodoxy with Conservative Judaism, which allowed them the flexibility to compete economically and thrive socially in middle-class American society while still maintaining ties to the Jewish community and tradition.<sup>9</sup>

Likewise, the great cantors moved from a religious to a secular stage. When Yoselle Rosenblatt first arrived in America, he turned down a lucrative opera offer to work as a full time cantor at Ohab Zedek Synagogue in New York.

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Yet when he was not leading Sabbath and holiday services, he belted medleys of traditional Jewish and mainstream opera music to packed audiences at the Hippodrome and Carnegie Hall. He eventually gave up his cantor position to perform in the profitable Vaudeville and film industries. Some even became spokesmen in advertisements for mainstream American products, like David Roitman, who appeared in a Maxwell House coffee ad in 1940.<sup>10</sup> Others sported American styles. The clothing Rosenblatt wore on his album covers changed from yarmulkes and *talit*, articles worn in synagogue, to three-piece suits and top hats that followed American fashions.<sup>11</sup> And Moishe Oysher shaved his beard, a traditional style, in exchange for a clean-shaven Americanized face.<sup>12</sup>

Contemporary Orthodox musicians also mingle with mainstream musicians—Matisyahu, for example, recently played a set at the Bonaroo Music Festival in Tennessee and performed the song “Roxanne” with Sting at a concert in Tel Aviv. Still, this kind of assimilation seems less extreme than the kind of life changes made by the cantors in earlier generations. For while ears outside of the Orthodox community may listen to Matisyahu’s music, Matisyahu himself retains his cultural Orthodox identity, along with his long beard and yarmulke. The cantors, on the other hand, not only altered their outer appearance, but also engaged in deeper, cultural changes.

Yet even the cantors’ career moves into mainstream America could not stop their Jewish American audience from turning their ears towards different tunes. The children of Eastern European immigrants did not have the same cravings for Eastern European musical morsels like their parents. Instead, they sought the economic and social success that secular America provided, and a Judaism that would correspond with their aspirations for assimilation. The entertainment value of the cantor disappeared as the swell of Conservative synagogues employed cantors, transforming them from performers to professionals. Professional schools for cantors replaced the traditional Eastern European apprenticeships, including the School of Sacred Music of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, the Cantor’s Institute of the

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Jewish Theological Seminary, and the Cantorial Training Institute of Yeshiva University.<sup>13</sup> Though the American cantor survived as a profession, as Eastern European Jews entered American universities, professions, and entertainment, settled in the suburbs, and converted to the “middle-of-the-road” Conservative movement,<sup>14</sup> the Golden Age of cantors and the bridge that connected American Jews to the cantorial tradition of their Eastern European heritage came to a close. Yet thanks to the Greater Recording Studio of the late 1960s and early 70s, the early twentieth-century cantors were resurrected. It is no coincidence that this revival happened at this time, a time when American Jews were going through a period of ethnic identity affirmation and spiritual awakening. As the American climate shifted away from an anti-foreigner mentality to embrace ethnic identities, Jews also turned inward for identity. Since assimilation meant that mainstream America no longer defined Jews as outsiders, Jews now had the chance to “reinvent themselves culturally on the basis of internal choice rather than outside pressure.”<sup>15</sup> American Jews’ practice of *tikkun olam*, literally “repairing the world”, exemplifies this inward search for identity. Following World War II, American Jews devoted their energies to universal causes such as international peace and the African-American Civil Rights Movement, but by the 1970’s they shifted their focus on social action to causes that dealt directly with Judaism such as Israel and the Jews in the Soviet Republic.<sup>16</sup> The Greater Recording Company’s revival of cantors’ voices reflected a cultural offshoot of the new inward self-definition American Jews sought.

The liturgical prayers featured on the “Great Cantor Series” records such as *V’Shamru* (and listen) and *K’dusha* (holiness) illuminate the religious awakening amongst American Jews, another way in which Jews turned inward in the 1960s and 1970s. Representing only ten percent of the American Jewish population, Orthodoxy resurged around the time that the “Great Cantor Series” was released. Orthodox communities that remained in the cities not only healthily maintained their populations, but Orthodoxy also experienced an inundation of thousands of new members from non-Orthodox upbringings

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as it spread out to the suburbs. The Orthodox revival branched into two groups: modern and traditional. While Modern Orthodoxy was a branch of Judaism determined to balance religion and the modern secular world and “enjoy many comforts of the larger middle- and upper-middle class lifestyle while adhering to Orthodox Jewish norms,”<sup>17</sup> traditional Orthodox adherents felt it important to “isolate themselves and forbid partaking of or participating in anything outside of their community.”<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, Modern Orthodox adherents listened to secular American music while traditional adherents did not. In the words of musical ethnologist Mark Kilgman, distinctly Jewish music “need not be their primary means of musical entertainment, since they seek to integrate their Jewish and secular lives.”<sup>19</sup> Traditional Orthodox adherents on the other hand, in separating themselves from secular culture, had to create their own music to fulfill their cultural entertainment needs. As Kilgman explained, the “community’s rightward flow in recent years necessitated the creation of their own cultural expression based on Orthodox Jewish values.”<sup>20</sup>

Releasing cantorial along with Yiddish and Hassidic records, the Greater Recording Company focused exclusively on preserving the Eastern European heritage from where the traditional Orthodoxy in America originated. As with their ancestors who lived in *shtetlach*, small Jewish villages, that contained “a common religion, language, set of values, norms, institutional structure, and sense of belonging” isolated from the secular Russo-Polish surrounding, traditional Orthodox communities sought to keep their city neighborhoods isolated from the surrounding secular American city culture.<sup>21</sup> The Golden Age cantors in particular symbolized the Old World of Ashkenazic Jewry in relation to the New World. The melodies that the cantors sang not only embodied Ashkenazi heritage that eased Jewish entry into America, but the words they prayed came from the sacred texts that had bound Jews together from the time of the Diaspora in 70 C.E. Rosenblatt’s son Henry saw the role of the cantor as essential to preserving this unique aspect of Judaism, namely as a religion centered on auditory prayer. “Cantors,” he said, “who proclaim the faith of

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today with the faith of our fathers have been interpreters of the Jewish faith for countless generations.”<sup>22</sup> Though cantors remained a fixture in American Jewry at the time that the “Great Cantor Series” was released, the re-mastering of the rare original discs of the late Golden Age cantors reflected the desire of the American Orthodox community to not only uphold the Jewish liturgical tradition but symbolically preserve the connection between Jews in America and their Eastern European heritage through the early-twentieth century cantors who did just that.

Since the cantorial records symbolized their isolationist stance of preserving the past and remaining distinct from American culture, traditional Orthodox communities consisted of the main market for the Greater Recording Company’s Great Cantor Series. Music, then, was an important way that Orthodox communities sought to separate themselves from the mainstream American society. Located in Brooklyn, New York—an important center that produced goods and services for Orthodox communities all over the United States and the world—the Greater Recording Company offered distinctively Jewish music that provided an alternative to mainstream songs.<sup>23</sup> This music played a key part in the main mission of Brooklyn’s Orthodox community “to resist acculturation, to distinguish themselves from the American mainstream, and to perpetuate their commitment to their own sacred path.”<sup>24</sup> The records that the Greater Recording Company produced helped maintain a distinct Jewish culture in America. Stephen Erdely pointed out in his discussion of Jewish liturgical chants in the U.S. that “American born descendents of immigrants have learned native songs from recordings and published notions.”<sup>25</sup> Records played only a small piece in this larger musical picture. In his book *Judaism as a Civilization*, Mordechai Kaplan considered music to be a cohesive force in the conservation of American Jewish life. He highlights “the idea of having talented Jewish musicians write special liturgical music for the synagogue” as an unmistakable way that “Jewish life in this country is expressing itself,” which is precisely what the Golden Age cantors did, as records with titles

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such as “Cantor Zavel Kwartin Sings *His Original* Outstanding Cantorial Masterpieces”, “David Roitman Sings *His Most Original* Compositions” and “Cantor Yossele Rosenblatt Sings *His Original* Compositions” confirm. Shlomo Carlebach, who gained popularity around the same time as the Greater Recording Studio released the Great Cantor Series, followed the lead of these cantors by expressing Torah verses through his original music compositions. Just as cantors whose soulful renditions of Jewish prayer kept the old Jewish culture of Eastern Europe connected to the new generations of Jewry in early twentieth century America, Carlebach’s *Am Yisrael Chai*, meaning “the Jewish nation lives,” was used as an anthem for Soviet Jews in the 1960s and is still sung at Jewish rallies and celebrations today.

Yossele Rosenblatt, Gershon Sirota, David Roitman, and the other renowned cantors whose faces flashed from the covers of the Greater Recording Company’s records symbolized the desires of both Eastern European immigrants and the growing American Orthodox community in the late 1960s. With voices that expressed contemporary musical styles of the early twentieth century and sang traditional liturgical tunes, these entertainers provided Orthodox Jews living between 1918 and 1969 with music that satisfied their needs for entertainment and the preservation of Jewish tradition. Arguably, the reason Judaism has survived for thousands of years while immersed in other cultures is its dynamic ability to adapt to the surrounding environment while preserving its ancient traditions. Unfortunately, in the case of The Greater Recording Company, efforts at preserving the cantorial tradition could not contend with the tradition’s essentially outdated operatic melodies, which finally made it an unpopular musical form and led to the disbanding of the company. Orthodox music, however, revised its rhythms to modern melodies and this form of music continues to flourish to this day. Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach blends electric guitar, bass, and drums with texts from the Torah and Matisyahu raps lyrics about Jerusalem to classic reggae beats. Orthodox Judaism in America, much like the voices of these once-renowned cantors, was once believed to have died

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out. But as the “Great Cantor Series” revived the Golden Age of the cantor, so too did Orthodox Judaism restore itself as a thriving facet of American Jewish life.

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### **Notes**

1. All of the records mentioned in this paper come from the Schweitzer Record Collection of Jewish American records currently stored at the National Museum of American Jewish History.
2. Between 1881 and 1924, over 2.5 million Jews left their homes in Eastern European cities and villages to escape religious and political persecution and economically advance in the free capitalist land of America. Chaim Waxman, America's Jews in Transition. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), 29.
3. Mark Slobin. *Chosen Voices: The Story of the American Cantorate* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 18.
4. Yossele Rosenblatt, *Masterpieces of the Synagogue: The Art of Cantor Josef Rosenblatt*, RCA, 1959.
5. Slobin, 9.
6. Slobin, 60.
7. Waxman, 52.
8. Jonathan D. Sarna. *American Judaism*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 282.
9. Waxman, 123.
10. Slobin, 66
11. Yossele Rosenblatt.. *Great Cantor Series 1969-1973*.
12. Moishe Oysher, *The Art of Cantor Moishe Oysher*, Greater Recording Company, 1973.
13. Slobin, 95.
14. Sarna, 284.
15. Slobin, 113.
16. Sarna, 307.
17. Waxman, 129
18. Mark Kligman. “One the Creators and Consumers of Orthodox Popular Music in Brooklyn” *YIVO Journal* 23 (1996): ,262.
19. Kligman, 284.
20. Kligman, 287.
21. Waxman, 33.
22. Yossele Rosenblatt, *Yossele Ninety Minutes With Yossele Rosenblatt*, Shirim Records.
23. Kligman, 260
24. Sarna, 297.
25. Stephen Erdely, “Ethnic Music in the U.S: An Overview,” Yearbook of the International Folk Music Council 11 (1979:), 20.